INTRODUCTION

Johnson's observations on many subjects have in common the basic notion of a polarity of faculties: Reason and Imagination. This is the polarity that equally underlies the religious, the moral, the political, the aesthetic, and the psychological phases of his thought. In the Dictionary, Imagination is defined as (among other things) "the power of forming ideal pictures" or "the power of presenting things absent," and these are in fact the senses in which Johnson most frequently uses the term. But a full understanding of the underpinning of his thought involves an extended meaning. The faculty of Imagination as opposed to that of Reason ultimately denotes a power in man which increases the inherent incompatibility between his bodily and his mental modes of being, or, interchangeably, between that in man which is temporal and that which is extratemporal. It is Imagination that projects itself beyond presentness and actuality, fixes upon objects that are distant in time or space, and imbues them with value. Imagination is the great overreacher. All human "uneasiness" about earthly affairs, whether the anxious forward-projection of hope and fear or the equally tense backward-projection of obsessive memory, is produced by Imagination. Imagination transforms the unspecified into the specific, directs desire and aversion toward particular earthly goals, and is behind man's futile pursuit of absolute "happiness" within time. It is the power that is forever trying to halt time by means of its metamorphosing action upon temporal reality. In imaginative "memory," it projects itself backwards in time, creating delusive obsessions with either the glamor or the horror of past experience, forming imaginary Golden Ages, personal states of absolute bliss, or, conversely, total guilt. In its extreme form it becomes overt madness, for its culmination is a complete loss of contact with reality.
Imagination not only moves forwards and backwards in time but, so to speak, upwards as well, "speculating" on questions of metaphysical import, reducing to rigid formulae what is outside the sphere of limited human knowledge. Not only the idea of a Cosmic Hierarchy, but all "meteors of philosophy" ¹ are produced by this idealizing, delusive tendency: "the Cartesian, who denies that his horse feels the spur . . . the disciple of Malebranche, who maintains that the man was not hurt by the bullet . . . the follower of Berkeley, who while he sits writing at his table, declares that he has neither table, paper nor fingers" ² are victims of the same fallacy. The Skeptic and the Stoic are in different ways its prey. It is Imagination that denies the primacy of experience and claims for itself the infallibility of godlike views, uncommitted and totally objective; views that in reality represent human subjectivity. Stoic detachment, supposedly rational, is seen by Johnson (and by many Christian thinkers before him) as springing from a loss of touch with what it means to be human. The same is true of the kind of scientism that is not oriented toward real use (not only in the utilitarian but in the older and wider sense of the utile) and of primitivism, with its idealization and glorification of exotic simplicity. All such views are condemned as "dangerous" to both religion and morality. In forming ideal pictures, Imagination is the great simplifier, for it springs from the human need for something absolute, immutable, and uncomplicated. Reason also functions in terms of this need, but Reason, through experience, learns to concentrate upon true absolutes—the ultimate truths of religion—where Imagination treats the relative and contingent as if they were absolutes.

On the religious level, Imagination manifests itself as pride and false security. It makes man treat his mortal life as if it were never to end. The custom of quotidianism, generated by Imagination, is the mark of man's lapsed state. On the moral level, Imagination appears as quixotism, obsessiveness, specialization, the "Choice of Life." On the political level it is what underlies fanaticism, utopianism, and the revolutionary impatience with those shortcomings in society that are necessary and inherent because they are produced by unchanging human creatureliness. Imagination sets

¹ Rambler No. 181, Works, III, 345.
² Idler No. 10, Works, IV, 179.
up Heavenly Cities on earth. In doing so it becomes the root of war, discord, and faction. On the aesthetic level it is the mainspring of freakish romances, of "ideal" literature (the pastoral, for example), and of partial depictions of detail at the expense of the extensive (yet humanly committed and observant) view of the whole. 3

Reason is the diametrical opposite of Imagination. It is the faculty in man which keeps him in contact with his true state. It is that which diminishes the incompatibility between the bodily (or temporal) and the mental (or supratemporal) by providing man with "general" estimates both of his limitations and of his capacities. In religion, Reason is the secret of spiritual regeneration, of the "Choice of Eternity," the religious hope and fear that completely negate earthly, imaginative desire and aversion; for the focal point of religious hope and fear is man's true destiny as apprehended by Reason. In his Prayers, Johnson asks to be "animated with reasonable hope." 4 The religious fear of death and of punishment hereafter is no less rational: "If he who considers himself as suspended over the abyss of eternal perdition only by the thread of life, which must soon part by its own weakness, and which the wing of every minute may divide, can cast his eyes round him without shuddering with horror . . . he is not yet awakened" 5 to truly reasonable fear.

In morals Reason is the mainspring of right action, synonymous with virtue, for virtue is the exercise of reason. In politics, Reason is at the core of all enlightened yet realistic and tradition-respecting policy. In aesthetics it is the source of the delight and instruction which are the necessary ingredients of real poetic worth. Reason manifests itself in art through the true portrayal of that which is constant and abiding in Nature and in Life, that which transcends time.

Such a summary is admittedly crude. All the terms I have been using—whether "narrow," "general," "nature," "obsession," "hope and fear," "pride," and even "time"—appear here in a special sense, and the reader is referred to the following chapters for my attempt to clarify such notions in terms of Christian-Humanist tradition, of

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3 Imagination and fancy for Johnson are interchangeable terms. But Johnson does sometimes use these terms in his criticism to designate something different from what I have been discussing, i.e., poetic inventiveness.

4 Diaries, p. 74.

5 Rambler No. 110, Works, III, 23.
Johnson’s life, and of that which is recurrent in his writings and conversation. I do not think, for example, that Johnson’s idea of Imagination can be understood apart from his basic ideas on the “vacuity of life,” apart from his personal struggle with “indolence” and the “chain of sin,” or apart from the diabolical associations the word had acquired throughout the centuries of faith. “His laboring brain / Begets a world of idle fantasies,” says Mephistophilis of Faustus in Marlowe’s play (V. ii. 14-5). Underlying this is a conception of Imagination that is radically closer to Johnson’s than anything to be found in post-Augustan literature. One of my points in this book is that Johnson usually employs the term Imagination in a sense lost to romantic and modern usage, but very much alive in medieval and Renaissance English literature. Much Augustan literature is best studied as a product of the late Renaissance, the culmination of many centuries of basically homogeneous civilization. The medieval element in Johnson’s thought is, as I try to show, strong, and in more than one way. The conventional view of him as a representative of the English “Common Sense School” certainly does not do him justice.

What is perhaps important to stress in this attempt at an introduction is the fact that Johnson always satirizes the human ideal of a purely rational state, completely released from the tensions which vacuity, lapsedness, passion, and imaginative projection of one kind or another produce. His ideal is rather the regulation and control of imaginative impulse through rational awareness. Again, this is completely traditional, as I hope my quotations from the Essay on Man, Gulliver’s Travels, and many earlier works will demonstrate. Human virtue, merit, enduring achievement, and worth are connected in Johnson’s thought with religious redemption, as their opposites are connected with sin; but he always portrays the attainable goal of man in terms of a balance of Reason and Imagination, or rather in terms of a true ordering and control of impulse by lucidity. Imagination, which superficially appears to be man’s “lower” faculty, is really on a par with Reason, the “higher” faculty, in that it is a given constituent of human nature and in that all attempts to disregard this fact are in themselves manifestations of man’s imaginative folly. The real goal for man is the exercise of the kind of rational imagination and passionate intelligence which lead to virtuous action, whereas the vain attempt to become a “superior being” or to see humanity from an
INTRODUCTION

angelically rational point of view inevitably ends in something that is below the potential dignity of man. Most frequently it ends in cruelty, stupidity, and degradation. True human dignity is the exercise of both human tendencies, the rational and the imaginative, through the submission of impulse and desire to the control of reason and to a courageous confrontation of the painful facts of human futility and guilt.

_Rasselas_, perhaps the fullest statement of Johnson’s ideas on many subjects, is, I shall try to show, a deeply Christian book. A large proportion of the _Ramblers, Idlers_, and _Adventurers_ are really no less religious in intent than the Sermons or the Prayers and Meditations. Johnson’s moral teaching is an extension of his religious belief, just as his aesthetic doctrine is an extension of his morality. None of his work can be understood apart from his faith, for “his piety [was] the ruling principle of all his conduct.”6 One of my main aims in this book is thus to show in what sense his views on highly diverse subjects spring from the primacy of his orthodox Christianity.

But the primacy of religion in his work should not obscure his extreme relevance to an unbelieving age. Johnson should be read in the same spirit as one reads Pascal. He is the greatest moralist in English—not in the sense that he had a new system of ethics to offer, but in the sense that he was the most original rethinking of a great cultural heritage. Among English moralists, it was he who most richly and pithily summed up the abiding meaning (and meaninglessness) of human existence. There is nothing dead about his works. His religious pessimism may serve as an antidote—whether we share his theism or not—for the kind of pettiness, complacency, and ridiculous self-satisfaction that seem to be the companions of abundance and technological advance. His morality is ever-relevant: if ever there was a man who exemplified in both his life and his work the difficult, Jobian, unsentimental meaning of human goodness, it was Johnson. His distrust of all perfectionism in politics surely has meaning in a century that has committed its worst crimes in the name of high-flown abstractions and fanatical idealisms. His rigorous aesthetics, the distrust of “vain fancy” in many kinds of literature, and the insistence that only what can endure has merit are entirely to the point in a society that seems increasingly to regard as “art” what is mere entertainment, ephemeral shock-effect, or sheer escapism.

6 _Life_, IV, 429.