

“This mournful truth is everywhere confest

SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPREST”

A brief comment on Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Satirical Mode in ‘London’.

Dr. Samuel Johnson’s ‘London’ was published in 1738 anonymously as an *imitation* of Juvenal’s ‘Third Satire’. Imitation was a poetic form that was practiced by poets in the latter half of the 17th Century like Dryden, with works like ‘*Preface to Ovid’s Epistles*’ (1680). The form underwent extensive development during the Restoration Period with notable practitioners like Abraham Cowley, John Oldham (Who also has a version of Juvenal’s Third) and The Earl of Rochester. By the 1730s, Imitation was a popular contemporary poetic form with Alexander Pope’s ‘*Imitations of Horace*’ gaining immense popularity. Critics like T.F. Wharton have viewed Johnson’s employment of the form as a bid for recognition and commercial success, while others have viewed it as a political statement in support of Pope’s Tory and Pro-Jacobite convictions.

Dryden had described the imitation as a kind of translation, "where the translator assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases." Johnson defines imitation in the ‘*Life of Pope*’ as "a kind of middle composition between translation and original design, which pleases when the thoughts are unexpectedly applicable and the parallels lucky." A typical deficiency of this form was that it relied heavily on the Classical Literacy of its readers, a deficiency that was recognised by Johnson himself. However, his reworking of Juvenal’s original operates as a broader Social and Political indictment of the political setting and social backdrop of England. His project seemed to have struck a chord with the burgeoning population of readers as ‘London’ was printed in numerous subsequent editions across a variety of journals and magazines. This can be owed to the extremely political and topical nature of ‘London’ as it was rife with allusions to matters like the Licensing Act of 1737 and The Excise Bill of 1733. Johnson’s use of the imitation form as a method of satirising was brilliant as it was able to accommodate topicality with the general tone of the Augustan age. Harriet Raghunathan observes that the classical atmosphere affords a kind of Augustan respectability to the poem which endowed it with weight and universality which made it general rather than merely topical.

Johnson’s ‘London’ was unique in its engagement with both the social and political issues that throttled Britain. Britain, at the time was functioning under the principles of Mercantilism which bestowed regulatory authority unto a government for the purpose of augmenting national prosperity. Mercantilism emerged as a manifestation of Capitalism that had evolved from earlier practices of Proto-Capitalism which were prevalent in the preceding centuries such as Agrarian Capitalism. It was because of a Mercantilist attitude of accumulation that Britain had expanded its influence in the Colonial Marketplace. England under the Ministerial umbrage of Sir Robert Walpole had ascended to the state of a Mercantilist nation. By the 1730s, Britain had emerged as a major colonial power contending with the likes of France and Spain for profit. The commercial ethic that had propelled Britain to this stature had wide ranging social and political ramifications. It was these outcomes that were satirised by Johnson in his work. The ethic of commercial success that propelled the Walpole administration to maintain the Peace treaty with Spain (After the Spanish Wars of Succession), to the disgust of The Opposition (Which had the Tories and a faction of Opposition Whigs) who conglomerated under the broad umbrella of “Patriotism”. The members of this group,

also broadly known as the Country Party (as opposed to the Court Party) were in support of waging war against Spain as a response to the damage incurred by English ships around the Caribbean. David Nichols Smith alerts us to Johnson's hypocrisy towards the issue of Piracy, Johnson is riled up due to the losses incurred by the British but he remains unperturbed by the perpetuation and condoning of Piracy by the British. Maintaining a peaceful relationship with Spain was viewed as an act of acquiescence by these Patriots. Johnson identified himself as a part of this group at the time and his sentiment echoes in the following Lines from 'London'

*"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 the Dread of Spain"*

These lines use England's past image as a contrast to its current stance of servility towards the Spaniards. The character of Thales also frequently refers to previous visions of Britain's glory with images of Elizabeth I (and the annihilation of the Spanish Armada at the hands of Drake). Thales constantly conjures up images where England was a dominant force and was unwilling to submit to foreign entities. The image of Henry V's victory over the French also serves as an image to view against Britain's current relationship with the French. Johnson lambasts the import of French culture and affectations in the English circles of power and influence. This mirrors the invasion by the Greeks in Juvenal's original work. Johnson here distinguishes himself drastically from Juvenal. As Wharton observes, Juvenal describes in detail all the latest fashions his parasite Greeks have brought along from harp-strings to sandals, while Johnson uses details in a controlled manner for the dismissal of such values as Johnson's parasites are just seen as "Singing, Dancing and Clapping".

It is the commercial ethic that Johnson links to the Greed and avarice in men which manifests itself as a corrupt Walpolean system, where Walpole takes the place of Verres in Juvenal's original under the name of 'Orgilio', as a veiled attack. Johnson uses a strategy of not naming the targets of his satire openly as Walpole's administration had placed oppressive mechanisms to silence all Opposition to his reign. It is said that Walpole spent around 50,000 pounds (from 1731-1741) in an effort to propagandise everybody through his control over the papers like Gazetteer and Hyp-Doctor. Walpole's efforts to control the work of outspoken writers are what probably lead to the most famous lines from this poem.

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It was through measures like the Licensing Act of 1737, which required every production to go through the Chamberlain's Men before public viewership that created a festering resentment in the minds of struggling writers like Johnson. These lines are In Capital letters to highlight the pain felt by Johnson as a poet who had his dreams of advancement being abbreviated due to inadequate funds. He had to quit Oxford and the lack of that degree, which was a result of his financial turmoil which precluded him from attaining smooth advancement. Poverty had become a crime in Mercantile Capitalist societies such as England, the competition had rendered the poor as socially unacceptable. People were judged on the basis of their appearance rather than their "worth" (The sober trader and the Tattered cloak) Writers, much like other people needed money to survive. Writing in the time of Walpole was a highly political activity, most writers who flourished were "Pension'd Bands' who

received money from the administration or those who sought refuge under the patronage of Political Umbrellas. In both cases, the work of these writers had to be moulded to suit the agenda of the overarching political force. Johnson refused to compromise the value of his work and suffered the ignominy of living in poverty in a city like London. In 'London', Johnson illustrates the travails of living in a city that was slowly getting overpopulated due to the massive influx of immigrants whose livelihood as small time agriculturalists were destroyed because of the Enclosure Acts. These people fled to London, "dreaming" of brighter futures. With the majority of the nation seeking value in monetary currency, Johnson laments the decline (or possibly the demise) of "Worth". "Worth" is a word is used recurrently in 'London', Johnson seems to have formulated a notion of intrinsic worth that was divorced from positions and privilege in society. He saw the decline of that worth in a society where "worth-less" or "un-worthy" people found themselves seated in positions of power due to their monetary influence or sycophancy. To my mind, Johnson seems to highlight a state of constant unhappiness in the existence of man in a mercantilist society. These lines serve as a General Truth, irrespective of its immediate political implications in Walpolean England. The notion of Universality exuded by these lines seems to tie-in with Johnson's larger philosophical idea of having a common human existence that exists for all. This can also be seen in the character of Thales as a character that despises the mechanisms of mercantile capitalism that promote Greed and Corruption and the promotion of unworthy individuals to positions of Authority and respect, still finds himself in the "Want of cheap Reward of empty Praise". The character of Thales now functions as a limited character which can be read in two ways. The first reading of Thales can undermine the entire validity of Johnson's Political Satire, as he is the principal agent through whom the readers are awakened to the misgivings of a world "where all are slaves to gold". The second reading can view him as a character who understands the issue with such a world but is radically limited even in his act of subversion by the oppressive force of Capitalism and succumbs to the wants of adulation that do not correspond to "Worth". Other Scholars have also read his hatred for the system as a manifestation of resentment, as he is unable to progress within a system that has satisfied the material needs of even those who he considers less worthy than himself.

The Excise Bill acts as an interesting focal point which is attacked by Johnson, the Bill allowed officials to conduct searches for items like Tobacco, Gin etc. on which the Excise had to be paid. What made this curious was that this form of regulation went against the notions of Private Ownership that is often central to Capitalist Economies. This Bill was severely castigated by the British public and there was widespread unrest on account of the same.

Johnson uses the image of the pastoral to invoke an alternative space to the oppressive atmosphere of London. Thales imagines receding into the beauty and peacefulness of nature where the poet seems to search for a domain which is unspoiled by Greed and Mercantilism. He views the areas of Wales as a space where this is possible (As it has never been invaded by the Anglo-Saxons or the Romans), Johnson seems to search for a space for "True Britons" and like his character the answer seems to have been echoing in the scenery of the pastoral for him. 'London' is littered with vocabulary like 'patriots' and 'true Britons' such vocabulary was extremely popular among the Opposition propaganda against the Walpole administration. Johnson tried to juxtapose the image of the rustic country to counterbalance the ills of the corrupt Urban Society. It is perhaps this vision of an alternative space that links him and other Augustan poets to the Romantic Movement that was to articulate a systemic response to the ills of Industrial and Capitalist societies with the Country and Nature at the centre of its alternative conception. However, it would be specious on our part to extend that argument to conclude that Johnson intended to do the same. His satirical critique of England's social and political interface through the poetic form of Imitation was instrumental in

providing him with a platform from where his career as a writer started gaining mileage. While his allusions got him into trouble with the British administration, which released arrest warrants in his name he remained a trenchant critic of the system whilst maintaining his “artistic integrity”.

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