

Johnson and Swift: Footnotes to Rawson

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Abstract: Of the many critics who have tried to understand Johnson's complex attitude to Swift, Rawson is surely the most insightful. This essay explores some Johnsonian responses to Swift in addition to those canvassed by Rawson and takes up anew the question of Swiftianism in Johnson's writings and conversation. Operating within the framework established by Rawson, this essay finds, in sum, that the harshest sort of irony is slightly less exceptional than Rawson judged and slightly less confined to his early years as a writer. Later in life Johnson could be more Swiftian in conversation and in ex tempore writing than in his more considered and more public utterances. This suggests that he controlled his harshest tendencies when he was speaking on the record or, more importantly, making pronouncements that might reach a broader audience of impressionable readers. But the tendencies ran deep, just as Rawson says.

Keywords: Samuel Johnson; Swiftianism; irony

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In "The Character of Swift's Satire," "Intimacies of Antipathy: Johnson and Swift," and occasionally in several other essays, Claude Rawson has made the most insightful comments on the literary relationship between Johnson and Swift of all time, though it has long been a subject of interest to literary scholars and critics. A general summary cannot do justice to Rawson's views because they are both complex and inseparable from the style in which he wrote them. It is fair to say, however, that "Intimacies of Antipathy" clarifies through several examples the long-observed but still puzzling compound of attraction and repulsion evident in Johnson's relationship with Swift. Johnson's *Life of Swift* in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781) naturally provides the richest field for the exploration of this relationship, and Rawson canvasses it thoroughly:

Johnson's antipathy to Swift was intense. It is not merely that the *Life of Swift* expresses some severe criticisms and a degree of personal dislike. The same is true of the lives of Milton and Pope. What is exceptional in the *Life of Swift* is, first, the sheer persistence, sometimes subtextual, of the antipathy [...]. Secondly, some of his severest strictures on Swift's real or presumed states of mind have a peculiar inwardness, a censorious probing of dark corners of motivation or outlook, which have the stamp of psychological fellow-travelling. Finally [...] there are some surprising parallels in the private and religious meditations of both men, as well as in their moral and political opinions, and their underlying mode of thought. ("Intimacies" 120-121)

To dwell for a moment on the writing in this passage, the metaphors implicit in "inwardness" and "dark corners" are characteristic of a predilection for visual and spatial ways of putting things that is a strength of Rawson's style, surprisingly evident in his often-brilliant descriptions of tone: the "uppishness" or "hauteur" and even, at a stretch, "avuncular" ("confident derision mingling with sympathetic reassurance") suggest bodily positions and spatial relationships between people.

In addition to probing Johnson's strictures in the *Life of Swift*, Rawson examines several other places in Johnson's writings, and in his biography, that show "his curious self-involvement with an author he persistently disliked" ("Intimacies" 127). It is curious, Rawson points out, that Johnson's relationship with Hester Thrale was tinged with his awareness of Swift, not least because she was in fact an admirer of Swift. In one of his many letters to Thrale, Johnson was willing to style himself "Presto" (Redford I:302). This is the name that appears as Swift's signature in the first edition of his *Journal to Stella* (1755), the edition that Johnson and Thrale knew. As Rawson points out, Thrale's son Harry had a dog named Presto, and Johnson referred to himself in a letter to Hester at about this time as "This little Dog" (*Letters* I.296). There is a suggestion here that Johnson was willing to play Swift to Thrale's Stella and hit the same notes of a poor creature seeking maternal comfort that Swift sometimes hit when styling himself a "poor dear fellow"—the true reading of the manuscript letters, which the indignant cousin/editor, Dean Swift, changed to "Presto."¹

In amplifying Johnson's note of self-abasement Rawson wisely stops short of invoking the famous letter in French that Johnson wrote to Thrale, addressing

1 The MS reading, restored in the Cambridge edition is "pdf'r" or "podefar," short for "poor dear fellow" (*Journal to Stella* 577). The original shows that the name was one of mild self-abasement, which is lightened though not erased in "Presto."

her as his “Mistress,” from inside the Streatham house, which has been taken as an indication that he regarded her as his dominatrix and granted her the right to manacle him in his room. The letter (and the manacles that were auctioned with the rest of the Thrale-Piozzi property in Streatham) has perhaps been taken too literally. Read merely as a courtly gesture of abasement, like throwing one’s cloak on the ground to protect the beloved’s feet from mud, the letter is of a piece with the gesture of declaring oneself the beloved’s dog or other pet. (The gesture was still alive for Trollope when he had the interloping beau in *Is He Popenjoy?* [1877-1878] use it as a come-on to the recently married heroine of the novel.)

The most famous of the pets that literary lovers claim they wish to be is the dove in the Anacreontic poem that Johnson imitated and recited to Hester Thrale¹ as he had earlier recited it to his intended second wife, Hill Boothby (Wright 109). In the original Greek poem, the dove is a go-between for Anacreon and his beloved boy Bathyllus, but the creature contentedly lies down in the arms of his master at bedtime. Johnson changed the gender of the beloved in his version because, presumably, he wished to identify her with the woman for whom he performed. As the dove is the speaker in the poem, delivering both the poem and Anacreon’s letters to his beloved, he must be identified with Johnson as poet, even if, as lover, Johnson is identified with the dove’s master. In any case, the prostration of the dove before “Anacreon” is a posture that Johnson struck before Thrale or Boothby as he delivered the poem, in which he asks, “Can a prudent Dove decline/Blissful bondage such as mine?” (ll: 24-25) Johnson’s couplet, moreover, is a notable expansion of the simpler line in the original— Δούλη μὲν ᾧ παρ’ αὐτῷ (A slave, I will stay with him). Johnson’s interrogative couplet recalls lines from the proem of *The Rape of the Lock*—“Oh say what stranger cause, yet unexplored/Could cause a gentle belle to reject a lord?”—but the meter is wrong, as I’ll suggest soon.

In “Intimacies” Rawson discusses another poem that Johnson composed and recited, probably impromptu, to Thrale. She had complained in 1777 when she was thirty-five that Swift wrote birthday poems to Stella until she was forty-six, but she had nothing from Johnson. He told her, as she prepared to transcribe the verses, that she should now “see what it is to come for poetry to a Dictionary-maker; you may observe that the rhymes run in alphabetical order exactly” (*Johnsonian Miscellanies* 1:260). The mention of the *Dictionary* validates Rawson’s characterization of the lines as “displaying a half-derisive virtuosity of inwardness” (“Intimacies” 128) because Johnson was so identified with his *Dictionary*, as is shown, for example, in Γνῶθι σεαυτόν (Know thyself), the self-examining poem he wrote as an address to

1 See G. B. Hill, ed, *Johnsonian Miscellanies* vol. 1, New York: Harper&Brothers, 1897, 176.

his intellectual master, Joseph Scaliger, when he finished revising his great work in 1773. The poem recalls Swift's famous birthday poems for Stella, but the verse is in the manner of Waller's "To Zelinda" which begins, "Fairest piece of well-form'd earth, /Urge not thy haughty birth." This is the same measure that Johnson used in his imitation of "Anacreon's Dove" and in earlier amorous poems, such as "On a Lady's Presenting a Sprig of Myrtle to a Gentleman."¹ Interestingly, Waller's poem appears in the Prosody preliminary to Johnson's *Dictionary* as an exemplification of the trochaic verse form of seven syllables per line. The double reference to the *Dictionary* in Johnson's birthday poem for Thrale makes the lines even more an expression of "inwardness," but Johnson's own history in using the form for love poetry does that as well.

Johnson's *Dictionary* is itself filled with references to Swift. I suggested, as Rawson recalls, that Johnson may have gone out of his way to associate Swift with scatological or proctological words in the illustrative quotations. He quotes Swift as saying, for example, "I got the hemorrhoids!" (DeMaria 210) This is not a very illustrative quotation; it does not illuminate the meaning of the word; it is fun at Swift's expense, but, given Johnson's medical history and his difficulty with constipation—hinted at by Boswell in his coy questions about Johnson's retention of dried orange peels—it may also be a cri de coeur. Overall, Brian Grimes has counted 3,460 citations of Swift by name or the name of one of his works in the first edition of the *Dictionary* (1755). The largest number of quotations come from *Gulliver's Travels*, but "Directions to Servants" supplies the highest number per page. *Johnson's Dictionary Online* counts 94 for the former and 75 for the much shorter latter work in 1755. The advice transmitted from Swift in "Directions" is mainly ironic, such as that provided in the quotation under the first sense of the noun "lap": "If a joint of meat falls on the ground, take it up gently, wipe it with the lap of your coat, and then put it into the dish." "Armpit" evokes another quotation of "Directions," addressed by Swift to the Footman: "Others hold their plate under the left arm-pit, the best situation for keeping it warm." And again (one more), from "Directions to the Butler" under the noun "plug": "In bottling wine, fill your mouth full of corks, together with a large plug of tobacco." Many of the quotations of Swift in the *Dictionary* refer to violations of the strict sanitary code to which both Swift and Johnson somewhat compulsively subscribed.

Swift's poems are also well-represented in Johnson's *Dictionary*, although in his *Life of Swift* Johnson was dismissive of them, dispatching them with the bare

1 This and many other observations about Johnson's poetry in this essay derive from *The Complete Poems of Samuel Johnson* (Routledge, 2024), edited by Robert D. Brown and Robert DeMaria, Jr.

remark, “There is not much upon which the critic can exercise his powers” (Lonsdale 3:214), although, as Rawson reminded us, the *Lives* were originally called “Prefaces Biographical and Critical” and intended as introductions to the poetry in *The Works of the English Poets*. Nor does Johnson shrink from quoting in the *Dictionary* poems that he says in the *Life of Swift* he would have classed as “gross” or “trifling,” if he had bothered to treat the poetry at all, including two ironic quotations of “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed” under “cleanliness.” As Rawson notes, Thrale said Johnson “‘used to quote [Swift] perpetually,’ but often reverted to [‘Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift’] in particular” (“Intimacies” 136). In the first edition of the *Dictionary*, Johnson quoted this poem at least sixteen times. The first-person grammar of this poem, and many of Swift’s other works, allows Johnson to ventriloquize Swift—in itself a very Swiftian move—to have him speak, often to his own derogation, but also, though more rarely, to utter his own thoughts in the voice of his nemesis. A harmless example occurs under “spick and span” meaning “Quite new”: “I keep no antiquated stuff;/But spick and span I have enough.” Another pops up under “sniveller” (“A weeper; a weak lamenter”: “He’d more lament when I was dead,/Than all the snivellers round my bed.”) Johnson always said he hated a “Feeler,” at least insofar as the feeling was affected (*Thraliana* 1:541 and n. 2). Johnson is also united with Swift in approving of charitable giving. In addition to promoting several charitable schemes—such as the Hereford hospital and the benefit night for Milton’s grand-daughter—Johnson made a point of discussing his subjects’ charity in many of his biographies. Swift, of course, left money for the establishment of a sanatorium for the mentally ill in Dublin. Johnson gives Swift credit for his charity, despite complaining that “His beneficence was not graced with tenderness or civility” (Lonsdale 2:211).

In the Preface to the *Dictionary* Johnson refers, as Rawson notes, to Swift’s *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712) as a “petty treatise” and goes further in the *Life of Swift* to say it was “written without much knowledge of the general nature of language, and without any accurate enquiry into the history of other tongues” (Lonsdale 3:195). Nevertheless, Johnson drew on it for illustrative quotations in the *Dictionary* (see, e.g. “heart,” sense 9). Interestingly, the reason for Johnson’s criticism—Swift’s naive belief that an academy can legislate correctness—is prefigured in Swift’s own satire of academies in *A Tale of a Tub*, which can be seen as a source for Johnson’s derision of them. Swift imagines a parodic “large Academy [...] capable of containing nine thousand seven hundred forty and three Persons, which by modest Computation is reckoned to be pretty near the current Number of *Wits* in this Island” (26). The Hack who

speaks for Swift in the *Tub* also imagines that the “worthy Members of the several *Academies* abroad, especially those of *France* and *Italy*, will favourably accept these humble Offers, for the Advancement of Universal Knowledge” (68). Without irony, but perhaps in a voice equally theatrical, Johnson is similarly derisive in the Preface to the *Dictionary*: “If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile, which I, who can never wish to see dependence multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy, let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavour, with all their influence, to stop the licence of translatours, whose idleness and ignorance, if suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of *France*” (108-109). Despite this injunction, Johnson quoted numerous translations in his *Dictionary* and made them important in his representation of English. Part of the tone of the Preface, as a performance for the English market, was an obligatory Francophobia, and an almost Swiftian disdain for academies was consistent with that tone.

Johnson may be performing, but he is not ironic in issuing an opinion on academies that resembles Swift’s; he repeats some other Swiftian opinions in a similarly unironic way. The ending of the *Idler*, for example, is a version of the ending of *A Tale of Tub*, without irony. Johnson wrote in *Idler* 103: “This secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful [...] the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination” (315). In concluding *A Tale of a Tub*, Swift wrote, “The Conclusion of a Treatise, resembles the Conclusion of Human Life” (135). The idea may be a commonplace, but its attraction for both Swift and Johnson is a measure of the curious compatibility of their views. Other examples of shared commonplaces may be found. For example, in Part 2, Chapter 1 of *Gulliver’s Travels* Swift writes: “Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the Right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison” (124). Johnson expands the commonplace in his preface to Shakespeare: “As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains and many rivers; so in the productions of genius, nothing can be stiled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind” (1:60).

Johnson followed Swift in lamenting the exuberant growth of publication and the proliferation of writers. Both also, in a satirical vein, ascribe this proliferation to the weather. Swift’s hack presents his *Tale of a Tub* to Prince Posterity as “The poor Production of that Refuse of Time, which has lain heavy upon my Hands, during a long Prorogation of Parliament, a great Dearth of Forein News, and a tedious Fit of rainy Weather” (20). In the Conclusion he invokes a bookseller who “knows to a

Tittle, what Subjects will best go off in a *dry* Year, and which it is proper to expose foremost, when the Weather-glass is fallen to *much Rain*" (134). In *Adventurer* 115 Johnson laments the "epidemical conspiracy for the destruction of paper" and speculates that it might be caused by "the intemperature of the seasons [...] the long continuance of the wind at any single point, or intoxicating vapours exhaled from the earth" (458-459).

Both Johnson and Swift also made fun of a kind of mechanical operation of the literary spirit. Swift begins his *Tale of a Tub* with a disquisition on the mechanical forms of rising (Longinian ὕψους or the sublime). He finds the three methods of rising, thus enabling one's words to land with more force, are the ladder, the pulpit, and the stage itinerant. in *Rambler* 117. Johnson uses the logic of the Hack's description of the importance of altitude to the delivery of words when he writes his "theory of a garret" as a fictional letter from "Hypertatus" (4: 258-264). Johnson focuses the effects of altitude on the writer rather than his words, but his reduction of an intangible literary element to something mechanical resembles Swift's operation in his *Tub*. Wind is another of Swift's frequently employed materializations of spirit: "For, whether you please to call the *Forma informans* of Man, by the name of *Spiritus*, *Animus*, *Afflatus*, or *Anima*; what are all these, but several Appellations for *Wind*?" (99) Johnson also invokes wind, and he does so by alluding to Pythagoras, a classical source for the conflation of wind and spirit also present in Swift's work. Johnson's Hypertatus finds Pythagoras an important authority for his effort "to inculcate to posterity the importance of a garret" (260). He cites the "celebrated symbol [i.e. maxim] of Pythagoras, ἀνεμῶν πνεόντων τὴν ἡχώ προσκύνει; 'when the wind blows, worship its echo'" (260). Most of the "symbols" are quite as silly as this one: "Write not in the snow," for example, "Threaten not the stars," and "Eat not in the chariot" (a good inscription for a twenty-first-century automobile air freshener). Pythagoras was a commonplace for exemplifying the folly of pedantry, and Johnson translated early in his career the Jests of Hierocles, a commentary on Pythagoras's *Aurea Carmina*, a work full of jokes about pedants (*Johnson on Demand*, 56). There is a kind of commutative principle by which Pythagoras connects Johnson and Swift, especially through their younger selves.

The elevation of the garret in Johnson's *Rambler* 117 enables not only access to the wind but also an increased speed of rotation as the earth spins, and this increase in velocity makes one smarter:

Another cause of the gaiety and sprightliness of the dwellers in garrets is probably the increase of that vertiginous motion, with which we are carried

round by the diurnal revolution of the earth. The power of agitation upon the spirits is well known; every man has felt his heart lightened in a rapid vehicle, or on a galloping horse; and nothing is plainer, than that he who towers to the fifth story, is whirled through more space by every circumrotation, than another that grovels upon the ground-floor. (263)

Although Johnson focuses on the mind of the writer rather than, like Swift, his emissions in the form of words that fall with more force from a great height, his conceit surely qualifies as “Swiftian.” Johnson enlists Tibullus and Lucretius in his army of apologists for the garret. As the archetypal materialist, Lucretius is a favorite of Swift’s ironic spokesmen; these spokesmen are parts of the pantheon of wits supporting the views of Hypertatus.

In “The Character of Swift’s Satire” Rawson points out:

[...] just as Swift, in some of his lesser works, and less often than had been claimed, sometimes wrote in a plain style devoid of ironic indirection, so Johnson occasionally did the opposite. Two of his early works were conscious exercises in “Swiftian” irony: *Marmor Norfolciense* and the *Complete Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage*. This early fixation on Swift was also playfully sustained by the parliamentary reports that he concocted for the *Gentleman’s Magazine* under the title “Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia,” and there were examples of “sarcasm and ‘sophistry’” among the political writings of his later years. But these works are exceptional, and the few overt Swiftian imitations may be taken as among the more superficial instances of that deep similarity with Swift that Johnson seems uneasily to have sensed in himself. (“Character” 23)

This is all very true and the perception that these are “superficial instances of [a] deep similarity” is particularly acute. Combing Johnson’s writings, however, one can find more numerous “superficial instances.” Those that Rawson notes are the most important, but he plays down their extent, since Johnson’s work on the Parliamentary Debates constitutes his longest performance in prose, occupying three volumes in the Yale Edition, the same number as *The Lives of the Poets*, from which should be subtracted a larger volume of footnotes and a certain amount of non-Johnsonian prose, such as the *Life of Young*, which was contributed by Herbert Croft. There is also irony in many of the *Ramblers*, such as 117 cited above—another three-volume collection of Johnson’s prose.

Reverting first to one of Johnson's works well-known to be "Swiftian," perhaps it is worth remembering how closely Johnson follows Swift in his creation of the prophetic Latin poem at the center of *Marmor Norfolciense*. The poem is entitled "Post-Genitis" (To Posterity) and hence is dedicated to the same entity named in the dedication to *A Tale of a Tub*. There is a classical precedent for the counterfeit archaeological discovery in *Marmor* (Baldwin cites Ephemerus *Belli Troiani* [Diary of the Trojan War] by "Dictys Cretensis," alleged to have been discovered in the 4th century), but Swift used a similar satirical vehicle, albeit in an abbreviated way, in "The Windsor Prophecy" (1711).

A less frequently cited Swiftian work is Johnson's "Observations on *Common Sense*," published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for December 1738 (vol. 8:640-641). Like most of Johnson's work for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in his first year of involvement, "Observations" is part of the periodical war that the proprietor, Edward Cave, waged with the journals from which he drew his articles before he began replacing them with original content—mainly after 1740. In January of 1738 the editors of *Common Sense* complained that the *GM* not only pilfered its material but abridged it barbarously, canceling "everything that looks like spirit in writing." In retaliation, the *GM* abridged a piece written for *Common Sense*, 2 December 1738, but kept in brackets phrases that were stylistically unnecessary. Johnson added "Observations on the forgoing" in the voice of a penitent editor: "An ingenuous and artless confession of a fault is generally admitted as an extenuation of it, and, if accompanied with amendment, entitles the offender to pardon and compassion" (*Johnson on Demand* 24). His apology includes a precative address to prolixity worthy of Swift's dedication to Prince Posterity or even Pope's address to Dullness:

Oh thou great directress of political pens! known amongst the moderns by the names of FLUENCY and COPIOUSNESS, and amongst the men of former ages by the title of PROLIXITY! Thou, that weariest attention with invincible tautology, and bewilderest reason in inextricable mazes! Forgive, great goddess! the injuries rashly offered to the most zealous of thy votaries, the AUTHORS OF *Common Sense*, and accept of the small atonement which I now offer thee by publishing, in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, four columns SACRED TO PROLIXITY. (*Johnson on Demand* 25)

Then, after many more protestations that he was reformed, Johnson's speaker provides a long footnote listing expressions he would have expunged in his "unenlightened" state. The list is interesting for those who study Johnson's style for

it includes mixed metaphors, pleonasms, and solecisms having to do with imprecise usage, or with tense or number: for example, “was *owing*,” “the people who ruled the roost,” “now and then,” “two *most* opposites,” “Once more before I *died*,” “she retired into France, where, when *strangers* became acquainted with her, *all the world* was in love with her” (ibid., 26n2). It is fair to say, by the way, that Johnson’s strictness about metaphor is a trait of his literary outlook that he shares with Swift—one that is a constant throughout his life, not just in youth.

Although “Swiftian” irony is more common in Johnson’s earliest writings, he also used unreliable if not thoroughly ironic speakers in his later periodical essays. There are many examples in the *Rambler* (1750-1752) and some from later productions, such as the *Idler* (1758-1760). One from an intermediary time is worth mentioning because it contains the kind of mock proposal that is closely associated with Swift’s most famous writing. Johnson, as is generally true, does not make proposals as violent or as disgusting as Swift’s, but in its analogy between dogs and writers, this one comes close. The piece appeared in the *Universal Visiter*, volume 4 (April 1756), 159-166 and was there entitled “Reflections on the Present State of Literature.” Thomas Davies changed the title to “A Dissertation on Authors” when he included it in *Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces* (2:21-29), and it entered Johnson’s *Works* in 1788 as “A project for the Employment of Authors” (199-209). The speaker, like Swift’s projector in *A Modest Proposal*, is a “computist.” He says, “I have computed, at some hours of leisure, the loss and gain of literature, and set the pain which it produces against the pleasure” (*Johnson on Demand*, 254). True to his identity as a kind of computational economist, Johnson’s speaker goes on to discuss the great proliferation of authors, which amounts to a kind of plague. He finds that every sixth man passing Temple Bar between the hours of eleven and four is an author. Authors lead miserable lives because, as this computist knows, “the price of commodities must always fall as the quantity is increased, and [...] no trade can allow its professors to be multiplied beyond a certain number” (257).

Johnson’s economist also makes some comparisons of authors in their suffering to animals: “Many universal comparisons there are by which misery is expressed. We talk of a man teased like a bear at a stake, tormented like a toad under a harrow; or hunted like a dog with a stick at his tail; all these are indeed states of uneasiness, but what are they to the life of an author!” (258) The speaker goes on to describe authors as cannibalistic animals: “like wolves in long winters, they are forced to prey on one another” (259). The animal imagery returns in the modest proposal itself:

The result of all these considerations amounts only to this, that the number of writers must at last be lessened, but by what method this great design can be accomplished, is not easily discovered. It was lately proposed, that every man who kept a dog should pay a certain tax, which, as the contriver of ways and means [i.e. Internal Revenue] very judiciously observed, would either destroy the dogs, or bring in money. Perhaps it might be proper to lay some such tax upon authors, only the payment must be lessened in proportion as the animal, upon which it is raised, is less necessary; for many a man that would pay for his dog, will dismiss his dedicator. Perhaps, if every one, who employed or harboured an author, was assessed a groat a year, it would sufficiently lessen the nuisance without destroying the species. (*Johnson on Demand* 260)

This is obviously not as bad as the proposal to eat Irish babies or the proposal to eliminate the Yahoos from the face of the earth, but it has some resemblance to them, and shows that Johnson carried some of his “Swiftian” irony into middle age. Moreover, Johnson echoed the imagery of this passage in 1773 when, as Boswell reports in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, “Lady MacLeod asked if no man was naturally good. Johnson. ‘No, madam, no more than a wolf.’ Boswell. ‘Nor woman, sir?’ Johnson: ‘No, sir.’ Lady MacLeod started, saying low, ‘This is worse than Swift’” (170; Rawson, “Character” 4).

Also in 1773, Johnson composed a “Meditation on a Pudding,” which surely recalls Swift’s “Meditation on a Broomstick” (1710). Both of Johnson’s most important early biographers—Hawkins and Boswell—believed that Johnson’s immediate object was James Hervey’s popular *Meditations and Contemplations* (1746-1748). The immediate object of Swift’s *Meditation* is Robert Boyle’s *Meditations* (1665), but both Swift’s and Johnson’s works are sendups of the metaphysical mode in general. Johnson evidently never committed this work to paper but performed it, with differences, for Hawkins and Boswell on separate occasions. It begins, in one version, “Let us seriously reflect of what a pudding is composed. It is composed of flour that once waved in the golden grain, and drank the dews of the morning; of milk pressed from the swelling udder by the gentle hand of the beauteous milk-maid. [...] who, while she stroked the udder, indulged in no ambitious thoughts of wandering in palaces [...]” (*Johnson on Demand* 529). Swift’s “Meditation” begins, “This single Stick, which you now behold ingloriously lying in that neglected Corner, I once knew in a flourishing State in a Forest: It was full of Sap, and full of Leaves, and full of Boughs” (*Parodies* 13). He goes on to make the metaphysical statement that “SURELY MORTAL MAN IS A BROOMSTICK” (14).

This more resembles the kind of extravagant metaphysical metaphor that Johnson criticized in his *Life of Cowley* than the kind he ridicules in his “Meditation on a Pudding,” but the resemblance to Swift is still pertinent.

It is notable that this late “Swiftianum” was an impromptu production. There is evidence in Johnson’s poetry that he was more inclined to Swiftian irony when he composed such verse in performance than when he wrote for publication. There are several late poems, composed impromptu, that exhibit such irony. One of these is “A Short Song of Congratulation,” which Johnson composed on or about 8 August 1780, when he sent the poem to Hester Thrale with the following note: “You have heard in the papers how Sir John Lade is come to age, I have enclosed a short song of congratulation, which you must not show to any body. It is odd that it should come into any bodies head. I hope you will read it with candour [i.e., genially], it is, I believe one of the authours first essays in that way of writing, and a beginner is always to be treated with tenderness” (*Letters* 3.296). Thrale said in her journal that Johnson sent this in a “fit of frolicksome Gaiety” (*Thraliana* 1.451). Johnson was joking about this being his first attempt “in that way of writing;” whether he meant irony in general or unironic congratulations in particular, he had long been adept at creating an authorial persona. The poem celebrates ironically the coming of age of a notorious spendthrift whom Johnson occasionally encountered at Streatham, as he was the ward of his uncle Henry Thrale. Lade evidently took Johnson’s advice literally, soon marrying a horsewoman of light repute and squandering the family fortune.

A Short Song of Congratulation

Long-expected one and twenty
Ling’ring year, at last is flown,
Pomp and Pleasure, Pride and Plenty
Great Sir John, are all your own.

Loosen’d from the Minor’s tether, 5
Free to mortgage or to sell,
Wild as wind, and light as feather
Bid the slaves of thrift farewell.

Call the Bettys, Kates, and Jennys
Ev’ry name that laughs at Care, 10

Lavish of your Grandsire's guineas,
Show the Spirit of an heir.

All that prey on vice and folly
Joy to see their quarry fly,
Here the Gamester light and jolly, 15
There the Lender grave and sly.

Wealth, Sir John, was made to wander,
Let it wander as it will;
See the Jocky, see the Pander,
Bid them come, and take their fill. 20

When the bonny Blade carouses,
Pockets full, and Spirits high,
What are acres? What are houses?
Only dirt, or wet or dry.

If the Guardian or the Mother 25
Tell the woes of wilful waste,
Scorn their counsel and their pother,
You can hang or drown at last.

John Hoole heard Johnson repeat the poem "with great spirit" on 30 November (Swift's birthday, coincidentally), 1784 (*Johnsonian Miscellany* 2:152).

A less funny and crueller spontaneous performance is Johnson's "An Extempore Elegy," which he composed at Streatham where Fanny Burney heard it and eventually copied it out. "The *occasion*," she wrote in her journal, "was to *make fun* of an Elegy in a Trumpery Book we had just been reading" (Burney 4:448-449).

1
Here's a Woman of the Town,
Lies as Dead as any Nail!
She was once of high renown,—
And so here begins my Tale.

2
She was once as Cherry plump, 5

Red her Cheek as Cath'rine Pear,
 Toss'd her Nose, & shook her Rump,
 Till she made her Neighbours stare.
 3
 But there came a country'squire
 He was a seducing Pug! 10
 Took her from her friends & sire,
 To his own House her did lug.
 4
 There she soon became a Jilt,
 Rambling often to & fro',
 All her life was nought but guilt, 15
 Till Purse & Carcase both were low.
 5
 Black her Eye with many a Blow,
 Hot her Breath with many a Dram,
 Now she lies exceeding low,
 And as quiet as a Lamb. 20

This is surely Johnson's meanest poem unless one counts "To Lyce," which may not be his. "To Lyce" appeared in the *GM* for May 1747 (17.240) and was accepted into both *Poetical Works* (1785) and *Works* (1787). The poem follows Horace, Odes, 4.13 and similarly mocks an aging woman. It sounds more like Swift in his so-called misogynist verse than Johnson:

Her silver locks display the moon,
 Her brows a cloudy show, 10
 Strip'd rainbows round her eyes are seen,
 And show'rs from either flow.

 Her teeth the night with darkness dyes,
 She's starr'd with pimples o'er,
 Her tongue like nimble lightning plies, 15
 And can with thunder roar.

Robert Brown and I—coeditors of the Longman's edition of Johnson's poems—are inclined, like other Johnsonians, to doubt Johnson's authorship of "To Lyce" partly

because it is so cruel (though we acknowledge that Johnson may have contributed to it). Boswell also doubted it on those grounds: “I have also some difficulty to believe that he could produce such a group of *conceits* as appear in the verses to Lyce [...];” but he concedes that “[Johnson] may have, in his earlier years, composed such a piece as this” (*Life* 1:179). Sherbo concludes his article on “Certain Poems in the May 1747 *Gentleman’s Magazine*” with this judgment on “To Lyce”: “The one poem that remains has so much evidence against its ascription to Johnson that it is rather anticlimactic to point out that even Smith and McAdam, sharing Boswell’s extreme suspicion, have little to say for it” (389). Still, rejecting the poem because one thinks the sentiment beneath Johnson is not entirely valid.

One poem that was formerly ascribed to Johnson, despite its cruelty, Brown and DeMaria have shown not to be Johnson’s. Lars Troide, the editor of Burney’s early journals thought this was Johnson’s Swiftian improvisation.

With Patches, Paint, & Jewels on,
 Sure Phillis is not Twenty one!—
 —But if at *Night* you Phillis see—
 —The Dame, at least, is Forty Three (3:126)

My co-editor Rob Brown discovered that these lines paraphrase Matthew Prior’s “Phyllis’s Age”:

How old may Phyllis be, you ask,
 Whose beauty thus all hearts engages?
 To answer is no easy task,
 For she has really two ages.
 Stiff in brocard, and pinch’d in stays,
 With patches, paint, and jewels on,
 All day let envy view her face;
 And Phyllis is but twenty-one.
 Paint, patches, jewels laid aside,
 As night astronomers agree,
 The evening has the day belied;
 And Phyllis is some forty-three.

The unmasking of this false ascription is a warning that one should not go too far in imagining the extent of Johnson’s “Swiftian” behavior as a writer, and that

is a salutary note on which to conclude. What I have added here are footnotes to Rawson's sane and considered view that Johnson's Swiftian works are "exceptional" ("Character" 23). This is, however, to allow more Swiftianism in Johnson's works than Boswell allowed. Johnson's greatest biographer, reflecting on the "Short Song of Congratulation" describes it as satire "conveyed in a strain of pointed vivacity and humour, and in a manner of which no other instance is to be found in Johnson's writings" (*Life* 4:412). This is incorrect. I would certainly go further than Boswell and a bit further than Rawson, with the caveat that the additional works of Swiftian irony in his mature years are mainly in Johnson's *ex tempore* poems. As his sometimes violent behavior in debate (which he often sorely regretted) or his remark to Lady MacLeod (above) suggest, he could be more virulent *viva voce* than in print, and, likewise, he could be fiercer in *ex tempore* verse than in the cooler medium of prose or verse intended for publication. This is consistent with my view of Johnson as conscious throughout his published writings of his effect on his audience. He is often performing with attention to his reception, particularly his moral reception. Hence, I see the ending of the *Vanity of Human Wishes*, with its Christianizing and softening of the harsher Juvenalian message, as a concession to the audience and what would benefit them as Christians, rather than an expression of Johnson's personal feelings about life. The rest of the poem is more ironic and includes, as well as the cruel reference to Swift "expir[ing] a driv'ler and a show," a direct borrowing from Swift in line 73 where suitors "croud preferment's gate."¹ Not that I think Johnson quite as harsh as Swift in his view of humanity, but I think him harsher and more Swiftian than he wished to let on in his public performances. That he could express that harsher view more easily in private performances is a sign, however, of how deeply it ran, just as Rawson says.

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1 Swift wrote "croud about Preferment's Gate" "To Doctor D-l-y" (l. 93), as noted by Christopher Ricks (413) and noticed by Smith and McAdam (118).

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