CHAPTER 1

Johnson's Compassion

Johnson defines "compassion" in his *Dictionary* as "Pity; commiseration; sorrow for the sufferings of others; painful sympathy." In an essay first published in the *Johnsonian News Letter* entitled "What Johnson Means to Me," the distinguished American poet and classical translator David Ferry provides a compelling gloss on Johnson's quintessentially compassionate nature, and he includes extensive quotations from poems he has based on Johnsonian sources. He writes that "Johnson is, to my mind, in his prose and in his verse, one of the masters of pity, unsentimental pity founded on his awareness of our situation in a universe we cannot fully explicate; and it is founded on his awareness that our limitations, our vulnerability, are what we, all fellow creatures, share, the actualities of our natures and our circumstances."[1]

As Ferry suggests, the literary world has, perhaps, no greater illustration of the mastery of unsentimental pity than the writings of Johnson and the lessons taught by his life. Examples of his compassion in the daily practice of life are well documented by his biographers. There is the organized chaos of Johnson's London household with its family unit of eccentrics, unfortunates and improbable dependents precariously gathered under a single roof. Such a charitable mode of domestic life has been often remarked, and in speaking of Johnson's "compassion" I have no wish to ignore these everyday kindnesses to those less fortunate than himself, materially or intellectually, nor to pass over the multitude of Johnson's generous acts. These include his mentoring of other writers and his extensive ghosting for the literary and professional advantage of friends. Of these latter favors, the full extent is even now not finally known; and

[1] David Ferry, "What Johnson Means to Me," *JNL*, vol. 55, no. 2 (September 2004), pp. 7–10, at 7, reproduced as the final chapter of *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 262–67, at p. 265. For further discussion of the "underrated David Ferry" in connection with Johnson see Jeffrey Meyers, "Samuel Johnson and the Poetry of David Ferry," *JNL*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 2021), pp. 23–27.

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given the difficulties of attribution, collaborative authorship and anonymity, they may never be revealed entirely. Johnson's offices of compassionate care famously extended to the proper tending of his domestic cat, and this, with much else, is an everyday instance of what the philosopher Michael Ignatieff calls the "ordinary virtues."[2] But my focus in what follows will be to illustrate the intellectual and emotional structure of Johnson's compassion. "Compassion" is the term I elect to capture Johnson's artistically forged but spontaneous responsiveness to the sufferings of fellow humanity in the particular case. I'll highlight two of many moments from the critical and biographical writings where in this spirit the reality of human frailty is faced.

The publication of volume XIX of the Yale edition of the works of Johnson, devoted to his biographical writings, has made his practice in portraying the lives of others more extensively available, while in a well-known essay on the theory behind the practice, *Rambler* 60, Johnson had defined a compositional standard applicable alike to historians, biographers and writers of fiction. His paper opens with a somewhat formal reflection on how readers participate imaginatively in the emotional life of the characters of a narrative, whether factual or fictional:

> All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination, that realises the event, however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever emotions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves. (Works III, pp. 318–19)

In the life-history of real persons Johnson's "Life of Savage" has always served as an eminent example of Johnson's sympathetic imagination. I will repeat its famously clear-sighted closing strokes: "Those are no proper judges of his conduct, who have slumbered away their time on the down of plenty, nor will any wise man easily presume to say, 'Had I been in *Savage*'s condition, I should have lived or written better than *Savage*'" (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 188). The remark expresses an acceptance of those profoundly different from ourselves in ways we may not always approve. Here tolerance for Savage – a convicted murderer – is tinged with Johnson's sense of

[2] Cf. Michael Ignatieff, *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). For a collection of essays on the historical, theoretical and political meanings and dimensions of "compassion" see Kristine Steenbergh and Katherine Ibbett, eds., *Compassion in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Feeling and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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having been equipped by personal experience of penury, plus the requisite imagination, to give due credit to Savage's character and poetry. Johnson shows how moral and aesthetic judgments draw as much critical attention to the moral and aesthetic qualifications of the person making the judgment as they do to the merits or deficiencies of the person judged. No writer's writings are ever hermetically sealed off from their lives. The hardships Savage suffered, together with his self-inflicted misfortunes, are both the liberating and the limiting conditions of his artistic achievement.

It is as an aspect of Ferry's "unsentimental pity" that I will explore such nuances of Johnson's "sorrow for the sufferings of others." This is pervasive in Johnson's prose and suggests a consciousness in the presence of fragile humanity revealing Johnson's own vulnerability as well as ours. In the passages I examine, the boundaries between observer and observed, between the describer and the described, seem simultaneously both profound and nonexistent; there is a homage to psychological and material detail, what Ferry calls "the actualities of our natures and our circumstances."

Johnson, Ferry and Pope's Body

The merits of my first passage are best understood through one of David Ferry's own poems, where Ferry versifies an excerpt from Johnsonian biography and helps elicit the compassionate perspective I wish to define. The piece is called, simply, "Johnson on Pope – from the Lives of the Poets"; first published in 1960, it is reprinted in Ferry's 1999 collection *Of No Country I Know*. The poem condenses a passage in the "Life of Pope" where Pope is depicted at war with his own body, and the experience is one of absences and silences combined with ferocity. Ferry reveals how Pope's physical disability is manifest in his nocturnal habits and neurotically inconvenient demands. Here is the poem:

> He was protuberant behind, before;
> Born beautiful, he had grown up a spider;
> Stature so low, he could not sit at table
> Like taller men: in middle life so feeble
> He could not dress himself, nor stand upright
> Without a canvas bodice; in the long night
> Made servants peevish with his demands for coffee;
> Trying to make his spider's legs less skinny,
> He wore three pair of stockings, which a maid
> Had to draw on and off; one side was contracted.
> But his face was not displeasing, his eyes were vivid.

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He found it very difficult to be clean
Of unappeasable malignity;
But in his eyes the shapeless vicious scene
Composed itself; of folly he made beauty.[3]

The putative connection between Pope's bodily form (as cause) and his satirical malignity (the supposed effect) has long fuelled the defensive vengeance of his enemies and victims (as Johnson's various disabilities – blindness, deafness, scrofula, Tourette's and so on – are read back into features of his disabled judgments that people have not liked[4]). This tradition is touched on here, but it is transcended poetically: Pope's spider-beauty recollects the insect poet of his famous self-satire from *Guardian* 91 (June 25, 1713). The passage comically features the club for "intractable dwarfs" where "The table was so high, that one who came by chance to the door, seeing our chins just above the pewter dishes, took us for a circle of men that sat ready to be shaved."[5] The starkness of Ferry's poetical portrait may also hark back somewhat to Pope's personal incarnation of the "Beauty that shocks you" of the Sporus-bug-with-gilded-wings of the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (line 309).[6] The incongruity captures the insect brilliance evoked by Ferry's poem, as by Pope's. But it can also, I suggest, cast new light on the prose poem: the sequence of paragraphs in Johnson's "Life of Pope." On this passage, which I shall quote in a moment, Ferry bases his stripped-down creative versification, and distillation, of Johnson's spare eighteenth-century prose. Pope's "unappeasable malignity" is a direct lift from the preceding pages of the "Life" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 49). Johnson here summarizes the antagonism of Cibber to Pope. The borrowed phrase, from the implications of which Johnson does not draw back, places Pope centrally within the "shapeless vicious scene" of the

[3] Originally published in David Ferry, *On the Way to the Island* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1960), and reprinted in his *Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 86. Reprinted here with the permission of the poet.

[4] Lonsdale notes that Pope, impressed by Johnson's *London*, tried through Lord Gower to recommend him for a degree at Dublin, but that in the letter, which Sir Joshua Reynolds was unwilling to show to Johnson, Pope mentioned Johnson's "infirmity of the convulsive kind, that attacks him sometimes, so as to make Him a sad Spectacle." See *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. IV, p. 194 and n.; *Lives*, vol. IV, p. 236.

[5] *The Guardian, with Notes and Illustrations*, 2 vols. (London, 1828), vol. II, p. 32. In *Guardian* 92 (June 26, 1713) Pope appears as the "little poet": "The figure of the man is odd enough: he is a lively little creature, with long arms and legs: a spider is no ill emblem of him" (vol. II, p. 34).

[6] *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939–69), vol. IV, p. 118.

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world's folly. This scene is the battleground of the combative Pope. It is the objective reality of one who, like William Blake, "will not cease from Mental Fight."[7] It is what Pope sees and despises. But it is also a product of the crystalline interior vision he projects onto the screen of the "shapeless" exterior world brought into focus by his poetry. Pope's "Born beautiful" in the second line of the poem is similarly held together with his composing, unifying gaze, and through the comprehension that makes folly beautiful in the last. How can folly ever count as beauty? Pope tells us how. The effect is redemptive of this strangely refined and unusual specimen of the malign who, as the self-appointed moral voice of his generation, "found it very difficult to be clean."

Ferry's destabilizing shift between the high moral and the brutally physical replicates Johnson's passage very closely. It rests on key expressions selected and recombined from the Johnsonian text. Ferry's creative translation draws attention to the neglected constituents of its source and reenacts sympathetically its poetic tempo and its architecture of phrase. Christopher Ricks has written rightly of Ferry's translation of "haunted prose to haunted poetry," and Ferry renders afresh a Johnsonian sensitivity to the concrete immediacy of the abstract noun "suffering."[8] I quote the following from the third edition of the *Lives*. This is the last to have been published in Johnson's lifetime and serves as the copytext of Roger Lonsdale's magnificent four-volume Oxford edition:

> The person of Pope is well known not to have been formed by the nicest model. He has, in his account of the *Little Club*, compared himself to a spider, and by another is described as protuberant behind and before. He is said to have been beautiful in his infancy; but he was of a constitution originally feeble and weak; and as bodies of tender frame are easily distorted, his deformity was probably in part the effect of his application. His stature was so low, that, to bring him to a level with common tables, it was necessary to raise his seat. But his face was not displeasing, and his eyes were animated and vivid. (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 54)

"[B]odies of tender frame" and their propensity to easy distortion is language that might equally apply to a range of animate and inanimate entities and objects, obedient to Newtonian laws. There is the art of surprise: the "stature . . . so low . . . But his face. . . not displeasing." The

[7] From Blake's Preface to *Milton a Poem in 12 Books*, in *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), vol. I, p. 318.

[8] Christopher Ricks, "David Ferry and the Shades of the Dead," in *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 327.

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phrasing marks a contrast opening out to express the incongruities and complexities of the human individual, and recalls the beauty and intensity evident in the striking Roubiliac busts of Pope and the delicate features of the Jervas portrait. Johnson is meeting the "animated and vivid" eyes of Pope at this point, and he inverts the conventional cause-and-effect relationship cherished by his enemies between Pope's disfiguring, disfigured poetry and deformed physique – a theme of literary histories and popular introductions alike: His "application" to poetry is now the cause; his "deformity" the effect.[9] Ferry need make minimal change when shaping the line in his modern poetical "Johnson on Pope": "But his face was not displeasing, his eyes were vivid."

The unnamed "another" remarked at the start of Johnson's paragraph is Voltaire, whom Johnson identifies by name in the surviving manuscript version of the "Life of Pope." In a footnote to this passage in the three-volume Yale *Lives*, the editors note that the phrase "by another" is added in the third edition, and Johnson gets reprimanded for making the change and for not checking his sources: "SJ should have left his sentence as it was first written," they opine (Works XXIII, p. 1163, n. 8). Perhaps he should, but the rebuke makes too little allowance for what gains by suppression in the backbeat and rhythm of Johnson's poetical prose. These evolve creatively through successive versions – manuscript alterations and then proofs of the first edition – toward a final printed manifestation in the third, and show how different is the intention and pitch of Johnson's poetical prose from the obligations of editorial procedure. Voltaire had recorded his impression of the person of Pope, whose company he had shared, as "un petit homme contrefait, bossu par devant et par derrière." This becomes the "protuberant behind and before" of Johnson and the almost identical "protuberant behind, before" of Ferry's poem.[10] But Johnson is less interested in the precise source of the observation than in linking his physically diminutive stature to Pope's existential condition: "By natural deformity, or accidental distortion," Johnson continues, accepting Pope's vivid, laconic, self-description of his experience from the *Epistle to Dr.*

[9] Pope told Joseph Spence: "his perpetual application (after he had set to study of himself) reduced him in four years' time to so bad a state of health that after trying physicians for a good while in vain, he resolved to give way to his distemper, and sat down calmly, in full expectation of death in a short time." Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men Collected from Conversation*, ed. James M. Osborn, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vol. I, p. 30.

[10] The remark by Voltaire comes from his "Parallèle d'Horace, de Boileau et de Pope" (1764; first published 1761), in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1843–85), vol. XXIV: *Mélanges*, vol. III (1879), pp. 223–28, at 225n.

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Arbuthnot: "his vital functions were so much disordered, that his life was a *long desease*. His most frequent assailant was the headach, which he used to relieve by inhaling the steam of coffee, which he very frequently required" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 54). In his commentary to the "Oxford" *Lives* Lonsdale has noted that in the *Monthly Review*, vol. 74 (1786), p. 308, Charles Burney, Jr. records that "Johnson has been much criticized for the minuteness with which he has described Pope's mode of living" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 304n.). And Pope's demand for coffee at inconvenient hours "in the night" (according to Johnson) and "in the long night" (in Ferry's poem) is one of these details. It is, however, through these very same "petty peculiarities" that the haunting quality of Johnson's austere and unsentimental sympathy is brought out:

> Most of what can be told concerning his petty peculiarities was communicated by a female domestick of the Earl of Oxford, who knew him perhaps after the middle of life [the source of Ferry's "in middle life"]. He was then so weak as to stand in perpetual needs of female attendance; extremely sensible of cold, so that he wore a kind of fur doublet, under a shirt of very coarse warm linen with fine sleeves. When he rose he was invested in boddice made of stiff canvass, being scarce able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender, that he enlarged their bulk with three pairs of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean. (*Lives*, vol. IV, pp. 54–55)[11]

This last sentence supplies the sudden arrival of the first line of Ferry's final, minimalist, quatrain: "He found it very difficult to be clean."

The pathos of Johnson's details grounds the singular life of the supreme poetical genius of the eighteenth century in the general nature of human

[11] The printed text of the "Life" suggests that Pope's weak and distorted physique meant that he was unable to perform the necessary cleansing of his posterior after defecating; the text of Johnson's MS notes to Pope (Dyce Collection in the National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London) suggests the weakness of an incontinent person: "Very dirty abed." Works XXIII, p. 1254. A detailed account of these notes, with transcription, can be found in Harriet Kirkley, *A Biographer at Work: Samuel Johnson's Notes for the "Life of Pope"* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002). For further detailed reflection on this passage see the analysis by Greg Clingham, *Johnson, Writing, and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 132–34. Clingham, to whose discussion I am indebted, observes that "the eloquent power of the passage arises ... from Johnson's knowledge of the near impossibility for the subject to *represent* bodily pain ... This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language. Bodily pain, therefore, more often than not makes for pathos rather than tragedy or satire" (p. 133).

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vulnerability and struggle, and as Johnson acknowledges, his commentary is adapted from a report by the Earl of Oxford's maid. The Yale editors refer to this report as "Her account" in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1775, though Lonsdale's edition identifies the same description as the product of an interview with the maid (that is, a report of a report) conducted by a certain (unspecified) "D" (possibly, Lonsdale suggests, John Duncombe).[12] "Mr. Urban," the interviewer begins: "If the following inconsiderable particulars concerning Mr. Pope's person, &c. deserve a place in your Mag. they are much at your service. I took them down, without arrangement, from the mouth of an ancient and respectable domestic, who lived many years in the family of Lord Oxford." The particulars listed are, of course, the sorts of things that an attentive servant might well commit to memory's store: "Mr. Pope was unable to dress or undress himself, or get into bed without help; nor could he stand upright till a kind of stays, made of stiff linen, were laced on him, one of his sides being contracted almost to the back-bone."[13] She goes on to describe the twenty-four-hour care package that Pope required:

> He wanted much waiting on, but was very liberal to the maid-servants about him, so that he had never reason to complain of being neglected. These females attended him at night, and, in the morning, brought him his writing-desk to bed, lighted his fire, drew on his stockings, &c. which offices he often summoned them to perform at very early hours; so that, when any part of their business was left undone, their common excuse was, that they had been employed with Mr. Pope, and then no farther reprehension was to be dreaded.[14]

Then there is the detail of Pope's addiction to coffee as medicinal inhalant: "He ordered coffee to be made several times in a day, that he might hold his head over its steam, as a temporary relief to the violent head-achs from which he usually suffered." And the memory of his pernickety vanities and his quarrelsomeness:

> His hair having almost entirely fallen off, he sometimes dined at Lord Oxford's table in a velvet cap; but, when he went to court, he put on a tie-wig and black clothes, and had a little sword peeping out by his pocket-hole. It was difficult to persuade him to drink a single glass of wine. He and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu had frequent quarrels, which usually ended in their alternate desertion of the house. When Mr. Pope wanted to go out any where in the evening, he always sent for Mrs. Blount to accompany him

[12] The report had also appeared in the *Universal Magazine*, vol. 57 (August 1775), pp. 91–92.
[13] *Gentleman's Magazine* (September 1775), p. 435. [14] Ibid.

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> in a hackney-coach. He often resided at Lord Oxford's while the family was absent in the country, and whatever he ordered was got ready for his dinner.[15]

He might seem an ungrateful guest, but he was worth courting. The maid continues:

> He would sometimes, without any provocation, leave his noble landlord for many months, nor would return till courted back by a greater number of notes, messages, and letters, than the servants were willing to carry. He would occasionally joke with my Lord's domestics, as well as higher company, but was never seen to laugh himself, even when he had set the whole table in a roar at Tom Hearne, Humphrey Wanley, or any other persons whose manners were as strongly tinctured with singularity.[16]

The tone of the maid's witness statement on Pope is respectful and amused, with an undercurrent of affection. Like many literati of the eighteenth century, Johnson shares her love of the anecdote. But there is a difference between telling tales about the behind-the-scenes "vital functions" and private habits of a famous person – as they come to mind at interview – and Johnson's creative organization of such mundane incidentals into an iconic vision of the human state that accepts all our private peculiarities. There is no guarantee that the maid's report was rendered verbatim (some of the expressions are literary in flavor); but the relative absence of control over the detail of this passage (taken down "without arrangement") brings out by comparison the compositional artistry of Johnson's paragraphs and highlights the syllabic precision of his cadences. These are the shapings of expression that Ferry has heard and skillfully recrafted or echoed in his poem so that we might hear them again, or discover them for the first time, in Johnson's prose-poem on Pope's body and his poetical presence. Less is more, and the "inconsiderable particulars" recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine* are given moral, symbolic and aesthetic meaning by Johnson. Thus "one of his sides being contracted almost to the back-bone" is a diagnosis that informs the biographical database of the "Life." But Johnson writes of Pope only: "One side was contracted."[17] The effect of the simple, pared-down, six-syllable, four-word sentence is to concentrate the human implications of Pope's arduous

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid. Hearne was a diarist and antiquarian; Wanley was an Old English scholar and the first keeper of the Harleian Library.
[17] Johnson's MS notes to his "Life of Pope," preserved in the Dyce Collection, has "one side contracted." Works XXIII, p. 1254.

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day-to-day physical battle – famously self-ridiculed in "this long Desease my Life." Johnson unglazes the onlooker's eyes to face the piteous human scenario. This is mediated by the small feats of endurance by one whose quotidian suffering occurs symptomatically (to quote Ferry) in "a universe we cannot fully explicate." Pope is at the center of this dark, incomprehensible nightmare universe that is all around him.

Johnson's expression anticipates the economy of linguistic means that we now associate with Samuel Beckett, who learned bleakness and the meaning of human isolation partly from Johnson. The restraint contrasts with the ready loquacity of the report at second hand from the maid, and Johnson's temperate simplicity shifts the factual substance of a disability assessment based on the domestic habits of one individual into a moral vision of desolation and alienation. Johnson is adaptive: He modifies the specific information about Pope being *reluctant* to take wine to later write that Pope "seemed angry when a dram was offered him" (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 55). There are at the same time other details that must have been acquired from sources beyond the report: that for example the doublet Pope wore to keep warm was made of fur and covered by a "flannel waistcoat."[18] There is nothing in the report about Pope's seat having to be raised to bring him level with the table. The supporting "boddice" is "stiff canvass" in Johnson; in the source it is "stiff linen" (the constituent of canvas): Johnson's eye falls on the thing itself, reimagined for this purpose, and not exclusively on the words.[19]

Ferry's poem on Johnson on Pope brings out the struggle of the mental and the physical that happens when (to quote a second Johnsonian poem by Ferry) "the stupid demogorgon blind | Recalcitrance of body, resentful of the laws | Of mind and spirit, [is] getting its own back now." The poem entitled "That Evening at Dinner," from which I take these lines, is another verse tribute to suffering mediated by allusion to Johnson.[20] Its thematic relationship to "Johnson on Pope" is achieved through the details we are made to live through by the poetry, "the actualities of our natures and circumstances." The focus is again on the awkward physicality of life's routine perambulations. The elderly lady in that poem is being assisted to the table to eat:

[18] The Yale edition suggests that Johnson acquired certain details through conversations with Savage and the third Earl of Marchmont, both friends of Pope. Some observations that appear in the MS notes are left out of the "Life," for example that Pope was "More helpless than a child of 5 years." Works XXIII, p. 1254.

[19] In the MS notes it is "Coarse linen." Works XXIII, p. 1254.

[20] The poem appears in Ferry's collection *Of No Country I Know*, pp. 40–43.

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> And after we helped her get across the hall,
> And get across the room to a chair, somehow
> We got her seated in a chair that was placed
> A little too far away from the nearest table,
> At the edge of the abyss, and there she sat,
> Exposed, her body the object of our attention –
> The heaviness of it, the helpless graceless leg,
> The thick stocking, the leg brace, the medical shoe.

The poem on Johnson's Pope makes Pope fully "the object of our attention"; we view the precarious and refined fragility of his body in tandem with his clarifying fierceness, his "unappeasable malignity." But the lighter tone in the next paragraph but two of Johnson's account, the last to be brought into play by Ferry, mitigates the bleakness of Johnson's visualization of Pope's mortal "person." Here Johnson indulges, to a degree, the narcissism of Pope, who had learned "all the unpleasing and unsocial qualities of a valetudinarian man." The account taps into the good humor of the maid's recounting of domestic life tending to the curious and exasperating Mr. Pope. There is a sneaking admiration for the servants who used Pope's exorbitant demands, and his role as a precious guest of their employer, to fabricate cast-iron excuses for neglecting household duties elsewhere:

> The reputation which his friendship gave, procured many invitations; but he was a very troublesome inmate. He brought no servant, and had so many wants, that a numerous attendance was scarcely able to supply them. Wherever he was, he left no room for another, because he exacted the attention, and employed the activity of the whole family. His errands were so frequent and frivolous, that the footmen in time avoided and neglected him; and the Earl of Oxford discharged some of the servants for their resolute refusal of his messages. The maids, when they had neglected their business, alleged that they had been employed by Mr. Pope. One of his constant demands was for coffee in the night, and to the woman that waited on him in his chamber he was very burthensome; but he was careful to recompense her want of sleep; and Lord Oxford's servant declared, that in a house where her business was to answer his call, she would not ask for wages. (*Lives*, vol. IV, p. 55)

Johnson's below-stairs source reports servings of coffee "several times a day" (to inhale the caffeinated steam); Johnson writes of the more inconvenient, sleep-depriving, need to serve coffee "in the night"; but the complicity between servant and guest worked, in the end, to the advantage of all concerned: Pope, the house-guest-from-hell, was the welcome fount of generous gratuities. The old days of pandering to him could be recalled with a smile.

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The lightness of touch at this point contrasts with the hauteur of Lord Byron's later description of Pope as the "little Queen Anne's man," the poet who nevertheless belonged, for Byron, in a totally different class from his Romantic contemporaries;[21] and Johnson's treatment of Pope's person, in all its frankness of physical detail, could not be further from the viciously *ad hominem* rants of the critic John Dennis and his gross assaults on Pope as the "hunch-back'd Toad."[22] The beauty of the formal portraits of Pope tells one story in the narrative of contemporary responses; the other side is depicted by the cruelty and laughter of his period's graphic satire, to which he regularly fell victim. Few of his enemies – such as Lord Hervey, the "Sporus" of the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* – failed to mention his physical stature and deformities.[23] Few later critics of Pope's poetry have forborne to fixate on his crippled body.[24] His verse has been read reductively as a symptom of his physical form or as evidence for the presiding biographical fact of his disability, relegating the poetry to the margins of that primary reality. Not all these cases count as malicious gossip at Pope's expense, but the observer's experience of the person under observation can suggest superiority; it can imply the viewer's insulation from the human object. The dry light of Johnson's compassion fixes the "person of Pope" and his domestic inconveniences in a world in which we are obliged to

[21] "I took Moore's poems and my own and some others, and went over them side by side with Pope's, and I was really astonished (I ought not to have been so) and mortified at the ineffable distance in point of sense, harmony, effect, and even *Imagination* passion, and *Invention*, between the little Queen Anne's man and us of the Lower Empire." Byron to John Murray, September 15, 1817, in *Byron: A Self-Portrait; Letters and Diaries 1798 to 1824*, 2 vols., ed. Peter Quennell (London: John Murray, 1950), vol. II, p. 167.

[22] The insult appears in Dennis's *Reflections Critical and Satyrical, upon a Late Rhapsody, Call'd, An Essay upon Criticism* (1711), in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), vol. I, p. 415. Further quotations from Dennis's criticism are taken from this edition and where appropriate are referenced parenthetically in the text, with the title *Critical Works* followed by volume and page numbers. I discuss Johnson's attitude to Dennis's treatment of Pope in more detail in Chapter 3.

[23] Pope was quite willing to turn the portrait of his physical deformities to his personal, poetical and ironic advantage and to draw specific attention to them. For critically penetrating reflections on Pope's portrayal of himself see Helen Deutsch, "Pope, Self, and World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 14–24. Deutsch quotes the famous lines from Pope's *Essay on Man* (Epistle II, lines 1–18) beginning "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan" alongside Helen Vendler's observation on the "strange genius-cripple" who "is looking at himself in his interior solitude." Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 28.

[24] One of the most recent of such critics is Colin Burrow, "Puppeteer Poet," *London Review of Books*, vol. 44, no. 8 (April 21, 2022), pp. 31–34. Burrow's first paragraph reminds you that Pope "was only four foot six and suffered from curvature of the spine in an age when physical disabilities were often taken to imply moral deformity" (p. 31).

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accept our ignorance of the causes and meaning of the human state, and, as Shakespeare demonstrates in his great tragedies, our consequent sense of the baffling inexplicableness of human suffering.

This recognition of the singular absurdity of being human shapes Johnson's 1757 critique of the shallow and knowing optimism of Soame Jenyns's *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*. It is from this text, "that leaves," he says, "no room for pity," that David Ferry assembles some of the phrases he needs for the verse narrative of the poem I quoted earlier: "That Evening at Dinner." This is the story of an elderly dinner-guest, a friend of the poet, who, having lost the husband of her late-life marriage, had kept herself going. Here is a further extract:

> After his death, and after the stroke, she had
> By force of character and careful management,
> Maintained a certain degree of happiness.
>
> The books there on the bookshelves told their stories,
> Line after line, all of them evenly spaced,
> And spaces between the words. You could fall through the spaces.
> In one of the books Dr. Johnson told the story:
> "In the scale of being, wherever it begins,
> Or ends, there are chasms infinitely deep;
> Infinite vacuities . . . For surely,
> Nothing can so disturb the passions, or
> Perplex the intellects of man so much,
> As the disruption of this union with
> Visible nature, separation from all
> That has delighted or engaged him, a change
> Not only of the place but of the manner
> Of his being, an entrance into a state
> Not simply which he knows not, but perhaps
> A state he has not faculties to know."[25]

Ferry writes that his poem "quotes from two sentences of Johnson's" and that "indeed," he says: "I think of the poem as a reading of those

[25] Ferry, *Of No Country I Know*, pp. 42–43. The "Acknowledgments" page of the Chicago collection gives *Slate Magazine* (© 1997 Microsoft Corporation) as the original (online) source. In his essay "Samuel Johnson and the Poetry of David Ferry," *JNL*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 2021), pp. 23–27, Jeffrey Meyers concludes that "It is significant that the aged Ferry, so close to the end of his life, emphasises in these Johnsonian poems the infirmities of the helpless swimmer [a reference to Ferry's translation of one of Johnson's Latin poems he entitles "The Lesson," discussed here in Chapter 2], the crippled poet and the dying woman" (p. 27). This explanation for Ferry's engagement with Johnson might serve for the other two poems; but the poet of "Johnson on Pope" was thirty-six in 1960 when he printed the poem in *On the Way to the Island*.

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sentences." Certainly, Ferry does more than simply quote from Johnson. "[Chasm[s]] infinitely deep" and "Infinite vacuities" are resonant phrases taken from Johnson's review; so too the run of Johnson's almost exact words: "In the scale [of being], wherever it begins or ends, are infinite vacuities" (Works XVII, p. 404). Yet while the former expression appears on the same page in the review, it gravitates to a different sentence in the poem and is then inserted to make up the sequence of Ferry's lines. Thus Ferry, via Johnson, constructs a dialogue between the eighteenth-century writer and the modern poet, between principle and instance, between the conditions of general nature and the immediate human individual who calls those conditions to mind, between the books on the shelves in the room and the book by Johnson in which he takes Soame Jenyns to task. The final line, on death as a state that man "has not faculties to know," recalls the closing paragraphs of Johnson's damning judgment of Jenyns on the tenets of religion. Of this the "evidences and sanctions [of religion] are not irresistible, because it was intended to induce, not to compel, and that it is obscure, because we want faculties to comprehend it" (Works XVII, pp. 430–31). But the greater part of the quotation is again powerful in its recognition of human limitations and its cautions against contemporary cultural hubris. It comes almost verbatim from a source that Ferry recalls in his notes to the poem.[26] The notes appear in his edition of 1999 but are omitted from the *News Letter* account he gives of the poem as a response to the Johnson. The text is Johnson's *Rambler* 78 on the nature of mortality:

> Milton has judiciously represented the father of mankind, as seized with horror and astonishment at the sight of death, exhibited to him on the mount of vision. For surely, nothing can so much disturb the passions, or perplex the intellects of man, as the disruption of his union with visible nature; a separation from all that has hitherto delighted or engaged him; a change not only of the place, but the manner of his being; an entrance into a state not simply which he knows not, but which perhaps he has not faculties to know. (Works IV, p. 47)

It is most likely a memory of this *Rambler* that leads Ferry to a final Miltonic allusion in his poem. Satan, returning to Pandemonium in book X of *Paradise Lost*, finds all transformed into serpents; these, when they taste the fruit of Satan's expedition to Eden, "Chewed bitter ashes" (line 566).[27] "That Evening at Dinner" concludes with a similar apocalyptic collapse:

[26] Ferry, *Of No Country I Know*, p. 288.
[27] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and Harlow: Longman, 1968), p. 955.

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> The dinner was delicious, fresh greens, and reds,
> And yellows, produce of the season due,
> And fish from the nearby sea; and there were also
> Ashes to be eaten, and dirt to drink.[28]

The Last Days of Jonathan Swift

The character of Johnson's compassion does not mean he must hold back from some harsh judgments of the English poets – even such poets as Pope – whose poetry has moral implications of which he must sometimes disapprove. The eloquence of the "spaces between the words" in Ferry's poem leads me, however, to my complementary example of the Johnsonian mode of compassion and its distinctive voice. Again, Johnson's "unsentimental pity" is expressed in response to a writer of whose moral ambiguities Johnson was sharply aware. As we shall explore in later chapters, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* contains many descriptions – usually brief, laconic or terse – of the deaths of the poets, but the conclusion to his "Life of Swift" is the longest dying in the *Lives* and captures the dark inner drama of Swift's constitutional melancholia and final illness. Anecdotal in mode, the description mingles an air of clinical curiosity with Johnson's inner fears of psychic derangement and terminal depression four years before his own death. The closing paragraphs chart Swift's final King Lear-like progress to mental and physical dissolution:

> He grew more violent; and his mental powers declined till (1741) it was found necessary that legal guardians should be appointed of his person and fortune. He now lost distinction. His madness was compounded of rage and fatuity. The last face that he knew was that of Mrs. Whiteway, and her he ceased to know in a little time. His meat was brought him cut into mouthfuls; but he never would touch it while the servant staid, and at last, after it had stood perhaps an hour, would eat it walking; for he continued his old habit, and was on his feet ten hours a-day.
>
> Next year (1742) he had an inflammation in his left eye, which swelled it to the size of an egg, with boils in other parts; he was kept long waking with the pain, and was not easily restrained by five attendants from tearing out his eye.
>
> The tumour at last subsided; and a short interval of reason ensuing, in which he knew his physician and his family, gave hopes of his recovery; but in a few days he sunk into lethargick stupidity, motionless, heedless, and speechless. But it is said, that, after a year of total silence, when his

[28] Ferry, *Of No Country I Know*, p. 43.

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> housekeeper, on the 30th of November, told that the usual bonfires and illuminations were preparing to celebrate his birth-day, he answered. *It is all folly; they had better let it alone*.
>
> It is remembered that he afterwards spoke now and then, or gave some intimation of meaning; but at last sunk into perfect silence, which continued until about the end of October 1744, when, in his seventy-eighth year, he expired without a struggle. (*Lives*, vol. III, pp. 207–08)

This passage too has a biographical source. Here the description of the final illness and death of Swift is John Hawkesworth's "Account" from the 1755 edition of Swift's *Works*.[29] Johnson borrows or near-echoes vocabulary, expressions and even some cadences; but the effect is Johnson's own. Again, Johnson follows his original not to replicate a biographical record that is already in print but to define a unique form of the human self that is at once a critical instance of the suffering situation of general humanity. His phrasing isolates Swift's step-by-step decline as a proxy for the writer's tormented and detached contrarian life, now beyond human aid. The italicized direct speech – Swift audible in his own words – arrives with stark suddenness, while Johnson suggests the interweaving of mental and physical atrophy and evokes the suspensions of language formation in a disintegrating mind. The measured pulses of the Johnsonian prose enact these silent interludes: Swift's own "spaces between … words." Correspondingly the citation of dates in the passage (the years between 1741 and 1744) marks the countdown to the point where, as individuals exist in time, time means nothing any more. In this inexorable, unpredictable, curmudgeonly descent into oblivion, the prevailing note is tragic, but Johnson allows our reaction to Swift as an absurd or even darkly comic phenomenon while he implicitly universalizes Swift's final assessment of his own singularity, as cited in Hawkesworth's account: "I am what I am, I am what I am."[30] Johnson admired Shakespearean tragedy as a conduit for "general nature." Here, as in the "Life of Pope," he shows how writing of surpassing dramatic power is not a theatrical monopoly. There are other ways of being Shakespearean than writing plays for the stage.

There are, doubtless, differences between compassion instilled by the pain-filled life-force of Alexander Pope (a chronic invalid) and that of Swift (in the last incoherent throes of life); but the two images of human

[29] John Hawkesworth, "An Account of the Life of Dr. Swift," in his edition of the *Works of Swift* (London, 1755), pp. 30–31. Hawkesworth was in his turn indebted in this passage to the *Remarks* of John Boyle, Earl of Orrery (1752).

[30] Hawkesworth, "An Account of the Life of Dr. Swift," in *Works of Swift*, p. 31.

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suffering I have outlined here have in common that they link the isolation of untranslatable individuality to the experience of "general nature." David Ferry's poetic re-statements of Johnson's own words help bring this relationship to the fore and suggest the wide awareness of suffering in Johnson's writings. Johnson's quality of *looking* at both Pope and Swift (or, in recognizing harrowing pain or terminal disablement, refusing to *look away*) is unfaltering, and his discretion in having the reader attend offers a perspective at the other extreme from indifference. In common with the elderly lady dinner-guest in Ferry's poem, the human figures in Johnson stand out in vivid relief as "the object[s] of our attention," as sharply focused portraits of unmitigated impairment. We have seen that this same unsentimental pity responds to the unfathomable causes of pain analysed in Johnson's deconstructing of Jenyns, who claimed to perceive an order in things on the strength of believing an order must exist. At key moments in the biographies of Pope and Swift – the two last to be composed of the fifty-two "Lives" of his *English Poets* – Johnson's own moral order elicits by contrast the pathos of a human consciousness prey to unknowable causes. Such images suggest the vital remedial role, in reaction to the darkness and fear, of Johnson's vision; they give particularity and depth to Johnson's *Dictionary* definition of "compassion," the "sorrow for the sufferings of others", the "painful sympathy" these portraits inspire.

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