CHAPTER THREE: THE ART OF FORGETFULNESS

"Memory, in Johnson’s thought, may be seen as the temporal inverse of hope or desire or expectation."

Human expectation represents the mind’s tragic transcendence of the present moment toward future objects that are in themselves neutral but which it transmutes into goals of pursuit. We are "condemn’d to Hope’s delusive mine/as on we toil from day to day" 1 because the dissatisfaction inherent in our present circumstances drives us to project our wishes into the future, fixing upon some object which we imaginatively transform into a solution of all ills. Such objects are necessarily vain and illusory 2 because the temporal process itself belies our idealization: when once the imagined future has emerged into the actual present, that is to say is no longer distant in time, it by definition is no longer ideal. Being temporal, the objects of expectation are elusive; our hope is frustrated by the materialization of its object, so that the mind must once again "send imagination out upon the wing" 3 in new plans and desires. What is true of hope is inversely true of memory. Like our "expectations," our memories (as distinct from "recollections" which are merely the calling to consciousness of stored information) 4 represent a transcendence of time through the mind’s projection into the past in search of unattainably infinite satisfaction.

Expectation and retrospection are the forward and backward projections of Imagination, the key term of the Johnsonian ethos. All of Johnson’s general observations on the human condition and all of

1 On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet, ll. 1-2.
2 This is the central theme of both Rasselas and The Vanity of Human Wishes.
3 Rasselas, chap. xlv, p. 140.
4 To recollect means "to recover to memory" (Dictionary). I do not wish to imply, however, that Johnson consistently uses “memory” to designate imaginative projection and “recollection” to denote the technical operation of the mind when it turns to stored experience. As in most other cases, Johnson does not keep to fixed labels. He uses interchangeably all terms that in ordinary usage are synonymous or nearly so.
his particular observations on the various phenomena of human life are ultimately explicable in terms of the basic tension he sees between the rational and the imaginative faculties of man. What Johnson meant by Imagination may be understood in terms of his frequent discussion of the incompatibility between the mental and the bodily modes of existence. The starting point is the fact that the body must obey the restrictions placed upon it by time, whereas the mind is unrestricted: the body has no existence apart from its *present* being, whereas the mind’s mode of existence lies precisely in its constant projection of itself into future or past. The consequence of this difference in the modes of being of body and of mind is a perpetual incompatibility between human conceptions and human performance. The body can never entirely keep up with the mind. Imagination may thus be defined as the mental faculty which tends to increase this incompatibility, Reason as the mental faculty which tends to diminish it. When the mind loses touch with the actual possibilities of performance represented by the body’s purely temporal mode of being, Imagination may be said to hold full sway, for this is the condition of overt madness. On the other hand, a life led with the constant end of decreasing the incompatibility between human transcendence and human actuality is the rational life, or, interchangeably, the sane and virtuous life, in that it implies a confrontation of one’s true state. In the conclusion of the Seventeenth *Rambler*, for example, an essay devoted to the contemplation of mortality (and one of Johnson’s most impressive performances), we are told that “it is always pleasing to observe, how much more our minds can conceive, than our bodies can perform; yet it is our duty, while we continue in this complicated state, to regulate one part of our composition by some regard to the other.”

In the *Dictionary*, Imagination is defined as (among other things) “the power of forming *ideal* pictures” or “the power of representing things *absent*.” In both expectation and retrospection we “indulge the power of fiction,” as Imlac puts it, and employ our fundamental irrationality to supply us with “objects of attention” that are idealized, “gilded,” and distorted in accordance with the mind’s infinite need. The indulgence of such memory will be observed, of

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5 *Rambler* No. 17, *Works*, II, 87. The entire essay may serve as an illustration of the points I have been making.

6 In his crucial analysis of “The Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination,” *Rasselas*, chap. xliv, p. 140.
course, most strikingly in cases where present and future no longer hold much in store for "the attention," as "when we are old [and] amuse the langour of age with the recollection of youthful pleasures" (which at the time were quite unreal, since they were dependent on "expectation"). But imaginative memory, the mind's leap from the present moment into the seemingly satisfying past, may occur throughout life whenever we are "offended by the bitterness of truth."  

In fact, this power of "forming ideal pictures" is constantly at work upon the past, even when we are not completely aware of it, for it is our most spontaneous reaction to the elusiveness of experience. Our natural need to stop time, to rest in an immutable X that will not slip through our fingers, leads us to idealize scenes of the past in precisely the way we imaginatively transform the future "prospects" of expectation into seemingly absolute satisfactions. The discrepancy between the real setting of our past experience and what we have imaginatively made of it by our restless craving for the ideal was what Johnson had in mind when he sadly told Baretti how he "went down to [his] native town, where [he] found the streets narrower and shorter than [he] thought [he] had left them." 

Like all his basic ideas, Johnson's observation of the fallacies and distortions of memory becomes highly generalized and manifold. It underlies his distrust of the philosophical glorification of primitive states, the romantic glorification of mindless childhood, the primitivistic exaltation of precivilized, supposedly prelapsarian man, and the notion of a golden age of one kind or another which Johnson observed to be a perennial human obsession. Ultimately, it may be seen to underly his distrust of any kind of idealized, "happy" literature, notably his antipathy toward pastoral poetry or toward the theodicies of philosophical optimism. The function of the true poet (or, interchangeably, of the true moralist) is to expose the "luscious falsehoods" which the mind creates "whenever she is offended with the bitterness of truth," to present not the "ideal pictures" of

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7 On Shakespeare, p. 78. The phrase recurs in Johnson's writings. Cf., e.g., Rambler No. 90, Works, II, 421: "the langours of attention."

8 Rasselas, chap. xliiv, p. 140.

9 Idler No. 72, Works, IV, 365.

10 Letters, I, 139-40.

11 Rasselas, chap. xliiv, p. 140.
imaginative memory and hope but the true pictures which Reason sees in the nature of things. Johnson's entire work, whether literary, scholarly, religious, or political, may be seen as an attempt to do precisely that.

Man's passion becomes his obsessive dream. The object of his passion, whether the future object of desire or the past object of memory, in extreme states rules out attention to all else, becoming an imaginative absolute which subjectively appears to have a validity beyond time. Perhaps the most striking example of such obsessive retrospection in Johnson's writings is presented in *Rasselas* in the chapters that deal with the Princess' reaction to the loss of her beloved Pekuah. She is described as having "sat from morning to evening recollecting all that had been done or said by her Pekuah, *treasured up with care* every trifle on which Pekuah had set an accidental value, and which might recall to mind any little incident or careless conversation. The sentiments of her whom she now *expected to see no more*, were *treasured in her memory as rules of life.*"  

"*Treasured in her memory*": such hoarding of particulars is dangerous both because the particulars themselves undergo Imagination's process of distortion and because they leave no room for attention to matters at hand or to the future objectives that guarantee the forward movement of life. What Imlac says of the general "*Prevalence of Imagination*"—"*the mind, in weariness or leisure, recurs constantly to the favourite conception*" 13—is thus true of obsessive retrospection no less than of obsessive expectation: the Princess' mind, "*though forced into short excursions, always recurred to the image of her friend*." 14 Her "*hunger of imagination*" has taught her to feed upon this particular image from the past, so that no present experience and no projection into future experience can provide the same satisfaction. As we learn in the Seventy-fifth *Idler*, "*if the repositories of thought are already full, what can they receive? If the mind is employed on the past or future,*" it cannot attend to the present. In order "*to attend*" to life, in order to move through time with relative sanity, we must minimize the discrepancy between our conceptions and our actuality; we must retain our rational control of both desire and memory, be "*able, at pleasure, to evacuate*

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[our] mind" and bring to our pursuits "an intellect defecated and pure, neither turbid with care, nor agitated by pleasure." 15

I have tried to show how Johnson sees in the dangers of memory the corollary of the dangers of earthly hopes or wishes. In hope future objects are imaginatively idealized until they appear infinitely desirable; in obsessive memory the same thing happens to experiences of the past. But hope is not the only way in which the mind throws itself into the future. Throughout Johnson's writings, as indeed throughout the moral and psychological literature he read,16 hope is nearly always coupled with fear. "The hopes and fears of this world," 17 "the fears and hopes . . . of this life," 18 are what menace balance, rationality, and piety. In The Vanity of Human Wishes, we are invited to see how "hope and fear, desire and hate / O'erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate" (5–6). Hope is complemented by fear because fear is in reality negative hope. What we fear we hope to avoid, just as what we desire we fear we may not attain. In both cases illusion is involved, the objects of both earthly hope and earthly fear being what Hazlitt called "bugbears and idols." 19 "As treach'rous phantoms in the mist delude/ [Man] shuns fancied ills, or chases airy good": 20 the relation between hope and fear is not merely schematic; hope itself is a kind of fear, since what Johnson has in mind is the general anxiety or "uneasiness" 21 which characterize all expectation, all projections into the future, whether of the "chasing" or of the "shunning" kind. Hope and fear are interchangeable in the sense that they both sum up the tragic restlessness inherent in man's temporal being, his mind's constant over-reaching of his body.

Precisely the same holds true of memory. The mind turns to the past in search of absolute satisfaction, painting past experience with the colors of infinity, and is haunted by "fearful" memories that are no less obsessive. The very transformation of past experience into obsessions implies a kind of misery which is analogous to fear. When Imlac shows how the "prevalence of imagination" makes life "pass

16 Idler No. 75, Works, IV, 370.
16 E.g., Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy
17 Diaries, p. 78.
18 Ibid., p. 103.
20 Vanity of Human Wishes, II. 9–10.
21 Cf. Life, II, 73: "as to care or mental uneasiness, [savages] are not above it, but below it, like bears."
in *dreams of rapture or anguish*" 22 he is referring to the mind’s transcendence both in the “hopes and fears” that feed upon an imagined future and in the obsessively pleasurable or horrifying memories of an imagined past.

This is where Johnson’s basic psychological insight into the human predisposition toward *guilt* becomes relevant. Imagination in general is seen by Johnson as spurred and intensified by our tendency to take upon ourselves responsibility for what in reason we would see to be outside our power. The Astronomer, for example, whose imagination has so far gained control over his reason as to make him believe that he has power over the weather, is very anxious that his tremendous duties will not be discharged perfectly and catastrophe will ensue. His unconscious megalomania (which is an extreme symbol of the general human “prevalence of imagination”) is “a disease of imagination which is *complicated with the dread of guilt,*” an irrational condition in which “*fancy and conscience . . . act interchangeably.*” 23 The same thing happens in the retrospective obsessions which we have seen to be analogous to hope and fear. Our potential of anxiety, our natural propensity to feel guilt and irrationally to employ our conscience upon evils that are really not of our making, is particularly exercised when calamities befall persons who are close to us. After her favorite had been kidnapped, Nekayah blames herself for what is really not her fault, and it takes considerable persuasion on the part of Imlac (who, representing the point of view of Reason, becomes a kind of therapist in this case) to lessen the harmful effects of her overdeveloped sense of guilt. “*Fancy*” and “*conscience*” do indeed act interchangeably in her case: even after Imlac has practiced his rational therapy upon her, we find her “*imagining* many expedients by which the loss of Pekuah might have been prevented.” 24 And it should be emphasized that Johnson, here as elsewhere in *Rasselas,* is exposing and analysing what he considers average, “*normal*” humanity—us, in other words—since, as we learn in Imlac’s “Prevalence of Imagination” discourse, all apparent normality conceals a latent madness that is the mark of fallen humanity.

22 *Rasselas,* chap. xliv., p. 141.
Obsessive states of sorrow, intensified by "the pangs of guilt," are dangerous in that the fixation upon the past interferes with the "regulated" state that is our precarious normality by increasing the discrepancy between our idealizing conceptions and our temporal actuality. Nekayah, completely obsessed with Pekuah's loss, resolves "to retire from the world with all its flatteries and deceits . . . till with a mind purified from all earthly desires [she will] enter that state to which all are hastening, and in which [she hopes] again to enjoy the friendship of Pekuah." The irony here is subtle. It would appear at first that Nekayah has been driven to true piety by her loss. Such, indeed, is Johnson's traditional notion of the "use" of calamities and his explanation of the evils of life: they serve to disillusion us with the "Choice of Life" and drive us to the rational "Choice of Eternity." But, in fact, Nekayah's rejection of earthly delusions is in terms of one particular delusion, in terms of her fixation upon one idealized point in the past which not her reason but her imagination, complicated with guilt, characteristically focussing all intensity and all value upon a particular to the exclusion of all else, has given the dignity of a transcendental absolute. Her conception of the afterlife is in essence an epitome of earthly obsession, of a vain human wish. Her idea of Paradise is now identical with her idea of Pekuah, just as it had previously been (and later once again becomes) connected with her favorite wish-fulfillment of pastoral bliss. Her decision to reject the world is rightly seen by Imlac as a manifestation of the irrational and dangerous human need to stop time. "Do not entangle your mind by irrecoverable determinations . . . you will wish to return to the world when the image of your companion has left your thoughts," he says. "'That time,' said Nekayah, 'will never come.'" I do not think it has been sufficiently noticed how strongly the chapters that trace Nekayah's grief in Rasselas reflect Johnson's personal experiences at the time. Rasselas was written for the express purpose of defraying the expense of his mother's funeral, to whom he was strongly attached. He was so "extremely agitated" by his mother's death that he was "afraid of being left alone." The fear, as

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25 Ibid., chap. xxxv, p. 119.
26 Ibid., p. 120.
27 Life, I, 341.
28 Life, II, 124.
29 Letters, I, 125.
always, was the terror of incipient madness, and he "composed his
mind" only by an extraordinary effort of will.\textsuperscript{30} Guilt was a strong
element in his agitation. Boswell recounts how he "regretted much
his not having gone to visit his mother for several years, previous to
her death."\textsuperscript{31} In Johnson's last letter to his mother he begs to be
forgiven for "all that I have done ill, and all that I have omitted to
do well."\textsuperscript{32} Shortly after her death Johnson wrote Lucy Porter that
if his mother were to live again "surely I should behave better to her.
But she is happy, and what is past is nothing to her; and for me,
since I cannot repair my faults to her, I hope repentance will efface
them."\textsuperscript{33} In the \textit{Idler} of January 27, 1759, obviously written under
the impact of his bereavement, Johnson writes that "the loss of a
friend upon whom the heart was fixed, to whom every wish and endeavour
tended, is a state of dreary desolation, in which the mind looks
abroad impatient of itself, and finds nothing but emptiness and
horror."\textsuperscript{34} The language of this paper is extremely reminiscent of
Nekayah's "grieving and musing" in \textit{Rasselas}.\textsuperscript{35} That Johnson
regarded his extreme grief as a dangerous compound of
imagination and guilt which was a threat to sanity becomes clear
when we find him in his Prayer of January 23, 1758 "returning
thanks for the alleviation of [his] sorrow."\textsuperscript{36} The threat, as with
Nekayah, had ultimately been that of criminal despair. "Forgive me,
O Lord," prays Johnson, "whatever my Mother has suffered by my
fault, whatever I have done amiss, and whatever duty I have
neglected. \textit{Let me not sink into useless dejection}."\textsuperscript{37} Nekayah, "when she
saw nothing more to be tried, sunk down inconsolable \textit{in hopeless
dejection}."\textsuperscript{38}

The danger of obsessive grief is the danger of the kind of
despair which is in itself a denial not only of earthly hope but
also of otherworldly hope, and therefore of religion itself. Johnson

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Life}, II, 124.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Life}, I, 340.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Letters}, I, 121.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Letters}, I, 124.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Idler} No. 41, \textit{Works}, IV, 271.
\textsuperscript{35} E.g. (\textit{ibid.}, p. 272): "Happiness is not found in self-contemplation; it is
perceived only when reflected from another." Nekayah similarly comments that
"since Pekuah was taken from her . . . [she lacks] \textit{the radical principle of happiness},"
for she has "no one to love or trust" (\textit{Rasselas}, chap. xxxv, p. 120).
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Diaries}, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Rasselas}, chap. xxxiv, p. 117.
was hardly the first to connect the effects of "tender conscience" and "aroused imagination" with the threat of religious despair. His conception of "profitable" sorrow, of the kind of rational mourning which turns our thoughts toward God, implies an emotional tightrope over an abyss of obsession and of mad grief that would halt time in order to perpetuate itself. This is perhaps brought out most clearly in the prayers written in 1752 after the death of his beloved Tetty: "And now, O Lord, release me from my sorrow ... and enable me to do my duty ... without disturbance from fruitless grief, or tumultuous imaginations." In May he was repeating the same prayer: "O Lord grant ... that I may not sorrow as one without hope, but may now return to the duties of my present state ... nor idleness lay me open to vain imaginations." Four years later (March 28, 1756), he was still beseeching God "that the remembrance of my Wife ... may not load my soul with unprofitable sorrow." "The state of mind oppressed with a sudden calamity," says Imlac, "is like that of the fabulous inhabitants of the new-created earth, who when the first night came upon them, supposed the day would never return." But day does return, and it is our religious and moral duty to behave in accordance with this fact. "The business of life is to go forwards," we are told in the Seventy-second Idler. "We must be busy about good and evil," exhorts Idler No. 73, for virtue implies the rational exercise of choice in terms of present actualities. The obsessions of memory are even more dangerous to reason and virtue than the futile fixations of hope and fear, because "he who sees evil in prospect meets it in his ways; but he who catches it by retrospection turns back to find it." It is this acute consciousness of the psychological dangers of retrospection that explains Johnson's recommendation, in more than one of his moral writings, that we cultivate "the art of forgetfulness." In the forty-fifth Idler he identifies himself with

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39 For references and a discussion of the traditional connection made among imagination, overscrupulous conscience, and despair, see my essay "Religious Despair in Mediaeval Literature and Art," Mediaeval Studies, XXVI (1964), 231–56.
40 Diaries, p. 46.
41 Ibid., p. 47.
42 Ibid., p. 61.
43 Rasselas, chap. xxxv, p. 120.
44 Idler No. 72, Works, IV, 363.
45 Idler No. 73, Works, IV, 365.
46 Idler No. 72, Works, IV, 363.
Themistocles who "when an offer was made to [him] of teaching him the art of memory . . . answered that he would rather wish for the art of forgetfulness. He felt his imagination haunted by phantoms of misery which he was unable to suppress, and would gladly have calmed his thoughts with an oblivious antidote." In the seventy-second Idler Johnson elaborates the idea that "it would add much to human happiness, if an art could be taught of forgetting all of which the remembrance is at once useless and afflictive." "Forgetfulness is necessary to remembrance" because the thoughts that are merely afflictive in their combination of scrupulosity and obsessiveness take up that room in the mind which should be open to recollection useful to the business we have at hand and are, therefore, an impediment to both action and sanity. The criterion of Reason, here as throughout Johnson’s writings, is that of control or regulation. "Forgetfulness" implies a regulating power over impulse. Just as Imlac argues that "there is no man who is entirely master of his imagination, no man whose ideas will come and go at his command," but that we must strive by sheer will power and lucidity to attain a rational control of our fancies, so in the Seventy-second Idler we learn that "the power of forgetting is capable of improvement. Reason will, by a resolute contest, prevail over imagination."

But the "art of forgetfulness" is the true "art of memory" in a more basic sense. Imagination in the Johnsonian ethos is ultimately that power in man which blinds him to his true state and is therefore the supreme menace to his salvation. Salvation itself is the state of our forgetfulness or control of irrational impulses, of our "letting go from the remembrance" all the earthly obsessions which distract our attention from the true urgency of our mortal lives. All of Johnson’s thoughts ultimately point to what he considers rational memory, the memento mori which is identical with

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47 Idler No. 45, Works, IV, 281. Cf., George Wither’s Abuses, Stript and Whipt (London, 1614), I, 11: "Monstrous shapes which seem for to appear/Through [despairing mens’] imaginations.” Examples could be multiplied from the hortatory and allegorical literature of the Middle Ages and the Reformation with which Johnson was familiar.

48 Idler No. 72, Works, IV, 364.

49 Ibid., p. 363.

50 Rasselas, chap. xlii, p. 140.

51 Idler No. 72, Works, IV, 364.

52 This is one of the meanings of "forget" as Johnson defines it in his Dictionary.
the memento quod es homo. "Let me remember [that] of the short life of man a great part is already past," he prays year after year. "Make me remember, O God, that every day is thy gift"; "make me remember how much every day brings me closer to the grave." The beautiful or monstrous idealizations of fancy and passion stop time for us and make us avoid and escape remembrance of our true state. All the operations of Reason ultimately depend on the essential "remembrance of death [which] ought to predominate in our minds, as an habitual and settled principle, always operating, though not always perceived . . . our attention should seldom wander . . . from our own condition." Johnson, whether asking God to make him "forget" his guilt-ridden sorrows, to "remember" the urgency of his true condition, or to be "animated with reasonable hope," is ultimately praying for the same thing—for what could interchangeably be termed sanity, rationality, or the redemption of his immortal soul.

63 Diaries, p. 110.
64 Ibid., p. 49.
65 Ibid., p. 65.
66 Rambler No. 78, Works II, 368.
67 Diaries, p. 74.