

Seminar Model
 "On the Death of Dr Robert Levet" by Samuel Johnson

I	Syllabic / Caesura Count
Condemn'd / to hope's delusive mine,	2 / 6
As on we toil / from day to day,	4 / 4
By sudden blasts, / or slow decline,	4 / 4
Our social comforts / drop away.	5 / 3
II	
Well tried / through many a varying year,	2 / 6
See LEVET / to the grave descend;	3 / 5
Officious, / innocent, / sincere,	3 / 3 / 2
Of ev'ry friendless name / the friend.	6 / 2
III	
Yet still he fills / affection's eye,	4 / 4
Obscurely wise, / and coarsely kind;	4 / 4
Nor, / letter'd arrogance, / deny	1 / 5 / 2
Thy praise / to merit unrefin'd.	2 / 6
IV	
When fainting nature / call'd for aid,	5 / 3
And hov'ring death / prepar'd the blow,	4 / 4
His vig'rous remedy / display'd	6 / 2
The power of art / without the show	4 / 4
V	
In misery's darkest caverns / known,	7 / 1
His useful care / was ever nigh,	4 / 4
Where hopeless anguish / pour'd his groan,	5 / 3
And lonely want / retir'd to die.	4 / 4
VI	
No summons mock'd / by chill delay,	4 / 4
No petty gain / disdain'd by pride,	4 / 4
The modest wants / of ev'ry day	4 / 4
The toil of ev'ry day / supplied.	6 / 2
VII	
His virtues walk'd / their narrow round,	4 / 4
Nor made a pause, / nor left a void;	4 / 4
And sure th'Eternal Master / found	7 / 1
The single talent / well employed.	5 / 3

VIII

The busy day, / the peaceful night,	4 / 4
Unfelt, / uncounted, / glided by;	2 / 3 / 3
His frame was firm, / his powers were bright,	4 / 4
Tho' now his eightieth year / was nigh.	6 / 2

IX

Then / with no throbbing fiery pain,	1 / 7
Nor cold gradations / of decay,	5 / 3
Death broke at once / the vital chain,	4 / 4
And free'd his soul / the nearest way.	4 / 4

Samuel Johnson: The Complete English Poems, ed. J. D. Fleeman (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1982), pp. 139-40.

Notes:

1) What to make of the ambivalence given to the image of the mine, its physical and abstract nature as a suggestive motif: miners are prisoners, isolated from society, are punished by having to dig underground in dark, dangerous caverns; so do all humans by analogy because the human condition is one of unrealised aspirations and existential solitudes. Interweave the comparative implications of restraint, emotional power, the poet's self-control and stern authority.

2) Levet and the metaphor of the worker who is the product of mines: he is 'tried' but 'unrefin'd.' He is no professional doctor. Socially coarse like his patients, he attends to the unenlightened lower class to which he belongs and which mediates his identity. Yet Levet willingly goes down into dark regions of death to befriend the friendless. He paradoxically displays his medical skills that alleviate suffering without superiority or boastfulness. He is known among the nameless. He is no typical professional. He neither mocks nor puts off calls for help. He takes in payment what he needs for his subsistence and what the poor can afford. His virtues were circumscribed but always exercised. His time passed smoothly and without anxiety. Death frees him quickly from the imprisoned human condition. The chain binding body and soul is broken as immediately as conceivable without either fever or lethargy. Undiminished in light; he remains bright to the end.

3) The motif of darkness: Levet is obscurely wise because, working in obscurity, he is not only harmless but effective; he may be illiterate but he is effectual. Whereas death aggravates the dark caverns of the poor, Levet's nights are untroubled as a result of his conscientious palliative actions.

4) Scansion and grammar as style: Note the variable cadences effected by (i) the mobile, flexibly placed cæsuras, creating sound and sense contours for the stanzas and the poem as a whole; (ii) the varying placements of subjects and predicates in stanzas; (iii) the relative suppression of personal pronouns by nominal phrases governed by possessive adjectives; (iv) the reliance on a range of syntactic inversions and ellipses [See stanza VI especially for the latter]. The poem's apparent traditional and seemingly conventional forms are beautiful illusions on account of Johnson's skills.

5) The run-ons (that extend sense units over two lines) at the end of the third lines in stanzas III, splitting predicate [ie. dividing direct object from verb], IV [ditto], and VI, splitting subject from predicate. The run-on in VII divides verb from direct object and object complement. Note the coordination that extends the third into the fourth line of stanza IX, giving rhythmic acceleration to the compound sentence. Wonderful syntactic variety.

6) The ironical adaptation of the biblical parable of the talents in Matthew 25: 18-30 with its implications of profound earthiness/worldliness. In Christ's story the lord who issues talents to his servants is not necessarily a reference by analogy to the supreme deity. Johnson's version pretends to speak to the creator against the thrust of Christ's parable on behalf of the dead doctor. Levet, like everyone, digs in the earth; in a sense he hides his lord's money; but unlike the third servant in the parable he is not fearful or slothful. He is far from being an unprofitable servant because he enters voluntarily into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Levet, if not a personable or sociable individual, may have had only one talent, but in putting it into the ground of despair and pain, he exerted it to the full and to the end of a useful life.

7) Questions: (i) what to make of the images of slow and sudden motion and extended and quick time in the calculated and highly measured rhythms of the stanzas; (ii) how is it that, while Levet is presented as a mundane individual, as an unheroic and even ignoble person, he is rendered exceptional by the scansion and the grammar; (iii) note Johnson's deployment of formal and thematic contraries throughout so that Levet's individuality is de-emphasized by the grammar and rhetoric while these also render him a modest but fit subject for an elegy?

