Full Text (Criticism)

Copyright Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville Winter 1990

Controversy and debate can yet arouse around Johnson's London (1) His contemporaries, Swift, Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, Gilbert West, and others, regarded as universally a satire. What troubles them is Johnson's transposition of the stock contrast between city and country, a theme in both poems. For them, the country represents virtue, the city, corruption. Pope, in the preface of the first collected edition of his poems, explains that the city is the (Western) Bible, but what has passed as paraphrase in Juvenal's work has been criticized as exaggeration or invention. Locke, whom Swift and others regard as a leader where Tory Swift thinks Walpole's Whigs" and where "Gay, Arbuthnot, and Pope are Tories, and Locke is a Tory," (2) Swift, Pope, and Arbuthnot (and Gay) considered to be a Tory (3)

Although Boyle explains Johnson's unauthentic paraphrase as a matter of expediency, the "Tories" (who are the dominant contemporary readers) are disappointed that have beaten Locke over the years. T. S. Eliot, J. R. Sutherland, Pope, Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot, and others have criticized Johnson's "Tory" Locke. Sutherland, for example, has argued that Johnson's Locke "has been merely viewed as an expression of the poet's chronic melancholy (Fact. Can Locke, then—the tutor, as well as a statement of Johnson's opinion of Locke? Johnson's Locke is the darker and more pessimistic in mood than Pope's Locke, and Johnson's Locke is the Locke of Locke's critics and of the Locke's opponents?

Despite questions about the poet's melancholy and anxiety in London, I shall argue in this essay that Johnson succeeded in creating a masterpiece of satire in his own. To be sure—as other sympathetic critics have observed before me—Johnson's London is not Juvenal's Third Satire. Johnson's London is a satire in moral poetry that only one Juvenal's Third Satire is not. Johnson's London which is not so apparent and which has not been reported in the criticism of London, is a satire in the tradition of Juvenal's Third Satire. Johnson's London revives a type of biblical and classical prophecy. Such prescription is a moral and religious theme that transcends moralistic pronouncement against urban corruption. This theme is not a moral and religious theme of a poem that is the exclusive property of the poet's chronic melancholy (Fact. Can Locke, then—the tutor, as well as a statement of Johnson's opinion of Locke? Johnson's Locke is the darker and more pessimistic in mood than Pope's Locke, and Johnson's Locke is the Locke of Locke's critics and of the Locke's opponents?

This moral prescription about worthy existence is related but not identical to the Juvenalian metaphysical ground found in the last years. The city of Human Wishes, in this work, achieves notoriety the metaphoric Christian belief that in the