NOTES ON A LATIN POEM BY SAMUEL JOHNSON


The opening lines read as follows:

_lexicon ad finem longo luctamine tandem_
Scaliger ut duxit, tenuis pertaesus opellae,
vile indignatus studium, nugasque molestas
ingemit exesus, scribendaque lexica mandat
damnatis, poenam pro poenis omnibus unam.

_Ille quidem recte, sublimis, doctus, et acer,
quam decuit majora sequi, majoribus aptum ...

The editors point out that Johnson is referring to the following poem by Scaliger the Younger:

_Si quem dura manet sententia iudicis olim,
dannatum aerumnis supplicisique caput,
hunc neque fabrili lassent ergastula massa,
nec rigidae vexent fossa metalla manus._

_lexica contextat, nam cetera quid moror? Omnes
poenarum facies hic labor unus habet._

This poem was written by Scaliger in his copy of an Arabic dictionary. The editors of Johnson’s poem fail to point out that he has misunderstood Scaliger: Johnson obviously believed that Scaliger had written his poem when he had finished a dictionary of his own, but, in fact, Scaliger has never written any dictionary: he is lamenting the ordeal of lexicographers in general, not his own toil.
...cogor

notior ipse mihi fieri, incultumque fateri
pectus, et ingenium vano se robore jactans.
Ingenium, nisi materiem doctrina ministret,
cessat inops rerum, ut torpet, si marmoris absit
copia, Phidiaci secunda petentia coeli.

Quicquid agam, quocunque ferar, conatibus obstat
res angusta domi, et macrae penuria mentis.
Non rationis opes animus, nunc parta recensens,
conspicit aggestas, et se miratur in illis,
nec sibi de gaza praeens quod postulet usus
summus adesse jubet celsa dominator ab arce:
non operum serie, seriem dum computat aevi,
praeteritis fruitur, laetos aut sumit honores
ipse sui judex, actae bene munera vitae;
sed sua regna videns, loca nocte silentia late
horret, ubi vanae species, umbraeque fugaces,
et rerum volitant rarae per invane figurae.

Lines 35-37 were written after the date at the end of the poem and replace
the following cancelled lines:

notior ipse mihi fieri, pectusque fateri
incultum studiis et paucis dotibus auctum
Materies arti, sua desunt arma labori
ingeniunque sui cohibet penuria census.
Nec miratur opes, celsa speculator ab arce
congestas animus, laetos aut sumit honores

The cancelled lines are clear, but I would put a period after auctum and a
comma after arce: ‘... (I am forced) to become better known to myself and
to admit that my mind is not steeped in studies and that it is endowed with
few talents. Material is lacking for my art and tools are lacking for my work,
and the poverty of its gifts is limiting my genius. My mind, looking down from
high above, does not admire any wealth nor does it receive any honours ...’
In this version speculator is obviously an apposition to animus. In the final
version summus dominator is subject; Baldwin translates (p. 78): ‘nor does
the omnipotent master from his tall tower order that whatever daily life
demands for itself from the treasure be present.’ Who is this *dominator*? If it is still *animus*, the contents are strange: how can it be called *summus dominator* and how could it be expected to order money from any treasure? If, on the other hand, *dominator* is the same as *Dominus* ‘the Lord’, we have a hard change of subjects; *animus* is obviously the subject from line 46 (*computat*) on.

Still more difficult is, in my opinion, the form *praeteritis* (47); I cannot see that this ablative makes sense, and I think it is a *lopsus calami* for *praeterita*, going with *serie* (46). This emendation agrees, in fact, with Baldwin’s translation: ‘Its own judge, it does not enjoy the roll of accomplishments from the past as it reckons up the roll of years …’, but Baldwin says nothing about the implied change of *praeteritis* to *praeterita*.

In the critical editions of the poem and in the original (now in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)¹ one can see that these added lines have been rewritten and changed several times; Samuel Johnson obviously had difficulty finding the right formulation. It is my opinion that he never found it.

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¹I thank the librarian A. Mueller for sending me photocopies of the manuscript.
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