CHAPTER 7

Johnson and Time

'Tis with our *Judgments* as our *Watches* . . .
(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, line 9)[1]

Everyone admires the amazing speed and productivity of Samuel Johnson in the matter of publication. We need think only of the papers he so efficiently turned out for the *Rambler* or the *Idler* and the grind of the parliamentary reporting for the *Gentleman's Magazine*. A quick competitive wit and a ready creative intelligence mark poetical compositions that suggest a talent for the extempore. Similar qualities infuse Johnson's conversations with all who engaged in intellectual exchange with him; but he is also, in many ways, a genius in slow motion. "SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D," as Johnson laments in *London* (1738) (line 177; Works VI, p. 56).

Not only did Johnson's professional elevation prove slow, but we also remember him for his succession of busted deadlines – the *Dictionary* that took so much longer than projected; the delays dogging the Shakespeare edition; the spurts and flurries of compositional energy that punctuated periods of lassitude and procrastination, combined with a good deal of travelling about, distracted by other tasks, that characterized the tardy completion of the Prefaces to the English poets. Detailing the composition of these late productions, Roger Lonsdale notes that, on a visit to Lichfield in 1777, "There is no sign that [Johnson] tried, or wished, to start work on his biographies while visiting his birthplace: as he told Mrs Thrale, he loitered, 'and what is worse, loitered with very little pleasure. The time has run away, as most time runs, without account, without use, and without memorial'" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 19).[2] Johnson's reckoning with time, and his

[1] *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939–69), vol. I, p. 239.

[2] Johnson refers to his "vacillation and vagrancy of mind" and determines to "spend [his] time with more method" (Works I, p. 292).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

running the race of the writing life against it, are profoundly connected to life's possibilities and limits, to his religion, to the pleasures of literature and to his reading experience of writers whose work seemed so much longer than it was. How time is connected to mind is a constant source of imagery and analogy in Johnson's writings, and his comments on all manner of things, persons and poets are haunted by a sense of the temporal.

Some of Johnson's most famous passages and celebrated sayings (on the prospect of being hung in a fortnight, for example) entail a sense of time and its expiration. Among Johnson's various forms of alertness to time, less often recalled, is his commendation of chronology to the teachers of young minds in the Preface to *The Preceptor* (1748). His advice deserves to be better known in circles where courses in English literature are devised:

> it should be diligently inculcated to the scholar, that unless he fixes in his mind some idea of the time in which each man of eminence lived, and each action was performed, with some part of the contemporary history of the rest of the world, he will consume his life in useless reading, and darken his mind with a croud of unconnected events, his memory will be perplexed with distant transactions resembling one another, and his reflections be like a dream in a fever, busy and turbulent, but confused and indistinct. (Works xx, pp. 180–81)

There is much on the measuring-out of time in the work of Johnson, who is reputed to have bought his first watch at the age of fifty-nine.[3] His adjudication between the fictional characters of the novelists Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, according to the difference between the face of a timepiece and the complex inner workings, is the substance of one oft-quoted critical remark, and this is the more important because relatively little of Johnson's published critical output is devoted to the novel. "In comparing those two writers," Boswell records, "he used this expression: 'that there was as great a difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who could tell the hour by looking on the dial-plate'" (Boswell, vol. II, pp. 48–49).

Less prominent is the sense in which Johnson grasps the imponderables of time at the level of its philosophy. With this he seems to have been rarely credited – arguably because philosophers and their historians have largely ignored his achievement, though also, as Fred Parker has shown,

[3] Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660–1785* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 191.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

because the categories made available by historians of philosophy are ones that Johnson does not easily fit.[4] In what follows I will suggest that Johnson nevertheless registers very movingly in his writings the conceptually elusive nature of time and that the mental experience of time for Johnson is a factor in his judgments of literary value. Johnson's sense of time is made available to us through records of the painful, untheorized intimacies of daily experience. He offers in consequence of this experience no developed or explicit theory of time, but he brings, nevertheless, a high degree of personal detachment to a problem central to philosophy. Time is a leading theme of Johnson's work, and the unresolved contradictions entailed in his engagements with time reveal a key relationship between the subject matter of his criticism and his personal nature.

A philosophically conscious parallel between on the one hand the material and measurable universe, and on the other the time-inhabited universe of mind, is brought out very eloquently in *Rambler* 8. In a manner directly pertinent to his literary, lexicographical and editorial labors, Johnson draws attention to the vast discrepancies between the mental time taken to conceive a project and the time needed to carry it out:

> It is said by modern philosophers, that not only the great globes of matter are thinly scattered thro' the universe, but the hardest bodies are so porous, that, if all matter were compressed to perfect solidity, it might be contained in a cube of a few feet. In like manner, if all the employment of life were crowded into the time which it really occupied, perhaps a few weeks, days, or hours, would be sufficient for its accomplishment, so far as the mind was engaged in the performance. (Works III, p. 41)

With, perhaps, something of his own Pembroke College undergraduate swagger in mind, Johnson wrote in his biography of Richard Savage that he admired "the extent of his knowledge compared with the small time which [Savage] spent in visible endeavours to acquire it" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 186). And the movement of time, as Greg Clingham has shown, is a determinant in Johnson's eloquent memorials of human lives which found durable meaning in poetry.[5] Time and its tendency to expire, to drag, to betray, to be wasted, to pass or (as we shall see) to destroy create the existential structure of Johnson's last great critical work and reflect back on

[4] Fred Parker, "'We are perpetually moralists': Johnson and Moral Philosophy," in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 15–32.

[5] 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.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

the endurance of a literary life that was not long from its end as composition was concluded.

Johnson's regret for time's dreadful subtractions and extinctions is painfully felt, and as his diaries and annals show, the metaphorical life of these records gives voice to a personal experience of hard times, and expresses a will to "endure" that combines difficulty with duration. The fragment of an autobiography composed in the 1760s commences with a combination of memorized and reported glimpses of Johnson's precarious birth and boyhood. This includes the recollection of what he must have been told of his early self and even of his prenatal struggle. The entry is written in the past tense from an advanced adult perspective: "SEPT. 7, 1709, I was born at Lichfield. My mother had a very difficult and dangerous labour" ("Annals," Works 1, p. 3).

In the course of this record, Johnson reflects on his yet-to-be-born and infant self from the position of middle age, and he relays the common experience that in one's childhood world time passes more slowly, and is more drawn out, than in grown-up life: "I was with Hawkins but two years, and perhaps four months. The time, till I had computed it, appeared much longer by the multitude of novelties which it supplied, and of incidents, then in my thoughts important, it produced" (Works 1, p. 17). For the young Johnson the crowding of life with new experience elongates time, so that time recalled and time computed (or remembered to have been computed) are discrepant. But in the entries dating from 1734 Johnson begins to take temporal stock of experience, and the annals reflect the pain of self-examination we find in his diaries, prayers and occasional letters. For an entry in 1736 under "Friday, August 27th, 10 at Night," he writes: "This day I have trifled away, except that I have attended the school in the morning. I read to night in Rogers's sermons. To night I began the breakfast law anew" (Works 1, p. 35).

In this habit of self-accounting, not only the day but the hour of the day bears the burden of emotion. It matters that it is "10 at Night."[6] Johnson's privacies of self-exposure develop from the conventional way time is divided up and from the names given to the divisions. The "hours" and the "days" in the calculus of Johnson's time-awareness are often dogged with anxiety or regret, or an unbearable self-reproach. "Forgive me," Johnson prays on November 19, 1752, that "I have this day neglected

[6] Cf. the relation between the time of night and Johnson's emotional condition as expressed in his letter to Hill Boothby, December 30, 1755. *Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 116–17: "It is again Midnight, and I am again alone. With what meditation shall I amuse this waste hour of darkness and vacuity."

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

the duty which thou hast assigned to it." And on January 1, 1753, he prays to Almighty God "who hast continued my life" to "this day" (Works 1, p. 49). The phrases "the hour of death" and "the day of judgment" commonly accompany Johnson's religious observance and movingly evoke a terminology of time intrinsic to his spiritual vulnerability and the regular tending of his Christian soul. Johnson habitually (as on January 1, 1745) offers a prayer on New Year's Day, and his language captures his characteristic sense of the relation of being to time:

> Grant, O merciful Lord, that thy Call may not be in vain, that my Life may not be continued to encrease my Guilt, and that thy gracious Forbearance may not harden my heart in wickedness. Let me remember, O my God that as Days and Years pass over me, I approach nearer to the Grave where there is no repentance. (Works 1, pp. 40–41)

The ratio of an expired past to an unexperienced future changes with time, and the suggestion that days and years "pass over" us offers likewise a literary metaphor of time that Johnson repeats. The essential nature of being is first conceived as static in relation to time's dynamic movement. As we stand still, time moves anyway, and leaves us trailing in its wake. But then, in a characteristically Johnsonian about-turn of perspective, the approach to the grave orientates the shifting nature of being toward an immovable datum corresponding with the individual's death. For this interval between present time and the moment of one's extinction no language is available – as Johnson suggested in his 1745 editorial note to Shakespeare's "last syllable of recorded time": "'Recorded time' seems to signify the time fixed in the decrees of Heaven for the period of life. The 'record' of 'futurity' is indeed no accurate expression, but as we only know transactions past or present, the language of men affords no term for the volumes of prescience, in which future events may be supposed to be written" ("Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth," Works VII, p. 42). Johnson does not approach death as melodramatically as King Lear, by his "crawl" toward it (I.i.41), but the vital powers are given up bit by bit: "Days and months pass in a dream," writes Johnson on April 6, 1777, "and I am afraid that my memory grows less tenacious, and my observation less attentive" (Works 1, p. 267). When time is passing, as Henri Bergson was later to observe, it is we who pass.[7]

[7] Henri Bergson, "Concerning the Nature of Time," chapter 3 of *Duration and Simultaneity* (1922), in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 216.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

Some of the most moving expressions of this temporal self-accounting, including the time of eternity, occur in the period immediately after the death of Johnson's wife on March 17, 1752. On April 24 Johnson prayed to God that "by the assistance of thy Holy Spirit I may repent, and be comforted," and "obtain that peace which the world cannot give," and "pass the residue of my life in humble resignation and cheerful obedience" (Works I, p. 45). That phrase, "the residue of my life" (the smaller part of the whole of life that is left, the computed remainder, the probable, then the certain minority), is repeated by Johnson in his January 1 prayer of 1753:

> Almighty God, who hast continued my life to this day grant that by the assistance of thy holy spirit I may improve the time which thou shalt grant me to my eternal salvation. Make me to remember to thy glory thy judgements & thy mercies. Make [me] so to consider the loss of my wife whom thou hast taken from me that it may dispose me by thy grace to lead the residue of my life in thy fear. (Works I, pp. 49–50)

Such revelations of Johnson's time-conscious and time-penetrated inner life, and especially his communings with his creator, suggest the consolations available whenever he is read. His imaginative and rhetorical engagement with his emotional nature makes available to philosophical thought insights that are not presented in formal terms as a philosophy. But there is also an impersonal quality to some of his expressions of time that again bring Johnson within range of philosophical tradition and suggest a remoteness from the unprocessed and undistanced pain expressed in the annals, the diaries and the prayers.

One such moment might be Johnson's tribute to Shakespeare's undimmed durability as a writer in the *Preface* (1765), where he describes the unusually lasting appeal of Shakespeare's comic scenes, beyond, he seems to be saying, that of the celebrated tragic material: "The sand heaped by one flood is scattered by another, but the rock always continues in its place. The stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabricks of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare" (Works VII, p. 70).[8] Pope had used the metaphor of "the stream of time" in his *Essay on Man*,[9] while Shakespeare had anticipated this image in lines attributed to the Archbishop of York from *Henry IV, Part 2*:

[8] The close relation between the comic and the durable also appears in Johnson's "Life of Cowley." *Lives*, vol. I, p. 216.

[9] The key phrase is repeated. *Twickenham Pope*, vol. III (i), p. 165.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

> Hear me more plainly.
> I have in equal balance justly weigh'd
> What wrongs our arms may do, what wrongs we suffer,
> And find our griefs heavier than our offenses.
> We see, which way the stream of time doth run,
> And are enforc'd from our most quiet sphere,
> By the rough torrent of occasion.
>
> (IV.i.66–72)[10]

Sometimes the passage of time's stream transforms into the "torrent" of Fate we are doomed to roll darkling down in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749; line 346). Sometimes events in time divert the stream, and disrupt its smooth flow by the turbulence of a conflicted present and the urgent call to action. The metaphor of "the stream of time" also appears in other Johnsonian writings. The epigraph of *Rambler* 102 (1751) is quoted from the fifteenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> Ipsa quoque assiduo labuntur tempora motu
> Non secus ac flumen: neque enim consistere flumen,
> Nec levis hora potest; sed ut unda impellitur undâ,
> Urgeturque prior veniente, urgetque priorem,
> Tempora sic fugiunt pariter, pariterque sequuntur.
>
> (lines 179–83)

In rendering these lines for English readers, Johnson cites the translation of James Elphinston (Works IV, p. 179). The passage may also however be interpreted for the modern world through Dryden's elegant version of Ovid from *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700):

> For Time no more than Streams, is at a stay:
> The flying Hour is ever on her way;
> And as the Fountain still supplies her store,
> The Wave behind impels the Wave before;
> Thus in successive Course the Minutes run,
> And urge their Predecessor Minutes on,
> Still moving, ever new . . .
>
> (lines 268–74)[11]

[10] For Johnson's text see Samuel Johnson (ed.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), vol. IV, pp. 305–06.

[11] "Of the Pythagorean Philosophy," in *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. VII: *Poems 1697–1700*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (2000), p. 492. See also David Hopkins, "Translation, Metempsychosis, and the Flux of Nature: Dryden's 'Of the Pythagorean Philosophy,'" in *Conversing with Antiquity: English Poets and the Classics, from Shakespeare to Pope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 238–49.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

In this gathering of sources, the temporal metaphor shifts its terms of comparison, while in the body of the essay Johnson adds the complementary sense of advancing life as an oceanic meander:

> "Life," says Seneca, "is a voyage, in the progress of which, we are perpetually changing our scenes; we first leave childhood behind us, then youth, then the years of ripened manhood, then the better and more pleasing part of old age." The perusal of this passage, having excited in me a train of reflections on the state of man, the incessant fluctuation of his wishes, the gradual change of his disposition to all external objects, and the thoughtlessness with which he floats along the stream of time, I sunk into a slumber amidst my meditations, and, on a sudden, found my ears filled with the tumult of labour, the shouts of alacrity, the shrieks of alarm, the whistle of winds, and the dash of waters. (Works IV, p. 179)

Fluidity, process, interminability, uncertainty of prediction, are all called up by this image of the stream of time, and time assumes at this point an elemental identity, unfixed by calendar or clock.

These are striking expressions, and they engage the enduring perplexity of how, curiously and at once, we can exist in time and yet seem to observe time as it flows "over" our heads, or "before us" as a stream viewed from a point high and dry on the adjacent banks. Johnson is drawn to such problems and shares with the philosophy of time an ambition to disentangle them. But he is also a literary artist on time, and while his words have philosophical value and effect, Johnson's treatment recalls the metaphorical temper of those for whom thought about time is a central theme, as it is for Ovid or Dryden, for example, or for Shakespeare or Proust. Like them, Johnson allows us access to a consciousness partitioned off by the specialized investigations into time of cosmology, philosophy or quantum physics. Other literary artists also suggest a contrast with Johnson on time. "Time's winged chariot" is Marvell's glorious conceit.[12] But when confronted with the irony of time by the poetical image, we are lookers-on, like the Epicurean deities of Johnson's "Life of Cowley" who "never enquired what, on any occasion, they should have said or done; but wrote rather as beholders than partakers of human nature; as Beings looking upon good and evil, impassive and at leisure" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 201). By uniting observer and object, Johnson's writing about time folds us back into our own consciousness. He gives us at first hand, as it were, an experience of what it means to be in time and out of time as an intimately

[12] "To his Coy Mistress," line 22, in *Andrew Marvell*, ed. Frank Kermode and Keith Walker, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 24.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

shared condition. This condition is no less real for being elusive, ironic, comic and tragic; it is one and indivisible, as a function of General Nature, indefinable because universal.

More urgent and emotional is the time recalled in Johnson's own poetry as the uncompromising enemy of mental content. Johnson's compulsive marking of the calendar in the annals and diaries of his middle and late middle age registers a restless and active mind for whom, nevertheless, despair was criminal. For Heidegger, writing in less combative terms than Johnson, the concept of "Dasein" "'reckons with time' and regulates itself *according to it*."[13] But for the Johnson of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, we have not only to reckon but more actively to contend with Time as a destructive agent (the "antagonist not subject to casualties" of "He that runs against Time" in the "Life of Pope" [*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 16]). Toward the end of life:

> Time hovers o'er, impatient to destroy
> And shuts up all the passages of joy.
> (lines 259–60; Works VI, p. 104)

Time's superintending presence in these lines does not fly as an arrow might in a line from point A to point B, or flow as a stream, but keeps perpetual station. Time is here in suspension above the humanity on which it preys. The second line of the couplet is dominated by its seven monosyllables, and seems exceptionally compacted. Joy has its "passages" or avenues or channels of expression and reception, but Time's impatience to "shut" them "up" suggests how the ledger of life's opportunities falls closed with unnegotiable finality. Time devours its victim in the end, but not without a contest. Johnson's flux of time is restrained by a pessimistic scorn that holds fatalism at bay.

From Time externalized as the hovering agent of annihilation, we can move to the experience of time that pervades Johnson's literary criticism. Here, Johnson's philosophical understanding appears historically akin to the imaginatively produced "Concept of Time" of the "Metaphysical Exposition" from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (2nd ed., 1787): "Time is nothing but the form of inner sense," writes Kant, "that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of our inner state." Kant denies that time is something which exists of itself, "or which inheres in things as an objective determination," and he goes on to characterize time as "nothing but the

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 456.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

form of our inner intuition."[14] In Johnson's phrase from the 1765 *Preface to Shakespeare*, time is the "mode of existence" which is "most obsequious to the imagination" (Works VII, p. 78). Johnson is using the word "imagination" here as we might use the word "consciousness,"[15] and, in adopting the phrase, we have seen that he is famously defending Shakespeare's ditching of the Renaissance pseudo-classicizing unity of time without damage to the continuity of his plays. Johnson explains why the passage of years is as easily accepted as the passage of minutes or days:

> The time required by the fable elapses for the most part between the acts; for, of so much of the action as is represented, the real and poetical duration is the same ... The drama exhibits successive imitations of successive actions, and why may not the second imitation represent an action that happened years after the first; if it be so connected with it, that nothing but time can be supposed to intervene ... a lapse of years is as easily conceived as a passage of hours. (Works VII, pp. 77–78)

When carried along by the pace and passion of the action, we do not "count the clock" (Works VII, p. 77). Here Johnson does not mean to consult the dial-plate on one's watch, but to "count" the number of tolls of the bell or the chiming of the hour, where the recording of time is audible and takes time, suspending the experience. In that time is "obsequious to the imagination," the mind takes causal priority over time's unfixities and perceptual warps:

> A play read, affects the mind like a play acted. It is therefore evident, that the action is not supposed to be real, and it follows that between the acts a longer or shorter time may be allowed to pass, and that no more account of space or duration is to be taken by the auditor of a drama, than by the reader of a narrative, before whom may pass in an hour the life of a hero, or the revolutions of an empire. (Works VII, p. 79)

The unity of the play is experienced as a coherence without gaps because we keep the past action in our heads as a memory.

Coleridge later echoes this famous Johnsonian passage when he claims in 1810 that so far as Shakespeare has the power of exciting our internal emotions "as to make us present to the scene in imagination chiefly, he

[14] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 74–79.

[15] Johnson's *Dictionary* definitions of "imagination" include the sense of the word as a creative faculty of mind: "1. Fancy; the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent to one's self or others."

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

acquires the right and privilege of using time and space as they exist in the imagination, obedient only to the laws which the imagination acts by."[16] But later enquiry on time's relation to space confirms Johnson's philosophical prescience. In reacting against Kant's sharp line of separation between time and space,[17] for example, Bergson distinguishes between the spatial, in which the elements are mutually exclusive and externally related, and the temporal, in which the quantitative is replaced by the qualitative. "Space contains only parts of space," writes Bergson, "and at whatever point of space we consider the moving body, we shall only get a position . . . But in time we are compelled to admit that we have . . . to do with a synthesis which is, so to speak, qualitative, a gradual organization of our successive sensations, a unity resembling that of a phrase in a melody."[18] This different experience of the "unity" of time involves a gradual synthetic organization of our successive sensations as not external one to another. Conceived in philosophical terms, Bergson's formulation pinpoints the irrelevance of the Renaissance pseudo-classical unity of time that Johnson rejects as a critic. Johnson brings a philosophical psychology to a category error in contemporary critical thought, and suggests how Shakespeare's willed or ignorant abandonment of the clock-counting unity of time weaves the seamless fabric of artistic experience. For Johnson, as for the W. B. Yeats of "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), the markings-off of "what is past, or passing, or to come" collapse within consciousness.[19]

When we are enjoying Shakespeare, as with other pleasures, time speeds up: "others please us by particular speeches," Johnson writes in his *Preface*, "but he always makes us anxious for the event, and has perhaps excelled all but Homer in securing the first purpose of a writer, by exciting restless and unquenchable curiosity" (Works VII, p. 83). Yet Johnson's thought on time often speaks of its slowness. This dragging-out of time is burdensome; but there is no desire that life should arrive with abnormal swiftness at its terminus, and in the finite life of the critic, a part of the available whole is used up by the reading of poetry and the watching of plays. This time can

[16] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1960), vol. I, p. 176.

[17] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 77. On the tendency to regard time and space as conceptually distinct individuals see Anthony Quinton, "Spaces and Times," *Philosophy*, vol. 37 (1962), pp. 130–47.

[18] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. by F. L. Pogson of *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) (London: George Allen, 1913), p. 111.

[19] "Sailing to Byzantium," line 32, in *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 194.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

be measured (as if it were space), and a spatial metaphor of time in fact appears prominently in Johnson's criticism when the time-compressing excitements of Shakespeare are replaced by a more tedious eighteenth-century poetry. Thus, the author of *Solomon* (1708), Johnson writes in his "Life of Prior," did not discover "that [the poem] wanted that without which all other [qualities] are of small avail, the power of engaging attention and alluring curiosity." The development of Johnson's remarks on "tediousness" exhibits the impatient consciousness of wasted time that Johnson brought to negative literary judgments: "negligences or errors are single and local, but tediousness pervades the whole; other faults are censured and forgotten, but the power of tediousness propagates itself. He that is weary the first hour, is more weary the second; as bodies forced into motion, contrary to their tendency, pass more and more slowly through every successive interval of space" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 61). The experience of empty time is not here made replete by literary pleasure, and Johnson remarks in *Rambler* 41 that "So few of the hours of life are filled up with objects adequate to the mind of man, and so frequently are we in want of present pleasure or employment, that we are forced to have recourse every moment to the past and the future for supplemental satisfactions, and relieve the vacuities of our being, by recollections of former passages, or anticipation of events to come" (Works III, p. 221). Because its slowness seems to extend unwanted experience, time is oppressive; and when the measurements of time impose themselves too heavily on the conscious mind they contaminate what is left of our lives, recalling the lines from Lucretius where Man is revealed "Unsatisfy'd with all that Nature brings; | Loathing the present, liking absent things."[20] Kipling wrote of the urgency of the "unforgiving minute" as the inspiration to pack life full with the immediate living of it;[21] but for Johnson the "hours of life" are subdivided by "the weary minutes flagging wings" (*The Vanity of Human Wishes*, line 300; Works VI, p. 105). Whether the time is long or short, linear as an arrow or a stream, or volumetric (and able to be "filled"), the duplicity of time is at the heart of Johnson's experience.

Stuart Sherman has suggested that time's void for Johnson is "transformed into a plenum by text" and that this comes from writing down daily experiences of the Western Isles tour in his journal (1775) and in

[20] "Translation of the Latter Part of the Third Book of Lucretius; Against the Fear of Death" (1685), in *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, vol. III: *Poems 1685–1692*, ed. Earl Miner *et al.* (1969), p. 52, lines 155–56.

[21] Rudyard Kipling, "If—," line 29, in *Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Daniel Karlin, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 497.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

letters to friends. By this he is referring to the sense of fulfilled purpose, by which Johnson keeps boredom at bay; Sherman observes that time, for Johnson, "is left vacuous," or is inclined to drag, when no writing is done.[22] But from the evidence of Johnson's criticism salvation from empty time also depends on the quality of the literary experience available to the reader, and this is registered in the capacity of works to compress time, as Shakespeare does, or to slow it down, as does Prior. Johnson's critical imagery suggests that this time, while immeasurable as simply time, symbolizes or analogizes duration by the external, measurable, nonimaginary world of quantities and divisions. When therefore Johnson writes of being bored reading Prior he is employing a literary figuration which restrains the exercise of metaphysical curiosity in the interests of a practical critical judgment and poetic valuation. Johnson's critical imagery conceptualizes Time within the science of a three-dimensional world inhabited by "bodies" subject to inertia and moving through time, in its aspect as space, with measurable, and decreasing, velocity; so that for Johnson unsatisfactory experiences of poetry such as Prior's are associated with the drawn-out experience of time and the sacrifice of intensity to extensity. The temporal and the spatial are not confused; as Bergson allowed, each dimension is necessary to the expression of the other. Johnson repairs experience which philosophy murders to dissect.

We have observed how time's clock and calendar divisions confront Johnson with an unforgiving reality, and we have witnessed the anguish of his annals and prayers when the mental calculations are done; but Johnson also has one of the most eloquent accounts in literature of the remediating flux of time, fluid, endless and indefinable. Thus Johnson's philosophical fiction of *Rasselas*, published fifty-nine years after Dryden's rendering of Ovid quoted above, can take the alternate deprivations and healing powers of time as the theme of a philosophical consolation. The situation is the gloomy atmosphere of the travellers' grieving for Pekuah, a young woman presumed dead after a kidnap; the words are spoken by Imlac the poet:

> Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired. To lose much at once is inconvenient to either, but while we glide along the stream of time, whatever we leave behind us is always lessening, and that which we approach increasing in magnitude. Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world. (Works XVI, p. 127)

[22] Sherman, *Telling Time*, pp. 205–06.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013

"Lost" stands against "acquired" in this passage; "lessening" is set against "increasing." The alternations in this advocacy of self-renewal register the opposite of mental vagrancy or neurotic vacillation. According to Sherman, Johnson found that "the imagination, operating upon time, discovers vacuity rather than fullness."[23] But Sherman may overstate the tragic manifestation of time in Johnson's writings at the expense of its power to recuperate being, a role appreciable in the accelerated "mingled" drama of Shakespeare where "the loss of one is the gain of another." We have seen that time, for Johnson, is a mode of existence "obsequious to the imagination" (*Preface to Shakespeare*, Works VII, p. 66), and the imagination itself exists in the condition of time. But in the passage from *Rasselas* "minds" and "bodies," the mental and the corporeal, the temporal and spatial, run together as the Shakespearean "course [or current] of the world." And in this collaboration between inward and outward reality, the "whole system of life is continued in motion" (Works VII, p. 62).

[23] Ibid., p. 205.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 01:03:54, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009369992.013