



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 42 (Apr., 1935), pp. 145-162

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/508775>

Accessed: 22-03-2020 14:30 UTC

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THE RECEPTION OF JOHNSON'S PROSE STYLE

By W. VAUGHAN REYNOLDS

MACAULAY, speaking of the reception afforded to the *Rambler* when it first appeared, gives the following picture of Johnson's critics, divided into opposite camps :

A large party pronounced the style perfect, so absolutely perfect that in some essays it would be impossible for the writer himself to alter a single word for the better. Another party, not less numerous, vehemently accused him of having corrupted the purity of the English tongue. The best critics admitted that his diction was too monotonous, too obviously artificial, and now and then turgid even to absurdity. But they did justice to the acuteness of his observations on morals and manners, to the constant precision and frequent brilliancy of his language, to the weighty and magnificent eloquence of many serious passages, and the solemn yet pleasing humour of some of the lighter passages.¹

So have his critics always remained. This article is an attempt to show the various opinions of the contending parties on Johnson's prose style, the discussion being almost wholly confined to the eighteenth century.

What Macaulay said of the *Rambler* was true of most of Johnson's work. His reputation as man of letters once established, fresh works from his pen aroused controversy—now on account of their subject, now on account of their style or of the sentiments expressed. I take Johnson's detractors first, as they include those whom Macaulay considers "the best critics." Their name was legion, but only a few are remembered to-day.

The *Dictionary* may fairly be said to have established Johnson's fame. His previous works, even the satire *London*, which delighted Pope, even *The Vanity of Human Wishes* with its fine command of metre, even *The Rambler*, held by some to be the superior of *The Spectator*, failed to arouse an interest comparable with that excited by this triumph of single-handed lexicography. Appropriately, then, the first paper mentioned concerns the *Dictionary*, and its

¹ Article on Samuel Johnson, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed., vol. xv, pp. 466, col. ii—467, col. i).

effect on Johnson's style. Although actually entitled *A Defence of Mr. Kenrick's Review of Dr. Johnson's Shakespeare*,¹ it pays attention to the style of the *Ramblers*, and treats the faults of those essays at some length. The reviewer pierces the weak point in Johnson's armour by mentioning the "amazing number of blunders and inconsistencies in etymology" to be found in the *Dictionary*, which had been "recommended by foreigners as a standard of the English language." The mistakes of the lexicographer led him to examine the compositions of the writer. In these he discovered

the same traces of inattention to the idiom of our tongue. . . . In the meantime he [Johnson] was found to be eternally aiming at the introduction of *Latinisms*, and other vicious modes of expression, by way of *enriching* our tongue; but thereby corrupting it, as he himself says of Shakespeare, "by almost every mode of depravation."

Proceeding further, the reviewer finds that Johnson

instead of producing great and noble images . . . seldom reached farther than high sounding words. Instead of new and really elegant turns of thought, his novelty and refinement generally ended in some florid allusion, quaint antithesis, or fanatical preciseness of expression. His verse seemed heavy, cold and spiritless; and his prose alternately pompous and puerile.²

The accusation implied above, that Johnson's ignorance of native etymology and idiom drove him on to the surer ground of Latinisms, finds the support of Archibald Campbell in *Lexiphanes*. The title page announces that the dialogue is

An attempt to restore the ENGLISH Tongue to its ancient Purity, and to correct, as well as expose, the affected Style, hard Words and absurd Phraseology of many late Writers, and particularly of our ENGLISH LEXIPHANES, the RAMBLER.

Campbell attacks Johnson through parody, but his imitation is unsuccessful. He represents Johnson's style as consisting of a mass of polysyllables and triplets, mostly tautological. His parody is

¹ Published in London in 1766. On the title page, the author is named as "A friend. R.R." It was probably by Kenrick, who sought to conceal his responsibility by using these initials. He had published in 1765 *A Review of Dr. Johnson's new edition of Shakespeare* under his own name. This had been examined by James Barclay, in a paper called an *Examination of Mr. Kenrick's Review* (1766). The reply soon appeared, and if, as is generally supposed, it came from Kenrick's pen, he did not wish to admit that he had been so far stung as to answer in print.

² The quotations included in the text are from pp. 6-8 of the 1766 issue of this *Defence*.

manifestly unfair, and we should not expect this volume to contain much useful criticism. After the implications of the title-page, that Johnson had contaminated the English tongue; that his words were hard, his phraseology absurd, and his style affected; *Lexiphanes* has little material which calls for remark. Campbell suggests that the influence of Johnson's work for the *Dictionary* on the style of the *Ramblers* had its financial, as well as its literary aspects. " 'Twere to be wished we could only recover him so far as to enable him to translate his own *Ramblers* into tolerable good English; such English, I mean, as a common reader might understand, without the help of a dictionary. For after all, this may be a bookseller's project at bottom; he might write his *Ramblers* to make his dictionary necessary, and afterwards compile his dictionary to explain his *Ramblers*.'"¹

Another imitator of Johnson, George Colman, undertook the twofold task of parodist and critic. In his *Prose on Several Occasions*² appears *A Sketch of Dr. Johnson*, signed "Chiaro Oscuro," and dated December 22, 1775. Campbell's criticism had been unreasoned and ill-founded; Colman, on the other hand, in moderate terms, points to an obvious weakness in Johnson's more imaginative papers:

In his *Ramblers* and *Idlers*, whenever he introduces characters, their actions, deportment and thoughts have a most accurate and minute resemblance to nature, but they all talk one language, and that language is Dr. Johnson's. Words are the vehicle of our thoughts, as coaches are of our persons; the *state-equipage* should not be drawn forth but upon solemn occasions.³

Johnson was lashed by Churchill in the third part of *The Ghost*.⁴ The satirist disliked Johnson primarily for his Tory politics, but he tilts at his literary reputation in three passages. One of these brought home to Johnson the necessity of producing his edition of Shakespeare, the proposals for which had been printed seventeen years before. The other two refer to his style, and are much in the spirit of Campbell. When the "Ghost," commanded to knock nine times, obeyed

Immane Pomposo⁵ was not heard
T' import one crabbed foreign word:
Fear seizes heroes, fools and wits,
And Plausible his prayers forgets.⁶

¹ *Lexiphanes*, 4th ed., pp. 108-9.

² Published 1787.

³ *Prose on Several Occasions*, 1787, vol. ii, pp. 98-9.

⁴ Issued 1762.

⁵ Johnson.

⁶ *The Ghost*, ii, 335-38.

The account of those "singled forth" to test the authenticity of the "Ghost," gives the following picture of Johnson as a literary dictator :

Pomposo,—insolent and loud,
 Vain idol of a scribbling crowd,
 Whose very name inspires an awe,
 Whose every word is sense and law ;
 For what his greatness hath decreed,
 Like laws of Persia and of Mede,
 Sacred through all the realm of Wit,
 Must never of repeal admit ;
 Who, cursing flattery, is the tool
 Of every fawning, flattering fool ;
 Who Wit with jealous eye surveys,
 And sickens at another's praise ;
 Who, proudly seized of learning's throne,
 Now damns all learning but his own ;
 Who scorns those common wares to trade in,
 Reasoning, convincing, and persuading,
 But makes each sentence current pass
 With puppy, coxcomb, scoundrel, ass ;
 For 'tis with him a certain rule,
 The folly's proved when he calls fool ;
 Who to increase his native strength,
 Draws words six syllables in length,
 With which, assisted with a frown,
 By way of club, he knocks us down ;
 Who 'bove the vulgar dares to rise,
 And sense of decency defies ;
 For this same decency is made
 Only for bunglers in the trade,
 And, like the cobweb laws, is still
 Broke through by great ones when they will—
 Pomposo, with strong sense supplied,
 Supported, and confirm'd by Pride,
 His comrade's terrors to beguile
 " Grinn'd horribly a ghastly smile : "
 Features so horrid, were it light,
 Would put the devil himself to flight.¹

By 1780, the *Lives of the Poets* were making their appearance. Johnson's critical opinions did not meet with universal approval. Papers were issued by champions of Milton and Gray, who thought the Doctor ill-qualified to judge the merit of their favourites. Indignation at his critical dicta often prompted attacks on his style. A paper entitled *Remarks on Johnson's life of Milton*² speaks of Johnson's "inimitable style of abuse."³ This remark only leads up to a more general censure of his manner :

¹ *The Ghost*, ii, 653-88.

² "To which are added Milton's Tractate of Education and Areopagitica," London, 1780. [By Archdeacon Francis Blackburne.]

³ P. 99.

We should perhaps be degraded into the class of such cavillers,¹ should we express our dislike of Dr. Johnson's style ; but candor itself must allow, that there are periods in it which require to be translated into intelligible English, even where the sentiment is trivial enough for the conception of an honest John Trot.²

Johnson's strictures on Gray called forth this abuse from John Callander :³

It is curious to observe a man draw his own picture, without intending it. Pomposo, when censuring some of his odes, observes, that "Gray is too fond of words arbitrarily compounded. The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence. *Double, double, toil and trouble.*" He (the author of an Elegy in a country church-yard) "has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tip-toe. His art and his struggle are too visible, and there is too little appearance of ease, or nature. In all Gray's odes, there is a kind of cumbrous splendour which we wish away." We may say like Nathan, *Thou art the man.*⁴

Writing of Johnson's *Life of Milton*, Callander remarks :

With all his affectation of hard words, the Doctor becomes at once intelligible when he wishes to reprobate a rival genius, or insult the ashes of a benefactor. In defiance of Addison, and a thousand other *shallow fellows*, he asserts that Milton "both in prose and verse had formed his stile by a *perverse* and *pedantick* principle."⁵

Three years after Johnson's death the Reverend Robert Burrowes, A.M., published an *Essay on the Stile of Dr. Samuel Johnson*.⁶ This is an important fact in Johnson criticism ; his style is now being carefully weighed and valued, without the bias of either party or faction. The results of the inquiry are unfavourable, but the essay shows a commendable resolution to avoid groundless assertions and to base all critical comments on definite inquiry.

Burrowes finds Johnson's style obscure,⁴ mainly from his affectation

¹ *I.e.* Carping critics like Johnson.

² P. 129.

³ In *Deformities of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, selected from his works. 1st ed., Edinburgh, 1782 ; 2nd ed., London, 1782. [By John Callander of Craigforth.]

⁴ 1st ed., p. 17.

⁵ 2nd ed., p. 44. The reference to Milton does not occur in the first edition, where the word *benefactor* is followed by the sentence : "Speaking of Mr. Walmsley he says, 'In this man's house I passed many chearful and agreeable hours.' But 'he (Mr. Walmsley) was a *whig*, with all the *virulence* and *malevolence* of his party.'" "

⁶ This appeared in Volume I of the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* for the year 1787, published at Dublin. Vol. I is divided into two sections—Science and Polite Literature. The Essay, which is in two parts, begins on p. 27 of the section devoted to Polite Literature.

of polysyllables of Latin origin. Johnson thus defeats his own ends. As a moralist, his aim is to instruct the people ; but he gives his salutary counsel in words beyond the comprehension of ordinary men.¹ Burrowes admits, however, that Johnson's long words are "formed according to the exact analogy of the English language"²—which is at least an important concession.

Johnson's faults of style are placed under two heads—"as arising either from his endeavours after splendor and magnificence, or from his endeavours after harmony."³ His attempts to attain sublimity "taught him the abundant use of inversions and licentious constructions of every sort. Almost all his sentences begin with an oblique case, and words used in uncommon significations, with Latin and Greek idioms, are strewed too plentifully in his pages."⁴ The principal error resulting from Johnson's study of harmony is called by Burrowes "the parallelism of his sentences," that is, his balance. Of this "fault," the critic remarks: "There is scarcely a page of the *Rambler* which does not produce abundant instances of this peculiarity: and what is the ornament, which if introduced so often, can be always introduced happily?"⁵ In these extracts, Burrows was not in his happiest mood. Johnson *opposed* Latin and Greek idioms: his use of inversions is not "abundant,"⁶ and his balance is not employed so frequently as to become an affectation.

A generous appreciation of Johnson's talent for antithetical composition follows this censure of his balance. "For antithesis indeed he was most eminently qualified; none has exceeded him in nicety of discernment, and no author's vocabulary has ever equalled his in a copious assortment of forcible and definite expressions."⁷ This is discounted somewhat by strictures on his carelessness of arrangement and his faulty harmonies. ". . . Sounds almost similar are suffered to approach too near each other; and though some of these are too palpable to be passed over unnoticed by the author, yet I can never think any ear so incorrect as to adopt sameness and monotony for harmony."⁸

But though Burrowes has produced a telling criticism, his name is not generally familiar to readers of the present day. The most

¹ P. 28.² P. 40.³ P. 43.⁴ Pp. 47-48.⁵ P. 50.

⁶ In the first ten *Ramblers* I can find only seventeen inverted constructions—not an inordinately large number in sixty-five pages of the 1792 edition of his *Works*. Johnson's critics seem to have paid too much attention to his inversions.

⁷ Pp. 51-52.⁸ P. 54.

famous name among Johnson's contemporary detractors is that of Horace Walpole. This master of the gentlest art rarely suppressed his feelings; not the least remarkable of which was a peevish dislike of Johnson—both as a man and a literary figure. Ten letters,¹ ranging over a period of nine and a half years, bear witness to Walpole's contempt of the prose which was still rousing controversy through the country. "I have no thirst to know the rest of my contemporaries," he writes in 1773, "from the absurd bombast of Dr. Johnson down to the silly Dr. Goldsmith, though the latter changeling has had bright gleams of parts, and the former had sense, till he changed it for words, and sold it for a pension."² In an epistle to the Reverend William Mason,³ Johnson's sense is described as "overwhelmed by words." A third letter⁴ refers to "the fustian of his style, and the meanness of his spirit," which are good enough to please the degenerate age.

Walpole occasionally criticises individual works of Johnson, as apart from the general style in which his writings are couched. Of the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, he remarks: "What a heap of words to express very little! and though it is the least cumbrous of any style he ever used, how far from easy and natural!"⁵ By such letters we are introduced into the libraries of men of fashion, and look over their shoulders as they read each new production of Johnson's pen. His diction is condemned as "teeth-breaking" in one letter,⁶ and as "composed of the limbs of clowns of different nations" in another.⁷ Johnson's use of the triplet is described by Walpole as "triple tautology, or the fault of repeating the same sense in three different phrases."⁸ The *Life of Pope* is "a most trumpety performance, and stuffed with all his crabbed phrases and vulgarisms. . . . He seems to have read the ancients with no view but of pilfering polysyllables, utterly insensible to the graces of their simplicity, and these are called standards of biography!"⁹ Johnson's character of Warburton, in his *Life of Addison*, is "expressed

¹ References in the following notes are to the numbering and pagination of Mrs. Paget Toynbee's sixteen volume Oxford edition of *The Letters of Horace Walpole, fourth Earl of Orford*, 1904.

² Letter 1461, April 27, 1773.—viii, 269.

³ Letter 1535, April 7, 1774.—viii, 440.

⁴ Letter 1554, August 23, 1774.—ix, 35.

⁵ Letter 1600, January 21, 1775.—ix, 146.

⁶ Letter 1612, April 3, 1775.—ix, 173.

⁷ Letter 1682, February 18, 1776.—ix, 329.

⁸ Letter 1922, February 1, 1779.—x, 372.

⁹ Letter 2165, April 14, 1781.—xi, 427-28.

in the same uncouth phrases which he satirizes,"¹ and Madame d'Arblay's *Cecilia* is censured for being written in Dr. Johnson's "unnatural phrase." This was in 1782,² and thus a period of nearly ten years had not diminished Walpole's dislike of the Johnsonian style.

The points amassed against Johnson's style by his critics can be restated in the form of a threefold charge. His love of Latinisms and hard words forced him into a pompous, obscure and affected style; his attempts to attain the sublime introduced licentious constructions into his work; and in seeking rhythm he had only achieved monotonous parallelisms and disjointed harmonies. These were serious objections; but Johnson's army of admirers was as numerous as that of his foes.³

The first adulatory passage which we have to consider came, strangely enough, from the pen of an opponent. Johnson's *Taxation No Tyranny*, perhaps the least fortunate of his political pamphlets, met with stern opposition. One of the papers written in reply appeared under the flatly contradictory title of *Taxation, Tyranny*.⁴ While attacking Johnson's opinions, it pays tribute to his mastery of the art of prose, and gives evidence of the contemporary recognition of that mastery:

I recollect the time when entertainment and instruction were inseparably connected with every sentence which you wrote. Amidst the splendour of your language, we traced the close solidity of argument. To what cause, whilst you remain fantastically nice in the attainments of the former, must we attribute your contemptuous desertion of the latter? The sounds of reason are no more; the harmony of the periods still ravishes the ear, and reminds us of the music of an Opera, accompanying words the meaning of which is neither recommended by its novelty, nor distinguished by its importance.⁵

"The death of Dr. Johnson," says Murphy, "kept the public mind in agitation beyond all former example. No literary character

¹ Letter 2215, September 25, 1781.—xii, 58.

² Letter 2357, October 1, 1782.—xii, 339.

³ Included among his foes, but rather outside the main current of contemporary criticism was Dr. M. Maty, who reviewed English productions in French. His review of Johnson's *Dictionary*, in the *Journal Britannique* contains these remarks: "Son stile est pur, fort, et majestueux; mais il abonde en figures, et en antithèses, on y trouve souvent de l'enflure, et presque toujours une affectation de symétrie, de cadence, et d'obscurité.—Vol. xvii (July-August, 1755), p. 223.

⁴ *Taxation, Tyranny*. Addressed to Samuel Johnson, LL.D., London, 1775. Published anonymously.

⁵ Pp. 1-2.

ever excited so much attention.”¹ It is, then, not surprising that a number of biographical sketches, now paling into insignificance beside Boswell, but yet valuable in themselves, appeared in rapid succession within a few years of the end of his life. The first three of these, *A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, (1784) by Thomas Tyers, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785), published by Kearsley and attributed to William Cook, and *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Dr. Samuel Johnson*, (1785) commonly said to be by the Reverend William Shaw, are not important for our purpose. Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the last twenty years of his life* one might expect to prove more fruitful, but it contains only a few meagre references to Johnson's conversational style. These remarks deserve attention, however, as they show how Mrs. Piozzi realized the greatness of the thought behind the long words :

His mind was so comprehensive, that no language but that he used could have expressed its contents ; and so ponderous was his language, that sentiments less lofty and less solid than his were, would have been encumbered, not adorned by it.

Mr. Johnson was not intentionally, however, a pompous converser ; and though he was accused of using big words, as they are called, it was only when little ones would not express his meaning as clearly, or when, perhaps, the elevation of the thought would have been disgraced by a dress less superb.²

Four notable biographies contain definite attempts to describe the nature of Johnson's style, to trace its development and estimate its value. Joseph Towers, LL.D. produced his *Essay on the Life, Character and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson* in 1786. He remarks upon the “ harmony and splendour of the language ” in the *Ramblers*,³ and upon the “ admirable language and highly polished periods ” of the “ political productions.”⁴ The *Lives of the Poets* “ abound with . . . beauties of style.”⁵ Summing up, Towers points out that Johnson's manner suited his thought. Though seemingly too learned for common readers, it appealed to those whom Johnson had chosen as his public. Whatever its faults, his style had “ great strength and great dignity ” and its periods were “ often highly polished ” ; perhaps the task of finding a contemporary who wrote the English language with equal energy would be difficult.⁶

¹ *An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.—Works of Johnson* (1792 ed.), i, 3-4.

² 1st ed., p. 33.

³ P. 45.

⁴ 1st ed., p. 298.

⁵ P. 102.

⁶ Pp. 114-17.

Next to appear was the *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, by Sir John Hawkins, knight.¹ The biographer's first praise of Johnson's style is implied rather than definitely expressed. He declares that the mistakes and grammatical licentiousness of the translation of the *Voyage to Abyssinia* make it very hard to believe that Johnson was responsible.² Passing on to the *Rambler*, Hawkins remarks that the style was original, though said by some to be tumid. But "the vulgar opinion," he adds, "is that the style of this century is the perfection of our language, and that we owe its ultimate and final improvement to Mr. Addison, and when we make his cold and languid periods the test, it is no wonder if we mistake strength and animation for tumidity."³

Johnson's "excellence as a writer" is ascribed to the influence of "the divines and others of the last century" on his vocabulary and constructions.⁴ His style was the model on which popular English orators then living founded their speeches. This was proof of Johnson's "purity, elegance and strength,"⁵ The style of *Rasselas* earns high praise: "Considered as a specimen of our language, it is scarcely to be paralleled: it is written in a style refined to a degree of immaculate purity, and displays the whole force of turgid eloquence."⁶ Gleig, in his general preface to his edition of Johnson's translation of *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (London, 1789) attacks Sir John Hawkins as unsuited to the task of editing Johnson's works, and acting as his biographer and critic, mentioning his taste as "deplorable"⁷; however that may be, Hawkins was an enthusiastic defender of Johnson's style.

Arthur Murphy was an important predecessor of Boswell. His *Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson* was prefixed to the 1792 edition of Johnson's *Works*, and published separately in 1793. After describing a passage from the translation of Lobo's *Voyage* as the performance of an infant Hercules,⁸ the biographer makes little reference to style for nearly one hundred and fifty pages. When he returns to the discussion it is to consider two well-worn questions—the effect of the *Dictionary* on the style of *The Rambler*, and Johnson's debt to Sir Thomas Browne and the prose-writers of the preceding century. Murphy has nothing new to say:

It is remarkable, that the pomp of diction, which has been objected

¹ London, 1787.

⁴ P. 271.

⁷ P. 1.

² 1st ed., pp. 22-23.

⁵ P. 291.

⁸ 1793 ed., p. 15.

³ Pp. 269-70.

⁶ P. 367.

to Johnson was first assumed in the *Rambler*. His Dictionary was going on at the same time, and, in the course of that work, as he grew familiar with the technical and scholastic words, he thought that the bulk of his readers were equally learned or at least would admire the splendour and dignity of the style.

But how Johnson came to differ so widely from such "elegant models" as Cowley, Dryden, Tillotson, Temple, Addison, Swift and Pope is a problem

not to be solved unless it be true that he took an early tincture from the writers of the last century, particularly Sir Thomas Browne. Hence the peculiarities of the style, new combinations, sentences of an unusual structure, and words derived from the learned languages. . . . There is, it must be admitted, a swell of language often out of all proportion to the sentiment; but there is, in general, a fulness of mind, and the thought seems to expand with the sound of the words. Determined to discard colloquial barbarisms and licentious idioms, he forgot the elegant simplicity that distinguishes the writings of Addison.¹

If this paragraph leaves an unfavourable impression behind, Murphy pays an eloquent tribute to Johnson's command of style three pages later: ²

Johnson is JUPITER TONANS: he darts his lightning, and rolls his thunder, in the cause of virtue and piety. The language seems to fall short of his ideas; he pours along, familiarizing the times [*sic*] of philosophy, with bold inversions, and sonorous periods; but we may apply to him what Pope has said of Homer: "It is the sentiment that swells and fills out the diction, which rises with it, and forms itself about it; like glass in the furnace, which grows to greater magnitude, as the breath within is more powerful, and the heat more intense."

After this, Murphy must be classed among Johnson enthusiasts.

The appearance of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*³ did not stop the flow of biographies. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., with Critical Observations on his Works*, by Robert Anderson, M.D., was published in London in 1795. The criticism of Johnson's style, concentrated in a few pages, contains some interesting remarks. Although there is some tendency to pomposity in his diction, Johnson's epistolary skill entitles him to rank with the best letter-writers of the nation.⁴ This division of his literary productions is

¹ Pp. 156-58.

² P. 161.

³ Boswell's opinion of Johnson's style is so well known, and the volumes containing it are so easily accessible that it is not included here. It is summarized most clearly in the passage I, 217-225 (Birkbeck Hill ed.).

⁴ 1st ed., pp. 217-18.

too rarely discussed by his critics. Anderson admits that Johnson's adoption of Latin derivatives marks an innovation, but this would not be dangerous if he were copied only by men capable of thinking with equal precision. Johnson's "comprehension of mind was the mould for his language. Had this comprehension been narrower, his expression would have been easier . . ." ¹ "And it is to be remembered," proceeds Anderson, "that while he has added harmony and dignity to our language, he has neither vitiated it by the insertion of foreign idioms, or the affectation of anomaly in the construction of his sentences." ²

Literary biographers often make chronological surveys of their author's style. Anderson's views are peculiar, and unlike Boswell, ³ he finds little trace of Johnson's settled "manner" in his early performances. He also remarks that Johnson "altered, and perhaps improved his style, "long after his reputation had been established, and his *Rambler* had appeared. The composition of this work differs a good deal from that of *Rasselas*, *The Journey to the Western Islands*, and *The Lives of the Poets*. Anderson agrees with the usual theory, that the seventeenth century prose-writers had helped to mould the style of the *Rambler* essays. ⁴ The biographer concludes by noting Johnson's effect on his contemporaries: ". . . from the influence which he has had upon our composition, scarcely anything is written now, that is not better expressed than was usual before he appeared to lead the national taste." ⁵

Our excursions into the nineteenth century must be strictly limited. Three critics alone are considered. In 1802 *A Critical Enquiry into the Moral Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson* was published in London, the author's name being given as Attalus. ⁶ This production is interesting as evidence of the continued inquiry into the nature and value of Johnson's work. Though the author possesses no very pronounced critical ability, he draws a notable comparison between Addison and Johnson, which shows that they were still regarded as rival claimants of the palm among essayists:

Johnson possessed powers unattainable by Addison; and Addison moved in a circle where Johnson could not approach. Addison is gay and lively; Johnson grave and sententious. Addison is sometimes trifling; Johnson is always uniform. Addison is seldom more than

¹ Pp. 227-28.

² P. 228.

³ *Life*, i, 88.

⁴ Pp. 229-31.

⁵ Pp. 231-32.

⁶ The 1803 edition bears the name of William Mudford, the pseudonym being dropped.

pleasing ; Johnson is of the sublime ; the language of Addison is pure and simple ; that of Johnson is nervous and elegant ; Addison's is equable, and never offends by its harshness ; Johnson's is sometimes rugged and pedantic ; Addison is never affecting ; Johnson is often highly pathetic ; Addison displays no irregular flights, no sudden inspirations ; Johnson rises with his subject and frequently towers into sublimity. . . .¹

Attalus considers the style of *Rasselas* dignified and "uniformly grand," but has to admit that there is a "want of discrimination" between the characters.²

Alexander Chalmers is concerned more closely with the essays than with Johnson's other works. His reviews of the *Rambler* and the *Idler* in *The British Essayists*, first published in 1802,³ take the form of "historical and biographical prefaces," and he does his work thoroughly and well. The most important point in Chalmers's survey is his investigation of Johnson's revisions, but he also has some remarks on the style of both the *Rambler* and the *Idler*. On the reception of the *Rambler*, he makes the same observation as most critics : "The style was new : it appeared harsh, involved, and perplexed : it required more than a transitory inspection to be understood ; it did not suit those who run as they read, and who seldom return to a book if the hour which it helped to dissipate can be dissipated by more active pleasures."⁴ But, as Chalmers remarks at a later stage in his preface,⁵ "the prejudices which were alarmed by a new style and manner have long subsided" ; and though a new generation of detractors has arisen, incessantly repeating the "few . . . pedantic sentences" of the *Rambler*, these objections are, fortunately, "not very prevalent." The general opinion is, "that although Dr. Johnson is not to be imitated with perfect success, yet the attempt to imitate him, where it has neither been servile nor artificial, has elevated the style of every species of literary composition. In everything, we perceive more vigour, more spirit, more elegance. He not only began a revolution in our language, but lived till it was almost completed."⁶

Chalmers disagrees with Anderson, finding Johnson's settled "manner" even in his earliest works. Comparing the styles of Addison and Johnson, he gives preference to the former, on the

¹ 1802 ed., pp. 61-2.

² P. 82.

³ The references are to the 1823 ed. of *The British Essayists, with Prefaces Historical and Bibliographical*, London. Vols. xvi, xvii and xviii contain the *Rambler*, and Vol. xxvii the *Idler*.

⁴ Vol. xvi, p. xix.

⁵ P. xl.

⁶ Pp. xl-xli.

ground of his *more general utility*, Johnson's style being only calculated for the more liberally educated readers of the eighteenth century. Both, however, wrote in their natural manner. "The earliest of Dr. Johnson's works confirm this; from the moment he could write at all, he wrote in stately periods; and his conversation, from first to last, abounded in the peculiarities of his composition."¹ One of the chief merits of Chalmers as a critic of Johnson was that he realized the close connection between the Doctor's style and his theme. He tries to explain the lighter style of the *Lives of the Poets* as the result of subject matter:

If the *Lives of the Poets* be thought an exception to Dr. Johnson's general habit of writing, let it be remembered that he was for the most part confined to dates and facts, to illustrations and criticisms, and questions; but when he indulged himself in moral reflections, to which he delighted to recur, we have again the vigour and loftiness of the *Rambler*, and only miss some of what have been termed his *hard words*.²

On the *Idler*, the critic has less to say. "These Essays . . . afford evident marks of the same depth of thought which predominates in the *Rambler*, although expressed with more ease and familiarity of style and more general gaiety of manner."³ Chalmers had remarked how Johnson, in the *Rambler*, had given all his correspondents the same lofty periods⁴; in the *Idler*, however, the characteristic correspondence is more fortunate, as "the Author unbends with considerable felicity . . . and where he catches himself relapsing into his more solemn periods, he immediately descends to common language. . . ." ⁵

Chalmers had written historical and biographical prefaces. Nathan Drake, the last critic we shall consider, produced a series of *Essays, Biographical, Critical and Historical* illustrative of the various series of collected papers, such as the *Spectator* and the *Rambler*. His essays "illustrative of the *Tatler, Spectator* and *Guardian*" appeared in three volumes in 1805. The paper *On the Progress and Merits of English Style, and on the Style of Addison in particular* contains a reference to the influence of Johnson's "splendid and elaborate diction" on literary expression.⁶ The subject of Johnson's style is exhaustively treated in the series on the *Rambler, Adventurer* and *Idler*, produced by Drake in 1809.⁷

¹ P. xlii.² *Ibid.*³ Vol. xxvii, pp. x-xi.⁴ Vol. xvi, p. xliii.⁵ Vol. xxvii, p. xi.⁶ Vol. ii, p. 114.⁷ *Essays, Biographical, Critical and Historical*, illustrative of the *Rambler, Adventurer* and *Idler*, and of the various periodical papers which, in imitation of

The author finds traces of Johnson's settled style in *The Preface to the Translation of Father Lobo's Voyage*, but it was not until the *Rambler* appeared that Johnson "first presented to the public those peculiarities and prominent beauties of style which immediately distinguished him, in so striking a manner, from all preceding writers, and which have made so durable an impression upon our language."¹

In twelve pages,² Drake gives an excellent survey of Johnson's style. He does not give unqualified praise; he hastens to point out defects before passing on to beauties. Johnson's use of Latin words with an English idiom is no less pedantic than Milton's principle of using foreign idioms in his native language. Johnson, Drake considers, was probably driven to use Latinisms by his attachment to the works of Sir Thomas Browne. The style of the *Rambler* is well suited to a scientific treatise, but not to popular essays: "almost every sentence . . . is replete with abstract substantives taken from a learned language, and therefore unintelligible to mere English readers." Obscurity is not the only fault of these Essays; there is a "monotony . . . which . . . envelopes every character and subject introduced into the work." Though his grammatical inaccuracies are few, Johnson's desire of "imparting unusual dignity and importance to his diction" "drove him into numerous *licentious constructions and inversions*." The "parallelisms, the triads and the antitheses of the *Rambler*, occasionally the sources of great richness and splendour, are so abundantly employed as to pall upon the ear; and if, as is frequently the case, the subject demand rather simplicity than ornament, their adoption must excite either ridicule or disgust."

But, on the other hand, given a sublime subject, Johnson has no equal in harmony, propriety and energy. His precision in the choice and use of terms, one of the first requisites towards a perspicuous style, is a remarkable characteristic of his composition. His long words, "abstract, and of classic derivation," are formed on native analogies, and despite their heavy effect, they are so clear in their meaning, and so appropriate to their respective ideas that they express the author's meaning with complete accuracy. Johnson's harmonious arrangement is praised as imparting "to forcible and

the writings of Steele and Addison, have been published between the close of the eighth volume of the *Spectator* and the commencement of the year 1809; by Nathan Drake, M.D., London, 1809. Vol. i, part ii, Essay i contains an account of *The Literary Life of Dr. Johnson*.

¹ I, ii, 211.

² *Ibid.*, 255-66.

sonorous [words] . . . the utmost dignity, melody and nerve." He is happy in the choice of his metaphors, and the richness of his style elevates the thought. As a result, his manner is "perfectly original": Johnson is the most correct of authors, yet he combines his correctness with dignity, warmth and strength.

Johnson's style had been widely used as a model:¹ Drake remarks on its usefulness for that purpose. The adoption of his style "by the Critic, the Orator, and the Historian, has been frequently attended with the best effects; as the weight, the splendour, and dignity of the subjects have often been such as would most happily harmonize with the strong and nervous periods of their prototype."² On topics of a more familiar kind, however, "it would surely be no mark of judgment" to employ the phraseology of the *Rambler*.

Drake is agreeably surprised by the "apparently unlaboured, free, pure and flowing" style of Johnson's letters;³ and finds the *Prayers and Meditations* written "in a strain remarkable for its simplicity and plainness."⁴ These are, however, minor divisions of Johnson's work. Reviewing his productions in general, Drake passes a final judgment: ". . . the style which he adopted as an author was polished with great care and corrected with indefatigable attention. It has beauties of peculiar lustre and defects which are very apparent; but it has, upon the whole, greatly contributed, and more than the style of any other writer, to the correctness, the dignity, and the harmony of English composition."⁵

Against the points urged by Johnson's detractors, his more friendly critics prepared a strong defence. They explained the splendour of his diction as being due to the expansiveness of his thought. He was precise, both in the choice and the use of his terms and he never indulged in empty verbiage. If he was fond of Latinisms, he was always careful to form them on English analogies, and he introduced no foreign idioms. To this purity and clearness was added an unremitting care for the harmony and dignity of his

¹ Drake quotes Courtenay as naming Goldsmith, Reynolds, Burney, Malone, Stevens, Hawkesworth, Jones (poet) and Boswell as having been influenced by Johnson's style. To this list he adds the names of Dr. Robertson, Dr. Blair, Mr. Gibbon, Mr. Burke, Dr. Leland, Madame d'Arblay, Dr. Ferguson, Dr. Knox, Dr. Stuart, Dr. Parr, Dr. Gillies, Archdeacon Nares, Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Chalmers, Mr. Roscoe and Dr. Anderson as those who have "in a greater or less degree, founded their style on that of the author of the *Rambler*."—I, ii, 281-83. Courtenay's list may be found in *A Poetical Review of the Literary and Moral Character of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, London, 1786, pp. 22-4.

² I, ii, 283.

³ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 458-9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 481.

construction. Consequently, he wrote in a style remarkable for its elegance and strength, which had improved the standard of English prose: its influence was likely to be of abiding value, and his prose was to be a model for future ages.

Such were the opinions of the opposite camps. It is notable that his later critics tend to pay more and more attention to his influence, and to his fitness as a model. As the late Sir Walter Raleigh once observed, "Johnson continued to be the most influential teacher of English prose until Macaulay, by introducing a more glittering kind of antithesis and a freer use of the weapons of offence in criticism, usurped his supremacy."¹ Johnson's reputation then declined rapidly, and Macaulay himself was in no small measure responsible. But even *he* modified his views. In 1831, in his Review of Croker's edition of Boswell, he had condemned Johnson's language as *universally* and systematically vicious: he found Johnson to have used "those strong plain words, Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French, of which the roots lie in the inmost depths of our language" less than any other eminent writer. Some twenty-five years later when the impetuosity of a brilliant youth had been modified by a more mature judgment, he softened his remarks.² He now says that Johnson was "evidently too partial to the Latin element in our language." In some passages he finds a "weighty and magnificent eloquence." The *Preface to Shakespeare* is "not in his best manner." That Macaulay allows to a man, whose diction he had called universally and systematically vicious, all of whose books he had found written in the same language, a *best* manner, implies a notable change of view. This change is proved when he refers to the *Lives of the Poets* as in a lighter and easier style than the earlier works. Macaulay had ceased to regard Johnson's "manner" as entirely barbaric.

Johnson's prose style has the same effect on most of his readers as it had on Macaulay. It starts with a bad name: the word "Johnsonese," with all its less favourable implications, gives the unwary a prejudice against his diction. But because of the weighty thought and comprehensive mind which require the long words to express themselves; the skilful use of balance and the pleasing harmonies of the cadence, Johnson's "manner" meets with growing

¹ Introduction to his edition of E. S. Barrett's *Heroine*, Oxford, 1909, p. xii.

² In his *Life of Johnson*, reprinted in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed., Vol. xv, pp. 468-70. This life was written in 1856.

appreciation as it becomes more familiar to us. Its faults have been censured often enough by its critics : but the perfect style has yet to be formed. He worked with a definite aim in view—to raise the standard of English composition. Though we may not agree with all his views, though we may not applaud all his methods, his achievement marked an epoch in the history of English prose. His composition embodied the ideals of a century marked by tireless inquiry into the principles of prose technique. From such a man the present age has much to learn.