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*Aspects of Samuel Johnson: Essays on His Arts, Mind,  
Afterlife, and Politics* (review)

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Biography, Volume 30, Number 4, Fall 2007, pp. 645-649 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2008.0010>



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larger issue of what's at stake in the "rhetorical drag" practiced by male editors can become attenuated or obscured. This lack of clarity may, of course, be intentional, but toward the end, it seems as if every contradictory detail in the Johnson or Howe texts must correspond to something historical/political/social, but just *what* that something might more concretely be seems continually deferred, not only by the impersonators, but by Carroll.

This quibble may simply be an issue of better editing, but it may, I suspect, also have something to do with the theory of "rhetorical drag" itself. When his historical desire becomes not only rhetorically unreachable, but more significantly, unstable to the gender impersonator, it seems that "s/he" falls into a circular game in which the rhetoric of the drag becomes its own unsolvable end. Rather than the critic's seeking out some fixed historical or social interpretation of the drag revealed in a given captivity narrative—that is, its success or even its failure as "drag"—the theoretical question now becomes how to analyze the desire at stake in the attempt to keep the drag's disparate meanings in play. At this point, Lorraine Carroll's interesting book points us away from Judith Butler's early performative theory as such and towards a quite different theory, a theory that it engages in its discussion of identification in Thoreau but elsewhere does not develop—the psychoanalytic.

Teresa A. Toulouse

Howard D. Weinbrot. *Aspects of Samuel Johnson: Essays on His Arts, Mind, Afterlife, and Politics*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005. 417 pp. ISBN 0-87413-874-4, \$40.00.

Howard Weinbrot is among our most eminent eighteenth-century scholars. He has published several important studies since the 1960s, but *Aspects of Samuel Johnson* is his first book on Johnson. It collects sixteen essays written over four decades covering various aspects of Johnson's writing—poetry, metaphor, narrative style, and the idea of language in the dictionary (in a section on Arts); generality, genre, and skepticism (in a section on Mind); Percival Stockdale and the French response to Johnson's writings (in a section on Afterlife); and Jacobitism, politics, and the nature of scholarly and historical evidence (in a section on Politics). All but one of the essays has appeared elsewhere. Some of them—for example, "The Reader, the General, and the Particular: Johnson and Imlac in Chapter Ten of *Rasselas*," "Johnson and Genre," and the essays on Johnson's politics—are classics of their kind. The book exceeds the sum of its parts, for the contiguity of the essays allows the reader to appreciate the sustained consideration of the topics, and to acquire a general sense of the author's critical procedures.

A “collected essays” implies if not the intervention of death (Professor Weinbrot is very much with us), then at least a summing up and looking back. Looking back over these essays from the vantage point of the present, one is struck by two ironically related things. The essays still accord with a general sense of Johnson as a philosophically conservative but rigorous moral thinker, whose learning and great command of the language are devoted to a rational understanding of human existence within formal Augustan and neo-classical forms. This is so because Weinbrot’s essays were (along with formative work by Jean Hagstrum, Gwin Kolb, W. J. Bate, Paul Alkon, and others) partly responsible for promoting the idea of Johnson *as* such a writer, and because in some respects Johnson *is* indeed such a writer. Unlike other English writers—Shakespeare and Byron, for example—whose classic status changes over time, Johnson’s identity as a writer has remained remarkably constant since he became the object of concerted critical attention midway during the last century.

This is odd, since the advent of discourse, ideology, theory, cultural studies, and a skeptical cultural politics—in short, the intellectual life of the last twenty years—has changed critical priorities in ways that are everywhere visible in eighteenth-century studies, for both good and bad, and one does not need to be an advocate of new methodologies to feel the need to consider their impact. Weinbrot, however, does not reflect upon the differences between his traditional historical scholarly approach and others, or even register that there are other legitimate ways of considering Johnson’s writings and their connection to questions of critical and historical meaning and value. Certainly, he has “provided full and new citations for each essay and allowed necessary overlap in use of evidence and quotations” (11), and he has avoided the use of “prescriptive concepts like an ‘age’ which often also is ‘Augustan,’ or ‘Christian Humanist,’ or ‘neoclassical,’ or ‘ancien’ or some other construct to which the individual is subordinated, and through which he or the ‘age’ should be read” (22–23). But is this enough?

Weinbrot traces his critical approach to the “intellectual sway” of R. S. Crane and the Chicago School of formalists and neo-Aristotelians:

One of the difficult but I think healthy tenets of the Crane legacy was the coupled insistence on evidence and on approaching a work with as much neutrality as possible . . . plural approaches to literary texts, awareness of one’s critical assumptions, testing of one’s hypotheses, trying not to impose one’s personal agenda on a text, casting a wide intellectual net, avoiding deductive contexts into which one fits the particular work, and insisting that the author, so far from being “dead,” is paramount in his or her text. (22)

Weinbrot applies these positivist principles learnedly and conscientiously to ensure a “retreat from the *a priori* [that] can help to illuminate the varied aspects of Samuel Johnson’s arts, mind, afterlife, and politics” (22). Certainly, his “habitual distrust of the *a priori*” governs his declared indifference to critical fashion (22). Thus we get a Johnson firmly and unambiguously grounded as a historical figure in a wide array of historical, textual, and intellectual contexts, for whom authorial intention is paramount, but one in whom experience fails to command a convincing imaginative inwardness, and who resists rapprochement with current critical practices.

One does not have to espouse postmodernism to recognize how problematic literary—as well as historical and legal—evidence is. We might long for the golden ideal of a rational argument that derives its truth from evidence that is clear, coherent, accessible, and empirical, but evidence and truth are of many kinds, clearly work in complex ways in literary structures (poetic as well as legal and historic), and require subtle, nuanced forms of reading and attention that go beyond the formal and the empirical. This is not, as one sometimes feels in Weinbrot’s essays, a matter of the incompetence, ideological agenda, or personal prejudice of other critics. Erudite, direct, and forceful, Weinbrot’s explication of Johnson’s thinking characteristically suggests few obstacles or difficulties. Evidence is positive, and either supports or does not support the argument. There is no middle ground. But this manner does not address the more nuanced and self-questioning nature of Johnson’s writing that emphasizes how little truth is contained in any critical formulation, and his recognition that the thinking mind has to *work* to generate and to approximate itself to truth. Johnson’s writing is particularly sensitive to the creative resistance necessary in generating knowledge and truth, especially truth that *seems* to be self-evident, and “neutrality” is seldom an option for him, whatever it was for Crane.

Resistance to desire, inclination, fantasy, doubt, opinion, argument, temporal change, and reality in its unexpected manifestations are all part of Johnson’s discourse. This is not to say that he finds no value in those experiences, just that he usually encounters them skeptically, by incorporating and transforming them. The proposition, as expressed by Rasselas, that “when wrong opinions are entertained . . . they mutually destroy each other, leaving the mind open to truth,” suggests a quintessentially skeptical Johnsonian manner of thinking. These *aperçus*, shorthand reminders of how Johnson’s writing substantiates truths, play off partial perspectives against each other and thereby produce a larger, differential, inwardly experienced thought that is neither merely a synthesis nor an accumulation of the separate original propositions. As Boswell quotes him as saying, “human experience, which is constantly contradicting theory, is the great test of truth.”

Weinbrot is tough on views that apply the term “skepticism” or “resistance” to Johnson’s writing, insisting (in “‘Obstinate Contests of Disagreeing Virtues’: Johnson, Skepticism, the But Clause, and the Dialectical Imperative”) on the gap that divides Hume’s atheism from Johnson’s Christianity, which “was hostile to skepticism because skepticism seemed hostile to happiness” (219): “Much of the supporting evidence for the nature of Johnson’s presumed skeptical method actually is subsumed under what I call his secular dialectical imperative” (228). And again, the “fluidity of thought and willingness to engage in the ‘but clause’ of exception to received wisdom characterize Johnson’s dialectical mode of proceeding and its acceptance of contradiction” (209). But “dialectical imperative” is too blunt an instrument to probe the aspect of Johnson’s thought that recognizes the many ways in which experience exceeds and escapes the capacities of the rational mind to control its meaning, however necessary the rational mind is to a moral being. Fred Parker (in *Scepticism and Literature* [2003]), who gets short shrift from Weinbrot, describes that recognition as “sceptical thinking,” an “expectation of almost inevitable slippage in a series of distinct but overlapping areas: between theory and experience, between the mind and the world, between language and its referents” (10), and as a way of coming at knowledge that distinguishes it from Pyrrhonism and atheism. Like some other recent critics of Johnson, Parker finds particular value in Johnson’s skeptical thinking as it “exposes ideas to the transforming processes of literary realization . . . imbuing them with a new, subtle life invisible in summary and resistant to abstraction, that easily evaporates in any history of thought” (5).

Certainly, when faced with the prospect of life without moral purpose, it is easy to embrace the hope, happiness, mercy, and love of which Johnson’s writing is full. But the pricelessness of these values is not a given in Johnson’s writing, but repeatedly wrestled by him from the jaws of doubt, difficulty, and pain. Being intrinsic to Johnson’s knowledge of being human, these values are the warp of a woof that is his sceptical thinking. The outcome is not atheistic rationality—he is clearly antagonistic to the philosophical project of Hume and Voltaire—but a supple, creative, and synthetic form of thinking that opens up layers of historical and personal experience to the reader. But Weinbrot will have no truck with it. This is a pity because it prevents the connection that needs to be made between what Weinbrot demonstrates, in a useful essay (“Johnson Before Boswell in Eighteenth-Century France”) about Johnson’s presence in French eighteenth-century letters, and Johnson’s imaginative appropriation and Anglicization of seventeenth-century French critical thought (described by Parker, Philip Smallwood, and others).

The difference between Weinbrot and Parker amounts to more than semantics; it is indicative of a general failure of a positivistic methodology to

engage with arguments, no less grounded in literary and historical evidence, that value different, real things in Johnson's writings and in literature itself. *Aspects of Samuel Johnson* constitutes a substantial body of work, but it represents only one way of reading Johnson's writing, and it is weakened by its indifference to legitimate alternatives.

Greg Clingham

Peter W. Sinnema. *The Wake of Wellington: Englishness in 1852*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. 165 pp. ISBN 0-8214-1679-0, \$42.95.

The funeral on November 18, 1852, of Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington, was less a laying to rest than an earthquake, exposing a range of fault lines in Victorian culture and producing aftershocks felt long after the event. These aftereffects are the subject of Peter W. Sinnema's *The Wake of Wellington*, which focuses on neither the illustrious man nor his lavish funeral, but on the cultural repercussions that followed in the wake of his death. The ambition to attend, in effect, less to a sound than to its echo is an excellent one, and at its strongest, Sinnema's book strikes new notes on the Wellington theme. At its weakest, however, it resembles an echo chamber, literally repeating words that have already been uttered clearly in other contexts.

The most dramatic, and disappointing, echoes are of Sinnema's own words. Though unacknowledged, *The Wake of Wellington* repeats parts of Sinnema's earlier book, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1998). *Dynamics* includes a chapter on the Duke's funeral, extensively chronicled in the *ILN*, and in many ways the present book is a dilation of this previous work. There can be no objection to the author's recognition that the subject was far from exhausted, and *The Wake of Wellington* benefits from its employment of a broader spectrum of periodical publications, and its expansion of some of its more suggestive but less developed arguments. One must object, however, to the reprinting, without acknowledgment, of parts of the previously published book. Four of the five illustrations from the Wellington chapter in *Dynamics of the Pictured Page* are printed again in *The Wake of Wellington*. Given the tremendous number of other relevant illustrations from which one might draw, it seems a squandered opportunity to extend the range and analyses of visual materials beyond those offered in the previous book. More troubling are the paragraphs transferred nearly verbatim, and without attribution, from *Dynamics* to *Wake*. Wholesale passages reappear like revenants, including, for example, the comparison of the funeral car to Andrea Mantegna's "painted chariot" (*Dynamics* 190; *Wake* 75–76); the review of responses to the rise of