Samuel Johnson and Sir Thomas Browne

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Abstract of thesis

This thesis explores the literary and intellectual relationship between Samuel Johnson and Sir Thomas Browne. It demonstrates the importance of Johnson’s contribution to the history of criticism of Browne, and also constitutes a case study of Johnson’s methods in compiling his Dictionary.

I show what grounds there are for believing that Browne was of special importance to Johnson, and that there were significant affinities between the two writers. I set my work against the background of existing scholarship, which tends to neglect the links between Johnson and Browne. I consider the decline of Browne’s reputation in the years that followed his death, suggesting how it is possible to see Johnson’s work on Browne as a significant recuperation. I then examine Johnson’s Life of Browne and the edition of Christian Morals to which it was prefixed, arguing that the Life is an important event in the development of Johnson’s biographical method.

I next consider the relationship between Browne’s natural philosophy and Johnson’s, focusing on three particular areas in which their thinking is allied: the emphasis on experiment and observation, the moral purpose of natural philosophy, and the attraction of ‘strangeness’. Thereafter I examine in detail Johnson’s extensive use of extracts from Browne’s works in his Dictionary. First I provide a description of Johnson’s deployment of illustrative quotations culled from Browne, showing the distribution and sources of quotations, including those added for the fourth edition; the result is a ‘map’ of the Dictionary’s use of Browne. I then analyse these findings, in order to determine what fields of knowledge they delineate, as well as how they illustrate Johnson’s critical interests and priorities.

Finally, I consider Browne’s nineteenth-century afterlife. I chart the influence of Johnson’s critique and uses of Browne, and examine the championing of Browne by Coleridge, Hazlitt, Lamb and others.
Contents

Abstract 2

Contents 3

Acknowledgements 4

Key to abbreviations 5

Introduction 7

Chapter 1: Browne before Johnson, and the conditions in Which Johnson took on the Life of Browne 35

Chapter 2: the Life of Browne and the business of Literary biography 71

Chapter 3: Johnson and Browne – doubt, truth and natural philosophy 115

Chapter 4: Johnson and the Dictionary – lexicographical precedents and the uses of Sir Thomas Browne 179

Chapter 5: Browne's contribution to the Dictionary 242

Chapter 6: Browne after Johnson; the nineteenth-century after-life of Sir Thomas Browne 306

Appendix A: the availability of Johnson’s Dictionary – print runs and prices 349

Appendix B: a list of the words under which Browne is cited by Johnson in the Dictionary 351

Bibliography 366
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My research has been facilitated by the staff of the British Library and The University of London Library at Senate House.

I especially wish to thank my parents for their unstinting support and encouragement over the past four years.
Key to abbreviations used

Works by or about Johnson


Works by or about Browne


**Wilkin**  *Sir Thomas Browne's Works including his Life and Correspondence*. Edited by Simon Wilkin. 4 vols. London, 1835-6.
### Periodicals

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ECS</td>
<td>Eighteenth-Century Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Modern Philology</td>
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<tr>
<td>N &amp; Q</td>
<td>Notes and Queries</td>
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<td>PMLA</td>
<td>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</td>
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<td>PQ</td>
<td>Philological Quarterly</td>
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<td>RES</td>
<td>Review of English Studies</td>
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<td>TLS</td>
<td>Times Literary Supplement</td>
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<td>YES</td>
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Introduction

The most conspicuous link between Samuel Johnson and Sir Thomas Browne is Johnson's *Life of Browne*, which appeared in the second edition of Browne's *Christian Morals*, published in 1756. Of all the biographies Johnson wrote prior to the *Lives of the Poets*, it is his most sustained and interesting, with the exception of the implicitly autobiographical *Life of Savage*.¹ The *Life of Browne* was Johnson’s first significant publication following the completion the previous year of his *Dictionary*, which itself testifies to his reading in Browne, since Johnson selected from Browne’s works a very large number of its illustrative quotations. As I shall show, this body of quotations has a distinctive place in the *Dictionary*. In addition to these two compelling but almost entirely unexplored links – and perhaps explaining them – there is a kind of intellectual kinship between the two men. Both are Christian moralists, and they share many attitudes regarding matters of truth and religion. Both men’s works display a keen attention to moral and scientific details, and both are profoundly concerned with medicine and with the collection of arcane and interesting information. What is more, there is a perceptible stylistic link between the two men’s writings, which was noted by several of Johnson’s contemporary critics. My thesis therefore is an account of affinities as well as of influences.

¹ The Johnson scholar Sydney Roberts, in his introduction to the only authoritative modern edition of *Christian Morals*, suggests that Johnson’s edition was ‘part of ... [his] work in Grub Street’, but that ‘it was a task to which he must have turned con amore’ (*CM*, xii).
My purpose is to suggest that the connection between Johnson and Browne is an important one, and that it is unfortunate it has usually been overlooked. The scholar of Johnson may profit from taking more account of Johnson’s interest in Browne, and the scholar of Browne may profit from understanding the contribution of Johnson to the development of Browne’s posthumous reputation. My approach to this project commenced from a position as a student of Johnson, rather than from that of a student of Browne. The idea of examining Johnson’s relationship with Browne was initiated by my observing, in the course of work on the Dictionary, that it contained what seemed to be a very large – and to me surprisingly large – number of quotations from Browne. I was conscious of having seen very little reference to this in scholarly publications on Johnson. Indeed, further research confirmed that critical accounts of Johnson’s work almost invariably made no mention of Sir Thomas Browne. The biographical essay that precedes Johnson’s edition of Christian Morals has merited only the occasional passing comment. For the most part it is merely included in a list of the biographies written by Johnson, the implication being that it is just another piece of hack work of the kind critics can afford to overlook. Johnson’s minor writings are usually dismissed, and the Life of Browne is unjustly bundled in among them. Yet recent scholarship has suggested that Johnson’s less clearly canonical works offer essential insights into his thinking.²

The considerable volume of quotations from Browne in the *Dictionary* is sometimes briefly noted by critics.\(^3\) Equally, there is, on occasion, a throwaway reference to the traces of Browne's style discernible in Johnson's prose. In what probably remains the best modern biography of Johnson, Walter Jackson Bate remarks only that the *Life of Browne* 'tends to be rather testy and is remembered now largely for its perceptive remarks on Browne's style'.\(^4\) Another of Johnson's best critics, Donald Greene, has noticed that Johnson's *Dictionary* definition of 'network' appears to have been influenced by Browne's *Garden of Cyrus*, but he explores this no further, despite describing one of Johnson's prose idioms as his 'best Brownean style'.\(^5\) Robert DeMaria, who has written at length about the *Dictionary*, has drawn a parallel involving the two men, suggesting that

Like his idol Joseph Scaliger in *De Emendatione Temporum*, and like Sir Thomas Browne in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Johnson sets himself up as a modern investigator determined to believe only what is reliably attested or scientifically proved.\(^6\)

Such remarks are tantalizing, but this, with rare exceptions, is as far as discussion of the two men's relationship goes. My bibliography lists the half-dozen articles that do contribute something to the understanding of the relationship, but of these only O M Brack's article of 1991 on the *Life of Browne* and the *Life of Ascham* is substantial.\(^7\)

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Critics of Browne are more inclined to notice Johnson's contribution to Browne studies. Daniela Havenstein, in the most significant work on Browne to have appeared in recent years, goes so far as to assert that 'Johnson's importance for the reputation of Browne cannot be exaggerated. In him we find what we could call the synthesis of a Browne critic'. But even when the relationship is noticed, it is not evaluated, perhaps because Christian Morals is the least esteemed of Browne's major works. Sydney Roberts, in the introduction to his edition of Christian Morals, claims that 'The particular flavour of Browne's scholarship was highly agreeable to Johnson'; he argues that Browne's interests and preoccupations were of exactly the kind suited to assuaging Johnson's 'thirst for out-of-the-way knowledge' (CM, xii). Even after scotching arguments for a similarity between the two men's prose styles, he concludes that 'the temperamental bond' between them 'was a strong one' (CM, xviii). The scantiness of evidence offered by Roberts in support of his judgements is perhaps typical of his age, yet in choosing to dwell on the relationship between Browne and Johnson he is unusual. Christian Morals frequently appeared in editions of Browne's works in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. However, between Johnson's edition in 1756 and Roberts's more than 170 years later, there was no fresh edition of it on its own, although two reprints were issued. The first of these was in 1863, by the London publishing house Rivingtons, and the second in 1904 (perhaps to coincide approximately with the three hundredth anniversary of Browne's birth) in a run of 250 copies at the

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Cambridge University Press. Roberts, in presenting the first new edition for more than a century and a half, begins his introduction with the understatement that ‘Though many times reprinted in conjunction with other works, *Christian Morals* has not often been separately republished’ (*CM*, vii).

That the relationship between Browne and Johnson has been overlooked is not entirely surprising; Browne’s presence in Johnson’s thinking is not unique. Yet a case study of how a singular author is used by Johnson may tell us a good deal about his methods and his habits of thought. It is not the purpose of my thesis to propose that this is a ‘special case’ – that a failure to understand the relationship between Browne and Johnson represents a failure to understand Johnson. Nevertheless, Johnson’s literary and intellectual relationship with Browne is significant, not least because of his role in the history of Browne criticism. Johnson’s place in the literary culture of the eighteenth century has been widely and profoundly – though not exhaustively – examined, but his relationship to the seventeenth century has commanded far less critical attention. Part of the broader mission of my work is to develop a sense of the way Johnson’s writings are indebted to seventeenth-century thought. The *Dictionary* enshrines a set of values and a cultural map that are, I shall argue, more aligned to seventeenth-century practices than to those of Johnson’s contemporaries. Yet if, in common with the *Lives of the Poets*, it can be seen as a *memento mori*, it is also a progressive work postulating Enlightenment values. Like Browne, Johnson frequently appears torn between superstition and pragmatism, between faith and
scepticism. This parallel, while it should not be exaggerated, seems a potentially valuable prism through which to review Johnson's work.

It will be apparent from the above that I am proposing the existence of a kind of affinity or intellectual sympathy between Johnson and Sir Thomas Browne. Circumstances of history necessarily mean that there is a considerable epistemological gap between them, yet there are similarities that tell us something about Johnson's occasionally antiquated sensibilities. Clearly, his world is very different from Browne's, and it is not as easy to think of Johnson as a natural philosopher as it is to think of Browne as one. I shall discuss this at length in Chapter Three, but wish to adduce some evidence at this stage of Johnson's interest in this area, in order to define a little more clearly my frame of reference. The reluctance to get to grips with Johnson's interest in this subject is another failing of Johnson criticism. The modern unwillingness to think of Johnson as a scientific amateur or as a natural philosopher is attributable in large measure to Boswell, who neglected Johnson's interest in this area. Richard Schwartz suggests that Boswell underplays it 'because of his own lack of interest in science'.\(^9\) The alternative is simply that Johnson's experiments were private, and consequently invisible to his biographer. Regardless, Johnson's interest in what we might broadly term 'scientific' subjects exceeds what is commonly supposed. In the course of dealing with this in Chapter Three, I made use of John J. Brown's unpublished thesis 'Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth Century Science'. Brown offers useful insights into some of Johnson's less widely documented enthusiasms. (He employs the word 'science' with a liberality that

now seems anachronistic; I shall use the term ‘natural philosophy’ in its place, and shall say more about this distinction in Chapter Three.) Brown argues, plausibly, that ‘Johnson is almost unique among the major figures of English literature for his knowledge of medicine’.10 This knowledge, reflected in his work with assisting Dr Robert James in the compilation of his Medicinal Dictionary (1743-5), was derived from medical friends, his private reading (reflected in his own quite sizeable medical library), and the observations he made respecting his own physiology. Other technical subjects occupied him less, but his writings manifest, at various points, a serious concern with physics, biology, chemistry and mathematics. It was not unusual for a man of his time to dabble in such spheres, yet he is peculiar in importing so much technical vocabulary and technical thinking into his daily life and work. He is interested not only in specialized words, but also in novel ideas.

Johnson’s reading suggests this. We do not have a comprehensive account of the books he read, or even of those he owned. We do, however, know that he possessed copies of works by Roger Bacon, the mathematicians Richard Helsham and Girolamo Cardano, the natural scientist Giovanni Baptista Della Porta, and Jean-Baptiste Duhamel, the first ever secretary of the French Académie des Sciences.11 He also owned texts on astronomy by John Greaves and John Hill, on botany by John Gerard, on chemistry by Pierre Joseph Macquer and G. C. Schelhammer, on geology by J. J. Becher and John Woodward, on

arithmetic by Alexander Malcolm and Cuthbert Tunstall, on physics by
Musschenbroek and Maupertuis, and on zoology by Claudius Aelianus and René
Antoine Ferchault de Réamur.\(^\text{12}\) There are records of his also owning William
Gilbert’s *De Magnete* as well as volumes by Vesalius, Cesalpino, Conrad Gesner
and Pierre Gassendi.\(^\text{13}\) While a student at Oxford, he owned a copy of John
Harris’s *Description and uses of the Celestial and Terrestrial Globes*.\(^\text{14}\) There are
indications of his technical reading in his *Life of Boerhaave*, where he discusses
the 1715 *De Comparando Certo in Physicis*.\(^\text{15}\) In his copy of Camden’s *Remains*
he added cross-references to John Freind’s *History of Physic*.\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore,
many of the books he reviewed were concerned with natural philosophy and its
applications. Among these were Hoadly and Wilson’s *Observations of a Series
of Electrical Experiments*, an essay by Stephen White on bee-keeping, Francis
Home’s *Experiments on Bleaching*, and the 1755 volume of the Royal Society’s
*Philosophical Transactions*.\(^\text{17}\)

The *Dictionary* bears copious evidence of the breadth and depth of
Johnson’s reading in what we would now think of as science. It appears that he
was not familiar with the writings of Bacon until he began work on the

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 61, 112, 60.

\(^{14}\) A complete list of the books Johnson had with him is given by Aley Lyell Reade in his

\(^{15}\) See *Early Biographical Writings of Dr Johnson* (Farnborough, 1973), 30.

\(^{16}\) See Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1997),
49.

\(^{17}\) See J. D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Treating his published
works from the beginnings to 1984*, prepared for publication by James McLaverty (Oxford,
2000), I, 686-7. The attribution to Johnson of the review of Hoadly and Wilson can only be
considered ‘tentative’ (p. 689), but is supported by various critics, including Richard Schwartz,
Donald Greene and O M Brack. It is also included in the full and recent account of Johnson’s
work as a reviewer offered in Brian Hanley, *Samuel Johnson as Book Reviewer: A Duty to
Examine the Labors of the Learned* (Newark, Delaware, 2001).
Dictionary, but he seems to have read him very thoroughly then, to judge by the number of Bacon's works from which he quotes and the very large volume of quotations.\textsuperscript{18} The Dictionary testifies to his reading in Newton and Boyle, to his knowledge of the medical writings of John Arbuthnot and Gideon Harvey, and to his close familiarity with works such as Burnet's Theory of the Earth, Woodward's Natural History, and Cheyne's Philosophical Principles of Religion, Natural and Revealed. It includes numerous quotations and definitions furnished by the physico-theologians; it is demonstrable, for instance, that he read William Derham's Physico-Theology and Astro-Theology, John Ray's The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation, and Nehemiah Grew's Cosmologia Sacra. Moreover, Johnson added to the knowledge gained by reading, through conversation and personal experience. We know that he met and talked with the eminent scientists Roger Boscovich and Benjamin Franklin.\textsuperscript{19} During his tour of the Hebrides, he rode in a coach with John Hope, Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University, and 'much instructive conversation' passed between them.\textsuperscript{20} On the same trip, he stayed at Glenmoriston with a man called Macqueen, and presented his daughter with a copy of Cocker's Arithmetic he had bought at Inverness; the gift suggests an attempt to supplement the education of a

\textsuperscript{18}See Life, III, 194.

\textsuperscript{19}Boscovich, a Jesuit, was a professor at the University of Pavia, where he specialized in astronomy. According to Boswell, Johnson during their meeting 'maintained the superiority of Sir Isaac Newton over all foreign philosophers, with a dignity and eloquence that surprised that learned foreigner' (Life, II, 125). Evidence of his encounter with Franklin has been collected by Maurice Quinlan and appears in the article 'Dr Franklin Meets Dr Johnson' in Hilles (ed.), New Light on Dr Johnson, 107-120.

young woman who had hitherto 'learnt reading and writing, sewing, knotting, working lace, and pastry'.\textsuperscript{21} What he learnt he sought also to disseminate.

Johnson's lexis frequently shows the scientific dimension present in his thinking. The \textit{Rambler} essays employ a good deal of unusual technical vocabulary. W. K. Wimsatt's perceptive study of Johnson's style in the \textit{Rambler}, entitled \textit{Philosophic Words}, proposes that he looked on his \textit{Ramblers} as a kind of testing ground or supplementary illustration for the ideals of purity and canons of meaning which he was systematizing in the Dictionary.\textsuperscript{22}

Certainly, when we read the \textit{Rambler} essays, we are conscious that Johnson is experimenting with a new and exacting diction. He often uses an image from physics, chemistry or mathematics to illustrate a human quality or tendency. For instance, in \textit{Rambler} 69 he writes:

Thus one generation is always the scorn and wonder of the other, and the notions of the old and young are like liquors of different gravity and texture which can never unite. The spirits of youth sublimed by health and volatilised by passion, soon leave behind them the phlegmatick sediment of weariness and deliberation, and burst out in temerity and enterprise.\textsuperscript{23}

The language here – 'liquors of different gravity', 'spirits ... sublimed', 'volatilised', 'phlegmatick sediment' – resembles that which might be used in describing a chemical experiment. Another parallel of this kind is drawn in \textit{Rambler} 127, where he suggests that

The advance of the human mind towards any object of laudable pursuit, may be compared to the progress of a body driven by a blow. It moves for a time with great velocity and vigour, but the

\textsuperscript{21} Boswell, \textit{Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides}, 104.
\textsuperscript{23} Yale, III, 365.
force of the first impulse is perpetually decreasing, and though it should encounter no obstacle capable of quelling it by a sudden stop, the resistance of the medium through which it passes, and the latent inequalities of the smoothest surface, will in a short time by continued retardation wholly overpower it.\textsuperscript{24}

The imagery is striking; the metaphor is sustained, exhibiting Johnson’s knowledge of physics and of the vocabulary of physics, yet also giving his description of an everyday problem (one, indeed, that afflicted his work on the Dictionary) a distinctly visual quality. In \textit{Rambler} 169 he begins a discussion of the necessity of labour with a metaphor borrowed from another science, biology:

\begin{quote}
Natural historians assert, that whatever is formed for long duration arrives slowly to its maturity. Thus the finest timber is of tardy growth, and animals generally exceed each other in longevity, in proportion to the time between their conception and their birth.
\end{quote}

He continues: ‘The same observation may be extended to the offspring of the mind’.\textsuperscript{25}

There are comparable passages elsewhere in his works. \textit{Rambler} 179 contains references to the ‘catenarian curve’ and the ‘quadrature of the circle’, showing that he is happy to adopt ideas from celestial mechanics.\textsuperscript{26} In the first of the \textit{Idler} essays we are told that ‘the diligence of an Idler is rapid and impetuous, as ponderous bodies forced into velocity move with violence proportionate to their weight’.\textsuperscript{27}

Every species of animal as well as the vegetable creation may be said to have a fixed or determinate form towards which nature is continually inclining, like various lines terminating in the center;

\textsuperscript{24} Yale, IV, 312.
\textsuperscript{25} Yale, V, 130.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 179-180.
\textsuperscript{27} Yale, II, 5.
or it may be compared to pendulums vibrating in different directions over one central point.\textsuperscript{28}

These localized images and extended metaphors have the effect of giving physicality and precision to Johnson’s descriptions of phenomena and processes. This reflects a general tendency whereby Johnson renders in markedly physical terms those descriptions of the mind and mental processes that might otherwise be nebulous. Johnson chooses the language of natural philosophy because it is rhetorical and persuasive. Though it is possible to conclude that he wishes to flaunt his learning, his lexis in cases such as these may be considered as symptomatic of the widespread eighteenth-century conflation of what we would now call ‘science’ with the language of power and argument.\textsuperscript{29} The particular character of Johnson’s rhetoric is to a large degree inherited from seventeenth-century natural philosophy rather than empowered by the latest, mid-eighteenth-century developments, but regardless of the sources of his vocabulary he remains an influential figure in insinuating the specialized terms of natural philosophy into public lexical currency.

As my quoted extracts from the \textit{Idler} suggest, Johnson’s philosophic prose is not confined to the \textit{Rambler}. For instance, in \textit{Adventurer} 45 he declares, with obvious reference to Newton:

\begin{quote}
The reigning philosophy informs us, that the vast bodies which constitute the universe, are regulated in their progress through the ethereal spaces, by the perpetual agency of contrary forces; by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} Yale, II, 255.
\textsuperscript{29} This subject is dealt with in detail by Geoffrey Cantor, in his essay ‘The Rhetoric of Experiment’ in David Gooding, Trevor Pinch and Simon Schaffer (eds), \textit{The Uses of Experiment: Studies in the Natural Sciences} (Cambridge, 1989). Cantor describes the role of scientific prose as an ‘instrument of persuasion’ (p. 161) and suggests that the rhetorical features of scientific discourse make it ‘a discourse of power’.
one of which they are restrained from deserting their orbits, and losing themselves in the immensity of heaven; and held off by the other from rushing together, and clustering around their centre with everlasting cohesion.

He follows this with an observation that is perhaps an eighteenth-century commonplace, but which none the less reflects his tendency to borrow imagery and terms from physics:

The same contrariety of impulse may be perhaps discovered in the motions of men: we are formed for society, not for combination; we are equally unqualified to live in a close connection with our fellow beings, and in total separation from them: we are attracted towards each other by general sympathy, but kept back from contact by private interests.30

In Adventurer 95, Newton appears again, as Johnson observes that

It has been discovered by Sir Isaac Newton, that the distinct and primogenial colours are only seven; but every eye can witness, that from various mixtures, in various proportions, infinite diversifications of tints may be produced. In like manner, the passions of the mind ... are very few.31

And when he seeks in his Preface to Shakespeare to characterize the inconsistent quality of the dramatist’s writing, he has recourse to an image from geology, arguing that

His characters are praised as natural, though their sentiments are sometimes forced, and their actions improbable; as the earth upon the whole is spherical, though its surface is varied with protuberances and cavities.32

This language bears out his dictum that ‘He that thinks with more extent than another, will want words of larger meaning’.33 By employing technical terms

30 Yale, II, 359-60.
31 Ibid., 428-9.
32 Yale, VII, 70-1.
33 Life, I, 218.
both literally and metaphorically, he endows his writing with a remarkable internal logic and specificity.

The period in which Johnson lived was marked by technological developments that altered the geography of human thought. By the time of his death the steam engine and the chronometer were both in existence. Amateurs were quite likely to own microscopes and telescopes, theodolites and hydrometers. As John J. Brown points out, 'He was of the generation which learned how to make practical application of the scientific discoveries of the previous century', and his practice was informed by a 'predominantly utilitarian point of view'. As he also observes, Johnson imported this kind of utilitarian approach into areas where it was unusual and unorthodox:

Perhaps more important than any definite reference to science or literary use of its findings is the essential scientific method which Johnson applies, for almost the first time, to subjects such as lexicography, literary criticism, and biography.

Johnson is a non-specialist, and does indeed advocate the combining of disciplines. In his biography of the physician Boerhaave, he suggests something of what he thinks a natural philosopher should be, reflecting that Boerhaave did he not suffer one Branch of Science to withdraw his Attention from others: Anatomy did not withhold him from Chymistry, nor Chymistry, enchanting as it is, from the study of Botany.

Moreover, he emphasizes that Boerhaave's pursuit of such activities was allied to a profound religious commitment: 'He asserted on all Occasions the divine Authority, and sacred Efficacy of the Holy Scriptures, and maintained that they

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34 Brown, 'Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth Century Science', xxii.
35 Ibid., 278.
36 Early Biographical Writings of Dr Johnson, 27.
alone taught the Way of Salvation'. For Johnson, these disciplines do not exist in opposition to one another. Nor are they incompatible with his moral and religious values. He believes in the reciprocity of religion and natural philosophy.

The Dictionary was written side by side with the Rambler. It not only testifies to Johnson's reading in natural philosophy, but also embodies his desire to create a resource enabling others to read and understand the works of natural philosophers. Johnson's heavy deployment of illustrative quotations drawn from Browne creates, among other things, a vital lexicographic tool for understanding Browne's writings. More than a third of this thesis is explicitly concerned with the Dictionary. Though arguably Johnson's greatest and most important work, it remains the least examined of his major achievements. This clearly has a great deal to do with its sheer size; it is much harder to trace what is significant in the Dictionary than it is to trace what is significant in, for instance, Rasselas. There have been several impressive contributions to scholarship on the Dictionary in recent years: Allen Reddick's The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, Robert DeMaria's Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning, and the suggestive essays contained in a special number of The Yearbook of English Studies (1998) dealing with eighteenth-century lexis and lexicography. However, Johnson's treatment in the Dictionary of particular authors remains an almost completely uncharted area.38

37 Early Biographical Writings of Dr Johnson, 34.
38 The special YES contains a potentially useful article by Keith Walker entitled 'Some Notes on the Treatment of Dryden in Johnson's Dictionary', but the article is only four pages long.
The difficulties traditionally standing in the way of close study of the *Dictionary* have been partially alleviated by Anne McDermott's development for the Cambridge University Press of a CD-ROM of the first and fourth editions of Johnson's *Dictionary*. In preparing the sections of this thesis concerned with the *Dictionary*, I made extensive use of this resource. Utilizing the CD-ROM, it was possible to confirm that Browne was the eleventh most frequently cited author in the *Dictionary*; full details of my findings appear in Chapters Four and Five. The CD-ROM allows the researcher to perform searches of a kind that would be nigh impossible for anyone using traditional methods. The CD-ROM enables the user to view the first and fourth editions in parallel. This makes comparing the two editions a straightforward matter. It also allows the user to perform searches both simple and complex. For instance, it is possible to search for all illustrative quotations tagged in a particular way – as, say, 'Anatomy of Melancholy' or 'Dryden'. It is also possible to search for any particular word or combination of words, to search for words and groups of words within definitions and usage labels, and to limit searches using search strings governed by Boolean logic. The CD-ROM was a vital tool for me in my work on this thesis, and without it I should probably have been unable to carry out my work on the *Dictionary*. The searchable text on the CD-ROM, like other electronic resources, permits a kind of research that has not previously been practicable.39

The CD-ROM does not, unfortunately, spare the researcher all need for effort. There are certain kinds of search that are not possible. One cannot search

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39 Another useful electronic resource is the web page maintained by James Eason of the University of Chicago at penelope.chicago.edu. This page provides searchable texts of Browne's major works, making it considerably easier (though still not especially easy) to locate quotations.
for all usage labels in which Johnson brands a particular word as, say, ‘good’; there is ‘stop list’ of words that are not permissible in search commands. Moreover, the faithful transcription of the original editions preserves Johnson’s quirks of labelling. Sir Thomas Browne appears as ‘Brown’ throughout; he is not differentiated from other Browns or Brownes (his son Edward, for instance), and his writings are sometimes cited by title only, without his name. A very small number of Johnson’s attributions are erroneous; he attaches the name of one author to a quotation taken from another. Furthermore, there are limits to the scope of the custom search commands one can devise using the CD-ROM. It is possible to search for all entries in which the author Browne is cited and the word ‘medical’ appears, but not for all the times Browne is cited using the word ‘medical’. A search of the first kind directs the user to a multitude of entries in which Browne appears as a quoted author, but where the illustrative quotation including the word ‘medical’ is not from Browne. It is not possible to search for all entries where a given author is the sole authority for a word or sense. Nor is it possible to search for all entries where, say, Browne and Bacon are cited in conjunction without any other author being cited. This is perhaps not surprising, but the fact remains that in the case of this electronic resource, as with most others, the degree of empowerment it provides is counterbalanced by the frustrations resulting from its limitations. Moreover, it is important to recognize that using the CD-ROM is no substitute for looking at printed copies of the Dictionary. The experience of perusing the printed text is very different from that available by exploiting the electronic resource.
The experience of looking at, or indeed reading, the *Dictionary* quickly prompts the realisation that Johnson, though he tends to appear confident of his own authority, accepts that it is open to question. As Allen Reddick points out, in *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, there is a tension at the heart of the work between 'its implicit claims to a unified authority and the presence of other diffuse and disparate – and sometimes competing – authorities'.  

Johnson’s authoritativeness is superficially guaranteed by his impersonality, and to this end he repeatedly defers to usage (or what he perceives to be usage). In the *Plan* he claims to borrow the 'vicarious jurisdiction' of Chesterfield, but in the end he relies on his own opinions. The *Dictionary* could have been a rigidly prescriptive and impersonal work, but was not. Popular accounts tend to exaggerate the presence of idiosyncrasies, quoting the oft-cited entries under words such as ‘patron’ (‘One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery’) and ‘oats’ (‘A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people’). In fact, the *Dictionary* is remarkably immune from prejudice of this kind, but Johnson’s selection and deployment of quotations remain personal. The *Dictionary* is not only an anthology of what may broadly be defined as the English literature of the previous two hundred years, but also a repository of all kinds of information about subjects as diverse as precious stones, prosody, architecture, gunpowder, geometry, foodstuffs, fashion, church history and fishing. As such it has much in common with an encyclopaedia, and

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41 *Plan*, 30.
it is conspicuously Johnson's encyclopaedia. The writers he chooses to quote, and the quotations he selects from their works, represent a particular, Johnsonian vision of what is necessary, important or attractive not just in the English language, but in English letters and English life. Indeed, the effect is such that it is almost as if he achieves the cryogenic suspension of his image of English literature.

Some of the characteristics of the Dictionary were conditioned by issues of practicality. Its authorities are printed texts, never oral sources, and it tends therefore to privilege written language and exclude purely colloquial terms. One of the tensions within the Dictionary – articulated in the Preface – is between the desire for permanence and the recognition that permanence is not achievable. Marcus Walsh has written that 'The Dictionary in its ethical and encyclopaedic as well as its philological purposes is perhaps the most obviously humanist of Johnson's achievements.'\(^{42}\) It is, undeniably, humanist, but it also unmistakably human. In a recent essay Daniel Gunn describes the presence in Johnson's Preface of

\[\text{ a commitment to traditional principles of reason and order, an abiding sense of human limitation, acute self-consciousness about the texture and material reality of words, and a personal narrative of courage and perseverance in the face of failure, ... [which] intersect and combine to generate the unusual meaningfulness of the text.}\]

\(^{42}\) Marcus Walsh, Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing (Cambridge, 1997), 199.
Johnson offers 'a deeply felt evocation of ideal order', yet at the same time celebrates 'the richness and profusion of language'. The treatment of Browne in the Dictionary reflects both Johnson's ideals and his practices very well. It shows him striving to be practical, yet also finding space for his enthusiasms and interests; it shows him setting limits, yet also indulging the proliferative properties of language; and it shows him at his most authoritative, yet also at his most tolerant of other authorities.

In this thesis, then, I am looking at dimensions of Johnson's work that tend not be examined. The particular case of his relationship to Browne exemplifies Johnson's capacity for strong engagement with writers of the seventeenth century and the issues, language and materials in which they deal. I am not concerned with evaluating closely the similarities between the two writers' prose styles. Yet it is worth saying something on this matter, since it is the one area of similarity between Browne and Johnson that has often attracted comment. The suggestion of a similarity seems first to have been raised by the politician John Courtenay in his Poetical Review of the Literary and Moral Character of Samuel Johnson LL.D. (1786). There Courtenay objects to the stylistic preferences implied in the Dictionary:

In solemn pomp, with pedantry combin'd,
He vents the morbid sadness of his mind;
In scientifick phrase affects to smile,
Form'd on Brown's turgid Latin-English style.

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The notion of this similarity recurs in Boswell, as I shall discuss more fully in Chapter Two. Sir Walter Scott, in his *Lives of the Novelists* (1821-4), considers the style of *Rasselas* to be ‘in Johnson’s best manner’. It is enriched and made sonorous by the triads and quaternions which he so much loved, and balanced with an art which perhaps he derived from the learned Sir Thomas Browne.

In his *Essay on the Life and Genius of Johnson* (1792), Arthur Murphy perceives the difference between Johnson’s style and that of Addison and his contemporaries, and writes:

> How he differed so widely from such elegant models is a problem not to be solved, unless it be true that he took an early tincture from the writers of the last century, particularly Sir Thomas Browne.

The lexicographer Noah Webster, in his *Letter to Dr David Ramsay* (1807) noted Johnson’s ‘injudicious selection of authorities’ in the *Dictionary*. Webster is generally dismissive of Johnson’s lexicographical endeavours, but particular opprobrium is reserved for his enthusiasm for Sir Thomas Browne. Of various seventeenth-century writers who in Webster’s estimate ‘had neither taste nor a correct knowledge of English’ Browne ‘seems to have been a favourite’. He continues:

> yet the style of Sir Thomas is not English; and it is astonishing that a man attempting to give the world a standard of the English Language should have ever mentioned his name, but with a reprobation of his style and use of words.

Webster gives several examples of Browne’s ‘Latin-English’, chosen for their ridiculousness. He quotes, for instance, ‘Its fluctuations are but motions

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45 See *Life*, I, 221-2.
46 *Samuel Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, 422.
47 Ibid., 70.
subservient, which winds, shelves, and every interjacency *irregulates*’ and
‘Some have written rhetorically and *concessively*, not controverting, but
assuming the question, which, taken as granted, advantaged the illation’. Later in
the letter, Webster complains that Johnson’s illustration of the senses of words is
‘one of the most exceptionable parts of his performance’, not only because the
writers he employs to this end ‘did not write the language with purity’, but also
because ‘a still larger portion of them throw not the least light on the definitions’.Browne, once again, is the principal culprit.48

The miscellaneous writer Vicesimus Knox commented on the stylistic
similarities between Browne and Johnson in a piece published in a volume of
‘lucubrations’ dated 1788. He quoted seven examples from *Pseudodoxia
Epidemica* as representative of this parallel, before concluding that ‘A thousand
instances of similarity might be produced, if the whole volume were searched’.
Three of Knox’s examples will perhaps do to suggest what he considers to be the
essence of Browne’s prose: ‘Intellectual acquisition is but reminiscential
evocation’, ‘We hope that it will not be unconsidered that we find no constant
manuduction in this labyrinth’, ‘Their individual imperfections being great, they
are moreover enlarged by their aggregation’.49 Could one imagine Johnson
writing any of these sentences? It is a matter of conjecture and impressionistic
judgement. But Knox is correct in identifying that Johnson shares with Browne a
genuine delight in the potential – philosophic, descriptive, and humorous – of
Latinisms and polysyllables. Unlike Webster, Knox sees Johnson’s taste for

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Browne not as something debilitating, but as a virtue. He worries that ‘Though Brown is an excellent writer, yet it must be allowed that he is pedantic’, but reflects that ‘Johnson, considered as a lexicographer and improver of the English language, did right to select an author who presented him with a model for coining new words’. In the end he is not entirely comfortable with Johnson’s liking for Browne:

Perhaps he was led to study Brown in order to qualify him for the compilation of his lexicon; but, after all, it is certain that his moral writing would have been more extended, and consequently done more service, had he chosen a style more simple, and less obscured to vulgar readers, by polysyllabic words of Latin and Greek etymology.  

Boswell hints at a possible reason for this discomfort when he suggests that Knox appears to have the *imitari aveo* of Johnson’s style in his mind; and to his assiduous, though not servile, study of it we may partly ascribe the extensive popularity of his writings.

Twentieth-century critics have persisted in asserting the stylistic link between Browne and Johnson. Edmund Gosse claims that

It was from ... *Christian Morals* that Johnson took his inspiration. It was this work, which is far from being of Browne’s best, which encouraged Johnson, and with him a whole school of rhetorical writers in the eighteenth century, to avoid circumlocution by the invention of superfluous words, learned but pedantic, in which darkness was concentrated without being dispelled.

Lytton Strachey goes so far as to suggest that Johnson’s own stylistic influence covertly transmitted the example of Browne, to the extent that ‘the *Decline and Fall* could not have been precisely what it is, had Sir Thomas Browne never

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51 *Life*, IV, 490-1.
written the *Christian Morals*. The character of Johnson's prose is attributed by W. K. Wimsatt, in his two books *Philosophic Words* and *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson*, to his reading of scientific volumes. Wimsatt argues that 'there is some resemblance between the diction of Johnson and that of Browne's scientific writing, especially the *Pseudodoxia*. He continues:

> To say ... Johnson went back to Sir Thomas Browne for philosophic diction may be to seek too remote and too literary a source. It may be rather that Johnson and Browne derived their diction from the same kind of source – the physician and scientific speculator, from his proper scientific reading, and the moralist, philosopher and chemical dabbler, from departments of his own reading.  

Howard Weinbrot, in a much more recent discussion of Johnson's style, observes that

> Several reasons have been suggested for Johnson's putative alien diction. It was natural to him; it stemmed from his scientific and philosophical reading for the *Dictionary*; it especially was influenced by Sir Thomas Browne's Anglo-Latin style; it was an over-reaction to the fashionable French syntax he hoped to correct; it was a form of polishing the English language; and it was necessary because compendious thoughts need compendious words.

Weinbrot very properly recognizes that Johnson's prose frequently combines the elevated and the homely; Latinisms sit alongside references to domestic situations or commonplace phenomena. ‘A stylistic allusion to Latin allows him to elevate the importance of recurring moral decisions and predicaments’, but is typically balanced by ‘excursions into simple language’. Weinbrot argues that ‘The psychological reason [for this] is Johnson’s knowledge that contrast is a

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defining part of the restless human condition'.\textsuperscript{55} It is striking that Knox, Boswell, Gosse, Wimsatt and Weinbrot all find Johnson's style peculiar, and all imply that its peculiarities must have been derived from a particular source, but none of them uses the observation of stylistic similarity to inform a more searching examination of his relationship to Browne.

A definitive evaluation of Johnson's stylistic debt to Browne is beyond the scope of this thesis. The modern science of stylometrics has taken such matters out of the hands of the literary critic (whose judgements, even at their most acute, depend in large measure on impressionistic responses) and put them into those of the computer programmer.\textsuperscript{56} Did Johnson quote so extensively from Browne in the \textit{Dictionary} because he wished to promote Browne and the kind of style in which he wrote? Or did he assimilate elements of Browne's style and an appetite for Browne's writings only by reading his works while compiling the \textit{Dictionary}? It is impossible to answer these questions decisively, yet we can, I think, see that whatever stylistic similarities there are between Johnson and Browne exist not because Johnson was keen to imitate his style, but because he shared with him certain values and beliefs regarding language. Their styles are alike in their shared use of repetition for the purpose of amplification, their penchant for parallel syntactic structures and antitheses, their frequent pairing of synonyms or near-synonyms to achieve emphasis, and their apparent belief that Latinate diction affords a special degree of semantic precision. Behind these

\textsuperscript{55} Howard D. Weinbrot, 'Samuel Johnson and the Domestic Metaphor', \textit{The Age of Johnson} 10 (1999), 137-8, 140.

\textsuperscript{56} The character of Browne's style and the inadequacy of existing analyses have been discussed at length by Daniela Havenstein, in chapters five to nine of \textit{Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne}. Her findings were achieved by means of electronic text analysis using bespoke computer software.
similarities lies a shared ambition to write prose that evinces the strenuousness of
the thinking it embodies.

It is appropriate at this stage to consider the content of Johnson’s *Life of
Browne* and the edition’s notes, in order to establish more clearly the necessary
basis for any discussion of Johnson’s relationship to Browne. However, before
doing so it is worth noticing one other small link between Johnson’s work and
Browne’s which predates both the 1756 *Christian Morals* and the *Dictionary.*
Johnson’s satiric political prophecy *Marmor Norfolciense,* which was first
published in 1739, was not only an attack on the Walpole administration but also
in part a satire on antiquarianism. It opens with the following words:

> In Norfolk near the town of Lynn, in a field which an ancient
> tradition of the country affirms to have been once a deep lake or
> meer, ... was discover’d not long since a large square stone, which
> is found upon an exact inspection to be a kind of coarse marble....
> It was brought to light by a farmer, who observing his plough
> obstructed by something, through which the share could not make
> its way, order’d his servants to remove it.^^

As Donald Greene explains in his edition of Johnson’s political writings, the
stone ‘bears a cryptic prophecy, which the writer, donning the mask of a
judicious and pedantic scholar, ... purports to interpret’. In due course ‘the
bumbling commentator adds to the fun by professing to find it all very obscure
and refusing to accept the obvious meaning’, and the exposition ‘is interrupted
by a number of digressions’.^^ Though *Marmor Norfolciense* is first and
foremost a political work, it seems to offer a glancing critique of exactly the kind

[^57]: Yale, X, 22.
of scholarship occasionally practised by Browne. Browne's treatise *Hydriotaphia* had been similarly concerned with discovering significance in buried treasure, but there is a much clearer link between the opening of *Marmor Norfolciense* and Browne's lesser-known antiquarian report 'Concerning Some Urnes Found in Brampton Feild in Norfolk' (1667). The second paragraph of this piece begins:

> In a large arable feild lying between Buxton and Brampton, ... divers urnes were found. A part of the feild being designed to bee enclosed, while the workemen made several ditches ... [they] fell upon divers urnes, but earnestly & carelessly digging they broake all they met with.\(^5^9\)

It would be possible to exaggerate the significance of this really quite modest parallel, but it is striking that Johnson, in thinking of a way of satirizing the Norfolk-based Walpoles, appears to turn before anything else to a genre that had been signally employed by another resident of Norfolk, namely Browne. Furthermore, another of Johnson's political pamphlets, *Taxation No Tyranny*, which was published in 1775 (also the year of a second edition of *Marmor*), concludes with words borrowed from the same author. Johnson writes that

> The time is now perhaps at hand, which Sir Thomas Brovm predicted between jest and earnest,

> When America shall no more send out her treasure,  
> But spend it at home in American pleasure.\(^6^0\)

This is a slight misquotation of lines from 'A Prophecy Concerning the Future State of Several Nations', in which Browne anticipates a time 'When America shall be better civilized, ... [and] it may come to pass that they will no longer suffer their Treasure ... to be sent out to maintain the Luxury of Europe and other

\(^{5^9}\) K, I, 233.  
\(^{6^0}\) Yale, X, 454.
parts'. That Johnson should turn to Browne on these two occasions – and in both instances turn to his less obviously canonical writings – suggests a particular sense on his part that Browne's works are a quotable, provoking resource.

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61 K, III, 107. Browne's actual words are 'When America shall cease to send forth its Treasure, / But employ it at home for American Pleasure'. It seems likely that Johnson was quoting from memory.
Chapter One: Browne before Johnson, and the conditions in which Johnson took on the Life of Browne

The first edition of Sir Thomas Browne's Christian Morals was published in 1716 at the Cambridge University Press, thirty-four years after its author's death. Browne's son Edward had been his literary executor; he lent his father's manuscript papers to their family friend Thomas Tenison, who was Rector of St Martin-in-the-Fields and later Archbishop of Canterbury, in order that Tenison could prepare an edition of them. In 1683 Tenison edited Sir Thomas's Miscellany Tracts, thereby establishing a claim to be the first choice to edit any further publications of his work. But Edward later reclaimed the papers, having decided himself to issue another of his father's unpublished works, the Letter to a Friend. The manuscript of Christian Morals, which Edward knew his father to have written, was not found at that time, but it was later recovered from Archbishop Tenison by Browne's daughter, Elizabeth Lyttelton. She assigned editorial responsibility to John Jeffery, the rector of Browne's old Norwich parish. Jeffery explained in his preface to the published edition that 'The reason why it was not printed sooner is, because it was unhappily lost, by being mislay'd among other manuscripts for which search was lately made' (CM, 61).

Jeffery's edition did not sell successfully. J. D. Fleeman records that copies were still on sale, priced 1s. 6d., in 1749, thirty-three years after being printed.¹ The edition was reprinted at Halle in Saxony in 1723 (the reprint is

¹ J. D. Fleeman, A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson, I, 674.
described as ‘very uncommon’, and no reason for its being republished there is obvious), but a second English edition did not appear until forty years after the first. It was for this edition, issued in 1756, that Samuel Johnson wrote his Life of Browne. Printed by Richard Hett for the bookseller John Payne, who had published the Rambler and Adventurer, the edition promised ‘a Life of the Author, by Samuel Johnson; and Explanatory Notes’. The Monthly Review carried a notice which stated that

Sir Thomas Brown’s character, as an Author, is so generally known, that to enlarge upon it would be needless and impertinent, especially with regard to the learned; for whom principally his writings seem calculated... The compiler of Sir Thomas’s life, has animated his narration with many spirited and judicious remarks; as might, indeed, be naturally expected from the known abilities of Mr Johnson.

Before considering in detail this 1756 edition of Christian Morals and the particular contribution of Johnson, I should like to examine Browne’s standing in the years that followed his death, in order to determine what kind of reputation he might actually have enjoyed by that time. This will help give some indication of whether Johnson’s decision to work on Browne was a natural one for him and an obvious one in the eyes of his contemporaries.

The Monthly Review’s suggestion that Browne writes for an essentially learned audience conveys a sense of how he may have been regarded three-quarters of a century after his death, but it is worth probing this a little more carefully. In his lifetime Browne had enjoyed a wide though not always favourable reputation, which appears to have stemmed chiefly from his first published work, Religio Medici (1642). The work’s title seems to have been without precedent; Geoffrey Keynes considers it ‘to have been

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entirely original'. The choice of title was significant in that it suggested to others the possibility of explicitly allying religion to secular subjects (such as, in this case, medicine). The originality of both work and title prompted considerable critical and popular attention, resulting in its inclusion in William London's 1657 *Catalogue of the Most Vendible Books in England.* Modern accounts tend to be casual in their description of the work's reception; Jeremiah Finch suggests that 'Few books in any age have caused such a commotion', and quotes a remark made by a friend of Samuel Pepys that is recorded by the diarist, suggesting that *Religio* was one of the books 'most esteemed and generally cried up for wit in the world'. Another report of *Religio*'s reception, more accurately suggestive of the response with which it met, is offered by the best of Browne's nineteenth-century editors, Simon Wilkin, who reports that 'no sooner was the book printed, than the public commenced operations upon it'.

The first of these 'operations' was Sir Kenelm Digby's *Observations upon Religio Medici,* which appeared in 1643. Digby was disturbed by the work's apparently dangerous tone of tolerance. His riposte was hastily composed; indeed, he dismissed it as the product of a mere twenty-four

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4 Keynes, *A Bibliography of Sir Thomas Browne,* 233.
5 William London, *A Catalogue of The most vendible Books in England* (London, 1657). Three of the listed publications are stated to be Browne's. *Religio Medici* appears among the 'Divinity Books', *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* appears in the 'History' section, and *Nature's Cabinet Unlock'd* in the section concerning 'Physick and Chirurgery'. *Nature's Cabinet Unlock'd* was not in fact by Browne, though it was widely attributed to him. His publisher Henry Brome issued a formal disclaimer in the first edition of *Hydriotaphia* (1658). The book's authorship is apparently unknown.
6 Jeremiah S. Finch, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1950), 7, 113. Frank L. Huntley suggests, in *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1962), that 'thanks partially to the good sale of *Religio Medici*, the fame of Browne's publisher Andrew Crooke 'grew until in 1665 he became master of the Stationers' Company' (p.99), but in fact the post was assigned by seniority.
7 Wilkin, I, lxii.
hours, and suggested that ‘My superficial besprinkling will serve only for a
private letter, or a familiar discourse with lady-auditors’. He did not have
time to evaluate Religio very carefully, and he has little to say about
Browne’s qualities as a writer. He is chiefly concerned with rebutting
Browne’s suggestion that the soul is mortal, with interrogating his notions of
eternity and predestination, and with criticising his understanding of the
nature of divine light. He is also worried by Browne’s worldliness and his use
of metaphor. He repeatedly ascribes to Religio a quality he chooses to call
‘wit’, which is in his hands a pejorative term. As James Wise comments,

Digby’s system was too rigid and too mechanical to allow for
the Janus-like Browne, who enjoyed paradox and
contradiction. Digby searched for tangibility and reliability in
his universe, so he expected the same qualities in Religio.

Digby’s response was later censured by Coleridge, who suggested that his
comments were ‘those of a pedant in his own system & opinion’, and implied
his own critical priorities in adding that

He ought to have considered the Religio Medici in a dramatic
& not in a metaphysical View – as a sweet Exhibition of
character & passion, & not as an Expression or Investigation
of positive Truth.

It is scarcely a surprise that Digby did not offer this kind of reading, but the
fact remains that his was not a considered response. He uses Browne’s text
only as a springboard for his own rather discursive musings, and fails to
engage with its essential qualities. Occasionally he affords a brief impression
of what he thinks of Browne’s writing; when Browne describes dying as ‘a

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8 Wilkin, II, xxix.
9 James N. Wise, Sir Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici and Two Seventeenth-Century Critics
(Columbia, Missouri, 1973), 121.
10 Roberta F. Brinkley (ed.), Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century (Durham, North Carolina,
1955), 438. I shall say more about the response of Coleridge and his contemporaries in
Chapter Six.
Kind of nothing for a moment', Digby considers this 'extream handsomely said', and he later remarks that 'his pious Discourses ... be Excellent and Pathetical ones'. Browne's language, he tells us, 'were handsome for a Poet, or Rhetorician to speak', but he cannot 'admit' it in the work of a 'Philosopher, that should ratiocinate strictly and rigorously'. For the most part he trivializes Browne's arguments and fails to capture the character of the work. He is not actively concerned with Browne's attempts to reconcile faith and natural philosophy; nor does he offer any trenchant critique of the methods Browne uses to achieve this reconciliation.

The deficiencies exhibited by Digby are shared by the other early commentator on Browne, Alexander Ross. Troubled by many aspects of Browne's thinking – including his views on the mortality of the soul and his non-partisan approach to Roman Catholicism and Puritanism – Ross, a noted controversialist, attempted to demolish the arguments of Religio Medici in a volume entitled Medicus Medicatus, which was published in 1645. He begins with a stylistic comment, complaining that 'all is not gold that glisters' – the implication being that Browne's aureate diction is insubstantial. But thereafter the style of Religio proves not to be his subject. He is concerned with the 'aberrations' discernible in Browne's text; his is a critique of Browne's theology, and it ignores the book's status as literature. In his dedication he explains: 'Expect not here from mee Rhetoricall flourish; I study matter, not words.' He cites Browne's 'Tropicall pigments, and Rhetoricall dresses' as aberrant qualities of the work, but the defining

12 Alexander Ross, Medicus Medicatus (London, 1645), 1, 79.
intention of *Medicus Medicatus* is to take issue with particular aspects of Browne’s faith, and more generally to upbraid his religious tolerance. We should not be surprised to find that Browne’s religious beliefs exercised early critics more than his style did. It is nevertheless striking that these early critics had very little to say about Browne as a stylist or about the contribution of his style to the development of his arguments and the character of his thought.

After the apparently unsuccessful *Medicus Medicatus*, which Johnson claims ‘was universally neglected by the world’ (*CM*, 14), the next book-length criticism of Browne, and the first published response to one of his other works, occurred in 1651. Again it came from Ross. His new critique, entitled *Arcana Microcosmi*, was a scathing response to *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, which had first been published in 1646 (a second edition appearing in 1650). The temper of this treatise is suggested by the bold announcement on its title-page that it is ‘A Refutation of Doctor Brown’s VULGAR ERRORS’. As if this is not enough, Ross asserts that he will also refute two other respected works, Bacon’s *Natural History* and Harvey’s *De Generatione*. The book is almost entirely devoid of anything that might pass for a comment on Browne’s style or essential modes of thought, though Ross does hint at one of his objections to Browne’s writing when he refers to ‘the Doctor[’]s elaborate book’.¹³ Ross is intemperate and boring – a wretched combination – and his essential premiss is that Browne’s work, like Bacon’s and Harvey’s, is dangerously novel and regrettably disrespectful of ancient wisdom. He concludes that it is pitiful to see ‘so many young heads still

gaping like Camelions for knowledge', feeding upon 'airy and empty phansies' and disdaining 'the sound, solid and wholesome viands of Peripatetick wisdome'. 'Whereas they should stick close and adhere as it were by a matrimoniall conjunction to sound doctrine,' he complains, 'they go a whoring.' Ross finds *Pseudodoxia* subversive and meretricious; his main objection is to its ready embrace of new ideas and principles, and he is at pains to insist on (indeed, 'prove') what Browne has refuted — including, for instance, the existence of centaurs and giants, the true blackness of the fires of Hell, the existence of islands before the Flood, and the ability of the chameleon to live on air alone.

Clearly, rejoinders of this kind show that Browne was in some quarters considered controversial, but they do not give us a very complete sense of Browne's standing or of the wider response to his work. The loudest voices are those of his opponents; as so often, the writer's supporters are less vehement than his detractors. Both Digby and Ross portrayed the largely conservative Browne as a dangerous radical. As Wise suggests, they 'increased his authority by making his ideas appear more controversial and uncompromising than they truly were'. That they viewed him as they did owed much to Browne's skills of expression, which lent his thoughts a peculiar, almost biblical authority. But neither Digby nor Ross recognized that the capacity of *Religio Medici* to engage and perhaps even seduce the minds of its readers was attributable to Browne's style, vocabulary, and aptitude for coining striking images. A fourth major critique of this period, concentrating on *Pseudodoxia*, was written by the Norwich doctor John

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Robinson, and was published under the Aristotelian title *Endoxa* in 1656 (in Latin) and 1658 (in the author’s own English translation). *Endoxa* is in truth a rather polite response, which quietly demurs on a few points and mounts no serious assault on Browne or his writing. The title-page explains that part of it will consist in ‘a calm ventilation of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*’; Robinson refers to Browne as ‘my honoured Friend’, and he concludes by saluting ‘our Judicious Author, to whom be peace’. Robinson is baffled by Browne’s style – he refers to his ‘elaborated exercitations’ – but goes no further than this.15

Subsequent responses to Browne’s works tended to take the form of attacks and defences of his thinking and theology. Thomas Keck’s 1656 *Annotations upon Religio Medici* were a useful explanation of Browne’s allusions, but provided no critical ballast. Most critiques were little more than nuggets. Robin Robbins, in the introduction to his edition of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, observes that responses to Browne’s work ‘come from men as various as its matter’ (*PE*, I, xxix). But these effusions are scattered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no full-scale critique, just an array of bits and pieces. Keynes’s bibliography is a useful guide to these, though probably not an exhaustive one. There are references to Browne and his writings in works as disparate as George Buck’s *History of Richard III* (1646), Walter Charleton’s 1650 translation of Helmont’s *Ternary of Paradoxes*, Guy Holland’s *The Grand Prerogative of Human Nature* (1653), Boyle’s *Physiological Essays* (1661), and Symon Patrick’s *Paraphrase Upon the Books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon* (1675).16 These references suggest that Browne’s work,

though not itself highly specialized, could appeal or prove useful even to
specialist authors. Critiques, notices, biographical sketches and critical
comments appear much less frequently, however, after about 1700. Browne’s
reputation persists on the continent, but English interest decreases. For the
period between the first publication of *Religio Medici* and Browne’s death in
1682, Keynes itemizes forty-nine English responses to Browne and twelve
continental ones; between 1682 and 1700, the figures are, respectively, fifteen
and two; and between 1700 and the Johnson edition of *Christian Morals* in
1756, there are seven English responses and sixteen continental ones.\(^\text{17}\)

The first of the biographical sketches of Browne, and the first account
to venture beyond animadversion or annotation, was furnished by Anthony
Wood. The publication of Browne’s *Works* in a handsome folio in 1686,
under the supervision of Tenison, suggests an attempt to cement Browne’s
reputation, but this volume contained no biography or introductory matter,
and it fell to Wood to supply the gap. In his *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691) he
gives an account of Browne’s life, more than two-thirds of which consists of
a brief description of each of Browne’s writings. He does not, however, pass
judgement on any of them. This is in the nature of the work, but it means that
there is still no precedent for thinking about Browne the writer. *Athenae
Oxonienses* is actually billed as ‘An Exact History of all the Writers and
Bishops Who have had their Education in the most Antient and Famous
University of Oxford’, but Wood’s definition of ‘writer’ is loose to the point
of being meaningless. In the course of his remarks about Browne, the closest
he comes to critical comment is the statement that he ‘was a Philosopher very

\(^{17}\) Keynes, *A Bibliography of Sir Thomas Browne*, 174-207.

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inward with nature' – and hence could not have been the author of the dubious *Nature's Cabinet Unlocked* (which Wood describes as a 'scribble').

It was another twenty years before a more substantial life was produced. Then, abruptly, there appeared two, printed in the edition of the *Posthumous Works of the Learned Sir Thomas Browne* that was published by Edmund Curll in 1712 and reissued in 1723 by Mears and Hooke. The first of these lives, which occupies pp. i-xxiii of the volume, has no literary critical content, though it is dismissive of Browne's opponent Ross. The second, which is a life by John Whitefoot that Johnson later quotes liberally in his own biography, is presented as a collection of 'Minutes', rather than as a complete account. It offers more judgements than the life that precedes it, but has the appearance of an encomium. Browne was an 'Excellent Person', possessed of 'extraordinary Merits', and 'the Horizon of his Understanding was much larger than the Hemisphere of the World'. When Johnson comes to write about Browne more than forty years later, he defers to Whitefoot because Whitefoot knew Browne personally, and Johnson was of the view that there was no substitute for actual experience of one's biographical subject. Yet Whitefoot has little to say about what Browne wrote. The only text to be mentioned by name is *Religio Medici*, and Whitefoot's one remark on Browne's style (a reference to the 'Briskness' of his writings) does not suggest either critical acuity or a desire to be critical.

The last attempt at a life of Browne before Johnson's is the biography by Andrew Kippis that appears in the *Biographia Britannica*. The

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19 *Posthumous Works of the Learned Sir Thomas Browne* (London, 1712), xxiv-xxv, xxviii, xxxi.
Biographia is an ambitious and inclusive work, and it is no surprise that Browne is deemed to merit a place. It is also no surprise, given the work's historical emphasis, that the Biographia entry reviews the various debates that affected Browne's individual works, without providing an overview of his thinking, style or significance. Religio Medici is considered to have established Browne's reputation for 'wit, learning, and singular solidity of judgement'. Pseudodoxia Epidemica is characterized by 'profound learning'. Of Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus the author reports: 'These treatises are in themselves extremely curious, and abound with noble, uncommon, and useful observations'. We are also told that 'His very letters were dissertations, and full of singular learning, tho' written upon the most common subjects'.

This is the general tenor of the Biographia Britannica; its judgements are scarcely judgemental, and only very occasionally does it offer a more sustained criticism of an author and his writings. Browne's inclusion and the nature of the entry suggest that his reputation was well established, but not that he was considered to be especially important among the Biographia's literary subjects.

Digby and Ross initiated critical 'operations' on Browne, but there was another kind of engagement prompted by his writings. In the half-century that followed Religio's first publication, there appeared an abundance of works in imitation of it, or at least in imitation of its title and the basic implications contained therein. The more substantial of these included Lord Herbert of Cherbury's Religio Laici (1645), Gideon Harvey's Religio

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20 Biographia Britannica: or, the Lives of the Most Eminent Persons who have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the earliest ages, down to the present times (London, 1747-66), II, 994-5, 996-7, 998.
Philosophi (1663), Sir George Mackenzie’s *Religio Stoici* (commencing 1663), John Dryden’s 1682 *Religio Laici*, Mark Hildesley’s *Religio Jurisprudentis* (1685), and *Religio Bibliopolae*, a work which began to appear in 1691, bearing on its title-page the name of Browne in letters nearly as large as the title, though the names of its authors, John Dunton and Benjamin Bridgwater, were conspicuous only by their absence. Books of this type continued well into the eighteenth century – and indeed beyond it – but after the publication in successive years of the anonymous *Religion of the Wits* (1716) and the similarly anonymous *Religion of A Church of England Woman* (1717), Keynes’s bibliography lists only three more titles until another modest flurry of imitation begins in 1764 with the *Religio Laici* of Stephen Tempest. Though Keynes’s list of ‘imitations’ should not be considered definitive, it affords a useful outline of the reception of Browne’s works. Discussing the influence of Browne in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Daniela Havenstein has argued that ‘the many and complex responses to ... *Religio Medici* bear witness to the book’s centrality in this period’. But she has also noted that ‘the imitations of *Religio Medici* over the course of the period are characterized by a gradual cheapening and democratizing (in the sense of popularizing) for the purpose of financial gain’, and an examination of the books in question confirms that what were often presented as imitations were in fact imitative in little more than name.21

While *Religio Medici* spawned a large number of imitative works, the same cannot be said of Browne’s other productions. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* was the most protracted and ambitious project of Browne’s life. Robin

21 Havenstein, *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne*, 3.
Robbins states that ‘Responses to Pseudodoxia came from men as various as its matter’ (PE, I, xxxix) and gives details of some of those who ‘not only refer to him approvingly, but adopt his coinages and phraseology’ (PE, I, xlii). Yet those who were encouraged to emulate Browne were happy to stand on his shoulders and expand his catalogue rather than engage with it. Occasionally Browne’s observations were plagiarized, as in the case of Richard Burridge’s Religio Libertini (1712). Sometimes Browne’s work was explicitly referred to, as in the title of Thomas Vaughan’s 1669 A Brief Natural History Intermixed with variety of Philosophical Discourses ... With Refutations of such Vulgar Errors As our Modern Authors have omitted. But Pseudodoxia was a work with several forerunners, and it belonged to a tradition, rather than initiating one. After the publication in 1686 of a book entitled A Memorial for the Learned, which contains a catalogue of vulgar errors, there is listed in Keynes’s bibliography no English work in imitation of Pseudodoxia until a book by George Colman and Bonnell Thornton, published in 1755-6 under the title The Connoisseur, which seeks to deflate certain vulgar errors and offers a ‘Specimen of a Supplement to Sir Thomas Browne’s Treatise’. As I shall suggest in Chapter Three, the declining influence of Pseudodoxia, or the declining tradition of engaging with and imitating its content, was at least in part the result of the increasing

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22 In the introduction to his edition of Pseudodoxia Robbins discusses its reception and influence – see PE, I, xxxix-xl. But few of the responses cited by Robbins date from after Browne’s death. He notes the various translations of Pseudodoxia and argues that ‘interest ... spread across Western Europe for a century after its first appearance’ (p. xlvi), but the latest of the English responses he mentions is Edward Tyson’s Philological Essay concerning the Pygmies of the Ancients, which was published in 1699.

23 See Havenstein, Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne, 76-87.

24 Keynes, A Bibliography of Sir Thomas Browne, 270-3.
development of scientific method.²⁵

The history of editions of Browne's works gives some further sense of their standing in the years after his death. The edition of Browne's Posthumous Works published by Curll in 1712 and reissued by Hooke and Mears eleven years later contained Repertorium, Hydriotaphia, some letters and a few miscellaneous items including the Letter to a Friend. It is possible to infer that this publication was an attempt on the part of these booksellers to rehabilitate Browne, but an examination of the other titles they offered in these years reveals no obvious programme underlying their choices. It is plausible that their taste for the antiquarian made Browne seem a suitable addition to their stock. Ralph Straus records Curll's writing to the topographer and antiquary Ralph Thoresby and referring to 'our club of antiquaries': 'Precisely what the club of antiquaries may have been I do not know, but Curll was genuinely keen on all matters of the kind'.²⁶ In 1712 Curll issued a range of books whose titles suggest something of his interests: there were several publications concerning witchcraft by Francis Bragge, along with Montfaucon's Travels and a modern English version by Samuel Cobb of Chaucer's Miller's Tale. He continued his association with Browne when in 1736 he published a new edition comprising Hydriotaphia, Letter to a Friend and The Garden of Cyrus — the last of these missing its final two chapters. Curll's other publications that year included Isaac Hawkins Browne's poems in praise of tobacco, a volume of Addison's maxims,

²⁵ Johnson himself observes of Pseudodoxia: 'It might now be proper, had not the favour with which it was at first received filled the kingdom with copies, to reprint it with notes partly supplemental and partly emendatory, to subjoin those discoveries which the industry of the last age has made, and correct those mistakes which the author has committed not by idleness or negligence, but for want of BOYLE's and NEWTON's philosophy' (CM, 18).
²⁶ Ralph Straus, The Unspeakable Curll (London, 1927), 68.
Dryden’s *Merlin*, a second edition of Pope’s letters, and a comic poem entitled *The Rape of the Smock*. In the period during which he published these two volumes of Browne he also reissued a number of the major titles of the two previous centuries, including Sidney’s works and Castiglione’s *The Courtier*. For his part Hooke, who occasionally collaborated with Curll on publications, appears to have had a taste for books of local history. In 1723, the year in which he reprinted Browne’s *Posthumous Works*, he published Thomas Abingdon’s account of the antiquities of Worcester Cathedral, Clarendon’s of Winchester Cathedral, Richard Rawlinson’s of the cathedrals at Rochester and Salisbury, as well as Elias Ashmole’s account of the antiquities of Berkshire, and John Aubrey’s of Surrey. From this diverse and largely trivial assortment of titles, one derives the sense that issuing the works of Browne was for both publishers a typically adventitious undertaking, not a scholarly one. All the same, at the point in time when Johnson came to Browne, these were the only supplements to the 1686 folio *Works*.

*Religio Medici* went through eight editions in Browne’s lifetime, but the 1736 edition was only the tenth. Thereafter, there was an eleventh edition published by the London bookseller Torbuck in 1738, which, like the tenth edition and the printing of a ‘tenth edition corrected’ by the Edinburgh firm of Ruddiman & Co. in 1754, included a life of Browne abridged from the account in the *Posthumous Works*. Titles other than *Religio* were less in demand. *Pseudodoxia*, which had gone into a sixth edition by 1672 (this being ‘the sixth and last edition, corrected and enlarged by the author, with many explanations, additions and alterations’), had been reworked largely because Browne chose several times to expand it. After his death, which
removed the possibility of any further expansions, there was no new edition in English for over a century, though foreign interest seems to have remained. Translations allowed Browne’s writings to be transmitted across Europe, even if their reputation at home stagnated. *Pseudodoxia*, having appeared in a Dutch translation in 1668 (reprinted in 1688) and in German in 1680, went on to be translated into French in 1733 (twice reprinted), and into Italian in 1737. Religio was translated into Dutch in 1665 (corrected and enlarged in 1683). A French version, translated from the Dutch, appeared in 1668; a German in 1746; and a Latin version in 1644, which was several times reissued up to 1743. One of Browne’s more acute modern critics, Norman Endicott, has suggested that it was ‘perhaps the first literary (as distinct from learned) English book to reach as wide continental audience since More’s *Utopia*’. Yet the by the middle of the eighteenth century its continental audience appears to have been keener than its audience at home.

Other evidence of Browne’s standing occurs in poems by his contemporaries which imply that both he and his works were significant presences in public discourse during his lifetime. For instance, John Collop, author of a plea for universal religious toleration entitled *Medici Catholicon* (1656), penned a poem ‘On Doctor Brown. His Religio Medici and vulgar errors’, in which he defended Browne against imputations of atheism of the kind made by Alexander Ross. Collop professed that ‘More zeal and charity Brown in twelve sheets shows, / Then twelve past ages writ, or th’present knows’. The poem’s hyperbole concludes with the inelegant dictum that

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27 See PE, I, xlvii.
'Folli's unmask'd, and errors bald pate show'n, / Brown others errors, others write their own.'²⁰ Browne is thus characterized as a uniquely charitable figure and the opponent of an otherwise rampant Error. In similar vein another poet, George Daniel, wrote 'Upon an excellent Treatise written by T: B: D: M: called Religio Medici' as well as a laudatory piece 'To the Reader of Doctor Brown's booke Entituled Pseudodoxia Epidemica'.³¹ Both Collop and Daniel were royalists, and their commendation of Browne is a reminder of his involvement in the political turmoil of mid-century. Religio Medici figures in poems by two other royalists, Robert Wild, a controversial divine, and Alexander Brome, a poet known for his attacks on the Rump Parliament, which included the ballad Bumm-fodder: or waste-paper proper to wipe the nations rump with.³² These responses, though none of them is substantial, indicate that Browne's works and name were the locus of critical and even political debate. That there are no similar poems among the works of the generations that followed is an indication that after his death, and especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, his writings ceased to be such an important spur to debate.

One modest reminder of Browne's former standing did occur in 1711, when his library was auctioned, along with the library of his son Edward, by the bookseller Thomas Ballard. The auction was explicitly advertised as being of Browne's library; booksellers frequently sold off whole libraries

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²¹ Peter Beal in his Index of English Literary Manuscripts: Volume II 1625-1700. Part I: Behn-King (London, 1987) notes (p. 13) that 'Various printed exempla of Browne's works have notable reader's marginalia', and includes among these Daniel's personal copy of the 1646 edition of Pseudodoxia.
without even printing catalogues, so Ballard’s decision to mention Browne by name suggests he expected the Browne connection to provoke interest. Ballard’s sale catalogue shows 2,448 titles, and it offers suggestive evidence of Browne’s reading. As such, it may have served to remind a book-collecting public of his erudition. The sale in 1676 by the London bookseller William Cooper of the library of Lazarus Seaman had begun a fashion for book auctions. In 1680 the library of Browne’s sometime antagonist Sir Kenelm Digby had been disposed of, and that of Elias Ashmole followed in 1693. The phenomenon of the auction was a small but interesting influence on the rise of a reading public; it resulted, inevitably, in a wide and often inexpensive dissemination of previously inaccessible texts. This apparent democratization of knowledge was capable of inspiring anxiety as well as excitement, as in the case of John Evelyn, who regarded the wholesale disposal of books and dismantling of libraries as an epidemic atrocity. The subject has not been much documented, but it is possible that those writers whose books were split up and distributed in this way became for at least a moment the public’s property, their rekindled personas the stuff of debate, discussion and rivalry. The sale of Browne’s books may have served, at least fleetingly, to refresh certain book-buyers’ memory of him: the issue of the Posthumous Works the following year may be no more than a coincidence.

33 There is a modern facsimile reproduction of this: A Catalogue of the Libraries of Sir Thomas Browne and Dr Edward Browne, His Son, with an introduction, notes, and index by Jeremiah S. Finch (Leiden, 1986).
34 In a letter of 12 August 1689 to Samuel Pepys – for which see Diary of John Evelyn Esq., F.R.S. To which are added a selection from his Familiar Letters, ed. William Bray, 4 vols (London, 1906), III, 448 – Evelyn lamented ‘the sad dispersions many noble libraries & cabinets have suffer’d in these late times: one auction, I may call it diminution, of a day to two, having scatter’d what had been gathering many yeares’. The reference to ‘cabinets’ recalls his diary entry for 17 October 1671, in which he records visiting Browne’s home – the ‘whole house and garden being a paradise and cabinet of rarities’ (Diary, ed. Bray, II, 270).
but seen from a distance the sale feels like a short-lived, one-off attempt to resurrect his name.

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The name of Sir Thomas Browne is not wholly invisible in the writings of the generation that preceded Johnson, but it is certainly not conspicuous. Clearly, the fact that one writer makes no reference to another is no conclusive proof that he is ignorant of his existence, but Browne’s almost complete absence from others’ work – either as a point of reference or as a subject for discussion – suggests that neither his name nor his _oeuvre_ was prominent. It is impossible to offer a comprehensive account of Browne’s (dis)appearance in eighteenth-century discourse; what follows can only be a partial account.

We may note, for instance, that Browne is never referred to in Pope’s letters. Although it is true that the literary figures to whom the letters refer are predominantly Pope’s own contemporaries, there are numerous references to Milton, Spenser, Newton, Cowley and to Browne’s posthumous publisher, Pope’s enemy, Curll. Among those mentioned at some stage in his correspondence are Sidney, Locke, Bacon, Jeremy Taylor, Aphra Behn, Ben Jonson, John Donne, Hobbes, Bunyan, Samuel Butler, John Evelyn and Roger L’Estrange. The list reads like a pantheon of the major writers of the previous hundred and fifty years, and even when their appearances are brief, the mere fact of their mention is a form of recognition – something which Browne is not accorded. Browne is equally absent from the correspondence
of other prodigious letter-writers of the period; no reference to him is to be found in Addison’s letters, in Edward Young’s, or in Swift’s. On 9 January 1711, the first day of the Ballard book sale, Swift does write suggestively that ‘To-day ... I set apart to go into the city to buy books’. Ballard’s sale of the Brownes’ books appears to have been the only book sale taking place in London on that day, and it is therefore quite possible that it was this was the sale Swift had in mind. However, he does not refer to Browne by name, and it remains possible that he went to a bookseller, rather than to an auction.

Periodical literature bears almost as limited testimony to contemporary reading of Browne. His prophetic verse is discussed in the Gentleman’s Magazine for October 1768, but I have found no reference to him in the volumes prior to 1756. There is a single, by no means explicit allusion to Browne — predictably, it is to Religio Medici — in the Tatler. Addison refers to him by name and quotes Religio in Spectator 177; in Spectator 326 Steele seems to make passing reference to Pseudodoxia. It is scarcely surprising that Browne’s contemporary Milton is often discussed in the Spectator, but others who figure much more prominently than the scarcely noticed Browne include Bacon, Burton, Hobbes and L’Estrange. In Spectator 37, Sir Roger de Coverley inspects Leonora’s library and discovers a curious array of titles. Leonora possesses, among other items, the works of Newton and Malebranche, Locke’s Essay concerning Human Understanding, Temple’s essays, Sherlock’s Practical Discourse concerning Death, and Jeremy Taylor’s Holy Living and Holy Dying. Predictably, there is no

34 Gentleman’s Magazine 38 (1768), 503.
Browne. One can think of reasons why Browne would not figure in such a library, but his absence is another small defeat in a succession of significant absences. Frequently, modern criticism of Browne’s contemporaries or of the immediately succeeding generations seems equally oblivious to his existence. When he is mentioned, it is often in a throwaway fashion. Thus William Riley Parker tantalizingly remarks, in his Milton’s Contemporary Reputation, that Milton was stylistically ‘an independent, like Sir Thomas Browne’, but that remark (in which Milton is compared to Browne, rather than vice versa) is the one time that Browne makes an appearance. The implications of the comment are never pursued — certainly not in Parker’s two-volume biography of Milton, which contains not one indexed reference to Browne.

However, for all Browne’s frequent public invisibility, his writings seem to have found their way into a good many eighteenth-century libraries. Catalogue records of eighteenth-century libraries are by no means exhaustive; in an attempt to build up a sense of who owned what, one is necessarily hampered by the limited availability of information. Whichever editions of Browne’s works Johnson may have possessed, the only one that can now be connected with him is a copy of the first edition of Pseudodoxia Epidemica. The annotated sale catalogue of Johnson’s library records the purchase for eight shillings of his copy of ‘Browne’s vulgar errors &c.’ We do, however, know that Locke owned the fourth edition of Religio Medici.

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39 The Spectator, 1, 154-7.
40 William Riley Parker, Milton’s Contemporary Reputation (New York, 1940), 58.
43 Donald D. Eddy, Sale Catalogues of the Libraries of Samuel Johnson, Hester Lynch Thrale (Mrs Piozzi) and James Boswell (New Castle, Delaware, 1993), 44.
Fielding possessed the 1686 folio of Browne’s Works;\(^4^5\) Sterne owned a copy of *Pseudodoxia*;\(^4^6\) Defoe owned *Pseudodoxia, Religio Medici* and the *Posthumous Works*;\(^4^7\) and one of Johnson’s sternest critics, Horace Walpole, owned *Pseudodoxia* and the *Posthumous Works*.\(^4^8\)

Swift is another one might expect to have owned works by Browne, but he appears to have owned none – a surprising omission, given his evident knowledge of his writings.\(^4^9\) Discussing the respective styles of Swift and Temple, Irvin Ehrenpreis claims that ‘during the Restoration ... nobody required an introduction to the names of Montaigne and Sir Thomas Browne’.\(^5^0\) He goes on to suggest that Temple may have brought the two men’s writings, rather than their mere names, to Swift’s attention, and that Swift may have imbibed the spirit of Browne’s prose. In a section on Swift’s reading in their introduction to *A Tale of A Tub*, Guthkelch and Nichol Smith argue that *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*

appears to have suggested not only the use of some uncommon words like ‘exantlation’, ‘atramentous’, and ‘fuliginous’, but also the passages about the orientation of man’s body, the description of Moses, the white powder that

\(^4^9\) See Harold Williams, *Dean Swift’s Library. With a Facsimile of the Original Sale Catalogue* (Cambridge, 1932) and *A Catalogue of Books belonging to Dr Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick’s Dublin*, Aug. 19. 1715. A facsimile of Swift’s autograph with an introduction and alphabetic catalogue by William LeFanu (Cambridge, 1988). Williams (p. 86) comments that ‘It is remarkable ... that ... Sir Thomas Browne’s *Vulgar Errors*, is in none of the lists’.
kills without report, the belief that by slitting the ear of a stag the defect may be spread through a whole herd, and the story of the Macrocephali. Swift might have been directly indebted to the same sources as Browne, but, taken together, these points of contact are satisfactory evidence that ... [it] was one of his favourite volumes.51

The suggestion that Browne was a ‘favourite’ of Swift’s may appear an overstatement given the evidence adduced. However, two aspects of Browne’s writing that are echoed in Swift are his affection for abstruse vocabulary and his connoisseurship of outlandish stories and obscure scientific snippets. These were among the very attributes of Browne’s work that were most likely to estrange a later audience.

Selecting catalogues of contemporary book sales almost at random, one builds up a fuller picture of the distribution of Browne’s works. For instance, the year the Johnson Christian Morals was published, the library of Martin Folkes was sold at auction over a period of forty days. Folkes had been President of the Royal Society; his library, which amounted to a considerable 5,126 lots, included Browne’s Repertorium, the 1672 Pseudodoxia, the Miscellany Tracts of 1683, and the 1686 Works.52 A sizable auction catalogue of five years earlier, in which several private libraries were dispersed, amounting to more than 15,000 lots, comprised the 1686 Works, Pseudodoxia (1646), Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus (1658), the Miscellany Tracts, and the 1682 edition of Religio Medici.53 Browne appears to have been on the whole well represented in substantial libraries such as

53 A Catalogue of the Libraries of Edward Webbe, Esq; Counsellor at Law, Alexander Davie, Esq; Late of Sidney College, Cambridge, Francis Carrington, Esq; The Hon. Lady Mary Worsley, And several others (London, 1751), 70, 77, 331, 358, 359.
these. But he was less likely to figure in the catalogues of smaller libraries.

Lewis Theobald’s small library, auctioned in 1744, contained no Browne.54 Another contemporary catalogue, running to a fairly modest 986 lots, contains nothing clearly attributable to Browne, though there is an item listed as ‘Brown’s works’.55 Mentions of ‘Brown’s works’ or even ‘Browne’s works’ are common in catalogues of the period, but often, or even generally, refer to Browns and Brownes other than Sir Thomas, such as Thomas Brown, the licentious Shropshire poet whose Works were published first in three volumes (1707-8) and then in four (1719). Occasionally these potentially misleading mentions are supplemented by genuine misattributions. A catalogue from 1735 includes as Browne’s not just Pseudodoxia but also Nature’s Cabinet Unlock’d, as well as an item attributed to the author of the latter, entitled ‘Brown’s Cures by Cold Baths, &c.’ and dated 1707.56

Edward Baynard, author of the popular ‘Health, a Poem’ and a medical practitioner at Preston, was educated, like Browne, at Leiden, and was an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. One might expect to find that his library, auctioned in 1721, contained some of Browne’s publications, but it appears not to have done.57 Yet in the library of the late Poet Laureate, Nicholas Rowe, which consisted of just 421 lots at sale, we do find Browne’s works.58 And the previous year, a comparatively modest sale that included the library of the divine Benjamin Woodroffe but ran to only

58. A Catalogue of the Library of Nicholas Rowe, Esq. Deceas’d, Late Poet-Laureat to His
726 lots, offered the second edition of *Pseudodoxia*.

The library of one Sir Robert Atkins, sold in 1717 and documented in a catalogue of around 1,200 lots, contained the 1646 folio *Pseudodoxia* (as well as a quarto edition of the same work), *Religio Medici, Hydriotaphia* and the *Miscellany Tracts*. Later that same year a larger collection contained only *Pseudodoxia*, though it offered eight books by William Salmon, a well-known ‘irregular practitioner’.

Four years previously, and two years after the sale of the Brownes’ books, Thomas Ballard had offered part of Salmon’s library for sale – a collection that had included nothing by Browne. The public library at Bedford, founded in 1700 and handsomely provided with theological books and the literature of the Civil War, did contain some of Browne’s writings, but, perhaps a little unexpectedly, these were *Hydriotaphia* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, not *Religio Medici*. A consideration of even this small sample of holdings and sales suggests that ownership of works by Browne was common though not anywhere near universal, that of all his individual works *Pseudodoxia* was perhaps the most widely owned, that early editions of *Pseudodoxia* may have been taken up more than later ones, and that, unsurprisingly, there were no really obvious patterns of ownership, but rather...
an uneven, unpredictable distribution.\textsuperscript{64}

Explanations of Browne's virtual disappearance from public and private discourse are necessarily speculative. Among those that offer themselves is the suggestion that his style was either offensive or baffling to an audience habituated to different standards. Discussing eighteenth-century theories of literary style, Pat Rogers has argued that most of the recent imperatives in prose had endorsed Thomas Sprat's pleas for a simpler style, stressing the denotative rather than the connotative; Bacon was much more in fashion than Thomas Browne.\textsuperscript{65}

Rogers's observation is another hint at Browne's disappearance from the cultural map in the eighteenth century. He notes that Addison above all ... pioneered a theory of style which stressed the production of a particular level and kind of response in the reader, as against the previous emphasis on preordained levels of seriousness determined by the writer and the literary kind employed.\textsuperscript{66}

It is hard to see how Browne's prose could have failed to jar against sensibilities such as these. Edwin Morgan, contextualizing the style of Browne while also trying to assess its impact on Johnson, has suggested that 'after 1660 there was a broadening tendency for matter to outweigh expressiveness', and to this end quotes Francis Osborn's exhortation of 1658 that writers

\textsuperscript{64} If we survey the general index to the first decade of comprehensively recorded London book auctions, we find four copies of Certain Miscellany Tracts, thirteen of Hydriotaphia, and two of the Posthumous Works. The index includes ten first editions of Pseudodoxia, three copies of the second edition, and two of the sixth. There are eight copies of the unauthorized first edition of Religio Medici, six of the authorized version, and eighteen copies of the other editions of Religio that were published in Browne's lifetime. Finally, there are twenty-one copies of the 1686 Works, which would thus appear to be the version in which the individual works came to be most widely known. See General Index to Book Auction Records for the Decade 1902-1912, ed. William Jaggard (London, 1914), 152.


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 369.
should spend no time in reading, much less writing. Strong-lines: which like tough meat, ask more pains and time in chewing, than can be recompensed by all the nourishment they bring.\textsuperscript{67}

It is more usual to encounter the words ‘strong lines’ in reference to poetry, not prose, and the rather visceral imagery of Osborn’s precept is at odds with the language of later prescriptions. Nevertheless Browne’s compacted diction cannot have been digested with relish or even ease by readers addicted to popular history, magazines and novels.

Alternatively, there is the possibility that it was the content of Browne’s work that estranged the eighteenth-century reader. Antiquarianism was resurgent – thanks to the endeavours of figures such as William Stukeley – by the time Johnson’s edition of \textit{Christian Morals} appeared, but it had been out of fashion in the early part of the century.\textsuperscript{68} Arcane lore, mystic speculations and religious ordinance could all have seemed either baffling or gratuitous to even the most educated audience. In the case of \textit{Religio Medici}, the writer’s extreme introspection might have seemed indecorous if not bizarre. Increasingly, narratives spoken by an all-seeing ‘I’ were becoming the preserve of fiction. The non-fiction dramas of seventeenth-century selfhood discussed by Joan Webber in her study \textit{The Eloquent ‘I’} – examples of which include the major prose works of Milton, Burton and Richard Baxter, as well as \textit{Religio Medici} – depended on ‘the writer’s ... unremitting awareness that he is the subject of his own prose’.\textsuperscript{69} In the eighteenth century,


\textsuperscript{68} One exception to the early eighteenth century’s apparent contempt for antiquarianism was Henry Bourne, author of \textit{Antiquitates Vulgares} (1725).

\textsuperscript{69} Joan Webber, \textit{The Eloquent ‘I’: Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose} (Madison, Wisconsin, 1968), 4.
this awareness was to a large degree relocated, as fiction became the main arena in which writers explored psychology and selfhood, as well as an arena in which it was possible to examine the influence on personality of larger social forces. Browne in his time had worked, as Rosalie Colie has argued, 'to re-establish thematic genres – archaeology, geography, history, and the like – ... and to restore to them their lost status as literature'. As Colie also suggests, it is possible to 'learn' from Browne that

\[\text{T}h\text{e miscellaneous and wonderful materials of the natural world and the world of thought can be organized into different encyclopedic forms, one, the \textit{Pseudodoxia}, in the low style of the modest inquirer after truth, another in the high style of vatic interpreter of nature.}\]

But for all Browne’s differentiation of genres, his works almost invariably traffic between the ludic strategies of the first person and the durable lode of hard fact, and the fundamental strangeness of his methods and materials may well have marginalized his work.

Another possible explanation for the decline of Browne’s reputation may lie in his exclusion from the Royal Society. Browne had no powerful patron; institutional approval could have compensated for this, but was never forthcoming. His absence from the ranks of the Society was taken by one influential critic, Edmund Gosse, as an implicit criticism of his scientific method and scholarship – reason enough to suppose him an antique.

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\(^{70}\) Without exploring the subject at length, it is impossible to give a precise account of the interpenetration and reciprocal influence of the genres of novel and autobiography in the eighteenth century. But the novel does appear to have altered the modes of autobiography and the expectations it created. The subject is treated in depth in Patricia Meyer Spacks, \textit{Imagining A Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England} (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976).

The Society, which obtained its royal charters in 1662 and 1663, numbered among its early ranks not just the major scientific minds of the day – Boyle and Hooke, Wren and Ray – but literary figures including Dryden, Evelyn and Aubrey. Browne’s absence, taken alongside Sprat’s insistence that the style of scholarly writing be a naked, unembellished one, looks like a snub directed at the extravagant prose of which Browne was an obvious exponent. However, Browne did correspond with prominent fellows – including the Society’s secretary, Henry Oldenburg – and provided them with both information and scientific curios (including a petrified bone). The Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*, edited by Oldenburg, refer to ‘that deservedly famous Physitian Dr Thomas Brown’, though only in the context of referring to Browne’s son, the ‘Ingenious and Learn’d’ Edward. The suspicion that his not being a fellow of the Society had some dark explanation can be countered quite simply with the suggestion that it owed more to Norwich’s distance from London than it did to any perceived lack of scholarly excellence. Nevertheless, his absence from the Royal Society’s roll could easily have been seized on as an indictment of his scholarship and indeed his entire opus.

Finally, there is the possibility that Browne’s work was regarded as being too intricately bound up with the politics of its day. Michael Wilding detects in *Religio Medici* a strong current of political reference: ‘Browne embodies a recognized, mainstream political response to the documented political circumstances and events of his time.’ This, he suggests, is the

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72 Gosse writes that ‘I would suggest as a plausible cause the reputation which Browne had now gained as an infatuated astrologer’. See Gosse, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 134.

73 *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 58 (1670), 1189.
reason ‘why Religio Medici, apart from the eight extant manuscript copies – none in Browne’s hand – went through five editions between 1642 and 1645 and, after an interval of eleven years, another three editions between 1656 and 1659’. The existence of these various manuscripts by hands other than Browne’s testifies to the underground popularity Religio enjoyed in the years between its composition and formal publication. Harold Love cites this as an example of a tendency whereby ‘a work intended ... for private use might become a public possession against its author’s wishes’. Religio’s sensitivity to the politics of the struggle between the crown and its radical opponents charged its ideological discussion with a highly contemporary resonance. It appeared ‘amidst a flood of millenarian speculations’, bristled with references to contemporary issues ranging from iconoclasm to sectarian aggression, and was steeped in the lexis and lore of the Bible, church history and politicized religion. Wilding has argued that

Religio Medici is not a work that puts forward an explicit or positive political position; but negatively, in its rejection of sectarianism, mass action, millenarianism, the multitude, and any manifestations of plebeian Puritan activism, it is possible to locate the work in a cautious, conservative, law-and-order context.... The attacks on the sects and the multitude are the iconography, the shared language, of the emerging conservative party of law and order that provided the basis of the Royalist movement, but that was careful enough not to be explicitly assertive.

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75 Harold Love, Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England (Oxford, 1993), 43. ‘Scribal publication,’ he explains (p. 38), ‘operating at relatively lower volumes and under more restrictive conditions of availability than print publication, was still able to sustain the currency of popular texts for very long periods and bring them to the attention of considerable bodies of readers’. Moreover, the scribal text ‘only came into existence in response to the desire of prospective readers’.
Religio was dense and prickly in ways that conveniently bore out Browne's adage that 'this visible World is but a picture of the invisible', and it was allusive in ways that called for elucidation and annotation (RM, 19). Thus if his engagement with the politics of his time explains the rapid turnover in editions of his work during the years of political turmoil, it is also an explanation of the relative decline in interest once this turmoil was past, since political references which might at the time have been urgent would subsequently have lost their significance. Rosalie Colie concludes an article on Browne's Dutch reception with the plausible argument that

The more tolerant eighteenth century fought battles less clear-cut than those of the preceding age, and Browne's own tolerance fitted too well the eighteenth-century spirit to make him partisan in later quarrels.\(^78\)

The tolerance for which Browne pleaded in Religio Medici was, once achieved, the very thing that dampened interest in his work. Once the controversy in which he took part had been resolved, the work was less resonant and provoking — and as a result it was less read.

None of these facts and speculations constitutes sufficient evidence for arguing that Browne had in fact been entirely forgotten by the time Johnson came to write his life, but his general invisibility suggests at least that Johnson was undertaking a project that would have been regarded neither as an obvious choice nor a matter of priority. Johnson's embarking on the life seems an idiosyncratic move; but it continues a pattern whereby, in the years prior to the Lives of the Poets, he wrote biographies that tended to be revivals of largely forgotten or neglected figures. Some of these can be dismissed as

\(^78\) Rosalie L. Colie, 'Sir Thomas Browne's “Entertainement” in XVIIth Century Holland', Neophilologus 36 (1952), 171.
hack work (the lives of Boerhaave and the Dutch scholar Pieter Burman are close paraphrases of the funeral orations delivered by Albert Schultens and Herman Oosterdyke Schact), but others – notably the Life of Savage – are original. Johnson would appear to have had a consistent interest in saving the past from oblivion. Furthermore, he seems to have had a particular affection for doctors, stemming perhaps from his own perpetual status as ‘patient’. Of those whose lives he wrote in the early part of his career, Boerhaave, Lewis Morin and Thomas Sydenham were all physicians. To Dr Robert James’s Medicinal Dictionary he contributed accounts of at least a dozen physicians – not just Boerhaave, but ancient figures such as Aesculapius, Aretaeus and Asclepiades, along with two more recent ones in Frederic Ruysch and Joseph Pitton de Tournefort. The interest in medical men spans Johnson’s career. His best-known poetic memorial commemorates Dr Robert Levet, and one of the lives he chose to add to the canon prescribed for him by the booksellers who underwrote the Lives of the Poets told of Sir Richard Blackmore, a physician who was the contemporary of Browne’s son Edward, becoming a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1687, and who resided in Cheapside, Thomas Browne’s birthplace. Furthermore, in 1756, the year his Life of Browne appeared, Johnson arranged for his

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79 While the Life of Savage dealt with a literary figure, it was not chiefly literary in its focus and was largely motivated by Johnson’s friendship with Savage. Savage apart, Johnson’s subjects were usually doctors, scholars or churchmen. Browne falls into all these categories, yet transcends them, and the Life is at once a part of the corpus of Johnson’s early biographical works and a departure from this corpus.
80 Bate describes Johnson’s approach to the ‘panorama of ... individuals – so many of whom were already being forgotten’ whose biographies he wrote in the Lives of the Poets: ‘we sense an instinctive desire to rescue them, if only briefly, from extinction in the sludge of time’. Bate, Samuel Johnson, 531.
81 The subject is discussed at length in John Wiltshire, Samuel Johnson in the Medical World (Cambridge, 1991).
manservant Frank Barber to be apprenticed to an apothecary.\textsuperscript{82}

The exact reasons for Johnson's undertaking the \textit{Life of Browne} at the time he did are unknown. On 13 July 1755 he had made resolutions, as part of a 'scheme of life', 'to read Scripture methodically with such helps as are at hand' and 'to read books of divinity either speculative or practical'. That same month he wrote a prayer 'On the study of philosophy, as an instrument of living'. The Yale editor of his \textit{Diaries, Prayers, Annals} suggests that this prayer

\begin{quote}

is probably to be connected with [the resolution to read divinity]... But Johnson usually found his heart a reliable guide in directing his behaviour, and it is not surprising that he did not pursue the study.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

It is also suggested, plausibly, that Johnson's short-lived but serious interest in attempting 'books of divinity either speculative or practical' may have resulted in his undertaking the edition of \textit{Christian Morals}. Certainly, Browne's works (or at least some of them) were to hand while Johnson was working on the \textit{Dictionary}. His attention to them during this period, boosted by the determination to engage in serious study of books on divine subjects, may have encouraged him in the perception that a fresh edition was a worthwhile venture as well as one which would serve its own educative, spiritual ends.

If there were spiritual reasons for the edition, though, there were

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{82} In the years prior to the \textit{Life of Browne} Johnson wrote, besides the account of Savage and the pieces included in James's \textit{Medicinal Dictionary}, a total of eleven biographies. His subjects, listed chronologically, were: Father Paul Sarpi, Sir Francis Drake, the seventeenth-century seaman Admiral Robert Blake, Dr Lewis Morin, Pieter Burman, Confucius, the former child prodigy John Philip Barretier, Dr Thomas Sydenham, the poet Roscommon, Dr Francis Cheynel, and Edward Cave. After the \textit{Life of Browne} came biographies of Frederick the Great, Roger Ascham, the poet William Collins, the preacher and cleric Zachariah Mudge, and Dr Syan Thirlby. These accounts varied considerably in length, from a single page to several dozen. The \textit{Life of Browne} was longer than any of them.\textsuperscript{83} Yale, I, 56-7.
\end{flushleft}
others that doubtless proved every bit as pressing. Johnson was well rewarded for the Dictionary, but by the time it was completed he had spent what he had been paid for it. O M Brack has suggested that Johnson’s commercial motives were most readily to be satisfied through the deployment of his recently acquired skills:

With the Dictionary concluded and a need for financial support, he turned the knowledge he had gained compiling the Dictionary to editing, a branch of learning he viewed as closely akin to lexicography.  

The need for financial support is beyond question; in March Johnson was sent six guineas by Samuel Richardson, having been arrested for a debt of £5.18s.. Boswell begins his account of the year with the sentence ‘In 1756 Johnson found that the great fame of his Dictionary had not set him above the necessity of “making provision for the day that was passing over him”’.

Johnson’s publications over the course of the year certainly suggest he was happy to turn his hand to whatever would pay: he began to oversee the Literary Magazine, composed dedications to Richard Rolfe’s New Dictionary of Trade and Commerce and William Payne’s Introduction to the Game of Draughts, contributed to Christopher Smart’s Universal Visiter (one of his pieces being an essay entitled ‘Further Thoughts on Agriculture’), and wrote essays including ‘A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil’. He also reviewed titles as disparate as Patrick Browne’s History of Jamaica, Sir Isaac Newton’s Four letters to Dr Bentley; containing some arguments in proof of a Deity, and Stephen Hales’s An Account of a Useful Discovery, to 

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85 Life, I, 303.
86 The attribution to Johnson of items in the Universal Visiter remains uncertain, but the essay on agriculture is now generally accepted as his work.
distill double the usual quantity of sea-water, as well as Thomas Birch’s 
*History of the Royal Society of London.*

What Johnson earned from the edition of *Christian Morals* is unknown. There is no record of what he received for it in J. D. Fleeman’s essay ‘The revenue of a writer: Samuel Johnson’s literary earnings’, and all that is clear is that the edition was not a great success – copies remaining from the 1756 printing were reissued five years later with a new title-page. Yet even if Johnson’s motives were chiefly commercial, and even if the undertaking formed but a part of a whole hotchpotch of circumstantial activities, there can be little doubt that making the edition and the life was an endeavour which, while it may have had its beginnings in financial anxiety, proved attractive to his imagination. Richly allusive, linguistically mannered, occasionally esoteric and somewhat repetitious, *Christian Morals* was characteristic of Browne, or at least of a significant strand in his thinking and character. As such, it was sufficient to warrant a prefatory biography, by way of explanation for its logic and its quirks. Brack writes that ‘perhaps Johnson, hoping to edit *Vulgar Errors*, but having been discouraged by John Payne and other booksellers, made an edition of *Christian Morals* his second choice’. This seems no more than conjecture, and, while it is evident from the *Dictionary* that Johnson was familiar with – and even fascinated by – the better-known work, to make an edition of it would have been a difficult, vastly time-consuming task, by no means certain of success in the literary

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87 Birch received from Johnson an inscribed copy of the edition of *Christian Morals*. (See Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 1, 675.)  
marketplace. Furthermore, as is evident from the ratio between the efforts expended on the *Life* and on the relatively scanty annotations, it was the biographical part of the edition, rather than the editorial part, that proved most conducive to Johnson's interest, and a life of the author could be prefixed to the edition regardless of which work was its object.
Chapter Two: the Life of Browne and the business of literary biography

The 1756 Christian Morals is a small volume, unimpressive in appearance. Browne’s original text occupies 136 pages. Johnson’s biographical contribution is placed before the text, and thus serves as an introduction to it. It amounts to sixty-one pages, and contains approximately 10,000 words. Even though the biography is presented in such a way that the reader expects it to serve the role of introduction, Johnson has almost nothing to say about Christian Morals; after mentioning the work in his opening paragraph – where he refers to ‘the following essays’ (CM, 3) – he does not deal with it again. While Christian Morals contains many pleasing and quotable sentences, it cannot be ranked as one of Browne’s best performances. It resembles a compendium of reheated commonplaces, and though it is generally regarded as a continuation of Religio Medici it is much less concentrated than the earlier work and has the feel of a compilation of interesting ideas rather than a sustained argumentative performance.

Johnson’s purpose in the Life is not to offer any kind of guide to the text, but to introduce the reader to Sir Thomas Browne. Having opened with a single paragraph arguing the need for a biography of Browne, Johnson then narrates the events of his life chronologically. He offers a brief description of Browne’s education, mentions the controversy over the unauthorized publication of Religio Medici, describes in chronological order his published works and the reception they received, quotes at some length a favourite passage from the end of Hydriotaphia, describes Browne’s posthumous works, briefly mentions his knighthood and his reputation, and provides a
thumbnail sketch of Browne's son Edward. He then quotes at considerable
length from Whitefoot's account of Browne, in order to include an eye-
witness account of Browne's appearance and personal qualities, before
concluding with a quite full discussion of Browne's style, character of
thought, and faith.

The text of *Christian Morals* follows. The promised notes are printed
at the foot of the page and are not extensive. Many are simply reprinted from
Jeffery's 1716 edition. Those that are new deal largely with glossing
Browne's harder words. The very first note, for instance, explains that
'funambulatory' means 'narrow, like the walk of a rope-dancer' (*CM, 63*).
The phrasing of the title-page creates uncertainty about whether Johnson is
the author of these notes. It tells us that the volume includes 'a Life of the
Author, by Samuel Johnson; and Explanatory Notes'. The semi-colon
between Johnson's name and the mention of the notes seems to suggest that
Johnson's contribution and the notes are two separate things. Contemporary
advertisements are equally unclear on the matter. At the time of publication
the *Literary Magazine*, to which Johnson contributed, included in a list of
'Books and Pamphlets published since January 1, 1756' what it described as
'Sir Thomas Browne's *Christian morals* a new edition, with the author's life
by Samuel Johnson'.¹ When the volume came to be reviewed in the *Literary
Magazine* it was billed simply as ‘*Christian Morals* by Sir Thomas Browne’,
and no mention was made of the biographer.² Thus neither the phrasing of the

¹ *Literary Magazine* 2 (May-June 1756), 97.
² *Literary Magazine* 3 (June-July 1756), 141. There is a strong suggestion that the reviewer
was Johnson himself, which would explain the absence of his name. Brian Hanley, in *Samuel
Johnson as Book Reviewer*, identifies the review as Johnson's; he suggests (p. 106) that
Johnson's 'principled restraint' in the review is 'noteworthy'. The review is also identified as
Johnson's by Donald D. Eddy, in *Samuel Johnson, Book Reviewer in the Literary Magazine*.
title-page nor the terms of these notices make it clear whether the edition’s notes are Johnson’s work. In both cases it is Johnson’s contribution of a life that is billed as being the chief point of interest, and this contribution, from a writer who was by 1756 established as an essayist, biographer, scholar of language, and above all lexicographer, would have been an important attraction.

In the 1761 reprint of the edition the phrasing is slightly amended, to emphasize Johnson’s authority: the volume offers a ‘life written by the celebrated Author of the RAMBLER; AND EXPLANATORY NOTES’. The ambiguity remains. If the notes are Johnson’s, why not advertise them as such? The phrasing raises questions about their authorship, and Johnson’s contemporary audience appears to have been unsure on the matter. The Gentleman’s Magazine for April 1756 contains a short review of the edition; the reviewer notes that Browne’s writing has often been found to contain obscure or difficult words and allusions, but explains that ‘in this impression they are explained by the editor Mr Samuel Johnson, who has also written the author’s life, which is prefixed’. This appears to be evidence for claiming the notes as Johnson’s, but in the previous month’s issue the list of new publications had included Christian Morals in ‘a new edition, with the author’s life by Samuel Johnson’; as on the title-page, it is here by no means certain that the notes are by Johnson, and the apparent reluctance to make a consistent connection between Johnson and the notes is sufficient grounds for

or Universal Review, 1756-1758 (New York, 1979), 47. Robert DeMaria, following Eddy, notes Johnson’s tendency in the Review to give ‘generally favourable reviews to useful books of practical religion, like ... his own edition of Sir Thomas Browne’s Christian Morals’ – see DeMaria, The Life of Samuel Johnson, 189. But Donald Greene, in his article ‘Johnson’s Contributions to the Literary Magazine’ – see RES, n.s., 7 (1956), 367-92 – appears to suggest this particular review is not one of Johnson’s contributions.

5 Gentleman’s Magazine 26 (1756), 194.
uncertainty. In his nineteenth-century edition of Browne’s works, W. A. Greenhill expressed an anxiety about the wording of the edition’s title:

It is not quite certain whether Johnson contributed to this edition more than the *Life*, as it would seem from the wording and the punctuation of the title-page, as if a marked distinction were intended to be drawn between the writer of the *Life* and of the *Explanatory Notes.*

Greenhill’s doubts are justified. The semi-colon between ‘Samuel Johnson’ and the words ‘with explanatory notes’ does indeed leave the reader uncertain of their provenance.

The most obvious argument against accepting the notes as Johnson’s work – or at least as entirely his work – is that they were not explicitly advertised as his. More importantly, though, there are discrepancies between the way words are glossed in these notes and the relevant definitions provided in the (contemporaneous) first edition of his *Dictionary*, and between the material in these notes and the *Dictionary*’s revised fourth edition. It seems certain that the *Life of Browne* was written after the completion of the *Dictionary*; there is not a single quotation in the *Dictionary* from *Christian Morals*. In fact, it is possible that Johnson had not even read *Christian Morals* at the time he completed the *Dictionary*. Nevertheless, in preparing the edition of Browne’s work, he would have had his new scholarly tool to hand, and would accordingly have been well placed to define Browne’s obscure terms. It is therefore puzzling that the definitions in the notes to *Christian Morals* differ from those in the *Dictionary*. For instance, the noun ‘digladiation’ is defined in the notes as ‘fencing-match’, while in the *Dictionary* it had been less tersely explained as ‘a combat with swords; any

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4 *Gentleman’s Magazine* 26 (1756), 139.
quarrel or contest' - a definition less immediately suggestive of a competitive 'match' (and not exemplified with a quotation from Browne, but only with one from Joseph Glanvill). More problematically, there are terms that exercise the author of the notes to *Christian Morals* which do not appear in the *Dictionary*. 'Eluctation' and 'bivious', both of which are glossed in the notes, do not appear in either the first or fourth editions. There is no entry even in the fourth edition for 'phylactery', though here in *Christian Morals* the note provides a detailed explanation: 'A phylactery is a writing bound upon the forehead, containing something to be kept constantly in mind. This was practised by the Jewish doctors with regard to the Mosaic law' (*CM*, 86).

The same is true of 'funambulatory', 'pinax', 'tetrick', 'parallaxis', 'quodlibetically', 'ergotism' and 'choragium': they are defined here in the notes, but fail to make any appearance even in the fourth edition of the *Dictionary*. Johnson's failure to include these words in the first edition is not grave, but their absence from the fourth edition is more curious. Clearly these are quite unusual words; yet Johnson appears disposed in the *Dictionary* (as I shall illustrate in Chapter Four) to take Browne's use of a word as sufficient reason for its inclusion. If he had glossed these words in his own edition of *Christian Morals*, why did he not incorporate them in his revised *Dictionary*?

One possible answer is that the notes and definitions were not his.

In an attempt to remedy the uncertainty over the authorship of the notes, O M Brack has argued that, regardless of the punctuation of the title-page, there are good reasons for accepting them as Johnson's. He claims that 'It is the nature of these annotations that clearly demonstrates Johnson's
authorship’, citing their style and range of knowledge as evidence. His article does not deal with all the issues I have mentioned, but it is for the most part persuasive. He makes a credible case for accepting that the notes were Johnson’s, even if they were not advertised as such. Some of them certainly feel Johnsonian; the cadences sound like his, and so does their erudition. If one does accept his authorship, a number of them appear striking. For instance, the mystic Jean Baptiste van Helmont and his alchemist associate and guide Paracelsus are dismissed as ‘wild and enthusiastick authors of romantick chymistry’ – strong language, perhaps reflecting Johnson’s dislike of unempirical Paracelsianism (CM, 122). There is an implicit criticism of Pope’s classical learning when Browne mentions Cato and the note observes that the Cato in question is Cato the Censor ‘who is frequently confounded, and by POPE amongst others, with Cato of Utica’ (CM, 66). Geographical nicety seems important; Browne points out that life’s seas are rough and one should not suppose one is ‘sailing from Lima to Manilla, when you may ... sleep before the wind’ – to which the note runs ‘Over the pacifick ocean, in the course of the ship which now sails from Acapulco to Manilla, perhaps formerly from Lima, or more properly from Callao, Lima not being a sea-port’ (CM, 64). To question scientific practice, knowledge of history and knowledge of geography is not simply to correct a text’s errors, but rather to insinuate one’s own wisdom and prejudices into its frame. In this case, the notes, if they are indeed Johnson’s, make gestures reminiscent of the Dictionary’s famous moments of bias and predictive of some of the

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7 As for instance in this note (see CM, 132): ‘Bellisarius, after he had gained many victories, is said to have been reduced, by the displeasure of the emperor, to actual beggary: Bajazet, made captive by Tamerlane, is reported to have been shut up in a cage. It may somewhat gratify those who deserve to be gratified, to inform them that both these stories are FALSE.’
peculiarities of his later edition of Shakespeare.

Particularly arresting is the note to the opening of section nine of the second part of Browne’s work. In this section Browne argues that a person’s physical appearance is an index of his nature. He begins:

Since the brow speaks often true, since eyes and noses have tongues, and the countenance proclaims the heart and inclinations; let observation so far instruct thee in physiognomical lines, as to be some rule for thy distinction, and guide for thy affection unto such as look most like men (CM, 127).

The note reads: ‘This is a very fanciful and indefensible section.’ ‘Fanciful’, as I shall suggest later in this chapter, is a loaded word where Johnson is concerned. As for ‘indefensible’, it is an adjective which carries unambiguous moral weight; it is clear that the author of the note disapproves of Browne’s belief in the exotic doctrine of physiognomy. In the Dictionary ‘physiognomy’ is defined as ‘the art of discovering the temper, and foreknowing the future by the features of the face’. In other words, it is little better than astrology. And Johnson, familiar with seventeenth-century thoughts on the subject from Burton and probably from Jonson’s The Alchemist, was doubtless troubled by physiognomy’s popularity among his own contemporaries, its fashionable status owing much to Chesterfield’s insistence on the importance of observation and the understanding of appearances.8 Browne’s acceptance of such a vogueish, insubstantial practice was characteristic of a generous credulity that Johnson found it hard to accept in him. If it is Johnson’s, this criticism is of a piece with other remarks of his; the indictment of Browne’s ‘fanciful’ moments is rooted not only in his own

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empiricism, but also in his recognition that a doubting, religiously
underpinned empiricism is what allies him with Browne and assures his
sympathy towards him.

However, the notes to Christian Morals do not compare, even at their
most suggestive, with what the biographical part of the edition has to offer in
terms of insights into Browne, Johnson, and the affinity between the two.
This affinity is apparent in the flashes of autobiography that colour the Life.
Johnson salutes his old Oxford college, of which Browne had himself been an
alumnus. Yet he goes on to suggest that a ‘scholastic and academical life’
offers ‘more safety than pleasure’ (CM, 12). This is perhaps an act of recoil
on Johnson’s part, as he remembers his own experience of academia during
his truncated stay at Oxford, a time of more pleasure than safety. He derides
what he refers to as ‘the reciprocal civility of authors’ (CM, 10), a condition
of the Grub Street world in which he had once had to toil, and mentions –
thinking, perhaps, not just of Browne, but also of himself – the ‘troublesome
irruptions of scepticism, with which inquisitive minds are frequently
harrassed’ (CM, 44). There are some characteristically Johnsonian conceits:
Browne’s career serves as the occasion for an oblique recollection of his own,
and in depicting an author ‘panting for fame’, determined to ‘enter the lists’,
he conjures a somewhat chivalric image of authorship (CM, 8). It is an image
Johnson uses elsewhere; in Rambler 93 he suggests the author be

considered as a kind of general challenger, whom every one
has a right to attack; since he quits the common rank of life,
steps forward beyond the lists, and offers his merit to the
public judgment.  

The competitive nature of the image seems more appropriate to the highly

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9 Yale, IV, 133-4.
contentious literary marketplace within which Johnson worked than it does to the more gentlemanly, or at any rate less commercial, world of letters where Browne was able to operate. Johnson’s several references to literary politics— to ‘that exuberant applause with which every man repays the grant of perusing a manuscript’, or to the ease of conveying a book to the press and ‘plead[ing] the circulation of a false copy as an excuse for publishing the true’— reflect tellingly on manuscript culture, and on its manners and practices. This capacity to find a foretaste of his own society in the social situation of Browne is a symptom of biographical sympathy. The model for Johnson’s ‘sympathetic’ biography is the Life of Savage. Clearly, Johnson knew Savage and did not know Browne, which meant that he commanded very different resources in writing the two lives. But the Life of Savage establishes Johnson’s habit of discriminating between a writer’s public and private lives—indeed, of recognizing the need for such a distinction— and understanding his subjects as people rather than merely as authors.

Furthermore, it enforces a sense that the errors and quirks of the past can be an education useful to one’s understanding of the present. Paul Fussell has argued that

There is abundant autobiographical meaning in the Lives but it is not really so singular and personal as it might appear. To

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10 Isobel Grundy suggests that the reference to Browne entering the lists connotes something ‘public, formalized, ostentatious; Johnson often places the contests of both wits and beauties in this chivalric and unreal setting’. See Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and The Scale of Greatness* (Leicester, 1986), 111.

11 *CM*, 7. The words recall Johnson’s more celebrated remark—perhaps triggered by his reluctance to look over the manuscript of a new play by Frances Brooke— that ‘Praise is the tribute which every man is expected to pay for the grant of perusing a manuscript’ (*JM*, II, 192) and the observation that ‘A man, who is asked by an authour, what he thinks of his work, is put to the torture, and is not obliged to speak the truth’ (*Life*, III, 320).

12 *CM*, 8. This of course refers to the circumstances of Religio’s publication. But it may also serve, at least obliquely, as a reminder of the chicane of Pope, who seduced Curll into issuing an edition of his letters in order that he might have reason to issue an edition of his own. Johnson’s account of this appears in *Lives*, III, 155-160.
He has also claimed that "It is the pre-eminence of delusion and energetic self-destruction in human affairs that is the great theme of the Lives".  

Certainly, the *Life of Browne* reflects a tendency to see the writer as an individual and yet at the same time a representative of general humanity. Literary practice, and indeed the whole business of life, repeats itself across generations - or so Johnson seems to say. In the light of which, can he have failed to derive some slight amusement from the fact that one of his Lichfield teachers, who died not long after he left his care, and of whom his one surviving recollection is that he 'published a spelling-book, and dedicated it to the UNIVERSE', rejoiced in the name of Thomas Browne?  

Johnson's *Life of Browne* is not the product of especially diligent research; its interest lies not in the facts it rehearses, but in what it makes of them. It contains little information that is not in Andrew Kippis's entry in the *Biographia Britannica* (1748), and reproduces a substantial part of the life written by Browne's intimate John Whitefoot for the 1712 *Posthumous Works*. Johnson's inclusion of a sizable extract from Whitefoot reflects his customary reliance on others' material, a habit visible not just in his early lives but in later efforts - the most notable example being the life of Edward Young. Johnson's use of Whitefoot can be interpreted as an example of authorial sloth or as a mark of respect for his predecessor's account, but it should be recalled that he believed strongly in the principle that the

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15 *Life*, I, 43.  
16 See *Lives*, III, 361, n. 1.
observations of an eye-witness are always the best record of a man’s character. It is also possible to conclude that for Johnson, what mattered about writing a life of Browne was not to assemble a new set of hard-won facts, but rather to insert his altogether more valuable critical insights into a pre-existent factual structure.

Johnson’s lack of research shows particularly in one omission. Like both Kippis and Whitefoot before him, he appears unaware that Browne testified before Sir Matthew Hale in a trial of witches held at Bury St Edmunds in March 1664. Browne’s deposition is reproduced, as indirect speech, in the anonymous account of the trial published in 1682, which appears in the catalogue of Harleian Miscellany. It seems he argued that ‘in Denmark there had been lately a great Discovery of Witches’ and that the behaviour of the accused tallied with what had been witnessed elsewhere, inasmuch as the accused’s fits were

Natural, ... but only heightened to a great excess by the subtility of the Devil, co-operating with the Malice of these which we term Witches, at whose Instance he doth these Villanies.

Called as an expert witness, Browne lent weight to the prosecution, though not to the extent implied in some accounts. The defendants were hanged, and Browne has been censured for his part in this. What matters here, though, is not what Browne thought or said, but rather how it was subsequently interpreted.

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17 See for instance Life, II, 166, where Johnson, complaining of the weakness of Goldsmith’s life of Parnell, pronounces that ‘Nobody can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him’.
18 Catalogus Bibliothecae Harleianae, 5 vols (London, 1743-5), IV, 737.
19 A Tryal of Witches, at the Assizes held at Bury St Edmonds for the County of Suffolk; on the Tenth day of March, 1664. Before Sir Matthew Hale Kt (London, 1682), 41-2.
20 See for instance Gosse, Sir Thomas Browne, 147-50.
It is unclear whether Johnson knew of the Bury St Edmunds trial. He was certainly familiar with the figure of Sir Matthew Hale; in the Life of Johnson, Boswell records Johnson mentioning him on three separate occasions, and Hale is frequently quoted in the Dictionary. Gilbert Burnet, whose History of his Own Times Johnson owned, wrote a life of Hale. This life, the tone of which is little short of encomiastic, omits any account of the Bury St Edmunds trial, but Burnet's publisher, William Shrowsbury, was also the publisher of works by and relating to Hale, and in a catalogue of these, which appears at the end of Burnet's account, one of the listed items is A Short Treatise touching Sheriffs Accounts, to which is added a Tryal of Witches, at the Assizes held at Burey St Edmonds, for the County of Suffolk 10th. of March, 1664. before the said Sir Matthew Hale, Knight. One wonders that Shrowsbury did not alert Burnet to this document; or wonders, if Burnet was perhaps aware of it, why it failed to influence his account. Even if Johnson knew Burnet's life of Hale, there is no guarantee that he saw Shrowsbury's advertisement, but he would appear to have known plenty of Hale from other sources. His copy of Hale's The Primitive Origination of Mankind is bound with his copy of Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, which was, according to Boswell's report of Dr Maxwell's account of Johnson, 'the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise'. Discussing witchcraft with a dinner companion on his trip with Boswell to Scotland, Johnson remarked that 'wise and great men have condemned witches to die'. The footnote in the Hill-Powell edition of Boswell reads: 'Johnson was thinking of Sir Matthew Hale for one.' One

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22 Life, II, 121.
23 Life, V, 45.

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might perhaps add: ‘And Sir Thomas Browne.’ In his *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745), Johnson deals with the subject more fully. He explains that ‘The reality of witchcraft or enchantment ... has in all ages and countries been credited by the common people, and in most by the learned themselves’. In Shakespeare’s age it was ‘not only unpollite, but criminal, to doubt it’. Johnson considers witchcraft the feeble superstition of a less enlightened age, and indeed the statutes against witchcraft – in force continuously since 1563 – were repealed when he was a young man, in 1736. But in the *Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* he dwells on the subject for a thousand words, and it is clear that even as it repels him it also intrigues him.

Such generalizations usually stem from a specific factual source. Naturally, a close familiarity with the work of both Browne and Hale is no guarantee that Johnson was aware of the way in which the two men’s paths had fleetingly crossed, but the absence from Johnson’s account of this episode means the absence of the one detail of Browne’s life which was liable to be held against him by later generations. Joseph Towers, writing two years after Johnson’s death, claimed that

> The principal fault of Johnson, as a biographical writer, seems to have been, too great a propensity to introduce injurious reflections against men of respectable character, and to state facts unfavourable to their memory, on slight and insufficient grounds.

Towers perhaps exaggerates, but it is true that where Johnson found material detrimental to his subjects’ reputations, he was not slow to include it, and if

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24 Yale, VII, 3, 6.
this may be taken as an (inconclusive) indication that he was unaware of the Bury St Edmunds trial, the reader may also be struck by the *Life of Browne*’s freedom – unusual among Johnson’s more substantial lives – from material likely to injure its subject’s good character.

Johnson’s omitting Browne’s part in the witchcraft trial may be a matter of simple ignorance, but there are other less venial inaccuracies. He follows earlier accounts in asserting that Browne’s wife bore him ten children, though in fact they had twelve (*CM*, 16). He also seems to misread some of the texts to which he alludes. He claims that Browne in 1672 published the sixth edition of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* ‘with some improvements; but I think rather with explications of what he had already written, than any new heads of disquisition’ (*CM*, 17). In fact, Browne added new sections and refreshed existing ones in the second, third and sixth editions. Johnson also notes Browne’s claim that the Spanish have retained so much Latin that they are able to write sentences which are grammatically correct in both Castilian and Latin; he dismisses the claim, and cites in his support James Howell, author of *Instructions for Forreine Travell*, though in the *Instructions* Howell quotes a stanza which is ‘Latin good enough, and yet is it vulgar Spanish’.*

Johnson claims, moreover, that Browne ‘never mentions the motion of the earth but with contempt and ridicule’, yet in *Pseudodoxia*, I, 5 he states, without apparent derision, that ‘if any affirme the earth doth move, ... I will not quarrell with his assertion’ (*PE*, I, 29) – a statement that Johnson actually quotes in the *Dictionary* under ‘assertion’.

Johnson is also inexact about the circumstances under which Browne

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27 C. A. Patrides points out most of these in his edition of *Sir Thomas Browne: The Major Works* (Harmondsworth, 1977).
received his knighthood. He was possibly influenced in his understanding of
events by the suggestion in the 1712 Posthumous Works that the title was
bestowed 'with special Manifestations of more than ordinary Favour'.

Certainly, Johnson appears unaware that Browne was the beneficiary of
another man's indisposition. Having remarked that Browne was in 1665
elected to an honorary fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians, he goes
on to record that 'in 1671, [he] received, at Norwich, the honour of
knighthood from Charles II'. This in turn becomes the occasion for a

Johnsonian aside concerning Charles –

a prince, who with many frailties and vices, had yet skill to
discover excellence, and virtue to reward it, with such
honorary distinctions at least as cost him nothing, yet
conferred by a king so judicious and so much beloved, had the
power of giving merit new lustre and greater popularity (CM, 33).

In Johnson's estimate the episode is one that benefited both king and subject,
suggesting the former's eye for a worthy cause as well as the esteem in which
the latter was held. But this was not the case (the King knighted Browne faute
de mieux), and it is a mark of Johnson's royalism that he is quick not only to
interpret the bestowal of Browne's knighthood as a sign of the king's
percipience, but also to repeat his implicit approval of Charles in noting the
praise he accorded Browne's medically eminent son.

In another hasty moment, Johnson states that Browne, having lost his
father at an early age, 'was, according to the common fate of orphans,
defrauded by one of his guardians' (CM, 4). This view is corroborated by
Norman Endicott, who shows, in a minutely detailed article, that Browne's
childhood was indeed hard. Endicott argues that 'Dr Johnson's disillusioned

29 Posthumous Works, xv.
feeling about the common fate of orphans is nearer the truth than the modern sentimental approach’. But Johnson’s estimate of the fraud is a wild one. He claims that Browne’s mother, ‘having taken three thousand pounds, as the third part of her husband’s property, left her son, by consequence, six thousand’. This, he observes, was ‘a large fortune for a man destined to learning, at that time when commerce had not yet filled the nation with nominal riches’ (CM, 4). The mathematics of the claim are incorrect. The reality of the situation appears to have been that a third of Browne’s father’s estate was bequeathed to him and his sisters – of whom there were three when the father died, with a fourth born after his death – and Browne’s share would have amounted to around six hundred pounds, not six thousand.

These errors suggest a degree of casualness about Johnson’s composition of the Life of Browne. Yet its origin as a booksellers’ project did not prevent him from taking it seriously; many, if not most, of his published works were initiated by the booksellers, and in each case he felt able to give the task his full attention. The Life contains ample evidence that Johnson was sympathetic to his subject and to the possibilities offered by a life of him. Characteristic of Johnson’s account is the way he digresses to suggest his broader interests and preoccupations. It is as if, after the habit of many a hack writer, he enhances what is essentially a workaday task by making it an opportunity to develop his views on a more diverse range of issues. In this he is preparing for the pattern of his later, more concerted biographical project, the Lives of the Poets, which often expands quite strikingly into a kind of history which is more than merely literary. The Lives are not only essays

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about the individual lives of men, but also essays about life itself: Johnsonian biography is tutelary, moral and personal.¹ The Lives accommodate criticism within the larger movements of a narrative of emergent nationhood, rehearsing the cultural significance of, inter alia, the Civil War, Puritanism, Jacobitism and the Restoration, while taking in phenomena such as the development of publishing and the growth of foreign travel.² This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the account of Browne’s near contemporary Milton, in the course of which Johnson digresses to consider subjects as diverse as education, marriage, Cromwell’s Protectorate, the relationship between public service and private life, the effect of climate on creativity, the danger of being neither Catholic nor Anglican, the triviality of pastoral, the nature of epic poetry, and English heroic verse. Johnson at one point worries lest he be ‘censured for ... digression’, but answers his putative critics by impugning their habit of ‘turning off attention from life to nature’ when in fact the best writing moves ‘from the study of nature to speculations upon life’. He argues the importance of ‘an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth and prove by events the reasonableness of opinions’.³ Predating as it does the Life of Milton by more than twenty years, the Life of Browne appears less certain of the value of such ‘speculations’. Yet Johnson embellishes his narrative with numerous asides; much of what it contains is, strictly speaking,

¹ The early English literary historians were often also Anglican divines – as for instance Thomas and Joseph Warton, Thomas Percy and William Warburton – and it is possible to conclude that literary history seemed, to its earliest English practitioners, an ideal vehicle for conveying moral education.

² In Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History (Athens, Georgia, 1984), John A. Vance describes Johnson’s ‘irrepressible desire to write in the historic vein’ (p. 106) and suggests that ‘A careful reading of the Lives discovers Johnson’s use of historical, rather than biographical, transitional devices’ (p. 104).

³ Lives, I, 100.
superfluous, though it is in these superfluous passages that a good deal of its interest lies.

When Johnson refers to the rise of commerce between the time of Browne’s youth and his own, he executes a typically glancing stroke of social history (CM, 4). As Maximillian Novak has suggested, Johnson’s ‘literary history is infused with an understanding that there can be no history of poetry or the drama that is separated from ordinary existence’. The Life of Browne mentions in passing the primacy of European centres of learning (Montpellier, Padua, Leiden) in the earlier part of the seventeenth century; the interest great writers such as Homer and Virgil have vested in fanciful projects akin to The Garden of Cyrus; the influence of tutors on their students’ careers; and the improvements in natural philosophy achieved by Boyle and Newton (CM, 14-15, 18). Such details are reminders that the history of literature is also the history of men. Johnson does not execute the Life of Browne with rapid economy; rather, his account is driven by his sense of its larger possibilities. Thus when he mentions Browne’s time in Ireland he adds – inessentially, but with a characteristic flourish – that ‘Ireland had, at that time, very little to offer to the observation of a man of letters’. On the subject of travel, he complains that Browne’s failure to leave posterity an account of his European experience reflects a tendency whereby ‘those who are most capable of improving mankind, very frequently neglect to communicate their knowledge’ (CM, 5-6). This is a reminder of Johnson’s understanding of travel as a fundamentally moral process, and the moral

worth of biography is also underlined. Johnson’s discussion of the charges of atheism levelled at Browne becomes the occasion for a general survey of what is commonly taken to constitute atheism, and he censoriously observes the way religious controversy is often adopted by an individual as a means whereby he may make his name, remarking that ‘to play with important truths, to disturb the repose of established tenets, to subtilize objections, and elude proof, is too often the sport of youthful vanity’ (CM, 44). Johnson’s biographies tend to offer such moral positions; and his progression beyond necessary fact into a realm of culturally and morally sensitive judgement is discernible in the *Life of Browne* to a degree only previously seen in his *Life of Savage*. It is this that makes it — with the exception of Savage — the most serious work of biography Johnson executed before the *Lives of the Poets*, and it serves as an opportunity for Johnson to test and put into practice a theory of biography which he had for some time been developing in his periodical essays on the subject.

Nevertheless, Johnson says nothing of some of the most important historical events of Browne’s lifetime. He omits to mention the Civil War, the Interregnum, Laud’s execution, and the rise of Cromwell. Norwich was a centre of Puritan sympathy – its cathedral was desecrated by parliamentarian troops in 1641 – but Johnson ignores this fact and the possibility that Browne played a part in the conflict. Particularly given some of the Life’s gestures in

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35 The moral underpinnings of Johnson’s philosophy of travel are suggested by Thomas M. Curley in his study *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel* (Athens, Georgia, 1976). He notes that Howell’s royalist *Instructions for Forreine Travell* ‘was probably the single most important influence upon Johnson’s philosophy of travel’ (p. 69), and goes on to explain (p. 70) that ‘the emphatic moral and religious tone of the guidebook proved very attractive to him since the work was quoted from memory in the *Life of Browne*, used for moral illustration in *Rambler* 169, and ... paraphrased throughout his major statement on travel in *Idler 97*.'
the direction of a broader history of the time, these omissions may seem
strange, yet Johnson's very first paragraph goes some way towards explaining
these absences. For in his opening, with his emphasis on the writer's 'private
life' and 'peculiarities of nature', on the influence of virtue and of learning,
he straightway establishes a paradigm for a biography which will turn out to
be less concerned with shapes than textures, and less with society than with
man. It is an opening which, to quote Donald Stauffer, 'allies biography with
philosophy, psychology, and literature, rather than with historical annals,
antiquarianism, or science'.36 It is not that Johnson is reluctant to consider the
implications or meaning of Browne's life, but that he wishes to pursue them
less from a historical perspective than from a psychological one. In this
respect, the Life of Browne is an important practical application of the
principles Johnson had quite recently developed in Rambler 60. In his
Rambler essay, he had noted that 'It is frequently objected to relations of
particular lives, that they are not distinguished by any striking or wonderful
vicissitudes'. Browne's life, in which the vicissitudes do not bulk large, is an
important occasion for Johnson's rehearsal of a sense of what really animates
biography. In the Rambler essay he supposed that among those generally
'considered as no proper objects of public regard, ... whatever might have
been their learning, integrity, and piety', was 'the scholar who passed his life
among his books'.37 This neglected scholar seems the very image of Sir
Thomas Browne.

Johnson quotes Browne's profession that his life has been 'a miracle
of thirty years'. Browne offers this as evidence of his life's freedom from

Jersey, 1941), 397.
37 Yale, III, 321. (The essay concludes with a quotation from Sir Matthew Hale.)
striking or wonderful vicissitudes. This causes Johnson to reflect that

There is, undoubtedly, a sense, in which all life is miraculous; as it is a union of powers of which we can image no connexion, a succession of motions of which the first cause must be supernatural.

Johnson’s statement is nothing less than an attempt to supplement Browne’s elusively mystical self-portrait with a religious certitude that is all his own.

He continues:

But life, thus explained, whatever it may have of miracle, will have nothing of fable; and, therefore, the author undoubtedly had regard to something, by which he imagined himself distinguished from the rest of mankind (CM, 12).

Johnson here argues that Browne’s sense of his life’s ‘miracle’ implies an event or experience which the intervening years have obscured: but what he is suggesting, over and above this, is that it would be unacceptable for Browne to suppose himself ‘distinguished from the rest of mankind’ unless there was good reason for him to do so. Johnson, inclined to think of biography as a means of confirming common truths about humanity rather than defamiliarizing its subjects, wishes to suppress the possibility that Browne has an exaggerated impression of his special personal importance.

Thus, as Robert Folkenflik has proposed, ‘Imlac’s advice to the astronomer might have been Johnson’s to Browne: “keep this thought always prevalent, that you are only one atom of the mass of humanity... ”’. 38 Johnson uses his biographies as lessons in mortality: individuals can never be immune to the large inevitable facts of humanity, the most certain of which is death; and without death, there are no biographical subjects. Each biography is, necessarily, a memorial to something past. Browne’s description of his life as

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a miracle deflects attention from the immortal part of himself, namely his works; and Johnson's rebuttal of the 'miracle' reference is an attempt to return critical focus to the written word.

In order to relate Browne's life to the common current of existence, Johnson generalizes about the human condition, and he stresses the normal, the expectable, and the everyday. The Life opens with the observation that Browne 'seems to have had the fortune common among men of letters, of raising little curiosity after his private life' (CM, 3). The remark, though casual, is a reminder that Johnson had occasion to regret the penury of English biography, and it signals his interest in redressing this common fortune which was in fact -- from the perspective of later generations -- a misfortune. The Life of Browne is arguably Johnson's first attempt to sketch the biography of a figure whose largest achievements had been literary, and it is a template for his biographical method or at least an experiment in how to be a literary biographer. In Rambler 60 Johnson had prescribed that 'the business of a biographer is ... to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life' 39. In the Life of Browne he reflects that 'Of every great and eminent character, part breaks forth into publck view, and part lies hid in domestick privacy'. He goes on to argue that

those minute peculiarities which discriminate every man from all others, if they are not recorded by those whom personal knowledge enabled to observe them, are irrecoverably lost (CM, 37).

The purpose of these details is that they point up the differences between men while at the very same time giving a suggestion of what it is that is quintessentially natural, human and above all morally right. Johnson

39 Yale, III, 321.
expresses in his diary the hope that the Lives are 'written ... in such a manner, as may tend to the promotion of piety'. The emphasis on what is uncommon in a person cannot but clarify what he and his peers have in common, and this interest in shared human response and experience is palpable when Johnson anticipates the sympathy with the common reader which he later, more famously, admits in the lives of Somerville and Gray, in remarking that Edward Browne's Travels is a book he 'cannot recommend ... as likely to give much pleasure to common readers' (CM, 35-6).

When Johnson refers to the common reader he acknowledges the power of readers and the mutability of concepts such as 'taste' and 'audience'. In the Lives he suggests that the common reader will be alienated by the metaphysical poets and by Butler's Hudibras. Johnson first uses the term in his Plan of the Dictionary, and is widely credited – notably by Virginia Woolf – with having coined it, though it is worth noting that in the Life of Browne Johnson quotes Whitefoot's remark that in his reading of history Browne's 'observations were singular, not taken notice of by common readers' (CM, 39). The emergence of the common reader reflects the decline of the intimate reader-writer literary relations embodied in manuscript culture – a decline that may have been partly responsible for Sir Thomas Browne's diminished status in the eighteenth century. For its part, Edward Browne's Travels is perhaps unappealing to the common reader because it is aimed at specialists and thus depends on the author's predetermined view of his audience. Clarence Tracy has argued that 'the common reader is a non-specialist, a person eager to learn but with no need for detailed

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40 Yale, I, 294.  
By the time of the *Life of Browne* Johnson has, in the *Dictionary*, created a resource for readers of just this kind. If he plays up the 'common' features of Sir Thomas it may be in order to compensate for the uncommonness perceived in his works by commentators who, like the *Monthly Review*, consider Browne's writing 'calculated' for the 'learned'.

Johnson's recognition of the common reader is an acknowledgement of a new kind of audience. W. R. Keast has emphasized that

> The importance of the reader in Johnson's scheme ... lies not merely in the fact that literature has a pleasurable end, for such an end has been stated by critics in whose work the reader plays a relatively unimportant role, but in the fact that Johnson is seeking a stable basis in nature on which to rest critical inquiry and judgement: *the audience is the only fixed element in the process*; for while nature has invariable features, they can be identified only through general recognition, and while poets may excel in the power to discover and represent nature, we become aware of this capacity only through its effect upon us.

In the case of Sir Thomas Browne, the judgement of the reader is invoked because there is a tradition of understanding Browne as a specialized or rarefied writer. If this tradition is to be overcome, Browne has to be repositioned. Edward Browne's *Travels* may not have 'common' appeal, but Thomas Browne is intent on examining issues which do have common appeal. Significantly, Johnson refers to *Pseudodoxia* neither by its Latin title nor by the informal title 'Vulgar Errors', choosing instead to refer to it as 'ENQUIRIES INTO VULGAR AND COMMON ERRORS' (*CM*, 16). In attacking 'common errors' Browne is implicitly creating a textbook of redress which is for 'common' use, and Johnson here chooses, somewhat wishfully,
to emphasize what he considers to be the true common appeal of Browne's writings.\footnote{Virginia Woolf's definition of the common reader is rather different from this. It deprecates even as it elevates:}

The democratic possibilities of readership are threatened, as Johnson fully perceives, by that one quality of Browne's writing which is at once his greatest distinction and his most alienating attribute – namely, his style. This is particularly visible in his treatment of Browne's language. Rather than illustrating the peculiarities of Browne's prose by quoting it, Johnson describes it, using an abundance of adjectives and some distinctly physical imagery. He gives the impression of being at once taxed and enthralled by its peculiarities; in trying to depict it, rather than to exemplify it, he suggests a personal, nuanced engagement – a desire to understand, rather than merely to know. Browne's prose is described as

\begin{quote}
a tissue of many languages; a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another.
\end{quote}

The judgement anticipates Johnson's description of metaphysical poetry in the *Life of Cowley*:

\begin{quote}
The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom
\end{quote}

\footnote{The common reader, as Dr Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar. He is worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously.... Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure, his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out; but ... [he may have] some say in the final distribution of poetical honours.}

Woolf begins by claiming that her definition is derived from Johnson, but hers is a less democratic perspective. See Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), 11-12.
pleased.\textsuperscript{46}

In both cases Johnson is troubled by heterogeneity and violence, yet Browne’s prose is deemed to be rich in innovations that are ‘pleasing’, and the ‘uncommon words and expressions’ are to a degree excused by Browne’s ‘uncommon sentiments’ (CM, 49).\textsuperscript{47} Johnson is explicit about his ambivalence. Browne’s style is ‘vigorous, but rugged; ... learned, but pedantic; ... deep, but obscure’.\textsuperscript{48} The balanced clauses of Johnson’s description reflect his recognition of the need to find an equipoise between his conflicting and extreme responses. He recognizes the qualities of Browne’s prose as a peculiar trait of this one author, yet also observes that he ‘fell into an age, in which our language began to lose the stability which it had obtained in the time of Elizabeth’.\textsuperscript{49} Browne and Milton are identified as key figures responsible for ‘moulding’ English to their own ends, but the language ‘was considered by every writer as a subject on which he might try his plastick skill’. Browne is considered, in his very idiosyncrasies, to embody his age’s affection for experiment; his quirks and mannerisms are symptomatic, though not typical, of a literary culture less trammelled than Johnson’s own by notions of polite discourse, as well as more intrigued by its language’s range of expressive potential. When Johnson remarks of Browne’s

\textsuperscript{46} Lives, I, 20.

\textsuperscript{47} In \textit{Rambler} 208 (the final number) Johnson explains that in his own writing ‘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’ (Yale, V, 319).

\textsuperscript{48} ‘Rugged’ is probably being used here in the fifth sense given in the Dictionary: ‘Rough or harsh to the ear’. The second illustrative quotation under this sense is an observation by Dryden that ‘A monosyllable line turns verse to prose, and even that prose is rugged and unharmonious’. Though what Dryden describes is the very opposite of what Browne tends to practise – monosyllables, not polysyllables – the suggestion is that ruggedness is a property of sound, or an infelicitous quality that compromises readers’ appreciation.

\textsuperscript{49} In the preface to the Dictionary Johnson argues that ‘From the authors which rose in the time of Elizabeth, a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance’. He cites as examples Hooker, Bacon, Raleigh, Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare. See \textit{MW}, 319-20.
'exotick' coinages that 'many ... [are] useful and significant ... ; but many superfluous', he expresses his mixed feelings regarding neologisms and novel usage (CM, 48).\textsuperscript{50} Browne 'has many "verba ardentia", forcible expressions' (the reinforcement of the sense through a conscious near-tautology is so close to the style of Browne as to seem a sort of joke on Johnson's part), and these he would never have found, but by venturing to the utmost verge of propriety; and flights which would never have been reached, but by one who had very little fear of the shame of falling (CM, 49).

Johnson seems at once intrigued, admiring and scandalized: Browne profanes the proper logic of the language, yet finally achieves his desired results by virtue of a shocking brio which is radically at odds with the tidy propriety of the model stylists such as Addison whose principles Johnson is at least half-inclined to embrace.

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It is no coincidence that the \textit{Life}, completed so soon after the publication of the \textit{Dictionary}, should manifest such concern for Browne's language. But what is striking is that Johnson seems to admire it almost in spite of himself. When he writes of 'terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another' he is criticising Browne's prose in a similar way to that in which he criticises metaphysical poetry and its 'dearly bought' effects. In this case he is talking about language, whereas in the other he is discussing ideas, and he immediately concedes that Browne

\textsuperscript{50} The supposedly superfluous 'paralogical' is omitted from the \textit{Dictionary}, but 'arthritical analogies' (one of the phrases 'so obscure, that they conceal his meaning rather than explain it') is included.
‘must, however, be confessed to have augmented our philosophical diction’.

The words ‘must’, ‘however’ and ‘confessed’ are telltale; the first movement of Johnson’s criticism here is away from Browne and against him, but he is forced to make concessions, to give in to what ‘must ... be confessed’. As I suggested in my Introduction, contemporaries and later critics have identified a kinship between Johnson’s style and Browne’s. Boswell was of the opinion that Johnson’s prose was ‘much formed upon that of the great writers in the last century, Hooker, Bacon, Sanderson, Hakewell, and others’. He added that

Sir Thomas Brown, whose life Johnson wrote, was remarkably fond of Anglo-Latian diction; and to this example we are to ascribe Johnson’s sometimes indulging himself in this kind of phraseology.51

In another context he wrote of ‘those words which he sometimes took a pleasure in adopting, in imitation of Sir Thomas Browne’, while suggesting that instances of Johnson’s Browneism are in fact scarce. He cited the example offered to him by the historian Robertson, who noticed in Johnson’s life of Frederick the Great a reference to soldiers being commanded to marry tall women ‘that they might propagate procerity’, and noted that ‘for this Anglo-Latian word ... [he had], however, the authority of Addison’.52

Boswell’s deflation of this example (the humour of which he fails to detect) does not change the fact that he was conscious of the affinity between the styles of Johnson and Browne. In his Biographical Sketch of Dr Samuel Johnson (1785), Thomas Tyers mentions Johnson’s essays and observes:

‘There is, indeed, too much Latin in his English. He seems to have caught the infectious language of Sir Thomas Browne, whose works he read, in order to

51 *Life*, I, 219, 221-2.
52 Ibid., 308.
write his life'. Tyers appears unaware that Johnson would have been more likely to have familiarized himself with at least some of Browne’s works for the purposes of writing the *Dictionary*. He is right to discern the resemblance between the two men’s styles, but does not see that their shared fondness for Latinisms may be conditioned by shared interests in precision of diction, in neo-classicism, in achieving particular effects of sound and cadence, and perhaps even in indulging a certain sort of amusing verbal playfulness.

What nevertheless seems to trouble Johnson is that Browne’s ever-playful style has the capacity to make serious things seem slight and slight ones serious. Discussing *The Garden of Cyrus*, he holds the author’s thesis up to ridicule, and appears somewhat contemptuous of the lazy reader who would allow himself to be gulled by it:

> as a man once resolved upon ideal discoveries, seldom searches long in vain, he finds his favourite figure [the quincunx] in almost every thing, ... so that a reader, not watchful against the power of his infusions, would imagine that decussation was the great business of the world, and that nature and art had no other purpose than to exemplify and imitate a Quincunx (*CM*, 24).

Yet this dismissal of the tract is sandwiched between less damning comments. In introducing his critique, Johnson reflects that ‘Some of the most pleasing performances have been produced by learning and genius exercised upon subjects of little importance’, and he locates *The Garden* in a tradition to which works by Homer, Virgil and Spenser also belong (*CM*, 23).

The implication would appear to be that Browne is actively aware that his essay is no more than a sustained piece of whimsy, buoyed by an existing tradition of such *jeux d’esprit*; it seems that Johnson, recognizing Browne’s

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awareness of this, accepts and even warms to it. For having laughed off Browne’s thesis, he concedes that ‘The fanciful sports of great minds are never without some advantage to knowledge’, and he proceeds to pay brief tribute to Browne’s skills as ‘a very accurate observer of the modes of germination’ and a nice student of ‘the evolutions of the parts of plants’ (CM, 24-5). Johnson is here forgiving Browne’s extravagance, while at the same time building the ambiguity of his personal response into his critique. The key word ‘fanciful’ embodies the mixture of interest, awkwardness, amusement and scepticism that attends Johnson’s appreciation. In the Dictionary ‘fanciful’ is defined as ‘imaginative; rather guided by imagination than reason’ and as ‘dictated by the imagination, not the reason; full of wild images’; ‘fancifulness’ is ‘addiction to the pleasures of the imagination’ (with an illustration from Hale); and the root noun ‘fancy’, defined as ‘imagination’ and ‘thought’, is also glossed, with examples from Dryden, Bacon and Mortimer, as ‘caprice’, ‘false notion’ and ‘something that pleases or entertains without real use or value’. Usefulness, value and reason are qualities that Johnson hopes to find in literature. He is pleased to find them in Browne. Moreover, he is embarrassed when, as here, he does not find them, and is embarrassed not to be more troubled by the fact of his not finding them.

The attitude to Browne that emerges from the Life is thus by no means unequivocal. Donald Greene has argued that ‘Johnson’s treatment of Browne is so detached that it gives the impression almost of coolness’. He suggests that Johnson treats the positive qualities of Religio Medici ‘rather perfunctorily’, and claims that his picture of Browne ‘is far too judicious to
please the full-fledged Browne enthusiast'. The defining characteristic of the *Life of Browne*, however, is its balance – not so much coolness or ambivalence as an awareness of the tensions and dichotomies that exist within Browne's thought. Johnson's critical equipoise is a tacit acknowledgement of Browne's essential 'dividedness' and love of paradox; Browne's style frequently explores deuteroscopies and ambiguities, brashly doubling up adjectives or making outrageously malleable statements ('I could easily believe ...', 'I am half of the opinion ...'). What Greene terms Johnson's detachment seems closer to a manifest awareness of Browne's divided idiom and mentality, and Johnson's somewhat inconclusive treatment of Browne is not a symptom of a lack of interest. Rather, it borders on being a sort of reverential parody of the qualities Browne's writing often embodies.

Summing up its character, Johnson declares that

His exuberance of knowledge, and plenitude of ideas, sometimes obstruct the tendency of his reasoning, and the clearness of his decisions: on whatever subject he employed his mind, there started up immediately so many images before him, that he lost one by grasping another. His memory supplied him with so many illustrations, parallel or dependent notions, that he was always starting into collateral considerations; but the spirit and vigour of his pursuit always gives delight; and the reader follows him, without reluctance, thro' his mazes, in themselves flowery and pleasing, and ending at the point originally in view (*CM*, 47).

The final words consider the response of the reader, and Johnson perfectly evokes the experience of reading Browne by describing it in a way which itself mirrors the labyrinthine process of Browne's thought. In *The Garden of Cyrus* Browne conceives of the search for truth as a labyrinth, and Johnson's description of the experience of reading Browne seems consciously

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55 K, I, 226.
to participate in Browne’s imagery, with its hints of the surfeited and
circuitous, the reference to mazes and the copious Latinisms.

Linguistic mannerisms entirely of Johnson’s own also colour the Life.
He refers on three occasions to Browne’s ‘performances’. Of Religio Medici
he reports that ‘when it was written, it happened to him as to others, he was
too much pleased with his performance, not to think that it might please
others as much’ (CM, 7). Johnson subsequently suggests that its reception
encouraged Browne: ‘the success of this performance was such, as might
naturally encourage the author to new undertakings’ (CM, 13). Later he
argues, while considering The Garden of Cyrus, that ‘some of the most
pleasing performances have been produced by learning and genius exercised
upon subjects of little importance’ (CM, 23). To a modern audience the word
carries implications of drama – even of histrionics – but the Dictionary’s first
given sense is ‘completion of something designed; execution of something
promised’. Clearly it is in the sense of ‘composition; work’ that Johnson uses
the word, but it has an extra resonance, carrying as it does the faintest note of
approval, of the critic’s apparent acceptance that Browne’s performances are
promises fulfilled. Equally striking is Johnson’s repeated use of the adjective
‘great’. Having suggested, with The Garden of Cyrus in mind, that ‘the
fanciful sports of great minds are never without some advantage to
knowledge’, he proceeds in quick succession to commend the ‘great nicety’
of Browne’s observation and the ‘great learning’ and ‘great justness’ with
which he discourses on languages. He notes how Browne’s slighter pieces
‘gratify the mind with the picture of a great scholar, turning his learning into
amusement’ and ‘shew, upon how great a variety of enquiries the same mind
has been successfully employed' (CM, 24, 25, 28, 32). Again, the word in itself does not signify much, but its iteration ensures that it sticks to Browne like a formulaic epithet. Isobel Grundy has argued that

Johnson frequently applies the adjective great to Browne, taking his stature as assumed, though he only once, when writing about literary style, elaborates or explains.... He dwells repeatedly on Browne’s attention to the by-ways of scholarship, assuming their pettiness as he assumes Browne’s greatness; he does not attack him for this, but by defending him reveals that he supposes defence to be called for.\(^{56}\)

Johnson’s discussion of Sir Thomas Browne’s marriage continues the pattern of seeming to tell us as much about the biographer as it does about his subject. Johnson recalls the wish voiced by Browne in Religio Medici that ‘I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction’ (RM, 106) and wonders if his bride was ignorant of it, ‘was pleased with the conquest of so formidable a rebel’, or ‘like most others ... married upon mingled motives, between convenience and inclination’ (CM, 15-16).\(^{57}\) The phrases Johnson quotes are from a section of Religio which begins ‘I was never yet once, and commend their resolutions who never marry twice, not that I disallow of second marriage’ (RM, 106). Browne very possibly wrote this sentence in recollection of his mother’s unsatisfactory second marriage to Sir Thomas Dutton.\(^{58}\) But whatever their relation to the details of his life,

\(^{56}\) Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and The Scale of Greatness*, 65.

\(^{57}\) The *Life of Johnson* and other sources record numerous remarks on the subject. The more relevant of these include his reference to an unidentified gentleman’s second marriage (after an unhappy first) as ‘the triumph of hope over experience’ (Life, II, 128); the proposal that there should be an alternative marriage service, since the ‘refined’ standard version was inappropriate to ‘matches of convenience, of which there are many’ (JM, I, 246); and the suggestion that ‘it is so far from natural for a man and woman to live in a state of marriage, that we find all the motives which they have for remaining in that connection, and the constraints which civilised society imposes to prevent separation, are hardly sufficient to keep them together’ (Life, II, 165).

\(^{58}\) It was Dutton, a soldier notable chiefly for having killed his rival Sir Hatton Cheke in a duel, who was supposed to have cheated Browne out of his inheritance. Ironically, he was in the habit of signing his correspondence – apparently a gallimaufry of illiteracies – ‘poor / Thom Dutton’.  

103
Browne’s final words could not have failed to arrest his biographer, for
Johnson had wrestled, since his own wife’s death in March 1752, with the
idea of remarrying. Diary entries excluded by Boswell from his account of
Johnson’s activities in 1753 mention this, and although entries for later years
emphasize the pious remembrance of his first wife rather than the intention of
taking a second, it is clear that Johnson’s intelligence was exercised in the
years following her death by thoughts of remarriage, the mingled motives that
preceded marriage, commendable resolutions and the odd business of
‘conjunction’.

On 22 April 1753 (which was Easter Sunday) Johnson wrote in his
diary:

As I purpose to try on Monday to seek a new wife without any
derogation from dear Tetty’s memory I purpose at sacrament
in the morning to take my leave of Tetty in a solemn
commendation of her soul to God.

The next day he recalled: ‘During the whole service I was never once
distracted by any thoughts of any other woman or with my design of a new
wife’. To record one’s resistance to distraction is to acknowledge the very
real possibility of succumbing to distraction; Johnson was not congratulating
himself so much as agonizing about the legitimacy of his ‘design’, which was
in any case affected by circumstances utterly beyond his control. As Donald
and Mary Hyde point out in their pamphlet Dr Johnson’s Second Wife,
perhaps the most obvious candidate for Johnson’s affections was Hill
Boothby; but 1753

... [her] because of the death on March 12 of her intimate,
Mary Meynell, who had for some years been married to

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59 Yale, I, 52-3.
William Fitzherbert. Miss Boothby was named sole executor and residual legatee. Miss Boothby may have been obliged, at a time when she was much in Johnson’s thoughts, to direct her attentions elsewhere, given her responsibilities regarding her deceased friend’s estate. Alternatively, Johnson may have felt awkward about courting a woman who was set to acquire some wealth. When she died, early in 1756, Johnson felt the loss deeply. He had not only to negotiate the loss of his wife, but also that of the woman he had probably had in mind to take her place. As he continued his relations with a bevy of literary women – of whom at this time the most notable was Charlotte Lennox – and afforded them his valuable patronage, he cannot have failed to find a special resonance both in Browne’s resolution and in his inability to hold himself to it.

This is not the only instance of Johnson’s apparent emotional sympathy with Browne. Johnson quotes Browne in numbers 39 and 50 of the

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60 Donald and Mary Hyde, *Dr Johnson’s Second Wife* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1953), 11.
61 The Dictionary expresses strikingly uncomfortable feelings on the subject of marriage. The word ‘married’ is defined as ‘conjugal; connubial’, and there follows a single example of this sense, from Dryden. The quotation consists of a single line, ‘Thus have you shun’d the marry’d state’. The provision of an example that refers to absence, rather than presence, of connubiality, seems quirky. In fact, the line is taken from Dryden’s ‘Epistle the Fifteenth. To My Honoured Kinsman John Driden ...’, a poem which opens with the lines

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Promoting concord, and composing strife,
Lord of yourself, uncumbered with a wife....
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The poem salutes the kinsman’s *unmarried* condition, describing wives as burdensome, and asserting that

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man and woman, though in one they grow,
Yet, first or last, return again to two.
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Moreover, the line that completes the couplet begun by Johnson’s excerpted line about having shunned the married state is ‘Trusting as little as you can to fate’: marriage is presented as a fateful union, born of accident and fraught with hidden danger, and the sentiment is traced back to Original Sin, as Dryden reflects that

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Minds are so hardly matched, that even the first,
Though paired by heaven, in Paradise were cursed.
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Adventurer. In Adventurer 39, dated 20 March 1753, he discusses sleep, and his final paragraph is:

Sleep has often been mentioned as the image of death; 'so like it', says Sir Thomas Brown, 'that I dare not trust it without my prayers': their resemblance is, indeed, apparent and striking; they both, when they seize the body, leave the soul at liberty; and wise is he that remembers of both, that they can be made safe and happy only by virtue.  

A year after his wife's death (and while he was thinking carefully about taking a second wife), Johnson chooses to quote Browne in the midst of a meditation on death and virtue. The words quoted by Johnson come from a section of Religio Medici which follows quite shortly after the musings on marriage, and in which Browne reflects that 'We tearme sleepe a death, and yet it is waking that kils us, and destroyes those spirits that are the house of life' (RM, 114). Browne continues by quoting a poem he uses to help him sleep, which

is the dormitive I take to bedward, I need no other Laudanum than this to make me sleepe; after which I close mine eyes in security, content to take my leave of the Sunne, and sleepe unto the resurrection.

Johnson’s anxiety about sleep, his recognition that it is an anxiety he shares with Browne, his presumable awareness of Browne’s entire thoughts on the subject, and his assertion that virtue is the one thing capable of making sleep secure, add up to suggest more about Johnson than they do about Browne. Significantly, he turns to Browne again in print within six weeks. In Adventurer 50, dated 28 April 1753, he describes the treatment accorded to liars, and observes that 'it is the peculiar condition of falsehood, to be equally detested by the good and bad'. He continues: “The devils”, says Sir Thomas

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62 Yale, II, 351.
Brown, "do not tell lies to one another; for truth is necessary to all societies; nor can the society of hell subsist without it". The footnote in the Yale edition refers to a piece printed in the *Academy* in 1894, in which Lionel Johnson points out that the passage Johnson has in mind is from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*:

> But of such a diffused nature, and so large is the Empire of Truth, that it hath place within the walls of Hell, and the Devils themselves are daily forced to practise it ... And so also in Moral verities, although they deceive us, they lie not unto each other; as well understanding that all community is continued by Truth, and that of Hell cannot subsist without it.

The large empire of truth is a formula entirely Johnsonian in flavour, and it is striking that at this difficult time, when he had need of guidance and reassurance, he seems to have looked for it in Browne.

Moreover, Johnson reproduces Whitefoot’s claim that Browne’s wife was ‘of such symmetrical proportion to her worthy husband, both in the graces of her body and mind, that they seemed to come together by a kind of natural magnetism’ (*CM*, 15). Johnson’s periodical essays contain more than one example of ideal unions constructed along such lines. In *Idler* 100, one of his many experiments in imaginary autobiography, Johnson conjures up the figure of Tim Warner, who argues the importance of discovering a golden mean in relationships – the ideal wife being one ‘in whom nature and reason had reached that happy mediocrity which is equally remote from exuberance and deficienc[e]’. In *Rambler* 167, he conceives the figures of Hymenaeus and Tranquilla, who consider their marriage an image of perfection. ‘We ... [are] less deceived in our connubial hopes’, they insist, ‘than many who enter into the same state, [in] that we have allowed our minds to form no

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63 Yale, II, 362.
64 Ibid., 306.
unreasonable expectations'. They continue by asserting that

> tho’ our characters beheld at a distance, exhibit ... [a] general resemblance, yet a nearer inspection discovers such a dissimilitude of our habitudes and sentiments, as leaves each some peculiar advantages, and affords that *concordia discors*, that suitable disagreement which is always necessary to intellectual harmony.\textsuperscript{65}

The suggestion here that the *concordia discors* is the essence of a harmonious relationship reverses the terms of the formula ‘Wit ... may be ... considered as a kind of *discordia concors*’ later offered in the *Life of Cowley*.\textsuperscript{66} To reverse its terms is not to reverse its polarity, but it does create a different emphasis, and although Johnson is to some degree satirizing both the above positions, he appears to be making a serious point. Jean Hagstrum suggests that

> In applying the ancient idea of elemental strife-harmony to marriage, Johnson uses not Manilius' *discordia concors* but Horace's *concordia discors*.... Why did he prefer *concord* as the substantive? The answer appears if we consider the absolutely basic importance which Johnson attaches to similitude in lasting human relationships.\textsuperscript{67}

He goes on to argue that

> The union of likeness and difference in human relationships Johnson called *concordia discors*; the union of the natural and the new, the familiar and the unfamiliar in wit he called *discordia concors*. The difference is suggestive. In the first concord is the substantive, in the second discord. It is as though Johnson is saying that in human life the virtues of similarity are fundamental and can indeed be made generative and productive by human difference; but the foundation must always be conformity of idea, taste, habit, and inclination. In literature or art, where imagination enables the writer to convey to his reader the ‘energies of passion’, one can give greater rein to variety, dissimilarity, and the crowding in of diverse and novel impressions. In unions of love and friendship, the ‘effervescence of contrary qualities’ must be

\textsuperscript{65} Yale, V, 123-4.
\textsuperscript{66} *Lives*, I, 20.
\textsuperscript{67} Jean H. Hagstrum, ‘Johnson and the *Concordia Discors* of Human Relationships’, in Burke and Kay (eds), *The Unknown Samuel Johnson*, 42.

108
Johnson’s descriptions, in *Idler* 100 and especially *Rambler* 167, of forms of marriage which play with similitude and the subtleties of difference, seem perhaps to owe a debt of inspiration to the description of Browne and his wife in Whitefoot. Johnson, as we have seen, later reproduces a whole section of Whitefoot’s account, but the description of Browne’s marriage, introduced on its merits at this earlier stage, was one which Johnson felt happy to accept and found memorable enough to quote unchanged.

The connection between Johnson’s thinking on marriage and the experience of Browne is intriguing, but there are two key areas in which Johnson and Browne have a more clearly identifiable affinity. These are the large matters of faith and what we would usually call ‘science’. Each man is at pains to reconcile the two. In the chapters that follow I shall explore the relationship between the two men’s thinking on these subjects; for the moment it is essential only to note the way Johnson treats Browne’s natural philosophy and religious convictions in the *Life*. Their kinship as natural philosophers resides in the commitment they both have to the pursuit of experimental knowledge. Browne’s is compromised, in Johnson’s eye, by its diffuse applications, but the uprooting of error and the dissemination of new discoveries are fundamentally moral. One of the habits Johnson conspicuously admires in Browne is his research. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is described as ‘a work, which ... arose not from fancy and invention, but from observation and books’, and its composition ‘must have been the collection of years, ... which arose gradually to its present bulk by the daily aggregation of

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68 Hagstrum, ‘Johnson and the *Concordia Discors*’, 51.
new particles of knowledge' (*CM*, 16-17). Even if Johnson did not understand
the way in which the work evolved, he grasped the diligence with which
Browne pursued it, and his emphasis on Browne’s use of his own powers of
observation and the materials gathered in books is indicative both of his
belief in the value of the written word and of his empiricism. ‘He appears’,
says Johnson, ‘to have been willing to pay labour for truth’. And though in
the description that follows of an experiment performed by Browne to test the
‘flying rumour of sympathetick needles, by which, suspended over a circular
alphabet, distant friends or lovers might correspond’, Johnson is dismissive of
what he sees as an unnecessarily ‘operose’ (laborious) undertaking, the
respect for research remains (*CM*, 18-19). *Hydriotaphia* is regarded as the
best example of Browne’s reading and his powers of memory, and

it is scarcely to be imagined, how many particulars he has
amassed together, in a treatise which seems to have been
occasionally written; and for which, therefore, no materials
could have been previously collected (*CM*, 20).

Taking Browne’s work as a whole, Johnson considers the ‘esteem of
posterity’ certain ‘while learning shall have any reverence among men’.

There is, he decides,

no science, in which he does not discover some skill; and
scarce any kind of knowledge, profane or sacred, abstruse or
elegant, which he does not appear to have cultivated with
success (*CM*, 47).

Johnson aspires to this. He may not always be persuaded by Browne’s
conclusions, and there are times when he has cause to question his method.

Nevertheless, Browne’s improvement of knowledge, along with his
understanding that truth is best discovered by being tested, appeals to the
democratizing, popularizing, humanistic instinct in him which seeks to
deliver knowledge into the hands of the multitude. Further, it appeals to his sense that the essentially doubting practice of the ‘test’ may be an ultimately creative instrument.

The Life concludes with a lengthy discussion of Browne’s religion. Even though it was written as an introduction to Christian Morals, the Life pays no specific attention to this work; but in discussing Browne’s religion, Johnson clearly draws on the views and values contained in Christian Morals. He explains that in Browne’s works there are ‘passages, from which some have taken occasion to rank him among Deists, and others among Atheists’ (CM, 49). He recognizes that Browne was a victim of other writers’ interest in finding controversies to prosecute. As Michael Hunter has noted, in the mid-seventeenth century ‘“atheism” is a very diffuse phenomenon, the more so because it could easily be extended to include views and attitudes that were thought – if only by implication – to lead in an irreligious direction’. The condemnation, then, was unspecific, but even if the word ‘atheism’ did not imply anything diabolic, it stuck, and it is clear from the length at which Johnson deals with Browne’s religious beliefs and the controversy they engendered that this issue more than any other had besmirched Browne’s reputation, resulting in the very sort of misrepresentation which it is the task of biography to overcome.70 Browne, though viewed as dangerously unorthodox, was held up to ridicule as well as anti-latitudinarian opprobrium. Alexander Ross’s systematic refutation of Religio Medici in Medicus Medicatus takes a strong but almost flippantly

70 Indeed, the section on Browne’s religion begins ‘There remains yet an objection against the writings of Browne, more formidable than the animadversions of criticism’. Johnson is recognizing that literary criticism is a less powerful tool – both of destruction and redress – than the hostility of adverse politics and dogma.
dismissive line: ‘this may be indeed religio Medici, the religion of the House of Medicis, not of the Church of England’. In the face of such casual smears, Johnson attempts to reclaim for Browne not just the truth of his faith but his essential seriousness.

In order to reaffirm Browne’s seriousness Johnson quotes from him liberally in this final part of the life. Browne’s convictions are set out on the page so that the reader can decide for himself about their merit. But Johnson makes it clear where his sympathies lie. The experience of preparing Christian Morals for the press could not have failed to equip him with a battery of reasons to accept Browne’s good faith. It is, after all, a Christian work and a moral one. As Huntley discerns,

The noun, ‘Morals’, of its title describes the historical, classical, humanely reasoned half of it, and the adjective, ‘Christian’, describes the other half: where something not ourselves has raised the morals of the greatest pagans to a point beyond recta ratio.

The book abounds with strong moral precepts: ‘Nothing can be said hyperbolically of God’; ‘Calculate thyself within’; ‘Though the world be histrionical, and most men live ironically, yet be thou what thou singly art, and personate only thyself’; ‘Look beyond Antoninus, and terminate not thy morals in Seneca or Epictetus’; ‘Be a moralist of the mount, an Epictetus in the faith, and christianize thy notions’; ‘Think not thy time short in this world, since the world itself is not long’ (CM, 146, 153, 179, 181, 182, 197).

Browne’s tone is decisive, his manner certain. Johnson, whose pursuit of

71 Ross, Medicus Medicatus, 2.
72 The Literary Magazine review already cited quotes the final pages of the Life of Browne in full. Given Johnson’s involvement with this publication, the emphasis on this final section of the Life can be read as an indication of which part of it was considered — by him, or at least by those who were intimate with him and his work on the Life — most vitally important.
73 Huntley, Sir Thomas Browne, 228.
religious truth embraced Antoninus and Seneca and Epictetus (all of whom Boswell has him quote in the Life), would have seen in Browne’s admonitions and assertions something potentially dangerous but ultimately enriching – a conversion to Christian ends of a whole history of moral teaching, a ‘Christianization’ of ordinances and words of guidance mined from a plethora of disparate and often curious sources. The morality he advocates is an active one; the frequent imperatives are calls to arms. Johnson, we know, believed in active religion, a belief perpetually visible in his repeated written undertakings to pray and read the Bible and extend or enhance the diligence of his faith. The activity of faith is something the two men share.

Johnson’s final paragraph begins: ‘The opinions of every man must be learned from himself: concerning his practice, it is safest to trust the evidence of others. Where these testimonies concur, no higher degree of historical certainty can be obtained.’ The biographer reveals his understanding of what constitutes proof – or what proves beyond reasonable doubt – and continues:

they apparently concur to prove that BROWNE was A ZEALOUS ADHERENT TO THE FAITH OF CHRIST, that HE LIVED IN OBEDIENCE TO HIS LAWS, AND DIED IN CONFIDENCE OF HIS MERCY (CM, 54-5).

Trusting the evidence of Christian Morals, and trusting the evidence of Whitefoot, Johnson feels able to annul all negative imputations. These final words, printed in upper case, are an emphatically capitalized and thus explicitly active statement of acceptance; they mark Johnson’s final, decisive approval of Browne, and are akin to an epitaph, a funeral oration, or a formal pardon. Johnson’s advocacy of Browne’s position suggests he is determined to recover his reputation from dubious criticism and a history of
misunderstanding and neglect. Furthermore, they suggest not only that he
shares certain religious and moral values with Browne, but also that his
sympathy extends to include the principles, habits and assumptions embedded
in Browne's natural philosophy.
The 'uniqueness' of Sir Thomas Browne consists, according to Margaret Wiley, in 'his decision to present himself, a man seeking the truth', rather than present the conclusions at which he arrives.  

Certainly, the process of 'seeking', with all its meanders and complexities, is central to Browne's natural philosophy. Truth, for both Browne and Johnson, is the goal of a journey. 'We cannot make truth, it is our business only to find it,' Johnson declares in one of his sermons.  

The theme recurs throughout the Dictionary, which abounds with quotations dealing explicitly with the search for truth. In Rambler 137 Johnson declares that

It is the proper ambition of the heroes in literature to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge by discovering and conquering new regions of the intellectual world. To the success of such undertakings perhaps some degree of fortuitous happiness is necessary, which no man can promise or procure to himself; and therefore doubt and irresolution may be forgiven in him that ventures into the unexplored abysses of truth, and attempts to find his way through the fluctuations of uncertainty, and the conflicts of contradiction.

The process Johnson describes here seems like an adventure; the language – 'heroes', 'discovering', 'conquering', 'ventures', 'unexplored abysses', 'conflicts' – suggests at once the world of the explorer and that of the crusader.

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2 Yale, XIV, 223.
3 For instance, under 'well', Locke's 'What a pleasure is a well-directed study in the search of truth'; under 'quirk', Watts's 'Conceits, puns, quirks or quibbles, jests and repartees may agreeably entertain, but have no place in the search after truth'; and under 'to take up', Glanvil's 'The mind of men being naturally timorous of truth, and yet averse to that diligent search necessary to its discovery, it must needs take up short of what is really so'.
4 Yale, IV, 362.
Johnson's imagery when he deals with the search for truth tends to suggest that it is an arduous proceeding. Unlike Browne, he derives little happiness from difficulty and uncertainty, yet like him he is conscious both of the inevitability of being in a state of doubt and of the epistemological and moral value of attempting to resolve doubts. Moreover, Johnson knows that doubting is a protection against complacent habits of thought. While it is usually the pattern of his moral writings that they reinforce received wisdom, he is perpetually seeking to renovate or revitalize that wisdom by examining its structure and foundations. In the opening paragraph of *Taxation No Tyranny* he proposes the general truth that

> In all the parts of human knowledge, whether terminating in science merely speculative, or operating upon life private or civil, are admitted some fundamental principles, or common axioms, which being generally received are little doubted, and being little doubted have been rarely proved.\(^5\)

Here he articulates his perception that doubt is a necessary condition for proof. Secondhand beliefs are without value; he insists that truths be experienced, not just inherited. A comparable statement regarding the necessity of proof is to be found in the *Life of Dryden*, where he observes that

> A writer who obtains his full purpose loses himself in his own lustre. Of an opinion which is no longer doubted, the evidence ceases to be examined.\(^6\)

Doubting can be equated with testing; that which is untested is unproven. The most cherished projects of both Johnson and Browne thrive on this procedure, and ultimately it is the act of attempting to stabilize truth that is morally and scientifically significant, rather than its success or otherwise. As I shall suggest more fully in due course, Johnson realises during his work on

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\(^5\) Yale, X, 411.

\(^6\) *Lives*, I, 411.
the *Dictionary* that he cannot fix the language, and Browne in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that he is unable to eradicate error. But the process of trying to achieve these ends is itself worthwhile. Browne recognizes that some matters are beyond resolution. ‘The wisest heads,’ he claims towards the end of *Religio*, 'prove, at last, almost all Scepticks, and stand like *Janus* in the field of knowledge' (*RM*, 105). The same conviction is stated in *Pseudodoxia*, VI, 6:

> Thus have I declared some public and private conceptions in the enquiry of ... truth; but the certainty hereof let the Arithmetick of the last day determine (*PE*, I, 483).

Browne concedes the limitations of the chivalric, militant pursuit of truth:

> There is, as in Philosophy, so in Divinity, sturdy doubts, and boysterous objections, wherewith the unhappinesse of our knowledge too neerely acquainteth us. More of these no man hath knowne than my selfe, which I confesse I conquered, not in a martiall posture, but on my knees (*RM*, 32).

In the end doubt engenders faith: ‘an obscurity too deepe for our reason’ may ‘teach my haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoope unto the lure of faith’ (*RM*, 16-17). It is a position Browne sets out in the very first chapter of *Pseudodoxia*, where he explains that in certain matters he can reach no decision:

> we leave it unto God: for he alone can truly determine these and all things else, who as he hath proposed the world unto our disputation, so hath he reserved many things unto his owne resolution; whose determinations we cannot hope from flesh, but must with reverence suspend unto that great day, whose justice shall either condemne our curiosities, or resolve our disquisitions (*PE*, I, 8-9).

Browne’s enquiries, when they cannot be resolved, are left in the hands of his Creator. It is this concession to the finality of divine judgement that informs his statement that the world is ‘not an Inne, but an Hospital, and a place, not
to live, but to die in' (RM, 111). These words, superficially morbid, in fact convey religious confidence. In Book VI of Pseudodoxia he intimates that the grave is like a womb; the end of the world will be an act of birth:

for then indeed men shall rise out of the earth, the graves shall shoot up their concealed seeds, and in that great Autumn men shall spring up, and awake from their Chaos againe (PE, I, 442).

Browne's scepticism, fruitful though it was, incensed his early critics, as did his love of paradox and original diction. Johnson was himself troubled by these traits of Browne's, but understood them as an integral part of Browne's self-knowledge and the expression of his beliefs. The Life of Browne concludes with Johnson's defence of Browne's religion, which makes it clear that Johnson was able to accommodate Browne's peculiarities within his idea of Christian orthodoxy. The language of his defence expresses what seems to border on astonishment at the objections voiced by Browne's detractors: 'there is scarcely a writer to be found, whose profession was not divinity, that has so frequently testified his belief of the Sacred Writings'; 'It is, indeed, somewhat wonderful, that He should be placed without the pale of Christianity ...'; 'it is no difficult task to replace him among the most zealous Professors of Christianity' (CM, 52). The frame of reference is significant; Johnson does not involve himself in close examination of doctrinal issues, choosing instead an emotive register ('there is scarcely a writer to be found', 'so frequently testified his belief', 'somewhat wonderful', 'it is no difficult task', 'the most zealous').

Johnson's acceptance of Browne's religious orthodoxy is suggested by Maurice Quinlan, in one of the standard studies of Johnson's religion.
Quinlan notes that Johnson, despite frequently alluding to the 'essentials' of Christian faith, never specifies what he means by this. He then proposes that perhaps the nearest he came to doing so was in his *Life of Thomas Browne* [sic]. Here, in refutation of those who had called Browne a condemner of religion, Johnson defends him as 'among the most zealous professors of Christianity' for the following reasons—his belief in Scripture; his faith, which was founded on 'the principles of grace, and the law of his own reason'; his submission to the authority of Scripture, and, when that is silent, to the interpretation of the Church; his belief in the death and resurrection of Christ; his belief in an afterlife; his reverence for Church ritual and especially for the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Browne is indeed an embodiment of what Johnson 'essentially' expected of a Christian, and Johnson's approval of his religion can come as no surprise. He takes Browne's faith for granted; he only writes about it at any length in order to plead for a defendant unable to defend himself. What really stimulates him in Browne's works is not the faith, but the natural philosophy. The bedrock of Browne's thought, as of Johnson's, is a devout and active Christian morality, but this morality is channelled into the realm of scholarship and learning. In their important study of the relationship between religion and medicine in the seventeenth century, Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham explain that in the last thirty years the traditional picture of 'science advancing only as religion was beaten back to its supposedly rightful circumscribed sphere' has given way to an awareness of the way natural knowledge was in seventeenth-century England 'intimately and inseparably' linked to certain kinds of religious belief and practice. Browne embodies this, and Johnson echoes

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7 Maurice Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964), 151. In fact, Browne had been described, at least in Johnson's account of the controversy, as a 'contemner' of religion, not a 'condemner'.

Browne in what we may call his 'scientific' morality. Johnson's defence of Browne's religion is a defence calculated to defend Browne *qua* natural philosopher.

Browne's practice of natural philosophy is chiefly biological. Besides medicine, his major concerns are anatomy, natural history and physiology. The heart of his natural philosophy lies in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, and we may reasonably wonder what *Pseudodoxia* looked like from an eighteenth-century vantage point. Browne explains in his preface that the book was written 'as medical vacations, and the fruitless importunity of Uroscopy would permit us'; in so doing, he immediately strikes a note of apology, while also establishing his amateurism. Moreover, the work is addressed 'unto the knowing and leading part of Learning', not to a popular audience; in emphasizing the distinction between the learned and 'the people ... whom Bookes doe not redresse', Browne aligns himself with the gentleman scholar, and hints at a readership made up of similar scholarly gentlemen (*PE*, I, 2-3). Whereas Browne occupied a place in a tradition embodied by Galileo and Newton, which stressed the essential opposition between natural philosophy and popular knowledge, Johnson's age was one in which natural philosophy was an object of public contemplation. Browne's remoteness from the methods of eighteenth-century natural philosophy is suggested in his frequent references, by name, to God and Satan. He locates the intellectual deficiencies of mankind not within the history of philosophy, but within the much larger, religiously charged history of Man.

*Pseudodoxia* is explicitly moral in its intentions. As Jonathan Post argues, 'Mistakes, for Browne, are never simply intellectual, a failure in the
mechanics of reasoning, as they often are, for instance, with Hobbes'  
Throughout *Pseudodoxia* images of error seem to cluster, to glut the page, to give the impression of exponentiating disastrously. This, Browne suggests, is the trajectory of human experience – from order to disorder. The opening sentence of Book I announces that ‘the first and father cause of common Error, is the common infirmity of humane nature’, which begins with ‘our first and ungenerated forefathers’. Browne proceeds to explain that ‘first, they were deceived by Satan’, and, in establishing this aetiology of error, he assigns himself a crucially moral task (*PE*, I, 5). Error having reached proportions such that one is ‘almost lost in its dissemination, whose wayes are boundlesse, and confesse no circumscription’, there exists an epidemic which must be medicated with truth (*PE*, I, 14). Browne’s method is essentially recuperative. His ‘Baconian mission’ is to ‘make patterned sense of the world-puzzle, many of whose most important pieces were obviously still missing.’  
‘Intellectual acquisition,’ he argues in the opening sentence of *Pseudodoxia*, ‘were but Reminiscentiall evocation’ (*PE*, I, 1). His encyclopaedism derives from ‘a desire to “remember” or retrieve a lost order’.  

Browne’s ambitions in *Pseudodoxia* hark back to a proposal shaped by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*. There Bacon underlines the intellectual value of doubting:

> But there remaineth a division of Naturall Philosophy according to the *Report of the Enquirie*, and nothing

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concerning the Matter or subject, and that is POSITIVE and
CONSIDERATIVE: when the enquirie reporteth either an
Assertion, or a Doubt.

The usefulness of doubts is acclaimed:

The Registring of doubts hath two excellent uses: The one that
it saveth Philosophy from Errors & falshoods: when that
which is not fully appearing, is not collected into assertion,
whereby Error might drawe Error, but reserved in doubt. The
other that the entrie of doubts are as so many suckers or
sponges, to drawe use of knowledge, insomuch as that which
if doubts had not preceded, a man should never have advised,
but passed it over without Note, by the suggestion and
solicitation of doubts is made to be attended and applied.

Later Bacon argues that ‘[the] use of wit and knowledge is to be allowed
which labour to make doubtfull things certaine’. He continues:

Therefore these Kalenders of doubts, I commend as excellent
things, so that there be this caution used, that when they bee
thoroughly sifted & brought to resolution, they bee from
thence forth omitted, decarded, and not continued to cherish
and encourage men in doubting. To which Kalender of doubts
or problemes, I advise be annexed another Kaldender as much
or more Materiall, which is a Kalender of popular Errors, I
meane chiefly, in naturall Historie such as passe in speech &
conceit, and are nevertheless apparantly detected &
convicted of untruth, that Mans knowledge be not weakened
nor imbased by such drosse and vanitie.¹²

Robin Robbins has demonstrated that the conceptual framework of
Pseudodoxia was derived from the 1640 English translation by Gilbert Wats
of the expanded, nine-book, Latin version of Bacon’s Advancement of
Learning.¹³ Pseudodoxia had certain other forebears, mostly concerned with
errors in the understanding and practice of medicine. Browne mentions in his
preface a number of authors whose works had anticipated his. These include
Laurent Joubert, author of the French

¹³ See PE, I, xxviii-xxxiv.
Erreurs Populaires au fait de la Medecine (first published in 1578), James Primrose, who first published a debunking of medical errors in 1630, and Girolamo Mercurii, author of De gli Errori Popolari d'Italia (1603-45). Geoffrey Keynes suggests that the most significant English forerunner was George Hakewill, who is quoted 135 times by Johnson in the first edition of Dictionary. In his An Apologie or Declaration of the Power and Providence of God in the Government of the World (first published in 1627), Hakewill discusses giants, mistakes in ancient cosmography, the practices of Caligula, the Antichrist, myths about the end of the world, and a host of other miscellaneous subjects—many of them, like Browne’s, pertaining to misconceptions and morality. But the work is at no stage mentioned in Pseudodoxia.

For all its antecedents, acknowledged and unacknowledged, Pseudodoxia is a work that reveals Browne’s limitations as a thinker; even when he deals in abstractions or mathematics (as also in The Garden of Cyrus) he remains rooted in concrete experience. When he refers to Aristotle it is not to Aristotle in his guise as a logical philosopher, but to the author of the (in Browne’s eyes deeply flawed) Parts of Animals. Pseudodoxia is not an ambitiously theoretical work; it is an accumulation of details, lacking a structured argument. Browne’s chief intention is declared in his initial address to the reader; he determines ‘to purchase a clear and warrantable body of Truth’ (PE, I, 1). In achieving this body of truth, he consistently begins by identifying and interrogating common untruths. The three ‘determinators’ he uses to support his arguments are authority, sense and

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14 Geoffrey Keynes, A Bibliography of Sir Thomas Browne, 262.
reason. The commitment is restated in *Christian Morals*, where he advises his audience to ‘join sense unto reason, and experiment unto speculation’ (*CM*, 119). Browne’s methods are not revolutionary, but his empiricism is paramount. The interest of his works lies not in their philosophical techniques, but in the wealth of empirical research to which their curious and arresting materials testify, and in the heightened language he employs to evoke the profundity and moral resonance of his experiences.

For Browne in *Pseudodoxia*, experiment is the key means of testing a claim. The belief is one that Johnson, more than a hundred years later, chooses to espouse:

> Human experience, ... which is constantly contradicting theory, is the great test of truth. A system, built upon the discoveries of a great many minds, is always of more strength, than what is produced by the mere workings of any one mind, which, of itself, can do little.¹⁵

The reference to the ‘the discoveries of a great many minds’ equates with Browne’s concept of ‘authority’; ‘Human experience’ blends Browne’s ‘sense’ and ‘reason’. The fusion of qualities described here recalls the quotation from Bacon offered by Johnson under ‘rationalist’ in the Dictionary:

> the empirical philosophers are like to pismires; they only lay up and use their store: the rationalists are like to spiders; they spin all out of their own bowels: but give me a philosopher, who, like the bee, hath a middle faculty, gathering from abroad, but digesting that which is gathered by his own virtue.

Johnson’s assertion of such a system is essential, for the world is cluttered with unhelpful ones. Morris Golden describes the primacy of experience in Johnson’s epistemology:

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¹⁵ *Life*, I, 454.
Johnson sees the average man as a pilgrim dazzled in a bazaar of facile systems which offer to solve all his problems.... Inevitably, these systems conflict with experience, which is always in flux and therefore always needs to be organized anew.  

Golden’s allusion to the organization of experience reflects Johnson’s assertion of the need for an active engagement with it. 

Browne lived in an age when experimental techniques and ocular demonstration were increasingly central to scientific endeavour. He was influenced by the work of Bacon and by more recent publications like Hooke’s *Micrographia* and Boyle’s *Sceptical Chemist*, yet it is probable that he was most affected by what he witnessed during his continental studies at Montpellier, Padua and Leiden. By the end of the sixteenth century, the University of Padua, in particular, was a great centre of *a posteriori* reasoning. One key influence was Jacopo Zabarella, a figure ‘particularly noteworthy for his insistence on observation and empirical grounding when studying nature, not only in practice but in the logical justification of his investigative procedures’. At Padua, Browne was taught in the anatomical theatre established in 1594-5; at Leiden, he had access not only to the anatomical theatre (built in 1593), but also to Carolus Clusius’s renowned medical garden. We know, moreover, from the epitaph he wrote on Johannes Polyander that he was influenced by the teachings of the Leiden theologian, whose most notable work was as an apologist for combining religion and natural philosophy. New resources tend to beget new theories:

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18 The epitaph appears in K, III, 327-8. A suggestive account of Browne’s continental education is provided in Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 60-71.
contemporary developments such as Vesaluis’s dissections and Ghini’s
dissection work in botany, as well as Della Porta’s work on optics,
emphasized that observation had to be at the centre of practice. The title-page
of Pseudodoxia’s first edition includes, as an epigraph, a quotation from a
writer Johnson esteemed, Julius Scaliger: ‘Ex libris colligere quae
prodiderunt Authores longe est periculosissimum; Rerum ipsarum cognitio
vera e rebus ipsis est’ (PE, I, 1). The second half of Scaliger’s statement
announces Browne’s radical emphasis on things themselves rather than
received opinion.

Browne’s continental education determined that he would put his faith
in ocular testimony: that, to put it simply, seeing is believing. While Browne
and Johnson are hardly unique in subscribing to this principle, its primacy in
their epistemology is striking. Clearly, there are occasions when experiment
is inappropriate. There is no experiment Browne can perform to settle the
issue that opens Book VI of Pseudodoxia (‘Concerning the beginning of the
world, that the time thereof is not precisely knowne, as commonly it is
presumed’). By the same token, nearly all the subjects under discussion in
Book VII (‘concerning historicall Tenents’) admit no possibility of test by
experiment. But where experiment is possible, Browne attempts it. Huntley
suggests the centrality of the experiment in Browne’s epistemology:

Actual experience brings sharpened sensation to the inherited
capacity to misapprehend things. Reason, where possible
upheld by sensation, corrects the second cause of error, the
disposition we have to indulge in fallacious inference.

19 ‘To gather from books the things that authors have transmitted is a lengthy and most
dangerous business; true knowledge of things comes from the things themselves’ (my
translation). In his poem ‘Post Lexicon Anglicanum Auctum et Emendatum’ Johnson goes so
far as to liken himself to Scaliger – for which see Yale, VI, 271.
20 Huntley, Sir Thomas Browne, 157.
The fruits of such experience require their own idiom. The 'sharpened sensation' is conveyed on the page through a 'sharpened' use of language that accentuates the reality of what has been observed. For instance, Browne questions the belief that 'a Kingfisher hanged by the bill, sheweth in what quarter the wind is, by an occult and secret propriety, converting the breast to that point of the Horizon from whence the wind doth blow'. Having explained why 'unto reason ... [this] seemeth very repugnant', he continues:

As for experiment we cannot make it out by any we have attempted, for if a single Kingfisher be hanged up with untwisted silke in an open roome, and where the ayre is free, it observes not a constant respect unto the mouth of the wind, but variously converting doth seldom breast it right; if two be suspended in the same roome, they will not regularly conforme their breasts, but oft-times respect the opposite points of heaven (PE, I, 196-7).

The references to the 'untwisted silke' and the 'open roome' vivify the description; Browne is referring to his own experiment, his own investigative work. This is the pattern of *Pseudodoxia*; he believes that one knows best what one has made oneself, and that the language of the private experiment must be heightened and personal. In this he is at odds with the general pattern of his age; at a time when medicine is increasingly moving from private to public control, and towards institutional rather than idiosyncratic modes of expression, Browne's practice is domestic, not corporate, and it is documented in vocabulary that is very much his own.²¹

Browne's language and experimental method are the enemies of cliché. They upend received opinion and revitalize the numb language of common parlance. *Pseudodoxia* is a riposte to credulity and a rebuttal of

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²¹ This increasing institutionalization is described at length in Michael Hunter, *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1995).
credulous misconception. Browne quickly identifies language as the
instrument and even origin of error:

the fallacies whereby men deceive others, and are deceived
themselves, ... [are] divided into Verball and Reall. Of the
Verball, and such as conclude from mistakes of the word, ...
there are but two ... worthy of our notation: ... that is the
fallacie of Aequivocation and Amphibologie, which conclude
from the ambiguity of some one word, or the ambiguous
sintaxis of many put together (PE, I, 22).

In this he may appear to follow Bacon, who in his concept of the idol of the
marketplace (originated in the New Organon) addresses the deceptions
arising from language. But Bacon's concerns are semantic, whereas Browne's
stem from issues of usage, not inherent instability. Most of the errors he
documents are to be found in books. Browne's use of technical language —
much of it novel — is a characteristic of his natural philosophy, calculated to
lend greater precision to his prose, and thus prevent these fatal ambiguities. It
is relevant that in Idler 70 Johnson defends the use of hard words respecting
technical subjects; he recognizes the dangers of obscurity, but argues the need
to have specialist language for specialized subjects and their specialist
audiences. ‘Difference of thoughts,’ he concludes, ‘will produce difference of
language.’22 Lorraine Daston suggests that the pursuit of ‘strange facts’ by
writers such as Browne ‘by definition strained the boundaries of everyday
experience and therefore of everyday language’, resulting in ‘a language of
multiple analogies, fine-grained and circumstantial detail, and frank aesthetic
pleasure’. This kind of language generated ‘descriptions that emphasized
differences at the expense of resemblances, that prized rather than ignored

22 Yale, II, 218. We should note, however, that there are certain kinds of language Johnson is
not prepared to accommodate in the Dictionary. For instance, he omits a number of words of
French origin that were in wide usage at the time of its composition.
peculiarities and variability'. The *Rambler* essays often explode clichés or defuse them; the cliché reduces complexity to a lifeless formula. To this end, they frequently deploy heightened, 'philosophic' language, as in each case Johnson's moral programme is to get behind the cliché to a more actual, vivid account of a situation. This is the method of *Pseudodoxia*: to excavate the terrain circumscribed by myth and popular conceit, in order to retrieve buried truths.

Browne's idiolect is, then, a reflection of his personal, original, innovative engagement with his subjects. The domesticity of his experiments is paramount. *Pseudodoxia* frequently reflects Browne's habit not of deciding on an experiment and then procuring its materials, but, conversely, of discovering the materials for an experiment and then effecting it. For instance, he appears on one occasion to have found a number of death-watch beetles in his home and kept them in thin boxes, wherein I have heard and seen them work and knack with a little *proboscis* or trunk against the side of the box, like a ... Woodpecker against a tree (*PE*, I, 153).

His observation stems from curiosity, rather than preceding it. He seems, moreover, to have been prepared to risk the lives of the creatures that made up the menagerie John Evelyn observed when he visited him in 1671; there is a hint of recklessness in the simple pronouncement 'That Flos Affricanus is poyson, and destroyeth dogs, in two experiments we have not found' (*PE*, I,

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24 It is a critical commonplace that Johnson preferred generalities to particulars, yet his writings - the *Rambler* at least as much as any others - possess a remarkably concrete style. This has recently been discussed in Thomas Kamin’s article 'Some Alien Qualities of Samuel Johnson's Art', in *Samuel Johnson in Historical Context*, ed. Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill (Basingstoke, 2002), 224-5.
158). There is also sometimes a ruthlessness in his descriptions:

Exactly weighing and strangling a chicken in the Scales, upon an immediate ponderation, we could discover no sensible difference in weight, but suffering it to lye eight or ten howres, untill it grew perfectly cold, it weighed most sensibly lighter (PE, I, 315).

At other times, his touch is delicate. He observes, of the bee, that

if while they humme we lay our finger on the backe or other parts; ... thereupon will be felt a serrous or jarring motion like that which happeneth while we blow on the teeth of a combe through paper (PE, I, 282).

He is attentive to detail, and thus, considering the belief that ostriches digest iron, notes that ‘Poultrey, and especially the Turkey, do of themselves take done stones, and wee have found at one time in the gizard of a Turkey no lesse than seven hundred’ (PE, I, 254). Elsewhere, a note of macabre comedy suggests his awareness of the extremity of some of his measures: in a section headed ‘Of Swimming and Floating’ he writes,

Whether Cripples and mutilated persons ... will not sink but float ... we have not made experiment. Thus much we observe, that animals drown downwards, and the same is observeable in Frogges, when the hinder legges are cut off (PE, I, 314).

He does not mask the idiosyncratic nature of his undertakings. It is the guarantee of their integrity.

Observation and experiment are used to counter the beliefs that ‘the tenth wave is greater and more dangerous than any other’, that there are no spiders in Ireland, that men and women have a different number of ribs, and also to confirm unlikely truths – for instance, ‘that a candle out of a Musket will pierce through an inch board, or an Urinall force a naile through a planke’ (PE, I, 594, 605). One chapter in Book IV begins ‘That men weigh heavier dead then alive, if experiment hath not failed us, we cannot
reasonably grant' (*PE*, I, 315). It is possible not to notice Browne’s own presence in each of these statements, but if at times he erases himself from the presentation of his experimental findings, he is always tacitly there, participating in the activity of natural philosophy. Leonard Nathanson has argued that

> the crucial consideration for Browne and his contemporaries is that the life of the mind is an inextricable part of the life of man and not simply an attempt to master a set of external problems.²⁵

For Browne, however, this is scarcely a ‘consideration’; it is a given of his philosophy. It is, moreover, one that he shares with Johnson, whose subscription to this view explains the tendency in his thinking for specific judgements to precede overarching theories. Observation is at the centre of Johnson’s epistemology. He believes in nothing so much as the evidence of his own eyes. In praising Shakespeare, he identifies as one of the dramatist’s great qualities his reliance on his own powers of observation: ‘whether life or nature be his subject’, he proves himself to have ‘seen with his own eyes’ and ‘gives the image which he receives, not weakened or distorted by the intervention of another mind’.²⁶

Johnson’s experiences in the realm of natural philosophy have frequently been overlooked.²⁷ Yet even Boswell, who underestimates Johnson’s interest in the subject, offers abundant examples. He records an episode in which Johnson spoke with the diplomat Sir George Staunton, who

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²⁶ Yale, VII, 89-90.

²⁷ The two substantial exceptions are Richard B. Schwartz’s *Samuel Johnson and the New Science* and John J. Brown’s unpublished thesis ‘Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth Century Science’.
was going to America, and advised:

The new world has many vegetables and animals with which philosophers are but little acquainted. I hope you will furnish yourself with some books of natural history, and some glasses and other instruments of observation. Trust as little as you can to report; examine all you can by your own senses.\(^{28}\)

On another occasion he mentions Johnson’s staying at his friend Topham Beauclerk’s house in Windsor, ‘where he was entertained with experiments in natural philosophy’.\(^{29}\) The biographer’s rather casual attitude is suggested when he writes that

My readers will not be displeased at being told every slight circumstance of the manner in which Dr Johnson contrived to amuse his solitary hours. He sometimes employed himself in chemistry, sometimes in watering and pruning a vine, and sometimes in small experiments, at which those who may smile, should recollect that there are moments which admit of being soothed only by trifles.\(^{30}\)

This appears a little patronizing, yet it all the same suggests that experiments were a form of therapy for Johnson. Boswell’s first view of Johnson’s home includes ‘an apparatus for chymical experiments’.\(^{31}\) He was not alone in spotting this apparatus the first time he went to Johnson’s house. According to Mrs Thrale, when Arthur Murphy first met Johnson at his lodgings, he was surprised to find him

all covered with soot like a chimney-sweeper, in a little room, with an intolerable heat and strange smell, as if he had been acting Lungs in the Alchymist, making \textit{aether}.\(^{32}\)

In his narrative of their travels in Scotland, Boswell offers further evidence of this part of Johnson’s life. At Montrose Johnson ‘went into an apothecary’s

\(^{28}\) \textit{Life}, I, 367-8.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 250. Beauclerk’s villa at Muswell Hill was equipped with both a laboratory and an observatory.

\(^{30}\) \textit{Life}, III, 398.

\(^{31}\) \textit{Life}, I, 436.

\(^{32}\) \textit{JM}, I, 306.
shop, and ordered some medicine for himself, and wrote the prescription in technical characters'. The boy working there ‘took him for a physician’. On an earlier occasion Johnson advertised his medical learning, telling Boswell that ‘My knowledge of physick ... I learnt from Dr James’, and that he also ‘learnt some from Dr Lawrence’. The two men later visited the village of Strichen. Johnson writes that ‘We dined this day at the house of Mr Frazer ... who shewed us in his grounds some stones yet standing of a druidical circle’. Boswell enlarges on this; one of the man’s neighbours ‘remembered to have seen Dr Johnson at a lecture on experimental philosophy, at Lichfield’. On the same trip Johnson visits Fort George. He says he can give no account of it: ‘I cannot delineate it scientifically, and a loose and popular description is of use only when the imagination is to be amused.’ Boswell, as usual, offers greater detail. ‘Before dinner we examined the fort,’ he reports. ‘Dr Johnson talked of the proportions of charcoal and salt-petre in making gunpowder, of granulating it, and of giving it a gloss.’ Boswell suggests that Johnson ‘made a very good figure on these topicks’, adding that Johnson told him afterwards he believed he ‘had talked ostentatiously’. The implication here is that Johnson thought it unacceptable to make a show of his knowledge of such matters. Yet in the Life Boswell records an episode in which Johnson spoke authoritatively of Maupertuis and ‘the great anatomist

33 Life, V, 74.
34 Life, III, 22.
35 Yale, IX, 21.
36 Life, V, 108.
37 Yale, IX, 26.
38 Another testament to Johnson’s knowledge of this subject is provided by his friend Bennet Langton – for which see Life, III, 361.
39 Life, V, 124.
Morgagni’, and suggests that ‘He seemed pleased to talk of natural philosophy.’

When Johnson conducted his own experiments, he had no audience. Though trivial in appearance, the experiments were personally significant. His diary entry for 12 October 1777 records: ‘Brachia satis setosa paulum a carpo rasi, ut notum sit quantum temporis pilos restituat’. The footnote in the Yale edition reads ‘On the twelfth Johnson shaved his hairy arms enough “to see how much time would restore the hairs”, a rather extreme example of his intellectual curiosity’. On 7 August 1779 the diary records: ‘Partem brachii dextri carpo proximam et cutem pectoris circa mamillam dextram rasi, ut notum fieret quanto temporis pil renovarentur’. In the Yale edition, the relevant note explains that he shaved part of his right arm above the wrist and the hair around his right breast to see how long it would take to grow hair again. Perhaps he had forgotten to keep track of his October experiment, or thought that in summer the hair would grow faster.

The suggestion that such behaviour is ‘extreme’ does not in any way detract from the sense we derive from such records of Johnson’s intellectual curiosity, and this curiosity is here directed at the question of bodily renewal. John J. Brown claims that

John’s experiments may have been in part a method of passing time, but his deliberate statements about them show that in the back of his mind was the hope that he might happen upon some discovery of value to mankind.

While it is possible to question what kind of valuable discovery Johnson

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40 Life, II, 55.
41 Yale, I, 278.
42 Ibid., 297-298.
43 Brown, ‘Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth Century Science’, 44.
might have accomplished by shaving his arms, Brown rightly identifies the significance of the ‘deliberate statements’ Johnson makes about them: it is one thing to perform these operations, and quite another to record them so minutely.\footnote{Moreover, we should recognize that there was, traditionally, a connection between shaving and medicine. In 1450 Parliament incorporated the Guild of Surgeons and the Barbers’ Company, and it was only in 1745 that by sanction of the king the incorporation between surgeons and barbers was severed.}{44}

Another episode highlights Johnson’s enthusiasm for small experiments. His accounts for 8 November 1777 record the purchase, at a cost of four shillings, of some casting weights. The Yale editors explain that ‘a casting weight is one which turns a balance when exactly poised. Those which Johnson bought were no doubt to be used in his weighing leaves a few days after this’.\footnote{Yale, I, 283, n.}{45} On 10 December (rather more than ‘a few days’ later) the diary records, somewhat perfunctorily, what one assumes to be a summary of Johnson’s experiment: ‘An ounce weight of green laurel leaves, laid to dry, weighed 139.5 grains having lost about 17 in 24.\footnote{Ibid., 285.}{46} The note states that Johnson ‘made one of his experiments, finding that an ounce of laurel leaves when dried lost seventeen parts in twenty-four by weight’. On 15 August 1783 his diary reads:

HINTS.
Tom Rose’s Scales
1783 Aug.15. I cut from the vine 41. leaves which weighed five oz. and half and eight scruples.
I lay them upon my bookcase to try what weight they will lose by drying.\footnote{Ibid., 362.}{47}

Johnson’s records are brief, but his omission of any explanation of why he should wish ‘to try what weight they will lose by drying’ suggests that he saw
such an experiment as something entirely natural. The domesticity is implicit in the mention of Tom Rose. Johnson’s diary for 25 November 1782 records that ‘Tom Rose’s Scales I returned’. Tom is almost certainly the son of Johnson’s friend William Rose, a Chiswick schoolmaster, whose daughter Sarah on 24 June 1783 married Charles Burney the younger, the son of Johnson’s musicologist friend. Tom, in other words, was not a scholarly associate, but simply the son of an acquaintance; Johnson obtained the wherewithal for his private projects in natural philosophy not from professional practitioners or academic fellow clubmen, but from whoever happened to be at hand. Moreover, the object for Johnson of his experiment is not to establish some new principle, but to test a principle of which he is already aware.

Johnson’s correspondence documents his interest in experiments. His letters are frequently tutelary, advocating procedures for testing, examining and enlarging knowledge. Bruce Redford suggests that they ‘usually resemble a moral essay that has been cursorily adjusted to the identity of the recipient’. On 24 July 1783 he wrote to Sophia Thrale, advocating small computational procedures of the kind he performed with the vine leaves:

Never think, my Sweet, that You have arithmetick enough; when You have exhausted your Master, buy Books. Nothing amuses more harmlessly than computation, and nothing is oftener applicable to real business or speculative enquiries. A thousand stories which the ignorant tell, and believe, dye away at once, when the computist takes them in his gripe. I hope You will cultivate in yourself a disposition to numerical enquiries; they will give You entertainment in solitude by the practice, and reputation in publick by the effect.

48 Yale, I, 352.

Johnson’s enthusiasm for computation was probably conditioned by his belief in the therapeutic effects of meditation. Here, though, he goes on to suggest that Sophia should borrow a copy of An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language by John Wilkins, who was also the author of a work entitled Mathematical Magick, notable for its preponderance of ‘philosophic’ words. It seems likely that Johnson would have wished Sophia to read Wilkins’s essay because it argued the need for a clinically precise correspondence between words and things (Wilkins is one of the seventeenth-century divines Johnson often cites in the Dictionary). However, what he actually says is:

You will [find] there a very curious calculation, which You are qualified to consider, to show that Noah’s Ark was capable of holding all the known animals of the world with provision for all the time, in which the earth was under water.

This letter, then, suggests Johnson’s interest in the ‘curious’ – an interest he was keen to impart to the twelve year-old daughter of his friend Hester Thrale – and his belief in man’s ability to dismiss, by means of computation, ‘a thousand stories which the ignorant tell’. It underlines his belief in experimentation as an antidote to vulgar errors, and at the same time hints at his enthusiasm for peculiar knowledge and intriguing theories – an attraction to the bizarre, and a conscious and careful limitation of it, existing side by side.

In a letter of 5 August 1775 to Sophia’s mother, Johnson had set out his conception of life as education and experience as its mainstay. ‘It is said and said truly, that Experience is the best teacher,’ he reflects, before going on to suggest that young minds ‘observe every thing because every [thing] is
new', whereas an older observer 'perhaps seldom makes with regard to life
and manners much addition to his knowledge'. The letter has a tutorial tone,
and Johnson laments that

Far the greater part of human minds never endeavour their
own improvement. Opinions once received from instruction or
settled by whatever accident; having been once supposed to
be right, they are never discovered to be erroneous.

He concludes that 'from this acquiescence in preconceptions none are wholly
free' — the consequence, he suggests, of 'fear of uncertainty' and 'dislike of
labour'. It is precisely this labour, albeit in many different forms, that
underpins Johnson's realization of natural philosophy. A letter of 30 June
1783, also to Hester Thrale, records that 'yesterday in the evening I went to
Church and have been to day to see great Burning glass, which does more
than was ever done before by transmission of the Rays'. Popular education
of this sort played an important part in the dissemination of new scientific
ideas in the eighteenth century. In his invaluable study The Rise of Public
Science, Larry Stewart argues that 'the deliberate employment of scientific
apparatus in public spaces ... was an effort to establish an epistemology of
common experience'. Johnson's attendance at a display such as this can
hardly be considered unusual. He furnishes details of what he saw, and
confesses that he 'talked to the artist rather too long, for my voice though
clear and distinct for a little while soon tires and falters', the implication
clearly being that his fascination with the experimental burning glass made

50 Letters, IV, 176.
52 Letters, IV, 161.
53 Larry Stewart, The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology, and Natural Philosophy
in Newtonian Britain, 1660-1750 (Cambridge 1992), xxi.
him inattentive to the frailties of his body.\textsuperscript{54} Here, like Browne, he is
rapturous and reckless when some curious innovation or discovery is at hand. The appeal of the public experiment is that Johnson, while not a participant, can be the next best thing, and does not have to rely on an account of events furnished by another writer.

Johnson’s experiments were occasionally conceived on a grander scale. On 15 July 1771 he writes from Ashbourne, where he has been visiting his friend John Taylor, to Hester Thrale. He begins, abruptly, with the sentence ‘When we come together to practice chymistry, I believe we shall find our furnaces sufficient for most operations’. Johnson explains that he has been attending ‘philosophical lectures’ involving chemistry; he jokes that ‘a Chymist is very like a Lover “And sees those dangers which he cannot shun”’. On the 24th he writes to Mrs Thrale for the ninth time that month:

\begin{quote}
Be pleased to make my compliments to Mr Thrale and desire that his builders will leave about a hundred loose bricks. I can at present think of no better place for Chimistry in fair weather, than the pump side in the kitchen Garden.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

Commandeering the Thrales’ garden, he intends to be a chemist even if he cannot be a lover. The nature of the proposed experiment is unclear, but it is a means of asserting himself territorially – of creating a private space. The letter bears witness to his wish to be a practitioner, rather than merely an observer. He was aware of the limited scope available to him in his exercises in natural philosophy, but he persisted with them nevertheless.

Johnson was minutely attentive to the operations of his mind and body. His experiments in shaving himself reflect his habit of making his own

\textsuperscript{54} Letters, IV, 162.
\textsuperscript{55} Letters, I, 371, 376.
body and mind the objects of a studious, informed control. In *Rambler* 47 he
presents himself among those who ‘have undertaken the arduous province of
preserving the balance of the mental constitution’. This, as John Wiltshire
suggests, is ‘on the analogy of the Galenic physician preserving the balance
of the four bodily humours’. Wiltshire proposes that ‘in the *Rambler* Johnson
generates by metaphorical transference the role of psychological physician’,
and quotes Boswell’s summary of the publication’s entire run: ‘I venture to
say, that in no writings whatever can be found *more bark and steel for the
mind*. Certainly, the *Rambler* essays commonly begin by sketching some
sort of psychological or intellectual malady and then move on to consider the
means of its remedy. In *Rambler* 68, Johnson reflects that

> the chemists tell us, that all bodies are resolvable into the
> same elements, and that the boundless variety of things arises
> from the different proportions of very few ingredients; so a
> few pains and a few pleasures are all the materials of human
> life.\(^\text{58}\)

The equation between a form of writing that relies heavily on the metaphor of
natural philosophy – the necessary balancing of both words and humours –
and Johnson’s ‘small experiments’ is significant, suggesting as it does the
need for Johnson to achieve balance (at once in his prose and in himself) by
means of the exact and exacting language of the physician.

A letter of 7 October 1783 to William Bowles refers to the operation
performed on him by William Cruikshank in August of that year, in which (as
he explained to the Plymouth surgeon John Mudge in a letter of 9
September), he had had his swollen left testicle surgically perforated. Johnson

\(^{56}\) Yale, III, 253
\(^{57}\) Wiltshire, *Samuel Johnson in the Medical World*, 150, 163.
\(^{58}\) Yale, III, 359.
Johnson’s use of the word ‘experiment’ is striking and curious. It recurs in a letter to Richard Brocklesby, written in August 1784, where he describes how he repeated the experiment of purging without eating, but in my purge I poured so much of my new vinegar that after some struggle the stomach rejected it, and I underwent, in some degree, the operation of an emetick. He is explaining to one of his medical friends the condition of his health and the actions he has taken in order to improve it, but his tone makes it possible to lose sight of this, for there is a detachment in his language. He speaks with a peculiar detachment not of ‘my stomach’, but of ‘the stomach’.

Even if we allow for the peculiarities of eighteenth-century medicine, we cannot help being struck by Johnson’s readiness to allow all manner of substances into his body: oil of terebinth, opium, musk, ipecacuanha, dried orange peel in hot red port, salts of hartshorn, dried squills and vinegar. He was also quick to accept new surgical procedures, allowing his various doctors to carry out innovative operations on him. Moreover, in the same letter to Brocklesby of August 1784, he tells his friend that ‘none of your prescription[s] operate to their proper uses more certainly than your letters operate as cordials’ – a distinct suggestion that the letter is in Johnson’s view another sort of medical intervention, and a reflection of the way the idioms of medicine were able to colour his thought processes as well as his diction.

59 Letters, IV, 218.
60 Ibid., 377.
61 Wimsatt, in Philosephic Words (p. 57), hints at the link in Johnson’s writing between medical and moral language, observing that ‘Medicine is connected with morals ... in the analogy between physical and moral ills and in the fact that physical suffering is both the partial cause of sin and the badge and punishment of our fallen state.’
Experiment is a means not just of getting to grips with the workings of the world, but of anchoring the self. ‘Will any body’s mind’, wondered an anxious Mrs Thrale, ‘bear this eternal microscope that you place upon your own so?’ Mrs Thrale’s question suggests that Johnson’s self-scrutiny was trusted less by others than he trusted it himself. For Johnson, it was an essential duty to try to understand the workings of the psyche and abjure secondhand information about the human mind. In *Rambler* 24 he argues that ‘the great fault of men of learning is still, that they ... appear willing to study any thing rather than themselves’; he pictures ‘the great philosopher, insensible to every spectacle of distress, and unmoved by the loudest call of social nature, for want of considering that men are designed for the succour and comfort of each other’; and he suggests that the speculative thinker ‘may be very properly recalled from his excursions ... [and] reminded that there is a nearer being with which it is his duty to be more acquainted’.  

Johnson’s self-scrutiny echoes not only Browne’s microscopic scrutiny of the world, but also his minute self-examination. In *Religio Medici* Browne unravels his conscience, his Anglicanism, and the relationship between reason and religion, while arguing the primacy of faith, hope and charity. His focus upon himself is summed up in his statement that

> wee carry with us the wonders we seeke without us: There is all *Africa* and her prodigies in us; we are that bold and adventurous piece of nature, which he that studies wisely leames in a *compendium* what others labour at in a divided piece and endlessse volume (*RM*, 24).

Yet Browne’s project in *Pseudodoxia*, even though he experiments in private, is to ‘timely survey our knowledge’ (*PE*, I, 1). He intends to disseminate his

62 *JM*, I, 207.
findings and use them as a means of rectifying public understanding.

Johnson’s experiments, by contrast, are never intended for the attention of anyone but himself. The difference reflects the historic shift between the two men’s eras in the recognition available to the amateur; their similarity is that they both use experiments as ‘regulatory’ events.

Johnson’s experiments are driven by an awareness of knowledge as a kind of activity. In Rambler 5 he argues that

There is no doubt but many vegetables and animals have qualities that might be of great use, to the knowledge of which there is not required much force of penetration, or fatigue of study, but only frequent experiments, and close attention.

Anyone may ‘find … in the productions of nature an inexhaustible stock of materials upon which he can employ himself’ and in consequence enjoy ‘the prospect of discovering new reasons for adoring the sovereign author of the universe’. When he refers to the ‘materials’ upon which he may ‘employ’ himself, he suggests that experimentation can be an antidote to idleness. In Idler 31, he visualizes a character called Sober, who allays melancholy by means of chemistry: ‘He has a small furnace… [and] sits and counts the drops as they come from his retort’. Johnson declares ‘my hope … that he will quit his trifles, and betake himself to rational and useful diligence’. The key words here are ‘rational’ and ‘useful’; Johnson requires experimenters to have a reasoned end in sight. John J. Brown suggests that by the middle of the eighteenth century chemistry had degenerated into a popular fad. He quotes Smollett’s statement that during the reign of George II ‘the new doctrine of electricity grew into fashion’ and ‘The art of chemistry was … applied to the

63 Yale, III, 131-3.
64 Ibid., 28-9.
65 Yale, II, 98.
purposes of sophistication'. Johnson was suspicious of this sort of modish trifling; he insisted on an experimental practice that was underpinned by morality. The moral possibilities of experiment were considerable; at the very least, it was possible to stave off the evils of melancholy by fully captivating the attention.

‘Attention’ is a subject Johnson frequently considers; it is a faculty or performance that demands ‘regulation’. In the *Dictionary* he defines it, somewhat idiosyncratically, as ‘the act of bending the mind upon any thing’. It is a definition that implies an active, physical, supplicant mode of thought; in support Johnson quotes Isaac Watts’s dictum that ‘Attention is a very necessary thing; truth doth not always strike the soul at first sight’. Johnson’s customary imagery postulates that the mind is like a chamber, needing to be filled. In the *Rambler* he describes the obligation to ‘relieve the vacuities of our being’, writes of it being ‘necessary to ... fill up the vacuities of action’, and refers more than once to ‘the vacuities of life’ or its ‘vacancies’.

Conversation is one technique for filling the vacuum; so too are his minute experiments. Experiment is a way of dealing with melancholy or vacuous inactivity; its first purpose may in fact be to enhance the self’s awareness of its own existence by providing it with the means to test its boundaries and potential. Golden observes that

In *Rasselas* the impossibility of keeping the mind’s appetitive faculty legitimately employed decisively colours Johnson’s vision of man stumbling through life. 68

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67 Yale, III, 221; V, 44; II, 228, 476; V, 235; III, 217. Johnson informed Boswell (*Life*, I, 254) that ‘Whatever philosophy may determine of material nature, it is certainly true of intellectual nature, that it abhors a vacuum: our minds cannot be empty’.
Rasselas himself explains that 'My desire of excellence impelled me to transfer my attention to nature and to life'. In *Idler* 74 Johnson offers a different but equally affirmative position: 'The true art of memory is the art of attention'.

Attention is a condition of Johnson's understanding, and a condition also of his prose, which enjoys the distinctions that empiricism makes necessary. As Jean Hagstrum has argued, 'for Johnson all mental action, whether rational or imaginative, is always secondary to the direct experience of reality and is, apart from experience, seriously suspect'. Attentive experience highlights the particular; general truths can only be arrived at through a sensitivity to specifics. In the sermon Johnson wrote to deliver at his wife's funeral, he insisted that 'intellectual truths can be taught no otherwise than by positive assertion, supported by some sensible evidence'. Sensible evidence and positive assertion combine in Johnson's hunger for particulars, which he studiously itemizes. This is evident right through his diaries: when he records the dimensions of rooms he has been in, computes his accounts, or compiles lists of 'purposes' and resolutions, and notes how many steps he has had to climb to reach the top of the Eagle Tower at Carnarvon Castle, he gives evidence of his commitment to precision. It is a commitment deliberately pitched against the superficiality he describes in, for instance, *Idler* 32, where he observes that 'vulgar and inactive minds confound familiarity with knowledge': knowledge is a step, or several steps, beyond familiarity, and the bridge from familiarity ('acquaintance' or

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69 Yale, XVI, 41.  
70 Yale, II, 232.  
72 Yale, XIV, 265.
‘habitude’ in the *Dictionary* – and thus a state of casual customariness) to
knowledge (‘certain perception; indubitable apprehension’) is achieved by a
dedication to accuracy and the careful understanding that depends on
accuracy.

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Any apprehension of the affinity between Browne and Johnson is
necessarily troubled by the fact of their being separated by what is in effect a
century. Between two figures thus separated historically there are shifts of
intellectual paradigm, and in this case, the intervening years were especially
busy with developments. They were marked by an increasing contempt for
scholasticism, and at the same time witnessed a new emphasis on empiricism,
an enthusiasm for intellectual consensus, and, crucially, the rise of the New
Science. Moreover, even in his own lifetime Browne had seemed old-
 fashioned. His distance from the intellectual preoccupations of his
contemporaries can be very immediately discerned from *Hydriotaphia,*
which, instead of being an archaeological appraisal of the urns found at Old
Walsingham, uses this discovery as an opportunity for a more creative
meditation. Browne the antiquarian was not necessarily a creature of his time.
As Graham Parry points out,

> The antiquarian movement in England developed out of the
> convergence of Renaissance historical scholarship with
> Reformation concerns about national identity and religious
> ancestry.\(^3\)

Its starting-point was Camden’s *Britannia* (1586), which coincided with the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries, whose activities were conservative and churchly. Browne comes closest to this kind of undertaking in *Repertorium*, which is a pious text that emphasizes local values, enumerating the graves of bishops, clerics, and Norfolk worthies; it is a stand against iconoclasm, and a royalist document. *Hydriotaphia* is very different from this – ‘a unique production: part excavation report, part meditation on the mystery of time and the vanity of human wishes’.

Browne’s antiquarian works commend and recall civil ceremonies and the remnants of classical civilization. It seems fair to think of Browne not as the harbinger of a new scientific age, but as a figure whose work might have seemed outmoded and antique even at the time it was produced.

To speak of ‘science’ in the age of Browne is dangerous and misleading. During the seventeenth century and for at least a part of the eighteenth, ‘science’ meant something approximating to ‘the state or fact of knowing’ or ‘knowledge acquired by study’. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the second quarter of the eighteenth century it began to acquire a new sense:

> A branch of study which is concerned either with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified and more or less colligated by being brought under general laws, and which includes trustworthy methods for the discovery of new truths within its own domain.

Isaac Watts is the first cited user of the word in this sense, in 1725, though it did not become truly prevalent until the nineteenth century, and Johnson does

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74 Parry, *The Trophies of Times*, 250.
not record the sense in his Dictionary. Under ‘scientifick’, which Johnson defines as ‘producing demonstrative knowledge; producing certainty’, he quotes first from Browne, who writes that

Natural philosophy proceeding from settled principles, therein is expected a satisfaction from scientifical progressions, and such as beget a sure or rational belief.

The rather awkward 'scientifical' smacks of Browne’s enthusiasm for novel usage more than it indicates lexical acceptance. Among Browne’s contemporaries, what was later to be known as ‘science’ would have been termed ‘philosophy’ – or, more specifically, ‘natural philosophy’. The distinction, moreover, is not merely a linguistic one; it reflects the shift from a culture of individual research and endeavour to a more institutionalized and formally regulated set of disciplines.

The key influence on this shift was Isaac Newton, whose discoveries permanently altered the procedural model for investigation. Newton’s achievements were complemented by those of Bacon and Hobbes, as well as those of Descartes and Galileo, but his was the most important contribution, not least because of the disjunction it provoked between the highly technical language of scientific advance and the everyday language of public exposition. ‘By the early eighteenth century,’ explains Thomas Kuhn, ‘those scientists who found a paradigm in the Principia took the generality of its conclusions for granted’.\textsuperscript{75} Previously, theorists had had repeatedly to build from scratch the foundations for their enquiries, but after Newton there was a platform of knowledge almost universally accepted, allowing future investigations to proceed not from an enumeration of first principles, but with

\textsuperscript{75} Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1970), 30.
their theoretical basis already in place. Kuhn explains that before Newton there were various theories of light in competition, but once his theory had been propounded there was a single view accepted by nearly everyone.

Newton’s work establishes a set of basic rules explaining movement and mechanics; it demonstrates that the world is not merely capricious. Within the forty years from 1670 to 1710 – or between his *On Analysis of Infinite Series* (1669) and the *Arithmetica Universalis* (1707) – there was a transition in the sphere of natural philosophy from a culture of contested authority to what Simon Schaffer has called ‘the imprimatur of collective assent’.76 It is with this collectively approved set of rules in place that Johnson writes, whereas Sir Thomas Browne writes within a pre-Newtonian culture of competing theories. Furthermore, Browne, operating within this different epistemological tradition, subscribes not to a kind of endeavour that postulates as its basis an inalienable theoretical model, but rather to a haphazard, idiosyncratic culture of fact-collecting.77

Newton’s presence in Johnson’s world is reflected in the *Dictionary*. He is quoted by name 115 times in the first edition, and 176 in the fourth. He is a source for words such as ‘arithmetical’, ‘density’, ‘gyration’, ‘mechanically’, ‘pressure’, ‘refractive’, ‘spectrum’ and ‘to vibrate’, as well as for a large number of colour words – including ‘azure’, ‘black’, ‘blue’, ‘green’, ‘red’, ‘russet’, ‘white’ and ‘yellow’. The *Opticks*, by far the most accessible of Newton’s works, is even explicitly recommended in one of the

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77 In *Books & Characters: French & English*, Lytton Strachey suggests (p. 35) that ‘Browne was scientific just up to the point where the examination of detail ends, and its co-ordination begins. He knew little or nothing of general laws; but his interest in isolated phenomena was intense’.
illustrations of the noun ‘optick’, which is taken from Johnson’s sometime physician George Cheyne: ‘Those who desire satisfaction in the appearance, must go to the admirable treatise of opticks by Sir Isaac Newton.’ Lewis Freed notes that eighty-five per cent of Johnson’s quotations from Newton are explicitly stated to come from the Opticks. There is, by contrast, no evidence that he quoted the English translation of Newton’s Latin masterpiece, the Principia Mathematica. Yet even if the Dictionary fails directly to manifest the lessons of all Newton’s writings, technical language of the kind employed by Newton does appear in the Dictionary, in no small part thanks to Thomson’s Seasons, the peculiar idiom of which owes much to its author’s digestion of Newtonian ideas.

The treatment of Newton in the Dictionary suggests something of his reception in the eighteenth century. Much of his work may have been unintelligible to most readers, but his ideas were enthusiastically popularized. This took a variety of forms: coffee-house lectures, public experiments, expositions by aggressively popularizing apostles of Newtonianism like John Harris and John Theophilus Desaguliers. Equally influential were greatly simplified versions of Newton’s philosophy, such as that offered in Francesco Algarotti’s Sir Isaac Newton’s philosophy explain’d for the use of the ladies (translated by Johnson’s friend Elizabeth Carter, and first published in English by Edward Cave in 1739). A key development between Browne’s time and Johnson’s is the bifurcation of scientific writing into two distinct

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genres, the technical and the popular. In the latter category the influence of periodicals – notably the *Athenian Mercury* – enabled new ideas to be absorbed by non-academic readers. Larry Stewart has argued that ‘The most important achievement in natural philosophy in the eighteenth century was a burgeoning public interest’; during this period Nature ‘entered the realm of public property’. 

Furthermore, there is a crucial transition between the age of Browne and that of Johnson in the way information is organized, as well as in the institutional or commercial values implicit in its organization. Browne’s work – *Pseudodoxia* especially – tends towards being a mere morass of data, and this structural trait reflects the solitary, non-institutional nature of Browne’s scholarship, which was endorsed by no patron. By contrast, the generation of natural philosophers that succeeded Browne tended to compile highly organized taxonomies and minute catalogues of knowledge, which were printed by subscription. This patronage made it possible for them to evade corruption by the mercenary practices of booksellers, as well as to afford the expensive plates their books needed. In terms of working practices there was little difference between Browne and the botanist John Ray, who spent most of his adult life pursuing his own experiments and observations at his rural fastness in Black Notley, Essex. But Ray’s two-volume *Historia Plantarum* (1686) was sponsored by the Royal Society, and their protocols determined its form and presentation.

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The proponents of Enlightenment formed a kind of unofficial respublica litteraria. Thomas Sprat spoke for the new knowledge culture when he stated that

By ... [the] union of eyes, and hands there ... will be a full comprehension of the object in all its appearances; and so there will be a mutual communication of the light of one science to another: whereas single labours can be but as a prospect taken upon one side.  

What Sprat describes is very different from what was practised by Browne. Yet in the eighteenth century an enthusiasm persisted for what are termed the 'non-normal' sciences. New modes of thought were not, after all, able to erase old ones instantaneously. Gloria Flaherty cites as examples the continued use of almanacs, the influence of herbalists and healers, and the belief in the science of physiognomy. Encyclopaedias of the period abounded with explanations and descriptions of such things. Johnson's Dictionary, even as it embodies Enlightenment values, preserves vestiges of a pre-Enlightenment world. For example, we know that Johnson was not unreceptive to alchemy. In the Dictionary 'alchemy' is defined as 'the more sublime and occult part of chymistry which proposes for its object, the transmutation of metals, and other important operations'. That Johnson says 'proposes' rather than 'professes' suggests he takes it seriously.

By the time of Johnson's Dictionary, ideas from natural philosophy were increasingly likely to find their way into literature and the discourses of popular culture, but innovation in natural philosophy was entirely distinct

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from this. It was pointless for an individual such as Johnson, without finance or resources, to attempt anything more ambitious than small experiments. The expense involved in more substantial undertakings meant that what we may term ‘popular science’, rather than being practised merely for its own sake, was directed towards commercial ends. Indeed, without this commercial dimension popular science could scarcely have come into being. Johnson was uncomfortable with this; he endorsed the popularization of new ideas, but was sceptical of the commercial impetus behind this movement. For him, as for Browne a hundred years before, knowledge equalled morality, and the introduction of economic forces into this equation threatened to compromise the purity of morality and knowledge alike. As Larry Stewart suggests,

The natural philosophy of the Restoration sought to unify the ideal with the actual, and explicitly to demonstrate the connection of nature with the public good. A kind of knowledge that is too difficult and recondite to be accessible is useless. Johnson’s intellectual instincts steer him towards popularizing knowledge and making it publicly available, but the public practice of natural philosophy in the eighteenth century was too closely braided with hopes of financial gain. The kind of science that is available to Johnson, and which he chooses to practise, is old-fashioned, amateurish, domestic, and extra-institutional; the vehicles of its transmission may be the essay, the travelogue, or the anecdote, but it is relayed in forms digestible by common readers.

Johnson’s diary entry for 31 October 1784 contains a ‘Repertorium’, which the Yale editors describe as ‘a miscellaneous storehouse of notes on

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85 Ibid., xxxiii.
The entry concludes with a list that bears the title 'skepticism caused by'. It comprises eleven categories: 'Indifference about opinions', 'Supposition that things disputed are disputable', 'Denial of unsuitable evidence', 'False judgement of Evidence', 'Complaint of the obscurity of Scripture', 'Contempt of Fathers and of authority', 'Absurd method of learning objection first', 'Study not for truth but vanity', 'Sensuality and a vicious life', 'False honour, false shame', and 'Omission of prayer and religious Exercises'. The suggestion in the notes is that these 'heads on scepticism' were written 'in preparation for an essay on the subject, perhaps to be included in the book of devotions' – this book being one Johnson had for some time been contemplating.

The 'Repertorium', composed right at the end of Johnson's life, appears to be a summation of his intellectual anxieties. Furthermore, the subjects he addresses reflect considerations that are in fact central to Browne's work, and to Pseudodoxia specifically: the emphasis on study being pursued 'for truth', the concern about evidence and the inability to determine the relative merits of different opinions, 'authority' (along with the need to respect it), and the scorn that is to be poured on a scholarly methodology that prioritizes the casuistical learning of objections above the rigorous learning of proofs. These are subjects of precisely the sort that Johnson engages with in his periodical writings; they could almost be a collection of themes noted down in preparation for a new run of essays. They

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86 Yale, I, 407.
87 Ibid., 414.
88 As for the word 'Repertorium', the Yale editors are silent. It is an unusual word (the first use cited in the OED is by Anthony Wood in 1667, and it is scarce thereafter); Johnson’s choosing it recalls – inadvertently perhaps, but curiously – its use by Browne for his account of the tombs and monuments of Norwich Cathedral.
reflect Johnson’s tendency in print to think about the social aspect of natural philosophy. He seldom attends directly to technical details. Occasionally, there is an exception, such as the reference in *Rambler* 199 to the properties of the loadstone (probably derived from *Pseudodoxia*, II, 3). But for the most part he is concerned with the human consequences of natural philosophy.

This is reflected in Johnson’s concern with the relationship between knowledge and morality, and with the ways in which the integrity of knowledge can be preserved. The subject is frequently addressed by Browne’s contemporaries, in works such as Henry Peacham’s *The Complete Gentleman*, which Johnson frequently cites in the *Dictionary*. Steven Shapin argues that in early modern England ‘[g]entility was a massively powerful instrument in the recognition, constitution, and protection of truth’. In *Rambler* 150 Johnson suggests that the disinterestedness of the English gentleman is fundamental to his telling the truth. ‘To him who is known to have the power of doing good or harm, nothing is shown in its natural form’, he writes, adding that ‘Truth is scarcely to be heard but by those from whom it can serve no interest to conceal it’. (‘Disinterestedness’ is a word for which Johnson gives Browne as his sole authority in the *Dictionary*, though the attribution of the quotation to him is almost certainly erroneous.) Browne, who stands outside the confines of any particular establishment, and who in his written works detaches himself from any notion of professional necessity

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89 See Yale, V, 273.
91 Yale, V, 37.
(which might invite the complaint of a mercenary, paid-up approach to 'truth'), defines himself as a gentlemanly truth-teller.

The protection of truth by gentility is threatened by commercial applications of natural philosophy, and Johnson's distrust of these commercial applications is reflected in his depiction of 'projectors', a social group who were frequently an object of suspicion in the eighteenth century. In *Rambler* 67 he satirizes their materialism, citing the rapaciousness of one who is 'preparing to dive for treasure in a new-invented bell' and another 'on the point of discovering the longitude'. In *Rambler* 82 he portrays a virtuoso and his collection. The essay satirizes the magpie scholarship of the virtuoso, who as a child dismantles his toys in order to discover how they are made, and who is unable to enter an old house without removing its stained glass for his private collection. The virtuoso turns to medicine as a means of gratifying his curiosity while also making himself rich. Later, he allows his tenants to pay their rent in butterflies, discovers new species of earthworms, and collects ancient remains – a fragment of Trajan's bridge over the Danube, a horseshoe broken on the Flaminian Way, a snail that once crawled along the Great Wall of China. He has 'been careful to chuse only by intrinsick worth, and real usefulness, without regard to party or opinions'. The virtuoso's name is Quisquilius, which plays on the Latin *quisquiliae*, meaning 'rubbish' or 'sweepings' – with the implication that his activities focus upon curious trash rather than anything of lasting substance.

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92 See Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science*, 14-16. Johnson's two definitions of 'projector' in the *Dictionary* are 'One who forms schemes or designs' and 'One who forms wild impracticable schemes' – the latter illustrated with damning quotations from Pope and L'Estrange.
93 Yale, III, 356.
94 Yale, IV, 69.
Yet having appeared to deride the behaviour of such individuals in *Rambler* 82, Johnson in the next number offers a defence of the virtuoso’s curiosity. He suggests that it is dangerous to discourage well-intentioned labours, or innocent curiosity; for he who is employed in searches, which by any deduction of consequences tend to the benefit of life, is surely laudable.

It is, moreover, ‘impossible ... to foresee what consequences a new discovery may produce’; and all such items as may be collected by the virtuoso ‘bear ... testimony to the supreme reason, and excite in the mind new raptures of gratitude, and new incentives to piety’. Curiosity, of any kind, apparently inspires moral rectitude — a belief more in keeping with the theories of Ray or Browne than with eighteenth-century scepticism about the self-indulgence of virtuosi. Lest we forget, Johnson was happy to endorse the work of the eccentric amateur Zachariah Williams, who arrived in London in 1721 to claim the government’s £20,000 reward for finding a means of calculating longitude at sea, and whose data were distilled by Johnson in a pamphlet published under Williams’s name. This pamphlet characterized Williams as ‘a kind of stranger in a new world’ and ‘the single votary of an obsolete science, the scoff of ... puny philosophers’, while asserting the typical Johnsonian moral that ‘no man is more in danger of doing little, than he who flatters himself with abilities to do all’. Johnson’s adoption of Williams’s cause shows that he was not immune to the attractions of contemporary projects. Later he became involved in the controversy about the kind of arches most appropriate for Blackfriars bridge, in the wake of the acceptance

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95 Yale IV, 71-3.

96 Zachariah Williams, *An Account of an Attempt To Ascertain the Longitude at Sea, by an Exact Theory of the Variation of the Magnetical Needle* (London, 1755), 16.
of Mylne's design (with elliptical arches) in 1759. He wrote a series of letters on the subject to the *Daily Gazetteer*, arguing on behalf of Mylne's rival John Gwynn that the arches should in fact be semicircular. He was, moreover, a member of the Society of Arts, which existed in part to promote practical applications of scientific theories.

In *Rambler* 177 Johnson suggests the tension between the urge to subscribe to modish practices and the wish to deride their futility. A fictional correspondent furnishes an account of a club of antiquaries. The correspondent is one Vivaculus (presumably a blend of *vivax* and *homunculus*, and thus 'a sprightly little man'), and Johnson pokes fun at both the individual and the waspish clan of snobs to which he subscribes. But Vivaculus ultimately disavows such company, and Johnson reflects that

> Whatever busies the mind without corrupting it, has at least this use. That it rescues the day from idleness, and he that is never idle will not often be vitious.97

The apparent conflict between an inclination to ridicule virtuosi and a recognition of the appeal of their way of life recalls *Idler* 85, in which Johnson ridicules the 'useless compilations' beloved of amateurs. He observes that in such works 'we are flattered with repeated promises of growing wise on easier terms than our progenitors'. Yet in this essay too his ambivalence is evident, for a moment later he adds:

> He that recalls the attention of mankind to any part of learning which time has left behind it, may be truly said to advance the literature of his own age.98

Johnson's treatment of balloons and ballooning reflects the tension I have suggested above. Johnson's first inclination appears to be scepticism.

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97 Yale, V, 172.
98 Yale, II, 264-5.
On 18 September 1784, he writes to Joshua Reynolds, ‘I have three letters this day, all about the ballon. I could have been content with one. Do not write about the ballon, whatever else You may think proper to say’. The event to which he refers is the first successful balloon ascent to have been achieved in England, which had been made on 15 September by Vincenzo Lunardi, in the presence of the Prince of Wales. Johnson seems dismissive of it here, but one need only look at earlier letters to grasp how much the balloon intrigued him. He writes to Hester Thrale of the ‘chymical philosop[h]ers’ having ‘discovered a body... which dissolved by acid emits an vapour lighter than the atmosp[h]eral air’; to William Bowles asking ‘Have you made a Ballon?’ (and remarking that ‘The effects already produced are wonderful’); and to Hester Maria Thrale of having ‘continued my connection with the world so far as to subscribe to a new ballon which is [to] sustain five hundred weight, and by which, I suppose, some Amerigo Vespucci ... will bring us what intelligence he can gather in the clouds’. Johnson is interested in the balloon as a physical presence (its weight, chemistry, and so on); he appears to be more concerned with the balloon when it is on the ground then when it is airborne – the words ‘some Amerigo Vespucci’ and ‘what intelligence he can gather’ suggest he is not confident of what can be achieved.

In a letter to Edmund Hector, written less than a month before his death, he mentions sending his servant Francis Barber to watch James

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100 Ibid., 204, 222, 268, 279.
Sadler’s balloon flight from the University Botanic Garden in Oxford. Six weeks before, he had remarked to the physician Richard Brocklesby:

The fate of the balloon I do not much lament.... The vehicles can serve no use, till we can guide them, and they can gratify no curiosity till we mount with them to greater heights than we can reach without.

He seems not to recognize that the mountaineer and the balloonist see markedly different things; but then, he is wary of man’s ambitious attempts at flight – in *Rasselas*, Imlac declares that ‘To indulge the power of fiction, and send imagination out upon the wing, is often the sport of those who delight too much in silent speculation’. Nevertheless, Johnson admits to Brocklesby that ‘the first experiment ... was bold, and deserved applause and reward’. His attitude is once again ambivalent. We know that balloons were voguish; in the wake of the feats of the Montgolfier brothers, a ballooning craze seized fashionable Britain, and Horace Walpole had occasion to claim that ‘all our views are directed to the air. Balloons occupy senators, philosophers, ladies, everybody’. Johnson seems to be both drawn into the craze (hence the subscription he mentions to Hester Maria Thrale) and estranged by it (hence his remarks to Brocklesby). Yet in describing his subscription to the balloon as a means of continuing his ‘connection with the world’ Johnson suggests his reasons for taking an interest. He is keenly aware of the hold the craze exerts over those around him. His decision to take a part

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101 *Letters*, IV, 438.
102 Ibid., 415. (The balloon flight in question was attempted by John Sheldon and Allen Keegan, on 29 September 1784. The balloon caught fire and was destroyed.)
103 Yale, XVI, 151. In *Idler* 32 Johnson remarks, of the dangerous pleasures of inwardness, that ‘Many have no happier moments than those that they pass in solitude, abandoned to their own imagination, which sometimes puts sceptres in their hands or mitres on their heads, shifts the scene of pleasure with endless variety, bids all the forms of beauty sparkle before them, and gluts them with every change of visionary luxury’ (Yale, II, 101).
104 *Letters*, IV, 416.
105 Quoted in *Letters*, IV, 204, n.1.
in the excitement and debate surrounding the balloon stems from an anxiety about the way fashion and public sentiment can overtake good sense and reason. His desire to follow the progress of the balloon craze reflects a need to be intimate with the experience of those caught up in it. His natural inclination, even when he is sceptical, is to be a participant, rather than merely a disenfranchised spectator.

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Johnson’s advocacy of the exploration of all possible avenues of experience is affirmed in a letter of 25 March 1784, to Susanna Thrale. There he explains that

> With Mr Herschel [sic] it will certainly be very right to cultivate an acquaintance, for he can show You in the sky what no man before him has ever seen, by some wonderful improvements which he has made in the telescope. What he has to show is indeed a long way off, and perhaps concerns us but little, but all truth is valuable and all knowledge is pleasing in its first effects, and may be subsequently useful.... Take therefore all opportunities of learning that offer themselves, however remote the matter may be from common life or common conversation. Look in Herschel’s telescope; go into a chymist’s laboratory; if you see a manufacturer at work, remark his operations.\(^{106}\)

Here Johnson the letter-writer is also Johnson the moralist, offering instruction and arguing the value of inquisitiveness. Herschel had discovered the planet Uranus three years before. He pursued the idea that sunlight consists of rays both visible and invisible. His experiments into this were notably untheoretical in their direction; for Herschel, observation did not have

\(^{106}\) Letters, IV, 301-2.
to be theory-laden. The moral content of Johnson's letter lies in his statement that 'all truth is valuable'; everything inscribed within the fabric of nature, regardless of its size, can contribute to an understanding of the universe.¹⁰⁷

This position is one that Browne espouses too. By virtue of his profession, Browne was frequently occupied with natural phenomena. Seventeenth-century medicine, though progressive, was still in many ways quite primitive; developments in natural philosophy had yet to become public events, and his investigations were not only personal and visceral, but also tinged with a sense of wonder. In his published works, the attitude he has to his surroundings is at once exploratory and sacramental. He thinks of Nature, whose mazy paths he assiduously explores, as a sort of second Bible, a 'universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all' \((RM, 24)\). He discerns encrypted messages within it; the curious mathematics of the anatomy of the beetle suggest to him the 'mystical Mathematicks of the City of Heaven'.¹⁰⁸ The 'strange and mysticall transmigrations' that he observes in silkworms \((RM, 61)\) turn his natural philosophy into divinity, and when he observes the glow-worm glowing he remarks:

> Now whether the light of animals, which do not occasionally shine from contingent causes, be of Kin unto the light of heaven ... Phylosophy may yet enquire \((PE, I, 284)\).

This conception of nature's code reflects the popular tendency to think of the Book of Nature as a text sharing with the Book of Scripture a cryptic message fit to be deciphered. This is also at the heart of *The Garden of Cyrus*, which reads nature as allegory, finding occult purpose in its lineaments. Underlying

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¹⁰⁷ In *Rambler* 137 (Yale, IV, 362) Johnson similarly argues that 'they who devote their lives to study ... [should] believe nothing too great for their attainment, and consider nothing as too little for their regard'.

¹⁰⁸ *K, I, 226.*
this is Bacon’s rapacious approach to the natural world, which is paraphrased by Peter Pesic: “To read the Book of Nature means to experience it, to experiment with it, even at the risk of destroying old certainties.”¹⁰⁹ This is Browne’s method; even as he admires Nature in all its strangeness, he seeks to test it, and he adheres to the Baconian principle that knowledge is to be collected from all available sources.

Johnson and Browne are both intrigued by diverse aspects of Nature, but for both it is important to keep the moral purpose of their interest in view. Johnson appears to define his position on the relative importance of morality and natural philosophy in the Life of Milton, where he offers the pronouncement that ‘we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance’.¹¹⁰ Yet this is not a wholly representative statement of his views. A very different valuation is to be found in Rambler 24, where Johnson suggests that the ‘great praise of Socrates’ is that ‘he drew the wits of Greece, … from the vain pursuit of natural philosophy to moral inquiries’.

In Rambler 180 the same point is made:

If, instead of wandering after the meteors of philosophy …, the candidates of learning fixed their eyes upon the permanent lustre of moral and religious truth, they would find a more certain direction to happiness.¹¹¹

Johnson is not impugning natural philosophy; he is simply making clear that it needs to be underpinned by morality. Browne argues a similar position in Religio Medici, where he says of the relationship between Man and God:

those highly magnifie him whose judicious enquiry into his acts, and deliberate research of his creatures, returne the duty

¹¹⁰ Lives, I, 100.
¹¹¹ Yale, III, 131-2; V, 186.
of a devout and learned admiration (RM, 21).

The consequence of Johnson’s insisting that enquiries into natural philosophy be informed by morality is that he is ultimately most concerned with the uses to which such enquiries are put. Utility and accessibility are essential. Schwartz quotes Johnson’s review of Stephen White's essay on Collateral Bee-Boxes, in which White was applauded as ‘a man of ingenuity, candor, and, what is far more valuable, of piety; willing to communicate his knowledge for the advantage of others’. Without this willingness, natural philosophy is recondite and irrelevant. This conviction is apparent through Johnson’s interest in inventions, innovations and everyday processes. If the first two of these are perhaps best considered in relation to Johnson’s attention to the ‘strange’, we may none the less identify his curiosity about both practical procedures and the workings of new inventions as relating to his sense of natural philosophy as an activity — or, if not an activity, a phenomenon in which it is valuable to participate. We may compare Browne’s insistence that if ‘curiosities ... [had been] sedentary, the face of truth had been obscure unto us’ — an explicit assertion of curiosity’s status as an active process (PE, I, 29-30).

Johnson’s interest in manufacture is amply documented in his diaries. On his tour of Wales in 1774, he visited a brass works, a copper works and an iron works at Holywell. Having devoted three paragraphs to his description of the different processes (complete with the appropriate vocabulary — ‘lapis Calaminaris’, ‘pigs of copper’), he reflects, ‘I have enlarged my notions’.

112 Schwartz, Samuel Johnson and the New Science, 88-9. (Emphasis added.)

113 Yale, I, 186-7.
On the return journey he visited Henry Clay’s Birmingham japanning factory and the factory where Matthew Boulton made metal buttons and spoons. A little over a year later, he made a two-month trip to France with the Thrales. His account of this short tour is typically compressed, concerned, as Bate accurately states, with ‘details about things and places (chapels, churches, paintings), about manufactures, roads, libraries, and social conditions’, but we know that he visited the porcelain factory at Sevres, the Gobelin tapestry factory, and the brewery run by Antoine-Joseph Santerre. In Scotland with Boswell, he demonstrated an understanding of brewing and tanning as well as the making of gunpowder. His knowledge of trades (among them farming, cheese-making and butchery – as evidenced in Boswell’s *Tour*) informed his work on political economy – specifically, his agricultural essays for the *Universal Visitor* in 1756, and the *Considerations of the Corn Laws* (1766).

Johnson’s records of his travels suggest, more broadly, that the value of travel lies in its furnishing opportunities to examine unusual trades, customs and practices. He was sceptical both of the usefulness of travel as it was generally experienced and of the value of most travel narratives, because travellers often seemed so incurious and complacent. ‘The use of travelling,’ he told Hester Thrale, ‘is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are.’ This formula contains a subtle criticism of travel as it was most often practised; Johnson is at pains to differentiate his own enquiring, sceptical mode of travel from the sort of fashionable tourism typically embodied in the eighteenth-century

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114 Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 518.
115 *Letters*, II, 78. In the *Dictionary* he cites Watts to illustrate the noun ‘travels’: ‘Histories engage the soul by sensible occurrences; as also voyages, travels, and accounts of countries’.
Grand Tour. In the preface to his first published work, a translation of Father Jerome Lobo’s *Voyage to Abyssinia*, Johnson outlines some of the qualities which had drawn him to his project, stating that ‘The Portuguese traveller ... has amused his reader with no romantick absurdities or incredible fictions; whatever he relates, whether true or not, is at least probable’. Enlarging on this, he explains that he

> described things as he saw them, ... copied nature from the life, and ... consulted his senses not his imagination; he meets with not basilisks that destroy with their eyes, his crocodiles devour their prey without tears.

He goes on to poke fun at a number of the clichés of travel writing (‘here are no Hottentots without religion, polity, or articulate language, no Chinese perfectly polite ...’).\(^{116}\)

> When travelling himself, Johnson is a sceptic, whose interest is in improving upon received wisdom and rooting out misconceptions. As both reader and observer, he invokes doubt as a means of testing veracity. His doubting cast of mind is perhaps nowhere better exhibited than in the *Lives of the Poets*, where he repeatedly begins from a position of scepticism regarding existing accounts of his biographical subjects.\(^{117}\) Martin Maner has argued that, in the *Lives* especially, Johnson makes use of doubt ‘as an instrument of inquiry and as a means of educating the reader’s judgement’.\(^{118}\) Johnson shares with Browne an awareness that doubt may serve as a creative instrument. Mrs Thrale remarked that Johnson’s habitual mode of thought

\(^{116}\) Yale, XV, 3-4.  
was characterized not only by an ‘attention to veracity ... without equal or example’, but also by an ‘incredulity’ that ‘amounted almost to disease’.

Johnson writes in Taxation No Tyranny that ‘All trial is the investigation of something doubtful’. To launch an experiment, one must be in a state of doubt regarding the matter the experiment is contrived to examine. The experiment may, at best, resolve that doubt, but even if it fails to do so, it promotes discoveries and revelations. In other words, to be in a state of doubt is to stand on the brink of a heightened understanding, for the procedures designed to make trial of that doubt result in increased knowledge and empirical intelligence. The range of possibilities opened by doubt is a subject to which Johnson repeatedly returns. Rambler 150 examines the usefulness of difficult circumstances to the acquisition of knowledge. ‘No man,’ Johnson argues, ‘can form a just estimate of his own powers by inactive speculation’, before proceeding to suggest that ‘distress is necessary to the attainment of knowledge’, while ‘to live at ease is to live in ignorance’.

He characteristically sees adversity as a ‘sharpener’ of the senses: error assists a sense of truth; doubt has creative possibilities.

Uncertainty fertilizes the works of both Johnson and Browne. Theirs is a scepticism that bears out Eliot’s definition of the word as ‘the habit of examining evidence and the capacity for delayed criticism’. Browne’s projects begin with doubt: Pseudodoxia with the premiss that uncertainties abound, Religio Medici with an anxiety about reconciling faith and natural philosophy, Hydriotaphia with a reflection on the vanity of human wishes.

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119 JM, I, 297, 241.
120 Yale, X, 440.
121 Yale, V, 5-6.
Johnson, for his part, most often seizes on undertakings that aim to create
stability where none exists: fixing the language in the Dictionary, confronting
untruths and popular issues in his periodical essays, attempting to improve
Shakespearean scholarship, commemorating the half-forgotten luminaries of
the past (his favourite practitioners, such as Boerhaave or Sydenham, and
men of letters, such as Ascham and Browne), or historicizing and
memorialising English literature in the Lives of the Poets. In Idler 85 he
emphasizes the difficulty of discovering and pursuing a path of truth –
perhaps also silently nodding to Browne’s efforts in working against this
difficulty:

Particles of science are often very widely scattered. Writers of
extensive comprehension have incidental remarks upon
topicks very remote from the principal subject, which are
often more valuable than formal treatises, and which yet are
not known because they are not promised in the title. He that
collects those under proper heads is very laudably
employed. 123

In Adventurer 107, Johnson discusses the prevalence of divergent opinions
and scholarly disputes:

At our first sally into the intellectual world, we all march
together along one strait and open road; but as we proceed
further, and wider prospects open to our view, every eye fixes
upon a different scene; we divide into various paths, and as we
move forward, are still at a greater distance from each other.

Towards the end of the piece he writes that

Such is the uncertainty, in which we are always likely to
remain with regard to questions, wherein we have most
interest, and which every day affords us fresh opportunity to
examine: we may examine, indeed, but we can never decide,
because our faculties are unequal to the subject: we see a little,
and form an opinion; we see more, and change it. 124

123 Yale, II, 265.
124 Ibid., 441, 444.
Uncertainty, here, appears a fecundating power. It is, moreover, central to the pursuit of knowledge. Johnson accepts that different theories will always be in competition, and that different opinions may be equally plausible.

When Browne speaks, at the very beginning of *Pseudodoxia*, of purchasing a body of truth, he is acknowledging the expense — in terms of time, money and effort — of affronting error (which operates freely in the human marketplace, and is thus very quickly spread). Browne's mission is, he knows, a qualified one; he explains that

> now our understandings being eclipsed, as well as our tempers infirmed, we must betake our selves to wayes of reparation, and depend upon the illumination of our endeavours; for thus we may in some measure repaire our primarie ruins, and build our selves men againe (PE, I, 30).

The words 'in some measure' testify to the difficulty of competing with the free and easy traffic of error. In *Religio* he describes the 'cryptick and involved method' of divine providence; it takes a route full of 'Meanders and Labyrinths', and 'Fortune' is a 'serpentine and crooked line' (*RM*, 27). He also refers to 'the maze' of God's counsels (*RM*, 20). It is a maze through which a path may be traced, thanks to the thread of divine guidance. But this guidance is not always obvious ('wee finde no ... constant manuduction in his Labyrinth'), and Satan threatens to suggest that the maze is a 'maze of Error' (*PE*, I, 3). In *The Garden of Cyrus*, where he further examines the intricacies of nature and the complications of understanding, Browne writes, with what seems at least equal relevance to *Pseudodoxia*, of his commitment to 'sense and ocular Observation, which seems to me the surest path, to trace the Labyrinth of Truth'.

\[125 K, I, 226.\]
labyrinth is explained by John Knott, in an essay on Browne's understanding of scriptural truth:

His awareness of the imperfections of human understanding entailed by the loss of paradise was counterbalanced by a serene confidence that this divine order could be apprehended, in the Bible as in nature, by those who knew how to look. Its supreme symbol, the city of heaven, can be set against the figure of the labyrinth, which Browne used to express both the intricacy of the natural world and the complexity of scriptural truth.126

In Browne's estimate, truth is serpentine in shape; its route is a sinuous one, often difficult to trace. The imagery so frequently returned to here suggests Browne as a knightly figure pursuing a dangerous and necessary adventure. His morality appears almost chivalric in flavour. In Christian Morals he even goes so far as to suggest that the quest in endless: 'A man may come into the Pericardium, but not the Heart of Truth' (CM, 117). Labyrinthine imagery is attractive to Johnson as well. For instance, he writes that it has always 'been ... a delicious employment of poets' to 'perplex the labyrinth of uncertainty'.127 In Rambler 39 he refers to the 'labyrinth of life', in Rambler 151 to 'labyrinths of fallacy', and in the final Adventurer (Number 138) to the habit of the mind, on being presented with conflicting thoughts, of falling 'into a labyrinth ... [where it] toils and struggles without progress or extrication'.128 The image is perhaps initiated by Bacon in the preface to the Great Instauration. There he suggests that

the universe to the eye of the human understanding is framed like a labyrinth; presenting as it does on every side so many ambiguities of way, such deceitful resemblances of objects and

126 John R. Knott, Jr, 'Sir Thomas Browne and the Labyrinth of Truth', in Patrides (ed.), Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne, 30.
127 Lives, III, 224.
128 Yale, III, 214; V, 40; II, 494.
signs, natures so irregular in their lines, and so knotted and entangled ... [that] Our steps must be guided by a clue.\textsuperscript{129}

Browne's use of the image of the labyrinth suggests the difficulty of finding the truth. This difficulty or slipperiness accounts for his frequent recourse to paradox, a device which acknowledges the insufficiency of language and logic to articulate the extremes of experience. The trait is one that Johnson finds it hard to approve, as is apparent in the Life. Yet Browne's paradoxes inform his religious conviction, rather than undermining it, and Johnson is aware of this. In Religio Browne uses as a motto Tertullian's 'odde resolution' that 'Certum est, quia impossibile est' (RM, 15). 'To call our selves a Microcosme, or little world,' he argues, is not 'onely a pleasant trope of Rhetorick' but 'a reall truth' (RM, 53). In Christian Morals he counsels his reader to 'astronomiz[e] in caves' and 'delight to be alone and single with Omnipresency' (CM, 159). Knowledge of oneself is knowledge of the world: the mysticism Browne espouses is not at odds with his morality, but rather buttresses it, and his irrational claims prove the authenticity of his faith. Pseudodoxia, a more diffuse but still concerted testament of faith, shows Browne delighting in the perverse and the paradoxical. It abounds with examples of strangeness, and Browne indulges these. Many of the phenomena with which Browne engages are familiar to the modern reader, but the erroneous beliefs concerning them often seem bizarre. It might strike one as peculiar that he expends a good deal of energy disabusing the reader of apparent misconceptions such as the belief that elephants have no joints, or that storks will only live in republics and free states. Yet he is also concerned

with stranger phenomena: the phoenix, and gryphons; the basilisk, the unicorn, and the two-headed serpent known as the Amphisbaena. Any enquiry into the status of such phenomena reveals not only a desire to legislate or circumscribe them, but a fundamental fascination with them. To expend three thousand words on a discussion of the chameleon which begins ‘Concerning the Chameleon there generally passeth an opinion that it liveth onely upon ayre’ is scarcely to conceal that it is the chameleon, more than the myths that surround it, which is of primary interest (PE, I, 242). Pseudodoxia is not only an inventory of public misconceptions, but also a collection of strange facts, informed by a sense of wonder. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park explain, ‘wonder was central to the mid-seventeenth-century psychology and epistemology of empirical investigation’. Browne derives aesthetic pleasure even from what others would consider ugly. In Religio he claims that there are ‘no Grotesques in nature’, on the grounds that monstrosity itself contains ‘a kind of beauty, Nature so ingeniously contriving the irregular parts’ (RM, 23, 26). He thinks of misfits and deformities as part of the world’s majestic, God-given totality. He describes the condition of a world whose 

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\text{divided Antipathies and contrary faces doe yet carry a charitable regard unto the whole by their particular discords, preserving the common harmony, and keeping in fetters those powers, whose rebellions once Masters, might bee the ruine of all (RM, 103).}
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This seeming paradox reflects his belief that the act of documenting strangeness is a means of controlling it. The abundance of inexplicable

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phenomena is the hallmark of divine artistry. Browne refers time and again to
myths about Jews, the Creation, black people, poisons, and God, but it is the
stranger, less persistent subjects that give the work its special flavour, and, as
I shall show in Chapter Five, it is to this dimension of the work that Johnson
is particularly drawn.

Browne's enthusiasm for oddities was noticed by Virginia Woolf,
who indeed defines one of the essential qualities of Browne's work as
'strangeness'. She writes of the 'strange journeys' of Browne's imagination,
of the 'strange thoughts and imaginings [that] have play with him as he goes
about his work', and of his voice's resemblance to that of 'a strange preacher'
who is 'filled with doubts and subtleties and suddenly swept away by
surprising imaginations'. Hydriotaphia is concerned with 'the strangeness
which surrounds us on every side'. She identifies his gift for 'bringing the
remote and incongruous astonishingly together'. He possesses a
complementary aptitude for conveying to his audience a sense of their
participation in his thoughts: 'Here, as in no other English prose except the
Bible, the reader is not left to read alone in his armchair but is made one of a
congregation.' Describing the way in which his arguments typically proceed,
she observes how 'Vast inquiries sweeping in immense circles of ambiguity
and doubt are clenched by short sentences rapped out with solemn authority.'
And in a comment that could with equal usefulness be applied to Johnson,
she reflects that 'Steeped in ... glooms, his imagination falls with a peculiar
tenderness upon the common facts of human life'. In The Common Reader
she conveys Browne's appeal:

131 Virginia Woolf, 'Sir Thomas Browne', TLS, 28 June 1923, 436.
173
Now we are in the presence of sublime imagination; now rambling through one of the finest lumber rooms in the world—a chamber stuffed from floor to ceiling with ivory, old iron, broken pots, urns, unicorns' horns, and magic glasses full of emerald lights and blue mystery.

His writings 'paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, confession-mongers, and dealers in the curious shades of our private life.'

She sees him 'swooping and soaring at the highest altitude', yet stooping 'suddenly with loving particularity upon the details of his own body.' Woolf suggests his importance in the history of literature, as a key figure in the development of the literature of the self:

In short, as we say when we cannot help laughing at the oddities of people we admire most, he was a character, and the first to make us feel that the most sublime speculations of the human imagination are issued from a particular man, whom we can love.

She reflects that

Whatever he writes is stamped with his own idiosyncrasies, and we first become conscious of impurities which hereafter stain literature with so many freakish colours that, however hard we try, make it difficult to be certain whether we are looking at a man or his writing.\(^\text{132}\)

Woolf's ascription to Browne of this persistent strain of the bizarre and the peculiar is appropriate. Browne himself alludes to 'strangeness'. The word is a catch-all for the unlikely, the fanciful, the extreme and the extraordinary. In Book I, Chapter 7 of *Pseudodoxia* he speaks of 'the strange relations made by Authors' (such as that a nightingale has no tongue), of the 'strange effect' induced by a certain medical preparation, and of the 'strange' notion that a weasel's left testicle wrapped in the skin of a mule can 'secure incontinency

from conception' \((PE, I, 43-4)\). In the next chapter he refers to the 'strange and incredible accounts' of Ctesias and the 'strange and singular relations' of Athenaeus \((PE, I, 47, 50)\). The word recurs throughout \textit{Pseudodoxia}.

In the \textit{Dictionary} Johnson provides a number of definitions of 'strange', including 'wonderful; causing wonder', 'odd; irregular; not according to the common way' and 'unknown; new'. In the \textit{Life of Swift} he employs the word in a sense somewhere between the first and second of these, describing \textit{Gulliver's Travels} as 'a production so new and strange that it filled the reader with a mingled emotion of merriment and amazement'.\textsuperscript{133} In the \textit{Life of Butler} he suggests that 'Nor even though another Butler should arise, would another \textit{Hudibras} obtain the same regard', and then expands on this to establish a general principle:

\begin{quote}
All disproportion is unnatural; and from what is unnatural we can derive only the pleasure which novelty produces. We admire it awhile as a strange thing; but, when it is no longer strange, we perceive its deformity.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

Here the word seems to be used in the second and third of the senses given above. 'Deformity' is defined in the \textit{Dictionary} as 'irregularity' or 'inordinateness' (the latter in turn being defined as 'want of regularity; intemperance of any kind'). It appears that strange creations or phenomena trouble Johnson because they threaten the boundaries imposed by his moral sense; yet this very menace is the source of their interest and appeal. Though their frames of reference are different, he and Browne are both excited by the very things they are inclined to attack.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Lives}, III, 38.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Lives}, I, 218.
Johnson's attitude to the supernatural suggests his interest in strange phenomena. In 1762 the Cock Lane ghost held the fascination of much of London.\textsuperscript{135} Johnson, who wrote an account of investigations into its existence for the \textit{Gentleman's Magazine}, was satirized for his part in the affair by the poet Charles Churchill, despite having been one of those who exposed the imposture.\textsuperscript{136} Even though he was intellectually satisfied of their non-existence, Johnson took the phenomenon of ghosts seriously; he told Boswell that 'All argument is against it; but all belief is for it'.\textsuperscript{137} As a boy he read \textit{Hamlet} in the basement of his father's shop, and was so scared of the ghost that he ran upstairs in order that he might 'see people about him'.\textsuperscript{138}

Johnson's interest in ghosts -- a subject to which he frequently returns -- stems not from credulousness, but from a desire to accommodate the fugitive details of the world around him within the framework of his instinctive generalizations. Strange facts demand to be taken seriously; they promise to give more bulk and definition to general principles. Yet for Johnson the essence of strangeness is that it is for the most part only remotely apprehended. Throughout the \textit{Journey to Western Islands of Scotland} he is at pains to provide details of what he sees, but is especially exercised by what he does not see -- by the absence of certain things he would hope or expect to encounter (fish, flowers, ventilation, roads, formal memorials, laws, coins, trees and orchards). These absences, or deficiencies, are estranging.

Johnson's notion of what is strange differs from Browne's in often being

\textsuperscript{135} There is a brief account of this in Joseph M. Beatty Jr, 'Dr Johnson and the Occult', \textit{South Atlantic Quarterly} 21 (1922), 144-51.
\textsuperscript{136} For Johnson's account see \textit{Gentleman's Magazine} 32 (1762), 81-2. For Boswell's, see \textit{Life}, I, 406-7.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Life}, III, 230.
\textsuperscript{138} JM, I, 158.
conditioned by what is absent (morality, structure, the expected), not by the curiousness of what is present.

Johnson's involvement with the phenomena of nature is less complete and intense than Browne's, and this explains why he is not immune from misconception. Boswell records his erroneous claim that 'Swallows certainly sleep all winter. A number of them conglomerate together, by flying round and round, and then all in a heap throw themselves under water, and ly in the bed of a river'. In the same paragraph Boswell mentions Johnson's having told him that 'one of his first essays was a Latin poem upon the glow-worm'. Again, we sense that Johnson is more seduced by the idea of the glow-worm (which was a sign of divine illumination for Browne), than by the glow-worm itself. But there are other episodes that reveal his thoroughgoing communion with what he seeks to understand. Most notably, when he visits the Scottish minister Alexander Grant, he relates how his friend Sir Joseph Banks has travelled in Australia and come across an extraordinary animal known as the kangaroo. To explain what he means, Johnson impersonates the creature. His performance can be read as an instance of the eccentric behaviour that many have ascribed to him, but it can also be understood as an attempt to improve upon talking about the kangaroo by being the kangaroo, which is to say, an attempt to supplement theory with action, dramatizing and realizing what would otherwise only be a two-dimensional account. This incident, omitted by Boswell from the Life, demonstrates Johnson's capacity for a highly personal engagement with nature. When this occurs, it exists in

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139 Life, II, 55.
order to affront a kind of specious, philosophic impersonality that perpetually threats to invade the thinking of his peers. 'I would rather see the portrait of a dog that I know,' he opined, 'than all the allegorical paintings they can shew me in the world'. Throughout his Scottish journey, he is stimulated and intrigued by those details of the regional oddities that afford human interest: the 'elf-bolts' allegedly shot by fairies at cattle, the practice of giving cows as dowries, the education of girls at home, the prevalence of casual labour, the presence of cheese at tea-time, the phenomenon of second sight. This enthusiasm of Johnson's for collecting strange facts and evidence of curious phenomena is nowhere more evident than in the Dictionary, and in the Dictionary it is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the illustrative quotations he selects from Sir Thomas Browne.

141 J.M., II, 15.
Chapter Four: Johnson and the *Dictionary* – lexicographical precedents and the uses of Sir Thomas Browne

Johnson’s achievements as a lexicographer were impressive, but he was less an innovator than a successful user of others’ innovations. He was not the first to supply authorities for his definitions, and he was not the first to attempt etymologies. In their study *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson*, De Witt Starnes and Gertrude Noyes examine twenty-four works of lexicography published in the hundred and fifty years prior to the issue of Johnson’s two volumes. The history Starnes and Noyes reveal demonstrates that there were good dictionaries before Johnson, such as Elisha Coles’s 1676 *An English Dictionary* (saluted for its ‘general usefulness’) and Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (first published in 1721, and characterized both by ‘its intelligibility to all’ and a ‘special appeal to the learned’). But those who had previously attempted to make dictionaries had tended to restrict themselves to producing glossaries of hard words, and even when they had done more than this they had often failed to give a sufficient sense of language as it appeared in use. As is generally acknowledged, the achievement of Johnson’s *Dictionary* – and its major difference from even the most comprehensive of its English forerunners – lay in the quality of its definitions and its wide-ranging and careful deployment of authorities. Johnson’s definitions were rooted in the experience

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2 There were, however, foreign precedents for this, as Paul J. Korshin explains in his article ‘Johnson and the Renaissance Dictionary’, in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974), 300-
of reading and interpreting texts; in the *Preface* he states that his task is 'not [to] form, but register the language', and that his intention is not to 'teach men how they should think', but rather to 'relate how they have hitherto expressed their thoughts'. Inevitably, he breaks with this principle; the *Dictionary*'s registering of language reflects his personal priorities and values. As Robert DeMaria points out, 'To present knowledge is to shape it'. Johnson's authorities were chosen according to their scope for demonstrating his idea of correctness and reflecting what seemed to him a broad range of fields of knowledge.

In the *Plan of an English Dictionary*, published in 1747 following his initial engagement by the booksellers who underwrote the project, Johnson gives his first indication of the importance he will attach to authorities. He explains that 'many of the writers whose testimonies will be alleged, were selected by Mr Pope'. Pope's plans for a *Dictionary*, or for a canon of exemplary authors, are detailed by Joseph Spence, though they are not mentioned in Johnson's *Preface* of eight years later. Of the prose authors suggested by Pope, Johnson ultimately

312. Korshin cites the European dictionaries assembled by Constantine, Faber, Estienne, Buxtorf and Golius, to whom Johnson was indirectly indebted. He argues (p. 311-2) that

His mixture of copious illustrations and terse explanations, his conception of the dictionary as both word-list and an intellectual history of an entire national culture, his evoking the prefatorial theme of monumental and solitary labors, his preference for quotations from the best and purest authors on all subjects of intellectual importance — all these qualities of the *Dictionary* relate to the methodology of Renaissance lexicography more closely than to the English.

Johnson would have had an opportunity to examine the great European dictionaries while working with William Oldys on the catalogue of the Harleian Library.

3 *MW*, 322.

4 DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 118.

5 *Plan*, 31. There is no modern edition of the *Plan*, so I have referred to the original version. However, quotations from the *Preface* are from *Samuel Johnson: The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford, 2000).

quotes Bacon, Hooker, Clarendon, Tillotson, Dryden, Temple, Locke, Sprat, Atterbury, Addison and Swift, but, as I shall discuss later in this chapter, he chooses to drop Hobbes, Barrow and Bolingbroke. His reference in the Plan to Pope’s selection of possible authorities is a reminder of the debate about dictionary-making that had occupied the fifty years or so preceding his commencement of the work. It was argued that lexicography could best be practised under the aegis of an institution, rather than by an individual. The Académie Française and the Italian Accademia della Crusca had both been set up with this in mind, and their achievements provoked an increasing English awareness of the need to establish a comparable academy. This movement found expression in Swift’s 1712 Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue; Johnson read the Proposal, and considered it to be a ‘petty treatise’. Those who sought to realize the movement’s ambitions included Joseph Addison, who began work on a dictionary, marking quotations in a copy of Tillotson’s sermons, which he considered the ‘chief standard of our language’. Addison’s inchoate materials appear to have passed into the hands of his friend Ambrose Philips, who published his own ‘Proposals for Printing an English Dictionary in Two Volumes in Folio’. Johnson was not the first, then, to give thought to the question of which authorities might best serve an English dictionary-maker. However, unlike those who had gone before, he presumed not only to consider the question of authorities, but also to convert this groundwork into a finished product. In the

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7 MW, 326.
Plan he addresses the question of where to begin, and establishes a number of ‘obvious rules’, one of which is ‘preferring authors of the first reputation to those of an inferior rank’. He proposes

selecting, when it can be conveniently done, such sentences, as, besides their immediate use, may give pleasure or instruction, by conveying some elegance of language, or some precept of prudence, or piety.\(^9\)

Such sentiments clearly indicate that the writers chosen as authorities for the *Dictionary* were to be looked on not merely as convenient sources of illustration. They were, rather, to be exemplars in matters of morality, scholarship, everyday wisdom, and literary value.

It is possible to exaggerate the significance of the choices Johnson made in compiling the *Dictionary*, but we are left with a number of compelling facts. The modern reader will consider many, if not most, of the authors from whom he quotes extensively to be unsurprising choices, and few of Johnson’s contemporaries can have been startled by the copious citations of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden or Pope. In the *Preface* he states his belief that

From the authors which rose in the time of Elizabeth, a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance. If the language of theology were extracted from Hooker and the translation of the Bible; the terms of natural knowledge from Bacon; the phrases of policy, war, and navigation from Raleigh; the dialect of poetry and fiction from Spenser and Sidney; and the diction of common life from Shakespeare, few ideas would be lost to mankind for want of English words in which they might be expressed.\(^{10}\)

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\(^9\) *Plan*, 31. It is worth noting Johnson’s heavy use of educational works such as Isaac Watts’s *Logick* and *Improvement of the Mind*, Milton’s essay ‘Of Education’, Andrew Bourde’s *Fyrst Boke of the Introduction to Knowledge*, and George Cheyne’s *Philosophical Principles of Religion*, which was a manual for philosophy students. Johnson’s choice of Roger Ascham’s *Schoolmaster* (1570) is of particular interest, as it predates his stated historical boundary, the works of Sir Philip Sidney.

\(^{10}\) *MW*, 319-20.
This statement of intent does not on the whole strike the modern reader as strange. However, it does seem curious that Johnson should profess to find in Shakespeare what he calls ‘the diction of common life’; there were more likely reasons for using Shakespeare (the attractiveness of his language, the force and originality of his imagery), but in the above quotation Johnson is emphasizing the ‘usefulness’ of authors, not merely their capacity for pleasing. While the quotation gives a clear sense of who some of Johnson’s preferred sources will be, it also suggests why he had to look beyond these favoured authors in order to find what he needed. Theology, natural knowledge, policy, war, navigation, poetry, fiction and everyday speech may be important and sizable lexical fields, but a dictionary worth the name needs to embrace the lexis of many other spheres. The fact that the Dictionary quotes not just these few authors, but also some five hundred others, reflects the essential inclusiveness of Johnson’s work. Yet within this inclusiveness there exist priorities and opinions, and Johnson is not beyond omitting certain authors whose writings might have been favoured by others. Among those excluded are Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Isaac Barrow, Lord Bolingbroke and Samuel Clarke. Clarke was a writer whom Johnson admired, but, as Reddick suggests, he was omitted ‘because of his anti-Trinitarian positions’.\footnote{Reddick, \textit{The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary}, 34.} Bolingbroke was omitted on the grounds that his English was Frenchified (under the fifth sense of ‘to owe’ his prose is explicitly criticised).\footnote{A small number of quotations from Bolingbroke – under, for instance, ‘acquaintance’, ‘lustre’ and ‘to mine’ – do in fact survive despite Johnson’s apparent commitment to excluding him. This may be the accidental contribution of his amanuenses.} The reasons for Barrow’s omission are impossible to determine, but it is clear
that Hobbes and Shaftesbury were left out because Johnson was reluctant to
ascibe any kind of authority to them, disapproving thoroughly of their
philosophies. While Hobbes was considered an important thinker, rather than
an important writer, by Johnson’s contemporary audience, the omission of
Shaftesbury jarred more awkwardly with eighteenth-century notions of
exemplary style, since Shaftesbury was widely considered a fine stylist.

Though the Dictionary’s illustrative quotations deny positions like those
of Hobbes and Shaftesbury, emphasizing instead Johnson’s ideas of ‘prudence’
and ‘piety’, it is an exaggeration to claim that when Johnson quotes a statement
or an opinion he is choosing to endorse it. Even so, repeated citation of an author
does constitute evidence of approval for some aspect of his work. A. D.
Atkinson’s study of Johnson’s quotations under the letters F, W, X, Y and Z gives
an overview of the volume of quotations chosen from particular authors.

Discounting the Bible and Prayer Book, Browne (bracketed with his son
Edward) appears sixteenth in a table of the most used sources. Those ahead of
him include Shakespeare, Dryden, Milton, Addison, Bacon, Spenser, Pope,
Swift, Locke, Sidney, Hooker, South, L’Estrange, Prior and Arbuthnot. Unlike
Atkinson, the modern student is able to use electronic resources which allow a
comprehensive search to be made. Utilizing the Cambridge University Press CD-
ROM, we can review the contents of the whole Dictionary. It emerges that

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He told Thomas Tyers that he had left out Hobbes ‘because I did not like his principles’. For
which see Brack and Kelley (eds), Early Biographies, 82. Among the texts Johnson does cite is
Joseph Bramhall’s 1658 Castigations of Mr Hobbes.

Charles Lamb would later, in criticizing Shaftesbury, suggest the qualities others had found
pleasing. In his essay ‘The Genteel Style In Writing’ he refers to the ‘inflated finical rhapsodies’
of Shaftesbury, who ‘seems to have written with his coronet on, and his Earl’s mantle before


184
Atkinson's list is broadly correct. In the first edition Shakespeare, Dryden, Bacon and Milton are, in descending order, the most frequently cited authors. Pope, Addison, Swift, Locke, Hooker, Arbuthnot and Sidney – all of whom are mentioned by Atkinson – are each cited over a thousand times. It is perhaps not surprising to find these authors represented so copiously. Yet the list of those quoted more than a thousand times also includes Robert South, Jeremy Taylor, Richard Allestree and Sir Thomas Browne, and the breadth and depth of Johnson's reading for the Dictionary is suggested in his finding room for well over a hundred illustrative quotations from each of John Ray, Edward Stillingfleet, George Hakewill, John Tillotson, Jeremy Collier, Francis Atterbury, and Nehemiah Grew. All the authors in this second group are moralists, as is to a large degree reflected in the kind of words Johnson uses them to illustrate. Hakewill, for instance, provides illustrations of many words suggesting the extremes of human experience: 'beatifically', 'daintiness', 'disconformity', 'heartbreaking', 'incorruptibility', 'posthaste', 'to revomit', 'stalkinghorse', 'stiletto', 'unimpearable'. Stillingfleet is a fecund source of technical terms connected with the theory and practice of religion: 'apostasy', 'chalice', 'doxology', 'genuflection', 'libation', 'to ordain', 'pontifical', 'sodality', 'thurification' (the act of burning incense), and 'worshipfully'. While even authors whose subject matter is specialized are used to illustrate commonplace words, it is broadly true to say that there is a link between the essential matter in which a writer deals and the words and quotations with which Johnson represents his works.
Johnson’s extensive use of Browne’s works for illustrative quotations in the *Dictionary* has been remarked upon by critics of both authors. He meets in varying degrees the criteria I have suggested above, but anyone who has had the experience of looking carefully through the *Dictionary* will have been struck by the frequency with which quotations from Browne appear. Jonathan Post reflects the rather proprietorial attitude of Browne critics in observing that ‘Browne figures frequently in the *Dictionary*, as we might expect’. Daniela Havenstein argues that Johnson’s use of Browne in the *Dictionary* ‘promotes ... [him] as an authority on the English language’. Johnsonians have less to say on the subject. Usually, if his presence in the *Dictionary* is remarked, he is incorporated in a list of those most often quoted; for instance, Pat Rogers, in his useful *Samuel Johnson Encyclopaedia*, cites him as one of the authors whose writings appear in the *Dictionary* ‘with a high incidence’. Robert DeMaria notes Johnson’s inclusion of texts ‘concerned chiefly with the limitations on human knowledge unassisted by revelation’, and suggests that of these ‘One of the best and most important is Sir Thomas Browne’s catalogue of human error, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*’. DeMaria’s recognition of Browne’s contribution is atypical; critical awareness of the contribution made by Browne to the content of the *Dictionary* has seldom extended beyond brief statements acknowledging its existence.

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16 Post, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 152.
17 Havenstein, *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne*, 184.
19 DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 120.
Regrettably, we do not have the copy or copies of Browne’s works used by Johnson in compiling the Dictionary. His surviving copy of the 1646 quarto edition of Pseudodoxia is barely marked. In any case, it is clear that the 1646 edition was not the one he used when marking passages for the Dictionary; his text largely follows that of the second edition (1650), and there are occasions when, for instance, he quotes from Chapter 27 of Book III of Pseudodoxia, which does not exist in the 1646 edition, and the contents of which were new in 1650. This edition, as Browne’s Victorian editor Wilkin legitimately claimed, is ‘the handsomest as to typography’ – and was thus presumably the most satisfying version from which to work. Notwithstanding the absence of Johnson’s marked copy (or copies) of Pseudodoxia, we can infer how it must have looked in its marked form. Furthermore, his annotations in other copytexts tell us something about his working habits. Their significance has been considered in detail by Eugene J. Thomas in his unpublished thesis on the Dictionary. Thomas’s study confirms that Johnson did not usually work right through a text when marking it up, and that his approach, though rigorous in its methods of transcription, was not systematic.

Of the copytexts used by Johnson for the Dictionary, thirteen are known to be extant. These are: the third volume of The Works of Francis Bacon (1740);
Bryan Duppa, *Holy Rules and Helps to Devotion* (1675); an anthology entitled *Works of the most celebrated Minor Poets* (1749); Matthew Hale’s *Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677), bound in one volume with the eighth edition (1676) of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*; John Norris, *A Collection of Miscellanies* (1699); seven of the eight volumes of the *Plays of William Shakespeare* (1747); the second volume of Robert South’s *Twelve Sermons* (1694); the second volume of Christopher Pitt’s translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1740); Izaak Walton’s *Life of Dr Sanderson* (1678); Isaac Watts’s *Logick* (1745); and – consulted for the fourth edition, but not for the first – Michael Drayton’s *Works* (1748) and Walter Harte’s *The Amaranth* (1767).23

Of these texts, the one that is inherently most like Browne’s writings is Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and the *Anatomy* are both compendia of received tenets and accumulated wisdom; both seek – albeit in quite different ways – to explode misconceptions; both function by citing a wide range of opinions and theses; both are wildly digressive; and both exhibit the virtuoso styles of their authors. Johnson’s fondness for the *Anatomy of Melancholy* is well attested. The best-known reflection of this is in the comment reported to Boswell by Johnson’s Irish friend William Maxwell:

‘Burton’s “Anatomy of Melancholy”, he said, was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise.’24

It might be expected that Johnson would have drawn heavily on the *Anatomy* for *Dictionary* illustrations. But in fact he marked for quotation only fifty-five

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23 Full details of these volumes are given by J. D. Fleeman, in his *Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books associated with Dr Samuel Johnson.*

24 Life, II, 121.
passages in his personal copy. Fifteen of these marked Burton quotations – and no others – appear in the Dictionary. Robert DeMaria suggests that it is Burton’s frequent use of Latin terms that explains this surprisingly modest exploitation of a book Johnson might have been expected to quote liberally.

Eugene Thomas argues both that Johnson ‘may have hesitated to extract passages from it because of the heavy borrowing from so many other sources’, and that he ‘may not have wished to quote from a miscellaneous or “impure” text of this sort’. Thomas goes on to explain that

There appears to be a reasonable explanation ... for the absence of over a score of passages from the Dictionary, as twenty-three marginal letters lack the usual amanuenses’ cross-out strokes. To begin with, the text is set in double columns, thus providing Johnson with more marginal areas than the usual single outer margin for the initial letters. Every case of an uncrossed marginal corresponds to its position to be not that of the outer margin. It appears that the copyists failed to search beyond the usual outer margin for the initial letters.... [They] had been conditioned to finding the letters only in the outer margin for thousands upon thousands of pages.

Nevertheless, even before this, Johnson only marked a small number of passages, and whatever the reasons for this it ensured that few quotations from Burton ended up in the published work.


26 Robert DeMaria, Jr, Johnson’s Dictionary and the Language of Learning (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1986), 116. Moreover, DeMaria argues that ‘the classical quotations he did admit often had some special qualification’. Many of them are ‘especially pointed versions of some of ... [the Dictionary’s] general concerns’. Thus for instance the excerpt from Bacon under ‘to blanch’:

‘Optimi consiliarii mortui; books will speak plain, when counsellors blanch’.

27 Thomas’s view is corroborated by H. J. Jackson’s article, ‘Johnson and Burton: the Anatomy of Melancholy and the Dictionary of the English Language’, in English Studies in Canada 5 (1979), 36-48. Jackson suggests (p. 45) that insofar as there was an orthodox view of the Anatomy at the time Johnson was working on the Dictionary, it was that the book was ‘an antiquarian curiosity, ludicrous in its opinions and quaint in its style’, containing ‘nuggets of Elizabethan lore and many anecdotes from scholastic writers whom no one cared to read any more’.


189
Where Johnson's use of the *Anatomy* is modest, his exploitation of *Pseudodoxia* is extensive. Even a cursory examination of the *Dictionary* is sufficient to show that Browne is a frequently cited author, and it is readily apparent that *Pseudodoxia* (or 'Vulgar Errours', as Johnson calls it) is frequently his source. Determining the true extent to which Johnson employs both author and work is complicated by his characteristic inconsistency in labelling the quotations from Browne. In the first edition, when he quotes from *Pseudodoxia*, he often supplies the number of Book and Chapter, though not always correctly. In the fourth edition these details are removed. More confusingly, Browne is in both editions almost always referred to as 'Brown'. When it is Browne’s son Edward that he is quoting, Johnson marks the quotation ‘Brown’s Travels’, but the casual denomination ‘Brown’ serves not just for Sir Thomas, but for William Browne, author of the narrative love poem *Britannia Pastoriales*, and, under ‘to beatify’, for the author of what he refers to as ‘Brown’s Cosmologia Sacra’ (the *Cosmologia* being in reality a work by Nehemiah Grew).

If we focus on selected entries under the letter G, we see the changes made between the first and fourth editions to the way in which quotations are labelled. In the first edition, Browne is cited under the adjective ‘garous’, and the quotation is correctly identified as coming from ‘Brown’s Vulgar Errours’, Book III, Chapter 4. But in the fourth edition the quotation is marked only as being from ‘Brown’. Similarly, the noun ‘gustation’ is (correctly) marked in the first edition as coming from Book VII of ‘Brown’s Vulgar Errours’, but in the fourth

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Reddick (*The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary*, p. 222, n. 2), suggests that the appearance of quotations from William Browne in the fourth edition may be explained by the publication in 1772 of a three-volume edition of Browne’s *Works* by Johnson’s friend Thomas Davies.
edition it is marked only with the name ‘Brown’. None of the entries in the
fourth edition gives a reference to Book or Chapter, but some do preserve the
reference to ‘Brown’s Vulgar Errours’ – see for instance the entries under
‘geography’, ‘geoponical’ and ‘girdle’. Still other entries are labelled ‘Brown’ in
both editions – as for instance ‘generalissimo’ and ‘gestation’ – while some are
labelled ‘Brown’s Vulgar Errours’ in both – as ‘generator’, ‘glasswort’ and
‘granulary’. Finally, the adjective ‘gemmary’ is given as being drawn from Book
I, Chapter 2 of ‘Brown’s Vulgar Errours’, though in fact it is from Chapter 1 of
Book II. The inconsistency of the labelling leads one at first to suppose that those
quotations not specifically tagged with the words ‘Vulgar Errours’ are from
others among Browne’s works. Such a conclusion is, as I shall show, incorrect. It
is also perhaps worth noting that Johnson consistently refers to Pseudodoxia as
‘Vulgar Errours’. In doing so he follows established habit; but his preference for
the colloquial title, rather than for the more formal Latin one, renders the text
explicitly English. This may seem to be at odds with the Dictionary’s quite
frequent recourse to Latin sententiae, but when Johnson ventures into learned
language he is emphasizing the dichotomy between the languages of learning and
literature. In giving Browne’s work its English title, Johnson is highlighting its
Englishness, perhaps in order to suggest that it is an everyday work, and not an
arcane or a classical one.

Johnson’s extensive use of Pseudodoxia was not unprecedented. In 1656
Thomas Blount had published Glossographia, a glossary of hard words. Blount
was innovative both in his repeated deployment of authorities and in his attempts

at etymology. The descriptions of sources for Blount’s entries include approximately two hundred explicit references to Browne, mostly to *Pseudodoxia.* A brief examination of *Glossographia* demonstrates the importance of Browne to Blount’s lexicography. Blount’s range of authorities is quite limited, and, as one would expect of a volume specifically intended as a dictionary of ‘Hard Words’, the English authors cited are for the most part contemporary ones, with the interpretation of whose works readers urgently require assistance. Those he cites include – aside from Browne – Bacon, Cowley, Selden, Peacham, Howell, and Sir Kenelm Digby. Among these, Browne figures prominently; he and Bacon are Blount’s two most frequent points of reference. Moreover, some of Blount’s definitions are lifted wholesale from *Pseudodoxia,* and Browne is one of Blount’s favoured authors in his *Academie of Elegance* (1654), a commonplace book illustrating the best of English prose with passages from, among others, Bacon, Wotton, and Felltham.


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31 Havenstein, *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne,* 173. (The catalogue of Browne’s library does not contain *Glossographia,* but does include a copy of Blount’s 1672 *Animadversions on Sir Richard Baker’s Chronicle.* See Finch’s facsimile *A Catalogue of the Libraries of Sir Thomas Browne and Dr Edward Browne, His Son,* 73.)


33 See *The Correspondence of Thomas Blount,* ed. Theo Bongaerts (Amsterdam, 1978), 21.
words appear with quotations from Browne attached.) Moreover, when Blount is explicit about which of Browne’s works he has in mind, it is in each case bar one *Pseudodoxia*; the exception being ‘asphaltick’, for which he cites as his source *Religio Medici*. Under S, Blount cites Browne seventeen times. Sixteen of the words for which he is given as an authority – ‘salamander’, ‘salinous’, ‘segment’, ‘seminality’, ‘septenary’, ‘spadiceous’, ‘spermatize’, ‘spondyles’, ‘sternutatory’, ‘strigment’, ‘succussation’, ‘suffraginous’, ‘superfetation’, ‘superfluity’, ‘supernation’ and ‘supersaliency’ – reappear in Johnson’s *Dictionary* with Browne as one of their sources. *Glossographia*, however, is not mentioned by name in Johnson’s work, and Blount himself is used as an authority fewer than thirty times in the first edition of the *Dictionary*.

That the sustained use of Browne was not exclusive to Johnson made little difference to the *Dictionary*’s detractors. Johnson’s frequent deployment of long passages taken from the works of technical or pseudo-scientific writers proved disagreeable to numerous critics, who, as Reddick explains,

> argued that the lexicographer simply inflicted upon his readers his own perverse attraction to these dense and obscure writers, whose use of the language should never be held up as an example of correct usage.\(^{34}\)

However, Johnson’s apparent preference for Bacon and Browne – as opposed to, say, Ephraim Chambers – reflects not only his principle of illustrating the language from authors whose usages seem proper, but also his somewhat backward-looking approach to the sciences. One of the interesting features of the *Dictionary*, not generally remarked, is that it tends to look backwards rather than

forwards. This is manifest not only in the canon of authors Johnson cites, but in the kinds of knowledge he includes and the nature of the language he promotes. For instance, Johnson chooses as one of his authorities George Abbot's *Brief Description of the Whole World*, a superannuated geography book published in 1600. Other works which seemingly appealed to him but were remarkably antiquated included a 1567 printing of Matthaeus Westmonasteriensis's *Elegans, Illustris, et Facilis Rerum Praesertim Britannicarum* (first published in 1307), and the outmoded pedagogic works of Roger Ascham and Andrew Bourde. He quotes in translation a large number of Greek and Latin authors: Lucretius and Pindar, Homer and Statius, Manilius and Ovid. He refers, usually very favourably, to an array of classical figures that includes Archimedes, Anacreon, Pythagoras, Hesiod, Anaxagoras, Demosthenes, Ptolemy and Cicero.

Other enthusiasms implicit in some of Johnson's chosen material - his comments on the excellence of classical learning, for example - suggest a certain conservatism. He includes no words beginning with the letter *X* (he claims it 'begins no word in the English language'), even though words of this type were in use at the time of the *Dictionary*’s composition. Even the language he records is often conceded to be obsolete. His etymology is outmoded, too. He uses John Wallis’s *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae* (1653) as an authority in his outline of English grammar, but criticises him. This shows, in effect, that he knows Wallis has been superseded by more recent philology. It is presumably with these conditions in mind that Johnson’s most recent biographer Lawrence Lipking refers to the *Dictionary* as illustrating his ‘embrace of the past’, and suggests that
he ‘records a language already passé and sustains the before in spite of the after’.

If it were possible to make a huge scattergram recording the dates of all the quotations in the Dictionary, it would very probably emerge that the median would be about 1660, with Milton occupying the middle ground. Shakespeare, Bacon and the King James version of the Bible would be on one side; Dryden, Pope and Swift on the other. This is a function of Johnson’s decisions about the Dictionary’s historical coverage; he chooses to begin with Sidney (‘the boundary beyond which I make few excursions’), and establishes that he will ‘admit no testimony of living authors’. Sidney’s first Arcadia was written before 1581, and Johnson’s stated reluctance to include living authors appears to guarantee the exclusion at least of anything written after 1754. Browne’s published works span a period from 1642 and 1672, and are thus in the middle of Johnson’s chosen historical range.

The quotations Johnson selects from Browne come, almost without exception, from Pseudodoxia, even when a word first occurs in the earlier Religio Medici. Apart from these two works, the only source among Browne’s writings used by Johnson is his ‘Observations upon several plants mentioned in Scripture’. There is a single quotation from this work (which Johnson does not name) under ‘arboreous’; it is a dramatically compressed version of Browne’s original, the compression suggestive of the quotation’s being given from memory, rather than with the text to hand. In the full version, the passage is striking enough to make such an act of recollection plausible:

35 Lawrence Lipking, Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998), 139-40.
36 MW, 319.
the Parable may ... point at such a grain as from its fertile spirit, and other concurrent advantages, hath the success to become arboreous, shoot into such a magnitude, and acquire the like tallness. And unto such a Grain the Kingdom of Heaven is likened which from such slender beginnings shall find such increase and grandeur.\(^\text{37}\)

This is Johnson’s only quotation from Browne’s *Miscellany Tracts*, and there is nothing at all from *Hydriotaphia* or *The Garden of Cyrus*, even though Johnson soon after expressed admiration for both of them.\(^\text{38}\) Nor are there any quotations from *Christian Morals*. Moreover, there are just two illustrative quotations from *Religio* in the whole of first and fourth editions of the *Dictionary*. The book is cited only once by name, when Johnson supplies a quotation from it as the sole authority for the noun ‘galliardise’ (‘Merriment; exuberant gaiety’).\(^\text{39}\) In addition, Johnson illustrates the verb ‘to violate’ with Browne’s assertion that ‘I would rather violate my own arm than a church’.\(^\text{40}\) This seems an extraordinarily slender representation of a work which Johnson was to describe, in his introduction to *Christian Morals*, as capable of exciting public attention by its ‘dignity of sentiment, ... subtlety of disquisition, and ... strength of language’ (*CM*, 9). On this last count, if on no other, it might have qualified as a resource for *Dictionary* quotations. Why then was it not used? One possible explanation is that Johnson did not read the work with any great care until he

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\(^{37}\) K, III, 17.

\(^{38}\) See *CM*, 21-4.

\(^{39}\) The quotation is as follows: ‘At my nativity my ascendant was the watry sign of Scorpius: I was born in the planetary hour of Saturn, and I think I have a piece of that leaden planet in me: I am no way facetious, nor disposed for the mirth and galliardise of company.’

\(^{40}\) The extract quoted under ‘to violate’ appears to have occurred to earlier dictionary-makers as well. The thirteenth edition of Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (London, 1747) offers ‘To VIOLATE Churches, to commit profane and wicked Actions there’. The seventeenth edition, published in 1757, slightly expands this, and also exactly reproduces Johnson’s well-known, Browne-influenced definition of ‘network’.
came to prepare the edition of *Christian Morals* — if indeed he read it carefully then. Another explanation is that, whatever the merits of *Religio* as an example of good writing and original language, they were as nothing compared to those of *Pseudodoxia*. Yet before considering Johnson’s use of *Pseudodoxia*, it is worth pausing to note that of the words for which Blount offered *Religio* as a source, nine appear in the first edition of the *Dictionary*, but in no case is the citation of *Religio* preserved. The word ‘suicide’ makes its first appearance in *Religio*, and this source is given in *Glossographia*, but in both the first and fourth editions of the *Dictionary* Johnson supplies illustrations only from Richardson and Savage. This even though Browne is an earlier source — indeed, the earliest given today in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Johnson’s emphasis on *Pseudodoxia* is not in itself very surprising. It would no doubt have seemed an ideal source to quarry for words, given its subject matter and the nature of the style in which it is written. N. E. Osselton, discussing Blount’s use of Browne, observes that *Pseudodoxia* covers with characteristic erudition an immense range of topics … about which popular beliefs might be set right by the application of the new scientific knowledge.

Johnson’s citations of *Pseudodoxia* may not have answered such urgent contemporary concerns as did Blount’s; but even a hundred years on, the range of *Pseudodoxia* and its engagement with a galaxy of everyday issues and strange phenomena were sufficient argument for its use. It can indeed be considered a sort of onomasiological dictionary. Furthermore, it is in part a book about the

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41 See Havenstein, *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne*, 180.
Dictionary's principal subject, namely language. In the Plan Johnson reflected that

> It seems necessary to the completion of a dictionary design'd not merely for critics but for popular use, that it should comprise, in some degree, the peculiar words of every profession.  

Clearly Pseudodoxia, a book overtly concerned with exactitude in matters of definition and terminology, and abounding with medical and pseudo-scientific language, would have been a convenient source for terms connected not only with medicine, but with natural philosophy and more recondite pursuits such as alchemy and heraldry. As one would therefore expect, Browne is among several key sources for medical terms, others of whom include Bacon, Arbuthnot, Quincy and Wiseman. He is also a ready source for philosophical terms, along with Locke and Watts.

However, Johnson's emphasis upon a single work of Browne's does not reflect his usual practice in representing a favoured author. He quotes very extensively from a large number of texts by Bacon; the Natural History is the dominant presence, but there are numerous extracts from the Essays, the New Atlantis, the History of Henry VII, and others of Bacon's writings. Quotations from another favoured author, Locke, are seldom tagged, but derive from a range of works, as do those from Swift. Johnson cites a broad range of works by his most quoted poets (Milton, Dryden and Pope), and though quotations from Spenser are most often from The Faerie Queene there are numerous illustrations from the Amoretti, the Pastorals, Epithalamion, and the View of the Present State of Ireland. Quotations from Sidney are chiefly, but by no means exclusively,

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43 Plan, 7.
from *Arcadia.* Indeed, the only authors besides Browne who are quoted extensively yet represented by a single work are Hooker and South, both authors whose reputations rested on a single substantial publication. Johnson’s emphasis on *Pseudodoxia* is thus striking; usually, when an author is frequently quoted, the total range of his work is reproduced.

Before we move on, we may also note that the *Dictionary* is replete with references to itself. The self-referentiality alerts us to Johnson’s covert but strong presence; it suggests that there is nothing contingent or haphazard about the deployment of material. Johnson famously pays homage to the act of making the *Dictionary* in his definition of ‘lexicographer’ as ‘a harmless drudge’. The same self-consciousness is discernible under ‘dull’ and ‘grubstreet’; the former containing, as part of one of its definitions, the statement ‘to make dictionaries is *dull* work’, and the latter listing dictionaries among Grub Street’s ‘mean productions’. Elsewhere, the illustrative quotations include ‘He who pretends to learned professions ... should frequently converse with dictionaries’ (the line taken from Isaac Watts, and appearing under ‘philological’); while Locke provides Johnson with an *apologia* for lexicographic incompleteness (‘A dictionary containing a natural history requires too many *hands*, as well as too much time, ever to be hoped for’). The illustrative quotation from Arbuthnot under ‘common’ suggests that in dictionaries and books of antiquities ‘it is impossible to avoid puerilities’, and Jeremy Collier insists on the limitations of

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44 These remarks are based on my own observations, but are borne out by the work of Lewis Freed in ‘The Sources of Johnson’s Dictionary’.
dictionaries:

When words are restrained, by common usage, to a particular sense, to run up to etymology, and construe them by dictionary, is wretchedly ridiculous.

Furthermore, Johnson's dictionary is presented, emphatically, as a 'dictionary', rather than with one of the more circumlocutory or less explicit titles favoured by his predecessors: John Bullokar's *An English Expositor* of 1616, the *Gazophylacium Anglicanum* of 1689, or even the lexicographical work of his contemporary Benjamin Martin, contained in the *Lingua Britannica Reformata* of 1749.

It is interesting, then, to examine how Johnson illustrates the word 'dictionary'. For his second and third illustrative quotations he chooses extracts from Edward Stillingfleet and Isaac Watts, both of which have an obvious bearing on the definition they support. But Johnson's earliest source for the word is Sir Thomas Browne:

Some have delivered the polity of spirits, and left an account that they stand in awe of charms, spells, and conjurations; that they are afraid of letters and characters, notes and dashes, which, set together, do signify nothing; and not only in the dictionary of man, but in the subtler vocabulary of Satan.

The 'dictionary' mentioned here is not a work of lexicography; Browne is referring to the total human experience of language and its power to create meaning. The quotation appears in a reduced form under 'vocabulary', and parts of it are also reproduced under 'dash' and 'spell'. Its appearance as part of this particular entry is, however, the most interesting, serving as it does as a reminder
of the Dictionary's capacity for containing an awareness of its own inadequacies and of the vagaries of interpretation.

* * *

In the first edition of the Dictionary, Browne is quoted 1,883 times. Before examining the distribution of these quotations through the Dictionary, it is worth comparing this number with those for other authors. In the first edition we find quotations from the works of Hooker, one of those mentioned by Johnson as a key authority, 1,898 times. Sidney, another of those identified as a major source, is quoted 1,293 times. There are 610 quotations from John Ray; 547 from Joseph Glanvill; 541 from Sir Matthew Hale; 454 from Nehemiah Grew; 301 from Jeremy Collier; and 122 from Roger Ascham. I have chosen these authors because of their connections or affinities with Browne; Ascham, for instance, was the subject of Johnson's other significant biography in the years following the Dictionary, while Glanvill deals with subjects akin to those examined by Browne. What is beyond denial is that the 1,883 citations of Browne constitute a very large body of material – approximately one and a half per cent of the total number of quotations used. Only Shakespeare, Dryden, Bacon, Milton, Pope, Addison, Swift, Locke, South and Hooker are quoted more times in the first edition.

Across both editions, there are a total of 1,962 Browne quotations – a figure that includes not only quotations added for the fourth edition, but also
those removed from it. It is this *maximum* number of quotations that forms the basis of the calculations that follow, in which I shall show the pattern of Johnson’s use of Browne. The distribution of the Browne quotations should be measured against Allen Reddick’s account of Johnson’s procedure in marking his copytexts:

Rather than always working his way right through a text from beginning to end, marking quotations as he came to them, Johnson frequently marked pages at random, or worked through a section, then paused … only to take up the book again and begin marking in a completely different part of the text.

Reddick explains that almost all the extant marked texts demonstrate Johnson’s ‘apparently erratic process of selection’, and cites the example of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*:

After marking quotations on the first few pages of the *Anatomy*, Johnson then leaves off abruptly until page 66, when, in the middle of a section, he resumes marking passages. Soon after, he again ceases to mark passages for many pages, then marks two or three pages, only to leave off again. In the lengthy part II, Johnson marks no passages; then suddenly, in part III, section 2, on page 322, he marks one long quotation … , then no more until page 340.

Reddick observes that Johnson ‘appears, frequently, to have simply plunged into his books wherever he chanced to find himself’, marking passages ‘as he encountered then, but usually in an unsystematic way’. He concludes that Whatever the randomness of Johnson’s procedures in marking quotations, he was probably guided by his sense of the sustained or declining usefulness of a work for providing illustrations for his wordlist, recognizing instinctively when the text had exhausted its value as a supplier of passages and as an authority to be incorporated into the *Dictionary*.45

As the data I have gathered show, Johnson's marking of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* did not proceed in the unsystematic fashion described above. His selection of passages covers the text with a thoroughness that argues his view of Browne's book not merely as a valuable source of material, but as an inexhaustible one. Eugene Thomas's thesis demonstrates very clearly the way Johnson generally marked up his copytexts. The way in which he marked *Pseudodoxia* is different from this.

Johnson quotes from the Preface to *Pseudodoxia* thirty-nine times. In the standard modern scholarly edition by Robin Robbins the Preface occupies four pages, so Johnson quotes 9.75 times per page. Book I (sixty-nine pages) is quoted 284 times, giving an average of 4.12 quotations per page. The average numbers of quotations for the Books that follow are: Book II, 351 quotations, 4.08 per page; Book III, 417 quotations, 3.18; Book IV, 285 quotations, 3.75; Book V, 194 quotations, 2.66; Book VI, 234 quotations, 2.43; Book VII, 158 quotations, 2.14. Over the course of the volume's 609 pages, the average number of quotations per page is 3.24. My reference to the Robbins edition is conditioned, however, by a need to refer to a practically available, modern text. In fact, the editions to which Johnson would have had access contained fewer pages. The first edition of 1646 contains 386 pages of text, the second of 1650 comprises 329, and even the rather less closely printed fourth edition of 1658 comprises only 468. If we work on the principle that Johnson is most likely to have used the edition of 1650, the average number of *Dictionary* quotations per page of Browne's text is just under six.
Eugene Thomas suggests that Watts's Logick, with 974 words marked in the space of 365 pages, is heavily used. Yet the density of quoted passages in Pseudodoxia is more than twice that of the Logick. On the evidence of the distribution of extracted passages, it would seem that Johnson read through Pseudodoxia, marking useful sentences as he came to them. Such sentences were numerous, but gradually he marked fewer such extracts, either because his patience with the task wore thin, or, more likely, because the text supplied fewer new terms and striking usages (the earlier pages having already provided instances of many or most of Browne's characteristic words and phrases). Yet he did not reach a point where he considered the book's value as a source sufficiently exploited to allow its being discarded. The only figure inconsistent with this reading is either that for Book III – which might be considered somewhat low – or, alternatively, that for Book IV – which might appear a little higher than expected. However, neither is much out of line with the figures' general downward curve. The use of Pseudodoxia implicit in this pattern may at first seem damningly parochial, and may convey the impression that Johnson's reading of the text was systematic to the point of disengagement. However, the fact remains that his thorough coverage of the volume is in marked contrast to his treatment of the copytexts examined by Eugene Thomas, and the degree of thoroughness is indeed egregious. This bears testimony to the importance Johnson ascribed to Browne's text, and to a methodology reflecting his perception that the process of searching it for quotable passages was one that required special care and attention.

As one would expect, certain chapters of *Pseudodoxia* are quoted much more heavily than others. However, the chapters from which quotations are most frequently excerpted are generally the longest. Although chapters of the sort one might expect Johnson to find interesting are often strongly represented, the number of quotations extracted never deviates markedly from the average for the book in question. For instance, Johnson quotes no less than seventy-three times from Book IV, Chapter XII (‘Of the great Climactericall yeare, that is 63’). His attention to, or interest in, this phenomenon is several times attested elsewhere in his work. He not only adopts the word – applying it, for instance, in the *Lives of the Poets*, when he speaks of ‘the grand climacterick of Addison’s reputation’\(^47\) – but uses it with precisely the same significance as does Browne. One example of this occurs in *Rambler* 151, in which Johnson considers physicians’ accounts of the effects of time on the body. He notes their habit of ‘marking the various periods of their constitution’, and refers to the moral philosophers’ concern with the ‘climactericks of the mind’.\(^48\) Another instance is to be found in the *Journey to the Western Islands* – undertaken when Johnson was sixty-three. There he poignantly mentions being ‘on the brink of … [my] own climacterick’.\(^49\) We might perhaps conclude that the subject is one that held Johnson’s special focus, but in fact the large number of quotations he extracts from the relevant chapter of *Pseudodoxia* can be explained by its uncommon length (eighteen pages in the Robbins edition). Here, as in many other cases, the heavy use of a chapter is not necessarily an indication of Johnson’s critical, ideological or lexical preferences.

\(^47\) *Lives*, II, 98.
\(^48\) *Yale*, V, 38.
\(^49\) *Yale*, IX, 84.
Yet equally, there are occasions when heavy use of a chapter does reveal his priorities.

Within Book I, the distribution of passages used is as appears below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Of the first cause of common Errors the common infirmity of human nature’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘A further illustration of the same’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘Of the second cause of popular Errors, the erroneous disposition of the people’ and ‘Of the neerer causes of common errors’ (credulity, ‘adherence unto Antiquity’, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Of mistake, misapprehension, fallacy or false deduction’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>‘Of credulity and supinity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>‘Of obstinate adherence unto Antiquity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>‘Unto Authority’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>‘Of Authors who have most promoted popular conceits’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>‘Of others indirectly effecting the same’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>‘Of the last and great promoter of false opinions, the endeavours of Satan’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>‘A further Illustration’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Book is described by Browne as ‘Containing the General part [of the work]’, and its defining characteristic is that it reflects not Browne’s private studies and their specifics, but a more general polemical mission. As Jonathan Post observes, in the Books that follow ‘Browne works more from the library and laboratory than the lectern’, and Book I is unique in its generalizing tendencies. The distribution of Johnson’s selections is not idiosyncratic, though the selected quotations frequently advance strong moral arguments, dealing with subjects such as truth, evil and the need to resist deceptive authorities.

Book II of *Pseudodoxia* is somewhat narrower in focus. Browne summarizes it as ‘Beginning the particular part concerning Minerall and Vegetable bodies’. The content of the book ranges from a highly technical section on electricity to the consideration in the later chapters of myths and

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50 Post, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 102.
folklore, such as the claims ‘That bitter Almonds are preservatives against Ebbriety’ and ‘Porcellane or China dishes lye under the earth a hundred yeares in preparation’. The distribution of quotations from this Book appears below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  ‘The common Tenent, that that Crystal! is nothing else but Ice strongly congealed’</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  ‘Concerning the Loadstone’</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  ‘A Rejection of sundry opinions and Relations thereof… ’</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  ‘Of bodies Electricall in generall’ and ‘Of let and Amber in particular… ’</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  ‘Compendiously of several other Tenents’ (including ‘That Glasse is poyson’ and ‘Of white powder that kills without report’)</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  ‘Of sundry Tenents concerning Vegetables’ (including mandrakes, cinnamon, etc.)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  ‘Of some Insects, and the properties of severall plants’</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chapter most heavily used is the first, which provides more than six quotations per page, while the last chapter provides fewer than three quotations per page and is the least thoroughly represented. This is in line with the pattern I have already identified, whereby Johnson’s extraction of quotations tails off as he works through the text.

The discussion ‘Of popular and received Tenents concerning Animals’ in Book III is taken by Post to be ‘the heart of Pseudodoxia’. While not in structural terms the centre of the work, it is, he argues, ‘perhaps … the book to which readers have most readily taken’.51 It is certainly the part of Pseudodoxia which seems to the modern reader most arcane and amusing. It is, moreover, the Book from which Johnson extracts the highest number of quotations, and though his representation of its content in the Dictionary is only proportionate to its considerable scale, the recondite, contentious and frankly bizarre nature of the

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51 Post, Sir Thomas Browne, 105.
material it contains makes it an intriguing but at the same time thoroughly quirky
source from which to draw illustrations. Their distribution is as appears below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 'That an Elephant hath no joynts'</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 'That an horse hath no Gall'</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 'That a Pigeon hath no Gall'</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Beaver</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The Badger</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 'That a Beare brings forth her cubs informous or unshaped'</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 'Of the Basilisk'</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 'That a Wolfe first seeing a man begets a dumbnesse in him'</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 'Of the long life of Deere'</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 The Kingfisher</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 'Of Gryphins'</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 'Of the Phaenix'</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 'Of the pissing of Toads... '</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 'That a Salamander lives in the fire'</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 The Amphisbaena</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Vipers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 'That Hares are both male and female'</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 'That Moles are blinde and have no eyes'</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 'That Lampries have many eyes'</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 'That Snayles have two eyes.... '</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 'That the Chamaeleon lives onely by Aire'</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 'That the Ostridge digesteth Iron'</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 'Of the Unicornes horne'</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 'That all Animals in the land are in their kinde in the Sea'</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Animals' Diet</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 'Of Sperma-Ceti, and the Sperma-Ceti Whale'</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 'Compendiously of some others' (e.g. the swan's song, the bittern, the earwig)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 As above ('That Snakes sting', etc.)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The earlier chapters are the most copiously quoted, and the general trend is that
the later chapters are quoted less. The highest average is Chapter 10 ('Of the
Kingfisher'), followed by Chapter 28 (in which Browne relates various
misconceptions about animal diet, reproduction among chickens, and the
poisonous qualities of snakes). The chapter that provides the highest number of
quotations is 21 ('Of the Cameleon'), with forty-three, but it is the second
longest chapter in the Book. Perhaps surprisingly, Browne is not one of the
authors cited in the entry under ‘chameleon’ in the Dictionary, and the extracted quotations from this chapter instead serve to illustrate predominantly technical words such as ‘contemperation’, ‘elixation’, ‘jejune’, ‘nostril’, ‘paucity’, ‘sapor’, ‘to suffocate’ and ‘unctuosity’. Yet Johnson’s interest in the creature is implicit in the very extensive Dictionary definition, running to nearly three hundred words, which is translated from Augustin Calmet’s Dictionary of the Bible.\(^{52}\)

There follow five illustrative quotations, of fairly similar hue, of which one, from Bacon’s Natural History, runs to another hundred words. In lavishing so much attention of the chameleon, Johnson reflects his interest in the extreme phenomena of nature. With this in mind, the large number of quotations from Book III – and, in particular, the large amount of physical space he gives to some of these quotations – seems quite unsurprising.

Book IV deals with ‘popular and received Tenents concerning Man’. It is the Book in which Browne’s medical training is most in evidence, and he addresses himself to many of the strangely prevalent beliefs about man that arise not from rational self-examination but from a mixture of superstition and ignorance. The distribution of quotations is as given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ‘That man hath onely an erect figure and that to looke up to Heaven’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ‘That the heart of a man is seated on the left side’</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ‘That pleurisies are onely on the left side’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ‘Of the fourth finger of the left hand... ’</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ‘Of the right and left hand’</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{52}\) The use of Calmet is of passing interest. His work, first published at Geneva in 1730, appeared in an English translation by Samuel D’Oyly and John Colson two years later. Wimsatt suggests that the translation used by Johnson was not this one, however, but one of his own devising (see Philosophic Words, 151). Calmet provides material for lengthy, encyclopaedia-style articles under ‘armadillo’, ‘chameleon’, ‘dromedary’, ‘eagle’, ‘elephant’, ‘ossifrage’, ‘ostrich’, ‘porcupine’, ‘seacow’, ‘stork’, ‘swan’ and ‘woodlouse’.

209
There are seventy-three quotations from Chapter 12 ('Of the great Climactericall yeare, that is 63'), sixty-five from Chapter 13 ('Of the Canicular or Dog-dayes'), and thirty-nine from Chapter 5 ('Of the right and left hand'), yet only four from Chapter 2 ('That the heart of a man is seated on the left side'). However, within this Book there are also very substantial differences in the size of chapters, and the only one egregiously underrepresented in Chapter 11 ('Of Pygmies'). It is not immediately obvious why this chapter is so little used – if indeed there is a reason.\(^5\)

In Book V Browne's attention turns to 'many things questionable as they are described in Pictures'. Its contents, well summarized by Robbins, 'move ... from the subject of heraldry and inn-signs to Biblical subjects, from classical back to Christian, with no overall temporal or thematic progression' (PE, I, xxxiii). The Book's interest in pictorial representation and its capacity for skewing or problematizing perceptions of truth and reality accords with Johnson's own anxieties about pictures. ('Pictorial', incidentally, is illustrated in the Dictionary by Browne alone; it is a word 'not adopted by other writers, but elegant and useful'.) Johnson's approach to works of art reflects his functionalism. Robert Folkenflik suggests that

\(^5\) I can find no evidence of Johnson having had strong views on the subject of pygmies, though he did translate into English Addison's *Proelium inter Pygmaeos et Grues* (1698).
In private (and to some extent in public) his position was
sceptical of art and its possibilities, [even though] he was ... an
important public spokesman for art.\(^{54}\)

Johnson preferred portraits to other representative forms, but his argument in
*Idler* 45 that portraiture is 'a natural and reasonable consequence of affection'
suggests limited enthusiasm for the genre. 'Genius,' he claims, 'is chiefly exerted
in historical pictures.... But it is in painting as in life; what is greatest is not
always best.'\(^{55}\) In 1756 he was, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, elected to the
Society of Arts, having been proposed by the Greek reviver James Stuart, but
at the time of compiling the *Dictionary* his public endorsement of artistic
ventures had not properly begun. Though the *Dictionary* contains few quotations
in which artistic representation is disparaged, quotations on the subject of art
tend either to stress the need for accuracy or to suggest the superior
representational properties of poetry. The distribution of quotations over the
course of the Books as a whole is as follows:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ‘Of the picture of the Pelecan’</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ‘Of the picture of Dolphins’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ‘Of the picture of the Grasshopper’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Serpent tempting Eve</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Adam and Eve with navels</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jewish Feasts</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Christ with long hair</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Abraham sacrificing Isaac</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Moses with horns</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 ‘Of the Scutcheons of the twelve tribes of Israel’</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 The Sybils</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Death of Cleopatra</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 The Nine Worthies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Jephtha sacrificing his daughter</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 John the Baptist in a camel’s skin</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^{55}\) Yale, II, 140.
The one chapter quoted to an egregious degree is Chapter 8 ('Of the picture of Abraham sacrificing Isaac'), which comprises a mere two paragraphs yet supplies seven of Johnson’s illustrative quotations – under headwords that include ‘adolescency’, ‘cognomination’ and ‘consentaneous’ (all very Brownean words), as well as ‘generalissimo’ and ‘holocaust’. Chapters 7, 16 and 21 are the only chapters in the whole of *Pseudodoxia* not to be used at all, but all of these are short, and their exclusion should not be taken as an indication of any particular disapproval of, or aversion to, their contents.

The subject of Book VI is ‘sundry Tenents Geographicall and Historicall’. The distribution of quotations is as follows:-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The beginning of the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘Of mens enquiries in what season or point of the Zodiack it began... ’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The division of the seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Of some computation of dayes... ’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>‘A Digression of the wisdome of God in the site and motion of the Sunne’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>‘Concerning the vulgar opinion that the earth was slenderly peopled before the floud’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>‘Of East and West, and properties respectively ascribed unto Countries’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>‘Of the seven heads of the Nile’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Red Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>‘Of the blackness of Negroes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>‘Of the same’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>‘A digression of Blacknesse’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Gypsies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>‘Of some others’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No chapter in this Book is quoted with outstanding frequency. Chapters 13 and 14 were added only for the second edition of 1650, and the inclusion of quotations from these chapters again belies the assumption that Johnson compiled his collection of Browne quotations from *Pseudodoxia*’s first edition.

Book VII is described by Browne as ‘Concerning many historicall Tenents generally received, and some deduced from the history of holy Scripture’. In fact, it contains a peculiarly diverse array of material, and is the least thematically unified Book of *Pseudodoxia*. The distribution of Johnson’s chosen quotations is as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  ‘That the forbidden fruit was an Apple’</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  ‘That a man hath one Rib lesse than a woman’</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Methuselah</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Rainbows</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  ‘Of Sem, Ham and Iaphet’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  The Tower of Babel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  The Mandrakes of Leah</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  ‘Of the three Kings of Collein’</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  ‘Of the food of John the Baptist in the wildernesse’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10  ‘Of the conceit that John the Evangelist should not dye’</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11  ‘More compendiously’ of other matters, such as Lot’s wife and the death of Judas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12  ‘Of the cessation of Oracles’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13  ‘Of the death of Aristotle’</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14  ‘Of the wish of Philoxenus to have the neck of a Crane’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15  The Dead Sea</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16  ‘Of divers other Relations’ (e.g. ‘That our Saviour never laughed’)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17  ‘Of divers others’ (e.g. ‘Of the wandring lew’ and ‘Of Pope Joane’)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18  ‘More briefly’ (e.g. ‘That Haniball eate through the Alpes with Vinegar’)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19  ‘Of some Relations whose truth we feare’</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are no extreme deviations here from an average of a little over two quotations per page, and no section is used to an egregious degree.

* * *
In the Plan Johnson explains that it will be possible for a word to appear in the Dictionary on the authority of one writer only, but that such instances will be special cases. He undertakes that

words which are found only in particular books ... be known by the single name of him that has used them; but such will be omitted, unless either propriety, elegance, or force, or the reputation of their authors affords some extraordinary reason for their reception.\(^56\)

When we find a word in the Dictionary supported by quotation from the work of one author only, we cannot infer that this author is the only one to have used the word. However, we can reasonably infer Johnson's belief that either the word's attractiveness or the author's repute justifies its inclusion, and that he either could not find or did not feel the need to include any other supporting authority.

In making an author the sole authority for a word he is not necessarily suggesting that this author is unique in using it, but is suggesting that this author's use of it is either sufficiently arresting or sufficiently rare to warrant his being its sole supporting authority. If we consider the entries that appear under the letter A, we find that of the 156 words for which Browne is an authority, forty-five are illustrated by him alone. A list of these words gives some indication of the kind of information extracted by Johnson from Browne. They are: 'accountant' (as a noun), 'accusable', 'advocacy', 'affirmatively', 'aggregation', 'allegeable', 'alternation', 'alternity', 'ambulation', 'to amit', 'to amply', 'anatiferous', 'animator', 'annex', 'anomalously', 'antepileptic', 'anteriour', 'anthropophagy', 'antidotal', 'antipodal', 'apparition', 'appertenance', 'apprehensible', 'approachment', 'appropriable', 'approvable', 'approximate' (as an adjective),

\(^{56}\) Plan, 28-9.
'argillous', 'ariolation', 'ascensive', 'aspection', 'assation', 'assentment',
'assertion', 'assimilable', 'assuefaction', 'atramental', 'atramentous', 'attractor',
'to avel', 'auguration', 'augurial', 'to australize', 'automatons', and 'axillary'.
Clearly, even to a modern audience, some of these words will indeed seem to be
distinguished by their propriety, their elegance, or their force, and a number
survive in everyday usage — among them 'advocacy', 'approximate' and
'assertion'. However, the obscure nature of several of them is recognized by
Johnson himself. 'Anatiferous' (meaning 'producing ducks') is described in the
fourth edition as 'Not in use', and there are similar comments on 'to absterse'
('A word very little in use') and 'abstrusity' ('A word seldom used').
The inclusion of words such as these — and of so many words for which Johnson
cannot find, or chooses not to find, any other authority — seems to owe more to
Johnson's estimate of Browne's reputation than it does to their intrinsic
usefulness.

Throughout the Dictionary, Browne is the sole authority for a word with
remarkable frequency. At one point, under the letter F, he even provides the sole
illustrative quotations for three consecutive words: 'flammation', 'flammability',
and 'flammeous' — terms drawn not from a single passage or chapter of
Pseudodoxia, but from three different Books. In the case of one word,
'belomancy', the entire definition is lifted from Book V of Pseudodoxia, and this

57 The OED provides evidence of the scarcity of some of these words. Browne is its only source
for 'anatiferous' and (excluding the citation of Browne in Glossographia) for 'to australize'. He
is the earliest given source for 'altemity', 'antidotal', 'antipodal', 'appropriable', 'ariolation' and
'atramental'.
58 The words are exemplified with quotations from, respectively, Pseudodoxia II, 5; VI, 12; and
III, 27.
term, meaning ‘divination by arrows’, does indeed appear not to have been used at any time by other writers. Generally, there is a high incidence of words illustrated by Browne where he alone is the authority for their existence. In the fourth edition, under C, he is the authority for 227 words, and is the sole authority for ninety-seven of these – which is to say, in over forty per cent of cases. In addition, when not the sole authority for a word, he is the sole authority for twenty-two definitions. Thus Johnson, in 119 cases out of 227, cites a word or sense on the sole authority of Browne’s using it. In each case the word or sense may have been used by others, but Johnson offers no evidence of this, and the authority of Browne is sufficient to justify its inclusion. Under H, Browne is an authority for fifty-six words, and for eighteen of these is the sole authority (32 per cent). Under P, he is cited 190 times, and in sixty-eight instances is the sole authority (almost 36 per cent). In all, more than a quarter of Johnson’s quotations from Browne in the Dictionary reflect usage which appears to be unique to this author. If we compare the figures for H with those for a few other authors whom Johnson quotes frequently and extensively, we arrive at a sense of the unusualness of this statistic in an author so widely represented. Bacon, a writer given to neologisms and frequently deployed by Johnson, is an authority 139 times under H, and a sole authority 19 times (about 13.5 per cent). Pope, also an important linguistic innovator, albeit a later one, provides figures of 129 and 25 (about 19 per cent). For Swift the figures are 113 and 20 (about 17.5 per cent), and for Hooker 50 and two (four per cent).
Focusing on another single letter, I, we may observe that Browne is given 155 times as an authority for quotations. In sixty-one instances (thirty-nine per cent), he is the sole given authority. This compares with figures of twenty per cent for Bacon, fourteen per cent for both Pope and Swift, and four per cent for Hooker. The statistic bears striking testimony to the store Johnson sets by Browne’s use of language; the Browne represented in the *Dictionary* is very often a neologist, and Johnson readily accepts his neologisms, suggesting that he finds them not only original but useful. Moreover, in sixty-three of the 155 cases mentioned above, Browne is the first authority given today by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which confirms the accuracy of Johnson’s sensitivity to the originality of Browne’s lexis. His neologisms are wonderfully various, ranging from what must to modern users seem redundant (‘ingannation’, ‘inturgescency’61) to words that remain vividly alive in the language (‘indigenous’, ‘indoctrination’, ‘inflammability’, ‘insecurity’).62

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59 Johnson does not differentiate between / and J, so the figures that follow include words beginning with /, such as ‘jejune’ and ‘jocosity’.

60 Bacon is an authority 208 times; a sole authority 41 times. The figures for the others are 164 and 23 (Pope), 139 and 20 (Swift), and 138 and 6 (Hooker).

61 For both these words, Browne is the *OED’s* only source outside works of lexicography.

Several patterns are noticeable here, which apply not just to the words illustrated by Browne, but to the Dictionary entries in general. Some of these have already been observed by Daisuke Nagashima, who, in a detailed but somewhat inconclusive article examining Johnson’s use of the copytext of Hale’s *Origination of Mankind*, suggests certain traits of Johnson’s use of Hale. These include marking ‘a good number of words … from the viewpoint of word-formation’, being ‘rather begrudging of the hyphen’, marking passages where the a particular word appears more than once, citing collocated words for the purpose of ‘semantic clarification’, and citing ‘juxtaposed synonymous words and phrases’. The much larger body of quotations from Browne exemplifies several of these tendencies. Notably, a large number of the words Johnson includes are derivative forms – nouns stemming from adjectives or verbs he has already defined, adjectives stemming from nouns, adverbs from adjectives. Johnson often selects both a word and its derivative from Browne – for instance, ‘climacter’ and ‘climacterical’, ‘fish’ and ‘fishy’, ‘incontrovertible’ and ‘incontrovertibly’, ‘parallel’ and ‘to parallel’, ‘to postulate’ and the noun ‘postulate’, ‘torrefaction’ and ‘to torrefy’. In some cases he draws the relevant illustrations from the same passage in *Pseudodoxia*, but he often takes them from quite separate sections. For example, ‘to illustrate’ and ‘illustrative’ are both supported by extracts from Book I, Chapter 9, but ‘illustratively’ by one from Book IV, Chapter 12. ‘Incantation’ and ‘incantatory’ are illustrated with passages from Book I, Chapter 3; but ‘pendulous’ is illustrated with a passage

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from Book II, Chapter 3, while ‘pendulousness’ is taken from Book V, Chapter 13. Furthermore, Johnson uses Browne to illustrate words with shared roots (‘augural’ and ‘auguration’, ‘conjecturality’ and ‘conjecturer’, ‘denominable’ and ‘denominator’, ‘presumably’ and ‘presumptive’), and permits different forms of the same word (‘atramentous’ and ‘atramental’, for instance). None of this is unique to Browne, but one of the traits of Johnson’s lexicography that is made clear through an examination of the quotations from Browne is his juxtaposition of entries recording derivative forms. By providing illustrative material for derivative forms, Johnson reinforces meaning. Moreover, as I shall briefly suggest in my next chapter, he achieves a similar effect by selecting passages in which juxtaposed synonyms and antonyms appear.

The peculiarity of Browne’s language is repeatedly acknowledged in the Dictionary. For instance, in both editions Browne is the sole authority for ‘indiscovery’, which is labelled ‘an unusual word’, and for ‘magnifiable’, which is simply described as ‘unusual’. In the fourth edition there are only nine words deemed ‘unusual’, and Browne and Shakespeare are the only authors from whose works Johnson extracts more than one ‘unusual’ word. What Johnson means when he writes of a word’s unusualness is apparent from his own definition of ‘unusual’, which is ‘Not common; not frequent; rare’. He often remarks upon a word’s rarity, though he seldom uses the adjective ‘rare’ (even in the fourth edition there are only twenty references to a word or sense being ‘rare’). Rather, he designates certain words ‘not in use’, thereby indulging both a utilitarian

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64 The nine words are ‘to disembitter’ (Addison), ‘to disliken’ and ‘disnatured’ (both Shakespeare), ‘incoexistence’ (Locke), ‘indiscovery’ and ‘magnifiable’, ‘philosopheme’ (Watts), ‘to recriminate’ (South), and ‘to syndicate’ (Hakewill).
approach to language — he grasps the need to determine whether words are used or not — and his refusal to be dictated to by the customs and restrictions of contemporary usage — he is prepared to record words even if they are out of use. The words are fit to be included because they occur in literature. Whether or not they are used by speakers is immaterial; in the Dictionary the spoken word always defers to the literary, and Johnson seeks to teach those who consult the work to use language with as much care as has been taken by the best authors.

‘Unusualness’ is something different from ‘not in use’; the word reflects the lexicographer’s digression from issues of usage into a more phenomenological realm, within which the strangeness of language reflects not merely the strangeness of writing, but the strangeness of the world. It is in this vein that Johnson writes of the ‘unusual’ reception accorded to strangers in his translation of Lobo’s Voyage to Abyssinia, or, in a note on a line in The Winter’s Tale, that ‘a dance of satyrs was no unusual entertainment in the middle ages’. Yet we should also note his reference, in Rambler 86, to ‘that offence which is always given by unusual words’. The unusual, in Johnson’s estimate, is equivalent to eccentricity; an ‘unusual’ word differs from one that is ‘not in use’ in that it cannot be claimed ever to have been in use. The ‘unusual’ is thus a distinguishing feature occurring in writing that refuses conformism. What is unusual is also superfluous; its use and obsolescence are not consecutive, but concomitant.

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65 Yale, XV, 16; VII, 304.
66 Yale, IV, 89.
In the Plan Johnson explained his position on obsolete terms and their right to be included in the Dictionary:

Of antiquated or obsolete words, none will be inserted, but such as are to be found in authors who wrote since the secession of Elizabeth, from which we date the golden age of our language; and of these many might be omitted, but that the reader may require, with an appearance of reason, that no difficulty should be left unresolved in books which he finds himself invited to read, as confessed and established models of stile.\(^\text{67}\)

This reflects Johnson’s ideological commitment to improving the language and stripping away anything that is truly superfluous. The implication is that obsolete or little-used words will only be afforded space in the Dictionary if their explanation can facilitate the understanding of seminal works – specifically, of works held up as being exemplary in their style. Johnson’s principal comment on this subject in the Preface eight years later is that

\[\text{Obsolete words are admitted, when they are found in authors not obsolete, or when they have any force or beauty that may deserve revival.}\quad \text{68}\]

The first edition of the Dictionary contains 317 words or senses marked ‘obsolete’. In the fourth edition the figure increases to 460, presumably because in the intervening years a number of words have either become increasingly obscure or have come to seem increasingly obscure in Johnson’s eyes. Johnson differentiates between words that are ‘obsolete’ and those that are ‘not in use’, and also describes various shades of decrepitude that fall short of actual obsolescence – as for instance in the case of words that are ‘scarcely used’. If we add up all the words that fall into one or other of these categories, we find that a

\[^{67}\text{Plan, 28.}\]
\[^{68}\text{MW, 314.}\]
significant percentage of the *Dictionary’s* entries are described in these ways; and it would scarcely be an exaggeration to suggest that the *Dictionary* at times resembles a mausoleum for an antiquated English, the old-fashioned nature of which Johnson himself is quick to concede. Johnson makes it explicit that he does not wish to embalm the language, but there remains a sense in which he is preserving terms that are, as Lipking puts it, ‘passé’.

In the first edition Browne is used to exemplify either an obsolete or little used word, or an obsolete or little used sense, thirty-seven times. Once, under ‘dealbation’, we are authoritatively told that this is ‘A word which is now almost grown into disuse’. In three cases, a word is ‘little in use’ or ‘in little use’. ‘To absterse’ is ‘very little in use’. ‘Surcle’ is ‘Not in general use’. In the case of ‘to opinion’, we are told that the word is ‘out of use, and unworthy of revival’ (the label making a characteristically Johnsonian transition from the descriptive to the proscriptive). There are fourteen words which are designated ‘Not in use’:

survives in contemporary usage.\(^6^9\) ‘Vital’ – in its fourth given sense, ‘So disposed as to live’ – is ‘Little used, and rather Latin than English’. (Johnson’s comments on the Latinity of usages are few; he finds the Latinism contrived in examples he provides from *Paradise Lost*, Pope and Dryden, but Latinate diction is seldom impugned.) Overall, we find in the first edition a substantial number of archaisms and defunct terms attributed to – and authorized by – Browne.

Curiously, a number of these words seem anything but defunct. ‘Parable’, ‘plausibly’ and ‘to transcend’ would not appear to have been obsolete then and are certainly in use now. We may wonder at Johnson’s confidence in his judgements. Where does his authority stem from? Or to put it another way, what makes him so sure he is right? In the *Plan* he makes clear that his own opinions will be decisive (the pronoun ‘I’ is highly visible), but his personal authority is backed up by that of his patron Chesterfield and – by extension – the government of which Chesterfield is a part. By the time the *Dictionary* is published, Chesterfield’s flimsy patronage has been rejected: Johnson’s opinions and judgements must stand alone. While Johnson does express reservations about some of his own decisions, he ultimately has to project an image of confidence; his is the only name on the title-page, though it is still supported by the passive authority of his paymasters, the booksellers.\(^7^0\)

\(^6^9\) Only once in the first and fourth editions does Johnson pronounce a word ‘necessary’. This is the third sense of ‘to imbibe’, defined in the first edition as ‘to drench; to soak’, and supported with a single quotation from Newton. Johnson argues that ‘This sense, though unusual, perhaps unexampled, is necessary in the English’.

\(^7^0\) Lawrence Lipking observes that the spines of bound copies, with their customary short title ‘Johnson’s *Dictionary*’, testify to his ultimate authority: ‘The name mounts a claim of ownership, as if one man commanded the language’. The title ‘conjures up the image of its author’ and of ‘an English on which the author has put his stamp’. Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author*, 109-10.
In the fourth edition the number of words confidently tagged in the various ways I have described above increases to sixty-four. Again, this is almost certainly because Johnson’s awareness of their obsolescence has been sharpened through his having rarely or indeed never encountered them during his reading of contemporary works in the years between the two editions. None of the words described as out of use in the first edition is removed, but there are additions to the body of words described as being ‘Not in use’: ‘to admove’, ‘anatiferous’, ‘ascensive’, ‘derogative’, ‘deuteroscopy’, ‘to fertilitate’, ‘galliardise’, ‘ignitible’, ‘immanifest’, ‘operable’, ‘portension’, and ‘terse’. ‘Dealbation’ is now merely ‘a word in little use’. ‘Preambulous’ is ‘Not in use, but not inelegant’ – a description which reflects Johnson’s capacity for discerning elegance in Browne’s writing. In the case of all but six of the added words described in this way Browne is the sole authority, and in four of these six cases he is the sole authority for the particular definition under which he is quoted. ‘Capillation’, ‘to celestify’, ‘fermentai’, the noun ‘impair’ and the adjective ‘sudorous’ all appear in the first and fourth editions with Browne as the sole authority for their use, but in the fourth edition Johnson adds that they are ‘Not used’. Browne is also cited in sole support of senses of ‘regardable’ and ‘rime’ which, in the fourth edition, are described in this way, and he supplies one of the illustrations of the equally unused ‘preciosity’. ‘To consolate’ is ‘Not much used’. ‘Impolarity’, ‘inconnexedly’ and ‘signaturist’ are ‘little used’. For the fourth edition Johnson even adds a new sense of the verb ‘to endure’ – ‘to continue in’ – which he describes as ‘Not used’ and illustrates only with a quotation from Browne.
It is curious that Johnson is willing to give room to all these redundant or obsolete words, since in the fourth edition he is deeply concerned with cutting unnecessary information in order to make way for new material. Moreover, there were plenty of words that were in use that he did not acknowledge. As I suggested in Chapter Three, a good many of these were of French origin; there is no space in the Dictionary for 'bourgeois', 'unique', 'champagne', 'picturesque', 'cutlet' and 'envelope'. 'Trait' he considers to be 'scarce English', while 'the sublime' is dismissed as 'a Gallicism'. Certain other words are omitted for what were in all likelihood reasons of propriety. For instance, 'buggery', which had appeared in at least one earlier dictionary, is excluded. Yet when words such as these were left out, his preservation of what are even very obscure or moribund usages on Browne's part seems perverse. Ultimately, it can be seen to reflect an interest in offering an apparatus enabling Browne's works — and Pseudodoxia specifically — to continue to be read and understood. This clearly demonstrates Johnson's high estimate of the usefulness and importance of the text. However, it should be noted that Johnson does not follow many of the leads suggested by Browne in his one sustained work of philology, his tract 'Of Languages and Particularly of the Saxon Tongue'. In this essay Browne collected a number of peculiar instances of (words including 'bunny', 'mawther',

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71 As I shall shortly discuss more fully, the new material reflects new tastes and priorities (especially moral ones). Clearly, introducing this while keeping everything from earlier editions would have made the fourth edition of the Dictionary truly unwieldy. J. D. Fleeman observes even of the first edition that 'few copies survive in booksellers' boards, and all such have restored spines, for when standing upright, the contents are too heavy for the binding cords' — see A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson, I, 415.

The only words from the list to appear in the Dictionary are ‘kedge’, ‘clever’, ‘dere’, ‘stingy’, ‘sap’ and ‘bide’, but of these only ‘kedge’ and ‘stingy’ are characterized by Johnson in a way that accords with what Browne appears to have had in mind.

For all this, Johnson’s comments on Browne’s usage do not always concentrate on his obscurity. Several times he applauds Browne’s language. One example is the adjective ‘impennous’, for which Browne is the sole authority. It appears in the first edition without comment, but in the fourth edition Johnson notes that ‘The word is convenient, but, I think, not used’. ‘Convenient’ (‘Fit; suitable; proper; well adapted; commodious’) is no faint praise; the only other word of which Johnson makes this remark is the noun ‘ultimity’, which he finds in Bacon, and comments on in both editions. Similarly, the noun ‘determent’ is ‘A good word, but not now used’ — a particular form of favourable description that I have not found elsewhere in the Dictionary. Browne and Boyle are its two cited users. Elsewhere, we find Browne cited as the sole authority for the adjective ‘pictorial’, which he considers, as previously mentioned, ‘a word not adopted by other writers, but elegant and useful’. Only three other words in the whole of the fourth edition are designated ‘useful’. Elegance, for its part, is a quality attributed to fifteen words in the fourth edition, all of them used by writers of Browne’s period or earlier.

73 See K, III, 80.
74 Johnson himself does not, however, appear to have adopted it.
75 These being ‘effumability’ (found in Boyle), ‘indesert’ (used by Addison in the Spectator), and ‘to vade’ (Wotton).
76 The words are: ‘to gride’ (Spenser and Milton), ‘impartible’ (Digby), ‘inconsumptible’ (Digby again), ‘to infoliate’ (Howell), ‘melliority’ (‘very elegant’, and found by Johnson in Bacon and Bentley), ‘mountainet’ (Sidney), ‘operant’ (Shakespeare), Browne’s ‘pictorial’, ‘revile’ (as a
Furthermore, Browne escapes Johnson’s linguistic animadversions, except in the two instances where his language is labelled ‘unusual’, and in two other cases. One of these is ‘uncircumstantial’, a ‘bad word’ for which he is the sole authority. The other is the noun ‘opiniatry’, of which Johnson comments that ‘This word, though it has been tried in different forms, is not yet received, nor is it wanted’. Browne is the first authority cited; the others include Locke, Woodward and Pope. This, however, is the full extent of Johnson’s adverse criticism. Browne is not once among those whose use of language is deemed ‘barbarous’, ‘improper’ or ‘harsh’, nor among those whose writings furnish examples of ‘low’ or ‘cant’ words, although such charges are spread among even those authors for whom his esteem is most conspicuous. Milton, Locke, Dryden, L’Estrange, Glanvill and Mortimer are among those whose usage is at least once deemed ‘barbarous’; Dryden, Bacon and Hooker are all guilty of usages termed ‘harsh’; and Dryden, Pope, Hooker and Addison are among those given as sources for usages branded ‘improper’. ‘Low’ words are found in Dryden, Prior, Locke, L’Estrange, Arbuthnot, Richardson, and Bentley, among others; ‘cant’ words are found in Pope, Dryden, Locke, Bacon, Clarendon, Robert South, and, most frequently, Swift.

noun, used by Milton), ‘scatterling’ (Spenser), ‘sequence’ (in the sense ‘order of succession’, found in Shakespeare), ‘to subordinate’ (Wotton), ‘troubous’ (for which several authorities are given, four of them from Spenser), ‘trustless’ (also Spenser), and ‘to warray’ (‘very elegant and expressive’, and illustrated with four quotations, three of them from Spenser).

77 The other writers guilty of the use of ‘bad’ words are: Dryden, Shakespeare, Thomson, Gay, Mortimer, L’Estrange, King Charles I, Richard Allestree, Samuel Sharp (author of the 1739 A treatise of the Operations of Surgery), and the physico-theologian William Derham.

78 In the Dictionary Johnson defines ‘to receive’ as ‘to embrace intellectually, ‘to allow’ and ‘to admit’. ‘Received’ is not separately defined, but ‘receivedness’ is defined as ‘general allowance’. When he states that the word ‘opiniatry’ is ‘not yet received’, he presumably means that the word’s existence has yet to be allowed – either by writers, or, more specifically, by other arbiters of correctness.
In the fourth edition Johnson does add a couple more criticisms of Browne’s usage. The verb ‘to circumference’ is illustrated with a single quotation, drawn from *Pseudodoxia*, and in the fourth edition Johnson adds that the word is ‘Not proper’. The same is said of his use of the adjective ‘perspirable’. In the first edition of the *Dictionary* there are ninety-three references by Johnson to words or usages ‘proper’, ‘not proper’, or ‘improper’, while in the fourth edition there are 127. Only in the fourth edition are such comments made of Browne. When Johnson accuses him of using words that are ‘not proper’ he is suggesting that these words are not suitable for adoption by other users. The senses he gives in the *Dictionary* include ‘natural; original’, ‘fit; accommodated; adapted; suitable; qualified’, ‘exact; accurate; just’, ‘elegant; pretty’. When Browne’s usage is ‘not proper’ it is not a lack of exactness that is being censured; rather, it is the unwieldiness of his language — a want of elegance, and perhaps also a lack of consideration for his audience. But this is not a particularly negative criticism, and Browne avoids Johnson’s more caustic labels. One of the features of the *Dictionary* is Johnson’s propensity for labelling words. Harold B. Allen has noted that ‘Johnson’s stigmatised terms outnumber those in earlier works’. He explains:

> In the entire dictionary there ... appear more than 1,150 words bearing indications of Johnson’s personal attitude towards them, roughly one in forty.79

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79 Harold B. Allen, ‘Samuel Johnson: Originator of Usage Labels’, in Mohammad Ali Jazayery, Edgar C. Polomé, and Werner Winter (eds), *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Archibald A. Hill* (The Hague, 1979), 198. Furthermore, Johnson’s labels are remarkably diverse. The verb ‘to doff’ is ‘in all its senses obsolete, and scarcely used except by rusticks’; one sense of ‘plum’ is ‘the cant of the city’, while a particular sense of ‘to spoon’ is marked as belonging to ‘sea language’.
About 220 words are described as ‘low’, and about forty are ‘barbarous’. What this shows is that Johnson was capable of finding ugliness even in authors whose work he esteemed. Yet Browne largely escapes such censure. He is a ‘high’ source of English; his lexis is almost entirely undefiled by late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century depredations.

There is indeed one entry that explicitly shows Johnson’s view of Browne’s authority as a standard for correctness. In both editions the word ‘glister’ is illustrated with quotations from Swift and Browne. The quotation from Browne reads:

Choler is the natural glister, or one excretion whereby nature excludeth another; which, descending daily into the bowels, extimulates those parts, and excites them unto expulsion.

The subject of this quotation is one that frequently appears in Johnson’s correspondence, as well as in the various documents collected in the first volume of the Yale edition of his works under the title *Diaries, Prayers, Annals*. In both the first and fourth editions Johnson asserts that the word is ‘properly written clyster’, but for the fourth edition he adds a further comment. This reads: ‘It is written wrong even by Brown’. These words plainly suggest that Johnson credits Browne with a special nicety or rectitude in matters of orthography and linguistic precision. It is the only comment of this kind I have been able to find in the first or fourth editions of the *Dictionary*; for while Johnson’s comments on spelling and usage occasionally mention particular others – Dryden and Milton, for instance – there is no comparable statement to the effect that a favoured or
indeed exemplary author fails to uphold a linguistic standard he might be expected to promote.

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The Dictionary's fourth edition differed from the first in many ways—many of them subtle, but some striking. One of the main changes Johnson made between the two editions was a substantial reduction in the length of many of his illustrative quotations. Extracts were clipped or compressed, many of them quite savagely. The most aggressive treatment was reserved for Miller's Gardener's Dictionary and the poems of James Thomson. Allen Reddick notes Johnson's reservations about Thomson, and explains that, having included a good many quotations from The Seasons in the first edition (on account of his 'bold use of scientific or philosophical language, which had been particularly influenced by the physico-theological writers'), he 'liberally dropped' these quotations from the fourth. This, he convincingly suggests, reflects a movement whereby

> The sacred and prophetic voice of Milton ... usurps Thomson's tentative and precious words as the Dictionary becomes overtly more religiously concerned in the fourth edition.\(^80\)

The increased religious concern of the Dictionary is apparent in the addition of quotations from writers such as William Law, Daniel Waterland, John Kettlewell, and the Anglican divines Peter Heylyn, Barten Holyday, Francis White and John Fell, as well as the living Scottish moral philosopher James

\(^80\) Reddick, The Making of Johnson's Dictionary, 137, 94, 140.
Beattie, whose 1770 Essay on Truth was an important counterblast to Hume.\textsuperscript{81} It is probable that some of these writers had only become known to Johnson after 1755. Yet equally, we may infer Johnson's increasing determination, in maturity, to make the Dictionary a tutelary book, full of good moral counsel and Christian doctrine that might be imbibed by its users.

In the fourth edition, Johnson increases the number of quotations from Browne by about five per cent. He begins assertively, with nineteen new entries under the letter $A$. These new Browne quotations are in most cases recycled from entries that appeared under other headwords in the first edition. Thus the new quotations under 'to account', 'admittable', 'aggregate' and 'agreeable' appear, in the first edition, under 'fraction', 'paralogism', 'imprejudicate' and 'paucity' respectively. The new quotations under 'acceleration' and 'to advantage' are both in the first edition too – under 'marcour' and 'to opinion' – but appear in abbreviated forms there, with the words they now serve to illustrate not in fact included. Browne is the authority for a new sense of 'to accommodate' in the fourth edition, but the supporting quotation appears in the first edition under 'to mysterize'. He supplies the sole illustrative quotation under 'aquatile' – there having been no illustrative quotation for the word in the first edition – but the extract is one that appeared in the first edition under 'plash'. Two of the added

\textsuperscript{81} This is one of a number of cases in which Johnson breaks his own rule about not admitting living authors. Beattie would seem to have been included because Johnson approves of his opposition to Hume. Other living authors included in the Dictionary are his friends Samuel Richardson and Charlotte Lennox. Under 'marital' and 'to prink' there are quotations from the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting by Jane Collier, who died in 1755 after Johnson had finished work on the Dictionary. Any account of Johnson's reasons for including such authors can only be speculative. His choices were no doubt conditioned in part by what was conveniently available. We do know for instance that he used an indexed concordance to the sentiments of Richardson's Clarissa – see W. R. Keast 'The Two Clarissas in Johnson's Dictionary', Studies in Philology 54 (1957), 429-39.
quotations exemplify headwords which are new in the fourth edition –
‘aggelation’ and ‘alimentally’ – though we should note that the quotation used to
illustrate ‘alimentally’ appeared in the first edition under ‘medicamentally’. Of
the remaining Browne quotations added under A for the fourth edition, only those
under ‘to amplify’, ‘animation’ and ‘articulate’ do not reproduce material from
the first edition.

Johnson’s recycling of quotations to furnish what at first appears to be
new material in the fourth edition reflects a practice that runs right through the
Dictionary. Reddick describes Johnson’s labours in preparing the fourth edition,
suggesting that his chief priority was to add new illustrations. In order to do this,

he first turned to the abandoned manuscript [of the first edition]
… for whatever textual fragments he could salvage which would
illustrate different words and supplement other entries in the
Dictionary.

As Reddick also suggests,

By reusing those quotations he had already gathered to illustrate
other words, Johnson spared himself much of the large task of
reading through books again and extracting new quotations.82

Johnson returned to the manuscript, rather than to an earlier printed edition of the
work, because the extracted passages contained in the manuscript were often
longer than those that had found their way into the printed version. In other
words, he had at his disposal a resource that could provide him with additional
data, without his having to go to the effort of returning to the books themselves.

Under B Johnson adds no new Browne entries in the fourth edition, but
there are fourteen under C. All of these bar one are reused quotations from other

entries in the first edition. Thus, for instance, there are new quotations from Browne under ‘clarity’, ‘compactness’ and ‘connascence’, but they appeared in the earlier edition under ‘deceivable’, ‘durity’ and ‘geminous’. Two entries that are completely new in the fourth edition, under ‘to colliquate’ and ‘complexed’, are supported with Browne quotations, but these same quotations appear in the first edition in support of definitions of ‘calidity’ and ‘inexistent’. The one exception to Johnson’s habit of recycling among these new entries under the letter C is the verb ‘to constellate’, where the added Browne quotation supplements the single illustration (from Glanvill) in the first edition.

Of eleven new Browne quotations under D in the fourth edition, the only one not to be recycled from an entry in the first edition appears under ‘to divell’, which is a new headword in the fourth edition. ‘Defraudation’ and ‘denominable’ are also new headwords, but the Browne quotations that illustrate them appear in the first edition; the former under ‘pecuniary’, the latter under both ‘affluxion’ and ‘predominancy’. Again, under E, although there are eleven new Browne quotations, only one, under ‘exclusion’, is not used to illustrate some other word in the first edition. Under F there are four new Browne quotations. Only one, which appears under the word ‘featherly’, is not used in the first edition, but this quotation had already appeared in the fourth edition under ‘aggelation’. The other new Browne quotations, under ‘firm’, ‘fish’ and ‘flood’, are used to illustrate the words ‘limous’, ‘flesh’ and ‘remotely’ in the first edition. There is also a new Browne quotation under ‘to gain’ in the fourth edition; this is the same quotation used under ‘firm’ in this edition, and under ‘limous’ in the first.
‘To gangrenate’ and ‘glacious’ are new headwords in the fourth edition, but their illustrations from *Pseudodoxia* appear in the first edition, under ‘siderated’ and ‘to shoot’.

After the letter *G* there are only five additions from Browne in the revised *Dictionary*. ‘To knabble’ is a new headword in this edition, but the quotation is recycled from the entry under ‘rat’ in the first. ‘Penality’ is also newly included as a headword, but the Browne quotation used in support of it appears – in a compressed form, and without the word ‘penalty’ – in the first edition. The other three added quotations cited by Johnson as being taken from Browne are curious. They appear under ‘to open’, ‘ore’ and ‘wet’. I have not been able to locate any of the quotations in Browne’s works, and I am under the impression that they are not in fact from Browne. This has been confirmed by Robin Robbins, who has suggested that none of the illustrative quotations Johnson attributes to Browne under these words is in fact from his works.\(^{83}\)

The added Browne quotations in the fourth edition show Johnson revising the *Dictionary* not on the strength of new reading, but by using the two volumes of the first edition – and its second volume especially. Sometimes, however, Johnson can be seen moving in the opposite direction; rather than incorporating more quotations, he excises them. Many authors are treated in this way. Browne is among the fortunate ones whose quotations are very seldom removed. In total, five Browne quotations found in the first edition of the *Dictionary* are absent from its revised version. These quotations are found in the first edition under the words ‘fairystone’, ‘gallows’, ‘life’, ‘omission’, and ‘to retract’. In each case, the

\(^{83}\) In an e-mail dated 18 July 2001.
most plausible explanation for the removal of the Browne quotation is that, as it
stands, it sheds very little light on the meaning of the word it is meant to be
illustrating. Thus, for instance, in the first edition Browne is used to illustrate the
eighth sense of ‘life’ (‘The living form; resemblance exactly copied’). The
illustrative quotation appears, in full, as ‘Galen hath explained this point unto the
life.’ It comes from *Pseudodoxia*, IV, 13 (‘Of the Canicular or Dogdayes’) and is
accurately reproduced. This sense of the word ‘life’ remains in the fourth
edition, slightly altered, but the Browne quotation is no longer offered in its
support. The extract, as it appears in the first edition, is rather insubstantial, but
Johnson would probably have been reluctant to restore it to its fuller original
context, since the words come from a remarkably convoluted sentence, more
than two hundred words long. The omitted quotation under ‘omission’ is also
from this Book and Chapter of *Pseudodoxia*. In the *Dictionary* it appears as
‘Would it not impose a total omission of physic’ – a snippet clipped from a
section in which Browne discusses medicine and climate. Standing alone, the
quotation makes little or no sense, and, as in the case of the quotation removed
under ‘life’, to restore it to its fuller context would have required quoting a
convoluted and not obviously meritorious passage of some considerable length.

In the first edition ‘fairystone’ is defined solely by means of a quotation
from Browne, drawn from *Pseudodoxia*, II, 1. This reads:

> It is found in gravelpits, being of an hemispherical figure; hath
five double lines arising from the centre of its basis, which meet
in the pole.

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84 See *PE*, I, 354.
85 Ibid., 363.
In the fourth edition the quotation is removed, and there is instead merely a definition, ‘A stone found in gravel-pits’, without any mention of Browne.

Johnson’s reasons here are unguessable. It may just be that he wanted to save himself a little space. The two other cuts share a particular theme. In the 1755 edition, the first defined sense of ‘gallows’ is ‘a beam laid over two posts, on which malefactors are hanged’. This is followed by six illustrative quotations. Apart from Browne, the quoted authors are Sidney, Shakespeare, Hayward and Swift. The Browne quotation, taken from *Pseudodoxia*, II, 6, is ‘A production that naturally groweth under gallowses, and places of execution’. The original text, which comes from a passage in which Browne examines the myths and misapprehensions about mandrakes, is as follows:

The second assertion concerneth its production. That it naturally groweth under gallowses and places of execution, arising from fat or urine that drops from the body of the dead (*PE, I, 143*).

While the Browne quotation is removed for the fourth edition, the other five illustrative extracts remain intact. It seems fair to suggest that the Browne quotation sheds little light on the nature of the gallows, and at the same time possesses little in the way of obvious merit. It is perhaps also worth noting that Johnson’s substantial illustration of ‘mandrake’ does not in either the first of fourth edition make any mention of the property of mandrakes here claimed by Browne. In both editions the word is defined solely by means of quotations, the largest of these being from Philip Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary* (1731). The quotation from Miller – which is, in common with many of the extracts from this source, cut down for the fourth edition – reads, in the first edition:
The flower of the mandrake consists of one leaf in the shape of a bell, and is divided at the top into several parts; the pointal afterwards becomes a globular soft fruit, in which are contained many kidney-shaped seeds: the roots of this plant is said to bear a resemblance to the human form. The reports of tying a dog to this plant, in order to root it up, and prevent the certain death of the person who dares to attempt such a deed, and of the groans emitted by it when the violence is offered, are equally fabulous.

This does not answer the question of why Johnson removed Browne’s quotation from the entry. We may note, however, that it is not the only Browne quotation making reference to mandrakes to be cut from the fourth edition. Quotations from Browne making specific mention of mandrakes are found under ‘eradication’, ‘papaverous’, ‘to retain’, ‘to retract’ and ‘simplicity’ in the first edition. Of these, one (under ‘to retract’) is absent from the fourth. This quotation, used in both editions under ‘to retain’, is as follows: ‘Although they retain the word mandrake in the text, they in effect retract it in the margin.’

This comes from Pseudodoxia, VII, 7, a chapter entitled ‘Of the Mandrakes of Leah’. In the passage employed by Johnson, Browne discusses the different authorities for supposing that mandrakes have fecundating powers (PE, I, 553).

In his edition of Shakespeare Johnson comments several times on characters’ references to mandrakes. In two instances he dismisses the stories attaching to the mandrake as ‘fabulous’. The impression in each case is that he regards the myth of the mandrake as highly questionable. Perhaps he expunged these two mandrake-themed illustrations in order not to indulge the myth any further than necessary, or perhaps he simply found them uninstructive and unhelpful.

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86 Yale, VIII, 589, 747.
Within the context of the general squeezing of quotation in the fourth edition, we might expect Browne's often quite lengthy illustrations to be cut down. In fact, this seldom happens. When it does, it is not without an impact on the manner in which the quotations can be interpreted. For instance, in the first edition the adjective 'albugineous' is defined only by means of two illustrative quotations, and not by any gloss of Johnson's devising. The first of these two quotations is from Book II of Pseudodoxia: 'Eggs, I observe, will freeze in the albugineous part thereof.' In the fourth edition Johnson supplies his own definition ('Resembling the white of an egg'), and the words 'I observe' are excised from the Browne quotation, with the result that the authority for the definition transfers from Browne to Johnson. The compression of quotations in the fourth edition typically detracts from their encyclopaedic usefulness, with key phrases being removed. Thus for instance in the first edition, under 'degeneration', there is an extract from Browne's chapter concerning the belief 'That Hares are both male and female' (PE, III, 17). In the first edition the quotation, which refers to transplantation in the vegetable kingdom, begins with a parenthetical reminder that 'In plants ... there is no distinction of sexes'. This statement disappears from the entry in the fourth edition. This may seem trivial, but it reflects a broad trend whereby detail is erased from entries during the necessary process of trimming that enabled Johnson's enlargements in the fourth edition. There are occasions when the fourth edition expands on the first edition in the interests of what appears to be either precision of quotation or clarity of
meaning, as for instance in the case of ‘nutmeg’. The word is illustrated in the fourth edition with the following from *Pseudodoxia*, II, 6:

> The second integument, a dry and flosculus coat, commonly called mace; the fourth, a kernel included in the shell, which lieth under the mace, is the same we call *nutmeg*.

The word ‘integument’ has been added for the fourth edition; it does not appear in the original passage in *Pseudodoxia*. Overall, though, and unlike many of Johnson’s other authorities, Browne is largely unaffected by the acts of editorial surgery carried out in the fourth edition, and we may infer that Johnson feels the substance of his quotations is generally worth preserving in its entirety.

In Johnson’s treatment of Browne, we see in miniature many of the processes that characterize his revision. The fourth edition includes wholly new definitions, but also revises existing ones. One instance of this which involves Browne concerns the word ‘pectinated’, which is defined in the first edition as ‘Put one within another alternately’. Johnson adds that ‘This seems to be the meaning’, and illustrates the word with a sentence from Browne: ‘To sit cross legg’d or with our fingers *pectinated*, is accounted bad.’ In the fourth edition the entry is altered, so that the definition reads ‘Standing from each other like the teeth of a comb’. This alteration reflects Johnson’s desire, in preparing the revised edition, to improve where possible the accuracy and clarity of definitions, while also introducing greater consistency to entries. In both editions Johnson shows ‘pectinated’ as being derived from ‘*pecten*’, though he does not go so far as to mention that this is the Latin for ‘comb’. Browne himself, in *Pseudodoxia*, supplies two brief paraphrases, suggesting that ‘pectinated’ is effectively

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87 See *PE*, I, 147.
synonymous with 'shut together' and that 'pectination' means the same as
'complication' – the latter in fact being quoted by Johnson under 'pectination'
(PE, I, 426-7). Johnson's understanding of 'pectination' is thus more precise than
it appears in the first edition, where the somewhat guarded words 'This seems to
be the meaning' detract from the credibility of the definition to which they are
appended. In the first edition he quotes from Browne a reference to 'pectinals, or
such as have their bones made laterally like a comb'. Furthermore, in the first
edition he gives as the second sense of 'comb', 'The top or crest of a cock, so
called from its pectinated indentures'. This suggests that as early as the first
edition he understood the relationship between the adjective's meaning and its
literal derivation. By changing the definition in the fourth edition he is not only
improving an individual entry, but, more broadly, standardizing his
interpretations and eliminating the possibility of conflict between definitions.

The revisions Johnson makes in refining definitions for the fourth edition
reflect a fresh engagement with the quotations used in their support. For instance,
the adverb 'innoxiously' is defined in the first edition as 'Harmlessly', with a
single illustrative quotation from Browne: 'Animals, that can innoxiously digest
these poisons, become antidotal to the poison digested.' Johnson offers no further
sources in the fourth edition, but expands the definition, discriminating between
two senses: 'Harmlessly; without harm done', and 'Without harm suffered'. It is
for the second of these that the sentence from Browne is offered in support, and
Johnson's alteration of the definition – one that proposes a greater complexity of

240
meaning, as well as an important difference in application – suggests a careful re-reading of Browne's words.
Chapter Five: Browne’s contribution to the Dictionary

In this chapter, I discuss the spheres of knowledge suggested by the quotations from Browne in the Dictionary, and I consider the picture that develops of Johnson’s reading in Browne. In his book Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading, Robert DeMaria suggests it is possible to divide Johnson’s reading into four distinct areas: ‘study’, ‘perusal’, ‘mere reading’, and ‘curious reading’. ‘Study’ involved diligent examination of the Greek New Testament or of humanist scholars, while what DeMaria terms ‘perusal’ was usually reserved by Johnson for books that might broadly be categorized as self-help (of Isaac Watts’s Improvement of the Mind he reflected, ‘Few books have been perused by me with greater pleasure’). ‘Mere reading’ embraced pamphlets and other materials consulted only for the purpose of obtaining information; ‘curious reading’ was directed at fiction and romances. Though DeMaria’s anatomy of Johnson’s reading habits may be at once insufficiently precise and excessively schematic, it is useful; it reminds us that the attention and intelligence invested in the act of reading vary according both to the kind of book being read and to the reasons the reader has for looking at it. Johnson’s reading for the Dictionary was a mixture of mere reading and perusal: if at times he gutted copytexts in order to garner the essential information contained in them, he was also attentive to the significance – lexical, informative, moral and personal – of the books he consumed.

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1 Lives, III, 309.
To its users the *Dictionary* was above all else a work of reference. They consulted it to ascertain meaning. In the *Plan* Johnson noted that ‘The unlearned much oftener consult their dictionaries, for the meaning of words, than for their structures or formations’. Regrettably, there are no obvious records of how the *Dictionary* was utilized by its early users. We do know that it initially cost £4. 10s. – a high price that must have limited its audience (see Appendix A). It seems likely that very few members of this quite limited audience regarded the *Dictionary* as a collection of quotable *sententiae*, or as an anthology of exemplary poetry and prose. Yet Johnson’s method of compilation means that at every turn the *Dictionary* manifests his concerns, priorities and perceptions. Moreover, a dictionary, seen from within rather than from without, and not employed by the user as a means of self-information, but exploited by the author as an opportunity to make claims for a language and its literature, embodies purposes beyond those merely philological. Johnson’s idiosyncratic definitions – such as those of ‘patron’, ‘excise’ and ‘oats’ – are not representative of the general flavour of the work, but the *Dictionary* remains a missionary text, full of highly personal readings and perspectives, as is made clear in the *Preface*. Johnson speaks there of his work’s effect on the ‘dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer’; he began it with nobly poetical intentions, but emerged from this reverie to confront the realities and constraints of lexicography. Nevertheless, the volumes, despite his lament, retain elements which, though not perhaps poetic, bespeak his poetic, creative instincts.

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2 *Plan*, 5.

3 *MW*, 322.
In his study of early English lexicography, Werner Huellen discusses the capacity of dictionaries to offer a resource that is more than simply a collection of definitions and etymologies. He argues that they employ and, at the same time, create on various levels linguistic knowledge to help users to overcome difficulties in their language performance. But for this very purpose they also need and use encyclopaedic knowledge.\(^4\)

A dictionary cannot avoid appealing to its users' knowledge and experiences. This is what makes it possible for a user to close a dictionary as well as open it: in order for it to be viable for a dictionary to be used without the user endlessly moving from one entry to the next, constantly seeking the definitions of words used in definitions, there has to be a reliance on the user's existing knowledge. Robert DeMaria's study entitled *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning* appropriately begins with the premiss, borrowed from Umberto Eco, that a dictionary is 'a disguised encyclopaedia'.\(^5\) It addresses the *Dictionary*'s themes, examining the mixture of diversity and consistency to be found in the many entries indirectly dealing with subjects such as 'Probability and Opinion', 'Teachers and Pupils', 'Poetry and Poets' and 'Human Wishes'. DeMaria treats the *Dictionary* as if it were a giant commonplace book. He has an historical justification for doing so, and his reading is useful in drawing attention to the work's didacticism.

This said, one must be careful not to make grand generalizations about Johnson's views or tastes on the evidence of the content of the *Dictionary*'s illustrative quotations. It is in the nature of a dictionary that it cannot offer

thematic consistency. There are themes that appear to run through the entire work, but Johnson almost always tries to record the diversity of experience and opinion. Though there are authors he refuses to accommodate, there are few kinds of thinking that do not find a space somewhere within the Dictionary’s pages. As Allen Reddick argues, a dictionary is a collection of fragments, and it is important to recognize that

A generalized position in relation to political issues – gender, race, monarchy, political party – may be identified and marked in parts of the Dictionary, or possibly even the whole, but it would be a mistake to discern coherence or consistency, whether of intention or of effect, in the user’s experience of the Dictionary.6

Reddick describes the ‘unavoidable opposition ... between Johnson’s definitions and his quotations’:

The former are produced by a drive for exactness, accuracy, and delimitation, but the latter reveal the complexities, and the wide possibilities of signification, of the rhetoric of poets, philosophers, preachers, and other writers.7

The quotations are unlikely to embody Johnson’s views, because their multifariousness ensures that any kind of reading of the Dictionary’s overall orientation can usually be undercut by a reading that is diametrically opposed to it.8 However, it is still possible to see patterns in Johnson’s deployment of particular authors and particular works, as well as in the kinds of learning and information he seems to privilege.

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8 A case in point would be the Dictionary’s diverse statements about women – about their roles, natures and histories. There are many quotations in the Dictionary that suggest strong anti-feminist sentiment on Johnson’s part, but there are also many that accord with Johnson’s more equitable, non-discriminatory thoughts on sex and gender.
Johnson writes, in the Preface, that when he first collected the Dictionary's illustrative quotations he was 'desirous that every quotation should be useful to some other end than the illustration of a word'. He then confesses that the sheer size of a book fulfilling this intention 'would fright away the student', and adds that it has been necessary to 'reduce my transcripts very often to clusters of words, in which scarcely any meaning is retained'. Yet he allows that

Some passages I have ... spared, which may relieve the labour of verbal searches, and intersperse with verdure and flowers the dusty deserts of barren philology.

Later in the Preface he mentions that he has occasionally exhibited 'a genealogy of sentiments, by showing how one author copied the thoughts and diction of another', the result of this being 'a kind of intellectual history'. This phrase is a remarkable one; 'intellectual history' was a concept not yet realized, and though Johnson means rather less by it than a modern intellectual historian might, it is significant that he imagines his work having this dimension. There are, he suggests, 'innumerable passages selected with propriety' – 'some shining with sparks of imagination, and some replete with treasures of wisdom'. Here he makes explicit the encyclopaedic qualities of his work. He concedes the necessity of reaching beyond a merely mechanical kind of lexicography, and suggests what the fruits and effects of this may be.

As I have suggested in the preceding chapter, Pseudodoxia Epidemica would have seemed, to any reader properly acquainted with it, a very useful source for materials appropriate to the compiling of an English dictionary (or

9 MW, 318, 320.
indeed an encyclopaedia). But more than this, it is a work sharing some of the objectives of a dictionary. It shares the Dictionary's concern with authorities, with setting standards of interpretative correctness, with the replacement of error by exactitude, and with an experiential model of learning and understanding. DeMaria notes Johnson's choice as major sources for quotations three books 'thoroughly dedicated to the topic of ignorance': Thomas Baker's Reflections upon Learning, Joseph Glanvill's Scepsis Scientifica, and Pseudodoxia Epidemica. Baker's book is concerned with demonstrating human ignorance, 'in order' (as its title-page announces) 'to evince the Usefulness and Necessity of Revelation'. It highlights common ignorance of logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, law, languages and medicine; Baker is scathing about the 'imaginary' quality of much scholarship and reflects that 'the State of Learning is so far from perfection ... That it ought to teach us Modesty and keep us Humble'. Glanvill, also author of an empirical defence of his belief in witches (Saducismus Triumphatus, 1681), was evidently influenced, in matters of both style and content, by Browne, whom he refers to as 'ingenious'. His works, which are concerned with the limits of knowledge and the prevalence of strong but unsubstantiated opinions, are quoted more than 550 times in the fourth

10 DeMaria, Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning, 61. The many quotations from Glanvill are most frequently drawn from Scepsis. This was his 1665 revision of the 1661 Vanity of Dogmatizing. In due course, he revised the work more extensively, in order that its language be less obscure and more in keeping with the dictates of Sprat and the Royal Society (of which he was by then a member). This revised version appeared under the title Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion in 1676.
11 'Bakers papers' is one of the items listed by Johnson in his 'Repertorium' (for which see Yale, I, 408).
13 Joseph Glanvill, The Vanity of Dogmatizing (London, 1661), 204.
edition; in the first edition there are fifty-two occasions when Browne and Glanvill are quoted in illustration of the same word, and there are sixty-one such occasions in the fourth edition. But much the most heavily used of Johnson’s sources for examples of ignorance and false learning is Browne.

DeMaria argues that the Dictionary, like Pseudodoxia, ‘both displays vast stores of false opinion and seeks to explode them’. The purposes of the two books are coincident ‘because so many words are names for nonexistent things instituted in vulgar opinion’.

Certainly, the Dictionary records the existence of terms for things that may be assumed not to exist (one thinks of the entry for ‘basilisk’, supported with an illustration from Browne). But the Dictionary and Pseudodoxia are also similar in the doubts they express about the English language’s satisfactoriness as a vehicle for complex thinking. Browne’s observations on language reflect the widespread seventeenth-century mistrust of English as a proper medium for philosophical argument. In the third quarter of the century there was great interest in formulating universal languages and visual

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14 He illustrates many technical or pseudo-technical words, such as ‘congruity’, ‘physiology’, ‘scintillation’, ‘seminal’, ‘to subtilize’ and ‘vacuity’.

15 Among the words for which both serve as authorities in the fourth edition are: ‘amphibology’, ‘authority’, ‘causality’, ‘deficiency’, ‘encyclopedy’, ‘humanity’, ‘idiosyncrasy’, ‘ingenuity’, ‘inquirer’, ‘to opinion’, and ‘temperamental’, which may perhaps give some impression of the fields of knowledge within which both authors are able to serve as touchstones.

16 DeMaria, Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning, 70.

17 See Lia Formigari, Language and Experience in Seventeenth-Century British Philosophy (Amsterdam, 1988). Formigari argues (p. 51) that ‘mistrust of language was a recurrent attitude in 17th-century British philosophy, which repeatedly stressed the shortcomings of all systems of communication’. She cites Browne as one of the authors who took this view, and goes on to detail various abortive attempts – like that of John Wilkins, for instance – to reconstruct from the Babel of contemporary usage a kind of linguistic unity. As she explains, Locke hits such endeavours on the head; his works open a new era in the philosophy of language. After Locke, ‘The arbitrariness of linguistic systems is … recognised as being inseparable from the very genesis of meaning’ (p. 88).
grammars in order to bypass English. One writer who sought to develop a more philosophically exact language was John Wilkins, author of the *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* Johnson recommended to Sophia Thrale. In the first edition of the *Dictionary* there are 209 explicit citations of Wilkins; in the fourth edition the figure goes up to 299. Wilkins is one of a number of theological writers – mentioned in my previous chapter – whose works figure much more prominently in the fourth edition than in the first. It appears that the *Alphabetical Dictionary* contributed by William Lloyd as an appendix to Wilkins's *Essay* may have influenced Johnson's approach to organizing definitions. The *Essay* itself is described by W. K. Wimsatt as having 'produced a still-born language, a cryptic system of “integral” and “particle” short-hand symbols that far exceeded in degree of abstraction ... all the living and dead languages which he rejected as models.' Wilkins probably interested Johnson because he was so concerned with matters of linguistic exactitude. The *Dictionary* is often resistant to linguistic innovation, yet it is interested in the innovators, and enshrines the conservative belief that the best kind of English is one that embraces the classical heritage. Browne may be a favoured author because his neologisms are largely informed by Latin and Greek; his diction thrives on analogy, and is far removed from the conversational style promoted by Addison and his admirers. The language of *Pseudodoxia* –

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18 This is discussed in detail in Murray Cohen, *Sensible Words* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1977), 1-34.
19 Wilkins illustrates a wide variety of words. Some are quite specialized, as for instance 'circumvolution' and 'submarine'.
born of a desire to regulate error, yet itself at times obscure and convoluted –
documents the problems of philosophical writing.

This ordeal is frequently discernible in the illustrations Johnson culls
from Pseudodoxia, and the chosen quotations are representative of Browne’s
range of concerns. Among the fields of knowledge or enquiry most frequently
touched upon are error, medicine, and religion. The chosen quotations rehearse
familiar Brownean concerns relating to the sources of error and its
manifestations; questions of diet, anatomy and physic; and issues of doctrine,
judgement and revelation. Many of the quotations demonstrate Browne’s
adherence to the ‘three determinators of truth’ (authority, sense and reason), and
many adumbrate his experimental methods. Other persistent concerns include
nature and its phenomena, man’s customs and habits, as well as superstition,
myth and lore. Lessconcertedly, but with sufficient frequency to be worth
remarking, the selected quotations contribute information – or at the least,
curious vignettes – concerning subjects that include optics, geology, heraldry and
iconography, prophecy and oracles, planetary motion and the zodiac, age and
death, electricity, geometry, the seasons, chemistry, and problems of language,
nomenclature and interpretation.

Throughout the Dictionary, there is an obvious correlation between the
words selected from an author and his habitual concerns. It is hardly surprising
that a gardening specialist is chosen to provide illustrations for words relating to
gardening, or a travel writer for terms to do with travel; but beyond this, and in
spite of the in fact frequent lack of connection between headword and illustrating

250
author, there is a pertinence about many of Johnson’s choices. Not only does he represent the essential character of a writer and his concerns, he also offers an impression of the richness and diversity (or even inconsistency) of his work and language. Eugene Thomas provides a good example: he notes that in Johnson’s copy of South’s *Sermons*, the words for which passages have been marked include ‘absolution’, ‘blasphemous’, ‘covenant’, ‘devotional’, ‘doxology’, ‘repentance’ and ‘scripture’; yet South is also cited under a number of coarser words, of the kind for which he was censured by Johnson – ‘bordel’, ‘hellish’, ‘ignoramus’, ‘shallow-brained’, ‘sneaking’, ‘sot’, ‘sottishness’, ‘whoredom’.  


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22 Thomas, ‘A Bibliographical and Critical Analysis of Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary*’, 90, 93-4. For Johnson’s views on South and the styles of other authors of English sermons, see *Life*, III, 247-8.

23 South and Watts are sources for illustrations of a good number of technical or apparently technical words in the *Dictionary*. South appears in support of ‘concatenation’, ‘emanation’, ‘indissoluble’, ‘nutriment’ and ‘to superinduce’, while Watts is used to exemplify ‘ductility’, ‘geometrician’, ‘meridian’, ‘quadrature’ and ‘telescope’.  

251
scientific uses such as ‘calidity’, ‘frigidity’, ‘magnetism’, ‘meridian’, ‘meteorology’, ‘mineralogist’, ‘perspirable’, ‘planet’ and ‘tortuosity’. Words chosen from Browne are apt to be technical, though it is a trait of Browne’s style that he often uses a technical term outside the expected technical context.


Several of the words illustrated with examples from Browne describe concepts that are uniquely important to his work. He supplies the first illustration under ‘amphibology’, a term which, like ‘deuteroscopy’, has to do with the confusion caused by the multiple senses of words and multiplicity of interpretations. Johnson defines it as ‘discourse of uncertain meaning’, and explains that it is to be distinguished from ‘equivocation, which means the double signification of a single word’. He provides an example of equivocation: ‘captare lepores, meaning by lepores, either hares or jests.’ For its part, the nature of amphibology is exemplified in the quotation ‘noli regem occidere, timere bonum est’, which can be interpreted either as ‘don’t kill the king, it is
good to fear him’ or as ‘don’t be afraid to kill the king, which is a good thing’.

Equivocation is, in this instance at least, less dangerous than amphibiology.

Johnson’s example of amphibology reflects to a degree both his instinctive
reference to Latin as a model for general patterns of argument and his royalist
inclinations. More than this, however, it serves to point up a particular kind of
linguistic problem that the Dictionary is concerned with resolving or reducing.

Though few illustrative quotations make mention of ‘amphibology’, there are
many that take it as their subject. Swift refers to the ‘impertinence of pedants,
who affect to talk in a language not to be understood’, while Locke complains of
‘the fallacious and illusory use of obscure or deceitful terms’.

Certain of the quotations extracted from Browne demonstrate the peculiar
and perhaps even awkward qualities of his writing – not least its occasional
tendency towards obscurity. For instance, under ‘to refrigerate’ we find this:

  Whether they be refrigerated inclinatory or somewhat
  equinoxically, though in a lesser degree, they discover some
  verticity.

The quotation does little to illuminate the meaning of the verb, but does give a
sense of the character of the author’s prose. Yet even if there are occasions when
Browne’s diction appears wilfully baroque, it is clear that his unusual language is
often a function of his unusual subject matter. Thus for instance we find Johnson
citing him as the sole authority for ‘retromingent’ (‘staling backward’) and
‘retromingency’ – ‘to stale’ meaning ‘to make water’. Browne is rather less prim
about what he means by this word, which comes from a section of Pseudodoxia
in which he discusses the alleged hermaphroditism of hares. The quotation that
appears under 'retromingency' is, in full:

The last foundation was retromingency, or pissing backwards; for
men observing both sexes to urine backwards, or aversly between
their legs, they might conceive there were feminine parts in both.

Browne makes it clear that 'retromingency' is a synonym for 'pissing backward',
but although Johnson preserves the word 'pissing' in the illustrative quotation, he
does not see fit to use it for the purposes of his definition (PE, I, 231). In the
same passage Browne refers to 'retrocopulation', which Johnson in the
Dictionary rather coyly defines as 'post-coition'. Here we have an example of
one of the words chosen by Johnson in accordance with his claim in the Preface
that 'Many quotations serve no other purpose than that of proving the bare
existence of words'. The quotation nevertheless proves suggestive about
Browne's interests and areas of inquiry, and perhaps also suggests Johnson's
willingness to indulge these interests, at least to the degree of being prepared to
represent them. However, Johnson does not quote from the end of Browne's
chapter, where he reflects on the 'constant Law' of animal coition, and
complains that

onely the vitiositie of man hath acted the varieties hereof; nor
content with a digression from sex or species, hath in his own
kinde runne thorow the Anomalies of venery, and been so bold,
not onely to act, but represent to view, the Irregular wayes of lust
(PE, I, 232).

This is Browne the sexual moralist (the same Browne who is embarrassed by the
absurdities of human reproduction), and it is remarkable that of eleven references
to 'venery' in the fourth edition Dictionary six come from Browne. The word is

24 MW, 319.
defined by Johnson as 'the sport of hunting' and 'the pleasures of the bed'. It is clear which of the two Browne has in mind in quotations such as those under 'acceleration' and 'marcour', in which he argues that 'venery ... much abridgeth our days', and in the quotation 'Immoderate salacity and excess of venery is supposed to shorten the lives of cocks'. The reason for Browne's anxiety on this subject may be detected in the quotation he provides under 'to conspire'. Johnson quotes from *Pseudodoxia*, III, 12: 'There is in man a natural possibility to destroy the world; that is, to conspire to know no woman.' Browne's original has been compressed, having actually read:

> Some conceive, and it may seeme true, that there is in man a naturall possibility to destroy the world in one generation, that is, by a general conspire to know no woman themselves and disable all others also (PE, I, 208).

Browne goes on to argue that divine providence would prevent any such abstinence, as might for instance have been practised by Cain, 'for that would have imposed another creation upon him' and required him 'to have animated a second rib of Adam'. But Johnson's quotation preserves the essential substance of Browne's concern. Browne the Christian moralist and Browne the natural philosopher are united in the belief that to 'know' a woman is to practise something much more to do with biological and theological necessity than with sensual pleasure. Sex originates with 'the great Benediction of God, ... Be fruitfull and multiply' (PE, I, 220).

Here we get a sense of one of the Brownean traits that Johnson wishes to incorporate in the *Dictionary*. Browne writes about base and natural things with a probing morality that is reflected in a heightened and particular use of language.
By including Browne’s specialized language and the passages in which it occurs, Johnson may obliquely be commenting on the general pattern of language used to discuss sex, nature and the body; Browne’s original and specific language is nicely suited to appraise subjects often approached with less exactness and greater licence. Yet although the Dictionary of necessity incorporates many of Browne’s novel and technical forms of expression, he is also chosen to illustrate words that are non-technical: ‘cinder’, ‘drossy’, ‘jejune’, ‘mermaid’, ‘picklock’, ‘richly’, ‘swimmer’, ‘wooden’. The use of Browne to illustrate these words reflects a dimension of his writing that is often forgotten; his prose frequently plays Latinism off against more demotic usage. One example of this that appears in the Dictionary is the sentence ‘The beaver is called animal ventricosum, from his swaggy and prominent belly’. Huntley provides a good list of formulations of this kind.\(^{25}\) Daniela Havenstein suggests that Browne’s ‘penchant for pairings’ is the result of his ‘general liking of structuring his experience in binary schemes’.\(^{26}\) It is a quirk of Browne’s prose that he frequently uses a common, chiefly colloquial word in conjunction with a more rarefied one, and Johnson here illustrates a signal idiosyncrasy of Browne’s diction.

DeMaria notes how many of the works Johnson canvassed for quotations argue ‘the superiority of virtue to knowledge, the limitations of human reason, and the need for revealed religion’. These themes, as he observes, are especially

\(^{25}\) Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 120-1.

\(^{26}\) Havenstein, *Democratizing Sir Thomas Browne*, 128. The section of this book on ‘Coordinating conjunctions, “doublets”, pairings, and semantics’ (pp. 119-28) offers a good survey of usages of this kind.
visible in the works of Hooker, Raleigh, Locke, Boyle and Browne. Twice—though once in slightly abbreviated form—Johnson quotes Browne’s aphoristic claim that

Knowledge is made by oblivion, and to purchase a clear and warrantable body of truth, we must forget and part with much we know (PE, I, 1).

A similar philosophy is advanced in the quotation from Browne supplied under ‘expurgation’:

Wise men know, that arts and learning want expurgation; and if the course of truth be permitted to itself, it cannot escape many errours.

DeMaria notes the accord between these illustrative quotations and Johnson’s statement, in Rambler 156, that

the studies of mankind, all at least which, not being subject to rigorous demonstration, admit the influence of fancy and caprice, are perpetually tending to error and confusion.... The systems of learning therefore must be sometimes reviewed, complications analised into principles, and knowledge disentangled from opinion.

Under ‘aphorism’ Johnson quotes from Browne’s chapter concerning ‘the erroneous disposition of the people’:

He will easily discern how little of truth there is in the multitude; and though sometimes they are flattered with that aphorism, will hardly believe the voice of the people to be the voice of God.

These quotations argue the need for moral self-tuition and a resistance to received opinion. As I suggested in Chapter Three, Browne and Johnson share

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27 DeMaria, Johnson’s Dictionary and the Language of Learning, 23.
28 Yale, V, 66. Quoted in DeMaria, Johnson’s Dictionary and the Language of Learning, 76.
29 Browne also appears under ‘apologue’ (a ‘story contrived to teach some moral truth’), hailing the tutelary potential of proverbs—and specifically of Aesop’s fables. Boswell, in the Life of Johnson, records an episode during one of Johnson’s visits to Ashbourne, when Johnson attempted to unblock an artificial waterfall: Boswell excuses the triviality of his anecdote by
a commitment to moral self-control. The second sense of 'collective' ('Employed in deducing consequences; argumentative') is nicely illustrated with a quotation from *Pseudodoxia*, VI, 8:

> Antiquity left unto us many falsities, controulable not only by critical and collective reason, but contrary observations.

It is a position that encapsulates three of the key attributes of Browne’s work: he notes the flawed nature of some of the ancient authorities to which modern opinion cleaves, emphasizes the importance of reason in resisting these authorities (at the same time implying that reason is not sufficiently employed), and stresses the value of observation as a safeguard against erroneous beliefs.

The most important word he uses here is ‘controulable’. It and its variant forms ('controlable', 'controllable') are very scarce in the *Dictionary*, but in every case they are followed with the words ‘by reason’. In the *Life of Browne* Johnson quotes Whitefoot’s statement that his subject ‘had no despotical power over his affections and passions ... but as large a political power over them, as any Stoick’. Whitefoot adds that ‘the strongest that were found in him ... were under the controul of his reason’ (*CM*, 39). Whitefoot is describing Browne’s personality, not the trajectory of his written arguments, but he underlines one of the truly philosophical components of Browne’s thought – its pursuit of *ataraxia*. The idea of reason as an instrument of self-control, necessary to

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The word is illustrated in the *Dictionary* by Glanvill: ‘The scepticks affected an indifferent equiponderous neutrality, as the only means to their ataraxia, and freedom from passionate disturbances.’
regulate the passions and achieve inner peace, is a key one for understanding both Browne and Johnson.

As one would expect, given the English title of *Pseudodoxia*, error is a recurring subject of the quotations selected from Browne. Johnson twice quotes (under ‘inconsequent’ and ‘inferible’) Browne’s observation that

> Men rest not in false apprehensions without absurd and *inconsequent* deductions from fallacious foundations, and misapprehended mediums, erecting conclusions no way *inferable* from their premises.

The passage suggests the complicated nature of error, as does the illustration under ‘dissemination’, in which Browne reflects that

> Though now at the greatest distance from the beginning of errour, yet we are almost lost in its *dissemination*, whose ways are boundless, and confess no circumscription.

The quotations extracted by Johnson from *Pseudodoxia* offer numerous judgements on the subject of error’s spread and growth. In one of several of his references to Scaliger quoted by Johnson (other critical ones occurring under ‘proud’ and ‘surreptitious’), Browne remarks that commentators on Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium* have not been averse to adding their mistakes to his:

> ‘Scaliger, finding a defect in the reason of Aristotle, introduceth one of no less *deficiency* himself.’ The Scaliger referred to here is Julius Caesar Scaliger, from whose *Poeticks* Johnson took the motto for one of his early poems. It is from the same Scaliger that Browne takes *Pseudodoxia*’s epigraph. Scaliger is thus established as Browne’s empiricist predecessor, but, as the quotation under ‘deficiency’ shows, even those who seek to eradicate error are capable of

[31 See *Life*, I, 61-2.]
propagating it. The human susceptibility to error is repeatedly underscored.

Johnson quotes the observation in *Pseudodoxia*, I, 4 that ‘Men often swallow falsities for truths, *dubiosities* for certainties, *feasibilities* for possibilities, and things impossible for possible’. Under both ‘acorn’ and ‘inflexible’ he quotes from Browne’s address ‘To the Reader’:

> Such errors as are but *acorns* in our younger brows, grow oaks in our older heads, and become *inflexible* to the powerful arm of reason.

The transmission of error – its easy acceptance among the weak, and its transfer from them to the strong – is briefly noticed under ‘to consummate’, while the antiquity of error is suggested under ‘clarity’, where Johnson quotes from the opening chapter of *Pseudodoxia*: ‘Man was not only deceived in his integrity, but the angels of light in all their *clarity*.’ It is an important notion for both writers that Error predates Man, but even more important is the notion that efforts to resist error can in fact accommodate it. Such a realisation strengthens the case for moral and intellectual vigilance, for the attentive and scrupulous self-regulation that both men advocate.

Johnson frequently enlists Browne in this cause, but Browne’s prolix diction means that Johnson must sometimes edit the quotations in order to make them manageable. It is possible that he sometimes edited them for ideological reasons, rather than practical ones. It would be easy to exaggerate the

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32 In the fourth edition ‘*feasibilities*’ is altered to ‘*sensibilities*’. In both the first and fourth editions, though, this quotation also appears under ‘*feasibility*’.

33 In the *Preface* (MW, 318-9) he suggests that ‘The examples ... are no longer to be considered as conveying the sentiments or doctrine of their authors’, for ‘it may sometimes happen, by hasty detruncation, that the general tendency of the sentence may be changed: the divine may desert his tenets, or the philosopher his system’. Later he states that ‘The examples are too often injudiciously truncated, and perhaps sometimes, I hope very rarely, alleged in mistaken sense’
importance of the changes he makes, not least because they may have been the
work of his amanuenses. One cut that is at first sight interesting is to be found in
both the first and fourth editions under ‘colourable’ (‘specious; plausible’). The
word is described as ‘now little used’, yet it warrants four illustrative quotations.
The last of these is from *Pseudodoxia*, I, 2:

We hope the mercy of God will consider us unto some mineration
of our offences; yet had not the sincerity of our parents so
\textit{colourable} expectations.

The original reads:

For although we now doe hope the mercies of God will consider
our degenerated integrites unto some minoration of our offences,
yet had not the sincerity of our first parents, so colourable
expectations .... (\textit{PE}, I, 11).

Here, as is so common in the Dictionary, Johnson has compressed the original.

Whether this particular compression was the result of mistranscription or
deliberate editorial choice, the removal of the words ‘our degenerated integrites’
appears significant. The passage in question concerns the temptation of Eve, and
Browne argues that Eve’s fallibility was less excusable than that of modern man,
since for Eve and her partner ‘the commandement was but single’. In other
words, she had only one rule to stick to; but since then more rules have been
instituted, and the possibilities of transgression have increased
accordingly. Furthermore, ‘our first parents’ were possessed of ‘integrities best
able to resist the motions of its transgression’ (\textit{PE}, I, 11-12). Browne, in
contrasting the diminished integrity of contemporary humanity with the pristine
integrity of Adam and Eve, expresses the idea that it is in the nature of sin to

\textit{(MW}, 321). These comments should be understood as a caveat, rather than as an injunction
against finding value in the sentiments and doctrine exhibited in the illustrative quotations.
ramify and exponentiate. The history of humanity has been a history of increased temptations, increasing fallibilities, and increasing error. The process is irreversible. Browne shortly after reflects that

Thus may we perceive, how weakely our fathers did err before the flood, how continually and upon common discourse they fell upon errours after; it is therefore no wonder we have been erroneous ever since: And being now at greatest distance from the beginning of error, are almost lost in its dissemination, whose wayes are boundlesse, and confesse no circumscription (PE, I, 14).

Johnson's editing, along with the necessary removal of the quotation from its full context, has the effect of playing down Browne's realism, and erases the most subversive part of Browne's statement. However, the full version of the quotation does appear under 'minoration'. Under this more theologically important word Johnson manages to preserve the wonderful resonance of Browne's original, complete with the reference to 'degenerated integrities' – the phrase one that accords with his own consciousness of humanity's postlapsarian condition.

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There are occasions when the quoted extracts from Browne seem to serve as self-references on Johnson's part. To read them in this way is not without its dangers, and the self-references are scarcely unique to the illustrative quotations drawn from Browne, nor radically different from the self-references we find elsewhere in the Dictionary. All the same, Johnson's occasionally conspicuous
snippets of autobiography (as in the famous definitions of 'lich' and
'lexicographer') provide evidence of a ludic undercurrent within the *Dictionary*.
Thus when Johnson quotes Browne's statement that 'Authors write often
dubiously, even in matters wherein is expected a strict definitive truth', he may
appear to be commenting on the disparity between his audience's expectations of
the *Dictionary* and the reality of its failure to furnish 'strict definitive truth'. On a
different note, Johnson's affection for horse-riding and persistent difficulties
with gout lend a certain resonance to the illustration of 'sciatick' with a reference
from *Pseudodoxia* to the Scythians, who 'using continual riding, were generally
molested with the sciatica, or hip gout'. The same sentence furnishes an
illustration of 'suppedaneous' ('placed under the feet'):

> He had slender legs, but encreased by riding after meals; that is,
> the humour descended upon their pendulousness, they having no
> support or *suppedaneous* stability.34

The same subject is touched on in the quotation Johnson includes to illustrate
'podagrical' ('afflicted with the gout'); it is taken from a passage in which
Browne mentions the belief 'that a Loadstone held in the hand ... doth either
cure or give great ease in the gout' (*PE*, I, 109). Browne is frequently a source of
information regarding the loadstone, as well as magnetism more generally.
Johnson, we know, was forever investigating new remedies. The therapeutic use
of electricity was proposed by Richard Lovett in *The Subtil Medium* (1756) – a
book reviewed by Johnson – and John Wesley's *The Desideratum, or Electricity

34 For the original see *PE*, I, 402.
made Plain and Useful (1760). Johnson appears to have allowed his physician
Thomas Lawrence to try it on him.\textsuperscript{35}

Many of the positions, medical and otherwise, that are advanced in the
Dictionary entries seem closely related to opinions of Johnson’s recorded
elsewhere. For instance, his sole authority for the adjective ‘fermental’ (‘Having
the power to cause fermentation’) is Browne. He quotes from Pseudodoxia, II, 7:

Cucumbers, being waterish, fill the veins with crude and windy
serosities, that contain little salt or spirit, and debilitate the vital
acidity and fermental faculty of the stomach.

No such indictment of the vegetable is to be found under the word ‘cucumber’
itself; the first illustration is a substantial excerpt from Miller’s Gardener’s
Dictionary – much reduced for the fourth edition – and the second a couplet from
Dryden. But under ‘elaterium’ there appears a comparably hostile description of
the properties of cucumbers, taken from an unspecified source among the
writings of the populist medic John Hill, whom Johnson apparently regarded as a
‘very curious observer’.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, in the Life of Johnson, Boswell records
Johnson’s remark – perhaps made with Browne in mind – that

\begin{quote}
It has been a common saying of physicians in England, that ‘a
cucumber should be well sliced, and dressed with pepper and
vinegar, and then thrown out, as good for nothing’.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} See Wiltshire, Samuel Johnson in the Medical World, 60; 251, n. 163. In Rambler 199
Johnson, in the guise of ‘Hermeticus’, writes, perhaps not entirely seriously, of ‘the wonders
every day produced by the pokers of magnetism and the wheels of electricity’, and goes on to
mention ‘those qualities of magnetism which may be applied to the accommodation and
happiness of common life’ (see Yale, V, 271). In the year Johnson died, Franz Anton Mesmer
published a ‘Catechism of Animal Magnetism’, and Mesmer later launched the Society of
Universal Harmony to promote the healing properties of magnetism. See Gloria Flaherty, ‘The
Non-Normal Sciences: Survivals of Renaissance Thought in the Eighteenth Century’, in Fox,
Porter, and Wokler (eds), Inventing Human Science, 278-9.

\textsuperscript{36} Life, II, 39. The quotation is probably from Hill’s History of the Materia Medica (1751).

\textsuperscript{37} Life, V, 289.
There is no indication of which ‘physicians’ Johnson is thinking of, but he appears to be in agreement with Browne on this point. This is confirmed in an episode recorded by Boswell, who retails a conversation in which Goldsmith described Gray’s odes as ‘forced plants, raised in a hot-bed’ and then remarked that ‘they are but cucumbers after all’. Boswell continues:

A gentleman present ... unluckily said, ‘Had they been literally cucumbers, they had been better things than Odes.’ — ‘Yes, Sir, (said Johnson,) for a hog.’

Though the animosity towards cucumbers is scarcely of philosophic significance, it reveals a kind of personal sympathy between Johnson and Browne.

The medical quotations in the Dictionary refer with striking frequency to ill health and its remedies. The morbidity apparent here recurs in the large number of illustrative quotations concerned with age and death. Johnson several times quotes Browne on these subjects, and the selected passages frequently chime with his own thinking. Many of Johnson’s numerous remarks about death are recorded by Boswell; when he asked Johnson if the fear of death was ‘natural to man’ he was told that ‘the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it’. The Dictionary abounds with morbid sentiments of just this kind. Eugene Thomas suggests that Johnson’s gloomy mood during the compilation of the Dictionary – especially during 1749 – led him to read Samuel Garth and extract quotations from his work. In Rambler 78, Johnson opined that ‘The great incentive to virtue is the reflection that we must die’, and Rambler 17 is

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39 Life, II, 93.
captioned ‘The frequent contemplation of death necessary to moderate the passions’. 41 These Rambler essays were being written at the very same time as Johnson was compiling the Dictionary (Rambler 17, for instance, is dated 15 May 1750), and the concerns they manifest are inevitably influenced by the reading Johnson performed as he assembled materials for quotation. One of the texts he often cites in the Dictionary is Jeremy Taylor’s The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying (1651). Two other books addressing this subject from which Johnson quotes are William Wake’s Preparation for Death (1687) and John Graunt’s Natural and Political Observations Mentioned in a Following Index, and Made upon the Bills of Mortality (1662).

The quotations Johnson extracts from these last two works are diverse in character, but, in keeping with much of the Dictionary’s content, their comments on mortality are often also comments on morality. The prospect of death sharpens the senses and impels human conduct to better ends; in Rambler 78 he suggests that ‘Every instance of death may ... quicken our vigilance’.42 There are 102 quotations from Wake in both the first and fourth editions, and 109 from Graunt in the first edition (110 in the fourth). Wake’s work takes the form of a letter to a young and sickly female correspondent, whom he seeks to reassure regarding her imminent death. In the Dictionary it furnishes such snippets of wisdom as ‘Never despair of God’s blessings here, or of his reward hereafter; but go on as you have begun’ and ‘Numbers engage their lives and labours, to heap together a little dirt, that shall bury them in the end’. When we die, he

41 Yale, IV, 50.
42 Ibid., 48.
assures us, ‘Our bodies shall be changed into *incorruptible* and immortal substances, our souls be entertained with the most ravishing objects, and both continue happy throughout all eternity’. Graunt’s more closely historical work provides fewer extracts of this colour, but does offer illustrations under such headwords as ‘sickliness’ and ‘rickets’. Among the passages Johnson quotes are the following: ‘The law ought to be strict against *fornications* and adulteries; for, if there were universal liberty, the increase of mankind would be but like that of foxes at best’; ‘Men, being more *intemperate* than women, die as much by reason of their vices, as women do by the infirmity of their sex’; ‘The fumes, steams, and stenches of London, do so *medicate* and impregnate the air about it, that it becomes capable of little more’; ‘Christian religion, prohibiting *polygamy*, is more agreeable to the law of nature, that is, the law of God, than mahometism that allows it’; ‘There is pleasure in doing something new, though never so little, without pestering the world with *voluminous* transcriptions’.

Browne’s quotations on the subject of mortality are less immediate in their purpose than those of Wake and Graunt. Unlike Graunt he does not describe closely the physical process of death; unlike Wake he does not provide exact advice on dealing with the prospect of it. Nevertheless, he is acutely aware of the way death informs life, and of the difficulties people experience in reconciling themselves to death or preparing for it. Under ‘decrement’ Johnson quotes from a

4 Other quotations include the following: ‘There is nothing in the world more generally dreaded, and yet less to be feared, than death: *indeed*, for those unhappy men whose hopes terminate in this life, no wonder if the prospect of another seems terrible and amazing’; ‘Those who have most dread of death, must in a little time be content to *encounter* with it, whether they will or no.’
chapter of *Pseudodoxia* entitled ‘Of some computation of dayes and deductions of one part of the year unto another’:  

Upon the tropick, and first descension from our solstice, we are scarce sensible of declination; but declining farther, our decrement accelerates: we set apace, and in our last days precipitate into our graves.

The image here is of a fatal inattention to the imminence of death; incapable of picking up on the early signs of their mortality, men are surprised by their eventual decline. Johnson fell victim to no such inattention. The dial-plate of his watch was engraved with a Greek motto from the Book of Isaiah, which translates as ‘Night cometh’; images of decline and the approach of night abound in his writings on life and living. DeMaria suggests that Johnson may have been influenced by Browne in his decision, while working on the *Dictionary* in 1749, to alter a line in ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’ from ‘And restless enterprise impels to death’ to ‘And restless fire precipitates to death’. He observes that

As there is in Browne’s language, there is also a Johnsonian ring to some of the many ironic little stories in the *Dictionary* that turn on someone’s failure to remember the inevitability of death. He cites an illustrative quotation drawn from Bacon, which, like many quotations in the *Dictionary*, is almost a story in itself:

One was saying that his great grandfather, and grandfather, and father died at sea: said another, that heard him, an’ I were as you, I would never come at sea. Why, saith he, where did your great grandfather, and grandfather, and father die? He answered, where but in their beds? He answered, an’ I were as you, I would never come in bed.

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44 See *Life*, II, 57. The watch, apparently purchased in 1768, may well have been the first that Johnson owned.

The story pokes fun at the superstitious behaviour resulting from man’s fear of his mortality, and suggests the folly of our thinking that we control our fates. Furthermore, it reflects Johnson’s habit of including quotations that in their scope far exceed what is needed merely to give a sense of words’ appropriate uses. Browne highlights the neurotic behaviour engendered by deathly thoughts:

In vain do they scruple to approach the dead, who livingly are cadaverous, or fear any outward pollution, whose temper pollutes themselves.\(^{46}\)

The risible yet also pathetic behaviour of the elderly is suggested under ‘to commend’, when Johnson quotes Browne’s claim that

Old men do most exceed in this point of folly, commending the days of their youth they scarce remembered, at least well understood not.\(^{47}\)

Again, a few words of the original have been omitted – in this case, Browne’s reference to ‘old men’ as those ‘from whom wee should expect the greatest example of wisdome’ (\(PE\), I, 32-3). Johnson’s cutting these words makes the quotation more pointed and satirical. He is tailoring Browne’s words to suit his own ends, but the chosen quotations, even in their original form, indicate the sympathy between the two men on this subject.

The one defence against the toothless follies of senescence is religious faith, and, as we should expect, many of the quotations from Browne that appear in the \textit{Dictionary} enshrine religious truths. Twice Johnson quotes the statement

\(^{46}\) The quotation appears in a slightly different (and less accurate) form under ‘cadaverous’: ‘In vain do they scruple to approach the dead, who livingly are cadaverous, for fear of any outward pollution whose temper pollutes themselves.’

\(^{47}\) Under another sense of this verb Johnson quotes Sir Matthew Hale’s precept that ‘Among the objects of knowledge, two especially commend themselves to our contemplation; the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves.’
that ‘The habit of faith in divinity is an argument of things unseen, and a stable
assent unto things inevident, upon authority of the divine revealer’. Browne is
emphasizing that Christianity requires of its adherents a leap of faith, and at the
same time he stresses that there is more to existence than that which merely
appeals to the senses. In both the first and fourth editions there are five
quotations – under ‘concealable’, ‘confutable’, ‘deludable’, ‘to obscure’ and
‘omnisciency’ – that make mention of divine omniscience and its inescapability.
Browne supplies references to ‘the omnisciency of God, whereunto there is
nothing concealable’, and to his ‘omnisciency and essential ubiquity’ (under ‘to
obscure’). All these illustrations are taken from Pseudodoxia, I, 2, and three of
them come from a single paragraph concerning the mendacity of Cain. This book
of Pseudodoxia provides an average of nearly eight quotations per page. There
are three separate appearances (the fullest under ‘perspicacity’) for this extract:

He that laid the foundation of the earth cannot be excluded the
secrecy of the mountains; nor can there any thing escape the
perspicacity of those eyes, which were before light, and in whose
opticks there is no opacity.

From Browne’s discussion of the Flood and the Tower of Babel in Book VII,
Chapter 6, Johnson chooses the following parenthetical remark:

They could not be ignorant of the promise of God never to drown
the world, and the rainbow before their eyes to put them in mind
of it.

The relationship between man and God’s purpose is the subject of this quotation
from Pseudodoxia, VII, 10: ‘The inconcealable imperfections of ourselves will
hourly prompt us our corruption, and loudly tell us we are sons of earth.’ From
Pseudodoxia, I, 10, Johnson quotes:
Although they had divers stiles for God, yet under many appellations they acknowledged one divinity; rather conceiving thereby the evidence or acts of his power in several ways than a \textit{multiplication} of essence, or real distractions of unity in any one.

This comes shortly after Browne's important statement -- quoted by Johnson under 'access' -- that 'unity is the inseparable and essential attribute of Deity' \cite{I, 60}. It is a doctrinal point repeatedly made in the \textit{Dictionary}, nowhere better than in the following quotation from Hooker:

\begin{quote}
The unity of that visible body and church of Christ, consisteth in that \textit{uniformity} which all the several persons thereunto belonging have, by reason of that one Lord, whose servants they all profess themselves; that one faith which they all acknowledge; that one baptism wherewith they are all initiated.
\end{quote}

Johnson's defence of Browne's faith in the \textit{Life of Browne} has already been discussed, but it is necessary to remember that it was written after the \textit{Dictionary} had been completed. Here in the \textit{Dictionary}, even before mounting that defence of Browne's religious beliefs, Johnson is citing Browne as an authority on matters of doctrine and religious practice. In emphasizing aspects of his religious orthodoxy, and in aligning him with a theologian such as Hooker, he illustrates Browne's good faith. Having enlisted him in order to underscore moral and doctrinal points, Johnson later finds, when he tackles the job of writing Browne's life, that he must assert the unimpeachably correct religious values of his subject. He cannot have forgotten the importance he attached to Browne's theological dicta; in the light of this, it becomes imperative to defend him.

In addition to suggesting the religious underpinnings of Browne's work in the sphere of natural philosophy, Johnson records its practical basis: one of the more common subjects of the extracts from \textit{Pseudodoxia} is experiment. Browne

271
provides the sole illustrative quotation under ‘empirically’ (in the sense ‘experimentally; according to experience’), but his practice is differentiated from another kind of ‘empiricism’, which Johnson abhors. The noun ‘empiric’ is defined not with a gloss of Johnson’s devising, but with four quotations, from Quincy, Hooker, Browne and Swift (a fifth, from Dryden, being added in the fourth edition). The quotation from Quincy makes it clear that being labelled an ‘empiric’ is undesirable; the word denotes

A trier or experimenter; such persons as have no true education in, or knowledge of physical practice, but venture upon hearsay and observation only.

The Browne quotation – from *Pseudodoxia*, II, 7 – is as follows:

That every plant might receive a name, according unto the diseases it cureth, was the wish of Paracelsus; a way more likely to multiply *empiricks* than herbalists (*PE*, I, 156).

Browne’s methodology may be empirical, but being an ‘empiric’ is an entirely different matter. His reference to Paracelsus marks his defence of the wisdom born of experience against the assaults of fanciful theorists. Paracelsus is bracketed with his student Helmont in the notes to *Christian Morals*, where they are branded ‘Wild and enthusiastick authors of romantick chymstry’ (*CM*, 122, n. a). There are at least a dozen mentions of Paracelsus in the *Dictionary*, and at least a third of these are disparaging – as, for instance, in the entry under ‘bombast’, in which Johnson refers to his ‘unintelligible language’. From

48 Johnson’s second definition of ‘empirically’ is ‘without rational ground; charlatanically; in the manner of quacks’. Taken alongside his definition of ‘empiricism’ as ‘quackery’, this suggests that he may have tended to associate ‘empiricism’ either with the solipsism of early amateurs, or with the unpalatable philosophies of Berkeley and Hume.

49 It is not uncommon for Johnson to offer no definition of his own, but when this is the case he confers additional authority on the writers he quotes in evidence.
Browne, Johnson quotes the following passage to illustrate the headword ‘venial’:

More *veniable* [sic] is a dependence upon potable gold, whereof Paracelsus, who died himself at forty-seven, gloried that he could make others men immortal.

Johnson and Browne are united in their criticism of Paracelsus. Johnson’s criticism of him may also be seen in his *Life of Boerhaave*, where he writes of

The follies and weaknesses of the jargon introduced by Paracelsus, Helmont, and other chymical enthusiasts, who have obtruded upon the world the most airy dreams, and, instead of enlightening their readers with explications of nature, have darkened the plainest appearances, and bewildered mankind in error and obscurity. ⁵⁰

Johnson identifies the sort of experimental fancy practised by Paracelsus as being not only insubstantial, but also unethical. It cheats its audience, and its linguistic misadventures prevent enlightenment.

In numerous instances, Johnson reproduces Browne’s much more stable and morally credible adherence to the lessons of experience. Thus we find Browne referring to ‘the definitive *confirmator*, and test of things uncertain, the sense of man’. Similarly, he is the sole authority for the adjective ‘approvable’, the illustration of which is the statement that ‘The solid reason, or confirmed experience, of any men, is very *approvable* in what profession soever’. When Browne discusses the Nile and its floods, he proposes that its causes are ‘best *resolvable* from observations made in the countries themselves, the parts through which they pass’. Under ‘coral’ there appears another of the Dictionary’s many self-contained anecdotes – in this case a memorial to the human craving for

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ocular testimony. In both the first and fourth editions, there are in all seventeen illustrative quotations from Browne that refer specifically to the importance of experiment as a means of testing beliefs. The relevant words are 'admittance', 'controvertible', 'coralloidal', 'effectible', 'experimental', 'to go', 'to impose', 'to indurate', 'magnality', 'to overpoise', 'parallelogram', 'to postulate', 'satisfactorily', 'stamp', 'succedaneous', 'to take', and 'to waft'. There are, of course, numerous illustrations in the Dictionary that allude to this subject, but Browne appears to account for about ten per cent of them.

Browne's interest in experiments often amounts to no more than an instructive hobby. This is reflected, for example, in the extract quoted under 'icicle':

If distilled vinegar or aqua-fortis be poured into the powder of loadstone, the subsiding powder, dried, retains some magnetical virtue; but if the menstruum be evaporated to a consistence, and afterwards doth shoot into icicles, or crystals, the loadstone hath no power upon them.

This is a long quotation, and it is not reduced in size for the fourth edition. The subject is somewhat reminiscent of Johnson's domestic experiments. But other quotations drawn from Browne suggest practices that are more determinedly adventurous. Under 'cramp' Johnson quotes the following:

Hares, said to live on hemlock, do not make good the tradition; and he that observes what vertigoes, cramps, and convulsions follow thereon, in these animals, will be of our belief.

Under 'urinal' Johnson quotes from Book VII of Pseudodoxia a passage which suggests, as I observed in Chapter Three, the strangeness of some of the phenomena Browne reports having observed. He makes it known that 'A candle
out of a musket will pierce through an inch board, or an urinal force a nail through a plank’. Here the value placed on observation seems to precede the value of the thing observed. But for Browne, there is no such thing as superfluous knowledge. Herein lies a difference between Browne’s knowledge-gathering and post-Newtonian empiricism; where in Browne’s age the antiquarian and the natural philosopher could be one and the same, by Johnson’s the distinction was sharply drawn. Yet Johnson, despite the influence of Newton, has some of Browne’s enthusiasm for the gratuitous and the obscure. It is an enthusiasm licensed by the conviction that important knowledge can often be arrived at by unlikely routes. In embracing this view, Johnson espouses Browne’s proposal in *Christian Morals* that the advancement of learning should embrace any and every kind of information: ‘Let thy studies be free as thy thoughts and contemplations’ (*CM*, 119). Browne was a physician, but he felt able to turn his hand to veterinary and chemical science, as we can see from the observations recorded in entries such as those for ‘sinuous’, ‘ponderosity’ and ‘supernatation’. In the first of these cases Johnson quotes Browne’s statement that

In the dissection of horses, in the concave or sinuous part of the liver, whereat the gall is usually seated in quadrupeds, I discover an hollow, long, and membranous substance.

Under the second and third of these words appears the following:

Bodies are differenced by a supernatation, as floating on a water; for chrystal will sink in water, as carrying in its own bulk a greater ponderosity than the space of any water it doth occupy; and will therefore only swim in molten metal and quicksilver.
Elsewhere, Johnson cites Browne’s observation that ‘Turkeys take down stones’, based on his ‘having found in the gizzard of one no less than seven hundred’.

These quotations reflect Browne’s resistance to the notion that he should confine himself within a narrow channel of specialism. In reproducing them, Johnson perhaps unintentionally sanctions the wide reach of Browne’s investigations, though it may be that he is simply illustrating their quaintness.

Johnson certainly records Browne’s investigative work in all its oddity.

The illustration provided under ‘kitten’ reflects one of the characteristic quirks of *Pseudodoxia*, which is Browne’s apparent refusal to balk at what seem to the modern reader the most shockingly brutal experiments. Johnson quotes, accurately though not precisely, from *Pseudodoxia*, IV, 6: ‘That a mare will sooner drown than an horse is not experienced, nor is the same observed in the drowning of whelps and kittens.’ We are clearly to understand that Browne has drowned whelps and kittens *himself*, and in selecting this quotation Johnson – no matter whether it is deliberate or not – reproduces one of the more arresting and disquieting features of Browne’s amateurism, namely his unflinching and thoroughly matter-of-fact approach to testing others’ claims. We see this same ruthlessness in the extract quoted by Johnson under ‘to weigh’, in which Browne describes how

> Exactly weighing and strangling a chicken in the scale, upon an immediate ponderation, we could discover no difference in weight; but suffering it to lie eight or ten hours, until it grew perfectly cold, it *weighed* most sensibly lighter.

Sometimes, moreover, Browne appears to take wilful risks in order to overturn misconception, as is suggested in the excerpt Johnson quotes under the verb ‘to
unteach': ‘That elder berries are poison, as we are taught by tradition, experience will *unteach* us.’

The episode involving the strangled chicken testifies to Browne’s lack of squeamishness. He is not afraid to perform experiments from which other practitioners might recoil. The quotation Johnson uses under ‘salamander’ illustrates this:

> Whereas it is commonly said that a *salamander* extinguisheth fire, we have found by experience, that on hot coals it dieth immediately.

This quotation is placed after extracts from Bacon and Glanvill in which exactly the opposite is suggested – namely that the salamander lives in fire. Furthermore, the quotation from Browne is followed by one from Addison, in which the author’s reference to the creature demonstrates that the misconception survived into the eighteenth century, Browne’s rebuttal notwithstanding. Here, then, we see three important qualities of Browne’s thought: his interest in dismantling popular myths, his emphasis on experiment as a means of discovering truth, and the almost callous attitude he has to his experimental practice, which he depicts in bald terms. Moreover, we witness some of the characteristic mannerisms of Johnson’s lexicography; for he not only provides a miniature history of the use of a word, but also furnishes a short history of beliefs, and fixes on a key attribute of one of his chosen authors. He could easily have provided a briefer yet equally satisfactory definition and illustration of the word, but he uses the entry as an

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51 Quotations from Browne regarding salamanders also appear under ‘incremable’, ‘mucous’ and ‘septical’.

277
opportunity to expand the scope of his work beyond the duties of lexicography and into the realm of the encyclopaedia.

If the illustrations under ‘salamander’, ‘sinuous’ and ‘kitten’ show Browne’s experimental practice at its most bold, other extracts chosen from *Pseudodoxia* demonstrates that certain limits remain. From the same paragraph that provides the quotation used for ‘kitten’, Johnson quotes – again with sufficient accuracy, though not complete precision – the following:

> Whether cripples who have lost their thighs will float; their lungs being able to waift up their bodies, which are in others over-poised by the hinder legs; we have not made experiment.

In other words, Browne was not prepared to go quite so far as to experiment on a cripple. When he cites passages of this kind, Johnson furnishes examples of Browne at his most esoteric, yet there are occasions when he represents Browne’s less outlandish enquiries. Under ‘to refect’ (‘To refresh; to restore after hunger or fatigue’), there is the observation that

> A man in the morning is lighter in the scale, because in sleep some pounds have perspired; and is also lighter unto himself, because he is refected.⁵²

Johnson records Browne’s attention to other people’s dependence on demonstration. This is discernible in the quotation he uses under ‘rectangle’:

> If all Athens should decree, that in *rectangle* triangles the square, which is made of the side that subtendeth the right angle, is equal to the squares which are made of the sides containing the right angle, geometricians would not receive satisfaction without demonstration.

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⁵² This is reminiscent of Johnson’s own investigations into weight loss resulting from evaporation, discussed in Chapter Two.
The same passage is used, in abbreviated and marginally different form, in another entry: ‘Although there be a certain truth, geometricians would not receive satisfaction without demonstration thereof.’ Browne is underlining the superiority of demonstration to authority. It does not matter to him what the Athenians or any other scholarly group have to say, unless their claims are supported by observation. In quoting this passage, Johnson highlights Browne’s almost obstinate empiricism, yet also implies that Browne is not alone in being so insistent on the testimony of his own eyes.

When Browne finds other people’s work unsatisfactory, it is often on account of their insufficiency of evidence. He will go to great lengths to obtain evidence himself. He worries that the positive achievements of philosophy and the quest for knowledge are counterbalanced, or at least undermined, by bogus philosophers and disseminators of untruth. Both Browne and Johnson decry bad authors and false authorities, and they make a connection between the two. The ethics of writing is a subject with which they are intimately concerned. The Dictionary abounds with quotations relating to authors, authorship, and the machinery and politics of literary production and criticism. A number of these – as, for instance, under ‘bum’, ‘current’, and ‘to pester’ – disparage authors collectively, characterizing them as a breed of unreliable hacks. The quotations from Browne on this subject are of a more subtle nature. Under ‘discourser’, Johnson quotes from Browne a reference to ‘philologers and critical discoursers, who look beyond the obvious exteriors of things’; the words come from Browne’s address ‘To the Reader’, and he is arguing the need for his own, rather
different ‘narrower explorations’. In this introductory section he is attempting to make common cause with other kinds of thinker – with ‘our brothers in Physicke’ and ‘those honoured Worthies, who endeavour the advancement of Learning’ (PE, I, 4). But he is crucially aware of those against whom he must take a stand. Under ‘diviner’ (‘One that professes divination, or the art of revealing occult things by supernatural means’) Johnson reproduces from Book VII, Chapter 12, this passage:

Expelled his oracles, and common temples of delusion, the devil runs into corners, exercising meaner trumperies, and acting his deceits in witches, magicians, diviners, and such inferior seducers.

Johnson’s participation in Browne’s condemnation of the sinister seductions effected by the devil is reflected in his alteration of Browne’s ‘solemne Temples of delusion’ into the altogether more damning ‘common temples’.53 Bad practices are widely disseminated; the inaccuracies of authors, scholars and self-professed divines seduce unwary, untutored, inexperienced minds.

For Browne, the art of misinformation is a vicious one, too often practised by his fellow authors. Under ‘to drive’ Johnson quotes his remark that ‘Our first apprehensions are instructed in authors, which drive at these as highest elegancies which are but the frigidities of wit.’ Browne is suggesting that wit can be attractive, but that it is ultimately without substance. The extract appears again under ‘frigidity’ and ‘ingenuity’. The definition of ‘frigidity’ in support of which it is offered is ‘Dulness; want of intellectual fire’. This may seem surprising, since in Rambler 22 Johnson sets ‘wit’ and ‘dulness’ up as opposites, while in Rambler 179 he argues that ‘dulness’ may ‘give disgust’ when it aspires

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53 See PE, I, 572 for Browne’s version.
to 'assume the dignity of knowledge, or ape the sprightliness of wit'\textsuperscript{54} But 'wit' was of course a word which was to become, in the \textit{Life of Cowley}, highly charged.\textsuperscript{55} When Johnson quotes Browne sniping at 'the frigidities of wit', he is enlisting him as an ally in an attack on writing devoid of affect. In the entry for 'wit' itself Johnson quotes Locke's distinction between wit and judgement:

\begin{quote}
Wit lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance, or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures in the fancy. Judgment, on the contrary, lies in separating carefully one from another, ideas, wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude.
\end{quote}

This is an eighteenth-century commonplace, transplanted from Locke into the \textit{Spectator} and \textit{Tristram Shandy}. Writing that bristles with wit is writing that lacks judgement, and this, in the estimate of both Johnson and Browne, is dangerously widespread. In the \textit{Life of Swift}, Johnson is critical of \textit{The Tale of a Tub}; he considers the work a 'wild' one and suggests that 'Wit can stand its ground against Truth only a little while'.\textsuperscript{56} In \textit{Rambler} 56 Johnson refers to 'the dulness of the writing generation'.\textsuperscript{57} He has in mind a species of writing which is criticized by implication in the quotation from South that appears under 'dulness': 'Nor is the dulness of the scholar to extinguish, but rather to inflame the charity of the teacher'. 'Dulness' is an attribute of scholarly, pedantic writing; it neither educates nor informs.

It is appropriate, then, that Browne is quoted under 'pedantry' itself, disparaging pedants. He refers to 'a practice that savours much of pedantry; a

\textsuperscript{54} See Yale, III, 122; Yale, V, 177.
\textsuperscript{55} Lives, I, 20.
\textsuperscript{56} Lives, III, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{57} Yale, III, 304.
reserve of puerility we have not shaken off from school'; the practice in question involves using the authority of writers such as Plato and Cicero to lend 'triviall verities' the status of 'elegancies'. The quotation comes from a chapter in which Browne is ostensibly concerned with 'adherence unto Antiquity'. In reality, it is a chapter in which he serves up a potent critique of bad writing. He discusses the tedious inclination to

urge authorities, in points that need not, and introduce the testimony of ancient writers, to confirm things evidently believed, and whereto no reasonable hearer but would assent without them (PE, I, 37-8).

Johnson's own view of pedantry at the time he was compiling the Dictionary can be found in Rambler 173 (12 November 1751), where he equates it 'with 'the superciliousness of learning', 'the unseasonable ostentation of learning', and 'talk[ing] intentionally in a manner above the comprehension of those whom we address'. In the Dictionary, under 'sciolist' ('one who knows many things superficially'), he quotes Browne's coeval, Joseph Glanvill:

'Twas the vain idolizing of authors which gave birth to that silly vanity of impertinent citations; these ridiculous fooleries signify nothing ... but the pedantry of the affected sciolists.

Browne and Glanvill are being enlisted as powerful weapons in the war against the pedants, and their seventeenth-century scholarly values are being contrasted both with the non-scholarly values of their less disciplined contemporaries and with the more dilettantish practices detected by Johnson among his peers.

Browne deals sharply with writers' abuses of their authority. Johnson uses him to illustrate 'plagiary' — which is defined as 'the crime of literary theft',

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58 Yale, V, 151, 153.
and described as 'not used'. The word has a special significance where Browne is concerned, since Religio Medici was the victim of illicit publication. Browne may have engineered this, but he professed himself innocent. The quotation used by Johnson suggests a matter-of-fact approach by Browne, rather than a vigorously defensive one: ‘Plagiary had not its nativity with printing, but began when the paucity of books scarce wanted the invention.’ The quotation appears again under ‘transcription’, though in a fuller and somewhat different form:

The ancients were but men; the practice of transcription in our days was no monster in their’s: plagiary had not its nativity with printing, but began in times when thefts were difficult.

Johnson’s own views on plagiarism are articulated in Rambler 143 (30 July 1751) and Adventurer 95 (2 October 1753); his discussion of the subject is geared more to dismissing erroneous claims of plagiarism than to sniffing out further examples. The vanity of authors and the redundancy of their works are suggested when Johnson cites Browne’s scathing remark that

Authors presumably writing by common places, wherein, for many years, promiscuously amassing all that make for their subject, break forth at last into useless rhapsodies.

This is a misquotation, since Browne in fact writes ‘trite and fruitlesse Rhapsodies’ (PE, I, 53). It seems plausible that Johnson was quoting from memory here; evidence to suggest that he quoted from memory can be found in the many slight inaccuracies that appear in quotations from Shakespeare, Pope, the Bible and other favourite sources. Regardless, though, it is a comment that chimes with Johnson’s perception of contemporary writing as ‘an epidemical
conspiracy for the waste of paper'.\(^5^9\) DeMaria comments that the *Dictionary* ‘expresses an attitude toward the profession of writing that developed in the furious competitiveness of the Grub Street wars’. The vituperation it rains on bad authors and their feeble productions ‘stems from an eagerness to trim the ranks and raise the dignity of professional writing’. He continues:

> To guard against the prolific vacuity and the consequent degradation of all books, the *Dictionary* reminds writers that by publishing they necessarily expose themselves to harsh and unrelenting criticism.\(^6^0\)

The position is declared by Johnson in *Rambler* 93: ‘He that writes may be considered as a kind of general challenger, whom every one has a right to attack.’\(^6^1\) When he quotes Browne on the subject of authors and authorship, he implicitly admonishes the publishing industry, which raises bad writers to eminence and encourages the literary efforts of those unequipped and unready to withstand criticism.

This scepticism about the motives and capabilities of writers is evident in an extract Johnson twice quotes, in which Browne asserts that

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\(^5^9\) Yale, II, 458. Here, in *Rambler* 115 (11 December 1753), Johnson offers what is perhaps his most swingeing critique of Grub Street culture. He impugns the ‘universal eagerness of writing’, suggesting that its large extent would convey to any observer the (incorrect) impression that ‘literature was now blessed with patronage far transcending the candour or munificence of the Augustan age’, that ‘the road to greatness was open to none but authors’, and that ‘by writing alone riches and honour ... [may] be obtained’. He goes on to lament that ‘there is not one I can recollect at present, who professes the least regard for the votaries of science... [or] invites the addresses of learned men’, and that no author ‘seems to hope for reputation from any pen but his own’. Later (p. 459) he describes the fixation with authorship as an ‘intellectual malady’, and he suggests that ‘he who undertakes to write on questions which he has never studied’ runs the risk that ‘he shall shock the learned ear with barbarisms, and contribute, wherever his work shall be received, to the deprivation of taste and the corruption language’ (pp. 460-1).


\(^6^1\) Yale, IV, 133-4.
Authors are suspicious, nor greedily to be swallowed, who pretend to deliver antipathies, sympathies, and the occult abstrusities of things.

The authors Browne has in mind include ‘Alexis Pedimontanus, Antonius Mizaldus, [and] Trinum Magicum’ (PE, I, 52). Robin Robbins explains that Browne is thinking of Ruscelli’s 1558 Secretes of Alexis of Piemont Containing Remedies against Diseases, the sixteenth-century astrological writer Mizaldus, and a collection of tracts edited by ‘Caesar Longinus’, relating “secrets” such as weapon-salve, alchemy, … and other mysteries (PE, II, 690). In dismissing these authors and their works, Browne is aligning Pseudodoxia with a more philosophically exacting tradition. We should note, moreover, that Pseudodoxia, the work Johnson quotes so often, marks a break on Browne’s part with what Jonathan Post aptly describes as ‘the world of sympathetic insinuations, signatures, chiromancy, and astrology so valued in Religio’. Browne is divorcing himself from those writers whose works abound with alluring but extravagant claims.

Johnson’s sole illustrative quotation under ‘typography’ (‘emblematical, figurative, or hieroglyphical representation’) continues this attention to Browne’s pronouncements on literary culture. Browne complains that ‘Those diminutive and pamphlet treatises daily published amongst us, are pieces containing rather typography than verity’. The sentence is broadly satirical, and reflects Browne’s attitude to the ephemeral publications of charlatans. This attitude is one that Browne and Johnson share, and it would have interested Johnson that Browne, writing a century earlier, felt so keenly the uselessness of works of a kind with

62 Post, Sir Thomas Browne, 34.
which he, operating in a literary marketplace overwhelmed with pamphlets and incredible treatises, was all too well acquainted. Johnson defines ‘pamphlet’ as ‘a small book, properly a book sold unbound, and only stitched’. His general opinion of pamphlets is perhaps reflected in his refusal to accept the word ‘derange’ as English, for when it was suggested to him that the word had been seen in a book, he answered that this was ‘Not in a bound book’. Pamphlets and obscurantist or fantastical pseudo-scientific tracts are not sources of ‘verity’.

Browne and Johnson, in resisting and even condemning works of this kind, argue the importance of a less ephemeral approach to writing. Johnson’s publications may not always have been the fruit of long consideration, but both men privilege works that proceed from effort (like the Dictionary and Pseudodoxia) rather than prospects of short-term glory.

The bad writer is morally and intellectually dangerous. So is the bad physician, who is physically dangerous to boot. Unsurprisingly, then, Browne’s doubts about false practitioners extend to medicine. One of his recurring themes is the prevalence of malpractice, and he repeatedly emphasizes the need to be vigilant against the bogus claims of deceivers. Johnson three times quotes the following extract from Pseudodoxia, I, 3:

Saltimbancoes, quacksalvers, and charlatans deceive the vulgar in the lower degrees; were Aesop alive, the piazza and the pont neuf could speak their fallacies.

63 Life, III, 319, n. 1. However, he elsewhere referred to the Gentleman’s Magazine, for which he can be assumed to have had some reverence, as ‘a periodical pamphlet’ (Life, I, 112, n. 1).
64 Robbins (PE, II, 658) suggests that Browne’s reference here may owe something to the fact that ‘a quack set himself up in the centre of … [Oxford] in 1626-7, while Browne was still at Pembroke. While reading medicine at Padua, he may have seen those in Venice, and those in Paris while on his way to Leiden’. 286
In the *Life of Garth* Johnson quotes his subject's complaint of 'the mischief done by quacks', and notes with approval that the poet's best-known work, *The Dispensary*, 'was on the side of ... regular learning against licentious usurpation of medical authority'. The subject of quacks was indeed a highly charged one at the time Johnson was compiling the *Dictionary*; in 1748, for instance, there was published an anonymous print entitled *Quackery Unmasked. Or, Empiricism display'd*, and in the same year the *Gentleman's Magazine*, a publication which frequently reported medical superstitions, provided a (damning) list of quack medicines in common use. Browne, for all his eccentricities, is a trained physician; he and Johnson stand on the same side of this quarrel. He is quoted in similar vein under 'utility':

> Should we blindly obey the restraints of physicians and astrologers, we should confine the *utility* of physick unto a very few days.

Here his target is not deception, but superstition, which threatens to limit the effectiveness of medicine, if only by distracting patients from immediate treatment. Johnson quotes the following from *Pseudodoxia*, I, 3:

> As though there were a seminality in *urine*, or that, like the seed, it carried with it the idea of every part, they foolishly believe we can visibly behold therein the anatomy of every particle.

The 'they' of this sentence refers to 'physitions ([or] many at least that make profession thereof)'. It comes from a passage in which Browne is ridiculing the

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65 *Lives*, II, 60.
66 *Gentleman's Magazine* 18 (1748), 348-50. The subject is discussed fully in Roger A. Hambridge, 'Empiricism, or an Infatuation in Favour of Empiricism or Quackery': The Socio-economics of Eighteenth-Century Quackery (Los Angeles, California, 1982). The role of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in popularizing medicine is examined by Roy Porter in his article, 'Lay Medical Knowledge in the Eighteenth Century: The Evidence of the *Gentlemen's Magazine*', *Medical History* 29 (1985), 138-68.

287
credulous belief that ‘there is the book of fate ... in Urines’ (PE, I, 19). Here there is no suggestion of malice on the part of those who promote the erroneous belief, but there remains a clear impression of Browne’s frustration, audible in his exasperated ‘as though’ and his judgemental ‘foolishly’.

Even without the intervention of spurious authorities, people’s understanding can err. Johnson four times quotes the following:

Not attaining the true deuterescopy and second intention of the words, they are fain to omit their superconsequences, coherences, figures, or tropologies, and are not sometimes persuaded beyond their literalities.

Here, Browne’s ‘they’ refers to ‘the greater part of mankinde’, of whom he also remarks that ‘their apprehensions, are commonly confined unto the literall sense of the text’ – quoted by Johnson under ‘lecture’ (PE, I, 15-16). The ‘text’ Browne has in mind is ‘holy Scripture’. The seriousness with which Johnson takes Scripture is axiomatic; his annals are full of undertakings to study the Bible more assiduously, even though it appears that the Bible was his most frequent reading. A characteristically forceful quotation, added for the fourth edition under ‘primitive’, comes from Francis White, the Laudian author of a Treatise of the Sabbath Day (1635): ‘The scripture is of sovereign authority, and for itself worthy of all acceptation.’ This sovereign authority is susceptible to misunderstanding. Under ‘scavenger’ Johnson quotes South: ‘it is ... a labour of the mind ... to resolve difficult places of Scripture.’ And in the Life Boswell quotes Johnson’s assertion – made for the benefit of his Quaker sparring partner, Mary Knowles – that the New Testament is ‘the most difficult book in the world,
for which the study of a life is required’. Browne, in his ‘Observations upon
several plants mentioned in Scripture’, says much the same thing:

Though many ordinary Heads run smoothly over the Scripture,
yet I must acknowledge, it is one of the hardest Books I ever met
with.  

Browne is indirectly arguing the necessity of making available improved works
of interpretation. This position is one that the Dictionary is obliged to play up,
since it is itself a tool for repairing the misunderstanding of texts. The Bible is an
obvious example of a text that will be better understood if better resources for
grasping its language are available. For Johnson, as for Browne, this is not
merely a matter of convenience, but a theological necessity.

One aid to interpretation is a recognition of the interconnectedness of
disciplines. The word ‘encyclopedy’ (‘The circle of sciences; the round of
learning’) is illustrated in the first edition with quotations from Glanvill and
Arbuthnot. The extract from Glanvill is on the subject of ignorance and the
inevitability of reliance on works of reference: ‘Every science borrows from all
the rest, and we cannot attain any single one without the encyclopedy.’ For the
fourth edition Johnson adds, as the first illustration, a quotation from
Pseudodoxia’s address ‘To the Reader’:

In this encyclopaedia and round of knowledge, like the great
wheels of heaven, we must observe two circles, that while we are
daily carried about, and whirled on by the swing and rapt of the
one, we may maintain a natural and proper course in the sober
wheel of the other.

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67 Life, III, 298.
68 K, III, 3.
This comes from the opening paragraph of the work, and is quoted in full by
Johnson under ‘swing’, not only in the fourth edition, but also in the first. Johnson quotes Browne as writing ‘swing’: this is as the text appears in the third edition of 1658 (and those that followed), but in the second edition from which Johnson appears to have worked it is ‘swinge’, and in the 1646 edition the word appears as ‘swindge’. The quotation argues the need for structured learning; the mind’s inclination to digress from rational thought means that it is important to focus and organize its activities. All subjects are linked, and the ‘round of knowledge’ – epitomised in the encyclopaedic dictionary – guarantees the links.

But there are always tensions and dualities within the mind. Johnson quotes from Book VI, Chapter 10: ‘It is evident, in the general frame of nature, that things most manifest unto sense have proved obscure unto the understanding.’

It is not always possible to refer to written works in order to resolve these puzzles and misunderstandings. The Dictionary records the capacity of daily phenomena to be utterly baffling, and it is replete with examples of the diversity of human habits. ‘The web of our life is a mingled yarn,’ he quotes from All’s Well That Ends Well; the Dictionary testifies to the differences between cultures and professions, to life’s vicissitudes and variousness, to the wide disparities in the way people write and talk and think. In the Rambler Johnson explores this subject, attempting to distinguish general principles of human nature and at the same time determine what it is that makes mankind unique and remarkable. The Dictionary illustration of ‘sympathy’ gives an indication of Johnson’s view.

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69 The addition of the Browne quotation under ‘encyclopedy’ is thus an example of the phenomenon described in my previous chapter, whereby the first edition – its second volume especially – is a major source for new illustrations and terms in the fourth.
of Johnson’s chosen quotations comes from Robert South, who pronounces that ‘this noble quality ... makes men to be of one kind; for every man would be a distinct species to himself, were there no sympathy among individuals’. In the final number of the Idler Johnson reflects on death and observes that ‘We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole’. The Rambler essays emphasize what men have in common by emphasizing what differentiates them from each other, and Johnson’s generalizations are born of particular sources.

About sixty of the essays are presented as the thoughts of individuated fictional correspondents. Johnson is frequently concerned in these essays with the way people’s craving for public esteem – or at least for their own esteem – compromises their values and undermines their intelligence. He is concerned, like Browne, to get behind these vanities and self-delusions, these false projections of personality and travesties of thought.

Browne’s subjects in Pseudodoxia, though they are often esoteric and of personal rather than general interest, have their source in a comparable concern with human knowledge and the knowledge of humanity. The two authors share a curiosity about that which is distinctively human. Johnson quotes Browne’s observation that

The act of laughter, which is a sweet contraction of the muscles of the face, and a pleasant agitation of the vocal organs, is not merely voluntary, or totally within the jurisdiction of ourselves.

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70 Yale, II, 315.
71 For a wider discussion of this see the opening chapter of Philip Davis, In Mind of Johnson: A Study of Johnson the Rambler (London, 1989).
72 See DeMaria, The Life of Samuel Johnson, 149.
His own comments on laughter are to be found in, among other places, the *Life of Swift*, where he gives the flavour of the eighteenth-century satirist in remarking that ‘He stubbornly resisted any tendency to laughter’.  

73 Boswell, who consistently underestimates Johnson’s humour, none the less refers on several occasions to his laughter (calling it, for instance, ‘a kind of good humoured growl’, and quoting Tom Davies’s remark, ‘He laughs like a rhinoceros’), while Mrs Piozzi records that ‘Mr Johnson used to say “that the size of a man’s understanding might always be justly measured by his mirth”’.  

75 Johnson’s laughter and capacity for mirth, like Browne’s peculiar enjoyment of the strange and disquieting phenomena he describes, express an involuntary, cathartic, animal joy, provoked by the implacable perversity of human experience.

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Johnson’s *Dictionary* excels in the definition of natural phenomena. We see this clearly if we compare it with the contemporary *Lingua Britannica Reformata*: Or, a New English Dictionary (1749) compiled by Benjamin Martin, whom James Sledd and Gwin Kolb describe as ‘one of Johnson’s most notable predecessors’.  

76 In Martin’s dictionary ‘badger’ is defined as ‘The name of a wild beast’, ‘beaver’ as ‘an amphibious animal, like an otter’, ‘elephant’ as ‘the biggest of all beasts’, and ‘hare’ as ‘a well known animal’. To put this into

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73 *Lives*, III, 56.  
74 *Life*, II, 378.  
75 *JM*, I, 345.  
perspective, we may note that in Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (fifth edition, 1741), none of these animal names even commands an entry. By contrast, Johnson's entries for animals and plants are often startlingly full. Definitions of this kind are to be found under 'ambergris', 'armadillo', 'chameleon', 'crocodile', 'eagle', 'opium', 'seacow' and 'woodlouse'. Browne is one of the authors to whom Johnson turns for information about such phenomena of nature — in particular, the more extreme or curious ones.

A number of entries afford Johnson the opportunity to reproduce one of Browne's better-known anecdotes of popular misconception. Under 'badger' we receive a reminder of the erroneous belief that badgers have legs longer on one side than the other. Shortly after this, the adjective 'badger-legged' is defined by Johnson, with implicit reference to Browne, as 'Having legs of an unequal length, as the badger is supposed to have'. Similar misconceptions are highlighted in the quotations under 'basilisk' and 'beaver', 'hyena' and 'slowworm'. Twice we are referred to the belief that 'horses will knable at walls, and rats will gnaw iron'. A more oblique reference to a phenomenon of this kind appears under 'to eventerate'. In *Pseudodoxia*, III, 6, Browne noted the misconception that bears lick their offspring into shape:

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77 It is no coincidence that Browne is a touchstone for Jorge Luis Borges in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*. Borges refers to Browne in his chapters on the amphisbaena, the basilisk and the mandrake. See *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London, 1970), 24, 42, 45, 153.

78 Browne begins his chapter exploding this myth with the words 'That a Brock or Badger hath the legs of one side shorter then of the other, though an opinion perhaps not very ancient, is yet very generall' (*PE*, I, 176). Later in the chapter (p. 177) he refers to the norm whereby 'motion and station had bee performed by equall legs', and to the erroneous conceit of the badger's 'unequall organs'.

293
That a Bear brings forth her young informous and unshapen, which she fashioneth after by licking them over, is an opinion ... vulgar, and common with us at present (PE, I, 178).

Johnson’s entry under ‘to eventerate’ showcases Browne’s comprehensively empirical rebuttal of this: ‘In a bear, which the hunters eventerated, or opened, I beheld the young ones, with all their parts distinct.’ Here we have the quintessential Brownean explosion of a vulgar error by means of observation. Browne’s focus is essentially normative and myth-denying; as such, he can hardly be the key figure in helping Johnson conjure up the natural world. But his observations and enquiries are not confined to nature’s extremes. There is, for instance, no hint of nature’s eccentricity in Johnson’s illustration of the adjective ‘brunal’ with a nice quotation from Pseudodoxia, III, 10 concerning the seasons and the migration of birds: ‘About the brunal solstice, it hath been observed, even unto a proverb, that the sea is calm, and the winds do cease, till the young ones are excluded, and forsake their nests.’ The quotation calls to mind Johnson’s conversation with Goldsmith about birds’ migration and nesting habits, in which the two men argued over animal instincts.79

Johnson’s use of Browne as an authority on natural phenomena is not restricted to the animal kingdom. There are numerous quotations drawn from Browne on geological and mineralogical subjects, as well as information on plants. ‘Cuckoo-spittle’ is defined solely with a quotation from Browne:

\textit{Cuckoo-spittle}, or woodseare, is that spumous dew or exudation, or both, found upon plants, especially about the joints of lavender and rosemary; observable with us about the latter end of May.

Other entries relating to the plant kingdom that have definitions supported with illustrations from Browne include ‘arboreous’, ‘clove’, ‘glasswort’, ‘hyssop’, ‘nutmeg’, ‘spurge’ (‘a plant violently purgative’) and ‘tulip’. Browne is an authority for two of the Dictionary’s more obscure colour terms – ‘tawny’ and ‘jetty’ – and provides information on the phenomena of colour under ‘niveous’.

Furthermore, one of the strangest entries in the Dictionary occurs under ‘boramez’, of which Browne writes:

Much wonder is made of the boramez, that strange plant-animal or vegetable lamb of Tartary, which wolves delight to feed on, which hath the shape of a lamb, affordeth a bloody juice upon breaking, and liveth while the plants be consumed about it.

Johnson defines ‘boramez’ as ‘The Scythian lamb, generally known by the name of Agnus Scythicus’. One may reasonably wonder how ‘generally’ the boramez was ‘known’, but whatever its rarity, Johnson’s inclusion of this illustration shows his curiosity about unusual phenomena and his inclination both to see Browne as an authority on these subjects and to accept his discussion of them as sufficient reason for citing them in the Dictionary.

Two examples of Johnson’s using Browne as a source of information on subjects of this kind reflect the way that an entry may owe something to Browne without there being an explicit quotation. One is the definition of ‘network’, an oft-quoted instance of Johnson’s capacity for defining meaning without making it clear. He gives the sense of the word as ‘Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections’. As noted in my Introduction, it is a definition that appears to owe a debt to Browne’s discussion of networks in The Garden of Cyrus. There he implies that ‘Reticulate’ and ‘Net-
work' are synonyms, and uses the unusual verb 'to decussate' and its cognate forms almost forty times. A different kind of reference is to be found under 'lime', where Johnson quotes from Philip Miller’s description of the linden tree. The extract concludes with Miller’s observation that ‘Sir Thomas Brown mentions one, in Norfolk, sixteen yards in circuit’. Here the authority of Browne has been embedded within another authority, suggesting that Johnson was not alone in deferring to Browne’s minute and intimate knowledge of natural phenomena.

_Pseudodoxia_ is a repository of strange beliefs and arcane information, and it highlights Browne’s usefulness as a source of peculiar knowledge. The _Dictionary_ excerpts about the boramez and the linden tree are just two examples among many. Johnson, perhaps in part because he wished to convey the true flavour of _Pseudodoxia_, and more probably because he found such items curious, includes in the _Dictionary_ numerous quotations touching on oddities of the kind Browne chronicles. What is more, some of these quotations do not contain any concerted negation of the beliefs or conceits they retail. For example, Johnson quotes the following from Book V, Chapter 22:

> Great conceits are raised, of the membranous covering called the _sillyhow_, sometimes found about the heads of children upon their birth.

Browne explains that the ‘silly how’ is ‘preserved with great care’, but suggests that its protective properties are ‘not to be extended unto magical signalities or any other person’ (_PE_, I, 431). For reasons of economy, Johnson does not include this second part, but its absence has the effect of preserving in the user’s
mind the notion that some credibility may attach to the ‘great conceits’ the
illustration mentions. Another example of an illustration that removes Browne’s
words from their original context and thus appears to endorse what is in fact very
questionable appears under ‘venenation’, a word meaning ‘poison’ or ‘venom’.
The illustration is simply: ‘This venenation shoots from the eye; and this way a
basilisk may impoison.’ Yet in the relevant chapter of Pseudodoxia the sentence
goes on to explain that this ‘be not agreed upon by Authors, some imputing it
unto the breath, others unto the bite’ (PE, I, 183). In a further example, we find
that under ‘to inquinate’ (‘to pollute; to corrupt’) Johnson quotes:

An old opinion it was, that the ibis feeding upon serpents, that
venomous food so inquinated their oval conceptions, that they
sometimes came forth in serpentine shapes.

Here, the apparent misconception is quoted without Browne’s conclusion that
this ‘feare’ is ‘causelesse’ (PE, I, 185). Again, decontextualized in this way, the
spurious opinion is presented as a truth, with Browne’s name attached. Even if
the truncation was effected after selection, it is as though Johnson is interested in
the curious untruth that Browne is rebutting, rather than in the rebuttal. This
reflects his interest in all that is strange and his occasional indulgence of
strangeness; sometimes a misconception is so intriguingly bizarre that one can
lose sight of the fact that it is a misconception.

The Dictionary abounds with quotations that are tantalizingly incomplete,
and the phenomenon is certainly not confined to the illustrations from Browne.
The problems caused by incompleteness are well evidenced by the illustration
from Browne that appears under ‘virility’. Johnson quotes the following:
The great climacterical was past, before they begat children, or gave any testimony of their virility; for none begat children before the age of sixty-five.

These words come from Pseudodoxia, IV, 12, and from a passage in which Browne is discussing the age at which people bore children in the days before the Flood. Browne is talking here about individuals whom he believes to have attained ages of up to nine hundred years; but, away from this context, the quotation either surprises or alarms. Similarly, under 'jument' Johnson quotes from Browne what appears to be a complete sentence: 'Juments, as horses, oxen, and asses, have no eructation, or belching.' But this in fact comes from a passage in Pseudodoxia, I, 6, where Browne is listing a number of examples of wild misconceptions 'controilable, not onely by criticall and collective reason, but common and countrey observation' (PE, I, 33). Whatever Johnson's intentions, the result of this partial and decontextualized quotation is again a misrepresentation of the truth. Under the verb 'to urine' there appears the simple quotation 'No oviparous animal, which spawn or lay eggs, doth urine, except the tortoise'. This could easily be taken as Browne's final word on the subject, but in fact this brief extract comes from Pseudodoxia, III, 13, and in the original it is intended to represent Aristotle's view on the subject, rather than Browne's, which is considerably less clear-cut. On occasions such as these, it is possible to conclude that Johnson is more interested in the strange – sometimes laughable, sometimes oddly credible – information contained in Pseudodoxia, than in whether Browne actually chooses to sanction or disassemble it.

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80 For which see PE, I, 346.
81 See PE, I, 209.
Johnson is capable of misrepresenting Browne. However, the occasions
when he dramatically alters or truncates his text are few, and many of the
oddities he excerpts from *Pseudodoxia* are accurately representative of Browne’s
strange findings and beliefs. The *Dictionary* twice quotes Browne’s statement

That *temperamental dignotions*, and conjecture of prevalent
humours, that may be collected from spots in our nails, we
concede.

Elsewhere, Johnson quotes from a passage in Book II, Chapter 3, where Browne
discusses Dioscorides’s claims about the loadstone:

He makes it a help unto *thievery*; for thieves having a design upon
a house, make a fire at the four corners thereof, and cast therein
the fragments of loadstone, which raiseth fume.

He omits the final part of Browne’s exposition of the claims made by
Dioscorides, in which he explains that this fume ‘so disturbeth the inhabitants,
that they forsake the house and leave it to the spoyl of the robbers’ (*PE*, I, 112).

Nevertheless, he succeeds in conveying a memorable little vignette of human
behaviour and susceptibilities. There is a miniature history lesson in the
illustration of ‘horology’, in which Browne informs us that

Before the days of Jerome there were *horologies*, that measured
the hours not only by drops of water in glasses, called clepsydra,
but also sand in glasses, called clepsammia.

The illustration Browne provides of ‘reciprocation’ is an example of a legend
that has apparently mutated into a perceived truth:

That Aristotle drowned himself in Euripus, as despairing to
resolve the cause of its *reciprocation* or ebb and flow seven times
a day, is generally believed.
From these different extracts, and the different levels of credence attached to them, we may comprehend the different kinds of strangeness quarried and evaluated by Browne. At the same time, we inevitably sense that Johnson shared Browne’s interest in these odd conceits and improbable suppositions.

To this end, Johnson records some of Browne’s curious medical observations, along with snippets from *Pseudodoxia*’s informal history of medicine. Under ‘saxigfragous’ (‘dissolvent of the stone’) he quotes the following:

> Because goat’s blood was found an excellent medicine for the stone, it might be conceived to be able to break a diamond; and so it came to be ordered that the goats should be fed on *saxifragous* herbs, and such as are conceived of power to break the stone.

Browne resists the suggestion that ‘an amethyst prevents *inebriation*’, and under ‘succedaneous’ (‘supplying the place of something else’) Johnson quotes from Book III, Chapter 4: ‘Nor is Aetius strictly to be believed when he prescribeth the stone of the otter as a *succedaneous* unto castoeum.’ In recording Browne’s resistance to these remedies, Johnson is also recording the remedies themselves. Their quaintness and oddity seems to be worth commemorating. This is probably nowhere clearer than in the strange prescription recorded in the entry under ‘quartan’: ‘It were an uncomfortable receipt for a *quartan* ague, to lay the fourth book of Homer’s Iliads under one’s head.’ This comes from *Pseudodoxia*, I, 7, which concludes, as Robbins observes, ‘with a protest at the wild claims perennially made for new medicines’ (*PE*, II, 674). Browne’s scepticism about ridiculous quackery and outlandishly unlikely medical claims is conditioned by a concern for the integrity of his profession. At the same time, he is concerned for
the integrity of human understanding; medical malpractice and misconception
are dangers not just to him, but to humanity at large. Under ‘intermissive’, he
again furnishes an illustration that defends his profession. Johnson quotes from
*Pseudodoxia*, IV, 13 (‘Of the Canicular or Dogdayes’):

> As though there were any feriation in nature, or justitiums
> imaginable in professions, whose subject is under no *intermissive*
> but constant way of mutation, this season is commonly termed the
> physicians vacation.

The quotation appears, in two different and compressed forms, under ‘feriation’
and ‘were’. It is fairly accurately reproduced from the original, and though the
context is not provided, it is clear that Browne is ridiculing the notion that there
could be any ‘feriation’ in nature. The quotation is a self-reference on Browne’s
part; he is evidently irritated by suggestions that doctors get to have time off
during certain seasons, and his irritation, if it stems to a large degree from the
falsity of the claims, is also conditioned by indignation at finding his profession
criticised.

> Yet Browne is himself susceptible to beliefs that may seem less credible
> now. Two very different pictures of genetic heredity are painted in the
> illustrations that appear in the entries for ‘majority’ and ‘mutilation’. In the first
> of these, from Book III, Chapter 16 of *Pseudodoxia*, Browne expounds the
> proverb *Mali corvi malum ovum*:

> Of evil parents an evil generation, a posterity not unlike their
> *majority*; of mischievous progenitors, a venemous and destructive
> progeny.

In the other, from Book VII, Chapter 2, he reassures his reader that
Mutilations are not transmitted from father to son, the blind begetting such as can see: cripples, mutilate in their own persons, do come out perfect in their generations.

The first of these quotations instances Browne’s occasionally ambivalent attitude to medical tradition, while the second once again demonstrates the prevalence of bizarre beliefs, as well as Browne’s determination to overturn them. Stranger still is this extract from *Pseudodoxia*, I, 7, quoted under ‘hedge-hog’:

> Few have belief to swallow, or hope enough to experience, the collyrium of Albertus; that is, to make one see in the dark: yet thus much, according unto his receipt, will the right eye of an *hedge-hog*, boiled in oil, and preserved in a brazen vessel, effect.\(^{82}\)

Here Johnson reproduces one of the defining characteristics of *Pseudodoxia*, namely its capacity for giving space to the myths and misconceptions it aims to explode. Browne, even as he seeks to undermine vulgar errors, indulges them, and the most interesting part of his book – certainly for the modern reader, and perhaps also for his contemporaries – is not its defeat of erroneous beliefs, but rather the errors themselves, which by turns amuse, horrify, seduce, and bewilder. Johnson, in quoting this passage, sheds limited light on the word he is explaining, but does revivify a peculiar and presumably moribund pseudo-scientific myth. In his hands, natural philosophy can enjoy an afterlife as literature; the *Dictionary* repeatedly transplants passages from one genre to another.

Browne’s determination to establish truth and uproot error does not prevent his tolerating what he is not able to disprove. When he says on the

\(^{82}\) ‘Collyrium’ (‘an ointment for the eyes’) appears in both editions of the *Dictionary* without illustration.
opening page of *Pseudodoxia* that he will ‘timely survey our knowledge’, we are to understand that part of his task will consist not just in eradicating mistakes, but in opening up and problematizing issues upon which he is unable to pass decisive judgement (*PE*, I, 1). Sometimes he permits himself a sort of weary litotes, as if to concede that the giant aura of the possible is perpetually encroaching on the more regulated sphere of the probable. Johnson quotes one such comment: ‘The *toadstone* presumed to be found in the head of that animal, is not a thing impossible.’ Browne’s doubts are audible (‘not … impossible’), but his humanistic instincts require him to admit the limits of his researches as well as nature’s capacity for throwing up unlikely phenomena. Uncertainty will sometimes prevail: Johnson quotes Browne’s argument that ‘There being two opinions repugnant to each other, it may not be presumptive or sceptical to doubt of both’. Even here Browne’s habit of qualifying his views is in evidence.

Early in *Pseudodoxia* Browne suggests that by overthrowing erroneous beliefs ‘we may in some measure repaire our primarie ruins’ (*PE*, I, 30). The words ‘in some measure’ show what Jonathan Post justly calls the ‘postlapsarian’ character of the work. Browne cannot escape the belief that the history of mankind since the Fall has been a history of ever-multiplying error. By the 1750s it is difficult for anyone, Johnson included, to sustain such a belief. The New Science establishes a body of irrefutable truths. This promotes a stability that would for Browne have seemed unattainable. From the same paragraph Johnson quotes Browne’s remark that ‘It were some extenuation of the curse, if *insudore vultus tui* were confinable unto corporal exercitations.’ Browne is explaining that

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83 Post, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 118.
the Fall sentenced mankind to sweat mentally as well as physically; the quotation acknowledges the postlapsarian qualities of human thought – for rather than there being ‘a Paradise or unthorny place of knowledge’, ‘our understandings’ are now ‘eclipsed’. There is a distinct note of desperation in Browne’s portrait of the essential flaws in man’s consciousness. The Dictionary abounds with quotations that address this subject. Under ‘befooled’ we find South arguing that ‘the nature of sin ... [is] not only to defile but to infatuate’. Another quotation from South postulates that ‘Man, once fallen, was nothing but a great blur; a total universal pollution’. Woodward writes that ‘When man was fallen, ... a strange imbecility immediately seized and laid hold of him’. And there is the quotation, already mentioned, in which Browne declares that though we are ‘now at the greatest distance from the beginning of error [i.e. the Fall]’, we are ‘almost lost in its dissemination, whose ways are boundless, and confess no circumscription’. It would be difficult to survey in its entirety the Dictionary’s treatment of consciousness since the Fall, but such admissions of the weakness of the postlapsarian mind and its heedless susceptibility to error and inexact thinking run right through its pages. Browne, along with South, is Johnson’s most important source for quotations on this subject. Pseudodoxia, a repository of mistakes and deficient thinking, itself an attempt to resist the never-ceasing tide of error, can be seen as a model for Johnson’s attempts to purify and clarify human thought by rectifying language. Yet Johnson’s is an Enlightenment endeavour; he is attempting to set a new standard, to create a matchless model of excellence and establish a fresh paradigm for linguistic correctness. Browne
cannot hope to achieve such an improvement; the best he can manage is to slow
the progress of misconception. Their inclinations are similar, but Browne’s is a
more medieval challenge to error and corruption. The paradox of Johnson’s
*Dictionary* is that – for all its seventeenth-century resonances and its
conservatism, its concessions to the outmoded and the superfluous, the strange
and the improbable – it is a radical Enlightenment document.
Chapter Six: Browne after Johnson; the nineteenth-century after-life of Sir Thomas Browne

Before Samuel Johnson’s intervention, Sir Thomas Browne was not regarded as a writer. This may sound perverse – even to those with a close knowledge of Browne. But it is fair to say that his works were referred to, and appraised, individually, and that there had been no attempt to detect common themes or interests linking them. Johnson’s *Life of Browne* made it possible to think of him in a new way. The *Life* established that its subject, rather than being the author of a range of loosely affiliated texts, was a writer with his own distinctive voice, interests and outlook, whose diverse works constituted a corpus that was in fact marked by philosophical and creative integrity. Johnson drew together the disparate strands of Browne’s *oeuvre*, making it possible for future generations of readers to engage not merely with the different works, but with the creative force behind them.

The effect of Johnson’s *Life* on the status of Browne is not so much a recuperation as an initiating act. The criticisms that predate the 1756 *Christian Morals* approach Browne in a very different fashion. In Chapter One I suggested the character of the judgements passed on Browne’s writings prior to Johnson. That these early lives or snippets of lives contain no substantial criticism is hardly surprising. Johnson may be considered to have initiated the tradition of the critical biography in English; his fusion of history and critique was calculated to supersede the techniques practised by those who preceded him. Jonathan Post
argues that the ‘importance’ of the *Life of Browne* inheres in its status ‘both as an independent critical document and as a landmark in the history of Browne criticism’.¹ It differs radically from the accounts that preceded it in viewing Browne not merely as an antiquarian, or as a religious and philosophical controversialist. In the *Life*’s opening sentence Browne is referred to as a ‘writer’ and is grouped with other ‘men of letters’ (*CM*, 3). He is repeatedly described as an ‘author’, a term which Johnson tends to use to imply originality.² This recategorization is no accident. Johnson is trying to develop a sense of literary history. His vision of this literary history crystallizes only when he compiles his *Lives of the Poets*, twenty years later, but here he is beginning to develop an awareness of the history of literature and its authors as a discrete branch of history. Furthermore, his response to Browne differs from those offered by Ross, Digby and other seventeenth-century critics in its essential disengagement from the politics of Browne’s life and writings.

The consequences of this recuperative effort, though subtle, are lasting. Johnson made Browne available for a kind of criticism and creative exploitation that might otherwise have been, if not impossible, at least unlikely. His *Life of Browne* provided subsequent generations with an important *point de repère*. In the nineteenth century Browne’s opus was reclaimed by a host of authors. The recuperative efforts pioneered by Johnson become in nineteenth-century hands a

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¹ Post, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 152.
² See, for instance, *CM*, 16: ‘Browne having now entered the world as an author ...’.
complete repositioning.\textsuperscript{3} Browne exerted an influence or kindled an enthusiasm in writers who included Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb and Robert Southey, as well as the Americans Emerson and Melville and the Frenchman Joseph Milsand.\textsuperscript{4} Each found his own special significance in Browne’s writings. Jonathan Post argues that ‘Despite Johnson’s just measuring of Browne’s career and canon, ... there is a real sense of Browne’s being “discovered” by the romantics’.\textsuperscript{5} This is exactly how it feels: individual authors of the nineteenth century show signs of responding keenly to Browne, though their reactions are not chronicled in mainstream literary history. In the second half of this chapter, I identify what debt, if any, these authors feel to Johnson’s work on Browne. I am concerned with assessing what it might have been in Browne’s writings that would have appealed to figures such as Coleridge or Emerson, but am also interested in identifying the trace of Johnson’s mediating critical presence in the various strands of Browne’s after-life.

Before this, however, it is worth saying something of the more public presentation of Browne in this period, for the responses of the authors I cite above were largely private. The public image of Browne in the nineteenth century was a somewhat different matter. Many of the period’s historians of

\textsuperscript{3} Ruth M. Vande Kieft’s unpublished thesis ‘The Nineteenth Century Reputation of Sir Thomas Browne’ (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1957) examines the subject in more detail than is possible here. Unfortunately, difficulties in locating this thesis meant that I was only able to read it at a late stage in my work. Vande Kieft goes over much of the same ground that I cover in this chapter, but her purpose is different. She is particularly concerned with assessing the reasons for Browne’s appeal to writers such as De Quincey and Emerson, with finding points of connection between Browne’s writings and theirs, and with comparing the different reactions Browne provoked. She has almost nothing to say about the role of Johnson.

\textsuperscript{4} Milsand’s attempt to revive Browne is discussed in Albert Favre, \textit{L’Expression Chez Sir Thomas Browne} (Avignon, 1977), 26-28. Unusually, the work that pleased Milsand the most was \textit{Christian Morals}.

\textsuperscript{5} Post, \textit{Sir Thomas Browne}, 153.
literature had little of substance to say about him. For instance, Robert
Chambers’s account of English literary history, intended as a school text-book
and published in the same year as Wilkin’s edition, characterizes Browne in
reductive terms. He is ‘eloquent’ and ‘somewhat quaint’; *Religio Medici*
‘contains innumerable odd opinions on things spiritual and temporal’;
*Pseudodoxia* is notable for its ‘eloquence’ (a stock word, it seems); and his most
‘celebrated’ work is alleged to be *Hydriotaphia*, the language of which is ‘most
impressive’.* Another text-book, a mid-century *History of English Literature* by
William Spalding, who contributed biographies to the seventh and eighth
editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (including the article on Bacon), also
identifies ‘eloquence’ as a characteristic trait of Browne’s. Browne is deemed
superior to Burton in this and in his ‘strength of thought’, and is recognized as
‘the favourite author of not a few among the admirers of our older literature’. He
is again accused of ‘quaintness’, along with ‘cumbrousness’ and ‘extravagant
exaggeration’. The final word on the matter is left to Johnson, however, from
whom Spalding quotes some familiar comments on *Religio*. Browne is very
briefly noticed by the educationalist Thomas Arnold in his account of the Civil
War period in his *Short History of English Literature*; he merits about a third of a
page in a ten-page account of the prose of that time.* A quarter of a century after
Arnold’s *Short History*, Browne receives no better treatment in Edmund Gosse’s

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8 See Thomas Arnold, *Chaucer to Wordsworth: A Short History of English Literature* (London,
1870), 226-7.
account – again, a single paragraph, in which none of his works is mentioned by name.⁹

Yet Johnson’s *Life of Browne* is for others the most important point of departure for an attempt to define Browne’s critical heritage. In the French *Biographie Universelle* (1812), the author of the article on Browne quotes Johnson’s comments on his style, and Johnson is the only critic the article mentions.¹⁰ In the same way, the British *General Biographical Dictionary* of 1813 relies heavily on Johnson. The author describes the *Life of Browne* as ‘among Dr Johnson’s best biographical performances’; he admits to having ‘availed’ himself of it in writing the entry, and quotes several hundred words of Johnson’s.¹¹ Another comparable example is the detailed entry on Browne in Austin Allibone’s *Critical Dictionary of English Literature*, where the author defers to Johnson’s ‘masterly’ judgement, seven times displaying substantial quotations from the *Life*.¹² Even in the century’s final year, when George Saintsbury publishes his *Short History of English Literature*, Johnson is the only one of Browne’s critics who warrants a mention.¹³

The accounts offered by literary historians are unavoidably incomplete. Moreover, the literary historian is always some distance behind the literary author in his or her perception of fashion, taste and currency. However, another means of gauging status and reputation is through the history of editions, which

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¹⁰ See *Biographie Universelle, Ancienne et Moderne* (Paris, 1812), VI, 63. The author also approvingly observes Johnson’s ‘impartialité’ in the *Life*.
is to a degree the history of literary taste. As I noted in Chapter One, there was no new printing of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* after the sixth and final edition of 1672, and *Religio* was not reprinted on its own between 1754 (a corrected version of the tenth edition) and 1831. This may be a testament to the large print runs of the earlier editions. The 1686 folio of Browne’s *Works* seems to have been in fairly wide circulation, and a suggestion of the availability of the most popular individual works is contained in Lamb’s letter of 28 November 1800 to Thomas Manning, where he describes the pleasures of being in London (‘old book-stalls, “Jeremy Taylors,” “Burtons on Melancholy,” and “Religio Medicis,” on every stall’). We may wonder why the works of these ornate and challenging seventeenth-century authors were in such ready supply – and may conclude that these copies had been discarded because no one wanted them any more. Browne’s reputation had shrunk. Lamb was one of those who, even if he did not take pains to revive Browne, imbibed certain qualities of his writing and capitalized on the availability of old editions.

The most important public enhancement of Browne’s status in the first half of the nineteenth century is Simon Wilkin’s four-volume edition of 1835-6 (reprinted in three volumes in 1852). It may only be a coincidence, but it is in the wake of early nineteenth-century interest in Browne that this new collection of his works becomes available. Wilkin’s edition stimulated fresh public interest and was widely reviewed. Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, pronounced it ‘admirably edited’. Wilkin was indeed well qualified to grasp the essentials of

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Browne. He was brought up by his guardian Joseph Kinghorn, a Norwich Baptist minister with a particular interest in the occult. The most significant work he undertook before the edition of Browne was a catalogue of the books in the Public and City libraries of Norwich, which was published in 1825. He was also a noted entomologist. His edition was a substantial development in the history of Browne scholarship and the public presentation of his works. Appearing in four volumes, it included not only the major texts — *Religio, Pseudodoxia, Hydriotaphia, The Garden of Cyrus, Christian Morals* — but also 471 pages of Browne’s correspondence (including letters to important contemporaries such as John Aubrey, John Evelyn and Elias Ashmole), and an array of miscellaneous writings that included many previously unpublished papers. Among these last were eighty pages of jottings from his commonplace books, which offered abundant insights into Browne’s quotidian interests — and consequently suggested something of the spirit that informed his collection of materials for *Pseudodoxia*.

Wilkin’s respect for Johnson is clear. The edition was advertised on its title-page as ‘Including his Life and Correspondence’. The ‘Life’ in question was not a new one of Wilkin’s devising, but rather Johnson’s account, reproduced in its entirety. Wilkin had hoped to obtain the services of Southey, both as editor and biographer; his status as Poet Laureate would have lent social credibility to the edition. But Southey declined both opportunities, the second of the two on the grounds that he did not feel Johnson’s account of Browne’s life could be
improved. To the Johnson Life was appended a ‘Supplementary memoir’ (it is in fact half as long again as Johnson’s), in the course of which Wilkin filled what gaps he could in Johnson’s version. There is no full explanation of his decision to organize the biographical material in this way. He simply states that

I have reprinted Dr Johnson’s Life, adding here and there a note, corrective or explanatory;– but reserving such additional information, or more ample notices, as I have been able to collect from preceding biographies and other sources, for a separate and Supplementary Memoir.

When he is forced to concede that imperfections remain in his account, he turns to Johnson for an appropriate quotation:

if in this memoir I have been reluctantly compelled to leave many points of interest in obscurity, I must console myself with Dr Johnson’s reflection, ‘that in all sublunary things, there is something to be wished, which we may wish in vain’.17

Wilkin puts right certain of Johnson’s mistakes. These include his incorrect records of the amount Browne inherited from his father, the number of children he had, and the year in which he was awarded an honorary fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians.18 But it is hard for him to tamper with Johnson’s words; when he comes to the section of the Life where Johnson reproduces a large chunk of Whitefoot’s ‘minutes’, he supplies this note:

Mr Whitefoot’s being the earliest existing biographical sketch of our author, and the work of a contemporary, and an intimate friend, I had felt strongly disposed to print it entire, rather than give Dr Johnson’s extracts. But as he omitted only the commencement, and two or three paragraphs in the midst, I have thought it better to present Dr Johnson’s Biography just as it stood, supplying his omissions in notes.19

16 See Keynes, A Bibliography of Sir Thomas Browne, 152.
18 Ibid., xviii, xxvi, xxxviii.
19 Ibid., xli, n. 7.
Wilkin’s indebtedness to Johnson’s account is again suggested in his preface to 
Religio, which he concludes with the following words:

the present object is to edit the work, not to offer either eulogy or criticism; those, who do not perceive that it contains its own vindication, are referred to the eloquent and conclusive observations of his great admirer and biographer, Dr Johnson.²⁰

Later, he explicitly follows Johnson in describing the process of Pseudodoxia’s composition:

His very curious and extensive reading, – his daily and ardent pursuit of every branch of natural history –, the labour he was constantly willing (as Johnson observes) to pay for truth, in patient and reiterated experiments upon even the most trifling or absurd questions ... supplies him with copious materials for the exercise of his inquisitive propensities.²¹

In his preface to The Garden of Cyrus, Hydriotaphia and Brampton Urns Wilkin writes:

The garden of Cyrus has, by general consent, been regarded as one of the most fanciful of his works. The most eminent even of his admirers have treated it as a mere sport of the imagination, ‘in the prosecution of which, he considers every production of art and nature, in which he could find any decussation or approaches to the form of a quincunx, and, as a man once resolved upon ideal discoveries, seldom searches long in vain, he finds his favourite figure in almost every thing’.²²

This is, of course, a quotation from Johnson, and Wilkin not only terms him the ‘most eminent’ of Browne’s admirers, but borrows (and italicizes) Johnson’s description of the work as ‘fanciful’.²³ It is clear, here as elsewhere, that Johnson was an important critical touchstone for Wilkin. His edition of Christian Morals

²⁰ Wilkin, II, xvi.
²¹ Ibid., 164.
²² Wilkin, III, 380.
²³ See CM, 24.
established a platform on which subsequent criticism had – in Wilkin’s estimate at least – to be based.

Editions of the period, besides Wilkin’s, respond to Johnson’s presence in Browne studies with varying degrees of explicitness. Four years before Wilkin, there was an edition of *Religio Medici* by Thomas Chapman of Exeter College, Oxford, in which there appeared a preliminary note asserting that

> It would be impertinent to recommend a work, which has, for nearly two centuries, held so high a rank in English literature, and which has received the combined praise of an Addison and a Johnson.

Chapman has nothing more to say about Johnson, but he suggests that Johnson’s liking for Browne is, together with Addison’s, sufficient justification for an edition of *Religio*. More important among the other editions of Browne’s works available before Wilkin was James Crossley’s 1822 edition comprising *Hydriotaphia* and the *Letter to a Friend*. Crossley, a noted bibliophile, wrote an article on Browne for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in January 1820, in which he describes him as ‘neglected’ and suggests that he was heavily plagiarized by Sterne. He is particularly excited by the final chapter of *Hydriotaphia*, observing that

> Another singular sport of his mind is his Garden of Cyrus, or Quincunx; but of this, the character of Dr Johnson is so comprehensive and exact, as to leave nothing to be said by another.\(^{24}\)

In his edition of Browne’s *Tracts* two years later he announces that

> The attention which has lately been directed to the Works of Sir THOMAS BROWNE, the most extraordinary writer, as he has been justly characterized in the English language, has induced the

Editor of the present volume to believe that it will meet with favour from the Public.

He concludes his introduction with the following words:

As the life of Sir T. Browne, by Dr Johnson, has been republished so often, it has been thought unnecessary to prefix it to the present volume. To those who are admirers of Browne, it may be perhaps interesting in some measure to be informed, that a full and a correct Life of that singular author is preparing from ample materials, and will shortly be presented to the Public.\(^{25}\)

This seems strange indeed, as Johnson's *Life* was not that often republished, and Wilkin's edition—admittedly the fruit of twelve years' work—did not come out until thirteen years later. All the same, Crossley's words give a sense of the numinous presence of Johnson in the sphere of Browne scholarship. It is not a presence he appears to relish, but it is one that he has actively to acknowledge.

Two years after Wilkin's edition there appeared an edition of *Religio* and *Hydriotaphia* by J. A. St John, which included a 'preliminary discourse' that made no mention of Johnson but strenuously defended Browne against the charges brought by Digby. An 1844 edition of *Religio Medici* and *Christian Morals* by John Peace, the city librarian at Bristol, included details of what he took to be 'resemblant passages' suggesting a stylistic link between Cowper's *The Task* and Browne. A more suggestive indication of the changing condition of Browne's critical reputation in the nineteenth century may be found in a volume compiled by Basil Montagu, whose selection of seventeenth-century prose writings first appeared in 1805. Montagu's selection is representative of a wider movement; this was a period of mass anthologization. John Brewer illustrates the 'astonishing increase in the number of anthologies, readers and books used to

\(^{25}\) *Tracts, by Sir Thomas Browne, Knight, M.D.* (London, 1822), iii, vi.
learn English after 1770', explaining that 'thirty-four were recorded in the fifty years 1721-71 and 173 in the next half century'. This had much to do with the end of perpetual copyright, which 'helped to clarify the idea of a national tradition and simultaneously created a commercial environment in which it could be realized'. The first and second editions of Montagu's anthology did not include Browne; but when a third edition was brought out in 1829 Browne was included. Montagu gives some indication of contemporary tastes — and clearly some indication of his own — with the amount of space he accords to each of his chosen authors. Excluding the notes, the third edition is 394 pages long. Of these, Jeremy Taylor accounts for the first 158; Bishop Latimer for the next twenty; Robert South for the next thirty-four; Bishop Hall for forty-four; Isaac Barrow for thirty-two; Thomas Fuller for forty; and Browne, Bacon and Milton for twenty-two each. Montagu may have been responding to Browne's presence in other anthologies of the period. For instance, Browne is represented by extracts from *Religio Medici* and *Hydriotaphia* in George Burnett's 1807 *Specimens of English Prose Writers*.  

Johnson's legacy, for Wilkin and his contemporaries, consisted not only in his having written the *Life*, but in his having given Browne the imprimatur of his approval. After Johnson, Browne was a writer, and writers are fit to be commemorated by authoritative critical editions and by discrete acts of literary

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criticism. One key contribution to the development of Browne's critical reputation directly precipitated by Wilkin's edition was a lengthy review that appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The review is hostile to Johnson's role as a critic of Browne, but its hostility is a reflection of Johnson's clear presence in the sphere of Browne studies. Lytton's attitude to Johnson is suggested early in the review:

> The hard sense of Johnson was not calculated to enter into the visionary and ecstatic enthusiasm of the Knight of Norwich; nor did his critical opinions furnish him with an adequate rule whereby to test a philosophy that had nothing of the severity of logic, or a style which did not derive its singular beauties from the methodical correctness of its arrangement, or the regular cadence of its periods. Johnson never once appears to be alive to the *poetry* of Browne, whether as exhibited in his diction or his thoughts. He never examines, much less accounts for, the startling phenomena of an intellect that reconciled so many extremes - in some things so devout, in others so sceptical.

Lytton's terms of reference betray a set of values that are plainly those of a nineteenth-century critic. His reference to 'visionary and ecstatic enthusiasm' is illuminating; the trait he discerns in Browne is an exuberant Romanticism *avant la lettre*. His censure of Johnson's failure to 'be alive to the *poetry* of Browne' misprizes Browne's reasons for writing prose, not verse. For though Johnson may appreciate Browne's style, he understands this style as a function of his meaning. Lytton, by contrast, feels able to dissociate the two. He criticises what he sees to be Johnson's inadequacy in grasping his subject's essential character:

> A reader even superficially acquainted with Sir Thomas Browne, will be amused to perceive the uneasy pains with which the grave lexicographer attempts to tame down the wild and eccentric subject upon which he had fallen, to his own level of probable motives and ordinary conduct.
Apparently unconcerned with Browne’s matter and meaning, he prefers instead to reconceive him as a sort of prose psalmist, arguing that a ‘poetical spirit pervaded the reasoning, as well as the expressions, of ... that time’ and that Browne’s style consists of ‘painting thoughts’.

It is clear that Lytton is not disposed to look with favour on any of the other criticisms of Browne that have appeared, for he is almost as scathing in his judgement of two more recent commentators:

If Johnson, from want of sympathy with the Abstract and the Visionary, gives no satisfactory analysis of Browne as an author and a man, Coleridge and Hazlitt, unfitted for the task by a fault precisely the reverse, do not appear to us to supply the deficiency.

Again, Lytton picks out Browne’s ‘visionary’ qualities. The seventeenth-century writer is being reinvented for nineteenth-century consumption. Browne is characterized by Lytton as one of those ‘who rather write to throw off an exuberance of sentiment and thought, than for the stern design of effecting some particular and designed object’. Lytton uses ‘sentiment’ to denote a mixture of opinion and feeling, and seems in doing so to bracket Browne with a loose affiliation of eighteenth-century sentimental writers with whom he might be felt to have had little in common. The imputation of stylistic ‘exuberance’ suggests a patronizing contempt for the copiousness of Browne’s diction; the word is defined by Johnson as ‘useless abundance’. But Lytton’s inability to see Browne’s ‘object’ is his failure as a reader, not Browne’s as a writer. Later, his enthusiasm for linguistic legislation returns, as he reverts to the subject of Johnson’s shortcomings:

29 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, ‘Sir Thomas Browne’s Works’, Edinburgh Review 64 (1836), 1, 2, 11.
30 Ibid., 3, 12.
Time rolls on, and the obsolete diction, like the old-fashioned house, contracts a venerable and majestic sanctity in our eyes. Dr Johnson censures the exploded diction of Browne and Milton; the diction of Dr Johnson is more exploded than theirs.

He adds what may be taken as an explanation of Browne's diminished reputation, suggesting that there is something perverse and recondite at the heart of his work:

throughout all our author's gravest and loftiest idealism, there is ... something of the whimsical frivolity of a man who lives alone, with no occupation so attractive as that of sporting with his own fancies, and caressing his own conceits.\(^{31}\)

To accuse Browne of 'whimsical frivolity' is again to read him anachronistically. Browne, even when he is at his most amusing, beguiling or curious, remains a fundamentally moral writer, whose apprehension of the world's peculiarities is a recognition of the majesty of God's creation. Johnson's critique of Browne makes Browne available for anti-Johnsonian use; in mounting an assault on Johnson's critical assumptions and conclusions, the nineteenth-century reader of Browne can define his difference from Johnson and from eighteenth-century critical thinking. Lytton's revisionary reading of Browne, empowered by Wilkin's modern edition, marks the culmination of thirty years of appropriative criticism, which had witnessed a concerted repositioning of Browne, and had adumbrated the differences between the nineteenth-century critical temper and that of the age of Johnson.

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\(^{31}\) Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 'Sir Thomas Browne's Works', 31, 34.

320
Wilkin's edition was the most important contribution to Browne scholarship in the first half of the nineteenth century, but its appearance, while establishing a new and exciting scholarly resource, was in fact the conclusion of a chapter in the history of Browne's reception. For thirty years before its appearance, Browne's stock had been rising - at least within a small but eminent community of writers who enthusiastically championed his works. The existence of this community is suggested on the title-page of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's copy of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, which bears a detailed inscription testifying to the circulation of Browne's writings among an audience of mutually acquainted authors. First there appears 'Mr Wordsworth, Rydal Mount'; then on the fifth flyleaf 'C. Lamb 9th March 1804, bought for S. T. Coleridge'; and then in Coleridge's own hand, 'Given by S. T. C. to S. Hutchinson March 1804. N. B. It was the 10th; on which day I dined and punched at Lamb's & exulted in his having procured the Hydriotaphia & all the rest lucro posito. S. T. C.'. It seems extraordinary that the volume should have passed from Wordsworth to Lamb to Coleridge to Sara Hutchinson; each who discovers Browne chooses to pass on the discovery, and the resulting impression is of a community of aficionados participating in what might almost be an illicit predilection.

It is Coleridge who is perhaps Browne's most perceptive critic of the period. He was by inclination a cultural arbiter, and his writings abound with observations on seventeenth-century authors: he offers a multitude of comments on philosophers (Bacon, Locke), poets (especially Milton), dramatists (Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher), and divines (Hooker, Taylor, Donne). Browne is one of

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32 Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, 447, n. 18.
the prose writers in whom he is most interested, and while his interest in Browne does not seem to be out of keeping with the general tenor of his enthusiasms, it results in a succession of striking and original observations. These have been collected in R. F. Brinkley’s useful 700-page volume entitled *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*; Coleridge’s references to Browne, and his comments on passages in Browne’s works, make up almost thirty pages in this collection.

Coleridge frequently distinguishes in his criticism between literature that is organic and that which is mechanical. Browne’s writings appear to fall into the former category; Coleridge seems to have felt that the superiority of English prose before 1688 lay in its being composed not by a process of agglutination, but through the evolution of an organic inner principle. His assessment of *Religio Medici* suggests this; he considers it ‘a sweet Exhibition of character & passion, & not ... an Expression or Investigation of positive Truth’. Coleridge evidently feels a marked affinity with Browne, whom he describes as ‘active in enquiry, & yet with an appetite to believe, – in short, an affectionate & elevated Visionary!’ The ascription to Browne of ‘visionary’ qualities reflects Coleridge’s capacity for mapping his nineteenth-century values on to seventeenth-century texts, appropriating those parts of them he finds attractive, and relinquishing the remainder. Indeed, his emphasis on the visionary and the poetic reflects a broader Romantic movement in which the systems of thought

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34 Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, 438-9.
35 Walter Pater does something of this kind in proposing that the character of Browne’s writing is akin to the ‘delicate monumental sculpture of the early Tuscan School ... [and] many of the designs of William Blake’. See Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London, 1901), 153.
are based not on Cartesian linearity and a Newtonian logical paradigm, but on the alternative, organic energies of the imagination.

Coleridge is at pains to conceive Browne as a living, breathing creature. He makes no distinction between the life and the works. *Religio* is ‘a most delicious Book’; later he repeats the adjective, adding that it ‘paints certain parts of my moral and intellectual being, (the best parts, no doubt,) better than any other book I have ever met with’. Its author is ‘a fine mixture of humourist, genius, and pedant’. ‘A library was a living world to him,’ he proposes, ‘and every book a man’. He notes that ‘the gravity with which he records contradictory opinions is exquisite’. But Coleridge conveys no interest in, or understanding of, the politics of Browne’s theology. It is the knottiness of the problems Browne deals with, and the texture of the prose in which Browne deals with them, that appeal to Coleridge: the problems themselves are not his concern.

He marks a passage in *Religio* during which Browne explains that he is not content to examine ‘those general pieces of wonder’, but wishes rather to add to these ‘the more obvious and neglected pieces of Nature, which without further travel I can do in the Cosmography of my self. The poet comments approvingly that ‘This is the true characteristic of Genius – our destiny & instinct is to unriddle the world’.

It is Browne’s cultivation of personal identity that is central to Coleridge’s interest in his works. It satisfies Coleridge’s definition of poetic excellence:

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36 Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, 447.
37 Ibid., 439-40
a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.38

Coleridge, who tends not to argue a distinction between verse and prose, treats Browne as he might treat a poet. Indeed, some of the qualities he finds in Browne are the diametric opposite of what Browne must have intended; when he congratulates Browne on his ‘exquisite absurdity!’ he is wilfully ignoring Religio’s true purpose.39 When Browne writes that ‘There is, as in Philosophy, so in Divinity, sturdy doubts, and boisterous objections, wherewith the unhappiness of our knowledge too neerely acquainteth us. More of these no man hath known than my self’, Coleridge marks the passage:

This is exceedingly striking! Had Sir T. Brown lived now-a-days, he would probably have been a very ingenious & bold Infidel (in his real opinions) tho’ the kindness of his nature would have kept him aloof from vulgar prating obstreusive Infidelity.40

As with Lytton’s later characterization of Browne as poet and ecstatic enthusiast, so with Coleridge’s characterization of Browne as a possible infidel: the seventeenth-century is being reconceived in nineteenth-century terms. Coleridge appropriates Browne and reinvents him, with a brashness that is both wilful and provoking. Detaching him from his historical circumstances, he is able to read Browne without being caused the doctrinal anxiety that Browne provoked in his contemporaries.

Johnson’s presence is only briefly acknowledged. For instance, Coleridge marks a passage in which Browne writes that

39 Brinkley (ed.), Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century, 447.
40 Ibid., 441.
I am confident, and fully persuaded, yet dare not take my oath of my Salvation: I am as it were sure, and do believe without all doubt, that there is such a City as Constantinople; yet for me to take my Oath theron, were a kind of Perjury, because I hold no infallible warrant from my own sense to confirm me in the certainty thereof.

Coleridge comments that ‘Dr Johnson adopted this argument and I think, gave it as his own’. He is intrigued by some of the same things that intrigue Johnson.

For example, he marks the passage in which Browne suggests he would prefer it if mankind procreated like trees, and reflects on it thus:

He says, he is a Batchelor, but he talks as if he had been a married man, & married to a Woman who did not love him, & whome he did not love. Taken by itself, no doubt, the act is foolish, & debasing. But what a misery is contained in those words, ‘taken by itself’?

He shares Johnson’s impulse to make Browne a biographical subject, subscribing to the view that here especially it is impossible to disentangle the thinker, the stylist and the man. ‘O to write the character of this man’ he reflects in a notebook entry.\(^\text{41}\) Moreover, after the example of Johnson, he considers Browne’s works not as a miscellany, but as a whole. There is no apparent need to take each of his works separately so that each can be individually appraised.

Browne is cited among the poet’s ‘first favourites’, and is deemed to be

Rich in various knowledge; exuberant in conceptions and conceits, contemplative, imaginative; often truly great and magnificent in his style and diction, tho’ doubtless, too often big, stiff, and hyperlatinistic.

The use of the adverb ‘doubtless’ appears to imply a concession on Coleridge’s part to a prevailing or necessary view; he seems more inclined to emphasize the ‘great’ and ‘magnificent’ qualities of Browne’s prose, and includes the adjectives

\(^{41}\) Brinkley (ed.), Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century, 443, 445, 461.
‘big’, ‘stiff’ and ‘hyperlatinistic’ almost grudgingly, as if deferring to an accepted criticism of Browne. While these terms are not Johnson’s, their direction is, for it is Johnson who insists on Browne’s Latinate diction and its pedantic inflexibility.

Coleridge goes on to describe the mixture of qualities Browne possesses, characterizing him as a blend of ‘Enthusiast’, ‘Fantast’, ‘Humorist’ and ‘Philosopher’. He identifies as one of his key characteristics ‘a mind of active curiosity’, and describes him as ‘Fond of the Curious, and a Hunter of Oddities & Strangenesses’. Browne is also ‘a useful enquirer into physical Truth & fundamental Science’. Coleridge especially recommends Hydriotaphia, which serves, he says, to show ‘his entireness in every subject’, and which is defined by a prose that is ‘earthy, ... [and] redolent of graves & sepulchres’. The Garden of Cyrus is ‘far less interesting’, but manifests

the same attention to oddities, the same to the minutenesses, & minitiae of vegetable forms – the same entireness of subject – Quincunxes in Heaven above, Quincunxes in Earth below, & Quincunxes in the water beneath the Earth; Quincunxes in Deity, Quincunxes in the mind of man; Quincunxes in bones, in optic nerves, in Roots of Trees, in leaves, in petals, in every thing!

His tone here echoes the comment of Johnson’s later quoted by Wilkin in his preface to The Garden of Cyrus. He concludes by providing a key to his marginalia, which are designed to highlight variously ‘majesty of Conception or Style’, ‘Sublimity’, ‘brilliance or ingenuity’, ‘characteristic Quaintness’, and errors in fact or philosophy.42 Coleridge also enters the fray on the subject of Johnson’s stylistic debt to Browne, declaring:

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It is not true, that Sir Thomas Brown was the prototype of Dr Johnson, who imitated him only as far as Sir T. B. resembles the majority of his Predecessors – i.e., in the pedantic preference of Latin Derivatives to Saxon Words of the very same force. In the balance & construction of his periods Dr Johnson has followed Hall: as any intelligent reader will discover by an attentive Comparison.\(^{43}\)

On the matter of Browne's style, Coleridge also writes that '[he] it was, who, though a writer of great genius, first effectually injured the literary taste of the nation by his introduction of learned words, merely because they were learned'.\(^{44}\)

Here, the key word is 'first'; the importance of Browne lies in his primacy among innovators. Coleridge does not suggest who else might be culpable; Browne's name will suffice to bear the weight of responsibility. Edmund Gosse remarks that 'Coleridge ... remembered that the whole tendency of the age in which Browne lived was towards violent experiment in the aesthetic value of words'.\(^{45}\) What Coleridge certainly recognizes is that Browne's lexis is very much his own. As he goes on to say:

Sir Thomas Brown with all his faults had a genuine idiom; and it is the existence of an individual idiom in each, that makes the principal writers before the Restoration the great patterns or integers of English style. In them the precise intended meaning of a word can never be mistaken; whereas in the later writers, as especially in Pope, the use of words is for the most part purely arbitrary, so that the context will rarely show the true specific sense, but only that something of the sort is designed. A perusal of the authorities cited by Johnson in his dictionary under any leading word, will give you a lively sense of this declension in etymological truth of expression in the writers after the Restoration, or perhaps, strictly, after the middle of the reign of Charles II.\(^{46}\)

\(^{43}\) Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, 371-2.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 414.

\(^{45}\) Gosse, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 194.

\(^{46}\) Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, 414-5.
Coleridge’s sense of this ‘declension in etymological truth’ accords with Johnson’s apparent preference in the *Dictionary* for prose from before the Restoration. Whether or not Coleridge is right, he is thinking of the emphasis, which begins in the late seventeenth century, on perspicuity. Coleridge seems to believe that post-Restoration attempts at referential transparency and intelligibility resulted in a cheapening of the expressive potential of English. The repression of copiousness and hard words stunted language; the meanings of words were deflected away from their classical roots.

Coleridge was given his copy of *Pseudodoxia* by Lamb, and it is Lamb, among all the writers of the period, whose writings are most demonstrably indebted to Browne’s. He considered himself ‘the first of the moderns’ to discover *Hydriotaphia*. His sympathy with Browne is suggested in the titles of several of his essays: ‘Witches, and Other Night-Fears’, ‘Old China’, ‘On Burial Societies’, ‘The Religion of Actors’. Even if we accept that Lamb’s subject matter and channels of communication are rather different from Browne’s, there is a bold gesture in the direction of his style. Saintsbury characterizes Lamb’s style as ‘simulative’ – ‘It is not Browne, or Fuller, or Burton, or Glanvill, but something like them, yet different’. Lamb, like so many critics, assimilates the traits of those whom he criticizes. Suggestions of Browne’s prose are preserved, even if the theology and philosophical urgency have been stripped away.

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49 Ruth Vande Kieft claims in ‘The Nineteenth Century Reputation of Sir Thomas Browne’ that Lamb’s affection for Browne derives (p. 41) from his ‘romantic attachment to what was old, quaint, and obscure’.

328
is a study by Joseph S. Iseman of the similarities between Browne and Lamb, entitled *A Perfect Sympathy: Charles Lamb and Sir Thomas Browne*. It is a small, old-fashioned, impressionistic piece of work that is all the same quite seductive. Iseman argues that Lamb completely captures the spirit of Browne and seeks diligently to reproduce it in his writings; the two are united by a 'kindred realization of the value and worth of the self'. When Lamb echoes Browne's thinking, he is appealing to a tradition of civilized practice that he finds missing among his contemporaries (a grievance that is at the heart of Elia's October 1823 letter to Southey). In his essay 'Imperfect Sympathies', he describes 'the author of *Religio Medici*' as 'mounted upon the airy stilts of abstraction', adding that in his 'categories of Being the possible took the upper hand of the actual'. Iseman comments that 'Having refuted ... [Browne], Lamb goes on to emulate him exactly in the matter of complete self-revelation'. Lamb's prose often resonates with echoes of Burton, and sometimes with suggestions of Walton, but Browne is the dominant influence. Iseman's claims are supported by Post, who argues that 'Lamb's writings are saturated with Brownean moments, allusions, and recollections.' He continues:

Lamb's Browne was ... not Johnson's. The Solomonic scientist and moralist valued by Johnson became pre-eminently a personality, a visionary eccentric.... *Religio Medici* was now the centrepiece, flanked the by the last chapters of *Urne-Buriall* and *The Garden of Cyrus*. The author whom Johnson regarded at a distance was in the process of being enthusiastically assimilated.

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52 Ibid., 544.
54 Post, *Sir Thomas Browne*, 153.
That Lamb’s style was at least in part modelled on Browne seems certain.

Iseman quotes one of Lamb’s French critics, Jules Derocquigny, who expresses the essence of his style in terms that could equally be used of Browne: ‘Le style de Lamb est un style de mots.’\(^5\) A suggestion of what exactly he means is conveyed by Mario Praz, who writes of Browne’s use of words and images ‘turned over in all their facets by the skilful fingers of the lapidary, and set in the context by an exquisite industry which reminds one of the art of the jewellers’.\(^5\)

Another French critic, Olivier Leroy, claims that ‘Lamb a fait plus que lire Browne, qu’aimer Browne, il s’en est inspiré, presque nourri’.\(^5\) Lamb’s stylistically Brownean ‘A Chapter on Ears’ begins with words that bear this out:

\[
\text{Mistake me not, reader, — nor imagine that I am by nature destitute of those exterior twin appendages, hanging ornaments, and (architecturally speaking) handsome volutes to the human capital.}\]
\(^5\)

There are other miniature essays which recall the temper of *Pseudodoxia*. To William Hone’s *Every-Day Book* (1825-6) Lamb contributed, with a similar gesture in the direction of Browne’s style and matter, essays on ‘Dog Days’, the unfortunate nature of the twelfth of August, the ass, and squirrels. He published in the *New Monthly Magazine* a series entitled ‘Popular Fallacies’, in which he refuted common misconceptions (‘That a Man must not Laugh at his own Jest’,

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\(^6\) Mario Praz, ‘Sir Thomas Browne’, *English Studies* 11 (1929), 170-1.

\(^7\) Olivier Leroy, *Le Chevalier Sir Thomas Browne, médecin, styliste et métaphysicien* (Paris, 1931), 312.

\(^8\) *The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 1, 518.
Furthermore, for Lamb, as for Browne, language was a political statement; the choices he made about the kind of language he should employ were grounded not only in aesthetic considerations, but in revolutionary ones, for they demonstrated the autonomy of language and its scope for achieving spiritual urgency regardless of the prevailing climate of taste and cultural politics.

Lamb’s absorption of Browne’s style is unusual, but the fact that the style proves attractive to him is not. Style is central to the response of Thomas De Quincey, who offers his thoughts on Browne in an essay entitled ‘Elements of Rhetoric’ that first appeared in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in December 1828. Browne is deemed to be ‘deep, tranquil, and majestic’, ‘silently premeditating’ his diction ‘as under some genial instinct of incubation’. De Quincey writes of the ‘solemn chords’ of *Hydriotaphia*, and quotes passages that call up an impassioned comment:

> What a melodious ascent as of a prelude to some impassioned requiem breathing from the pomps of earth, and from the sanctities of the grave! What a *fluctus decumanus* of rhetoric! Time expounded, not by generations or centuries, but by the vast periods of conquests and dynasties.

He continues at some length, before claiming that ‘We will not, however, attempt a descant upon the merits of Sir T. Browne, after the admirable one by Coleridge’. Browne and Jeremy Taylor, ‘if not absolutely the foremost in the accomplishments of art’, are ‘undoubtedly, the richest, the most dazzling, and,  

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59 Others to write pieces with titles strongly suggestive of Brownean influence include Hazlitt (‘On the Shyness of Scholars’, ‘The Fear of Death’) and Leigh Hunt (‘Of Dreams’, ‘On Death and Burial’, ‘A Treatise on Devils’).

with reference to their matter, the most captivating, of all rhetoricians'. With those words 'with reference to their matter' De Quincey defines his difference from his contemporaries. Somewhat conventionally, he suggests that Browne's prose is characterized by a mixture of 'eloquent passion and rhetorical fancy'; yet the result of this is more exactly described – as a 'middle species of composition, more various and stimulating to the understanding than pure eloquence, more gratifying to the emotions than naked rhetoric'. Crucially, as he sees, in the seventeenth century 'science was unborn as a popular interest, and the commercial activities of after times were yet sleeping in their rudiments'. De Quincey considers Browne’s style, manner and matter to embody the characteristics of an uncommercial age, as well, more particularly, as those of a scholarly, rather obscure amateur.

It was the style of Browne, more than any of his other attributes, that exercised another of his nineteenth-century critics, William Hazlitt, whose thoughts on the subject are best shown in a lecture he delivered comparing the prose of Bacon, Browne and Jeremy Taylor. Their matter does not interest him; his concern is with how they write, not with what they write about. Browne, he argues, chose 'the incomprehensible and impracticable as almost the only subjects fit for a lofty and lasting contemplation, or for the exercise of a solid faith'. The view is one that pays little heed to the real bearings of Browne’s faith; Hazlitt merely wants Browne to be an addict of the baffling and the unlikely. In what follows, there are moments when his criticism of Browne assumes a style that resembles Browne’s. Tom Paulin has usefully discussed Hazlitt’s

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61 The Works of Thomas De Quincey, Vol. 6 (articles 1826-1829), 166.
enthusiasm for incorporating in his own prose the virtues he identifies in others. He identifies Hazlitt's conviction that prose 'must have an active, decisive energy that binds reason and instinct together'; Hazlitt particularly appreciates Bacon because he is 'highly sensitive to concrete particulars'. Instead of being stimulated by the moral, theological and medical exigencies that caused Browne to adopt his mode of writing, Hazlitt's criticism of him is predicated solely on the idiosyncrasy of personal taste. 'He pushes a question to the utmost verge of conjecture, that he may repose on the certainty of doubt,' Hazlitt claims, adding dramatically that 'He turns the world round for his amusement, as if it was a globe of paste-board'. While Browne's writing is certainly capable of ludic flights of fancy and alarming conceits, it is altogether more morally strenuous than Hazlitt seems prepared to acknowledge. The reading Hazlitt offers is partial and self-serving. In similar vein he suggests that Browne 'In describing himself, ... deals only in negatives', and suggests also Browne's habitual mode of operating:

He stands on the edge of the world of sense and reason, and gains a vertigo by looking down at impossibilities and chimeras. Or he busies himself with the mysteries of the Cabbala, or the enclosed secrets of the heavenly quincunxes, as children are amused with tales of the nursery.

But Browne is not at all like a child; the vertigo he experiences is the dizzying pull of illuminated faith. When Hazlitt seeks to illustrate the qualities of Browne's prose, he quotes from Hydriotaphia, selecting the conclusion of 'this singular and unparalleled performance', of which he reproduces more than a

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thousand words. The decision to characterize Browne’s style by quoting from the
final part of Hydriotaphia is conditioned more by a desire to show Browne at his
most extreme and exalted than by an eagerness to give a true picture of the way
he writes. The conclusion of Hydriotaphia may be magnificent, but it shows only
one dimension of Browne’s prose. In the service of his rather incomplete
portrayal of Browne’s style, Hazlitt reproduces Coleridge’s judgements, and, like
De Quincey, considers the differences between Browne and Jeremy Taylor. ‘The
elocution of the one is like a river,’ he avers, while ‘that of the other is more like
an aqueduct’. Browne is the latter; his style is ‘stately, abrupt, and
concentrated’. Hazlitt is not sensitive to the fact that Browne really writes in
several different styles. Browne is dislocated from his context and his purposes;
Hazlitt’s critique is textural, not historical.

In his essay ‘On Criticism’ he describes what he terms the ‘Occult
School’, who ‘prefer Sir Thomas Brown to the Rambler by Dr Johnson, and
Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy to all the writers of the Georgian Age’. The
Occult School read their authors in an adventitious fashion, but Hazlitt is himself
equally guilty of this. In ‘On Familiar Style’ he offers a generous reading of his
contemporary Lamb, who is ‘the only imitator of old English style I can read
with pleasure’, and classes Browne with Burton as one of the ‘old English
authors ... [who] are a kind of mediators between us and the more eccentric and
whimsical modern, reconciling us to his peculiarities’. Lamb’s prose offers
what he terms, in deliberately Johnsonian phrase, ‘A well of native English

64 Hazlitt, VI, 334, 335, 341.
65 Hazlitt, VIII, 225.
66 Ibid., 245.
undefiled'. In his essay 'On Old English Writers and Speakers' in The Plain Speaker, Hazlitt cites Browne, along with Bacon and Baxter and Taylor, as one of those whose prose is characterized by the 'accumulation of past records' and by 'Images ... piled on heaps'. Hazlitt had an ambivalent view of Johnson; he was clearly influenced by him, yet protested that he lacked 'any particular fineness of organic sensibility'. Ultimately, Hazlitt's interest in Browne may be considered of a piece with his enthusiasm for recuperating the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Writing on Elizabethan literature, he explains:

If I can do anything to rescue some of these writers from hopeless obscurity, and to do them right, ... I shall have succeeded in what I chiefly propose.

His act of rescue, like so many acts of rescue, serves him as much as it serves its beneficiaries.

On 3 December 1826 Hazlitt's near-contemporary Thomas Carlyle records having recently read Religio and Hydriotaphia. He remarks the 'still, elegiac mood' of the conclusion to the latter, and, describing it as 'like the song of some departed Saint flitting faint under the everlasting canopy of Night', he reflects that 'Browne must have been a good man'. His other comments indicate that he likes the last chapter of The Garden of Cyrus best, while Religio prompts him to suspect that Browne may be 'a moral dandy'. Noting that there is a life by Johnson, he wonders 'Qualis?' A later entry repeats the reference to Johnson's

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67 Hazlitt, XII, 320.
68 Hazlitt, IV, 176.
69 Hazlitt, VI, 176.
Life, which he still shows no indication of having read, despite his interest in Browne's personality. Then again, his notebooks reveal little enthusiasm for Johnson; he reads Boswell, and concludes that Johnson 'has no strange ideas to shew, no curious modes of feelings'—'he only does well what every one can do in some way'. Carlyle's criticisms, though much briefer than those of Hazlitt or Coleridge, reveal something of the essential character of Browne's nineteenth-century after-life. Once Johnson has made it possible to see Browne as a stylist, critics focused on this aspect of his writing at the expense of all others. Browne's writing invites artful comparison; the simile Carlyle employs ('like the song of some departed Saint... ') is self-consciously exotic. Browne is appreciated for his most extravagant moments and sonorous phrases—in this case the cadenzas that close Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus. The moral dimension of his work is deliberately underplayed. Though the criticisms offered in the early nineteenth century may differ from each other, they are united in their emphasis on Browne the stylist, on the style as a reflection of the man, and on the timelessness of Browne, or on the irrelevance of a precisely historical view of his work.

One final nineteenth-century English response to Browne that may be considered in relation Johnson's work is that of Hester Piozzi (formerly Johnson's patron, Hester Thrale). In the winter of 1811 Mrs Piozzi read and annotated Pseudodoxia Epidemica. There is no evidence that she was influenced to do so by an awareness of Johnson's interest in Browne, but she must have

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71 Thomas Carlyle, Two Notebooks, 90.
72 Ibid., 60.
been aware of the existence of the *Life of Browne* and of the large number of quotations from Browne in the *Dictionary*. She owned the fifth edition of *Pseudodoxia*, the 1669 printing for the assigns of Edward Dod, which also contained *Hydriotaphia* and *The Garden of Cyrus*. The volume, which is in the library of the University of Virginia, was examined and described by Majl Ewing in an article published in 1943. We know that this was not Mrs Piozzi’s first contact with Browne’s works. On 26 May 1793 she recorded her thoughts on the subject of eternity, concluding that ‘Eternity is only time prolonged & Sir Thos Browne is of my Mind, but Sir Kenelm Digby says We talk nonsense’.73 The annotations in her copy of *Pseudodoxia*, however, constitute an intimate, almost editorial response.

When Browne in Book III, Chapter 12 of *Pseudodoxia* writes that God made Eve for Adam as ‘an help unto generation; for as for any other help, it had been fitter to have made another man’, Mrs Piozzi marks the passage with a sharp ‘Not so’, adding that ‘The fall was even in those words predicted and as by the man & woman all were ruined, so by the woman only all were restored!!!’74 She explains the scarcity of ambidextrous persons rather differently from Browne:

Nurses and mothers carry us when Babies on their Left Arm.... so her Right Arm may be at Liberty for use or Defense... & that Posture squeezes up our left hand to her Body, so that it is seldom brought into early Action.

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74 Majl Ewing, ‘Mrs Piozzi Peruses Browne’, *PQ* 22 (1943), 113.
She is especially interested in the superstitions relating to numbers. Browne is exercised by the notion that a man is entitled to a life of threescore years and ten. He writes:

That year must be of greatest danger which is the period of all the rest; and fewest safely pass thorow that, which is set as bound for few or none to pass.

Mrs Piozzi, who was seventy when she read *Pseudodoxia*, writes vigorously:

‘Awful Period to the writter [sic] of this note in 1811.’ Elsewhere, Browne’s refusal either to support or deny the existence of mermaids prompts her to note that ‘the Scots pretend to have seen a mermaid on their coast this year but nobody believes them’. Yet she is also happy to endorse Browne’s eccentricity. The passage in Book VI which sees him announce that the end of the world will be marked by men rising out of the earth and the graves shooting up their concealed seeds inspires the marginalium ‘Very good!’

In keeping with Johnson’s enthusiasm for the final chapter of *Hydriotaphia*, four of Mrs Piozzi’s five comments on the work deal with this part of it. But when Browne writes that ‘Happy are they whom Privacy makes innocent’, she counters with the view that ‘Privacy does not make men Innocent. It often makes them guilty’. This is the general tone of her comments; she is a disputatious, attentive reader, unwilling to accept a notion just because it is pleasingly expressed. Browne’s expression does not in fact elicit much of a response from Mrs Piozzi; perhaps the most striking detail of her forty marginal comments on her reading is that she only once remarks on Browne’s style, when she pronounces a passage in *Hydriotaphia* ‘very pretty’ – the adjective a

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75 Ewing, ‘Mrs Piozzi Peruses Browne’, 114, 116-118.
peculiarly unlikely one. Her comments show no clear sign of having been conditioned by Johnson’s thoughts on Browne, but, like Johnson, she is intrigued by Browne’s observations on gender and numerology, and we may note with interest that she chose to read this volume at all – let alone annotate it so energetically.

* * *

The nineteenth-century rediscovery of Browne was not confined to English letters. Indeed, it is curious that, even though an enthusiasm for Browne was communicated between certain English Romantic writers, others who had little in common chose, at approximately the same time, to boost his reputation. In turning to Browne, they recovered a voice that articulated their feelings and preoccupations. In America, Browne’s example ‘helped expand Melville’s sense of what constituted art by suggesting ways to adapt historical and “scientific” information to literary purposes’, with the consequence that *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* played a part in the design of *Moby-Dick*.76 There is an apparent debt to Browne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story ‘Rappaccini’s Daughter’,77 and F. O. Matthiessen convincingly suggests the shades of Browne in Thoreau.78

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76 Brian Foley, ‘Herman Melville and the Example of Sir Thomas Browne’, *MP* 81 (1984), 271.
77 This is mentioned by several critics of Hawthorne. For instance, see Luther S. Luedtke, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient* (Indianapolis, 1989), 171-2. Hawthorne’s enthusiasm for Johnson is suggested in many places, including his first novel *Fanshawe* (1828), in which his old school is fictionalized as the ‘Happy Valley of Abyssinia’.
Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Thoreau argues in the middle of a series of unconnected literary reflections

That [it] is a superfluous wonder, which Dr Johnson expresses at the assertion of Sir Thomas Browne, that ‘his life has been a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not history but a piece of poetry, and would sound like a fable’. The wonder is rather that all men do not assert as much.  

The enthusiasm of these Americans for Browne may have been a consequence of their taste for writers such as Lamb and Coleridge, but it is in itself striking. A writer like Emerson, whose work is deeply concerned with ideas of progress, seems remarkably different from Browne, whose writings so frequently deal with the morbid and the moribund. Yet as Ruth Vande Kieft suggests, ‘Emerson is like Browne in his habit of seeing the spiritual beneath and within all natural phenomena’.  

Emerson was compared to Browne by Melville, Thoreau and Longfellow. In March 1849 Melville wrote to his friend Evert Duyckinck, ‘Lay it down that had not Sir Thomas Browne lived, Emerson would not have mystified’. He continued: ‘The truth is that we are all sons, grandsons, or nephews or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire.’ The following month he enquired of the same correspondent, ‘Who in the name of the trunk-makers would think of reading Old Burton were his book published

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81 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 101.
for the first time today?' He reflects that 'All ambitious authors should have ghosts capable of revisiting the world, to snuff up the steam of adulation.'

Emerson's revival of the spirit of Browne began while he was an undergraduate at Harvard, where the seventeenth-century author proved a welcome alternative to the stately logic of ancient rhetoric, and continued during his thirties and forties. We know that he borrowed *Certain Miscellany Tracts* from the library of the Boston Athenaeum on 28 December 1830 and returned it on 1 January of the following year. Not long after this, on 1 April 1831, he took out *Religio Medici*, which he returned it on 10 May. On 29 December 1830 (the day after borrowing *Certain Miscellany Tracts*) he writes in his notebook that

'Hydriotaphia of Sir Thos Browne smells in every word of the sepulchre' – a judgement itself strongly redolent of Coleridge. Emerson here suggests Browne’s frequent concern with the decayed and decaying; in this Emerson and Browne are quite different. Yet his phrasing ('smells in every word') implies a close reading; the difference of temper does not preclude Emerson’s attentive interest.

He proceeds to quote without comment seven passages from *Hydriotaphia*, before concluding his entry with a string of aphoristic observations. 'Every science,' he writes, with implied reference to his reading, 'is the record or account of the dissolution of the objects it considers. All history is an epitaph.'

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82 Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Chicago, 1993), 121, 128.
All life a progress toward death'. Writing in May 1831, after reading *Religio*, he observes:

You read Burton or Montaigne or Sir Thos Browne. — You read Bacon, & you are in wonder at the endless profusion of wise observations which they seem to have barreled up in their great heads from the vast commonplaces of mankind.  

He does also have misgivings about the usefulness of these authors; in his journal entry for 13 October 1835 he complains of the credulity of the English writers of the centuries before Bacon, adding that there is ‘A great bump of nonsense in Bacon & in Brown’. But the ‘bump’ is a mark of unevenness, not of failure, and it is part of what Emerson is interested to find in Browne’s works.

His partial disavowal of Browne is evident again when he writes, on 3 August 1835, to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. He tells her that

A great tendency I like better than a small revelation & hate to be imprisoned in premature theories. I have no appetite such as Sir Thos. Browne avows for ‘difficultest mysteries that my faith may have some exercise’ but I had rather not understand in God’s world than understand thro’ & thro’ in Bentham’s or Spurzheim’s.

Such criticism notwithstanding, his appetite for Browne persisted. It seems that in the summer of 1839 he visited his friend George W. Haven in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and was impressed by his host’s reading to him from Browne.

That same year he gave a series of lectures in Concord, and the local people showed their appreciation by buying him a four-volume set of Browne’s *Works*.
We cannot know whose idea this gift was, but he acted on it immediately; a letter of 9 July to his friend Margaret Fuller mentions that he has been perusing the volumes. We know from the records of his library that, together with Wilkin’s edition (inscribed ‘the gift of Concord friends’ in Emerson’s own hand), he possessed a copy of the 1756 Christian Morals that included Johnson’s Life. Besides this he owned Alexander Young’s American edition of Miscellaneous Writings (1831) and two editions of Religio Medici. He also owned Arthur Murphy’s twelve-volume Works of Johnson, which included the Life of Browne.

There is only a modest amount of evidence for supposing a relationship between Emerson’s interest in Browne and his knowledge of Johnson. He suggests the possible appeal to him not just of Johnson, but of a book like Pseudodoxia, when he writes in his college theme book for June 1820 that

we require such works as the Rambler & books of that description, moral & learned & argumentative writers, minds of a firmer make, built up to persuade & convince the stubborn, employing themselves in encountering prejudices & detecting frauds, in checking & chastising profane abuse, & subjecting to controul those fiery passions which corrode & fret the soul.

Writing in his journal on 29 June 1837, he mentions that he has been reading Boswell’s Life of Johnson, and has been moved by this to look at others of his works. ‘Strong good sense had Johnson,’ he declares, ‘but he no philosopher, as

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89 Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, II, 207, n. 103.
90 Ibid., 209.
91 Walter Harding, Emerson’s Library (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1967), 42-3.
92 Ibid., 153.
likewise he says *philosophical* when he means *scientific*. He later criticises Johnson’s lexicography:

he is a Muttonhead at a definition. Before Coleridge he would be dumb. Much of his fame is doubtless owing to the fact that he concentrates the traits of English character. He is a glorified John Bull, so downright, so honest, so strongminded & so headstrong.

He impugns Johnson’s lack of real experience of the phenomena he attempts to define, claiming that ‘Pope and Johnson and Addison write as if they had never seen the face of the country but had only read of trees & rivers in books’. Having described certain natural phenomena to emphasize his own communion with the world he inhabits, he concludes: ‘Did they ever prick their fingers with the thorn of a gooseberry? Did they ever hear the squeak of a bat, or see his flitting?’ It is this very kind of communion with nature that makes Browne attractive; he is a writer who inhabits with visceral intensity the world about which he writes. In a notebook entry from 1827 Emerson quotes several times from Browne. Saluting what is pleasing about the seventeenth-century authors, he cites Johnson’s *Life of Browne* and then reproduces Whitefoot’s observation (quoted by Johnson) that

> The horizon of his understanding was much larger than the hemisphere of the world – all that was visible in the heavens he knew so well that few that under them knew so much &c &c and of the earth he had such a minute & exact geographical knowledge as if he had been by Divine Providence ordained perveyor general of the whole terrestrial orb & its products minerals plants & animals.  

What draws Emerson to Browne is his intuitive, compendious mode of thought – uncircumscribed by institutional direction. Matthiessen suggests that Browne expresses perfectly Emerson’s doctrine that the universe is ‘a system of

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94 *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VI, 339, 348.
95 Ibid., 62-3.
symbolical correspondences’, as well as his belief that ‘nature is to be studied by
the method of analogy and each fact to be read for its spiritual meaning’.96

Emerson, and others like him, are keen to construct a picture of intellectual
history that portrays the Enlightenment as an aberration. Laurence Stapleton
suggestively claims a connection between Browne and Emerson; the latter ‘wrote
meditative prose worthy of its descent from Browne’, and

> Without any limiting circumference of dogma, Emerson
> redisCOVERs a way to the intersection of eternity with time,
> through the partnership of the mind in the directions of change,
> and through ‘the quality of the moment’. 97

The ‘quality of the moment’ may be taken as a representative summary of what
both Emerson and Browne – unlike Johnson – seek, and are often able, to
entertain. A pre-scientific world, or a deliberately supra-scientific one, enables
this indulgence of the present. Browne’s capacity for living and writing with
great intensity and an intense awareness of self makes him a guide or a
touchstone for any writer who prizes such qualities. Matthiessen suggests that

> In reading … Browne… they [Emerson, Melville, et al.] were
> affected … by qualities of their own language which the
> eighteenth century had allowed to decay, and which they were
determined to renew. 98

In addition, they were affected by the power of this language to realize the self,
and by its indulgence of the imagination, which Browne and Emerson were
united in considering to be every bit as real as the embodied world of scientific
objects.

96 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 107.
97 Laurence Stapleton, The Elected Circle: Studies in the Art of Prose (Princeton, New Jersey,
1973), 194.
98 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 102.
A final instance of Browne's after-life and Johnson's role in it is worth recording. In 1799 there was published a printed text of the English playwright Edward Jemingham's *The Peckham Frolic*. The three-act comedy, also known as *Nell Gwyn*, was never performed. Jemingham was at best no more than a whimsical writer, but *The Peckham Frolic* offers an unexpected sidelight on Johnson's influence upon the reputation of Browne. In Act Three of the play, the King (Charles the Second) and his entourage await the nuptials of Sir Oliver Luke and Anne Killigrew. The King decides they should dismiss their servants and sit down to dine together, relying solely on dumb-waiters. The poet Lord Rochester (who incidentally happens to have been attended on his death-bed by Edward Browne) ventures to observe:

> I perfectly concur with his Majesty, concerning the advantage of dumb-waiters. The ease and freedom of convivial festivity is thus better ascertained, with all the gay privileges of Commensality.

The King is perplexed: 'I never before heard the word commensality'.

Rochester replies that 'It is an expressive word, invented by my friend, Sir Thomas Browne, the celebrated physician at Norwich'. Nell Gywn intervenes:

> Is it possible, Lord Rochester, that you should call that man your friend? wicked, profane man! he wishes in his *Religio Medici*, these are his very words, 'that we might procreate like trees without conjunction!'

At this point the dramatist Sir Charles Sedley enters the fray, complaining that 'This is treason against the enthroned majesty of nature'. Thomas Killigrew (the playwright, impresario and wit, famously boxed on the ear by Rochester in the

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King’s presence) is moved to wonder, ‘What does Lady Browne say to such a contemptuous declaration?’ Rochester answers:

She, like a loving wife, obtained his pardon from the queen of nature, on condition that he should make an *Amende Honorable*, to which, it seems, he has consented, for he is the father of ten children.

It is the King, however, who is allowed the last word on the matter:

As I am not a disciple of Sir Thomas Browne, nor consequently a friend to the arboreal procreation, I propose a bumper to the happiness of the bride and bridegroom.

The episode is somewhat incongruous in the context of a play that is essentially a comic romp. It is curious to note that the observation of Browne’s that prompts debate is the familiar one about the ridiculousness of sexual intercourse, which is quoted by Johnson in the *Life*. It is equally worth noting that the word Rochester uses to the King’s bafflement attracts comment from Johnson in the *Life*, where he writes of his subject’s contribution to the English language:

BROWNE ... poured in a multitude of exotick words; many, indeed, useful and significant, which, if rejected, must be supplied by circumlocution, such as *COMMENSALITY* for the state of many living at the same table (*CM*, 48).

Furthermore, Jemingham reproduces Johnson’s inaccuracy over the number of children Browne had with his wife. Here we witness not only the mediating presence of Johnson in general conceptions of Browne, but the capacity of Johnson’s *Life of Browne* to inspire a creative tribute. Jemingham’s forgotten and frivolous play is peculiarly suggestive of the role Johnson performed in shaping and promoting Browne’s posthumous image. Johnson makes it possible

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100 See *CM*, 15-16.
to detach Browne from his political and religious contexts. Once Johnson has initiated a tradition of thinking of Browne as a writer, he is ready for appropriation by anyone who chooses to appropriate him.
Appendix A: the availability of Johnson’s Dictionary – print runs and prices

Johnson’s Dictionary was initially printed in an edition of 2,000 copies, at £4. 10s.. Within months, a second edition was appearing in weekly numbers, of which there were ultimately 165. The release of the Dictionary in parts was intended to make it available to users who could not afford the expense of purchasing the entire text in one go. Early parts of the edition were issued in a run of 2,300, but the printer, Strahan, reduced this to 768 for the second volume owing to declining demand. It was almost ten years before a third edition, which was published in 1765 to coincide with Johnson’s edition of Shakespeare. 1,024 copies of this edition were printed, and eight years then elapsed before a new edition. This was the revised fourth edition, which appeared in 1773. It was issued in a run of 1,250 copies, still priced at £4. 10s.. This remained the price for the fifth (1784) edition as well. The fifth was the last two-volume folio edition and was printed in a run of 1,000 copies. In other words, at the time of Johnson’s death, and thirty years after its first publication, there were about 6,000 copies of English editions of the Dictionary in circulation, in addition to a few hundred copies of the two limited Dublin issues of 1775 and 1777. Shortly after Johnson’s death, the reach of the Dictionary was extended when a less expensive edition became available. This was quarto sixth edition, published in weekly numbers commencing November 1785, in a run of over 3,000. These were available at sixpence each, and parts were issued over a period of eighty-four weeks,
giving a total cost of £2. 2s.¹ Even this reduced price was unlikely, however, to make it widely affordable. For comparison, Johnson’s edition of *Christian Morals* was priced at 2s. 6d.. A complete bound *Idler* was available for five shillings, and the octavo of one of the *Dictionary’s* competitors, Benjamin Martin’s *Lingua Britannica Reformata*, for six shillings. Yet there were other publications intended for a mass audience that were comparably expensive; for instance, Smollett’s *History of England* cost £3. 3s..²

² See Gentleman’s Magazine 26 (1756), 139; 31 (1761), 479; 19 (1749), 384; 27 (1757), 191.
Appendix B: a list of the words under which Browne is cited by Johnson in the Dictionary

Where Browne is Johnson’s sole authority for a word, it is marked with a *, and where the quotation appears to have been attributed to him erroneously it is marked with a ^

<p>| to abbreviate | to abduce * | abecedary * |
| aberrancy * | aberring * | abrupted * |
| abscession | to absterse * | abstrusity * |
| acceleration | access | to accommodate |
| accomplishment | to account | accountant (n.) * |
| accubation * | to accuse | acorn |
| acuteness | to actuate | acuminated |
| adjacency * | adaptation | to addle |
| admittance | adjection * | admissible |
| adolescence | admixture | to admove * |
| to advantage | adorement * | advancement |
| affectedly | advenient | advocacy * |
| to afford | affirmatively * | affluxion * |
| aggregate | aggelation * | aggeneration * |
| agriculture | aggregation | agreeable |
| alexipharmick * | albugineous | agreeable |
| allegeable * | alimenter | alimently |
| alternity * | allowable | alternation * |
| to amass | altitude | aluminous |
| ambulation * | ambidexter * | ambidextrous |
| amphibology | amenity * | to amit * |
| amplification | amphisbaena | to amplify |
| amulet | to amplify | amputation |
| anatomy | anatiferous * | anatomically * |
| animation | androgynally * | angular |
| to annihilate | animator * | annex * |
| anomalously | annually | anomalous |
| antepileptic * | to answer | antediluvian |
| to anticipate | anteriour * | anthropophagy * |
| antipodal * | antidotal * | antidote |
| apodictical | antler | aphorism |
| apophysm | apogeum | apologue |
| apparition | apoplectical | apostume |
| appertenance * | appeerer * | appellation |
| to approach | apprehensible * | apprehension |
| approvable * | approachment * | appropriable * |
| aquatile * | approximate * | approximation |
| | aquiline | arbitrary |</p>
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to float
flourish
flux
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gentilitious
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gibbous
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glasswort
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to graduate
granivorous
gravity
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gunpowder

gymnastically *
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358
| mediety * | membrane |
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| menstruous | meridional |
| meridional | mermaid |
| meseraick | meteorological |
| meteorology * | migration |
| miller | minious * |
| ministerial | minoration * |
| minority | miscellaneous |
| to miscast * | misconstruction |
| mistakable * | to mistrust |
| mixtion | mole |
| molestation | monarchical |
| monastical | morbosity * |
| morse | motor * |
| to mouth | mucro * |
| mugient * | multiparous |
| multiplication | to multiply |
| mundificative | murrey |
| to mute | mutilation |
| to mysterize * |

| nail | namesake |
| narcotick (adj.) | narwhale * |
| to narrow | nasicornous * |
| naturity * | navel |
| to nauseate | neck |
| negro * | newt |
| nightingale | ninth * |
| nodosity | nodous * |
| nonexistence | nonnaturals * |
| northwest * | nostril |
| novenary | novity * |
| noxious | numerally * |
| numerist * | numerosity |
| nutgall * | nutmeg |

| objectively | oblation |
| oblivion | obtumescence * |
| observable | observably * |
| occasional | occidental |
| to occupy | ocular |
| odour | official |
| to oil | oiliness |
| omission * | omission |
| opacity | to open |
| ophiophagous * | opiniatrity |
| optick (n.) | opticks |

<p>| to open ^ | obliverously |
| to obstruct | to obscure |
| to occlude * | odd |
| officiousness | official |
| omniscient | operable * |
| to opinion | oraculously |</p>
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| Proneness   | Propinquity  | Proverbial  |
| Prosodian   | Prostration  | Proverbially *|
| Proud       | Proverbiality*| Pubescence  |
| Provincial  | Puerility    | Puberility  |
| Pubescent * | Pulsation    | Punctual    |
| Pullet      | To put       | Punctual    |
| Puncture    | Putrefactive | Punctual    |
| Putrescence *| Quadrant    | Quadrant    |
| Quacksalver | To qualify   | Quadrant    |
| Quadruped   | Queasy       | Quadrant    |
| Quaternity *| Questuary *  | Quadrant    |
| Questionable| Quadrant     | Quadrant    |
| Radicamion *| Radiance     | Radicality *|
| Radically   | To radicate  | Rainbow     |
| Rampart     | Ranny *      | Rat         |
| Ratiocination| Rationality | Receipt     |
| Receptary   | Reception    | Receptory * |
| Recess      | Reciprocation| To reclaim  |
| Recourse    | Rectangle    | Rectangularly *|
| Rectifiable *| Recumbency  | Recumbency  |
| Recurrence *| Recumbency   | Recumbency  |
| To reect    | Recurrence   | Recumbency  |
| Reflux      | Recumbency   | Recumbency  |
| Refuge      | Regardable   | Regardable  |
| Recurrence *| To reimpregnate* | Regardable* |
| Regression *| To relieve   | Regardable  |
| Relater     | Remotion     | Regardable  |
| Remotely    | Representer | Regardable  |
| Repandous * | Repugnantly *| Regardable  |
| To reproduce| Resistibly   | Regardable  |
| To resign   | To respect   | Regardable  |
| Resolution | Retrainer *  | Regardable  |
| Retiff (adj.)| To retard *  | Regardable  |
| To retain   | Retropgression*| Regardable  |
| Retrocopulation *| Revealer | Revealer |
| Retromingent *| Revealer   | Revealer    |

361
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trajectory

to transcend
transsexism *
transition
transmigration

to travel

to trim

triturable *
tropical
trutination *
tutelary

to vary
valetudinary
vegetability *
veneficial *
venery

verbality *
vermiparous *
vertically *

veterinarian *
virility
visive *
vitriolous
viviparous

to unarm

to uncivilly *
to unconsidered
undeniably
undulation

unfrequent *
uniparous *

unlearnedly *
unpetrified *
unready
unridiculous *
unsavoury

unspecified *

to unteach
untouched
to unwish

volcano
vomitory

urinary
uroscopy *
vulgaritv

traditionally
transanimation *

transcriptively *
transgressive *
to transmigrate
transpiration

trisulc *
trochilicks

truth
turgescency *
typography

to vary
vehicle
veneficiously *
venial

verisimility
versed

verticity
to violate

virtuality *
vital

vivacity

umbilical
uncarnate *
unconcocted

uncontrollably
undiscerned

unequivocal *
unfrequently *
unity

unmasterable *
unquarrellable *
unrequitable

unsatisfactory
unseconded

unsucessive
unthorny *

untravelled

vocabulary
volitation *
urbanity

urine
uterine

vulnerary

to veer

venation *
venenation *

venomous

veritable

verticallty *
vesicle

virent *
vascosity

vitellary *
vivency *

umbrosity *
uncircumstantial *

uncalgealed *
unctuosity *

undululary *
unestablished *

unicorn

univocal

unobsequiousness *

unquestioned

unrestrained

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unsigned

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unto

unveritable *
volatile *

vomitive *

urinal

to urine

utility

364
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365
Explanatory note:

For convenience of use, I have divided my bibliography into three main sections. In the first I list the works I have consulted in relation to Johnson. In the second I list those consulted in relation to Browne. There then follows a brief list of the few published articles that explicitly consider the relationship between Browne and Johnson, which I have collected separately in order to highlight the very fact of their existence. My third and final section comprises other primary sources and a list of the library catalogues to which I refer in Chapter One.

Clearly, there are some secondary works that relate to both Browne and Johnson, without actually being about their relationship. Those dealing mainly with the eighteenth-century background appear in the first section of the bibliography, while those dealing mainly with the seventeenth-century background appear in the second section.
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380


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