Chapter 1

Life and Times

> To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them.
>
> (*Lives*, II.119)

Samuel Johnson's last great work, his *Prefaces Critical and Biographical* to *The Lives of the Poets*, has – like so much of his writing – a strong autobiographical element. In these short biographies of English poets, begun in the late 1770s, Johnson also reviews his own life – as an author, a keen observer, and an important actor in the literary world of the eighteenth century. When the course of writing his *Prefaces* brings him to Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Johnson feels that he has entered the period of time that he himself inhabited. He writes, with an allusion to Horace, 'I begin to feel myself *walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished*' (*Lives*, III.18). Johnson felt a particular affinity with Addison: both attended Lichfield Grammar School, and Addison's literary career served as a model for Johnson's. Both writers combined journalism with ambitious works of verse drama, poetry, and travel writing. Johnson was, as he wrote about Addison, describing the beginning of his own era. What was for Johnson the age of Addison would gradually become in his maturity the age of Johnson.

The World Johnson Was Born Into

When Johnson was born, on 18 September 1709, Addison and Richard Steele's (1671–1729) *Tatler* essays were just starting to make their presence felt. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was an astonishing newcomer on the scene, writing his precocious pastoral poems and about to begin work on his translation of Homer, which Johnson considered so important to the literary world. In 1709, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) was still good friends with the Whigs Addison and Steele, though he would soon join the Tory ministry as one of its chief propagandists. Queen Anne – to whom the infant Johnson was

brought to be 'touched' as protection against the 'King's Evil' (i.e. scrofula or tuberculosis of the lymph glands) – would reign for five more years, before dying in 1714 and making way for George I and the Hanoverians who still rule today. That the succession passed over the Catholic son of James II, according to the Act of Settlement (1701), remained a sore point for many Britons throughout Johnson's lifetime; Johnson saw the case against the Act of Settlement and had some sympathy with opposition in general but was never affiliated with Jacobites – or, really, with any particular faction.

Johnson's parents, Michael (1656–1731) and Sarah (1669–1759), were relatively old when Samuel was born, and through them, particularly through his father, Johnson could reach back into history. In his *Lives*, Johnson uses some of his father's anecdotes on the trade to extend his account of the publishing industry into the seventeenth century, recalling through him, for example, the great success of John Dryden's poem about King Charles II and the Exclusion Crisis in 1672, *Absalom and Achitophel*. It was, however, the literary world dominated by Pope, Addison, and Swift into which Johnson was born. The English recorded in Johnson's *Dictionary*, for instance, is that written by authors from Shakespeare to Pope and Swift.

If Addison, Pope, and Swift more or less defined the literary and linguistic present for Johnson, his political present was the beginning of the Hanoverian reign, including the administrations of Robert Walpole (1722–42), when the conflict between city and country interests solidified as a contest between Whigs and Tories. Johnson's politics shifted a good deal during his lifetime, but he was culturally Toryish: monarchical, high church, concerned with maintaining social order; against foreign wars and the over-extension of the empire; in favour of concentrating on domestic issues; and supportive of the right of individuals, including authors, to ply their trades and move up in the world without being accused of insubordination.

Melancholy Christianity

Like his politics, Johnson's religion was also fundamentally consistent throughout his life, though not without vicissitudes. A story – probably apocryphal but indicative of Johnson's reputation – relates that his father carried him on his shoulders to hear the charismatic Henry Sacheverell deliver a sermon on his favourite subject, 'The Church in Danger' (i.e. from subversive Whig policies like the toleration of Protestant dissenters). Johnson was a strong churchman and seems to have adhered to the tenets of Church of England bishops such as John Tillotson and Robert South, both of whom he quotes extensively in his

Dictionary. His religion had a strong emphasis on piety and everyday morality, as opposed to theological complexity. The *Dictionary*, for example, is filled with works of practical devotion such as William Wake's *Preparation for Death* and Richard Allestree's *Government of the Tongue*. Even Tillotson and South, for that matter, are relatively practical in their approach to religion.

Henry Hammond's *Of Fundamentals*, also much quoted in the *Dictionary*, provides a clue to Johnson's theology in its emphasis on the beliefs in which all Christians can concur. For Hammond, as for Johnson, attaining Heaven is less about correct belief and more about putting Christian ethics into practice. Johnson's belief in the importance of financial generosity – to give one example – is evident throughout his life. It appears not only in the stories popularized by Boswell in which Johnson empties his pockets in alms for the poor, but also in his interest throughout the *Lives of the Poets* in rehearsing his subjects' records of charitable giving. Richard Savage, reprehensibly mendacious in so many ways, earns something like sainthood in Johnson's account because he shares his meagre wealth with the destitute woman who gave evidence against him in his murder trial (*Lives*, III.137–8).

There were, of course, plenty of religious views that Johnson found beyond the pale. He was particularly hard on religious enthusiasm, which he defined in the *Dictionary* as 'A vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication.' He would have been thinking of sects such as the Muggletonians, who laid claims to the thrill of prophecy from the time of the Interregnum on. Johnson, by contrast, was careful in his prayers and meditations to confess his ignorance of divine matters. When he prayed for the soul of his departed wife, for example, he always did so 'conditionally', as he would not presume to know enough about the afterlife to be sure such prayers could have any effect.

Nevertheless, Johnson was somewhat affected by the evangelicalism that swept through the Midlands in his youth. He disagreed with its tenets, perhaps, but he absorbed some of its attitudes. He was not a follower of the inner light, but he believed (later in life, at least) in the power of grace extended directly by God (through the agency of Christ) to individuals prepared to receive it. His letters to Hill Boothby (1708–56) indicate his disagreement with her evangelicalism, but his interest in marrying her testifies to his tolerance of her views. In his last prayer, he uses the Protestant language of 'conversion' to describe his preparation for death (*Works*, I.417–18).

Whatever Johnson's religious opinions – and it is difficult to know them for sure – throughout his life he was dogged by religious melancholy of a kind that is more closely associated with Protestant sects such as Methodism and even Moravianism, with which Johnson's friend John Wesley was briefly

associated, than with high church doctrine. Johnson was frightened of damnation, as his famous exchange with Dr Adams, master of Pembroke College in 1784, shows:

> The amiable Dr. Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. JOHNSON. 'That he is infinitely good, as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an *individual*, therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be *sure* that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned.' (looking dismally.) DR. ADAMS. 'What do you mean by damned?' JOHNSON, (passionately and loudly) 'Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.' (*Life*, IV.299)

G. B. Hill links this passage to *Rambler* 110, where Johnson describes a sinful man as 'suspended over the abyss of eternal perdition' (*Works*, IV.224). Such hellfire and brimstone is conspicuous in some high church works, such as the sermons of Jeremy Taylor, but it also abounds in evangelical divines: the American Jonathan Edwards, who spoke of man as a 'spider' 'in the hands of an angry God', as well as in the works of John Bunyan. *Pilgrim's Progress* was among Johnson's favourite books, and it seems likely that the bipolar, staccato rhythm of hope and fear in Bunyan's works (especially *Grace Abounding*) was familiar to him. The high church, on the other hand, regarded religious melancholy as a kind of failing and preached a sort of confidence that Johnson could not achieve, although he often berated himself for his failure to do so – for, in other words, entertaining 'vain scruples' instead of grooming his faith to perfection.

Johnson identified with other people who suffered from religious scruples and religious melancholy. When he heard that Christopher Smart had been confined to a madhouse, he told Charles Burney, 'I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it' (*Life*, I.397). Johnson sometimes asked people to pray with him or suddenly began to pray himself, and when he was talking to himself, he was 'frequently uttering pious ejaculations' and prayers (*Life* I.483, V.307; *Miscellanies*, II.273). Like Smart, William Collins suffered from mental disease with religious overtones, and Johnson sympathized deeply. He wrote to Joseph Warton when Collins was discharged from an asylum but still 'weak and low': 'Poor dear Collins . . . I have often been near his state' (*Letters*, I.91 and n. 1).

It may be that mental disease – melancholy, as it was usually called in the eighteenth century – takes a religious form for a person concerned with

religion, and Johnson, like most intellectuals of his time, was intensely concerned with religion. His melancholy presented itself in other dimensions of his thinking and acting as well, and that from a very early age. In fact, his melancholy may well have had a physical cause. His birth was evidently difficult; he contracted scrofula as an infant and suffered scars from the brutal treatment of the time, which involved making suppurating incisions on his neck. His eyesight was poor all his life: he was near-sighted, and it seems likely that his left eye wandered and may have been useless. He also had tics and spasms of the sort now associated with Tourette's Syndrome, and his hands were chronically cramped, as at least two of Joshua Reynolds's portraits indicate (1756 and 1765).

Johnson's Mind

As the modern diagnosis of Tourette's suggests, Johnson's physical ills were associated with psychological problems. He suffered from melancholy and in particular what is now called obsessive-compulsive disorder. He compulsively performed ritual movements such as touching or stepping on certain places on entering or leaving his house, and he endured obsessive intrusive thoughts of a sexual and perhaps violent nature. He berated himself for having such thoughts in his diaries, many of which he destroyed before his death. As a teenager, he sent a description of his symptoms to his uncle Swynfen, a doctor in Birmingham. He was so alarmed to find that his uncle had discussed these symptoms with others that he never spoke to him again.

In addition to his physical and psychological ills, however, Johnson was also born with extraordinary intellectual gifts. He had a highly retentive mind from an early age and could memorize poetry and religious lessons with remarkable speed. He probably did not write the epitaph of a duckling on whom he carelessly trod at the age of three or five, as family lore held (*LAEP*, 805), but by fifteen he was writing polished if mainly derivative verse. His childhood friend Edmund Hector reports that he helped other grammar school students with their work so often that he was sometimes carried to school as a hero (*Life*, I.47). His diaries indicate that he was somewhat contemptuous of his immediate family: he found his mother dull-witted and his father merely mercantile, and he was distressed by their quarrelling. He also looked down on his brother Nathaniel, a more gregarious, risk-taking young man who sadly got into debt and probably took his own life. In later life, Johnson never stopped thinking about his family with guilt; one of his last

acts was to arrange for a commemorative stone to be laid for them in St Michael's Church in Lichfield (*Works*, XIX.523–4).

Contemptuous of mere shopkeeping, even when the shop was a relatively high-toned bookstore, Johnson felt himself drawn away from Market Street, where the family house and shop were built, towards the higher society of the Cathedral Close, especially at the house called the 'Bishop's Palace', the residence of the barrister Gilbert Walmesley. There, Johnson met prominent local Whigs and began an argument about Milton that he would continue on and off for his entire life. In 1725, at the age of sixteen, Johnson stepped into more elevated society when he visited his cousin Cornelius Ford at Pedmore near Stourbridge. He had studied with the estimable, if 'very severe', Reverend John Hunter at Lichfield Grammar (*Life*, I.44), but in Ford he found a teacher who at thirty-one had already been a Cambridge don and an associate of literary lights such as Alexander Pope. The visit, which was planned as a six-week holiday, became a six-month sojourn that had a lasting effect on Johnson. Ford was known not only for learning and literate society, but also for dissipation: he is purportedly the louche parson in Hogarth's satirical print *A Modern Midnight Conversation*. Fifty years after his visit to Pedmore, Johnson paid tribute to Ford in his 'Life' of the poet John Fenton, lamenting his dissolute ways but praising his abilities, which 'might have enabled him to excel among the virtuous and the wise' (*Lives*, III.91).

After six months at Pedmore, Johnson was refused readmission to Lichfield Grammar School and placed at Stourbridge, thus extending his stay in that neighbourhood to a full year. During this time, Johnson wrote most of his extant juvenilia, including the first of many attempts at translating Horace's *Odes*.

When he returned to Lichfield in 1726, Johnson was again in company with Walmesley – a man he would later praise for his 'amplitude of learning' and 'copiousness of communication' ('Life of Smith', *Lives*, II.179), and who was certainly among those whom Johnson said he 'wished to please' but were 'sunk into the grave' when he published his *Dictionary* in 1755 (*Works*, XVIII.113). During this period, Johnson continued his study of the classics on his own, fell into a fruitless infatuation with Edmund Hector's sister, wrote some love poetry, and prepared for longer flight to Oxford.

A Disappointing Education

Johnson's thirteen months at Oxford University began after Michaelmas (29 September) in 1729. In Cornelius Ford and Gilbert Walmesley, Johnson

had found father figures whom he wished to emulate more than Michael Johnson the provincial bookseller. Unfortunately, he did not find another such figure at Oxford. What he found instead was a caste system that valued social status more than learning. Indignant and rebellious, he disdained his tutor, William Jorden, and famously reported that he had been fined two-pence for sliding on the ice in Christ Church Meadow when he was supposed to be at a lecture not worth a penny. He refused to write a mandatory exercise on the Gunpowder Plot and instead wrote an elaborate, learned excuse called 'Somnium' in imitation of Macrobius, a Latin satirist too obscure to be in the curriculum at Oxford.

On one occasion, he was overheard muttering to himself about leaving Oxford: 'Well, I have a mind to see what is done in other places of learning. I'll go and visit the Universities abroad. I'll go to France and Italy. I'll go to Padua' (*Life*, I.73; Johnson did eventually, forty-six years later, set foot in France, but, to his sorrow, he never got to Italy). His experience at Oxford was largely negative, and it may have stimulated some powerfully oppositional energy. Johnson wrote a Latin translation of Pope's *Messiah* for a college collection called *A Miscellany of Poems by Several Hands* (1731). This is the only Latin poem in the collection, and, in a way, Johnson was both challenging his fellow students academically and aligning himself with a great writer whose Roman Catholicism had barred him from matriculation at Oxford. Johnson was not a crypto-Catholic, despite refusing the Gunpowder Plot exercise and imitating Pope, but he was an outsider at Oxford, and he may have expressed that in his first published work.

Johnson's most important poem from this period, 'The Young Author', also aligned him with writers in the world outside of the academy:

> So the young author panting for a name,
> And fir'd with pleasing hope of endless fame,
> Intrusts his happiness to human kind,
> More false, more cruel than the seas and wind.
>
> (lines 11–14)

This prefigures elements of both *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, his most important poems. In the *Vanity*, a student is told unceremoniously and ironically to 'pause awhile from letters, to be wise' (line 158).

New Beginnings

When Johnson went home from Oxford over Christmas in 1730, he found his father ill and his financial resources dried up. The fact that he left his books in

Oxford suggests that he was planning to return, but he did not. Michael Johnson died about a year later, and Johnson was faced with making a living. He tried teaching with mixed results: the one position that he secured, at Market Bosworth, was unbearable after six months. After failing to find another teaching job, he went off to Birmingham in 1732 to pursue a career as a journalist. He first wrote essays for *The Birmingham Journal*, edited by Thomas Warren. Whatever he published there is unfortunately lost, but Warren soon commissioned Johnson to write a translation of the Jesuit Father Lobo's *Itinerario*, a Portuguese narrative describing a missionary trip to Abyssinia. Johnson made his translation from the French translation of Lobo's manuscript by Joachim Le Grand, *Relation historique d'Abissinie* (1728). As well as the fee of five guineas, the work had the added benefit of allowing him to hone an approach to literary daywork that he would employ throughout his career. Without straying very far from strict translation, Johnson infuses his work with small digressions on some of his favourite humanistic topics: the vanity of human wishes, the prevalence of ignorance and error, the cruelty of colonial imperialism, and the mendacity of religious excuses for securing financial advantages. In this exercise, Johnson also packed away a good deal of learning about the Middle Eastern world that would serve him well in writing his 'oriental tales', including his novel *Rasselas* and his play *Irene*.

Although he needed daywork, Johnson was still hoping to progress as a serious scholar. In 1734, he borrowed a copy of the works of Angelo Poliziano (1454–94) and put together a proposal for an edition of his Latin poetry. Unsurprisingly, there were few takers in the Midlands, and Johnson began to train his eyes on the metropolis. Under an assumed name, he wrote a letter to Edward Cave, the proprietor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, offering to raise the tone of that publication with learned contributions, provided 'on reasonable terms' (*Letters*, I.6). The letter did not yield immediate results, but it was the beginning of Johnson's relationship with the London publishers, who would provide the lifeblood of his whole career.

Another of Johnson's proposals was more successful than either his notes on Poliziano or his offer to Cave. He proposed marriage to the widow of Harry Porter, the former Elizabeth Jervis. Tetty, the nickname by which she became known in the Johnsonian world, was twenty years his senior. Her sons rejected the attachment and refused to have anything to do with Johnson. Her daughter Lucy, however, then nineteen, became a lifelong friend. Johnson was suspected of coveting Elizabeth's £600 inheritance, but he told a friend, 'It was a love-marriage upon both sides' (*Life*, I.96). She called him 'the most sensible [i.e. sensitive] man that I ever saw in my life' (*Life*, I.95–6). It is not

hard to imagine that Johnson, beset by chronic melancholy, unsure of his path in life, and inexperienced, would find comfort and love with an older woman, and that she, recently bereft, would love a sensitive, highly intelligent young man who understood emotional pain.

With the backing of his wife's money, Johnson set up a school at Edial just outside of Lichfield in a grand old house. He placed an advertisement in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for June 1736: 'At Edial, near *Litchfield* in *Staffordshire*, Young Gentlemen are Boarded, and Taught the *Latin* and *Greek* Languages, by SAMUEL JOHNSON.' The school was not a success – it never attracted more than a handful of students – but Johnson used his free time to make another attempt at authorship. Knowing that playwriting could sometimes provide a fast track to success, he began writing a verse tragedy called *Irene*. His identification with the humanist tradition evident in his proposals for Poliziano also came through in this work, which he set at the fall of Constantinople (1453), then considered the decisive moment in the spread of classical learning in the West. A principal character in Johnson's play is Constantine Lascaris, a Byzantine scholar who fled the occupation of Constantinople and became an influential Greek teacher in Milan and Sicily.

On 2 March 1737, Johnson packed up his manuscript of *Irene*, abandoned his failing school at Edial, and set off for London with the liveliest of his few students, David Garrick. Three days after their departure, Johnson's brother Nathaniel was buried in St Michael's Church beside his father. He was twenty-four and possibly died by suicide, though his grave being in sacred ground argues against that assumption. It is unclear when Johnson received the news, but it was at about the same time that Garrick learned his father had died. The two nevertheless persevered and completed the 125-mile trip to the city in around ten days, alternately walking and riding a packhorse. They made an odd pair: Johnson was, according to his friend Hester Thrale, just under six feet (very tall for the time), while Garrick was closer to five feet.

Johnson's most important connection in London was Edward Cave. On 12 July 1737, Johnson wrote to Cave proposing a translation of Paolo Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* (1619). This was to be a serious contribution to intellectual history and a subtly patriotic statement in support of the Church of England: as a Venetian statesman, Sarpi had famously resisted the power of the pope over the free state of Venice.

Cave's resources were so tied up in 1738 that it took a year for him to publish Johnson's proposals and a life of Sarpi. (Publishing, especially in the days of cold type and very expensive paper, was a capital-intensive business.) The project as a whole foundered after this delay because it transpired that another translator – also, oddly, named Johnson – was at work on the same

project. Despite its failure in itself, the Sarpi project had the important effect of inaugurating Johnson's work as a biographer: it was the first of nearly seventy he wrote over the course of his career. The Sarpi project also ushered Johnson into the world of Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* (see Chapter 2).

Building a Career

At the beginning of this period of Johnson's heaviest involvement with the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Cave published *London*, Johnson's second most important poem after *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. As an imitation of a satire by the Roman poet Juvenal, *London* kept up Johnson's pretensions to a life of scholarship, while also situating him on the contemporary scene. The politics of the poem are 'patriotic' (i.e. anti-Walpolian), but the figures who speak are authors, and Johnson as ever identifies himself with that class, rather than with politicians of any stripe.

At about the same time, Johnson produced two fiercely anti-Walpole tracts: *Marmor Norfolciense* (1739) and *A Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage* (1739). These are satirical works that channel the irony and savage indignation of Swift, who was still alive, but they did not lead Johnson to take a durable, partisan position in politics.

In the five years between 1738 and 1743, Johnson was extremely busy as a writer, but in 1739 he found time for a trip to Lichfield and environs to settle some family business and socialize with old friends. Tetty, significantly, did not join him: the marriage had hit a rough patch. When he returned to London, Johnson continued to build a career. He got to know some wealthy publishers, as well as fellow hacks in the literary-journalistic world known as 'Grub Street'. One important connection was Thomas Birch, a hub of communication in the Grub Street world and the author-editor of an immense biographical dictionary. Birch was in correspondence with potential literary patrons, such as Lord Hardwicke and Lord Orrery; with booksellers such as Robert Dodsley and William Strahan; with their trade publishers or distributors, such as Mary Cooper and James Crokatt; with writers such as Richard Savage and Alexander Pope; and with literary workers further down the food chain who were sometimes reduced to translating and indexing, such as George Psalmanazaar and William Guthrie. Johnson acted as a kind of chaperone for dinners with Birch and Elizabeth Carter, whom Birch wooed as a potential wife. (Carter was finally appalled by his advances and left London for her father's home in Deal.)

Birch tried unsuccessfully to get Johnson's play *Irene* produced and published, beginning no later than 1741. In the end, however, it was Garrick who

promoted that project for Johnson – but not until 1749. By then, a great deal more had happened in Johnson's career. He had gradually reduced his commitment to the *Gentleman's Magazine* after taking a large commission to prepare a catalogue for the sale of the printed books in the magnificent Harleian Library. The catalogue, the first of its kind to command a price in the bookshops, began publication in 1743 and ran to five volumes. Johnson worked with William Oldys, the Harleian librarian and a well-established bibliographer; it is likely that Johnson received part of his pay in books because otherwise it is hard to imagine how such expensive volumes as George Hickes's massive *Thesaurus* wound up in his own private library.

In August 1743, one of Johnson's and Birch's most notable mutual contacts died and instantly became a hot topic for biography. Richard Savage had walked the streets of London with Johnson; together they had heard the chimes at midnight. He was therefore an obvious choice to write Savage's storied life. There had been biographical accounts before his death, but now the whole story could be told, and Johnson was in a position to tell it. He got fifteen guineas for the job from Cave on 14 December and by 11 February 1744 the work of 186 pages was published. Johnson could always write quickly. *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage* was not a best-seller (there wasn't a second edition until 1748), but it was a work of great interest to the Grub Street world and helped put Johnson on the map for London publishers. Johnson's biography is a rather tendentious apology for Savage, blaming his putative mother (who was probably not related to him) for much of his depravity, but it is a great read. It shows Johnson clearly emerged from his shell of classical learning and willing to perform for a general audience. Joshua Reynolds famously took up the book while leaning on a fireplace mantle and couldn't put it down until he had finished and his book-holding arm was dead numb (*Life*, I.165).

In 1745, Johnson got his first commission that involved, eventually, a group of London publishers instead of a single 'patron' like Cave. His proposals for an edition of Shakespeare, which included notes on *Macbeth* as a specimen, were published by Cave; but by the time Johnson's edition, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, eventually came out in eight volumes in 1765, there were eleven publishers (or booksellers, as they were then called) on the title page.

Gough Square

In 1745, Robert Dodsley engaged Johnson to help with his two-volume self-schooling text, *The Preceptor*. Johnson wrote the introduction and one of the

concluding allegories, 'The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit of Teneriffe'. Johnson's 'Vision' is one of the most concentrated statements of his educational and moral philosophy and, he said, his own favourite among his works. In the allegory, the pilgrims' ascent to the mountaintop of existence is aided by education and reason, but only religion can lead them to true happiness. The enemies of the pilgrims' ascent are bad habits, indolence, ambition, and avarice. Like so much of Johnson's writing, 'The Vision of Theodore' is fundamentally a performance on the theme of Ecclesiastes 1.14, 'All is vanity'. But the work was not in vain for Johnson's career.

Dodsley was a self-made man who had forced his way to the forefront of London publishing partly by hitching his wagon to a star, in the diminutive form of Alexander Pope. After Pope's death in 1744, Dodsley needed a new lead horse, and he chose well in harnessing Johnson. He knew Johnson through Birch and through his main distributor, or trade publisher, Mary Cooper. The *Account of the Life of Richard Savage* showed that Johnson could write popular prose rooted in classical learning and age-old tropes. The 'Hermit of Teneriffe' confirmed it.

In 1746, Dodsley brought many of his fellow London booksellers together around a plan to publish *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson. Johnson wrote his 'Short Scheme for compiling a new Dictionary', and the contract was signed on 18 June. The booksellers agreed to pay Johnson £1,575, a vast sum (five years' worth of the pension he was ultimately to receive in 1762). Nevertheless, Johnson ran through the money in three years: the expenses involved in making the *Dictionary* were great, and Johnson was never frugal. By 1749, he had leased a grand house in Gough Square, just off the Strand, and he would end up staying there for ten years; it is still 'Dr Johnson's House'. Then, he hired a total of six secretaries, or amanuenses, to help with preparing the copy, and he had to supply them with paper (always expensive), pens, and ink. He needed furniture for his workers, books, and probably victuals as well, but the house was the main thing. When he ran out of money, Johnson sought supplementary income from other projects and further payments from the publishers.

The Gough Square house provided not only the workspace (the garret) in which the *Dictionary* was composed, but also a nesting place for the odd collection of souls who made up Johnson's household and his primary domestic society for the rest of his life. He met Robert Levet in 1746 and sheltered this largely self-taught, poor doctor in his home, with some gaps, until his death in 1783. In 1748, Johnson allowed Anna Williams, the daughter of an experimenter in electricity, to undergo an operation for cataracts in his capacious house. The operation failed; Anna became blind; and Johnson took

her in as a dependant for virtually the rest of her life. During his wife's long illness and her residence in Hampstead, Johnson hired Elizabeth Desmoulins (née Swynfen) to assist her. This woman, the daughter of Johnson's godfather, became an inmate of Johnson's house in the 1770s.

There were others, including Polly Carmichael, who may have been a reformed prostitute, but most notable of all was Francis Barber, a Jamaican child born into slavery on the plantation of Colonel Bathurst and transported to London when the plantation, along with the rest of the enslaved people, was sold. Barber was first in the custody of the colonel's son Richard, a good friend of Johnson's, and then remanded to Johnson's care when he was about seven. Barber gained his legal freedom on the death of his former master; served Johnson as household help; got an education with Johnson's assistance; went to sea with the navy briefly; and eventually returned to marry and live with Johnson, with his wife and child. The relationship matured into one of familial devotion, and Barber became Johnson's heir.[1]

By the time he began the *Dictionary*, Johnson's marriage had been largely upended by Elizabeth's worsening physical condition. As Johnson's only extant letter to her shows, she hurt her leg in London while Johnson was on his six-month-long visit to the Midlands from August 1739 to March 1740. The letter is very tender and marked with homely Midlands usages that are absent in Johnson's other correspondence. Johnson addresses Tetty as 'thee', for example. It is likely, however, that Johnson's long absence was a sign of marital trouble. It is also likely that the treatment for Tetty's injury included opiates and that she compounded the effect of these with alcohol. Reports from Johnson's friends of her flushed complexion and excessive make-up, as well as some derisive comments about her state of mind, suggest Tetty was not doing well in London. By the mid-1740s she was spending a lot of time out of the city (mostly in Hampstead) for her health, while Johnson stayed in town, working hard and keeping up with his contacts as a professional writer must.

Johnson published his *Plan of a Dictionary*, dedicated to Lord Chesterfield, in 1747, but soon – even before all the sheets of the first issue were printed – Johnson regretted his approach to the great man and expunged his name and titles from the heading of his work. Chesterfield was not, as Johnson realized, willing to support the project: instead, he wrote two articles in *The World* in 1754 touting its imminent appearance and implying that he had fostered the project in some way. Johnson responded on 7 February 1755, two months before the publication of the *Dictionary* on 15 April, with an indignant letter: 'The notice which you have been pleased to take of my Labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot

enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known and do not want [i.e. need] it' (*Letters*, I.96).

Johnson also asked Chesterfield: 'Is not a Patron, My Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for Life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help.' This passage especially has been reasonably interpreted as a declaration of independence on the part of authors from the patronage system in the arts, a set-up that persisted well into the eighteenth century and made most authors dependent on the benefactions of the wealthy. Certain genres of writing – including journalism of all kinds and playwriting – were sometimes financially viable through direct appeals to the reading public; others, such as poetry, were very rarely so. Those who escaped the need for noble patronage, however, needed the support of the booksellers, who were often ruthless in their exploitation of authors. When Johnson called Robert Dodsley his 'patron' (*Letters*, I.173) – although Dodsley was a publisher rather than an aristocratic benefactor – he was candidly acknowledging his choice to operate in the new economy of authorship. That said, Johnson also tacitly acknowledged the need for old-fashioned patronage – at least for others – by ghostwriting so many dedications to nobles on behalf of his friends.

In 1749, Johnson cashed in on some of his connections to publish his greatest poem, one of the best verse satires in any language, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Like *London*, the *Vanity* is an imitation of a satire by Juvenal – this time the expansive and philosophical tenth satire, rather than the sharper, more scurrilous and indignant third. The *Vanity* certainly has political moments – the section on the fall of Wolsey can be read as a celebration of the fall of Walpole, for example – but on the whole it is less particular and less dangerous than *London*. Robert Dodsley was again the publisher, but this time he was also the chief backer: Johnson was fast becoming the lead author in Dodsley's stable of talent.

In the same year, through the influence of Garrick, who had been performing bits of Johnson's play at the end of some of his productions in Drury Lane, Johnson was finally able to publish *Irene* and see it performed in its entirety. Dodsley and Cooper were again the publishers. On the first night, the play was hissed off the stage because of the melodramatic murder scene. With the murder taken off-stage, the play ran for another eight nights, making it at least a moderate success. Johnson netted almost £200, plus £100 from Dodsley for the copyright.

In 1750, after the first three letters of the *Dictionary* were set up in type, work came to a halt. Johnson was probably out of funds, despite his record earnings in 1749. Although beholden to numerous London publishers for

copy, he struck a deal with two others to produce an essay twice a week for two years. Those essays, averaging around 1,500 words apiece, would be the sole content of the publication called *The Rambler*, and he would assume the identity of 'Mr Rambler' (see Chapter 2). Johnson published the essays anonymously, but his authorship was an open secret, and he was soon known as Mr Rambler.

Bereavement and Fame

The *Rambler* came to an end on 14 March 1752. The last two numbers are especially gloomy. On 17 March, Elizabeth Johnson had died, sending Johnson into an abyss of melancholy. He wrote prayers of contrition and composed a sermon for her service, intending it to be read by his friend John Taylor; but he did not attend her funeral in Bromley, nine miles south-east of Charing Cross, nor did he ever visit her grave. Taylor did not deliver the sermon, on the grounds that it praised Tetty too highly (*Works*, XIV.261n1). Johnson's sermon suggests his wife was not intellectual, but rather practical and kind:

> her wit was never employed to scoff at goodness, nor her reason to dispute against truth. In this age of wild opinions, she was as free from scepticism as the cloistered virgin. She never wished to signalize herself by the singularity of paradox. She had a just diffidence of her own reason, and desired to practice rather than to dispute . . . She was exact and regular in her devotions . . . grateful for every kindness that she received, and willing to impart assistance of every kind to all whom her little power enabled her to benefit. (*Works*, XIV.269)

Whether or not Johnson's praise is just, it does not seem overblown for a eulogy. Moreover, it reflects to some extent Johnson's sense of his own moral failings. He was not diffident of his reason, but he was given to scepticism and paradox; and he was beset by scruples and doubts in his religion. He aspired to kindness and generosity but did not always show it. He talked for victory at times rather than truth, and he could blast opponents to such a degree that he was later filled with remorse. If the Tetty he created in the sermon was an ideal, it was one to which he himself aspired.

Thirteen months after Tetty's death, Johnson sought a second wife in Hill Boothby, the daughter of a distinguished Derbyshire gentleman who had been an important customer of Johnson's father. Johnson addressed her in his letters as 'My Sweet Angel' and professed that he loved her. They differed on matters of religion, but the real bar to marriage was Boothby's commitment to

care for the orphaned children of a friend; she sustained those duties for only a short time before dying in January 1756, leaving Johnson once more bereft. Though there were many women in his life after 1756, Johnson never sought marriage again.

In 1753, he wrote a prayer before re-engaging with the *Dictionary* and starting the second volume: 'Oh God who hast hitherto supported me enable me to proceed in this labour & in the Whole task of my present state that when I shall render up at the last day an account of the talent committed to me I may receive pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen' (*Works*, I.50). The great book was at last published officially on 15 April 1755; copies were delivered to the French Académie and to the Accademia della Crusca in Florence. Johnson was hailed in Great Britain and on the Continent. He was famous – as well as broke, sick, and tired. In March, Johnson was briefly under arrest for a debt of less than £6. Samuel Richardson promptly sent him six guineas, but Johnson needed work. Around the same time that Richardson bailed him out, Johnson began editing the *Literary Magazine*, and he signed a contract with Jacob Tonson for a new edition of Shakespeare, the project for which Johnson had originally published proposals in 1745.

Now, he issued new proposals and achieved a column in Tonson's financial ledger, where he was credited with various sums – including £40 in 1758 when he was again under arrest for debt. (Johnson never had his own bank account, unlike Alexander Pope, and existed financially mainly on the ledgers of William Strahan and Robert Dodsley, his publishers.)

The *Literary Magazine* kept Johnson very busy for about thirteen months, during which period he reviewed some thirty-nine books and wrote several other articles. He clearly was not making enough money on this job, but it did give him an avenue for venting his anger over the Seven Years' War. He was particularly moved by the deplorable case of Admiral Byng, who was unfairly sentenced to death in the aftermath of the Spanish victory at Fort Mahon, Menorca. The cruelty exhibited in war – to the enemy as well as to the troops of one's own country – most appalled Johnson. He was against colonial expansion for a host of reasons, including the inevitable weakening of the homeland because of it, but cruelty of any kind angered him. He was against it in war as well as in society with respect to the poor, the disadvantaged, the sick, and the mentally disabled.

In 1758, Johnson, still in need of money, and still angry about the war, agreed to write a regular essay called the *Idler* to be published in the *Universal Magazine*. He carried on once a week for two years. The *Idler* is more topical, generally, than the *Rambler* and less heavily philosophical. It is also more political, inveighing sometimes against the Seven Years' War and sometimes

against war in general. One instalment – the original number 22 – was so cynical about warfare that it was rejected from the collected, hard-bound edition. Despite earning a decent income from the *Idler* (three guineas per essay), Johnson did not have the money to handle the expenses incurred by his mother's last illness. He struck up a bargain with William Strahan, and in the evenings of one week produced the two small volumes of *Rasselas*: an oriental tale, his only extended work of fiction, and by all accounts his most popular work. It has never been out of print; there have been over 400 editions; and it has been translated into 50 different languages.

By the time the last *Idler* was published in April 1760, Johnson had been out of his grand house in Gough Square for over a year. He took rooms in several places, finally settling on Inner Temple Lane. He temporarily lost his household of odd fellows, although Francis Barber, just released from the navy, may have stayed with him even in his straitened circumstances. Johnson penned some anti-slavery pieces at this time and a host of other small works: he wrote a preface in support of the Republican Thomas Hollis's appeal for clothing the French prisoners of war; several dedications, prefaces, and proposals for friends, such as Charlotte Lennox and Giuseppe Baretti; a series of letters in support of his friend Thomas Gwynn's design for a bridge with semicircular arches at Blackfriars; letters for the Society of Artists, whose first president would be his friend Joshua Reynolds; proposals for a miscellany ostensibly by Anna Williams; a life of Roger Ascham; and many other odd jobs. His expenses were much reduced, but he was still scraping to get by.

Then, rather suddenly, halfway through 1762, he was granted a civil pension of £300 per year. Since he was known as a long-time critic of the government – from *London* (1738) to his anti-war essays in the *Idler* (1760–2) – he was pilloried in the press for accepting a pension from the crown. There was no use denying the appearance of hypocrisy; he had defined 'pension' in the *Dictionary* as 'pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country'. Rather than fight it out in London, Johnson went on holiday to Devonshire with Joshua Reynolds, who was from Plymouth, and let the press have its way. He was assured by Lord Bute, the prime minister, that the pension was given without any expectation of future service or consideration of past political involvement (*Letters*, I.207–8 and n.6).

With his new-found wealth, Johnson resumed living in quarters ample enough to house his familiar inmates; he chose to live in the fortuitously named Johnson's Court, right around the corner from Gough Square. Relieved of the need for day labour, Johnson got back to work on his long-delayed edition of Shakespeare. He had issued new proposals for the work in 1756, and the subscribers were wondering where the book was. It finally

appeared in October of 1765 in eight quarto volumes. Johnson's place in literary history was now firmly established. He had compiled the best dictionary of English and the best edition of the best writer in English. (It is impossible to imagine anyone doing something today that would even remotely resemble this dual achievement.) His edition of Shakespeare, which dovetailed with his *Dictionary* because Shakespeare is so conspicuous in its illustrative quotations, both energized the national exaltation of the Bard, epitomized in the Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769, and gained greater importance through it. Shakespeare was Britain's poet, and Johnson was Shakespeare's (and therefore Britain's) critic and scholar. In addition to the *Dictionary* and Shakespeare, Johnson had written volumes of brilliant essays, an extended work of fiction, and hundreds of other works of all descriptions, and all, or almost all, with characteristic power. It was time to rest from the isolation of literary toil.

Boswell and the Thrales

Johnson's literary career was less isolating than one might assume, because he wrote so much more rapidly than most people, but he craved company. It was just the right time, then, for new friends to arrive in his life, first and foremost in the lively form of James Boswell. They met for the first time on 16 May 1763 in Tom Davies's bookshop. Davies himself was an old actor, and in Boswell's telling of the scene Davies theatrically quotes *Hamlet* – 'Look, my Lord, it comes' – as through a glass door in the back of his shop he spies Johnson approaching. With a kind of psychological prescience, Davies was casting Johnson as the ghost of Boswell's father. 'Don't tell him where I come from', whispers Boswell to Davies, and Davies, who has already spoken Boswell's name, cries, 'From Scotland.' Boswell squeaks, 'I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it', setting up Johnson to thunder: 'That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help' (*Life*, I.392). And the two are off, making an odd couple of subject and biographer unsurpassed in English literature. True, Boswell exaggerated their closeness and the amount of time they spent together. That, however, is a testimony to the power and ingenuity of Boswell's writing, which makes his Johnson so fully present and alive that it eclipsed for generations the Johnson who comes across even in his own greatest works.

Early in 1765, probably on 9 January, Johnson made the acquaintance of Hester Lynch Thrale and her husband Henry. After some success as the owner of a brewery, he was seeking to be an MP for Southwark and in other ways to rise above his station. She was a beautiful, intelligent, and accomplished

young woman, not yet twenty-three, married a little over a year to a man thirteen years her senior. It was not a love match, and it was full of pain as only four of their twelve children survived into adulthood. Hester was determined, however, to have a circle of intelligent, artistic friends, and she succeeded brilliantly. At the centre of the circle was Johnson, who was given his own room at the Thrale house in Streatham, about seven miles south of Gough Square, now part of Greater London but then a village on a country hill. Johnson also had accommodations at Brighthelmstone (Brighton) where the Thrales had a seaside residence. Johnson wrote more, and more intimate, letters to Hester Thrale than to any other correspondent, and he confided in her all his hopes and fears. Their affection for each other was deep, and when, after the death of her husband in 1780, Hester did the unthinkable and fell in love with her music teacher Gabriele Piozzi, Johnson was devastated. (The second marriage divided all of Hester's friends and relatives, most of whom found her attachment to a Catholic, an Italian, and a near-servant shamefully carnal.)

While the Thrale family was intact, it provided not only a social circle for Johnson but also a means of travel, one of his great unsatisfied desires. He and the Thrales went together to northern Wales to see the ancestral home of the Salusburys – a trip cut short by the calling of a general election – and later to France on Johnson's only voyage outside the British Isles. Johnson kept journals of both trips, but neither amounted to much. The grand trip he planned with the Thrales was to Italy; their mutual friend the Genovese Giuseppe Baretti had it all mapped out, the suitcases were packed and sent ahead, when news came that Harry, the Thrale's eldest boy, had suddenly died. The trip was cancelled, and the idea was never revived.

That was in 1776. In the autumn of 1773, Johnson had taken the longest and most productive journey of his life – a three-month tour of Scotland with Boswell. Both men kept journals, and both produced books about the experience. Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* came out in 1775. Boswell held his book back until the year after Johnson's death, 1785, and used it as a kind of specimen and introduction to his full *Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, which did not appear until 1791. Johnson's work shows his mind settling into a late phase, in which he achieved a new kind of clarity. Many of his earlier writings had been marked by tendentiousness, prompted as they were by a particular purpose: defending Edward Cave, apologizing for Richard Savage, glorifying the English language and English literary culture, proclaiming the durability of Shakespeare, and so on. That said, the *Journey to the Western Islands* was itself seen as having an axe to grind against the Scots, despite its attempts to be empirical and objective.

Last Projects

Back in London in the mid 1770s, Johnson was certainly writing for a purpose. He produced two more essays in defence of ministerial politics (*The Patriot*, 1775; *Taxation No Tyranny*, 1776); he had written two others before his Scottish trip (*The False Alarm*, 1770; *Thoughts on Falkland's Islands*, 1771). There is an irony in Johnson presenting himself as a defender of the ministry when he had before his pension been frequently in opposition, but his late political writings display some of the essential features also found in his earlier works: a hatred of slavery; a dim view of colonial expansion; cynicism about war; contempt for cruelty in all its forms; and a sharp eye for hypocrisy. His enthusiasm for expressing some of these foundational commitments led the ministry to order the cancellation of several paragraphs in *Taxation No Tyranny* and put an end to his career as a polemicist. He did not turn against the ministry in *Taxation No Tyranny*, but he pressed his points with such rhetorical energy that his handlers feared a backlash. There had been talk at various times of getting Johnson a place in Parliament, but he had such confidence in his rhetorical powers and took such pleasure in displaying them that he would have been hard for any political leader to manage.

By 1779, the real value of Johnson's pension had been reduced by inflation, and he was casting about for other sources of income. He tried unsuccessfully to get additional funds and to secure a grace-and-favour apartment from the Lord Chamberlain. He did, however, still have credit with the booksellers of London, who engaged him on one more vast project.

Motivated by challenges to what they regarded as their copyrights in English literature, a group of London publishers conceived of a large collection of English poetry running from Cowley and Milton all the way to Gray and Lyttelton – a total of fifty-eight octavo volumes. Johnson's job was to write *Prefaces Critical and Biographical* to the collection. His work swelled over the two years in which he wrote and eventually became a stand-alone set of four octavo volumes called *The Lives of the Poets* (1781). The increased candour and bluntness visible in his *Journey to the Western Islands* is more fully on display in this, his last great work. Part of being frank and plain-spoken for Johnson was drawing material primarily from his own experience. The *Journey* reflects what he saw and not what one was supposed to see. Likewise, the *Lives of the Poets* tells of Johnson's reactions to the English poetry he had been reading for most of his life and not what one could be presumed to say about it. He presents his critical views in an unvarnished way, and he provides his personal, frank opinions about the poets themselves. In doing so, Johnson is necessarily talking about poetry in general and mankind

in general; he has ideas about the nature of poetry and the nature of life, but his experience is the foundation of what he says, and some of his autobiography infuses the criticism, as we suggested at the beginning of this chapter. In effect his own sensibility – both aesthetic and moral – becomes the subject of his work. At times, he may rejoice 'to concur with the common reader', as though devoid of critical prejudices (*Lives*, IV.184), and he is partly such a reader; but he is also unique, and his particular point of view is what steadily informs his judgements and makes them so durable and memorable (see Chapter 5).

The End – and After

Johnson remained active in his last years, though he was beset by illness more often and more violently than earlier in life. Gout, a painful sarcocele (a testicular tumour), pulmonary edema, congestive heart failure, and a good deal of pain drove him to take opium and other palliatives – all recorded in his diaries and in his letters to Hester Thrale. His doctors became a significant part of his company, but he kept up with other old friends and made new friends almost to the end. Many of his last writings were for friends, the last of all a dedication that he wrote for Charles Burney's *Account of the Musical Performance . . . in commemoration of Handel* (published in 1785, after Johnson's death). His household thinned out. He lost Robert Levet and wrote a moving elegy in his honour, beginning with a sense of his increasing loneliness:

> Condemn'd to Hope's delusive mine,
> As on we toil from day to day,
> By sudden blast, or slow decline,
> Our social comforts drop away.
>
> (lines 1–4)

His other very old companion Anna Williams slipped away near the end of Johnson's life, but Francis Barber survived Johnson as his heir, and many friends memorialized Johnson, collecting anecdotes and biographical details and contributing to Boswell's attempt to preserve Johnson in full and 'Johnsonize' the land.

As he neared the end, Johnson stopped taking opium because he wanted to meet his maker with a clear head. He prepared for his judgement day with prayers, the last of which asks to be forgiven for his 'late conversion' – a clause excised by the scrupulous divinity student George Strahan, in whose care

Johnson left his written prayers. The words evidently suggested to Strahan that Johnson had become a Catholic or experienced some sort of evangelical conversion that put his high church Anglicanism in doubt. Johnson's biographers and acolytes have wanted him to be monumental, monotonal, and fixed in his thinking. But despite his firm ethical commitments, he was versatile, changeable, and sceptical to the end.

Starting in 1785, within months of his death the previous December, an outpouring of works by and about Johnson filled the presses. Short biographies began appearing that year; in 1787, there was a longer one by Sir John Hawkins, a nearly lifelong friend, which served as volume I of the first edition of Johnson's collected works. The *Life* and the *Works* were augmented in the following few years and reprinted and re-edited scores of times over the years. In 1791, Boswell's great *Life* appeared and initiated a competing stream of Johnsoniana that was also reprinted and augmented over the years. Since Johnson's death, there have been only two years in which works of his were not reprinted or re-edited, both war years. It is fair to say that Johnson's afterlife has been as rich and as conspicuous a part of British culture as his life itself (see Chapter 8). Many great scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have dedicated their professional lives to editing and recording the publication of his works, and many more have devoted themselves to interpreting and reinterpreting his writing.

This *Introduction* to Johnson is a further attempt to bring attention to Johnson's works, not as monuments in the history of English literature but as writings that challenge one to read carefully and, just as importantly, to think carefully. 'Clear your *mind* of cant', Johnson urged Boswell (*Life*, IV.221): that is, think for yourself; look at the facts; go to the source; don't passively accept received or modish wisdom. Striking up a relationship with Johnson's works challenges almost every reader to become more intelligent and thoughtful – and, as Johnson entitled one of his most personal poems, to 'know thyself' (*LAEP* 448).