

Treatment of theme of country and city in eighteenth century with special reference to Johnson's poem "London".

Samuel Johnson's "London" (1784) was written in imitation of Juvenal's Third Satire which describes Umbricius leaving Rome (city) to live in Cumae (countryside) in order to escape from the vices and dangers of the city. An imitation depicts the structure and patterns of thought of the original but modernizes the content to the period of the imitation, that is, it is written in accordance to the time in which the writer lives. Thus, Johnson substitutes London for Juvenal's Rome, and Frenchmen for the Greeks.

The theme of the countryside and the city is central to the poem. The reader is immediately introduced to the trope of country and city in the first 10 lines. The poet "regret[s]" his friend Thales (who by many a critic is considered to be based on the impoverished poet, Richard Savage, but Johnson denied such claims) leaving "vice and London" to live in the calm and idyllic "Cambria" (Wales) "to breathe in distant Fields a purer Air". The city of London was marked in this period by abject poverty, in spite of Industrial Revolution, and widespread corruption. London was slowly degenerating into a shell of the city it once was. It was also haggled by the constant presence of the French in the English courts and Spanish in the English seas. Thales is also described as "one true Briton" as he was disgusted by the decline of British liberty and the cultural influence of France in London. According to J.P. Hardy, "Johnson condemns the city and praises what the still uncorrupted country, ought, ideally, to stand for. For Thales the corrupt capital has become an alien land, and when he resolves to leave to flee it, he is prompted not by a desire of rural retirement, but a willingness to associate himself with the spirit of his country's ancient inhabitants." However, even though "Malice, Rapine, Accident" are common occurrences of the city, the narrator through the character of Thales has not deluded himself into believing in the bucolic atmosphere of the countryside. Exaggeration was a common satirical device, and the poet suggests that the vices of the city make it far more intolerable than the difficulties faced in countryside.

As Thales waits for the "wherry" that would transport him to Wales, he "dreams" of the "blissful age" and the "calm" which "such happy scenes bestow". These "happy scenes" of "Britannia's glories" temporarily "soothe" both Thales and the narrator. Even though "hope" assuages their anxiety, it does not completely dissolve them and results only to "double" his "distress". He remembers the "guard of commerce" and that "dread of Spain". In this period, the popular opinion was extremely hostile to Spain because of their continued commercial rivalry in the Caribbean. Attacks on British shipping by Spanish coast guards was particularly resented, and Prime Minister Robert Walpole's policy of not going to war was one of the main grievances, not only of his political opponents but also of the nation. According to one critic, "Walpole's alleged failure to protect British merchant ships from depredation by Spanish coast guards" was seen as seen as "cowardly" and "English honour" was "jest[ed]".

Thales was so disappointed by the "degenerate days" of the "neighb'ring town" (London), which was devoted only to "vice and gain" and not "science" which "toil[ed] in vain". He wishes heaven would find him a "happier place" where "honesty and sense" would not be "disgraced" with green willow trees ("verdant osiers") and "nature's paintings gay". Even though Thales wants to retire from the city to settle in the countryside, he seems to have forgotten what the countryside actually stood for- hard agricultural labour, poverty and hunger. Here, he envisages the countryside only as a picturesque place where a city bred man came to enjoy the "paintings" of nature. There is a hint in the poem that Thales' dream would not find fulfilment in the countryside either.

Thales also refers to himself as having a “rustic tongue”. According to Johnson’s dictionary, the word rustic means “untaught, inelegant, artless”. Even though Thales had been living in the city, he still called himself “rustic”, as he is unlike those “heroes” whose greed and pride knew no restraint and had gained control over their countrymen’s lives, properties and liberty. He also describes London as being the “common shore” that is the drain of the refuse of other corrupt states like France and Rome. He does not want the “dregs” of these corrupted states to come to the “Land of Heroes” (London) and does not want it to become a “French metropolis.” Such is Thales’ feeling of frustration that he bids a “fasting monsieur”- who has later been described as a “parasite”- to “go to Hell, to Hell he goes.”

He is thoroughly dissatisfied with the life in London as no criminal feels “shame” or fears “censure” as the “number” of the crimes has increased exponentially. The only crime which remains is that of poverty. He asks heaven whether isn’t any place “reserved” “in pity for the poor” albeit it be a “pathless waste” or “undiscovered shores” but safe from the Spanish. He ends his soliloquy with a repartee to the narrator of the poem, who would “fly for refuge” to the “wilds of Kent” that is areas which are far from human habitation, when they are tired of the “follies and crimes” in the city. He urges his friend, the narrator and in turn the readers to “exert their rage” and write incisive satire against the administrators of the city and “animate thy page”. Thus, even if Thales’ friend moves to the countryside, this must act as a deterrent and should not forget their responsibility. They can become writers, warning “succeeding times” against vice and folly.