ALEXANDER POPE

Selected Poetry and Prose

Edited by Robin Sowerby

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Edited by
Robin Sowerby

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Introduction

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF POPE

> As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
> I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.
> (*An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot,* 127–8)

> He considered poetry as the business of his life; and, however he might seem to lament his occupation, he followed it with constancy; to make verses was his first labour and to mend them was his last.[1]

Alexander Pope, born in 1688, the only son of moderately well-to-do Catholic parents (his father was a linen merchant) had a London childhood in comfortable circumstances. His family moved to Binfield in Windsor Forest when he was about 12. He was educated partly by priests in the home, then at a Catholic school in Twyford near Winchester, and subsequently under the tutelage of a former fellow of University College Oxford who had set up a school near Marylebone. His youthful literary endeavours were encouraged by his father and fostered by influential friends. His first publications (*The Pastorals* in 1709, *An Essay on Criticism* in 1711 and the first version of *The Rape of the Lock* in 1712) brought him immediate fame and success. In this period he made a number of enduring friendships with leading literary figures like the satirist Jonathan Swift, John

Gay, author of *The Beggar's Opera,* Thomas Parnell, a poet who later gave him scholarly help with his Homer, and Dr John Arbuthnot, man of letters and the Queen's physician. Together they were members of an association calling itself the Scriblerus Club designed in Pope's words to ridicule 'all the false tastes in learning under the character of a man of capacity enough [Martinus Scriblerus] that dipped into every art and science but injudiciously in each'.[2] Later Pope's *Dunciad* (1728) and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) doubtless owe much to this earlier association.

The great preoccupation of Pope's life from 1714 when he started translating the *Iliad* to 1726 when the final volumes of the *Odyssey* were published was his translation of Homer. On the proceeds of subscriptions to the project (advance payments made to the poet and his publisher by those who wished to see Homer in modern English and had faith in Pope's ability to prove adequate to the task) he became financially secure and therefore independent of aristocratic patronage and free to shape the course of his literary career.

In addition to the rewards of recognition and success both tangible and intangible, Pope had to endure critical attack from the beginning. In the preface to an edition of his *Works* in 1717, he declared: 'The life of a wit is a warfare upon earth', and in the early eighteenth century that warfare was often prosecuted with a ferocity that may surprise and shock us in the twentieth. The malignant spirit of many of the attacks against Pope is illustrated by Dr Johnson in a quotation from John Dennis, no mere literary hack but a leading critic of the day, who later attacked *The Rape of the Lock* but who is here writing about *An Essay on Criticism:*

> Let the person of a gentleman of his parts be never so contemptible, his inward man is ten times more ridiculous; it being impossible that his outward form, though it be that of a downright monkey, should differ so much from human shape as his unthinking immaterial part does from human understanding.[3]

As a boy Pope had contracted a form of tuberculosis which resulted in curvature of the spine and stunted growth so that he was never more than 4 feet 6 inches tall. This condition

worsened with age and entailed physical pain and dependence upon others. In the 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' he speaks of 'this long disease, my life' (1. 132). His adversaries readily seized upon his weakness and physical abnormality (in the same poem he also refers to 'The libelled person and the pictured shape' (1. 353)) and much play was made with the letters of his name, A.P..E. He had the support of friends, but was always a controversial figure in the literary life of his times. Even the Homer translation involved him in controversy when he quarrelled with the more genial figure of Joseph Addison over the latter's promotion of a rival (and inferior) version of the first book of the *Iliad* published by his protégé Thomas Tickell. His private response was to compose the portrait of 'Atticus' later included in *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* (1735). He did not intend publication at the time, but the portrait circulated among friends, one of whom, Francis Atterbury, the Bishop of Rochester, encouraged him to employ further the talent it showed for sharp satire. But it was not until Lewis Theobald in his edition of Shakespeare of 1726 pointed out the deficiencies of Pope's own Shakespearian venture published in the previous year that Pope, possibly to forestall further criticism, entered the warfare of the wits with a vengeance that delighted his supporters and dismayed his enemies. *The Dunciad* with Theobald as its hero was published anonymously in 1728 but Pope's authorship was soon suspected. Thereafter he was increasingly drawn to controversial satire, though not exclusively since *An Essay on Man* (1733–4) also belongs to this period. Nevertheless there is a marked change in Pope's literary career after the Homer translation towards the moral, the didactic, and the satiric.

As a result of his literary earnings, in the year after his father died he moved into an elegant country house at Twickenham in 1718, then well outside the city of London, where he lived with his mother until her death in 1733 and then on his own, for he never married, until his death in 1744.

> Here he planted the vines and the quincunx which his verses mention; and being under the necessity of making a subterraneous passage to a garden on the other side of the

> road, headorned it with fossil bodies, and dignified it with the title of a grotto; a place of silence and retreat, from which he endeavoured to persuade his friends and himself that cares and passions could be excluded.[4]

He cultivated his own garden with diligence and, detached at Twickenham from the life of business and the court yet near enough the centre to be in touch, he lived out his version of the good life dedicated to friendship, conversation, and books that is recommended in many of his poems, notably the verse epistles and of these particularly *The Imitations of Horace*. A collection of letters in prose extending to four large volumes, some of which he published in his own lifetime, provides a record of the style and values of the man and of his various interests and social relationships. His poetry was always his main preoccupation: he continued composing and revising to the end and was working on a final edition of his poems in the last months of his life. It is reported that three weeks before he died he was sorting out presentation copies of the first volume for his friends with the comment:

> Here am I, like Socrates, distributing my morality among my friends just as I am dying.[5]

At the time, and more so in retrospect, the year of Pope's birth, 1688, was a momentous one in British constitutional history. For the second time in a century an English monarch was deposed. The execution of Charles I in 1649 came after a prolonged civil war and resulted in the rule of Oliver Cromwell followed by the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. It must have seemed to those who opposed the absolutism of Charles I that little had been gained after two decades of upheaval, for, although Charles II was invited back by Parliament with whom he negotiated terms, the powers of the monarchy were little restricted. Charles II ruled with greater political sensitivity than his father but the Stuart monarchy came to grief over a question that proved beyond his powers to solve. Charles himself had no legitimate children so that his natural heir on the hereditary principle was his younger brother the Catholic James, Duke of York. The religion of James was seen to be a threat to the established church and to the

traditional independence of Britain. Forces in Parliament, predominantly Dissenters (Protestants who separated themselves from the communion of the established Church of England) and low Anglicans proposed to exclude James from the throne. They were opposed by those supporting the royal prerogative (including naturally the King), who were generally high Anglicans. It was at this time that the terms Whig and Tory were first used in opposition as abusive terms to describe supporters and opponents of the Exclusion Bill. To some extent this division echoed the religious and political polarization of the earlier civil war. The King and the anti-exclusionists prevailed, and James succeeded on Charles's death in 1685. His conduct as King, however, confirmed the fears of his opponents and alarmed his supporters, who felt that the established constitution of Church and state was in danger. Whigs and Tories joined forces in 1688 to invite over the Dutch Prince William of Orange, husband of James's daughter Mary who had been brought up on the instructions of Charles II in the Protestant faith. James's army deserted in large numbers and he took refuge in Catholic France at the court of Louis XIV, who continued to uphold his claim to the throne. Parliament offered the throne jointly to William and Mary on conditions set out in a Bill of Rights. The hereditary principle was replaced by a parliamentary succession and the sovereign was required to be Protestant. A number of provisions in the bill shifted power away from the monarch and towards Parliament. Thenceforward the government of the kingdom was more of a partnership between the monarch and the Parliament largely controlled by the nobility. The absolutist tendencies of the Stuart monarchs before 1688 were checked and thereafter England had a more mixed constitution in marked contrast to the absolute monarchy holding sway in France. Nevertheless the monarch continued to exercise great power, and the royal prerogative in appointments and dismissals remained effective throughout the eighteenth century. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed freedom of worship for Dissenters (though not for Catholics) so that in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–9 a constitutional settlement was achieved without bloodshed that was broadly acceptable to a majority in the kingdom.

Supporters of the exiled James, known as Jacobites from theLatin version of his name Jacobus, were thereafter always a small minority including many Roman Catholics, some Tory Anglicans who questioned the legitimacy of the succession in 1688 and later, largely for dynastic reasons, many Scots. As Catholics, Pope's family might have felt excluded from the settlement of 1689, for Catholics experienced a variety of restrictions relating to property and residence, education, politics and professional life. Technically they were required to live ten miles from the centre of London. The universities were not open to them, nor could they hold public office. Nevertheless their minority status did not hinder their economic activity even though they were subject to special taxes. Pope's father was a successful businessman. The poet himself retained the religion of his upbringing. In his letters and his poems his Catholicism is not much in evidence, and it is apparent that his religious beliefs were tolerant and enlightened. Nevertheless his religion must have set him apart to some extent from the mainstream of English life. In practice, there was increasing toleration of Catholics doctrinally and at the same time continuing suspicion of them politically in view of the perceived threat from the king over the water. In 1689 James landed in Ireland and was defeated by William at the Battle of the Boyne. In 1708 there was an abortive French invasion. In 1715 came the first Jacobite uprising in Scotland in support of James's son James Edward whose claim was recognized by the French King and who was known subsequently as the Old Pretender, and in the year after Pope died came the final uprising in 1745 in favour of Charles Edward, grandson of James II and called the Young Pretender.

When Pope began his literary career, the childless William and Mary had been succeeded by Mary's younger sister Anne. England was heavily involved in foreign campaigns prosecuted by the Duke of Marlborough, who had succeeded William III as leader of the grand alliance of English and Dutch forces against the power of France. Party rivalry in this period was intense and centred upon Tory resistance to religious toleration promoted by the Whigs and upon Tory attempts to bring to an end the long foreign campaign, which was a drain upon the resources of the gentry. Whig views on foreign policy

werepromoted by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* and by Richard Steele in *The Tatler*. The Tory view was promoted in pamphlet form by Jonathan Swift. The Tories were in power when the peace of Utrecht celebrated in 'Windsor Forest' was signed in 1713. Tories and Whigs were not formally organized into parties and the terms are only loosely connected with easily defined values and interests. In this period the Tories are usually identified with the established Anglican Church and the squirearchy and the Whigs with the interests of Dissenters, with the landowning aristocracy, and with the commercial interests of the rising middle classes.

An issue that divided Whigs and some Tories concerned the succession to Queen Anne, none of whose offspring had survived childhood. Even before she came to the throne, Parliament had decreed in 1701 that the succession should go to her nearest Protestant relative, Sophia, the Electress of Hanover, the granddaughter of James I. The Tories reopened the issue in the last year of her reign when illness made her demise likely, making overtures to James Edward, the son of James II, which foundered when he refused to give up his Catholicism. Nevertheless when the Queen died the Tory cause was greatly damaged. One of their leaders, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, was imprisoned in the Tower and another, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, fled the country for France where he became James's Secretary of State. He forfeited his estates and his peerage. Pope had known them both from association in the Scriblerus Club and there seems to be an allusion to their fate at the close of the 'imitation of Horace' addressed to Bolingbroke in 1737 and included in this selection. The new King George, the son of Sophia who had just predeceased Anne, naturally chose his ministers from among the Whigs who had staunchly supported his succession and who remained in the ascendancy for the next fifty years. Many Tories had supported the Hanoverian succession but they were seriously weakened by association with their Jacobite brethren particularly in the wake of the Jacobite uprising in Scotland in 1715.

The Whig ministry was soon dominated by the personality and policy of Sir Robert Walpole, who held the offices of First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer

continuously from 1721 to 1742. He aimed through continuing Whig supremacy to secure the Hanoverian succession against any aspirations to the contrary among Tory Jacobites. The twin pillars of the policy by which he gained several electoral victories were economic success with low taxation and a peaceful foreign policy. He gained the confidence of George I (1714–27) and of his son who succeeded him, and was able to use their power of royal patronage to party advantage. Never before had so much power been concentrated in any of the monarch's ministers, and this great power itself was often the main target of attack on the part of his critics. To opponents his extensive network of patronage was corrupt, and his peaceable foreign policy an expediency which appeased Britain's commercial rivals. The unpopularity of individual financial measures could be exploited by the opposition, but in general Walpole's economic management was successful. Many historians look back upon his rule as a time of political stability and growing national prosperity. One of his main opponents was Pope's friend Bolingbroke who had been pardoned in 1723 and allowed to return to England. In the early 1730s Bolingbroke sought to build up a new Country party made up of former Tories and Whig opponents of Walpole, with the aim of protecting the independence of Parliament against what they regarded as the corruption of Walpole's government. In the later 1730s a new opposition group of self-styled 'patriots' gathered around George II's son Frederick, the Prince of Wales, for which Bolingbroke wrote his most famous work, *The Idea of a Patriot King*. But none of his political aspirations came to anything, and when Walpole was eventually removed it was because in the eyes of his own supporters he had outlived his usefulness. The Whigs then regrouped under new leadership.

Pope had always had friends and social contacts across the main religious and political divisions, though his own inclinations were undoubtedly Tory, as his early association with the Scriblerians and his continuing friendship with Bolingbroke might indicate. To what extent he may from time to time have had Jacobite leanings it is difficult to say. In 'Windsor Forest' he happily identified himself with the ruling powers in the land and praised the peace of Utrecht recently

negotiated by the Tories and disapproved of by some of the Whigs. After 1714, he was no longer a political 'insider', but since as a Catholic he was not eligible for office he could never have contemplated the kind of career in which literature went hand in hand with government service as in the case of the Whig Addison or the Tory Swift. Hence the events of 1714 were not the personal blow to Pope that they were to his Protestant friend Swift. In an age when most literary men had some clear political affiliation and when poets were courted by politicians, perhaps because of his religion and his health, Pope remained more detached than most. In this of course he was aided by the financial independence he achieved through his Homer translation. He was never a party man and never addressed political issues as directly as, for example, John Dryden, who as poet laureate at the court of Charles II had written many poems in support of the government, notably *Absalom and Achitophel* in 1686. Pope always prided himself upon his independence, and in his poems his expression is often teasingly elusive:

> My head and heart thus flowing through my quill,
> Verse-man or prose-man, term me which you will,
> Papist or Protestant, or both between,
> Like good Erasmus, in an honest mean,
> In moderation placing all my glory,
> While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory.
>
> ('To Mr Fortescue', ll. 63–8)

Nevertheless part of that independence was not merely detachment but conscious opposition to Walpole and all his works. *The Imitations of Horace* are not exclusively political poems, but one of the more marked ways in which they differ from their originals, in which Horace represents himself in broad sympathy with the ruling order, stems from Pope's oppositional stance.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEMS

The best introduction to the literary career of Pope is one of his own earliest works, *An Essay on Criticism,* published in 1711 when he was only 23, in which the young poet sought

toclarify for himself and his times both the principles necessary for the formation of good judgement and the spirit in which the critic should set about his task. In the course of it, he renews in contemporary terms traditional humanist ideas about art and its relation to the nature of things that were part of the common European inheritance from the classical world. Here is the most positive and attractive representation of that broad-based humanism in the light of which he later attacked false learning, improper study, short views, narrow interests, and bad taste, in *The Moral Essays, An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and *The Dunciad*. If we survey his literary life as a whole, it serves almost as a manifesto, though it was doubtless not quite intended as such at the time.

In its form, organization, and style the *Essay* emulates the achievement of the Roman Augustan poet Horace as poet and critic in his verse epistles on the subject of art and literature, notably his *Ars Poetica*. Pope's characterization of Horace in the *Essay* may virtually be applied to himself:

> Horace still charms with graceful negligence,
> And without method talks us into sense,
> Will, like a friend, familiarly convey
> The truest notions in the easiest way.
> He, who supreme in judgement, as in wit,
> Might boldly censure, as he boldly writ,
> Yet judged with coolness, though he sung with fire;
> His precepts teach but what his works inspire.
>
> (ll. 653–60)

Both poets have in common a particular conception of good sense, ease of expression and address, the rare art of being attractively didactic (for the *Essay* is a work of exuberant wit), and a paradoxical blend of coolness and fire in which critical authority is allied to poetic talent so that the poem becomes the embodiment of the critical attitudes it advocates.

But if the *Essay* is to serve as a useful introduction, we must attempt to follow Pope's own principle:

> A perfect judge will read each work of wit
> With the same spirit that its author writ.
>
> (ll. 233–4)

In some accounts of Pope, the *Essay* is used to deduce a rather formidable set of period attitudes labelled 'neo-classical' often on the assumption that it only has real value as a period piece. With this assumption may also be found the feeling that the characteristic attitudes of the period stressing imitation of the ancients and adherence to the rules were narrow and limiting. Allied to this feeling is the prejudice that no critic before Coleridge in the nineteenth century can have much of value to say about literature because of the limiting terms in which the discussion is conducted. The world has moved on since Pope. But with a little historical perspective, we can see not only that the *Essay* transcends the narrower limitations of its time, but also that it embodies a critical ideal that can still challenge us today.

The *Essay* was written at a time when the so-called 'Querelle des anciens et des modernes' which had caused much intellectual ferment in France was reverberating in England. One extreme felt that the moderns could not possibly compete with the established masterpieces of the ancients; modern culture was inevitably overshadowed; the other that the unenlightened ancients had been superseded by the moderns writing in an age when man had come of age through exploration of the natural sciences. Ancient or modern is not of course merely an argument in this period but one for all time. In the twentieth century our ancients are no longer the classics of Greece and Rome but the classics of our own literature of which Pope is one. The years spent on the Homer translation and *The Imitations of Horace* testify to the veneration of the ancients ('Hail, bards triumphant!', l. 189) expressed in the *Essay*. But as a modern poet who was confident of his own talent and ability he approached the great authors of the past not in a spirit of abject humility but as a potential equal who hoped to rival their success. At its creative best, the Renaissance impulse did not of course aim at reproduction of the ancients (such an aim was a snare and delusion since the world has indeed moved on from antiquity) but rather sought inspiration from the great ancients that might aid fresh creative endeavour in the present. There is all the difference in the world between imitation that is servile and imitation (and translation too) that is creative. It is not

therefore surprising to find that Pope in the *Essay* avoids extremes and is neither ancient nor modern. The comprehensiveness of his mind precluded allegiance to the narrower dogmas of his day:

> Some foreign writers, some our own despise;
> The ancients only, or the moderns prize.
> Thus wit, like faith, by each man is applied
> To one small sect, and all are damned beside....
> Regard not then if wit be old or new,
> But blame the false, and value still the true.
>
> (ll. 394–7, 406–7)

These lines are eloquent testimony to his catholic taste and to the searching independent spirit that informs the *Essay* and the literary career to which it is a prelude.

If we are to judge the spirit of the work, then we must have a sympathetic understanding of the terms in which Pope discusses literature, both in the more general sense and also literally in giving back to words like 'wit' and 'judgement' (which may roughly be translated as the creative and the critical faculty respectively) the richer meaning they had in his time. In passing it may be noted that Pope allows no simple distinction between them for judgement is necessary to the poet just as true taste in the critic is an inner light derived from heaven. But even when it is acknowledged that Pope's terms have a wider range than the same words today, there remains a further stumbling block in the way of sympathetic appreciation of the account of poetry contained in the *Essay*. Pope followed Aristotle and Horace in maintaining the clear distinction of the ancient rhetorical tradition between sense, *res* (matter), and style, *verba* (words), using the old metaphor in which language is the dress of thought. In pre-Romantic criticism sense and style, or content and form, are brought together in the central concept of decorum or propriety:

> For different styles with different subjects sort,
> As several garbs, with country, town, and court.
>
> (ll. 322–3)

As imitation of the ancients can be either servile or creative so the concept of decorum can be mechanically or imaginatively

applied. In Pope's case, we owe the different strengths of *The Dunciad* and *The Rape of the Lock,* as well as the Homer translation, to his discriminating sense of the linguistic requirements of an heroic poem. As to the larger question of form and content, for practical reasons the distinction continues to be made, and it is very difficult to continue the discussion of literature for long without falling into it even if it is recognized, as doubtless Aristotle, Horace, and Pope recognized, that ultimately the distinction is invalid.

However, the main thrust of the argument about criticism in the *Essay* emerges clearly enough. Pope asserts what was for him a principle by which he sought to guide his whole life, that criticism and poetry should serve human ends in the widest sense. The critic must certainly be learned ('A little learning is a dangerous thing', l. 215) but learning is not enough ('So by false learning is good sense defaced', l. 25). Memorable is the ridicule of the impertinent critic:

> The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,
> With loads of learned lumber in his head.
>
> (ll. 612–13)

It is the way in which learning is applied that is stressed. For true judgement involves the whole man ('Nor in the critic let the man be lost', l. 523) just as it must concern itself with the whole work in its total effect. The true critic must 'survey the whole' (l. 235), judging the parts by the end they serve; those who judge (and write for) artistic effect alone whether it be conceit (imagery, particularly like that of the metaphysical poets, ll. 289ff), style (ll. 305ff), or numbers (versification, ll. 337ff) concentrate upon the means at the expense of the end and so fall short of the comprehensiveness required for true judgement whether in critic or poet. This comprehensiveness, which is so striking an ideal in the *Essay,* is not to be achieved without rigorous self-examination for the true critic (and artist) must seek to transcend prejudice, party spirit, idiosyncrasy, envy, and above all pride and self-conceit. The character of the good critic (ll. 629–44) is therefore the character of the good man ('Good nature and good sense must ever join', l. 524). Pope constantly keeps before us the relation between poetry, criticism, and moral sense. True wit,

true judgement, and true taste do not merely belong to a realm we might label the aesthetic; they are only possible when literary endeavours are fully integrated with the rest of life. The *Essay* offers a useful introduction to Pope, but its real value is the value it had for its first audience; it challenges us as readers, and every reader is a potential critic, to examine both the grounds of our taste, and the criteria we apply in making our judgements.

The central proposition in which the broad-based humanism of the *Essay* is grounded is a declaration of faith, almost a hymn to the divine and unchanging light of nature, in language that suggests the first cause:

> First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
> By her just standard, which is still the same:
> Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
> One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
> Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
> At once the source, and end, and test of Art.
>
> (ll. 68–73)

Here is Pope's belief in the underlying order that gives dignity, beauty, and meaning to the cosmos. Included in this metaphysical conception is a statement about the nature of man. Within the grand scheme of things, man has his appointed place, and man stands in the same relation to nature irrespective of considerations of time and place, or culture and society. The proposition

> Nature and Homer were, he found, the same
>
> (l. 135)

entails a belief that, however different archaic Greece and eighteenth- or twentieth-century Britain may be, these differences are the accidents of time and place, for what Homer had achieved in his poems is the representation of humanity in its timeless aspects. Homer enables us to see clearly how man stands in relation to nature, to things as they are. The equation of Homer with nature may be said to embrace both content and form; what is natural is both the object represented, that is human passions and actions, and the manner of representation, that is narrative method and

style. Let us take, for example, the main plot of the *Iliad* revolving around the anger of Achilles. Homer does not waste time telling us about inessential aspects of Achilles' life and character that do not have a bearing upon his anger, nor does he tell us about the siege of Troy from the beginning. He begins in the middle of things concentrating attention only upon those particulars which relate to his central theme. This selectivity, Homer's *method,* enables us to see Achilles' behaviour in a clear light because we are given a central core without distracting and inessential particulars. Of course much of the *Iliad* may seem to have little direct bearing upon the main action, but in the final analysis the episodes are subordinate to the irreducible plot. Achilles is powerfully individualized so that it is not being suggested that Homer has created bloodless archetypes. But he has arranged his main plot around the anger in such a way as to give us a pattern of behaviour that in its causes and effects represents a probable if not inevitable sequence. Underneath all that is particular and individual, the anger is typical in its causes and consequences, and it is Homer's method or art that enables us to see this. Homer the artist has therefore accomplished in his poems all that Aristotle the philosopher and critic held to be the end of art; he has imposed form and order on the undifferentiated matter and random chaos of life thus enabling us to see through the particular to the universal.

It is in this light that the famous lines defining true wit are to be understood:

> True wit is Nature to advantage dressed;
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;
> Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,
> That gives us back the image of our mind.
>
> (ll. 297–300)

To dress Nature to advantage is to express the universal whose truth we respond to because it is bound up with our essential humanity. The famous first couplet is not of course end-stopped, and its sense is extended and clarified in the couplet that follows. When the sentence is completed and related to the ideas of the *Essay,* it is apparent that by 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed' Pope means to suggest rather more

than that poetry is the elegant and polished expression of commonplace notions. It is unfortunate that the line can lend itself to such a banal interpretation. What he means by a truth that convinces at sight may perhaps be illustrated by the famous remarks of Johnson on Gray's *Elegy:*

> The *Churchyard* abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning 'Yet even these bones' are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them.[6]

It is also in the light of this Aristotelian view that Pope's account of language and expression must be understood:

> False eloquence, like the prismatic glass,
> Its gaudy colours spreads on every place;
> The face of Nature we no more survey,
> All glares alike, without distinction gay:
> But true expression, like the unchanging sun,
> Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon,
> It gilds all objects, but it alters none.
>
> (ll. 311–17)

This has sometimes been understood to mean that artistic expression offers an improved version of reality, a gilded world that comforts us because it is what we might wish our own to be. But true expression does not alter objects; they are simply seen in a clearer light; it is our perception through the superior clarity of the artist's vision that is improved. The root idea is that it is the sacred function of art to throw the universal into a clear radiant light, and the sacred duty of the artist to render and express his vision with emphatic clarity. In *An Essay on Man* the poet's re-creating vision restores to man as far as this is possible in a fallen world the image of his humanity as God intended it (see p. 156). In *The Dunciad,* the effect of Dullness is

> To blot out order, and extinguish light.
>
> (IV, 14)

Dullness undoes creation:

Light dies before thy uncreating word.

(IV, 654)

In Pope's exalted conception of its nature and function, art brings man into new or renewed awareness of the profoundest truths.

The central proposition about nature is immediately followed by an injunction to the would-be critic to have due regard to the rules of art. In the modern world in which we have long been accustomed to the breakdown in traditional art forms in the interests of artistic freedom and experiment, a belief in the validity of rules or guidelines sanctioned by tradition is perhaps difficult to comprehend and may even seem faintly absurd. To the Romantics and the nineteenth century when there was greater emphasis upon the creative imagination in theories of art it also seemed to betoken an unduly mechanical attitude for poetry of the highest seriousness was felt in Arnold's phrase to be 'conceived in the soul', having little to do with abstract rules. Yet a preoccupation with the rules of art is an ancient one and not merely an aberration of this particular period. In other arts it is perhaps easier to understand the emphasis upon basic groundrules of the craft. In antiquity the ideal proportion between height and breadth in a building or between limbs and torso in the representation of the human form was arrived at in the first instance by precise measurement. In the Renaissance great artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer made mathematical studies of proportion and consciously set out to establish the rules that constituted their findings. The rules are not regarded as a human invention but exist and are given in the nature of things rather as the laws of physics describe the underlying pattern of the natural world:

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodised.

(ll. 88–9)

The method that Homer discovered according to Aristotle 'by natural genius or knowledge of his art' is described by the Greek critic in his *Poetics,* and the principles there identified, such as beginning in the middle of things, concentration of

time and events, unity of action, consistency of characterization, subordination of the episodes to the main plot, all came in the course of time to acquire the force of *rules,* though in fact Aristotle was not writing prescriptively but offering a philosopher's reasoned analysis of the principles underlying the masterpieces of Greek art.

The *Poetics* is a fragmentary work, mostly about tragedy but with incidental remarks about epic and other genres. Aristotle identifies the object and end of tragedy, and breaks the form into its constituent parts, analysing the means by which the end is achieved in the best sort of tragedy. He therefore himself bequeathed a method which by the time of Pope had long been systematically extended by Italian and French critics to other classical genres such as comedy or pastoral and even to non-classical genres such as tragicomedy or romance. Rules might concern the use of particular metres for particular genres, the need to keep the genres distinct and separate, to adopt an appropriate style (grand for epic or humble for pastoral), to observe proportion in structure (five acts for drama), to observe the three unities in drama (Aristotle in fact only talks about unity of action), to keep consistency in characterization, and to use spectacle and divine intervention sparingly, rigorously to subordinate the parts to the whole thereby keeping the end in view all the time, and so on. At the root of all this of course is the Renaissance admiration for the classics of Greece and Rome which were thought to have established standards of excellence in the various genres which might be emulated in the vernacular. These inspired literary masterpieces are seen to embody principles of organization and design which had enabled the poet to render the essential truth of things in the most appropriate form:

> Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
> To copy Nature is to copy them.
>
> (ll. 139–40)

The just esteem for ancient rules is balanced in Pope by a vigorous defence of the poet's right boldly to deviate from the common track and essentially to make his own rules, for rules are but a means to an end, not an end in themselves, and there is a grace beyond the reach of art (ll. 141–57).

The freedom and flexibility Pope reserved for the poet in respect of the rules reflect a freedom and flexibility he felt in relation to the masterpieces of the past from which they were principally drawn. The past was of value to Pope as it might serve the cause of true civilization in the present. Even in those poems which may seem on the face of it to be most reliant upon ancient form because they are written in genres that do not have a currency after the eighteenth century, Pope's design springs from contemporary concern. He unites the style and conventions of epic with the incongruous subject-matter of *The Rape of the Lock* not of course to mock epic, but to bring to bear upon the trivial social behaviour of the fashionable world the serious perspective afforded by epic and Homer's very different society of heroes. Yet, though this incongruity between present and past is central to the design and effect of the poem, we are also made subtly aware of occult resemblances between things apparently unlike, between polite society and the world of epic. To give one example, when Umbriel undertakes his journey to the gloomy Cave of Spleen bearing in his hand a branch of healing spleenwort, we are reminded of journeys to the underworld in classical epic. In Virgil's *Aeneid,* Aeneas entering Hades with the Golden Bough meets in spirit form all the monsters and miseries that have plagued him in the upper world. Umbriel has a parallel encounter with the miseries that afflict the polite world of Belinda: Pain, Megrim, Ill-Nature, and Affectation. Instead of classical monsters, the cave is inhabited by horrors appropriate to the female world:

> Here sighs a jar, and there a goose-pie talks:
> Men prove with child, as powerful fancy works,
> And maids turned bottles call aloud for corks.
>
> (IV, 52–4)

The comic miniaturization may perhaps be regarded as a parody, but startling is Pope's own note on the goose-pie: 'alludes to a real fact; a lady of distinction imagined herself in this condition'. The sexual implications of the final line have often been commented upon. The passage is not wholly nonsensical; it glances at dangers and frustrations attendant upon the social life of the *beau monde*. In fact the Cave of

Spleen might be said to be translation of the classical underworld in terms appropriate to the polite society illustrated in the poem. From these dissimilar images drawn from the literature of the past and the society of the present, Pope's wit creates a new combination integrating past and present.

The integration of past and present is what he aims for in the translation of Homer. On the one hand, he used every means at his disposal to avail himself of the learning of his day and arrive at the best historical understanding of the poems following his own advice in the *Essay:*

> Know well each ancient's proper character:
> His fable, subject, scope in every page;
> Religion, country, genius of his age.
>
> (ll. 119–21)

Had the moderns of Pope's day made such an effort to acquire this historical understanding:

> None e'er had thought his comprehensive mind
> To modern customs, modern rules confined;
> Who for all ages writ and all mankind.
>
> (cancelled from the *Essay* after l. 124)

Deliberate modernizing he therefore despised. On the other hand the ancient poem has to be reconciled with the modern world and modern expression. This is the eternal problem of translation which must always be a compromise between the original and the translator, for there can be no such thing as an absolute translation. In years to come translations of our own day, which may now seem nearer to the original than Pope's, will appear equally of their time while lacking in most cases the creativity to transcend it. Pope made a virtue of necessity and aimed at fidelity not to Homer's words but to his spirit and to all that is implied in the equation of Homer with nature. While never intending to impose modern sense upon Homer, he nevertheless used a modern form, the heroic couplet, to render the classical hexameter, and would not have been in sympathy with the desire for an ideal reproduction of Homer's metrical effect expressed by Matthew Arnold in his *Lectures on translating Homer*. He was equally wary of archaizing:

Some by old words to fame have made pretence,
Ancients in phrase, mere moderns in their sense.
(ll. 324–5)

He aimed as always to integrate ancient and modern, rendering ancient sense as faithfully as modern expression might allow.

Of all the ancient inheritance no form was more valued by Pope than the epic deemed in the Renaissance, despite the clear preference of Aristotle in his *Poetics* for tragedy, to be the highest and noblest of genres. Right at the end of his life, he was still contemplating the idea of a national epic on the subject of Brutus (a son of the Trojan Priam), who according to legend had brought civilization from Troy to Britain, rather as the Trojan Aeneas had brought civilization to Italy (the subject of Virgil's *Aeneid*). A fragment written in 1743 survives:

The patient chief, who labouring long, arrived
On Britain's shore and brought with favouring gods
Arts, arms and honour to her ancient sons:
Daughter of Memory! from elder time
Recall; and me, with Britain's glory fired,
Me, far from meaner care or meaner song,
Snatch to thy holy hill of spotless bay,
My country's poet, to record her fame.

The Brutus fragment suggests that Pope's epic aspirations were not satisfied by translation, or by *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad,* but the same preoccupation with national life that it reveals ('arts, arms and honour') was successfully expressed in other interrelated genres, in the epistles, the moral essays, the satires, and *The Imitations of Horace*.

It is at this point that we may consider the meaning and propriety of the term 'Augustan' when it is frequently applied to Pope and his age. As a period term in Roman civilization it covers the rule of Rome's first emperor from the time when, after he had defeated Mark Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, he renounced the power he had held as the triumvir Octavian and adopted the name Augustus from 27 BC to his death in AD 14. Abroad, Augustus consolidated the conquests of his predecessors by a programme of urbanization and a

series of treaties with neighbouring states by which he secured the Roman frontiers; at home, he revised the old republican constitution, investing supreme power in himself as Imperator, commander of the armed forces, though disguising his power under republican forms, for his rule was ratified in the traditional way by the Senate and the popular assembly. After nearly a century of wars and civil strife, including two major civil wars, he gradually brought peace, order, and stability to Rome and her dominions. He initiated moral reforms in which he attempted to breathe new life into the old religion and instituted a grand programme of public building so that it was said of him that he found Rome brick and left it marble. He fostered the arts through the patronage of his friend Maecenas. The foremost poets of the age, Virgil and Horace, though they had been on the opposing side in the civil war, accepted the patronage of Maecenas, identified themselves with the new order, and gave expression in their poems on public themes to the new mood of self-confidence generated by the Augustan peace. Their poems are sometimes called Augustan to denote their relation to the political order and to suggest the conditions under which they were produced. But the term goes further than this to suggest a quality in the art of the poems, for the works of Virgil and Horace have been seen to have a formal polish and a refinement of expression that set them apart from the literature of the previous age, and a poise and balance that set them apart from the literature that followed. These qualities of polish, refinement, urbanity, and poise have been considered to be the hallmarks of Augustan literature, representing the high-water mark of Roman culture and civilization. It is the indubitable fact of the supreme literary achievement of Virgil and Horace that has sustained and propagated an Augustan myth wherein Latin comes to perfection of expression in the golden age of the rule of Augustus (the phrase 'golden Latin' referring to this period being a commonplace of Roman literary history), made possible by the interlocking relationship of poetry, patronage, and political power, for Virgil and Horace achieve greatness not in spite of Augustus but because of him.

This myth, embodying an ideal for some, masking reality for others, exerted a powerful fascination upon the nation

states of modern Europe seeking in their cultural aspirations to emulate Greece and Rome. In his youth in Queen Anne's reign Pope had celebrated the peace of Utrecht in 'Windsor Forest', a poem inspired by the *Georgics* in which Virgil celebrated man's fruitful cultivation of the natural world in the Italian country-side made possible after peace had been restored to the political order by Augustus. But after 1714 he no longer identified himself with the ruling powers in the land, becoming with the passing of time increasingly alienated from the government and its aims, and the financial independence he achieved through his Homer translation allowed him to be independent of patron and court. In his imitation of the verse epistle addressed by Horace to Augustus (with whom the Roman poet is reported to have had cordial relations), he brilliantly uses the Augustan parallel for satirical effect since the Hanoverian King George Augustus to whom he addresses Horace's lines, in the power of Whig politicians and no lover of poetry (in his reign Colley Cibber, later to be the hero of Pope's new *Dunciad*, was created poet laureate), was no Caesar and no Augustus:

> While you, great patron of mankind, sustain
> The balanced world, and open all the main;
> Your country, chief, in arms abroad defend,
> At home, with morals, arts, and laws amend;
> How shall the Muse from such a monarch steal
> An hour, and not defraud the public weal?
> 'The first epistle of the second book of Horace imitated'
> (ll. 1–6)

Although his relation to the Horatian original is ironic at the opening here and at the end where he again addresses the august majesty of the king, in the main body of the epistle he is concerned with two arguments that seek to set a value upon poetry and to vindicate the literature of his time. The first concerns the role of poetry in the *civitas;* in its highest form poetry is useful to the state, *utilis urbi:*

> Yet let me show a poet's of some weight,
> And (though no soldier) useful to the state.
> (ll. 203–4)