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Johnson and The Common Reader:

The Roy M. Wiles Memorial Lecture for 1976

The late Roy Wiles was fond of speaking and writing about what he called the “cultural explosion” that occurred in England in the eighteenth century, and in two important books he provided detailed concrete evidence of it.¹ In one of them he demonstrated the extent to which London publishers made books available to the less privileged classes by selling them a sheet or two at a time at prices that wage-earners could afford. The volume of business done proves a substantial demand. The practice continued through the century, though Professor Wiles carried his study down only to 1750; in 1797, for example, the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was published in a similar way. In his other book he studied the provincial journalism of the period and showed that literary news and essays on a wide variety of subjects as well as foreign and domestic news was being systematically circulated through the provincial towns and villages. I saw some evidence of this myself some years ago in Scotland when shown a copy of a literary magazine that was published for several years in what was then the little town of Perth. Its contents may have been largely derivative, but a journal of similar proportions today would survive only in London or New York, and only there with difficulty. Evidently culture was spreading horizontally across the nation as well as vertically down through the social strata. Some of the books and essays circulated in both the ways described by Roy Wiles were, as one might expect, trashy, but a surprisingly large number of them were solid and serious works—like the encyclopaedia. Weavers in the Midlands, for example, were not long ago shown to have been willing to subscribe more than a week’s wages in order to acquire a work of local history, and analysis of the subscription lists of many other books has produced similar surprises. Q.D. Leavis, in her *Fiction and the Reading Public*,² tells about a poor apprentice boy who taught himself to read by spelling out books—probably number books—by the light of the moon in the dreary attic where he slept. It is

impossible to get accurate statistics about literacy in the eighteenth century and so hard to judge how representative such an anecdote may be. But Johnson vouched for the fact that numbers of women had become readers in his time, and he remarked more than once that the spectacular development that had occurred in journalism had contributed greatly to the spread of information among the people. In 1758 he wrote in the *Idler*: "All foreigners remark, that the knowledge of the common people of England is greater than that of any other vulgar. This superiority we undoubtedly owe to the rivulets of intelligence (i.e. the newspapers and magazines), which are continually trickling among us, which every one may catch, and of which every one partakes." People not only knew more; they had become more articulate in both prose and poetry. In another number of the *Idler*, Johnson, perhaps with his tongue in his cheek, wrote: "the cook warbles her lyrics in the kitchen, and the thrasher vociferates his heroicks in the barn."³

Gone, however, for Johnson and for most of the other writers of his time, was the intimate author-reader relationship that had existed in earlier periods. John Donne, for example, wrote most of his poems for circulation in manuscript among the members of a relatively cohesive group. Not all of them, of course, were his friends, but he knew them well enough to understand their tastes and to predict their reactions. The metaphysical wit that suited them so well would have been caviar to the general. At the end of the seventeenth century, Dryden took pains to create a similarly closed and cosy atmosphere in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, to cite only one example from his works. Dedicated to the Earl of Mulgrave, who set the tone of easy sophistication for the whole work, it proceeded by means of a relaxed dialogue among four well educated friends, who, though given fancy names, were easily identified with members of the literary and social elite. The essay was, of course, published in print, but the illusion was deliberately created that what was said by the four friends was said for each other rather than for the public. Dryden's image of his reader is clear: he was either a member of the elite himself or some one who could easily identify himself with it. Like Virgil, Dryden "chose to please the most judicious: souls of the highest rank, and truest understanding."⁴ By Pope's time the reading public had become substantially larger, but, though Pope was by no means indifferent to public acclaim (no matter what he may have sometimes said to the contrary), he tended to turn his back on the world of professional writing that threatened, or seemed to him to threaten, his privacy, dedicating his poems to select friends and in the poems themselves pretending to carry on a dialogue, albeit a one-sided one,

ing for sale a wide range of wares from the most learned books and the most sophisticated plays down to sure cures for venereal disease and pacifiers for teething infants. Clearly the *Gentleman's Magazine* was attempting to reach literate individuals in all classes of society and not catering just to a literary elite. Johnson must have learned a lot more about the new reading public during these years and continued to learn more about it as he wrote and published books of his own for general consumption. He was the better able to reach the people because he was himself of them.

Nevertheless, well as Johnson understood the new reading public and proud though he was of it, he was presented by it with a brand new problem. A writer who can form in his mind a clear mental image of his reader knows what he can take for granted, knows what jokes the reader will laugh at, what ironies he will penetrate, what foreign languages he will understand, what quotations and allusions he will recognize, what ethical values he will share. Writing for him is entering into a kind of dialogue with a personal friend. But the public, no matter how familiar one may be with people of all sorts, is by comparison a faceless, anonymous multitude, whose potentialities and reactions as readers may only be guessed at. "The people," as Johnson once wrote, "is a very heterogeneous and confused mass of the wealthy and the poor, the wise and the foolish, the good and the bad."⁸ What could one write that they would understand and find useful; indeed, what would they enjoy and buy, for, as he once wrote, "that book is good in vain which the reader throws away"?⁹ Those have continued to be problems for writers ever since, and as the reading public has increased in size over the years it has also increased in anonymity. Though some writers claim to write only for their own hearts' ease, most are aware of a reader somewhere out there in the void and some have tried to form a mental image of him. Harold Nicholson, for instance, when reporting the Paris Peace Conference of 1946 over the B.B.C. wireless to an audience estimated at twenty millions, wrote in his diary: "I do not yet feel that I have got my 'sense of audience.' To whom am I talking?" So he tried to solve his problem by inventing what he called a "*personal audience*," and proceeded to do so: "some imaginary person," he explained, "sympathetic and yet ignorant, interested but uninformed. . . . I shall invent a woman of 35," he decided, "who has experienced great unhappiness in life."¹⁰ I shall not pause to comment on the ingredients that went into the mix of his ideal auditor, though she has some of the same ones as Johnson's common reader; I mention the incident only to illustrate the need felt by a successful broadcaster to put a face on the faceless multitude that he

confronted. The modern poet can have the same need. W.B. Yeats, repelled by the heterogeneous reading public of his time, conceived his ideal reader in the form of a Connemara fisherman, a sun-freckled man wearing grey Connemara clothes, who casts his flies at dawn in a cold stream in the hills:

Before I am old
I shall have written *him* one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.¹¹

Though Johnson's audience was not so miscellaneous as Yeats's nor so vast as Nicholson's, it created just as much of a problem for him.

The face that Johnson put on his public was that of the *common reader*, a phrase that may have been in general use in his time but that certainly turns up frequently in his writings from 1747 onwards, and with especial frequency in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81). The modern equivalent is *general reader*, the epithet *common* having acquired a pejorative sense that it did not so regularly have in the eighteenth century. The concept of the common reader was inevitably a good deal vaguer in outline than an imaginary woman of thirty-five or a Connemara fisherman because it is inclusive in intent whereas Nicholson's and Yeats's concepts were reductive; Johnson welcomed the vast new public and opened his arms to it whereas Nicholson and Yeats were put off by it and took comfort in singling out one particular face in the crowd. Johnson's common reader is less than a real human being, like many of the characters in his fictions, because he is more than one; he is all of mankind in miniature. He is a general idea, in short, belonging to a category of ideas to which Johnson always attached importance, and, as he always recognized, the particular is the enemy of the general. The description of Dover Cliff in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Johnson thought, was weakened in its effect by the "enumeration of the choughs and crows, the samphire-man and the fishers."¹² To have given particular lineaments to the image of the common reader, consequently, though as we shall see presently Johnson to some extent did so, would have been to destroy its generality. For the most part, however, the common reader may be defined only by negatives. In his *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, in which he first used that term, the common reader is a non-specialist, a person eager to learn but with no need for detailed information.¹³ In his *Life of Gray*, where he defined the term most fully, there is a similar emphasis: the common reader is a person "uncorrupted with literary prejudices"— by which words I think that Johnson

means someone who has not committed himself to the ideology of any literary coterie—and one who is innocent of “the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning”—one, that is, who cannot spin the cobwebs of sophisticated argument or take up stances on literary principles.¹⁴ Elsewhere we learn that the common reader is one who would soon be out of his depth if he tried to read metaphysical poetry or Butler's *Hudibras*, one who does not know Latin, one who cannot understand the technical terms used in ship-building, hunting, musicology, tactics, or versification, and one who is bored by classical mythology. All these negatives, unfortunately, leave him a little bloodless, but that was inevitable, and even today we can do little better: a reviewer writing recently in the *Times Literary Supplement* could define what he called the general reader only as a creature who “finds it hard to cope with footnotes.”¹⁵

But when one has stripped away from a real person his layers of acquired knowledge and experience, his particular manners and customs, his race, age, and sex, his personal and ideological commitments, and all his other similar wrappings, what is there left of him? What was left for Johnson was the basic man who was so much the preoccupation of seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers, man deprived of innate ideas, of traditions, and of superficial differences owing to time, place, and culture, man, in short, reduced to the level on which all men's minds work alike. The advantage possessed by the concept of the common reader was universality; what pleases him is what will please everybody everywhere, except readers who have been unable to shake themselves free from personal bias and ephemeral interests. In applying the concept to practical criticism, Johnson realized that in order to have universality the verdict of the common reader must not be just that of one individual, but one given by many such readers over a period of time. Sometimes, as in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson seems to have accepted Horace's formula that it takes a hundred years to make a classic: “Est vetus atque probus, centum qui perficit annos.”¹⁶ Longinus also had remarked that the greatest works of literature are those written with the intent that they “may be transmitted to latest Posterity”, a view endorsed by Boileau.¹⁷ But on the whole Johnson attached less importance than they did to lapse of time, being prepared to accept the verdict of the common reader delivered after a much less prolonged deliberation. He concurred, for example, in the common reader's verdict on Gray's *Elegy* only thirty years after that poem had been published, and he felt that the “opinion of the publick on the *Rape of the Lock* had been “settled” after only fourteen years.¹⁸ In fact,

Johnson had considerable faith in contemporary opinion, though he recognized, as we shall see presently, that contemporaries may sometimes be carried away by fads and partial views. But usually he required only a brief cooling off period, and sometimes none at all. More important for Johnson was a broad spectrum of readers, "from the critick to the waiting maid," as he wrote in the *Life of Pope*.¹⁹ The verdict he sought was the genuine response of nature to a work of literature. He believed that though the purpose of all writing is to give instruction and pleasure, the particular purpose of what we now call creative literature, in contradistinction to scientific writing, is that it give pleasure. One will get instruction wherever one may, at whatever cost in blood, sweat, and tears, but one will not read a poem or a work of fiction, or go to see a play, unless one enjoys the experience. "Works of imagination excel by their allurements and delight," he wrote in his *Life of Dryden*, and in the *Life of Pomfret* he defined the common reader as "that class of readers, who without vanity or criticism seek only their own amusement."²⁰ The best, if not the only, test of literary merit, then, is whether or not a work has been read by a substantial number of people who received genuine pleasure from it without having had their vanities tickled or their special interests exploited.

If Johnson's common reader, stripped down as he was of everything that might have made him an uncommon one, seems like a poor naked wretch shivering at every breeze, it was the necessary result of Johnson's determination to make him both inclusive and exclusive, both everybody and nobody in particular. But when he was put to work by Johnson as either a critical norm or as the beneficiary of the writer's and critic's activities, some flesh is put back on his bones. Going through Johnson's writings, one finds him from time to time making assumptions and occasionally positive statements about the common reader that restore to him some at least of those particular characteristics that we have just been careful to remove from him as destructive of his generality. Naturally the basis of many of those assumptions was his own experience and they tend to make the common reader look a little like one of the readers whom Johnson did his best to attract to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Though, theoretically at least, the common reader belonged to no one class in society, or rather, perhaps I should have said, to all classes in society, Johnson seems often to have thought of him as belonging to the lower middle class, to the vulgar, a word that he defined in the *Dictionary* as "the common people." Clearly his periodical essays were written for readers far less genteel than those who read the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and in the *Idler*, in particular, he seems to have gone out of

his way to bring shopkeepers, mercers, maids of all work, oilmen, and common soldiers within the orbit of his pen. How many such persons actually read the *Idler* I cannot say, but clearly Johnson thought of them as potential readers, for his tone is no way condescending or dismissive. But though Johnson always had sympathy with what we call the lower classes, he had no proletarian axe to grind, and he drew the gentry in as well. Probably he showed special interest in the lower classes not merely because of his own sense of kinship with them but also because he fancied them likely to be freest from that brand of literary prejudice that he felt most inimical to sound literary judgments. There was enough primitivism in his intellectual make-up to lead him to expect more of nature and common sense, more genuine reactions, in a tradesman or servant maid than in a fine lady or gentleman. Again and again he noticed that certain works of literature, like Otway's two plays, *The Orphan* and *Venice Preserved*, succeeded because of their appeal to the feelings: "If the heart is interested," he wrote "many other beauties may be wanting, yet not be missed."²¹ The lower classes, having little education, fall back naturally on the heart.

But the common reader is not merely a feeling heart; he has a mind as well. The most celebrated illustration of Johnson's faith in the common man's mind is the anecdote told by Boswell about the water-boy who rowed Johnson and him down river to Greenwich one summer day in 1763. "This boy," remarked Johnson, "rows us as well without learning, as if he could sing the song of Orpheus to the Argonauts. . . ." He then asked the boy, "What would you give, my lad, to know about the Argonauts?" and received the immortal reply, "Sir . . . I would give what I have." One might dismiss the episode, if one wished, with the comment that the water-boy knew a good way of cadging a fat tip, which he got, but Johnson drew a more favourable conclusion: "Sir, (said he) a desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all that he has to get knowledge."²² Johnson may have overstated his case. Mrs. Piozzi, in her *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson*, expressed the opinion that "Mr. Johnson . . . always measured other people's notions of every thing by his own."²³ Many of that lively lady's statements, however, were inaccurate, as Boswell was fond of observing, and in this case she was judging him, unfairly, on the basis of his conversation rather than on that of his writing. As we shall see later, he was usually well informed about what the public thought on literary matters and in his writings very often took account of its judgments. The cynically low estimate put on the common man today by the popular newspaper press

and the TV may make him look more naive by contrast than he was. Roy Wiles and others, as we have already seen, have demonstrated that in spite of the absence of any system of universal education in the eighteenth century the urge to self education was strong, and so Johnson may not have been far off the mark. Certainly, in his thinking about literature, not only was instruction always one of the desiderata of great literature, even of great imaginative literature, but the acquisition of knowledge is itself one of the principal pleasures that one seeks in literature. *Dulce* and *utile* did not stand at opposite poles in his mind but were concordant parts of a monistic system of literary thought. Everybody, he believed, loves to learn and accordingly his common reader was endowed with a generous share of that positive characteristic. Throughout the *Lives of the Poets* he took for granted a considerable interest on the part of his readers in literary history, assuming that they would be interested in the evolution of Milton's plans for *Paradise Lost* or in passages from an early draft of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, though he drew himself up short when transcribing the latter with the thought: ". . . most . . . readers are already tired, and I am not writing only to poets and philosophers."²⁴ But he had already given them a generous dose of information.

At this point it will be useful to recall that all his life as a writer Johnson did everything he could to satisfy this particular desire of the common reader. The concept of the common reader apparently first occurred to him, as I have already said, when he was planning his dictionary and considering what kind of definitions would be most appropriate. Would it be better, he wondered, to define *baronet*, for example, tersely, as "a title of honour next in degree to that of baron," or to be more generous with information and make some mention as well of "the creation, privileges and rank of baronets?"²⁵ He decided in favour of the second type, even though he knew that he could not print enough information to satisfy heralds—experts on baronets—on the ground that it would be more useful to "common readers," and so he determined to include "explanations real as well as verbal." Accordingly, when the *Dictionary* appeared in 1755, the common reader who looked up *baronet* found a sixty word entry containing in a nut-shell all the information Johnson had planned to give. The same is true of *barometer*, another word that he had cited as an example in his *Plan*, and of a host of other terms that drew encyclopaedic entries from his pen. In fact his *Dictionary* is not so much a scholar's work of reference as one for the common reader. The scholar was sometimes disappointed in it, especially by its grammar and its etymologies, but the common reader, looking

for useful information, seldom failed to find what he needed. Later lexicographers, being unable to improve on the clarity and perceptiveness of its definitions, have often borrowed them for their own use, sometimes with and sometimes without acknowledgement. So useful was the *Dictionary* found to be that it remained standard in England in successive editions for more than a century. Meanwhile the name *Johnson* grew into a generic one for dictionary, just as *Kodak* is for camera. The library of the State University of Indiana at Terre Haute has an incredibly large collection of dictionaries labelled *Johnson's Dictionary*, many of them badly printed pocket-sized volumes that amount to little more than spelling books or lists of hard words, which were published in the last century without copyright authority and with little or no real relationship to the original work of that name. However, they all serve to commemorate Johnson's contribution as a lexicographer to the needs of the public, and the evident response made to it by that public.

One may make similar comments on Johnson's edition of Shakespeare. It was not an entire success with scholars and even the revisions made for the edition of 1773 did not mend matters a great deal. It was disappointing chiefly because Johnson had not carried out the extensive collation of the early editions that he had promised in his *Proposals*, and it was soon superseded by editions by Capell and Stevens, who did what Johnson had failed to do.²⁶ Its explanatory notes, however, were a success from the start, particularly with common readers, who found them always helpful, always clear, and always full of common sense. In an article published more than twenty-five years ago Arthur Eastman pointed out that even in his revision of Shakespeare's text Johnson had the interest of the common reader in the forefront of his mind, introducing changes aimed at helping him picture what was meant to go on on the stage and understand the language. He simplified the punctuation, broke up long run-on sentences into shorter ones, marked quotations appropriately, made small corrections in grammar and syntax, introduced dashes as a kind of stage direction "to indicate changes in the direction or tone of a speech, e.g., to show a shift from aside to direct address," and, most important of all, wrote in scores of new stage directions explaining the stage action. Certainly it was not based on the best twentieth-century bibliographical principles, but it was, in Mr. Eastman's words, a text "designed to clarify and illuminate the drama's highest pleasure to the untrained reader, to keep his fancy easily and uninterruptedly aloft. It was, as was no Shakespeare before it, a Shakespeare for the laity."²⁷ Unlike the *Dictionary* it did not go on be-

ing republished again and again, but many of its notes entered the public domain and continue to be used in whole or in part by modern editors because their clarity and helpfulness cannot be improved upon.

Johnson's recognition of the common reader as a judge of literary merit, however, is his most intriguing use of the concept. Again and again in his published criticism he showed his awareness of what the common reader thought and often built up his essay around his judgment. (It is important, by the way, to exclude from our consideration any of Johnson's conversational pronouncements, because in them he was speaking as an individual who felt free to air his prejudices and go out on as many limbs as he wished to, as we all do under similar circumstances. In his published essays, however, he was a far more responsible critic.) He had, as we have already seen, great faith in the common reader; in his *Life of Addison* he wrote that "about things on which the public thinks long it commonly attains to think right."²⁸ It would be foolish, he thought, for a writer whose work has been a failure to blame the public rather than himself, for "when the end is to please the multitude, no man perhaps has a right . . . to throw the whole blame upon his judges, and totally exclude diffidence and shame by a haughty consciousness of his own excellence."²⁹ The strength of the common reader, however, lay not so much in his intellectual powers of analysis and discrimination, highly as Johnson rated the common reader's love of learning, as in his immediate natural responses, in his ability to derive pleasure from good writing. Those responses are among the most significant data with which the critic must work. Johnson, as every student of his writings knows, gave great importance to the role of the critic and was far from thinking of him as a mere mouthpiece of popular opinion or a blurb writer for best sellers. Nevertheless, one of his major tasks, in Johnson's scheme of things, was to interpret the verdict of the common reader and to analyse the reasons for the pleasure that some works have given and to point out why others have given none. Cowley's abortive epic, *Davideis*, for example, attracted his attention apparently because, though it had, as he put it, "miscarried," Cowley was otherwise a popular poet, and so Johnson devoted several pages to explaining why in this instance the poet had failed: "Attention has no relief," he concluded; "the affections are never moved; we are sometimes surprised, but never delighted, and find much to admire, but little to approve."³⁰ I had, in short, little for the common reader. Sometimes, however, the critic must go beyond that, for Johnson knew that the common reader is not always right, at least at first, and that the pleasure he gets from a book may not always be of a lasting kind or

pleasure that may be shared with a variety of people. So the critic must also instruct him, appealing to his cooler judgment and more basic interests. In the *Lives of the Poets* Johnson operated between these two poles much of the time in ways that are curiously complex and occasionally amusing.

Running one's eye over the table of contents in the *Lives* one quickly notices that the amount of space assigned by Johnson to each poet and the amount of space assigned to each individual work correspond in a general way to the degree of acclaim enjoyed by that poet or that work.³¹ When the verdict of the common reader was favourable and he agreed with it, as he did preëminently over Pope, for example, he wrote a long essay, and even when he did not agree, as over Milton, he also wrote a long one, but when he agreed with the common reader in an unfavourable judgment, he saw no need to take up much space: about *The Brothers*, for example, a play by Young, Johnson merely wrote: "Of *The Brothers* I may be allowed to say nothing, since nothing was ever said of it by the Publick,"³² Naturally in his apportionment of space Johnson was to some extent also motivated by other considerations, such as the amount of information available to him and the difficulty or novelty of the subject. His reason for giving several pages to Cowley's *Davideis*, for example, and only ten lines to Milton's *Paradise Regained*, though he agreed with the popular verdict on both poems, must have been that little or no critical attention had previously been given to the former whereas the latter had been often discussed. Since Johnson had been given a free hand by the syndicate that was to publish what he wrote, he must have made these decisions on space himself. In one other respect, however, they had made the decisions for him; they had decided what poets were to be included. On the whole Johnson accepted their directive, only reserving to himself the right to express his dislike of any of the works that they wished to include, but he got them to agree to the inclusion of five poets whose works had not been a part of the original plan. Of them the most important was Thomson, a poet whom (as we shall see presently) Johnson did not much care for, but who was an outstanding popular favourite.³³ His motive could have been none other than deference to the common reader. Of the other four, one at least, Pomfret, he must have supported for a similar reason. Of Pomfret's chief work, *The Choice*, Johnson wrote: "Perhaps no composition in our language has been oftener perused." His critical comment on the poem, though favourable, was brief. Pomfret was undeniably a minor poet and perhaps Johnson had some difficulty in finding the reason for his poem's

popularity, for he wound up with this somewhat ambivalent remark: "He pleases many, and he who pleases many must have some species of merit."³⁴ His reasons for wishing the inclusion of the other three poets, Watts, Blackmore, and Yalden, are obscure, but one must not rule out similar ones for at least one or two of them.

Possibly the best point of vantage from which to observe Johnson's dealings with the common reader is his comments on the great successes, the best sellers of the eighteenth century. Of these Gray is the first to come to mind. We know from remarks made by Johnson in conversation and recorded by Boswell that he did not like Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, though he did admit to liking it better than any of Gray's other works. In 1775, dining with Boswell at the Thrales, he called Gray a dull fellow and a mechanical poet. "No, Sir," he said, "there are but two good stanzas in Gray's poetry, which are in his 'Elegy in a Country Church-yard,'" and he went on to repeat the stanza beginning "For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey," getting one word wrong and forgetting the second stanza altogether.³⁵ Could any praise have been fainter? But when a little later he wrote his *Life of Gray* he could not ignore the fact that the *Elegy* was popular. The odes may have been esteemed in *avant garde* circles, but the *Elegy* was a universal favourite. Even though it had as yet by no means survived a century, the voice of the common reader had been unmistakeably heard. So Johnson wrote:

In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning "Yet even these bones" are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.³⁶

About another popular favourite, Thomson, Johnson's private opinions were, as I have previously intimated, equally lukewarm. He recognized that Thomson was a man of genius and that he had "as much of the poet about him as most writers" seeing everything through a "poetical eye." But one must interpret such words of praise in light of the fact that *genius* was not so superlative a word in Johnson's time as it became later and has been ever since; for Johnson it did not necessarily mean much

more than *aptitude*. Moreover, he diminished even that praise by complaining that Thomson was "not very skilful in the art of composition." "His fault," as Johnson remarked on another occasion, "is such a cloud of words sometimes, that the sense can hardly peep through." He went on to recount an amusing anecdote: one day when a Scottish literary friend was visiting him, he took down a volume of Thomson and read a long passage aloud, asking at the end: "Is not this fine?" The friend neatly fell into the trap set for him by expressing high admiration for what Johnson had just read. The great man then said: "Well, Sir, . . . I have omitted every other line."³⁷ Moreover Thomson wrote his best loved poem in blank verse, a form of which Johnson normally disapproved, thinking it little more than prose cut into lengths. In view of all these things, Johnson's *Life of Thomson* is remarkably favourable. Above all, Johnson praised him for originality, as he had praised Gray, and he found this originality not only in his views on nature and life but, surprisingly, also in his diction and versification: "His numbers, his pauses, his diction," wrote Johnson, "are of his own growth, without transcription, without imitation."³⁸ and he went into details in defence of the use of blank verse in *The Seasons*. What he wrote about both Thomson and Gray must have surprised people who had heard him talk about them. But Johnson had not really recanted; he was merely holding back his own unfavourable personal opinions while playing up the good things that he could honestly write. The faults that he had formerly found in both poets were not ones that he had to reprobate on either moral or religious grounds and he had never had any quarrel with the substance of either poem. Moreover, he had never denied the originality of either poet and always had something good to say about both poems. The four stanzas in the *Elegy* cited for special praise in the *Life* include the two that he had previously commended. Consequently it would be unjust to accuse him of turning his coat, though certainly the tone of both lives is different from that of his conversations on the same subjects. The comparison, incidentally, that has just been made demolishes the old stereotype of him as a dogmatic critic who rode rough-shod over other people's opinions.

Nevertheless there were limits to Johnson's deference to the common reader. "One cannot always easily find the reason," he once wrote, "for which the world has sometimes conspired to squander praise."³⁹ Part of the trouble is that the common reader will not always trust his own natural judgment. In the *Life of Pope*, for example, he complained about those readers of the *Essay on Man* who could not make up their minds about its worth so long as the name of its author was unknown to

them: "Those who like only when they like the author, and who are under the dominion of a name, condemned it; and those admired it who are willing to scatter praise at random, which while it is unappropriated excites no envy."⁴⁰ He complained also about those poetical agnostics who withheld their opinion of the *Dunciad* before the identities of the dunces had been revealed in the variorum edition. The common reader who is uncorrupted with literary prejudices, moreover, is less common than one would have liked to think. Sometimes he allows himself to be swept away by fads, as over Cowley's *Pindarique Odes*, which, Johnson wrote, "have so long enjoyed the highest degree of poetical reputation that I am not willing to dismiss them with unabated censure."⁴¹ Accordingly he gave them a generous allotment of space and went through each of them in turn with a fine-toothed critical comb. In all of them he found "great comprehension of knowledge and great fertility of fancy," and thoughts that are often "new and striking." Occasionally, he allowed, Cowley rose to "dignity truly Pindarick." But, according to Johnson, Cowley was never able to maintain this elevation of tone for long; littleness was always breaking in. His diction was feeble and his wit often fatuous. In one of his odes, Johnson wrote, "celebrating the power of the Muse, (Cowley) gives her prescience or, in poetical language, the foresight of events hatching in futurity; but having once an egg in his mind he cannot forbear to shew us that he knows what an egg contains." How could such a man, Johnson demanded, have imagined "either waking or dreaming, that he imitated Pindar?" It is unlikely that the common reader would have known or cared whether or not Cowley had imitated Pindar, but he did know sense from nonsense when he had not allowed himself to be carried away. The gist of Johnson's essay on the metaphysical poets, which forms an integral part of the *Life of Cowley*, is that their erudition, their recondite jokes, and their far-fetched allusions put them over the heads of common readers and hence made them inferior poets. Great poetry is written for all mankind to read, not just for a "fit audience though few." The common reader can be trusted eventually to wash the dust of literary prejudice out of his eyes, but a good critic can persuade him to do so sooner than he otherwise might.

The common reader is even more apt to be led astray in his award of praise by considerations that are not literary at all. Addison's *Cato* was one of the smash hits of the early eighteenth century stage, but it owed its success mainly to political causes. Johnson tells the story in the first part of his *Life of Addison*: "The whole nation was at that time on fire with faction," he wrote; on the opening night of *Cato* the house was packed with spectators who had come prepared to see every sentiment

expressed in the play as an allusion to the contemporary political situation. "The Whigs," went on Johnson, "applauded every line in which Liberty was mentioned, as a satire on the Tories; and the Tories echoed every clap, to shew that the satire was unfelt."⁴² The play could hardly have failed under those circumstances, and as success gathers its own momentum, it went on being a success performance after performance and season after season throughout the eighteenth century, long after the political situation of 1713 was over and had been forgotten. So when Johnson came to *Cato* in the course of the critical portion of his *Life of Addison* he gave it several pages, calling it "unquestionably the noblest production of Addison's genius." After that opening, however, he seems to have been embarrassed, confessing that "of a work so much read, it is difficult to say anything new"⁴³—an obstacle that did not often impede him—and went on to endorse what he described as the received opinion that *Cato* was not so much a play as a poem full of noble sentiments expressed in memorable language. Actually what he wrote about it has more to do with its faults than with its virtues. It utterly fails to move the reader and, one must suppose, would have failed to move an audience not predetermined to be moved for the wrong reasons. After saying that, Johnson shifted the burden of proof by devoting the greater part of his remaining space to long quotations from John Dennis's *Remarks upon Cato*, in which the play's faults were skilfully and vigorously laid bare. Johnson did not endorse everything that Dennis had written, but he endorsed most of it and complimented Dennis on his critical sagacity. Consequently the total effect of Johnson's pages on *Cato* is ambivalent: *Cato* is at one and the same time Addison's noblest production and a defective play. It seems as if Johnson had hesitated to pan the play outright because of its continued popularity, but quoted with approval the common reader's own finding that it lacked dramatic impact, and then went on, with help from Dennis, to suggest at some length that if the common reader would think a little harder about it he would realize that it was not such a classic as he had believed. If what Johnson planned, however, was to burst the bubble of *Cato's* reputation, he was not completely successful. As late as 1816 Kemble produced it in London, but the audience, according to Macready, listened "with respectful, almost drowsy attention."⁴⁴ Time was eventually doing what the critic had been unable to do.

In his criticism of Milton's poetry, however, Johnson seems at least at first to have parted company with the common reader altogether. By the date of his *Life of Milton* that poet had outlived his century and had become an acknowledged classic. Dryden, Pope, and Thomson had all

come under the spell of *Paradise Lost*, and by Johnson's time the minor poems were inspiring such new poets as Gray and the Wartons. In the *Spectator* Addison had canonized Milton with a series of essays on *Paradise Lost*, and by mid-century Milton's name had become almost sacrosanct. A early as 1751 Johnson let off a broadside against Milton in two *Rambler* essays on *Samson Agonistes*, and in 1770 his *Life of Milton* gave offence on account of his harsh criticism of many of the minor poems. *Samson*, he repeated, has "been too much admired," and *Lycidas* he took apart in spite of acknowledging that it was a poem on which "much praise has been bestowed."⁴⁵ Not even *Paradise Lost* altogether escaped censure: it is, he wrote, "one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again."⁴⁷ So much has been written about Johnson's Milton criticism that a detailed analysis of it here is as unnecessary as it would be inappropriate. In it Johnson was mostly speaking for himself, founding his argument not on the consensus of common readers but on reason, logic, and occasionally critical authority. Nevertheless he had not forgotten the common reader entirely; as critic he was acting, however, not as the interpreter and analyst of the popular verdict but as the good schoolmaster who is prepared to indulge his pupils as far as possible but who will bring them up sharply to heel when they have gone too far. Milton, he felt, has acquired an inflated reputation, and the common reader needed to be brought back into touch with his common sense. But the dust stirred up by the Miltonists who took violent exception to what he wrote both in his own time and in the nineteenth century as well may have blinded our eyes to the positive things that Johnson wrote about Milton. If one peruses the life candidly, without allowing one's hackles to rise too far over his more provocative remarks, one perceives that Johnson really did concur in the common reader's general estimate of Milton as a very great poet indeed, one of the literary heroes of whom the nation is most justly proud. Johnson's high regard for Milton is evident also elsewhere in his writings. In 1750, for example, the year before his attack on *Samson*, he wrote a prologue to be spoken at a benefit performance of *Comus*, in which he called Milton a "mighty Bard," and wrote with approval of the "universal Praise" that had been given him and that Johnson believed would endure through "the Centuries to come." In the life itself he wrote of *Paradise Lost*, in spite of a few faults that even its most ardent admirers, when they cooled off, would most likely admit, as one of the most splendid poems in world literature. When he wrote of it that it lacked human interest, and that it is a poem which one is apt to forget to finish reading, surely he is standing in the common reader's shoes.

To go through all of Johnson's lives in order to comment in detail on the way in which he took account of the common reader's reactions would be tedious, though interesting insights into the way that his mind worked might also be obtained from his remarks on the works of Roscommon, on *Venice Preserved*, on Thomson's *Liberty*, or on Addison's *Travels*, to mention only a few examples. Enough has been said, however, to demonstrate the importance that Johnson attached to the concept. No other great English critic is so constantly aware as he was of the common reader or so sensitive to his opinions and reactions. It was particularly important for him because he stood as a critic and writer in the gap between two eras; if he had lived a little earlier, in the time of Donne or Dryden, he would most likely have written for an elite group of literary friends and the common reader would scarcely have existed for him, or if he had written later, in the romantic period, he might very well have stood aloof from the common reader, forging his own way ahead as an individual and narrating the adventures of his own soul among masterpieces. But for Johnson, writing when he did, the author was a kind of public servant whose job it is to bring pleasure of the most valuable kind to a wide range of readers. The only finally valid test of his worth is whether or not in the long run he has actually given that pleasure. The function of the critic is not to tell the writer what he must do or ought to have done according to some preconceived system of critical thought, but rather to analyse empirically the causes of success and failure as a guide to writers in the future. Criticism, as Johnson pointed out again and again, is not an exact science; the worth of a work of literature can never be demonstrated in the same way as a proposition in geometry can be proved. The principles upon which he said "the merit of composition is to be determined"⁴⁷ must be distinguished from the old neoclassic rules; they are rather ones that must be inferred from a multitude of examples and tested during a lifetime of experience with readers. Even then they will remain tentative for a long time, if not for good, and will be modified, or absorbed, or rejected by other readers and critics in his own generation and later. For Johnson the judgment of literature was a communal undertaking, an effort of the whole civilized community.

NOTES

1. *Serial Publication in England before 1750*. Cambridge, 1957 and *Freshest Advices: Early Provincial Newspapers in England*. Columbus, Ohio, 1965
2. London, 1932, rpt. 1965.
3. *The Idler and the Adventurer*, ed. W.J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L.F. Powell, New Haven and London, 1963, pp. 23, 7 (The Yale Johnson).

4. *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker, Oxford, 1926, II, 225: "Dedication of the Aeneis."
5. *Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, Oxford, 1956, I, 306.
6. Cf: Ralph Straus, *Robert Dodsley*, London and New York, 1910.
7. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, New Haven and London, 1968, VII, 49, 81 (The Yale Johnson). *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, Oxford, 1905, I, 143. (Hereafter referred to as *Lives*.)
8. *The Political Writings of Dr. Johnson*, ed. J. P. Hardy, London, 1968, p. 94: "The Patriot" (1774).
9. *Lives*, I, 454.
10. *Diaries and Letters*, 1945-62, London, 1968, p. 68.
11. "The Fisherman" (italics mine).
12. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VIII, 695.
13. *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, London, 1747, p. 21 (written in 1746). David Hume used the same term in the second paragraph of his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1748.
14. *Lives*, III, 441-2.
15. James Sutherland in *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 1974, p. 992.
16. Horace, *Epistles*, 2.1.39. Cf: *Rambler* no. 3.
17. As translated into English from the French translation by Boileau in the *Works of Boileau*, London, 1711-3, II, 113-4 and chapter xii of "On the Sublime" in the same volume.
18. *Lives*, III, 441-2, 104.
19. *Lives*, III, 232.
20. *Lives*, I, 454, 302.
21. *Lives*, I, 245.
22. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, Oxford, 1934-50, I, 457-8.
23. *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. G. B. Hill, Oxford, 1897, I, 320.
24. *Lives*, III, 126.
25. *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, p. 21.
26. It also disappointed expectations because Johnson had not introduced many textual emendations, as Warburton and Theobald had done.
27. Arthur M. Eastman, "Johnson's Shakespeare and the Laity: A Textual Study," *PMLA*, 65 (1950), 1118, 1121.
28. *Lives*, II, 132.
29. *Lives*, I, 14. In *Rambler* no. 25 he wrote: "I have found reason to pay great regard to the voice of the people, in cases where knowledge has been forced upon them by experience, without long deduction or deep researches." *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, New Haven and London, 1969, III, 136 (The Yale Johnson).
30. *Lives*, I, 55
31. There are some exceptions to this statement in addition to the ones to be mentioned below. The *Life of Savage*, which is the most out of scale, was written many years earlier and on a different plan. Johnson may have intended to recast it for the *Lives of the Poets* but did not do so. The *Life of Cowley* was expanded by the inclusion of a section on metaphysical poetry and that of Waller by a mass of political history that Johnson evidently thought of interest to his readers.
32. *Lives*, III, 397.
33. *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1952, II, 170 and note 8.
34. *Lives*, I, 302.
35. *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, 327-8.
36. *Lives*, III, 441-2.
37. *Letters of Samuel Johnson*, I, 100 Cf: *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, 453, and III, 37.
38. *Lives*, III, 298.
39. *Lives*, I, 311.
40. *Lives*, III, 161.
41. *Lives*, I, 42-8.
42. *Lives*, II, 100-1.
43. *Lives*, II, 132.
44. *Lives*, II, 133 note 4.
45. *Lives*, I, 188, 163.
46. *Lives*, I, 183.
47. *Lives*, I, 410.