Passionate Intelligence

Sachs, Arieh

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Sachs, Arieh.
Passionate Intelligence: Imagination and Reason in the Work of Samuel Johnson.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/71830

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2457045
CHAPTER FIVE: THE GENERAL AND PARTicular

Im'ac's dictum that "the business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species" has been studied in the light of Johnson's other statements on the relative importance of particularity and generality in poetry and has been convincingly related to the eighteenth-century concern with the "sublime" but it has not, so far as I know, been considered in relation to what is perhaps more fundamental for an understanding of Johnson's aesthetics: the moral and religious observations which form the core of his thought. Since for Johnson, as for many other eighteenth-century writers, the religious, the moral, and the aesthetic were not, what they later became, separate spheres (Imlac "the poet" is in fact the moral sage in Rasselas), it seems to me that his views on the nature and function of poetry are best understood in terms of his more general ideas concerning the nature of man. In the present chapter I propose to follow Johnson's dictum and to attempt a wider examination of generality and particularity as key notions not merely in his theory of poetry but also in the body of thought which emerges from a reading of all his principal religious and moral writings.

1 Rasselas, chap. x, p. 62.
Perhaps the first thing to notice concerning the role of
generality and particularity in Johnson's view of man is the idea
that, although the will, and consequently "the attention" of men as
we observe them existing in time, fixes upon particular objects,
man's real being, unlike that of beasts, is essentially defined by the
contradiction between a transcendence of and its employments in
time. The human will is seen as infinite and "general" in the sense
that it is a priori undifferentiated and objectless. The difference
between man and beast lies in the fact that animal desire has no
margins beyond its temporality. Animal desire does not need to
"fix" upon a particular object because it is by nature wholly oriented
toward specific temporal goals, whereas man's real craving transcends
nature. Man's earthly, temporal strivings are really expressions of a
hunger that is entirely beyond time:

"What" said [Rasselas], "makes the difference between man and all the
rest of the animal creation? Every beast that strays beside me has the same
corporeal necessities with myself: he is hungry and crops the grass, he is
thirsty and drinks the stream; his thirst and hunger are appeased, he is
satisfied and sleeps . . . I am hungry and thirsty like him, but when thirst
and hunger cease I am not at rest; I am like him pained with want, but am not
like him satisfied with fulness."

Man, unlike the beasts, is restless and "uneasy" in a world of
fluctuation and differentiation. His restlessness, which springs from
the unalterable contradiction between his metaphysical,
undifferentiated desire and its differentiated mock fulfillments in
time, makes him concentrate all his powers upon particular temporal
ends which he imaginatively elevates to that dignity of absolute
value which only the truly general and unspecified can have. Such
transformation may be objectively absurd, but, when seen from
within the human condition, must be recognized as the essence of
temporal life. A lack of particular desire is a "vacuity," a condition
of "tediousness" or "torpidity" that may culminate in madness
(since the mind will invent particular ends-of-desire that have no
relation to reality and will shape itself accordingly). Consciousness

3 See Chapter 1, "The Vacuity of Life."
4 Rasselas, chap. ii, p. 41.
5 Cf., Life, II, 73: "As to care or mental uneasiness [savages] are not above it, but
below it, like bears."
6 Cf., e.g., Rasselas, chap. xi, p. 66: "Ignorance . . . is a vacuity in which the soul
sits motionless and torpid for want of attraction."
must have particular objects to attend to in the real world; the extratemporal will must fasten upon particular temporal goals or be utterly frustrated by inaction, by a negation of what the process of time itself dictates. "If I had any known want," says Rasselas, "I should have a certain wish: that wish would excite endeavour and I should not then repine to see the sun move so slowly . . . I fancy that I should be happy if I had something to pursue." 7 The "hunger of imagination which preys upon life" must be "appeased by some employment." 8

The mind’s attempts to find proper objects within time thus lead it to narrow the general will which is its supratemporal nature and to ascribe value to the particular. Man "devotes his heart" 9 to definite objects of pursuit and his attention becomes "fixed upon" 10 narrow, differentiated goals. But this concentration of human attention (I employ this word because it is so recurrent in Johnson’s writings) upon a particular end can be possible only at the expense of attention to other particulars. The very act of ascribing (earthly) value to one thing involves the act of ignoring the possibility of value or interest in other things. Johnson therefore sees, in the concern with particular ends which is so necessary a concomitant of temporal life, a symptom of man’s irrationality, of what in the Johnsonian ethos is designated as Imagination. It is Imagination that concentrates upon some particular to the exclusion of others, in the same sense that Reason surveys particulars in the context of a whole. Reason leads to truth, Imagination to error and delusion. But Imagination is, as I have noted, inextricably woven into human life and consciousness; the process of life from moment to moment enables particular objects to conquer our attention by arousing our hopes or fears. That our concentration upon one thing makes us blind to others is thus the essence of human limitation. No man can be (or should expect to be) purely rational. Imlac himself, recounting his life to the prince, tells how "when this thought [of the imagined happiness that awaited him in his native land] had taken

7 Rasselas, chap. iii, p. 44.
8 Ibid., chap. xxxii, p. 113.
9 Rambler No. 58, Works, II, 277.
10 Nekayah, perceiving her brother’s "attention fixed, proceeded in her narrative" (Rasselas, chap. xxvi, p. 96). "Curiosity . . . fixes the attention" (Idler No. 57, Works, IV, 317).
**PASSIONATE INTELLIGENCE**

*possessed of my mind, I considered every moment as wasted that did not bring me nearer to Abyssinia.*"11

Reason and Imagination form the basic polarity of concepts that underlies all of Johnson's generalizations about man. Imagination is the faculty which leads the mind into error by distorting, limiting, or hiding the true state of affairs in accordance with the heart's perverse desires and needs. Reason, on the other hand, is that which discloses the true state of affairs and which thus controls (or "regulates," as Johnson frequently puts it) the impulses of Imagination. If the notion of Imagination may be associated with the limited viewpoint, with passion, with a projection of value upon particular ends (and with subjection to time), Reason is linked with the general viewpoint, with the evaluation of particular objects in terms of a larger context, and with that which is not dependent upon or subject to time. Inasmuch as man is inescapably a creature of Imagination as well as a rational being, his limited awareness inevitably entails basic error. Since no man can "take in the whole concatenation of causes and effects . . . where . . . is the wonder that they who see only a small part should judge erroneously of the whole?"12

The theme of the limitation of human attention and awareness to selected particulars recurs throughout Johnson's writings and conversation. Nekayah, in the "Debate on Marriage," suggests that people do not act "with all the reasons of action present to their minds" and that this fact points to what is "the state of mankind."13 In *Rambler* No. 203 we learn that "the eye of the mind, like that of the body, can only extend its view to new objects, by losing sight of those which are now before it" 14—a statement pointing to the connection I have already indicated between the temporal nature of human awareness and its limiting confinement to particulars. In *Rambler* No. 108 we are told that "of extensive surfaces we can only take a survey, as the parts succeed one another."15 During a discussion of Hume, Johnson remarked that "the human mind is so limited that it cannot take in all the parts of a subject, so that there

---

11 *Rasselas*, chap. xii, p. 58. Cf., chap. xlvi, p. 150: the Astronomer's "reason had been . . . subjugated by an uncontrollable and overwhelming idea."
13 *Rasselas*, chap. xxix, p. 106.
14 *Works*, III, 443.
may be objections raised against anything," 16 and in the Adventurer No. 107—a paper which contains what is perhaps the most complete discussion of the subject—we learn that "disagreement of opinion . . . will be multiplied . . . because we are finite beings, furnished with different degrees of attention, and discovering consequences which escape another, none taking in the whole concatenation of causes and effects, and most comprehending but a very small part." 17 The religious basis of this recurrent insistence on human limitation to particularity as a symptom of man's creatureliness and irrationality is made quite clear in this essay: "life is not the object of science; we see a little, a very little . . . the only thought, therefore, on which we can repose with comfort, is that which presents us to the care of Providence, whose eye takes in the whole of things." 18

The butt of Augustan satire is frequently the man of "useless" learning who has concentrated all his attention upon single aspects of experience at the expense of all others. He is the man who does not see his own pursuit as a detail in a more general picture of human life to which it is and must be subservient. The exclusive concern of Swift's Laputans with mathematics, astronomy, and music, for example, points to their total irrationality. They represent in unadulterated form what Johnson (and many before him, including Swift himself) 19 designated as Imagination. Their mad obsession with the abstract disciplines makes them lose sight of the "usefulness" that characterizes true rationality and which can be achieved only by a balancing view of one's particular pursuit within the perspective of the whole. Their total inability to see things in context points to their essential guilt of pride, of concentration upon self, of what Swift saw as the profoundest kind of impiety and irrationality (for the two ultimately come to the same thing). Again, in the Fourth Book of the Dunciad there is an amusing episode in which the Goddess of Dulness is called upon to settle a quarrel

16 Life, I, 444.
17 Works, IV, 95: cf., Idler No. 5, ibid., 163, "of all extensive and complicated objects, different parts are selected by different eyes; and minds are variously affected as they vary their attention."
18 Works, IV, 99. Cf., Pope's insistence in the Essay on Man that "Tis but a part we see and not a whole" (Epistle I, l. 60), whereas "the first Almighty Cause/Acts not by partial, but by gen'r'al laws" (ll. 145-46). "Each individual seeks a sev'ral goal;/But heavens great view is One, and that the Whole" (Epistle II, ll. 237-38).
19 See, e.g., Tale of a Tub, Sec. IX, where "imagination" is used as an interchangeable term for "cant," "vision," and "deception."
between two natural scientists. The plaintiff tells how he had reared a flower that was the most beautiful ever seen; he had devoted his entire life to the delightful plant, had spread its leaves "soft on paper ruffs," and had lovingly named it "Caroline." Then, he weepingly complains, an insensitive ruffian trampled the flower into the dust. But the accused has an analogous story with which to justify himself. He had seen a lovely butterfly which he pursued until it had landed on the flower. When he pounced to seize it, he had indeed destroyed the flower, but, says this entomologist,

Rose or Carnation was below my care;  
I meddle, Goddess! only in my sphere.20

The Goddess settles the dispute by blessing both dunces and exclaims:

O! would the Sons of Men once think their Eyes  
And Reason given them but to study Flies!  
See Nature in some partial, narrow shape,  
And let the Author of the whole escape.21

The portrayal of dunce scientists, of pedants, virtuosi, enthusiasts, and projectors in eighteenth-century satire is intended to expose the roots of human discord, faction, and erroneous opinion. Underlying these grotesqueries is the assumption that were men more rational no disagreement or clash would occur. Satires like the Tale of a Tub, Gulliver's Travels, and the Dunciad deal basically with what their authors saw as the profound irrationality of man, an irrationality manifested in the limited view which so concentrates upon particulars as to completely lose sight of the general. The whole, the general, grasped by pious reason—as is made so vivid in Windsor Forest and the Essay on Man—is in turn identified with beauty, harmony, usefulness, and agreement of details.

This association of unreason with the particular and of reason with the general is a cornerstone of Johnson's thought on many subjects. The concentration upon certain aspects of experience at the expense of others, which, as we have seen, is inevitable in finite existence, explains the inability of men to communicate rationally with one another; it explains the proliferation of contradictory

20 Dunciad, Book IV, ll. 431-33.  
21 Ibid., 453-56. Cf., the satirical portrait of Quisquilius, the virtuoso-collector, in Rambler No. 82, and the analysis in Rambler No. 83.
opinions in almost any matter; and by extension it underlies the entire social fabric of man.

Whatever has various respects, must have various appearances of good and evil, beauty and deformity; thus, the gardener tears up as a weed the plant which the physitian gathers as a medicine; and "a general," says Sir Kenelm Digby, "will look with pleasure over a plain, as a fit place on which the fate of empires might be decided in battle, which the farmer will despise as bleak and barren, neither fruitful of pasturage, nor fit for tillage . . ." Two men examining the same question proceed commonly like the physitian and gardener in selecting herbs or the farmer and hero looking on the plain; they bring minds impressed with different notions, and direct their inquiries to different ends; they form, therefore, contrary conclusions and each wonderes at the other's absurdity.22

In the Adventurer No. 128, Johnson writes that to a man of one profession men of another may appear absurd precisely because what seems to one of absolute value does not interest others. The crucial notion is again the notion of "attention"; we do not ascribe value to what has not caught our attention. What does not interest us can have no significance for us. We believe that we regard some particular interest, which we do not share, with a kind of objectivity, for we are outside the consciousness which has given it value, but ultimately one man's view of another's pursuit or calling is not really detached, since it is determined and limited by his own interests. If he finds the partiality of others absurd, this may be ascribed to the fact that "by a partial and imperfect representation, may everything be made equally ridiculous." 23

The entire analysis depends on Johnson's primary concern with the effects of time. Our particular preoccupations are "radicated by time." Those limited objects of life which have interested us over a long period determine our individuality, our nature. Habit confirms our partial evaluations in our minds. It places us with increasing firmness within a given role that is determined by those things which have "gained our attention." Time itself has the effect of making men's basic attitudes more insular. They become increasingly incapable of taking the general view which would place all particulars, including the objects of their own hopes and fears,

22 Adventurer No. 107, Works IV, 95-6.
23 Works, IV, 131.
within the context of a wider reality. Thus, in the Fifty-sixth Idler, we learn that "there is such difference between the pursuits of men, that one part of the inhabitants of a great city lives to little other purpose than to wonder at the rest. Some have hopes and fears, wishes and aversions, which never enter into the thoughts of others." And in the Sixtieth Rambler: "The man whose faculties have been engrossed by business, and whose heart never fluttered but at the rise and fall of the stocks, wonders how the attention can be seized, or the affection agitated, by a tale of love." Imlac's father, who "desired only to be rich" could envisage no other pursuit worthy of his son, and Imlac's own thirst for knowledge is equally described as a "predominant desire." 

Johnson's thought in this as in most matters is nourished by traditional ideas. Pekuah, who finds that the Arabs' "predominant passion was desire for money" echoes the traditional psychology which is the keynote of the Second Epistle of Pope's Essay on Man:

As Man, perhaps, the moment of his breath,
Receives the lurching principle of death,
The young disease that must subdue at length,
Grows with his growth, and strengthens with his strength:
So, cast and mingled with his very frame,
The Mind's disease, its Ruling Passion came,
Each vital humour which should feed the whole,
Soon flows to this, in body and in soul:
Whatever warms the heart, or fills the head
As the mind opens and its functions spread.
Imagination plies her dangerous art,
And pours it all upon the peccant part
Nature its mother, Habit is its nurse;
Wit, Spirit, Faculties, but make it worse;
Reason itself but gives it edge and power;

24 E.g., Rasselas, chap. xxix, p. 106: "... time itself, as it modifies unchangeably the external mien, determines likewise the direction of the passions." In the Adventurer No. 107 there is a metaphorical description of life which perfectly sums up the relation between the limits of attention and the effects of time: "At our first sally into the intellectual world, we all march together along one straight and open road; but as we proceed further, and wider prospects open to our view, every eye fixes upon a different scene, we divide into various paths, and, as we move forward, are still at a greater distance from each other" (Works, IV, 95).
25 Ibid., 315. Cf., Rambler No. 99, ibid., II, 471: "the sailor, the academick, the lawyer, the mechanick, and the courtier, have all a cast of talk peculiar to their fraternity; have fixed their attention upon the same events."
26 Ibid., II, 286.
27 Rasselas, chap. viii, p. 55.
28 Ibid., p. 57.
As Heaven's blest beam turns vinegar more sour . . .
Yes, Nature's road must ever be preferred;
Reason is here no guide, but still a guard:
'Tis hers to rectify, not overthrow,
And treat this passion more as friend than foe:
A mightier Power the strong direction sends,
And several Men impels to several ends . . .

(II, 33–148, 161–67)

But it is important to note that Johnson took strong exception to Pope's version of the theory, especially to what he saw as its tendency "to produce the belief of a kind of moral predestination, or overruling principle which cannot be resisted." In the Life of Pope he condemns Pope's "favourite theory of a Ruling Passion" (as set forth in the Characters of Men, 1734) for being "pernicious as well as false." The main difference between the versions of Pope and Johnson lies in the fact that for Pope the direction of the passions is potentially fixed "at the moment of breath," determining the nature of a man's whole life, whereas Johnson, insisting as always on the primacy of experience, on moral freedom and the necessity of choice, points out that "human characters are by no means constant . . . he who is at one time a lover of pleasure, is at another a lover of money." He further maintains that, inasmuch as men's lives do exhibit constant tendencies, their predominant orientation is fixed not by a pre-experiential determinism but by something that has early caught their attention—"not by an ascendant planet or predominating humor, but by the first book which they read, some early conversation which they heard, or some accident which excited ardour and emulation." 29 This is Johnson's point in Rambler No. 103, when he speaks of "the modern dream of a ruling passion," 30 and in A View of the Controversy between Mons. Crousaz and Mr. Warburton on the Subject of Mr. Pope's Essay on Man; it underlies his approval ("an observation which every writer ought to impress upon his mind") of Crousaz's assertion that "nothing so much hinders men from obtaining a complete victory over their ruling passion, as . . . a free intercourse . . . with libertines." 31

Predominant desires fixing upon particular earthly events, the fact that "a lover finds no inclination to travel any path but that which leads to the habitation of his mistress [and] a trader can spare

30 Works, II, 489.
little attention to common occurrences, when his fortune is endangered by a storm," 32 are, as we have seen, produced by Imagination, the fundamental characteristic of fallen man; but they are also necessarily at the root of civilized life and have their value in guarantying the integrity of the social structure. In fact, without the partiality of men for their own pursuits, no progress in these pursuits would be possible: "It may be observed in general, that no trade had ever reached the excellence to which it is now improved, had its professors looked upon it with the eyes of indifferent spectators, the advances, from the first rude essays, must have been made by men who valued themselves for performances, for which scarce any other would be persuaded to esteem them.33

Where, then, does imaginative partiality for one's pursuit cease to be subjective pride and become social virtue? At what point does involvement in one's particular end cease to be folly and become rational commitment to the realities of organized social life? The criterion, which Johnson shares with Pope, Swift, and their many humanist predecessors, is that of "use," the utile, which means the same thing when applied to social morality as it does when applied to art. Pope's botanist and entomologist need not have given up their particular interest in plants and butterflies to lose the status of dunces and gain that of humanists; their guilt and their absurdity lie in their having made their narrow interest so ruling a passion as to lose sight of all else, to lose sight of the "usefulness" which could have been a real moral justification for their particular passions: "This passion... like that for the grandeur of our own country, is to be regulated, not extinguished. Every man, from the highest to the lowest station, ought to warm his heart, and animate his endeavours with the hopes of being useful to the world, by advancing the art which it is his lot to exercise, and for that end he must necessarily consider the whole extent of its application, and the whole weight of its importance." 34

Johnson's employment of the word "hopes" in this context is telling. For indeed what he is saying here about professional pride he would apply to all the earthly hopes which center in particular goals.

32 Rambler No. 103, Works, II, 488.
33 Rambler No. 9, Works, II, 42.
34 Ibid., p. 43. Cf., Rambler No. 99, ibid., II, 471: "partiality is not wholly to be avoided, nor is it culpable, unless suffered so far to predominate as to produce aversion from every other kind of excellence."
Such hope is a necessary condition of human existence, its absence being the greatest of threats to sanity, but it can be prevented from turning itself into a mad and sinful obsession with particular ends only by the perspectives of rational judgment, by the balancing general view which provides an evaluation of the real "use" of that particular. The same commonsensical balancing of particular and general, or rather the same ascription of real value to the particular only inasmuch as it is subservient and "useful" to the general, lies at the core of Johnson's aesthetics.

The main use of poetry, according to Johnson, is as an antidote to Imagination. It must lead us toward whatever sanity we are capable of, protect us from the mad obsessions of the heart, and it can do this only by presenting us with the "stability of truth." By presenting truth it releases our "attention" and widens "the extent" of our views. When in Johnson's Christian imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, we are invited to

Let observation with extensive view,
Survey mankind, from China to Peru.

a rationality is invoked which would free us from our constricting private concerns by calling our attention to the general state of man. We are invited to widen our horizon in a way which should enable us to place each particular detail in the context of a whole, to notice what all may agree upon, for "we differ . . . when we see only part of the question . . . but when we perceive the whole at once . . . all agree in one judgement." The same is true of Rasselas. In The Vanity of Human Wishes, the phrase "extensive view" becomes truly pregnant with meaning only when we appreciate the connotations it accrues by its connection with the Johnsonian view of the "limits" of human attention, for the imagery of mental width and narrowness recurs throughout his writings—width inevitably connected with Reason and narrowness allied to Imagination. "We grow more happy as our minds take a wider range," we are told in Rasselas. Shakespeare's instructiveness is due to his "wide extension of design." His "adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of

35 Vanity of Human Wishes, ll. 1–2.
36 Rasselas, chap. xxviii, p. 103.
37 Ibid., chap. xi, p. 66.
38 Preface to Shakespeare, Works, V, 106.
critics, who form their judgements upon narrower principles.’” 39
Nekayah, investigating family life, meets the daughters of many houses and finds "their thoughts narrow, their wishes low, and their merriment often artificial," 40 while Pekuah tells how the Arab women who were her sole companions in captivity could be neither diverting nor instructive (the attributes of both art and rational discourse) because "they had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view." 41 The Prince’s views, earlier in the book, are described as "extended to a wider space." 42

In the poem, to observe with extensive view is to "remark each anxious toil, each eager strife"; from the vantage point of rationality to notice in proper context the particular manifestations of imagination in many instances of men pursuing earthly goals; to see how men become obsessed with "fancied ills" and "airy good," with the imaginary values of particular earthly ends; to observe nations brought to ruin by "darling schemes," 43 i.e., by ideas of worldly glory that become so obsessive as to exclude all rational considerations. After noting how human "vent'rous pride" and human imagination (concepts that are closely associated in Johnson’s mind since both lie at the core of human folly) are crushed by the process of time that had brought them into being, we should find ourselves in a position of truly rational, Christian pessimism. Having


Most Critics, fond of some subservient art
Still make the whole depend upon the part
They talk of principles, but notions prize,
And all to loved folly sacrifice.


40 Rasselas, chap. xxv, p. 95.
41 Ibid., chap. xxxix, p. 131.
42 Ibid., chap. iv, p. 45. Cf. also Rambler No. 80, Works, II, 375: "the hill flatters with an extensive view"; Rambler, No. 78, Works, II, 367: "It is . . . the business of wisdom and virtue, to select among numberless objects . . . such as may enable us to exalt our reason, extend our views, and secure our happiness"; and Rambler No. 103, Works, II, 488: "There are, indeed, beings in the form of men, who appear satisfied with their intellectual possessions and seem to live without desire of enlarging their conceptions."

43 Vanity of Human Wishes, ll. 3–15. Cf. Rambler No. 56, Works, II, 269: "When we see a man pursuing some darling interest, without much regard to the opinion of the world, we justly consider him as corrupt and dangerous"; and Rambler No. 99, Works, II, 471: "as limits must be always set to the excursions of the human mind, there will be . . . some darling subject on which a man is principally pleased to converse.”
learned how vain are all temporal, particular pursuits, we must conclude that hope and fear can find their proper "objects" only outside time, in the other state of being taught by religion. The method of the poem remains continually that of the "extensive view." Whereas the narrow views which our obsessions impose upon us make us time's fools, because we are so immersed in ultimately absurd earthly hopes and fears, the wide perspective of the general human condition should lead us to a rational otherworldliness. In quotidian life a "particular train of ideas fixes the attention," 45 a particular object "intrenches itself strongly in the mind" 46 or "fastens upon" it; 47 our thoughts may be "long fixed upon a single point," and consequently the "images of other things [will be] stealing away." 48 The deepest function of poetry is to dispel these fixations upon particular notions and to restore our sanity by calling our attention to the general truths about the condition of man which are the truths of religion.

Generality in art, then, signifies that which is common to all man, in all ages, "from China to Peru"; that which is essential in human nature. The particular in the aesthetic phase of Johnson's thought means the accidental and mutable. "Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans and Kings, but he thinks only on men." 49 The true aim of art is precisely the aim of the moralist: to show "the uniformity in the state of man." A recognition of this basic uniformity is supremely important because by providing a release from the tensions of self and subjectivity it leads to salvation, and therefore we find it reiterated in varying contexts throughout Johnson's writings. In the Ninety-ninth Adventurer, we are told that "human nature is always the same." 50 In Rasselas we learn that the poet must trace "human nature through all its variations," 51 because fundamentally "nature and passion . . .

---

44 See Chapter 7, "The Rationality of Faith."
45 Rasselas, chap. xliiv, p. 150.
46 Rambler No. 58, Works, II, 277.
47 Rasselas, chap. xlili, p. 137.
48 Ibid., chap. xl, p. 134.
50 Works, IV, 85.
51 Rasselas, chap. ix, p. 60.
are always the same.” 52 In the Sixtieth Rambler, the idea is elaborated and explained: “When the claims of nature are satisfied, caprice, and vanity, and accident, begin to produce discriminations and peculiarities, yet . . . we are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire and seduced by pleasure.” 53 The antidote to these fallacies, hopes, and desires is the recognition that although we seem to ourselves uniquely different from others, since other men set value upon what does not interest us and have different objectives, the basic motivation which makes them follow their particular objectives and which springs from their essential humanity is identical with ours. This recognition that human nature is uniform will ensure both rationality and Christian humility. It will save us from both subjectivity and pride: “Keep this though always prevalent, that you are only one atom of the mass of humanity.” 54

As anyone will have noticed who has “attentively” read the Rambler, Rasselas, the Vanity of Human Wishes, the Preface to Shakespeare, or the Lives of the English Poets, Johnson’s main preoccupation is always with time, not in the abstract but as the irreducible mode of human existence. The initial religious concern which underlies all Johnson’s morality shows itself in the constant distinction, on many levels, between the temporal “Choice of Life” and the “Choice of Eternity.” Generality points to that which is beyond temporal existence precisely because it survives even within time. The partial view, the intensity of a narrow preoccupation, necessarily obscures all other possible views of experience and is therefore ill-treated by time. “It is indeed, the fate of controvertists,” we are told in Rambler No. 106, “even when they contend for philosophical or theological truth, to be soon laid aside and slighted,” 55 whereas the true moralist, whose view is not determined by transient polemics but by his insight into what is most general in human nature, may rationally hope that his writings will survive his death. The occupation of the true moralist (who is the only true poet) has more rational dignity and endurance than that of the specialist in particular sciences because it is concerned with what

52 Ibid., chap. x, p. 61.
53 Works, II, 287.
54 Rasselas, chap. xlvi, p. 150.
55 Works, III, 4.
THE GENERAL AND PARTICULAR

does not change: "There are, indeed, few kinds of composition from which an author, however learned and ingenious, can hope a long continuance of fame. He who has carefully studied human nature, and can well describe it, may with most reason flatter his ambition." 56 Particular and partial observation is thus connected in Johnson's mind with the elusive and transient and comes to mean the same thing.

The entire body of his literary criticism rests on this identification of generality with enduring interest, moral truth, and aesthetic worth. The crucial notion is again that of "attention;" only that which is generally true, true for all times and places, will have interest for future generations, whereas the particular will inevitably become boring once its occasion has passed:

Of the ancient poets every reader feels the mythology tedious and oppressive. Of Hudibras, the manners being founded on opinions, are temporary and local, and therefore become every day less intelligible, and less striking. What Cicero says of philosophy is true of wit and humour, that "time effaces the fictions of opinion, and confirms the determination of Nature." Such manners as depend upon standing relations and general passions are co-extended with the race of man; but those modifications of life, and peculiarities of practice, which are the progeny of error and perverseness, or at best of some accidental influence or transient persuasion, must perish with their parents.57

Shakespeare's greatness lies above all in his transcendence of such "accidental influences," which is simultaneously a transcendence of the limits of particularity and of temporal life. His characters, who are not modified by the customs of particular places, un-practised by the rest of the world . . . or the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions . . . are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.58

We have seen how men's tendency to ascribe absolute value to their particular pursuits may be redeemed by their rational ability to relate themselves to the general fabric of society. The narrow impulses of Imagination become positive when properly regulated by the wider awareness of Reason. The same balancing of general

56 Ibid., 5.
57 Life of Butler, in Lives, II, 144.
and particular may be observed in most (though not in all) of Johnson’s observations on poetry. The particular fulfills a positive function in true poetry so long as it remains subservient to the initial conception of a whole. Thomson is praised for having “a mind that at once comprehends the vast, and attends to the minute,” and in Johnson’s own work the particular commonly fulfills the function of exemplification, for the natural tendency of his mind was to generalize from all topics. Even in dealing with so specialized a subject as the problems facing an editor of Shakespeare he is immediately led to the comment that “the chief desire of him that comments an author, is to show how much other commentators have corrupted and obscured him. The opinions prevalent in one age, as truths above the reach of controversy, are confuted and rejected in another, and rise again to reception in remoter times. Thus the human mind is kept in motion, without progress.” His comments become more and more general as he pursues his subject. In Rasselas we are told that “example is always more efficacious than precept;” and indeed the whole book may be regarded as a series of ingenious particular exemplifications of general truths. History, whether of nations or of art, is important only to the extent that it illustrates general moral truth.

A genre like literary biography is no less moral (that is to say, dependent on the universal truths it makes us perceive in the particular instance) than the invented situations in Rasselas. In the Sixtieth Rambler, which is partly devoted to an assessment of biography as a literary form, Johnson writes that “most accounts of particular persons are barren and useless,” because they deal with the insignificant idiosyncracies of individual life. “The only circumstance by which Tickell has distinguished Addison from the rest of mankind [was] the irregularity of his pulse.” But the facts of biography can become supremely significant when they embody something profoundly illustrating general human nature:

59 Life of Thomson, in Lives, II, 358. Thomson’s poem has both a “wide expansion of design” and an “enumeration of circumstantial details.”

60 Preface to Shakespeare, Works, V, 141.


62 “... there is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities ... the enquiry, how far man may extend his designs, or how high he may rate his native force, is of far greater dignity than in what rank we shall place any particular performance” (Preface to Shakespeare, Works, V, 124).

63 Works, II, 289.
"all the plans and enterprises of De Witt are now of less importance to the world, than that part of his personal character, which represents him as careful of his health, and negligent of his life." 64

In the first few paragraphs of his own Life of Savage, Johnson deals in a general way with the typically Johnsonian idea that even those who are aware of the fact that worldly greatness and power do not guarantee happiness frequently expect intellectual greatness to "produce better effects," but this "expectation" is "very frequently disappointed." 65 The narrative of Richard Savage's life is then offered as an illustration, a particular instance, of this sad general truth.

Generality in art, associated with moral truth, reason, and permanence, is also connected in Johnson's mind with the principle of "diversification" or interest. In the first chapter I attempted to show that Johnson's entire moral system proceeds from the observation that the mind in itself, apart from its experience, is in a natural state of vacuity or boredom, which determines its attitude toward all experience. The mind needs to be filled by diverse objects succeeding each other quickly, else it grows restless and uneasy. Imlac, for example, grows bored by the "barren uniformity" of the sea and longs for the land, where there are "mountains and valleys, deserts and cities"; and if nature prove uninteresting, he at least expects to find "variety in life." 66

Poetry, in order to present its general message, must hold attention, and it can do this only by "filling the mind" during the time-span of the reading with a variety of particular details which in conjunction will form the true experience of a whole. It has perhaps not been sufficiently noticed how central this principle of interest is in Johnson's criticism. Shakespeare's merit does not lie only in the fact that his drama is "the mirror of life" and that the reader who "has mazed his imagination in following the phantoms which other writers raise before him, may here be cured of his delirious exstasies, by reading human sentiments in human language." 67 It also lies in the simple and all-important fact that Shakespeare's plays are on the whole interesting. In Romeo and Juliet "the scenes are busy and

64 Ibid., 288.
65 Life of Savage, in Lives, II, 93.
66 Rasselas, chap. ix, p. 58.
various." 68 In Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare "has diversified his characters with great variety. 69 Antony and Cleopatra "keeps curiosity always busy, and the passions always interested. . . . The continual hurry of the action, the variety of incidents, and the quick succession of one personage to another, call the mind forward without intermission from the first Act to the last." 70 Thus the great poet simultaneously instructs us by pointing to "general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same" and delights us by making full and diversified use of his knowledge of all particular "modes of life." 71 Just as instruction and delight are separable only in analysis—in the work of art they are simultaneous—so real generality and an interesting heterogeneity of particulars are mutually complementary. Like Imlac, who is "less unhappy . . . because [he has] a mind replete with images, which [he] can vary and combine at pleasure," 72 poetry will truly delight only when it is all-embracing both in the sense that its conception has a wide extent covering many particulars at once and in the sense that it ranges from one particular to another with a versatility and inventiveness that leave no gaps of attention.

This principle of variety runs through Johnson's thought on subjects other than poetry, throwing light on his insistence that interest is a sine qua non of good art. Nature's real use, we are told in the fifth Rambler (a meditation on the spring), in addition to the instruction it provides by offering us objects for ethical meditation, lies in its great variety, in the fact that it may provide sane and rational entertainment by feeding our incessant appetite for diversity and novelty.

There is, indeed, something inexpressibly pleasing in the annual renovation of the world, and the new display of the treasures of nature. . . . The spring affords to a mind, so free from the disturbance of cares or passions as to be vacant to calm amusements, almost everything that our present state makes us capable of enjoying. The variegated verdure of the fields and woods, the succession of grateful odours, the voice of pleasure pouring out its notes on every side . . . throw over the whole earth an air of gaiety significantly expressed by the smile of nature. 73

68 On Shakespeare, p. 188.
69 Ibid., p. 184.
70 Ibid., p. 180.
71 Rasselas, chap. x, p. 63.
72 Ibid., chap. xii, p. 69.
73 Rambler No. 5, Works, II, 22.
Johnson goes on to recommend walks in the spring as good medicine for disturbed, bored, melancholy, and restless minds. The contemplation of nature may be a good antidote to the harmful mental tendency to fix upon a single notion to the exclusion of all others. A man obsessed by his subjective imagination, by his private hopes or fears, will do well to make use of nature, which may bring him back to comparative sanity by providing him with numerous "objects of attention" that are really there. Nature, thus approached, may serve as a cure for Imagination by releasing us from our "particular thoughts."

There are animals that borrow their colour from the neighbouring body, and consequently vary their lure as they happen to change their place. In like manner it ought to be the endeavour of every man to derive his reflections from the objects about him; for it is to no purpose that he alters his position, if his attention continues fixed to the same point. The mind should be kept open to the access of every new idea, and so far disengaged from the predominance of particular thoughts, as easily to accommodate itself to occasional entertainment.74

Johnson's various preoccupations may be seen converging in the language of this meditation. Although "a nation of naturalists is neither to be hoped, nor desired," nature can and should provide "fresh amusement" for those who "languish in health and repine in plenty." In brief, for those who are, like the inhabitants of the Happy Valley, bored. Nature's variety and diversity can be good medicine for the mind's obsession with "particular thoughts"—"particular" with all its Augustan connotations of pride, passion, hope and fear, and sin; in the same sense that great poetry counters excessive Imagination. The moral point is in the anti-specialization implied in all Johnson recommends. Swift's mad projectors and Pope's rival botanist and entomologist are so totally involved in the particularities of nature that they become freaks of nature themselves. Johnson's ultimate justification for the study and enjoyment of natural phenomena is precisely in the religious emphasis on the general. It is not "the partial, narrow" aspects of nature that are of interest to a mind in search of sanity and reason, not the "streaks of the tulip" but "the inexhaustible stock of materials" which nature can provide to fill, entertain, instruct, and keep the balance of the mind. A man who forms the habit of turning natural study to

74 Ibid., p. 23.
advantage "has always a certain prospect of discovering new reasons
for adoring the sovereign Author of the universe, and probably
hopes of making some discovery of benefit to others, or of profit to
himself."  

What is true of the contemplation of nature is true of the
description of nature in poetry and is true of poetry in general.
Just as the virtue of nature described in the fifth Rambler lies in its
"inexhaustible stock of materials," Shakespeare's, discussed in the
Preface, lies in his "inexhaustible plenty." Great poetry both
"fills the eye with awful pomp, and gratifies the mind with endless
diversity." The fault of the metaphysical poets lies not so much
in their dwelling upon particulars—this in itself may be necessary
for the illustration of general truth—as in their conceits, in their
tendency to elaborate and "labour particularities" without making
them subservient to a wider rational design. Cowley "loses the
grandeur of generality" by "claiming a dignity" for the detail which
only the whole can have. By doing so, he loses all sublimity and
indeed becomes "ridiculous." Shakespeare, on the other hand,
"opens a mine which contains gold and diamonds in unexhaustible
plenty" where "other poets display cabinets of precious rarities,
minutely finished." 

One may thus distinguish between two kinds of particularity in
Johnson's thought. On the one hand, the particular represents those
elements in reality, neutral in themselves, which are turned by the
Imagination (through its distorting operations of hope, fear, delusive
recall, and intellectual "speculation") into static objects of absolute
value. These obsessive particulars become substitutes for both
observation and thought; a mind riddled with such particularity is
incapable of rational activity. The danger of particulars lies in that
they limit the mind's perspective, its freedom to exercise itself in
the only way that is compatible with the temporal process in which
it is placed, through flexible and continuous observation, selection,
and rejection. The imaginative faculty increases the inherent
incompatibility between the mind's employment and the temporal
reality upon which it must be employed if sanity is to be preserved,
by limiting individual attention to the detail, the partial goal, and
the fixed object (pinned down by imagination, not truly fixed, for
nothing within time can be static in itself). The culmination of such
partiality is madness, an absolute subjectivity in which time becomes
frozen around some partial aspect of experience that excludes
attention to all else. But there is another kind of particularity in
Johnson's thought that is positive and is in fact the essence of
Reason's work. The general arises from moving flexibly handled
particulars that are reasoned into law and principle, and such
particulars from observation are both healthy and necessary. They
form the imaginative basis of all rational cogitation and are the
material through which consciousness must work both in life and in
art.

Generality too may be seen as either positive or negative,
depending on the strength of its relation to the moving particulars
that are its guarantee of validity. The attempt to maintain a general
point of view that is divorced from concrete particulars is a product
of obsessiveness and pride. The futile ambition of the flier and the
stoic in Rasselas to detach themselves completely from the kind of
particularity and limitation inherent in the sublunar state of man,
the ambition of the "speculators" in metaphysics or morals or
criticism to construct all-embracing systems for which concrete
exemplification will be irrelevant, creates a split in their
all-too-human consciousness, or paradoxically limits them to ever
more negative and constricting narrowness. Their willful divorce
from reality may mask itself as Reason, but for Johnson "erring
reason" springs from extreme imagination. It should be added that
exactly the same distinction between integral and disjointed
generality is present in Johnson's application of aesthetic standards.
Shakespeare’s greatness lies in his ability to convey insight into the
general state of mankind by means of vivid and concrete particulars.
Nicholas Rowe's plays are "general" indeed, but Johnson condemns
them for precisely that reason. They lack "accurate discriminations"
and fall flat because everything in them is "general and indefinite." 80

Johnson's central point for the literary critic is an extension of
his lesson for all men. Criticism applies criteria of judgment that
suffer, like all intellectual constructions, from the fact that they tend

80 Life of Rowe, in Lives, II, 76.
to exclude rival criteria and other constructions, of which perforce there are many. Johnson's practice as a critic is consistent with his more general teaching in that he sees literary judgment as perennially open to correction from life. His defense of Shakespeare against the critics of "narrower principles," who condemn Shakespeare's mixture of high and low styles and his disregard of the conventional unities, must be understood as an insistence upon open rather than closed critical judgment. What underlies Johnson's evaluation of Shakespeare is the conviction that critical and aesthetic systems are no less a product of Imagination's "speculative" nature than are man's metaphysical attempts to provide a systematic explanation of the universe. Doctrinal criticism (and all critics in some measure are doctrinal) springs from the profoundest of human needs—the need to rest in some absolutely fixed criterion of value and thereby impose an absolute pattern upon the chaotic material of raw experience. Critical judgment, Johnson believed, proceeds from a human and therefore limited viewpoint; to correct this necessary limitation, the critic must at least rationally confront its necessity and be prepared to modify his own private estimate in view of what many men have believed in many ages.

Johnson's ideas of generality and particularity in art, as in life, thus represent a critique of all purely systematic thinking. The touchstone, if critical judgment is to be close to its object, must always be human reality itself and not a set of presuppositions. Humility is as necessary for good criticism as it is for salvation, humility in the sense that we must be prepared to efface our "darling" imaginative schemes when reality does not conform to them. "General" criticism, referring judgment to life, open to the impression of new particulars, able to take in the surprising as well as the conventional, what at first seems outside the accepted sphere of reference as well as what can easily be accounted for, is a true exercise of Reason, partaking of the dignity (and the religious value) that all rational pursuits confer.

Johnson's literary activity itself may serve as a model for the writer who aspires to such generality. The astounding flexibility of mind which he displayed as he moved from one subject to another, equally competent at lexicography, economics, poetry, and a score of other heterogeneous disciplines, is a measure of the generality he not only extolled but practiced. Not many may hope to imitate such
breadth of comprehension and versatility of writing, especially in an age that abounds with one-subject professors who do much of the critical revaluation that the age requires. But the humble recognition of limitation, as Johnson so fully illustrates, is in itself a partial transcendence of limitation. The writer, the critic, the scholar, enter a groove of thought and feeling that is determined by what their own particular "attention" finds available in the circumstances of their life, but their release is possible through the self-effacing awareness of this fact. Humanity, constricted by initial choices—conscious or half-conscious—that determine the actual framework within which the world is observed and evaluated, may be saved by glancing at the mirror that truly "general" art puts up to life. The amplitude of Johnson's own generality of interest, embodied in all he wrote, must stand as an enduring rebuke and corrective to those who live and write by "narrower principles."

Finally, it must be emphasized that for Johnson the ultimate justification of fullness and versatility in literary practice lay in religion. My main point in this chapter, as indeed throughout this book, is that his ideas on many seemingly unrelated subjects appear strikingly coherent when we trace them to what is the point of departure of his thought: the religious idea that there is an inherent contradiction between human craving and human employment. Man's potentiality transcends the limits of time and space. The only object which can finally fulfill it must have as infinitely wide an extent as itself, and this is true only of the divine. In all experience Johnson found confirmation for his basic view that the human tragedy lay in the insufficiency of all things circumscribed and ephemeral to a hunger that is limitless and infinite, and his insistence that poetry must go beyond the bounds of the narrow, the detailed, and the particular is an extension of his basic religious presupposition concerning human life.