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From Vile Melancholy to Christian Hope: The Religious
Aspects in The Work of Samuel Johnson

by

Robert John Mills

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ABSTRACT

The eighteenth century in England is generally considered to be a period of increased religious optimism. More and more, religious thinkers of the time came to regard their religion in terms of hope instead of fear, and much of the austerity generally associated with religion in the previous century began to disappear. Ironically, however, Samuel Johnson, one of the greatest eighteenth-century men of letters, did not fall into this general pattern of religious optimism. Strictly orthodox in his beliefs, Johnson's religion was definitely grounded in fear, and this religious fear contributed greatly to the "vile melancholy" which plagued him all his life. Yet, paradoxically, it was through the ultimate comfort and hope which religion offered him that Johnson was able to endure a life which many would have found unendurable. It is the purpose of this study to try to reconcile this seeming contradiction by a careful examination of the religious aspects in Johnson's writing.

After briefly looking at such prominent religious trends and movements of Johnson's time as Socinianism, Arianism, Arminianism, Pelagianism and Deism, this study examines Johnson's own religious beliefs as specifically revealed in his Diaries, Prayers and Annals. It is apparent from these personal writings that Johnson's religious fears

were indeed very great. Strongly influenced by the great eighteenth-century divine and mystic, William Law, Johnson strove to attain the perfection which Law advocated in his writings. Such perfection, of course, was impossible to attain and Johnson's pain and frustration over failing to achieve it is movingly illustrated throughout his prayers and meditations. Plagued by a fear of damnation, or, what was worse in his mind, total annihilation, Johnson prayed continually for salvation. Yet, it is clear that even though he could never be sure of salvation and hence spent many tortured hours, his religion at least provided him with the hope for a better life, and ultimately enabled him to meet death with a confidence that few can feel.

A further chapter examines Johnson's views on religion in literature. Going directly against the "religious sublime" theory of poetry as put forward by such men as John Dennis and Isaac Watts, Johnson firmly held that religion had no place in poetry. His reasons for this belief are amply expressed in The Lives of The Poets, and basically come down to his contention that the prime purpose of the poet should be to provide the reader with self-knowledge, something which religious writing simply cannot do as it does not deal with ordinary experience. It is only by showing man his true state in this world, Johnson claims, that man can ever rise above his fleeting and transitory wants and find true happiness in God. It is for this reason that Johnson has such high praise for Shakespeare, whom he considers to be above all the "poet

of nature."

Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, two of Johnson's most famous works, are then analyzed in the light of Johnson's religious views. In both works it is apparent that Johnson's prime purpose was to provide his reader with the self-knowledge which he felt was so important in achieving salvation. Both works embody the curious mixture of pessimism and optimism which pervades Johnson's whole life, but in the final analysis it is apparent that while Johnson's view of this life may be pessimistic, his view of eternity certainly is not. Far from being merely a pessimistic condemnation of this life, then, Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes really show the orthodox Christian belief of man's position in the world, and as such must be considered as presenting an optimistic viewpoint.

The next chapter considers a rather strange and neglected facet of Johnson's writing, his Latin poetry. I say strange because even though Johnson often expressed his aversion to religious writings, most of these Latin poems are deeply religious in content and treatment. The reason for this curious anomaly seems to be that Johnson never intended these poems for publication. Through his use of the Latin language, he found a vehicle through which he could express his deepest and inner-most feelings more clearly than in English. The poems are perhaps the clearest indication of Johnson's deeply felt religious experience, and plainly show how Johnson was able to rise above the cares of this world and find ultimate peace with God.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. JOHNSON AND THE RELIGIOUS OPTIMISM OF HIS TIME.....	1
II. JOHNSON'S "VILE MELANCHOLY": <u>THE</u> <u>DIARIES, PRAYERS AND ANNALS</u>	9
III. JOHNSON'S VIEWS ON RELIGION IN LITERATURE.....	35
IV. JOHNSON'S SECULAR WRITINGS AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY.....	55
V. JOHNSON'S LATIN POETRY.....	81
VI. CONCLUSION - THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH.....	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	101

Chapter One

Johnson and The Religious Optimism of His Time

Basil Willey has referred to the eighteenth century as "the Golden Age of natural theology and deistical free-thinking,"¹ and certainly when one examines the religious climate of the period, it is hard to disagree with this assessment. Tired and frustrated by the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many now strove to find a religion which would not be so difficult to fathom, and hence would be acceptable to all. The religious conflicts of the past two centuries had called into doubt all the points of the faith, and now, in the freer climate of the eighteenth century, many were beginning to reject doctrines which had formerly been considered fundamental to Christianity.²

1. Basil Willey, The Eighteenth-Century Background (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 10.
2. One such doctrine which was increasingly questioned in the eighteenth century was the idea of the Trinity. Ultimately, this English anti-Trinitarianism arising through rationalist Calvinism and Enlightenment religion was to lead to modern Unitarianism. In England Socinianism, a movement which had begun in the sixteenth century when two Italian theologians, Laelius Socinus and his nephew Faustus Socinus, denied the divinity of Christ, was indirectly influential in the rise of Unitarianism. Much more important, however, was the attempt to simplify Christianity to a "natural religion" on which all might agree. John Biddle (1615-1662), often regarded as the father of English Unitarianism, instructed against prayer directed to Christ, and denied the deity of the Holy Spirit. Locke's view that the miracles of Christ are not self-evident proofs of his divinity was also adopted. From 1691 to 1705 Thomas Firmin sponsored a series of tracts which spread Unitarian ideas throughout England. Many people

Early eighteenth-century English divines widely stressed the rational element in religion to the extent of placing "natural religion" in the forefront while neglecting revelation to some extent, even though as orthodox Christians they did not doubt the necessity for Christian faith to be understood as revealed. Even John Locke said that "The works of Nature everywhere sufficiently evidence a Deity."³ Joseph Butler, who in his Analogy of Religion (1736) stressed the importance of a revealed religion, still confidently put forward the theory that God had granted to each man an inner faculty or conscience which directed man to do right on all occasions. This was not merely to say that all man had to do was follow whatever impulse happened to be strongest at a given moment, for, as Butler said, "if by following nature were meant only acting as we please, it would indeed be ridiculous to speak of nature as any guide in morals."⁴ Rather, "by following nature" Butler meant that we must follow our true sense of what we know is right, and ignore as much as possible other passions which may try to interfere. Butler certainly was not saying that all men act perfectly all the time, but he

first became Arminians, emphasizing the freedom of man and the goodness of God, and others Arians who denied the eternity of Christ. It was not until around 1800 that Unitarianism became a distinct movement in England.

3. Willey, Eighteenth-Century Background, p. 14.

4. Ibid., p. 90.

was saying that by following our own reason in all matters and listening to the dictates of our conscience we may lead moral and worthwhile lives.

However, English Deism, which advocated a purely natural religion and specifically denied the need for any revelation, also began to grow and flourish during this time. Led by such articulate spokesmen as William Wollaston and Mathew Tindal, the Deists believed that reason alone was the source of our knowledge of God and the truth of man's destiny. This is not to say that the Deists disagreed with all orthodox Christian doctrine. They still held firmly to the concept of God as the sole cause of the universe. God was seen as being above all other things, absolutely perfect, and having infinite wisdom and power. Also, most Deists believed in the concepts of an afterlife and of the immateriality of the soul.

What they strongly opposed, however, were the mysteries inherent in the New Testament. It was their belief that religion was only beclouded and confused by the miracles and mysteries found in the Bible, and by attempting to explain all these so-called mysteries rationally, the Deists discredited great sections of scripture necessary to orthodox Christian belief. Inevitably, then, most Deists found it necessary to reject the Bible as a guide for moral action, and there evolved a system of natural morality in which the sanctions of divine rewards and punishments were seen as being no longer valid.

Such ideas as these inevitably led men to a new and higher opinion of their own nature. Basil Willey, commenting on this new concept of man, puts it this way:

Speaking broadly, on approaching the eighteenth century we are confronted with a steady decline in what has been called the tragic sense of life. We have gone on too long, it was felt, repeating that we are miserable offenders and that there is no health in us. We must change these notes to something more cheerful, something more befitting a polite and civilized age.⁵

Clearly, then, men took full advantage of the freer climate of the eighteenth century to give full expression to their religious convictions. Inevitably, the general trend of this period was towards a newly found religious optimism, and religion became less a source of fear and more a source of hope to the typical Englishman of the eighteenth century.

But if the general trend of the eighteenth century was towards a more cheerful form of religious belief, one of the greatest men to come out of that century, Samuel Johnson, certainly did not fit into this general pattern. Throughout his life, Johnson was constantly oppressed by a melancholy nature - perhaps inherited from his father - a mood of melancholy which became so intense at times that he feared madness. Ezra Pound, perhaps himself a victim of cultural

5. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

displacement, is one who has realized Johnson's profound dislocation from his own times. Pound says of Johnson that he was "...living in the seventeenth century, so far as Europe is concerned."⁶

It is a well-known fact that the work of William Law, the great eighteenth-century divine and mystic, had a profound effect on Johnson's religious beliefs throughout his life. The fact that Law was a High Churchman probably did much to influence Johnson's High Church position, but more important than this, Law's exacting demands upon the Christian to help him attain perfection and to make himself worthy of salvation definitely increased the severity of Johnson's own scruples and contributed greatly to his fear that he might not be saved. As we shall see from his prayers and meditations, Johnson continually deliberated on his own faults and on his own unworthiness. A firm believer in the doctrine of original sin and the fall of man, Johnson asserted that "Man's chief merit consists in resisting the impulses of his nature."⁷ This idea, of course, was diametrically opposed to those put forward by the Deists.

Johnson was an orthodox Christian in the true sense of

6. Ezra Pound, A.B.C. of Reading (Norfolk, Conn. 1951), p. 186. Quoted in Paul Fussell, The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 21.

7. George Birkbeck Hill, ed., Johnsonian Miscellanies (New York, 1897), II, 285. Quoted in Fussell, The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism, p. 8.

the word. To him, God was a judging God, and only those who merited salvation through good works, repentance and firm belief would be saved. Johnson, in direct contrast to the Deists, regarded the world of physical nature as being morally neutral, and hence completely irrelevant to man's moral existence. The true tenets of morality were not to be found in nature, but only in the Bible, the true and revealed word of God. Also, Johnson firmly believed that this world was not the paradise that some of the Deists seemed to think it was. Rather, he felt that true happiness was not to be found in this world and that all one could hope to achieve was a realization that it is only to be attained in an afterlife with God. As we shall see, it is this kind of self-knowledge that Johnson attempts to convey in many of his secular writings.

In the following chapters, it will be my purpose to show how Johnson's religion, although filled with much fear, also provided his tortured mind with the hope that he so desperately needed. Johnson could see that man's lot on this earth was basically tragic. Here, it seemed, man spent some sixty or seventy years pursuing false hopes and enjoying false happiness while suffering almost continually from very real pains and misfortunes. Johnson believed that with all the potential that man has there must be a greater purpose in creation than this. Religion - and specifically orthodoxy - provided Johnson with the hope for the afterlife which he so desperately desired,

and hence provided his only source of solace in a world filled with pain. In Idler 41, written on January 27, 1759, Johnson most clearly displays the hope which religion offered to him. In discussing the death of a dear friend, he goes on to say:

These are the great occasions which force the mind to take refuge in religion: when we have no help in ourselves, what can remain but we look up to a higher and greater power; and to what hope may we not raise our eyes and hearts, when we consider that the greatest power is the best.

Surely there is no man who, thus afflicted, does not seek succour in the Gospel, which has brought "life and immortality to light." The precepts of Epicurus, who teaches us to endure what the laws of the universe make necessary, may silence but not content us. The dictates of Zeno, who commands us to look with indifference on external things, may dispose us to conceal our sorrow, but cannot assuage it. Real alleviation of the loss of friends, and rational tranquility in the prospect of our own dissolution, can be received only from the promises of him in whose hands are life and death, and from the assurance of another and better state, in which all tears will be wiped from the eyes, and the whole soul shall be filled with joy. Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, but religion only can give patience.⁸

These lines were written when Johnson was forty-nine years old. Before him lay twenty-six more years of pain, frustration and melancholy. But through it all Johnson never lost his hope, and inevitably this hope enabled him to die with a more tranquil mind than he had before. Johnson had a deep need for some sort of religious belief, and since orthodox Christianity provided him with the strongest hope for eternal salvation in a world which he saw as basically tragic,

8. Samuel Johnson, The Idler and The Adventurer - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, II, ed. W. J. Bate (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 130-131.

he embraced it with all his heart and soul. In his adherence to orthodoxy, Johnson was perhaps not echoing the fashionable religious beliefs of his own time, but this did not matter to him. In the tragic world in which he found himself, Johnson desperately needed some source of comfort, and this comfort he found in his orthodox faith.

Chapter Two

Johnson's "Vile Melancholy": The Diaries,
Prayers and Annals.

In his biography of Samuel Johnson, Joseph Wood Krutch refers to him as "a pessimist with an enormous zest for living."¹ Anyone familiar with Boswell's Life of Johnson could have little quarrel with this seemingly paradoxical assessment of one of the most extraordinary men in English literature. Looking at Johnson's character through the eyes of men such as Boswell, we come to see what amounts to two entirely different characters embodied in the same man. On the one hand, we see a man who seems possessed by a compulsive desire to extract from life all that it is humanly possible to extract. It is here that we see the social side of Johnson's character: a man who would eat so rapidly and voraciously that the veins would stand out on his forehead; a man who completely dominated any social group of which he was part and who filled his house with characters far beneath his social and intellectual level partly so that he could be surrounded by people willing to listen to his endless conversation. Yet, it is this same man who said in Rasselas, through the person of Imlac, "Human life is every where a

1. Joseph Wood Krutch, Samuel Johnson (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945), p. 1.

state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."²

As we delve deeper into the character of Johnson, we discover that he really had a dread of solitude, and that much of the merry exterior he put on for his friends was merely an attempt to prevent them from leaving him alone with his thoughts. In Rasselas, Johnson comments on the merry-makers by saying that "there was not one who did not dread the moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection."³ Clearly, this statement is strongly grounded in personal experience. Johnson said to Boswell that even in company he might "be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun."⁴ On July 21, 1763, Boswell first heard from Johnson that he "had been distressed by melancholy, and for that reason had been obliged to fly from study and meditation, to the dissipating variety of life."⁵ It will be the purpose of this chapter to take a close look at the melancholy nature that Johnson tried so hard to escape.

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2. Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 531.
 3. Ibid., p. 542.
 4. James Boswell, Life of Johnson, ed. G. B. Hill, and L. F. Powell, IV, 304. Quoted in A. R. Humphreys, "Dr. Johnson, Troubled Believer," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 42.
 5. Ibid., I, 446. Quoted in A. R. Humphreys, "Dr. Johnson, Troubled Believer," p. 42.

It is well known that Johnson was a man of extreme physical courage, a courage almost bordering at times on foolhardiness. The accounts of his singlehandedly fending off several robbers late at night until help arrived and of how he broke up a fierce fight between two ferocious dogs when no one else would dare approach them, give ample evidence that Johnson was certainly not afraid of physical pain. Paradoxically, however, Johnson did have one great and overwhelming fear, the fear of death. Obviously, his fear of death went much deeper than the mere fear of pain associated with the act of dying, for, as we have seen, Johnson feared physical pain much less than most men. It seems, rather, that Johnson did not so much fear the actual process of dying as much as he feared the state of being dead. It was primarily this fear, I believe, that produced the "vile melancholy"⁶ that haunted him throughout his life.

One may wonder why a professed Christian like Johnson

6. The phrase "Vile Melancholy" is found in James Boswell, Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (Toronto: The MacMillan Co., 1936), p. 174.

He [Johnson] owned this morning that one might have a greater aptitude to learn than another, and that we inherit dispositions from our parents. Said he, "I inherited a vile melancholy from my father, which has made me mad all my life, at least not sober." Lady MacLeod wondered he should tell this. "Madam," said I, "he knows that with that madness he is superior to other men."

should have had any fear of death whatsoever. After all, wouldn't he be sure of going to heaven and meeting his Maker, there to dwell in eternal happiness? Actually, it was a fundamental part of Johnson's religion to have doubts about his salvation. This claim may seem self-contradictory at first, but I think it will become clear after we have examined Johnson's idea of salvation. It has been reported by Arthur Murphy that when Johnson was in company and not engaged in the conversation, he had a rather curious habit of repeating a passage from Measure for Measure spoken by Claudio:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.⁷

This passage clearly reflects notions of Hell which were most unpleasant for Johnson to think about. Boswell makes it very clear in the Life that Johnson did believe wholeheartedly in a literal Hell. A famous incident which clearly shows this belief occurred when Johnson, in conversation with

7. Arthur Murphy, Johnsonian Miscellanies, 2 vols., ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 1897. Quoted in Hesketh Pearson, Johnson and Boswell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 338-339.

Dr. William Adams, expressed fears that he was to be damned. Upon being asked by Adams what he meant by "damned" Johnson passionately replied, "Sent to Hell, sir, and punished everlastingly."⁸ Johnson, then, did believe in a literal Hell, and yet one wonders why a religious man should have any fear about going to Hell. Should not a believer like Johnson be sure of going to Heaven? On this point, Johnson himself was anything but sure.

It was a fundamental part of his religion to believe that God was a judging God, and that the only way that one could find eternal salvation was through merit. Here, Johnson was being a perfectly orthodox Anglican. Robert South, whom Johnson greatly admired, stated this same theology clearly and simply when he said that the two essential beliefs of Christianity were:

- 1) That there is an infinite, eternal, all-wise mind governing the affairs of the world, and taking such an account of the actions of men, as, according to the quality of them, to punish or reward them.
- 2) That there is an estate of happiness or misery after this life, allotted to every man, according to the quality of his actions here.⁹

It is only necessary to look at part of Johnson's Third Sermon to see how strongly he believed in a literal Hell and how South's writings undoubtedly influenced his thought:

8. James Boswell, Life of Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 1296.

9. Robert South, Sermons (Oxford, 1842), I, 269. Quoted in J. H. Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," E.L.H., 14 (1947), 312.

The Bible tells us, in plain and authoritative terms, that there is a way of life, and a way to death; that there are acts which God will reward, and acts that he will punish. That with soberness, righteousness, and godliness, God will be pleased; and that with intemperance, iniquity, and impiety God will be offended; and that, of those who are careful to please him, the reward will be such as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and of those who, having offended him, die without repentance, the punishment will be inconceivably severe, and dreadful.¹⁰

Similarly, in his belief that salvation was conditional and depended on the merit of the individual, Johnson was echoing traditional orthodox Anglican belief. South says about salvation:

Assurance is properly that persuasion or confidence which a man takes up of the pardon of his sins, and his interest in God's favour, upon such grounds and terms as the scripture lays down. But now, since the scripture promises eternal happiness and pardon of sin, upon the sole condition of faith and sincere obedience, it is evident, that he only can plead a title to such a pardon, whose conscience impartially tells him, that he has performed the required conditions. And this is the only rational assurance, which a man can with any safety rely or rest himself upon.¹¹

In a conversation recorded by Boswell, Johnson describes two types of people who do not share his opinion of conditional salvation: the Calvinists with their doctrine of absolute decree, and the mystical enthusiasts, who speak of inner "marks of sanctification". He then makes the following revealing statement:

10. Samuel Johnson, Works of Samuel Johnson (Oxford, 1825), IX, 310 (Sermon III). Quoted in Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," p. 313.

11. Robert South, Sermons (Oxford, 1842), I, 289. Quoted in Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," p. 313.

Others, and those the most rational in my opinion, look upon salvation as conditional; and as they never can be sure that they have complied with the conditions, they are afraid.¹²

This is a very clear statement of Johnson's own belief. As we shall see, Johnson had very strong doubts about his own merit, and because of this he had a powerful, if not overpowering, fear of death.

Perhaps the best place in which to discover Johnson's doubts about his own merit is in his personal prayers and meditations. It is here that we first discover the idea of Heaven and Hell as implanted in Johnson's mind. Johnson is reflecting back on the year 1712 (he was three at the time) when he says:

I suppose that in this year I was first informed of a future state. I remember, that being in bed with my mother one morning, I was told by her of the two places to which the inhabitants of this world were received after death; one a fine place filled with happiness, called Heaven, the other a sad place, called Hell. That this account much affected my imagination, I do not remember.¹³

But if his mother's account did not affect his imagination to any great extent at the time, the idea she implanted in his mind became one of the utmost importance as the years wore on.

As we read the Diaries, Prayers and Annals, we see that Johnson is continually referring to the great sense of guilt and unworthiness that constantly plagued his thoughts. For

12. Boswell, Life of Johnson (Hill-Powell edition), IV, 278. Quoted in Hagstrum, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," p. 314.

13. Samuel Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, I, ed. E.L. McAdam Jr. with Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven and London: The Yale University Press, 1960), 10.

anyone who believed that the only way that man could find salvation was through merit, this sense of guilt and frustration was indeed a terrible thing, and, from the anguish so evident in nearly all of Johnson's prayers, we can see just how much these thoughts affected him. As Humphreys points out:

The Diaries refer again and again to such matters as "thoughts clouded with sensuality," and "appetites /which/ have predominated over my reason" (p. 77), "tumultuous imaginations" (p. 46), a mind "depraved with vain imaginations" (p. 63), "sinful and corrupt imaginations" (p. 138). These the American editors equate, rightfully no doubt, with sexual fantasies; they occur after Tetty's death.¹⁴

There is strong evidence, however, that even before Tetty's death Johnson's strange sexual activities may have given him cause for anguish. James L. Clifford, in Young Sam Johnson, makes the following reference to Johnson's sexual habits in 1748:

It must have been about this time that an incident occurred which Mrs. Desmoulins /one of several unfortunates with whom Johnson shared his home/ later described so vividly to Boswell to illustrate how Johnson restrained his strong passions. When his wife was at Hampstead he came out two or three days every week, and sometimes when Dr. Bathurst was in the neighbourhood would spend the evening with his friend, staying up until two or three in the morning. Since Tetty went to bed early and the maid could not be expected to wait up that late, it devolved upon Mrs. Desmoulins to sit up to let him in and to warm his bed with a pan of coals. Thus it happened that the thirty-two year old daughter of his godfather, Dr. Swinfen, assumed some of the duties of his wife. Hating to go to sleep, desperately needing affection, Johnson would quickly undress and then call her back to sit on his bed and talk. While Tetty slept soundly in another room,

14. Humphreys, "Dr. Johnson, Troubled Believer," p. 43.

he would discuss the affairs of the day and would kiss and fondle the younger woman, who sometimes even lay with her head on his pillow. Not that the endearments ever went too far. Mrs. Desmoulins was very clear on that point. She always respected him as a father. There had never been anything beyond the bounds of decency. For her it was the humoring of an honoured friend. For him it was something more - a pathetic longing for tenderness and sympathy, combined with a dangerous playing with smoldering passions he was determined to repress. As she once confessed to another lady, such was the awe and respect she had for him she could never have resisted if matters had come to extremities. It was Johnson who drew back. When the desire became almost more than he could bear he would push her away and cry out in anguish for her to leave him. She could plainly see the struggle and the conquest.¹⁵

Related to this, we have the evidence advanced by Frederick A. Pottle in his article "The Dark Hints of Hawkins and Boswell."¹⁶ It is Pottle's contention that the oblique references to Johnson's sexual transgressions found in both Boswell's and Hawkin's biographies were not merely the product of idle conjecture or an attempt to get back at Johnson for injuries he may have caused them. Rather, they were based on sound fact, taken secretly from Johnson's own private papers.

Perhaps the most disturbing article dealing with Johnson's alleged sexual fantasies is Katherine Balderston's "Johnson's Vile Melancholy."¹⁷ Miss Balderston, relying

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15. James L. Clifford, Young Sam Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 314-315.
 16. Frederick A. Pottle, "The Dark Hints of Sir John Hawkins and Boswell," New Light on Dr. Johnson, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 153-162.
 17. Katherine C. Balderston, "Johnson's Vile Melancholy," The Age of Johnson, ed. Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 3-14.

largely on little known letters and diary entries of Johnson and oblique diary entries of Mrs. Thrale, proves almost conclusively that Johnson was, in fact, a very sick man mentally. Since these entries deal with a later period of Johnson's life, beginning in 1768 and continuing for some five years, it seems clear that the root of Johnson's tortured melancholy and sense of guilt was a strong amorous nature severely repressed after his wife's death. The disturbing conclusion Miss Balderston reaches is that Johnson's sexual irregularities often took a masochistic form, with Mrs. Thrale as the administrant of punishments. Taking into account Johnson's difficulty in believing wholeheartedly in a forgiving God, it is easy to see that if these accounts of his sexual transgressions were true, Johnson would indeed have found it impossible to rid himself of his overpowering sense of guilt.

Whatever the full reasons for Johnson's guilt may have been, we see that again and again he prays for forgiveness of his sins, although he simply cannot be sure that his repentance is sincere enough or that God has listened to his prayers. Boswell relates an incident where Johnson, discussing the question of the certainty of salvation, has this to say:

But what man can say that his obedience has been such, as he would approve of in another, or even in himself upon close examination, or that his repentance has not been such as to require being repented of? No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation!¹⁸

18. Boswell, Life of Johnson (1965), p. 450.

Johnson also had a view of life itself which made it very difficult for him to believe that he would obtain salvation. To Johnson, it was simply not enough for man to relieve his mind of evil thoughts and to repent earnestly to God. Repentance of this kind was merely a sort of negative good. There also had to be a positive side to this good and this consisted of his belief that merely to do nothing was as great a sin as to do evil. He thought of each day as a gift from God, and to waste such a gift was definitely a sin. This view is made clear in the following prayer, dated November 19, 1752, and entitled "After Time Negligently and Unprofitably Spent":

O Lord, in whose hands are life and death, by whose power I am sustained, and by whose mercy I am spared, look down upon me with pity. Forgive me, that I have this day neglected the duty which thou hast assigned to it, and suffered the hours, of which I must give account, to pass away without any endeavour to accomplish thy will, or to promote my own salvation. Make me to remember, O God, that everyday is thy gift, and ought to be used according to thy command. Grant me, therefore, so to repent of my negligence, that I may obtain mercy from Thee, and pass the time which thou shalt yet allow me, in diligent performance of thy commands, through Jesus Christ. Amen.¹⁹

From the many lists recurrent throughout the Prayers and Annals, it would seem that Johnson considered his idleness the most inveterate of all of his sins, as invariably this sin is listed first. For example, on his forty-eighth birthday he

19. Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals, p. 49.

ends a prayer by listing the following faults which need correction:

Idleness intemperate sleep dilatoriness immethodical life
Lust
Neglect of Worship
Vain Scruples.²⁰

Lists like these are common throughout the Prayers and Annals, extending right up to the time of Johnson's death. Equally common, however, are lists of resolutions which Johnson had decided to put into practice in order to cure himself of his idle nature. For example, on the sixth of April, 1777, Johnson lists his purposes as

- 1) To rise at eight
To keep a journal
- 2) To read the whole Bible in some language before Easter
- 3) To gather the arguments for Christianity
- 4) To worship God more frequently in publick.²¹

Now anyone who has read Johnson's writings cannot help but be impressed by the extraordinarily large amount of work that the man did during his lifetime. One of his most mammoth projects, his Lives of the Poets, was completed in 1781 when he was an old man and in failing health. A project of such magnitude as this alone would seem to render Johnson's self-criticism of his idleness ridiculous, but when we look at the huge bulk of his writings as a whole, it seems almost incomprehensible that such a man as this should feel guilty about

20. Ibid., p. 64.

21. Ibid., p. 268.

leading an idle life. But Johnson, as we have seen, had a very strong faith in the idea that each day was a gift from God and that each moment had to be usefully employed. Coupled with this, it is common knowledge that during his lifetime he was, in fact, idle for days, months, and even years. Of course, when he did work he worked extraordinarily hard, but this does not alter the fact that Johnson himself knew that he could have done a great deal more had he been working at his full capacity.

It seems that no matter how much Johnson did he could never satisfy himself that it was enough. This attitude is clearly reflected in the following comment from his Good Friday prayer, April 14, 1775:

When I look back upon resolutions of improvement and amendments which have year after year been made and broken, either by negligence, forgetfulness, vicious idleness, casual interruption, or morbid infirmity, when I find that so much of my life has stolen unprofitably away, and that I can descry by retrospection scarcely a few single days properly and vigorously employed, why do I yet try to resolve again? I try because Reformation is necessary and despair is criminal. I try in humble hope of the help of God.²²

We can see from this passage that Johnson was very despondent over his failure to mend his ways, and yet he did not give up. Instead, he makes the terse statement, "Reformation is necessary and despair is criminal." It would seem from this that it was a fundamental part of Johnson's religion to ask for salvation and to attempt to reform. As we shall see,

22. Ibid., p. 225.

this idea was based on Johnson's fear of God.

It has been stated previously that one of the main causes of Johnson's fear of death was his fear of a judging God who only admits worthy people into the Kingdom of Heaven. Johnson, as we have seen, had grave doubts about his worthiness and hence greatly feared death lest he should be sent to Hell. As Maurice J. Quinlan points out, however, both Johnson's fear of God and his fear of death were regarded by him as necessary aids for salvation.

The fear of God [Johnson] says (Sermon 3), is a holy fear, for a constant apprehension of offending the Deity is the best bulwark against sin and temptation. But, ensnared by worldly distractions, man is likely to forget how short a time remains before he must account for his transgressions to his Maker. Therefore he should constantly remind himself of his mortality and of the brevity of life by meditating on death. Such reflections will naturally produce fear, but this is a salutary effect, for the fear of death keeps alive the fear of God, and both constantly remind man of the importance of being prepared to meet his judgement.²³

From this statement it becomes more apparent why Johnson is so preoccupied with the idea of death. By thinking on death, Johnson is also reminding himself of the brevity of life, and hence has continually before him the notion that man must always be preparing himself to meet his Maker. This constant preparation, of course, is a good effect of fearing death and a central part of Johnson's religion. Nowhere is this idea more apparent than in a prayer written on March 28, 1758, in which Johnson, reflecting on his wife's death, says:

23. Maurice J. Quinlan, Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 136.

Almighty and eternal God, who givest life and takest it away, grant that while thou shalt prolong my continuance on earth, I may live with a due sense of thy mercy and forbearance, and let the remembrance of her whom thy hand has separated from me, teach me to consider the shortness and uncertainty of life, and to use all diligence to obtain eternal happiness in thy presence.²⁴

Even though Johnson realized that meditation on death was a necessary duty of all Christians, he obviously considered it in no way a pleasant duty. This point is stressed in Sermon 15 when he says, "To consider the shortness, or misery, of life, is not an employment to which the mind recurs for solace or diversion; or to which it is invited by any hope of immediate delight." It must instead be thought of as a nauseous medicine that the "fastidiousness of nature prompts us to refuse." It is still a medicine, however, and as such must be taken frequently and in large doses, for "it is our duty, in the pilgrimage of life, to proceed with our eyes open, and to see our state, not as hope or fancy may delineate it, but as it has been in reality appointed by Divine providence."²⁵

It has been pointed out by several critics that Johnson was greatly influenced in many of his theological beliefs by William Law,²⁶ and Johnson's ideas on death are no exception.

24. Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals, pp. 64-65.

25. Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 136.

26. See for example:

Paul K. Alkon, "Robert South, William Law, and Samuel Johnson," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 6 (1966), 499-528.

Katherine C. Balderston, "Doctor Johnson and William Law," P.M.L.A., 75 (1960), 382-394.

In his discussions on perfection, Law consistently urged the penitent to think daily on death and to fear God. Johnson obviously took Law's advice to heart. As Quinlan points out,²⁷ nowhere does Johnson write more clearly in the spirit and temper of Law than in Sermon 3, which is on the text, "Happy is the man that feareth alway; but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief." (Proverbs 28:14). It is in this sermon that Johnson speaks of how fear can actually produce happiness. Now, it would seem from Johnson's prayers that his fear certainly did not produce happiness in the normal sense of the word, so perhaps it would be interesting to see just what Johnson meant by the word "happiness" used in this theological context. In a famous passage from this Sermon Johnson writes:

He is happy that carries about with him in the world the temper of the cloister; and preserves the fear of doing evil, while he suffers himself to be impelled by the zeal of doing good; who uses the comforts and conveniences of his condition as though he used them not, with that constant desire of a better state, which sinks the value of earthly things; who can be rich or poor, without pride in riches, or discontent in poverty; who can manage the business of this life with such indifference as may shut out from his heart all incitements to fraud or injustice; who can partake the pleasures of sense with temperance, and enjoy the distinctions of honour with moderation; who can pass undefiled through a polluted world; and among all the vicissitudes of good and evil, have his heart fixed

Katherine C. Balderston, "Dr. Johnson's Use of William Law in the Dictionary," Philological Quarterly, 39, No. 3 (1960), 379-388.

Quinlan, Layman's Religion, pp. 3-26.

27. Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 137.

only where true joys are to be found.²⁸

An existence such as this, Johnson says, is only possible "by fearing always, by preserving in the mind a constant apprehension of the Divine displeasure." Clearly, such happiness as this is very different from the secular type we usually think of as happiness. The point that Johnson is making here is that even though the fear of death and of God may cause a person much hardship and sorrow, it does serve as a warning that in order to achieve salvation man must repent of his sins. In other words, the fear of death and of meeting God is actually a positive thing because it prepares man to achieve salvation by causing him to repent. In repentance there is hope, and in hope there is the happiness that Johnson speaks of. I would agree with Quinlan, then, when he says, "Hope and fear [for Johnson] are not antithetical elements; instead they are closely related virtues."²⁹

I have so far been dealing with one reason for Johnson's fear of death, his fear of damnation, but there is another major reason why Johnson feared death and this reason is perhaps the most disturbing of all. Earlier in this chapter I spoke of how Johnson was fond of quoting a certain passage from Measure for Measure when not engaged in conversation, and

28. Samuel Johnson, Sermon III. Quoted in Quinlan, Layman's Religion, pp. 137-138.

29. Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 138.

how this passage echoed his fear of damnation. He was, however, equally fond of quoting a passage from Paradise Lost, a passage which reflected another great fear, his fear of annihilation, or complete extinction devoid of any after-life whatsoever. The passage is spoken by the fallen angel, Belial, in the Council in Hell:

Who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated Night,
Devoid of sense and motion.

(II. 146-151)³⁰

This statement by Belial is an accurate reflection of Johnson's own views on annihilation. He once told Boswell that, "No wise man will be contented to die if he thinks he is to fall into annihilation. For however bad any man's existence may be, every man would rather have it than not exist at all."³¹ His answer to Mrs. Seward's assertion that, "There is one mode of the fear of death, which is certainly absurd; and that is the dread of annihilation, which is only a pleasing sleep without a dream," is well known. Filled with indignation, Johnson burst out, "It is neither pleasing, nor sleep; it is nothing. Now mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain, than not exist."³² Related closely to this is the equally

30. John Milton, Paradise Lost, Book II, 146-151. Quoted in Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 134.

31. James Boswell, Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York, 1936), p. 155.

32. Boswell, Life of Johnson (1965), p. 950.

well known story of the educated pig. One day, Anna Seward told Johnson that she had seen a pig capable of doing all the tricks normally performed by dogs and horses. A young clergyman present remarked that great torture must have been applied to make the pig submissive. Johnson asked, "How old is your pig?"

"Three years," replied Anna.

"Then the pig has no cause to complain," Johnson decided; "he would have been killed the first year if he had not been educated, and protracted existence is a good recompense for very considerable degrees of torture."³³

Johnson's love of some form of existence was so overwhelming that he simply could not conceive of anyone who believed in total extinction after death dying with any sort of composure. When Boswell reported to Johnson that a man apparently believing in annihilation, David Hume, had gone to his death without any great agitation, Johnson could only reply:

It was not so, sir. He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he should assume an appearance of ease, than that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going (as, in spite of his delusive theory, he cannot be sure but he may go) into an unknown state, and not being uneasy at leaving all he knew. And you are to consider, that upon his own principle of annihilation

33. Pearson, Johnson and Boswell, p. 339.

he had no motive to speak the truth.³⁴

Interestingly enough, Johnson seldom directly mentions his fear of annihilation in his prayers and meditations, although he often implies this fear by praying to be finally received into everlasting life. One of the few places where his fear of annihilation does come over clearly is in his prayer for March 28, 1762, in which he makes the statement, "grant that I may not have been created to be finally destroyed."³⁵ Perhaps the idea of total extinction was just too painful for Johnson to think of in his private meditations.

In The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, Walter Jackson Bate makes a very interesting point. It is well known that

34. Boswell, Life of Johnson (1965), p. 839.

The relationship between Johnson and David Hume is most interesting. It appears that Hume was one of the few men whom Johnson really despised; and it is surprising to discover that Johnson never had one word of praise for Hume, perhaps the greatest of all eighteenth-century philosophers. In a most interesting article, "Johnson and the 'Proofs' of Revelation," by Chester Chapin, Philological Quarterly, 40, No. 4 (1961), 297-302, Chapin convincingly argues that Johnson's apparent hatred for Hume was really a fear of his brilliance. He contends that had Johnson been willing to look objectively at Hume's arguments against Christianity, it is quite possible that his own faith might have been shaken. Johnson was a true and devout Christian, but he was also a rationalist, and as such he was always searching for more proof to back up his belief. It is a measure of the need the man had for Christianity when this most rational of men refused to look at arguments which might have shaken his faith.

35. Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals, p. 75.

Johnson had an overwhelming fear of going mad, and this fear, Bate asserts, is very closely paralleled by his fear of total extinction, "for in either case the fear is of the loss of the strong rational grip on reality toward which Johnson's most strenuous efforts were always bent, at times with the desperation of a drowning man."³⁶ Boswell said that Johnson's "supreme enjoyment was in the exercise of his own reason,"³⁷ and the prospect of losing this supreme faculty was just too horrible for him to contemplate.

One might possibly think that for Johnson to have even the slightest thoughts about annihilation indicates that his faith in God was not very strong, but, as Chester Chapin points out in The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson, this is not a valid view. It is Chapin's contention, rather, that since Johnson had such an overwhelming fear of total extinction and clung so desperately to the hope of retaining his power of reasoning after death, or, in Chapin's words, had a "positive hunger for immortality"³⁸ this "hunger for immortality" led Johnson to orthodoxy. "Of all available alternatives in his own day, only orthodoxy held out the positive hope of life and immortality, and I would argue that this

36. Walter Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 162.

37. Ibid.

38. Chester F. Chapin, The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 102.

was, for Johnson, its compelling attraction, whether he was consciously aware of it or not."³⁹

Chapin tells the charming story of how one day Unamuno, talking to a Spanish peasant, proposed the hypothesis that there might be a God who governs all things, but that nevertheless "the soul of every man may not be immortal in the traditional and concrete sense." To this the peasant answered, "Then wherefore God?" Johnson, of course, might have said exactly the same thing, for to Johnson there would be little need of a God who could not provide him with some rational hope for a life hereafter.⁴⁰

Throughout the Prayers and Annals, however, we see that Johnson was never certain about his salvation. He was always praying for God's acceptance, but he could never be sure that he had deserved it. For example, in his Easter day prayer of March, 1777, he says:

When I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time with some disorders of body, and disturbances of the mind very near to madness; which I hope he that made me, will suffer to extenuate many faults, and excuse many deficiencies. Yet much remains to be repented and reformed.⁴¹

Even as he began the last year of his life (1784) it is very obvious from his New Year's Day prayer that Johnson was anything but sure of his salvation.

39. Ibid., pp. 103-104.

40. Ibid., p. 105.

41. Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals, p. 264.

O Lord God, heavenly Father, by whose mercy I am now beginning another year, grant, I beseech thee that the time which thou shalt yet allow me, may be spent in thy fear and to thy glory, give me such ease of body as may enable me to be useful, and remove from me all such scruples and perplexities as encumber and obstruct my mind, and help me so to pass by the direction of thy Holy spirit through the remaining part of life that I may be finally received to everlasting joy through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.⁴²

During the spring of this year, however, a remarkable experience took place in Johnson's life, an experience which brought about a great increase of hope and enabled him to die with more confidence than he had ever experienced during the course of his life. In his excellent article, "Samuel Johnson's Wonderful Experience", Chester Chapin deals fully with this strange incident. It is Chapin's contention that during mid-February of 1784 Johnson made a truly remarkable recovery from dropsy. It seemed as though some miracle had happened and Johnson's prayers for recovery had been answered. Both Boswell and Hawkins thought of the recovery of their friend as a miraculous event, and even the normally cautious Johnson could not help but marvel at the remarkable quality of his experience.

I this day returned thanks to God in St. Clement's Church for my recovery, a recovery in my seventy fifth year from a distemper which few in the vigour of youth are known to surmount; a recovery of which neither my self, my friends, nor my physicians had any hope, for though they flattered me with some continuance of life, they never supposed

42. Ibid., p. 368.

that I would cease to be dropsical.⁴³

As Chapin points out, it is natural that Johnson would consider his remarkable deliverance as a reprieve from God which gave him a final chance at the heartfelt repentance necessary to receive eternal salvation. "Repentance was much more to Johnson than a matter of cool assent to the proposition that one had sinned, followed by prayers for forgiveness."⁴⁴ Johnson's conception of repentance is made very clear in the following passage from his Easter Day prayer, dated April 11, 1784, in which he thanks God for his late deliverance:

Enable me, O Lord, to glorify thee for that knowledge of my corruption, and that sense of thy wrath which my disease and weakness, and danger awakened in my mind. Give me such sorrow as may purify my heart, such indignation as may quench all confidence in myself, and such repentance as may by the intercession of my Redeemer obtain pardon.⁴⁵

Commenting on this passage, Chapin makes the observation:

Johnson welcomed the knowledge of his "corruption" and that sense of God's wrath which the prospect of imminent death had awakened in him. Such feeling he regarded as the necessary accompaniments of any sincere, heartfelt repentance, and it was only through such repentance that he felt he could obtain hope to "obtain pardon" at the Last Day. Thus, the unusually deep sense of his unworthiness which had

43. R. W. Chapman, ed., The Letters of Samuel Johnson (Oxford, 1952), III, 955. Quoted in Chester F. Chapin, "Samuel Johnson's 'Wonderful' Experience," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 55.

44. Chapin, "Johnson's 'Wonderful' Experience," p. 58.

45. Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals, pp. 368-369.

accompanied his prayers for recovery in February, far from plunging Johnson into gloom, was rather a cause for hope. His remarkable recovery he could not but regard as a sign that this hope had not been altogether vain and that his repentance had been of such depth and sincerity as to have found favour in the sight of God.⁴⁶

The serene details of Johnson's last days are well known. It seems that as the end drew near Johnson grew more and more hopeful of salvation - still not willing to die, but yet composed enough to accept his death and to hope for eternal joy. At the end, it seems apparent that Johnson was no longer plagued by the fear of death that had so long haunted him, but rather through his fear of death and ultimately through his fear of God, he had found the thing that he had been searching for all his life - hope. It was this hope in eternal salvation that enabled Johnson to conquer his fear of death and to face the prospect of meeting his Maker with a confidence that he had never enjoyed during his lifetime.⁴⁷

46. Chapin, "Johnson's 'Wonderful' Experience," p. 58.

47. There has been a great deal of controversy about whether or not Johnson was converted in the "Evangelical" sense. George Strahan obviously wished to suppress any such conjectures when he deleted the second petition, "Forgive and accept my late conversion," from the prayer composed for Johnson's last communion. Hawkins, however, saw no danger in the phrase and left it in, but Boswell, obviously fearing that some might feel that Johnson had, in fact, been converted to Evangelicalism, chose to retain Strahan's reading. Later commentators almost unanimously reject the idea that Johnson was converted in the Evangelical sense, perhaps the most forceful and convincing rejection coming from Maurice J. Quinlan's "The Rumor of Dr. Johnson's Conversion" / Review of Religion, 12, (March 1948), 243-261. However, the most interesting article that I have come upon on the subject is by

Donald J. Greene, entitled "Dr. Johnson's 'Late Conversion': A Reconsideration," Johnsonian Studies, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 61-927. It is Greene's contention that the whole argument is really meaningless, since Johnson obviously used the word "conversion" in his death-bed prayer in the classic theological sense, and this was identical to the way the Evangelicals used it. Greene goes on to contend that there were no Evangelical beliefs different from those of general Anglican doctrine; that "assurance of salvation" did not mean "certainty of election" to the Evangelicals, and most importantly, that Johnson, and all orthodox Anglicans, certainly believed that man is saved by faith alone.

Chapter Three

Johnson's Views on Religion in Literature.

After examining Johnson's personal prayers and meditations the reader can have no doubt about the strength and sincerity of Johnson's religious convictions. Here certainly was no hypocrite who professed belief simply because it was the thing to do; rather, here was a man whose whole life and inner being were strongly affected by his deeply felt religious experience. As we have seen, Johnson had an uncontrollable zest for living and for getting the most out of life, and yet his life could hardly be described as very happy. Because of this, Johnson found it not only expedient but of the utmost necessity to turn to religion, for this, and only this, offered him the hope of an after-life. Perhaps because of his overwhelming need for religion, his belief was a strange mixture of both happiness and horror. Happy in the thought that man can obtain eternal salvation, he was filled with horror at the thought that unrepentant man would just as surely receive eternal damnation. Paradoxically, fear of God and fear of damnation were seen as being beneficial in that they would lead to a true repentance, and hence were great aids to the final attainment of salvation.

It may seem strange to the reader, then, that such a deeply religious man as Johnson wrote only two minor English poems of a specifically religious nature during his whole career. Surely it is common for a poet to deal with the subjects that most deeply concern him, and religion was by far the most important subject to Johnson. As we shall see, however, Johnson had some very definite reasons for not writing poetry of a specifically religious nature, reasons which he expressed most clearly in his late work, The Lives of the Poets. In avoiding religious themes in his poetry, Johnson was going directly against a respected critical theory of the time. That theory - which may be referred to as the "religious sublime" theory of poetry - had been made popular by certain poets and critics from the time of Cowley and Milton in the seventeenth century down to Johnson's own time.

Among the more prominent writers who held this theory of the "religious sublime" just before and during Johnson's time were such poets and critics as John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Isaac Watts, Sir Richard Blackmore and Edward Young. Although coming from different religious backgrounds, these writers all held a firm belief that the subject most suited for poetry was religion, and naturally they felt that the greatest poets were those who were able to convey in the strongest way possible the relationship between man and God. Ultimately, of course, the most perfect type of poetry was that found in certain parts of the Old Testament, especially

the Psalms, but they also held a great admiration for some of the divine poets of the seventeenth century, especially Cowley and Milton.

Of these five writers it was John Dennis who pushed the concept of the "religious sublime" most vigorously. He did this not so much through his poetry, which was not very highly regarded even in his own day, but rather through his works of criticism, which were and are much better known than his poetry. In 1701 he published his famous treatise, The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry, in which he insists that religion and human passions must be united, and that the only way to do so is through great and sublime religious poetry. As Dennis says:

...no Subject is so capable of supplying us with Thoughts that necessarily produce these great and strong Enthusiasms, as a Religious Subject: For all which is great in Religion, is most exalted and amazing; all that is joyful, is transporting; all that is sad, is dismal; and all that is terrible, is astonishing.¹

In a later critical work, The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704), Dennis goes on to expand this same idea. While agreeing with Johnson that the dual purpose of poetry is to please and instruct, his idea of instruction is certainly far different from Johnson's. While Johnson always believed that instruction must be based on sound reason and

1. John Dennis, The Critical Works of John Dennis, I, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1939), 218.

not directed to the passions, Dennis was of the completely opposite view. Hoxie Neale Fairchild summarizes Dennis's view as follows:

Philosophy corrects passion through reason; poetry corrects reason through passion. "And therefore," since men are swayed chiefly by their emotions, "Poetry instructs and reforms more powerfully than Philosophy can do." But religion also works upon men's reason through their passions: the method of poetry is the method of religion.²

Naturally, because Dennis felt that poetry must appeal to the passions, he put a great deal of emphasis on the language used in the poem. In order to express the strong feelings of the poet, the language must be spontaneous and intense, with the conveying of deep emotion taking precedence even over coherence. What could be more diametrically opposed to Johnson's view of poetry than this strange notion? Johnson, the rationalist who made it a point never to let his heart get the better of his head, simply abhorred any type of instruction which attempted to appeal to the passions. Dennis, however, continually emphasized the importance of poetic diction in expressing strong emotions:

...the figurative language is but a Consequence of the Enthusiasm, that being the natural language of the Passions. And so is...the Nobleness of the Expression, supposing a Man to be a Master of the Language in which he writes. For as the Thoughts produce the Spirit or the Passion, the Spirit produces and makes the Expression, which is known by Experience to all who are Poets; for never anyone, while he was wrapt with Enthusiasm or Ordinary Passion, wanted either Words or Harmony, as is

2. Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 187.

self-evident to all who consider that the Expression conveys and shows the Spirit, and consequently must be produc'd by it.³

Dennis divides the passions into two types: the "vulgar", which is an immediate response to sense experience, and the "enthusiastic", which arises from the contemplation of things that do not belong to common life. This enthusiasm is what Dennis considers to be invaluable in both religion and poetry. Fairchild explains Dennis's idea of enthusiastic passions as follows:

For Dennis the principal enthusiastic passions are six: "Admiration, Terror, Horror, Joy, Sadness, Desire." He proceeds to show "that the strongest Enthusiastick Passions, that are justly and reasonably rais'd, must be rais'd by religious Ideas; that is, by Ideas which either show the Attitudes of the Divinity, or relate to his Worship." Aristotle, Hermogenes, and of course Longinus are cited as authorities. Examples of great poetry inspired by religious enthusiasm are drawn from Homer, Virgil, Tasso, and Milton. Milton is by far his favorite source of illustrations, with Tasso a fairly close second.⁴

This, then, is Dennis's theory of the religious sublime. In brief, he believed that a poem should be religious, and that it must be conveyed in such a manner as to stir the passions. There is no doubt that Dennis did have a great influence on other religious writers of the age,⁵ and that

3. Dennis, Critical Works, p. 359.

4. Fairchild, English Poetry, p. 187.

5. For a good account of Dennis's influence see -
H. G. Paul, John Dennis: His Life and Criticism (1911; rpt. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1966), pp. 202-211.

even such a well known religious writer as Isaac Watts owed Dennis quite a debt. Yet, as Fairchild points out, "...the direct influence of Dennis is not easy to estimate, for his chief importance lies in the fact that he represented tendencies widely current in the thought of the time."⁶ But if the thoughts which Dennis represented were widely current during this time, they certainly were not held by Samuel Johnson, a man who went against many thoughts that were widely current. As we shall see, in his Lives of the Poets Johnson builds up a very strong case against the writing of religious poetry.

It was an essential tenet of Johnson's religion that man must be totally submissive to the will of God. Man, in his present fallen state, is completely dependent on God, and must strive to follow the simple and clear-cut rules of life as set down in the Scriptures. Any attempt by man to rise above his fallen state without God's help, or to explain the miracles clearly and plainly set down in the Bible is the next thing to blasphemy. In "The Life of Cowley", Johnson makes this point extremely clear in his criticism of Cowley's religious epic, The Davideis.

Sacred history has been always read with
submissive reverence, and an imagination over-awed
and controlled. We have been accustomed to acquiesce
in the nakedness and simplicity of the authentic

6. Fairchild, English Poetry, p. 189.

narrative, and to repose on its veracity with such humble confidence as suppresses curiosity. We go with the historian as he goes, and stop with him when he stops. All amplification is frivolous and vain; all addition to that which is already sufficient for the purposes of religion, seems not only useless, but in some degree profane.

Such events as were produced by the visible interposition of Divine Power are above the power of human genius to dignify. The miracle of Creation, however it may teem with images, is best described with little diffusion of language: He spake the word, and they were made.⁷

We see, then, that one of the reasons why Johnson did not care for religious poetry was that it violated the principle of simplicity so important to his idea of religion. But while Johnson did believe in the idea of the essential simplicity of religious doctrine, he also believed that the miraculous events related in the Bible were far beyond man's realm of comprehension, and that to understand them or to elaborate on them was impossible. Then too, these topics were not numerous and were well known by everyone, so of necessity the poet must only be going over old and familiar material when he uses sacred subjects in his writings. It was a prime requisite of Johnson that in order for poetry to be enjoyable it had to surprise and delight, whereas religious poetry, of course, could not do both, and therefore would have little appeal to the reader. He makes this idea most clear in his famous criticism of religious poetry in "The Life of Waller":

7. Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets. (London: Dent, 1964), I, 33.

Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man, admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.

The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but few as there are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression.

Poetry pleases by exhibiting an idea more grateful to the mind than things themselves afford. This effect proceeds from the display of those parts of nature which attract, and the concealment of those which repel, the imagination: but religion must be shown as it is; suppression and addition equally corrupt it; and, such as it is, it is known already.

From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy; but this is rarely to be hoped by Christians from metrical devotion. Whatever is great, desirable, or tremendous, is comprised in the name of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved.⁸

Johnson then goes on to mention that true Christian piety consists of four main elements: faith, thanksgiving, repentance, and supplication. Each of these things is simple and uniform, and any attempt to amplify or exalt them can only lead to bad writing. It is impossible to improve the lustre of anything by adding to it something less perfect than itself; and this is what Johnson contends the poet is trying to do by adding poetry to the simple and sublime expressions of purely religious sentiments. He summarizes all his feelings on the subject in the following magnificent sentence:

8. Ibid., pp. 173-174.

"The ideas of Christian theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestic for ornament: to recommend them by tropes and figures is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere."⁹

We see much the same sort of reasoning in Johnson's criticism of Paradise Lost. This is perhaps one of the strangest bits of criticism that Johnson ever wrote, and because it reflects Johnson's ambivalent attitude towards Milton and his outright prejudice against religious poetry, it might be worth while to look at this criticism in some detail.

Johnson's criticism of Paradise Lost is indeed a most difficult subject to deal with, for we really cannot arrive at any concrete idea of what Johnson thought of the poem by simply quoting a single passage from "The Life of Milton." What Johnson does is first to praise the poem in very glowing terms, and then to condemn it for what seem to be almost the same reasons. If we were to separate his praise of the poem from his condemnation, we would probably be left with the impression that we were looking at two completely different pieces of work. In attempting to come to any true understanding of what Johnson really thought of the poem, then, it seems necessary that we take none of his statements at face value, but rather that we see each statement in relation to the whole structure of the argument.

9. Ibid., p. 174.

Johnson opens his praise of Paradise Lost on a very formal note:

I am now to examine Paradise Lost, a poem which, considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance, the second among the productions of the human mind.¹⁰

"Design" for Johnson in this context means the idea which an artist endeavours to execute or express. In respect to this, Paradise Lost is the greatest poem in the world. In respect to performance, or completion of something designed, it is the second greatest poem in the world. This in itself is very high praise, but when we consider what Johnson meant by "second" the praise becomes even greater. He closes his "Life of Milton" with this sentence:

His great works were performed under discountenance, and in blindness, but difficulties vanished at his touch; he was born for whatever is arduous; and his work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first.¹¹

In other words, what Johnson is saying is that Paradise Lost is second only because the first heroic poem has already been written. Milton, then, has written the greatest possible poem that anyone of his day could have written.

From this general praise of the poem, Johnson goes on to praise specific qualities in Paradise Lost with equal enthusiasm. The points Johnson singles out for special praise are the following:

10. Ibid., pp. 99-100.

11. Ibid., p. 114.

1) ... every part appears to be necessary; and scarcely any recital is wished shorter for the sake of quickening the progress of the main action.¹²

2) The subject of an epic poem is naturally an event of great importance....His subject is the fate of worlds, the revolutions of heaven and of earth; rebellion against the Supreme King, raised by the highest order of created beings; the overthrow of their host, and the punishment of their crime; the creation of a new race of reasonable creatures; their original happiness and innocence, their forfeiture of immortality, and their restoration to hope and peace.¹³

3) It is justly remarked by Addison, that this poem has, by the nature of its subject, the advantage above all others, that it is universally and perpetually interesting. All mankind will, through all ages, bear the same relation to Adam and to Eve, and must partake of that good and evil which extend to themselves.¹⁴

Really, then, what we have here is Johnson apparently going against some of the statements that he has made in the Lives of Cowley and Waller about the nature of religious poetry. He now says that Milton's subject - certainly sacred - is not only an event of great importance, but is also universally and perpetually interesting. This would seem to contradict what he has said about the subjects from sacred history being few, well known, above the realm of human experience, and hence unsuitable for verse. As I said earlier, however, in order to come to a clear understanding of what Johnson thought of Milton's poem it is impossible

12. Ibid., p. 100.

13. Ibid., pp. 100-101.

14. Ibid., pp. 102-103.

to look at isolated statements. One must look at the whole critique.

Once we begin to examine what Johnson considered to be the faults of Paradise Lost, we realize that he still firmly holds to his previously mentioned views on religious poetry. Whereas Johnson has earlier praised Milton's poem for having a subject which is universally and perpetually interesting to his readers, he now makes the following statement, seemingly in direct contradiction to what he has said previously:

The plan of Paradise Lost has this inconvenience, that it comprises neither human actions, nor human manners. The man and woman who act and suffer are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know. The reader finds no transaction in which he can by any effort of imagination place himself; he has therefore little natural curiosity or sympathy.

We all, indeed, feel the effects of Adam's disobedience; we all sin like Adam, and like him all bewail our offences: we have restless and insidious enemies in fallen angels, and in the blessed spirits we have guardians and friends; in the redemption of mankind we hope to be included; in the description of heaven and hell we are surely interested, as we are all to reside hereafter either in regions of horror or bliss.

But these truths are too important to be new; they have been taught to our infancy; they have mingled with our solitary thoughts and familiar conversation, and are habitually interwoven with the whole texture of life. Being therefore not new, they raise no unaccustomed emotion in the mind; what we knew before, we cannot learn; what is not unexpected, cannot surprise.¹⁵

Johnson, then, is saying that while sacred subjects may be interesting and important in themselves, they are so well

15. Ibid., p. 102.

known to everyone that they really have no place in poetry. Besides this, the events and characters from sacred history are so far removed from our own realm of experience that any genuine interest in the actions of these characters is impossible. As Johnson says:

The want of human interest is always felt. Paradise Lost is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master and seek for companions.¹⁶

In effect, Johnson is calling the greatest of all poems dull. Although this statement may appear to be self-contradictory, it does serve to clarify what Johnson really thought of the poem. Obviously, he knew that the poem was a great work of art and as such deserved his praise. And yet, because of his strong bias against subjects from sacred history being used in poetry, Johnson could not help finding this admittedly brilliant poem dull. His final verdict on the poem led to much controversy and provoked cries from all sides that Johnson could not put aside his political dislike of Milton in order to give Paradise Lost its due praise. This charge, however, does not seem to me to be valid. Johnson praised Paradise Lost in very glowing terms, but his honesty simply would not allow him to praise unequivocally a work which contradicted his deeply held views on religious

16. Ibid., p. 108.

poetry. It is to Johnson's credit that he did not allow public opinion to sway him in his beliefs of what he felt to be right.

I have so far dealt with two reasons as to why Johnson did not care for religious poetry: that the Old Testament is the Old Testament and cannot be tampered with, and that what happens to these celestial beings really cannot matter to us, since they are all beyond our realm of experience. But there is another reason why Johnson did not like religious poetry, and this deals specifically with the nature of his own religion.

Johnson conceded that terror and astonishment were prime elements in the sublime, and he also agreed that poetic terror was a true source of poetry. But because of his own religious fears, which at times made life almost unbearable for him, Johnson simply could not stand to read this poem by Milton, whose "delight was to sport in the wide regions of possibility,"¹⁷ and who knew what "nature had bestowed upon him more bountifully than upon others; the power of displaying the vast, illuminating the splendid, enforcing the awful, darkening the gloomy, and aggravating the dreadful."¹⁸ Johnson was both attracted to the beauty of Milton's sublime poetry and repelled by it, and this ambivalent attitude is

17. Ibid., p. 104.

18. Ibid.

nowhere clearer than when, after having discussed the fall and expulsion of Adam and Even, he says:

Of the ideas suggested by these awful scenes, from some we recede with reverence, except when stated hours require their association; and from others we shrink with horror, or admit them only as salutary inflections, as counterpoises to our interests and passions. Such images rather obstruct the career of fancy than incite it.

Pleasure and terrour are indeed the genuine sources of poetry; but poetical pleasure must be such as human imagination can at least conceive, and poetical terrour such as human strength and fortitude may combat. The good and evil of Eternity are too ponderous for the wings of wit; the mind sinks under them in passive helplessness, content with calm belief and humble adoration.¹⁹

In speaking about this ambivalence in Johnson's approach to Milton's sublime poetry, Hagstrum provides the following analysis:

The paradox is that Johnson was too deeply religious to enjoy or even tolerate religious poetry. Themes of the highest and most solemnizing dignity, as he knew all too well, aroused disquieting emotions. When "strong devotion to the skies aspires," Johnson was apparently not in the mood for the enjoyment of verse. And this deep and disturbing sensibility of his gave him solemn pause in contemplating the sublimity of Milton.

The rationalist in Johnson also tended to limit the flight of the imagination toward sublimity, which might become a "dangerous prevalence of the imagination." Reason and the terrible-sublime could not be expected to prevail together. Johnson, as a man of broad humanistic learning, must also have had serious doubts about the value of cultivating the emotions of wonder and astonishment, almost always conceived of as the concomitants of the sublime.²⁰

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19. Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 149. Quoted in Jean. H. Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (Minneapolis: The Minnesota Press, 1952), p. 149.
20. Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, pp. 149-150.

As we can see, Johnson's reasoning is diametrically opposite to that put forward by John Dennis, but, when we consider the nature of Johnson's religion, his reasons for disliking religious poetry certainly are just as valid as Dennis's reasons for praising it. Johnson was, if anything, a more deeply religious man than Dennis, and it is a measure of his deeply held religious convictions that he felt that even such a great art as poetry could only degrade the pure and simple truths laid down in the scriptures.

We have now looked at some of the reasons for Johnson's distrust and dislike of religious poetry, but if Johnson did not believe in the validity of religious verse, he certainly did believe that the poet had an obligation to his reader to lead him towards a moral, and hence Christian, way of life. However, Johnson firmly believed that the way to do this was not through religious poetry, but rather through poetry which would clearly reveal to man his true state in the world. Once man is able to come to a clear conception of his own nature, and the nature of the world in general, Johnson believed that man must inevitably become a Christian. It is for this reason that Johnson saw fit to praise Shakespeare above all other poets, for only Shakespeare was able to show effectively man as he really is, and to represent life in a manner which ultimately must lead the reader to a revelation of man's true state in the universe.

Throughout the Preface to Shakespeare (1765), Johnson

refers to Shakespeare as "the poet of nature." What he means by this can be ascertained from the following paragraph in the Preface:

Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.²¹

This paragraph really sums up the two great meanings of nature for Johnson. Clearly, when he speaks of "nature" he is thinking of the essence of human nature. Johnson certainly believed that once man was stripped of all the superficial social manners and customs of his time each person was basically the same. In other words, each person possessed the quality of "humanness." This essential quality is the same now as it was three hundred or three thousand years ago, and it will always remain the same. There are some things in each person which make him specifically human, and these qualities do not change through the ages. It is the genius of Shakespeare that he is able to discover these essential qualities of human nature and to bring them out in his characters. Thus, Shakespeare's plays can never grow out of date. The reader must see in Shakespeare's characters characteristics which are common to himself and to all those

21. Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 241.

around him. Shakespeare, therefore, is praised as being the poet of human nature. Allied very closely to this, we have the idea that Shakespeare is effectively able to represent the way life really is and the way things really are. Time and time again, Johnson enthusiastically praises this attribute in Shakespeare's writing. This, then, is obviously another meaning of the word "nature" - i.e., real life.

Now that we have an idea of what Johnson considered to be the ideal attribute of a poet, that he be a "poet of nature," it should be possible to discover just how Johnson felt that poetry should provide the necessary element of moral instruction. He begins his discussion of Shakespeare's greatness in providing moral instruction by making the following point early in the Preface:

Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion.²²

What Johnson is saying here is that since Shakespeare really presents human nature, or shows life as it really is, his writings are greatly superior in a moral sense to the tales of barbarous romance writers who, as Johnson states in

22. Ibid., p. 243.

Rambler #4, wrote "without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life."²³ It was one of Johnson's fundamental beliefs that in order for a man to live a moral life he must first possess self-knowledge as to his true state in this world. This knowledge could only be conveyed by writers such as Shakespeare who attempted to portray real life in their works. This portrayal of real life was for Johnson the primary attribute of a truly moral type of writing. As Jean Hagstrum points out:

It should not be surprising that one of Johnson's basic requirements for art is that it be a representation of nature so conceived /i.e. realistically/. What other position would be expected of one whose incredulity, according to Mrs. Thrale, "amounted almost to disease" /Johnsonian Miscellanies/, who warned of "the dangerous prevalence of imagination" /Rasselas, Ch. XLIV/, who said that "there is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth" /Idler #20/, who praised those critics who founded beauty upon truth, and who "inculcated upon all his friends the importance of perpetual vigilance against the slightest degrees of falsehood; the effect of which, as Sir Joshua Reynolds observed to me, has been that all who were of his school are distinguished for a love of truth and accuracy which they would not have possessed in the same degree, if they had not been acquainted with Johnson" /Boswell's Life/.²⁴

All this, of course, goes far towards explaining Johnson's dislike for religious poetry. Because it of

23. John Hardy, "The Poet of Nature and Self-Knowledge: One Aspect of Johnson's Moral Reading of Shakespeare," The University of Toronto Quarterly, 36 (1966-67), 154.
24. Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism, pp. 57-58.

necessity dealt with things outside our realm of experience, it simply could not provide us with the self-knowledge necessary to lead a moral life. Johnson undoubtedly would have agreed with Shaftesbury when he wrote, "By examining the various Turns, Inflexions, Declensions, and inward Resolutions of the Passions, I must undoubtedly come the better to understand a human Breast, and judg better both of others and my-self."²⁵ The way to do this, Johnson believed, was not through religious poetry, but through a deeply moral secular poetry, and it is this aspect of Johnson's writing which I will be examining in the next chapter.

25. Shaftesbury, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (1714, 2nd. ed. corrected), I, 295. Quoted in Hardy, "Poet of Nature," p. 158.

Chapter Four

Johnson's Secular Writings and Christian Morality.

In Chapter Three, I attempted to show how Johnson felt that self-knowledge was perhaps the most important attribute any person could have in order to live a moral life. Since the primary purpose of poetry was to instruct, Johnson firmly believed that the most important thing a poet could strive for was to present to his readers an accurate picture of the human condition. Knowing Johnson's pessimistic view of man's state on this earth, one would naturally expect him to depict human life in a rather tragic sense, and this, in fact, is what he usually does.

In this chapter I propose to look at two of Johnson's most famous secular works, Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, both of which depict life as a state "in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."¹ Because of the extreme pessimism that is exhibited throughout the greater part of both of these works, the reader might be tempted to see Johnson as an out and out pessimist who had the idea that man is merely a fragile pawn set unprotected in a world in which the forces of fate and chance brutally

1. Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), p. 531.

assault him at every turn. For man to attempt to find happiness in this world is impossible, for everywhere he may chance to look he is either thwarted immediately or else given a merely false sense of security, only to be thrown down to the depths of despair when his fortune seems highest. This is the extremely pessimistic view of life that Johnson's secular works seem to present.

However, as we know, Johnson was a great advocate of free will and absolutely refused to listen to any talk of man's lot being completely ruled by fate. The notion of free will, however, seems to contrast with the ideas presented in works such as Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, for in these works it seems that no matter how man acts, he is still doomed to unhappiness. It seems to me, though, that critics who look at Johnson's works in the light of such apparent contradictions, simply do not realize what an orthodox Christian he really was. As we know, it is a basic tenet of Christianity to believe that man's will is free, and that he is perfectly able to choose to live either a good, Christian life or an immoral sinful life. Johnson's view of life was thoroughly orthodox, but, as we shall see, he strongly believed that man's will is free even though the world in which he lives may seem predetermined. This paradoxical view is clearly expressed in both Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, and critics who fail to realize this are probably overlooking the traditional Christian views that Johnson is

adopting in these works.

It is surprising that so few Johnson critics have realized that Johnson really was a Mediaevalist at heart. The evidence is there, and one need only look at some of Johnson's interests to come to the conclusion that he indeed held many mediaeval religious writers in very high esteem. As has been pointed out by Susie Tucker,² one of the few critics to comment on Johnson's mediaeval tendencies, Johnson held Chaucer in very high regard, and one of his most burning ambitions was to write a life of King Alfred. Indeed, one need only look closely at some of the religious doctrines held by Johnson to realize that in many ways he was more attuned to the doctrines held in the Middle Ages than he was to the naturalistic and sceptical ideas which were brought forward in his own time. Speaking about Johnson's preference for some mediaeval religious doctrines to those of his own day, Susie Tucker says:

Of his respect for doctrines commoner in England during the middle ages than in his own time, there can be no doubt, even if some of what he said was 'talking for victory.' Purgatory, he declared, 'is a very harmless doctrine...there is nothing unreasonable in it:' 'Sir, there is no idolatry in the Mass:' 'They do not worship saints' they invoke them; they only ask their prayers.' 'Confession?' 'Why, I don't know but that it is a good thing.' And we may remember that he prayed for his dead 'conditionally if it were lawful.' ...

Johnson was speaking from his heart, when in the year of his death he said 'A good man, of a timorous disposition, in great doubt of his acceptance with God,

2. Susie I. Tucker, "Dr. Johnson, Mediaevalist," Notes and Queries, 203 (1958), 20-24.

and pretty credulous, might be glad to be of a church where there are so many helps to get to Heaven. I would be a Papist if I could. I have fear enough; but an obstinate rationality prevents me. I shall never be a Papist, unless on the near approach of death, of which I have a very great terrour.³

In Johnson's Diaries, Prayers and Annals, discussed in Chapter Two, the reader no doubt observed that in many ways Johnson was very much in tune with mediaeval religion. The personal supplicatory quality of many of his prayers, often with suggestions of his own personal fear, goes right to the essence of the mediaeval church. In the next chapter I shall be discussing Johnson's Latin poetry, in which only his most personal and deep-felt sentiments are expressed, and in these poems it is even more apparent that Johnson was a mediaevalist at heart.

In order to get a full picture of just what Johnson is trying to get at in Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, one must have a clear concept of some of the mediaeval ideals and doctrines that he held in such high esteem. Undoubtedly, the most popular book in Europe during the Middle Ages was Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy, written in the year 524 or 525. The Consolation proved to be a favorite in England right up to the time of Elizabeth,⁴ and, to a lesser extent,

3. Ibid., 23. 25.

4. F. N. Robinson, ed. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1961), p. 319.
"The Consolation was translated into Old High German by the celebrated Notker Labeo of Saint-Gall. There are said to be as many as eight French translations which were made before the end of the fifteenth century....In England, long before the

its influence extended far beyond the period of her reign. That Samuel Johnson held Boethius in extremely high regard is evidenced by Mrs. Thrale's assertion that Johnson

told me that he would translate the Consolation of Philosophy, but said I must do the Odes for him, and produce one every Thursday; he was obeyed; and in commending some, and correcting others, about a dozen Thursdays past away....The work was broken off without completion, because some gentleman, whose name I have forgotten, took it in hand; and against him, for reasons of delicacy, Johnson did not chuse to contend.⁵

As E. L. McAdam points out,⁶ the man against whom Johnson "did not chuse to contend" was a poor octogenarian, Daniel Bellamy, whose Ethic Amusements, (1768) reprinted an earlier translation of Boethius with some editorial additions. The fact that in 1738 Johnson suggested to Elizabeth Carter that she attempt a translation of the Consolation proves that his interest in Boethius was long standing, and it is significant that he himself translated three quotations in the Rambler. The most famous of these is the translation which

time of any of these Continental versions, Boethius's treatise was selected by King Alfred as one of the four great works which he translated, or had translated, for the education of his people. And centuries later, after the Renaissance had enlarged men's knowledge of classical literature, the Consolation still held so important a place that another sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, undertook its "Englishing." Throughout all the generations from Alfred to Elizabeth it exerted a steady influence on poets and philosophers."

5. Samuel Johnson, Poems - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, VI, ed. E. L. McAdam Jr., with George Milne (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 257.

6. Ibid.

he made from Boethius to use as the motto for his seventh Rambler. Since this is one of only two poems of a purely religious nature that Johnson ever wrote in English, and because of its sincere and moving tone, the poem deserves to be quoted in full:

O thou whose pow'r o'er moving worlds presides,
Whose voice created, and whose wisdom guides,
On darkling man in pure effulgence shine,
And cheer the clouded mind with light divine.
'Tis thine alone to calm the pious breast
With silent confidence and holy rest:
From thee, great God, we spring, to thee we tend,
Path, motive, guide, original, and end.⁷

Clearly, then, Johnson had a great deal of respect for mediaeval religious doctrines in general, and those put forward by Boethius in particular. Naturally, when he came to write Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, he made good use of ideas central to Boethian philosophy. Because of this, I think it would be advantageous to examine briefly some of the ideas found in the Consolation. After doing so, Johnson's purpose in writing Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes will be more clearly seen.

In The Consolation of Philosophy, the reconciliation of God and man is presented in the form of a dialogue, almost Socratic in nature, between Boethius and Lady Philosophy. At the beginning of the book we see Boethius in a situation very similar to that of most of the characters in The Vanity of

7. Ibid., p. 243.

Human Wishes. Fortune, who was once the kind and faithful ally of Boethius, has now deserted him completely, throwing him into the ultimate depths of despair. All that is left to Boethius are his poetic muses and all they can do is give him the inspiration to write bitter poems bewailing his fate.

But onto this dismal scene comes Lady Philosophy, with the goal of somehow remedying Boethius's distressing position. At first, Lady Philosophy becomes angry with Boethius and chides him for his lack of courage. But later, she discovers that the reason he is now in such a lowly state is that he really does not understand the order of the universe. Speaking on this point to Boethius she says:

You do not know the aim and end of all things; hence you think that if men are worthless and wicked, they are powerful and fortunate. You have forgotten by what methods the universe is guided, hence you think that the chances of good or bad fortune are tossed about with no ruling hand. These things may lead not to disease only, but even to death as well.⁸

In order to remedy Boethius's situation, Lady Philosophy must explain the order of the universe to him.

First of all, she makes it very clear to Boethius that while everything that happens in the universe proceeds according to the plan present in the Divine mind, there is in the working out of the plan a double method: that of Providence and that

8. W. V. Cooper, trans. The Consolation of Philosophy, by Boethius (New York: Random House, 1943), p. 18.

of Fate. The difference between Providence and Fate or Destiny is basically that Providence is eternal, all powerful, and all seeing; a force which binds all things into order by the power of love which pervades all from high to low. Destiny, or Fate, on the other hand, is the agent which executes the immutable decree of Providence, ordering the great movements of the universe and all the tides in the affairs of the world and of man. Lady Philosophy makes it quite clear that "... everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence, to which Fate is itself subject."⁹ This distinction between Providence and Fate is perhaps best explained by Helen M. Barrett:

Providence: [for Boethius] belongs to the eternal world, Fate to time. Providence is simple, Fate works by various methods, among them that chain of cause and effect which appears at times to involve moral confusion. But whatever language is used in the attempt to elucidate the distinction between Providence and Fate, the point clearly is that nothing in the whole universe happens by any "destiny" or "fate" which lies outside the control of Providence - everything without exception falls within the orbit of the Divine plan. God, "looking forth from the lofty watch-tower of His Providence," gives to each what for him is best, to the upright man what will help him to continue in the path of righteousness, to the evil what will bring about his entering on the good life.¹⁰

But there is also a third force in the universe that has influence over the lives of men, and this is the force of

9. Ibid., p. 92.

10. Helen M. Barrett, Boethius (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 96.

Fortune. Fortune is portrayed as being the executrix of Destiny. However, seeing that Fortune is twice removed from the perfection and stability of Providence, it is mutable and fickle; it raises men to the heights of power only to let them fall to the depths of despair. But it is very important to note that men are not entirely subject to the whims of Fortune. They do have free will, and they may exercise this free will to choose virtue and reason rather than passion and worldly pleasures as guides for their comfort. In the Middle Ages, the word "virtue" was often considered synonymous with "love of God," and one gets the feeling that for Samuel Johnson this was also the case. The attributes of right reason and faith are seen as necessarily leading to virtue and so to God, who is the true aim and end of all men.

If man does possess reason and self-knowledge, he is seen as being self-sufficient and completely unaffected by the mutability of worldly things. Thus Fortune loses its hold on man. It should be clear from this why Johnson considered Shakespeare to be the greatest of all poets. Being the "poet of nature," it was Shakespeare's quest to show man as he really is - in other words to supply his readers with self-knowledge. Only by possessing self-knowledge can man ever become free of the bonds of the fickle Fortune which will ultimately destroy him. The only way to find independence from Fortune is by aspiring to find true felicity, and it is made very clear that this does not reside in the materialistic

things of this world, such as money, rank, power, riches or glory. As Lady Philosophy says:

...human spirits must be more free when they keep themselves safe in the contemplation of the mind of God; but less free when they sink into bodies and less still when they are bound by their earthly members. The last stage is mere slavery, when the spirit is given over to vices and has fallen away from the possession of its reason.¹¹

This is a very important point in understanding Johnson, for by it we see that while man does live in a world where hardships are bound to occur, he need not succumb to the ups and downs of fortune. The meaning of life is to be discovered and not created; but man's free will lies in the fact that he can, if he will, discover the true meaning of life and become essentially self-sufficient. Obviously, a man with such enormous zest for living as Johnson did not think that man should simply remain passive in this world, and stoically accept everything that comes to him. Rather, the ideal man is one who actively desires to choose to live by virtue, and who therefore puts his trust in the unchanging love of God, rather than relying for his happiness on the mutable things of this world. The idea that man is free to choose truth which leads to true felicity is, of course, an explicit part of the Christian doctrine and Johnson's strong adherence to it is simply another proof of his orthodoxy.¹² God's

11. Cooper, Consolation by Boethius, p. 103.

12. James Boswell, Life of Johnson, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). Johnson's belief in free will is amply displayed in several incidents related in Boswell's Life. For example, Boswell tells of the following conversation

relationship to his creatures is one of love; and if man so chooses he may find salvation from the unstable world of fortune by freely choosing recognition of and devotion to that love, which is the highest good in contrast to the worldly things governed by the whims of fortune.

It is this basic philosophy that Johnson expounds in his two most famous works, Rasselas, and The Vanity of Human Wishes. Although both works definitely reflect the melancholy

which took place on Monday, October 16 1769:

Dr. Johnson shunned to-night any discussion of the perplexed question of fate and free will, which I attempted to agitate: 'Sir, (said he), we know our will is free, and there's an end on't.' (II, 82).

Much later on in his life, on Wednesday, 23 June, 1784, we see that Johnson still has not changed his opinion as to the freedom of the will. Boswell relates the following conversation:

On Wednesday, June 23, I visited him in the morning, after having been present at the shocking sight of fifteen men executed before Newgate. I said to him, I was sure that human life was not machinery, that is to say, a chain of fatality planned and directed by the Supreme Being, as it had in it so much wickedness and misery, so many instances of both, as that by which my mind was now clouded. Were it machinery it would be better than it is in these respects, though less noble, as not being a system of moral government. He agreed with me now, as he always did, upon the great question of the liberty of the human will, which has been in all ages perplexed with so much sophistry. 'But, Sir, as to the doctrine of Necessity, no man believes it. If a man should give me arguments that I do not see, though I could not answer them, should I believe that I do not see,' It will be observed, that Johnson at all times made the just distinction between doctrines contrary to reason, and doctrines above reason. (IV, 328-329).

It would seem from this that Johnson held his notions of free will more on faith than on reason, but then his whole religion was based on faith,-and, as we have seen, this base certainly did not detract from the strength of his beliefs.

nature of their author, they cannot be considered as completely pessimistic. Johnson's outlook on the world was rather bleak, but, as we have seen, he was able to rise above the troubles and cares of this world and find peace and satisfaction through love of God. In order to rise above the transitory things of this world, it is essential that man possess self-knowledge, and in Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, it is Johnson's goal to show his reader in as clear a way as possible the true state of man in this world.

One of the points that Johnson attempts most strongly to make in Rasselas is that human wishes, no matter of what nature, are ultimately bound to lead not to happiness but only to frustration and disappointment. However, Johnson adds another level to the work which makes it much more than a simple catalogue of unfulfilled human desires. The most striking aspect of the work is the manner in which Johnson shows that man is essentially trapped by his own psychological makeup into wishing for things that are ultimately unachievable. It does not matter what state man may acquire in life, there is in his very makeup a ceaseless "hunger of imagination" which constantly pushes him to desire other things. This is the great psychological irony of the human condition. As Sheridan Baker expresses it, "Give a man his heart's desire, and his heart will desire something else."¹³ It is this psychological irony that Johnson sets out to explore in Rasselas.

13. Sheridan Baker, "Rasselas: Psychological Irony and Romance," Philological Quarterly, 45, No. 1 (Jan. 1966), 260.

In the first chapter we see Rasselas "trapped" in what seems to all intents and purposes to be a paradise. Johnson goes to great lengths to describe the luxurious natural surroundings of Rasselas's homeland. Indeed, one would think that Rasselas is living in the Garden of Eden, for such natural perfection seems impossible in the outside world. Coupled with this natural beauty, the inhabitants of this "Happy Valley" were also granted all they could desire in a materialistic sense. All they had to do was ask and their every wish was granted. On top of this, they were not lacking intellectual amusements, for poets, writers and sages from all over the country were brought in to instruct and delight the inhabitants. Indeed, the Happy Valley seemed like a paradise in every sense of the word.

Yet, the reader soon discovers that even in this utopian setting Rasselas finds it impossible to be happy. In a speech which seems to sum up many of the frustrations of the human condition, Rasselas explains the cause of his unhappiness as follows:

That I want nothing...or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint; if I had any known want, I should have a certain wish; that wish would excite endeavour, and I should not repine to see the sun move slowly towards the western mountain, or lament when the day breaks and sleep will no longer hide me from myself....I have already enjoyed too much; give me something to desire.¹⁴

14. Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, p. 511.

This, in brief, is the nature of all human action. No matter what situation a man may find himself in, whether he be rich or poor, young or old, he still cannot be satisfied. There is something in man which keeps him continually pushing onward with an insatiable desire to have more, or at least to have something different. This being the case, we realize that it is impossible for man ever to be happy or even to be content. Rasselas, however, being ignorant in the ways of the world, must see for himself, and in order to do so enlists the help of a man called Imlac, a poet who has seen the world from all aspects, and whose experience has only taught him that, "Human life is every where a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed." Rasselas, however, simply cannot believe this, and so, with Imlac as guide, Rasselas, his sister Nekayah, and a servant, Pekuah, escape from the Happy Valley and begin their search for a way of life which will make them happy.

No matter where Rasselas and his sister look for happiness they find nothing but deceit, hypocrisy, and wretchedness. They look among both the rich and the poor in life, the socialites and the hermits, the sages and the uneducated shepherds, but all are discontented. Finally, they encounter a very old and very wise man who has lived a life which merits nothing but praise, who has been virtuous all his life and who has kept his vices to a minimum. Surely, our travellers think, if anyone deserves to be happy, it is this man. Rasselas and

his companions now seem to realize that happiness cannot be attained by material possessions, but perhaps, they think, it can be attained from the knowledge that others think highly of you and from the inner satisfaction of knowing that one has led a good life. As Imlac says, "You have at least recreate yourself...with the recollection of an honourable and useful life, and enjoy the praise which all agree to give you."¹⁵ However, the old man's answer all but destroys any hope the travellers may have had of finding happiness in any form in this world.

Praise, said the sage, with a sigh, is to an old man an empty sound. I have neither mother to be delighted with the reputation of her son, nor wife to partake the honours of her husband. I have outlived my friends and my rivals. Nothing is now of much importance; for I cannot extend my interest beyond myself....My mind is burthened with no heavy crime, and therefore I compose myself to tranquility; endeavour to abstract my thoughts from hopes and cares, which, though reason knows them to be vain, still try to keep their old possession of the heart; expect, with serene humility, that hour which nature cannot long delay; and hope to possess in a better state that happiness which here I could not find and that virtue which here I have not attained.¹⁶

But if happiness is impossible in life, it may still be possible to find true happiness after death, and it is here that man's freedom of choice really comes into play. Near the end of the book, the travellers pay a visit to the catacombs, wherein Imlac discourses on the nature of the soul. As we would expect, the discourse presents the views of orthodox Christianity, with the soul being represented as

15. Ibid., p. 599.

16. Ibid.

immaterial and indestructable except by Him who made it. After Imlac's discourse, Rasselas makes a remark which is perhaps the key to an understanding of the whole book.

Let us return, said Rasselas, from this scene of mortality. How gloomy would be these mansions of the dead to him who did not know that he shall never die; that what now acts shall continue its agency, and what now thinks shall think on forever. Those that lie here stretched before us, the wise and the powerful of antient times, warn us to remember the shortness of our present state: they were, perhaps, snatched away while they were busy, like us, in the choice of life.¹⁷

In other words, the important thing in life is not what position one may occupy during one's brief sojourn on earth, but rather how one prepares during this life for the next. In our life on earth, man is represented as being pretty well free to choose what occupation he wishes to pursue, but the point that Johnson is making here is that this is not really such an important choice as man may believe. By the very nature of man and of the world, he is destined to be unhappy no matter what he may do. The only way to find happiness, Johnson is saying, is to rise above the pursuit of the transitory pleasures of this life and to put one's faith in the goodness of God. Only by trusting in Him, and preparing for the next life, which will be permanent and not transitory, can man ever find true happiness. Nekayah puts her finger right on the theme of the book when she says, "To me...the choice of life is become less important; I hope hereafter to

17. Ibid., p. 611.

think only on the choice of eternity."¹⁸

However, the book does not end here, and in the final chapter entitled "The Conclusion, in which Nothing is Concluded," Johnson makes his final ironic comment on the human condition. Even after our travellers have concluded their journey of experience and have seen that human wishes lead only to disappointment and despair, they still cannot forebear wishing for some future state of happiness. Nekayah wishes to find a college of learned women over which she would preside, whereas Rasselas wishes for a little kingdom over which he would rule and administer justice. Both wishes are noble enough in themselves, but the point that Johnson is making is that Rasselas and Nekayah have still not come to a full realization of the transitory nature of earthly wants. Equally noteworthy, however, is the fact that Johnson puts absolutely no blame on his characters for not coming to this realization. In fact, it is a psychological impossibility for any human being ever to stop wishing, and this wishing is indeed necessary to drive life along. This is the psychological irony of the human condition. Grasp this idea, Johnson is saying, and you are ready to put your hope for everlasting happiness in the only power in which true happiness can ever be found, the love of God.

Despite the fact that our travellers, being human beings, must wish for something beyond their grasp, Johnson is careful

18. Ibid.

to point out that they have in fact learned the ultimate lesson. "Of these wishes...they well knew none could be obtained. They deliberated a while what was to be done, and resolved when the inundation should cease, to return to Abissinia."¹⁹ Sheridan Baker makes the following observation concerning this conclusion:

The psychological message is complete with the penultimate sentence, which concedes the inevitability of wishing as it grasps the ultimate knowledge that wishes are not to be obtained - and not in frustration but in acceptance. This is the essential irony of the mind, and the essential knowledge both of the mind's ways and of reality, which we can perceive in no other way than through the mind. Reality will always turn out different from wishing; yet the mind cannot avoid wishing: "some desire is necessary to keep life in motion," Imlac has already told Rasselas, "and he, whose real wants are supplied, must admit those of fancy."²⁰

We see, then, that Rasselas really cannot be considered a pessimistic work. Rather, it is a work designed to supply the reader with that self-knowledge necessary to make life in this world bearable and also necessary to prepare him for happiness in the next world. It is only by putting one's hope for happiness in this next world and by learning to accept the unhappiness which will inevitably result from the human necessity of wishing, that man can ever rise above the disappointments which he must encounter. It is made most clear, however, that man certainly has the capacity to do this, and hence his lot in this world is definitely not

19. Ibid., p. 612.

20. Baker, "Rasselas: Psychological Irony and Romance," p. 259.

represented as being hopeless.

The Vanity of Human Wishes is generally considered to be an even more pessimistic work than Rasselas; and after one has read the depressing catalogue of human misery and disappointed expectation which the poem presents, one might be inclined to agree with this assessment. As James L. Clifford has pointed out, Johnson was in a particularly depressed frame of mind when he wrote the poem, and this may account for what some consider to be an exaggerated pessimism. Clifford says:

...during the autumn of 1748 Johnson was actually in a somber mood....He was still plagued by financial worries, illness, and his old constitutional lethargy....But the chief cause of his low spirits was undoubtedly domestic. At home there was little or nothing to cheer him when he came downstairs after hours of drudgery in the garret. Tetty's health was poor, her temper uncertain, her petty demands increasing. She was no happy wife to calm his jaded nerves or talk him out of his melancholy. Marriage, he was gradually finding out, had many pains.²¹

Clifford may be right when he asserts that Johnson's spirits were not very high when he wrote the Vanity, for most of the poem does reflect the melancholy nature with which Johnson was continually afflicted; but to say that the poem is a completely pessimistic statement on man's lot, leaving him with absolutely no hope for any kind of happiness or even

21. James L. Clifford, Young Sam Johnson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), p. 310. Quoted in Robert Voitle, Samuel Johnson The Moralist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 43.

with any freedom to improve his tragic state, seems to me to be an overstatement. Yet another critic - Robert Voitle - sees the poem as an out and out pessimistic statement of man's tragic situation. In comparing the Vanity to Rasselas, Voitle states:

Although he denies that man can will happiness, Johnson, by confining himself in Rasselas to this one impossibility, still leaves man some freedom to act, in The Vanity of Human Wishes he leaves him almost none. It is better to be the "vassal," the skulking "hind," "the needy traveller, serene and gay," than to strive greatly for any goal - and the substitution of Christian resignation for this lowly apathy in the concluding lines of the poem, does little to relieve this impression.²²

To think that a man of Johnson's vitality and zest for living would write a poem which advocates "lowly apathy", as Voitle suggests, seems to me to be a ridiculous assertion. Admittedly, Johnson does give a pleasant picture of the needy traveller who "Walks the wild heath, and sings his toils away" (39),²³ only to undercut it with these ironic lines:

Does envy seize thee? Crush th' upbraiding joy,
Increase his riches and his peace destroy;
Now fears in dire vicissitude invade,
The rustling brake alarms, and quiv'ring shade,
Nor light nor darkness bring his pain relief,
One shows the plunder, and one hides the thief.
(40-45)

The point that Johnson is making here is not, as Voitle suggests, that it is better to be poor than to strive for any

22. Voitle, Samuel Johnson The Moralist, p. 40.

23. Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, p. 48. All subsequent references to The Vanity of Human Wishes are from this edition; line references will be given at the end of each quotation.

sort of goal. Johnson knew what it was like to be poor, and certainly no one could convince him that he was happier without money than when he finally had enough to allow him to live fairly comfortably. No, the point is that if a man with money becomes so obsessed with its possession that he places his entire hope for happiness in it, to the exclusion of all other things, despair and unhappiness are bound to follow. This, in effect, is the theme of the entire poem. Johnson did not want to convey some vague pessimistic assertion that all wishes are vain, but rather he attempted to convey the same idea which he made so clear in Rasselas. He realized that it was part of the human condition that man could never be satisfied with what he had, and that wishing for something better was inevitable. This wishing, in itself, is not seen as being bad, but rather as being necessary for any sort of progress ever to occur. What is condemned by Johnson, however, is the foolish habit that man has of putting all his hopes for happiness in one transitory object, and to dwell "attentively upon it, till it has wholly engrossed the imagination, and permits us not to conceive any happiness but its attainment, or any misery but its loss" (Rambler 17).²⁴ Just as mediaevalists like Boethius had used the metaphor of the wheel of fortune to convey the idea of the unstable nature of happiness derived from placing

24. Walter Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 81-82.

one's complete hope in transitory things, so Johnson uses a personified "Fortune."

Delusive Fortune hears th'incessant call,
They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall.
(75-76)

The poem, then, is not merely a pessimistic assertion showing how all human wishes are bound to fail, but rather a warning from Johnson to the reader that all who place their entire hopes for happiness in worldly, and hence transitory things, are ultimately going to find only disappointment. This idea applies equally to the great and the small in life. Wolsey, for example, is first described in all his magnificent glory:

In full-blown dignity, see Wolsey stand,
Law in his voice, and fortune in his hand:
To him the church, the realm, their pow'rs consign,
Thro' him the rays of regal bounty shine,
Turned by his nod the stream of honour flows,
His smile alone security bestows:
Still to new heights his restless wishes tow'r,
Claim leads to claim, and pow'r advances pow'r,
(99-106)

Yet, like all other worldly things, power is fleeting, and slowly but inevitably the wheel of fortune turns, and power is lost. Finally, Wolsey's state is described in the following pitiful terms:

With age, with cares, with maladies oppress'd,
He seeks the refuge of monastic rest.
Grief aids disease, remember'd folly stings,
And his last sighs reproach the faith of kings.
(117-120)

Clearly, the mistake that Wolsey has made is that he has put all his hopes for happiness in one thing, the possession of power, and when the wheel of fortune inevitably turns and

this transitory thing leaves him, Wolsey finds himself completely devoid of any hopes for happiness, and spends the rest of his days bemoaning his cruel fate.

As in Rasselas, Johnson makes it clear in The Vanity of Human Wishes that old age is not a time when happiness is readily available. In the poem, he gives us a picture of old age which is, if anything, even more depressing than the portrait of the old sage found in Rasselas. In The Vanity, Johnson describes the decrepit old man, once filled with youth and vitality, who now "with listless eyes...views the store/...and wonders that they please no more" (263-264). One must realize that by the very nature of life on earth man is doomed to find nothing but unhappiness, and to base one's hope for happiness simply on a long life is to delude oneself, for, as Johnson says, "...life protracted is protracted woe" (258). This is not to say that one should wish for death, for, as we have seen, death necessarily means going into a state of which man can have no prior knowledge, and such an idea as this is even more terrifying than the prospect of a life of extended misery. This is but another aspect of the ironically tragic state in which man finds himself.

Perhaps the most disturbing verse paragraph in the whole poem is the one in which Johnson describes men who have lived what most would consider to be a worthwhile life, and who have been praised highly by many of their contemporaries.

Yet even these famous men inevitably succumb to the final end of all mankind. As Johnson says:

From Marlborough's eyes the streams of dotage flow,
And Swift expires a driv'ler and a show.
(317-318)

This is Johnson's ultimate statement of the futility of all wishes for earthly happiness, since life itself is the most transitory of all things and eventually must lead to nothing but decrepitude and decay. And yet, even after reciting the final disappointment that all hopes for earthly happiness must lead to, the poem is not really pessimistic. The ending confirms that Johnson is writing a poem in the most orthodox Christian sense, and that all his examples of the unsatisfactory nature of transitory things are meant solely to contrast with the happiness that may be found when we put our trust in the only thing that will never change, the love of God.

Enquirer, cease, petitions yet remain,
Which heav'n may hear, nor deem religion vain.
Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
But leave to heav'n the measure and the choice,
Safe in his pow'r, whose eyes discern afar
The secret ambush of a specious pray'r.
Implore his aid, in his decisions rest,
Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.
Yet, when the sense of sacred presence fires,
And strong devotion to the skies aspires,
Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;
For love, which scarce collective man can fill;
For patience sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;
For faith, that panting for a happier seat,
Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat:
These goods for man the laws of heav'n ordain,
These goods he grants, who grants the pow'r to gain;
With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.
(349-368)

It should be clear from these lines that The Vanity of Human Wishes is certainly not the pessimistic poem that some critics have taken it to be. Rather, it is a poem of confidence and hope, with Johnson urging man to turn away from the false happiness of this world to the true and only happiness which is to be found in God. As Patricia Meyer Spacks points out:

Adjectives of assurance dominate the last lines of the poem. With proper orientation, man becomes suddenly safe, secure; his devotion is strong; he achieves obedient passions, resigned will. In the final couplet, the chaos of the rest of the poem disappears; instead of chaos, we have calm, instead of misery, happiness. Happiness is not to be found, the last line suggests, but it can be achieved. In the struggle to understand and finally to achieve lies man's glory.²⁵

The last lines of this poem, then, do not represent a mere token gesture to orthodoxy, but rather go right to the heart of Johnson's opinion as to man's state in this world. In Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes we see that Johnson firmly believed that it is inevitable that unhappiness must come to all men at one time or another. By his very nature, man must continually wish for more than he has, but, ironically, happiness cannot be found in the fleeting and transitory things of this life, and to look for it there is only to delude oneself. In these works, then, Johnson attempts to present the reader with the self-knowledge that Johnson had praised Shakespeare so highly for presenting, and by doing so he hopes to show that there is only one way that true

25. Patricia Meyer Spacks, "From Satire to Description," The Yale Review, 58, No. 2 (Winter, 1968), 245.

happiness can ever be found. Johnson, I believe, firmly upheld the Boethian doctrine that man can, by an exercise of his free will, escape from the hands of the fickle fortune of this earth, and put his hopes for true and lasting happiness in God. Only by doing so will man ever be able to find more than a fleeting and transitory happiness. It is the tragedy of the characters in The Vanity of Human Wishes that they fail to realize this, and, putting all hopes in delusive fortune, they ultimately fall when she deserts them.

In the next chapter I shall be looking at some of Johnson's Latin poetry, which, in effect, represents the most personal of all his writings. In many cases, we see Johnson alone with his God, his only source of solace during times of need. As we shall see, Johnson was ever aware of the truths that he portrayed in Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes, and was wise enough to look for true happiness only in the permanence of the love of God.

Chapter Five

Johnson's Latin Poetry.

Perhaps the most neglected aspect of Johnson's writing is his Latin poetry. Surprisingly, there has never been a complete translation in either prose or verse of all of Johnson's Latin poems. This neglect is unfortunate, for these poems are essential for a full understanding of Johnson's religious views. In the nineteenth century, the Reverend James Henry undertook the translation of a number of these poems, but, while the effort was commendable in itself, the translations lack that personal quality which is so evident in the original. In a way, the poor quality of these translations is understandable, since it is most difficult to convey in English the intense personal feelings which Johnson was able to express only through the use of the Latin language.

One of the prime reasons for Johnson's use of the Latin language in these poems was to separate himself from the general reader, to rise above the cares and afflictions of this world into a state where he could freely express his inner-most feelings. In his diary, Dr. James Beattie relates the following encounter with Johnson which, it seems to me, shows just how deeply Johnson felt the need to express himself in Latin:

I sat two hours with Dr. Samuel Johnson, who was in exceedingly good humour and spirit; showed me some Latin verses he had lately composed, on finishing the last edition of his Dictionary....¹

The connection between the Latin verses and Johnson's good humour is unmistakable. Susie Tucker and Henry Gifford make the following comment on the Latin verses referred to in Beattie's diary:

Clearly in this very intimate poem Johnson was able to free himself from his melancholy, just as the Ode on Skye had enabled him to overcome the marked and unreasonable anger he had shown against Boswell, a few days before. The use of Latin poetry served in part as a screen, but also as a support. Not only does Johnson raise a kind of barrier between himself and the general reader by his insistence on decorum; but he finds in Latin poetry phrases and images to fit his experience. These, being traditional (however bold his use of them), relate the experience to what had been thought and felt before, and make it rational.²

Owing to the necessity of working with translations of questionable quality, the reader who is not proficient in Latin may find it somewhat difficult to appreciate the purely personal and deep-felt emotions of these poems, but in spite of this obstacle much of the meaning of Johnson's poetry is apparent. For our purposes, these poems may be divided into two fairly large groups. First, we have poems which are not specifically religious in nature, but rather deal with some

1. Susie I. Tucker and Henry Gifford, "Johnson's Latin Poetry," Neophilologus, 43 (1957), 219.

2. Ibid.

person or incident very close to Johnson's heart. As in his secular writings in English, a strong Christian point of view is always present in these poems. Secondly, we have Johnson's purely religious Latin poetry, written in times of need and often conveying both fear and hope simultaneously - the overall effect creating some of the most moving Christian verse ever written. Before examining these purely religious poems, however, I should like to look briefly at some of his non-religious Latin poems, which, nevertheless, do contain strong Christian overtones.

Some of Johnson's Latin poetry consists of translations from poems which he really enjoyed and in which he found deep meaning. One such poem is his translation of Busy, Curious, Thirsty Fly, originally written under the title, The Fly, An Anacreontic, by Johnson's collaborator on the Harleian Catalogue, William Oldys, and first published in the Scarborough Miscellany, 1732.³ In this poem, the poet cordially and lightheartedly invites a busy fly to join him at his cup. From this seemingly lighthearted beginning, however, the poem quickly shifts to a theme which was very close to the heart of Johnson, the brevity of life:

Make the most of life you may,
Life is short and wears away.
Both alike are mine and thine
Hastening quick to their decline:
Thine's a summer, mine's no more,
Though repeated to threescore.

3. Samuel Johnson, Poems - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, VI, ed. E. L. McAdam Jr. with George Milne (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 282.

Threescore summers, when they're gone,
Will appear as short as one!⁴

As we have seen in Rasselas and in The Vanity of Human Wishes, Johnson was at all times deeply concerned with the brevity of life. However, unlike the old man in The Vanity of Human Wishes who prays to God to "Enlarge my life with multitude of days" (l. 255), and who fails to realize "That life protracted is protracted woe" (l. 258), Johnson here takes a philosophical attitude towards the shortness of life. This translation was made sometime around July, 1774, when Johnson was sixty-five years old. As we know, the fear of death plagued him all his life, and perhaps Johnson was attracted to this poem in order to find an escape from his own fears. In any case, the poem deals with a subject that is near and dear to Johnson's heart, and this is why he chose to translate it into Latin.

Even more personal, however, are the poems which Johnson composed himself in the Latin language. One such poem is an ode on The Isle of Skye, which Boswell believed Johnson wrote while visiting the Isle on the fifth of September, 1773. The poem begins with a conventional description of the beauties of the island, and Johnson's belief that if peace and tranquility of mind are to be found anywhere on this earth, they are surely to be found in such an idyllic setting as this. However, as Johnson has shown in Rasselas, it does not matter where a man may be, he still is destined to be unhappy. Even

4. Ibid.

in a paradise like the "Happy Valley," or, by analogy, The Isle of Skye, there is only one way to find happiness, and that is through trust in God. This theme is clearly developed in this Latin ode in the closing three stanzas:

And yet to climb the hilly heath,
Or search the hollow'd cave beneath,
Or count the white waves as they flow,
Affords no cure for mental woe.

All human aid is weak: to bind
By philosophic rules the mind,
And curb each wish, is weak and vain,
As idly boasts the stoic train.

The storms that shake the troubled soul,
'Tis thine, Almighty, to control;
And, as thy wise decrees dispose,
The tide of passion ebbs and flows.

(trans. anonymous)⁵

What we have here is the theme of Rasselas stated in a very condensed form. All forms of philosophy, especially stoicism, are seen as simply a vain waste of time if they are not rooted in God. Through God, and through God alone, can man ever hope to rid himself of the mental anguish which will inevitably perplex his mind. We see, then, that while this poem is not specifically religious in nature, its sole purpose is to convey the most basic of all Christian messages - that man is helpless without the love of God.

Dealing with a similar theme in a different way we have Johnson's beautiful Latin Ode Ad T.L. M.D., which was written to Johnson's good friend and physician, Thomas Lawrence, who was President of the Royal College of Physicians

5. Ibid., p. 279.

from 1767 to 1774. In this poem, Johnson first of all speaks of how a physician is not only burdened with his own cares, but also has the misfortunes of others thrust upon his shoulders. Naturally, such a heavy load must inevitably wear the physician down mentally, and finally cast him into deep despair, for, as Johnson says:

Skill'd in a thousand drugs, you find
No remedy to heal a wounded mind.
(trans. John Desmoulins)⁶

However, there is hope, and, as we might expect, this hope is to be found only in the love of God.

More than enough of grief; at length
Rise, bravely rise, collect your strength;
You, sages dead, a numerous band,
You your lov'd medical pursuits demand.

Trust to th' Almighty each event;
Trust, firm in hope; nor thus lament
With female softness, but once more
To us and to yourself restore.
(trans. John Desmoulins)⁷

Even though the quality of this translation is inferior, it is still apparent that the poem contains one of the strongest condemnations that Johnson makes in any of his writings of the weakness of allowing oneself to be engulfed by depression. By doing so, one is merely displaying "female softness" and, in effect, depriving others of any good which one may do them. Johnson was aware of the great temptation that man was under to allow himself to be engulfed by depression.

6. Ibid., p. 299.

7. Ibid.

Indeed, he was continually fighting to free himself from this condition, but he also realized that the only way man could function in this world was to rise above its sorrow and put one's trust in the love of God. Such a philosophy as this went right to the heart of the Christian religion, and we see that although this poem also cannot be considered as a religious poem in the technical sense, its main purpose is still to provide the reader with the self-knowledge so necessary for him to rise above the fortunes of this world by putting his complete trust in God.

It is in Johnson's purely devotional Latin poetry, however, that he most clearly reveals his deeply felt religious beliefs. Knowing the strong dislike that he had for religious poetry of any sort, one might well wonder why he chose to write such poetry himself, albeit in Latin. The fact of the matter seems to be that it was never Johnson's intention that these poems should ever be published. Sir John Hawkins, Johnson's good friend and the first editor to print these pieces, explains the circumstances under which they were written:

...many were composed in those intervals of ease, which during his last illness he at times experienced, others, and those the greater number, were the employment of his thoughts, when, being retired to rest, the powers of sleep failed him, when the remission of pain became to him a positive pleasure, and having no outward objects present to view, his ever-active imagination had liberty to wander through the boundless regions of fancy, and his reason to

investigate the most important and sublime truths.⁸

As I attempted to show in the chapter on Johnson's "Vile Melancholy," it was one of his greatest worries that his reasoning power might be impaired. For this reason, he feared madness more than any other affliction, and also feared death primarily because it would mean an end to his power of thinking. Naturally, as Johnson grew older, he feared that his mental faculties might deteriorate, and for this reason he was continually setting up tests for himself to prove that he was still mentally alert. Boswell makes a very telling remark when he says:

In the latter part of his life, in order to satisfy himself whether his mental faculties were impaired, he resolved that he would try to learn a new language, and fixed upon the Low Dutch, for that purpose....⁹

Indeed, by far the greatest number of Johnson's Latin prayers were written during old age, and so it is very likely that his writing in Latin was another manner in which he was continually testing his mental faculties. In 1783 when Johnson awoke one night to find that he had incurred a paralytic stroke which left him temporarily unable to speak, the first thing he did was to write the following prayer in Latin in order to test his mental faculties:

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8. Sir John Hawkins, "Advertisement," Works of Samuel Johnson (11 vols.; London, 1787), I, IX. Quoted in Maurice J. Quinlan, Samuel Johnson, A Layman's Religion (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 195.
9. James Boswell, Life of Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 1080.

Father Supreme, whatever be Thy care
Touching this body (Jesu, plead the prayer),
Spare me my mind, nor count it fault in me
If that I ask which most pertains to Thee.
(trans. Morris Bent)¹⁰

Writing to Mrs. Thrale about the composition of this prayer, Johnson said, "The lines were not very good, but I knew them not to be very good: I made them easily, and concluded myself to be unimpaired in my faculties."¹¹ This, then, was one of the reasons why Johnson wrote his prayers in Latin. He never intended them to be published but rather meant them as an exercise whereby he was able to test his mental faculties.

But Johnson's Latin poetry was certainly much more to him than simply a mental exercise. In these poems, Johnson bares his inner feelings, and pleads passionately to his God for forgiveness and increased hope. For example, in his Prayer on Christmas Day, 1779, Johnson writes:

Now, now, has shone the ne'er forgotten day
When Christ was born. Oh, let a blissful ray
Enter my soul from heaven's sweet clemency.
Thy trembling servant grant a quiet rest:
O Christ, do Thou make all work for the best.
Sure hope inspire, and hear his mild request.
(trans. James Henry)¹²

In another of his Latin poems, Christ to the Sinner, Johnson even dramatizes the person of Christ in order to ease his fears:

10. Johnson, Poems, p. 313.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 305.

Sinner, not hopeless, to my side,
You fly from storms, when ills betide.
Here comfort sought by thee is found,
And safe you rest upon the ground.
(trans. James Henry)¹³

This poem, in effect, summarizes Johnson's Christian view of life. He sees man as a sinner who is necessarily assaulted from all sides in this world by hardship and toil; and yet man's lot is not hopeless, for there is always the choice that man can freely make to turn away from the world and find happiness and security with God. Anyone who may have been tempted to call Johnson an out and out pessimist must, I think, change his mind after reading these beautiful lines. Perhaps Johnson may be called a pessimist as far as this world is concerned, but certainly he is an optimist when he considers the whole order of things eternal. I certainly agree with Susie I. Tucker when she says of this magnificent poem:

The virtues of simple expression and sublime feeling are nowhere perhaps more strikingly revealed than in the poem he wrote on Christmas Day, 1782, in his bed...

With this poem we are at a long remove from the classics. Both metre and expression recall Christian hymns of the early church.¹⁴

Perhaps the most moving prayers that Johnson ever composed, however, are the seven which he wrote while waiting

13. Ibid., p. 312.

14. Tucker, "Johnson's Latin Poetry," p. 221.

for death. As was his custom, he based several of these prayers on specific Collects in the Book of Common Prayer, but the analogy between the two must not be overstressed. For example, the third Prayer is based on the last of the Prayers upon Several Occasions, in the Book of Common Prayer:

O God, whose nature and property is ever to have mercy and to forgive; receive our humble petitions; and though we be tied and bound with the chain of our sins, yet let the pitifulness of thy great mercy loose us, for the honour of Jesus Christ our Mediator and Advocate.¹⁵

From this well-known Anglican prayer, Johnson derives the following personal testament of his faith:

Thou gracious God, who crime forgiv'st, attend,
And to the sufferer prove a present friend!
Vouchsafe a favouring ear upon my cry,
And, from the night of sin, may labouring I
Delivered be, in Thy free clemency,
And thus due praise ascend to Christ on high.
(trans. James Henry)¹⁶

The contrast between the two prayers is obvious. Whereas the former uses the collective "we" in addressing its plea to God, Johnson brings his poem right down to the personal level. He prays to God to "Vouchsafe a favouring ear upon my cry," and even goes so far as to implore God to be his own personal friend. One may conclude that these Latin prayers were a desperate last attempt for Johnson to ingratiate himself

15. Johnson, Poems, p. 346.

16. Ibid.

with his own personal God; as such, they lead to some of the most intimate religious poetry ever written.

But although we still have the pleading element of these poems clearly in evidence, the reader also senses an increased hope in these prayers. This increased hope, as has been pointed out by Maurice J. Quinlan,¹⁷ comes from Johnson's new-found belief in the Atonement. As I pointed out in the chapter on the prayers and meditations, Johnson had a very difficult time believing that Jesus's death on the cross actually atoned for man's sins. He seemed to think, rather, that the sacrifice was more of an exemplary than a propitiatory nature. Of course, Johnson would have liked to have believed that Christ's death redeemed man, as evidenced by an incident that took place on April 7, 1776. Speaking of the Communion service for that year, Johnson states in his diary that "I was so mollified by the concluding address to our saviour that I could not utter it."¹⁸ The concluding address which so "mollified" or affected Johnson is this:

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ;
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that
takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon
us. Thou that takest away the sins of the world,
have mercy upon us. Thou that takest away the
sins of the world, receive our prayers. Thou that

17. Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 197.

18. Samuel Johnson, Diaries, Prayers and Annals - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, I, ed. E. L. McAdam Jr. with Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), 260.

sittest at the right hand of God the Father,
have mercy upon us.

For thou only art holy; thou only art the
Lord; thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost,
art most high in the glory of God the Father.¹⁹

But try as he might, it is clear from his personal prayers
and meditations that Johnson found it most difficult to
accept the propitiatory nature of God's sacrifice.

In these last prayers, however, it seems that Johnson
has finally come to accept the doctrine of the Atonement,
and this accounts for the new hope displayed in them. For
example, in the first Prayer, he prays for accepted repen-
tance, shelter from ills and final bliss with God. These
requests are customary with Johnson, but the way he ends
the poem certainly is not:

A suppliant low, I use a suppliant's art,
For death of Christ these blessings now impart.
(trans. James Henry)²⁰

The reference to the Atonement is unmistakable, a reference that
would never be found in any of Johnson's earlier writings.

Similarly, in the fifth Prayer, Johnson makes the same point:

All powerful Sire, regard, from heavens pure,
A wretch whom sins oppress and make demure.
Send peace and pardon - grant a tranquil mind;
Something to please Thee, grant my hands may find,
And do thou suffer that the price for me,
Which for all Christ has paid, may payed be.
(trans. James Henry)²¹

19. Ibid.

20. Johnson, Poems, p. 346.

21. Ibid., p. 347.

It seems, then, that as death approached Johnson grew ever so much more confident of the propitiatory nature of Christ's sacrifice, and consequently he was able to face death with a greater feeling of serenity than he had ever enjoyed during his lifetime. On December 5, 1784, Johnson received the sacrament for the last time. For the occasion he composed his final Latin prayer, which has been translated as follows:

Greatest God, to whom the hidden interior of the heart lies open; whom no anxiety, no lust escapes; from whom the subtle craftiness of sinners keeps nothing secret; who, surveying all things, rulest all every where; by your divine inspiration cast out from our minds earthly uncleanness, that there may reign within a holy love. And bring powerful eloquence to sluggish tongues, that your praise may sound continually from every mouth. May Christ be willing to have merited this for us by the blood wherewith he atoned for peoples and all generations.

(trans. Maurice J. Quinlan)²²

Quinlan makes the following observation on this final prayer:

This prayer, though based on the collect for the Communion service, adds a plea for praising God and a specific allusion to the Atonement. Why, especially since the service read by Strahan contains several appropriate prayers, did Johnson elaborate on the collect? For one thing, December 5 was the Second Sunday in Advent, and, as he would have known, the Epistle for that day emphasizes the importance of glorifying God. The reason for his adding the reference to the Atonement seems clear, in view of what has been said on that subject. But a comment of William Law may also be relevant. On the subject of prayer he observes: "It should be under the direction of some form, but not so tied down

22. Quinlan, Layman's Religion, p. 202.

to it but that it may be free to take such new expressions as its present fervours happen to furnish it with, which sometimes are more affecting, and carry the soul more powerfully to God, than any expressions that were ever used before." Johnson, it would appear, had learned this lesson extremely well.²³

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, it is indeed a shame that Johnson's Latin poetry is so little known, and that no complete translation of it exists. It is through this poetry, much of it never meant for publication and hence intensely personal, that one is able to get right to the heart of Johnson's religion. Certainly, the Latin poetry does more than any of Johnson's writings to show that he was indeed one of the most devout, sincere, and orthodox Christians who ever lived.

23. Ibid.

Chapter Six

Conclusion - The Rationality of Faith.

Johnson concludes his Adventurer #107 in the following manner:

Life is not the object of science: we see a little, very little; and what is beyond we can only conjecture. If we inquire of those who have gone before us, we receive small satisfaction; some have travelled life without observation, and some wittingly mislead us. The only thought, therefore, on which we can repose with comfort, is that which presents to us the care of Providence, whose eye takes in the whole course of things, and under whose direction all involuntary errors will terminate in happiness.¹

This paragraph effectively summarizes the main reason behind Johnson's passionate religious beliefs. Johnson was a man who had great faith in human potential, and clearly saw that man was far superior in intellect to any other living creature. However, it was equally obvious to him that man's lot in this world was tragic. By his very nature, man could never be happy with anything that the world had to offer, and yet it is the psychological irony of the human condition that man must continually seek this fleeting happiness. There is an alternative, however, and this is to put one's hope for

1. Chester F. Chapin, The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 155.

happiness entirely in the love of God. This is where free will, God's great gift to man, plays a part. If man is able to realize the tragic and paradoxical nature of his own existence on earth, Johnson believes, then this man also has the ability to rise above the transitory things of this life and place his faith in the only thing that is permanent, the love of God. While man's state in this world is tragic, then, his state in the universe certainly is not, for by an exercise of his own free will man can find happiness which will be perfect and everlasting.

This personal belief is evident in all of Johnson's writings. In his Diaries, Prayers and Annals he is continually reaching out for the security to be found only in God. Naturally, because of his orthodox conception of a judging God, Johnson could never be sure of his own salvation. However, even this uncertainty had its positive side since it induced him to pray even more fervently to God to accept his repentance. Paradoxically, then, Johnson's fear of God actually increased his hopes for salvation. In the end, he was able to meet death with more confidence of his ultimate salvation than he had possessed throughout most of his lifetime. Through fear came hope, and through hope came the happiness available only through religion.

Even in his theory of poetry, we see Johnson's concern for the happiness to be found only in God. While specifically disliking religious poetry - primarily because it failed to

provide the reader with any degree of self-knowledge - his own writings were definitely intended to show man's true state in the world. Such works as Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes vividly show man's ironically tragic position. Forced to search for a happiness which can never be found, all of man's hopes and aspirations must ultimately end in frustration and disappointment. But the point Johnson is making is that it is essential for man to realize his own tragic state, for only then will he be able to put his complete hope for happiness in the love of God. Then, and only then, does fortune relax its hold on man and life become bearable.

In his Latin poetry, we see that Johnson certainly followed his own advice. In these most personal of Johnson's writings we often see him alone with his God. Never completely certain of salvation yet with an ever increasing hope, Johnson based his whole concept of ultimate happiness on his faith in God's love. Through his faith, this melancholy and in many ways tortured man was able to withstand the cruel buffets of fortune and continue to live a meaningful and worthwhile life where many in his position would have faltered.

Arieh Sacks, commenting on Johnson's choice of a religious view of life, points out that for Johnson such a choice was the ultimate test of a man's rationality:

Moving through the mists of earthly hope and fear, man becomes capable of religious hope and fear - the ultimate tests of

rationality. Johnsonian man is a son of Adam in that his primary impulse is toward selfishness and pride, toward faction, disagreement, excess, particularity, romantic escape, illusion, obsession, ultimate madness. But he is also potentially saved, for the faculty of reason in him, exercised through initial free choice, makes possible moral commitment, humility (in the widest religious sense), patience, realism, fulfillment of duty, "usefulness," salvation.²

The basis of Johnson's religious writing, then, was a strong knowledge of human nature and the human condition. These things never change, and because of their permanence Johnson's writings have just as much validity today as they had two hundred years ago.

Samuel Johnson obviously was a man who found his position in the world almost intolerable. Deeply aware of the vast potential of human reason, he was tortured by the fact that ultimately all men must live a life of unhappiness and sorrow. And yet, even a man so aware of his own tragic situation was able to find comfort from the miseries of this life. This comfort he ultimately found in his passionate religious convictions. Through orthodoxy, Johnson was able to go beyond the cares and frustrations of the world and find true happiness in the permanence of God's love. Johnson's great comfort in life was that through an exercise of man's most

2. ArieH, Sacks, Passionate Intelligence: Imagination and Reason in the Work of Samuel Johnson (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 110.

powerful faculty, the faculty of reason, ultimate salvation was attainable. Thus religion - and specifically orthodoxy - was by far the most important element in Johnson's life, for through it Johnson found the strength to endure a life which for many would have been unendurable.

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