
UNIT 27 BOSWELL'S : *LIFE OF JOHNSON*

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27.0 OBJECTIVES

After having gone through this unit you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life of Samuel Johnson;
- appreciate Boswell's biographical method;
- appreciate the art of Boswell as a biographer.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

The main intention of this unit is to acquaint you with the biographical techniques of one of the greatest biographers of all times—James Boswell. Boswell was a friend and disciple of Samuel Johnson, one of the greatest men of letters Britain has ever produced. Johnson was also a biographer. Boswell wrote the biography closely following Johnson's ideas on the art and craft of biography.

In the section on Boswell we give you an insight into Boswell's character and his method of writing biographies. This is, of course, with special reference to the *Life of Johnson* (1791).

In the next section you get some information on Johnson's life and work and his ideas on the art of biography. The pieces of information should help you co-relate the three sections from the *Life of Johnson* and appreciate them.

In the two major sections on Boswell and Johnson you learn a few things about the art and craft of biography. In the discussion that follows the three passages from the *Life* we examine the application of some of these techniques.

Lastly we examine the language of the passages you will have read.

27.2 JAMES BOSWELL (1740-95)



Boswell

Son of a Scottish Laird and Judge in Edinburgh, Boswell was trained in the family profession of law. He later became a successful advocate, especially on the criminal side. His main interest, however, was in cultivating the friendship of renowned people and becoming a great writer of English prose.

Among his friends and acquaintances were some of the most well-known people of the age—John Wilkes (1727-97) English radical M.P., journalist and agitator; David Hume (1711-76), the Scottish philosopher; Voltaire (1694-1778), the French philosopher, historian, playwright and poet; Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), the French political philosopher and novelist; Pascal Paoli, the Corsican politician and leader about whom you would read more, later in this Unit; and above all Samuel Johnson. While on his tour of the Continent he tried to meet, (with the help of one Earl Marischal), Frederick the Great (1721-86) of Prussia, but without success.

After having read his *Rambler* essays and seen his famous dictionary (1755) Boswell was keen to meet Johnson. An opportunity presented itself to him on 16th May, 1763 in the back parlour of the actor and bookseller Thomas Davies. This is how Boswell recorded the event in his *Life of Johnson*.

Mr. Davies mentioned my name and respectfully introduced me to him. I was much agitated; and recollecting his prejudice against the Scott, of which I had heard much, I said to Davies, 'Don't tell where I come from'— 'From Scotland', cried Davies roguishly. 'Mr. Johnson, (said I) I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.'

I am willing to flatter myself that I meant this as light pleasantry to sooth and conciliate him, and not as an humiliating abasement at the expense of my country. But however that might be, this speech was somewhat unlucky; for with that quickness of wit for which he was so remarkable, he seized the expression 'come from Scotland', which I used in the sense of being of that country; and, as if I had said that I

had come away from it, or left it, retorted, 'That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help.' This stroke stunned me a good deal; and when we had sat down, I felt myself not a little embarrassed, and apprehensive of what might come next.

Johnson had defined oats in his *Dictionary*, as 'A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people', and gained a notoriety for Scot baiting. Johnson, of course, had no prejudice against the Scots. From the passage quoted above, you get a foretaste of the respect and awe with which Boswell treated Johnson. The former ruthlessly subordinated his own personality to the latter's and reported every blow that he received from his subject without reminding his readers of his own strong points—his manipulation of his subject, his powers of description, narration and analysis.

When Boswell published his first book on Johnson—*The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson LL.D* (1785)—an account of 101 consecutive days' travel in Scotland with the great friend, it was the author's fatuity and the subject's greatness that struck the reading public. When in 1791 *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D*, was published the impression became stronger and Boswell did not receive the acclaim that was his due. On the other hand, to Hannah More who begged him to soften his portrait, he replied 'I will not make my tiger a cat to please anybody.'

In the nineteen-twenties Boswell's private papers were discovered at Malahide Castle near Dublin, and in the thirties in Aberdeenshire in Scotland, which placed him among the greatest diarists of all time. Boswell's writings are now studied with as great an avidity as Johnson's own.

Apart from the two works mentioned above, Boswell's *An Account of Corsica, the Journal of a Tour to That Island; and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* were published in 1768. The 70 essays entitled *The Hypochondriac* were published in the *London Magazine* between 1777 and 1783. Boswell's letters, private papers and his *London Journal* were published in the twentieth century.

Check Your Progress 1

Mention the main reasons, in the light of the above note, for Boswell's success as a biographer.

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27.3 SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-84)

Samuel Johnson has been called the symbol of the genius of England. 'He has become' wrote Sir Walter Raleigh, 'the tutelary genius of the English people. He embodies all that we most admire in ourselves.' What were those qualities of head and heart that Johnson had? Strong common sense, learning, wit, courage, honesty and sympathy. These are some of the qualities that we

admire wherever we find them but we find all these together in any one person so rarely.

Johnson was born into a family of average means. His father Michael was a bookseller. He was also a learned man and his philosophical nature rather interfered with his trade and prosperity. His mother, Sarah came from a Birmingham family of Fords who were well-to-do. She was not much educated and she also feared that their economic condition was getting worse. The result was that there was not much peace in the family. Johnson had a younger brother, called Nathaniel. He committed suicide in 1737 and within a few days Johnson too moved to London, in search of a living. There he entered the service of Edward Cave (1691-1754) the printer, and wrote for *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

Johnson had to give up his studies at Oxford in 1729 for financial reasons. In his search of employment he went, among other places, to Birmingham. There he wrote essays for the *Birmingham Journal* and translated Jeronymo Lobo's French version of *Voyage to Abyssinia* into English. Apparently, during his stay at Birmingham, Johnson also met Elizabeth Porter, wife of the draper Harry Porter. After the death of her husband. Johnson married Elizabeth who had a son as old as Johnson himself. She was 20 years older than him. With the help of the dowry she brought, Johnson opened a school at Edial. One of its students, David Garrick, became eminent in the theatre and Johnson's lifelong friend. However, the attempt was unsuccessful and the school had to be closed.

Johnson was a poet (*London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are his most famous poems), essayist (the three series *Rambler*, *Adventurer* and *Idler* are well known), novelist (*Rasselas*, *Prince of Abyssinia*) playwright (*Irene*), socio-political pamphleteer and above all a lexicographer and biographer.

One of the works that built Johnson's reputation was his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) in which he defined over 40,000 words, illustrating them with the help of 1,14,000 quotations. These were drawn from books in every branch of knowledge written since the time of Sir Philip Sidney (1563-1626). Nathaniel Bailey had preceded Johnson in the task but Johnson's was so much superior to Bailey's that the latter was soon wiped out of public memory. However, there are many words in the dictionary to which Johnson attached indefensible meanings either in sport or petulance. Some of these were not of this class. 'Pastern' Johnson defined as 'the knee of a horse.' When a lady asked him how he came to do that, he replied with admirable frankness, 'Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance'. There are some other definitions that are commonly remembered. Lexicographer was defined as 'a harmless drudge' and pension 'a pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.' These, however, are no specimens of the precision of the definitions of words in the *Dictionary*.

Apart from the journalism for the *Magazine*, Johnson wrote many short lives of eminent and not so eminent men. The first one was the *Life of Paul Sarp* published in 1738 in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the last ones were the well-known *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81). In all he wrote about 70 of them. In *Rambler*, No. 60 (Oct. 13, 1750) he wrote:

I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistake and miscarriage, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use, but there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind.

In short, biographies are more useful to us than other branches of literature because from them we learn about the merits and shortcomings and their effect on the lives of certain people which can be examples for us to imitate or avoid. Johnson preferred autobiographies to biographies because the former could convey the truth better. He thought that biographers should record and collect facts with perseverance and try to arrive at the truth. He encouraged Boswell to keep a diary for the purpose, and it has often been pointed out that Boswell employed Johnson's precepts in the writing of the latter's life.

Now do the following exercise before going any further into the unit.

Check Your Progress 2

Fill in the blank spaces with the most suitable answers:

Two of Johnson's most famous poems were and His series of essays were called, and Boswell had read his essays and seen his before he came to meet Johnson in Johnson published his *Dictionary* in the year and the *Lives of the Poets* between Johnson was born in the year and Boswell in and the latter was thus years younger than him. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was published in about years after Johnson's death.

27.4 BOSWELL'S LIFE OF JOHNSON (1791): TEXT

Below (27.4.1, 27.4.2 and 27.4.3) are three short sections from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Read them, if necessary, with the help of the glossaries given at the end of each section.

27.4.1 Birth and Early Childhood

Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield, in Staffordshire, on the 18th of September, N.S. 1709; and his initiation into the Christian Church was not delayed; for his **baptism** is recorded, in the register of St. Mary's parish in that city to have been performed on the day of his birth. His father is there styled *Gentleman*, a circumstance of which an ignorant **panegyrist** has praised him for not being proud; when the truth is that the **appellation** of *Gentleman*, though now lost in the indiscriminate assumption of *Esquire* was commonly taken by those who could boast of gentility. His father was Michael Johnson, a native of Derbyshire, of obscure extraction, who settled in Lichfield as a bookseller and **stationer**. His mother was Sarah Ford, descended of an

ancient race of substantial **yeomanry** in Warwickshire. They were advanced in years when they married, and never had more than two children, both sons; Samuel, their first born, who lived to be the illustrious character whose various excellence I am to endeavour to record, and Nathaniel, who died in his twenty-fifth year.

When he was a child in **petticoats** and had learnt to read, Mrs. Johnson one morning put the common prayer book into his hands, pointed to the **collect** for the day, and said, 'Sam, you must get this by heart.' She went upstairs, leaving him to study it. But by the time she had reached the second floor, she heard him following her. 'What's the matter?' said she. 'I can say it,' he replied; and repeated it distinctly, though he could not have read it more than twice.

But there has been another story of his infant precocity generally circulated, and generally believed, the truth of which I am to refute upon his own authority. It is told that, when a child of three years old, he chanced to tread upon a duckling, the eleventh of a brood and killed it; upon which, it is said, he dictated to his mother the following epitaph:

Here lies good master duck,
Whom Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd, it had been good luck,
For then we'd had an odd one.

There is surely internal evidence that this little composition combines in it, what no child of three years old could produce, without an extension of its faculties by immediate inspiration; yet Mrs. Lucy Porter, Dr. Johnson's stepdaughter, positively maintained to me, in his presence, that there could be no doubt of the truth of this anecdote, for she had heard it from his mother. So difficult is it to obtain an authentic relation of facts, and such authority may there be for error; for he assured me, that his father made the verses, and wished to pass them for his child's. He added, 'my father was a foolish old man; that is to say, foolish in talking of his children'.

Glossary I

N.S. : New Style Gregorian calendar adopted in England in 1751.

- Baptism:** a Christian ritual in which a person is touched or covered with water to make him pure and show that he has been accepted as a member of the church; generally accompanied by name giving.
- panegyrist:** one who writes panegyric, i.e. a speech or piece of writing praising somebody for something
- appellation:** a name or title, especially one that is formal or descriptive
- stationer:** a person or shop that sells stationery, i.e. writing material paper, pencils, pens etc.

- yeomanry:** the body of yeomen, i.e. men holding and cultivating a small estate; minor landowners in a rural area.
- petticoats:** skirts collectively; also, skirts worn by very young children; chiefly in the phrase (said of a boy): in petticoats
- collect:** a short prayer, varying from day to day, read near the beginning of certain Christian religious services

27.4.2 Lord Chesterfield's Neglect

Lord Chesterfield to whom Johnson had paid the high compliment of addressing to his Lordship the Plan of his *Dictionary*, had behaved to him in such a manner as to excite his contempt and indignation. The world has been for many years amused with a story confidently told and as confidently repeated with additional circumstances, that a sudden disgust was taken by Johnson upon occasion of his having been one day kept long in waiting in his Lordship's antechamber, for which the reason assigned was, that he had company with him, and that at last, when the door opened, out walked **Colley Cibber**; and that Johnson was so violently provoked when he found for whom he had been so long excluded, that he went away in a passion, and never would return. I remember having mentioned this story to **George Lord Lyttelton**, who told me, he was very intimate with Lord Chesterfield; and holding it as a well-known truth, defended Lord Chesterfield, by saying that Cibber, who had been introduced familiarly by **the back-stairs**, had probably not been there above ten minutes. It may seem strange even to entertain a doubt concerning a story so long and so widely current, and thus implicitly adopted, if not sanctioned, by the authority which I have mentioned; but Johnson himself assured me, that there never was any particular incident which produced a quarrel between Lord Chesterfield and him; but that his Lordship's continued neglect was the reason why he resolved to have no connection with him. When the *Dictionary* was upon the eve of publication, Lord Chesterfield, who, it is said, had flattered himself with expectations that Johnson would dedicate the work to him, attempted, in a courtly manner, to sooth, and **insinuate** himself with the Sage, conscious, as it should seem, of the cold indifference with which he had treated its learned author; and further attempted to conciliate him, by writing two papers in *The World*, in recommendation of the work; and it must be confessed, that they contain some **studied** compliments, so **finely** turned, that if there had been no previous offence, it is probable that Johnson would have been highly delighted. Praise, in general, was pleasing to him: but by praise from a man of rank and elegant accomplishments, he was peculiar **gratified**.

Johnson, who thought that all was false and hollow; ... despised the honeyed words, and was even indignant that Lord Chesterfield should, for a moment, imagine that he could be the **dupe** of such an artifice. His expression to me concerning Lord Chesterfield, upon this occasion, was, 'Sir, after making great professions, he had, for many years, taken no notice of me; but when my *Dictionary* was coming out, he fell a scribbling in *The World* about it. Upon which, I wrote him a letter expressed in civil terms, but such as might show him that I did not mind what he said or wrote, and that I had done with him.'

This is that celebrated letter of which so much has been said, and about which curiosity has been so long excited, without being gratified. I for many years **solicited** Johnson to favour me with a copy of it, that so excellent a composition might not be lost to posterity. He delayed from time to time to give it me; till at last in 1781, when we were on a visit at **Mr. Dilly's** at Southill in Bedfordshire, he was pleased to dictate it to me from memory. He afterwards found among his papers a copy of it, which he had dictated to **Mr. Baretti**, with its title and corrections, in his own handwriting. This he gave to **Mr. Langton**; adding that if it were to come into print, he wished it to be from that copy. By Mr. Lington's kindness, I am enabled to enrich my work with a perfect **transcript** of what the world has so eagerly desired to see.

'To the Right Honourable the Earl of Chesterfield

February 7, 1755

'My Lord,

'I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of *The World*, that two papers, in which my *Dictionary* is recommended to the public, were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished, is an honour, which being very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

'When upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address; and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*;—that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world **contending**; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in public, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

'Seven years, my Lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was **repulsed** from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not except, for I never had a Patron before.

'The shepherd in **Virgil** grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

'Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the Public should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which **Providence** has enabled me to do for myself.

'Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, my Lord, your Lordship's most humble, most obedient servant.

'Sam Johnson'

'While this was the talk of the town,' (says Dr. Adams, in a letter to me) 'I happened to visit **Dr. Warburton**, who finding that I was acquainted with Johnson, desired me earnestly to carry his compliments to him, and to tell him, that he honoured him for his manly behaviour in rejecting the treatment he had received from him, with a proper spirit. Johnson was visibly pleased with this compliment, for he had always a high opinion of Warburton. Indeed, the force of mind which appeared in this letter, was congenial with that which Warburton himself amply possessed.'

Glossary II

- Lord Chesterfield:** Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth earl of Chesterfield (1694-1773), a statesman and diplomat, English ambassador at the Hague 1728-32. He is best known for his letters to his son, Philip Stanhope (1732-1768), published by the son's widow in 1774. These letters consisting of instructions in etiquette were considered a handbook of good manners.
- Colley Cibber (1617-1757):** a minor comic playwright and critic.
- George Lord Lyttelton:** a prominent politician, and an opponent of Robert Walpole and a liberal patron of literature.
(1709-73)
- backstairs:** private stairs at the back or side of a house, generally used by servants.
- insinuate:** to suggest (something unpleasant) by one's behaviour, or questions or comments.
- The World:** the title of a periodical (January 1753—December 1756) edited by Edward Moore.
- studied:** carefully thought or considered especially before being expressed.
- finely:** closely and delicately.
- gratified:** to give pleasure and satisfaction to (often used in the passive)
- dupe:** noun—a person who is tricked or deceived (by someone else) verb—to trick or deceive.

solicited:	asked for money, help, a favour, etc. from a person.
Mr Dilly:	John Dilly (1731-1806), brother of Edward and Charles Dilly, booksellers who published Boswell's <i>An Account of Corsica</i> . Johnson paid a visit to John Dilly in company with Boswell and Charles Dilly in June 1781
Mr Baretti:	Guiseppe Baretti (1719-89), an Italian teacher introduced to Johnson by one of his students called Charlotte Lennox, actress and playwright
Mr Langton:	Bennet Langton (1737-1801), a valued friend of Johnson, who read the <i>Rambler</i> essays and on their conclusion came to see him in London. Langton came from an ancient and noble family and his pedigree had been traced to Cardinal Stephen Langton in the reign of King John (1167-1216). Johnson admired him.
transcript :	something transcribed, a written or printed record.
Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre:	The conqueror of the conqueror of the earth: Boileau, <i>L' Art Poetique</i> iii 272.
contending:	to compete as in a race or against difficulties.
repulsed:	to refuse coldly; push away (a friendly person).
Virgil:	(70-19 B.C.) the greatest Roman poet, best known for his epic the <i>Aeniad</i> (about 30 B.C., unfinished at his death). His <i>Eclogues</i> (pastoral poems) influenced everyone who could read Latin.
Providence:	God and his wise care and direction of the affairs of living creatures, fate as a kindly influence.
Warburton:	Dr. William Warburton (1698-1779), rose to be bishop of Gloucester in 1759. His edition of Shakespeare in eight volumes brought out in 1747, was criticized as unscholarly. He was Pope's literary executor, and published an edition of his works in 1751. He admired Dr. Johnson, who remained grateful for his early praise of his essay on <i>Macbeth</i> (1747): Johnson said, "He praised me at a time when praise was of value to me."

On the evening of October 10, I presented Dr. Johnson to **General Paoli**. I had greatly wished that two men, for whom I had the highest esteem, should meet. They met with a manly ease, mutually conscious of their own abilities, and of the abilities of each other. The General spoke Italian, and Dr. Johnson English, and understood one another very well, with a little aid of interpretation from me, in which I compared myself to an **isthmus** which joins two great continents. Upon Johnson's approach, the General said, 'From what I have read of your works, Sir, and from what Mr. Boswell has told me of you, I have long held you in great veneration.' The General talked of languages being formed on the particular notions and manners of a people, without knowing which, we cannot know the language. We may know the direct **signification** of single words; but by these no beauty of expression, no sally of genius, no wit is conveyed to the mind. All this must be by allusion to other ideas. 'Sir (said Johnson) you talk of language, as if you had never done any thing else but study it, instead of governing a nation.' The General said, '*Questo e un troppo gran complimento*; 'this is too great a compliment. 'I should have thought so, Sir, if I had not heard you talk.' The General asked him, what he thought of the spirit of **infidelity** which was so prevalent.

JOHNSON. 'Sir, this gloom of infidelity, I hope, is only a transient cloud passing through the hemisphere, which will soon be dissipated, and the sun break forth with his usual splendour.'

'You think then, (said the General) that they will change their principles like their clothes.'

JOHNSON. 'Why, Sir, if they bestow no more thought on principles than on dress, it must be so.' The General said, that a great part of the fashionable infidelity was owing to a desire of showing courage. Men who have no opportunities of showing it as to things in this life, take death and futurity as objects on which to display it.'

JOHNSON. 'That is mighty foolish affectation. Fear is one of the passions of human nature, of which it is impossible to divest it. You remember that the **Emperour Charles V**, when he read upon the tomb-stone of a Spanish nobleman. "Here lies one who never knew fear," wittily said, "Then he never snuffed a candle with his fingers."

Dr. Johnson went home with me, and drank tea till late in the night. He said, 'General Paoli had the loftiest **port** of any man he had ever seen.' He denied military men were always the best bred men. 'Perfect good breeding' he observed, 'consists in having no particular mark of any profession, but a general elegance of manners; whereas, in a military man, you can commonly distinguish the brand of soldiers, *I'homme d'epée*.'

Dr. Johnson shunned to-night any discussion of the perplexed question of fate and free will, which I attempted to agitate. 'Sir (said he) we know our will is free, and there's an end on't.'

Glossary III

Pascal Paoli: (1725-1807) was a Corsican democratic leader in exile in England. His father had been one of the leaders of the Corsicans in their revolt against Genoa in 1734. Paoli himself was

chosen by the Corsicans as their General-in-Chief in 1755. In 1769 the island was conquered by the French and Paoli escaped in an English ship and arrived in England on 20 September. Paoli returned to Corsica in 1789. This was in response to Mirabeau's recall of the Corsican patriots, in the National Assembly of France, Paoli was appointed Lieutenant General and military commandant in Corsica by Louis XVI.

In Walpole's *Memoirs of the Reign of George III* we see Paoli in a rather unfavourable light. Walpole wrote,

Paoli's character had been so advantageously exaggerated by Mr. Boswell's enthusiastic and entertaining account of him, that the opposition were ready to incorporate him in the list of popular tribunes. The Court artfully intercepted the project; and deeming patriots of all nations equally corruptible, bestowed a pension of \$1000 a year on the unheroic fugitive.

This is a rather unflattering picture of Paoli and also, to some extent, Boswell who had dedicated *An Account of Corsica* to him. Boswell later introduced Johnson to Paoli. You have read the account of the meeting.

- isthmus:** a narrow area of land with sea on each side, joined to a large land mass at both ends.
- signification:** the intended meaning of a word.
- infidelity:** (an example or act of) disloyalty, unfaithfulness.
- Emperour Charles V:** (1500-1558) Holy Roman Emperor (1519-56) and king of Spain (as Charles I, 1516-56) who abdicated in September 1556 and joined the monastery of Yuste in Spain in February 1557.
- port:** The manner in which one bears oneself; external deportment; carriage, bearing .
- L'homme d'eepee:** the man of the sword.

27.5 BIOGRAPHICAL TECHNIQUES

Let's now examine some of the biographical techniques employed by Boswell in the three sections you have read from his *Life of Johnson*.

27.5.1 Birth and Early Childhood

Notice Boswell's narration of the family background of Johnson. Johnson's father, Boswell carefully establishes, was not well-to-do or belong to a well-known family. The title of Gentleman, Boswell tells his readers, was 'taken by those who could not boast of gentility'. His mother, on the other hand came from a well-known family of small landowners. Boswell, no matter how appreciative of Johnson, was a biographer, who wished to enable his readers to see the man described and discussed in the life, and not a panegyrist. He was in a way, following Johnson's precept. 'He that narrates,' wrote Johnson in *Idler* No. 84, 'the life of another.....shows his favourite at a distance, decorated and magnified like the ancient actors in their tragic dress and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero!' Boswell tried to project the man. Notice also the emphasis on 'never' in the first paragraph. It gives us a hint of the amount of research and interviews Boswell conducted in order to arrive at definite facts on the life of Johnson. In the second and third paragraphs Boswell tried to establish the precise nature of Johnson's precocity (prematurely developed in some faculty).

27.5.2 Lord Chesterfield's Neglect

Notice once again the pains Boswell takes to discover the true story about Johnson's break with Chesterfield. He tells us about the testimony of Lord Lyttelton, that palliates the act of Chesterfield to some extent. He narrates the manner in which he got a copy of the letter Johnson wrote to Chesterfield and having given the letter he tells us what one of his eminent contemporaries William Warburton thought about Johnson.

Boswell's biography is interesting and useful not only because he tries to tell us the true story objectively but also because he draws inferences from the events described. You will recall that in 'Birth and Early Childhood' Boswell said that he would endeavour to record the 'various excellences' of Johnson's character. It is this effort to record the qualities of the man and of course his shortcomings that is of central importance to us. Incidents and events only go to show the man that Johnson was. Can you now point out Boswell's observations on Johnson's character in the second section from the *Life* in this unit? Read the last sentence of the first paragraph. Can you relate it to the information you gained in the previous section on Johnson's birth and childhood?

Finally we may point out that there is a letter of Johnson quoted in full in this section. It is so perfectly worded that it has been committed to memory by many. Historians have pointed out that this letter signals the end of the system of patronage in England. You may like to know that Boswell painstakingly collected all the letters of Johnson he could and incorporated them into his *Life*. This set the trend in the nineteenth century, of writing the two-volume *Life and Letters* of so and so. In our own time, when collections of letters are published separately, biographers use letters with discretion.

27.5.3 Johnson and Paoli

One of the strengths of Boswell's *Life* is his reports of meetings and conversations of Johnson with or about the other eminent people of the age, and many a time also with people not so well known. In the short space of the

first paragraph we have Johnson's views on language, infidelity and courage and fear, that he expressed before Paoli. In the last paragraph Johnson discusses good breeding and free will and pre-determination with Boswell. In the west very frequently and sometimes in India as well, religious people wish to know to what extent human beings are free to take moral decisions in their lives, and to what extent they are pre-planned for specific actions and functions by God. Orthodox Christians believe that we are free unlike animals and Johnson holds the same point of view.

Now answer the following questions and discover for yourself how well you have understood the three sections from Boswell's *Life*.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Who wrote the epitaph for the eleventh duckling of the brood? What authority was there for saying that Samuel Johnson wrote it?
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- 2) Name the persons he received information/material from for the episode in the *Life* relating to Chesterfield's neglect of Johnson.
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- 3) What did Paoli think about language and why do you think he should have begun their talk with that subject?
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27.6 ART IN LIFE OF JOHNSON

Biography is often defined as an account of a person's life, and a branch of history. In the previous section, we examined the ways in which Boswell collected and sifted his material on Johnson's life. In Boswell's own time there were at least four others who wrote Johnson's life—Mrs. Piozzi, John Hawkins, William Shaw and Arthur Murphy. Many others have written since

then and Johnson is still popular as a subject of biography. C.L. Reade, Joseph Wood Krutch, James L. Clifford and John Wain have written Johnson's life in this century and the need for another life of Johnson is still felt and Donald Greene is writing another one. Notwithstanding this, Boswell's *Life* is still read and edited, despite its voluminous size. Is it only because of its authentic material? No.

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is a piece of art. In spite of the fact that the arrangement of the material is chronological rather than topic-wise, there is a unity of design. This unity is given to the work by Boswell's respect for the penetrating wisdom of the man that Johnson was, his piety, his courage, his wit, his learning, his sympathy for the oppressed, the weak and the poor.

It is often said that Boswell kept notes on Johnson's conversations. This is true but the way he recorded just the essence of a talk and not the chaff of the trivialities that often go on in company makes Boswell's biography so effective. Notice the brevity of Boswell's report of the meeting of Paoli and Johnson. Boswell was there on that occasion. Did he not say anything? He did. But what exactly did he say? That we do not know. Why did Boswell not tell us anything about it? Possibly because he said nothing of value. Possibly because what he said would have told us more about Boswell than about Johnson. Possibly because he wanted to maintain an artistic distance. Hence it is in his selection of material that Boswell employed his artistic talent.

Related to this is the issue of authenticity. If Boswell was trying to make his history interesting did the historical Johnson actually say what Boswell's Johnson says in the *Life*? Modern scholarship, through its comparison of the accounts of incidents related in the biography with those in the notes or the journals of Boswell and reports of others present on the occasions shows that Johnson was absolutely faithful in reporting the words of different persons. It is in condensation that Boswell exercised his artistic manipulation.

Sir Harold Nicolson has pointed out that Boswell's artistic talent lay in 'projecting his detached photograph with such continuity and speed that the effect produced is that of motion and of life.' There is both narrative speed and descriptive force in Johnson's biography. You do not only follow the narrative or a philosophical discussion you also see Lucy Porter talking to Johnson and Boswell in a homely setting and Johnson and Paoli in a very formal one. You feel the hurt pride of Samuel Johnson as he hits back Chesterfield in his reply to him. You live the tension of October 10, 1769 in Boswell's mind when Paoli paid Johnson a visit. These are made possible by Boswell's peculiar abilities of description and narration, analysis, exposition and intuitive understanding of his subject's mind.

James L. Clifford suggested that Boswell constantly tried to make his expression precise and suggestive of colour and charm. For instance, 'loved and caressed by everybody' of the notes become, 'caressed and loved by all about him', 'remarkably lively and gay and very happy' became 'a gay and frolicsome fellow'. Thus we find that the power of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is a result of a variety of talents Boswell possessed—painstaking research, accurate description, honest narration, an imaginative understanding of the subject, and a command over the English language.

27.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have examined Boswell's and Johnson's ideas on the art and craft of biography, and acquainted you with some of the bare facts of Johnson's life in order to enable you to place the three sections from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in proper perspective. After you read and understood the three pieces, we discussed Boswell's biographical techniques as employed in the extracts from the *Life*. Finally we discussed some prominent features of Boswell's biographical art.

27.8 SUGGESTED READING

Lives of the Poets by Samuel Johnson (1779-1781). There are many popular editions of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* available in the market and also in the libraries. Abridged editions of the *Life* are also easily available. Two of these are by M.A. Pink (Macmillan: London, 1957) and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Washington Squares Press: New York, 1965). The most easily available collection of criticism is *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson*, edited by J.L. Clifford (Prentice Hall: New Jersey, 1970). References are from this anthology.

Queen Victoria by Lytton Strachey (1921).

Rajaji: A Life by Rajmohan Gandhi (Viking Penguin Book India, 1997).

The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi by Rajmohan Gandhi (Penguin Books India, 1995).

27.9 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- a) Exaltation of his subject's personality even at his own expense
- b) Manipulation of life (that is the person Johnson) for purposes of art
- c) Powers of description, narration and analysis

Check Your Progress 2

London.
The Vanity of Human Wishes.
Rambler, Adventurer and Idler.
Rambler.
Dictionary.
1763.
1755.
1779-81.
1709.
1740.

31 years.
1791.
7 years.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Lucy Porter held on the authority of Johnson's mother that he wrote the epitaph and Boswell heard her say so in Johnson's presence. Nonetheless, Samuel Johnson affirmed that his father Michael wrote it and wanted it to be taken as his son's.
- 2) Samuel Johnson, Lord Lyttelton, Bennet Langton, Dr. Adam and Dr. Warburton.
- 3) It is possible that Paoli thought of language as a topic for discussion because while he spoke Italian and Dr. Johnson English, they understood one another well enough. Hence Paoli may have wondered why they did not talk in the same language; either Italian or English. Moreover, Paoli must have known about Johnson's compilation of the *Dictionary* (1755).

It was in this context that Paoli thought aloud. To know a language properly involves a knowledge of the customs and traditions, notions and manners of the native speakers of that language. Beauty of expression and creative use of language were based on such a knowledge and not just the meanings of some words. Since they could not speak in one another's language effectively Paoli and Johnson chose to speak in their own languages banking on the other's ability to understand the language of the other person, with the help of Boswell as interpreter.