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Alexander Pope

The Evolution of a Poet

Netta Murray Goldsmith

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Alexander Pope by Michael Dahl, *c.* 1727. From the collection of the Earl of Pembroke, Wilton House

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In memory of Ernest

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library.
Corr.	*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956).
PRO	Public Records Office.
Spence	Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed J. M. Osborn, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966).
TW	*Poems of Alexander Pope*, The Twickenham Edition (London: Methuen and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938–69). I *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (1961); II *The Rape of the Lock*, ed Geoffrey Tillotson, 3rd edn (1962); III-i *An Essay on Man*, ed Maynard Mack (1950); III-ii *Epistles to Several Persons*, ed F. W. Bateson, 2nd edn (1961), IV *Imitations of Horace*, ed John Butt, 3rd edn (1961); V *The Dunciad*, ed James Sutherland, 3rd edn (1963); VI *The Minor Poems*, ed Norman Ault, completed John Butt, 3rd edn (1964); VII–VIII *The Translations: The Iliad*, ed Maynard Mack et al. (1967); IX–X *The Translations: The Odyssey*, ed Maynard Mack et al. (1967); XI *Index Volume*, ed Maynard Mack (1969). This edition has been used for all quotations from the poems, except where otherwise stated in the notes.

General Editor's Preface

Studies in Early Modern English Literature

The series focuses on literary writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its objectives are to examine the individuals, trends, and channels of influence of the period between the Renaissance and the rise of Romanticism. During this period the English novel was invented, poetry began to tackle its unsteady relationship with non-literary discourse, and post-Shakespearean drama reinvented itself.

Alongside studies of established figures, the series will include books on important but lesser-known writers and those who are acknowledged as significant but given slight attention: typically, William Cartwright, James Shirley, John Denham, Edmund Waller, Isaac Watts, Matthew Prior, William D'Avenant, Mark Akenside and John Dyer. Also of particular interest are studies of the development of literary criticism in this period, monographs which deal with the conditions and practicalities of writing – including the practices of the publishing trade and financial and social circumstances of writing as a profession – and books which give special attention to the relationship between literature and other arts and discourses.

Monographs on a variety of writers and topics will be accepted; authors are invited to combine the best traditions of detailed research with astute critical analysis. The use of contemporary theoretical approaches will be acceptable, but every book will be founded upon historical, biographical and textual scholarship.

Professor Richard Bradford,
University of Ulster

Preface

Three biographies of Alexander Pope were written in the last century. The first two, George Sherburn's in 1934 and Peter Quennell's in 1968 did not say what happened to their subject after 1728. Only Maynard Mack's *Alexander Pope: A Life* was fully comprehensive, going from the poet's birth in 1688 until his death in 1744. In telling Pope's story again, I have also covered the whole period and, like Mack and Sherburn I have discussed the poet's work as well as his actions as a man. In other respects however my book is somewhat different from its predecessors.

In it I have attempted a relatively new approach to literary biography. You could call this study a psychobiography, except that it does not put the poet on a psychoanalyst's couch. Instead it makes use of recent research into creativity. Human creativity is an intriguing subject which currently interests a varied group of men and women, including geneticists, biologists, sociologists and computer scientists, as well as psychologists. One reason they are interested is that we are all of us creative, whilst occasionally there appears amongst us that mysterious phenomenon, a creative genius, such as Pope. When I say Pope was a genius, I am recalling Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* definition of one as 'a man endowed with superior faculties'. Modern psychologists have identified a number of features we can expect to find in the personalities of these rare individuals.

There are two primary aims in this biography. The first has been to bring Pope the man clearly before our eyes. Bearing in mind the observations of researchers into creativity enables us to see Pope in relation to his intellectual peers and so understand his complex and often perplexing character.

The second aim has been to show how it was that Pope succeeded so triumphantly as a poet in his own lifetime, becoming celebrated throughout the Western world. Admittedly he was endowed with a high degree of linguistic ability, but most of us have come across gifted people who have never achieved anything of value. Pope could have used his verbal facility to hold forth brilliantly in taverns and coffee houses, without ever writing a line. Mere genius is not enough. Furthermore, given that he had the necessary character traits, as well as the talent, to be a poet, he might yet have suffered the fate of the many creative geniuses who are unrecognized until after they are dead – had it not been for the way he related with his society.

The relationship between a creative genius and society has interested several modern researchers. One of these is the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi who argues that genius is in the eye of the beholder. To be more precise, he has formulated a theory, known as the Systems Perspective, to explain how a creative work comes to be recognized. Recognition is all because without it the public does not realize the work exists.

Csikszentmihalyi's starting point in *Creativity: Flow and the Discovery and Invention* (1996) is to ask not 'What is creativity, but where is it'? He locates it in a system that has three parts. The first part is the Domain, the body of knowledge and rules an individual must learn before he or she can contribute to it. The second part is the Field, which includes the institutions and judges who decide whether the individual's work is of value. Csikszentmihalyhi calls these experts the Gatekeepers. In the case of a writer they are usually the editors and critics. Finally, the third component in the Systems Perspective is the individual. Creativity occurs when the individual has a new idea or sees a new pattern and this is accepted by the Gatekeepers in the Field for inclusion in the Domain. Csikszentmihalyi, who often writes about scientists, stresses originality as a distinguishing feature of true creativity.

R. Ochse, however, in *Before the Gates of Excellence: the determinants of creative genius* (1990), points out that in the Arts the new idea or pattern is not necessarily so dramatic as it is in the Sciences. Originality can occur within an existing tradition without causing a major shift and he gives Bach and Mozart as examples. With Ochse's proviso, Pope's career is a copybook illustration of how the Systems Perspective works.

Csikszentmihalyi's theory has been endorsed and developed by other psychologists, including Howard Gardner and Howard Gruber, writing about great scientists and artists of all kinds. Both these men have also helped me in tracing the pattern of Pope's career.

In *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity* (1993), Howard Gardner points out that creative people normally look for allies and support groups among people who will encourage them and with whom they can share their ideas. Thinking about Pope, it seemed to me that for him support groups were particularly important. He had two kinds. From the first kind, such as the Scriblerus Club where he met Swift and Gay, he looked for literary encouragement. From the second kind, consisting of his VIP friends, he looked for the political protection he needed as a vulnerable Papist and suspected Jacobite subversive.

Pope also devised umpteen, varied methods for dealing with his enemies – he is famous for it. But he was not alone in this. Howard Gruber in *Darwin on Man: A Psychological Study of Scientific Creativity* (1974), has described his subject taking immense pains to forestall and circumvent his opponents.

However, Pope had a much clearer idea than many creative people have of how important the Field is and he tried to influence it. Indeed he became a Gatekeeper himself, decreeing the literary standards for his era.

Looking at Pope in the light of what modern psychologists have to say about creativity enables us to place him, with all his good and bad points, along with Darwin, Freud, Einstein, Stravinsky and T.S. Eliot, in which, different as the members of that family are, you can still see that they are kin.

As well as being indebted to the psychologists, I owe a great deal to Pope

scholars, as the notes to this book will show. There are so many of these that it is impossible to mention them all here but I would like to pay my personal tribute to Maynard Mack who died in 2001 after a long and distinguished career. Presiding over a golden age in American scholarship which he helped to create, he, more than anyone else, has added to my understanding of Pope.

Because Maynard Mack included every known fact about the poet in his 1985 biography of him, I have felt free to be selective in my shorter book, concentrating on those aspects of his life that show his evolution as a creative artist, rather than include every detail about him. Nor have I made any new discoveries. Not even Maynard Mack was able to do that, apart from revealing a few letters from the unidentified female admirer of the poet who called herself Amica. The ground has now been gone over so thoroughly that one suspects that only serendipity – the chance discovery in an attic or provincial record office – will produce fresh information.

I do however offer various hypotheses about aspects of Pope's life that still remain obscure and hope these will be considered worthy of consideration, while my interpretation of those poems I discuss is, for better or worse, my own.

The staff of the British Library, the Cambridge University Library and the London Library have, as ever, dealt courteously and patiently with my many enquiries. At the CUL I am especially grateful to Neil Hudson of the Periodicals Department, who went to Addenbrooke's Hospital and found a newly published paper on Pope's medical condition for me.

It seemed at first that collecting illustrations for this book might prove complicated. However any difficulties that arose were resolved smoothly by James Kilvington of the National Portrait Gallery, as well as by Sibylle Beck, Melanie Blake and Barbara Thompson of the Witt Library at the Courtauld Institute, London. May I thank them for their special efforts on my behalf and also all the private individuals who kindly gave their permission to reproduce pictures they owned.

Finally I would like to say how much I appreciate the generosity of the Authors Society who gave me a grant for research expenses.

Postscript. I hope I may be forgiven for referring to Martha Blount as Patty throughout this book. My excuse for doing so is that Pope's friend was hardly ever known by the name she was given at birth. Nor is Patty a familiar form of Martha but an entirely separate appellation and, presumably, the one she chose to go by.

Prologue: Images of Pope

On 9 March 1742 an important art auction was held in Mr Cock's saleroom in Covent Garden. Edward Harley, Earl of Oxford, had died virtually bankrupt the previous June and his widow wished to get rid of his huge collection of bronzes, coins and books. The sale attracted a large number of connoisseurs. Lord Hervey bought several items, including an elaborate sarcophagus for ten guineas, outbidding Horace Walpole to get it. A young student, Joshua Reynolds, was also present. As Reynolds told Boswell fifty years later, he was standing 'at the upper end of the room, near the auctioneer, when he perceived a considerable bustle at the farther part of the room, which he could not account for and at first thought somebody had fainted, as the crowd and heat were so great. However, he soon heard the name of "Mr. Pope, Mr. Pope", whispered from every mouth, for it was Mr. Pope himself who then entered the room. Immediately every person drew back to make a free passage for the distinguished poet, and all those on each side held out their hands for him to touch as he passed; Reynolds, although not in the front row, put out his hand also, under the arm of the person who stood in front of him, and Pope took his hand, as he likewise did to all as he passed.'[1]

Pope, at that time nearly fifty-four, had been a public figure for many years. The minor furore he caused that spring day was by no means unusual. Samuel Johnson tells a story of Pope going to the theatre in 1738 and, as he entered his box, being greeted by the audience with a round of applause.[2] When he was still in his teens contemporaries had compared him with the young Virgil.[3] Before he was forty his books were on the shelves of libraries in New England and he was receiving admiring letters from the other side of the Atlantic,[4] while Voltaire declared he was 'the best poet of England, and at present of all the world.'[5] Yet if Pope was a literary ideal for scores of men and women throughout the Western world, to scores of others who came into contact with him in London, he was an anathema.

Not everyone at the Covent Garden sale who watched the courteous figure smiling upon his well wishers, smiled back. Lord Hervey's feelings can be imagined. By then he had featured as Sporus in six successive editions of the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* since the first one in 1734. In under a fortnight, when the *New Dunciad* was published on 20 March, he would find himself evoked ambivalently yet again as Narcissus in that poem. Less ambivalently, before the summer was over, Hervey, in his turn, would denounce Pope in a sixpenny pamphlet as 'a second-rate Poet, a bad Companion, a dangerous Acquaintance, an inveterate, implacable Enemy, no body's Friend, a noxious member of society, and a thorough bad Man.'[6] No English writer has attracted more adulation or more animosity than Pope. Throughout his career admirers heaped praise upon him while his detractors hurled abuse.

One of his most vigorous champions was his chosen editor William Warburton, who declared that Pope was not only 'one of the first poets in the world' but also 'one of the noblest works of God ... *an honest man*', distinguished by his 'filial piety, disinterested friendships, reverence for the constitution of his country, his love of virtue, hatred and contempt of vice, extensive charity to the indigent, warm benevolence to mankind [and] supreme veneration of the deity.'[7] Almost every phrase in this somewhat fulsome accolade was carefully chosen to contradict specific counter claims made by Pope's enemies.

In nearly 160 pamphlets (to say nothing of newspaper items), men and women who loathed Pope accused him of being dishonest, self seeking, avaricious, a hanger on of the rich who sneered at the poor, a traitor to his country and an obscene and dissolute blasphemer. These charges and much wilder ones were all levelled at Pope in his lifetime. If only half the insults of his enemies and compliments of his friends had any basis in fact, he was, as one of his contemporaries perceived, a 'very comprehensive Creature, in whom all Contradictions meet'.[8] Nowadays, more than 300 years after Pope came into this world, the jury considering his character is still out. To the author of a modern, scholarly biography of him, he is an almost wholly admirable man, while among others 'Pope-bashing' goes on, if not as crudely as it once did.[9]

One of the things no longer held against Pope is that he was physically deformed, though while he lived he was abused for this more than for anything else.[10] In saying his friend was 'one of the noblest works of God', Warburton had in mind specifically all those other men and women who, in taunting Pope for being a hunchback, said that his crooked back was an emblem of his crooked mind and 'the mark of God and nature upon him, to give us warning that we should hold no society with him.'[11] This view of deformity was held by many people in the eighteenth century, whatever their level of sophistication, including Lord Orrery, a man whom Pope had counted among his friends[12] as well as a provoked Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.[13] A journalist, Jonathan Smedley elaborated this notion in quasi medical terms affirming that 'it is generally remark'd, that crooked, minute, and deform'd People, are peevish, quarrelsome, waspish, and ill-natur'd; and the Reason is, the Soul has not Room enough to pervade and expand itself thro' all their nibbed, tiney Parts, and this makes it press sorely on the Brain, which is of a yielding Substance.'[14] At its most extreme, eighteenth-century revulsion at deformity led to the conclusion that Pope was not even human. He was described, very early on, as 'a grimacing Monkey',[15] and that image of the poet became a popular one, taken up by the caricaturists.

To counteract the picture drawn of him by his enemies, Pope presented the public with images of his own choosing. He sat for painters and sculptors nearly eighty times.[16] Most of his friends possessed a picture of him. Edward Harley had three which were all up for auction at the Covent Garden sale

in 1742. None of the portraits he sat for show he was deformed. Instead they focus on his mobile face and sometimes on his hands with their long sensitive fingers.

A more comprehensive picture than any of these was provided by Joshua Reynolds who, when he described how Pope walked into Christopher Cock's saleroom, remembered Pope's physical appearance as clearly as if he had made a sketch of him. Like everyone else he noted first of all that the poet was a mere 'four feet six high; very humpbacked and deformed.' Pope was lopsided. His spine was weak as well as bent and he had to wear a corset. He contracted tuberculosis of the spine in childhood and from then on his health deteriorated slowly, but steadily; headaches, breathing problems and a poor digestion being just some of the side effects of Potts disease, as his condition is now called. By 1742 he could only walk short distances and his very thin legs were habitually padded out with three pairs of stockings. Reynolds also recalled that Pope wore a black coat and 'according to the fashion of the time had on a little sword' – not for use but as a sign of gentility.

Next Reynolds described Pope's face, and here he was impressed by a 'pallidly studious look; not merely a sharp, keen countenance but something grand; like Cicero's.' He 'had a large and very fine eye, and a long handsome nose; his mouth had those peculiar marks which are always found in the mouths of crooked persons; and the muscles which ran across the cheek were so strongly marked as to appear like small cords.' In conclusion Reynolds added that the sculptor Roubiliac had mentioned, after making a bust of Pope, 'that his countenance was that of a person who had been afflicted with headache and that he should have known the fact from the contracted appearance of the skin above the eyebrows.'[17]

We have a good idea of what Pope looked like from descriptions and surreptitious sketches of him, as well as from authorized portraits and busts which depict him from childhood onwards. Deciding what sort of personality he had is more difficult, not only because of the conflicting views about his virtues and vices which were expressed by those who knew him, but because Pope reinvented himself periodically on paper and in everyday life.

To begin with, on arriving in London at the age of seventeen he noted the look of scorn on the face of the minor dramatist and critic Charles Gildon when the two of them met in the rooms of the courtly old dramatist William Wycherley. Gildon, seeing for the first time the youth who wore 'his own cropt Hair and Dress agreeable to the Forest he came from', mistook him for the son of one of the dramatist's tenants.[18] On that occasion Pope had 'scarce uttered three words' on any subject the two older men talked of but he was observant enough to know when he was being patronised and why. As he said afterwards, it was because Gildon 'had the luck to be born a Gentleman'.[19] So he decided to discard his rustic self as soon as possible. He studied Wycherley's manners as well as the light chit-chat current in sophisticated society and, when he had the

money to do so, bought a fashionable full-bottomed wig and wore shirts with ruffles at the wrists. There is a portrait of him in this guise by Charles Jervas in which he looks very much the young man about town.

Making himself 'polite' in a way he noted Dryden had never done,[20] was easily the most successful of Pope's reinventions of himself. He was regarded as acceptably genteel in the houses of the great, from the time his rising talent as a poet gained him invitations to such places. On social occasions he curbed his youthful high spirits and became decorous and sedate, never laughing out loud, as if he had absorbed Lord Chesterfield's dictum that a man of parts and fashion can only be 'seen to smile.'[21] Even so, not everyone accepted his well bred image. Lady Mary declared that by Birth and hereditary Fortune his social status was that of a link boy.[22] His family was middle class and respectable but that did not stop his excitable foes demoting his linen merchant father to being a hatter or a mechanic, or saying he was a bankrupt and that he, the poet, was illegitimate.[23] More pertinently Lord Hervey noted that Pope's polished performance in society was a self-conscious one, so that his conversation was not 'flowing and easy' but too studied, as if he were talking not in the character for which nature had designed him, but one that 'in Spite of Nature, he designed himself for.'[24]

Far fewer people were convinced by some of Pope's other reinventions of himself, least of all by his short-lived attempt to persuade people he was a debonair rake who, during those early days in London, stayed up half the night drinking and knocking up whores. It is possible he tried to put this project into practice but, if he did, the devastating *Letter from Mr. Cibber* in 1742 shows what the reaction of more robust libertines was likely to be. In the *Letter* Cibber reminisced about those early days, telling a possibly fictitious but plausible tale about an occasion when he and Lord Warwick enticed the young poet into a house of 'carnal recreation' in the Strand, where they saw to it that he was utterly humiliated.[25] In any case ill health soon forced him to give up even trying to be a debauchee.

Eventually, in early middle age, Pope found a new role as the guardian of public virtue. As he 'moraliz'd his Song' he constructed an image of himself as an honest, independent country gentleman, frank and forthright, who 'pleas'd by manly ways.'[26] By that time, careless of fashion, he mocked the 'bright brocade' that made up the 'Birthday-day Nobles splendid Livery'[27] and admitted that his own clothes were 'snuff stained and dusty with wig powder.'[28] He said he did not care about getting money because he lived abstemiously on local mutton and the broccoli he grew himself in the garden of his rented house at Twickenham.[29] In this home he kept a welcome for 'ancient friends' who were poor and played no part in public affairs.[30]

If anything Pope's last attempt at personal myth making has proved more irritating than any other he engaged in. A growing number of critics have deconstructed it recently, while in the poet's day even some of those well

disposed towards him, were moved to amend his self portrait.[31] As for his enemies, they continued to give their own partisan picture.

Those who were the targets of Pope's satire refused to believe that he was motivated by a 'strong antipathy of Good to Bad.'[32] Instead, they insisted he was venomous and vengeful, a man who never forgot a slight, so that the attacks he launched in his verse were merely a matter of paying off old scores. They denied he did not care about money, accusing him of being mercenary with an unpleasant way of heaping contempt on writers less well off than himself, as if, one of his victims said, 'want of a dinner made a man a fool, or riches and good sense only kept company.'[33]

Far from being honest and forthright, those Pope had injured maintained he was a 'Stabber in the Dark', who professed candour and friendship in a face to face encounter with a man, before going away to try and destroy him with his pen.[34] While even friends agreed he was secretive and devious, someone who could 'hardly take tea without a stratagem.'[35]

Last, but not least, hardly anyone believed him when he said, 'Sworn to no Master, of no Sect am I', or his claim that he was prepared to give praise where praise was due to a man, whatever his religion or politics.[36] As the years went on his Whig and Protestant opponents insisted the house at Twickenham, where he entertained those old friends he spoke of, was actually the Tory opposition headquarters, while Pope himself, being a Roman Catholic, was the Jacobite subversive he had always been.[37]

Amidst the flickering images of Pope, conjured up by himself and others, is it possible to see him plain? The answer to this question is 'Yes, perhaps', if we keep in mind the one thing that was constant in him, which is that he was a poet, first, foremost and always. This obvious fact is the thread which can guide us through the labyrinth of contradictions that made up his personality.

A biographer of Pope can be baffled and exasperated, just as his contemporaries were, because he was serious and high minded one day, frivolous and bawdy the next, both compliant and aggressive, self-deprecating and arrogant, tender-hearted and cruel and so on. Furthermore he was a man of 'so little moderation' when he displayed such contrasting qualities.[38] However the inconsistencies become less puzzling if we accept a suggestion, made recently, that complexity is the trait that, more than any other, distinguishes creative men and women. This means 'that they show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes – instead of being an "individual," each of them is a "multitude." Like the color white that includes all the hues in the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves.'[39]

It is an advantage for the poet as a creative individual to be like this. One has only to think of Shakespeare, who could enter into the feelings of a Falstaff, Hamlet or Lady Macbeth. Keats once said 'if a Sparrow comes before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.'[40] The same

was true of Pope who entered into the sensations of a spider with its touch 'exquisitely fine!' as it 'Feels at each thread and lives along the line.'[41] For the poet as man, however, this receptivity and power of comprehensive empathy has its disadvantages because it makes him unsure of his own character, or whether he even has a character.

Keats's description of this state of affairs is the best known. He declared 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually [informing] and filling some other Body. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none,' and he went on to warn the friend he was writing to, 'It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature – how can it, when I have no nature?'[42]

Keats's apologia was written in 1819. A hundred years before that Pope was debating with Swift, Dr Arbuthnot and the other members of the Scriblerus Club the question of whether or not any human being had an abiding self. This topic had come up because John Locke in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) had discussed identity in such a way as made it possible to doubt whether anyone could say he had an essential personality which he was born with and retained to the end of his life.[43] Pope, aware of the contradictions in his own nature, was the most sympathetic of the Scriblerians to Locke's ideas.[44]

Twenty years later he dealt at length with the subject of identity in the *Epistle to Cobham* (1733). In the first 170 lines or so of that poem he depicts human beings as inexplicable because they behave so inconsistently. This brings him to the conclusion that 'Our spring of action to ourselves is lost' (l. 42), and man 'A bird of passage! gone as soon as found' (l. 156). In all probability Pope was moved to make these observations partly for subjective reasons. As he says himself 'All Manners take a tincture from our own' (l. 25).

However Pope refuses to let the matter rest there. In the remainder of the poem he suggests it is possible to understand another human being once we discover his ruling passion, be it lust of praise or lechery, because this determines his every action.[45] A problem with this argument is that it is hard to believe that the majority of people are so single minded that they are motivated in everything they do by any one thing such as vanity or acquisitiveness, or love of food, even if they do have a reputation for being vain, materialistic or gourmands. Nevertheless, Pope's hypothesis is of interest if we relate it to creative individuals. Those people, be they scientists, inventors or artists, who make their mark in the world by their outstanding achievements, are often noted for their utter dedication to their chosen calling and for the fact that it comes before everything else in their lives.

Pope had his ruling passion. It was his calling as a poet. This was so, not just because he was gifted, but for several other reasons, including the pressure

exerted by external circumstances. So, for instance, it is relevant that he was born to be an outsider in the society he determined to conquer by his art. Many creative individuals have been marginalized by class or religion or geography, while some twenty per cent have suffered from physical handicaps.[46] Pope was marginalized three times over, by physical deformity, as well as by his middle class origins and because he was a Papist in a Protestant country. All these things were the source of affliction to him as a man but they were of no disadvantage to him as a poet. If anything they gave him an incentive to work hard at what he proved to be good at so as to make those inclined to view him with contempt and distrust, admire or fear him.

Pope found his vocation early and soon dreamed of being a great poet. Thereafter, from the age of twelve he began educating himself for this purpose. Like many poets, before and since, he did this by reading voraciously all the verse and criticism he could lay his hands on. It was necessary to acquaint himself with the cultural domain in this way, because he had to know what had been done before, whether he wanted to follow faithfully in the footsteps of his predecessors, or whether he decided to expand or break with tradition.[47] At the same time that he was reading, Pope taught himself the craft of composing verse by writing in various genres and imitating his favourite poets. Finally, he concentrated, as most of his contemporaries did, on imitating the classics of ancient Greece and Rome and on practising the heroic couplet which, for much of the eighteenth century, was used by the majority of poets.

As a poet Pope was fortunate to live in the right place at the right time, in a period when the literary tradition was temporarily stable and in a country where the rules that determined that tradition were fairly flexible. Before the end of the century popular culture and romanticism raised the neoclassical fortress in England to the ground but while he lived it still stood, even if the besiegers were at the gates. This meant that when Pope focused on writing heroic couplets to the best of his ability, he could do so undistracted. By the age of sixteen he had made himself a master of that particular verse form. Eventually he would become a technical virtuoso who could make the couplet do anything he wanted, whether it was reproducing what his enemies called the language of Billingsgate, or conveying Apocalyptic grandeur in the finale to *The Dunciad*.

Becoming a master however was not enough. It is the mark of creative individuals that they do not go on doing exactly what others have done before them; they try something new. Pope did not wish to break with the neoclassical tradition but, from early on in his career, he wanted to expand and develop it in untried ways. As Dr Johnson said, he 'had a mind active, ambitious and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest reaches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher, always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do.'[48]

If we wonder sometimes why Pope behaved as he did we need only ask

ourselves how his actions fitted into or protected his role as a poet and we can usually find the answer. He used everything and everyone to feed his talent. He made many friends and ensured they all helped him in one way or another. Some of them he put into his verses, others he went to for literary advice or ideas for more poems. Often the men and women he knew gave him practical assistance, copying and storing his manuscripts, or acting as a cover when he feared the publication of a work might lead to him being sued for libel.[49] When he launched his devastating and occasionally unfair attacks on his literary enemies he was safeguarding a tradition and his reputation as the leading exponent of it. Eventually he found a way to make these enemies serve his purpose directly when he orchestrated their clamour to publicise *The Dunciad*.

Right from the beginning of his career Pope realized that it was one thing to write poems which he thought were good and quite another to see that they were recognized as such by other people. It may happen that a work of genius bursts upon the firmament in a shower of stars like a rocket, but someone has to have set a match to the touch paper first. Sooner or later a creative work has to be approved by those deemed competent to judge, if it is to become part of our cultural heritage. Furthermore, no poet wishes to blush unseen. Even Emily Dickinson, who kept her poems hidden in drawers and cupboards, tried to get some of them published when she was a girl. She was unsuccessful in this attempt because she was ahead of her time and because she lacked influential contacts who were both perceptive and energetic enough to promote her work.

Pope was fortunate, as we have already said, in being born at the right time when the public was familiar with neoclassical verse. Nevertheless, when he decided to embark on his career as a poet, he realized he was likely to meet with indifference or prejudice because he was an unknown country boy and a Papist to boot. He went about overcoming these problems with noteworthy efficiency. Before he made his debut with *The Pastorals*, he sought the approval of the accepted field of literary judges by sending the manuscript of his poems to be read by a dozen influential Protestant gentlemen.[50] This exercise in generating advance publicity might not have worked if the poems had been egregiously bad, but they were not and, as a result of their author's preparatory efforts, they were being talked about favourably even before the general public was able to see them on the printed page. As time went on he set himself up as the leader in the field of literary judges, so as to establish all the more clearly the criteria by which his own poetry should be evaluated. He succeeded in this endeavour, so that his enemies, not without justification, said he was a literary dictator, in the words of one of them the 'Lord Paramount-wou'd-be of Mount Parnassus.'[51]

Living in an age when the concept of a professional writer who made an adequate living by his pen was still in its infancy, Pope proved an adept at career management. It is doubtful whether any writers nowadays are better than he was at this, even with all the modern machinery of public relations at their disposal.

As well as being his own best publicity agent, Pope knew instinctively that he needed freedom if he was to develop his full potential as a poet. The prerequisite for this was to establish a measure of independence. He set about doing so in a number of ways.

In the first place he made money, reaping about £5,000 when he translated the *Iliad* while he was in his twenties, and as much again when he went on to publish a translation of the *Odyssey*.[52] This meant that he did not have to rely on the vagaries of patronage. It did not mean that he ignored the market. Throughout his career he was willing to consider ideas for poems that would interest one or other section of the public. When he embarked on the Homer he knew there was a need for an English version of the epics which a polite audience could read easily, if only because many gentlemen had forgotten whatever Greek they had learned at school and the ladies had never been taught it anyway. The only reason a translation to meet the modern taste had not been made already was that it was thought to be a 'prodigous' undertaking, 'which not all the Poets of our Island durst jointly attempt.'[53] But Pope never lacked confidence in his own abilities. Nor was this confidence misplaced. Because of the sizeable sum of money which the successful completion of his task brought, he was able to choose whether or not he wrote verses on topics and personages suggested to him by others. It also meant that, as well as not having to rely on a patron, he was not tempted to become one of Robert Walpole's hacks, as so many of his contemporaries were, even those inimical to the Government, including Henry Fielding.[54]

Pope actively maintained his marginality, realizing instinctively that the outsider has more space and freedom than a regular and accepted member of any community. So he resisted suggestions that he abandon his religion, even though going on for half the English Catholics in the eighteenth century defected to the Church of England.[55] His conversion need only have been nominal, as it was with some of his other co-religionists, and Anglicanism would have brought him certain practical advantages such as no longer having to pay the double taxes imposed on Papists. However, it would also have brought him closer to the established order and he was always wary of any attempt to identify him too closely with a particular group, even one he sympathised with. He soon became incensed with Catholics when they reprimanded him for his lines about monkish superstition in *An Essay on Criticism*.[56] Later on, he lent his services to the Tory Opposition but was never subsumed by it, refusing insistent pleas by some members of it to write this, that or the other, if these did not fit in with his own plans.[57]

Pope was not unusual in seeking to maintain a certain distance between himself and society. Creative individuals who are not marginalized to begin with sometimes strive to make themselves so, for instance T.S. Eliot. He removed himself from his establishment background in America, choosing exile in London, where he distanced himself still further by adopting the

religious and political stance of a minority.[58] In so doing, Eliot instinctively protected his vocation.

At the same time Pope guarded his chosen destiny as a leading poet by keeping out of serious political danger. He might be suspected of being a Jacobite but no one has ever been able to prove conclusively that he was one. This is as well because proven Jacobites could end up in gaol, if not on the gallows. Eventually too, when his satires in support of the Tory Opposition led to his windows being broken and the possibility of an investigation by the Whig Government, he wrote no more of them.[59]

That did not mean however that he stopped writing. With some relief he seized on a good excuse to pen no more overt Tory propaganda and turned to other projects. Pope might say sometimes that he wrote when he had nothing better to do, but we should not be deceived. Whenever he visited friends he insisted on having a writing desk placed by his bedside, in case ideas occurred to him during his hours of insomnia.[60] Even his chronic ill health did not deter him for long at a time. There was probably never a day in his adult life when he was free from pain.[61] Nevertheless he worked whenever he could, often early in the morning when he was at his best and at other times, according to Swift 'he had always some poetical scheme in his head.'[62] He composed verse quickly and then went over every work he wrote, making corrections and revisions, until he was satisfied it was ready for the printer, which might not be for two years. Thereafter he nursed the poem through the press, ensuring that each minute instruction he had issued for its presentation on the page was followed exactly. Towards the end of his career when he asked the question 'This subtle Thief of Life, this paltry Time, / What will it leave me, if it snatch my Rhyme?' he knew the answer.[63]

Pope was in love with poetry. At times he resented his bondage to an exacting mistress but she gave him more lasting satisfaction than anyone or anything else in life could have done. When he was in the throes of creation he could forget the cares and preoccupations of everyday existence, including the fact he was 'that little Alexander the women laugh at.'[64] While he translated Homer during the 1715 rebellion the fretful Jacobite struggles faded far away because he was spending all his waking hours in Troy or laying siege to its walls. On one occasion he described to a young friend how it was for him when he was in the process of creating a poem. During the bitter winter of 1712, when he was writing *Windsor Forest*, he said he could not always tell the difference between what was going on in his mind and what was going on around him, so that he spoke to his family of things as truths and real events, he had only dreamed of. He sat close to the fire in his parents' house, conjuring up 'a painted scene,' which he alone controlled, of 'trees springing, fields flowering, Nature laughing,' and compared himself in his entranced state to 'a witch whose Carcase lies motionless on the floor, while she keeps her airy Sabbaths, & enjoys a thousand Imaginary Entertainments abroad, in this world, & in others.'[65]

Creative work has its pains as all those engaged in it will admit. But artists keep going because of the sense of power, the feeling of being fully alive it can bring.[66] Of the many men and women who have testified to this, one of the most recent is Harold Pinter who, describing both the good and bad patches in his career as a dramatist, has said, 'When you can't write you feel banished from yourself', adding on another occasion, 'But my writing life ... has been one of relish, challenge, excitement.[67] Pope, who breathed by writing, would surely have understood these sentiments.

Pope had genius in that he had an extraordinary aptitude to excel in a particular domain and make a unique and valuable contribution to our cultural heritage. Without that he would not be on the roll of great poets more than 300 years after his birth. Civilization, however, often produces gifted individuals who do not fulfil their potential. Pope's genius might not have flowered if it had not been for the circumstances in which he found himself and, also, if he had not had certain traits in his character, including mental energy, a capacity for hard work, perseverance, resilience, unwavering confidence in his own abilities along with the habit of rigorous self criticism and a reasonably good, co-ordinating intelligence. It is also doubtful whether he would have achieved noteworthy material success and extraordinary fame in his own lifetime without other qualities as well, such as business acumen, an instinct for self-promotion, a combative spirit and guile.

This book tells the story of Pope's evolution as a poet, how he found people to help him and how he coped with an equal number of others who wanted to hinder him. It describes what he did when he suffered reversals, as well as how he prepared for and engineered his triumphs. By concentrating in this way on his essential being, it is hoped to look beyond the images of him which he and others conjured up and glimpse the man seen so often in distorting mirrors.

Notes

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3. William Walsh and Lord Lansdowne. *Corr.* 1: 7 and TW. 1: 59n.
4. Letter from Mather Byles, 7 October 1727, *Corr.* 2: 450–1.
5. Letter to Thieriot, 26 October 1726, quoted Spence, no. 527n.
6. *A Letter to Mr. C-b--r, On his Letter to Mr. Pope*, printed for J. Roberts, 19 August 1742, p. 25.
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24. *A Letter to Mr. Cibber* (London, 1742).
25. *A Letter From Mr. Cibber, To Mr. Pope* (London, 1742).
26. *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, l. 120.
27. *Sixth Epistle of the First Book of Horace*, ll. 32–3.
28. *First Epistle of the First Book of Horace*, l. 162.
29. *Second Satire of the Second Book of Horace*, l. 138.
30. Ibid., ll. 139–40.
31. William Kent was one of several of Pope's contemporaries who denied he was abstemious, see *Corr.* 4: 150. Modern critics who dwell on Pope's affluence, which permitted him to have an aristocratic life style at Twickenham, include Brean S. Hammond, *Pope* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986) and Leopold Damrosch Jr, *The Imaginative World of Alexander Pope* (University of California Press, 1987).
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56. Letter to John Caryll, 25 June 1711, *Corr.* 1: 122.
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60. Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, 3: 209.
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64. Letter to John Caryll, 25 January 1710, *Corr.* 1: 114.
65. *Corr.* 1: 163 and 168.
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PART I

How Alexander Pope Became a Poet

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CHAPTER ONE

On Being a Papist

Alexander Pope was born on Monday 21 May 1688 at 6.45 pm when England was on the brink of a revolution. Much of his character and life were to be determined by that revolution and by the decision his father had taken to become a Roman Catholic. From birth he was destined to be an outsider.

Mr Pope, whose first name was also Alexander, probably converted to Catholicism when he was a young man, during the early, easy years of the Restoration. Later, during the agitated reign of James II, he bought and read all that was being written on both the Protestant and Papist sides but, when he had finished reading, he found no way he could change his mind.[1] After the revolution Mr Pope's decision to remain a Catholic made him a religious and political outcast, ever careful to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities, or of hostile neighbours. He had virtually no civil rights. In modern terminology he was a non-person. His son would live all his life as a potential enemy alien in the land of his birth.

Mr Pope was an unlikely martyr. He was not reckless, impractical, or an obvious rebel, but he thought for himself and his education in a puritan setting failed to indoctrinate him against the Church of Rome. He was born posthumously in 1646, the year in which Charles I lost at Edgehill and surrendered to Parliament. His father had been the energetic and zealous Rector of Thruxton in Hampshire, who once rejoiced in bringing the daughter of a local Catholic landowner 'unto our Church of England.'[2] After the Rector's death his widow returned with her newborn child, and his brothers and sisters, to Micheldever where her father, the Rev. William Pyne, had his parish. The theological views of Mr Pope's grandfather can be guessed at from the fact he kept his living throughout the Cromwellian era.

Mr Pope rejected his family's Protestant faith, but not the Protestant work ethic. He grew up to be industrious, thrifty and ambitious. At the beginning of 1688 he was a successful linen merchant. Twenty years earlier he and his brother William had used the few hundred pounds they had inherited from their father to start a business, dealing in 'Hollands wholesale.'[3] After a while William had disappeared and Mr Pope carried on alone, selling cloth in England, then expanding his operations so as to export goods to the American colonies, steadily increasing his initial capital of £500 until he was worth several thousand.[4] In this respect he was a typical member of the rising, mercantile, middle class.[5] He was also a typical and worthy descendant of men who were hard working and knew how to make and look after money, in

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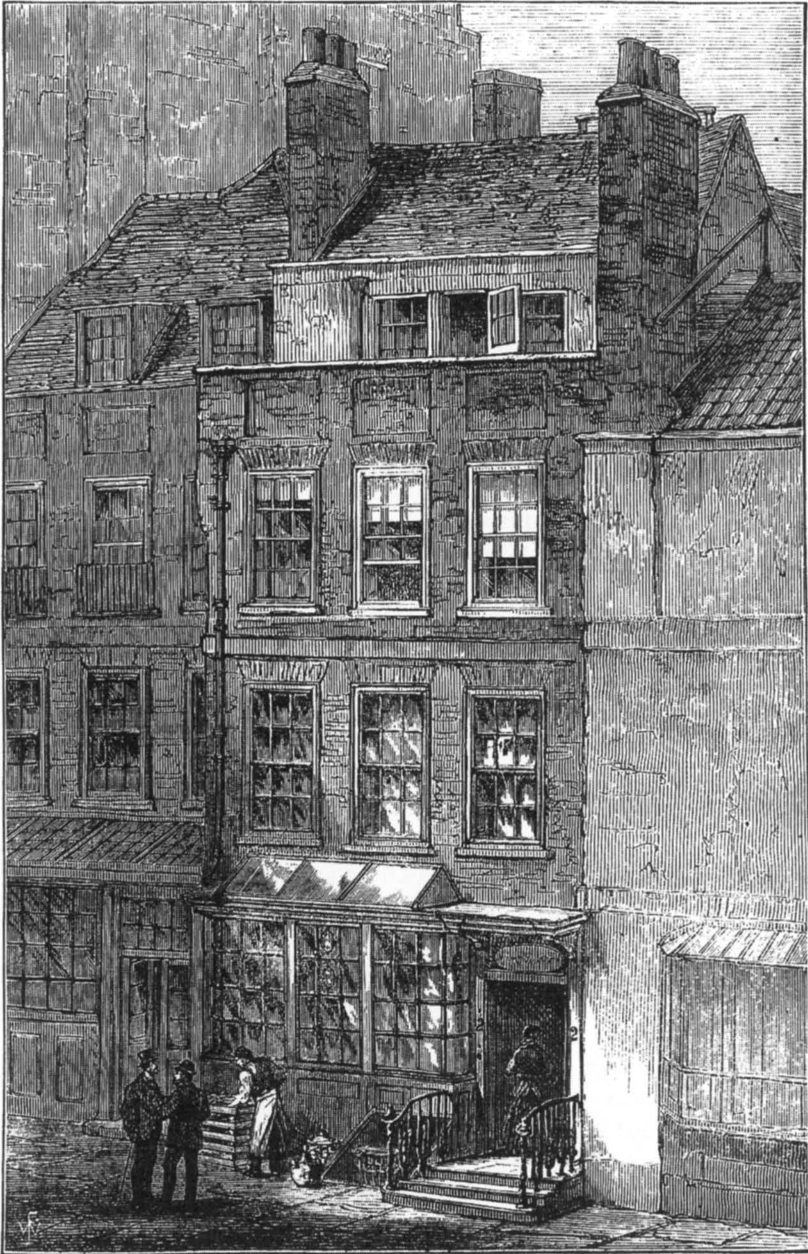
whatever field they laboured – and, as we shall see, his son would carry on this family tradition.

Since the sixteenth century the Popes had moved a few steps up the social ladder with each generation. The first one we know anything about was a blacksmith in Andover. He did well enough to enable his son Richard to buy The Angel Inn, the leading hostelry in the town. Richard prospered, played an active part in Andover's public affairs and sent his son Alexander to Oxford. This was the Alexander who became the Rector of Thruxton who, dedicated to his calling as he was, still looked after his worldly interests.[6] Before his sudden death he was on the brink of securing an income of more than £400 a year, which was six to eight times as much as the average parson received.[7] It was in order to obtain the standard of living the Rector would have enjoyed, had he lived, that Mr Pope had gone into trade. When he did so he did not expect to find that his religious convictions would get in the way of his commercial success.

He married twice, choosing Catholic women on both occasions. His first wife died in 1679, leaving a daughter Magdalen who survived, and a son (another Alexander) who died three years later. While Mr Pope looked for a second wife he had sent his children to be cared for by his sister, not minding that her husband was the Anglican Rector of Pangbourne. When he remarried Mr Pope chose Edith Turner, a plain, affable woman, three years older than himself. She came from a highly respected, middle class family in Yorkshire, but was unlikely to inherit much money because she was one of seventeen children who lived to maturity. There were fourteen girls, half of them Protestants. Like her husband, Edith never let religious differences prevent her getting on with her relatives.[8] One of her Catholic ancestors was Margaret Clitherow who was canonized, after embracing an excruciating martyrdom in 1586.[9] Mrs Pope, however, was simply a devout woman who later won the respect of Jonathan Swift because she was that rare being, 'a good Christian.'[10]

Mr Pope took Edith and Magdalen to live in the house he had rented in Plough Court, off Lombard Street in the City. His landlord John Osgood was another linen merchant.[11] He was also a Quaker but this did not stand in the way of his having a cordial relationship with his tenant. The Popes and the Turners were perhaps unusual in numbering both Catholics and Protestants in their families, but they were not unusual in being able to get on with people from other denominations. During the reign of Charles II Protestants often lived and worked alongside Catholics without friction, turning a blind eye when they knew their neighbours celebrated Mass, even though this was against the law. Catholics were in the minority, amounting to less than two per cent of the population. As individuals practising their faith, they were not feared. Trouble arose, when it did, because Roman Catholicism was not just a matter of private belief. It was also a political system which English Protestants were determined should never be re-imposed on them.



1.1 Pope's birthplace, 2 Plough Court, London. From *The Illustrated London News*, 7 December 1872