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"THE ENTHUSIASTICK FIT" : THE FUNCTION AND FATE OF THE POET IN JOHNSON'S *RASSELAS*.

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RESUMEN: En este artículo se interpreta la teoría poética expuesta por Samuel Johnson en Rasselas *en su relación con dos contextos diferentes. Por una parte, la ideas sobre poesía de Samuel Johnson tal como se exponen en otras obras suyas, así como su lugar en el panorama crítico de la época. Por otra parte, se estudia la función literaria que dicha teoría desempeña en* Rasselas. *Resulta de ello una reevaluación de la actitud de Johnson ante el neoclasicismo, y una mejor comprensión de las relaciones entre su poética y su filosofía vital.*

ABSTRACT: This paper interprets the poetic theory expounded by Samuel Johnson in Rasselas *as it relates to two different contexts. The first consists of other theoretical statements by Johnson and their place in the critical panorama of the age. The second context is* Rasselas *itself considered as a whole in which the section on poetics fulfils a literary function. Johnson's attitude to neoclassicism is thereby revaluated, the result being a more adequate understanding of the relationship between his poetics and his overall outlook on life.*

> Literature is a kind of intellectual light, which, like the light of the sun, may sometimes enable us to see what we do not like; but who would wish to escape unpleasing objects, by condemning himself to perpetual darkness?
>
> Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson is no longer seen as the staunch defender of rigid neoclassical principles that he was thought to be in the nineteenth century. Neoclassical theory is

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characterized by Walter Jackson Bate as "an attempt to build primarily on one side of experience—the demand for order, arrangement, and unity .... The ideal aim, in short, is a rational unity of impact, free from distractions or from needless supplement." [1] Wishful thinking! As Jacques Derrida has taught us, the supplement always finds its way in. In the case of Johnson, it threatens to overpower the main body of the theory. It does so, indeed, in some studies on Johnson's criticism, which stress the hidden coherence of his empiricist, pre-Romantic view of literature under the ill-fitting neoclassical idiom in which it is clad, somewhat like mighty Johnson himself under his "little old shrivelled unpowdered wig, which was too small for his head." [2]

This view must be purchased at the cost of surrendering the adequacy of some of Johnson's most forceful theoretical assertions. Boswell believed that the *Lives of the Poets* contained "such principles and illustrations of criticism as, if digested and arranged into one system, by some modern Aristotle or Longinus, might form a code upon that subject, such as no other nation can shew" (2.340). Those who have attempted the task have found Johnson's criticism rich and complex indeed, but hard to arrange into *one* system. There is often a wide gap between Johnson's theoretical pronouncements and his critical practice.[3] Some of his best known theoretical passages, such as Imlac's dissertation on poetry in Chapter X of *Rasselas*,[4] offer a contradictory and partial image of Johnson's views on poetry.

In this paper I will interpret and qualify the poetic theory Johnson expounds in this crucial chapter of *Rasselas* as it relates to two different contexts. The first consists of other theoretical statements by Johnson and their place in the critical panorama of the age. The second context is *Rasselas* itself considered as a work of fiction in which the section on poetics fulfils a literary function. Johnson's attitude to neoclassicism will be shown to be both aesthetically and psychologically complex. Following this path we may achieve a more adequate understanding of the relationship between Johnson's poetics and his overall outlook on life.

That Johnson's neoclassicism should not be pure is not surprising. English neoclassicism had a romantic slant at least since Dryden—that is, since the beginning, for it was Dryden who, in a greater measure than Hobbes and Davenant, diffused in England the knowledge of the authors and principles of French neoclassicism. The romantic streak is present in Addison's essays on the pleasures of imagination[5] and in Burke's analysis of the sublime.[6] It is present even in the criticism of Pope—in his prefaces to Shakespeare or Homer, rather than in the more conventional "Essay on

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1 Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* 204.

2 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* 1.245.

3 Cf. W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* 323; Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato* 324; William Edinger, *Samuel Johnson and Poetic Style* x.

4 Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759). Page references are to the Penguin Classics edition by D. J. Enright (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976). I have preserved nevertheless the original spelling of the endings in -c ('enthusiastick', but 'Imlac') in deference to Johnson's having referred to *Rasselas* in this respect (Boswell 2.337).

5 *Spectator* No. 411, 412, 416, 418-420 (1712).

6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), sections VII and XXVII in Adams 310 ff.

Criticism."[7] This romantic vein is most prominent in minor aestheticians like Hurd and Alison.[8] Eighteenth-century British aesthetics exerted for some decades a revolutionary influence on the aesthetics of continental Europe, and was a crucial lever in displacing neoclassicism, even if it often looks confused and simplistic when compared with the German theories of the last quarter of the century.

Yet neoclassicism lingered on until late. Many romantic principles current in general aesthetic theories, like those of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, were not immediately introduced into the realm of literary criticism, which still relied mainly on Horace and Boileau. And often the same author affirms principles which seem contradictory to us, some in his neoclassical mood, some in his other moods. Johnson is only the most notorious instance in this respect.

The status of Johnson's deviations from neoclassicism has been subjected to heated debate. René Wellek's view of the subject is the most extreme, though it may contain its grain of truth. In Wellek's view, Johnson is not a mere neoclassic, but neither is he a forerunner of Romanticism:

> He is rather one of the first great critics who has almost ceased to understand the nature of art, and who, in central passages, treats art as life. He has lost all faith in art as the classicists understood it and has not found the romantic faith. He paves the way for a view which makes art really superfluous, a mere vehicle for the communication of moral or psychological truth.[9]

Realism and morality, Johnson's two main standards, are not specific to literature, and moreover they run against each other (Wellek 82). Johnson sometimes stresses realism, "but more frequently the moralist is dominant, to the exclusion and even detriment of the critic" (Wellek 83); a similar tension is to be seen in the relations between generality and particularity in his doctrine (Wellek 85). Wellek sees only a sad literal-mindedness in Johnson's use of *incredulus odi* as a six-shooter.[10] Johnson is suspicious of fiction and insists that the experience communicated by the author must be sincere and felt. In Wellek's view, this amounts to the introduction of the individual experience of the author as a critical standard, one which is "indeterminate and aesthetically false" (81).

The classical Horatian maxim of sincerity (*si vis me flere...*) is often invoked in the eighteenth century against neoclassical taste, against excessive symmetry, conventionality and evident patterning according to the rules.[11] This move is often found in

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7 H. A. Needham, *Taste and Criticism in the Eighteenth Century* 23.

8 Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762); Archibald Alison, *On Taste* (1790).

9 René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950* (vol. 1, *The Later Eighteenth Century*) 79.

10 E.g. in the "Life of Gray," *The Works of Samuel Johnson* 11.178.

11 A related phenomenon is the eighteenth-century reaction against French gardens and the fashion of the "English" garden, artfully careless and asymmetrical. Cf. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics* (1709); Addison, *Spectator* 414 (1712); Walpole, *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1771); Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* (1799); see Needham (28ff. and chapter 6).

Johnson. But at least in one instance he goes even further. Cowley's love poems are not grounded on any real experience lived by the poet—and their value is thereby lowered for Johnson, quite independently of their intrinsic aesthetic qualities.[12] Mere literal-mindedness? This standard of truthfulness can also be seen as a curious convergence of two opposed principles: on one hand, the no-nonsense motto of empiricism; on the other, the pre-Romantic assumption, that poetry, being the expression of feeling, must be sincere.[13] Maybe it is Wellek who is being simplistic? Both Wellek and Johnson are dangerous men to accuse of oversimplification. But when we find them at such odds, the safest way out is to conclude that Wellek's blindness rests on a previous blindess of Johnson's. Widely different views of Johnson as a critic are to be expected, because they usually stem from a division in Johnson himself, an incomplete integration of the critical principles he adheres to. As Johnson observed, "we very often differ from ourselves" (*Adventurer* No. 107).

THE BUSINESS OF A POET

> The business of a poet, said Imlac, is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristicks which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness. (*Rasselas* 61-61, X)

Lodwick Hartley relates Imlac's example of the tulip to Sir Joshua Reynold's criticism (in his *Discourses on Art)* of the excessive particularity of the Flemish school of painting—the tulip is typical of the Netherlands, and was a common subject for Flemish painters, streaks and all.[14] Robert Folkenflik provides further contexts for Johnson's tulip. In the botanical semiotics of the day, the tulip was assumed to be a highly individualized flower (no two tulips were alike), and it connoted gaudiness, extravagance and needless luxury, even sinfulness. The tulip is an epitome of individuality and particularity. Poems by Richard Leigh and Cowley, which Johnson must surely have read, are devoted to tulips and their numerous streaks—one thinks again of Johnson's complaint that the metaphysicals dwelt too much on particulars and thus perverted the function of poetry.[15]

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12 "Life of Cowley," *Works* 7.280.

13 A claim voiced, for instance, by William Jones, "On the Arts Commonly Called Imitative" (1772; qtd. in Edinger 118), or by Hurd: "we must first believe, before we can be affected" (*Letters* 139).

14 Lodwick Hartley, "Johnson, Reynolds, and the Notorious Streaks of the Tulip Again."

15 Robert Folkenflik, "The Tulip and Its Streaks: Contexts of Rasselas X" 66-67. The poems in question are Leigh's "Beauty in Chance" (1675) and Cowley's Latin poem "Tulipa" (*Plantarum* III).

Pronouncements similar to *Rasselas* X can be found in the "Preface to Shakespeare" and in the *Lives of the Poets.* In the "Life of Cowley" Johnson explains why the metaphysical poets failed to reach sublime conceptions: "Sublimity is produced by aggregation, and littleness by dispersion. Great thoughts are always general, an consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness."[16] Johnson condemns metaphysical poets for their lack of generality: "Their attempts are always analytic: they broke every image into fragments." [17] And he finds in Milton's *Paradise Lost* the grandeur of generality, the model of sublime poetry.[18] Reynolds was to place a similar emphasis on generality in his *Discourses* before the Royal Academy. Johnson was wrongly suspected of having written these discourses himself, but he suscribed entirely to them (Boswell 2.263).

According to some critics (Wellek, Wimsatt and Brooks), this concept of generality in Johnson and Reynolds derives from neo-Platonic aesthetics, and more directly from similar conceptions in the previous century (in Bellori and Du Fresnoy) and in Shaftesbury. A different filiation, empiricism, is perhaps more telling, though it need not lead to a wholly different aesthetics. It has been noted that the universal in Johnson (as in Hume) is not grounded in nature independently of humans. The measure of truth for Johnson not a transcendental reality different from "the general sense or experience of mankind." [19] Universals, therefore, derive from the common collective experience of humanity divested from accident or prejudice, and grounded in a "general sense" or an unchanging human nature.[20] The latter, by the way, is a curiously rationalist assumption of English empiricism: "In the mirror-universe of universals, like recognizes like, so that the universal subject reflects the universal object." [21] In theory this standard is flexible, since a genius might arise who by his unprecedented activity would redefine the nature and extent of human achievement (cf. Keast 185). But in practice Johnson recognizes that the outlines of all future achievement are already in the classics. Which, given his identification of poetry and life, means that human nature is essentially the same for Homer, for Shakespeare and for us. Johnson's concern with morality allows him to lay the emphasis on "the passions of men, which are uniform" rather than on "their customs, which are changeable" (*Rambler* No. 36). The duty of the writer is "to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time and place" ("Preface to Shakespeare" 1). Homer can easily be translated because "his positions are general . . . with very little dependence on local or temporary customs." Subsequent experience has not displaced the original nucleus of human truth already depicted by Homer; his is an "open display of unadulterated nature." [22] The empiricist turn,

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16 Works 7.295. Cf. Jean H. Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* 145. Further examples of Johnson's insistence on generality are gathered by Wellek (86).

17 "Life of Cowley," *Works* 7.296.

18 "Life of Milton," *Works* 8.100 Cf. Wellek 94; Hagstrum 129.

19 *Lives of the Poets,* qtd. in W. R. Keast, "The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Criticism" 178.

20 Cf. Imlac in *Rasselas:* "The Persians are a nation eminently social, and their assemblies afforded me daily opportunities of remarking characters and manners, and of tracing human nature through all its variations" (60, IX).

21 Murray Krieger, "Fiction, Nature, and Literary Kinds in Johnson's Criticism of Shakespeare" 185.

22 "Life of Pope." *Works* 10.212. Manners, however, change, and with them the degree of poetic refinement (ibid. 323).

therefore, does not immediately alter the neoclassical assumptions which were originally grounded in an older metaphysics (cf. Krieger 186).

The shortcomings of Johnson's formulation of the principle of generality in *Rasselas* are evident.[23] The characteristics which are obvious to both the vigilant and the careless are the characteristics obvious to the careless, and do not seem to offer an adequate basis for successful poetry. Blake's anger against the comparable theories voiced by Reynolds comes to mind: "To generalize is to be an idiot." [24] Johnson's biographer Sir John Hawkins, in his examination of *Rasselas*, also commented unfavorably on "that which appears to me a recipe for making a poet, from which may be inferred what he thought the necessary ingredients, and a reference to the passage will tend to corroborate an observation of Mr. Garrick's, that Johnson's poetical faculty was mechanical, and that what he wrote came not from his heart but from his head." [25]

Wellek observes that in view of Johnson's literal-minded theory of realism, it is this abstractionism which saves his conception from identifying art with the slice of life (85). This is no doubt too harsh a judgement: elsewhere Johnson offers much more elaborate accounts of the relationship between cognition and aesthetic pleasure. But still we have to account for the oversimplified doctrine of generality which we find in this passage. One thing seems clear: in the standard doctrine of poetic universality (Aristotle-Plotinus-Coleridge-Wimsatt), generality is the end of the poet's business, rather than the means. Johnson's practical criticism agrees with this conception; he often condemns abstract, general and indeterminate treatments, and praises the kind of writing which gives the reader concrete images to illustrate or grasp abstract conceptions.[26] "What Johnson was seeking when he asked that poetry represent general nature," William Youngren observes, "was . . . precisely the sort of vivid particular images that present generalized moral content more forcefully and effectively than mere generalities or general terms can ever do." [27] This is true of much of Johnson's practical criticism, especially when its deep intention is seen from today's vantage point. It is also true to some extent of his more theoretical statements, but here the sympathetic critic who tries to unify Johnson's views under a single logic has to do more substantial rewriting.[28] One problem with the tulip passage is that it seems to recommend general ideas and images

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23 In Wimsatt's view, "The theory of universality as it appears in Johnson and Reynolds leads to platitude and to a standard of material objectivity, the average tulip, the average human form, some sort of average" (74). Hagstrum and Edinger, who make a brilliant case for Johnson's critical coherence and comprehensiveness, admit nevertheless that in his doctrine neoclassical linger dogmas from which Johnson could never fully free himself (Hagstrum 161; William Edinger, *Samuel Johnson and Poetic Style* 171ff.).

24 William Blake, annotations to Reynolds's *Discourses*, in Adams 402. Folkenflik draws attention to the likelihood that the "'Fairy mocking as he sat on a streak'd Tulip' at the beginning of Blake's 'Europe' is a nose-thumb at winking and blinking Dr. Johnson" (62).

25 Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* 155.

26 See, for instance, his essay on Pope's epitaphs, *Works* 11.1-18, or his praise of a simile in the Essay on Criticism which "makes particular what was before general" (Review of Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Life and Writings of Pope; Works 13.212).*

27 William Youngren, "Dr. Johnson, Joseph Warton, and the 'Theory of Particularity'" 183.

28 Hagstrum, Krieger, and Edinger often play down their own interpretive role in constructing a coherent Johnsonian doctrine, one which articulates universality and particularity in a workable way. Showing "how little [Johnson's] standard of general nature has to do with abstraction" (Edinger 89) requires a very generous and deliberate reading of *Rambler* No. 36 or *Rasselas* X. For Edinger, Johson's rejection of the 'streaks of the tulip' only bears on the visual effects of poetry (199ff)!

as the *means* to achieve the representation of poetic universals. Some critics explain away this inadequacy by means of the trump card of interpretation, irony: for them, Imlac is being the victim of the implied authorial attitude, and Johnson never espouses his theory of generality. The problem is that in more "literal" contexts Johnson also puts forward this view of universalization which excludes particularity: "Poetry cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions, by which one species differs form another, without departing from that simplicity of grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent qualities of things, without losing its general power of gratifying every mind, by recalling its conceptions" (*Rambler* No. 36). Neither of these accounts will ever lead to anything like Wimsatt's "concrete universal." [29]

Moreover, Imlac has just said that in his program of observation no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked: "I . . . pictured upon my mind every tree of the forest and flower of the valley. I observed with equal care the crags of the rock and the pinnacles of the palace. Sometimes I wandered along the mazes of the rivulet, and sometimes watched the changes of the summer clouds. To a poet nothing can be useless" (*Rasselas* 61, X). Except for the streaks of the tulip? And after the dissertation on universality, we return once more to the particulars:

> But the knowedge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the pasions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, form the spriteliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude. (*Rasselas* 62, X)

For Wellek, there is in Johnson's poetics "a certain undeniable contradiction between his constant recommendations of the abstract, the generalized and the universal, and his actual practical love of life, of its concrete particularity" (85): Johnson stressed one aspect or another of his principles according to necessity, without being troubled by the fact that each led to a different conception of the nature and role of poetry. We find him therefore praising Shakespeare's characters for two opposite reasons: because they are species, and not individuals ("Preface to Shakespeare" 329), and because they are individuals, plain everyday people (331). Johnson is espousing at the same time two contradictory views of art, a conceptualizing one and a purely reproductive one (cf. Krieger 187), without successfully sublating them in a wider system.[30]

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29 W. K. Wimsatt, "The Concrete Universal," in *The Verbal Icon.*

30 Edinger (52-60) points out a similar wavering between generality and particularity in Hurd and other eighteenth-century critics. Critics such as Joseph Warton and Joseph Priestley, who followed Hume's nominalism in a rather literal way, emphasized poetry's portrayal of particularities (through the use of 'particular terms'): "since general terms do not, without an effort of the imagination, suggest those determinate ideas which alone have the power of exciting the passions . . . it is proper that the writer, who would thoroughly affect and interest his reader, should, as much as possible, make that effort unnecessary, by avoiding general and abstract terms" (*Priestley, Lectures on Oratory and Criticism,* qtd. in Edinger 69-70). However, Edinger holds that in Johnson's practice, if not in his theory, we can find a successful articulation of particularity and generality, a theory of the concrete universal (90).

Of course, it has also been argued that there is no real contradiction between the two passages. The poet reproduces the particulars in such a way that the reader can abstract the general qualities and produces a concept.[31] Or the qualities of the particulars illuminate and give a concrete feel to the abstract idea (Youngren 173). Or again, the particulars are such that their unique relations point to an otherwise undefinable universal—a concrete universal.[32] In Wimsatt's definition,

> a literary work of art is a complex of detail (an artifact, if we may be allowed that metaphor for what is only a verbal object), a composition so complicated of human values that its interpretation is dictated by the understanding of it, and so complicated as to seem in the highest degree individual—a concrete universal. (*Verbal Icon* 77)

Not every theory which stresses both unity and variety can be said to be a theory of concrete universality. For instance, Johnson's contemporary Francis Hutcheson argues that a mixture of uniformity and variety is the foundation of beauty—proportion and correspondence are essential.[33] But Hutcheson's aesthetic theory has no relation to cognition, while the concrete universal is a cognitive phenomenon. Diversification and variety, on the other hand, are given a cognitive function by Johnson: "He, who knows most, will have most power of diversifying his scenes, and of gratifying his reader with remote allusions and unexpected instruction" (*Rasselas* 61, X). The role of the particulars in the passages just quoted is still defined in relation to conceptualization in one sense. They are valued for their cognitive qualities, they are "knowledge." As noted by Edinger (76), most other British aestheticians of the eighteenth century see particularity only as the locus of aesthetic pleasure. Johnson upholds an ethical and cognitive theory of poetry, in which aesthetic pleasure is related to knowledge and morality. But still this is not a theory of the concrete universal. The problem with this cognition of particulars is that it has no place in the doctrine of generality just expounded by Imlac. The relation between universality and particularity is merely additive; at worst, it is contradictory, at best, it is unspecified. Johnson's theory in *Rasselas* and elsewhere is

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31 This is the least adventurous interpretation of Aristotle's passages on this subject, for instance in the *Poetics:* "A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse .... The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (1451a-1451b). Other major sources for the conceptualist theory are Cicero's *De Oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, and, in the English tradition, Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. Hagstrum (88) and Edinger (3-7, 77) present Johnson's conceptualism in this light.

32 Hagstrum 155ff.; Edinger 90; Hartley 331. Bate (199) also strives to conciliate Johnson's simultaneous emphasis on generality and particularity, but the "larger framework" (something like Wimsatt's concrete universal) in which both principles are allegedly subsumed by these critics requires some critical acumen on the part of the observer which is not at hand in Johnson's formulations. Bate has to admit as much (200). Similarly, on the question of morality versus realism, he has to concede that Johnson's unaccountable endorsement of poetic justice "does show a rather pathetic tug towards wish-fulfillment" (201).

33 *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) 1.II.iii-viii; in Needham 171.

either a theory of the concrete, a theory of the universal, or both, but with the relation between them remaining paradoxical. It is never fully developed into a theory of the concrete universal such as Wimsatt finds in Aristotle or Coleridge (Wimsatt 81), and sometimes it takes the opposite direction.

The synthesis of generality and particularity is not evident in *Rasselas,* as it is not evident in most of Johnson's theoretical pronouncements. What strikes us there is the obviousness of the contradictions. Krieger speaks of the "profoundly nominalistic tendencies" of Johnson's praise of Shakespeare for his sheer realism (Krieger 190). He notes an unreconciled opposition between the universalizing and the particularizing theories of poetry, between the call for conceptual moral instruction and the admiration for realism without design. For Krieger, the conflict concerns ultimately the status of the universal structures (truth, human nature) as transcendental realities or mere delusions: "What is at stake is both a metaphysic and an aesthetic, both a definition of nature and a definition of the function of art . . . the poet must either bypass the peculiar properties of the particular in order to imitate its universality or he must dwell on its peculiarities since there is no going beyond them" (193). In his occasional valuation of variety and novelty as the sources of aesthetic pleasure *par excellence*, Johnson is closest to the anti-intellectualist aestheticism so common in his century.[34] But his strong moral concern will always balance (and even obscure) that hedonistic vein of his thought. He always held that "the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing" ("Preface to Shakespeare" 335), even if in doing so he had to renew his allegiance to the fast decaying neoclassical principles.

The implied Johnson is more satisfactory. Unlike Coleridge, Johnson does not seek to ground his critical theory on a general epistemology. But there is a very definite empiricist epistemology behind his criticism. The basis of knowledge is the storage in memory and the conceptualization of data obtained through sense experience. As Hagstrum observes, Johnson's "universals" or "general ideas" are not Platonic Ideas, since they derive ultimately from experience: "Plato wanted the particular to reveal the general and universal; Johnson wanted the general to recall the particular. Plato's point of view is metaphysical, Johnson's psychological" (88). The main lines of Johnson's view are fairly traditional, and are congruent with the principle of scholastic epistemology, "nihil in intellectu quod non fuerit prius in sensu." [35]

What is most Johnsonian in this theory of knowledge is the conception of generality. As used by Johnson, "general" has at least three senses: 1) An abstraction is general, since it can be said to correspond to several more specific phenomena; 2) A

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34 Addison, Hume, Burke, Alexander Gerard, Kames, Joseph Priestley, Hugh Blair, James Beattie, Young, Hurd, Joseph Warton and Adam Smith all placed the source of aesthetic pleasure in a "fancy" unrelated to judgement. Cf. Edinger 64ff. Some of these writers offer a quasi-mechanistic aesthetic theory, in which taste is an intermediary faculty between perception and cognition (Addison, *Spectator* No. 411; Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* [1762], 12). But Johnson is very far from there.

35 Hagstrum 5f. A measure of Platonism and rationalism is present in Johnson, here under the cover of the "system of the world." Analogous covert assumptions in Locke are a standard objection against empiricism. For a discussion of the tangled relations between neo-Platonism and other kinds of conceptualism, cf. Edinger 52ff.

conception which is widely shared by different persons is also general, widespread. 3) Logical relationship between propositions is general too, since it reduces multiplicity to a common unity, and sets particular propositions in a wider perspective. The three senses of generality are logically related in Johnson's theory of knowledge. Human knowledge consists most characteristically of the connection of particulars to general propositions (*Rambler* No. 158). Moreover, concrete, individual detail is not likely to be shared at large in a community: widespread notions, Johnson would say, involve a degree of abstraction.[36] This has the corollary that conceptualization is not a solitary process effected by individuals. There is no such thing as complete originality of conception, since universal elements of knowledge and passion underlie all individual achievement and experience.[37] Conceptualization is communal, and is guided by the need of communication, the diffusion of knowledge and, most important, the necessity of adjustment between our representations and the system of the world.[38] The effect of this adjustment, realism, requires in Johnson's view "that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world" (*Rambler* No. 4). Johnson can affirm that "nothing can please many, or please long, but just representations of general nature" ("Preface to Shakespeare" 328), or that "almost every man's thoughts, while they are general, are right." [39] Krieger has observed that this combination of universalization with an empiricist desire to "please" the public shows that Johnson's neoclassicism appeals not to the nature of things, but to collective judgement, a "Hume-like confidence in the collective observations of common sense." [40]

The collective experience of individuals in an ordered reality is ultimately at the basis of Johnson's conception. If this experience is too eccentric, unique, particular, not of general interest, it is unable to contribute to the communal stock of knowledge. But if this experience manages to adjust the concept to the object, to teach something new which can be shared by all, it becomes of great value. Genius is defined by Johnson as "that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates." [41] It is clear that Johnson conceived the mission of the poet along these lines. And the same empirical principles are applied by Johnson to the activity of the critic elsewhere: "As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep, or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains, and many rivers; so in the productions of genius, nothing can be stiled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind." [42] Or, in the "Life of Pope," "Judgement is forced upon us by experience. He

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36 The picture becomes even more complex when we take into account Johnson's conception of sublimity, which also seems to involve generality and simplicity. Cf. Wimsatt and Brooks 324.

37 *Adventurer* No. 95. According to Boswell, Johnson had projected "a work to shew how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation, have served all the authours who have ever written" (2.479).

38 On Johnson's conception of Nature as the system of the world see Hagstrum 65-75.

39 "Life of Pope," Works 10.293-294.

40 Krieger 185. The paradoxical affinities between Johnson's criticism and Hume's philosophy, which he abhorred, are also noted by Hagstrum (29) and Edinger (51).

41 "Life of Pope," Criticism 10.307.

42 "Preface to Shakespeare" 326; cf. Keast 177, 180.

that reads many books must compare one opinion or one style with another, and, when he compares, must necessarily distinguish, reject, and prefer" (*Works* 10.194). The education of taste is individual, but scholarship, like the history of poetry, is seen by Johnson as a collective labor, the product of cumulative experience (Hagstrum 12).

One element is still missing in Johnson's theory of knowledge. Morality is grounded on experience, but also on reason and revelation. Empirical truth is mutable to some degree, as collective experience changes. Moral truth is universal in yet another sense: it is immutable and eternal. The role of reason in this economy is an uneasy one. As Hagstrum notes (17), knowledge for Johnson is ultimately based on the coercive experience of reality; whenever reason seems to contradict experience, Johnson leans to experience.

We shall note the emphasis on moral universality in Imlac's discourse. Cognitive and moral universals coincide for Johnson in the last instance: in a writer, "virtue is the highest proof of understanding and the only solid basis of greatness; and . . . vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts" (*Rambler* No. 4). Apparently, giving too much attention to the streaks of the tulip not only reveals a doubtul taste, but also a certain viciousness.

Nevertheless, the relation of aesthetics to morality is looser than that for Johnson. On Gray's "Progress of Poetry," he made this observation: "That poetry and virtue always go together is an opinion so pleasing, that I forgive him who resolves to think it true" (*Works* 11.177). Johnson is evidently skeptical of the link between the good, the true and the beautiful which is to be found, for instance, in Shaftesbury. For this "school," moral sensibility may be improved by the mere exercise of aesthetic sensibility—an idea which is wholly foreign to Johnson's thought.

Francis Hutcheson develops Shaftesbury's ideas in the direction of an outright sensualistic aesthetics. Hutcheson observes that beauty is a quality of the object dependent on the mind of the perceiver. This is not relativistic in any sense: it means merely that beauty is one of the Cartesian "secondary qualities," like temperature or color. This quality is for Hutcheson the object of a special sense (a derivation of Shaftesbury's "moral sense"), which precedes the Lockean association of ideas and is ultimately independent from it, although it may be influenced by this association.[43] But empiricist theories of beauty will not follow this curious direction. Most critics,[44] Johnson among them, reject this crude sensualism which would lead to purely impressionistic criticism, and see taste and appreciation as intellectual activities. Beauty is for Johnson an empirical quality, relative to the perceiver—his doctrine of generality does not extend as far as general beauty.[45] This conception is also put forward by Hume: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty." [46]

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43 *Inquiry*, 1.I.ix-xvii; 1.VI.viii; Needham 167-174.

44 Rapin, Le Bossu, La Bruyère, Dryden, Rymer, Dennis... (Hagstrum 26).

45 Cf. *Rambler* No. 92; Hagstrum 83ff.

46 "Of the Standard of Taste" [1757], 315.

Towards the end of the century, Archibald Alison provides the fullest psychological basis for this view. Alison sees in the perception of beauty only the result of the association of ideas.[47] His theory moves towards a Romantic definition of beauty in terms of expression. Beauty, of course, is in the mind of the perceiver, and it is not a sensory quality of the object. The aesthetic qualities of objects are for Alison only signs of a state of the mind, signs created by an association of ideas which Alison ascribes to different causes: education, fortune, or accident, but also experience, or individual association. For Alison, poetical descriptions are beautiful in proportion to their power to stimulate emotional associations.

Johnson has not followed the road of empiricism that far in the direction of Romanticism. But there are some similarities. For Johnson, taste derives from experience; its principles are not immutable (like the basic moral principles) nor innate.[48] Beauty is not demonstrable, taste is not mathematical (*Rambler* No. 93). Imlac stresses the need for experience and careful observation, the enlargement of the poet's "sphere of attention." Poetry is conceived not as an ethereal substance or an undefinable quality, but as a way of dealing with reality, a human activity which is not essentially different from any other activity and is therefore not alien to morality or cognition.[49] Johnson conceived a close relationship between personal experience and poetry.[50] He is an enemy of triteness and cliché, and his praise is usually lavished on that novel expression which combines the familiar and the unfamiliar, which enlarges experience for us or imposes intelligibility and unity on the multifarious (cf. Hagstrum 155ff.). A poet who draws his images from the previous tradition and does not refresh them with his own observations can be correct, but never outstanding. The *Lives of the Poets* are full of complaints in this sense (cf. Bate 189). The poem must disclose the world; it is a vehicle of knowledge and communication between people, not an autonomous entity subsistent in itself (Hagstrum 36, 74). Edinger reads this aspect of Johnson's theory as a crucial upholding of poetry and rhetoric as a mode of discovery, and a way of bridging the gap between words and things which originates in the empiricist reaction against the world-views of late humanism (Edinger 39). In the work of writers like Locke or Sprat[51] it is not uncommon to find a distrust of language and the verbal arts at large; Johnson's views must be seen as a defense of the cognitive nature of literature. Feeling and emotion are of course not rejected by Johnson, but in his conception they are also subordinate to the law of generality: the poem is not an expressionist overflow of individual emotion, because emotion must be generalized to make it universally communicable (Hagstrum 48). The poet's attempt at communication is inscribed in the poem. The work is conceived by Johnson in its relation to the author, to the contribution made by the latter to literature and society, and in its relation to the reader—whether the poem is worth

47 "On Taste" 2.VI.vi; in Needham 180-183.

48 As held by "hard line" neoclassic critics of the past (Le Bossu, Rymer), who were extreme rationalists (Hagstrum 29).

49 Cf. Keast 184, Edinger xiv.

50 Keast; James Engell, "Johnson on Novelty and Originality" 276.

51 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (rev. ed, 1700); Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (1667).

reading or not.

There are underlying connections between other aspects of Imlac's discourse and the interpretation which bridges the gap between generality and particularity appealing to the empiricist side of Johnson's theory of literature. For instance, on the question of originality and tradition:

> In almost all countries, the most ancient poets are considered as the best: whether it be that every other kind of knowledge is an acquisition gradually attained, and poetry is a gift conferred at once; or that the first poetry of every nation surprised them as a novelty, and retained the credit by consent which it received by accident at first: or whether, as the province of poetry is to describe Nature and Passion, which are always the same, the first writers took possession of the most striking objects for description, and the most probable occurrences for fiction, and left nothing to those that followed them, but transcription of the same events, and new combinations of the same images. Whatever be the reason, it is commonly observed that the early writers are in possession of nature, and their followers of art; that the first excel in strength and invention, and the latter in elegance and refinement. (*Rasselas* 60, X)

Another Johnsonian version of the same narrative presents the evolution of literature as one "from rudeness to convenience, from convenience to elegance, and from elegance to nicety."[52] This is a common neoclassical notion, which little by little acquires pre-Romantic overtones. The opposition between a poetry of nature and a poetry of art was already fully elaborated in the Italian Renaissance by Patrizzi.[53] Both Vico and Fontenelle trace an evolution of poetry from nature and expression to art and though (though they evaluate it in opposite ways). For Vico, Homer will always remain the most sublime of poets, by virtue of having been the first.[54] Something not unrelated to these conceptions can be found, too, in Dryden's praise of "primitive poets" like Homer and Chaucer over more polished ones like Virgil and Ovid.[55] Addison[56] conceives of the genius of the ancients as being unbounded by rules; this placed them above the moderns, who are subject to them. For Addison, too, there are differences already among the ancients: Homer is a child of nature, while Aristotle and Virgil or

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52 *Idler* No. 63. Cf. also "Life of Pope," *Works* 10.323.

53 Francesco Patrizzi, *La deca disputata* (1586); Wellek 136.

54 Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Traité de la poésie en général* (ca. 1678); Giambattista Vico, *Scienza nuova* (1725) 298; see Wellek 136.

55 John Dryden, "Preface to the *Fables, Ancient and Modern*" (1700), in *John Dryden: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Kinsley and Parfitt.

56 *Spectator* 160, 592 (1711, 1712).

Milton belong to a second class of geniuses, formed by rules. Johnson himself quotes a very similar remark by Joseph Warton, "a remark which deserves great attention: 'In no polished nation, after criticism has been much studied, and the rules of writing established, has any very extraordinary book ever appeared.'" [57] Richard Hurd believes that "there is . . . in the revolutions of taste and language, a certain point, which is more favorable to the purposes of poetry, than any other. It may be difficult to fix this point with exactness. But we shall hardly mistake in suposing it lies somewhere between the rude essays of unconnected fancy , on the one hand, and the refinements of reason and science, on the other." [58] Modern times, says Hurd, are no longer fit for poetry: "What we have gotten by this revolution, is a great deal of good sense. What we have lost, is a world of fine fabling." [59]

Johnson does not go that far. He seems to say that generality belongs in a greater measure to the ancients—that "only 'first' poets can be unconditioned perceivers" (Edinger 99). A contemporary work must always balance the divergent needs for generality and particularity, which are seen by Johnson in their relation to the permanence of the work and its immediate attractiveness (cf. Hagstrum 87). The moderns will find originality difficult to achieve, and subject to heavy liabilities. A very definite teleology and a theory of history are present in this model. They appear more clearly in its half-satirical development by Peacock in his essay on "The Four Ages of Poetry,"[60] but they also underlie the nostalgia for classicism we find in Hegel's aesthetics.

The first of Imlac's theories for the superiority of the Ancients is pre-Romantic: poetry is a substance which overwhelms the poet by coming unto him. The second is more Johnsonian, but it is the third which is most congruent with the theory of universality Imlac is about to expound. Nature and Passion, which in themselves would seem to belong to the critical language of Young or Dennis rather than to Johnson's, are the proper subjects of poetry, but they are themselves "always the same," conceptualized, idealized, and generalized. They are best attained by "the most striking objects for description and the most probable ocurrences for fiction." A less tentative version of this conception is used elsewhere by Johnson in praise of Shakespeare:

> It may be observed, that the oldest poets of many nations preserve their reputation, and that the following generations of wit, after a short celebrity, sink into oblivion. The first, whoever they be, must take their sentiments and descriptions immediately from knowledge; the resemblance is, therefore, just, their descriptions are verified by every eye, and their sentiments acknowledged by every breast. Those whom their fame invites to the same studies, copy partly them and partly

57 Review of Joseph Warton's *Essay on Pope*, Works 13.213; cf. *Adventurer* No. 137.

58 "Dialogue III. On the Golden Age of Queen Elizabeth" (*Moral and Political Dialogues*, 1759), in Letters 71.

59 *Letters* 154. Similar patterns of thought are found even in the writers who refuse to set the genius of the ancients over that of the moderns (e. g. in Edward Young's "Conjectures on Original Composition" [1759]).

> nature, till the books of one age gain such authority, as to stand in the place of nature to another, and imitation, always deviating a little, becomes at last capricious and casual. ("Preface to Shakespeare" 24)

Early poets are unmediated observers, while the perception of later writers is partly filtered through the mind of the earlier poets as perpetuated by literary tradition. Shakespeare is for Johnson (as he had been for Dryden) a natural force, a rough genius.

> The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades, and scented with flowers; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with an awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity. Other poets display cabinets of precious rarities, minutely finished, wrought into shape, and polished into brightness. Shakespeare opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in unexhaustible plenty, though clouded by incrustations, debased by impurities, and mingled with a mass of meaner minerals. ("Preface to Shakespeare" 18)

The corruptions of the Shakespearean text and the "impure" nature of the author's genius are related to each other in Johnson's mind; both are the product of the barbarism lingering in Elizabethan England. But while he chides Shakespeare, Johnson also admires him deeply, and precisely for those qualities that are least neoclassical: the curiosity he awakens in the reader (16), the freshness of his sentiments and actions (17).

The quality of poetry is linked therefore to the quality of the author's experience.[61] The author is presented by Imlac as a superior human being, submitted nevertheless, like the object of his knowledge, to the law of generality:

> He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions and raise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same: he must therefore content himself with the slow progress of his name; contemn the applause of his own time, and commit his claims to the justice of posterity. He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of

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61 Perhaps more than any other great critic, I. A. Richards has followed Johnson in this respect. Cf. his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, esp. chapters IV, XXII, XXIV.

> mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superiour to time and place. (*Rasselas* 62, X)

Originality (within the limits allowed by "general nature") is also highly valued by Johnson. "To copy is less than to invent," [62] and Imlac's poet must go beyond imitation:

> I read all the poets of Persia and Arabia, and was able to repeat by memory the volumes that are suspended in the mosque of Mecca. But I soon found that no man was ever great by imitation. My desire of excellence impelled me to transfer my attention to nature and to life. Nature was to be my subject, and men to be my auditors: I could never describe what I had not seen; I could not hope to move those with delight or terrour, whose interests and opinions I did not understand. (*Rasselas* 61, X)

Let us note, however, that the experiential principle of originality Imlac opposes to the imitation of other poets is not "expression" or "creation," but the knowledge of men and nature. Imagination is not a creative principle for Johnson, as it is not, generally speaking, for other eighteenth-century writers.[63] And the poet's efforts, far from being a spontaneous overflow of feeling or a solitary song overheard by the audience, are directed from the start towards his public. Poetry is a social activity, a "profession" (*Rasselas* XI, 63).

Imlac's requirements have been found excessive—must a poet be an *übermensch* ? The impossibility of these claims is bridged to some extent by Johnson when he posits the separation of the literary man from the historical man (and offers thereby an anticipation of the concept of implied author). Johnson distinguishes between the moral qualities of the man and those of his work in spite of his predominantly moral interest.[64] Still, the poet remains a formidable figure. Imlac's definition cannot but bring to mind Shelley's exaltation of the poet in his "Defense of Poetry." Elsewhere, Johnson affirmed that the man of genius always subverts previously existing rules and laws of genre (*Rambler* Nos. 125 and 156). This principle is profoundly contrary to the neoclassical principles of definite models and fixed rules. It supposes instead a continual evolution of forms and a historical conception of poetry. Of course, the implications of these views could not be drawn by Johnson. They belong to a line of thought which was to be developed by the romantic and historicist schools, and which can also be related to the Russian formalists' conception of the evolution of literary genres, although the latter is rather more impersonal. Johnson's attitude to genius, emotion and inspiration was

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62 "Life of Gray," *Works* 11.178; cf. also *Rambler* No. 121.

63 E. g. Addison, *Spectator* No. 411, 416; Burke, "On Taste" (1759), in Needham 119. Cf. Hagstrum 89ff.

64 See, e.g., *Rambler* No. 14.

deeply ambivalent, and, as usual, it leads him to contradictory statements. It is not impossible to find him endorsing some version of inspirationism. In his commentary on Pope's epitaphs, for instance, Johnson admits the existence of an inspiration beyond the efforts of the poet: "All works of imagination . . . are often influenced by causes wholly out of the performer's power, by hints of which he perceives not the origin, by sudden elevations of mind, which he cannot produce in himself, and which sometimes rise when he expects them least" (*Works* 11.15) But in the "Life of Gray" he mocks the very notion of creative moments, not to speak of inspiration, in an attitude which is perhaps more typically Johnsonian: "He had a notion, not very peculiar, that he could not write but at certain times, or at happy moments; a fantastick foppery, to which my kindness for a man of learning and virtue wishes him to have been superiour" (*Works* 11.174).

We have seen how Johnson stresses the experiential ground of poetic creation. This emphasis is related to some of his favorite principles, such as the rejection of bookishness and the role given to truth as a critical standard in the evaluation of poetic subjects—when Johnson says that "the rejection and contempt of fiction is rational and manly,"[65] he is referring to the conventional apparatus of "literary style." Krieger sees in this aspect of Johnson's thought: "a preview of the spirit of Wordsworth, and of his words that speak of keeping his eye on the object. It is a similar response to a similar rejection of artifice as mediator" (Krieger 189). Engell goes even further, suggesting that Johnson is something like the first Romantic:

> Johnson was the first to say that poetic originality no longer depended on the description of a previously unnoticed image or quality in the natural world. Originality now meant the ability to reflect the inner drama and process of a mind charged with feeling as it descries the value and the elusive truths of experience (279).

Johnson's reaction against some trite phrasings does seem to lead towards Wordsworth sometimes—for instance, when he praises Shakespeare's language by saying that "Addison speaks the language of poets, and Shakespeare, of men" ("Preface to Shakespeare" 17). But it might just as well lead right out of literature, as Wellek has shown.

As opposed to a whole tradition of conceptualizing criticism which, starting with Aristotle, established a basic opposition between poetry and history, "Johnson at times blandly takes on history's casual truths as the poet's" (Krieger 191). After all, biography was one of Johnson's favorite genres (see *Rambler* No. 60). He strongly believes in the knowledge that can be gleaned from particular facts not submitted to a predetermined organization (Edinger 60ff.). His distaste for fiction (and maybe the absence of a classical tradition) made him relatively indifferent to the "effect of the real"

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65 "Life of Addison," *Works* 9.176.

in the novel. But he admired Richardson's writing, and, according to Fanny Burney, he praised in *Evelina* the "knowledge of life and manners" and the "accuracy of the observation." [66]

But can the empiricist reading of Johnson's criticism lead us to dismiss his neoclassical pronouncements? There is no doubt that Johnson was more aware of the latter than of the former as a coherent set of principles, and that "his stylistic criticism, and probably in some degree his personal taste, reveal the strains of a contradiction which he did not perceive" (Edinger 176). The relation between awareness and unawareness is not irrelevant, as the presence in Johnson of unconscious anticipations and underlying coherences could lead us to think. The fragmentation of Johnson's theory is closely linked (both as a cause and as a result) to the fact that he does not pay attention to the contradictions involved in it. As by any theory, a whole world-view is implied by this fragmentation: "The fact that [Johnson] can so blithely utter an eighteenth-century commonplace right after a suspiciously revolutionary suggestion indicates how secure he remained in his orthodoxy—so secure that he could not see how profoundly some of his own subterranean tendencies threatened it" (Krieger 193). Johnson often equates realism with variety, and instruction with identity. Only his best intuitions, such as the more integrated accounts of particularity and generality in the "Life of Thomson" or the "Preface to Shakespeare," the discussion of familiarity and unfamiliarity in relation to Pope's *Rape of the Lock* or the definition of wit in the "Life of Cowley," avoid the pitfalls where Johnson keeps falling elsewhere.[67] His criticism tends strongly towards an identification of literary pleasure with novelty, realism and variety, and of instruction with abstract idealization. Variety and novelty are rarely seen to contribute in any way to instruction and moral value; most often, their relation to generality is doubtful. Shakespeare, with all his variety and originality of concept and image, "is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose" ("Preface to Shakespeare" 1). Variety, originality and realism are often presented as the staple of literary pleasure (cf. Engell 277). Johnson once observes that "'all pleasure consists in variety'—a strong statement for a stalwart representative of a tradition almost wholly focused on unity" (Krieger 194).

Edinger sees Johnson's critical views (and those of other eighteenth-century critics) as the transition form a conceptual (abstractive, neoclassical, Ramist) standard of poetic achievement to a perceptual or experiential one—from a conception of poetry as product to one of poetry as process (Edinger xiv, *passim*). He makes clear that in Johnson (as in other eighteenth-century critics) the vocabulary and theoretical pronouncements of the old views linger on, "when the characteristic tendencies of their critical

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66 Mme. D'Arblay, *Diary and Letters*, ed. A. Dobson (London, 1904), I, 246-247; qtd. in Wellek 82.

67 *Works* 11.38-39; "Preface to Shakespeare" 331; "Life of Pope," *Works* 10.318; "Life of Cowley," 7.293ff. See esp. Hagstrum 173; Youngren 174 ff., Edinger 134-136; Krieger 197. Hagstrum and Krieger see in Johnson an anticipation of the Coleridgean doctrine of discordia concors and creative imagination. Likewise, the foundations for a doctrine of organic form and imagination can be traced back to Johnson's discussion of the dramatic unities ("Preface to Shakespeare" 8-10). Hagstrum (165), Krieger and Bate stress "Johnson's appeal to the total nature of experience as the basis for the evaluation

thought reflected the influence of very different premises" (51). There are two Johnsons, the conceptualist and the nominalist, at odds with each other. The first is the official Johnson, Johnson's Johnson. It is the second who interests most Krieger or Edinger as "the one who so clearly foreshadows what lies just ahead in metaphysics and literary theory" (Krieger 194). Due to Johnson's unawareness of the profound contradictions between his claims, these appear often as an all-or-nothing polarity, without any attempt at integration.

Johnson does not relinquish the neoclassical ideal. He has other interests which are not adequately formulable in the language of neoclassicism, but he also has a deeply ingrained distrust for any kind of inspired expressionism, aesthetic exploitation of solitude, self-dramatizing poses and sentimental communion with nature. The direction of romanticism is blocked for him; he does not even share many of the attitudes of his contemporaries which are generally acknowledged to be pre-Romantic. His treatment of the sublime is a case in point. Hagstrum notes that the motifs related to the eighteenth-century sublime which appear in *Rasselas,* such as the description of the Happy Valley in Chapter I, are under control and belong to the background of the action (149). That is, they are part of the framework of the oriental tale which is parodied and transcended by Johnson. A similar movement occurs when, at the sight of the sea, Imlac experiences the pre-Romantic sublime: "I looked round about me with pleasing terrour, and thinking my soul enlarged by the boundless prospect, imagined that I could gaze round for ever without satiety." [68] The novelty soon fades away and weariness follows. Like the Happy Valley, like Rasselas's tour of the world, the sublime is used obliquely, with a parodic aim.

But the parody of *Rasselas* is universal, and it does not stop where we would expect it to stop. The astronomer, the hermit are the object of parody, but so is Rasselas. So is Imlac, the author's spokesman. Johnson's theory of poetry in *Rasselas* X is unsatisfactory, but we should not forget that it is also parodied. That the theory is truly Johnson's, instead of a straw target, only makes the parody richer and more grim.

SIGNIFYING NOTHING

For an immediate purpose, I shall borrow Dryden's definition of satire as "a kind of poetry, without a series of action, invented for the purging of our minds; in which human vices, ignorance and errors . . . are severely reprehended; partly dramatically, partly simply, and sometimes in both kinds of speaking, but for the most time figuratively and occultly." [69] Much of this (even the qualification "without a series of action," one is tempted to say!) no doubt applies to *Rasselas.* According to Patrick O'Flaherty, however, *Rasselas* cannot be adequately described as a satire. Its deepest intention is directed against the human condition as a whole, and not against vice or the

68 Rasselas 57, IX; cf. Hagstrum 147.

69 John Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693); in *Selected Literary Criticism* 268.

evil doings of a few. The folly or delusion of some men is not an object of criticism in itself. It is used as an image, a vehicle for another meaning, a more general delusion.

> The laughter that reverberates throughout *Rasselas* is a species of laughter which transcends satire, laughter which seems to be directed at us almost from another dimension, which contains love as well as irony. It is laughter that stems from a recognition of the absurdity, not just of the ordinary, curable follies which occupy the satirist, but of *all* human aspiration and achievement.[70]

The protagonists' choice of life is indifferent, since any course of action will lead at best to disillusion. But what of the commitment to a "choice of eternity" in Chapter XLVIII? I find O'Flaherty's reading compelling in this respect as well. "The paradox of *Rasselas* is that in it an absurdist view of human life is not seen as irreconcilable with the idea of a supervising Divinity" (O'Flaherty 205). The usual assumptions about Johnson's religious beliefs have to be reconsidered—Johnson's christianity rested on fear and not on reason; he was "literally afraid to examine his own thoughts on religious matters." [71] Johnson refuses to ask the relevant questions which would lead to the conclusion that no conciliation between the absurd and Christianity is possible:

> The dichotomy is not confronted by logic or healed by argument: it is hidden by perspective .... But once we penetrate the veneer of melancholic levity, we have revealed a work just as disturbed as *Idler* No. 41 and *Rambler* No. 184, essays in which he does not have the protection of irony. (O'Flaherty 207)

This leads us to an additional side of Johnson's fascination with realism. Johnson praises Shakespeare for imitating the sublunary world as it is, a "chaos of mingled purposes and casualties," an "endless variety" without the idealization of tragedy or comedy, in which men's purposes confront each other and reality at random, "without design." [72] Krieger notes in this use of the word "design" "can be seen to treat the futility of human purpose as a microcosmic reflection of the gap between cause and effect that precludes order in our entire 'sublunary nature'" (188n.). The lack of moral design Johnson finds in Shakespeare's plots and characters is not without relation to that subliminal conception of human life as chaos which emerges most clearly in *Rasselas*.

But the main implication of the meaning of *Rasselas* for Johnson's poetics is the

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70 Patrick O'Flaherty, "Dr. Johnson as Equivocator: The Meaning of *Rasselas*" 204.

71 O'Flaherty 208, quoting *Recollections of the Table-Talk of Samuel Rogers* [sic], ed. Morchard Bishop (London, 1952), 180.

72 "Preface to Shakespeare" 334, 333, 334.

mise en abyme to which they are submitted in chapters X and XI. Imlac's dissertation on poetry was long considered to be Johnson's thumbnail poetics, and for many critics it still is on the whole a reliable statement which voices Johnson's own beliefs.[73] In the book at large, Imlac is indeed Johnson's mouthpiece, and he is presented as a more experienced and wiser figure than Rasselas or the secondary characters. But Imlac is also human. His folly is ultimately the same as that of the rest, and he is time and again the butt of the implied authorial irony (cf. O'Flaherty 200-201).

Now how does this apply to the dissertation on poetry? Much recent criticism has cast doubt on the passage by interpreting it contextually. For one thing, Johnson's views of the poet's achievement and his personality are more frustrating elsewhere.[74] And Weinbrot (86) notes the parallel between the "dissertation on poetry" and the "dissertation on the art of flying" in Chapter VI. Just as the would-be pilot ends his flight in a lake, Imlac is brought down to earth by Rasselas. Chapter X concludes with Imlac heaping more and more requirements on his ideal poet:

> 'His labour is not yet at an end: he must know many languages and many sciences; and, that his stile may be worthy of his thoughts, must, by incessant practice, familiarize to himself every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony.'

CHAPTER XI

Imlac's narrative continued. A hint on pilgrimage

> IMLAC now felt the enthusiastick fit, and was proceeding to aggrandize his own profession, when the prince cried out, 'Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration.'
>
> 'To be a poet, said Imlac, is indeed very difficult.' 'So difficult, returned the prince, that I will at present hear no more of his labours. Tell me whither you went when you had seen Persia.'
>
> 'From Persia, said the poet, I travelled through Syria . . . ' (*Rasselas* 62-63, X-XI)

Imlac's 'enthusiastick fit' was soaring in a Longinian and pre-Romantic direction. The word "enthusiasm" did not have its present-day positive connotations in the

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73 Cf. Hawkins 155; J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries* 280; Hagstrum 75; Wellek 4; Wimsatt and Brooks 320; Martin Kallich "Samuel Johnson's Principles of Criticism ansd Imlac's Dissertation Upon Poetry" 71; Adams 324; Anthony Kearney, "Johnson's Rasselas and the Poets" 514; Donald T. Siebert, Jr., "The Reliability of Imlac" 352; Edinger 199.

74 *Rambler* Nos. 2, 14, 16, 106; *Adventurer* No. 137.

eighteenth century, and least of all in Johnson's idiom. In Chapter XXI, the hermit's conversation is praised for being "cheerful without levity and pious without enthusiasm." And elsewhere Johnson criticized the "wild enthusiastick virtue" of some Stoic sages (*Rambler* No. 32). Some critics therefore hold that Imlac's views on poetry must be read ironically, and do not reflect Johnson's opinions.[75] Several of them compare Imlac to Johnson's satire of a critic in Dick Minim (*Idler* Nos. 60, 61). According to Tracy, Johnson's aim is precisely to demolish the opinions voiced by Imlac. Hartley does not want to go that far, and he sees merely "some sort of comic irony."[76] Imlac's exclusive emphasis on generality is for Hartley a gentle irony directed against Reynolds' neoclassical theory of painting. Imlac's conception of poetry would therefore be somewhat distanced from Johnson's own, and this would explain why his eulogy of the poet is ironically undercut at the beginning of Chapter XI (336).

Since Johnson's critical pronouncements in his work at large exhibit the same kind of contradiction, finding that he elsewhere agrees or disagrees with the doctrines voiced by Imlac can help to focus the question, but cannot settle it (cf. Folkenflik 58). Johnson's ultimate commitment to Imlac's doctrine is bound to be ambivalent. My point is that what would be ambivalent from a strictly doctrinal point of view is clearly the butt of the authorial irony as far as its dramatic function is concerned. Folkenflik notes analogies between Imlac's attitude towards humanity in *Rasselas* X and that of other figures in later chapters. Like the moralists in Chapter X, Imlac's poet affects an "angelic nature" which is dangerously far from the potentialities of real individuals; the self-possessed astronomer in chapter XLVI is also a case in point (Folkenflik 60). In Folkenflik's words, "It is precisely *because* Imlac is so frequently Johnson's mouthpiece that Johnson undercuts him in this crucial chapter. Johnson is as wary of self-aggrandizement in his most admirable character as he is in himself."[77]

No human being can be a poet. To be a poet is very difficult. It is also very difficult not to read this passage in an ironic light. However, the precise nature and extent of this irony may easily be misunderstood. In discussing the labors of an editor, Johnson again says as much, after setting high standards to the extent of learning necessary: "Such must be his knowledge, and such his taste. Conjectural criticism demands more than humanity possesses, and he that excercises it with most praise, has very frequent need of indulgence."[78] Johnson's irony on Imlac is not triumphant or unmitigated. The dissertation on poetry is both Imlac's and his. When Rasselas cries "Stop!" Johnson is metafictionally rebuking himself for his indulgence in poetics. Not

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75 Clarence R. Tracy, "Democritus Arise! A Study of Dr. Johnson's Humor"; Geoffrey Tillotson, "Imlac and the Business of a Poet"; Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* 232-234; Howard Weinbrot, ""The Reader, the General and the Particular: Johnson and Imlac in Chapter Ten of Rasselas"; Arthur H. Scouten, "Dr. Johnson and Imlac"; J. P. Hardy, *Samuel Johnson* 133; Hartley, op. cit.

76 Hartley 331; cf. O'Flaherty 205; Enright 18; William Vesterman, *The Stylistic Life of Samuel Johnson* 83. Carey McIntosh accepts the doctrine of generality (*The Choice of Life* 170) but finds a slight irony about the excessive requirements for the poet (195). For Bate (199) and Folkenflik (69), Imlac's phrasing is a misleadingly emphatical one. But wasn't Johnson himself misleadingly emphatical?

77 Folkenflik 69. Cf. a similar view in Scouten 506.

78 "Preface to Shakespeare" 31. Siebert (351) has drawn attention to this analogy.

unfittingly, the metafictional structures of Rasselas do not involve Chinese boxes or the fictional writing of some character: they are introduced on the occasion of a dissertation on the nature of poetry, and the poet in general. The novel at large practices the doctrine of generality it preaches, and, as befits the writer of metafiction, Johnson lifts himself from the ground pulling at *his own* periwig.

The implied authorial attitude towards Imlac and his doctrine is ironical, but the author is standing on no secure ground while he adopts this ironic stance. The distance which separates the human being from the poet is an epitome of the distance between facticity and norm which intervenes in any human enterprise. Like Samuel Beckett, Johnson is saying that humans, or writers, cannot but fail—our limited success must be seen as a modulation of the essential failure of our condition. The function of the poet is to please and instruct, but, as Imlac himself says, "I lost much of the reverence with which I had been used to look on my instructors; because, when the lesson was ended, I did not find them wiser or better than common men" (*Rasselas* 56, VIII). Johnson is not without sympathy for Imlac, as shown by the latter's endearing understatement that "to be a poet is indeed very difficult." Or, as Johnson says in *Idler* No. 58, "it is necessary to hope." Folkenflik notes that "the questioning of Imlac's authority is itself questioned, when Johnson delicately supplies the dignity in Imlac's deference to the prince's social position with the words 'said the poet'" (83).

Some aspects of Johnson's criticism may allow us to see him as a precursor in the sense Hagstrum, Krieger and Edinger point out. But Johnson's insight into this matter is greatly assisted by these critics. No doubt a narrative can be constructed in which a thesis (the neoclassical norm) and an antithesis (multifarious reality) are transcended into the synthesis of the *discordia concors* , the concrete universal and the organic form. It is the narrative that we want to hear, and at his best Johnson no doubt pointed this way. These instances are none the less the exception rather than the norm. A meditated insight into the nature of the aesthetic experience led Johnson to assert its ambivalent synthesis of reality and inessentiality, as suggested by Sidney or Dryden before him, but most often his own patterns of thought pushed hard to explode this synthesis into two irreconcilable principles. Johnson at his most peculiar is perhaps not Johnson at his best. He conceived the aesthetic experience otherwise than as a pantheistic communion in which the body is also the soul. Imlac's dissertation in *Rasselas* is an extreme and exceptional statement. It leads to a fragmented theory of poetry, in which the relations between abstract universality and the concrete phenomena remain problematic. In discussing Johnson's style, Bate shows how its characteristic movement is a dialectic of stability, expansion and reincorporation to an expanded stability. Its parallelisms and branching sentences manifest "a compelling need for order and finality," a drive toward "conviction and certitude" (Bate 176). While the style of *Rasselas* achieves this order in every paragraph considered by itself, the work as a whole refuses to achieve such order, and concludes instead in paradox and stagnation. By the time the novel ends, the principle of order is at its thinnest: an absurdly Sisyphean succession of inessential desires in human life, and a profession of faith in a better

existence whose articulation with the rest of the novel is deficient and perfunctory. Johnson's compelling need for order and finality is more clear than ever in this passage, and his verdict on that need is passed in the conclusion to the novel. It is fitting that some of Johnson's most contradictory pronouncements on the subject of poetry should occur precisely in this text. The serious commitment to universality and normativity which we find in this passage is made at variance with other aspects of Johnson's awareness; it cannot be dismissed as a mere satire of neoclassicism or accepted as Johnson's last word. In Folkenflik's view, "The tenth chapter of *Rasselas* is . . . at once a last statement of the Renaissance conception of the poet and a critique of it" (69). However, it is not a critique whose aim is the instauration of a different poetics. It is the same kind of critique as the critique of human life at large in the novel—a cry of anguish at the inherent incommensurability of desire and ability, at the lag between the thirst for plenitude and its perpetual deferral. The ultimate world-view of the fiction that questions the role of the poet shows both the seriousness of the questioning and the ultimate irrelevance of critical warfare to the understanding of Johnson's satire, which is in part a satire on himself. It is his own internal divisions, and those of the end of a culture, that Johnson is staging, and he does not do it lightly. Perhaps it is symptomatic in this connection that Johnson did not find the consolation of a religious belief which would appease his terror of both hell and annihilation. There, too, his doubts made him waver between one and the other, between unlimited order and unlimited disorder. It is perhaps ironic that the fullest articulation between Johnson's poetics and his metaphysical anguish was to be effected through the limited ordering of narrative fiction—a literary genre he did not care overmuch about.