CHAPTER 6

Two Ways of Being Wise
Johnson, Philosophy and Montaigne

Degrees of Like-Mindedness

Compared with the celebrated intellects discussed in the foregoing chapter, the legitimacy of Montaigne within the history of philosophy remains slightly precarious. But because both writers were suspicious of system and theory when set against the uneven experience of life, it is perhaps not surprising that neither Johnson nor Montaigne has done well from the divisions of an intellectual narrative taking the history of ideas, doctrines or theories as its organizational paradigm. Where Johnson has never been accepted as a philosopher proper, Montaigne's broadly humanistic appeal has found an audience outside the stricter disciplinary limits of philosophy. Strangely perhaps, this common unfixability means they have never been easy writers to name in the same breath. Most might think of Johnson as the great rationalist and Montaigne as the preeminent skeptic, of Johnson as seeking firm principle at every turn, of Montaigne as exalting all that is wandering and noncommittal. The terms of closer comparison have therefore proved elusive. As Jack Lynch has noted:

> Johnson's attitudes toward Montaigne have received surprizingly little attention. We should expect the great essayist of the eighteenth century to say much about the great essayist of the sixteenth, often credited with inventing the genre. But in the tens of thousands of items catalogued in the Johnsonian bibliographies by Clifford, Greene, and Vance, there's not a single index entry for Montaigne.[1]

Lynch is right to be surprised, since comparison provokes tantalizing parallels: the fact that both spoke Latin; that both wrote extensively of their travels; that both are wise on the nature of happiness; and that both enjoyed the company of a favorite cat. Both are also adept at seeing the

[1] Paper delivered on April 27, 2001, at the Johnson Society of the Central Region, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

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world from opposite points of view and both offer types of Shakespearean context.[2] Montaigne, however, offers an analogue for Johnsonian critical and philosophical thinking that exceeds the circumstantial. Montaigne may be a writer less obviously part of Johnson's literary context than Dryden or Pope, but he illuminates Johnson's thinking under the aspect of broadly European, broadly humanistic, traditions of thought. His highlighting points to the stature of Johnson's critical achievement when set against more formal disciplines of intellectual history and defines Johnson's place in what Isobel Grundy has called the "scale of greatness."[3]

There are intermediaries no doubt: Dryden wrote with appreciation of the "Wise Montaigne,"[4] and he alludes to the French essayist in his poetical translation of the latter part of the third book of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things"), "Against the Fear of Death" (1685). In the Preface to his last work, *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1700), he defends his personal "rambling" in prefaces "learn'd from the Practice of honest *Montaign*."[5] Dryden's undogmatic ease in his English critical essays suggests a quality domesticated from Montaigne which produced the "gay and vigorous dissertation" Johnson could delight in ("Life of Dryden," in *Lives*, vol. II, p. 120). We have seen that Charles Cotton (he of the contributions to Isaac Walton's *The Compleat Angler*) had published a new English "Augustan" translation of Montaigne in 1685 – the same year as the volume of *Sylvae, or Poetical Miscellanies* that contained Dryden's translations of Lucretius.[6] In addition to Lucretius, both Dryden and Pope found inspiration in the same classical originals that stock the text of Montaigne – particularly Ovid, Virgil, Horace and Cicero. These and other Roman or Greek authors populate the *Essays*; they combine with Montaigne's own thought, or stand in its place.

[2] As a topic relatively neglected by the scholarly community, it has been left to the columnist David Brooks of the *New York Times* to suggest a lively – if very brief – comparison between Johnson and Montaigne. "Ease and Ardor," *New York Times* (February 28, 2014), p. 23.

[3] Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986).

[4] *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. XV: *Plays: Albion and Albanius, Don Sebastian, Amphitryon*, ed. Earl Miner and George R. Guffey (1976), p. 70.

[5] "Fables: Preface," in *The California Edition of the Works of John Dryden*, vol. VII: *Poems 1697–1700*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (2000), p. 31. Enthusiasts for Montaigne in the period included Rochester, Pope, Fielding and Sterne.

[6] A second edition of the Cotton translation, *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne . . . To Which is Added a Short Character of the Author and Translator, by Way of a Letter; Written by the Marquis Hallifax* (London: M. Gilliflower), appeared in 1693. Further printings appeared in 1700, 1711, 1738, 1743 and 1759. A revised "eighth edition" appeared "with very considerable amendments and improvements from the French edition of Peter Coste" (London: J. Pote, 1776).

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Confluences of nature and taste associate the two writers. It is true that Johnson embarked on the sorts of laborious literary endeavors – the Shakespeare edition, the *Dictionary* – the like of which, save editing Étienne de la Boétie and translating the five hundred pages of Raimond de Sebonde's *Theologia naturalis* ("Natural Theology"), seem unimaginable as tasks congenial to Montaigne. Yet as readers both confess to being easily bored. "Tediousness is the most fatal of all faults," wrote Johnson ("Life of Prior," in *Lives*, vol. III, p. 60), who once advised his friend Boswell that "A man ought to read just as inclination leads him" (Boswell, vol. I, p. 428); Montaigne is outspoken in his willingness to abandon a book at the point where it ceases to please. "I seek, in the reading of Books," wrote Montaigne, "only to please myself, by an irreproachable Diversion":

> Or, if I study, it is for no other Science, than what treats of the Knowledge of my self, and instructs me how to die and how to live well . . . I do not bite my Nails about the Difficulties I meet with in my Reading; after a Charge or two, I give them over. Should I insist upon them, I should both lose myself and Time.[7]

Montaigne, as Lynch points out, is often credited with inventing the literary form whereby Johnson made his mark as a moralist. "Montaigne and Bacon, in particular," suggests the Introduction to the Yale edition of Johnson's *Rambler*, "are the progenitors of the more straightforward moral essays" (Works III, p. xxvii). "Perhaps responding to his reading of Francis Bacon for the *Dictionary*," argues Robert D. Spector, "and surely reflecting his familiarity with . . . Montaigne . . . Johnson found the form attractive."[8] Yet Montaigne's essays do not have the discipline that Johnson – with the examples of Bacon, Cowley, Steele and Addison before him – was skillful in imposing on the organized "rambling" of his own productions. As Johnson appears to have noticed, the essays of his French predecessor are shaped by what Paul Korshin has called "colloquial tradition."[9]

The scholar of French literature Terence Cave has indicated in a recent study that the *essai*, for Montaigne, in fact corresponded closely with what

[7] "Of Books," in *Essays of Michael, Seigneur de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, 4th ed., 3 vols. (London, 1711), vol. II, pp. 116–17. Subsequent English quotations from Montaigne are taken from this edition.

[8] Robert D. Spector, *Samuel Johnson and the Essay* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 131.

[9] Paul Korshin, "The Essay and *The Rambler*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 51–66, at 63. See also Philip Smallwood, "Johnson and the Essay," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 27–50.

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we might call today a "sounding";[10] and perhaps for this reason Johnson argues in *Rambler* 158 with the pragmatism of the periodical journalist against a lazy pseudo-spontaneity made popular by the prestige of Montaigne's invented form. He describes how critics have deduced rules from lyric poetry "which they have set free from all the laws by which other compositions are confined, and allow to neglect the niceties of transition, to start into remote digressions, and to wander without restraint from one scene of imagery to another." Without naming names, Johnson moves to the prose counterpart of the lyric and ambivalently praises "A writer of later times" who "by the vivacity of his essays reconciled mankind to the same licentiousness in short dissertations; and he therefore who wants skill to form a plan, or diligence to pursue it, needs only entitle his performance an essay, to acquire the right of heaping together the collections of half his life, without order, coherence, or propriety" (Works v, p. 77).

In his habit of gathering anecdotes relating to notable, strange and curious persons and events, Montaigne commonly expresses wide-eyed wonder, incredulity (and mock-credulity), and his capacity for actual astonishment (even at the workings of his own mind) recalls this combination. By contrast Johnson writes his earlier essays within a public discourse partly borrowed from the sermon. When, once again, Johnson refers to Montaigne in *Rambler* 13 concerning the confidences of friendship, it is to disagree with him. This is the text ("De l'amitié," "Of Friendship") that the Duchess of Marlborough had once used manipulatively to extract secrets from Queen Anne:

> That such a fallacy could be imposed upon any human understanding, or that an author could have advanced a position so remote from truth and reason, any otherwise than as a declaimer, to shew to what extent he could stretch his imagination, and with what strength he could press his principle, would scarcely have been credible, had not this lady kindly shewn us how far weakness may be deluded, or indolence amused. (*Rambler* 13, Works III, p. 71)

The "kindly" of "kindly shewn" has its irony here.

[10] Terence Cave, *How to Read Montaigne* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 21. The French word *essai*, Cave suggests, "means 'test' or 'trial,' and in the sixteenth century it was not used to designate an established genre; the individual titled pieces of which the volume is made up are called 'chapters,' not 'essays.'" Cave goes on to observe that "The title *Essais* denotes not the literary genre to which the work belongs but the mode of thinking and writing it embodies. Drawing on the whole semantic field from which the word comes, Montaigne speaks of his written thoughts as 'trials,' 'attempts,' 'soundings'" (p. 21).

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Johnson, Montaigne and Reason's Instability

The two Yale volumes of *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Works VII and VIII) register no allusions to Montaigne; none appear in the Yale text of *Rasselas* (Works XVI). Yet Montaigne's array of topics remains tantalizingly prescient of Johnson: "That to Study Philosophy Is to Learn How to Die," "Of Experience," "That the Mind Hinders Itself," "Against Idleness," "That Our Desires Are Augmented by Difficulty," "The Inconstancy of Our Actions," "Of the Uncertainty of Our Judgment," and so forth. These are not insignificant signposts of Montaigne's mind; but they equally characterize Johnson's. And in neither author is theme entirely separate from form – from a way of thinking that brings comparison closer. That Florio's 1603 Elizabethan Montaigne informed profound moments of Shakespeare's plays has been widely entertained and equally firmly denied, and in one place only ("Of Cannibals") is Montaigne uncontroversially a source.[11] This is the speech in *The Tempest* by the old counsellor Gonzalo on life lived according to nature and is one of the passages that Johnson annotated without "censure or approbation" (Works VII, p. 105). Johnson reprints a note from Warburton's edition of 1747 that reads: "All this Dialogue is a fine Satire in the *Utopian* Treatises of Government, and the impracticable inconsistent Schemes therein recommended."[12] The evidence of Shakespeare as English cousin to Montaigne is supported when Montaigne's themes correspond with philosophical issues arising in a dramatic form in the plays. Thus William H. Hamlin has given the example of "conscience" – of compelling importance to Johnson's own moral and personal life. "Like the essays of Montaigne," writes Hamlin, "the plays of Shakespeare abound with explorations." "One of the primary instances," he claims with respect to Montaigne's "Of Conscience," "is

[11] First suggested by Shakespeare's editor Edward Capell in *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Hughs, 1779–80), vol. II, p. 63. For the wisdom, or otherwise, of seeking or assuming links between Shakespeare and Montaigne see Philip Smallwood, "Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Philosophical Anti-Philosophy," in *Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 77–87.

[12] Samuel Johnson (ed.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), vol. I, p. 35. In a study of "Shakespeare's Argument with Montaigne" Fred Parker has taken the *Tempest* parallel into account, and he cautiously suggests that the evidence "makes it tenable, perhaps plausible, to suppose that Shakespeare was reading Montaigne with close attention in the 1600s." "Shakespeare's Argument with Montaigne," *CQ*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1999), pp. 1–18, at 2. A somewhat more emphatic sense of the relationship, where more weight is placed on the connection, has been outlined by T. Oliver in "Shakespeare and Montaigne: A Tendency of Thought," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 54 (May 1980), pp. 43–59.

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that of Claudius in *Hamlet*."[13] Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt in their selection from Florio's translation point to the relation between the bastard Edmund in *King Lear* and Montaigne's "Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children."[14] But they also revive the suggestion that "To Study Philosophy Is to Learn How to Die" (Montaigne's essay reasoning in the vein of Lucretius against the fear of death) influenced the Duke's famous address to the condemned Claudio in *Measure for Measure*:

> Be absolute for death; or death, or life
> Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life:
> If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
> That none but fools would keep . . .
> . . . Thy best of Rest is sleep.

With this argument Johnson, who notoriously did fear to die, could have little sympathy. He wrote in his 1765 notes to the same play that: "Here Dr. *Warburton* might have found a sentiment worthy of his animadversion. I cannot without indignation find *Shakespear* saying, that *death is only sleep*, lengthening out his exhortation by a sentence which in the *Friar* is impious, in the reasoner is foolish, and in the poet trite and vulgar."[15]

Doubtless other particular parallels can be invoked. Johnson can be said to "argue" with Montaigne on various issues within the disciplines of moral thought and its persistent topics. But Johnson's comparability with Montaigne is best observed at the level suggested by Matthew Arnold's reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and by his reference to the unstable nature of experience that emerges from the *Essays*:

> Shakespeare conceived this play with his mind running on Montaigne, and placed its action and its hero in Montaigne's atmosphere and world. What is this world? It is the world of man viewed as a being *ondoyant et divers*,

[13] "The play-within-the-play is . . . imagined to function in a manner quite structurally similar to that of judicial torture in Montaigne's account." William H. Hamlin, *Montaigne's English Journey: Reading the Essays in Shakespeare's Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 114–15.

[14] Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt, eds., *Shakespeare's Montaigne* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2014), pp. xxv–xxvi. On this volume see Jonathan Bate, "The Shaping of Shakespeare: Two Great Writers Who Were of One Mind," review of *Shakespeare's Montaigne*, *New Statesman* (July 4–10, 2014), pp. 42–44. For other discussions see also Robert Ellrodt, *Montaigne et Shakespeare: l'émergence de la conscience moderne* (Paris: José Corti, 2011). For an older study see George Taylor, *Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

[15] The passage from *Measure for Measure* (III.i.4–13) and Johnson's note are both quoted from Johnson's *Plays*, vol. I, pp. 312–14. Warburton had found a source for the passage in Cicero but commended Shakespeare on the grounds that "the Epicurean insinuation is, with great judgment, omitted in the imitation." Johnson (ed.), *Plays*, vol. I, p. 314.

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> balancing and indeterminate, the plaything of cross motives and shifting impulses, swayed by a thousand subtle influences, physiological and pathological.[16]

"Shakespeare's plays," Johnson writes, with *Hamlet* very much in mind, "are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies" (Works VII, p. 66), an explicit repudiation of John Heming and Henry Condell's division of the dramatic *oeuvre* into "Tragedies," "Comedies" and "Histories" in 1623. Johnson's passage on Shakespeare's "mingled" drama (Works VII, p. 66) offers likewise symmetries of loss and gain, but he refuses an account of Shakespeare's formal success, and the energy of his passage suggests, as we have seen, that he would not want the plays, or indeed the world, to be different. Johnson replaces the criteria of literary categories with the sovereignty of diversified experience – "the whole system of life," "the sum of life" and "the course of the world." (Works VII, pp. 62, 63, 66). The praise of *Hamlet* is the praise of "variety" (Works VIII, p. 1011).

This variety is the philosophical hallmark of *Rasselas*. Johnson had had the poet Imlac claim that "The causes of good and evil . . . are so various and uncertain, so often entangled with each other, so diversified by various relations, and so much subject to accidents which cannot be foreseen, that he who would fix his condition upon incontestable reasons of preference, must live and die inquiring and deliberating" (Works XVI, p. 67). Montaigne had explained in "Of Experience" how careful an observer of human nature he had come to be:

> I let few things about me, whether Countenances, Humours, or Discourses, that serve to that purpose, escape me. I study all, both what I am to avoid, and what I am to do. Also in my Friends, I discover by their Productions their inward Inclinations, not to order this infinite variety of so diverse and distracted Actions into certain Genders and Chapters, and distinctly to distribute my parcels and divisions under known Heads and Classes.[17]

[16] Matthew Arnold, "Hamlet Once More," *Pall Mall Gazette* (1884), reprinted in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 168–71, at 170. See also Jacob Feis, *Shakespeare and Montaigne: An Endeavour to Explain the Tendency of Hamlet from Allusions in Contemporary Works* (1884; New York: AMS Press, 1970).

[17] Montaigne, *Essays*, vol. III, p. 407. The original "Bordeaux copy," or "Édition Villey-Saulnier," is the last to have been published in Montaigne's lifetime. The original reads as follows: "J'estudie tout: ce qu'il me faut fuyr, ce qu'il me faut suyvre. Ainsin à mes amys je descouvre, par leurs productions, leurs inclinations internes; non pour renger cette infinie varieté d'actions, si diverses et si descoupées, à certains genres et chapitres, et distribuer distinctement mes partages et divisions en classes et regions cogneues." *Les essais*, 5th ed., ed. P. Villey and V.-L. Saulnier (Paris, 1588), chapter 13, quoted here from the "Villey edition of the *Essais* with corresponding digital page images from

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Montaigne connects these reflections with lines from Virgil's second *Georgic* devoted to cultivating varieties of vine:

> sed neque quam multae species nec nomina quae sint,
> est numerus.
>
> (lines 103–04)

[But for the many kinds, or the names they bear, there is no numbering.[18]]

From this locus in Roman poetry, appealing no doubt to the specialist expertise of the proprietor of a vineyard, Montaigne looks forward to Dryden's Lucretian or Epicurean vision. Montaigne expands a musical metaphor into a celebration of the good that comes from the inescapable mixture:

> We must learn to suffer what we cannot evade. Our Life, like the Harmony of the World, is compos'd of contrary Things, of several Notes, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, spritely and solemn; and the *Musician* who should only affect one of these, what would he be able to do? He must know how to make use of them all, and to mix them; and we likewise, the *Goods* and *Evils* which are consubstantial with Life: Our Being cannot subsist without this Mixture, and the one are not less necessary to it than the other.[19]

Such is the positive, consolatory, side of Johnson's like-mindedness with Montaigne.

But there is a darker aspect. Perhaps again with the ambiguous atmosphere of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in view, Johnson shares with Montaigne a sense of the limits and deceptions of Reason, and a conception of the boundary beyond which stability of judgment cannot be sustained. *Rasselas* once more invites comparisons. "Disorders of intellect," Johnson had Imlac claim (shortly after the travellers in *Rasselas* have encountered the delusions of an astronomer who believes he can control the weather),

the Bordeaux copy," ed. P. Desan (Director of The Montaigne Project), p. 1076, www.lib.uchicago.

[18] Virgil, "Georgic II," in *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, with an English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 142–43.

[19] Montaigne, "Of Experience," in *Essays*, vol. III, pp. 426–27. Cf. Montaigne's "Bordeaux copy" (1588): "Il faut apprendre à souffrir ce qu'on ne peut eviter. Nostre vie est composée, comme l'armonie du monde, de choses contraires, aussi de divers tons, douz et aspres, aigus et plats, mols et graves. Le musicien qui n'en aymeroit que les uns, que voudroit il dire? Il faut qu'il s'en sçache servir en commun et les mesler. Et nous aussi les biens et les maux, qui sont consubstantiels à nostre vie. Nostre estre ne peut sans ce meslange, et y est l'une? bande non moins necessaire que l'autre" (Montaigne, *Les essais*, "Villey edition," pp. 1089–90).

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"happen much more often than superficial observers will easily believe. Perhaps, if we speak with rigorous exactness, no human mind is in its right state." Imlac then reflects on the difference between normal psychological rivalries between Reason and Imagination, and madness proper:

> There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason, which can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose ideas will come and go at his command. No man will be found in whose mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize, and force him to hope or fear beyond the limits of sober probability.

– concluding with a move from "imagination" to "fancy" (of which one meaning given in the *Dictionary* is "Caprice; humour, whim"):

> All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity; but while this power is such as we can control and repress, it is not visible to others, nor considered as any depravation of the mental faculties: it is not pronounced madness but when it becomes ungovernable, and apparently influences speech or action. (Works XVI, pp. 150–51)

In suggesting the unattainability of the mind's "right state," Johnson writes in the vein of Montaigne's "*Apology* for Raimond de Sebonde" where the effort to live according to nature is defeated by nature:

> 'Tis not only *Feavers*, *Debauches*, and great Accidents that overthrow our Judgments; the least things in the World will do it. We are not to doubt, tho we are not sensible of it, but that if a *continued Feaver* can overwhelm the Soul, a *Tertian* will in some proportionate measure alter it. If an *Apoplexy* can stupifie, and totally extinguish the sight of our Understanding, we are not to doubt but that a great *Cold* will dazle it.[20]

Such parallels may fall short of the standard required to reveal the unambiguous influence of Montaigne upon Johnson; they underpin, nevertheless, the suggestive comparability of the two writers. Montaigne expresses the precariousness of Reason's "right state" on the foundation that there is "hardly one single Hour in a Man's whole Life, wherein our Judgment is in its due Place and right Condition." As Johnson was likewise to observe, the proximity of sense to insanity is unnerving, and the marks of madness, the tipping point of the astronomer's malaise in *Rasselas*, regularly show up too late for therapy: The "Malady does not very easily discover itself," wrote Montaigne, "unless it be extream and past Remedy."[21]

[20] Montaigne, "*Apology* for Raimond de Sebonde," in *Essays*, vol. II, p. 356. [21] Ibid., pp. 356–57.

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Intertraffic of the Mind

Johnson and Montaigne commonly address humanity's same essential problems: the questions "how to live and how to die?" In the answers available from religion there is similarity and dissimilarity: "Like Montaigne," writes Greg Clingham, "Johnson's ethics is based on Christian worship and theology, though he distinguishes between absolute issues of religion and the relative matters of social and personal experience."[22] Where the two writers combine is suggested by the account of Montaigne's general influence in the English eighteenth century proposed by Fred Parker, who describes "the presence of the thinking self within the process of thinking."[23] It is in this embodied thought – a way of thinking and living while learning to die – that we see the "intertraffic" between Johnson and Montaigne on terms that inform both the Shakespearean criticism and *Rasselas*.[24]

"Que sçay-je?" ("What do I know?") asks Montaigne, and exhibits the quizzical, unassuming humility in the face of the unknowable universe that goes with a reenergized determination to explore the world of mind as the mind presents itself to itself. Montaigne's breezy diffidence contrasts with the anguished soliloquies addressed to self of Johnson's *Diaries, Prayers and Annals* (Works I) and with the anxious self-inspection to be found at times in the *Rambler* (Works III–V). Johnson may indeed make a clearer distinction than Montaigne between the special case of religious observance through worship and prayer and the poetical expression of personal experience (as in the "Life of Waller" [*Lives*, vol. II, pp. 52–54]); but both writers incarnate the "certainty that is still struggling" – the questioning humanity that is the Wittgensteinian territory of modern philosophy.[25] As

[22] Greg Clingham, *Johnson, Writing, and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 33.

[23] Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 46.

[24] The phrase "*intertraffique of the minde*" was deployed by Samuel Daniel in praise of Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's *Essais*. Samuel Daniel, "To my deere friend M. *Iohn Florio*, concerning *his translation of* Montaigne," line 62. Prefixed to the 1603 *Essayes*; quoted by Hamlin, *Montaigne's English Journey*, p. 34.

[25] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p. 46e. The comparison is not too far-fetched. In a letter of September 8, 1945, to his friend Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein announced that "The other day I read Johnson's 'Life of Pope' & liked it very much," and in the following month Wittgenstein expressed his fondness for Johnson's *Prayers and Meditations*. On October 6, 1945, he donated to Malcolm a copy of H. R. Allenson's edition of the *Prayers and Meditations* (1785; 3rd ed. 1928) and wrote to him as follows in the accompanying letter: "This is the little book I promised to send you. It seems to be out of print so I'm sending you my own copy. I wish to say that normally I can't read any printed prayers

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many of his letters, prayers and diaries reveal, Johnson's criteria of judgment may be of the heart while simultaneously founded on principles amenable to a rigorously intellectual defence, and in the private departments of life he evinces a sensibility he was often ready to ridicule in its public displays. But given the extent and the eloquence of their expression, such experience cannot be completely divorced from Johnson's encounters with the dark interiors of human nature evoked by Shakespeare and others – by what Rapin had called the "abyss" of the heart.[26]

Johnson and Montaigne epitomize alternative ways of being human; and the contrast between them again makes clearer how his emotional life sustained Johnson's criticism. We feel the pride he took in personal achievements, in the lonely labors of the heroic self who movingly describes bringing the *Dictionary* to a close (Works XVIII, pp. 111–13). Such a personality seems discrepant with Montaigne's tendency (as the "I" of the *Essays*) to defer, abnegate or shed the specific self of Michel de Montaigne and to adopt the aloof nonchalance of French aristocratic containment with its arrogance of humility and self-deferral. The proud professional author of the English eighteenth century might find reason to despise this – as Johnson disdained the "Epicurean deities" to which, in his "Life of Cowley," he compared the Metaphysical poets "making remarks on the actions of men, and the vicissitudes of life, without interest [i.e. personal involvement, and], without emotion" (*Lives*, vol. I, p. 201).

Johnson's homage to the writer's public role stands symbolically against the rewards of a vineyard and a private library in the rural Dordogne. "Commit yourself again to the current of the world" is Imlac's consolatory wisdom in *Rasselas* (Works XVI, p. 127). As his work as a diplomatic intermediary will testify, Montaigne's own appetite for public life was never completely exhausted. But when Montaigne reflects on the miseries wrought by contending ideologies, and remembers the bigotry of France's barbarous religious wars, his skeptical inclination is to stand aside. "Je m'abstien" ("I abstain") is his motto.

When Johnson is issuing his general caution against solitary retreat from the world in *Adventurer* 126 he exempts the "great names" and in so doing

but that Johnson's impressed me by being *human*. Perhaps you'll see what I mean if you read them. As likely as not you won't like them *at all*. Because you will probably not look at them from the *angle* from which I see them. (But you might.) If you don't like the book throw it away." Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir, with a Biographical Sketch by G. H. von Wright*, 2nd ed. with Wittgenstein's letters to Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 98–99.

[26] René Rapin, *Rapin's Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie*, trans. Thomas Rymer (London, 1674), p. 38.

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accommodates the rationale for Montaigne's exit from his turbulent earlier career as Mayor of Bordeaux. Ordinary individuals are disappointed, writes Johnson, "from want of considering" "that those whom they aspire to imitate carried with them to their country seats minds full fraught with subjects of reflection, the consciousness of great merit, the memory of illustrious actions, the knowledge of important events, and the seeds of mighty designs to be ripened by future meditation" (Works II, p. 473). Johnson never published an autobiography, and to Boswell's regret he burned the pages of his diary. Montaigne, who enjoyed no Boswell equivalent, writes about, and out of, the self. That he might speak representatively for humanity, he makes himself the subject of the *Essais*. Johnson writes more consciously in a context of professional authorship, under the stimulus of other critics and rivals, and with the constraints of a reading public. He is less at ease with his person and situation than Montaigne. His susceptibility to guilt and anxiety, his propensity to remorse and his social appetite contrast with Montaigne's self-forgiveness, self-acceptance and self-sufficiency. If there is in both writers an instinct to look inward to find what is out there, for Montaigne, the resultant writing seems performed with "scant . . . presumption of exposure to criticism" (to adapt a remark of Henry James on the first-person narrative). For Johnson, more painfully, the process approximates to what James calls "the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation."[27]

Hamlet's evasion of finalist answers recalls the skepticism of Montaigne. On the inconstancy of the self, Montaigne foreshadows Hume, who writes that mankind is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which . . . are in a perpetual flux."[28] But Montaigne also anticipates Imlac's attempt to console the broken-hearted travellers when he reminds them that "our minds, like our bodies are in continual flux" (Works XVI, p. 127). Johnson could observe his own "disturbances of the mind very near to madness" (Works I, p. 264); Montaigne figures the indecision of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and he resists the Last Word that *Rasselas* also withholds: the work ends with "A Conclusion in which Nothing is Concluded." To a greater extent than Hume, Johnson and Montaigne could reach audiences beyond those of philosophy. In this, and with all their radical differences weighed in the balance, they unite moments in a

[27] Henry James, Preface to *The Ambassadors*, 2 vols. (1903; London: Macmillan, 1923), vol. I, p. xxi.
[28] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature . . . Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, 3 vols. (London, 1739–40), vol. I, p. 439.

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history of mind suggestive of the historian David Cannadine's appeal to "the undivided past."[29]

Montaigne and the *Lives*

Howard Erskine-Hill has written of the *Lives* as containing "narratives of history," surmising that "[their] great feature is the way [Johnson] sets forth the vulnerability of . . . people in the revolutions and storms of high politics." "There was rarely safe or stable life during these violent changes," he suggests, "and many people . . . put their hopes and lives in jeopardy."[30] Greg Clingham, meanwhile, focusing more on the literary and philosophical contexts, has noted how far the *Lives* is a comic enterprise, dramatizing and transforming a Christian theme "shared by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Montaigne's essays, and Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*."[31] Shakespearean playfulness has analogues in both Johnson and Montaigne, while both famously appreciate the ironies of a life wasted in the miseries of fearing to die. The poets in the *Lives*, major, middling or minor, Johnson sees in the company of others who are sometimes like them and sometimes not, sometimes living happily on the whole and sometimes miserably. They may be models of (not particularly attractive) self-control, like Addison; eccentric like Jonathan Swift, or reckless, destructive of others and self-destructive, like Richard Savage; sometimes hugely productive, like Dryden, or famous for their exquisite one-off achievements, like Pomfret; they may be private and retiring like Cowley or assiduous managers of their own celebrity like Pope. As Freya Johnston has shown, small things, down to the minute incidentals in the life of a minor poet, cohere with, and help constitute, Johnson's "grandeur of generality" ("Life of Cowley," in *Lives*, vol. 1, p. 220).[32]

The deaths of the poets are part of their lives, regardless of how variously those lives are lived and however suddenly, slowly, predictably or unpredictably death sweeps them away. Montaigne's "That to Study Philosophy Is to Learn How to Die" (here quoted again from the 1711 fourth edition

[29] David Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: History beyond Our Differences* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).
[30] Howard Erskine-Hill, "Fire under the Ashes: Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* as Narratives of History," *The Interpretation of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 120–64, at 122–23.
[31] 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, at 189.
[32] Freya Johnston, *Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking 1709–1791* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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of Cotton's 1685 translation) teaches a similar truth. Montaigne lists the miscellaneous causes by which individuals have encountered their ends:

> To omit fevers and Pleurisies, who would ever have imagin'd, that a Duke of *Brittany* should be press'd to Death in a Crowd, as that Duke was, at the Entry of Pope *Clement* into *Lyons*? Have we not seen one of our kings kill'd at a Tilting; and did not one of his Ancestors die by the justle of a Hog? *Aeschylus*, being threatened with the Fall of a House, was to much Purpose so circumspect to avoid that Danger, when he was knock'd o'th' Head by a Tortoise-shell falling out of an Eagle's Talons in the Fields. Another was choak'd with a Grape-stone.[33]

– and so on, to almost comic effect.

In Johnson's world of the English poets, death may come progressively. So Swift, who in the *Vanity of Human Wishes*, anticipating Johnson's passage in the *Life*, "expires a driv'ler and a show" (line 318; Works VI, p. 106). The end may arrive from the self-abuse of John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, "worn away by a long illness," or by sudden accident, as Thomas Otway, who died (allegedly) by choking on the first mouthful of a bread roll eaten in haste. Rochester's contemporary the Earl of Dorset was "tossed with the King in an open boat sixteen hours, in very rough and cold weather, on the coast of Holland," after which "his health ... declined; and on Jan. 19 1705–6, he died at Bath." Milton died "by a quiet and silent expiration," Addison after a "lingering decay," and King, before his death, "grew weaker by degrees, and died on Christmas-day." Richard Duke, on the other hand, "having returned from an entertainment," was "found dead the next morning." Hughes died on the very day his new tragedy was first performed. Parnell, having been appointed to an ecclesiastical post "worth four hundred pounds a year," "enjoyed his preferment little more than a year." Dryden, concluding the long life of a great poet, "died in Gerrard-street of a mortification in his leg." Congreve died after his coach overturned on the way to Bath to seek treatment for the gout, and before he expired the accident caused him "a pain in his side." Fenton, Johnson quotes Pope as saying, "*died of indolence*," but he adds that "his immediate distemper was the gout." Of Gay, Johnson relates, "a violent fit at last seized him, and hurried him to the grave ... with more precipitance than he had ever known" ("Rochester," in *Lives*, vol. II, p. 12; "Otway," in vol. II, p. 26; "Dorset," in vol. II, p. 62; "King," in vol. II, p. 184; "Duke," in vol. II, p. 181; "Hughes," in vol. III, p. 41;

[33] Montaigne, *Essays*, vol. I, p. 89.

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"Parnell," in vol. II, p. 193; "Dryden," in vol. II, p. 108; "Congreve," in vol. III, p. 70; "Fenton," in vol. III, p. 91; "Gay," in vol. III, p. 100).

Both writers chart routes to a common fate.[34] And as we shall see in the final chapter of this study, the characters of the *Lives* count likewise not as individuals only, but as a "species" (*Preface to Shakespeare*, Works VII, p. 62).[35] As Macbeth contemplates the death of Lady Macbeth, so the poets, like ourselves, die in the midst of life, thinking on tomorrow, caught while designing to live. Johnson's gloss on the speech, quoted in the previous chapter (Works VII, pp. 41–42), reinforces this moral of universal self-delusion that tomorrow must always come. Montaigne and Johnson correspondingly attacked the confident claims of any overarching theory – Montaigne in his critique of natural religion in his "*Apology* for Raymond de Sebonde" and Johnson in his withering treatment of Soame Jenyns. Johnson is skeptical of philosophical assurances in the portraits of *Rasselas*, and his criticism of the knowing philosophical complacency of Pope's *Essay on Man*, the poem on which Jenyns had relied in part for his insights, is only a little less withering: "Surely," Johnson complains after summarizing the versified arguments, "a man of no very comprehensive search may venture to say that he has heard all this before" ("Life of Pope," in *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 77). The subjects that bond Johnson with Montaigne may be commonplaces of moral life that have been widely discussed; but Johnson did not, and could not, dismiss Montaigne in the same terms as those in which he spurned Pope's *Essay on Man*. Significant among the shared philosophical issues that Johnson's writings bring to the fore is the penetration of both life and criticism by the great theme of Time; it is the further unfolding of this theme, philosophically and historically, that constitutes the next stage of our enquiry.

[34] The accumulation of departures from life reflects a truth of some pertinence to Montaigne personally, who had himself nearly died in a riding accident, and had lost his brother Arnaud de Saint-Martin to a blow on the head from a tennis ball.

[35] With more solemnity on the matter than either, Byron writes that "The infinite variety of lives conduct but to death, and the infinity of wishes lead but to disappointment." *Byron's Letters and Journals*, vol. VIII: *"Born for opposition"* (1821), ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1978), pp. 19–20. In this bitter truth he is particularly thinking of the moral of Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes* of 1749.

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