

A New Boswell for the Doctor

Samuel Johnson
 by John Wain
 Viking, 384 pp., \$12.50

Reviewed by Robert F. Moss

At the death of Samuel Johnson in 1784, William Gerard Hamilton, a noted political figure of the day, was moved to eulogize: "He has made a chasm, which . . . nothing can fill up." Indeed, the gap must have seemed equally cavernous to most of Hamilton's contemporaries, men whose culture had found its truest voice, its surest hand, in Dr. Johnson. But such are the vicissitudes of literary taste that by the early 1800s the Romantic rebellion was under way, and Johnson, deemed the *tyrannus rex* of Neoclassicism, was swiftly deposed. Accused of "contemptible" writing by Wordsworth and lack of "feeling" by De Quincey, Johnson was packed off to dwell in the literary shadows with Pope, Swift, and other Augustans who, from the Romantics' perspective, had sinned against the heart. In an 1831 essay Thomas Macaulay offered an even more damning portrait of Johnson as a monstrous if learned grotesque, with Boswell vaguely in the background scribbling mindlessly; all too influential, the essay extended Johnson's exile from English readers by almost a century.

In terms of image Johnson remained, at best, a gruff but lovable eccentric until just after 1900, when pioneering studies, such as Sir Walter A. Raleigh's *Six Essays on Johnson*, began to scrape through the carnival mask to the real Johnson. The restoration gained enormous impetus from the unearthing of Boswell's notebooks at Malahide Castle in Ireland in the 1920s. This extraordinary cache helped to explode the notions (contradictory to begin with) that Boswell was merely a fortunately placed stenographer and that Johnson was essentially Boswell's creation. Simultaneously, a literary re-evaluation of Johnson had been stimulated by men as diverse as T.S. Eliot and Alfred Noyes, who found

in Johnson a gifted poet and a commanding critic. Over the next 40 years the field of Johnsonian studies reopened in a big way, and scholarly excavations were probing every conceivable subtopic—Johnson's politics, his Christianity, his relationship with Hester Thrale, and so forth.

In this increasingly exhausted territory, one of the few underexploited areas is that of popular biographies of Johnson. It is this need that John Wain—the English poet, novelist, and critic—seeks to fill with his *Samuel Johnson*. In his introduction, he specifically identifies his intended audience as "the intelligent general reader" and disclaims any scholarly expertise. But, oddly enough, Wain immediately effaces this admirable humility by adopting a rather contemptuous attitude toward Boswell's great biography, which he evidently blames for the distorted image of Johnson that still persists in some quarters.

As one reads on, modesty begins to seem far more appropriate to Wain's work than arrogance. Setting up Johnson as an exemplar of a truly exacting mind, fiercely lucid and rigorous, Wain condemns the modern tendency toward "shoddy thinking"—while frequently exhibiting this tendency himself. Consider the fuzzy vision inherent in his declaration that Johnson "always found it easier . . . to identify with the opposition rather than the established power" and try, if you can, to fit it into the conservative, institution-worshiping temperament that Wain elsewhere ascribes to Johnson. When Wain tries for an overview of an entire age, the fog can really set in. Rhapsodizing foolishly over eighteenth-century England, where "ugliness was unknown," he triumphantly compares it with the modern age, in which virtually everything is "hideous."

Nor is Wain's style all that one might



From the book
Samuel Johnson—"A gruff but lovable eccentric."

hope for. The recurrence of bleached-out phrases—"brush strokes" in the portrait of Johnson, "seismic tremors" of the coming Romantic age—indicate that Wain is unaware how completely these tropes have lost their original color. Worse still, there is an occasional ooze of sentimentality ("The sad decline of Elizabeth Johnson's life is . . . like a plangent little melody played just out of earshot. . . .") and some unfortunate lapses of taste (" . . . help was at hand [for Johnson]. The United States Cavalry was just over the hill in the shape of a posse of booksellers").

Such is a partial checklist of Wain's failings as a biographer. Given their severity, it is remarkable, then, that his book can still be warmly recommended. Among its virtues is a concise and convincing defense of Johnson's much-disparaged political attitudes. In place of the "stupid old reactionary" of popular mythology, Wain gives us a shrewd realist whose Tory conservatism was rooted, not in class prejudices, but in a profound sense of human fallibility. Moreover, as Wain shows, Johnson's brand of Christianity was too broad (or was it too scrupulously narrow?) to condone the

Robert F. Moss is an assistant professor of English at Rutgers.

rapacity of colonialism or the inhumanity of slavery. To our modern eyes, weary of racial oppression, Johnson looks awfully good when we see him "toasting the next insurrection of the Negroes in the West Indies" before a shocked gathering of Oxford dons.

In appraising Johnson's place in English letters, Wain finds the right throne for him and the right reasons for installing him there. As a critic, Johnson surpassed all predecessors, and in the scope,

Louis & Antoinette

VINCENT CRONIN
author of *Napoleon Bonaparte: An Intimate Biography*

New research, new interpretations in the first dual biography ever of tragic Louis XVI and his Queen. Illus. \$12.50



WILLIAM MORROW

Lighthouse Point. A Villa Colony on Sanibel Island, Florida.

About a million miles
from here.



With birds. And trees. And long white beaches where sea shells outnumber people by thousands to one.

On Sanibel, you're far from traffic jams and highrises and noise. Yet you're close to shops. And tennis. And golf. And the sea.

And the incredibly lovely private two bedroom/two bath (plus den) villas at Lighthouse Point. Priced from \$76,700.

For information, phone (813) 472-2092 or write

Lighthouse Point

Lighthouse Road
P.O. Box 244, Dept. W
Sanibel, Florida 33957



This offer not made to residents of New York or other states where prohibited by law.

the subtlety, and the intelligence of his work, created standards that have rarely been equaled. His famous dictionary, that staggering prodigy of one man's intellectual strength, marked the beginning of modern lexicography. As for his verse, at least two poems, "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," have a stately, if mournful, eighteenth-century grandeur that only the most jaundiced anti-Johnsonian can dismiss. *Irene*, his ill-fated tragedy, has gone to a musty, archival destiny, but "Rasselas," his moral fable wrapped up in an Oriental tale, has survived. If anything more is needed to certify Johnson's eminence, there is of course his imperial prose style, that superb instrument of unflinching periodic cadences and massive organ tones.

Relaying these judgments of contemporary scholarship, Wain speaks with genuine conviction. Realistically, however, it is unlikely that Johnson will ever again be widely read outside the university, and Wain's greatest service is strictly in the biographical sphere. Despite his stylistic mediocrity, he is almost uniformly successful in animating the various stages of Johnson's life—the sickly, repressive upbringing in provincial Lichfield; the abortive enrollment at Oxford; the squalor and misery of the early years in London; the belated recognition; the adoring circle of votaries and disciples; the late, embittered period when his 20-year friendship with Mrs. Thrale came to a sad, painful end. Steadfastly avoiding embellishment and invention, Wain puts his novelistic abilities, slight though they are, to good use in dramatizing his subject.

AND WHAT A SUBJECT! Here, alive and breathing, is Sam Johnson himself, with his sloppy, bearish appearance, his convulsive walk, and his bizarre mannerisms. With the same vividness, Wain shows Johnson's successful struggle to compensate for his physical defects by the breadth of his knowledge and the force of his personality. No one, it seems, could withstand the sheer locomotive intensity with which Johnson bore in upon people. "If his pistol misses fire," said Oliver Goldsmith, a close friend and frequent victim, "he will knock you down with the butt-end of it." Yet, if he was a conversational autocrat, he fascinated his vassals (besides Goldsmith, there were Burke, Gibbon, and Sir Joshua Reynolds) as few such tyrants ever had.

Inside the bellowing, overbearing

Johnson there was a gentler, more somber figure, often afflicted with paralyzing depressions, and Wain gives him the attention he deserves. Johnson's deep sympathy for the needy and the oppressed is movingly evoked in his relationship with his black servant, Frank Barber; in his tenderness toward old friends like Edmund Hector; and in his willingness to see his home converted into a charitable institution for the various indigents, beggars, and prostitutes he collected. And Wain never lets us lose sight of the fact that Johnson's acts of generosity, no less than his roistering, disputatious social activities, were fortifications against an inner darkness, the threat of madness that crouched above him throughout his life.

It is further to Wain's credit that he is forthright and honest in toting up Johnson's more substantial deficiencies. He leaves us in no doubt that the "Great Moralist" effectively abandoned his mother during the last 20 years of her life; neglected his wife, Elizabeth, to dally with younger, more attractive women; and even nurtured masochistic sexual fantasies that he wanted Mrs. Thrale to share.

Wain gives us the whole man, then, the complete human being. His competition in this endeavor is not only tough but insurmountable, as he himself eventually acknowledges. Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is more than the definitive portrait of the man; it is the definitive English biography, period. Since Wain's work remains securely anchored to the Boswell *Life* throughout—in spite of his somewhat covert criticisms of it—one doesn't quite know whether the little Scotsman would feel flattered or resentful. But if Wain succeeds in introducing Johnson to a newer, wider audience, does this not fulfill Boswell's hope that "a man whose talents, acquirements, and virtues, were so extraordinary . . . will be regarded . . . by posterity, with admiration and reverence"? □

ANSWER TO MIDDLETON DOUBLE-CROSTIC NO. 65

J(OHN C.) MILLER:
THIS NEW MAN, THE AMERICAN

Passionately fond of dancing, Virginians jigged and reeled until the small hours, only to rise and begin again the next day. Balls, especially those given to celebrate weddings, sometimes consisted of three days of almost uninterrupted dancing, drinking, and feasting.

Adventures in Ideology

Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change

by Peter L. Berger
Basic Books, 242 pp., \$10.00

Reviewed by W. Warren Wagar

Scholars studying the fever chart of contemporary civilization have learned to expect sudden change. The "fever" in question is commitment to those quasi-theological structures of secular belief that we infelicitously call ideologies. In the cynical Twenties ideologies fell out of favor. In the conflicts of the Thirties and Forties, they returned. The Fifties rendered them obsolete once more—it was "the end of

ideology," the period "after Utopia," the "ice-age of the spirit." Beginning in the Third World, ideological enthusiasm heated up again during the Sixties and recorded its highest reading in the May Days of Paris 1968 and Cambodia 1970.

Since then, by all accounts, humanity's temperature has abruptly taken another downward plunge. For the third time in half a century, disenchantment is "in," and the programs of ideologists are dismissed as the fantasies of fanatics. *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, by the prolific Rutgers sociologist Peter L. Berger, is the latest manifesto of this worldwide disenchantment. It is a subtle, learned, and yet ultimately blood-chilling rejection of the ideological impulse.

Condensed for the reader's convenience into a list of 25 theses immediately following the preface, Berger's message comes across with near-perfect clarity. It is the old debate of Sartre versus Camus, with Berger playing a somewhat Anglo-Saxonized Camus and addressing himself in particular to the problem of economic development. The struggle of the Third World to achieve modernization, he writes, is not worth the cost imposed by Western capitalism and by Soviet or Maoist socialism. A plague a' both your houses! Berger counsels the Third World to follow a Third Course. It must search out "intermediate structures," ways for each country to modernize itself that operate somewhere between the two extremes of self-affirming, community-denying capitalism and self-denying, community-affirming socialism. Each country should devise its own program, replacing ideological purism with pragmatic realism. Sick with shame after the imperial adventures of the Sixties, the United States should simply "be itself," a "vast laboratory for innovative experiments to solve the dilemmas of modernity."

Most of *Pyramids of Sacrifice* offers analysis rather than advice. Berger draws ably on his background as a sociologist of religion and knowledge. He takes the familiar position that the ideologies of our time are, in effect, substitutes for religious faith. In place of salvation, they promise growth, progress, utopia. Like the Cargo Cult that arose on various Pacific islands early in this century, ideologies undertake to deliver an abundance of good things—but not right away. Whether the model originates with Adam Smith or with Karl Marx, the cost is always too high. Doctrinaire modernizers demand a generation of sacrifice and a radical rupture with the past that leaves men feeling homeless.

The "pyramids of sacrifice" erected by ideologues come in all shapes and sizes, Berger notes, from the million victims of the Spanish civil war to the 5 or 10 million victims of Maoist terror in China in the early Fifties to the peasant masses whose poverty deepens yearly in such capitalist countries as Brazil. Equally devastating is the cost in meaning. Although Maoism, for example, attempts



"Never breathe this to another soul, Morton, but the only real money I've ever made was under socialistic, pinko, Democratic administrations."

W. Warren Wagar is a professor of history at the State University of New York at Binghamton. His most recent book is Good Tidings: The Belief in Progress from Darwin to Marcuse.