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“That Power of Giving Pleasure”

Johnson on Novelty in the *Rambler*

The paper examines Dr. Johnson’s concept of novelty as a means to aesthetic pleasure. Undertaking the close reading of *Rambler* 121, an early and decisive paper on literary imitation, I argue that the most important critical principle by which Johnson judges ancient and modern imitations is novelty. In this essay, the Virgilian and the Spenserian imitations illustrate the pressure and the dangers of following models. I also consider the critical vocabulary that provides the context of this concept and, drawing on Wimsatt’s method, attempt to reveal the intimate connection between a *Dictionary* entry and a *Rambler* word reflecting upon the possible sources of Johnson’s idea of novelty.

There is a consistent view of novelty as a means to aesthetic effect in Johnson’s oeuvre. The bi-weekly *Rambler*¹ presents the earliest decisive accounts of this recurring principle. It should be noted that Johnson’s other major project, the *Dictionary*,² which was simultaneously compiled with the *Rambler*, conspicuously affects the language and style of the periodical essays. To be sure, “what illustrates a word in the *Dictionary*,” as W. K. Wimsatt argues, “embellishes an idea in the essays.”³ The influence of the lexicon upon the prose essays has long been recognized,⁴ and indeed the parallelisms between the two consciously related exercises have been well established. However, one can still draw productively upon Wimsatt’s method of searching for the context of Johnson’s “pregnant words,” and in the case of our key term,

1. The *Rambler*, which established Johnson’s reputation, ran from March 20, 1750 to March 14, 1752 and contains 208 essays.

2. April 15, 2005 marked the 250th anniversary of the *Dictionary*’s publication.

3. W. K. Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the Rambler and Dictionary of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1948), p. 72.

4. Archibald Campbell, one of Johnson’s contemporary Scottish critics, parodies the interdependence of these works: “He might write his *Ramblers* to make a dictionary necessary and afterwards compile his dictionary to explain his *Ramblers*” (Archibald Campbell, *Lexiphanes* [London, 1767]).

novelty, such a direction can yield new, surprising insights. The purpose of this paper is to examine Johnson's early formulations of the idea of novelty, one of his chief critical principles. To achieve this, therefore, I wish to limit my focus to a *Rambler* essay, in which the concept of novelty prominently figures, by considering the critical vocabulary of this vital concern and its indebtedness to the *Dictionary*. Focusing on an individual essay of the series not only helps us better understand the Johnsonian approach to novelty but may also satisfy the need for discussing the essays "as discrete, self-contained parts within a very loosely organized collection."⁵

The concept of novelty comes into play significantly when Johnson turns to the controversial issues of literary criticism in the essays.⁶ These are the problems of imitation, originality, authority, variety and genius; the old watchwords of critical thinking that become popular and dominant in the eighteenth century. Such concerns can be aptly illustrated by *Rambler* 121, an early critical paper, which defines the power of novelty as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Thus in the essay we find an attempt to explain pleasure in novelty embedded in an argumentation about the dangers of imitations, in other words, the dangers of being overwhelmed by "the burden of the past."⁷

Johnson opens *Rambler* 121 with a classical motto, "O imitatores, servum peccus!" – a short quotation taken from Horace's epistle on the ridiculous practice of slavish imitation.⁸ Horace, in his imaginary letter addressed to Maecenas, complains about

5. Leopold Damrosch, "Johnson's Manner of Proceeding in the *Rambler*," *ELH* 40 (1973) 70–89, p. 71. Damrosch emphasised already in 1973 that paragraphs or sentences are constantly quoted from the *Rambler*, but close analysis of individual pieces has received little attention.

6. In *Rambler* 208, Johnson distinguishes four kinds of essays in the *Rambler*: "the idle sports of imagination," "the disquisitions of criticism," "the pictures of life," and "the essays professedly serious" (*The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss in the *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1969], vol. V, pp. 319–20; all references are to this edition). About one-seventh (31) of the *Ramblers* are concerned with literary criticism, see W. J. Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 294.

7. Originally, the first part of the essay is entitled "The Dangers of Imitation" and the second is "The Impropriety of Imitating Spenser." Bate's idea of "the burden of the past" refers to the crisis of the mid-eighteenth century, when authors were troubled by the problem of following earlier models. See W. J. Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poets* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971).

8. Horace, *Epistles*, 1.19.19: "O you mimics, you slavish herd!" (Horace, *Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica* [The Loeb Classical Library]. English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough [London: Heinemann, 1926]).

being criticised for imitating Greek authors. In defending his originality, he exposes the faults of his accusers calling them a servile herd of imitators. Examining the relationship between the Horatian mottos and the essays, Robert C. Olson asserts that “[o]nly rarely does a Johnsonian essay reflect much more of the Epistle from which it is quoted than the lines of the motto itself and perhaps lines adjacent to it.”⁹ In the case of number 121, we might suspect that Johnson has the unquoted adjacent lines very much in mind, running parallel with and generating his points of attack on servile imitators:

decipit exemplar vitiis imitabile. . .

Libera per vacuum posui vestigia princeps,
non aliena meo pressi pede.¹⁰

The authority of the *Rambler* is, without doubt, Horace, who is cited more than any other writer and, no less important, the authorizing epigraph of the whole series is drawn from the same Latin poet:

Nullius addictus jurare in verba magistri,
Quo me cunque rapit tempestas deferor hospes.¹¹

In fact, the term “nullius in verba” was adopted as a motto by the Royal Society before it appeared on the title page of the *Rambler*. Thus, it seems that Horace’s sense of independence was well suited to both scientific and literary matters. Besides, Johnson’s use of classical mottos reveals his conscious effort to follow the opening device of the *Spectator*, the ultimate model of the *Rambler*. It is more important, however, to recognize Johnson’s purpose implied in both Horatian quotations: to ramble without any settled, authoritative direction and depart freely from his predecessors, ancient or modern, in the essays. In *Rambler* 121 it is exactly this distancing attitude that is required from authors who tend to follow precedent, the prevailing fashion among the moderns. This issue is not, of course, new with the Augustans, since “an imitation of a classic model is always a reference *to* and only thus a depar-

9. Robert C. Olson, *Motto, Context, Essay: The Classical Background of Samuel Johnson’s Rambler and Adventurer Essays* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), p. xvi.

10. Horace, *Epistles*, 1.19.7; 21–22: “A pattern with faults easy to copy leads astray. . . . I was the first to plant free footsteps on a virgin soil; I walked not where others trod.”

11. Horace, *Epistles*, 1.1.14–15: “I am not bound over to swear as any master dictates; wherever the storm drives me, I turn in for comfort.” There are 669 literary allusions or quotations in the *Rambler* of which 406 are from Greek or Latin writers (Horace is cited 103 times). Cf. Bate and Strauss, vol. III, p. xxxii.

ture *from* the model,"¹² but what is interesting is Johnson's primary attack on the model of imitation itself, that is, the classics.

In addition, not only in the original two mottos but also in the revision of their translations we may detect Johnson's departure from authority for the sake of novelty. Studying the complicated textual history of the *Rambler*, Ellen Douglass Leyburn remarks that the idea and the first execution of supplying translations of the mottos to the later issues of the *Rambler* derive from James Elphinston, a Scottish schoolmaster. Johnson, however, substitutes many of the Scottish translations of the Edinburgh edition because he does not find Elphinston's renderings adequate.¹³ As a result, the collected London edition contains Johnson's improvements on the Edinburgh *Rambler*. Interestingly enough, the revision of the general epigraph relies neither on Elphinston's translation¹⁴ nor on any other substitution; it remains in Latin on the title page. Perhaps behind the decision to remove Elphinston's rendering of the authorizing epigraph, lies the hope to demonstrate what "*nullius in verba*" precisely indicates: Johnson's decision of depending on the words of no one. Furthermore, the altered phrasing in the motto selected for *Rambler* 121, however minute it may seem, is characteristic on two accounts. The original version runs as follows: "Avaunt, ye imitators, servile herd!" Leyburn rightly points out that "avaunt" is "a word characteristic of Elphinston's inflated style"¹⁵ which simply becomes "away" in the revised translation appearing in later editions. This particular change in wording is in line with a characteristic trait of Johnsonian critical judgement: it suggests Johnson's dislike of anachronism, and of archaic language use, on the one hand, as well as his appeal, on the other, to novelty of expression, essential points of criticism which are some of the most remarkable issues of *Rambler* 121.

After the epigraph, as a conventional procedure, "an authoritative proposition" follows in the opening paragraphs.¹⁶ Johnson cites the opinion of a general-

12. W. K. Wimsatt, "Imitation as Freedom," *New Literary History* 1 (1970) 215–36, p. 218.

13. Ellen Douglass Leyburn, "The Translations of the Mottoes and Quotations in the *Rambler*," *RES* 62 (1940) 169–76, pp. 169, 172. The original Folio edition (1750–52) is not accompanied by English translations whereas the Edinburgh edition (1750–52) and the collected London edition (1752) are. Not content with Elphinston's translations, Johnson uses twenty-one different sources for renderings of the classical quotations.

14. The general motto is translated by Elphinston in the Edinburgh edition: "Sworn to no master's arbitrary sway, I range where e'er occasion points the way."

15. Leyburn, p. 172.

16. Steven Lynn, "Johnson's *Rambler* and Eighteenth-Century Rhetoric" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 19 (1986) 461–79, p. 467. Lynn convincingly argues for a tendency to authori-

ized authority, a fictitious letter “from one of the universities,” which complains about young students who instead of forming their original sentiments, “content with the secondary knowledge . . . adopt the criticisms and remarks, which happen to drop from those, who have risen, by merit or fortune, to reputation and authority.”¹⁷ Certainly the key words here are reputation and authority against which Johnson repeatedly warns in his essays regarding them as temporary, uncertain and accidental.¹⁸ Accordingly, as a next measure, he proceeds to develop this insight at greater length by revising the authoritative proposition to formulate his own opinion about following precedent. That he takes into protection “these collectors of fortuitous knowledge” (281) without the required severity¹⁹ is based on two much quoted arguments: i.e., “we are equally indebted to foreign assistance,” and “they . . . can seldom add more than some small particle of knowledge, to the hereditary stock devolved from ancient times, the collective labour of a thousand intellects” (282). It is interesting to observe that the opposition of “we” (implying authors) to “they” (referring to students) will of course have a rather different handling in Johnson’s later consideration of authorial imitation, which “can boast of very few additions to ancient fable” (283). In reading over the essays, however, we find these arguments and even the phrasing recurring in the problematization of literary independence in very much the same way: “there is a common stock of images, a settled mode of argument, and a beaten track of transition which all authors suppose themselves at liberty to use.”²⁰ As for Johnson’s strategy here, he characteristically weighs the simple case of young students against the more complex one of poets in order to pass a riper judgement on the latter’s following precedent. Therefore what deserves praise in university students turns to censure with required severity for poets.

Johnson concludes this line of thought with an extended distinction of science and literature, yet another persistent theme of the *Rambler*, to direct the attention specifically on the value of novelty and to prepare the ground for the central issue of

tative proposition in the opening sentences and distinguishes three kinds of authority: specified, generalized and implied. Although the author observes other patterns of rhetorical arrangement in the “professedly serious” essays, I find his handling of the opening assertion especially applicable to *Rambler* 121, which belongs to the group of literary criticism.

17. Bate and Strauss, vol. IV, pp. 280–281.

18. See also *Rambler* 146, 151, 154.

19. Cf. the original line: “I have no inclination to persecute these collectors of fortuitous knowledge *with the severity required.* . . .” (my italics).

20. *Rambler* 143, vol. IV, 394.

the essay that is, the dangers of poetic imitation. According to Johnson, science can offer restricted opportunities, since “being fixed and limited” it entails “the necessity of following the traces of our predecessors.” Imagination, on the contrary, furnishes us with new and varied possibilities for originality, therefore, “there appears no reason, why [it] should be subject to the same restraint” (282). Thus novelty and variety, it should be observed, here are regarded merely as a means to independence from authority without being applied to any aesthetic effects. What is also interesting about this passage is Johnson’s turning for the first time in the course of the argument to metaphoric language in his contrast of the narrow roads of science to the boundless regions of fiction:

The roads of science are narrow, so that they who travel them, must either follow or meet one another; but in the boundless regions of possibility, which fiction claims for her dominion, there are surely a thousand recesses unexplored, a thousand flowers unplucked, a thousand fountains unexhausted, combinations of imagery yet unobserved, and races of ideal inhabitants not hitherto described. (282)

The sudden metaphoric turn of mind, the antiscientific leanings, the topos of the traveller, or the rambler, all signify a new direction carrying the reader to the more specific dominion of literary criticism.

Having argued for unlimited opportunities to exploit new modes and combinations that images and thoughts can offer to authors without treading a beaten path, Johnson reconsiders “the universal and acknowledged practice” of imitating the ancients, (284) and after that the current fashion of Spenserian imitation. In both cases, he focuses on the critical principle of novelty by which the two types of imitation are judged. Yet, Johnson’s primary concern is to attack the *model* of imitation, i.e. in the case of the universal practice, the classics. This attitude shows that he finds his place in the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns taking side with the moderns and that, however “tremendous a classicist” Johnson may seem, he “lacked an emotional commitment to the classical past.”²¹ It is little wonder, therefore, that he challenges the authority of the Roman poets on the ground that their achievement appears to be a refinement on an original. As Bate com-

21. R. G. Peterson, “Samuel Johnson at War with the Classics,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1975) 69–86, p. 85. Peterson points out that “Johnson never used the classics but as means to reveal the moral significance of the actual world, and this is why he seems so un-classical.” For the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns see Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).

ments, “the conscious elegance of Latin literature, which critics of Johnson’s own period were always extolling, exacted a price.”²² Thus Johnson’s censure “with the severity required” follows:

The Romans are confessed to have attempted little more than to display in their own tongue the inventions of the Greeks. There is, in all their writings, such a perpetual recurrence of allusions to the tales of the fabulous age, that they must be confessed often to *want that power of giving pleasure which novelty supplies*; nor can we wonder, that *they excelled so much in the graces of diction*, when we consider *how rarely they were employed in search of new thoughts*. (283, my italics)

The passage expresses a decisive assertion of the principle of novelty as an indispensable means to aesthetic pleasure, a vital factor of Johnsonian criticism. It is clear that Johnson is not considered to be the originator of this notion. Studying the development of this conception, Clarence DeWitt Thorpe maintains that the “recognition of the power of the new and surprising to give artistic pleasure can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle.”²³ Although it seems quite difficult to define with certainty from which writers Johnson derives his idea of novelty, if we consult the headword in the *Dictionary*, it can offer some possible sources. In so doing, we find that *novelty* is illustrated by a passage from Robert South:

As religion entertains our speculations with great objects, so it entertains them with new; and novelty is the great parent of pleasure; upon which account it is that men are so much pleased with variety.²⁴

22. Walter Jackson Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 189.

23. Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, “Addison and Some of His Predecessors on ‘Novelty,’” *PMLA* 52 (1937) 1114–29, p. 1114.

24. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed. (London: W. Strahan, 1755), “novelty.” Wimsatt argues that Johnson draws heavily on the sermons of South in the *Dictionary*: “Johnson is known to have admired his work . . . and a copy of his *Sermons* at Litchfield is one of the few surviving which Johnson marked for the *Dictionary*” (Wimsatt, p. 146). From South’s sermons Wimsatt chooses twenty-four quotations that illustrate *Rambler* words in the *Dictionary*. It is worth noticing that one of the most important and recurring concepts of the *Rambler* whose philosophic source is South, that is, *novelty*, is *not* among those discussed in Wimsatt’s study.

That *variety* is basically regarded as a synonym for novelty is not only evident from the quoted lines above but also from the term's own definition illustrated by another quotation from South: "Variety is nothing else but a continued novelty."²⁵

Consequently, the *Rambler's* usage of novelty as a source of aesthetic pleasure corresponds to the lexicographic approach to the same concept. In other words, "what illustrates a word in the *Dictionary* embellishes an idea in the essays."

Conversely, the lack of novelty accounts for the lack of pleasure in imitations of originals. Virgil's following of Homer serves as an example for underlining the dangers of being overwhelmed by powerful models:

[Virgil] by making his hero both a traveller and a warrior, united the beauties of the Iliad and Odyssey in one composition: yet his judgement was perhaps sometimes *overborn by his avarice of the Homeric treasures*; and, for fear of suffering a sparkling ornament to be lost, he has inserted it where it cannot shine with its original splendor. (283, my italics)

"A search for pregnant words and the system of ideas attached to them,"²⁶ a method suggested by Wimsatt, can produce interesting and surprising results in the excerpt concerned. For instance, in his *Dictionary* Johnson draws upon Addison's *Spectator* for the illustration of *overbear*: "The horror or loathsomeness of an object may over-bear the pleasure which results from its greatness, *novelty*, or beauty."²⁷

In fact, the source of the pregnant word – *overbear* – is *Spectator* 412, one of the famous essays on the pleasures of the imagination.²⁸ It is clear from this latter essay that Addison, prior to Johnson, finds novelty, along with greatness and beauty, essential to aesthetic delight. Thorpe in the concluding remarks of his study points out that the relevance of Addison's essay on the imagination lies in its attempt to rationalize the pleasure in novelty and to place this concept "in proper relationship to other aesthetic pleasures."²⁹ Quoting a punchline from the essay on the imagination under the weighty word *overbear*, Johnson, therefore, seems to derive his idea of novelty indirectly from Addison in a way that illustrates the power of being overwhelmed by a past example. One may even go so far as to apply Johnson's criticism

25. Johnson, *Dictionary*, "variety."

26. Wimsatt, p. 81.

27. Johnson, *Dictionary*, "to overbear." Johnson does not specify the number of the *Spectator* he uses.

28. Cf. *Spectator* 412. "Overbear" in the sense of *outweigh* is the earliest example in the *OED*.

29. Thorpe, p. 1129.

of Virgil to himself and claim that Johnson's judgment is "overborn by his avarice" of the Addisonian "treasures."³⁰

To exhibit the dangers of following models, Johnson singles out Virgil's imitation of the Homeric motif of Ajax's silence in the *Aeneid*.³¹ It is certain that when Johnson writes "this passage has always been considered as eminently beautiful," (283) Longinus's famous lines on sublimity as "the echo of a noble mind" are heard in the *Rambler*: "How grand, for instance, is the silence of Ajax in the Summoning of the Ghosts, more sublime than any speech!"³² In *Tatler* 133 Addison also elaborates on the "Two Instances of Silence in Two greatest Poets," i.e. Ajax's silence in Homer and Dido's silence in Virgil; pointing out that "it would look as ridiculous to many Readers to give Rules and Directions for proper Silences."³³ In making his judgment on Virgilian imitation, it is the propriety of silence that Johnson reconsiders and finds the instance of silence in Dido lacks not only novelty but also propriety, in other words, decorum:

The lady turns away *like Ajax* in mute disdain. She turns away *like Ajax*, but she resembles him in none of these qualities which give either dignity or *propriety* to silence. She might without any departure from the tenour of her conduct, have burst out *like other injured women* into clamour, reproach, and denunciation; but Virgil had his imagination full of Ajax, and therefore could not prevail on himself to teach Dido any other mode of resentment. (284, my italics)

He even gives directions for three appropriate forms of reactions, such alternatives that, in his judgment, would be more fitting to convey Dido's resentment; clamour, reproach and denunciation. Johnson here characteristically argues for displaying generality in the figure of Dido expecting her to respond "like other injured women." Yet, for Johnson the Virgilian passage exhibits particularity by imitating the silence of Ajax in the silence of Dido, which, according to the Johnsonian standards, results in failure. As a conclusion to the Virgilian imitation and as an in-

30. Cf. p. 283, quoted above: "yet his [Virgil] judgement was perhaps sometimes overborn by his avarice of the Homeric treasures."

31. Cf. *The Odyssey*, 11.563 and *The Aeneid* 6.450–76.

32. *Treatise on the Sublime*, 9.2. For the vogue of Longinus in the eighteenth century see Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935).

33. *The Tatler* 133. *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. II, pp. 270–271.

roduction to the Spenserian one, he lists different poetic practices regarding them merely as forms of fashion:

If Virgil could be thus seduced by imitation, there will be little hope, that common wits should escape; and accordingly we find, that besides the universal and acknowledged practice of copying the ancients, there has prevailed in every age a particular species of fiction. At one time all truth was conveyed in allegory; at another, nothing was seen but in a vision; at one period, all the poets followed sheep, and every event produced a pastoral; at another they busied themselves wholly in giving directions to a painter.

(284)

Importantly enough, it is the first time when imitation and copying as technical terms are used in the text. Imitation, as Draper puts it, is interpreted in the sense of copying models, “a common conception that the age gleaned from its dictionaries and rhetorics”³⁴ regardless of the original Aristotelian sense. Likewise, the definition of imitation in Johnson’s *Dictionary* is “the act of copying.”³⁵ The passage also shows Johnson’s position on a typical classical genre exposing his readiness to attack pastoral poetry, particularly its fashionable modern imitations, ironically. Philip Smallwood argues that in *Rambler* 121 Johnson recalls his earlier papers on pastoral, and “he applies the same gentle art of sinking used here of the pastoral poem more widely to the history of poetry.”³⁶ The current imitations of pastoral, in short, call forth his sarcasm and denial since they do not produce novelty, variety and originality.

The examples of varying poetic practices – at one time allegory, at another vision and pastoral – lead to the consideration of the prevailing fashion of Spenserian imitation “which, by the influence of some men of learning and genius, seems likely to gain upon the age” (285). Yet, the primary criticism turns to the model of imitation: to Spenser, who is a major figure in the poetic practice of allegory, vision and pastoral. Spenser’s handling of allegory and vision appeals to Johnson both as a critic and as an allegorist, but obviously he finds little to praise in his pastorals, the genre that evokes the critic’s scorn in many respects. As Jack Lynch points out, John-

34. Joseph W. Draper, “Aristotelian ‘Mimesis’ in Eighteenth-Century England,” *PMLA* 36 (1921) 372–400, p. 375.

35. Cf. “imitation” in Johnson’s *Dictionary*.

36. Philip Smallwood, *Johnson’s Critical Presence: Image, History, Judgement* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 19. See *Rambler* 36 and 37 on the defects of pastoral poetry.

son “is more tolerant of allegorical writing” than most of his contemporaries³⁷ and for this reason the imitation of Spenserian allegory is acceptable for him. That the archaic diction and uniform stanza of the older poet are displeasing is surely a commonplace censure, however, it throws light on Johnson’s principle of novelty:

To imitate the fictions and sentiments of Spenser can incur no reproach, for allegory is perhaps one of the most pleasing vehicles of instruction. But I am very far from extending the same respect to his diction or his stanza. His stile was in his own time allowed to be *vicious*, so *darkened* with *old words* and *peculiarities of phrase*, and so *remote* from common use, that Johnson [*sic*] boldly pronounces him “to have written *no language*.”

(285, my italics)

Spenserian archaizing is regarded by Johnson as impropriety of language, which cannot account for pleasure because it wants novelty of expression. But Johnson’s strictures on Spenser’s diction are at the same time reactions against the sixteenth-century poet’s practice of imitating the ancients. In this respect the context of Ben Jonson’s bold remark is more revealing which is quoted in the *Dictionary* under the key word of *affect* in the sense of “imitating in an unnatural and constrained manner”: “Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language; yet I would have him read for his matter, but as Virgil read Ennius.”³⁸ Thus Spenser’s impropriety of diction is judged by the neo-classical concept of decorum, and exemplifies the dangers of imitating the classics. Furthermore, Johnson’s dislike of archaic language is also evident in his lexicographic approaches to the older poet. Lynch affirms that the lexicographer being compelled to record archaisms in his *Dictionary*, finds Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar*, simply identified as “*Pastorals*,” an important source of providing obsolete and rustic words.³⁹ Now, it is apparent, that Johnson’s antagonism to modern pastoral lies in its artificial nature, since pastoral is a typical classical genre employing old and rustic words in a natural way. Johnson particularly finds fault with Spenser’s modern pastoral, which, in affecting the ancient genre, results in archaizing, impropriety of diction,

37. Jack Lynch, “Studied Barbarity: Johnson, Spenser, and the Idea of Progress,” *The Age of Johnson* 9 (1998) 81–107, p. 93. Lynch emphasises the influence of Spenserian allegory on Johnson’s allegorical writings. *The Vision of Theodore*, for example, was influenced by Spenser among others.

38. Johnson, *Dictionary*, “to affect.” Cf. George Parafitt ed., *Ben Johnson: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 428.

39. Lynch, p. 97. Lynch mentions that “the words identified as obsolete provide 37 percent of the *Shepherd’s Calendar* quotations.”

lack of decorum and of novelty. In addition to diction, the Spenserian stanza is also found to be unpleasing and its failure derives from following models:

His stanza is at once difficult and unpleasing; tiresome to the ear by its uniformity, and to the attention by its length. It was at first formed in imitation of the Italian poets, without due regard to the genius of our language. (285)

In this way, the servile imitators of Spenser necessarily perform a twofold impropriety of diction because they copy the faults of the model by admitting old words instead of new ones. Such currently fashionable imitations provoke Johnson's dismissal and irony suggesting his desire for novelty of expression and antagonism to "easy" archaisms:

It would indeed be difficult to exclude from a long poem all modern phrases, though it is easy to sprinkle it with gleanings of antiquity. Perhaps, however the stile of Spenser might by long labour be justly copied; but life is surely given us for higher purposes than to gather what our ancestors have wisely thrown away, and to learn what is of no value, but because it has been forgotten. (286)

The conclusion of *Rambler* 121 urges the need for novelty as a cause of literary merit and anticipates the further development of Johnson's judgment on imitation: as he claims in the famous closing lines of *Rambler* 154 "[n]o man ever yet became great by imitation."⁴⁰ Perhaps Johnson applies this restriction to his own practice too, since after his *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* he refrains from producing imitations.

Thus, the Horatian mottoes, the revision of Elphinston's translations, the case of the young university students, the Virgilian and the Spenserian imitation models all display the dangers of following authoritative directions. The example of Virgil illustrates excellence in diction but failure in new thoughts. Dido's silence bothers Johnson because it lacks generality, novelty, propriety and decorum. Spenser's failure is associated with his archaising which results in impropriety of diction, lack of new words and of decorum. The critical principle by which Johnson judges these imitations is novelty. His insistence on the power of novelty as a means to creating aesthetic pleasure remains a vital concern in his criticism. *Rambler* 121 therefore formulates an early but a decisive statement of the power of novelty, which paves the way for Johnson's more mature critical practice in the *Lives of the Poets*.⁴¹

40. Johnson, p. 59.

41. In the *Life of West* Johnson criticises the contemporary fashion of Spenserian imitation. Cf. also the *Life of Gay*, *Collins*, *Shenstone*, *Thomson*.