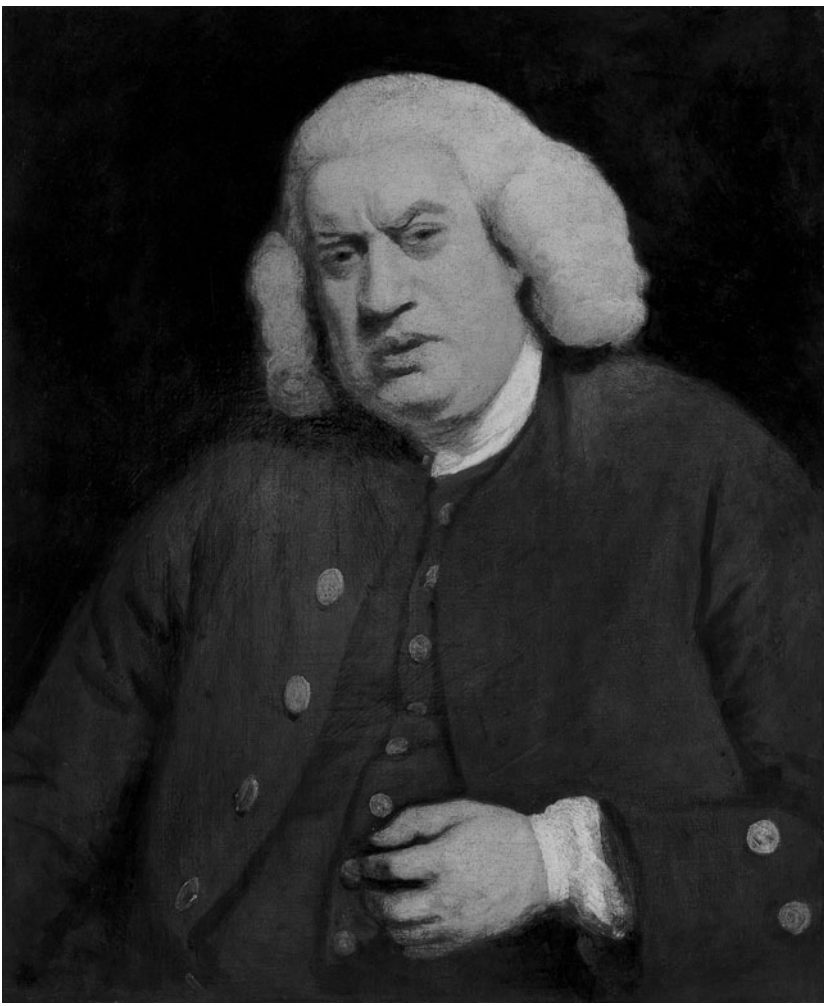
Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on Their Works, Volume I

ROGER LONSDALE

CLARENDON PRESS OXFORD

Samuel Johnson
The Lives of the Poets



Samuel Johnson by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1778).

SAMUEL JOHNSON

THE LIVES OF THE MOST EMINENT ENGLISH POETS; WITH CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THEIR WORKS

With an Introduction and Notes by

ROGER LONSDALE

Volume I

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R. H. L.

Oxford, September 2005

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PERIODICALS

Age of J	*Age of Johnson*
BJECS	*British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*
BLR	*Bodleian Library Record*
BNYPL	*Bulletin of the New York Public Library*
BRH	*Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*
DUJ	*Durham University Journal*
EC	*Essays in Criticism*
ECL	*Eighteenth-Century Life*
ECS	*Eighteenth-Century Studies*
ELH	*Journal of English Literary History*
ELN	*English Language Notes*
ES	*English Studies*
HLQ	*Huntington Library Quarterly*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JNL	*Johnsonian News Letter*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*

MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MP	*Modern Philology*
N & Q	*Notes and Queries*
PBSA	*Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SB	*Studies in Bibliography*
SEC	*Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
TLS	*Times Literary Supplement*

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INTRODUCTION

I COMPOSITION

(i) *Origins*

On 29 Mar. 1777 Samuel Johnson received a deputation of three prominent members of the London book trade. Thomas Cadell, Thomas Davies, and William Strahan represented a consortium of some forty-two London booksellers and six printers, who had decided to publish an elaborate edition of *The Works of the English Poets*[1], and they were calling on Johnson to invite him to provide a biographical and critical 'Preface' to each of the poets in the collection. The plan had apparently emerged at meetings of a 'monthly dining-club at the Shakspeare tavern', attended by the leading booksellers, 'at which were suggested the ideas which led to the publication of Dr. Johnson's invaluable "Lives of the most eminent English Poets" '.[2]

[1] For a detailed account of the financial intricacies of the shareholdings, see *Bibliography*, ii. 1352–3.

[2] See Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, v. 325 n., vi. 434 n. In his *Memoirs* (1809), i. 193–200, the author Percival Stockdale (1736–1811) complained that, before SJ's involvement, he himself had been approached by members of the London trade as prospective biographer for the *Eng. Poets*, on the strength of the prefatory 'Life' in his edition of Waller's *Works* (1772). Although an obituary of Stockdale by 'J.P.' (Jane Porter) in *Gent. Mag.* (Oct. 1811, 384–90) seems to corroborate this claim, much of her account in fact derives from Stockdale's own aggrieved narrative.

According to Porter, 'the booksellers resolved, in this meeting, to apply to him to be its biographer and editor. The agreement was accordingly made; but by some strange misunderstanding, Mr. Stockdale was deprived of this employment, and Dr. Johnson wrote the *Lives of the Poets*!' Nichols reacted immediately in an editorial footnote (388 n.): 'Here must be some grand error. EDIT.' When he reprinted the obituary in *Lit. Anec.*, viii. 26 n., he denied that here had been any such 'agreement' with Stockdale: 'some of the proprietors were desirous that he should be the Biographer. Greatly, however, to the advantage of the publick, Dr. Johnson was prevailed on to undertake the task.' There is more substance to Porter's statement that 'a feud arose between our injured Author and some of these booksellers, which never subsided, and from which he dated not a few of the misfortunes and vexations of his life'.

A fervent admirer of the satirist Charles Churchill in the 1760s, Stockdale later attached himself to SJ, whose virtues he praised at length in *The Remonstrance. A Poem* (1770), 15–20, and *The Poet* (1773), 29. Later, however, he became a bitter enemy, claiming that, by the time he wrote the *Lives*, SJ's 'faculties were on the decline', that 'he was intoxicated with his consequence, and with his fame', and that the *Lives* were 'a Disgrace to English Literature' (unpaginated notes in Thomson, *The Seasons* (1793), after 222). As he predicted in his *Poems* (Alnwick, 1800), 7, he elaborated these charges in his *Lectures on the Truly Eminent English Poets* (1809) as well as his *Memoirs*. For a violent letter about SJ, 30 Mar. 1793, see H. D. Weinbrot, 'SJ, Percival Stockdale,

Nothing suggests that the invitation caught Johnson by surprise, and the brief meeting may in fact merely have confirmed a commission already explored by some such intermediary as his friend George Steevens, the Shakespeare scholar, who seems to have recommended an approach to Johnson (see i. 78 below). Johnson is reported to have accepted the invitation 'very politely', and to have 'seemed exceedingly pleased with the proposal' (*Life*, iii. 111; see Edward Dilly's letter i. 7 below).

At the age of 68 Johnson was now approaching the end of a distinguished career as an essayist, biographer, lexicographer, editor, and critic. Although he had been given in the 1760s to claiming that 'the publick has no farther claim upon me', and that 'A man is to have part of his life to himself' (*Letters*, i. 256; *Life*, ii. 15), he had gone on to publish some combative political pamphlets (1770–5), and *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), and in 1773 had revised both his great *Dictionary* and his edition of Shakespeare. Yet his diaries make clear that even in his sixties Johnson was still troubled by a habitual guilt about his own indolence, by an acute sense of unfulfilled potential, and by the fear that he had wasted his God-given talents.

On his 62nd birthday in Sept. 1771 he had hoped that 'perhaps Providence has yet some use for the remnant of my life', and wrote two years later: 'when I consider my age, and the broken state of my body, I have great reason to fear lest Death should lay hold on me, while I am yet only designing to live' (*YW*, i. 143, 160). In 1772 an introspective poem (which he found easier to write in Latin than in English) had conveyed his painful sense of a wasted career and hollow reputation, of his inferiority to a great scholar like Scaliger, and of the inexorable approach of death.[3] It must have seemed that the London booksellers were in fact offering him in 1777 an opportunity of collecting his remaining energies, and of ending his literary career by contributing to an elaborate and prestigious but, on the face of it, not too demanding project.

Anxious to reassure himself that he had not entered into protracted commercial negotiations on 'Easter Eve', Johnson noted in his diary for 29 Mar. 1777: 'I treated with booksellers on a bargain, but the time was not long' (*YW*, i. 264). However attractive, he could not allow his 'bargain' to

and Brick-bats from Grubstreet', *HLQ* 56 (1993), 105–34; and for Stockdale and SJ, see also headnotes to 'Waller' and 'Pope'.

[3] As early as 1765 William Kenrick wrote derisively about SJ's eminence: 'Graduated by universities, pensioned by his prince, and surrounded by pedagogues and poetasters, he finds a grateful odour in the incense of adulation; while admiring booksellers stand at a distance, and look up to him with awful reverence' (*A Review of Doctor Johnson's New Edition of Shakespeare*, p. xi). For '[Know Yourself]' see *Poems* (1974 edn.), 187–90, and Lipking (1998), 236–40.

distract him from 'the review of life' and 'renovation of holy purposes' which he had undertaken at Easter ever since his wife's death in 1752 (*Life*, iii. 109; *Idler* 103 (1760); *YW*, ii. 316). On the following day, he pondered in his diary 'the barren waste of time' in the last year, his physical disorders and mental disturbances near to madness, hoping for 'more efficacy of resolution, and more diligence of endeavour' in future. A week later (6 Apr.), he reminded himself of his failure to carry out 'a scheme of life, and a plan of study' he had envisaged: 'Days and months pass in a dream, and I am afraid that my memory grows less tenacious, and my observation less attentive' (*YW*, i. 264, 267). His friend Sir John Hawkins believed that by this period Johnson's 'faculties seemed to be impaired: deafness grew upon him; long intervals of mental absence interrupted his conversation, and it was difficult to engage his attention to any subject' (*Life*, 530–1).

Johnson had long since shed the illusions about 'the hours which I should revel away in feasts of literature . . . and the triumph with which I should display my acquisitions to mankind' with which he claimed to have embarked on his *Dictionary* forty years earlier (*OASJ*, 321). If all went well, however, his new commission would at least give him a chance to prove that advancing years did not necessarily entail loss of intellectual power (whatever Hawkins thought), a subject on which he had strong views (see e.g. 'Waller' **85, 132** and n.; numerals in bold refer to paragraph numbers in individual lives). And he had, after all, been commissioned to write a series of short biographies, a genre he had practised successfully and with enjoyment throughout his career.[4] He himself had lived through about half the period of English literary history to be covered in his accounts of the poets, and the record of his conversation makes clear that it had always been rich with literary anecdotes and opinions, some of which would duly re-emerge in his *Lives*.

Whatever the personal satisfaction Johnson's new commission afforded him, he may also have approached it with some sense of patriotic duty in the troubled later 1770s, when Britain was at war with its American colonies and French intervention was impending. As he had asserted in 1755, 'The chief

[4] See i. 80 below. SJ did not disagree when told by an admirer that his 'literary strength lay in writing biography, in which line of composition he infinitely excelled all his contemporaries. "Sir," said Johnson, "I believe that is true. The dogs don't know how to write trifles with dignity"' (*Life*, iv. 34 n.). His commission in 1777 may, moreover, have recalled his own unrealized plans for such compilations as 'Lives of the Philosophers, written with a polite air, in such a manner as may divert as well as instruct', 'Lives of Illustrious Persons, as well of the active as the learned, in imitation of Plutarch', and 'Plutarch's Lives, in English, with notes' (*Life*, iv. 381–2 n.). He also claimed that in the 1770s he had taken seriously, and regretted declining, invitations to superintend new edns. of Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (2 vols., 1728) and the even more massive *Biographia Britannica* (6 vols., 1747–66) (*Life*, ii. 203–4 n., iii. 174).

glory of every people arises from its authors.' Five years later he had written of the English poets in particular that 'We consider the whole succession from *Spenser* to *Pope*, as superior to any names which the Continent can boast.' In 1761 he had claimed that England 'may now be justly termed, the capital of literature'.[5] During a famous meeting in the Royal Library in Feb. 1767, George III had in fact proposed a comparable biographical task to him as a matter of national honour: 'His Majesty expressed a desire to have the literary biography of this country ably executed, and proposed to Dr. Johnson to undertake it. Johnson signified his readiness to comply with his Majesty's wishes.'[6] In Mar. 1777 the London booksellers achieved what George III's flattering suggestion had so far failed to elicit, by involving him in what purported to be a definitive edition of *The Works of the English Poets*, a project which might itself be seen as marking a new sense of national literary identity, a new self-consciousness about, and pride in, the English language and poetic heritage, and a determination to make that heritage more easily accessible and comprehensible.

A less elevated interpretation of Johnson's contract with the booksellers in Mar. 1777 is, however, available. In another perspective, the *Works of the English Poets* may seem merely to mark a new stage in the commodification of literature, and the commercial forces which affected it. The London booksellers had always assumed that, whatever the precise stipulations of the Copyright Act (1710) of Queen Anne's reign, they in practice owned between them virtually perpetual copyright in the works of the most popular English authors, an assumption reinforced by their scrupulous respect for each other's literary 'property' and rights. As recently as Mar. 1774, however, a notable judgement in the House of Lords had confirmed the right of a Scottish bookseller, Alexander Donaldson, to reprint James Thomson's popular *The Seasons*, which was no longer in strict copyright. The London booksellers subsequently petitioned unsuccessfully against the ruling, which made clear that authors could not assign perpetual common-law copyright to a publisher, and themselves enjoyed only a fixed-term protection of up to twenty-eight years.

There followed, in Sir John Hawkins's words, 'a scramble of the lowest and least principled of the booksellers, for the jewel thus cast among them' (*Life*, 531–2). More than one Scottish publisher had in fact already challenged the London trade's monopoly, in, for example, the series of poets

[5] SJ had, however, referred to the dangers of 'literary patriotism' in *Rambler* 93 (1751) (*YW*, iv. 132–3).

[6] See *OASJ*, 327; *Idler* 91 (*YW*, II. 282, 284); *Early Biog. Writings (1973)*, 504; and *Life*, II. 40. For an interpretation of SJ's meeting with George III, see A. Kernan, *SJ & the Impact of Print* (Princeton, 1989), 24–47.

published by Foulis (48 vols., Glasgow, 1765–76), and the edition of *The British Poets* (Edinburgh, 44 vols., 1773–6) published by William Creech and others. Although these editions had not been aggressively marketed in London, such limited infringements had perturbed the booksellers. As William Strahan had warned William Creech in Jan. 1773, 'the trade in General . . . must soon be destroyed if every body is permitted to print every Thing': publishing would become one of 'the most pitiful, beggarly, precarious, unprofitable and disreputable Trades in Britain'.[7]

Among 'these numerous depredators' (Hawkins, *Life*, 532), the energetic young Scottish bookseller John Bell (1745–1831) posed a particularly determined and serious threat. He had already published an edition of Shakespeare (9 vols., 1773–4), and, soon after the copyright ruling in the House of Lords, embarked on *Bell's British Theatre* (21 vols., 1776–80). As Thomas F. Bonnell has shown in some important articles, the London trade had finally been provoked into a decisive response in 1777 by news of the imminent publication in London of Bell's comprehensive *The Poets of Great Britain Complete from Chaucer to Churchill*, printed by Gilbert Martin and Sons at the Apollo Press in Edinburgh, which would eventually run to 109 volumes (1776–82). Bell's plan of publishing his edition at the rate of a volume a week threatened to flood the London market with cheap reprints of what had hitherto been the property of the capital's own book trade.[8]

Once the booksellers understood the threat posed by Bell, they acted with some alacrity. Their deputation visited Johnson on 29 Mar. 1777 and by 9 Apr., only eleven days later, newspaper advertisements were announcing that *The English Poets, with a Preface, Biographical and Critical, to each Author, By Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* was 'In the Press, and speedily will be published', with emphasis on its implicit superiority to anything Bell could produce. The London edition was to be 'Elegantly printed in small Pocket Volumes, on a fine Writing paper, ornamented with the Heads of the respective Authors, engraved by the most eminent Artists' (*Public Advertiser*; *Gazeteer*). This was hardly more than a warning shot across John Bell's bows, since the *English Poets* would not appear for another two years. Five days later (14 Apr. 1777) Bell imperturbably advertised the imminent publication of *The Poets of Great Britain* in the *Morning Chronicle*, and on

[7] Creech Papers, cited in T. F. Bonnell, 'Bookselling and Canon-Making: The Trade Rivalry over the English Poets, 1776–1783', *SEC* 19 (1989), 55–6. Bonnell's three articles (see also nn. 8 and 9 below) on Bell's activities provide an invaluable context for the publication of *Eng. Poets* (1779).

[8] T. F. Bonnell, 'John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain*: The "Little Trifling Edition" Revisited', *MP* 85 (1987), 128–52.

25 Apr. duly announced vol. i of Milton's poems as the first instalment. His editions of other popular English poets, including Pope, Dryden, Butler, Prior, Thomson, Gay, Waller, and Young, followed steadily over the next few months.

While Bell had to finance his *Poets of Great Britain* from sales of his serial publication (eventually investing some £10,000 in the series), the London trade, as Bonnell has explained, did so 'at a minimum risk, dividing their property into shares, and raising a subscription of £50 per share'. They were in fact pressed for time rather than finance. With ten different printers soon at work on the *English Poets*, the booksellers had meanwhile to content themselves with making life difficult for Bell, refusing to distribute or sell his series, and, from Apr. 1777, organizing newspaper criticism of its shortcomings. Thus, 'Philo-epimelias' in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of 9 May 1777 claimed to be a disappointed purchaser of vol. i of Bell's edition, and hoped that the 'Work now coming out by Dr. Johnson' would be more carefully printed. John Bell would in turn continue protesting about 'the FORTY BOOKSELLERS, who have so long, and impotently attempted by their combined wealth and influence, as well as by every plausible imposition on the public, which art could suggest, or malevolence devise, to suppress and to rival Bell's Edition of the Poets, or to annihilate the publisher'.[9]

The most familiar account of the origins of the *Works of the English Poets*, printed by Boswell in 1791, understandably played down this context of commercial rivalry. Having elicited relatively little from Johnson himself on the subject at Ashbourne in Sept. 1777 (see i. 19–20 below), Boswell wrote to ask the bookseller Edward Dilly about the project, no doubt hoping for information which would be of use in the biography he was already planning. The formality of Dilly's detailed reply of 26 Sept. 1777 suggests that he may have been expecting Boswell to publicize its contents in Scotland, to

[9] See Bonnell, 'Bell's *Poets*', 145–7, 150. For Bell's letter of 19 July 1780 in the *Morning Post*, see also Bonnell, 'Patchwork and Piracy: John Bell's "Connected System of Biography" and the Use of J's *Prefaces*', *SB* 48 (1995), 200–1.

William Shaw, *Memoirs of . . . SJ* (1785) underlined the importance of the biographies to the London edition: 'He was engaged in this performance by a very general concurrence in the trade, to defeat the project which had been conceived of abridging their monopoly. This was the plan of Mr. Bell, who printed the English poets at, what he called, the Apollo press. His edition was cheap and diminutive, but elegant and likely to be popular. The booksellers were in hopes, the high reputation of Johnson, would, by this undertaking, prove a protection to what they deemed their property. The only thing to be feared was the declension of those abilities, on which they depended, as he was now arrived at a very advanced age.' An anonymous *Life* (1786) also emphasized the rivalry: 'a confederacy of booksellers, who knew the value of his works, and who were alarmed by Mr. Bell's proposal to furnish a new edition of the English Poets in miniature, had sufficient address to procure his powerful assistance for a rival publication' (*Early Biographies* (1974), 180, 285–6).

discourage not only Bell but any other opportunists who were thinking of invading English territory. Dilly gives the distinct impression that the London trade's response to Bell's 'little trifling edition of the poets' was motivated entirely by aesthetic considerations, by a disinterested concern for poetry-lovers, and by a high-minded desire to vindicate the honour of the 'English press'.

Dilly also makes clear, however, the importance to the 'reputation' of the *English Poets* of the involvement of Johnson with the project, and his eventual reference to the issue of invaded copyright, even if as ostensibly a minor consideration, and his account of the committees appointed to supervise the London edition, leave little doubt of the seriousness of the threat Bell actually posed:

The edition of the Poets, now printing, will do honour to the English press; and a concise account of the life of each authour, by Dr. Johnson, will be a very valuable addition, and stamp the reputation of this edition superiour to any thing that is gone before. The first cause that gave rise to this undertaking, I believe, was owing to the little trifling edition of the poets, printing by the Martins, at Edinburgh, and to be sold by Bell, in London. Upon examining the volumes which were printed, the type was found so extremely small, that many persons could not read them; not only this inconvenience attended it, but the inaccuracy of the press was very conspicuous. These reasons, as well as the idea of an invasion of what we call our Literary Property, induced the London Booksellers to print an elegant and accurate edition of all the English Poets of reputation from Chaucer to the present time.

Accordingly a select number of the most respectable booksellers met on the occasion; and, on consulting together, agreed, that all the proprietors of copy-right in the various Poets should be summoned together; and when their opinions were given, to proceed immediately on the business. Accordingly a meeting was held, consisting of about forty of the most respectable booksellers of London, when it was agreed that an elegant and uniform edition of 'The English Poets' should be immediately printed, with a concise acount of the life of each authour, by Dr. Samuel Johnson; and that three persons should be deputed to wait upon Dr. Johnson, to solicit him to undertake the Lives, *viz.* T. Davies, Strahan, and Cadell. The Doctor very politely undertook it, and seemed exceedingly pleased with the proposal. As to the terms, it was left entirely to the Doctor to name his own; he mentioned two hundred guineas; it was immediately agreed to; and a farther compliment, I believe, will be made him. A committee was likewise appointed to engage the best engravers, *viz.* Bartolozzi, Sherwin, Hall, &c. Likewise another committee for giving directions about the paper, printing, &c. so that the whole will be conducted with spirit, and in the best manner, with respect to authourship, editorship, engravings, &c. &c. My brother will give you a list of the Poets we mean to give, many of which are within the time of the Act of Queen Anne, which Martin and Bell cannot give, as they have no property in them; the

proprietors are almost all the booksellers in London, of consequence. (*Life*, iii. 110–11)[10]

In view of Dilly's condescending comments on the typography of Bell's edition, it is worth noting Boswell's own earlier report to Johnson on 9 June 1777: 'I have seen a specimen of an edition of the poets at the Apollo press, at Edinburgh, which, for excellence of printing and engraving, highly deserves a liberal encouragement.' He had already praised its elegance in a letter to Lord Hailes on 19 Apr. 1777, which contains his earliest reference to Johnson's biographies (*Life*, iii. 117–18; *Catalogue*, L 604).

While Dilly's reference to 'an invasion of what we call our Literary Property' may implicitly acknowledge the lack of any continuing legal basis to such 'Property', he also refers to a meeting of 'the proprietors of copy-right in the various Poets'. According to Boswell in 1791, the *English Poets* 'were selected by the several booksellers who had the honorary copy right, which is still preserved among them by mutual compact, notwithstanding the decision of the House of Lords against the perpetuity of Literary Property' (*Life*, iii. 370). Dilly's final sentence, however, suggests that the London trade still believed that it retained a superior claim to works published under the Copyright Act of 1710 (which had in fact merely secured copyright for fourteen years, renewable for another fourteen years if the author were still alive). The printer William Strahan had made a similar assumption in a letter of 26 Aug. 1774: 'We now have nothing else for it, unless when they meddle with Books still protected by Q. Anne's Statute. In that Case we must prosecute.'[11] This belief helps to explain the presence in the *English Poets* of at least some of such authors as Sprat, Rochester, Yalden, Otway, Duke, Dorset, Halifax, Stepney, and Walsh, who (together with Blackmore and Watts, Johnson's own suggestions) did not appear in Bell's series. The inclusion of several of these minor figures in a supposedly definitive 'canon' of English poetry later provoked derisive comment, and Johnson himself could summon up little critical enthusiasm for some of them.[12]

[10] The MS of Dilly's letter is in the Boswell Papers (*Catalogue*, C 1075). *Eng. Poets* (1779) eventually contained twenty-eight engraved portraits. The original imprint included thirty-six booksellers and six printers, but death and retirement had reduced those listed in *Prefaces*, vols. v–x (1781) (*Bibliography*, ii. 1352, 1362).

[11] Creech Papers, cited by Bonnell, 'Bookselling', 56.

[12] The legal basis of the London trade's claim is unclear, since the 1710 Act granted only 28 years' copyright protection. As Bonnell, 'Bookselling', 68 n., pointed out, such poets should have been first published, or published in a new form, after 1751 to justify a claim to legal protection. Tonson's edition of *The Works of Celebrated Authors, Of whose Writings there are but small Remains* (2 vols., 1750), which included Roscommon, Dorset, Halifax, Garth, Stepney, Walsh, Tickell, and Sprat, may still have provided the basis for such a claim in 1777. Tonson's collection was itself

Quite how the London trade settled the contents of the *English Poets*, whether by pooling their 'honorary' copyrights (as Dilly and Boswell imply), or by entrusting this responsibility to an individual or to one of their 'committees', is unclear. In Sept. 1777 Dilly still expected the series to include 'all the English Poets of reputation, from Chaucer to the present time', presumably in response to Bell's announcement that his *Poets of Great Britain* would run from Chaucer to Churchill. By then it must surely have been decided that the *English Poets* would in fact begin with Cowley in the mid-17th century rather than Chaucer. (The only earlier poets in Bell's series were Chaucer, Spenser, and Donne.) In 1777 Thomas Tyrwhitt's important edition of *The Canterbury Tales* (5 vols., 1775–8) was still incomplete, and Thomas Payne, its publisher, may have been unwilling to surrender its carefully established text. This did not deter John Bell from reprinting it without permission in his *Poets of Great Britain* in 1782, to Tyrwhitt's irritation.[13] Similarly, Thomas Davies, one of the deputation who originally visited Johnson on 29 Mar., had published editions of Suckling, Marvell, Carew, and other seventeenth-century poets as recently as 1770–3, and he may also have been reluctant to donate them almost immediately to the *English Poets*.[14]

Johnson himself always insisted that he had little or no responsibility for the contents of the *English Poets*, and was irritated by the astute later marketing of the series as 'Johnson's Poets' (see pp. i. 62–5 below). By his own account, he recommended only the inclusion of Pomfret, Yalden, and Watts and of Blackmore's *The Creation* ('Watts' 1 and n. below).[15] Replying to Boswell's enquiries about the recently advertised *English Poets*, he had also claimed on 3 May 1777 to have persuaded the booksellers to include 'something of Thomson' (*Letters*, iii. 20; *Life*, iii. 109). Any hesitation about the inclusion of the popular Thomson may be explained by the fact that *The Seasons* had been the subject of the famous dispute over copyright before the House of Lords in 1774. Thomson's inclusion was duly mentioned in a new advertisement for the *English Poets* in the *Public Advertiser* on 7 May 1777, when the collection was expected to extend to no more than forty volumes.

a response to F. Cogan's *Works of the Most Celebrated Minor Poets* (2 vols., 1749), which he considered an invasion of his property.

[13] See Bonnell, 'Bell's *Poets*', 140–50. For SJ's own projected edition and biography of Chaucer, see *Life*, iv. 381 n.

[14] See Nichols, *Sel. Collection*, i. 262 n.

[15] Nichols, who had tracked down uncollected verse by Yalden (see headnote), also appeared to claim responsibility for his inclusion: 'the publishers of the English Poets have been censured for admitting Yalden into their collection; a censure which, if deserved, I must take upon myself' (*Sel. Collection*, iii. 166–7 n.).

Mrs Thrale claimed in Dec. 1777 that Johnson had also insisted on the exclusion from the *English Poets* of the popular satirist Charles Churchill, whose ridicule in *The Ghost*, Bk. II (1762) had 'very much nettled' him: 'he rejected him from among the Poets when the Booksellers begged him a Place in the Edition . . . this was I think the only unjust or resentful Thing I ever knew him do.' Churchill's omission seems in fact just as likely to have been for copyright reasons (*Thraliana*, i. 203).[16] Another popular poet omitted for just such reasons was Oliver Goldsmith, who had died in 1774. As recently as 1776 Johnson had agreed to take over from Thomas Percy the task of writing a biography of his friend, but copyright problems led to his exclusion from the *English Poets*, as Edmond Malone told Percy in 1785: 'I often pressed Dr. Johnson to write Goldsmith's life, and he would have done so, had not the booksellers from some clashing of interests in the property of his works excluded them from their great collection of English Poetry' (*Life*, iii. 100 and n.).

In the circumstances, the London booksellers had to plan their 'great collection' in some haste, and are unlikely to have spent much time agonizing about the responsibility of creating a balanced and judicious 'canon' of the national poetry. The *English Poets* would resurrect no unjustly neglected talents, and included not even a token woman poet, such as the Countess of Winchilsea or Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Although forty-two of its fifty-two poets also appeared in Bell's series, the aspirations of the *English Poets* to be more definitive only prompted sterner criticism of its limitations. As John Scott of Amwell remarked in 1785: 'The Temple of Fame, lately erected under the title of The Works of the English Poets, affords a striking instance of caprice in the matter of admission to literary honours.'[17]

[16] The story was repeated in the *Morning Herald* of 8 Sept. 1783, and in Mrs Thrale-Piozzi's *Anecdotes of SJ* (1786) (*J. Misc.*, i. 271–2). *Gent. Mag.* (Sept. 1780), 433–4 n., quoted SJ's statement about Churchill that 'I thought him a shallow fellow at first, and think so still.' For his low opinion of Churchill, and Boswell's admission that 'It is strange that Churchill was left out of the collection', see *Life*, i. 406, 418–19, iii. 370 n., and *J. Misc.*, ii. 9. Complaints about Churchill's omission continued to the end of the century, as in *Ethic Epistles to the Earl of Carnarvon* (1794), 43–4, 136–7: 'Not even Johnson's envy, Johnson's fame, | Could raise a worthless, sink a worthy, name; | Known are his petty Poets now no more, | His outcast Churchill still read o'er and o'er.' The *Analytical Review*, 9 (1791), 195, had, however, recently stated: 'If ever there was a slovenly muse, it was certainly that of Churchill.'

[17] See John Scott, *Critical Essays on . . . English Poets* (1785), 247. Thomas Warton's protégé Henry Headley, in his *Select Beauties of Ancient English Poetry* (2 vols., 1787), i, pp. xxx–xxxiii, deplored the omission of 'our older classics' from 'the late very incomplete and careless edition of the English Poets, commonly called Johnson's Edition'. Headley found SJ's 'excuse . . . that he had nothing to do with the selection . . . most unsatisfactory . . . there cannot be a doubt, but that the management of the work, on the least desire intimated by him, would have been vested in his hands with the utmost gratitude and confidence . . . As the matter stands, however, a most unworthy rabble have gained a passport to the Temple of Fame.' Robert Anderson later echoed

The sparse surviving information about the planning of the *English Poets* contrasts with Robert Anderson's long account of the origins of his later and much ampler *Poets of Great Britain* (13 vols., Edinburgh, 1792–5), in which he discussed earlier collections, explained his decisions and aims, and listed the many poets he would have included had space permitted (i. 1–8). Anderson was dismissive about both Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* and the London trade's *English Poets*, the latter for 'admitting so few of our older classics in a work which bore so close a relation to the honour of the nation'. Although he had more to say about the eccentric inclusions and exclusions of the *English Poets*, he finally praised Johnson's *Lives*, for all their limitations, as 'the richest, most beautiful, and, indeed, most perfect production of his pen' (i. 3).

After Anderson's progress towards a more adequate 'canon' in the 1790s, Alexander Chalmers contented himself with a briefer explanation of his policy and methods in *The Works of the English Poets* (21 vols., 1810), i, pp. v–x. Admitting that what he persisted in calling 'Dr. Johnson's Collection' contained 'authors who have few admirers', Chalmers emphasized that they were chosen not by Johnson himself, 'but by his employers, who thought themselves . . . the best judges of vendible poetry', and had included few 'in their series for which there was not, at the time it was formed, a considerable degree of demand' (i, p. vi). Wordsworth later took a less tolerant view of what Chalmers called 'vendible poetry' when discussing the 1779 collection in his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815): 'The booksellers took upon themselves to make the collection; they referred probably to the most popular miscellanies, and, unquestionably, to their books of accounts'. Poets had been admitted, Wordsworth suggested, 'from the familiarity of their names with the readers of that day, and by the profits, which, from the sale of his works, each had brought and was bringing to the Trade'.

Headley's discussion, at times to the point of plagiarism, in the preface to his *Poets of Great Britain* (1792–5), i. 1–8.

For the omission of women poets, some of whom had featured in earlier biographical reference works, from both *Eng. Poets* (1779) and Bell's *British Poets*, see Linda Zionkowski, *Men's Work: Gender, Class and the Professionalization of Poetry, 1660–1784* (New York, 2001), 171–203. While there is no evidence to suggest that SJ actively opposed the inclusion of women in *Eng. Poets*, as Zionkowski comes close to assuming, he obviously could have done more to ensure their presence, even if many of those he respected, such as Elizabeth Carter and Hannah More, were still alive and therefore ruled out. As Zionkowski also notes, for all his support of contemporary women authors, SJ's incidental references to earlier women poets are often unflattering: see 'Waller' **98** and 'Dryden' **43** (Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle); 'Roscommon' **36–8**, 'Waller' **147**, and 'Pope' **171** (Katherine Philips); 'Dryden' **172** (Aphra Behn); 'Savage' **63**, and 'Pope' **265** (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu); 'Pope' **29**, **142** (Elizabeth Thomas); and 'Swift' **88** (Mary Barber). (Herbert Croft refers to Anne Wharton in 'Young' **30**, **67**.) The publication in 1785 of a revised edition of George Colman and Bonnell Thornton's *Poems by Eminent Ladies* (2 vols., 1755) was no doubt intended to supplement the *Eng. Poets* in this respect.

The few authors recommended by Johnson himself were 'scarcely to be mentioned without a smile'. Instead of Chaucer, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, and others, the *English Poets* had admitted minor poets and 'metrical writers utterly worthless and useless', who merely proved 'what a small quantity of brain' had once been admired for accommodating itself to temporary 'likings and fashions'.[18]

No direct comments by Johnson on Bell's invasion of the London 'monopoly' and the commercial rivalry which followed seem to have survived. When the Scottish bookseller Alexander Donaldson had started selling 'cheap editions of the most popular English books' in London in 1763, Johnson had been 'very angry', even 'loud and violent', at such an 'invasion' of what the London trade 'had ever considered to be secure'. Boswell noted, however, that although he later suggested that 'the exclusive right of authors' might be enlarged to a hundred years, Johnson was by then 'zealous against a perpetuity' (*Life*, i. 438–9). As he wrote in Feb. 1774, 'I would not have the right perpetual', and he told William Strahan a month later that 'It is inconvenient to Society that an useful book should become perpetual and exclusive property' (*Letters*, ii. 125, 130; cf. *Life*, ii. 272–3).

After some forty years as a professional author, Johnson was extremely knowledgeable about the practical workings of the book trade, as is clear from his letter of 12 Mar. 1776 on the subject, in which he shrewdly observed: 'I suppose with all our scholastick ignorance of mankind we are still too knowing to expect that the Booksellers will erect themselves into Patrons and buy and sell under the influence of a disinterested zeal for the promotion of Learning' (*Letters*, ii. 304–8). Even so, one may wonder whether he fully appreciated why the booksellers attached such flattering importance to his involvement with the *English Poets*. What will become clear, however, from his conversation with Boswell in Sept. 1777 is that he had no intention of acting as an obedient publicist for this elaborate enterprise (see i. 20 below).

For its publishers the mere association of Johnson's eminent name with the *English Poets* in fact mattered more than any biographical research or original criticism he might contribute, since it was in itself a crucial marketing device, the literary 'brand name' *par excellence*, which would in itself confirm the edition's superiority to anything Bell might produce.

[18] Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, iii. 79. For a more appreciative survey of the subjects of SJ's *Lives* ('a troop in gilded uniform, | The goodly band Johnsonian'), see James Hurdis, *The Village Curate* (1788), 130–43. This extended passage would no doubt seem somewhat dated by the time it was reprinted in the posthumous edition of *The Village Curate and Other Poems* (1810), 114–26. The variable merit of the minor figures in *Eng. Poets* (1779) was also defended by William Beloe, *Poems and Translations* (1788), pp. ix–xi, in the hope of disarming criticism of his own verse.

As Boswell immediately commented on hearing of the project: 'is not the charm of this publication chiefly owing to the *magnum nomen* in the front of it?' (*Life*, iii. 108). Reviewing the first *Prefaces* in 1779, Edmund Cartwright admitted that he had always assumed that Johnson's name had been merely a 'lure' for prospective purchasers of the collection.[19] The London trade's decision to commission new biographies for their collection was in fact virtually forced on them by Bell's inclusion of lives of the poets in his series.[20] A desire to claim visible superiority to Bell in this respect alone would explain the prominence their advertisements gave to Johnson's name, but, as will become clear, the booksellers were also happy to give the impression that his contribution to the *English Poets* was even more extensive.

Johnson may also have been somewhat unworldly in the matter of financial remuneration. Contemplating a journey to Italy with Mrs Thrale in 1776, he had said: 'I do not see that I could make a book upon Italy; yet I should be glad to get two hundred pounds, or five hundred pounds, by such a work.'[21] Yet, as Edward Dilly told Boswell, he accepted only 200 guineas for his 'Prefaces', a sum to which, as Dilly predicted, the booksellers later voluntarily added a further 100 guineas. Edmond Malone later expressed astonishment at the 'extraordinary' modesty of what Johnson found acceptable: 'Had he asked one thousand guineas, or even fifteen hundred guineas, the booksellers, who knew the value of his name, would doubtless have readily given it.' Malone estimated that the booksellers 'have probably got five thousand guineas by this work in the course of twenty-five years' (*Life*, iii. 111 and n.). Many contemporary literary bargains for much less substantial works, including those struck by Johnson's own acquaintance, only underline the modest terms for which he settled.[22] Financial remuneration was not a matter of indifference to him at this time. On 22

[19] *Monthly Review*, 61 (1779), 1. Cf. SJ's comment that Dryden's 'reputation in time was such, that his name was thought necessary to the success of every poetical or literary performance, and therefore he was engaged to contribute something, whatever it might be, to many publications' ('Dryden' **106**). J. D. Fleeman suggested that association with SJ was also important in establishing copyright in the *Eng. Poets*: 'His 'Prefaces' were inalienable, and so were intended to defend the texts of the Poets' (*Bibliography*, ii. 1353 and n. 6). Not long before his death, SJ discussed with Nichols the possibility of a 'regular edition of his own works': 'he had power, to print such an edition if his health admitted it; but had no power to assign over any edition, unless he could add notes, and so alter them as to make them new works' (*Life*, iv. 409).

[20] For the anonymous biographies in John Bell's *Poets*, usually compiled from earlier printed sources, including SJ's own biographies from 1779, see Bonnell, 'Patchwork', 193–228; the details are summarized in *Bibliography*, ii. 1463–4, 1466, 1470, 1481–2, 1493–4, 1504–6, 1514, 1517.

[21] *Life*, iii. 19. See also Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, viii. 416–17.

[22] The £6,000 John Hawkesworth received for compiling Capt. James Cook's *Voyages . . . in the Southern Hemisphere* (3 vols., 1773) is too unusual to be relevant (*Life*, ii. 247 and n.). In 1767 Goldsmith assembled a modest anthology, *The Beauties of English Poesy* (1767), for which,

July 1777, a few months after his 'bargain' with the booksellers, he told Boswell that he would have to limit his travels later in the summer because 'my money has not held out so well as it used to do' (*Letters*, iii. 39).

Yet Johnson insisted that he had been treated fairly over the *Lives*, as he told John Nichols: ' "Sir, I always said, the Booksellers were a generous set of men. Nor, in the present instance, have I reason to complain. The fact is, not that they have paid me too little, but that I have written too much." '[23] According to the original agreement, he was to provide only 'a concise account of the life of each author' (*Life*, iii. 111). While this limited conception of his task helps to explain its initial appeal to Johnson himself, it was also an important consideration for the booksellers, who had to respond to John Bell's 'invasion' as rapidly as possible. Anything resembling the delays that had dogged some of his earlier projects might threaten the whole enterprise. Those with long memories may have recalled that, thirty years earlier, Johnson had contracted to deliver his *Dictionary* in three years and had in fact taken nine, and that the edition of Shakespeare he planned to complete in eighteen months had also taken nine years.[24] Yet, they must have reasoned, even the ageing and ailing Johnson would surely be able to deliver a few dozen short biographical and critical prefaces while the multi-volume *Works of the English Poets* were being hurriedly printed.

(ii) *Prefaces, Vols. I–IV (1779)*

The gap between authorial conceptions and actual performance is a familiar Johnsonian theme (cf. 'Pope' **89** and n.), an ironic version of which Reynolds once recorded:

according to William Cooke, he 'did nothing but mark the particular passages with a red lead pencil, and for this he got *two hundred pounds*' (*European Mag.* 24 (1793), 94). The agreement (1773) for the publication of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* stipulated £600 for the two volumes originally envisaged (*History*, ed. D. Fairer (1998), i. 27). Hannah More made more than £400 from her tragedy *Percy* (1777), and Fanny Burney sold the copyright of her second novel *Cecilia* for £250 in 1782 (Burney, *Early Journals*, iii. 133 n.; Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (Oxford, 1958), 148, 151).

Thomas Sheridan received £300 for his *Life of Swift* (1784) and a further £300 for editing Swift's *Works* (17 vols., 1785), Mrs Thrale-Piozzi £300 for her *Anecdotes* of SJ (1786), and Arthur Murphy £300 for his *Essay* on SJ (1792) (*J. Misc.*, i. 143; Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, ix. 159, and *Lit. Ill.*, v. 395 n.). In 1777 William Strahan offered Hugh Blair 100 guineas for his *Sermons*, adding a further £100 after the book's success. In 1778 Boswell negotiated further with Dilly and Strahan on Blair's behalf, obtaining £300 for *Sermons*, vol. ii, and £600 each for vols. iii (1790) and iv (1794) (J. A. Cochrane, *Dr. J's Printer* (1964), 53–4). By 1782 Reynolds could command 200 guineas for a full-length portrait (Lipking (1970), 179).

[23] Nichols, *Lit. Anec.*, viii. 416–17 n. For SJ's literary income, see J. D. Fleeman, 'The Revenue of a Writer: SJ's Literary Earnings', in *Studies in the Book Trade in Honour of Graham Pollard* (Oxford, 1975), 211–30.

[24] Cf. *Life*, i. 287 and Reddick, 1–88; *YW*, vii, pp. xvi–xxv.

There are two things which I am confident I can do very well: one is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be executed in the most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion, shewing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the authour promised to himself and to the publick. (*Life*, i. 292)

In 1777 Johnson seems to have resolved not to promise himself or others more than he could easily deliver. As he stated in the 'Advertisement' to the first *Prefaces* (1779), he had accepted 'an undertaking, as it was then presented to my mind, not very tedious or difficult. My purpose was only to have allotted to every Poet an Advertisement, like those which we find in the French Miscellanies, containing a few dates and a general character.' In Edward Dilly's words, Johnson's commission was merely to provide 'a concise account of the life of each authour' included in the *English Poets* (*Life*, iii. 110). Such conciseness in itself always appealed to him, as he had explained in his early 'Life of Boerhaave': 'We could have made it much larger, by adopting flying Reports, and inserting unattested Facts; a close Adherence to Certainty has contracted our Narrative, and hindered it from swelling to that Bulk, at which modern Histories generally arrive' (*Gent. Mag.* (Jan. 1739), 37).

Early in May 1777 Johnson told Boswell that he was 'engaged to write little Lives, and little Prefaces, to a little edition of the English Poets' (*Letters*, iii. 20), and he repeatedly referred over the next few months to his 'little Lives'. His initial attitude is probably reflected in his advice at just this time (19 May 1777) to the Irish historian Charles O'Conor, who had consulted him about a project: 'do what you can easily do, without anxious exactness. Lay the foundation, and leave the superstructure to posterity' (*Letters*, iii. 24).

Yet Johnson had also stated in 1773 that 'he did not think that the life of any literary man in England had been well written' (*Life*, v. 240), and there are signs in the spring and summer of 1777 that he wanted to show that he knew what serious biographical research might involve. He wrote to Boswell on 9 May, for example, enquiring about local information in Scotland about James Thomson, 'as the life we have is very scanty'. Boswell took this request seriously, and by 9 June was able to send some information about Thomson's surviving relatives and friends.[25]

Whatever his initial plans, Johnson found it hard to escape the inevitable distractions entailed by his literary eminence. During May 1777 he was 'compelled' to read a 'poor' tragedy by the author Henry Lucas who was seeking his advice, and then to write the prologue for a performance of Hugh Kelly's *A Word to the Wise* for the benefit of his widow and children

[25] *Boswell in Extremes*, 127, 141; *Life*, iii. 116–18, 133.

(*Letters*, iii. 21, 27; *Poems*, 209–11). A more serious distraction was the notorious trial for forgery of William Dodd, the fashionable clergyman and author, who was sentenced to death on 17 May. Johnson worked energetically first to assist, and then to console, Dodd, who was eventually executed on 27 June 1777 (*Life*, iii. 139–48).[26]

A week later, on 3 July, Johnson repeated in his diary 'a prayer on studies' he had originally composed in 1776, as if trying to refocus his concentration on his biographies (*YW*, i. 260–1).[27] Within a few days (7 July) he was pursuing 'necessary information' about Isaac Watts, a poet he himself had recommended for inclusion in the *English Poets*, but of whose life he knew 'very little'. He was still reminding himself and others of the limited scope of his project: 'My plan does not exact very much; but I wish to distinguish *Watts*; a man who never wrote but for a good purpose' (*Letters*, iii. 38).

Hester Thrale later claimed that Johnson had always been unusually well equipped for his task:

> Mr. Johnson's knowledge of literary history was extensive and surprising: he knew every adventure of every book you could name almost, and was exceedingly pleased with the opportunity which writing the Poets' Lives gave him to display it. He loved to be set to work, and was sorry when he came to the end of the business he was about. (*J. Misc.*, i. 298)

Boswell similarly claimed that Johnson's delight in discussing the 'various merits', characters, and 'progress through the world' of the English poets was clear from his conversation:

> His mind was so full of that kind of information, and it was so well arranged in his memory, that in performing what he had undertaken in this way, he had little more to do than to put his thoughts upon paper, exhibiting first each Poet's life, and then subjoining a critical examination of his genius and works. (*Life*, iv. 34–5)

Johnson's task was in fact by no means as effortless as such accounts may suggest. Mrs Thrale might, indeed, have recalled his later description of himself in Apr. 1780 as 'seeking for something to say about Men of whom I know nothing but their verses, and sometimes very little of them' (*Letters*, iii. 237). For all his 'knowledge of literary history', he would find himself

[26] In the preface to 'The Earl of Somerset, A Tragedy' in his *Poems to Her Majesty* (1779), p. xxxv, Henry Lucas, Student of the Middle Temple, thanked SJ for 'the peculiar kindness of his perusal, emendations, and good opinion of this work'. For Dodd, see A. D. Barker, 'SJ and the Campaign to Save William Dodd', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 31 (1983), 147–80; and J. D. Fleeman, 'Dr J and Revd William Dodd', *Edinburgh Bibliographical Society Transactions*, 6 (1993), 55–6.

[27] See W. McCarthy, 'The Composition of J's *Lives*: A Calendar', *PQ* 60 (1981), 54. While reaching different conclusions at times, I have benefited from this lucid and thoughtful presentation of the evidence.

writing about many less familiar names than Thomson and Watts, about poets of whose lives and works he had little or no detailed knowledge. Although, as he admitted in the 'Advertisement' to *Lives* (1781), he might have 'gleaned many particulars' about some of the more recent poets by consulting their surviving friends, and also knew that for earlier writers original archival research might have been fruitful, the fact is that he had neither the time nor the temperament for such patient, methodical enquiries.

Nevertheless, he wrote on 22 July to his friend Richard Farmer at Cambridge, once more explaining his task: 'The Booksellers of London have undertaken a kind of Body of English Poetry, excluding generally the dramas, and I have undertaken to put before each authours works a sketch of his life, and a character of his writings.' Admitting that of some of his poets 'I know very little, and am afraid I shall not easily supply my deficiencies', Johnson sought Farmer's advice about relevant archival sources at Cambridge. He could instruct the booksellers to 'employ a transcriber' of such materials, or even visit Cambridge himself, 'If you think my inspection necessary'. No response from Farmer to this letter, or indeed to Johnson's later enquiries in 1780 about Cambridge poets, seems to have survived (*Letters*, iii. 43, 257).[28]

Shortly after making these enquiries in Cambridge, Johnson was on his way to Oxford, where he stayed from 28 July to 5 Aug., telling the Thrales: 'I have been searching the library for materials for my lives, and a little I have got' (*Letters*, iii. 45). During this visit he may have learned of the MS material in the Bodleian Library he later used in his lives of John Philips and Edmund Smith (see 'J. Philips' **18–38** and 'Smith' **77** below). There is no sign in the Library's original 'Entrybooks', however, that Johnson or any likely agent consulted particular MSS or printed books during his week in Oxford, and his enquiries may have been mainly exploratory. He may not in fact have been greatly encouraged by the realization of what would be involved in diligent and systematic research, such as his friend Thomas Warton of Trinity College was pursuing in the Bodleian at just this time.[29]

[28] One of SJ's scholarly friends may have reminded him of the MS collections presented to Cambridge University by the antiquary Thomas Baker (1656–1740): see *Gent. Mag.* (1778), 321; (1782), 290. The idea of hiring transcribers could have come from Percy, who 'employed six amanuenses to transcribe from Pepys's Collection', when working in Cambridge on his *Reliques* in 1761 (Shenstone, *Letters*, 597).

[29] As a regular visitor to Oxford, SJ presumably knew of the arrival of Richard Rawlinson's literary MSS at the Bodleian in 1756. Although John Price, the Librarian, told Richard Gough on 10 Nov. 1779 that they were 'now open for any one that wishes to consult them' (Nichols, *Anecdotes of Bowyer* (1782), 100 n.), the Library could offer only a rudimentary guide to the 5,205 volumes, which were not properly catalogued until 1893: see Ian Philip, *The Bodleian Library in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1983), 96–7).

As in the past, Johnson stayed with his friend William Scott, a tutor at University College since 1765 and Professor of Ancient History since 1773. It was presumably during this visit in July 1777 that one of Scott's students, the young poet Thomas Maurice, claimed to have heard him discussing the biographies in which he was 'about to engage at the request of the London booksellers', and 'who *ought* and who *ought not* to be admitted into that immortal catalogue'. Johnson even invited Scott and Maurice to 'write down such a list as our memories supplied, or our judgements suggested' of suitable names for inclusion in the *English Poets*. The elderly Maurice's memories of this distant occasion after the passage of some forty years present a number of problems, however, as he himself was partly aware, and must be treated cautiously.[30]

[30] See Thomas Maurice, *Memoirs of the Author of Indian Antiquities* (2 parts, 1819–20), ii. 25–7. Maurice knew that SJ 'had not the immediate direction of the Lives that were to be written', but tried to disarm this objection by suggesting that 'The work probably at this time was in embryo, and had been only distantly hinted to him, not formally proposed.' For this reason alone Maurice's failure to date the letter about SJ's visit to Oxford is all the more crucial. His previous letter, which refers to a forthcoming visit by SJ, is dated 14 Feb. 1775. This led W. R. Keast in 1970 to assume that he wrote his account of his tutor showing SJ Maurice's recently published poem *The School-Boy*, and of their conversation about the *Eng. Poets*, some three weeks later, after a visit by SJ to Oxford in early Mar. 1775. See W. R. Keast, 'SJ and Thomas Maurice', in W. H. Bond (ed.), *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde* (New York, 1970), 63–79.

Keast failed to notice, however, that Maurice states that SJ's visit was in fact delayed 'for a much longer period than usual' until the end of May 1775. Maurice may well have written the section of the undated letter describing SJ's polite praise of *The School-Boy* (1775) at this time. What seems most likely is that in 1820 he found it convenient to conflate it with part of a later letter about SJ's visit to Oxford in the summer of 1777, when he no doubt discussed the contents of the *Eng. Poets*, whether seriously or as some kind of playful game. There is certainly some retrospective fabrication in the undated letter, such as the odd assertion that his tutor, William Scott, 'must remember the fact' in a letter supposedly about a very recent occasion. This is Maurice's account, such as it is:

> After breakfast, the conversation principally turned on his great work, the 'Lives of the Poets,' in which he was about to engage at the request of the London booksellers; who *ought* and who *ought not* to be admitted into that immortal catalogue; and, after breakfast, he desired Mr. Scott (who I am certain must remember the fact) and myself to take pen and paper, and write down such a list of names as our memories supplied, or our judgements suggested. Mr. Scott, glancing at me, condescendingly asked, 'Are living poets to be recorded?' The Doctor smiling, said, 'Why, no; Mr. Maurice must wait for his meed from some future biographer.' We set our wits to work, and in a short time a considerable list was produced.

From the problematic evidence of Maurice's undated letter, Keast concluded that SJ and the London booksellers were already planning the *Eng. Poets* by Mar. 1775, two years earlier than any other evidence has ever suggested. His argument included the erroneous assumption that Bell's *British Poets* had already appeared in 1774–6, whereas it was its imminent London publication early in 1777 which forced the London trade to respond. It should be noted that Keast himself conceded that the elderly Maurice had 'doctored' the text of his letters for publication in 1820, including the crucial passage about the *Eng. Poets* (77–8). Although Lipking (1970), 411, accepted that the *Lives* were 'in embryo' by 1775, Keast's interpretation of Maurice's confusing evidence has not been widely influential.

On 5 Aug. 1777 Johnson left Oxford, where Mrs Thrale sensed from his letters that he had been depressed ('Perhaps the bad State of Affairs abroad lowers your Spirits . . . we let the Americans torment us on purpose'). He now travelled on to his birthplace Lichfield, where he complained about his 'miserable, distresful, tedious nights'. There is no sign that he tried, or wished, to start work on his biographies while visiting his birthplace: as he told Mrs Thrale, he 'loitered, and what is worse, loitered with very little pleasure. The time has run away, as most time runs, without account, without use, and without memorial' (*Letters*, ed. Chapman, ii. 188; *Letters*, iii. 55, 60).[31] Later than planned, and almost by now as if willing to postpone the task that awaited him, Johnson left on 30 Aug. for Ashbourne in Derbyshire, to stay with his former Lichfield schoolfellow John Taylor (1711–88), a prosperous and worldly clergyman and farmer. Their lifelong friendship is curious, given that he considered Taylor's 'habits . . . by no means sufficiently clerical', and that 'Taylor was as violent a Whig as Johnson was a Tory', as illustrated in at least one heated argument during this visit (*Life*, iii. 155–6, 181).

Eager to add a detailed record of the genesis of what was likely to be his last major literary work to the biographical information about Johnson he was already assiduously collecting, Boswell travelled down from Edinburgh to join him at Ashbourne on 14 Sept. He had already referred in a letter of 9 June to 'Your edition of the "English Poets" ' and, writing on 9 Sept. to announce his impending arrival, did so again, making clear what he hoped would be a prominent topic of their conversations: 'I have keen expectations of delight from your edition of the English Poets.' He could also tell Johnson that he had been pursuing further information about Thomson in Edinburgh (*Life*, iii. 117, 133).

When told of Boswell's imminent arrival, Hester Thrale drily reminded Johnson that 'nothing that you say for this Week at least will be lost to Posterity' (*Letters*, ed. Chapman, ii. 209), and this knowledge may in fact have inhibited him. Although Boswell later claimed that 'From this meeting at Ashbourne I derived a considerable accession to my Johnsonian store'

[31] According to a story reported by a Revd Mr Parker, SJ wrote some of his biographies at Elizabeth Aston's house in Lichfield: 'A great portion of the *Lives of the Poets* was written at Stow Hill: he had a table by one of the windows, which was frequently surrounded by five or six ladies engaged in work or conversation' (*J. Misc.*, ii. 414). Since SJ did not visit Lichfield in the summers of 1778 and 1780, the story must refer either to his visit in Aug. 1777, when there is no sign that he had started work on his *Prefaces*; or to his brief return on his way back to London at the end of Oct. 1777, when he had only just started writing; or to his two-week visit to Lichfield from 22 May 1779, when there is nothing else to suggest that he had resumed work on the later *Prefaces*. He next visited Lichfield in the autumn of 1781, several months after their publication. Mr Parker's informant no doubt remembered SJ writing *something* at Stowe Hill among the ladies of Lichfield, but surely not a 'great portion' of the *Lives*.

(*Life*, iii. 208), he was in fact disappointed to learn nothing very specific about the poetical biographies, which Johnson seemed reluctant to discuss. As his earlier references to 'your edition' indicate, Boswell had assumed that Johnson was to be not merely biographer for the multi-volume collection, but its supervising editor:

> I was somewhat disappointed in finding that the edition of the *English Poets* for which he was to write prefaces and lives was not an undertaking directed by him, but he was to furnish a preface and life to any poet the booksellers pleased, just as I [as a lawyer] will furnish a paper upon any cause. I asked him afterwards if he would do this to any dunce's works if they pleased. 'Yes,' said he, 'and *say* he was a dunce.' He did not seem much to relish talking of this edition.[32]

Johnson was evidently irritated by Boswell's surprise that he was willing to accept such limited responsibility for the *English Poets*, and by his curiosity about a project on which he had still not started work. Even so, Johnson said enough to make clear that he had no intention of subordinating his critical judgement to the commercial interests of the booksellers. The subject of English poetry inevitably cropped up in later conversations. Boswell had brought with him the *Poems* (1748) of the Jacobite William Hamilton of Bangour, perhaps with some hope of winning a place in the London collection for this favourite poet. Johnson commented dismissively that 'there was no power of thinking in his verses', and Boswell was left, as many others would be over the next few years, 'somewhat sorry that a poet whom I had long read with fondness was not approved by Dr. Johnson. I comforted myself with thinking that the beauties were too delicate for the Doctor's robust perceptions.'[33]

On 17 Sept. they discussed the question of whether biographers should write frankly about their subjects' vices, such as the heavy drinking of Parnell and Addison (see 'Parnell' **6** and 'Addison' **117** below). On the following evening Johnson was even prepared to envisage the possibility of a mega-collection of all the English poets who had ever published a volume of verse, speculating that it would involve at least 500 poets (an underestimation), and conceding that 'in every volume of poems something good might be found'. It is unclear, however, whether the context of this discussion was the arbitrariness of the 'canon' which the *English Poets* would inevitably seem to establish. Another topic was the 'bad style' of Thomas Warton's recent *Poems* (1777). Johnson's opinion that Warton 'puts a very common thing in a strange dress until he does not know it himself, and thinks other

[32] *Boswell in Extremes*, 150; *Life*, iii. 137.
[33] *Boswell in Extremes*, 152–3; *Life*, iii. 150–1.

people do not know it' ominously anticipated his defiant lack of sympathy with fashionable poetic taste in the later *Lives*.[34]

While there was lively talk about other authors and literary topics, and Johnson struck Boswell as 'more uniformly social, cheerful and alert, than I had almost ever seen him', nothing suggests that his biographies were at the forefront of his mind. An excursion to Ilam on 22 Sept. seems only coincidentally to have led them to the 'recess' in which Congreve allegedly wrote *The Old Batchelour* (see 'Congreve' 1 and n.). That evening, with his visit almost at an end, Boswell again raised the subject of Johnson's biographies and the editorial policy of the *English Poets*, asking whether 'bawdy' verse would be included. Talking, as he rarely did later, as if sharing responsibility for such policy, Johnson claimed to have arranged for George Steevens to 'castrate' the Earl of Rochester's poems for the edition, and discussed the limitations of Gilbert Burnet's life of the poet. He also defended the inclusion of Prior's verse in its entirety, denying that it contained anything 'that will excite to lewdness'.[35]

Boswell could report no more. Perhaps nosing about for any signs that Johnson had actually started work on his biographies, he discovered that he was in fact composing a sermon for his host, John Taylor: 'At this time I found, upon his table, a part of one which he had newly begun to write.' Johnson himself mentions this sermon in his diary on 17 and 21 Sept.: by 13 Oct. he had written four sermons for his friend (*YW*, i. 276–7, 279; *Life*, iii. 180). In mid-Sept. Johnson also noted that he was reading Suetonius' 'Lives of the Caesars', but there is no sign that this was in conscious preparation for writing his own biographies (*YW*, i. 175). It was presumably in frustration at Johnson's reluctance to discuss the project that Boswell wrote within a day or two to Edward Dilly for information about its origins (see i. 7–8 above).

Six months had now passed since Johnson agreed to write several dozen 'little Lives' for the London booksellers. By Oct. 1777, John Bell had already published twenty-two volumes of his *Poets of Great Britain*, including such popular poets as Milton, Pope, Dryden, and Prior.[36] Ten different London printers were meanwhile hard at work on the fifty-six volumes of the rival edition of the *Works of the English Poets*. Although Johnson had at first seemed to approach his task in an optimistic and businesslike spirit, there is no evidence that he had so far written a single word.

[34] *Boswell in Extremes*, 156, 159–60; *Life*, iii. 154–5, 158–60.

[35] *Boswell in Extremes*, 178, 180; *Life*, iii. 187, 189, 191–2; see 'Congreve' 1 and n., 'Rochester' **12**, and 'Prior' **55** and n. below.

[36] T. F. Bonnell, 'John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain*: The "Little Trifling Edition" Revisited', *MP* 85 (1987), 131.

With the approach of autumn, he seems at last to have felt some urgency. Boswell left Ashbourne on 24 Sept. and next day Johnson wrote to ask Mrs Thrale, who was about to leave for Brighton, to send the multi-volume *Biographia Britannica* (1747–66) from Streatham 'to my habitation' (*Letters*, iii. 76), presumably with a fairly imminent return to London in mind. He must have realized by now that he would have to rely for basic information, especially about the minor poets, on some such cyclopedic reference work, and the *Biographia* would eventually become an important source (see i. 88–91). Only a few days earlier he had told Boswell that he regretted having declined an invitation to supervise a new edition of the *Biographica Britannica*, as if unconsciously making some kind of proprietorial claim over a reference work on which he about to become heavily dependent (*Life*, iii. 174).[37]

Although Johnson frequently lamented his own idleness, it is tempting to interpret the entry in his diary on 5 Oct. 1777—'de tempore per desidiam perdito' (time lost by sloth)—as a reproof of his particular failure to apply himself to his biographies. Next day he told Hester Thrale that 'When I come to town I am to be very busy about my Lives', implying that he had *not* so far been 'very busy' with them at Ashbourne. He even added – how seriously is unclear – 'Could not you do some of them for me?' (*Letters*, iii. 81). He did not in fact return to London for another six weeks, and seems eventually to have postponed doing so until he had some clear evidence of progress to allay the anxieties of his publishers. As he explained to Mrs Thrale on 13 Oct., 'You know, I have some work to do. I did not set to it very soon, and if I should go up to London with nothing done, what would be said, but that I was – who can tell what? I therefore stay till I can bring up something to stop their mouths, and then –' (*Letters*, iii. 83).

Johnson's diary reveals that he had by then at last started work. Although it is not known what resources he had taken with him on his summer travels, or were available in John Taylor's library, on 11 Oct. he noted 'Finished the life of Cowley', and, two days later, 'Finished the life of Denham'. He also wrote out, apparently on 13 Oct., a list of thirteen poets in two columns:

Milton	Sprat
Cowley	Roscommon
Butler	Rochester
Waller	Congreve

[37] The original record of SJ's conversation on 19 Sept. 1777 in *Boswell in Extremes* does not mention the *Biographia*.

Dryden	Fenton
Prior	Broome
Pope	

The first column may include poets to whom he expected to give extended treatment, and the second a less important series (*YW*, i. 279), but neither list throws much light on the actual chronology of his progress. As for the supposedly completed 'Cowley', it must seem unlikely that in a few days he had written more than a version of the opening biographical section. He was still thinking in terms of 'little Lives' and the extended central discussion of 'Metaphysical' poetry was probably a later addition.

Although Johnson intended to have more to show before returning to London, there is no firm evidence of further progress by the time he left Ashbourne at the end of Oct. 1777. By now his task was clearly weighing on him. On 16 Oct. he told Mrs Thrale: 'I purpose now to come to London as soon as I can, for I have a deal to look after, but hope I shall get through the whole business' (*Letters*, iii. 84). Reminders in his diary on 20 Oct. to write again to Richard Farmer at Cambridge (see headnote to 'Butler') and to Percival Stockdale, the editor and biographer of Waller, suggest that he had settled on Butler and Waller as his next subjects: they follow Cowley in the first of the lists above, and were almost certainly the next lives to be written. Johnson also reminded himself in his diary to visit Sir John Hawkins when he returned to London, perhaps with some thought of consulting him about sources: in 1774 he had described Hawkins's 'Life of Walton' in his edition of *The Compleat Angler* (1760) as 'very diligently collected, and very elegantly composed', and his friend had recently published a huge *History of Music* (5 vols., 1776) (*YW*, i. 279; *Letters*, ii. 139).

As he set out for London via Lichfield and Birmingham, Johnson was gritting his teeth, telling Mrs Thrale from Lichfield on 3 Nov.: 'It will be proper for me to work pretty diligently now for some time. I hope to get through, though so many weeks have passed. Little lives and little criticisms may serve' (*Letters*, iii. 93). Back in Bolt Court on the evening of 6 Nov., he wrote immediately to Mrs Thrale at Brighton, having found that his earlier instructions had been ignored: 'Be pleased to write word to Streatham that they should find me the Biographia Britannica, as soon as is possible' (*Letters*, iii. 93).[38] The *Biographia Britannica* is a source for too many of the shorter lives to be a guide to his precise progress. While he may conceivably have rattled off some of his short accounts of minor Restoration poets before the end of 1777 to placate his conscience and the booksellers,

[38] One might expect SJ to have written 'send me' rather than 'find me' in this sentence.

there is nothing to confirm this, and it is more likely that he needed the *Biographia* for his account of Waller.

Apart from joining the Thrales at Brighton for a few days in mid-Nov., Johnson evidently applied himself after his return to London. According to John Nichols, the printer of the *Prefaces* and, in effect, the editor of the *English Poets*, 'Cowley', the first of the biographies, was 'begun at the press' in Dec. 1777, although Nichols remembered that '*Butler* was the life in which the Doctor at that time more particularly prided himself' (*Gent. Mag.* (Jan. 1785), 9 n.). In view of Johnson's later opinion that 'Cowley' was 'the best of the whole, on account of the dissertation which it contains on the *Metaphysical Poets*' (*Life*, iv. 38), Nichols's recollection only increases the likelihood that he had not yet written this substantial 'dissertation'. (For evidence of the early printing of 'Butler', see headnote.)

Encouraged by learning, presumably from Nichols, that Johnson was at last getting into his stride, the 'Proprietors' announced in *The Gazetteer* of 22 Jan. 1778 (and elsewhere over the next few days) that what they described as 'Dr. JOHNSON'S EDITION of the ENGLISH POETS' was 'in great forwardness at the press, and nearly compleated'. This optimistic claim referred, of course, primarily to the *Works of the English Poets* rather than to Johnson's biographies, even if one or two of these were by now also technically 'at the press'. The misleading description of the project as 'Johnson's Edition' underlines yet again the importance of his name to the proprietors, and the continuing threat posed by Bell's edition is implicit in their hope that 'the superior execution of this complete and uniform edition will, on its appearance, merit the approbation of the Public'.

The morale of their figurehead was, however, wavering early in 1778. On 24 Jan. Johnson told Boswell that he was making slow progress with the proofs of Lord Hailes's *Annals of Scotland*, ruefully admitting that, 'if he saw my languid neglect of my own affairs, he would rather pity than resent my neglect of his. I hope to mend' (*Letters*, iii. 104; *Bibliography*, ii. 1255–6). He was in poor health in Feb. 1778, though not so poor as to justify a confident report — which must have startled his publishers — in the *Morning Post* of 27 Feb. that he was on his deathbed, 'without the smallest hopes' of recovery (McGuffie, 218).

Johnson must in fact have been working on 'Waller', although references to particular biographies in his numerous and often undated notes to John Nichols, his printer, throw less light on his progress than might be hoped, in that they have usually been dated by a circular process based on assumptions about that progress itself. The first such note, mentioning material to be included in 'Waller', probably belongs to Mar. 1778 (*Letters*, iii. 109–10), and he had certainly received the proofs of 'Waller' by 17 Apr., when

Boswell noted that Johnson was unwilling to read them because it was Good Friday. By then Boswell had already seen, 'with wonder and delight', the proofs of the earlier 'Denham' on 19 Mar. at the Dillys' premises, and two days later saw 'a good portion' of 'Cowley', which 'was still greater than his Denham'.[39]

Johnson's conversation during Boswell's latest visit to London touched on several topics relevant to later biographies. Between 8 and 10 Apr. 1778, for example, he discussed Swift's biographers, the personalities of Pope and Edward Young, Pope's *Homer*, the importance of rhyme in poetry, and some Latin verses by Edmund Smith.[40] Boswell did not, however, hear him refer to 'Dryden', eventually one of the most elaborate of the biographies, on which he must have been at work by Easter 1778. Noticeably, Johnson was by now no longer referring to his 'little Lives', a sign that his conception of the scope of the project was changing.[41] In his annual Easter retrospect, however, he wrote gloomily that the past year had been 'a very melancholy and shameful blank; so little has been done that days and months are without any trace'. His health had been poor, even with the help of opium. Although 'I have written a little of the lives of the poets, I think with all my usual vigour', his continuing 'vacillation and vagrancy of mind' prompted renewed resolutions to 'spend my time with more method' (*YW*, i. 291–2).[42]

Boswell meanwhile remained eager to encourage and assist, producing still more information about Thomson, probably without getting much response from Johnson, whose mind had not yet turned to the Scottish poet.[43] On 12 May 1778, Boswell made a much more presumptuous intervention, by calling on Hugh Campbell, Earl of Marchmont, to ask him to favour Johnson with his recollections of his friend Alexander Pope. Although Johnson had earlier predicted that Marchmont 'will tell *me* nothing', the Earl readily agreed to call on him on the following day for this very purpose. Johnson was staying at Streatham with the Thrales and, when Boswell triumphantly arrived to announce his coup, snubbed him with unexpected severity and refused to return to London to meet Lord

[39] Charles Burney told Mrs Thrale, 4 Mar. 1778, that SJ 'had been at a full dose of Opium, again . . . He is *not well* — nor perhaps ever will be much better than he has been for some time past — & *that* is melancholy & heart-breaking' (*Letters*, ed. A. Ribeiro, SJ, i (Oxford, 1991), 245); *Boswell in Extremes*, 221–3, 297.

[40] *Boswell in Extremes*, 251, 253, 257–8, 264–5; *Life*, iii. 249, 251, 256–7, 269.

[41] As late as 25 May 1780, SJ described 'Congreve' as 'one of the best of the little lives', but by then only to differentiate them from his more elaborate biographies (*Letters*, iii. 262).

[42] For SJ's tendency from the beginning to refer to his biographies as 'lives' and 'the lives of the poets' rather than as 'Prefaces', see i. 48–9 below.

[43] *Life*, iii. 350–60; Carnie (1956), 74.

Marchmont. Later in the day, his mind evidently still running on this matter, he pointedly observed: 'How foolish it was in Pope to give all his friendship to Lords, who thought they honoured him by being with him . . . and then always saying, "I do not value you for being a Lord;" which was a sure sign that he did' (*Life*, iii. 344–7).

Johnson was presumably irritated by what Boswell himself later admitted had been 'over-exultation' in showing what he could achieve through his social contacts, which 'humbled [Johnson] too much' (see 'Pope' headnote). Yet he may also have been reluctant to make the effort to focus at such short notice on an important interview about Pope when he was in fact preoccupied with 'Dryden'. (He did not in fact start work on 'Pope' for another two and a half years.) Boswell presumably had the good sense to keep to himself his suggestion, when Marchmont expressed some doubts about Johnson's political impartiality, that he should revise the 'Life of Pope' when it was complete. Fortunately, he managed to organize, with greater tact, another meeting between Johnson and Lord Marchmont a year later.[44]

On the face of it, Johnson may seem to have spent most of the spring and summer of 1778 working on 'Dryden', often irritated, as he repeatedly admits, by such matters as the perplexing chronology of Dryden's numerous plays (see 'Dryden' **11** and n.). He had written 'a great part of it' by mid-July, and it was 'very far advanced' by 27 July, as he told Nichols, his printer, in a cryptic note, which also refers for the first time to the unexpected length of his biographies. Johnson's publishers may already have conveyed through Nichols some concern about his slow progress: 'You now have all *Cowley*. I have been drawn to a great length, but *Cowley* or *Waller* never had any critical examination before. I am very far advanced in *Dryden*, who will be long too. The next great life I purpose to be *Milton's*' (*Letters*, iii. 120–1, 122–3).

Since 'Cowley' had supposedly been 'Finished' in Oct. 1777, had gone to press in Dec. 1777, and been read in proof by Boswell in Mar. 1778, the phrasing of Johnson's reference to it some four months later can only mean that he had recently expanded it, presumably by adding at least the long central 'dissertation' on Metaphysical poetry ('Cowley' **50–101**). This would explain why Nichols had only recently received 'all *Cowley*' (though whether in MS or corrected proofs is unclear), and also why the writing of 'Dryden' had been so protracted. There is other evidence to suggests that he may also have recently expanded 'Butler' and 'Waller', both apparently completed much earlier (see headnotes).

[44] *Boswell in Extremes*, 332–8; Boswell, *Laird of Auchinleck*, 101–2; *Life*, iii. 342–5, 392.

By the spring of 1778 Johnson's conception of his task had evidently changed considerably.[45] Instead of the 'little Lives' commissioned by the booksellers, he was now concentrating on a series of 'great' lives, planning to move on to 'Milton' once 'Dryden' was finished, and envisaging

[45] SJ's changing conception of his task early in 1778 may have been influenced by the appearance on 6 Apr. 1778 of Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, vol. ii (Warton, *Corresp*., 394 n.). In his dedication to Percy's *Reliques* (1765) SJ had stated that 'the barbarous productions of unpolished ages' enabled the 'active or comprehensive mind . . . to inquire by what gradations barbarity was civilized, grossness refined, and ignorance instructed', and Percy himself explained that his collection would illustrate 'the gradual improvements of the English language and poetry from the earliest ages down to the present' (i, pp. vi–vii, x). Warton's 'Preface' to his *History*, vol. i (1774), had offered a similar perspective: 'We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance' (i, pp. i–ii).

Yet by the end of vol. i Warton was already suggesting that 'the manners of romance are better calculated to answer the purposes of pure poetry, to captivate the imagination, and to produce surprise, than the fictions of classical antiquity' (i. 434). His conclusion to vol. ii (quoted with approval in *Gent. Mag*. (June 1778), 272), in which his narrative reached the Reformation, claimed that later enlightenment and refinement had in fact proved inimical to 'Romantic poetry': 'Ignorance and superstition, so opposite to the real interests of human society, are the parents of imagination.' The 'catholic worship' suppressed at the Reformation had been both 'picturesque' and essentially 'poetical' in encouraging 'credulity' and 'a general propensity to the Marvellous', and had 'strengthened the belief of spectres, demons, witches, and incantations'. The 'savage pomp and the capricious heroism of the baronial manners' had 'framed rich materials for the minstrel-muse'.

All this was to disappear with the later triumph of 'civility' and 'uniformity', 'the force of reason and inquiry', 'the study of the classics', 'reflection and philosophy': 'Judgment was advanced above imagination, and rules of criticism were established. The brave eccentricities of original genius, and the daring hardiness of native thought, were intimidated by metaphysical sentiments of perfection and refinement.' As Warton concluded, 'We have parted with extravagancies that are above propriety, with incredibilities that are more acceptable than truth, and with fictions that are more valuable than reality' (*History*, ii. 462–3).

It may be merely coincidental that, just as Warton was professing such nostalgia for lost 'fictions', 'extravagancies', and 'incredibilities' in Apr. 1778, SJ seems to have found a new sense of purpose in his biographies, implicitly accepting the challenge of defending the 'propriety', 'truth', and 'reality' which Warton found so poetically tepid. SJ himself had always considered belief in 'enchantment' and 'supernatural agents', and a taste for 'strange events and fabulous transactions', however understandable in Shakespeare's day, morally dangerous in the present: 'The mind, which has feasted on the luxurious wonders of fiction, has no taste of the insipidity of truth' (*YW*, vii. 3, 81–2; 'Collins' 8 and n.).

Warton's *History*, vol. iii (1781) would in fact carry his survey only to the end of the 16th century. Yet SJ, who had congratulated Warton in July 1754 on his *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1754) (*Letters*, i. 81), would remember his argument in this earlier work that English poetry, far from acquiring the new refinement SJ valued, had in fact degenerated in the late 17th century:

> imagination gave way to correctness, sublimity of description to delicacy of sentiment, and majestic allegory to conceit and epigram. Poets began now to be more attentive to words, than to things and objects. The nicer beauties of happy expression were preferred to the daring strokes of great conception. Satire, that bane of the sublime, was imported from France. The muses were debauched at court, and polite life, and familiar manners, became their only themes. The simple dignity of Milton was either entirely neglected, or mistaken for bombast and insipidity, by the refined readers of a dissolute age, whose taste and manners were equally vitiated. (2nd edn., 1762, ii. 111–12)