welfare benefits cumulatively declined: Adjusting for inflation, "median AFDC payments in 1992 were 43 percent lower than they were in 1970," as interest in the war on poverty evaporated from the public agenda.

Sweet Land of Liberty deals with black employment far more sure-handedly. Between the late 1940s and the late '60s, cities such as Detroit and New York lost hundreds of thousands of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, and "over the course of the 1960s, government became the single most important employer of African Americans in northern cities." Thus, "government became the most important vehicle for the expansion of the black middle class," and by 1995 "more than half of all black professionals worked in the public sector."

Blacks' concentration in the public sector may be a more mixed state of affairs than Sugrue acknowledges, but he rightly emphasizes that in the North, as in the South, "the growth of the black middle class is the most obvious result of the civil rights movement." Sugrue gives significantly less attention to the rise of black electoral politics in the North than many other historians do, and that too may be the result of his overarching belief that economic power is more important than moral claims, cultural innovations, or election results. *Sweet Land of Liberty* is a richly detailed tome, but many readers may wish Thomas Sugrue had drawn a clearer road map through his own urban sprawl.

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First Man of Letters

Reviewed by Brooke Allen

SAMUEL JOHNSON: A Biography.
By Peter Martin. Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press. 608 pp. $35

SAMUEL JOHNSON: The Struggle.
By Jeffrey Meyers. Basic. 528 pp. $35

For elegance, invention, and mellifluence, the English language is usually considered to have reached its apogee during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. But there is a case to be made for the 18th-century Augustan age, with the great critic, poet, philologist, and journalist Samuel Johnson as its brightest star. Observing Johnson in conversation with Edmund Burke, the young novelist Fanny Burney opined that for sheer brilliance Burke was "the second man in this Kingdom," but that Johnson was "the first of *every* kingdom." Praise indeed, for along with Burke, the most dazzling politician of the age, Johnson's close social circle included Edward Gibbon (whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* achieved a sustained perfection in prose that has perhaps never been matched), Oliver Goldsmith, Adam Smith, Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the great naturalist Joseph Banks, the portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick (the Olivier of his day), and the irrepressibly naughty and amusing young James Boswell, who would one day write *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.*

In retrospect, it is easy to see Johnson standing as a sort of dividing line between the distant past and our own era. While he identified himself as a Tory and saw himself as a conservative and upholder of tradition, this was true only in the most limited sense. He was passionately anti-militarist and anti-imperialist, and (unusually, for his time) deplored his country's foreign adventures and the oppression of native peoples throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas. He was just as passionate in opposing slavery. He spoke out loudly

against the political suppression of Catholics in the British Isles. His essay advocating the humane treatment of prisoners of war during the wars against the French was so powerful that the International Red Cross saw fit to reprint it in the mid-20th century. He protested against vivisection of animals for scientific research, which he considered as immoral as the torture of human beings. Most significantly, he commiserated deeply with the poor, whose unhappy lives he ascribed to social conditions rather than their own vices. "A decent provision for the poor," he wrote, "is the true test of civilization."

Intellectually, too, Johnson pointed toward a new sensibility. His *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) marked a revolution in English letters by being descriptive rather than prescriptive: In other words, he gave up on the project of creating a dictionary that would purify the unruly language by fixing meanings and pronunciations (as the Académie Française had recently attempted across the Channel) in favor of simply describing the state of English as it was spoken at that time and had been in the past. His philosophy and achievement cleared the path for the *Oxford English Dictionary* begun a century later. "Language," Johnson wrote, "is the work of man, of a being from whom permanence and stability cannot be derived." Of words, he said that "like their author, when they are not gaining strength, they are generally losing it. Though art may sometimes prolong their duration, it will rarely give them perpetuity."

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* appeared in 1791, six years after the great man's death. Being one of the most enchanting writers who ever lived, Boswell succeeded in creating an image of Johnson that has so far proved impossible to dislodge from the public imagination, that of the clubman, the wit, the doughty champion of tradition, the truculent, bullying conversationalist who "tossed and gored" his interlocutors with impunity. All these aspects of Johnson are real enough, but they are only part of the picture, and probably not the largest part. In any case, Boswell's account is heavily weighted toward the last 20 years of his subject's life—the years, in other words, of the two men's friendship. Only one-fifth of the text is devoted to Johnson's first 55 years. These defects have now been compensated for in two new biographies, written in time to celebrate the tricentennial of Johnson's birth: an English one by Peter Martin, and an American one by Jeffrey Meyers.

As far as quality and depth go, there is not any real competition between the two. Martin has spent a lifetime steeped in Johnson's world, having written definitive biographies of Boswell and of Edmond Malone, the Irish Shakespearean scholar without whose help the unstable Boswell might never have finished his massive biography. Meyers is a prolific and facile writer who has produced a range of biographies so large and varied—works on Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Orwell, Amedeo Modigliani, W. Somerset Maugham, Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, Edgar Allan Poe, Edmund Wilson, and many more—as to preclude a deep knowledge of any one area of study. If it were necessary to choose between the two, Martin's would be the book to read. Nevertheless, they are both interesting, and both succeed in filling in the very substantial gaps in Boswell's account.

As Martin points out, the *Life of Johnson* "presents a man essentially at peace in his own mind. Boswell did not want his portrait to be of a man wracked with self-doubt, guilt, fear, and depression. He rarely cited from Johnson's writings, did not make sensational use of Johnson's diary extracts to which he had access, and was not privy to his friend's deepest secrets and worries." The diaries (or at least what remained of them after Johnson made a huge bonfire of his private papers shortly before his death) and his surviving prayers and meditations portray a man "poised dangerously between control and madness, between doubt, fear, and faith, tormented by the dread of loneliness and death and lacerated by physical as well as mental sickness." A severe depressive, Johnson occasionally toyed with the idea of writing an account of his "melan-

cholia." It's a pity he did not, for then we might have had an addition to the literature on the subject as valuable as Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) or William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1990).

A depressed Johnson was not the father figure that Boswell, himself prey to crippling bouts of melancholia and insecurity, wanted to celebrate. Another side of Johnson he chose to suppress was his sexuality, a subject explored by Martin and especially by the more prurient Meyers. Everyone knows Johnson's much-quoted line about his idea of contentment being to "spend my life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman," but few will know the answer he gave to Garrick (here provided by Meyers) when asked what activity gave the greatest pleasure in life. The first pleasure, he said, was "fucking & the second was drinking. And therefore he wondered why there were not more drunkards, for all could drink tho' all could not fuck."

Meyers devotes considerable space to evidence for what he calls Johnson's "secret life": a sexual desire to be locked up and physically disciplined, activities that Meyers, on the basis of scholarship by Katharine Balderston and others, believes Johnson and his friend Mrs. Hester Thrale engaged in. Martin pooh-poohs the notion, but the citations Meyers provides from Johnson's correspondence with Mrs. Thrale do seem too suggestive for mere coincidence. And in any case, why shouldn't Johnson have his sexual peculiarities just like anyone else? The real question is just what, if anything, this knowledge adds to our understanding of the man and his work. Meyers claims that "Johnson's secret life adds to rather than detracts from his greatness. It makes his character more complex and tormented, his struggle more extreme, his achievement more impressive."

There is a certain truth in this, however self-justifying it might seem coming from Meyers. Johnson was on record as believing that "to strive with difficulties and to conquer them, is the highest human felicity." If this is true, then Johnson more than earned whatever felicity he attained, for the difficulties he encountered on his upward path were considerable. He was poor, obscure, and largely self-educated. Struck by scrofula shortly after his birth in 1709, he lost much of his eyesight and went through life half-blind, having to read by pressing his face to the page. He suffered from violent physical tics that have been posthumously attributed to Tourette syndrome.

Though highly sexed, he was not attractive to women. His 17-year marriage, to a woman two decades his senior, was not a passionate one, and many women found his appearance quite grotesque. Fanny Burney wrote, "his mouth is continually opening and shutting, as if he were chewing something; he has a singular method of twirling his fingers, and twisting his hands: his vast body is in constant agitation, seesawing backwards and forwards: his feet are never a moment quiet; and his whole great person looked often as if it were going to roll itself, quite voluntarily, from his chair to the floor." "When he walked," Boswell observed with his usual genius for the apt image, "it was like the struggling gait of one in fetters."

Johnson was not only the first English literary celebrity, in the modern sense of the word, but one of the first professional men of letters. Lord Chesterfield had originally proposed to stand patron to the *Dictionary*; in the event, he contributed a mere £10 to the effort as against Johnson's seven years of unremitting labor and poverty, then tried to claim some credit for the final product. Johnson's famous snubbing letter to Chesterfield, which Boswell published in 1790 for all the world to read, was described by one critic as "the Magna Carta of the modern author, the public announcement that the days of courtly letters were at last ended." "Is not a patron, my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help?" Johnson asked pointedly. " . . . I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligation where no

benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself."

As a character, Johnson turns out to be not only funny and wildly eccentric—as we always knew he was—but deeply poignant. I was moved to tears by Martin's biography, as I also was by his beautiful life of Boswell. But neither Martin's book nor Meyers's answers the fundamental question of just how important Johnson's writing (as opposed to his famous witty remarks) will continue to be to 21st-century readers. Johnson's edition of Shakespeare and its introduction, as well as his *Lives of the Poets*, were turning points in literary criticism, vastly important to scholars but not much read nowadays, and the same applies even to the great *Dictionary*. His poems *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* live on under almost purely academic auspices.

His essays, however, particularly those he wrote under the alias of "The Rambler," in a pamphlet series of the same name he published twice a week from 1750 to 1752, deserve to be brought back into the literary mainstream. Meyers is correct to emphasize the influence Johnson exerted on Jane Austen, two generations younger than he. Like countless readers of the 18th and 19th centuries, Austen was steeped in Johnsonian principles imbibed through his essays, and each of her novels can be seen as a working out, in imaginative terms, of themes explored in *The Rambler*. Sometimes it is nearly impossible to differentiate one author from the other, as in this excerpt from *Rambler* 172: "It is certain that success naturally confirms us in a favorable opinion of our own abilities. Scarce any man is willing to allot to accident, friendship, and a thousand causes which concur in every event without human contrivance or interposition, the part which they may justly claim in his advancement. We rate ourselves by our fortune rather than our virtues, and exorbitant claims are quickly produced by imaginary merit." As guides to the kind of questions that were troubling thoughtful men and women then—and now—Johnson's reflections can hardly be equaled.

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Captain America

Reviewed by Max Byrd

AMERICAN LION: Andrew Jackson in the White House.

By Jon Meacham. Random House. 483 pp. $30

There is reason to believe that Herman Melville modeled his Captain Ahab after the perpetually furious, sublimely obsessive seventh president of the United States, Andrew Jackson.

It is an easy association to make—Ahab, the man of "fixed purpose" and an "iron soul," Jackson the "Iron President," as his contemporaries called him, not only for his triumph over physical infirmities (he was probably the only president to endorse a patent medicine), but also for what one eulogist described, without irony, as his "amazing inflexibility of will."

Ahab was stark, staring mad, of course, hurling defiance at the Almighty and the Whale, imagining the day his own head would turn slowly to solid metal, a "steel skull . . . that needs no helmet in the most brain-battering fight." In Jackson's case, though plenty of his enemies thought him crazed and even insane, those closer to him suspected that underneath his ferocious glare and temper Old Hickory was a calculating politician, fully rational and in control.