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## **Review Article**

### **Samuel Johnson's Politics: Some Points of Disagreement**

*The Politics of Samuel Johnson*. By Donald J. Greene. 2nd. ed., Athens, Ga.: U of Georgia P, 1990. Pp. 356. \$20.00.

The late twentieth century has witnessed a resurgence of interest in some eighteenth-century literary figures and, not surprisingly, portions of their *oeuvre* have become, as it were, the property of certain scholars who have erected their own fence posts and put up "No Trespassing" signs as warnings to would-be usurpers. This happens all the time in scholarship. No big deal. *Ça marche*. As far as Samuel Johnson's political writings are concerned, the holes for the posts have been dug, and dug deeply, and a strong wire boundary fence constructed from corner to corner by Donald J. Greene, whose book *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (1960) remains, after more than three decades, the work which exerts the dominant influence in this field of study. A second edition of the book appeared in 1990, with an introduction in which Greene lengthily congratulates himself on the rightness of his views of thirty years ago. "I think the book's arguments have been accepted by most students of English literature," he says. He then goes on to demolish the arguments of a few hardy souls, notably J. C. D. Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill, who have poked their heads under the wire to question one or two small points. It is hard to think of a scholar who is so adept at sniffing out

weaknesses in opponents, and pouncing, as Greene. A good many have bled from trying to get under that fence. I have a few scars on my own back.

It isn't only the 1960 book that has made Greene's influence in Johnson studies powerful. He has acidly promoted and defended his views in the journals, reviews, and papers. His name is prominent in *Samuel Johnson: A Survey and Bibliography of Critical Studies* (1970), edited by James L. Clifford and Donald J. Greene, and in its sequel, *A Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies* (1987), edited by Donald Greene and John A. Vance. He edited the Twentieth Century Views collection of essays on Johnson (1965). He wrote the Twayne biography of Johnson (1970) and the *Annotated Guide* to Johnson's Library (1975). He edited the Oxford Authors anthology of Johnson (1984). He edited the *Political Writings* (1977) in the Yale edition of the *Works* of Johnson, which, as he told us in 1990, is "probably the most useful single volume for students of Johnson's politics" to be published "during the past thirty years." Nor is that all. Pick up a volume of essays entitled, say, *New Approaches to Eighteenth Century Literature*, and there he is. Like old Hamlet's ghost, he is *hic et ubique*.

But *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* constitutes, perhaps, his main achievement. What that study does, or tries to do, is to survey Johnson's political writings against the background of English history, and to claim for him, rather unexpectedly, an eminent status in eighteenth-century political thought. The main drift of Greene's study has not been accepted by historians and political theorists, who seem on the whole to have remained indifferent to the claims made for Johnson, but scholars in the related field of literary history have, as Greene has said more than once, by and large accepted it. I, too, as I've stated on more than one occasion, accept some of what's in his book. But scholarship proceeds, in part, by disagreement. What Johnson himself said of writers in *Rambler* 93 may be usefully remembered: "he that writes may be considered as a kind of general challenger, whom every one has a right to attack; since he quits the common rank of life, steps forward beyond the lists, and offers his merit to the public judgement." This maxim has been well absorbed by Greene, who has spent a lifetime questioning, rebutting, revising, and ridiculing the arguments of other Johnsonians.

Greene has always struck me as too much of an enthusiast, a Johnso-

nian zealot whose cause is to defend his idol against Macaulay and other enemies or alleged enemies. It is Greene and Johnson *contra mundum*. I mention Macaulay because it is his essay of 1831, actually a review of Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, to which Greene repeatedly returns as the main fomenter of the view he most wants to challenge: namely, the view that Johnson was "a bigotted Tory" or (to quote Macaulay again) a "Tory and high churchman." Greene, in his introduction to his new edition, dismisses this review contemptuously as "Macaulay's little one-hundred-year-old piece of journalism." A few comments on this phrase are called for. First, Macaulay's review is not little, it's an essay of about 20,000 words, much longer than any of Johnson's political pamphlets of the 1770s, nearly half the length of his novel *Rasselas* (1759). Second, it's not 100 years old, it's 162 years old. Not that its antiquity should be used to discredit it! Indeed, some would argue that Macaulay's proximity to the Age of Johnson—the essay was written less than fifty years after Johnson's death—might bestow certain advantages on it, advantages which we, living in the late twentieth century, do not enjoy. Third, why the crack about the essay being a "piece of journalism"? If we're going to dismiss such pieces as Macaulay's long review as trivial, let's not forget that Johnson himself produced a lot of much shorter pieces of journalism in a long life of writing, and that Greene has made ample use of them in his book. More of that later. Those who read Greene's repeated assaults on Macaulay should go back to Macaulay and read *him*. They will find that Greene's view of that essay is not to be trusted.

Greene, to repeat, is an enthusiast. He has to be defending Johnson all the time against imagined attackers or those who will not accept fully the arguments in his book, arguments to which, as he wrote in *Studies in Burke and his Time* in 1970 (XI, 3, 1586), he "continues to await" replies. Enthusiasm of the kind we find in his book does not always sit easily with the responsibilities of scholarship. We don't get a complete picture of Johnson's political views from him. We find out where he thinks Johnson was brilliant and advanced; but there is an unwillingness to concede that some of his views were shallow and limited. I think we have to be prepared to make this kind of concession of Johnson, as we do of Tolstoy, Swift, Orwell, and other thinkers. Someone who could say what Johnson said of Milton's "Lycidas" ("the diction is harsh, the rhymes

uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing") or of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* ("once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest") was capable of other dumb judgments.

To give an example. Johnson's pamphlet of 1770, *The False Alarm*, was an effort to defend the ministry's (and Parliament's) treatment of John Wilkes. I can't give a detailed account of this affair, but the essence is this: on February 17, 1769, the House of Commons declared Wilkes incapable of being elected in "this present Parliament;" on April 15, having considered the returns from the Middlesex election of April 13 (Wilkes 1143, Luttrell 296), the House passed the resolution that "Henry Lawes Luttrell Esq. ought to have been returned a member for Middlesex and not John Wilkes Esq.," thereby giving Luttrell the seat. The two resolutions set England in turmoil. Greene shows that Johnson in his pamphlet argues with considerable legal subtlety that what the House did on this occasion was constitutionally correct. As far as I know, Greene still "continues to await" replies to this position. I am not going to reply to it here, although I have to point out that the Commons itself, in 1782, passed a motion to the effect that the resolution of February 17, 1769, be expunged from the *Journals* of the House, "as being subversive of the Rights of the whole body of Electors of this kingdom." This may suggest that however right Greene may think Johnson was in his constitutional argument, the House of Commons had misgivings about it. But let that pass.

The point I want to make is that the gist of *The False Alarm*, as provided by Greene and praised by him for the advanced quality of the thinking contained in it, isn't all that's in *The False Alarm*. He does allude briefly and uncomfortably to one other aspect of it, namely, Johnson's scornful discussion of the role of the "rabble" in politics. This is the pamphlet in which Johnson writes of the responsibility of leading "the people back to their honest labour." He adds, through the mouth of an imaginary "man of higher rank and more enlightened mind" of whose views he approves, that "submission is the duty of the ignorant, and content the virtue of the poor." Greene doesn't feel happy that Johnson wrote the last six words. "I do not know of any other place," he writes, where Johnson tells the poor to be content with their lot. A couple of comments on this. First, I note that Greene, while he seems to regret that Johnson tells the poor to follow the virtue of contentment, doesn't draw



attention to the first half of the phrase, where it is said that "submission is the duty of the ignorant." I don't know why he wouldn't feel as inclined to try and justify that half of the phrase as the other. Does he think that by focussing on the second part the reader might slip over the first? But no doubt he is aware that such a sentiment can be found elsewhere in Johnson, as, for instance, in the discussion of the role of the tacksmen in the Highland economy in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), where Johnson seems well pleased to have the Highlander walking his heath "with the peaceable submission of a French peasant," while the tacksmen, who were middlemen employed by the lairds to collect rents, walked off with a big share of the loot. In any case, to tell the ignorant they should submit is as repugnant as telling the poor to be content with their lot. If one has to be explained, the other has to be explained. As usual, Greene is much inclined to let Johnson off the hook. "Perhaps he should not be too harshly blamed for not being farther in advance of his time," he says of these sentiments in *The False Alarm*. Farther in advance! In this pamphlet, bringing up the rear would be more like it. Remembering Swift in Ireland in the 1720s will help us gain a perspective on Johnson in his political writings of the 1770s.

That's the first point. Second: Greene says he can't find Johnson preaching to the poor contentment with their lot in "any other place" *except* in a pamphlet dealing with a crisis in English constitutional history brought on, in part, by the farmers and shopkeepers and tailors and drapiers and blacksmiths and other common men (the "rabble" referred to in the pamphlet) who evidently *were* discontent with their lot and who demanded a say in public affairs. That is, he can't find Johnson preaching to the poor contentment with their lot apart from what he wrote in a work dealing with the role of the poor in politics. He brings to mind an old acquaintance who once said he wasn't sure Shakespeare had much interest in Denmark because he'd set only one play there.

But there are still other parts of *The False Alarm* that Greene ignores or glides over. In the course of presenting his constitutional points, Johnson turns away from legalistic argument to more general considerations. Of governments, he says this: "We must be content with them as they are; should we attempt to mend their disproportions, we might easily demolish . . . them"—which comes close to arguing

. . . that all reflection  
On ministers, is disaffection.

But he continues. Despite what has happened in Parliament, he says, "The sun has risen, and the corn has grown, and whatever talk has been of the danger of property, yet he that ploughed the field commonly reaped it, and he that built a house was master of the door. [Citizens] feel at present no evils which government can alleviate." Moreover, if what has happened to Middlesex had happened in every other county in England, "it could produce no great change in Parliament." Then this remark, so intriguing when we consider Greene's claims that Johnson's constitutional arguments are right: "What has been done [by the ministry] is probably right, and . . . if it be wrong it is of little consequence." This vein is continued. "Why, he says, referring to the petitions being circulated throughout England, "should the farmers and shopkeepers of Yorkshire and Cumberland know or care how Middlesex is represented?" But I've quoted enough from the pamphlet. The thread of political indifferentism, because that's what it is, runs throughout it. We recognize it from many other statements made by Johnson, in conversations, letters, and books. This is the Johnson who said to Sir Adam Fergusson that he wouldn't give "half a guinea to live under one form of government rather than another; it is of no moment to the happiness of an individual;" who has Rasselas, Prince of Ethiopia, say that no matter what happens in governments "the smith still plies his anvil, and the husbandman drives his plough forward, the necessaries of life are required and obtained, and the successive business of the seasons continues to make its wonted revolutions;" who added to Goldsmith's *The Traveller* these lines:

How small, of all that human hearts endure,  
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure,

and who penned this in perhaps his most celebrated pamphlet, *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775), written to counter the arguments of the American colonists that they were being taxed without representation in Parliament: "What at last is the difference, between him that is taxed by compulsion without representation, and him that is represented by compulsion in order to be taxed?"

The implication being that there is no difference between somebody

living in Boston, taxed without representation, and somebody living in Middlesex, taxed with it.

What are these but very superficial arguments and statements? And yet Johnson makes them over and over. I've quoted only a few examples. He evidently believed them; they have to be considered, and well considered, in any complete reading of his political attitudes. Greene does treat this indifferentism in his book, but passes over it quickly as if embarrassed by it (179–81), and relates it to a period in Johnson's life, the 1750s, that "was not a happy time"—forgetting that the attitude extends well beyond the 1750s. He quotes the lines from Goldsmith's *Traveller*, and says how "mournful it is to speculate that Johnson might well have changed his mind" about the idea in it, "had he known what progress would be made by posterity in extending the dominion of laws and rulers over human hearts."

*Might well have; had he known.* We have to be on the watch for phrases like this as we read Greene on Johnson.

The unwillingness to find fault is a product of Johnson idolatry, of the assumption that the great lexicographer was also a political thinker of the stature of Burke and Marx. This assumption pervades Greene's book. It gives it, at times, an element of fantasy which I can best illustrate by looking briefly at the opening section of Chapter 2, entitled "The Legacy of the Civil War." Now if you assume that Johnson was a great political thinker, then it is perhaps natural to want to trace the origins of his beliefs back to his youth, to his memories of historical conflicts, to early influences. Greene does this, and improbably locates the roots of Johnson's political thinking in the Civil War of 1642–51—perhaps hoping to find some early explanation of the older Johnson's hostility to rebellion and support for the principle of subordination in society. Besides, Johnson was born in Lichfield, whose Cathedral Close had been a Royalist garrison for most of the war. (It was held briefly by Parliamentarians in March–April, 1643, but was retaken by Royalists; it surrendered to Parliament's forces in July, 1646. In this latter siege, the highest spire of the Cathedral was destroyed by cannon fire.) It is to "the memory of the 1640s and 50s" (29) that Greene attributes some of Johnson's political instincts.

It may be necessary to remind ourselves here that Johnson was born in 1709, so that whatever "memory" of the war survived in his maturity

would be rather faint. But Greene spends eleven pages of his book trying to establish that the Civil War did have a "possible effect" on Johnson's political thinking. It is a tricky thing to prove, since Johnson wrote practically nothing on the subject apart from a few paragraphs in biographies of four men whose lives happened to span the period in question, some references to it—surprisingly tepid ones—in his essay of 1756, "An Introduction to the Political State of Great-Britain," where you might well expect him to deal with it at length, a sentence or two in *The False Alarm*, and scattered allusions hither and yon. In fact, he directed an ironical sentence in *Rambler* 46 at those who still feel "the heart-burnings of the civil war." But Greene faces his task manfully, and his chapter, whatever its faults, is a superb illustration of what ingenuity can contrive when facts are in short supply.

Lichfield Cathedral, he reminds us, suffered so much from the civil commotions of the seventeenth century that by 1660 it was "a battered ruin." It was, however, repaired during the next twenty years, and Michael Johnson, Samuel's father, "would have vividly remembered the process of reconstruction."

Let's pause here. In the introduction to the new edition of *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, Greene quotes Boswell, who said of Michael Johnson that he was "a zealous high-churchman and royalist, and retained his attachment to the unfortunate House of Stuart." Greene's comment: "How Boswell who was not born until thirty years after Michael Johnson's assumption of the office of Sheriff of Lichfield, could have acquired this insight into the recesses of Michael's mind at the time we are not told."

Nor, I might add, are we told, by someone born over two hundred years after Michael Johnson became Sheriff of Lichfield, how *he* knows that said Michael would have remembered, nay "vividly" remembered, the reconstruction of Lichfield Cathedral.

But to return. The sight of the rebuilt cathedral, says Greene, "could hardly fail to leave some lasting impression on the mind of an imaginative boy" like Samuel. We know that at the age of 64 he condemned those who wanted to strip the cathedral of its lead, and when he wrote movingly of the ruins at Iona in his *Journey to the Western Island of Scotland*, "perhaps he was also thinking of Lichfield Cathedral." Having offered this evidence, Greene continues: "If to Johnson's poetic mind the old Cathedral of Lichfield was venerable as a symbol of the hard-won

victory of light over darkness . . ."

*If!* Some if! Johnson grew up in Lichfield and therefore knew the great Cathedral: I don't deny that. Its history had some meaning in his life: of that too we may be confident. But to speculate about what that meaning was, in the absence of specific written testimony, seems to me a futile exercise. A "symbol of the hard-won victory of light over darkness," was it? It could have meant something completely different. We simply have no means of knowing.

Proceeding to enlarge on the historical associations and Royalist sympathies of the town of Lichfield, Greene says: "To grow up in Lichfield in the early years of the eighteenth century, as Johnson did, would be a little like growing up, to use an American analogy, in Atlanta during the later decades of the nineteenth century." (We have to watch Greene's use of words like "early" and "later": non-specificity is useful to him.) A *little* like, he says. How little is little? Johnson was a lot farther removed in time from the English Civil War than someone in Atlanta in the "later" decades of the nineteenth century was from the American Civil War. In 1864 Atlanta was invaded by Union troops under Sherman, and most of it burned to the ground; nothing comparable happened in Lichfield. The American Civil War resulted in the armed conquest of one huge part of the nation by another; it cost the lives of over 600,000 men and left deep scars, especially, of course, in the South; by comparison, the English Civil War, while it had serious consequences of course, had nothing like such losses in life or property. The analogy he draws has, I think, little real weight. He goes on: "Certainly it would have been a much less alert and curious youth than Samuel Johnson whose political sympathies would not have been awakened and stimulated by such a heritage of memory and tradition." Despite the "Certainly," we are here in the region of pure guesswork.

Greene now invites his reader to assume that something has been proved. "At the bottom of Johnson's political thinking, then," he notes casually, "there would always have been a vivid awareness of the events of 1640 to 1660" (27). Note: not just an awareness, but a *vivid* awareness. Note too: we have passed from Greene's statement that Johnson's Midland milieu had a "possible effect" on his "political and social thinking" (22) to an assertion, five pages later, that it was "at the bottom" of his "political thinking"—quite a jump. Gaining confidence from the

use of the word "then," not to mention the "always," he cautions that "the problem must not be oversimplified." The alert reader, not aware as yet that any "problem" exists, wonders into what airy region he is to be taken next. The "problem," it turns out, is that in the seventeenth century there were people in Lichfield other than those of Royalist tendency. There were Parliamentarians there too. Greene lists some of them, says that Michael Johnson took one into his house as a boarder, gives a few similarly trivial facts, and notes that it is "significant" that Samuel "was named after the grandson of a persecutor of Royalists." On the exact significance of this point he chooses not to enlarge.

He is now seven pages into his commentary. It "may be useful" at this point, he writes, to collect "what we can" of Johnson's actual ideas about the Civil War and its effects. (The phrase "may be useful" provokes the response: yes, since you are elaborating on a writer's opinions, it *would* be useful actually to quote him. Note as well the shrewdness of "what we can." The implication is that we may yet turn up more, or that Johnson said a lot on the subject in unrecorded conversations.) There are six brief paragraphs on the Puritans in the life of Butler (1779). Here's one of them, from the discussion of *Hudibras* (1663–78):

It is scarcely possible, in the regularity and composure of the present time, to image the tumult of absurdity and clamour of contradiction which perplexed doctrine, disordered practice, and disturbed both public and private quiet, in that age when subordination was broken, and awe was hissed away; when any unsettled innovator who could hatch a half-formed notion produced it to the public; when every man might become a preacher, and almost every preacher could collect a congregation.

Greene quotes and makes much of this paragraph, relating it to "Johnson's horror of the revolutionary state," and saying that in his eyes "the days of Cromwell appeared not, as some writers in the comparative calm of the nineteenth century seemed to regard them, a prelude to Victorian liberal democracy, but rather an adumbration of something not far removed from Orwell's *1984*."

Having made so much out of thin air, once he gets his hands on a *text*, albeit a short one, that supports what he wants to have us think, he can really run with it. To me the paragraph reads somewhat differently. It has Johnson stressing the remoteness and indistinctness of the milieu of

*Hudibras*, which, he says, it is now "scarcely possible" even to "image." He does not say, the memory of that tumultuous age is keenly alive in me, so much so that it fills me with horror. He says, in the present state of "regularity and composure" in society, it is hard to imagine the crazy things that went on back in that dark, distant era. He is writing literary criticism, and is trying to explain the ideas found in an odd old poem. As he says in the sentence immediately prior to the paragraph in question, "Our grandfathers knew the pictures from the life; we judge of the life by contemplating the picture." He goes on in succeeding paragraphs in this mood of folkloristic explanation, saying "we have never been witnesses of animosities excited by the use of mince-pies and plum-porridge," noting a story told to him once by "an old Puritan," discussing games of chance and astrology. I can see little in these paragraphs to support the view that they convey "a horror of the revolutionary state," much less remind one of 1984. Greene has grossly distorted their meaning.

He then notes the anti-Puritan element in the life of Milton (1779) and improbably cites Johnson's criticism of "Lycidas" as an example of his hostility towards "Whig" thinking. Comments on the lives of Cheynel (1751) and Blake (1740) follow. He quotes Johnson's harsh comments on Cheynel's attempt to "destroy subordination" in his experiments at Oxford University and, this not conforming well with his own notions of Johnson's political attitudes, adds: "one wonders whether Johnson's recommendations of the spirit of subordination were not sometimes the product of an uneasy feeling that he himself might have used more of it." ("Sir, you *may* wonder.") But there is little grist for Greene's mill in these two short biographies. What is surprising to the student of Johnson who turns to them after reading Greene's book is that they are almost barren of political comment.

Aware by this point that he has offered his reader only a few scraps of evidence, most of it decidedly anti-Puritan in temper, Greene attempts his most daring coup. It is rather, he says, "what Johnson does not say about the Puritans than what he does that may be found surprising." From this odd remark he goes on to suggest that Johnson was not bigotted against the Puritans; indeed, "it is even possible to trace at times a certain sympathy in Johnson for aspects of the Puritan movement." Two times, to be precise. Johnson on one occasion praised Cromwell's abilities as a leader and on another told Boswell that he had at one time planned to

write Cromwell's life.

The conclusion reached by Greene after this medley of perhapses, ifs, mights, and misreadings is hardly worth relating. If it is necessary to build a system on such a flimsy "bottom" as this, scholars may feel safer holding the opinion that Johnson's political views are important but secondary extensions and illustrations of the moral insights contained in a work like *The Rambler*. The solemn parading of the alleged influences upon Johnson's political thought strikes me as a distortion of his early life. Had the Civil War deeply touched him—as, say, Cromwell's massacre of citizens at Drogheda scarred Irishmen's memory, or as the American Civil War affected Margaret Mitchell—he would surely have written more about it than he did. We have accounts of his early life, including his own account. There is no suggestion in it of an awakening political consciousness about the Civil War, or much else, for that matter. I am not saying he had no political awareness at all; he wasn't a monk. I'm talking about his particular interests, or what we can find out about them. There is no political dimension that I know of to the story of his stay at Oxford. Sir John Hawkins, whose biography of Johnson is better than Boswell's on the early years, tells us that at Oxford Johnson's "favorite objects" were "classical literature, ethics and theology," and that while he had an inclination to "the practice of the civil or the common law," he had no opportunity to take "the long course of academical instruction" required by the former, nor any knowledge of how to pursue the latter. Boswell relates that Johnson told him that at Oxford he read "solidly" in Greek literature—"not the Grecian historians, but Homer and Euripides, and now and then a little Epigram"—and that "the study of which he was the most fond was Metaphysics." His earliest literary projects were not political; indeed, in his letter to the London bookseller Edward Cave in November, 1734, when Johnson was twenty-five, he proposes the insertion in Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* of "literary dissertations in Latin or English, critical remarks on authors ancient or modern, forgotten poems that deserve revival, or loose pieces, like Floyer's, worth preserving," instead of "low jests, awkward buffoonery, or the dull scurrilities of either party." There is in this a bookish contempt for the pettiness of political squabbling. When he came to London in 1737, he brought with him a letter by Gilbert Walmsley commending him as a translator from Latin or French and as "a very good scholar and a



poet," together with the tragedy *Irene*, which is a heavily moralistic drama centring on the question of whether or not the heroine will pawn her chastity for security. This may owe much to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; it reflects nothing of any emerging political awareness. In all likelihood Johnson became politically aware in London, when he wrote anti-Walpole tracts—not many—of no particular merit, though not uninteresting.

It is true that, late in life, in his biography of Edmund Smith, Johnson says of Walmsley, whom he met in 1726, that "He was a Whig, with all the virulence and malevolence of his party; yet difference of opinion did not keep us apart." This latter-day judgment may be something to go on. It isn't much to go on.

Another caveat. I always feel in reading Greene that I have descended into a Johnsonian sub-canon of occasional writings, hack work, pamphlets, prefaces to this and that book, and doubtful attributions. The reason for his reliance on such texts is obvious: Johnson's greatest works, from the *Account of the Life of Savage* (1744) to *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), the *Dictionary* (1755), the edition of *Shakespeare* (1765), and the *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), are not political. *The Rambler* (1750–52), two hundred and four essays which contain Johnson's most profound thinking about human problems, is, as Greene admits, "remarkably free of direct expressions of specifically political opinion." We may translate this nervous statement into plain English by saying that *The Rambler* is not concerned with politics. The admission by Greene in *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* is a highly suggestive one. A rough equivalent would be to find in a book on, say, Marx as psychologist, a sentence noting that *Das Kapital* will have to be passed over because it regrettably contains nothing on the subject of psychology. But notice the way Greene finds to make this admission: the *Rambler* is *remarkably* free of *direct* expressions of *specifically* political opinion. The suggestion is that were politicians to root around in it, they would find much to stimulate them. In the Introduction to his new edition, he comes back to this: it is "sometimes hard," he says, "to make a distinction between what constitutes a political pronouncement and what not, especially if, as I argue, Johnson, like Orwell, thought politics and morality inextricably linked." (I'll have a word to say about this comparison between Johnson and Orwell a little later.) Accordingly, he says, his collection of Johnson's *Political Writings*

in the Yale edition might well have included "many *Rambler* . . . essays." I guess these are the ones with *indirect* political opinion in them. There are a few *Rambler* essays which may indeed be construed as political. But Greene says there are "many." How many is "many"? And if there are "many," why didn't he expound on their political significance?

At any rate, in 1960 he felt he had to exclude the *Rambler* from his consideration of Johnson's politics. He also had to exclude all but a paragraph of the essays which Johnson contributed to *The Adventurer* (1753–54), *Rasselas*, and (though he finds a little to chew on here) *The Idler* (1758–60). In effect, from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* to *Rasselas*, which, according to the editors of vol. II of the Yale edition of the *Works*, was Johnson's "most fertile decade" as an author, the amount of political commentary is puny when compared with the bulk of his other writing, and his attitude to politics is, as indicated by the earlier quote from *Rasselas*, largely one of indifference. Greene himself finds nothing much by Johnson to work on from 1744 to 1756, a fact which he attributes to "a revulsion on Johnson's own part from his intense preoccupation with politics during the previous six years." The remark is prefaced by a judicious "perhaps" (141).

The fact is that the great central texts of the Johnson canon yield little in the way of political discussion. Greene has to go elsewhere into such examples of ephemeral literature as are described in *Rambler* 106; by the way Johnson there specifically gives "political pamphlets" as an example of these "bubbles." I suspect that, influenced by Greene, Johnsonians have over the last thirty years given inordinate attention to this miscellaneous literature, at the expense of a work like *The Rambler*, which to my mind is still by no means fully understood.

I also have to ask how credible is the reliance placed by Greene and others on certain works on the fringe of the canon. Let me illustrate this.

Much is made by Greene and, to my dismay, by biographers Walter Jackson Bate and John Wain, and still others, of Johnson's alleged contributions to Robert Chambers's Vinerian lectures on the English law. Greene refers to these lectures at length both in the 1960 edition of his book, where he devotes five pages to them and calls the "Johnsonian portions" of them "the clearest and most important statement of Johnson's fundamental political views extant," and in the introduction to his new edition, where they occupy him for about six more pages. Robert

Chambers, a young friend of Johnson's, was elected Vinerian Professor at Oxford in 1766. For some reason, he was tardy in composing the lectures on law which were required of him in the position. Johnson helped him prepare them in the years 1766-7, and perhaps later. There is no external evidence in the limited surviving correspondence or in journal entries to indicate the precise nature of Johnson's participation in this work—though Mrs. Thrale says in a note in 1777 (*Thraliana*, I, 204) that she knew he wrote the lectures—but there is plenty to show that he did indeed help with it.

How much of Chambers's Vinerian 56 lectures is to be attributed to Chambers himself, a clever, learned man and a fine writer, and how much to Johnson? Greene says they "collaborated," but what does that mean here? Who did the writing, and who supplied the knowledge and ideas? Did the process of collaboration vary from lecture to lecture, and how did it vary? "Come up to town, and lock yourself up from all but me, and I doubt not but Lectures will be produced," Johnson wrote to Chambers from London on December 11, 1766. (Chambers was in Oxford.) Note: he was not proposing to write the lectures and hand them to Chambers. The latter's presence was required for a period of seclusion and work. "I hope you are soon to come again, and go to the old business, for which I expect great abundance of materials and to sit very close": this is Johnson to Chambers on January 22, 1767. Note: he expects "abundance of materials" to work with, possibly meaning that Chambers supplied drafts and Johnson helped him put them into proper literary form. "I returned from helping Chambers at Oxford," Johnson wrote in a notebook on April 9, 1767. "Helping Chambers": so he described it. Is this correcting, shaping, editing? Or writing from scratch? It sounds more like the former than the latter to me. How much *would* he have asserted his own ideas when advising and encouraging a professor of law, albeit a young one? Would he have been a party to such a gross deception as to write another man's set of lectures and have him pass them off as his own?

These are questions that we have no ready means of answering. E.L. McAdam Jr., indeed, in his book *Dr. Johnson and the English Law* (1951), says he is able to distinguish Johnson's contributions from Chambers's on internal evidence, and it was from McAdam's book that Greene learned which were the "Johnsonian portions" of the lectures.

Though McAdam unquestionably made a contribution to Johnson scholarship, which I acknowledge, I place no confidence in his stylistic analysis in that book. I don't think Greene is now fully convinced of it either, for in the introduction to the new edition he tells us:

The question of how Johnson's and Chambers' hands can be distinguished is a difficult one. E.L. McAdam had no doubt about the quotations he prints as Johnson's. . . . Curley [Thomas M. Curley, who produced an edition of the lectures in 1986] is more dubious, and points out that Chambers himself could write excellent English prose. The late Sir Rupert Cross, Chambers's successor as twelfth Vinerian professor, as inclined to see Johnson's hand more frequently than Curley. But now that the full text of the lectures is available, those interested in trying to discover stylistic criteria for canonical attribution have plenty of material to work on.

We do indeed. The first sentence in the above quotation seems to me to concede that the extrication of Johnson's contributions from the lectures remains undone. This, together with the admission that "stylistic criteria" for canonical attribution have not yet been discovered, doesn't square well with the extensive use made of the lectures in his own book. What is more, Greene put one of them, comprising ten pages, in his Oxford anthology *Samuel Johnson*. He couldn't have known for sure that Johnson wrote all, or even a part, of this lecture, but he put it in the anthology anyway.

Entertaining his new doubts about how to distinguish Johnson's hand from Chambers's, how can he persist in calling portions of the lectures the clearest and most important statement of *Johnson's* political principles? Surely it would have been safer, in this second edition of his book, to say they are the clearest and most important statement of Johnson's *and Chambers's* political principles: quite a different thing. (And not a very clear thing.) But do we know enough to say even that? I doubt it.

I have similar misgivings about using the summaries of parliamentary debates in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the late 1730s and early '40s as evidence of Johnson's political thinking.

Let's state the obvious here. The chief subject of Johnson's major writings (leaving aside his scholarly, biographical, and editorial labours) is the moral life of man. The "principal design" of *The Rambler* was, he

said in No. 208, "to inculcate wisdom or piety," and the way he tried to achieve this was to bring his readers to "a nearer acquaintance" with themselves through "the attentive study of [their] own minds" (No. 28). It should not seem "remarkable" that politics does not figure in *The Rambler* because politics is peripheral to that major purpose. "We all have good and evil," he told Joseph Baretti in 1762, "which we feel more sensibly than our petty part of public miscarriage or prosperity" (*Letters*, I, 145). "We are placed here," he wrote emphatically late in life, in his biography of Milton, to learn "how to do good, and avoid evil." That stated purpose, the emphasis on "the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong," distinguishes Johnson from a writer like Orwell, to whom Greene wrongly compares him. Orwell's greatest writings were frankly political in nature, and his involvement in politics was prolonged and intense. He wrote in 1947 that in large part his "job" as an author was to write on "the essentially public, non-individual activities that the age forces on all of us." Nothing could be further from Johnson's intention in a work like *The Rambler*, where his attention is focussed on the inner moral life of man.

What does it mean to say that Johnson was "one of the most political of major writers"? (Greene, 21). Well, I guess he *is* more political than Gray, Swinburne, Tennyson, and Lewis Carroll. But was he, for instance, as politically motivated as Swift or Burke? Or Tolstoy? Or Voltaire? Or Shaw? To my mind, it is unwise to make such a claim. Granted, after reading Greene we have to view Johnson's politics in a somewhat different light. But he still seems to me to have been a great writer who thought and wrote occasionally on political subjects, and who believed there were more important subjects to write, think, and talk about. Hawkins called Johnson "a moralist, a philosopher, and a poet," and on the whole that's not a bad way to think of him.