CHAPTER ONE: THE VACUITY OF LIFE

That human life is in a special sense "vacuous" is a recurrent idea in Johnson and may be seen as the starting point of his thought on many subjects. To understand its meaning is to understand the way in which his observations on a great variety of topics are guided by the implicit polarities of eternity and time, reason and imagination, expectation and existence, speculation and fact.

Johnson’s basic metaphor for human experience is the empty receptacle which cannot tolerate its own emptiness. The mind has an insatiable craving to be “filled” by ever-new “objects of attention” which it discards as soon as they have become familiar. It exists in time, and time, to satisfy it, must do what it cannot do, supply it with eternal “novelty.” “The old peripatetic principle that Nature abhors a vacuum may be properly applied to the mind,”¹ but the vacuous mind, preying hungrily on experience, can never satisfy its gnawing need to be filled. The essential dichotomy in Johnson’s concept of the mental vacuum is between this inherent need of the mind to be filled with “objects of attention” and the elusive nature of the objects offered it by temporal experience. The mind, surpassing its immediate experience, ultimately is beyond all possible earthly experience; for it operates on reality through acts of imagination that prevent it from staying with anything that is close at hand. The soul and the will are infinite, the objectifications of will in the temporal flow of life finite, and that is why life is inherently unsatisfactory—not merely because of some contingent misery or special misfortune.

The initial state of the human mind is a kind of metaphysical ennui into which fresh ideas must be “poured” and “curiosity kept in a perpetual motion”² if it is not to stagnate in subjectivity. "Vacancy" implies the total blankness and neutrality of

¹ Rambler No. 85, Works, II, 402.
² Rambler No. 89, Works, II, 419.
consciousness as it is in itself, apart from its experience. All energy and all activity are caused by man's essential need to escape this vacuity, by his need "to fill the vacancies of attention, and lessen the tediousness of time."³ For example, "if you shut up any Man and Woman for six Months together, so as to make them derive all their Pleasures from each other, they would inevitably fall in Love; but if at the end of that Term you would throw each of them into Assemblies, and let them change Partners at Pleasure, they would soon forget their mutual Attachment; which nothing but the necessity of some Connection, & the vacuity of life had caused."⁴

This central theme of Johnson's thought went quite unnoticed by Boswell, and it was left to the sophisticated Mrs. Thrale to note that "Johnson who thinks the vacuity of Life the source of ye passions, says it is certainly so both with regard to Love and Friendship,"⁵ and to recount how "somebody would say—Such a Lady never touches a Card—how then does She get rid of her Time says Johnson, does she drink Drams? Such a Person never suffers Gentlemen to buzz in his Daughter's Ears: who is to buzz in her Ears then?—the Footman!"⁶ And Mrs. Thrale even went so far as to recognize the relation of such lighthearted observations to Johnson's central theme and obsessing image. "The vacuity of Life," she suggests,

had at some early period of his life perhaps so struck upon the Mind of Mr. Johnson, that it became by repeated impressions his favourite hypothesis, & the general Tenor of his reasonings commonly ended in that: The Things therefore which other philosophers attribute to various and contradictory Causes appeared to him uniform enough; all was done to fill up the time upon his Principle. One Man for example was profligate, followed the Girls or the Gaming Table,—why Life must be filled up Madam, & the man was capable of nothing less Sensual. Another was active in the management of his Estate & delighted in domestic Economy: Why a Man must do something, & what so easy to a narrow Mind as hoarding halfpence till they turn into Silver?⁷

I think that Mrs. Thrale is especially acute in speaking of vacuity not only as Johnson's "favourite hypothesis" but also as

³ Rasselas, chap. i, p. 39.
⁴ Thra/iana, i. 198.
⁵ Ibid., p. 254.
⁶ Ibid., p. 193. Cf., p. 355: "Johnson says Women who will not work and cannot play at Cards must drink Drams of necessity."
⁷ Ibid, p. 179.
"the general tenor of his reasonings." 8 Where the vacuity of life is not the explicit theme of his writings or conversation, it is present as the underlying assumption and constantly shows up in the imagery. All human activity is seen as a futile attempt to fill an aching inner void, an incessant and hopeless search for "novelty" and "diversity" with which to feed the hunger of the mind. The imagery of emptiness and filling-up appears in such phrases as "every diversity of nature pours ideas in upon the soul," 9 and explicit statements of the theme in Johnson's moral writings are quite numerous:

All our gratifications are volatile, vagrant, and easily dissipated. The fragrance of the jessamine bower is lost after the enjoyment of a few moments, and the Indian wanders among his native spices without any sense of their exhalations. It is, indeed, not necessary to shew by many instances what all mankind confess, by an incessant call for variety, and restless pursuit of enjoyments, which they value only because unpossessed. . . . The most important events, when they become familiar, are no longer considered with wonder and solicitude, and that which at first filled up our whole attention, and left no place for any thought, is soon thrust aside into some remote repository of the mind, and lies among other lumber of the memory, overlooked and neglected.10

In the Dictionary a large proportion of the meanings Johnson distinguishes in the words "vacancy" and "vacuity" refers to this mental emptiness.11 In Boswell we find Johnson struck by "Madame [de] Sévigné, who, though she had many enjoyments, felt with

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8 Among Johnson's modern commentators, W. J. Bate, in his illuminating study *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1955), and Robert Voitle in *Samuel Johnson The Moralist* (Cambridge, Mass, 1961), pay some attention to Johnson's "favourite hypothesis." The present study owes much to their analyses.


11 Many of the passages he quotes to illustrate these meanings bear out the personal set of connotations he attaches to the word. E.g.,

"VACANCY 5. Listlessness; emptiness of thought. 'When alone, or in company, they sit still without doing anything, I like it worse; for all dispositions to idleness or vacancy, even before they are habits are dangerous.' Wotton

VACANT 2. Free; unencumbered; uncrowded. 'Religion is the interest of all; but philosophy of those only that are at leisure, and vacant from the affairs of the world.' More's *Divine Dialogues*. 'A very little part of life is so vacant from uneasiness as to leave us free to the attraction of some remoter good.' Locke 4. Being at leisure; disengaged. ' . . . The memory relieves the mind in her vacant moments, and prevents any chasms of thought by ideas of what is past.' Addison 5. Thoughtless; empty of thought; not busy. 'The wretched slave/Who, with body filled and vacant mind,/Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread.' Shakes. 'Some vain amusement of a vacant soul.' Irene"
delicate sensibility the prevalence of misery, and complains of the task of existence having been imposed upon her without her consent." 12 His comment is: "That man is never happy for the present is so true, that all his relief from unhappiness is only forgetting himself for a little while. Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment." 13 As for Raselas, its central theme is, of course, precisely that hope is futile not because particular hopes end in disappointment, though this is the empirically observable outcome of the human condition, but because it is in the nature of earthly hope, which is the supreme manifestation of initial vacuity and craving, to be frustrated by reality in the end. 14

Hope is the action of the mind transcending itself, but the objects of hope are temporal, so that they necessarily remain behind. The difference between the various objects hope fixes on is superficial. The mind may choose wealth, power, sensual pleasure, even knowledge, as the proper object of its desire, but in the end the desire itself and the fact that it is infinite will make all those finite ends equally "insufficient." The elusive present can never, by definition, be really satisfactory; the mind, continuing its temporal movement beyond present fulfillments, inevitably imagines something else that is more desirable, or even more of what it already has but which it values precisely because it is not yet fully possessed. The only real experience available to the vacuous mind, which incessantly craves new "presentness," is that which disappears into the past as soon as it has emerged from the future. Consequently, it throws itself back into the past, to memories that are largely of its own invention, by an act of imagination that tries absurdly to overcome the frustration of real temporal experience in an illusion of past glamor; or, by a similar act of imagination that tries absurdly to transcend time, it reaches into the future and fixes on objects of hope—Johnson often calls it "expectation"—which it makes in the image of its need. Obviously, these objects of hope can never, in the strict sense of the word, materialize.

12 Life, III, 53. Hill quotes Madame de Sévigné, writing her daughter (March 16, 1672): "Je me trouve dans un engagement qui m'embarasse: je suis embarquée dans la vie sans mon consentement ... si on m'avait demandé mon avis j'aurais bien aimé à mourir entre les bras de ma nourrice." (Ibid, n.2.).

13 Life, III, 53.

14 For other instances of the "vacuity of life" see, e.g., Thraliana, pp. 179–80, 193–199, 254, 355. Among the early writings, Ramblers No. 2 and No. 8 stand out as full statements of the theme.
"We represent to ourselves the pleasures of some future possession, and suffer our thoughts to dwell attentively upon it, till it has wholly engrossed the imagination," 15 but the mind will be as vacuous and "hungry" when the object of its hope becomes present. "The deceitfulness of hope" 16 and "the fallacies by which mortals are deluded" 17 thus form another of Johnson's great themes: hope is "a Bubble which by a gentle Breath may be blown to a large Size, but a rough Blast bursts it at once." 18 In the Adventurer, he writes that "it is easy for the imagination, operating on things not yet existing, to please itself with scenes of unmingled felicity," 19 and in the Idler: "fancy dances after meteors of happiness kindled by itself." 20 "He that has pictured a prospect upon his fancy, will receive little pleasure from his eyes." 21

This unbridgeable gap between the image created by the mind as it throws itself into the future, and the reality of that future when once it has emerged into the present, is the true reason why one can speak of "the insufficiency of wealth, honours, and power to real happiness" 22—which is the theme of Johnson's greatest poem, The Vanity of Human Wishes. Like all of Johnson's recurrent themes, his analysis of hope is generalized from his own experience and is also applied back to it. In a letter to Baretti, for example, he wrote:

Last winter I went down to my native town, where I found the streets narrower and shorter than I thought I had left them, inhabited by a new race of people, to whom I was very little known. My play-fellows were grown old, and forced me to suspect that I was no longer young. My only remaining friend had changed his principles and was become the tool of the predominant faction. My daughter-in-law, from whom I had expected most and whom I met with sincere benevolence, has lost the beauty and gaiety of youth, without having gained much of the wisdom of age. . . . Moral sentences appear ostentatious and tumid, when they have no greater occasion than the journey of a wit to his own town: yet such pleasures and pains make up the general mass of life; and as nothing is little to him that feels it with great sensibility, 23 a mind able to see things in their real state is disposed by very

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15 Rambler No. 17, Works, II, 83.
16 Idler No. 59, Works, IV, 323.
17 Rambler No. 54, Works, II, 259.
18 Thraliana, I, 202.
20 Idler No. 41, Works, IV, 271.
21 Idler No. 58, Works, IV, 322.
22 Rambler No. 54, Works, II, 259.
23 Cf., above, Johnson's comment on Mme. de Sévigné's "delicate sensibility [to] the prevalence of misery." What such sensibility comes to for Johnson is simply an acute sense of fact.
common incidents to very serious contemplations. Let us trust the time will come, when the present moment shall be no longer irksome; when we shall not borrow all our happiness from hope, which at last is to end in disappointment.24

His "sensibility" to examples of the futility of expectation, a futility which ultimately he saw as the very definition of human existence on earth, extended from life to literature (which was at its best for him when it justly portrayed "general nature," i.e., the human condition). His close readings of poetry became especially pointed, acute, and sensitive when the theme was the futility of hope. On "Pope's melancholy remark, 'Man never is, but always to be blest,'" 25 he "enlarged," reports Boswell, with the comment "that the present was never a happy state to any human being; but that, as every part of life, of which we are conscious, was at some point of time a period yet to come, in which felicity was expected, there was some happiness produced by hope." 26 Of the lines,

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\text{Thou hast nor youth, nor age,} \\
\text{But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,} \\
\text{Dreaming on both,}^{27}
\]

he says, "This is exquisitely imagined. When we are young we busy ourselves in forming schemes for succeeding time, and miss the gratifications that are before us; when we are old we amuse the langour of age with the recollection of youthful pleasures or performances; so that our life, of which no part is filled with the business of the present time, resembles our dreams after dinner." 28 Johnson's qualified approbation of Cowley's "Against Hope,"

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\text{Hope, whose weak Being ruind is,} \\
\text{Alike if it succeed, and if it miss;} \\
\text{Whom Good and Ill does equally confound,} \\
\text{And both the Horns of Fates Dilemma wound,}
\]

which follows in the Life of Cowley much unqualified disapproval of other metaphysical poems, may also be traced to his special concern with the topic and to his agreement with Cowley's sentiments; although one can only guess why Johnson justifies his approval by saying that hope is a subject upon

26 Life, II, 351.  
27 Measure for Measure, III. i.  
28 On Shakespeare, p. 78.
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which "scholastick speculation can be properly admitted." 29 But the fallacy of hope always represents for Johnson the triumph of Imagination over Reason, due to the mind's vacuous and futile obsessions.

Ultimately, Imagination, which is the mind's obsessive tendency to limit itself to some particular earthly goal or object as a result of its inherent incompatibility with temporal experience, is associated with madness. Earthly hope, is the product of Imagination, that part in man which is out of touch with reality, and of the incessant craving of the mind to be filled with objects "pleasing to itself"—objects which reality does not and cannot supply. But hope is not something one can take or leave alone; it is woven into the fabric of life itself, the inevitable mark of human existence in time. As Johnson puts it in his chapter on "the prevalence of imagination" in *Rasselas*, life itself implies universal madness: "Perhaps, if we speak with rigorous exactness, no human mind is in its right state. There is no man whose imagination does not, sometimes, predominate over his reason. . . . 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 probability. All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity." 30

Man's need for "diversion" and "novelty" thus entails perpetual illusion. The unsatisfactoriness of the present leads him to "expatiate in boundless futurity" and "cull, from all imaginable conditions, that which, for the present moment, he should most desire." 31 This becomes a habit, until the mind automatically "feasts on the luscious falsehood whenever she is offended with the bitterness of truth" 32 and then literal madness has set in. The syllogism is simple: hope, which is the necessary concomitant of existence, is the observable outcome of the "prevalence of imagination"; imagination prevailing over the rational recognition of the true state of affairs makes for madness; it follows that existence itself, which forces us to "regale our mind with airy gratifications," 33 has absurdity and madness at its core.

30 *Rasselas*, chap. xlv, pp. 139–140.
31 *Ibid*.
32 *Ibid*.
The insufficiency of the world to the spirit of man is a commonplace. In the third century B.C., the mysterious Preacher of Ecclesiastes was maintaining that "the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled hearing" (1:8), that "he loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase" (5:10), and that in human experience "that which is wanting cannot be numbered" (1:15). In the seventeenth century Donne was meditating "upon this great world, Man, so far, as to consider the immensitie of the creatures this world produces; our creatures are our thoughts, creatures that are borne Gyaunts; that reach from East to West, from Earth to Heaven, that do not only bestride all the Sea, and Land, but span the Sun and Firmament at once. . . . My thoughts reach all, comprehend all. Inexplicable mistery: I their creator am in a close prison." 34 In the nineteenth century, Walter Bagehot dryly remarked that "taken as a whole, the universe is absurd. There seems an unalterable contradiction between the human mind and its employments." 35

The Johnsonian axiom that the human condition is defined by the boredom which results from the incompatibility between the soul's infinite desires and the finite quality of the experience available to it in the elusive temporality of life, that the futility of temporal existence is demonstrated by the fact that "no man can at pleasure obtund or invigorate his senses, prolong the agency of any impulse, or continue the presence of any image traced upon the eye, or any sound infused upon the ear," 36 would appear therefore to be a mere reaffirmation of an oft-repeated truth. But the central assumptions of Johnson's thought, and in particular the idea that the secret of earthly value lies in the mind's obsessions and that these obsessions are generated by the mind's initial "vacuity," gain added depth and force when viewed in terms of Johnson's particular being, in terms, that is, of his biography. "Nothing is more common than to call our own condition, the condition of life," 37 we are told in Rasselas, and surely nowhere is the truth of this statement more apparent than in the case of Johnson himself. The natural movement of his mental processes was to follow upon and generalize from highly personal

36 Rambler No. 78, Works, II, 367.
37 Rasselas, chap. xlv, p. 144.
experience, so that all his ideas about the general human situation are in an important sense an extension of private sensibility.

Neoclassical though his attitude to language was, his use of words is no less charged with connotations than that of the most romantic or symbolistic of poets, and it is with due regard to this charged quality of his language that his prose should be read. Phrases like "to fix the attention," "to dwell attentively" upon something, to let something "get possession of your thoughts," "prevail over the mind" or "preoccupy the soul," all key phrases in both Johnson's writings and conversation, reveal their full meaning only when we relate them to the context of his particular—essentially private—mode of experience; when we take into account personal connotation as well as public denotation. The Times Literary Supplement reviewer of the Yale edition of Johnson's diaries failed to realize this when he made the conventional separation between the anguished Johnson "shut in his den" and "that other Johnson who really matters—Johnson the public figure and talker.”

There was, in fact, only one Johnson. His public statements are charged with a meaning that is more directly expressed in what he wrote when he confronted himself in solitude and are generalized from that solitary experience. The "public figure" is a sentimentalized fiction unless seen as that very same man.

Johnson's concept of the "vacuity of life" was abstracted from an experience of mental blankness and stagnation that had nothing general or formal about it. Au fond, "vacuity of life" simply means a severe form of personal boredom. In the same way Imagination was derived from his conviction that he had the seed of madness within him. In Rasselas madness is a recurrent theme, and Johnson's own mind, like that of the mad hermit and the mad Astronomer he portrayed in his moral tale, had firsthand knowledge of that peculiar staleness and paralysis of will, that accidie which drives the mind to turn upon itself for imaginative wish fulfills. Like his brain children, Johnson's own dread and terror were intensified by a powerful consciousness of sin bordering on criminal despair. His was a "disease of the imagination . . . which is complicated with the dread of guilt," in which "fancy and conscience . . . act interchangeably" and which, in religious terms, meant a constant

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38 Times Literary Supplement (London), March 6, 1959, pp. 121–2.
39 Rasselas, chap. xlvi, p. 149.
walking of the tightrope over an abyss of despair. Johnson tells us that the astronomer's mind was clouded by the gloom of solitude until its constant introspection and highly developed sense of guilt—for he was a man of superior intelligence and parts—became so unbearable that he was driven to seek refuge in the mad belief that he was God's Chosen and could regulate the weather at will. His inactivity and isolation from the world stimulated his imagination until finally his reason lost control. In the same way the hermit, living a life of solitude, introspection, and lack of involvement in the real moral concerns of mankind, finally discovers that his mind has begun "to riot with scenes of folly," to lose all contact with reality. Both the astronomer and the hermit are projections. They serve as a kind of self-diagnosis for a man who felt himself constantly at the point of madness and who could not help but indulge himself in that indolence and "immoderate sleep" which he at the same time felt to be morally a waste of precious time, psychologically a laying-open of the mind to melancholy, madness, and despair, and, religiously, to be his most grievous transgression against the will of God.

Johnson did not tire of confessing to his friends that "he always felt an inclination to do nothing," that he was "an idle fellow all his life," and that he allowed no excuse for it. Both Hawkins and Murphy noted his guilt-ridden sloth, and Boswell—who observed with obvious justice as far as the external facts were concerned that "it was strange to think that the most indolent man in Britain had written the most laborious work, THE ENGLISH DICTIONARY"—nevertheless records, year after year, Johnson's melancholy insistence that he was "an idle fellow." Johnson saw himself as suffering from a "frigid and narcotick infection," a

40 Ibid., chap. xl et seq., pp. 133–142.
41 Ibid., chap. xxi, p. 89.
42 Life, I, 463.
43 Ibid., 465.
44 Ibid., IV, 9.
45 For Arthur Murphy see Life, I, 268, n. 4 and 307, n. 2; for Sir John Hawkins, Life, III, 98, n. 1.
46 Life, I. 463.
47 In his boyhood—Life, I, 48, 50, 56; at College—ibid., I, 70, n. 3; in 1760—ibid., I, 353; in 1761—ibid., I, 358; in 1763—ibid., I, 398; in 1764—ibid., I, 482; in 1767—ibid., II, 44.
48 Rambler No. 89, Works, II, 419.
chronic disease grounded in his physical constitution and therefore incurable. Guilt ridden, driven to despair of his salvation, we find him in his diaries again and again recording renewed and desperate resolutions to "shake off this sloth and to redeem the time misspent in idleness and Sin," and the theme is repeated throughout his "public" pronouncements. His moral injunctions, his conversation, his moral pamphlets and his letters to his friends turn upon the slightest pretext to his obsession with the ways in which solitude and idleness lead to despair and damnation. In a letter to Boswell, praising the latter's decision to study law, he immediately points out that by diligent application to his studies Boswell will "gain, at least, what is no small advantage, security from those troublesome and wearisome discontents, which are always obtruding themselves upon a mind vacant, unemployed, and undetermined."  

But the idea, derived from highly personal experience, is characteristically generalized and extended, until it becomes part of his definition of existence. In the eighty-fifth Rambler we are told that "almost every occupation, however inconvenient or formidable, is happier than the life of sloth. The necessity of action is ... demonstrable from the fabric of the body."  That "vile melancholy" which Johnson claimed he had "inherited from his father" never let go of him, and he was convinced that he was "mad, or at least not sober" most of his life. He was extremely interested in abnormal psychology and at one point even proposed to write his own case history. He was always on the lookout for remedies against indolence and developed an entire system of complex moral thought out of his conviction that too much leisure necessarily aggravated mental disorder and that social activity was its rational and religious cure. But the search for a cure never ended. Mrs. Thrale was pointing to a mental state that persisted throughout his life when she reported with her usual combination of insight and

49 Life, I, 87, 203, 482.
50 Easter, 1757, in Diaries, p. 63 et passim.
51 Life, II, 21.
52 Rambler No. 89, Works, II, 388.
53 Life, I, 63, 343; IV, 300; IV, 2.
54 Ibid., I, 340, n. 1.
55 Ibid., 35, 65; V, 215.
56 Ibid., II, 45, n. 1.
57 Ibid., I, 190, 446; II, 440.
58 See esp., Rambler No. 33, Works, II, 164.
glibness that "his over-anxious care to retain without blemish the perfect sanity of his mind, contributed much to disturb it. . . . He had studied medicine diligently in all its branches; but had given particular attention to the diseases of the imagination, which he watched in himself with a solicitude destructive of his own peace, and intolerable to those he trusted." 60

Johnson's greatness lies in his ability to transform his personal distress of melancholy, guilt, and indolence into impersonal observation. The experience of a desperately neurotic man was turned into a generalized scheme of morals and religion which could claim universal validity. Indolence became "vacuity," the obsessive "chain of sin" became "habit," neurotic fantasy became "imagination," and these notions were tied together in generalizations about mankind that on the whole are distinguished by their striking pertinence. Insisting that to achieve virtue and sanity (i.e., salvation) man must extricate himself from sterile introspection and—as Heraclitus put it—"follow what he has in common" with the rest of mankind, Johnson, in the highest sense, did precisely that. The starting point may have been the solitary

59 One of Johnson's favorite medical authorities was George Cheyne, whose recommendations in matters like diet and tea-drinking he frequently referred to. See Life, I, 65; III, 26–27, 87, 152; IV, 3, 473; V, 154, 210. Johnson's notion that the necessity of action is demonstrable from the fabric of the body may well have originated in Cheyne's observation the "tho' Experience, which extremely confirms the Benefit of this Remedy [physical exercise] is the only solid Foundation to go upon, in the Cure of Distempers; yet the Reason of the Thing speaks so loudly, that it cannot but be hearken'd to by every reasonable Person. As Diet and proper Medicine in due time will certainly rectify the Juices, so Labour and Exercise will most infallibly strengthen the Solids, by promoting and continuing their constant Action and Motions." The English Malady (London, 1734), pp. 177–78. Further on Cheyne insists that those afflicted with nervous distempers should not only exercise their bodies but also provide constant diversion for their minds. Without "some amusement to employ themselves in . . . it seems absolutely impossible to keep the mind easy. . . . It is no matter what it is, provided it be but a Hobby Horse, and an Amusement, and stop the Current of Reflection and intense Thinking which Persons of weak nerves are aptest to run into" (pp. 181–82). The same recommendations may be found in earlier medical books. Lemnus, to relieve the "inconvenience which distempereth the mind" (L. L. Lemnus, Touchstone of Complexions, trans. T. Newton [London, 1565], leaf 145, recto), suggests diversions, games, and "Moderate myrth and banqueting" (leaf 154, verso). A medical treatise published in 1634 gives as a cause of melancholy, "studying without recreation or exercise of the body." I. M., General Practice of Medicine (London, 1634), sig. B2 and 3. The same idea appears in T. Bright, Treatise of Melancholy (London, 1586), pp. 300 et seq., and, of course, in the conclusion of Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, which Johnson found so powerful (See Life, III, 415, and II, 440).

Johnson suffering unspeakable frustration in his "den," but his very suffering was the ground from which grew the "public figure," as the Times Literary Supplement reviewer called him; the man who gave the world insights of the first order in criticism, morals, and religion.

From this point of view, Johnson's "madness" is responsible for his notion of what the life of virtue and piety consists in. Out of the connection between Vacuity and Imagination, between the "habitual drowsiness," "the state of neutrality or indifference," on the one hand, and "the luxury of fancy," "the art of regaling the mind with airy gratifications," the "invisible riot of the mind," the "secret prodigality of being," and the "sport of musing" in which the solitary dreamer of the eighty-ninth Rambler indulges, on the other, comes the notion of that real state of being which is its opposite, in which reason directs the mind to a life of contemplation, usefulness, and piety. Out of the sense of sin that gives rise to the damning notions of Vacuity and Imagination comes its opposite: the moralist's exhortation to virtue and to a rational "abstraction from the senses" in which the evil "habits" of life are overcome. The initial idea of vacuity-as-sin is complemented by an insistent emphasis on activity. Action becomes imbued with a deeply religious significance: action and objectivity both refer to a state of grace.

When we think about life's span we must only consider maturity, not "the ignorance of infancy, or imbecility of age. We are, long before we are able to think, and we soon cease from the power of acting. The true period of human life may be reasonably estimated at forty years." 61 Such comments on the urgency of life, one of Johnson's recurrent themes, gain new meaning and coherence when we are familiar with the nature of Johnson's mental disorder and with his futile "resolutions" to act. Infancy and senility are immediately associated with subjectivity, imagination, paralysis of will and thought; and this paralysis with that personal indolence, sloth, and ennui Johnson firmly believed to be punishable by eternal damnation.

The insistence on the need to avoid self and subjectivity, to "teach one's desire to fix on external things," and, "in order to regain liberty, to find the means of flying from oneself," 62 equates the state of grace with activity on the one hand and with

61 Rasselas, chap. iv, pp. 46-47.
62 Rambler No. 89, Works, II, 418.
contemplative detachment from obsessive desires and hopes on the other. Johnson’s belief in the indispensability of action to virtue and its function in liberating us from ourselves is paralleled and complemented by his repeated exhortation that we detach ourselves from any sort of total involvement in the present world of delusive hopes. To transcend the demands of the senses we must maintain a disengaged and contemplative state of mind, fixed not on the “Choice of Life” but on the “Choice of Eternity.” The core of the argument lies in what both contemplation and virtuous action must break through, in the notion of habit which, like all else in his thought, is directly generalized from his own efforts to break “the chain of sin.” Habit comes to mean the natural threat arising from existence in time. It is the normal state of man when he loses sight of his true situation because he is so totally in that situation. The vacuity of life leads to sensuality and subjectivity because it creates the habit of living according to the insatiate appetite of the senses. All virtue and all grace thus center on the loosening of the “chain of sin,” the breaking of habitual fixations. In the seventh Rambler we are told that “we are in danger from whatever can get possession of our thoughts” and that “all that can excite in us either pleasure or pain has a tendency to obstruct our way to happiness.” Existence itself involves “an hourly necessity of consulting the senses,” so that mere sensual existence from moment to moment becomes habitual, and virtue, knowledge, and piety consequently need to be achieved through a conscious struggle with what existence-in-time itself dictates and is most deeply rooted in our nature.63 In Rasselas, Imlac tells us that “pleasure” is in itself “harmless,” but “may become mischievous, by endearing to us a state which we know to be transient and probatory, and withdrawing our thoughts from that, of which every hour brings us nearer to the beginning, and of which no length of time will bring us to the end.” 64 “A constant residence amid noise and pleasure, inevitably obliterates the impression of piety,” 65 so that there is a constant “necessity of dispossessing the sensitive faculties of the influence that they must naturally gain by this preoccupation of the soul.” Only when we break the habit of being preoccupied with sensual hope and fear will “the motives to the

64 *Rasselas* chap. xlvii, p. 152.
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life of holiness"—which in themselves are strong and convincing, since they are simply the dictates of reason—be able to "gain our attention." 66

This is where rationality and faith meet—in a state of contemplation and "repose" that is at once a disengagement from the mind's hungers, hopes, and fears and a total victory over the power of Imagination, the vehicle of those hungers and the supplier of mock fulfillments. This notion of a disengaged state of being, a notion directly derived from his personal need, guilt, and anguish, is the ideal Johnson sets up not only in his moral theories and as the goal of religious experience, but, in an important sense, as the point of departure for his literary criticism and aesthetic judgments as well. The famous critical dictum that "nothing can please long, but just representations of general nature" 67 is, after all, also the literary conclusion of his characteristic argument for a freedom from the falsifying tensions of self and imagination and from time itself; a freedom which can be provided only by "the stability of truth."

"The irregular combinations of fanciful invention [i.e., imagination, the vacuity of life in search of objects] may delight awhile," he writes in the Preface to Shakespeare, "by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth." The notion of truth as an ultimate criterion of value thus extends from morals and religion into art. It is one more instance of a religious rationalism that relates all human experience to the mind's fundamental struggle to be free of Imagination. Sanity, reason, virtue, and truth point at once both to religious salvation and to aesthetic worth: the "just portrayal of general nature" is the "Choice of Eternity" on the aesthetic level, a preference for the disclosures of pious Reason over the diabolical mirages of Imagination.

The religious state of mind in which "the stability of truth" is attained implies contact with one's actual state, objectively, in a full experience of mortality. For it is only the combination of "imagination" and "habit" that makes us forget death and enables us to live from moment to moment as if life were eternal. Imagination enables us to regard our finite ends as if they were infinite by stopping the flow of time for us. Habit confirms us in

66 Ibid., p. 33.
our imaginative error, until it has become "radicated by time" and is taken for granted—else all the striving of mankind after earthly goals, which depends entirely on fundamental self-delusions and on the habit of living from day to day, would have been impossible. The rationality of religion manifests itself in its insistence on the full experience of mortality, on the objective view of human life. Reason itself discovers the truth of religion, because it is the initial truth of the contradiction between the infinite desire of the mind and the insufficiency and finitude of the temporal ends with which the mind becomes obsessed. The full experience of mortality is therefore the experience in which all Johnson's thought culminates, for it opens up the other state of being—real being—as distinct from the thoughtless vegetation of quotidian life. In Rasselas, this is the "Choice of Eternity" as opposed to that "Choice of Life" which the parable progressively teaches us is irrelevant and pointless, belied by time and determined by the mad fixations of human fancy. In the fifty-fourth Rambler, a dying man's final hours are described as "hours of seriousness and wisdom" in which "everything that terminated this side of the grave was received with coldness and indifference, and regarded rather in consequence of the habit of valuing it, than from any opinion that it deserved value; it had little more prevalence over his mind than a bubble that was now broken. . . . All conversation was tedious, that had not a tendency to dis-engage him from human affairs."68

Johnson's notorious "fear of death" ties in with his religious thought concerning "the vacuity of life" through elaborate doctrinal and existential justification. Ultimately, it is a reassertion of one of Christianity's main tenets: the idea that a constant contemplation and remembrance of death is a constant contemplation and remembrance of the most essential truth—a truth which, by pointing to the urgency which is inherent in temporal life, frees the mind from its most cherished (and sinful) delusions. The following passage is a pensée of Pascal, but, apart from the language in which it is couched, it could just as easily have been Johnson's: "La seule chose qui nous console de nos misères est le divertissement, et cependant c'est la plus grande de nos misères. Car c'est cela qui nous empêche principalement de songer à nous et qui nous fait perdre insensiblement. Sans cela, nous serions dans l'ennui, et cet

68 Rambler No. 54, Works, II, 260.
ennui nous pousserait à chercher un moyen plus solide d’en sortir. Mais le divertissement nous amuse, et nous fait arriver insensiblement à la mort.”  

Reaffirming the Stoic-Christian ideal of the contemplation of mortality as a “universal medicine of the mind” (as he calls it in the seventeenth Rambler), Johnson gives us the conclusion in which the traditional doctrines, what he himself experienced in his most intimate self and what he took to be the fundamental truth about man, are fused and summed up:

Think, says Epictetus, frequently on poverty, banishment and death, and thou wilt never indulge violent desires, or give up thy heart to mean sentiments. That the maxim of Epictetus is founded on just observation will easily be granted, when we reflect, how that vehemence of eagerness after the common objects of pursuit is kindled in our minds. We represent to ourselves the pleasures of some future possession, and suffer our thoughts to dwell attentively upon it, till it has wholly engrossed the imagination, and permits us not to conceive any happiness but its attainment, or any misery but its loss.

In terms of Johnson the “public figure” such passages are the uninteresting output of a ponderous writer and conversationalist, whose claim to permanence, it is perhaps still felt, lies much more in his acute literary criticism than in any contribution to moral thought. Seen in the context of the anguished man “shut in his den,” fully experiencing the “vacuity of life” and battling to achieve godliness against the terrific odds of disease, disorder, and despair and seen in the context of Johnson’s elaborate (and highly original) rethinking of the Christian and Humanist heritage, such passages become fascinating moral literature.