

Wit and Nature: A Critical Study of the Pope's An Essay on Criticism

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In the history of English literature there is perhaps no poet whose fame has suffered more dramatic ups and downs than that of Alexander Pope (1688–1744). In his own age he was deemed the very personification of Muse herself, the most “poetical,” most refined poet, as Samuel Johnson asked: “If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?” (1984, 752) In the nineteenth century, with the rise of Romanticism, critics such as Coleridge and Hazlitt, believing in the overflowing of one’s powerful feelings, certainly thought that poetry was not to be found in Pope. Pope, if a poet at all, was condescendingly called by Hazlitt as a poet of “art” instead of a poet of “nature” (cited in O’Neill 1972, 17). Only Byron boldly claimed that Pope’s versification was “perfect” and he was “the moral poet of all civilization” (cited in O’Neill 1972, 18). Byron, however, was not a critic, and his admiration for Pope had but the weakest influence during the Sturm und Drang movement in the early nineteenth century England when Wordsworthian expressionism had won over the politically committed poets such as Shelley and Byron himself. How could Pope’s notorious toryism and justification of status quo stand the sweeping aftermath of French Revolution and the Europe-wide struggle against the ancient regime? Pope belonged to the last generation of civil peace and religious tolerance which could afford the reading public necessary

patience and understanding to appreciate such works as *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and *An Essay on Man* (1733–34).

Victorian critics went further in depreciating Pope. Matthew Arnold’s relentless deprivation of Pope’s title of a poet perhaps is still ringing in the minds of Pope’s critics today: “Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose” (cited in O’Neill 1972, 21). Pope still remained a second-rate poet or a quasi-poet until the 1930s, when Edith Sitwell, feeling that contemporary English poetry had fallen into a chaotic situation, advocated Pope’s “rhetoric and formalism” in her biography *Alexander Pope* (1962, 13). W. H. Auden also refuted the charge of Romantic critics that Pope’s language is unpoetical and that his poetry unemotional (1972, 25). The modern reevaluation of Pope began shortly after Sitwell and Auden’s re-initiation of formalism, and since then critics have put both the content and form of Pope’s works under much scrutiny. His ideas on art, philosophy, politics, and women, and the imageries, metaphors, ironies and other stylistic features in his poetry have attracted the investigations from such scholars as George Sherburn, John Butt, Austin Warren, Maynard Mack, and Pat Rogers. One way to approach Pope’s writings is to regard his poetic genius as a “pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age,” to use William Hazlitt’s epithet on Wordsworth.

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The religious wars in mid-seventeenth century had become a distant memory; Satanic rebellion in Milton's time and courtly debauchery in Dryden's had only supplied the table-talks of the rising bourgeoisie. There seemed to be relative peace, order, and moderation in Queen Anne's reign in England. What followed were reconsiderations of the previous opinions on God, the outside world, and man himself. Englishmen came to realize that neither ostentatious Roman Catholicism nor morally rigid Protestantism was the right spiritual guide for them. Already averse to extremisms, especially in religion and politics, English critics began to seek a possible mean in the ideal of life, and found it in Anglicanism. The spirit of the time was neither passion nor asceticism, but calm weighing and sensible balancing in daily life. Pope had synthesized and organized the major moral assumptions of his age into his *Essay on Man* (1734) to follow the publication of *An Essay on Criticism*. The concept of a natural mean finds its manifestations not only in Pope's cosmology and ethics (Feng 2008) but also in his literary criticisms; as he was the leading poet of his time, whatever he had to say about moral philosophy, he articulated it in an artistically acceptable form. In fact, Pope developed his aesthetic doctrines much earlier than he formulated his whole system of ethics. His *Essay on Criticism*, published in 1711, won immediate applause from such important critics as Joseph Addison, who acclaimed the poem a "Master-piece" (1970, 252). A precocious genius, Pope ventured to lay down rules for the writing and judging of poetry, just as what Aristotle and Horace would do, when he was no more than twenty years old. Pope's literary criticism embodies the same Aristotelian mean that characterizes his moral writings, e.g., *An Essay on Man* and *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Exalting "nature" as the ultimate

standard for literary criticism, Pope advocates stylistic propriety and seeks to reconcile the two conflicting critical approaches prevalent in his time: invention and judgment. Quite consistent with his well-stratified cosmology, the poetical decorum which Pope conceives as the order in art corresponds to the appropriateness of every creature's specialty to its own unmistakable place on the great Chain of Being.

Pope's unification of invention and judgment is a continuation, or a literary reproduction, of his ethical reconciliation of passion and reason. His aesthetic principles are largely derived from his moral philosophy, a phenomenon not surprising to aestheticians since Immanuel Kant, who theoretically prepared the transition from neoclassicism to Romanticism. Before discussing the subtle meanings of those eighteenth-century concepts such as decorum, invention, and judgment, we first ask what sort of rationale lurks behind Pope's recommendation of these critical standards and to what purpose Pope proposes a natural mean that asks for propriety and suitability. The answer seems obvious when we examine Pope's notions of art, and more particularly, his writings on poetics. It is rather a neoclassical cliché that art imitates nature: "Unerring Nature, still divinely bright . . . / At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art" (1961, 170–3). But it is hardly the same nature that Wordsworth imitates in *The Prelude*.

As Pope says, the proper study of mankind is man, so for him the proper object of literary imitation is what Aristotle says in *Poetics*, "men in action" (1970, 20). Instead of vomiting out "lava of imagination" like Byron or tracing out the light of the "lamp" of mind, Pope faithfully holds up a "mirror" to human nature, imitating, as it were, the "empirical ideal" (Abraham 1977,

49, 52, 31, 35). Pope's mannerisms may seem unnatural to Romantics such as Wordsworth and Rousseau, but sentimentalism, which appeals to Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, would also strike a neoclassical mind as unnecessarily primitive. Unlike Aristotle, who in *Poetics* implicitly denies the moral function of art, Pope follows the Horatian dictum that poetry *autprodesseautdelectare*—it instructs and delights. In his "Observations on the *Iliad*", assuming that the aim of Homer's *Iliad* is to "instruct," Pope makes the bold claim that "if the reader does not observe the morality of the *Iliad*, he loses half and the nobler part of its beauty" (1965, 135). In another place, Pope concludes that the major moral lesson he gleans from *Iliad* is that "we should avoid anger, since it is ever pernicious in the event" (136). Pope himself seldom depicts natural sceneries without dropping hints, and sometimes, explicit expositions, of morality—witness his *Pastorals* (1709) and *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Pope proves to be a good student of John Denham, for whose *Cooper's Hill* he praises the poet's skill to blend "descriptions of places and images" with "reflection upon moral life or political institution. The fact that Pope devotes his late career almost exclusively to satires reveals his concern with the big issue of morality.

De Quincey's distinction between literature of knowledge and literature of power, setting aside the anachronism, would seem an illicit dichotomy to Pope. For Pope, what remains at stake of artistic reproduction is the question of how to imitate "men in action" so as to effectively inculcate moral lessons into the reading public. Pope shows his preference for a golden mean or a harmony in his cosmology and moral philosophy, and not surprisingly, he tends to be eclectic in aesthetics. Horace has already

told us that the best way to move the audience is to imitate with verisimilitude. "If you wish me to weep," Horace wrote, "you must first feel grief yourself" (1970, 53). Pope, a devoted disciple of Horace, invites his fellow poets to follow the rule of mean in order to reach this verisimilitude in the poetic process.

The importance of Horatian decorum, of genre as well as of character, lies in its influence on neoclassic critics like Boileau and Dryden, both were Pope's predecessors. Dryden's English translation of Boileau's *L'ArtPoétique* (1674) came in 1683, five years after the publication of his own *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). These two pieces encapsulate the main assumptions of neoclassicism in seventeenth-century France and England: realistic imitation of nature, high probability of plot, and decorum in genre and diction. Pope must have read them both, for in his own criticism Dryden and Boileau are seen rather frequently. To begin with, Pope's poetic decorum has three major denotations. First, it means appropriateness of style to the subject matter; second, it emphasizes the proportion of the part to the artistic whole; and finally, it recommends pureness and plainness of poetic diction. The quotation from Horace best explains what propriety of style is. Besides tragedy, comedy, and epic, there are some other minor genres: satire, pastoral, ode, elegy, epigram. Neoclassical critics, e.g. Boileau and Hobbes, all proclaim that poets should conform to the rule of each genre. According to Hobbes, the English society in the seventeenth century had three major hierarchical layers: court, town, and country, so correspondingly there should be three genres: tragedy for the court, epic for the town, and pastoral for the country.

Besides appropriateness of style to subject, proportion of parts to the whole, Pope's

decorum also means the pureness or “plainness” of language and the avoidance of any unnatural conceits. Like Samuel Johnson, Pope satirizes the “metaphysical poets” who favor far-fetched conceits (metaphors) to the degree of fanaticism: “Some to Conceit along their Taste confine,” Pope writes, “And glitt’ring Thoughts struck out at ev’ry Line” (289–91). In pursuing the similarity between objects in nature, metaphysical poets have forsaken, maybe unnecessarily, the easy path of writing. For Pope, figurative language is quite compatible with the naturalness of diction, but if one of them occasionally conflicts with another, then the pureness of language must be preserved and “glittering” metaphors, similes, and hyperboles, deserted.

Nature has endowed human beings with reason and common sense, so when readers discern the discrepancy between a literary subject and its style, they cannot help laughing because they immediately find out that it does not conform to the order of things. This is how humor creeps into our life, and this is also why Pope says that archaism in poetry would only “make the Learned Smile” (327). Languages may evolve with time, but nature as an eternal artifice of God hardly changes at all. In other words, the modes of imitation may change, but its object remains the same throughout ages. The task of an artist is not to search for outlandish expressions such as archaism or euphuism, but to ponder how to “find out the latent cause of conspicuous beauty” (Reynolds 1971, 287), and to represent that beauty in the most suitable artistic form. In the discussion of Pope, the word “wit” is perhaps the most misunderstood and misused one.

Hobbes insists on a larger interpretation of wit that compromises the antithetical fancy and judgment, quickness and liveliness in figurative

language, and the ability to discriminate suitable tropes from unsuitable ones. Hobbes’s stress on the complementing nature of fancy and judgment has a deciding influence on Pope’s idea of wit as a combination of invention with judgment. Pope first makes a distinction between false wit and true wit. False wit, as Pope conceives it, is wit for wit’s sake, sacrificing the resonance of the whole to meet the ingenuity of a part.

In Pope’s own words, invention “furnishes Art with all her materials, and without it judgment itself can at best but steal wisely . . . Whatever praise may be given to works of judgment, there is not even a single beauty in them but is owing to the invention” (1965, 107). Inventive imagination gives animation to literature, preventing it from dullness, what Pope loathes most and satirizes all the time relentlessly. Pope himself highly praises Homer’s invention in his “Preface to the Translation of the Iliad” (1715), even at the risk of rendering his status of a neoclassic spokesman dubious. Pope thinks that invention resembles the “poetical fire,” which is “so forcible in Homer that no man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads him” (1965, 108). Pope further compares Homer’s invention with that of Virgil, Milton, and Shakespeare, concluding that “in Homer, and in him only, it [the poetical fire] burns everywhere clearly and everywhere irresistibly” (108). Homer’s imagination in plot, speeches, descriptions, images, similes, and versifications, to Pope, is supreme: “Homer not only appears the inventor of poetry, but excels all the inventors of other arts in this, that he has swallowed up the honor of those who succeed him. What he has done admitted no increase, it only left room for contraction or regulation” (108). Pope’s unreserved admiration for Homer’s “poetical fire” seems to contradict his criticism of fancy

and his insistence on poetical decorum. But if we understand that Pope's decorum, instead of prescribing a rigid, impassive, and dull formula for poetry, actually emphasizes the suitability of style to subject, then it becomes clear that he admires Homer's poetical imagination because of its appropriateness to the sublime subject. Homer is unequalled because in such a magnanimous, elevated epic as *The Iliad*, his descriptions and dictions are accordingly diversified and truly sublime. Samuel Johnson's comment best summarizes Pope's grand synthetic project: Of his intellectual character the constituent and fundamental principle was good sense, a prompt and intuitive perception of consonance and propriety. Pope had likewise genius; a mind attractive, ambitious; and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imaging something greater than it knows; always endeavoring more than it can do. (1984, 733–4) Being a poet of "consonance and propriety" is far from being a mediocre one. The Horatian epithet that "neither gods nor stones allow poets to be mediocre" must be a catchphrase deeply rooted in Pope since his youth. Having a balance between invention and judgment sets no limit to a poet's genius; rather, it exhorts him to fly "higher" in stylistic invention, only that this invention remains non-esoteric. Pope's is not a formula full of shoulds and should-nots, nor a recipe for the cooking of any passable verse, but a hornstone to whet one's perception and expression of the world. To achieve this goal, Pope has sought to combine two formative forces of art making, imagination and execution, directing them towards the task of evoking general nature in its diversity. For small wits like Wycherley, synthetic capability is badly needed,

and for great wits like Homer and Virgil, it is seldom absent.

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