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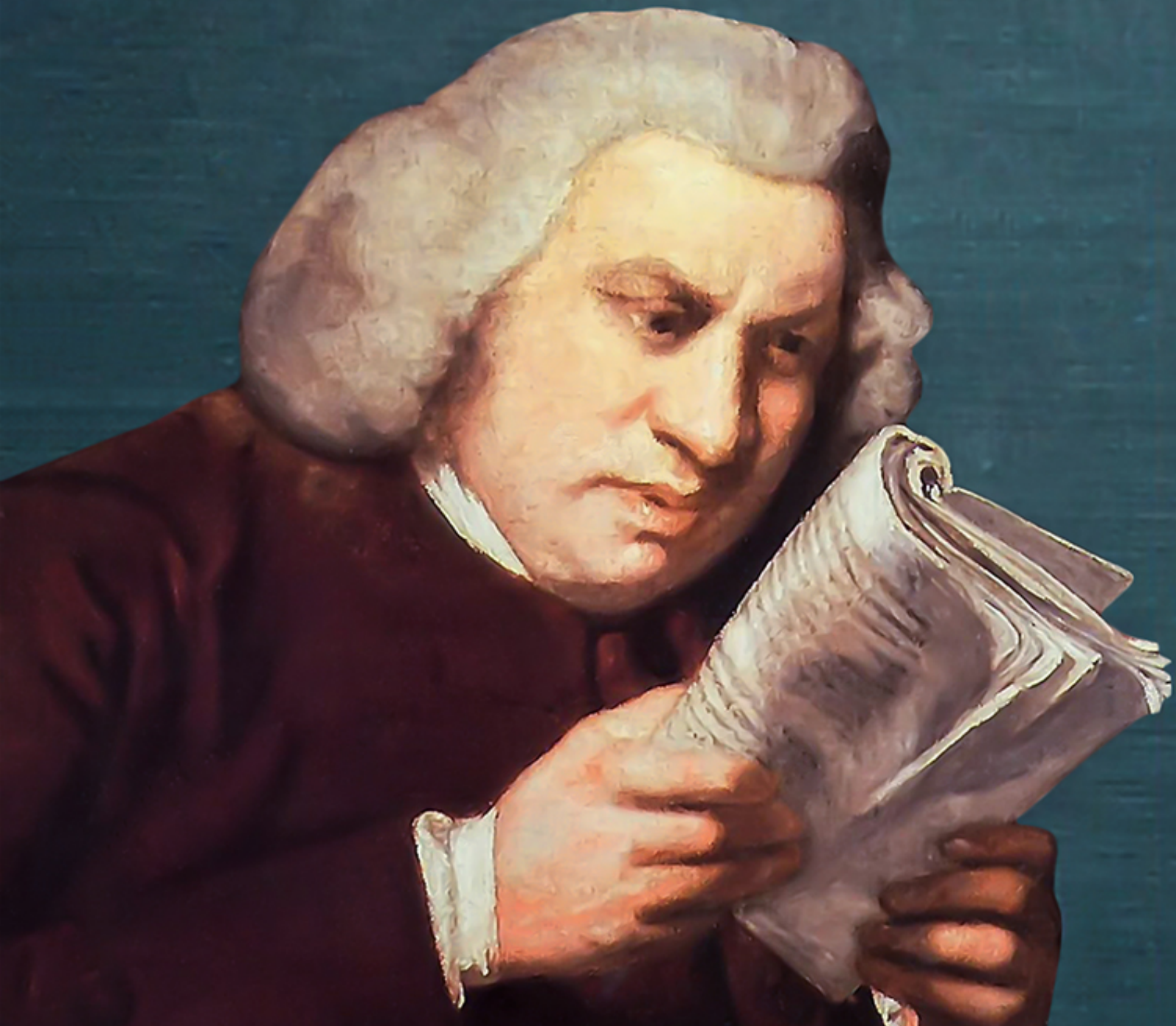

THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

JAMES BOSWELL

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Preface

In making this abridgement of Boswell's Life of Johnson I have omitted most of Boswell's criticisms, comments, and notes, all of Johnson's opinions in legal cases, most of the letters, and parts of the conversation dealing with matters which were of greater importance in Boswell's day than now. I have kept in mind an old habit, common enough, I dare say, among its devotees, of opening the book of random, and reading wherever the eye falls upon a passage of especial interest. All such passages, I hope, have been retained, and enough of the whole book to illustrate all the phases of Johnson's mind and of his time which Boswell observed.

Loyal Johnsonians may look upon such a book with a measure of scorn. I could not have made it, had I not believed that it would be the means of drawing new readers to Boswell, and eventually of finding for them in the complete work what many have already found—days and years of growing enlightenment and happy companionship, and an innocent refuge from the cares and perturbations of life.

Princeton, June 28, 1917.

INTRODUCTION

Phillips Brooks once told the boys at Exeter that in reading biography three men meet one another in close intimacy—the subject of the biography, the author, and the reader. Of the three the most interesting is, of course, the man about whom the book is written. The most privileged is the reader, who is thus allowed to live familiarly with an eminent man. Least regarded of the three is the author. It is his part to introduce the others, and to develop between them an acquaintance, perhaps a friendship, while he, though ever busy and solicitous, withdraws into the background.

Some think that Boswell, in his Life of Johnson, did not sufficiently realize his duty of self-effacement. He is too much in evidence, too bustling, too anxious that his own opinion, though comparatively unimportant, should get a hearing. In general, Boswell's faults are easily noticed, and have been too much talked about. He was morbid, restless, self-conscious, vain, insinuating; and, poor fellow, he died a drunkard. But the essential Boswell, the skilful and devoted artist, is almost unrecognized. As the creator of the Life of Johnson he is almost as much effaced as is Homer in the Odyssey. He is indeed so closely concealed that the reader suspects no art at all. Boswell's performance looks easy enough—merely the more or less coherent stringing together of a mass of memoranda. Nevertheless it was rare and difficult, as is the highest achievement in art. Boswell is primarily the artist, and he has created one of the great masterpieces of the world.* He created nothing else, though his head was continually filling itself with literary schemes that came to nought. But into his Life of Johnson he poured all his artistic energies, as Milton poured his into Paradise Lost, and Vergil his into the Aneid.

* Here I include his Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides as essentially a part of the Life. The Journal of a Tour in Corsica is but a propaedeutic study.

First, Boswell had the industry and the devotion to his task of an artist. Twenty years and more he labored in collecting his material. He speaks frankly of his methods. He recorded the talk of Johnson and his associates partly by a rough shorthand of his own, partly by an exceptional memory, which he carefully trained for this very purpose. 'O for shorthand to take this down!' said he to Mrs. Thrale as they listened to Johnson; and she replied: 'You'll carry it all in your head; a long head is as good as shorthand.' Miss Hannah More recalls a gay meeting at the Garricks', in Johnson's absence, when Boswell was bold enough to match his skill with no other than Garrick himself in an imitation of Johnson. Though Garrick was more successful in his Johnsonian recitation of poetry, Boswell won in reproducing his familiar conversation. He lost no time in perfecting his notes both mental and stenographic, and sat up many a night followed by a day of headache, to write them in final form, that none of the freshness and glow might fade. The sheer labor of this process, not to mention the difficulty, can be measured only by one who attempts a similar feat. Let him try to report the best conversation of a lively evening, following its course, preserving its point, differentiating sharply the traits of the participants, keeping the style, idiom, and exact words of each. Let him reject all parts of it, however diverting, of which the charm and force will evaporate with the occasion, and retain only that which will be as amusing, significant, and lively as ever at the end of one hundred, or, for all that we can see, one thousand years. He will then, in some measure, realize the difficulty of Boswell's performance. When his work appeared Boswell himself said: 'The stretch of mind and prompt assiduity by which so many conversations are preserved, I myself, at some distance of time, contemplate with wonder.'

He was indefatigable in hunting up and consulting all who had known parts or aspects of Johnson's life which to him were inaccessible. He mentions all told more than fifty names of men and women whom he consulted for information, to which number many others should be added of those who gave him nothing that he could use. 'I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London, in order to fix a date correctly.' He agonized over his work with the true devotion of an artist: 'You cannot imagine,' he says, 'what labor, what perplexity, what vexation I have endured in arranging a prodigious multiplicity of materials, in supplying omissions, in searching for papers buried in different masses, and all this besides the exertion of composing and polishing.' He despairs of making his picture vivid or full enough, and of ever realizing his preconception of his masterpiece.

Boswell's devotion to his work appears in even more extraordinary ways. Throughout he repeatedly offers himself as a victim to illustrate his great friend's wit, ill-humor, wisdom, affection, or goodness. He never spares himself, except now and then to assume a somewhat diaphanous anonymity. Without regard for his own dignity, he exhibits himself as humiliated, or drunken, or hypochondriac, or inquisitive, or resorting to petty subterfuge—anything for the accomplishment of his one main purpose. 'Nay, Sir,' said Johnson, 'it was not the wine that made your head ache, but the sense that I put into it.' 'What, Sir,' asks the hapless Boswell, 'will sense make the head ache?' 'Yes, Sir, when it is not used to it.'

Boswell is also the artist in his regard for truth. In him it was a passion. Again and again he insists upon his authenticity. He developed an infallible gust and unerring relish of what was genuinely Johnsonian in speech, writing, or action; and his own account leads to the inference that he discarded, as worthless, masses of diverting material

which would have tempted a less scrupulous writer beyond resistance. 'I observed to him,' said Boswell, 'that there were very few of his friends so accurate as that I could venture to put down in writing what they told me as his sayings.' The faithfulness of his portrait, even to the minutest details, is his unremitting care, and he subjects all contributed material to the sternest criticism.

Industry and love of truth alone will not make the artist. With only these Boswell might have been merely a tireless transcriber. But he had besides a keen sense of artistic values. This appears partly in the unity of his vast work. Though it was years in the making, though the details that demanded his attention were countless, yet they all centre consistently in one figure, and are so focused upon it, that one can hardly open the book at random to a line which has not its direct bearing upon the one subject of the work. Nor is the unity of the book that of an undeviating narrative in chronological order of one man's life; it grows rather out of a single dominating personality exhibited in all the vicissitudes of a manifold career. Boswell often speaks of his work as a painting, a portrait, and of single incidents as pictures or scenes in a drama. His eye is keen for contrasts, for picturesque moments, for dramatic action. While it is always the same Johnson whom he makes the central figure, he studies to shift the background, the interlocutors, the light and shade, in search of new revelations and effects. He presents a succession of many scenes, exquisitely wrought, of Johnson amid widely various settings of Eighteenth-Century England. And subject and setting are so closely allied that each borrows charm and emphasis from the other. Let the devoted reader of Boswell ask himself what glamor would fade from the church of St. Clement Danes, from the Mitre, from Fleet Street, the Oxford coach, and Lichfield, if the burly figure were withdrawn from them; or what charm and illumination, of the man himself would have

been lost apart from these settings. It is the unseen hand of the artist Boswell that has wrought them inseparably into this reciprocal effect.

The single scenes and pictures which Boswell has given us will all of them bear close scrutiny for their precision, their economy of means, their lifelikeness, their artistic effect. None was wrought more beautifully, nor more ardently, than that of Johnson's interview with the King. First we see the plain massive figure of the scholar amid the elegant comfort of Buckingham House. He is intent on his book before the fire. Then the approach of the King, lighted on his way by Mr. Barnard with candles caught from a table; their entrance by a private door, with Johnson's unconscious absorption, his sudden surprise, his starting up, his dignity, the King's ease with him, their conversation, in which the King courteously draws from Johnson knowledge of that in which Johnson is expert, Johnson's manly bearing and voice throughout—all is set forth with the unadorned vividness and permanent effect which seem artless enough, but which are characteristic of only the greatest art.

Boswell's Life of Johnson is further a masterpiece of art in that it exerts the vigorous energy of a masterpiece, an abundance of what, for want of a better word, we call personality. It is Boswell's confessed endeavor to add this quality to the others, because he perceived that it was an essential quality of Johnson himself, and he more than once laments his inability to transmit the full force and vitality of his original. Besides artistic perception and skill it required in him admiration and enthusiasm to seize this characteristic and impart it to his work. His admiration he confesses unashamed: 'I said I worshipped him . . . I cannot help worshipping him, he is so much superior to other men.' He studied his subject intensely. 'During all the course of my long intimacy with him, my respectful attention never

abated.' Upon such intensity and such ardor and enthusiasm depend the energy and animation of his portrait.

But it exhibits other personal qualities than these, which, if less often remarked, are at any rate unconsciously enjoyed. Boswell had great social charm. His friends are agreed upon his liveliness and good nature. Johnson called him 'clubbable,' 'the best traveling companion in the world,' 'one Scotchman who is cheerful,' 'a man whom everybody likes,' 'a man who I believe never left a house without leaving a wish for his return.' His vivacity, his love of fun, his passion for good company and friendship, his sympathy, his amiability, which made him acceptable everywhere, have mingled throughout with his own handiwork, and cause it to radiate a kind of genial warmth. This geniality it may be which has attracted so many readers to the book. They find themselves in good company, in a comfortable, pleasant place, agreeably stimulated with wit and fun, and cheered with friendliness. They are loth to leave it, and would ever enter it again. This rare charm the book owes in large measure to its creator.

The alliance of author with subject in Boswell's Johnson is one of the happiest and most sympathetic the world has known. So close is it that one cannot easily discern what great qualities the work owes to each. While it surely derives more of its excellence than is commonly remarked from the art of Boswell, its greatness after all is ultimately that of its subject. The noble qualities of Johnson have been well discerned by Carlyle, and his obvious peculiarities and prejudices somewhat magnified and distorted in Macaulay's brilliant refractions. One quality only shall I dwell upon, though that may be the sum of all the rest. Johnson had a supreme capacity for human relationship. In him this capacity amounted to genius.

In all respects he was of great stature. His contemporaries called him a colossus, the literary Goliath, the Giant, the

great Cham of literature, a tremendous companion. His frame was majestic; he strode when he walked, and his physical strength and courage were heroic. His mode of speaking was 'very impressive,' his utterance 'deliberate and strong.' His conversation was compared to 'an antique statue, where every vein and muscle is distinct and bold.' From boyhood throughout his life his companions naturally deferred to him, and he dominated them without effort. But what overcame the harshness of this autocracy, and made it reasonable, was the largeness of a nature that loved men and was ever hungry for knowledge of them. 'Sir,' said he, 'I look upon every day lost in which I do not make a new acquaintance.' And again: 'Why, Sir, I am a man of the world. I live in the world, and I take, in some degree, the color of the world as it moves along.' Thus he was a part of all that he met, a central figure in his time, with whose opinion one must reckon in considering any important matter of his day.

His love of London is but a part of his hunger for men. 'The happiness of London is not to be conceived but by those who have been in it.' 'Why, Sir, you find no man at all intellectual who is willing to leave London: No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.' As he loved London, so he loved a tavern for its sociability. 'Sir, there is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern.' 'A tavern chair is the throne of human felicity.'

Personal words are often upon his lips, such as 'love' and 'hate,' and vast is the number, range, and variety of people who at one time or another had been in some degree personally related with him, from Bet Flint and his black servant Francis, to the adored Duchess of Devonshire and the King himself. To no one who passed a word with him was he personally indifferent. Even fools received his personal

attention. Said one: 'But I don't understand you, Sir.' 'Sir, I have found you an argument. I am not obliged to find you an understanding.' 'Sir, you are irascible,' said Boswell; 'you have no patience with folly or absurdity.'

But it is in Johnson's capacity for friendship that his greatness is specially revealed. 'Keep your friendships in good repair.' As the old friends disappeared, new ones came to him. For Johnson seems never to have sought out friends. He was not a common 'mixer.' He stooped to no devices for the sake of popularity. He pours only scorn upon the lack of mind and conviction which is necessary to him who is everybody's friend.

His friendships included all classes and all ages. He was a great favorite with children, and knew how to meet them, from little four-months-old Veronica Boswell to his godchild Jane Langton. 'Sir,' said he, 'I love the acquaintance of young people, . . . young men have more virtue than old men; they have more generous sentiments in every respect.' At sixty-eight he said: 'I value myself upon this, that there is nothing of the old man in my conversation.' Upon women of all classes and ages he exerts without trying a charm the consciousness of which would have turned any head less constant than his own, and with their fulsome adoration he was pleased none the less for perceiving its real value.

But the most important of his friendships developed between him and such men of genius as Boswell, David Garrick, Oliver Goldsmith, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Edmund Burke. Johnson's genius left no fit testimony of itself from his own hand. With all the greatness of his mind he had no talent in sufficient measure by which fully to express himself. He had no ear for music and no eye for painting, and the finest qualities in the creations of Goldsmith were lost upon him. But his genius found its talents in others, and through the talents of his personal friends expressed itself

as it were by proxy. They rubbed their minds upon his, and he set in motion for them ideas which they might use. But the intelligence of genius is profounder and more personal than mere ideas. It has within it something energetic, expansive, propulsive from mind to mind, perennial, yet steady and controlled; and it was with such force that Johnson's almost superhuman personality inspired the art of his friends. Of this they were in some degree aware. Reynolds confessed that Johnson formed his mind, and 'brushed from it a great deal of rubbish.' Gibbon called Johnson 'Reynolds' oracle.' In one of his Discourses Sir Joshua, mindful no doubt of his own experience, recommends that young artists seek the companionship of such a man merely as a tonic to their art. Boswell often testifies to the stimulating effect of Johnson's presence. Once he speaks of 'an animating blaze of eloquence, which roused every intellectual power in me to the highest pitch'; and again of the 'full glow' of Johnson's conversation, in which he felt himself 'elevated as if brought into another state of being.' He says that all members of Johnson's '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.' He quotes Johnson at length and repeatedly as the author of his own large conception of biography. He was Goldsmith's 'great master,' Garrick feared his criticism, and one cannot but recognize the power of Johnson's personality in the increasing intelligence and consistency of Garrick's interpretations, in the growing vigor and firmness of Goldsmith's stroke, in the charm, finality, and exuberant life of Sir Joshua's portraits; and above all in the skill, truth, brilliance, and lifelike spontaneity of Boswell's art. It is in such works as these that we shall find the real Johnson, and through them that he will exert the force of his personality upon us.

Biography is the literature of realized personality, of life as it has been lived, of actual achievements or shortcomings, of success or failure; it is not imaginary and embellished, not what might be or might have been, not reduced to prescribed or artificial forms, but it is the unvarnished story of that which was delightful, disappointing, possible, or impossible, in a life spent in this world.

In this sense it is peculiarly the literature of truth and authenticity. Elements of imagination and speculation must enter into all other forms of literature, and as purely creative forms they may rank superior to biography; but in each case it will be found that their authenticity, their right to our attention and credence, ultimately rests upon the biographical element which is basic in them, that is, upon what they have derived by observation and experience from a human life seriously lived. Biography contains this element in its purity. For this reason it is more authentic than other kinds of literature, and more relevant. The thing that most concerns me, the individual, whether I will or no, is the management of myself in this world. The fundamental and essential conditions of life are the same in any age, however the adventitious circumstances may change. The beginning and the end are the same, the average length the same, the problems and the prize the same. How, then, have others managed, both those who failed and those who succeeded, or those, in far greatest number, who did both? Let me know their ambitions, their odds, their handicaps, obstacles, weaknesses, and struggles, how they finally fared, and what they had to say about it. Let me know a great variety of such instances that I may mark their disagreements, but more especially their agreement about it. How did they play the game? How did they fight the fight that I am to fight, and how in any case did they lose or win? To these questions biography gives the direct answer. Such is its importance over other literature. For such reasons,

doubtless, Johnson 'loved' it most. For such reasons the book which has been most cherished and revered for well-nigh two thousand years is a biography.

Biography, then, is the chief text-book in the art of living, and preeminent in its kind is the Life of Johnson. Here is the instance of a man who was born into a life stripped of all ornament and artificiality. His equipment in mind and stature was Olympian, but the odds against him were proportionate to his powers. Without fear or complaint, without boast or noise, he fairly joined issue with the world and overcame it. He scorned circumstance, and laid bare the unvarying realities of the contest. He was ever the sworn enemy of speciousness, of nonsense, of idle and insincere speculation, of the mind that does not take seriously the duty of making itself up, of neglect in the gravest consideration of life. He insisted upon the rights and dignity of the individual man, and at the same time upon the vital necessity to him of reverence and submission, and no man ever more beautifully illustrated their interdependence, and their exquisite combination in a noble nature.

Boswell's Johnson is consistently and primarily the life of one man. Incidentally it is more, for through it one is carried from his own present limitations into a spacious and genial world. The reader there meets a vast number of people, men, women, children, nay even animals, from George the Third down to the cat Hodge. By the author's magic each is alive, and the reader mingles with them as with his acquaintances. It is a varied world, and includes the smoky and swarming courts and highways of London, its stately drawing-rooms, its cheerful inns, its shops and markets, and beyond is the highroad which we travel in lumbering coach or speeding postchaise to venerable Oxford with its polite and leisurely dons, or to the staunch little cathedral city of Lichfield, welcoming back its famous son to dinner and tea,

or to the seat of a country squire, or ducal castle, or village tavern, or the grim but hospitable feudal life of the Hebrides. And wherever we go with Johnson there is the lively traffic in ideas, lending vitality and significance to everything about him.

A part of education and culture is the extension of one's narrow range of living to include wider possibilities or actualities, such as may be gathered from other fields of thought, other times, other men; in short, to use a Johnsonian phrase, it is 'multiplicity of consciousness.' There is no book more effective through long familiarity to such extension and such multiplication than Boswell's Life of Johnson. It adds a new world to one's own, it increases one's acquaintance among people who think, it gives intimate companionship with a great and friendly man.

The Life of Johnson is not a book on first acquaintance to be read through from the first page to the end. 'No, Sir, do YOU read books through?' asked Johnson. His way is probably the best one of undertaking this book. Open at random, read here and there, forward and back, wholly according to inclination; follow the practice of Johnson and all good readers, of 'tearing the heart' out of it. In this way you most readily come within the reach of its charm and power. Then, not content with a part, seek the unabridged whole, and grow into the infinite possibilities of it.

But the supreme end of education, we are told, is expert discernment in all things—the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine to the bad and the counterfeit. This is the supreme end of the talk of Socrates, and it is the supreme end of the talk of Johnson. 'My dear friend,' said he, 'clear your mind of cant; . . . don't THINK foolishly.' The effect of long companionship with Boswell's Johnson is just this. As Sir Joshua said, 'it brushes away the rubbish'; it clears the mind of cant; it instills the habit of singling out

the essential thing; it imparts discernment. Thus, through his friendship with Boswell, Johnson will realize his wish, still to be teaching as the years increase.

THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

Had Dr. Johnson written his own life, in conformity with the opinion which he has given, that every man's life may be best written by himself; had he employed in the preservation of his own history, that clearness of narration and elegance of language in which he has embalmed so many eminent persons, the world would probably have had the most perfect example of biography that was ever exhibited. But although he at different times, in a desultory manner, committed to writing many particulars of the progress of his mind and fortunes, he never had persevering diligence enough to form them into a regular composition. Of these memorials a few have been preserved; but the greater part was consigned by him to the flames, a few days before his death.

As I had the honour and happiness of enjoying his friendship for upwards of twenty years; as I had the scheme of writing his life constantly in view; as he was well apprised of this circumstance, and from time to time obligingly satisfied my inquiries, by communicating to me the incidents of his early years; as I acquired a facility in recollecting, and was very assiduous in recording, his conversation, of which the extraordinary vigour and vivacity constituted one of the first features of his character; and as I have spared no pains in obtaining materials concerning him, from every quarter where I could discover that they were to be found, and have been favoured with the most liberal communications by his friends; I flatter myself that few biographers have entered upon such a work as this, with more advantages; independent of literary abilities, in which I am not vain enough to compare myself with some great names who have gone before me in this kind of writing.

Instead of melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person, by which I might have appeared to have more merit in the execution of the work, I have resolved to adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason, in his Memoirs of Gray. Wherever narrative is necessary to explain, connect, and supply, I furnish it to the best of my abilities; but in the chronological series of Johnson's life, which I trace as distinctly as I can, year by year, I produce, wherever it is in my power, his own minutes, letters or conversation, being convinced that this mode is more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him, than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could know him only partially; whereas there is here an accumulation of intelligence from various points, by which his character is more fully understood and illustrated.

Indeed I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to 'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life. Had his other friends been as diligent and ardent as I was, he might have been almost entirely preserved. As it is, I will venture to say that he will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived.

And he will be seen as he really was; for I profess to write, not his panegyrick, which must be all praise, but his Life; which, great and good as he was, must not be supposed to be entirely perfect. To be as he was, is indeed subject of panegyrick enough to any man in this state of being; but in every picture there should be shade as well as light, and when I delineate him without reserve, I do what he himself recommended, both by his precept and his example.

I am fully aware of the objections which may be made to the minuteness on some occasions of my detail of Johnson's conversation, and how happily it is adapted for the petty exercise of ridicule, by men of superficial understanding and ludicrous fancy; but I remain firm and confident in my opinion, that minute particulars are frequently characteristick, and always amusing, when they relate to a distinguished man. I am therefore exceedingly unwilling that any thing, however slight, which my illustrious friend thought it worth his while to express, with any degree of point, should perish.

Of one thing I am certain, that considering how highly the small portion which we have of the table-talk and other anecdotes of our celebrated writers is valued, and how earnestly it is regretted that we have not more, I am justified in preserving rather too many of Johnson's sayings, than too few; especially as from the diversity of dispositions it cannot be known with certainty beforehand, whether what may seem trifling to some, and perhaps to the collector himself, may not be most agreeable to many; and the greater number that an authour can please in any degree, the more pleasure does there arise to a benevolent mind.

Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield, in Staffordshire, on the 18th of September, N. S., 1709; and his initiation into the Christian Church was not delayed; for his baptism is recorded, in the register of St. Mary's parish in that city, to have been performed on the day of his birth. His father is there stiled Gentleman, a circumstance of which an ignorant panegyrist has praised him for not being proud; when the truth is, that the appellation of Gentleman, though now lost in the indiscriminate assumption of Esquire, was commonly taken by those who could not boast of gentility. His father was Michael Johnson, a native of Derbyshire, of obscure extraction, who settled in Lichfield as a bookseller and stationer. His mother was Sarah Ford, descended of an

ancient race of substantial yeomanry in Warwickshire. They were well advanced in years when they married, and never had more than two children, both sons; Samuel, their first born, who lived to be the illustrious character whose various excellence I am to endeavour to record, and Nathanael, who died in his twenty-fifth year.

Mr. Michael Johnson was a man of a large and robust body, and of a strong and active mind; yet, as in the most solid rocks veins of unsound substance are often discovered, there was in him a mixture of that disease, the nature of which eludes the most minute enquiry, though the effects are well known to be a weariness of life, an unconcern about those things which agitate the greater part of mankind, and a general sensation of gloomy wretchedness. From him then his son inherited, with some other qualities, 'a vile melancholy,' which in his too strong expression of any disturbance of the mind, 'made him mad all his life, at least not sober.' Michael was, however, forced by the narrowness of his circumstances to be very diligent in business, not only in his shop, but by occasionally resorting to several towns in the neighbourhood, some of which were at a considerable distance from Lichfield. At that time booksellers' shops in the provincial towns of England were very rare, so that there was not one even in Birmingham, in which town old Mr. Johnson used to open a shop every market-day. He was a pretty good Latin scholar, and a citizen so creditable as to be made one of the magistrates of Lichfield; and, being a man of good sense, and skill in his trade, he acquired a reasonable share of wealth, of which however he afterwards lost the greatest part, by engaging unsuccessfully in a manufacture of parchment. He was a zealous high-church man and royalist, and retained his attachment to the unfortunate house of Stuart, though he reconciled himself, by casuistical arguments of expediency and necessity, to take the oaths imposed by the prevailing power.

Johnson's mother was a woman of distinguished understanding. I asked his old school-fellow, Mr. Hector, surgeon of Birmingham, if she was not vain of her son. He said, 'she had too much good sense to be vain, but she knew her son's value.' Her piety was not inferiour to her understanding; and to her must be ascribed those early impressions of religion upon the mind of her son, from which the world afterwards derived so much benefit. He told me, that he remembered distinctly having had the first notice of Heaven, 'a place to which good people went,' and hell, 'a place to which bad people went,' communicated to him by her, when a little child in bed with her; and that it might be the better fixed in his memory, she sent him to repeat it to Thomas Jackson, their man-servant; he not being in the way, this was not done; but there was no occasion for any artificial aid for its preservation.

There is a traditional story of the infant Hercules of toryism, so curiously characteristick, that I shall not withhold it. It was communicated to me in a letter from Miss Mary Adye, of Lichfield:

'When Dr. Sacheverel was at Lichfield, Johnson was not quite three years old. My grandfather Hammond observed him at the cathedral perched upon his father's shoulders, listening and gaping at the much celebrated preacher. Mr. Hammond asked Mr. Johnson how he could possibly think of bringing such an infant to church, and in the midst of so great a crowd. He answered, because it was impossible to keep him at home; for, young as he was, he believed he had caught the publick spirit and zeal for Sacheverel, and would have staid for ever in the church, satisfied with beholding him.'

Nor can I omit a little instance of that jealous independence of spirit, and impetuosity of temper, which never forsook him. The fact was acknowledged to me by himself, upon the authority of his mother. One day, when

the servant who used to be sent to school to conduct him home, had not come in time, he set out by himself, though he was then so near-sighted, that he was obliged to stoop down on his hands and knees to take a view of the kennel before he ventured to step over it. His school-mistress, afraid that he might miss his way, or fall into the kennel, or be run over by a cart, followed him at some distance. He happened to turn about and perceive her. Feeling her careful attention as an insult to his manliness, he ran back to her in a rage, and beat her, as well as his strength would permit.

Of the power of his memory, for which he was all his life eminent to a degree almost incredible, the following early instance was told me in his presence at Lichfield, in 1776, by his step-daughter, Mrs. Lucy Porter, as related to her by his mother. When he was a child in petticoats, and had learnt to read, Mrs. Johnson one morning put the common prayer-book into his hands, pointed to the collect for the day, and said, 'Sam, you must get this by heart.' She went up stairs, leaving him to study it: But by the time she had reached the second floor, she heard him following her. 'What's the matter?' said she. 'I can say it,' he replied; and repeated it distinctly, though he could not have read it more than twice.

But there has been another story of his infant precocity generally circulated, and generally believed, the truth of which I am to refute upon his own authority. It is told, that, when a child of three years old, he chanced to tread upon a duckling, the eleventh of a brood, and killed it; upon which, it is said, he dictated to his mother the following epitaph:

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'Here lies good master duck,
      Whom Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd, it had been GOOD LUCK,
      For then we'd had an ODD ONE.'
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There is surely internal evidence that this little composition combines in it, what no child of three years old

could produce, without an extension of its faculties by immediate inspiration; yet Mrs. Lucy Porter, Dr. Johnson's stepdaughter, positively maintained to me, in his presence, that there could be no doubt of the truth of this anecdote, for she had heard it from his mother. So difficult is it to obtain an authentick relation of facts, and such authority may there be for errour; for he assured me, that his father made the verses, and wished to pass them for his child's. He added, 'my father was a foolish old man; that is to say, foolish in talking of his children.'

Young Johnson had the misfortune to be much afflicted with the scrophula, or king's evil, which disfigured a countenance naturally well formed, and hurt his visual nerves so much, that he did not see at all with one of his eyes, though its appearance was little different from that of the other. There is amongst his prayers, one inscribed 'When, my EYE was restored to its use,' which ascertains a defect that many of his friends knew he had, though I never perceived it. I supposed him to be only near-sighted; and indeed I must observe, that in no other respect could I discern any defect in his vision; on the contrary, the force of his attention and perceptive quickness made him see and distinguish all manner of objects, whether of nature or of art, with a nicety that is rarely to be found. When he and I were travelling in the Highlands of Scotland, and I pointed out to him a mountain which I observed resembled a cone, he corrected my inaccuracy, by shewing me, that it was indeed pointed at the top, but that one side of it was larger than the other. And the ladies with whom he was acquainted agree, that no man was more nicely and minutely critical in the elegance of female dress. When I found that he saw the romantick beauties of Islam, in Derbyshire, much better than I did, I told him that he resembled an able performer upon a bad instrument. It has been said, that he contracted this grievous malady from his nurse. His mother yielding to

the superstitious notion, which, it is wonderful to think, prevailed so long in this country, as to the virtue of the regal touch; a notion, which our kings encouraged, and to which a man of such inquiry and such judgement as Carte could give credit; carried him to London, where he was actually touched by Queen Anne. Mrs. Johnson indeed, as Mr. Hector informed me, acted by the advice of the celebrated Sir John Floyer, then a physician in Lichfield. Johnson used to talk of this very frankly; and Mrs. Piozzi has preserved his very picturesque description of the scene, as it remained upon his fancy. Being asked if he could remember Queen Anne, 'He had (he said) a confused, but somehow a sort of solemn recollection of a lady in diamonds, and a long black hood.' This touch, however, was without any effect. I ventured to say to him, in allusion to the political principles in which he was educated, and of which he ever retained some odour, that 'his mother had not carried him far enough; she should have taken him to ROME.'

He was first taught to read English by Dame Oliver, a widow, who kept a school for young children in Lichfield. He told me she could read the black letter, and asked him to borrow for her, from his father, a bible in that character. When he was going to Oxford, she came to take leave of him, brought him, in the simplicity of her kindness, a present of gingerbread, and said, he was the best scholar she ever had. He delighted in mentioning this early compliment: adding, with a smile, that 'this was as high a proof of his merit as he could conceive.' His next instructor in English was a master, whom, when he spoke of him to me, he familiarly called Tom Brown, who, said he, 'published a spelling-book, and dedicated it to the UNIVERSE; but, I fear, no copy of it can now be had.'

He began to learn Latin with Mr. Hawkins, usher, or under-master of Lichfield school, 'a man (said he) very skilful in his little way.' With him he continued two years, and then rose

to be under the care of Mr. Hunter, the headmaster, who, according to his account, 'was very severe, and wrong-headedly severe. He used (said he) to beat us unmercifully; and he did not distinguish between ignorance and negligence; for he would beat a boy equally for not knowing a thing, as for neglecting to know it. He would ask a boy a question; and if he did not answer it, he would beat him, without considering whether he had an opportunity of knowing how to answer it. For instance, he would call up a boy and ask him Latin for a candlestick, which the boy could not expect to be asked. Now, Sir, if a boy could answer every question, there would be no need of a master to teach him.'

It is, however, but justice to the memory of Mr. Hunter to mention, that though he might err in being too severe, the school of Lichfield was very respectable in his time. The late Dr. Taylor, Prebendary of Westminster, who was educated under him, told me, that 'he was an excellent master, and that his ushers were most of them men of eminence; that Holbrook, one of the most ingenious men, best scholars, and best preachers of his age, was usher during the greatest part of the time that Johnson was at school. Then came Hague, of whom as much might be said, with the addition that he was an elegant poet. Hague was succeeded by Green, afterwards Bishop of Lincoln, whose character in the learned world is well known.'

Indeed Johnson was very sensible how much he owed to Mr. Hunter. Mr. Langton one day asked him how he had acquired so accurate a knowledge of Latin, in which, I believe, he was exceeded by no man of his time; he said, 'My master whipt me very well. Without that, Sir, I should have done nothing.' He told Mr. Langton, that while Hunter was flogging his boys unmercifully, he used to say, 'And this I do to save you from the gallows.' Johnson, upon all occasions, expressed his approbation of enforcing

instruction by means of the rod. 'I would rather (said he) have the rod to be the general terrour to all, to make them learn, than tell a child, if you do thus, or thus, you will be more esteemed than your brothers or sisters. The rod produces an effect which terminates in itself. A child is afraid of being whipped, and gets his task, and there's an end on't; whereas, by exciting emulation and comparisons of superiority, you lay the foundation of lasting mischief; you make brothers and sisters hate each other.'

That superiority over his fellows, which he maintained with so much dignity in his march through life, was not assumed from vanity and ostentation, but was the natural and constant effect of those extraordinary powers of mind, of which he could not but be conscious by comparison; the intellectual difference, which in other cases of comparison of characters, is often a matter of undecided contest, being as clear in his case as the superiority of stature in some men above others. Johnson did not strut or stand on tiptoe; He only did not stoop. From his earliest years his superiority was perceived and acknowledged. He was from the beginning [Greek text omitted], a king of men. His school-fellow, Mr. Hector, has obligingly furnished me with many particulars of his boyish days: and assured me that he never knew him corrected at school, but for talking and diverting other boys from their business. He seemed to learn by intuition; for though indolence and procrastination were inherent in his constitution, whenever he made an exertion he did more than any one else. His favourites used to receive very liberal assistance from him; and such was the submission and deference with which he was treated, such the desire to obtain his regard, that three of the boys, of whom Mr. Hector was sometimes one, used to come in the morning as his humble attendants, and carry him to school. One in the middle stooped, while he sat upon his back, and one on each side supported him; and thus he was borne

triumphant. Such a proof of the early predominance of intellectual vigour is very remarkable, and does honour to human nature. Talking to me once himself of his being much distinguished at school, he told me, 'they never thought to raise me by comparing me to any one; they never said, Johnson is as good a scholar as such a one; but such a one is as good a scholar as Johnson; and this was said but of one, but of Lowe; and I do not think he was as good a scholar.'

He discovered a great ambition to excel, which roused him to counteract his indolence. He was uncommonly inquisitive; and his memory was so tenacious, that he never forgot any thing that he either heard or read. Mr. Hector remembers having recited to him eighteen verses, which, after a little pause, he repeated verbatim, varying only one epithet, by which he improved the line.

He never joined with the other boys in their ordinary diversions: his only amusement was in winter, when he took a pleasure in being drawn upon the ice by a boy barefooted, who pulled him along by a garter fixed round him; no very easy operation, as his size was remarkably large. His defective sight, indeed, prevented him from enjoying the common sports; and he once pleasantly remarked to me, 'how wonderfully well he had contrived to be idle without them.' Mr. Hector relates, that 'he could not oblige him more than by sauntering away the hours of vacation in the fields, during which he was more engaged in talking to himself than to his companion.'

Dr. Percy, the Bishop of Dromore, who was long intimately acquainted with him, and has preserved a few anecdotes concerning him, regretting that he was not a more diligent collector, informs me, that 'when a boy he was immoderately fond of reading romances of chivalry, and he retained his fondness for them through life; so that (adds his Lordship) spending part of a summer at my parsonage

house in the country, he chose for his regular reading the old Spanish romance of Felixmarte of Hircania, in folio, which he read quite through. Yet I have heard him attribute to these extravagant fictions that unsettled turn of mind which prevented his ever fixing in any profession.'

1725: AETAT. 16.—After having resided for some time at the house of his uncle, Cornelius Ford, Johnson was, at the age of fifteen, removed to the school of Stourbridge, in Worcestershire, of which Mr. Wentworth was then master. This step was taken by the advice of his cousin, the Reverend Mr. Ford, a man in whom both talents and good dispositions were disgraced by licentiousness, but who was a very able judge of what was right. At this school he did not receive so much benefit as was expected. It has been said, that he acted in the capacity of an assistant to Mr. Wentworth, in teaching the younger boys. 'Mr. Wentworth (he told me) was a very able man, but an idle man, and to me very severe; but I cannot blame him much. I was then a big boy; he saw I did not reverence him; and that he should get no honour by me. I had brought enough with me, to carry me through; and all I should get at his school would be ascribed to my own labour, or to my former master. Yet he taught me a great deal.'

He thus discriminated, to Dr. Percy, Bishop of Dromore, his progress at his two grammar-schools. 'At one, I learnt much in the school, but little from the master; in the other, I learnt much from the master, but little in the school.'

He remained at Stourbridge little more than a year, and then returned home, where he may be said to have loitered, for two years, in a state very unworthy his uncommon abilities. He had already given several proofs of his poetical genius, both in his school-exercises and in other occasional compositions.

He had no settled plan of life, nor looked forward at all, but merely lived from day to day. Yet he read a great deal in

a desultory manner, without any scheme of study, as chance threw books in his way, and inclination directed him through them. He used to mention one curious instance of his casual reading, when but a boy. Having imagined that his brother had hid some apples behind a large folio upon an upper shelf in his father's shop, he climbed up to search for them. There were no apples; but the large folio proved to be Petrarch, whom he had seen mentioned in some preface, as one of the restorers of learning. His curiosity having been thus excited, he sat down with avidity, and read a great part of the book. What he read during these two years he told me, was not works of mere amusement, 'not voyages and travels, but all literature, Sir, all ancient writers, all manly: though but little Greek, only some of Anacreon and Hesiod; but in this irregular manner (added he) I had looked into a great many books, which were not commonly known at the Universities, where they seldom read any books but what are put into their hands by their tutors; so that when I came to Oxford, Dr. Adams, now master of Pembroke College, told me I was the best qualified for the University that he had ever known come there.'

That a man in Mr. Michael Johnson's circumstances should think of sending his son to the expensive University of Oxford, at his own charge, seems very improbable. The subject was too delicate to question Johnson upon. But I have been assured by Dr. Taylor that the scheme never would have taken place had not a gentleman of Shropshire, one of his schoolfellows, spontaneously undertaken to support him at Oxford, in the character of his companion; though, in fact, he never received any assistance whatever from that gentleman.

He, however, went to Oxford, and was entered a Commoner of Pembroke College on the 31st of October, 1728, being then in his nineteenth year.

The Reverend Dr. Adams, who afterwards presided over Pembroke College with universal esteem, told me he was present, and gave me some account of what passed on the night of Johnson's arrival at Oxford. On that evening, his father, who had anxiously accompanied him, found means to have him introduced to Mr. Jorden, who was to be his tutor.

His father seemed very full of the merits of his son, and told the company he was a good scholar, and a poet, and wrote Latin verses. His figure and manner appeared strange to them; but he behaved modestly, and sat silent, till upon something which occurred in the course of conversation, he suddenly struck in and quoted Macrobius; and thus he gave the first impression of that more extensive reading in which he had indulged himself.

His tutor, Mr. Jorden, fellow of Pembroke, was not, it seems, a man of such abilities as we should conceive requisite for the instructor of Samuel Johnson, who gave me the following account of him. 'He was a very worthy man, but a heavy man, and I did not profit much by his instructions. Indeed, I did not attend him much. The first day after I came to college I waited upon him, and then staid away four. On the sixth, Mr. Jorden asked me why I had not attended. I answered I had been sliding in Christ-Church meadow. And this I said with as much nonchalance as I am now talking to you. I had no notion that I was wrong or irreverent to my tutor. BOSWELL: 'That, Sir, was great fortitude of mind.' JOHNSON: 'No, Sir; stark insensibility.'

He had a love and respect for Jorden, not for his literature, but for his worth. 'Whenever (said he) a young man becomes Jorden's pupil, he becomes his son.'

Having given a specimen of his poetical powers, he was asked by Mr. Jorden, to translate Pope's Messiah into Latin verse, as a Christmas exercise. He performed it with uncommon rapidity, and in so masterly a manner, that he