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JOHNSON'S RHETORICAL STANCE IN THE RAMBLER

THE EFFECT OF SAMUEL JOHNSON'S prose style is pronounced, so pronounced that, as W. K. Wimsatt observed, "probably the style of no other English prose author has received so much attention."¹ The principal features of the style are its elevated, Latinate—Wimsatt called it "philosophic"—diction; its elaborated, balanced, frequently antithetical sentence structures; and its aphoristic character. Such are the trademarks of Johnson's style as they have been described by critics ranging from Burrowes to Krishnamurti, and about them there can be little disagreement.² What is open to dispute is not the literal details but the precise effect of Johnson's style.³ The debate involves an argument about the relation in Johnson's style between concrete and particular experience and abstracted and generalized analysis. Is his prose concrete and particular, or is it generalized—if you will, "philosophic"?

Taking note of the question, Donald J. Greene suggests that the "double tradition" of Samuel Johnson the man is seconded by a "double tradition of Johnson the writer—two quite contradictory ways of reading the words on a Johnsonian page. The one sees it as exuberant with concrete and vivid imagery; the other finds only a drear waste of 'abstraction' and inflated, pompous verbosity."⁴ The widely held opinion of the nineteenth century, that Johnson possessed a "heavy, pedantic style," is seconded by many who find in him nothing that even remotely approaches the "concrete" or "the vivid." Yet other modern critics would share the perception of an early one, Chalmers, that Johnson's prose does in fact deal with the concrete and the particular and does so with "irresistible force."⁵ To sharpen the issue, I will quote two preeminent modern critics of Johnson's style and ignore, for a moment, the context of the quotations. A successful explanation of the effect of Johnson's style must reconcile Wimsatt's position—"Johnson's bent for generality cannot be denied"⁶—with that of Walter Jackson Bate. Bate finds in Johnson a "continual concreteness," the consistency of which is "unparalleled in the history of moral thought."⁷ The opinions are apparently contradictory but are typical reactions to Johnson's didactic prose, reactions consistent even in their apparent contradiction; as such they are critical pieces of evidence for any analysis of Johnson's style.

I propose to undertake an analysis of Johnson's prose, focusing on *The Rambler* essays and dealing at length with a pattern of pronoun usage in *Rambler* No. 76 which exemplifies his didactic style in *The Rambler* and elsewhere. In so

doing, I propose to view Johnson's style as an aspect of his rhetoric, that is, as a tool being used by a moralist in an argument. This will not entail discarding the views or the terminology of critics such as Wimsatt and Bate; men such as they are not simply wrong. But I shall try to account for the "double tradition" of Johnson, the stylist, as a consistent reaction to one of his habitual rhetorical strategies.

First, a word about the terminology of the discussion. In traditional equations, "general" is a term which draws its meaning from a concept in logic. A "general" term refers to a class of things. Its equivalent is a "distributed" term, and its opposite is a "particular," a term with a logical reference to a part of or a single member of a class. Also paired, but with denotations rising from physics and metaphysics, are the terms "concrete" and "abstract." A "concrete" term denotes, in the parlance of empiricism, something subject to perception by sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell. There is no necessary connection between the logical distribution of a term and its status in denoting an object of sensory perception. The phrase "every man" is both general and concrete. The word "God" is a particular abstraction.

Some of the statements about Johnson's style are troublesome because they mix physical and logical concepts. Going beyond their terminology, it is not difficult to bring critics such as Wimsatt and Bate closer together than my first representation of their positions would have them. That Johnson's style is "generalized" in the sense described by Wimsatt is unmistakable if we oppose to it a notion of "particularity" which is conditioned by a post-romantic sensibility. He will talk about Mrs. Busy, Papilius, and Squire Bluster; he will talk about "the man who"; or he will talk about Charles XII of Sweden; but even in the latter case he seeks to represent a class, rather than an individual. "The man who" is synecdochic; Johnson does not "keep the reader in the company of flesh and blood" as does Wordsworth, as many moderns wish he would. He keeps them in the company of a member of a logical class. But even while noting Johnson's fondness for words which are "non-sensory and general," Wimsatt qualified his observation: "Yet it is only in a vague and collective sense that this is so. . . ."⁸ The characteristic Johnsonian sentence is not his first reaction to *The Rehearsal*, "It has not wit enough to keep it sweet," but his second, "It has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction."⁹ I agree with Wimsatt that the shift in expression produces the Johnsonian style, but the change here results from a choice of "philosophic" diction, not a change in level of concreteness or of generality.

Wimsatt's analysis accounts for the diction but not the dynamics of Johnson's style, at least as these are described by Bate. Speaking of Johnson's prose writing during the decade of the 1750's, Bate points out that "in urging the need for a fuller awareness and more enduring courage, the prose of the decade that follows *The Vanity of Human Wishes* enlarges upon this need and concretely illustrates it. For the 'epic wind of sadness,' even the powerful general observations that reverberate throughout this prose like muffled drum rolls, are not themselves the principal content or aim of this writing."¹⁰ Bate sees Johnson's generality

but sees it as subordinate to a set of particular moral intentions. Johnsonian generality is something that is a “background and also a by-product” of “the incisive treatment of specific problems and failings.” The Rambler is Johnson, concretely, particularly, but Johnson allegorized in a process the underlying imperatives of which are moral rather than logical. Johnson can see himself as a member of the class “procrastinators,” and he knows the general outlines of that class. But in offering generalizations drawn from close observation of himself, he was also engaged in a personal struggle. He and the Rambler are procrastinators, and his task was to “transmute the objective and moral awareness into concrete and daily life.”¹¹

In offering this commentary, I am, in one sense, reiterating the truism that style cannot be separated from content. Johnson’s style is generalized, but his topic is not an analysis of universal moral principles. He studied individual men, especially himself; and he struggled to relate the moral stances of Christianity, commonplaces in his day, to the lives of individual men. Bate’s record of Johnson’s struggle, of the topic of his discourse, cannot be ignored in a treatment of his style any more than can his habitual phraseology. A treatment of Johnson’s style must explain how a style can be impersonal, often logically generalized, and at the same time be personal and highly particular.

Two critics have undertaken such explanations since 1970. Howard D. Weinbrot coined the term “normative generality” to describe Johnson’s style.¹² That Johnson’s prose, demonstrably free of reference to real people, places, and events, is relatively generalized cannot be gainsaid. Weinbrot suggests that the way in which readers perceive it to have particular reference is a function of a “normative generality based upon careful, detailed, and laudable close observation” and intended to evoke “not an ideal image but the original, with all its sublunar particularity.”¹³ Another critic, Melvin Williams, finds in Johnson the “concrete universal” and observes “that the general cannot be equated with the total abstraction of an idea or moral precept, however strong is Johnson’s didacticism.”¹⁴ Phrases such as “normative generality” and “concrete universal” suggest concerns similar to my own, but Weinbrot and Williams do not tie their perception to the mechanics of Johnson’s style.

The current views of Johnson’s style are at a provocative impasse and one which exemplifies a traditional problem in stylistic criticism. Descriptive studies of style, particularly quantitative studies of a given writer’s transformational signatures, exist in an intellectual and moral vacuum. Rhetorical studies of the intentions behind and the effects of a style often have trouble getting beyond the level of impressionism. Here again is the problem of connecting the general and the particular in a way that falsifies neither. Indeed, the problems Johnson encountered as a moral critic are the same as those of any other critic, of any other speaker, who attempts to link words and things, but especially they are the problems of critics of Johnson’s own powerful discourse.

The rhetorical imperatives behind Johnson’s style dictate attention to features of Johnson’s style other than those which have occupied earlier critics. What a

critic is seeking in Johnson's moral writing is explanations of the paradoxical way in which Johnson seems to link generality and abstraction in diction with concreteness and particularity of impression. This means he seeks a rhetorical rather than a simply stylistic explanation. One such explanation of how Johnson generates such seemingly opposite responses as those stated above rests in the patterns of pronoun usage which are characteristic of Johnson's voice, in *The Rambler* and elsewhere, when he is "professedly serious." *Rambler* No. 76 illustrates the pattern of usage clearly.¹⁵

The topic of No. 76 is "the arts by which bad men are reconciled to themselves." Typically, the essay is a study of a variety of criminal egotism and of its consequences. Typically, Johnson makes definite choices and definite subordinations. The first paragraph, which I quote in full, illustrates how, while making such judgments, Johnson avoids the appearance of simple dogmatism.

It is easy for every man, whatever be his character with others, to find reasons for esteeming himself, and therefore censure, contempt, or conviction of crimes seldom deprive him of his own favour. Those, indeed, who can see only external facts, may look upon him with abhorrence, but when he calls himself to his own tribunal, he finds every fault, if not absolutely effaced, yet so much palliated by the goodness of his intention, and the cogency of the motive, that very little guilt or turpitude remains; and when he takes a survey of the whole complication of his character, he discovers so many latent excellencies, so many virtues that want but an opportunity to exert themselves in act, and so many kind wishes for universal happiness, that he looks on himself as suffering unjustly under the infamy of single failings, while the general temper of his mind is unknown or unregarded.

The paragraph is representative of Johnson's style, from the word "palliated" to the triplet of "excellencies," "wishes," and "virtues." I would expect that most who have read much of him could identify its author on sight. This is also the quotable Sam Johnson. One of the sentences in the paragraph can stand out of context, as can ten of the twenty-three sentences in the essay. The second cannot, since it depends for the sense of its pronoun reference on the preceding sentence. Ten sentences in the essay exhibit a similar dependence.

I find the governing feature of Johnson's style to be his handling of indefinite nouns and noun phrases and the pronoun references which they dictate. Consider the initial paragraph of No. 76. Within it there are fifteen third person singular masculine pronouns, each of which has as its reference the word "man" in the first line. There is one third person plural pronoun, the "those . . . who" of the second sentence, and its reference is indefinite. This pattern of pronoun usage, an indefinite noun used in its fullest distribution, "every man," "great numbers," "none," "no man," or "men," followed by a series of third person pronouns, the reference of which is hence equally universal and equally indefinite, is the basis to a startling degree of Johnson's style of moralizing.

Several observations are in order. The first is that, complex as Johnson's grammatical and syntactical usages are in some respects, his handling of pronouns in *The Rambler* is very simple and very consistent. The indefinite reference of

Johnson's pronouns, as much as anything, universalizes his tone; and the repeated usage of this simple grammatical structure has much to do with the unity of his tone. In No. 76, nine of the ten remaining paragraphs reflect a rhetorical stance controlled by a similar pronoun usage. Paragraphs three and four vary the pattern slightly by utilizing nouns which require ("numbers"), or which allow ("none"), subsequent third person plural rather than singular pronouns.

Secondly, it is this aspect of Johnson's moral style which allows him to appear both generalized and particularized at the same time. The moral writer faces the problem of ambiguity as an inherent aspect of his trade. In describing the problem, Plato does not use the terms abstract and concrete. He rather distinguishes one class of words referring to things which, if they are not concrete, are what we sometimes mean by concrete, are words about which there is no ambiguity or reference. "Iron" and "silver" are his examples. He also describes a class of words, generally those referring to qualities, emotions, and ideas, that are subject to considerable ambiguity—his example is the word "love"—and that consequently demand definition.

Precise observation of particulars, like precise definition, is an act of closure which insures understanding, but it may well be synonymous with ethical rejection of part or all of the speaker's audience. Closure upon a particular, if it is a particular within an audience's awareness, communicates a point clearly, but if the audience either does not see or will not accept the particular, then the *ethos* of the speaker is rejected as either foreign or untrustworthy.

The Rambler's pronoun usage solves this ancient dilemma in a fashion visible in the paragraph quoted in No. 76. What Johnson has to say is a rather hard truth. We think we are good. We are not. We simply have elaborate ways of lying to ourselves which serve the will within us. Badly stated, the thesis is as liable to offend as instruct. In Johnson's language the observation remains applicable to "every man" but has ambiguous distribution. On the one hand, the motive, a man's quest for "reasons for esteeming himself," can be successfully distributed among the class "every man" because of two qualifications, "whatever be his character with other" and "seldom." On the other hand, this universality of application, as qualified, contains no inevitable censure of the individual member of Johnson's audience. Rhetorically, the thrust of the remark is focused on those laboring under communal disgrace.

The second, and very complex, sentence in the paragraph cannot stand alone. It requires the noun "man" to govern its pronoun reference. The second sentence is also a much more particular extension of the observation in the first sentence. The logic of the first sentence includes the reader, but its topic does not. Most of us do not see ourselves as outcasts. But the reader cannot help but find himself the topic of the analysis of character in the second sentence. We all do "discover . . . excellences" within ourselves, whether or not they are there. Johnson has removed, at this point, the distance between his reader and the object of his analysis. They are identical, given the logic and the topic of the sentence.

What allows Johnson to retain a certain amount of openness even at a point of maximum closure is a grammatical feature. The "him" introduced in the first independent clause of the second sentence is the individual member of the audience. This follows since the pronoun's reference is to a universally distributed singular noun, "man." But in its rhetorical effect, the pronoun need not be any individual in the audience. We see ourselves as "I." We see some other man as "he." By selecting as the governing noun of the paragraph one that with suitable modifier becomes universally distributed and yet which generates third person singular masculine pronouns, Johnson achieves what so many of his critics have noticed, a sentence functioning simultaneously as a generalization and as a particularization.

The reader may, if he wishes, accept the logical reference of the pronouns in the second sentence (eleven of twelve are to "he") as a reference to his own situation; the reader is the "he" who is fooling himself. But if the observation is too close to home, the fairly distant indefinite reference of the pronoun can be invoked. The "he" of the second sentence can be some other man more foolish than himself. The particular statement of the second sentence which is logically and, in the Rambler's mind, intentionally, a particularization of the general statement of the first sentence, remains for those readers who wish it so, a generalization of the same order as the first sentence, a reference to an archetypal "he."

Rambler No. 76 offers, I think, a startlingly clear instance of the link between the grammatical patterns and rhetorical effects of a given style. That the style of the passages in question is characteristic of Johnson will not, I expect, be disputed. But I would like to spend some time discussing Johnson's pronominal stance in other "serious" Rambler essays and in the rest of his prose. I do this not with any pretension to statistical purity when I say that his pronominal usage is a signature of his style, but rather to elaborate the ways in which and the occasions when Johnson adopts the stance I have described.

Bate points out that fewer than half of *The Rambler* essays (92 or less by his count) are "direct moral essays" in which the Rambler speaks in his own voice.¹⁶ The other essays are portraits, letters from correspondents, literary criticism, eastern tales, and allegories. Working with the first 104 numbers of *The Rambler*, I found forty-four essays which were directly moral.¹⁷ This figure is arbitrary—there are a number of essays where portraits begin to turn into moral essays, and vice versa—but it is roughly accurate. The forty-four essays have a total of 618 paragraphs and of these roughly 186, or thirty per cent exhibit the pronominal stance I have described. Only four of the essays examined (Nos. 32, 41, 78, and 81) are free of it. Nos. 32 and 41 are first person singular in stance. Nos. 78 and 81 are third person commentaries on, respectively, death and justice. In the other essays, the count was highest in No. 11, where eleven of thirteen paragraphs on "the folly of anger" open with variations of the stance. Conservatively, I would estimate that twenty-five percent of Johnson's didactic paragraphs in *The Rambler* function as do those opening *Rambler* No. 76; that is, he establishes a logical class, a general category, and follows with third person

pronouns which tend to invite the reader to see himself as a member of the class without forcing him to.

Rambler No. 76 delineates the class with the noun phrase "every man" in the first sentence, but Johnson has a number of ways of varying the pattern without losing its rhetorical effect. One of these utilizes what Wimsatt called the relative clause of characteristic.¹⁸ The second sentence of No. 76 begins with one: "Those indeed, who can see only external facts. . . ." Here an indefinite antecedent is used before a relative clause, an antecedent which does not delineate a class until it is coupled with the clause which lists the characteristic of the class. It is, again, for the reader to decide whether he is one of "those." Here in No. 76, the clause, which logically must refer to someone who does not know the reader personally, creates further pressure for the reader to see the "he" which refers to "every man" as in fact "he" himself.

Wimsatt noted Johnson's "fondness" for this construction, "especially those with a completely indefinite antecedent—'be that,' 'that which,' 'what,' 'what,' etc." He did some brief counts and found "five of these in one passage from the *Life of Pope* and no fewer than nine in *Rambler* No. 2." But Wimsatt's comments on these clauses rest in a footnote, and he called them a "detail of meaning." That these clauses and their indefinite antecedents frequently govern Johnson's didactic focus is something Wimsatt overlooked.

The ninth paragraph of No. 11 is an example:

One motive there is of these loud extravagancies, which a man is careful to conceal from others, and does not always discover to himself. He that finds knowledge narrow, and his arguments weak, and by consequence, his suffrage not much regarded, is sometimes in hope of gaining that attention by his clamours, which he cannot otherwise obtain, and is pleased with remembering that at least he made himself heard, that he had the power to interrupt those whom he would not confute, and suspend the decision which he could not guide.

This paragraph opens with a singular noun of potentially universal distribution—"a man" can mean "any man"—but its major effect comes from the second sentence. The "he" of the second sentence has no grammatical antecedent in the first sentence, although there is a tendency to identify "a man" with "he." The reference of the pronoun is to the following relative clause of characteristic. "He" is "he that finds his knowledge narrow," etc. Here again, this time as a function of the clause, is Johnson's double-edged rhetoric. Since all men find their knowledge narrow, the "he" has an inevitably personal and particular application to the reader. At the same time, the clause has no logically necessary application. The reader can, in effect, choose whether he wishes the insight to apply to himself. If the observation applies but is embarrassing, the reader can salvage his pride by learning that "he" is only "sometimes in hope of gaining that attention by his clamours, which he cannot otherwise obtain. . . ." Here, as in No. 76, John delineates a very broad class and invites, but does not compel, the reader to see the generalization as a particularization.

Another variation of this pattern results from the way in which Johnson sometimes uses proper names, in effect, from the way in which he allegorizes historical personages. No. 6, with the thesis that "happiness is not local," is a moral essay which threatens to become a portrait of Cowley. That it does not is, I suspect, a function of the fact that Cowley's name is only mentioned five times in the essay and is juxtaposed in four of the five paragraphs to comments about "no individual" or "a man." Here is paragraph twelve:

It was, perhaps, ordained by providence, to hinder us from tyrannising over one another, that no individual should be of such importance, as to cause, by his retirement or death, any chasm in the world. And Cowley had conversed to little purpose with mankind, if he had never remarked, how soon the useful friend, the gay companion, and the favoured lover, when once they are removed from before the sight, give way to the succession of new objects.

The logic of this paragraph, given its topic sentence, is governed by the phrase "no individual," again an indefinite, singular, but universally distributed noun phrase. Initially, Cowley is an example of the "individual," and the "he" of the adverbial clause clearly refers to Cowley. But two and one half paragraphs elapse before Cowley's name is mentioned again in paragraph fifteen. In the interim, a succession of third person singular masculine pronouns, while retaining their logical reference to Cowley, refer to an antecedent which slowly recedes from view. The reader is lulled. "When he was interrupted," "he so strongly imaged," "he determined," "he forgot." The pressure here, again, is to see the "he" not as Cowley, but as an individual in a class, the class of men who are escapists. Although the direction is reversed in No. 6—a logical particular functions rhetorically as a generalization—the passage reflects the double-edged mixture of Johnson's style. Readers who are willing to see judgments made about Cowley's desire to flee to a pastoral retreat in America are trapped by a pronoun structure which begins to link both Cowley and the reader.

Johnson often uses examples which tend to turn into generalizations, as do his remarks about Cowley. But his customary pattern moves in the other direction, from general to particular: an indefinite noun phrase is linked to third person pronouns, "a passionate man . . . he" (No. 11), "such apologists . . . they" (No. 31), "Many minds . . . some" (No. 53), "the virtuoso . . . he" (No. 83); or an indefinite pronoun is linked to a relative clause of characteristic, "he, who follows an employment" (No. 9), "those who wish to elevate the character of a scholar" (No. 21), "he that would pass the latter part of his life with honour and decency" (No. 51), "he who finds in himself no tendency to use them" (No. 79).

There is a place in this discussion for some remarks about Johnson's use of indefinite pronoun structures in his other writing and about the appearance of such structures in the writing of other periodical essayists. Again, I add, these comments are not based on exhaustive statistical studies, but I believe they are representative.

In general, the use of indefinite pronoun structures seems to be characteristic of Johnson alone and, especially, of Johnson moralizing. One can read for pages in his letters and see nothing but first person narrative of the customary sort. At one point in a letter to Cave, Johnson announces, "I communicate to You the Sentiments of a person. . . . His opinion is. . . ." ¹⁹ The person is Johnson, who switches to the first person in the next sentence. The third person structure here is reminiscent of *The Rambler* but is atypical in the letters. He is angry at Cave and chooses to mask his persona, but the mask is transparent. I think such a passage is evidence to support an assumption that much of *The Rambler*, written in a similar stance, is similarly personal, but such third person usages are rare in the letters.

The exception seems to prove the rule, as well, in the *Prayers and Meditations*. The usual stance of those confessions, resolutions, and prayers is first person. At one point only does the indefinite noun-pronoun structure appear, and that is at a point when Johnson gazes out for a moment, becomes the Rambler again, and records a short moral essay. ²⁰

Some sample counts of Johnson's other prose indicate that he uses the construction in political writing but to other effects than in *The Rambler*. Four of the fourteen paragraphs in "Pamphilus on Condolence" (1738) use the device. ²¹ The subject of paragraph four is "a faithful subject," and "he" is the topic of paragraph five. The major change here is semantic rather than logical. The term "faithful" has a lexical weight which pressures the reader to join the class "subject" and hence see himself as the "he" of the passage. At this point, the reader is then united with Johnson against "those critics who would persuade us . . ." in the first paragraph. Here Johnson's pronominal stance invites his audience to join one class and exclude themselves from another, but, characteristically, allows the reader to decide for himself whether either class is a particular reference to himself. He can choose to be either a "critick" or a "faithful-subject." Similar constructions appear in two of the first twenty paragraphs of "The False Alarm" (1770) and in two, arguably three, of the first twenty paragraphs of "Taxation No Tyranny" (1775). On the other hand, "Observations on the Present State of Affairs" (1756), has thirty-four paragraphs of straight narrative. ²²

A similar spot check of *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* revealed one interesting point. That narrative is generally first person, but at certain points Johnson interrupts the travelogue and undertakes short digressions which are didactic and which exhibit indefinite pronoun usages. One of these occurs in the introductory chapter, "The Highlands," where Johnson's comments on the behavior of the clans and their tribal codes lead him to a digression on the nature of "justice." ²³ Here, briefly, he is the Rambler again.

I have mentioned that Wimsatt found five relative clauses of characteristic in one passage of the *Life of Pope*. My counts would indicate that this is somewhat high. The shorter lives such as those of Thomson, Grey, and Akenside, have few

such clauses because, I suspect, they are mostly narrative followed by short passages of criticism. The longer lives—I have in mind *Milton*, *Pope*, and *Swift*—have more such clauses because, I imagine, Johnson is more often making general moral pronouncements.

Johnson seems to have relied, to some extent, on the indefinite noun-pronoun or indefinite pronoun-clause structures any time he was “serious,” in the sense of analytical and moral. In the first ten numbers of *The Idler*, none of the fifty-eight paragraphs devoted to satire and portraits have the structure. Eighteen of seventy-four “serious” paragraphs do. The ratio is again twenty-five percent, even though the tone of *The Idler* is much lighter than that of *The Rambler*. In the “Preface to Shakespeare,” Johnson is not by the second paragraph before we hear that “he that thinks reasonably must think morally. . . .” Krishnamurti found that the word “man” was the most frequently used noun in an 8000 noun sample of Johnson’s prose, 6000 nouns of which were from *The Rambler*.²⁴ This might be an index of the importance of indefinite noun-pronoun structures to Johnson’s moral rhetoric.

One other point remains; that is the question of whether we have been examining a stylistic feature which is genre-specific, a signature of the periodical essays of the eighteenth century rather than of Johnson. Again, I am not prepared to offer a comprehensive answer to the question, but samples of such periodicals as *The Examiner*, *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, and *The Bee* indicate that it is not. I find one relative clause of characteristic in five *Examiners*,²⁵ one, which occurs in the first sentence of the first number, in five numbers of the *Bee*;²⁶ and infrequent use of the construction in Addison and Steele. The tone of the *Spectator*, for example, is light and topical, and the stance of both Addison and Steele is generally first person. Only three of the first twenty *Spectators* (Nos. 4, 17, and 19) use the construction. All are by Steele. In No. 4 he refers to “those who want any one sense” but finishes the sentence in the first person.²⁷ The usage in No. 17 is similar, with an indefinite opening quickly becoming first person singular. Only in No. 19 does Steele approach Johnson’s usage; and here, still, there is a crucial difference.²⁸ The topic of the essay is envy and the key noun phrase is “the Envious Man.” It is a broad, nearly universal class, and generates third singular pronouns. But Steele repeats the phrase “the Envious Man” three times in the paragraph. This tends to keep the focus of the passage on the antecedent, which is general, rather than the pronoun “he” which might become particular. Steele is close to Johnson here, but he did not use the construction as consistently or to the same effect as Johnson.

Johnson felt that the *Ramblers* were “pure wine.” Although their power has never been universal, and in this age has lessened, they retain their ability to evoke identifications from readers who find themselves mirrored in Johnson’s portrait of “every man,” or “the man who.” I think the resolution of the debate between critics such as Bate and Wimsatt and the explanation of the *Rambler*’s peculiar power as moral argument lie in the grammatical features which this

essay has described. But in closing, I would like to anticipate an objection. How seriously should we take Johnson's rhetorical stance? Johnson has been accused of simple everyday dishonesty for political ends.²⁹ He was a "no-holds barred" debater; in Boswell's words, potentially "the greatest sophist that ever contended in the lists of declamation," susceptible, at least in conversation, to "mere rhetoric."³⁰ Paul Fussell confesses to being near "open skepticism" about Johnson's "trustworthiness."³¹ Benjamin Franklin was not, *prima facie*, totally straightforward in propounding his ledger book morality. Is not Johnson up to something similar when he levies charges against the race in a style that confronts every member of the race but one, his reader?

The answer to the question, I think, is no. It is a question that can be asked at any point in the history of rhetoric. Any time a speaker works consciously to purpose he is open to the charge, and I am not sure that evidence exists for any positive refutation. We need rather contemplate Johnson's problem. His positions are not original. They are truisms. His problem, in the words of Jim Corder, is how to "create trust, how to give assertions weight and relevance," while at the same time avoiding arguments that "alienate friends as they refute enemies."³² That his pronominal stance helps do this is beyond question. By requiring no men to be what they cannot recognize as themselves, it invites them into an analytical context that cannot help but lead them to see what they are.

NOTES

¹William K. Wimsatt, *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Anchor, 1972), p. vii.

²Wimsatt provides a bibliography of the major writers on Johnson's style in *Prose Style*, p. xv.

³See Arthur Friedman, rev. of *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson, PQ*, 21(1942), 211-13, and Wimsatt's reply, "Johnsonian Generality and Philosophic Diction," *PQ*, 22(1943), 71-73.

⁴Donald J. Greene, "'Pictures to the Mind:' Johnson and Imagery," in *Johnson, Boswell and Their Circle: Essays Presented to L. F. Powell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 156.

⁵Alexander Chalmers, "Historical and Biographical Preface to the *Rambler*." *The British Essayists*, (London: J. Johnson, 1803), XVI, 49.

⁶Wimsatt, *Prose Style*, Chapter II, iii, 55.

⁷Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 31.

⁸Wimsatt, *Prose Style*, p. 55.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰Bate, p. 31.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹²Howard D. Weinbrot, "The Reader, the General, and the Particular," *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 5(1971), 80-96.

- ¹³Weinbrot, p. 87.
- ¹⁴Melvin G. Williams, "Samuel Johnson and the Concrete Universal," *CEA Critic*, 34(1972), 10-15.
- ¹⁵Here and following I am using the text of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), III-IV.
- ¹⁶Walter Jackson Bate, "Introduction" to *The Rambler*, Yale ed., III, xxvi.
- ¹⁷Nos. 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 21, 24, 28, 29, 31, 32, 41, 43, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 56, 58, 63, 64, 66, 68, 69, 71, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 83, 85, 87, 99, 104.
- ¹⁸Wimsatt, *Prose Style*, p. 54.
- ¹⁹*The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), I, 3.
- ²⁰"Prayers and Meditations" in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 55.
- ²¹*Works*, Yale ed., X, 9ff.
- ²²*Ibid.*, 184ff.; 313ff.; 401ff.
- ²³*Ibid.*, IV, 46.
- ²⁴A. Krishnamurti, "Frequency-Distribution of Nouns in Dr. Johnson's Prose Works," *Journal of the University of Bombay*, 20(September 1951), 1-16.
- ²⁵Jonathan Swift, *The Examiner and Other Pieces Written in 1710-11*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 3ff. The clause is in No. 16, p. 23.
- ²⁶*Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), I, 353ff.
- ²⁷*The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 19f.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, 83f.
- ²⁹See Patrick O'Flaherty, "Johnson as Rhetorician: The Political Pamphlets of the 1770's," *SBHT*, 11(1970), 1571-84.
- ³⁰*Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New York: Bigelow, Brown, 1887), V, 17.
- ³¹Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 91.
- ³²Jim W. Corder, "Ethical Argument and *Rambler* No. 154," *QJS*, 54(1968), 352-53.