CHAPTER 10

Arts of Structure and the Rhythm of the Lives

Lives in Pieces

To recapitulate: Starting out as "prefaces" to a new edition of the English poets, the *Lives* as we know the work was commissioned by a consortium of London booksellers who recruited the prestigious literary authority of Johnson as their unique selling point in the race for profits. That the project at first seemed attractively undemanding is well known. Johnson wrote to Boswell that "I am engaged to write little Lives, and little Prefaces, to a little edition of the English Poets" (Boswell, vol. III, p. 110; *Letters*, vol. III, p. 20). But also apparent is that once undertaken the commission expanded and, as the editors of the Oxford and Yale editions have shown, Johnson became increasingly taken over by it, so that some "little Lives" – "a few dates and a general character" – spun out into dissertations the length of entire books (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 189). Lonsdale has outlined the many interruptions, periods of frantic composition and creative longueurs; so that what started out as a task of modest proportions for the old and ailing Johnson consumed increasing quantities of time. "I have been led beyond my intention," Johnson writes in the "Advertisement," "I hope, by the honest desire of giving useful pleasure."[1]

[1] Lonsdale gives an exhaustive account of the compositional evolution of *The Lives of the Poets* in the Introduction to his edition. With the assistance of Johnson's project manager, the industrious John Nichols, the *Works of the English Poets* in fifty-six volumes had been printed by 1778 and awaited the "Prefaces" of Johnson that were to be published with them. Delays, however, consequent on the time Johnson had been taking to create them, and his tendency to "dilate," as he wrote to Thomas Cadell, on some of the major poets (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 30), meant that the first twenty-two "Prefaces" of the required fifty-two were incorporated, not with the poems, but in vols. I–IV of *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets* and were published in 1779. These "Prefaces," according to Lonsdale, "were normally available only to purchasers of the fifty-six volumes of the complete *English Poets*" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 35). The second tranche of vols. V–X to make up the ten-volume set was not to appear until May 1781, the consortium of booksellers having in the meantime decided to print as freestanding *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on Their Works*. These were made available to any purchaser and completed the

Debates about what was fairly counted in and counted out of the *Lives* and about how far it fell to Johnson to admit some poets and exclude others have arisen; why there are no women poets, why the chronological range begins only around 1660 and why all the poets Johnson writes about are dead. Answers to these questions have been proffered, though rarely to the satisfaction of those disposed to find Johnson's actual judgments wrongheaded. The fact that Johnson thought ill of *Lycidas* or the *Odes* of Thomas Gray can seem then to reflect a sensibility in other ways misguided. No Charles Churchill, no Christopher Smart, no Oliver Goldsmith, but a work on the most "eminent" of the English poets that could still (with apparent absurdity) welcome such minor genius as Smith, Hammond, Mason, Dorset, Halifax, Hughes, Duke and other forgotten figures. The fact of the matter is that apart from the obvious greats, the tally of poets was largely an unsystematic compromise; the selection was in the event settled pragmatically from the rights maintained by the holders of literary copyright at the time the project took shape. Johnson, it is true, made five suggestions of his own – Watts, Pomfret, Thomson, Yalden and, most enthusiastically, Blackmore (for his poem *Creation*).[2] Yet he distanced himself from the booksellers' program and he objected when publicity for the collection referred to "Johnson's Poets."

Yet when individual "Lives" are taken together, Johnson's personal artistry cannot be disowned.[3] In his essay on "Johnson as Critic and Poet" T. S. Eliot insists that "[W]e must read [the *Lives*] as a whole if we are to appreciate the magnitude of Johnson's achievement,"[4] and in a review of Lonsdale's edition Colin Burrow has lately remarked on the difference between the literary results of what Johnson finally produced in the *Lives* and the various sources on which he had relied for their making:

> [Johnson] often seems to be shaking himself out of the drudgery of digesting the facts, rephrasing the narrative and countermanding the judgments of the biographical encyclopedias, in order to awake into pleasure and often into joy at a fine set of verses. This gives the *Lives* their own curious rhythm,

transition from "Prefaces" to "Lives." See also T. F. Bonnell, "John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain*: The 'Little Trifling Edition' Revisited,'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 85 (1987), pp. 128–52.

[2] On responsibility for suggesting Thomson's inclusion see Lonsdale in *Lives*, vol. 1, p. 9.

[3] For the view that Johnson was indeed thought to practise an art, see Robert Potter, *The Art of Criticism: As Exemplified in Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (London, 1789).

[4] T. S. Eliot, "Johnson as Critic and Poet" (1944), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), p. 163.

> which is perhaps the greatest pleasure of reading them through, and which (one imagines) was the rhythm of Johnson's own mind.[5]

The holistic perspective is easily overlooked. If the *Lives* is perceived only as a "suite of biographies,"[6] as separate pieces of life-writing hastily assembled under the pressures of a strict deadline, the search for meaning in an overview of the work may yield little. Johnson's stop-start composition and the fact that he did not begin at the beginning might strengthen this impression. Moreover, the wide landscape of Johnson's achievement has always been obscured by the excerpting and selecting through which the *Lives* has most often entered the consciousness of the modern world.[7] This excerptibility is invited by the *Lives*. There are many passages – often but not only theoretical digressions devoted to matters of principle – that stand apart to be judged especially typical, foolish or fine. I have earlier commended the judicious comparison of Dryden and Pope in the "Life of Pope." At the end of this comparison Johnson confesses "some partial fondness for the memory of Dryden" (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 65–66). But various set-pieces stand out, and it seems Johnson intended they should – for example the passage on the power of epic poetry in the "Life of Milton" (*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 282–83), or again, in the "Life of Pope," Johnson's famous digression on the relation of Sound and Sense. The latter consists of paragraphs that Lonsdale points out Johnson revised "with particular care" in the manuscript of the "Life." Having reflected on the simile on the Alps from the *Essay on Criticism*, and then similes in general, Johnson here flags up his intentions:

[5] Colin Burrow, "Sudden Elevations of Mind," review of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vols. XXI–XXIII: *The Lives of the Poets*, *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 4 (February 17, 2011), pp. 22–24, at 23.

[6] The expression is that of David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), on one very limited "form" of literary history (p. 161).

[7] A recent example, *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, ed. John Mullan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), prints ten of the fifty-two "Lives." Recent efforts to represent the *Lives* in selections of the Johnsonian *oeuvre* can be found in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Womersley, 21st-Century Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and *Samuel Johnson: Selected Works*, ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr., Stephen Fix and Howard D. Weinbrot (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2021). The Yale reproduces the full uncut text of five "Lives" ("Savage," "Cowley," "Milton," "Pope," and "Gray"); Womersley includes twelve, with the long "Lives" of Milton, Dryden and Pope tolerated as extracts. For an assessment of these volumes see Philip Smallwood, "Review Essay: Choosing Johnson," *The New Rambler* (2020–21), pp. 70–76. For students and general readers the unannotated but textually complete two-volume "World's Classics" edition (edited by Arthur Waugh and first published by Oxford University Press in 1906) and the "Everyman" *Lives* (published by J. M. Dent, 1925) have been largely superseded by such selections.

> Let me likewise dwell a little on the celebrated paragraph, in which it is directed that *the sound should seem an echo to the sense*; a precept which Pope is allowed to have observed beyond any other English poet.
>
> The notion of representative metre, and the desire of discovering frequent adaptations of the sound to the sense, have produced, in my opinion, many wild conceits and imaginary beauties. (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 69–70)

The theoretical topics raised in the *Lives* are the leading issues of eighteenth-century literary thought, and Johnson often seeks to resolve them. After a page of analysis, he concludes his deliberations on Sound and Sense in decisive style: "Beauties of this kind are commonly fancied; and when real, are technical and nugatory, not to be rejected, and not to be solicited" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 70).

Such emblematic concerns are often probed in compact, closely argued asides, and Johnson's subjects include the form of the Pindaric ode, pastoral poetry, the nature of blank verse, the character of imitation, the integrity of allegory, metaphor and much more. Even if other textual features suggest a work cobbled together to satisfy the booksellers' urgent demands, these are without question highlights, and they would not be there if Johnson had not been invited to write. Other set-piece passages that stand out from their context would include the artful comparison between the criticism of Dryden and that of Rymer in the "Life of Dryden." The passage joins imagery from the natural world with allusion to the different means of exerting power over the state – criticism as a journey of discovery and criticism expressed by wielding the rod:

> With Dryden we are wandering in quest of Truth; whom we find, if we find her at all, drest in the graces of elegance; and if we miss her, the labour of the pursuit rewards itself; we are led only through fragrance and flowers: Rymer, without taking a nearer, takes a rougher way; every step is to be made through thorns and brambles; and Truth, if we meet her, appears repulsive by her mein, and ungraceful by her habit. Dryden's criticism has the majesty of a queen; Rymer's has the ferocity of a tyrant. (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 120)

To this we can add the enthusiastic praise of the *Essay on Criticism* in the "Life of Pope" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 68). The celebration of Pope is closely followed by Johnson's deliberations on his poem's treatment of poetry's sound as an echo of its sense. This "representative metre" is a topic Johnson revisits in the "Life of Pope" three decades after his earlier analysis in *Rambler* 94 (Works IV, pp. 135–43).

Lost, however, in this summing of parts is the major form of the *Lives*. It may be said that we live in patterns, but that we do not see them except

from the distance that art affords us. My suggestion is that the constituent parts of the *Lives* are limbs equally necessary to a body whose underlying structures and vital rhythms describe the patterns we do not ordinarily see. The *Lives*' major form has us witness a human condition that includes the most painful examples of personal suffering endured in the experience of life or consequent on artistic experience. We see such suffering from a due distance, remedially, therapeutically and in combination with life's joys. Moreover, once the framework of the *Lives* was established, Johnson found opportunities for forms of thought present within the backwaters of his mind for many years. Both the passage from the "Life of Dryden" and the celebration of Pope's *Essay on Criticism* suggest material likely to play a role in the "History of Criticism as it relates to judging Authours from Aristotle to the present age": a prospective title listed in Johnson's manuscript catalogue of "Designs." The "History" of this "art" of criticism (as Johnson calls it in the brief abstract of his plan) was never written. However, it is easy to imagine that the *Lives* provided Johnson with a template to express potentially prominent moments in his unwritten work.[8]

Reading between the "Lives"

In the final paragraph of the "Life of Gray," on Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Johnson imposes form on a choice of biographical subject matter over which he had little control. We have seen that the remarks offer a valedictory finale and sound an appropriate elegiac note:

> In the character of the Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.

"Had Gray written often thus," Johnson observes, "it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 184). The cadence of this sentence appears in the *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical* printed prior

[8] The entry in the MS list continues: "An account of the rise and improvements of that art [of criticism], of the different Opinions of Authours ancient and Modern." For extended discussion of Johnson's unwritten projects see Paul Tankard, "That Great Literary Projector: Samuel Johnson's Designs, or Projected Works," *AJ*, vol. 13 (2002), pp. 103–80. The "Designs" are recorded in a footnote to Boswell, vol. IV, pp. 381–82. The original MS is lodged in the Royal Collection, London.

to the revised *Lives* of 1781 (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 482). Such phrasing enables one to imagine that Johnson had meant a certain judgmental poise should conclude his great work; the balanced expression offers an artistic grace applied to the bare bones of the booksellers' remit. When, therefore, the critical biographies of the *Lives* were reorganized chronologically according to the dates of each poet's death and the "anticlimactic" "Lyttelton" replaced the "defiant" "Gray" (the adjectives are Lonsdale's), we find an impairment. But we also see how other kinds of meanings might arise. This is because the essays now published in looser connection to their occasion enable a reading with more facility from one "Life" to the next. As successive chapters of the same book, they give significance to the poets to which they refer but also strengthen the reference they make to each other. Such integration becomes apparent when we trace the internal transitions, changes and shifts of topic, tone and gradations of critical engagement that mark Johnson's progressively ambitious interpretation of his task.

Maintaining the rhythm of the *Lives* is the surprising brevity, even peremptoriness, of some "Lives" when set against the generous proportions of others – Cowley, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Swift and Pope are understandably the most voluminous. Within any one "Life" some passages can be cool and sardonic; others are infused with Johnsonian warmth and geniality. We respond to these rhythms when we read along the length of the work (so to speak), and in contravention of Johnson's own somewhat haphazard practice as a reader; I mean by reading *through* the *Lives* – sufficient to sense what Burrow calls the "rhythm of [Johnson's] mind," and to comprehend what Johnson once called the "mutability of mankind" (*Adventurer* 98, Works vol. II, p. 429). Johnson exalts the qualities that make poets immortal and disdains time-wasting trivia and empty convention in the verses of those he often struggles to say something about; there is verbal succinctness with critical digression, the perfunctory snub with the willingness to dilate anecdotally, affection and pity with expressions of brusque contempt. The "Lives" of poets are seen then as individual episodes realizing a vision of humanity. I have suggested at an earlier point that one might think of the *Lives* alongside other capacious works of literary artistry dependent on the juxtaposition of successive narratives.

With the end of each life comes a new birth and the beginning of another poetical career – until that in turn is cut short. The liaison between one essay and the next invites reflection on the diversities of character and fate. Take the close of the "Life of Savage" with its rhetorical appeal to those "who languish under any part of [Savage's] sufferings" or those who, "in confidence of superior capacities or attainments, disregard the common

maxims of life." Johnson reminds us that "nothing will supply the want of prudence; and that negligence and irregularity, long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 188). Turn, now, from this moralizing climactic to the start of the next "Life" – the "Life of Swift." "An Account of Dr. Swift has been already collected," Johnson begins, "with great diligence and acuteness, by Dr. Hawkesworth" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 189). We are at ground level once again and reminded of the mundane labor of gathering materials for a "Life." We are present at the start of another personal adventure whose destination will be a different form of success and a different kind of failure: We have seen that Johnson inserted the "Life of Savage" into the *Lives* from an earlier version of 1744, but its placing does not diminish the moral and emotional import behind its composition. The biography stands within a context of interpretation its new location creates; other "Lives" must now likewise be read in company with the "Life of Savage."

It is not, then, any single element or collection of best passages that makes the *Lives* the aesthetic and expansive moral experience that it is, a "piece of English literature of the very first class" according to Matthew Arnold.[9] Johnson traces a flux of life through the vicissitudes of *Rasselas* and in the *Lives* through different configurations of personal history. The revised order is determined by the dates of the deaths of the poets; but the control of background and foreground, of length, light and shade, is Johnson's. The representative, the rightly overlooked or the most eminent English poets, are discriminated in a dramatic narrative of critical biography. The order that chronological arrangement imposed on Johnson is not in the event the constraint it had first seemed to be. Granted there are givens. Thus the "Life" of Milton must fall between the great poet's lesser near contemporaries Denham and Butler, that of Dryden between Walsh and Smith, and that of Pope, the second longest and last written of the "Lives," must be bracketed between Broome and Pitt – the former Pope's assistant in translating Homer, the latter a fellow translator of classical poetry and a Pope admirer. But many chronological overlaps occur. Episodes are cross-referenced via poetical quarrels and alliances; lives lived at great length play into others of shorter span. A mode of composition, haphazard at first sight, assumes an organic form.

Johnson's six years writing the *Lives* were a time of interruptions, indolence and concentrated spurts, and the order in which the "Lives"

[9] Matthew Arnold, Preface to *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets"* (London: Macmillan, 1886), p. xxvii.

are printed is not the order in which they were composed. The interleaving of major and minor essays is broadly reflective of major and minor poets. Subsequent critical opinion has not overturned the relative standing of such figures. But alongside the incongruities of "mingled" drama, where "the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend," where "the loss of one is the gain of another" (Works VII, p. 66), the *Lives* defines a human state subject to every revolution of fortune, triumph, disappointment, reckless impulse, acquired capability and the privilege or inconvenience of birth. Our relation to the disruptive causes of things, the reversals, and realities, becomes the logical subject of the *Lives* and an encapsulation of life. In a conversational exchange with Lord Monboddo during his Scottish tour Johnson is reported as saying: "I esteem biography, as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use" (Boswell, vol. V, p. 79). The biography and criticism of the *Lives* grew from a commercial prospectus; but the material is subject to Johnson's management of tone, mode and register. Such "use" of the *Lives* – "written I hope in such a manner, as may tend to the promotion of piety" – Johnson's humanity and empathy were well equipped to promote (April 2, 1779, Works I, p. 294). In choosing the right man for the job, the booksellers could not have known how right they would prove to be.

The mix of biography functioning as criticism, criticism functioning biographically, operates creatively upon Johnson's original brief. In some "Lives" Johnson decisively segregates these modes. We thus have a relatively tight-lipped "Life" of Milton openly disapproving of the poet's politics and personality. This is followed by concerted, item-by-item treatment of the poems and turns on the difficult tribute to the greatness of *Paradise Lost*, an epic performance with all its contradictions honored as second only to the *Iliad* of Homer. Sometimes the modes cannot be fully disengaged: hence the leisurely unfolding of the "Life of Dryden." In the example of "Swift," the eccentric human figure is recreated through anecdotes harvested widely. These far outweigh the restricted attention given to the writings, and we have seen how the "Life" concludes with the cursory dismissal of the poetry and a sense of tragic futility. In the case of Prior, life as a competent career diplomat took precedence over the poet's commitment to poetry; but space adequate to Prior's poetical *oeuvre* is nevertheless found. Sometimes, as in the "Life of Cowley," the structure is tripartite. Johnson inserts the famous theoretical essay on Metaphysical "wit" (*Lives*, vol. I, pp. 199–202) at the hinge-point between a "Life," substantially based on Sprat, and new analyses of poems by Donne, Cleveland and Cowley himself. The longest of all, the "Life of Savage,"

has little to say about the verse. Sometimes the ordered nature of the writing seems to echo the ordered mind of the poet who is the subject of the "Life," as in the carefully signalled transitions between individual writings and between writings and life in the "Life of Pope." "The Works of Pope," writes Johnson as he turns from an account of similarities and differences between Pope and Dryden, "are now to be distinctly examined" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 66). Contrast this textual signposting with the baggy extent and swings between biography and criticism of the "Life of Dryden." The truth of a poetic character is enacted by the biographical and critical structure that represents it. Dryden's experience, and our experience of him, then take their place in the awkward tangle of the writing life with life's other experiences that have nothing to do with writing.

The Deaths of the Poets

Such strategies of form enable Johnson to "chase the dead" (in Hilary Mantel's haunting phrase).[10] Johnson resurrects within his late eighteenth-century present the ghosts of a 150-year poetical past. He actualizes this past in the fictional imagination of the living, just as Johnson's death filled with a sense of life the imagination of his own most famous biographer. The artistic moral of the *Lives* arises from the succession of poetical deaths, and perhaps the subject is not far removed from Johnson's immediate consciousness four years before his own death in 1784. "That Individuals die, his Will ordains; | The propagated Species still remains," writes Dryden in his translation of the speech on the nature of change over time made by Theseus at the conclusion to "Palamon and Arcite," his version of book 3 of Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale."[11] In such transitions as occur between "Savage" and "Swift," we see how the poetical species carries on, but also how an individual life in poetry is end-stopped by death, with epitaph-like finality. The theme recalls an ethical tenet of *Rambler* 78: "the remembrance of death ought to predominate in our minds, as an habitual and settled principle, always operating, though not always perceived . . .

[10] Hilary Mantel, in the first of her series of five Reith Lectures on historical fiction, "Resurrection: The Art and Craft," broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 13 June, 2017. The first lecture is available on the BBC website as "The Day is for the Living," www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b08tcbrp.

[11] "Palamon and Arcite," in *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. VII: *Poems 1697–1700*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (2000), p. 189.

[for] the great incentive to virtue is the reflection that we must die" (Works IV, pp. 47, 50).

The dying of the poets sees mortals as the individuals of a propagated species. Striking in Johnson's catalogue of life-endings is how often it is the arbitrariness, or irony, or even the comedy of the going that Johnson brings out. The life of a poet is a special case of life, but death is the great leveller, the baseline of universal nature. Johnson paints the portraits of individuals whose corporeal selves are bound by time. As time passes, the poets' independent being transforms into memories anchored in the minds of the living by their surviving writings. They are reclaimed for the present by personal recollection, by anecdotes and stories told by friends or friends of friends. Their biographies record hopes, disappointments, lives lived fully and lives lived through to no particular eminence.[12] The random remains of any life, a knock-on effect, often, of Johnson's partial information, provide in the event an intense experience of the always unknowably complete person lost forever. Poets propagate poets but are caught out by death in the act of living; their departure from life is no different from that of those philosophically unprepared. We know from Montaigne that "To Study Philosophy is to Learn How to Die," but in practice there may be no time: "when I consider my age, and the broken state of my body," Johnson had written in his diaries of 1773, "I have great reason to fear lest Death should lay hold on me, while I am yet only designing to live" (Works I, p. 160).

The *Lives* builds on this irony: It is one of the great comic and satiric documents of English literature created in defiance of the sufferings it narrates. Its cadence is wry acceptance, and a sharp awareness of the ridiculousness of heroic endeavor in the literary or critical arts. It is laden with tones of moral responsibility, but also resonant with critical laughter. We have seen that the appetite for ridicule duly deserved is evident in Johnson's scornful mockery of the pastorals of Hammond, or the aristocratic poeticizing of Lord Halifax. But alongside it in the *Lives* is the tragic counterpoint to what David Ferry calls "unsentimental pity." This

[12] In *Rambler* 8 Johnson writes that "If the most active and industrious of mankind was able, at the close of life, to recollect distinctly his past moments, and distribute them, in a regular account, according to the manner in which they have been spent, it is scarcely to be imagined how few would be marked out to the mind, by any permanent or visible effects, how small a proportion his real action would bear to his seeming possibilities of action, how many chasms he would find of wide and continued vacuity, and how many interstitial spaces unfilled, even in the most tumultuous hurries of business, and the most eager vehemence of persuit" (Works III, p. 41).

capacity – I have called it compassion – is evident especially, though not exclusively, in the "Lives" of the few poets known personally to Johnson. The "Life of Savage" offers an apology for a colorful but deeply flawed individual who had forged a friendship that Johnson never repudiated. The "Life of Collins," meanwhile, its subject another early acquaintance, exhibits an account of what human sympathy for suffering might be. The descriptions of Collins's progressive loss of his mental faculties and the pathos of his heroic attempts to retrieve them, and then to fail to retrieve them, and then to accept that he had failed, are among the most poignant moments in the *Lives*. They remind us of how emotional a literary critic – inside the carapace of sense and astuteness – Johnson actually is. Consciousness of this palliative, redemptive, consolatory sympathy shines through at such moments and conveys the emotional interiority that Johnson reveals in his private confessionals and letters.

We have seen that Johnson's demand for emotion is crucial to many of his most famous or notorious judgments – on the coldness and lack of sublimity of the Metaphysical poets who were "not successful in representing or moving the affections" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 200), on the contrivances of pastoral, the inanity of mythology or the empty rhetorical gesturings of Dryden's plays. Johnson's general judgment on Dryden, at the conclusion to the "Life," makes some careful discriminations within the poetry of feeling:

> Dryden's was not one of the *gentle bosoms*: Love, as it subsists in itself, with no tendency but to the person loved, and wishing only for correspondent kindness; such love as shuts out all other interest; the Love of the Golden Age, was too soft and subtle to put his faculties in motion. He hardly conceived it but in its turbulent effervescence with some other desires; when it was inflamed by rivalry, or obstructed by difficulties: when it invigorated ambition, or exasperated revenge . . .
>
> We do not always know our own motives. I am not certain whether it was not rather the difficulty which he found in exhibiting the genuine operations of the heart, than a servile submission to an injudicious audience, that filled his plays with false magnificence . . . he could more easily fill the ear with some splendid novelty, than awaken those ideas that slumber in the heart. (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 149)

Dryden's plays allude to love, but Dryden does not express love with the warmth and intimacy Johnson valued. The hesitation here – "I am not certain whether" – is telling. How far this registers a negative criticism of Dryden, as distinct from a poetical character impartially appraised, is difficult to fix. Johnson brings the question back to the enduring mystery

that we are to ourselves: It is "we" (Johnson, the reader of Johnson, and Dryden) who "do not always know our own motives." If the effect of the plays is to suffocate authentic emotion in extremity and bombast, the reason behind this is an open question Johnson refuses to close. "[A]ctions are visible, though motives are secret," Johnson writes in the "Life of Cowley" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 198).

Johnson's sympathies are ultimately with those ideas that "slumber in the heart." In his regard for a truth ascertainable within literary experience through a capacity for feeling, we have seen how the *Lives* counts as a History of Poetry and how poetry advances towards, though never finally achieves, the "stability of truth" (Works VII, p. 62). This progress occurs up to the point where a refinement of the diction and meter initiated by Waller and Denham, then mightily reinforced by Dryden and finally perfected and polished by Pope, becomes over-refinement. The luxuriance of metrical and verbal accomplishment carried aesthetic and moral implications. Johnson considered Pope's "Homer" as balanced on the cusp – the moment at which Nature gives way to Art. But Johnson excuses Pope because it is the first duty of a writer to be read, and his public at the time required of him what his great translation supplied:

> It has been objected by some, who wish to be numbered among the sons of learning, that Pope's version of Homer is not Homerical; that it exhibits no resemblance of the original and characteristic manner of the Father of Poetry, as it wants his awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected majesty. This cannot be totally denied; but it must be remembered that *necessitas quod cogit defendit*; that may be lawfully done which cannot be forborn. Time and place will always enforce regard . . .
>
> To a thousand cavils one answer is sufficient; the purpose of a writer is to be read, and the criticism which would destroy the power of pleasing must be blown aside. Pope wrote for his own age and his own nation: he knew that it was necessary to colour the images and point the sentiments of his author; he therefore made him graceful, but lost him some of his sublimity. (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 73–74)

Johnson saw how far the "luxurious" (a kind of decadence in poetry) had set in when he took a celebrated but lesser work, such as Addison's *Cato*, as his test. This does nothing to subtract from his faith that original genius is irrepressible. Johnson found in *The Seasons* of Thomson a fresh observation of the natural world.

Johnson's appreciation of Thomson (and criticism of Gray) is echoed in the next generation by Wordsworth. Wordsworth never did confess his debts to the *Lives* but complained of what Johnson had omitted, or

eccentrically included.[13] This was not the only peremptorily hostile reaction that Johnson's great work was to suffer. There is much to suggest Johnson was swimming against the tide of a younger generation. To many the *Lives* appeared as the last gasp of taste and principles that could no longer be defended. Pungently graphic evidence to this effect exists in the two brilliant satirical prints that James Gillray made of the *Lives* and its author. Gillray ridicules the overrated critical authority and narrow prejudice he perceives in Johnson. He is "Old Wisdom Blinking at the Stars" (1782). He is "Dr. Pomposo" (1783).[14] The aesthetic blindness thereby imputed to Johnson recalls his literal shortsightedness. A weakness of vision is sometimes argued to have made him insensitive to the visual arts, just as his alleged hearing impairments are supposed to have cut the pleasures of music out of his life. I won't here go into the false inferences drawn from such well-canvassed physical disabilities.[15] Enough to suggest how resistance to critical verdicts pronounced in the *Lives* is most potent when indirect. The challenge to Johnson's authority rests on the image of one whose defects were inherent and ineradicable, located deep in his very being, body and personality. His defective judgments, in that they were inevitable, seem then so satisfactorily explained that they require no refutation to be proved wrong. F. R. Leavis is one of many who have posed their challenge on terms that refuse to face Johnson squarely on his.

The rhythms of Johnson's writing in the early style of the *Rambler* are often remarked; they are perhaps a symptom of the influence of the heroic couplet or the stylistic susceptibility of Johnson's prose to the syntax of Latin. The tempo of the *Lives* is however audible at a level different from Johnson's balanced clauses and rhetorically orchestrated paragraphs. Each successive "Life" is read beside adjacent narratives or is thematically linked to ones quite distant to which it is tied by a running agenda of critical and

[13] Wordsworth's complaints are discussed by Adam Rounce, "'Pleasure or Weariness': Additions to and Exclusions from the *Lives of the Poets*," in *New Essays on Samuel Johnson: Revaluation*, ed. Anthony W. Lee (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2018), pp. 47–67. Rounce cites *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), vol. III, p. 79.

[14] The full title is "Apollo and the Muses, Inflicting Penance on Dr Pomposo, Round Parnassus." Johnson had been dubbed "Dr. Pomposo" by Charles Churchill in his satirical poem *The Ghost* (1762). For detailed discussion of these caricatures see Philip Smallwood, "The Johnsonian Monster and the Lives of the Poets: James Gillray, Critical History and the Eighteenth-Century Satirical Cartoon," *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Autumn 2002), pp. 217–45.

[15] For discussion of these inferences see Philip Smallwood, "Johnson, the Arts and the Idea of Art," in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 164–85.

moral subject matter. As shifts in any conversation about poetry and people, these links may include a return to matters earlier discussed but temporarily laid aside. This would for example include common issues faced by poets in the making of poetry, the role of blank verse in the work of different poets or such matters as the logical rules of propriety in allegory.[16] Johnson charts the different ways and varying success with which poets tackle the same or different forms and genres, and different poets' responses to the same or different sets of political and historical conditions or their subjection to the same or different kinds of poetic conventions.

The "minor" "Lives" may seem pointless commentaries on works that nobody reads any more (as T. S. Eliot complained). Matthew Arnold gave similar reasons for wanting to make a selection for educational purposes:

> If we could but take, I have said to myself, the most important of the lives in Johnson's volumes, and leave out all the rest, what a textbook we should have! . . . The work as Johnson published it is not fitted to serve as such a text-book; it is too extensive, and contains the lives of many poets quite insignificant.[17]

But Johnson's portraits of poets that Arnold thought "quite insignificant" play their part in the rhythm of the *Lives*; they are not in the event incidental and may include compelling passages it is easy to overlook. Thus, the choice Johnsonian satire of Halifax or Hammond, and the critical laughter this inspires, could not have appeared had they not been on Johnson's list of prescribed subject matter. Minor "Lives" of minor poets these may be; but they do not produce minor writing. The *Lives* illustrates how the poets of the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century realized their greatness, or failed to do so, wasted their God-given gifts or discovered they didn't have any.

Ends and Beginnings

The lives of all the poets come to a close in the varied and unpredictable modes of their dying. But the poets' surprisingly unpredictable starts in life, and particularly their education, mark the cycle of ends and beginnings. Johnson's extended meditation on the moral task of what we make

[16] On blank verse see, for example, the "Life of Milton" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 294) and the "Life of Akenside" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 174); on allegory, see particularly the passage on the allegory of Sin and Death in the "Life of Milton" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 291).

[17] Arnold, Preface to *The Six Chief Lives*, p. xii.

of ourselves means he gives credit to whoever helped make the poets the people they turned out to be. The old schoolmaster from Lichfield is therefore careful to note the educational benefits enjoyed by such a mover and shaker as Joseph Addison: "Not to name the school or the masters of men illustrious for literature," he urges in the "Life of Addison," "is a kind of historical fraud" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 1). This abiding interest in beginnings is one that the Johnson of the *Lives* shares with the author of *Rasselas* where the Prince of Abyssinia contemplates his escape from the not-so-Happy Valley of his youthful confinement. "Abraham Cowley," we learn, "was born in the year one thousand six hundred and eighteen. His father was a grocer" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 191).

Such matter-of-fact opening statements will often prepare the ground for a narrative of social mobility consequent on a life in poetry, and they remind us of Johnson's own progress in life. So Collins "came to London a literary adventurer, with many projects in his head, and very little money in his pocket" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 120). "Matthew Prior [in common with Johnson] is one of those that have burst out from an obscure original to great eminence" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 48). Johnson puts on record the ordinariness of beginnings (such as Collins's, Cowley's or Prior's) to suggest a democratic republic of letters having no longer use for inherited privilege and the patronage of the great. In more general terms, and while alluding to Johnson's ambition to write a "History of the Revival of Learning in Europe," the editors of the Yale edition of the *Rambler* note his "deep sympathetic kinship with human effort" and that "this close interest in the earlier stages of any achievement, is one of the principal characteristics of Johnson's mind" (Works III, p. xxxiii). In its alternations of ends and beginnings, the *Lives* populates the dynamic society of which Johnson was a member; the work calls into being an historically imagined community of actual people who turned out to be poets; it is the late-life mental and emotional home of a man who found solitude unbearable.