

**Freya Johnson and Lynda Mugglestone, eds., *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. 226. £35. ISBN 9780199654345.**

‘Anyone who deals with Johnson and his writings’, writes Paul Fussell, ‘gets accustomed early to making contrary motions.’ These ‘contrary motions’ have been part of the critical commentary on Samuel Johnson since his lifetime, because few literary figures are quite so complicated, even contradictory. This is particularly remarkable considering that Johnson often spoke directly – unlike, say, Shakespeare, whose opinions have to be teased out from those of his characters. With Johnson, we have hundreds of thousands of words delivered more or less in his own voice, along with tens of thousands more from his conversation. We have moral essays, poems, biographies, criticism, reviews, histories, sermons. We have letters and prayers and even a short autobiographical memoir. We have the testimony of friends who knew him for decades. There are very few writers whose opinions have been recorded in greater detail.

And yet he remains notoriously difficult to pin down. Johnson has been seen by some as a conservative, even a reactionary; by others as a liberal, even a revolutionary. He is an avatar of joyous sociability and of agonized solitude. He embodies the most devoted orthodoxy and the most tortured skepticism. He is remembered as Milton’s fiercest critic, yet he called *Paradise Lost* ‘a poem which, considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind.’ His quip about a dog on its hind legs is among the most famous misogynist zingers in the language, yet there was no greater champion of women writers in eighteenth-century Britain. For Fussell, Johnson’s thought was marked by ‘the all but simultaneous embrace of antithetical or distant properties.’

How to make sense of these paradoxes? Critics have figured these contradictions in various ways. For a few, especially among his contemporaries, Johnson was simply inconsistent, and therefore not to be taken seriously. Most, though, have found him difficult to dismiss. For some, Johnson was locked in a struggle with himself – a struggle that might be either celebrated or pathologised. For others, the metaphor of ‘struggle’ gave way to one of ‘balance’ – in W. B. C. Watkins’s formulation, a ‘perilous balance’. For a handful of critics Johnson was a profound practitioner of dialectic, perhaps a precursor of Hegel, even of postmodernism.

William Hazlitt, writing in 1819, likened Johnson’s prose style to ‘the oscillation of a pendulum’. He did not intend it as a compliment. This pendulum provided nothing more than a mechanical tick-tock, producing what he called ‘monotony of style’. The contributors to this volume, however, have coopted Hazlitt’s dismissive metaphor and redeployed it, treating Johnson’s ‘contrary motions’ not as a struggle, not as a balance, but as a pendulum’s arc. The editors’ introduction introduces the image, and all the contributors – including some of the most important Johnsonians working today – manage to invoke it in exploring Johnson’s multifarious mind.

The essays vary widely in character, touching on a great many topics in Johnson’s writing and his life. Some are fairly narrowly focused, as with James McLaverty’s reading of the textual variation in Johnson’s poems, John Mullan’s account of ‘Fault Finding in Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*’, or Charlotte Brewer’s even-handed exploration of women writers in the *Dictionary*. Others are much broader, trying to make sense of the whole of Johnson’s life and works: Jane Steen with ‘The Creation of Character’, Philip Smallwood with ‘Johnson and Time’, even Isobel Grundy with ‘What Is It About Johnson?’ Some of the chapters challenge conventional wisdom, as when Howard Weinbrot puts paid to the fashionable conception of Johnson as a mental wreck. Others fill in gaps in our knowledge, as

when David Fairer documents Johnson's complicated relationship with Joseph and Thomas Warton. Many chapters, though, ask questions that have simply never been asked before, or consider subjects so broad that they have never been explored satisfactorily, as when Robert DeMaria, Jr meditates on 'Johnson and Change', or Lawrence Lipking on 'Johnson and Genius'.

Despite the considerable variety, the chapters are without exception grounded in incisive close reading, which gives a diverse collection a kind of unity. They also make genuine contributions to Johnsonian studies, demonstrating extensive knowledge of both the primary texts and the relevant scholarship. They will not make Johnson seem any more consistent or even coherent – they do not try to stop the pendulum from swinging. They will, however, reward any reader of late eighteenth-century British literature.

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