UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—LA CROSSE

GRADUATE COLLEGE

CANDIDATE: Jeanne Reed

I recommend acceptance of this seminar paper to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of this candidate's requirements for the degree Master of Science in Teaching.

Date: June 13, 1972

Seminar Paper Advisor

This seminar paper is approved for the Graduate College:

Date: May 12, 1972

Dean, Graduate College
ABSTRACT

Literary critics have frequently found the poetry of Samuel Johnson lacking in effective imagery. A study of the imagery in two major poems by Johnson appears to be a sound approach to determining the validity of this criticism. This appraisal of his imagery includes a consideration not only of the widely acclaimed The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749) but also of the lesser known London (1738).

The solution to the question of effective imagery lies in a view of the poetry from several standpoints. The mode of the poems as imitations of Juvenal influences the imagery and, consequently, requires consideration. Also, a study of Johnson's poetic theory as it pertains to the two poems helps to clarify Johnson's method of imagery. Finally, an appraisal of the imagery as it develops themes and reflects the purpose of the poems is necessary.

This work, based on the consideration of the two poems, tends to disprove the unfavorable comments of the critics. The study leads to the conclusion that the position of both Vanity and London, as worthy representatives of Samuel Johnson's literary genius, is due at least partially to their effective imagery.
THE EFFECTIVE USE OF IMAGERY
IN SAMUEL JOHNSON'S LONDON
AND THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES

A SEMINAR PAPER
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School of
the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Teaching

by
Jeanne Reed
May 12, 1972
In the final pages of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, James Boswell summarizes Johnson's attributes, "his talents, acquirements and virtues."¹ He gives high praise to Johnson's wit, wisdom, and literary achievements. Boswell also speaks briefly but glowingly of Johnson's potential as a poet: "His mind was so full of imagery, that he might have been perpetually a poet."² However, Boswell finds a lack in Johnson's actual performance as a poet, as he minimizes the significance of the imagery in Johnson's poetry. The biographer remarks that "however rich his prose is in this respect, his poetical pieces, in general, have not much of that splendour."³ Indeed, it is true that Samuel Johnson is not "perpetually" a poet; his poetry, in fact, comprises a small part of his literary work. Nevertheless, Samuel Johnson is, according to many critics, a poet of some merit. James Sutherland praises "the Johnsonian observation" in poetry and calls Johnson's poetic technique


²Ibid., p. 1401.

³Ibid., p. 1401.
"difficult of attainment." However, if one is to determine the degree of "splendour" in Johnson's poetic imagery, it is necessary to examine the images in some of his poetry, specifically in his two major poems: the widely acclaimed The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749) and the lesser known London (1738).

A look at the criticism of Johnson's poetic imagery reveals a mixed reaction. Admittedly, there is support for a negative view from certain literary critics. Yvor Winters calls Samuel Johnson the "master of English prose, but whose poetry appears to have been an acquired language in which he was never entirely at home, with a style of imagery which consists of a kind of coagulation of cliches." Johnson's poetic ineptness is also asserted by another of his biographers, Joseph Wood Krutch, who refers to the imagery in Johnson's London with the term "coldness," and who declares of Vanity that "the author fails" in his achievement. However, not all critics have been negative; Johnson, the poet,

---


has his defenders. Wallace Cable Brown considers Johnson's poetic imagery to be "that which is lyric and that which is universal fused into the impersonality of great art."7 Another critic, Donald J. Greene, asserts that "the great English critics have often been great poets" and that "Johnson is no exception."8 No less a poet than T. S. Eliot finds Johnson's London and The Vanity of Human Wishes "among the greatest verse satires of the English or any other language."9

It is Johnson's London and Vanity that are cited most often in connection with Johnson's reputation as a poet. While both poems are hailed by Brown, Greene, and Eliot as "great" poems, it is Vanity which receives the bulk of attention from these and other critics. Discussion of London is frequently limited to a few lines identifying the poem with Juvenal's Third Satire and the political life of Johnson's era. Although such critics as Edward Bloom, Henry Gifford, and David Nichol Smith present somewhat detailed analyses of Vanity

7 Wallacable Brown, "Johnson As Poet," MLQ, 8 (March, 1947), 64.


with some consideration of its imagery, there is not, at this time, a similar treatment of London by any critics. However, it is the imagery of both these poems which deserves consideration and lends weight to the contention that Samuel Johnson uses imagery effectively.

To explore the question of imagery, one needs to view the poetry from several standpoints. The answer lies, first of all, in an understanding of the mode of the poems as imitations of the satirist Juvenal. The extent to which the imagery in each poem follows or differs from the original is one key to appreciating both London and Vanity. Then a look at Johnson's poetic theory, pointing up the use of generalization and personification in imagery, as well as his adherence to certain conventions of the era, helps to clarify Johnson's method of imagery. Finally, an investigation of theme and purpose as each is developed by the imagery is essential to determine effectiveness. This extended study of the imagery employed by Samuel Johnson is a valid approach to challenging

critics who find the imagery in his poems "blunted" and
"bare." This effort includes a consideration not only of
The Vanity of Human Wishes but also of London, revealing
the true merits of the imagery in the poem that is so
frequently eclipsed by the later work.

Both London and The Vanity of Human Wishes are
imitations of Juvenal's satires. While imitations of the classics
had long been a traditional exercise among scholars as well as
experienced writers, imitation as a genre and as adopted by
Samuel Johnson grew from the popular theory of paraphrase
in translation as practiced by Denham and Cowley. From
their idea of imitation, it was only a short step to modernize
the classical text being translated by altering the scene from
Rome to London and by making use of English names of men,
places, and customs whenever the parallel would permit.

Imitation reached the height of its popularity in the early
decades of the eighteenth century, mainly with the work of
Pope. Writers quickly realized that the imitation was likely
to be the most successful with didactic and satiric poems,
and, consequently, most of the imitations are poems in this
mode.

F. W. Bateson, English Poetry and the English
Language: An Experiment in Literary History (Oxford:
Samuel Johnson defines imitation in his Dictionary as a "method of translating looser than paraphrase, in which modern examples and illustrations are used for ancient, domestick, or for foreign." He finds imitation a sympathetic vehicle for his satiric poetry for several reasons. First of all, he holds the concept of "general nature": if the sins and the sinners of Augustan London are similar to the sins and the sinners of Augustan Rome, then certainly, the terms of castigation may also be similar. Also, Johnson believes that all good poetry deals with the unchanging passions of men. Johnson, in discussing the continuity of thought between modern and ancient authors, insists that the ancients have planted "flowers of fiction in the open road of poetry for the accommodations of their successors" and that these flowers belong to "everyone that has art to pluck them without injuring their colors or their fragrance." There is some significance in relating Johnson's two works to Juvenal's satires when pointing out the former's versatility in imagery, since the works of Juvenal have been


judged rich in imagery. Edward A. Bloom describes the imagery of Juvenal as "vehement," "bursting," "emotionally explosive," and "vividly effective." This is not to say, however, that with Johnson, the imitative tradition is rigidly compartmentalized. He, along with the other eighteenth-century poets, often chooses in subject matter and imagery a combination of treatments of the parent-poem: close translation, paraphrase, or extreme freedom. John Dryden's explanation of the three categories of imitation is representative of the ideas held by most literary figures of the day:

All Translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads:

First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an Author word by word and line by line, from one language into another. Thus, or near this manner, was Horace his Art of Poetry translated by Ben. Jonson. The second way is where the Author is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplyfied, but not alter'd. Such is Mr. Waller's translation of Virgil's Fourth Aeneid. The third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator (if now he has not lost his name) 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 ground-work, as he pleases. Such is Mr. Cowley's practice in turning two Odes of Pindar and one of Horace into English.  

Samuel Johnson's London is an imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal, which according to Gilbert Highet is "one of the finest ever written" and "is alive with brilliant epigrams." When London and Juvenal's Third Satire are compared, a number of interesting facts appear. The adjectives, explosive, exuberant, lively, colorful, attributed to Juvenal's work also fit London. Then too, the structure and some of the ideas are parallel. However, Juvenal's poem runs to 322 lines; Johnson's has only 259. Since Latin is considered a more concise language than English, it may be inferred that Johnson has not felt constrained to give a full or a literal translation of Juvenal's poem. This is the result partially of his ability at condensation and partially of his deliberate ignoring of parts of Juvenal that did not suit his purpose.


Juvenal's Third Satire takes the form of a dialogue between friends. Umbricius, who is moving away from Rome, pauses to take leave of his friend. Umbricius' reasons for leaving the city form a framework for most of the imagery in the satire. With the first set of images, Umbricius describes the consequences of poverty which he has witnessed. He begins by discussing the difficulties that are in the way of making a living in Rome. Umbricius declares, for instance, that honesty is not rewarded:

me nemo ministro fur erit,
nulli comes exeo tamquam mancus
et extinctae corpus non utile dextrae.
(lines 46-48)17

The literal translation is: "No man will get my help in robbery, and therefore, to no one do I become an associate: I am treated as a maimed and useless body that has lost the power of its right hands." Also according to Umbricius, there are the Greeks who edge out the native Romans:

Horum ego non fugiam conchylia? me prior
ille signabit fultusque toro meliore recumbet,
advectus Roman quo pruna et cottona vento?
(lines 81-83)

The literal translation inquires: "Must I not flee from purple-clad gentry like these? Is a man to sign his name before me, and recline upon a couch above mine, who has been brought to Rome by the wind which brings us our plums and our figs?" Finally, Umbricius complains that the poor dependent is universally despised and rejected because money is the only standard by which people are judged: "quantum quisque qua nummorum servat in arca, / tantum habet et fidei" (lines 143-144). ("A man is believed in exact proportion to the amount of cash which he keeps in his strong box.") Thus, Umbricius decides that there is nothing for him to do in Rome: let others stay who can make compromises.

The second main set of images in the Third Satire details the dangers and discomforts of life in Rome and indicates that life is not worth living there anyway. Umbricius asserts that houses fall down or burn up, crimes disturb the night, traffic disrupts the day. Umbricius pictures what it is like to be jostled by a crowd:
nobis properantibus opstat unda prior,
magno populus premit agmine lumbos qui sequitur;
ferit hic cubito, ferit assere duro alter,
at hic tignum capiti incutit, ille metretam.
(lines 243-246)

The literal translation states: "A crowd hinders us hurrying in front, and a dense mass of people press in on us from behind: one man digs an elbow into me, another hits with a hard pole; moreover, this one dashes a piece of timber against my head, that one a nine-gallon measure." The discouraging conditions of city life here seem endless.

Johnson follows the dramatic framework of Juvenal in picturing the city. The parallel he finds between his London and Juvenal's Rome is credible and, for the most part, authentic enough to attract great attention and approval in his own day. He finds the streets unsafe, both from "relentless ruffians" (line 15) and "falling houses" (line 17); he scorns the fawning Frenchmen rather than the odious Greeks; he deplores the impossible fate of the poor, honest citizen. In notable instances, imagery of the original comes off poorly by comparison with London's: "Haut facile emergunt quorum virtutibus opstat res angusta domi" (lines 164-165). (It is no

easy matter, anywhere, for a man to rise / When poverty stands in the way of his merits”). These lines in Juvenal become
"SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS’D (line 177; Johnson's capitals) in London. Johnson's very concise picture achieves a majestically somber note that is quite distinctive along side Juvenal's. When Juvenal bemoans the fate of a poor man who is denied respect simply because he is poor, he pictures a man ridiculed because of soiled and patched clothing; then the Roman satirist pursues his illustration till it becomes so involved as to lose force:

nil habet infelix paupertas durius in se, quam quod ridiculos homines facit. "exeat," inquit, "si pudor est, et de pulvino surgat equestri cuius res legi non sufficit," et sedeant hic lenonum pueri quocumque ex fornice nati; hic plaudat nitidi praeconis filius inter pinnirapi cultos iuvenes iuvenesque lanistae.

(lines 152-158)

The literal translation reads: "Of all the woes of luckless poverty none is harder to endure than this, that it exposes men to ridicule. 'Out he goes! what a shame!' says the marshall; 'out of the Knights' stalls, he whose means does not satisfy the law.' Here let the sons of panders, born in any brothel, take their seats; here let the spruce son of an auctioneer clap his hands, with the smart sons of a gladiator on one side of him and the young gentlemen of a trainer on the other." Johnson uses the same example of the poor man who is taunted because
of his tattered clothing, but brings the details to a head:

Of all the griefs that harrass the distress'd,
Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest;
Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous heart,
Than when a blockhead's insult points the dart.

(lines 166-169)

Thus a more succinct image comes into focus.

In the Third Satire, Umbricius advises his friend to leave the thankless city and find a place to live in the country. Here Juvenal in his image of country life calls up some half-belief that has traditionally charmed or comforted men; then he threatens the complacent picture with a piece of wry flippancy:

vive bidentis amans et culti vilicus horti,
unde epulum possis centum dare Pythagoreis
est aliquid, quocumque loco, quocumque recessu
unius sese dominum fecisse lacertae.

(lines 228-231)

The literal translation is: "Live as a loving steward of a hoe and a tilled garden, till a hundred vegetarians could feast off its produce. It's quite an achievement in whatever retreat, in whatever place to have yourself master of—well, say one lizard." Johnson turns Juvenal's sour acceptance of a country life into a picture of pastoral stateliness:

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:
There ev'ry bush with nature's musick 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.

(lines 215-223)
The images of country life presented by the two poets contrast sharply with each other.

Congenial though the general import of the original may be, the imitation must recognize that a considerable part of satirical complaint has to do with to-day's vexation, with foul weather here and now. Thus, although there are some passages which only need recharging with personal experience, there are others from which the meaning has ebbed. The good imitator will only keep that which either fits as it stands or can be transformed by a turn of wit. Here Johnson's firmness appears. He does, in fact, allow London to attack private vice as a "social poem" in the manner of Juvenal, but his most important imagery reveals the evils of the public acts of the Walpole administration, as in these lines:

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.
(lines 51-55)

There is no imagery in Juvenal that parallels this picture of political bribery. The political drift to the satire is Johnson's own. Like Juvenal, Johnson exhorts the reader to return to the peace and security of the country; unlike Juvenal, he also urges the reader to return to the courage, strength, and political wisdom of earlier days: "In pleasing dreams the
blissful age renew, / And call Britannia's glories back to view" (lines 25-26). The imagery in London centers upon the virtues of country life and the follies of city life and upon the strength of an earlier government in England and the weakness of Britain's present political system. Some of the images are suggested by the Third Satire; others are completely Samuel Johnson's.

Juvenal's Tenth Satire is built on quite another plan from his Third, and Johnson's treatment tends to widen the division. The Roman satirist proposes to show the range of human futility and inability to choose between good and its opposite. The image repeated with variations throughout the poem is a man who has obtained what he asks of the gods and is by his attainment the more wretched. Some images are historical: Sejanus, who sought the imperial crown and found a felon's death; Hannibal, who fretted within the narrow limits of a single empire and became an exile and a suicide; Cicero, who achieved fame as an orator but whose head and hands were nailed to the platform where he used to speak; Priam, whose length of days brought heaped-up woes. Other images are typical: the orator who seeks the fame of a Cicero or a Demosthenes; the old man who has outlived all that makes life worth living; the children whose ambitious parents obtain for them an unhappy position. The theme then is simple: what is man to wish for? Most wishes, according to Juvenal, are
mistaken, the commonest and most foolish being for wealth and social distinction: "sed quae praeclara et prospera tanti, / ut rebus laetis par sit mensura malorum?" (lines 97-98). The literal English translation is: "But what grandeur, what high fortune, are worth the having if the joy is overbalanced by the calamities they bring with them?" The general question is asked again: "What wishes then are wise?" Not power, nor eloquence, nor military glory, nor long life, nor good looks, but man should wish only for health and virtue, leaving the rest to the gods: "Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano" (line 356). ("A sound mind in a sound body is that which ought to be prayed for.")

Within this framework, Johnson's imitation of the Tenth Satire is more independent of the original than his imitation of the Third Satire. Only at a superficial level is The Vanity of Human Wishes an imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire. Here Johnson is completely free with his materials. He owes little more than his theme to Juvenal, and this he modifies substantially. Instead of an original poem and an imitation, Vanity and the Tenth Satire are two poems with a similar theme. He substitutes Wolsey for Sejanus, Charles XII of Sweden for

Hannibal, the scholar's fate for that of the orator. Even where he keeps the man or the type, he changes the tone and, consequently, the imagery. The difference is apparent in their description of the conquering warrior. In describing Hannibal, Juvenal employs scorn to motivate the portrait of the great general:

finem animae, quae res humanas miscuit olim,
non gladii, non saxa dabunt nec tela, sed ille Cannarum vindex et tanti sanguinis ultor anulus. i demens et saevas curre per Alpes,
ut pueris placeas et declamatio fias!

(lines 163-167)

The literal translation is: "No battle-flung stone, no sword, no spear will snuff the fiery spirit that once had wrecked a world: those crushing defeats, those rivers of spilled blood were all wiped out by a poisoned ring. On, you madman, drive over the savage Alps, so that you may thrill young schoolboys and supply a theme for recitations." Johnson's description of Charles XII, whose prototype in the Tenth Satire was Hannibal, inspires a contrasting emotion from the reader:

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. 20

(lines 219-222)

The image evokes a mood not of scorn but of extreme pity.

Juvenal presents his portraits in a series of clear-cut images, linking them together with the common theme of vain wishes. Johnson links his portraits through the recurring images of fitful desires and decay. Images of cloudiness and mist expand from a brief reference in lines 2-4 by Juvenal, "pauci dinolescere possunt vera bona atque illis multum diversa, / remota erroris nebula" ("there are but few who can distinguish true blessings from their opposites, putting aside the mists of error"), to a persistently functioning image throughout Vanity:

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 tread the dreary paths without a guide,
As treach'rous phantoms in the mist delude,
Shuns fancied ills, or chases airy good.
(lines 4-10; italics mine)

The image recurs with the scholar, who gropes through "misty doubt" (line 146), and the few who "set unclouded" (line 312) by the decay of dotage. Similarly, Juvenal presents the military image briefly in his pictures of Hannibal and Xerxes. Johnson not only employs the military image to depict their counterparts but also weaves it into his pictures of senility and of greed for gold. Moreover, he builds on the war image independently. Its use in Vanity is complemented by references of Johnson's own invention to animals,
traps, and snares. The result is a major pattern of military images and of pictorial allusions to man's warlike disposition.

The contrasting imagistic techniques of the two poets are evident in a few parallel passages. For example, Johnson's picture of the traveller is noticeably formal. When he is poor, he "Walks the wild heath, and sings his toil away" (line 38); but "Increase his riches and his peace destroy" (line 40). His dangers are only hinted in "rustling brake" and 'quiv'ring shade" (line 42), with their suggestion of mystery in sound and shadow. Juvenal, however, is specific with his identification of the reader with the traveller:

\[\text{pauca licet portes argenti vascula puri} \\
\text{nocte iter ingressus, gladium contumque timebis} \\
\text{et motae ad lunam epidabis harundinis umbra:} \\
\text{cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator.} \\
\text{(lines 18-21)}\]

The literal translation states: "Though you carry but few silver vessels beginning a night journey, you will be afraid of the sword and spear, and you will tremble at the shadow of a reed, shaking in the moonlight; but the empty-handed traveller will sing openly at the robber."

In another example, Wolsey comes "near the steeps of fate" (Vanity, line 125) but Sejanus is "building up the many stories of a lofty tower" (Tenth Satire, line 106).

Johnson uses generalized imagery which makes more imaginative demands upon the reader, with the terms near and fate
evoking a feeling of uncertainty and connoting the fickleness of success. Juvenal's words have a tendency to state rather than suggest. As in London, in which Johnson divorces himself completely from Juvenal with his political theme, Johnson makes in Vanity a clear departure from Juvenal with his conclusion. Here, although both men revere the "healthful mind," their beliefs are radically opposed. The Roman endorses the Stoic doctrine of endurance and self-determination with concern for the immediate and secular. Johnson, on the other hand, while conceding the impossibility of escaping sorrows and misery, emphasizes faith and insists that man must look beyond temporal pain and death. Thus, both poets build up a series of negative images to present successfully two divergent attitudes: the moral attitude of Samuel Johnson and the stoical attitude of Juvenal.

While the mode and style of Juvenal plays a role in shaping the imagery in Johnson's imitations, it will help one to see the merits of the imagery in London and Vanity by glancing briefly at some of Johnson's own criteria of excellence in poetry. One needs to be aware of Johnson's idea of a poet, his use of satiric imagery, his mastery of placing imagery in the framework of the heroic couplet, and his insistence on the value of the general image rather than the particular. All of these influences contribute to the method that develops his
imagery in the two poems.

To Johnson, the poet is the man who has in a larger measure those same traits of intelligence and observation that are shared by society at large. To his native gifts he has added a discipline of years of study and imitation of the poetic tradition into which he was born. Johnson believes the imagery of common experiences forms the link between the poet and his audience and enables him to communicate with it in artistic form; hence of central importance in Johnson's theory is the necessity of a poet's mixing with his world. Johnson scorns the poet who writes for posterity; he believes a poet should write for an audience in a contemporary world. Consequently, in agreement with Dryden and with Pope, Johnson asserts that poetry must be made out of the language of the day because only through modern terms is the poet able to communicate things of current concern.

Ian Jack sees a connection between Johnson's desire to communicate current matters and his use of satiric imagery in *London* and *Vanity*. He finds that implicit in the realization by Johnson that contemporary life is the best field for his poetry is the discovery that the satiric must be the principal mode of his vision.  

vague and the distant, its true quarry is found nearer at hand, in the things that go on day after day. Moreover, satire provides the marks, bearing, and gesture which enable the poet to express his deepest feeling within a cloak of stylization. Thus, it is logical that Samuel Johnson would find the satiric image a satisfactory method for pointing out the follies of vain wishes or the evils of self-seeking politicians.

In both London and Vanity, Johnson employs standard verse form; he demonstrates the masterful use of the heroic couplet. Within the framework of the couplet, Johnson makes generous use of the familiar hallmarks of repetition, parallelism and antithesis to clarify his images. These lines from London demonstrate the startling quality of imagery built up by balance and antithesis:

Slaves that with serious impudence beguile,
And lye without a blush, without a smile;
Exalt each trifle, ev'ry vice adore,
Your tast in snuff, your judgment in a whore.
(lines 146-149)

The absurdity of the contrasts achieves the desired effect on the reader. To indicate the abundance of the evidence, Johnson also makes telling use of images that are emphasized by repetition. Examples vary from simple repetition in Vanity--"For Gold his sword the hireling ruffian draws, / For gold the hireling judge distorts the laws" (lines 25-26)--to the more
extended repetition in London:

Grant me, kind heaven, to find some happier place,
Where honesty and sense are no disgrace;
Some pleasing bank where verdant osiers play,
Some peaceful vale with nature's paintings gay;
Where once the harrass'd Briton found repose,
And safe in poverty defy'd his foes;
Some secret cell, ye pow'rs, indulgent give.
Let ____ live here, for ____ has learn'd to live.

(lines 45-52; italics mine)

The steady march of such lines, promoted by the parallel structures, forms a fitting accompaniment to the massive accumulations of political and social jibes in London and of somber statements of life in Vanity, and bears witness to the poet's skill.

It is Johnson's hope that, by advancing his art, he might be useful to the world. Since Johnson finds that fixations upon particulars stimulate irresponsible obsessions, the function of Johnson's poetry is to restore reasonableness by calling attention to the general truths about man. For this reason, Johnson admits metaphor to his poetry only on a no-nonsense basis as an instrument for illustration and embellishment of concepts already formed. Johnson explains his reservations about a poet's use of metaphor in a passage in the Life of Cowley:

The fault...is that of pursuing his thoughts to their last ramifications, by which he loses the grandeur of generality; for of the greatest things the parts are little; what is little can
be but pretty, and by claiming dignity becomes ridiculous. Thus all the power of description is destroyed by a scrupulous enumeration; and the force of metaphors is lost, when the mind by the mention of particulars is turned more upon the original than the secondary sense, more upon that from which the illustration is drawn than that to which it is applied.22

The poet's idea of generalization as opposed to particularity is further clarified by Imlac in Johnson's Rasselas:

The business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest; he is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness.23

Johnson is certain that the general term makes more individual demands on the reader, and as a result, the imagery becomes more satisfying and has more personal meaning for him.

This regard for generalization is evident in Johnson's frequent use of the figure of personification in poetry. Later


poets, particularly in the nineteenth century, regarded personification as a mechanical device of rhetoric and hence one devoid of intense or sincere emotion. Yet, capable poets of the eighteenth century were able to use the figure with sufficient skill to attach a solid sense of experience to it. Such a poet was Johnson. Chester F. Chapin finds Johnson "distinguished among eighteenth-century poets for his masterly use of personification as a means of lending poetic value to the expression of such abstract truths."\(^\text{24}\) Another critic, Earl Wasserman, favors Johnson's use of personification and believes that "personification is the product of the most sublime working of the imagination operating under the impulse of intense feeling."\(^\text{25}\)

In lines from The Vanity such as "Year chases Year, Decay pursues Decay / Still drops some Joy from with'ring Life away" (lines 304-305), or from London as "SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D" (line 177; Johnson's capitals) the personifications carry a weight of thought and imagery that reflect their firm attachment to experience, yet generalize that experience. Johnson's image depends for its


effectiveness upon the reader's emotional awareness of the many individual instances where time has withered or poverty has oppressed.

The basic difference between Johnson's conception of London and his conception of Vanity, specifically, as the difference relates to purpose and theme, is evident in the poems, especially in their imagery. Consequently, all assertions that deny or confirm Johnson's effective use of poetic imagery and ignore purpose and theme are probably incomplete. London was published in May, 1738, after Johnson had experienced a year of dire poverty in the city of London. The poem is a reflection of these experiences with a topical appeal to an audience of the day. Johnson's reason for choosing a topical subject may have been partly that he wished to voice his feelings concerning the conditions in the city and partly because he was, according to Boswell, "writing for bread." London attacks two kinds of evil: it is both a social poem that berates private vice and a political poem that criticizes the public acts of the Walpole administration. Johnson uses contrasting pictures to show the superior aspects of country life and of the earlier days of Briton over eighteenth-century city life. He alternates

26 Boswell, p. 94.
these contrasts with specific topical images to sharpen his attack on social and political evils in the city. A progressive review of both types of images reveals the effectiveness with which Johnson's imagery presents his ideas in London.

In the opening section of the poem, Thales is about to leave the city for the country and bids his friend farewell. The friend contemplates the contrast in the two types of living, beginning with the country. He wonders who would "change the rocks of Scotland for the Strand? / There none are swept by sudden fate away, / But all whom hunger spares with age decay" (lines 10-12). The grimness of the retreat may make one think that Johnson's imagery is ironic, that it is detracting from the country itself. But the succeeding attack on the city implies that the inherent barrenness of Scotland is more desirable if only because it is at least predictable: a pattern of life is preserved; one knows what to expect, and death is due to natural causes. The rocks of Scotland are stable, while the Strand--the word itself suggests instability--is shifting and unstable. Then the friend reflects on the city using contrasting images to evoke dismay:

Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,  
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay
And here the fell attorney prows for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

(lines 13-18)

The startling quality of the contrasts sharpens the images and stimulates the desired reaction.

Thales follows a similar pattern of attack on the city and praise of the country. He begins his own speech by berating "those curs'd walls, devote to vice and gain / since unrewarded science toils in vain" (lines 37-38), and then asks the heavens for a retreat at "Some pleasing bank where verdant osiers play / Some peaceful vale with nature's paintings gay" (lines 45-46). Here Johnson clothes the universal in effective imagery by generalization ("vice and gain") and personification ("curs'd walls," "unrewarded science," "osiers," "nature's paintings").

Thales moves on to complaints against the city that are more political in nature. In rapid succession, he castigates masquerades, excise, flattery, unrewarded learning, The Stage Licensing Act, and poets laureate. Since London attacks a specific political administration, it pictures severely specific details for effectiveness. Johnson clearly announces the crimes of Walpole and of his "pension'd band" (line 200), and scornfully portrays the functions of the Committee of Ways and Means:
Scarce can our field, such crowds at Tyburn die,
With hemp the gallows and the fleet supply.
Propose your schemes, ye Senatorian band,
Whose Ways and Means support the sinking land;
Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,
To rig another convoy for the king.  
(lines 242-247)

The poem's implied thesis, that Walpole's government is in the process of corrupting every aspect of English life, continues to provide the basis for an exuberant display of topical imagery. Thales abhors the policies of Spain toward England and bitterly describes the French immigrants who pour into London:

Their air, their dress, their politicks import;
Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay,
On Britain's fond credulity they prey,
No gainful trade their industry can 'scape,
They sing, they dance, clean shoes, or cure a clap.  
(lines 110-114)

The picture Johnson presents of the "fasting Monsieur" (line 115) makes possible a direct identification between the reader and Thales, as Thales contrasts his hopeless position with the supple Gaul, whose "lavish tongue" bestows "wit, brav'ry, worth" (line 126). The sarcastic wit with which Johnson portrays the fawning Frenchman employs an exaggerated but empathic image for the reader, who can easily recall a personal experience with hypocrisy:

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.
(lines 140-143)

Thus Johnson deplores both the conceit of the patron and
the deceit of the flatterer.

In another section of the poem, Thales attacks the
power of Orgilio, a rich member of Walpole's administration,
with an explicit picture of the means Orgilio employs to
rebuild his wealth:

With well-feign'd gratitude the pension'd band
Refund the plunder of the begger'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.
(lines 200-205)

He derides corrupt holders of pensions, who are a cause of
heavy taxes: "To such, a groaning nation's spoils are giv'n"
(line 64). He also invokes a past golden age to contrast with
the present. He calls "Britannia's glories back to view"
(line 26) in a time "Ere masquerades debauch'd, excise
oppress'd, / Or English honour grew a standing jest"
(lines 29-30). He praises Alfred's reign, during which a single
jail could hold half the nation's criminals and justice rather than
Walpole's "special juries" (line 252) triumphed.

Many of Thales' subsequent images register complaints
against the social life of the city, against, as it were, man's
inhumanity to man. We hear Thales' protest and feel Johnson's
anger regarding this evil in the lines which provide a climactic theme:

This mournful truth is ev'ry where confess'd
SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D:
But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold,
Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold;
Where won by bribes, by flatteries implor'd,
The groom retails the favours of his Lord.
(lines 176-181)

The disillusionment and frustration felt in the imagery of these lines enlarge the dimension of Johnson's talent in London. England's past greatness, Johnson believes, was partially due to her foreign trade and to her respect for the humble poor. In Walpole's decadent age, however, the old standards are perverted: poverty is now incompatible with worth and the commerce now trades in human attributes, where gold rather than a good man is master.

A remedy for these evils is a life in the country, according to Thales. He firmly endorses the country's goodness with a typical pastoral image:

There ev'ry bush with nature's musick 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.
(lines 220-223)

The vivid impact that the crowded world of London has made on Samuel Johnson in his first year in the city gives a personal genuineness to the images dwelling on the crime,
political corruption, and squalor of London, as well as an understanding of the somewhat idealized picture of the rural scene.

Thus, the success of the imagery in developing a topical purpose and theme in *London* must be attributed to the vivid contrasts of some images and to the specific quality of others. In *London* Johnson compresses and contrasts past and present, material and spiritual gain, and country and city in a wealth of satisfying and artistic images: the smile of Greenwich, "the seat that gave Eliza birth" (line 23) gives way to the "contemptuous frown" (line 33) of Thales as he looks at London, the seat of Walpole; the humility of Thales, as he kisses the "consecrated earth" (line 24) and recalls "the blissful age" (line 25) changes to chagrin as he turns to the "degen'rate days" (line 34) and "curs'd walls" (line 37) of the city before him. On the other hand, his specific, topical images succeed in defining the present social and political evils that make life in London difficult and unpleasant. Johnson lashes out at politicians whom "pensions can incite" (line 51) to allow Londoners to be "excise oppress'd" (line 29), at poet laureates who write in "servile verse" (line 198), and at the "Senatorian band / whose Ways and Means support the sinking land" (lines 244-245).

Eleven years after the publication of *London*, Samuel
Johnson published *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. In this work, the maturity of the poet is reflected by the more universal theme and tone. Here, rather than emphasizing a series of personally experienced disappointments, the poet proposes to show the range of human futility, as it must appear to the spirit of a philosopher, unconfined by bounds of space or time: the whole habitable world, past as well as present. Everyone is self-destructive; all human wishes are vain. Although this poem depicts a few manifest villains, they are historical figures who, unlike the villains in *London*, are not contemporaries of Johnson. Also, rather than the evils of the villain, *Vanity* stresses the impossibility of man's escaping villainy.

Johnson separates himself from the common human state by his powers of perception, but in *Vanity* he describes the world with a tone of melancholy authority rather than with the scorn he employs in *London*. He creates a winding and revolving image which distances him from the immediate situation. The observer is not an individual who lives in London but a personified figure of Observation, who stands outside the events he describes. Johnson seems to speak not so much from personal experience, but from meditating about the problems of mankind. The chosen symbol, repeated with variations throughout the poem, is the image of a man
whose rise to great heights precedes an equally spectacular fall. This image affords opportunity for satiric portraits, which may be historical (Wolsey, Charles XII, Xerxes) or typical (the self-seeker, the miser, the scholar). The recurring images and metaphors of fitful desires and rival ambitions, of fears and envy are delineated, then replaced by pictures of attainment that move into rapid decay. Working through this chain of images is a second theme: "Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?" (line 343). Is "helpless man" (line 345) automatically condemned by the evils that his own impulses create, or can the desiring person be given positive direction?

Images of haze and cloudiness alternate with those of clutter, crowds, and swelling; each at times gives way to images of rising and sinking. Thus, at the start, man is seen as a traveller, alone, surrounded by mist, searching, groping, in danger of snares. Johnson tells us of the traveller:

Now fears in dire vicissitude invade,
The rustling brake alarms, and quiv'ring shade,
Nor light nor darkness bring his pain relief,
One shews the plunder, and one hides the thief.
(lines 41-44)

In this image, the skill of Johnson, as he defines the general situation accurately, invites the reader to supply his own
particular version of it.

The prevailing image in *Vanity* is one of conflict—the internal conflict of unreconciled instincts such as hope and fear, desire and hate on one hand, and the external conflict of man against the world on the other. Both conflicts provide the traps set to snare man—both are difficult to avoid because they are hidden by the mists of social and religious deception: the lure of "false kindness" (line 147) and the secret ambush of "a specious pray'r" (line 354). Vainglorious man can and will be trapped any time that nature chooses.

The second train of images, in which "anxious toil" (line 3) is associated with "crowded life" (line 4), suggests both the confused wants and rivalries a person alone starts to feel and also the nudging pressure of others in the same condition. The "restless wishes" (line 105) during one's brief moment of life, intermеш and conflict with those of others who "crowd Preferment's gate" (line 73). The poem, as if in some clouded atmospheric swelling and sinking, begins to suggest the rise and fall of human destiny:

> the sinking statesman's door
>Pours in the morning worshipper no more;
>For growing names the weekly scribbler lies,
>To growing wealth the dedicator flies.
> (lines 79-82)

The examples grow from small, familiar ones to the swelling
"full-blown dignity" (line 99) of a Cardinal Wolsey, so near the metaphorical "steeps of fate" (line 125) that precariously "On weak foundations raise the enormous weight" (line 126). Johnson's generalized imagery once more makes imaginative demands of the reader. However, the word choice and the resulting imagery imply a constant association with the theme as in the lines devoted to the scholar where the didactic imagery forcefully uses generalizations and personification.

Johnson advises the scholar:

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.  
(lines 143-150)

Even should the scholar avoid all these dangers, "Yet hope not life from grief or danger free" (line 155), for "There mark what ills the scholar's life assail, / Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail" (lines 159-160). Here, a hint of an autobiographical image appears, for the scholar, whose problems include a lack of money and an indifferent patron, may well be Samuel Johnson himself in his early years.

The poem's most prominently ironic idea, "warrior's pride" (line 191), is developed in the middle portion of Vanity.
Set in biography of Charles XII, the results of vanity appear to have the authority of historical truth. Through exposition, metaphor, and image, Johnson denounces military ambition at any time as a perversion of rational order:

Peace courts his hand, but spreads her charms in vain;
"Think nothing gain'd," he cries, "till nought remain,
On Moscow's walls till Gothic standards fly,
And all be mine beneath the polar sky."
(lines 201-204)

Austerely, with imagery that is modulated and suggestive, Johnson renders the physical and moral hazards inevitable in the reckless pride of conquest: "Stern Famine guards the solitary coast / And Winter barricades the realms of Frost" (lines 207-208).

Some of Johnson's best lines describe the fall of Charles XII:

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.
(lines 219-222)

These lines, according to T. S. Eliot, "with their just, inevitable sequence of barren, petty, and dubious, still seem to me among the finest that have ever been written in that particular idiom."

The imagery continues, consistent with the controlling theme of conflict. Greed is given the same deadly connotation as war; both the "massacre of Gold" (line 22) and the ravages of war surge from irrational impulse. Johnson shows the lust

\(^{27}\)Eliot, p. 271.
for wealth at its most detestable in an account of the miser surrounded by legacy-hunters. In one of his darkest moods, the poet creates an image symbolizing disruption of a domestic order, with honor sacrificed to covetousness and the irascibility of old age. Neither virtuous nor reasonable, the hoarder epitomizes senility and decay, and ultimate human frailty. His decline repeats the military imagery: "Unnumber'd maladies his joints invade / Lay siege to life and press the dire blockade" (lines 283-284).

In the concluding lines of The Vanity of Human Wishes, the tone shifts from pessimism to optimism. After 342 lines of individuals who direct their hopes and fears to mistaken objects, Johnson finally offers a solution. First, he presents a somewhat despairing answer, in such a way that it must be rejected at once:

Must dull Suspence 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?

(lines 344-348)

Johnson abandons this pessimistic reaction in favor of the Christian answer of commitment to the right values:

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.

(lines 359-364)
In this terse military metaphor, Johnson insists that man must look beyond temporal pain and death. Human hope is rooted in the exercise of reason fortified by faith.

Accordingly, Samuel Johnson arranges the sequence of visual images in Vanity close to the sequence of ideas. The poem clearly states the thesis that man's reason rarely dictates the course of his life, and then the work presents pictures with stately precision to enforce the thesis. The image patterns in Vanity show Johnson's facility for illustrating a concept with a concrete situation. These ironic portraits individually sum up a particular argument and collectively unify the entire poem.

Thus, although London and The Vanity of Human Wishes differ from each other in purpose and theme, both poems present a display of imagery that is both fitting and effective. In London, Johnson deliberately chooses subjects that are contemporary and somewhat narrow in scope. He selects images that are lively and exuberant. He often seems to be chatting, rising only occasionally to an elevated level. Such is his intention. In Vanity, Johnson aims at a more universal quality, presenting majestic somber images, so that the poem rises to the grandeur and the dignity of a sermon. He intends his readers to feel the weighty seriousness
of his topic. The final passages of these two poems manifest the pervading tone of each work. The last couplet of *London* creates an image of one defeated man helping another to exert his rage in satire: "In virtue's cause once more exert his rage, / Thy satire point, and animate thy page" (lines 263-264).

On the other hand, the last couplet of *Vanity* shows the calm which celestial wisdom creates within a man who will accept the proven alternative: "With these celestial wisdom calms the mind, / And makes the happiness she does not find" (lines 367-368). These concluding couplets are Johnson's final words on these topics.

The foregoing examination of Samuel Johnson's *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* illustrates his mastery of imagery from the standpoint of mode, poetic theory, and development of theme and purpose.

In considering mode, the reader discovers that *London* is an imitation of Juvenal's *Third Satire*, which critics believe contains the Roman's most successful imagery. A comparison of the imitation with the original indicates that Johnson's *London* follows the pattern closely in some instances. However, Johnson imitates the imagery in the *Third Satire* only when it is most nearly applicable to his own situation and when his own criterion of effective imagery warrants it. Indeed, the emphasis
on political satire and political imagery in London is original with Johnson. The Vanity of Human Wishes, Johnson's imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, follows merely the structure of the original. In this poem, Johnson avails himself of the full liberty traditional in imitation with regard to the illustrations. Even when he retains the man or the type, he changes the tone of the satiric image. The power of Johnson's imagery is apparent when both Vanity and London are compared with Juvenal's works.

The imagery in the two poems reflects Samuel Johnson's personal criteria for excellence in poetry. Both poems demonstrate Samuel Johnson's preference for the heroic couplet. In Vanity, Johnson begins with the compressed image in couplet form. Then with a succession of couplets he presents a panoramic view of the hunger of the human ego, and finally creates a total image of the thesis. In London, Johnson utilizes the couplet to present a series of startling and frequently topical images to point out and attack the social and political ills of the time. The satirist tempers the rapid pace of his presentation and emphasizes his ideas by the skillful use of repetition, balance, and antithesis, all of them hallmarks of the heroic couplet. Both poems illustrate Johnson's use of personification and generalization in depicting images. An examination of Vanity substantiates the favorable criticism
which cites the poem as an example of the mastery of such imagery. Indeed, _Vanity_ demonstrates the success of the poet in employing the general picture as a method of exciting the particular image in the reader. Since the particular nature of the poem _London_ to a great extent requires the particular image, Johnson uses generalization less frequently. However, in notable instances, he skillfully contrasts the particular portraits with portraits utilizing generalization and personification. The effectiveness of poetic imagery in _London_, while not wholly dependent on the general image, is at least partially due to its use.

A final look at _London_ and _Vanity_ reveals a sequence of imagery that effectively develops the theme and the purpose of each poem. Once again, an investigation of _Vanity_ confirms the stress that favorable critics place on the grandeur of its images. A collection of stately images depicts man scrambling for riches, for reputation, for power. The powerful pictures develop a thoughtful, somber theme and fulfill a morally directed purpose. On the other hand, an appraisal of the theme and the purpose of _London_ developed by means of imagery, discloses an achievement that a majority of critics have failed to note. Johnson reveals the follies of the government and the social ills of the city by means of definitive
imagery that is intensified enough to provide entertainment and authentic enough to provoke sympathy.

While this study points out the acceptance of *Vanity* and *London* by many critics as poems of great merit, it also calls attention to the limited criticism given to *London*. The foregoing appraisal of *London* discovers imagery that ranges from serious to comic, from stately to burlesque, from ironic to invective. The pictures skillfully depict people and events, making a convincing indictment. From the imagery, the reader becomes aware that much of what was true in Johnson's day in London is true in other times and in other places. The reader discovers that the topical theme of the eighteenth-century strikes a surprisingly responsive note in an audience of a later century.

This study, therefore, concludes that each poem succeeds on its own merits and fulfills its own purpose. The appraisal of the poems points out that, to a great extent, each meets the specifications which Johnson himself sets down for poetry when he asks that poets retain "the grandeur of generality," and that imagery "both illustrate and ennable the subject; must shew it to the understanding in a clearer view, and display it to the

---

fancy with greater dignity."\textsuperscript{29} The two works include an abundance of the "splendour" of imagery that James Boswell searches for in Johnson's "poetical pieces."\textsuperscript{30} London and The Vanity of Human Wishes are distinguished representatives of Samuel Johnson's great literary talent, and the poems merit this recognition to some degree because of the effectiveness of their imagery. Both poems, by picturing what man is and knows and feels, raise significant questions. Both poems, by looking at things as they are, present images that find a mirror in every man's mind.

\textsuperscript{29}Samuel Johnson, quoted by Edward A. Bloom, p. 183.

\textsuperscript{30}Boswell, p. 1401.
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


