CHAPTER 4

Readers Curious and Common
Johnson, Thomas Warton and Historical Form

Thomas Warton's *History*

With all that divides them, Dennis and Johnson respond to poetry and to poets by reference to their respective standards of artistic failure and success. The primary purpose of their critical mission they see as the advocacy and defense of their poetical judgment in the court of literary opinion. But by Johnson's day, an important broadening of the role available to the literary critic is the telling of the story of poetry, a narrating of its kind over time. The *History of English Poetry from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of Eighteenth Century* (1774–91), by the Poet Laureate and Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, and the Society of Antiquaries Thomas Warton, develops the possibilities of a poetical "history" against a contemporary background rich in biographical dictionaries and editions of poetical "beauties." Warton's *History of English Poetry* in three volumes (with the fragments of a fourth unfinished volume) charts an enterprise in scholarly curiosity, and with Warton we move from assimilation of the past of poetry via poetical translation, imitation and cultural integration to its distantiation.[1] His antiquarian's perspective enlivens cultural comparison: "We look back," writes Warton in his preface, "on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority." And he continues: "we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance: and our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising in great measure from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge" (*Warton's History*, vol. 1, p. i). Warton's formula for the writing of history recalls the digressive character of his brother Joseph's method as a literary

[1] For an authoritative account of the making of the work see David Fairer's Introduction to his facsimile edition of *Warton's History*, vol. 1, pp. 1–70.

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critic. He describes his historical procedure as walking the line between the thematic and the merely annalistic:

> I have chose to exhibit the history of our poetry in a chronological series: not distributing my matter into detached articles, of periodical divisions, or of general heads. Yet I have not always adhered so scrupulously to the regularity of annals, but that I have often deviated into incidental digressions; and have sometimes stopped in the course of my career, for the sake of recapitulation, for the purpose of collecting scattered notices into a single and uniform point of view, for the more exact inspection of a topic which required separate consideration, or for a comparative survey of the poetry of other nations. (*Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. iii–iv)

An alternative scheme for a taxonomic history, devised by Pope, was transmitted to Warton personally via his fellow poets William Mason and Thomas Gray; but he rejected it in favor of the narrative-digressive compromise he describes here.[2] Working to this plan, he determines not to exclude drama from the purview of poetry, but not to deviate too far in its direction either; he defends his practice of lavish quotation (the giving of "specimens" of poetry) on the grounds that many of the early poems are hitherto unknown. His history functions as an act of scholarly mediation between the early native texts and a developing taste in the present of the eighteenth century for nonclassical antiquity: this Warton's *History* partly serves and partly calls into being.[3]

In his comments on Thomas Gray's widely celebrated *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1751; *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 184), Johnson in the *Lives of the Poets* famously appeals to, and rejoices to concur with, the experience of the "common reader"; but Warton writes his poetical history on the understanding that many will not actually have read the poetical texts he historicizes or know the poets, even when they know of them. In this respect his history falls somewhere between a narrative of poetical development, tradition and innovation from the eleventh century, and a sampler, an anthology or a variety of "beauties." Yet like his brother he cannot resist the urge to bring more examples in. We find him having consciously to restrain this tendency:

> I could give many more ample specimens of the romantic poems of these nameless minstrells, who probably flourished before or about the reign of

[2] On the rejected scheme, see *Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. iv–v.

[3] For a comprehensive account of eighteenth-century taste for the poetry of Chaucer and its complex relations with the vitality of the classics in the period, see David Hopkins and Tom Mason, *Chaucer in the Eighteenth Century: The Father of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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> Edward second. But it is neither my inclination nor intention to write a catalogue, or compile a miscellany. It is not to be expected that this work should be a general repository of our ancient poetry. (*Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. 207–08)

That said, the temptation to compile a "general repository" regularly gets the better of him – there is often an outburst of deep personal enthusiasm which fights against and temporarily retards the narrative flow. Warton feels patriotically duty-bound to bring all his findings into the light, and he regrets the parlous state of neglect for the jewels of English literary and poetical creativity buried in the archives: "I cannot however help observing, that English literature and English poetry suffer, while so many pieces of this kind still remain concealed and forgotten in our MSS. libraries" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. 208–09). In the modern age, writes Warton, historical and critical values are connected closely. The condition of present culture is at stake: "the curiosity of the antiquarian is connected with taste and genius, and his researches tend to display the progress of human manners, and to illustrate the history of society" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 209).[4]

The fraternal relation between Thomas and Joseph reflects and encourages the new audience for early texts and binds historical enquiry to the cultivation of taste. But Warton's appeal to "the curious reader" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 2 n. d) does not target a naive or uneducated audience. The lavish footnotes and detailed scholarly citation invite specialist verification; they allow Warton to identify sources with the exactness his peers might expect. Drawing on some seven hundred manuscripts, he suggests parallels between early texts and the borrowings from them made by later English poets. Much of his scholarship is displaced into the notes, though not to the point where the main text is completely decongested. As explained by David Fairer in the Introduction to his modern facsimile edition of the *History*, there remains the sense of a "work in progress" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 34). Mason and Walpole both record their contemporary experience of "wading through" the history as readers (Introduction, *Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. 37–38).

As in the extended adjudication on the satires of Hall and Marston appearing in the fragment of a fourth volume (see esp. vol. IV, pp. 67–68), much of this history consists of careful, detailed commentaries on

[4] Cf. John Brown, *The History of the Rise and Progress of Poetry through Its Several Species* (Newcastle, 1764), whose focus ranges outside the English tradition.

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individual poems. Such a habit of exposition incorporates many astute critical remarks, and fine formulations expressive of a highly developed poetical taste. But Warton does not overlook the obligation of a history (as it is from time to time held in common with the obligations of the critic) to rise to a totalizing oversight of a whole period or phase of English poetical culture: Warton begins the opening section (XLIV) of the unfinished fourth volume by noting that "More poetry was written in the single reign of Elizabeth than in the two preceding centuries," and he explains the broader cultural causes of such poetical efflorescence. He insists upon a logic of history operative within the textual disorder and contextual unknowns of the past, and he acknowledges the fertile circumstances for poetical composition, the coming together of diverse conditions whose union is conducive to poetic creativity.

However digressive and opportunistic, or however weighed down by citations and notes, Warton's historical method means that he measures the rational relation of historical causes to historical effects:

> The same causes . . . which called forth genius and imagination, such as the new sources of fiction opened by the study of the classics, a familiarity with the French Italian and Spanish writers, the growing elegancies of the English language, the diffusion of polished manners, the felicities of long peace and public prosperity, and a certain freedom and activity of mind which immediately followed the national emancipation from superstition, contributed also to produce innumerable compositions in poetry. (*Warton's History*, vol. IV, p. 1)

Warton, we see, brings a sense of logical concatenation, and an awareness of social context, to the chronological evolution of poetry.

Johnson as Poetical Historian: *The Lives of the Poets*

Pat Rogers has noted that Johnson wrote no such formal history as Warton's and felt no guilt at not doing so.[5] But there is no doubting Johnson's deep historical interests in the literary past as such. Johnson wrote personal histories in his role as a biographer; he worked on the Harleian Library catalogue; he engaged with the Ossian fraud, and with

[5] Pat Rogers, *Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 105–08. Johnson had projected, but never wrote, a "History of Criticism." See Paul Tankard, "That Great Literary Projector: Samuel Johnson's Designs, or Projected Works," *AJ*, vol. 13 (2002), pp. 103–80. For Johnson's engagement with historical concepts, see John A. Vance, *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

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the Chattertonian issues of textual authenticity: All such activities testify to historical, indeed textual-historicist, concerns not dissimilar to Warton's. His sense of the history of the language from its earliest manifestations informs his *Dictionary* etymologies and is resurgent in his notes to the language of Shakespeare. All his works convey an apprehension of the reality and remains of the past, and most prominently the literary past, as a source of comparison with the present.

Johnson's sense of its history is that poetry develops, as Warton also concluded, from an unimproved to an improved (if far from ideal) state. Wordsworth in the next generation was to conduct a revolt against his own poetical past that draws lines of division; but Johnson charts a "progress of poetry": Individual poets, such as Roscommon, give freely of their wares to an appreciative posterity of readers and of other poets and "may be numbered among the benefactors to English literature" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 23). Generosity of spirit is accorded to both points on the historical scale. Successive poets each make their contribution independently to this expanding transhistorical community. Originality and innovation are thrown into relief by the historical point of view that sets fresh achievements in time. This pattern comes out memorably in Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765):

> Shakespeare must have looked upon mankind with perspicacity, in the highest degree curious and attentive. Other writers borrow their characters from preceding writings, and diversify them only by the accidental appendages of present manners; the dress is a little varied, but the body is the same. Our authour had both matter and form to provide; for except the characters of Chaucer, to whom I think he is not much indebted, there were no writers in English, and perhaps not many in other modern languages, which shewed life in its native colours. (Works VII, p. 88)

Again, and also in the *Preface*, he writes: "To [Shakespeare] we must ascribe the praise, unless Spenser may divide it with him, of having first discovered to how much smoothness and harmony the English language could be softened" (Works VII, p. 90).

This sensitivity to the decisive turns of history, and the credit that is owed to the poets who made them, shapes the narrative of the *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), where historical understanding serves the purposes of criticism by supplying luminous comparisons.[6] Johnson can write of the

[6] For historical "sensibility" in the *Lives*, see April London, "Johnson's *Lives* and the Genealogy of Late Eighteenth-Century Literary History," in *Critical Pasts: Writing Criticism, Writing History*, ed. Philip Smallwood (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 95–113.

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young William Congreve that "Among all the efforts of early genius which literary history records, I doubt whether any one can be produced that more surpasses the common limits of nature than the plays of Congreve" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 68); and again, it is Congreve's originality to which Johnson accords praise: "Congreve has merit of the highest kind; he is an original writer, who borrowed neither the models of his plot, nor the manner of his dialogue" (*Lives*, vol. III, pp. 70–71).

The temporal depth of perspective is apparent from the very beginning of the *Lives*. Johnson reassesses the past of the seventeenth-century poetical scene for the present: "About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets" (*Lives*, vol. I, pp. 199–200). Johnson writes historically when he thinks about the impact of the Metaphysicals upon later poets: "When their reputation was high, they had undoubtedly more imitators, than time has left behind. Their immediate successors, of whom any remembrance can be said to remain, were Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Cleveland, and Milton" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 202). We see how a particular phase in poetry bifurcates and trifurcates into different kinds of consequent innovation:

> Denham and Waller sought another way to fame, by improving the harmony of our numbers. Milton tried the metaphysick style only in his lines upon Hobson the carrier. Cowley adopted it, and excelled his predecessors, having as much sentiment, and more musick. Suckling neither improved versification, nor abounded in conceits. The fashionable stile remained chiefly with Cowley; Suckling could not reach it, and Milton disdained it. (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 202)

Sometimes, noticing how original a poet has been makes Johnson willing to suspend judgments of value to put on record the importance of formal changes. Thus "Cowley was, I believe, the first poet that mingled Alexandrines at pleasure with the common heroick of ten syllables, and from him Dryden borrowed the practice, whether ornamental or licentious" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 233). Sometimes, literary-historical knowledge must check unwarranted claims to originality. Of Butler's *Hudibras*: "We must not . . . suffer the pride which we assume as the countrymen of Butler to make any encroachment upon justice, nor appropriate those honours which others have a right to share. The poem of *Hudibras* is not wholly English; the original idea is to be found in the history of Don Quixote" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 215). Here we apprehend how the historical, political and social context necessary to appreciate old poetry can erode with the passage of time:

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> Much . . . of that humour which transported the last century with merriment is lost to us, who do not know the sour solemnity, the sullen superstition, the gloomy moroseness, and the stubborn scruples of the ancient Puritans; or, if we knew them, derive our information only from books, or from tradition, have never had them before our eyes, and cannot but by recollection and study understand the lines in which they are satirised. Our grandfathers knew the picture from life; we judge of the life by contemplating the picture. (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 8)

Historical knowledge is again the crucial divider between past and present in the "Life of Dryden." Johnson is explaining the different conditions of authorship imposed by the changing of taste over time: "in Dryden's time the drama was very far from that universal approbation which it has now obtained" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 97). Observing an historical fact, that "The playhouse was abhorred by the Puritans," transmutes into the controlled employment of historical imagination. What undoubtedly "was" leads to what it is reasonable to deduce "would have" been: "A grave lawyer would have debased his dignity, and a young trader would have impaired his credit, by appearing in those mansions of dissolute licentiousness" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 97).

Johnson comments with unmitigated admiration on poets who effect changes for the good of poetry that cannot be reversed. Dryden was the great watershed in English poetry for Johnson:

> the veneration with which his name is pronounced by every cultivator of English literature, is paid to him as he refined the language, improved the sentiments, and tuned the numbers of English Poetry . . .
>
> There was . . . before the time of Dryden no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestick use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts . . . The new versification . . . may be considered as owing its establishment to Dryden; from whose time it is apparent that English poetry has had no tendency to relapse to its former savageness. (*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 123–24)

A little later, after a glance at Jonson, Feltham, Sandys, Holyday and Cowley, Johnson concludes that "It was reserved for Dryden to fix the limits of poetical liberty, and give us just rules and examples of translation" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 125).

Thus the great writer builds on the small advances of his minor predecessors; his eminence is the historical effect of an historical cause. Denham "appears to have been one of the first that understood the necessity of emancipating translation from the drudgery of counting lines

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and interpreting single words" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 239). Such pathbreaking poets, quite minor in themselves, give the progress of poetry a helping hand; they prepare the way for great geniuses to thrive and to realize their greatness, and they contribute to the general wellbeing of poetry. So Denham (again) wrote versions of Virgil which "are not pleasing; but they taught Dryden to please better" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 239). Roscommon, "very much to his honour," is ("perhaps") "the only correct writer in verse before Addison" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 200). John Philips, in *The Splendid Shilling*, "has the uncommon merit of an original design" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 69), while in general it can be said that "if he had written after the improvements made by Dryden, it is reasonable to believe that he would have admitted a more pleasing modulation of numbers into his work" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 69). Matthew Prior, commendably, "was one of the first that resolutely endeavoured at correctness" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 62), and at the time he composed his verses, "we had not recovered from our Pindarick infatuation" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 63): "what he received from Dryden [in versification] he did not lose" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 62). Waller, for his part, "added something to our elegance of diction" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 55). It may only be "something," but it matters.

Johnson in this spirit offers a corrective to general opinion on the overlooked "thoughts" of Waller's poems, which had "that grace of novelty, which they are now often supposed to want by those who, having already found them in later books, do not know or enquire who produced them first. This treatment is unjust. Let not the original author lose by his imitators" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 54). And in order that his reader might see for herself what Waller's originality amounts to, Johnson then quotes a "specimen" from Fairfax's translation of the *Gerusalemme liberata* of Tasso, which "after Mr. Hoole's translation, will perhaps not be soon reprinted" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 55). Johnson was conscious from the example of Dryden that a writer could over time lose himself in his own luster.

Like Warton, Johnson is careful to distinguish the knowable from the probable. In the "Life of Roscommon" he responds to an anecdote attributed by Fenton to Aubrey that "ought not . . . to be omitted, because better evidence of a fact cannot easily be found than is here offered, and it must be by preserving such relations that we may at last judge how much they are to be regarded" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 18). Johnson is willing to correct nonliterary historians when they seem inaccurate on matters pertaining to literature. He takes Clarendon to task in his "Life of Waller" for mistaking the time when Waller began to write poetry (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 45).

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Method and Audience in the History of Poetry

The major works of Warton and Johnson suggest, then, distinct but related forms of a hybrid balance – criticism functioning as history, history as criticism – that is essential to the history of poetry. But the *Lives* also functions independently of the historical imperatives that guide Warton. The deficiencies of the biographical procedure, as against the historical, reflect Johnson's tragic sense of the passage of time in human life: "History may be formed from permanent monuments and records; but Lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for ever ("Life of Addison," in *Lives*, vol. III, p. 18). Johnson's temperamental difference from Warton's exuberant delight in novelty and discovery is marked by a philosophical resignation in the face of his contracted task: "To adjust the minute events of literary history is tedious and troublesome; it requires indeed no great force of understanding, but often depends upon enquiries which there is no opportunity of making, or is to be fetched from books and pamphlets not always at hand" ("Life of Dryden," in *Lives*, vol. II, p. 98).

At the cost of a more tensioned argument, Warton frequently reminds us of his personal contact with early books and with original manuscripts, the ones he had "at hand." The implicit invitation is to check his conclusions and those of other textual historians on whom he has drawn. While Johnson often makes plain enough the origins of the information he has acquired, or comments on its reliability, he does not construct a textual apparatus for his sources. Perhaps because the *Lives*, when separately printed, remains at some level in the implied service to an edition of the poets, he feels no particular obligation to do more. It is not that Johnson did not take trouble or consult widely, particularly on the biographical details of poets' lives. But the life in literature that is lived by Johnson is less marked by the dusty tedium of the library stacks. It seems more suggestive of the free conversational exchange of critical opinion on the basis of what comes "at hand" in the moment of composition, as a proxy for what – in the process of talk – comes to mind.

These different methods speak to different, but overlapping, readerships. Both critics employ quotation to bring lost literature to the notice of readers. Warton included many long illustrative quotations in his text and yet more in his notes. While quotation is particularly rich in the "Life of Cowley," Johnson quotes throughout the *Lives* many poems in part or entire. In the "Life of Dryden," for example, he reprints Luke Milbourne's strictures on Dryden's Virgil because, although "the world has forgotten

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his book," "his attempt has given him a place in literary history" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 144). Johnson's reasons for reproducing long quotations from Dryden's *Notes and Observations on the Empress of Morocco* resemble Warton's determination to satisfy the "curious reader": "as the pamphlet, though Dryden's, has never been thought worthy of republication, and is not easily to be found, it may gratify curiosity to quote it more largely" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 85). The quotation extends to several pages of rant at the expense of the tragedy, and is rounded off with one of the shortest sentences in the entire *Lives of the Poets*. Johnson can bear the travesty of critical writing no longer: "Enough of Settle" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 93).

When Johnson at one point quotes some long passages from Pope's translation of the *Iliad* in order to compare versions, he checks himself and calls the process to a halt: "Of these specimens every man who has cultivated poetry, or who delights to trace the mind from the rudeness of its first conceptions to the elegance of its last, will naturally desire a greater number; but most other readers are already tired, and I am not writing only to poets and philosophers" ("Life of Pope," in *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 23). Johnson's source of information is generally his own memory, or the recollections and findings of other scholars, and often acquired via personal contact, conversation and correspondence.

A great deal that Warton discusses in the early stages of his *History* has not survived within the literary canon. It may, however, remain of great interest to (say) specialists in medieval literature, and what Warton unearths, prints or reprints often inspired the work of poets who came to be regarded as classics and who have survived better. Johnson, whose curiosity concerning poetry's past is held in tension with his strong antipathy of good to bad, has by comparison done more to unburden the present of the past. Yet a pattern of development is shared with Warton, who can appeal to a similar process of clarification and refinement of the poetical language. At the commencement of section II he writes:

> Hitherto we have been engaged in examining the state of our poetry from the conquest to the year 1200, or rather afterwards. It will appear to have made no very rapid improvement from that period. Yet as we proceed, we shall find the language losing much of its antient barbarism and obscurity, and approaching more nearly to the dialect of modern times. (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 43)

As is also true in Johnson's conception of poetical history, the sense of poetic improvement depends upon the state of the language. The opening of section III seems to suggest what is lost as well as gained as linguistic

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barbarism is left behind: "the character of our poetical composition began to be changed about the reign of the first Edward . . . a taste for ornamental and even exotic expression gradually prevailed over the rude simplicity of the native English phraseology" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 109).

From time to time Warton can suggest how the improvement in historical method is related to a more analytical and skeptical approach to literary evidence:

> It was indeed the fashion for the historians of these times [the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries], to form such a general plan as would admit all the absurdities of popular tradition. Connection of parts, and uniformity of subject, were as little studied as truth. Ages of ignorance and superstition are more affected by the marvelous than by plain facts; and believe what they find written, without discernment or examination. (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 137)

As an historical vision of the intelligence informing narrative method, this resonates with the comments in the *Preface to Shakespeare* where Johnson reflects on the intellectual context of Shakespeare's time when "The tales, with which the infancy of learning was satisfied, exhibited only the superficial appearances of action, related the events but omitted the causes, and were formed for such as delighted in wonders rather than truth" (Works VII, p. 88).

In his discussion of the medieval religious drama, Warton objects to the impropriety of treating religious themes comically: "an enlightened age would not have chosen such subjects for theatrical exhibition" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, pp. 242–43). Johnson had likewise objected to the mixing of poetry with religion in certain of the later English poets, including Cowley. The unfinished biblical epic the *Davideis* does not escape the exercise of Cowley's irrepressibly lighthearted wit (*Lives*, vol. I, pp. 223–24). Congeniality of mind emerges in Warton's allusion to the first page of Johnson's Preface to the *Dictionary*, where he pays an eloquent compliment to Johnson for his combination of historical perspective and critical faculties: "The most illustrious ornament of the reign of Edward the third, and of his successor Richard the second, was Jeffrey Chaucer; a poet with whom the history of our poetry is by many supposed to have commenced; and who has been pronounced, by a critic of unquestionable taste and discernment, to be the first English versifier who wrote poetically" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. 341).[7]

[7] He in fact refers to the "History of the English Language" (Works XVIII, p. 182). Boswell had concluded that an early "Life of Chaucer" appearing in the *Universal Visiter* was not actually authored by Johnson. Johnson may have intended that the *Lives* should start with Chaucer since "Chaucer, a new edition of him," had appeared among Johnson's *Designs*. See Tankard, "That Great

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Johnson saw himself as contributing to "the history of our poetry" at least partly in Warton's sense: as a record of scholarship made manifest within a narrative organization. In the advertisement to the *Lives*, while laying claim to historical form for his critical biographies, Johnson can apologize for possible inaccuracies when dating works in the "Life of Dryden": "In this minute kind of History, the succession of facts is not easily discovered" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 189). And he complains at the beginning of the "Life of Cowley" that in his biography of the poet, Thomas Sprat had produced "a funeral oration rather than a history" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 191). In his own writing about Cowley – attempting to rebalance praise and blame – Johnson perhaps thought he had produced something worthier of the term. He may not have formalized his conception, but Johnson sees how time changes the way time itself is conceived.[8] Thus "the gradual change of manners," he writes, "though imperceptible in the process, appears great when different times, and those not very distant, are compared" ("Life of Dryden," in *Lives*, vol. II, p. 110). In Johnson's historical outlook, resembling in some ways that of the philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood in the twentieth century, one looks into the self and the common ground of human nature to understand the past: "We do not always know our own motives," Johnson avers, on the reasons for the "false magnificence" of Dryden's plays (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 149), including himself in the plural possessive.

Memorial and Research in Poetical History

As I shall examine in more detail in Chapter 10, it is well known that Johnson's *Lives* became something other, formally, than its author had first set out to make them, and his great work of literary biography blends the ambitions of literary criticism with what is in practice a history of English poetry covering 150 years. In this, Johnson stands markedly apart from the recent historians of poetry whose points of reference are the waning of Neoclassicism, the rise of Romanticism or the significance of the Preromantic. His critical deliberations start and end as life-narratives of the poets, and the essential human interest of the author is at the center of every discussion. Of course, certain genres, such as epic or pastoral, are recurrent themes in the *Lives*, and on special topics such as occasional

Literary Projector." For a full discussion of Johnson's engagement with Chaucer see chapter 8 of Hopkins and Mason, *Chaucer in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 252–75.

[8] See Chapter 5 for further discussion of this subject.

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poetry, rhyme as against blank verse, devotional verse, sound and sense, or translation, he can wax almost as digressive as Warton. (The character of "work in progress," applied to Warton's *History*, might be only slightly less apt to account for the diverse materials that are gathered in the *Lives*, harnessed from other sources, imported, recycled, contracted out or appended. As we shall see in Chapter 9, the great twenty-first-century editions of the *Lives* have helped bring out this character.)

When the chronological order of the *Lives* was adjusted according to the dates of the deaths of the poets, the change – the effect of which I again explore in Chapter 10 – was perhaps one with which Johnson would have been happy to comply. His respect for the orderings of time, as a condition of mental organization, is memorably recorded in his Preface to *The Preceptor* (1748), an educational essay where Johnson describes "*chronology* and *history*" as "one of the most natural delights of the human mind" (Works XX, p. 180). We shall see that Johnson's critical biographies together express the collective project of the English poets, with their failures, false starts and dead ends noted on the way. To this narrative his own verse had made a distinguished contribution that he cannot for obvious reasons examine.

But although Johnson is denied the opportunity to discuss his personal additions to poetry of the eighteenth century, the history he outlines within the *Lives* is informed by his witness testimony to literary-historical facts not substantially open to dispute. Johnson regenerates in the *Lives* a conception of the poetical past as a stable consensus inherited from the previous age and then extended into a world of near-contemporary poets. The moral meaning of this Johnsonian version of history builds on the narrative sketched in lines that Dryden and Soame translated vis-à-vis English poetry from Boileau's *L'art poétique* (lines 111–20, 131–42).[9] In their English rendition of the French critical poem Dryden and Soame had substituted Waller for Malherbe. According to Johnson, writing in his "Life of Waller" a century later:

> By the perusal of Fairfax's translation of Tasso, to which, as Dryden relates, [Waller] confessed himself indebted for the smoothness of his numbers, and by his own nicety of observation, he had already formed such a system of metrical harmony as he never afterwards much needed, or much

[9] *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. II: *Poems 1681–1684*, ed. H. T. Swedenburg, Jr., and Vinton A. Dearing (1972), pp. 127–28.

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> endeavoured, to improve. Denham corrected his numbers by experience, and gained ground gradually upon the ruggedness of his age; but what was acquired by Denham, was inherited by Waller. (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 28)

This processionary, tutelary, dynastic, collaborative history embedded within the *Lives* is conceived with the hindsight of someone seeming to stand at the end of history. Johnson shares with Warton the sense of cause and consequence, of a rise and of a fall, of episodes, of ends achieved, of lines of development exhausted, of ancient possibilities closed off for good and of new avenues cleared.[10] Although Warton died before his work was complete, a "grand narrative" is the task of both writers. Thus Dryden, sustained by many minor poets, gave something to English poetry which it had never had before and performed a radical transformation: "What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, *lateritiam invenit, marmoream reliquit*, he found it brick, and he left it marble" (*Lives*, vol. II, p. 155).

Pope perfected what Dryden had begun. With Milton we have an English epic that ranks with the classical productions of Greece and Rome and a going forward in European poetry as a regress to its roots. With Gray we see (in Johnson's considered judgment) a disintegration, a withering and a petering out; with James Thomson – as if for the first time – we make contact with the realities of rural nature as one might see them with one's own eyes (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 103). (Wordsworth, who credits Johnson with little or nothing in the development of his own taste and the relation of that taste to his practice as a poet, could not dissent.[11]) With the Metaphysicals we have the exemplar of a poetical fashion which

[10] Assumptions regarding historical causation seem here to obscure the facts of chronology. In the "Life of Pope," and as noted in the previous chapter, Johnson attributes Dennis's attack on Pope's *Essay on Criticism* to Addison's praise. But as the Yale editor of the Works points out, the *Essay* was published on May 15, 1711, Dennis's *Reflections* on June 20, Addison's *Spectator* 253 on December 20. Works XXIII, p. 1048, n. 5.

[11] Wordsworth wrote in praise of Thomson in his "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" (1815) that "it is remarkable that ... the poetry of the period intervening between the publication of the Paradise Lost and the Seasons does not contain a single new image of external nature; and scarcely presents a familiar one from which it can be inferred that the eye of the Poet had been steadily fixed upon his object." *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), vol. III, p. 73. Quoting Gray's "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West," Wordsworth had observed that Gray "was more than any other man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction." "*Preface* to Lyrical Ballads" (1800), in *Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 132. "Gray thought his language more poetical as it was more remote from common use," writes Johnson in his "Life of Gray" (1781). *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 181.

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arrived as an Italian import, overwhelmed poetical style for a while in the seventeenth century and then passed into history, leaving its traces, as such phenomena always must – not an aberration quite, but not quite part of the greater continuum either. Roughly speaking, the earlier *Lives* record the improvements in poetry in the first half of the chronological range they cover; the later ones suggest how poetry has begun to fall away; how a refined style can become overrefined; and how the progress of correctness cools the poetical spirit. Thus a turn of the narrative comes in the "Life of Addison" at the moment where Johnson is commenting on the success of Addison's tragedy of *Cato* of 1712, a play which "has introduced or confirmed among us the use of dialogue too declamatory, of unaffecting elegance, and chill philosophy" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 27); "The versification which he had learned from Dryden," writes Johnson, "he debased rather than refined . . . his lines are very smooth in Rosamond, and too smooth in Cato" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 36).

Throughout the *Lives* poets are born, write poetry, and die, sometimes prematurely and sometimes with little lasting to show for their efforts. Johnson locates their printed texts within a moral and comic narrative of human aspiration, triumph, absurdity, disappointment and desire; and if Warton saw the history of poetry as giving access to the history of society, Johnson's context is more psychological than social while his subject matter is already in the public domain. For all their efforts in the search for fame, time very quickly erases the work of most poets, relieving the present from the dead weight of a past we do not need as active minds in the present. The consequence is that for Johnson the moral meaning of poetical history is not, as for Warton, preeminently tied to the "free exertion of research" (*Warton's History*, vol. I, p. v) – the scholar's heroic struggle against forgetting conceived as an antiquarian effort of cultural completion and inclusion. Nor, similarly, is it the retrieval of as much embalmed or decomposed trace material as Warton can gather from the manuscript graveyards of the past to vary, delight, instruct and enrich the present. The forgetting, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, lest we forget, throws into relief the need for critical memorials, and Johnson's many memorializations of poets in the *Lives* show he well understood this.[12] Johnson's consolatory conception of poetry suggests that the process of selecting, rejecting and preferring – from among the many candidates of poetical

[12] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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history – is the prerequisite on which life in the present depends.[13] And in his simultaneously dramatic and philosophical role as a source and end and test of Johnson's heartfelt criteria, Shakespeare must once more enter the picture. I turn now therefore from the artistry of literary history to Shakespeare's dramatic encapsulation of thought.

[13] Clingham writes of Johnson's "commemorative intelligence." "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, at 162.

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