THE NATURE OF DR. JOHNSON'S RATIONALISM

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In *From Classic to Romantic* W. J. Bate has presented Samuel Johnson as " a Christian and a very English Socrates," classical rather than neo-classical in his dedication to humanistic and ethical rationalism and in his conception that art should be a revelation of general nature. Such an analysis, valuable though it is in emphasizing the dignity of Johnson's critical thought and sound though it is in preceiving the basic assumptions upon which the Johnsonian system rests, should not be allowed to stand without important qualification.[1] It is the purpose of this paper to describe briefly that which is traditionally rationalistic and humanistic in Johnson's conception of reason and then more fully to discuss the vitally significant empirical strains in his criticism, to clarify the hitherto unnoticed but, I think, perfectly clear relationship in him between the empirical and rational faculties, and finally to call attention to his perception that the reason was not only a restraining, normalizing force but was instinct with positive energy of its own. This acute awareness and the corollary one that literature is an expression of all the faculties of the mind energized and active enabled Johnson to transcend that dry and almost mathematical rationalism with which he has sometimes been accused of being tainted and to over-leap those boundaries which neo-classicism at its most rigid had fixed between the separate faculties of the mind.

1

Bate comments properly that Johnson's conception of the nature of rational insight " is not easy to define with precision." The basis of that difficulty (and what student of Johnson has not been vexed by it!) perhaps lies in the fact that his use of the word *reason*, although extensive and forcible, does not seem

[1] See Bate, pp. 59ff. Bate is aware of empirical and even anti-rationalist elements in Johnson's criticism, but he makes nothing of them. He says, in passing, that Johnson " certainly preferred an accurate presentation of empirical or particularized nature to a completely lifeless idealization " (p. 64). See also pp. 74 and 79.

to have rested upon a satisfactory abstract conception of the term. In *Idler* no. 24 (1758) he rejected a currently popular definition of the soul on the grounds that " it supposes what cannot be proved, that the nature of mind is properly defined," and eight years earlier, in *Rambler* no. 41, he averred that no accurate answer can be given to the question of how reason differs from instinct because " we do not know in what either reason or instinct consists." Nevertheless, the following conclusions (here stated in the briefest summary) can be drawn with confidence from a fairly thorough examination of all the important passages of both moral and literary criticism in which Johnson invokes reason and bases his argument upon it.

1. *Reason and universal truth.* When, in the *Life of Cowley,* Johnson says that " truth, indeed, is always truth, and reason is always reason; they have an intrinsick and unalterable value, and constitute that intellectual gold which defies destruction," he refers to the following universals which should always, in some way or other, be expressed by the poet and critic: (a) *moral and religious truth* and (b) *the immutable order of nature* and *the unalterable mind of man.*

(a) Since " he who thinks rationally thinks morally," reason, assisted by Christian revelation, will lead man to " those general and transcendental truths " which for Johnson were expressed in humanistic and Christian ethics. The writer, who must also be guided by this ethical insight, should " consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state " and should not be a promiscuous recorder of things as they are. He ought rather to " distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation " and exhibit " the most perfect idea of virtue, the highest and purest that humanity can reach." The highest literature thus becomes the result of a selective imitation, guided by ethical perceptions, of an ideal moral reality. In this important respect Johnson's position must be sharply distinguished from all literary naturalism and from all imitations of reality guided exclusively by aesthetic considerations.

(b) Johnson often uses fidelity to the *order of nature* and to the unalterable *mind of man* as a test of literary value: literature must conform to the " settled and unalterable nature of things," to " the order of nature and the operations of the intellect," to " the nature of things and the structure of the human mind "; it must be " adequate to our faculties and agreeable to nature." When followed, these principles

have a two-fold effect upon literature: it attains permanent significance and avoids the temporary, the local, the superficial, and the accidental; it also represents reality and avoids the chimerical, the fantastic, the hypothetical, and that which is only the arbitrary prescription of authority and tradition.

To follow nature, in Johnson's view, is to represent in art observable reality. "What is commonly called *nature* by the critics," he says in the discussion of epitaphs which concludes the *Life of Pope*, is "a just representation of things really existing, and actions really performed." [2]

2. *The operations of reason considered as a faculty of the mind.* It is possible to distinguish five separate but closely related functions of reason, the human faculty, in Johnson's discussion of literature:

(a) As that quality in man which understands and appropriates, to the practical purposes of life, general truth and reality, reason watches scrupulously the data of the senses and the combinations of the imagination (which creates fictions and adorns nature) to make certain that they resemble order of reality discussed under 1(a) and (b). It continually forces the mind back upon nature and life.

(b) Reason, as a dividing, partitioning faculty, may be relied upon to "disentangle complications and investigate causes," to "divide the object into its parts, or mark the intermediate gradations from the first agent to the last consequence." Its function is directly antithetical to that of the imagination which unites disparate data into new combinnations of imagery and which is accompanied by wonder, a "pause of reason, a sudden cessation of the mental progress."

(c) But the reason is also a concatenating and synthesizing faculty, which establishes order, provides transitions, and properly arranges the disposition of materials—a mental architect which in philosophy constructs systems and in poetry creates plot, form, and structure.

(d) Reason as a moderating force opposes excess and ecstasy, perceives the ethical and the aesthetic mean, and resists all tendencies to disproportion, lack of symmetry, inappropriateness of language and ornament.

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[2] Citations from Johnson come from the nine-volume edition of his *Works* (Oxford, 1825) and appear in part 1(a) of the schematization in the following order: *Life of Cowley* (*Works*, 7.51), *Rasselas* (1.222), *Rambler* no. 4 (2.18, 19-20). Part 1(b): *Rambler* no. 140 (3.163), *Rambler* no. 156 (3.239-40), *Rambler* no. 92 (1.220-1), *Life of Pope* (8.348).

(e) Reason is an abstracting and generalizing power, of moral importance in detaching the mind from the insistent claims of sense and habit and of aesthetic importance in guiding the writer to select general and therefore more permanent reality. It operates not only as an intuitive and sudden perception of general truth but also as the slower inductive process of generalizing from specific data.[3]

Because the ideas that appear in the foregoing schematization of the elements in Johnson's rationalism have their roots in the entire intellectual legacy of Western Europe and had passed current in the Republic of Letters for generations, any attempt to determine their specific source would, of course, be futile. They themselves, however, are the very bones and sinews of the Johnsonian system of criticism. And yet, as the remaining sections of this paper will attempt to show, they bear no more resemblance to his total conception of the mind that creates literature than does a skeleton to a man of living flesh.

2

All of the rational processes outlined in the preceding section point to an antecedent operation of the mind—the appropriation of nature and life through the senses and the empirical collection of materials upon which the reason can operate in the functions mentioned above. The mind obviously cannot watch, divide, combine, moderate, or generalize *in vacuo*. "Judgment," said Johnson in the *Life of Pope*, "is forced upon us by experience." The reason (no less than the picture-making faculty of the mind, the imagination) depends upon raw material from the world outside, and what Johnson once said about the imagination is equally applicable to the reason. On his tour with Boswell (19 September 1773) he expressed the opinion that the poetry of St. Kilda must be very poor because the locality was barren of images and therefore starved the poet's fancy. To Boswell's objection that even what material

[3] For 2(a) see the passages cited under "Truth" in Joseph E. Brown, *The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson* (1926), pp. 250-3. For 2(b) see *Rambler* no. 137 (*Works*, 3.147-8). For 2(c) see *Rambler* no. 151 (3.217), *Rambler* no. 158 (3.249-50), *Rambler* no. 139 (3.157-62), *Life of Milton* (7.139), and *Adventurer* no. 95 (4.81). For 2(d) see *Rambler* no. 38 (2.185-6), *Rambler* no. 129 (3.113), *Rambler* no. 122 (3.28), and *The Fountains* (9.181, 183, 190). For 2(e) see *Rambler* no. 208 (3.462) and *Idler* no. 59 (4.324).

there was could be combined into poetry by " a poetical genius," Johnson replied:

" But, sir, a man cannot make fire but in proportion as he has wood. He cannot coin guineas but in proportion as he has gold."

Because Johnson is deeply concerned with the experience of life and the empirical search antecedent to the operations of reason, he cannot be denominated, without important qualification, a rationalist. In the Dictionary he defined a *rationalist* as " one who proceeds in his disquisitions and practice wholly upon reason," and the happy similes from Bacon which he used to illustrate its meaning make it clear that Johnson, like Bacon, was in no way satisfied with an exclusive reliance upon the rational faculty.

He often used this comparison, the empirical philosophers are like to pismires; they only lay up and use their store; the *rationalists* are like to spiders; they spin all out of their bowels: but give me the philosopher, who, like the bee, hath a middle faculty, gathering from abroad, but digesting that which is gathered by his own virtue.

Bacon's little fable of the bee leaves room for the rational faculty, since the mind must, by its own power, digest at home the materials presented to it. But before everything else it must gather from abroad through empirical observation and search.

Johnson not only accepted this Baconian conception of the mind—empirical observation followed by rationalistic " digestion "—as an epistemological truth, but he made it fundamental to his conception of the mental preparation of the poet for his task. One of the most striking facts about Johnson's oft-repeated " character " of the poet is the prominence he gives to the empirical faculty. Although he often recommends, as he does in *Rambler* no. 154, the humanistic labor of possessing the " intellectual treasures which the diligence of former ages has accumulated " and complains that " the mental disease of the present generation is impatience of study, contempt of the masters of ancient wisdom," the noteworthy fact about Johnson is that he reveals impatience with an exclusive reliance upon this somewhat academic and bookish knowledge of the great traditions and insists repeatedly that the mind of the poet be

stocked with fresh, immediate observations of nature and men. Baconian philosophy and Lockean psychology provided him with a new touchstone for determining the excellence of literary imitation: has the poet, like the natural philosopher, collected accurate and extensive data? has he exercised the empirical faculty in gathering from abroad? have the senses stocked the mind with original impressions of nature and reality? As Imlac says, " no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked by the poet "; mountains, deserts, forests, flowers, crags, pinnacles, rivulets, summer clouds, plants, animals, minerals, meteors must all " concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety." Milton apparently was content with less, for his

> images and descriptions of the scenes, or operations of nature, do not seem always copied from original form, nor to have the freshness, raciness, and energy of immediate observation. He saw nature, as Dryden expresses it, ' through the spectacles of books; ' and, on most occasions, calls learning to his assistance.

But Shakespeare, on the other hand, " shows plainly that he has seen with his own eyes "; he is " an exact surveyor of the inanimate world; his descriptions have always some peculiarities, gathered by contemplating things as they really exist."

This important empirical strain in Johnson's criticism perhaps results from the fact that for him the principles of evoking literary pleasure did not possess the absoluteness and inflexibility of the moral and ethical principles mentioned earlier. In discussing the metrical harmony of Pope, for example, he denounced " the cant of those who judge by principle rather than by perception "—an almost complete reversal of his position in the realm of morals, where the cant lies in unprincipled reliance upon instinct. The simple but absolute principles of morality apply to art only to the extent that it instructs life. Since the *belles lettres* mix pleasure with instruction and thus introduce a somewhat more lawless element, Johnson approaches them from an entirely different point of view. In his *Preface to Shakespeare* he finds that works of literary pleasure like the drama are " gradual and comparative," " tentative and experimental," and are therefore to be distinguished from those " raised upon principles demonstrative and scientifick." Literature is thus neither morality nor science, and partakes only to a limited extent of the rational certitudes of

these disciplines. But although the literature of pleasure is thus to be distinguished from demonstrative science, the empirical faculty becomes even more necessary than otherwise would be the case, and the appeal to experience takes on a deeper significance. Since works of pleasure appeal " wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem "; their worth is discovered only in a " long succession of endeavours." Earlier, in *Rambler* no. 92, Johnson had said much the same thing about beauty, which he found to be a quality merely " relative and comparative," an epithet which we transfer from one object to another " as our knowledge increases " and as " higher excellence comes within our view."

It is not therefore remarkable that criticism, which attempts the evaluation of so protean a thing as beauty, " has not yet attained the certainty and stability of science." Johnson here (*Rambler* no. 92) holds out some hope that the critic may in time be able to " establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge." But such principles could be determined on the basis not of universal notions of beauty nor of inner reason but only of continuing observation and experience. He thus praised, as " an example of true criticism," the treatise on the sublime by Edmund Burke, who certainly made it clear that he had sought a knowledge built upon a " more extensive and perfect induction " and had attempted, in his own words, to approach the method of the investigative sciences, a method which even in matters of aesthetics he considered " incomparably the best." [4]

This insistence in the criticism of literature upon the data of the senses and upon first-hand observations of life and nature reflect what is the natural bent of Johnson's mind, which always distrusted abstruse speculation and often demanded arduous and unrelenting search for factual verification. But this persistent empirical strain may also, I think, be properly related to what Johnson said about the nature of reason and the problem of intellectual certainty. It was observed at the outset of this paper that Johnson was impressed with the difficulty of arriving at an exact definition of reason and the mind. In the

[4] *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (New York, 1901), 1.70, 81. For Johnson's praise of Burke's treatise, see Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (Hill-Powell ed.), 2.90.

preface to Dodsley's *Preceptor* (1748) he recommends first that the student consult books on logic by Crousaz, Watts, Wolfius, Le Clerc, and Locke, but that list is immediately followed by mention of works of "peripatetick logic, which has been, perhaps, condemned without a candid trial." This wavering between two leading schools of logic may have arisen from a fear that it would weaken morality and religion to rely, in all areas, upon induction. But when ethical considerations are not fully pertinent, Johnson reveals that it was with thinkers of the empirical school that he had the closest affinity.

He was a life-long and almost fervent admirer of the logical treatises of Isaac Watts, who says that "the old Aristotelian scheme of this science will teach us very little, that is worth knowing." [5] The fact that Locke (Watts' mentor and source), Bacon, Boerhaave, and Newton were all intellectual heroes to Johnson and that they all, up to a certain point at least, followed the methods of empirical logic is of some significance in determining Johnson's own concepts. But it is his own comments on the nature of certitude that are the most convincing. *Rambler* no. 41, in which Johnson despairs of determining exactly the meaning of reason and instinct, has already been cited. But after having admitted the semantic difficulty, he then forms a working conception of the terms:

> . . . but surely he that contemplates a ship and a bird's nest, will not be long without finding out, that the idea of the one was impressed at once, and continued through all the progressive descents of the species, without variation or improvement; and that the other is the result of experiments, compared with experiments, has grown, by accumulated observation, from less to greater excellence, and exhibits the collective knowledge of different ages and various professions.
>
> Memory is the purveyor of reason, the power which places those images before the mind upon which the judgment is to be exercised, and which treasures up the determinations that are once passed, as the rules of future actions, or grounds of subsequent conclusions.
>
> It is indeed, the faculty of remembrance, which may be said to place us in the class of moral agents.

This passage is crucial to an understanding of Johnson on the mind. Doubtful of the abstract meaning of the term, he turns

[5] *Improvement of the Mind* (Boston, 1833), pp. 210-217. For Johnson's praise of Watts, see his *Life of Watts* (*Works*, 8. 385) and also Boswell's *Life*, 4. 311.

with almost obvious relief to nests and ships, to the certitudes of observation and experiment, of collecting data, and of storing the memory. He thus shifts the emphasis from the reason itself to the antecedent operations of the mind without which it would grope uncertainly in the dark. Memory, therefore, rather than the rational faculty itself, becomes here the distinguishing mark of human nature. Apparently Johnson, like Hamlet, finds " god-like reason " most meaningful when it exists with " large discourse looking before and after."

There is another most meaningful passage on intellectual certainty, written in the *Life of Boerhaave* when its author was thirty years of age. It deserves more attention than it has received, for it justifies placing Johnson " among th'asserters of free reason's claim," to use the language of Dryden, and shows comprehension of and admiration for the scientific method.

> When he [Boerhaave] laid down his office of governour of the university, in 1715, he made an oration upon the subject of ' attaining to certainty in natural philosophy; ' in which he declares, in the strongest terms, in favour of experimental knowledge; and reflects, with just severity, upon those arrogant philosophers, who are too easily disgusted with the slow methods of obtaining true notions by frequent experiments; and who, possessed with too high an opinion of their own abilities, rather choose to consult their own imaginations, than inquire into nature, and are better pleased with the charming amusement of forming hypotheses, than the toilsome drudgery of making observations.
>
> The emptiness and uncertainty of all those systems, whether venerable for their antiquity, or agreeable for their novelty, he has evidently shown; and not only declared, but proved, that we are entirely ignorant of the principle of things, and that all the knowledge we have, is of such qualities alone as are discoverable by experience, or such as may be deduced from them by mathematical demonstration.

In *Rambler* no. 137 (1751) Johnson expressed a principle of Locke which has been of crucial importance in all scientific advance and which Bertrand Russell in our own time has made basic to what he has called logical atomism—further evidence that Johnson understood the implications of the scientific revolution of the preceding century.

> The chief art of learning, as Locke has observed, is to attempt

but little at a time. The widest excursions of the mind are made by short flights frequently repeated; the most lofty fabricks of science are formed by the continued accumulation of single propositions.

The passages just cited refer primarily to the attainment of scientific truth. What is their relevance to literature? Literature, after the process of selective imitation, guided by ethical insight and devotion to general nature, and after the addition of imaginative elements designed to create pleasure, becomes, as an end-product, something different from a work purely scientific or informative. Nevertheless it was one of Johnson's most important critical emphases that before the process of rational and imaginative digestion takes place the poet must rigorously subject himself to a program of investigative and inductive exploration of reality. The result is that the quest of Johnson's poet (how unlike the Platonic quest of, say, Shelley's Alastor!) is a Baconian, Hobbesian, and Lockean quest for sense-data—for impressions of and information about nature and life. Johnson is always pre-occupied with the poet's mental stores and is under no illusion as to the way in which the shelves of the mind are stocked. Mental power, even when possessed by a poet, is the somewhat earth-bound ability to make use of what has already been supplied. Had Shakespeare (as he says in the *Preface*) waited upon the power of nature or the stirrings of inner genius, he had waited in vain, for

> the power of nature is only the power of using to any certain purpose the material which diligence procures, or opportunity supplies. Nature gives no man knowledge, and, when images are collected by study and experience, can only assist in combining or applying them. Shakespeare, however favoured by nature, could impart only what he had learned . . .

3

In his best criticism Johnson was profoundly aware that a great work of literary art was an expression of all the powers of the writer—genius, invention, reason, imagination—working together and mutually energizing one another. This perception led him to transcend (without in any way destroying what he felt was the basic constitution of the mind) the rigidly defined categories of neo-classical psychology.

In Boswell's record of the journey to the Hebrides (15 August 1773) there is a passage in which Johnson expresses some important opinions about the mind. After the arrival of Dr. William Robertson the conversation, which then turned to the mental powers of Edmund Burke, became animated. Johnson said

> he could not understand how a man could apply to one thing, and not to another. Robertson said one man had more judgment, another more imagination. JOHNSON. 'No, sir; it is only one man has more mind than another. He may direct it differently; he may by accident see the success of one kind of study and take a desire to excel in it. I am persuaded that had Sir Isaac Newton applied to poetry, he would have made a fine epic poem. I could as easily apply to law as to tragic poetry.' BOSWELL. 'Yet, sir, you *did* apply to tragic poetry, not o law, *JOHNSON*. 'Because, sir, I had not money to study law. Sir, the man who has vigour may walk to the east just as well as to the west, if he happens to turn his head that way.'

In this lively interchange of opinion Johnson denies any special place to literature, removing from it the mystification that has often surrounded it and relating it to the law, to mathematics, and to other co-ordinate disciplines. The assumption is that literature is, like the others, a rigorous mental pursuit. But the prevailing intellectuality is instinct with a kind of dynamism. Excellence depends upon *vigor* of mind—a quality that transcends the conventional distinctions, which Robertson introduced, between the imagination and the judgment. "No, sir; it is only one man has more mind than another."

Among the expected definitions of *vigour* in the Dictionary there occurs one that isolates a purely intellectual quality. Johnson describes it as "mental force, intellectual ability." Such metaphorical language about the mind that achieves excellence he persisted in using again and again. In *Rambler* no. 129 he urges everyone to "endeavour to *invigorate* himself by *reason* and reflection." In *Rambler* no. 145 he describes the impulse of genius as being "*invigorated* with stronger *comprehension*." Addison, who thinks justly but faintly, writes poetry that is the "product of a *mind* too judicious to commit faults, but not sufficiently *vigorous* to attain excellence." Pope's *judgment* often "makes the representation more *powerful* than the reality." Scientific projects are often the product of minds

"*heated* with intenseness of *thought*." For Johnson methodical deduction possesses "placid beauties"; transitions are lovely; a well-connected plan has "the power of attracting attention"; and generalization possesses grandeur and sublimity. All this points to a conception of reason somewhat different from the neo-classic and Lockean conception of the cold, restraining judgment and even from Rapin's conception of a "*Judgment* proportion'd to the *Wit*" in strength in order to "moderate the heat and govern the natural Fury" of the imagination.[6] For Johnson the purely intellectual faculty is impelled by heat and power of its own generation—a fact which it is important to notice as an important supplement to the functions of reason outlined in the first section.

Reason was also energized by its co-existence with other powers of the mind and by co-operation with them in literary creation. It had certainly been one tendency of neo-classic criticism to separate the mental faculties, partly in order to understand them more fully and partly in order to give emphasis to the qualities of judgment and good sense that would moderate the excesses to which other faculties were all too prone. But although, as was noted earlier, Johnson often makes these conventional separations, especially when writing with a moral view, his purely aesthetic pronouncements point often to a fusion of the rational and the imaginative. If, as he said in *Rambler* no. 122, "experience soon shows us the tortuosities of imaginary rectitude, the complications of simplicity, and the asperities of smoothness," an attempt to account for the complicated effects of literary pleasure would soon enough show him the impossibility of keeping the imagination and the reason in logic-tight compartments. Johnson might well have exclaimed with Pope: "'What thin partitions Sense from Thought divide!" Johnson found it "ridiculous to oppose judgment to imagination; for it does not appear that men have necessarily less of one, as they have more of the other."[7] The co-existence

[6] *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie* tr. by Rymer (London, 1694), p. 23. For Locke on judgment, see *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 1. xi. 2. The phrases from Johnson in the two preceding sentences come from *Adventurer* no. 99 (4. 87), *Rambler* no. 158 (3. 249), *Life of Milton* (7. 139), and *Life of Cowley* (7. 38).

[7] *Life of Roscommon* (7. 169). Irving Babbitt cites this passage in *On Being Creative* (London, 1932) as an "occasional remark of admirable perspicacity"

of these two powers, each of which has its own kind of animation, leads Johnson to forget, in some of his best critical comments, the antitheses between reason and fancy that are elsewhere sharply drawn. His very language is such that one cannot always separate the rational from the imaginative strains. A passage in the *Life of Milton* on the effect of the imagination in that poet illustrates the point. I shall italicize those words and phrases which normally concern the operation of reason but which here comment upon the workings of the poet's imagination.

> The *thoughts* which are occasionally called forth in the progress, are such as could only be produced by an imagination in the highest degree fervid and active, to which materials were supplied by incessant *study* and unlimited *curiosity*. The heat of Milton's *mind* may be said to sublimate his learning, to throw off into his work the spirit of *science*, unmingled with its grosser parts.

The same type of fusion takes place between judgment and invention, between judgment and genius. As we have seen, there are passages in Johnson which do, in the more strictly neo-classical manner, separate the concept of invention, wit, natural genius, and imaginative power, on the one hand, from judgment, restraint, and art, on the other hand. But such passages do not represent his central conception of genius or of original invention, which he calls " the highest praise of genius." *Genius* is the inclusive term which refers, in the language of the Dictionary, to all " mental powers or faculties " or to a man " endowed with superior faculties." And Johnson refused to oppose the part to the whole. He ridicules, in *Idler* no. 60, Dick Minim's cant that " a perfect writer is not to be expected, because genius decays as judgment increases." In commenting upon the " chief scene of enchantment " in *Macbeth* (Act IV, sc. 1) he observes the extraordinary use of historical judgment in selecting the ingredients of the witches' unholy brew: " These are the touches of judgment and genius." But it is not only a matter of the necessary and plausible coexistence of the two. As in the case of reason and imagination,

(p. 92), but he finds that usually Johnson tends, " like most neo-classic critics, to set imignation and reason . . . in sharp opposition to one another " (p. 92). In contrast, this paper argues that the fusion of the two is a central Johnsonian insight, present in his best criticism.

there is a kind of mixing of essences. In quoting the conclusion of the *Life of Milton*, a passage on original genius, I shall again italicize those words and phrases that point to the presence of rational elements, which are here woven inseparably into the very fabric of the language itself.

> The highest praise of genius is original invention. Milton cannot be said to have *contrived* the *structure* of an epick poem, and, therefore, owes reverence to that *vigour* and amplitude of *mind* to which all generations must be indebted for the art of poetical narration, for the texture of the fable, the variations of incidents, the interposition of dialogue, and all the stratagems that surprise and enchain attention. But, of all the borrowers from Homer, Milton is, perhaps, the least indebted. He was naturally a *thinker* for himself, confident of his own abilities, and disdainful of help or hindrance . . .

Johnson early acquired the habit of introducing into his biographies (like those of Sarpi, Boerhaave, Barretier, Burman, and Sydenham) abstract and summary delineations of the moral and intellectual character of his subject. That habit he carried over into literary biography and criticism, and one finds a succession of " characters " of the poet from Imlac's to those that appear in virtually every one of the *Lives of the Poets*. Such delineations of literary persons and their mental qualities Johnson makes a functional part of his critical evaluations, since in his conception a work of art is a display, or proof, of those qualities. As early as the *Life of Savage* (1744) he found the poet's tragedy of Sir Thomas Overbury " an uncommon *proof* of strength of genius, and evenness of mind, of a serenity not to be ruffled, and an imagination not to be suppressed." He looked for " rays of genius " in all literary production. The point that has been made in this section is that literary excellence is the product of a reason that possesses vigor and power but not of reason, even thus considered, operating alone. The mind stimulated to literary activity is one in which all its powers are heightened and deeply and inextricably interfused.

I have not intended to deny what has always been perceived to be the central truth about Johnson as a critic, that he was a stout champion of the classical and humanistic ideal in letters. But I have found it necessary to point out what has often been ignored or perceived only dimly: that his devotion to general

nature and ethical truth was freshened by a vigorous empiricism and by an imaginative *élan* which freed him from the springes of conventional categories of psychology and rhetoric. He probably never asked himself where fancy is bred, but he doubtless would have placed in the head what others have placed in heart, blood, bowels, and reins. He always cherished the *vivida vis animi*, for to him the mind of a great writer (like Pope, for example) was a mind energized and invigorated—

> a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.

Such powers of mind it is the aim of literature at its finest to display for the instruction and pleasure of man.

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