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SAMUEL JOHNSON: A POET DOUBLE-FORM'D

Faridoun Farrokh

**A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Arts**

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SAMUEL JOHNSON: A POET DOUBLE-FORM'D

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ABSTRACT

SAMUEL JOHNSON: A POET DOUBLE-FORM'D

by Faridoun Farrokh

The world of literature and criticism has taken little notice of Samuel Johnson's poetry. He is generally regarded as a critic, lexicographer, moral essayist, and biographer. That he also wrote poetry is often dismissed as a minor trait in the literary character of a man who lived in an age when writing verses was considered a polite exercise, often engaged in by men, and women, of learning and taste. Such a view of Johnson ignores the fact that his poetic activity spans the entire length of his literary career, from his early school days to within a few weeks of his death. It also fails to note that Johnson made his first impression upon the contemporary literary scene with one of his major poems, London.

The present dissertation, therefore, has undertaken an examination of Johnson's literary identity and a study of his major poetic works with the basic assumption that he was primarily a poet. This study will not concern itself with Johnson's Latin poems because they were either school exercises or expressions of private, often religious, sentiment,

and not intended by Johnson for circulation. (The average reader, in fact, is not even aware that Johnson wrote Latin verse.)

This study is divided into six chapters. While each chapter relates to the overall subject of the discussion, it is self-contained and independent in theme and structure. Chapter I notes that the general neglect of Johnson's poetry is partially due to the sheer bulk and historical significance of his prose. Therefore, it is difficult for the general reader to espy the poet behind such a mass of scholarship and learning. It also observes that Johnson's name in the mind of the laity is closely connected with that of James Boswell, whose biography is largely responsible for Johnson's image. By exploring Boswell's disposition, literary attitudes, and methods as biographer, the chapter concludes that he did not enlighten the posterity on that part of Johnson's character which might be considered poetic.

Chapter II examines Johnson's view of himself. By taking into account his upbringing, education, and early life as a hack writer, the chapter reaches the conclusion that Johnson never fully worked out his poetic ambitions. As a professional writer under constant pressure to produce in mass, he came to view poetry as a luxury in which he could indulge only infrequently.

Having shed some light on Johnson's literary identity and self-image, the discussion moves on to an examination of Johnson's poetry. Chapter III evaluates Johnson's poetic performance in his only dramatic work, Irene, a blank-verse tragedy. The play is generally considered a failure, but the chapter suggests that its language, as such, contains some examples of Johnson's finest verse. The poetry of the play fails only when Johnson attempts to subject it to his narrow, moralistic view of the heroic drama.

Chapters IV and V deal with Johnson's London and The Vanity of Human Wishes. These poems are imitations of Juvenal's Third and Tenth Satires. The discussion here underlines Johnson's creativity and independence in his practice of the contemporary convention of imitation with a detailed examination of imagery and other rhetorical devices.

The final chapter is devoted to a study of Johnson's occasional and complimentary verse. The thrust of this segment is to present Johnson as a more general poet responding to a miscellany of poetic urges and producing verse which is a more intimate, though less grand, emanation of his poetic genius.

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PREFACE

Samuel Johnson worked long and hard before he could make an impression upon the literary scene of his time. From our distance, his talents were evident in the uncommonly good Latin and English verse he was turning out as a mere school boy, but the world took little notice of him until the appearance of his London when he was twenty-eight. And for many years after London he continued to write anonymously.

Although the success of London made it possible for him to think of himself as a professional writer, he continued to move in that sub-literary, vulgar, threadbare underworld of failed poets, journalists, and playwrights that was Grub Street. During these years poverty drove Johnson to produce massive amounts of writing in a variety of genres. Much of this writing was for Gentleman's Magazine, but he ventured into an increasing number of independent enterprises in order to supplement his income. For instance, he contributed to the Medical Dictionary, published by an old school friend, Dr. Robert James, by ghost-writing a prospectus, a dedication, and even some of the articles.

As his career advanced, Johnson turned his hand to a staggering multiplicity of forms. He wrote essays, formal

and familiar, an oriental romance, travel books, criticism, political pamphlets, book reviews, sermons, theatrical prologues and epilogues, satire, Horatian odes, advertisement, legal briefs, letters, biography, epitaphs. A professional writer was of course expected to be capable of such versatility and Johnson's self-image and reputation in his lifetime was distinctly that.

Johnson lived in an intellectual environment that more than ever before or since recognized and institutionalized the formal distinctions between the species of writing. The poet did not merely embark on the composition of a poem; he wrote an ode, or an elegy, or a pastoral, or a panegyric, or a lyric. Even within these forms he observed subdivisions, each with its own set of characteristics and conventions.

To a large measure this was due to the influence of Latin tradition on literary education still universal in Johnson's formative years. Also during these years the interest in classical esthetics was at a peak which held till Johnson attained the zenith of his career. But Johnson's age had lost a clear distinction between literary and non-literary writing. No doubt when Johnson wrote legal briefs, medical prescriptions, and bogus parliamentary reports, he was convinced that he was engaged in an activity as artistic as the composition of an ode. As a matter of

fact, to Johnson, writing in the middle third of the eighteenth century, almost any species of written human verbal communication was literature, and it could be of value only if it instructed and delighted simultaneously. For instance, in evaluating a work of only historical interest, Richard Knolles' Historie of the Turks, from which he extracted the outline for his Irene, Johnson uses criteria and a terminology which could easily have come from his literary criticism. "His stile," wrote Johnson, "though somewhat obscured by time, and sometimes vitiated by false wit, is pure, nervous, and clear. A multiplicity of events is so artfully arranged and so distinctly explained, that each facilitates the knowledge of the next." Today, of course, we suppose ourselves to have a greatly increased awareness of the qualities which give a piece of writing its literary character. As Paul Fussell notes, we have been exposed to the "romantic emoluments" and literary writing for us is "necessarily a self-expressive act, verging on confession." The modern reader, confronted with Johnson's massive production in such a profusion of forms, is, therefore, likely to be mystified as to the particular literary character of the man. He is apt to overlook the fact that as Johnson wrote he sincerely conformed to the generic expectations of his modes, which were more rigid then than they are now.

Such shift in the general conception of literature has brought about a vague, though persistent, notion that Johnson is not primarily a literary figure. Boswell contributes to a wider circulation of this notion by presenting the illustrious subject of his famous biography more as a sage and moral leader than a man of letters. Consequently, Johnson's personal image has grown larger than the literary significance of his works. General readers, therefore, tend to read less of his works and more about him.

Johnson's poetry has attracted even less attention than his prose. This is unfortunate, because the key to Johnson's literary genius is in his verse. It is in his poems that Johnson is most responsive to his creative urge and displays a resistance to the restrictions of contemporary form and convention without actually violating them. The present account of Johnson's poetry, therefore, will concentrate on a variety of his verse with a view to understanding these elements in the modes of perception and expression which brought depth and originality to Johnson's adaptations of what are otherwise derivative forms.

Chapter I

BOSWELL'S LEGACY: JOHNSON THE SAGE

Sometime in his seventeenth year, Samuel Johnson, translating from Horace's Odes, Book II.xx, wrote:

Now with no weak unballast wing
A poet double-formed I rise,
From the envious world with scorn I spring
And cut with you the wond'ring skies.

Though from no princes I descend,
Yet shall I see the blest abodes,
Yet, great Maecenas, shall your friend
Quaff nectar with th' immortal Gods.¹

The young scholar, in translating the ancient poet, was clearly inspired with more than a desire to polish his Latin. The poem displays an elation and exultation, rising from the translator's complete identification with his model. Even at that tender age, Johnson envisioned himself a poet. And a poet he remained until his last day, though his accomplishments in other fields of literary endeavor have overshadowed this fact. In a later stanza of the same ode, uncannily prophetic of Johnson's future renown, he predicts that

¹ E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 14.

My works shall propagate my fame,
 To distant realms and climes unknown
 Nations shall celebrate my name
 That drink the Phasis or the Rhone.

However, contrary to the aspiration in the final lines,

I, without fun'ral elegies
 Shall live forever in my verse,

this reputation came to be based on his Dictionary, critical writings, formal and familiar essays, and, perhaps as notably, his biography, written by a zealous and dedicated disciple, James Boswell.

It is true that the bulk of Johnson's literary output is in prose, but the body of his poetical works is also considerable. It may be suggested that had he been born under more affluent circumstances, had he not been forced by impecunity to engage in hack work for survival, he probably would have remained a poet all his life. Indeed, he never relinquished the notion of being a poet. Boswell reports that "a few days before his death, he had asked Sir John Hawkins, as one of his executors, where he would be buried; and on being answered, 'Doubtless, in Westminster Abbey,' seemed to feel a satisfaction, very natural to a poet."² And, appropriately enough, Johnson was buried in Westminster, indicating the fact that his poetic achievement was considered of sufficient

² James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 393.

significance by his contemporaries to relegate his remains to that "noble and renowned edifice."³

The world of literature and criticism, however, has not placed Johnson's poetry in the forefront of his literary production. Consequently, to regard Johnson as poet necessitates dispelling a variety of prejudices and reservations. For one thing, the name of Johnson in the mind of the laity is closely connected with that of James Boswell. Anthology selections from Boswell's Life are often such that they present a picture of Johnson as sage and moral leader. Editors often excise the passages that depict those of turbulences, emotional upheavals, sensitivities, and idiosyncrasies which are very much a part of the poetic disposition. Anthology selections present Johnson to the readers at large as a man of great good sense, albeit somewhat eccentric. But Johnson's personality, as I will try to show in the following pages, was much more varied and complex. This complexity reveals itself even though the reverence of a Boswell whose own idea of greatness--a quality he clearly believed Johnson to have possessed--was a typically neo-classical idea of orderliness and mechanical preciseness. To Boswell, anything that could not be brought within the confines of a rational and logical explanation was suspect and even unworthy. As we will see in the following

³ Ibid.

discussion, his method in writing the life was to rationalize and "explain away" those elements of Johnson's contemporary image that might have been thought bizarre. In the process, that multi-faceted, je ne sais quoi quality of Johnson's poetic character was quite intentionally camouflaged and could be discovered only by a discriminate reading of the Life and, of course, Johnson's verse.

The impact of Boswell's Life of Johnson on the imagination of general readers is not surprising. The work is certainly of formidable literary merit and breaks new ground in the art of biography. It deserves the attention it has received since its publication. Its value lies not only in its treatment of Johnson, but also in its minute chronicling of the contemporary literary and social scene. As such, the Life is not only a literary biography, it is also a social and historical document. While it is not the purpose of this study to analyze and evaluate Boswell's achievement as Johnson's biographer, it is necessary to cast a cursory glance at his opus magnum in order to see to what extent he --a dedicated student and close observer of Johnson's last twenty-one years--was able to discern the elusive poetic spirit behind the conspicuously palpable person of the scholar and sage.

To begin with, Boswell's theory and practice of biography-writing should be examined. There are, of course,

numerous instances in his writings in which the question of what a biography should be is brought up. One notable, and typically engaging, example occurs in the very beginning of his own London Journal. In establishing some ground rules for writing the diary--an autobiography in fact and so a variety of biography--he pledges accuracy and honesty in the relation of episodes, events, and anecdotes: "I shall here put down my thoughts on different subjects at different times, and whims that may seize me and the sallies of my luxuriant imagination. I shall mark the anecdotes and the stories that I hear, the instructive or amusing conversations that I am present at, and the various adventures that I may have."⁴ However, following this boy-scout pledge, he recounts a conversation with a friend which seems to suggest the exercise of a circumspect reticence in the Journal:

I was observing to my friend Erskine that a plan of this kind was dangerous, as a man might in the openness of his heart say many things and discover many facts that might do him great harm if the journal should fall into the hands of my [sic] enemies. Against which there is no perfect security. "Indeed," said he, "I hope there is no danger at all; for I fancy you will not set down your robberies on the highway, or the murders that you commit. As to other things there can be no harm." I laughed heartily at my friend's observation, which was so far true. I shall be upon my guard to mention nothing that can do harm. Truth shall ever be observed, and these things (if there should be any) that require the gloss of falsehood

⁴ Boswell's London Journal, 1762-63, Fredrick A. Pottle, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), p. 39.

shall be passed by in silence. At the same time I may relate things under borrowed names with safety that would do much mischief if particularly known.⁵

This strategy suggests a tendency to cover up and an expedient selectivity. It nevertheless displays a genuine desire for accurate recording of facts. After all, the Journal, as Boswell would have us believe, was to be a confessional, an instrument of self-knowledge and self-betterment. He states this with disarmingly boyish ingenuousness in the introductory paragraph: ". . . A man cannot know himself better than by attending to the feelings of his heart and to his external actions, from which he may with tolerable certainty judge 'what manner of person he is.' I have therefore determined to keep a daily journal in which I shall set down my various sentiment and my various conduct, which will be not only useful but very agreeable."⁶

Today, after two hundred years, we are convinced that Boswell remained constant to his declared aim of giving full account of his London sojourn, but whether the practice helped his moral rectitude is an entirely different question. We also know that in the Journal Boswell allowed his personality to be split into two personae: one is the twenty-one-year-old giddy Scottish nobleman, with an obsession to live as a "gentleman"; and the other, less obtrusive and more restrained, is the worldly-wise Boswell,

⁵ Ibid., pp. 39-40.

⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

keeping his alter ego under close observation and in check, occasionally patting him on the back, giving him the much-needed assurance that he has what it takes to achieve his aim. Let us look at the following examples (which also give us an idea of the wealth of detail Boswell invariably supplied in his accounts):

This evening I had a little adventure which took away the twenty-sixth part of my little stock. I was passing by Whitehall when a little boy came and told a girl who sold gingerbread nuts that he had just given her sixpence instead of a farthing. She denied this. Upon which the poor boy cried and lamented most bitterly. I thought myself bound to interfere in the affair. The boy affirmed the charge with the open keen look of conscious innocence, while the young jade denied it with the colour of countenance and bitterness of expression that betrayed guilt. But what could be done? There was no proof. At last I put it to this test: "Will you say, Devil take you, if you got his sixpence?" This imprecation the little gipsy roared out twice most fervently. Therefore she got off. No jury in any court could have brought her in guilty. There was now a good many people assembled about us. The boy was in very great distress. I asked him if the sixpence was his own. He said it was his mother's. I conceived the misery of his situation when he got home. "There, Sir," said I, "is the sixpence to you. Go home and be easy." I then walked on much satisfied with myself. Such a little incident as this might be laughed at as trifling. But I cannot help thinking it amusing, and valuing it as a specimen of my own tenderness of disposition and willingness to relieve my fellow-creatures.

The next example reveals Boswell's belief not only in his honorable nature, but also in his diplomatic bent and ability to manipulate situations:

⁷ Ibid., pp. 99-100.

On Tuesday I wanted to have a silver-hilted sword, but upon examining my pockets as I walked up the Strand, I found that I had left most of my guineas at home and had not enough to pay for it with me. I determined to make a trial of the civility of my fellow-creatures, and what effect my external appearance and address would have. I accordingly went to the shop of Mr. Jeffrys, sword-cutter to his majesty, looked at a number of his swords, and at last picked out a very handsome one at five guineas. "Mr. Jeffrys," said I, "I have not money here to pay for it. Will you trust me?" "Upon my word Sir," said he, "you must excuse me. It is a thing we never do to a stranger." I bowed gently and said, "Indeed, Sir, I believe it is not right." However, I stood and looked at him, and he looked at me. "Come Sir," cried he, "I will trust you." "Sir," said I, "if you had not trusted me, I should not have bought it from you." He asked my name and place of abode, which I told him. I then chose a belt and put the sword on, told him I would call and pay it tomorrow, and walked off. I called this day and paid him. "Mr. Jeffrys," said I, "there is your money. You paid me a very great compliment. I am much obliged to you. But pray, don't do such a thing again. It is dangerous." "Sir," said he, "we know our men. I would have trusted you with a value of a hundred pounds." This, I think, was very good adventure and much to my honour."⁸

Such examples divulge Boswell's tendencies and characteristics. It has been noted that his Life of Johnson is in many ways an autobiography as well. A good portion of the biography is structured around the interaction between the two men. In fact, to know Johnson, the Life has made it mandatory for the reader to take note of Boswell first. Colorful and engaging as Boswell is, it is by no means drudgery to make his acquaintance through the pages of Life. But the overall effect is that Johnson's image emerges from

⁸ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

the Life somewhat doctored and perhaps adulterated. Anthology editors correctly assume that the Life is at its best when Boswell's ego is most intrusive and when he in passage after passage compulsively lays himself bare to public notice.

This commitment to full exposure and the urge for self-expression inform Boswell's other writings, but in his Life of Johnson they constitute the cornerstone of his theory in biography-writing. There are, of course, other influences at work. In the opening chapter of the Life Boswell makes a genuine attempt to give a full account of his modus operandi.

The writing of lives was by the mid-1700's a fully established literary genre, although there was no formulated theory governing it. Boswell, in the first few pages of the Life, acknowledges some debt to former biographers. "If authority be required," he writes, "let us appeal to Plutarch, the prince of ancient biographers,"⁹ who advocates delineating the characteristics of the subject not so much by enumeration, but by recounting "an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest."¹⁰ As for the tone of the biography, Boswell sees fit to "adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason,¹¹ in his memoirs of Gray,"¹² whereby narrative is only

⁹ Life, p. 24. ¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rev. William Mason, author of The Life of Gray, 1775.

¹² Life, p. 22.

used to "explain, connect, and supply" the necessary link between events in the chronology of the subject. Otherwise, indisputable facts taken from authentic documents are supplied.

The ultimate authority, however, has to come "from the very man whose life I [Boswell] am about to exhibit." Here, Boswell quotes from the Rambler No. 60 which contains one of the many Johnsonian treatises on the art of biography-writing. Boswell's choice of the points raised in Rambler No. 60 reflects his ideas fairly accurately. For one thing, Johnson's essay stresses impartiality and dedication to a just presentation of the subject. Here, he warns against an undue zeal in "gratifying the publick curiosity" which may cause the biographer even to invent things that promote sensation. Conversely, he may endanger the integrity of his work by concealing things detrimental to the image of his subject out of "his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness." Johnson finds that many biographers have ignored these essentials and "we therefore see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyrick, and not to be known from one another but by extrinsick and casual circumstances."¹³ Furthermore, in this Rambler Johnson emphasizes the exercise of discretion in the selection of material to be included in the biography. "The business of the biographer,"

¹³ Ibid.

he writes, "is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thought into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue."¹⁴

Boswell, as he expounds Johnson's views on biography, justifies his own procedure in terms of the Johnsonian dicta. He promises to be impartial and discreet, though not at the cost of being evasive and inaccurate. "Indeed," he declares, "I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and 'to live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life."¹⁵ In a characteristic self-congratulatory tone Boswell adds: "Had his other friends been as diligent and as ardent as I was, he might have been almost entirely preserved."¹⁶

Chauncy B. Tinker, in his introduction to the 1953 Oxford edition of the Life, notes the pandemonium caused by the publication of Boswell's biography of Johnson. He observes that Boswell had for his subject a "picturesque hero" and a figure of great contemporary interest. "Its

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁶ Ibid.

approaching publication," Tinker writes of the Life, "was therefore awaited with great misgivings." The publication of the Tour to the Hebrides some years earlier had given ample warning to the public that Boswell had "slight regard for the graces of reticence" and it was widely rumored that the Life was even more audaciously outspoken. "Readers fastened at once on the new volume, to discover not only what was said of Samuel Johnson but what was said of themselves. There was evidence on all sides of a state of nerves. Even before the appearance of the Life, people began remonstrating with the author."¹⁷ Considering the prodigious number of contemporary personages that figure in the Life, it is easy to visualize the frenzy on the London literary scene in 1791. Many of Johnson's intimates (Mrs. Piozzi, Burke, Reynolds, Langton, Dilly, Dr. Burney, Steevens, et al.) and an army of his enemies and detractors (Mrs. Chapone, Mrs. Montagu, and Gibbon, to name only a few) were still alive, anxious and apprehensive to read Boswell's revelations about themselves.

The Life completely lived up to public expectations of its fullness of detail and exactness of reporting. Its publication caused a sensation unrivaled in the annals of English literary history. Boswell, however, disavows any intention of sensation-mongering. He attributes the tumultuous reaction to his work to the fame and eminence of its

¹⁷ Ibid., p. xiii.

subject and the fact that the Life is a well-executed biography based upon sound principles. "I am fully aware," he writes in response to his critics, "of the objections which may be made to the minuteness on some occasions of my detail of Johnson's conversation, and how happily it is adapted for the petty exercise of ridicule, by men of superficial understanding and ludicrous fancy; but I remain firm and confident in my opinion, that minute particulars are frequently characteristick, and always amusing, when they relate to a distinguished man. I am therefore exceedingly unwilling that any thing, however slight, which my illustrious friend thought it worth his while to express, with any degree of point, should perish."¹⁸

There were other biographical works on Johnson which appeared soon after his death. The most notable among them is Sir John Hawkins' Life of Samuel Johnson which, despite its bulk, made only a minimal impact on the contemporary and subsequent generations of readers. Boswell, though not an entirely impartial critic, provides all the reasons we need to know why:

Since my work was announced, several Lives and Memoirs of Dr. Johnson have been published, the most voluminous of which is one compiled for the booksellers of London, by Sir John Hawkins, Knight, a man, whom, during my long intimacy with Dr. Johnson, I never saw in his company, I think but once, and I am sure not above twice. Johnson might

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

have esteemed him for his decent, religious demeanour, and his knowledge of books and literary history; but from the rigid formality of his manners, it is evident that they never could have lived together with companionable ease and familiarity; nor had Sir John Hawkins that nice perception which was necessary to mark the finer and less obvious parts of Johnson's character. His being appointed one of his executors, gave him an opportunity of taking possession of such fragments of a diary and other papers as were left; of which, before delivering them up to the residuary legatee, whose property they were, he endeavoured to extract the substance. In this he has not been very successful, as I have found upon a perusal of those papers, which have been since transferred to me. Sir John Hawkins's ponderous labours, I must acknowledge, exhibit a farrago, of which a considerable portion is not devoid of entertainment to the lovers of literary gossiping; but besides its being swelled out with long unnecessary extracts from various works (even one of several leaves from Osborne's Harleian Catalogue, and those not compiled by Johnson, but by Oldys), a very small part of it relates to the person who is the subject of the book; and, in that there is such an inaccuracy in the statement of facts, as in so solemn an authour is hardly excusable, and certainly makes his narrative very unsatisfactory. But what is still worse, there is throughout the whole of it a dark uncharitable cast, by which the most unfavourable construction is put upon almost every circumstance in the character and conduct of my illustrious friend; who, I trust, will, by a true and fair delineation, be vindicated both from the injurious misrepresentations of this authour, and from the slighter aspersions of a lady who once lived in great intimacy with him.¹⁹

The lady "who once lived in great intimacy" with Johnson is of course Mrs. Thrale, the author of Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. during the last Twenty Years of his Life. Her treatment of Johnson, though not as two-dimensional and ill-humored as that of Hawkins, tends to be spiteful and

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

at times irreverent. Somewhat later, another such memoir was published by Fanny Burney, who wrote of Johnson with affection and delight but dealt almost entirely with that lighter side of Johnson showed on social occasions when he was mostly in female company.

This brief review of Boswell's Life of Johnson is intended to show not only Boswell's attitude toward Johnson but the reasons why the book was so crucial in forming Johnson's overall image from the moment of its publication and ever since. In recognizing Johnson as an imposing and unique social and intellectual phenomenon Boswell proved his considerable astuteness; and it is much to his credit that he diverted public attention from the oddities of Johnson's character and behavior to his literary and intellectual achievements.

This attention, however, is not evenly distributed among all Johnson's enterprises. His poetic work is generally disregarded both in the Life and in subsequent studies of Johnson. There are two major reasons for this neglect: the first is the fact that the eighteenth century, or what we may now call the age of Johnson, was an epoch distinguished for what one critic, Paul Fussell, calls "historical and judicial" prose. "When we look at the general literary output of Johnson's time," writes Fussell, "we will probably not conclude that great poems make up a large part of its production.

Nor would we want to say, despite the novels of Smollett and Sterne and the comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan, that it is the fiction or the drama of the age that give it its special literary identity. Its special identity arises rather from its extraordinary production of works of intellectual, critical, and polemic prose."²⁰ Fussell observes that during this period "there is hardly a year without its masterpiece."

True enough, from the appearance of David Hume's Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding in 1748 to the publication of Boswell's Life in 1791, many lastingly significant prose works enriched the culture of the era. These include Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England (1769), Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses on Art (1769), Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations (1776), Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776), Hume's Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion (1779), and Johnson's own Lives of the Poets (1779-81).

The second reason for the neglect of Johnson's poetry is the ubiquitous influence of Boswell in the formation of the historical view of Johnson. Boswell's method is to describe Johnson as a conversationalist. To record and report conversation was his forte and the consensus is that it is the peculiar genius of the Life. The Johnson we now know is in large

²⁰ Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971), p. 246.

measure a product of Boswell's projection and manipulation. As John Butt notes, Boswell "made himself exceptional among biographers by moulding his subject while alive, by making of him something other than he would have been if he had never met his biographer. I refer not merely to Boswell's capacity for eliciting Johnson's opinions, but to his skill in manhandling Johnson, in leading him into peculiar and even dangerous situations so as to see how he would behave."²¹ There are numerous instances in the Life, and even in the Tour to the Hebrides, in which Boswell describes with winsome candor and apparent innocence his machinations to maneuver Johnson into situations in which he might utter epigrams which Boswell would lovingly commit to memory.

For all his merits as a biographer, Boswell was not a profound, cerebral man. His notions of greatness were fixed and conventional, certainly received and not original. Consequently, what he most cherished among Johnson's utterances were those which fitted his conception of wit and what he considered as evidence of a robust, methodical intellect. His contrivances, therefore, were to stimulate Johnson's rational faculties and emphasize his powers as a conversationalist and not as a poet.

Before proceeding any further in this line of argument, it is necessary to point out that our concept of the poet is

²¹ Biography in the Hands of Walton, Johnson and Boswell (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 36.

to some extent colored by the heritage of the romantic era. The depictions we have of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, et al., are portraits in sentimentality, febrile imagination, and an ecstatic absorption in self. Of course, much of these extreme and stereotypical descriptions are rejected today. But we must bear in mind that they were for the most part based on what the romantics themselves said about poetry and poets. Wordsworth's memorable definition of poetry as an "overflow of powerful feeling recollected in tranquility" (Preface to Lyrical Ballads), and Coleridge's concept of the poet as one who "brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordinations of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity" (Biographia Literaria, Chap. xiv) are undeniably valid and cogent to the point that they are now lodged in our notion of poets and poetry.

Somehow, Boswell's portrayal of Johnson has downplayed that part of the Johnsonian character that coincides with these notions. He is sincerely desirous of giving a full presentation of his subject and he therefore includes episodes such as this:

On Monday, March 19 [1781], I arrived in London and on Tuesday, the 20th, met him in Fleet-street, walking, or rather indeed moving along; for his peculiar march is thus described in a very just and picturesque manner, in a short Life [by G. Kearsley] of him published very soon after his death:--'When he walked the streets, what with the constant roll

of his head, and the concomitant motion of his body, he appeared to make his way by that motion, independent of his feet.' That he was often much stared at while he advanced in this manner, may easily be believed; but it was not safe to make sport of one so robust as he was. Mr. Langton saw him one day, in a fit of absence, by a sudden start, drive the load off a porter's back, and walk forward briskly, without being conscious of what he had done. The porter was very angry, but stood still, and eyed the huge figure with much earnestness, till he was satisfied that his wisest course was to be quiet, and take up his burthen again.²²

For Boswell such aberrant behavior was the source of diversion and amusement, in fact, endearment. But for us, looking at Johnson and his work in their entirety and across the romantic interlude, it is difficult not to be reminded of Coleridge's description in "Kubla Khan" of the poet in creative frenzy, and of his admonition:

Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The later, anthologists' view of Johnson is so conditioned by Boswell's rendering of Johnson's character that they usually include only those passages and episodes which depict Johnson as a level-headed genius with prodigious powers of reasoning and self-control. Johnson's meeting with King George III is a perennial favorite. The setting is almost proverbial--a learned man of renown is absorbed

²² Life, pp. 1120-21.

in his studies at the royal library when he is visited by the sovereign of the realm. The exchange that ensues is proper to the point of being ritualistic. Each party, according to Boswell's report, which we have no reason to doubt, conducts himself in full accordance with the requirements of the occasion. The King is gracious and "courteously easy." Johnson, on the other hand, "talked to his majesty with profound respect, but still in his firm manly manner, with a sonorous voice, and never in that subdued tone which is commonly used at the levee and in the drawing-room."²³ The King pays Johnson a handsome compliment on his writing. When asked later by a friend whether he made any reply to the King, Johnson answers: "No, Sir. When the King had said it, it was to be so. It was not for me to bandy civilities with my sovereign." Boswell of course cannot help but grab at the chance to comment: "Perhaps no man who had spent his whole life in courts could have shewn a more nice and dignified sense of true politeness, than Johnson did in this instance."²⁴

The story of this royal audience presents Johnson in what Boswell would think his top form. He displays dignity, composure, and self-esteem. There are numerous other episodes showing him in more relaxed circumstances among his peers. One of the most widely quoted descriptions of Johnson

²³ Ibid., p. 384.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 380.

in such company is that of the meeting Boswell ingeniously arranged between him and John Wilkes, a long-time political adversary. As always, Boswell gives a candid and equally engaging account of his trickery to get Johnson to commit himself to attend. Boswell's report on how the two men "insensibly gained upon each other's favour" and the account of the congenial transactions of the evening at Dilly's house following an impeccable dinner is among the highlights of the Life and clearly displays Johnson's good sense and his basically convivial disposition.

Johnson's witticisms are sprinkled aplenty throughout the Life and they comprise an essential part of any anthology selection. The examples of Johnson's exquisitely acerbic humor chosen by Boswell for inclusion in the Life are of such high quality and gem-like character that it is difficult to choose a few as samples for this discussion. Suffice it to say that Boswell considered them a salient feature of Johnson's "conversation" and therefore took great pains to collect them for the purposes of his biography.

Such are the anecdotes and incidents in the Life that have gained wide circulation among readers and, as I have already intimated, they fail to present an image of Johnson congruous with the modern conception of a poetic temperament.

This is by no means to say that the Life is purged of all evidence of pointing up frailties, peculiarities, contradictions,

and complexities in Johnson's character. In fact, from the very beginning of their association on that memorable day in May of 1763, Boswell makes it clear that Johnson can be irascible, unpredictable, and brusque. More often than not Boswell himself is the object of Johnson's abuse. However, with the dedication and detachment of an almost scientific observer, he never takes Johnson's vituperations personally. But somehow Boswell, his analytical method and perspicacity notwithstanding, fails to connect such behavior to Johnson's basically artistic temperament. Almost invariably, Boswell construes Johnson's impatience and tantrums as the marks of a great man beset by his natural inferiors. Many such instances can be found in the Life, but I think the following is the most cogent and demonstrative. The subject of the conversation is death, a matter with which Johnson was philosophically and spiritually preoccupied for most of his adult life:

. . . To my question, whether we might not fortify our minds for the approach of death, he answered, in a passion, "No. Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time." He added (with an earnest look), "A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine."

I attempted to continue the conversation. He was so provoked, that he said, "Give us no more of this;" and was thrown into such state of agitation, that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; shewd an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, "Don't let us meet tomorrow."²⁵

²⁵ Ibid., p. 427.

In Johnson's outburst, Boswell senses no existential ordeal or what T. S. Eliot calls "the ague of the marrow." It is Boswell's childish toying with an idea whose comic dimensions can be conceived only in a poet's imagination that has provoked Johnson. Boswell, therefore, goes home more confused than contrite. "I went home," he writes, "exceedingly uneasy. All the harsh observations which I had ever made upon his character, crowded into my mind; and I seemed to myself like the man who had put his head into the lion's mouth a great many times with perfect safety, but at last had it bit off."²⁶ It is ironic, and indescribably touching, that Boswell should mistake poetic sensitivity for leonine ferocity.

This confusion persists in Boswell's understanding of Johnson to the end. In a gathering of close friends in the spring of 1784, only a few months before Johnson's death, when a mellow, speculative mood prevailed, "it was observed to Johnson, that it seemed strange that he, who has so often delighted his company by his lively and brilliant conversation, should say he was miserable. JOHNSON. 'Alas! it is all outside; I may be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun. Sun, how I hate thy beams!'" Poignantly, almost tearfully, Boswell admits his exasperation. "I knew not what to think of this declaration," he writes, "whether to hold it as a

²⁶ Ibid.

genuine picture of his mind, or the effect of his persuading himself contrary to the fact, that the position he had assumed as to the human happiness, was true."²⁷

To say that Boswell's affectionate, and unwavering, gaze did not focus on the poet in Johnson is not to speak to his detriment. It may be said that neither Boswell nor his age could see Johnson as poet. For the Augustan humanists of the era, of whom Boswell by the virtue of his education was one, saw too much rationality and erudition in Johnson to believe him to be afflicted with the divine madness. His poetry was then, as it is now, received as a mere "polite" avocation in which many learned personalities of the time engaged. His explosive temperament, his compulsiveness, his occasional flights of fancy were thought of as aberrations in an otherwise stable and reasonable character. This may very well be, unless these attributes are considered in the light of Johnson's poetic writings--something that no one, not even Boswell, was willing to do while the great man lived.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 1300.

Chapter II

SPLIT-IMAGE FOCUSING

The general view of Johnson is that of a philosopher and conversationalist adept at making verses. Very few regard him as a poet with a gift for writing potent, epigrammatic prose and a penchant for repartee. This is, of course, not all due to Boswell's portrayal in his Life of Johnson. The question is whether or not Johnson himself had any identification with the images of such professional poets of the era as Pope, Collins, and Gray, whose reputations were based on their poetry although they engaged in other forms of literary activity. The answer is not readily available and requires a closer look at Johnson's background and some educated guesswork. On the one hand, Johnson's verse is consummately contemporary and (unlike Pope, Collins, and Gray) his poetic activity spans the entire length of his literary career, from his early school days to within a few weeks of his death. On the other hand, his prose production is so massive, significant, and at times so coldly rational and objective that it is difficult to espy the poet behind it.

When translating from Horace, young Samuel Johnson envisioned himself as a poet "double-formed" soaring on the

wings of poetic inspiration. The poets were then the lions of the literary scene. It is natural for a young man of Johnson's description and attributes to aspire to be a poet. But he was yet to suffer the slings and arrows of necessity and deprivation even more harshly after he left the relative security and comfort of the parental home to seek his fortune, first as schoolmaster and later as litterateur in London.

As already noted, Johnson lived in what Matthew Arnold called an age of prose. Although the reputation and prestige of poetry were by no means at an ebb, the dynamic pace of transition from rural life to urban in eighteenth-century England and the burgeoning demand for reading matter forced Johnson and many others like him to produce prose in prodigious quantities.

There is no need here to discuss the impecunious circumstances of Johnson's early life as a Grub-Street hack writer. It is safe to assume that he had been to a great extent prepared for them by the austerity of his familial abode. It was also the practical and financial considerations in the family that prevented him from receiving the full benefit of the kind of education which would have satisfied and nourished his native curiosity and intellect. At this juncture we can only guess at the psychological effects of Johnson's early life on his later career, but it is certain

that he was brought up in a financially oppressed household in which life was necessarily pragmatic.

Sensitive and discerning as Johnson was, it did not take him long to grasp the inequity of his dismal lot. His brief career at Oxford, made possible through the short-lived munificence of a benefactor, had made him even more conscious both of his own abilities and of the fact that they would go to waste should he be forced to remain the rest of his days in his father's trade. In response to Boswell's remark that he (Johnson) had been "frolicsome" in his university days, he said: "I was mad and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolick. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority."¹ Much of Johnson's abrasiveness, lack of regard for high office and office-holders may be attributed to this element of his background. Along the same lines, Bertrand Bronson suggests: "Mad, violent, and bitter; miserably poor and conscious of intellectual abilities of a high order: the mixture spells, as always, Radical, Iconoclast, Enemy of the Established Order."²

¹ James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 54.

² Johnson and Boswell: Three Essays (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944), p. 363.

Johnson's poverty and the resulting bitterness could conceivably be responsible for his impatience with the slower process of poetic creativity. We have evidence to the effect that his characteristic compulsiveness was also at work when he wrote poetry. According to Boswell, he produced "the greatest part, if not the whole" of The Vanity of Human Wishes with "fervid rapidity." He composed more than seventy lines of the poem at almost one sitting. Such "fervid rapidity" was not always characteristic of Johnson's poetic composition; it took him two months to write his tribute to Dr. Levet, a man he genuinely liked and whose passing he meant to mourn in a poem. Such a man as Johnson, pressed both by necessity and an inner urge to create, is likely to resort to the more freely flowing fount of prose expression.

It is, of course, absurd to suggest that poverty and affluence produce poets or prose writers. But in a study of Johnson as poet it is of some relevance to note that such poets as Pope, Gray, and Thompson, for instance, whose reputations rest on their verse, came from at least relatively affluent backgrounds. As a rule, they wrote poetry as the spirit moved them. Johnson, Swift, and Goldsmith, on the other hand, all with considerable poetic powers but risen from impoverished circumstances, have gone down in history as the writers of prose because they wrote usually out of

necessity. There are, of course, others who, despite dire need or genuine desire, simply did not have the ability to produce anything but either verse or prose. A case in point is Richard Savage, Johnson's unfortunate friend and protégé, who could write nothing but poetry--often mediocre verse at that, though occasionally brightened by flashes of genuine poetic brilliance.

In addition to practical considerations in Johnson's involvement in large-scale prose writing, we must also take into account the influences his family exerted on his attitude toward a literary career. Boswell reports that Michael Johnson was literate to the extent of knowing Latin; in book trade some Latin was perhaps a requirement. In any event, he had no discriminating powers and from all accounts we gather that he had no taste for literature. A household headed by such a man, especially a man perennially beset by pecuniary problems, considered poetry a decided luxury; it was to be sought, revered, and perhaps quoted, but not to be taken up as a serious vocation.

It is possible that the notion of writing as a business entered Johnson's mind at the behest and perhaps insistence of his father who had detected his son's talents early in life. There is a curious episode reported by Sir John Hawkins and Mrs. Thrale and related by Boswell in the Life. This indicates Michael Johnson's recognition of his son's genius and also the pride he took in it:

There has been another story of his infant precocity generally circulated, and generally believed, the truth of which I am to refute upon his own authority. It is told, that, when a child of three years old, he chanced to tread upon a duckling, the eleventh of a brood, and killed it; upon which, it is said, he dictated to his mother the following epitaph:

"Here lies good master duck,
Whom Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd, it had been good luck,
For then we'd had an odd one."

There is surely internal evidence that this little composition combines in it, what no child of three years old could produce, without an extension of its faculties by immediate inspiration; yet Mrs. Lucy Porter, Dr. Johnson's step-daughter, positively maintained to me, in his presence, that there could be no doubt of the truth of this anecdote, for she had heard it from his mother. So difficult is it to obtain an authentick relation of facts, and such authority may there be for error; for he assured me, that his father made the verse, and wished to pass them for his child's. He added, "my father was a foolish old man; that is to say, foolish in talking of his children."³

This episode is also peripherally significant in the fact that of all the accomplishments this doting but aloof father could have attributed to his son, he should have chosen dabbling at poetry which he considered the pastime of the wealthy and the vocation of the dilettante. Later on, when Johnson was at school, there is no evidence that his father acknowledged or encouraged him on account of the uncommon quality of verse he was turning out as school exercises.

It is reasonable to assume that Johnson inherited his mercenary attitude toward writing from his father. He is on

³ Life, pp. 30-31.

record as saying that only a "jack ass" would not write for money. By the same token, he might have engaged in large-scale prose writing and not poetry because he knew the former to be a more saleable commodity.

Other influences in Johnson's overall view of literature and writing were exerted by teachers, friends, and relatives. But because he was actively involved with the family book trade, his exposure to his parents was more extensive than was usual for boys of other families in that social class who were sent away to boarding schools or put to apprenticeship away from home or even hometown. Johnson's father, from all descriptions, does not seem to have been a communicative man. Whatever zest and enthusiasm for anything he might have had originally had been dissipated by years of plugging away at a business that had become moribund by the time Johnson was in his formative years.

All biographers of Johnson take note of the fact that he was in constant company of his mother. Sarah Johnson was at best an ordinary woman. She was aware of her son's remarkable abilities, particularly his phenomenally retentive memory, but she was not particularly excited about it. It is fair to say that she took it for granted. Although the two of them spent an unusual amount of time together, they were never affectionate. In fact, years later, when she died at the advanced age of ninety and when

Johnson himself was fifty, he was not present at her side. John Wain, who takes a post-Freudian approach to Johnson's biography, describes Sarah Johnson as a woman of conventional piety, concerned with what she thought to be her son's spiritual welfare. She was drab and joyless, constantly worried, always nagging. Johnson, writes Wain, found it hard "not to imbibe deeply of her anxiety and overscrupulousness." Wain goes on to explain:

There had never been much gaiety in her disposition, and what there was had been heavily shaded by life with Michael. The child Samuel lived with her admonitions continually in his ears, but because she lacked wide experience of life she seldom offered him the kind of moral teaching from which he could draw real, specific lessons: it was precept, precept, precept, with nothing concrete for his developing mind to seize on. "My mother", he recalled years later, "was always telling me that I did not behave myself properly; that I should endeavour to learn behaviour, and such cant: but when I replied that she ought to tell me what to do and what to avoid, her admonitions were commonly, for that time at least, at an end."⁴

Nevertheless, at her death, Johnson felt severe pangs of remorse for not having been more attentive: he had not been to see her for over twenty years. Although he had amply provided for her material comfort, the imminence of her death gave him an emotional jolt. The account of his frenzied attempts to make up for what he considered a breach of filial piety is one of the most poignant episodes in his

⁴ Samuel Johnson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 22.

life. Within ten days before she died he wrote her four letters, all of which throb with the searing pain of guilt and contrition. John Wain finds them "so personal, so agonized, that it seems an intrusion to set them up in cold print for any casual eye to read."⁵ He nevertheless goes on to provide the following example:

Dear honoured Mother

Neither your condition nor your character make it fit for me to say much. You have been the best mother, and I believe the best woman in the world. I thank you for your indulgence to me, and beg forgiveness of all that I have done ill, and all that I have omitted to do well. God grant you his Holy Spirit, and receive you to everlasting happiness, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. Lord Jesus receive your spirit. Amen.

I am, dear mother, Your dutiful son

SAM: JOHNSON⁶

The strength of feeling in these letters is undeniable, but Wain expresses bafflement at the true nature of this feeling. He finds a sense of loss and grief, though not of love. He explains why: "Because, sadly, I do not think that love, in any sense in which I understand the term, was effectively present among the bundle of emotions which Johnson felt for his mother. He had tried to love her; the attempt had proved impossible, for neither in his infancy nor later did she put herself within the reach of his love. Since the frustration

⁵ Ibid., p. 206.

⁶ Ibid.

that resulted was deeply painful to him, he did the only other possible thing--absented himself from her for the last twenty-one years of her life."⁷

It is, of course, paradoxical that, in Johnson's youth, while he and his mother spent extended periods of time in physical proximity, they remained emotionally distant. But the paradox is compounded by the fact that despite this distance, Sarah Johnson exerted a subtle influence in the substructure of her son's consciousness. One effect of this influence is Johnson's conspicuous religiousness, as exemplified in the letter quoted above which shows the unmistakable traits of the rhetoric of the Common Prayer Book which Johnson as a boy had to learn by heart under injunction from his mother.

This unwavering adherence to the tenets of the family religion may be considered as some element in Johnson's campaign against Deism and Freethinking. Of course he engaged in other forms of activity--satire, pamphleteering, verbal argument--in defense of the High-Church Anglicanism. Because of his dogged adherence to the established church and its hierarchy, he incurred the disfavor and sometimes the outright contempt of the proponents of Deism. One such adversary was Adam Smith, who never learned to regard Johnson

⁷ Ibid.

except in the worst light. Paul Fussell, in a discussion of Johnson's piety, quotes Smith concerning his religious antics: "I have seen that creature [he means Johnson] bolt up in the midst of a mixed company, and, without any previous notice, fall upon his knees behind a chair, repeat the Lord's Prayer, and then resume his seat at table. He has played this freak over and over, perhaps five or six times in the course of an evening. It is not hypocrisy, but madness."⁸

It is likely that Johnson was held within the rigid boundaries of formal religion and maintained his apparently unquestioning, and even unintellectual, devotion to the established order because of his mother's unremitting religious admonitions in his childhood. But we must also consider that Johnson was something of a rebel against established norms and despised unthinking pursuit of fashion of any kind. There are numerous accounts of his neglect of the dress code and table manners. It is possible that he displayed enthusiasm for the old traditional religions not so much in support of the clerical establishment but in defiance of the deistic cant which was at that time very fashionable in the social circles in which he moved.

Johnson's life under parental care and later in London as an aspiring writer intent upon making a living by his pen denied him long periods of voluntary solitude and the

⁸ Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javonovich, 1971), p. 92.

opportunity to dream. In fact, because of the stark practical necessities that dominated his family life, he came to view even a brief withdrawal from everyday toil as sinful. All his biographers note his severe self-criticisms for the fits of slothfulness and inactivity that occasionally descended upon him.

It is understandable that for Johnson, driven by the force of these deeply embedded convictions, writing poetry soon became a luxury in which he could not very well indulge. He did not have the leisure to wait for poetic inspiration before he could put pen to paper. Therefore, prose writing, which is more occasional and does not require the experience of intense feeling to be pleasing or credible, became the mainstay of that literary production which was always his livelihood. This attitude became a part of Johnson's literary character and its emanations may be found in various degrees of clarity in a number of his works. His Life of Gray, for example, can provide an interesting case in point.

As always, we are indebted to Boswell for an indication of Johnson's distant animosity toward Gray. The scenario is a familiar one: Boswell carefully needling Johnson, prying out of him everything he is prepared to say on the issue:

Next day I dined with Johnson at Mr. Thrale's. He attacked Gray, calling him "a dull fellow."
BOSWELL. "I understand he was reserved, and might appear dull in company; but surely he was not dull

in poetry." JOHNSON. "Sir, he was dull in company, dull in his closet, dull everywhere. He was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him GREAT. He was a mechanical poet." He then repeated some ludicrous lines, which have escaped my memory, and said, "Is not that GREAT, like is ODES?" Mrs. Thrale maintained that his Odes were melodious; upon which he exclaimed,

"Weave the warp, and weave the woof;"--
I added, in a solemn tone,

"The winding-sheet of Edward's race."
"There is a good line." "Ay, (said he,) and the next line is a good one," (pronouncing it contemptuously;)

"Give ample verge and room enough."--
"No, Sir, there are but two good stanzas in Gray's poetry, which are in his Elegy in a Country Church-yard." He then repeated the stanza,

"For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey," &c. mistaking one word; for instead of precincts he said confines. He added, "The other stanza I forget."⁹

The antagonism between Johnson and Gray, the two luminaries of the latter half of the eighteenth-century literature, has baffled and surprised historians. For instance, W. Powell Jones, writing in 1937, enumerates the qualities that, while setting them apart, could have brought them together: "Gray had more learning than Johnson, his poetry was admittedly better, and had a gift for sharp criticism that often equalled the best quips that Boswell reported. Both were cursed with disease and inertia. But Johnson had two decided advantages: poverty that commanded him to write for a livelihood, and a personality that made him tower above his fellows."¹⁰

⁹ Life, pp. 600-601.

¹⁰ Thomas Gray, Scholar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 142.

Some years later, writing in 1959, the same critic is still mulling over the question. He still finds the contrasts valid, but feels compelled to qualify them somewhat: "The scholarship of Johnson was written for a livelihood and published in the Dictionary and the magazines, while Gray's learning was embalmed in the neat writing of his commonplace book."¹¹ Such differences--and the fact that Johnson was extrovert, explosive, and exuberant, while Gray cultivated an air of elitist aloofness and intellectual detachment--do not satisfy Jones as the answer to the problem. "After much reflection," he writes, "I have decided that this picture is incomplete. The full story has never been told."¹² Jones then proceeds to explain this antagonism within a historic context. He argues that Johnson's bitterness toward Gray increased after Gray's death and the publication of his own Life of Gray as a result of an outcry of protest and the shower of abuse rained upon him by Gray's votaries. But more importantly, he suggests that Johnson was upset by the liberties that Gray took with the established forms of poetic expression and the acclaim he received as a result. This he thought patently harmful to the integrity of English language and letters. Gray, on the other hand, detested Johnson's uncouth appearance and dogmatical ways. Jones suggests that

¹¹ W. Powell Jones, "Johnson and Gray: A Study in Literary Antagonism," Modern Philology, 56 (May, 1959), 244.

¹² Ibid.

Gray might have even been prevented by shyness to approach Johnson. Whatever the reasons for this lack of sympathy between them, Jones finds it regrettable that Johnson and Gray never met.

Another critic, James Swearingen, finds Jones's comparison and contrast of the two men's characters plausible, but he disagrees with the interpretation of some commentators, especially those contemporary with the two men who rallied to Gray's banner and decried Johnson, accusing him of jealousy, intolerance, and bigotry. He argues that Johnson fully conformed to "well-established tradition of distinguishing moral character from the literary." He asserts that Johnson's "praising Thomson as a poet and condemning his manners, is a further assurance that his [Johnson's] criticism of Gray cannot be reduced to simple malice." Swearingen goes on to say that "the fact is that he went out of his way to be fair to a man whom he knew to be radically different from himself in temperament; if he resorts to a more careful examination of the verbal minutiae of the poems than usual in order to destroy them completely, the reason may be that he felt, especially in the Odes, the gathering of forces that threatened the supremacy of his own Augustan standards."¹³

¹³ "Johnson's 'Life of Gray,'" Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 14 (May, 1972), 285.

He then goes on to examine Johnson's verdict on Gray in the light of the former's critical credo and concludes:

The "Life of Gray," in short, is not to be explained either as a product of temperamental differences between the two men or as a biased discussion of poems that the critic could not understand. There is no inconsistency in Johnson's overlooking a degree of wildness and lack of rational refinement in the poets of the past while condemning the same qualities in a contemporary. There is no risk in forgiving the weaknesses of the past, but to condone the popular enthusiasm for poetry like the Odes would be to contribute to the destruction of the ideal of reason in poetry and to turn back the progress of the imagination.¹⁴

All such remarks regarding Johnson's attitude toward Gray are valid and they shed critical and historical light on the two men. However, they fail to tell the whole story as they fail to take into account Johnson's own claims to being a poet. Admittedly, these claims are latent and have only subtle emanations in Johnson's works and behavior. To say that Johnson was envious of Gray's easier circumstances; although to some extent true, does not help us to an understanding of the whole question, for among the fifty-odd poets who were treated in the English Poets, with a Preface, Biographical and Critical, to Each Authour, better known as Lives of the English Poets, there are some with backgrounds much easier than Gray's and some with means more modest than Johnson's and none has received the same cool, distant treatment Johnson has accorded Gray.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 302.

What Johnson finds disturbing, and perhaps threatening in Gray, is the latter's remarkable ability to withdraw into a subjective mood without actually becoming mawkish. Gray's verse is invariably more contemplative than Johnson's without losing touch with the realities of the reader's world. Even Johnson cannot deny this quality in Gray's poetry. He eloquently praises the Elegy in a Country Church-Yard for having this very attribute: "In the character of this Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The Churchyard abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom return an echo."¹⁵ Johnson himself, on the other hand, feels compelled to be topical and to give his poetry an immediacy which will take hold of the reader and shake him into an awareness of the realities of Johnson's world.

No doubt Gray's adult financial independence enabled him to enjoy a gentlemanly, unharried modus vivendi. But more significant was his lack of commitment to any set of ideas either in politics or literature. He was able to accord himself a freedom from any dogma that would require him to

¹⁵ Lives of the English Poets, L. Archer Hind, ed. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1958), p. 392.

react to people, events, and opinions in a certain predetermined way. But Johnson, for reasons of background and education, and because of the basic necessities of a life of hack-writing, was incapable of such luxurious detachment. He therefore approached everything (including his food and drink) with a zest and gusto that earned him the ursine image in social circles and the reputation as dictator in the world of literature.

This freedom from an ideological frame of reference allowed Gray the luxury to write whatever he wanted. His poetry was various. Early conventional poems enjoyed phenomenal popularity. The Elegy was the most popular poem in the language for generations. His "scholarly" poems were self-indulgences about which posterity has agreed with Johnson. He never wrote, as an adult, in fashion; and he never courted popularity. Indeed, he was surprised by public acclaim; and he never originated the publication of his own poems. Conversely, Johnson wrote poetry, and prose, for that matter, with a zeal and conviction that today we have come to regard as doctrinaire. Johnson could not understand, and therefore forgive, Gray's detached individualism. He considered him a dilettante, contemptuous of others less fortunate than himself. When he calls Gray "dull," he means to characterize him as removed, indifferent, and perhaps apathetic. If Johnson envied Gray on any ground, it must

have been because Gray was indifferent to the world and yet retained the attention of the literary society.

This resentful attitude, of which Johnson himself may not actively have been aware, has found its way into the Life of Gray and is most evident in the faint praise Johnson accords Gray. At the very outset of the biography Johnson underlines Gray's nonchalance. Gray, having breezed through Eton, goes to Cambridge on a scholarship. But this event, from which "most young scholars . . . date their manhood, liberty, and happiness," fails to excite Gray. "Gray seems to have been very little delighted with academic gratifications; he liked at Cambridge neither the mode of life nor the fashion of study, and lived sullenly on to the time when his attendance on lectures were no longer required."¹⁶ After an interlude in the outside world, Gray retires to the leisurely life of Cambridge where "without liking the place or its inhabitants, or professing to like them, he passed, except a short residence in London, the rest of his life."¹⁷ Such an eremitic existence and disregard of the world seems to have incensed Johnson. Without being openly critical or derisive, he points out that at Cambridge Gray lived "very little solicitous what others did or thought, and cultivated his mind and enlarged his views without any other purpose than

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 383.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 384.

improving and amusing himself."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Johnson reminds us, Gray coveted the chair of history at Cambridge and when, after an unsuccessful campaign to attain it, he was given it without solicitation, he accepted and retained it to his death. However, "he was always designing lectures, but never reading them." Johnson shows reluctance in accusing Gray of unconscionable neglect, mentioning that he was "uneasy at his neglect of duty," although he managed to find some respite in "designs of reformation" and resolution of resigning the office "if he found himself unable to discharge it."¹⁹ Here we cannot help but sense a bitterness in Johnson's tone who suffered the same fits of depression and periods of indolence, and yet always recovered in time to meet his deadlines; while Gray, secure in his position as a Cambridge don, managed to attain serenity and spiritual calm in Johnson's view by rationalization and self-expiation.

What has been said so far in regard to Johnson's Life of Gray is by way of shedding some light on that certain element in Johnson's temperament which prevented him from developing a more acute awareness of his identity as a poet. In elucidating the matter further, we must also consider the critical and esthetic principles at work. Johnson, as already indicated, could not allow himself to lapse into a contemplative mood. He invariably mistook it for melancholia or even

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 386.

sloth. This is not to say that Johnson was thoughtless and precipitate in his writings and utterances. If we may be allowed yet another comparison with Gray and oversimplification, it can be said that while Gray was contemplative, Johnson was inclined to cogitation. In other words, Johnson thought methodically and purposefully. The character of his verse--structured, poised, declamatory--and the fluid, epigrammatic quality of his prose attest to this fact. From all biographical evidence, we know that Gray submitted to that facet of his disposition which we now know as romantic. He allowed himself to be fascinated and moved by individuals and objects of less than cosmic proportions, be it a humble grave in a country churchyard or a cat drowned in a fish bowl.

Looking at Johnson and Gray across two centuries of enrichment in literary and critical theory, we find that the content of Gray's best-known poetry--we are speaking in general terms--and the details of his approach to poetic composition conform more closely to a modern concept of poeticism. Gray, much more readily than Johnson, puts us in mind of Keats's brilliant and influential notion of poetic creativity. I am referring to that quality of mind which he called "Negative Capability." Here is the key passage of that historic letter he wrote to his brothers in December, 1817: "Several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it

struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason--

Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge."²⁰

Of course there has been a myriad of interpretations, explications, and discussions of this Keatsian dictum. But on the whole, the consensus of reputable critical opinion is that by Negative Capability Keats means that tenuous strain in the mind of the artist which renders him capable of passive receptivity to the external reality and universalizing the Truth extracted therefrom without recourse to the faculties of logic and ratiocination. Negative Capability has been otherwise interpreted as the artist's freedom from observing Truth. Lionel Trilling points out that Negative Capability "is often taken to mean that creative literature should properly have no traffic with ideas and that it is not properly to be judged by standards of intellectual vitality."²¹ But based on the context within which Keats

²⁰ Lionel Trilling, ed., The Selected Letters of John Keats (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), p. 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

proposes the concept--a "disquisition" with a perfectionist friend who "will never come at the truth; because he is always trying for it"--Trilling argues that "it [Negative Capability] is a means of insuring that we shall not be content with less than the truth and that the poet deals with ideas under the aspect of the ineffable complexity of life."²²

However, because this Keatsian idea has had a significant influence in the modern concept of artistic creativity, and because of the notions of passivity and indolent contemplation associated with it, we somehow find it easier to visualize Gray, serenely meditative in academe, experiencing Negative Capability than Johnson, frequenting the coffee-houses and literary salons of London and feverishly working on a multitude of writing projects simultaneously. In our view of the two men, the difference between them lies in the fact that Gray submitted to the chaos of experience in the creation of his art, while Johnson frantically fought this seeming chaos as an antithesis to reason and order, attempting to reduce it to a coherent system of thought. Such concern with matters of the mind rather than the heart must have blinded Johnson to an identity of himself as a poet. As a professional writer with no other income than the proceeds of his literary labors (until he was given a pension), he was deeply immersed

²² Ibid., p. 29.

in the stream of everyday life. The need to produce in bulk allowed him little opportunity to indulge his poetic bent at will. Yet the gleam of poetic genius is never absent in his works. In fact, in reading Johnson, we find, as Bronson observes, that "the most characteristic utterance, and the turbulent imagination and impulsive temperament of the man, belonged to a poet. . . . In the deepest sense of the word--in his imaginative apprehension of the quality and texture of experience, in his dynamic attitude to life and its values, in his need of the shaping expression of his perceptions--he was a poet, a maker."²³

²³ Johnson and Boswell: Three Essays, p. 398.

Chapter III

IRENE: DRAMA VERSUS POETRY

By far the greater bulk of Johnson's verse is in heroic couplets, the dominant poetic form of the Augustan age and later eighteenth century. Johnson's one important departure from the norm is his blank-verse tragedy, Irene, which might be considered, because of its bulk, one of his major poems. Since Irene is Johnson's only play and also because he began composing it early in his literary career, Irene seems a suitable work with which to begin a study of Johnson's poetry. This is especially so because it is this poetic drama to which Johnson dearly attached his earlier professional ambitions.

It is not certain when Johnson commenced the writing of Irene, but it is known that he had an unfinished version of it in 1737 when he made a preliminary expedition to London in search of a literary career; and he made this expedition with David Garrick, whose own ambitions were decidedly theatric. By then Johnson enjoyed a reputation of sorts as a literary man in Lichfield and its environs. Gilbert Walmsley, a prominent local man with some claim to learning and literary taste, writing to a London friend to recommend his protege, Garrick, also introduces Johnson as "a very good

scholar and poet." He goes on to say, "I have great hopes [that Johnson] will turn out a great tragedy writer."¹

Obviously Johnson, aware of the fame and fortune that the world of show business could bestow upon a deserving dramatist, sustained delusions of breaking into the market with his Irene. Boswell informs us that he had written only three acts of Irene when he went to London and that "he retired for some time to lodgings at Greenwich where he proceeded in it somewhat further, and used to compose, walking in the park; but he did not stay long enough at that place to finish it." But upon return to Lichfield he went to work on it and "at last finished his tragedy which was not executed with his rapidity of composition upon other occasions, but was slowly and painfully elaborated."² The play was not produced until twelve years later, and during the interim Johnson tinkered with it occasionally. Eventually it was staged by Garrick, who deemed some modifications necessary to make it acceptable on stage. Like any artist worth his salt, Johnson resisted the idea of any alteration. On one occasion he barked at the Rev. Dr. Taylor, who had agreed to mediate on behalf of Garrick. "Sir, the fellow wants me to make Mahomet run mad, that he may have an opportunity of tossing his hands and kicking his heels."³

¹ James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 74.

² Ibid., p. 78.

³ Ibid., p. 140.

Boswell reports that he eventually relented and agreed to "comply with Garrick's wishes, so as to allow of some changes; but still there were not enough."⁴

Despite Garrick's theatrical shrewdness and his real desire to make a success of Irene, the production was not a popular success. It ran for nine nights and it was never revived. However, Johnson's share of the proceeds and copy-right came to about three hundred pounds, which, after the Dictionary, was his largest income from the sale of any single work. The reviews of Irene were generally favorable, apparently in tribute not so much to the play as to the prestige and popularity of its author--and of its producer (who played the leading role of Demetrius).

Few critics attend to Irene as a serious work of drama. Most commentaries on this play are incidental and in conjunction with discussions of Johnson's "Preface" to Shakespeare or his philosophic and critical conception of tragedy. Those studies which deal exclusively with the play (often brief and in essay form) are either source studies or analyses showing why Irene fails as drama. The questions of language and prosody are rarely raised.

There is, after the event, a firm consensus that Irene is an unsuccessful play. Even Boswell could not bring himself to praise it without qualification. "The whole of it," he

⁴ Ibid.

writes, "is rich in thought and imagery, and happy expressions; and of disjecta membra scattered throughout."⁵ And yet, later, in a more extensive commentary, he finds that "analysed into parts, it [Irene] will furnish a rich store of sentiments, fine imagery and beautiful language; but it is deficient in pathos, in that delicate power of touching the human feelings, which is the principal end of the drama." That is why, Boswell notes, "notwithstanding all the support of such performers as Garrick, Barry, Mrs. Cibber, Mrs. Pritchard, and every advantage of dress and decoration, the tragedy of Irene did not please the public."⁶

What Boswell and other critics have said about the dramatic quality of Irene is just and indisputable. The fact is that Johnson was not a good storyteller. He failed in telling the story of Irene as he would fail in telling the tale of Rasselas. Somehow his intellect remained preoccupied with notions that interfered with creating vital and probable characters and situations both in his fiction and in his drama. Garrick is correct (only partially, though, as I will show in the following) in observing that "Johnson not only had not the faculty of producing impressions of tragedy, but that he had not the sensibility to perceive them."⁷ Johnson himself was aware of this handicap. As one recent critic notes, "in the years of Grub street hackwork . . . we may

⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁶ Ibid., p. 141.

⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

imagine that he would have written more tragedies if he had seen any prospect of success."⁸ The turn to lexicography, after all, was no more an exhibition of learning than it was an attempt to satisfy the demand of an identifiable market.

Johnson simply could not tell a gripping tale. He had not the gift of the raconteur. But he could recognize the dramatic potential of a situation, historic or fictive, and be duly moved by it. Johnson's inability to tell an absorbing story, however, did not deprive him of esthetic transport and the critical faculty of identification. Boswell has provided ample evidence that Johnson reacted forcefully to stories and plays. Although he is reported abusing and mishandling Garrick's private library holdings as "no books," but "silly plays in fops' dresses," we know that he as a boy was affected by the ghost in Hamlet and in adulthood responded powerfully to the emotional scenes in Shakespeare. Boswell records that in the last summer of his life, when he was unwell and indisposed to talk, Johnson employed himself "chiefly in reading Euripides."⁹

⁸ Leopold Damrosch, Jr., Samuel Johnson and the Tragic Sense (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 110.

⁹ Life, p. 1306. For a competent account of dramatic quotations in Johnson's speech and writing, see Roy S. Wolper, "Johnson's Neglected Muse: The Drama," in Studies in the Eighteenth Century: Papers Presented at the David Nicholl Smith Memorial Seminar, Canberra, 1966, ed. R. F. Brissenden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 109-117.

This evidence tends to negate the assertion by some critics (including Garrick) that Johnson had not "the sensibility to perceive" dramatic quality whether in tragedy or in other subgeneric forms of drama. He possessed the imagination to visualize a scene or character and react to it accordingly.

When Johnson started to write Irene, he had available to him several sources.¹⁰ But the general agreement, based on Boswell's report, is that Johnson borrowed from Peter Garrick Richard Knolles' Historie of the Turks, ostensibly for the purpose of extracting a "tragedy" from its contents.¹¹ As Smith and McAdam point out in their edition of Johnson's poetry, "We may say that Johnson was indebted to Knolles for little more than the suggestion for his Irene. He did not write with a book lying open before him, but once having found his subject let it take shape in his own mind."¹² The story is that of Irene, an exquisitely beautiful Greek woman, captured by the Turks at the sack of Constantinople in 1453 and taken to the court of Sultan Mohammad II, who

¹⁰ For an exhaustive study of the sources and background to Irene, see "Johnson's 'Irene,'" in Bertrand Bronson, Johnson and Boswell: Three Essays (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944), pp. 431-468. Bronson suggests that Johnson was influenced by other versions of the Irene story.

¹¹ Life, p. 73.

¹² David Nicholl Smith and E. L. McAdam, The Poems of Samuel Johnson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 267.

fell in love with her instantly. The conquering despot was so infatuated by Irene that he lavished all his attention on her, to the exclusion of everything else. "Mars slept in Venus' lap, and now the soldiers might go play." Such neglect of the affairs of the state caused concern among the courtiers as the unrest among the subjects reached threatening proportions. Mahomet was duly warned of the situation by a childhood crony, Mustapha Bassa, and after some hesitation came to an agonizing decision. He ordered an assembly of all his generals and statesmen, determined to resolve the matter once and for all. The account of this meeting, as it appears in Knolles' Historie, shocks as well as fascinates, repels as well as attracts. There can be no doubt that it had a tremendous impact on Johnson's sensibility and excited his dramatic imagination to construct an entire play on the story of Irene. For the purposes of the ensuing discussion the entire passage from Knolles' Historie must be reproduced here, despite its cumbersome length:

So the Bassa being departed, he after his wonted manner went in unto the Greeke, and solacing himselfe all that day and the night following with her, made more of her than ever before: and the more to please her, dined with her; commanding, that after dinner she should be attired with more sumptuous apparell than ever she had before worne: and for the further gracing of her, to be deckt with many most precious jewels of inestimable valour. Whereunto the poore soule gladly obeyed, little thinking that it was her funerall apparell. Now in the meane while, Mustapha (altogither ignorant of the Sultans mind) had as

he was command, caused all the nobilitie, and commanders of the men of warre, to be assembled into the great hall: everie man much marveiling, what should be the emperors meaning therein, who had not of long so publikely shewed himselfe. But being thus together assembled, and everie man according as their minds gave them, talking diversly of the matter: behold, the Sultan entred into the pallace leading the faire Greeke by the hand; who beside her incomparable beautie and other the greatest graces of nature, adorned also with all that curiositie could devise, seemed not now to the beholders a mortal wight, but some of the stately goddesses, whom the Poets in their extacies describe. Thus comming together into the midst of the hall, and due reverence unto them done by al them there present; he stood still with the faire lady in his left hand, and so furiously looking round about him, said unto them: I understand of your great discontentment, and that you all murmur and grudge, for that I, overcome with mine affection towards this so faire a paragon, cannot withdraw my selfe from her presence: But I would faine know which of you there is so temperat, that if he had in his possession a thing so rare and precious, so lovely and so faire, would not be thrice advised before he would forgo the same? Say what you thinke: in the word of a Prince I give you free libertie so to doe. But they all rapt with an incredible admiration to see so faire a thing, the like whereof they had never before beheld, said all with one consent, That he had with greater reason so passed the time with her, than any man had to find fault therewith. Whereunto the barbarous prince answered: Well, but now I will make you to understand how far you have been deceived in me, and that there is no earthly thing that can so much blind my senses, or bereave me of reason as not to see and understand what beseemeth my high place and calling: yea I would you should all know, that the honor and conquests of the Othoman kings my noble progenitors, is so fixed in my brest, with such a desire in my selfe to exceed the same, as that nothing but death is able to put it out of my remembrance. And having so said, presently with one of his hands catching the faire Greeke by the

haire of the head, and drawing his falchion with the other, at one blow strucke off her head, to the great terror of them all. And having so done, said unto them: Now by this judge whether your emperour is able to bridle his affections or not. And within a while after, meaning to discharge the rest of his choller, caused great preparation to be made for the conquest of PELOPONESUS, and the besieging of BELGRADE.¹³

There are some elements in this dramatically potent narrative that could have appealed to Johnson. To begin with, the prose, despite its antiquity, is surprisingly vivid and fluent. It moves with a cadence that is in harmony with the unfolding of the story. With the deftness of an instinctive storyteller, Knolles inserts hints of an approaching horror as preparations are made for the momentous meeting. Irene, "poore soule," gladly goes about dressing herself up for an occasion which the reader knows to be her "funerall." That she is not aware of her impending doom gives rise to pathos as well as a dramatic tension which continues to tantalize the reader as the narrative moves in measured pace through the preliminary stages of the meeting. The climactic action, Irene's decapitation, takes everyone by surprise. Its suddenness, horror, and cruelty surpass all expectation. Even the onlookers, Turks renowned for their heartlessness, are terrified by the enormity of Mahomet's act.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 267-268. Smith and McAdam have reproduced the text from Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, xiv, 1929.

"Such is the story," write Smith and McAdam, "which Johnson transformed in his Irene. This simple tale of lust and cruelty became in his hands a drama of the struggle between virtue and weakness."¹⁴ The key word here is "transformed," for Johnson's rendition of Irene is basically different from Knolles' historical account. In dealing with the material of the story Johnson sees himself in two separate, though not necessarily opposing, roles, those of the poet and the moralist. The story is replete with romantic and emotional elements--Mahomet and Irene, symbolizing East and West, side by side, involved in a love plot. The emotional content of the story must have been very appealing to a young poet of Johnson's description who lived in an age when voyages of discovery were opening up the world before the fascinated eyes of Europeans and when anything foreign and remote, either in time or place, triggered the artistic imagination. There are also strong moral implications inherent in the story. Should Irene have died the death of a martyr rather than have succumbed to the solicitations of an infidel potentate? Was her eventual death, degrading and ignoble in its cruelty and senselessness, an emanation of divine as well as poetic justice?

These are the preoccupations which, as suggested earlier, obsessed Johnson's mind to the point that he neglected

¹⁴ Ibid.

technical concerns and the dramatic necessities of language and diction. In reading Irene we are struck by a sense that Johnson has his eye on something more sublime and elevated than constructing a competent, workable tragedy. To put it negatively but more succinctly, there is an incongruity of content and form, with the former always overwhelming the latter. This incongruity accounts for a good deal of what is wrong with Irene as a theatrical property. The discussions of this failure of Johnson's have had such an impact on the general view of the play that they have diverted critical attention from the fact that Irene contains some of his highest poetical achievements.

No critic has, so far as I know, commented on the poetry of Irene outside the dramatic context for which it was intended. This is, of course, not to say that Irene is poetical throughout and that the poetry is invariably good. There are moments in the play when even the muse of poetry nods. But as I will try to show in the following, in most cases the poetry fails to impress because of Johnson's attempt to force it into a tragic framework.

Let us first deal with Johnson's moral considerations in Irene. Knolles' text, as can be deduced from the quoted passage, is morally neutral. It makes no attempt to pass any moral judgment on Mahomet and Irene. The facts, as he saw them, are presented historically. The murder of Irene and

the resulting terror among the onlookers are presented in the briefest and most impersonal fashion. We therefore cannot assume that Johnson was in any way "indoctrinated" by the text he was working with. It is reasonable to expect that Johnson should have been sufficiently overwhelmed by the savagery of Mahomet's act to allow his sympathy for Irene to influence the overall tenor of the play in her favor. Mahomet, on the other hand, should have been made to appear the bloodthirsty monster he historically was.

The reason for this expectation is based on the assumption, amply supported by biographical data, that Johnson was a man of considerable tenderness and sensitivity. A treatment so inhuman and harsh as depicted in Knolles' text could not have failed to arouse his sentiments in favor of the victim. We have evidence to the effect that he was greatly impressed by Knolles' performance. Years later, writing in Rambler 122 of Saturday, May 18, 1751, Johnson pays him tribute with only slight reservations. His praise of Knolles' approach and style provides grounds for us to believe that he was affected by what he read. He finds that no contemporary writer can "justly contest the superiority of Knolles, who in his history of the Turks, has displayed all the excellencies that narration can admit. His stile, though somewhat obscured by time, and sometimes vitiated by false wit, is pure, nervous, elevated, and clear. A multiplicity of events is so artfully

arranged, and so distinctly explained, that each facilitates the knowledge of the next."¹⁵ Johnson regrets that the "nation which produced this great historian has the grief of seeing his genius employed upon a foreign and uninteresting subject; and that writer, who might have secured perpetuity to his name, by a history of his own country, has exposed himself to the danger of oblivion, by recounting enterprizes and revolutions, of which none desire to be informed."¹⁶ This is particularly interesting because Johnson, himself an omnivorous reader and gatherer of seemingly useless knowledge, is so influenced by his practical, petit-bourgeois upbringing that he neglects the intrinsic value of Knolles' contribution to the general body of human knowledge.

Johnson, his much-touted regard for a stratified social order notwithstanding, had a soft spot for the helpless and the underdog. One seldom-mentioned incident that shows just such an attitude in Johnson is reported by Mrs. Thrale. "After a very long summer particularly hot and dry," she writes, "I was wishing naturally but thoughtlessly for some rain to lay the dust as we [in Johnson's company] drove along the Surrey roads." Johnson's reaction to this innocent, casual remark is indicative of the depth of his feeling in

¹⁵ W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: The Rambler, IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 290-291.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the matter. Mrs. Thrale quotes: "'I cannot bear (replied he, with much asperity and an altered look), when I know how many poor families will perish for want of that bread which the present drought will deny them, to hear ladies sighing for rain, only that their complexions may not suffer from the heat, or their clothes be incommoded by the dust;--for shame! leave such foppish lamentations, and study to relieve those whose distresses are real.'"¹⁷

A man so sensitive and sympathetic to human suffering and deprivation would not be indifferent to Knolles' shocking account; and we know that Johnson was fully aware of Mahomet's unsavory character, which is described in the draft outline and tentative character sketches of Irene as "avaritious and, irreligious, perfidious, ambitious bloody cruel revengeful crafty and dissembling."¹⁸ In these sketches, Irene's character is summarily dealt with as "A Grecian lady belov'd by Mahomet who for a crown &c."¹⁹

The play, however, presents Mahomet in a totally different light in which none of the atrocious characteristics enumerated above is discernible. In fact, as Leopold

¹⁷ Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. G. B. Hill (1897; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), I, 218-219.

¹⁸ E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Damrosch has noted, Mahomet emerges as a "civilized and indeed anxiously conscientious monarch who is depressed that Irene's conversion to his religion is not sincere, and who resolves, upon learning that he has unjustly commanded her death, to 'quit the scepter of dominion' forever." Mahomet only "precipitates this crisis" which Irene's ambition and treasonable conduct has brought on, and he "agonizes over it."²⁰ Damrosch finds this arrangement unsatisfactory and one of the weaknesses of Irene. He suggests that Johnson should have emphasized the ferocity of Mahomet's murder of Irene and at the same time presented him as an "enlightened monarch whose passions provoke behavior altogether at variance with his cultural sensibility." By failing to do so, says Damrosch, Johnson "has chosen to eliminate this powerful source of dramatic interest and to internalize a different kind of drama within the minds of various characters."²¹

While this suggestion may afford advantages in improving the dramatic quality of the tragedy, it fails to take into account Johnson's determination to instill an unmistakable sense of morality into the play. An "enlightened" eastern monarch, transformed by love and frustration resulting from uncertainty in the sincerity of his beloved captive, as Damrosch himself suggests, would have generated such dramatic

²⁰ Damrosch, p. 113.

²¹ Ibid.

interest that it would have shifted attention away from Irene, in whom Johnson visualized the epitome of faltering virtue. In Irene Johnson also creates the only personage in the play whose character undergoes a gradual change in the course of the action, and therefore she is not as wooden and immutable as others.

Irene makes her first appearance on stage at the beginning of Act II. She has only recently been accosted by Mahomet's solicitations and is clearly bewildered by the wailing temptation within her. She asks Aspasia for help:

Aspasia, yet pursue the sacred theme;
Exhaust the stores of pious eloquence,
And teach me to repel the Sultan's passion.²²

At this point both Irene and Aspasia are presented as equally virtuous; and Aspasia, a character totally unwarranted by any source Johnson might have used, is created solely to provide an example of constant, as opposed to Irene's faltering, virtue. The significance of Aspasia's stable and unwavering personality is underlined in an encomium Irene addresses to her following the request for moral support:

Still at Aspasia's voice a sudden rapture
Exalts my soul, and fortifies my heart.
The glittering vanities of empty greatness,
The hopes and fears, the joys and pains of life,
Dissolve into air, and vanish into nothing.
(II.i.4-8)

²² McAdam and Milne, pp. 132-133. All future references to the play are from this edition and are indicated parenthetically by act, scene and line.

Further evidence of Aspasia's sinewy and uncompromising virtue is in the advice she offers Irene: "Let nobler hopes and juster fears succeed,/ And bar the passes of Irene's mind/ Against returning guilt" (II.i.9-11).

As the plot unfolds, the rift between Aspasia and Irene widens. Although Irene, in her first appearance on the stage, has the benefit of Aspasia's council and is admonished to "Think on th' insulting scorn, the conscious pangs" which will result from submission to temptation, she gives up her faith and allegiance to Greece in return for the power and safety that Mahomet offers her. The seduction of Irene, however, is not easily and fortuitously accomplished. Johnson astutely senses that the moral impact of the play will be enhanced if Irene's fall from innocence and virtue is gradual. In her first dialogue with Aspasia she is genuinely concerned about her ability to withstand the allurements of power and wealth. The scene is designed, as Nichol Smith notes in his introduction to the play, to draw attention to the fact that Irene is "not a helpless victim of the Sultan's passion [as Knolles has presented her], but the mistress of her fate."²³ Soon thereafter she is placed vis-a-vis Mahomet's tempting pleas:

²³ Smith and McAdam, p. 268.

Wilt thou descend, fair daughter of perfection,
 To hear my vows, and give mankind a queen?
 Ah! cease, Irene, cease those flowing sorrows,
 That melt a heart, impregnable till now,
 And turn thy thoughts henceforth to love and empire.
 How will the matchless beauties of Irene,
 Thus bright in tears, thus amiable in ruin,
 With all the graceful pride of greatness heighten'd,
 Amidst the blaze of jewels and of gold,
 Adorn a throne, and dignify dominion.

(II.vii.1-10)

Irene's rejoinder is in the form of rhetorical questions and is clearly defiant:

Why all this flare of splendid eloquence,
 To paint the pageantries of guilty state?
 Must I for these renounce the hope of Heav'n,
 Immortal crowns and fulness of enjoyment?

(II.vii.11-14)

But Mahomet perseveres, making light of Irene's scruples:

Vain raptures all--For your inferiour natures
 Form'd to delight, and happy by delighting,
 Heav'n has reserv'd no future paradise,
 But bids you rove the paths of bliss, secure
 Of total death and careless of hereafter;
 While Heav'n's high minister, whose awful volume
 Records each act, each thought of sov'reign man,
 Surveys your plays with inattentive glance,
 And leaves the lovely trifler unregarded.

(II.vii.15-23)

As the scene progresses, Irene's arguments against Mahomet's solicitations lose their edge. When Mahomet suggests that in her position as the Queen of Turkey she will have the power "To shine the goddess of applauding nations,/ To scatter happiness and plenty around thee,/ To bid the prosperous captives rise and live,/ To see new cities tower at thy command,/ And blasted kingdoms flourish at thy

smile" (II.vii.68-72), Irene sees the chance to seize upon this plausible excuse for which she has probably been waiting. She lets all her defenses down:

Charm'd with the thought of blessing human kind,
Too calm I listen to the flatt'ring sounds.
(II.vii.73-74)

Mahomet delivers the coup-de-grace to Irene's crumbling resistance:

O seize the power to bless--Irene's nod
Shall break the fetters of groaning Christians;
Greece, in her lovely patroness secure,
Shall mourn no more her plunder'd palaces.
(II.vii.75-76)

At this point Johnson has set in motion the moral machinery of the play. Two separate questions, those of Irene's real motives and whether it is morally feasible to subordinate one's creed to the attainment of aims intrinsically noble,²⁴ are now before the audience. In the remainder of the play these questions are answered in Johnson's typically unequivocal way. Irene, whose loss of virtue and faith has tainted her soul, extols the merits of ambition in no uncertain terms:

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of the issue of morality in Irene, see Marshall Waingrow, "The Mighty Moral of Irene," From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Fredrick A. Pottle, eds. Fredrick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 79-92. Waingrow's thesis is that the question of noble ends justifying the means is central to Irene and he presents evidence from the action and content of the play to show that Johnson rejected the notion.

Ambition is the stamp, impress'd by Heav'n
 To mark the noblest minds, with active heat
 Inform'd they mount the precipice of pow'r,
 Grasp at command, and tow'r in quest of empire;
 While vulgar souls compassionate their cares,
 Gaze at their height and tremble at their danger:
 Thus meaner spirits with amazement mark
 The varying seasons, and revolving skies,
 And ask, what guilty Pow'r's rebellious hand
 Rolls with eternal toil the pond'rous orbs;
 While some archangel nearer to perfection,
 In easy state presides o'er all their motions,
 Directs the planets with a careless nod,
 Conducts the sun, and regulates the spheres.

(III.viii.111-124)

Aspasia, already established as the symbol of constant, unflinching virtue, perceptively observes: "Not pow'r I blame, but pow'r obtain'd by crime,/ Angelic greatness is angelic virtue" (III.ix.129-130). But her remonstrances that Irene should "Stoop from thy flight, trace back th' entangled thought" fall upon deaf ears.

The exposure of Irene's total corruption comes when she sends a messenger to Mahomet to intercept the flight of Aspasia, Demetrius, Leontius, and other Christians ("This lucky strategem shall charm the Sultan,/ Secure his confidence, and fix his love") by keeping a conversation going. Johnson's heavy hand in the irony of the situation is unmistakable; Irene, prompted by self-interest, is plotting against the same Christian comrades for whose welfare she submitted to the passion of the potentate.

The issue of Irene's Machiavellianism is settled somewhat more subtly. Marshall Waingrow, quoting the final two

lines of the play ("Weak men with erring rage may throw the dart,/ But Heav'n shall guide it to the guilty heart"), comments that Johnson's intention is to "approve the paradox that divine justice employs human injustice."²⁵ Waingrow's remark is apt. Irene is falsely and unjustly accused of plotting against Mahomet and is fortuitously and unjustly put to death. The ultimate outcome of this compounded injustice is the vindication of divine justice.

Many critics who have expressed dissatisfaction with Irene ignore the fact that the play was mostly written when Johnson was still young. He had as yet not lived in London, and his experience with the theater was almost nonexistent. Figuratively speaking, Irene was a product that Johnson assembled strictly by following an instruction manual. The "manual" from which Johnson worked consisted of his own local and educational background, his considerable, though haphazard, reading in classical philosophy and critical theory, and, of course, the maverick mass of plays he had read from Aristophanes to Addison. When he found his raw material, as it were, in the story of Irene, he went to work on his artifact, keeping a close eye on the manual. The desiccated and impersonal quality generally associated with Irene is in large measure due to Johnson's unsure, mechanical approach to the writing of plays.

²⁵ Waingrow, p. 79.

As I have already noted, Johnson put all sentimental considerations aside and created Irene in a new role concentrating on its moral possibilities. He knew from his knowledge and reading that the best vehicle for a moral message would be a heroic drama. So we have in Irene a tragedy constructed in compliance with the strictest standards of classical drama. Although Johnson followed his own light in the writing of Irene, it has been suggested (and there is no reason to disagree) that for a working model he used Dryden's All for Love. Obviously he was not in full agreement with Dryden's handling of the story. Much later in life (forty years, to be exact), maturer, mellowed, and more sophisticated, Johnson still censured Dryden for failing to moralize explicitly in All for Love. Admitting that the play is "rather moral," he complains that "it has one fault equal to many." The fault is that "by admitting the romantick omnipotence of Love, he has commended as laudable and worthy of imitation that conduct which through all ages the good have censured as vicious and the bad despised as foolish."²⁶ With this in mind, we can see why the romantic interest which plays a central part in All for Love is of no significance in Irene.

²⁶ "Life of Dryden," Lives of the English Poets, ed. L. Archer Hind (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925), I, 198.

In writing *Irene*, Johnson apparently adopted a strict and narrow view of the heroic drama. This narrowness is understandable in view of Johnson's lack of experience in putting theory to practice. There can be no doubt that even in those early years of his career he was familiar with the classical (specifically, Aristotelian) dramatic theory. In fact, as Philip T. Clayton observes that in those years, "out of touch not only with the temper of his times, for England never truly converted to neoclassicism, but with his own dramatic criticism as well, Johnson--nevertheless and paradoxically--wrote in *Irene* a curiously successful neo-classical tragedy."²⁷ The merit of *Irene* as a neoclassic tragedy, says Clayton, is in Johnson's successful implementation of the rule of the three unities and the incorporation of a sense of poetic justice by duly punishing fickleness and apostasy and rewarding virtue and constancy. "Probably," writes Clayton, "no type of drama other than the neoclassical would better suit Johnson's stern moral purposes in the play."²⁸

Clayton does not comment on the diction of *Irene*, but Damrosch, among others, extends his criticism to the language of the play. He says that Johnson "was probably far from

²⁷ "Samuel Johnson's *Irene*: 'An Elaborate Curiosity,'" Tennessee Studies in Literature, 19 (1974), 122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

sure how he ought to represent emotion in dramatic verse, and surprisingly he ended by imitating the excesses of the heroic drama." He agrees with Gibbon's description of some speeches in Irene as "the extravagance of the rant." But he concedes that Johnson's heroic bombast, modeled after Dryden and Congreve, "would seem ordinary if not tame. The point is not simply that Johnson descends into bathos, but that he must be presumed to do so with his eyes open."²⁹

In addition to the "heroic extravagance" in the language of Irene, Johnson's handling of the blank verse has also been criticized. When Johnson began the composition of Irene he had little or no experience with any other measure in English prosody than the heroic couplet. In fact he never again used blank verse in any of his significant English poems. The major fault of the poetry of Irene has been aptly diagnosed by T. S. Eliot: "The phrasing is admirable, the style elevated and correct, but each line cries out for a companion to rhyme with it."³⁰ Of course, this is not the case throughout the play, but the instances are frequent enough to give Donald Greene cause to complain that "the reader's ears soon rebel against the sledge-hammer monotony of the

²⁹ Damrosch, pp. 121-122.

³⁰ Quoted by Donald Greene, Samuel Johnson (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 66.

stop at the end of each ten syllables," giving the impression that "the heroic couplet is masquerading the blank verse."³¹

Such infelicities in the poetry and diction of Irene have reflected unfavorably on the merits of this work as a poem. Admittedly the choice of blank verse as a mode of dramatic expression was not a happy one. But it must be understood that Johnson's disposition was to give preponderance to the moral of the play and simultaneously preserve the neoclassical integrity of his work. Despite these self-imposed handicaps, whenever it is possible for Johnson to ignore the exigencies of the dramatic framework, he modulates into a poetry of high quality and, conversely, when he attempts to further some dramatic goal, his poetry suffers. This is true of almost any segment of Irene. The first scene of the first act, for instance, contains examples of both the success and the failure of Johnson's verse.

The play opens with a promising vigor. The lines, short, symmetrical, and end-stopped, throb with the breathless grief resulting from the defeat and destruction wrought upon Greece:

LEONTIUS.

And is it thus Demetrius meets his friend,
Hid in the mean disguise of Turkish robes,
With servile secrecy to lurk in shades,
And vent our suff'rings in clandestine groans?

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

DEMETRIUS.

Till breathless fury rested from destruction
 These groans were fatal, these disguises vain:
 But now our Turkish conquerors have quench'd
 Their rage, and pall'd their appetite of murder;
 No more the glutted sabre thirsts for blood,
 And weary cruelty remits her tortures.

(I.i.1-10)

This first exchange in the extended dialogue between Demetrius and Leontius is replete with the imagery closely associated with war. A coordinated chain of personifications, "servile secrecy," "glutted sabre," and "weary cruelty," underlines the horrors and humiliation recently suffered by the two men and their comrades. Within the brief span of these few lines not only the atmosphere of the play has been set but also the sympathy of the audience has been enlisted.

As the dialogue continues, the longer and less rigidly regular lines convey a reflective and melancholic mood. Several of the lines have epigrammatic poignancy. Referring to the plunder that comes with victory, Leontius observes: "The lust of gold succeeds the rage of conquest," and Demetrius describes Cali as "tir'd of slav'ry, tho' the highest slave." One of the best examples of Johnson's fluidity and eloquence is a brief speech by Demetrius in which the character expresses his deep-seated resentment and chagrin over the inner corruption of Greece which precipitated the defeat at Turkish hands. Leontius blames a lack of heavenly concern for the fate of Greece:

That power that kindly spreads
 The clouds, a signal of impending show'rs,
 To warn the wand'ring linnet to the shade,
 Beheld without concern, expiring Greece,
 And not one prodigy foretold our fate.

(I.i.31-35)

Demetrius replies with open bitterness,

A thousand horrid prodigies foretold it.
 A feeble government, eluded laws,
 A factious populace, luxurious nobles
 And all the maladies of sinking states.
 When publick villainy, too strong for justice,
 Shows his bold front, the harbinger of ruin,
 Can brave Leontius call for airy wonders,
 Which cheats interpret, and which fools regard?
 When some neglected fabrick nods beneath
 The weight of years, and totters to the tempest,
 Must Heaven dispatch the messengers of light,
 Or wake the dead to warn us of its fall?

(I.i.36-47)

Here Johnson is at his best, both poetically and dramatically. The lines have the normal rhythm of speech, retaining their poetic cadence without resorting to convolutions. The caesura in line 40 provides a necessary and timely pause to prepare the reader for the momentous conclusion of the speech. The use of an abstract kenning ("airy wonders") provides an effective contrast to the concreteness of the metaphor it introduces ("some neglected fabrick"). Dramatically, too, the speech works well. For one thing, its normal speaking pattern coaxes the reader or listener into the proverbial "suspension of disbelief." Furthermore, the first line, more a retort to Leontius' blasphemy than an integral part of the speech, sustains the dramatic air of the dialogue and prepares the audience for Demetrius' outburst.

Johnson, however, is not able to maintain this level of achievement. Even in the first scene of Act I his poetry gives way to the dictates of dramatic necessity. The first complication of the plot occurs at the end of this act. Demetrius reveals that he has been contacted by Cali Bassa. For some reason Johnson feels that he should heighten the dramatic effect by adopting an artificial, elevated language: "When the tenth sun had set upon our sorrow,/ At midnight's private hour a voice unknown/ Sounds in my sleeping ear, 'Awake Demetrius,/ Awake, and follow me to better fortunes'" (I.i.120-123). He further complicates the passage and removes it from reality by including not only a thumbnail character sketch of Cali, but a description of Greek sailors gathered on the shore at Cali's behest. The result is disappointing:

Surpriz'd I start, and bless the happy dream;
 Then rousing know the fiery chief Abdalla,
 Whose quick impatience seiz'd my doubtful hand,
 And led me to the shore where Cali stood,
 Pensive and list'ning to the beating surge.
 There in soft hints and in ambiguous phrase,
 With all the diffidence of long experience,
 That oft' had practis'd fraud, and oft' detected,
 The vet'ran courtier half reveal'd his project.
 By his command, equipp'd for speedy flight,
 Deep in a winding creek a galley lies,
 Mann'd with the bravest of our fellow captives,
 Selected by my care, a hardy band,
 That long to hail thee chief.

(I.i.124-137)

These are, of course, neither the best nor the worst examples of Johnson's poetry to be found in the play. But

they should help us to an understanding of the nature of Johnson's triumph and defeat in Irene.

As a conclusion to the present discussion I might add that Irene is in many ways an epitome of the struggle between two elements of Johnson's literary identity. On the one hand there is the poet who seeks to pour the anguish of a tormented soul into the tragic mold of a Greek slave girl's story, and on the other hand there is the intellectual systematizer (philosopher, critic, moralist) who attempts to tame the poet's creative urge and direct it to his own specific, definable ends.

Chapter IV

JOHNSON AND THE UNEASY SATIRE OF LONDON

In discussions of Johnson's London and The Vanity of Human Wishes, two points are always raised. First, the poems are less than successful as satire and, second, although their construction is that of Juvenal's Third and Tenth Satires, they do not display the same spirit and outlook as their originals. Of the two, London is generally regarded as the inferior because it departs further in form and meaning from Juvenal. The present chapter will review important critical opinions and then concentrate on London to evaluate Johnson's overall poetic performance in that work.

By the time Johnson published his London, a Poem, in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal, he had earned himself a limited literary reputation. We know that he was in easy familiarity with Edward Cave, the publisher of the Gentleman's Magazine, a notable London publication which occasionally featured Johnson's anonymous writing. Cave read London and recommended it to Dodsley for publication. But according to Boswell, "what first displayed [Johnson's] transcendent powers, and 'gave the world assurance of the MAN,'" was London which "came out in May this year [1738]

and burst forth with a splendour which will forever encircle his name."¹ Boswell's rapturous report of the appearance of the poem should not blind us to the fact that Johnson had misgivings about his own performance in the poem. Boswell, of course, expresses surprise at Johnson's lack of confidence: "To us who have long known the manly force, bold spirit, and masterly versification of this poem, it is a matter of curiosity to observe the diffidence with which its author brought it forward to publick notice, while he is so cautious as not to avow it to be his own production; and with what humility he offers to allow the printer to 'alter any stroke of satire which he might dislike.'"² A few lines later, Boswell notes that Johnson might have been prompted by more than humility in permitting the printer to exercise his discretion in editing the poem; he was too desperate for the proceeds of the poem to insist on the integrity of its printed text. Boswell finds it "painful to see that a writer of such vigorous powers of mind was actually in such distress" that he courted even such a "small profit from the poem as a welcome relief."³ Johnson must have been delighted to see London become an overnight success. Within a week it went through a second edition, and its popularity was

¹ James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 86.

² Ibid., p. 40.

³ Ibid.

enhanced by Pope's approval and his prediction that its anonymous author would soon be deterré.

As Boswell has pointed out, London brought Johnson the first glimmer of that fame he was to enjoy the rest of his life; and it became the cornerstone of his contemporary reputation as a literary giant. But after the political mood which sanctioned its passion in 1738 had subsided, London became an object of a more dispassionate critical scrutiny and was read with some dissatisfaction.

The shortcomings of London became more apparent to critical readers when The Vanity of Human Wishes appeared in 1749. Although the two poems are separated by more than ten years, they are often treated as companion pieces. Almost all critiques of London judge it by the standards of The Vanity of Human Wishes. For instance, in the introduction to London in their edition of the poetry of Samuel Johnson, David Nicholl Smith and E. L. McAdam quote a passage from Johnson's Life of Pope in which Johnson observes that "between Roman images and English manners there will be an irreconcilable dissimilitude, and the [imitation] will be generally uncouth and party-coloured; neither original nor translated, neither ancient nor modern." Smith and McAdam find that this comment is "truer of London than . . . of [Johnson's] mature Vanity of Human Wishes."⁴ Joseph Wood

⁴ The Poems of Samuel Johnson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 4.

Krutch, commenting on the onset of decadence in the neo-classical poetry of the eighteenth century, considers The Vanity of Human Wishes superior to London in that it is "no mere rhetorical exercise. In itself the theme proclaimed by Ecclesiastes is no less familiar than that elaborated by Juvenal, but Johnson, who can only in a moment of aberration have convinced himself that he hated London, believed in the deepest recesses of his being that 'All is vanity.' Hence the one poem is fundamentally sincere, the other fundamentally artificial."⁵ Even Howard Weinbrot, who devotes an entire chapter of his book to the exclusive study of London, begins his disquisition with a review of critical assessments that employ the comparative approach. "In 1809," Weinbrot informs us, "William Mumford observed that the Vanity 'is by far more energetic, and more pleasing than London,' and 'it certainly contains more masterly touches, more spirited delineations, more rigour of sentiment, and compression of language than his London.'"⁶ Weinbrot continues the review with another early nineteenth-century critic, Nathan Drake, who "similarly urged the superiority of the Vanity, claiming that its 'calm and dignified philosophy' was 'more pleasing to the mind, and certainly much more consonant to truth,

⁵ Samuel Johnson (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1944), p. 65.

⁶ The Formal Strain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 165.

than the party exaggeration' of the earlier satire."⁷ No doubt, as Weinbrot points out, critics and readers have felt a "certain uneasiness" about London. Even those who generally praise Johnson's satiric achievement in this work have done so with reservation. To indicate the nature of these complaints, Weinbrot offers a brief survey of such criticism. The verdict is that the poem fails as a satire "because the portrait of the city is not historically accurate or because the beliefs Johnson expresses are not his own."⁸ Additionally, some commentators take Johnson to task on the sincerity of his grievances. Eliot, for example, thinks that Johnson's outrage is feigned and is directed at generalizations about contemporary affairs which were not accurate in the first place.⁹ Krutch doubts whether Johnson seriously believed that "Britons were languishing in slavery."¹⁰

Weinbrot, while agreeing that some of these objections are valid, argues that such critics do not take into account the fact that "London should be read both as an imitation and as a formal satire," which reading demands an "examination of the speaker's ethos and of the necessary pattern

⁷ Weinbrot, pp. 165-166.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 174.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Krutch, p. 63.

of praise and blame."¹¹ He thinks too much has been made of a statement of Johnson's in 1777 to the effect that when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life. He urges all concerned to "recall that it was the secure and settled Johnson who [made that statement], whereas in 1738 Johnson was insecure and newly transplanted from the country which, as London's favorable mention of Trent (l. 211) suggests, was still in his mind."¹² Weinbrot further argues that "Johnson--like Pope and Juvenal--has probably exaggerated his own anger and the evils of his surroundings . . . but he and many others did believe that British liberty was threatened. Exaggeration is essential to the satiric art, and differs in degree only from simile and metaphor, 'untruths' which, if denied to the poet would destroy poetry."¹³

Such criticisms of the incongruity of Johnson's lamentations and the true state of affairs, Weinbrot calls "improper grounds" for faulting London. The "proper grounds" for such criticism, however, can be found in what Weinbrot calls the area of "ethos and structure." Thrales as the embodiment of the ethos of this satire is, according to Weinbrot, too "generalized." His reactions are to the contemporary topical issues. Unlike Umbricius, his

¹¹ The Formal Strain, p. 166.

¹² Ibid., p. 168.

¹³ Ibid., p. 169.

counterpart from Juvenal's satire, he shows no concern for the lot of the plebians. A note of self-pity in his diatribes against the city creates an impression of him as "self-righteous rather than righteously indignant." The structure of London, Weinbrot asserts, is that of alternating blame and praise--blame for the city and praise for the country. But Weinbrot finds that Thrales is not totally unequivocal in his indictment of city life or in his devotion to the bucolic existence he is about to embark on. There are suggestions that once installed in the country he will be able to enjoy the amenities and privileges he was denied in the city. This, according to Weinbrot, contradicts the traditional view of a rustic retreat as a hermitage characterized by a lack of ostentation and an emphasis on contented simplicity. On the whole, Weinbrot finds that Johnson's attempt in the poem to fuse general social commentary with criticism of particulars of Walpolian politics "blurs the focus of the satire." Weinbrot's overall verdict is that "London fails not because it imitates too closely, but not closely enough."¹⁴

Whatever the failings or virtues of London as an imitation of a Juvenalian formal verse satire, it is generally agreed that poetically it is one of Johnson's

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

significant achievements. Since the poetic effectiveness of London is partially due to the sincerity of its general intentions and the intensity of its moral outrage, the political elements of this poem should be explored.

Donald Greene points out that modern "literary students" often take it for granted that "Walpole and the Whigs were representatives of the moneyed interests and that the opposition stood for the good old English pastoral virtues."¹⁵ But the historical truth is that the opposition was composed of men representing commercial interests, not the least notable among whom was William Pitt, whose family had made a fortune in the East India trade. The opposition stood for British expansion and curtailment of the Franco-Spanish access to rich trading grounds of South America and the Pacific. To achieve such goals, the members of the opposition advocated the resumption of the hostilities in the earlier part of the century known as the Spanish war. "It is on their side," writes Greene, "that Johnson is undeniably found in London."¹⁶

Why should Johnson, himself from an impoverished class, in 1738, intelligent enough to gauge the motives of this campaign, lend his support to such a cause? Part of the

¹⁵ The Politics of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 89.

¹⁶ Ibid.

answer may be in the fact that ins and outs of the political situation of those days are perhaps clearer to us now, from a distance, than they were to contemporary men on the scene. Governments were run largely in private; and political journalism as we think of it did not exist. Johnson, therefore, cannot be expected to have been enlightened and analytical in his political attitudes, as we might expect a well-informed public man to be today. Donald Greene sheds further light on the question:

If one attempts a psychological reconstruction of the way his political writings of 1738 and 1739 came into being, one must imagine the young Johnson newly arrived in London, sore at the neglect of the world, repelled by the ugliness of city life, and homesick for the gentler scenes of the Midlands. Through the instrumentality of Savage, or Hervey, or Guthrie, or the Craftsman, there is revealed to Johnson the appalling wickedness of Walpole's regime, which is responsible for the sad state of a world in which "slow rises worth." The young man's eyes are opened. He eagerly seizes on the Walpolian iniquities and uses them as pegs on which to hang his own griefs: bribery and castrati and masquerades become projections and symbols of the Johnsonian dissatisfaction with the world. . . . This is to make out Johnson to be a rather naive young man, yet, after all, until he arrived in London he had lived on the whole a bookish and academic life, and there is little evidence of his having had close contact with the realities of current national politics.¹⁷

Another part of the answer lies in Johnson's basic disposition, of which a sympathy for the underdog and

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

hostility toward the established order were integral parts. The historical fact is that Walpole, given a free hand by a foreign, apathetic King George I in the governance of the country, had grown cunning, corrupt, and imperious. There can be no doubt that Walpole, haughty, aloof, and isolated by a clique of cronies such as Newcastle and Hervey, appeared to Johnson as the symbol of an unjust system which he as iconoclast had to oppose. The poem is, therefore, "impregnated with the fires of opposition"¹⁸ and is enriched by the "most spirited invectives against tyranny and oppression" which in Johnson's view pervaded England.

If such are Johnson's inner urges and source of inspiration in composing London, then to what extent is the content of the Juvenalian model responsible for invoking Johnson's poetic imagination? Probably very little, according to the critical consensus. The "imitation," as Weinbrot obliquely suggests in his study, is only of Juvenal's framework. Other commentators have noted that Johnson's poem is not animated by the same spirit as Juvenal's. (It is the scorn and lack of compassion that distinguishes Juvenalian satire --and which opposes it to the so-called Horatian satire, of which Johnson's friend Goldsmith was a practitioner in his own satire of London life, as in Citizen of the World.)

¹⁸ Life, p. 93.

One anonymous critic in the last century is perhaps the first commentator to state the issue explicitly. Commenting on the general qualities of Johnson's poetry, this critic writes, "It is true, we think, that Johnson can hardly be called a great satirist, in the sense in which we apply that term either to Juvenal, after whom he moulded his satires, or to Thackery, for example, to whose higher shafts of scorn the present age is better accustomed. Johnson was not light enough for satire,--of which a certain negligence, whether real or skilfully simulated, is the very essence. For such negligence he was too much in earnest. Juvenal himself, indeed, is often too earnest for the genius of satire, but where he is earnest, his earnestness is the earnestness of disgust; while Johnson is apt to throw in a drop of genuine compassion."¹⁹

Another critic, Raymond Mortimer, touches on a different element of the incongruity between Johnson and Juvenal. "It is remarkable," he writes, "that Johnson's two principal poems should be paraphrases of Juvenal. The practice, in which Pope excelled, of bringing classical poems up to date by substitution of topical names and instances, demands ingenuity, excites enjoyment and deserves revival. But for Johnson Juvenal seems a curious choice, since his gusto for

¹⁹ "Johnsonese Poetry," Spectator, 49 (May 13, 1876), 619.

indecentcy was so alien to the Doctor. Moreover Johnson, unlike Juvenal, considered that 'gross wickedness' was rare."²⁰

In recent decades this question has received more serious and analytical attention from critics. In his "Introduction" to one of the volumes of The Yale Edition of Johnson's works, W. J. Bate explores the elements of Johnson's satiric writing which set him apart from Juvenal:

One of the fascinations of Johnson is that he seemed to possess all the positive equipment for satire though he was himself ultimately incapable of writing it: a completely undeluded view of human nature; strong aggressive instincts --above all, a capacity for anger (not the cold anger of Swift, but, as in Juvenal, something heady, impetuous, even potentially violent); and, above all, an ingenious gift for inventing grotesque or ludicrous remarks and scenes, thrown off by an imagination that is often most fertile and concrete when it is stung by exasperation. Yet Johnson is not really a satirist, and in fact, as Mrs. Thrale said, he had "an aversion" to general satire. We would put it more strongly and say that he had a hatred and fear of satire--a fear that led him to be notoriously unfair in his critical estimate of Swift. We do not explain this by saying only that he feared to release the satiric impulse because it was too strong. We come closer to an explanation if we say that Johnson was unable merely to observe, but had to participate and share; and that his own participation sets a bar to satire. The result, time and again in all of

²⁰ "Books in General," New Statesman and Nation, November 1, 1941, p. 394.

his moral writing, is that we have anger, protest, even ridicule, always in the process of turning into something else.²¹

In an attempt to explain this tendency in Johnson, D. V. Boyd sheds some religious and philosophical light on the problem. "Despite Paul Fussell's insistence upon Johnson's 'acute sensitivity to genre,'" he writes, "neither London nor The Vanity of Human Wishes can be adequately understood in terms of the assumptions and expectations appropriate to traditional verse satire." That certain quality distinguishing Johnson's satiric verse from that of more conventional satirists Boyd calls the "subversive element." According to Boyd, this is "essentially what a later age would call 'sympathetic imagination.'" He continues:

But it would be quite erroneous to assume that this tendency in any way constitutes a "pre-Romantic" element in Johnson's thought. The nature and the origin of Johnson's anti-satiric sympathy is peculiar to himself. It is based ultimately, I wish to suggest, on that condition which existential psychologists sometimes call "ontological insecurity." But it must be quickly added that such insecurity, in Johnson's case, is neither neurotic nor even essentially private. Rather, it springs from his explicit, deeply-held, and frequently professed belief, based on perfectly orthodox

²¹ W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: The Rambler, IV (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), xxviii-xxix.

religious grounds, that the existence of man is necessarily arbitrary and inexplicable.²²

So persuaded, Johnson would naturally find it difficult to detach himself from other creatures with whom he endures in common this universal difficulty. "Were Johnson capable of dismissing hunger and poverty and disease, along with fires and falling houses, with Leibnitzian cheerfulness, no doubt things would be clear. But of course he is not," writes Boyd. "He has no more patience than Voltaire with the complacent distinction between 'the physical evil' and 'the moral evil.' Only the latter, he may know in theory, is a proper subject for satiric and indignation; the former, however intolerable, is natural to the human lot."²³

The list of commentaries on how Johnson has differed in his "imitations" from the text and spirit of Juvenal can be further extended. In fact such departures on the part of Johnson from the originals both in London and in The Vanity of Human Wishes have been the main preoccupation of critics for generations. As a result, very little attention has been paid to other particularities of these works.

As I have already noted, London is the more neglected of the two, perhaps because it is not philosophical and

²² "Vanity and Vacuity," ELH, 39 (1972), 387-388.

²³ Ibid., p. 393.

deals with notions less profound. On the positive side, it may be said that it is more varied and lively than its companion piece; and for the very reason that it takes more liberties with its purported model it better represents Johnson's underlying emotions and the general character of his poetry. Whatever Johnson's original aim might have been in the choice of the genre of imitation, a closer study of the poem will promote the impression that he soon lost interest in adhering strictly to the dictates of the genre. This is part of the reason for the complaint made by some critics, such as that of Weinbrot quoted above, that as satire London suffers from a blurred focus. The notion that Johnson was not planning to write an earnest imitation of Juvenalian satire is based on a comparative reading of London and another imitation by John Oldham of the same original. Several critics have undertaken such comparisons with the purpose, however, of deciding the superiority of one over the other. But here, I will try to show only that Johnson and Oldham had two distinctly different purposes.

Oldham's "Imitation" opens with marked sonorous statelyness:

Though much concerned to lose my old friend,
I must however his design commend
Of fixing in the country; for were I
As free to choose my residence as he,

The Peak, the Fens, the Hundreds, or Land's-end,
I would prefer to Fleet-street, or the Strand.²⁴

Johnson, while echoing Oldham in borrowed rhymes and words (friend, commend, and Strand), creates a totally different atmosphere in his opening lines:

Tho' grief and fondness in my breast rebel,
When injured Thales bids the town farewell,
Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,
I praise the hermit, but regret the friend.²⁵

For one thing, these lines convey a lighter mood. They are possessed of a delicate joviality which is reflected in the jaunty rhythm, the hyperbolic personification of line 1, and especially in the masterful compactness of line 4. These elements constitute a strain of good humor which immediately brings into question the satiric intent of the poem.

The next passage in Oldham is a sustained invective against the evils of the city, itemized, it seems, in the order of their gravity and organized in a rhetorical question for the greatest appeal to the reader's logic:

²⁴ Robert Bell, ed., Poetical Works of John Oldham (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1856), p. 188. All future references to this work are from this edition and are indicated parenthetically by page number.

²⁵ E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 47-48. All future references to this work are from this edition and are indicated parenthetically by line number in the text.

What place so desert, and so wild is there,
 Whose inconveniences one would not bear,
 Rather than the alarms of midnight fire,
 The fall of houses, knavery of cits,
 The plots of factions, and the noise of wits,
 And thousand other plagues, which up and down
 Each day and hour infest the cursed town?
 (p. 188)

But Johnson's treatment of the same passage is considerably more personalized and therefore more subjective. There seem to be real people in it:

For who would leave unbrib'd Hibernia's land,
 Or change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand?
 There none are swept by sudden fate away.
 But all whom hunger spares, with age decay:
 Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
 And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
 Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
 And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
 Here falling houses thunder on your head,
 And here a female atheist talks you dead.
 (ll. 9-22)

The reference to the barrenness and isolation of Scotland indicates Johnson's phobia for that region, and it is introduced almost as a private joke shared with the London reader who would probably look down his nose at Wales and Scotland. The dangers of city life which are seemingly thrown together in a haphazard fashion ("And now a rabble rages, now a fire;" and "Here falling houses thunder on your head,/ And a female atheist talks you dead"), are actually arranged in a contrivedly unlikely proximity to underline not only the multiplicity but the variety of urban perils. The colloquial tone of the last line provides an amusing and pleasant contrast with the rigid formality of the last lines.

The divergence of mood and tone in the opening passages of the two works, together with Johnson's token borrowings from Oldham, indicates that Johnson was fully familiar with the intention of both Juvenal's and Oldham's works but consciously wished to differ from them. In other words, although Johnson was adopting a Juvenalian structure, he intended to adorn it with pattern entirely of his own design.

From here on, Oldham's version maintains the same level of ridicule directed at the city and closely follows the line of development suggested to him by his model. It would be unfair to fault Oldham on this account. As Mary Lascelles points out, "in Oldham's work we may fairly look for the inherent possibilities and limitations of this way of writing as these presented themselves to his English successors. It requires of the reader just so much familiarity with the original poem as will make him quick to recall, when adroitly prompted, some memorable passage; of the writer a knack of analogy: the art or trick of awakening such recollections."²⁶ But Johnson, who cut Juvenal's 322 lines down to 263, cannot reasonably be imagined to have had the same objective. However, Lascelles, among others, is not willing to relinquish the idea that Johnson intended to

²⁶ "Johnson and Juvenal," in Fredrick W. Hilles, ed., New Light on Dr. Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 38.

create in London a strict "imitation" of Juvenal's satire. She makes a valiant effort to justify Johnson's drastic modifications and reductions of the original:

Congenial though the general import of his original may be, the imitator of an ancient satire must here and there find its particulars intractable. Difference of time and place may lend enchantment to other literary forms, but a considerable part of satirical complaint has to do with the immediate: with the sting of to-day's vexation, or the sourness of yesterday's hope; with foul weather here and now. Thus, while there will be, in any great satire, passages which time cannot tarnish--passages that only await recharging with personal experience and the passionate affirmation "I know--I have been there myself"--there must necessarily be others from which the force, the very meaning, has ebbed. Success in imitation will therefore be the reward of insight and boldness: the good imitator will keep no lumber--what he cannot either take as it stands or transform by a turn of his wit he will throw out. Some of Juvenal's grievances are peculiar to his world: those, for example, that relate to slavery and its ramified consequences. Here Johnson's firmness appears. Whereas Oldham had encumbered himself with all the references (direct or oblique) to the particulars of Roman life in his original, he cuts out those which refuse to be translated into English terms.²⁷

That in London Johnson was practicing the contemporary literary form of imitation is indisputable. But to judge the merits of this poem as a strict imitation of the classic model is similar to assessing Edward Fitzgerald's renderings of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat as translations. Roused by a series of developments patently opposed to his philosophy and temperament, Johnson's sensitized imagination seized

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

upon Juvenal's raillery against the injustices, follies, and imperfections that have always plagued man's existence.

In London, as many critics have justifiably complained, we do not see much of Juvenal. The reason is that Johnson intended it to be a declaration of his poetic aspiration by which the young, newly-arrived poet wished to make his mark upon the literary society of London. Then, one might ask, why did he adopt the Juvenalian structure and insist upon having the Latin text printed at the foot of his "imitation"? A partial answer to this question can be gleaned from literary history. Paul Fussell, discussing the "force of genre" as a rhetorical consideration in Johnson's age, writes:

All this consciousness of the rhetorical, even the polemic, character of poetry accompanied an awareness of the objective world of poetic kinds. To most twentieth-century readers a contemporary poem is a poem: it is hard to sense any determining difference between, say, the mode of The Waste Land and the mode of one of Pound's Cantos. But in Johnson's day the distinctions between the poetic kinds were still clear and firm, just as they had been in Roman theory. One began writing a poem with a distinct sense of the kind of poem one wanted to produce. One then selected the meter, diction, figures, and structure appropriate to that kind only, and fit for no other. One wrote, that is, not a "poem," but a satire, a song, a pastoral, an elegy, an ode, an epitaph, or an epigram.²⁸

²⁸ Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 69.

Furthermore, it was customary and convenient for the literati to propound political opinion by "imitating" an extant classic and revitalizing it by contemporary allusions. By this ruse they avoided charges of libel. But more significantly, this kind of expression was in a bona fide literary activity and, as such, far removed from the political sloganeering and pamphleteering, which was considered lowly and in poor taste; and there were many writers who wrote imitations purely as a literary expression and without ulterior motives.

As for the reason why Johnson had the original Latin printed alongside his own poem, for one thing the presentation of the imitated material was a part of the tradition of imitation, and Johnson perhaps wished to acknowledge the parent poem as normative and challenge it.

For a better understanding of these differences we must refer to Johnson and Oldham again. Oldham is generally praised for his faithfulness to Juvenal's text, although his verse is considered mediocre. Weinbrot observes that "Oldham is an imitator and modernizer whose chief allegiance is to Juvenal."²⁹ John Butt finds that Johnson "does not compete with Oldham in decorating the scene with particular details."³⁰ But such comments are based on the assumption

²⁹ Weinbrot, The Formal Strain, p. 79.

³⁰ "Johnson and the Poetical Imitation," in Hilles, New Light on Dr. Johnson, p. 28.

that Johnson was in competition with Oldham and an earlier "translator" of the Third Satire, Dryden, whereas Johnson aimed at giving a new metaphoric expression to Juvenal's poetic thought. He therefore feels free to be eclectic. The result is that even those critics who are preoccupied with the extent of Johnson's success or failure in his imitation of Juvenal can hardly refrain from admiration for the more narrowly poetic achievement in London. John Butt, for instance, regrets "the absence in Johnson of that picturesqueness of imaginative detail," but notes that "we shall not fail to recognize the skill which Johnson shows in defining the general situation so accurately as to incite us to supply our own particular versions of it."³¹

This quality of Johnson's poetry in London which "incites us to supply our own version" of the scenes is the result of the freedom Johnson has allowed himself in responding to Juvenal's verse. This point will be made clearer by comparing Johnson's approach with those of Oldham and Dryden in treating the same passages in Juvenal's satire. One of the highlights of London is the episode of the burning down of Orgilio's mansion. This man, wealthy and influential, receives so many gifts and subscriptions from the public after the fire that he is able to rebuild and

³¹ Ibid., p. 33.

redecorate his house again without any cost to himself. Oldham (identifying the victim of the conflagration as some great man) adheres to his model, providing ample detail and consequently creating the impression that the speaker is merely jealous of the man:

But if the fire burn down some great man's house,
 All straight are interested in the loss;
 The court is straight in mourning sure enough,
 The act, commencement, and the term put off;
 Then we mischances of the town lament,
 And fasts are kept, like judgments to prevent.
 Out comes a brief immediately, with speed
 To gather charity as far as Tweed.
 Nay, while 'tis burning, some will send him in
 Timber, and stone to build his house again;
 Others choice furniture; some rare piece
 Of Rubens, or Vandyke presented is;
 There is a rich suit of Mortlack tapestry,
 A bed of damask or embroidery;
 One gives a fine scrutoire, or cabinet,
 Another a huge massy dish of plate,
 Or bag of gold: thus he at length gets more
 By kind misfortune than he had before;
 And all suspect it for a laid design,
 As if he did himself the fire begin.

(p. 192)

Johnson, however, with an eye to the political intentions of the poem, presents Orgilio as a political power-broker who controls parliamentary seats:

Should heaven's just bolts Orgilio's wealth confound,
 And spread his flaming palace on the ground,
 Swift o'er the land the dismal rumour flies,
 And publick mournings pacify the skies;
 The laureat tribe in servile verse relate,
 How virtue wars with persecuting fate;
 With well-feign'd gratitude the pension'd band
 Refund the plunder of the beggar'd land.
 See! while he builds, the gaudy vassals come,
 And crowd with sudden wealth the rising dome;
 The price of boroughs and of souls restore,

And raise his treasures higher than before.
 Now bless'd with all the baubles of the great,
 The polish'd marble, and the shining plate,
 Orgilio sees the golden pile aspire,
 And hopes from angry heav'n another fire.

(ll. 194-209)

The compactness of these lines are achieved by an ingenious economy of detail. Instead of enumerating the gifts and gratuities bestowed upon Orgilio, Johnson gives us only "the baubles of the great." By so doing, he has left the readers to their own particularizing. Also by connecting the words "great" and "bauble" Johnson has inserted a minuscule dose of bathos in the line that permeates the rest of the passage, underlining his scorn not only for the baubles, but also for the great who are associated with them.

Butt takes due note of Johnson's effective economy of words. Among the examples he provides to demonstrate this facet of Johnson's poetic aptitude, the following, which also brings in the Latin original for further illumination, is most relevant here. He writes:

To some extent we may account for Johnson's brevity by the skill with which he packs his verse. That famous line, "Slow rises worth, by poverty depress'd," is the distillation of a line and a half in Juvenal:

Haud facile emergunt, quotum virtutibus obstat
 Res angusta domi.

Six English words represent nine Latin ones. Both Oldham and Dryden come off poorly by comparison. Here is Oldham:

'Tis hard for any man to rise, that feels
His virtue clogg'd with poverty at heels;

and Dryden:

Rarely they rise by Virtues aid, who lie
Plung'd in the depth of helpless Poverty;

and neither of them achieves Johnson's admirably
sombre note.³²

We may also consider the fact that the nature of Latin grammar and syntax is such that English translations of Latin texts are very rarely more succinct than their originals. And Johnson's remarkable ability to capture (and sometimes to sharpen) the succinctness of his Latin models shows not only his power over the English language but his thorough command of Latin. This latter condition reinforces any sense we might otherwise have that Johnson's departures from his Latin models were intentional and well-informed.

The brevity in Johnson's London is not only the soul of its wit, but it is also the source of a power and poignancy which transcend its stated intention of general satire. Having read London through, the reader, as critics have been at pains to show, does not feel that he has read a satire. He nevertheless comes away with a satisfaction that virtue has been rewarded or, rather, evil and evil-doers have been exposed and deservedly maligned. Johnson creates this effect by localizing his satire, that is, by "packing"

³² Butt, "Johnson and the Poetical Imitation," p. 26,

ridicule, resentment, and venom (all bona fide ingredients of satire) into a single line or phrase and placing it strategically to provide a particular passage or episode with a satiric center of gravity. Let us look at a few lines, in which such instances have been underlined:

Here let those reign, whom pensions can incite
 To vote a patriot black, a courtier white;
 Explain their country's dear-bought rights away,
 And plead for pirates in the face of day;
 With slavish tenets taint our poison'd youth,
And lend a lye the confidence of truth.
 (ll. 51-56)

Illustrious Edward! from the realms of day,
 The land of heroes and of saints survey;
 Nor hope the British lineaments to trace,
 The rustic grandeur, or the surly grace,
 But lost in thoughtless ease, and empty show,
Behold the warrior dwindle to a beau;
Sense, freedom, piety, refin'd away,
 Of France the mimick, and of Spain the prey.
 (ll. 99-106)

Juvenal's satire, as well as Oldham's and Dryden's emulations thereof, reach and sustain a satiric monotone which in its own way is very effective. But Johnson, by allowing the satiric outcry periodic crescendos, gives himself the freedom to lower his voice occasionally and introduce soothing notes of almost pastoral and lyrical melodiousness. This he effects with exquisite mastery so that the result is not a jarring contretemps but a pleasing contrast with the vituperations of the preceding and following passages. One instance of this practice occurs early in the poem. The narrator, after inveighing the outrages of

the city, lapses into a quiet, pensive mood and with his friend Thales indulges in a moment of nostalgia about the past glories of the land. The mood is serene and sentimental, and the lines are superb reflections of the mood:

On Thames's bank, in silent thought we stood,
 Where Greenwich smiles upon the silver flood:
 Struck with the seat that gave Eliza birth,
 We kneel, and kiss the consecrated earth;
 In pleasing dreams the blissful age renew,
 And call Britannia's glories back to view;
 Behold her cross triumphant on the main,
 The Guard of commerce and dread of Spain.
(ll. 21-30)

But the mood does not last long and there is a return of the bitter invective which is in fact occasioned by the reminiscences of the past and the view of London stretched out in distant perspective.

The presence of such oscillation in the level of invective has disturbed some critics in their considerations of London as an imitation of Juvenal's Third Satire. But London is an expression of a young poet's temperament. That he has selected this genre for self-expression indicates his respect for the literary mores and received customs of his day. But within the genre he introduces elements of his individualism and reveals his rebellious nature and his inventiveness.

Chapter V

THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES AND THE CLOUDED MAZE OF FATE

Of all of Johnson's poetic works The Vanity of Human Wishes is universally considered his highest achievement. In theme and structure it closely follows Juvenal's Tenth Satire, but it is thought more personal and spontaneous than London, Johnson's earlier imitation of Juvenal. Boswell reports that although it was published in 1749 Johnson had composed it in the preceding year. He also tells us of the "fervid rapidity" with which Johnson composed the poem.

Despite Johnson's alleged haste in its composition, The Vanity of Human Wishes is an immensely complicated work. The poem is complex not only in its language and metaphoric structure, but in its patterns of allusion and philosophic construct. Boswell believes that this poem "has less of common life, but more of a philosophick dignity than his London. More readers, therefore, will be delighted with the pointed spirit of London, than the profound reflections of The Vanity of Human Wishes."¹ He goes on to report the

¹ James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 138.

reactions of one such reader: "Garrick . . . observed in his sprightly manner, with more vivacity than regard for just discrimination, as is usual with wits, 'When Johnson lived much with the Herveys, and saw a good deal of what was passing in life, he wrote his London, which is lively and easy. When he became more retired, he gave us his Vanity of Human Wishes, which is hard as Greek. Had he gone on to imitate another satire, it would have been hard as Hebrew.'"²

A good deal of the difficulty in The Vanity of Human Wishes is in its intensely metaphoric language. More than any other of Johnson's poems, the meaning and the mood of this work is dependent on the figurative, a fact which vindicates Boswell's assertion that Johnson's mind "was so full of imagery that he might have been perpetually a poet." As Edward Bloom notes, "in [The Vanity], at any rate, if nowhere else to a comparable degree, Johnson was a poet."³

The use of imagery in Johnson's work is not confined to his poetry. Readers through the ages have been impressed by the metaphoric force of Johnson's prose. Lord Monboddo, a noted contemporary of Johnson, "his own style being exceedingly dry and hard," had complained in a letter to Boswell of the richness of Johnson's language. Boswell, given this

² Ibid.

³ "The Vanity of Human Wishes: Reason's Images," Essays in Criticism, 15 (1965), 181.

excellent opportunity to extract a comment from Johnson, informed him of the content of Monboddo's letter. "Why Sir," said Johnson, "this criticism would be just, if in my style, superfluous words, or words too big for the thoughts, could be pointed out; but this I do not believe can be done. . . . And, Sir, as to metaphorical expression, that is a great excellence in style, when it is used with propriety, for it gives you two ideas for one;--conveys the meaning more luminously, and generally with a perception of delight."⁴ The import of this exquisitely vivid Johnsonian utterance is fully realized in the composition of The Vanity of Human Wishes, in which with consummate skill the vehicle of the metaphor is made to fuse with the tenor.

Fortunately, this facet of The Vanity of Human Wishes has in recent years attracted considerable critical attention and has brought about a wider appreciation of Johnson's poetic talents. "Earlier readers," writes Bloom, "had not noticed, perhaps from their stylistic premises could not notice, how consistently metaphoric the language is."⁵

The "stylistic premise" to which Bloom refers is articulated by an anonymous contributor to the Spectator a hundred years ago. This article clearly betrays the esthetic premises of its times. "We take it that there is but two absolute essentials of poetry," it states. "First,

⁴ Life, p. 855.

⁵ Bloom, p. 181.

the resonance of feeling which finds its natural expression in the cadences of verse and in subtle sweetness of rhyme; and next, enough, at least, of special genius for the selection of words, to give the power either of charming by their felicity or of riveting us by their pent-up force."⁶ In the case of Johnson's poetry, the article goes on to say, "there was assuredly but very limited region within which his mind seemed to need the help of rhythm and rhyme, in order to convey what was in it; nor was the empire which he wielded over words either a very varied or uniformly a very happy one. . . . He was, no doubt, often pompous and always a little ponderous. His manner is sometimes stately beyond the level of his feeling. . . . There is little flexibility and no variety of movement in his verse."⁷ The article is generally in praise of Johnson, but the patronizing tone is unmistakable. While it tells us how the nineteenth century felt about Johnson, it also provides us with a revealing glimpse of the prejudices of that era regarding the poetry of the eighteenth century. In summing up, the article concludes that on the whole, despite the absence of flexibility and variety of movement, "the monotony which often wearies us in Pope and Dryden would have wearied us still more in

⁶ "Johnsonese Poetry," Spectator, 49 (1876), 619.

⁷ Ibid., p. 620.

Johnson if Johnson had been anything as voluminous a poet as Pope and Dryden." Such arbitrary value judgments notwithstanding, the author displays some understanding of Johnson's state of mind. He writes, "no poetry of that order, neither Pope's nor Dryden's, seems to us to contain so much that is really majestic in it, so much that portrays for us a great mind and a glowing heart, groping its way painfully through the darkness of the world, by the help of a vivid but distant gleam of supernatural light, and intent on 'making'--by that aid--'the happiness it could not find.'"⁸

This view of Johnson's poetry as "pompous" and "stately beyond the level of his feeling" persisted well into the twentieth century. Even as late as 1941, Raymond Mortimer, reviewing Smith and McAdam's edition of Johnson's poetry, finds his style "flabby and upholstered," expressing "bewilderment" that Sir Walter Scott had more pleasure in reading London and The Vanity of Human Wishes than any other poetic composition he could remember.⁹

However, a shift in critical attitude toward the poetical works of Johnson was under weigh at the beginning of the century and it was given further momentum in 1930 by

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Books in General," New Statesman and Nation, November 1, 1941, p. 394.

T. S. Eliot's praiseful introduction to a 1930 edition of London and The Vanity of Human Wishes. Exhorted by Eliot, critics have undertaken a reevaluation of the recurrent images and other poetic devices in the development of form and enhancement of meaning in these two poems. In the case of The Vanity of Human Wishes the imagery and use of language have been extensively treated. There are various interpretations of elements of form and structure in the poem. Such variety is indicative of the poem's rich suggestiveness, a quality which characterizes any example of first-rate poetry. The following is a survey of such interpretative attempts.

One of the earliest critics to take an analytical approach to the metaphorical content of The Vanity of Human Wishes is Henry Gifford. Writing in 1955, he finds that "it is the tragic sense of life that informs Johnson's poem."¹⁰ This tragic view, says Gifford, is expressed by "numerous images of downfall. Much of the evocative power in [The Vanity] comes from [Johnson's] verbs, and it is the repetition of sinking and falling that gives a marked pattern to the poem." To prove his point, Gifford extracts the following list from the text of the poem:

¹⁰ "The Vanity of Human Wishes," The Review of English Studies, New Series, 6 (1955), 160.

How nations sink, by darling schemes oppress'd. (13)

. . . the sinking statesman's door. (79)

For why did Wolsey near the steeps of fate,
On weak foundations raise th' enormous weight?
Why but to sink beneath misfortune's blow,
With louder ruin to the gulphs below? (125-8)

But scarce observ'd, the knowing and the bold
Fall in the gen'ral massacre of gold. . . . (21, 22)

From every room descends the painted face. . . . (83)

Now beauty falls betray'd, despis'd, distress'd.
. . . (341)¹¹

Gifford goes on to say that "through these and other images is mediated a philosophy of life at once more sombre and more compassionate than Juvenal's. The poem, for all its general statement, is deeply coloured with Johnson's own feeling."¹² The "general statement" to which Gifford refers is the universal tragic sense which the poem promotes by stressing "the sense of an ineluctably shared condition." According to Gifford's analysis, Johnson achieves this sense by "writing of 'the gen'ral massacre', 'one gen'ral cry', and again of 'ev'ry stage', 'every room', 'search every state, and canvas ev'ry prayer.'"¹³

In a detailed examination of The Vanity of Human Wishes and its significance to the expression of Johnson's moral philosophy, Paul Fussell finds the figurative scheme of the poem appropriate to its message. According to Fussell, the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 161.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

writings of Johnson in general contain an unusual number of military metaphors. For instance, Johnson likens Milton to a soldier "hiding in ambush to entrap the reader: he [Milton] owes to Homer, says Johnson, in the Life of Milton 'all the strategems that surprise and enchain attention.'" In Idler 2 Johnson presents a bad writer "seeking a stupid correspondent to impress, 'as the young soldiers in the Roman camp [who] learned the use of their weapons by fencing against a post in the place of an enemy.'" Writing in the Life of Pope about satire and satirists, Johnson observes and Fussell quotes, "The satire which brought Theobald and Moore into contempt, dropped impotent from Bentley, like the javelin of Priam."¹⁴

Fussell's list of such examples in Johnson's writing grows to an impressive and convincing length. He then goes on to say that "the way Johnson turned his habit of military figuration to supreme ethical and aesthetic advantage is perhaps best observed in The Vanity of Human Wishes, which he conducts as if against a dark but vivid background of slaughters, ambushes, sieges, and military betrayals. The military imagery is deeply interwoven into the substance of the poem."¹⁵ Since the poem deals with the inherent irony

¹⁴ The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

of the "inappropriateness of most prayers and wishes," and seems to suggest a series of losing battles man wages against his intractable fate, The Vanity of Human Wishes "develops an entirely original vigour and weight from its unique dependence on military imagery."¹⁶ Fussell observes that Juvenal used "lots of literal military matter" in his treatment of Hannibal, "but what we look for in vain in Juvenal is Johnson's dimension of military metaphor."¹⁷

Edward Bloom is more precise in his distinction of Juvenal and Johnson in their use of military images. Like Fussell, Bloom believes that "the concepts of pictures are integrated or co-ordinated to enforce the poem's basic theme," which according to him is that reason "rarely . . . guides the stubborn choice" man makes according to the dictates of his passion.¹⁸ He therefore argues that images of war enhance the "moral disharmony" stated explicitly in the poem. Furthermore, writes Bloom, such images "are complemented by references of Johnson's own invention to animals and traps. Through stress on the brutish and instinctual, in other words, he has expressed his judgment that a violent animal nature belies man's claim to a civilised condition. Image-patterns of militarism and animalism are fully as

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bloom, p. 181.

important therefore to the poem's intention as those of crowds, decline, and the like."¹⁹ Bloom, however, does not perceive military images in The Vanity to be the dominant metaphor. In fact what he finds most impressive in the poem is the variety of images Johnson uses to convey the nuances of his meaning. These images, he notes, sometimes closely follow Juvenal's, although they are sometimes modified to suit Johnson's intention:

The chief interest of The Vanity of Human Wishes, however, is not in its borrowings but in its originality. Where Johnson establishes the individuality of his poem beyond doubt is in a seriousness and dignity of tone lacking in Juvenal's. This distinctive tone is immediately recognisable in the images, whether they have been suggested by Juvenal or freshly conceived, as many of them certainly are. Whereas Juvenal's pictures of human irrationality are vehement and scornful, Johnson's are grave and thoughtful. Typically Juvenal's representations burst upon the reader in a rapid succession; Johnson's move deliberately and methodically. The Juvenalian images are emotionally explosive, whereas those of Johnson, whose metaphoric language is relatively subdued, set a greater distance between himself and his reader. While he loses much of Juvenal's vivid affective quality, he counteracts that with a rationally more effective assault upon the depravity of undirected instincts.²⁰

This sampling of discussions of the imagery in The Vanity of Human Wishes should show that in this work Johnson has displayed the truly poetic quality of his genius. The variety of these interpretations, each useful and astutely conceived,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 183.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 183-184.

is a measure of the rich suggestiveness which gives the poem a timeless freshness. It is true that Johnson, as so many others of his contemporaries, wrote within the sacrosanct confines of the heroic couplet and Augustan conceptions of proper diction; yet he was peculiarly able to endow his poetry with color, verve, and variety. To grasp and delight in Johnson's esthetic achievement in The Vanity of Human Wishes or any other of his poems, the reader must raise himself above the prejudices and stock responses exemplified in the anonymous nineteenth-century critic quoted above. Once he has discarded such preconceived notions and moved beyond a superficial rejection of the rigid regularity of the heroic couplet, the flexibility and "variety of movement" in Johnson's handling of the couplet will become apparent to him.

The poetic merit of The Vanity of Human Wishes is not only in its imagery. There are other rhetorical elements at work which enhance the power and appeal of the poem. One of the most effective facets of this poem is the subtlety of its tone, which has ingeniously been made to differ from that of Juvenal's Tenth Satire. Throughout the poem, as Gifford noted, Johnson uses a language which is methodically generalized. In fact the first lines of the poem,

Let observation with extensive view,
 Survey mankind, from China to Peru;
 Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
 And watch the busy scenes of crowded life,²¹

suggest what follows as applicable to all humanity.

Juvenal's lines do not connote such universal applicability and openness of view:

Omnibus in terris, quae sunt a Gadibus usque
 Auroram et Gangem, pauci dinoscere possunt
 vera bona atque illis multum diversa, remota
 erroris nebula.²²

Juvenal immediately focuses the attention on those who can recognize their own good. The reader is asked to limit his view and not expand it. Even Dryden's wonderfully compacted lines do not imply the airy vastness in Johnson's interpretation. Dryden urges us to

Look around the habitable world, how few
 Know their own good; or knowing it pursue.²³

By specifying the "habitable world," Dryden has somehow implied a limit. But the impression created by Johnson's

²¹ E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 91. All future references to the text of The Vanity of Human Wishes are from this edition and will be parenthetically indicated by line numbers.

²² C. H. Pearson and H. A. Strong, eds., Thirteen Satires of Juvenal (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 88.

²³ The Poems of John Dryden, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), Vol. 2, p. 720. All future references to the text of this translation are from this edition and will be parenthetically indicated by JD and line numbers.

"from China to Peru" is that of breaking out of all known geographical boundaries. Fredrick W. Hilles explains why:

Johnson was writing when chinoiserie was the rage and Hogarth's poor poet dreamed of gold mines in Peru. But surely the lines insist upon something more important, upon establishing at the outset a point of view. The reader, endowed by the poet with extraordinary farsightedness, looks eastward all the way to China, where the sun rises. As his gaze follows the path of the sun, he discovers in the remote west, where the sun sets, Peru. Beyond China to the east, beyond Peru to the west, there is nothing but water. Between the two countries lies the inhabited globe. But if we are to observe men so widely separated we must be above the world, looking down. Only so can our view be as extensive as the poet demands. And what happens when we look down on the world from high altitudes? Even the greatest of men dwindle. We have a new perspective on what we observe; and farsightedness has long been equated with good judgment.²⁴

Hilles goes on to suggest that "Johnson prefers to lift us up, and in a language that is properly elevated suggests the magnitude of the habitable world." Hilles observes that this is in keeping with Johnson's view of the poet. He quotes Imlac as saying that the poet must "consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations, as a being superior to time and place." In The Vanity of Human Wishes, says Hilles, "Johnson shares that superiority with his readers."²⁵

²⁴ "Johnson's Poetic Fire," in From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Fredrick A. Pottle, eds. Fredrick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 68-69.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

Although the poem begins at such a height, it soon lowers to particulars. The catalogue of follies and miseries committed and suffered by man, immediately laid bare to "extensive view" after the opening lines, introduces the grave and sobering import of what is to follow and becomes the basis of the entire discussion.

Garrick has said that The Vanity of Human Wishes is the work of a "more retired" Johnson. This is either a misstatement--since in 1749 Johnson was in fact expanding the circle of his social activity--or Garrick may have meant a more mature Johnson. Certainly by the time Johnson wrote The Vanity of Human Wishes he had outgrown the personal resentments and topical grievances which he had voiced in London; he was now able to relate to the more cosmic concerns of Juvenal's Tenth Satire. As is often the case, an expanded view of the world is accompanied by a more lugubrious tone and a darker vision of the fate of man. The gloom of Johnson's disposition can be gauged by a glance at his "imitation" of Juvenal's opening passage:

Let observation with extensive view,
Survey mankind, from China to Peru;
Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;
Then say how hope and fear, desire and hate,
O'erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate,
Where wav'ring man, betray'd by vent'rous pride,
To treat the dreary paths without a guide,
As treacherous phantoms in the mist delude,
Shuns fancied ills, or chases airy good.

(ll. 1-10)

This interpretation instills more despair in the reader than Juvenal's own lines:

Omnibus in terris, quae sunt a Gadibus usque
Auroram et Gangem, pauci dinoscere possunt
vera bona atque illis multum diversa, remota
erroris nebula. quid enim rationes timemus
aunt cupimus? quid tam dextro pede concipis, ut te
conatus non paeniteat votique peracti?²⁶

Beside the obvious difference in length, the two passages diverge in their tone. Dryden's translation projects Juvenal's mood and it strikes us as being more sardonic than sombre:

Look around the habitable world, how few
Know their own good; or knowing it, pursue.
How void of reason are our Hopes and Fears!
What in the Conduct of our Life appears
So well design'd, so luckily begun,
But, when we have our wish, we wish undone?
(JD, 1-6)

Dryden deviates from Juvenal somewhat. He explicitly casts the lot of the poet with that of the reader, thus bringing them closer together. Note such phrases as "our Hopes and Fears" and "Conduct of our Life." Johnson on the other hand is distant, and he deals in such awesome abstractions as "clouded maze of fate," "vent'rous pride," and "Phantoms in the mist." Johnson's abstractions are not the only reason for our sensation of that distance. Patricia M. Spacks, in a comparative study of Juvenal's text and

²⁶ Pearson and Strong, p. 88.

Johnson's imitation, analyzes how the latter's use of language promotes this sensation:

For Juvenal's direct assertion, Johnson substitutes a convoluted presentation which distances him from the immediate situation. The observer, in his version, is not any individual, but a personified figure of Observation. This fiction is a mode of generalizing his own poetic authority: he says, in effect, "I speak not out of mere personal experience, but as one who has thought extensively about the problems of mankind." The progression of verbs in the first four lines defines the poetic focus. First Observation merely surveys mankind in the mass. Gradually attention increases: the observer remarks, gives special notice to, "each anxious toil, each eager strife." He notes, in other words, that the toil in which men find their occupation and ideally their fulfillment has become a source of anxiety, that the strife which should be a curse is eagerly engaged in. Finally he watches "the busy scenes of crowded life." The scene of the whole poem has already been hinted by the adjective crowded, an adjective which the rest of the poem will elaborate and explicate. Having seen the world in some systematic fashion, the observer is now able to say what its nature is. Juvenal makes no distinction between seeing and saying; that Johnson does is characteristic of an age highly aware of the difficulties and importance of literary activity. The effort at articulation is a moral activity; Johnson suggests as much by the precision of his paradoxical formulation, which balances hope and fear, desire and hate, to explain, as Juvenal does not, exactly why the maze of fate is so clouded.²⁷

The maintenance of a distance between the immediate situation and the speaker's detached stance is essential to Johnson's success in giving The Vanity of Human Wishes a tone of universal morality. He retains this distance by the

²⁷ "From Satire to Description," Yale Review, 63 (1969), 236.

strategic location of abstractions and personifications. If personified abstractions are used discriminately and with restraint the result is elevated, dignified verse. The abstract generality of such personifications removes the ethos of the poem from the particularized concreteness of the physical world, making it more receptive to and reflective of intellectual notions. Let us compare a key passage in Johnson with Dryden's translation of the same passage in Juvenal. Here Johnson illustrates the vanity of young scholar's wishes:

Are these thy views? proceed, illustrious
youth,
And virtue guard thee to the throne of Truth!
Yet should thy soul indulge the gen'rous heat,
Till captive Science yields her last retreat;
Should Reason guide thee with her brightest ray,
And pour on misty Doubt resistless day;
Should no false Kindness lure to loose delight,
Nor Praise relax, nor Difficulty fright;
Should tempting Novelty thy cell refrain,
And Sloth effuse her opiate fumes in vain;
Should Beauty blunt on fops her fatal dart,
Nor claim the triumph of a letter'd heart;
Should no disease thy torpid veins invade,
Nor Melancholy's phantoms haunt they shade;
Yet hope not life from grief or danger free,
Not think the doom of man revers'd for thee:
Deign on the passing world to turn thine eyes,
And pause awhile from letters, to be wise;
There mark what ills the scholar's life assail,
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.
See nations slowly wise, and meanly just,
To buried merit raise the tardy bust.
If dreams yet flatter, once again attend,
Hear Lydiat's life, and Galileo's end.

(JD, 141-164)

In these lines the succession of abstractions and personifications not only enhances and generalizes the moral of the poem, it heightens their poetic grandeur.

Dryden's version, on the other hand, exudes an air of intentional levity:

The boy, who scarce has paid his entrance down
 To his proud Pedant, or declin'd a Noun,
 (So small an Elf, that when the days are foul,
 He and his Satchel must be borne to School,)
 Yet prays and hopes and aims at nothing less,
 To prove a Tully, or Demosthenes:
 But both those Orators, so much Renown'd,
 In their own Depths of Eloquence were Drown'd;
 The Hand and Head were never lost, of those
 Who dealt in Dogrel, or who punn'd in Prose:
Fortune foretun'd the Dying Notes of Rome:
Till I, thy Consul sole, consol'd thy Doom.
 (JD, 180-191)

The light mood is due partly to the concrete picture of the schoolboy carried to school through the mud and grime of a rainy day. But more important, it is promoted by the jaunty, almost droll musicality of a cluster of alliterations at the end of the passage ("Hand and Head," "dealt in Dogrel," "punn'd in Prose"). Besides, there are the puns in lines 190 and 191 ("Fortune foretun'd," "Consul sole, consol'd") which serve a twofold purpose; they lighten the mood as well as suggest the game schoolboys often play.

These lines are of course excellent satire. Juvenal and Dryden have joined hands in this satiric gibe against the quirks of fate and the fickleness of man that join to bring undeserved destruction upon innocent heads.

In his version, Johnson brings into play a network of abstractions that elevates the style and contributes a philosophic concision, a concision reflected in the epigrammatic quality of the verse. The force and pertinency of such lines as "Should no false kindness lure to loose delight,/ Nor praise relax, nor difficulty fright" have made them into proverbs. If we recall Johnson's own abbreviated career at Oxford and his desperate struggle to gain recognition in the world by the sheer force of his learning, we know why these lines are so affecting.

A similar strategy is followed in the passage about Bishop Laud. Here Johnson's skillful use of abstractions elevates an episode from recent history to the timelessness of a parable.

Nor deem, when learning her last prize bestows,
 The glittering eminence exempt from foes;
 See when the vulgar 'scape, despis'd or aw'd,
 Rebellion's vengeful talons seize on Laud.
 From meaner minds, tho' smaller fines content
 The plunder'd palace or sequestered rent;
 Mark'd out by dangerous parts he meets the shock,
 And fatal learning leads him to the block:
 Around his tomb let Art and Genius weep,
 But hear his death, ye blockheads, hear and sleep.
 (ll. 165-174)

The dominant figure of speech in these lines is personification, extended and distributed to highlight the philosophic implications of the ironic fate of Laud. Had Johnson used concrete nouns to refer to persons of learning

and intelligence instead of abstract notions of Art and Genius, the lines would have lost their parabolic universality and remained only ironic. This method of Johnson's explains how (both in poetry and prose) he is rarely satisfied with the merely ironic abstraction. And it shows (when he is compared with his contemporaries) the difference in kind and quality between the ironic and philosophic eye.

Johnson's personifications in The Vanity of Human Wishes are not refined so far that they become abstract manifestations of gravity or high-mindedness. Although they effectively put a distance between the poet and the "immediate situation" with which they deal, they seem to have a vitality and a concrete relevance to the realities of the human condition. The reason is that Johnson uses this species of metaphor not merely as a concentration of meaning, but as a means of highlighting the mundane facts of "the crowded life" which are, after all, the subject of the poem. In the following example the reader, who is first elevated by a series of abstract notions to a vision of ideal existence, is brought down to earth by the mention of specific, concrete, worldly disappointments:

But grant, the virtues of a temp'rate prime
 Bless with an age exempt from scorn or crime;
 An age that melts with unperceived decay,
 And glides in modest innocence away;
 Whose peaceful day Benevolence endears,
 Whose night congratulating Conscience cheers;

The gen'ral fav'rite as the gen'ral friend:
 Such an age there is, and who shall wish its end?
 Yet ev'n on this her load Misfortune flings,
 To press the weary minutes' flagging wings:
 New sorrow rises as the day returns,
 A sister sickens, or a daughter mourns.

(ll. 291-302)

One cannot escape the melancholic irony of these lines. The array of virtues enumerated in solemn abstractions ("temp'rate prime," "Benevolence," "congratulating Conscience") cannot protect the frail human happiness when "A sister sickens, or a daughter mourns."

Such fusion of the lofty and the mundane keep The Vanity of Human Wishes within the bounds of common human experience. Noting this quality in the overall impact of the poem, Macdonald Emslie offers a more technical explanation. He finds that Johnson gives "a special quality of experience" to his abstractions and personifications. He uses the following lines to illustrate his point:

Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
 And watch the busy scenes of crouded life;
 Then say how hope and fear, desire and hate,
 O'erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate.

(ll. 33-36)

The metaphors in the final line, though not remarkable in themselves, merge with the meaning of previous lines. The abstractions, says Emslie, "are connected by O'erspread, snares, and clouded maze." As a result, our impression "is that the poet knows what these abstractions amount to in

terms of actual life." The use of metaphors, according to Emslie, has enforced the abstractions.²⁸

Ironically, some of the objections directed at the eighteenth-century poetry in general and to the poetry of Johnson in particular are to personifications and abstractions which as we have already seen enhance the meaning and charm of such poetry. Generally speaking, the post-romantic readers find the use of this metaphor too frequent. But considering the moral, philosophic, and esthetic premises of the age, this tendency to personify and abstract is understandable. Bertrand Bronson has examined this phenomenon and offers the following explanation:

Since, on the whole, abstractions in poetry fail to move us to-day, we are prone to conclude that the aesthetic response of the eighteenth century, nourished on such things, must therefore have been relatively thin. This attitude is all but universal in critical writing from Wordsworth's time to the present. But such an inference is quite unjustified. Surely, nothing is more unforced than another inference: that if eighteenth-century poets labored long and hard to raise their immediate personal experiences and emotions to the most general statement, they did so because their keenest aesthetic delight lay in that direction. They were neither humanly incurious of, nor emotionally insensitive to, particulars, as almost any page of Boswell will prove; but personal statement gained force, conviction, vaster horizons, when lifted to the plateau of the general consensus. Force, conviction, and vaster horizons do not weaken effects for those who experience them. We work

²⁸ "Johnson's Satires and 'The Proper Wit of Poetry,'" The Cambridge Journal, 7 (Oct. 1953-Sept. 1954), 351-352.

to-day in an opposite direction: we are, roughly speaking, insensitive to the emotional appeal of a general statement. This insensitivity, I suspect, is our characteristic weakness--meaning by us all who have been vitally affected by the intellectual drift of the last hundred and fifty years toward Egocentricity.²⁹

Having attempted to place the matter in historical perspective, Bronson goes on to say that "we have moved from a taste for the abstract . . . to a preference for the concrete." This shift of sensibility is evident not only in literature but in other forms of art as well. "With regard to poetry," Bronson continues, "we are in a position analogous to Johnson's with regard to Lycidas."³⁰ Johnson had by then lost all patience with the pastoral convention of the preceding age.

As cogent and helpful as Bronson's remarks are concerning the widespread use of abstractions and personifications in the literature of the eighteenth century, they do not fully explain the significance of these rhetorical devices in the poetry of Johnson. As I said earlier, the use of abstractions helps to give the speaker of the poem a more generalized and detached character. Johnson systematically resists a more personal identification with the speaker for two reasons: first, to give the message of the poem the

²⁹ "Personification Reconsidered," ELH, 14 (1947), 154-156.

³⁰ Ibid., 156-157.

universality and authority of a moral sermon and, second, to divert attention from the identity of the real poet. In other words, by adopting a very generalized point of view in The Vanity of Human Wishes, Johnson disguises the fact of his own strongly emotional response to Juvenal's Tenth Satire. And yet, as we shall see, the response is real.

The reason for Johnson's desire to diffuse and dilute the personal emotional content of The Vanity of Human Wishes or any other of his poems must be sought in the basic premises of the Augustan temperament and literary taste. We must remember that to betray any unrestrained emotion, zeal, hatred, joy, or sorrow, went against the grain of the Augustan character. Traditional and dedicated to convention as Johnson was, he even decried religious poetry on grounds that it called for a display of fervor and enthusiasm. In fact, this bias became the basis for his critical evaluation of Milton. His only religious poem is "Upon the Feast of St. Simon and St. Jude," which he wrote when he was about seventeen years old. This is perhaps the most personal poem Johnson wrote in English and a representative stanza indicates the poem's highly emotional texture:

When Christ has conquered hell and fate
 And rais'd us from our wretched state,
 O prodigy of love!
 Ascending to the skies he shone
 Refulgent in his starry throne,
 Among the saints above.³¹

³¹ McAdam and Milne, p. 16.

The poem is permeated by the passion of the religious vision shown in this stanza. But the poem fails to hide the fact that it is a devotional gesture and, as such, it is artificial and perfunctory.

We know that Johnson expressed his inner feelings and private thoughts in his Latin verse. Indeed his last poem, written when he was virtually on his death bed, was in Latin. A passage (translated) from a Latin poem he composed when he had just finished revising the fourth edition of the Dictionary and was suffering from an acute emotional and physical exhaustion presents an intimate view of Johnson which may surprise the readers of his English verse:

The listless will succeeds, that worst disease,
 The rack of indolence, the sluggish ease.
 Care grows on care, and o'er my aching brain
 Black Melancholy pours her morbid train.
 No kind relief, no lenitive at hand,
 I seek at midnight clubs the social band;
 But midnight clubs, where wit with noise conspires,
 Where Comus revels, and where wine inspires,
 Delight no more; I seek my lonely bed,
 And call on Sleep to sooth my languid head.
 But Sleep from these sad lids flies far away;
 I mourn all night, and dread the coming day.³²

"Such a confession of his state of mind," writes E. L. McAdam, "such matter so intimately personal, Johnson could not have paraded before English readers."³³ If we look at any of Johnson's mature English poems--London, The Vanity of Human

³² Translated by Michael Murphy, quoted in E. L. McAdam, "Samuel Johnson's Poems," Review of English Studies, 19 (1943), 47.

³³ Ibid.

Wishes, "Verses to Sir John Lade," the prologues, the epilogues--we will find none in which the persona could be even remotely identified with the poet.

This anonymity of the poet, however, does not obliterate the evidence of emotion in the texture of The Vanity of Human Wishes. The reader soon senses the presence of a powerful undercurrent in the poem, although there is no turbulence on the deceptively calm and resigned surface of the poem. The Vanity of Human Wishes derives its subliminal passion from the recurrent examples of futility and despair. Such a passionate force is not promoted in the reader of Dryden's translation of the Tenth Satire. Dryden, in faithful imitation of his model, focuses sharply on the specific objects of the satire and, indeed, exaggerates with vivid instance the final indignity suffered even by the great. The fate of Sejanus might give rise to a chuckle:

Some ask for Envy'd Pow'r, which publick Hate
Pursues, and hurries headlong to their Fate:
Down go the Titles; and the Statue Crown'd,
Is by base Hands in the next River Drown'd.
The Guiltless Horses, and the Chariot Wheel
The same Effects of Vulgar Fury feel:
The Smith prepares his Hammer for the Stroke,
While the Lung'd Bellows hissing Fire provoke;
Sejanus almost first of Roman Names,
The great Sejanus crackles in the Flames:
Form'd in the Forge, the Pliant Brass is laid
On Anvils; and of Head and Limbs are made,
Pans, Cans, and Pispots, a whole Kitchin Trade.
Adorn your Doors with Laurels; and a Bull
Milk white and large, lead to the Capitol;
Sejanus with a Rope, is drag'd along;

The Sport and Laughter of the giddy Throng!
 Good Lord, they Cry, what Ethiop Lips he has,
 How foul a Snout, and what a hanging Face:
 By Heav'n I never cou'd endure his sight.
 (11. 85-105)

This treatment is sardonic, not passionate. The details are too visible and personalized to imply a generalized notion. The irony in the conversion of Sejanus's honorific statue to "Pans, Cans, and Pispots" is too biting to allow any sympathy for a man whose hopes have been dashed against an intractable fate. The passage is also an oblique gibe against the cruelty and inhumanity of the masses. Those who once cheered Sejanus when he appeared shoulder to shoulder with Tiberius in the streets of Rome are now a "giddy Throng" ridiculing his thick lips and unshapely nose. In this passage Dryden and Juvenal together point an accusatory finger at the nature of man, but in the following excerpt Johnson sheds a generalized tear for his misery:

In full blown dignity, see Wolsey stand,
 Law in his voice, and fortune in his hand;
 To him the church, the realm, their pow'rs consign,
 Thro' him the rays of regal bounty shine,
 Turn'd by his nod the stream of honour flows,
 His smile alone security bestows:
 Still to new heights his restless wishes tow'r,
 Claim leads to claim, and pow'r advances pow'r;
 Till conquest unresisted ceas'd to please,
 And rights submitted, left him none to seize.
 At length his sov'reign frowns--the train of state
 Mark the keen glance, and watch the sign to hate.
 Where-e'er he turns he meets a stranger's eye,
 His suppliants scorn him, and his followers fly;

At once is lost the pride of awful state,
 The golden canopy, the glitt'ring plate,
 The regal palace, the luxurious board,
 The liv'ried army, and the menial lord.
 With age, with cares, with maladies oppress'd,
 He seeks the refuge of monastic rest.
 Grief aids disease, remember'd folly stings,
 And his last sighs reproach the faith of kings.
 (ll. 99-120)

Here Wolsey, Sejanus's counterpart in Johnson's imitation, is not singled out to be maliciously derided and humiliated. Rather, he is presented as a prominent example of how fruitless are man's efforts and provisions against the whimsies of destiny. This is subtly emphasized by Johnson's cursory description of the turning point in Wolsey's career: "At length his Sovereign frowns." By so briefly epitomizing the historical circumstances and the chain of causes and effects that led to Wolsey's downfall, Johnson gives the event a fatal inevitability--an inevitability that suggests important historical truth. The signs of hate, scorning suppliants, and flying followers are presented not as an indictment against human depravity and faithlessness, but as the sadly predictable accompaniments of a fall from grace.

These instances of man's helplessness in the clutch of fate continue and reach a climax with the lengthy passage on Charles XII of Sweden, in whom Johnson had earlier expressed an interest as a possible subject for a tragedy. Here we may note that one of Johnson's triumphs in modernizing the

allusions in The Vanity of Human Wishes is the choice of such characters as Wolsey and Charles who did not go down in history as totally blameless personalities. Wolsey, for instance, was greedy and ruthless; Charles, ambitious and over-confident. Such faint suggestions of a flawed character has given each man the dimensions of a hero for a full-fledged tragedy. In the case of Charles, the elements of a tragic hero are strongly suggested in his description:

A frame of adamant, a soul of fire,
 No dangers fright him, and no labours tire;
 O'er love, o'er fear, extends his wide domain,
 Unconquer'd lord of pleasure and of pain;
 No joys to him pacific scepters yield,
 War sounds the trumpet, he rushes to the field.
 (11. 192-198)

Such a man with such noble attributes has a tragic flaw: ambition.

"Think nothing gain'd, he cries, till naught remain,
 "On Moscow's walls till Gothic standards fly,
 "And all be mine beneath the polar sky."
 (11. 202-204)

With remarkable concision the verse narrative follows the outline of Charles's military and political career. Consequently, by the time the reader reaches the end of the episode, he has developed an emotional tie with him and experiences something of a catharsis in the final lines:

His fall was destin'd to a barren strand,
 A petty fortress, and a dubious hand;
 He left the name, at which the world grew pale,
 To point a moral, or adorn a tale.
 (11. 219-222)

But unlike a tragic hero, Charles has not learned from his own fate and he dies still in pursuit of his ambition. The fact that he meets his end in some insignificant corner of Europe³⁴ by a "dubious hand" denies him the dignity of a heroic death. He is to be pitied, not emulated.

In contrast to Johnson's sympathetic portrayal of Charles XII, Juvenal's presentation of Hannibal is as of a burlesque character whose picture "scarcely wou'd deserve a Frame." To the satiric pen of Juvenal he is no more than an "Ambitious Fool" and a "one Ey'd Heroe on an Elephant." Here scorn is obviously the motive, and it should be; Juvenal is, after all, Juvenal.

As the poem continues, describing the sinking and falling of ambitions, "darling schemes," and desires, there emerges before our eyes a landscape remorselessly barren of all hope. The "suppliant" for a long life finds that "Life protracted, is protracted woe." Not even the "virtue of a temp'rate prime" can save the "dotard" from the "load of misfortune." Even Swift "expires a driv'ler and a show."³⁵

³⁴ McAdam and Milne, p. 102, explain that "Charles's aide-de-camp, in a delirium, said that he had shot Charles. Voltaire is supported by modern historians in saying that Charles was killed by a cannonball from the opposing forces."

³⁵ McAdam and Milne, p. 106, explain that "Swift was intermittently insane before his death in 1745. Servants are said to have shown him to tourists for a fee."

This long parade of misery and heartbreak is summed up in the grim forecast of what may befall beautiful women:

Against your fame with fondness hate combines,
 The rival batters, and the lover mines.
 With distant voice neglected virtue calls,
 Less heard and less, the faint remonstrance falls
 Tir'd with contempt, she quits the slipp'ry reign,
 And Pride and Prudence take her seat in vain.
 In croud at once, where none the pass defend,
 The harmless freedom, and the private Friend.
 The guardian yields, by force superior play'd;
 By Int'rest, Prudence; and by Flatt'ry, Pride.
 Now beauty falls betray'd, despis'd, distress'd,
 And hissing Infamy proclaims the rest.

(11. 331-342)

This in turn raises the ultimate and inevitable questions:

Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
 Must dull suspense corrupt the stagnant mind?
 Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
 Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?
 Must no dislike alarm, no wishes rise,
 No cries attempt the mercies of the skies?

(11. 343-348)

The solemn procession of personifications and abstract notions eliminates the hysterical shrillness in these lines. The tone maintains a certain dignity and philosophic calm without blunting our awareness of the existential despair which informs the passage. These lines and the ones that follow are the most emotionally charged in The Vanity of Human Wishes. The depth of feeling and force of conviction are evident in the fluidity and careful symmetry of the lines. Ian Jack notes that "just as Donne's images tend to become more and more daring as his inspiration catches fire, so the

better Johnson is writing the more prominent [his] abstract personifications become."³⁶ The following concluding lines which come in response to those ponderous questions, bear witness to Jack's assertion:

Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
 But leave to heav'n the measure and the choice,
 Safe in his pow'r, whose eyes discern afar
 The secret ambush of a specious pray'r.
 Implore his aid, in his decisions rest,
 Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.
 Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires,
 And strong devotion to the skies aspires,
 Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
 Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;
 For love, which scarce collective man can fill;
 For patience sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;
 For faith, that panting for a happier seat,
 Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat.
 (ll. 351-364)

Discussions of The Vanity of Human Wishes, mainly on its poetic merits and its significance in Johnson's body of thought, also include its function as a satirical "imitation." It is generally agreed that the poem follows the outline of the classic formal verse satire. It includes the element of attack and the eventual coda affirming virtue against vice. But the elevated tone and the metaphoric structure based on abstractions and personifications have rendered the poem too general in scope to serve a purely satirical purpose. Such a verdict on The Vanity of Human

³⁶ Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry, 1660-1750 (1945; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 140.

Wishes is of course just and incontrovertible. However, I may add that, like that of London, the satire in this poem is localized through condensation of meaning and economy of words. For instance, the passage that lambastes those who seek the gratification of political ambitions at any cost includes a masterful synecdoche, a concentrated variety of personification, to point up the grotesque element in the fate of such men when they are driven out of office:

From every room descends the painted face,
That hung the bright Palladium of the Place,
And smoaked in kitchens, or in auctions sold,
To better features yields the frame of gold;
(ll. 83-86)

Another example of satiric ridicule is in the description of the rich old man. These lines underline the sad comedy of an absurd obsession:

He turns, with anxious heart and crippled [sic] hands,
His bonds of debt, and mortgages of lands;
Or views his coffers with suspicious eyes,
Unlocks his gold, and counts it till he dies.
(ll. 287-290)

Such nuclei of satire are interspersed through the poem and provide occasional bright but short-lived moments of satiric glee.

As a whole, The Vanity of Human Wishes is a successful poem. It achieves what it sets out to do: to illustrate Johnson's profound religious faith and his conviction that human problems cannot be solved and that failure and defect

are inescapable afflictions of human nature. Yet man is not to be despised for being so afflicted, for there is dignity and courage in his determination to achieve salvation through faith in God. Whether or not we see eye to eye with Johnson on these issues, we are moved by its force, spontaneity, and poetic sincerity. Johnson himself is reported by Mrs. Thrale to have "burst into a passion of tears" when he read the poem many years after he had composed it.

Chapter VI

JOHNSON'S LESSER POEMS

Johnson's poetry is usually represented by London and The Vanity of Human Wishes, and they are the poems that readers know best. His other major poetic undertaking, Irene, receives some critical attention because it is Johnson's only drama and because it is in blank verse, a poetic mode to which Johnson (except for the translation of a brief passage in Metastasio's Adriano) never again turned his hand. The rest of Johnson's poetry is little read today; it is even less discussed. The reason, in addition to Johnson's unique position in an important era of eighteenth-century prose, might be that this poetry has a strong tinge of the occasional and diversionary.

Such a quality in some of Johnson's lesser poems suggests that Johnson was not wholly serious in their composition. In the examples discussed below this notion is reinforced by the obvious joviality and lightheartedness of the verse. However, an attempt will be made to show that Johnson's verse need not be serious to be worthy of note. The mark of Johnson the poet is as clear in these works as in his major poems. Besides, among Johnson's minor verse

there are lines that reverberate with seriousness of intent and profundity of thought and feeling which, together with Johnson's light, humorous verse, form an integral part of his overall poetic achievement.

One of Johnson's earliest known poems is an epilogue to the Distrest Mother, Ambrose Philips' adaptation of Andromaque. E. L. McAdams, Jr., and George Milne reproduce Boswell's note to Hector's transcript of the epilogue to the effect that "some young ladies at Lichfield having proposed to act the 'Distrest Mother,' Johnson wrote this, and gave it to Mr. Hector to convey it privately to them."¹ The subtitle of the epilogue, "intended to have been spoken by a Lady who was to impersonate the Ghost of Hermione," suggests that it was never used. But years later, when it was published in Gentleman's Magazine, it was so favorably received that Boswell could liken the Drury Lane Prologue in poetic brilliance to the "celebrated Epilogue to the Distrest Mother."² The poem, however, lacks originality and does not rise above contemporary occasional verse of its type. The opening lines are particularly unpromising:

¹ The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Poems, VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 37. All future references to the poems of Samuel Johnson will be from this edition and will be parenthetically indicated either by page or line number.

² Life, p. 131.

Ye blooming train who give despair or joy,
 Bless with a smile, or with a frown destroy,
 In whose fair cheeks destructive Cupids wait,
 And with unerring shafts distribute fate,
 Whose snowy breasts, whose animated eyes,
 Each youth admires, tho' each admirer dies,
 Whilst you deride their pangs in barb'rous play,
 Unpitying see them weep and hear them pray,
 And unrelenting sport ten thousand lives away;
 (p. 37, ll. 5-9)

There is a notable ruggedness in the lines and the music is tenuous. But soon, as if the poet has gained confidence, the lines improve and display a lyric smoothness which is commensurate with the pastoral theme of the poem:

For you, ye fair, I quit the gloomy plains,
 Where sable night in all her horror reigns;
 No fragrant bow'rs, no delightful glades,
 Receive th' unhappy ghosts of scornful maids.
 For kind, for tender nymphs the myrtle blooms,
 And weaves her bending boughs in pleasing glooms,
 Perennial roses deck each purple vale,
 And scents ambrosial breathe in every gale;
 (ll. 10-17)

In the following lines, Johnson as poet feels secure enough to introduce a faint note of bathos:

Far hence are banish'd vapours, spleen, and tears,
 Tea, scandal, ivory teeth, and languid airs;
 No pug nor favourite Cupid there enjoys
 The balmy kiss for which poor Thyrsis dies;
 Form'd to delight, they use no foreign arms,
 Nor tort'ring whalebones pinch them into charms;
 No conscious blushes there their cheeks inflame,
 For those who feel no guilt can know no shame;
 (ll. 18-25)

What is interesting about the closing lines is that they show Johnson's ease with the use of personified abstractions which was to become the hallmark of his mature poetry:

Vexation, Fury, Jealousy, Despair,
 Vex every eye, and every bosom tear;
 Their foul deformities by all descry'd,
 No maid to flatter and no paint to hide.
 Then melt, ye fair, while crouds around you
 sigh,
 Nor let disdain sit low'ring in your eye;
 With pity soften every awful grace,
 And beauty smile auspicious in each face;
 To ease their pains exert your milder power,
 So shall you guiltless reign, and all mankind
 adore.

(11. 38-47)

But on the whole, the attitude of the epilogue is somewhat ambiguous. The lighter mood suggested by the hyperbole in the opening lines is contradicted by the admonition in the succeeding passage and the ultimate dictum, "Then melt, ye fair, while crouds around you sigh. . . . So shall you guiltless reign, and all mankind adore," is too cursory to justify the vehemence of the middle part of the poem.

The occasions on which Johnson wrote most of his poetry were no more important or inspiring than the one that brought about the epilogue to the Distrest Mother. A few years later he wrote some complimentary lines to Miss Hackman, the daughter of Gregory Hackman who had tried to get him a job as usher at Stourbridge. The verse in this poem is of maturer quality. Johnson takes more liberties with the heroic couplet to create variety. For instance, the successive triplets in the first stanza heighten the musical effect:

Bright Stella, form'd for universal reign,
 Too well you know to keep the slaves you gain.
 When in your eyes resistless lightnings play,)
 Aw'd into love, our conquer'd hearts obey,)
 And yield, reluctant, to despotick sway.)
 But when your musick soothes the raging pain,)
 We bid propitious Heav'n prolong your reign,)
 We bless the tyrant, and we hug the chain.)
 (p. 39, ll. 1-8)

The borrowing from Dryden's Alexander's Feast in the second stanza is tastefully adapted to the purpose of the poem and it pokes gentle fun at the object of this friendly, mock panegyric:

When old Timotheus struck the vocal string,
 Ambitious fury fir'd the Grecian king:
 Unbounded projects lab'ring in his mind,
 He pants for room, on one poor world confin'd.
 Thus wak'd to rage by musick's dreadfull pow'r,
 He bids the sword destroy, the flame devour.
 Had Stella's gentle touches mov'd the lyre,
 Soon had the monarch felt a nobler fire,
 No more delighted with destructive war,
 Ambitious only now to please the fair,
 Resign'd his thirst of empire to her charms,
 And found a thousand worlds in Stella's arms.
 (ll. 9-20)

Throughout his life Johnson enjoyed writing such light extempore verse and he took every opportunity to indulge in it. As McAdam and Milne point out, Johnson "enjoyed shining in company, especially in the company of charming women. The stimulus he found in talk with beautiful and intelligent women is responsible for the production of a surprising amount of occasional and humorous verse."³ Even as late as

³ McAdam and Milne, p. xvi.

1777, when Mrs. Thrale announced her thirty-fifth birthday, Johnson composed the following lines impromptu, and she "wrote them down as he made them."⁴

Oft in danger yet alive
 We are come to thirtyfive
 Long may better years arrive,
 Better years than thirtyfive;
 Could philosophers contrive
 Life to stop at thirtyfive,
 Time his hours should never drive
 O'er the bounds of thirtyfive:
 High to soar and deep to dive
 Nature gives at thirtyfive;
 Ladies--stock and tend your hive,
 Trifle not at thirty five
 For howe'er we boast and strive,
 Life declines from thirtyfive;
 He that ever hopes to thrive
 Must begin by thirty five:
 And those who wisely wish to wive,
 Must look on Thrale at thirtyfive
 (p. 292)

Johnson even built a special feature into these lines. As he remarked to Mrs. Thrale, "you may see what it is to come for poetry to a Dictionary-maker; you may observe that the rhymes run in alphabetical order exactly."⁵

More or less in the same spirit that animates these lines, Johnson casually composed a set of verses on the occasion of the twenty-first birthday of Mrs. Thrale's prodigal nephew, Sir John Lade. These lines, commonly known as "A Short Song of Congratulation," are more biting than those addressed to Mrs. Thrale; and as such they come close

⁴ Ibid., quoting Mrs. Thrale, p. 292.

⁵ Ibid.

to being something of a personal satire. The playful rhythm and the jovial tone render the poem highly personal and diversionary:

Long-expected one and twenty
 Ling'ring year at last is flown
 Pomp and pleasure, pride and plenty
 Great Sir John, are all your own.

Loosen'd from the minor's tether,
 Free to mortgage or to sell,
 Wild as wind, and light as feather
 Bid the slaves of thrift farewell.

Call the Bettys, Kates, and Jennys
 Ev'ry name that laughs at care,
 Lavish of your grandsire's guineas,
 Show the spirit of an heir.

All that prey on vice and folly
 Joy to see their quarry fly,
 Here the gamester light and jolly
 There the lender grave and sly.

Wealth, Sir John, was made to wander,
 Let it wander as it will;
 See the jocky, see the pander,
 Bid them come, and take their fill.

When the bonny blade carouses,
 Pockets full, and spirits high,
 What are acres? What are houses?
 Only dirt, or wet or dry.

If the guardian or the mother
 Tell the woes of wilful waste,
 Scorn their counsel and their pother,
 You can hang or drown at last.

(pp. 307-308)

Despite the poem's apparent giddiness, there is an underlying grimness of thought in the persona's mock invitation to vice and folly. Johnson in these lines has clearly drawn on his first-hand experience from everyday life. The

string of temptations, enumerated in hard, concrete, realistic terminology--"Bettys, Kates, and Jennys," "lender, grave and sly," "gamester, light and jolly," "jockey," "pander,"-- suggest that the heir is foredoomed to ruination. His only hope, therefore, is existential abandon which is suggested by the rollicking rhythm of the poem.

Such light, informal versifying is of course not unusual among poets. Pope, for instance, is famous for the humorous verse he addressed to friends, and sometimes enemies, to express an opinion or sentiment. But Johnson sometimes wrote verses which were openly playful and seemed to have no particular purpose. For instance, here is a distich-like composition in French which he wrote while on an excursion in France with the Thrales in 1775:

A Calais
Trop de frais.

St. Omer
Tout est cher

Arras
Helas!

A Amiens
On n'a rien.

Au Mouton
Rien de Bon

(p. 286)

There is certainly no profound message in these lines, except perhaps in so far as they indicate Johnson's dislike

of the French. Yet the charm of their apparently intentional simplicity indicates that Johnson did not write them merely as an exercise in banality.

However, that simplicity which Johnson did consider banal was the sort affected by some mid-eighteenth-century poets in imitation of old ballads and for the purpose of giving an archaic air to their poetry. Notable among such poets was Thomas Percy, who in 1765 had published his Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. Johnson had amicable relationships with Percy and had even helped him in the preparation of the Reliques. But when in 1771 Percy produced The Hermit of Warkworth in imitation of the ancient ballads, Johnson disliked the feigned simplicity of the poem and reacted to it strongly. Johnson knew the difference between the simple and the primitive. Two years later, as Boswell reports, "the conversation having turned on modern imitations of ancient ballads, and someone having praised their simplicity, he treated them with that ridicule which he always displayed when this subject was mentioned."⁶ The parodies of Percy's Hermit came about, according to a report by Steevens, when Johnson was provoked, in Percy's presence at Miss Reynolds' tea-table, to prove that if the content were left out, there would be no difference between banality

⁶ Life, p. 510.

and the affected simplicity. He improvised the following stanza:

The tender infant meek and mild
 Fell down upon a stone;
 The nurse took up the squealing child
 But yet the child squeal'd on.⁷

He produced two more stanzas further to prove his point:

I put my hat upon my head
 And walk'd into the Strand,
 And there I met another man
 Who's hat was in his hand.

I therefore pray thee, Renny dear
 That thou wilt give to me
 With cream and sugar soften'd well,
 Another dish of tea.

"And thus," quote McAdam and Milne, "he proceeded through several more stanzas till the Reverend Critic cried out for quarter."⁸

Johnson also objected to a blind following of what he considered a new-fangled trend in contemporary poetry to unwarranted inversions and sublime phraseology to produce an impression of archaic elegance. Johnson found this diction ludicrous when it neither heightened the sense nor added to the smoothness of rhythm. He mocked Thomas Warton for affectations of this kind in his recently published poetry. Boswell's report of an occasion in September 1777 when Warton's poems were mentioned is illuminating:

⁷ McAdam and Milne, p. 269.

⁸ Ibid.

He observed, that a gentleman of eminence in literature had got into a bad style of poetry of late. "He puts (said he,) a very common thing in a strange dress till he does not know it himself, and thinks other people do not know it."

BOSWELL. "That is owing to his being so much versant in old English poetry." JOHNSON. "What is that to the purpose, Sir? If I say a man is drunk, and you tell me it is owing to his taking much drink, the matter is not mended. No, Sir, _____ has taken to an odd mode. For example, he'd write thus:

'Hermit hoar, in solemn cell,
Wearing out life's evening gray.'
Gray evening is common enough; but evening gray
he'd think fine.--Stay;--we'll make out the stanza:

'Hermit hoar, in solemn cell,
Wearing out life's evening gray;
Smite thy bosom, sage, and tell,
What is bliss? and which the way?'"

BOSWELL. "But why smite his bosom, Sir?"

JOHNSON. "Why, to shew he was in earnest," (smiling.)--He at an after period added the following stanza:

"Thus I spoke; and speaking sigh'd;
--Scarce repress'd the starting tear;--
When the smiling sage reply'd--
--Come, my lad, and drink some beer."⁹

Johnson was even more strongly offended by Robert Potter's translations of Euripides in which this practice was carried to an extreme. It is easy to see why Johnson's poetic sensibility should have been assailed by lines such as the following from Potter's translations of Euripides'

Electra:

He, when for Troy
He sailed, his son Orestes in his house
And young Electra's budding beauties left.
Orestes, by Ægisthus marked for death,

⁹ Life, p. 843.

The guardian of his father's youth by stealth
 To Strophius bore, that in the Phocian land
 He might protect him. In her father's house
 Remained Electra: her, when youth's warm bloom
 Glowed on her cheek, the high-born chiefs of
 Greece
 In marriage sought: through fear lest she should
 bear
 To any Argive sons that might revenge
 The death of Agamemnon, in the house
 Ægisthus held her, and repulsed the suit
 Of ev'ry wooer.¹⁰

Encouraged by Mrs. Thrale, Johnson wrote some stanzas burlesquing Potter's style, an exercise which he clearly relished as indicated by Susan Burney's account of a visit to Streatham in August 1779. McAdam and Milne quote:

"I followed my father into the library. . . . Dr. Johnson interrupted Mrs. Thrale by telling my father Mrs. Thrale had desired Mr. Potter to translate some verses for him, which (Dr. J.) had before undertaken to do. . . . Mrs. Thrale said she would go and fetch them. . . . The verses were then given to my father. After he had read the first stanza. 'Why, these are none of Potter's!' said he, 'these are worse than Potter. They beat him at his own weapons.' Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Thrale laugh'd very much and the verses proved to be the former's, and were composed in a comical humour."¹¹

¹⁰ Ernest Rhys, ed., The Plays of Euripides (1901; rpt. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936), I, 155-156.

¹¹ McAdam and Milne, pp. 303-304.

For the burlesque Johnson translated one of his own favorite passages from Euripides' Medea. As such, it suffers somewhat in effectiveness. Had he chosen inane material to go with the parodied style, the result would have been more pungent. Nevertheless, bearing the object of the parody in mind, we find the stanzas contagiously hilarious:

Err shall they not, who resolute explore
 Times gloomy backward with judicious eyes;
 And scanning right the practices of yore,
 Shall deem our hoar progenitors unwise.

They to the dome where smoke with curling play
 Announc'd the dinner to the regions round,
 Summon'd the singer blythe, and harper gay,
 And aided wine with dulcet-streaming sound.

The better use of notes, or sweet or shrill,
 By quiv'ring string, or modulated wind;
 Trumpet or lyre--to their harsh bosoms chill,
 Admission ne'er had sought, or could not find.

Oh! send them to the sullen mansions dun,
 Her baleful eyes where Sorrow rolls around;
 Where bloom-enamour'd Mischief dreads the sun,
 And Murder, all blood-bolter'd, schemes the wound.

When cates luxuriant pile the spacious dish,
 And purple nectar glads the festive hour,
 The guest, without a want, without a wish,
 Can yield no room to music's soothing pow'r.

(p. 304)

Johnson never took these parodies seriously. And perhaps for good reason, because their topicality and occasionality make them somewhat lost to us today. Yet, had it not been for the perspicaciousness of Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, Sir John Hawkins, and other devotees of Johnson,

posterity would have been altogether deprived of these examples of Johnson's wit and sensitivity to the ideal in good poetry.

Such effusions of poetic wit help us to an understanding of Johnson as they show him in the act of being a poet. In these parodies Johnson is not the shrewd, deliberate critic engaged in analytical evaluation, but a poet passing judgment on the performances and practices of his peers. These parodies are always free of personal satire and, although in some cases they caused embarrassment to the objects of their humor, Johnson never intended them as anything but friendly gibes from one professional to another.

Even some of the more serious and significant of Johnson's lesser poems were occasional, notably his prologues to various theatrical events, which were written at the behest of friends and associates. One such expression of friendship on the part of Johnson was a prologue he wrote for Garrick's Lethe, first produced at Drury Lane Theater in April 1740. The poem is short enough to be produced here in its entirety:

Prodigious madness of the writing race!
 Ardent of fame, yet fearless of disgrace.
 Without a boding fear, or anxious sigh,
 The bard obdurate sees his brother die.
 Deaf to the critick, sullen to the friend,
 Not one takes warning, by another's end.
 Oft has our bard in this disastrous year,
 Beheld the tragic heroes taught to fear.
 Oft has he seen the poignant orange fly,

And heard t' ill omen'd catcall's direful cry.
 Yet dares to venture on the dangerous stage,
 And weakly hopes to 'scape the critick's rage.
 This night he hopes to shew that farce may charm,
 Tho' no lewd hint the mantling virgin warm.
 That useful truth with humour may unite,
 That mirth may mend, and innocence delight.

(p. 67)

There is nothing exceptional in the content and the poetic quality of these lines. Yet it rises above mediocrity by its assertiveness and technical polish. Also the general satire of the prologue, intended as a gibe at the "writing race," is reinforced by a display in the last four lines of Johnson's perennial concern for moral observances upon the stage.

Another and better known prologue is that which Johnson furnished for the first performance at Drury Lane Theater in September 1747 under Garrick's management. The poem is thematically ambitious. Aware that he was writing for the opening of a theater rather than a play, Johnson allowed himself to be more general in considerations than was customary in conventional prologues. In addition to commenting with remarkable compression on the issues facing the English theater, he provided a bird's-eye-view survey of dramatic history from Shakespeare through Jonson and the Restoration Period to the contemporary eighteenth century. It even manages to cast a glance at the future of the theater in England:

But who the coming changes can presage,
 And mark the future periods of the stage?--
 Perhaps if skill could distant times explore,
 New Behns, new Durfeys, yet remain in store.
 (p. 89, ll. 39-42)

The prologue ends with an exhortation to the audience
 to "watch the wild vicissitudes of taste," and

to bid the reign commence
 Of rescu'd Nature, and reviving Sense;
 To chase the charms of sound, the pomp of show,
 For useful mirth, and salutary woe;
 Bid scenic virtue from the rising age,
 And Truth diffuse her radiance from the stage.
 (ll. 57-62)

As in his composition of The Vanity of Human Wishes,
 Johnson told Steevens, he composed many lines of this
 prologue "before I threw a single couplet on the paper.

. . . I did not afterwards change more than a word in it,
 and that was done at the remonstrance of Garrick. I did not
 think his criticism just, but it was necessary he should be
 satisfied with what he was to utter."¹²

The poem as a whole bears the mark of its hasty gesta-
 tion. The couplets display a certain ruggedness without
 being innovative and adventurous. There are, however, no
 instances of conspicuous weakness and on occasion we find
 flashes of Johnson's unique image-making, as in the opening
 lines:

¹² G. B. Hill, ed., Johnsonian Miscellanies (1897; rpt.
 New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), II, 313.

When Learning's triumph o'er her barb'rous foes
 First rear'd the stage, immortal SHAKESPEAR rose;
 Each change of many-colour'd life he drew,
 Exhausted worlds, and then imagin'd new:
 Existence saw him spurn her bounded reign,
 And panting Time toil'd after him in vain:
 His pow'rful strokes presiding truth impress'd,
 And unresisted passion storm'd the breast.
 (11. 1-8)

Some time later, when Johnson was jovially taken to task by Garrick on the poetic propriety of the line "And panting Time toil'd after him in vain," he "exclaimed (smiling) 'Prosaical rogues! next time I write, I'll make both time and space pant.'"¹³ This anecdote clearly indicates Johnson's recognition of an apt, yet startling, metaphor which, while it gives offense to the "prosaical" taste of Garrick and others in the company, provides the verse paragraph with its only moment of poetic brilliance.

The Drury-Lane prologue was written two years prior to the composition of The Vanity of Human Wishes. But in its personified abstractions it anticipates Johnson's rhetorical strategy in that memorable imitation. Such abstractions in the prologue occur when Johnson intends to express disapproval but to avoid the appearance of bias or conventional moralizing. The following lines, for instance, are a mild criticism of Jonson's drama:

¹³ Life, p. 1083.

Then JOHNSON came instructed from the school,
 To please in method, and invent by rule;
 His studious patience, and laborious art,
 By regular approach essay'd the heart;
 Cold approbation gave the ling'ring bays,
 For those who durst not censure, scarce could
 praise.

(11. 9-14)

In the ensuing lines Johnson is registering unequivocal protest against the lewdness of the Restoration stage where

Intrigue was plot, obscenity was wit,
 Vice always found a sympathetic friend;
 They pleas'd their age, and did not aim to
 mend.
 Yet bards like these aspir'd to lasting praise,
 And proudly hoped to pimp in future days.
 Their cause was gen'ral, their supports were
 strong,
 Their slaves were willing, and their reign was
 long;
 Till shame regain'd the post that sense betray'd,
 And Virtue call'd oblivion to her aid.

(11. 20-28)

Such use of personified abstractions raises the commentary of the prologue to a universal level and adds a note of sobriety to the poetry which might otherwise have been lighthearted and perhaps inconsequential.

These two prologues, as well as the one Johnson wrote for Oliver Goldsmith's The Good Natur'd Man, were gestures of friendship and camaraderie and not manifestoes of belief and philosophy. As we have seen, they are informed by an underlying joviality and as a rule they are lacking in total seriousness. Johnson of course was rarely at his poetic best when he wrote on these premises. But in 1750 Johnson

was to find a worthy cause for the writing of theatrical prologue. "Johnson's attention," write McAdam and Milne, "had been drawn to Mrs. Foster . . . Milton's only surviving grandchild [who] had been reduced, with her husband, to keeping 'a little chandler's or grocer's shop, for their subsistence. (Johnson's postscript to Lauder's Essay on Milton, 1750)." ¹⁴ Johnson prevailed upon Garrick to give a benefit performance of Comus with the proceeds going to Mrs. Foster. He also undertook to write a prologue for the performance. Here existed all the ingredients of an act of faith and charity to which Johnson could aspire. He was certainly moved by the destitute circumstances of Milton's grandchild and the letter he wrote to the General Advertiser for April 4, 1750, reflects the depth of his feelings:

Whosoever then would be capable of pleasure in reading the works of our incomparable Milton and not so destitute of gratitude as to refuse to lay out a trifle in a rational and elegant entertainment for the benefit of his living remains, for the exercise of their own virtue, the increase of their reputation, and the pleasing consciousness of doing good, should appear at Drury-Lane Theatre to-morrow, April 5, when Comus will be perform'd for the benefit of Mrs. Elizabeth Foster, grand-daughter to the author, and the only surviving branch of his family.

N.B. There will be a new Prologue on the occasion written by the author of Irene, and spoken by Mr. Garrick. . . . ¹⁵

¹⁴ McAdam and Milne, p. 239.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.

Johnson transferred the same sentiment and nobility of purpose to the lines of the prologue he wrote for the occasion. The poem is only thirty-eight lines long, but within its brief, compact scope it achieves its aim admirably.

The opening passage is an appeal to the audience and in its dignity and seriousness it is almost Miltonic:

Ye patriot crouds, who burn for England's fame,
 Ye nymphs, whose bosoms beat at MILTON'S name,
 Whose gen'rous zeal, unbought by flatt'ring rhimes,
 Shames the mean pensions of Augustan times;
 Immortal patrons of succeeding days,
 Attend this prelude of perpetual praise!
 Let Wit, condemn'd the feeble war to wage
 With close malevolence, or public rage;
 Let Study, worn with virtue's fruitless lore,
 Behind this theatre, and grieve no more.
 This night, distinguish'd by your smile, shall tell,
 That never BRITON can in vain excel;
 The slighted arts futurity shall trust,
 And rising ages hasten to be just.

(p. 240, ll. 1-14)

The balanced rigidity of the first two couplets sets not only the tone, but also the grave tempo of the rest of the passage. The restrained use of personification ("Let Wit, condemn'd the feeble war to wage") adds to the grandeur of the lines without removing them from the concrete particularities of "this theatre."

The grand eloquence of the opening lines continues to ring through the succeeding lines which first praise Milton's achievement in his "victorious lays" and then draw attention

to the unfortunate state of his grandchild. The contrast between the magnificence of Milton's image and the impoverished simplicity of his offspring is particularly moving:

At length our mighty bard's victorious lays
 Fill the loud voice of universal praise,
 And baffled spite, with hopeless anguish dumb,
 Yields to renown the centuries to come.
 With ardent haste, each candidate of fame
 Ambitious catches at his tow'ring name:
 He sees, and pitying sees, vain wealth bestow
 Those pageant honours which he scorn'd below:
 While crowds aloft the laureat bust behold,
 Or trace his form on circulating gold,
 Unknown, unheeded, long his offspring lay,
 And want hung threat'ning o'er her slow decay.
 What tho' she shine with no MILTONIAN fire,
 No fav'ring muse her morning dreams inspire;
 Yet softer claims the melting heart engage,
 Her youth laborious, and her blameless age:
 Hers the mild merits of domestic life,
 The patient suff'rer, and the faithful wife.
 (ll. 15-32)

The increased momentum achieved by the use of run-on lines in two successive couplets (lines 19-22) stresses the vehemence of the content. However, after the period in line 32, bringing the rhythm to a contrapuntal pause, the change of tone in the final segment provides a pleasing contrast:

Thus grac'd with humble virtue's native charms
 Her grandsire leaves her in Britannia's arms,
 Secure with peace, with competence, to dwell,
 While tutelary nations guard her cell.
 Yours is the charge, ye fair, ye wise, ye brave!
 'Tis yours to crown desert--beyond the grave!
 (ll. 33-38)

The use of long-drawn vowels ("Secure with peace, with competence to dwell") is soothing and conciliatory; it plays down the invective of the preceding lines and at the same time connects it to the curiously persuasive final couplet.

In addition to these, Johnson also attached a prologue to his own Irene and wrote a number of epilogues. These compositions conform closely to the conventions of this literary and theatrical genre and display the characteristic traits of Johnson's verse.

No treatment of Johnson's lesser poems could be complete without a reference to the lines he composed on the death of Dr. Robert Levet in 1782. Often referred to as an elegy, "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet" is in fact a commemorative poem written as a gesture of bereavement felt by Johnson at the death of a long-time friend and personal physician who actually lived in his household for a number of years. These lines may be considered Johnson's most spontaneous, direct, and undisguised expression of personal feeling. The first stanza opens with a ringing Johnsonian abstraction, but the succeeding lines remain in tune with the less generalized point of the poem:

Condemn'd to hope's delusive mine,
 As on we toil from day to day,
 By sudden blasts, or slow decline,
 Our social comforts drop away.
 (p. 314, ll. 1-4)

The suggestion of hopelessness, reminiscent of The Vanity of Human Wishes, is a fitting theme for the poem which deals with death. The succeeding stanzas, however, divert the reader's attention to the subject of the elegy. By means of a series of highly descriptive epithets he is given the warmth and palpability of a real person who "fills affection's eye." The short, carefully chosen list of a physician's daily activities in the following stanzas presents Levet not as an ethereal angelic form administering to human suffering, but a common man of uncommon compassion for man:

Well tried through many a varying year,
 See Levet to the grave descend;
 Officious, innocent, sincere,
 Of ev'ry friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills affection's eye,
 Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;
 Nor, letter'd arrogance, deny
 Thy praise to merit unrefin'd.

When fainting nature call'd for aid,
 And hov'ring death prepar'd the blow,
 His vig'rous remedy display'd
 The power of art without the show.

In misery's darkest caverns known,
 His useful care was ever nigh,
 Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
 And lonely want retir'd to die.

No summons mock'd by chill delay,
 No petty gain disdain'd by pride,
 The modest wants of ev'ry day
 The toil of ev'ry day supplied.

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
 Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
 And sure th' Eternal Master found
 The single talent well employ'd.
 (ll. 5-28)

The poem makes no attempt to raise Levet's story to the level of a philosophical statement. In fact the abstractions in the lines above ("misery's darkest caverns," "fainting nature") function as reflections of the poet's sympathy and admiration for the subject of the poem. Even the concluding stanzas, stark in their narration of Levet's last phase of life, do not hint at the universal connotations of Levet's death:

The busy day, the peaceful night,
 Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
 His frame was firm, his powers were bright,
 Tho' now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then with no throbbing fiery pain,
 No cold gradations of decay,
 Death broke at once the vital chain,
 And free'd his soul the nearest way.
 (ll. 29-36)

The reader, nevertheless, cannot help but hear the echo of a cry of despair beneath the restrained sentiment of this poem. This is the echo that always reverberated with varying pitch in Johnson's thought and philosophy and only ceased when he died less than two years after he composed the lines "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet."

In this poem, as in the other specimens of his verse presented and discussed in the preceding pages, Johnson

achieves and maintains a degree of excellence that can come only from a pen genuinely inspired by poetic imagination. These poems show that contrary to what the nineteenth-century critical tradition has led the reading public to believe, Johnson was not a counter of syllables and manipulator of measures. Beyond the symmetrical and precisely patterned facade of his verse there is that sublime, indescribable quality that separates poetry from the mere metrical language. At his poetic best, Johnson wrote with a power and conviction that inform the best examples of his work in other genres. But even in his less inspired moments he wrote with remarkable precision and felicity of expression and, as T. S. Eliot has so aptly put it, "it is that certainty, the ease with which he hits the bull's-eye every time, that makes Johnson a poet."¹⁶

¹⁶ Samuel Johnson, London: A Poem and The Vanity of Human Wishes, with introduction by T. S. Eliot (London: Etchels and Macdonald, 1930), p. 309.

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