

Wallow in the Mire

by Thomas Fleming

Samuel Johnson: A Biography

by Peter Martin

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 640 pp., \$35.00

Samuel Johnson: The Struggle

by Jeffrey Meyers

New York: Basic Books; 552 pp., \$35.00



One of the less appreciated perils of literary fame is the risk a writer runs every hundred years as the anniversary of his birthday approaches. This year marks the 200th birthday not only of Darwin but of Lincoln, a completely irrelevant coincidence that inspired *Smithsonian*—the trivializing newsletter of “the nation’s attic”—to celebrate the two men in the same issue. It turns out that Darwin and Lincoln were both featherless bipeds who had a lot of influence on the modern world. But then what else should we expect from the most consistently error-ridden propaganda sheet published in the United States?

Two thousand nine is also the 300th anniversary of Samuel Johnson’s birth, and, although academic libraries are stuffed with popular biographies and learned monographs on the “Great Cham,” poor Johnson’s ghost must be trembling with impatience as the presses churn out new volumes. The trouble for every would-be biographer of Johnson is the unpleasant fact that he was the subject of the first major literary biography ever published, James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, but even in his own day Boswell had to face competition from two people who had known Johnson before the young Scottish scapegrace had ever struck up an acquaintance with the great man: Hester Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi) and Sir John Hawkins. Since Boswell’s time the books and articles have never stopped coming, and in our own time Johnson has been the subject of two celebrated biographies:

one, by John Wain, both sensible and readable; the other—a psychoanalytic travesty—by Walter Jackson Bate.

One would hope that a biographer, looking back on distinguished predecessors, would have something new and important to bring to the subject. If Peter Martin had such an expectation, he does not make it clear to the hapless reader. Overall, his book is well researched and, for the most part, clearly written. If there were no other books on Johnson, Peter Martin, who has already written good books on Johnson’s friends James Boswell and Edward Malone, might have made a useful contribution to literary history. In the event, however, his researches have yielded little that is new, and the details he chooses to highlight often seem to obscure rather than to illuminate his subject.

These days, every biographer must have a theory or two to push, and Peter Martin is no exception. In virtually every chapter he informs the reader that Johnson was not the hidebound Tory of legend but really quite a progressive, and, from time to time, he reminds us that Johnson took quite a lively interest in young women. But neither of these opinions is exactly new. Johnson’s intense feeling for social justice has been noted by such diverse writers as G.K. Chesterton and John Wain, and Martin’s understanding of Toryism is the sort of thing one used to expect from Whig historians who had accepted Fielding’s portrayal of Squire Western at face value. Tories like Dr. Johnson and Sir Walter Scott detested Whiggery precisely because they regarded the Whigs as the party of the ruthless rich who were willing to exploit the poor and betray their country’s traditions for the sake of holding on to their money. One may debate the correctness of this judgment, but it is a waste of time to try to fit Johnson into a “progressive model.” Martin rides this hobbyhorse so far that he even finds a progressive motivation for Johnson’s defending Shakespeare from the charge that he violated the tragic unities and responding to Voltaire’s critique of Shakespeare with an insult. He does not mention any-

where that Johnson loathed Voltaire and early in his career set out to counter the philosophe’s pernicious ideas, but, then, Martin seems to have only the dimmest awareness of Johnson’s thought.

Johnson’s great contribution to our literature is as a moralist, in *Rasselas*, in his essays, and in his two imitations of Juvenal (“London” and “The Vanity of Human Wishes”). Unlike John Wain, Martin does scant justice to Johnson’s moral teachings and offers little discussion either of the influences on his thought or of his originality. On page after page of *Rasselas* and the essays, Johnson offers penetrating insight into human misery, the importance of duty, and the burdens of loyalty. Of this, Martin gives us hardly a hint.

As for Johnson’s supposed hypersexuality, he was not, I suppose, the only man to be interested in women, much less the only man married to a woman nearly twice his age to be excited by younger and more vital females. The 18th century was not the Victorian Age, and people talked a good deal more frankly about sex than they did even in the 1960’s. Johnson is unusual only in making an effort—whether successful or not is a matter of conjecture—to lead a Christian life. The Freudian voodoo of Bernard Meyer, taken seriously by both Peter Martin and Jeffrey Meyers, contributes nothing to our understanding of Johnson the writer or Johnson the moralist, but such a preoccupation tells us all too much about our own squalid need to reduce a human life to its most primitive dimensions.

Johnson is, for me, the supremely interesting writer in the English language, but so far from not being able to put this book down, I found myself dropping it in weariness until I resolved to give it up two thirds of the way through—not without paging forward in a fruitless search for a serious treatment of Johnson’s moral philosophy.

I opened Jeffrey Meyers’ book, hoping to find some of the original insights that Meyers had displayed in his biographies of Hemingway, Lawrence, and Fitzgerald, but once again the unwary reader is trapped in a morality

play devised by an author with a thesis to push. Johnson had to struggle with physical and emotional infirmities, and it is that struggle, then, which explains the writer's genius.

Meyers' well-known propensity for psychologizing is on full display in his latest book, and, armed with materials from two Johnson scholars who died without completing their works, he does offer new material, but much of the novelty is either speculative or salacious or both. What good it does—except to show us that Johnson had his human weaknesses—I cannot imagine. Meyers, once a frequent contributor to *Chronicles*, apparently thinks that in presenting the great man's human side he has magnified his literary achievements, but it is not at all clear he understands what those achievements are. I dropped the book even sooner than Martin's, with a sense of weariness and disgust. When the writer of *Ecclesiastes* complained that "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh," he did not know, believe me, the half of it.

Neither Martin nor Meyers appears to have much of an appreciation for the 18th century, in general, or for Johnson's erudition, in particular. Johnson's most serious study had been of the ancient classics and of Renaissance humanism, but one looks in vain through Meyers' Index to find any hint of this, though there is room for entirely irrelevant allusions to Albert Camus and Gore Vidal. He boasts of offering a new interpretation of Johnson's great imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, but proceeds to give us nothing more than a circular argument: First, he reconstructs Johnson's personal life, and then he reads that reconstruction into the poem. I thought they used to teach English majors about the biographical fallacy.

If either Martin or Meyers had contributed something to our understanding of Johnson's work, I should be prepared to overlook their tendency to wallow in the mire, but if they did make such a contribution, I was unable to find it. I wanted to praise Jeffrey Meyers out of loyalty, but the best I can say is to recommend that he return

to the depravities of the 20th century where his Freudian reductionism will have a wider scope. This biography is the equivalent of a vandal's mustache scrawled across the *Mona Lisa*.

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Freedom and Action

by Brad Green

The Theological Origins of Modernity

by Michael Allen Gillespie

Chicago: University of Chicago Press;
368 pp., \$35.00



In this rich and dense book, Michael Allen Gillespie is self-consciously trying to correct the "standard" understanding of the origin of modernity. Rather than being the "victory of secularism," modernity, he says, is a series of attempts to grapple with fundamental theological issues: the realities of God, man, and nature, and, in particular, how meaningfully to construe the relationships between divine omnipotence and freedom, and human action and freedom: "[I]t is a mistake to imagine that modernity is in its origins and at its core atheistic, antireligious, or even agnostic . . ." Rather,

from the very beginning modernity sought not to eliminate religion but to support and develop a new view of religion and its place in human life, and . . . it did so not out of hostility to religion but in order to sustain certain religious beliefs.

We should see modernity as

an attempt to find a new metaphysical/theological answer to the question of the nature and relation of God, man, and the natural world that arose in the late medieval world as a result of a titanic struggle between

contradictory elements within Christianity itself.

At the heart of the matter is the ascendancy of nominalism within the framework of scholasticism: "Modernity came into being as the result of a series of attempts to find a way out of the crisis engendered by the nominalist revolution." As Gillespie writes, "While nominalism undermined scholasticism, it was unable to provide a broadly acceptable alternative to the comprehensive view of the world it had destroyed."

In Gillespie's view, nominalism entails a shift in understanding of three key areas: man, God, and nature. God is viewed as radically omnipotent; He can do whatever He chooses, and thus we do not really know if God will always do what is good or right. As nominalism took hold, man was increasingly viewed as an autonomous actor. Nature does not in any way participate in what Gillespie calls "divine reason"; it simply *is*.

Gillespie can suggest that at

the end of modernity, we are thus left to confront the question whether there is any solution to this problem within the ontological horizon that modernity opens up, and thus whether modernity even in its most secular form can escape from the metaphysical/theological problem with which it began.

Gillespie goes on to offer summaries of the key thinkers involved in the attempt to find a way out of the nominalist crisis. During the Renaissance, Petrarch attempted to synthesize an Augustinian understanding of man's dependence on God with a Stoic one of man's independence. Erasmus espoused a Christian humanism that would counter Martin Luther's more thoroughgoing "nominalist" doctrine of an omnipotent God. Luther enters Gillespie's account as the main representative of the Protestant Reformation. Whereas Erasmus gave more attention to the dignity and freedom of man, Luther placed more emphasis on