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**Samuel Johnson: London: textual notes (part 1: lines 1-106)**

**The epigraph**: Samuel Johnson’s “London” has a subtitle clearly stating the source and inspiration of the poem – it is an “Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal”. Juvenal was the chief poet of the decadent phase of the Roman Empire, writing in the early second century A.D., and his bitter satires on the decadent, immoral Roman oligarchy and public life were models for English neoclassicists since they found there a lofty moral tone denouncing hypocrisy, greed and shallowness, which they found rampant in contemporary England. The socio-cultural parallelism of 2nd century Rome and late 17th and early 18th century England prompted John Oldham to imitate Juvenal’s third satire in 1682, and John Dryden to translate it in 1693. These poets, and Johnson after them, had found the parallelism so pithy that Johnson had insisted on having Juvenal’s passages printed alongside his own. In Johnson’s hands, Juvenal’s general social satire turns to an indictment of the English ruling class under the monarch George II and Prime Minister Robert Walpole.

The epigraph is a line from the third satire asking the indignant question – “who can hold patience in this horrible city, with an iron will to live on here?” In Juvenal, the question is raised by Umbricius, who feels disgusted with life in Rome. The name Umbricius with its suggestion of darkness perhaps prompted Johnson to see London as a site of moral and intellectual darkness, a hell from which redemption was possible only in a morally purifying pastoral heaven of the kind frequent in classical pagan poetry. Johnson’s shepherd is named Thales, who speaks to the poet as his soul’s companion and in the end leaves him the legacy of moral condemnation in a way that makes them alter-egos. Through the poem, as London is painted with a dark brush, the two voices conjoin to raise the question of the epigraph above the temporality of 18th century London to a timeless parable for the soul.

**Ll. 1-8>** These lines set up an introduction and premise to the whole poem, and also frame the range of emotions traversed in the whole. Thales is leaving vicious London for pastoral Wales, to live in peace under St. David, its patron saint. The poet’s heart and mind are divided over this – he is sad at his beloved friend’s departure, but his reason tells him Thales is right in leaving. He recognizes the higher truth that Thales the hermit could not have lived here. He is leaving the city for the country, vice for God. It is a dramatic moment when grief, love and reason contend in the poet’s heart, and impersonal truth prevails over personal emotions. There is a sure indication that without Thales, the poet’s life in London would become unbearable – he must exercise his conscience, his ‘calmer thoughts’, and follow the hermit’s path. The first eight lines, therefore, move in direct continuity with the epigraph, providing its answer and leading to reasons thereof.

**Ll. 9-18>** The passage begins describing London, and picks up the wry ironic tone of satire. Supporting Thales’ decision, the poet affirms that the rocky plains of Scotland or Ireland are such superior habitats to London that none would choose the city unless heavily bribed. Life in the Scottish or Irish countryside goes on peacefully, unruffled by urban vices – there is poverty, but poverty and age are slow and natural killers. On the contrary, life in London is characterized by unnatural accidents (‘sudden fate’) and human evil – fire and crashing buildings on one hand and robbery, fierce mob attacks, malicious and predatory people in various masked appearances on the other. Urban evil thus is sorted into two categories, a shabby and danger-prone metropolis, and a lawless citizenry. Significantly, the citizenry is class-divided – a pedestrian mob of ruffians out for physical crimes like robbery and murder, and a middle class and aristocracy engaged in sophisticated moral crimes and intrigues, represented by malicious attorneys and female atheists. The constant threats to the body and property from the former class are compounded by threats of moral degradation and insidious legal plots from the latter. The sources of criminalization are a hypocritical and decadent urban middle class, and the large masses of jobless rural people flocking the streets. Johnson depicts a London of volatile and dangerous economic inequities, and a serious distortion of religious and moral values (indicated in the ‘female atheist’) underlying it.

**Ll. 19-30>** After the poet has established the rationale for Thales’ departure, these lines set the stage of departure at a vantage point which, being historically significant, brings up comparisons of England’s glorious past and deplorable present, and the opposite moods of nostalgic pride and despair attendant on them. The two friends are standing by the Thames at Greenwich, where Queen Elizabeth I was born, waiting for the boat to take Thales away. The association of the Queen reminds them of the grand Elizabethan era, when the English nation progressed in flying colors. Mentally transported to that bright phase of history, they are inspired with awe and reverence, and kneel to kiss the sacred earth. Glories of the past return upon them – ‘in pleasing dreams’ they imagine the national flag (Britannia’s Cross) flying high, and remember the unfettered expansion of English overseas trade and the proud victory over the Spanish Armada. This sweet journey into memory is brought to a bitter end in line 29, with a return to the present. The present regime under George II is in stark contrast to Elizabethan expansiveness – it is a decadent era where imperial dominance is replaced by masquerade and debauchery at the royal court, and various taxes levied by the Walpole government torment the masses. ‘English honor’, which had been a formidable matter for other nations in the past age, has now dwindled to a joke – England’s powerless effeminacy is mocked by other militant races.

The passage performs two important satiric duties – one, it places a glorious, heroic age in juxtaposition with a corrupted, self-indulgent one, thus enabling the mock-heroic comparison so necessary for satire; two, it takes the reader back and forth in the time scale, associating pride with the past and indignation with the present, creating a sense of anticlimactic fall, also necessary for the arousal of satiric rejection. In doing these, the passage prepares the ground for Thales’ satiric harangue.

**Ll. 31-34>** These four lines record a painful awakening into woeful reality of the present, from the happy memories of the past. Reminiscences of the glorious Elizabethan age had afforded a ‘transient calm’ of mind – an emotionally balanced point from which to judge the maltreatments of innocence and honesty in contemporary London. The awakening, involving the polar transition from calm and happiness to woe and contempt also works as an emotional metaphor to be repeated through the poem – a metaphor for the fall from heavenly past to hellish present. In Juvenal’s pagan scheme of things, the heavenly past was the golden age which pagans believed to be an earthly paradise, and the present age as a subsequent fallen state.

**Ll. 35-49>** Thales begins his speech here in line 35. The speech has two clear parts – one that rejects ‘degenerate’ London that sets no value on his talents and moral virtue; another that prays to the heavens to grant him refuge in a pastoral haven secluded from urban vices. The first part is a scathing, high-pitched attack on London in the Juvenalian vein. London is a ‘cursed’ city devoted to vice and monetary ends, and has no care for human worth, knowledge (science) or virtue. These go unrecognized and devalued here, and so a true genius like Thales (Johnson’s other self) remains unknown. Any hope of recognition here is frustrated; so Thales decides to leave for a better place before it is too late – before he is disabled by illness or old age, as long as his life-force is flowing. The place he seeks is in moral contrast to London – where ‘honesty’ and ‘sense’ are not disgraces. There is an implied faith that such purity may be found only in unpolluted nature, which provides man a balmy repose and a rejuvenation of his life-force through sensual engagement in natural beauties. This romantic, Wordsworthian conception of nature is generated in Johnson in response to the repulsiveness of the early 18th century metropolis – a festering wound to the nation’s life created by burgeoning industry and trade, yet uncontrolled by civic law or Christian sobriety. The pastoral refuge Thales seeks offers a sensual caress of its ‘pleasing bank’ and ‘verdant osiers’ to a heart oppressed by urban dinginess. Further, the pastoral has been part of the traditional identity of the Briton – agrarian and morally ‘safe in poverty’, while urbanity is hated as essentially foreign (French). Here again is an implicit comparison working under a Christian standard of judgment – the pastoral is a repertoire of Christian virtues representing the church or heaven, the city is a bundle of vices, a veritable hell.

**Ll. 50-56>** After Thales has stated his reasons for departure in the previous passage, these lines begin his sustained, caustic attack on the corrupt court of George II. The king is the apex of a pyramid of corruption and hypocrisy. Only those who have taken up flattery and greed as their religion have ‘learned to live’ here – the dashes/blanks indicate both George II and his band of spineless courtiers. The king has set up an intricate system of ‘pensions’ – financial grants expressing royal favor – which lure his courtiers to perpetuate political wrongs. They smoothly malign a true lover of the country and praise a deceitful fellow, sell out England’s hard-won political and commercial advantages for personal profit, and shamelessly plead to further the interests of those who rob the nation’s wealth (‘pirates’). All these crimes are committed with blatant disregard of conscience, for personal gains. Their moral slavery to a corrupt king has become the order of the day – their worship of vice is the ‘slavish tenet’ held up before the nation as an ideal to confuse truth and falsity, black and white.

The hypocrisy and mammonism of the royal court was a legacy of the Restoration – the court of Charles II and subsequent ones were full of sycophants ready to please the king at the cost of moral integrity, and plunder the nation’s generating wealth and honesty. The intense political rivalries between Protestant and Catholic sects in the court and parliament, the constant intrigues and treacheries, are reflected in the line – “To vote a patriot black, a courtier white”; and the demoralizing effects of such unprincipled politics on society at large is brought out in “with slavish tenets taint our poisoned youth”. The word ‘taint’ reminds of the tainting of sheep – a stain on the flock of Christ the shepherd.

**Ll. 57-60>** The lines extend the attack on courtiers of George II with close references to their ill-gathered property (palaces and manors), misuse of political power to levy unjust taxes and farm lotteries – investing in lotteries to multiply the invested money by collecting sale proceeds. The protests that these outrageous financial crimes could provoke is silenced by an intellectual torpor symbolized by ‘warbling eunuchs’. The reference is to the popular French or Italian operas where eunuchs or ‘castrati’ sang – a degenerate, effeminate theatre in obvious comparison to the great Elizabethan stage. The rotten stage of the day had been under attack sine the time of Rev. Jeremy Collier, and in Johnson’s time was heavily controlled by the government who ‘licensed’ plays before they could be performed. Here, such theatre stands for the general poverty of thought in the period – an unheroic era peopled by intellectual dwarfs.

**Ll. 61-64>** In these four lines, Johnson’s sarcasm at the courtiers takes the form of direct address – sarcastically calling these corrupt, ignoble men heroes. He exhorts them with the obvious irony of a mock-heroic apostrophe to go on. Nothing can hold their vainglorious pride within any limit; nothing can satisfy or restrain their greed for power or money. These are stated in rhetorical questions that sharpen the irony, followed by the irony of the mock-justice done when ‘rebellious virtue’ is overthrown and the wealth and lives of common men become the property of this self-seeking ruling class. By hailing the courtiers’ mammonism to go on unrestricted, Thales hits a bitter, pessimistic tone for the future that is distinctly Juvenalian.

**Ll. 65-74>** The passage turns from sarcasm to statement of the speaker’s honesty and innocence that makes him a misfit in London, but also retains the sarcastic vein in a softer, Horatian voice. Lines 65-66 summarize the previous apostrophic questions, accusing the ruling class of ‘public crimes’ that invite God’s anger – ‘public crimes’ mean both crimes against the nation and its religion and morals, and crimes public because they distort laws and government policies for personal ends. Such is the heinous ruling class to whom the ‘groaning nation’s’ wealth goes – the phrase ‘groaning nation’ is a vivid image bringing out the distress of the common masses. Since this sinful hierarchy (here Johnson takes into account the hypocrisy, shallowness, greed, and betrayal to the nation) has become the norm of London life, Thales desperately asks what chance of survival he has in this world. He has witnessed how ‘rebellious virtue’ is ‘overthrown’, and so despair grasps him as he looks into his innocent self. Theft and perjury, accepted as proper in this London, still shock his conscience – he is a failure in this morally reversed society. As a poet (here Johnson is autobiographical) he is patriotic and sings the glory of British kings, and precisely this patriotism renders him a mismatch in the contemporary crowd of sycophantic poets who flatter George II or Walpole. His honesty forbids him to follow (‘pluck’) this hypocritical route to fame, and sit by poetasters who receive titles through flattery. The ‘borrowed wing’ of such flatterers is a satire on the plagiarism and stereotypical panegyric verses late Augustans composed, that lacked scholarship, poetic talent and honesty of feeling or idea. The ‘titled poet’ with his ‘borrowed wing’ evokes the humourous image of a hollow peacock (with its showy wings and hoarse voice). The strain of poking humour is continued in the next three lines, where Thales says he cannot be convinced by the ‘logic’ in a politician’s speech, and finds the sombre declarations of the Gazetteer dull and sleepy, and sees in a gaudily dressed courtier a laughable and despicable fool. The passage ends with a very contemporary reference to Revd. John Henley, who was a preacher with a habit of making jokes, and as Walpole’s supporter was Johnson’s political enemy. The whole passage, stating Thales’ inability to conform to the life of the court, is laced with a fine irony that mocks the shallowness and vanity by attributing a mocking seriousness to them.

**Ll. 75-82>** These lines continue the same contrast of the speaker’s pure heart with the hypocritical practices rampant in London. Others, comfortably adjusted to the city’s immoral ways, can feign courtesy (‘with softer smiles’) and use their tongues artfully to cheat and retort. Their oratory is the devil’s art of false promises to win the heart, or dupe a person from honesty to insincerity. They are full of tall but hollow professions of love, designed to subtly push the virgin’s heart from innocencee to sin. These with their suave lies are fit to survive in London, but the speaker’s ‘rustic tongue’, simple and sincere still, remains yet untrained in confusing with a hidden aim (‘puzzle right’) or passing ‘wrong’ as proper. His rustic artless truthfulness is not only unwanted in this sly network of dark rhetoric, it is also dangerous and therefore ‘spurned’. Since the speaker of truth may tear apart the web of lies, he is ‘dreaded as a spy’ – branded as a dangerous alien and thrown into the darkness of oblivion. Thus Thales is doomed to ‘live unregarded, unlamented die’ here, being the moral foil of the courtier. The attack on the hypocritical court rises here to the true temper of Juvenalian invective, when the condemnation of honesty squarely condemns the condemner. The pattern of setting off Thales’ virtue and honesty against the dishonesty of the court, already established in previous passages, accentuates here. The pattern reflects on a moral plane what was earlier expressed on a spatial plane – the pastoral heaven and urban hell here become rustic honesty and urban hypocrisy. The ostracism of the deliverer of truth bears the symbolic shadow of the fall of man from paradise.

**Ll. 83-90>** This passage condenses the contrast of honesty and falsehood in terms of greed, and then moves out of the ironic tone to establish, in a defiant, prophetic voice, the value and prizes of honesty. Wealth in contemporary London is synonymous to crime – one has to be Orgilio’s (the king, George II) accomplice to make his fortune, and must share the ‘social guilt’ of depriving the people. Thales is incapable of gathering wealth in this way, at the cost of the mental peace that honest poverty gives. He puts forth two examples of moneymaking by deceit – the Duke of Marlborough who piled wealth by tactfully prolonging a national war, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, whose huge riches were wasted phenomenally. Had such wealth been offered to Thales, he would not have bartered his peaceful sleep, clear conscience or good name for it. Rising above greed, he scorns wealth and itrs attendant vices, and declares the victory of honest poverty. It is distinctly a Christian message fortified against material temptation, along the tenets of Protestantism.

**Ll. 91-98>** The triumphant voice of honesty in the earlier passage rises to a prophetic indictment of London here, with an impassioned call to witness the injustice. The ‘happy favorites’ cheat the nation and yet enjoy fame and power (‘the great caress’) ; and the true patriot is ostracized. Thales curses London as home to villainy, and traces the evils to foreign influences of Paris and Rome – the Restoration and Catholicism. England has since the Restoration imitated French and Roman filth – has drunk their follies and vices ‘with eager thirst’, and destroyed her own Englishness. This cowardlike submission of the English identity is unbearable to the true Briton – and therefore comes the blaring denunciation: “I cannot bear a French metropolis.” London has become a lackey to Paris – a gutter where the effeminate hypocrisy of the French and the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church (against which England had fought for centuries) have gathered. The image of the odious gutter is enforced by words like ‘shore’ (in Johnson’s own Dictionary it meant ‘sewer’), ‘sucks’ and ‘dregs’. On a general plane, the indictment expresses displeasure at Frenchification of English upper class life and culture shared by the Protestant majority of the population.

**Ll. 99-106>** The passage again begins with an apostrophe, but not a mock-heroic one. The satiric tone is replaced by one of lamentation. Thales invokes Edward III, the medieval English king considered a hero for his conquests over the French, from his heavenly abode, and pleads him to see Britain now, that had once been the proud land of heroes and saints. The ‘rustic grandeur’ of the English church derived from its simple, pure flock, and the ‘surly grace’ of the warrior nation are vanished today. Edward must not hope to see the old and solid ‘lineaments’ of British manhood – decadence has set in the British moral character. The old uprightness and sturdiness have given way to dissipation and debauchery (‘empty show’), honor has been bartered for ‘thoughtless ease’ fit for the effeminate courtier. Shamefully, the warrior has cast his manhood down and become a dandy of no use to his country or church. The use of the word ‘beau’ signals that the loss of national character/manhood has been due to blind imitation of the French (‘of France the mimic’). The British ruling class, thus weakened through Frenchification, is today intimidated by Spain (the contemptuous reference is to the compromising Spanish policies of the Walpole government. In the process of this decadence, virtues like good sense, piety (devotion to the Anglican Church) and love of freedom – cornerstones of quintessential Englishness – have died. There is a fine irony in the phrase ‘refined away’ – refinement means the influences of the French court and when we see sense, freedom and piety being refined away, such refinement takes on a sinister shade. As elsewhere in the poem, French ways ushered in by the Restoration are seen as roots of evil, as also of an urbanization that is alien to the traditional, and morally pure, English character that finds expression in rusticity.