DR. JOHNSON AS A BIOGRAPHER

by

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PREFACE

In this thesis an attempt is made to indicate the great influence of Dr. Johnson's artistic methods in his Lives, as well as his theories in the Idler and the Rambler, which established biography as a respectable literary genre. A brief survey of the development of English biography from the earliest times of English literature to the eighteenth century has been made with the view of indicating that Johnson stands out as a most remarkable milestone on the road of the development of the concept and methodology of biography. A collection of Johnson's statements on the art of biography, both in recorded conversation and in his writings, has also been made and embodied in the bibliography. Owing to the limited scope of this study, only four of his Lives have been examined with respect to his theory. Opinions of his contemporaries and those of the critics of later centuries have been consulted, and there is a preponderance of evidence that in spite of the poor standard of his research, Johnson ranks among the greatest of biographers.

The reader will notice that in some of the works frequently referred to in this thesis, economy has been served by abbreviated references in the footnotes. After the first entries, only the surnames of authors are given in the footnotes. But when more than one of a single author's works have been

consulted, the author's name and the work quoted are given. For instance, Johnson's Lives of the Poets is referred to merely as, Lives; Boswell's Life of Johnson is footnoted as, Boswell, Johnson, etc.; and Boswell's The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. as, Boswell, Hebrides, etc.; Donald Stauffer's The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England as, Stauffer, etc.

I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation for the generous assistance given to me in the preparation of this thesis by numerous friends among the Professors and the graduate students of the English Department, as well as among the staff of the Redpath, Chemical Research Centre, Medical and Osler, Libraries of McGill University.

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHY BEFORE JOHNSON

Biography, it appears to me, is as old as the conscious experience of man and has its roots in the instinct of self-preservation: "and even the behaviourists might allow"[1] that it is this instinct that consciously or unconsciously motivates man to struggle in defiance of total annihilation by either natural or social forces to preserve himself and his heritage. One of the ways in which it expresses itself is in the desire to commemorate outstanding individuals whose lives have been found to be remarkable and useful in society. In pre-historic times it gave rise to the primitive custom of erecting tombs over the graves of the dead and engraving characters on them to indicate the essential qualities, rank, and perhaps, occupations of the ones commemorated. Tombs of hunters were often decorated with pictures of dogs, hunting implements, and animals which they killed while they were living. Tombs of great chieftains often showed signs of the

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[1] Harold Nicolson, "The Development of English Biography," Hogarth Lectures, No. 4(London, 1927), p. 2.

pageantry to which they were accustomed. A retinue of courtiers, servants, wives (in polygamous societies) and children, was not occasional but usual with the tombs of such dignitaries.

Though this practice was deficient in clearly depicting the distinctive characteristics of an individual personality as a being by himself, it undoubtedly preserved for posterity, the qualities and characteristics of the class he represented. This may not be biography as an art, as we know it to-day, but it is a form of commemorative biography to which we owe our knowledge of pre-historic times. It is different from history in that the commemoration is not designed to affect society as a whole but the individual and his activities in the society.

This desire to preserve or commemorate is common to all peoples in all ages. Generally it is the predominant idea and the standard of development of a people at a certain time that determines the form of commemoration. When an individual proves himself an embodiment of the predominant idea, be it religious, economic, literary or scientific, his friends feel the need of preserving his qualities for the information of future generations. Whatever form the showcase might take it serves the same purpose so long as it has the essential quality of displaying the goods. This, precisely, is what Harold Nicolson means when

he says that "We can trace the ancestry of English biography to the ancient runic inscriptions which celebrated the lives of heroes and recorded the exploits of deceased and legendary warriors."[2] But when Pinto says that biography "is necessarily a very late development in literature,"[3] one feels that he intentionally mistakes the foliage for the tree he is describing. Though "biography...has merely run to leaf,"[4] it belongs to the earliest development of literature.

Biography has received attention in all ages in the history of literature. Its principal purpose is commemoration. As in the primitive form of commemoration so it is in the biographical form that the idea or thought in which the passion of the people is involved at a particular time, and the standard of development of the people determine its form and purpose. In England before the sixth century, when hero-worship was the predominant social involvement of the people, the warriors were commemorated in runic inscriptions, and traces of these rudiments of English biography can be made back to the old sagas and epics "to such strange parentage as

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[2] Nicolson, p. 17.

[3] Vivian de Sola Pinto, English Biography in the Seventeenth Century (London, 1951), p. 11.

[4] Nicolson, p. 17.

Beowulf or the Widsith fragments."[5]

But in the sixth century with its new idea of Christian religion, biography began to be used as a means of teaching moral lessons. This form of biography, called hagiography, or the record of saints' lives, flourished from now on through the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century. The biographer was bound to follow a set pattern and all lives written appeared as if cast in a single mould. Examples of such lives are The Life of Saint Columba, by Adamnan, Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert, Willibald's Life of Boniface, Eadner's Life of St. Anslem, and many others. In all of these lives the Church and its work were the important matters, and the inculcation of Christian piety was the purpose. It was not the whole life of the saint that was written but a few selected incidents in which the saint reflected his faith in Christianity. Hence the formula of this type of biography was: punishment of sin, miraculous healing, a pagan converted, or faith restored through the sanctity of the saints.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the revival of the classics gave another perspective to biography. During these periods the biographical works of Plutarch and Suetonius and Tacitus were studied and translated, not only

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[5] Nicolson, p. 17.

into English, but into many other European languages. The Plutarchian interest in delineating the individual personality by recording minute domestic incidents and anecdotes was not greatly favoured. But Suetonius' influence appears to have been more dominant at this time. As Garraty asserts, "over forty editons of his Lives of the Twelve Caesars were published between 1470 and 1820."[6] His influence gave rise to the development of portraits of friends and panegyrical type of biography. Here again it was not the whole life of the subject that received the attention of the biographer, but only those parts that reflected credit and respect and were worthy of emulation. The purpose was the same as in the preceeding centuries, that of edification, except that following the desolation of the monasteries by Henry VIII, the principal matter was patriotism and not religion. Subjects of biography therefore varied from the regular portraits of the saints to the lives of persons in other spheres of life. The tendency was to create outstanding types in all areas of life as models for moral behaviour. Character sketches in the Theophrastian method came into vogue. Prose and poetic forms depicted characters outstanding for either virtue or vice. In this period

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[6] John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography (London, 1958), p. 67.

appeared A Mirror for Magistrates,[7] in which the vicious character of Jane Shore was dramatized in poetic form as suffering without remission from her sins of sensuality and greed. Towards the end of the century imaginary character sketches, such as Hall's Characteristics of Virtues and Vices and Overbury's Characters or Witty Descriptions of the Properties of Sundry Persons,[8] became very popular. Some of the biographies of actual individuals in this period are: History of Richard III, supposed to have been written by Thomas More, Roper's Life of Sir Thomas More, and Cavendish's Life of Wolsey. Though the popularity of the Theophrastian character sketches gave method and unity to psychological investigation in biography, didacticism still held sway. For instance, the mutability of human fortune was prominent among other moral lessons, emphasized in the Life of Wolsey. The biographer was still not free and objective. He was partial to certain qualities and types and consequently often adjusted the details of his materials to fit his own purposes.

Though biography had been popular along the past

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[7] Thomas Churchyard, "Shore's Wife," A Mirror for Magistrates, ed. William Baldwin (London, 1559); in Rollins and Baker's The Renaissance in England (Boston, 1954), pp. 277-81.

[8] Sir Thomas Overbury (1581-1613), published The Characters in 1614; Joseph Hall (1574-1656), published Characteristics in 1608.

centuries it was not until the seventeenth century that it received a systematic and critical examination. The numerous biographies of the century were still typical of "the funeral orations of Jeremy Taylor and the equally commemorative orations of Dr. Sprat."[9] There was a great deal of writing about people and characters. Interest in the individual human being which started with the advent of the humanist movement incited curiosity and study of the human personality. But no one had yet taken thought to develop biography as a literary genre.

The recognition of biography as a separate form of literature, distinct from legend, fiction or history, started with Francis Bacon's Advancement of Learning, in which he with his analytical and scientific mind divided history into three parts:

> History which may be called Just and Perfect History is of three kinds, according to the object which it propoundeth or pretendeth to represent: for it either representeth a Time or a Person or an Action. The First we call Chronicles, the Second Lives and the Third we call Narrations or Relations. Of These... the second excelleth in profit and use. 10

Bacon went further to prescribe the method for writing lives:

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[9] Nicolson, p. 38.

[10] Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning, II, in Selected Writings of Francis Bacon, ed. Hugh G. Dick (New York, 1955), p. 235.

> But lives if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent in whom actions both greater and smaller, public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation. [11]

With these statements he laid the foundation for the cultivation of biography as an art. But it was not until the 1660's that the word "biography" appeared in Dryden's introduction to his translation of Plutarch, when he defined it as "the history of particular men's lives." Like Bacon, Dryden rebelled against the panegyrical effusions of the biographers of his time and of the previous ages. He insisted upon presenting the subject of biography as he really was. In his opinion a good biography was one in which "the pageantry of life is taken away: you see the poor reasonable animal as naked as ever nature made him: are made acquainted with his passions and his follies: and find the demi-god a man."[12]

After several centuries of slow growth, abuse or neglect, biography reached its maturity in the eighteenth century when it was bedecked with new ornaments and accepted as a respectable form of literature; and Dr. Samuel Johnson has the honour of forming a bridge between a fumbling past

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[11] Bacon, p. 235.

[12] Edgar Johnson, One Mighty Torrent (New York, 1937), p. 43.

and an experimenting future in the art of biography.

Before investigating Johnson's theory of biography it is necessary first to examine a little more closely the degree of development of biography in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; for it is only by such an examination and juxtaposition of Johnson's theory and the general practice in these periods that his great contribution to the development of the genre can be clearly seen and appreciated.

It is true that it was in the seventeenth century that the word "biography" came into use for that branch of literature which treats of real individuals, their growth and their activities in society as distinctive elements that constitute the society. It is true, too, that the advent of this name marked the beginning of the conscious awareness of biography as a separate form of literature. But in spite of the endeavours of Bacon and Dryden to clarify the distinction between history and biography, a great many of the historians of the seventeenth century, whom the moderns choose to call biographers, were unwilling to follow their example and persisted in blurring the distinction. Commenting upon this situation Donald Stauffer says:

> indeed, until the seventeenth century was nearly over, 'historian' or 'historiographer' was the usual designation for the biographer....Writers laboured under the impression that an individual career must be made worthy of a reader's attention by the inclusion of

> great historical events. Or again, the material for a life would be so scanty that they could be rounded out into a volume only by filling in the historical background, whether or not it was relevant. 13

Bacon, who stressed the need for separating biography from history, was not as good in practice as in precept. His History of the Reign of Henry VII, which was meant to be the biography of Henry of Richmond, the first of the Tudor dynasty, though a delightful narrative of a master of style, is very disappointing in the delineation of the character of the central figure. Nothing is heard of Henry of Richmond before Bosworth Field. In essence it is the history of England from 1485 to 1509, with Henry VII looming vaguely and unconvincingly in the scenes.

There was a rich crop of biographical material in the seventeenth century, however, but no one seemed to have reached the desired mark. The inclination towards ponderous and pedantic learning, sonorous poetry and far-fetched conceits, made biographers in this century write, according to Dr. Johnson in his Life of Cowley, "as Epicurean deities making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest and without emotion....Their wish was only to say what they hoped had never been said before."[14]

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[13] Donald Stauffer, The Development of Biography in Eighteenth Century England (Princeton, 1941), pp. 517-18.

[14] Samuel Johnson, "Cowley," Lives of the Poets, intro. by Arthur Waugh (London, 1896), I, 29. Subsequent references to Lives of the Poets will be made to this edition.

The excessive desire to appear learned resulted in an endless collection of unmanageable materials, a chronological arrangement of prolific details that scholars of the age admired and moderns detest.

Prominent among the biographers of this century were Anthony a Wood, John Aubrey, Thomas Fuller and Gilbert Burnet. Wood was a pedantic scholar, typical of his century. He was the author of a biographical dictionary called Athenae Oxonienses, a collection of lives of distinguished graduates of Oxford. It is remarkable as an epitome of untiring scholarship and ruthless honesty but wants,"the warmth and sympathy which a good biography must possess."[15] He left no stone unturned in his search for information. "He waded through Oxford archives, read every scrap he could find written by or about his subjects, dug up old church records, and pored over wills, genealogical tables, and tombstones."[16] His main interest was to satisfy the requirements of accurate scholarship but not to seek to understand his subjects as human beings who once lived among men and not alone in records and books.

Wood was assisted in this work by John Aubrey who,

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15 Garraty, , p. 72.

16 Ibid.

by a mere accident arising from his nature and not from knowledge, proved to be one of the best biographers of the century. Aubrey was not an antiquarian. The oddities and peculiarities of his contemporaries attracted his curious nature, and in response to this urge he started out to collect information about his subjects by interviewing people who had personal knowledge of, and association with them. As he progressed in his pleasant and delightful work he could write to Wood, "It will be a pretty thing and I am glad you put me on it. I doe it playingly."[17] Aubrey, as well as Wood, was interested in the whole truth, though his truth was somewhat marred by his prejudice against a certain family.

His Minutes of Lives was more delightful and entertaining than Wood's Athenae. It was, he said in a letter to Wood, "the naked and plaine truth, which here exposed so bare that the very pudenda are not covered....So that after your perusal I must desire you to make a castration...and sow on some figge-leaves."[18] The pedantic Wood, it is stated, pruned off about forty-four pages of the Minutes.

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[17] Nicolson, pp. 46-47.

[18] Nicolson, p. 47.

Thomas Fuller was a student of the polite school of biography. Insatiable as to details, whenever he toured in the country towns of England he indefatigably took notes on their "histories, antiquities, their products, their monuments, their dialects and their celebrated men since the days of Alfred,"[19] and he compiled these into an insufferable and boring volume called Abel Redivivus. He worked the whole up into a cumbersome figure that confused the imagination instead of helping it. The whole state of England was likened unto a large house, the towns and cities to the rooms. Then he set about to describe the 'furniture' and arrange the 'pieces' as princes, martyrs, confessors, prelates, statesmen, soldiers, writers and so on. It is not only these interminable details that made Abel Redivivus an unsatisfactory biographical work, but also the conscious effort of Dr. Fuller to omit the shadows and shades in the characters of his subjects. He says of John Donne:

> Should I endeavour to deliver his exact character I (who willingly would not do any wrong) should do a fourfold injury: (1) to his worthy memory, whose merit my pen is unable to express; (2) to myself in undertaking what I am not sufficient to perform; (3) to the reader, first in raising, then in frustrating, his expectation; (4) to my deservedly honoured master, Isaac Walton, by whom his life is learnedly written. It is enough for me to observe that he died March 31 A.D. 1631, and lieth buried in St. Paul's under an ingenious and choice monument, neither so costly as to occasion envy, nor

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[19] Nicolson, p. 51.

so common as to cause contempt. [20]

Such naïveté, such polite confession of incompetency and unwillingness to make impartial presentation of the facts of life as he found them, will be seen when Johnson's theory is discussed, to be contrary to his principles of writing lives.

Another notable biographer of this century was Bishop Gilbert Burnet. He too was a lover of assiduous scholarship in biography, not for the purpose of applying the results of diligent research as a means of delineating character, but as an attempt to satisfy the demands of the reading public of his time. He rebuked his contemporaries for partiality; he loved truth in biography, but he does not appear to have loved it principally as a means of singling out the distinctive characteristics of his subject. Therefore he wrote, "People desire to see papers, records and letters published at their full length." [21]

In other ways he remained a faithful disciple of the old school of moralistic biography. He strained material for moral lessons. Even with regard to truth he was not convinced that the biographer should meddle with the unpleasant side of the memory of his subject. In his Life and Death of Rochester he made an effort to show the hero's hatred of

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[20] Thomas Fuller, History of the Worthies of England (London, 1840), II, 381.

[21] Garraty, p. 72.

middle class hypocrisy. Yet in this attempt he could not help drawing a veil over the important statements which Rochester made at moments when he was in anger and without control. "In detestation of these courses," Burnet wrote, "he would often break forth in such hard expressions concerning him-self as would be indecent for another to repeat."[22] His weakness was too apparent for Dr. Johnson to overlook and, thus, while discussing History of his own Times with Boswell he observed, "I do not believe that Burnet intentionally lyed; but he was much prejudiced, that he took no pains to find out the truth. He was like a man who resolves to regulate his time by a certain watch; but will not inquire whether the watch is right or not."[23] Later in an answer to the question of his querulous catechist as to whether Burnet had not given a good life of Rochester, Johnson retorted: "We have a good death: there is not much Life."[24] This was a just criticism of the Life in which Burnet had wilfully withheld such materials as would have depicted the character in all of its aspects.

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[22] Garraty, p. 72.

[23] James Boswell, Life of Johnson, Oxford Standard Author's Edition (London, 1953), p. 510. Subsequent references to Boswell's Life of Johnson will be to this edition.

[24] Boswell, p. 869.

From the few examples here examined the general state of biography in the seventeenth century can be spelled out. It was heavily loaded with excessive and irrelevant materials; it was still believed that the main purpose of biography was to teach moral lessons; it was not considered polite and decent for the biographer to point a frank camera at his subject; and the biography was still a display of panegyrical effusions showered on aristocrats and dedicated for the most part to the aristocracy.

By the turn of the century, the texture of biography began to change. There was a notable shift from didacticism to mere inquisitiveness. Biography was used for other purposes than the inculcation of morals and the eulogy of the great. As education became more and more widespread the field for circulation of printed materials became greater and greater. The rising commercial and labouring classes now benefiting from wider education found pleasure in reading records of lives of people like themselves. This gave rise to a fantastic change in the choice of subjects, who had no longer to be kings, aristocrats and saints, but could be chosen from all classes of people. The expanding metropolis of London, increasing leisure, the success of places of entertainment, notably the coffee-houses, fostered curiosity about one's own neighbours and tended to prepare the field for a new type of biography which was to be developed by

the middle of the century. This "democratization" of biography, as Donald Stauffer terms it, threw open the door for sundry motives to be achieved through the medium of biography.

"Now [that] all men were becoming equally interesting in their own right,"[25] biographers did not spare any subject they considered would bring in profit, for most biographies of this period were produced principally for profit. There was something both sensational and trivial about biography upon which the hack-writers and the booksellers capitalized.

> The biographies of crime and lust, the account of current cynosures in the public eye, journalistic competence in getting the latest crimes immediately before the public, the appeal to curiosity--- these were found to pay. Biography was in consequence adulterated to gratify the common taste of the common reader. [26]

Biography became a potent force for such purposes as defence, begging, lampooning and soliciting justice or lenience for accused persons. Major John Bernade's autobiography was typical of biographies written as a means of registering public sympathy for criminals. Henry John Gray, supposed to be a disabled soldier, wrote his autobiography, The Life and Suffering of Henry John Gray, as a means of

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[25] Stauffer, p. 478.

[26] Stauffer, p. 478.

advertising his misery and begging for alms. He complained that though he was a veteran with a bullet wound on his right arm which prevented him from manual labour (the only thing he was qualified to do) he had no pension from the government. And he made his purpose quite clear at the end of his book:

> On these considerations I submit my case, with the many distresses I have gone through, and my present melancholy situation, to the consideration of the humane and benevolent, hoping for some relief; and any favours received, will be acknowledged with the utmost gratitude, by their distressed humble servant....Finis. 27

Once the commercial potency of biography was discovered it was shamefully exploited. Its most sordid exploitation was to be found in the notorious Newgate prison. The last words of a famous convict had a high commercial value. It was the practice of the officials of this prison to take down last words and, as soon as the execution was over, to publish them together with any biographical information about the criminal that they could collect in a hurry. Sometimes the Chaplain of the prison had his eyes more on the profit to be made than on the restitution of the souls of the criminals under his charge. An interesting example of this misplacement of values is found in the Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake, published in Dublin in 1755. Drake was an adventurer and a sailor; and at one time he and his accomplices

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27 Stauffer, p. 482.

were sentenced for high treason. He managed to wiggle out of the penalty, but one of his companions was executed. This companion was attended in his last days by Chaplain Paul Lorain of Newgate, who, in view of the great publicity attending the case, had calculated upon a large profit from the publication of the prisoner's repentance. When he was told that this document had been given to someone else he is reported to have been very angry. Captain Drake himself who published his Memoirs for profit says that "by this it seems, the Ordinary of Newgate has prerequisites more at heart than the souls he prays for."[28]

In the field of autobiography, truth was slightly regarded or not at all. Since it was known that it was only by being amusing, entertaining or horrifying that an autobiographer could enhance the commercial value of his Life, no barriers were respected by the writer in his endeavour to give these attributes to his story. Sometimes a wilful debasement of the writer's personality was considered expedient because such a portraiture afforded the necessary amusement. To this category of autobiography belong the apologies of Colley Cibber and Connie Phillips. Sometimes the autobiographer had to depict himself as a superman strutting under the high heavens to which alone he agreed to deem himself inferior in strength,

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[28] Stauffer, p. 483.

intelligence and diligence. To this category of autobiography in which the hero is always victorious, always successful, and always right, the Autobiography of Matthew Bishop belongs.

Joseph Addison's observations on the deplorable situation of adulterated biographies of the early decades of the eighteenth century summarizes the disgust with which critics viewed it. In The Freeholder for Friday, April 20, 1716, he said:

> Gratian, among his Maxims for raising a man to the most consummate Character of Greatness, advises first to perform extraordinary Actions, and in the next Place to secure a good Historian....
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> The Misfortune is, that there are more Instances of Men who deserve this kind of Immortality, than of authors who are able to bestow it. Our Country, which has produced Writers of the first Figure in every other kind of Work, has been very barren in good Historians. We have had several who have been able to compile Matters of Fact, but very few have been able to digest them with that Purity and Elegance of Style, that Nicety and Strength of Reflection, that Subtilty and Discernment in the Unravelling of a Character, and the Choice of Circumstances for enlivening the whole Narration, which we justly admire in the ancient Historians of Greece and Rome, and in some authors of our neighbouring Nations....
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> There is a Race of Men lately sprung up among this sort of Writers, whom one cannot reflect upon without Indignation as well as Contempt. These are our Grub Street Biographers, who watch for the Death of a Great Man, like so many Undertakers, on purpose to make a Penny of him. He is no sooner laid in the Grave, but he falls into the Hands of an Historian; who, to swell a volume, ascribes to him Works which he never wrote and Actions which he never performed; celebrates Virtues which he was never famous for, and excuses Faults which he was never guilty of...what can We expect from an Author that undertakes to write the

> Life of a Great Man, who is furnished with no other Matters of Fact, besides Legacies; and instead of being able to tell us what he did, can only tell us what he bequeathed?...
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> The truth of it is, as the Lives of great Men cannot be written without any tolerable Degree of Elegance or Exactness, within a short Space after their Decease; so neither is it fit that the History of a Person, who has acted among us in a publick Character, should appear till Envy and Friendship are laid asleep, and the Prejudices both of his Antagonists and Adherents be, in some degree, softened and subdued....It were happy for us, could we prevail upon ourselves to imagine, that one, who differs from us in opinion, may possibly be an honest man. 29

Addison's observations fail to embody the best principles of "pure" biography, but they have been quoted at length partly as an illustration of educated opinion on Grub Street biography and partly to show to what extent Dr. Johnson, who was seven years old when Addison made this criticism, differed from Addison in his conception of biography. Addison was not far from the old scholastic school that was interested in a monumental collection of facts about the subject, and compilations that Professor Edel calls "skyscraper biography." He certainly was mistaken to believe that "the unravelling of the character" can better be done by poring into old records, listening to the ruffle of their pages, smelling the glue of their binding, and moving through the tombs in the graveyard, than by intimate and personal knowledge of the character. To relegate judgment of character to posterity is to relegate

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29 Joseph Addison, The Freeholder, or Political Essays (London, 1774), pp. 207-211.

biography to the realm of fiction in which a few isolated facts can be woven with art into an elegant and convincing whole. But this is not pure biography and not a representation of the character as it really was. It is art, not life.

While Addison's exasperation and his indignation over the rash and indiscriminate production of popular biography can be justified on the grounds that such biographies tended towards desecration of literature as a whole and biography in particular, his biographical theory is deplored as tending to the fictionalization of biography and to the making of the biographical subject into a "Cato" who owes his vitality only to his elegant language. If Addison's theory of delaying the writing of a life "till envy and friendship are laid asleep" had any chance of acceptance in his day, it certainly would not be successfully applied today when some likely subjects of biography, being more conscious of the meaning of history than those of Addison's time, consciously determine to conceal themselves in such a way that only what they want to be known of themselves can be known. In such a case the biographer tends to miss the opportunity for true depiction of his subject as he really was, whereas a few direct statements by those who were intimately acquainted with him could have served the purpose effectively.

This was the state of biography in the early

decades of the eighteenth century, and Addison was not the only critic who, in defence of decency in literature, raised a hue and cry against the offenders. As Addison has hinted, it was a popular practice of fortune seekers through cheap literature, to extend such meagre information as they were able to gather about their subjects to preposterous proportions. Sometimes all they had to work with were the last statements of a criminal, the statement and will of a person in the public eye, and these were then rounded out into volumes.

The anonymous author of the Life of Mr. John Dennis, in parodying the popular practice said:

> Being to write the Life of Mr. John Dennis, some will wonder perhaps why we dwell thus long upon the Excellencies of another; but our Design in this, is to give the most delectable Entertainment to our Courteous Readers, and likewise to follow the Mode and Fashion of the present Times, and, as far as our poor Abilities will permit us, to imitate the admired writings of some of the choice Spirits of the Age, who do endeavour much to vary from the Subject they first set out upon as, many times, almost, and sometimes quite to forget it. 30

Edmund Curll was one of the ambitious publishers of these sordid biographies. Among the attacks on the formlessness of his publications was a very poignant one in the Remarks on 'Squire Ayre's Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. Pope. In a Letter to Mr. Edmund Curll, the anonymous author ironically regretted

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30 Stauffer, p. 532.

> that you did not, as you might assuredly, with equal Justice, introduce Memoirs of the Life, etc. of every Friend, and every Enemy of Mr. Pope's; and by that Means, have swelled your Work into twenty Volumes in Folio: And I cannot but think, this example of yours will be of notable Use to another Writer, of much your Stamp, the Ordinary of Newgate; who has already found the Way of stretching his accounts of wretched Creatures, under his care, to second, and third Parts; and may, by following your Method, swell 'em into fifty, but adding only to his Detail of the Culprit's Crimes the whole Lives and Characters of his Judges and the Jury.
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> Nay, you have, in one Instance, even outgone this large Allowance (of comparing the subject's quoted verses with the verses of other writers), bringing in, by Head and Shoulders, a Dialogue from the Craftsman, for no other Reason in the World but because it was not Mr. Pope's. Here lay an ample field, indeed, for enlarging your Work to whatever Dimensions you might think convenient: for by a Parity of Reason you might have call'd in all the Authors of the World to your Assistance. 31

It is easy to see by this humorous but offended critic that popular biography of the time was a mere product of fertile imaginations prompted by the hope of profit, and that it was not in any case a true account of the course of a life of a living person. When Samuel Johnson began publishing his critical material on biography in The Rambler at the beginning of the fifth decade of the century, it is not unlikely that he also felt offended by this wide-spread profanation of his favourite branch of literature. Such was the degree of profanity and abuse of "pure" biography which offended many lovers of biography as a true and entertaining

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31 Stauffer, pp. 532-33.

account, written "of the actions of particular persons."[32] This pure biography, of which "Dr. Johnson is the real founder,"[33] we shall now begin to examine.

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[32] Samuel Johnson, Dictionary of the English Language (London, 1755).

[33] Nicolson, p. 79.

CHAPTER II

JOHNSON'S THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

Doctor Johnson's critical essays on biography appeared at the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century. But before then he had already shown his extraordinary aptitude for that branch of literature which he "loved most."[1] He had published (though not in his own name) eight lives: Father Paul (1738), Boerhaave (1739), Admiral Blake, Admiral Drake and Philip Barretier (1740), Syndenham (1742), Richard Savage (1744), and Roscommon (1748). One of these lives, Richard Savage, was so impartially and so entertainingly written that, in spite of the poor standard of research exhibited in the pleasing narrative, it is still considered by experts in biography to be "unquestionably...our first masterpiece in biography."[2]

There is something about Johnson which particularly qualified him for life writing. This attribute is his deep-seated interest in human nature. He responded more

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[1] Boswell, Johnson, p. 301.

[2] Nicolson, p. 76.

positively to the idea that man's greatest business on earth was to seek and possess the knowledge of himself and his fellow human beings than did the poet who admirably embodied the idea in his poem. Pope was more or less like a road sign that gives directions to places it has not visited; but Johnson accepted the message as a personal bidding, and in the pursuance of its fulfillment he could say blithely to Mrs. Thrale, "A blade of grass is always a blade of grass: men and women are my subjects of inquiry."[3] The psychology of the individual personality, the knowledge of the life within which motivates outward behaviour of all kinds interested Johnson most. As Donald Stauffer expressively states, "He collected human specimens as a botanist collects plants;...he had the Linnean[4] genius for their classification."[5] His deep-seated interest in human nature is revealed in his love of the poor and the oppressed and underprivileged, whom he discovered through keen observation to partake with the great and the successful in certain general characteristics. With conviction which nothing but

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[3] Hester Lynch Piozzi, Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson LLD, During the Last 20 Yrs. of his Life (Cambridge, 1786), p. 100.

[4] Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, the founder of modern systematic botany and of the method of designating plants and animals.

[5] Stauffer, p. 395.

confident knowledge impels, he was able to declare that "we are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure."[6] His comprehensive knowledge of the general nature of the human species enabled him to know that our needs and our taboos are basically the same, differing only in details. It was the realization of this factor of the basic similarity of human desires and their effects on the motives of human behaviour that buttressed many of his sympathetic observations on those who have dropped behind in the exacting march of life only to wake up to find that while the desire to satisfy the basic needs is still as warm as ever in their breasts, they have not the means to do so.

Mrs. Thrale, whose opinion of Johnson in this connection seems most reliable from the fact that she, unlike Boswell, was not a blind worshipper of Johnson, says of him:

> He loved the poor as I never yet saw anyone else do, with an earnest desire to make them happy. What signifies, says some one, giving halfpence to common beggars? They only lay it out on gin or tobacco. "And why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence (says Johnson)?...Life is a pill which none of us can bear to swallow without gilding; yet for the poor we delight in stripping it still barer, and

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[6] Samuel Johnson, "The Rambler No. 60," Works, ed. Arthur Murphy (New York, 1835), I, 101. Subsequent references to The Rambler will be made to this edition.

> are not ashamed to show even visible displeasure, if ever the bitter taste is taken from their mouths." [7]

It is such a mind like Johnson's, always warm towards mankind, except the American, of course,[8] that can truly understand what is needed in writing a human life.

In the Rambler for the 13th of October, 1750, we have Dr. Johnson's first extended views on biography. As should be expected from this great student and lover of all mankind, he begins his first sustained statement on biography thus:

> I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such a uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. [9]

We have already seen that up to the seventeenth century, owing to the narrow conception of the purpose and the misapplication of the medium of biography, the choice of the subject was for the most part limited to persons of distinction. Johnson's opening paragraph in this article is a rejection of the circumscribed conception that only

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[7] Piozzi, pp. 84-85.

[8] Boswell, Johnson, p. 946. "I am willing to love all mankind, except an American."

[9] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 101.

through the lives of the saint and the great can moral lessons be taught to posterity. It breaks down the barrier and with little or no restriction, Johnson widens the scope of choice of subject for the biographer. Along with this he warns, of course, that biography is an art and must be treated as such. It is art of great distinction that can turn every life to useful purposes. His advice to the biographer in this paragraph is simply this: Your choice of subject is very wide, indeed, you can choose almost any person as the subject of your narrative, because every human being is practically the same in essential attributes. But see that the events of the life you have chosen are judiciously selected and faithfully recorded without partiality.

The democratization of biography which had begun earlier in the century was not yet respected by refined men of letters. Its recognition waited for the powerful pen of Johnson. When he spoke, it was realized that his motive was different from the mercenary incentive of the popular life writers. It was indeed something new from the pen of a man of letters who by this time had distinguished himself as such through his London, The Vanity of Human Wishes, The Life of Savage.

By considering every human life a potential subject, Johnson by no means diminished the importance of biography as

a medium of moral instruction. Instead, he intensified it by extending the field from which moral lessons could be drawn. He was intensely aware that people are more likely to be in sympathy with men like themselves than with those different from them. The common man, who belongs to a class that far exceeds in number the saints, the kings and the aristocrats, is more likely to be in sympathy with the success and failure, pain and pleasure, achievement and discomfiture, of those of his class than with the sackcloth and ashes and self-mortification of the saints, the pomp and pageantry of the kings, and the sensual indulgence of the aristocrats. If biography must serve its purpose of imparting moral instruction to all humanity, which to Johnson was very essential, its subjects must be drawn from the various stations of human life.

Condemning the value judgement that misguided the choice of subjects of biography, Johnson says in the same Rambler No. 60:

> It is frequently objected to relations of particular lives, that they are not distinguished by any striking or wonderful vicissitudes. The scholar, who passed his life among his books, the merchant, who only conducted his own affairs, the priest, whose sphere of action was not extended beyond that of his duty, are considered as no proper objects of public regard, however they might have excelled in their several stations, whatever might have been their learning, integrity, and piety. But this notion arises from false measures of excellence and dignity, and must be eradicated by considering, that, in the esteem of

uncorrupted reason, what is of most use is of most value. [10]

It is interesting to notice here the relative importance which the Doctor found in all classes of people and the professions they follow. "Every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers like himself." If the biography of a scholarly recluse will not appeal to the boisterous sentiment of the soldier, or the self-centered interest of the merchant, or to any other class of people, it cannot be considered ineffective for this reason alone because it can still serve a useful purpose to the scholars who might therein see a reflection of themselves and their thoughts.

Another contribution which Dr. Johnson made to the cause of biography was his insistence that it should be written by someone who has an intimate knowledge of its subject, not through information collected second-hand, but through personal acquaintance. Talking with Boswell on the biographical part of history he said: "We cannot trust to the characters we find in history, unless when they are drawn by those who knew the persons; as those, for instance, by Sallust and by Lord Clarendon." [11] In many of his various discussions on biography he constantly alluded to the importance of intimate and personal relationship between the

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[10] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 101.

[11] Boswell, Johnson, pp. 408-9.

biographer and his subject. It was his opinion that many of the biographies written by eminent men of letters who had distinguished themselves in other branches of literature failed to satisfy, mainly because the authors were working with facts and not with the lives of their heroes. On Goldsmith's Life of Parnell, he said to Boswell, "Goldsmith's Life of Parnell is poor: not that it is poorly written, but that he had poor materials; for nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him."[12]

Thomas Parnell died in 1718, some twelve years before Goldsmith was born. Evidently Goldsmith collected the materials for his biography through study, just as Johnson had suspected.

> There is scarcely any man but might be made a subject of a very interesting and an amusing history, if the writer, besides a thorough acquaintance with the character he draws, were able to make those nice distinctions which separate it from all others. The strongest minds have usually the most striking peculiarities, and would consequently afford the richest materials: but in the present instance, from not knowing Dr. Parnell, his peculiarities are gone to the grave with him; we are obliged to take his character from such as knew but little of him, or who, perhaps, have given very little information if they had known more. [13]

Two other instances of Johnson's emphasis on this

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[12] Boswell, Johnson, p. 474.

[13] Oliver Goldsmith, Poetical Works of Thomas Parnell, With a Life (Boston, 1854), p. IX.

principle of intimate and personal relationship between the biographer and his hero might help to show the strength of the Doctor's conviction that it is the only means by which character can be drawn with exactness.

In Rambler No. 60 he said: "more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral."[14] In Rambler No. 68 he again insisted that the "most authentic witnesses of any man's character are those who know him in his own family and see him without any restraint or rule of conduct, but such as he voluntarily prescribes for himself."[15]

It was with such conviction that he censured Goldsmith's Parnell. In spite of the gripping, lucid and animating style of the author of the Vicar of Wakefield, Parnell failed to satisfy Johnson as a record of life. It was just one of those "series of actions or preferments"[16] chronologically arranged. For Johnson, no degree of scholarship exhibited in a meticulous collection of facts could compensate for personal contact with the subject.

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[14] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

[15] Johnson, "Rambler No. 68," Works, I, 113.

[16] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

A corollary to this factor of personal and intimate knowledge is the need for a community of interest and sentiment between the biographer and his subject. The Doctor knew that writers express most effectively and clearly such ideas as are parts of their own experience. The success of biography may be hindered if the author and his subject have different orbits of experience. Misconstruction of motives behind actions recorded and unsympathetic representation of the life as a whole may result from such a difference.

Boswell reports the following conversation with Johnson on the subject of biography, and it is relevant to the point.

> He censured Ruffhead's Life of Pope, and said: "he knew nothing of Pope and nothing of poetry." He praised Dr. Joseph Warton's Essay on Pope, but said: he supposed we should have no more of it, as the author had not been able to persuade the world to think of Pope as he did. Boswell: "Why, Sir, should that prevent him from continuing his work? He is an ingenious Counsel, who has made the best of his cause: he is not obliged to gain it." Johnson, "But, Sir, there is a difference when the cause is of a man's own making." 17

Here was an instance in which two biographers with different backgrounds wrote on the same subject. One was deficient in the two factors of personal knowledge and community of sentiment; the other had only one of these — personal knowledge. Neither succeeded in making a judicious

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17 Boswell, Johnson, p. 475.

representation of his subject. Warton knew Pope personally and was so much enamoured by the sweetness of his poetry that he overlooked the shades and shadows of his character. He endeavoured to show these qualities of Pope to his readers but failed to impress men like Johnson who were acquainted with more of Pope's works than he was able to disclose. Ruffhead studied Pope and presented the gleanings from Pope's poetry and records of Pope's life. Both presented to the public a Pope of their own making, and however clever and ingenious the narrative might have been, however imaginative the writers, the portrait was not a genuine portrait of Pope.

Another stimulating point in Johnson's theory was his renovating statement on the content of biography. Hitherto it was considered that only the most magnificent and glorious actions of a subject were worthy of mention in the record of a life. The emphasis had been placed mainly on the commemorative value of biography. As a result, every effort was made to preserve for posterity a stuffed-up effigy of the biographical subject, instead of a real life. It was deemed a great offence both to decency and the memory of the dead to mention defects either of person or of character. Great pains were taken to adorn the biographical narrative with virtues the hero was never known to possess and of heroic deeds which he neither was capable of doing nor ever attempted to do.

Biography, as regards its contents, was similar to modern funeral orations or parting speeches in which the departed is generally and unduly exalted above the human species regardless of the known facts of his life.

But Johnson had a much more comprehensive view of biography than this kind of panegyric. He by no means overlooked its commemorative value which he indeed cherished as a link between the present and the future, but what he most wished to preserve was the truth. In biography he considered that the true character of a man can be trapped by an ingenious biographer who observes his subject in his unguarded moments, when he feels free, relaxed and acts and speaks without disguise. Records of sayings and actions at such moments, however trivial they may appear to be, reveal the true character better than the conditioned behaviour of public life. "The business of a biographer," says Johnson,

> is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thought into domestic privacies, and display minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence, and by virtue. The account of Thuanus is, with great propriety, said by its author to have been written, that it may lay open to posterity the private and familiar character of that man...whose candour and genius will to the end of time be by his writings preserved in admiration.
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> There are many invisible circumstances, which whether we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtues, are more important than public occurrences. Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgotten in his account of Cataline,

> to remark, that his walk was now quick, and again slow, as an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion. Thus the story of Melancthon affords a striking lecture on the value of time, by informing us, that when he made an appointment, he expected not only the hour, but the minute to be fixed; that life might not run out in the idleness of suspense; and all the plans and enterprises of De Witt are now of less importance to the world, than that part of his personal character, which represents him as careful of his health, and negligent of his life. 18

With respect to the minute private details of the life of an individual as the best means of making fine distinctions of character known, Johnson said again in the Rambler, No. 68:

> The younger Pliny has very justly observed, that of actions that deserve our attention, the most splendid are not always the greatest. Fame, and wonder, and applause, are not excited but by external and adventitious circumstances, and often distinct and separate from virtue and heroism.
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> The main of life is, indeed, composed of small incidents and petty occurrences.
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> It is, indeed, at home that every man must be known by those who would make a just estimate either of his virtue or felicity; for smiles and embroidery are alike occasional, and the mind is often dressed for show in painted honour and fictitious benevolence.
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> Every man must have found some whose lives, in every house but their own, were a continual series of hypocricy, and who conceal under fair appearances bad qualities, which, whenever they thought themselves out of the reach of censure, broke out from their

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18 Johnson, "Rambler No. 69" Works, I, 101.

> restraint, like winds imprisoned in their caverns, and whom everyone had reason to love, but they whose love a wise man is chiefly solicitous to procure. And there are others who, without any show of general goodness, and without the attractions by which popularity is conciliated, are received among their own families as bestowers of happiness, and reverenced as instructors, guardians and benefactors. [19]

Johnson strongly advocated the use of anecdotes and domestic details in biography not merely because he was writing for an age curious about the domestic affairs, but because in his pursuit of complete delineation of character he found that the use of anecdotes was the only honest means by which both the dark shadows and the bright spots could be brought to light. "Besides I love anecdotes,"[20] he said to Boswell and Dr. Robertson at Edinburgh while on a tour of the Western Highlands of Scotland, when they were complaining about the absence of great things in Lord Hailes' writing. When Boswell became very expansive on the amount of information he was going to give about Corsica which he had recently toured, Johnson, who knew better what would make his account more entertaining, said to him, "you cannot go to the bottom of the subject; but all that you can tell us will be new to us. Give us as many anecdotes as you can."[21]

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[19] Johnson, "Rambler No. 68," Works, I, 112-13.

[20] James Boswell, The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, ed. Ernest Phys (Toronto, 1926), p. 26.

[21] Boswell, Johnson, p. 358.

Johnson had great capacity in discerning the truth of human behaviour through what to others appeared petty actions and trivial statements. To borrow William Blake's idea, he could "see a world in a grain of sand/And a heaven in a wild flower."[22]

> I mentioned that I had in my possession the Life of Sir Robert Sibbald, the celebrated Scottish antiquary, and founder of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, in the original manuscript in his own handwriting; and that it was I believed the most natural and candid account of himself that ever was given by any man. As an instance, he tells that the Duke of Perth, then Chancellor of Scotland, pressed him very much to come over to the Roman Catholic faith: that he resisted all his Grace's arguments for a considerable time, till one day he felt himself, as it were, instantaneously convinced, and with tears in his eyes ran into the Duke's arms, and embraced the ancient religion; that he continued very steady in it for some time, and accompanied his Grace to London one winter, and lived in his household; that there he found the rigid fasting prescribed by the church very severe upon him; that this disposed him to reconsider the controversy, and having then seen that he was in the wrong, he returned to Protestantism. I talked of some time or other publishing this curious life. Mrs. Thrale, "I think you had as well let alone that publication. To discover [disclose] such weakness, exposes a man when he is gone." Johnson. "Nay, it is an honest picture of human nature. How often are the primary motives of our greatest actions as small as Sibbald's, for his reconversion." 23

Here we see the Doctor's conviction reiterated, that in order to paint an honest picture of human nature and to get to the dark recesses of the mind for the true character,

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[22] William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," Enlightened England, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York, 1947), p. 1176.

[23] Boswell, Johnson, p. 898.

one must use petty events, actions and statements. The extent of Johnson's conviction of the efficacy of this principle is suggested by the number of times he mentioned this theory in nearly all of his discussions on the writing of life. These petty events are the blocks that make the structure of human character, and he advised that they must be captured and utilized, if possible as soon as they occur. It was from this conviction that he differed with Addison about the time the biography of an individual should be written. Addison had advised that it should be left for posterity, when friendship and envy had gone asleep, because then an impartial estimate of character could best be made. But Johnson said:

> If a life be delayed till interest and envy are at an end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence; for the incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory, and are rarely transmitted by tradition. We know how few can portray a living acquaintance, except by his most prominent and observable peculiarities, and the grosser features of his mind; and it may be easily imagined how much of this little knowledge may be lost in imparting it, and how soon a succession of copies will lose all resemblance of the original. 24

Johnson, then, did not condone partiality in biography but stressed that while impartiality is important on ethical grounds, small incidents are equally important for that purpose and more so for accurate and entertaining

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24 Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

characterization. It was his recommendation that small facets of individual character ought to be recorded as soon as possible, because the type of biography which he advocated was not only a true recounting of facts such as chronicles, registers of births, deeds and deaths can provide, but this, along with a moving and progressive picture of an individual life which will be capable of instructing as well as delighting. If the purpose of biography was solely to furnish information on important events in the life of the individual, it would be convenient to abandon writing until "friendship and envy," which are sources of partiality, "have gone to sleep." But it would be an unprofitable undertaking to duplicate the records which in most cases are kept by civil authorities. When the purpose of a biography is to portray the individual as he or she once was and to feed the curiosity of the reader who often wonders how an exalted hero passed his life, Johnson thought it imperative that the life be written while envy and friendship are wide awake. But the biographer, while taking advantage of such a revealing situation,must be judiciously impartial, though not cold and unsympathetic.

Johnson was a moral philosopher who laid great emphasis on truth, not only in biography, but in other branches of literature and in every aspect of life. In literature he was impatient with romance. "I had rather see the portrait of a dog that I know," he said, "than all the allegorical

pictures they can show me in the world."[25] In life as a whole, he scorned triflers and jesters and would not willingly pun, or tell a story, or be interested in one unless it "is a specimen of human manners, and derives its sole value from its truth."[26] Love of truth which seems to have been his "ruling passion" goes side by side with his principle of "general nature" in controlling his critical theory.

His unrelenting advocacy for the whole truth, especially for the representation of a biographical subject, has been misconstrued by many critics, including Boswell. He is said to have contradicted himself in recommending at one time that both faults and virtues of the hero of a biography be shown, and at another time advising that for moral reasons the faults should be concealed. In order to see clearly what Johnson meant, which has been so grossly misunderstood, it will be necessary to track down his pronouncements on this issue.

It was in the evening of September 22, 1773, while on the tour of the Hebrides that Johnson, Boswell, M'Leod and others discussed the two versions of the Life of Swift, one by Lord Orrery and the other by Dr. Delany. Both biographers had

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[25] Walter Raleigh, Six Essays on Johnson (Oxford, 1910), p. 38.

[26] Ibid.

intimate and personal knowledge of Dr. Swift, and the discussion centered on the difference in the picture which each artist painted of the same man. It was seen that Lord Orrery made Swift despicable while Dr. Delaney pictured him as elegant and glorious. The question was put to Johnson, the oracle of literary propriety, as his friends were wont to make of him, by M'Leod, whether Lord Orrery was justified in exposing the defects "of a man with whom he lived in intimacy."[27] Before giving his verdict the Doctor explained to his audience that the situation was like that of the fabled judgment of the blind man on the likeness of an elephant. Neither biographer conceivably was wrong since each disclosed what he wished to expose. As to the ethical implication of exposing the defects of a friend who has departed from life, which was the main point the questioner was trying to bring out from the teacher, Johnson said: "Why no, [it is not wrong to expose] sir, after the man is dead; for then it is done historically."[28]

In 1777,[29] Boswell and Johnson fell again to discussing biography. Boswell here became the teacher asserting

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[27] Boswell, Hebrides, p. 225.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Boswell, Johnson, pp. 839-40.

that "in writing a life, a man's peculiarities should be mentioned, because they mark his character." Johnson retorted:

> "Sir, there is no doubt as to peculiarities: the question is, whether a man's vices should be mentioned; for instance, whether it should be mentioned that Addison and Parnell drank too freely; for people will probably more easily indulge in drinking from knowing this; so that more ill may be done by the example than good by telling the whole truth."

Boswell observed a certain measure of contradiction between the two statements made by Johnson within an interval of four years, and after reporting the last one--

> Here was an instance of his varying from himself in talk: for when Lord Hailes and he sat one morning calmly conversing in my house in Edinburgh, I well remember that Dr. Johnson maintained, that "If a man is to write A Panegyrick, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write A Life, he must represent it really as it was: and when I objected to the danger of telling that Parnell drank to excess, he said, that "it would produce an instructive caution to avoid drinking, when it was seen, that even the learning and genius of Parnell could be debased by it." And in the Hebrides he maintained, as appears from my Journal, that a man's intimate friend should mention his faults, if he writes his life.

One who knew so much of Johnson as the curious Boswell, should not have found Johnson "varying with himself in talk" in this particular case. Apart from the fact that "he appeared to have a pleasure in contradiction, especially when any opinion whatever was delivered with an air of confidence; so that there was hardly any topick, if not one of the great truths of Religion and Morality, that he might not have been incited to argue either for or against,"[30] one

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[30] Boswell, Johnson, p. 734.

can see that, Johnson, as a lover of truth, was placing all his cards on the table here to show the possible effect the telling of the whole truth might have on all classes of readers. There is no denying that a reader who is inclined to drinking would find solace in knowing that such a literary luminary as Parnell found comfort in drinking, and might for that reason indulge more in drinking. By the same token, one averse to drinking would undoubtedly conclude that without that vice Parnell would have been a perfect hero, and while imitating his goodness would endeavour to avoid that which made his hero short of the perfection he himself was striving for. There is no doubt that Boswell delivered, "with an air of confidence" here, an opinion which was in actual fact a re-echoing of the Doctor's idea given to him four years before, and it was necessary that his Mentor should point out to him that there was more to the issue than he thought he knew.

It may be argued that Johnson did not remember his own previous pronouncement on the issue at the time that he was considering its adverse effect. But be that as it may, it does not appear to me that he contradicted himself as Boswell suggested, nor that this statement was made merely to "give an impression of the play, back and forth, of an active mind, and perhaps even of tongue-in-cheek,"[31] as Professor

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[31] Leon Edel, Literary Biography (Toronto, 1957), p. 16.

Edel feels. To me it is a statement of a comprehensive mind enamoured of the love of truth and therefore used to examining both sides of a given coin to assess its full value. I feel that both remarks were made in all sincerity.

There is no doubt about Johnson's consistency as regards dispassionate representation of faults and virtues of the hero of a biography. He was so convinced of the effect of the full truth on the portrayal of character that he was unwilling to compromise with anything short of it. Neither personal interest nor popularity could deflect him from this principle. When Boswell asked him directly if he objected to his letters being published after his death, Johnson answered: "Nay, Sir, when I am dead, you may do as you will."[32]

When Johnson published his Lives of the Poets in 1781, critics and advocates of "discreet" biography took him to task for exposing the faults of some of the poets whose memories they would have liked to remain unstained. Notable among these public darlings was Addison whose meanness in taking a court action against his friend Steele for the recovery of a debt Johnson had exposed and criticized. It was considered by friends of Addison that since his character was "so pure" this particular shortcoming should have been suppressed. Though Johnson was mindful of the sacred purpose

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[32] Boswell, Johnson, p. 396.

of biography, which he expressed in his diary in these words: "Last week I published the Lives of the Poets, written, I hope, in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety,"[33] he still strongly objected to imprudent delicacy:

> If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shown, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in any thing. The sacred writers, (he observed,) related the vicious as well as the virtuous actions of men; which had this moral effect, that it kept mankind from despair, into which otherwise they would naturally fall, were they not supported by the recollection that others had offended like themselves, and by penitence and amendment of life had been restored to the favour of Heaven. 34

Johnson had just turned forty-one in October 1750, when he first publicly declared his theory of biography in an extended form in The Rambler, No. 60. Among other principles of biography he discussed in that article was the impartial representation of the character of a biographical subject: "There are many, " he observed, "who think it an act of piety to hide the faults of their friends, even when they can no longer suffer by detection." He was seventy-two when he made his last statements on the biographical issue. This was in 1781, following the publication of the Lives of the Poets, when his own biographical work was completed. We can observe, therefore, a consistency of conviction running

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[33] Samuel Johnson, "Diaries and Prayers," The Yale Ed. of Johnson's Works (New Haven, 1958), I, 294.

[34] Boswell, Johnson, p. 1105.

through a period of about thirty-one years. It would be utterly unfair for his editors to accuse him of insincerity or self-contradiction, simply because in this case of Parnell and Addison he had explained to Boswell that truth wholly told can cut both ways, by inspiring piety in some and encouraging immorality in others. Being a keen student of human nature and possessing "a passionate interest in the science of human life"[35] and behaviour, Johnson was expressing his observations on the imitative instinct of man and its effects on biography. He expressed this idea in a variety of cases, the most elaborate of which was in the Rambler No. 164.

> As the greater part of human kind speak and act wholly by imitation, most of those who aspire to honour and applause, propose to themselves some example which serves as a model of their conduct and the limit of their hopes.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The faults of a man loved or honoured sometimes steal secretly and imperceptibly upon the wise and the virtuous, but, by injudicious fondness or thoughtless vanity, are adopted with design. There is scarce any failing of mind or body, any error of opinion, or depravity of practice, which, instead of producing shame and discontent, its natural effect, has not at one time or other gladened vanity with the hopes of praise, and been displayed with ostentatious industry by those who sought kindred minds among the wits or heroes, and could prove their relation only by similitude of deformity. 36

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[35] Raleigh, p. 70.

[36] Johnson, "Rambler No. 164," Works, I, 251.

After establishing the human propensity to imitate consciously or unconsciously the weaknesses of heroes, he did not advise that for moral purposes the faults of the heroes should be concealed from posterity. Instead, he stressed that they be exposed with emphasis on the odiousness of the faults and on the revulsion with which the public reacts to such faults. Towards the end of the article (Rambler No. 164) he said:

> It is particularly the duty of those who consign illustrious names to posterity, to take care lest their readers be misled by ambiguous examples. That writer may be justly condemned as an enemy to goodness, who suffers fondness or interest to confound right with wrong, or to shelter the faults which even the wisest and the best have committed from the ignominy which guilt aught always to suffer, and with which it should be more deeply stigmatized when dignified by its neighbourhood to uncommon worth, since we shall be in danger of beholding it without abhorrence, unless its turpitude be laid open, and the eye secured from the deception of surrounding splendour. 37

For love of truth Johnson preferred biography to romance and history because "all history, so far as it is not supported by contemporary evidence is romance;"[38] and for the same reason he preferred autobiography to biography. He found in autobiography a higher potentiality for dissemination of truth than in biography. His Idler No. 84 was devoted chiefly to this argument. He examined the merits of romance, history

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37 Johnson, "Rambler No. 164," Works, I, 251.

38 Boswell, Hebrides, p. 394.

and biography in propagating truth and concluded that romance only engages imagination as a pleasant dream while history stuffs it with useless truth. The possessor of useless truth is like the possessor of gold which cannot be spent. As gold which cannot be spent makes nobody rich, knowledge which cannot be applied makes no one wise. "Biography," he observed, "is of the various kind of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life,"[39] and this is because it is neither falsehood nor useless truth. Even in biography there is a great temptation to falsification and to a consequent deterioration of truth when the narrative of a life is written by someone other than the one who lived it. This theme of the superiority of autobiography to biography owes its importance not only to the persuasiveness of the argument in its support but also to the weight it adds to Johnson's advocacy for absolute truth. The following is an exerpt from the potent argument which Johnson made in support of this new theme:

> Those relations are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story. He that recounts the life of another, commonly dwells most upon conspicuous events, lessens the familiarity of his tale to increase its dignity, shows his favourite at a distance decorated and magnified like the ancient actors in their tragic dress, and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero.
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> But if it be true, which was said by a French Prince, "that no man was a hero to the servants of his chamber," it is equally true that every man is yet less a hero to himself....

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[39] Johnson, "Idler No. 84," Works, I, 437.

The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another.

Certainty of knowledge not only excludes mistake, but fortifies veracity. What we collect by conjecture, and by conjecture only can one man judge of another's motives or sentiments, is easily modified by fancy or by desire; as objects imperfectly discerned take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder. But that which is fully known cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding, and alarm of conscience; of understanding, the lover of truth; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue.

He that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt his praise or aggrevate his infamy; many temptations to falsehood will occur in the disguise of passions, too specious to fear much resistance. Love of virtue will animate panegyric, and hatred of wickedness imbitter censure. The zeal of gratitude, the ardour of patriotism, fondness for an opinion, or fidelity to a party, may easily overpower the vigilance of a mind habitually well disposed, and prevail over unassisted and unfriended veracity.

But he that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed that all are on the watch against its artifices. He that writes an apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, to recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calm and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly be presumed to tell the truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb. [40]

"He that writes the life of another is either his

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[40] Johnson, "Idler No. 84," Works, I, pp. 437-438.

friend or his enemy." If he is a friend, from a sense of obligation which friendship entails, he will be tempted to exaggerate, soften, extenuate, or even invent evidence as a particular situation demands, in his effort to paint a desirable picture of his friend. As an enemy, he is no less vulnerable to these artifices though his motives be different from those of a friend. While a biographer, friend or enemy, is assailed by a variety of motives for falsification of evidence, from which he cannot completely disentangle his emotion and his pen, the autobiographer, is vulnerable only to the primary motive of self-love which is easily detected, for rationalization quickly fails when placed under examination. The subjective colouration is a very thin coating over the hard core of truth which autobiography may convey.

A conscientious autobiographer, who records his life for the expressed purpose of instructing posterity, and who leaves it unpublished until he himself has been buried, may be exonerated from the charges of self-love and falsehood, for his narrative can be relied upon for truth, since falsehood tranquilizes no conscience, and fame and profit, the autobiographer's only motives for falsification, are meaningless to him when he is laid "beneath the tomb."

Johnson's contention here is not simply the superiority of autobiography to biography in terms of the beauty of narrative or the degree of delight derivable from each, but

in the extent to which each allows of veracity of recording. His deep knowledge of human psychology enabled him to come to this conclusion that so far as the truth of statement and interpretation of motives are concerned, autobiography may be superior to biography.

It might be argued that Johnson contradicted himself here again, because in his Life of Browne he said that "the opinions of every man must be learned from himself: concerning his practice, it is safest to trust the evidence of others."[41] I would be willing to take this to mean that Johnson recognized that the whole truth of character can only be distilled from the combined evidence of the individual's friends, his enemies, and himself. None of these is sufficient in itself, since in each case quite a different motive prevails. To rely entirely upon any one of them would be like pretending to give an accurate description of a huge object after viewing it from only one of its many dimensions.

Not only in this particular aspect but throughout his whole theory of "the art which he was the first man of letters deliberately to isolate and exploit,"[42] Johnson's essential focus was on the whole truth. Critics who have disagreed with some of his notable innovations, namely,

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[41] Johnson, "The Life of Browne," Works, ed. Arthur Murphy (New York, 1816), XII, 294.

[42] Nicolson, p. 83.

personal acquaintance with the subject and inclusion of judiciously selected minute details of the hero's life, have, either failed to discover the delicate link between these and the whole truth without which biography loses its value, or they have taken up the argument for its own sake, and unknowingly worked against the cause they pretend to serve.

CHAPTER III

JOHNSON IN THE PRACTICE OF HIS THEORY OF BIOGRAPHY

Perhaps one of the most difficult things that a literary critic can undertake is to play simultaneously the roles of a theorist and a practitioner in art. Any theory of art, like the constitution of a country, is a man's conception of a state of excellence which, though captivating and alluring to imagination, is illusive and unattainable in practice. Hence it is not really surprising to find theorists talking like angels but practising like men. Man's capacity to design a Utopia has never yet been equalled by his ability to put his design into practice.

Most critics agree that Doctor Samuel Johnson's theory of biography is unattainable in practice. How far Johnson succeeded in applying his theory in practice is the subject of enquiry in this chapter. As biography was Johnson's greatest literary achievement, not excepting lexicography, it would be impossible for the scope of this thesis to examine all of the many lives he wrote. In order to accomodate the material to the scope, only four of his sixty-five

"lives," namely, Milton, Boerhaave, Savage and Cave, have been selected. It will be noticed that two of these men, Savage and Cave, were intimately known to Johnson, and the other two, Milton and Boerhaave, were not. Johnson had advanced the theory that "nobody can write the life of a man but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him."[1] The main motive of the above grouping, among others, is to see how much better Johnson succeeded in the practice of biography with subjects personally known to him than with those with whom he had no personal contact.

I. MILTON

John Milton died in 1674, over a hundred years before Johnson wrote his biography (1779). Before this time biographies of Milton were already on many bookshelves. Some of these early biographers were eye-witnesses to the actor and the scenes they described; and some who had not this advantage obtained first hand information from eye-witnesses. Edward Phillips and his brother John,[2] who besides being Milton's

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[1] Boswell, Johnson, p. 474.

[2] Helen Darbishire in her intro. to Early Lives of Milton (London, 1932) claims with substantial evidence that the anonymous Life of Milton in the BM, Bold. MS. Wood. D.4, was written by John Phillips, Milton's nephew.

nephews were also his students, had each written a biography of their uncle. Anthony a Wood, the famous antiquarian, John Aubrey, the gossip and curiosity monger, Jonathan Richardson, the artist, Dr. Birch and Fenton, were a few of those who had published biographies of Milton.

These early lives, in Johnson's opinion, were mere personified qualities that did not reflect Milton as a man. In the eagerness to give honour to his memory, the biographers ignored their important responsibility of giving respect to truth, knowledge and virtue. Edward Phillips, from a mistaken conception of the meaning and purpose of biography, frankly admitted withholding information which might have enhanced the effectiveness of his work. In introducing his narrative, The Life of John Milton, he lamented that "pitty it is the person whose memory we have here undertaken to perpetuate by recounting the most memorable Transactions of his life finds not a well-informed Pen able to set him forth, equal with the best."[3] Pity indeed it was that such a noble aim which would have been most suitable for a funeral oration was misapplied for a biography.

After completing his Life of Milton, Johnson is reported to have said to Maloney, "we have had too many honey-

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[3] Edward Phillips, "The Life of Mr. John Milton," Early Lives of Milton, ed. Helen Darbishire (London, 1932), p. 50. The underlining of "most memorable Transactions" is my emphasis.

suckle lives of Milton."[4] His was going to be in another strain. Undoubtedly it was in another strain, for it was the first time that a complete view of Milton was given to those who did not know him. Even though his picture of Milton aroused (and continues to arouse) violent anger from Milton's admirers and lovers of decent biography, it gives more honour to Milton as a man than those of his early biographers "who contemplated in Milton the scholar and the wit, [and] were contented to forget the reviler of his king."[5]

The ground idea of Dr. Johnson's biographical theory which he paved with minute details of artistry was a recreation of a life with the remains left behind by an individual in the form of words and deeds, so that the replica can fit properly into the niche in the continuum of life which was once occupied by the original. It is in consideration of this central idea that his success or failure as a practical biographer must be determined.

The Life of Milton follows the conventional tripartite pattern common in the lives of Johnson's literary subjects. The first part is a progressive picture of life from birth to death, the second a sketch of character and the

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[4] G.B. Hill, Johnson's Miscellanies (New York, 1897), I, 483, n. 2.

[5] Johnson, "Milton," Lives of the Poets, I, 153.

third is a literary criticism, a series of critical observations on the works of the subject. Though Johnson follows this pattern consistently, the method of approach is largely his own.

In the first part which is a piecing together in a chronological order of anecdotes, facts and details both from Milton's previous biographers and Milton's works, Johnson has been very imaginative. He has endeavoured to recapture the spirit within that propelled the outward man and in that way has revealed hidden traits of character not at all obvious but deducible from the words and deeds of Milton. As a non-directive psychotherapist would do, he has analyzed Milton with the help of his words and brought out such traits of character as peevishness and recalcitrance which would have frozen on the lips of his nephews.

Milton objected to academic education on the grounds that men designed for orders in the church were permitted in the universities to act in plays and put to the profane practice of "writhing and unboning of their clergy limbs to all the antick and dishonest gestures of ... buffoons and bawds, prostituting the shame of the ministry...to the eyes of the courtiers and court-ladies, their grooms and mademoiselles."[6] Johnson uses this expression to characterize Milton

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[6] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 105.

as a peevish personality. He explains that when Milton mentioned his suspension from the university he had confessed that the pleasure of the theatre afforded him relief from the mortifying feeling of humiliation which the suspension engendered. This means that he was aware of the usefulness of plays. He could not therefore have condemned them "when they were acted by academicks"[7] unless he was by nature capricious and difficult to please.

When Milton went to the university his design was to become a clergyman. This design he later abandoned, declaring as a reason for his change of mind that whoever became a clergyman must subscribe to slavery and take an impossible oath, which, unless his conscience was weak, must continually afflict him with the consciousness of guilt. For this reason he preferred a blameless silence to"the office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing."[8] From this declaration, Johnson deduced that he was refractory. And for such deductions he did not depend alone upon the effect of isolated incidents.

> These expressions are, I find, applied to the subscription of the Articles [39] ; but it seems more probable that they are related to canonical obedience. I know not any of the Articles which seem to

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[7] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 105.

[8] Ibid.

> thwart his opinions: but the thoughts of obedience, whether canonical or civil, raised his indignation. [9]

An interesting facet of Milton's character which would be exciting to modern psychologists is Johnson's depiction of his subject as a near mental patient suffering from fantasy or "a splitting from reality." Milton is shown as a frustrated and neurotic personality resorting to the defence mechanism of rationalization in an effort to resolve a conflict between exhaustion and a violent motive to produce verses. Edward Phillips, Toland, and Richardson had recorded seasonal recessions of Milton's poetic skill, and Johnson found evidence of Milton's belief in this phenomenon [10] and analyzed it as follows:

> This dependence of the soul upon the seasons, those temporary and periodical ebbs and flows of intellect, may, I suppose, justly be derided as the fumes of vain imagination...The author that thinks himself weather-bound will find, with a little help from hellebone, that he is only idle or exhausted. But while this notion has possession of the head, it produces inability which it supposes. Our powers owe much of their energy to our hopes....When success seems attainable, diligence is enforced; but when it is admitted that the faculties are suppressed by a cross wind, or a cloudy sky, the day is given up without resistance. [11]

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[9] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 105-106.

[10] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 149. "From such prepossessions Milton seems not to have been free."

[11] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 149.

When it is remembered that "hellebone" is an ancient name given to various herbs that were supposed to cure madness it will be seen from this analysis that Johnson considered Milton a schizophrenic personality that badly needed therapy.

There is yet another instance of subtle deduction of traits of character from Milton's works. There is a passage in Paradise Lost which runs thus:

> Me of these
> Nor skilled nor studious, higher argument
> Remains, sufficient of it self to raise
> That name, unless an age too late, or cold
> Climate, or years damp my intended wing
> Depressed, and much they may, if all be mine,
> Nor hers who brings it nightly to my ear. 12

In this passage Milton shows his acceptance of a popular seventeenth-century belief in the degeneracy of the whole creation which was spread by Dr. Gabriel Goodman, Bishop of Gloucester.[13] The Bishop held that the whole creation had deteriorated, "that neither trees nor animals had the height or bulk of their predecessors, and that every thing was daily sinking by gradual diminution."[14] Johnson finds Milton superstitious for accepting this unfounded belief. "Milton," he

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12 John Milton, "Paradise Lost," The Portable Milton, ed. Douglas Bush (New York, 1955), IX, 41-47. Subsequent references to Milton's poems will be made to this edition.

13 Gabriel Goodman, The Fall of Man, or the Corruption of Nature (London, 1616).

14 Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 149.

says, "appears to suspect that souls partake of the general degeneracy, and is not without some fear that his book is to be written in 'an age too late' for heroick poesy."[15]

In the second part of the narrative which depicts Milton at home, much less undesirable qualities appear, though nothing suggests warmth and affection. This section deals mainly with the time when Milton was completely blind. His person is described with minute details that help imagination so much that the reader seems to see Milton standing before him. Though height and weight are not given in figures the reader has no doubt whatsoever about Milton's stature and bulk when he is told that the poet "narrowly escaped from being short and thick."[16] With such details as the colour of his hair and the way he parted it, his complexion and his habit of wearing a sword, the portrait approaches in effect that of a painter with colour and brush. Milton's daily activities are given round the clock, and the regularity of the routine heightens the distinctiveness of his personality. The account of his "sitting obliquely in an elbow-chair, with his leg thrown over the arm,"[17] the position he usually assumed while dictating his verses, increases our

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[15] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 149.

[16] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 163.

[17] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 164.

impression of him as an individual who had his own ways of performing common actions. Peculiarities like these are the real ingredients that give flavour to a biography.

The third section of the narrative is literary criticism rather than biography and does not lie directly within the scope of this enquiry. Considering the narrative as a whole, one finds that even if Johnson had not satisfied Milton's friends with his portrait of Milton, he has at any rate succeeded in presenting to his readers the Milton that he knew from reading and from anecdotes. Except on one occasion, which we shall see in the chapter treating Johnson's limitations as a biographer, he has not invented material in his reconstruction of Milton's personality. But he has been extremely imaginative, and the interpretation which he has given us of his subject is his own interpretation of the material. In a Chaucerian style he plays the roles of a narrator and a commentator. When he records an anecdote which does not appear to be consistent with truth and experience, he gives a commentary and then passes judgment. The anecdote on Milton's omission of prayer in the distribution of his hours is one of the many instances in which Johnson plays these two roles. "In the distribution of his hours," says Johnson, "there was no hour of prayer, either solitary, or with his household; omitting public prayers, he omitted all."[18] Then

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[18] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 167.

in the commentary and judgment which follows he actually tells us more about himself than about Milton.

> Of this omission the reason has been sought, upon a supposition which ought never to be made, that men live with their own approbation, and justify their conduct to themselves. Prayer certainly was not thought superfluous by him, who represents our first parents as praying acceptably in the state of innocence, and efficaciously after their fall. That he lived without prayer can hardly be affirmed; his studies and meditations were an habitual prayer. The neglect of it in his family was probably a fault for which he condemned himself, and which he intended to correct, but that death, as too often happens, intercepted his reformation. 19

In this passage we are reminded of Johnson, stricken in his conscience of the sins of omission and commission and resolving over and over in his diary to stand up against sloth.

If Johnson has given us a different picture of Milton it is only because he has taken a more thorough and critical look at Milton than had his earlier biographers. He has undoubtedly shown more critical understanding and psychological penetration than they did. His view of Milton is more comprehensive than that of his earlier biographers, most of whom he derides for covering over Milton's faults in other aspects of life with his scholastic eminence and considering him only as a scholar.

This does not exonerate Johnson from the fault of

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19 Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 167.

that partisanship which he agrees to be detrimental to biography. The desire to expose and make the demi-god a man tempted him beyond resistance. His conclusions are just and true, but they are so coldly and energetically drawn that a personified animosity seems to mark his trail on every page. I find it suitable to close with the observations of the critic Pearson on the Lives in general:

> The outstanding merit of Johnson's Lives of the Poets is that his intense interest in people was only equalled by his passion for the truth. Some of his sketches are coloured by predudice; but he was human, and the man without predudice is yet to be born: he may be the robot of the future. 20

II. BOERHAAVE

Herman Boerhaave was one of the most remarkable and versatile men of letters in Europe in the early part of the eighteenth century. His proficiency in the new science of chemistry and his introducing clinical teaching in the curriculum of the University of Leyden, the first curriculum of its kind, distinguished him for honours in Europe. He drew followers from Europe and Asia and was elected an associate member of the Parisian Academy of Science as well as the Royal Society in England.

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20 Hesketh Pearson, "About Biography," Essays by Divers Hands, ed. E. Rieu (Oxford, 1958), New Series, Vol. 29, 57.

Shortly before his death on 23 September, 1738, he had written a short account of his life. This was used by his student, Professor Albert Shultens, as the basis of the funeral oration, which he delivered in commemoration of his master. This oration, delivered in Latin, was published in many periodicals in Europe in 1739, particularly in the Journal des Scavans, June, and in the Nouvelle Bibliothèque,[21] for January, February and March.

Samuel Johnson had been in London for only two years by this time. Earning his living as a free-lance journalist or a hack-writer, he fed various periodicals, the most outstanding of which was the Gentleman's Magazine published by Edward Cave. Literary history has no record of the origin of the idea of publishing the life of Boerhaave. But whoever suggested it, the writer or the publisher, it is quite certain that the author found the subject interesting for different reasons. If Cave made the suggestion, Johnson was bound to find in the life of Boerhaave many similarities to his own. There was the same element of inglorious youth. Hardship and physical torture by a malignant disease was a condition shared by both in their early lives. Both were distinguished for precocity. It was from Boerhaave's example

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[21] William Burton, An Account of the Life and Writings of Herman Boerhaave, 2nd. ed. (London, 1746), intro., p. i.

that Johnson developed a tolerable interest in chemistry "which never forsook him."[22] If on the other hand the suggestion was made by Johnson, Cave would not have hesitated for the simple reason that the publication of the life of such a famous man would doubtless enhance the sale of his paper.

Who made the suggestion may not be known, but it was adopted, and the life was published in the Gentleman's Magazine, in 1739, running through January to April issues.[23] As one commentator puts it, "His technique was that of direct translation of Shultens' eulogy, interspersed with Johnsonian reflections."[24]

Before the Life of Boerhaave was included in the 1840 edition of the Lives of the English Poets ... and Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons,[25] two enlarged versions of the translation had appeared in Dr. James' Medical Dictionary and in Davies' Johnson's Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces. The enlarged version in the Medical Dictionary contains short

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[22] Boswell, Johnson, p. 102.

[23] Gentleman's Magazine (Jan. - April, 1739), IX, 37-38; 72-73;114-116;172-176.

[24] Edward R. Atkinson, "Samuel Johnson's Life of Boerhaave," Journal of Chemical Education (March, 1942), XIX, 103.

[25] W.R. Courtney, "A Bibliography of Johnson," Oxford Historical and Literary Studies (Oxford,1915), V,144.

criticisms of Boerhaave's Institute, Aphorisms and Chemistry. The Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces contains the enlargements in the same order as in the Medical Dictionary.[26] A third enlarged version appeared in the Universal Magazine for 1752 and had an additional expansion. Besides the criticisms contained in the other two enlarged versions, this version contains six paragraphs of Boerhaave's Indexes. The problem of deciding the authenticity of these enlarged versions as Johnson's remains unsolved, unless the authority of Dr. Allen T. Hazen of the Department of English in Yale University is accepted.

Dr. R.W. Chapman in a correspondence to the Literary Supplement of the London Times refers to the version in the Medical Dictionary and says that "the style does not strike ... as Johnsonian."[27] We know, by the authority of Boswell,[28] that Johnson wrote the dedication and that he contributed some materials other than the dedication to the dictionary itself, even though the importunate researcher was unable to discover what these other materials were. After what appears to have been an exhaustive search Boswell says: "I have in vain endeavoured to find out what parts Johnson

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[26] Allen T. Hazen, "Samuel Johnson and Dr. Robert James," Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine (1936), IV, 456.

[27] R.W. Chapman, "Dr. Johnson and Dr. James," TLS (Dec. 13, 1928), p. 991.

[28] Boswell, Johnson, pp. 103, 115-16.

wrote for Dr. James. Perhaps medical men may."[29] Hazen, knowing that though Boswell gave up the search he did not give up the conviction that Johnson had really contributed articles to the dictionary, followed up the search in 1936 and submitted that the article "Botany" in the dictionary was written by Johnson. Since the six paragraphs about the Indexes appear both in the article "Botany" and in the account of Boerhaave's life, Hazen argued that they must have been written by one person. However, he advanced no reason for assigning the article to Johnson, and this has greatly weakened his conclusion that "the enlarged biography is the authentic text."[30] It could be possible that Dr. James himself adopted his friend's translation of the Life of Boerhaave into his dictionary and added his own criticisms on the subjects about which he certainly knew more than Johnson.

Johnson begins the Life of Boerhaave with an apology for its shortness and says: "We would have made it much longer, by adopting flying reports, and inserting unaltered facts: a close adherence to certainty has contracted our narrative, and hindered it from swelling to the bulk at

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[29] Boswell, Johnson, p. 733, n. 2.

[30] Johnson, "Boerhaave," Works, ed. Arthur Murphey (London, 1816), XII, 11.

which modern histories generally arrive."[31] Even at this early stage of his biographical writing he was conscious of truth as an important factor in the effectiveness of a biography. In the pursuit of this principle he discarded the extraneous information and rumours to which the death of a man so universally acknowledged to be good must have given rise. He has succeeded in representing Boerhaave to his readers in the light of the truth known to him. But the absence of minute details and of mental conflicts which should necessarily create dramatic circumstances and enliven the narrative takes much out of its total effect. If there is a conflict, it is one between the virtues of a uniformly good man and the jealousy of the malcontents, the solution of which comes as if from heaven itself and not through the struggles of a fallible human being. The total impression given by the portrait of Boerhaave is an enlarged silhouette or a distant view of a huge and magnificent mountain obtained with the help of binoculars with cracks and crevices conspicuous only for their absence.

III. SAVAGE

They only who live with a man can write his

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[31] Boswell, Johnson, p. 694.

> life with any genuine exactness and discrimination; and few people who have lived with a man know what to remark about him. 32

Unlike Boerhaave, Savage was intimately known to Johnson. They had lived in social intercourse, eaten and drunk to-gether. They had walked and talked to-gether, sharing the same sentiments and the same condition of extreme poverty. On one occasion, Arthur Murphey reports that they walked around Grosvenor Square in London until four in the morning discussing social and political problems of the day affecting England and the whole continent. When fatigue and hunger came the two of them to-gether could not produce fivepence for refreshment. During this time Savage must have told Johnson of his mother's "barbarity" which gives a mournful tone to Johnson's narrative in his Life of Savage.

The details relating to the date and place of the first meeting of Johnson and Savage are not exactly known. Boswell tells us that by the authority of Johnson they were not "so much as acquainted" when Johnson wrote his London[33] which was published in May, 1738. Sir John Hawkins is of the opinion that they met in 1737[34] during Johnson's first visit

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32 Boswell, Johnson, p. 694.

33 Boswell, Johnson, p. 91, n. 1.

34 Sir John Hawkins, Life of Samuel Johnson, 2nd. ed. (London, 1787), pp. 51-52.

to London; and Cave, though not committing himself to an exact date, states that they had been acquainted before they met at St. John's Gate, the headquarters of the Gentleman's Magazine to which both were contributors. Whatever the time was, it is not likely that they moved about together for longer than two years. Savage left London for Swansea on the first of June, 1739, and did not return until his death in 1743. Though the duration of their acquaintance was so short, Johnson the keen student of human nature and behaviour has impressed upon his readers that time is not an impediment to a talented observer.

It is to be remembered, of course, that in addition to personal knowledge, there were confidental oral accounts of transactions and a fund of anecdotes which Johnson must have collected from those who knew Savage longer than he. There were also three biographical write-ups about Savage. Additional information came from letters which Savage wrote while he was in prison at Bristol. Armed with genuine materials, Johnson was anxious to give an accurate and authentic account of his extraordinary friend. His proposal appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine for August, 1743. In February, 1744, the Life of Savage was published and was uniformly acclaimed as a just representation of the character of Richard Savage.

Of the controversial question, whether Richard Savage was an imposter or not, for which Johnson has often been accused of credulity, it would be pretentious to promise an answer. Perhaps no investigation will be able to furnish a completely satisfactory conclusion until a document containing Anne Brett's denial has been unearthed. Even then, the weight of argument from the existing records is such that she would be required to submit to a lie detector in addition. However, the controversy is one of the most interesting in literary history and it is impossible to stay out of it when discussing the life of the so-called artificial bastard. My intention is to submit my argument and declare my stand in the issue in the chapter on Johnson's limitations as a biographer in practice. For the moment only the relation between Johnson's theory and practice of biography will be discussed.

In the Life of Savage we see one of the most objective analyses of human character which a friend can make of a friend. Objectivity amounts to impartiality and truth. It does not mean absence of the warmth of feeling and sympathy even though it may reveal rather than conceal truth. It is this principle that Johnson adopts in this masterpiece of a biographical narrative. As he reconstructs his life he looks objectively at Savage the man he knew and apportions to him his share of the blame in the whole drama in which he remains a peculiar actor both in kind and in circumstance.

The Life of Savage is neither the portrait of a saint nor that of a devil, but a representation of good and evil, the main stuff of life, with reference to the particular part which Richard Savage the man played in his mingling of elements. The first time that Johnson brings Savage to view as a maturing man is in connection with the Bangorian controversy. Though he had previously mentioned as a general summary that Savage's ability in literature was equal to his opportunities, which we know to have been very negligible, he did not forbear in this particular instance to point out that this gifted and self-made genius was, like the rest of mankind, sometimes rash and indiscreet. The Bangorian controversy was a popular topic of conversation in coffee-houses where literary men gathered together to talk about current issues and discuss literature. Savage chose this subject for his debut in literature, "and without any other knowledge of the question than he had casually collected from conversation, published a poem against the Bishop."[35] Here Johnson frankly discloses indiscretion which, had he belonged to the school of biographers that make their subjects better in memory than in life, he could have concealed under the excuse that Savage had no opportunity to know better than he did.

In his report of the friendship between Sir Richard

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[35] Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IV, 143-4.

Steele and Savage and the disagreement which came as a result of the flippancy of the younger man, Johnson reveals his deep knowledge of human nature and rubs in his theory that a biographer can tell the whole truth about his hero without injuring his reputation. He looks at the two men and their conduct objectively, blames both in part and justifies both in part, before delivering a judgment so palliating that it is safe to say that both would have accepted it had it been delivered in their time. In morals, Sir Richard Steele was not an exemplary knight. Some of the anecdotes relating to him, "the liveried bailiffs" for instance, were sufficient to dissolve the austerity of a stoic into the giggles of a school girl. It was too much temptation for young Savage to resist sharing these jokes with his friends, perhaps with due injunction not to let them spread. Unfortunately the injunction could not be kept and Sir Richard heard that his young friend was ridiculing him behind his back and decided that he no more wanted such a human tape recorder around him. This is how Johnson decides the case for them:

> A little knowledge of the world is sufficient to discover that such weakness is very common, and that there are few who do not sometimes, in the wantonness of thoughtless mirth, or the heat of transient resentment, speak of their friends and benefactors with levity and contempt, though in their cooler moments they want neither sense of their kindness, nor reverence for their virtue. The fault therefore of Mr. Savage was rather negligence than ingratitude; but Sir Richard must likewise be acquitted of severity, for who is there that can patiently bear contempt from one whom he has relieved

> and supported, whose establishment he has laboured, and whose interest he has promoted. 36

In a life in which faults are more numerous than virtues, Johnson does not at all sit on judgment or condemn any of the weaknesses of his friend. He understands him as a lover of goodness but not a good man, and so he tries to reason with him as if they were talking face to face while he records his explanations for those actions he censures. There are several instances of this impartial, sincere and understanding psychological penetration strewn throughout the Life. I will mention only a few of the most striking.

Johnson reports that Savage's esteem of individuals was not permanent, that he frequently lampooned those whom he had previously praised. An unsympathetic biographer could have left his character as it is, but Johnson tried to discover some mitigating circumstances to soften the total effect of the fault upon his friend's memory. He shows that though Savage appeared inconsistent with his friends he was consistent with truth. A man devoted to truth automatically responds to situations in accordance with their real nature. If Savage was beguiled by a show of goodness to praise an individual when he observed him from a distance, it was only just that he change his tune when upon close acquaintance he

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36 Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IV, 148-9.

discovered that beneath the smooth surface of the sepulchre there was decay. Justly he observes that:

> As a false satire ought to be recanted, for the sake of him whose reputation may be injured, false praise ought likewise to be obviated, lest the distinction between vice and virtue should be lost, lest a bad man should be trusted upon the credit of his encomiast, or lest others should endeavour to obtain the like praises by the same means. 37

The ruining fault in the character of Richard Savage was his dependence upon circumstantial provisions for the satisfaction of his wants. Imagining himself nobly born and disregarding the peculiar circumstances of his birth, and trusting in the charm of his conversation and his ability to make friends with anybody he happened to talk to, he did not at all make provisions for the future. Thus "he spent his life between beggary and extravagance."[38] Johnson was naturally sympathetic towards the poor, and so we are not surprised that he does not cast a stone at Savage. His analysis is not less sympathetic than it is penetrating:

> The cause of his profusion was the absurd kindness of his friends, who at once rewarded and enjoyed his abilities, by treating him at taverns, and habituating him to pleasures which he could not afford to enjoy, and which he was not able to deny himself, though he purchased the luxury of a single night by the anguish of cold and hunger for a week. 39

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37 Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IV, 175.

38 Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IV, 172.

39 Ibid.

Savage's friends complained that he was a difficult visitor. Wherever he was invited it was his desire that all other business should be suspended and all attention be devoted to merriment and joy. It was his habit to overstay his welcome, forgetting that his host must attend to his regular business in spite of his delightful conversation. Savage would have appeared extremely selfish had not Johnson palliated this weakness by explaining that the behaviour was forced on him since he had no home of his own to which he could return.

In his theory Johnson advocated that minute details and anecdotes relating to a person's life should be narrated in order that his character may be represented as it really was. In his Life of Savage he has adhered to this principle by giving several anecdotes and minute details with the help of which the curious character of Richard Savage has been clearly revealed.

The story of Savage's vanishing from his friends whenever he received his pension and emerging again after it had been spent is both entertaining and revealing. When Johnson withholds any information he wittily makes a hint and gives reasons for withholding it, so that the reader, though he regrets being deprived of delight, sympathizes with the delicate position of the narrator. An example of this device occurs when he reports Savage's inquisitiveness and keenness in

observation. He remarks that his discoveries of the foibles of human nature were remarkable but "it may not be entirely safe to relate, because the persons whose characters he criticized are powerful; and power and resentment are seldom strangers."[40]

Though the physical description of Richard Savage is delayed to the very end of the narrative, I would venture to say that none who reads the Life fails to see him vividly as if he had known him in life. The course of his life is told as a fatalistic tragedy. He never saw the sun without a cloud. There was always something to derail the train of his fortunes, and mercurial and impecunious as Dickens' Micawber, he was always waiting for something to turn up. The story of his distress is so movingly told that none that reads the following paragraph can easily refrain from shedding dry tears at least.

> In this manner were passed those days and those nights which nature had enabled him to have employed in elevated speculations, useful studies, or pleasing conversation. On a bulk, in a cellar, or in a glass-house among thieves and beggars, was to be found the Author of The Wanderer, the man of exalted sentiments, extensive views, and curious observations; the man whose remarks on life might have assisted the statesman, whose ideas of virtue might have enlightened the moralist, whose eloquence might have influenced senates, and whose delicacy might have polished counts.[41]

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[40] Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IX, 189.

[41] Johnson, "Savage," Lives, IV, 222.

Johnson once said to Boswell that Ruffhead did not know Pope and did not know anything about poetry and therefore could not be expected to write a good life of Pope, meaning in this that a biographer of a man ought to know the man and also share his sentiments. It is doubtful that Johnson could have been able to depict Savage so vividly if they did not have many things in common. Both were poor and proud. As Savage rejected a suit of clothes that was left in the coffee-house for him by an unidentified donor, Johnson is said to have flung away a pair of shoes that was secretly left for him at the door of his room at Oxford. Both were resentful of superiority not based upon merit. They were lovers of conversation and eloquent talkers. Most of all, they felt injured by society that based the importance of the individual upon rank instead of merit. It can be imagined that while Johnson was painting the distress of his friend he was musing on his own.

Perhaps it may not be altogether a wild and romantic speculation to suggest that Johnson always remembered his success in the Life of Savage and held it up in his mind as the model from which he drew up his theory of biography, for in it all aspects of his theory are manifest.

IV. CAVE

The long connection which Dr. Johnson maintained with Edward Cave and the Gentleman's Magazine started from November, 1734, when he wrote to Cave from Birmingham suggesting that the literary section of his journal might be conveniently extended with some original materials and offering to provide the materials if the suggestion were accepted.[42] Cave replied to the letter on 2 December, but nothing was done presently with the suggestion. No other correspondence between them is known from now until 1737. Johnson had arrived in London in March and on 12 July, he wrote to Cave offering to translate Father Paul Sarpi's History of the Council of Trent.

This offer was accepted but, owing to a quarrel with a rival translator, also named Samuel Johnson, the project did not succeed. The rivals ruined each other's effort. But Cave had paid Johnson the sum of forty-nine pounds and seven shillings,[43] from August, 1738, to July, 1739, in small sums. There is no record that he demanded refund of this amount.

Before this suggestion was given a trial, Johnson, of course, had won Cave's confidence as a powerful writer, by

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[42] Boswell, Johnson, p. 65.

[43] C. Lennart Carlson, The First Magazine (Providence, R.I., 1938), p. 20.

the ode "Ad Urbanum" in defence of Sylvanus Urban which was Cave's "nom de plume" in the Gentleman's Magazine; this was Johnson's first publication in this journal. His sturdy wit and "nervous" style highly impressed and gratified Cave. From this time on Johnson was closely connected with the Gentleman's Magazine "and contributed to it poems, biographies, essays, and most important of all, the Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia."[44] From 1738 to 1745 he seems to have been in charge of the editorial supervision of the magazine and continued still to contribute articles to it.[45]

Though they had not many things in common, there was a substantial understanding between them. Johnson tolerated Cave's slowness of wit, and Cave tolerated Johnson's sloth. Besides giving Johnson employment, Cave, the patron of poetry, did a great deal to publicize Johnson's literary genius. When Johnson's London, written for Mr. Dodsley, came out in 1738, Cave published extracts of it in the Gentleman's Magazine in order that it might have a wider notice from the public. Johnson, no doubt, showed his gratitude to Cave in many ways and "of all people...whom Cave's publishing activities attracted to St. John's Gate, none was so useful to him as Samuel Johnson, nor did any one do more to make the

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[44] Carlson, p. 13.

[45] Johnson, Works, ed. Arthur Murphy (London, 1816), XII, 210, n.

magazine successful."[46] The writing of Cave's biography was undertaken as a tribute to the memory of a lasting friendship and understanding which ended in a kind farewell. Shortly before Cave died he had become incontinent and lethargic and only regained consciousness for a short while during which he performed his last act with reason; and this was to press the hand of his faithful friend and trusted editorial assistant, Samuel Johnson.

Edward Cave died on January 10, 1754, and in the following month Johnson published "An Account of the Life of the Late Mr. Edward Cave" in the Gentleman's Magazine, a periodical which Cave started almost out of nothing and built up to "become the most important periodical publication of the eighteenth century."[47] In 1781 Johnson revised the account at the request of Arthur Murphy who included it later in his 1816 edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson.[48]

Johnson once said that only a fool would write for anything except money. But money was not the only motive for writing An Account of the Life of Edward Cave. As in the Life of Savage, the main motive was to perpetuate the memory of a friend. Throughout the account Johnson has shown that a friend

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[46] Carlson, p. 13.

[47] Carlson, p. 13.

[48] Johnson, Works, ed. Arthur Murphy (London, 1816), XII, 210, n.

can write the biography of a friend without sacrificing truth to friendship, and that a biographer can be objective without being malicious. In the anecdote of the favourite cock of Mrs. Holyoake, Johnson displays his great ability to balance objectivity with sympathy. Mrs. Holyoake was the wife of the master of Rugby School which Cave attended. She is said to have lost her favourite cock, and Cave was suspected of stealing it. Johnson seems to credit this story, but he does not coldly condemn Cave for the alleged crime. Sympathetically he wishes that a more thorough examination had been made before subjecting the poor boy to humiliations.

Perhaps it was necessary in the interest of his business that Cave should be "a penurious paymaster."[49] If he was kind and indulgent to Johnson sometimes, he was not so to all of his employees or contributors. Among his hacks was Samuel Boyle who wrote verses for him with a pen stuck through a hole in the blanket while he was lying naked in bed, his clothes having been pawned for the barest needs of life. Cave "could contract for verses by the hundred and expect the long hundred."[50] Johnson observes this weakness but palliates its effect with a sympathetic examination of its cause.

In order to produce a character as near as possible

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[49] Boswell, Johnson, p. 1386.

[50] Ibid.

to what was known of Cave while he was alive, Johnson endeavours to reconcile the generous side of Cave's nature with the meanness of his financial dealings, and the qualifying statement which he makes of his character does not unduly flatter nor coldly debunk the memory of the bookseller. If Cave was mean it was because he could not entirely wrest himself from some hereditary influence to which rich children of poor parents are common victims. "Nor have many men been raised by accident or industry to sudden riches," says Johnson, "that retained less of the meanness of their former state."[51] Cave could no longer be hurt by the truth which must be told if his biography must provide instruction to the reader. In this strain Johnson objectively examined Cave and found out that he was rather an easy and constant friend than a zealous and active one; though he was slow he always moved forward; his mental faculty was such that he could absorb but little at a time, but that little was thoroughly digested; though tenacious he was never adamant in his claims. In a series of contrasting qualities such as this he brings out the conflict of character which makes biography both interesting and valuable. He does not approach his subject with awe which often compels students of the school of decent biography to paint a picture larger than life. With a thin film of

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[51] Johnson, Works, XII, 216.

ridicule on Cave's dieting he says:

> He was generally healthful, and capable of much labour and long application; but in the later years of his life was afflicted with gout, which he endeavoured to cure or alleviate by a total abstinence both from strong liquors and animal food. From animal food he abstained about four years, and from strong liquors much longer; but the gout continued unconquered, perhaps unabated. 52

Johnson is considered "the greatest British biographer,"[53] regardless of Boswell. Perhaps this conclusion has been reached not so much because of his theory as it is because of his practice. The Life of Savage is the quintessence of pure biography in which there is a truthful transmission of the personality of the subject of biography from the scattered fragments of the life he once lived into the pages of a recreated life. The sharpness of characterization for which the Life of Savage is remarkable could not have been possible if Johnson did not know Savage in person. It would have been still less possible if he did not have certain sentiments in common with him as a result of which the biographer could fully comprehend the internal working of his subject's mind. The vividness of the sordidly vicious but sympathetic character of Savage which Johnson has depicted, owes much to certainty of knowledge, and this certainty together with

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52 Johnson, Works, XII, 218.

53 Hesketh Pearson, "About Biography," Essays by Divers Hands, XXIX, 57.

instant recording produces one of the most fascinating narratives in biography.

Milton was a subject drawn from history and Boerhaave, though a contemporary, was more or less a legendary personification of virtues. Though the Life of Cave is not as impressive as the Life of Savage owing, for the most part, to the narrow orbit of experience of a mind that went only upon the oiled groove of the Gentleman's Magazine, and "who never looked out of his window, but with a view to the Gentleman's Magazine,"[54] the characterization nevertheless reveals a great intimacy between the subject and the biographer. Nothing but close and constant association could make possible the observation that though Cave appeared indifferent and completely inattentive to projects that did not appeal to him, he could surprisingly give details relating to such projects if they were brought up again for discussion.

With the Life of Savage in particular, and to a certain extent with the Life of Cave, the Doctor has convinced us that intimate knowledge and close association with the subject of a biography coupled with immediate recording are indispensible in the graphic and convincing recreation of life.

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[54] Boswell, Johnson, p. 1386.

CHAPTER IV

JOHNSON'S LIMITATIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF BIOGRAPHY

Johnson's shortcomings in the practice of biography are of three different kinds. There are those that arise from his use of the imperfect records existing in his own period, those that arise from his own negligence, and those that are attributable to a weakness very common to all mankind. The discussion of these shortcomings will be confined principally to their occurrence in the four lives discussed in the preceding chapter.

The outstanding biographical source materials in the eighteenth century were Bayle's Dictionaire historique et critique (1695-97), translated into English as early as 1710, (which inspired similar dictionaries, such as the General Dictionary, Historical and Critical (1734-41), prepared by Thomas Birch); The Biographia Britannica, or The Lives of the Most Eminent Persons Who Have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, From Earliest Ages, Down to the Present Times (1740-60); Giles Jacob's Poetical Register (1719-20); The Lives of the Poets (1735) by Robert Shiels, published under the name

of Theophilus Cibber; and Horace Walpole's Catalogue of Notable Authors (1758). These materials cannot be said to have provided adequate aids to subsequent biographers because they "were...carelessly and incorrectly written."[1]

That Johnson consulted some of these materials while writing the Lives of the Poets is more than a conjecture. Several years before he took up the contract with "about 40 of the most respectable booksellers of London"[2] for an elegant and uniform edition of The English Poets to be printed, with preface and concise account of each poet's life, Johnson had very highly recommended Bayle's dictionary to biographers and lovers of biography. "Bayle's Dictionary," he said, "is a very useful work for those to consult who love the biographical part of literature, which is what I love most."[3]

In addition to consulting these collected biographies which were generally short, Johnson consulted individual lives which were known to him. Evans, who in 1932 made a careful study of the sources of information for Johnson's Lives of the Poets, reported that he was convinced that Johnson consulted all accounts of Milton's life known to him.[4] His reliance

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[1] Stauffer, p. 251.

[2] Boswell, Johnson, p. 802.

[3] Boswell, Johnson, p. 301.

[4] Bergen Baldwin Evans, Johnson as a Biographer (Harvard Univ. Thesis, 1932), I, 17.

upon these imperfect records led him to many inaccuracies for which cavilling critics have made him responsible. But errors in dates and place names or even the precise nature of relationships between people were not considered very important by Johnson. Some of these errors were pointed out to him and though he admitted them he did nothing about correction because in the Lives of the Poets he regarded the critical as the most important of his functions.

In the Life of Milton Johnson was misled by the Biographia Britannica to state that Milton entered the Christ's College a sizar instead of a pensioner as the register of the college testifies. This event is thus reported in the Biographia Britannica: "At the age of seventeen he was admitted sizar of Christ's College in Cambridge."[5]

He brought the hornet's nest of Milton's admirers about his ears when he echoed Aubery's statement that Milton was subjected to corporal punishment at the university. When discussing Milton's activities at college Aubery had said "His first tutor there was Mr. Chapell, from whom receiving some unkindness (whip't him), he was afterwards...transferred to the Tuition of one Mr. Torell, who dyed Parson of Lutterworth."[6] Aubery's motive in making this report does

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[5] "Milton," Biographia Britannica. (London, 1760).

[6] John Aubery, "Mr. John Milton: Minutes," Early Lives of Milton, p. 10.

not appear to have been to disparage Milton, though he is well known for his interest in punching little holes in the inflated reputations of public men. In this connection it appears that his purpose was to disclose the austerity of the tutor rather than to ridicule the student.

Why Johnson coloured this incident with so much shame cannot be dissociated from his prejudice against Milton the politician and the reviler of his king. Corporal punishment, by the authority of Mark Pattison,[7] is known to have continued in the universities up to 1667, and Milton was not therefore "one of the last students in either university that suffered the public indignity of corporal correction."[8] But to consider the story of the infliction of corporal punishment as reported by Aubery as untrue and therefore to accuse Johnson of credulity is rash criticism, and perhaps those who so criticize are guilty of the very fault they are trying to find in Johnson. John Aubery is known in literary history as a gossip but not as a liar. Because of the explosive nature of the materials he handled,he usually made sure they were correct before he dealt them out. This anecdote of Milton's whipping at college, Aubery claimed to have got from Christopher Milton, the poet's brother, and it has been

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[7] Johnson, Lives, I, 103.

[8] Ibid.

"confirmed by the industry and knowledge of T. Warton.... Aubery was a curious enquirer, with ample means of information, and no motive whatever for telling a lie."[9]

Arthur Waugh, an editor of the Lives of the Poets, has accused Johnson of inaccuracy in reporting that both Milton and Salmasius were paid for the services they did for the people and crown of England respectively. If this report is inaccurate the blame belongs more to the source from which Johnson obtained the information than to Johnson himself. Salmasius in his Defence of the King stated that Milton was paid four thousand pounds for writing for the Parliament, and Milton in his Defence of the People returned the charge that Salmasius undertook the defence for a hundred Jacobusses. However, each denied having received any reward. But Toland, who did original research on Milton, stated that Milton was rewarded with a thousand pounds for his Defence.[10] The editors of the Biographia Britannica, perhaps induced by Toland's diligence in making the important discovery of the real author of Eikon Basilike which was supposed to have been written by King Charles I,[11] adopted this statement. Waugh in his research went to the council records of Cromwell's government

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[9] Johnson, Lives, ed. Peter Cunningham (London, 1854), I, 85, n. 12.

[10] John Toland, "The Life of John Milton," Early Lives, p. 158.

[11] Toland, pp. 145-51.

for evidence of this payment to Milton, and failing to find it concluded that Milton received nothing extra on his stipulated salary of £288, 13s, 6d,[12] for writing the Defence. Whether Milton received a bonus or not is not really important, though it is likely, from his boast in the Second Defence of having satisfied both his countrymen and the whole of Europe with his Defence of the People, that he could have had his palms greased for work so well done. But since the information was taken from existing accounts of Milton's life, Johnson cannot be blamed for originating the error.

The same editor brings up another charge of inaccuracy against Johnson in his report that Milton "is said to have read all the Greek and Latin writers"[13] during the five years that he lived with his father at Horton in Buckinghamshire when he left the university. "Dr. Johnson is here guilty of a loose enlargement of Milton's own phrase. What the poet said was that he 'enjoyed a complete holiday in turning over Latin and Greek authors.'"[14] So says editor Waugh. As he does not leave a clue to where Milton made the

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[12] Johnson, Lives, ed. Waugh, I, 125.

[13] Johnson, Lives, I, 106.

[14] Johnson, Lives, I, 106, n. 13.

statement he cannot be charged with misquotation. Milton had an occasion in his Second Defence to write his own biography. After his Defence of the People which followed Salmasius' Defence of the King there appeared an anonymous publication entitled The Cry of the King's Blood for Vengeance against the English Parricides. In this book Milton was particularly attacked and accused of misdemeanour at the university, for which he was said to have been expelled before seeking refuge in Italy. The attack on Milton started off with "One John Milton, a great hero doubtless,"[15] which shows that the attacker was begging Milton for information on himself, and he generously obliged.

In order to clear himself of the shame of the alleged expulsion and hibernation Milton narrated the whole history of his life, and reaching the period in which he was suspected of abscondence to Italy he said:

> I fled not into Italy, as this foul miscreant falsely asserts, but, of my own free will, returned home, leaving behind me among most of the fellows of the college, who had shown me no ordinary attention, even an affectionate regret. At my father's country house, to which he had retired to pass the remainder of his days, being perfectly at my ease, I gave myself up entirely to reading the Greek and Latin writers. 16

Johnson is believed to have followed Milton's own

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15 John Milton, "Second Defence of the People of England," Works, ed. Frank A. Patterson, et. al. (New York, 1933), VIII, 111.

16 Milton, Works, VIII, 121.

account of his Italian tour[17] which is in this Second Defence. It is doubtless that his report is based upon Milton's boast. Examining the two statements "I gave myself up entirely to reading the Greek and Latin writers" and, "is said to have read all the Greek and Latin writers," there appears to be no grounds for the pedantic censorship of the editor. There is no sense of enlargement in Johnson's upon Milton's idea. The article "the," is restrictive only in the sense that it distinguishes the Latin and the Greek writers from either the Hebrew, Italian or French writers which Milton does not pretend to have read at this particular time.

The date of Milton's death was variously given by his biographers before Johnson. Edward Phillips, his nephew, stated that "he died in the year 1673, towards the latter end of the summer,"[18] and his brother John stated that "hee... expired no less calmly in the yeare 1674."[19] Elizabeth Fisher, Milton's maid servant, when giving evidence on Milton's nuncupative will, stated in court that he "died upon a Sunday the fifteenth of November last,"[20] the contest of will being then examined in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury

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17 Johnson, Works, ed. Cunningham, I, 88, n. 20.

18 Edward Phillips, Early Lives, p. 76.

19 John Phillips, Early Lives, p. 29.

20 Johnson, Lives, ed. Cunningham, I, 167.

in February, 1675.[21] Wood stated that he died "on the ninth or tenth day of November 1674."[22] Richardson reported that "he dy'd Nov. 10, 1674."[23] "The correct date is Sunday, November 8;"[24] so says Arthur Waugh. Obviously Johnson must have followed Richardson into this error.

With respect to the dates of publication of Milton's works Johnson seems to have trusted to the authority of Wood, so that while he was apologizing in the Advertisement for possible errors in the dates of Dryden's works he said nothing of Milton's. Not only Dryden's, however, but also some of Milton's works have been discovered by critics to have been placed "in wrong years." In the publication of Accidence Commenced Grammar, Johnson followed Wood[25] to place it in 1661. Mrs. Napier claims that "no copies of this have been found with an earlier date than 1669."[26]

In the Life of Savage, Johnson's declared opinion on certain issues raises a controversy which is as indissoluble as religious or philosophical problems, and perhaps the world

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21 Johnson, Lives, ed. Cunningham, I, 167.

22 Wood, Early Lives, p. 47.

23 Richardson, Early Lives, p. 227.

24 Johnson, Lives, ed. Waugh, I, 162, n. 84.

25 Wood, p. 46.

26 Johnson, Lives, ed. Mrs. Napier (London, 1890), I,141.

will ever continue to "vibrate in a state of uncertainty"[27] about them, as Boswell suggested. But some of his facts are not as invulnerable as his opinions. Ever since Boswell and Cust started to question the authenticity of Savage's claim that he was the bastard son of Earl Rivers born by the Countess Macclesfield, a claim which Johnson conceded to him, a great deal of investigation has been made in connection with this question. Yet none, but prepossessed critics, have been able to dismiss the claim, though most critics agree on the authority of existing records that Johnson's submission of the date of Savage's birth, and the statement that the Countess Macclesfield voluntarily confessed her misdemeanour of adultery are wrong. These facts are wrong, because the sources immediately available to Johnson carried wrong information.

As early as 1724 Aaron Hill had published a life of Savage in the Plain Dealer[28] in which he gave the date of Savage's birth as January 10, 1697-8. In 1727 when Savage was convicted of the murder of Mr. Sinclair, an anonymous Life of Richard Savage was published, and his date of birth was given as January 10, 1697-8.[29] The writer of this life,

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[27] Boswell, Johnson, p. 127.

[28] Aaron Hill, "Richard Savage," Plain Dealer, No. 73 (London, 1724).

[29] Anonymous, Life of Savage (London, 1727), p. 5.

who probably chose to remain anonymous because Savage is reported to have objected to it when a bookseller approached him in prison with the suggestion,[30] must have got this date from Savage himself, for Savage knew everybody and talked with everybody in the literary circle in London. When in 1739 Savage wrote to Mrs. Elizabeth Carter[31] disclaiming some of the statements made in the anonymous life, he did not refute the date of his birth.

On an unspecified date he wrote a letter to an unspecified friend while he was in jail at Bristol. In the letter, among other things, he gave thanks to the Almighty for the kindness of the jail keeper, though he had found it fit to visit him on his birth-night.[32] We are told by Johnson that he was arrested on January 10, 1742-3. It is certain that in their close, though short, intimacy he had acquainted Johnson with this date. Even if the letter was not dated, it was entirely within the bounds of reason that Johnson should infer from previous and intimate knowledge of Savage's birthday that the arrest was made on January 10.

There is yet another accusation of inaccuracy made

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[30] Clarence Tracy, The Artificial Bastard (Toronto, 1953), p. 17.

[31] Tracy, p. 17.

[32] Johnson, "Savage," Lives, I, 250.

against Johnson which, of course, is refutable. This concerns the identity of the nurse who took care of Savage from 1697 when he disappeared as an infant in the care of Mrs. Portlock under the name of Richard Smith to the time he emerged in 1715, a grown lad, known as Richard Savage. The anonymous Life of 1727 declared that Lady Mason, Savage's grandmother, committed the boy to the care of a poor nurse and instructed her to rear him as the nurse's own child according to her position and never to let slip out of her mouth the child's true parents. Johnson incorporated this version of the story in his narrative, and now Dr Tracy doubts its accuracy on the conjecture that Johnson did not discuss this aspect of the story with Savage, since in a letter to Mrs. Carter referred to above Savage had refuted the statement as fictitious.[33] Here Johnson triumphs over his critic as a better student and judge of human behaviour. Savage knew himself to have been born great and determined to remain great, or failing in this to attribute the cause of his failure to the malice and inhumanity of his mother. He could not bear to be associated with meanness during the period that his grandmother, whom he admitted to have taken kindly interest in him, was alive. Mrs. Carter was a young bluestocking upon whom both Johnson and Savage

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[33] Tracy, p. 20.

desired to create a favourable impression. Johnson himself "composed a Greek epigram to Eliza."[34] This decision of Mr. Tracy's to rely upon private correspondence for evidence of refutation of statements which were in public circulation is rather unsound. The great scientist of human nature informed us on this subject that:

> There is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse. In the eagerness of conversation the first emotions of the mind often burst out before they are considered; in the tumult of business, interest and passion have their genuine effect; but a friendly letter is a calm and deliberate performance, in the cool of leisure, in the stillness of solitude, and surely no man sits to depreciate by design his own character.[35]

Nobody, who in a private correspondence not directed to the accuser disclaims a charge publicly made against him, can be taken seriously. Johnson tells us that Savage was not a person who could accept injury without retaliation. When he was accused by The Daily Courant "of influencing elements against the court,"[36] he published a refutation against the charge and would have prosecuted the editor had he not found afterwards that no ill effect could come out of the accusation. Though the writer of the 1727 Life was anonymous he could likewise

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[34] Boswell, Johnson, p. 90.

[35] Johnson, "The Life of Pope," Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York, 1952), p. 224.

[36] Johnson, Lives, I, 207.

have published a vindication if he felt that some of the statements therein were false and fictitious.

With respect to the statement that the Countess of Macclesfield voluntarily confessed adultery, there is no evidence that Savage himself gave this information to Johnson; and there is none to prove that he did not, for he who could lightly jest on the weakness of a benefactor would have had no scruples in exposing the faults of an adversary. Before Savage met Johnson he had already made several abortive efforts to gain recognition from his putative mother and had resolved to refrain from the use of supplicating measures and adopted lampooning as the only means of achieving his end. He had published the Bastard in which he exposed the malicious heartlessness and cruelty of the mother and recounted "the real calamities which he suffered by the crime of his parents."[37] To conceal any defect which he knew about others, even his friends, was not one of the few virtues which Richard Savage possessed. He might have given the information to Johnson, or to the author of the anonymous Life of 1727. And doubtless, from this source Johnson got the information that the Countess made a voluntary confession of adultery in order to dissolve an uncomfortable marriage. This statement has been found to be wrong because records of the proceedings of the case show that the Countess rigorously contested the divorce and

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37 Johnson, Lives, I, 196.

adopted all sorts of ingenious designs to conceal her crime. Our satisfaction rests in that Johnson's inaccuracy arose from a record which was in existence without refutation for at least seventeen years (1727-1744). Critics who suggest that Johnson should have done more thorough research on this seem to lose sight of the overwhelming pressure of time and near destitution which beset a hack writer in the early part of the eighteenth century. Johnson had no assistance from the sinking fund of a benevolent foundation in which case he could have proceeded at ease with the research as most of his critics are doing today. He had to finish the work within schedule or lose the benefit of the paltry reward of fifteen guineas which Cave gave him for this work. "I wrote forty-eight pages of the Life of Savage at a sitting; but then I sat up all night,"[38] he said to a company at St. Andrews. At this rate Hill believes the whole work was completed in about thirty-six hours.[39]

The second kind of inaccuracy which arises from neglect should not really surprise students of Johnson. As we know him he was impatient with details that merely depict pedantic and ostentatious scholarship. In the Life of Dryden he said: "To adjust the minute events of literary history is

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[38] Boswell, Hebrides, p. 52.

[39] G. B. Hill, Johnsonian Miscellanies (Oxford, 1897), II, 343.

tedious and troublesome: it requires, indeed, no great force of understanding, but often depends upon inquiries which there is no opportunity of making, or to be fetched from books and pamphlets not always at hand."[40] To go down to minute details in studies seems to have been against Johnson's principles. For instance, he never really finished reading a book from cover to cover. But he insisted upon the whole truth and minute details in biography as a means of enlarging the vista of truth and enhancing the dimensions of delight. It is true that in biography dates correctly given, relationships rightly reported, and anecdotes properly assigned to the tellers, will fortify the narrative against distraction which is bound to arise when doubt sets it. The desire for the whole truth must go hand in hand with patient study and research to produce the desired effect in biography.

Some of the errors into which Johnson ran could have been avoided had he taken a little more care to study his source materials. In the Life of Milton he assigns anecdotes to wrong persons, which in itself is not an unpardonable mistake, but it reduces to a great extent the amount of trust and confidence which the reader must have in the writer. In the same Life he displays a neglect of his responsibility as a biographer by extending the meaning of his source material

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[40] Johnson, Lives, ed. Cunningham, I, 302.

beyond the limits of its allowance. And this is a serious abuse of the duty of a biographer against which he was unwilling to compromise in his theory. To extend the meaning of any anecdote beyond what is allowed by the story is tantamount to invention of material for the purpose of producing a favourable or unfavourable portrait of the subject.

> But as faction seldom leaves a man honest, however he might find him, Milton is suspected of having interpolated the book called Icon Basilike, which the Council of State, to whom he was now made Latin Secretary, employed him to censure, by inserting a prayer taken from Sidney's Arcadia, and imputing it to the King; whom he charges, in his Iconoclastes, with the use of this prayer as with a heavy crime, in the indecent language with which prosperity had emboldened the advocates for rebellion to insult all that is venerable or great. [41]

Perhaps the clause "But as faction seldom leaves a man honest," is equally applicable to Johnson in this respect. The source of Johnson's suspicion cannot be determined, nor can the argument of interpolation be understood, since this book, Eikon Basilike, in which the prayer was printed, was not published by the Council of State but by the Royalists. There appears to be no ground for suspecting Milton of this crime. The nearest statement to the suspicion of interpolation, (remember, it is only near and does not at all suggest interpolation) is in Bayle's Dictionary in which, in an attempt to compare the French and the English reception of Milton's Iconoclastes, the editor stated that:

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[41] Johnson, Lives, I, 124-25.

> The Opinion of this writer [Milton] made no impression in strange countries: Everybody there was persuaded that King Charles I wrote the book which bears his name. Which did so much honour to his memory, and appear'd so fit to make him be looked upon as a true martyr; that it was thought that Milton endeavouring to rob him of it, did only use the trick of Advocates, who deny every thing that is too favourable to the Contrary Party. Those of the Cromwellians who remained in England, agreed to Milton's judgment: But their Opinion was suspected for the reason I have just now given. [42]

Dr. Johnson argues that the regicides intercepted the papers which the King gave to Dr. Juxon on the scaffold, and that according to Dr. Birch, the publishers of the King's papers were the forgers of the heathen prayer, because of which the King was charged of plagiarism. It appears from this that he did not take notice of Toland's discovery that the real author of Eikon Basilike was not King Charles I, but Dr. Gouden, Bishop of Exeter.[43] Or, if he did, faction enticed him to stick to unfounded rumours and neglect his solemn duty of serving truth with the utmost care and attention.

Johnson's neglect of appropriate sources of information for the Life of Cave led to the reconstruction of a life which, but for three dates, would have had no location in the continuum of time. However monotonous the life of Mr. Edward Cave might have been, pin-pointing certain events to certain dates would have rendered the progress of the Gentleman's

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[42] Bayle, "Milton," Critical and Historical Dictionary, trans. 1710, III, 2052.

[43] John Toland, "Milton," Early Lives, p. 145.

Magazine more impressive. We know not when Cave went to school, when he worked with the collector of excise, when he commenced his apprenticeship in printing, when he got married, when he was employed in the post office, or even when he started the Gentleman's Magazine. All dates are suppressed except those of Cave's birth and death and the death of his wife.

It does not appear that Johnson consulted any record whatever for his Account of the Life of the Late Mr. Edward Cave. His reliance upon oral relations of the events, perhaps by Cave himself, led him to inaccurate statements on Cave's dismissal from the post office, and reasons for the supposed dismissal. According to Johnson, when Cave was raised to the position of clerk "of the franks" he exercised the authority of his office in checking illegal use of franks by Members of Parliament. For this he was summoned to the House of Commons for abuse of privilege and encroachment upon the privacy of the Members of Parliament, harshly treated at first, and forthwith dismissed. It is reported by Carlson, whose research on the Gentleman's Magazine led to the discovery of materials in the London General Post Office about Cave, that Cave was not dismissed but retired from the post office in 1745, furthermore, that "A careful search of the Journals of both Houses [of Parliament] gives no evidence of

the proceedings mentioned by Johnson."[44]

The last group of Johnson's limitations in the practice of biography cannot be classified as the mistakes of the head but as those of the heart. "He that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt his praise or aggrevate his infamy; many temptations will occur in the disguise of passion too specious to fear much resistance."[45] It appears from this statement that Dr. Johnson felt that no biographer can be absolutely impartial, that no matter how much he tries, he must always fall a victim to an irresistible force of passion to write either as a friend or as an enemy. This in its ultimate sense amounts to predudice.

In the practice of biography, Johnson the philosopher and the moralist has shown himself the human being that he really was, subject to predudice, that indisputable director of human taste. We have seen him writing as a sympathetic and benign judge in the Life of Savage, and in the Life of Milton as a grudging enemy whose muffled feelings of dislike occasionally get out of control. Though Johnson's predudice against Milton cannot by itself be defended, at least we can admit that he had adequate reasons for it. The Church

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[44] C.L. Carlson, The First Magazine, p. 12.

[45] Johnson, "Idler No. 84," Works, I, 438.

of England and the House of Stuart were sacred to him, and one could imagine that it would be difficult for Johnson to write the biography of a man who flouted, defiled and insulted these institutions with impunity and still maintain a compassionate reluctance to inflict pain upon Milton's memory. Not only this, there is also to be remembered that Milton's type of verse did not appeal to Johnson, and still less did his vituperative prose. In Johnson's day, Milton's prose and verse had become like the beauty of the king's new clothes which every body, whether he saw them or not, must have praised for fear of being regarded as a fool; and this type of fashionable approbation not founded upon common sense and sound judgment was what Johnson could not subject his assured individuality to.

Today, as in the eighteenth century, most people prefer to know Milton only as the author of Paradise Lost. An eighteenth-century critic openly declared," But it is of little consequence to the present and future ages whether the author of Paradise Lost was Papist or Presbyterian, Royalist or Republican; it is the Poet that claims our attention."[46] But what difference does it make to know the poet as well as the man, to know the part that the man played in contemporary politics and his conception of, and sense of relationship with,

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[46] Robert Porter,"An Inquiry into Some Passages in Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Poets," quoted from Herbert G. Wright, "Porter as a Critic of Dr. Johnson," RES, XII (1936), 309-10.

the creative force; except that it makes for greater understanding and a more intelligent appreciation of his poetry?

Sometimes Johnson's harshness on Milton's biographers is mistaken by his critics for harshness on Milton. In describing his uncle's educational project Edward Phillips depicted Milton as possessing abilities, almost superhuman, that came just a little short of producing students superior to their master. Johnson's examination of this statement has no direct reflection on Milton's character, but on the falsification into which passion led his biographer. "The speed of the horse man must be limited by the power of his horse."[47] So said Johnson and the Monthly Review was hurt. The choice of the ground is as important to the horseman as the choice of horse, the Review suggested; perhaps Milton the teacher would have agreed with Johnson that the best program of education cannot do much more than stimulate and direct what is already there in the child. Continuing his examination, Johnson says:

> Of institutions we may judge by their effect. From this wonder-working academy, I do not know that there ever proceeded any man very eminent for knowledge: its only genuine product, I believe, is a small History of Poetry, written in Latin by his nephew Phillips, of which perhaps none of my readers has ever heard.[48]

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[47] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 113.

[48] Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 114-15.

To this the critic of the Monthly Review replied:

> When it is considered how small must have been the number of Milton's scholars, it is matter of wonder rather than of reproach, that even one should ever rise to literary distinction. Were the history of all the schools through the kingdom to be enquired into, we should not find above one scholar in five hundred that ever attains to a like degree of eminence. 49

This reproach which the critic censures and imputes to predudice in Johnson, is not directed to Milton but to his biographer, who unfortunately for him, happened to have been a product of the institution which he considered a fountain-head of knowledge from which all who went could drink and be wise. If not more than one eminent scholar could be found in five hundred in the kingdom, that does not minimize the justness of Dr. Johnson's remark, for into what more was infused more should be expected in effect.

Richardson, one of the fondest admirers and a biographer of Milton, reported another wonder about Milton:

> He would sometimes lie awake whole nights, but not a verse could he make; and on a sudden his poetical faculty would rush upon him with an impetus or aestrum, and his daughter was immediately called to secure what came. At other times he would dictate perhaps forty lines in a breath, and then reduce them to half the number. 50

Johnson's remark on this report which follows, is not a criticism of Milton but an attack on the wonder-loving

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49 John Ker Spittal, Contemporary Criticism of Dr. Samuel Johnson (London, 1923), p. 218.

50 Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 151.

mania of his biographer who endeavoured to discover a strange deviation from the natural in the composition of Milton's poetry.

> These bursts of lights, and involutions of darkness; these transient and involuntary excursions and retrocessions of invention, having some appearance of deviation from the common train of Nature, are eagerly caught by the lovers of a wonder....By Mr. Richardson's relation, casually conveyed, much regard cannot be claimed. 51

That human faculties fluctuate is not peculiar to a particular individual alone, and so, there is nothing wonderful about it. Though this interpretation of the report discloses the lack of warmth with which an uninteresting story is received, it truly reveals the indignation which Johnson felt against the improbability ignored by the narrator. If Milton's daughters were not taught to write, and if Mary and Deborah could not even spell their own names correctly, as it has become known,[52] Johnson argued, how could they have taken the verses down by dictation, and when awakened at night?

In the Life of Savage many critics have found Johnson partial in his subject's favour. Even Boswell, Johnson's Friday, said: "Johnson's partiality for Savage made him entertain no doubt of his story, however extraordinary and

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51 Johnson, "Milton," Lives, I, 151.

52 Helen Darbishire, Early Lives, Intro., p. 1.

improbable."[53] With this statement he pulled out a brick or two from the artfully reconstructed life of Richard Savage. Since Boswell, several critics have taken up the gauntlets thrown down by the literary monarch of the eighteenth century. The result so far is far from an overthrow of the king of sturdy wit and astute judgment.

The most formidable of these attackers is Moy Thomas who, in a series of articles in Notes and Queries in 1858, endeavoured to reverse the verdict and audaciously pronounced Savage guilty of imposture. "Nevertheless there were some circumstances that might suggest doubt to a friend less partial than Johnson,"[54] he says. And in conclusion he says, "I have not, I confess, any doubt that Richard Savage was an impostor."[55] He has been so well answered by both Makower[56] and Dr. Tracy[57] that it would be quite unnecessary for someone else to take up Johnson's defence unless some fresh material relating to the case were discovered. But Tracy has left

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[53] Boswell, Johnson, p. 132.

[54] Moy Thomas, "Richard Savage," Notes and Queries, 2nd Ser., VI (Nov. 27, 1858), 427.

[55] Thomas, p. 448.

[56] Stanley V. Makower, "Who was Richard Savage?" N&Q, 11th Ser., I(Jan. 1,1910), 1-4.

[57] Tracy, The Artificial Bastard.

partially developed the question of the character of the Countess of Macclesfield upon which Moy Thomas places so much importance as the pivot of his conclusion. Also, in trying to unveil the mystery of Savage's whereabouts from 1698 to 1715 he has misinterpreted the document from which he quotes. Stanley Makower's article is a long delayed preface to his book, Richard Savage: A Mystery in Biography, and does not pretend to give a solution to the problem of Savage's identity.

The main thesis of the long article by Moy Thomas which is full of misstatements, contradictions and deliberate misinterpretations, might be summed up in three clauses: that the Countess of Macclesfield was a dutiful mother and was quite incapable of the charge of inhumanity made against her; that she was justified for not defending herself against that charge; and that since Richard Savage's story is full of contradictions he must have made it up.

Of the Countess of Macclesfield nothing that Moy Thomas tells us proves beyond doubt that she had the warmth of maternal feelings that would have overwhelmed her excessive aristocratic pride and made her accept the odds against her in recognizing the child. All he says to this effect is that she took the risk of concealing herself when her crime was rumoured, gave presents to the nurse, enquired frequently about the first child, and sent for a lock of its hair when it died. The

motive for the risk of concealment no one but Thomas would attribute to interest in the child.

On the other hand, the letter that Lord Brandon wrote to his wife on March 2, 1685, of which Mr. Thomas has favoured us with a transcript,[58] and her conduct before the annulment of their marriage depict her as invidious, unfaithful, secretive and uninterested in children. She openly told the husband that she "did not care to have any children" by him, but each time he went away she lied to him that she was pregnant. She threatened him with separation and nagged him continually to provoke him to strike her so that she could move out on the charge of cruelty. She entertained her company in cold rooms to show to them that her basic needs were denied her by her husband. She was extremely jealous, would not ask for her husband's coach until she knew that it had been lent to his sister with whom she suspected that he had an incestuous relationship.[59] She was malicious and scandalous, accused her husband of having contracted the marriage for mercenary reasons, and dared him, if he were a man, to return her dowry of twelve thousand pounds. At last the husband who himself was not an excellent character said: "The world must know my misfortunes in being disappointed in all the contents I

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[58] Thomas, N&Q, pp. 361-62.

[59] Tracy, p. 6.

hoped for in the state of marriage, and found neither a faithful nor a cheerful companion ('as a good wife ought to be') in either fortune." As the climax of his disappointment he declared: "And now Madam I am resolved to give you the satisfaction you often asked, for parting with me...for I will never live with you as long as I live."[60]

In his interpretation of this letter Dr. Tracy says: "From the list of faults that his lordship was pleased to point out...that of infidelity was absent."[61] I know not what else unfaithfulness would mean other than infidelity. Even Moy Thomas, who assumed the role of an advocate to the Countess, admits that the inquiry on the trial of adultery embraced this time.[62] Though this charge is not openly alleged in this letter the word "unfaithful" has a veiled allegation. However, about ten years after she had left her husband on a temporary separation she bore a child for Earl Rivers whom she and the Earl proudly, though clandestinely, gave their names -- Anne Savage. The time of their meeting is not known though this child was born in 1895. Towards the end of the following year she was again in the family way. Dinah Alsop the maid, not able to withstand the surge of the smouldering scandal, gave

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60 Thomas, pp. 361-62.

61 Tracy, p. 6.

62 Thomas, p. 362.

notice to leave her ladyship's service. Following her usual practice of secrecy the Countess now left her sister and made arrangements for a private lying-in at the house of a Mrs. Pheasant in Fox Court. Mrs. Pheasant was induced to change both her name and place of business, and while taking care of the Countess she was known as Mrs. Lee, for fear that "the Bitch, the maid, would find her out, for she had betrayed my lady."[63] The Countess herself went by the name of Mary Smith, wife of a captain.

About January 16, 1697, the child was born and two days after was christened and given the name of Richard Smith, son of John Smith and Mary. Lord Rivers himself, whose Christian name the child bore, is said to have been present at the christening and was one of the god-parents who included also Newdigate and Dorothy Ousley. By this time the husband's investigation, which started upon hearing the rumours of the birth of the first child a year before and the subsequent pregnancy, was already under way. There was therefore every need for strict secrecy, because, we are told, the Countess' title and fortune were in danger. As was the case with the first child, the second was quickly put to nurse. The first nurse, Mrs. Peglear, deposed on oath during the trial that "The child came to me by the name of Richard

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[63] Tracy, p. 10..

Lee, and was taken away by the name of Richard Smith."[64] She had the child for six months after which he was taken away by a baker's wife whose name was Ann Portlock, who claimed that the child was her own. Mrs. Peglear seems to have resisted what appeared to her as an abduction, obviously from the absence of substantial evidence, and she "had Portlock before a Justice."[65] It appears also from her appeal to the Justice for settlement of the case that she could get no help from either the Countess or her agents. From here the history of the child is based upon conjectures.

The Countess of Macclesfield might have had the appearance of a simple woman but she was not a simpleton. She had spoken through a mask to her nurse during her confinement;[66] had through her agent, Beesley, bribed the principal witnesses the Portlocks, out of court during the trial,[67] and had bribed her husband out of a treason sentence.[68] It is doubtless that a woman with such ingenuity and resolution when driven at bay would spare no expedient that might offer a relief.

In stating his case against Savage's claim Thomas

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64 Thomas, p. 364.

65 Thomas, p. 365.

66 Thomas, p. 365.

67 Thomas, p. 386.

68 Thomas, p. 386.

says that there was no published report of the proceedings of the case of adultery against the Countess, and so the details of the case could not have been known except to the Countess and her friends. He even repudiates Luttrell's report that "Tis said the son she had during her elopement goes by the name of Savage, and supposed father the present Earl of Rivers"[69] as improbable. Later, forgetting that he has already stated that the case could not be known, he says: "Speculation and gossip on the fate of this child was sure to be rife, and were not unlikely to produce a pretender."[70] One wonders from what source but specific information a youth of about fifteen could have got the audacity of assuming a name that led to a neat story of imposture, as Thomas chooses to call Savage's claim. That this claim is lacking in specific details is admitted. But must it not rather be imputed to the fact that "the original letter" that revealed this youth's identity by its own nature contained only such pertinent information as affected the injunction of the grandmother to the nurse, than to the inadequacy of gossip and speculation which Thomas believes to be the only foundation to the claim?

He further states that the youth came out of nowhere to claim to be the son of the Countess and Earl

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[69] Thomas, p. 365.

[70] Thomas, p. 386.

Rivers, and not knowing that the Countess' son was christened Richard Smith, confused the son with the daughter who had the Earl's surname. He who has been very captious on Johnson for inaccuracies which he himself can hardly avoid in an intricate story such as the life of Savage, gives "the earliest indication of Savage's existence"[71] as 1717 when he published The Convocation on the Bangorian Controversy. But Professor Sutherland discovered in 1938 that he had used the name as early as 1715, and this confirms Savage's claim that he had been using the name since his seventeenth birthday.

Dr. Tracy uses Professor Sutherland's discovery in his argument, but seems to misinterpret his material. His statement that our hero in the heat of the moment of his arrest by the police in 1715 spontaneously gave his name as "Mr. Savage, natural son to the late Earl Rivers,"[72] has ignored the details leading to the arrest to which he makes this reference. Here is an exerpt of Professor Sutherland's discovery:

> Mr. Savage, natural son to late Earl Rivers, being taken into custody, by a Warrant from Mr. Justice Woolaston, for having a treasonable pamphlet in his possession, impeach'd one of Mr. Berington' the Printer's Men; upon which the said Person so accus'd was committed to Newgate. 73

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[71] Thomas, p. 386.

[72] Tracy, p. 13.

[73] James R. Sutherland, "Richard Savage," TLS, Jan. 1, 1938, p. 12. Sutherland quoted this from the Weekly Packet of Nov. 5-12, 1715.

It can be seen from this exerpt that the offence leading to our hero's being taken in custody was not a common misdemeanour of the class of public nuisance for which he could have been arrested on the spot. It was a grave offence, as a matter of fact, a felony for which the arrest was made by warrant of the Justice. My argument is that he must have been known in the community to have been going by that name and living presumably at a specified location to which the warrant was issued. And it is not unlikely that he had discovered this name and was using it long before this arrest was made.

It is not known whether Savage made any effort at this time to gain his mother's recognition until his Memoir in Giles Jacob's Poetical Register depicted him as a gentleman, son of the late Earl Rivers and the Countess of Macclesfield who owed no thanks to his mother for his education, but to his grandmother, the Lady Mason, who committed him to the care of his godmother, Mrs. Lloyd. The Memoir also complained of his being defrauded by the executors of his godmother's will of 300 pounds legacy to which the will entitled him, and of his mother's unfair methods that deprived him of liberal provisions which his father, Earl Rivers, would have made for him.

The mention of Mrs. Lloyd as Savage's godmother by this Memoir gives Thomas one of his most difficult points of argument on which he belabours himself interminably. He goes

back to the christening where the Ousleys and the Earl acted as the child's godparents. From this he argues that Dorothy Ousley was the child's godmother, and no one else. Then he supposes that Dorothy could have been married afterwards to a Mr. Llyod from whom she could have been named Mrs. Llyod. If this is true, which he rather feels is highly improbable, the complaint of fraud by the executors of her will is groundless. To this conclusion he arrives from the argument that the Ousleys belonged to a respectable and wealthy family, that the executors of Dorothy's will were likely to be members of her family who would not have descended to such meanness of cheating a child of only 300 pounds!

Mr. Tracy has answered this argument most effectively, except that his partial acceptance of this conjecture as an explanation of the fraud of the executors incapacitates his argument for the unfair methods of the mother which deprived Savage of the liberal provision Earl Rivers should have made for him. If the conjecture is accepted, he argues, the case of fraud becomes that of a technical difficulty for the executors. If Dorothy Ousley was the same as Mrs. Lloyd, her will should have mentioned Richard Smith and not Richard Savage. And if Savage could not clear this point of difference in his surname the position of the executors was a delicate one, and their rejection of the claim was understandable, and the claim genuine.

But the argument against this is that if the identity of Dorothy and Mrs. Lloyd is reconcilable her brother Newdigate Ousley who outlived both the Earl and Mrs. Lloyd and was the Earl's agent in this affair would have advised the executors, if he were not one of them, and also, Earl Rivers would have had no need of asking the Countess about the child on his death-bed, and if he did, would not have been satisfied with her answer that the child was dead. This, therefore, would destroy Savage's complaint of unfair methods used by his mother to cheat him out of 6000 pounds which the Earl intended for him in his will.

Savage himself does neither accept nor reject Mrs. Lloyd as his godmother. On the basis of Giles Jacob's statement, "I forbear to mention the names of other gentlemen who have transmitted their accounts to me"[74] Thomas assumes that Savage wrote his own Memoir which referred to Mrs. Lloyd as his godmother. It is not unlikely that the "poor nurse" mentioned in Johnson's and in the account of 1727, upon the instruction of Lady Mason to rear the child as her own, according to her poor condition, had rechristened him in her own name under which Savage probably went until his discovery of his true identity in the "convincing original letter;" and that she had also chosen for him another godmother, who must not have been very rich, judging from the legacy she left for

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[74] Thomas, p. 386.

her godson. The idea of her keeping a coach, which Savage mentioned in a private letter to Mrs. Carter has been dismissed as one of those falsifications into which men in Savage's condition are driven when they desire the companionship of a respectable woman. This woman could have been the Mrs. Lloyd of the Poetical Register repeated later by other accounts. Then we can see how both the fraud and the unfair methods could have been possible.

Mr. Moy Thomas' article is very heavily documented and makes an impressive argument. But there are so many misinterpretations that it is not altogether reliable. He claims that there were no codicils in Earl River's will, but Tracy assures us that the Earl revised the will twice, the last time only six months before his death and added "codicils in which he made several large additional bequests, one or two of the beneficiaries being probably illegitimate children."[75] The record of the proceedings of the Countess' case in the Court of Arches which he claims to have seen has now vanished, Tracy says.[76] He tells us that Savage started using the name,"Richard Savage," in 1717 and we have seen in Professor Sutherland's discovery that he started using it two years before, and probably earlier. He wilfully misunderstands Johnson to mean ~~that~~ that the husband's discovery of her adultery was the cause of

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[75] Tracy, p. 22.

[76] Tracy, p. 14.

the temporary separation from the Countess,[77] whereas Johnson's statement which follows refers to the final annulment of the marriage. "This, as may be imagined, made her husband no less desirous of a separation than herself, and he prosecuted his design in the most effectual manner;...the nuptial contracts totally annuled, and the children of his wife illegitimated."[78]

His justification of the Countess' unearthly silence rests upon the proposition that the death of her child would have been difficult to prove. This sober admission of Mrs. Brett's silence in spite of the incessant attacks and appeals of her son for over twenty years exonerates Johnson from the charge of partiality, for no judge who passes judgment in default of a defendant when the defendant had due notice of the case can be regarded as partial. Among the questions which the defenders of Mrs. Brett have still to answer is: If Richard Savage was not the son"of the late Earl Rivers and the Countess of Macclesfield," whose son was he? So far none of them has attempted it. Until they answer it adequately and convincingly Johnson will be still respected as an impartial judge.

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[77] Thomas, p. 361.

[78] Johnson, Lives, I, 135.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF JOHNSON'S THEORY AND PRACTICE

Dr. Johnson's contribution to the art of biography, both in theory and in practice, is very ample, and perhaps unsurpassed; but in the opinion of many critics, it still lacks what might be desired to make biography a perfect art. Perhaps this is not at all strange, for art continually evolves towards perfection which it can never reach. Johnson more than all other critics of art in his century was intensely aware of this common and inherent frailty of whatever is of man's creation, and so he never bestowed unqualified praise upon any work of art that he was called upon to appraise. "I know nobody who blasts with praise as you: for whenever there is exaggerated praise, everybody is set against a character,"[1] he once said to Mrs. Thrale. It is to be imagined, and not unjustly, that he was equally aware that his own works were no less subject to censure than those of the other artists he examined from time to time.

His theory of biography is like a curious bag of

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[1] Boswell, Johnson, p. 1129.

tools, some of which command attention more by their elegant appearance than by their utility; and his practice, which covered not less than sixty-five lives, is like a magnificent piece of tapestry of diverse colours with no co-ordination in their varying degrees of beauty. "Slow rises worth by Poverty depress'd."[2] Though Johnson had remarkable precocity, his genius, on account of extreme poverty, took a long time to gain the notice of the public. When recognition came at last, it was destined to stay. Walter Raleigh in his tribute to the achievements of Johnson said at the beginning of his Leslie Stephens Lecture, delivered in the Senate House, Cambridge University, February, 1907:

> Literature, as it is understood for the purpose of these lectures, is to include, so I am informed, biography, criticism, and ethics. If I had been commanded to choose from the world's annals a name which, better than any other, should serve to illustrate the vital relations of those three subjects to literature, I could find no better name than Samuel Johnson. 3

His contribution to the art of biography did more than other factors in raising the poverty-depressed genius of Johnson. His Life of Savage met with general approbation when it came out. The editor of the Champion paid an unrestrained regard to it in these words:

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2 Johnson, "London," Johnson:Prose and Poetry, p. 32.

3 Raleigh, Six Essays, p. 9.

> This pamphlet is, without flattery to its author, as just and well written a piece of its kind I ever saw; so that at the same time it highly deserves, it certainly stands very little in need of this recommendation. As to the history of the unfortunate person, whose memoirs compose this work, it is certainly penned with equal accuracy and spirit, of which I can so much the better judge, as I know many of these facts mentioned to be strictly true, and very fairly related. [4]

Sir Joshua Reynolds could not stop reading once he had started, and standing and leaning against a chimneypiece had his arm totally benumbed by the time he got to the end of the fascinating narrative.

When the Lives of the Poets came out, Johnson was seriously attacked for his censure of the poets that hitherto had been uniformly eulogized by critics and had enjoyed public veneration in general. Even the bitterest of the critics expressed the admiration for Johnson's soundness of judgment. Though furiously incensed against Johnson for what amounted to him as a profanation of his idols, Cowper could not control his admiration for the sharpness of Johnson's characterization. In the heat of this overwhelming admiration, he exclaimed:

> What vanity, what petulance in Pope! How painfully sensible of censure, and yet how restless in provocation! To what mean artifices could Addison stoop, in the hope of injuring the reputation of his friend! Savage, how sordidly vicious, and the more condemned for the pains that are taken to palliate his vices....What a sychophant to the public taste was Dryden; sinning against his

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[4] Boswell, Johnson, pp. 122-23.

> feelings, lewd in his writings, though chaste in his conversation. 5

It was not only in this summary of Johnson's characterization of the major figures in the Lives that this critic showed his liberal notice of Johnson's proficiency. After violently wishing he could thrash the old jacket of the veteran pensioner to make his pension jingle in his pockets for plucking "one or two feathers" from the wing of Milton's Muse,he coolly said:

> I am very much the biographer's humble admirer. His uncommon show of good sense, and his forcible expression, secure to him that tribute from all his readers. He has a penetrating insight into character, and a happy talent of correcting the popular opinion when it is erroneous: and this he does with the boldness of a man who will think for himself, but, at the same time with a justness of sentiment that convinces us he does not differ from others through affectation, but because he has a sounder judgment. 6

If we find minor faults in Johnson, it is not from want of recognition of his position as the founder of pure biography; but it is because here and there he makes some unqualified statements that tend to weaken this position. It is known to every school boy that Johnson was a great moral teacher, and morality and truth went like coloured threads on the canvas of his literary theory, whether it was critical, or biographical. He never told a story, nor was he interested in one, unless it

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5 Edgar Johnson, One Mighty Torrent, p. 207.

6 Edgar Johnson, p. 198.

was based on truth and had some moral to impart. He clung tightly to the classical theory that the sole purpose of literature is to teach and delight. To Johnson the supreme purpose of biography resided in its moral utility. For the fostering of this purpose he devised a theory that would facilitate a distinctive characterization of the subject in such a way that its merits and defects might be clearly seen and be emulated or avoided as seemed desirable.

But in an amoral age when good and evil are allowed to be relative, moral criteria and social mores are ruled out of order, and Johnson's theory of biography, based principally upon the moral utility of biography, stands in danger of being relegated to oblivion. In such an age, which is not far from ours, biography exists only for the delight the artist has in painting a portrait and in telling a story which approaches as much as possible to being a facsimile of an individual known to him and his readers. To the readers of such an age, biography is interesting merely because it feeds their curiosity and humours their sentiments. They are tickled to learn the hitherto unknown faults of a character. After all, scandal is the stuff of biography. The world has always loved and always will love scandal. Very few people truly regulate their lives by the mistakes or virtues of others. Vice and virtue are qualities more or less dependent upon condition than on choice. Johnson himself

testified to the truth of this statement when he said in the Life of Savage: "Those are no proper judges of his conduct, who have slumbered away their time on the down of plenty; nor will any wise man presume to say, 'Had I been in Savage's condition, I should have lived or written better than Savage.'"[7]

"Lives of great men all remind us/we can make our lives sublime"[8] would have been cited in support of the moral utility of biography, if all the school boys and girls who read lives of great men and women in school became great in their turns. Sublimity of temperament and greatness owe more to environmental and perhaps to hereditary factors than to the reading of lives of great men; for there can be many inglorious Miltons and Shakespeares and Einsteins and Johnsons, with the lives of great men in their hands, and yet wasting away in "the dark unfathomed caves" of the ocean of poverty and lack of opportunity.

Intimate knowledge of the biographical subject was one of the strongest points in Johnson's theory. To this topic he made consistent references, both in his oral and written expatiations on the subject. We agree that his unparalled success in the Life of Savage owes more to this than to any other factor. It is true to a great extent that some of

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[7] Johnson, Lives, I, 265.

[8] Henry W. Longfellow, "What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist," The Le Gallienne Book of American Verse, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (New York, 1925), p. 50.

the best biographies in the English language would not have been so successful had they not been written by biographers who had personal and intimate contact with their heroes. Among these are Edmund Gosse's Father and Son, Anthony Froude's Life of Carlyle and, of course, Boswell's Johnson. It goes without doubt that if the biographer is honest, and honesty in biography is a rule more honoured in the breach than in the observance, intimate knowledge makes for graphic characterization and accurate portrayal of the subject. Except when biography has been relegated to the realm of fiction as in the case of Carlyle's The Diamond Necklace or Makower's Richard Savage: A Mystery in Biography, it is intimate knowledge alone that can enable a biographer to produce a moving and life-like picture. Though James Boswell was another John Aubrey, his biography of Johnson would have been different from what we now have had he not known his hero in person. The chance of manipulating his subject, setting the scenes, and watching to record the reactions would have been lost. The diversity of the Doctor's temperament, ranging from neurotic eccentricities, strong prejudices to morbid fears of insanity, which Boswell has so acutely depicted, would not have been possible had he not lived in close intimacy with Johnson, seen him at home, in the club; dined out with him; travelled with him; and occasionally shared apartments with him.

In spite of this acknowledged success of these biographers who wrote from intimate knowledge of their subjects, it is necessary to say that intimate association with the subject of a biography can become a liability instead of an asset to a biographer. One may not agree entirely with Pearson that "A man, like a mountain, can be seen more completely from a distance."[9] A mountain that is seen from afar lacks the distinctive features of a mountain examined at close quarters. From afar the observer misses the cracks and crevices on the mountain. He could even miss the enjoyment of a beautiful lake or the sweet music of a gay little stream trickling through the rocks. The argument is not whether one who lives in social intercourse with another will or will not see and know more of him than someone who lives apart from him (because it is more than a conjecture to affirm that he will), but whether he will be honest and truthful enough to make an objective record of what he knows. Intimacy sometimes breeds obligation as well as contempt, and these have a tremendous influence upon the biographer.

Intimacy becomes a serious handicap to truth in biography when the biographer is a blood relative, a close friend, of the same party or fraternity, as his subject. There is bound to arise a great conflict between loyalty and truth. To rise

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[9] Pearson, p. 66.

against public opinion and the censure of interested friends and relatives and record the faults in addition to the virtues of the subject requires an exacting sense of obligation to truth and more than common courage. Men like Johnson could do this easily, but his type of character, a character entirely dedicated to truth and impervious to all kinds of temptations to falsify or conceal facts, is rare indeed.

We seldom come across an impartial representation of character in biographies written by relations of the subjects. The temptation to preserve or present what in the opinion of the biographer constitutes the best in his memory of his hero is an urgent one. Often we run into biographies written by relatives of the subject, and with professed sincerity of portraying the character as he really was. We have already seen in Chapter III how Milton's nephews, Edward and John, denied the public a balanced presentation of the character of their uncle.

J.W. Cross wrote the biography of his wife which he professed to have done accurately and objectively. Yet he informs us that

> Each letter has been pruned of everything that seemed to me irrelevant to my purpose--of everything that I thought my wife would have wished to be omitted. Every sentence that remains adds, in my judgment, something (however small it may be) to the means of forming a conclusion about her character. 10

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10 J.W. Cross, George Eliot's Life (New York, 1885), I, vi.

It might be easy to frown on Mr. Cross for this obvious disservice to the cause of biography, but we must not forget the emotional involvement in the situation of a man who was publishing the papers of a wife of about six months' duration of relationship, whose morbid feelings of guilt for infringement of social laws were frequently apparent in her correspondence with friends. A case like this makes us feel that perhaps a biographer need not be involved in intimate relationship with his subject unless he is able to wrest himself from ties of obligation and passion to tell a true story and paint a genuine portrait.

Johnson's insistence that the writing of a life should not be delayed "till interest and envy are at an end,"[11] calls for re-evaluation. It is possible that when Johnson made this statement he was thinking of Addison's article on the Grub Street biographical undertakers to which referance has already been made in Chapter I of this paper.[12] In this article Addison suggested that in order that the lives of great men might be written "with any tolerable degree of elegance or exactness" they should be delayed "till envy and friendship are laid asleep." When Johnson came to the Life of Addison, he obviosly remembered his own and Addison's statements on the issue of the most suitable time to write biography. It will be seen

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[11] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

[12] Ante, p. 20.

from the following quotation that he was in difficulties. His readjustment of his previous statement is rather vague. The general impression is not a categorical declaration but a middle-of-the-road position between Addison's ideas and his own.

> The necessity of complying with times, and of sparing persons, is the greatest impediment in biography. History may be formed from permanent monuments and records; but Lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost forever. What is known can only be immediately told; and when it might be told, it is no longer known. The delicate features of the mind, the nice discriminations of character, and the minute peculiarities of conduct, are soon obliterated; and it is surely better that caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly, however they might delight in the description, should be silently forgotten, than that, by wanton merriment and unreasonable detection, a pang should be given to a widow, a daughter, a brother, or a friend. As the process of this narrative is now bringing me among my contemporaries, I begin to feel myself walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished, and coming to the time of which it will be proper rather to say nothing that is false, than all that is true. 13

If this "greatest of biographers,"[14] the greatest sponsor of truth in literature in the eighteenth century, could, for once in his life, be afraid of telling the whole truth lest the feelings of the living relations of his subject be hurt, it may be justly questioned, in the interest of pure biography, whether impressionistic description and stenographic

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13 Johnson, Lives, III, 140-41.

14 Johnson, Lives, ed. Cunningham, I. intro., X.

presentation of character, which can only be made possible by immediate recording, should be allowed to override truth. If a biographer cannot conquer the urge to spare persons and the sensitiveness of relatives and portray his hero objectively, it would be better not to attempt writing until the fire under the ashes had been extinguished.

Johnson frequently confessed his love of anecdotes, and his recommendation for their use in biography was unqualified. He also acknowledged the general tendency of man to fabricate, enlarge upon, castigate, or invent a story to suit any impression the teller intends to make. The general disposition of many to accept without questioning what is exotic was not unknown to Johnson, fpr he made a concrete demonstration of this deplorable inclination to Boswell when discussing the value of a story. "Suppose," he said, "a man should tell that Johnson, before setting out for Italy, as he had to cross the Alps, sat down to make himself wings. This many people would believe."[15] In this unconditional emphasis on the value of anecdotal materials in biography, he does not seem to have remembered this reservation.

"More knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his

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[15] Boswell, Johnson, pp. 685-86.

pedigree, and ended with his funeral."[16] Few people would be willing to disagree with this statement if servants were a special race of people invulnerable to the common frailty of mankind. From a sense of obligation to the master a servant could be as passionately and emotionally involved as a widow, and as a result his conversation would tend to amplify the virtues of his master and extenuate his vices. A discontented or discomfited servant whose memory of ill-treatment from the master remains fresh, may, from a feeling of contempt, exaggerate the master's weaknesses and deny him any virtues. It is only when a servant is honest and has respect for truth that a certain measure of credit could be granted to the story he tells about his master. Even yet, it would not redound to the credit of a lover of objective biography to rely upon the testimony of a single servant for accuracy in his search for the true character of his subject. It is not to be presumed that a purely objective biography is by any means attainable, but even for a tolerable objectivity, which is all that the most impartial biographer can hope to achieve, the range of search must be extended beyond a conversation with a single servant.

Both in literary history and in living experience, instances of distorted accounts of events and variations in

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[16] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

stories are copious. Oral relations are often so varied from person to person that in the long run only a few isolated facts in the original are preserved in the various versions. A vivid example of this is the anecdote connected with Johnson's physical violence to the mean and insolent Osborne. Mrs. Thrale and Boswell claimed to have got the story from Johnson himself, but in their reports, both vary in details. Mrs. Thrale's version indicates that the beating was done in Tom Osborne's house,[17] while Boswell sets the scene of the scuffle in Johnson's own chamber.[18] In years after Johnson's death, other "retailers" spiced up the story with further ingredients. Johnson admitted, according to Mrs. Thrale,[19] to having knocked the blockhead down with his own Dictionary, but the retellers named a huge Greek folio Bible as the weapon. With what they knew of Johnson's character and favourite expressions and with the use of imagination, these retellers increasingly padded the anecdote. Johnson was made to put his foot on Osborne's neck by one account, and on his breast by another account.[20] What remains consistently true in all of these versions of the anecdote is the naked

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17 Piozzi, Anecdotes, p. 150.

18 Boswell, Johnson, p. 112.

19 Piozzi, p. 150.

20 James L. Clifford, "A Biographer Looks at Dr. Johnson," New Light on Dr. Johnson, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven, 1959), p. 127.

statement that Johnson beat up Tom Osborne.

While it must be admitted that anecdotal materials are invaluable to a biographer, it must be realized, too, that they are the most delicate of his tools. A biographer who determines to vindicate the character of his subject with anecdotes and follows up any given one, must come to a dilemma when he has no means of reconciling the various versions. The only authentic authority to fall back to in such a case is one of the characters in the story. If he cannot say as Mrs. Thrale or Boswell, "Dr. Johnson told me," the only objective way of handling the problem would be to report the various versions of the story and appraise them thereafter. Or, one could imitate Dr. Johnson's own approach and condense and compress several anecdotes into a generalized discourse. Johnson does this most effectively in one of his usual summaries and commentaries after the narration of major incidents in the Life of Savage. This follows the frustration of Savage's hope of recognition and reward from the Prince of Wales for the dedication of his poem Of Public Spirit in Regard to Public Works to the Prince.

> Thus his poem contributed nothing to the alleviation of his poverty, which was such as very few could have supported with equal patience,...
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> He lodged as much by accident as he dined, and passed the night sometimes in mean houses, which are set open at night to any casual wanderers, sometimes in cellars, among the riot and filth of the meanest and most

> profligate of the rabble; and sometimes, when he had not money to support even the expenses of these receptacles, walked about the streets till he was weary, and lay down in the summer upon a bulk, or in the winter, with his associates in poverty, among the ashes of a glass-house. 21

This account compresses several anecdotes which Boswell would have been delighted to narrate separately and in great detail; for it is not to be doubted that Savage's practice of taking refuge from cold in cellars and upon the ashes of glass-houses had colourful anecdotes connected with it, some of which Johnson must have known from others, and some as part of personal experience. Compressing anecdotes to their salient points and thus reporting them as headlines, as Johnson does here, is a more reasonable way of handling them than narrating them as stories when the details cannot be ascertained. It shows maturity of comprehension, judgment, and interpretation.

Dr. Johnson's love of anecdote seems to have been an unconscious response to a seething demand of an age that freely indulged in gossip, correspondence, and journal-keeping. Biography fostered the desire to be well informed about the minute details of human behaviour. No writer can be entirely free from involvement with the temper of his age, since he must either be preoccupied with the struggle to change it, or be contented to express its approval, in his writing. Either of these lines of action can be taken consciously or unconsciously.

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21 Johnson, Lives, IV, 221.

As an explanation for the conflict between Johnson's distrust of history, romance and stories, and his love of anecdote, it might be proposed that the latter was a result of an unconscious motivation. In his biographies, anecdotes -- "minute passages of private life"[22] -- are not copious, and the few are seldom employed with sharpness as a passage into private recesses of character. They lack the precision and clarity of the Plutarchian anecdotes. For instance, when Plutarch, in his Life of Alexander the Great, wanted to illustrate what he called "Alexander's passion for pre-eminence,"[23] he recounted that when Alexander, campaigning in Asia, learned that his old teacher had published some philosophical treatises, he wrote at once: "Alexander to Aristotle greeting. You have not done well to publish your books of oral doctrine, for what is there now that we excel others in, if those things which we have been particularly instructed in be laid open to all?"[24]

When Johnson wants to illustrate Savage's generosity and humanity, he recounts the anecdote in which Savage gave half of the only guinea he had to the street woman who had testified against him in the Sinclair case. The motive

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[22] Johnson, "Anecdote," The Dictionary of English Language, fourth ed. (London, 1773).

[23] Plutarch, Lives, The Translation Called Dryden's, ed. A.H. Clough (London, 1893), IV, 167.

[24] Ibid.

for this action is not as explicit as the one in the Plutarchian story. While no one can assent that there were other motives in Savage's case than the desire to relieve want, no one can deny the possibility that there were. When the motive for action is liable to many interpretations, the anecdote loses something of its force or usefulness in the interpretation of character. Most of Johnson's anecdotes either point a moral or furnish delight, and it was this type of anecdote that he loved; they do not assist impressively in enforcing conviction. His strength of conviction lies upon psychological penetration and analysis, rather than upon anecdotes.

Some critics have found Johnson confusing, if not completely inconsistent, in his insisting upon minute details in biography but upon generalization in poetry or drama. "The business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display minute details of life,"[25] says Johnson on biography. "The business of a poet 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,"[26] he says on poetry.

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[26] Johnson, "Rambler No. 60," Works, I, 102.

[27] Johnson, History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, ed. G. B. Hill (London, 1958), p. 62.

Professor Tracy considers this an "unconscious inconsistency"[27] on the part of Johnson to advocate detailed description in one part and generalized presentation in another part of literature. But the apparent inconsistency or confusion vanishes with the understanding that poetry or drama is a representation of life or human nature in general, in which what is represented is "the genuine progeny of common humanity," and "not modified by the customs of particular places."[28]

Biography is the description of particular lives which must be done in such a way that the distinction between one life and another is clearly brought out. The necessity for the difference of approach which Johnson here recommends is elementary and offers no opportunity for cavilling. Perhaps Professor Tracy will agree that when the description of an immense building is required, details of each room would be boring, whereas details would not only be satisfying but necessary when that of single rooms in the building is called for.

Johnson rated autobiography above biography. On this there have been dissenting opinions. Autobiography may be regarded as an expression of certainty of knowledge, and

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[27] C.R. Tracy, "Johnson and the Art of Anecdotes," University of Toronto Quarterly, XV, No. 1 (October 1945), 87.

[28] Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," Prose and Poetry, selected by Mona Wilson (London, 1957), p. 491.

biography, in that respect, as reconstruction with materials which might not all be genuine. No one denies that certainty of knowledge makes for truth. But a point to be remembered is that it can also facilitate artful suppression of useful materials. Johnson's preference for autobiography, like his recommendation of the conversation with a servant, is unqualified. An autobiography can be more of a true picture of the individual as he really was, provided that the writer is honest. Johnson seems to assume honesty for everyone who writes the history of his life, even when he has discovered that epistolary correspondence, which is a type of autobiography, is very unreliable, and that no one willingly sits down to depreciate himself. Even when an autobiographer is honest, self-preservation will unfailingly induce him to conceal some outstanding defects which in his judgment are detrimental to a decent memory. The opinion of Herbert Spencer in the following quotation is in agreement with the general conception of the quality of truth in autobiography:

> The autobiographer is bound to omit from his narrative the commonplace of daily life and to limit himself almost exclusively to salient events, actions and traits.... But by leaving out the humdrum part of the life, forming that immensely larger part which it has in common with other lives, and by setting forth only the striking things, he produces the impression that it differed from other lives more than it really did. This defect is inevitable. 29

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29 Garraty, p. 151.

As long as didacticism, the preponderant emphasis upon moral behaviour, such as Johnson advocated, remains the purpose of biography, and society remains critical of private behaviour of the individual, so long will the autobiographer remain compelled to veil himself. But he may unconsciously drop occasional hints from which a diligent researcher may find more of the real man than he may ever find from a distorted biography.

As a biographer, Dr. Johnson does not distinguish himself as a patient, scientific research scholar. He made it clear in the Preface to the Lives of the Poets that to search for the minute details of a life is tedious and not really important. The passion for research, the insatiable desire and quest for manuscripts, letters and people who have outlived their time and who may be able to release secrets of the past -- this was not one of his many qualifications for the writing of a life. He depended mostly upon anecdotes for his biographies. He also consulted previous biographies of his subjects, and in many instances did not study them carefully. His Lives are not entirely reliable as far as the basic facts are concerned.

Though he entered in his diary, after completing the Lives of the Poets, that he wrote it in his usual dilatory and hasty manner, it cannot be assumed that it was mainly due to natural sloth that he failed to search patiently for accurate and copious information for his biographies. When he wrote his

early Lives he was a hack-writer and so was constrained under the circumstances to rush, in order to meet the deadline of the publishers and booksellers. When he started writing the Lives of the Poets he was sixty-eight years old, and this is not the time in any man's life for flexibility and mobility which research requires. In addition, Johnson was never a very robust man. Nevertheless, he wrote letters to surviving relatives of the poets, asking for information, and did some research at Oxford, either in person or by proxy. It appears to me, as Thayer has observed,[30] that most critics of Johnson's biographies do not appear to have taken the trouble to read them, but condemn Johnson on the authority of Boswell that he was a sloppy and impatient biographer.[31] They are ready to set against him the modern scientific biographer with his great assemblage of facts and documents, who composes Lives that are tiresome and unreadable, though perhaps more reliable as source materials.

Unlike the scientific biographers or the antiquarians, Johnson is a master of his facts which he melts down to a plastic form that yields easily to his graphic and virile manipulation. His narrative is generally terse and elegant, while theirs, for the most part, are prosaic and insipid. A single example in

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[30] W.R. Thayer, The Art of Biography (New York, 1920), p. 85.

[31] Boswell, Johnson, p. 1000, n. 1, pp. 1102-3.

the Life of Pope may illustrate this point. Owen Ruffhead, an early biographer of Pope, whose work was supervised by the antiquarian, Dr. William Warburton, in reporting Pope's early education had said that he was

> for a few months, placed under the tuition of another priest, one Deane from whose instructions, however, he received very little benefit, having made no farther progress under him, than that of being able to construe a little of Tully's Offices. 32

Johnson uses a little more than half the number of Ruffhead's words to report this point with more clarity and precision: "He had for a few months the assistance of one Deane, another priest of whom he learned only to construe a little of Tully's Offices."[33]

Most critics would agree that Johnson's Life of Savage and Life of Pope are foremost among his Lives and outstanding among English biographies of all ages, though they may not be definitive with respect to facts. Their chief merit lies not in accuracy of details but in the pleasing and vigorous style and sound judgment of the author. Professor Tracy says of the Life of Savage that it "is Johnson's best study of character, and one of the best ever written by anyone;"[34] and Professor Sherburn says of Johnson's Pope that "it is easily

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32 Frederick W. Hilles, "The Making of The Life of Pope," New Light on Dr. Johnson, pp. 264-266.

33 Hilles, pp. 264-266.

34 Tracy, The Artificial Bastard, p. vi.

the most satisfactory of the lives of the poet yet written."[35] Each of these men is a biographer of the poet whose life by Johnson he so highly commends. Their own accounts are so cluttered with facts and so full of literary disputations on the pedigree and family tree of their subjects that none but the scholar or the antiquarian finds them appealing. But Johnson's accounts remain the most readable because, as Professor Hilles says, of his "pithy aphorisms, or those sub-acid comments"[36] which characterize his biographical narratives.

To seize the essential facts that make the difference between one individual and another and with them construct a moving and progressive life: these abilities constitute the quintessence of biography. Unless a biographer succeeds in carrying out these tasks, no amount of painstaking documentation will make his work appealing to the general reader, unless it is to the scholar who is as scientific in his approach to facts as himself.

Johnson triumphs over most biographers with his power of seizing the essential facts and presenting them vividly. His knowledge of the human heart in its private or secret depths as well as in its public manifestations, together with his talent for dramatic narration, place Johnson among the foremost of

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[35] George Sherburn, The Early Career of Alexander Pope (Oxford, 1934), p. 13.

[36] Hilles, p. 266.

biographers. His wide sympathies, his deep knowledge of human nature, account for his remarkable psychological penetration. He has gained a position as the greatest of biographers not because of accurate and elaborate documentation of his biographies, but because he was more interested in men than in poetry, and more in life than in scientific scholarship.

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