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ROMANTICISM AND CULTURES OF PRINT

A detailed portrait of Samuel Johnson, an 18th-century English lexicographer and writer. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a dark, textured coat over a white cravat. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right. His hands are clasped in front of him. The background is dark and indistinct.

# Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*

Ethical Literary Criticism

Edward L. Tomarken

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# Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print

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*In memory of  
Emma 1971-2022  
Beloved mother, wife, daughter, and friend*

## PREFACE

During lockdown, I began to reread Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Our daughter Emma had worked tirelessly for months to save her husband and son from bouts of COVID, but as they recovered, she was becoming increasingly ill, in constant pain for over a year. I began to think about her early life. When she was 8 or 9, we chatted about my recent speeding ticket. I hoped to try to "beat the rap" in court because the policeman had not tracked my car as long as required by law. Emma asked if I was speeding. After my admission of guilt, she said, "please don't lie in court." A decade later when she was attending the university where I taught, I asked if she had ever thought of taking one of my classes. She replied, "Dad, I have been taking your classes all of my life." At her funeral two years ago, three women from Emma's former office at the Department of State came to tell us about a time when the women felt threatened by a newly appointed manager, and Emma stood up for her colleagues, insisting that they were doing a good job.

Ethics, it would seem, was perhaps the class I had been teaching our dear daughter—or she had been teaching me—during her sadly fore-shortened life. This book seeks to explain that the literary commentary of the *Lives of the Poets* speaks to us today because of its ethical goals. This element of Johnson's literary criticism is elucidated by using Ralph Cohen's genre method, the topic of Chapter One, "Why Genre." One of Cohen's greatest undergraduate lectures was on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Instead of viewing the narrative in traditional terms

as a coming-of-age tale, Cohen focused upon Huck's inner debate about whether to shelter his friend Jim, a runaway slave: Huck decides to "go to hell," making him in terms of his upbringing a "low down abolitionist." The genre of Twain's story is for Cohen more than a "Bildungsroman." Huck confronts the values and assumptions of his youth, finding them wanting. He adopts an ethical stance against slavery. Cohen's genre method pointed me to the ethical ends in Johnson's criticism in the *Lives of the Poets*. Moreover, as the opening chapter demonstrates this study will be the first full length work on and the first to apply a genre method to the whole of the *Lives of the Poets*.

Chapters Two to Six address the most prevalent genres of the *Lives*, tragedy, metaphysical poetry, the epic, the pastoral elegy, and the mock-epic. Chapter Seven demonstrates how ethical genre criticism relates literature to life. And the final chapter explains why, although Johnson considers "moral" and "ethical" as nearly interchangeable terms, I prefer "ethical." A more comprehensive description of the structure of the book and the subject of each chapter is placed in the first chapter after the detailed discussion of Cohen's genre method. Using Ralph Cohen's genre method, my goal is to demonstrate how Samuel Johnson's literary criticism in the *Lives of the Poets* points to ethical concerns of our daily life.

Lenham, UK

Edward L. Tomarken



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While our beloved daughter is the inspiration for the book, my wife Annette has continued her role as my most encouraging and rigorous editor, urging me to keep writing and clarifying my position. Despite the recent loss of her husband James Myers, our friend and neighbour Amy Myers, has, in her capacity as a very successful professional writer, guided me through the mine fields of publishers' protocols, filling my manuscript with constructive and useful suggestions. John Rowlett's book on Ralph Cohen's genre theory, *Genre Theory and Historical Change: Theoretical Essays of Ralph Cohen*, has been invaluable. I am grateful for Rowlett's endorsement of the project and his inspired suggestions concerning details in the manuscript.

On a more personal level, our son-in-law, Magistrate Judge James Grimes (Beau), our grandson James Grimes (Jamie), along with members of the Tomarken and Porter families have helped us endure our time of mourning.

Lastly, I wish to thank Clifford Siskin and Aaron Hanlon, editors of *Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print*, for including the manuscript in this series. Their chosen peer reader(s) made helpful and constructive suggestions. Executive Editor, Molly Beck has been the soul of patience and forbearance in seeing the manuscript through what for me is the modern obstacle course of digital publication.

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ALL REFERENCES TO *THE LIVES OF THE POETS* ARE  
CONTAINED IN PARENTHESES AFTER THE CITATION,  
GIVING FIRST THE VOLUME AND PAGE NUMBER OF THE  
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS EDITION AND SECOND THE  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS EDITION VOLUME AND  
PAGE NUMBER. REFERENCES TO OTHER JOHNSON  
WORKS ARE CITED FROM THE YALE EDITION OF THE  
WORKS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON.



## CHAPTER 1

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# Why Genre

The present study of the *Lives of the Poets* is designed to show that Johnson's value judgements about literature lead to ethical literary criticism that pertains to human problems affecting our daily life and world crises. In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defines ethics as "the doctrine of morality; a system of morality."<sup>1</sup> While morality and ethics were, according to Johnson, nearly interchangeable in his time, we nowadays usually associate morality with the disapproval of a parent or teacher, accompanied by the scowl of a Headmistress or School Principal. Often concerned with absolutes of right and wrong, morality is ultimately based upon the biblical Ten Commandments.

By contrast, ethics, as I shall use the term, is concerned with forwarding what philosophers in the field call "the good life." Attempting to define this phrase is as futile, Johnson reminds us in the *Life of Pope*, as defining poetry: we define little more than our own limitations as definers. But often we can agree on what is unethical. For instance, most would accept that a bomb site is less likely than a children's playground to serve the good life. One of the distinctive elements of Johnson's literary criticism is his regular inclusion of ethical/moral value judgements: he is often referred to as the great moralist. Present-day critics, however, avoid value

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, London, 1785. All future citations from Johnson's *Dictionary* refer to this edition.

judgements since most of the literature examined by academic or professional critics is assumed to be part of what F. R. Leavis called the “great tradition,” not requiring justification. But recently, attention to female, feminist, and minority literature has led to the modification and alteration of the canon. For this reason, the function of value judgements in criticism is as important now as it was in Johnson’s day when the profession was just coming into its own.

Although Johnson often uses the terms ethics and morality interchangeably, his literary value judgements are seldom moral. For instance, he defends Milton’s Satan against the accusation of blasphemy but asserts that *Paradise Lost* lacks “human interest,” that is, connection to the life of the ordinary person. Similarly, Johnson attacks many metaphysical poems for deliberate obscurity, an elitist neglect of common human interest. Samuel Garth’s “The Dispensary” is characterized as “mediocre” for pretentious erudition that distracts from the purpose of the satire. Pope and Swift are criticized for participating in their daily social life in what they satirize in their writing. And Gray is seen as a recluse who remains apart from “the passing world.” These value judgements focus upon social responsibility. Not so much moral matters of right and wrong, they are more accurately characterized as ethical, that is, not violations of “virtue” or the law, but of social mores or norms, often, in a literary-critical context, lack of consideration for the general reader. A typical example of ethical judgement appeared in a recent *Observer* article: “London is full of smart lawyers and some of them work for the Russians on avoiding sanctions... the work might be legally permissible but is unethical.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever the good life is, for Johnson it is markedly social. Given the shrinking resources of the world, we cannot expect our discipline or any others of the humanities to continue to be subsidised and supported unless we demonstrate how we contribute to the good life. My argument is that the *Lives of the Poets* documents the ethical function of poetry in our culture. Samuel Johnson uses moral literary criticism to analyse poetry. I use Ralph Cohen’s genre methodology to convert Johnson’s moral commentary to ethical literary criticism. The difference between morality and ethics involves norms or what is considered normal as opposed to abnormal. For instance, in the eighteenth century divorce was only possible by way of a public admission of adultery, a scarlet letter

<sup>2</sup> *The Observer*, London, 18 June 2023, p. 2.

of infamy. Nowadays divorce has no such stigma; indeed, one California statute is called “No Fault Divorce.” Also involving norms that change in history, ethical judgements entail consideration of the relation of means to ends, that is, divorce to what good end for the family and society at large. And ends or goals are, as we shall see later in this introduction, particularly pertinent to genre criticism. But before explaining my own approach to the *Lives*, the reader will need a brief summary of previous commentary.

In 1994, upon completion of a survey of criticism on the *Lives*, I was surprised to find that no full-length work had been devoted to the literary-critical sections of this monumental work. Why had this portion of the *Lives*, in its day the most extensive example of textual critical analysis in English, not been deemed worthy of study on its own? Although much commentary focuses upon specific lives and on Johnson’s criticism in general, the present book will be the first full-length study of the literary-critical sections of the *Lives of the Poets*.

Most of the *Lives* are divided into three sections, a biography of the author, a brief character summary, and a final section of critical analysis, often involving close readings of literary texts. This last section represents about forty per cent of the whole work, some four to five hundred pages in unannotated editions. Numerous studies have been devoted to the biographical and moral material contained in the other two sections of the *Lives*, but the literary-critical portions present a unique problem.

Since the 1950s, commentary on Johnson’s literary criticism has been clearly divided between the specific and the general. During the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, the literary criticism in the *Lives* was treated as a series of personal opinions, ranging from learned to eccentric, on poetic genres and poetry. In 1952, the appearance of Jean H. Hagstrum’s *Samuel Johnson’s Literary Criticism* marked the first attempt to outline some general principles of Johnson’s criticism. His ground-breaking work remains influential to this day. Nevertheless, in 1967, in the second edition of his study, Hagstrum advised readers to be aware of an alternative view that had been developing during the middle of the twentieth century.

Before accepting the essentially empirical approach of my study, which invokes for Johnson psychological, educational, and rhetorical norms and which denies neo-Platonic content to his notion of generality, the student will wish to read Professor Wimsatt’s brief but stimulating analysis of

Johnson's thought as a 'massive summary of the neo-Platonic drive in literary theory and of its difficulties' and to study the ninefold definition of what neoclassicists meant by universality.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction between the empirical and the neo-Platonic views has prevailed. In 1994, Charles Hinnant's study, *Steel for the Mind*, demonstrated how Johnson's views are compatible with and related to modern literary theories, but Hinnant made clear that he sides with Hagstrum's empirical approach against the Yale school's view of Wimsatt that is based upon the notion of the "grandeur of generality."<sup>4</sup> The problem for the reader of Johnson's practical or textual criticism is that these two opposing theories leave open to question which alternative applies in a specific context. In any event, both positions are too abstract to be of much help in resolving concrete problems that arise in the critical sections of the *Lives*.

Yet the continuing interest in these portions of the *Lives* might well lead us to assume that Johnson proceeds without a consistent method of practical criticism. In preparing for this study, I reread the *Lives*, not as individual entities, but as a continuous work. Traditionally treated in piecemeal fashion as a series of critiques of genres and poems by various poets, Johnson's *Lives* has continued to be seen by most commentators as lacking methodological principles. I discovered, however, that Johnson's critical procedure involved an approach less abstract than any of the available general theories. Beginning with the first life, the *Life of Cowley*, Johnson went beyond Dryden and others' use of the term "metaphysical," establishing this kind of poetry as a genre. This innovation enabled him to compare some forty examples of the poetry of Cowley, Cleveland, and Donne. The section of the *Life of Cowley* devoted to metaphysical poetry (25 of the 81 pages in the Yale University Press edition) constitutes probably the first instance of a lengthy, systematic, close textual analysis of a genre in English. The establishment of the genre of metaphysical poetry enabled Johnson to justify his value judgements distinguishing successful from unsuccessful examples of the genre.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Hagstrum, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1962, 2nd edition, ix-x. All future citations are from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Hinnant, *Steel for the Mind: Samuel Johnson and Critical Discourse*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994, 12.

The analysis of metaphysical poetry is followed in the *Life of Milton*, the third life, by a detailed consideration of the pastoral elegy and the epic as genres; both are key topics throughout the *Lives*. The pastoral elegy is further discussed in the lives of Pope, Phillips, Hammond, Gray, and others. The analysis of Cowley's epic in the first life is followed by discussions of *Paradise Lost*, Blackmore's *Creation*, Cowley's *Davideis*, Prior's *Solomon*, and Pope's *Essay on Man*. Genre is also a focal point in another of the early lives. Containing probably the first analysis of the mock-heroic as a genre, the *Life of Garth* is preceded by discussion of this genre in the lives of Butler, Addison, and Dryden, and followed by accounts of the development of the genre by Gay and Pope. In short, genre is a central issue recurring throughout the critical sections of the *Lives of the Poets*. Yet very little has been written about genre in the *Lives*; in fact, the paucity of such commentary may help explain why there has been no full-length study of the literary-critical sections of the *Lives*. And, as will become clear, genre as a method is suitable to Johnson's practice of concluding with value judgements. In this study I shall apply the genre theory of Ralph Cohen to the literary-critical commentary in the *Lives*. Cohen first introduced me to Johnson's writings at UCLA and went on to the University of Virginia, where he founded *New Literary History* and developed his genre theory.

Since Cohen developed his theory over many decades in the form of essays and oral presentations but never presented it in a book, John L. Rowlett gathered the materials together in a volume entitled *Genre Theory and Historical Change: Theoretical Essays of Ralph Cohen*. The best summary of Cohen's theory is Rowlett's cogent and carefully organized introduction to this study. The following outline of the introduction may help clarify my application of Cohen's theory. Rowlett begins by stressing that Cohen's theory is more comprehensive than any others because it describes generic change not merely in literature and the other arts but also in all forms of our culture, including behaviour:

While Cohen's literary experiments have been salutary to his students and other readers during a time of rapid and often incomprehensible change, they deserve a much wider audience, since Cohen himself is the scholar whose theoretical work on genre, I suggest, exceeds competing procedures, such as those more narrowly focused on lyric poetry, novel theory, narrative theory, or cultural theory. That is because, for dealing with the implications of such historical change, his is the most precise systematic, effective, and



inclusive. It is also the most comprehensive, since in proposing a genre theory suited to describing and analyzing generic change, Cohen makes possible an exploration of the functions of change in the making of society. And to whom is this alien?

Rowlett goes on to present five axioms or principles of Cohen's theory. (1) "Genre theory [is] conceptualized not as a hermeneutic theory, a rhetorical theory, or a logical theory, but as a *historical theory* according to which groupings of texts constitute indeterminate categories instantiating processes of change as member texts accrue." The description of generic change is based not on ideological, philosophical, logical, or linguistic assumptions but is seen as a function of historical change. Hence, no rules or laws apply to genre or genre change just as history itself cannot be defined by such restrictions. (2) Cohen prioritizes "throughout his work the *phenomenon of change*, resulting in his adoption of the *language of change* (generation, innovation, variation, alteration, modulation, transition, transformation, shift, etc.) what Cohen calls the 'generative metaphor.'" Genre unfolds in relation to the cultural context, that of the writer and the reader. (3) Cohen conceives of a text as "*historical in nature*, that is, any text is an *individualized expression of a historically sedimented group or class*, namely, a unique instance of a genre; more completely put, a text is a singular combination of a received genre's conventionalized elements and contemporaneous constructional components—mixed behavioral features from language (speech, rhetoric, developing discourses, and so forth)." Genre as a "radical of presentation," while subject to history and cultural conventions, is nonetheless individualized. It contains, in a sense, the writer's signature. (4) "Genres are *descriptions of the ways oral and literary phenomena operate, resulting in texts as implicit explanatory mechanisms*." Genres serve a goal or purpose, that is, to explain or communicate a position or view. (5) Cohen hypothesizes "a *synchronic hierarchy of genres and member texts* (including those from other periods) that implies a knowledge hierarchy and hierarchy of values—an ordering based on literary and cultural responses to social exigencies and political pressures." At the top of the hierarchy during the Renaissance, the epic is replaced in the eighteenth century by the mock epic. In 1737, Samuel Johnson arrived in London with a tragedy; in the early twentieth century, James Joyce came to Ireland's capital city with a series of short stories, *The Dubliners*. The hierarchy