

Alan McKenzie 3/6/2023

Making the Wisdom Figure, in Person and in Print

WISE GUYS

Trip kit dinner

Philib Gully

\$70 for person

MONDAY MARCH 20

I begin with a passage full of wisdom:

Every man who proposes to grow eminent by Learning, should carry in his Mind, at once, the Difficulty of Excellence, and the Force of Industry; and remember that Fame is not conferred but as the Recompense of Labour, and that Labour, vigorously continued, has not often failed of its Reward. *Rambler #25*

This passage is by Samuel Johnson, whom The Secretary, with his usual sagacity, cited in his February letter warning you of the topic of this talk. I shall look at "Wisdom" as both noun and adjective, and at "Figure" as both noun and verb, but we should pause to acknowledge the lovely, or perhaps wishful, idea of "growing eminent by Learning."

The wisdom in this passage is in its vocabulary, the hefty, abstract, nouns like "Learning," "Excellence," and "Recompense." Words like these require sturdy syntax, and strong, complex sentences like this one, which is nicely balanced by the semi-colon after "Industry." Johnson provides, perhaps challenges, the reader with weighty ideas, abstract nouns, and complex. *Syntax.*

I do wonder if "wisdom" is one of those nouns with too much meaning to serve as an adjective. Figure, on the other hand, and curiously enough, works very well as either verb or noun: *The wisdom figure figures in this paper.*

Johnson, the "figure" in this instance was as eager to share his wisdom in person as in print, and Boswell was an excellent listener, with a good, retentive, mind, so we can watch Johnson being wise in person, as it were, by putting our minds to the conversations Boswell heard, sometimes provoked, and then put into print.

Johnson always has the human mind in mind:

a man stored his mind better there [London], than any where else; and that in remote situations a man's body might be feasted, but his mind was starved, and his faculties apt to degenerate, from want of exercise and competition. No place, (he said) cured a man's vanity or arrogance so well as London; for as no man was either great or good per se but as compared with others not so good or great, he was sure to find in the metropolis many his equals, and some his superiours.

(Boswell, Life, 438)

So here we have some of Johnson's wisdom in print, put there, in this case, by Boswell, who handed it in text to a printer. We, that is posterity, have it only through the retention and distribution of print, and I daresay we can understand it and appreciate it all the better because we can hold it in our hands and run our minds through it more than once. Johnson himself saw to it that a good many of his other works appeared in print. It seems to me that wisdom requires print, and isn't often to be found on the television screen.

But that particular piece of print wouldn't have reached us without the participation of a good many others, beginning with the enthusiasm of Johnson's friends and admirers and the canniness of the London publishers through a good many years. Unlike, say, Dickens, Johnson's works wouldn't have stayed on the market without the support, interference, and perhaps even authority, of people like me, academics who studied, explained, assigned, and celebrated him—as I am doing here, now. It is we academics who make the wisdom continue to figure, and decide which figures should continue to find readers. It is a responsibility I take seriously, and enjoy.

Those of us who help, perhaps sometimes even force, others to make the wisdom figure, have various ways of doing so, such as: paraphrase, analysis of the vocabulary and structure of parts of a passage, reading aloud, asking others to read aloud, summarizing, and so forth. We make the wisdom available by suggesting various

aspects of it for scrutiny, special attention, comparison with similar, or contradictory, passages elsewhere, and so on. We have to figure out how to understand the passage, and then get others to make their own ways thoughtfully through it by themselves.

There are, of course, various ways to do this. One can single out the economic, sexual, or religious vocabulary and concerns of a whole work, and compare them to the treatment of the same concerns in works of other writers, in other eras, places, or cultures. This is selecting bits of the wisdom and looking elsewhere for similar, or sometimes contradictory, passages. This would be breaking the wisdom into bits--not a wise, smart, or thoughtful thing to do.

One could also stick with a single text, scrutinizing it for passages that are complex, obscure, religious, beautiful, anachronistic, sexist, derived, and so on. In the right circumstances this might produce wisdom.

These ought to be the right circumstances, so let's look at this passage on Stoicism from *Rambler* 32 together, to figure out how much wisdom there is in it, ~~passage~~, where it is, and how well it figures (or, if you prefer, "works"). I expect this to show how much wisdom there is in this room. What are some aspects of the passage on Stoicism in your handout that repay scrutiny?

Thank you for your attention.