CHAPTER 9

Annotated Immortality

Lonsdale's Johnson

I have focused to this point on the thought and artistry shaping Johnson's practice, methods and values as a literary critic. Judgments in the periodical essays, the Shakespeare criticism and the *Lives* often seem to cohere with judgments made elsewhere; they reinforce and explain them or suggest principles pervasive throughout the critical *oeuvre*. Other judgments do not, but register the diversity of Johnson's values and the tensions between rival criteria. In this chapter I consider two recent editions of the entire text of the last extended example of Johnson's criticism. My immediate purpose is to prepare the ground for a fairer appraisal of the *Lives* and to explain the connections between the work that Johnson produced and the editorial attention he now receives. The new editions stand as milestones in Johnson's modern reception history; they attend to the minutest textual details and provide a record of scholarly deliberation.[1] It is not merely the vast scale of the enterprise that makes editing the fifty-two "Lives" so demanding a task, a labor that cannot be reduced to the routines of period specialists: Herculean and Johnsonian drudgery are involved. But large issues in criticism, critical history, literature and biographical form are also at stake.

Roger Lonsdale's edition of *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (2006) benefits from Lonsdale's long experience as an editor and anthologist of eighteenth-century poets; the three volumes of the Yale edition published four years later find their focus in attention to the Johnsonian text and delve into the intricacies of its evolution. Both, however, display the contours of Johnson's taste in ways that selections and excerpts cannot. "[S]carcely any man ever wrote so much and praised so few," says Johnson

[1] David F. Venturo writes of the publication of the Yale edition of the *Lives* as marking "a high point of contemporary scholarly accomplishment." "Organizing a Life and the 'Lives': Samuel Johnson and the Yale Edition of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," *AJ*, vol. 24 (2021), pp. 175–90, at 175.

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of the poet John Milton (Works XXI, p. 112), and the comment recalls that, overall in the *Lives*, there are correspondingly few expressions of unrestrained praise for individual poems. The English poets seem to have impressed on their greatest critic an experience marked less by pleasure than by pained disapproval or regulated derision. Johnson's criticism is for this reason probably more widely known for its stress on the downsides of poetical tradition and for pungent observations on its valleys and troughs – the extravagance and coldness of the Metaphysical poets, the tasteless literary tears shed for a youthful friend that mar Milton's *Lycidas*, the derivative philosophizing in verse of Pope's *Essay on Man*, the empty rantings in Dryden's plays, the stilted grandeur of almost all eighteenth-century tragic drama or the logical impiety of devotional poetry. Some poets, Hammond being a case in point, are treated with withering satire from which it is hard to believe any reputation could be salvaged. So too, on account of his tuneless croonings, the poems of Lord Halifax. Johnson may be too little appreciated as a critic for how radically he cleared the ground by sifting 150years of English poetry and the extent to which he relieved his poetical present of its second-rate past. Some of this judgment-making must leave readers to wonder why someone who found so much to dislike should spend life so passionately attentive to poetry.

But in a work as capacious and judicious (if controversial) as the *Lives* there remains a Johnson whose criticism brought the poet within him, and his love of poetry, exuberantly to the fore. Thus Abraham Cowley, for all his faults and stylistic quirks, was redeemed for poetical tradition by Johnson, who draws particular attention to the "gaiety of fancy" and "dance of words" in Cowley's *The Chronicle*, and delights in the airy lightness of his *Anacreontiques* (*Lives*, vol. I, pp. 215, 216–17). Such comments display an unusual regard for comedy, replicated in the tilt of Johnson's Shakespeare appreciation. The tone of Johnson's authorial personality may evoke the famously deliberative critic, but he is frequently light and satirical on his own account, quietly witty, dry or laconic. "Surely," writes Johnson on Hammond, having quoted some colorful lines in the pastoral mode on love unrequited, "no blame can fall upon the nymph who rejected a swain of so little meaning" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 117). We see how Johnson can turn literary criticism into a comic and satirical form now lost to its more intellectually selfconscious modes. Johnson is able to generate humor at the expense of, and sometimes in sympathy with, his poets.[2]

[2] For a study of this aspect of Johnson's criticism see Philip Smallwood, "Voice and Laughter in Johnson's Criticism," in the special feature "Critical Voices: Humor, Irony and Passion in the

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Some tastes may be quite personal and surprise anyone wanting an overarching critical system or encompassing theory from Johnson. He discriminates Blackmore's *Creation* as a poem in which the poet excelled himself, and the soft spot he had for Blackmore leads Johnson to recommend the poem be reprinted in the new collection (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 78).[3] Elsewhere, and unexpectedly to anyone thinking Johnson favored ancient over more recent genius, we find him placing Milton's *Paradise Lost* second only to the *Iliad* of Homer. He marks out Dryden's second ode on St. Cecilia's Day, *Alexander's Feast*, as a moment of unusual excellence, and he honors Dryden's whole achievement as a profound innovation in poetical diction, indeed its inauguration for poetry. From such a major turn in the history of poetry (see Chapter 4) there is no returning, and Johnson repeatedly praises the makers of original advances in metrical form, subject and style, however minor, relatively speaking, the poet who introduced them.

The ambitious new editions and their prestigious publishers bring Johnson's judgments together, making contradictions, where we find them, easier to resolve. But some differences of taste, and the criteria used to underpin them, must be left to stand as the opinions of a contradictory, contradicting human being. In the process of unrolling the vast catalogue of poetical judgments in the *Lives* the modern editors discover how different Johnson's critical tastes can be from our own. Academic courses and selected editions have tended to steer readers of Pope away from the extensive Homer translations in favor of the satires. But we see that Johnson's evaluation of the satires of Pope, if dutiful, is hardly enthusiastic. His respect for the English *Iliad* on the other hand suggests that Pope's Homeric translations are central to his achievement: "Had he given the world only his version, the name of poet must have been allowed to him," writes Johnson: "if the writer of the *Iliad* were to class his successors, he would assign a very high place to his translator, without requiring any other evidence of Genius" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 80). Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, often remarked by critical historians for its "neoclassical" commonplaces and trim couplets, Johnson regards as a work of excelling power, the more

Literary Critics of the Long Eighteenth Century," ed. Philip Smallwood, *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, vol. 15 (2008), pp. 293–314.

[3] For the critical value of the "Life of Blackmore" see James Engell, "Johnson on Blackmore, Pope, Shakespeare – and Johnson," in "Johnson after Three Centuries: New Light on Texts and Contexts," ed. Thomas A. Horrocks and Howard D. Weinbrot, special issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. 20, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2009), pp. 51–61.

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amazing in coming from a youthful prodigy merely twenty years old.[4] (Johnson was elsewhere impressed by the early flowerings of genius, as his comments on the young William Congreve suggest.) But to cap all this is the exhilarating general praise of the genius of Pope and a mind "active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 62). The way in which judgment, appreciation, analysis, discrimination, and taste coalesce with surpassing fineness in the *Lives* is illustrated by the detailed comparison of Pope with Dryden (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 64–66).

Both major editions suggest the emotional nature of Johnson's critical and biographical efforts at this late stage of life and give us a clearer sense of the moral and psychological logic of the *Lives*. We learn from Lonsdale that Johnson did not write the *Lives of the Poets* in the order in which individual "Lives" are printed, nor always all of any one "Life" in a single effort of composition. His overall progress seems to have been somewhat fitful. Different "Lives" engaged Johnson's critical and human attention to different extents. In the earlier "Lives" we have seen how poetry improved and became more polished; in the later ones we gather how the ambition of elegance degenerates into clumsy or sentimental excess. There are exceptions to the general tendency in both phases, but in a world of mind, memory and immediate experience, whose poets have finite lives while part of the whole extended life of poetry, we trace once again the narrative arc of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.[5]

Form and meaning, dress and substance, are closely connected in such editorial projects. Lonsdale's large-scale edition (of well over 2,000 pages) has on first inspection the effect of embedding Johnson more deeply within conventional contexts of eighteenth-century literary and Johnsonian studies. These it ably responds to, with select bibliographies of important secondary sources printed at the start of each collection of notes; but it does so in ways that pay due respect to the fascinating critical enigma that Johnson continues to represent. The implication is that Johnson's writing characteristically rewards this attention. Lonsdale returns to basics on matters of textual accuracy, information, and

[4] See the Preface to *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. I, ed. Julian Ferraro and Paul Baines (London and New York: Routledge, 2019). The editors characterize the *Essay* as "a substantial statement of ideas" (p. xix). This is not wrong, but plays too incautiously to the reputation of the poem as a model of intellectual wit as against poetical force.

[5] For the *Lives* as an exploration of "the effect of time on human endeavor" see Greg Clingham, "Life and Literature in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 161–91.

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authority, and selects as his copytext the 1783 four-volume *Lives*. This he collates with variant printings, manuscript and proof revisions which he has recorded in sections devoted to "Textual Notes." His commentary substantially replaces the textual annotations of George Birkbeck Hill, editor of the three-volume *Lives* that appeared in 1905.[6] In place of Hill's somewhat *détendu* Victorian or Edwardian scholarly demeanor, Lonsdale has brought a sense of complexity, depth and range. One of the most muted but important observations is the final section of Lonsdale's Introduction on Hill's choice of text for the *Lives*. If Hill's edition is indeed based on an unidentified nineteenth-century text (a possibility conveyed to Lonsdale by the bibliographer J. D. Fleeman), the revelation would give serious pause to every scholar of Johnson who has quoted with scrupulous care from Hill over the years. Not that Lonsdale commits himself to saying which nineteenth-century edition this is, or whether Fleeman had in mind an edition of the *Lives*, or of the *Works of Johnson* where the *Lives* are reprinted.[7]

Lonsdale's analysis points up the patchwork quality of the *Lives.* Among the many resonant and acute paragraphs, considered judgments, extended comparisons, embedded digressions and so forth, he brings out how a sense of writing in or from the fragmented margins combines the material needed to embrace the poetical past. To a greater degree than we might think admissible for a critic of Johnson's stature, its textual fabric appears stitched together from offcuts and shreds and is thereby a work that ought to find acceptance for itself, and its subject, in any post-postmodernist climate. The story that Lonsdale tells of Johnson at work on the *Lives* resembles the compositional narrative of other great efforts of literary creation – a combination of enthusiasm and boredom, flurries of intense productivity and lapses into spiritual exhaustion, a sense of purpose at some times and of futility at others, the integration of a working life with a life that is the common experience of writers. All this Lonsdale brings out in precise and sometimes moving detail.

[6] *The Lives of the English Poets by Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).

[7] Lonsdale notes that Fleeman lists some seventy-three or so separate printings between 1800 and 1900 – including overseas editions and those within the *Works*: J. D. Fleeman (ed.), *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating His Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). Fleeman's verdict on the unreliability of the "Oxford Edition" of 1825 is recalled by Robert DeMaria, Jr., in his essay on "Editions" in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jack Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 83–99, to the effect that "the editors of Johnson's works . . . have got further away from what Johnson himself wrote and submitted for publication" (p. 83).

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Johnson's pragmatism is made evident; one sees how sources of widely varying orders of authority are yoked together and how the joins between components expose the process of composition. In allowing us, as it were, behind the scenes in the making of the *Lives*, Lonsdale's edition registers the drawn-together nature of Johnson's enterprise. We see, for example, a "Life of Savage," originally published in 1744, recycled into the *Lives*, with some changes, as if made to be there; an earlier "Criticism upon Pope's Epitaphs" appended, with modifications, to the "Life of Pope"; a transcript of Dryden's "Heads of an Answer" to Thomas Rymer's criticism attached to the "Life of Dryden"; the adjoining of a long letter from Pope to Broome praising Elijah Fenton on the occasion of Fenton's death; the biographical section of a "Life of Young" included, as it stands, in a letter from Sir Herbert Croft (*Lives*, vol. III, pp. 120–88; vol. IV, pp. 81–93; vol. II, pp. 157–63; vol. III, pp. 93–94; vol. IV, pp. 132–66). As an argument against any late-life tendency on Johnson's part to rest on his critical laurels, the changes Lonsdale charts through the successive early editions of the *Lives* confer a sense of instability, or fluidity, on his text.

The sources for the *Lives* in Lonsdale's edition convey how far Johnson's factual information is often piecemeal and personal. In an allusion to Sacheverell's trial at the end of the "Life of Sprat," for example, Johnson reveals that "[t]his I was told in my youth by my father, an old man, who had been no careless observer of the passages of those times" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 188). There is much, admitted as such by Johnson, that cannot be known or concluded, or there has not been time or life to discover, or which he will not trouble to investigate, even when his memory falters. Johnson begins the critical section of his "Life of Congreve" with unembarrassed candor: "Of his plays I cannot speak distinctly; for since I inspected them many years have passed" (*Lives*, vol. III, pp. 70–71). The *Lives*, then, might give the appearance being of the most highly *un*integrated, casual and provisional of the great literary-critical works in English.

The extensive notes to Lonsdale's edition evidence many parallels and allusions, but it is in the nature of an edition, even one as capacious as the Oxford, that the notes do not have vast scope for analyzing the *quality* of Johnson's contact with his sources and analogues. A passing remark on Johnson's judgment of Thomson's poems, where Lonsdale finds Johnson in conflict with his underlying self, seems open to question:

> He thinks in a peculiar train, and he thinks always as a man of genius; he looks round on Nature and on Life, with the eye which Nature bestows

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> only on a poet; the eye that distinguishes, in every thing presented to its view, whatever there is on which imagination can delight to be detained, and with a mind that at once comprehends the vast, and attends to the minute. The reader of the *Seasons* wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses. (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 103)

Lonsdale accords this evaluation to a generosity Johnson extended to Thomson *despite* the negative assumptions he is supposed to have held about blank versification: "SJ stifles one of his deepest convictions about the importance of rhyme" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 375n.). In the commentary on the "Life of Young" Lonsdale refers to the same passage as a "concessionary statement" that Johnson approved (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 450), but the open-heartedness of the judgment to which this conclusion applies might as well suggest that Johnson held no such "deepest convictions," and that to a greater extent than Lonsdale allows, Johnson judged Thomson without need to concede or stifle. The note illustrates how measuring a judgment made by Johnson in one place against a judgment in another may fall prey to overinterpretation. Johnson wrote against blank verse but enjoyed Thomson. Both things are true.

Perhaps most of what ultimately matters in Johnson's *Lives* can be appreciated without notes. This might be obvious to anyone who learned to value the two-volume "World's Classics" *Lives*, now long out of print, and has encountered unaided, and for very little money, the large questions of life and literature at stake in Johnson.[8] Such editions work by shedding the historical baggage of Johnson's critical past and the logic of its necessity. Other imaginable editions might have notes that did more to capture the transhistorical reach of Johnson's intellectual, emotional and critical world. But when such imaginings are given their due, anyone encountering Lonsdale's edition is bound to wish that the same energy, scholarly dedication and editorial intelligence could be brought to any number of other literary or critical works more skimpily treated in major editions.

Definitively Johnson? The Yale *Lives of the Poets*

A great deal of the Yale edition's self-valuation is invested in the attention accorded to a "sound, readable text" (Works XXI, p. xi). This the edition

[8] *Lives of the English Poets by Samuel Johnson*, with an Introduction by Arthur Waugh, 2 vols., World's Classics (1906; London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

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supports with fresh opportunities for understanding the method of Johnson's composition, and to this end the editors put on record a sequence of minute or substantive variants dated before and after the point at which the text first entered the public domain. Here the conservationist roles of Boswell, to whom Johnson made a present of "copy," now partly surviving, and a production management team that included George Steevens and the indefatigable John Nichols, are especially highlighted. Of the three official editions that appeared during Johnson's lifetime (1779–81, 1781, 1783), the Yale editors choose as their copytext "the first edition, with the order of the poets adjusted to that of the second and third editions" (that is, conforming to the date order of their deaths). The text of the first edition is then modified by "occasional corrections and adjustments" made in the second edition and carried over into the third, and by the elimination from the first edition of some poems by West, Gray and Tickell. These are omitted from the collection but appended by Johnson. In addition to these changes, "Johnson's substantive revisions for the third edition" (Works XXI, pp. xli–xlii) are also incorporated.

In weaving such an original and intricate fabric, with its catalogue of provisos and tacit and recorded amendments, a policy announced in the Introduction and supplemented in the notes and headnotes, we are given a *Lives* that Johnson did not see and could not – as it stands – have overseen. The "obvious basis for the text," in the opinion of Lonsdale, was the third edition of February 1783. This Johnson was paid £100 to revise and did therefore see (even if it could be proved that he did not authorize detailed compositorial changes [*Lives*, vol. I, p. 183]).[9] Without an extensively explicit rationale – the "why?" of the editorial procedure – the Yale editors' choice of an earlier copytext suggests how important is the first meeting of text and world. Certainly, the earliest of the printed editions does most to invite cross-references between the published form of the *Lives*, the manuscript, proofs and the corrected proofs (where any exist). But the claim made by the dustjacket to the volumes – that they also provide a "definitive text reflecting Johnson's final wishes for its wording" – appears to shift the emphasis back to the corrected edition of 1783. How these "final wishes" are determined poses an interesting editorial challenge for the Yale, of which one consequence is that possible compositors' amendments (punctuation changes from the second to the third edition or printers'

[9] When revising for the third edition Johnson annotated a copy of the first volume of 1781. This annotated material is extant in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library and has been drawn on by the Yale editors.

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misreadings of Johnson's difficult hand) are not incorporated into the copytext even when Johnson accepted them tacitly. This scrupulosity is reflected in remarks that appear passim in the body of the edition – for example in the headnote to the "Life of Otway." The note has the ring of one long immersed in Johnsonian prose, and it suggests how difficult it may sometimes be to know whether improvements that Johnson made to the proof were subsequently overlooked by the printer or whether genuinely authorized amendments went unrecorded in the unbound sheets: "Although it could be argued that some of Johnson's changes [in the proofs to this "Life"] are improvements over the final version," writes John Middendorf, "I have, perhaps too cautiously, not admitted them into the text, for it cannot be determined when they were made" (Works XXI, p. 253).

The Yale edition addresses in its own way, then, the difficult task that had confronted Lonsdale. The material prefatory to the Yale volumes contains "A Note from the General Editor," Robert DeMaria, Jr., who describes the extended gestation period of the project,[10] summarizing the few things he thought necessary to change, and determining not to take advantage "of very recent work on the *Lives* which John [Middendorf] did not live to consider" (Works XXI, p. xvii). Middendorf's own Preface provides a personal take on the project and a record of assistance received, while his Introduction, though relatively short, contains some respectable, if unremarkable, encapsulations of the critical value of the *Lives*: "It is for their psychological, moral, and critical penetration that the *Lives* are now chiefly admired, outstanding testimony to Johnson as a critic who viewed literature in relation to life and, in turn, life as the essence of poetic history" (Works XXI, p. xxxvi). Not new, perhaps, but certainly true, and the edition offers a more nuanced and critically astute introduction than, say, the companion Yale edition of another great series of critical essays, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Sherbo and published in 1968 in two volumes (Works VII and VIII) with an unambitious essay by Bertrand Bronson.

The Yale text collates thirteen editions, and the textual notes make available the detailed variants of the "Lives" in manuscript, in proof, in corrected proof (where available) and in the forms printed during

[10] Robert DeMaria, Jr. has described the trials and tribulations attendant on the making of the edition in "Careful and Careless," *TLS* (March 6, 2015), pp. 14–15. He points out that it took Johnson less time to write the Works than it took Yale to edit them. DeMaria gives a fuller account of the Yale project, and a comparison with Lonsdale's edition, in "Editions," chapter 5 of *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Johnson*.

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Johnson's lifetime: The proofs of thirty-odd "Lives" have survived, though only two manuscripts are extant – of "Pope" and of "Rowe." Drawing on the aforementioned scholarly work of Harriet Kirkley,[11] the edition transcribes Johnson's manuscript notes for a "Life of Pope" (by Frederick W. Hilles), and the list of findings from the editors' record of capitalization and spelling variants is so long that it has had to be lodged separately in the library of Columbia University. This painstaking attention means that we are now equipped to see what passages or phrases Johnson worked on, what he worried over and what he left to others to approve, repunctuate or otherwise put right. From Johnson's approach to composition one can infer an aspect of the personality he brought to composition: that he is both more casual and more cautious than we had previously thought.

The fact of Alexander Pope's central poetic importance, that his was the last composed of the "Lives," and that we have in sequence manuscript, corrected manuscript, proofs, corrected proofs and revised proofs of the "Life," means that this text above others offers a test case for the Yale editorial protocols. The textual annotation of this "Life" is especially intricate and prolific. Referring to a corrected sentence in manuscript of heavy Johnsonian irony concerning Pope's *Essay on Man*, and perhaps with a smile at his own dogged tracking of complexity, the editor notes that "Sometime between MS and proof [Johnson] apparently had had second thoughts about his second thought" (Works XXIII, p. 1219, n. 2). Obvious errors and misreadings aside, we see how fine, or how very fine, the changes for the better (where they are better) can be. Commencing his comparison of Dryden and Pope, for example, Johnson first wrote in the manuscript that "Integrity of understanding and justness of discernment were not allotted in a less proportion to Dryden than to Pope" (Works XXIII, p. 1187), but corrected "justness of discernment" to "nicety of discernment" and so achieved both a stylistic grace and a more accurate comparison.[12] As the textual notes reveal, Johnson's famous contrastive judgment that "Dryden knew more of man in his general nature, and Pope in his local manners" (Works XXIII, p. 1189) was refined in printed form from the twice-corrected state of a manuscript version which began by opposing temporal as distinct from spatial terms: "local manners" was once "present manners." There is a cumulative effect to such changes, and their

[11] Harriet Kirkley, *A Biographer at Work: Samuel Johnson's Notes for the "Life of Pope"* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002).

[12] I owe to a conversation with Tom Mason the suggestion that because it would be natural to think "nicety" more typical of Pope's "discernment" than Dryden's, Johnson's substitution is sufficiently counterintuitive to be more than a matter of style.

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frequency suggests Johnson's attentiveness to details of expression as well as factual accuracy and conceptual form; but the alterations are often exceedingly small, and although it is good to have them somewhere recorded, little stylistic or substantive difference is sometimes made.

The Yale decision to adapt the first edition of the *Lives* by reference to changes made in the second and third is consistent with the incorporation of Johnson's "final wishes," but means some material is deleted. Given Johnson's commendation of Blackmore, one might, for example, prefer that the song of Mopas from Blackmore's *Prince Arthur*, dropped in editions during Johnson's lifetime after the first, where he specified its inclusion, had been retained in a note. Self-imposed rules are in any case bendable where light can be shed. The edition helpfully re-attaches Granville's "Essay on unnatural flights in poetry" (Works XXII, pp. 816–22), abandoned after the first edition, to the end of the "Life of Granville" (Lord Lansdowne). The text we read in the Yale is avowedly, then, a latter-day realization of the editors' making; it exists at the confluence of minute changes of varying authority. Some of these changes are admitted into the copytext while others are excluded, according to judgments made case by case and interpretations of intent or estimates of timing, some inevitably better than others. One big unshiftable fact deserves, however, more weight if the aim is to reconcile "Johnson's final wishes" with a first edition: that Johnson published a revised third edition of the *Lives of the Poets* before he died. Individual editors make sensible decisions about detailed changes to the copytext reading, and from time to time they warrant, and get, a clear justification in the notes. Such moments subtract from the appearance of editors resolving difficulties of their own making.

Though very few pages of the Yale have no notes, the light touch of the annotation is coherent with the textual style of the earlier volumes. (Lonsdale, in taking a different approach, has no equivalent obligation to the house style of a Works of Johnson.) The Yale, seeking elegance as part of the design, operates within limits of economy that some will prefer, and while too parsimonious annotation can suggest a text less richly allusive than it actually is, there are efficiency gains, and some "Lives" justifiably attract more attention than others.

Doubtless the wish to be rigorously selective in the notes has been hard to reconcile with the wide-ranging audience envisaged, and while the Introduction refers to "informed literate readers" and to "the newcomer to Johnson" (Works XXI, p. xi), the space given to the notes is not always used to best advantage. A note on Dryden's reluctance in conversation

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seems superfluous when the editors remind us that "When roused, SJ was a formidable talker" (Works XXI, p. 425) – as if anyone might not know this and when general readers have often encountered Johnson through his conversations in Boswell. Notes at the foot of the page are more firmly under the condition of necessity than the expansive post-textual commentary of Lonsdale. But some Yale notes suggest a rather curt, no-nonsense, editorial demeanor that thwarts rather than invites further analysis. In the "Life of Dryden," for example, Johnson reflects on the "degradation of genius" that diminishes the great mind behind many of Dryden's plays (Works XXI, p. 426). The editor notes: "SJ's view was unequivocal: 'It is always a writer's duty to make the world better.'" It is not that the content of this note – taken from the *Preface to Shakespeare* (Works VII, p. 71) – is irrelevant to understanding the "Life of Dryden": A merit of both editions is that we appreciate the connective tissue that links Johnsonian critical thought in its different contexts; but the famous remark from the *Preface* is not specific to the "Life" in any way that extends understanding, nor is it right to say so peremptorily that "SJ's view [on the question of a writer's making the world better] was unequivocal" (Works XXI, p. 426). Following F. R. Leavis's notorious assertion that for Johnson "a moral judgment that isn't *stated* isn't there,"[13] the place of moral purpose in Johnson's critical writings is a topic on which much ink has been spilt. Again, one recalls the clarity with which Johnson can state the implied (but unstated) moral point of Falstaff in *Henry IV* (Works VII, pp. 523–24) as against the very difficult or hopeless grasping for finalist moral conclusions at the close of *King Lear* and the possibility – without it clearly counting against the worthwhileness of experiencing Shakespeare's power in this play – that there may not be any moral, stated or stateable (Works VIII, p. 704). The time in critical history has passed when it seemed plausible to attribute "unequivocal" views to Johnson on the intersections of literature and morality.

Where delicate qualifying perspectives are required, the economy of the Yale notes can reinforce a tendency to simplify the criticism. On one occasion Johnson is expatiating with eloquence on the point of view necessary to encompass and compare major works of English poetry: "It is not by comparing line with line that the merit of great works is to be estimated, but by their general effects and ultimate result." From such remarks we acquire the essence of a critical procedure appropriate when

[13] F. R. Leavis, "Doctor Johnson," *Kenyon Review*, vol. 8 (1946), pp. 637–57, at 652. See Appendix for critical discussion of this claim.

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dealing with works of the stature of Dryden's "Virgil." However, the note at the foot of the page seems only to pigeonhole Johnson in a hand-me-down category of critical history: "A neoclassical commonplace, associated with 'the grandeur of generality'" (Works XXI, p. 481). Not quite or entirely wrong, perhaps (assuming you accept the force of that "neoclassical," and so much has been written on the subject in the years of the Yale edition's development that makes this concession risky), but not apposite either: "associated with" compounds the imprecision of the note's formulation in the presence of a difficult idea and a complex historical relationship.

On a more positive note, the Yale's brief editorial headnotes comment succinctly on matters of composition and answer textual and biographical questions efficiently by supplying information one does not have to search for. The comparatively attenuated apparatus bespeaks a similar stringency while the Introduction, not entirely accurately, can claim in their defence that the notes "stop short of the merely speculative" (Works XXI, p. xxxvii). Yet "speculative" they can't help but be – for at least part of the time, and often helpfully so. Thus, for example, note 5 at volume XXII, p. 827, suggests, speculatively enough, where and how the *Dictionary* can furnish a "possible clue" in the resolution of a textual problem in the "Life of Yalden." On the uncertain matter of dates of composition for individual "Lives," Lonsdale may sometimes offer suggestions, or weigh probabilities, or possibilities, when the evidence is slight or open to interpretation. The Yale editors are usually readier to say simply that the date cannot be known (as in the headnote to the "Life of Walsh" [Works XXI, p. 358]). Here Johnson's own thinking on the value of unfalsified assertions of fact, even when unverified, suggests the merits of a more elastic approach than the Yale allows. But the directness of the Yale edition aids the reader-friendliness of the volumes by getting earlier to the point.

Sometimes neither of the two great editions quite hits the mark. When Johnson writes at the end of his "Life of Pomfret" that the poet "pleases many, and he who pleases many must have some species of merit," the Yale editor refers the reader to a source in Cibber, and to Johnson's own "Life of Dyer," where "Grongar Hill" is said to raise images "so welcome to the mind" with "reflections of the writer so consonant to the general sense of mankind, that when it is once read, it will be read again" (Works XXIII, p. 1338). Lonsdale cites the "Life of Milton" and the remark that "Since the end of poetry is pleasure, that cannot be unpoetical with which all are pleased" (*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 289, 224). But a closer (and more obvious) correspondence than either of these, whereby the "Life of Pomfret" echoes

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one of the most famous rhetorical repetitions of Johnson's entire prose *oeuvre*, is the praise of Shakespeare in the *Preface*: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (Works VII, p. 61).

The *Lives* is Johnson's last major work of any kind, and by coming late in a series begun in the 1950s the Yale edition enjoys one advantage of lateness: By referencing previously edited Yale volumes his latest editors can suggest the interconnection in Johnson's thought across his long, productive and varied career: A paper from the *Rambler*, say, or the *Idler*, or an example from the Shakespeare criticism can be juxtaposed with a remark in the *Lives*. The editorial policy as defined in the Yale Introduction states that "Cross-references pointing to ... echoes and parallels have been kept to a minimum" (Works XXI, p. xxxviii), and includes the astute *caveat* that whatever their origin, Johnson's critical observations at times "suggest a dialogue with his source" (Works XXI, p. xxxvii). It would always be in the spirit of this latter remark for us to appreciate how "ideas," though apparently replicated within Johnson's *oeuvre*, may nevertheless shift in content with their context of judgment.

Given critical history's cultural divisions it comes as no surprise that the editors of the Yale edition should make no attempt in their notes to suggest the chain of historical causation between the critical past and the recent critical present, and so bring the Johnsonian criticism into an active relationship with the modes of intellectual enterprise that have developed over the years of its emergence as an edition (not insignificantly within Yale University). From these unmentioned cultural presences, abominated on the one hand and hailed as revolutionary on the other, not exclusively Gallic in their derivation and not uniformly commendable, but indisputably *there*, Johnson's work of criticism is kept at a distance. Both recent editions offer more on Johnson's context of origin than on his context of reception. But just as Johnson entered into a dialogue with his own sources, so editions can do much to suggest the conversability of critical past and present. Middendorf writes in his Yale Preface that the *Lives* is "recognized as the finest body of English literary criticism of the eighteenth century and still very much to be taken into account today" (Works XXI, p. xii). But it would always be good to know more about what it means to take this criticism "into account today," and to do so "very much." The new edition of an old critic provides a forum.

In a "From the Editor" essay for the *Johnsonian News Letter*, Robert DeMaria, Jr., writes preemptively of the Yale *Lives* with respect to Lonsdale's that "we hope that in ... comparisons [between the two

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editions] reviewers will see how different the two editions are," and he goes on to suggest that the Yale commentary "is focused more sharply on Johnson" (as opposed to the poets on which he wrote).[14] No one could miss the difference between the two editions or escape the fact that their aims vary. Yet for the later edition to focus more "sharply" on Johnson might necessitate fuller annotation of the critical sections of the *Lives* than the Yale sometimes allows, while if the price of focus is to downgrade relations between critic and poetry, it is too high. In fact, by including in the notes from time to time quotations from the poets in the tradition of Hill (1905) and of Lonsdale (2006), the Yale edition sensibly reinforces these relations – poetry being the context against which all other settings for Johnson's criticism are secondary. That said, DeMaria is right to suggest that the two editions do not have to be viewed in the spirit of competitive enterprises. Relative superiority depends on how the volumes are used, and is in any case hard to judge in works so various, complex and extensive. The fact that in a space of four years we have had two major editions of the *Lives* so different in design, and from such temperamentally different academic cultures, is an enrichment that need embarrass no one. Time now, then, to move from editorial policies and the details of practice to how both major editions reflect a conception of the artistic form of the *Lives*.

[14] Robert DeMaria, Jr., "From the Editor," *JNL*, vol. 61, no. 2 (September 2010), p. 6.

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