CHAPTER - VI
PROSE STYLE

Both Johnson and Scott are great masters of prose style. Johnson’s prose style is generally considered to be vigorous and forceful. He was the master of the art of conversation and this skill is clearly reflected in his prose style. He has numerous critics who have criticized several of the features of his style. They say that Johnson uses lengthy words for short ones and abstract ideas for concrete concepts. In the *Lives* he gives up mannerisms and writes as easily and lucidly as he talked. Indeed, Johnson’s style has the merits and defects of scholarship.

Scott is equally great a prose writer. He is among the greatest men of letters of all times. He wrote both in prose and verse with equal skill. He continues to occupy the high place he achieved during his own lifetime. Of the many ingredients of the art and craft of fiction writing, Style is an important ingredient. Scott had faults in his style but, despite these, he is
liked and loved by his readers. Scott's *Lives* is the epitome of the merits of his prose style.

It is truly said that style is the man. According to Pater, the true literary artist pays great attention to words, and disciplines himself to find in each so much value as it is fitted to hold. He will tolerate no short-cuts and no hackneyed illustrations. He strains hard to find the right word. Every writer's style bears the imprint of his mind and soul. About the reflection of a writer's personality in his style B. R. Mullik observes:

Thus the personality of the artist cannot but affect his style, but the great artist attains perfection in his style after having worked on it for long and with much effort, that in course of time it looks so natural that we do not feel the presence of the artist in it. (*Essays* 53)

Johnson wrote *Lives* in an easy manner but the result is a great work of literary criticism which is equally great in its style. Arthur Waugh describes his style as uniformly animated,
witty and picturesquely incisive. He goes on to say that the work is a great literary document of prose and reason. The credit goes to the personality and art of Johnson. Waugh writes:

These *Lives* form the Record Office of the literature of that golden ‘age of prose and reason’ – a treasure – house where nothing is faded or musty or of tedious import, but every page alight with wit and wisdom and understanding. (Johnson, *Live IX*)

On the other hand, Scott’s prose style is marked by poetic quality and an obvious aura of history. One finds an endless variety in his style. The various dialects of towns and shires of different social layers or of different individuals are employed. This lends a special originality to his style. Due to this his characters look more real than those even of Shakespeare. Very often his language is nearer to that of the poetic drama than of the novel. He is indeed, a lyric orator in prose. Scott’s interest in history is another guiding factor in his style. He uses such words as were employed in the medieval ages. His style appears to be old-fashioned, but it is never without a clear touch of
modernity. He uses many shades and varieties of style. His task was difficult and he did not receive, in prose-writing, a tradition to guide or help him. Scott's language is suffused with humour, irony and banter. It comes as well from his common people as from his person, of quality and serves to link all classes together and makes for naturalness and gaiety. His narratives are the inevitable expression of his temperament. They are genuinely romantic, not subtly so, not deeply so, but alive with the colour and movement of bygone times. He breathed the past. It is with history that he feels at home. In his Lives he shows a keen interest in the past as well as in the heart of a poet.

Johnson is reputed as a great lexicographer. He is a master of the art of the use of words. His Dictionary is unique of its kind. In 1746, a group of publishers approached Johnson about creating an authoritative dictionary of the English language. Johnson's dictionary was not the first, nor was it unique. It was, however, the most commonly used and imitated for the 150 years between its first publication and the
completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928. His mastery of words enables him to use them in the most forceful manner. He regarded language as a powerful medium of finding out the truth. In this respect Robert Demaria, Jr. aptly remarks:

> Despite its attempts to present knowledge with moral and religious overtones, and in spite of its attempts to make language more ideal, the *Dictionary* must also be seen as an expression of Johnson’s life-long interest in empirical, historically verifiable truth. (*Dictionary* 100)

Johnson not only finds out the truth but also communicates it in powerful language. The force of this language makes it look sometimes rough and ruthless but the fact is that he is fully in control of it and uses it for the noble purpose of delivering the truth. The following remark on Crowley’s diction and sentiments contains a universal truth which becomes memorable due to its sheer force:

> The diction shews nothing of the mould of time, and the sentiments are at no great distance from our
present habitudes of thought. Real mirt hmust be always natural, and nature is uniform. Men have been wise in very different modes; but they have always laughed the same way. (Johnson, Lives 32)

It is generally believed that Johnson is a ruthless critic who criticizes almost everyone in scathing terms, but the reality is that Johnson is equally liberal in his recognition of greatness as well as in his praises. In the following words he describes Milton's lofty purpose in his writing. His writing was meant for the upliftment of menkind. The following words are a fitting tribute to the great epic poet:

The purpose of Milton, as it seems, was to teach something more solid than the common literature of Schools, by reading those authors that treat of physical subjects; such as the Geogrick, and astronomical treatises of the ancients. This was a scheme of improvement which seems to have busied many literary projectors of that age. (72)
A great merit of Johnson in the eyes of critics is that he is a great talker. Although he is often dominating, he never ceases to be a great conversationalist. As one reads the Lives, one feels as if talking to a friend who is dominating but always correct. David Daiches remarks in this connection:

Thanks largely to James Boswell's Life, Johnson is remembered more as a great personality and a great talker than as a poet or critic. Johnson was indeed a great talker though often a dominating one who would "talk for victory". (History 794)

Several of Johnson's statements sound like proverbs. He believes that poets are generally interested in fiction but they must never be unmindful of the truth. They must not flatter great men. They must always speak the truth. They must never lose their dignity in the glitter of flattery. The following lines are from the "Life of Waller":

Poets, indeed, profess fiction; but the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth; and he that has flattery ready for all whom the vicissitudes of the
world happen to exalt, must be scorned as a prostituted mind that may retain the glitter of wit, but has lost the dignity of virtue. (Johnson, *Life* 186)

Johnson is always frank and candid. He is never swayed by the false aura of a poet. Writing about William Walsh he says that he was a man of fashion. He was a Member of Parliament. He had a friend circle of noted men and it contributed largely to his fame as a writer. In brief, he did nothing remarkable and wrote nothing lasting:

He is known more by his familiarity with greater men, than by anything done or written by himself. His works are not numerous. In prose he wrote *Eugenia, a Defence of Women*; which Dryden honoured with a Preface. (234)

With all his greatness, Dryden was susceptible to human weaknesses. Johnson criticises him for his catering to the popular taste. Swift also suffered from this weakness. They were subjected to severe criticism in their own time. In the
following words Johnson sees this weakness in the wider perspective of human nature:

But let it be remembered, that minds are not leveled in their powers but when they are first leveled in their desires. Dryden and Settle had both placed their happiness in the claps of multitudes. (246)

Johnson is absolutely free in his thinking. As a biographer it is his effort to be free from all prejudices. His frankness often created enemies for him but he never lost his freedom of thought. He praises Smith for his freedom of thought. In fact, he himself regarded it the best merit in a writer and always tried to achieve and maintain it:

And therefore, though his want of complaisance for some men's overbearing vanity made him enemies, yet the better part of mankind were obliged by the freedom of his reflections. (349)

As a critic Johnson is clear in his views. Writing about Sprat, he says that he is concerned only with his poems. It is clear that he was more interested in appreciating poetry than in
finding faults with men. Sprat regarded Cowley as his ideal and made his best efforts to imitate him in the best possible manner:

My business is only with his poems. He considered Cowley as a model; and supposed that as he was imitated perfection was approached. Nothing therefore but Pindarik liberty was to be expected.

(375)

Johnson is bold in his views as well as in his prose style. His use of language shows the weight of his personality. Sometimes it appears as if language reels under the burden of his formidable personality. But one thing is clear that he is a man of kindly wisdom. He is a powerful thinker whose sympathies are well expressed in his language. Arthur Waugh mentions these qualities of Johnson in these words:

He is a master of expression, and a prophet of kindly wisdom. Above all, he shows in every thought and reflection the full orbed quality of a powerful and manly character, a typical Englishman.
of a strenuous and true hearted generation. (XIV-
XV)

Due to his merits and demerits, he got a somewhat poor response from his readers in the beginning but as they got acquainted with the peculiarities of his style as well as of his personality, they could easily see the truth inside. In the following lines he describes how Congreve’s last play *The Way of the World* was poorly received. Johnson himself might have felt the same kind of shock in his own time:

> From this time his life ceased to be publick; he lived for himself and for his friends; and among his friends was able to name every man of his time whom wit and elegance had raised to reputation. It may be therefore reasonably supposed that his manners were polite, and his conversation pleasing.

(28)

Johnson’s prose style has been variously termed as manly and straightforward, distinct, individual, heavy and ponderous, full of mannerisms, vigorous and forceful, wearisome and lucid.
Indeed, Johnson's style has the merits and defects of scholarship. He seldom uses language which is either empty or inexact. He always uses it with a scholar's pride. Steven Lynn remarks:

Whatever aspect of Johnson's work is being examined (style, audience effect, referential accuracy), these elements seem to be referred back to Johnson himself: they reveal Johnson the man, and they are explained by Johnson the man.

(Critical 243)

Scott was a born story-teller and had that delightful knack of improvisation which is the secret of all good story telling. He did not see an old tower or a stream without instantly conjuring up its old-world associations Gifted with this creative energy of imagination, he made the reader also feel the glamour of places and the actuality of the past. In his Lives, he draws his characters in full size. He successfully describes their character and temperament. In the following lines the reader comes across the straightforward nature of Jonathan Swift:
The Dean’s temper, while he was its master, was strictly economical, but the reverse of avaricious. He gave to the uttermost of his power, but he suffered no advantage to be taken of him. This was for a time an obstacle to his popularity; for the vulgar are always inclined to praise an easy and indifferent temper, in preference even to liberality, when meted forth by the severe test of merit. (Scott, *Lives* 176)

His biographical sketches read like complete stories. The reader gets the pleasure of reading a short story or a novella. He describes the circumstances of each writer in clear detail. In the following lines he describes how Samuel Richardson became an apprentice to a printer, which brought him in close connection with literature:

His father had nourished some ambitious views of dedicating young Richardson to the ministry, but, as his circumstances denied him the means of giving him necessary education, Samuel was destined to
that profession most nearly connected with literature, and was bound apprentice to Mr. John Wilde of Stationers Hall. (385)

On the one hand Scott tells stories in an interesting manner and, on the other; he never loses the approach of a competent critic. He notices the failures of writers with the critical eye. He also explores the causes of these failures. In the following lines he describes how Fielding failed as a dramatist. Fielding was fit only for writing novels.

During his theatrical career, Fielding, like most authors of the time, found it impossible to interest the public sufficiently in the various attempts which he made to gain popular favour, without condescending to flatter their political animosities. Two of his dramatic pieces, "Pasquin" and "The Historical Register", display great acrimony against Sir Robert Walpole, from whom, in the year 1730, he had in vain sought for patronage. (424)
Another example is that of Tabias Smollett's failure as a physician. He tried his hand at the profession but failed because of his non-nonsense manners. He was impatient with his female patients and so he became very unpopular among them:

One account says, that he failed to render himself agreeable to his female patients, certainly not from want of address or figure, for both were remarkably pleasing but more probably by a hasty impatience of listening to petty complaints, and a want of sympathy with the lamentations of those who laboured under no real indisposition. (441)

Writing about Richard Cumberland Scott says that he was a respectable man like his ancestors. He wanted to live a peaceful life. His interests were diversified. He was more interested in literature and politics than in divinity. In the following words Scott presents a just assessment of a man who was to make a mark in the literature of his age:

Mr. Cumberland's original destiny was to have walked the respectable and retired path by which
his ancestors had ascended to Church dignity; and there is every reason to believe, that, as he was their equal in worth and learning, his success in life might have been the same as theirs. But a temptation, difficult to be resisted, turned him from the study of divinity to that of politics. (469)

Scott keenly observes the merits and demerits of the personalities of great writers. According to him Goldsmith was a man of quite unimpressive personality. He was short and his face was full of the marks of smallpox. But a keen observer could easily detect a thinking mind in him. The following lines praise a man who was outwardly unimpressive but inwardly a thinking soul:

The personal features of Dr. Goldsmith were rather unfavourable. He was a short stout man, with a round face, much marked with the smallpox, and a low forehead, which is represented as projecting in a singular manner. Yet these ordinary features were
marked by a strong expression of reflection and of observation. (497)

Scott is a sensitive writer who captures the pathos of the lives of various writers. His sympathies are clearly expressed in his words. Writing about Johnson he points out that the giant had to face great difficulties in the beginning of his career. When he arrived in London, he found the city full of rich fools. He had to work hard to earn his bread as well as to establish himself as a writer. The following words describe this difficult phase of the giant's life:

There is little doubt, that upon his outset in London, Johnson felt in full force the ills which assail the unprotected scholar, whose parts are yet unknown to the public, and who must write at once for bread and for distinction. (501)

Describing the features of the prose style of Laurence Sterne; Scott observes that it is full of contradictory features. On the one hand it is ornamented and on the other forceful and animated. It is capable of expressing the fine feelings of the
heart. Sterne was a great original genius as well as a great plagiarist. The following lines bring to light the fact that Scott praised a vigorous and animated style full of human sensitivity:

In the power of approaching and touching the finer feelings of the heart, he has never been excellent, if indeed he has ever been equalled; and may be at once recorded as one of the most affected, and one of the most simple of writers, - as one of the greatest plagiarists, and one of the most original geniuses, whom England has produced. (521)

Scott’s language is more poetic than that of Johnson. He analyses the works of literature with a poet’s heart. Although he writes the biographical sketches of novelists, he is always poetic in his approach. About Mackenzie, he says that his major aim is to bring out the moral pathos of human life. His greatness lies in his successful delineation of the human heart. In fact, Scott himself is a great delineator of the human heart:

But all these powerful talents, any single one of which might have sufficed to bring men of more
bounded powers into notice, have been by Mackenzie carefully subjected to the principal object which he proposed to himself, the delineation of the human heart. (530)

Scott immediately finds out the objective of a writer in his works. While Mackenzie was a delineator of the human heart, Walpole is a creator of surprise and terror. He takes his readers back to rude ages. The reader clearly perceives the sympathy of Scott for Mackenzie:

It was, therefore, the author's object, not merely to excite surprise and terror, by the introduction of supernatural agency, but to windup the feelings of his reader till they became for a moment identified with those of a ruder age. (540)

Johnson is definitely superior to Scott as a critic but the remarkable fact is that at several times Scott is found equally skilled in the task of a critic. He can bring to light the weaknesses of even the greatest writers. His use of language is such as creates a special effect and gives an extra edge to his
criticism. Writing about Clara Reeve, he says that her major fault is that she often judges the supernatural by the rules of the mundane realities:

We must, however, notwithstanding her authority, enter our protest against fettering the realm of shadows by the opinions entertained of it in the world of realities. If we are to try ghosts by the ordinary rules of humanity, we bar them of their privileges entirely. (547)

Writing about Mrs. Ann Radcliffe Scott comes to the conclusion that she had her own weaknesses. As a writer of romance she introduced such things as were superficial. Her works do not appeal to the human feeling as they should have done. She reduced the novel to the level of a drama being reduced to a melodrama:

The species of romance which Mrs. Radcliffe introduced, bears nearly the same relation to the novel that the modern anomaly entitled a melodrama does to the proper drama. It does not
appeal to the judgment by deep delineations of human feeling. (562)

About Alain Rene Le Sage, Scott observes that his work *Gil Blas de Santillane* is a work of rare literary worth. The first three volumes establish it as a work of exceptional originality. He contradicts the charges of plagiarism. He criticises the critics in forceful terms. He says that it is the habit of critics to frame charges of plagiarism wherever there is some resemblance to some earlier work. The force of the following words is noticeable:

Le Sage's claim to originality, in this delightful work, has been idly, I had almost said ungratefully, contested by those critics who conceive they detect a plagiarist wherever they see a resemblance in the general subject of a work to one which has been before treated by an inferior artist. (588)

If Scott is scathing in his criticism, he is equally forceful and liberal in his appreciation of merit. He regards Robert Bage as a man of extraordinary genius. He worked against all odds.
He was good humoured and capable of facing difficulties. The following words clearly indicate to the fact that Scott is quite profuse in his applause:

The communication is extremely interesting, and the extracts from Bage’s letters show, that amidst the bitterness of political prejudices, the embarrassment of commercial affairs, and all the teasing technicalities of business, the author of “Barham Downs” still maintained the good humoured gaiety of his natural temper. (605)

In the eighteenth century Swift was a master of a prose style that is simple and direct. It is highly malleable and flexible. It has got its own rhythm. Addison is another great name of this period. He wrote in a clear, simple and effective style. By bringing prose as near as possible to speech, he built it up as definite art form. About the prose style of Dr. Johnson, B. R. Mullik makes the following apt remark:
Dr. Johnson set a model of prose style which had rhythm, balance and lucidity, and which could be practised with profit. (Essays 275-276)

Johnson's prose is not without poetic quality. At times it acquires poetic dimensions quite successfully. Describing the private habits of Addison, he points out that after leaving coffee houses he took the habit of heavy drinking. In his drunken state he found himself on a high which enabled him to write great prose:

From the coffee-house he went again to a tavern, where he often sat late, and drank too much wine. In the bottle discontent seeks for comfort, cowardice for courage, and bashfulness for confidence. (Johnson, Lives 426)

Both the writers have their points of superiority. While Johnson is loaded with erudition Scott is free from this burden. So far as their language is concerned, Johnson's is elevated while Scott's is simpler and more down-to-earth. In the poetic quality Scott is definitely superior. So far as the critical
insight is concerned, Johnson is clearly superior to Scott. The structure of sentences is also simpler with Scott. It appears as if the Sacred Muse has favoured both with different gifts. In the following lines, Scott praises Cumberland for his treatment of lofty subjects. It appears as if the lines are for both Johnson and Scott who treated lofty subjects in their own ways:

The Sacred Muse shared with her dramatic sisters in Cumberland's worship. In his poem of "Calvary," he treated of a subject which, notwithstanding Klopstock's success, may be termed too lofty and too awful to be the subject of verse. (Scott, Lives 480)

Every writer's work reflects his own personality. While we read Johnson, we see him sitting before us and writing powerful words. With our mental eye, we see Scott writing for the pleasure of his readers. In the following lines Scott says that the present generation can clearly see Johnson's formidable personality in his works:
But with respect to Dr. Johnson, this has been in some degree accomplished; and, although the present generation never saw him, yet he is, in our mind’s eye, a personification as lively as that of Siddons in Lady Macbeth, or Kemble in Cardinal Wolsey. (500)

Critics have found faults with Johnson’s style. They regard it as ponderous. It involves a large number of Latin words. Johnson doubles epithets, adds illustrations, develops, expands, modifies, balances, repeats and exhausts the idea before he will have done with it. His sentences are complicated. They are loaded with rhetorical artifices. His manner is always elaborate. Although he could be simple and colloquial, he is often burdensome. But with all these weaknesses he is a unique writer of English prose Moody and Lovett point out about his innovations:

He introduced a greater variety of effect, a more complex sentence structure, and a more copious diction. He showed how, even within the rules of
composition defined in practice by Dryden and Addison, the richness and variety of Elizabethan prose might be attempted. *(History 219)*

Johnson's style, like his personality, is full of contradictory features. While his detractors condemn him for his weaknesses, his followers find great inspiration for him. He has exerted a greater influence on his followers than another man of letters. In the following lines, W. E. Simonds summarises the salient features of his genius which are clearly reflected in his style:

Observer, moralist and critic; ponderous, sententious, irascible, domineering, honest old Doctor Johnson, the dictator in literary art for his generation less read perhaps, than any other great writer of that century and yet better known to posterity than any other eighteenth century essayist. *(History 281)*

It is not easy to make judicious comments on a writer's prose style. It is generally believed that poetry is more difficult
than prose but the fact is that almost every one can say something about a poem while only a few can make appropriate critical comments on someone’s prose style. The famous critic Marjorie Boulton makes the following remark about the difficulty of judging a prose style:

Poetry is usually more intense than prose, often more subtle; many people who never read poetry have a habit of prose reading; but it is probably easier to learn to say at least something about a poem than to learn to make intelligent comments on a prose style. (Anatomy I)

In order to appreciate a writer’s style one has to have a full understanding of his personality and literary merits. While Johnson’s greatness lies in his scholarship and critical acumen. Scott’s greatness is in his basic human interests and in his ability to reconstruct history. Harry Blamires points out:

It might be argued that Scott is at his best when basic human interests are fused with and not submerged under the reconstruction of history. (History 311)