

LOVING
DR. JOHNSON

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HELEN DEUTSCH

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INTRODUCTION

THE BEGINNING, IN WHICH
NOTHING IS FOUND

Mr. Thrale's attentions and my own now became so acceptable to him, that he often lamented to us the horrible condition of his mind, which he said was nearly distracted; and though he charged us to make him odd solemn promises of secrecy on so strange a subject, yet when we waited on him one morning, and heard him, in the most pathetic terms, beg the prayers of Dr. Delap, who had left him as we came in, I felt excessively affected with grief, and well remember my husband involuntarily lifted up one hand to shut his mouth, from provocation at hearing a man so wildly proclaim what he could at last persuade no one to believe; and what, if true, would have been so very unfit to reveal.

HESTER LYNCH THRALE PIOZZI, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the Last Twenty Years of His Life*

The names of many greater writers are inscribed on the walls of Westminster Abbey; but scarcely anyone lies there whose heart was more acutely responsive during life to the deepest and tenderest emotions. In visiting that strange gathering of departed heroes and statesmen and philanthropists and poets, there are many whose words and deeds have a far greater influence on our imagination; but there are very few whom, when all has been said, we can love so heartily as Samuel Johnson.

LESLIE STEPHEN, *Samuel Johnson*¹

Now to my word.

It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me."

I have sworn't.

Hamlet, 1.5.110-12

The Samuel Johnson who has lived in the Anglo-American popular imagination for the last two hundred years is as familiar, as clubbable, as a childhood uncle, as charming and commodifiable as the image of his cat Hodge that festoons the entries of a recent popular abridgement of his Dictionary.² He is

known for his quotable conversation and for his emblematic gestures — kicking the stone to refute Berkeley thus, comparing women preachers to dancing dogs, toasting the next insurrection of slaves in the West Indies, rejecting an anonymous gift of new shoes as a proud but destitute young Oxford scholar, admonishing Hester Thrale to sympathize with the poor who love the smells of Porridge Island, praying annually for his dead wife, standing in the rain at Uttoxeter market to do penance for long-past neglect of a paternal command. This Johnson is portable — there is at least one Johnson Handbook and a pocket book of his insults³ — and he is reassuring. This is the Johnson who comes to Leslie Stephen's mind as he views the walls of Westminster Abbey, the Johnson whose acutely responsive heart inspires others to love him heartily. This book, whose subject is that love, will give many examples of Johnson the familiar. But Stephen, let's not forget, is walking through an illustrious graveyard, and each of the categories with which he characterizes that eclectic and "strange gathering" of the dead applies to Johnson. Thrale's anecdote reminds us that the popular idealization of a man who comes to encapsulate all the famous English dead is shadowed by a darker version, as immortality is shadowed by mortality.

Hester Lynch Thrale — the biographer who lived with Johnson for intermittent short periods during almost twenty of his happiest years in the realm of domestic privacy that he himself considered the stuff of the genre — provides the tonal counterpoint to Stephen's celebration of the hearty communal love of a celebrity who is public, indeed national, property. "The business of the biographer" — Johnson had written in his Rambler "on the dignity and usefulness of biography" for October 13, 1750, sixteen years before the moment Thrale records — "is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue."⁴ In the case of the biography of an author — as Johnson himself, a major innovator of the form in his prefatory *Lives of the Poets*, well knew — there is an added obligation to balance the moral effects of the work against the inevitable mortal shortcomings of an individual life. No biographer of Johnson experienced this potential conflict between "vulgar greatness" and "minute details" more intensely than Thrale, in whom Johnson confided "a Secret far dearer to him than his Life," along with a padlock and fetters to use in the event that the secret — uncontrollable madness — should become public. Such private knowledge, she wrote in her journal, "contradict[s] the Maxim of Rochefoucault, that no Man is a Hero to his Valet de Chambre. — Johnson is more a Hero to me than to any one — & I have been more to him for Intimacy, than ever was

any Man's Valet de Chambre." Having witnessed the horrific scene she describes in my epigraph, Hester is left alone by her husband in order "to prevail on him to quit his close habitation in the court, and come with us to Streat-ham, where I undertook the care of [Johnson's] health, and had the honour and happiness of contributing to its restoration."⁷

Characterized by later biographers as mother-substitute, potential wife, and dutiful daughter to Johnson, Thrale, who married (in a Roman Catholic ceremony) the Italian singing master Gabriel Piozzi after her husband's death and shortly before Johnson's own death, became for many an ungrateful betrayer of both her famous friend and her country.⁸ Johnson himself provided the foundation for this construction of Thrale, responding to the news of her marriage with these famous words:

If I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously married, if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If You have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your Fame, and your country, may your folly do you no further mischief.⁹

His final letter to her is fraught with the emotional vulnerability that characterizes Stephen's portrait:

When Queen Mary took the resolution of sheltering herself in England, the Archbishop of St. Andrew's attempting to dissuade her, attended on her journey and when they came to the irremovable Stream that separated the two kingdoms, walked by her side into the water, in the middle of which he seized her bridle, and with earnestness proportioned to her danger, and his own affection, pressed her to return. The Queen went forward. — If the parallel reaches thus far; may it go no further. The tears stand in my eyes.

The errant geography of this comparison is striking — the Catholic Mary Stuart takes refuge in England to her ultimate destruction, while the Protestant Hester Thrale, for the duration of Johnson's life, remains in Italy, "seduce[d]" in Johnson's view, by "phantoms of imagination" and desire.¹⁰ Johnson uses this historical anecdote to persuade Thrale to return home, but the anecdote renders home as threateningly unattainable. We will return to the anecdote and the idea of wandering throughout what follows. For now I want to focus on Johnson's moment of sentiment, his contemplation of the anecdotal conflation of past and present, Mary Stuart and Thrale, in an acknowledgment of loss: "The tears stand in my eyes." Thrale from that time on was dead to Johnson; as he told Frances Burney, "I drive her quite from my mind.