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INTRODUCTION

Dinner with Joseph Johnson

Over the course of the eighteenth century a landscape of bookshops formed in the City of London, under the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral. In Paternoster Row and St Paul's Churchyard the booksellers congregated, dealing with customers from street-facing frontages, commissioning new titles and negotiating with printers and paper-makers in back offices and workshops, eating and sleeping in warrens of rooms above their businesses.

Upstairs in one of the houses in St Paul's Churchyard there was a room with no right angles and no straight walls. Over the decades the appearance of this room altered and re-formed. For many years the most striking sight to catch the eye of visitors was a painting of a nightmare, featuring an incubus leering over a sleeping woman. The flesh-and-blood figure at the centre of the room formed an incongruous contrast to his backdrop. He was the bookseller Joseph Johnson, the proprietor of 72 St Paul's Churchyard. Johnson was a small, bewigged man, with dark eyes. One woman who had reason to be grateful to him testified to the 'tenderness' of his 'look'.¹ Another acquaintance recalled that Johnson greeted visitors with 'a good humoured face', an outstretched hand and an open invitation on his lips. 'How d'ye do Sir, I dine at three.'²

Once a week, between the early 1770s and the end of 1809, Joseph Johnson issued an invitation to dinner. Throughout the year he filled his dark, sloping dining room with the men and women who remade the literary landscape of the late eighteenth century. His guests did not come to dinner because of the quality of the food. Each week the fare consisted of roasted veal, boiled fish, boiled vegetables and rice pudding. There was wine to drink, although sometimes when Johnson's shop staff joined the company they insisted on bringing their own beer – a 'brutal' practice, thought one more refined guest.³ Over the decades, Johnson entertained hundreds to

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dine under the eye of the incubus. And the lines of their lives – and ideas – overlapped as they crossed his path.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that the men and women who dined with Joseph Johnson are gathered around the table once again, according to their centrality to Johnson's story rather than the realities of time and place. Gradually, a picture of the community he created becomes visible beneath the painting of the nightmare. Seated at Johnson's right hand, monopolising the attention of the host, is the artist responsible for the image of incubus and sleeper, Henry Fuseli. Fuseli himself acknowledges that once he starts drinking he finds it hard to control his tongue. 'A few glasses of wine cause his spirits to run away with him, and He always repents of his extravagance in conversation', reports one witness to his table manners.⁴ Fuseli's chief sparring partner at dinner is a mathematician called John Bonnycastle. During working hours Bonnycastle teaches maths to trainee soldiers at the Woolwich Military Academy; during his leisure he writes books designed to reveal the beauties of mathematics to general readers. He is not an elegant eater. According to the testimony of one young guest he has an unfortunate tendency to 'goggle' over his plate, 'like a horse'.⁵ When he laughs his teeth are exposed at the sides, and in Fuseli's presence he laughs and shouts in equal measure.

Sitting apart from the squabbles of Fuseli and Bonnycastle, in this imagined gathering, is Joseph Priestley. Priestley is at once a philosopher, chemist, theologian, teacher and more: there is barely an aspect of human existence to which he has not given some thought. At his own table Priestley has to be dissuaded from reading while he eats, but at Johnson's house there is too much pleasure to be had in the company of others for Priestley to be distracted by books. Chief among his friends at the table are Benjamin Franklin, a fellow chemist increasingly concerned by the deterioration in relations between Britain and his native America; and the Unitarian minister Theophilus Lindsey, whose chapel at Essex Street, further down the Strand, is another gathering place for many of Johnson's friends. Also clustered around Priestley are Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his brilliant novelist daughter, Maria; Erasmus Darwin, a doctor and poet whose girth is barely contained by his waistcoat; and from the younger generation, the quiet figure of another doctor, John Aikin, and John's sister, the writer Anna Barbauld. Barbauld is usually accompanied on her visits to St Paul's Churchyard by her husband, Rochemont, a Suffolk schoolmaster eclipsed by his brilliant wife. In letters to friends Barbauld writes of the

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intensity of her pleasure in the conversation to be found at Johnson's, although sometimes, like Fuseli, she writes the morning after dinner with wine-sodden wisdom of the perils of a late night on a tender head.

There are more men than there are women at dinner with Joseph Johnson, but Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth are by no means the only representatives in the dining room of their sex. Sometimes the company is joined by the white-capped figure of Sarah Trimmer, a children's writer and devout Anglican who has little in common with Johnson's more radical guests. Also present, when the boundaries of time and place are collapsed, is the poet Charlotte Smith, who finds refuge on Johnson's list in the final years of her life. His nieces Elizabeth and Hester form part of the family unit at St Paul's Churchyard, alongside their younger brother Rowland, a pupil at the Barbaulds' school who will become first Johnson's apprentice and later one of his heirs. But of all the women who gather for dinner it is the voice of Mary Wollstonecraft that can be heard most clearly across the table. It is the early opinion of another dinner guest, the philosopher William Godwin, that Wollstonecraft has a good deal too much to say for herself, but even Godwin's attention is snagged by the clarity with which Wollstonecraft makes her views known. At this end of the table Godwin would prefer to hear from Thomas Paine, whose political writings have caused a stir in both America and Britain. He is to be disappointed since Paine, as Godwin will later acknowledge, 'is no great talker.'⁶ Another guest is also disappointed in Paine, although for different reasons. An aspiring poet called James Hurdis, who seriously over-estimates the extent of his own literary talent, finds Paine's appearance as objectionable as his views. In a letter to a friend Hurdis complains that Paine's face is red and 'somewhat resembling in the inequality of its surface the coat of a Seville orange.' Paine's hair is as bad: thin, 'carelessly frizzed', and untidily held back with a slip of ribbon.⁷

Jostling for space at the table alongside the men and women who come to dinner most regularly are other figures eager to make their voices heard. Amongst a group of young men trying to carve space in the conversation is the poet William Wordsworth, down on his luck after being forced by political crisis to leave France. Alongside Wordsworth in this outer group is his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Some of the older guests have nursed the hope that Coleridge might channel his genius with words as a minister in the Unitarian Church, but their wishes will not be fulfilled. Also anxious for a place at the table is another chemist, Humphry Davy, who, the gossips

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report, sometimes runs to dinner straight from his workshop without stopping to change his shirt, and William Hazlitt, a follower of Godwin who has turned his back on the religion of Johnson and Priestley. Hazlitt wants to paint Johnson, but he cannot persuade the bookseller to sit still long enough to have his likeness taken.

Johnson is more interested in listening to others than he is in his own image. As the candles flicker, illuminating both the animated faces round the table and the strange image on the wall, he remains still. When the wine glasses have been drained and the guests at this phantasm of a dinner disappear down the stairs and into the night he is left alone in the crooked dining room. There are servants to clear the dirty crockery, their presence barely registered in the historical record. There is work to be set in train for the morning, and manuscripts to be read. The business of making and selling books is unrelenting, and within a few hours of the candles guttering in the dining room the shutters protecting the shop front will be thrown back, and into 72 St Paul's Churchyard will come once again the procession of authors, tradesmen and friends for whom dinner with Joseph Johnson offers the prospect of sustenance, conversation and safety.



Joseph Johnson became a bookseller and a maker of books in an age when books appeared to have the potential to change the world. Between 1760 and 1809, the years of Johnson's adulthood, Britain experienced a period of political, social, scientific, cultural and religious change during which nothing was certain and everything seemed possible. On paper Johnson's dinner guests charted the evolution of Britain's relationship first with America and then with Europe: several were intimately involved in the struggles that reformed the world order. They pioneered revolutions in medical treatment and scientific enquiry and they proclaimed the rights of women and children. All those whose presence was documented in the dining room were white. Most, but not all, were opponents of the global trade in enslaved people. Johnson's guests lived in a clubbable century, during which multiple groups of people came together and adopted or were given names that signalled their allegiances. 'Grub Street' was one such name: so was 'Scriblerians', 'Bluestockings', 'The Club of Honest Whigs' and, towards the end of the century, 'Anti-Jacobins'.

The men and women who gathered around Johnson had no communal name and they never moved as a single group. Some, like Wollstonecraft,

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Fuseli, Bonnycastle and Lindsey, frequented his shop and his dining room without waiting to be invited, treating his home as an extension of their own. Others, like Priestley and Barbauld, viewed St Paul's Churchyard as their Pole Star: the beacon towards whose light they were drawn whenever they came to London. A few – Paine, Trimmer, Darwin – are harder to place, because they left fewer textual traces of their physical presence in Johnson's house. One man, Johnson's engraver William Blake, came to dinner only rarely. At St Paul's Churchyard Blake was a tradesman, like Johnson. Few at the dining table saw him as either an author or artist: he was referred to by one of the guests simply as 'Blake, the Engraver'.⁸ Also absent from dinner was the poet William Cowper. Cowper was one of Johnson's bestselling authors and among his most significant correspondents, but he never visited London and never met the bookseller in person. Despite this he made his presence felt in the dining room just as surely as did those who came to Johnson's shop and home.

Many of those who came to dinner understood that the weekly gatherings at St Paul's Churchyard were emblematic of a broader interwoven community, and that to dine with Johnson was to acknowledge one's allegiance both to the bookseller and the network he enabled. As the years went on some among Johnson's guests came to resent the way in which they were identified outside the walls via their presence in his house. All those who dined were connected by a web that spun outwards from Johnson's house through the medium of paper, as conversations begun within the privacy of the dining room stretched out – often in public view – across the country and over the decades. Johnson turned his home into a writers' house in the most capacious sense of the phrase: a place where writers of contrasting politics and personalities could come together. Some of his guests took shelter under his roof for weeks on end; others called only occasionally. A few, through either choice or necessity, sent proxies in place of themselves. The dining room provided space for thinking and talking but it also symbolised and served as a sanctuary at times of crisis. Johnson's guests had to contend with events that threatened their physical security as well as their intellectual liberty. In the tumultuous years either side of the French Revolution they faced riots, fire, exile and prison, alongside the more quotidian but no less serious threats of homelessness, mental collapse, poverty and the exigencies of childbirth. Johnson's house provided a refuge throughout, and his labours allowed his visitors to make their voices heard even when external forces conspired to silence them.

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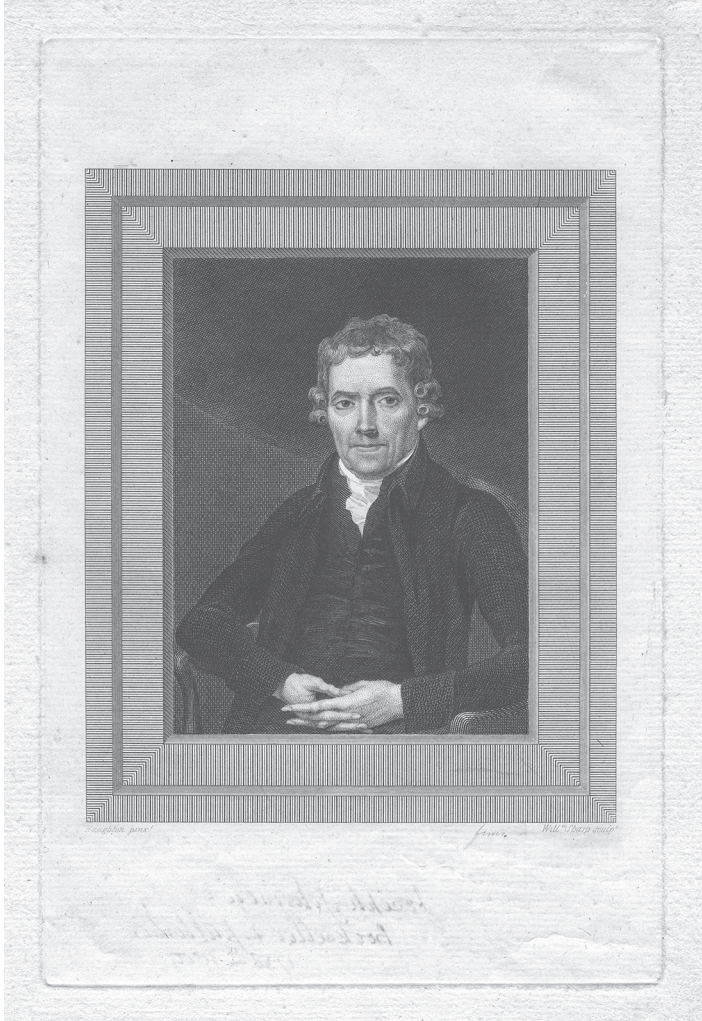
If 72 St Paul's Churchyard offered both the reality and the possibility of shelter, Johnson himself embodied a way of being in the world that many of those who sought out his company described as a kind of gift. In the historical record Johnson's voice is quieter than those of many of his guests. As a result his own story is less audible than those of his authors, through which he forms the connecting line. But although his voice is sometimes difficult to hear he remains visible through the decisions he made. He worked hard in order to make money and he died a rich man. But his professional and personal lives were characterised by generosity, and by the belief that acts of kindness contained within them a political and ethical significance that could not be gainsaid by reactionary State power. He threw open his dining room to all comers because he enjoyed the company of others and because it served his business interests, but also because the ethics of so doing underpinned every decision he took.

At St Paul's Churchyard Johnson made little distinction between public and private, or work and home. He lived according to a set of principles about the responsibilities of an individual to his friends, and those principles offered their own kind of sanctuary to the men and women who sought out his company. In Johnson's house family was not a concept bounded by claims of blood, and a friend could be someone who never crossed the threshold just as surely as someone who visited daily. His relationships with the men and women to whom he was closest were sometimes unconventional, but in all cases they demonstrated the strength of his belief in the political power of friendship. Friendship and its unknowability stand at the centre of Johnson's story, and at the centre of the communal story of the men and women who made their way to St Paul's Churchyard.

In the image of the nightmare hanging on Johnson's wall creatures lurk in the gloaming, exuding a force both potent and frightening. In the crooked dining room Johnson risks being lost in the shadows, while his guests appear in colour and light. In the one image of him that survives he looks away from the viewer, eluding discovery. Yet although Johnson has sometimes been obscured by the personalities gathered around his table he stands at the heart of the group, uniting them, giving them space and focus. In so doing he gives us a literature religious, revolutionary and Romantic. He championed the supremacy of the untrammelled creative imagination, for which Fuseli's painting stood as a symbol, but he did so alongside a commitment towards the imaginative and intellectual potential inherent in the collegiate conversations enabled at his table. In the strength of his allegiance

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to both shadowy nightmare and candlelit reality he was a maker of books who was also a maker of dreams. Chiselled throughout the strata of his story and the story of the dinners he held are the stories of the people, the books and the dreams he made.



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