

*“The tears stand in my eyes”*  
*Johnson and Emotion*

**Emotion and Too Little of It**

Compassion is a special case of the sympathetic imagination Johnson extended to others. We turn now, however, to the emotional personality of Johnson’s criticism and its origins. Tensions and anxieties of a deeply personal order shape Johnson’s critical practice, and he is one of the most emotionally intense personalities in English writing. But he is also one of the most reluctant betrayers of emotion, a tendency we see in the unsentimental language of his criticism, in the compact, restrained, rugged austerity of some of his poetry and in the organization and formulation of his literary tastes.

Emotion, then, for Johnson – in common with Tolstoy – is pivotal in the attribution of value to art.<sup>1</sup> But Johnson’s critical approval always depends on the artistic realization of emotional states in the work in question. In response to the empty rantings of the plays, and the intellectual and scholastic contexture of his reasonings in verse, Johnson thought the poet Dryden, on the whole, not much acquainted with “the simple and elemental passions.” His great predecessor, he wrote, in a passage we shall return to later in this study, is “not often pathetick” (*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 148–49). Nevertheless, one of the poems in the *Lives of the Poets* Johnson exalts most highly of all is Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast*. This is the famous music ode of 1697 devoted to the headiest of emotional states, and Johnson is perhaps hinting that the rhapsodies of the poem, echoed in the exquisite musical setting by Handel, have dazzled perceptions. Johnson notes that “some of the lines are without correspondent rhymes” but this is a defect, he observes: “I never detected but after an acquaintance of many years, and which the enthusiasm of the writer might hinder him from

<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy writes of art’s defining characteristic being its capacity to “infect” the viewer, reader, or spectator. Count Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art and Essays on Art* (1898), trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 227–30.

perceiving." If the "last stanza has less emotion than the former," Johnson's praise nevertheless remains exceptional: "The ode for *St. Cecilia's Day*, perhaps the last effort of his poetry, has been always considered as exhibiting the highest flight of fancy, and the exactest nicety of art. This is allowed to stand without a rival. If indeed there is any excellence beyond it, in some other of Dryden's works that excellence must be found" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 148). This pitch of esteem for any individual poem, here in harmony with the general judgment of mankind, is a rarity in the sometimes abrasive critical atmosphere of the *Lives of the Poets*. "Fancy," "art" and especially the overall generous supply of "emotion" go together in Johnson's appraisal.

At a different point on the judgmental and emotional scale, the failure of particular poems to make their readers weep (if only inwardly) when weeping is required can stir Johnson to unqualified critical disapproval and to assert his need for a full-out expression of sympathy and pity. In his "Life of Milton," famously, Johnson is scathing on the poet's pastoral fatuity in the fanciful artistry of his poetical elegy *Lycidas*. He objects that while ostensibly mourning the death of his college companion, Milton strikes a would-be elegiac note that is full of showy and distracting convention about imaginary flocks of sheep and their shepherds: "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 278). Again, in the "Life of Cowley," the first of the *Lives*, Johnson can complain of the sterility of Cowley's poem on the death of his friend William Hervey that "when he wishes to make us weep, he forgets to weep himself," preferring to impress by clever imagery and chill metaphysical conceits (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 215). Johnson's account of the deficiency of the Metaphysical school of poets is more generally that they refrigerate feeling – especially in the poems about love or death that precisely demand it. Such writers are like "Epicurean deities making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest and without emotion" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 201). The fact that the Metaphysicals missed the "sublime" is a mark against them.

### And Too Much

Examples from Johnson's life and writing are significant outposts of this territory. As the corollary to Johnson's wish for emotional incitements in poems, some of Johnson's letters, the personal diaries, his annals and his private prayers to his Maker testify to an utterly merciless cycle of self-inspection revealing the core of his suffering humanity and his propensity

to guilt and regret. His work on Shakespeare as an editor and a critic correspondingly displays the role of emotion in critical experience. The attention Johnson accords to Shakespeare supports his preferences in the *Lives*, and explains why emotionally impoverished writing must be taken to task.

When personal feelings arise in his own poetry, Johnson can seem to evade self-revelation. The major works of Johnson's poetic *oeuvre*, *London* (first published anonymously in 1738) and the *Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), are famously imitations of Latin originals. They are emotional proxies that displace personal feelings through their Juvenalian sources and the classical poet's relentlessly caustic satire. But another form of self-fashioning is the personal emotion concealed within Johnson's neo-Latin. An eloquent conduit for autobiographical experience is "In rivum a Mola Stoaana Lichfeldiae diffluentum" ("On the stream flowing away from the Stowe Mill at Lichfield") where Johnson in his final year of life recalls being taught to swim as a boy by his father. Evoking the constancy and change that shape any individual past experience, the poem first appeared posthumously in Johnson's *Works* of 1787 and is a poignant masterpiece of restrained emotional capaciousness that admits but does not indulge the personal:

Errat adhuc vitreus per prata virentia rivus,  
 Quo toties lavi membra tenella puer;  
 Hic delusa rudi frustrabar brachia motu,  
 Dum docuit blanda voce natare pater.  
 Fecerunt rami latebras, tenebrisque diurnis  
 Pendula secretas abdidit arbor aquas.  
 Nunc veteres duris periëre securibus umbræ,  
 Longinquisque oculis nuda lavacra patent.  
 Lympha tamen cursus agit indefessa perennis,  
 Tectaque qua fluxit, nunc et aperta fluit.  
 Quid ferat externi velox, quid deterat aetas,  
 Tu quoque securus res age, Nise, tuas.  
 (Works VI, p. 342)

I do not agree with the editor of Johnson's Latin poetry Niall Rudd that "charming" is the right description for this poem's intensity and power.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>2</sup> Niall Rudd, trans. and ed., *Samuel Johnson: The Latin Poems* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), p. 9. For Rudd's prose translation see pp. 121–22. David F. Venturo very eloquently captures the "touching and delicately ironic conclusion" to the poem in his discussion of the allusion to Nisus and Euryalus from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and in his observation that Johnson "provides consolation in the face of . . . painful change by noting that, in spite of the transformation of the

addition to his reworkings of a passage from the "Life of Pope" and the lines from Johnson's review of Jenyns I have already discussed, David Ferry has movingly translated Johnson's "In rivum" as "The Lesson – from the Latin of Samuel Johnson" (1993). The version focuses the potential of the Latin to express psychological self-searching (the swimming "lesson" becomes a moral one) and suggests the relation between past and present in the shift from wistful recollection to urgent reality. We are reminded of how much of the present is the past:

The stream still flows through the meadow grass,  
As clear as it was when I used to go in swimming,  
Not good at it at all, while my father's voice  
Gently called out through the light of the shadowy glade,  
Trying to help me learn. The branches hung down low  
Over those waters made secret by their shadows.  
My arms flailed in a childlike helpless way.

And now the sharp blade of the axe of time  
Has utterly cut away that tangle of shadows.  
The naked waters are open to the sky now  
And the stream still flows through the meadow grass.<sup>3</sup>

There is the fondness of the memory, and there is the unbearableness of a recollection that cannot be admitted without overwhelming the writer. The tenderness and elegiac continence of the twentieth-century poem recur to its eighteenth-century Latin inspiration and sound a distinctive note. Christopher Ricks has conducted a detailed analysis of Ferry's version of Johnson's original where he explains Ferry's complicated reconstruction of the spirit of the Latin in pointedly un-Johnsonian English.<sup>4</sup> Ferry omits the last lines addressing the remembrance to Nisus (the Virgilian pseudonym for Edmund Hector and a recollection of the schoolboy friendship

landscape, the tireless stream continues uninterrupted along its perennial course." *Johnson the Poet: The Poetic Career of Samuel Johnson* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), pp. 137–38.

<sup>3</sup> David Ferry, *Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 199. The poem first appeared as "The Lesson, Adapted from the Latin of Samuel Johnson" in *Raritan*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Spring 1986), p. 146. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the poet.

<sup>4</sup> Ferry's note to the poem in *Of No Country I Know* expresses a debt to the prose translation of E. L. McAdam, Jr., in the Yale edition, *Works* vi, p. 289. But Ricks's rendering of the last line of the Latin, strategically omitted in Ferry's version, appears more accurate than that of McAdam. For Johnson's "Tu quoque securus res age, Nise, tuas" McAdam has "Whatever the haste of a stranger carries off, or old age wears away, may your life also, Nisus, move serenely on." *Works* vi, p. 343. Ricks's prose rendering of the final line is "You also, Nisus, heedless of what swift time brings from outside or what it wears away, do what is yours to do" – a version that does more to respect the force of Johnson's "tuas." See Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 338.

the memory of which allegedly gave rise to the poem). But Ferry's English adaptation is otherwise surprisingly close and is sufficiently keyed to the Latin to evoke the emotional consequence of the memory. Thus the repetition of the emphatic "Nunc" dividing off the second of the two mood-movements of the poem is reenacted in the "And now . . . the sky now" of Ferry's own variety of estranged idiom. "He could be the more personal," comments Ricks, "when he was not being nakedly so."<sup>5</sup> The concomitant of the neo-Latin is the additional layer of Johnson's response to the disruptive emotions stirred in gratitude to his father from this distance in life, the sorrow of old age and the loss of trusting innocence in a childhood world of long ago.

The real-life feelings of "In rivum" are filtered obliquely through the near-extinct artistry of neo-Latin in Johnson's day. The Latin makes present emotion deriving from Johnson's personal history possible to endure. "The great business of his life," Boswell reports Reynolds citing Johnson, "was to escape from himself" (Boswell, vol. 1, pp. 144–45), and anxiety about confronting his feelings holds Johnson's untethered emotion in check when he is appraising the physical person of Pope or the death of Swift. But this is the Johnson hard up against all-too-true truths faced in the implacable finality of Ferry's "sharp blade of the axe of time." Such realism has frequently explained Johnson's literary personality and his critical judgments, and this is directly expressed in his English prayers, diary entries, meditations and correspondence. Johnson experienced personal grief of the most painful kind when his wife died in 1752, once again on the death of his mother and a third time on the death of his friend Henry Thrale: "No death," he wrote to Henry's wife, Hester, "since that of my Wife has ever oppressed me like this" (Thursday April 5, 1781, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 330).

It is on the death of his wife that this wave of emotion seems to have swept over Johnson and taken two years to subside. Boswell reports that on the night of his wife's death, the Reverend Dr. Taylor found Johnson "in tears and in extreme agitation" (March 18, 1752, in Boswell, vol. 1, p. 238). One year after she died, Johnson recorded on March 28, 1753, that "I kept this day as the anniversary of my Tetty's death with prayer and tears in the morning." On Easter Monday of the same year Johnson visited Tetty's grave in Kent and said a prayer for her, and it is here, as the distancing effect of the Latin once more comes to his aid, that "Fluunt lacrymae." Johnson's prayer "In the Morning" after a second grief-

<sup>5</sup> Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 336.

stricken year (March 28, 1754) has at its head the same expression in painfully abbreviated form: "Fl. Lacr." (Works I, pp. 50–54). Again, the prayer brings out the relation between Johnson's personal lamentation and the intensity, even the agony, of his religious communion at a time of psychological crisis.

Loss of a different kind much later in life occurs when, having heard the shocking news that the widowed Mrs. Thrale was to marry the Italian musician Gabriel Piozzi, Johnson felt once again utterly bereft. The original letter from Johnson to Mrs. Thrale is preserved in the Hyde Collection of the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and the margins of the main text seem – to my eye – in places slightly smudged. I won't insist that the run of the black ink on the paper is caused by the falling tears of a man weeping over what he is attempting to write – from the disappointment and reproach that the content of the letter undoubtedly expresses; but it is at least consistent with this possibility. After many years of intimate friendship, writing on June 30, 1784, Hester Thrale had sent Johnson an official announcement of her second marriage, begging Johnson's pardon for having concealed the connection with Piozzi from him so far. On July 2, 1784, Johnson wrote back to Mrs. Thrale as follows:

Madam:

If I interpret your letter right, You are ignominiously married, if it is yet undone, let us talk together. If You have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your Fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.

If the last act is yet to do, I, who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you, and served you, I who long thought you the first of humankind, entreat that before your fate is irrevocable, I may once more see You. I was, I once was, Madam, most truly yours,

SAM. JOHNSON

(Friday July 2, 1784, Letters, vol. IV, p. 338)

However pompously unreasonable in content and tone, the letter registers an agony of betrayal that cuts to the quick. But then follows the hasty, anxious, poignant postscript, scribbled down the left margin of the page and oriented at right angles to the main text: "I will come down if you permit it." (He means he will come from London "down" to Streatham, where Mrs. Thrale lived.) This addition in the wings of the letter seems as swiftly to quench the petulant outburst. It issues from the heart – is uttered in unmediated anguish, and suddenly artless compared with the letter itself

and the rhetorical patterning of “if,” “I,” “who” and the accusatory “You” that resists, at least in the composure of the composing, an emotional disintegration. In a letter to Mary Manning, Samuel Beckett recalls Johnson's grappling with the consciousness of his own powerful emotions on this same occasion. Beckett there describes Johnson's “horrificed love of Mrs Thrale” and “the whole mental monster ridden swamp.”<sup>6</sup> That there is an element of self-horror in Johnson's reaction, horror at perceiving the capacity of his own emotion to engulf him, is the force of Beckett's intuition.<sup>7</sup>

### Emotion in Art and Life

Such vulnerability to sensations of loss comes out in Johnson's depictions of grief-stricken states in his other writings. In 1759 Johnson turned aside from the travails of his edition of Shakespeare to write *Rasselas*, which is a narrative fable, not quite a novel and not really a treatise, but at the pinnacle nevertheless of English literature's capacity for philosophical consolation; it cannot be divorced from the personal sorrow and isolation that Johnson felt at this time. Here the Prince, having escaped from the putative “Happy Valley” in order to embrace the realities of the world, meets with the distinguished philosopher of Nature. He, having a short time ago lost his daughter, finds no consolation, at the moment when he needs it most, in his lifelong philosophical commitment to reason:

Rasselas, who could not conceive how any man could reason so forcibly without feeling the cogency of his own arguments, paid his visit in a few days, and was denied admission. He had now learned the power of money, and made his way by a piece of gold to the inner apartment, where he found the philosopher in a room half darkened, with his eyes misty, and his face pale. “Sir,” said he, “you are come at a time when all human friendship is useless; what I suffer cannot be remedied, what I have lost cannot be supplied. My daughter, my only daughter, from whose tenderness

<sup>6</sup> Beckett's letter to Manning, July 11, 1937, as quoted in Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 127. The original of the letter, regrettably absent from the recent four-volume Cambridge edition, is held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Beckett had a deep and longstanding interest in Johnson's complex emotional character, and his *Human Wishes* represents an attempt to write a play about the Johnson–Thrale relationship. For an excellent discussion of Beckett's interest in Johnson see Frederick N. Smith, *Beckett's Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 110–31.

<sup>7</sup> Commentators have sometimes suggested that Johnson might have felt jealousy at Mrs. Thrale's attachment to Piozzi and had hoped to marry her himself. Given their difference in ages, however, it seems as likely that his concern was paternal. Hester was forty years old when Thrale died in 1781; Johnson was by then in his seventies.

I expected all the comforts of my age, died last night of a fever. My views, my purposes, my hopes are at an end: I am now a lonely being disunited from society." (Works xvi, pp. 74–75)

"My daughter, my only daughter": the repetition bespeaks agonizingly the initial unprocessed stages of pain. But for all the sympathetic sentiment we may extend to the bereaved, fictional or real, we don't feel this emotional pain as we feel our own. It is common to humanity, but somehow peculiar to ourselves, an aspect of Johnsonian "general nature" yet unique in its characteristics, context and cause.

### **As a Mother Weeps over Her Babe**

Such passages from Johnson's own writings will explain the compassionate scholar who edited and evaluated the great master of humanity's extensive emotional empire in 1765. The dialogue of Shakespeare, he tells us, is "level with life" (Works vii, p. 64). Shakespeare "has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion." Shakespeare holds up to his readers "a faithful mirrour of manners and of life." He excels in "accommodating his sentiments to real life" and engaged in dramatic poetry "with the world open before him"; he caught his ideas "from the living world" while his plays seem "scarcely to claim the merit of fiction." The reader of other dramatists, in encountering Shakespeare, "may be cured of his delirious ecstasies" by reading "human sentiments in human language" (Works vii, pp. 62–65, 69). The emotions of life and those of art are brought very close in these formulas, but there is no confusion of art and life as René Wellek once suggested there was. In an anecdote related by Stendhal, who thinks along lines similar to Johnson, the gallant soldier present during a performance of Shakespeare in the Baltimore theatre who rose, took out his pistol and shot the actor playing the part of Othello at the point where he "murders" Desdemona – so deludedly carried away by the performance was he – shows how the difference between responding to art and responding to life will not withstand a category mistake. As Johnson well knew, our sanity is at risk when we confuse the two.<sup>8</sup> But if Shakespeare "seems scarcely to claim the

<sup>8</sup> The anecdote is related by Stendhal's persona of the "Romantique." See *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823–25), in *Oeuvres complètes de Stendhal*, ed. Pierre Martino and Victor Del Litto, new. ed., 50 vols. (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1970), vol. xxxvii, pp. 15–16. For the historian of ideas René Wellek, Johnson "is one of the first great critics who has almost ceased to



merit of fiction," Johnson's emphasis on "seems" is not one that all his contemporaries or successors would unequivocally share.

Having drawn up his shortlist of Shakespeare's faults in the *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765; Works VII, pp. 59–113), Johnson turns to the commonplace charge that he has failed to observe the dramatic unities of time and place, rules conventionally prized from the time of Corneille and Racine as a guarantee of credibility and thus emotional intensity. We think of the extreme time disparities of the *Winter's Tale* or the changes of place from Rome to Alexandria in *Antony and Cleopatra*. As readers or spectators we connect the remembered narrative with what is presently happening on the page, stage or screen, and respond without perplexity to the action, dialogue and human situations we witness.

Johnson's exposure of the central fallacies is forthright, devastating and satirical and he suggests that while the theory of the unities is self-refuting it cannot be left to reveal its absurdity unaided:

It is false, that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramattick fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited.

The objection arising from the impossibility of passing the first hour at Alexandria, and the next at Rome, supposes, that when the play opens the spectator really imagines himself at Alexandria, and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to Egypt, and that he lives in the days of Antony and Cleopatra. Surely he that imagines this may imagine more. He that can take the stage at one time for the palace of the Ptolomies, may take it in half an hour for the promontory of Actium. Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation . . . (Works VII, pp. 76–77)<sup>9</sup>

This leads to the second critical strategy of the passage. While "delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation" (and Johnson admits nothing of the sort), "The truth is, that the spectators are always in their

understand the nature of art, and who, in central passages, treats art as life." *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, 8 vols. (London: Cape, and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955–92), vol. 1: *The Later Eighteenth Century*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson's use of the term "delusion" is precise and significant. In his *Dictionary* he defines "delusion" as "1. A cheat; guile; deceit; treachery; fraud; collusion; falsehood" and "2. A false representation; illusion; error; a chimerical thought." "Illusion" he defines as "Mockery; false show; counterfeit appearance; error." There are clearly overlaps between the two terms; but Claude Rawson is writing a little incautiously when he says that Johnson "was impervious on principle to the force of dramatic illusion." See "Art and Money," review of Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *The Publication of Plays in London 1660–1800*, *TLS* (March 4, 2016), pp. 24–25, at 24. The term Johnson uses, "not dogmatically but deliberately" (or "deliberately"), Works VII, p. 80, is not "illusion" but "delusion."

senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players”:

They come to hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation. The lines relate to some action, and an action must be in some place; but the different actions that compleat a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre. (Works VII, p. 77)

The section in which the argument culminates makes in its own terms a very moving observation about the credibility of Shakespeare’s most emotionally compelling dramatic scenes:

It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to drama. It is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original; as representing to the auditor what he would himself feel, if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done. The reflection that strikes the heart is not, that the evils before us are real evils, but that they are evils to which we ourselves may be exposed. If there be any fallacy, it is not that we fancy the players, but that we fancy ourselves unhappy for a moment; but we rather lament the possibility than suppose the presence of misery, as a mother weeps over her babe, when she remembers that death may take it from her. The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more. (Works VII, p. 78)

Johnson employs the simile of the mother who weeps over her babe to delineate the precise sense in which artistic experiences distinct from situations in the actual world are nevertheless credible. Note the deployment here of the conditional mood of the verb (“may”) to signify the hypothetical, unreal condition having real effects in the present. The tears fall as the mother imagines an event that has not happened but still might. It is as if she had already endured the loss. The tears shed in expectation respond to her recognizing that her child must one day die. However, the event that the mother conceives is not the terminus of her child’s adult life but the possible premature death that is always a prospect in vulnerable infancy (and a commonplace real-world fact of eighteenth-century parental experience – as Johnson’s friend Mrs. Thrale was sadly aware<sup>10</sup>). The premonition of grief is experienced as present emotion. And just as the

<sup>10</sup> Only four of Mrs. Thrale’s twelve children survived to adulthood.

sufferings she brings to mind belong to a future unrealized, so as we sit in the theatre ("always in [our] . . . senses") it is a "fallacy" that the audience, any more than the players on the stage, are unhappy. Yet as we confront the ruling conditions of uncertain real life starkly dramatized, we do really "lament." Being in one's senses does nothing to diminish the role that predictive imagination has in Shakespeare's artistic capacity to generate emotional scenes of non-delusive reality.<sup>11</sup>

### The Painful "Pleasure" of Grieving for Heroines

Johnson's remarks on the dying of Cordelia reveal this vulnerability and make it harder to speak in general terms of tragic "delight." They cut across, but do not eliminate, the intensity of sustained pleasure that Johnson undoubtedly felt when as a reader he experienced *Lear*, *Hamlet* or *Othello*. Johnson responds to the tragic climax of *King Lear* in guarded yet at the same time self-exposing terms quite alien to the scholarly decorums permitted to a modern editor of Shakespeare's plays (he has been talking about the tendency of modern audiences to prefer the 1681 Nahum Tate adaptation where Lear's daughter survives):

Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add any thing to the general suffrage, I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor. (Works VIII, p. 704)

"The mournful distraction of Ophelia," Johnson writes of *Hamlet*, "fills the heart with tenderness" (Works VIII, p. 1011), while in *Othello* "the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, and conscious of innocence, her artless perserverance in her suit, and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected," yet murdered by her crazed husband (whose psychological realization Johnson greatly admires), is one of the "proofs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature, as, I suppose it is vain to seek in any modern writer" (Works VIII, p. 1047).

The depth of the pathos here is evident in Johnson's response to other unfortunate heroines in Shakespeare's most ambitious plays. "I am glad

<sup>11</sup> In his discussion of this passage Fred Parker observes that "The act of imagination [by the mother] is indispensable; but it ends in 'the stability of truth'" (Works VII, p. 62). *Johnson's Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 97. See also the examination of the passage by Greg Clingham, "Playing Rough: Johnson and Children," in *New Essays on Samuel Johnson: Revaluation*, ed. Anthony W. Lee (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2018), pp. 161–91, at 171.

that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene," writes Johnson of Desdemona: "It is not to be endured" (Works VIII, p. 1045). The experience of both *Othello* and *Lear* is, however, endured, sufficiently at least to permit the shaping of his remarks, and though neither scene can be enjoyed without complication, Johnson is under the obligations of an editorial duty. He cannot fully give way to these feelings. But while he laments "the possibility . . . of misery" raised in stage performance by *Lear*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, he cannot evade the "presence of misery" when he encounters the tragic text as an editor.

Nor is it clear he wants the plays other than they are. What happens has to happen. Johnson's first-person language on Cordelia is modalizing, and it is unlike that of the critic John Dennis, whom he quotes, working with a concept of poetical justice that he cannot relinquish. Faced by the heroine's death at the end of the play, the mind is too mazed to know quite what is wanted: "If my sensations could add"; "I might relate"; "I know not whether" are Johnson's formulations. Johnson intimates his feelings; but he registers his distraction without apology for Shakespeare's exorbitant vision in *King Lear* and he offers no censure, moral or aesthetic. As Fred Parker has noted, emotional disarray does not develop into devaluation. Shakespeare is the "poet of nature," but Johnson is the only critic of his period to account for the full dark, barely bearable, horror of such scenes without condemning them a priori – as had, for example, Thomas Rymer, in his honest scorn for the raucous barbarity of Shakespeare's *Othello*.<sup>12</sup> For Johnson the moments of desolation elevate the plays to which they belong, even as they hover on the brink of unnatural extremity or have us stare appalled into its depths.

Shakespeare is the dramatic artist who typically produces such scenes, and with the death of Cordelia we might suspect that he can carry even this heroine "indifferently" through right and wrong and at the close dismiss her "without further care." Such an act of dramatic disregard, according to Johnson's estimate in the *Preface*, goes down as a fault. Yet at this concluding moment Shakespeare seems all too dreadfully intent on the

<sup>12</sup> *A Short View of Tragedy* (1692), in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1956), pp. 82–175. I have in mind Rymer's (justified) outrage at the opening scenes of the play in which Brabantio is so cruelly bated: "The first we see are *Jago* and *Roderigo*, by Night in the Streets of *Venice*. After growling a long time together, they resolve to tell *Brabantio* that his Daughter is run away with the Black-a-moor . . . But beside the Manners to a *Magnifico*, humanity cannot bear that an old Gentleman in his misfortune should be insulted over with such a rabble of Skoundrel language, when no cause or provocation" (pp. 136–38).

effects he contrives. Johnson, in response, is the reluctant but necessary advocate of the nature in theatrical art that humanity cannot reconcile. These instances qualify our sense of tragedy as a bearable experience, its bearableness being a precondition of any "delight." Knowing that it is only a fiction does not undermine the credibility of drama; under the conditions of Shakespearean art, fictionality may do very little to mitigate the bewildering, terrible force of the plays:

*Enter Lear with Cordelia in his arms*

reads the stage direction in the final scene of the play. Lear:

She's gone for ever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She's dead as earth.

(v.iii.259–62)<sup>13</sup>

"My daughter, my only daughter," cries Johnson's philosopher of Nature in a father-daughter bereavement echoed in *Rasselas*.

### Diverted Feelings: The Comedy of Tragedy

For all his distress caused by the deaths of Cordelia, Desdemona and Ophelia, Johnson asks us to face full on the feelings they arouse. The haunting image of the mother who weeps over her babe looks ahead to the real-world domestic (paternal) tenderness of Johnson's letters to Hester Thrale's daughter, Queeney, and their solicitous tone, followed up in the correspondence after the devastating news of Hester's second marriage.<sup>14</sup> But the passage from the *Preface* also links the credibility of tragic drama to a chaotic reality that refuses to divide laughter from tears. Disrupting the categories defined in the Heming and Condell folio, the plays are:

not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which, at the same time, the reveler is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the

<sup>13</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *The Complete Works*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Quotations from Shakespeare in this chapter are from this edition.

<sup>14</sup> See especially the letters to Hester Maria Thrale of Saturday July 3, 1784, and Tuesday July 6, 1784, *Letters*, vol. iv, pp. 339–40.

malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design. (Works VII, p. 66)<sup>15</sup>

Johnson means to be taken as loud and clear, but his sentence expands through the extent of the paragraph to chart the tensions that make "mingled" drama. As Johnson lets go the formal generic classifications, so the thought is amplified through the sequence of parallel clauses, unrolling a description of the texture of life from one semicolon to the next. When he imagines the bizarre coincidence of the reveller "hasting to his wine" as "the mourner is burying his friend," it may not be clear that Johnson is thinking of any particular scene from Shakespeare but is allowing his attention to roam beyond the intervening text and to inhabit a world where the emotions of life and the emotions of art most naturally intersect.

In this connection, a note to the subsequent paragraph by Johnson's editorial collaborator and successor George Steevens, printed with Johnson's *Preface* in Edmond Malone's 1821 *Shakespeare*, comments on Johnson's statement that the "two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy," are "compositions . . . considered so little allied, that I do not recollect among the Greeks or Romans a single writer who attempted both" (Works VII, p. 66). To supply what Johnson here cannot bring to mind, Steevens quotes the commentary on Aristotle by the scholar Thomas Twining, who invokes a plot from classical tragedy analogous to Johnson's claims for the Shakespearean scenes:

The unlearned reader will understand me to allude particularly to the scene [in the *Alcestis* of Euripides], in which the domestick describes the behaviour of Hercules: and to the speech of Hercules himself, which follows. Nothing can well be of a more comick cast than the servant's complaint. He describes the hero as the most greedy and ill-mannered guest he had ever attended, under his master's hospitable roof; calling about him, eating, drinking, and singing, in a room by himself, while the master and all the family were in the height of funereal lamentation.<sup>16</sup>

Johnson's Shakespearean "mingled" drama offers an image of life containing many such preposterous situations, and it is by reference to this idea that Johnson makes approving allusion to three scenes from *Hamlet*,

<sup>15</sup> In their *Preface to the First Folio Edition of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1623), John Heming and Henry Condell had divided Shakespeare's plays into "Tragedies," "Comedies" and "Histories."

<sup>16</sup> Edmond Malone, ed., *Works of Shakespeare*, 10 vols. (London, 1821), vol. 1, p. 66.

answering criticisms by Voltaire and by Dennis on the play's departure from due decorum of character and genre. There is the early representation of the Danish "usurper" as a "drunkard," the fact that "The play of *Hamlet* is opened, without impropriety, by two centinels" and the scene at the end of the play where "the Grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause" (Works VII, pp. 65, 68, 69). By such means the sadness and sorrow that incite weeping in more uniformly tragic drama are checked or diverted by some ludicrous or incongruous turn of events, punning banter or clownish character. Feelings are not destroyed by counteraction, but made more intense.

The clash between Hamlet's bitterness and grief over his dead father, and the drunken nighttime revels of King Claudius (I.iv) play out this habit of sudden emotional redirection. The noisy carousing is heard while Hamlet waits for the ghost of old Hamlet to appear, and where Hamlet's comment to Horatio is caustic with a sense of his uncle's vulgar impropriety:

The King doth wake to-night, and takes his rouse,  
Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring up-spring reels;  
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,  
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus Bray out  
The triumph of his pledge.

(I.iv.8–12)

The burial of Hamlet's father is alluded to almost immediately in the same scene. This comes in the challenge Hamlet mounts to the unburied spectre:

Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell  
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,  
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre,  
Wherein we saw thee quietly [inurn'd,]  
Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws,  
To cast thee up again.

(I.iv.46–51)

The ensuing stage business whereby the ghost of Hamlet's father urges Hamlet to swear on his sword that he will exact revenge manages to be at once awesome, horrible and comic.

"All pleasure," writes Johnson at the conclusion of his defence of Shakespearean practice (in which the "pleasures" of tragic experience are exalted), "consists in variety" (Works VII, p. 67). Even as he had the available spaces of his emotional consciousness filled out to its periphery by

painful events, Johnson nevertheless found the "highest pleasure that the drama can give" (Works VII, p. 111), and he acknowledged in his endnote to *Hamlet* that: "If the dramas of *Shakespeare* were to be characterized, each by the particular excellence which distinguishes it from the rest, we must allow to the tragedy of *Hamlet* the praise of variety" (Works VIII, pp. 1010–11).<sup>17</sup> The dislocations of "mingled" drama are, then, an excitement to "pleasure," and they are not to be wished away without evading the realities that make Shakespeare the poet of a nature not very reassuringly humane. This experience of an emotional landscape fully equal to nature's desolation was the occasion for Johnson's most sustained critical revolt against the parochial limitations of untranscended time.

### "Unsentimental Pity"

Johnson, I have suggested, was conducted by Shakespearean "pleasure" to the terrible abysses of life's "tragic plane" and its appalling absolutes and finalities.<sup>18</sup> Yet Johnson is a robust satirist of an Age of Sensibility: He comically parodied the emotive effusions of his friend the poet and critic Thomas Warton, and he subjected to ridicule some of the versified pathos and simpering sentiment fashionable among his contemporaries. But we have seen that Johnson is also the "Man of Feeling" himself; he is instinctively more emotional, and in his criticism far more demanding of emotion, than generally allowed. On a passage in Congreve's *Mourning Bride* he wrote admiringly that the reader "feels what he remembers to have felt before, but . . . feels it with great increase of sensibility" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 72). This reaction must be held in tension with Johnson's adverse response to excessive varieties of emotional exuberance; these stand in contrast with the qualities felt on the death of Queen Catherine in Act V, scene ii, of Shakespeare's tragedy of *Henry VIII*: "This scene is above any other part of Shakespeare's tragedies, and perhaps above any scene of any other poet, tender and pathetick, without gods, or furies, or poisons, or precipices, without the romantick circumstances, without improbable

<sup>17</sup> It was as a little boy – spooked by reading the scene with the ghost in *Hamlet* – that Johnson rushed upstairs to the street from the kitchen of his father's shop in the center of Lichfield, "that he might see people about him." "Piozzi's Anecdotes," in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), vol. 1, p. 158. Yet even in 1765, now a grown man in his fifties, Johnson can write in his endnote to the play of the apparition that in the first act of *Hamlet* "chills the blood with horror." Works VIII, p. 1011.

<sup>18</sup> I take the expression from H. A. Mason's attempt to define "tragedy" in *The Tragic Plane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).



sallies of poetical lamentation, and without any throes of tumultuous misery" (Works VIII, p. 653) – praise for Shakespeare, certainly, but a rebuke to the author of *Hamlet* (for the poison), *King Lear* (for the precipice) and perhaps *Othello* (for the "throes of tumultuous misery").

The emotional Johnson is known for the black dog of melancholia and for the depression which forms "a kind of rust on the soul" (*Rambler* 47, Works III, p. 258). But correctives to spiritual desolation were forever on his mind: "despair is criminal," Johnson records at one low point in his personal diaries (Works I, p. 225).<sup>19</sup> As for tears, human wishes may seem vain, but while misery is part of life, never in his writings does Johnson come near to the bleak lacrimose effusions of (say) Tennysonian emotion. This is not because eighteenth-century men were any more proponents of the stiff upper lip than the great souls of Victorian sensibility. Theatre audiences were often ready with their handkerchiefs: Boswell reports a pleasing performance by Garrick where "I was fully moved, and shed abundance of tears."<sup>20</sup> Johnson once confessed to crying as a schoolboy when moved up a form against his will (Works I, p. 18); in his adult years he wept many private tears for the loss of Tetty. Occasional outbursts of anger or irritation are recorded by his biographers, and extensive evidence of the disturbing forces at work at every level of his psyche. There are, however, few records of Johnsonian tearfulness in public life.

Johnson's life, and his writings, reveal the extraordinary depths of compassionate sympathy for other people, and it is this that Ferry accurately calls Johnson's "unsentimental pity."<sup>21</sup> The experience of such pity is built into the sequence of the fifty-two "Lives" of the poets, and it is encompassed in Johnson's movement between judgments of poems on emotionally demanding criteria and the lives of the poets who composed them.

Johnson's account of the final stages of the life of William Collins indicates how our pitying attention may indeed be "unsentimental":

The latter part of his life cannot be remembered but with pity and sadness. He languished some years under that depression of mind which enchains the faculties without destroying them, and leaves reason the knowledge of right without the power of pursuing it. These clouds which he perceived

<sup>19</sup> April 14, 1775, 10:30 p.m. For commentary on Johnson's depression (including speculation, and a response to speculation, about his neuroses and sexuality) see Donald Greene, "A Secret Far Dearer to Him than His Life: Johnson's 'Vile Melancholy' Reconsidered," *AJ*, vol. IV (1991), pp. 1–40.

<sup>20</sup> James Boswell, May 12, 1763, in *Boswell's London Journal, 1762–1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), p. 257.

<sup>21</sup> "David Ferry, What Johnson Means to Me," *JNL*, vol. 55, no. 2 (September 2004), pp. 7–10.

gathering on his intellects, he endeavoured to disperse by travel, and passed into France; but found himself constrained to yield to his malady, and returned. He was for some time confined in a house of lunatics, and afterwards retired to the care of his sister in Chichester, where death in 1756 came to his relief. (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 121–22)<sup>22</sup>

He "found himself constrained to yield to his malady." In the quiet respectfulness of this phrasing, Collins discovers within himself the loss of mind that Johnson places on record. This is a rational act of self-knowledge experienced with heartbreaking dignity and lucidity. Then follows the story of Collins's mental self-ministrations and their ultimate failure. When he remembers Collins Johnson's "pity and sadness" seem to forgo the healing of tears. But through this example of distressed humanity, known to him in life, Johnson renews his exposure to human misery with the same steady gaze; he must admit once again its inexplicable causes and defiance of justice.

Characteristic of Johnson the critic and biographer of poets is this acceptance of a human lot that no writer can evade; it is a recognition of the reality present in his stark accounts of the sufferings of Pope and Swift but always quite distinct from complicity in melancholic despair. As pervasive in Johnson's criticism is his robust response to the poetry of the poets. This is sometimes overstated or perceived as dogmatic; but there is also, as we shall see, a measured respect for such a spirit in other critics and a delight in the sometimes bold expression of judgment, even at the cost of some delicacy and tact. In Part II of this study we turn to contextual relations with two critics temperamentally different from Johnson in different ways. In both cases, however, there are surprising likenesses of character and method revealing of Johnson's critical moods and guises. In the chapter which now follows we see how critical relations acted as a catalyst spurring Johnson to develop his views on Shakespeare, on Addison and on Pope. The opinions of the arch-contrarian John Dennis, even when they are at odds with Johnson's, are here a necessary abrasive material striking the critically luminous spark.

<sup>22</sup> Lonsdale points out that Johnson's "character" of Collins originally appeared in the *Poetical Calendar*, vol. XIV (December 1763), pp. 110–12. *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 407.

