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RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON'S "RAMBLER"

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RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON'S RAMBLER

Branson L. Woodard, Jr.

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RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON'S RAMBLER

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ABSTRACT

RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON'S RAMBLER

by Branson L. Woodard, Jr.

The second self or implied authorial voice in Samuel Johnson's writing receives little critical attention. The historical and biographical Johnson (primarily Boswell's) diverts scholars from Johnson's works. Traditional criticism of Johnson's writing focuses on ethical motives and textual history, and in the process Johnson's persuasive designs are ignored. This problem is most acute in reference to the periodicals essays, particularly the Rambler--Johnson's most extensive and accessible discussion of common human weaknesses as impediments to happiness, a discussion that depends for its effect on the development of Johnson's second self.

This study identifies the Rambler's Johnson and evaluates his assessment of the periodical as the "pure wine" of his literary career. Emphasizing the work's functions more than its forms, I examine the rhetorical strategies Johnson uses to balance the authorities of reason and of experience.

Branson L. Woodard, Jr.

The first chapter, using Boswell, argues that Johnson's propensity to oral communication undergirds his compositional process and influences his decisions as a critic. Boswell's conversationalist Johnson does not inevitably obscure our view of Johnson as a writer.

Chapter II reveals the Rambler as one of Johnson's many autonomous voices in the periodical. Ramblers 1 through 22 introduce the Rambler through his own essays, in a manner different from the traditional, Addisonian biographical sketch. There is reason to suspect the sincerity of Johnson's early attempt to conceal his authorship.

Johnson's sympathies with the middle class, the point of Chapter III, show in his use of letters to the editor. Their narrative mode reveals insights gained from their writers' experiences, in contrast to the argumentative pattern of the Rambler's philosophical essays. The result is a dialogue between Experience and Reason. Here Johnson exploits his experience as parliamentary "reporter" and biographer.

The oriental tales, according to Chapter IV, contribute variety and diversion and show the Rambler as storyteller. The sage-novice dialogue is important--however illusoire. Johnson also adapts the dialogical mode of Irene.

The final chapter concludes that the Rambler was written not so much for individual readers as for a

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community of readers. His studied attempts to make the world better for his ordinary readers, the new audience in the mid-century, reveals a Johnson quite different from the antagonistic polemicist of Boswell's Life; and the Rambler's Johnson is a much more attractive figure.

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## PREFACE

The literature of English-speaking peoples is unusually rich in its variety of subjects and methods of exposition. Even one subject, the freedom of literary expression for instance, is treated in strikingly different ways, as shown by Milton's forthright Areopagitica and Johnson's satiric Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage. But one of the often surprising realizations that confront readers, both scholarly and general, is the variety of literary personalities or speaking voices assumed by the same writer. Frequently, one personality or "second self" differs markedly from another.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing such a circumstance in J. R. R. Tolkien's fiction and letters, Lawrence Biemiller's review of Tolkien's letters, entitled "Professor Tolkien's 'Aberration,'" "

<sup>1</sup> Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 83. Booth further clarifies this "second self"; even fiction containing no dramatized narrator "creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the 'real man'--whatever we may take him to be--who creates a superior version of himself, a 'second self,' as he creates his work" (p. 151).

notes that works such as the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings have appealed to countless readers; but, continues Biemiller, they

may have difficulty recognizing in the writer of these letters the kindly myth maker they seek. In his correspondence, Tolkien reveals himself not as a figure of heroic proportions but as a father concerned about his children, a scholar delighted by philology, an academic plagued by exams and committee meetings. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Bilbo Baggins and Wilderland have little apparent connection with this latter Tolkien.

One need not be a literary scholar to appreciate Biemiller's concern. The Tolkien who endears himself to many is the second self of the fantasies, not the Oxford don--what we may term the "biographical Tolkien."

The case with Samuel Johnson, however, is quite the opposite. Both general readers and academicians, until rather recently, have been more intrigued by the biographical Johnson (as set forth in Boswell's Life) than by the Johnson revealed in his own writings. This circumstance, further, has influenced critical responses to Johnson's works. For nearly forty years scholars have decried the historical and biographical cast of criticism of the

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Biemiller, "Professor Tolkien's 'Aberration,'" rev. of The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien, by Humphrey Carpenter, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 16 Dec. 1981, p. 22.

Rambler and other Johnsonian literature as well. In 1948

William K. Wimsatt noted:

The impressive figure of Samuel Johnson is so largely the creation of one genius in dramatic biography and of several smaller memorialists . . . that both the writing and the reading of Johnson himself have very largely escaped the kind of exploration which is usually directed toward intellectual records of equal importance. . . . [B]y and large the texture of Johnson's writing . . . remain[s] almost unexamined.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently (though London [1737], The Vanity of Human Wishes [1749], Rasselas [1759], and Lives of the Poets [1779-81] gained some closer attention), Paul Fussell stated in 1971 that general readers and even scholars of the period continued to have more biographical than literary interests in Johnson: "if the writings are little read for their own sake, they are almost as little written about as attractive objects of criticism."<sup>4</sup> And though Johnson's works are indeed attractive objects, in 1977 William Vesterman echoed the persistent "Boswell problem" in Johnsonian scholarship:

<sup>3</sup> Philosophic Words (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1948), pp. x-xi.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. xii. This expansive, exploratory discussion of Johnson's literary attitudes as they appear in his own works, instead of in biographies and criticism about him, surveys Johnson's entire literary output, from London (1737) to Lives of the Poets (1779-81); thus, Fussell does not focus on Johnson's literary personality in the Rambler alone.

Boswell's genius has . . . dominated the imaginations of Johnson's readers partly by offering them attractive, almost irresistible ways of deflecting critical attention from precisely those contradictions and complications in Johnson's writing that are most in need of it.

Unfortunately, Vesterman omits the Rambler in his discussion, The Stylistic Life of Samuel Johnson.<sup>5</sup> Though various doctoral dissertations written since 1965 suggest that critical attention is indeed shifting, this biographical cast continues to hinder critical studies of Johnson, especially his periodical essays--what Walter J. Bate has termed the "moral writings."<sup>6</sup>

Even the neophyte of Johnsonian literature recognizes the ethical impulses in the Rambler, probably from Boswell rather than from his own reading of the work. Apart from

<sup>5</sup> (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1977), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 296.

Perry Alice Organ Carroll, "Samuel Johnson and the Art of Moralizing: A Study of the Periodical Essays and Rasselas," Diss. Harvard 1965; Stanley W. Lindberg, "Johnsonian Irony: The Theory and Practice of Irony in the Writings of Samuel Johnson," Diss. Penn University 1969; Donald E. Thackrey, "The Uses of Argument in the Prose of Samuel Johnson," Diss. University of Michigan 1969; James Woodruff, "Samuel Johnson and the Periodical Essay," Diss. Chicago 1971; and Veva D. Vonler, "Samuel Johnson's Epistolary Essays: His Use of Personae in the Rambler, the Adventurer, and the Idler," Diss. North Texas 1972.

Boswell's assessments, however, Johnson regarded himself as a moralist and perceived writing as an activity with important moral elements. Criticizing the lax conduct of characters like Roderick Random and Tom Jones, Johnson's *Rambler* states in No. 4 that "nothing indecent" should be written, especially for young readers, and that properly drawn characters should exhibit the "most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability . . . but the highest and purest that humanity can reach. . . ." <sup>7</sup> And throughout the series Johnson's ethical emphasis is unmistakable: of the 208 papers, ninety-two are what Bate calls "direct moral essays."<sup>8</sup> These papers, spoken by the *Rambler* about topics such as discontentment among both single and married women and bashfulness defined and remedied (Nos. 39 and 159), are not, however, the only instructive pieces. The former topic reappears in Ramblers 42 and 51, while the latter comprises No. 157. These three papers are ostensibly letters to the editor (actually written by Johnson), narratives relating the writers'

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Johnson, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: The Rambler, ed. W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss, III (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 21, 24. Quotations from the Rambler (vols. III-V), Irene (vol. VI), and the Political Writings (vol. X) are taken from the Yale edition and noted by volume number and page number in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Introd., the Rambler, III (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. xxvi.

mistakes, or those committed by the writers' acquaintances. Still other papers, such as the oriental tale about the wealthy Almamoulin (No. 120)--who learns that riches can transform a friend into a foe--are also morally instructive, though a delight to read. Nevertheless, if less than half of the Ramblers are "direct" moral essays, many of the others illustrate ethical facets of the human experience, and do so in literarily attractive ways.

The point here is that we misread the papers, individually and collectively, if we notice only Johnson's moral scruples. The pious voice of the dedicatory prayer differs markedly from the numerous voices in the essays. If we allow the Ramblers to operate only within what seems to us to be Johnson's moral code, the "intentional fallacy" also rears its ugly head, and our investigation is lost in a monstrous maze of regurgitated Boswell, eighteenth-century literary history, and--to protect our analysis from total separation from matters Johnsonian--a footnote or two about the Rambler.

Except for Chapter I, this present study, therefore, draws most heavily upon the text of the Rambler for supporting information. The first chapter does not because any thorough treatment of Johnson must at least address the "Boswell problem," in one manner or another. This I do, seeking further to align Boswell's emphasis

upon Johnson's orality in the Life with the writing of the Rambler.

The other chapters, though, focus upon the Rambler. Because Johnson's identity, as Fussell amusingly reminds us, "remains stubbornly that of a writer," our attention is centered upon his writings. Moreover, our analysis, modifying the methods of rhetorical critics Edward P. J. Corbett and Donald C. Bryant, works primarily outward from the text.<sup>9</sup> The study attempts to show that Boswell's emphasis upon Johnson's conversation can illuminate his literature only because oral and oratorical elements strongly informed both Johnson's compositional process in general and the Rambler in particular. These qualities further clarify Johnson's second self or literary personality in the Rambler and his assessment of the papers as the "pure wine" of his writings, the most forthright confrontation and explanation of the anxieties common to man--forthright both in its unpretentious discussions and in its accessibility to literate as well as scholarly readers. The series indeed "inculcates wisdom and piety" (V. 319), satisfying the moralist; but, more important to

<sup>9</sup> Fussell, p. xii; see Corbett, Introd., Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. xi-xxv, and Bryant, Rhetorical Dimensions in Criticism (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1973), pp. 27 ff.

our purposes in this study, the periodical compresses into marketable prose Johnson's talents as playwright and poet--artistic functions deriving from a sensitivity to orality.

I omit the allegorical papers because in them, as in the oriental tales, Johnson casts the Rambler as a storyteller, which I explain in Chapter IV. Also deleted, a subject always close to Johnson's heart and pen, is the literary criticism. That it was a conventional part of earlier periodicals shows us Johnson's concern for (useful) tradition. But the fact that literary criticism appears throughout his writings diminishes the usefulness of the genre in the Rambler as a source of information about Johnson's second self. In short, these papers, although composed with didactic motives, functioned also as fillers.

We do consider several historical and biographical matters, but as forces shaping the rhetoric of the Rambler. This approach, I think, should be used in all analytical studies of Johnson, to extend our knowledge of the literary judgments of the Johnson that we know rather obscurely--the writer.

## Chapter I

### BOSWELL'S JOHNSON, THE COMPOSITIN OF THE RAMBLER, AND "PURE WINE"

. . . every man hath his proper gift of God, one  
after this manner, and another after that.

I Corinthians vii.7

Any modern study of Samuel Johnson, of either the scrupulous sage or the versatile writer, inevitably confronts James Boswell's hindrances to the progress of Johnsonian scholarship: "Slow rises worth by [Boswell's Life] depressed." Paul Fussell has observed that far more general readers know Boswell's book than Johnson's.<sup>1</sup> In portraying Johnson as sagacious conversationalist and "majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom," Boswell inadvertently has drawn attention from the Rambler, the Adventurer, and the other works to his own literary feat; and his success has been noted and decried virtually since 16 May 1971. In the last fifty years or so, however, his success has resulted in attempts to disentangle the Great Talker from the literary craftsman and so has become

<sup>1</sup> Life of Writing, p. xii.

an operational critical concern. But insufficiently noticed is a subtle but important distinction between Johnson as moralist and as talker. In Boswell's talented hands these two portraits are combined, and so intrigue readers. But his distortion of Johnson also interferes with an attempt to learn about the literary Johnson. Distinguishing the two portraits, however, can expand our awareness of Johnson's literature, particularly the moral essays; and, perhaps ironically, the talker influences the moral writings no less than does the sage.

Johnson's pithy sayings have claimed too much critical attention to warrant further discussion here: both scholars of the eighteenth century and general readers know the scope and depth of Johnson's moral wisdom. His orality, however, has received far less attention; but, as the following discussion attempts to show, this propensity to oral communication--which he obtained in part from his knowledge of classical rhetoric--affects his compositional process and influences his decisions as a critic. Therefore, Boswell's depiction of Johnson as a conversationalist can, instead of obscuring an understanding of Johnson as writer, be used to increase that understanding.

## II

Boswell cites various incidents between 1750 and 1752, the Rambler years, that show the importance of conversation and oral contexts to Johnson's own writing and to his critical responses. Johnson once described his compositional process to Sir Joshua Reynolds as an attempt to "clothe" his thoughts "in the most apt and energetick expression . . . to do his best on every occasion and in every company."<sup>2</sup> Did he succeed? Boswell thinks so: "it is remarkable, that those [essays] for which he had made no preparation, are as rich and as highly finished as those for which the hints were lying by him" (I.207-08). Moreover, much other testimony to this effect verifies almost beyond question Johnson's hasty, impulsive practice as a writer, postponing this act as long as possible so that the Rambler essay or book review or dedication had to be composed swiftly.

But his habitual procrastination was, in my opinion, not the impetus but the consequence of a more basic consideration, his tendency to conversation instead of

<sup>2</sup> James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., ed. G. B. Hill, rev. and enl. by L. F. Powell, I (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934), p. 204. All further quotations from the Life refer to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

print. If the range of topics and frequency of his conversation were as we believe them to have been, such articulations of his ideas were no doubt rehearsals of a sort for his writing. To write a good essay quickly is easier if the writer has already been talking things out for himself, especially in conversation. At any rate, we are not surprised to learn that he dictated at times, perhaps more frequently than we have discovered. Under the year 1751 Boswell records that Johnson dictated a letter to Dr. John Douglas regarding the Scotch literary forger William Lauder; and we may even infer that Johnson dictated various of the Ramblers, as he would do later with the Adventurer (I.254). James Gray has suggested, further, that he "dictated," as well as wrote, sermons for Reverend John Taylor.<sup>3</sup>

Writing eloquent, forceful speeches, though, differs from dictating essays to be read, in that speech-writing demands oratorical talents. These talents, and other compositional tendencies mentioned above, are evident in the title of a political piece written in 1757 to castigate the military for cowardly refusing to attack (and probably capture) France's key arms depot at Rochefort. The complete title reads A Speech "Dictated"

<sup>3</sup> Johnson's Sermons (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 24.

by Dr. Johnson, without Premeditation or Hesitation, on the Subject of an Address to the Throne, after the Expedition to Rochefort, in September, 1757, at the Desire of a Friend, Who Delivered It, the Next Day, at a Certain Respectable "Talking" Society. The final clause, says Donald J. Greene, seems "designed to make the reader think that it was a parliamentary occasion (with the old joke about the derivation of 'parliament' from parler). . . . But, as the text itself clearly states, Parliament was not in session. . . ."4 This composition, reasonably close in time to the Rambler, reveals Johnson's oral and oratorical abilities, which made him, at least from Boswell's later perspective, such a striking, intimidating figure. Of course, his physical size added to this conception of him.

Preparing his readers for Johnson's role as "majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom" (the first statement for the year 1750), Boswell concludes his account of 1749:

His necessary attendance while his play was in rehearsal . . . brought him acquainted with many of the performers of both sexes. . . . With some of them he kept up an acquaintance as long as he and they lived, and was ever ready to shew them acts of kindness. He for a considerable time used to frequent the Green Room, and seemed to take delight in dissipating his gloom, by mixing in the sprightly chit-chat of

<sup>4</sup> Greene, ed., Introd., A Speech "Dictated," in The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Political Writings, X (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), p. 261.

the motley circle then to be found there. Mr. David Hume related to me from Mr. Garrick, that Johnson at last denied himself this amusement, from considerations of rigid virtue; saying, "I'll come no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities."  
(I.201)

And in 1775 we see another of many Boswellian manipulations of Johnson's talk--to suit his own purposes:

[During dinner with Henry Thrale] He attacked Gray, calling him a "dull fellow." BOSWELL. "I understand he was reserved, and might appear dull in company; but surely he was not dull in poetry." JOHNSON. "Sir, he was dull in company, dull in his closet, dull every where. He was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him GREAT. He was a mechanical poet." He then repeated some ludicrous lines, which have escaped my memory, and said, "Is not that GREAT, like his Odes?" (II.327)

Obviously Boswell presumes upon his readers to adopt both his view of Gray's lines ("ludicrous" is his, not Johnson's, term) and, more important, Johnson's critical opinions of Gray as a poet. Perhaps the quotation from Gray indeed "escaped" Bozzy's memory, but the point is that Boswell is more captivated here by Johnson's talk than by his judgment of Gray. In this instance especially, though Boswell records Johnson's ideas, the emphasis is upon Johnson's manner of expression, his delivery.

Boswell's purpose here and throughout the biography is to display Johnson's "deliberate and strong utterance,"

his "impressive" mode of speaking. Boswell continues by wishing that Johnson's conversation could be "preserved as musick is written." But the point remains that the above passages slant Johnson's conversation toward Boswell's intent--to exhibit Johnson's "bow-wow way" (I.31-34).

Manipulated or not, Boswell's account captures Johnson's rhetorical brilliance. Once, after a predawn jaunt through London with Johnson and Topham Beauclerk, Bennet Langton abandoned them to attend several young ladies to breakfast, to mingle with, said Johnson, "a set of wretched un-idea'd girls" (I.251). This anthimeria, the substitution of one part of speech for another, precedes the well-known chiasmus (a syntactical inversion of the second of two parallel phrases) about Johnson's contempt for Chesterfield: "This man . . . I thought had been a Lord among wits; but, I find, he is only a wit among Lords!" (I.266). And the masterful metaphors describing Johnson's hurried reading of Elizabeth Montagu's Essay on Shakespeare are included in the Life: "I have, indeed, not read it all. But when I take up the end of a web, and find it packthread, I do not expect, by looking further, to find embroidery" (II.88).

Numerous other examples fill the Life, further documenting the influence upon young Sam of the learned Cornelius Ford and the fluidly disputatious Gilbert Walmesley--and both highly prized the art of conversation.

Under the tutelage of these two, moreover, Johnson developed and displayed, as he would throughout his life, a tendency to debate.<sup>5</sup>

### III

These developments in Johnson's oral skills reveal the influence of classical rhetoric, whose principles developed in eras in which public language was primarily oratorical. Because our twentieth-century conceptions of language derive more from reading literature than from hearing speeches, the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilianus--even in translation--seem to us of rather limited usefulness. But Johnson was schooled in all three rhetoricians; and such preparation was the norm in his day. In fact,

from about 1540 to at least 1800, English creative writers looked as much to rhetoric as to any system of poetics for a rationale governing the construction of literary works. It would be hard to find a major English writer, from Chaucer on, who had not had rhetorical training in the grammar schools and universities or at least had not been influenced by the rhetorical bias of his age. When these writers sat down to compose a poem or a play or a . . . prose essay, they quite naturally harked back to the lessons that their rhetoric books had taught them about the construction of a real address or assertion.

<sup>5</sup> Bate, Samuel Johnson, pp. 50-51, 82.

Accordingly, when a critic turns his attention to a literary work produced during the long period when rhetoric was a reigning discipline in the schools, he finds ample and unmistakable evidence in the text itself, aside from any documentary evidence he may have, that the principles of rhetoric had helped to inform the work.<sup>6</sup>

And Wilbur S. Howell offers one additional note about rhetoric in Johnson's time: rhetoricians throughout the eighteenth century perceived no great functional difference between speech and writing. These were only categories of authorship that included "the writer of epistles and essays and dialogues."<sup>7</sup>

Johnson's "reports" of the parliamentary debates, written between 1741 and 1743, are noteworthy in this authorial context. Written for Edward Cave's Gentleman's Magazine, the reports exhibited such mastery of the principles governing oratory that they were perceived by contemporary readers as transcriptions of Parliament's business--instead of imaginative speeches built upon a paucity of notes and composed in Cave's office. This misconception, to be sure, enlarged Cave's receipts, because transcribing speeches delivered in the Houses

<sup>6</sup> Corbett, p. xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 676.

had been illegal since 1738. We should here forego elaborate attempts to reconcile Johnson's detestation of falsehood and his composition of the speeches; quite simply, he is being literary. The more important point is that these pieces furnish testimony to the importance of Johnson's sensitivity to speech as an influence upon his writing. Also, as Fussell has suggested, Johnson was here learning to wear various masks, a talent exploited extensively in the Rambler.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the Rambler itself determines the extent to which speech rather than print "informs the work," as we shall consider further in this chapter and, in a way, throughout this dissertation. But before leaving Howell's point we should note a matter that precisely addresses the point in this chapter--that Boswell's focus upon Johnson's conversation can both illuminate his writings and clarify his critical stance.

Howell's observation implies that literature in the eighteenth century was perceived as written conversation. This implication certainly pertains to letter-writing. As William H. Irving says:

[T]he earlier English books on . . . letter writing [suggest] that the letter should be accepted as the spoken word and its style

<sup>8</sup> Life of Writing, pp. 73-74.

adapted to this man-to-man purpose. The letter writers . . . habitually analyzed style . . . from the rules, much more natural to them than to us, which governed oral composition. Letters should be written, as a speech should be made, on the basis of rhetorical rules . . . and the test of success was the sound they made when read aloud, not the logical register of meaning in the mind, as the eye passed from word to word on the written or the printed page. Hence the continued emphasis on the idea of conversation. A friend is talking to a friend. But more important [is that the] letter must reveal the mind after it has been working over the material.<sup>9</sup>

Irving's remarks here not only establish the oral impulses in letter-writing but point out the element of spontaneity in the composition of letters. He extends the oral connection by noting that "Talk is tentative, hesitant, boldly launching out with an idea and rarely foreseeing

<sup>9</sup> William H. Irving, The Providence of Wit in the English Letter Writers (1955; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1975), pp. 6-7. Elsewhere Herbert Davies has explained the affinity of talk and the Familiar Letter ("The Correspondence of the Augustans," in The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Howard Anderson, Philip Daghlian, and Irvin Ehrenpreis [Lawrence, KS.: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1966], p. 13).

In his discussion of the art of letter-writing, the Rambler quotes, and seemingly rejects, William Walsh's assertion that letters should resemble conversation (No. 152). Closer examination, however, reveals the two points of contention voiced by the Rambler: that Walsh deceitfully has claimed discovery of this very old assertion and that letter-writing "cannot be properly reduced to settled rules," due to the multiplicity of occasions upon which letters are written. Thus the Rambler is not denying the kinship of letters and talk, though exceptions to this closeness exist.

the end from the beginning as the phrases develop, neglecting connectives . . . jerky and superficially formless. . . ." <sup>10</sup> We know from Fussell Johnson's habit of "making up his mind" about the specific content of the Ramblers "as he writes" them, <sup>11</sup> though they obviously display organization, transitions, and anything but "jerky and superficially formless" writing. Another important qualification is that the Ramblers are both letters and essays. Were there compositional similarities during the mid-eighteenth century between letters and essays that illuminate Johnson's decision to use these genres for reasons other than simple adherence to the traditional periodical forms?

There were at least two. As Irving defines the letter, so in his Dictionary Johnson similarly describes the essay: a "loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition . . . A trial; an experiment." Both the letter-writer and essayist associated with their tasks an aura of spontaneity, the trait typical of talk. Second, the writer of Familiar Letters and the essayist often

<sup>10</sup> Irving, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Life of Writing, p. 171.

addressed each of their compositions to a specific reader though the piece was written to appeal to the public. Samuel Richardson's Letters Written to and for Particular Friends (1741) contain none of the personal communication that characterizes Johnson's or Walpole's letters; instead, the Familiar Letters (as Richardson's epistles were later entitled) reflect more generalized instructions about gentlemanly and ladylike behavior. Letter 171 is typical; its occasion, "To a Father, on the Loss of his Son, who died under Age," precedes the addressee, "My dear Friend." After a brief and kind introduction, Richardson expresses the main points:

Look upon all the great families of the earth, upon all your neighbours round you; and see if they have not almost every one shed tears on this very occasion; and then judge of the unreasonableness of too great a grief, and what pretension you have to be exempted from those accidents, to which royalty itself is liable. . . . But I think it surpasses all other comforts . . . that he is taken away at an age, at which God's mercy renders his eternal happiness unquestionably certain; and you, and your mourning spouse, have the pleasure to reflect, that ye have been the happy means of adding one to the number of the blest above; and that . . . you will, in time, follow him, and enjoy him for ever. . . .<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, Letters Written to and for Particular Friends (1741; rpt. Familiar Letters on Important Occasions. Ed. J. Isaacs. London: George Routledge, 1928), pp. 241-42. Letter 171 contains thoughts similar to those expressed by Johnson in his letter to James Elphinston (see pp. 20-21 below).

Even Lord Chesterfield's Letters . . . to His Son, never written for publication but only for the younger Philip's private instruction in social graces, sound rather impersonal. One letter characteristic of the series, written in 1748, begins:

Dear Boy,  
 Having, in my last, pointed out what sort of company you should keep ["people of considerable birth, rank, and character"], I will now give you some rules for your conduct in it; rules which my own experience and observation enable me to lay down and communicate to you with some degree of confidence. I have often given you hints of this kind before, but then it has been by snatches; I will now be more regular and methodical. I shall say nothing with regard to your bodily carriage and address, but leave them to the care of your dancing-master, and to your own attention to the best models; remember, however, that they are of consequence.<sup>13</sup>

Chesterfield's polite but impersonal voice makes the letter sound rather like "Richardson Revisited," as his 1700-word epistle (reading much like an essay) enumerates rules about social conduct: avoidance of story-telling, references to oneself, and the like.

To mention Chesterfield's letters in the context of Richardson's Familiar Letters is, of course, to be somewhat unfair; whereas Chesterfield's addressee was an

<sup>13</sup> Chesterfield, The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, ed. Bonamy Dobree (New York: AMS Press, 1932), IV, 1244-50.

actual person, Richardson's various addresses were fictional. Nevertheless, both letter-writers--who also, interestingly enough, wrote excellent periodical essays--spoke with rather impersonal voices, because their primary concern in the letters cited above was their subject, not their reader.

Likewise, the essayist attended more closely to his topic than to his reader, as Edward Young's Conjectures on Original Composition (1759) indicates. Despite its epistolary form the piece is clearly an essay. Its beginning,

Dear Sir,

We confess the Follies of Youth without a Blush; not so, those of Age. . . . I have endeavoured to make some amends [for the licentiousness of former literature], by digressing into subjects more important, and more suitable to my season of life,

could have been addressed to anyone, rather than Young's avowed reader, Samuel Richardson. But any reader's eye would have been struck by Young's euphuistic style--as in the following:

To Men of Letters and Leisure, it [writing] is not only a noble Amusement, but a sweet Refuge; it improves their Parts, and promotes their Peace: It opens a back-door out of the Bustle of this busy, and idle world, into a delicious Garden of Moral and Intellectual fruits and flowers; the Key of which is denied to the rest of mankind. When stung with idle Anxieties, or

teazed with fruitless Impertinence, or yawning over insipid Diversions, then we perceive the Blessing of a letter'd recess.<sup>14</sup>

Some 14,000 words later, Young closes with the conventional,

"I am, Dear Sir, Your most obliged, humble Servant."

Thus letters and essays were often composed to sound like polite conversations, thereby (intentionally or, in the case of Chesterfield's Letters . . . to His Son, coincidentally) appealing to readers in general though addressed to individuals.

This second affinity between letters and essays cannot be overemphasized because it prompted readers to conceive of letters and essays as practically (in both senses of the word) the same. Consider, for example, William Duncombe's prefatory remarks to his edition of The Works of Mr. Henry Needler, Consisting of original Poems, Translations, Essays and Letters (1728):

That which may be suppos'd to stand most in need of Apology, is the inserting private Letters in this Collection. It is well known the French have publish'd Volumes of Epistles loaded with Compliments. The English, in order to avoid this Error, have run perhaps too far into the other Extreme; at least, I apprehend, that such as contain Moral or Philosophical Dissertations ought not to be rejected, merely because they

<sup>14</sup> Young, Conjectures on Original Composition (Dublin, 1759; rpt. New York: Garland, 1970), pp. 3, 5, 59.

have this Form; since it seems almost indifferent, whether they be publish'd under the Title of Epistles or Essays.<sup>15</sup>

Noting that the Rambler comprises both and that these are used for similar purposes, we may assume that Johnson agreed. In my Preface I mentioned the similar themes of two groups of Ramblers: Nos. 39 (a philosophical discourse) and 42 and 51 (letters to the editor); and Nos. 157 (a letter to the editor) and 159 (a philosophical discourse). Granted, the discourses argue propositions whereas the letters narrate the troubles of the writers, who either do not understand or have not adopted the Rambler's propositions. But both genres serve the didactic function. The Rambler theorizes in No. 39 that unmarried women "seldom give those that frequent their conversation, any exalted notions of the blessing of liberty," an observation verified by Euphelia's letter (No. 42):

[I am] condemned to solitude; the day moves slowly forward, and I see the dawn with uneasiness, because I consider that night is at a great distance. I have tried to sleep by a brook, but find its murmurs ineffectual;

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Irving, p. 24. Boswell also notes this affinity, though he does not refer specifically to the Rambler: he says that Johnson wrote the Idlers "as hastily as an ordinary letter" (I.331).

so that I am forced to be awake at least twelve hours, without visits, without cards, without laughter, and without flattery. I walk because I am disgusted with sitting still, and sit down because I am weary with walking. I have no motive to action, nor any object of love, or hate, or fear, or inclination. (III.211, 230)

But wives too suffer from anxiety, as Cornelia's epistolary portrait of Lady Bustle (No. 51) illustrates. After citing several instances of the Lady's pretentiousness, Cornelia-- who, though youthful, seems to be a reliable narrator-- concludes:

. . . I cannot perceive that she is more free from disquiets than those whose understandings take a wider range. Her marigolds when they are almost cured, are often scattered by the wind, the rain sometimes falls upon fruit when it ought to be gathered dry. While her artificial wines are fermenting, her whole life is restlessness and anxiety. . . . Her conserves mould, her wines sour, and pickles mother; and, like all the rest of mankind, she is every day mortified with the defeat of her schemes, and the disappointment of her hopes. (III.278)

Even if Cornelia's summary lists a fantastic number of moral weaknesses, her letter nevertheless illustrates and reiterates the Rambler's point in No. 39.

Ramblers 157 and 159 likewise emphasize a common theme, though here, unlike the proposition-example-example order in the above group of papers, Johnson places the example (Verecundulus's letter, No. 157) before the proposition (Rambler's discourse, No. 159). "The wit and

the scholar" Verecundulus suffers in conversation from bashfulness, even with the less learned ladies, and disappoints them (and himself) during dinner, though his "academic laurels," "criticism," and "philosophy" urge him to talk with "ease and volubility" (V.157). His description of this experience, in short, points to the Rambler's remarks in No. 159: though bashfulness may cause temporary uneasiness and "sometimes exclude pleasure," this shyness rarely leads to "remorse," and "its mischiefs soon pass off without remembrance." Moreover, the Rambler continues:

He that hopes by philosophy and contemplation alone to fortify himself against that awe which all, at their first appearance on the stage of life [or at a tea-table], must feel from the spectators, will, at the hour or need, be mocked by his resolution. . . . (V.82-83)

Verecundulus's letter verifies that his hour had indeed come; and though these two series of Ramblers comprise both letters and essays, each series accomplishes a similar end.

Johnson's didactic use of letters in the Rambler relates to his use of them elsewhere. On Tuesday, 25 September 1750, he wrote to J. Elphinston in Edinburgh, whose mother had recently died. Though compassionately addressing Elphinston, Johnson uses the occasion to focus upon the most important "business of life," the

exercise of virtue (especially between two friends). In closing, Johnson urges Elphinston to record, and henceforth often refer to, his recollections of his righteous mother:

Dear Sir

You have, as I find by every kind of evidence, lost an excellent mother; and I hope you will not think me incapable of partaking of your grief. I have a mother now eighty-two years of age, whom therefore I must soon lose, unless it please God that she rather should mourn for me. I read the letters in which you relate your mother's death to Mrs. Strahan; and think I do myself honour when I tell you that I read them with tears; but tears are neither to me nor to you of any farther use, when once the tribute of nature has been paid. The business of life summons us away from useless grief, and calls us to the exercise of those virtues of which we are lamenting our deprivation. The greatest benefit which one friend can confer upon another, is to guard, and incite, and elevate his virtues [emphasis added]. This your mother will still perform, if you diligently preserve the memory of her life, and of her death: a life, so far as I can learn, useful, wise, and innocent; and a death resigned, peaceful, and holy. I cannot forbear to mention, that neither reason nor revelation denies you to hope, that you may increase her happiness by obeying her precepts; and that she may, in her present state, look with pleasure, upon every act of virtue to which her instructions or example have contributed. Whether this be more than a pleasing dream, or a just opinion of separate spirits, is indeed of no great importance to us, when we consider ourselves as acting under the eye of God: yet surely there is something pleasing in the belief, that our separation from those whom we love is merely corporeal; and it may be a great incitement to virtuous friendship, if it can be made probable, that [that] union which has received the divine approbation, shall continue to eternity.

There is one expedient, by which you may, in some degree, continue her presence. If you

write down minutely what you remember of her from your earliest years, you will read it with great pleasure, and receive from it many hints of soothing recollection [emphasis added] when time shall remove her yet farther from you, and your grief shall be matured to veneration. To this, however painful for the present, I cannot but advise you, as to a source of comfort and satisfaction in the time to come; for all comfort and all satisfaction, is sincerely wished you by, Dear Sir, Your most obliged, most obedient, and most humble servant, Sam. Johnson.<sup>16</sup>

Herein lie the Rambler's ideas about friendship (No. 64) and the usefulness of biography (No. 60): friends should be "firm in the day of distress" and "useful in exigences" and provide "cheerfulness" and "courage," as well as dispelling the "gloom of fear and of melancholy" (III.342); and "there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful" as long as it leads the reader's thoughts "into domestick privacies, and display[s] the minute details of daily life," which unfortunately are of a "volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory" and thus must be recorded without delay (III.320-23). Not only is there similarity of thoughts in the letter and the Ramblers: Johnson's didacticism pervades both.

<sup>16</sup> The Letters of Samuel Johnson, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), I, pp. 29-30.

## IV

The close relation of the composition of letters and essays points to an intriguing rhetorical subject in the Ramblers, ethos. Early in their discourses, Aristotle urged, speakers should establish themselves as virtuous and magnanimous, for indeed men of probity would be perceived as worthy of trust. Yet, Aristotle continued, the speech itself, not the character of the speaker, should "create" this trust.<sup>17</sup> Because in Aristotle's day communication was primarily oral, we might apply his reasoning here to the written Rambler somewhat reluctantly: whereas a speaker's audience is physically present, a writer's readers are not. Johnson's readers certainly were not in his company as he wrote the periodical. Thus his slovenly appearance did not, so far as his readers knew, contradict his moral literary designs. But as the following discussion implies, he wrote the Ramblers imagining his readers to be seated before him, creating a parliamentary and theatrical perspective from which to write. Therefore, his concern about ethos, and other rhetorical considerations identified by Aristotle, was more than just ceremonial.

<sup>17</sup> Rhetoric, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932), p. 8.

Indeed the Aristotelian influence upon the composition of the papers is too extensive to question, much less ignore. James Gray notes that Johnson uses the rhetorical pattern of introduction, proposition, evidence, and conclusion in composing many Ramblers, and sermons as well (written for various divines):

Sermon II bears a close resemblance to Rambler 110, treating the theme of repentance in similar sequence: (1) the character of God: fear and mercy; (2) the inadequacy of external repentance only; (3) superstition in piety; (4) the definition of repentance as a change of life and practice; (5) the consideration of future punishment; (6) repentance as the result of sorrow and fear.

And Sermon VI (the foolishness of pride) displays criticisms of the haughtiness of theorists and philosophers that we see also in Ramblers 173 and 181.<sup>18</sup> Essentially, then, in writing the Ramblers according to Aristotelian rhetorical theory, Johnson feels quite physically "close" to his readers.

A rhetorical analysis of this subject immediately presents a complex issue which I have attempted to resolve in Chapter II, the distinction between the Rambler's and Johnson's literary personality. Perceiving the voice of the Rambler and the voice of Johnson as those of two persons, though not necessarily antipathetic,

<sup>18</sup> Johnson's Sermons, pp. 199, 36-38.

we can reach at least two tentative conclusions about Johnson's audience in the Rambler. First, if Johnson is preoccupied with ethos, he indeed feels in some sense vulnerable to his readers. Second, if he imagines himself close to his readers, the Rambler's voice betrays this closeness. A passage from Rambler 1 offers considerable, though preliminary, support for our conclusions:

The difficulty of the first address on any new occasion, is felt by every man in his transactions with the world, and confessed by the settled and regular forms of salutation which necessity has introduced into all languages. . . .

Perhaps few authors have presented themselves [not their writing, notice] before the public, without wishing that such ceremonial modes of entrance had been anciently established, as might have freed them from those dangers which the desire of pleasing is certain to produce, and precluded the vain expedients of softening censure by apologies, or rousing attention by abruptness. (III.3-4)

Wishing to introduce himself politely, the Rambler seems quite concerned about pleasing his audience. This opening paper is his first "address" and he feels more anxious, apparently, about himself than about his essay. Though he speaks eloquently, he speaks about this solicitude. Indeed the subject of the paper, and the Rambler's words, are chosen by Johnson; and these choices reveal his concern about pleasing his readers. By seeming timorous, Johnson is establishing his speaker's

ethos, wanting the Rambler to make a favorable first impression.

A clear distinction between the voices of the Rambler and Johnson, though presumably made--at least to some extent--by some of Johnson's critics, would have preempted at least one superb biographer from misreading this first Rambler. Mistakenly assuming in the above passage that the Rambler is speaking for Johnson "the man," James L. Clifford has surmised that "Johnson was not exactly sure what he meant to do . . . seem[ing in No. 1] overly modest and almost apologetic." Johnson's tonal manipulation here simply verifies Edward Bloom's remark (which surely Clifford knew) that despite various trepidations, Johnson "never had any doubts about his technical abilities as a writer."<sup>19</sup> In other words, maybe Johnson was not "exactly sure what he meant to do" in relation to the topics, characters, and such in the Ramblers collectively, but he was quite sure about how to introduce the periodical. Drawing upon Aristotle, as well as his own preoccupations about literature that instructs by pleasing, he must present a speaker whose learning and magnanimity are matched by his eagerness to please.

<sup>19</sup> Dictionary Johnson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 77; Samuel Johnson in Grub Street (Providence, R.I.: Brown Univ. Press, 1957), p. 161.

This third quality is established in Rambler 1 by Johnson's clever manipulation of tone, in my opinion the paper's most significant rhetorical achievement. Clifford, perhaps remembering Boswell's remarks about Johnson's "constitutional indolence," especially in relation to naming the periodical (I.202-03), seems to perceive the temerity in No. 1 as wholly Johnson's. The sense of anxiety is partly his because, as I have mentioned above, he imagines his audience to be quite physically close to him. But of no less importance is Johnson's deliberate characterization of the Rambler. The persona is timorous not simply because Johnson (like any writer) is uneasy about the prospects of a new publication, but because he intends the Rambler to reflect anxiety about satisfying the public.

To relate the Rambler's tone to what Johnson's feelings may have been is to approach the paper biographically. But to relate the tone to the persuasive design of the paper is to approach it rhetorically, a more certain and--in light of the "Boswell problem" in Johnsonian scholarship--a more useful procedure. Clifford never claimed to be a literary critic, so his remarks about the Rambler may be more biographically oriented. But to analyze the papers rhetorically, we must remember that the Rambler's voice may have little or nothing to do with Johnson's.

## V

These matters notwithstanding, what we have been analyzing in this chapter, through Boswell and English literary history, are Johnson's habits of composition that are oral, those according to Thomas Percy's ears, of "humming and forming periods, in low whispers to himself." Percy's remarks refer to the Idler, but we may assume with Clifford that "[t]his was Johnson's method with all his compositions. There is no evidence that he was more casual about the Idlers than anything else."<sup>20</sup>

These final comments stress the orientation to sound that informed Johnson's critical responses, to matters nonliterary as well as literary. Illustrations appear above in the two quotations from Boswell. In the first, heard rhythms supply Johnson's eloquence: "I'll come no more behind your scenes" and "excite my amorous propensities"; and, in the second, the rhythmical "silk stockings and white bosoms" engagingly alliterate the point of just how closely the assonant Johnson came to being "fondly overcome with Female charm."

<sup>20</sup> Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1897; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), II, 215-16; Dictionary Johnson, p. 194.

The second passage from Boswell presents Johnson's disdain for Gray because, among other reasons, his conversation was "dull"; and not just "in company" but "every where." How does Johnson draw this conclusion? The point we noted earlier, that literature was written conversation--authors "spoke" in print much as they spoke at, say, chocolate houses--seems a likely explanation. Identifying Johnson's practice, especially in the Rambler, Cecil Emden writes: "The reminiscences of several of his friends vouch for the fact that he spoke as he wrote, especially as he wrote the Rambler."<sup>12</sup> Certainly Johnson's remarks about Gray stress the latter's oral, not just his written, "dullness." Further, even the printed page from Boswell cannot diminish the oral strength of Johnson's utterance: how could Johnson have more pointedly expressed his stricture of Gray than by repeating a monosyllable like dull?

This latter example from Boswell, however, occurred years after the Rambler was published. Even so, an oral element appears in Johnson's critical writing immediately preceding the publication of the Rambler, in a letter to the editor published in the Gentleman's Magazine in 1749, for example. The polite but intense letter,

<sup>21</sup> "Rhythmical Features in Dr. Johnson's Prose," RES, 25 (Jan. 1949), 54.

addressed to Sylvanus Urban (Edward Cave's pseudonym), criticizes the monarchy's extravagant use of pyrotechnics to celebrate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), which suspended the War of the Austrian Succession. The effects of various oral and poetic devices make the letter seem more of a spoken address than a written communique. Its phonology is indeed impressive:

MR. URBAN,

Among the principal topics of conversation, which now furnish the places of assembly with amusement, may be justly numbered the Fireworks, which are advancing, by such slow degrees, and with such costly preparation. . . . Here are vast sums expended [but for nothing useful]. To shew the blessings of the late change of our state, by any monument of these kinds [a building or a bridge], were a project worthy not only of wealth, and power, and greatness, but of learning, wisdom, and virtue. But nothing of this kind is designed, nothing more is projected, than a crowd, a shout, and a blaze. . . .

The fireworks are, I suppose, prepared, and therefore it is too late to obviate the project; but, I hope, the generosity of the great is not so far extinguished, as that they can for their diversion drain a nation already exhausted, and make us pay for pictures in the fire, which none will have the poor pleasure of beholding, but themselves.

O.N.  
(X.114-15)<sup>22</sup>

In the last paragraph one oral device, "I suppose," gives the latter a conversational quality. Another more

<sup>22</sup> For additional information about the historical background of the letter, see Donald J. Greene's commentary and edition of the letter (pp. 111-15), my source here.

potent device is the alliterative s in the two final clauses of paragraph three: "there are some who think not only reason, but humanity offended, by such a trifling profusion, when so many sailors are starving, and so many churches sinking into ruins." Two functions are served here: the s not only sounds like shooting fireworks but also creates the impression that the monarchy hisses at malnourished seamen and crumbling churches. Indeed the clauses may have set off another royal show, a Georgian explosion at Windsor Castle, assuming of course that the King read the Gentleman's Magazine.

Another example is the pair of p and f sounds in the phrase "make us pay for pictures in the fire." The p-f combination reminds us of "poof," the sound emitted by a pyrotechnical dud; and this aptly describes Johnson's attitude about the fireworks. At any rate, these two oral devices, with the following poetic ones, reveal the forcefulness of the letter.

The lengthy quotation above contains three noteworthy poetic devices. First, internal rhyme accentuates key phrases. After naming a building and a bridge as projects worthy of parliamentary expenditure, Johnson indignantly remarks: "nothing of this kind is designed." But this rhyme is to me less striking than his acknowledgment of

the impossibility of stopping the show: it is "too late to obviate" the display. Second, through the assonant "crowd" and "shout" we almost hear Johnson scream "ouch" as he depicts the puerile pyrotechnical show as simply "a crowd, a shout, and a blaze." Last, the letter abounds with rhythmical phrases. The first, establishing the speaker's eloquence, appears at the beginning of the letter ("Amóng the príncipal tópics of cónversation").<sup>23</sup> Other rhythms more interesting in terms of this present discussion also appear in paragraph one: "of assémbly with amúsement" (particularly the accent upon "muse"), which implies that Parliament squanders its time by daydreaming; "bý súch slów degrées," which at once cannot be spoken clearly and quickly, thereby harmonizing the sound of the phrase and its sense; and "with such cóstly preparation," which (like the opening phrase) adds a general eloquence to the address.

As the speaker begins eloquently, so he closes: hopefully some of the nobility regret the decision to "máke us páy for píctures in the fíre, which nóne will

<sup>23</sup> This phrase phonologically and syntactically resembles a sentence in Rambler 120, all of which further confirms Johnsonian authorship of the letter (see Donald Greene's cautious attribution of the letter to Johnson in the Political Writings [X.112]). Compare: "Amóng the príncipal tópics of cónversation . . . may be jústly númered the Fireworks . . ." and "Amóng the favóurite tópics of móral declamation, may be númered the miscarriages of imprudent boldness . . ." (IV.321).

have the poor pléasure of behólding but themséives."

In the first group of rhythms the accented (and assonant) make and pay call attention to George's financial flippancy at his subjects' expense. The final word in the second group, Johnson's finale of criticism through oral and poetic devices, lays the blame where it belongs--not just "themselves" but selves. Selfish members of Parliament, as well as the king, squander money. This strong criticism and the other barbs we have noted are clearly manifested by the phonological and poetic elements which make this letter seem more like a speech.

To read this letter with the eye but not the ear is to overlook the writer's oratorical impulse--a sensibility that, as we have seen, is basic to Johnson's habits of composition during the 1740's and 1750's, and later as well. (In 1774 Johnson wrote speeches for Henry Thrale, who was campaigning for a seat in Parliament.) We then can readily agree with Morris Croll, who describes Johnson's prose as "the more copious and sonorous language of oratory."<sup>24</sup> Many Fourths of July may pass before we forget Johnson's depiction of pyrotechnics as "pictures in the fire."

<sup>24</sup> "The Cadence of English Oratorical Prose," SP, 16 (1919), 26.

## VI

But to examine the oral and oratorical influences upon Johnson's compositional habits and prose in general is one matter. To relate these details to the Rambler is quite another. What evidence from the Rambler indicates that Johnson's conception of language was primarily oral?<sup>25</sup>

One small piece of evidence is his apparent indifference to spelling (a function of the written language only) during a period in which there was developing a standard orthography. As Albrecht Strauss has shown, Johnson "seems not to have cared" that the printer often normalized whatever irregularities in spelling he found, such as in Rambler 7-- and on the same page--pursue, persuit, and persue.<sup>26</sup> But such normalization makes conclusive judgments about Johnson's regard for spelling more difficult to ascertain.

Other evidence in the individual papers is the cadence of sentences, which display more varied rhythms than the

<sup>25</sup> Glenn J. Broadhead's "Samuel Johnson and the Rhetoric of Conversation," (SEL, 20 [1980], 461-74) describes Johnson's interest in conversation as a context for appreciating the characters in the periodical essays-- especially letter-writers in the Rambler. This article simplified some of my work in Chapter III but supports my discussion in this chapter more generally.

<sup>26</sup> Strauss, ed., Introd., the Rambler, III (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.

"dignified march" that Boswell perceived (I.222)-- particularly in the final phrases of paragraphs, as Cecil Emden has shown.<sup>27</sup> To cite only three of the eleven classes of cadences explained in this study serves our purpose in this present discussion. Ramblers 17 and 95 contain paragraph-ending sentences with identical rhythms. From No. 17:

We may then usefully resolve the uncertainty of our own condition, and the folly of lamenting that from which, if it had stayed a little longer, we should ourselves have been taken away. (III.95)

He is sure that he destroys his happiness, but is not sure that he lengthens his life. (III. 96)

And Pertinax, the skeptical letter-writer of No. 95, remarks:

I was weary of continual irresolution, and a perpetual equipoise of the mind; and ashamed of being the favourite of those who were scorned and shunned by the rest of mankind. (IV.147)

Another rhythm appears in Nos. 77 and 87:

. . . Admiration begins where acquaintance ceases; and his [the vicious moralist's] favourers are distant, but his enemies at hand. (IV.42)

[A student] may enable himself to criticise with judgment, and dispute with subtilty, while the chief use of his volumes is unthought of, his mind is unaffected, and his life is unreformed. (IV.98)

<sup>27</sup> "Rhythmical Features," pp. 40-41, 45-47.

This cadence is noteworthy also because it resembles the closing of the "O.N." letter, further suggesting Johnsonian authorship of the piece.<sup>28</sup>

Still a third cadence (appearing in Nos. 28, 51, and 101) ends paragraphs on an unstressed syllable, thereby differing from the two aforementioned rhythms:

. . . though his [a miser's] whole life is a course of rapacity and avarice, he concludes himself to be tender and liberal, because he has once performed an act of liberality and tenderness. (III.153)

I [Cornelia] pleased myself with imagining that I should rather see a wedding than a funeral. (II.274)

My friend [says Hilarius] endeavoured to rouse them [disgruntled dinner guests] by healths and questions, but they answered him with great brevity, and immediately relapsed into their former taciturnity. (IV.177)

These various cadences, then, illustrate Johnson's primarily oral conception of language in the Rambler.

Interesting in this context is Northrup Frye's remark that "oratorical prose shows many metrical features" and "is normally thought of as a subsidiary form of spoken

<sup>28</sup> See pp. 31-32 above: "which none will have the poor pleasure of beholding but themselves." The variance here lies in the extra syllable between the first two accents.

expression, of which the highest form is verse."<sup>29</sup> The numerous metrical features of the Rambler, only a few of which we noted above, do not make the periodical oratorical; but the rhythms certainly lead us to assume a kinship exists between the Ramblers and oratorical prose. Moreover, Frye's description of oratorical prose as a "subsidiary" form of speech seems to mean written speech, and indeed the Ramblers meet this criterion. Through his papers the Rambler hopes to have contributed "to the harmony of its [the language's] cadence" (No. 208). His diction, he further notes, derives more from oral than from written communication:

When common words were less pleasing to the ear . . . I have familiarized the terms of philosophy by applying them to popular ideas, but have rarely admitted any word not authorized by former writers. . . . (V.318-19)

We are not surprised, then, when in No. 168 the Rambler's criterion for attractive writing is the ear: if a solemn passage contains a phrase that has appeared in a merry piece of fiction, "the gravest auditor [instead of reader] finds it difficult to refrain from laughter" when he cannot discern the reason for the incongruity. And laughter at

<sup>29</sup> Anatomy of Criticism (1957; rpt. Princeton: Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 250, 263.

the time was a function not of amusement but of derision. Further describing the decay of language, the Rambler notes that:

Words which convey ideas of dignity in one age, are banished from elegant writing or conversation in another, because they are in time debased by vulgar mouths, and can be no longer heard without the involuntary recollection of unpleasing images. (V.126-27)

Though the Rambler mentions both print and speech, the latter clearly guides a writer's diction.

## VII

Before examining a final oral impulse in the Rambler, we should consider a curious, and to some readers an irritating, characteristic of Johnson's diction, his polysyllabic words. Noticing this characteristic leads to a clear understanding of one significant difference between Boswell's Johnson and Johnson's personality in his own writings.

That Johnson's diction derives primarily from speech may well explain his use of sesquipedalian words--though he uses them sparingly. In fact, during the first month of the Rambler's publication, only eight big words appear: equiponderant and trepidations (No. 1), variegated and equipoise (No. 5), compendious and preponderate (No. 7),

interstitial (No. 8), and fortuitous liquefaction (No. 9). But speech need not be polysyllabic to be eloquent, so why should he use the big words at all?

There is every reason to suppose that Johnson chooses at least some of these words because of their sounds. Indeed fortuitous liquefaction offers much more oratorical fun than chance liquefying. Further, Johnson's clear and plain English in the Rambler is everywhere evident, so that we can hardly accuse him of writing polysyllables to flaunt his learning. Instead, he enjoys periodically inserting big words among one- and two-syllable ones as a sort of phonological frivolity. One typical example of such fun appears in No. 9, where the Rambler summarizes the process whereby glass came to be manufactured:

Who, when he saw the first sand or ashes,  
by a casual intensesness of heat melted into  
a metalline form, rugged with excrescences,  
and clouded with impurities, would have  
imagined, that in this shapeless lump lay  
concealed so many conveniencies of life, as  
would in time constitute a great part of the  
happiness of the world? Yet by some such  
fortuitous liquefaction was mankind taught  
to procure a body at once in a high degree  
solid and transparent, which might admit the  
light of the sun, and exclude the violence of  
the wind. . . . (III.49)

Though Hester Mulso disliked the serious tone of the opening Ramblers--she asks (in No. 10) that the Rambler include "some papers of a gay and humorous turn" (III.52)--neither

she nor anyone else could justly accuse Johnson of verbal esoterica.

But Mulso's disposition against Johnson, in the Rambler anyway, is diametrically opposite that of Boswell, who is quite proud of Johnson's learning and in the Life parades that learning. But no such exhibition occurs in Johnson's periodical essays, though some of the speakers--particularly the Rambler--are established as learned. Therefore, when Johnson does reach beyond the normal vocabulary, the motive is purely literary or, as it were, oratorical.

These considerations point to a literary personality quite different from Boswell's Johnson who, we must constantly keep in mind, is Boswell's creation--not Johnson's. Frequently in the Life Johnson is shown (partly due to Boswell's own litigious cast of mind) in an adversarial relationship with the people to whom he speaks. But in his own essays Johnson does not so consistently establish such a relationship.

#### VIII

The Ramblers represent Johnson's intense effort to reform, not combat, his audience, all of which may partly explain his frequent reference to the papers as his

"performances." (Johnson also uses performance to refer to personal essays [No. 21], biography [No. 60], political pamphlets [No. 106], and drama such as Samson Agonistes [No. 139].) This final oral impulse in the periodical warrants our scrutiny, due primarily to its dramatic implications. Of particular interest in this context is No. 207, the next-to-last paper. Here the Rambler, anticipating his final "appearance," explains in a theatrical framework the similarity of performance and composition, a kinship later established in Johnson's Dictionary:

The toil with which performance struggles after idea, is so irksome and disgusting, and so frequent is the necessity of resting below that perfection which we imagined within our reach, that seldom any man obtains more from his endeavours than a painful conviction of his defects, and a continual resuscitation of desires which he feels himself unable to gratify.

So certainly is weariness the concomitant of our undertakings, that every man, in whatever he is engaged, consoles himself with the hope of change; . . . if by the necessity of solitary application he is secluded from the world, he listens with a beating heart to distant noises, longs to mingle with living beings, and resolves to . . . display his abilities on the universal theatre, and enjoy the pleasure of distinction and applause. (V.311-13)

Johnson's disposition here is interesting especially as this passage related to the conclusion of the paper:

He that is himself weary will soon weary the public. Let him therefore lay down his employment, whatever it be, who can no longer exert his former activity or attention; let him not endeavour to struggle with censure, or

obstinately infest the stage till a general  
hiss commands him to depart. (V.315)

In these passages Johnson describes a writer's most intimate, and therefore most embarrassing, conflicts and stresses the awesome and constant threat of public abuse to which a writer unavoidably exposes himself. In a very real sense for Johnson, a writer's relationship with his public is no less tenuous than that of an actor with his audience.

Indeed, in the context of the above passages Johnson seems to have conceived of the Rambler as a sort of play; and this impression is reinforced by an indirect reference to drama in No. 208: "I am far from supposing, that the cessation of my performances will raise any inquiry, for I have never been much a favourite of the publick" (V.316). The final clause should surprise us, because Johnson has continued the project for two years instead of one, as he initially planned,<sup>30</sup> and published enough essays to comprise "four volumes" (V.315). In other words, the Rambler has gained considerable popularity.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bate, Samuel Johnson, p. 290.

<sup>31</sup> Bate, ed., Introd., the Rambler (Yale edition), III, xxii. Bate also points out the immediate and frequent reappearance of Rambler essays in other periodicals, which further indicates the strong appeal, at least among editors, of Johnson's papers. Moreover, this attraction was not limited to London: "provincial newspapers all over England," says Fussell, "picked up and reprinted the essays" (Life of Writing, p. 147).

Why then does Johnson depict the Rambler as generally unpopular? Quite simply, Johnson is playing on his audience's sympathy. During the course of the previous 206 papers Johnson has created in the Rambler an austere but sympathetic speaker. His learning and incisive thinking have sustained him amid the perplexities of life and established him as intellectually superior to the middle class, as well as to the masses. But the moral conflicts that plague both groups trouble him too. Nevertheless, he and they must endure the inescapable sorrows of human existence so as to find its sweet but ephemeral fortunes.

In essence, the author of Irene senses the dramatic possibilities inherent in his Rambler's final two "performances"; and we cannot read far into either without feeling the power with which he achieved a sort of theatrical timing. In these closing numbers Eubulus, Hilarius, Myrtylla, and all the others have no part: they already have made their entrances and exits. In center stage the Rambler appears to us much like Milton's Samson, as he felt the two main pillars buttressing the Philistine temple:

. . . with head a while inclin'd,  
 And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd,  
 Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd.<sup>32</sup>

Whatever "great matter" occupies the Rambler's mind, we know assuredly that he stands exactly where Johnson has directed him. Likewise, throughout the papers the persona has spoken, and spoken well, precisely what Johnson's script specified.

## IX

Through the Rambler, then, we see various oral and oratorical impulses by which Johnson turns the phrases and seizes the drama of the moment. Treating the written word as an extension of the spoken word, as the eighteenth-century affinity between the letter and essay suggests, Johnson composes the letters and essays that make up the Rambler, which also contain numerous manifestations of the influence upon Johnson of classical rhetoric. Moreover, as this chapter has shown, various oral elements similarly inform Johnson's critical responses. The point is that his conception of composition, in the broadest sense of the word, and to criticism, oral and written, is keenly

<sup>32</sup> Samson Agonistes, in John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. M. Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), p. 590.

dramatic: he is sensitive to the timing of his remarks as well as to his audience and to the subject.

Oral expression is not, however, necessarily dramatic expression. Though both kinds rely upon a phonological system, which includes sounds and cadences (not always used correctly), to transmit the speaker's thoughts or feelings, ordinary speech lacks the elements of surprise and showmanship. To assume the dramatic dimension, spoken words must stir the auditor's emotions by displaying a certain novelty, a linguistic uniqueness that calls attention first to the words themselves, then to the speaker.

From the Rambler's opening address to his final adieu, our minds and hearts are generally fixed upon this inspiring figure who well knows the nagging discrepancies between a moralist's writing and his conversation. These differences, in fact, are the subject of the final paragraph of No. 14 and give the essay a poignant conclusion:

A transition from an author's books to his conversation, is too often like an entrance into a large city, after a distant prospect. Remotely, we see nothing but spires of temples, and turrets of palaces, and imagine it the residence of splendor, grandeur, and magnificence; but, when we have passed the gates, we find it perplexed with narrow passages, disgraced with despicable cottages, embarrassed with obstructions, and clouded with smoke. (III.79-80)

If we read Boswell's Life too preoccupied with Johnson's morality, we miss much of the Rambler's Johnson. But more important, if we fail to distinguish Boswell's from Johnson's own dramatic sensibilities, we likewise fail to learn about Johnson the writer; after all, Boswell too displays in the Life a remarkable sensibility to drama. But noticing in the Life (as best we can) the distinctively Johnsonian talents in relation to rhetoric and conversation prompts us to study his prose writings as, in some sense, printed speech. Although some Johnsoniana was composed only to be read privately, Rasselas and Lives of the Poets for example, other pieces--particularly the Rambler--contain oral impulses whose kinship with either rhetoric or conversation may remind us of the Great Talker. In other ways Boswell's Johnson, no doubt, differs considerably from the Rambler's Johnson. But this latter figure, whose literary personality is the principal subject of this dissertation, writes with close attention to sound; and this characteristic of Johnson's appears frequently in the Life. In addition, this compositional detail shows us the special sense in which Johnson conceived of his Rambler and the fictional letter-writers as speakers.

All the considerations in this chapter prepare us not only to identify Johnson's literary personality in the Rambler but to generate a rationale for his assessment

of the periodical as the "pure wine" of his writings--the most straightforward and thorough, the most accessible and useful exposition of man's moral impediments to happiness. To understand Johnson's praise of the Rambler, in short, we must identify his second self in the papers. Fortunately, the rhetorical practices of the periodical illuminate both the Rambler's Johnson and suggest a probable explanation for his holding the papers in highest esteem.

### Chapter III

#### JOHNSON'S SECOND SELF AND THE RAMBLER:

#### THE MAKING OF LITERARY MORALITY

Long calculations or complex diagrams affright the timorous and unexperienced from a second view; but if we have skill sufficient to analyse them into simple principles, it will be discovered that our fear was groundless. . . . Complication is a species of confederacy, which, while it continues united, bids defiance to the most active and vigorous intellect; but of which every member is separately weak, and which may therefore be quickly subdued if it can once be broken.

Rambler 137  
(IV.361)

To read fiction (in the general sense of literature whose characters and incidents are imaginary) as "direct, literal statements of the author's principles," warns Irvin Ehrenpreis, is no less "absurd" than reading fiction as "independent of those principles."<sup>1</sup> This seemingly simple pair of extremes, though indispensable to an understanding of Johnson's literary personality in the Rambler's philosophical papers, presents a unique

<sup>1</sup> "Personae," in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature, ed. Carroll Camden (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1963), p. 33.

difficulty to modern readers of periodical essays-- distinguishing the Spectator from Addison, the Covent Garden journalist from Fielding, and especially the Rambler from Johnson. Part of the difficulty, ironically, relates to the numerous sophistications of twentieth-century fiction: the "stream of consciousness" technique and reliable versus unreliable narrators, to name only two. No such complexities appear in eighteenth-century periodicals, thereby tempting readers to conceive of the papers as revealing the essayists' attitudes (which at times they do).

This part of the problem is compounded by the essayists' use in each periodical of a principal speaker or eidolon (a fictional writer, editor, and social commentator).<sup>2</sup> That the eidolon's vocation and interests are, like the author's, literary further entices readers to conceive of the principal speaker and the author as one voice. Moreover, readers may identify the Spectator with Addison or the Rambler with Johnson because both eidolons are the periodicals' principal speakers, those who (supposedly) determine the content of the essays. (Of course this is a fiction.)

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Knight, "The Writer as Hero in Johnson's Periodical Essays," PLL, 13 (1977), 238.

It follows that if writers wish to reveal one of their own particular opinions, they will do so through primary, rather than secondary, characters. To be sure, this notion is a fiction also; some of the letter-writers in the Rambler, as explained in the next chapter, serve as illustrations. In addition, such a notion diverts readers' attention away from the secondary characters-- in the context of eighteenth-century periodicals, writers of letters to the editor. Thus, not only do these potentially significant sources of the author's literary personality suffer critical neglect; the eidolon, particularly the moralistic Rambler created by the Johnson familiar to most readers (according to Boswell, the "majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom" [I.201]), becomes the author's literary personality.

All the above difficulties derive from a tendency to read periodicals biographically, a proclivity of many critics of Johnson. Hence the present paucity of knowledge about Johnson's literary personality in the Rambler. This present chapter, therefore, attempts to identify Johnson's second self as created by the Rambler--whose intellectual powers and ethical concerns may remind us of the "biographical Johnson," but whose identity as an eidolon makes him an autonomous character. Further, as we examine the Rambler, we shall perceive his rhetorical functions

by which Johnson, writing the periodical anonymously, achieved literary recognition. In the process we shall perceive an impulse that I have termed literary morality (the use of a persona to experience what Aristotle called intellectual virtue or the supreme happiness).<sup>3</sup>

These considerations lead to a complication which we shall examine soon, but first we should relate further the notion of literary morality to Johnson's composition of moral essays. In defining my term more specifically, I also shall relate Ehrenpreis's aforementioned principles to Johnson's creation of the Rambler.

Literary morality means the entitlement of an author to assume moral authority that has not operated consistently in his own life. (This concept is related to the subject of ethos, which I discussed in Chapter I, though from a different perspective.) The author's moral license is possible through a fictional moralist whose practice more closely coincides with his maxims--though the Rambler has a few faults and admits them. In another sense, as explained in the final section of this chapter, Johnson uses the Rambler to achieve quite a literary feat. In short, Johnson uses the Rambler supposedly to conceal his own identity: but as an eidolon, a man of letters, and a moralist, the Rambler is used in fact to reveal the name

<sup>3</sup> Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. II, Ch. 1. Specifically, the temperamental Johnson delights in the mild mannered (though assertive) Rambler (III.99).

of the Rambler's author to the public. As for Ehrenpreis's comment, because the Rambler's moral code, at some point, becomes independent of Johnson's, we cannot indiscriminately attribute the persona's attitudes to the author. At the same time, the persona is a creation of the author and therefore a projection of the author's own personality.

However useful as background information about Johnson's creation of the Rambler, these literary details also lead to a complication. They draw the Rambler and Johnson so closely together that their voices become difficult to distinguish. A scene from Cecil Day Lewis's "The Double Vision" (1948) illustrates this closeness of fantasy and fact:

The river this November afternoon  
Rests in an equipoise of sun and cloud:  
A glooming light, a gleaming darkness shroud  
Its passage. All seems tranquil, all in tune.

Image and real are joined like Siamese twins:  
Their doubles draw the willows, a brown mare  
Drinks her reflection. There's no margin where  
Substance leaves off, the illusory begins.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis does not mean that illusion and reality are the same, only that the natural elements appear in such harmony ("All seems tranquil," notice) that "no margin" is readily observable. One must look closely, in other words, to

<sup>4</sup> In Poems 1943-1947 (New York: Oxford, 1948), p. 3.

notice "where / Substance leaves off, the illusory begins." Because both the Rambler and Johnson were literary figures, one a creation and the other the creator of course, readers of the Rambler may associate the two rather easily. This is, I think, no accident; Johnson so intended it. At the same time, he created the Rambler as an independent character, and we must, at least initially, perceive him as such.

## II

Studying the Rambler as an autonomous figure involves two main considerations: his remarks about himself and his observations about other topics. Granted, these remarks and observations are chosen by Johnson; and as Irvin Ehrenpreis has noted, reading fiction ultimately places us in communication with the author, not simply with an "intermediary."<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, we must not over-emphasize these matters when passages apparently exhibit considerable aesthetic distance, when the author is developing a character whose experiences, attitudes, and characteristics differ significantly from his own. Such distance is apparent in the Rambler's "autobiographical" comments, forceful descriptions referring only to the

<sup>5</sup> Booth, p. 74; Ehrenpreis, p. 33.

eidolon, not veiled references to Johnson or someone he knew.

Self-references are few. Rambler 18 contains the only sustained comment about himself:

. . . I, who have long studied the severest and most abstracted philosophy, have now, in the cool maturity of life, arrived to such command over my passions, that I can hear the vociferations of either sex without catching any of the fire from those that utter them. For I have found, by long experience, that a man will sometimes rage at his wife, when in reality his mistress has offended him; and a lady complain of the cruelty of her husband, when she has no other enemy than bad cards, I do not suffer myself to be any longer imposed upon by oaths on one side, or fits on the other; nor when the husband hastens to the tavern, and the lady retires to her closet, am I always confident that they are driven by their miseries; since I have sometimes reason to believe, that they purpose not so much to sooth their sorrows, as to animate their fury. But how little credit soever may be given to particular accusations, the general accumulation of the charge shews, with too much evidence, that married persons are not very often advanced in felicity; and, therefore, it may be proper to examine at what avenues so many evils have made their way into the world. With this purpose, I have reviewed the lives of my friends, who have been least successful in connubial contracts, and attentively considered by what motives they were incited to marry, and by what principles they regulated their choice. (III.99)

The Rambler's assertive, confident posture is evident; indeed he addresses his readers with unassailable authority. He does admit, "like the rest of mankind, many failings and weaknesses" (III.315), but this token acknowledgment

in No. 59 is quickly followed by a redeeming quality, the disavowal of being superstitious. The Rambler, then, disclaims impeccable conduct but asserts that his virtue has been increasing over the years. He claims to have known one Suspirius the screech-owl for "fifty-eight years and four months," which, with his having reached the "cool maturity of life," suggests that, though Johnson is forty-one, the Rambler is elderly. He has said in No. 10 that Flirtilla, an irate reader, "quarrels with me for being old and ugly" (III.51).

This difference in the ages of the Rambler and Johnson is a fiction of Johnson's because it shows that he is inventing a personality, not just exposing one. Specifically, though Johnson's extensive observation of mankind is apparent throughout the Rambler letters, essays, and oriental tales collectively, for the philosophical papers he creates a worldly-wise speaker older than himself. This decision should not surprise us, however; in 1750 he was not unknown, but he had not yet reached his great fame. We should note, moreover, that this is not the familiar Johnson--the pensioned editor of Shakespeare and biographer of Restoration and eighteenth-century poets. In the Rambler (and the Adventurer) he is an indigent essayist who is writing to survive.

These particulars not only indicate Johnson's invention of a personality but his concern for reader's prejudices, particularly the notion that wisdom comes only with age. For Johnson, this was a sentiment to be exploited, a sophism from which to create his principal speaker. Wrinkled and withered, perhaps, but Mr. Rambler is also reactional and wise. He epitomizes wisdom gained through reasoning and experience.

The sagacious Rambler, who is also aged, stoical, erudite, and seemingly unmarried, apparently says little about himself until No. 18, where the aforementioned conditions are stated rather straightforwardly. Why has not the Rambler been described earlier? He has. Papers 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9--all philosophical discourses by the Rambler--in fact establish all but one of these characteristics. That the Rambler is not youthful is implicit in No. 2: "This quality of looking forward into futurity seems the unavoidable condition of being, whose motions are gradual, and whose life is progressive . . ." (III.10). To be sure, those younger than thirty know that man is mutable and therefore tends to think about the future. But only older adults, whose many experiences (some unpleasant) force them to take heart in tomorrow's possibilities, recognize anticipation as the "unavoidable" condition of man. In other words, this highly reflective

comment by the Rambler assimilates facets of human experience that younger people generally cannot assimilate. This human experience, the Rambler continues in No. 2, is more to be endured than enjoyed: "he that undergoes the fatigue of labour, must solace his weariness with the contemplation of its reward" (III.10). Even further, the Rambler sighs at the literary neophyte whose supposedly novel ideas send him scurrying "to the press, and to the world," only to learn that his discoveries are antiquated (III.12-14). In No. 9 the sage notes the irreligion of lawyers and illustrates their animosity for clergymen: "A young student from the inns of court, who has often attacked the curate of his father's parish . . . is now gone down [to his residence] with a resolution to destroy him . . ." (III.48). The word young more implies the seniority of the Rambler than reveals the youth of the student, since a young speaker probably would have seen no need to make the distinction.

The Rambler's stoicism appears in the opening paper and continues elsewhere. Whether his papers will promise either more or less than they supply, he reasons in No. 1, is "not necessary to discover"; thus, come what may, he resolves to publish this first "performance" (III.7). Though Rambler 6 begins with a rejection of the ascetic excesses of Stoicism, the paper explains how that

happiness does not derive from external material objects. To illustrate, the Rambler refers to the knowledgeable--but not erudite--seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley, who failed to realize that the

fountain of content must spring up in the mind; and that he, who has so little knowledge of human nature, as to seek happiness by changing any thing, but his own dispositions, will waste his life in fruitless efforts, and multiply the griefs which he purposes to remove. (III.35)

If to be erudite is to know the ancients, the Rambler is indeed learned. No. 1 includes either quotations from or allusions to Juvenal, Horace, Thucydides, and Plutarch--all of whom establish the Rambler's authority as scholar. Rambler 2 contains references to Horace and Epictetus, as well as an illustration from the more modern Cervantes. Sagacity, though, requires not just knowledge of the classics but precision of thought. Two duties of an author and the formidability of these tasks are stated in No. 3 in two short paragraphs:

The task of an author is, either to teach what is not known, or to recommend known truths, by his manner of adorning them; either to let new light in upon the mind, and open new scenes to the prospect, or to vary the dress and situation of common objects, so as to give them fresh grace and more powerful attractions, to spread such flowers over the regions through which the intellect has already made its progress, as may tempt it to return, and take a second view of things hastily passed over, or negligently regarded.

Either of these labours is very difficult, because, that they may not be fruitless, men must not only be persuaded of their errors, but reconciled to their guide; they must not only confess their ignorance, but, what is still less pleasing, must allow that he from whom they are to learn is more knowing than themselves.  
(III.15)

The first paragraph could be even shorter except that the clauses following the semicolon are demonstrations of the author's function to praise familiar truths "by his manner of adorning them." The Rambler, we conclude, not only recognizes his literary duties but knows well the human hindrances to his designs. The incisive quality of his thought is evident.

Such perceptions as those above reveal the Rambler's wisdom, so that he may say in No. 7, and with his readers' complete confidence, "The love of Retirement has, in all ages, adhered closely to those minds, which have been most enlarged by knowledge, or elevated by genius" (III. 36). Mentioning yet another precise distinction (the command of copious amounts of information as opposed to the capacity to analyze information from an original perspective), the Rambler apparently has either read numerous biographies about or in other ways observed intelligent people, noting their propensity to retirement.

To demonstrate his reading of and decidedly moral response to literature, in No. 4 the Rambler criticizes comic romances, primarily those of Fielding and Smollett.

He focuses on the heroes in these "Works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted" (III.19), lamenting that some writers have allowed these protagonists to demonstrate vices that "should" but do not "always disgust" (III.24). Noticeably absent from the paper are the names of specific authors, books, and heroes that would have exemplified the Rambler's barbs. That he analyzes "not the individual but the species" partially accounts for the omission, but there are other reasons. First, to have named writers, titles, and characters would have alienated readers from the still generally unknown Rambler: only three of his papers had appeared. His character was not sufficiently established to allow Johnson to risk antagonizing some of his readers, who (we have little reason to doubt) liked Tom Jones and Roderick Random.

In addition, Rambler 4 extends the allegory that decries unjust criticism in No. 3. The Rambler argues, in essence, that useful writing is distinguished from pointless writing not by critics, who can be angered by malevolence or swayed by flattery, but by the constancy of time itself. Though some critics "have been pacified with claret and a supper," certain others have yielded to the "soft notes of flattery." But the Rambler uses this paper also to reveal his indignation at such

merchandising opportunists, despite the personal risk involved in writing the Rambler:

Though the nature of my undertaking gives me sufficient reason to dread the united attacks of this virulent generation, yet I have not hitherto persuaded myself to take any measures for flight or treaty. For I am in doubt, whether they can act against me by lawful authority, and suspect that they have presumed upon a forged commission, stiled themselves the ministers of Criticism, without any authentic evidence of delegation, and uttered their own determinations as the decrees of a higher judicature. (III.16)

The Rambler discredits some of his critics--though in this passage and in a previous one he does not call them critics: he refers to a "certain race of men" who "distinguish themselves by the appellation of Criticks" (III.15). The Rambler has inflicted the wound; and his own just critical essay that follows (Rambler 4) sprinkles the wound with salt.

Still another, and the most important, reason for omitting the names of specific authors, books, and heroes from No. 4 is the point which concludes Rambler 3: "Time passes his sentence [on literature] at leisure, without any regard to their [Flattery's and Malevolence's] determinations" (III.19). In short, if indeed Roderick Random (1748) and Tom Jones (1749) are "This kind of writing" (III.19),<sup>6</sup> the Rambler could not--only a year

<sup>6</sup> Fussell, p. 223.

or two later--pass sentence on them specifically. If he did, he would be violating his own principle of time stated in No. 3.

Less serious matters, however, are the subject of Rambler 5, namely, man's need for diversion, for which the spring seems so designed. While reminding readers that labor must follow rest and relaxation--"the vernal flowers, however beautiful and gay, are only intended by nature as preparatives to autumnal fruits" (III.29-30)--the Rambler emphasizes the idea that whoever "enlarges his curiosity after the works of nature, demonstrably multiplies the inlets to happiness . . ." (III.29). But the next sentence relates to Rambler 4, if we remember that the Rambler has said, "These books [comic romances] are written chiefly to the young" and "the highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth, and . . . nothing indecent should be suffered to approach their eyes or ears . . ." (III.21):

The younger part of my readers, to whom I dedicate this vernal speculation, must excuse me for calling upon them, to make use at once of the spring of the year, and the spring of life; to acquire, while their minds may be yet impressed with new images, a love of innocent pleasures, and an ardour for useful knowledge; and to remember, that a blighted spring makes a barren year. . . . (III.29)

Rambler 5, seemingly, is also a response to the books criticized in No. 4, and the Rambler, providing his

readers young and old with a diversion from the seriousness of former numbers, reveals his own capacity to enjoy life.

In the opening discourses, then, we have encountered not only a learned, mature, and stoical speaker but also an energetic figure who can pause to enjoy a walk in the woods. Actually, Johnson is recalling his remarks in preceding papers as he writes others and develops the Rambler's attributes. The back-and-forth movement in these papers is, therefore, a cause and effect of the unity of the essays as a group. But to study the Rambler in individual numbers, we must recognize him in the initial papers as an independent character, not just as a manifestation of Johnson or of what we think Johnson was like.

To recognize the Rambler as an autonomous speaker is to facilitate our understanding of his personal references in No. 18. They seem to derive from two circumstances. First, the paper explains connubial discontent, and the previous Ramblers have said nothing about the persona's marital status; therefore, to establish his credibility as sage and counselor he claims to "command" his "passions," which especially enables him to mediate impartially between vociferous spouses. Second, his "long experience" and extensive knowledge of "the severest and most abstracted philosophy" merely summarize what the previous papers have intimated, thereby further unifying

the Ramblers. As single-sheet papers, they were sold individually; readers of No. 18, thus, may have seen all, none, or only a few of the first seventeen--hence the need to state briefly and in one paper the characteristics of the persona.

To whatever extent the two aforementioned circumstances relate to the Rambler's personal references in No. 18, we know with certainty that in Nos. 1 through 17 Johnson avoids a formal introduction of the Rambler deliberately. In No. 23 Johnson reveals his disdain for an author who uses literary conventions only because they are established:

Of the great force of preconceived opinions I had many proofs, when I first entered upon this weekly labour [of writing the Ramblers]. My readers having, from the performances of my predecessors, established an idea of unconnected essays, to which they believed all future authors under a necessity of conforming, were impatient of the least deviation from their system, and numerous remonstrances were accordingly made by each, as he found his favourite subject omitted or delayed.

Johnson's opening papers, as I have mentioned, are anything but "unconnected," because he feels no obligation to force the Rambler into the literary mold of earlier periodicals. But his defense of his papers lacks no forcefulness of detail. He continues, and so addresses the point claiming our interest:

Some [readers] were angry that the Rambler did not, like the Spectator, introduce himself to the acquaintance of the publick, by an account of his own birth and studies, and enumeration of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy. (III.129)

Since Johnson knew well the Spectator and other periodicals before commencing the Rambler, we must acknowledge his treatment of the Rambler's attributes in the opening papers as a willful departure from established practice. Such a choice reveals his desire to excuse himself from certain conventions, a privilege (as explained in his Preface to Shakespeare) afforded only to superb writers.

### III

Through the two motivations for the Rambler's personal references in No. 18 (to establish his credibility as marital counselor and to summarize explicitly his maturity, stoicism, wisdom, and learning implied in the previous papers) and through the Rambler's remarks about his authorial preoccupations while publishing the Rambler, we perceive a clever literary personality. Recalling with Wayne Booth that this personality selects, "either consciously or unconsciously, what we read,"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 74.

we notice in No. 18 no statement specifying the Rambler's marital status. The following sentence, in fact, teases us into thought: ". . . I have found, by long experience, that a man will sometimes rage at his wife, when in reality his mistress has offended him; and a lady complain of the cruelty of her husband, when she has no other enemy than bad cards" (III.99). What does the Rambler mean by "long experience," his own or that of his friends? We assume the latter because the Rambler is an unmarried moralist, and the word mistress, aside from numerous nonsexual meanings, connotes an extramarital lover. Further, the greater part of No. 18 is the Rambler's collection of observations about the most unhappily married of his friends. And the tone of the previously quoted paragraph from No. 18 seems more speculative than experiential. The analytical method is unmistakably inductive and could be made by any cautious observer. Of special interest to us, though, is the Rambler's substitution of studies in philosophy for the experience or marriage, a substitution that he believes enhances his role as marital counselor.

The Rambler's belief in the superiority of theory over experience not only serves as a context for Johnson's development of the Rambler in the opening papers but supports my contention that the persona serves the same

literary and moral functions throughout the remainder of the periodical. He is a man of letters and a competent critic, as well as an articulate theorist of the moral flaws apparent in man's conduct. Having used the initial philosophical discourses, and to a lesser extent the literary and spritely ones (Nos. 4 and 5 respectively), to display the Rambler's literary and moral attributes-- a strategy strikingly different from that of the Addisonian prototype--Johnson has made his point. The Rambler, like Mr. Spectator, has both social and literary intentions in the papers bearing his name; but the Rambler's aphoristic power, as in the following examples, transcends the politely conversational discourses by the Spectator:

[W]hen a man cannot bear his own company there is something wrong. . . . [O]f two states of life equally consistent with religion and virtue, he who chuses earliest chuses best. . . . Hypocrisy is the necessary burthen of villainy, affectation part of the chosen trappings of folly. . . . Ease is the utmost that can be hoped from a sedentary and unactive habit; ease, a neutral state between pain and pleasure. . . . Knowledge is praised and desired by multitudes whom her charms could never rouse from the couch of sloth. . . .  
 (III.27, 110, 113; IV.83; V.175)

In short, Johnson, I think, consciously introduced the Rambler in the opening papers by demonstration, rather than by biographical sketch, explained his motive in No. 23, and--content with the older, wise, erudite,

and unmarried persona developed in Ramblers 1 through 22-- altered the Rambler's qualities minimally throughout the remaining numbers.

## IV

Another consideration in the distinction between Johnson and the Rambler is the extent to which Johnson uses the Rambler as an eidolon. This fictitious writer and editor appears throughout the 208 essays, despite dissenting opinion by Charles A. Knight<sup>8</sup>--whose misconceptions about other matters also deserve our notice, because these notions probably appeal to readers who know only (or primarily) Boswell's Johnson. The following discussion, therefore, identifies the Rambler's various literary activities, attempting in turn to correct Knight's interesting but misleading opinions.

To create an audience for the Rambler, Johnson devotes early papers to the "correspondence" between the Rambler and some of his readers. Such spirited exchanges create the illusion of reader interest in both the Rambler and the content of the essays, a significant fiction because there is no evidence that during the first month of

<sup>8</sup> "The Writer as Hero," p. 238.

publication Johnson received any letters critical of the Rambler. Subtly asserting the immediate and accelerating "popularity" of the month-old serial, the Rambler observes in No. 10:

The number of correspondents which encreases every day upon me, shews that my paper is at least distinguished from the common productions of the press. It is no less a proof of eminence to have many enemies than many friends, and I look upon every letter, whether it contains encomiums, or reproaches, as an equal attestation of rising credit. The only pain, which I can feel from my correspondence, is the fear of disgusting those, whose letters I shall neglect; and, therefore, I take this opportunity of reminding them, that in disapproving their attempts whenever it may happen, I only return the treatment, which I often receive. (III.51)

Four billets (and his polite responses to them) follow, after which he states forthrightly his magnanimity as a critic: "Thus have I dispatched some of my correspondents, in the usual manner, with fair words, and general civility" (III.55). In No. 15 his introduction states his role as an eidolon: "There is no grievance, public, or private, of which, since I took upon me the office of a periodical monitor, I have received so many . . . complaints, as of the predominance of play . . ." (III.80). Returning to his role as correspondent in No. 20, the Rambler humors us by lamenting that many of his letters, though signed with female names, are written by men. One such letter, he explains, caused him much distress:

Among all my female friends, there was none who gave me more trouble to decypher her true character, than Penthesilea, whose letter lay upon my desk three days, before I could fix upon the real writer. There was a confusion of images, and medley of barbarity, which held me long in suspense; till by perseverance, I disentangled the perplexity, and found, that Penthesilea is the son of a wealthy stock-jobber. . . . (III.111)

This and the preceding passages further reveal the Rambler as a benevolent literary figure whose immediately popular serial has gained for him considerable public attention. Johnson's success lies not just in causing the Rambler's notice by London's literate class but in inventing the notice itself.

With considerable wonder, then, we may ask Knight how the Rambler "virtually lacks an eidolon."<sup>9</sup> To say this makes little sense. Either there is one or there is not; and my view that there is rejects only the initial part of Knight's thesis: "in place of the eidolon,

<sup>9</sup> "The Writer as Hero," p. 238. I dwell upon this point because Knight's motivation for "virtually" denying the presence of an eidolon seems to be a biographical reading of the text, or at least a tendency to align the Rambler too closely with the "biographical Johnson." This, as I suggested earlier, is a common tendency; but, as the remainder of this chapter and the next attempt to show, it obscures Johnson's second self in the Rambler--what we may term the "Rambler's Johnson."

[Johnson] involves his reader in the richer and more complex image of the writer himself as moral hero." First, Knight fails to prove from the Rambler itself the absence of an eidolon, offering instead a mixed mash of historical and biographical information. And second, for some reason he considers the eidolon and the "image of the writer as moral hero" as mutually exclusive. Are not these two quite compatible?

In fact, the image of the writer as a courageous literary champion depends upon the Rambler as an eidolon,  
a

fictionalized editor and writer who is the paper's entrepreneur. The eidolon's purpose is to reform society by reflecting in a conversational style upon its manners and patterns of behavior and by making generally accessible the wisdom found in the classical tradition. But however didactic he may become, he carries on a rather close relationship to his readers, summarizing their support and encouragement.

According to this criterion, Knight denies the Rambler as an eidolon because "Johnson's tone is not that of conversation [as was Addison's]: he does not claim to reform society, and he recognizes his unpopularity with the general reading audience."<sup>10</sup> These three facets--

<sup>10</sup> "The Writer as Hero," pp. 241, 238.

tone, purpose, and audience response--support Knight's view in highly suspect ways and thus should be examined carefully.

V

Johnson's tonal variations do not undermine his use of the Rambler as an eidolon. Though Parson Abraham Adams' naivete generally amuses us, Dr. Primrose's does not: the vicar's leads to several agonizing personal losses. We cannot say, though, that Fielding uses a conventional character (the idealistic and often ridiculous preacher) but Goldsmith does not. Instead, both writers use the same type of character but for different rhetorical effects. A middle-class reader may shun naivete on the one hand for fear of being ridiculed, as was Adams, and, on the other, for fear of becoming destitute, as did Primrose. Thus, the Rambler's serious tone, as opposed to the lightheartedness of the Spectator, is a red herring to the issue of whether the Rambler is an eidolon--especially in the Addisonian tradition. Besides, Johnson makes clear in No. 23 that his use of the Rambler deliberately departs from Addison's prototype. Some of Johnson's readers

were angry that the Rambler did not, like the Spectator, introduce himself to the acquaintance

of the publick, by an account of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy. Others soon began to remark that he was a solemn, serious, dictatorial writer, without sprightliness or gaiety, and called out with vehemence for mirth and humour. Another admonished him to have a special eye upon the various clubs of this great city, and informed him that much of the Spectator's vivacity was laid out upon such assemblies. He has been censured for not imitating the politeness of his predecessors . . . And another is very much offended whenever he meets with a speculation, in which naked precepts are comprised, without the illustration of examples and characters.

I make not the least question that all these monitors intend the promotion of my design, and the instruction of my readers; but they do not know, or do not reflect that an author has a rule of choice peculiar to himself; and selects those subjects which he is best qualified to treat . . . ; that some topicks of amusement have been already treated with too much success to invite a competition; and that he who endeavours to gain many readers, must try various arts of invitation, essay every avenue of pleasure, and make frequent changes in his methods of approach. (III.129)

Here we perceive first the voice of the Rambler and then, speaking the entire second paragraph, the voice of Johnson. The former paragraph, in addition to the fact that Johnson speaks the latter, may seem difficult to attribute to the Rambler because this fictional character contains an authorial self-consciousness that is not apparent in the Spectator. But this self-consciousness does not undermine--it simply complicates--Johnson's use of the Rambler as an eidolon.

Although Nos. 1 through 22 are dominated by "naked precepts . . . without the illustration of examples and

characters," we may doubt that Johnson ever received complaints about this circumstance. Rather, he is claiming to have received such criticism to sustain readers' interest and, more important, to create a writing situation extremely familiar to him--exploring various subjects through numerous masks. At any rate, Ramblers 24 to 208 proportionately have far more narratives that illustrate the use (or disuse) of moral principles than Nos. 1 through 23 have. Only three of the first twenty-three papers are primarily narratives, that is, letters to the editor or oriental tales, whereas sixty-seven--or one in three--of the other 185 Ramblers (sixty-one letters and six oriental tales) illustrate the consequences of ignoring various moral truths. But Johnson's decision to use more narrative papers does not weaken the fact that in No. 23 he states his avoidance of the eidolon as used by Addison and Steele. Though Knight twice refers to Rambler 23, he does not address the above passage.

## VI

Knight's second basis for denying the Rambler as an eidolon is that Johnson does not claim to effect moral change in society. Though the Rambler initially

intends to "entertain" his readers (No. 1), he reveals in No. 8 his attempt to reform them by "consider[ing] the moral discipline of the mind, and . . . promot[ing] the increase of virtue rather than of learning" (III.42). His readers, he specifies in No. 2, are a "multitude fluctuating in pleasures, or immersed in business, without time for intellectual amusements"; they are "prepossessed by passions, or corrupted by prejudices"; various ones are "too indolent to read any thing" while others are "too envious to promote that fame, which gives them pain by its increase"; and "most are unwilling to be taught" (III.14).

This imaginary audience of Johnson's serves his didactic motives well.<sup>11</sup> By stating these moral weaknesses so bluntly and so early in the periodical, Johnson is simultaneously creating and reforming his audience. They were to read and hopefully (even falsely, if necessary) dissociate themselves from this list of undesirable traits. Obviously, such a forthright description, which of course we must read ironically, would prompt self-examination.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful discussion of writers' conceptions about their audiences, see Walter J. Ong's "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction" (pp. 53-81) in Interfaces of the Word (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977).

If, as Knight says, Johnson "does not claim to reform society," the Rambler must have no social purposes. This is not the case. Johnson's social motif is revealed both outside and inside the text of the Rambler. Johnson's dedicatory prayer before commencing the periodical closes with the hope that the Rambler will promote the salvation "both of myself and others" (I.43). Within the text Johnson's social motif is shown by the Rambler's interaction with his "critics," his statement that virtuous conduct is necessary to the public good, and his role as matchmaker. His attention to "critics'" charges in Nos. 10 and 23 implies that he considers himself a "man among men," though obviously a learned and upright one. Nonetheless, he values, or so his readers may believe, the opinions of others. Regarding individual virtue as a preventative of public moral deterioration, he reminds readers in No. 81 that "all the duties of morality ought to be practised" in order to spare the "world" from turmoil, pain, and sorrow (IV.60). And following the developments between the disgruntled bachelor Hymenaeus and the "antiquated virgin" Tranquilla (as she calls herself [IV.271]), we see Johnson's use of the Rambler as a publisher of their letters. He, as it were, introduces the two to each other, which ultimately contributes to their marriage (see Nos. 113 and 115 by Hymenaeus, 119 by Tranquilla, and 167 by them as newlyweds). Certainly, most of the letters to

the Rambler, including those of Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, were written by Johnson, not actual correspondents; but this fact only fortifies our skepticism toward Knight's statement that Johnson did not claim to reform society. If he did not express such a claim publicly, his private intentions in relation to society are indicated by his dedicatory prayer and threefold use of the Rambler: as a combatant with fictional critics, as a proponent of the concept that public good derives from individual virtue, and as a matchmaker.

Moreover, Fussell reminds us that in the Rambler Johnson has two "poles of focus," "individuals and society."<sup>12</sup> Knight apparently sees only the former. But this tunnel vision keeps in obscurity Johnson's numerous fictional correspondents, whose letters request advice about or call attention to the problems of people moving in the general society (Zosima's troubles as a servant [No. 141]). We must attend to the letters to the Rambler, as well as the nonepistolary papers, if we analyze the Rambler fairly. All the speakers, not just the Rambler, are functions of Johnson's literary personality.

The inherent weakness of Knight's approach, other than ignoring the significance of the letters as social

<sup>12</sup> Life of Writing, p. 146.

interaction with the Rambler, is the merely token acknowledgement of the Rambler as a developing character.<sup>13</sup> Inadequate attention to this matter, I think, can foster the notion that the Rambler is a literary manifestation of the "biographical Johnson." If this notion were true, the Rambler's integrity as a character of literature would be undermined, if not destroyed, and the Rambler's Johnson would remain imprisoned in the cell inadvertently built for him by James Boswell.<sup>14</sup>

## VII

Irony is the careless critic's bugbear. No one can read the Rambler too carefully, particularly the Rambler's

<sup>13</sup> See "The Writer as Hero," p. 241: ". . . Johnson does not create a fictional mask with the particularities of Bickerstaff or Mr. Spectator, for the very peculiarities of such a persona tend to belittle the serious nature of the material. Instead, he strives in the Rambler for a voice that speaks with the common tone of human experience. . . ." I deal at length with the letters as social interaction with the Rambler in Chapter III.

<sup>14</sup> Knight's approach to the Rambler seems to extend Michael Rewa's view of the Rambler as "less a person or fictive character" than the "embodiment of certain attitudes, values, and skills"--a "Generalized persona" ("Aspects of Rhetoric in Johnson's 'Professedly Serious' Rambler Essays," QJS, 56 [1970], 81). Rewa observes (p. 81 n.) that the Rambler is an "extension" rather than a "disguise" of Johnson's "personality." But as I argue in this chapter and following, Johnson's second self is the composite of the Rambler and the other speakers. Rewa and Knight seem to treat the Rambler and the Rambler's Johnson as one voice. They are two.

claim in No. 208 to "have never been much a favourite of the publick." This supposed unpopularity is Knight's third basis for denying the Rambler as an eidolon; and unfortunately he refers to the above remark by the Rambler as evidence.

As I explained in my first chapter, the Rambler's statement is ironic and enhances the dramatic value of his farewell. He was quite a favorite, and Johnson knew it.

Johnson also knew that he could use the Rambler as a thin disguise for Johnson's own dispositions as a writer. To understand this is to perceive the significance of, for example, passages in nonepistolary essays in which the speaker refers to himself as I while referring to the Rambler in the third person:

I will advise him [a young letter-writer who has complimented the Rambler], since he so well deserves my precepts, not to be discouraged, though the Rambler should prove equally envious, or tasteless, with the rest of his fraternity.  
(III.54)

Of the great force of preconceived opinions I had many proofs, when I first entered upon this weekly labour. My readers having, from the performances of my predecessors, established an idea of unconnected essays, to which they believed all future authors under a necessity of conforming, were impatient of the least deviation from their system. . . . Some were angry that the Rambler did not . . . introduce himself to the acquaintance of the publick, by an account of his own birth . . . and enumeration of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy. (III.128-29)

Time, which puts an end to all human pleasures and sorrows, has likewise concluded the labours of the Rambler. Having supported, for two years, the anxious employment of a periodical writer, and multiplied my essays to four volumes, I have now determined to desist. (V.315)

And in a paragraph subsequent to this final passage, the speaker again distinguishes himself from the Rambler:

As it has been my principal design to inculcate wisdom or piety, I have allotted few papers to the idle sports of imagination [which should pacify the reader who] is driven by the sternness of the Rambler's philosophy to more chearful and airy companions. (V.319)

Little aesthetic distance is apparent in these quotations; the first person pronouns in each passage could be exchanged with "the Rambler" with no change of sense. In fact, the speaker seems to mention the Rambler merely to avoid another I or myself or other first person pronoun. Further, the passages mention phrases which must remind us of the real Johnson: "my precepts," "when I first entered upon this weekly labour," "the anxious employment of a periodical writer," and "inculcate wisdom or piety."

In the above passages the shifting between first person pronouns and the Rambler is not unique. Yet this shifting is noteworthy because it suggests a distinction between speakers. In other words, little aesthetic distance raises the possibility that in these quotations, however relevant to Johnson's own moral sensibilities to

literature and financial insecurity, Johnson is not the speaker, for the same reason that he does not argue the advantages of living in a garret in No. 117. This latter paper, a letter to the editor written by Johnson under the pseudonym Hypertatus, may well capture some of Johnson's sentiments about his own experiences of upper-storey habitation. But in the context of the Rambler he is not the speaker; and to preserve this distinction is to preserve the literary integrity of the Rambler, to read the papers with keen awareness of characterization (one of Johnson's principal concerns), and to perceive the speakers--the Rambler and the letter-writers--as Johnson's many voices. The Rambler, an eidolon familiar to readers of periodical essays, is in this sense no more Johnson's voice than are the numerous other speakers. Quite the contrary, without the many voices the Rambler would not be Johnsonian at all.<sup>15</sup>

To view the Rambler biographically, to perceive him as a literary version of Boswell's "majestick teacher of

<sup>15</sup> Fussell reminds us of Johnson's "reports" on the parliamentary debates, from which he learned "how to express convincingly views not his own and how to wear numerous literary masks" (Life of Writing, p. 19). This experience enlarged Johnson's range of characterization, an immensely significant circumstance in relation to his development of the Rambler in Nos. 1 through 22, but also in relation to the letter-writers.

moral and religious wisdom," is tragically easy. Johnson's eidolon displays several literary proficiencies also possessed by Johnson: those of the incisive essayist, astute critic, and assertive defender of diurnal publication (see No. 1). This factor seems quite related to the minimal aesthetic distance between Johnson and the Rambler. The latter, as we have seen, makes few overt self-references, but when he does he stresses them and they are immensely important. As we have noted, the Rambler is also a polite respondent to "critics" (No. 10), a self-effacing reader (No. 20), and even a matrimonial agent for two lonely hearts (No. 167). In other words, the Rambler is striving to seem much like his readers, thereby maintaining a close relationship with them--all of which differs markedly from the antagonistic Johnson portrayed in Boswell's Life. The stoical but fun-loving, assertive but obliging Rambler eclipses the lofty moralist whose epigrams are the warp and woof of the Life. Obviously, the Rambler's tone is serious, its focus moral. But its fictional entrepreneur is as much Chaucer's playful Pandarus as the male counterpart of Boethius's Lady Philosophy; and Johnson, who wanted both to instruct and amuse his readers, must have been pleased.

## VIII

In Chapter I we noted that Johnson's "effort" to write the Rambler anonymously failed quickly. In this second chapter we have isolated the Rambler, by perceiving him as a character distinct from the "biographical Johnson." In particular, we have examined the Rambler as an eidolon, considering also the minimal aesthetic distance at times between him and Johnson. These seemingly unrelated details in fact point to one of Johnson's obscure accomplishments. In short, he used the Rambler to reconcile each of two sets of incongruent circumstances. The first set is Johnson's moral faults and the strikingly moral motif in the Rambler; and the second is his desire to gain literary recognition while writing anonymously and working in a genre known for its personae. The result is what I term literary morality.

The first set is resolved handily in No. 14:

for many reasons a man writes much better than he lives. For, without entering into refined speculations, it may be shown much easier to design than to perform. A man proposes his schemes of life in a state of abstraction and disengagement, exempt from the enticements of hope, the solicitations of affection, the importunities of appetite, or the depressions of fear, and is in the same state with him that teaches upon land the art of navigation. . . .

It is . . . necessary for the idea of perfection to be proposed, that we may have some object to which our endeavours are to

be directed; and he that is most deficient in the duties of life, makes some atonement for his faults, if he warns others against his own failings, and hinders, by the salubrity of his admonitions, the contagion of his example. (III.75-76)

The Rambler, then, is the voice of virtue though at times he may be the victim of vanity. He states in No. 193, for example, that he once wrote himself, "pseudonymously" of course, a letter whose "universal learning," "unbounded genius," "Soul of Homer, Pythagoras, and Plato," "solidity of thought," and other similar strengths delighted him. Speaking as the Rambler's editor and wanting to publish this eloquent epistle, he admits that his humility was almost overcome by pride when after much solicitude he decided not to print it. Thus he could say in his final installment, "The seeming vanity with which I have sometimes spoken of myself, would perhaps require an apology, were it not extenuated by the example of [my predecessors]" (V. 247, 317, emphasis added). The I here refers, but is not limited, to No. 193, to be sure. Another referent of the I is the lengthy passage from Rambler 18 quoted above. But the point is expressed by a curious discrepancy: within the Rambler laudatory remarks about the periodical are vain because they are chosen by Johnson. The remarks are not vain because the Rambler and fictional correspondents--persons distinct from Johnson--speak them.

Addressing the second set of literary incongruities, the Rambler excuses the apparently proud self-references in the papers "by the privilege which every nameless writer has been hitherto allowed"; and he explains, continuing,

"A mask," says Castiglione, "confers a right of acting and speaking with less restraint, even when the wearer happens to be known." He that is discovered without his own consent, may claim some indulgence, and cannot be rigorously called to justify those sallies or frolics which his disguise must prove him desirous to conceal. (V.317-18)

At this point, and almost two years previous, Johnson's Rambler has made him anything but a nameless writer, though--strictly speaking--he was discovered without his own consent. That is to say, he donned the mask of a persona, exploited this figure as an eidolon (departing somewhat from the Addisonian prototype), and never publicly identified himself between 1750 and 1752 as the paper's author. He did not have to: the style and weightiness of thought in the early numbers, familiar to Garrick and other close friends of Johnson, revealed that he wrote them.<sup>17</sup> Although Johnson initially was uncertain about some of the precise literary goals of

<sup>17</sup> Bate, ed., *Introd.*, the Rambler (Yale edition), III.xxv.

his enterprise, he suffered no doubt that as a writer he could execute any plan. This distinction enables us to attribute the timidity of tone in Rambler 1 not to Johnson but to the Rambler. Moreover, other periodical writers traditionally used such a tone of anxiety to introduce their idolons.

These circumstances about Johnson's initiation of writing the periodical bear other, more interesting, significance. Quite simply, Johnson's decision to phrase the initial Ramblers (most of which are philosophical essays by the Rambler) as he spoke in public implies one of two propositions: either he wanted to remain anonymous but, in writing as he spoke, committed an incredible blunder; or he sought to divulge his identity as the Rambler's author from 20 March 1750, the day Rambler 1 appeared.

The first thesis is indeed "incredible." The second is the truth. Through his use of the Rambler, Johnson gained precisely what he sought and needed (for financial reasons) and deserved, literary recognition. Without offending his own moral consciousness at all, Johnson displayed his literary self-confidence through the Rambler while seeming to write pseudonymously: he, simultaneously, lied and told the truth.

### Chapter III

#### JOHNSON, THE RAMBLER LETTERS, AND

#### THE MIDDLE-CLASS EXPERIENCE

The laws of social benevolence require, that every man should endeavour to assist others by his experience. He that has at last escaped into port from the fluctuations of chance, and the gusts of opposition, ought to make some improvements in the chart of life, by marking the rocks on which he has been dashed, and the shallows where he has been stranded.

Rambler 174  
(V.155)

By creating other speakers and more narrative discourses Johnson could more easily maintain the interest of the increasingly large and literate--but not necessarily learned--middle class. I mentioned in Chapter II the influx of more narrative papers (particularly letters to the editor) following No. 23;<sup>1</sup> and Johnson reveals in this Rambler the two poles between which his literary persuasiveness operates: the "suffrage of reason" and the "voice . . . of experience." Some readers then and now find in Nos. 1 through 22 a dominance of argumentative discourses delivered

<sup>1</sup> See p. 72 above.

by a somewhat "solemn, serious, dictatorial writer" who, the Rambler's critics charge, has deferred to treat topics of particularly female interest (III.126, 129). These strictures, as we have seen, were probably the consequence of Johnson's decision to develop gradually his eidolon through his own essays, rather than through a biographical sketch as Addison had done with Mr. Spectator.

It is significant in this context that the Rambler defends this decision in No. 23 but does not refute the aforementioned censures; instead, he will

gain the favour of the publick, by following the direction of [his] own reason, and indulging the sallies of [his] own imagination. (III.130)

Part of this is play. Johnson is actually cultivating the great new audience, women. The tendency of the commercial classes to teach women to read and write and of mistresses to require their servants (especially maids) to read made a very great difference in the audience for writing of all kinds. This rapidly occurring change is revealed by the rhetorical functions of the Rambler letters, which clearly show Johnson's studied attempts to gain and keep this new female audience, a segment of his larger audience--the middle class. These matters, in turn, show us a Johnson quite different from the aggressive polemicist of Boswell's Life.

## II

Before examining four purposes of the letters, we should consider two preliminary matters. One is Johnson's use of the rhetoric of the letter to attract the less scholarly readers of the middle class. That the Rambler clearly indicates in No. 1 his intention to please his readers supports Paul Fussell's remark that literary success largely depends upon "the decision of an audience that a piece of writing is 'literary.'" This reader-centered judgment, he continues, forces most writers to launch literary careers by writing in established genres.<sup>2</sup>

One such genre in Johnson's day was the letter to the editor, whose conventions offered him some potential for literary success, even from (as the Rambler describes his readers) "a multitude fluctuating in pleasures" (III.14). A remark to be read ironically, indeed; but such a throng, with meager literary skills, also may have represented Johnson's conception of his middle-class audience. This circumstance, with the predominantly argumentative and speculative essays commencing the periodical, makes No. 23 a pivotal paper. Hereafter, Johnson would seek to please

<sup>2</sup> Life of Writing, pp. 35-39.

(and instruct) his middle-class audience by inserting more sallies of his imagination; and the sixty-one letters to the editor, more than the six oriental tales and twenty-four papers of literary criticism, fit into this classification.

All this emphasizes the fact that the essence of the successful letter is attention to the reader as distinguished from (but not necessarily opposed to) the subject.<sup>3</sup> We have already cited two Rambler essays whose topics and didactic function reappear in letters to the editor. There is in the Rambler, then, to some extent thematic repetition, which without seeming to do so instructs the common reader.

The other preliminary matter is the identification of several characteristics common among the letters. Doing so provides a framework within which to study the letters more rhetorically than generically and allows us to identify types of letters and correspondents as typical. To begin with, the letters narrate the speakers' experiences, using relatively short sentences and simple diction. This contrasts sharply with the Rambler's discourses, which usually argue propositions through syllogisms and numerous and lengthy subordinate clauses and periodic sentences. The difference is indeed remarkable, as Johnson hoped his

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the rhetoric of letter-writing, see Howard Anderson et al., The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century, pp. 272-82.

common readers would perceive; and they should have.

Consider the introduction to Eubulus's letter (No. 26):

MR. RAMBLER,

It is usual for men, engaged in the same pursuits, to be inquisitive after the conduct and fortune of each other; and, therefore, I suppose it will not be unpleasing to you, to read an account of the various changes which have happened in part of a life devoted to literature. My narrative will not exhibit any great variety of events, or extraordinary revolutions; but may, perhaps, be not less useful, because I shall relate nothing which is not likely to happen to a thousand others.

I was born heir to a very small fortune, and left by my father, whom I cannot remember, to the care of an uncle. He having no children, always treated me as his son. . . .

And this style is apparent in his conclusion:

An account of my expectations and disappointments, and the succeeding vicissitudes of my life, I shall give you in my following letter, which will be, I hope, of use to shew how ill he forms his schemes, who expects happiness without freedom.

I am,  
&c.  
(III.141, 146)

What a relief to some readers, after struggling to comprehend the Rambler's periodic sentence in No. 24:

When a man employs himself upon remote and unnecessary subjects, and wastes his life upon questions, which cannot be resolved, and of which the solution would conduce very little to the advancement of happiness; when he lavishes his hours in calculating the weight of the terraqueous globe, or in adjusting

successive systems of worlds beyond the reach of the telescope; he may be very properly recalled from his excursions by this precept, and reminded that there is a nearer being with which it is his duty to be more acquainted; and from which, his attention has hitherto been withheld, by studies, to which he has no other motive, than vanity or curiosity. (III.131)

The mere length of this sentence no doubt taxed the memory of some of Johnson's common readers and presumably served to discourage them from using such locutional sophistications. This does not signify, however, antagonism between the Rambler and Johnson's audience. Quite the opposite: that the eidolon publishes these letters--which indicates his approval of them--endears himself to these readers.

A second similarity among the letters is the blend of entertaining and didactic purposes. In his introduction (quoted above) Eubulus assumes his narrative to be "not unpleasing" to the Rambler, and his conclusion states a moral aim to be illustrated by his forthcoming letter (No. 27).

A third and final common characteristic is the implied closeness between the letter-writer and the Rambler. Certainly Eubulus, a man of letters, enjoys a natural intellectual affinity with the well-read Rambler, a kinship which prompts the writing of the letter. But the personal touch to which I refer--and it can be unpleasant--appears in epistles written by people not particularly

interested in literature, such as the unnamed writer of No. 35:

SIR,

As you have hitherto delayed the performance of the promise, by which you gave us reason to hope for another paper upon matrimony [No. 18, final paragraph], I imagine you desirous of collecting more materials than your own experience, or observation, can supply; and I shall therefore lay candidly before you an account of my own entrance into the conjugal state.

(III.190)

Here and in other letters we perceive a dialogue between the letter-writer and the Rambler, a dialogue that Wayne Booth has pointed out in post-eighteenth-century fiction but that also appears widely in the Rambler.<sup>4</sup> More about this dialogue is said near the end of this chapter.

### III

We now shall examine those four rhetorical purposes of the Rambler letters by which Johnson sought to appeal to common readers and their middle-class experience--as he perceived it. One such purpose in using letters to the editor is a matter of convenience. Years before, he had been developing talents such as writing in various

<sup>4</sup> See the first paragraph of the letters in Ramblers 12, 15, 16, 26, 27, 35, 82, and 84; and paragraphs two and three of No. 113. The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp. 155-56.

personae (parliamentary debates) and writing biography (Life of Savage [1744]). Granted, these pieces, like those of almost everyone else, were written anonymously. But unlike other writers, Johnson was becoming proficient in wearing fictional masks. Why not continue this writing experience in the Rambler, whose individual papers nearly always were written hastily?

These matters seem to reveal Johnson's disposition to develop primarily the eidolon in the initial papers and include many other speakers following No. 23. These speakers, the letter-writers, are fictional, though their names satirize human weaknesses very real among Johnson's countrymen, as Edward Bloom has shown.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the flightly Papilius, after humoring and thereby undermining the gravity of his tutor, "continued to dissipate the gloom of collegiate austerity," to squander time, and until he went to London to "lure others from their studies." But in the city his shallow regard for serious matters came to fruition:

I soon discovered the town to be the proper element of youth and gaiety, and was quickly distinguished as a wit by the ladies, a species of beings only heard of at the university, whom I had no sooner the happiness of approaching

<sup>5</sup> In his article "Symbolic Names in Johnson's Periodical Essays," MLQ, 13 (Dec. 1952), 333-52, Bloom calls Johnson "the most skillful practitioner" of exemplifying characters' conduct by their names in the genre of periodical essays (p. 333).

than I devoted all my faculties to the ambition of pleasing them. (IV.385)

But unsigned letters also appear: Nos. 15 (the second letter), 34, 35, 45, 55 (Parthenia in the Folio), 101, 147, 153, 161, and 181. Though Johnson perhaps found no appropriate Greek or Latin appellation for these characters, their particular follies are no less apparent. In the vein of Papilius, the misguided writer of No. 101 begins his history, wherein we notice Johnson's exploitation of the kinship between history and biography:

Having by several years of continual study treasured in my mind a great number of principles and ideas, and obtained by frequent exercise the power of applying them with propriety, and combining them with readiness, I resolved to quit the university, where I considered myself as a gem hidden in the mine, and to mingle in the croud of publick life. I was naturally attracted by the company of those who were of the same age with myself, and finding that my academical gravity contributed very little to my reputation, applied my faculties to jocularly and burlesque. Thus, in a short time, I had heated my imagination to such a state of activity and ebullition, that upon every occasion it fumed away in bursts of wit, and evaporation of gaiety. I became on a sudden the idol of the coffee-house. . . . (IV.173-74)

Through his narrative, this gadabout demonstrates the difficulties of those lacking sober-mindedness.

Before relating more fully the narrative element in this and other letters to Johnson's writing of biography, we should consider further No. 101, especially the closing

paragraph. Here Johnson uses a letter-writer to rebuke a reader, and a learned and kind one at that.

After attributing the dullness of a recent conversation to the somberness of his companions, Hilarius asks the Rambler to

prevent any misrepresentations of such failures, by remarking that invention is not wholly at the command of its possessor; that the power of pleasing is very often obstructed by the desire; that all expectation lessens surprize, yet some surprize is necessary to gaiety; and that those who desire to partake of the pleasure of wit must contribute to its production, since the mind stagnates without external ventilation, and that effervescence of the fancy, which flashes into transport, can be raised only by the infusion of dissimilar ideas. (IV.178)

In isolation, Rambler 101 reiterates the timeless truths that no man is an island and that sometimes his own best intentions interfere with his attempts to satisfy them. But following No. 100 (Mrs. Elizabeth Carter's urgent exhortation to write more humorous and diverting papers), the above passage achieves a quite personal goal--to rebuff an unfair criticism, and even in a similar structural manner. Most of No. 100 proposes advantages of reading periodical essays about "fashions" and "frolicks," "balls" and "assemblies," and "auctions" and "bear-gardens"--all that better equips people to "flutter, sport, and shine" (IV.170). But the conclusion (the final three paragraphs) succinctly voices Carter's concerns: by writing about the

"numberless benefits of a modish life," the Rambler will verify that the "true purpose of human existence" is "perpetual dissipation"; and by urging readers to devote their time to "trifles," he will help them "avoid many very uneasy reflections." Moreover, in the final paragraph--which contains for Johnson a very uneasy reflection--Carter gives him a dose of his own medicine:

All the soft feelings of humanity, the sympathies of friendship, all natural temptations to the care of a family, and solicitude about the good or ill of others, with the whole train of domestick and social affections . . . will be happily stifled and suppressed in a round of perpetual delights; and all serious thoughts, but particularly that of the "here-after," [my emphasis] be banished out of the world;

and the (intentional) flippancy of the final clause must have stirred Johnson even more:

a most perplexing apprehension, but luckily a most groundless one too, as it is so very clear a case, that nobody ever dies. (IV.173)

Johnson's horror of death is well documented. The point here is that, uttered by a knowledgeable woman whom Johnson deeply respected and admired,<sup>6</sup> this remark drew a polite but pointed response. After tracing his rise to and fall from conversational eminence, Hilarius

<sup>6</sup> Bate, Samuel Johnson, pp. 177, 212.

notes in his conclusion the four causes (quoted above) of his sadness, causes that if understood by Carter would have dissuaded her from writing the letter. But Johnson also inflicts a wound by juxtaposing the name Hilarius, which captures both Hilarius's own former temperament and the subject and mood of Carter's proposition, with the solicitude and even despondence that pervade his final paragraphs. Johnson's cleverness in Rambler 101, then, lies not simply in his application of a symbolic name to a narrative which demonstrates the name's appropriateness. No. 101 also reveals Johnson's literary combativeness in creating an unharmonious name and narrative to defend his papers against Carter's second expression of displeasure.

Her first, which Johnson graciously published as Rambler 44, is an allegorical but thinly veiled complaint about the Rambler's predominantly serious papers. Ramblers 45 through 50 contain no implicit responses to No. 44; Johnson apparently intended none. But after receiving Carter's second letter, Johnson not only published but replied to it: he had decided, apparently, that enough was enough; and by following her letter with his own, he would have the last word.

However successful, this use of Hilarius draws heavily upon another Johnsonian talent, biography-writing.

The Rambler letters summarily narrate the speakers' (often unhappy) youths. Wealthy Melissa (No. 75) enjoys numerous "friends" and "lovers" until the "failure of a fund" reduces her to rags and loneliness; the country gentleman Misocapelus (No. 116), though anxious to open a shop in London, must until age twenty-two remain at home, where lessons on bookkeeping occupy what he calls "tedious days"; and the impoverished orphan Misella (Nos. 170, 171), seduced by her "great cousin," becomes a woman of the London streets.

But these and other similar narratives point to a remark in Rambler 60:

biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from publick papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferments; and . . . little regard the manner or behaviour of their heroes. . . . (III.322)

Johnson's Life of Savage certainly exercised him in biography-writing, and his polished prose (see passage below) reveals his care about the performance. But the point here is that, for instance, Melissa's letter provides far more than a "chronological series of actions or preferments"; her narrative about simultaneously losing her wealth and enduring the pious platitudes of condolence from her "friends" qualifies her to offer several truths:

a victim of misfortunes should not be reminded of them, especially if they are impossible to resolve and if the sufferer forgoes complaint; because the wealthy tend to selfishness, they cannot "judge rightly of themselves or others"; and a person learns of others' genuine estimation of him only when his acquaintance gives them no advantage (III.31, 33).

Likewise, Myrtylla's letter (No. 84) contains something far more than a polite request for the Rambler to approve her plan to desert her "tyrannical" guardian. Having learned early in her sixteen years the "common rules of decent behaviour, and standing maxims of domestick prudence," Myrtylla thinks herself mature enough to make her own way in the world. Her domestically oriented aunt discourages Myrtylla's eagerness to read, concluding that thereby "girls grow too wise to be advised, and too stubborn to be commanded"--two conclusions seemingly justified by the tone of Myrtylla's closing comments:

These menaces [the aunt's attempts to control Myrtylla's conduct], Mr. Rambler, sometimes make me quite angry; for I have been sixteen these ten weeks and think myself exempted from the dominion of a governess, who has no pretensions to more sense or knowledge than myself. I am resolved, since I am as tall and as wise as other women, to be no longer treated like a girl. . . . I wish you would state the time at which young ladies may judge for themselves, which I am sure you cannot but think ought to begin before sixteen; if you are inclined to delay it longer, I shall have very little regard to your opinion.

My aunt often tells me of the advantages of experience, and of the deference due to seniority; and both she and all the antiquated part of the world talk of the unreserved obedience which they paid to the commands of their parents. . . .

Nevertheless, I beg once again, Mr. Rambler, to know whether I am not as wise as my aunt, and whether, when she presumes to check me as a baby, I may not pluck up a spirit and return her insolence. I shall not proceed to extremities without your advice, which is therefore impatiently expected by

Myrtylla.

And lest the Rambler somehow over look her age, which (rather than insight) most conclusively reveals maturity, Myrtylla adds a postscript:

Remember I am past sixteen. (IV.80-81)

This letter, like No. 75 and many others, transcends the uninstructional "chronological series of actions or preferments." But to remind readers of Myrtylla's industrious, wise governess, instead of the saucy idle sixteen-year-old, the Rambler states in No. 85:

whenever chance brings within my observation a knot of misses busy at their needles, I consider myself as in the school of virtue; and . . . look upon their operations with as much satisfaction as their governess, because I regard them as providing a security against the most dangerous ensnarers of the soul [idleness, fears, and other dangers]. . . .

And the implicit ferocity in Myrtylla's intent to "pluck up a spirit and return her [aunt's] insolence" is laid bare in the Rambler's closing remark: "he has lived with little observation either on himself or others, who does not know that to be idle is to be vicious" (IV.86-87). Even without the Rambler's response, however, Myrtylla's letter furnishes insight into both her previous experience and, more important, her conduct.

Johnson's biographical account of Richard Savage likewise stresses not just his writings but his actions in public. After narrating these at length, drawing moral inferences in the process, Johnson concludes the biography with two other moral truths:

This relation will not be wholly without its use if those who languish under any part of his sufferings shall be enabled to fortify their patience by reflecting that they feel only those afflictions from which the abilities of Savage did not exempt him; or those who, in confidence of superior capacities or attainments, disregard the common maxims of life, shall be reminded that nothing will supply the want of prudence, and that negligence and irregularity long continued will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.<sup>7</sup>

We may suppose that Johnson included most biographical information available to him, from which he drew relevant moral axioms such as those above. This didactic impulse

<sup>7</sup> "Savage," in Lives of the English Poets, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1905; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1967), II, 434.

with which Johnson terminates his treatment of Savage is apparent also in the Rambler letters. But in these, Johnson can don the mask of the subject and invent details of the narrative which furnish evidence of the attributes he wishes to stress. He fuses the writing situations he had encountered and mastered years before, and uses them in a genre (the letter to the editor) that his readers regarded as established.

#### IV

But however conveniently Johnson used his various writing experiences, the letters had to interest his readers; and in two particular ways, as we shall see, the letters do precisely that. First, Johnson maintains reader interest through sustained narratives by the same speaker. Those letters by Eubulus (Nos. 26, 27), Euphelia (Nos. 42, 46), Hymenaeus (Nos. 113, 155, and [with Tranquilla] 167), Misocapelus (Nos. 116, 123), Victoria (Nos. 130, 133), Eumathes (Nos. 132, 194, and 195), Misella (Nos. 170, 171), and Captator (Nos. 197, 198)--eighteen papers altogether--comprise almost one-third of the sixty-three letters that appear throughout the Rambler. This detail suggests Johnson's significant use of the letters as epistolary fiction á la Samuel

Richardson, whom Johnson respected and who wrote Rambler 97. In this mode the writer arranges letters so as to develop a plot.

But the spacing of these Rambler letters implies a more important point: the first pair and the two last pairs appear back to back (26, 27; 170, 171; 197, 198) whereas the intervening ones are quite separated--from two weeks, as in Nos. 42 and 46, to thirty-one weeks, as in Nos. 132 and 194-195 (42, 46; 113, 115, 167; 116, 123; 130, 133; and 132, 194, 195). However, Johnson may have fortified his own interest in writing the papers by suspending the narratives of Euphelia, Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, Misocapelus, Victoria, and Eumathes. In so doing he forced his readers to wait for one of these speakers to continue his story. During the wait Johnson's readers had to buy, or at least read, the Ramblers that intervened. Allured by the eloquent history (No. 130) of the beautiful Victoria, who would not await anxiously her continuation (No. 133), especially after being tantalized by a final paragraph such as this?

Having thus continued my relation to the period from which my life took a new course, I shall conclude it in another letter, if by publishing this you shew any regard for the correspondence of,

Sir, &c.  
Victoria.  
(IV.331)

That her life, readers are told, undergoes a drastic change is appealing enough. But her admirers, perhaps panting for quick succession of her history, must, until No. 133 appears, satiate their curiosity by some other means, such as reading Ramblers 131 and 132.

At any rate, Victoria's second narrative appears as Rambler 133 and after a polite introduction describes her melancholy due to the measles and other physical maladies that had blemished her beauty. Resigned to an idle existence, avoided by gentlemen and ridiculed by ladies, Victoria nevertheless confided her misery to her friend Euphemia, who immediately perceived the problem and instructed Victoria (and us) about its solution:

We must distinguish . . . those evils which are imposed by providence, from those to which we ourselves give the power of hurting us. Of your calamity, a small part is the infliction of heaven, the rest is little more than the corrosion of idle discontent.

Have we not heard this problem mentioned before? But Euphemia continues:

You have lost that which may indeed sometimes contribute to happiness, but to which happiness is by no means inseparably annexed. You have lost what the greater number of the human race never have possessed; what those on whom it is bestowed for the most part possess in vain; and what you, while it was yours, knew not how to use. . . .

And returning to the problem of idleness, Euphemia concludes,

You . . . have lost it while your mind is yet flexible, and while you have time to substitute more valuable and more durable excellencies. Consider yourself, my Victoria, as a being born to know, to reason, and to act; rise at once from your dream of melancholy to wisdom and to piety; you will find that there are other charms than those of beauty, and other joys than the praise of fools. (IV.344-45)

We see then in Victoria's letters (and we could refer to letters by others) a female version of Bunyan's Mr. Christian--enduring Vanity Fair and the Slough of Despond as he journeys toward the Celestial City. Outward appearance, Victoria learns, signifies far less of eternal value than inner purity; and contentment in one's circumstances safeguards her (and Mr. Christian) from despondence.

The theme of the individual's struggles with various hindrances to happiness dominates numerous letters (and philosophical discourses and oriental tales as well) and reveals the influence upon the Rambler of Johnson's constant rereading of Pilgrim's Progress and Don Quixote.<sup>8</sup> This recurrent theme is another means by which Johnson

<sup>8</sup> Bate, Samuel Johnson, pp. 290, 339.

attempts through the letters to sustain readers' interest in the Rambler.

A favorite related topic is marriage, which is discussed first by the Rambler (No. 18); and, as I mentioned in Chapter II, he helps the gentlemanly Hymenaeus meet and marry Tranquilla (see Nos. 113, 115, 119, and 167). Readers of Hymenaeus's letters (Nos. 113 and 115), despite his name, were struck by his antipathies for women, which would preclude any marriage--his availability, virtue, and interest notwithstanding. (Here appears another example of Johnson's sensibility to drama, for indeed few readers could be unaffected by the narrative of a bright young beau almost forced to a solitary life.) At any rate, his letters add a personal touch to the Rambler, a happy ending to their initial charges and countercharges (by which Johnson generates additional dramatic value), and a statement from two participants that (contra the Rambler) connubial felicity is attainable.

The personal touch derives from the (illusory) involvement of the Rambler in transforming Hymenaeus's and Tranquilla's disappointment in courtship with others into not only a happy marriage but, along the way, some useful observations about poor candidates for matrimony. Hymeneus dislikes women who want only wealthy, gullible, or submissive husbands. But Hymenaeus's second letter

also emphasizes that he is neither a misogynist nor a confirmed celibate:

Surely, Mr. Rambler, it is not madness to hope for some terrestrial lady unstained with the spots which I have been describing; at least, I am resolved to pursue my search; for I am so far from thinking meanly of marriage, that I believe it able to afford the highest happiness decreed to our present state;

and by Hymenaeus's final remark, Johnson creates an opportunity of which he later takes advantage:

and if after all these miscarriages I find a woman that fills up my expectation, you shall hear once more from

Yours, &c.  
Hymenaeus.  
(IV.252)

Indeed, to Hymenaeus the politely indignant Tranquilla speaks (No. 119):

. . . I have never . . . thought those writers friends to human happiness, who endeavour to excite in either sex a general contempt or suspicion of the other. To persuade them who are entering the world, and looking abroad for a suitable associate, that all are equally vicious, or equally ridiculous; that they who trust are certainly betrayed, and they who esteem are always disappointed; is not to awaken judgment, but to inflame temerity.

And after a series of sketches about her own cowardly, effeminate, dishonest, and foppish lovers, she (like Hymenaeus) reaffirms her trust in marriage, adding an

incisive qualification to both her and Hymenaeus's observations:

I do not yet believe happiness unattainable in marriage, though I have never yet been able to find a man, with whom I could prudently venture an inseparable union. It is necessary to expose faults, that their deformity may be seen; but the reproach ought not to be extended beyond the crime, nor either sex to be condemned, because some women, or men, are indelicate, or dishonest. (IV.271-75)

After reading the narratives of these two unhappy but optimistic, tactful but unpretentious--in other words, appealing--speakers, one may ask, what is to become of them? Is their confidence in marriage perhaps their only important similarity?

By arranging their individual letters in close sequence, and by writing Tranquilla's as a response to Hymenaeus's, Johnson is pairing the two in the mind of the reader, a pairing which is consummated in No. 167. Here the couple inform the Rambler of their marriage and resolutely express their common confidence in their commitment to virtue:

Such, Mr. Rambler, is our prospect of life, a prospect which as it is beheld with more attention, seems to open more extensive happiness, and spreads by degrees into the boundless regions of eternity. But if all our prudence has been vain, and we are doomed to give one instance more of the uncertainty of human discernment, we shall comfort ourselves amidst our disappointments, that we were not betrayed but by such delusions as caution could not escape, since

we sought happiness only in the arms of virtue.  
We are,

Sir,  
Your humble servants,  
Hymenaeus,  
Tranquilla.  
(V.124-25)

The personal touch, the happy ending, the tasteful negation of the Rambler's skepticism about marital bliss (No. 18): these are apparent. They also intensify, not just sustain, reader interest in the periodical.

But of course much else for readers to consider lies between Ramblers 113, 115, 119, and 167; and Johnson so intended it. Further, an unnamed letter-writer has much earlier (No. 45) argued for the possibility of marital contentment and criticizes the apparently unmarried Rambler in the process:

You seem like most of the writers that have gone before you, to have allowed, as an uncontested principle, that "Marriage is generally unhappy": but I know not whether a man who professes to think for himself, and concludes from his own observations [as the Rambler had done in No. 18], does not depart from his character when he follows the crowd thus implicitly, and receives maxims without recalling them to a new examination. . . . As I have an equal right with others to give my opinion of the objects about me, and a better title to determine concerning that state which I have tried, than many who talk of it without experience [including the Rambler?] . . . I believe . . . that marriage is not commonly unhappy, otherwise than as life is unhappy. . . .

Here then is the testimony of another participant, another voice of experience. But his thoughts on the subject, he has already mentioned, will interest "great numbers" of people, not simply the Aristocracy (III.243).<sup>9</sup> But again, we should note that this paper, published 21 August 1750, responds to another published 19 May--more than nine weeks earlier. Johnson is sustaining readers' interest by creating letter-writers who address the same subject, but from points of view based on their own experiences. (Johnson's talents as a dramatist appear once more. If unified in the experience of the reader, most discussions about one topic by two or more characters, with their spontaneous responses [including silence], contain definite dramatic value.) Though marriage is not the only subject similarly used, it no doubt was one of the more popular ones, especially among Johnson's female readers.

V

Another subject similarly treated is the contrast between urban and rural living, and this subject reveals to us a third Johnsonian use of the letters to the editor--

<sup>9</sup> Likewise Eubulus eyes the public (No. 26), stating that his narrative about the troubles of extravagance will be useful because his circumstances could "happen to a thousand others" (III.141).

to make the Rambler seem less removed from the social experiences of both Londoners and residents in the provinces. In so doing, Johnson anticipates potentially negative responses to the Rambler and through letter-writers such as Hypertatus (No. 117) voices such responses. According to Hypertatus:

He who brings with him into a clamorous multitude the timidity of recluse speculation, and has never hardened his front in publick life, or accustomed his passions to the vicissitudes and accidents, the triumphs and defeats of mixed conversation, will blush at the stare of petulant incredulity, and suffer himself to be driven, by a burst of laughter, from the fortresses of demonstration. (IV.259)

No doubt Johnson used the letters to protect the Rambler from such a predicament. As we examine other examples of this function of the letters, we should recognize their cathartic value--a consideration vital to a successful play or, for that matter, any discourse spoken in the presence of an audience.

The first Rambler entirely devoted to a letter to the editor (No. 12) is that of Zosima, a "daughter of a country gentleman" who as a servant girl--an archetype, I think, for some of Johnson's female audience--has sought work (unsuccessfully) in London. In two ways this letter implies that the Rambler is both charitable and sympathetic to a country maiden's doleful plight in the city. First, there is her opening remark:

As you seem to have devoted your labours to virtue, I cannot forbear to inform you of one species of cruelty [abuse of servants], with which the life of a man of letters perhaps does not often make him acquainted. . . .

The Rambler is indeed a man of letters and by merely reading the epistle would learn about Zosima's troubles. But by having the Rambler publish her letter, Johnson allows his readers to witness her activity of informing the Rambler. Moreover, by publishing her letter, the Rambler shows esteem for the writer and her account; he is not "above" reading Zosima's narrative and wants his readers to know this.

Second, by including the letter, the Rambler gives Zosima opportunity to thank publicly the benevolent Euphemia for her deeds of kindness (apparently the same Euphemia who helps Victoria [No. 133]):

When she had heard [my sad story], she put two guineas in my hand, ordering me to lodge near her, and make use of her table till she could provide for me. I am now under her protection, and know not how to shew my gratitude better than by giving this account to the Rambler. (III.68)

He contributes, then, to a young girl's desire to express thanksgiving, and in the best way she knew.

Another letter mentioning both city and country life is Euphelia's first (No. 42). The London-born sophisticate, though proficient in all necessary social customs, grows despondent, resorting to a three-month

visit to the country. But there her discontent increases, because the rural women have "no curiosity after plays, operas, or musick" and Euphelia gains no pleasure from hearing about feuds and marriages among neighboring residents (III.230). In fact, she longs to return to London because, as she indicates in her second letter (No. 46), only country bumpkins and foolish old maids perpetuate rural factions.<sup>10</sup>

Letters that praise the country offset those uncomplimentary to it. As Bucolus (No. 138) acknowledges, "the country, and only the country, displays the inexhaustible varieties of nature, and supplies the philosophical mind with matter for admiration and enquiry"--a view that is decidedly not Johnson's--so Vagulus remarks (No. 142), ". . . I passed some time with great satisfaction in roving through the country, and viewing the seats, gardens and plantations which are scattered over it" (IV.365, 389). But Bucolus, unlike Vagulus, uses the reference to rural pleasures to introduce the virtuous but intellectually limited Mrs. Busy, one of many country personalities deserving the attention of writers such as the Rambler.

<sup>10</sup> Though we suspect Euphelia's account of the residents to be tainted by her own shallowness, the city-dweller Cornelia, who also spends a summer in the country, corroborates Euphelia's description of clannish country people.

Explicit in Bucolous's introduction, moreover, is the suggestion that the Rambler, a literary monitor of the London social scene, should also study personages of the provinces:

. . . I am generally employed upon human manners, and therefore fill up the months of rural leisure with remarks on those who live within the circle of my notice. If writers would more frequently visit those regions of negligence and liberty, they might diversify their representations, and multiply their images, for in the country are original characters chiefly to be found. In cities, and yet more in courts, the minute discriminations which distinguish one from another are for the most part effaced, the peculiarities of temper and opinion are gradually worn away by promiscuous converse.  
 . . . (IV.365)

By publishing these remarks the Rambler of course displays his recognition of Bucolus's insight; that is to say, the Rambler regards the observations as worth considering, if not heeding. From the above passage, thus, we perceive a dramatic moment: a letter-writer is pointing the finger of instruction at the Rambler, rather than (as in the philosophical discourses, in which the Rambler speaks) vice versa.

Bucolus, though, is doing what others such as Sophron (No. 57) have done already. Enlightened by the Rambler's philosophical paper decrying the folly of those who squander money, Sophron first praises the Rambler's

concern for his common readers, the less secluded members of society:

I am always pleased when I see literature made useful, and scholars descending from that elevation, which, as it raises them above common life, must likewise hinder them from beholding the ways of men otherwise than in a cloud of bustle and confusion. (III.305)

Rambler can, apparently, enjoy the monastic life so conducive to intellectual inquiry while relating his studies to the needs of servant girls, shopkeepers, and other common people.

Before analyzing Johnson's use of this passage to develop the paper, we should emphasize his genius in creating the letter-writers. Epistles from the magnanimous Eubulus, the indecisive Papilius, the hopeful Zosima, the insolent Myrtylla, and the despondent Victoria (to mention only a few) furnish the Rambler with a wide variety of tones. But more important, these tonal variations show us people who are not just variously concerned but variously disposed. This is genius.

Returning to Sophron's praise of the Rambler quoted above, we shall observe a letter-writer whose disposition changes within the letter. Sophron's compliment merely leads to his occasion for writing, to criticize the Rambler's oratorical expression:

Your late paper on frugality [No. 53] was very elegant and pleasing, but, in my opinion, not sufficiently adapted to common readers, who pay little regard to the musick of periods, the artifice of connection, or the arrangement of the flowers of rhetoric: but require a few plain and cogent instructions, which may sink into the mind by their own weight. (III.305)

The Rambler, Sophron suggests, attends to the problems faced by the public but treats them in sonorous language, from which unsophisticated readers derive neither pleasure nor instruction. The Rambler's literary identification with common readers is less than complete, and here--in a polite manner indicative of middle-class sensibilities--his inadequacy is called to his attention.

All this is, of course, a rhetorical game for Johnson. He wrote the letter; he created Sophron's point. But not only does he use this letter to write about a topic already discussed, he uses it to reduce the effect of any perceived aloofness of the erudite, stoical Rambler toward the literate, social-minded letter-writers, who also seem to represent (to use Sophron's words) "common readers." These multitudes during the 1750's were demanding copious amounts of Journalistic writing,<sup>11</sup> and Johnson could not alienate them from the Rambler without endangering his prospects

<sup>11</sup> Roy M. Wiles, "Middle-Class Literacy in Eighteenth-Century England: Fresh Evidence," in Studies in the Eighteenth Century, ed. R. F. Birssenden (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 50-52, 59-63.

as a writer. His use of the Rambler letters, as we have observed, emphasizes their vital role as the collective voice of the middle class. Further, the Rambler's inclusion of the letters reveals his esteem for the supposed correspondents' experiential knowledge. Indeed, the letters imply that the Rambler wishes to say with Sophron, "I . . . draw my opinions from a careful observation of the world" (III.306). Such observation, we should assume, is made not from an ivied cloister but from a cobblestone street.

Such are the implications of the relationship between the Rambler and the letter-writers. For Johnson, as this chapter has illustrated, the letters allow him to fuse his talents as parliamentary "reporter" and biographer, control reader interest, and establish a social and literary kinship between the scholarly Rambler and the more practical-minded middle class.

## VI

Yet a fourth purpose, related in a way neither to persona nor author, is served by the letters: to establish a dialogue between the voice of Reason (principally manifested in the Rambler) and the voice of Experience (as in the letter-writers). In Rambler 14, a philosophical paper defending the ethical inconsistencies between a

moralist's writing and his conduct, the two speakers are juxtaposed (Reason as the "speculatist" and Experience as the "man involved with life"):

In moral discussions it is to be remembered that many impediments obstruct our practice, which very easily give way to theory. The speculatist is only in danger of erroneous reasoning, but the man involved with life has his own passions, and those of others, to encounter, and is embarrassed with a thousand inconveniences, which confound him with variety of impulse, and either perplex or obstruct his way. He is forced to act without deliberation, and obliged to choose before he can examine; he is surprised by sudden alterations of the state of things, and changes his measures according to superficial appearances; he is led by others, either because he is indolent, or because he is timorous; he is sometimes afraid to know what is right, and sometimes finds friends or enemies diligent to deceive him. (III.75-76)

Constantius (No. 192), more than any other correspondent, exemplifies the "man involved with life," whom the Rambler in the above passage has defined in detail. If we compare this description with the character of Constantius, we readily can identify him as a voice of Experience.

Never allowed by the greedy neighbor Lucius to court his daughter Flavilla, Constantius suddenly became the heir apparent to his wealthy uncle's estate, and equally suddenly gained great favor with Lucius and Flavilla--until Constantius's younger brother daily accused the heir of "pranks and extravagance," contempt for others,

and lust for money, so that the uncle reverted the inheritance to the younger (V.239-43). Constantius encounters his own passions and those of others; he is "embarrassed," not with a "thousand" difficulties, but he suffers his share. "Without deliberation" or examination he must respond to Lucius's overtures of friendship; the unexpected loss of Flavilla's interest certainly shocks Constantius; a "timorous" suitor, he seems willing to fall into Lucius's "nets of matrimony"; and after losing his inheritance, Constantius discovers at least one "friend" (his younger brother) who has been "diligent to deceive him." This letter to the Rambler, then, concisely reviews and dramatizes his description of mankind's public social as distinguished from (but not necessarily opposed to) the private intellectual consciousness. There is a dialogue between Ramblers 14 and 192; the latter verifies the accuracy of the former.

Of course twenty-two months and 178 papers separate Nos. 14 and 192. To identify the dialogue between these two would, no doubt, have put quite a burden on a reader's memory. But this dialogue occurs in the intervening papers, in No. 54 for example. Here the philosophical Rambler is not the only speaker who addresses this man "involved with life." The wise Athanatus, before narrating his experience at the death-bed of a friend, observes that

though the speculatist may see and shew the folly of terrestrial hopes, fears, and desires, every hour will give proofs that he never felt it. Trace him through the day or year, and you will find him acting upon principles which he has in common with the illiterate and unenlightened, angry and pleased like the lowest of the vulgar, persuing, with the same ardor, the same designs, grasping, with all the eagerness of transport, those riches which he knows he cannot keep, and swelling with the applause which he has gained by proving that applause is of no value.

If we accept these conclusions--Johnson did not embrace them--we may agree to Athanatus's thesis, whose authority is his experience: "The only conviction that rushes upon the soul, and takes away from our appetites and passions the power of resistance, is to be found, where I have received it, at the bed of a dying friend" (III.290, emphasis added). A dialogue also links Rambler 14 with this letter, though here the two Ramblers support each other: both speakers, though in different words, emphasize the same distinction, that of the theorist and the participant. We should note, however, that unlike the Rambler, Constantius is conspicuously both, having witnessed his friend's death and having formulated a precept from it.

This is not to deny the Rambler as a speculatist and participant. In No. 5 he defends the positive effects of periodically diverting one's mind to amusements (like the spring) by mentioning a person he has "long known"

(III.26). But this reference is brief, and the other third person pronouns in the paper refer to man in general. The Rambler's statements, not only here but throughout the periodical, are more speculative than referential to his own experience. Nevertheless, as editor of the papers, he includes numerous letters to him; and the publication of these, collectively, counterpoises his own argumentative discourses with "extensive observation, acute sagacity, and mature experience" (III.159). Both Reason and Experience have their say.

Moreover, this counterbalance extends the Rambler's remark in No. 25:

As I have found reason to pay great regard to the voice of the people, in cases where knowledge has been forced upon them by experience, without long deductions or deep researches, I am inclined to believe that this distribution of respect, is not without some agreement with the nature of things; and that in the faults, which are thus invested with extraordinary privileges, there are generally some latent principles of merit, some possibilities of future virtue. . . . (III.136)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Katharine Rogers, one of Johnson's recent editors, says that instead of using his writing to elevate himself above the middle class, he interwove into his compositions their sentiments, but expressed with refinement and gentility (The Selected Writings of Samuel Johnson [New York: New American Library, 1980], p. 5). This observation, I think, particularly applies to the Rambler's philosophical essays though the observation relates also to the letters to the editor.

This passage explains how that, as he states in No. 80, "experience is of more weight than precept" (IV.60), that we should not reason blindly by a priori principles. That the Rambler's ninety-two philosophical papers are complemented by sixty-three letters to the editor shows that he tempers his own speculations with testimonies of their usefulness, or lack of it, in the world.

## VII

In the fictional context in which the Rambler is an eidolon, the aforementioned decision reveals a thoughtful journalist, willing to challenge intellectuals but also eager to accommodate (and thereby instruct) common readers. Ultimately, of course, Johnson decided what types of papers to include in the periodical, and the Rambler's equivocality in relation to reason and experience is significant in this context. Essentially, Johnson's Rambler letters, directed to less scholarly readers, reveal his attention to the needs of people generally ignored by Boswell in his treatment of Johnson. In the Life Johnson is depicted as an overbearing antagonist of Berkeley, Hume, and other intellectuals. But the Rambler's Johnson, and especially in the letters, seems hardly combative, feeling at ease in the presence of

less learned readers such as maids and merchants, whose company Johnson actually shared only on rare occasions.

This ease, I think, derives primarily from Johnson's confidence in the letters as ample illustrations of the moral truths he wished to teach. But there were other illustrative pieces, the oriental tales for example. As the next chapter will explain, these extended Johnson's effort to influence his middle-class readers through illustration. But the tales make use of a dialogue different from that of the letters; and this dialogue reveals to us one of Johnson's rhetorical adjustments from the dramatist disappointed by Irene to the scribbler satisfied by the Rambler.

## Chapter IV

### DIALOGUE TRANSFORMED: THE ORIENTAL TALES

To a young man entering the world, with fulness of hope, and ardor of pursuit, nothing is so unpleasing as the cold caution, the faint expectation, the scrupulous diffidence which experience and disappointments certainly infuse; and the old man wonders in his turn that the world never can grow wiser, that neither precepts, nor testimonies, can cure boys of their credulity and sufficiency; and that not one can be convinced that snares are laid for him, till he finds himself entangled.

Thus one generation is always the scorn and wonder of the other, and the notions of the old and young are like liquors of different gravity and texture which never can unite.

Rambler 69  
(III.365)

"[N]othing of noticeable intrinsic value" can be found in Johnson's oriental tales, writes Martha Conant, calling them the "least valuable part of [his] work."<sup>1</sup> These misleading judgments verify the inadequacy of reading the Rambler only from the perspective of literary history, as Conant's approach to her subject forced her to do. But such an approach, if altered so as to supplement the rhetorical, can be useful in relation to the Rambler.

<sup>1</sup> The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century (1908; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1966), pp. 110-11.

Because the Rambler was written according to various conventions of periodicals, it consists mainly of essays and letters; and though both satisfy certain didactic purposes, both maintain their distinctiveness. Whereas the direct moral essays or philosophical papers argue propositions through complicated syntax, sonorous language, and sound reasoning, the letters illustrate various truths through fewer subordinated clauses and phrases, sentences less oratorical, and structures that are determined by the nature of operational experience instead of by a priori reasoning. The rather speculative Rambler, largely epitomizing the voice of Reason, and his many "correspondents," narrating their actions in the "business of life," participate in an implied dialogue between the power of intellect and the authority of experience.

Because seventy-five percent of the 208 Ramblers is made up of ninety-two philosophical papers and sixty-three letters to the editor, we can perceive easily the dominance of this dialogue. It is, in my opinion, the rhetorical crux of the periodical. And because this crux is connected primarily with the two dominant genres with the Rambler, other literary forms--despite their vital rhetorical functions--seem insignificant or, in Conant's thinking, devoid of innate value.

One such form, the oriental or Near Eastern tale, is used in only six papers (Nos. 38, 65, 120, 190, 204, and 205); its absence from most anthologies is therefore not surprising.<sup>2</sup> Readers do not need these sallies of Johnson's imagination to understand his ethical preoccupations and purposes. But as I have said earlier, analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of the Rambler enables a reader to study the paper's persuasive dialectic without being preoccupied with its moral impulses.

A similar approach to the oriental tales not only reveals their "intrinsic value" but enables us to identify an adaptation of Johnson's use of dialogue, which he employed extensively (but unsuccessfully) in Irene (1749). Indeed this earlier use of dialogue made the play stimulating to read but apparently tedious to view. Irene suffers from weaknesses like those Johnson found in Milton's Comus: the speeches "seem rather declamations deliberately composed and formally repeated on a moral

<sup>2</sup> Three collections (one for graduate students, one for undergraduates, and one for nonacademic use) include one or more philosophical papers and critical essays but no oriental tales: Geoffrey Tillotson et al., eds., Eighteenth-Century English Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), Ramblers 32, 37, 60, 71, 82, 83, 106, 128, 146, 154, 158, 168, 180, and 208; M. H. Abrams, gen. ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), I, Ramblers 4, 5, 60, and 203; and Katharine Rogers, ed., The Selected Writings of Samuel Johnson, Ramblers 4, 12, 18, 45, 51, 59, 60, 79, 130, 144, 148, 156, 168, 188, and 200.

question [so that] The auditor . . . listens as to a lecture, without passion, without anxiety"; and the "language is poetical and the sentiments are generous, but there is something wanting to allure attention."<sup>3</sup> But the oriental tales, if dispensible to anthologizers, serve vital rhetorical purposes, especially for Johnson's middle-class readers.

## II

As the distribution of the tales suggests, their most obvious purpose is to add to the periodical variety, even diversion--necessary ingredients to please Johnson's common readers. Before commending the Rambler, he and his publishers (John Payne, Joseph Bouquet, and Edward Cave) planned to collect the essays and publish them in volume form, perhaps after one year,<sup>4</sup> as had been the

<sup>3</sup> "Milton," in Lives of the English Poets, ed. G. B. Hill, I, 168-69. In 1792 Arthur Murphy, assessing Irene as a "fine poem," perceived the composition as more appealing in print than on stage and the sentiments as "forcefully expressed" but "seldom appropriated to the character" (An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, in Johnsonian Miscellanies, I, 386, 462). More recently, Allardyce Nicoll (A History of English Drama 1600-1900: 1700-1750, II [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1952], pp. 94-95) states that "declamation dominates" the play, though the speeches at times swell with eloquence and persuasiveness. Yet Irene fails because "declamation does make a play."

<sup>4</sup> Edward Bloom, Samuel Johnson in Grub Street, pp. 145-47.

practice with other periodicals. Presumably, then, Johnson's infrequent use of the tales was intentional. His holistic view of the Rambler, although not entirely consistent, is the source of many connections among the papers that we have noticed, connections which both required and sustained ongoing reader interest.

Though Johnson's readers were familiar with the oriental tale, its appearance in English literature throughout the century seemed always a delightful surprise. Here was entertainment for readers who "yearned for affections more idyllic, passions more unrestrained, and wisdom more absolute than any that modern Europe could afford." As a setting for these affections, passions, and wisdom, the tales depicted "a world in which strange, surprising adventures are commonplace [and] the supernatural needs no apology. . . ." <sup>5</sup> For Johnson, the oriental tale was a genre teeming with exoticism that would appeal to merchants and other commoners struggling with the daily financial (and, in turn, social) pressures of commercial life.

This circumstance Johnson exploited. What is novel, if not used in excess, can both surprise and please.

<sup>5</sup> John Butt and Geoffrey Carnall, The Oxford History of English Literature: The Mid-Eighteenth Century, VIII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 491.

Publication dates of the tales show Johnson's avoidance of such excess: 28 July and 30 October 1750; 11 May 1751; and 11 January, 20 February, and 3 March 1752. Ramblers 204 and 205, published on the last two days listed, are only one tale; and Johnson, nearing the close of the periodical, immediately completed the tale begun in No. 204. Keeping his readers' interest was now relatively unimportant. By this time the public had received many opportunities to become acquainted with the Rambler--as essayist, editor, critic, sage, and storyteller.

These last two roles, especially that of storyteller, are important to the oriental tales. The Rambler's wisdom permeates the philosophical papers, and their incisively articulate judgments no doubt intimidated some readers, if intrigued others. Johnson's first tale (No. 38), in fact, follows and illustrates the sagacious Rambler's proposition that the

gifts of nature, which may truly be considered as the most solid and durable of all terrestrial advantages, are found, when they exceed the middle point, to draw the possessor into many calamities, easily avoided by others that have been less bountifully enriched or adorned.

(III.206)

This paper comprises thirteen paragraphs, and the tale occupies the final two. Thus, though Johnson is here offering readers a morsel of this genre that is new to the Rambler, he focuses attention once again upon the

eidolon as sage. So structuring the paper was a prudent decision: the audience was familiar with the philosophical persona, so the unobtrusive tale concluding the paper would likely be well received; and it was.<sup>6</sup>

### III

But readers' unpredictable response to a relatively new literary form was not the only Johnsonian concern; also there was the need to expand the Rambler's personality, in particular to make him less austere. Noting Rambler 23 as the signal to include more socially-oriented speakers (the invented correspondents), we have identified one facet of Johnson's effort to lessen the Rambler's reclusion. In No. 38 we see another. Here Johnson aligns the Rambler's penetrating truths with his delightful narrative about the Indian shepherds Hamet and Raschid. Only in No. 38 does Johnson combine a philosophical discourse by the Rambler and an oriental tale; each of the other tales takes up an entire paper.

<sup>6</sup> Bate remarks (Samuel Johnson, p. 336): in 1759 the publisher Strahan contracted to print a story "in the popular form of the 'Eastern tale.' Readers had liked the 'Eastern tales' in the Rambler, particularly that of Seged . . ." (Nos. 204, 205). Fussell adds an account of Arthur Murphy who, in 1754, happened upon an "appealing Near Eastern morality tale in a French Journal." He quickly published it, translated, in Gray's Inn Journal; it was Rambler 190 (Life of Writing, p. 147).

But a brief tale, as in No. 38, can be no less illustrative and therefore persuasive than a more elaborate story. Severely thirsty, Hamet's and Raschid's cattle and sheep present a pitiable sight. The shepherds pray for help, which quickly comes by way of the "Genius of distribution," a sage figure who warns, "of whatever can be enjoyed by the body, excess is no less dangerous than scarcity" (III.210). Though the temperate Hamet requests and receives a moderate but perpetual supply of water, the incontinent Raschid rashly seeks for his animals the mighty and magnificent Ganges. Disastrous results, foretold by the Genius as well as the Rambler, seem inevitable: suddenly the

mounds of the Ganges were broken. The flood rolled forward into the lands of Raschid, his plantations were torn up, his flocks overwhelmed, [and] he was swept away. . . .

And to add the fillip of injury to insult, the Rambler concludes, "a crocodile devoured him" (III.210).

This carnivore bares his teeth in No. 205 before Seged, the beleaguered "lord of Ethiopia." But, in this similarly persuasive tale about a powerful ruler's vain attempts to buy happiness, the crocodile inflicts emotional rather than physical pain; the emotional was for Johnson the more unnerving. After allotting his subjects ten days for merry-making in the "house of pleasure" (built especially

for the occasion), Seged forbids anyone to exhibit a "dejected countenance"; and, though for several days he perceives only pretentious smiles and forced laughs from his now fearful court, on the fourth day genuine contentment apparently returns--until the crocodile appears. Though chased away before harming anyone, the reptile nevertheless causes anxiety to plague both Seged and his subjects. In addition, the forthcoming death of his sick daughter, a tragedy he could not avert, deepens his dejection. According to the final edition of the paper approved by Johnson (1756), Yale's copy-text, the Rambler thus concludes the tale:

This narrative he has bequeathed to future generations, that no man hereafter may presume to say, "This day shall be a day of happiness."  
(V.305)

Though this story is lengthy (continuing No. 204), it concisely illustrates the fragility of happiness. Yet the final clause represents, in my opinion, a poorly chosen revision. I find it difficult to read the clause in context and ignore the element of optimism--a difficulty not raised by the Folio version:

This narrative he has bequeathed to future generations, that no man may imagine the happiness of a day in his own power.

Thematically both versions summarize the folly of Seged's pride and presumption. But the final clause in the revision (unlike that of the Folio) fails to exclude the impulse of innocent anticipation. Granted, the final clause in the revision points back to Seged's remark early on the fourth day, "This day shall be a day of pleasure" (V.301). Yet here, and throughout the narrative, we are given no reason to disbelieve that hope, though corrupted by selfishness, sustains the emperor, an uncommonly wealthy but flawed--and therefore archetypal--human being. Moreover, "The natural flights of the human mind," according to Rambler 2, "are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope" (III.10). In short, one may say, "This day shall be a day of happiness" without pride or presumption.

This qualm about Johnson's revision, however, is much less noteworthy than the surprise, perhaps even shock, generated by the fantastic tales of genies (the sages), crocodiles, and Near Eastern culture in general--in the midst of elegant essays and loquacious letters about English people and English life. Admittedly, I had to smile (though only for a moment) upon my first reading of passages mentioning supernatural sages and mouthy man-eaters; they seemed so out of place. And when Seged, angered by the young crocodile's intrusive search for supper in a garden filled with young women,

"indignantly" chased him away, my smile gave way to raised eyebrows. A monarch, if not aged, is nevertheless in the "twenty-seventh year of his reign" and challenges the armored villain in the spectacular tradition of P. T. Barnum's Franco the Gator Tamer. Could Johnson have identified one of the women as Jane and alluded to a vine hanging nearby, I would not have doubted hearing an echo of Johnny Weismueller's yell.

But this element of the incredible is not a momentary lapse on Johnson's part but a convention within the genre. In Johnson's day, writes Fussell, the Near Eastern tale combined ethical instruction and unbelievable comedy, for example the farcical. The fictions, he continues, were supposed to be "too palpable for belief."<sup>7</sup> Thus, the tales in the context of the Rambler contain the element of exoticism, and this exoticism, in turn, served to make these narratives not only instructional pieces but what we now call escapist literature. These tidy tales appear intermittently in the periodical, thereby offering readers variety and even a sort of comic relief from the weighty philosophical papers by the Rambler and the often mournful letters from his "correspondents."

The striking differences of the tales in the context of other Ramblers also, as I suggested earlier, divert readers' attention from the Rambler's posture of lofty

<sup>7</sup> Life of Writing, pp. 221-22.

moralist to that of accessible storyteller--a necessary dimension, because Rambler 5 (on the spring) and other numbers about less serious topics depict the weightily philosophical Rambler as nevertheless appreciative of life's lighter moments. But in these papers he develops his essay by argument; in the oriental tales his pattern of development is, like that of the letter-writers, narration. In these tales the Rambler seems less intellectually and socially removed from the middle class. Whereas the moral essays exhibit the Rambler's capacity "to think in solitude" and the letters his devotion "to read and hear, to inquire and answer inquiries," the oriental tales show his willingness "to talk in public." What the Rambler does in these various ways makes him a man who certainly fits Johnson's definition of a scholar in Rasselas (ch. VIII).

As I indicated in Chapter I, literature in the eighteenth century was regarded as printed speech, so that all the nonepistolary Ramblers exhibit the eidolon's discourses as "talk in public," with emphasis on the word talk. The letters are public discourses as well, in that arrangements are made for us to be privy to the correspondence between the Rambler, Zosima, Euphelia, Constantius, and the others. But on a few occasions the Rambler pauses to amuse with a tale, which enlarges

our conception of his personality and makes him less stern-seeming.

#### IV

All this demonstrates Johnson's skillful manipulation of rhetorical circumstances. As in the letters, so in the tales he intends to instruct by illustration, which is evident (among other places) in the Rambler's remarks about the declining influence of the once prosperous Indian merchant Morad (No. 190): "human greatness is short and transitory, as the odour of incense in the fire" (V.229). Were it not immersed in commentary on Morad's past, this statement would seem more akin to the Rambler's remarks in the philosophical paper No. 127:

It is not uncommon for those who at their first entrance into the world were distinguished for attainments or abilities, to disappoint the hopes which they had raised, and to end in neglect and obscurity that life which they began in celebrity and honour. To the long catalogue of the inconveniences of old age . . . may be often added the loss of fame. . . .

It is not sufficiently considered in the hour of exultation, that all human excellence is comparative . . . and that he who stops at any point of excellence is every day sinking in estimation, because his improvement grows continually more incommensurate to his life. . . . Nothing then remains but murmurs and remorse; for if the spendthrift's poverty be embittered by the reflection that he once was rich, how must the idler's obscurity be clouded by remembering that he once had lustre!

(IV.312, 315)

But in the oriental tale, the Rambler's observation that fame is "short and transitory" not only adds ethical solidity to the biographical sketch of Morad but serves as a transition to the main point of the tale:

Morad lived many years in prosperity; every day increased his wealth, and extended his influence. The sages repeated his maxims, the captains of thousands waited his commands. Competition withdrew into the cavern of envy, and discontent trembled at her own murmurs. But human greatness is short and transitory, as the odour of incense in the fire. The sun grew weary of gilding the palaces of Morad, the clouds of sorrow gathered round his head, and the tempest of hatred roared about his dwelling.

Morad saw ruin hastily approaching. . . .  
(V.229)

If not a "spendthrift," Morad was "deprived of his acquisitions": if not an "idler," he "knew not how to fill up his hours in solitude" (V.230-31). We cannot then identify Morad as the referent in No. 127, but the truth his narrative teaches was mentioned there. More important, all these things fold in on themselves and buttress one another; the result is a remarkable coherence of thought within a wide range of discourse. The Rambler might well ramble--but not outside his circuit.

Moreover, the oriental tale, unlike Rambler 127, describes an individual history (and one that is invented), rather than refers to people in general. Certainly Morad

suffers no unique difficulties. But however generally we know mankind, we are acquainted by Johnson with Morad specifically. We know details peculiar to him, even as we learn the private wishes and innermost thoughts of Seged. That our source of these insights is the Rambler as storyteller, a speaker (and tale) we have no reason to doubt, makes us perceive him more as a sociable counselor than as a recluse theorist. Each of his tales, though articulate and fluid, is not a recitation but a chat: the scholar in the Rambler seems as comfortable in the coffeehouse as in the cloister. And this illusion no doubt appealed to Johnson's common readers, because they conversed at St. James's and Will's, not at Oxford and Cambridge.

## V

But to appreciate fully these interesting rhetorical strategies, we must extend our analysis beyond the Rambler alone. Though it was for Johnson "pure wine," the most extensive and readable treatment of the hindrances to happiness, it was not written in isolation but with other literary projects, such as the Dictionary. Another project, completed a year before Rambler 1 was published, is Irene, which uses a rhetorical technique that reappears in the Rambler oriental tales--the sage-novice dialogue.

Before examining this strategy, in my opinion a far more "noticeable intrinsic value" in the tales than either their amusement value or extension of the Rambler's personality, we should recall two relevant biographical details. Roy Wolper has identified in Johnson's conversations an array of quotations and allusions to classical, Elizabethan, and seventeenth-century plays, concluding that in the course of Johnsonian scholarship drama has become his "neglected muse."<sup>8</sup>

These quotations and allusions, with the affinity of the letters and essays by virtue of their orality (explained in Chapter I), reveal Johnson's sensitivity to drama, even when he is not writing plays--indeed he wrote but one that we know about. For example, the Rambler argues (No. 114) for controlling crime by relaxing the laws and more rationally adapting penalties to offenses; petty thieves in Johnson's day, we should recall, were hanged. His suggestions certainly contradicted the common wisdom, and so surprised his readers. Further, the element of surprise in this lengthy argument is enhanced significantly by the last sentence:

This scheme of invigorating the laws by relaxation, and extirpating wickedness by lenity, is so remote from common practice, that I might reasonably fear to expose it

<sup>8</sup> "Johnson's Neglected Muse: The Drama," in Studies in the Eighteenth Century, pp. 111-13.

to the publick, could it be supported only by my own observations: I shall, therefore, by ascribing it to its author, Sir Thomas More, endeavour to procure it that attention, which I wish always paid to prudence, to justice, and to mercy. (IV.247)

Having stunned his readers with such novel ideas, Johnson suddenly reveals that the ideas are in fact quite old and were originated by a revered Englishman. The ideas that at first seemed novel and revolutionary now must be considered as thoroughly authorized, even if the reader disagrees with them.

The second biographical point, that Irene's modest showing of nine nights disappointed Johnson--though its sale in print surely obviated some of this displeasure<sup>9</sup>--informs the writing of the Rambler, and the oriental tales in particular. In writing his blank-verse tragedy Johnson learned what Patrick Cruttwell articulated rather recently. In writing plays, as opposed to a diary or an autobiography or a novel, the distance between the writer's person and his literary personality (or artistic self created by and in the piece of writing) is greatest. This results from the fact that in drama the characters

<sup>9</sup> "Only the Dictionary," say E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne, "brought him a larger sum in these middle years of his career" (Introd., Irene, in The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1964), p. 110.

must be self-explanatory in their actions and their sayings--whereas in the novel, or the narrative poem, the opportunity is always there for the writer to comment and explain and tell the reader how such and such a character or episode ought to be taken: and that is where, in narrative, the personal usually enters. The only possible point of entry for it into the drama is through . . . the moral-philosophical reflections which the characters make on what is going on. . . .

Moreover, Cruttwell continues, the drama's plot gives to the play structure and organization and so is "in itself impersonal"; therefore, artistic individuality can enter the play only through the "treatment" of the plot, not through the plot itself.<sup>10</sup>

These judgments pinpoint whatever compositional frustration Johnson felt in relation to Irene. A talented but inexperienced writer in the 1730's and 1740's, one searching for a workable literary voice, he chose the form (drama) demanding maximum distance between the writer as a man and his speaking voice as an artist.

This distance is greatly diminished in the Rambler oriental tales because they allow Johnson to intrude through the Rambler's commentary. But Irene offered no such opportunities for authorial intrusion; and the unpracticed dramatist had not learned to lessen the distance between himself and his voice as an artist

<sup>10</sup> "Makers and Persons," Hudson Review, 12 (Winter 1959-60), 495-96.

through the only other "sieve" (to use Cruttwell's term), the plot. We then can see why Irene, despite its flashes of poetic brilliance and horrifying climax (Irene's death), is a torpid play.

## VI

This dramatization of a Christian slave girl's abandonment of her faith and her Greek countrymen for the Islamic monarch Mahomet, however, has some impressive moments, segments generating considerable dramatic tension--especially in the sage-novice dialogues. Irene's dilemma, a tension in itself, is revealed early in the play. The sage figure Cali Basa, "The chief, whose wisdom guides the Turkish counsels," asks the consulate Mustapha if Irene will forsake her Christianity and "receive the faith of Mecca."<sup>11</sup> In some splendid poetry Johnson has Mustapha reply:

Those powerful tyrants of the female breast  
Fear and ambition, urge her to compliance;  
Dressed in each charm of gay magnificence,  
Alluring grandeur courts her to his arms,

<sup>11</sup> Irene (Yale edition), pp. 118, 126. Subsequent quotations from Irene are taken from this edition, whose volume number and page number appear parenthetically in the text.

Religion calls her from the wished embrace,  
 Paints future joys, and points to distant  
 glories. (VI.126-27)

But this segment in which Cali learns rather than informs is unusual; in most dialogues, as with the insolent despotic Mahomet, Cali counsels. To the king's intemperate and selfish plan to subdue nonIslamic nations, Cali replies:

This regal confidence, this pious ardour,  
 Let prudence moderate, though not suppress.  
 Is not each realm that smiles with kinder suns,  
 Or boasts a happier soil, already thine?  
 Extended empire, like expanded gold,  
 Exchanges solid strength for feeble splendor.

But the foolish monarch scorns this counsel:

Preach thy dull politics to vulgar kinds,  
 Thou know'st not yet thy master's future  
 greatness,  
 His vast designs, his plans of boundless pow'r.  
 (VI.131-32)

This sage-novice dialogue, and the dramatic tension it generates--apparent (as we shall see) in the Rambler oriental tales--in Irene is extended also to the women. The youthful Irene initially rejects Mahomet's advances, both physical and spiritual. But fearfully she seeks and receives advice from the perceptive and seemingly older Greek woman Aspasia. To the girl's request, "teach me to repel the Sultan's passion," the wise Aspasia says, "Let nobler hopes and juster fears succeed, / And

bar the passes of Irene's mind / Against returning guilt."  
 To protect her virtue, Aspasia continues, Irene must "Think  
 of th' insulting scorn, the conscious pangs, / The future  
 miseries that wait th' apostate; / So shall timidity assist  
 thy reason, / And wisdom into virtue turn thy frailty"  
 (VI.133). These encouraging words make Aspasia seem to  
 Irene more than a woman--"all Aspasia but her beauty's  
 man"--but the mature and cautious adviser attributes her  
 insights to the teaching of her lover Demetrius (VI.134),  
 as Milton's Eve acknowledges to Adam: "My Author and  
 Disposer, that thou bidd'st / Unargu'd I obey; so God  
 ordains, / God is thy Law, thou mine: to know more /  
 Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (Paradise  
Lost, IV.635-38).

## VII

How does all of this relate specifically to the  
Rambler oriental tales? Johnson's translated motto of  
 No. 65 (the second tale) explains:

The chearful sage, when solemn dictates fail,  
 Conceals the moral counsel in a tale. (III.345)

This couplet represents a projection of Johnson's imaginary  
 relationship with his readers: he is their counselor.  
 But through the Rambler he has much earlier made this

relationship apparent. Likewise in Irene the plot demonstrates "how Heav'n supports the virtuous mind"; "what anguish racks the guilty breast, / In pow'r dependent, in success deprest"; and "that peace from innocence must flow; / All else is empty sound, and idle show" (VI.111). In other words, in the Rambler and the play Johnson's didactic purpose is early revealed.

Further, the Rambler's discourses are generally declamations, as are Irene's speeches--despite the drama's semblance of dialogue. But in the oriental tales Johnson modifies this dialogue and so achieves in print what eludes him on stage.

The sage-novice dialogue in the first tale (No. 38) begins after a brief commentary; the sage or "Genius of distribution" calms Hamet and Raschid, alarmed by his sudden and spectacular appearance:

"Fly not from your benefactor, children of the dust! I am come to offer you gifts, which only your own folly can make vain. . . . Now, Hamet, tell me your request."

"O Being, kind and beneficent," says Hamet, "let thine eye pardon my confusion. I entreat a little brook, which in summer shall never be dry, and in winter never overflow." "It is granted," replies the Genius. . . . (III.210)

Only two brief narrative intrusions ("says Hamet" and "replies the Genius") appear in this, the only true dialogue in the oriental tales. In subsequent narratives Johnson supplies through commentary what the second speaker would

have said. The effect is one of dialogue illusoire and is foreshadowed in the confrontation between the Genius and Raschid, the passage immediately following the above quotation:

Then turning to Raschid, the Genius invited him likewise to offer his petition. "I request," says Raschid, "that thou wilt turn the Ganges through my grounds, with all his waters, and all their inhabitants." Hamet was struck with the greatness of his neighbour's sentiments [emphasis added], and secretly repined in his heart, that he had not made the same petition before him; when the Genius spoke, "Rash man, be not insatiable! remember, to thee that is nothing which thou canst not use; and how are thy wants greater than the wants of Hamet?" Raschid repeated his desire, and pleased himself with the mean appearance that Hamet would make in the presence of the proprietor of the Ganges [emphasis added]. . . . (III.210)

The raging flood and awful end of Raschid have been mentioned already. The point here is that the narrator reports Hamet's reaction to Raschid's request, rather than Hamet's own words revealing his disquietude. And to the Genius's question "how are thy wants greater than the wants of Hamet?" again Johnson's narrator, the Rambler, supplies the information, and the remainder of the tale.

In other tales Johnson constructs situations suitable to dialogue, and though the first character speaks, the Rambler supplants the second. Obidah of Indostan (No. 65) forsakes the dusty winding, but safer, trail for an easier way, flanked by sparkling waterfalls and plush vegetation.

But soon perplexed by his loss of direction, he reverses himself and attempts to relocate the familiar route he unthinkingly abandoned. Exhausted and hungry, he happens upon a hermit's cottage and, after being fed and refreshed, is asked:

"Tell me," said the hermit, "by what chance thou hast been brought hither; I have been now twenty years an inhabitant of the wilderness, in which I never saw a man before." Obidah then related the occurrences of his journey, without any concealment or palliation. "Son," said the hermit, "let the errors and follies, the dangers and escape of this day, sink deep into thy heart. Remember, my son, that human life is the journey of a day. . . . Happy are they, my son, who shall learn from thy example not to despair, but shall remember that though the day is past, and their strength is wasted, there yet remains one effort to be made; that reformation is never hopeless, nor sincere endeavours ever unassisted, that the wanderer may at length return after all his errors, and that he who implores strength and courage from above, shall find danger and difficulty give way before him. Go now, my son, to thy repose . . . and when the morning calls again to toil, begin anew thy journey and thy life." (III.347-49)

Approximately one-third of the hermit's entire speech, this quotation nonetheless shows Johnson's propensity to monologue instead of dialogue.

Similarly the dying Nouradin (No. 120) gives Almamoulin, his only son, some last instructions:

"My son," says he, "behold here the weakness and fragility of man; look backward a few days, thy father was great and happy, fresh as the

vernal rose. . . . Now . . . look upon me  
withering and prostrate; [though] my house is  
splendid, my servants are numerous; yet I  
displayed only a small part of my riches; the  
rest, which I was hindered from enjoying by  
the fear of raising envy, or tempting rapacity,  
I have piled in towers, I have buried in caverns,  
I have hidden in secret repositories. . . . I  
am now leaving the produce of my toil, which it  
must be thy business to enjoy with wisdom."  
The thought of leaving his wealth filled Nouradin  
with such grief, that he fell into convulsions,  
became delirious, and expired.

Almamoulin, who loved his father, was touched  
a while with honest sorrow, and sat two hours  
in profound meditation. . . . (IV.277)

Here, another sage-novice setting, appears a second example  
of illusory dialogue. Certainly Johnson had no other choice  
than to provide the cause of Nouradin's death through  
commentary: Almamoulin had no means of knowing this cause,  
so he could not reveal it. But these matters do not diminish  
the point, as two further examples from this tale demonstrate.

Following Nouradin's passing, the youthful heir courts  
a "princess of Astracan" and, though Johnson omits quotation  
marks around her words, she--but only she--speaks. The  
Rambler sets the scene:

Almamoulin approached and trembled. She saw his  
confusion, and disdained him: How, says she,  
dares the wretch hope my obedience, who thus  
shrinks at my glance? Retire, and enjoy thy  
riches in sordid ostentation; thou was born to  
be wealthy, but never can be great.

He then contracted his desires to more private  
and domestick pleasures. He built palaces, he  
laid out gardens, he changed the face of the  
land. . . . (IV.278)

Even without quotation marks, we know that the princess clearly addresses Almamoulin; but he does not respond verbally. He is a novice and perhaps in Johnson's mind should not say something like: "Enjoy your contempt, madam, in solitude! With one fairer than you I shall build palaces, lay out gardens, and change the entire face of the land."

But he says nothing, neither here nor near the end of the tale, as he resorts to a reticent sage whose monologue concludes Rambler 120. We learn of Almamoulin's dejection not from his own words--there are none--but through the Rambler: "being now weary with vain experiments upon life and fruitless searches after felicity, he had recourse to a sage . . ." (IV.279). Constructed upon dialogue, this scene could offer some poignancy as the despondent son explains his need of counsel. But Johnson, writing rapidly and more interested in the sage's maxims than Almamoulin's mistakes (which we know already anyway), leaves the novice mute.

As in the Nouradin-Almamoulin scene in this tale, so in No. 190 we read another father-son, a sort of sage-novice, account. The wealthy Morad, facing death, leaves his eldest son Abouzaid some "precepts of ancient experience," including in summation,

despise not thou the malice of the weakest,  
remember that venom supplies the want of

strength, and that the lion may perish by the puncture of an asp.

But like Almamoulin, Abouzaid remains silent; the next sentence reads: "Morad expired in a few hours" (V.231).

This habit of allowing the experienced to speak and the would-be respondent to say nothing recurs. At the conclusion of the tale Abouzaid, now well informed of the ways of the world, "called to him Hamet the poet" (did Raschid's neighbor [No. 38] also write verses?):

"Hamet," said he, "thy ingratitude has put an end to my hopes and experiments; I have now learned the vanity of those labours that wish to be rewarded by human benevolence; I shall henceforth do good, and avoid evil, without respect to the opinion of men; and resolve to solicit only the approbation of that being whom alone we are sure to please by endeavouring to please him." (V.233)

Potential for dialogue exists, but only one character speaks.

In the final tale (Nos. 204, 205) Johnson again creates incidents potentially dialogical but supplants the second speaker with the Rambler, whose commentary interprets thoughts that in a true dialogue would be revealed through speech. The first example is when Seged, disappointed by his failure to patronize equitably and thereby please the court's artists, laments, "Behold here . . . the condition of him who places his happiness

in the happiness of others." This observation is spoken apparently among or near the king's subjects, perhaps some of the musicians and poets. The Rambler's remarks follow, which inform us of the artists' reaction to Seged's actions: "He then retired to meditate, and, while the courtiers were repining at his distributions, saw the fifth sun go down in discontent" (V.303).

But in the second passage is a setting with even more potential for explosive dialogue--but one constructed on monologue (and soliloquy). Not only does one of Seged's most likable courtiers question the emperor's moral right to rule, which cannot but suggest treason, but the courtier's questioning takes place in supposed privacy. As the scene begins, the Rambler identifies Seged's thoughts as resulting from another speaker's words:

as he [Seged] was roving in this careless assembly with equal carelessness, he overheard one of his courtiers in a close arbour murmuring alone: "What merit has Seged above us, that we should thus fear and obey him, a man, whom, whatever he may have formerly performed, his luxury now shews to have the same weakness with ourselves." This charge affected him the more, as it was uttered by one whom he had always observed among the most abject of his flatterers. At first, his indignation prompted him to severity; but reflecting, that what was spoken, without intention to be heard, was to be considered as only thought . . . he invented some decent pretence to send him away. . . . (V.304)

Here as in other similar incidents we have analyzed, the wise sayings are emphasized by Johnson through spoken words,

whereas any response by the listener is succinctly described by the Rambler. In these scenes Johnson uses various Near Eastern speakers to stress important insights; recipients, either novices or novice-figures, ask no questions and offer no comments.

### VIII

Certainly there is evident in these oriental tales the sage-novice dialogue later exploited more fully in Rasselas. But the point remains that the Rambler is closer in time to Irene, with its declamations and lectures on moral questions. But there is one significant difference between the passionless play and the periodical papers: through the Rambler as narrator of the tales, Johnson's powerful propensity to involvement in life and in the creation of literature based upon it--which was necessarily suppressed in Irene--is everywhere evident. Here is dialogue transformed, and to both instructive and entertaining ends.

## Chapter V

### CONCLUSION: THE RAMBLER'S JOHNSON

When he draws to the end of his farewell . . . we find . . . something of the same feeling we have when we lose a close friend, a friend who has given us a gift which we can never repay. The gift he leaves--his book--is himself, precisely himself. The author has created this self as he has written the book. The book and the friend are one.

Wayne Booth  
The Rhetoric of Fiction

Only the most insensitive of the Rambler's readers can find in its pages only the stern, lofty sage of Boswell's Life. No one denies the moral purpose of the Rambler's essays, the "correspondents'" letters, and even the hearty oriental tales. But the classical rhetorical tradition in which Johnson wrote, examined in Chapter I, demands our notice not only of the periodical's ethical facets but of its persuasive designs. These, in turn, lead to an analysis more of what the papers do rather than of what they are. Hence the focus in Chapters II, III, and IV upon the papers' functions, though their forms were not ignored. This critical method, I think, enables us to understand more fully Johnson's assessment

of the Rambler as the "pure wine" of his works--though we need not regard his critical judgment as necessarily more authoritative than that of other critics. When an author writes or speaks about his own work, Northrup Frye reminds us, he does so as a critic--not as an author.<sup>1</sup>

If to some readers the Rambler is not vintage Johnson, it is to me by far his best periodical writing; to consider the periodical papers with London, Irene, The Vanity of Human Wishes, Rasselas, or Lives of the Poets is to compare generically dissimilar pieces, and we have known for some years now the "force of genre" upon Johnson.<sup>2</sup> But his unique accomplishment in the Rambler, an achievement for which I regard it as his greatest work, is his use of a playwright's compositional situation to reach an audience through print.

In previous chapters I treated the Rambler, the letter-writers, and characters in the Near Eastern tales as speakers, not simply fictional figures. I did so because the papers, in my opinion, were not written as much for individual readers as for an assembled audience. For Johnson, this imagined group of spectators demanded various accommodations of language and rhetoric in the

<sup>1</sup> Anatomy of Criticism, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See Fussell's "The Force of Genre" (Life of Writing, Ch. III) which argues for Johnson's tendency to perceive literature as "an objective function related to a world of fixed literary forms outside the writer and validated by the impact of the work on the reader . . ." (p. 62).

Ramblers. To notice these accommodations one by one is to identify evidence of this "assembled audience."

First, the audience required some type of repetition, what George F. Reynolds exemplifies by the "parallel constructions of oratory."<sup>3</sup> The oratorical elements in some of the Rambler's many philosophical essays were mentioned in my first chapter. In addition, as we have seen in Chapter III, Johnson uses certain speakers (Eubulus, Euphelia, Hymenaeus, and others) and themes (marriage, urban and rural living, and so on) more than once. Thus we can agree with James L. Clifford that the Rambler contains redundancies but suggest that they are both intentional and justified.<sup>4</sup>

Second, such an audience needed anticipation; and Johnson supplied it. Through the sustained narratives of various letter-writers, especially the lovers Hymenaeus and Tranquilla--who both "meet" and "marry" in the Rambler--the audience's curiosity was aroused, cultivated, and ultimately satiated.

Johnson exploited the audience's need to be tantalized in a different sense as well. The timorous tone of Rambler 1 certainly should have attracted London's attention and

<sup>3</sup> "Literature for an Audience," SP, 28 (1931), 814. I borrow from Reynolds all four qualities identifying literature written to be heard, not simply read.

<sup>4</sup> Dictionary Johnson, p. 83.

prompted some to ask, "What will this accommodating writer, so highly esteeming our desire to be pleased, say next?" In No. 2 the Rambler mentions the usefulness of anticipation:

He that directs his steps to a certain point, must frequently turn his eyes to that place which he strives to reach; he that undergoes the fatigue of labour, must solace his weariness with the contemplation of its reward. (III.10)

Anticipation likewise concludes the Rambler. The philosopher remarks as he bids adieu: "Celestial pow'rs! that piety regard, / From you my labours wait their last reward" (V.320). The Rambler hopes that his paper has imparted to his audience this expectation of reward based upon virtue.

Papers that divert readers' attention from serious thoughts, such as No. 193 (on a writer's art of praising himself), and diversionary papers, such as Rambler 5 (on the spring)--but particularly the oriental tales--allowed readers as it were to "take a long breath," to smile momentarily, even to laugh a little--thereby achieving the same end as the gravediggers' scene in Hamlet. Apparent in the Rambler, in short, is a third characteristic of literature composed for an assembled audience, merriment or instances of comic relief.

A fourth and final characteristic, the "crystallization of ideas at frequent intervals into phrases immediately comprehensible but pregnant with meaning,"<sup>5</sup> relates to Johnson's aphoristic power. For instance, writing in No. 77 about the inconsistencies between a moralist's flawed conduct and his admonitory writing, Johnson includes numerous striking references to vice: "bursts of pride," "prattle of affectation mimicking distresses unfelt," "fumes of passion," "levities of sportive idleness," "warm professions of drunken friendship," "languors of excess," "pestilence that taints the air," "poison infused in a draught," "frigid villainy of studious lewdness," and "calm malignity of laboured impiety" (IV.39-44). Each phrase is adapted to a particular context, of course. The point is that the phrases are distributed throughout the essay; and, like the destruction implied by "bursts of pride" or the tumult inevitably resulting from the "calm malignity of laboured impiety," the phrases are indeed connotatively explosive. How could Johnson's audience read this paper oblivious to evil's deceitfulness and folly?

This same energetic expression was mentioned in my first chapter, the memorable reference to pyrotechnics

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, p. 819.

as "pictures in the fire"--elsewhere in the same writing called "the mighty work of artifice and contrivance," "this blaze, so transitory and so useless," and "a trifling profusion" (X.114-115). Here too are explosive phrases; but their appearance throughout the 208 Ramblers (as opposed to the appearance of those in a single letter published in the Gentleman's Magazine) reveals Johnson's habitual use of these potent phrases.

All this points to the effect desired by Johnson of the Rambler upon his imagined audience. While fashioning the Rambler as intellectually above the masses, Johnson repeatedly juggles rhetorical situations to portray the persona as sensitive to middle-class concerns. In so doing, Johnson and his readers achieve a sort of unity about which, in a slightly different context, Robert Benedetti (the Yale authority on acting) has written:

The actor watches his own performance at the same time that he is involved in creating it, and this makes him a special sort of audience member; the audience members participate in the performance at the same time that they watch it. . . .

This is a return to the communal experience of the Classic theatre, in which the active participation of the audience is necessary for the complete realization of the drama. The aim is to make the social reality and the aesthetic reality combine so thoroughly that the result is a new kind of experience, which transcends both the social relationship of audience and actor and the aesthetic relationship

of audience and character by combining them into a unique theatrical experience.<sup>6</sup>

In closing the periodical, the Rambler claims to have "never been much a favourite of the publick" (V.316). Did Johnson fail, then, to create in the Rambler a "communal experience"?

He achieved immense success. First, despite the seemingly limited popularity of the initial Ramblers--only 500 of each number were printed, though many quickly appeared as reprints in papers in the provinces and even (as early as 1750) in the colonies--the Ramblers' appeal increased substantially when they were collected and sold as six volumes (1752).<sup>7</sup> This response originates less in the diversity of opinions in the 1750's about English prose style<sup>8</sup>--controversy always has stimulates sales of newspapers--than in the Johnsonian composite which the collected edition, as opposed to individual papers, more clearly revealed. Having first read the Rambler

<sup>6</sup> The Actor at Work (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Bate, ed., Introd., the Rambler (Yale edition), III, xxi-xxii; Bloom, Samuel Johnson in Grub Street, pp. 288n., 147.

<sup>8</sup> W. V. Reynolds, "Johnson's Opinions on Prose Style," RES, 9 (1933), 436.

piecemeal, Johnson's audience could respond more fully to the series later in book form, because its rhetorical dimensions, explored in this dissertation, were more apparent. Also, because Johnson initially and continually viewed the papers holistically, we conclude that his praise of the Rambler probably pertained to its collected form.

Second, as I have argued, the Rambler's Johnson is not simply the Rambler but the composite of him and the other speakers. Thus, even if the Rambler has "never been much a favourite of the publick" (V.316)--a proposition to be read ironically--the other characters have been well received. Reading letters about experiences familiar to themselves, Johnson's audience had a great variety of ways to identify with circumstances and human weaknesses and attitudes described in the periodical.

In this collection Johnson's many voices addressed readers who tended to regard literature as printed speech. In a sense, then, the Rambler speakers presented monologues originating in the countless intricacies of human experience. This allowed the Rambler's Johnson and his audience to achieve the aforementioned communal experience.

This, I think, represents the "pure wine" of the Rambler. Johnson's studied--and successful--attempts to make the world better for his common readers reveals a quite different Johnson from the antagonistic polemicist

of Boswell's Life; and the Rambler's Johnson is, in my opinion, a much more attractive figure. His periodical compresses, distills, and sweetens the human experience into a wine glass. But he who tastes this vintage encounters an odd realization. With each sip he gains a greater sobriety with which to endure, and even at times enjoy, the moral struggles inherent in the intriguing poignancy peculiar to mankind.

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