
RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

environmental fluctuations that damage crops.

This need was demonstrated by America's 1970 "corn blight": 90 percent of the U.S. corn varieties carried the same disease-prone gene. Since then, a landrace of barley from Turkey that resists yellow dwarf disease has saved U.S. farmers \$150 million a year. A new, more digestible soybean variety from Korean germplasm may save them \$100 to \$500 million a year in heat-processing costs.

The authors propose a compromise to end the seed war: Create a global network of gene banks (where germplasm is stored in a climate-controlled atmosphere) and a "gene fund" to be managed by the FAO. Western nations would contribute according to, say, the size of their seed industries. The money could be spent to conserve global plant resources and train Third World breeders to produce commercial germplasm, too.

The "common heritage" notion is no longer politically workable, say the authors. Western nations must recognize that fact—or return to a native diet of sunflowers, Jerusalem artichokes, cranberries, raspberries, chestnuts, oats, and rye.

ARTS & LETTERS

Johnson's Vision

"Samuel Johnson and the Art of Observation" by Ian Donaldson, in *ELH* (Winter 1986), The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Journals Publishing Div., 701 West 40th St., Ste. 275, Baltimore, Md. 21211.

Samuel Johnson (1709–84), the renowned English essayist, lexicographer, poet, and conversationalist, often scoffed at his countrymen's consuming love for foreign travel and exploration. Mere observation had "very little of intellectual" in it, he complained; scholarship and inward reflection were better paths to knowledge.

Not surprisingly, his own writing skimmed on eyewitness detail. One reader of *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* suggested angrily that Dr. Johnson must have "passed the Bridge of Don with [his] eyes shut." More sympathetic critics surmised that Johnson's poor eyesight, rather than somnambulance, marred his descriptive powers. (As a child, Johnson recalled crossing the road to school on his hands and knees; in later life, he often burned his wig reading too close to his candle.)

Certainly, "Blinking Sam" (as the Romantics called him) had his blind spots, concedes Donaldson, a professor at the Australian National University. Johnson failed entirely to appreciate painting, for example; he felt it could "illustrate" but not "inform."

But to fault him for insensitivity to the world around him misses the point. "The business of a poet," explains Johnson's alter ego in the novella *Rasselas*, is to examine "general properties and large appearances" rather than "the streaks of the tulip." By assuming a philosophical perspective, Johnson made a virtue of necessity.

Sickly and uncoordinated, Johnson professed a distaste for travel that

ARTS & LETTERS

belied his keen appetite for news of faraway discoveries: One night in 1773 his startled companions watched him jump up, gather the tails of his huge brown coat to resemble a pouch, crook his hands forward, and bound across the room. Naturalist Sir Joseph Banks had just returned from Australia with a description of the kangaroo.

As a writer and thinker, however, Johnson looked inward for inspiration. His visual myopia served as a metaphor for mankind's mental myopia: "We see a little, very little; and what is beyond we only can conjecture," remarks the speaker in *Adventurer*.

Exploration and adventure are the foils by which Johnson's characters typically discover the folly of their hopes. In *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, the travelers seeking truth and happiness are all the more disappointed for having looked "from China to Peru."

Just before he died, Johnson inspected the three-volume new edition of Cook's and King's *Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. "Who will read them through?" he demanded testily. One "set of Savages" was "like another." The stirrings of the civilized soul—now *there* was cause for wonder.

Natural Skyscrapers

"Naturalized Technology: Louis H. Sullivan's Whitmanesque Skyscrapers" by Lauren S. Weingarden, in *The Centennial Review* (Fall 1986), 110 Morrill Hall, Michigan State Univ., East Lansing, Mich. 48824-1036.

In 1886, the young Boston architect Louis Henry Sullivan stumbled upon an edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. "You then and there entered my soul," wrote Sullivan to his new-found hero, "have not departed, and never will depart." Never shy, he enclosed a few (dreadful) verses of his own. Whitman did not write back.

Many architectural critics have played down the symbolic content of Sullivan's work, says Weingarden, an assistant professor at Florida State University. But Sullivan vehemently upheld it: "I am a poet who uses not words but building materials as a medium of expression."

Like Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, Sullivan assigned himself the great 19th-century dilemma: how to integrate industrial "progress with a national identity rooted in the pastoral ideal." Whitman's poetic solution was to invoke opposing voices—the objective, masculine self linked to progress, the subjective, feminine self to nature—and blend them in a harmonious song to the "Kosmos."

As a pioneering architect of skyscrapers, Sullivan saw this poetic task from a builder's perspective: "Form Follows Function," the dictum he became famous for, referred to the aesthetic and symbolic functions to which the actual structure (form) must adhere. "How," as he put it, "shall we impart to this sterile pile, this crude, harsh, . . . stark, staring exclamation of eternal strife, . . . this strange, weird, modern housetop" the "graciousness of those higher forms of sensibility and culture that rest on lower and fiercer passions?"

His most Whitmanesque skyscraper, the 16-story Guaranty Building in Buffalo, N.Y. (1894-95), creates a unified visual impression while remain-