

Introduction

WHEN I EMERGED from hospital in early 2010 with a certificate to say that I had a case of leukemia to go with my wrecked lungs, I could hear the clock ticking, and I wondered whether it was worth reading anything both new and substantial, or even rereading something substantial that I already knew about. Poetry, yes: I was putting the finishing touches to my *Poetry Notebook*, and there were still some more notes demanding to be added. But even the slightest book of prose looked like a big thing that I might not have time to get through. The cure for that attitude was Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. After reading the whole masterpiece with delight—I had read bits of it before, but I could now see that it needs to be taken complete—I resolved to get back to Johnson himself later.

In view of the fact that I was once again on my feet, instead of flat on my back, the concept of “later” suddenly