Johnson, Sallust, and Translation

In his 1787 biography of Dr Johnson, Sir John Hawkins observed:

Among his papers was found, a translation from Sallust of the *Bellum Catilinarium*, so flatly and insipidly rendered, that the suffering it to appear would have been an indelible disgrace to his memory.1

Finally the interdict has been overturned and the fragment of Johnson's translation has been made public: *Samuel Johnson's Translation of Sallust. A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hyde Manuscript*, edited by David L. Vander Meulen and G. Thomas Tanselle for the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia. It is a journeyman translation made no more agreeable by the transcription with its necessary brackets and dashes and accounts of superscriptions and cancellations—one is reminded of Johnson's comment on footnotes: 'Notes are often necessary but they are necessary evils.' At this point it is not going to affect Johnson's reputation. In any case Hawkins' real intention was not to protect Johnson's memory, but in his rather mean minded and jealous way to highlight Johnson's decline in his last years, to suggest that he was addicted to opium and to cast doubt on his overall ability as a translator:

After he had finished the lives of the poets, Johnson, contemplating the strengths of his mental powers, was so little sensible of any decay in them, that he entertained a design of giving to the world a translation of that voluminous work of Thuanus, the history of his own times, an undertaking surely too laborious for one who had nearly completed the age of man, and whose mind was generally occupied by subjects of greater importance than any that relate to this

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world. But in this estimate of his abilities, he soon found himself deceived. Sleepless nights, and the use of opium, which he took in large quantities, alternately depressed and raised his spirits, and rendered him an incompetent judge of his own powers...

It may farther be questioned whether, upon trial, he would not have found himself unequal to the task of transfusing into an English version the spirit of his author. Johnson's talent was original thinking and though he was ever able to express his own sentiments in nervous language, he did not always succeed in his attempts to familiarize the sense of others...

This really does seem to overlook Johnson's justly admired 'imitations' of Juvenal, London and The Vanity of Human Wishes, but perhaps Hawkins saw them as totally unrelated to their originals.

It is not easy to discover just what Johnson intended for his translation; presumably the rest of the manuscript was burnt with the personal papers which he destroyed in December 1784, and throughout is an indication that he did not intend it for the eyes of posterity. McAdam in his edition of the Diaries Prayers and Annals suggests that he made the translation 'just for amusement,' but this is unlikely. Boswell indeed observes that 'During his sleepless nights he amused himself by translating into Latin verse from the Greek many of the epigrams in the Anthologia', but this was less a matter of 'amusement' than of combating the 'painful and restless' nights which oppressed his old age. Johnson probably wrote very little purely for amusement. He wrote under pressure—'Sometime in March I finished the lives of the Poets, which I wrote in my usual way, dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work, and working with vigour and haste.' And of course we have his famous dictum 'No

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2 Loc. cit.

3 W. Jackson Bate, Samuel Johnson (London 1978) 596.

4 Samuel Johnson, Diaries Prayers and Annals, ed. E.L. McAdam with Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven 1958) 367.


man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.' A more convincing likelihood is that Johnson had contracted to do the translation of Sallust for the booksellers. In his 'Biographical Sketch of Dr Samuel Johnson' in the Gentleman's Magazine, Thomas Tyers notes that the 'Booksellers had other service to offer him' and by including Hawkins' account of the Sallust fragment in his footnote to the passage Birkbeck Hill implies that the Sallust was one of the tasks offered by the Booksellers. Perhaps Johnson saw his translation as a possible crib and thereby achieving a certain longevity, rather like Dr Joseph Trapp's version of Virgil, of which Johnson noted that it 'may continue its existence as long as it is the clandestine refuge of schoolboys'. Another, anonymous comment on Trapp's work is not so generous:

Keep to thy preaching Trapp; translate no further.
Is it not written. 'Thou shalt do no murder'?10

In his 'Scheme for the Classes of a Grammar School' Johnson lists Sallust as essential reading: 'In the study of Latin, it is proper not to read the latter authors, till you are well versed in those of the purest ages; as Terence, Tully, Caesar, Sallust, Nepos, Velleius Paterculus, Virgil, Horace, Phaedrus.'11 Sallust had of course been the staple of grammar schools since the sixteenth century.12 No doubt Johnson also appreciated Sallust for much the same reasons as the Elizabethans, as Whibley has outlined them in his introductions to Heywood's translation: 'Above all, he was likely to win the appreciation of the Elizabethans, because he had, as they had, a constant love of preaching. He delighted in moralities and

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7 Boswell, Life, 731.
11 Boswell, Life, 72.
12 See Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th Edition, 1911, 'Schools'. Sallust appears in the statutes of both Ipswich School in 1528 and Bury St. Edmunds School in 1550.
generalisations. He was always ready to take the past as an example for the present, and to arrive at large, if hasty conclusions in political philosophy.\textsuperscript{13} Most of all he probably admired Sallust for what Sir Ronald Syme has noted as his habit of putting 'personality at the centre of events.'\textsuperscript{14} In \textit{Rambler} No. 60, Johnson praises Sallust's skill in observing how Catiline's inner state was reflected in his walk: 'Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgot, in his account of Cataline, to remark that \textit{his walk was now quick, and again slow}, as an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion.'\textsuperscript{15} In this essay Johnson exalts biography at the expense of history, noting of the latter that 'The general and rapid narratives of history, which involve a thousand fortunes in the business of a day, and complicate innumerable incidents in one great transaction, afford few lessons applicable to private life...'\textsuperscript{16} Whereas: 'Those parallel circumstances and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.'\textsuperscript{17} Some years later in 1759 Johnson again praised biography, this time at the expense not only of history—'The examples and events of history press indeed upon the mind with the weight of truth; but when they are reposed in the memory, they are oftener employed for shew than use, and rather diversify conversation than regulate life'\textsuperscript{18}—but also of fiction: 'from the time of life when fancy begins to be over-ruled by reason


\textsuperscript{14} Ronald Syme \textit{Sallust}, (Berkeley 1964) 51.


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}, 382.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Idler}, No. 84 in \textit{Works}, Vol. 7, 339.
and corrected by experience, the most artful tale raises little curiosity when it is known to be false',¹⁹ and adds, a little later, 'Those relations are therefore commonly of most value where the writer tells his own story.'²⁰ One is not surprised to find him telling Boswell, 'we may know historical facts to be true, as we may know facts in common life to be true. Motives are generally unknown. We cannot trust to the characters we find in history, unless when they are drawn by those who knew the persons; as those, for instance, by Sallust and by Lord Clarendon.'²¹ Sallust, with what Syme has noted as his preoccupation with 'decline and fall',²² and his sharp awareness of 'the whole grim tragedy of Roman history'²³ must have contributed largely to Johnson's views of history as 'but narratives of successive villainies, of treasons and usurpations, massacres and wars'.²⁴ One can see how the author of London with its heartfelt central line: SLOW RISES WORTH BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D would have responded with profound sympathy to Sallust's portrait of Roman society. As Syme brilliantly describes it: 'The social diagnosis of Sallust reveals the dominance of wealth—and its corollary the evil appetites of impoverished aristocrats. It shows how, behind the façade of laws and constitution, there operated 'amicitia' and 'factio' (its other name), how the traditional devices of the nobilitas were now enhanced and perverted from the contest for office, honour and glory into conspiracy against the Commonwealth.'²⁵ Indeed the whole story of Catiline: 'From his youth addicted to Civil dissentions, to Quarrelling, to Cheting and discord: these were merely the humours of his youth. His body could well inure it selfe to undergo Want, Watching, and cold, more

¹⁹ Loc. cit.
²¹ Ibid, 340.
²³ Syme, Sallust, 64.
²⁴ Ibid, 253.
²⁵ Rambler, No. 175 in Works, Vol. 6, 205.
²⁶ Syme, Sallust, 136.
then humane. Bold of Spirit, Subtle, Waywarde, a deep dissembler, greedy of another mans Thrift, Prodigall of his owne: Talkative enough, voide of wisedom, of an high minde, accompanied with desires unsatiable, incredible, too too, ambitious',

could easily have found its way into The Vanity of Human Wishes.

The question that above all exercised the translators of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century was, what was the degree of liberty allowable in translation. Dryden returns to it again and again in his Prefaces, casting doubt on the value of close literal translations. Good translators, he argues 'know very well, that they are not to creep after the words of their author, in so servile a manner as some have done; for that must infallibly throw them on a necessity of introducing a new mode of diction and phraseology with which we are not at all acquainted, and would incur that censure which my Lord Dorset made formerly on those of Mr Spence, viz. that he was so cunning a translator, that a man must consult the original, to understand the version. For every language has a propriety and idiom peculiar to itself, which cannot be conveyed to another without perpetual absurdities.'

As a consequence Dryden dismissed the translators of the previous age: 'They neither knew good verse, nor loved it; they were scholars it is true, but they were pedants; and, for a just reward of their pedantic pains all their translations want to be translated into English.'

What is essential for the writer who wishes to translate well into English, Dryden believes, is above all a critical skill, a skill which is at the same time a social skill: 'The proprieties and delicacies of the English are known to few; it is impossible even for a good wit to understand and practise them, without the help of a liberal education, long reading and digesting of those few good authors we have among us, the knowledge of men and manners, the freedom of habitudes and conversation with the best company

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'Dedication of the Third Miscellany, 1693', in Works, Vol.12, 63.
of both sexes; and, in short, without wearing off the rust which he contracted while he was laying in a stock of learning. Thus difficult it is to understand the purity of English, and critically to discern not only good writers from bad, and a proper style from a corrupt, but also to distinguish that which is pure in a good author, from that which is vicious and corrupt in him... Thus it appears necessary, that a man should be a nice critic in his mother-tongue before he attempts to translate a foreign language."29 The result of this critical insight by the translator is to completely 'possess' the author: 'He ought to possess himself entirely, and perfectly comprehend the genius and sense of his author, the nature of the subject and the terms of the art or subject treated of, and then he will express himself as justly and with as much life, as if he wrote an original...30 This exalted vision of the translator's art may have lain behind Johnson's assertions to Boswell that poetry could not be translated while history might. However in choosing the 'poetical' Sallust, Johnson appears to have disregarded his own advice: 'We talked of translation. I said, I could not define it, nor could I think of a similitude to illustrate it; but that it appeared to me the translation of poetry could be only imitation. Johnson. "You may translate books of science exactly. You may also translate history, in so far as it is not embellished with oratory, which is poetical. Poetry, indeed, cannot be translated..."31 Johnson's views on translation like so many of his critical positions were shaped by Dryden. He continues and expands Dryden's attack on earlier translators and their willing submission to 'the shackles of verbal interpretation.' Observing: 'How much this servile practice obscured the clearest and deformed the most beautiful parts of the ancient authors, may be discovered by a perusal of our earlier versions; some of them the works of men well qualified, not only by critical knowledge, but by poetical genius, who yet, by a mistaken ambition of exactness, degraded at once their originals and themselves.'32 He noted


31 Boswell, Life, 742.
Dryden's insistence on the proper choice of style as being the key to the resemblance which is at the heart of translation, and quotes with approbation his statement 'Translation therefore, is not so loose as paraphrase, nor so close as metaphrase.' But the most powerful consideration for Dryden and Johnson in the end, is the capacity of a translation to please, a requirement in poetry that goes back to Horace. Without eloquence in his own tongue argues Dryden, the translator 'can never arrive at the useful and the delightful; without which reading is a penance and a fatigue.' Johnson's views are most strongly set forth in his sturdy defence of Pope's translation of Homer, against those who decried it as not 'Homerical', as wanting 'his awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected majesty.' For Johnson, the changes in taste over the centuries meant that 'awful simplicity' would no longer do. Virgil found 'the demand for elegance so much increased, that mere nature would be endured no longer.' Between Virgil and Pope the demand increased: 'repletion generates fastidiousness; a saturated intellect soon becomes luxurious, and knowledge finds no willing reception till it is recommended by artificial diction. Thus it will be found, in the progress of learning, that in all nations the first writers are simple and that every age improves in elegance. One refinement always makes way for another, and what was expedient to Virgil was necessary to Pope.' Finally, he concludes 'To a thousand cavils one answer is sufficient; the purpose of a writer is

33 Dryden does not say this, rather he distinguishes between **metaphrase:** 'turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another', **paraphrase:** 'or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered' and **imitation:** 'where the translator (if now he has not lost that 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 divisions on the ground-work, as he pleases'. 'Preface to the Translation of Ovid's Epistles', Works, Vol. 12, 16. Both London and The Vanity of Human Wishes were 'imitations' of Juvenal. The Johnson reference is to 'Dryden', Lives of the Poets, Vol. 1, 437.
34 'Life of Lucian', Works, Vol. 18, 83.
to be read, and the criticism which would destroy the power of pleasing must be blown aside. Pope wrote for his own age and his own nation: he knew that it was necessary to colour the images and point the sentiments of his author; he therefore made him graceful, but lost him some of his sublimity.\textsuperscript{36}

No doubt it was Johnson’s sad awareness that his translation of Sallust was so conspicuously lacking in \textit{elegance} that caused him to consign to the flames all of it save those few pages that have now been published.

D.I.B. Smith
University of Auckland

\hspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid}, 184.