

Agustín Coletes Blanco, *Literary Allusion in Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (Glasgow, 2009). ISBN 1845300602, RRP £12.95.

This study approaches its subject with careful objectivity. Scrupulously researched and reasoned, concisely conveyed, and tightly focused, it follows in the judicious footsteps of Dr. Johnson himself. When the famous travelogue was penned in 1775, Culloden had been, of course, experienced only a generation before. The fear and anger of the reciprocal invasions, battles and horrific reprisals were very much part of living memory, and the author had numerous friends and readers in both Scotland and England. As the reader moves easily, fascinated, through this little ninety-page analysis of Sam Johnson's literary allusions evoked by Scotland, he is struck above all by how balanced the images are, but also by how naturally, relatively inconspicuously and often humorously the learned author was moved to use these literary echoes to supply emphasis and emotion. And in a way that penetratingly observes the Scottish scene without wallowing in either triumphalist self-satisfaction or embittered recriminations. A far and reasoned cry from the smug sense of Augustan superiority that so often has been said to characterize Johnson's view of Scotland.

Consider the question of Scottish emigration, perhaps the issue of the day alluded to with the most visible feeling. On the one hand, Johnson laments it as profoundly misguided, recalling that Julius Caesar had been obliged to save the Helvetii from themselves when they wanted to set off on an impulsive migration to no one knew where. But on the other hand, Johnson refers to the powerful classical quotation to the effect that a conquest that results in a wasteland is no demonstration of enlightened or even effective government. Who is to blame then for the massive emigration? Readers are left to think it through themselves. The stress is on what's to be done in the future, not on stirring up old, sterile resentments. Coletes Blanco respects this approach. At first, the reader wonders

when the author will attempt to interpret for us the tone of the references, what Johnson thought of the implied comparisons, their ‘aesthetic function’, as he puts it in his introduction. Since the allusions reflect some of Johnson’s major themes, wouldn’t it be appropriate to analyze and draw conclusions regarding what the author had to say about them directly, in other passages where he was not making use of literary evocation to heighten the emotion?

Not in Coletes Blanco’s view; if the allusions are “attended with (inevitable) bearings on the text, and even on the genre to which the text arguably belongs, we would at least have played safe” (73). He insists that his principal aim is to demonstrate that this particular travelogue is a literary work. To that end he makes a practice of stopping short of speculation about Johnson’s political opinions and concluding simply that the allusion in question “adds a cultural-literary connotation.” Indeed, he is keenly aware of the warning issued recently by the critic, Gregory Machacek, whose studies of allusions have a lamentable tendency to jump to unwarranted conclusions about the meaning of the text as a whole into which they were inserted. This prudent concern is paramount in Coletes Blanco’s characteristically succinct explanation of why there is a need for his study: “Leaving aside isolated references in footnotes of various editions or in general works, the only study of allusion in the *Journey* seems to be Thomas R. Preston’s 'Homeric Allusion in a Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland', published in 1972 [*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer, 1972), pp. 545-558]. Preston’s article covers a limited field (his conclusions being by contrast rather bold ones!) and is marred by lack of theoretical apparatus and some errors concerning spurs (i.e., the texts alluded to by Johnson)”(5).

Such an approach comes as no surprise when one knows the author’s skills as a meticulous editor, annotator, and translator (into exceptionally nuanced Spanish) of both Johnson’s *Journey* itself and of Lord Byron’s *Mediterranean Letters and Poems*. What

then does Coletes Blanco reliably conclude about the *Journey* as literary text? His “Conclusions” helpfully articulate five points. First and foremost, Johnson’s text is not a Frommer’s guide. It is amply supplied with literary allusions and is a literary text itself, drawing on the emotions and ideas of the literary heritage Johnson shares with his readers to convey in a deeper way his experience of Scotland. Second, the allusions are interconnected because they lead us into his mental world, which has its own inner logic and connections. Third, those deep emotions are rooted in the literary works that Johnson had lived with particular intensity: Shakespeare, the Bible, and above all, the classics. Similarities in material and social culture between Highlanders and ancient Greeks and Romans frequently spring to mind with a life of their own, like dreams to be analyzed and marshaled under the discipline of objectivity. Fourth, Johnson is not using literary allusions to paradigmatic texts of his culture as a way of establishing his intellectual pedigree. Rather, as Coletes Blanco puts it well: “Johnson’s familiarity with the classics and other literatures ... is not manifested in an encyclopaedic or mimetic way ... but with a powerful personal voice and, no less important, looking for reader involvement” (75). Fifth, all the allusions carry out literary ‘microfunctions’ (e.g., validation of personal impressions, observed similarities as metaphors, humorous deflation of one’s own and others’ shortcomings) and so enrich the simple facts of the journey with sunbursts of insight and emotion, lines of poetry, the chording that brings out a melody.

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