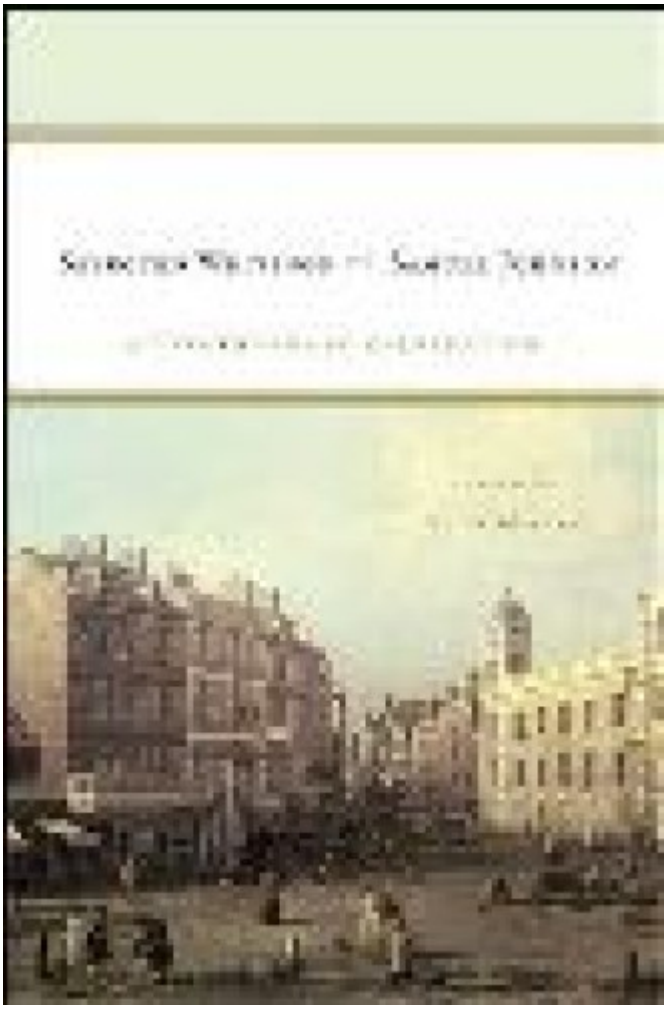
Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings

reviewed by Levi Miller in the April 6, 2010 issue

In Review



Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings

Peter Martin, ed.
Harvard University Press

Some 300 years after his birth in 1709, Samuel Johnson is remembered for having had a very successful biographer and for being eminently quotable. He of course

planned the biographical part by giving his young friend James Boswell access to so much of his life. He would probably have less pleasure about being remembered mainly by quotes on the op-ed pages of our newspapers. In his preface to the works of Shakespeare, Johnson complains that one who tries to recommend Shake speare by means of select quotations will succeed like the “pendant in Hierocles, who when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen.” So there is another quotation.

But there is also value in reading the insights, morals and wit of one of the greatest writers of the English language in his 18th-century context—or, should we say, in reading his paragraphs and short essays. In his own time, Johnson was best known as an essayist, literary critic and lexicographer. Peter Martin is well equipped for the job of editing this collection of Johnson’s writings on a variety of topics, having written two biographies that were critically well received: *A Life of James Boswell* (2000) and *Samuel Johnson*: *A Biography* (2008).

For the nonspecialist readers for whom this volume seems to be intended, Martin wisely has made short periodical essays the focus of the book. One can read in context Johnson’s short reflections on morality, psychology, society, marriage, manners, biography, literature, death and politics; these make up about half of the book. For religious and confessing Christians, Johnson is of special interest for being a devout Anglican believer and a rationalist during the Enlightenment; the backdrop is a conversation with philosophers such as Voltaire, Hume and the American deists. For the most part, Johnson assumed religion and the Christian faith but generally did not write in an apologetic or defensive style.

As I’m writing this review during one of the snowiest winters in several decades here in the mid-Atlantic region, I read Johnson’s 1750 “A Meditation on Spring.” In that short essay, Johnson reflects on the human need to think that a better time may come and to hope for future happiness. Using spring as a metaphor for a better future, he points to one who “always talked of the spring as coming till it was past”: “when it was once past, everyone agreed with him that it was coming.”

That these thoughts were written by someone given to periods of melancholy and depression does not subtract from their value. But it’s the ending that surprises, as Johnson reflects on human curiosity about nature and how it works. He encourages especially his “younger readers” to use their rational minds to explore nature—not as a mystery or religious experience, but to further human knowledge, albeit with a

moral edge, “and to remember that blighted spring makes a barren year, and that the vernal flowers, however beautiful and gay, are only intended by nature as preparatives to autumnal fruits.” It’s easy to see how such a cultural outlook may have led to or at least been friendly to significant advances in scientific and practical discoveries in the 18th-century English-speaking world.

The rest of the volume includes more from Johnson’s monumental literary achieve ments: excerpts from his preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language*; from his fiction work *The History of Rasselas*, *Prince of Abissinia*; from his *Lives of the Poets*; and from his preface to his collection *The Plays of William Shakespeare*. These selections are just a sampling of the output of a literary figure who was the smartest man in London when that was not necessarily considered a failing.