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“Intimacies of Antipathy: Johnson and Swift”

ABSTRACT

Johnson disliked Swift but had an intense self-implicating interest in him, sharing much of his social, psychological and devotional outlook, and exhibiting a wide and life-long reading of his works. He found Swift's irony, and satire in general, unsympathetic, but wrote in a manner deeply shaped by Swift and other Augustan satirists. His relationship with Hester Thrale included a self-conscious and often conflicted awareness of Swift's friendship with Stella. His novel *Rasselas* shares with Swift's "Digression on Madness" a strikingly similar diagnosis of humanity's mental constitution, but draws teasingly opposite and sometimes adversarial consequences from it. Johnson's antipathies coexist with a reluctant sense of likeness, a combination implicit in the forthrightly evasive and wayward judgments of the "Life of Swift", from which the main examples are drawn. Their nevertheless compelling power (like that of F.R. Leavis's very different but equally hostile essay) raises questions about what we can learn about Swift from those who dislike him.