

insisted that Johnson “spoke far better than he wrote.”

But while Johnson in conversation “often played the part of the blustering arch-Tory” and does seem, in Boswell’s pages, to be driven at times by strong prejudices, Johnson the writer, Miller points out, was quite different. Even philosopher David Hume, who disliked Johnson, acknowledged that though “abusive in Company,” he never was so in his writings.

“The writer he most closely resembles,” argues Miller, “is George Orwell. Just as Orwell attacked the cant of international socialism, so Johnson poured cold water on all forms of cant—especially the cant of the sentimental revolution.” Johnson’s conviction that man is driven by many dark passions was at odds with the upbeat school of 18th-century thought that regarded man as innately benevolent. Feelings of benevolence come too cheaply, Johnson believed.

The best place to begin a tour of Johnson’s works, according to Miller, is probably with “his two extended narratives.” *Rasselas* (1759), “which touches on all the

main themes of Johnson’s work—the dangers of solitude as well as man’s restlessness, envy, and self-deception—is sometimes moving and often amusing.” *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) “mixes accurate description with acute reflections about the stages of political and economical development in various parts of Scotland—reflections that anticipate many of the points Adam Smith would make in *The Wealth of Nations*, which appeared a year later.”

Perhaps Johnson’s finest work, says Miller, is his four-volume *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), which uses “telling incidents in a writer’s life to deliver an aphorism about human conduct.” Thus, Johnson writes of Alexander Pope that “his scorn of the great is repeated too often to be real: no man thinks much of that which he despises; and as falsehood is always in danger of inconsistency, he makes it his boast at another time that he lives among them.”

“No doubt there are many pleasures to be gained from Johnson’s conversation,” concludes Miller, “but there are far more to be gained from his writing.”

The Return of the Author

“The Primacy of the Literary Imagination, or Which Came First: The Critic or the Author?” by Paul A. Cantor, in *Literary Imagination* (Spring 1999), Assn. of Literary Scholars and Critics, 105 Franklin Dr., Ste. 220, Mount Pleasant, Mich. 48858.

With the Author famously proclaimed dead, academic critics in recent decades have stepped self-confidently to the fore, all of literature theirs to conquer, to deconstruct, to expose for its nefarious biases. At times, the critics have even seemed to suggest that *they* are the truly creative force. But they ought to be a little more humble about their calling, suggests Cantor, a professor of English at the University of Virginia.

The history of literature and criticism in this century, he says, shows that, in general, “critics have been more indebted to authors than authors have been to critics. Critics may have appeared to be working independently of authors, but in fact they have usually derived their ideas of what literature is and their standards for judging literary works from the new exemplars authors continually provide.”

The mid-century New Criticism movement is a premier example, Cantor argues. “The values the New Critics searched out and praised in literature—ambiguity, irony, paradox, metaphoric complexity, precision and concision of statement—are precisely the literary qualities that characterize the modernist revolution in poetry” brought about by T. S. Eliot and others. Cleanth Brooks and the other New Critics, Cantor says, “forever changed the way we read literature,” and their approach brought out previously neglected aspects of earlier works. But the New Critics and their disciples sometimes went too far. “[To] read the confessional poetry of the Romantics as if it were the anti-confessional poetry of the modernists,” for instance, is “at least in some sense to misread it,” he contends. Moreover, the New Critics eventually began applying their tech-

niques to “all forms of literature,” often losing sight of pertinent differences among genres.

Deconstruction, a more recent, much more theoretical and abstract literary movement, has been similarly inspired—by “the postmodern novel and drama, specifically the works of Samuel Beckett,” Cantor says: The illogical babbling of Beckett’s character Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* shows what all literature is like, in the eyes of the deconstructionists: a text devoid of a single meaning, referring to nothing outside itself, and breaking down on analysis into parts that work against one another, undermining any comprehensive authorial intent. Philosopher Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction, notes Cantor, spent his formative intellectual years in Paris in the 1950s, “just when and where Beckett’s revolutionary works of literature were appearing.”

Today’s Marxist-oriented race/class/gen-

der criticism is likewise “following in the footsteps of creative writers,” Cantor says. Anticipating the current critical view of the English classics in postcolonial studies, Jean Rhys, in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “tries to correct the British colonialist bias” of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Similarly, “Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* rewrites Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* rewrites a series of European works about Africa.”

While it would be “very difficult to assert the pure primacy of literature over theory” in postcolonial studies, since “the literature is so ‘contaminated’ by theory to begin with,” Cantor says, it is clear that the creative authors not only “have made a major contribution” to the field’s theoretical foundations, but also “have generally proven to be more subtle in their criticism than the academic critics.”

Dissolving Gender

Does it matter if the author is a woman? asks novelist Joyce Carol Oates in *The Gettysburg Review* (Spring 1999).

For the feminist critic, it makes a considerable difference to know that the text has been authored by a woman, for a woman’s discourse will presumably differ from a man’s, even were the texts identical. . . . As a writer and a woman, or a woman and a writer, I have never found that I was in possession of a special female language springing somehow from the female body—though I can sympathize with the poetic-mystic yearning that may underlie such a theory. Having been marginalized throughout history—told that we lack souls, are not fully human, are unclean, and that we therefore cannot write, cannot paint, cannot compose music, cannot do philosophy, math, science, politics, or power in its myriad guises—the least of our compensations should be that we are in possession of some special gift brewed in the womb and in mother’s milk. For the practicing woman writer, feminist/gender criticism can be wonderfully nurturing. . . .

Yet this criticism, for all its good intentions, can be restrictive as well, at least for the writer who is primarily a formalist and for whom gender is not a pressing issue in every work. As a writer who happens to be a woman, I choose to write about women, and I choose to write from the perspective of women—but I also choose to write about men, and I choose to write from the perspective of men. I do both with the confidence that, dissolving myself into the self of a fictitious other, I have entered a dimension of consciousness that is not my own in either case, and yet legitimate. Surely it is an error to reduce to a genitally defined essence any individual, whether a woman or a man. For the woman writer especially it is frustrating to be designated as a woman writer, when there is no corresponding category, man writer.