

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories: Introduction Lecture 5

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Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Johnson's literature, especially his *Lives of the Poets* series, is marked by various opinions on what would make a poetic work excellent.

He believed that the best poetry relied on contemporary language, and he disliked the use of decorative or purposefully archaic language.

In particular, he was suspicious of John Milton's language, whose blank verse would mislead later poets, and could not stand the poetic language of Thomas Gray

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

In terms of biography, Johnson did not agree with Plutarch's model of using biographies to teach morals and complement the subjects.

Instead, Johnson believed in portraying the subjects accurately, including any negative aspects of an individual's life.

Although revolutionary and more accurate as a biographer, Johnson had to struggle with his beliefs against a society that was unwilling to hear of details that may be viewed as tarnishing a reputation.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

In his *Lives of the Poets*, he chose great and lesser poets, and throughout all of his biographies, he always insisted on including what others may consider as trivial details to fully describe the lives of his subjects.

When it came to autobiography, and diaries including his own, Johnson considered that genre of work as one having the most significance; he explains this in Idler 84, when he described how a writer of an autobiography would be the least likely to distort their own life.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

His works on Shakespeare were not devoted just to Shakespeare, but to critical theory as a whole, and, in his Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson rejects the previous belief of the classical unities and establishes a more natural theory on what makes drama work: drama should be faithful to life. In particular, Johnson claimed that “Among [Shakespeare's] other excellences it ought to be remarked, because it has hitherto been unnoticed, that his heroes are men, that the love and hatred, the hopes and fears, of his chief personages are such as common to other human beings... Shakespeare’s excellence is not the fiction of a tale, but the representation of life: and his reputation is therefore safe, till human nature shall be changed.”

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

William Wordsworth was primarily a poet but still he has given us a most comprehensive critical document in the form of the “Preface to Lyrical Ballads.”

His approach is romantic. He advocates that the theme of poetry should be drawn from simple and rustic life.

The poet should choose incidents and situations from common life. According to Wordsworth in this rustic and humble life the fundamental passions of the heart develop smoothly and grow harmoniously. They are not controlled by the fastidious rules of the so-called society. Thus the real subject matter of poetry is to be found in the primary affections.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Wordsworth's theory of poetic language is protest against the pseudo classical theory of poetic diction.

This protest was against pedantry and affectation; and it is based on an appeal to the primitive, the passionate, and the natural spoken word. He stresses upon the communicative power of poetry. He advocates the use of the language of the rustic and humble people for the purpose of poetry.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

According to him the language of the rustic is capable of being poetic. It is because the rustic and humble people convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.

Thus such language is more permanent and more philosophical. In short, Wordsworth advocates for the use of the language really spoken by men.

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)