The critical theory of Samuel Johnson

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THE CRITICAL THEORY OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the State University of Iowa
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts

by

Florence Sara Taylor

Iowa City Iowa

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I. CONSERVATISM

Johnson's critical theory is the outgrowth of his own character. He was conservative by nature; hence he followed the conventional rules accepted by the Neo-Classical school, in all matters of secondary importance. This conservatism is based, not on any slavish dependence upon tradition, but on his thoroughly English confidence in the verdict of time and of the people. He said, in effect, "Where the people think long on any subject, they commonly attain to think rightly." The common impression of the superiority of the ancients he accounts for in this way; for the decisions of time are usually just. This democratic spirit appears again and again. For example, in the life of Pomfret, "He pleases many, and he who pleases many must have some species of merit." 1 In regard to a common opinion about Savage's "Wanderer", "This criticism is universal and therefore it is reasonable to believe it at least in a great degree just." 2 When his own tragedy, "Irene", failed, he accepted the verdict of the public, as he said, "like the monument." As a general rule, he accepts the current opinion just so far as he has no positive reason for disputing it.

1. Versification.

This attitude explains his close adherence to the versification of his own day. "All change," he said, "is of itself an evil, which ought not to be hazarded but for evident advantage." 3

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Had he considered metrical form of sufficient importance, he would not have hesitated to defy the prevalent traditions. But that he did underestimate the significance of form is evident from his apology for what he considers Milton's neglect of numbers: "He had indeed a greater and nobler work to perform; a single sentiment of moral or religious truth, a single image of life and nature, would have been cheaply lost for a thousand echoes of the cadence of the sense; and he who had undertaken to vindicate the ways of God to man, might have been accused of neglecting his cause, had he lavished much of his attention upon syllables and sounds."  

Johnson's metrical theory is Pope's, as may be inferred from his final estimate of Pope's work. "To attempt any further improvement of versification will be dangerous. Art and diligence have now done their best, and what shall be added will be the effort of tedious toil and needless curiosity." In general his theory is the same as that set forth in Bysshe's "Art of Poetry", which Saintsbury says expresses "what everybody had been thinking more or less confusedly for more than a generation and what almost everybody was to think it proper to think for more than one or two generations more." Briefly, the system includes: the "pure" line of ten syllables, the accent falling on every other syllable, with the pause as near the middle as possible; the rhymed couplet with the sense complete within the couplet.

The clearest and simplest statement of his theory is found

in connection with the discussion of Milton's versification. The heroic measure, Johnson observes in the eighty-sixth "Rambler", "may be considered as pure or mixed. It is pure when the accent rests upon every second syllable through the whole line. The repetition of this sound or percussion at equal times, is the most complete harmony of which a single verse is capable and should be exactly kept in distichs and generally in the last line of a paragraph, that the ear may rest without any sense of imperfection."

The mixed measure allows some variation of the accents, which is necessary in a long composition. "This, though it always injures the harmony of the line, considered by itself, yet compensates the loss by relieving us from the continual tyranny of the same sound, and makes us the more sensible of the harmony of the pure measure." With the first pair of syllables Johnson allows perfect freedom; but he advises the poets "not having the invention or knowledge of Milton" to avoid more than one variation from the rule in a line. The mingling of trochees with iambs is expressly forbidden as deviation from the established practice, and the following lines cited as inharmonious.

"This delicious place,
For us too large; where thy abundance wants
Partakers, and uncropped falls to the ground,"

the offending syllables being falls to.

Much of Milton's variation Johnson attributed to the use of elision rather than to the substitution of other feet for iambs,

since this license was allowed in other languages. In this way Milton has left the language, "already over-stocked with consonants," harsher even than before.

Feminine endings are acknowledged not to be unpleasing; but "they ought not to be admitted into heroick poetry since the narrow limits of our language allow us no other distinction of epick and tragic measure than is afforded by the liberty of changing at will the terminations of the dramatick lines, and bringing them by that relaxation of metrical vigour nearer to prose."

The first rule for pause is that there should not be a full stop at less distance than three syllables from the beginning or end of a verse; for "when a single syllable is cut off from the rest it must either be united to the line with which the sense connects it, or be sounded alone. If it be united to the other line, it corrupts its harmony; if disjoined, it must stand alone, and with regard to musick be superfluous." The most desirable place for the full pause is on the fourth or sixth syllable; preferably the latter; the third, fifth, and seventh, being weak, that is unaccented, should receive only those pauses which suspend the sense, without concluding the period.

Johnson states his opinion in regard to the couplet, in the discussion of Denham, who did his first work in "the old manner of continuing the sense ungracefully from verse to verse." Later Denham so reformed as to teach "his followers the art of con-

3. Works VII, p. 64.
cluding their sense in couplets. The couplet is the unit of verse and must not be divided. "To conclude a period or a paragraph with the first line of a couplet always displeases in English poetry." That Johnson was not wholly satisfied with this is evident from the clause he adds, "which has perhaps been with rather too much constancy pursued." Again he points out that Dryden did not, judging from the irregularity of the first lines of the "Hind and Panther", approve of the perpetual uniformity which confines the sense to couplets. "The effect is rather increase of pleasure by variety than offence by ruggedness. Such exceptions Johnson is willing to make to any of his rules, but only in favor of poets of very high rank.

Rhyme Johnson considered all but essential to English poetry; it can not be spared "but where the subject is able to support itself." The office which he assigned to rhyme is "the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds. The variety of pauses, so much boasted by the lovers of blank verse, changes the measures of an English poet to the periods of a declaimer; and there are only a few skillful and happy readers of Milton, who enable their audience to perceive where the lines end or begin." Johnson distinctly says, however, that he would not have Milton a rhymer; but neither would he have him imitated by poets of inferior ability. John Philips is censured for attempting blank verse, supposing "that the numbers of Milton, which impress the mind with veneration, combined as they

1. Works VII, p. 329  
2. Works VII, p. 141.
are with subjects of inconceivable grandeur, could be sustained by images which, at most, can rise only to elegance.\(^1\) Thomson, Young and Akenside are the only poets, except Milton, whose blank verse is praised, Akenside being commended only to the extent that his lines are superior to most blank verse. Even this superiority is balanced by the statement that "the concatenation of his verses is commonly too long continued, and the full close does not occur with sufficient frequency,"\(^2\) and a warning against blank verse in general. "The exemption which blank verse affords from the necessity of closing the sense with the couplet, betrays luxuriant and active minds into self-indulgence, that they pile image upon image, ornament upon ornament, and are not easily persuaded to close the sense at all. Blank verse will, therefore, I fear, be too often found in description exuberant, in argument loquacious, in narration tiresome."

Thomson is praised more unreservedly. "Thomson's wide expanse of general views and his enumeration of circumstantial varieties would have been obstructed and embarrassed by the frequent intersection of the sense, which are the necessary effects of rhyme."\(^3\) The dignity essential to blank verse seems to have been gained by "extended scenes and general effects" which "bring before us the whole magnificence of nature." Of Young's "Night Thoughts" Johnson says, "This is one of the few poems in which blank verse could not be changed for rhyme but with disadvantage. The wild diffu-

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sion of the sentiments, and the digressive sallies of imagination, would have been compressed and restrained by confinement to rhyme."

That Johnson condemned the use of rhyme in tragedy is evident from his approval of Dryden for discontinuing the practice. Yet he can see even there a possible advantage in rhyme. "Sentences stand more independent of each other and striking passages are, therefore, easily selected and retained."

Since the rhymed couplet seemed to Johnson the ideal form for poetry, it might be expected that he would not enjoy irregular forms, such as the sonnet and the Spenserian stanza. The sonnet he considers impossible in English, "which having greater variety of termination (than Italian) requires the rhymes to be often changed." For the same reason, the Spenserian stanza is difficult and unpleasing.

That Johnson was not entirely satisfied with the kind of poetry he praises most highly is evident from many passages. Milton's use of a long series of proper names is attributed to a desire to call in, whenever possible, "a softer word to his assistance," convinced as he was, "of the unfitness of our language for smooth versification." His final conclusion in regard to Milton's versification is that "he has performed all that our language would permit.


We have seen that Johnson in his theory of versification followed the prevalent ideas of the eighteenth century. This is true also of his ideas of the subjects suitable for literary, especially poetic, treatment, method of description and poetic diction.

In "Rasselas" is found the most complete expression of what he considers proper subjects for poetry; they must be of general and human interest:

"The business of the poet is to examine not the individual but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip or describe the different shades of the verdure of the forest."

His study is man. A poet must know all the modes of life; must observe the power of all the passions and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by institutions. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; must disregard present laws and opinions and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same. His work, it seems, is the same as that of the philosopher, the method only being different.

Johnson liked to apply this same principle of universality of theme to prose also; although he realized that much prose is necessarily of a more temporal nature. The ideal which he set himself for his own work is clear from the last "Rambler", where

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he refers to the fact that he has not in that paper treated topics of the day, but has appealed rather to "those who had leisure for abstracted truth and enjoyed virtue in its naked dignity." Even philosophy of a temporary nature should not take the place of the permanent lustre of moral and religious truth." In commenting upon the universality of Shakespeare's themes, he says: "Nothing can please many and please long, but just representations of general nature."

Johnson apparently did not distinguish between the abstract theme and the concrete application; he did not recognize the possibility of having at the same time an exalted theme and a lowly subject. This seemed to him mere incongruity.

3. Description.

This insistence upon general subjects accounts for his idea of description, which he valued only as it contributes to the abstract theme. To repeat a quotation already referred to: "The business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip or describe the different shades of the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit, in his portraits of nature, such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and

carelessness." The object of description, then, is to stimulate the imagination so that it will build up a picture.

The significant points of a description are not those individual details that separate the scene from every other, but the general impression which affects the mood. In other words the highest use of description is to contribute to the study of man. The significance of the familiar comparison of the description of Dover cliff with that of the temple in the "Mourning Bride" is that in the latter the emphasis is upon the mood rather than upon the sense impressions. In the same way, "In the description of night in Macbeth, the beetle and the bat detract from the general idea of darkness-inspissated gloom."

A comment on Cowley's description of the dress of Gabriel suggests that perhaps Johnson's dislike of detailed description could be partly accounted for by his associating it with the metaphysical poets. "What might, in general expressions be great and forcible, he weakens and makes ridiculous by branching it into small parts. That Gabriel was invested with the softest or brightest colors of the sky, we might have been told, and been dismissed to improve the idea in our different proportions of conception; but Cowley could not let us go, till he had related where Gabriel got first his skin, and then his lace, and then his scarf, and related it in terms of the mercer and tailor."

In justice to Johnson it must be admitted that he seems to appreciate description for its own sake, more fully when he wrote

the "Lives of the Poets" than earlier in his work. In the life of Cowley he says: "One of the great sources of poetical delight is description, or the power of presenting images to the mind."

4. Diction.

Poetic diction, too, must stand the test of universality. "Poetry is to speak an universal language. "It is not to use terms that will not be understood after temporary customs have passed away. It must be elevated above the language of common life." Language is the dress of thought; and as the noblest mien, or the most graceful action, would be degraded and obscured by a garb appropriated to the gross employment of rusticks and mechanics; so the most heroick sentiments will lose their efficiency and the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence, if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions, debased by vulgar mouths and contaminated by inelegant applications."

Johnson recognized one of the difficulties inherent in such a rule - the impossibility of agreeing upon what words are low. "The disgust (low words) produce arises from revival of images with which they are commonly united." Words of dignity in one age are debased in another; to such changes of connotation are due the mean expressions in Shakespeare.

Johnson's views on poetic diction illustrate his tendency to compromise. He would have it take a middle ground, not so common as to be flat and yet not so remote as to be obscure. Obscurity

is even worse in his estimation than meanness. "Words to which we are nearly strangers, whenever they occur, draw that attention on themselves which they should transmit to things." Dryden delights to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle; to approach the precipice of absurdity and hover over the abyss of unideal vacancy." Thomson's diction is in the highest degree "florid and luxuriant xx too exuberant and sometimes may be charged with filling the ear more than the mind." It may be observed that Johnson was always more independent of his age in the consideration of prose than of poetry. He selected examples and authorities for his dictionary from the writers before the Restoration, "whose works I regard as the 'wells of English undefiled', as the pure sources of genuine diction. Our language for more than a century has been gradually departing from its original Teutonick character and deviating toward a Gallick structure and phraseology from which it ought to be our endeavor to recall it, by making our ancient volumes the groundwork of style."

II. TRUTH

Truth was another of the guiding principles of Johnson's life. He was not only truthful in the general sense of the word, but he

is said even in conversation to have spoken as if on oath. In criticism he uses the word in three senses: truth to fact, truth to life, and truth to one's own emotions.

1. To fact.

Biography and history were his favorite forms of writing because they are founded on fact. "History," he says, "will always take stronger hold on the attention than fable." He considered the object of biography to give a real picture of the man rather than an elaborate eulogy. It was wrong, in his eyes, to hide a man's faults in writing his life. "If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth." In defense of his own frankness in Lord Lyttleton's biography, he said that he considered that he had a certain portion of truth in trust, and that he would be dishonest in withholding it.

2. To nature.

The first requisite which Johnson expects in fiction, poetry and the drama is truth to nature, that is, to life. Truth to nature has been insisted upon by every school of criticism, but each one has reserved the right to interpret the phrase to suit itself. To the Romanticist it meant faithful and appreciative representation of the physical universe as it appeared to the writer himself; but to the eighteenth century nature meant human nature or the inanimate world, as interpreted by the ancient clas-

Johnson stood midway between these two positions. He cared little for out-of-door life or natural scenery; on the other hand, he got his knowledge of men first hand from direct contact with many classes and many individuals. To him truth to nature meant truth to human character as he knew it from his wide experience. "The province of poetry is to describe nature and passion, which are always the same."

In no part of Johnson's criticism can the modern reader agree with him so thoroughly as in the "Preface to Shakespeare" which Adam Smith called the most manly piece of criticism that was ever published in any country. Johnson allows supremacy to Shakespeare because he is, "above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." "His reputation is safe till human nature be changed." He "excels in accommodating his sentiments to real life." In spite of the tendency of talk on the stage to become stilted and exaggerated, "The dialogue of this author is often so evidently determined by the incident which produces it, and is pursued with so much ease and simplicity, that it seems scarcely to claim the merit of fiction, but to have been gleaned, by diligent selection out of the common conversation and common occurrences." The truth to character is so perfect that "no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other."

His characters "act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion." This, therefore, is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstacies, by reading human sentiments in human language."

Probability is the first test applied to any drama, although Johnson acknowledges that a play may be enjoyed in spite of absurdities. Fidelity to the outward facts of life is good; but it is of much more importance that the passions be rightly represented. "Cymbeline" is the only one of Shakespeare's plays that is severely censured for improbability. On the other hand, Johnson even defends the anachronisms of "Julius Caesar".

Classic rules for the drama are set aside whenever they conflict with this principle of truth to life. Vaughn, in his strangely unjust account of Johnson's work, makes much of his adherence to "the indispensable laws of Aristotelian criticism," giving the impression that Johnson submitted slavishly to Aristotle's canons. As a matter of fact, the only Aristotelian rules that Johnson represents as indispensable are those in regard to the necessity of having a beginning, middle, and end; and there have been others so hidebound as to consider these parts necessary to any work of art. Johnson states his position in regard to laws

of criticism in "Rambler" number 156, where he says: "The accidental prescriptions of authority, when time has procured them veneration, are often confounded with the laws of nature." Some laws are to be considered "as invincibly supported by their conformity to the order of nature and the operations of the intellect; others as formed by accident or instituted by example, and therefore always liable to dispute and alteration. Some of the latter sort are: limiting the number of persons in a drama, the number of acts, and the time of action; the unity of place, and the forbidding of tragic-comedy.

His conclusion in regard to the unities of time and place is that they "are not essential to a just drama; that though they may sometimes contribute to pleasure, they are always to be contemplated as an elaborate curiosity, as a product of superfluous and ostentatious art, by which is shown rather what is possible than what is necessary."

The mixture of comedy and tragedy is excused on the ground that in this way the dramatist shows real life, where joy and sorrow are mingled, "in which at the same time the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend." "The connexion of important with trivial incidents, since it is not only common but perpetual in the world, may surely be allowed on the stage which pretends only to be the mirror of life. Is not certain that the tragick and comick affections have been moved

alternately with equal force, and that no plays have oftener filled the eyes with tears than those which are variegated with interludes of mirth?" All that is said on the other side is: "I do not, however, think it safe to judge of works of genius merely by the event. Perhaps the effects even of Shakespeare's poetry might have been yet greater, had he not counteracted himself."

Later he boldly defends Shakespeare's use of the mingled drama, although he acknowledges that it is "a practice contrary to the rules of criticism. He contends that "there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature." The effect of the combination is not to lose the power to move, as critics object; but "as he commands us, we laugh or mourn, or sit silent with quiet expectation."

The superiority of Shakespeare's work over such a drama as "Cato" is "that Addison speaks the language of poets, and Shakespeare of men. We place it in the fairest and noblest progeny which judgment propagates by conjunction with learning; but Othello is the vigorous and vivacious offspring of observation impregnated by genius." That Johnson did not consider correctness the highest virtue is evident from this passage: "The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted, varied with shades and scented with flowers; the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches and pines tower in the air." The work of other poets

compares with Shakespeare's as a cabinet does to a mine "which contains gold and diamonds in inexhaustible plenty."

Even such a favorite of the age as Congreve must submit to the test of fidelity to nature. Johnson, like every eighteenth century man of letters, had the keenest appreciation of wit; yet this did not blind him to the shortcomings of such a dramatist as Congreve, whose characters are "a kind of intellectual gladiators" yet are "commonly fictitious and artificial." Among novelists Johnson much preferred Richardson to Fielding, because he says, "There is more knowledge of the human heart in one letter of Richardson's than in all Tom Jones." "There was as great a difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made and a man who could tell the hour by looking at a dial plate." Johnson enjoyed Fielding's stories, for he read "Amelia" through at one sitting; and he admits that Fielding's characters of manners are entertaining; but they are more superficial than characters of nature, "where a man must dive into the recesses of the human heart."

3. To one's own emotion.

Next to moral integrity and truth to nature Johnson valued emotional sincerity. He had no patience with affectation in any form, whether it be "furious and unnecessary zeal for liberty," pretense of excessive sensibility, or the idea, so popular then, of the desirability of returning to primitive conditions of liv-

His favorite admonition to Boswell was, "Clear your mind of cant."

This antipathy for what seemed to him pretended feeling accounts in part for his dislike of the pastoral elegy. The criticism of Lycidas, which Leslie Stephen calls a misapplication of a very sound principle—hatred of affectation—is famous. "It is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion; for passion runs not after remote allusions and obscure opinions. Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief." That fiction is inconsistent with sorrow is reiterated in the Life of Hammond. "Where there is fiction, there is no passion; he that describes himself as a shepherd and his Neaera or Delia as a shepherdess, and talks of goats and lambs, feels no passion. Hammond produces nothing but frigid pedantry." Dryden's "Threnodia Augustalis" seems to him to lack real tenderness: "He seems to look round him for images which he cannot find, and what he has he distorts by endeavoring to enlarge them. 'He is', he says, 'petrified with grief' but the marble sometimes relents and trickles into a joke." Dryden is found wanting again when he writes with such calmness of the great fire, the general conclusion being that he was not much acquainted with "simple and elemental passions."

One of the most truly classic of Johnson's principles is moderation. He has no patience with expression that is "indecently hyperbolical." Earlier critics of the century carried this idea

to the extreme, with the result that they condemned any expression of strong feeling; but such a position would have been inconsistent with Johnson's sincerity. Here we see his tendency to compromise. He holds, on the one hand, that literature without feeling does not move; on the other, that emotion "strained by poetical violence above the natural sentiments of man" merely disgusts. This position is an example of his typical English character; for certainly nothing is more characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon than restraint.

That Johnson valued sincerity beyond originality may be inferred from his preference, among his own works, for "The Hermit of Teneriffe", an allegory of very little originality, modeled closely after Addison's "Vision of Mirza". Otway's "Orphan" is excused for lack of comprehension of thought and elegance of expression by its power upon the affections. "If the heart is interested, many other beauties may be wanting, yet not be missed." 1

III. COMMON SENSE

Common sense is to be the guide of the critic and the author in applying all principles; not impression, but reason, is to indicate when they may be disregarded, and when they must be followed. To cite passages to show Johnson's common sense would be to quote the bulk of his work; the aim here will be to show where his theory was influenced by the doctrine of common sense rather than to point out individual opinions which seem to the present

1. Works VII, p. 175.
day reader most sensible.

The mixture of mythology and Christianity in the same poem, if it is not profane, is at least contrary to common sense. The third stanza of Gray's "Bard" is made ridiculous by its "puerilities of obsolete mythology, while worse still is connection of "trifling fictions" with the "most awful and sacred truths" as in Lycidas. Grecian deities and Gothic fairies are alike proscribed. "Neither species of these exploded beings could have done much; and when they are brought together they only make each other contemptible." The Phoenix seems to him "too incongruous to reason ever to be used in serious poetry." In Paradise Lost the confusion of spirit and matter in the angels, the allegory of Sin and Death, and the Paradise of Fools, all are declared too ludicrous to have a place in such a dignified composition. The greatest trouble with the metaphysical poets, outside of their affectation, or perhaps rising from it, is that their figures are usually too far-fetched, "the most heterogeneous ideas xx yoked together."

Sometimes this close adherence to common sense led Johnson into what seems to later critics failure to appreciate poetic imagination. He could not enjoy a lyric whose progress was determined by change of mood rather than by sustained reasoning. A fanciful play like Cymbeline seemed to him unreasonable; this is his comment: "To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity

of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life, were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection and too gross for aggravation."

Figures of speech must be submitted to the test of reason; they must satisfy the intellect as well as stimulate the imagination; perhaps the intellectual element is even more important in Johnson's eyes. Hence the high commendation bestowed upon the comparison of the progress of a student to climbing the Alps. "The simile of the Alps has no useless parts, yet affords a striking picture by itself; it makes the foregoing position better understood, and enables it to take faster hold on the attention; it assists the apprehension and elevates the fancy." On the other hand, such a figure as "the whips and scorns of time, seems unreasonable to him because far-fetched." "Whips and scorns have no great connection with one another or with time. Though at all times scorn may be endured the times that put men ordinarily in danger of whips are very rare." As a rule his interpretation of particular passages in Shakespeare is illuminating, for he can penetrate to the heart of the deepest thought; but where the idea is fanciful, he cannot always reconcile it with common sense.

IV. THE SUPREME IMPORTANCE OF MORALS

The didactic purpose of literature is always uppermost in

Johnson's mind. As a man, he was primarily a moralist, and in the words of Walter Raleigh, "His morality was the motive power of all that he wrote." In the last of the "Ramblers" we learn that his highest wish was "to be numbered among the writers who have given ardor to virtue and confidence to truth." He even went so far as never to quote in his dictionary any author "whose writings had a tendency to hurt sound religion and morality." Among his other writings, his own favorite was "The Vision of Theodore, the Hermit", the reason being, without doubt, that it gives his philosophy of life and reveals what he felt most deeply about the big moral problems. Johnson's test for the morality or immorality of a literary work is its influence on conduct - the typical, practical morality of the eighteenth century. This criticism he applies most fully to the novel and the drama.

1. The Novel.

In "Rambler" number four Johnson discusses the increased responsibility of the novelist, owing to the treatment of realistic subjects. The stories of the age before, romances with supernatural elements so prominent that they seem to be of another world, could not influence conduct. But the characters of realistic fiction are so near to us that we unconsciously follow them. The novelist must not count on the subtle, indirect influence of the spirit of his work, but must make the moral so evident that not even the most inexperienced reader can miss it.

3. Works II, p. 16.
"It is xx to be steadily inculcated, that virtue is the highest proof of understanding, and the only solid basis of greatness, and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts; that it begins in mistake and ends in ignominy."

The novelist should guard especially against "confounding the colors of good and evil." Hence characters where right and wrong are mingled so that they are equally conspicuous, as, for example, in many of Fielding's, are bad. The novelist should select. "If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eyes immediately upon mankind as upon a mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination." Many characters ought not to be presented at all. "Where historical veracity has no place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical nor above probability but the highest and purest that humanity can reach. Vice should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it as to reconcile it to the mind." Later critics have shown more confidence in the ability of the reader to separate the good from the evil for himself; Johnson would have the novelist do that for him.

2. The Drama.

Shakespeare's morality does not quite satisfy Johnson because he "is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he
seems to write without any moral purpose. His precepts and maxims drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good and evil, nor is he always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong and at the close, dismisses them without further care, and leaves their example to operate by chance. The end of "As You Like It" is unsatisfactory because "By hastening to the end of his work Shakespeare suppressed the dialogue between the usurper and the hermit and lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson, in which he might have found matter worthy of his highest powers." Shakespeare's disregard of poetic justice in allowing "the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause" is censured and the change made by Tate approved. "A play in which the wicked prosper and the virtuous miscarry may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellences are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue." On the other hand, Johnson acknowledges that Shakespeare has probably given the world as many "maxims of theoretical knowledge and rules of practical prudence" as all his successors, and that "a system of social duty may be selected" from his writings. The

criticism of Shakespeare's morality may be summed up in this way: On the whole, his influence is good; but it might have been stronger still had he used every opportunity to enforce moral precept.

Contrasted with this conclusion, is the censure of Congreve, the only dramatist whose moral attitude he condemns absolutely. "Their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated."

Particular dramatic characters are judged first for their probable influence on conduct. The delineation of Iago is approved because it "is so conducted that he is from the first scene to the last, hated and despised," even though "there is danger lest wickedness, conjoined with abilities, should steal upon esteem, though it misses of approbation." Falstaff is excused on the ground that this moral may be drawn from his conduct: "No man is more dangerous than he that, with a will to corrupt, hath the power to please, and that neither wit nor honesty ought to think themselves safe with such a companion when they see Henry seduced by Falstaff." Johnson is here making one of the many exceptions to his rules, which he allows to such authors as Shakespeare, in whose ability he has perfect confidence.

Another variation from the rule that good and evil should not appear indifferently in the same character, is excused in this way: When Benvolio ("Romeo and Juliet") is justly charged

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1. Works VIII, p. 28.  
with falsehood, "the author who seems to intend the character of Benvolio as good, meant perhaps to show how the best minds, in a state of faction and discord, are detorted to criminal partiality."

Sometimes a moral purpose is assumed where probably Shakespeare was influenced only by artistic or emotional considerations. In "Romeo and Juliet" Act V, Sc. 1, 1.3, "These three lines are very gay and pleasing. But why does Shakespeare give Romeo this involuntary cheerfulness just before the extremity of unhappiness? Perhaps to show the vanity of trusting to those uncertain and casual exaltations and depressions which many consider as certain foretokens of good and evil."

Perhaps the most severe criticism on a single passage in Shakespeare is where Hamlet decides not to kill the king at prayer. "This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered."

The idealization of Satan might have been expected to meet with Johnson's disapproval; but instead he defends it on the ground that Milton has succeeded in making Satan speak as a rebel without tainting the reader's imagination, because "his expressions are commonly general" - that is (we may interpret- no suggestions are given that might incite definite wicked deeds. On this same ground "The Beggars' Opera" is declared harmless, since "High-

waymen and housebreakers seldom frequent the playhouse nor is it possible for anyone to imagine that he may rob with safety because he sees Macheath reprieved on the stage."

We may conclude, then, that Johnson was willing to abrogate any of his subordinate rules in favor of the one all important question, "What is the influence of this work on conduct?"

CONCLUSION

We have found, then, that Johnson based his critical theory on the principles by which he ruled his life. He was conservative in all matters which seemed to him of secondary importance; consequently he subscribed to the Neo-Classical conventional ideas about verse form, style and subjects suitable for literature. On the other hand, although his conservatism led him to accept a large body of conventional rules in harmony with the criticism of the day, he never allowed these rules to interfere with the operation of those independent principles which he considered fundamental. He was devoted to truth, hence he insisted upon accuracy in biography and history, and upon emotional sincerity and fidelity to life in fiction, poetry and the drama. Common sense was characteristic of everything he did and said; it influenced all of his criticism and determined many of his judgments. Above all, he was a moralist, and he considered that the most important requisites for literary work are a sound moral purpose and wholesome moral influence.

1. Works VIII, p. 68.