Laurence Tennant 2014

‘Hasty Detruncation’: Decontextualising Dr Johnson

Standing to give a speech to EU officials in 2005, the European Ombudsman repeated some ‘wise words’ of Samuel Johnson as a rationale for going ‘the extra mile’: ‘nothing will ever be attempted, if all possible objections must be first overcome’ (Diamandouros). The Ombudsman was probably unaware of the context of this particular aphorism, for in *Rasselas,* it is spoken by an artist shortly about to ‘leap […] and in an instant drop into [a] lake’ as part of a failed Icarian escape attempt (*Rasselas,* p.15).

Johnson’s work frequently stages the failure of witty maxims to stand up to experience by contextualising them in comical and ironical ways. It is not only public speakers who neglect to call attention to this; in an editorial note on the aphorism quoted above, J.P. Hardy cites an almost identical expression from Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson,* without remarking on the irony of the original quote or including any further information (p.132). A pursuit of the reference in Boswell’s *Life* shows that Johnson’s expression already comes decontextualised there, appearing as part of a series of disjunct paragraphs, and in this context — or lack of context — it seems absolutely sincere (*Life*, p.316). Not only do Johnson’s words, as reported by Boswell, completely contradict the spirit of those from *Rasselas*, but the very form of the decontextualised aphorism is virtually antipodal in effect to the coiling nature of Johnson’s prose.

Whilst Hazlitt went so far as to argue that Johnson’s ‘ostentation and circumlocution of expression’ swallowed what was ‘striking and valuable’ in his writing (Hazlitt, VI.101), Grundy maintains that ‘the pleasure of reading’ Johnson is in the circumlocution; decontextualisation would eliminate ‘the pleasure of tracking his thought sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph through twists and turns’ (Grundy 2012, p.171). These antithetical views represent good co-ordinates for navigating the problem of decontextualisation, which is, broadly speaking, the problem of words and sentences taking on widely different meanings depending on their contexts. By beginning with Boswell’s presentation of Johnson and moving towards a consideration of the difficulties that critics have faced in even approaching *The Rambler*, this essay will emphasise the ways in which Johnson is a lens through which the problem of decontextualisation can be focussed.

Boswell’s monolithic *Life* perhaps bears the greatest responsibility for promoting the idea of reading Johnson principally for his succinct ‘wise words’, as the biography persistently offers images of him announcing brilliant, spontaneous expressions. The complications that arise from encountering Johnson in this manner quickly become apparent from the numerous caveats and qualifications appended to his speech. The following is a rendering of a scene ‘at a Tavern, with a numerous company’:

> Patriotism having become one of our topicks, Johnson suddenly uttered, in a strong determined tone, an apophthegm, at which many will start: ‘Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.’ But let it be considered, that he did not mean a real and generous love of our country, but that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest. (p.615)

The powerful image of Johnson emphatically announcing his apophthegm, literally ‘something clearly spoken’ (*Etymonline*), is intensified by the way that his present tense cuts across the ‘having become’ gerund that introduces a vague conversational context. The apophthegm works in a similar fashion to a slogan like “affirmative action is racist” — the juxtaposition of an idealistic sentiment

with an emotively negative thing like “racism” or “a scoundrel” elicits a memorable effect which prompts us to consider attributes that the two disparate concepts might share. But in this case, although the saying is something clearly *spoken*, it is evidently not something clearly *stated*, since Boswell is obliged to explain it with a kind of gloss that wraps ‘patriotism’ in sardonic quotation marks, virtually reversing the apophthegm’s meaning and dissipating the sharp emotive effect that it relied upon. Yet Boswell’s qualification is unmemorable and ineffective. Its twisted, apologetic syntax is thrown into sharp relief by the tautness of the expression that it is glossing. It is no wonder that Johnson’s saying became famous, shedding this clause-overloaded context.

Johnson actually implicitly praised patriots in his *Dictionary* by supplying the line ‘patriots who for sacred freedom stood’ as an example of usage, although in the fourth edition (1773) he added that the word ‘patriot’ was ‘sometimes used for a factious disturber of the government’, and in his essay ‘The Patriot’ (1774) he condemned politicians who expediently adopted the term. This suggests that the apophthegm was intended to be a quick indictment of a specific group of political ‘scoundrels’ — it was far from an attack on the notion of loving one’s country. Although this brief tour of Johnson’s thoughts might appear to triangulate what he really meant, it at once indicates the futility of accurate triangulation by hinting at the quickly evolving nature of his ideas. In a way, Boswell is aware of the difficulties of pinning down Johnson’s meaning, and his provision of at least a minimal context seeks to temper the most strident maxims. Yet Boswell’s general decontextualisation of Johnson invites readers to make the additional refinement of discarding his own qualifications too.

It is ironic that the *Life* encourages this reading of Johnson, for the mock-apologue *Rasselas* is in many ways a fable of the dangers of decontextualisation. The contingent promises of rhetoric are repeatedly deflated by being located contextually. In a central chapter titled after the fact that ‘the prince finds a wise and happy man’, Rasselas listens to a lecture on the prospect of achieving a ‘conquest of passion’, upon which:

> man is no longer the slave of fear, nor the fool of hope; is no more emaciated by envy, inflamed by anger, emasculated by tenderness. (p.47)

Rasselas treats these negative parallelisms, that promise happiness through the erasure of desire, as the ‘instruction[s] of a superior being’ (p.47). Yet the speaker is later found in despair over the death of his daughter:

> you are come at a time when all human friendship is useless; what I suffer cannot be remedied, what I have lost cannot be supplied. (p.48)

Placed in context, the speaker’s original proclamations suddenly look like overblown cant, their rhetoric absurdly prompting Rasselas to hope that he would no longer be a ‘fool of hope’. Moreover, the man employs exactly the same rhetorical strategy of parallelism and asyndeton to verbalise his anguish as he does to exhibit his ‘conquest of passion’. This strategy is symptomatic of Johnson’s style in general, and when Rasselas becomes ‘convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences’ (p.48), the uniformity verges on becoming a joke; as Parker notes, the disenchantment with rhetoric is itself rhetorical (p.135). If the text seems in this light to be self-defeating — ‘unfinished, unnatural and uninstructive’ in a contemporary conduct book writer’s words (Chapone, I.108) — on a broader scale *Rasselas* reflects a kind of proto-structuralism, exposing ‘studied sentences’ as being interdependent on each other

and on physical events rather than being self-contained moral truths. The stylistic uniformity across the novella discloses the fact that it would be possible to extract as aphorisms any of the hundreds of mutually contradictory claims made by the characters. The 'wise and happy man' episode, in its play of seemingly inherent wisdom and timeless maxims against arbitrary and contingent events, is synecdochal of the entertaining dialectic of *Rasselas* as a whole. Because the dialectic is more than the sum of its parts, the very form of *Rasselas* supports Grundy's contention that we should encounter Johnson amidst the 'twists and turns' of his prose.

Yet although it may be possible to read Johnson as Grundy advises, there is always the sense that actually apprehending or discussing Johnson's vertiginous writing — in noting an episode as being "synecdochal" of a work, for instance — is decontextualising. The difficulty of approaching the hugely assorted *Rambler* collection illustrates this, for even to characterise the essays by the obvious trajectory of their 'ambivalence if not outright contradictions' (O'Flaherty, p.531) is to overstate a case. O'Flaherty notes that Rambler 78 proposes that 'the remembrance of death ought to predominate in our minds, […] though not always perceived' (p.45), while Rambler 126 argues that 'to be always afraid of losing life is, indeed, scarcely to enjoy a life' (p.100). However, not only are these samples cherry-picked from essays with very different preoccupations, but such allegedly directly opposed statements are surprisingly challenging to find in the first place. Rambler 126 is written from the point of view of the proud Thraso, who proclaims freedom from fear, while 78 employs the example of death to point out the way that we tend to acclimatise to things to the point of anaesthesia. The claim that the essays embody contradictory attitudes towards death is tenuous; 126 is a provocatively hortative piece, 78 is descriptive. On the other hand, to broadly categorise even subsets of the essays is to fall into another trap. Powell mentions that the epistolary essays are often 'excerpted, to the neglect of the epistles as a group' (Powell, p.579), but when trying to deal with all sixty-five of them, he is forced to dart between superficial readings of individual essays as a means of supporting claims that are either reductive, or that can only affirm that themes appears 'often' or are present 'for the most part'. Thus it feels as if *The Rambler* is eluding his critical ambit. While it is relatively easy to identify flaws in the methodologies of other readers of the *Rambler,* the task of formulating a better means of coming to terms with such a variegated collection is less than straightforward. As with *Rasselas*, to decontextualise segments is to miss the interdependence of individual essays and paragraphs; furthermore*,* the alternative approach of broadly condensing *The Rambler* tends to understate the collection's imposing heterogeneity.

The problem of decontextualisation, then, first defined in this essay as the issue of words hinging on contexts for their meanings, has developed into a dilemma apposite to any critical reading of Johnson. Context is manifestly almost infinitely extensible, and any reading or perusal of a work necessarily fails to enclose it all. This fact troubled Johnson; in the course of discussing his selection of example sentences in *Preface To A Dictionary*, he lamented that limited space forced him to:

> depart from [his] scheme of including all that was pleasing or useful in English literature [...] by hasty detruncation, [...] the general tendency of the sentence may be changed: the divine may desert his tenets, or the philosopher his system. (*Prose And Poetry*, p.313)

The word 'detruncation' is stronger than 'decontextualisation': it intimates the mutilation of a body of meaning. Nevertheless, Johnson is forced to place even more constraints in scope on his ludicrously grandiose scheme of 'including all that was pleasing or useful in English literature'. He proceeds to outline a new plan, whereby the criteria for selection is the extent to which an example

sentence's 'tract and tenor' is functional in determining a word's definition (p.314). A series of further constraints culminates in his advancing of a model of expedient reading:

> Many quotations serve no other purpose, than that of proving the bare existence of words, and are therefore selected with less scrupulousness than those which are to teach their structures and relations. (p.314)

Johnson himself admits that he heavily decontextualises authors for reasons entirely dependent on the objectives of his work. In this light, the decontextualisation committed by the European Ombudsman or Boswell is something that he anticipates. Decontextualisation becomes less of a problem and more of an opportunity to utilise the exceptional sentences of others in ways appropriate to one's own projects. Johnson does takes pains, however, to decontextualise with great care, by elucidating his criteria for selection, and by providing sources so that the sentences that he uses can readily be traced back to their intricate contextual origins.

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