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The Philosophical Biographer: Doubt and Dialectic in Johnson's "Lives of the Poets"

David Wheeler

University of Southern Mississippi

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The Philosophical Biographer: Doubt and Dialectic in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*

Martin Maner / Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988. Pp. 187.

Johnson scholars will welcome Martin Maner's *The Philosophical Biographer* both because it is an illuminating book and because so few volumes have been devoted to Johnson as biographer. While Robert Folkenflik's *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), treats Johnson's biographical theory and practice throughout his life writings, and Thomas Kaminski's *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford, 1987) covers the formation of Johnson's biographical art, Maner is the first, curiously, to offer a book-length, thematic study of *The Lives of the Poets*. The book's subtitle might suggest that it combines a rehash of Johnson's skepticism with a Marxist reading of the biographies. The work, however, is neither of these things; in fact, the myriad ways—supplementary, not contradictory—in which Maner employs these two terms render the book much less thematic than we might anticipate and less reductive than we might fear.

Maner begins his "attempt to link Johnson's dialectic with the epistemological presuppositions that support it" (p. 1) by identifying the philosophical influences that shaped Johnson into what Maner considers a transitional figure between periods dominated by deductive certainty and inductive probabilism. Since Johnson's thought often seems to originate from several sources simultaneously, Maner's arguments are not always convincing; and if they are, they often derive from Doug Patey's impressive *Probability and Literary Form* (Cambridge, 1984).

Fortunately, Maner largely abandons this influence study and, in his second chapter, explores different kinds of doubt that characterize Johnson's thought process and the effect they will have on the biographer's readers: "Whatever the psychological bases for Johnson's biographical skepticism might have been, its ultimate philosophical purpose was the education of the reader's faculty of judgment" (p. 32). Johnson's habitual practice of distrusting his "evidence," of weighing (often antithetical) possibilities, of just plain thinking out loud produces provocative forms of dialectic: self-debate, engagement with a source, wrestling with a subject's created self, or playing to and then undercutting a reader's expectation. Witnessing this active dialectical process demands a reader's participation, and Maner is at least mainly correct in asserting that such dialectic "transfers authority from text to reader" (p. 44). I think, however, that Johnson often reclaims—or attempts to reclaim—authority in the magisterial concluding sentences of the major lives.

The bulk of Maner's study departs from generalizations about Johnson's thought process to analyze the use of doubt and dialectic in four of the major biographies included in *The Lives of the Poets*: those of Savage, Swift, Milton, and Pope. Maner, in these almost self-contained essays, is less reductive than many authors engaged in thematic studies largely because he adapts his key terms to suit his critical enterprise at hand. Each of these biographies presented Johnson with its own distinct task and elicited its own kind of dialectic. In his essays on the *Life of Swift* and the *Life of Milton* Maner examines Johnson's interaction with his biographical predecessors, who at once play dual roles as source and antagonist. Correcting some prevailing assumptions that Johnson set out to damage Swift's

reputation, Maner demonstrates how Johnson's skepticism is directed both at Swift's multifaceted career and at the account of it given by Johnson's old friend, John Hawkesworth.

While Maner's study of the *Life of Milton* covers some of the same ground explored recently in essays by Stephen Fix, it is also the essay most closely related to his introductory, philosophical discussion.¹ In examining Johnson's revision of Milton's previous biographies, Maner finds "implicit in this revision . . . a shift in the notion of probable truth itself, away from the idea that probability inheres in a consensus of authorities and toward the idea that probability inheres in an act of individual judgment that evaluates evidence by juxtaposing and weighing degrees of likelihood" (p. 113). What Maner fails to consider, however, is Johnson's own motive in wishing to overturn a consensus of opinion on Milton: Johnson is not merely representative of an epistemological shift; he is positively engaged in the historical activity of trying to rechannel the course of English poetry, and the public estimation of Milton necessarily figures prominently in his agenda.

With the pieces on Savage and Pope, we see Maner at his best. He is concerned not so much with generalizing about eighteenth-century epistemology as he is with analyzing the rhetorical structure of specific passages, and he is superb at such analysis. A rhetorician is vitally concerned with his or her audience, and Maner focuses here on how Johnson facilitates the reader's formation of moral judgment. As Maner realizes, Johnson's audience was "already primed to see Savage's story in pathetic and melodramatic terms on the one hand or in ironic and satiric terms on the other" (p. 61). Maner claims convincingly that "Johnson's control over the reader's sympathies involves a process of anticipating expectations, heightening them, and finally curbing them or allowing them only limited release" (p. 68). Such a process engages the reader directly and emotionally in the act of judging the morally ambiguous Savage, whose biography has generated such diverse readings over the years.

When he arrives at the *Life of Pope*, which he calls a "masterpiece of dialectical rhetoric" (p. 121), Maner gives free reign to his analytical skills. "Johnson virtually invented a rhetoric of biography," Maner asserts, "and one of its distinctive features was an art of contrast deriving from a specific way of encouraging the reader to think about judgment" (p. 122). An example of Maner's effectiveness can be drawn from his discussion of Johnson's familiar description of Pope's famous grotto: "Here he [Pope] planted the vines and the quincunx which his verses mention, and being under the necessity of making a subterraneous passage to a garden on the other side of the road he adorned it with fossil bodies, and dignified it with the title of a grotto: a place of silence and retreat, from which he endeavored to persuade his friends and himself that cares and passions could be excluded." Maner glides through this passage phrase by phrase, pointing out ironies and rhythmic shifts, showing how Johnson "evokes an entire complex of attitudes" (p. 132). Maner then characteristically links this passage with the biography as a whole: "The grotto is a

1/See three essays by Stephen Fix: "Distant Genius: Johnson and the Art of Milton's Life," *Modern Philology* 81 (1984): 244-64, "Johnson and the Duty of Reading *Paradise Lost*," *ELH* 52 (1985): 649-71, and "The Contexts and Motives of Johnson's *Life of Milton*," in *Domestick Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography*, ed. David Wheeler (Lexington, Ky., 1987), pp. 106-32.

revealing detail that suggests much about broader topics: Pope's character, his knack for ingenious adaptation, and his strategic approach to life, work, and play" (p. 132). Through such analysis, we can learn a great deal about Johnson's biographical process and about the relationship between thought and expression.

The problem of "how to know" was one that Johnson grappled with throughout his career, and perhaps this struggle is most apparent in his life writings, where unreliable sources, complex individual personalities and motives, and readers' preconceptions must be accounted for. Biography is a central enterprise in the Johnson canon precisely because its purpose, for Johnson, is the moral improvement of mankind. Maner concludes that "the Johnsonian rhetoric which returns again and again to a mode of side-by-side comparison and contrast is a rhetoric designed for the progressive education of human judgment under the influence of experience. Comparative judgments are a model for human choice, hence for human endeavor itself" (p. 145). That he found a rhetorical mode for accomplishing this purpose is what makes Johnson a great biographer; that Martin Maner succeeds in explaining this process makes his book a fine rhetorical study.

David Wheeler / *University of Southern Mississippi*

Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style

Marjorie Levinson / Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988. Pp. 346.

Marjorie Levinson argues that twentieth-century critics and biographers either overlook or try to defend Keats against the contemporary reviewers' objections to the vulgarity and self-indulgence of his poetry. By idealizing his life in the terms he used for Shakespeare ("Shakespeare led a life of allegory; his works are the comments on it"), and representing it as a struggle against adversity and a pursuit of humanistic ideals, they have suppressed the historical Keats, the young man from the working middle classes aspiring to be a poet of the leisure class. Byron sensed this aspiration in Keats and sided with the Tory reviewers of the first two volumes Keats published. Levinson takes Byron's remarks as a revelation of Keats's character and poetry. Of the new school of poets, Byron wrote, "I do not mean that they are *coarse*, but 'shabby-genteel'. . . . It is in their *finery* that the new under school are *most vulgar*" (p. 4). He thought Keats's poetry was "a sort of mental masturbation" and said that Keats was "frigging his *Imagination*," a charge he enjoyed repeating in various forms ("Johnny Keats's *piss a bed* poetry," "the drivelling idiotism of the Mankin," "dirty little blackguard Keates," "Self-polluter of the human mind" [p. 18]). Levinson believes this attack on Keats is "profound": Byron's "critique of Keats's overwrought relation to his mind tells a nasty little story about Keats's body" (p. 140).

Her intention is to account for the sensuousness of Keats's language and imagery, as well as the social and economic motivations behind it and, thereby, the origins of the style. She sees Keats's poetry as an example of the way "the middle class of his day produced itself as a kind of collective, throbbing oxymoron: achieved by its ambitiousness, hardworking in its hedonism, a 'being' that defined itself strictly by its properties, or ways of having. In the style of Keats's poetry, we