THE RAMBLER'S SECOND AUDIENCE:  
JOHNSON AND THE PARATEXTUAL 'PART OF LITERATURE'

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Throughout his life, Samuel Johnson's work as an essayist was the basis of his fame; according to Donald Greene, Johnson is oftener referred to during his lifetime as "the author of the Rambler" than by any other epithet.¹ The 208 essays of The Rambler were first published as a bi-weekly series of six-page pamphlets, from March 1750 to March 1752. I want to consider how The Rambler is framed for its 'second audience' — that is, all readers since those who read it on first publication — whose experience of The Rambler is of an artefact radically different from a series of periodical pamphlets. This second audience is larger than is usually imagined: in the eighty-one years after its first publication The Rambler appeared in at least seventy-eight collected editions.²

I believe that insufficient attention is given to the importance, at all levels, of The Rambler's seemingly accidental structure. In arguing this I want to challenge the assumption that there is an intrinsic contradiction between the literary form of The Rambler and its serious moral purposes. This view is expressed by such a sympathetic critic as Walter Jackson Bate, who considers that Johnson's universality as a moralist stands in some contrast to the form he took as readiest to hand — the eighteenth-century periodical essay.³ The form was not merely the readiest to hand: it precisely suited Johnson's purposes.

Johnson was always particularly attentive to issues of genre and the related issue of paratextuality. Gérard Genette, the authority on this latter subject (indeed, its inventor), gives as instances of paratextual issues such matters as a book's format, series, cover, type-setting, the titles, author identification (or lack of it), epigraph, preface, dedication, table of contents, notes. According to Genette, 'whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, [...] to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world'.⁴ In a long letter of Autumn 1743, Johnson

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writes to Edward Cave of their 'historical design',
which Boswell believed to be 'an
historical account of the British Parliament',
and briefly of the forthcoming Life of
Savage. Most of this letter is devoted to the print run, printing program, page layout,
use of margins, size of type. Of course, many authors are concerned about the
appearance of their work, but all this concerns a work that had not been written (and
never was). Johnson sees the content of the work and its mode of presentation as
being almost inseparable. When Johnson wrote to the printer William Strahan to
offer him the tale which became Rasselas (and which he had not yet written), he was
able to tell him that 'It will make about two volumes like the little Pompadour, that
is about one middling volume.' In the list that he made for Captain Daniel Astle, of
books to assist him in his studies for Christian ministry, even though he is in a
hurry and abbreviates the titles, Johnson jots besides five of the titles a note of their
format (e.g., 'Carte's Hist. of England 5 vols Fol'). He cannot conceive of these
books without imagining their physical form.

I. Reading Johnson

Modern readers, confronted with a three- or four-volume edition of The Rambler,
will look for a convenient entrance to the work. The general reader will rightly
regard the front cover of the first volume as the front door: obviously one should
begin at the beginning and read through to the end: from Rambler No.1 through to
No.208. But this is a much easier operation if one is, like the first audience, reading
two Rambler's a week over two years. To read the essays at something like that
original pace is not simply easier; it is the means of consumption upon which both
the format of the papers and the method of publication seem to insist. Donald
Greene says that this would be the ideal way to read The Rambler, and J.D. Fleeman
also has noted that periodical publication 'allowed the readers several days in which
to savour one before reading the next,' and thus enhances the sense that each essay
should stand alone, independent and self-sufficient.

The Rambler is not made for and is not best served by the kind of reading

volume and page (and date).) For an exploration of this and Johnson's many other
projected works, see my article, "That Great Literary Projector": Samuel Johnson's
8. Boswell omits these notes from his transcription of the list in the Life, IV, pp.311-12. See
the new transcription in my article, 'A Clergyman's Reading: Books Recommended by
10. J.D. Fleeman, review of Bate & Strauss's Yale edition of The Rambler, RES: The Review of
practices that are implied by volume and multi-volume presentation. Each Rambler assumes that its reading will take place in the midst of a life devoted to other matters – including literature – and that it will not itself be the matter with which life is busied. To read ten papers of The Rambler at a sitting is to read against it; to 'study' rather than simply read them complicates the relationship even further. Scholarly readers and academic professionals are not, like the ideal reader, disinterested (to use one of the Rambler's favorite terms): they are looking for systems. But this is an aim which is deflected by most of Johnson's strategies as a writer. Paul Fussell pointed out Johnson's 'prime quality of mind: an implicit skepticism, no matter what he finds himself saying, of "systems" and unambiguous positions', and it is an idea which has been pursued by many subsequent commentators on Johnson. To resist such systems is always part of Johnson's project, because they tend to relieve people of the responsibility of thinking and deciding for themselves.

A collection of parts that are also wholes inevitably invites browsing and selection, rather than the commitment of a consecutive reading, as a narrative requires. In fact, most of Johnson's literary work invites such treatment. We do not need to monitor actual reading practices to verify this: the most noticeable browsers of Johnson, whose own reading practices continue to set the pace for students and the general reader, are the innumerable editors of selections and anthologies of his work. Their tubby collections present an image of Johnson as a writer who is not to be read on his own terms, but whose work is to be gathered up – or selected from – in order that it may be read. Readers of these volumes (and I imagine that most people today who have read any Johnson will have done so in this way) are in effect reading the trace of an earlier act of browsing.

It has been another commonplace of Johnson criticism, at least since 1951, when Bertrand Bronson wrote of 'The Double Tradition of Dr. Johnson', that Johnson has ceased to be an author. But even insofar as Johnson continues to exist as a writer, he has ceased to be seen as an author of recognisable 'works', and is instead manifest as a construct of endlessly recombined bits and pieces. Whilst there are other reasons for this, it must be recognised that Johnson's work is suited to this treatment. He worked exclusively in short (or readily truncated) forms: essays, poems, prefaces, brief lives, prayers, letters, definitions, editorial notes; and, in Boswell's great book, he (or something like him) is manifest in aphorisms, paragraphs of conversation, and anecdotes. There are no long seamless texts, neither carefully reasoned discourses nor elaborately imagined fictions. The shortness, or openness to extraction, of the forms that Johnson employed, makes him seem selectable and accessible in a way that complements the impression given by Boswell, of a celebrated writer who is manifest at a human scale.

This circumstantial account of the sense we have of Johnson's scale is

corroborated by Johnson's own testimony. There is a discussion in Rambler No.108 of the sufficiency of life's resources - particularly time - to the achievement of all serious human purposes. The advice given in this paper is that time will bear fruit, if only we use it well; but the force of the essay is not so much to enjoin the reader to constant effort, as to encourage the reader with the belief that the world is so scaled that what is necessary and desirable in life is also possible. We delude ourselves, out of modesty, into believing that the great tasks of life require extended leisure time and a concentration of energies. For this reason, many great things are not attempted. But it is empowering for the reader to be told by Johnson that all common degrees of excellence are attainable at a lower price; he that should steadily and resolutely assign to any science or language those interstitial vacancies which intervene in the most crowded variety of diversion or employment, would find every day new irradiations of knowledge, and discover how much more is to be hoped from frequency and perseverance, than from violent efforts, and sudden desires. (108; IV, 212)  

As he does throughout The Rambler, Johnson has - without comment - taken the life of writing and reading as the best or most immediate example of a serious human endeavour (the transition occurs at the semi-colon in the passage just quoted); and it is to be expected that his readers should consider the very work before them in the light of what he says. The design of The Rambler does not require 'violent efforts' in its writing or its reading; unlike modern fiction, as he describes it in Rambler No.4 (III, 22), it does not set out 'to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence' (my emphasis). Rather, the Ramblers are designed to fit twice a week into 'those interstitial vacancies' in the lives of their readers, and there to manifest - as well as to teach - what 'is to be hoped from frequency and perseverance'.  

He continues this theme, observing that 'the most successful students make their advances in knowledge by short flights between each of which the mind may lie at rest'; but he exempts from the discussion 'those gigantick and stupendous intelligences who are said to grasp a system by intuition, and bound forward from one series of conclusions to another, without regular steps through intermediate propositions' (108; IV, 212-13). By this move, the Rambler - Johnson's semifictitious narrator - seems to align himself with his readers, giving us the comforting sense that he himself is at the same distance as we are from being a 'gigantick and stupendous intelligence'. Nevertheless, his argument that his readers need but diligence, rather than intuition and violent efforts, to achieve excellence, and his own manifest ability to compass the two modes of endeavour, show that he practises in The Rambler the former method, not because he is confined to it by the necessity of his abilities, but as a matter of choice. He believes what he says, that 'our faculties are fitted to images of a certain extent' (108; IV, 211), and therefore that all who would make effective contact with their fellows need to operate at an appropriate scale.

13. Samuel Johnson, The Rambler, No.108; IV, 212. (Hereafter referred to in the text by Rambler No., volume and page.)
So it is not by accident that Johnson the writer is particularly attractive in short bursts. He is not merely quotable – he is quoted; his writings are both selectable and selected. They are not only to be found in selections of his short works for the convenience of students and scholars; his writings and Boswellised conversations are scoured for popular anthologies of *dicta* and sayings, wit and wisdom, beauties (and deformities), ‘Dr Johnson on ...’ booklets, and the like, and have been since his own day. He is also one of the most extensively quoted individuals in dictionaries of quotations or aphorisms, and literary theme books. His commitment to short forms seems to have worked. People who read him want to make selections, people who read selections do so in order to quote him, or to see what someone else has selected. It is easy to imagine that Johnson would not be disappointed by this species of literary fame.

Johnson’s own reading practices indicate that he also read in the expectation of being allowed the freedom to roam and graze. Although he was often drawing up detailed reading (and writing) schemes, in an effort to reform what he felt were slothful habits, he generally read as he felt inclined. He was capable of sustained effort: Boswell tells of his reading Fielding’s *Amelia* in a sitting; and of his rising hours before he would have otherwise, when he read for the first time one of his favourite books, Burton’s great and compendious *Anatomy of Melancholy*. But these are noted by Boswell precisely because they were extraordinary performances, and far from his usual practice. As he put it, he had ‘looked into’ far more books than he had read through. Johnson was once questioned about a particular new book and, being ‘obliged to own his cursory mode of reading, [he] answered tartly, “No, Sir; do you read books through?”’ (*Life*, II, 226). Indeed, almost his favorite kind of book for casual reading is what we might characterise as the *pre-browsed* book. When he was first interviewed at Oxford, the young Johnson impressed his tutor by quoting Macrobius. Robert DeMaria comments on the writings of this obscure Latin author as follows:

This kind of *farrago* suited Johnson’s desires in reading, as did Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which he started reading early, and many collections of *ana* and bits and pieces of *materia literaria*, such as Aulus Gellius’s *Attic Nights* and the collected sayings of Gilles Ménage, *Menagiana.*

Boswell is intrigued by the seemingly casual nature of Johnson’s scholarship, and highlights other occasions when his practices in this regard are apparent. Johnson’s mind, as Boswell pictures it, is certainly mighty and irresistible – ‘gigantick and stupendous’ – able to comprehend (not so much in the sense of ‘to understand’ as ‘to overcome’) and to appropriate to his own purposes the intellectual structures of others. He reads, and understands what he reads, on his own terms. His browsing is not leisurely or decorous: he read books roughly, and as if his life depended upon it. At another point, Boswell tells us:

Before dinner Dr. Johnson seized upon Mr. Charles Sheridan's 'Account of the late Revolution in Sweden', and seemed to read it ravenously, as if he devoured it, which was to all appearance his method of studying. 'He knows how to read better than anyone (said Mrs. Knowles); he gets at the substance of a book directly; he tears out the heart of it.' He kept it wrapt up in the table-cloth in his lap during the time of dinner, from an avidity to have one entertainment in readiness, when he should have finished another; resembling (if I may use so coarse a simile) a dog which holds a bone in his paws in reserve, while he eats something else which has been thrown to him.

[Lit, III, pp.284-285, 15 April, 1778]

Not merely the dog and bone analogy, but all the metaphors in this vignette are drawn from eating: ravenously, devoured, gets at the substance, tears out the heart of it, keeps a book 'wrapt up in the table-cloth'. Johnson, as Boswell pictures him, either nibbles text, experimentally, to see if it contains anything of sustenance, or else, if it does, he greedily consumes it. Unlike a more Romantic reader — or unlike Boswell, as he describes his own reaction to violin music (Lit, III, 197) — he does not wish to be overtaken or consumed by it.

Mrs. Knowles's comment about Johnson knowing better than anyone 'how to read' can be taken to suggest that there is something normative about his reading practices, however eccentric they may have appeared to Boswell. Indeed, for the modern French theorist of 'everyday life', Michel de Certeau, reading is far from being (as it is often figured) a passive occupation. Rather, reading as he depicts it is a creative activity, and typical of the everyday tactics by which people resist being cast in the role of mere consumers. '[T]o read,' de Certeau argues, 'is to wander [or, we might say, ramble] through an imposed system (that of the text).' He continues:

The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they 'intended.' He fragments and creates something un-known in the space organised by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.15

Johnson would (say, in arguing with sceptics) probably have regarded this as hyperbole, but we can equally imagine him in a particularly extravagant mood (or arguing with someone who seemed to him to exhibit a too facile confidence in their own understanding) also asserting that texts, as unguided missiles and in being received by a potential infinity of readers, have 'an indefinite plurality of meanings'.

Similar to Boswell's image of Johnson the reader is that of Reynolds's 'blinking Sam' portrait of 1775. Johnson is shown holding a book with both hands, close to his face as if about to take a bite from it, bending it back on itself, urgent to twist some secret from it. There are a number of possible circumstantial origins of his reading practices: he may have developed the habits from years of reviewing, or from the work he did in the early 1740s, cataloguing the massive collection of books and pamphlets from the Harleian Library; or from the seven years he spent

scouring 200 years of English literature for illustrative quotations for the *Dictionary*, or from his having been brought up in a bookshop. But there is more to it. There is for Johnson not merely a pragmatic urgency to reading, but an intrinsic one — he reads as he eats, not simply in mechanical terms but in an ultimate sense: in order to save his life.

Johnson envisages the transaction of writer and reader as a contest: as a young man he found Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, so Boswell reports, 'quite an overmatch' for him (Life, I, p.68). His attitude to other writers, who do not — like Law — conquer him by their piety, is more truculent: as he confronts them through their texts, he seems to ask, 'Who are you, Sir, that I should spend my days in reading your long book from start to finish?' The 'violent effects' he employed in dealing with Fielding and Burton complement his 'cursory method': both reading practices demonstrate a determination not to be dictated to by an author. If he does choose to submit to the narrative force of *Amelia*, or to the length and discursiveness of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (perhaps on account of its insight into his own condition), he will do so either in the one sitting or else by getting up early. He will not allow reading to become the central business of life. And he certainly anticipates and encourages such responses from the readers of *The Rambler*. If he dogmatises, he also invites — and, by his choice of forms, leaves room for — contradiction.16 He does not insist on the surrender of our time or our intellectual independence. He is determined not to tyrannise or dictate to his readers. So much for Johnson the 'literary dictator'.

II. The Paratextual Frames of *The Rambler*

The Rambler's insistence on the reader's independence has not been well-served by the frames within which the text has subsequently appeared. When the periodical publication of the folio *Rambler* was completed, and the complete series was published in volumes, it was provided with the apparatus of a Table of Contents for each volume and a translation of the 'mottos'.17 The Table of Contents is not a list of 'titles' for each essay, as we understand titles of books or of chapters of books. Rather, each essay is described by up to three phrases that attempt to summarise the topics covered. Paul Korshin has noticed and discussed these 'thumbnail descriptions', and says that they 'are almost always too highly focused and are thus

16. 'I dogmatise and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight.' *Life* II, p.452, fn. 1 (21 March, 1776). Boswell is quoting Johnson's remark from Sir John Hawkins's *Life*.

17. In the first (collected) London edition (Fleeman 50.3R/4a), these were bound at the end of the sixth volume, but in the second issue in the same year (Fleeman 50.3R/4b), the relevant portion of Contents and mottos was prefaced to each volume. By the 'Fourth' Edition of 1756 (Fleeman 50.3R/6a), the translated mottos had migrated to their positions at the head of each essay.
often rather misleading.\textsuperscript{18} 'Almost always' is perhaps too strong, but there is no
doubting that the attempt to summarise is often not successful and that in any case
such short descriptions always imply a limitation of meaning which is far from
apparent in the essays themselves. Whilst it may be necessary for this purpose to
describe the essays in a kind of short-hand, the descriptions which are given
unnecessarily over-emphasise the moral content of the essays. To take the openings
of a series of descriptions from the Table of Contents, for \textit{Rambler} Nos. 36-43, we
are promised, 'The reasons why ..., the true principles ..., the advantages ..., the
unhappiness ..., the difficulty ..., the advantages ..., the misery ..., the
inconveniences ...' (\textit{Contents}, 3, xiii). The list could easily be continued, with many
definitions of the folly, the value, the danger, the requisites, the necessity.

These titles may be seen as part of a project of the booksellers to convert this
mass of slowly accumulated but now unmanageable written material to new and
more practical uses. Even before the original series was completed, a collected
edition of Nos. 1-136 in four volumes was advertised in \textit{The Gentleman's Magazine},
where it was listed among 'Books publish'd' under 'Miscellaneous'.\textsuperscript{19} When the
periodical series was finished and the final two volumes were advertised, they
appeared as 'Theology, Ethics'.\textsuperscript{20} This latter is a description which one cannot help
feeling would not have been chosen to encourage purchasers of the original leaflets,
for whom the title \textit{The Rambler} might have raised very different expectations.\textsuperscript{21}

The effect of this style of title may be seen by considering the difference it
would make to the Fable of Aesop known as 'The Tortoise and the Hare,' if it were
labelled at the start by its punch-line, 'Slow and Steady Wins the Race.' Although
the 'moral' is in this case an 'authorised' reading, used as a title it would not only be
far less imaginatively engaging but, in implying that the story is simply the means to
a fore-known didactic end, it would devalue the intrinsic interest of the narrative by
ruining the suspense. Any label that says (in moral or narrative terms) 'what
happens' may have this effect, of 'giving away' the text, discarding it, making it
irrelevant.

Something like this was the experience of Samuel Richardson with his
mammoth novel \textit{Clarissa}. For the second edition (1749), Richardson installed a
Table of Contents at the beginning of the first volume, as his most recent editor
says, 'to show "the connexion of the whole." He [later] came to believe that this
had injured the sale of the book by making "many persons master of the story".\textsuperscript{22}
So, in the third edition (1751) of \textit{Clarissa}, the Table was not part of the prefatory
matter: it was distributed among the seven volumes of the novel and put at the end

\textsuperscript{18} Paul J. Korshin, 'Johnson's \textit{Rambler} and Its Audiences', \textit{Essays on the Essay: Redefining the
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Gentleman's Magazine}, January, 1752; p.47.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., July, 1752; p.338.
\textsuperscript{21} I discuss \textit{The Rambler} as a fiction, and the implications of the Rambler's name, persona
and anonymity in another part of this project, as yet unpublished.
\textsuperscript{22} Angus Ross, 'Preface', in Samuel Richardson, \textit{Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady}
(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.9. (Quotes from letter to Aaron Hill, 12 July, 1749.)
of each, suggesting that the reader should require to use it only having completed a
first reading.

The presence of the Table of Contents as a preliminary to The Rambler, and the
skewed version which it offers of the contents of particular essays, has had a baeful
influence on later readers. John Bailey, in his much-reprinted volume for the
Oxford 'Home University Library', Johnson and His Circle (1913), describes the
Rambler's as 'sober essays on the most ancient and apparently threadbare of topics'
and invites the reader to 'wonder, not at the slow sale of the original papers, but at
the editions which the author lived to see.' Bailey does not expect his reader to have
read any of The Rambler, nor does he imagine that the reader may subsequently wish
to do so. Consider his description (in which I have emphasized the abstract nouns):

Here are Johnson's subjects for the ten Rambler which appeared between
November 20 and December 22, 1750: the shortness of life, the value of good
humour, the folly of heirs who live upon their expectations, peevishness, the
impossibility of knowing mankind until one has experienced misfortune, the self-
deceptions of conscience, the moral responsibilities of men of genius, the power of
novelty, the justice of suspecting the suspicious, the pleasures of change and in
particular that of winter following upon summer. None of these can be called
exciting topics.23

These are, however, not 'Johnson's subjects' or 'topics', but Bailey's. His talk of
subjects or topics of Rambler unhelpfully constrains his discussion, but even within
those terms The Rambler may be described with less tiniteness. For a start, Bailey's
descriptions (for eight of the ten) are based on the Table of Contents, rather than
the actual essays; if anything, his descriptions are actually less interesting. And a
different series of ten would yield different results. Here, for instance, are
descriptions of Rambler 95-106.24 which I have written so as to stress the literary
forms, especially narrative components; to make the descriptions morally and
narratively open-ended; to avoid abstraction; and to emphasize the presence of the
Rambler himself.

Pertinax writes to the Rambler, describing the results of habitual scepticism;
a tale of how Truth acquires an unexpected ally in the war against Falsehood;
a letter describing Tryphorus, a very inconsiderate man; why we need friends,
and what sort are best; the Rambler is rebuked in a letter from a fashionable
lady; a letter from Hilarius, a wit who finds himself lost for words; the
Rambler's vision of a dangerous voyage at sea; the fate of Nugaculus, a very
curious man; why we need to be flattered, but why some flattery is
dangerous; the Rambler fancies a clearing-house to match human needs with
skills.

Such descriptions as these make the essays sound, to a new audience, considerably

24. I exclude No.107, written by Richardson.
more interesting.

Of course, on first publication each individual pamphlet *Rambler* was given no title or description of contents – only the date, number in the series, and motto from the classics (which was not translated). In the volumes, each *Rambler* remains designated by its original date, and the 'titles' are not distributed, even though this puts the reader to the inconvenience of turning to the beginning of the volume to find what each *Rambler* is ostensibly 'about'. This stresses that the volumes are a reprint of texts which, although they are now gathered, forever belong in their earlier format. Korshin says that it is by being collected that *The Rambler* reaches its 'second audience', readers 'who first made an acquaintance with the work as a complete collection'. But such readers, by far the majority of *The Rambler*'s readers, are not permitted to believe that the work is defined by the format in which they have received it. We know as we read it that we are a second audience, because the history of the first reading is part of the text.

Even though the Table of Contents invites the reader to select, the lack of distributed titles makes it possible for even the second audience to read *The Rambler* in something approximating the same way as the first: that is, to find their orientation in the occasion of reading. A periodical essay does not need a title or topic to establish its relationship with the reader. On any particular Tuesday or Saturday, the original readers – unlike the second audience – were not offered a choice of *Rambler* to read, or of subjects to consider, but a particular encounter or meeting with a known persona, which only the occasion of reading would distinguish from previous or subsequent encounters. In this way *The Rambler* resists the characteristic of printed texts identified by Walter Ong, when he observed that 'Reading is always a preterite activity. It deals with something which is finished. Texts come out of past time. They are things, not events.' 25 In presenting something which is always and already 'over', a text gives the illusion of presence, but connotes absence. The periodical essay is, I contend, the form by which print text can come closest to being an event: it is not one text that simply *is*, but a series of texts that *happen*. The periodicity of the *Rambler* is more important for what they are, and how they are to be received by their readers, than their length, their subject matter, or their being by Samuel Johnson.

III. Reading and Re-Reading

Given that the Table of Contents, and the Index (which we will consider next), seem to work against the periodical nature of *The Rambler*, how did they come to be included at all? Korshin says that the Table of Contents was added 'later in the eighteenth century' by 'one of Johnson's editors ... so it has no authorial mandate.' 26 All three of these assertions may be doubted, but particularly the first. As David

Fleeman writes, 'In 1753 when the whole series of 208 Rambler was completed, (titles) were issued, together with Tables of Contents, and a list of the Mottos for the individual essays.' It was intended that these leaves be bound with the collected folio papers. Thereafter, the Table of Contents was included in every collected edition. Whilst it is unknown who made the Table (and it is perhaps unlikely that Johnson would have done it himself), he would surely have approved of it in principle, if not in execution.

We know a little more about the history of the Index. Johnson gives a perverse indication of his care for it by his reported dislike of Mr Flexman, a Dissenting Minister, of whom, he is being mentioned, 'the Doctor replied, "Let me hear no more of him, Sir. That is the fellow who made the Index to my Rambler, and set down the name of Milion thus: Milton, Mr. John."' (Life, IV, p.325.) Johnson, as himself a former cataloguer and writer of abstracts, believed in any strategy that would enhance the usefulness of literature, and in Rambler No.145 he commends abridgers and compilers for providing for the needs of lowly readers. They are, he asserts, further down the authorial hierarchy than daily journalists, 'the Ephemerides of learning', but they are undoubtedly useful to a certain class of reader, whose needs ought not to be neglected. In this essay he uses the intriguing expression 'every size of readers', implying that large volumes and comprehensive arguments will be beyond not simply the abilities but the practical needs of some readers. There are readers who may desire and would benefit from knowing a particular author's conclusions on a subject but who would not wish and should not be required to process all the writer's reasoning and research as well. Johnson knows that it is not sufficient for a writer simply to produce text. Text is the means of marketing ideas, and the customer is always right.

His constant attention to the paratextual and entrepreneurial side of literature is further evidenced in a letter he wrote to Richardson, shortly before concluding the first year of the folio Rambler, recommending that Richardson 'add an Index Rerum' to future editions of Clarissa, so 'that when the reader recollects any incident he may easily find it'. The letter continues, 'Clarissa is not a performance to be read with eagerness and laid aside forever, but will be occasionally consulted by the busy, the aged, and the studious'. It is consistent with this advice that an Index to The Rambler was provided in the 'Fourth Edition' of 1756. I believe we may assume that Johnson authorised the indexing of The Rambler which, with the Table of Contents, would assist those who wanted to 'consult' it; for he wants his readers to be enabled to become re-readers, or browsers. He would realise that any reader,
having once read *The Rambler* as the series proceeded, would be unlikely to read it again in its entirety or in the same way — any more than they would the seven-volume *Clarissa*. After a first reading, a work gives less of (the illusion of) presence, or of being an event. But an index provides an alternative to 'laying it aside forever'. The apparatus of the Table of Contents and the Index, then, are not so much for *The Rambler*’s second readers as for a second reading.

There is a third distorting frame to *The Rambler* which I wish to consider. Korshin notes with gratitude that 'the relatively pristine state of Johnson's text for most of the book's history has meant that his second audience has been relatively unhampered by dispensational readings and scholia'. For this reason it is particularly interesting to examine what Korshin calls 'the sparse, nonprescriptive notes of the Yale editors'. The Yale Edition is now the standard *Rambler* for scholarly purposes (and for the last century or so there has been little demand for *Rambler* for any other purpose). The editors say that they have aimed to keep their general (i.e. non-textual) annotation of the essays 'as lean in style as we could possibly make it. About half the references give the sources of the mottoes and of indented quotations of verse'. In the first volume of the Yale *Rambler*, there are 123 footnotes which identify the sources of Johnson's quotations, references or allusions. The tendency of the remainder of the notes might be termed 'midrashic': that is, there are 115 footnotes which refer to places where Johnson expresses similar (or contrasting) ideas to those of the footnoted passages. Many footnotes contain a number of such references. (There are a further 23 footnotes that provide bibliographical data, discuss the circumstances of composition of a particular paper, or — very occasionally — explain some topical reference.)

The text could easily support far more 'non-prescriptive' notes, which could, for instance, identify references in the essays to now-forgotten topical events, or translate, for a non-classically educated modern audience, the Latin names of the Rambler’s correspondents. But the Yale editors confine themselves to pointing out where coincidences of subject or opinion occur throughout *The Rambler*, or Johnson’s writings generally — and indeed in the writings of others. Of these 113 'midrashic' footnotes, 67 refer to elsewhere in *The Rambler*, 35 to other of his works, and 11 to Boswell’s *Life* or Hester Thrale’s *Anecdotes*. Most of the notes begin with a non-committal 'Cf.' Consider, for example, this footnote to *Rambler* No.4: 'Cf. Fielding, Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (par. 5), which Johnson said in 1772 he had never read (*Life*, II, 174)' (*Rambler* III, 19 n.2). This seems, without some further explanation, a masterpiece of irrelevance: a random indication of a mere coincidence of expression or opinion (or are the editors suggesting that Johnson had read *Joseph Andrews* and forgotten about it; or that he was lying?). There must be

32. The most recent edition for a popular market was in Everyman’s Library, No.994, *The Rambler*, selected by John Warrington (London: Dent, 1953). This contains 77 of the 208 Rambler.
34. I owe this description to Professor Kevin Hart.
hundreds of such coincidences in a work the size of *The Rambler*, to identify the occasional one proves nothing other than editorial erudition.

There is more point to the identification of parallel passages within the series itself, as the various expressions of similar ideas within a writer's work may each illuminate the others. The strategy is comparable with the cross-reference systems supplied in Study Bibles, which enable students of scripture to pursue themes for sermons. In the Yale *Rambler*, the annotation is far more haphazard than this, and the editors cannot imagine it to be comprehensive. In any case, this variety of 'scholia' seems to me to encourage the dangerous view that *The Rambler* is (or ought to be) a coherent whole, and that the chief interest in reading it is the pursuit of particular Johnsonian 'doctrines' or pre-occupations.

For all their attractive comprehensiveness, economy and convenience, collected editions can have undesirable effects on their contents. What were often originally miscellaneous and diverse materials are brought by collection into unforeseen relationships, particularly an appearance of dialogue, by which the reader loses in any individual piece the particularity of the moment of reading. This lost moment will often have represented something tentative and incomplete, a sense of openness of the original form, by which the readers themselves are invited into a dialogue with the essay from which some agreed position may emerge. Frequently this position will be at some degrees deeper than that of the issue which is ostensibly under discussion. A format of publication, or a bibliographical frame, which facilitates comparison, facilitates also a readily practice which ends finally in the kind of searches through a text which bypass its structure and tacitly assume that each component of the text is a discrete and intrinsically meaningless datum. Johnson is constantly aware of the ease with which readers may undermine the aims of authors, and their readiness to avail themselves of any device which assists this. Perhaps this is part of what Johnson meant when he said, 'what [a man] reads as a task will do him little good.' 33 For the essays are, in the end, persuasive - persuasive, particularly, in the cause of goodness. If a series of essays is submitted to a regime of systematic study, it is set at a distance from everyday life in which goodness needs to be manifest.

But when *The Rambler* 'second audience' approaches the work for a first reading, they find it framed by apparatuses which are supplied to assist either scholarly reading or re-reading ('consulting'): the 'misleading' Table of Contents, Mr. Flexman's Index, and the 'midrashic' footnotes of the Yale Edition. All these devices, by implying a sense of subject in the individual essays and coherence in the collection, undermine the sense of the work's original periodicity. The translation of the epigraph to the collected edition says: 'Sworn to no master's arbitrary sway, /I range where-<er occasion points the way.' These devices enable the reader to have some idea of the 'subject' beforehand, choose particular papers, chase up particular themes outside their natural context as if to discover some system, and to follow their own paths; in doing so they frustrate the Rambler's desire and design to range

and ramble.36

One further attempt to frame the essays ought to be noted, and this is simply the temptation to categorize them by type. It is a temptation which must be felt by all readers of the complete series, as a book, and to which scholars inevitably succumb, as a preliminary means of getting a large, various and discontinuous work into some sort of focus.35 To categorize the papers would not be a procedure that would occur to the reader of a bi-weekly periodical. But Johnson himself, in looking back over the series, thought it appropriate to try to discern some order, and what has been too formally, and hence misleadingly, described as 'Johnson's own scheme'38 of categorization of his papers occurs in the last Rambler, No.208. He describes the papers in the series as, 'the idle sports of imagination [...] the disquisitions of criticism [...] the pictures of life [...] the essays professedly serious' (208; V, 319-20). However well it may be made to work, this is hardly a scientific taxonomy, its categories shifting from a question of attitude (idle and serious), to subject matter (criticism and life), to process (imagination and disquisition), to form (pictures and essays).

The last essay in the series should not be regarded as an especially privileged source. Quite the opposite is in fact the case, as the self-defined 'occasion' of finality exerts an irresistible pressure on everything said on it. The formal conclusion of the series demands that the author should discuss his achievement and purpose, and it is to be expected that in doing so he would emphasize the morality and sobriety of the essays. In Rambler 208 the fact of finality moves Johnson to produce perhaps the most restrained and formal essay of the series. It is of course in its essence and accidents still very personal, but it uses the ceremony proper to the solemn occasion of an ending. The contents of this essay may be easily described in purely formal terms: he announces the conclusion of the series, justifies his lack of popularity and asserts his independence, acknowledges his obligations, admits his own accountability, explains his anonymity, firmly places his achievement in the context of literary history, summarises the contents, and finally submits The Rambler to the appropriate judgment. Anyone concluding any series of essays could follow the exact same procedure.

But although Johnson uses formal structures and modes of address, he does not and never does say purely formal things or have exclusively formal purposes. His two-fold post-hoc statement of his aims, which occurs here, is firstly that 'I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity,' and secondly that, 'it has been my principal design to inculcate wisdom or piety' (208, V, 318-19). This does not represent a carefully designed editorial policy: rather Johnson is, as he says,

36. However, there are other and stronger means by which text itself resists the reader's attempts to dictate the terms of the relationship, which I explore in other parts of this project, yet to be published.
37. See, for example, W.J. Bate's 'Introduction' to the Yale Rambler (III, p.xxvi). My own scheme of classification has been appended to this article.
looking back over *The Rambler* to see what he has done. In so doing, he is aware of many inadequacies — and is candid about these — but he is also confident that, considering the circumstances, the essays are as good as could be expected of him: 'That all are happily imagined, or accurately polished, that the same sentiments have not sometimes recurred, or the same expressions been too frequently repeated, I have not confidence in my own abilities sufficient to warrant' (208, V, 318). He has carefully selected the potential faults which he here confesses. The first two — the failure of inspiration to descend on demand, and the lack of opportunity to revise and polish — are to be expected in writings that are governed by strict deadlines. The second pair — the repetition of ideas and expressions from one paper to another — are faults only to be perceived by the second audience, who have the entire series before them. They would not disturb the periodical reader, for whom each paper fits not into a book or series but into the repetitive and remorseless but ever-changing daily round of business and domestic life.

The mitigating circumstances which Johnson goes on to cite are all simply intrinsic to periodical publication:

He that condemns himself to compose on a stated day, will often bring to his task an attention dissipated, a memory embarrassed, an imagination overwhelmed, a mind distracted with anxieties, a body languishing with disease: He will labour on a barren topic, till it is too late to change it; or in the ardour of invention, diffuse his thoughts into wild exuberance, which the pressing hour of publication cannot suffer judgment to examine or reduce.

(*Ibid.*)

The acknowledged disadvantages of periodical publication, which appear as such in the first ephemeral incarnation of the *Rambler*, become permanent conveniences when the same *Rambler* are published in volumes. They are not conveniences of which a writer of volumes could avail himself.

IV. The Periodical Event

Having raised the issue of writing being shaped by the circumstances of periodical publication, and also — as in the final *Rambler* — by a consciousness of occasion, such as an ending, I want to return, in conclusion, to Walter Ong's suggestive comment and consider how essays generally might function as 'events' rather than things. The different varieties of essay are usually distinguished by their style or subject matter, but I wish to propose a taxonomy based on the circumstances of their publication. With this in mind, we can easily distinguish essays which are Periodical events, Sporadic events, and Occasional events.

The Occasional essay is written for a particular historical purpose, external to the relationship of the writer and the reader. It may have been requested of the writer to celebrate an event, or to be part of a collection. It has a clear subject and stands alone. Most of T.S. Eliot's essays, for example, are of this type, and so are
the essays which are the currency of academic scholarship. The Sporadic essay resembles the Occasional in not being tied to a particular routine of publication, but differs in that the writer is under no obligation to an external event or subject. The Sporadic essayist may, like the Periodical writer, consider what he likes in what way he chooses. But the Periodical essayist has obligations, as Johnson has observed (184, V, 202), to a succession of self-imposed occasions – deadlines – and to supply a demand for continual variety, as well as to achieve a certain consistency of style and outlook.

In these terms, The Rambler has less in common with the literary essays of T.S. Eliot or the travel essays of Henry James (travel is an occasion), than with the neglected, almost despised, 'belles-lettres' work of G.K. Chesterton or Hilaire Belloc. Many of the essays of early twentieth-century writers first appeared as regular 'columns' in the pages of newspapers. Their first readers would merely stumble upon them, having taken up the invitation of the newspaper format to skim and sample. In this environment the essay fights for attention. Such essayists often use a strong and clearly individual voice, a whimsical choice of subject matter and a display of personal idiosyncrasy (which is frequently an exaggerated version of the writer's own). It is in this way rather than by writing anonymously and constructing a fictitious eidolon, like their eighteenth-century predecessors – that they achieve a sense of an on-going encounter with the reader and stand out against the backdrop of more impersonal reportage.

The choice of topic appears deliberate when the individual essay is first encountered in its original context; it is in fact always serendipitous. Belloc in particular was aware of the arbitrariness of his calling, and ironically notes it in the successive titles of his collections of essays: On Something, On Anything, On Nothing and, finally, just On. These titles, and those of many of his essays – 'On Fame', 'On Cheese', 'On a Piece of Rope' – function almost to parody the traditional, Ciceronian titles of serious, systematic essays like Francis Bacon's – 'Of Truth', 'Of Nobility', 'Of Travel', etc. They are, in other words, titles that undermine the convention of titling, and are equivalent to the lack of individual titles of the Rambler. The essay which has a subject, which is 'de This' or 'contra That,' such as Eliot's essays on 'Dryden' or on 'Dante', have very little in common with Belloc's essays or the Rambler's. If any Rambler is removed from its original context – framed by a title, or 'selected' – it ceases to function as an 'event', with its place in the relationship of Rambler and reader.

39. Donald Greene, p.105, uses this term, but distinguishes only 'sporadic' and periodical essays.
40. Graham Good, The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay (London: Routledge, 1988), considers both of these writers, with Johnson, as major essayists. He devotes a chapter to each, although he notes that the essays of James and Eliot 'are usually treated as an adjunct to the main work' (p.90). Good claims that 'Few essayists from this period (1850-1950) who were only essayists have survived in reputation' – which, if one is wanting to 'rediscover the essay', seems to me a good reason to examine their work anew, rather than ignore it in favour of the occasional writings of poets and novelists.
In any case, the *Rambler* resist neat titling, as their subjects are often very slippery. There are many numbers in which the focus shifts about halfway through, or in which an example that seems to provide a convenient entrance to a topic takes on a life of its own. Such are No.184, in which the Rambler gives a dissertation on the essay, on the way to discussing the role of chance in human affairs; and No.135, which starts with a lengthy digression on the role of fashion, authority and thought in human choice, before discussing annual retreats to the country. Johnson is certainly not anxious to achieve the sort of unity in each *Rambler* that we might assume to be desirable.

The most extreme example of this is No.126 (IV, 305-11), in which the Rambler gathers together three (supposed) letters on completely different subjects: the first argues that there is a difference between reasonable fears and unreasonable 'antipathies,' and that the latter are simply false opinions which ought to be challenged; the second is a complaint about society women who insist on soliciting praise for their possessions from their guests; and the third is a protest from a lady about a scholar who deflected her serious question by a jest. The essay has no explicit dynamic. These fragments are presented under the motto (of which this translation is misquoted from Edward Young's *Sabies*) 'Sands form the mountain, moments make the year;' or, as it is translated by Robert Olson, 'Nothing great is other than many minutiae'—which might in fact have served as a motto for the collected *Rambler*.

*The Rambler* in volumes is a collection of *Rambler*s, a souvenir of a reading encounter which is already over by the time the 'second audience' comes to it. New readers can access the collection at any number of points, selecting any individual paper serendipitously, or consulting the Index or Table of Contents. This is a privilege denied to the first audience. But the second audience also needs to know—as the first audience knew by experience—that *The Rambler* is a work which touches life at a succession of bi-weekly moments, at (almost) the everyday places in which the moral life is incarnate.

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Appendix: A Classification of the *Rambler* Essays

Everyone who reads *The Rambler* as a whole work, with the aim of studying it, is attracted to the idea of trying to classify the individual papers. Johnson would see this as the first attempt of a 'compiler' to discern or impose some sort of 'scheme' or 'system' on the work. Walter Jackson Bate has apparently made the effort and uses parts of his findings in his 'Introduction' to the Yale Edition of *The Rambler* (III, xxvi). I found that his numbers do not add up. I began by separating out those that were inarguably in particular forms, such as letters or tales, or which partook of fictional components, such as portraiture and narrative. This was initially in order to see if I could isolate 'moral writing' as a form. The papers devoted specifically to literary criticism seemed quite distinctive, but the category of those concerning the life of writing and scholarship, and its problems, overlapped into other categories. Every attempt to classify the essays will be partial and fallible; but the exercise is well worth doing, and every reader of *The Rambler* may judge my success for themselves.

**Allegories and Dreams**: 8 papers
3, 22, 33, 67, 91, 96, 102, 105.

**Eastern and other Fables**: 8 papers
38, 65, 120, 186, 187, 190, 204, 205.

**Letters 'TO THE RAMBLER'**: 59 papers

**Papers including letters or parts of letters**: 6 papers
10, 15, 34, 107, 163, 200.

**Literary Criticism**: 22 papers
4, 36, 37, 60, 86, 88, 90, 92, 93, 94, 121, 122, 125, 139, 140, 143, 145, 152, 156, 158, 168, 176.

**The Life of Writing and Scholarship, and its Problems**: 17 papers
1, 2, 14, 21, 23, 77, 83, 89, 106, 136, 137, 154, 169, 173, 180, 193, 208.

**Times and Places**: 4 papers
5, 80, 124, 135.

**Portraits of Individuals**: 1 paper
59.

**Papers including Portraits**: 18 papers
18, 19, 20, 24, 39, 40, 74, 103, 112, 128, 144, 146, 162, 179, 182, 189, 201, 206.

**Moral Essays**: 64 papers

**TOTAL**: 208