“Smoke Brightening into Flame”: An Argument for the Cohesiveness of Samuel Johnson’s Rambler

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By

Tyler John Gardner, B.A.

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Chapter 1: The *Rambler*’s Connections with the Reader and the Past

English literary giant Samuel Johnson referred to his other works as “wine and water,” but to his periodical, the *Rambler* as “pure wine.”¹ W.J. Bate believes that he was “really thinking of the best of them...for the series is naturally uneven” (Bate 290). But Bate’s perception that the series is “uneven,” is precisely the misperception that I wish to correct. If something is “pure” the implication is that every part of the whole contributes to its overall purity; there are no weaknesses in purity, and it would be contradictory to speak of an “uneven” purity. Johnson understood “pure” to mean something “unmingled; not altered by mixtures,” and “not connected with anything extrinsick.”² Bate even recognizes that Johnson wanted the “purity of the work to be accepted objectively” (293). I suggest that the *Rambler*’s purity lies in its functioning as an intrinsically connected unit rather than as individual essays, and that Johnson was referring to the *Rambler* as a whole when he called it “pure wine.”

But the *Rambler* is not simply intrinsically connected with itself,³ i.e., the essays are not just in conversation with one another. Johnson and his publishers, intentionally or not, designed the *Rambler* so as to be intrinsically connected to its reader. By exploring the bibliography of the *Rambler*, we find that it possessed several physical traits that gave it a “classic” nature and begged the reader to consider each individual essay as part of an “incarnate relationship.”⁴ I also suggest that by considering Johnson’s revision process,⁵

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¹ See Bate (290).
² Definitions 3 and 4 of “pure” from his *Dictionary*.
³ See Chapter 2 for a complete discussion on the intrinsic connections between the essays.
⁴ See Tankard (70).
and the distribution and eventual collection of the *Rambler*, we can see how both Johnson and his readers valued the collected edition of the *Rambler* over the individual essays.

The physical traits of the *Rambler* that Paul Tankard points to, such as continual page numbers and decorative headpieces, suggest that the *Rambler* stood apart from periodicals that had come before it, specifically Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele’s *Spectator*. Tankard suggests that these traits functioned as a “gentle reminder” to the reader that the *Rambler* was meant to be kept, rather than simply discarded. By comparing the two periodicals, Tankard is able to show that the *Spectator* did not possess these same physical traits. He argues that the reason for this is that Johnson and his publishers wanted the *Rambler* to be something unique, something that could perhaps stand the test of time and become a “classic.” He points to several qualities of the *Rambler* to support this claim, and these qualities are magnified when compared to the *Spectator*’s lack of such qualities. In other words, the physical comparison exposes the *Rambler*’s “classic” qualities as opposed to those “ephemeral” qualities of the *Spectator*.

The differences between the bibliography of the *Rambler* and the *Spectator* may seem minor, but it is precisely the *Rambler*’s “classic” qualities that allow the reader to become intrinsically connected with it. Bate suggests that within fifteen years of their original publication, the *Rambler* essays had become “something of a classic” and that Johnson was doing something “quite novel in the periodical essay, with a result that lifts the form into permanent universality.”

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5 Which came mostly *after* his last *Rambler* had been published.
6 Bate (290-294).
The first *OED* definition of a “classic” is something of “the first or highest quality, class, or rank.” Tankard shows us how the *Rambler* possesses several of these “classic” qualities. Holding one of the original *Rambler* essays in his hands, he describes the periodical as “a folio pamphlet of six pages…[the] first two leaves are conjugate, that is, a folded sheet makes up the first four pages, and a loose half-sheet contains the fifth and sixth pages.” There is a “decorative headpiece” at the top of the front page and the last page is left completely blank. He observes that the *Rambler* was published in single columns averaging 36 lines and about 340 words per page; the *Spectator* essays were published in double columns, averaging 74 lines per column and about 1360 words per page. Because the *Rambler* was given its own space, a space that was not intruded upon by any other articles or advertisements, it must have signaled to the reader that this was an important piece of writing. The amount of space given to the *Rambler* might be seen as a gesture on the part of the publishers to keep the work in tact and not allow any other publication to intrude upon the *Rambler*’s space.

Tankard also notes that the *Rambler*’s pages were numbered in a continual fashion. For example, Tankard’s copy of *Rambler* 169 is numbered from page 1008 to 1012, rather than from page 1 to 5. This numbering system serves as “a gentle hint to the purchaser and reader that, despite the date, this is an artifact to be kept” (Tankard 70). Not only does this signify perhaps that the reader should value this essay individually, but that he should remember that it was a part of a larger project. A reader holding pages

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7 See *OED*.
8 As opposed to *The Spectator* that did not have numbered pages. A lack of page numbers, as Tankard notes, signified the ephemeral nature of such a periodical, signaling to the reader that this document stood alone and could be discarded without guilt.
1008 to 1012 would want to know what pages came before, and what pages were yet to
come. Each essay functioned as if it was a small chapter in a larger novel. Tankard also
recognizes the desire that this would create for the reader to collect the essays: “The page
numbers tell the reader to keep this slight document, with its predecessors and successors,
and (ideally) to gather them all into bound volumes” (70). Tankard knows that the essays
eventually were bound and distributed as a collection, but it is worth noting that these
physical traits would entice readers to collect the essays to find a connection. If the
individual essays were always labeled as part of a “whole,” the reader surely would want
to know what that “whole” signified.

The *Rambler* was even printed on smaller paper than that of the *Spectator*, not so
that it would seem inferior, but so that it would be more durable and could be more easily
carried. As Tankard puts it: “*The Rambler*—being more compact and substantial—was
more easily carried and re-read, and might be folded once only, if at all” (70). If the
*Rambler* was as widely read as Roy Wiles proposes in his study of the distribution of the
*Rambler*, then it is certainly worth noting that the essays were printed in a more durable
fashion so as to be kept for a longer period of time. And even though it is difficult to
speak of intentionality, it seems as if Johnson’s publishers knew that they were creating
something “enduring” from the beginning. As Tankard adds:

[T]o encourage and assist the conversion of ephemera to literature, the publishers
of the *Rambler* issued in 1751 a title page, and in 1753, upon completion of the
series, full sets of preliminaries, including title pages, tables of contents, and
translations of the mottoes, to be bound into volumes with the collected papers.

(70)

To return to our original definition of a “classic,” these traits suggest that the *Rambler* may have stood out as a periodical of the “highest quality, class, or rank.” Along with the page numbers and the headpieces, each individual *Rambler* came with an issue number, and a reminder that the essays would be “Continued on Tuesdays and Saturdays.” Tankard explains that, “The issue number, and the advice that the series is to continue, are signs that each encounter with the *Rambler* is one in an ongoing sequence, and intended to take place in the context of a relationship composed of regular appointments” (69). The *Rambler*’s appearance encouraged the reader to come back frequently to the series, through “appointments.” If the reader returned to the series frequently, then he would be rewarded with an enduring relationship. And as Tankard asserts, “the moral life is incarnate in a relationship, rather than a book” (83).

I suggested earlier that the *Rambler* functions as an intrinsically connected unit; I now take this a step further and argue that this connected unit consists of a series of essays on morality that can only function optimally if read in the “context of a relationship composed of regular appointments.” And by regular appointments, I mean that the reader would have to keep the *Rambler* essays in order to be able to come back to them when seeking guidance. It is not enough merely to read a moral essay once, but it must be kept and referred to periodically. Once the essays had been collected, the
distribution and printing of the *Rambler* increased vastly. Clearly, there was an element to the collection of the *Rambler* that did not exist among the individual essays.

Paul Korshin points out, “most eighteenth-century readers of *The Rambler* first made an acquaintance with the work as a complete collection” (Korshin 52). These readers were privileged in that they did not have to wait to collect the *Rambler* but could experience it immediately as a whole. Readers did not have to wait for the next essay to make it out to their province, but could simply look up their favorite essay in the table of contents provided, and experience it as a part of the relationship. This experience must have been greater than that of the original readers because over the course of the next thirty-six years, eleven editions were issued from the press (Courtney 26). These editions would not have been printed in such quick succession had there not existed the demand for them. In fact, Paul Korshin observes, “Johnson’s periodical writings reached an even wider audience in the century after his death than they did during his lifetime” (Korshin 52). Korshin refers here to the “three dozen separate editions of the work plus twenty more reprintings in Johnson’s works” in the nineteenth century (52). By the nineteenth century, almost all of Johnson’s readers were encountering the *Ramblers* as a “coherent literary work” (52). The demand may have been higher for the collected work because by the 19th century Johnson’s fame had spread, or it may have been that the printing culture had become more extensive, but I suggest that we add to this list the possibility that readers wanted to experience the work as part of a literary whole, and now had the opportunity to do so.

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9 1756-1792.
Before Henry David Thoreau was even born, Johnson realized that just as “Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written,” so too must they be written as deliberately as they were meant to be read. Johnson expected much of his readers, for he knew morality was a serious topic, and in turn, he expected much of himself. He did not consider the revision process over after the essays had been sent to press. He further defines “purity” as something “not vitiated by any bad practice or opinion,” and something “not vitiated with corrupt modes of speech.” To maintain this concept of “purity,” his essays would have to be clear from errors and “corrupt modes of speech.” That the revision process played a large part in Johnson’s construction of the Rambler contradicts one of the great Johnsonian myths; most readers have a received understanding of Johnson as a hasty writer who spent minimal time in actually composing his manuscripts. Due in part to his haphazard writing style and his self-admitted idleness, or the fact that Johnson advised young writers to compose as quickly as possible for “it is so much more difficult to improve in speed than in accuracy” (Bate 206), it is difficult to accept immediately that Johnson actually did put a significant amount of work into the revision process of the Rambler. 

One of the more popular “Johnsonian anecdotes” is of him sitting in Sir John Hawkins’ library furiously scribbling away, composing a Rambler (on idleness) just minutes before it was to be sent to press. This anecdote tends to be used to show that Johnson rarely revised his papers and that he frequently was tempted towards idleness. It

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10 See Thoreau.
11 Johnson’s 7th and 8th definitions of “pure” in his Dictionary.
12 See Bate Chapter 17.
is hard to imagine that the Samuel Johnson, who wrote this infamous *Rambler* 134,\(^{13}\) could have possibly spent much time planning out or revising the individual *Rambler* essays. Johnson himself furthered this myth by exaggerating his own dissolute habit of mind. As he writes in this *Rambler*:

> After a short effort of meditation by which nothing was determined, I grew every moment more irresolute, my ideas wandered from the first intention, and I rather wished to think, than thought, upon any settled subject; till at last I was awakened from this dream of study by a summons from the press. (Yale, IV 345)

But even this self-declaration towards idleness must be read with caution, for we are speaking of the great Samuel Johnson. There is too much evidence against Johnson being an idle wanderer to consider this essay as anything but another topic for discussion. Johnson may have written several essays and poems in haste, but that is not to say that he did not put a great deal of thought into all that he produced.\(^{14}\) We must remember that we are speaking of the same Johnson who composed 70 lines of the *Vanity of Human Wishes* in his head before setting them to paper; the same Johnson who compiled a dictionary of the English language in nine years;\(^{15}\) the same Johnson who wrote *Life of Savage* in about 36 hours; the same Johnson who composed all 62 lines of the *Prologue Spoken at the

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\(^{13}\) *Rambler* 134 is used by many Johnsonian scholars to illustrate Johnson’s hasty writing style. See Bate, Davis, or Grundy.

\(^{14}\) He also seemed to define idleness as not *producing*. It is important that modern audiences don’t misinterpret his lack of production as a lack of thought.

\(^{15}\) Bate even makes a case that it would have been completed in a timelier manner had Johnson’s wife not died.
Opening of the Theatre in Drury-Lane, for David Garrick, in his head; and the same Johnson whose friends in his writing circle prided themselves on being able to remember paragraphs of rhetoric in their heads before setting them to paper.\textsuperscript{16} Johnson had the capacity to construct great plans in his head before he wrote them out. His ability to produce greatness \textit{instantaneously} is evident from his other works, and as Bate points out “he was drawing upon a large internal fund of assimilated experience and reflection” (Bate 291).

The \textit{Rambler} may have been written in haste,\textsuperscript{17} but as C.B. Bradford points out, in his work done on Johnson’s revision process, “it is not so well known that at the earliest opportunity the text was carefully corrected. Johnson, indeed, does not seem to have considered the act of composition ended when a work had appeared in print” (Bradford 302). This is why we must be cautious of Sir John Hawkins’ claim that the \textit{Ramblers} “hardly ever underwent a revision before they were sent to the press.”\textsuperscript{18} Although his statement is true, Bradford reminds us that “the man who wrote so hastily was later careful to delete, elaborate, and correct, adding to the literary qualities of all 208 essays.”\textsuperscript{19}

Bradford provides us with three dates when Johnson revised part, if not all, of the \textit{Rambler}. On June 1, 1750 Johnson made partial corrections to his folio text for James Elphinston. On April 1, 1751, Johnson agreed to a collected edition of the \textit{Rambler}. This

\textsuperscript{16} Edmund Burke, Sir John Hawkins, Charles Burney, etc. Bate provides a further discussion of this group of writers priding themselves on having the ability to remember large sections of verse or rhetoric in their heads before committing the ideas to paper.

\textsuperscript{17} See Bate (291).

\textsuperscript{18} See Yale, II (xv).

\textsuperscript{19} See Bradford (314). This point bolsters Tankard’s argument for the “classical” nature of the \textit{Rambler}.
time, “alterations [were] made in every number of the Rambler” (303). Finally, in 1756, for a fourth and final edition of the 208 collected essays, Johnson again chose to revise much of his work. He “simplified his syntax” (304) and “improve[d] his expression” (302). This evidence that Johnson revised much of his work shows us that he had a great deal of respect for his reader and wanted to give him the “purest” Johnsonian experience possible. He wanted to rid his moral essays of any “corrupt” speech in order to provide his reader with something “pure.” And as Bradford observes, “It was the essays giving moral advice that caused Johnson most trouble, for the majority of these were greatly changed and elaborated” (306). Johnson knew that his moral essays, more than other types of his essays, would be in direct conversation with his readers and their daily lives; the moral essays would be the central piece to this intrinsic connection with the reader.

In light of Korshin’s and Bradford’s research, we must rethink Bate’s claim that Johnson only wrote the Rambler for monetary gain or as an escape from the drudgery of the Dictionary.20 Had Johnson been concerned only with money and distraction, he would not have revised the Rambler three times within the first three years of their distribution. This evidence suggests that Johnson was truly concerned with the posterity of the Rambler, for he knew that it would serve as a moral guidebook to future generations. He revised in order to cut back on “corrupt modes of speech” in an attempt to purify the collection. He knew that by revising the essays, in particular the moral pieces, they would have a far better chance of enduring the test of time in order to reach the widest audience possible. Even though the original “audience” of the Rambler was

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20 See Bate (289).
quite small, and Johnson recognized that he was not that widely liked in London,²¹ Roy Wiles found that the redistribution of the essays in various provinces helped Johnson’s reputation grow. I suggest further that the combination of Johnson’s growing reputation, and the fact that many more people were being exposed to just parts of the *Rambler*, led to the eventual demand for the collected essays. Or, as Kathryn Temple observes, the periodicals helped Johnson in “constructing a national audience” (Temple 90).

Evidence of the distribution of the *Rambler*, found by Wiles, suggests that the round number of 500 copies that were printed and distributed through London, is an inaccurate account of how many copies were actually in circulation. Wiles recognizes that those original 500 copies were then reprinted in several of the provincial newspapers outside of London. He found that the English provincial newspapers were reprinting numbers of the *Rambler* and circulating them all over England. Not only were Johnson’s essays being widely circulated, but his reputation was also growing; some provincial newspapers were even praising him as the new Addison. Following Tankard’s logic, the wide circulation of individual *Rambler* essays would have enticed readers to find more copies and eventually seek out a collection of the copies. Perhaps Johnson recognized that “an audience was meanwhile being created to buy it later in book form” (Bate 294).

As Wiles notes, “in addition to the relatively few copies printed in London during the original run of Johnson’s best periodical essay, many of the *Rambler* essays were reprinted almost immediately in several English provincial newspapers and thereby gained an audience eight or ten or twelve times greater than the public that bought the

²¹ Johnson claims he has “never been much a favourite of the publick” in *Rambler* 208.
essays as they came from the press of Payne and Bouquet in London on Tuesdays and Saturdays during the two years from mid-March 1750 to mid-March 1752” (Wiles 155). Johnson’s readership, although at first quite small, eventually expanded to the whole of England. The fact that Johnson was reaching a greater audience in the years after he had written the last Rambler would have further encouraged him to revise and “purify” his collection.

To give an estimate of the number of copies that were in circulation, Wiles writes: “though Londoners bought fewer than five hundred of his twice-a-week essays, hundreds of newsmen had been carrying thousands of newspapers containing Ramblers to multitudes of readers all over England” (171). The numbers are vague, but even in their vagueness they suggest that the round number of 500 distributed copies of each Rambler is inaccurate and that there was a greater audience for Johnson awaiting him in the provinces.

Wiles found that the Earl of Arran wrote to the Vice Chancellor of Oxford in 1755, upon Johnson’s completion of the Dictionary, recommending Johnson for a Master of Arts. The Chancellor acknowledged that Johnson “very eminently distinguished himself by the publication of a series of essays” (156). Notice how the Earl does not refer here to Johnson as “the author of Vanity of Human Wishes,” but rather focuses on Johnson’s growing reputation as an essayist. His reputation was helped by the fact that several newspapers were not only comparing him to Addison, but recognizing that he might be surpassing Addison.
In October 1750, as Wiles finds, the *Newcastle General Magazine* reprinted *Rambler* 60, Johnson’s famous essay on the biographer, and introduced it with the following heading:

As the RAMBLER is now universally allow’d not only to be the best Paper of the present Time, but also equal to any ever before published, (the celebrated *Spectators* not excepted) we conceive that Extracts from it cannot fail of being most acceptable to our Readers. (158)

Wiles also observes that Thomas Boddely, editor of the *Bath Journal*, again compared Johnson to a modern Addison when he addressed a poem to ‘the Author of the Rambler’ that read in part:

Happy for us! Another Champion shines,

Equal in Genius [to Addison] and in great Designs. (161)

Wiles’ research supports the fact that the *Ramblers* were far more widely read than most believe. Given Paul Tankard’s insightful comments on the physical traits of the *Rambler*, it seems evident that the readers who were being exposed to the *Rambler* in parts would have also desired to possess the whole. Johnson’s reputation was also growing and he was becoming an eminent moral writer being compared to such figures as Addison and Bacon.
The last argument I would like to put forward in this section is that the *Rambler* was intrinsically connected with the past. Johnson’s work can be seen as one piece of an on-going conversation regarding morality and virtue. Johnson had the luxury of drawing on past English moralists such as Bacon, Addison, and Steele,\(^{22}\) just as now we have the luxury of drawing on his works. Theorists such as John Brewer and John Elsner assert that works of art that try to embody the identity of a nation function as conversations with the past. Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler*, seen through the eyes of an antiquarian, can be viewed as a collection of Britain’s national moral heritage. Specifically, the essays draw on various moral works from the past, and attempt to place them in a new context as a collection of British morality. Just as Johnson had relied on previous lexicographers while compiling the *Dictionary*,\(^{23}\) he relied heavily on the previous moralists, such as Montaigne, Bacon, Addison, and Steele while writing the *Rambler*.

John Brewer, in his cultural studies on 18\(^{th}\) century England, observes that “Individual works of art were connected to each other, reproduced and collected so that artists, critics and the public might see them as parts of a single, national culture” (Brewer 428). From John Gay to John Bell, Brewer traces the interconnectedness of various collections throughout the eighteenth century. He explains that these artists and writers “were all part of the same circle of conversation, a sort of cultural establishment setting the tone of debate about arts and literature and placing it in a historical perspective” (468). According to this logic, the *Rambler* can be read as a collection not just of the individual essays that Johnson produced, but of hundreds of essays of the

\(^{22}\) See Bate (292) for a discussion on the influence of Bacon in Johnson’s moral writings.

\(^{23}\) See Temple (91).
nation’s past. The *Rambler* becomes a collection of the purest of the pure lessons in morality. Writers and artists of the eighteenth century produced various collections in an attempt to embody their pure national culture. Sir John Hawkins and Dr. Charles Burney tried to capture the national histories of music, Edward Gibbons collected an entire history of the Roman Empire into six volumes, Johnson himself would eventually collect the essences of England’s greatest poets. All of these works function as collections of heritage and identity; all of these works owe something to the past and are in continual conversation with the future. These texts can almost function as “authorless” texts in respect to what each one of them borrows from the past and contributes to the future.

Brewer explains that this borrowing was quite common and that writers “drew on collections of pedigrees, scraps of verse, engravings, classical texts and inscriptions and on local histories that dated back to the sixteenth century and the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries in 1572” (471). In the *Rambler*, Johnson uses Latin and Greek aphorisms as essay headings in order to establish a sense of dignity and antiquity in his writing. He also refers to Addison, quotes Bacon, and critiques Milton. Bate also observes this concept of a “shared” literary heritage:

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24 I discuss the specific interconnectedness of the various moralists in Chapter 3.
He was combining several things. One is the tradition of “wisdom literature” from the Greek aphorists and the book of Ecclesiastes, through the Renaissance Humanists, down into the seventeenth century.25

The pages of the *Rambler*, specifically the headings and introductory paragraphs, can be seen as a form of conversation with past national figures, or as Brewer would say, these pages could be seen as “companions” and “friends” (Brewer 427). I suggest that Brewer and Tankard are both driving at the same point: as a collection, a work can be returned to as part of a relationship and the work can be viewed as an “incarnate” friend.

Now we can expand this argument even further. I initially suggested that the *Rambler* appealed to readers because its physical attributes promoted a sort of interconnected relationship. I then furthered that by adding that these essays consisted of moral writings that revolved around what Tankard referred to as an “incarnate relationship.” Now, we can add that these essays function as a relationship not just with the reader, but with the past as well. Readers can share in this experience of communicating with past scholars and thinkers on a regular basis. The collection makes it that much easier for the reader literally to hold the past in his hands. As Brewer summarizes: “At the dawn of the nineteenth century it has become possible to imagine, to hold and even to own the works of literature and art, or at least copies of them, which had been enshrined by London critics, commercial booksellers and art dealers as Britain’s cultural heritage” (489). Through this lens, we can view Johnson, and others, as a

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25 See Bate (294), for a longer discussion on past moralists who had a direct influence on Johnson.
collector of cultural heritage. We can also view the *Rambler* as a relationship not just between Johnson and the reader, but between Johnson, the reader, and the past. But Susan Stewart and John Elsner challenge the assertion that this relationship with the past can be read as “pure,” and propose instead that the collector, by bringing in “extrinsic” objects from other contexts, actually creates a new context and destroys creation.

Stewart argues that the “collection is the antithesis of creation” (Stewart 160), and that the collector is obsessed with the “reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context” (151). This sounds contrary to Johnson’s definition of “pure,” and might be problematic for my thesis if Johnson were not actually the producer of his collection. And even if he were not the producer, we have already seen that the *Rambler* functions as an intrinsically connected conversation with the past. Johnson challenges Stewart’s paradigm of the collector because he was not just a collector of objects, but actually the producer of those objects. Johnson literally produced the items which he later collected. The *Rambler* and the *Dictionary* serve as literary works that challenge Stewart’s claim that “collection is the antithesis of creation.” But in her work done on authorship in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, Kathryn Temple challenges the idea that we can only view Johnson as a collector:

> While Johnson gathered material that referred to the past, he replaced origins with a new system of classification meant to re-authenticate the materials he had collected. Souvenir hunter and collector collapse into each other here, as
Johnsonian classification always attempts a return to origins—a foregrounding of the very origins destroyed by the process of collection. (Temple 90)

In both cases, Johnson saw collection as a gathering of information and a reaffirmation of original contexts, as opposed to an eraser of contexts. But as Temple points out, he ended up destroying the original contexts to which he meant to return. The Dictionary specifically pointed to words in their original contexts, and the Rambler, when appropriate, cited scholars who had previously written on similar topics. Johnson was calling attention to the relationship that his work had to the past, and the relationship that the reader could have to the past. In this case, collection, rather than being the antithesis of creation, is actually the reason for creation. Johnson desired to collect his own essays, but he recognized that they shared a relationship with past thinkers. He did not want to be the eraser of origins, but rather the producer of their origins. Stewart’s claim that “the self generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer of those objects, a producer by arrangement and manipulation” (Stewart 158), does not apply in this case: Johnson authored these essays.

Another way in which Johnson challenges Stuart’s view of the collector is through his role as a distributor. Jean Baudrillard argues that objects, to a collector, symbolize a love affair and that the collector will pursue these objects in order to possess those objects (Baudrillard 7). But Johnson was only attempting to collect the Rambler in order to distribute it as a collection. In other words, Johnson was not just the collector, but he was also a type of distributor for the Rambler. Johnson did not have a desire to
possess this collection of essays, but rather to share it with as many people as possible.\textsuperscript{26} So when the hypothetical collector in Baudrillard’s essays finds a final piece to his collection and claims “It is all my own, the object of my passion” (7), we are forced to question whether or not we might apply this logic to Johnson. Johnson never felt as if his work could be complete, or if he could ever put every word into the \textit{Dictionary}; he admits in his preface that when working with something as evanescent as language, it would be impossible ever to produce something that embodied every possible word. To Baudrillard, the \textit{Rambler} did not function purely as a relationship with the past or the reader, because a relationship implies a complete integration of possession and use.

Baudrillard, however, argues that “any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized, or it can be possessed” (8). He claims that the “acts of possession mingle with acts of usage, in a process that always falls short of total integration” (8). But Johnson manages to integrate the two: both the \textit{Rambler} and the \textit{Dictionary} might be seen as texts that manage to totally integrate the concepts of usage and possession. Readers might own a complete collection of the \textit{Rambler}, and use it on a daily basis as a source of guidance. Or, they might own a copy of the \textit{Dictionary}, a collection of thousands of words, and use it whenever they needed to find a definition. As Johnson wrote in \textit{Rambler} 60: “what is of most use is of most value” (Yale, III 321). The \textit{Rambler} and the \textit{Dictionary} both manage to challenge Baudrillard’s theory. These collections both seem to integrate completely use value and possession value and allow the reader to embrace them fully as an “incarnate relationship.”

\textsuperscript{26} We can see this desire to have the \textit{Rambler} distributed in my earlier discussion on the distribution of the \textit{Rambler}. See (11, 12).
Johnson’s texts, and Johnson himself, add an unexplored element to this conversation on collecting and borrowing. What we gain from this theoretical approach to collecting is that the *Rambler* might serve as a relationship with past thinkers.\(^{27}\) Although Stewart challenges the way in which we think about the collector as a “pure” producer or creator, Johnson seems to escape her paradigm by literally being the author of the “collected” product.

Through analyzing the bibliography of the *Rambler*, I have shown that the essays might forge a relationship with the reader; through looking at Johnson’s revision process and the distribution of the *Rambler*, I have shown that the series functions on a higher level as a complete collection because the reader can come back to each essay for “regular appointments;” and analyzing other works that attempt to establish a national identity, I have shown that the *Rambler* can function as a relationship with the past as well. When Johnson refers to the *Rambler* as “pure wine,” he implies that he understands these connections and that his readers will as well. Just as the *Rambler* functions as a conversation with the past, and a collection of national moral heritage, so too does it function as a conversation with us now, and so too will it function as a conversation with those in the future, and we might continue to read it as a collection of moral writings that owes much to moralists of the past.

\(^{27}\) This is yet another piece of evidence to support Tankard’s claim for the literary qualities of the *Rambler*.\(^\)
Chapter 2: The *Rambler* and its Contents

It would be easier to accept Bate’s claim for “unevenness” within the *Rambler* if the essays were composed of disparate ideas, and if Johnson clumsily bounced around from one idea to the next. But I wish to argue that the essays engage with one another and possess an overarching unifying principle. This section explores the ways in which the various *Rambler* essays speak to one another, engage with one another, and form a cohesive unit. I suggest the overarching idea throughout the *Rambler* is that theory is useless if not repeatedly put into practice. Johnson presents his readers with a set of theories, and then enhances them by putting them into practice in the pages of the *Rambler*. Because the essays speak to one another in such a continual fashion, and so much of Johnson’s theory relies upon practical repetition, the *Rambler* would not possess this “purity” of principle if read as separate essays.

I would like to discuss four ways in which Johnson puts his theory into practice. First, Johnson consistently writes about envy and competition. His commentary on how to control envy and comparison is enhanced by the fact that he was clearly engaged in a competition of his own with moralists of the past, namely Joseph Addison and Francis Bacon. Second, several *Rambler* essays discourage idleness and propose a scheme that employs the mind in various activities. Biographical evidence suggests that Johnson used writing, and the *Rambler* in particular, to avoid such vacuity of the mind. Third, several of Johnson’s aphorisms discuss the concept of enduring long-term projects, even after they lose their initial “flame.” Johnson’s engagement with the *Rambler*, and several other
long-term projects, provides a type of practical authority for his theory. Finally, Johnson
discusses the role that the “critic” plays in judging an author’s “works.” I read these terms
metaphorically and suggest that Johnson was literally creating works, the *Rambler*
essays, which promoted virtue and were meant to be judged by his “eternal critic,” God.
Samuel Johnson grounds his theoretical propositions in concreted lived experience.

The first principle that permeates Johnson’s *Rambler*, and much of his other
writing, is that it is almost impossible to escape from competition. Isobel Grundy
observes: “[t]o look into any part of Johnson’s writing is to see at once how central and
consistent was his concern with measuring and comparing” (233). To Johnson, striving
for greatness was an inevitable human instinct. Naturally, we have a preconceived notion
of what it means to be *great*, and we recognize others in our society who we feel have
attained this *greatness*. The problem with competition, as both Johnson and Grundy
observe, is how quickly it becomes envy and how quickly envy leads to meanness.
Grundy writes:

[Johnson’s] works recognize and embody various logical connections between
greatness and pettiness. Striving for greatness is itself a cause of meanness, of
competition, envy, malice, and the attempted devaluation of others. (233)

Johnson’s primary concern in several of his *Rambler* essays is to distinguish
between a positive notion of competition and the “meaner” sort of envy.
In *Rambler* 9 Johnson writes: “Every man ought to endeavour at eminence, not by pulling others down, but by raising himself, and enjoy the pleasure of his own superiority, whether imaginary or real, without interrupting others in the same felicity” (Yale III 50). The difficulty here, as Johnson surely realized, is that we often do not consider ourselves great unless we know that others recognize our greatness. In order for others to recognize us as great, we either need to surpass them by “pulling them down,” or remind them of our greatness by “interrupting” their felicity. In *Rambler* 21, Johnson observes a similar negative side to man’s competitive nature: “Every man is prompted by the love of himself to imagine, that he possesses some qualities, superior, either in kind or in degree, to those which he sees allotted to the rest of the world” (115). Man often cannot help but comparing himself to others and this comparison naturally leads to envy. Johnson writes in *Rambler* 183:

This universal and incessant competition, produces injury and malice by two motives, interest, and envy; the prospect of adding to our possessions what we can take from others, and the hope of alleviating the sense of our disparity by lessening others, though we gain nothing to ourselves. (Yale, V 197)

These *Rambler* essays speak to one another in their attempt to find a middle ground between not competing at all, and becoming envious. In *Rambler* 9, Johnson proposed that man might seek a way to compete without pulling others down, but by
Rambler 183, he seems to have accepted that finding this non-envious path is almost impossible. He writes:

The frequency of envy makes it so familiar, that it escapes our notice; nor do we often reflect upon its turpitude or malignity, till we happen to feel its influence. When he that has given no provocation to malice, but by attempting to excel, finds himself pursued by multitudes whom he never saw with all the implacability of personal resentment; when he perceives clamour and malice let loose upon him as a publick enemy, and incited by every stratagem of defamation; when he hears the misfortunes of his family, or the follies of his youth exposed to the world; and every failure of conduct, or defect of nature aggravated and ridiculed; he then learns to abhor those artifices at which he only laughed before, and discovers how much the happiness of life would be advanced by the eradication of envy from the human heart. (199)

Johnson shows how easily man can fall victim to envy even if he is not conscious of it or desirous of it. Envy tends to “escape our notice,” and in its early stages we do not “reflect upon its turpitude or malignity” because it feels like we are simply striving to “excel,” or engaging in some sort of mild competition. To excel is virtuous, and to compete is noble, but to do it at another’s expense becomes mean and malignant.

Johnson’s theory on competition and envy is reinforced here because he was also

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i.e. It is impossible to escape comparison, so we must seek the good in the fact that it leads us to engage.
engaged in a type of competition with moralists from the past, namely Addison, Steele, and Bacon.\(^{29}\)

As Isobel Grundy points out, “the idea of desired individual superiority, of ‘burning to be great,’ of excelling one’s fellows in any field of endeavour, excites and compels [Johnson]” (Grundy 233). In *Rambler* 10, Johnson acknowledges that the ghost of Addison haunts his essays. In a letter to the author, Johnson is encouraged by Hester Mulso, to “now and then throw in, like his predecessor, some papers of a gay and humorous turn” (Yale, III 52). The letter goes on to assert that “if [Johnson] is a mere essayist, and troubles not himself with the manners of the age, she is sorry to tell him, that even the genius and correctness of an Addison will not secure him from neglect” (52).\(^{30}\) The reference to Addison is of particular importance because it implies that Johnson knew of his engagement in a type of competition. Johnson may not have cared to surpass Addison, and he may not have even wanted to compare himself to Addison, but that would not stop his readers from making the comparison. Johnson was engaged in a similar undertaking as moralists of the past, and would have to accept that readers would compare him to his predecessors.\(^{31}\) Addison was not the only ghost haunting the pages of the *Rambler*.

As Bate observes, we can trace much of Johnson’s work to [Francis] Bacon’s *Essaies*. He explains: “The formative influence [of the *Rambler*] was…Francis Bacon,

\(^{29}\) I say “type of competition” here because he clearly recognized his predecessors, but there is no direct
evidence that he wanted to surpass them, or even compare himself to them.

\(^{30}\) Mulso’s reference to “manners of the age” is in direct conversation with *Rambler* 1 where Johnson
claims that he will not write about gossip or “topicks of the day.”

\(^{31}\) See the newspaper quotations from Chapter 1 (12).
whose works Johnson had been reading for the first time while gathering quotations for the Dictionary” (Bate 292). In fact, as Bate points out:

One of [Johnson’s] primary themes, from The Vanity of Human Wishes (1748) to Rasselas (1759), is a development of Bacon’s treatment of the whole psychology of wishing and of hope, and in particular of boredom and satiety. (292)

Several of the Rambler essays elaborate upon Bacon’s Essaies. Three essays, in particular, are worth noting: Of Studies, Of Empire, and Of Vain-Glory. In these three essays, respectively, we find Bacon discussing the futility of purely theoretical knowledge, the insatiability of desire, and the vanity of attempts at greatness. Johnson’s response: Rambler 137, The Need for General Knowledge, Rambler 58, The Desire of Wealth moderated by Philosophy, and Rambler 183, The Influence of Envy and Interest Compared. Although I have only pointed out three direct responses, Johnson uses the pages of the Rambler to elaborate upon many of Bacon’s aphorisms and moral precepts. For example, Bacon observes in his essay, Of Studies, that wisdom does not necessarily equate to having read many books, but the scholar must learn how to use books to guide him through life. He writes:

Crafty Men Contemne Studies; Simple Men Admire them; and Wise Men Use them: For they teach not their owne Use; But that is a Wisdome without them, and above them, won by Observation. (Bacon 153)
Other than the fact that he focused on the concept of learning by observing through many of his works, Johnson also directly responds to Bacon’s idea in *Rambler* 137. Johnson adds:

The student must learn to commerce with mankind to reduce his speculations to practice, and accommodate his knowledge to the purposes of life. It is too common for those who have been bred to scholastic professions, and passed much of their time in academies where nothing but learning confers honours, to disregard every other qualification, and to imagine that they shall find mankind ready to pay homage to their knowledge, and to crow about them for instruction. (Yale, IV 363)

Johnson at some point came across *Of Studies*, and adapted it to fit his purpose in “The Need for General Knowledge.” Johnson’s borrowing of Bacon’s ideas in this *Rambler*, and others, should not be read negatively, but rather shed a positive light on the fact that Johnson knew his work was a continuing part of a conversation with the past. This conversation in which Johnson was engaged reinforces his theoretical principles; Johnson knew first-hand what it meant to be envious, or even just thoughtful, of his predecessors in his field of work. We must understand that there were greats who came before us, while not giving up our attempt to be great. Johnson could have read Bacon’s *Of Studies*, and accepted that a genius had already written all there was to know about the
topic, but he did no such thing and forced himself to elaborate upon the topic creating a more drawn-out and well-rounded argument than that of Bacon. We must also engage in the competition without trying to “pull others down.” Thus Johnson proposes the following advice in *Rambler* 25: “it is the business of every man to try whether his faculties may not happily co-operate with his desires; and since they whose proficiency he admires, knew their own force only by the event, he needs but engage in the same undertaking, with equal spirit, and may reasonably hope for equal success” (Yale, III 139). Johnson recognized that we could fail in our endeavors, or we could fall victim to envy, but he still promoted the attempt over remaining idle.

Johnson found sloth and idleness to be worse than envy and competition. Grundy writes: “to refuse to strive…is pettier still; to strive and accept the inevitability of defeat confers a paradoxical superiority” (Grundy 233). The middle ground that Johnson finds in his discussion with himself on envy and competition is that we must recognize envy as a sin while at the same time accepting that it urges us to engage with our community.

Johnson’s first demand of human action is that we engage in *something*. In *Rambler* 177 he writes: “he who does his best, however little, is always to be distinguished from him who does nothing” (Yale, V 172). This sounds quite simple, to do something, but the *Rambler’s* constant reinforcement of such an idea begs the reader to question how often he, the reader, actually employs himself. In *Rambler* 25, Johnson observes: “labour, vigorously continued, has not often failed of its reward” (III 140), and in *Rambler* 63: “he that steadily endeavours at excellence, in whatever employment, will
more benefit mankind than he that hesitates” (III 339). Or most famously in *Rambler* 129, he proclaims:

> It is the duty of every man to endeavour that something may be added by his industry to the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness. To add much can indeed be the lot of few, but to add something, however little, every one may hope; and of every honest endeavour it is certain, that, however unsuccessful, it will be at last rewarded. (IV 325)

Johnson leaves the specific type of employment vague because its irrelevance to his point: regardless of the type of employment, the human mind is being put to use. Johnson consistently struggled with his own vacuity of mind and sought to fill the void by employing it with any possible distraction.32 Speaking of Johnson’s state of mind after returning home from Oxford due to lack of funds, Bate claims: “he tried to combat his state of mind by rational analysis and by repeated resolves to act, to set himself in motion” (Bate 116). At only 20 years old, Samuel Johnson was experiencing what several authors have referred to as the “void” or the “nothingness:” a vacuity of mind combined with a general lack of employment. Bate describes some of the tactics Johnson himself used to try to combat such feelings of emptiness:

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32 See Bate, specifically Chapter 8, for more examples of Johnson’s own tendencies towards idleness.
He had also been trying to throw himself into exertions that would pull his mind away from itself into some kind of unified activity. He would force himself to walk to Birmingham and back, a distance of thirty-two miles, in the hope that it could shake him into manageability. ‘Imagination,’ as he was later to say, ‘never takes such firm possession of the mind, as when it is found empty and unoccupied.’ Any activity-recreation or labor-can be ‘styled its own reward if we recognize ‘how much happiness is gained, and how much misery escaped, by frequent and violent agitation of the body.’ From this experience began his lifelong conviction that what he had read in William Law at Oxford was not just probably but profoundly true: that effort in daily habits-such as early rising-was necessary to “reclaim imagination” and keep it on an even keel. (118)

We observe here that something as simple as “rising early” was enough to help Johnson through the day. Little habits, repeated, could lead to a large change in mental stability. Any “occupation” of the mind or any dedication to detail can help fill the void. The *Rambler* served as one such “occupation” of the mind for Johnson. Johnson had to compose two *Rambler* essays a week for two years; a commitment of this sort fills the mind with, whether imaginary or not, a sense of purpose and meaning. Or, if nothing else, the *Rambler* at least kept Johnson’s mind from a complete sense of emptiness. The *Rambler* provided Johnson with an opportunity to fill his own vacuity while at the same time allowed him to give advice to others; Johnson promotes his theory by literally *writing* the *Rambler*, and the reader practiced the same theory by *reading* the *Rambler*. 
But even if Johnson was successful in convincing his readers to engage in something based on his own personal engagement, he still wanted to make sure that they understood there would be moments of emptiness and vacuity. We can attempt to employ our minds as frequently as possible, but we must also learn how to endure those times of emptiness. In *Rambler* 1, Johnson urges his readers to be patient and endure the essays, or periods of life, that are filled with “smoke” and confusion.

All too frequently, the writer will abandon a project because he imagines it to be too difficult and can no longer endure the task. It is not enough just to make the attempt, we must finish what we have started and endure the projects once they have lost their novelty. As Johnson writes in *Rambler* 129:

[D]ifficult is, for the most part, the daughter of idleness…the obstacles with which our way seemed to be obstructed were only phantoms, which we believed real because we durst not advance to a close examination; and we learn that it is impossible to determine without experience how much constancy may endure, or perseverance perform. (Yale, IV 324)

But as Johnson observes, these “obstacles” in our paths tend to be nothing but “phantoms” of our imagination. We find ways to justify dropping projects in the middle of them because the splendor is gone. Johnson attempts to define a true genius in *Rambler* 137: “[a]n elevated genius employed in little things appears…like the sun in his evening declination, he remits his splendor but retains his magnitude, and pleases more,
though he dazzles less” (Yale, IV 364). It is this concept of “dazzling” that we so often seek in our long-term projects. We only want to partake in projects that continue to “dazzle,” the projects that continue to flame. *Rambler* 137 just furthers the point made by *Rambler* 1, namely that we would all rather work on a project that maintains its “flame” throughout, rather than seeing our own work “sink into flame” before we are done with it. Again, Johnson’s advice does not apply just to the reader, but represents Johnson’s own direct confession: Johnson is publicizing his attempt to overcome his own “obstacles,” and endure this project that is the *Rambler*. Surely it is a difficult task to improve upon the works of such minds as Addison and Bacon, but Johnson would have never known if it was possible unless he made the attempt. In *Rambler* 137 he confesses: “to suppose that the maze is inscrutable to diligence, or the heights inaccessible to perseverance, is to submit tamely to the tyranny of fancy, and enchain the mind in voluntary shackles” (IV 362).

Rather than enchaining the mind in “voluntary shackles,” Johnson suggests instead that the writer break the project into several, short sections. By breaking down a large project, individual parts become more manageable, and the writer is less apt to lose focus. He says in *Rambler* 137: “The chief art of learning, as Locke has observed, is to attempt but little at a time. The widest excursions of the mind are made by short flights frequently repeated; the most lofty fabrick[s] of science are formed by the continued accumulation of single propositions” (IV 361). Again, Johnson speaks to his reader, but also tells his reader about his own project. These essays will work best if the reader collects them, and returns to them in “short flights frequently repeated.” And Johnson
will accomplish his own goal of “most lofty fabricks,” if he continues to persevere in short spurts and endures the difficulties.

Speaking of those writers who have jumped into similar projects (i.e. periodical writing) with too much alacrity and vigor, Johnson writes: “It is more pleasing to see smoke brightening into flame, than flame sinking into smoke” (Yale, III 4). He recognizes that other periodical writers, in particular Addison, have made the mistake of producing intellectually challenging essays in the early stages of the series only to let down their readers by allowing the intellectual flame to sink into smoke. To avoid this lazy path, Johnson promises his readers an eventual flame. The Rambler will be a project, not just a set of disparate essays, and the patient readers should expect greatness from the Rambler as a “whole.” In other words, if readers can endure the smoke, or the seemingly disjointed essays, then they will eventually be rewarded with the flame, or a collection of essays that reinforce one another through theory and practice.

Johnson makes too many references in the series to a “larger purpose” for us not to think of the Rambler as a cohesive unit. In his first Rambler, Johnson implies that he has thought about the individual essays as eventually forming a cohesive unit: “He that questions his abilities to arrange the dissimilar parts of an extensive plan, or fears to be lost in a complicated system, may yet hope to adjust a few pages without perplexity” (Yale, III 8). The system of morality is a “complicated system,” and Johnson is modest enough here to admit his fear of forming such an “extensive plan,” but he still manages to suggest to his reader that he has thought about the Rambler as a “plan.”

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In Rambler 2, Johnson again makes reference to the fact that he has a “plan” for the Rambler as a cohesive whole. Referring to a hypothetical man dreamily lusting after the future when he has completed his life’s goals, Johnson writes: “as his powers are limited, he must use means for the attainment of his ends, and intend first what he performs last” (10). Johnson’s intentions, as seen in Rambler 1, are not to get “lost in a complicated system,” and to arrange “dissimilar parts of an extensive plan.” Further evidence of Johnson’s intentions is found in Rambler 8 when he says that “we contrive in minutes what we execute in years” (41). In Rambler 1, Johnson contrives his plan, in Rambler 2, he recognizes that he will have to remain determined and disciplined if he is going to complete his performance, and in Rambler 8, he tells his reader that it may even take years, perhaps two years to be exact,33 for him to complete his plan. But Johnson also knows that an author’s intentions do not always endure the test of time, and often “sink into smoke.” He needs to keep his goal, the completion of an intrinsically connected whole, in mind from the beginning, just as his reader needs to be patient and not walk out on the intended performance before it is finished.

On March 14th, 1752, the performance finally ended with the publication of Rambler 208, and Johnson had executed his plan with precision and confidence. In his penultimate performance, Rambler 207 dated March 10th, 1752, Johnson tells his reader that “[w]e proceed, because we have begun; we complete our design, that the labour already spent may not be vain” (V 311). The labour he refers to is the work he put into

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33 I refer here to the two years over which Johnson wrote the Rambler: March 1750-March 1752.
writing the 202 *Rambler* essays that had come before this one;\(^{34}\) his completed design is a set of connected essays all pointing towards the same idea: theory is useless if it is not repeatedly put into practice. But Johnson’s theories on envy, engagement, and endurance still all point towards a fundamental lack of happiness. Although he points to several ways in which the reader might avoid pain in this life, he never promotes a source for true happiness in this life.

Speaking of Johnson’s theme of emptiness in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, Bate suggests that Johnson recognized the futility of placing too much emphasis on finding happiness in this life. He shows how Johnson recognizes the “complete inability of the world and of worldly life to offer genuine or permanent satisfaction, and our need to turn from this world in order to seek safety and joy in religious faith and in another world” (Bate 279). But it is not just in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* that we find this idea in Johnson’s works. Throughout the *Rambler*, Johnson time and again turns to the concept of finding happiness in eternity, or God. Although he rarely mentions God, several *Rambler* essays refer to the inevitable confrontation between a work and its critic. The *Rambler* essays explore the idea of a work and its critic and are read metaphorically as an exploration of our, and Johnson’s, relation with God. There is perhaps no better example of Johnson putting his theory into practice than by him consistently placing his faith in the future to bring him happiness.

In *Rambler* 10, Johnson advises a young writer to not be too disappointed if his work is not immediately well received. He writes:

\(^{34}\) I leave out the four *Rambler* essays that were not written by Johnson: Numbers 30, 44, 97, and 100.
If [the author] cannot persuade the world to buy his works, he may present them to his friends; and if his friends are seized with the epidemical infatuation, and cannot find his genius, or will not confess it, let him then refer his cause to posterity, and reserve his labours for a wiser age. (Yale III 55)

We might read this passage in three ways: 1) Johnson is merely suggesting that his readers should not be too quick to throw out their work, for their work may be better regarded in a later age; 2) Johnson is making a self-reference to The Ramblers and their lack of appeal to the current age, in hopes that a “wiser age” will come along and appreciate them for their purpose; 3) Johnson speaks metaphorically and allows us to see ourselves as works of art waiting for a “wiser” age to be properly judged. It is no matter that our virtues may not be perfected, or that we may fall victim to vice, for nobody on this earth can properly judge us.

Similarly, in Rambler 23, Johnson uses “unperceived approaches” to instill in his reader a sense that being concerned with judgment now is futile: “the publick, which is never corrupted, nor often deceived, is to pass the last sentence upon literary claims” (Yale, III 128). The “publick” here stands in for God, and “literary claims” stands in for our efforts on earth. And when Johnson concludes the Rambler by saying: “I have always thought it the duty of an anonymous author to write, as if he expected to be hereafter known” (Yale, V 318), he is not speaking of himself as an author, but as a human, and he has always felt that it is the duty of an any anonymous human to expect that he will be
“hereafter known.” Johnson manages to unite theory and practice here because he is literally telling his “earthly” critics that they are of no importance to him. Using the *Rambler* as a way to promote earthly virtue, while at the same time freeing man from the “Vanity of Human Wishes,” Johnson practices virtue in hopes of finding that “Happiness she does not find.”  

I have shown that through analyzing the content of the *Rambler* and how the individual essays speak to one another, we can find several examples of Johnson reinforcing his theory with practice. Johnson’s use of his own competition to bolster his theoretical approach to envy, combined with his using the *Rambler* as a source of mental occupation, creates an intrinsically connected set of essays all pointing towards the idea that the *Rambler*’s purity lies in its ability to incorporate theory into practice for both Johnson and the reader.

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35 See Johnson’s *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. 
Chapter 3: Johnson as Oracle

In *Rambler* 14, Johnson writes: “It is…necessary for the idea of perfection to be proposed, that we may have some object to which our endeavours are to be directed” (Yale, III 76). The *Rambler* embodies this idea of perfection in its stylistic approach to the periodical form: it combines Johnson’s oracular presence with subtle reminders of his own humanity and fragility. Johnson knew that by combining high prose with a recognition of humanity’s “littleness,” he would obtain a purity of style unrivalled by past moralists. This final chapter explores the ways in which Johnson proposed an “idea of perfection” through his style, specifically, how he used the pages of the *Rambler* as a type of “Dictionary in practice,” in order to purify the English language of its many “barbarisms.”

As Robert Potter said in 1783: “the public has so long been habituated to receive and submit to [Johnson’s] decisions, that they are now by many considered infallible.” “Infallibility” implies perfection, and it is this level of perfection that Johnson attained through his stylistic choices. Through various stylistic techniques, Johnson set himself up as the oracle of not only morality, but of the English language as well. One technique Johnson used to set himself up as this oracular figure was simply to tell his readers to submit to his authority. As early as *Rambler* 3, we find Johnson telling his readers that they “must allow that he from whom they are to learn is more knowing than themselves” (Yale, III 15). By using the *Rambler* as a type of “Dictionary in practice,” Johnson

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36 See Yale, V (319).
37 See Bate Chapter 18 (301-310) for a complete discussion of Johnson’s “infallibility.”
created a periodical with an abundance of polysyllabic words, and long, often complex, sentences. This complexity in his language and syntax led many readers to believe that Johnson was “more knowing” than they were. Looking at individual *Rambler* essays, we see just how Johnson used such language in order to convince his readers of his infallibility. In *Rambler* 94, for example, Johnson begins:

> It is reported of the Persians, by an ancient writer, that the sum of their education consisted in teaching youth “to ride, to shoot with the bow, and to speak truth.” The Bow and the horse were easily mastered, but it would have been happy if we had been informed by what arts veracity was cultivated, and by what preservatives a Persian mind was secured against the temptations to falsehood. (Yale, IV 148)

Johnson uses several techniques here to force his reader into a state of acquiescence to his purpose. First, Johnson tends to begin his *Rambler* by referring to a great thinker of the past, or a widely accepted truth. By opening each *Rambler* with a call to the past, Johnson forces the reader to acquiesce to his initial moral precepts. If the reader finds himself disagreeing with Johnson, he must also accept that he is disagreeing with ancient sages of morality. Another technique he uses is simply to choose the right words. Through his careful diction, Johnson manages to remain specific even in his vagueness: in the first sentence of *Rambler* 94, Johnson makes no specific reference to which ancient writer he refers, but simply, and wisely, adds the term “ancient” so the
reader will not question the sentence. Next, Johnson often uses the passive voice (“It is reported…”) when opening his *Rambler*. By using the passive, Johnson is able to circumvent responsibility if he is wrong; he is not pointing out the specific writer, but rather telling us that something “has been written.” Also, by referring to the Persians, Johnson urges the reader to accept that he “knows” something of these exotic cultures. Johnson often references other cultures in the *Rambler* essays as if implying that he understands not only the English people, but other nations’ people as well, connoting a sense of worldliness in his writing. Finally, we note Johnson’s use of such words as “veracity,” “cultivate,” and “preservative;” although this is certainly not the most difficult sampling of Johnson’s diction, it gets the point across that these essays were not meant for the ill-schooled public, but rather for the academics and literates of England. Let us observe another example with even more complicated diction and subject matter. In *Rambler* 127, Johnson opens with the following:

Politian, a name eminent among the restorers of polite literature, when he published a collection of epigrams, prefixed to many of them the year of his age at which they were composed. He might design by this information, either to boast the early maturity of his genius, or to conciliate indulgence to the puerility of his performances. But whatever was his intent, it is remarked by Scaliger, that he very little promoted his own reputations, because he fell below the promise which his first productions had given, and in the latter part of his life seldom equaled the sallies of his youth. (Yale, IV 311)
Johnson is consistent in his stylistic choices: he initially calls upon a great thinker of the past, he uses the passive voice throughout, and his diction is complicated, yet flawless. By calling upon such thinkers as Politian and Scaliger, Johnson is almost begging his audience to disagree with him, for by disagreeing with him, they would be disagreeing with Politian and Scaliger. Most readers would have a very difficult time getting through such terms as “conciliate,” “puerility,” and “eminent.” Johnson uses this paradigm for his introductions throughout the *Rambler* and it is not hard to imagine why: he leaves no room for his readers to disagree with him, nor does he leave room for them to critique his “pompous” diction, unless they want to appear uneducated and illiterate. As Paul Korshin notes, “Just as Addison had done forty years before, Johnson finds himself in the role of educating the taste of a contemporary audience for a style of verse that was unfamiliar to the bulk of his readers” (Korshin 57). Johnson set himself up as an educator and an oracle by consistently adorning the *Rambler* with the purest words in the English language, and enhancing his introductions with the purest references to universal aphorisms.

It is no coincidence that Johnson wrote the *Rambler*, the self-professed most serious and difficult pieces he had written,38 while he was at the same time compiling the *Dictionary*. Johnson saw the *Rambler* as an opportunity to put his *Dictionary* into practice. In *Rambler* 208, Johnson writes:

38 See Bate Chapter 17.
I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations. Something, perhaps, I have added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence. When common words were less pleasing to the ear, or less distinct in their signification, I have familiarized the terms of philosophy by applying them to popular ideas, but have rarely admitted any word not authorized by former writers; for I believe that whoever knows the English tongue in its present extent, will be able to express his thoughts without further help from other nations. (Yale, V 319)

Johnson surprises us in this final Rambler by informing us that he has been using the pages of the Rambler not just to teach us moral precepts, and explore a great deal of life’s many absurdities, but also to refine the language to “grammatical purity.” He admits that he has “rarely admitted any word not authorized by former writers;” he remains committed to his stylistic choice of referring to past writers and their genius in order to deflect any possibility that he might be found fallible. Johnson provides us with enough evidence to conclude that he used the Rambler as a space to put the Dictionary into practice. We are provided with further evidence of Johnson’s intentions to practice his “pure” style in the Rambler when we compare the above paragraph to the following passage taken from Johnson’s Plan for the Dictionary. Johnson writes:
This my Lord is my idea of an English dictionary: a dictionary by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened… that it may promote the reformation of those translators who, for want of understanding the characteristic difference of tongues, have formed a chaotick dialect of heterogeneous phrases; and awaken to the care of purer diction some man of genius, whose attention to argument makes them negligent of style, or whose rapid imagination, like the Peruvian torrents, when it brings down gold, mingles with sand.39

These two paragraphs are almost completely interchangeable. In both cases, Johnson desires to “fix” the English language and “purify” it from its “colloquial barbarisms.” The Rambler provides him with a space to practice using the terms he was collecting for the Dictionary.40 There is even evidence of Johnson’s desire to “purify” the English language from before he started working on either the Rambler or the Dictionary.

In a letter to Samuel Ford, in 1735, Johnson wrote:

The greatest and most necessary task still remains, to attain a habit of expression, without which knowledge is of little use. This is necessary in Latin, and more

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39 See Johnson’s Plan of the English Dictionary.
40 This serves as a prime example of Johnson’s ability to incorporate theory into practice.
necessary in English, and can only be acquired by a daily imitation of the best and correctest authors.\textsuperscript{41}

In compiling the \textit{Dictionary}, Johnson read through hundreds of these “best and correctest authors” in his own attempt to extract sentences of theirs that could be used as models of perfection. Not only did Johnson spend days on end tearing through pages of books to find “perfect” quotations to help define his words, but he had also just recently finished helping William Oldys read through several thousands of books in an attempt to catalogue the Harleian library.\textsuperscript{42} Johnson’s breadth of knowledge at this point in his life was surely at its peak, and it is no surprise that he would have had the desire to imitate perfection. Although he could probably not bring himself to write in imitation of these authors daily, as he had great trouble doing almost anything daily, he was provided with an opportunity to imitate them twice weekly in the \textit{Rambler}. Twice a week Johnson imitated the models of perfection that came before him by using terms and phrases from past thinkers, and twice a week Johnson’s readers had the privilege of being exposed to such works, or such a “model of perfection.”

I have shown that Johnson had a strong urge to “purify” the English language, and that he himself viewed the pages of the \textit{Rambler} as an opportunity to put his learning into practice. I have also shown that by using such an oracular style, appealing to only universal truths, Johnson was able to establish himself as a “model of perfection.” But what truly stood out about the \textit{Rambler} was its ability to combine a purity of style with

\textsuperscript{41} See Kaminski Chapter 9.
\textsuperscript{42} See Kaminski Chapter 9.
Johnson’s own pure experiences in this world. Bate suggests that we appreciate Johnson more than other moralists for his ability to relate to us in the human condition. He says:

What is almost unique about Johnson’s writing on human life and experience is the immense reassurance and trust it inspires. Hence, for generations, people reading him have found themselves not merely cleansed and steadied in the head, and at times deeply moved, but often smiling or even laughing with what can only be called a sense of “relief.” This is especially the secret of the appeal that Johnson’s moral writing has begun to make to our own troubled generation, so suspicious of abstractions and slogans, of systems and mere theory, and so quick to distrust and mock whatever has not been personally tested. (Bate 297)

We are reassured by Johnson because he convinces us that he is one of us; we are relieved by Johnson because he convinces us that we all share a “common lot;” and we trust Johnson because we know that he has experienced the same things which we go through on a daily basis. Samuel Johnson, although stylistically infallible in the Rambler, comes across as quite fallible in the content of the Rambler. In the Rambler, and some of his other moral writings, we find countless examples of Johnson making reference to his condition as a “man,” rather than as an oracle. Johnson’s ability to recognize his own humanity comforts us and, ironically, brings him closer to oracular status in our minds.

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43 See Bate (299).
Johnson may have used difficult words and Latinate sentences, but even though he “discoursed like an angel,” he “lived like a man,” and made sure that his readers knew it. By constantly using the pronoun “we,” Johnson convinces his readers that although his style is oracular, he is anything but. Johnson observes in *Rambler* 14 that “there has often been observed a manifest and striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings” (Yale, III 74). Johnson’s writings come across as infallible and angelic; it seems as if Johnson is almost above and beyond this world, but in *Rambler* 14, he insinuates that there is a “striking contrariety” between his oracular style and his fragile humanity. Johnson only uses this oracular style in an attempt to “purify” the language, and because he knows that he could more easily instruct his readers if he maintains an image of superiority. He did not use the complex style to assert himself as an immortal sage; as Bate says, we gain a sense of “relief” from Johnson’s sense of his own mortality.

Bate defines the “moral” period of Johnson’s life to be from “the age of thirty-nine (1748) when he wrote *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, to the age of fifty-one (1760)” (Bate 296). I suggest, however, that the cut-off date for Johnson’s “moral” stage of life be pushed back to 1758, before he started his work on another periodical, the *Idler*. By 1760, Johnson had finished writing for the *Idler*, a publication similar to the *Rambler*, appearing weekly in print from April 15th, 1758 to April 5th, 1760. It is by comparing

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44 See Greene, *Rasselas*.
45 Johnson recognized that this created an interesting paradox: he had to act arrogant in order to teach humbleness.
46 See Bate’s introduction to the *Idler* in Yale, II for a full discussion of Johnson’s *Idler*. 

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the *Idler* to the *Rambler*, that we might see just how perfectly the *Rambler* fits into Johnson’s definition of “purity,” based on the *Idler*’s “impurity.”

Johnson’s choice of the *Idler* as a title for this periodical signifies his lack of commitment to creating another *Rambler*. He says he can scarcely imagine any name “from which less envy or competition is to be dreaded” and that it could produce “no rivals or enemies” (4). We cannot help but remember back to the *Rambler* where Johnson spent two years exploring the complex nature of envy and competition. Now, in 1758, Johnson almost begs his readers not to expect any such serious discussion; it is as if Johnson has discussed the topic enough and would prefer to produce a wine with lighter tones. But even more convincing is Johnson’s choice of content in the *Idler*.

As Bate observes, “twelve of the Idlers—about an eighth of the total—are primarily concerned with contemporaneous events or issues of the more popular and ephemeral sort” (Yale, II xxii). *Idler* numbers 22 and 38 comment on Debtor’s prison; number 4 asks for support for hospitals; numbers 5 and 39 discuss British military expeditions, and several of the essays refer to either places in London or actors of the time. Though we might not expect such topics to be discussed in the *Rambler*, Johnson actually invites the *Idler*’s readers to submit almost any topic of discourse: in his introductory *Idler* Johnson tells his readers that “He excludes no style, he prohibits no subject” (5). To claim that he would “exclude no style” is of particular note because it is the last thing one might expect to hear from the *Rambler*. In *Rambler* 208 Johnson describes himself as one who “troubles not himself with the manners of the age,” and

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47 The *Idler* did not fit into any of Johnson’s definitions of “pure,” “purity,” or “pureness.”
tells his readers that he has “allotted few papers to the idle sports of imagination” in his attempt to “inculcate wisdom or piety” (Yale, V 319). Let us recall that Johnson’s definition of “pure” work as something that is intrinsically connected and it “cannot be connected with anything extrinsick.” If, in his work on the \textit{Idler}, Johnson “excludes no style,” and “prohibits no subject,” then who knows what types of impurities might be produced in the pages of the \textit{Idler}? Johnson takes himself out of the picture completely in regards to monitoring or controlling the purity of such a work, perhaps because he recognized that he had already produced his “pure wine” in the \textit{Rambler}.

In the \textit{Idler}, as Bate points out, “Johnson, for the first time, tried to catch the easy tone of Addison and Steele” (Yale, II xix). He suggests that the \textit{Idler} was not as concerned with proposing universal truths, exploring age-old maxims, or discussing the role of vacuity upon the human mind. Or maybe it was the \textit{Idler}’s lack of polysyllabic words which had been so abundant in the \textit{Rambler}. Maybe it was the fact that several \textit{Idler} essays were “more topical in focusing on contemporaneous events and subjects of general interest at the time” (xx). The \textit{Idler} lacked a certain seriousness, or formality, that made it function as an intrinsic unit. We can see the differences in style and tone by comparing the introductory \textit{Idler} to Johnson’s first \textit{Rambler}.

The tone of the first \textit{Idler} is vastly different from that of the first \textit{Rambler}. In it, Johnson actually introduces himself, as the \textit{Idler}, a move similar to Addison’s in the introduction to the \textit{Spectator}. Whereas in the \textit{Rambler}, rather than discussing his creation as a particular author or even the title that he has chosen to work with, he discusses the universal plight of the author upon his first address to his readers; Johnson speaks in
universals to his readers in the *Rambler*, but trades universals for particulars in the pages of the *Idler*. This move from the universal to the particular in the *Idler* causes the periodical to lose its purity of thought. Johnson also makes it quite clear in the introduction to the *Idler* that he is not attempting anything great, but rather “will habituate himself to be satisfied with what he can most easily obtain” (Yale, II, 3). This confession shows that Johnson has moved past his days as a serious moral writer, and is quite content to embrace a lighter writing style and a less “pure” form of discourse; perhaps he recognized that he had already produced his “pure wine,” and could now safely idle away his time.
As Johnson asserts in his *Rambler* 207: “Nothing is ended with honour, which does not conclude better than it begun” (Yale, V 314). As I have shown in this thesis, Johnson’s declaration that his *Rambler* was “pure wine,” is not a simple one, but deserves to be analyzed in all of its complexity. The intrinsic connections that the *Rambler* makes with itself, its readers, past moralists, and even with Johnson himself, allow it to function as a truly “pure” unified whole.

The *Rambler* essays continually suggest to their readers that they are meant to be read as part of a collection. By exploring the physical appearance and bibliographic complexities of the *Rambler*, we see that it possesses several physical traits that give it a “classic” nature, while it begs the reader to consider each individual essay as part of an “incarnate relationship.” Analysis of Johnson’s revision process, especially his work done on the collected *Rambler*, provides further evidence that Johnson, and his readers, preferred the work as a “whole” to the individual essays. And by thinking of the collected *Rambler* essays as an on-going conversation with the past, we cannot help but feel our own intrinsic connection to the universal, timeless conversation that constantly drives us forward in our quest to find truth.

One of Johnson’s most enduring qualities, I argued, is his ability to unify theory and practice in the pages of the *Rambler*. The essays do not just engage in dialogue with each other, but possess this overarching unifying principle that it is possible to unite

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48 See Greene, *Rasselas* (418).
theory and practice. Through analyzing biographical evidence and Johnson’s own writings, we find that he truly “lives” into his writing and uses the *Rambler* as a space to engage in his own competition, to keep his mind occupied, and to practice his commitment to a long-term project. It would have been easy for Johnson to have quit writing the *Rambler*, especially considering he was in the midst of compiling the *Dictionary*, but his dedication and perseverance exemplifies his theoretical approaches to such topics. In *Rambler* 207, Johnson shows us that the *Rambler* was a project worth enduring:

> For the prevention of that disgrace, which lassitude and negligence may bring at last upon the greatest performances, it is necessary to proportion carefully our labour to our strength. If the design comprises many parts, equally essential, and therefore not to be separated, the only time for caution is before we engage; the powers of the mind must be then impartially estimated, and it must be remembered, that not to complete the plan, is not to have begun it; and, that nothing is done, while any thing is omitted. (Yale, V 314)

In order for nothing to be omitted, Johnson had to produce a “model of perfection” for his readers. He sets himself up as this “model of perfection” in order to inculcate morality and wisdom in his readers. He draws on “perfect” models of the past, in his work on cataloguing the Harleian library and compiling the *Dictionary*, in an attempt to “purify” the English language. But what truly makes the *Rambler* “pure wine”
is its intrinsic connectedness to a general humanity and a shared experience. We cannot read Johnson without recognizing our connection with him. Just as he recognized his connection with past moralists, we recognize our connection with him; just as he recognized the need to write the *Rambler* to occupy his mind, we feel the need to read it from time to time to do the same; and just as he understood that there is no conclusion to the eternal discussion between virtue and truth, I too understand this precept and will deliberate a while longer before I return to Abyssinia.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See Greene, *Rasselas* (418).
Bibliography


