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DR. JOHNSON: TIMID GIANT

"As I stood one day beholding the rock that overhangs my cell, I found in myself a desire to climb it, and when I was at its top, was in the same manner determined to scale the next, till by degrees I conceived a wish to view the summit of the mountain, at the foot of which I had so long resided."—"The Hermit of Teneriffe"

"Long journies in search of truth are not commanded."—Rasselas, ch. XI

On October 10, 1769, following a dinner with General Paoli during which conversation had been polite, serious, but not especially stimulating, Boswell tried to engage Dr. Johnson in a discussion of the vexed question of fate and free will. The Great Moralist would have none of it: "Sir, (said he,) we *know* our will is free, and *there's* an end on't." Two weeks later at the Mitre tavern Boswell returned to the same topic, but wisely abandoned it when he saw that Johnson was "displeased". But before the evening had ended, the younger man's persistence in raising thorny religious questions nearly cost him the loss of Johnson's friendship. Becoming extremely agitated, Johnson eventually insisted that Boswell quit his company and, when he was going, called out sternly: "Don't let us meet to-morrow."[1] Boswell, true to form, was not to be got rid of by anything so simple as a brutal dismissal. Early next morning he sent Johnson a note saying that they had both been at fault in the quarrel and asking for a five-minute interview. Soon afterwards he called at Johnson's Court, Fleet Street, where a typical levee was in progress, Thomas Tyers and George Steevens being in attendance. Boswell was received "very complacently", and before long was totally at ease. But he had learned a lesson. In future he would be more cautious about introducing ticklish moral and religious questions in Johnson's company. It was never safe to do so when "mixed company" was present, never safe to do so at a tavern. The wisest policy was to be with him on Good Friday or Easter Sunday and to confess one's own (alleged) private anxieties and doubts to him. Good advice, good conversation, perhaps even intimate revelations—matter, in short, for a good biography—would doubtless emerge from such encounters.

To an observant biographer, of course, a man's unwillingness even to discuss a subject as important as the freedom of the will must in itself be illuminating. Boswell considered the matter carefully and concluded that Johnson

> shrunk from any abridgement of an attribute usually ascribed to the Divinity [i.e., Omniscience], however irreconcileable in its full extent with the grand system of moral government. His supposed orthodoxy here cramped the vigorous powers of his understanding. He was confined by a chain which early imagination and long habit made him think massy and strong, but which, had he ventured to try, he could at once have snapt asunder (I, 376).

Boswell does not often admit to any intellectual limitations in Johnson, and when he does we should listen with attention. He hints in this paragraph at the central anomaly in Johnson's thought. Johnson presents the paradox of a man whose "supreme enjoyment was the exercise of his reason" (I, 31), who in conversation was renowned for his "love of argumentative contest" (I, 276), who admitted that he could "never be happy by being less rational" (II, 184), yet who, on the greatest issues which confront man, on (to use Boswell's fine phrase) "the momentous concerns of eternity" (I, 33), would accept no speculation or rational conclusion which "was not authorized by the regular canons of orthodoxy" (I, 346). On most matters, in all branches of natural science for example, his curiosity was limitless and his commitment to rational conclusions total. Boswell once asked him what the poor did with the bones of animals which he had seen them collecting in the London streets; Johnson knew immediately, in meticulous and fascinating detail (II, 456-7). At Icolmkill, while Boswell was strolling around to "receive the general impression of solemn antiquity," Johnson was busy "inspecting and measuring several of the ruins."[2] In 1783, one year before his death, he visited Stonehenge and saw that the "transverse stones" were "fixed on the perpendicular supporters, by a knob formed on the top of the upright stone, which entered into a hollow cut in the crossing stone." From this he deduced that the people who raised the monument had no knowledge of mortar, and that consequently the monument itself must have predated the Danish invasions.[3] He knew where swallows went in winter, and was never disposed to accept another's word on such questions as the reality of the Cock Lane ghost or the authenticity of Ossian's poems. Yet on religious issues, or on questions of morality or decorum related to religion, he was submissive to authority to the point of abject acquiescence. We must accept religion, he told the blind Scottish poet Thomas Blacklock, "without demonstrative reasoning" (*Journal*, p. 23). Only of religion would he say

that "we must not examine matters too deeply," or admit that "implicit faith" rather than reason was a sufficient guide to conduct (*Life*, I, 397; II, 214).

Boswell, in noting that Johnson "shrunk" from any suggestion which would tend to undermine belief in Divine omniscience, also hints at the root of the paradox in Johnson's response to reason and religion: fear. His attitude to Christianity resembles that of a cuckold who suspects his wife's infidelity but is afraid of inquiring too closely into her activities lest he discover that she really is unfaithful. Horrible suspicion is preferred to shattering truth. Details of Johnson's early religious experiences are scanty, but we know that he had abandoned his faith for a time while at Oxford, and it was perhaps to the Oxford period that he referred when he told Boswell (I, 275) that he had thought of all Hume's objections to Christianity long before Hume himself voiced them. As late as 1777 he is willing to admit the truth of one of Hume's main arguments against miracles; and six months before his death he answered Dr. William Adams' rebuke that "You have evidence enough, good evidence" for the existence of a spiritual world, by the chilling phrase: "I like to have more" (II, 137, 525). But in reality Johnson had long before stopped trying to reconcile reason and religion. Like Hume, he saw, or thought he saw, that many aspects of Christianity were "strange to reason" (*Life*, I, 246); but whereas this realization led Hume to abandon religion, it led Johnson in the other direction entirely, to declare religion taboo to the questioning intellect, to assert that there were many "questions out of the reach of human determination".[4] The mature Johnson simply did not have the emotional strength even fully to articulate his suspicions. Death terrorized him, and the thought of total annihilation he found excruciating beyond endurance; Christianity offered the prospect of continued existence. It was therefore his protection against the void, the barrier shielding him from the abyss into which he could not look and remain whole. He clung to it, against the prompting of his own reason, for he could not live without it, could not deny himself what he called the "one solid basis of happiness", the "reasonable hope of a happy futurity" (*Life*, II, 259). He clung to it with all the fervour and violence of the primitive Christian, and indeed he was in many respects a Christian of the most primitive variety, capable of great intolerance and brutality. Although his views on Roman Catholicism were on occasion lenient, it is idle to picture him as an eighteenth-century precursor of ecumenicism. In 1778, Mrs. Mary Knowles ventured to mention to him a young lady who had left the Church of England for a simpler faith, that of the Quakers. Johnson denounced the young con-

vert as "an odious wench", and later the same evening unexpectedly attacked her again "in the severest terms of reproach", so that all the ladies in the company were "much shocked" (*Life*, II, 214). While in Scotland he refused to attend a Presbyterian service to which he had been invited to hear a sermon by Principal William Robertson. "I will hear him", he told Boswell in words which cannot be called delicate, "if he will get up into a tree and preach; but I will not give a sanction, by my presence, to a Presbyterian assembly (*Journal*, p. 72). It was characteristic of him to bludgeon suspected impiety into submission by ridicule or rhetoric rather than to meet it with superior logic, to shout down opposition before it could make itself heard. All this, however, was the swagger of the secret coward. The Christian religion brought Johnson little happiness; it only helped him to avoid despair.

This essay is an attempt to examine the effects of Johnson's fundamental timidity on religious and related issues upon his published writings. Such effects are far-reaching, for religion was, after the Oxford period, "the predominant object of his thoughts" (*Life*, I, 33), and he consequently wrote very little which did not in some way bear upon his concern for its well-being or reveal the pecularities in his own attitudes towards Christianity. (Even in his *Dictionary* he refused to quote as authorities for meanings of words authors whose writings had infidel leanings.) It may be useful to turn immediately to one of Johnson's essays in order, first, to demonstrate at once that there is substance to the thesis that his timidity dces influence, significantly, his writings, and second, to provide an *exemplum* for subsequent discussion. *Rambler* No. 184 has all the features of a typical Johnson essay: a bald introductory statement of the intended theme; a telescoping into other, more serious meanings as he proceeds, with no fixed, logical plan in mind, from paragraph to paragraph; and, finally, the moralistic trumpet close. It starts with a discussion of the essayist's art. Essays, says Johnson, should be easy to write, for whereas other forms of writing demand prolonged research and careful planning, all an essayist has to do is throw a careless glance at a favourite author or think for a few minutes about the "varieties of life", and then, once having received a hint, he can proceed to compose. But no; to write an essay is not really that simple, for there is at least one important rule to be obeyed: "to avoid uniformity". And it often happens that as the various possible topics pass before his mind, and time passes by, the essayist is forced by necessity to select a subject which, if he had more time, he probably would not have written about at all. The element of chance is, therefore, quite often a decisive factor in determining the

essayist's topic. Indeed, how great a role chance plays in every aspect of our lives! Let the reader of this essay review his life, says Johnson, and he will discover that every event in it "has been influenced by causes acting without his intervention." The busy, ambitious, inconstant, and adventurous among men are subjected to the buffetings of fortune through their own choice, but even the timorous and judicious cannot escape the "subtle and insidious power" of chance. The truth is that we are all slaves of passion and caprice in whatever choices we make. We live in a world in which "it is necessary to act, but impossible to know the consequences of action":

> . . . nothing which has life for its basis can boast much stability. Yet this is but a small part of our perplexity. We set out on a tempestuous sea in quest of some port, where we expect to find rest, but where we are not sure of admission; we are not only in danger of sinking in the way, but of being misled by meteors mistaken for stars, of being driven from our course by the changes of the wind, and of losing it by unskilful steerage; yet it sometimes happens, that crosswinds blow us to a safer coast, that meteors draw us aside from whirlpools, and that negligence or error contributes to our escape from mischiefs, to which a direct course would have exposed us. Of those that, by precipitate conclusions, involve themselves in calamities without guilt, very few, however they may reproach themselves, can be certain that other measures would have been more successful.

What, then, are we to do? We should, says Johnson, adhere to the "conviction" that "nothing in reality is governed by chance, but that the universe is under the perpetual superintendence of him who created it." Our being is thus "in the hands of omnipotent goodness" and nothing will hurt the man who "debars not himself from the divine favour".

I have followed the essay's "argument" step by step for a purpose: to expose the awkward tergiversation contained in it. *Rambler* No. 184 illustrates, and by its brevity dramatizes, the ambiguity and uncertainty in Johnson's fundamental response to human existence. In one short treatise he has given us two utterly contradictory interpretations of experience: a Hardyesque vision of cosmic futility, of a world governed by "Crass Casualty"; and an orthodox Christian affirmation of belief in Divine Providence. To the first view he has been led by a process of reflection which resembles rational inquiry; the second is simply offered as truth and is supported by no reasoning whatever. It is simply posited as the only tolerable view of the universe. "Nothing" but it, Johnson says emphatically, "can afford any rational tranquility." The voice of reason is thus shouted down in the interests of piety and peace of mind, and

Johnson manages, by a complete about-face at the end of his essay, to redirect towards orthodoxy a train of thought which was moving dangerously towards a gloomy and non-Christian view of life. The clumsiness of the sudden change of heart cannot be papered over. Violence is done, not only to logic, but also to the essay itself when it is judged as an art form. Art and reason are both sacrificed to "truth". Nor is this the only example in Johnson's writings of an awkward appeal to Christian piety offered as a conclusion to gloomy meditations. Exactly the same phenomenon occurs in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), in which, after he has spent 344 lines telling us of the futility of hope and the inevitable misery of life, he brings us up short with these questions:

> Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
> Roll darkening down the torrent of his fate?
> Must no dislike alarm, no wishes rise,
> No cries attempt the mercies of the skies? (345-8)

The answer to both questions, surprisingly, is no. If we trust in God, he tells us in effect, then hope will not prove to be foolish after all. The conclusion of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is, to the uninitiated, as perplexing a *non sequitur* as that of *Rambler* No. 184.

The peculiar illogic in *Rambler* No. 184 is a reflection of Johnson's intellectual inhibitions; it is, therefore, self-revelation of a sort. Here we must proceed with caution. Johnson does not reveal himself in his writings as Wordsworth reveals himself (or claims to reveal himself) in *The Prelude*. He does not openly and directly expose his private doubts and intimate experiences to the reader. In the first place, the literary milieu in which he wrote discouraged over-exposure of the self in books; in the second place, Johnson could barely endure to voice his perturbation of spirit to his closest friends or even to himself, and therefore was not likely to parade it openly in his publications. As he told Sir Joshua Reynolds, the great concern of his life was "to escape from himself", not to indulge himself in introspection, privately or in public (*Life*, I, 82). But Johnson does nevertheless reveal himself by an inverse process, by attempting to conceal and repress himself. What he said of Pope—"Are we to think Pope was happy, because he says so in his writings? We see in his writings what he wished the state of his mind to appear" (*Life*, II, 181) may be said with more relevance of himself. Indeed, we can even say that we see in his writings what he wished the state of his mind to *be*. His works are expressions of his longing for total commitment, efforts to shout down the nagging spirit of doubt within him. When, as in *Rambler* No. 184, he acci-

dentally voices dark suspicions he turns quickly to the comfort of Christian orthodoxy. His private perturbation thus emerges, paradoxically, as pietism.

Obtrusive and pervasive pietism: this we may, therefore, point to as the first general effect of Johnson's intellectual timidity upon his writings. It is not the confident piety which springs from total conviction or sanctity, but the desperate, anxious piety of the precarious Christian. Indeed, so conscious is Johnson of the precariousness of his own Christianity, that he seems to project this feeling upon the public as a whole. If his faith is in jeopardy, then so is that of all men. Nothing, therefore, must be allowed to intrude into his writings, or be allowed to pass without censure in the writings of others, which tends in the slightest to threaten Christianity. Infidels must be given no quarter; no opportunity must be lost to inculcate virtue; nothing but virtue and piety can be shown to lead to happiness. Johnson will not trust his readers to think for themselves. We have to be warned against the fifth act of *King Lear*, for we might all be made infidels when we see what happens to Cordelia; Pope and Gray have to be publicly rebuked for encouraging dangerous thinking in "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" and "The Bard"; and the reading public must be told by a printed notice in the *Morning Chronicle* that nothing in *Rambler* No. 85 was intended by the author to encourage suicide![5] Johnson can rarely manage to write without interpreting what he writes for us. He supplies a moral even for the delightful story of Will Marvel in *Idler* No. 49.[6] And the best known of all his essays, the humorous and perceptive account of a stagecoach journey in *Adventurer* No. 84, concludes with the heavy-handed observation that "the time is at hand when every illusion shall cease", when "All must be shown to All in their real estate."

Yet *Rambler* No. 184 testifies too that the desperation and fear which underlie Johnson's piety manifest themselves despite his superficial commitment to orthodoxy, making necessary a conscious act of retreat or self-refutation. There is being played out in Johnson's imaginative writings—here I exclude his editorial and lexicographical pursuits—a continual and barely suppressed drama between suspicion and desire, reason and emotion. As Boswell says (I, 378):

> His mind resembled the vast amphitheatre, the Colisaeum at Rome. In the centre stood his judgement, which like a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehensions that, like the wild beasts of the *Arena*, were all around in cells, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drives them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still assailing him.

The mind, especially a mind like Johnson's, cannot be shut off like a faucet, cannot be instructed that there is a whole, vast region of thought which must not be examined. Even the Hermit of Teneriffe, who had spent forty-eight years in the solitude of his cave at the foot of the mountain, at length determined to try and reach the summit. And Johnson too failed to compartmentalize his mind, failed to inhibit inquiry. His reason kept hinting at darkness, and he had to keep crying out for the light of revelation. The wild beasts had therefore to be driven back, again and again, to their cells. They were never at rest, for, refusing to rely completely on the weapon of logic, he reached no conclusions which ultimately satisfied him. Iterated piety brought temporary relief but never permanent victory. Now it may well be that this tension between the two halves of his nature, this essentially dynamic and perpetually renewed effort to maintain what he suggestively called "management of the mind" (*Life*, I, 613) is the quality in his works which continues to draw readers to him.

Johnson's peculiar intellectual reticence and fear also result in the general darkness of tone and theme in his writings. Prompted by his deepest instincts to grapple with problems of ultimate significance, but afraid to be led by reason into the labyrinths of error, he forever hovers on the periphery of despair but never permits himself to examine or fully articulate that despair. Again and again he returns to the same themes: the folly of hope, the inevitability of suffering, the necessity of piety and trust in God, and—significantly—the untrustworthiness of logic. He is obsessively drawn to repeat them. He must tell us over and over how to live in the world, because he himself has suffered and known fear and no end is in sight. He is himself perplexed, and he assumes that we are too. We *must* be in need of advice; and advice, in God's plenty, he gives us. Yet his confusion is evident in the advice he offers, for at different times he warns us to be prudent but not timid, cautious yet adventurous, studious yet open to real experience, trusting yet wary of being cheated.[7] And all the while there is the pervasive gloom, the pessimism for which no ultimate explanation is offered, which is not unfathomable yet remains unfathomed. Of late it has become fashionable to describe Johnson as a "Christian Pessimist", but that phrase is really as unhelpful as, say, "Capitalistic Marxist": it recognizes a paradox but does not explain it. Christianity may on occasion lead one to exclaim against the vale of tears, but in essence it is, and was in Johnson's day, a religion of hope and joy. His pessimism is more persistent than Christianity allows, yet it is only a shadow of the real horror which threatens him.

All this means that there is essentially no development in Johnson's thinking on fundamental issues, no expansion in vision, throughout his mature and productive period as a writer. There is development of a kind, of course: he becomes less radical in politics between 1738 and 1750; his erudition or mere factual knowledge grows; he moves from genre to genre as if he were seeking new forms to accommodate new insights. But the frequent shifting of literary genres betokens no radical changes in outlook. From 1749 to 1759 he moves from satiric poetry to the essay and then to the novel, but only externals are altered and the essence remains the same. In *Rasselas* (1759), for example, he does not take advantage of the new opportunities for creativity which the novel form offered. He does not try to create believable and interesting characters, even though we know from our reading of the *Rambler* and the *Idler* that he possessed great skill in that direction. He makes no effort to write credible dialogue or to supply a realistic Oriental background for the story. In short, he does not adapt to the form, but forces the form to adapt to him, compelling it to carry the same blatantly moralistic message which he had conveyed before in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and numerous essays: the folly of the human desire for happiness. He has nothing new to say, but he says it in a new medium. But not only does Johnson remain unresponsive to the challenges offered by certain genres; he remains unresponsive to experience itself. We normally think of a creative writer as a man of exquisite sensibility, unusually susceptible to emotional and social stimuli, somebody who seeks and needs new experience. Johnson will not fit such a definition. After 1749 experience is not permitted to teach him anything new. Indeed he tends, as he grows older, to avoid those literary forms whose raw material is experience itself and to prefer what we might for convenience call the secondary modes: biography, criticism, and editorship, for example. The mature Johnson is never an objective observer of human existence: he pronounces upon it, encloses it within a pietistic mould, rubber-stamps it. Absolutism in religious matters leads to a hardening of attitudes in all aspects of thought. Novelty becomes suspect. "This motion of my thoughts I endeavoured to suppress, not because it appeared criminal, but because it was new; and all change, not evidently for the better, alarms a mind taught by experience to distrust itself." So spoke the Hermit of Teneriffe,[8] on first thinking of leaving the narrow cell in which he had lived for so long and to which he had become accustomed. The hesitancy, fear, distrust of novelty, distrust of intellect, and distrust of self which his words convey are all typical of Johnson. He speaks eloquently for his creator.

This brings us to the main contention of this essay: that Johnson's intellectual timidity and emotional weakness inhibited the full creative power of his mind—in effect, crippled his imagination. This may seem to some to be an ungracious comment. Johnson has given us much great writing. Is it not ungrateful to suggest that he could have given us more? Moreover, does not his extreme cautiousness in intellectual matters, combined with the characteristic piety, give his writings their individual flavour, make them *Johnsonian*? It is difficult not to answer in the affirmative to both questions. But this does not eliminate the suspicion that the taboo he placed on reason repressed his capacities for creation in general; that there were seeds of energy, insight, and humour in the man which did not flower in his works. There is reason to believe that we can actually see in some of his writings the heavy moralistic bias actively quarreling with, and eventually suppressing, the creative impulse which is vainly struggling to get free. It is not enough to say that "Johnson's deepest convictions are moral rather than aesthetic";[9] we can further affirm that his moral "convictions" (if that is the right word—I would prefer "obsessions") interfere with and injure the aesthetic qualities and possibilities in the work before him. We can see this happening most clearly in Johnson's first sustained imaginative work, his tragedy *Irene* (1749).

It will not be necessary here to detail the play's many inadequacies. To a great degree it shares the deficiencies of all eighteenth-century tragedy: exclamation replaces dramatized emotion, declamation pretends to be realistic dialogue, and there is throughout a simple lack of stage sense. But the real weakness of the play lies deeper: in Johnson's handling of the character of the heroine. When the play begins Christian Greece has fallen to the barbarous Turks, and a plot to assassinate the Turkish emperor, Mahomet, is already under way. Mahomet is pictured by Johnson as a fickle, vicious, mindless man, a total slave to his "amorous propensities". Having won Greece, he has tried and failed to seduce the "dear, hapless maid", Aspasia. Her virtue being impregnable, his eye falls next upon Irene, Aspasia's friend. He offers her the usual allurements if she will give herself to him, and (this is a new twist which he had failed to try on Aspasia) threatens to kill her if she refuses. She is tempted, not only by the prospects of sensual pleasure and "gay magnificence," but by the opportunities she would have, being queen, to lessen the suffering of the enslaved people of Greece. If she succumbs, however, as she well knows and as Aspasia keeps reminding her, she becomes an apostate and risks eternal damnation. Here are two specimens of dialogue between the righteous Aspasia and the weak Irene:

IRENE

When thou art absent
Death rises to my View, with all his Terrors;
Then Visions horrid as a Murd'rer's Dreams
Chill my Resolves, and blast my blooming Virtue:
Stern Torture shakes his bloody Scourge before me,
And Anguish knashes on the fatal Wheel.

ASPASIA

Since Fear predominates in every Thought,
And sways thy Breast with absolute Dominion,
Think on th' insulting Scorn, the conscious Pangs
The future Miseries that wait th' Apostate (II, i).

IRENE

But should I sin beyond the hope of Mercy,
If when Religion prompts me to refuse,
The dread of instant Death restrains my Tongue?

ASPASIA

Reflect that Life and Death, affecting sounds,
Are only varied Modes of endless Being;
Reflect that Life, like ev'ry other Blessing,
Derives its Value from its Use alone;
Not for itself but for a nobler End
Th' Eternal gave it, and that End is Virtue (III, viii).

Aspasia here reminds us strongly of Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, who, when she visits her condemned brother Claudio in prison to advise him that the villain Angelo has offered to exchange his life for her virtue, tells the weak, shivering prisoner not to be too worried about death, for

The sense of death is most in apprehension;
And the poor beetle that we tread upon,
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies (III, i).

"It's all right for her to talk," we feel, "she's not going to have her head chopped off tomorrow." Shakespeare's sympathies in the scene are divided. Isabella is pure, virginal, without guile, but her virtue is, to a degree, cold and repellent; Claudio is timid and ignoble, but he is recognizably human. Shakespeare allows complexity of response and refuses, as ever, to oversimplify a human relationship. Now it is obvious too that Johnson feels sympathy for Irene.

Her desire to do good, her genuine perplexity, and above all her fear of death, an emotion which in literature as well as in life always moved Johnson deeply—these features charge her with life. She has possibilities for tragedy. But Johnson's real, intellectual commitment is to Aspasia, and he therefore cannot permit Irene's latent possibilities to emerge. He quickly sacrifices her on the altar of absolutism. She becomes, not fully human, but an abstraction, a marionette whose fate proves the truth of the Christian precepts that, first, Sin Corrupts The Human Soul and, second, The Wages of Sin Is Death. It is hard to find a character in literature who is more brutally put down. Virtuous and right thinking though she is at the beginning of the play, she quickly becomes, once she has made her decision to be Mahomet's concubine, vicious and self-seeking, trying to destroy Aspasia and her Christian lover to gain greater esteem in the eyes of the tyrant. As if this were not incredible enough, Johnson also has Divine Justice immediately hunt her down. By the merest accident (to human eyes) Mahomet is mistakenly led to think her involved in the plot to assassinate him, and sentences her to instant death. She is not given time even to repent, but is dragged off stage by deaf-mutes, who are to perform unnamed atrocities on her:

IRENE

Unutterable Anguish!
Guilt and Despair! pale Spectres, grin around me,
And stun me with the Yellings of Damnation!
O, hear my Pray'rs! accept, all-pitying Heaven,
These Tears, these Pangs, these last Remains of Life,
Nor let the Crimes of this detested Day
Be charg'd upon my Soul. O, Mercy! Mercy!
[*Mutes force her out* (V, ix).

Well might she shout! But off she goes anyway, God not being as attentive to her cries as He is to those of the insipid Aspasia, who gets off scot-free. If the audience has been obtuse enough to miss the play's moral, Johnson hammers it home in the last speech:

So sure the Fall of Greatness rais'd on Crimes,
So fix'd the Justice of all-conscious Heav'n.
When haughty Guilt exults with impious Joy,
Mistake shall blast, or Accident destroy;
Weak Man with erring Rage may throw the Dart,
But Heav'n shall guide it to the guilty Heart (V, xiii).

No tragedy is possible when such a nonsensical oversimplification of human life is put forward as a truth. Johnson moreover *knew* that his play distorted life. In *Rambler* No. 52 we find he exclaims against divines who teach that "virtue will be rewarded in this life", and elsewhere he admits the sorrowful truth that "we do not always suffer by our crimes; we are not always protected by our innocence."[10] There was a tragic vision lurking within him, as well as a greater power to infuse characters with depth and passion than is exhibited in *Irene*. In that play both potentials are repressed.

"His supposed orthodoxy here cramped the vigorous powers of his understanding": Boswell's words ring true. In *Irene*, in his literary criticism, indeed in all his writings which can be called imaginative or creative, the limiting and retarding factor is fear. In Hume's and Gibbon's works we feel the exhilaration of liberated intellects: they go where reason directs them to go. In Johnson we always sense the ultimate holding back, the pressure to move towards orthodox positions, the fear of giving scandal or of self-betrayal. The works imperfectly contain the man. As we read them, we keep wanting him to be true to himself rather than to maintain dubious fidelity to strict doctrine. The demand is unfair, but it recurs. His writings fascinate, stimulate, occasionally even amuse, but remain profoundly unsatisfying.

NOTES

1. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Everyman edition (1952), vol. I, p. 378.
2. Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Everyman edition (1958), pp. 232-3.
3. Johnson, *Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman (1952), vol. III, pp. 85-6.
4. Johnson, *Works*, ed. Lynam (1825), vol. V, p. 670.
5. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Sherbo (1968), vol. II, p. 704; *Lives of the English Poets*, Everyman edition (1941), vol. II, pp. 216, 391; Boswell, *Life*, vol. II, p. 422 n.
6. The moral is supplied in *Idler* No. 50.
7. For example in *Rambler* No. 79 he notes that it is "Happier to be sometimes cheated than not to trust", but in *Rambler* No. 175 he advises young people to adopt a policy of "prudent distrust" when dealing with their fellow men.
8. "The Hermit of Teneriffe", in *Selections from Dr. Johnson's* Rambler, ed. W. Hale White (1907), p. 122.
9. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vol. I, p. xxxiii.
10. *Adventurer* No. 120.