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Towards an Understanding of Johnson's *Rambler*

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I

Despite the continuing scholarly interest in Samuel Johnson's writings, there remain major works by him as yet only superficially explored and dimly understood, and there continue to be even among scholars misconceptions about where Johnson's significance as a writer actually lies. Literary historians and critics are not less influenced by intellectual fashion than philosophers and journalists, and it is not surprising that those of the mid-twentieth century should have selected from Johnson's works as deserving of close study those which seem somehow to accord with the spirit of their own time. We thus know a great deal more about Johnson the "empiricist," "cultural anthropologist," "political skeptic," and "gloomy" poet than we do about his role as a moralist—the role for which he was best known during his lifetime. The kind of distortion which results is perhaps nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in Donald Greene's fine book, *Samuel Johnson* (1970). Greene's discussion of Johnson "The Political Writer" takes up nearly forty pages; his account of *The Rambler* (1750-1752), *The Adventurer* (1753-1754), and *The Idler* (1758-1760), periodicals containing three hundred and thirty-seven essays on human life written during Johnson's most productive decade as a writer, occupies a mere five pages. These five pages, moreover, are filled with miscellaneous information and opinion rather than analysis, and Greene indeed has the candor to admit of *The Rambler* that "analytical study in depth of its contents has not yet been attempted."[1] It is to the credit of scholars writing since the preparation of Greene's book that the crucial importance of *The Rambler* in trying to understand Johnson's luminous intelligence has been recognized, and that "analytical study" of the work of the kind attempted in Walter Jackson Bate's *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (1955) has begun anew.

[1]Donald Greene, *Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1970), p. 141.

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Older studies of *The Rambler* treat the work as a convenient repository of Johnsonian dicta from which one can deduce "the cornerstones" of his morality.[2] Recent students have seen this approach to be flawed, insofar as it takes no account of the author's apparent and (to some) alarming habit of vacillating, even on issues of great moment, and even within individual essays. The two most significant recent studies of the work have tried to come to grips with the Rambler's evident inconsistencies by focusing upon the single essay as an independent rhetorical structure. Paul Fussell has argued that we can understand *The Rambler* only if we think of Johnson, "caught short at deadline time," "working things out *ad hoc* from page to page." "Where he cannot resolve inconsistencies, he ignores them," writes Fussell, "where he cannot ignore them, he embraces them."[3] Leopold Damrosch, Jr. believes that Johnson's method of composition was much more carefully contrived than Fussell thinks. Damrosch detects two "rhetorical modes" in the *Rambler* essays, the first of which is designed "to jolt our complacency by a series of reversals," and the second "to deepen our understanding by a steady progression of reflections which are held together by association more than by logic."[4] These able studies illuminate aspects of Johnson's "manner of proceeding" in *The Rambler,* but both, it seems to me, are limited approaches. The error in both Fussell's and Damrosch's studies is that they give exaggerated emphasis to method or "mode" in individual essays and insufficient attention to what Johnson's overriding purpose throughout *The Rambler* actually is. Ultimately their concentration upon how Johnson says something rather than what he is saying somehow trivializes *The Rambler* and provides unconvincing solutions to the problem of resolving Johnson's inconsistencies and explaining his reversals. The argument of this paper is that we can understand the lack of any readily perceived symmetry among the numerous meditations in *The Rambler* by keeping in mind the area of experience Johnson is exploring and by focusing upon the weighty and complicated purpose behind his writing.

[2]See, for example, *'Rasselas' and Essays,* ed. Charles Peake (London, 1967), p. xxvi.

[3]Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (New York, 1971), p. 161.

[4]Leopold Damrosch, Jr., "Johnson's Manner of Proceeding in the *Rambler,*" *ELH,* 40 (1973), 82. Another recent essay of importance which centers upon *The Rambler* is John B. Radner's "Samuel Johnson, The Deceptive Imagination, and Sympathy," in *Studies in Burke and His Time,* 16 (1974), 23-46.

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That purpose, as is well known, is defined in *Rambler* 208, where Johnson states emphatically that his "principal design" was "to inculcate wisdom or piety."[5] Johnson in *The Rambler* was a Christian writer trying to help men know and lead the moral life, and the chief means by which he aimed to achieve this end was to bring his readers to "a nearer acquaintance" with themselves through "the attentive study of [their] own minds" (III, 151). This may seem to some readers today to be an unimportant task. To Johnson it appeared that the knowledge he was leading men towards was the most important kind for them to acquire. Men are placed on earth, he wrote emphatically late in life, to learn "how to do good and avoid evil."[6] Over and over again in *The Rambler* he advised readers to turn away from "remote and unnecessary subjects" to "moral enquiries" and "the various modes of virtue" (III, 131-132). Johnson had such a deep commitment to his "principal design," and there is such an urgency and responsibility in his inquiries into moral questions, that it is not possible to take seriously Fussell's view of him as tossing off these important essays in an effort to meet press deadlines.[7] It is also difficult to accept Damrosch's opinion that Johnson strategically contrived reversals and conceived alternatives in order to force readers to think for themselves, to jar them towards the truth. When Johnson thought he knew the truth, he told the truth as directly as he could. It is hard to think of a writer in whose works there is less literary toying with his readers. Even in his most lighthearted essays in *The Idler* it proved difficult for him to resist abandoning the masks of irony and satire and telling his audience the simple truth.[8]

II

What Johnson does typically in one of his "professedly serious" (V, 320) *Rambler* papers is to grapple as honestly as he knows

[5]*The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss (New Haven, 1969); in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, V, 319. Hereafter page references to this edition of *The Rambler* (in vols. III, IV, and V of the *Works*) will be given in the text of the paper.

[6]*Lives of the English Poets* (Everyman edition, 1941), I, 63.

[7]Johnson's habits of procrastination and impulsive composition did, as he confessed in *Rambler* 208, affect his performance in individual essays. However, Johnson was fully aware of the perils of hasty writing and took care to avoid them (see III, 78, 130-135). While Fussell's theory is no doubt true of particular essays, it is of very limited value when applied to the whole body of *The Rambler*.

[8]See my paper "Johnson's *Idler:* the Equipment of a Satirist," *ELH*, 37 (1970), 218.

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how with the problems inherent in leading a moral life in the world of men. This involves probing into the complexities of human motivation and "the labyrinth of complicated passions" (IV, 41) in order to detect and uncover the sources of human error. Johnson repeatedly says that he knows the difficulties of making such a scrutiny of the human heart. "To lay open all the sources from which error flows in upon him who contemplates his own character," he writes in No. 28, "would require more exact knowledge of the human heart than, perhaps, the most acute and laborious observers have acquired" (III, 152). The "state of mortal virtue," he says in No. 70, is "always uncertain and variable," influenced as it is by such factors as "the power of desire, the cogency of distress, the complications of affairs, or the force of partial influence" (IV, 5). Yet despite the difficulties, it is precisely into this knot of tangled emotions, motives, and actions that Johnson takes us, for he believes that knowledge of human nature is required for the exercise of "practical virtue" (III, 133).

If we follow his path through a typical essay, we will find him sincerely trying to explore the configurations and ramifications of a difficult subject and, quite often, giving the impression of vacillating. He will also be conscious of what he wrote in preceding essays, and he may want to correct or modify views which seem to him in retrospect to have been stated with too much appearance of confidence. *Rambler* 136 may serve as an example here. It is on a subject related to that discussed in bold and unequivocal terms in No. 91: patronage. In No. 136 Johnson worries the topic until his essay becomes a meditation of general moral significance upon the importance of distributing praise and blame justly in the world. He begins by noting that while rank may be given by princes and wealth by misers and robbers, men of letters have a power which only they possess: the power of conferring "the honours of a lasting name" upon their fellow men. The essay takes an immediate moral direction in the second paragraph where Johnson emphasizes that the power brings with it a heavy responsibility, requiring of authors "the most vigilant caution and scrupulous justice." This moral note is continued for three paragraphs, following which Johnson turns his attention to the literary habit of writing dedications, and censures writers for "fixing the stamp of literary sanction upon the dross and refuse of the world." A characteristic reversal takes place at the beginning of the seventh paragraph, where Johnson retreats from the bold tone of paragraph six and says that authors are not the only ones

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to blame for this convention of conferring false praise. Patrons too are at fault, for surely they have less pressing need to hear praise than the author has incitements to give it. Turning again in paragraph eight, Johnson says that patrons also "may claim indulgence." Hapless writers will persist until they find some lord "willing to hear of his own eloquence and taste," and "such weakness cannot be censured as an instance of enormous depravity." Continuing in this gentler vein, he notes that since praise is due to merit, those who exhibit exceptional merit to the public have a right to expect honors. Indeed, even those in private life who encourage an author may deserve public praise, and a writer is entitled to pay the tribute of a dedication even to an obscure person who helped him and whose own merit deserves to be rescued from oblivion. Indulging in a still greater "relaxation," Johnson admits that "hope as well as gratitude may not unblameably produce a dedication." Thus an essay that seemed at one point to discourage dedications has near the end turned into a kind of apology for dedicators. Johnson concludes (in another apparent turn, but really a change in tone rather than theme) by nonetheless reminding men of their "general obligations to virtue and to truth" and warning that "praise must lose its influence, by unjust or negligent distribution" (IV, 354-359).

The essay on first reading may strike one as showing indecision, but this is an inadequate response. What we see in No. 136, as we do in so many *Rambler* papers, is a mind seeking comprehensiveness and truth in an area of experience where such finality is elusive. It is not the circumstances or method of composition that determines the final shape of a *Rambler* essay as much as the difficulties inherent in a given subject and Johnson's determination not to oversimplify it.[9] The reversals and apparent inconsistencies we note, far from being a sign of Johnson being "adrift" and "playing by ear,"[10] indicate a desire not to forsake intricate truth for a superficially convincing orderliness. Johnson was well aware of the strong temptation in writers who have "heated" their

[9]Johnson did, however, have some general kind of loose, ruminative essay in mind when he began *The Rambler*. To "ramble" is defined in the *Dictionary* as "To rove loosely and irregularly; to wander." He would also, of course, be aware of the liberties taken by earlier periodical essayists. He may even have remembered Dryden's definition of "The Nature of a Preface" in the Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*. That "Nature," Dryden wrote, consists in "rambling; never wholly out of the way, nor in it." See Dryden, *Poems and Fables*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1962), p. 526. For Johnson's own account of the origin of the title of *The Rambler*, see III, xxiii.

[10]Fussell, p. 178.

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"zeal in a cause" to "persue the same train of reasoning" and to ignore "some adjacent difficulty" (III, 350). He evidently thought his subject too important to treat in this fashion, and accordingly the perceived "adjacent difficulties" are brought into the essay for discussion.

While there is no single "manner of proceeding" that can be called typical of the *Rambler* papers, No. 136 illustrates well some of the characteristics which go to make Johnson a highly individual essayist. At the beginning of many *Rambler* essays an idea is "started" up and expressed with some assurance. It is then pursued through its ramifications, measured against alternatives, worried and extended by the complications which occur to Johnson's ranging intellect—complications which, out of scrupulousness, he will not conceal from the reader. This procedure is not just an effort "to see both sides"[11] of a question, although of course it is partly that; it reveals a progressive and deepening awareness of the complexities of his subject and of the perils of giving advice on that subject. In this process of probing into and qualifying an idea, a process accompanied by a general relaxation of rigor as Johnson's sense of compassion comes more strongly into play, the degree of assurance felt at the beginning is often (at least partly) dissipated and the reader's mind is sometimes taken far afield from the starting point. At the end there is a sort of reining in, when a moral is (occasionally none too convincingly) offered as a conclusion to the reflections. The impression we have throughout is of seeing the process of Johnson's thinking rather than the results of his thought, and this indeed is a distinctive feature of many of his essays. We need not, however, impute this to the habit of hasty composition. It is rather Johnson's acknowledgement of the complexity of leading a moral life and of the difficulty of containing that complexity within neatly ordered sequences of ideas.

III

To uncover some of the other potential sources of ambiguity and inconsistency in *The Rambler*, we need to look away from particular essays to the moral vision which pervades the work as a whole. Johnson's perception of man's moral life in these essays is generally (but not exclusively, as we will see) of something threatened from within and without and maintained only by perpetual

[11]Arieh Sachs, *Passionate Intelligence* (Baltimore, 1967), p. 62.

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vigilance. The vast majority of men, he writes in No. 70, are in "a kind of equipoise between good and ill" and require only "a very small addition of weight" to be moved in one direction or the other (IV, 3-4). This sense of the precariousness of virtue is strikingly conveyed in *The Rambler* by a set of three recurring images, each of them commonplace in Christian writing but of interest here in the insistent reinforcement they provide to Johnson's theme. The most conspicuous of these images is of the heart (or mind) as a fortress or city under siege, typically having "only a few avenues" fortified while "all the rest is left open to the incursions of appetite" (IV, 5). The impression given by the image is of the heart as almost totally vulnerable to assault, as, for example, in No. 129, where Johnson wonders why "we have been warned [by moralists] only against part of our enemies, while the rest have been suffered to steal upon us without notice; why the heart has on one side been doubly fortified, and laid open on the other to the incursions of error, and the ravages of vice" (IV, 321). The fortress image occurs often, expressing poetically Johnson's vision of the embattled heart, preyed upon by its own longings and vanities. A similarly recurring image, this one conveying the danger of temptation from without and the appeal of falsehood, is that of the wanderer, trying to walk "with circumspection and steadiness in the right path at an equal distance between the extremes of error" (III, 137), threatened by "snares" (IV, 44), "ambush" (V, 301), "asperities and intricacies" (III, 140), and deceptively comfortable groves that seem "irresistibly pleasant" (III, 345). The third dominant image is that of human life as a ship lost on a stormy ocean, subject to the vicissitudes of wind and tide:

> Since life itself is uncertain, nothing which has life for its basis, can boast much stability. Yet this is but a small part of our perplexity. We set out on a tempestuous sea, in quest of some port, where we expect to find rest, but where we are not sure of admission; we are not only in danger of sinking in the way, but of being misled by meteors mistaken for stars, of being driven from our course by the changes of the wind, and of losing it by unskilful steerage; yet it sometimes happens, that cross winds blow us to a safer coast, that meteors draw us aside from whirlpools, and that negligence or error contributes to our escape from mischiefs to which a direct course would have exposed us. Of those that by precipitate conclusions, involve themselves in calamities without guilt, very few, however they may reproach themselves,

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> can be certain that other measures would have been more successful. (V, 204-205)

The image suggests powerfully the idea of the Christian struggling to live virtuously while surrounded by vast, capricious forces which he cannot hope to comprehend or control.

The more deeply Johnson burrows into human motivations to expose for men the innumerable strategies and vanities which enable them to live with error, the keener this awareness becomes of the frailty of virtue and the closer he is drawn to an extreme fastidiousness. The reader can be forgiven if he thinks at certain points in *The Rambler* that leading a moral life is too risky and toilsome for mere humans. Johnson warns us against even "a gradual relaxation of vigilance" (V, 96), and makes the slightest "negligence" in "small affairs" seem catastrophic, for "he that suffers the slightest breach in his morality, can seldom tell what shall enter it, or how wide it shall be made; when a passage is opened, the influx of corruption is every moment wearing down opposition, and by slow degrees deluges the heart" (V, 284). He is in a similar mood when he advises young people to enter the world with a policy of "prudent distrust," for the "dangers" to which the "converse of mankind" exposes them are "numerous," and "there is no ambition however petty, no wish however absurd, that by indulgence will not be enabled to overpower the influence of virtue" (V, 162-163). Johnson is capable of describing even the habit of day-dreaming as "a formidable and obstinate disease of the intellect" whose "slightest attacks" should "be watchfully opposed" (IV, 107). Little wonder that some of his "correspondents" complained of finding the Rambler "a solemn, serious, dictatorial writer" (III, 129).

Such stern morality, verging on overscrupulousness, is characteristic of the Rambler, but it is only one of his two prevailing moods. Modifying and humanizing this severe attitude is another side of Johnson which is also expressed throughout the work. This is Johnson the compassionate and forgiving observer of men. It is this quality of mercy in him which emerges in No. 63 when, after having earlier repeatedly warned readers against the dangers of being dissatisfied and restless, he writes that it is natural for mankind to be restless and that this condition deserves "pity" and may even "admit some excuse" (III, 335). The strict moralist in him more than once warns against wasting time on trifles and ridicules collectors of useless oddities; and yet he also defends such collectors, since "he who does his best, however

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little, is always to be distinguished from him who does nothing" (V, 172). Alongside warnings about the dangers inherent in deviating from the beaten track in even trivial ways, he can exclaim "what is there which may not be perverted?" (IV, 85) and caution readers against "too much" refining their "delicacy" (V, 281). These two halves of Johnson jostle with one another throughout *The Rambler*. We may detect the kind of ambivalence if not outright contradictions they cause, even in his views on the most weighty issues, by exploring briefly the advice he gives readers on two subjects to which he returns frequently in the essays: death and suffering.

Death is a subject to which he is obsessively drawn throughout *The Rambler*. No. 17 treats the topic rather smugly. A man ought to begin every day, Johnson tells us, "with a serious reflection that he is born to die." This will destroy "that vehemence of eagerness" after earthly possessions, make us moderate our desires, contract our designs, and at the same time urge us to do well what we know we are capable of doing; thus "when we find ourselves inclined either to immensity in our schemes, or sluggishness in our endeavours, we may either check, or animate, ourselves, by recollecting, with the father of physic, 'that art is long, and life is short'" (III, 97). But he knows too how few of us obey this sage precept. Those who give "learned lectures on the vanity of life," writes "Athanatos" in No. 54, pursue the same ends as the "lowest of the vulgar," grasping at riches, seeking applause. It is only when you attend the deathbed of a friend that you see the things of this world in true perspective. That is the real "school of wisdom" where we are taught the value of goodness and religion (III, 290). In No. 71 Johnson returns to the subject, noting that the maxim "life is short" is a saying which is frequently heard but seldom heard to any effect. We "act as if life were without end, though we see and confess its uncertainty and shortness." We ought to resist this "fallacy" and try to remember that since "the few moments remaining are to be considered as the last trust of heaven, not one is to be lost" (IV, 11). So far we have sensed nothing of the horror with which we know Johnson viewed death, and which is expressed with terrifying clarity and force in *Idler* 41 and in his conversation. He "never had a moment," he told Boswell, "in which death was not terrible to him."[12] We may well suspect that he himself did not follow the

[12]Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Everyman edit. (1952), II, 114.

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advice which, with a complacency rare even in a most optimistic philosopher, he gave readers on December 15, 1750: to accustom themselves, "whenever they see a funeral," to think about those "whose probation is past, and whose happiness or misery shall endure for ever" (IV, 50). But while he tells us often in the *Rambler* to try to keep death in our minds, he also offers advice radically different. For he also cautions against "great dejection, and too anxious alarms" (III, 45), against indulging in morbid contemplation about what the future holds for us. "Why should we think, with painful anxiety, about that on which our thoughts can have no influence?" he asks in No. 29 (III, 159). It is possible, Johnson says in No. 78, in an aside suggestively at odds with the main drift of the essay, to think too much about death: "A perpetual meditation upon the last hour" is "inconsistent with many duties of common life" (IV, 47). In No. 126 he allows a "correspondent" to exclaim against the very habit which he has been urging his readers to adopt:

> To be always afraid of losing life is, indeed, scarcely to enjoy a life that can deserve the care of preservation. He that once indulges idle fears will never be at rest. Our present state admits only of a kind of negative security; we must conclude ourselves safe when we see no danger, or none inadequate to our powers of opposition. Death, indeed, continually hovers around us, but hovers commonly unseen, unless we sharpen our sight by useless curiosity. (IV, 307-308)

Well, then, what should our attitude towards death be? Not to put too fine a point on it, Johnson does not appear to know. If we ask of him what our attitude should be towards suffering, we will find a similar tendency to contradiction. Should we accept suffering as part of the divine plan, seek it as a test for virtue, or resist it? Johnson in three different contexts gives all three answers. In *Rambler* 150 he says that "misfortunes are unavoidably incident to human life," and that "calamity will neither be repelled by fortitude, nor escaped by flight, neither awed by greatness, nor eluded by obscurity." We should therefore suffer "willingly what we cannot avoid" and remember that "the experience of calamity is necessary to a just sense of better fortune" (V, 32-36). Indeed, he says in No. 178, "calamities" are "sometimes to be sought, and always endured, in hope of rewards that shall be obtained in another state" (V, 174). But at the same time, he argues in No. 32, inert submission to pain is ignoble, for the "calamities of life" are "calls to labour" and we "are not to conclude that we can only

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obey the will of Heaven by languishing under it" (III, 177). In short, we may lawfully struggle against suffering and seek for joy.

In spite of what scholarly ingenuity may contrive, it is difficult to buckle these disparate and conflicting insights into one coherent system. And yet it seems naive and impertinent to charge Johnson with vagueness and vacillation. What we see in *The Rambler* is a moralist who would have men be perfect in conflict with an onlooker who knew the extent of men's imperfection and felt pity for their suffering. Johnson recognized that many of the problems facing his readers were beyond his powers to solve: the heaviness of time, the secret mortifications of defeated hope, the limits placed for whatever reason on the extent of human knowledge. His pity, his habit of withdrawing from unequivocal moral stances within essays and from essay to essay, expresses his unwillingness to make heavier by chastisement the already burdensome life of men. But the habit also shows once again Johnson's recognition of life's irreducible complexity. Johnson looked abroad at the world and saw what any observer must see: that experience cannot be exhausted or explained by formulae; that hope is both therapeutic and deceptive; that prudence is sometimes a wise policy, sometimes a foolish one; that suffering is both ennobling and degrading. As Imlac perceived in *Rasselas*, inconsistencies when imputed to man "may both be true" (Ch. VIII). *The Rambler* mirrors, rather than resolves, this complexity. If the views expressed in it occasionally lack the coherence of art or philosophy, they show well the diversity of life lived "in commerce with men."

Johnson's reluctance to try to reduce life to a system also shows humility. To take a "distinct and comprehensive" view of "human life," he admitted candidly, "with all its intricacies of combination and varieties of connexion, is beyond the power of mortal intelligences" (III, 336). His hesitancy is his acknowledgement that he may be wrong. Johnson is not willing to be thought of as a venerable, aloof speaker of incontestable truth. There is nothing more appealing in *The Rambler* than the occasional moments of self-mockery, when he imagines, for example, a young reader trying to cope with his hard words and employing subterfuge to avoid "puzzling" over his "philosophy" (V, 234). One "correspondent" writes to describe a "species of wretchedness" which he felt had escaped Johnson's attention, and imagines the Rambler "settling himself in his easy chair, that he may enjoy a new calamity without disturbance" (IV, 215). Johnson knew the gloomy bent of his own mind and took precautions against

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bludgeoning his readers into accepting his views and of distorting reality to accord with them. He did not presume to know the world better than "the great republick of humanity" (IV, 41), and even on questions that related to the heart of man he favored over the precepts of even learned writers "the common voice of the multitude" (III, 280).

IV

Scholars in search of the "larger harmony"[13] of philosophical insights behind *The Rambler* used to be fond of summarizing the work by listing a number of melancholy platitudes. One has heard them again and again: Johnson believed that the only cure for pain was palliative, not radical; he felt that life was everywhere a state in which there was much to be endured and little to be enjoyed; he thought the desire for happiness in this world is vain, the only true happiness available to man being non-earthly; he believed that man's lot was to suffer. Parts of various *Rambler* essays can be found to support all of these grim dicta, but a reading of the whole work leaves one with a sense of the utter inadequacy of such phrases to contain the richness and variety of Johnson's commentary. On the whole, despite gloomy interludes, Johnson impresses one as less a despondent, down-at-the-mouth prophet of doom than a humanist thinker, interested in improving the lot of men and advancing civilization. Some of Johnson's strongest essays are those in which he attacks specific social injustices such as execution for theft, prostitution, and arranged marriages, and his shrewd insight into the evil of poverty was expressed with bluntness and passion, making him surely one of the great humanitarians of his day. He saw human knowledge expanding, and we never see him attacking scientific inquiry as boldly as Swift did in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*. Johnson's attitude is typically this: "It is impossible to determine the limits of enquiry, or to foresee what consequences a new discovery may produce" (IV, 72). Johnson saw the whole of civilization as progressing slowly towards greater enlightenment and justice. In his great wisdom and charity, he held out to every man the opportunity to contribute to that advance:

> There are qualities in the products of nature yet undiscovered, and combinations in the powers of art yet untried. It

[13]W. J. Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1955; repr. 1961), p. 137.

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> is the duty of every man to endeavour that something may be added by his industry to the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness. To add much can indeed be the lot of few, but to add something, however little, every one may hope; and of every honest endeavour it is certain, that, however unsuccessful, it will be at last rewarded. (IV, 325)

The last few words in this paragraph remind us that we are reading the essays of a Christian writer. *The Rambler* is never theological, and we may safely speculate that Johnson was not argumentative or analytical on the subject of religion because he was unwilling to have his readers think that there were reasons for doubting "those truths which are of importance to the happiness of mankind" (IV, 133). But the "unalterable laws of right" (IV, 54) derived from religion are never far from Johnson's mind as he writes. Near the end of an essay in which he is arguing for the psychological advantages of practicing forgiveness, he is capable of throwing up his hands and saying "it is indispensibly required that [we] forgive. It is therefore superfluous to urge any other motive" (V, 210). He is never worried about the partial or complete about-face he is sometimes obliged to make at the end of essays, when he wrenches his meditation in the direction of Christian teaching. On one occasion, in No. 184, having been led over eleven paragraphs to the belief in the predominance of chance in human affairs, he tacks on a twelfth paragraph in which he flatly denies what he has written and affirms the truth of the Christian doctrine of divine providence, saying that "nothing in reality is governed by chance, but . . . our being is in the hands of omnipotent goodness, by whom what appears casual to us is directed for ends ultimately kind and merciful . . ." (V, 205). There is no more violent reversal than this in the whole of *The Rambler,* and it is probably exaggerating to say that in it we are seeing Johnson beating down a dark thought. He is simply sacrificing logical consistency for what he believes is the truth. His mood is an utter disregard for his own conclusions when they foolishly contradict what has been ordained. He thus abandons reason for the security and truth of religion, but Johnson would not have thought of this as a major betrayal for he saw reason as the possession of a subordinate being. We ought to bear this attitude towards reason in mind when we plunge into *The Rambler* in search of some mysterious "larger harmony" of insights. Johnson made no claim to having achieved such harmony and was apparently untroubled by the kind of inconsistency

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contained in an essay like No. 184. He did not make reason into a god, for God was firmly in his place in Johnson's universe. When the Hermit of Teneriffe was advancing up the mountain towards the summit, he met a creature named Reason who advised him of the extent of her powers in words which all students of Johnson's writings would do well to remember:

> "My power . . . is to advise, not to compel; I have already told you the danger of your choice. The path seems now plain and even, but there are asperities and pitfalls, over which Religion only can conduct you. Look upwards, and you will perceive a mist before you settled upon the highest visible part of the mountain; a mist by which my prospect is terminated, and which is pierced only by the eyes of Religion. Beyond it are the temples of Happiness, in which those who climb the precipice by her direction, after the toil of their pilgrimage, repose for ever. I know not the way, and therefore can only conduct you to a better guide."[14]

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[14]*Selections from Dr. Johnson's 'Rambler,'* ed. W. Hale White (Oxford, 1907), pp. 128-129.

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