

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Johnson's *Lives*

We should begin with the title in full: *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works* by Samuel Johnson. The author once remarked to Boswell that he was engaged in writing “little Lives, and little Prefaces, to a little edition,” an enterprise set in motion by a consortium of London booksellers. The “little edition” was to consist of fifty-two English poets in an anthology designed to fend off competition from a Scottish publisher, John Bell, who had brought out a comparable anthology. Johnson’s accompanying “lives” or prefaces—he used both terms to describe his contributions—would be a key attraction in the competition. It took him four years to complete the task, and in 1781 the prefaces were first published independently of the poems and poets they introduced. Now the remarkable Roger Lonsdale, already a distinguished eighteenth-century scholar, has, as a crowning achievement, edited them for Clarendon Press in a four-volume boxed set for which the cliché “magisterial” scarcely begins to suggest the project’s immensity.¹

Its dimensions deserve to be enumerated. Running to 1981 pages total, the editor’s commentary and textual notes easily outstrip Johnson’s own pages, especially in the fourth volume (190 pages of Johnson, 327 of Lonsdale) where the Life of Pope is especially heavily annotated. Lonsdale’s admirable predecessor as an editor of *Lives of the Poets* was George Birkbeck-Hill, who in 1905 brought out, also under the Clarendon Press imprint, a three-volume edition. The main difference between the earlier and the latest edition is that Birkbeck-Hill—to whom Lonsdale records his debt—placed his footnotes at the bottom of each page with numbers in the text to tell us when we might look down for further illumination. Birkbeck-Hill also placed marginal numerals to mark the beginning of each of Johnson’s new

¹ THE LIVES OF THE POETS, by *Samuel Johnson*. Intro. and notes by *Roger Lonsdale*. Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press. 4 volumes. \$595.00.

paragraphs, as does Lonsdale. But Lonsdale places his notes at the end of each volume so one is not directed at specific points to consult a note. And though he gives no explanation for this decision, it may be that since he annotates each and every one of Johnson's paragraphs—usually to the teeth—he is inviting us always to turn to the back.

So a reader of *Lives* in its entirety thus has to decide how much attention to give the always pertinent annotation. Eager to learn more about Milton or Dryden, I'm not so eager about William King or Richard Duke, the latter of whose poems Johnson wrote, "are not below mediocrity; nor have I found much in them to praise." Duke is dispatched by Johnson in less than a page; Lonsdale, in much smaller print, provides two pages of commentary in his standard format: Composition, Sources, Publication, Modern Sources—and gives notes, as always, to each paragraph of the seven Johnson wrote. The proportion of annotation to text is navigable in such a tiny compass but becomes not such clear sailing when Abraham Cowley's forty-one pages receive forty-nine of annotation. The *Life of Cowley* was thought by Johnson to be his best since he was proud of the lengthy set piece in which he adversely criticizes the Metaphysical Poets (especially Cowley and Donne). But the once-alive Cowley is now dead as a poet. "Who now reads Cowley?" asked Alexander Pope, rhetorically, a half-century after Cowley's death. Who now is impelled to attend to forty pages of commentary on a poet no one reads?

Further indications of the scope of Lonsdale's undertaking: volume one consists of 400 pages, only a quarter of which are made up of the first three lives—Cowley, Denham, and Milton—in Johnson's series. The volume is kicked off by a masterly introduction of 185 pages, which surely rivals (in length) any introduction to any book I'm aware of. It is occupied mainly with the project's origin; with the alternately dilatory and rapid pace at which Johnson composed the essays; with the persons who were his editorial assistants and the main sources he consulted. Lonsdale proceeds "to outline the trajectory of the *Lives* and to trace Johnson's explicit and implicit assumptions and preoccupations." This involves a chronological run-through of the whole list of poets by way of qualifying the received notion that Johnson was unambiguously devoted to celebrating the "elegance" and "correctness" that emerged in the Restoration and reached its apex in

the poetry of Pope. Persuasively, Lonsdale finds that Johnson did not simply hold such an assumption; that rather it is

haunted, first, by a growing suspicion that some older kinds of poetic “vigour” and mental “comprehension” had simultaneously been sacrificed, and, secondly by an awareness that the civilized poetic qualities he himself valued had unaccountably come to seem insipid and outdated to his younger contemporaries.

It is an interesting coincidence to note that the year 1783, when the final, revised version of *Lives* was published and Johnson’s six-year labor ended, is also the year in which William Blake published his first book—his only conventionally produced one—of poems. The last poem in *Poetical Sketches*, “To the Muses,” looked sadly at contemporary poets and addressed them reprovably:

How have you left the ancient love
That bards of old enjoy’d in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move!
The sound is forc’d, the notes are few!

Blake was preparing to move the strings to notes not yet heard.

Viewing the list of fifty-two poets from Cowley to Lyttleton, we might ask how, even two and more centuries ago, this could have passed as a reasonable list of the most eminent English poets. The official answer is that no poet who wrote before the Restoration was included (no Donne, no Spenser) nor any poet still alive (no Cowper, no Chatterton). Johnson’s friend, Oliver Goldsmith, had died but was omitted for reasons of copyright; the satirist Charles Churchill, praised by Yvor Winters but otherwise unread, was also omitted, either for the same reasons or because, as Mrs. Thrale claimed, Johnson didn’t want him in. So essentially these most “eminent” English poets were selected by the booksellers from a span of about a hundred years, and it is hardly surprising that most of them are unknown to serious readers of poetry in 2007. No women are represented, not even Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, or Lady Mary Wortley Montague, scourge in her verse of both Swift and Pope. (Lonsdale has edited an Oxford edition of eighteenth-century women poets.) One of the longest lives here is also the earliest written, Johnson’s sixty-nine-page

account of his friend of youthful days, Richard Savage. The *Life of Savage*, longer than any of the others except for Dryden and Pope, has, unsurprisingly, a personal, autobiographical note absent from the other lives—except for the one of William Collins, which contains the lovely sentence “Such was the fate of Collins, with whom I once delighted to converse, and whom I yet remember with tenderness.”

Johnson’s *Lives*, written as he tells us “in my usual way, dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work and working with vigour and haste,” has come down to us as in effect the great writer’s last will and testament. It is his supreme attempt to put in convincing order, as his own life drew to a close, his thoughts about the meaning of a literary career and the significance, or insignificance, of the English poets whose inheritance was his. Roughly a hundred years later, Matthew Arnold wrote a little-known essay on Johnson in which he put forward a possible use that contemporary readers, especially younger ones, could make of the *Lives*.² Arnold’s essay was an introduction to a volume that consisted of the six most substantial lives—in his opinion, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Pope, Swift, and Gray—and is opposed, in principle, to Lonsdale’s magnificent edition. Arnold’s idea was that in reprinting the six lives without encumbering notes and commentary, the selection would provide what he called an admirable “*point de repère*, or fixed centre” for the student of English literature. The lives of these six important authors, as told by a great man, would, Arnold hoped, help students to acquaint themselves with some of the leading and representative works of each. Except for Milton, Arnold had less than the highest opinion of the authors as poets, especially Swift and Addison. He saluted the Restoration and eighteenth century as the great age when English prose became a natural, viable, and adequate vehicle for thought, as it had not been in the earlier seventeenth century and before. (“Inconvenient” and “obsolete” are words he uses in “The Study of Poetry” to characterize the prose of such seventeenth-century writers as Milton and George Chapman.) Although Arnold was relatively uninterested (as was Johnson, often) in the facts and dates of biography; and although he disagreed with Johnson’s high valuation of Dryden and Pope, as well as with his dismissal of

² Matthew Arnold, “Johnson’s Lives,” in *Essays in Criticism*, Third Series (Boston, 1910).

Milton's *Lycidas* and his thorough downgrading of Thomas Gray (except for "Elegy in a Country Churchyard"), Arnold believed his selection from the *Lives* would give a "compendious story" of an important age in English literature and would itself be "a piece of English literature of the first class." Like his much abused "touchstones"—great passages from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton that would, as we recalled them, save us from overvaluing some contemporary lines from a lesser poet—Johnson's *Lives* provided a similar "*point de repère*" from which the life of literature could be contemplated.

T. S. Eliot, who never missed an opportunity to snipe at Arnold, nevertheless also used Johnson's *Lives*, specifically the Life of Cowley, as a "fixed centre" when he closed his introduction to *The Sacred Wood* with a note that began

I may commend as a model to critics who desire to correct some of the poetical vagaries of the present age, the following passage from a writer who cannot be accused of flaccid lenience, and the justice of whose criticism must be acknowledged even by those who feel a strong partiality toward the school of poets criticized.

There follow two paragraphs from the Life of Cowley in which, having convicted the Metaphysical "school" of far-fetched conceitedness, Johnson turns on himself and says something in favor of the poets he's been criticizing: "Yet to write on their plan, it was at least necessary and read and think." Twenty-four years later in his rich and lengthy essay "Johnson as Critic and Poet," Eliot addressed himself to the problem of Johnson's "ear" for poetry, or his lack of it, by noting that readers of the *Lives* remember most strongly the strictures against the Metaphysicals (including Donne) and the prosody of *Lycidas*, "of which the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers displeasing." Even more surprising than these strictures against poetry we take to be canonical, was Johnson's silence about Shakespeare (in the *Preface to Shakespeare*) as a writer of verse whose diction and movement—to apply the terms Arnold used in "The Study of Poetry"—were exemplary. But rather than deploring Johnson's ear, Eliot explains it historically by implying that, as it were, Johnson was unable to read Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which is set down the "obvious fact" that "art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same."

On the contrary, Johnson felt no need for the “renewal” of literature, as Eliot did in renewing his own verse by way of seventeenth-century English poets and nineteenth-century French symbolists. For, Eliot wrote, “the age in which Johnson lived, was not old enough to feel the need for such renewal: it had just arrived at its own maturity. Johnson could think of the literature of his age as having attained the standard from which literature of the past could be judged.”

At about the same time Eliot’s essay appeared, F. R. Leavis also criticized Johnson’s ear as a critic of poetry, but in a less farseeing way.³ While admiring of Johnson’s greatness as a writer of prose and verse, Leavis dwelt on the limitations revealed in his criticism of Shakespeare’s poetry, his inability to appreciate “the Shakespearean creativeness,” “the exploratory-creative use of words upon experience” that “we” (Leavis and other enlightened modern readers) find in the verse of Shakespeare’s tragedies, or—in another example Leavis adduces as beyond Johnson’s appreciative power—in the fourth book of Pope’s *Dunciad*. For Johnson, Shakespearean “complexity” was not to be marveled at, but rather explained as (in language from the *Preface to Shakespeare*) “the writer becoming entangled with an unwieldy sentiment, which he cannot well express, and will not reject.” So that, for example, Johnson felt it incumbent upon him to unpack Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy by translating it into clear, discursive prose.⁴ At first glance Leavis’ point seems final; but Eliot in his discussion of the same Johnsonian “limitation” manages to make something more positive out of it. If Johnson lacks the historical sense, is unable to understand “archaic” rhythm and diction such as is found in the *Metaphysicals* and in Shakespeare’s poetry, then it was, Eliot writes, “not through lack of sensibility but through specialization of sensibility.” He enlarges on this:

If the eighteenth century had admired the poetry of earlier times in the way in which we can admire it, the result would have been chaos: there would have been no eighteenth century as we know it. That age

³ Eliot’s essay may be found in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1959); Leavis’ “Johnson and Augustanism” is in *The Common Pursuit* (New York, 1952).

⁴ Johnson’s note begins, “Of this celebrated soliloquy, which bursting from a man distracted with contrariety of desires, and overwhelmed with the magnitude of his own purposes, is connected rather in the speaker’s mind, than on his tongue, I shall endeavour to discover the train, and to show how one sentiment produces another.”

would not have had the conviction necessary for perfecting the kind of poetry that it did perfect. The deafness of Johnson's ear to some kinds of melody was the necessary condition for his sharpness of sensibility to verbal beauty of another kind.

This seems to me on Eliot's part a wonderfully capacious and generous use of the historical sense that, more than any other twentieth-century critic, he helped bring into awareness.

Unlike Arnold, who sponsored a pared-down "essential" *Lives of the Poets*, Eliot insisted that they be read entire if Johnson's achievement were to be appreciated. (Eliot also insisted the same thing with respect to Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Herbert, and Baudelaire.) I read through the *Lives* in order—they are arranged by date of the author's death—turning frequently but not invariably to Lonsdale's commentary. Doubtless I flagged, blurred, and failed to take in some of the less memorable Johnsonian sentences, and I skipped the occasional Latin epitaph which, in the case of the forgotten seventeenth-century poet George Stepney, takes up half of the two-page life. Occasionally I marked, then typed out, utterances that made me smile, like the beginning of Otway: "Of Thomas Otway, one of the first names in the English drama, little is known; nor is there any part of that little which his biographer can take pleasure in relating." Lonsdale calls this "Johnson's most somber opening to a literary biography," but I should have called it not devoid of mischief. By way of making a point against the over-explicit long-windedness of Cowley's imagery in his twelve-book poem *Davideis* , Johnson quotes Cowley's description of the angel Gabriel:

He took for skin a cloud most soft and bright,
 That e'er the midday sun pierc'd through with light,
 Upon his cheeks a lively blush he spread,
 Wash'd from the morning beauties deepest red;
 An harmless flattering meteor shone for hair,
 And fell adown his shoulders with loose care;
 He cuts out a silk mantle from the skies,
 Where the most sprightly azure pleas'd the eyes;
 This he with starry vapours sprinkles all,
 Took in their prime ere they grow ripe and fall,

Of a new rainbow, ere it fret or fade,
The choicest piece cut out, a scarfe is made.

Johnson comments:

This is a just specimen of Cowley's imagery: what might in general expressions be great and forcible, he weakens and makes ridiculous by branching it into small parts. That Gabriel was invested with the softest or brightest colours of the sky, we might have been told, and been dismissed to improve the idea in our different proportions of conception; but Cowley could not let us go till he had related where Gabriel got first his skin, and then his mantle, then his lace, and then his scarfe, and related it in the terms of the mercer and taylor.

Excellent! Of Sprat, the historian of the Royal Society and a less than impressive poet: "He considered Cowley as a model, and supposed that as he was imitated, perfection was approached." So much for Sprat. Although Edmund Waller's "Petty compositions" are less hyperbolic than the "amorous verses" of some other poets, still

Waller is not always at the last gasp; he does not die of a frown, nor live upon a smile. There is however too much love, and too many trifles. Little things are made too important; and the Empire of Beauty is represented as exerting its influence further than can be allowed by the multiplicity of human passions, and the variety of human wants.

Here is the Johnsonian proportion and sanity. I raised my eyebrows when told about one of Waller's sons that he, Benjamin, was "disinherited, and sent to New Jersey, as wanting common understanding." I pictured poor Benjamin Waller as exiled to somewhere in the vicinity of Newark, perhaps Bayonne, until Lonsdale assured me that Johnson was speaking of Jersey, a colony in the West Indies. The brief life of William King is concluded by Johnson's noting that "if his verse was easy and his images familiar, he attained what he desired." Well and good, then Johnson qualifies: "His purpose is to be merry; but perhaps, to enjoy his mirth, it may be sometimes necessary to think well of his opinion." A sentence that has thought and thought well about its own opinion.

I quote these examples of satisfying sentences, representative

of many more, not for any larger significance they have in *Lives* overall, but because they are the other, humorous, side of Johnson's enterprise. As to the larger significances, Paul Fussell three decades ago named it in language that hasn't been improved on, placing the *Lives* within the tradition of a number of great eighteenth-century works of English prose and finding it, preeminently, "concerned with the nature, and more importantly, with the limits of human experience." Fussell sees the *Life of Savage*, in its mordant and sympathetic account of that poet's ills and depredations, as giving an overall tone to the book whose "subject is the pathos of hope and the irony of all human and especially literary careers." Recently a contemporary Johnson scholar, Greg Clingham, has spoken of the writer's distinctive combination of criticism and biography as discovering "in human limitations and the historical realm a dignity and grace."⁵ In other words, *Lives of the Poets* is the final investigation of matters Johnson has been exploring in various forms throughout his career: in the periodical essays from the *Rambler*; in the Prefaces to the Dictionary and to Shakespeare; in *Rasselas*; and in "The Vanity of Human Wishes" and the poem on Dr. Levet.

But it is finally at the level of style—of the sentence, the paragraph—where we engage with Johnson most fully and unmistakably. Lonsdale speaks well in his introduction when he says that whatever Johnson's critical limitations and idiosyncrasies, his "energy and trenchancy" are always evident, particularly in passages from the *Lives*—"in which his prose evokes, and even competes with, the qualities of the poetry he is describing." This may be true of any great critic, but Johnson's trenchancy—usually informed by irony—is often such as to obviate the necessity of saying anything further about the literary work under consideration. Any reader of the *Lives* will encounter passages that aptly illustrate this critical power, and in limiting myself to three examples I'm aware of ignoring much. The first is from the *Life of Dryden*, when Johnson, surveying the plays, has this to say about *The Conquest of Granada*, Dryden's over-the-top two-part heroic drama of 1672:

⁵ Paul Fussell's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (New York, 1971) is still the best introduction to Johnson's work. Greg Clingham's words are in his *Johnson, Writing, and Memory* (New York, 2002), p. 98.

The two parts of the *Conquest of Granada* are written with a seeming determination to glut the public with dramattick wonders; to exhibit in its highest elevation a theatrical meteor of incredible love and impossible valour, and to leave no room for a wilder flight to the extravagance of posterity. . . . Yet the scenes are, for the most part, delightful; they exhibit a kind of illustrious depravity, and majestick madness: such as, if it is sometimes despised, is often revered, and in which the ridiculous is mingled with the astonishing.

Johnson's two-mindedness about Dryden's spectacle is nicely concentrated in the oxymoron "illustrious depravity." How is any future critic of the play to top that, and why should he or she try?

From the paragraphs about Pope's *Essay on Man*, the following sequence suggests Johnson's less than fully admiring attitude toward the poem, "certainly not the happiest of Pope's performances." But as one paragraph turns into the next, we see the perspective moving from denigration to a somewhat reluctant admiration:

Having exalted himself into the chair of wisdom, he tells us much that every man knows, and much that he does not know himself; that we see but little, and that the order of the universe is beyond our comprehension; an opinion not very uncommon; and that there is a chain of subordinate beings *from infinite to nothing*, of which himself and his readers are equally ignorant. But he gives us one comfort, which, without his help, he supposes unattainable, in the position *that though we are fools, yet God is wise*.

This Essay affords an egregious instance of the predominance of genius, the dazzling splendour of imagery, and the seductive powers of eloquence. Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised. The reader feels his mind full, though he learns nothing; and when he meets it in its new array, no longer knows the talk of his mother and his nurse.

Such is the power of the "new array" in which Pope garbs his commonplaces, that genius, dazzle, and seductive eloquence are the results.

The third and final example is one of Johnson's most quoted pronouncements. The Life of Thomas Gray was originally to have concluded the whole series, but George, Lord Lytteleton was added subsequently, thus ending things on an anticlimax. Johnson was severe about the body of Gray's poetry, particularly the Odes, and especially "The Bard" whose "puerilities" and "obsolete mythology" Johnson condemned ("I do not see that 'The

Bard' promotes any truth, moral or political"). Near the end of the *Life*, he sums up his distaste for Gray's Odes which he says

are marked by glittering accumulations of ungraceful ornaments; they strike, rather than please; the images are magnified by affectation; the language is laboured into harshness. The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence. *Double, double, toil and trouble*. He has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tiptoe. His art and his struggle are too visible, and there is too little appearance of ease and nature.

Then follow two short paragraphs somewhat modifying the censure, after which Johnson abruptly directs attention to Gray's most famous poem, almost catching us by surprise:

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 mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom return an echo.

He singles out four stanzas for special praise, then writes the great final sentence: "Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him." This deference to the "common reader" is so graceful and assured that we almost forget to ask whether there weren't at that time a number of such readers whose bosoms returned an echo to the Odes of Gray. In the two pages of commentary Lonsdale devotes to that final paragraph, he aptly quotes Lawrence Lipking, who wrote about its final sentence, "Johnson resigns his authority—and also asserts it, by merging the public judgment into his own."⁶ Lipking adds, with an understandable flourish, that "his whole career had led up to this moment." If so, Johnson knew—once more and most memorably—exactly what should be said.

⁶ Lipking's excellent chapter on *Lives of the Poets* may be found in his *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 259–294.