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Creative Mind in the Making : The Impasse of *London*

Noriyuki Harada

Samuel Johnson's first major poem, *London*, was published anonymously on 12 May 1738 by Dodsley, subtitled as "a poem in imitation of the third satire of Juvenal." In comparison with his unsatisfactory trials of his "fortune" after his arrival in London, this undertaking was fairly successful, because the poem, which was "lively and easy," gained public favour and, especially at Oxford, was greeted with great praise. Boswell, who himself extolls it as "one of the noblest productions in our language, both for sentiment and expression," records John Douglas' reminiscences of the effect of the publication: "Every body was delighted with it ; and there being no name to it, the first buz of the literary circles was "here is unknown poet, greater even than Pope." And Alexander Pope, the most outstanding figure in the poetical world at the time, being struck by the sudden appearance of such a poet, requested Jonathan Richardson, the younger, to find out the name of the author. When he was informed of the name, he said in sincere celebration of the anonymous young poet : "He will soon be *déterré*" (Boswell 1 : 101, 128-29, 194).⁽¹⁾

All criticisms, both contemporary and later, did not unanimously agree with this memorable laudation, however. For example, in the early nineteenth century, William Mudford, being in favour of the critical opinion of William Shaw, a member of Johnson's literary circle, pointed out "many weak lines and puerile tautologies" in the poem and

concluded that Johnson “did not always reason with cogency, nor did he possess the vigor of Pope in condensing much meaning in a few words. . . . He was, indeed, soon aware that his abilities did not consist in poetry” (Boulton 44, 48). T. S. Eliot, who played a leading part in the reevaluation of Johnson’s poetry in the twentieth century, obviously appreciated *The Vanity of Human Wishes* more highly than *London* and mentioned that, although “*London* has fine lines and passages,” the poem “does not seem to me successful as a whole” and the “total effect” of the poem is only “one of querulousness” (179). Joseph Wood Krutch also stated that the “opinions and attitudes” in the poem are “supplied in part by Juvenal and in part by the satiric clichés current in Johnson’s own time” and are “not really Johnson’s” (63).

What should be noted here is that the doubt about the result of *London* can be observed even in Johnson’s mind. Of course every author, especially every young author, who does not have enough experience of publication, is not necessarily confident of the execution of his first major work, but Johnson’s exceptionally sycophantic letter to Cave seems to reflect his own dubious feeling about the result: “I . . . will take the trouble of altering any stroke of satire which you may dislike” (*Letters* 1: 14). In fact, in spite of the fairly successful publication, Johnson did not make plans to write any brisk verse satire after *London*. *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, published eleven years later, is also an imitation of Juvenal, but its philosophical and meditative tone is extremely different from the former imitation.⁽²⁾ If, as Mudford mentioned, he was aware of his lack of poetical abilities, or some dissatisfaction with verse satire itself, was the failure already disclosed in the poem despite of the merits praised by Pope and Oxford students? This question provides a good starting point for this paper, in which I will examine the poem and explain its meaning both in terms

of his career and in terms of the literary context at the time.

As D. N. Smith and E. L. McAdam, Jr. pointed out, one of the important features observed in Johnson's characteristic modification of the original satire is the emphasis of his attacks on the political conditions at the time. "What was pre-eminently a social satire," they stated, "becomes in Johnson's hands largely a political satire," and *London's* "rapid and steady sale . . . is not to be attributed solely to poetic merit" but to its political contents as well (*The Poems of Samuel Johnson* 61). Imitating the original satire, Johnson anglicized the material, simplified the description with heroic couplets, and at the same time widened the scope in order to satirize the political conditions, domestic and diplomatic, comprehensively.⁽³⁾ Indeed, the objects attacked by the satire are various: minor vicious politicians' scoundrelism, the follies of the warriors who "dwindled to a beau" (104), the corrupt practices of notorious plutocrats such as Olgilio, Marlborough, and Villiers, and the new Hanoverian reign in which the "British lineaments" cannot be traced (101).⁽⁴⁾ In particular, the criticism of the weak-kneed policy of the Whig government in diplomacy and the xenophobic idea that the vogue of imported manners causes the disorder of society are remarkable:

Studios to please, and ready to submit,
The supple Gaul was born a parasite:
Still to his int'rest true, where'er he goes,
Wit, bravery, worth, his lavish tongue bestows ;
In ev'ry face a thousand graces shine,
From ev'ry tongue flows harmony divine.
These arts in vain our rugged natives try, }
Strain out with fault'ring diffidence a lye, }
And get a kick for awkward flattery. } (123-31)

The triplet of the last three lines, which is the only such example in Johnson's mature verse, evidently shows his indignation over metropolitanized London, "the needy villain's gen'ral home," and corrupted Britain, the "groaning Nation" (93, 66).

What should not be overlooked here is that Johnson, as well as Juvenal, pays much attention to daily events which incite Thales' personal dread, hate, rage, rivalry or resignation. In other words, Johnson begins with daily and particular events as Juvenal did, but at the same time he intends to express originally his grand political satire. So, in his description, his own experiences are often intermingled with general surveys :

Here [in London] 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 ; (13-16)

Not only "a rabble," "ruffians," and "the fell attorney," but also many causes of Thales' indignation over the corruption of politics and social order are described in detail. "Poverty" which he himself suffers is a typical example. In his narration, he asks why only poverty is severely censured and insulted :

By numbers here from shame or censure free,
All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.
This, only this, the rigid law pursues,
This, only this, provokes the snarling muse ; (158-61)

Even the "lords of the street, and terrors of the way," confine their prey to the poor, shrewdly avoiding "the shining train, and golden coach" (231, 235). Besides poverty, Thales' rivalry towards the "titled" poet and the dramatists who are lionized for their "mimic's art" on the stage is also noteworthy ; for, it overlaps Johnson's own literary career at the

time and is largely emphasized in comparison with Juvenal's description. Thales asks: "Who scarce forbear, tho' Britain's court he sing, / To pluck a titled poet's borrow'd wing" (69-70). His attacks on contemporary poets and stage as well as his resignation towards his lack of poetical or theatrical success are frequently expressed, linked up with the sense of xenophobia and the criticisms of social disorder :

Besides, with justice, this discerning age
Admires their wond'rous talents for the stage :
Well may they venture on the mimic's art,
Who play from morn to night a borrow'd part ;
Practis'd their master's notions to embrace,
Repeat his maxims, and reflect his face ;
With ev'ry wild absurdity comply,
And view each object with another's eye ;
To shake with laughter ere the jest they hear,
To pour at will the counterfeited tear,
And as their patron hints the cold or heat,
To shake in dog-days, in *December* sweat. (132-43)

In the last scene of the poem, Thales' indignation, or his personal effusion, culminates in his decision to persist in criticizing the debasement of literary society even after leaving London for Cumbria :

Much could I add,--but see the boat at hand,
The tide retiring, calls me from the land:
Farewell!--When youth, and health, and fortune spent,
Thou fly'st for refuge to the wilds of Kent;
And tir'd like me with follies and with crimes,
In angry numbers warn'st succeeding times;
Then shall thy friend, nor thou refuse his aid,
Still foe to vice, forsake his Cambrian shade;

In virtue's cause once more exert his rage,

Thy satire point, and animate thy page. (254-63)

It is obvious that these final words show Thales', or Johnson's, revengeful indignation beyond mere satirical attack.

Daily and particular affairs and accompanying personal effusions of this sort may help to vivify the political satire, it is true ; but it can be hardly ignored that such personal effusions often become excessive and Johnson does not always succeed in associating them cogently with general problems of politics and society. As a result, confusion, or inconsistency of the descriptive point of view, is induced. The character portrait of Thales provides a good example of this confusion. His narration in the poem basically deals with political attacks on bribery, plutocracy, and all vicious monetary influences, to be sure ; but he nevertheless does not necessarily have the principle of honest poverty firmly in his mind. In fact, he already has "dissipated" his wealth in actuality. Similarly, in describing "the fair banks of Severn or of Trent" as an ideal countryside where he may "find some elegant retreat," he cannot exterminate the pecuniary description and baleful influence from London's polluted conditions :

There might'st thou find some elegant retreat,

Some hireling senator's deserted seat;

And stretch thy prospects o'er the smiling land,

For less than rent the Dungeons of the Strand ;

There prune thy walks, support thy drooping flow'rs,

Direct thy rivulets, and twine thy bow'rs ;

And, while thy grounds a cheap repast afford,

Despise the dainties of a venal lord : (212-19)

If the "elegant retreat" is genuinely hoped for, why does he describe it as "some hireling senator's deserted seat," and the "rent" as the one

cheaper than “the Dungeons of the Strand”? Why does he take the trouble to “despise the dainties of a venal lord” in the “elegant retreat”? It is probable that, even at that time, he could not give up London completely. So, his resentment is, one might say, irresponsible antipathy towards the society he himself in actuality wishes to participate in, rather than reasonable criticism. Even Thales’ censure of the conditions of contemporary poetry and theatre may be regarded as mere complaint of the scribbler who tries ruggedly the ornate and flowery arts in vain and is “Hiss’d from the stage, or hooted from the court” (109). This is a reason why Thales, although he scarcely forbears “To pluck a titled poet’s borrow’d wing,” nevertheless still tries to sing “Britain’s court” for his own sake.

In a sense, this confusion may be observed even in the title of the poem. In contrast to Juvenal, Johnson widens the scope of satire to various political topics in general outside London. But, needless to say, some of them are knotty problems and cannot be confined within London. Nor can mere satirical attack by the anonymous author give any solution to them. It is a natural consequence that the pecuniary theory is inserted unconsciously into the description of “some elegant retreat.” Accordingly, the objects attacked by satire and the satiric description itself become vague, and a reader of the poem cannot but doubt whether the satirical attack casts a new light on the problems discussed therein. As Patrick O’Flaherty pointed out, satire, at least the conventional one in the first half of the eighteenth century, is essentially to attack “imperfect or corrupt human institutions in order that they might be improved” (90-91). But Johnson’s is obviously deviated from the conventional notion of satire.⁽⁶⁾ In addition to this, Johnson himself seems to have been too close to Thales’ sentiment to keep the objective distance and due descriptive balance in making satire. “Satire and

sympathetic feelings,” as Ian Jack asserted, “are absolutely incompatible” (23). With these points in mind, one can safely state that the inconclusiveness of Thales’ narration--“Much could I add”--is a natural consequence. In *London*, Thales’, or Johnson’s, antipathy which seems to be simply querulous, and his reasonable criticism which will contribute to the improvement of contemporary political and social conditions are promiscuously exhibited ; so the unity of the theme and descriptions cannot be accomplished. Eliot’s and Krutch’s perplexity at the poem was presumably due to this promiscuity.

This will lead us further into a consideration of some oscillations of Johnson’s literary principles in making the poem. One of the typical example is his sympathetic sentiment to Thales’ fancy about country life, because Johnson’s satirical view of happy country life, which is well known in his later writings including *Life of Savage*, cannot be observed.⁽⁶⁾ Instead, in the poem, Thales’ imagination freely extends to a happy country life :

There ev’ry bush with nature’s music rings,
There ev’ry breeze bears health upon its wings ;
On all thy hours security shall smile,
And bless thine evening walk and morning toil.

(220-23)

Without satirizing the escape from London to the country, Thales’ friend--“I”--also appears to have some intention of leaving polluted London for “the wilds of Kent” (257). The friend never denies this possibility when it is suggested by Thales. And, it must be noted here that, after the publication of the poem, Johnson himself, tired like Thales “with follies and with crimes,” left London for Lichfield in dissatisfaction (258). “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life” (Boswell 3 : 178); this notion has been regarded as a summary of

Johnson's attitude towards London and the country, but we can say with fair certainty that this principle was not established when he was writing *London*.

Not only to country life, but also to the past "blissful age" of merry England governed wisely by virtuous sovereigns, Thales' "pleasing dreams" spread unreservedly. After the reference to "illustrious Edward" and the tale of Henry whose victory Thales was taught about in his early days, "Alfred's golden reign" appears just before the last scene :

A single jail, in Alfred's golden reign,
Could half the nation's criminals contain ;
Fair justice then, without constraint ador'd
Held high the steady scale, but drop'd the sword ;
No spies were paid, no special juries known,
Blest age! but ah! how diff'rent from our own!

(248-53)

We cannot say that these fancies are satirized sotto voce or censured explicitly in the poem. Instead, Johnson himself is really "struck with the seat that gave Eliza birth" and, with Thales, kneels and kisses the "consecrated earth" of Greenwich (23-24). This is extremely different from Johnson's later critical attitude towards "flights of imagination" into historical fancy.⁽⁷⁾ In the *Rambler* essays, Johnson casts ridicule upon Quisquilius, an antiquarian who indulges in historical reverie, but the principle, one may safely say, cannot be established at the time of *London*.

Confusion of literary principles also brings about his exceptionally incoherent choice of words in *London*.⁽⁸⁾ The adjective "gay," for example, is used four times in the poem. Basically, it means the "cheerful" or "merry" feature of innocent man or the undebauched

beauty of the countryside such as seen in “May the morn’s earliest tears on thee be shed, / And thou impearl’d with dew appear more gay” (“On a Daffodill” 11-12) and in “The needy traveller, serene and gay, / Walks the wild heath, and sings his toil away” (*The Vanity of Human Wishes* 37-38). In *London*, however, the adjective is also used for the attribute of Thales’ opponents. In the first half of the poem, “gay” expresses the ordinary meaning :

Some pleasing bank where verdant osiers play,
Some peaceful vale with nature’s paintings gay ;
(45-46)

The peaceful slumber, self-approving day,
Unsullied fame, and conscience ever gay. (89-90)

But, the word also comes to express in the second half of the poem the attribute of the “mischievous” Gaul and “some fiery fop” :

Their air, their dress, their politicks import ;
Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay, (110-11)
Yet ev’n these heroes, mischievously gay,
Lords of the street, and terrors of the way ; (230-31)

Inconsistency of this sort, which is not common in Johnson’s later works, is also observed in the conceptual words which are significant in the formation of philosophical argument. “Worth,” for example, is generally used in his writings as the meaning of “valuable quality” or “virtue” itself : “For now no more we trace in ev’ry line / Heroic worth, benevolence divine” (*The Vanity of Human Wishes* 87-88). The word is used with the same meaning in one of the most famous lines in *London* : “This mournful truth is ev’ry where confess’d, / SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS’D” (176-77). But the word, or the conception of “worth” itself, does not seem to have been confirmed in Johnson’s mind at the time. For, he uses the word for the explanation

of “the supple Gaul” : “Still to his int’rest true, where’ver he goes, / Wit, brav’ry, worth, his lavish tongue bestows” (125-26). Thus, “worth” is presented at the beginning of Thales’ narration as weak, obsequious, and deceptive conception : “Since worth, he cries, in these degen’rate days / Wants ev’n the cheap reward of empty praise” (35-36).

Besides, defectiveness can be found in the formal and structural characteristics of the poem. Like his predecessors such as Dryden and Oldham, Johnson uses heroic couplets in imitating the original satire. This means that, basically, one topic must be unified within or divided into each two lines. Although the style contributes to the musical progress of the narration, it may also result in a dispersion of the topics without sufficient description. In this sense, the twenty-eight verse-paragraph division in *London* is not actually effective, in contrast with the one, for example, in the blank-verse poems of later romantics. And also, because of Johnson’s adaptation -- simplification and intensification--of the original, *London* is “faithless” to Juvenal, compared with his predecessors’, and as a result, the poem, as a quid pro quo for conciseness and originality, inevitably comes to be the accumulation of disjecta membra. The awkward subdivision of verse paragraph, which is never seen in his later poems, obviously shows the mosaic and fragmentary nature of the poem.⁽⁹⁾

Although Johnson’s *London* was fairly successful greeted with great praise of Pope and Oxford students, it involved an embryo which led him to dissatisfaction with his work, or the genre of verse satire itself. Johnson intended to “point” his political satire, concisely shortening the original and particularizing and amplifying it in several parts. But his design was not realized well, because the satirized objects, or “human institutions,” in the poem were too general and complicated to be improved by his mere satirical attack and Johnson

himself was also too close to the narrator to restrain his personal effusions. Added to these, his own literary style and principles, which would be essential in his later career, were not established. These are the reasons why the poem has been less evaluated than *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. However, one cannot readily believe that these factors brought about Johnson's resignation concerning his lack of poetical abilities which Mudford pointed out, because Johnson in actuality continued writing various forms of poetry, chiefly in Latin, to his last days. Instead, in writing *London*, he realized that the conventional verse satire in which Dryden and Pope had effectively condensed "much meaning in a few words" was inappropriate for what he wished to describe.

Therefore, the best account for the defectiveness of the poem must be found in the more general problem : the congruity of the idea he desired to express with the practical form for the expression. And he himself must have been aware that he could not arrange his idea skillfully and express it satisfactorily in the poem. But, what should be noted here is that the gap he seems to have been aware of cannot be confined within the problem of Johnson's maturity. Instead, the gap arose from the difference between what the conventional verse satire had dealt with and what Johnson intended to describe. As to this difference, Thomas Lockwood discussed, surveying the transition of the style and subjects of poetry after Pope :

[T]he history of verse satire after Pope is the history of a genre trying to accommodate itself to the shift in ideas about what makes a poem. The subject of verse satire, according to Juvenal, is "whatever men do." . . . But [after Pope] most of the writers who take up society and the doing of men as their subject are novelists. The poets are

interested in other things. The effect . . . is to give the would-be writer a choice: either to be a poet and not a satirist, or else a satirist and not a poet—but not both.

(402)⁽¹⁰⁾

When Johnson was writing *London*, his own literary style and principles were still in the making, to be sure; but, the defectiveness of the poem was not due to his immaturity, but to his oscillation between the old verse satire and the new literary genre in which prose writings would play an important role. And, without doubt, what Johnson intended to describe in *London* should belong to the latter, although his works in general have been classified into classicism and, at least, not into novels. So, he had good reason to make plans to publish the *Rambler* essays when he set out to write another imitation of Juvenal, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, with a new attitude. In this sense, the defectiveness of *London* shows the poetical discords derived from the great transition of literary tendency at the time.

NOTES

- (1) First, Johnson sent the manuscript of *London* with a timorous letter to Cave. Cave thought that it was better to request Dodsley to publish the poem. The political bias and severe satire in the poem caused Cave not to publish it by himself. See Bruce Redford, ed., *Letters* (1: 14-15) and James L. Clifford, esp. 182-87. Although Johnson made some poems imitating Horace in his juvenilia, he did not choose Horace's satire as the parent-poem at the time. For, as John Butt mentioned, "to have trespassed on Pope's ground by choosing another satire of Horace to imitate was no doubt unthinkable" and therefore Johnson, the obscure young poet, chose Juvenal "with some deliberation" (32).
- (2) As to the distinctive tone of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, see Harada, "Regeneration from Vanity: Johnson's Satiric Mode in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*," esp. 265, 269.

- (3) As to the characteristics of Johnson's adaptation of Juvenal's satire in *London*, see Varney, esp. 202-03.
- (4) All the subsequent references to *London* and the other Johnson's poems including his juvenilia and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* are to *Poems*, Yale edition 6. The line numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.
- (5) First, Johnson wrote l. 259 of the poem as follows: "In useful satire warn'st succeeding time." But he changed "useful satire" to "angry numbers." As to this, A. D. Moody remarks: "The change to *in angry numbers* shifted the perspective from the conventional claims of the satirist, to his actually involved passions" (143). This change serves as a piece of evidence of Johnson's deviation from the conventional notion of satire.
- (6) Although the Yale editors, referring to Johnson's satirical comment on Savage's wish for rural retirement, regards Thales' praise of country life as one of the objects satirized in *London*, it is doubtful whether the narration of Thales can be paralleled by the description in *Life of Savage*. Instead, as Howard D. Weinbrot remarks, the country in *London* can be interpreted as the place where the virtues lost in London are preserved. This interpretation is based on faithful reading of the original satire and Weinbrot denies the possibility of Johnson's "ironic" interpretation of Juvenal concerning the description of country life. See Weinbrot, esp. 65. In addition, it is needless to say that Thales in London should not be easily identified with Savage. See also Boswell 1: 162-63, Kaminski 83-106, Harada, "The Rebirth of Resolution: Johnson's Writing from *London* to *Life of Savage*," esp. 5-7.
- (7) The phrase "flights of imagination" was originally used in Johnson's criticism on the poetry of William Collins and it has been regarded as a typical expression of his attitude towards romantic and fanciful imagination. See "Collins" in *Lives of the English Poets* (3: 337).
- (8) See Helen Harrold Naugle, esp. 133, 400, as well as the definitions of the words in Johnson's *Dictionary*.
- (9) As to the formal characteristics of *London* and the comparison with Dryden's and Oldham's imitation, see A. D. Moody, esp. 139-43 and Andrew Varney, esp. 205-09.
- (10) As to the transition of the nature of verse, or the decline of verse

satire, see also W. B. Carnochan, esp. 263-67, Ralph Cohen, esp. 191-92, R. G. Peterson, esp. 80-86, John E. Sitter, esp. 454-64, Patricia Meyer Spacks, esp. 238, 246.

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