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Eighteenth-Century Life

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John Wolcot and “The Anecdotic Itch”: Peter Pindar, Biography and Historiography in the 1780s

John Wolcot, under his nom de plume of Peter Pindar, was one of the most widely read poets of the late eighteenth century: his 50 odd poetic satires on divers subjects were one of the publishing phenomena of the age, with William Wordsworth, who generally affected a low opinion of Wolcot, forced to consider him as one of the ‘great names’ of satire.¹ If the scale of his popularity was likely subject to some contemporary hyperbole, nevertheless Donald Kerr’s analysis of Wolcot’s papers bears out the notion of Peter Pindar as a highly profitable publishing enterprise in which the book trade had significant commercial confidence.² Despite (or in part because of) this ubiquity, Wolcot has been neglected by scholarship, written off as a commercially-motivated trimmer devoid of principle or any commitment to higher ideals; a ‘literary gadfly’, in the words of Jeanne Griggs, ‘harmless but irritating’ who expended his talent on unworthy matters at a time of national emergency.³

Some, particularly more recent, accounts of Wolcot have sought a more sympathetic or complex response to his satiric method and output.⁴ Efforts devoted to the critical rehabilitation of Wolcot have broadly fallen into two camps. The first, and larger, effort has looked to ascribe a politically meaningful and radical value to a satiric method that otherwise seems unduly invested in the treatment of trivial matters in a frivolous
fashion. Gary Dyer has interpreted Wolcot’s refusal ‘to treat satire, in neo-Juvenalian fashion, as a duty in a time of crisis’ not as a moral failing or ducking of the important issues of the day, but instead as a refusal of the normative and inherited modes of satire and therefore as an anti-establishment gesture itself. John Barrell has argued that the tone of good natured ribbing inherent in Wolcot’s satire made it more not less subversive, not least because it allowed Wolcot’s views to reach a wide range of audiences, including ones that were unreceptive to more strident and openly radical messages. There is indeed evidence that Wolcot cultivated an image of innocuousness. In the ninth *Expostulatory Odes* Peter compares himself unfavourably with Charles Churchill. Churchill is a ‘first rate man of war’ compared to Peter’s ‘small cockboat bobbing at an anchor’; a ‘blacksmith’s sledge’ compared to Peter’s ‘sugar hammer’. Yet ironic disavowals and self-deprecation are amongst the more common currencies in which the satirist trades, and here Wolcot ensures an association with Churchill that might not otherwise have been apparent since suggesting that they should not be mentioned in the same breath involves mentioning them in the same breath. The second sort of rehabilitation, best exemplified by Benjamin Colbert’s ‘Petrio-Pindarics’ and Iain McCalman’s overview of Wolcot, has sought to understand Wolcot’s reputation and neglect in terms of the emerging (self) image of the Romantic canon. Colbert highlights Wolcot’s unnerving (for the established Romantic view of the poet) interest in the demands of commercial print culture, while McCalman draws attention to Wolcot’s liminal (to his disadvantage) position within the conventional ways in which literary history is periodised. These are all significant interventions, but overall it remains the case that Wolcot is not as notable a beneficiary as some of his contemporaries of a wider critical project that has, in the words
of Steven E. Jones, worked to ‘decentre Romanticism and reorientate its canonical works
and authors.’ In 1999 McCalman’s verdict was that Wolcot ‘remains seriously
underestimated by modern social historians and literary scholars’, and while today one
might not put it in quite such stark terms, nevertheless he remains a neglected figure
relative to his presence in his day. This article takes its cue from these various approaches while also breaking new
ground in the ways Wolcot can be read. Informed by the previously central question of
Wolcot’s politics as determined by the question of whether he is an anti-establishment or
toothless writer, it will consider key Peter Pindar satires of the 1780s in terms of
Wolcot’s interest in the use of anecdote within the writing of history and biography and
his self-conscious interest in the business (figurative but also literal) of writing about
Great Men. Through these interests, I shall argue, Wolcot is engaging in significant
cultural debates about the meaning of greatness and significant achievement in the 1780s.
Appreciating this engagement broadens our sense of the questions it is possible to pose
about Wolcot as a writer beyond those to do with an attitude to ministerial policy during
the Revolutionary period.

The essay is in four parts. The first section offers a relatively brief and necessarily
broad outline of the immediate intellectual contexts of anecdote, history, politeness and
commerce that provide the framework for the reading of Wolcot that follows. The aim is
here to demonstrate how these various cultural and intellectual dynamics can be seen in
vital relation to Wolcot’s work. The middle two sections offer reciprocal case studies of
these matters. The first considers two poems in which Peter Pindar addresses the
questions provoked by efforts to memorialise a figure of stature in the literary world in
the shape of the recently departed Samuel Johnson: *A Poetical and Congratulatory Epistle to James Boswell, Esq on his Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with the celebrated Dr Johnson* (1786); and *Bozzy and Piozzi, or, The British Biographers, A Town Eclogue* (1786). In these poems we shall see how Johnson can only be understood, and writing about him can only be guaranteed an audience, by focussing on the lowest-common-denominator of scurrilous detail and base indignity. This is diagnosed as the result of mass print culture, an obsession with gossip, and a base philistinism, the last of which best encapsulated in the figure of King George III himself. If these poems set the terms of the question or dilemma, my second set of examples offer Peter Pindar’s own solution to the question of mediating figures of eminence in the relationship he constructs between poet (and satirist) and monarch, in his various poems of 1787 offering advice to the Poet Laureate Thomas Warton with a particular focus on *Instructions to a Celebrated Laureat; alias The Progress of Curiosity; alias A Birthday Ode; alias Mr Whitbread’s Brewhouse*. In this poem the critique of the King offered in the *Celebratory Epistle* is extended but also inverted as Peter not only warms to his theme of royal imbecility but suggests, in his reproach to Warton, that this is the only fitting way to write about the King in a world where the values George represents defy the conventional language and attributes of greatness. Or to put it another way, in *Bozzy and Piozzi*, the eponymous biographers are chastised for writing mundane and trivial nonsense; in the *Instructions* and *Advice*, Warton is chastised for writing anything other than mundane and trivial nonsense. Separately the two sets of poems identify a mismatch between the subject of the panegyric (be it Johnson or King George) and the grounds for, and manner of, the celebration. Collectively they diagnose a wider cultural malaise to do with the meaning
and mediation of stature and what might count as significant achievement amongst a
polite and commercial people. The essay will conclude with a final section summarising
these findings and discussing how the issues explored might knit back into the issues
outlined at the start of the introduction to do with Wolcot’s place within late eighteenth-
century literary studies.

I. “The Anecdotic Itch”: History, Commerce, Virtue and the place of
Anecdote

The use of the anecdotal method within the writing of history and biography in the
eighteenth century has been the subject of significant recent enquiry. Such enquiries have
tended to stress the multiple uses and interpretations available to the eighteenth century,
something that Lionel Grossman, in his comprehensive anatomy of the anecdote and its
various forms, calls, with admirable understatement, ‘a complex matter’. Rebecca
Bullard’s discussion of secret history narratives (to which the anecdotal method is closely
allied etymologically and practically in the early eighteenth century) is perhaps most
notable for arguing, in the face of previous interpretations, that ‘there is no intrinsic
connection between secret history and radical whig politics’, but for the purposes of my
engagement with Wolcot, this is less important than her approach to thinking about the
secret – unsanctioned or unofficial – history as a ‘rhetorical act of revelation’, and a self-
conscious one at that. In what follows we shall see how Bullard’s reading of secret
history as a discourse that ‘scrutinizes the ethical, epistemic, historiographical and
political implications of its own revelatory gestures’ chimes with Peter Pindar’s highly
self-conscious examination of the most appropriate way of capturing the deeds of great
men and the implications of his chosen approach. In this way his anecdotal approach
offers an unusual but identifiable addition to the discourse of secret history during the
eighteenth century.

As Grossman notes, the connection between anecdote and the revelatory secret
history loosened through the eighteenth-century (without, as we shall see, entirely losing
touch with it). The term lost its specific sense of embarrassing revelation about the
powers-that-be and gained a wider currency as part of a historiographical method
evolving in response to the priorities of a polite and commercial age. As the political and
social priorities of civic humanism gave way to those of commercial humanism notions
of moral and political virtue underwent a profound shift. To cite one just one famous
example, this is Samuel Johnson on the ‘projectors’:

I cannot conceived why he that has burnt cities, and wasted nations, and filled the
world with horror and desolation should be more kindly regarded by mankind
than he that died in the rudiments of wickedness; why he that accomplished
mischief should be glorious, and he that only endeavoured it should be criminal.¹²

By ‘huddl[ing] together in obscurity and detestation’ both those conventionally
considered the heroes of history and those failed criminals – both the Caesars and the
Catilines, as he puts it – Johnson is revaluing the meaning of virtue for an age repelled by
the warrior ethics of the past. This suspicion about the public actions of those that had
previously been considered the heroes of history is also accompanied by a
reconsideration of the proper materials of history. As history came to be understood not
as the civic activity of the autonomous citizen but as the result of a complex series of
inter-relations, so understandings of the drivers of history and the ways in which history should be articulated changed. This, in the words of Mark Salber Phillips, led to an ‘enlargement of the boundaries of the historical’ in order to take account for all those things excluded from classical history but which commercial eighteenth-century Britain, extrapolating from its own experience, saw as vital to the understanding of the past, included ‘the history of literature, of the arts and sciences, of manners and customs, even of opinion and sentiment’. For Phillips, one symptom of this is the growth in importance of the sentimental biography as one of the constituent genres of history in the late eighteenth century, private histories containing anecdotal scenes of everyday life and of the domestic sphere not, as at the start of the century, as a way of revealing the sordid motivations and immoral priorities behind the pieties of official public history, but out of a growing sense that manners maketh the man. At such a cultural moment, anecdote can serve as a way of recovering what Helen Deutsch has termed ‘a lost embodied “real”, an undoing of larger, public historical narratives in order […] to bring the dead, particularly the illustrious scholarly dead, back to life.’

Johnson had made this point forcefully three years early than his comments in *The Adventurer in The Rambler* 60. There he argues against the limiting perspectives of public history and its ‘false measures of excellence and dignity’ (some of which he would consider criminal in the later article) in favour of ‘domestic privacies, and […] the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and virtue.’ Yet Johnson recognises the challenges of such a history. Challenges to do with the selection of material, since not everything that can be known is worth knowing; and the challenges of perspective that comes from a position intimate
enough to its subject to be aware of those private habits worth knowing but able to retain an independent and larger perspective, one that avoids seeing it ‘an act of piety to hide the faults and failings of their friends’. The answer, according to Johnson, remains firmly rooted in the classical notion of history as exemplar, or, as he puts it with a Horation rather than Plutarchean turn, to provide ‘instruction or delight.’ However, while Johnson rests on this Horation editorial principle, Isaac Disraeli, in the most famous account of the anecdote in England in the eighteenth century, goes one stage further in examining the potential crisis of editorial judgement and priority within the anecdotal valuing of the small details of life, a crisis summarised by Helen Deutsch as, ‘if details like these are important enough to record, then nothing is sacred, on the one hand, and nothing is meaningless, on the other.’

Disraeli is as clear as Johnson had been that if the proper study of history is the human mind, then ‘human nature, like a vast machine, is not to be understood by looking at its superficies, but by dwelling on its minute springs and wheels.’ Disraeli maintains that anecdote represents the essential means by which one understands the genius of men and times and he therefore denies (in a way that Johnson perhaps would have done) that there can ever be too many anecdotes collected and presented. Nevertheless he is clear that it is the presentation of anecdote, its interpretation and the larger truths to which it is taken to attest, that really matters. ‘To collect anecdote is the humble labour of industry’ he suggests, the challenge if ‘to present them with reflection, with acumen, and with taste.’ In Disraeli’s ideal anecdotal memoir, the memoirist collects exemplary episodes and stories and presents them in such a way as to render himself invisible. The aim is to set narrative and interpretation and anecdote off to such effect as to give the reader the
illusion of discovering the company of the great man for themselves rather than to insist upon the activities of the memoirist. In this way the anecdotal is central to what David Simpson calls a ‘culture of subjectification’ and the emergence of ‘middle class ideology’ during the period, not only because of the emphasis on the familiar and everyday closes the gap between the traditionally elite and a middle class audience but also because of the interpretative reading such an approach encourages: ‘to make significant meaning out of fragments or anecdotes is to make a self for ourselves in the very act of so making.’

Johnson and Disraeli both demonstrate a confidence and anxiety about the role of what had hitherto been secret history to provide an account of men and times more aligned with the values of their times. Indeed those values themselves were a matter of contest. As J.G.A. Pocock reminds us (and as Phillips’s book amongst others charts) ‘there is no greater and no commoner mistake in the history of social thought than to suppose that the tension [between commercial and civic virtue] ever disappeared’. The superiority ascribed to polite and commercial society was tempered by a nostalgia – and more in some quarters – for virtues it was easier to disavow than necessarily do without.

Reconciling sensibility and power was a key preoccupation of the middle decades of the century across various fields and numerous texts can be read in this light: the moral and political philosophy of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson; the novels of Samuel Richardson; the Poems of Ossian, which celebrate the impossible deeds of an impossible hero who, in the words of Walter Scott, combined ‘the strength and bravery of Achilles, with the courtesy, sentiment and high-breeding of Sir Charles Grandison’. The 1780s in particular saw increased anxieties, in the wake of the loss of the American colonies and renewed threats to British interests in India that the fruits of a commercial empire would
be moral corruption and inexorable decline. For example, Robert W Jones has demonstrated the various ways in which the literature and politics of Opposition sought a range of masculine identities and rhetorical forms that met the challenges of commerce and politeness during a disastrous war. In this context the anecdotal is both an emblem of the more expansive world of commerce and trade, of a complex, rich and sophisticated society needing to be understood in terms of the ‘secret springs’ that motivate the actions of complex modern individuals whose best and worst features were to be understood within the everyday and domestic, and also a symptom, in Grossman’s words, of ‘the decadence of taste and the intrusion of the commercial spirit into literature’, the overvaluing of a cult of the individual and their mannerisms at the expense of the significant messages of history. This cult of the individual helped created a celebrity culture built out of ‘an extensive, industrialised, and intertextual mode of gossip’ in which the details of lives stand for substantive achievement. Depending on your point of view the anecdotal is a solution to the opportunities and challenges of a new order, or the symptom of the inherent corruption of that order, or both.

This then provides the context for Wolcot’s exploration of the problems of finding an appropriate discourse of memorialisation in an age whose values are increasingly divorced from the traditional modes of valorisation and in which those responsible for that memorialisation are making a living out of their work. As such, Wolcot’s satire engages in this important eighteenth-century debate about the means of reconciling heroism and sensibility, the private and the public, the place of celebrity, and the most appropriate way of establishing, what Jones terms ‘a discursive mode capable of ensuring the legibility of character’ in an age of politeness and commerce. It is now appropriate
to turn to some examples of the way in which Wolcot’s interest in the nature of biography and the business of its literary representation is aligned with key eighteenth-century historiographical discourses and debates about the meaning and representation of the great figures of history.

II. “The Charming Haberdasher of Small Wares”: James Boswell and the Anecdotal Method

The Epistle to Boswell and Bozzy and Piozzi were both exceptionally popular, the latter going through ten editions in two years. They also had considerable longevity, appearing alongside The Lousiad, as representative of Wolcot’s work in Richard Griffin’s The British Satirist, Comprising the Best Satires of the most Celebrated Poets from Pope to Byron (1826). They date from an important point in Wolcot’s career. In 1782 he had announced Peter Pindar’s existence with his Lyrical Odes to the Royal Academicians and in 1785 produced the first canto of the Lousiad, another four cantos of which would appear over the next ten years. The Lyrical Odes (and its sequels) offer a demolition of the pretensions of the Royal Academy’s annual exhibition in which all but Sir Joshua Reynolds come in for blunt abuse. The Lousiad is a broad attack on George III as an oafish fool and domestic tyrant. The Boswell satires mark a turn towards a more specific analysis of the relationship between poetry and power, and the poetic representation of men of stature. They represent a satiric attack on the absurdity of biographies of Johnson that focussed on the anecdotal and quotidian, and they seek to connect this to a broader cultural interest in the inane and trivial most obviously articulated in the figure of George III himself. Thus they inaugurate one of Peter’s favourite topics in king-baiting –
George’s childish love of obscure or worthless detail – and one of his favourite ways of exploring it, the consideration of the proper object of poetry.

As is well known, Johnson’s death in December 1784 inaugurated a frenzy of speculation, planning and competition over the question of a biography of the great man. In the event Boswell was first out of the blocks with his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* in September 1785, a revised edition of which appeared before the year was out. Hester Piozzi’s *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson LL.D.* was published in March 1786. Sir John Hawkins’s *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* would appear in March 1787 though he, as Johnson’s official biographer, was known to be working on it well in advance (as Peter’s satires demonstrate). Peter’s *Congratulatory Epistle* appeared in February 1786, in response to the revisions to the second edition of Boswell’s *Journal*, and *Bozzy and Piozzi* the following month in immediate response to the first edition of Piozzi’s *Anecdotes*. As Helen Deutsch’s praise for Wolcot as ‘perhaps the most brilliant of the many contemporary critics of Boswell’s penchant for anecdotes’ reveals, these two poems were not unique in addressing the vogue for unflatteringly anecdotal accounts of Johnson. Indeed Robert Vales records four other occasions upon which Wolcot himself makes reference to Boswell’s addiction to anecdote, including one in his notorious “Ode to Lord Lonsdale” of 1792. The *Congratulatory Epistle* and *Bozzy and Piozzi* are however Peter’s most sustained meditations on the subject. *Bozzy and Piozzi* imagines the would-be memoirists Boswell and Piozzi locked in competition over the right to publish the first biography of Johnson. This takes the form of a debate over the relative merits of their previously published *Journal* and *Anecdotes* adjudicated by Johnson’s friend and executor, the magistrate Sir John Hawkins. The
poem opens with the consternation felt at the news of the death of Johnson amongst the Olympians:

Minerva sighing for her fav’rite son,
Pronounc’d, with lengthen’d face the world undone:
Her owl too, hooted in so loud a style,
That people might have heard the bird, a mile:
Jove wip’d his eyes so red, and told his wife
He ne’er made Johnson’s equal, in his life;
And that ‘twould be a long time first, if ever,
His art could form a fellow half so clever.

In the midst of what Peter terms the ‘Johnso-mania’, Boswell and Piozzi emerge as chief amongst the ‘pigmy planets’ who ‘catch their little lustre from the sun’ of Johnson’s life and opinions. Vying for what Peter calls ‘the palm of anecdote’ they come before Hawkins:

[…] for vict’ry, both as keen,
As for a tott’ring bishoprick, a Dean,
Or patriot Burke, for giving glorious bastings
To that intolerable fellow Hastings. (p.9)

This introduction is characteristic of Peter’s style with its debunking informality and a general facetiousness deployed in an indiscriminate manner. So Edmund Burke’s agitations against Warren Hastings over his conduct of the Maratha War that had begun early that year (and would of course culminate two years later with his four-day long opening speech at Hastings’ impeachment) are reduced to the stuff of schoolboy banter or
common room snobbery (‘glorious bastings’, ‘intolerable fellow’). Beyond that, the mock-heroic representation of ‘Johnso-mania’ implicates Peter as part of a cultural discourse that is unable to observe notions of literary decorum and congruity. Peter’s voice is comically bathetic as he pursues his satiric target, but the cost of this method is the undercutting of the sense of grandeur of its subject matter in just the ways that it will accuse Boswell and Piozzi in due course. In other words, we assume that it matters whether or not Hastings’s actions threatened British interests and influence in India and that, to the anti-ministerial Wolcot, Burke represents a force for good in bringing malpractice to light. In which case Hastings is more than merely ‘intolerable’ and the facetiousness implied in ‘glorious bastings’ misplaced. Peter’s desire to be funny at all costs compromises his ability to offer a voice of Juvenalian righteous indignation.

Hawkins instructs Boswell and Piozzi to trade stories about Johnson from their *Journal* and *Anecdotes* respectively so as to determine who should earn the right to a full biography. This functions as a convenient trigger, yet the reader is given no justification for this method of arbitration and no sense of the basis upon which Hawkins will form an opinion about Boswell and Piozzi’s relative merits via the anecdotes they relate (what, in this context, does good look like?). The formlessness of the event is reinforced by the fact that Boswell and Piozzi do not engage in debate, rebut or reinforce, rather they talk past each other, refuse to acknowledge the other’s presence and instead bombard Hawkins (and the reader) with unconnected anecdotes. One effect of this lack of discursive or argumentative structure – which is the anecdotal method in its purest form of course – is that the reader is encouraged to seek other patterns and make other senses. That being so, what emerges, in a vestigial echo of the previously dominant notion of the anecdote as
complicit in the revealing of the secret (or unofficial or private) histories that offer unflattering insights into the human frailties elided by more anodyne and public accounts, is the impression that all the stories told show Johnson up in a bad light: his irascibility, his gluttony, his desire to be funny or clever or have the last word. Each individual anecdote is footnoted with a page reference within the Journal or Anecdotes at which the original can be found. This cod-apparatus gives the debate the impression of rigour, and anchors the dispute in reality by reassuring the (perhaps presumed to be incredulous) reader that these are authentically from the texts in question. In fact this editorial joke cuts two ways. On the one hand, the reader who goes back to the source texts to look up these passages can join in the fun at Boswell and Piozzi’s expense, satirically rereading the passage in the light of what they know Peter has made of it, reading through Peter’s eyes as it were. On the other, there is a suspicious of a further neo-Scriblerian joke at the expense of Peter himself and his overly serious-minded assumption that readers are going to be interested (or be taking matters seriously enough) to go to the trouble of looking up references.

The poem is punctuated with an interlude during which Hawkins takes a nap. In fine epic style the ghost of ‘the surly RAMBLER’, appears to him in a dream, implores him to stop Boswell and Piozzi writing their biographies (‘nor crucify, through biography, a friend’ as Johnson puts it), and leaves after delivering a short speech on the subject of none other than Peter Pindar:

Tell PETER PINDAR, should you chance to meet him,
I like his GENIUS---should be glad to greet him ---
Yet let him know, CROWN’D HEADS are sacred things,
And bid him rev’rence more, the BEST OF KINGS; (p.27)

This comically double-edged meta-textual moment (being told by a visitor from the beyond that he is looking forward to meeting you is not comforting), is made more farcical by a footnote in which Peter expresses puzzlement with this last couplet, given what Peter understands Johnson’s view to have been of a ‘*certain* GREAT PERSONAGE’. The levels of recursive, mediated representation at this moment are playful in the extreme, an example of what Kyle Grimes means when he characterises Romantic parodic satire as ‘a dialogising counter-movement to the implicit truth-claims of all monological discourses.’ In this instance Wolcot has his imaginary author (Peter) evoke via a highly self-conscious epic trope a literary representation of a real but dead person (Johnson), and then has that imaginary author argue with what a figment of his own imaginary imagination has to say. As with most meta-textual jokes it is less amusing spelt out than experienced, but the larger point about the inherent fallacy of biographical attempts to establish a single version of the messy complexity that goes to make up the lives and opinions of their subjects is well taken.

Hawkins awakes and the action resumes, but with some differences. By now, Boswell’s stories have become entirely self-reflexive, and finally the protagonists round on each other, each attacking the other’s desire to scratch what Boswell terms the ‘anecdotic itch’. They criticise each other’s respective anecdotes for their triviality, their inaccuracy, the fact that they are unflattering to Johnson; and they are finally reduced to abusing the size and quality of each other’s readerships. At this point Hawkins calls a halt and a plague on both their houses:

For shame! For shame! For heaven’s sake pray be quiet ---
Not Billingsgate exhibits such a riot.

Behold for scandal, you have made a feast,

And turn your idol, Johnson to a beast:

‘Tis plain the tales of ghosts are arrant lies,

Or instantaneously, would Johnson’s rise:

Make you both eat your paragraphs so evil ---

And for your treatment of him, play the devil. (pp.50-51)

Hawkins goes on in similar style, though his defence of Johnson is significantly undercut when at the end of the poem he departs to write his own anecdotal biography. Hawkins’ biographical ambitions were of course known about even if the content of his offering was as yet unrevealed. Peter suggests that this episode will have inspired Hawkins ‘on anecdote to cram’ in order to ‘vomit first, a life of surly Sam’. The disease of the British biographers is apparently contagious and a symptom of a society that would appear to have lost a vocabulary of the glorious, a way of articulating the profound and timeless. We see explicitly the extent of Hawkins’ infection, while in more subtle ways Peter himself runs the risk of being accused of the elevation of the trivial and pettifogging through his memorialisation of it in mock-classical style, complete with footnotes.

The Epistle of a month earlier addressed to Boswell alone has a more straightforward rhetorical thrust: the ironic praise of Boswell and an encouragement to him both to hold his nerve in the face of the criticism provoked by his Journal (and revisions to the second edition suggested some such loss of nerve), and to beat Hawkins and Piozzi to producing a full biography of Johnson. Yet whereas Bozzy and Piozzi would only hint at the broader issues of literary taste at stake when abusing each other’s
readerships, the *Epistle* engages in an explicit critique of the cultural malaise whereby the great and the good are trivialised within a popular culture hungry for trivia and anecdote. In doing so he also makes explicit links between the questions of the lowest-common-denominator priorities of cheap print, the celebrity culture it embraces, the recalibration of what counts as history this might involve, and between all this and the figure of George III.

Peter widens and deepens his attack on contemporary print culture and its commercial imperatives in the terms of his encouragement to Boswell to keep the faith in the face of the outcry provoked by the first edition of the *Journal*:

> Though Wilkes abuse thy brain, that airy mill,

> And swear poor Johnson murther’d by thy quill;

> What’s that to thee? Why let the victim bleed ---

> Thy end is answer’d, if the Nation read. (p.16)

Peter’s mock-messianic invocation of the full biography had already forced home the point that satisfying the public appetite for scurrilous gossip is the best way of achieving longevity for a biography:

> O Bozzy, still, thy tell-tale plan pursue:

> The world is wond’rous fond of something new;

> And, let but Scandal’s breath embalm the page,

> It lives a welcome guest from age to age. (p.14)

This is the most striking example of what Deutsch notes as Peter’s habit of ‘continually evok[ing] [the] past as future spectacle’, and as Peter elaborates on that ‘something new’, he makes clear that it is not the stuff of conventional history:
Find when he eat and drank, and cough’d, and sneez’d –
Let all his motions in thy book be squeez’d:
On tales however strange, impose thy claw;
Yes, let thy amber lick up e’vry straw:
Sam’s nods, and winks, and laughs, will form a treat;
For all that breathes of Johnson must be great! (p.19)\(^{31}\)

Johnson is a victim several times over here of the creation of what, following Richard Schickel, is today understood as ‘the illusion of intimacy’ at the heart of celebrity.\(^ {32}\) The details of his personal life, his tics and habits, are paraded for the edification of the reading masses and the profit and fame of the biographer. At the same time it is hard for the reader not to feel some resentment towards Johnson himself as the minutiae of his life are assumed to be of interest and imposed upon the reader.

The upshot of the successful pursuit of ‘something new’ is, says Peter, nothing less than the recalibration of the pantheon of great historians, as he explicitly links the question of anecdotal biography to writing of other sorts of history writing, and indeed other forms of story-telling:

Stewart and Robertson, from thee, shall learn,
The simple charms of Hist’ry to discern:
To thee, fair Hist’ry’s palm, shall Livy yield,
And Tacitus, to Bozzy, leave the field!
Joe Miller’s self, whose page such fun, provokes,
Shall quit his shroud, to grin at Bozzy’s jokes!
How are we all with rapture touch’d, to see
Where, when, and at what hour, you swallow’d tea!

How, once, to grace this Asiatic treat,

Came haddocks, which the Rambler could not eat.33

Boswell’s achievements and methods overshadow the classical historiography of Livy and Tacitus and the Scottish Enlightenment historiographical and sociological thinking of William Robertson and Dugald Stewart, not to mention the achievements of Joseph Miller (1684-1738), the comedy actor immortalised by John Mottley in his joke book Joe Miller’s Jests, or the Wit’s Vade-Mecum of 1739. On one level this is facetious hyperbole and an example of ambitiously extended zeugma as Bozzy’s performance simultaneously overtops that of Livy, Tacitus and the most famous joke-teller of the age. But on another it is worrying at a problem within eighteenth-century historiography discussed in section one, namely that a view of history as the representation of active political virtue is being overtaken by a sociable, sentimental ideology whose implications for the writing of history had yet to unfold but whose potentially levelling implications were clear. As Phillips puts it, if it was ‘increasingly hard to think of history as exclusively concerned with the narrative of political action’ then the editorial task of the historian was suddenly increased beyond measure.34 The same cultural moment has been observed in the narrowing of the distance between biography and history to the point where in the words of Grossman, ‘history itself came to resemble a kind of national biography.’35 At the same time, according to Peter here with his references to Livy and Miller, History has become a joke, or at least indistinguishable from it.

It is notable that all these comments throw an emphasis upon Boswell’s profile as an author, rather than on the subject his efforts should illuminate. In Bozzi and Piozzi
Boswell is variously described as a ‘mighty shark for anecdote and fame’; a ‘charming
haberdasher of small ware’; an assiduous labourer ‘amid the anecdotic mine’; a ‘lively,
bouncing cracker’ at the tail of Johnson’s comet; and ‘a very Laz’rus at the rich man’s
table’. Peter even describes Boswell as a ‘watchful cat’ who for 20 years ‘did’st mousing
sit before Sam’s mouth so wide, | To catch as many scraps as [he] was able’. In the
*Epistle*, the emphasis on acquisition, on the gathering of scraps, hunting and mining,
places the memoirist front and centre, his activity distracting attention from the supposed
subject of the work. This is not the kind of memoir Disraeli would have in mind a few
years later, with its emphasis not on the collection of anecdote but upon their disposal
into a form that allowed the allusion that the reader was creating the narrative. Small
wonder perhaps then that at the end of his *Dissertation* he would expressed a desire for a
native anecdotalist to rival the French masters of the mode, one who combines the
‘learning’ of Joseph Warton, the ‘taste’ of Horace Walpole and the ‘faithfulness’ of
Boswell, where faithfulness might mean both loyalty to subject and to the task of
revealing all.

Wolcot may be responding satirically to pressures and movements within
historiographical writing that were felt by contemporaries to do with the editorial shaping
and selection of a richer history of people, characters and the times, but he also has a
particular figurehead for this cultural obsession with the trivial in the *Epistle*. Peter’s
claim that ‘pleas’d, on thy book thy sovereign’s eye-balls roll, | Who loves a gossip’s
story from his soul’ introduces a lengthy (over thirty line) account of the ‘one huge
cyclopedia of wit’ that makes up the King’s brain. In what would become the familiar
shape of his satires on George III, Peter emphasises the utmost triviality or mundane
practicality of almost everything the King knows, generating his comic charge from the
discrepancy between the power of majesty and ludicrous banality or penny-pinching
economy of most of the things he concerns himself with:

Which gard’ner hath most cabbages and peas,
And which old woman hath most hives of bees;
Which farmer boasts the most prolific sows,
Cocks, hens, geese, turkies, goats, sheep, bulls, and cows; (pp.10-11)

In later satires on George’s husbandry (notably *The Royal Tour; or Weymouth Amusements*), these preoccupations are integral to Peter’s attack on the King’s ill-placed parsimoniousness; ill-placed, according to Peter, because the King’s much trumpeted frugality is often sharp-practice at the expense of the livelihoods of his own subjects. In the *Epistle* they work to link Boswell’s idea of a biography of a great man, and his sense of the reading public’s appetite for the inane or grubby details of such biographies, with what passes for intellectual prowess with the sovereign. Both suggest a culture drowning in a sea of inconsequential nonsense, of triviality and distasteful gossip.

The references to George III are then the most significant of several moves that allow the *Epistle* to build from an attack on the impertinence of one man seeking to hitch his star to the fame of a literary great to the identification of a more widespread cultural malaise. One of the ironies of this is that Peter’s argument is fundamentally anecdotal, relying on taking the singular (Boswell’s biographical activities) as representative of the whole (a cultural taste for gossip). This shadows the larger question these two poems repeatedly raise about the place of Peter himself within this critique, since the sheer pyrotechnical brilliance and fascinated exuberance of his depiction of the ‘charming
haberdasher of small wares’ threatens to collapse the distinction between Peter and the
world he describes. If Boswell’s celebrity relies on Johnson, then Peter’s relies on
Boswell relying on Johnson. It is a deeply compromised position. More generally, the
culture of cheap print, the same culture that would soon be able to facilitate the
production of forty two and a half thousand copies of Peter’s own works (though Peter’s
print did not in fact come cheap), encourages the peddling of this mind numbing trivia.\textsuperscript{36}
The cult of celebrity and personality, the same cult of celebrity and personality that has
people rush to enjoy the picaresque literary adventures and opinions of Peter in print,
fosters, according to Peter, an attitude in which admiration for greatness can only be
expressed perversely via an obsession with the intimate details of everyday habits. In this
way Peter is a part of the malady he diagnoses, creating and satisfying the appetite his
poems otherwise condemn. He is in these poems an example of the dynamic whereby
‘even writers who lamented the degradation of literature and thought themselves as rising
above it, often became embroiled, willingly or unwillingly, in the culture of
commercialised celebrity.’\textsuperscript{37} In the next section I want to turn to some of Wolcot’s further
examinations of the relationship between writer and subject, and the problems of being a
public writer in a period where virtue has been replaced by celebrity and where it feels
like there is no longer a relevant public language of praise.

II. “Tribute All Sincere”: Brother Peter, Brother Tom, and the Poetic Discourse of
Majesty.

The Boswell poems outline a problem caused by a mismatch between a figure of great
stature in the world of letters – Johnson – and the ways in which popular culture would
seem to seek to memorialise figures of stature via the anecdotal and the ‘tell all’ memoir.

It is as if the discourse of memorialisation has come adrift from the characteristics, actions and behaviours traditionally considered worth memorialising. The Warton poems suggest a similar but opposite mismatch, this time between a traditional discourse of royal eulogy and a royal figure whose behaviours and values are more in tune with the cultural values so lamented in the Boswell poems.

Thomas Warton was appointed Poet Laureate in 1785, and his output in this office was subject to immediate and widespread derision in, for example, a collection of _Probationary Odes for the Laureateship_ of the same year. Peter weighed in on three occasions in 1787 (Ode Upon Ode; Instructions to a Celebrated Laureate […] alias Mr Whitbread’s Brewhouse; Apologetic Postscript to Ode Upon Ode) and again in 1788 with _Brother Peter to Brother Tom_. The inconvenience of Warton’s death in 1790 did not curtail Peter’s interest in the subject: his _Advice to the Future Laureate: An Ode_ (1790) laid out the poetic qualifications for filling the recently vacated post, while the subtitle to one of his most famous poems, _The Royal Tour and Weymouth Amusements: A Solemn and Reprimanding Epistle to the Laureat_ (1795) makes clear that it is occasioned by Peter’s disapproval of the then incumbent Henry James Pye. In the meantime Peter also offered various other animadversions on his relationship with the King and, by extension, the relationship between poets and majesty.

The ‘advice to the poet’ ploy serves of course as a useful disclaimer that allows Wolcot to claim that Peter is not attacking the King, but rather those who write about him. Nevertheless it provides other satiric opportunities. In the case of the Warton poems the examination of the relationship between the poet (and the notion of poetic merit) and
the subject matter at hand is a means of satirising the whole business of state-sponsored
verse and through this the person of the King. It also provides an opportunity to explore,
through the fictional poet Peter, the question of what kind of poet can be envisaged as
flourishing in this culture, and beyond that it was an established method through which
writers signalled a self-conscious interest in the writing of history. As Noelle Gallagher
has most recently demonstrated, satirists from the Restoration onwards used the Advice
to the Artist genre to ‘situate their works within an English historiographical tradition’
and make ‘historical representation itself a central issue in the portrayal of past persons
and events’ in such a way as to suggest, in a position becoming familiar in this article,
that ‘history might be less comprehensible from a lofty vista than from beneath the
narrowing lens of a microscope’. Wolcot’s own position is of course tending in the
other direction in terms of its conclusions, focussing on the potentially negative
consequences of the ‘narrowing lens.’ Yet it is important to be alert to the fact that he is
working within a recognised tradition, albeit coming to a different conclusion than many
that had come before, since it is another example of a way in which Wolcot’s
preoccupations can be seen within the context of a larger historiographical and
intellectual framework.

Given Wolcot’s interest in the ways in which Johnson might be memorialised for
the 1780s, it is hardly surprising that he had Peter engage in conversation with Warton,
since Warton in effect raises the same question when he favourably compares George,
and the sorts of poems it is fitting to write about him, with poems written in praise of
great men from the past. In effect Warton calls attention to the tensions discussed in
section one of this article; what Adam Potkay has termed ‘a cultural seam between two
ethical domains’ represented by the ‘sublime eloquence and political community’ of antique civic virtue and that of the ‘subdued manners in private life’ seen on as essentially modern and polite.\textsuperscript{40} In his \textit{Ode on His Majesty’s Birth-day, June 4 1787} Warton considers the royal myth-making of Chaucer, Spenser and Dryden on behalf of previous monarchs, before concluding:

\begin{verbatim}
  Had these blest Bards been call’d, to pay
  The vows of this auspicious day,
  Each had confess’d a fairer throne,
  A mightier sovereign than his own!
  Chaucer had bade his hero-monarch yield
  The martial fame of Cressy’s well-fought field
  To peaceful prowess, and the conquests calm,
  That braid the sceptre with the patriot’s palm:
  His chaplets of fantastic bloom,
  His colourings, warm from Fiction’s loom,
  Spenser had cast in scorn away,
  And deck’d with truth alone the lay;
  All real here, the bard had seen
  The glories of his pictur’d Queen!
  The tuneful Dryden had not flatter’d here,
  His lyre had blameless been, his tribute all sincere!\textsuperscript{41}
\end{verbatim}

In Warton’s eyes valuing George III above Edward III involves valuing a different set of arts and practices, a set more suitable for the modern, polished world. It is a distinction
lost on Peter, whose response in the *Instructions* to the ‘laurell’d ODE-MAN’ is blunt

(‘smoking’ in this context has the – already - archaic meaning of ‘ridicule’ or ‘make fun of’):

But, Thomas Warton, without joking,

*Art* thou, or art thou not, thy Sov’reign smoking?

How can’st thou seriously declare

That George the Third

With Cressy’s Edward can compare,

Or Harry?---- ‘tis too bad, upon my word.

In his early *Ode for the New Year, 1787* Warton had in similar vein compared the ‘rough magnificence’ and military adventuring of the Crusades with the ‘worthier triumphs’ of Georgian England and its commitment to the values of ‘commerce, peace and art’. The opening section of Peter’s *Ode upon Ode* paraphrases this position in a way that highlights the difficulty of the poet whose frame of reference is caught between a world of ancient eloquence and modern commercial politeness:

Great (says the Laureat) were the Poet’s puffings,

On idle daring red-cross ragamuffins,

Who, for their childishness, deserved the birch:

Quoth Tom, a worthier subject now, thank God!

Inspires the lofty Dealer in the Ode,

Than blockheads battling for old Mother-Church.
Times (quoth our courtly bard) are alter’d quite;
The poet scorns what charm’d of yore the fight;
Goths, vandals, castles, horses, mares:
The polish’d poet of the present day
Doth in his tasty shop display,
Ah! vastly prettier-colour’d wares.\(^{43}\)

Peter’s characterisation of crusaders as ‘red-cross ragamuffins’ is a *reductio ad absurdum*
of Warton’s position. It highlights the contradiction between Warton’s platitudinous way
of writing about the past and the attitude he displays towards it when he dismisses it as
anachronistic. In effect Peter takes Warton at his word and in doing so shows Warton as
caught in a rhetorical trap of his own devising. Similarly, Peter’s stanzas are animated by
a tension between two different rhetorical registers: on the one hand ‘courtly bard’ and
‘polish’d poet’ and on the other the notion of the poet as a shopkeeper displaying his
goods. This tension between the commercial and the civic is best encapsulated in the
phrase ‘lofty Dealer in the Ode’. Peter’s critique of Warton thus aims to demonstrate the
mis-match between the business of poetry and royalty, or at least its current embodiment.
Here and elsewhere Peter sees Warton’s mistake in part as one of misunderstanding the
kind of poetry fit for the court of George III. If the values of the Georgian world are
different from those of his warrior-prince forebears, then there needs to be a different sort
of poetry and language, one that seems beyond Warton’s grasp or imagining.
This dilemma about the appropriate memorialisation of the particular interests and achievements of George III is the context for the substantial matter of *Instructions to a Celebrated Laureate*. It is an extended anecdote about the royal birthday treat of 1787, a visit to Whitbread’s Brewery aimed at satisfying royal curiosity as to the art of brewing. Such sustained anecdotes would come to serve Peter well in his satires of George and, according to John Barrell, were ‘by 1795 much more corrosive of the King’s majesty than […] Gillray’s caricature’. Peter presents this mock-epic account of the visit to Warton as a model for the appropriate expression of the qualities of the King in verse. Furthermore Peter offers himself as the poet best placed to match form and theme, language and subject. That said, and from the very start of the poem when Peter ascribes its epigraph ‘*sic transit gloria mundi*’ to ‘old sun dials’ rather than any more elevated source, the reader is clear that this is a distinctly double-edged compliment. More sharply than in the Boswell poems, Wolcot has Peter act both as indicter and indictment of the discourse of triviality he attacks. In the former, Boswell and Piozzi are ‘pigmy planets’ who ‘catch their little lustre from the sun’ of Johnson. In the latter, there is no such incongruity between George and Peter because Peter’s poetry of the inconsequential matches the character, actions and nature of the King and times. Whereas Boswell and Piozzi had presumed on the reputation of the great Johnson with their mundane tittle-tattle, Peter’s jokey, colloquial informality, his fundamentally bathetic turn, resonates absolutely with the ‘microscopic genius’ of George in a way that the solemn platitudes of Warton had not.

The King’s qualities can be summarised as stupidity, rudeness and selfishness. His stupidity comes in the apparently indiscriminate inanity of his interest in brewing:
And now his curious Majesty did stoop
To count the nails on ev’ry hoop:
And lo! no single thing came in his way
That full of deep research, he did not say
“What’s this? hae, hae? what’s that? what’s this? what’s that?” (p.15)

George’s enquiries into ‘the world of small’ are inexhaustible. His numb-skull curiosity
on every matter must be satisfied however reductive and missing of the overall point. It
culminates in a moment that combines closely-observed social comedy and broad farce,
when Whitbread tells the royal party that if he laid all his barrels side by side in a row
they would reach Kew. George’s response to this commonplace way of indicating the
large number of barrels Whitbread has in his possession demonstrates a literal minded
curiosity devoid of any effort to really engage with what he is being told:

“What? If they reach to Kew then, side by side,
What would they do plac’d end to end?”
To whom, with knitted calculating brow,
The Man of Beer most solemnly did vow,
Almost to Windsor that they would extend;
On which the King, with wond’ring mien,
Repeated it unto the wond’ring Queen:

On which, quick turning round his halter’d head;
The brewer’s horse with face astonish’d neigh’d:
The brewer’s dog too pour’d a note of thunder,
Rattled his chain, and wagg’d his tail for wonder. (p.16)

This emphasis on child-like literal-mindedness, while not supportive of George’s dignity has nevertheless been interpreted by Vincent Carretta as part of Wolcot’s ‘laughing treatment of the King’ – whom he finds ‘embarrassing’ rather than anything stronger – within an overall ‘rhetoric of disappointment, not disobedience’ that stretches as far back as Andrew Marvell. The ‘Peter Pindarian tone’, according to Carretta, ‘reveals no serious discontent with the rule of George III’ and indeed renders George harmless and protects him from more searching political critique. A similar point has been made by Carol Percy in her consideration of the ways in which George’s supposedly idiosyncratic form of speech was rendered. It may have opened George up to a degree of ridicule, but more profoundly it ‘helped to craft his more public image as an ordinary man, able to bridge the social gulfs mapped by linguistic difference.’ By contrast however, John Barrell has reinvested the satires of the 1790s (poems such as A Royal Tour) with a more pointed political meaning by interpreting them as an attack on George III’s particular brand of royal ideology of ordinariness and ‘the irreconcilable desires of the King and crowd alike for a monarch both majestic and familiar.’ Barrell does this by way of a comparison with what he sees as less purposeful efforts in the 1780s. However, it is possible to see the latent (and not so latent) viciousness of the later portraits of the King in these earlier efforts, and a similar focus on the image of ordinariness as an image, and a hypocritical one at that. This is apparent in what Peter depicts as George’s habit of asking multiple, indiscriminate questions:

Now Whitbread inward said, “May I be curst
If I know what to answer first”.
Then search’d his brains with ruminating eye ---

But ere the Man of Malt an answer found,

Quick on his heel, lo, MAJESTY turn’d round,

Skipp’d off, and baulk’d the pleasure of reply. (pp.20-21)

This would not matter so much had Peter not previously been at such pains to emphasise Whitbread’s nervousness at the Royal visit and the ‘Whitbread-rout of preparation’ in advance of the King’s arrival. Whitbread’s response to the arrival of the Royal party is described in terms whose comic incongruousness derives from their colloquial matter-of-factness:

Arriv’d, the King broad grin’d and gave a nod

To Mr. Whitbread, who had GOD

Come with his angels to behold his beer;

With more respect he never could have met----

Indeed the man was in a sweat,

So much the BREWER did the KING revere. (p.14)

That we know such things makes the discomfort George causes Whitbread evidence of not merely gracelessness but cruelty. He is too rude to wait for answers to his own questions and tactlessly asks whether Whitbread’s beer is as good as that of rival brewers (a question that ‘grat[es] like arsenic on his host’s digestion’). As such the poem anatomises that most subtle form of bullying, the hypocritical abuse of power in which authority presumes familiarity while not submitting itself to the rules that govern interactions between the genuinely equal. Carretta suggests that the ‘domestication of the regal image brought the viewer up to the King’s level as much as it brought the king
down to his subjects’, but the most significant point within these interactions is the double-standard and hypocrisy that sits at the heart of this supposed ordinariness and apparent parity.

George’s questions appear trivial and random, but an interest in penny-pinching runs through them. This is most marked when the King ‘noteth notable things’:

Mem.---- ‘Tis hops that give a bitterness to beer ---

Hops grow in Kent, says Whitbread, and elsewhere.

Quaere.----Is there no cheaper stuff? Where doth it dwell----

Would not horse aloes bitter it as well?

Mem.----To try it soon on our small beer------

‘Twill save us sev’ral pounds a year.

Mem. ---To remember to forget to ask

Old Whitbread to my house one day ----

Mem.----Not to forget to take of beer the cask

The brewer offer’d me, away. (p.17)

The King makes his notes in ‘a very pretty memorandum book,| With gilded leaves of asses skin so white’, reinforcing the hypocrisy of the penny-pinching. Equally the laughter generated by the last quatrain, with its opposing impulses (though congruent sentiments) united through rhyme scheme, feels more hollow later in the poem when the
royal family greedily tuck into the lunch offered by the Whitbreads, a mock-epic
decimation ‘Of flesh, and fish, and fowl of ev’ry nation.’

At the end of the anecdote Warton reproaches Peter with the question “[i]s this an
action, Peter? this a deed | To raise a Monarch to the sky?” In effect Warton voices
Peter’s own critique of Boswell and Piozzi’s memorialisation of Johnson via unflattering
anecdote in the earlier poems. However Peter is unrepentant, refusing to concede that
this is an unacceptable way of celebrating George’s unique talents:

But this I tell thee, Thomas, for a fact,
Thy Caesar never did an act
More wise, more glorious, in his life.
Now GOD preserve all wonder-hunting KINGS,
Whether at Windsor, Buckingham, or Kew house,
And may they never do more foolish things

Than visiting SAM WHITBREAD and his brewhouse. (p.27)

The activation of the more conventional rhetoric of royal paean— the honorific Caesar, the
references to wisdom and glory – reminds the reader again of the questions of political
virtue and the representations of political virtue raised by Warton and applied literally for
satiric effect by Peter. Equally it shows Peter to be no nostalgic apologist for a previous
model of political virtue, for all that his satire attacks the modern notions of manners and
social virtue that have evacuated grandeur and meaning from high office. George is
recuperated by Peter giving thanks for a King about whom this is the worst that can be
said, an observation that perforce brings to mind all the much more unpleasant things
monarchs are capable of doing. It may be an act of royal recuperation, but it is one that comes with the strength of a threat.

In all this Peter is of course assuming a position from which he can judge George. Wolcot raises the stakes of this insight still further by exploiting the licence of this fundamentally levelling perspective to conceive of the relationship between poet and king in a radically different way. As Peter puts it in *Brother Peter to Brother Tom*:

The world may call me liar, but sincerely

I love him ----for a partner, love him dearly:

Whilst his great name is on the ferme, I’m sure

My credit with the Public is secure.

Yes, beef shall grace my spit, and ale shall flow,

As long as it continues George and Co.;

That is to say, in plainer metre,

George and Peter.49

Indeed, Peter can even posit a version of this partnership whereby he is the senior partner. He concludes to dedication to Pye in the *Royal Tour* by taking matters one step further when he says that he no more hates kings and queens than the hunter hates the wild boar:

May KINGS *exist*---and TRIFLE pig with Kings!

The MUSE desireth not more precious things----

Such sweet *mock-grandeur!*—*so sublimely garish!*

Let’s have no WASHINGTONS: did *such* appear,

The MUSE and I had ev’ry thing to fear ----
Soon forc’d to ask a pittance of the parish.

Such want not praise---in native virtue strong:

Tis folly, folly, feeds the POET’S song.\(^{50}\)

In another context the final line could be a Juvenalian rallying cry to the righteous standard of satire. But Wolcot has too close an eye on the literal reality behind the dead metaphor, and the immediately previous reference to Poor Relief makes the notion of feeding the poet’s song entirely inseparable from the imperative of feeding the poet.

In laying bare the profit motive in his satire Peter reveals that his commitment to the radical cause to be one of financial expediency rather than principled opposition. Yet to say that Peter portrays the relationship between poet and monarch to be one in which the latter provides opportunities to the commercial advantage of the former is also to say something rather far reaching about Wolcot’s disrespect for the monarchy. He has Peter reconfigure kings and queens as, at best, partners in the poet’s business, and, at worst, a commodity upon which the professional writer can trade. This might not be a particularly idealistic or appealing way of understanding equality of station, but its grubby logic is all the more deliberately undermining of royal authority for that.

\[ \text{III. Conclusion} \]

The poems discussed here explore the literary representation and mediation of ‘greatness’, and suggest its deterioration from the noble Lives model of the ancients to the triviality of celebrity culture either as a response to the demands of a crass commercialism or as a result of the inherent inanity of its modern subject. Yet they also
reveal a fraught and contradictory position for the writer. On the one hand Wolcot laments and satirises the absence of a recognised or applicable rhetoric of greatness: there is no way of doing justice to Johnson, and no way but Peter’s of doing justice to George. Yet on the other hand he lambasts the hypocritical high-handedness of the representatives of the political order who would be the beneficiaries of that rhetoric of greatness and who Wolcot might otherwise be thought of as defending though this attack on the trivial levelling of modern culture. Wolcot’s ultimate attitude towards Warton is one of pity for being lumbered with George III as a figure around which to attempt to create a model of discourse of royal virtue for the modern world that dispenses with the ludicrous anachronisms of previous royal paean. Peter Pindar is then a way of wrestling with the paradoxes of an age suspicious of, or anxious about, the relevance of traditional ways of mediating greatness yet unable to formulate a coherent or appealing alternative way of articulating a more relevant set of values. Peter on Boswell on Johnson, and Peter on Warton and Peter on George III represent Wolcot’s satiric investigation of nature of modern biography as surely as Disraeli on Anecdote offers a discursive one.

Peter Pindar emerges as both tenor and vehicle in this process, calling attention to the pitfalls of the age in significant part by embodying them. Any effort to separate John Wolcot and Peter Pindar completely would not only be naïve but fruitless. When, in the first canto of the Lousiad (1785), Peter announces his switch to royal satire with the claim that he ‘LOVE and the SONS OF CANVAS quit[s] for Kings’ he is collapsing the distinction between the Persian Love Elegies that had appeared in 1773 under Wolcot’s name and Peter’s own debut attacking the painters of the Royal Academy, the Lyric Odes to the Academicians (1782). But regardless of such elisions, it is crucial to understand
Peter Pindar as other than Wolcot, an unreliable commentator who is as often as not the butt of Wolcot’s satire, calling out what Wolcot identifies as the idiocies of his age by as often as not exemplifying them. Distinguishing Peter from John allows for an understanding of Peter as a poetic creation, a character in Wolcot’s imaginative world, and the acknowledgement that he is as open to interrogation and indeed satiric representation as any of the figures he is himself satirising.\(^{51}\)

Understanding Wolcot and his creation Peter in such terms not only deepens our sense of Wolcot’s sophistication as a poet and satirist but also provides a richer context for understanding the later Wolcot within of the range and subtlety of political responses to the French Revolution in Britain. The last twenty years have seen significant insights into the contexts and complexities, the debates and differentiations in what had previously been interpreted as a neat dichotomy of radical/reactionary.\(^{52}\) Of particular importance has been the reconfiguring of the notion of political loyalism (especially in historical studies) not only as a something with many hues but as ‘an empowering movement that gave its followers a public presence and political voice with which to criticise the polity they sought to defend.’\(^{53}\) Yet with a few exceptions the debate about Wolcot has not moved beyond questions of apostasy and double-dealing. Or again, the emphasis on competition between radical and loyalist writers over terms and ideas – what Mori terms ‘sites of contest and inspiration’ – should open the door on contextualising the practices of Wolcot discussed above in terms of others within the period. For example, the work discussed in this article resembles what Kyle Grimes has termed Romantic ‘hacker satire’, characterised as ‘parasitic, derivative, opportunistic or parodic’.\(^{54}\) Grimes’ account of William Hone’s satiric voice as a ‘parodic seizing of
cultural authority’ that is ‘definable by the role it plays in very immediate and historically specific discursive power struggles’ offers a compelling way of revaluing Peter’s interest in the local and, in the long view of history, trivial regardless of any judgement about the extent to which they shared a political position across generations. It also articulates the opportunistic way in which Peter is both a mouthpiece for and a target of Wolcot’s various satiric agenda, including the self-conscious and explicit consideration of the complicity between satirist and object of satire. The reader is invited to laugh at Peter almost as often as with him, and sometimes both with and at him at the same time.

Equally, to read Wolcot working in this way in the mid-1780s is to offer a contribution to the appreciation of what still seems like a lost decade in eighteenth-century poetry. Even sympathetic readings of Wolcot tend to focus on his output post-1789, and it is notable that many of the ideas and concepts deployed in this essay have had their most thorough and significant articulation in relation to periods either side of the work they are being asked to do here. It is notable then to see how Wolcot’s poetry from the 1780s combines themes and preoccupations more usually understood in terms of earlier or later periods, but which he demonstrates exist in vital relation through his work. As such the insights generated are important not just for understanding the significance of Wolcot’s work during this time, but for arguing for the importance of a decade itself frequently only understood in unflattering comparison with the one that followed.

Through Peter Pindar, Wolcot diagnoses and critiques a crisis of cultural authority in his age, creating a spokesman for that crisis who anatomises, exemplifies and glories in its absurdities. Acknowledging this recognition is a further step towards the rehabilitation of
not only one of the most prolific poetic voices of the age, but one of unacknowledged sophistication and importance.

2 Donald Kerr, “‘Satire is Bad Trade’: Dr John Wolcot and his Publishers and Printers in Eighteenth-Century England.” Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text, 12. Online: Internet (28/09/2010): http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc12_n02.html. For example 42,500 copies of his 1794 collection Pindariana were printed.
5 Dyer, British Satire, 3.
6 Barrell Spirit of Despotism, 138. Other dimensions to Barrell’s recuperation of Peter will be discussed below.
9 McCalman, “John Wolcot”, p.765
14 Helen Deutsch, Loving Dr Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), pp.178-9
15 Samuel Johnson, The Rambler 60 (13-10-1750), in Greene (ed), pp.204-207 (p.205)
Literatures: Writing About the Past in England, 1660–1850 (Spring, 2011), p.79


Instructions to a Celebrated Laureat; Alias the Progress of Curiosity; Alias A Birth-Day Ode; Alias Mr Whitebread’s Brewhouse, by Peter Pindar Esq, 8th edition, (London: J & A M’Lean, 1788) p.8

Ode Upon Ode; Or, A Peep at St James’s; Or, New Year’s Day; Or What you Will in The Works of Peter Pindar Esq 3 volumes, (London: J. Walker, 1797), vol.1, p.383-4.

Barrell, Spirit of Despotism, 121.


Carretta, George III and the Satirists, p.280.


The Royal Tour; Or, Weymouth Amusements; A Solemn and Reprimanding Epistle to the Laureat by Peter Pindar Esq. (Dublin: W Porter, 1796), p.iii

Dyer notes that ‘no poet’s practice conveys more than Wolcot’s how radically pseudonymity can differ from anonymity’ (British Satire, 37).

For a survey of key scholarship, see Emma Vincent Macleod, ‘British Attitudes to the French Revolution’, The Historical Journal 50.3 (Sept., 2007), 689-709. DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X07006310.

