



The Vanity of Human Wishes

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The Poem

Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* imitates, as its subtitle states, Juvenal's tenth satire. The 368 lines of iambic pentameter in rhymed couplets do not claim to provide an exact translation but rather to apply the poem to eighteenth century England. While Johnson therefore feels free to modernize the allusions, he follows his model closely. The poem opens with the proposition that people ask for the wrong things and points out the folly of the first common request, riches. An interlude follows during which the poet invokes Democritus, known as the "laughing philosopher" because of his amusement at human folly. Here Johnson repeats the poem's central idea, the absurdity of people's prayers.

The poem then resumes its catalog of vain desires. Many seek political power, but no one can remain supreme for long (lines 73-90). As proof of this general proposition, Johnson, after attacking parliamentary corruption (lines 91-98), offers the example of Thomas Cardinal Wolsey, the great favorite of Henry VIII. Wolsey enjoyed preeminence in church and state but fell from power and died, abandoned, in a monastery (lines 99-120). Johnson then offers several other, shorter examples of powerful men who have lost their positions, even their lives, in the vain pursuit of political success (lines 129-134).

Wisdom, though one of the four pagan virtues, also yields no joy (lines 135-173). The beginning student confronts many obstacles and distractions: doubts, praise, difficulty, novelty, sloth, beauty, disease, melancholy. Nor does learning guarantee happiness. On the contrary, the rewards awaiting the scholar are "Toil, envy, want, the garret [later changed to "patron"], and the jail." Again Johnson offers concrete examples to illustrate his point: Thomas Lydiat, an Oxford scholar who died in poverty; Galileo, imprisoned and forced to recant; William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, executed in 1645.

Greeks, Romans, and Britons have sought military glory; it, too, proves hollow. Johnson's aversion to war informs the opening passage of this section (lines 185-190). The chief emblem of the futility of "the warrior's pride" (line 191) is Charles XII of Sweden, who conquered Denmark in 1700 and Poland in 1704, and sought to place the Swedish flag on the walls of Moscow. At Pultowa (in 1709), Peter the Great, aided by the Russian winter, defeated Charles, who died nine years later by an unknown hand in his attempt to seize Norway. This section concludes with shorter treatments of Xerxes and Charles Albert, Elector of Bavaria, whose ends were equally inglorious.

Like Juvenal, Johnson concludes his list of vain requests with long life (lines 255-318) and beauty (lines 319-342). Those seeking the former discover "That life protracted is protracted woe" (line 258). Even the few who enjoy health in age lose friends and relatives to the grave and see the familiar world disappear, so that death provides welcome release. Anne Vane and Catherine Sedley, mistresses to royalty, demonstrate that beauty betrays its possessors.

Is nothing worth having, then? Here Johnson parts company with Juvenal, offering a Christian response to this question and urging his audience to wish for those qualities that can bring happiness: faith, hope, and love. Armed with these, the mind can rest content in a tragic world.

Forms and Devices

In this philosophical poem, Johnson often relies on that “grandeur of generality” that he said he missed in the poetry of Abraham Cowley. Even in his portraits, where he might detail particulars (as Juvenal does), he prefers to let the reader imagine the specifics. He does, however, employ a number of image patterns—of battles, disease, animals, the flux of time, and fire—to develop his argument. Often, the metaphors are implied; when he writes, “Time hovers o’er, impatient to destroy” (line 259), he is alluding to time as a vulture. This avian imagery is more explicit earlier in the poem when he describes “Rebellion’s vengeful talons [that seize] on Laud” (line 168).

Johnson constructs his argument through synecdoche, offering a few examples to stand for the infinite number of wishes one might make. So, too, the few people cited suggest the many others the reader can imagine. Preferring the general to the specific, Johnson finds synecdoche a convenient device for description. He does not paint a beautiful face but offers “rosy lips and radiant eyes” (line 323). The gifts of nature are suggested by “The fruits autumnal, and the vernal flower” (line 262).

Personification abounds from the first line, in which Observation surveys humankind, to the last: “Wisdom calms the mind/ And makes the happiness she does not find” (lines 367-368). Hope, fear, desire, and hate spread their snares. Preferment has a gate, History speaks, “Pride and Prudence take her [Virtue’s] seat in vain” (line 336). Like synecdoche, this device keeps the poem at the level of general truth that the author seeks. As he would write a decade later in *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759), “The business of the poet...is to examine, not the individual but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances.”

Much of the poem’s power derives from the strong verbs that Samuel Johnson uses, and many of these emphasize the destructive nature inherent in conventional desires. Thus, “the knowing and the bold/ Fall in the general massacre of gold” (lines 21-22). Those seeking political power “mount,...shine, evaporate, and fall” (line 76). Beauty also “falls betray’d” (line 341). All who seek to rise decline instead.

This paradox is reinforced through the use of antithesis. The section on long life concludes with the examples of the Duke of Marlborough and Jonathan Swift, who ended their lives in senility. During the reign of Queen Anne, Marlborough was the darling of the Whigs and bitterly opposed by Swift, strong supporter of the Tories who sought to conclude the war with France in which Marlborough so distinguished himself. Royal favor should have provided protection, but the favor of Charles I led to the execution of Thomas Wentworth. Similarly, Edward Hyde, father-in-law of James, Duke of York, and Charles II’s Lord Chancellor, was forced into exile. Writing of the perils that beset the would-be scholar, Johnson includes praise, which should encourage, and beauty, which should stimulate; but in the world of the poem, all things include and produce their opposites. Gold bribes the ruffian to draw his sword, and gold corrupts the judge who will try this criminal.

Themes and Meanings

In the thirty-second issue of his periodical, *The Rambler* (1750), Johnson wrote, “The armies of pain send their arrows against us on every side; the choice is only between those which are more or less sharp, or tinged with poison of greater or less malignity; and the strongest armour which reason can supply, will only blunt their points, but cannot repel them.” This same tragic sense pervades *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; indeed, the controlling metaphor of the *Rambler* passage is an elaboration on the poem’s central thesis: “Fate wings with every wish the afflictive dart” (line 15). As Johnson implies through his use of antithesis, wealth, power, learning, glory, longevity, beauty—all that this world offers—prove vain because these things deceive. Johnson does not suggest that if they could endure they would yield happiness. The poem recognizes that the things of

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this world pass away and laments the mutability of existence. Even when these gifts are at their greatest, though, they breed discontent. The more the wealth, the less the tranquillity of the possessor; the more beautiful the woman, the more likely she is to fall “betray’d, despis’d, distress’d” (line 341).

The gifts are flawed, as are those who seek them. At the beginning of the poem, Johnson speaks of “wavering man” (line 7). Human happiness is ultimately impossible, because one always wants more than what one has. Sweden’s Charles XII cannot rest until all is his “beneath the polar sky” (line 204). Wolsey gains so much power that “conquest unresisted ceased to please” (line 107). The irony in the poem reflects the irony of the world and its inhabitants.

Although Johnson draws on Juvenal and invokes Democritus, his poem is less satire than tragedy. Whereas the original, for example, mocks the old man with his dripping nose and toothless gums, the one-eyed Hannibal riding his last surviving elephant, Johnson pities his subjects. The characters he paints are heroic, sympathetic though fatally flawed. Satire posits distance from, tragedy identification with, the figures portrayed, and Johnson felt kinship with those in the poem: Reading the section on the scholar at the home of Mrs. Henry Thrale, Johnson burst into tears.

As Johnson parts company with Juvenal in his outlook on the world, so, too, does he differ in his solution for coping with the evils inherent in existence. For Juvenal, a stoic resignation and endurance are the best one can achieve. Johnson had much of the antique Roman in him, but he was also devoutly Christian. The title of the poem suggests Ecclesiastes’ pronouncement that all is vanity; the work itself embraces the Augustinian view that while worldly goods cannot bring happiness, religion can. “Our heart is restless until it rests in thee,” Saint Augustine wrote in the opening passage of his *Confessions* (397-400 c.e.), and so Johnson concludes. Trusting in divine Providence to shape one’s ends, seeking those things that abide—faith, hope, and love—one can achieve the tranquil mind that eludes those who seek happiness in the wrong places.

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