

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

JOHNSON'S POETRY

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IN 1777 Johnson celebrated Mrs Thrale's thirty-fifth birthday with some slight verses in which each alternate line rhymed with her age, 'thirty-five', as 'alive', 'arrive', 'contrive', and so on. Having presented these verses to her, Johnson followed up with the observation: 'Now . . . 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.'<sup>1</sup> Yet on inspection we find that their exactness is violated by the precedence of 'drive' (l. 7) over 'dive' (l. 9). When in the act of composition the poet neglected the dictionary-maker, and the lexicographer-critic overlooked a detail in the process of composition.

Of course, it is not to be supposed that poetic composition and literary criticism are wholly identical activities, but there is some kind of overlapping, and it is not unreasonable to look for it in an author who practises both. Johnson, however, was a poet before he was a critic.

Much of his criticism is founded upon a particular view of the nature and function of language. This view was common enough throughout the Renaissance and later. It probably owed most to the Ciceronian defence of rhetoric from Socrates' attack upon it because of the tendency of rhetoric and language to stand too far away from real things. Cicero argued for the approximation of *verba* to *res*, and the avoidance of such rhetorical extravagances as might tend to separate them.<sup>2</sup>

Bacon took up the Platonic suspicion of language and regarded it as a barrier to truth and an impediment to philosophical

<sup>1</sup> *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, ed. D. Nichol Smith and E. L. McAdam, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1974), pp. 205-6.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, III. xvi. 60. Socrates' attack is in *Phaedrus* 259e to the end, and *Georgias* 458e ff. Cicero's advice is *De Oratore*, III. v. 19: 'Nam cum omnis ex re atque verbis constet oratio, neque verba sedem habere possunt si rem subtraxeris neque res lumen si verba semoveris.'

enquiry, and Locke accepted much the same position.<sup>1</sup> Locke was a powerful influence upon Johnson who echoed the assumed primacy of *res* over *verba* in the 'Preface' to his *Dictionary*, 1755: 'I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that *words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.*'<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps impelled by Cicero's defence the English Augustans regarded the closing of the gap between words and things as meritorious: their impulse to write was an impulse to work an effect, to refer to and describe the real world, and to bring real things to the attention of their readers. This directness of reference further implied that their writings could have an impact upon the real world, whether to reform it or to vex it. From this arose their uneasy and ambivalent attitudes towards fiction.

Johnson's comment on Jerome Lobo's *History of Abyssinia* (1735) is his first critical remark on this point: 'The *Portuguese* traveller, contrary to the general Vein of his Countrymen, has amused his Reader with no Romantick Absurdities or Incredible Fictions . . . He appears . . . to have described Things as he saw them, to have copied Nature from the Life, and to have consulted his Senses, not his Imagination.'<sup>3</sup> Yet this very book brought Johnson face to face with the problems implicit in the Lockean thesis that the word is the reflection of an anterior idea, for Johnson's version of Lobo is a translation (avowedly free) of a French translation by Joachim LeGrand (1728) of Lobo's original account in Portuguese, published in 1659. If Locke's thesis is tenable, what is the original idea? Johnson implies that Lobo's observations are the true originals: 'he appears to have described Things as he saw them' so that the 'Things' represent the Lockean *idea* which is then reported in Portuguese words and reported closely. But LeGrand's translation intrudes a further stage of linguistic representation, and so of distance, into the process, and then Johnson's own

<sup>1</sup> Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, I. iv. 2 'men began to hunt more after words than matter . . .', and iv. *passim*; *Novum Organum*, I. xiv, 'verba notionum tesseractae sunt', and I. lix, on the Idols of the Market-place which he distinguished as '*Idola quae per verba intellectui imponuntur . . . aut enim sunt rerum nomina, quae non sunt . . . aut sunt nomina rerum, quae sunt . . .*' (I. lx); Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, iii, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), I. sig. A1<sup>v</sup>. All later references are to this edition save where noted. The 'quotation' is from Samuel Madden's *Boulter's Monument* (1745), line 377: '*Words are Mens Daughters, but GOD's Sons are Things*', where a footnote refers to 'A Famous Axiom of the Great *Hippocrates*'.

<sup>3</sup> *A Voyage to Abyssinia. By Father Jerome Lobo, a Portuguese Jesuit . . . By Mr. LeGrand. From the French* (London, 1735), pp. vii-viii.

version is yet another step away. His apology hardly addresses itself to the implications of this distance: 'In this Translation (if it may be so call'd) great Liberties have been taken, which, whether justifiable or not, shall be fairly confess'd, and let the Judicious part of Mankind pardon or condemn them.'<sup>1</sup> It is not wholly fanciful to suspect the writer of that sentence of some sensation of insecurity which cannot be wholly attributed to the indolent manner in which he performed the work.<sup>2</sup>

The Lockean theory has two main difficulties. It affords little guidance towards the reliable identification of the idea behind the words, and it confronts the problem of the space between words and things merely by following Cicero in advocating constant efforts to narrow the gap. The idea is uncertain because delusive words are the only indications of its nature, and however hard one tries the gap between them can never be closed. This sort of theory puts the adversarial literary critic into a powerful position, for no writer can ever succeed in his supposed purpose of representing reality by means of language, and if a writer repudiates such a purpose he can be treated simply as the purveyor of fanciful and fictitious amusements without any serious purpose.

This same theory also disallows originality since, as Bacon had observed, the existing terms which constitute language exercise a restriction upon all those thoughts which seek expression. One of Johnson's favourite authors, Robert Burton, wrote in his evasive discussion of originality: 'I must usurp that of *Wecker é Ter. nihil dictum quod non dictum prius, methodus sola artificem ostendit*, we can say nothing but what hath been said, the composition and method is ours only, and shews a Scholar'<sup>3</sup> and without originality and invention poetry descended into an elaborate kind of decoration, useful as a sweetener of the pill of instruction, but not readily related to things or even to the essential and original ideas of those things which Locke required.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934-64), i. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 8th edn. (London, 1676), p. 5, col. b. I cite this edition because Johnson owned a copy of it, now in the Bodleian. A copy of the 6th edn., 1652, bearing a suspicious flyleaf inscribed 'Samuel Johnson ejus liber', has not been available for inspection since the Huth sale at Sotheby's, 20 Nov. 1911, lot 1137.

In his *Dictionary* Johnson does not allow much scope to poetry:

- Poetry. 1. Metrical composition; the art or practice of writing poems.  
 2. Poems; poetical pieces.
- Poem. The work of a poet; a metrical composition.
- Poet. An inventor; the author of fiction; a writer of poems; one who writes in measure.

'Fiction' is almost pejorative: 'The art of feigning or invention', and an 'Inventor' is defined as 'One who produces something new; a deviser of something not known before', and 'A forger'. Invention or originality were therefore rare, and there are few authors apart from Shakespeare and Homer to whom Johnson allowed them.<sup>1</sup>

These are the attitudes which underlie Johnson's criticism: they are not consistently applied for he was a subtle reader and a delicate critic, but the main posture is clear, in that he regarded literature as a manifestation through which the reader must pass in order to encounter the original truth or idea which lay behind it.

It is interesting, if unsurprising, to find that Johnson the poet does not work like that at all. He was perhaps persuaded that he did, for he never questioned his own practice in the light of his own critical theory. Indeed, his account of the composition of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) suggests that he assumed the primacy of the inspirational idea, followed by the act of writing: 'I wrote the first seventy lines . . . in the course of one morning, in that small house beyond the church at Hampstead . . .',<sup>2</sup> and he added: 'I have generally had them in my mind, perhaps fifty at a time, walking up and down in my room; and then I have written them down, and often, from laziness, have written only half lines. I remember I wrote a hundred lines of the *Vanity of Human Wishes* in a day.'<sup>3</sup> These comments certainly imply the precedence of the idea over the language and conform to the Lockean model, but the surviving material shows that so simple an account is hardly consistent with the evidence. The act of writing down the first halves of the lines is exhibited in the manuscript, and it may be accepted that in writing them down Johnson was evacuating his recent memory. Yet even as he noted down these quasi-mnemonic

<sup>1</sup> *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. A. Sherbo (Yale edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson), vii (New Haven, 1968), 63, 88, and 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* A facsimile of the holograph manuscript of this poem was published by Mrs Mary Hyde and the late Donald F. Hyde in New York, 21 Sept. 1962.

records of that memory, his hand paused from time to time in order to modify the record or to modify the memory.

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;<sup>1</sup>

The manuscript shows that the third line was first written as the half line:

Explore each restless . . .

but even as he wrote down 'restless', he rejected it, and crossing it through, wrote 'eager' above it. The line stood thus until with a recut pen he returned to complete it. Rereading from the beginning he met the words: 'Explore each ~~restless~~ eager' and he completed the line by crossing through 'eager' and writing:

anxious toil each eager Strife

Now the 'eager' at the end of the first half-line just may have been the mnemonic to lead him to the close of the line, but evidently that word could not be repeated in two phrases in the same line, 'eager toil' and 'eager Strife'. One had to go, and the one removed was the first one. This suggests that the second phrase 'eager Strife' was already present to his memory in order to challenge the word 'eager' which met his eye on the page. He therefore deleted the existing written word and substituted 'anxious' and produced the line

Explore each anxious toil each eager Strife.

Yet it is not evident that this revision or development of the line is the effect of an anterior *idea*. It is rather (subject to the constraints of 'metrical composition') a simple verbal adjustment, in that the language is not so much subordinate to the idea, as that the language itself provides the dynamic of the composition of the line and engenders whatever ideas the line can express. If we consider the sequence of the adjectives applied to 'toil' as it runs from 'restless' to 'eager' to 'anxious' it is worth bearing in mind Johnson's *Dictionary* definitions of those words:

- Restless: 1. Being without sleep  
2. Unquiet; without peace  
3. Unconstant; unsettled  
4. Not still; in continual motion

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, p. 115.

- Eager: 1. Struck with desire; ardently wishing; keenly desirous; vehement in desire; hotly longing  
 2. . . . used with *of*  
 3. Hot of disposition; vehement; ardent; impetuous  
 4. Quick; busy; easily put in action  
 5. Sharp; sower [i.e. sour]; acid  
 6. Keen, severe; biting  
 7. Brittle; inflexible; not ductile; A cant word of artificers
- Anxious: 1. Disturbed about some uncertain event; solicitous  
 2. Careful; full of inquietude; unquiet  
 3. Careful, as of a thing of great importance  
 4. . . . generally with *for*

So although the movement of this change is from a somewhat imprecise epithet 'restless' to the more restrictive 'anxious', the shift is also from a primarily physical condition 'Being without sleep', etc., to a more temperamental state of mind: 'disturbed about some uncertain event'.

There is thus at one level a sharpening of the language: 'anxious toil' expresses the state of hard labour of uncertain purpose, but this is gained, somewhat paradoxically, by the rejection of the word 'restless' which has clear physical applications. The move is from the physical to the mental, or perhaps rather to the metaphysical, since 'anxiety' is not only a state of uncertainty but also an uncertain state. A move in this direction from a material reference to the insubstantial condition of psychology is acceptable to the reader because the evolving tenor of this whole poem is also from the physical world of 'China to Peru' into an interior religious psychology.

A further look at this same line shows that the manuscript was revised again before it appeared in print. The eventual manuscript version:

Explore each anxious toil each eager Strife

was printed as:

Remark each anxious Toil each eager Strife

and again it is observable that the change from 'Explore' to 'Remark' is from an active verb with vigorous implications:

Explore: To try; to search into; to examine by trial

which is reinforced by citations from Robert Boyle (an experimental philosopher), to 'Remark' which is less vigorous and which

applies to an activity which implicates an agent or remarker in its own function:

- Remark: 1. To note; to observe  
2. To distinguish; to point out; to mark

with citations from Locke and Milton.

I have deliberately avoided the consideration of passages which might be thought to have greater literary significance in this important poem because I want to show Johnson using his language in contexts which do not involve us in too many value-judgements. It is striking that where the evidence survives, his poetic compositions exhibit this tendency to shift his language away from physical imagery towards a more metaphysical application.

In one of his earliest compositions, a schoolboy translation of Horace's *Epode* 2,<sup>1</sup> the manuscript exhibits minor revisions in the course of composition. In line 11 'Northern tempests' is changed to 'boist'rous tempests'. The tempests themselves are merely Horatian fictions which are negated in order to emphasize the undisturbed mind of the happy man

Neque horret iratum mare

But they are not *real* tempests in Horace, and they are no more real or realized in Johnson, since neither of the adjectives he uses, whether 'Northern' or 'boist'rous' gives them any exactitude. Johnson's composition, even at the age of seventeen or so, is governed by the question of verbal appropriateness or manageableness, rather than by any quality of the wind whether it be Boreal or turbulent, which might be thought to have disturbed the metaphorical Horatian sea. Johnson's language has no reference at all to what the wind was like, not least because there was no wind in Horace, though one is implied by the 'iratum mare'.

In his last piece of English verse, a rendering of Horace's *Diffugere nives* (*Od.* iv. 7)<sup>2</sup> he altered his second line

The snow dissolv'd no more is seen,  
The fields, and woods, again, are green,

by changing 'again' to 'behold', so replacing an emphasis upon the return of spring by an invitation to the reader to attend to the phenomenon. Yet the phenomenon is but a line of Horace, not the

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, pp. 13-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, pp. 264-5.

return of spring itself, and if we examine that line we find little justification at all for either 'again' or 'behold':

Diffugere nives, redeunt iam gramina campi  
Arboribusque comae

The choice of words over which Johnson hesitated is hardly dictated by Horace's words at all, for Horace treats the phenomena of spring quite neutrally: Johnson's words, however, call attention to them. The exigencies of 'metrical composition' hardly explain the alternation since both are adequate disyllables. We may prefer 'again' on the grounds that it does in some way render the *re* of 'redeunt', or if we read the line in the knowledge that this manuscript is dated 'Nov. 1784', and that Johnson himself was never again to see another spring (his first extant poem celebrates the daffodil).<sup>1</sup> It might be possible to go further and see in the rejection of 'again' a repudiation of that personal significance which he might have dreaded, as both un-Horatian and personally disturbing; but in that sort of reading we skate on thin ice by intruding our extraneous knowledge upon Johnson's words. On the other hand, his substitute 'behold' is both a conventional address to the reader, and unmoving. Though we are addressed we are no more significantly addressed than we are by every poem which is in some sense an apostrophe. 'Behold' does not develop any engagement between poem and reader, and so it seems to me that this variation from 'again' to 'behold' is quite indifferent with regard to what might be described as the meaning of the poem.

That 'again' occurs a few lines later as a rhyme word:

The changing year renews the plain  
The rivers know their banks again (ll. 3-4)

may have influenced the change, but these two lines are not constrained by the Horatian model

Mutat terra vices et decrescentia ripas  
Flumina praetereunt

for Johnson's 'plain' which engenders the troublesome rhyme 'again' is not particularly close to Horace's *terra*, nor is there any particular emphasis in Horace on the *return* of the rivers to their courses. His point is that they have subsided: 'decrescentia Flumina'. Johnson's emphasis has shifted by his rendering of 'ripas praetereunt' as 'know their banks', and since they only know them by sinking to a level at which the banks are discernible, he is obliged to use 'again'.

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, pp. 1-4.



This verbal, or perhaps syntactic, pressure is the real reason why the earlier incidence of 'again' was deleted and replaced by 'behold' in an almost mechanical move to produce a conventional formula. No Lockean idea preceded such a revision. The ideas associated with it are posterior, they are themselves the products, not the provokers, of the words.

The training of schoolboys in the writing of Latin verses was doubtless an influence upon the verbal construction of poetical language. A limited range of suitable models (Virgil, Ovid, or Horace) supplied the practitioner with all the metrical rules and a stock of approved phrases. All he had to do was to manipulate them with ingenuity, but without undue repetition. The use of one phrase precluded the use of its original partner, and the range of choice was narrowed by precedent and restricted as the composition grew. The guiding principle of such compositions remained verbal rather than ideal.<sup>1</sup>

If then Johnson's poetical practice is not governed by his theory of language, it is reasonable to look for other principles. His own definitions stress the metrical nature of poetry, and it is easy to point to his ready acquiescence in metrical regularity, but that is no adequate explanation of his greatest poems. A recurrent factor in his observations on linguistic use is his strong sense of verbal propriety. This he called 'elegance' which he defined as 'Beauty of art; rather soothing than striking; beauty without grandeur', and of which the opposite or absence was 'harshness'.<sup>2</sup> Behind Johnson's 'elegance' was a Latinate sense of 'fastidious' or 'nice' and the notion of *choice*, deriving from *elegare* or *eligere*. This kind of active selectivity which lurked behind 'elegance' included etymological fidelity, and many of his severest strictures are aimed at breaches of this criterion. Gray, a scholar, was especially castigated for such linguistic departures. Johnson observed of the Eton Ode, 'His epithet "buxom health" is not elegant; he seems not to understand the word.'<sup>3</sup> Towards Shakespeare he was kinder. Of Orlando's

the thorny point  
Of bare distress hath ta'en from me the shew  
Of smooth civility

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, p. 42 n. describes an instance.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Ingham, 'Dr. Johnson's Elegance', *Review of English Studies*, 19 (1968), 271-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols. iii (Oxford, 1905), 435. The first definition of 'buxom' in the *Dictionary* is 'Obedient; obsequious'; cf. also Johnson's *A Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747), para. 58.

he remarked: 'We might read *torn* with more elegance, but elegance alone will not justify alteration.'<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in wrestling with one of Shakespeare's 'harsh metaphors' Johnson endeavours an explanation which brings the language into line with his own sense of linguistic propriety: Iago's 'stuff o' the conscience' (1. ii. 2) is noted: 'This expression to common readers appears harsh. *Stuff* of the *conscience* is, *substance*, or *essence*, of the conscience. *Stuff* is a word of great force in the *Teutonick* languages. The elements are called in *Dutch*, *hoefd stoffen*, or *head stuffs*,'<sup>2</sup> which shows Johnson disliking the grossly physical emphasis of Iago's words (which produced the discordant ideas and so the 'harshness') in order to concentrate upon the metaphysical 'essence'.

In reacting to metaphor Johnson accepted the common contemporary extension of the Lockean view of words as the representatives of ideas, and considered the combination of a metaphor as the giving of double value: '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',<sup>3</sup> but the two ideas had to be consonant in some acceptable way, and in general it seems that Johnson had to be able to visualize them. Of Wolsey's phrase 'a tomb of orphans' tears', he wrote: 'A *tomb of tears* is very harsh.'<sup>4</sup> This sort of view explains a certain insistent literalness: of Gray's 'Ode on a Favourite Cat' he asserted, 'In the first stanza "the azure flowers that blow" show [how] resolutely a rhyme is sometimes made, when it cannot easily be found'<sup>5</sup> because flowers painted on a vase cannot be considered to blow or bloom.

Literalness is inimical to much poetry, and Johnson is rarely so in his own verses. I have found only one instance in which his words can be directly related to phenomena which were physically before him and to which his words refer. In his Alcaic ode on Skye, 'Skia',<sup>6</sup> the description of his arrival at Armidale is directly linked with what he saw:

Ponti profundis clausa recessibus,  
Strepens procellis, rupibus obsita,  
Quam grata defesso virentem  
Skia sinum nebulosa pandis.

<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It*, II. vii. 94; *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vii. 294-50.

<sup>2</sup> *Othello*, I. ii. 2; *Johnson on Shakespeare*, viii. 1014.

<sup>3</sup> *Life*, iii. 173-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Henry VIII*, III. ii. 399; *Johnson on Shakespeare*, viii. 652.

<sup>5</sup> *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 434, 'Gray', para. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Poems*, pp. 192-3.

Boswell recorded the alternatives to *rupibus obsita* as 'imbribus uvida' then 'uvida nubibus', before the final reading, 'rupibus obsita'. This is a progression from 'wet with showers' to 'wet with clouds' to 'beset by rocks'. Although the rain had ceased by the time he stepped ashore at 1.0 p.m. on Thursday, 2 September 1773, 'imbribus uvida' must have been an appropriate phrase for his first sight of Armidale, and it would certainly have fitted the Friday when it rained all day. On the Sunday, however, it was, according to Boswell, 'a beautiful day' when the clouds had lifted and the low tide would reveal the skerries off the shore, so drawing Johnson's attention to the *rupes obsitens*. And it was on the Sunday that he composed or wrote out these verses. This sequence, then, shows a sharpening of the sense of things seen, from the pervasive rain showers to the lowering clouds, and lastly to the encircling rocks.

That literalness can operate with great force is exemplified in the lines 'On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet'.<sup>1</sup> The physical application of words like 'mine', or 'blasts', 'decline', and 'comfort', is moderated by their epithets: 'delusive mine', 'sudden blasts', 'slow decline', and 'social comforts'. This kind of imagery is plain, the circumstances are visualized, indeed, almost felt, and the images themselves are elemental, recalling the starkness of half-remembered allusions, whether to Plutarch's story of the sufferings of the captives in the Syracusan mines or to Homer's generations of men who resemble the falling leaves of autumn:<sup>2</sup>

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.

Unhappily no manuscript of this piece is known, and the various transcripts differ only in minor misreadings or misspellings. The genesis of the text can only be traced in an instance reported by Boswell from a recitation by Johnson, that the original version of line 20 was:

And Labour steals an hour to die.<sup>3</sup>

This is the last line of the stanza which reads:

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.

<sup>1</sup> *Poems*, pp. 232-5.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, 'Nicias', xxix; *Iliad*, vi. 146.

<sup>3</sup> *Life*, iv. 137-9, and 138 n. 3.

The personification of 'Labour' for the labouring poor was too precise a limitation upon the sufferer, whereas the substituted 'lonely want' was more generalized, and it provided in the adjective and noun a double image. 'Retir'd' is a tenderer word in the *Dictionary* sense of 'going into a place of privacy', than 'steals' which was too closely linked to the labourer's predicament in finding only with difficulty sufficient remission from his labour in order to die.

In the next stanza:

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

Boswell's 'His single talent' is too restrictive of the talent to Levett alone, whereas the definite article universalizes the allusion by linking it directly to the parable and the fate of the unprofitable servant.

This movement in Johnson's poetry and in his composition of it from the particular and visualized to the metaphysical and generalized, is the effect of his creative responses to the act of writing itself. As T. S. Eliot, also both poet and critic, remarked:

And what is the experience that the poet is so bursting to communicate? By the time it has settled down into a poem it may be so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognizable. The 'experience' in question may be the result of a fusion of feelings so obscure in their origins, that even if there be communication of them, the poet may hardly be aware of what he is communicating; and what is there to be communicated was not in existence before the poem was completed.<sup>1</sup>

It is this feature of Johnson's poetry which projects its interest beyond the words which make it. It is projected into a dimension which is not backward from or anterior to those words, but which looks forward to something which is yet to arise from the words. The interest of his words is not so much in where they start but in where they lead. 'Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings', he said on Iona.<sup>2</sup> Instinctively that was the mode

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The Modern Mind', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. M. M. Lascelles (Yale, *Works*, 1971, ix), p. 148.



but Aspirations were abandoned temporarily and the line re-written as:

Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires  
When strong Devotion fills thy glowing breast

which is not a rhyme. But Johnson let it stand for the time being since he was then busy with the completion of the whole series of half lines, a process which perhaps generated its own momentum leading him to anticipate the completion of another line a line early. In the following line the fervours were to be poured forth for a 'Soul re . . .' (presumably 'resigned') which is the rhyme word for the next line in that couplet:

Pour  
Breat[he] forth thy fervours for a Soul-re healthful mind  
Obedient Passions, and a will resigned.

Then comes the series: 'For Love', 'For Patience', 'For Hope', and the half lines:

For Love whose grasp Creation  
For Patience Sov'reign  
For Hope that panting  
Thinks Death kind

which are completed as:

For Love ~~whose grasp Creation~~ which scarce collective Man  
can fill,  
For Patience Sov'reign o'er transmuted ill,  
For Hope that panting for a happier seat  
Thinks Death kind Nature's signal of Retreat.

The problem of the line:

For Love which scarce collective Man can fill

is not so much the identity of the subject of the verb *to fill* (Johnson could never have implied that Divine Love had limitations on its ability to fill anything), but in what sense Mankind can be thought of as 'filling' up the 'Love' for which he prays.

The first sense of 'To Fill' in the *Dictionary* is, 'To store 'till no more can be admitted', and he went on to quote an intriguing sentence from George Cheyne's *Philosophical Principles of Religion*.<sup>1</sup> 'Nothing but the supreme and absolute Infinite can adequately *fill* and super-abundantly satisfy the infinite desires of intelligent

<sup>1</sup> George Cheyne (1671-1743), *The Philosophical Principles of Religion* (pt. 1, 1705; 2 pts., 1715).

beings.' Although 'Fill' does not occur in that part of the *Dictionary* which was printed off by Christmas 1750, it is likely that for any part of such a work to be printed, the task of sorting and arranging the citations must have been largely completed, and that the reading for those citations was also finished.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore very probable that Johnson had read Cheyne's book before composing *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, and that he had read it attentively. This sentence could well underlie his sense of 'fill' in 'which scarce collective Man can fill', allowing him to use it of the impossibility of Mankind filling up, or matching, what the Infinite Divine could easily perform.

If this reading is plausible, then again, despite the apparent debt of Johnson's line to an anterior idea, there is also a case for reading it as an associative reflection of some such verbal formulation as Cheyne's sentence, a sentence which partakes more of theological rhetoric than of strictly philosophical meaning.

As *The Vanity of Human Wishes* moves from this world of 'China to Peru' into a prayer for Hope for Happiness beyond this world, so did Johnson's poetical career evolve in a similar direction from his first schoolboy verses in praise of the daffodil, to his last verses composed just eight days before he died. These are a Latin paraphrase of the Collect from the Communion Service: 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open . . .', in which the power of the *word* is further invoked: 'that we may . . . worthily magnify thy holy Name . . .'

Eloquiumque potens linguis torpentibus offer  
Ut tibi laus omni semper ab ore sonet.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Thomas Birch to Lord Hardwicke, 6 Aug. 1748: 'Johnson has four Amanuenses . . . their Business will soon be over; for they have almost transcrib'd the Authorities' (BL Add. MS 35397, f. 140; cf. also J. L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson* (New York, 1979), pp. 54 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> *Poems*, p. 266.