

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE POETRY OF POPE

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The English Department on April 11th, 1967)

Alexander Pope, so often spoken of in the same breath as John Dryden, was his junior by more than fifty years, though because of Pope's precocity his early publications, including the *Pastorals*, appeared in Tonson's *Miscellanies* in 1709 at no great distance of time from the last publication of Dryden's lifetime, the *Fables*, of 1700. Pope's quick intellectual development may have been intensified by the degree of social isolation to which his weak physique and his parents' Roman Catholicism subjected him as a child; debarred from the normal schooling of the well-to-do he received his education from priests and read omnivorously in his father's library. T.S. Eliot is the only English poet who comes to mind as having a comparably intense literary culture emerging so functionally in his work for the purpose of significant allusion, whether as parody, ironic reflection, or intellectual reinforcement. Pope was widely acquainted not only with the ancient classics but also with sixteenth and seventeenth centuries English verse, and at one time thought of writing its history, a task not in fact achieved until Thomas Warton published his *History of English Poetry* in 1774-81. According to Pope's account of his education, related to his friend Joseph Spence, and published in the latter's *Anecdotes* (1820),

When I had done with my priests, I took to reading by myself, for which I had a very great eagerness and enthusiasm, especially for poetry; and in a few years I had

dipped into a great number of the English, French, Italian, Latin, and Greek poets. This I did without any design but that of pleasing myself; and had got the languages by hunting after the stories in the several poets I read.

In his teens he wrote perceptive imitations of Waller, Cowley, Dorset, and Rochester. He also tried Spenser, though his imitation fails to capture Spenser's characteristic melody (few poets have succeeded in this, though James Thomson achieved it charmingly, briefly, in certain stanzas of *The Castle of Indolence*, in 1798). Pope's Spenserian imitation is, however, a lively and Hogarthian rendering of London life, and thus early makes the point that much of Pope's work turns its back on graces and elegances in favour of realism in the vein of Swift; the Spenser poem is not unlike Swift's lifelike *Description of the Morning* and *A City Shower*. Not long after, in *The Happy Life of a Country Parson* (written in 1713), Pope approaches the unaffected conversational verse-idiom of Swift again, though the main model of imitation here is Martial. So, if Pope's first really notable work was the elegant-artificial *Pastorals*, his literary tastes did from the beginning include a much more realistic mode. Later in life he told Spence

I read Chaucer still with as much pleasure as almost any of our poets. He is a master of manners, of description, and the first tale-teller in the true enlivened natural way.

When about sixteen he modernized Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* and *Wife of Bath's Prologue* in a capable, animated fashion. Speaking to Spence of non-dramatic poetry he defined 'the great landmarks [of] the general course of our poetry' as being Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and Dryden; as for dramatic poetry he was strikingly sensitive to Shakespeare's qualities (allowing for some prejudices of his age) and explained them in the preface to his edition of the plays (1725). He admired, and echoed, Donne, Milton, Cowley, Butler, and Dryden; his knowledge of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Statius and other ancient classics was deep, and was displayed relevantly to the needs of his own poetic expression. At the age of fifteen he wrote four books of an epic on Alcander, Prince of Rhodes, in which he imitated Homer, Virgil, Statius, Ovid, Claudian, Spenser, Milton, and Cowley; some of it was

later worked into the *Essay on Criticism* and *The Dunciad*. A poet of vivid and brilliant literary culture, his allegiances were to the strong, grand, and majestic, and to the 'thru' enlivened natural way', as well as to the graceful, delicate, and sentimental.

After this brief review of his literary leanings, let us glance at what Dr Leavis calls the seventeenth-century 'Line of Wit.' For Dr Leavis, Pope is a master of wit in the best Metaphysical sense - namely, the striking expression of deep psychological perceptions'. This 'Metaphysical sense' of wit includes the dramatic management of the speaking voice against the conventional structure of metre, rhyme, and stanza, the surprises and alertness prompted by different levels or kinds of poetic material interacting round some witty point of unexpected analogy, so that the mind plays actively and with a sense of athletic agility among the discrepant ideas offered to it. This kind of wit, dominant in Donne, Herbert, Marvell, and Cowley — and the subject of Dr. Johnson's strictures in his *Life of Cowley* — allied itself in the seventeenth century tradition, upon which Pope so richly drew, with a refinement and urbanity coming through Ben Jonson from Horace and Catullus. In, for instance, Marvell's *Coy Mistress*, speech plays against line and couplet with a stimulating alertness incongruous ideas are wittily juxtaposed, and the intelligence is sophisticated and urbane.

Dr. Leavis compares Marvell's *Dialogue Between the Resolved Soul and Created-Pleasure* with Milton's *Comus*. Both poems express the Puritan concern for moral fineness; their different effects, as Dr. Leavis puts it, spring from the fact that

Milton's moral theme is held simply and presented with a single-minded seriousness. Marvell, presents his in relation to a wide range of varied and maturely-valued interests that are present implicitly in the wit — and his seriousness is the finer wisdom of a ripe civilisation.

And this leads him to bring Pope into line with the tradition of this mature, ripe, and civilised 'wit' :

Pope's peculiar greatness is that he can be a complete Augustan, realizing in his poetry the strength of that actual

concentrated civilization immediately around him, and at the same time... achieve a strength so closely related to Marvell's. And it is a very great poet indeed of whom we can say that, writing under George I, he is very much closer to Donne than Dryden is... In [his best work] subtle complexity is reconciled with 'correctness'; his wit is Metaphysical as well as Augustan, and he can be at once polite and profound.

Pope recommended Donne's satires and epistles to Spence as 'his best things'; the complexities of the *Songs and Sonets* were presumably less to an Augustan taste than the vigorous rendering of contemporary life and discourse. Possibly taking a hint from Dryden's query, —

Would not Donne's satires, which abound with so much wit, appear more charming if he had taken care of his words, and of his numbers? —

Pope did indeed produce versions which he somewhat invidiously called *Satires of Dr. John Donne, Versified* (c. 1713); he tackled the second and fourth satires, effectively transferring the vigorous colloquial commentary on Elizabethan London to the Augustan idiom and scene of his own time — and here again one observes Pope at an early date achieving the close, strenuous, satiric realism, packed with current allusions, which is customarily associated rather with late compositions like *The Dunciad* and the *Imitations of Horace*.

Yet it is not primarily in his modernisation of Donne that Pope shows himself to be in the seventeenth-century line of wit; it is rather in certain aspects of his poetic mind. A piece of evidence offered originally by John Middleton Murry, and developed by Dr Leavis — the subtle flavour and the interacting levels of the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* — is not substantial enough to throw more than a sidelight on the matter, interesting though it is. Perhaps the case can be set out more broadly.

First: Pope writes with a mind fully active over the whole range of his vigorous and extensive interests. He does not set up a specialized poetical world; his poetry is an attempt to express the sharpest and most telling assessments of the whole world of mind, morals, and society

around him. This sense of what poetry can do allies him with Ben Jonson and Donne, though it carries him far beyond them. Seventeenth-century wit is the wit of the whole intellectual man, and the whole intellectual man goes into Pope's poetry. Sir Herbert Grierson, in the epoch-making introduction to his *Metaphysical Lyrics from Donne to Butler* (the first effective attempt to re-instate the Metaphysical poets in the poetic tradition), recognized in Dryden and Pope 'the last great poets of an age of intense intellectual activity and controversy, theological, metaphysical, political.' It is this inclusiveness, this unseparateness, which one notes as the first sign of Pope's kinship. Second: there is in Pope's poetry a perpetual interplay of levels and tones, from the lightest to the gravest; and these are not a matter merely of varying degrees of gravity within a fairly uniform poetical attitude (such as one would find in Wordsworth or Tennyson, for example). They involve all the faculties, of the personality - the witty, serious, tender, malevolent, insolent, sensitive, tough, companionable, hostile, and so forth. *The Rape of the Lock*, the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, the Horatian epistles, and *The Dunciad* would be the main evidences here.

Third: there is a syntactical intensity and efficacy, an expressive vehemence and force, which Pope concentrates within the heroic couplet, which challenge comparison with the syntactical dramas of Donne's and Marvell's handling of line and stanza, where the syntactical forms keep the mind playing actively back and forth over the connections of meaning. Donne offers, for instance,

For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love:
 Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
 My five grey hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout:
 Seek you a course, get you a place,
 Observe his honour, or his grace,
 Or the King's real, or his stamped face
 Contemplate, what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love.

The variety and vehemence of movement are scarcely less in the opening lines of the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*:

Shut, shut the door! good John! fatigu'd I said;
 Tie up the knocker! Say I'm sick, I'm dead.
 The Dogstar rages! Nay, 'tis past a doubt
 All Bedlam - or Parnassus - is let out!
 Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,
 They rave, recite, and madden round the land,
 What walls can guard me, or what shades can hide?
 They pierce my thickets, through my grot they glide;
 By land by water, they renew the charge;
 They stop the chariot, and they board the barge,
 No place is sacred! Not the church is free!
 E'en Sunday shines no Sabbath day to me;
 Then from the Mint walks forth the man of rhyme -
 Happy to catch me, just at dinner-time.

Fourth: there is that quality which T.S. Eliot pointed to as distinctive of the Metaphysical style, by which 'a thought becomes an experience' and there occurs 'a direct, sensuous apprehension of thought, or a re-creation of thought into feeling'. Every so often Pope's poems blossom into such a rich, intense union of thought and feeling that an undeniable beauty is created. In *English Literature of the Early Eighteenth Century* Professor Bonamy Dobrée writes of a characteristic movement through Pope's longer poems - a firm, level opening, a lively development, and then, towards the end, 'a heightening, a greater poetic pressure', mounting to a lyrical richness which he refers to as the 'rise', a poetic surge carried on a singing quality he calls the 'lilt'. This is not, certainly, a general law about the procedures of the longer poems, but it does seem to describe what happens in several of them, and in such passages a remarkable union of thought and feeling occurs, thought and feeling promoting and becoming each other. This is apparent in the climax-passages of *Eloisa to Abelard*, in the glowing eloquence of the *Essay on Man* when it deals with the poor Indian (I. 99-112), the harmony of the universe (I. 207 - 80), the limited nature of man (II. 1 - 18), the unity of society (III. 283 - 302), and the summing-up of the whole argument ((V. 309 - 98). Perhaps the most majestic instance is the culmination of *The Dunciad*, those lofty and inexorable lines of visionary doom, profoundly comic and tragic at once, in which the thought and emotion provoked by the triumph of universal darkness

sound forth with so sombre a splendour. This is poetry of the whole experiencing personality.

Fifth, and akin to the fourth: the texture of words is expressively actual, realized in what they mean; the words enact what they say, not merely by simple devices of onomatopoeia (though Pope is clever with these when he wants to be, and parodies them deliciously in the *Essay on Criticism*, in the passage where the sound becomes the echo to the sense). When, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare makes the Prince protest to Queen Gertrude against the shamelessness of her marriage to Claudius, he does so in words which state the meaning but also, in the whole movement of the lines, the pressure and reiteration of idea, the choice of image and metaphor, and the substantial suggestiveness of expression, enact and present the dramatic complex of Hamlet's feelings:

... Such an act
That blurs the grace and blush of modesty;
Calls virtue hypocrite; takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And sets a blister there; makes marriage-vows
As false as dicers' oaths. O, such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words. Heaven's face does glow
O'er this solidity and compound mass
With heated visage, as against the doom -
Is thought-sick at the act.

Here the intense contradiction of health and sickness is rendered in the very movement and texture of the words, as well as in the emotional charge of the imagery. Pope can make his words work in a comparable manner of total communication. When Donne writes of the difficulty of achieving truth -

On a huge hill,
Craggy and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go,
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so -

or when Marvell, in *The Coy Mistress*, turns from the slow vision of their timeless love to the urgent pressure of Time -

But at my back I always hear
 Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
 And yonder all before us lie
 Deserts of vast Eternity -

the words likewise embody and project their meanings. (In the Marvell passage the second line enacts, and resounds, the urgency of movement, and the long 'aa' sounds in 'Deserts', 'vast', and 'Eternity' - still current in the way the English, though not the Americans, pronounce 'clerk' as 'clark' - represent the wide emptiness of the hereafter.) There is a comparable expressive drama of words in Pope. To take simple instances, one has the direct communication of sensation in

Gums and pomatums shall his flight restrain,
 While clogged he beats his silken wings in vain,

from *the Rape of the Lock* (this represents, in physical sensation, the punishment destined for any of Belinda's guardian sylphs who neglects his charge, and one feels immediately the thick stickiness against which the delicate texture of wings is helpless). Or there is the brilliantly imitative passage in which Belinda repels her assailant by tossing snuff into his nose, and one senses the physical discomfort in the texture of the words - 'titillating dust', 'Sudden, with starting tears':

Just where the breath of life his nostrils drew
 A charge of snuff the wily virgin threw;
 The Gnomes direct, to ev'ry atom just,
 The pungent grains of titillating dust.
 Sudden, with starting tears each eye o'erflows,
 And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.

A fuller, and famous, passage, more complex in its effects is that in which Belinda sails on the Thames, to sunlight and music, and the protecting sylphs fly invisibly, yet still with an indefinable airy glitter like embodiments of light, round her vessel. The whole passage is a miraculous communication — much more than a description — of the brilliance and fluidity of their motions:

But now secure the painted vessel glides,
 The sunbeams trembling on the floating tides;
 While melting music steals upon the sky,
 And softened sounds along the waters die.
 Smooth flow the waves, the zephyrs gently play;
 Belinda smil'd, and all the world was gay.
 All but the Sylph - with careful thoughts oppress'd,
 Th' impending woe sat heavy on his breast.
 He summons straight his denizens of air;
 The lucid squadrons round the sails repair;
 Soft o'er the shrouds aerial whispers breathe,
 That seem'd but zephyrs to the train beneath.
 Some to the sun their insect wings unfold,
 Waft on the breeze, or sink in clouds of gold;
 Transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight,
 Their fluid bodies half dissolv'd in light.
 Loose to the wind their airy garments flew,
 Thin glitt'ring textures of the filmy dew,
 Dipt in the richest tincture of the skies
 Where light disports in ever-mingling dyes,
 While ev'ry beam new transient colours flings,
 Colours that change, whene'er they wave their wings,

This is a translation into words of the Newtonian discovery of the prismatic nature of light, done with a translucency and shimmer which rival that of light itself, and a whispering delicacy which sounds like the very breeze of summer. This is poetry which wholly realizes, actualizes, and dramatizes its subject in the total intricacy of its configurations.

So too, with an even more astonishing power, does the greatest hate-poem in the English language, Pope's portrait of Lord Hervey under the guise of Sporus: the point of the name is that the historical Sporus was a hermaphrodite parasite of the degenerate Emperor Nero, and Lord Hervey an effeminate court politician — the parallel is not particularly close, but close enough for Pope's venom to exploit, since Hervey was a personal, political, and literary enemy. Nowhere in English is there a completer fusion of thought, passion and language directed and controlled to achieve the total realization of its object; the

passage is a dialogue between Pope (P.) and his companion Dr Arbuthnot (A.) —

- P. Let Sporus tremble - A. What? that thing of silk?
 Sporus, that mere white curd of ass's milk?
 Satire or sense, alas, can Sporus feel?
 Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?
- P. Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
 This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings;
 Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
 Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys.
 So well-bred spaniels civilly delight
 In mumbling of the game they dare not bite.
 Eternal smiles his emptiness betray,
 As shallow streams run dimpling all the way.
 Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
 And as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks,
 Or at the ear of Eve, familiar toad,
 Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
 In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
 Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies,
 His wit all see-saw, between **that** and **this**,
 Now high, now low, now Master up now Miss,
 And he himself one vile Antithesis - -

(the point of the last line is Hervey's supposedly indeterminate sex). Whether Hervey was really like this is less important than the intensity of Pope's imaginative grasp which, round the idea of the ambiguous 'Sporus', has assembled his flaccid pallor, silken effeminacy, malicious nastiness of mind, florid triviality, dangerous busybodydom and complacency, and chattering slanders; not only do the images — of ignominious insects and animals — convey this but also phrase after phrase in which intense meaning and auditory significance combine — words and phrases like 'white curd of ass's milk', 'This painted child of dirt', 'wellbred spaniels civilly delight', 'mumbling', 'dimpling', 'the puppet squeaks', or 'familiar toad, / Half froth half venom' (an allusion to the deception of Eve in *Paradise Lost* by Satan in the guise of a toad).

By the time he was forty, in 1728, Pope was in masterful command of most brilliant and formidable powers of expression and of a powerful

assessment of his fellowmen. These qualities go to make *The Dunciad* (1728 - 42) in its finest passages — transient though much of its contemporary content is, and not particularly interesting today — an extraordinary product of Pope's mature genius. I have already mentioned its majestic conclusion, but for expressive vivacity the portrait in the first book of the supreme Dunce (in fact, Colley Cibber) is as fine as can be; the diction is vigorous and unrestrained by notions of refinement (Pope uses the whole natural language), the syntax is forceful and unfettered, the imagery is ruthlessly grotesque and ignominious, the sonorities are explosive and vehement, and the contrast between the furious energy of the 'Hero' and its absurd results is of the strongest mock-heroic kind (Cibber is revealed in his garret amidst his abortive compositions):

Swearing and supperless the Hero sate;
 Blasphem'd his Gods, the dice, and damn'd his fate;
 Then gnaw'd his pen, then dash'd it to the ground,
 Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!
 Plung'd for his sense, but found no bottom there,
 Yet wrote and flounder'd on, in mere despair.
 Round him much embryo, much abortion lay,
 Much future ode, and abdicated play,
 Nonsense precipitate, like running lead,
 That slipp'd through cracks and zigzags of the head;
 All that on Folly Frenzy could beget,
 Fruits of dull heat, and sooterkins of wit.
 Next, o'er his books his eyes began to roll,
 In pleasing memory of all he stole,
 How here he sipp'd, how there he plunder'd snug,
 And suck'd all o'er, like an industrious bug.

Just as Dryden's satiric superiority over the Samuel Butler of *Hudibras* could be instanced in a comparison between his portrait of Shaftesbury as Achitophel and Butler's (Butler is a witty railer, Dryden an incisive, immortalising caricaturist), so Pope's poetic superiority over Dryden could be instanced in the extra fullness and creative energy of this as compared with even the best of Dryden, gloriously severe and superbly witty though Dryden can be.

This seems the moment to trace over the old dispute whether Pope is a poet at all. His contemporaries, provided they were not his enemies, took him unquestionably to be one, though the voice of the new poetry, heard even before Pope's death in James Thomson's preface to the second edition of *Winter* (1726), was already asserting the superior claims of 'Nature' over 'Wit'. 'Thomson' preface claims that

Nothing can have a better influence towards the revival of poetry than the choosing of great and serious subjects, such as at once amuse [that is, transport, captivate] the fancy, enlighten the head, and warm the heart. ... A genius fired with the charms of Truth and Nature is tuned to a sublimer pitch [than that of social affairs], and scorns to associate with such subjects.

Thirty years later Joseph Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756) drew the distinction which was to divide the conflicting views:

I revere the memory of Pope, I repect and honour his abilities; but I do not think him at the head of his profession. In other words, in that species of poetry wherein Pope excelled, he was superior to all mankind; and I only say, that this species of poetry is not the most excellent one of the art. We do not, it should seem, sufficiently attend to the difference there is betwixt a MAN OF WIT, a MAN OF SENSE, and a TRUE POET.... The sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy. What is there transcendently sublime or pathetic in Pope?

And he quoted, as a relevant formulation, Voltaire's summing-up of Boileau — 'Laborieux, sévère, précis, pur, harmonieux, il devint enfin le Poète de la Raison'. Dr Johnson's famous rejoinder, 'If Pope be not a poet, where then is poetry to be found?', did not settle the matter. For William Cowper, though Pope was indeed a poet, his example

Made poetry a mere mechanic art,
And ev'ry warbler has his tune by heart.

In Sleep and Poetry Keats wrote of the degenerate tradition which followed upon Pope:

A schism

Nurtur'd by foppery and barbarism
 Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
 Men were thought wise who could not understand
 His glories: with a puling infant's force
 They sway'd about upon a rocking-horse
 And call'd it Pegasus.

And though for Byron Pope was 'the most *perfect* of our poets, and the purest of our moralists', Coleridge was reserved about 'Mr Pope and his followers' and held that poetry which does not appeal to 'our passions or our imagination' is an inglorious kind. Arnold asserted that Dryden and Pope, though 'masters of the art of versification', 'are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose', and as late as 1933, in his lecture on *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, A.E. Housman admitted that Pope must be called a great poet but deplored the necessity:

That Pope was a great poet is true: but it is one of those truths which are beloved of liars because they serve so well the cause of falsehood. That Pope was not a poet is false: but a righteous man, standing in awe of the Last Judgment and the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, might well prefer to say it.

For two centuries the contest has gone on, and doubtless it will continue; poetic values serve the needs of men, and can never be finally settled. Currently we seek poetry in pregnancy of meaning, semantic expressiveness of language, and functional form, rather than in lofty feeling and diction. Such passages as I have quoted clearly do not do all the things we want from poetry; if, shutting the pages of Pope (who gives us the world we know, though with exceptional brilliance and drama), we open those of Milton or Wordsworth or Keats or Hopkins, we enter 'Far other worlds, and other seas'. Yet Pope has much of beauty, a fair share of nobility, abundant charm and grace, admirable lucidity and power, and, in many moods from light to sombre, a

complexity and intensity which raise language to an activity of significance very rarely equalled. It is a pity that the terms which often appear in eighteenth-century criticism — the rules, correctness, taste, judgment, and so on — have so negative a sound; they suggest that the eighteenth-century poet spent his time avoiding dangers, dodging excess and risk, scared of enthusiasm, shunning faults. It was rather because the poets of the time took the positives for granted — the need for something really to say about life and society, the need for unusual strength of conception and for cogency of style — that they talked so much of methods and procedures. A healthy culture — and English literary culture through the age of Pope was healthy — is not formed from evasions. Pope writes from thought and passion, and writes for intelligence, honesty, candour, goodness, and beauty. In the way his poetry sounds he has in the highest degree what T.S. Eliot has called 'the auditory imagination' —

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.

I should like to leave the subject with one more critical quotation, from Professor Geoffrey Tillotson's first article about him in *Essays in Criticism and Research*, because it makes a good point about Pope as the poet of the actual:

Everything for Pope is centralized in man, in men, in human character and the visible instruments upon which human character orchestrates its fine or broken music... Pope's sense of beauty is almost always incorporated into his sense of interest. He sees meaning among things - the sensuous world is important to him because it co-ordinates itself with the strength of his meaning.

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