

ALEXANDER POPE



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The work of any artist or poet is bound to reflect something of the period in which it is composed, and there's a modern tendency to dismiss Alexander Pope's poetry as conventional and as formulaic as the gardens of André Le Nôtre. This would be a mistake for several reasons. But it may also be confidently asserted that gifted persons of all periods whatever find themselves negotiating between two absolutely contradictory impulses: to pursue and exploit, on one hand, all their natural propensities, gifts, and talents, and, on the other, to choose, in W. B. Yeats's words, "whatever task's most difficult/Among tasks not impossible" – in other words, to rise to extreme challenges we set or find before ourselves, both technical and moral. We can see both of these tendencies at work in Pope. He tells us that he "lisp'd in numbers," and we have from his hand a superb poem of great imaginative maturity composed before he was twelve. He taught himself to write "by copying from printed books," and not from English alone: "In a few years I had dipped into a great number of English, French, Italian, Latin, and Greek poets. This I did without any design but that of pleasing myself, and got the languages by hunting after the stories in the several poets I read."

On the other hand, he suffered handicaps that made Lord Byron's clubfoot look like a trifle. He was, to begin with, a Catholic in a land where that faith was severely penalized by heavy taxes that eventually forced the poet's father to give up his home at Binfield, near Windsor Forest. The distrust and contempt in which Catholics were held was lasting and pervasive and afflicted the poet his life long. To this we must add that he was probably never free from physical pain from childhood on, having at first to fit himself into rough canvas bodices, "being scarce able to hold himself erect till they were laced," owing to the ravages of the tubercle bacillus in his bones, which allowed him to achieve his full height of only four and a half feet. In his forties and early fifties he was unable to dress himself or get into bed without help; "nor could not stand upright till a kind of stays, made of stiff liner, were laced on him, one of his sides being contracted almost to the backbone." In his sixties "his body had required the support of 'an iron case.' So a friend testified, (who saw his warped and shriveled figure lifted out of it after he was dead) . . . 'like a man whom you hang in chains.'" His enemies, who were many, and for whom his Catholic faith was enough justification, did not scruple to abuse him for his deformity. Said the poet John Dennis, "As there is no Creature so venomous, there is nothing so stupid and impotent as a hunch-back'd Toad." And the bookseller Edmund Curll: "There is no one Disease but what all the rest of Men are subject to; whereas the Deformity of this Libeller, is Visible, Present, Lasting, Unalterable, and Peculiar to himself. 'Tis the mark of God and Nature upon him, to give us warning that we should hold no Society with him, as a Creature not of our Original, nor of our Species."

In addition to Pope's religion and his deformity, contemporaries despised him because of his extraordinary financial success, attained chiefly through his translation of Homer. In *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, a survey of the English eighteenth century, John Brewer writes in regard to the monetary value of selected copyrights of the time: "In 1716 . . . the copyright of Pope's *Works* was valued at an astonishing £4,400, Shakespeare at £1,800, and Addison and Steele's *Spectator* as a part-book at £1,300." With his earnings he bought a modest estate at Twickenham, which remained his home until his death in 1744.

Consider the following as the work of an eleven-year-old.

“Ode on Solitude”

Happy the man whose wish and care
 A few paternal acres bound,
 Content to breathe his native air,
 In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
 Whose flock supply him with attire,
 Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
 In winter fire.

Blest, who can unconcern'dly find
 Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
 In health of body, peace of mind,
 Quiet by day,

Sound sleep at night; study and ease,
 Together mixt; sweet recreation,
 And Innocence, which most does please
 With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown.
 Thus unlamented let me die,
 Steal from the world, and not a stone
 Tell where I lie.

Such cheerful resignation on the part of a boy, such stoic fortitude, is quite remarkable even when we suppose he has appropriated consecrated pastoral themes and attitudes. Yet to have written out verses as serene as these must have meant to come face to face with the austerity and anonymity they envision, an anonymity plainly at odds with poetic ambition and hope of reputation. The brief phrase about “health of body” must have come with special meaning to one who by age fifteen was agonized by such constant pain that he told a friend he had “resolved to give way to his distemper, and sat down calmly, in full expectation of death.”

In his splendid biography of Pope, Maynard Mack makes these penetrating comments on the poet’s extraordinary poem *Eloisa to*

Abelard, which was sent to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Constantinople and who was the covert object of Pope's deep feelings. The story of the famous medieval lovers, Mack writes,

offered latent possibilities of emotional identification with both lovers. In Abelard, he might, if he chose, sense one kind of actuation of his own situation, both as it was and as he might wish it to be. Though there is no evidence whatever that Pope was sexually crippled, he had been penalized from boyhood by a dwarfish stature and deformity that seemed capable of bringing about similar frustrations so far as normal relations with women were concerned and were just as certain to last a lifetime. . . . On the other hand (going back to Pope's source), Abelard was deeply loved despite all. Hence at least in Pope's fantasy, he could be an emblem of hope. Had not a letter from him precipitated Eloisa's outpouring of passion? What if a letter of his own – to Lady Mary, say – should prove a comparable invitation?

A love that can never be physically consummated takes on a nobility of a special and almost religious kind, committed to anguish and transcendence.

Pope's brilliant, light-hearted mock-epic, *The Rape of the Lock*, is virtually impossible suitably to illustrate by small extracts, since much of its ingenuity consists in the sustained employment of parallels to the epics of John Milton, Virgil, and Homer, but ludicrously applied to a small social contretemps. We need care no more about Arabella Fermor and Lord Petre (the persons on whom the poem is based) than about John Dennis or Edmund Curll or any of the named targets of *The Dunciad*. In the following lines, Belinda, the heroine, just before waking, experiences a dream of sublime fatuity and self-flattery, in which she finds herself the center of terrestrial adoration (in the shape of a handsome courtier dressed as for the monarch's birthday) and the celestial focus of the vast hosts of spiritual creatures.

A Youth more glitt'ring than a Birth-night Beau,
 (That ev'n in Slumber caus'd her Cheek to glow)
 Seem'd to her Ear his winning Lips to lay,
 And thus in Whispers said, or seem'd to say,

“Fairest of Mortals, thou distinguish’d Care
 Of thousand bright Inhabitants of Air!
 If e’er one Vision touch’d thy infant Thought,
 Of all the Nurse and all the Priest have taught,
 Of airy Elves by Moonlight Shadows seen,
 The silver Token, and the circled Green,
 Or Virgins visited by Angel-Pow’rs,
 With Golden Crowns and Wreaths of Heav’nly Flow’rs,
 Hear and believe! thy own Importance know,
 Nor bound thy narrow Views to things below.
 Some secret Truths, from Learned Pride conceal’d,
 To Maids alone and Children are reveal’d:
 What tho’ no credit doubting Wits may give?
 The Fair and Innocent shall still believe.
 Know then, unnumber’d Spirits round thee fly,
 The light Militia of the lower sky.

An alert reader might hear an echo of Milton’s “Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth/Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep” (*Paradise Lost*, 4. 677–78), but a student of Freud might detect something about human egotism operating in the realm of the unconscious, not excluding the self-congratulation of the untutored as being certifiably the moral superiors of the educated. To be sure, this is a biblical as well as a pastoral commonplace. But the more we see of Belinda, the more she seems like Marie-Antoinette masquerading as a milkmaid, and the notion of her “simplicity,” even in the dreamworld, equally suspect and self-promoting. As the poem progresses, mockery is directed at the moral codes of the day. Pope is amusing throughout and sometimes downright funny. In fact, no sooner has Belinda’s delightful dream ended than she awakens to perform the first religious act of the day, which is self-adoration, cunningly likened to the preparatory arming of an epic hero.

And now, unveil’d, the Toilet stands display’d,
 Each Silver vase in mystic Order laid.
 First, rob’d in White, the Nymph intent adores,
 With Head uncover’d, the Cosmetic Pow’rs.
 A heavenly image in the Glass appears,
 To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;

Th' inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,
 Trembling begins the sacred Rites of Pride.
 Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here
 The various Off'rings of the World appear;
 From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,
 And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.
 This casket India's glowing Gems unlocks,
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box.
 The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,
 Transform'd to Combs, the speckled, and the white.
 Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
 Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.
 Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;
 The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,
 Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her Face;
 Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,
 And keener Lightnings quicken in her eyes.

One is reluctant to belabor with detailed commentary the complexly poised wit of these lines, but I will permit myself two slight observations. When the passage begins Belinda is a votary, and her maid the “inferior Priestess,” who will assist in her “devotions.” Before the passage is done, Belinda has transformed herself into the “Goddess” she adores. And her blush, in the penultimate line quoted, is “purer” than even the dream that “caus'd her Cheek to glow” in the lines quoted earlier, because it is, ironically, altogether artificial, thus unprompted by personal feelings.

In the early drafts of *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot had at one time included a section in heroic couplets, deliberately imitative of Pope, about “white-armed Fresca,” and which Ezra Pound persuaded him to delete. In his 1928 Introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems*, Eliot recalls, “Pound once induced me to destroy what I thought was an excellent set of couplets; for, said he, ‘Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better; and if you mean this as a burlesque, you had better suppress it, for you cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than Pope – and you can't.’”

In *Epistle IV: To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*, Pope writes

a poem that, though again in his favored couplets, resembles in its substance, and in some of its ideas, Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House*, which is also in couplets, but in tetrameter lines divided into eight-line stanzas. Both poems recommend a scrupulous, moral judiciousness as regards to architectural planning and the laying out of grounds and gardens. Both warn against the vulgarity of ostentation. In all things *taste* must govern, and taste is a form of judiciousness.

You show us, Rome was glorious, not profuse,
 And pompous buildings once were things of Use.
 Yet shall (my Lord) your just, your noble rules
 Fill half the land with Imitating Fools;
 Who random drawings from your sheets shall take,
 And from one beauty many blunders make;

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 At Timon's Villa let us pass a day,
 Where all cry out, "What sums are thrown away!"
 So proud, so grand, of that stupendous air,
 Soft and Agreeable come never there.
 Greatness, with Timon, dwells in such a draught
 As brings all Brobdignag before your thought.
 To compass this, his building is a Town,
 His pond an Ocean, his parterre a Down:
 Who but must laugh, the Master when he sees,
 A puny insect, shiv'ring at a breeze!
 Lo, what huge heaps of littleness around!
 The whole, a labor'd Quarry above ground.
 Two Cupids squirt before: a Lake behind
 Improves the keenness of the Northern wind.
 His Gardens next your admiration call,
 On ev'ry side you look behold a Wall!
 No pleasing intricacies intervene,
 No artful wildness to perplex the scene;
 Grove nods at grove, each Alley has a brother,
 And half the platform just reflects the other.
 The suff'ring eye inverted Nature sees,
 Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees,
 With here a Fountain, never to be play'd,

And there a Summer-house, that knows no shade;
 Here Amphitrite sails thro' myrtle bow'rs;
 There Gladiators fight, or die, in flow'rs;
 Unwater'd see the drooping sea-horse mourn,
 And swallows roost in Nilus' dusty Urn.

The Dunciad (1728), together with *The New Dunciad* (1742), is a monumental undertaking that, though it takes fatal aim at particular targets who had abused or harmed Pope, enlarges to epic dimensions that encompass coruscating views of the politics of the day, of society at large, and of religion, as well as other general topics. It was eventually accompanied by a huge critical apparatus of notes, as rich in wit and acidulous comment as the text itself, all of it by the poet, and a kind of precursor of the still more celebrated notes to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Certainly anyone who is not a victim of Pope's wrath will be suitably grateful; it can also be said that when personal venom rises to epic proportions it ceases to be purely personal and becomes a universe of comic rage, in which the comic predominates.

Finally, by way of preface to his satires, there is Pope's splendid *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, a verse dialogue of great freedom and invention, bracingly harsh in its contempt, learned as always in its allusions, but at moments deeply touching in its modest glimpse of something deeply vulnerable about the poet himself.

Why did I write? what sin to me unknown
 Dipt me in Ink, my Parents', or my own?
 As yet a Child, nor yet the Fool of Fame,
 I lisp'd in Numbers, for the Numbers came.
 I left no Calling for this idle trade,
 No Duty broke, no Father disobey'd.
 The Muse but serv'd to ease some Friend, not Wife,
 To help me thro' this long Disease, my Life,
 To second, **ar but hnot**! thy Art and Care,
 And teach, the Being you preserv'd, to bear.

It would be hard to deny that Pope's poetry does not enjoy a large reading audience today, even among the tiny readership that takes poetry seriously. Introducing his selection of Augustan poetry, Paul Fussell, Jr., comments, "Even when this poetry has not

been specifically dismissed on charges of artifice and conventionality, it has been benignly neglected in favor of the sort which seems to reflect back onto us those extreme emotional states made peculiar to our own modern history – strain, personal and collective guilt, hysteria, madness.” The inexorable chimings of rhyme at the fixed and inviolable intervals of ten syllables seems limited and predictable when contrasted with the prosodic and rhyming freedoms enjoyed by, say, John Donne, George Herbert, William Wordsworth, and John Keats. Yet one has only to hear G. F. Handel’s eloquent setting of these lines from Pope’s *Pastorals: Summer*:

Where-e’er you walk, cool Gales shall fan the Glade,
 Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade,
 Where-e’er you tread, the blushing Flow’rs shall rise,
 And all things flourish where you turn your Eyes

to feel that the composer has found in these words an expression of love which he has beautifully emancipated from any possibility of prediction and to which he has added his own reverence and admiration. As for the conventions of regular form, W. H. Auden has wisely observed, “continuous practice in the same form trains [the poet’s] mind to think easily and naturally in it and makes him sensitive to the subtlest variations of which it is capable.” To go on to hone that form to the power of perfection, as Alexander Pope did the heroic couplet, required the quality known as genius.