



Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing

By Paul Fussell

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Not everyone is as innocent as this engaging complainant. Most people who read know something about Johnson, enough at least to summon up images of him asseverating “No, Sir,” knocking back endless cups of tea, rambling over the Hebrides, puffing out his breath like a whale, repressing Boswell, standing bareheaded in Uttoxeter Market, and having a frisk with Beauclerk and Langton. And now, thanks to the Johnsonians of Yale, Columbia, Oxford, and Lichfield, our knowledge of the man and his social environment has increased more than anyone fifty years ago could have imagined. But despite prodigies of research and documentation, an interest in Johnson that could be called literary has been wanting. One suspects that for every hundred persons familiar with the classic Johnson anecdotes there is perhaps only one who has actually read the *Rambler* or the *Idler* or even the *Lives of the Poets*. And if the writings are still little read for their own sake, they are almost as little written about as attractive objects of criticism. Yale’s new edition of the writings, the first since the early nineteenth century, is an occasion to perceive that for all his value as conversational goad and wit and for all his attractiveness as a moral and religious hero, Johnson’s identity remains stubbornly that of a writer.

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