

SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *RASSELAS*: THE DUPLICITY OF CHOICE AND THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

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The philosophical novel *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* was published anonymously on April 20, 1759. Some reviewers soon identified Samuel Johnson as its author. They were fulfilling Johnson's expectations. In a letter to William Strahan, Johnson wrote, "I will not print my name, but except it to be known."¹ According to Boswell, Johnson wrote the work "that with the profits he might defray the expence of his mother's funeral, and pay some little debts which she had left. He told Sir Joshua Reynolds that he composed it in the evenings of one week."² The title originally planned for the work was "The Choice of Life".³ This phrase, which is emphasized several times throughout the novel, is also its shortest conceivable summary. The issue of that choice, however, is not clear. In spite of Johnson's well-turned aphorisms, *Rasselas*' choice of life remains inconclusive. Worse still, a study of the response to the work throughout its life reveals that the readers of the book have interpreted this inconclusiveness, and the doctrine of the book as a whole, in widely different ways—the implied authorial attitude of the work has been more difficult to identify than the author's identity originally was. These disagreements reveal, I think, some tensions in the thematic structure of the novel and in Johnson's system of morals. The status of Johnson's novel as a literary artifact seems to work against its purported moral content. A comprehensive interpretation of *Rasselas* cannot see it as the seamless product of its author's intention. We shall approach the issue of intention gradually, by first setting the work in its original intertextual medium.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Among literary works, the obvious candidate to a close kinship with *Rasselas* is "The Vanity of Human Wishes". Both works have been said to expound the same moral doctrine.⁴ For Robert Voitle, however, "it is only half true that the book is a *Vanity of Human Wishes* in prose".⁵ He argues that human wishes are defeated in the poem by an implacable fate, while in the novel they are thwarted by the individual's own foibles and chance. Leopold Damrosch finds in *Rasselas* some degree of acceptance of "the possible satisfactions of the present", while in "The Vanity of Human Wishes" these are rejected.⁶ On the whole, the poem is unambiguous in one fundamental point, the relationship between human enterprises

and the afterlife. The issue is much less clear-cut in *Rasselas*. The novel is less explicit, and it is both paradoxical and parodical. This makes its tone very different from that of the poem.

Johnson had published in 1735 an abridged translation of the Jesuit Father Jeronimo Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*. This work is probably the source of the setting of *Rasselas*.⁷ In the preface to his translation, Johnson presents the work as a model of realism, and denigrates fanciful and romantic travel books, which exploit a facile exoticism. *Rasselas* preserves something of the Cervantesque spirit of this preface. The early reviewers of *Rasselas* warned their readers not to expect a typical "Oriental tale". This effect of intertextual disappointment is surely intended by Johnson —and it worked remarkably well.⁸ The illustrations for the early editions of the work contributed to mislead the expectations of the readers, since they exploit whatever scenes have narrative interest or suggest an exotic, romantic content.⁹ Among the oriental tales currently fashionable in England, Geoffrey Tillotson has pointed out one possible source for *Rasselas* in the *Persian Tales* translated by Ambrose Philips (1714).¹⁰ We find there the well-known story of an unhappy prince who searches the world looking for a happy man. As for the *taedium vitae*, M. C. Hodgart suggests that Johnson may have found inspiration in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, one of his favourite books.¹¹

D. J. Enright sees in Johnson's novel a Christian version of the story of Faust, without the shadow of a rebellion against God.¹² The elements of the dissatisfied man who feels he is wasting his life and the travel through the world with an experienced counselor are there. Enright, however, sees no contrast in *Rasselas* between the aspiring mind of the pupil and the deflatory comment of the counselor. I would argue that the contrast is there to some extent, but that anyway *Rasselas* has less in common with Faust than it has with other variants of a common motif. The pair of the inexperienced prince/disciple and his wise counselor/teacher is one of the Oriental trappings adopted by Johnson. We may think of philosophical tales such as are common in Spanish literature, either Arabic or of a vague oriental ancestry: Abu Bakr ibn al-Tufail's *The Awakening of the Soul*,¹³ Don Juan Manuel's *El Conde Lucanor*, Baltasar Gracián's *El Criticón*. A related motif common in many eighteenth-century novels is the naive hero facing a complex or sophisticated society —Voltaire's ingénu, Fielding's Joseph Andrews.¹⁴

Voltaire's *Candide* contains a major instance and a *reductio ad absurdum* of these motifs. The parallelism between *Rasselas* and *Candide* is less striking once we identify the literary family to which they both belong, but it struck the early commentators.¹⁵ Johnson himself observed once that "if they had not been published so closely one after the other that there was no time for imitation, it would have been in vain to deny that the scheme of that which came latest was taken from the other".¹⁶ The final solution offered by *Candide*, to cultivate one's own garden, was taken to be an equivalent of the one in *Rasselas* (Belot). Boswell already noted that "though the proposition illustrated by both these works was the same, namely, that in our present state there is more evil than good, the intention

of the writers was very different": *Rasselas* voices a hope in a future existence which will redeem the insufficiency of mortal humanity, while there is no such hope in *Candide*.¹⁷ Most comparisons of both works hold essentially the same view.¹⁸

From a more general perspective, the structure of *Rasselas* is related to a widespread literary archetype which contrasts innocence and experience. According to Northrop Frye, *Rasselas* belongs in a group of tales of the second phase of romance (the Edenic or Arcadian phase) in which the taboo linked to the Edenic world produces a "feeling of malaise and longing to enter a world of action", together with Poe's "Eleanora", Blake's "Book of Thel" and Keats's "Endymion". All of these feature "a kind of prison-Paradise or unborn world from which the central characters long to escape to a lower world".¹⁹

The Biblical story of the Garden of Eden and the Fall is probably the main instance of the archetype of the closed paradise in the intertextual atmosphere of *Rasselas*.²⁰ For one thing, it is the most central to the culture of most readers of *Rasselas*—Enright, for instance, notes that Rasselas in the happy valley looks like an Adam in search of a serpent.²¹ Also, Johnson may have intended a deliberate allusion to this intertext. For Joost, the allegorical meaning of *Rasselas* is the drama of the Fall, of "our First Parents" venturing from Paradise into the world,²² and the moral meaning is the soul's loss of innocence while venturing misguidedly in search of truth. To interpret the novel as a specific allegory is, I think, to go beyond Johnson's intentions. But the Biblical myth doubtless adds powerful subliminal overtones to many a reading of this work. The Edenic intertext acts in a peculiar way linking the authorial attitudes at the beginning and the end of the novel. In the early chapters, Rasselas' unhappiness is a worthy quality in him; his escape from the valley is sinful in that it goes against the laws of his country. But the reader justly sees that Rasselas' enterprise is heroic and moral, because it makes him fully human. However, the Edenic intertext makes sure that it is inevitably laden with the inevitably negative overtones of the Fall of man. The frustration of Rasselas' hopes is, therefore, predictable and fitting. The intertext permeates with ambiguity the whole of the novel: has Rasselas got it all wrong after all?

A major source for the "choice of life" motif is Biblical—the story of the Ecclesiastes.²³ The parallels are obvious. The extent of the difference will depend on the final interpretation of the role of religion in *Rasselas*. Wasserman has also called attention to classical sources of the "choice" motif, such as Prodicus' *Choice of Hercules* and Cebes' *Tablet*.²⁴ Prodicus' is a narrative text in which Hercules comes to a fork in the road of his life. He must choose between the comfortable way of Pleasure or the difficult path of Virtue. Hercules' choice was to the taste of the eighteenth century; this subject became commonplace in children's textbooks, painting, and even in musical compositions by Bach and Händel. Among its literary offspring is Addison's version in *Tatler* no. 161). This was not narrative in form, but it pictured in an allegorical way a variety of different choices in various walks of life, as opposed to the single and abstract choice of Hercules. These two sources had already been fused in a variety of writings and ways of reading, such

as the allegorical interpretations of the *Aeneid* or of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Fénelon's *Télémaque* or James Fordyce's *Temple of Virtue*. The same concern can be detected in the frame of *Paradise Lost*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela* or *Tom Jones*.²⁶ In all, moral choice is a fundamental issue, and gives the work a circular shape. The world of innocence is abandoned, but only in order to be regained in a fuller, more mature way after experience outside Paradise (or Paradise Hall). Sometimes the stories have a more pessimistic cast: they tell of the youthful dreams of a hero, his disillusion when he comes into contact with the world, and his final seclusion as an old man. Of these, Imlac's tale in chapters VIII-XII of *Rasselas* is the nearest instance.²⁷ It is an icon of the whole novel, in a simplified form.

The optimistic and the pessimistic versions of the circular journey have much in common. According to Wasserman, the circle in these narratives suggests that life is a closed system, that it is a neat plot, with a beginning, middle, and ending in which something is concluded. Johnson overturns this literary heritage through parody, and pictures life as linear and open-ended. The final return to Abyssinia in *Rasselas* is merely "Johnson's ironic bow to the closed circular plot, emptying it of meaning".²⁸ Whitley says that to the extent *Rasselas* is circular, it is an endless circle, with no possible conclusion.²⁹

Wasserman's article sets *Rasselas* in the context of the parodic literature of the 18th century. Many genres of that age are articulated on the basis of a disparity between reality and the norm. For instance, satire portrays the inability of reality to stand up to the norm which it is supposed to be measured with. Novels like Fielding's constantly rely on the parody of earlier genres, such as romance or epic. And we also witness the emergence of paradoxical forms which overflow the classical limits, like the poems of Macpherson or Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.³⁰ *Rasselas*, too, is in its way a paradoxical work; its subject is the "Sternean comedy of observing men with simplistic closed-system minds encountering a reality which is open, contingent, incomplete, and recalcitrant".³¹ *Rasselas* makes the gesture of deflating all the ideals of happiness, even those which are traditionally endorsed by religion or philosophy: old age after a happy life is miserable, wise men often become enclosed in their own system of knowledge, ascetes are the prey of desire. Rakes, politicians or criminals are not better off, of course. The choice of life is not linked to any particular activity or social situation, and maybe it is essentially indeterminable.

This enterprise of unmasking affects the narrative structure of the work itself. According to Whitley,³² focusing on the parodic elements of *Rasselas* is a way of seeing the novel as a unified structure, instead of a loose collection of moral anecdotes. It is also a more playful view of *Rasselas*, which used to be considered a solemn book, totally devoid of a sense of humour. There are occasional instances of overt parody, such as the mock romance of Pekuah's captivity. The story frustrates all the romantic expectations of the characters and the reader: the Arab chief is polite, businesslike and nearly the sanest man in the book.³³ On the whole, however, the parodic use of intertextuality is tacit and also more radical.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL SELF

Parody is therefore central to *Rasselas*. The relation between expectations and actuality had been the central subject of Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes", and it will become a central subject of *Rasselas*. But here it is grafted into a parodical relation between the text and the intertext. It is also articulated to a variety of other polar dichotomies: innocence/experience, imagination/reason, past/future, body/mind, narrativity/commentary.

For Johnson, experience is "the greatest test of truth"; it is "constantly contradicting theory". *Rasselas* sets false expectations against experience.³⁴ The main organizing device of the narrative, the journey from the happy valley into the external world, is also the main instance of this moral deautomatization. The happy valley is associated with the past, youth, innocence, and ignorance, and the world appears therefore as the site of a possible future experience. The happy valley, like all such paradises, is womb-like. It is associated with freshness and water, and with an animal life. Like many of the paradises of romance, it is not fully human. Choice is not possible, and all the characters live under the condemnation 'to not know'. Like Eden itself, the happy valley is a pre-human paradise. Transgression, with a suggestion of the Edenic sin not far behind, is the condition of full humanity. *Rasselas* and *Nekayah* cannot stand their foetal existence any longer: they feel an urge to be born. Accordingly, the escape from the valley is a birth-fantasy: it is not effected through the air, but by a difficult passage through a narrow cavity.³⁵ All this suggests that there is no way back to the paradisaical womb. Nobody who passes the gate into the world is ever able to return (*Rasselas*, 48).

Rasselas explores the various states of the world.³⁶ Against his anticipations, the only experience he acquires is that the world is much the same all over, and that the Innocence/Experience opposition has a doubtful status. What is pointed out is the basic similarity of the world to the happy valley, and not the differences.³⁷ The problem of choice which will plague *Rasselas* and his companions in the world was already at work in the microcosm of the happy valley, where the characters had "to fill up the vacancies of attention, and lessen the tediousness of time" (*Rasselas*, 40).

The episodic nature of the plot is linked to the aphoristic nature of Johnson's wisdom. Like the Swift of *A Tale of a Tub*, Johnson distrusts the imperialistic claims of systems, be they narrative or philosophical. Abstract systems are faced with reality, and they always are found to be wanting. Sanity and aphorism go together. Flights of rhetoric are to be distrusted. Johnson's strategy to counter any doctrinary claim is "to draw attention to the rhetorical nature of whatever is being affirmed".³⁸ The restraint, irony and superior standpoint associated with the aphoristic style is much in keeping with Johnson's view of the role of reflection. The action lags, the conversations become more and more explicitly philosophical. The reader's expectation of romantic action is frustrated by the reality of the novel, which becomes a kind of philosophical treatise. Plot and character, the narrative

element, seem to belong to in the side of Imagination, Innocence and the happy valley, while the moral commentary falls with the world of experience and reason.

Finally the tale comes full circle: "Of these wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained. They deliberated a while what was to be done, and resolved, when the inundation should cease, to return to Abissinia" (*Rasselas*, 150). Barbauld assumes that at the end of the tale the characters return to the happy valley with the purpose to end their days there.³⁹ Sherburn denies that this is the case. He thinks that any possibility of return to the happy valley is excluded by the early chapters, and that all *Rasselas* and his companions have felt are the memories of the delightful valley — "the work ends in almost complete frustration".⁴⁰ None of these critics notes that the lawfulness or otherwise of returning to the Happy Valley cannot be an issue in the fictional world, since the case of *Rasselas* and his companions has by definition no precedent and is not covered by any law: a new one will have to be issued.

The first great articulation of the tale is the opposition between the happy valley and the World. It is an instance of man's artistic attempt to make reality fit his desires: "All the diversities of the world were brought together, the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded" (*Rasselas*, 40) Soon, however, this opposition is subverted. The happy valley is shown to be the paradoxical site of unhappiness. Its form is governed by a narrow poetics, while the conception of poetry expounded in chapter X insists upon the width of experience necessary to a poet. The happy valley can't help being impoverished, because it has excluded the world in trying to exclude evil. Hinnant has noted that the act of artistic exclusion effected by means of the mountains constitutes the happy valley as a potential ideal, but it also constitutes the world as bad and threatening. In its very nature there is a perverse logic, since it involves the restriction that it strives to keep out.⁴¹

Hinnant sees the same logic at work elsewhere in *Rasselas*, whenever a system reveals itself to be insufficient and defeats its own purpose, when the rhetoric of a system's construction vitiates its logical plausibility. He analyzes, for instance, the opposition between culture and warfare in the Arab chieftain's discourse (*Rasselas*, 120). The Arab emphasizes both politeness and the destruction of all difference.

The dualism that is obliterated in warfare is... regenerated in peacetime, embodied in the rigid segregation of men and women, masters and slaves. It is significant in this connection that the Abyssinians who are pastoralists without being predatory do not practice this kind of segregation by gender... By deriving 'the rules of civil life' from the very same will-to-domination he exercises in wartime, the chief negates the very purpose these rules were meant to serve.⁴²

The Arab chief's paradoxical attitude to Pekuah is therefore a side effect of his logic in his sexual life. The Abyssinians in an Arab culture become surrogate Europeans. But the image works both ways. Pekuah and Nekayah have much

more freedom than European women. As Hansen has commented, Johnson is using exoticism here to postulate a society without a subordination of the sexes. The debate on marriage in chapters XXVIII-XXIX, for instance, is concerned with the question of mutual compatibility, instead of subordination.⁴³ The situation of Nekayah and Pekuah, the Abyssinian women, is in sharp contrast with that of Arab or Egyptian women, as described in Pekuah's narrative:

The diversions of the women... were only childish play, by which the mind accustomed to stronger operations could not be kept busy. I could do all which they delighted in doing by powers merely sensitive, while my intellectual faculties were flown to Cairo. They ran from room to room as a bird hops from wire to wire in his cage. They danced for the sake of motion, as lambs frisk in a meadow... Part of their time passed in watching the progress of light bodies that floated on the river, and part in marking the various forms into which clouds broke in the sky. (*Rasselas*, 124).

The Arab chieftain's women are kept in a pre-cultural, animalistic state. Their lives are episodic and insubstantial, like the clouds or the "light bodies that floated on the river". These women are denied the benefits of conceptual thought — "they are portrayed as being imprisoned within a world of nominalistic particulars."⁴⁴ They stand, therefore, in sharp contrast with the abstractive ideal of a conceptual poetry put forward in chapter X as one of the summits of human achievement. Paradoxically, these women become unfit as the sexual companions of the Arab chief precisely because of the subordination which ensures that they will fulfil this role:

as they had no choice, their fondness, or appearance of fondness, excited in him neither pride nor gratitude; he was not exalted in his own esteem by the smiles of a woman that saw no other man, nor was much obliged by that regard, of which he could never know the sincerity, and which he might often perceive to be exerted not so much to delight him as to pain a rival. (*Rasselas*, 125).

Hansen notes that the situation of free women in Egyptian society (chapter XXV) is not much better than that of the Arabs: their ignorance ensures they are kept in a state of alienation.⁴⁵

According to Hinnant, in *Rasselas* all setting of limits and polar oppositions is denounced as perpetuating the very evil it seeks to denounce: "Johnson's argument is presented not as the simple frustration of a desire for security, but as the dissolution of a dialectic of inside and outside."⁴⁶ The Johnsonian analysis of desire and its function in the economy of the human mind shows Derrida's logic of supplementarity⁴⁷ at work in the eighteenth century: its effects are to be seen wherever the subject tries to restrain his desire to one particular object, or to reach a plenitude which will put an end to desire. Duplicity is inherent in any human enterprise. The learned men in chapter XXII "met at state times to unbend their

minds, and compare their opinions" (*Rasselas*, 86), but they can't help begetting envy and intolerance instead. *Rasselas* feels this duplicity in his own experience of unhappiness in the happy valley. In chapter III, an old man tries to show him the positive and tangible benefits of his life. It is not surprising that, after a conversation with this deconstructivist prince, "the old man went away sufficiently discontented to find that his reasonings had produced the only conclusion which they intended to prevent" (*Rasselas*, 45).

We could see in Johnson's language, in the celebrated "or" which inscribes the issue of choice into so many of the sentences in *Rasselas*, a sign that everything is bipolar in Johnson's world. However, Wasserman claims, this is ultimately an illusion. The bipolarity suggested by the "choice of life" is dissolved in a paradox. The alternatives are not clear-cut. "Choice, we are quickly made to see, is sometimes impossible and always indifferent".⁴⁸ Some sections in *Rasselas* also discredit other 18th-century favourite strategies to deal with bipolarity: the *concordia discors* and the *via media*. Johnson seems to suggest that all are too neat, through the "process of invoking closed designs long assumed to shape life into purposeful order and then letting them undo themselves to reveal that life has no significant order and forms no neat plot."⁴⁹ We are left only with a "directionless oscillation between opposites, neither of which is either sufficient or stable".⁵⁰ The debate on marriage, for instance, is not conclusive. A definite conclusion is impossible because men will want to drink from the source and from the mouth of the Nile at the same time. Logic is always contaminated by rhetoric, and solitude by a desire for society. The world is imperfectly ordered for the purposes of human action. This is Johnson's version of man's "middle nature", his imperfect condition, which is for him a decree of Providence (*Rambler* no. 179).

Hinnant draws a connection between the contestation of the logic of oppositions and limits which figures so prominently in *Rasselas* and Johnson's allegiance to Newton's new conception of the universe.⁵¹ Newton had rejected the notion of a "full" universe, and had put forward a very different picture: the universe as a void. Not only does the void exist: it permeates what we take to be the absolute presence and plenitude of matter. For Newton, matter is made of diminutive particles separated by vast stretches of empty space. And those particles themselves have the same structure: the void, then, if all matter were compressed to perfect solidity; it might be contained in a cube of a few feet."⁵² Hinnant sees Johnson's task in *Rasselas* as the equivalent of Newton's new physics in the moral realm. Instead of the plenitude of ethical systems, we find the emptiness of the conscience hurling itself from one desire to the next, without any solid basis to arrest it. In Johnson's view, good and evil, plenitude and emptiness, are intertwined. Happiness cannot be stable: it is always perceived through its contrary. The best moments in the life of *Rasselas* are those in which he is planning his escape from the happy valley: "In these fruitless searches he spent ten months. The time, however, passed cheerfully away... He met a thousand amusements which beguiled his labour, and diversified his thoughts" (*Rasselas*, 49). Whatever happiness we find is not grounded in presence, in satisfaction, but in absence, in desire. It becomes a question of

perspective. This conception of moral happiness is no longer heliocentric; relativism is close at hand.

There is no real order in the world, rather an “inexhaustible variety”, “a non-unified, heterogeneous plurality”.⁵³ This external variety is in contrast with an innate vacuity at the heart of the human mind. Desire is apparently a principle of order and selection in this multiplicity, but human desire is useless as an organizing principle or as a measure, since it is a bottomless vessel. It is, for a start, radically different from animal desire:

Every beast that strays beside me has the same corporal necessities with myself. ...I am hungry and thirsty like him, but when thirst and hunger cease I am not at rest; I am, like him, pained with want, but am not, like him, satisfied with fullness. The intermediate hours are tedious and gloomy; I long again to be hungry that I may again quicken my attention. (*Rasselas*, 43).

Johnson is not the first, nor the last, of the philosophers who see man as a kind of anomaly in the order of the cosmos, a sudden gap in the midst of the plenitude of being. Unlike other creatures, man is “burthened with [him]self” (*Rasselas*, 43). Pope’s world-view is more classical than Johnson’s. He adheres to what has been called the “Great Chain of Being” model of an ordered and stable universe. But even for Pope man is something special, an ambiguous or duplicitous element who cannot be assigned a fixed place, “the glory, jest and riddle of the world”.⁵⁴ Johnson goes further. His definitions of the human mind sometimes suggest an unstoppable vortex which can’t help its endless draining movement, a person running away from his shadow, or a snake swallowing its own tail. “Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux” (*Rasselas*, 115). That is, the restless movement of the mind is the counterpart of man’s bodily, mortal condition. The spirit which breathes through *Rasselas* is remarkably close to Miguel de Unamuno’s notion of the tragic sense of life.⁵⁵ And at times, Johnson sounds as if he would endorse Sartre’s definition of the human conscience as a void and a non-coincidence,⁵⁶ of man as a useless passion.

For the pyramids, no reason has ever been given adequate to the cost and labour of the work... It seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life, and must be always appeased by some employment. Those who have already all that they can enjoy, must enlarge their desires. (R 108, XXXII).

Johnson’s hunger of imagination, his logic of desire, is not one of full presence—in this it resembles Derrida’s logic of the supplement. Walter Jackson Bate has noted how life is for Johnson something which must be “filled up”.⁵⁷ Society, literature, work and conversation appear in many of Johnson’s writings as objects with which a hungry subject tries desperately to make up for its lack of being. “We

desire, we pursue, we obtain, we are satiated; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit.”⁵⁸ There is a Sisyphus inside every man. We are the constant prey of a desire for novelty, which pushes us beyond what is familiar and known. The human subject cannot find satisfaction with itself; it is not a godlike plenum, but a lack. It is in constant need. God is self-sufficient and perfectly happy in his eternal present. Human nature is “forced to have recourse, every moment, to the past and future for supplemental satisfactions.”⁵⁹ The present may be the only physical reality for our mind, but that is not enough. Indeed, the present, a minimally existent but restless entity, constantly processing the future and turning it into the past, is a good image of the Johnsonian mind. And it is insufficient for us. The present too is an empty locus which requires supplementation:

The truth is, that no mind is much employed upon the present; recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments. Our passions are joy and grief, love and hatred, hope and fear. Of joy and grief the past is the object, and the future of hope and fear. Even love and hatred respect the past, for the cause must have been before the effect. (*Rasselas*, 104).

Imlac observes that his wide experience permits him to escape from the narrow limits of the present:

I have a mind replete with images, which I can vary and combine at pleasure. I can amuse my solitude by the renovation of the knowledge which begins to fade from my memory, and by recollection of the accidents of my past life... The rest, whose minds have no impression but of the present moment, are either corroded by malignant passions, or sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy. (*Rasselas*, 68).

This requires an education of the mind, which is no easy task. *Rasselas* decided to put an end to his twenty-eight years of alienation. He spent then twenty months in vain imaginings and fantasies of escape. When he realized his self-deception, his regrets last four months. And when he again confronts the evidence of his inertia, he “regretted his regrets” (*Rasselas*, 48). In Johnson, thought is a process of combustion, and it is in constant need of fuel. Human wishes are both vain and unquenchable,⁶⁰ because the relationship between the subject and the object is one of supplementarity and endless reappropriation. That is the source of *Rasselas*’ dissatisfaction in the happy valley. This is man’s condition, the source of both madness and progress, of the best and the worst. “When fed with objective knowledge the ‘hunger of imagination’ may be turned to profit and led to growth. But if this awareness is lacking, as is generally the case, the imagination will seek to fill itself in some other way, or will uneasily begin to prey upon itself.”⁶¹

One such danger is confusing the means with the end. There is no intrinsic end in life, according to Johnson, because man is not designed as a self-sufficient being. The human mind does not want anything in particular: it just wants. Its desire is

essentially without object —will, pure will, as such, is one of its constituents. An inbuilt, *a priori* desire, unappeasable by definition. The particular objects of our wants, the provisional ends, are a function of the imagination: “the imagination, in common and daily life, is always simplifying the endless desires of the heart into specific wants, and then finding them insufficient”.⁶² If the imagination falters, however, desire is not interrupted, and the reflexive nature of desire becomes apparent. Rasselas can complain “That I want nothing... or that I know not what I want” (*Rasselas*, 44-45). Even that which is by definition not desirable may become the object of desire if it must find an outlet: “I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness” (*Rasselas*, 45). The masochistic nature of human desire vitiates even the philosophical reflection which analyzes it: In the middle of his meditations on unhappiness, Rasselas finds it inevitable “to feel some complacency in his own perspicacity, and to receive some solace of the miseries of life, from consciousness of the delicacy with which he felt, and the eloquence with which he bewailed them” (*Rasselas*, 43). The worst of the plights of unruly desire, that of the man who would, “at the same time, fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile” (*Rasselas*, 103) is always dangerously close to the normal workings of the mind.

But Johnson is not satisfied with this situation —nor does he believe that desire or imagination are the sole faculties of the human mind. If desire, fancy or imagination are unruly by definition, they must be controlled by reason. The imagination may alleviate pain momentarily, but it will never lead to truth and to real contentment; on the other hand, “the dangerous prevalence of imagination” (the title of chapter XLIV) may lead to outright madness. In this respect, Johnson is close to the traditional scholastic account of the faculties of the mind.⁶³ This reproduces in the structure of the mind itself the opposition mind/body, in the form of cognition/volition or reason/imagination.⁶⁴ We must recognize the true status of the objects of our endeavours —whatever they may seem to be, they are only provisional recipients of the activity of the mind.⁶⁵ Learning this is learning to manage the mind and keep its energies within bounds. The mind must observe its own workings and recognize them for what they are. Many interpreters of *Rasselas* have denied that its conclusion is the impossibility of happiness. Happiness is not linked to any specific state of mankind; rather, it demands an active control over the mind so as to prevent the diseases which lead to unhappiness, whenever the mind indulges too much in one fixed system or state.⁶⁶ The poet, one of the human ideals proposed in the book, needs to have a wide overview of the diversity of human states, and most of the examples of inadequate choices have in common a restriction or narrowing of the human experience available.⁶⁷ According to this interpretation, the journey of Rasselas may not have fulfilled his expectations, but it has not been entirely useless either. Self-observation and self-knowledge are still Johnson’s ideals; but their role is one of restraint and humility, and their success is always questionable.

SOME PARADOXES

The principle that happiness is limited in this world and that the human mind will not be able to stop jumping from one object to another finally embraces the authorial voice of *Rasselas*, in a way which has received widely divergent interpretations, to the extent that it can be considered to be a real crux in the interpretation of the novel. This happens to some extent through the use of analogical author —and reader— figures inside the work, *Rasselas* and *Imlac*. *Rasselas* is proposed as a reader —figure from the first phrase of the book, and his quest is closely followed by the parallel quest of the reader in search of meaning. *Imlac* is a poet and a chorus —an author figure.⁶⁸ These characters are at first the spectators of human folly; however, it soon becomes clear that they are trapped in the same folly they observe. Presumably, the author and the reader will not fare much better.

The hermit in chapter XXI is explicitly presented by the text as a dupe of his own wishes. But we find that the story of *Rasselas* and that of *Imlac* closely parallel the hermit's inability to be contented either within or without the limits he has traced. *Imlac* escaped from his native country into the world, only in order to finally seclude himself in the happy valley. But like the hermit, he returns to the world, and retraces his way once more.⁶⁹ *Imlac*'s role as an exposé of folly cannot be doubted, but even he is, to some extent, just another fool, an imperfect reflector which must be read through. *Rasselas*' story is much the same.

Another instance that shows *Imlac*'s unreliability is the scene where he sets his unfulfillable requirements for poets.⁷⁰ This has some metatextual implications when we keep in mind *Imlac*'s role as a surrogate author-figure: "Imlac now felt the enthusiastic fit, and was proceeding to aggrandize his own profession, when the prince cried out, 'Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration' " (*Rasselas*, 63). *Imlac* has digressed in his narration, but so has Johnson. The "dissertation on poetry" belongs to both author and character, and it is on the whole a clearly unambiguous instance of the author speaking through a character's mouth. We can read *Rasselas*' order as one directed both to his court poet and to his real author. Johnson addresses himself ironically through the voice of *Rasselas*. Johnson's sarcasm on the "enthusiastic fit" is a check to his own indulgence in poetics, and a warning that the poet may also be a victim of his own obsession.

At the end of the book, *Imlac*'s choice of life is just to go on drifting aimlessly in the "stream of life". This attitude is somewhat disappointing, because of the duplicity hidden in his choice. After all, "the stream of life is also a choice of life".⁷¹ Moreover, the phrasing of *Imlac*'s choice brings to mind the floating objects which the Arab chieftain's women watched to ease the monotony of their life (*Rasselas*, 124). These were symbols of inessentiality and alienation. In spite of appearances, there are no absolutely privileged characters in this narrative. Just as *Rasselas* is *restless*,⁷² *Imlac* is *in lack*.

The narrative structure of *Rasselas* mimics the intellectual quest of the hero.

The narrative interest is highest in the earlier episodes, where the fictional situation is at its most picturesque and the problem faced by the hero is most concrete: how to escape the valley. Once that problem is surmounted, the episodic nature of the narrative steadily disrupts the progress of the book and leads to the conclusion, which is overtly anticlimactic and perfunctory. The comfortable textual positions of the author and the reader are undermined as both share the confusion of the characters,⁷³ but this destabilization is not achieved through a master strategy which is ultimately under the author's deliberate control.

As to the narrative voice and the implied authorial voice themselves, a similar pattern can be pointed out. The story begins with olympian narratorial detachment: "Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue in eagerness the phantoms of hope..." (*Rasselas* 37, I). Surely the narrator is not so naive as the collective narratee thus described. But in the course of the story, the narrator abandons this explicit moralizing stance. Part of it is transferred to Imlac, and part to the dramatic irony of the situations.⁷⁴ The self-prepossession of the diverse characters (the philosopher, the astronomer) with their own opinions is submitted to a criticism which cannot but corrode the author's own self-assurance. And the author learns his lesson, perhaps subliminally —the solemn didactic tone of the first chapter is parodied in the mouth of the problematically wise men *Rasselas* meets (Vesterman, 87, 96). As Bate has noted, "Johnson was unable merely to observe, but had to participate and share;... his own participation sets a bar to satire. The result, time and again in all of his moral writing, is that we have anger, protest, even ridicule, always turning into something else".⁷⁵ In the final chapter, the author himself seems to flounder through his narrative persona; his conclusion is sloppy because on this point he has no better solution to offer than his characters —he is uncomfortably close to Imlac's noncommittal choice. There is no triumphant solution offered to the problem of what to do with one's life, or to the literary representation of this issue.

IS THERE A CHOICE?

To the extent that the solution offered is conservative, it is also skeptical about itself. The characters' choices of life at the end hover uneasily between gratuitousness and wisdom. It should be stressed that Johnson does privilege some choices over others in an unambiguous way (for instance, the beneficial role of free social intercourse in the stories of the astronomer and the Arab women). What is his attitude on the central issues of religion and the meaning of human life?

There are six basic ways of reading the main issues in *Rasselas*. The first two find that its moral stance is concerned solely with human existence in this world. Interpretation number one would run something like this: "There is no unalloyed pleasure and life is full of delusions, but with a clear conscience of this condition and under the guidance of reason, a measure of control and happiness can be achieved". Interpretation number two does not concede this, and stresses our

essential limitation: the nature of humans is such that they will inevitably be wretched. The four other readings bring to the fore the role of religion in the tale. Is it an important theme? Or, is the issue of religion neglected and deficiently articulated to the moral debate? Each of these interpretations of the significance of religion in *Rasselas* combine with the two basic interpretations of the nature of human life, and produce four new readings: (no. 3) human existence has some degree of sufficiency, and is supplemented by the prospect of an afterlife; (no. 4) human existence is inessential and gloomy, but there remains the prospect of an afterlife; (no. 5) Johnson's moderate optimism is deficiently articulated with the issue of religion; (no. 6) Johnson's pessimism is such that, except for some lame references, he ignores or obscures the consolation of religion. Interpretation no. 4 can be usefully subdivided: (4a) The *characters* reach the consolation of religion; (4b) The characters are to be viewed ironically—they do not fully grasp the significance of “the choice of eternity”, whose crucial importance is left to the inference of the reader. Most of these interpretations are already found among the earliest critiques of the book, which shows at least that they are not the result of a simple historical distance between Johnson and the present-day readers.

Most of the original reviews of *Rasselas* are favourable, with some qualification on the shortcomings of the plot, and they praise both Johnson's style and his moral outlook. But the longest, by Owen Ruffhead, is largely unfavourable.⁷⁶ According to Ruffhead, Johnson lacks the narrative imagination in plot and character necessary to write a romance, and the moral utility of the book suffers from this. It is too philosophical, instead of the tale it promises to be.⁷⁷ However, the worst is that it does not succeed as a moral theory. The moral is not original: “it is calculated to prove that discontent prevails among men of all ranks and conditions”.⁷⁸ In Ruffhead's view, Johnson is too rash in concluding that happiness is unattainable. His work is unworthy of him. It discourages the search of virtue and happiness, and encourages moral indolence. The moral attitudes of *Rasselas*, as well as some of the doctrines refuted in the book, are unnatural, and the characters are artificially kept from drawing all the conclusions they would draw in real life. However, Ruffhead finds the chapter on the astronomer “very sensible”. In sum, Ruffhead thinks that life allows conclusions which are more definite than the ones drawn by Johnson. And he does not appreciate the final chapter: “As nothing is concluded, it would have been prudent in the author to have said nothing”.⁷⁹

The anonymous reviewer of the *Annual Register* notes the same narrative deficiencies pointed out by Ruffhead, but plays them down on account of the sound moral of the book: “no book ever made a more just estimate of human life, its pursuits, and its enjoyments”.⁸⁰ This review was often used by early publishers as an advertisement of the book.

Octavie Belot compares Johnson's novel with Voltaire's *Candide*, which had been published in the same year. She points out the basic similarities in the two stories and sees in them an identically pessimistic moral attitude, which she then proceeds to refute.⁸¹ This comparison is the first of many to appear in print. The

next one follows immediately, in Élie Fréron's review of Belot's translation.⁸² Fréron's comparison is obviously inspired in Belot's (Kolb). Yet he finds that while *Candide* is cynically pessimist, *Rasselas* invites us to strive for perfection. Fréron is a candidate for our interpretation number one: "On veut prouver dans ce Roman philosophique & moral que le bonheur n'est attaché à aucun état, à aucune âge, à aucune condition, & qu'il faut perfectionner son esprit & son coeur si l'on veut trouver dans la vie quelques momens heureux".⁸³ He complains that the action is insufficient, "noyée dans des raisonnemens d'une longueur insupportable", and that it decays in the second half of the book. The dramatic possibilities of the plot are not sufficiently exploited, not even as a source of moral attitudes. Nevertheless, Fréron believes that the work is a valuable one.

Sir John Hawkins gave some authority to the current rumour that Johnson intended to write a sequel to *Rasselas*: "Johnson had meditated a second part, in which he meant to marry his hero and place him in a state of permanent felicity".⁸⁴ But alas, Johnson seems to have discovered in the meantime that permanent felicity was unattainable, and he abandoned his plan.⁸⁵ Other early biographers of Johnson (Mrs. Piozzi, William Rider, David Erskine Baker, William Cooke, Thomas Tyers) succinctly give favourable appraisals of the book. Most often they take for granted that it is generally admired.⁸⁶ Tyers quotes Edward Young's comment that *Rasselas* is "a lamp of wisdom".

However, many of the private contemporary comments collected by Kolb are less favourable; they often find the book gloomy, stern, pedantic and pompous. There were also occasional attacks in print. In his abusive epitaph on Johnson, George Mason speaks of "the matchless insipidity of *Rasselas*".⁸⁷ Joseph Towers believes that the morality of the tale is "more gloomy than warranted by truth or reason".⁸⁸ Towers thinks that the concern of the tale with the diseases of the imagination is probably due to "those fears of some derangement of understanding, and that morbid melancholy, with which Johnson was not unfrequently afflicted".⁸⁹ Arthur Murphy's reading is the same; *Rasselas* "is a view of human life displayed, it must be owned, in gloomy colours".⁹⁰ These critics favour the interpretation number two in our list.⁹¹

But Johnson's closest friends (Burke, Reynolds, Beattie, Boswell) appreciated the book.⁹² Boswell's appraisal is the best known of these early critiques. Johnson's novel, as read by Boswell,

shews us that this stage of our being is full of 'vanity and vexation of spirit'. To those who look no further than the present life, or who maintain that human nature has not fallen from the state in which it was created, the instruction of this sublime story will be of no avail... Johnson meant, by shewing us the unsatisfactory nature of things temporal, to direct the hopes of man to things eternal.⁹³

This interpretation (no. 4 in our list) seems to have been —and still is— a widespread one.⁹⁴ Boswell's praise is not given, however, without a shade of qualification:

Notwithstanding my high admiration of *Rasselas*, I will not maintain that the 'morbid melancholy' in Johnson's constitution may not, perhaps, have made life appear to him more insipid and unhappy than it generally is... Yet, whatever additional shade his own particular sensations may have thrown on his representation of life, attentive observation and close enquiry have convinced me, that there is too much reality in the gloomy picture.⁹⁵

Boswell then proceeds quietly to refute Johnson's views and advises us to "cultivate, under the command of good principles, la *'théorie des sensations agréables'*" and to "live pleasant".

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, *Rasselas* was well on the way to becoming a classic. But for William Mudford,⁹⁶ who voiced in print some of the earlier complaints about the work, its quality is overrated. The subject, the vanity of human wishes, is commonplace and useless. The moral stance of the book is far from real life; the reader cannot believe or experience anything in the story. It is a purely literary production (in the worst possible sense).

Anna Laetitia Barbauld also notices some defects, such as the indecision of the book and the abstracted situation of *Rasselas*, which makes the work unrepresentative of the human condition. But she believes that a more positive moral can be drawn from the tale: that no unmixed happiness can be found on earth, and that a choice cannot be arrived at by pure ratiocination. Religion prevents the moral of *Rasselas* to result in the indifference of *Candide*; Johnson turns with confidence to the prospect of immortality.⁹⁷ Barbauld notes the limitations of Johnson as a philosopher, since she finds that his ideas are not original.⁹⁸ She praises him instead for his fancy and his majestic style, as well as for his solid morality.⁹⁹ The salutary divergence of opinions went on during the early nineteenth century. Noah Webster saw in *Rasselas* and the *Rambler* the greatest proof of Johnson's intellectual powers,¹⁰⁰ while in Hazlitt's view "*Rasselas* is the most melancholy and debilitating moral speculation that was ever put forth".¹⁰¹

On the whole, later academic critics have been less outspoken, and have stressed the positive aspects of the tale. In case of disagreement with Johnson's doctrine, downright condemnations are no longer the rule. A result of the protocols of modern criticism, no doubt, but also a sign that the book's role as a moral theory is long over. However, this has not prevented the continuation of disagreement as to the philosophical and religious views put forward in *Rasselas*. Clarence Tracy believes that *Rasselas* lacks the religious dimension so prominent in "The Vanity of Human Wishes". He believes that through the use of his Oriental setting, Johnson has sidestepped the issue of religion.¹⁰² But Tracy is mistaken in believing that *Rasselas* is set in a non-Christian land. Johnson knew that Abyssinia was a Christian country (since the fourth century), and has Imlac speak of Palestine as "that country whence our religion had its beginning" (*Rasselas* 64, XI). Joost sees in the fact that the protagonists are Christian an indication of the religious dimension hidden in the book.¹⁰³ Joost explains the absence of an explicit religious dimension as an instance of irony. The characters are insufficiently aware of the

religious dimension of their choices. They fall short of fully embracing the Christian faith, “they content themselves with delusory schemes of happiness”. Joost finds that the projects of the characters at the end of the book are still fanciful, and not devised according to reason; that the characters have not learned anything. “Man’s desire to return to the happy valley may be natural, but it is vain”.¹⁰⁴ The novel, then, deals with life from a philosophical level, embodied in the figure of Imlac, but it also points to the limitations of this outlook. For Joost, the message of *Rasselas* is that “philosophy cannot answer the problem of man’s destiny”.¹⁰⁵ Even at its most grim, as in the discourse of the disillusioned old man, *Rasselas* voices a Christian hope, “to possess in a better state that happiness which here I could not find, and that virtue which here I have not attained” (*Rasselas*, 137). Nekayah is given the closing statement in the last chapter but one: “To me, said the princess, the choice of life is become less important; I hope hereafter to think only on the choice of eternity” (*Rasselas*, 149). Joost’s reading is number 4b in our classification, and it presupposes an Olympian authorial attitude in full control of the text. It has the undesirable consequence of turning all previous interpreters of the text. It has the undesirable consequence of turning all previous interpreters of the novel into radical misreaders. The early readers who favour interpretation no. 4 believe that the religious aspirations of the characters are to be accepted literally (4a). None of the early readers interprets the novel ironically. It is difficult to do so in view of this explicit concern on the part of the characters with the issue of religion —the irony required to accommodate this concern is too contorted to be plausible in a writer like Johnson. Most readers do not see an inadequacy between the supposedly religious message of *Rasselas* and its inconclusive ending. According to Schwartz, the inconclusiveness of the work is in keeping with its Christian outlook: “nothing can be ended in the final chapter, since the travelers’ earthly existence has not terminated. To provide a rounded conclusion would be to contradict the central lesson of the penultimate chapter”.¹⁰⁶ But this solution also turns most readers into radical misreaders, since they have failed to recognize the intended imitative form of Johnson’s novel.

The reference to a choice of eternity is curiously perfunctory: “the reader is left with no feeling that *Rasselas* [sic] was written for some ulterior moral purpose, as so many tales of this nature are”.¹⁰⁷ For Voitle, the promise of an afterlife is Johnson’s moral in “The Vanity of Human Wishes”, but not in *Rasselas*.¹⁰⁸ According to Krutch, Johnson’s call for a choice of eternity is a “formal rather than effective moral”, and it betrays a lack of conviction.¹⁰⁹ Voitle feels that “Johnson’s assertions concerning reward and punishment in a future state are largely intended for their therapeutic effect on his readers rather than as an expression of his own eschatological convictions”.¹¹⁰

Wasserman sees in the novel an indirect treatment of the question of immortality and the choice of eternity.¹¹¹ Like Joost, he thinks that although there is no explicit conclusion, the implicit conclusion is a recourse to traditional Christianity: finally Johnson upholds another inherited design to pattern our life with. Only, this pattern is a legitimate one, since it has been dictated by God.¹¹²

But in Wasserman's view this is not a major issue in the book —indeed, those who try to go beyond the vanity of human concerns meet the authorial disapproval. This is exemplified in the figure of the astronomer, the archetypal searcher into forbidden knowledge, like Adam (or Galileo) in *Paradise Lost*. The astronomer returns to a saner attitude when he returns to society. Although its outlook is ultimately a Christian one, *Rasselas* is concerned with life in this world: "Man's immediate concern is human life, but his destiny is eternity".¹¹³ Hinnant's reading of this question goes a step further: the choice of eternity is privileged over the choice of life, but it is also shown to belong to another sphere, and does not affect the structure of the book. "Johnson's narrative therefore refuses to make the choice of eternity into the central event in the lives of the characters".¹¹⁴ For Hinnant, there is no universal moral law offered at the end of *Rasselas*. The conclusion is not teleological, but "an enactment of the principle of undecidability" which governs such issues as the debate on marriage.¹¹⁵

This interpretation, in my view, credits Johnson with views that he never held, and which he abhorred. No Christian would accept that the choice of eternity is unrelated to the choice of life; Johnson probably wouldn't if we could ask him. Whitley's reading is still more extremely ignorant of Johnson's assumptions: he sees a "grim comedy" in the fact that the characters refuse to face the finality of death in chapter XLVIII. And Pierce believes that at the end of *Rasselas* Johnson wishes to put forward "an absurdist view of life" which can barely be staved off through social intercourse, and that "the religious approach to life has been considered and rejected by the travelers as one more choice of life that ultimately provides no more happiness than any other pursuit".¹¹⁶ This is surely not the intended authorial meaning of the book. For Johnson, it is atheists who are the dupes of eternity. This judgement is not extrinsic to the book —Nekayah does affirm that the choice of life is less important a concern than the choice of eternity, and there is no clear evidence that Johnson intended this to be viewed ironically by the reader. The problem is to conciliate Johnson's sincere feelings about this statement and the unsatisfactory way they are dealt with in *Rasselas*.

Boswell quotes a significant observation of Johnson on the subject of life after death:

No wise man will be contented to die, if he thinks he is to go into a state of punishment. Nay, no wise man will be contented to die, if he thinks he is to fall into annihilation; for however unhappy any man's existence may be, he yet would rather have it, than not exist at all.

The reasoning seems to point towards the conclusion, false, paradoxical and of course unintended, that a man will rather choose to go into a state of punishment than cease to exist. *Rasselas* exhibits a similar duplicity. Johnson's private professions of faith are well known. But are we sure they do not belong only to the public side of his private life, his consciousness? The opposition between deliberation and neglect is the predominant one in Johnson's *Players and Meditations*.

His religion is a source of anxiety, and not merely the solid pillar of comfort it purports to be. Bate notes on the subject of Johnson's adherence to religious orthodoxy, "there may be an element of compensation here, in reaction from his own disturbing doubts".¹¹⁷ Faith is in Johnson the result of a desperate escape from the suspicion that life is meaningless —it presupposes the feeling of futility we find at the end of *Rasselas* as a necessary condition.¹¹⁸ Ineffectuality, boredom, paralysis, lack of enthusiasm, procrastination, perfunctory activities. These are the main dominant notes in the book. Many of them were associated by Johnson with his own character, and his attitude towards religion. Faith, like conversation or the rational control of an unruly imagination, is one more discipline to exorcise the horror of the abyss... but one which is, by definition, an unconscious strategy. Johnson would never have admitted that his tale casts doubt on the primacy of faith or the value of Christianity as a solid ground for human action. "Sir", he might have said, "the jaundiced eye *will* see yellow". In my view, however, the conscious action of the mind on itself recommended by Johnson as a remedy against mental disease is only the tip of the iceberg. Much else in Johnson's thought is the result of a similar but unconscious deliberateness.

Rasselas shows but does not resolve the contradictions between art and nature, inside and outside, male and female, religion and psychology. Johnson wants to be both a realist and an idealist¹¹⁹; he points to the futility of embracing any system, but he embraces one himself for moral and didactic purposes.¹²⁰ At the end of *Rasselas* the authorial intention is divided between a Christian and an Absurdist interpretation of the meaning of human life.¹²¹ Imlac's dictum comes to mind: "Inconsistencies...cannot both be right, but, imputed to man, they may both be true" (*Rasselas*, 56). The ambiguity of the implied authorial attitude in *Rasselas* is the ultimate and unwilling example of the duplicitous nature of human choice which is denounced throughout the novel. The narrative structure of the work is infected by subject matter: although it does try, *Rasselas* cannot escape the general law it formulates.

Johnson emphasizes the gratuitousness of the activity of the mind, of its desires, aspirations, and constructions. Yet Johnson is notoriously orthodox in his attitudes towards the actual objects of choice, desire and belief which fall inside his own private sphere: the class system, capitalism, colonialism, the conventions of the academia, of polite society and the Church of England. At times he seems to regard them as a necessary occupation for the mind, a series of unjustified but convenient devices to insure human activity and sanity. Johnson sees the class system as a whole complex of differences sustained only by the human imagination, for the sake of its own activity and enjoyment. No universal redemption from evil, poverty or oppression is possible because of the inherent limitation of the human spirit, which has to privilege an object over the others, whose activity cannot but introduce difference and duplicity. The earthly state of man is the state of *différance* for Johnson. Only in the afterlife will we enjoy plenitude, and the mind will rest at last in its adequate object. The end of life is outside life. The choice of life is a pseudo-problem; what matters is the choice of eternity. That is the overt

doctrine of *Rasselas*. But the structural moves of the work seem to cast doubt on this conclusion, and to reduce this new polarity to the status of all others: a false resting point for a consciousness which is inherently restless because it cannot help being a maker of paradoxes.

Notes

1. Jan. 20, 1759. Reprinted in *Johnson Without Boswell*, ed. Hugh Kingsmill (London: Methuen & Co., 1940), 83-84.
2. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1793; 6th ed., 1822; London: Dent, 1906; 2 vols.), 1: 209.
3. Johnson, letter to William Strahan. The full title planned by Johnson runs: "The Choice of Life/or/The History of...Prince of Abissinia".
4. E.g., by Boswell (quoting "a very accomplished lady") 1: 210; Sir Walter Scott, *Lives of the Novelists* (Paris, 1825) 88-90, quoted in James T. Boulton (ed.), *Johnson: the Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 422; Louis Kronenberg and Samuel Holt Monk (eds.), *The Portable Johnson and Boswell* (New York: Viking, 1959), 29; *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Abrams et al. (New York: Norton, 1962), 853 n.1; Richar B. Schwartz, *Samuel Johnson and the New Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), 151.
5. Rober Voitle, *Samuel Johnson the Moralist* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard UP, 1961), 37. In a very different vein, William Vesterman analyzes the greater complexity of the authorial and narratorial voices of *Rasselas* in *The Stylistic Life of Samuel Johnson* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1977), 78 *passim*.
6. Leopold Damrosch, Jr., *Samuel Johnson and the Tragic Sense* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972), 154 n.
7. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, preface to *Rasselas* (in her series *The British Novelists* [1810], 1820, 3d., i-viii; reprinted in Boulton, 149-154), 150. John Wain, in *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 209, draws attention to another source in Job Ludolf's 1681 *Historia Aethiopica*. Peter Quennell notes that some motifs are extracted from the early seventeenth-century work *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (*Samuel Johnson: His Friends and Enemies*; New York: McGraw-Hill/American Heritage Press, 1972; 179).
8. See, for instance, Macaulay's account, *Macaulay's Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Charles Lane Hanson (Boston: Ginn & Co./The Athenaeum Press, 1903), 22. Macaulay falls into the trap himself, when he adds his own complaint about Johnson's geographical inaccuracies, turning the "filthy savages" of Abyssinia into civilized Englishmen.

9. See the illustrations reproduced in Paul Alkon, "Illustrations of *Rasselas* and Reader-Response Criticism", in Paul Alkon and Robert Folkenfic, eds., *Samuel Johnson: Pictures and Works* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1984), 1-62. Alkon draws attention to some attempts to reinterpret *Rasselas* as the romance it never was.
10. Geoffrey Tillotson, "*Rasselas* and the *Persian Tales*", *TLS* (29 Aug. 1935): 534.
11. M. C. Hodgart, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Batsford, 1962).
12. D. J. Enright, introduction to Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 14. All page references to *Rasselas* will be to this edition.
13. Sometimes known as *Philosophus autodidactus*.
14. Cf. Carey McIntosh, *The Choice of Life: Samuel Johnson and the World of Fiction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973), 179f.
15. Octavie Belot, preface to her translation of Johnson's *Rasselas* (Paris, 1760), quoted in Gwin J. Kolb, "The Early Reception of *Rasselas*, 1759-1800", *Greene Centennial Essays*, ed. Paul Korstin and Robert R. Allen (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 226; Boswell, 1: 210; Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs* (1807), 363-364 (quoted in Boulton 417); Barbauld, 151; Scott, *Lives* (quoted in Boulton 422); Voitle 157; Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Henry Holt, 1944), 183.
16. Boswell, 1: 210.
17. Boswell, 1: 210. Cf. Barbauld, 151; Scott, *Lives* (quoted in Boulton, 422).
18. Cf. the anonymous preface to Johnson's *Rasselas* (Troy: Pafraet Book Co., 1903), 3-4; Percy Hazen Houston, *Doctor Johnson: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Humanism* (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 1923), 196; Mildred C. Struble, *A Johnson Handbook* (New York: Crofts & Co., 1933), 150; Mark J. Temmer, "Candide and *Rasselas* revisited", *Revue de littérature comparée* 56.2 (1982): 176-193; McIntosh argues moreover for the superiority of the intellectual detachment advocated in *Rasselas* (209-212). However, other critics privilege the liveliness or optimism of *Candide* over the gloom of *Rasselas*. Cf. Arthur Murphy, "An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, L1.D."; prefixed to his edition of Johnson's works (London, 1792), reprinted in *Johnsoniana: Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, L1.D.*, ed. Robina Napier (London: Bell and Sons, 1884; 337-419), 410; Krutch, *Samuel Johnson*, 182; Michael Joyce, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Longman, 1955), 88; Quennell 180.
19. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 200.
20. Not surprisingly, it also figures among the subtexts of *Candide*: the narrator comments that at the beginning of his journeys Candide is "chassé du paradis terrestre". See Temmer, "Candide", 190.
21. Enright, 14. The edenic myth is also an intertext for Mary Lascelles, "*Rasselas* reconsidered", *Essays and Studies*, N.S. 4 (1951), 43; for Macintosh, 175; and for Anthony Kearney, "Johnson's *Rasselas* and the Poets", *English Studies* 53: 514-518 (this time as filtered by Milton).
22. Nicholas Joost, "Whispers of Fancy: or, the Meaning of *Rasselas*". *Modern Age* 1.2 (1957), 166.
23. S. C. Roberts, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Longman/The British Council, 1954), 16; Thomas R. Preston, "The Biblical Context of Johnson's *Rasselas*", *PMLA* 84 (1969), 274-281.

24. See Earl R. Wasserman, "Johnson's *Rasselas*: Implicit Contexts", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 74 (1975): 1-25.
25. Wasserman, 6.
26. Wasserman, 13-16.
27. Alvin Whitley, "The Comedy of *Rasselas*", *ELH* 23 (1956), 56.
28. Wasserman, 21.
29. Whitley, 70. Cf. also Cf. Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (Athens [GA]: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 163. Some critics do not see any parodic elements in the return, and believe the characters to be wiser; they have learned enough to be contented with life in their native country. See f.i. William Kenney, "Rasselas and the Theme of Diversification", *Philological Quarterly* 38.4 (1959): 84-89.
30. Wasserman, 3.
31. Wasserman, 5.
32. Whitley, 48f.
33. Whitley, 63.
34. Whitley, 56; Wasserman, 2.
35. This is for Joost (167) the "oneiric meaning" of *Rasselas*, which he adds to the classical levels of scholastic and Dantean interpretation.
36. It is curious that *Rasselas* never considers working, or abandoning his social class. His is an observation of, and not a participation in the world —which goes a long way to explain the final fruitlessness of his quest. I do not think this is an intended element of the work's meaning.
37. Whitley, 50.
38. Charles H. Hinnant, *Samuel Johnson: An Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 91.
39. Barbauld, 151. Other critics favour this reading: Hester Mulso (Mrs. Chapone), *The Works of Mrs. Chapone* (London, 1807), 1.109-10, qtd. in McIntosh, 184; Krutch, 175; Kenney, 88. Cf. also Macaulay, 23; Joyce, 260.
40. George Sherburn, "Rasselas Returns —to what?" *Philological Quarterly* 38.3 (1959), 383. Gwin J. Kolb argues that the text is ambiguous on whether it is possible for those who have left the Happy Valley to cross the gates again ("Textual Cruxes in *Rasselas*", in *Johnsonian Studies*, ed. Magdi Wahba [Cairo, 1962], 260).
41. Hinnant, 85-86.
42. Hinnant, 87-88.
43. See Marlene R. Hansen, "Sex and Love, Marriage and Friendship: A Feminist Reading of the Quest for Happiness in *Rasselas*". *English Studies* 66.6 (1985), 522. The choice of life is a problem both for women and men, and the women do not fulfil the archetypal role of detaining the hero in his quest. Hansen notes that this may be the reason why sex is avoided in the tale: Nekayah is *Rasselas*' sister, not his lover (Hansen 519, 525). Indeed, several critics have noted that the princess is more of a philosopher than her brother. Nehayah is more practical than *Rasselas*, more inclined to accept the limitations of human nature.
44. Hinnant, 88.
45. Hansen, 515.
46. Hinnant, 141.
47. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).
48. Wasserman, 9-10.
49. Wasserman, 11.
50. Wasserman, 11.
51. Hinnant, 1-10.

52. *Rambler* 1: 41, quoted in Hinnant, 1.
53. Hinnant, 95.
54. Pope, "Essay on Man", II.15.
55. Cf. Krutch, 176; Enright, 34.
56. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943); esp. II.1, "Les structures immédiates du pour-soi", 115-149
57. Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1955. Cf. also Krutch, 177-179.
58. *Rambler* No. 6.
59. *Rambler* No. 41.
60. Bate (70) notes that this is a modern version of the doctrine of Ecclesiastes: "All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full... the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing".
61. Bate, 65.
62. Bate, 72.
63. Cf. Joost, 168.
64. Joost finds that the projects of the characters at the end of the book are still fanciful, and not devised according to reason; that the characters have not learned anything. "Man's desire to return to the happy valley may be natural, but it is vain" (Joost, 169).
65. Cf. Bate, 69.
66. This is Kenney's reading: *Rasselas* encourages us to the salutary pleasures of "travel, study, conversation, knowledge, friendship and marriage" (88).
67. Kenney, 85.
68. The author of the "Advertisement" to an edition of *Rasselas* (London: William Miller, 1805, i-iii) saw in Imlac a fictionalised version of Johnson (quoted in Alkon, 49).
69. Whitley, 50f.; Kenney, 85.
70. Cf. Whitley, 52-53. Other critics who stress Imlac's fallibility are Patrick O'Flaherty, "Dr. Johnson as Equivocator: The Meaning of *Rasselas*", *Modern Language Quarterly* 31 (1970): 195-208; Agostino Lombardo, "The Importance of Imlac", *Bicentenary Essays on Rasselas*, ed. Magdi Wahba (Cairo, 1959), 31-49; Howard Winbrot, "The Reader, the General, and the Particular", *Eighteenth Century Studies* 5 (Fall 1971). Donald T. Siebert, Jr.'s qualification of the latter's view (*Eighteenth Century Studies* 7: 350-352) must concede that in chapter X there is at least an ironic view of Imlac's dogmatism and seriousness, if not of the doctrine of poetry he expounds.
71. Hinnant, 100. In my view, Hinnant is overestimating Johnson's deliberateness when he asserts that "Johnson controls the rhetoric of plenitude and presence in all 'choices of life', from the most naïve to the most devious forms, including even the refusal to make a choice of life" (101). I think that Johnson is also a victim of the same rhetoric he denounces from the moment he proposes a specific choice of life (Christianity).
72. Melinda A. Rabb, seminar lecture on *Rasselas* (Brown University, March 1989).
73. Cf. Grundy, 132.
74. On this evolution, see Vesterman's excellent fourth chapter, devoted to *Rasselas*.
75. Walter Jackson Bate, introduction to his edition of *Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968), xviii.
76. Owen Ruffhead, review of *Rasselas*, *Monthly Review* 20 (May 1759): 428-437. Rpt. in Boulton, 141-146. For further comment on some early responses to the book, see the articles by Kolb and Alkon.
77. Some version or other of this claim appears in most of the early critiques of the book.
78. Ruffhead, 142.

79. Ruffhead, 146.
80. Review of *Rasselas*, *Annual Register* 2 (1759): 447-449; reprinted in Boulton, 147. Cf. also Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs*, 363-364; reprinted in Boulton, 419; Sir Walter Scott, *Lives*, 88-90; reprinted in Boulton 422.
81. Belot, quoted in Kolb, "Early Reception", 226.
82. Élie Fréron, *L'Année littéraire* 7 (May 1760), quoted in Kolb, "Early Reception", 227.
83. A similar interpretation is found in Hodgart.
84. Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1787), abridged, ed. Bertram H. Davis (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 157. Kolb suggests that there may be some evidence in favour of this claim in the novel itself, "whose conclusion, 'in which nothing is concluded', may seem to invite a sequel" ("Early Reception", 243).
85. *Rasselas* did have a sequel, *Dinarbas: A Tale: Being a Continuation of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, published anonymously in 1790 by Ellis Cornelia Knight, a lady of Johnson's circle. The reviews were on the whole not unfavourable, and the piece went through a good number of editions. See Kolb, "Early Reception", 243; Alkon, 37-39; R. W. Uphaus, "Cornelia Dinarbas Knight: A Sequel to *Rasselas*", *Philological Quarterly* 65.4 (1986): 433-446.
86. See Kolb, "Early Reception", 235-237.
87. George Mason, "Epitaph on Johnson". *The Gentleman's Magazine* 66 (1796): 758-759. Reprinted in Boulton 415-416.
88. Joseph Towers, *An Essay on the Life, Character, and Writing of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1786), quoted in Boulton 372. Cf. the same opinion in Hawkins 156. These and other critics adhere to interpretation number 6 in our list.
89. Towers, *Essay*, quoted in Boulton, 372-372. The same comment is found in Hawkins, 155; Murphy, 409; Houston, 46; Damrosch, 62; Richard Hovey, "Dr. Samuel Johnson, Psychiatrist", *Modern Language Quarterly* 15 (1954), 321.
90. Murphy, 409.
91. Similar readings of this issue are found in Quennell, 182; Joyce, 88 (Joyce finds that *Rasselas*' moral defeatism is contradictory with Johnson's Christian faith); Charles E. Pierce, Jr., *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson* (Hamden [CT]: The Shoe String Press/Archon Books, 1983), 128.
92. Kolb, "Early Reception", 240f.
93. Boswell, 1: 210.
94. According to Scott, Johnson "shows us the nothingness of earthly hopes, to teach us that our affections ought to be placed elsewhere" (*Lives*, 88-90; qtd. in Boulton 422). Cf. also John Courtenay's "Literary and Moral Character of Dr. Johnson" (quoted in Boswell, I: 212), which sees "a light celestial" as an important part of Johnson's moral teaching; the Miller edition advertisement, quoted in Alkon, 49; Houston, 196; Gwin J. Kolb, "The Structure of *Rasselas*", *PMLA* 66 (september 1951): 698-717 (quoted in Pierde, 124-125); Roberts, 16; Schwartz, 155; Christopher Hibbert, *The Personal History of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 110; Wain, 209-210; Temmer, "Candide", 192-193.
95. Boswell, 1: 211.
96. William Mudford, *Critical Enquiry into the Moral Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1802), 80-85. Reprinted in Boulton 148-149.
97. Barbauld, 151.
98. Barbauld, 154.
99. Cf. also Scott, *Lives*, quoted in Boulton 422.
100. Letter to Dr. David Ramsay (oct. 1807), quoted in Boulton, 125. Even more

- enthusiastic praise is found in the "Advertisement" to the 1805 Miller edition of *Rasselas* (quoted in Alkon, 48).
101. Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), 201. Quoted in Boulton, 89. A similar view is voiced more tentatively by Leigh Hunt, "Essay on ...*Rasselas*", in *Classic Tales, Serious and Lively*, comp. Leigh Hunt, 3 vols. (London, Hunt & Reynell, 1807), 3: 1-13; quoted in Alkon, 7.
 102. Clarence R. Tracy, "Democritus Arise! A Study of Dr. Johnson's Humor", *Yale Review* 39 (1950), 294-310.
 103. Joost, 170-173.
 104. Joost, 169.
 105. Joost, 173. Another view which already finds an *implicit* religious meaning in the work is Hugh Kingsmill's, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 93.
 106. Schwartz, 155-156. A similar reading is found in Damrosch, 153. Schwartz recognizes, however, that *Rasselas* remains an incomplete statement of Johnson's views, since "we do not see that [Christian] message put into practice within the world of men" (156).
 107. Voitle, 40. This assertion is close to interpretation no. 1 in our list.
 108. Voitle, 44.
 109. Krutch, 183-184. This is interpretation number 5, leaning towards 6.
 110. Voitle, 157.
 111. Wasserman, 23.
 112. Wasserman, 24.
 113. Wasserman, 24. Wasserman therefore qualifies for interpretation no. 3 in our list. This interpretation is also that of the unusually optimistic readings of *Rasselas* in Struble, 148; McIntosh, 193ff. and J. P. Hardy, *Samuel Johnson: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 127ff. Preston reads in *Rasselas* the possibility of enjoying human life to some extent, in spite of its imperfection and its subordination to eternity (qtd. in Schwartz, 155n.); cf. also Damrosch, 154n.
 114. Hinnant, 101. Interpretation number 1.
 115. Hinnant, 100.
 116. Pierce, 126, 125.
 117. Bate, *Achievement* 73.
 118. Cf. Christopher Hollis, *Dr. Johnson* (New York: Holt & Co., 1929), 104.
 119. Cf. Wasserman, 2.
 120. Cf. the gradual separation effected by the Enlightenment between the traditional religion and morality and any grounding in cognitive rationality (e.g. in Kant). Joost reads *Rasselas* as the work of a fideist.
 121. Cf. O'Flaherty 206-209.

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