

Johnson's Quarrel with Swift: Johnson's Part in the Swiftian Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

Johnson, it is well-known, had conceived a prejudice against Swift. His friends trembled for him when he was writing that life, but were pleased, at last, to see it executed with temper and moderation.¹

— Arthur Murphy

This comparative study of Swift and Johnson is an attempt to “illuminate the often puzzling antagonisms” felt for Swift as a person and as a writer by Johnson.”² It is also, hopefully, the beginning of an assessment of Johnson’s part in the Swiftian tradition. By Swiftian tradition I mean the various images we have of Swift as a man and a style of writing that is characterized by a pungent, concrete and active use of language.

It would be out of place here to attempt a complete listing of Swiftian satire, but two main qualities apply to certain examples of Johnson’s writings. The first one is a convincing portrayal of the absurd and the second is a tragic sense of life which can be sensed in some of his satire. Both Swift and Johnson support Christian and humanistic values when faced with confusion, disbelief, and puerile speculation. In the welter of man’s vanity and foolishness, they search for his dignity.

There have been other comparative studies of Swift and Johnson. Milton Voight describes W.B.C. Watkins’ chapter, “Vive la Bagatelle,” in *Perilous Balance* as a “modest but perceptive comparative study of Swift and Johnson” (Voight, p.185).

Watkins believes that Johnson attacks Swift whenever he sees him succumb to the melancholy and despair that he himself was fighting against. This short study has been influential in establishing a standard explanation for Johnson’s reactions to Swift.

Major critics such as Walter Jackson Bate and W.K. Wimsatt accept Watkins' interpretation. Though Watkins' use of his material is at times conjectural, it still remains the most impressive effort to explain the problem of Johnson's attitude toward Swift.

There also have been a number of studies of Swift's early biographers. In the parade of biographies, criticism on Johnson's *Life of Swift* runs from Thomas Sheridan's bitter denunciation to a recent tendency of finding Johnson's work reasonably objective. Donald Berwick³ correctly observes that serious criticism of Swift begins with Johnson. Philip Sun,⁴ who does an admirable job of cataloging Swift's character traits as they have come down from the eighteenth-century biographies, also praises Johnson's performance. While Berwick and Sun's dissertations are primarily concerned with diverse reactions to Swift's life, I am primarily concerned with Johnson's reaction, which, though it is critical, is consistent with his major literary principles. This discussion lays the groundwork for Johnson's part in the Swiftian tradition.

Johnson's critique of Swift's life suggests that he thought Swift was often extreme in his attempt to be reasonable; indeed, he often describes Swift as "unreasonable." However, when he sees Swift's "wit, confederated with truth," he does not hesitate to say so.

Perhaps the key to understanding Johnson's attitude toward Swift lies in his fairy tale, *The Fountains*. The heroine of that story must surrender her own and other people's happiness as well, in order to have the gift of wit. Wit enables her to see how the world fails to measure up to reason, and it provides her with all the language of wit to destroy the contentment of others. It leaves her with nothing else but to prepare for her death in order to keep from losing more friends and from discovering more bitter truths.

A recent study by Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism*, discusses Swift and Johnson, along with several other eighteenth-century writers, such as Dryden, Goldsmith, Reynolds, Burke, and Gibbon. These men are described as Augustan Humanists in order to indicate a unity of thought and rhetoric from the early to the late eighteenth century. Fussell is helpful in drawing Swift and Johnson together through their writings, but in relating them to a larger circle of writers he obscures the special problem of seeing Johnson's part in the Swiftian tradition.

Another recent study by Arieh Sachs, *Passionate Intelligence*, considers Swift along with Johnson for an analysis of Johnson's views on reason and imagination. This book, though, is not a comparative study of Swift and Johnson. Other writers, like W.K. Wimsatt and Bertrand Bronson, have made passing references to the relationship between Swift and Johnson, but as yet there have been no full scale attempts to relate these two major legendary figures of eighteenth century literature.

My thesis is that Swift and Johnson are engaged in the same effort to reconcile nature to reason. Their concern with nature is mainly human nature, rather than the nature of the scientist or speculative philosopher. They both steer a middle course between Shaftesbury's idea of humanity's natural benevolence and Mandeville's view of innate selfishness. The tendency since Boswell's biography of Johnson is to view Johnson as closer to Shaftesbury and Swift more on Mandeville's side of this issue, but Johnson is much closer to both Swift and Mandeville. For them, in the words of Johnson, man by instinct is "no better than a wolf."

Moral feeling and values are created and cultivated through reason, which they regard as the effects of human experience, rather than an "inner light of reason." The most important task for reason is to guide and control human nature comprised of the passions, appetites, desires, and

will. As such, reason is more than the cognitive faculty. Reason actively participates in the formation of all subjective human experience.⁵

Swift's and Johnson's effort to reconcile nature to reason is complicated by their recognition of the pejoration of these words into "cant," that is, overused rhetoric, and by their desire to avoid "deistic, stoical, anti-Christian, utopian, perfectionistic, or merely cynical thought" (Voight, p. 143). As satirists, Swift and Johnson ridicule reason when it is mechanical or divorced from human instinct, or they ridicule instinct when it becomes rapacious or distorted.

As commentators on the social relations between men and women, they see a reconciliation of the sexes as the harmonization of nature and reason. In their political thought they are concerned with the abuse and usurpation of power. Nature, in the political sense of the word, is "the state of nature," which they agree with Hobbes is a state of open warfare. But they do not come to his conclusion that tyranny is necessarily preferable to it. Reason is only on the side of the monarch when he acts justly in the interests of the whole state.

They also agree that the lower classes in their ignorance and greed are easily fired with envy. Party politics from above arouses the natural impulse of pride below. The people then become intractable and rebellious. However, the body politic has nature and reason on its side when it overthrows a truly unjust and oppressive monarch or faction. Such was the character of the 1688 Revolution. But the earlier Puritan monarch or faction was the usurpation of a minority who had inflamed the people against a lawful monarch. The Puritan Revolution imposed tyranny whereas the 1688 Revolution restored traditional liberties.

Footnotes to the Introduction

¹*Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1897), I, 479.

²Milton Voight, *Swift and the Twentieth Century* (Detroit, 1964), p. 143.

³Donald Berwick, *The Reputation of Jonathan Swift* (Philadelphia, 1941)

⁴Unpublished dissertation (Yale University, 1963) by Philip Sun, *Swift's Eighteenth-Century Biographies*. Permission to make quotations from this work has been granted by Dr. Sun.

⁵For a fuller discussion of nature and reason in Swift and Johnson, the following books are particularly useful: Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic* (New York, 1961), pp. 59–79; Robert Voitle, *Samuel Johnson the Moralist* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 19–63. Kathleen Williams' discussion in Chapter V, "The Individual and the State," reinforces my own interpretation of the relationship between nature and reason as I apply it to Swift's and Johnson's political thinking.

CHAPTER I

JOHNSON AS SWIFT'S BIOGRAPHER AND CRITIC

Johnson's Interpretation of Swift's Life and Personality

Samuel Johnson's reactions to and appraisals of the life and works of Jonathan Swift must always remain a puzzle to those who appreciated the contributions to English literature of both writers. In his *Life of Swift*, Boswell thought that "Johnson had a certain degree of prejudice"¹ against Swift and that this prejudice manifested itself in conversations as well. Contemporary critics agree with Boswell. James L. Clifford, for example, in a lecture on Samuel Johnson,² stated that there are those who believe Johnson's lives of Milton and Gray can be reconciled to modern judgment, but that the *Life of Swift* falls short of Johnson's own standards of critical performance.

Boswell's charge can, to a certain extent, be refuted by showing how much of Johnson's verdicts on Swift derive from other eighteenth-century accounts of Swift's life and by showing the consistency in Johnson's interpretation of Swift. In this chapter I will show the nature of Johnson's respect for Swift and, in the next one, the influence Swift may have had on Johnson's satire. Hopefully, that will allow the reader to decide the balance between mere petulance and objective appraisal in Johnson's portrait of Swift.

Unlike the other eighteenth-century biographers of Swift, Johnson relentlessly pursues a central theme in relating the "facts" of Swift's life. It is not that he is trying to develop the eighteenth-century psychological commonplace of a "ruling Passion" for his subject. Swift's compulsions with money and power are symptomatic of a personality structure which Johnson is

attempting to reconstruct from the “facts” he had available from his predecessors. It is from such a reconstruction that Johnson could add that Swift was vain and self-pitying, character traits which were not listed in the other biographies.

Johnson organizes his material to enable readers to draw their own thematic conclusion. A fair reading of his *Life of Swift* should pay homage to the artistic subtleties of Johnsonian biography, where Johnson, at times, uses novelistic techniques.

One kind of organization in the *Life of Swift* employs the tragic cycle of rise and fall. There is the overall sweep of the cycle from the beginning to the end summarized as “Swift expires a driv’ler and a show.”³ But there are many smaller cycles of rise and fall contained within the larger one. At the beginning of the *Life of Swift*, Johnson relates the well-known story of Swift’s attaining his degree by “special favor.” Swift turns this “disgrace” to his advantage by studying eight hours a day for seven years “with what improvement is sufficiently known.”⁴

For Johnson the medium for this change was “shame,” which “had its proper effect in producing reformation” (*Lives*, III, 2). In another, reversal turns Ireland, Swift’s “state of exile,” into a country where he has “power almost despotic . . . flattery almost idolatrous” (III, 43). But here again there is then another reversal, for this *power* and *flattery* add to the decline of his mental powers. Where shame had let Swift to study, flattery leads him into intellectual stagnation. Swift’s life illustrates for Johnson the most profound yet elementary laws of human conduct. “We are commonly taught our duty by fear of shame, and how can they act upon the man who hears nothing but his own praises” (III, 46).

Johnson’s talk of “shame” and “duty” is the beginning of his interpretation of Swift’s personality. Present-day psychological jargon maintains a distinction between character and personality. Character is thought of as the outward face of the individual, his ability to comply

with certain social roles, whereas personality suggests the basic structure of the ego operating outside its social context. Johnson makes something of the same distinction: “*Swift appears to have preserved the kindness of the great when they wanted him no longer; and therefore it must be allowed that the childish freedom, to which he seems enough inclined, was overpowered by his better qualities*” (III, 22). [Italics mine]

Childish is a key word for Johnson’s understanding of Swift. This concept of Swift’s personality may be implied in the next passage: “His beneficence was not graced with tenderness or civility; *he relieved without pity, and assisted without kindness; so that those that were fed by him could hardly love him*” (III, 57–58).⁵ [Italics mine] That is, he fulfilled his social role as an agent of charity, but he lacked benevolence or the Pauline concept of *charity*, which should be love. Although Johnson did not stress sentiment in the giving of charity, the phrase, “he relieved without pity” seems to me significant because Johnson believes that pity is not natural. Children and savages do not feel pity, which is cultivated by reason and is a sign of maturity.⁶ The absence of pity which Johnson sees in Swift’s charity is perhaps another way Johnson develops the theme of Swift’s childishness.

Psychoanalytic critics of Swift have seen in one of Johnson’s statements a foreshadowing of their own interpretation.⁷ For Johnson, “the greatest difficulty that occurs in analyzing his character is to discover by what depravity of intellect he took delight in revolving ideas from which almost every other mind shrinks with disgust” (*Lives*, III, 62). He doubts Delany’s explanation that Swift’s mind was tainted by a long visit to Pope. Delany, Johnson maintains, “degrades his hero by making him at fifty-nine the pupil of turpitude, and liable to the malignant influence of an ascendant mind. But the truth is, that Gulliver had described his Yahoos before the visit; and he that had formed those images had nothing filthy to learn.” (III, 63).⁸

Johnson also sees Swift as a man who is unable to cope with the problem of aging. If Swift had made as a young man a resolution to study eight hours a day, now he made “some ridiculous resolution or mad vow . . . never to wear spectacles. “ Cut off from conversation and books, his ideas “wore gradually away and left his mind vacant to the vexations of the hour, till at last his anger was heightened into madness” (III, 47). In another passage, Johnson sums up the inexorable process of Swift’s decline by saying, “his asperity continually increasing condemned him to solitude; and his resentment of solitude sharpened his asperity” (III, 45).

For Johnson, Swift’s personality generates an unstable world of emotions, a child’s world of resentment and envy: “He is querulous and fastidious, arrogant and malignant; he scarcely speaks of himself but with indignant lamentations, or of others but with insolent superiority when he is gay, and with angry contempt when he is gloomy” (III, 61). When Bolingbroke offers Swift an English parish, he rejects it and retains “the pleasure of complaining.” (III, 62).

In our own age there have been a battery of terms used by psychoanalytic investigators to describe Swift’s malaise. But Johnson’s explanations of Swift’s behavior is an early part of the Swiftian psychological tradition. Whatever its merits or inaccuracies might be, Swift, in this tradition, is not merely a whipping boy, but an emblem of man’s own concern with the attempt to understand the flaws of human personality development.

This tradition owes a good deal of its material to a group of eighteenth-century writers on Swift. It is useful to turn to them to see how much Johnson made use of their impressions, while contributing something of his own. Johnson’s *Life of Swift* in the light of these other biographies does not appear as harsh as some readers think it is.

At the beginning of his *Life of Swift*, 1781, Johnson cites John Hawkesworth. In his biographical profile called, *An Account of the Life of the Reverend Jonathan Swift*, 1754,

Hawkesworth compiled information about Swift from several sources. The first one he mentions is Mrs. Letitia Pilkington's, *Memoirs* (1748). A portion of her memoirs was devoted to her acquaintance with Swift. Hawkesworth uses some of her material, but is generally suspicious of her authority. He next refers to the Fifth Earl of Orrery, John Boyle's, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Swift* (1751). These remarks were cast in the form of letters to his son and were answered by Patrick Delany in his, *Observations upon Lord Orrery's Remarks* (1754), which was anonymously signed JR.

Delany claimed he was defending Swift against Orrery's distortions. Both these books were attacked by Swift's cousin, Deane Swift, in his *Essay on Swift* (1755), which was a much longer work than the other two and which contained a fragment of Swift's own account of his life. Deane Swift believed both Orrery and Delany had done a disservice to his kinsman.

Johnson barely mentions Deane Swift's *Essay*, but he does use to Jonathan Swift's own autobiographical fragment found in Deane Swift's *Essay*. From all these heated previous accounts of Swift's life, Hawkesworth had tried to pick together an objective picture for his *Account of the life of the Reverend Jonathan Swift*.

Philip Sun⁹ finds in Letitia Pilkington's *Memoirs* Swift "somewhat caricatured in the manner of popular, fictional biography of the century." He is presented by her as a "temperamental, rude, and foul-mouthed old man whose speeches are characterized by buffoonery and cynicism" (Sun, p.16). Johnson must have come across her memoirs, since excerpts appeared in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, but he, like Hawkesworth earlier, probably distrusted her account because of her dubious reputation. Mr. Sun, however, demonstrates that Johnson probably got the remark that Swift "stubbornly resisted any tendency to laughter," from Pilkington. George Birkbeck Hill, the annotator of Johnson's *Life of Swift*, could not trace the

remark to the other biographies. Pilkington also recorded Swift's charity of allotting five hundred pounds for loans to the poor of Dublin. Orrery consciously omitted this detail. "I let the fame of it to Mrs. Pilkington's pen" (Sun, p. 18), he wrote in one of his manuscripts.

Johnson depended mainly on Orrery's and Delany's accounts for his image of Swift. Boswell reports how Johnson Praised Delany's Observations on Swift. "[He] ... said that his book and Lord Orrery's might both be true, though one viewed Swift more, and the other less favorably; and that between both, we might have a complete notion of Swift" (Boswell's *Life*, III, 249).¹⁰ In his own *Life of Swift*, Johnson cites Delany, Orrery, Hawkesworth, and Dean Swift. Delany is not only cited but also quoted at length in two places.

A few of Lord Orrery's remarks are immediately relevant to Johnson's observations. Orrery believes that Swift's misanthropy and madness stemmed from "his early and repeated disappointments."¹¹ Johnson acknowledges these early disappointments. He tells of Swift's losing both the post of secretary to Lord Berkeley and the Deanery of Derry, again from Berkeley, through the agency of one Bushe. In a man "like Swift such circumvention and inconstancy must have excited violent indignation" (*Lives*, III, 8).

Johnson, by using the phrase "a man like Swift," is putting the accent in a different place than Orrery does. It is not the disappointments which determine his character, as Orrery would have it, but his character which determines the effects of his disappointments. I have already shown Johnson's way of describing Swift's decline and the responsibility Swift himself had in that decline. Indeed Orrery, who speculates about insanity in the manner of the narrator of *A Tale of a Tub* or *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, sees Swift embrace his fate like an automaton.

Johnson describes Swift as having had “a kind of muddy complexion, which, though he washed himself with Oriental scrupulosity, did not look clear. He had a countenance sour and severe, which he seldom softened by any appearance of gaiety. He stubbornly resisted any tendency to laughter” (III, 55–56). Orrery on the same subject writes: “Dr. Swift had a natural severity of face, which even his smiles could scarce soften, or his utmost gaiety render placid and serene: but when that sternness of visage was increased with rage, it is scarce possible to imagine looks, or features, that carried in them more terror and austerity” (p.78).

He also observes that to his domestics he was “passionate and churlish” (p. 158). Johnson not only picks up this observation by saying “to his domestics he was naturally rough,” but goes on to narrate a story Orrery related to him directly. Swift, when dining alone with the Lord, observed that Orrery’s servant had committed “fifteen faults.” Johnson sees such acute observation as “tyrannic peevishness.” It is “perpetual” (*Lives*, III, 56) and it is not easily assuaged by Swift’s occasional acts of kindness to his servants.

On the subject of Swift’s writings there is general agreement among Orrery, Delany, and Johnson that Swift’s use of scatology is reprehensible. Orrery writes: “There are many places that I despise, others that I loath [sic], and others again that delight and improve me...they are of no further use than to show us, in general, the errors of human nature; and to convince us, that neither the height of wit nor genius can bring a man to such a degree of perfection, as vanity would often prompt him to believe” (p.52).

Delany agrees with Orrery on this observation and finds some of Swift’s works a pollution of the imagination and a corruption of style.¹² He finds Swift’s maxim “Viva la Bagatelle!” detestable. He squeamishly begs off a discussion of Books II and IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, and concludes his discussion of the whole book by declaring: “who would not wish

rather to be the author of one Arcadia than fifty Laputas Lilliput's [sic], and Houyhnhnms I am sick of this subject" (Delany, p.171).

Swift's regularity in performing his duties, his exactness in regard to time, and his frugality is found in Orrery's account: "His attendance upon the public service of the church was regular and uninterrupted; and indeed regularity was peculiar to him in all his actions, even in the greatest trifles" (p. 46). Johnson: "At Laracor he increased the parochial duty by reading prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays and performed all the offices of his profession with great decency and exactness" (*Lives*, III, 9). Orrery: "His hours of walking, and reading, never varied: His motions were guided by his watch" (p. 246). Johnson: "He did not, however, claim the right of talking alone: for it was his rule, when he had spoken a minute, to give room by a pause for any other speaker. Of time, on all occasions he was an exact computer, and knew the minutes required to every common operation" (III, 60).¹³

Johnson also notes that Swift's *Polite Conversation and Directions for Servants* demonstrate his keen powers of observation. But in the context of his peculiar temperament this "vigilance of minute attention which his works discover" (III, 56) must have made him intolerable to his servants. While traits of regularity and exactness might be thought of as virtues, given the context of Johnson's *Life of Swift* they are another instance of pitilessness, especially when they are applied to charitable projects. For Johnson, Swift's trying to collect punctually his interest-free loans from the poor tradesmen of Dublin betrays either a lack of patience or of pity:

Swift was popular awhile by another mode of beneficence. He set aside some hundreds to be lent in small sums to the poor, from 5s., I think, to 5l. He took no interest, and only required that, at repayment, a small fee should be given to the accountant: but he required that the day of promised payment should be exactly kept. A severe and punctilious temper is ill qualified for transactions with the poor; the day was often broken, and the loan was not repaid. This might have been easily foreseen; but for this Swift had made no provision of patience or pity. He ordered his debtor to be sued. A severe creditor has no

popular character; what then was likely to be said of him was loud, and the resentment of the populace outrageous; he was therefore forced to drop his scheme and own the folly of expecting punctuality from the poor (III, 44–45).

However, Johnson is sympathetic toward Swift's frugality. Orrery had written that Swift "was a mixture of avarice and generosity" and that, while his avarice was frequently prevalent, his generosity "seldom appeared unless excited by compassion" (p. 3). This comment had aroused Delany as one of Orrery's unflattering observations on Swift. Johnson settles the issue in favor of Swift:

In his economy he practiced a peculiar and offensive parsimony, without disguise or apology. The practice of saving being once necessary, became habitual, and grew first ridiculous, and at last detestable. But his avarice, though it might exclude pleasure, was never suffered to encroach upon his virtue. He was frugal by inclination, but liberal by principle; and if the purpose to which he destined his little accumulations be remembered, with his distribution of occasional charity, it will perhaps appear that he only like one mode of expense better than another, and saved merely that he might have something to give. He did not grow rich by injuring his successors, but left both Laracor and the Deanery more valuable than he found them. *—With all this talk of his covetousness and generosity, it should be remembered that he was never rich. The revenue of his Deanery was not much more than seven hundred a year (Lives, III, 57).*¹⁴

Both Boswell and Sheridan use this passage to illustrate Johnson's bias against Swift. Though Johnson does raise the possibility that Swift's passion for a shilling was "deep fixed in his heart" (III, 6), the above passage clearly puts Swift in a good light.

Johnson treats the stories of Swift's friendships with women more courteously and sympathetically than do either Orrery or Delany.¹⁵ Although he does quote Orrery when he says that after Stella's death "Swift never mentioned her without a sigh," he does not agree with Orrery's implication that Swift treated her cruelly. Orrery had written, "he never mentioned her without a sigh: for such is the perverseness of human nature, that we bewail those persons dead, whom we treated cruelly when living" (p. 19). Johnson believes rather Swift's emotions to be much more genuine. He called Swift a lover and he sees in his papers how much he "wished her

life.” Johnson strongly conveys the sense of Swift’s bereavement. As for the doubt raised about Swift’s marriage, Johnson answers affirmatively by citing the authority of Dr. Madden, Dr. Sheridan, and Delany.¹⁶

Patrick Delany (1685–1768), who follows Orrery, was from a lower class Irish family. A close friend of Swift, he knew him for twenty-five years. Delany was not harsh in his attack against Orrery’s book, even though it angered Swift’s friends and the Irish people, because he had also been friendly with Orrery. One of Delany’s chief aims in his *Observations* was to defend Swift from the charge that he had surrounded himself with low company. Another motive was his discontent over Orrery’s aristocratic pretensions in his treatment of Swift. He complains that Orrery has a “high view” of Swift, while he has the advantage of the “low view.” Johnson found Orrery’s and Delany’s books, unsatisfactory as biographical portraits, because they lost sight of Swift in aimless digressions.

Johnson quotes Delany extensively in several critical places in his *Life of Swift*. One quotation is in relation to the effects of the publication of *Cadenus and Vanessa* on the Swift-Stella households, and another quotation follows after Johnson explains, “I have here given the character of Swift as he exhibits himself to my perception; but now let another be heard who knew him better” (III, 63). By ending this way, Johnson is allowing for his own doubts about Swift and recognizing Swift’s high reputation. He uses Delany, again, in a discussion of Swift’s religious habits.

Dr. Hawkesworth has been described as a clever imitator of Johnson’s style. A significant portion of Johnson’s *Life of Swift* commends Hawkesworth’s picture of Swift and states that it was collected “with great diligence and acuteness . . . according to a scheme which I laid before him I cannot therefore be expected to say much of a life concerning which I had long since

communicated my thoughts to a man capable of dignifying his narrations with so much elegance of language and force of sentiment” (III, 1). Hawkesworth was of course a conscious imitator of Johnson’s style, so that it is not easy to prove the extent of Johnson’s help. But the passages I have selected from Hawkesworth seem to me better than imitations.

Hawkesworth and Johnson express compassion for Vanessa and Stella. Hawkesworth is tender in his treatment of Vanessa:

Such was the fate of Vanessa; and surely those whom pity could not restrain from being diligent to load her memory with reproach, to construe appearances in the worst sense, to aggravate folly into vice, and distress into infamy, have not much exalted their own character. . . . (pp. 36–37)

Johnson does not care to comment extensively on this relationship. He calls her “a woman made unhappy by her admiration of wit” and tells us “her history is too well-known to be minutely repeated.” Hawkesworth describes Stella’s feeling for Swift as growing from admiration into complacency and then into love. Johnson uses a similar process to describe Vanessa’s infatuation: “From being proud of his praise, she grew fond of his person” (*Lives*, III, 31).

Hawkesworth felt that Swift did not intend his relation with Vanessa to go beyond any proper bounds. But he concedes that Swift’s judgment of himself might have been erroneous. Swift was the ‘absolute master of those passions by which the greatest have been enslaved’ (Hawkesworth, pp. 47–48). Johnson sneers at that assumption of Swift’s character: “If it be said that Swift should have checked a passion which he never meant to gratify, recourse must be had to that extenuation which he so much despised, ‘men are but men’” (III, 32). He ironically rescues Swift by showing the falsity of Swift’s faith in a principle of self-denial. In this mocking defense of Swift, Johnson reveals his main objection to Swift’s philosophy of human nature, a philosophy which held too rigidly to the ideal of restraint. He expected too much from himself

and from Vanessa, just as he had expected too much from the poor in paying debts, or his servants, or mankind in general in his *Project for the Advancement of Religion*.

Beauty, which alone had been the object of universal admiration and desire, which alone has elevated the possessor from the lowest to the highest station, has given dominion to folly, and armed caprice with the power of life and death, was in Stella only the ornament of intellectual greatness (Hawkesworth, pp. 45–46).

While Johnson acknowledges the possibility of Stella's beauty, he is skeptical about her intellectual achievements. He calls her virtuous, beautiful and elegant on the basis of the admiration of her lover, who, he says, "makes it very probable." But he does not believe she had "much literature, for she could not spell her own language" (*Lives*, III, 42).¹⁷ Nor is he impressed with Swift's collection of her witty sayings. Johnson has recast Hawkesworth's analysis of Stella by stripping away the concept that beauty was merely an ornament to her life. But while he disagrees with Hawkesworth's verdict of Stella's accomplishments, he does support his moral sentiment that beauty by itself has dominion over folly and caprice. The thought in Johnson, however, is that beauty here was fatal to Stella rather than to Swift:

Beauty and the power of pleasing, the greatest external advantages that woman can desire of possess, were fatal to the unfortunate Stella (III, 41).

Johnson maintains that since Swift wanted to keep Stella in his power he hindered her chances of marriage, and then decided to make a secret marriage in order to insure that Stella would not leave him. The marriage was for Swift a way of obtaining all the pleasures of perfect friendship without the uneasiness of conjugal restraint. The marriage was "fatal" to Stella according to Johnson, because Swift was unwilling to own her as his wife when she would have enjoyed it. Though he did finally offer to acknowledge the marriage, 'it was too late', because of the "change of his manners and the depravation of his mind" (III, 41–42).

Hawkesworth and Johnson on Swift's Political and Religious Views

There is complete agreement between Hawkesworth and Johnson in their treatment of Swift's political and religious views. Both men go into considerable detail praising and describing Swift's political accomplishments. Writing in the Johnsonian style, Hawkesworth concludes his *Account of the Life of the Reverend Jonathan Swift* with the picture of Swift as an overreacher:

While he was viewed at a distance with envy, he became a burden to himself; he was forsaken by his friends, and his memory has been loaded with unmerited reproach: his life, therefore, does not afford less instruction than his writings, since to the wise it may teach humility, and to the simple content (p. 76).

This statement also seems to sum up the effect of Swift's life on others in Johnson's biography:

“He was not a man to be either loved or envied” (III, 61).¹⁸

Johnson twice cites Hawkesworth approvingly in his *Life of Swift*, first, as we have noted, at the beginning, then later when he discusses Swift's pamphlets encouraging the Irish to use their own manufactures:

For a man to use the productions of his own *labour* is surely a natural right, and to like best what he makes himself is a natural passion. But to excite this passion, and enforce this right, appeared so criminal to those who had an interest in the English trade, that the printer was imprisoned; as *Hawkesworth* justly observes, the attention of the public being by this outrageous resentment turned upon the proposal, the author was by consequence made popular (III, 30–31). [Italics mine]

Whatever Johnson may have felt about Swift's motives for power, he is generally quite sympathetic with his causes:

In the succeeding reign he delivered Ireland from plunder and oppression; and showed that wit, coniferated with truth, had such force as authority was unable to resist (III, 50).¹⁹

Hawkesworth, like Johnson, also views Swift's religious and political activity as his major achievement. He gives an accurate summary of Swift's political views:

As to his political principles, if his own account of them is to be believed, he abhorred Whiggism only in those who made it consist in damning the church, reviling the clergy, abetting the dissenters, and speaking contemptibly of revealed religion. He always declared himself against a popish successor to the crown, whatever title he might have by proximity of blood; nor did he regard the right to live, upon any other account than as it was established by law, and had much weight in the opinions of the people; he was of the opinion, that when the grievances, suffered under a present government, became greater than those which might probably be expected from changing it by violence, a revolution was justifiable, and this he believed to have been the case in that which was brought about by the Prince of Orange. He had a mortal antipathy against standing armies in time of peace, and was of the opinion that our liberty could never be placed upon a firm foundation, till the ancient law should be revived, by which our parliaments were made annual: he abominated the political scheme of setting up a monied interest in oppositon to the landed, and was an enemy to temporary suspensions of the habeas corpus act. If some asperities, that cannot be justified, have escaped his pen, in papers which were hastily written in the first ardor of his zeal, and often after great provocation from those who wrote against him, surely they may, without the exertion of angelic benevolence be forgiven. (Hawkesworth, p. 26)

Johnson also abhorred Whiggism as a “negation of principle.” He spoke of nature rising up when there was no relief from tyranny. Although he may have had some nostalgic sympathies with the Jacobite cause, he did not debate the succession. As an opponent of the Septennial Act,²⁰ he too favored annual parliaments. In short both Swift and Johnson viewed themselves as moderate Tories. In the last chapter of this dissertation, I will examine their political views in relation to their sermons.

In his summary of Swift’s political views, Hawkesworth cites two of his earlier works, *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man* and *An Argument against Abolishing Christianity*. Johnson warmly praises these works:

The Sentiments of a Church of England Man is written with great coolness, moderation, ease, and perspicuity. The *Argument against Abolishing Christianity* is very happy and judicious irony. One passage in it deserves to be selected (*Lives*, III, 12).

Johnson quotes the passage in which Swift ironically argues that the convenience of having religion as the butt of jokes or as an exercise in logic for the “freethinkers, the strong

reasoners and the men of profound learning” (III, 12) would be undermined if Christianity were abolished. Johnson himself had little sympathy for the clever arguments which might undermine his religion. In another place I would like to go into detail on the similarities of Johnson’s and Swift’s views as expressed in *The Sentiments of a Church of England*. On the Sacramental Test and The Project for the Advancement of Religion, Johnson expresses mild doubt: The reasonableness of a test is not hard to be proved; but perhaps it must be allowed that the proper test has not been chosen.

In the year following [1709] he wrote a Project for the Advancement of Religion, addressed to Lady Berkeley, by whose kindness it is not unlikely that he was advanced to his benefices. To this project, which is formed with great purity of intention, and displayed with sprightliness and elegance, it can only be objected that, like many projects, it is, if not generally impracticable, yet evidently hopeless, as it supposes more zeal, concord, and perseverance than a view of mankind gives reason for expecting. (III, 13)²¹

While Johnson does not praise the literary merits of *The Conduct of the Allies*, he accepts Swift’s position on the war:

That is now no longer doubted, of which the nation was first informed, that the war was unnecessarily protracted to fill the pockets of Marlborough; and that it would have continued without end if he could have continued his annual plunder. But, Swift, I suppose, did not yet know what he has since written, that a commission was drawn which would have appointed him General for life, had it not become ineffectual by the resolution of Lord Cowper, who refused the seal (III. 18).

Swift and Marlborough are ironically paired in the *Vanity of Human Wishes* to illustrate the bitter reversal of fortune in “life’s last scene.” Swift triumphs as a Tory pamphleteer but is defeated by life. While he is boasting of his political power, fate is preparing to rob him of Stella. Johnson’s treatment of Swift in the *Vanity of Human Wishes* again shows Swift’s life as a series of embittering reversals:

In life’s last scene what prodigies surprise,
Fears of the brave, and follies of the wise?

From Marlborough's eyes the streams of dotage flow
And Swift expires a driv'ler and a show. (11. 315-318)

Johnson is also showing in these lines the vanity of both valor and wit in the closing scenes of life, as well as their corruptions.

Some Reactions to Johnson's Life of Swift

In his review of the *Life of Swift*, Boswell thinks Johnson shows prejudice, though he does discredit Sheridan's explanation that Swift's failure to help Johnson is responsible for this prejudice. Boswell, however, does not know how to account for this prejudice. I have, however, been attempting to show that Johnson's *Life of Swift* does not necessarily reflect a prejudice and that it is even more favorable than its critics maintain.

Perhaps the most sensitive handling of the Irish degree incident can be found in Henry Craik's *Life of Swift*. After quoting Lord Gower's letter to Swift he observes:

The application came to nothing: and the fears that Lord Gower expresses of its hopelessness were probably well-founded. Even had such a grant been possible, it seems unlikely that Swift would either have been a suitor to the authorities of Dublin University, or that his recommendation would have been very favourably accepted by them. That the failure of a request, conveyed so indirectly as this, formed any part of the ground for Johnson's prejudice against Swift, is absolutely without foundation. A far more likely, and, indeed, a far more worthy cause of that prejudice was the very similarity of temperament. Genius is not prone to make allowances. Its possessors are not drawn to one another because they are alike in their haughtiness, in their cynicism, in their intolerance. Johnson knew, and shrank from, the bitterness that was bred in Swift as it was in himself, of hardship, of early poverty, of disappointed hopes, and of the ceaseless burden of ill-health. He had struggled too long against the fatal influences, not to know and dread their strength; and just in proportion as the effort to school himself was painful, so his judgment on another suffering from the same enemy, was severe. Even if Swift neglected to afford aid which it was in his power to bestow, the neglect was one entirely impersonal to Johnson. Swift knew nothing of him: he could not have read his poem: he could have borne no grudge against its author. Had the benefit been conferred, it might have constrained Johnson to a more lenient judgment: that it was not, could scarcely have given to his judgment its severity.²²