Mimesis and Understanding in Samuel Johnson’s Notes to Shakespeare (1765)

It has generally and reasonably been considered that Samuel Johnson’s Preface is the overwhelmingly distinctive achievement of his 1765 edition of Shakespeare. The Preface is not only Johnson’s theoretical justification of the Bard as the great poet of nature, but also, with such key texts as the tenth chapter of *Rasselas,* and the discussion of biography in *Rambler* 60, Johnson’s major exploration and exposition of his central and informing belief in the relation of imaginative literature to general, experienced, nature. Much less has been said about Johnson’s Notes to the plays. Indeed, Johnson’s 1765 Notes are, in contrast to the running annotations especially of the editions by George Steevens (1773, 1778, 1793) and Edmond Malone (1790), relatively few, and relatively thin. They draw to a surprisingly limited extent on the burgeoning Shakespearean contextualising scholarship, and increasingly sophisticated scholiastic methodologies, of mid-eighteenth-century editing. The Notes draw to a similarly limited extent on Johnson’s own first-hand researches, for his *Dictionary*, into the language of Shakespeare’s time.[[1]](#endnote-1) Discursive though they are, Johnson’s Notes have not generally been thought of, in their own time or since, as adding up to a coherent and consistent discourse. Representatively, Edward Tomarken opines that “For Johnson, the *Preface* represents his attempt to theorize about his practical findings in the notes”.[[2]](#endnote-2) In a previous essay, to which the present paper is intended to be a companion piece, I have argued that “Johnson was not fully invested in the methods … of the new editorial approach and methodology”, and that even his longer notes tend less to the particularly hermeneutic than “to the literary critical, the generalizing, and the moral, not to the strictly text-critical or exegetical”.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the present paper I shall expand on the generalising, and the moral or ethical, aspect of Johnson’s Notes to Shakespeare. I shall argue that Johnson’s Notes are the product of a consistent and carefully considered theoretical position on poetry in general and Shakespeare in particular. I shall identify and outline some appropriate, primarily mimetic, theoretical perspectives for Johnson’s thinking and procedures in his Notes. In presenting my thesis I shall make no concessions to the disappointingly common view that Johnson’s critical principles “do not cohere into a consistent whole”.[[4]](#endnote-4)

For Johnson, famously, “it is the task of criticism to establish principles, to improve opinion into knowledge, and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction”.[[5]](#endnote-5) Those principles, for Johnson, are not arbitrary rules: what Johnson identifies as the known first causes of literature’s means of pleasing are cognitive, and mimetic. “Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature”.[[6]](#endnote-6) Truth is everything: literature must be “true” or “agreeable” to experience “common in real life”. It must be “drawn from nature”. It must offer a “true” or “just” or “natural” picture. The poet must be like Imlac an observer, familiar with the entire human and physical world. He is an examiner and a depictor not of the particular, but of the general: “he is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recal the original to every mind”.[[7]](#endnote-7) The literary truth which gives pleasure is not local or time-bound. This is true for Johnson both of events and of characters. Boswell reports Johnson as insisting that “The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing”.[[8]](#endnote-8) In one of the fundamental theoretical statements of the Preface, we are told that Shakespeare’s characters are universal, common and familiar, not particular, unusual, or esoteric. They

are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. (*YE,* 7: 62)

It is precisely because Shakespeare’s characters act and speak according to shared and recognisable passions and principles that his plays may serve as the basis of moral instruction: “it is from this wide extension of design that so much instruction is derived . . . ; and it may be said of Shakespeare that from his works may be collected a system of civil and oeconomical prudence” (*YE*, 7: 60). The pleasure and instruction which such writing can give depends upon its evoking in the reader a sense of recognition. In the Life of Dryden Johnson states as a general principle that the mind, in reading or in watching a play, “can be captivated only by recollection, or by curiosity”. The poet must “awaken those ideas that slumber in the heart”.[[9]](#endnote-9) In the Life of Gray, the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is celebrated for its abundance of “images which find a mirrour in every mind, and . . . sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo” (*Lives,* 4: 184) There are suggestions here of a more democratic—“*every* bosom”—approach to the process of reading than such editorial successors as Malone, with his insistence on the professional expertise required to understand literature belonging to a distant cultural and linguistic past, would allow.[[10]](#endnote-10) There might seem to be hints too of a more passionate and sensible approach to reading. In the metaphor “images which find a mirrour in every mind” Johnson appeals, familiarly, to the sense of sight, and uses a figure long and regularly used in mimetic theory. In the parallel metaphor “sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo” Johnson appeals to the sense of sound. In his appeal here to the echoing sentiments of the “bosom”, as in his demand that the poet “awaken those ideas that slumber in the heart”, Johnson resorts to a figure, and an organ, which for many contemporaries was associated with sensibility. However, “sentiment” in Johnson’s usage here refers primarily to thought, rather than feeling; the first and fourth edition of his *Dictionary* offer only the senses “1. Thought; notion; opinion. 2. The sense considered directly from the language or things; a striking sentence in a composition”. These resonant phrases in Johnson’s Lives of Dryden and Gray speak not of solipsistic and individual relevance, but of perception and recollection of general and shared human experience; the sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo are shared and general human thoughts. Johnson has in mind not an Aeolian harmony of hearts sentimentally in tune, but a pleasurable process of universal recognition.

Johnson’s mimetic and epistemological conception of the principles and processes of poetic pleasure and instruction were not of course either new or unfamiliar. They belong to a developed and developing understanding of literature’s cognitive, mimetic and ethical nature and function. Johnson had certainly read amongst earlier French and English critics. He could have found in their writings much about the relation of literature and nature. He would have found less that resembled his own articulation of the concept of general nature, and strikingly little about the cognitive and recognitive elements of the literary experience which are so central to his own critical understanding. The French critics preferred an ideal to a general representation of nature, rejecting (in Molière’s words) “la faible vérité” of common experience in favour of a corrected and selected nature, “[le] beau vrai, . . . la belle [nature](http://www.toutmoliere.net/spip.php?article272).”[[11]](#endnote-11) An anticipation of Johnson’s distinction between the imaginative, on the one hand, and the false on the other, might be found in the writings of Bouhours, a critic he knew and admired:

Tout ce qui paroist faux ne l’est pas, et il y a bien de la difference entre la fiction et la fausseté: l’une imite et perfectionne en quelque façon la nature; l’autre la gate, et la détruit.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Bouhours evidently makes the distinction here, however, on the basis that literary art imitates *la belle nature*.[[13]](#endnote-13) In his *Art of Poetry*,Boileau makes classic statements of the importance of decorum in character construction. The tragic dramatist must keep “each man”, Agamemnon or Aeneas, to “his proper character”, “covetous and proud” or piously “austere”; the comic dramatist must know how to paint the comic types, “the Jealous Fool, the fawning Sycophant, / A Sober Wit, an enterprising Ass, / A humorous *Otter*, or a *Hudibras”*.[[14]](#endnote-14) This is a notion of character mimesis entirely at odds with Johnson’s celebration of Shakespeare’s understanding “that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings” (*YE*, 7: 66). In his early *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, John Dryden, speaking through the voice of Neander, is doubtful about French dramatic applications of *la belle nature*:

For the lively imitation of Nature being in the definition of a Play, those which best fulfil that law ought to be esteem’d superior to the others. ’Tis true, those beauties of the *French*-poesie are such as will raise perfection higher where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not: they are indeed the Beauties of a Statue, but not of a Man, because not animated with the Soul of Poesy, which is imitation of humour and passions.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Much later in his career, however, in his Preface to his translation of Du Fresnoy, Dryden strikes a markedly more conservative and Francophile note:

since a true knowledge of Nature gives us pleasure, a lively imitation of it, either in Poetry or Painting, must of necessity produce a much greater: For both these Arts . . . are not onely true imitations of Nature, but of the Best nature, of that which is wrought up to a nobler pitch.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The second couplet of Alexander Pope’s famous four lines on “true wit” perhaps hints at the recognitive nature of mimesis on which Johnson lays such stress:

*Something*, whose Truth convinced at Sight we find,

That gives us back the Image of our Mind.

Pope’s poetically compressed statement however is inevitably under-articulated, compressed, and arguably internally contradictory, and possible analogues and sources of its concluding line suggest the familiar thought better said, as much as the truth recognised.[[17]](#endnote-17)

I would suggest that, however much he might have learned from English and European sources, Johnson’s thinking on mimesis, in its contents and its methods, and especially in its cognitive and recognitive emphasis, is to some important degree both immediately and distinctively Aristotelian.[[18]](#endnote-18) Explicitly or implicitly, Johnson judges poets by Aristotelian mimetic principles. He begins one of his most significant critico-theoretical enterprises, the discussion of metaphysical poetry in the Life of Cowley, with a direct appeal to Aristotle:

If the father of criticism has rightly denominated poetry , *an imitative art*, these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets; for they cannot be said to have imitated any thing; they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Aristotle begins, “in the natural way, with first principles”. He states at the start of the *Poetics* that the forms of poetry “are all, taken as a whole, kinds of mimesis”.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes, and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man’s natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity ( . . . through mimesis [he] takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects. . . . as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element (identifying this as an image of such-and-such a man, for instance).

Our pleasure derives from and depends on our recognition of the object of *mimesis* as corresponding to something we already know: “if it happens that one has no previous familiarity with the sight, then the object will not give pleasure *qua* mimetic object but because of its craftsmanship, or colour, or for some other such reason”.[[21]](#endnote-21) The point crucially relates to Aristotle’s insistence that poetry deals not with particular events or historical individuals but with “the sort of things which were or are the case; the sort of things men say and think to be the case; the sort of things that should be the case”.[[22]](#endnote-22) History for Aristotle speaks of particulars, poetry of universals: “a ‘universal’ comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character. . . . A ‘particular’, by contrast, is (for example) what Alcibiades did or experienced.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

Thus Aristotle bases his mimetic theory on (as he sees it) a small set of fundamental epistemological givens: that we take pleasure in “mimetic activity”; that through mimetic pleasure we “take our first steps in understanding”; that in contemplating mimetic objects we apply our understanding; and that we take pleasure in the recognition that the mimetic object is indeed a representation of something familiar to us. The last point is also made in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In an instance of *mimesis*, a painting, a statue, or a poem, our pleasure does not derive solely from what is imitated: “instead there is an inference that ‘This is that’, so that the result is our coming to understand something.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Artistic pleasure derives not only from cognition of a particular object, but also from our recognition or recollection of what we already know of universals: in Johnson’s phrase, from “images which find a mirrour in every mind”.

I have offered only a brief account of Aristotle’s mimetic theory in the *Poetics*, a work which has itself been considered a condensed and sometimes obscure theoretical statement. The *Poetics* raises many questions, not least about the different kinds of imitative activity and recognition which Aristotle discusses under the term *mimesis*. Clearly Johnson’s critical arguments and ideas cannot be described as straightforwardly Aristotelian. Notably, where aristotle emphasises action, Johnson is much more concerned with discourse. Nevertheless, there are significant correspondences of method and thought between the *Poetics* and Johnson’s published criticism, and in particular the Preface, and (as it is the purpose of this essay to demonstrate) the Notes, to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare. Both Aristotle and Johnson insist that literary art must be based on the representation of nature, and particularly of human nature. Both understand literary art as relating and referring to the world. Both articulate theories which may be characterised as essentially epistemological. They base their mimetic theories on the pleasure human beings take, on the basis of their experience of the world, in their recognition of similarity between the art object, and the human or physical world the art object mimics. Literature represents, or should represent, not the particular and idiosyncratic, the accidents of historical time and place, which can be known to few, but the general and universal, which are part of shared human experience, and may be recognised; not the historically “real”, but what we take as probable and credible. It is because literature represents universals that it is capable of enlarging our understanding of the world.

Such a mimetic conception of art has been powerfully influential, in its essentials, for over two millennia, on western literary theoretical thinking. A recent defence of literary mimesis by the Liverpool philosopher Richard Gaskin maps particularly closely on to the theoretical positions of Aristotle and Johnson, and provides a helpful heuristic for Johnson’s methodology.[[25]](#endnote-25) Gaskin’s basic thesis is “that the reading and study of creative literature *is* a cognitive activity” (Gaskin, 345).

Gaskin sets out explicitly the principles that his book defends. He argues that works of literature “bear on the world by virtue of employing terms that refer to real (principally universal, but also sometimes individual) entities”, and “by virtue of making, or implying, true or false (principally general, but also sometimes particular) statements about the world.” Some works of literature “have cognitive value in the sense that, of the true statements that these works make or imply, some can be known to be true, and of these knowable statements some are worth knowing”. Gaskin re-affirms the possibility of belief in the referential and cognitive nature and value of works of literature. Amongst the holders of that belief, Gaskin names Horace, Johnson, and Arnold. Gaskin’s thesis is pertinent to Johnson’s Notes to Shakespeare, as to his other, more explicitly and discursively theoretical statements on literary mimesis.

Two of Gaskin’s comprehensive set of arguments are especially pertinent to Johnson’s handling of Shakespeare. Firstly, Gaskin insists that to call imaginative literature fictional is not to deny the potential truth of the propositions it affords about the world: “*all* literature . . . has factualist aspects: for example there will be . . . truths of a general nature that any work of literature, no matter how outlandish its imaginings, aims to track” (Gaskin, 38). The worlds of imaginative literature—*The Tempest*, for example— if they are to be “comprehensible to real readers”, must “traffic in ordinary properties and other abstract objects . . . with which those readers are familiar” (Gaskin, 49).[[26]](#endnote-26) They must traffic in fact with shared, and hence recognisable, human experience.

Secondly, Gaskin provides an analysis of the mimetic mode of existence of literary characters in terms which refer and apply directly to Aristotle, to Shakespeare, and to Johnson. Literature may of course refer to “real-world individuals” (as Shakespeare, and Pope, and Johnson, for instance, often do), but, Gaskin argues, “it is in a work of literature’s ability to pick out worldly *universals* that its main title to have cognitive value resides.” Thus he arrives “at the traditional (Aristotelian) doctrine that it is the business of literature to deal . . . in universalities rather than in particularities.” He illustrates the point not only by an extended quotation from Johnson’s Preface (the famous passage beginning “[Shakespeare’s] characters are not modified by the customs of particular places”), but also by a careful account of the ontological status of such characters as Hamlet. For Gaskin, Hamlet “is . . . endowed . . . with a psychology that is immediately comprehensible to . . . a very large number of people brought up within a wide variety of distinct cultures”. Ontologically, Hamlet is “a richly specified universal . . . not an individual”. Gaskin’s account is in effect a modern philosopher’s version and refinement of the position Johnson had articulated, in his own terms, just two hundred and fifty years ago (Gaskin, 59-61).

In his 1765 edition, Johnson’s running editorial annotations at the foot of Shakespeare’s text are relatively slight in comparison with the later variorum editions of Steevens and Malone. On many pages, however, Johnson engaged in a continuing argument with previous commentary, and especially the commentary of William Warburton’s 1747 edition, giving Johnson’s Notes a degree of visual presence at the foot of the page, and a degree of dialectical and hermeneutic nuance and density, which inevitably is under-represented in the text of his Notes as it appears in the scholarly edition best known to modern readers, the seventh and eighth volumes of the Yale Edition.[[27]](#endnote-27) A high proportion of Johnson’s Notes address issues of textual emendation, Johnson most commonly preferring to retain and explain the witnessed reading, in opposition to Warburton’s proposed conjectural emendations, always on the basis of hermeneutic considerations, less commonly on the basis of bibliographic considerations. Many even of the ostensibly textual notes, however, and certainly the overwhelming majority of the remainder, represent Shakespeare as the model mimetic poet of general nature.

There are a small number of set-piece examples of Johnson’s tendency to universalise Shakespearean character. Warburton’s note on the character of Polonius had begun by describing him, in rather general terms, as “a weak, pedant, minister of state”, but immediately gives him a local habitation and a name: “Polonius’s declamation is a fine satire on the impertinent oratory then in vogue”. Johnson refuses to accept that Polonius is such a “character only of manners, discriminated by properties superficial, accidental and acquired”. While acknowledging the temporal satire, Johnson insists that Polonius is not for an age but for all time:

Polonius is a man … exercised in business, stored with observations, confident of his knowledge, proud of his eloquence, and declining into dotage. … Such a man is positive and confident, because he knows that his mind was once strong, and knows not that it is become weak. … as the mind in its enfeebled state cannot be kept long busy and intent, the old man is subject to sudden dereliction of his faculties, he loses the order of his ideas, and entangles himself in his own thoughts … This idea of dotage encroaching upon wisdom, will solve all the phaenomena of the character of Polonius.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Polonius, like the uncharitable lawyer of Henry Fielding’s novel *Joseph Andrews*, is “not only alive, but hath been so these 4000 Years”.[[29]](#endnote-29) He is not, or not only, an individual, but a species: “such a man”. He is a picture not of “one Profession, one Religion, or one Country”, but, powerfully and appallingly, a universal mimesis of all men, and women, of once strong mind as they enter their decline. These are sentiments to which all too many of our bosoms return an echo. It is striking that Johnson does not provide comments on Polonius’s other extended speeches (his instructions to the departing Laertes, for instance, *Hamlet*, 1. 3. 54-81); in such matters Johnson is concerned not with “vertical”, local, editorial elucidation of each line and dramatic moment, but with the informing and general truths of character.

This theoretical position informs the 1765 Notes throughout. The observations Shakespeare makes about human life are “worthy of a man who has surveyed human nature with the closest attention”. “Such was the power” of his mind, “that he looked through life in all its relations private and civil” (*YE*, 8: 812). Johnson remarks of the characters of *The Tempest* that they “are preserved with profound skill in nature, extensive knowledge of opinions, and accurate observation of life”, men of all roles and stations “speaking in their real characters” (*YE*, 7: 135); he makes essentially the same judgment of all the plays. The plays imitate life, behaviour, and speech with both exactness and truth. The vicar of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* offers “a finished representation of colloquial excellence” (5. 1. 3; *YE*, 7: 279-800). When John of Gaunt speaks of attempting to avoid “a partial slander”, Johnson explains “That is, the ‘reproach’ of ‘partiality’. This is a just picture of the struggle between principle and affection” (*Richard II*, 1. 3. 472; *YE*, 7: 431). When the second Richard swears that he will “hate him everlastingly, / That bids me be of comfort any more”, Johnson remarks that “this sentiment is drawn from nature” (3. 2. 207; *YE*, 7: 441-2). When Henry IV asks God to forgive him for the way in which he obtained the crown, Johnson observes that “this is a true picture of a mind divided between heaven and earth” (*2 Henry IV*, 4. 5. 219; *YE* 7: 517).

The content and rhetoric of Johnson’s Notes repeatedly insist on the general and perpetual truth and application of Shakespeare’s characterisation. Don John in *Much Ado* confesses that “I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man’s jests; eat when I have stomach, and wait for no man’s leisure” (1. 3. 14; *YE*, 7: 362); Johnson comments that

This is one of our authour’s natural touches. An envious and unsocial mind, too proud to give pleasure, and too sullen to receive it, always endeavours to hide its malignity from the world and from itself, under the plainness of simple honesty, or the dignity of haughty independence.

Because the human behaviour Shakespeare describes is common, it is therefore recognisable to the reader or audience:

This vehement retraction of Leontes, accompanied with the confession of more crimes than he was suspected of, is agreeable to our daily experience of the vicissitudes of violent tempers, and the eruptions of minds oppressed with guilt. (*Winter’s Tale*, 3. 2. 173; *YE*, 7: 298) [[30]](#endnote-30)

Henry V muses at length on his responsibility, as king, for his country men:

Upon the King! let us our lives, our souls,

Our debts, our careful wives, our children and

Our sins, lay on the King; he must bear all.

(*Henry V*, 4. 1. 226-80; *YE*, 8: 553).

Johnson’s note finds

something very striking and solemn in this soliloquy, into which the King breaks immediately as soon as he is left alone. Something like this, on less occasions, every breast has felt. Reflection and seriousness rush upon the mind upon the separation of a gay company, and especially after forced and unwilling merriment.

Johnson understands Harry’s sense of his solitary burden, as Shakespeare articulates it, as a common and sharable sentiment, which all readers will recognise, which “every breast has felt”. On this occasion we may find, in Johnson’s stress on the emotions that arise from sudden solitude, a profoundly personal as well as a universalising understanding of Shakespeare’s lines.

Johnson’s grammatical constructions in his Notes characteristically generalise Shakespearean characters and their behaviour, by the use of plural pronouns, definite and indefinite articles, and “he that” and “those who” constructions (personal or demonstrative pronoun with post-modifying relative clause). “Those who cannot judge but by the eye, are easily awed by splendour; those who consider men as well as conditions, are easily persuaded to love the appearance of virtue dignified with power”; “He that has no longer any confidence in himself, is glad to repose his trust in any other that will undertake to guide him”; “Jocose follies, and slight offences, are only allowed by mankind in him that overpowers them by great qualities”; “This sally of Hotspur may be . . . vindicated as the violent eruption of a mind inflated with ambition and fired with resentment; as the boastful clamour of a man able to do much, and eager to do more”; the moral to be drawn from the representation of the character of Falstaff is “that no man is more dangerous than he that with a will to corrupt, hath the power to please”; “those who are vexed to impatience are angry to see others less disturbed than themselves”; “there is in this speech a sullen haughtiness, and malignant dignity, suitable at once to the lord and the man-hater”.[[31]](#endnote-31)

One of the properties of Johnson’s Notes which distinguish them most clearly from the annotations of other Shakespearean editors of his century is the frequency and consistency of his use of paraphrase. Paraphrase of course had been used by other editors, and would continue to be used by Steevens and Malone (as well as by such Milton editors as Thomas Newton); nevertheless, most editors, particularly Theobald and Steevens, more frequently favoured the interpretative methodology of linguistic contextualisation of Shakespeare’s meaning by citation of parallel places (in his own work and in that of his contemporaries), as well as through appeal to Shakespeare’s historical, social, political, and religious contexts. Johnson however, employed paraphrase frequently, indeed predominantly, as a textual and interpretative tool. He used paraphrase, particularly against Warburton’s conjectures, in order to defend original textual readings “and try if there be any interstice, through which light can find its way”. He used paraphrase also to explain Shakespeare’s meanings to readers who were not lexicographers and Shakespearean scholars, and no doubt especially to explain Shakespeare’s meanings to novice readers, who, as he advised in his Preface, when they have “read every play from the first scene to the last”, should “attempt exactness, and read the commentators” (*YE* 7: 106, 111).

Paraphrase has not always been welcomed by readers, or respected by theorists, either as offered explanation or as hermeneutic methodology. Late seventeenth-century romanist apologists, concerned to undermine the Protestant reliance on scripture as a rule of faith, argued that not only translation from one language to another, but also paraphrase within the same language, must be intrinsically unreliable.[[32]](#endnote-32) Protestant hermeneuticists naturally defended and practised both translation and, extensively, biblical paraphrase; Johnson’s use of paraphrase sits squarely within that Protestant interpretative custom and tradition.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The Romantic insistence on the unique and untranslatable linguistic mode of existence of any worthwhile poem began no doubt with Coleridge, and has been embraced since by many schools of theoretical thought, not least in the New Critical attack on what Cleanth Brooks called “the heresy of paraphrase”.[[34]](#endnote-34) There has however been a robust and cogent defence of paraphrase, as not only possible, but essential, to textual understanding and explication. Richard Gaskin, as part of his argument for the cognitive and referential nature of literature, provides a case for the possibility of paraphrase, based on the distinction between sense and reference. Works of literature have referents, and present their referential content “by means of a particular sense”.[[35]](#endnote-35) Hence, “works of literature to which the sense-reference distinction . . . applies can be paraphrased . . . , and . . . a paraphrase constitutively presents the same referential content as the work” (Gaskin, 68-9).

A work of literature is not, on Gaskin’s understanding, or on Johnson’s, a hermetically sealed linguistic object. It refers to the real world, and can be known and shared by human beings with knowledge of the world to which it refers. It is hence capable of adequate paraphrase, which communicates the work’s reference even though it does not duplicate the sense. Some texts say things about the world which may be true; and our understanding of those truths is not confined within the strict original verbal form of the work, but may be accurately comprehended within a periphrastic statement of the work’s referent.

Paraphrase notoriously meets its greatest challenge in relation to metaphorical, or to put it more broadly, tropological, modes of expression. Johnson was notoriously resistant to the semantic confusion of vehicle and tenor involved in metaphor, always preferring the clear distinction made in the simile. It is striking therefore, and at first sight perhaps surprising, that in the Notes Johnson is generally prepared to find paraphrasable meaning in Shakespeare’s metaphoric expressions, and to rescue them from Warburton’s desperate corrections. Laertes says of Ophelia’s madness that “Nature is fine in love; and where ’tis fine, / It sends some precious instance of itself / After the thing it loves.” Warburton, bemused by Shakespeare’s metaphor, amends to “fal’n in love”; Johnson, though he finds the passage obscure, avoids emendation and recovers the sense of the chemical or alchemical conceit by paraphrase: “*Love* . . . is the passion by which *nature is most* exalted and refined, and as substances *refined* and subtilized, easily obey any impulse, or follow any attraction, some part of nature, so purified and *refined*, flies off after . . . the thing it loves”. In his note on the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, Pope had suggested emending “take arms against a sea of troubles” to “a siege of troubles”, while Warburton insisted that “without question *Shakespear* wrote . . . assail of troubles”, both editors flattening and literalising Shakespeare’s mixed metaphor. Johnson sees no cause for emendation: “I know not why there should be so much solicitude about this metaphor. *Shakespeare* breaks his metaphors often”.[[36]](#endnote-36) Johnson certainly had little patience with poetry in his view merely fictional, based on extended allegory or on elaborated conceit. Lycidas notoriously is such a poem, pursuing “a long train of mythological imagery”. Of Milton and King “we know that they never drove a field, and that they had no flocks to batten; and though it be allowed that the representation may be allegorical, the true meaning is so uncertain and remote, that it . . . cannot be known when it is found.” The meaning of the opening stanza of Gray’s “Progress of Poesy” cannot be made out because of its confounding of “the images of *spreading sound* and *running water*”. The third stanza “is drawn from Mythology”, and therefore objectionable; though its mythology “may be more easily assimilated to real life”, its “metaphor drawn from Art degrades Nature”.[[37]](#endnote-37) For Johnson the critic, “Lycidas” and “The Progress of Poesy” do not recognisably represent, at the level of whole poem or long stanza, the world which we know. They cannot readily be construed or recognised. For Johnson the editor, establishing textual readings and textual meanings at the sentence level, Shakespeare’s metaphors, even his mixed metaphors, are quasi-propositional, and satisfactorily referential, and yield for the most part relatively straightforwardly to explanation by paraphrase.

The use by Johnson, as by other commentators, of paraphrase, is consistent with, and a constituent part of, his mimetic theory of literature. It deals not only with local textual and hermeneutic issues raised by Shakespeare’s text, but also with the mimetic truths that text represents. One of the most striking and characteristic features of the Notes is that, time after time, Johnson chooses to use extended paraphrase in relation to precisely those Shakespearean passages which deal with shared human experience. To take one instance amongst many: the Duke warns Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*, that:

all thy blessed youth

Becomes as aged, and doth beg the alms

Of palsied eld: and when thou art old and rich,

Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb, nor beauty

To make thy riches pleasant. (*Measure for Measure*, 3. 1. 32-8; *YE*, 7: 194)

Warburton had amended “all thy blessed youth / Becomes as aged” to “for pall’d, thy blazed youth / Becomes assuaged”; and “nor beauty” to “nor bounty”; as often, Johnson refutes Warburton’s conjectures with this extended paraphrasing elucidation:

Shakespeare declares that man has *neither youth nor age*; for in *youth* . . . he commonly wants means to obtain what he could enjoy; he . . . *must beg alms* from the coffers of hoary avarice: and being very niggardly supplied, *becomes as aged*, looks like an old man, on happiness which is beyond his reach. And when *. . .* he has wealth enough for the purchase of all that formerly excited his desires, he has no longer the powers of enjoyment . . . neither man nor woman will have much difficulty to tell how *beauty makes riches pleasant*. . . . this emendation . . . is not such as that an opportunity of inserting it should be purchased by declaring ignorance of what every one knows, by confessing insensibility to what every one feels.

Like many other paraphrases in Johnson’s notes, this begins with a specifically textual issue, and has a primarily hermeneutic purpose. Like other such paraphrases, however, it includes striking and insistent appeal to shared experience: the truths which Shakespeare relates are such as “neither man nor woman will have much difficulty to tell”, they are “what every one knows”, and “what every one feels”. A note that begins with textual dispute and semantic explanation becomes an affirmation, one of very many such affirmations, of the cognitive, mimetic processes involved in reading Shakespeare with understanding.

In the Preface Johnson notoriously wrote that Shakespeare “seems to write without any moral purpose”. It is possible, Johnson acknowledges, to select from Shakespeare’s writings “a system of social duty, . . . for he that thinks reasonably must think morally” (*YE*, 7: 71). Nevertheless, Johnson complains, his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil.” This is, for Johnson a serious criticism, but critics have arguably placed more than necessary stress on these words. Certainly this censure applies to the plots and to the outcomes of Shakespeare’s plays. It is nevertheless clear from the Notes that Johnson was entirely alive to the frequency and force with which Shakespeare presents, woven intrinsically into the text of his plays, the truths of moral experience. Johnson’s Notes do not pretend to extract from Shakespeare anything like a moral compendium. He does not simply proceed from paraphrase and interpretation to strictly didactic application, as Protestant biblical commentary typically did. Nevertheless, the Notes repeatedly insist not only on the familiarity of the human experience Shakespeare represents, but also on its truth, and its ethical value to Shakespeare’s readers and audience. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, for instance, Biron, “amidst his extravagancies”, “speaks with great justness against the folly of vows.” Johnson expands, and extrapolates, finding a general lesson in a dramatic moment:

Vows are made without sufficient regard to the variations of life, and are therefore broken by some unforeseen necessity. They proceed commonly from a presumptuous confidence, and a false estimate of human power.

(*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1. 1. 53; *YE*, 7: 267)

Of the Duke of York’s resort to arms to seize the crown from Henry VI, Johnson remarks

I know not whether the authour intended any moral instruction, but he that reads this has a striking admonition against that precipitancy by which men often use unlawful means to do that which a little delay would put honestly in their power. Had York staid but a few moments he had saved his cause from the stain of perjury. (*3 Henry VI*, 1. 2. 49; *YE*, 8: 599)

Even if Johnson cannot be certain that Shakespeare “intended any moral instruction” – whether indeed Shakespeare wrote with any moral purpose – he nevertheless stresses that we may find here a telling admonition against a common moral failing.

More explicitly, and with an altogether firmer and indeed challenging didactic direction, Johnson identifies and recommends a moral lesson in the words of Iago:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;

And, when she seem’d to shake, and fear your looks,

She lov’d them most . . .

This and the following argument of Iago ought to be deeply impressed on every reader. Deceit and falsehood, whatever conveniencies they may for a time promise or produce, are, in the sum of life, obstacles to happiness. Those, who profit by the cheat, distrust the deceiver, and the act, by which kindness was sought, puts an end to confidence. (*Othello*, 3. 3. 210; *YE* 8: 1032-3)

In their dramatic context Iago’s words are poisonous, and as readers or spectators we resist Iago’s representation of Desdemona’s motives and behaviour. Even in such moments however there are lessons which the readers and spectators of the drama must learn. For Johnson, deceit ultimately and generally leads to unhappiness and distrust. This Note is disturbingly exceptional only in the extent to which Johnson abstracts the moral application from the action of the play. Revealingly, and not atypically, Johnson is here not much interested in the particularities of plot, the specific local dynamics of character interaction, the possibilities or effects of stage enactment. He is concerned with the printed word. “A play read, affects the mind like a play acted”; Johnson’s Notes are directed at the reader in the closet, not the audience in the theatre.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Johnson was perpetually a moralist. Like his predecessor Theobald, and his followers Steevens and Malone, Johnson indeed was committed to the establishment of true textual readings and the eliciting of true textual meanings. Shakespeare’s drama however is the mirror of universal life, and Johnson was therefore also committed to the application of the universal truths, experiential and ethic, of the Shakespearean scriptures to his own life, and the life of his readers. That is a stage and process based on but beyond editorial correction, contextualisation and explanation. Everywhere in the 1765 Notes Johnson insists that writing which is based on “general principles” and which “delivers universal truths” can provide us with representations of the world and human life which we may recognise, which we take pleasure in recognising, and which we may use as ethical beings.[[39]](#endnote-39) The Notes to Shakespeare are everywhere concerned with demonstrating how literature may give us delight and wisdom; how the Bard enables his readers “better to enjoy life, or better to endure it”.[[40]](#endnote-40)

(I am grateful for helpful comments made on versions of this paper by colleagues during seminars at Pembroke College Oxford, Keele University, the University of Liverpool, and the University of Toronto. I am particularly indebted to suggestions made by Howard Weinbrot, Michael Davies, Paul Baines, Nicholas Seager, Susan Bruce, Kate Rumbold, and Thomas Keymer.)

1. For extended and rigorously analytic discussion, see Simon Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearian Textual Criticism and Representations of Scholarly Labour, 1725-1765* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare: the Discipline of Criticism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 15. Jean H. Hagstrum pays unusually close and penetrating attention to the 1765 Notes, in the light of Johnson’s larger critical principles, in *Samuel Johnson’s Literary Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967 (first published 1952, University of Minnesota)), Chapter 4, Nature (56-75). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Fragments and Disquisitions: Johnson’s Shakespeare in Context”, in Howard D. Weinbrot, ed., *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2014), 157-72 (at 170). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tomarken, *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare,* 5, agreeing with William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 318. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *The Rambler*, 92 (Saturday, 2 February 1751); *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969); Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 4: 122. I refer to the Yale Edition of Johnson hereafter as *YE.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968); *YE,* 7: 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Rasselas and other Tales,* ed. Gwin J. Kolb (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990); *YE*, 16: 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (6 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934-50), 2: 433. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (4 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2: 149. Hereafter *Lives*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I have discussed this tendency in my essay “Edmond Malone”, in *Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Malone*, ed. Claude Rawson, 160-199 (volume 1 of *Great Shakespeareans* (London: Continuum, 2010)) (at 176-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Molière, *La gloire du Dôme de Val-de Grâce*, 1: 107, 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Dominique Bouhours, *La manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit* (Paris, 1687; 1715 edition, facsimile reprint (Brighton: Sussex Reprints, 1971), 12). In discussion with Reynolds, Garrick, and Goldsmith, Johnson instanced the work of Dominique Bouhours as “an example of true criticism” (Boswell, *Life*, 2: 90). For a cogent discussion of this issue in relation to Johnson, see G. F. Parker, *Johnson’s Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Du Fresnoy, in his *De Arte Graphica*, insisted (in the words of John Dryden’s translation) that “the principal and most important part of Painting, is to find out and thoroughly to understand what Nature has made most beautifull, and most proper to this Art”. Dryden, in his own Preface to the translation, summarises: “The business of [Du Fresnoy’s] Preface is to prove, that a learned Painter shou’d form to himself an Idea of perfect Nature. This Image he is to set before his Mind in all his Undertakings, and to draw from thence . . . the Beauties which are to enter into his Work; thereby correcting Nature from what actually she is in individuals, to what she ought to be, and what she was created” (*De Arte Graphica. The Art of Painting, by C. A. Du Fresnoy. Translated into English … by Mr. Dryden* (London, 1695); *Prose 1691-1698: De Arte Graphica and Shorter Works*, ed. George R. Guffey, A. E. Wallace Maurer, and Alan Roper (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1989); California Works of John Dryden, 20: 85, 47). In his *Dictionary*, Johnson quotes, to illustrate his sense 3 of the adjective “lively”, “Representing life”, Dryden’s translation of another passage from Du Fresnoy: “Since a true knowledge of nature gives us pleasure, a *lively* imitation of it in poetry or painting must produce a much greater” (*Dictionary*, 1755). Discussing poetry’s representation of the visual, Addison asserts that “it is the part of a Poet to humour the Imagination in its own Notions, by mending and perfecting Nature where he describes a Reality, and by adding greater Beauties than are put together in Nature, where he describes a Fiction” (*Spectator*, 418, June 30, 1712; *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 3: 569.). *La belle nature* would later be developed and codified by Charles Batteux, in his *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *The Art of Poetry, Written … by The Sieur de Boileau*, tr. John Dryden (London, 1683), lines 535-8, 790-3 (*The Works of John Dryden, Volume II: Poems 1681-1684*, ed. H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. and Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972), 140, 148. *Otter* is a character in Ben Jonson’s *Epicene*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. John Dryden, *Prose, 1668-1691: An Essay of Dramatick Poesie and Shorter Works*, ed. S. H. Monk, A. E. Wallace Maurer, and V. A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); California Works of John Dryden, 17: 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *De Arte Graphica and Shorter Works*, 20: 60. On Dryden’s developing relation to the French classical tradition, see Michael Werth Gelber, *The Just and the Lively: the Literary Criticism of John Dryden* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Essay on Criticism*, lines 297-300. See the Twickenham edition note on line 300, *Pastoral Poetry and an Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The significance of Johnson’s epistemological understanding of Aristotelian mimesis is perhaps highlighted by contrast with André Dacier’s commentary on the *Poetics*, which provides for the most part a plainly explanatory periphrasis, and dilutes the specifically recognitive emphasis in Aristotle ch. 4 (*Aristotle’s Art of Poetry Translated* (London, 1709), 30-31). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Lives*, 1: 200. Johnson applies the same criteria (to take two amongst many examples) in judging “Lycidas” a failure on mimetic grounds (“in this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth”), and in lamenting that the plan of *Paradise Lost* “has this inconvenience, that it comprises neither human actions nor human manners. The man and woman who act and suffer, are in a state which no other man or woman can ever know. The reader finds no transaction in which he can be engaged” (*Lives*, 1: 278, 289). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ch. 1. *Poetics*, ed. S. Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1987), 31. For extended explanation and clarification of the *Poetics*, with particular regard to their ancient context, to more recent discussion, and to philosophical and epistemological issues, see the Introduction and Commentary to Halliwell’s translation, and the more developed examination in his monograph, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1988; second edition, 1998), especially chapter 4, “Mimesis”. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ch. 4. *Poetics*, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Chs. 25. *Poetics*, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ch. 9. Poetics, 41. Halliwell remarks that what Aristotle here requires “is not the direct reproduction of any one type of reality, but something more like an underlying correspondence to *the general concepts and truths which we derive from experience of the world*” (*Poetics*, 109; italics mine). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Rhetoric*, 1. 1371. *Ancient Literary Criticism: the Principal Texts in New Translations*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Language Truth and Literature: a Defence of Literary Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Tony Nuttall’s extended defence of mimetic theory in particular relation to our understanding of Shakespeare in his monograph *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Despite his equation of fiction with untruth—one of the *Dictionary*’s definitions is “a falsehood, a lye”— Johnson certainly believed that even supernatural or improbably burlesque action in fiction could seem probable to the reader. “Imagination is useless without knowledge”; where *Hudibras* is valuable it is because “Butler . . . had watched with great diligence the operations of human nature”. “Poetical Action ought to be probable upon certain suppositions”, and *Hudibras* is probable to the extent that its “suppositions” are based on Butler’s knowledge and observation of human nature (*Lives*, 2: 7, 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The relation between the Notes of 1765, and the marginal notes in Johnson’s handwriting made in his own copy of the 1747 Pope/Warburton Shakespeare, has been briefly examined by A. Cuming, ‘A copy of Shakespeare’s Works which formerly belonged to Dr. Johnson’, *Review of English Studies*, 3 (1927), 208-12. Johnson’s text appears to be based on Warburton’s 1747 edition of Shakespeare, in somewhat unprincipled alternation with the text of Theobald’s edition as it appeared in 1757. See G. Blakemore Evans, ‘The text of Johnson’s *Shakespeare* (1765)’, *Philological Quarterly*, 28 (1949), 425-8; Arthur M. Eastman, ‘The texts from which Johnson printed his Shakespeare’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 49 (1950), 182-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Note to *Hamlet*, 2. 2. 86; *YE*, 8: 973-4. For similar instances see Johnson’s lengthy discussion of Falstaff in his concluding note on *2 Henry IV* (*YE*, 7: 523-4); and, more briefly, the brilliant comment on Scroop in *Henry V*: “The king means to say of Scroop, that he was a cautious man, who knew that *fronti nulla fides*, that a specious appearance was deceitful, and therefore did not ‘work with the eye without the ear’, did not trust the air or look of any man till he had tried him by enquiry and conversation. Surely this is the character of a prudent man”

    (2. 2. 135, *YE*, 8: 540; Johnson’s citation is of Juvenal, *Satires*, 2. 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Book 3, Chapter 1; “Matter Prefatory in Praise of Biography” *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 189. Johnson of course did not approve of the moral methods or example of that novelist, however precisely his own theoretical position on mimesis maps on to Fielding’s. Johnson’s arguments for Shakespeare’s presentation of recognisable general characters, and for the reader’s recognition of the applicability of such moral examples, might be thought to be echoed however in the work of Henry Fielding’s sister. Kate Rumbold has argued cogently that Sarah Fielding’s persistent Shakespearean quotation in her novels, and particularly in *The Countess of Dellwyn* (1759), is designed to point out the valuable moral lessons to be derived from Shakespeare’s characters, the necessity to “discern the most important and applicable parts of Shakespeare’s writing” in our reading, and to apply them in our lives (“Shakespeare’s ‘Propriety’ and the mid-eighteenth-century novel: Sarah Fielding’s *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn*”, in Shaun Regan, ed., *Reading 1759: Literary Culture in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 187-205 (at 194). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Amongst many similar instances, compare Johnson’s comments on the Princess in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, who “shews an inconvenience very frequently attending rash oaths, which, whether kept or broken, produce guilt” (1. 1. 52; *YE*, 7: 267); on the inconsistency of Suffolk in *The First Part of the Contention* as “very common in real life. Those who are vexed to impatience are angry to see others less disturbed than themselves, but when others begin to rave, they immediately see in them, what they could not find in themselves, the deformity and folly of useless rage” (*2 Henry VI*, 3. 2. 333; *YE*, 8: 590); and on Bottom, who “declares his inclination to be for a tyrant, for a part of fury, tumult, and noise, such as every young man pants to perform when he first steps upon the stage” (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1. 2; *YE*, 7: 140). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Measure for Measure*, 2. 4. 14, *YE* 7: 187; *Much Ado about Nothing*, 4. 1. 251, *YE*, 7: 371; *All’s Well that Ends Well*, 1. 2. 32, *YE,* 7: 378-9; *1 Henry IV*, 1. 3. 201, *YE*, 7: 461; *2 Henry IV*, Johnson’s concluding Note, *YE*, 7: 524; *Timon of Athens*, 4. 3. 252, *YE*, 8: 736. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For example, William Rushworth: “who should conferre anie one chapter of two translations in the same language, and see whether anie one sentence doe so exactly agree as that scanning rigorously the varietie of their words, there may not be some different sense gathered out of them. And he will not denie but ’tis impossible to put fully and beyond all quarrel the same sense in divers words.” (*The Dialogues of William Richworth, or, The Judgmend of Common Sense in the Choise of Religion* (1640), 266-7; cf. 276-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. I discuss this issue in *Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Thus Coleridge in the first chapter of *Biographia Literaria*: “whatever lines can be translated into other words of the same language without diminution of their significance, either in sense of association or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their diction. . . . I was wont boldly to affirm that it would scarcely be more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least), without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say.” (*Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (2 vols., London and Princeton: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Princeton University Press, 1983), 1: 23). Compare Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), 207: “But to deny that the coherence of a poem is reflected in a logical paraphrase of its ‘real meaning’ is not, of course, to deny coherence to poetry; it is rather to assert that coherence is to be sought elsewhere.” Brooks uses the phrase “heresy of paraphrase” at 202 of this work. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. E. D. Hirsch Jr. makes a related point: “Synonymity is in fact possible, and . . . on this possibility depends the determinacy of meaning, the emancipation of thought from the prison house of a particular linguistic form, and the possibility of knowledge generally”. For Hirsch, periphrastic commentary on a text is not parasitic, but genuinely explicatory: “if we isolate . . . the interpretative function of commentaries . . . from their critical function, we will observe that the art of explaining nearly always involves the task of discussing meaning in terms that are not native to the original text. . . . A translation or paraphrase tries to render the meaning in new terms: an explanation tries to point to the meaning in new terms” (*Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 10; *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 136. Compare *Aims*, 50; *Validity*, 252-3). For a briefer but important statement, see M. H. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel”, in his *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York: Norton, 1989), 238. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *YE,* 8: 998, 981. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Lives*, 1: 279, 4: 181-182. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *YE*, 7: 79. Jean Hagstrum is properly troubled by Johnson’s note, remarking of it that “Nowhere is his morality more obtrusive, artificial, and irrelevant . . . Thomas Rymer at his worst equalled that, but he would have had difficulty outdoing it. It not only blandly disregards the motives of Iago’s remark and its specific dramatic context but it bases the tragic issue upon Desdemona’s ‘deceit’ and ‘impudence’ and thus destroys the fundamental moral and dramatic relationships of the play: the malignity of Iago, the innocence of Desdemona, and the helplessness of Othello” (Hagstrum, 72-3). I would argue that Johnson’s note does not “destroy the fundamental moral and dramatic relationships of the play”; it is, as Johnson’s running notes typically are, a local, moral application, not a judgment of the play as a whole. Hagstrum indeed concludes his judgment of this note with the comment that “fortunately such was not Johnson’s final estimate of Shakespeare’s masterpiece”. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *Idler,* 59 (June 2, 1759). *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1963), *YE*, 2: 183-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Review of Soame Jenyns’s “Free Enquiry into the Nature of the Origin of Good and Evil”, *Samuel Johnson: A Commentary on Mr. Pope’s Principles of Morality, Or Essay on Man*, ed. O M Brack, Jr. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), *YE*, 17: 421. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)