

CHAPTER I

Pope and the syntax of satire

Spence is always invaluable. It is a shame, though, that we should have to rely on him so heavily. Anecdotes can possess charm as well as graphic immediacy, but there is a limit to the amount of serious enlightenment which they can provide. Pope must have tangled with the grammarians in his earliest youth, long before the last book of *The Dunciad* was set down. Unhappily we know very little of this stage in his development. Spence cites a remark to the effect that it was the family priest (one Banister, alias Taverner) who ‘taught [him] the figures, accident and first part of grammar’. Such nuncupatory testimony is proverbially suspect; and it would be better for this essay – which constitutes, roughly, the first part of a poetic grammar of Pope’s work – if we had fuller evidence.¹ It would be nice even to have as much to go on as in the case of Martinus Scriblerus.

Martinus, it may be recalled, sampled parts of both the trivium and the quadrivium, not to mention metaphysics and gymnastics. But in Chapter VII, where one might have expected a formal analysis of the Scriblerian trivium, rhetoric and logic are joined by metaphysics. This is a pointed substitution, and we may guess at Martinus’ deficiencies from the parallel information that rhetoric, too, is passed over briefly – it has already been covered in *Peri Bathous*. That Martinus did learn some grammar, doubtless of a pedantic kind, we know from his association with Conradus Crambe. This was the schoolfellow carefully chosen for him by his deluded father: a word-chopper by hereditary right. Chapter IX of the treatise, which describes ‘How *Martin* became a great Critic’, thus

¹ Spence, I, 8–10, §14–17. Spence quotes Pope’s remark, ‘I did not follow the grammar [in the earliest reading of the classics he attempted], but rather hunted in the authors for a syntax of my own,’ (I, 11, §22). See also George Sherburn, *The Early Career of Alexander Pope* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 38–41.

describes the influence of ‘the puns of Crambe... on the Mind and Studies of Martinus’:

He conceiv'd, that somewhat of a like Talent to this of Crambe, of *assembling parallel sounds*, either *syllables*, or *words*, might conduce to the Emendation and Correction of *Ancient Authors*, if applied to their Works, with the same *diligence*, and the same liberty...

Here is the hint for *Virgilius Restauratus* and the various attacks on Bentley.² But something more than the over-niceties of classical scholarship is at issue. This is the satiric tip of an iceberg: for Pope throughout his life was vitally concerned with words, their interactions, their bumps and jars, their contrast or alignment, their phonetic weight, semantic range, and structural role. For Pope, as for any other practising poet, ‘the Dance of Numbers, and the Change of Rime’ (Savage’s phrase) came down ultimately to questions of verbal shape.

There are surprisingly few commentators on the structure of Pope’s language. Geoffrey Tillotson has invoked a Euclidean image to describe what might be called the geometry of syntax.³ That phrase recalls certain others used by Donald Davie in his absorbing book, *Articulate Energy*. Indeed, Davie speaks at one point of ‘a diagram of forces’ in a line of Pope’s prolonging the same metaphor.⁴ However, he has little to say directly on Pope; and in addition, as Christine Brooke-Rose has pointed out, the book is finally about conceptual processes rather than syntax in the narrow sense. Brooke-Rose, in her turn, confines herself to metaphor, somewhat stringently defined, and her analytic method comes uncomfortably close in places to downright parsing; besides producing statements like ‘He [Shakespeare] is very good indeed on Intransitive Verbs...’⁵ These are, needless to say, gaps which are prescribed by the declared scope of each book. Much more disappointing is Rebecca Price Parkin’s study of Pope’s ‘workmanship’. Her chapter on ‘Parallelism, Antithesis,

² *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, ed. C. Kerby-Miller (New Haven, Conn., 1950), pp. 118–24, 129; see also notes, pp. 243–71. ‘Crambe’ was defined by Nathaniel Bailey as ‘a Repetition of Words, or saying the same Thing over again’. A cognate form was ‘Crambo’, a rhyming game; Kerby-Miller, p. 247.

³ Geoffrey Tillotson, *Augustan Poetic Diction* (London, 1964), pp. 14, 124.

⁴ Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy* (London, 1955), p. 82. Cf. ‘Syntax like Mathematics’, pp. 91–5. Davie’s phrase ‘the path of an energy through the mind’ (p. 157) is a peculiarly apt one, for Pope just as much as for Wordsworth, whose poetry calls forth the expression.

⁵ Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Grammar of Metaphor* (London, 1958), pp. 21, 296. Pp. 303–5 are devoted to a summary of Pope’s practice, based on the rather limited sample afforded by *Eloisa to Abelard*.

and Paradox' could hardly be further from linguistic concerns. The antithesis is that of subject-matter or intention, not syntax; and in any case antithesis is a deliquescent thing for Parkin, always on the point of melting into paradox. We are indeed told that 'good poems may and do exist in which paradox is lacking or negligible' – a concession hardly wrung from the author – but paradox has itself softened into something larger and hazier than a rhetorical figure. As with the modern use of 'irony', we are dealing with psychological rather than lexical effects – paradox has become a state of mind. There are some interesting observations at the outset: 'Antithesis is a special kind of parallelism, and paradox may be defined as a special case of antithesis in which both halves of the antithesis are stated to be true.' But soon the hunt for 'tension' begins, as unending and as self-enclosed as the quest for the grail.

According to Parkin, the predominance of antithesis and parallelism 'in neoclassical English poetry, and particularly in the poetry of Pope, has long been acknowledged and commented on'.⁶ That would have been my own impression until recently. But as far as Pope goes, the truth seems to be that the detailed applications of these resources have seldom been considered. Pope's imagery, his diction, his versification, even his rhyming, have found able analysts. But on his poetry as a verbal structure we have little: linguistics, not an over-modest science in general, has kept unusually silent, and criticism at large has exhibited less valour than discretion. To be blunt, W. K. Wimsatt is the only guide offering his services on this expedition, apart from those who promise an easy day for a lady.

I

Wimsatt distinguishes between 'verse, where patterns of form do not...support parallels of stated meaning, but run counter to meaning': and prose, where symmetrical syntax 'comes fairly to the aid of logic'. In his view, it is rare to find 'equalities of verse' coinciding with 'parallels of meaning'.⁷ On this showing, it is rhyme

⁶ Rebecca Price Parkin, *The Poetic Workmanship of Alexander Pope* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1955), pp. 66–84.

⁷ See for example W. K. Wimsatt, 'One Relation of Rhyme to Reason', in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), pp. 154ff. Wimsatt's other valuable contributions to this broad field of study include *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, Conn., 1941), especially Chs. I, II, on parallelism and antithesis, as well as Ch. IV, 'The Consistency of Johnson's Style'; and his edition of *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1951), especially pp. xxii–xxxiii.

especially which dislocates the potential logic of the verse form by means of its irrational and irrelevant congruence. My own view is that a distinction has indeed to be drawn between the two modes of discourse, but that it should be drawn on different grounds. The basic fact is that in prose syntax any degree of parallelism is willed and therefore noticeable. It is a patterning imposed on recalcitrant material, or at least on neutral material. By contrast poetry is ductile, its inherent structure being hospitable to repetitive statements of any kind. To put this in concrete historical terms, we may distinguish (1) the typical symmetries of Renaissance prose, whether Ciceronian, Senecan, Euphuistic, 'baroque' or however labelled; and (2) the equivalences, positive or negative, achieved by Pope and others in the heroic couplet. In the first case, even where there is a deliberate attempt 'to avert an impending symmetry, to sabotage in advance what threatens to evolve into too fussy a balance',⁸ there is a more or less regular effect attained by setting one member of a sentence against another. The sentence carves out its own channel, and it is within the control of the writer to fix its external bounds, as the ideas conveyed seem to demand. But Pope is working with another independent variable, the couplet itself. And even if we disregard rhyme for the moment, it is plain that many syntactical parallels will be swimming with the tide of the verse. The line unit in its own form asserts an identity and a balance. It follows that symmetry, either of sound, of meaning or of construction, is less immediately apparent: the congruence may be put down to the pressure of the verse rhythm, or may even go unobserved insofar as it is a separate entity from that rhythm.

An example will help. In his dialogue with Fortescue (Horace, *Satires*, II.i)⁹ the satirist replies to his friend's hint that excessive boldness will call out physical assault in retaliation:

P. What? arm'd for *Virtue* when I point the Pen,
 Brand the bold Front of shameless, guilty Men,
 Dash the proud Gamester in his gilded Car,

⁸ Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 71. Much of Barish's excellent discussion is germane to the present essay: see for instance his comments on the 'slight sense of *offness*' favoured by baroque writers (p. 73), which tallies with many of Tillotson's observations on the fondness in Pope for 'unequal balance' – *On the Poetry of Pope* (Oxford, 2nd edn, 1950), pp. 127–8. For the Renaissance background, see also Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (Cambridge, 1968), Ch. IV, 'Syntactical Symmetry'.

⁹ Quotations and line-references follow *TE*. For *The Dunciad*, see pp. 98–128 below.

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Bare the mean Heart that lurks beneath a Star;
 Can there be wanting to defend Her Cause,
 Lights of the Church, or Guardians of the Laws?
 Could pension'd *Boileau* lash in honest Strain
 Flatt'ers and Bigots ev'n in *Louis*' Reign?
 Could Laureate *Dryden* Pimp and Fry'r engage,
 Yet neither *Charles* nor *James* be in a Rage?
 And I not strip the Gilding off a Knave,
 Un-plac'd, un-pension'd, no Man's Heir, or Slave?
 I will, or perish in the gen'rous Cause. (105–17)

An attentive reader will be alive to the successive questions incorporated within the third, fourth, fifth and sixth couplets here. The effect Pope seeks is to imply that his desire to speak out is as well justified as that of earlier satirists, and that his situation is broadly equivalent. The parallelism in the construction asserts the social and moral identity which Pope is claiming. And, of course, the sudden shift to a blunt affirmative style ('I will...') carries all the more impact because of the successive queries – rhetorical as they are – which have preceded this line. What might easily escape observation is an earlier series of equivalent statements. From the second line to the fourth Pope places a strong stress on the first syllable of each verse. Again, every one of these stresses falls on an active transitive verb, occupying the first part of a trochaic (i.e. inverted) foot. Following this verb we get a direct object in the formula 'the + moral adjective (monosyllabic) + noun', and then a phrase qualifying that object. The total effect is to distract attention from the line unit as such. The parallelism runs across the couplet form; the rhymes are in any case rather flat and unassertive; and the emphasis on the initial verb also contributes to this process. It might be said that Pope achieves an eloquent syntactical form by modifying and even impairing his basic metrical scheme.

This passage gives us, in fact, a disguised parison, as the rhetoricians would say: that is, a series of clauses using the same parts of speech in the same order. Analysts of Renaissance prose often set down the structure of a sentence in a kind of visual lay-out.¹⁰ There is some point in doing that, since the diagram enacts the reader's response; its contours are a fact additional to the plain prose utterance. But the verse parison just looked at already contains its own diagrammatic statement: indeed, arguably, it offers a formal

¹⁰ See for instance Vickers, pp. 115–40. For the rhetorical figures alluded to in the text, see Vickers, p. 97, and Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, pp. 176–7.

tautology. Pope's use of the standard symmetrical forms which Puttenham and others catalogue allows for that fact. Generally he avoids simple repetitive formulae, since the ineluctable repetition of the verses themselves provides a mode of continuity – any naked parallelism superadded can only appear jejune. So we find him indulging in what Tillotson calls 'significant variation'; that is, bending versification or sentence-structure so as to produce some uncovenanted or even discordant effect.

Another subdued version of the parisonic device (this time involving a train of direct objects) is found in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*. It occurs during Pope's celebrated vindication of his own career – immediately after the couplet describing his conversion from 'Fancy's Maze' to 'moraliz'd... song':

That not for Fame, but Virtue's better end,
 He stood the furious Foe, the timid Friend,
 The damning Critic, half-approving Wit,
 The Coxcomb hit, or fearing to be hit;
 Laugh'd at the loss of Friends he never had,
 The dull, the proud, the wicked, and the mad;
 The distant Threats of Vengeance on his head,
 The Blow unfelt, the Tear he never shed;
 The Tale reviv'd, the Lye so oft o'erthrown;
 Th' imputed Trash, and Dulness not his own;
 The Morals blacken'd when the Writings scape;
 The libel'd Person, and the pictur'd Shape;
 Abuse on all he lov'd, or lov'd him, spread,
 A Friend in Exile, or a Father, dead;
 The Whisper that to Greatness still too near,
 Perhaps, yet vibrates on his SOVEREIGN's Ear –
 Welcome for thee, fair Virtue! all the past:
 For thee, fair Virtue! welcome ev'n the *last!* (342–59)

Commentators have been so busy explaining the allusions that they have scarcely had time to remark the subtle technique or the ends it serves. The long catalogue of nouns may be regarded as in apposition to the initial object 'Foe'. That places a huge emphasis on the verb 'stood', which has to carry all the rest of this swollen predicate on its back. I take the meaning to be 'withstood', with a hint of the modern sense, 'put up with' – the nobly suffering satirist's Christ-like capacity to forbear every ill done to him thus indicated. All these can be endured for the sake of virtue.

In moving from grammar to rhetoric, however, it is noteworthy

that the passage involves a sort of anaphoric construction. That is to say, the repeated phrases almost all start with the word ‘the’. Now this is of course the greyest-looking word in English, though recent analysts have shown that the definite article is neither as definite nor as innocent as that. The result is to be scarcely aware of the parallelism set up by its use; when the passage is abstracted from its context, as I have just abstracted it, the repetition may be obvious, but in normal reading I doubt if many are conscious other than in the dimmest way of its anaphoric basis. And that is as Pope would wish it. Iterative constructions generally carry a hectoring air with them. Here the poet is seeking a more muted kind of symmetry. His employment of phrase introduced by ‘the’ performs several functions. (1) It lends a certain impersonality to the catalogue of outrages; ‘the Writings’ are those of ‘one Poet’ (line 336) rather than those simply of the actual Alexander Pope. This not only deflects the charge of egotism: it serves wider imaginative purposes, by suggesting that others might have been in Pope’s situation and might not have behaved as stoically as he did. This effect is strengthened by the participle phrases, of which more in a moment. (2) It implies a factuality, an agreed historicity, in the events to which it refers. A grammarian has written that ‘*the* assumes familiarity or previous knowledge’. Pope exploits the article to suggest that there is no argument about the threats, say, having been offered; he insinuates the idea that the only debate is about what exactly they constituted or why they were offered. (3) At the same time the formula conveys a measure of generalization; *the* tale is one of many, *the* lie ‘often’ encountered. (The article comes to the aid of the adverb; it is almost as if a continuous tense of the verb, such as the imperfect, were used.) The coxcomb is any coxcomb, not worth identifying more closely. An entire line is built up of these emblematic forms (‘The dull, the proud...’), making it sound almost like a modern movie title. These are representative men, and women: Pope’s syntax asserts that there are many more where they came from. (4) In this context any noun without an article, or with a different form of the article, will stand out. With line 346, ‘the Friends’ would suggest that they really were friends if only for a moment: the omission of ‘the’ indicates ‘the loss of such so-called friends...’ ‘Dulness’ is a sprawling mass unable to bear the definition even of a simple article; the chiasmic line allows ‘Dulness’ to be qualified not merely by the symmetrically placed ‘not his own’, but also by the original epithet ‘imputed’ – which would

not be possible if 'the' were repeated before the second noun. Abuse is scattered casually, piecemeal. And finally there is the sudden shift to 'a Friend', the special case of Atterbury, and 'a Father', the unique parental role. In a manner both economical and moving, Pope has switched from the general or public case to the intimate: grammar directs the change.

Nor is this the only interesting feature of the syntax. A cursory reading will disclose the fondness for participles: more especially, for past participles serving as predicative adjectives. Or rather, the strict grammatical form is predicative, the implied sense is perhaps equivalent to that of an absolute construction. So 'imputed Trash' has the force of a passive verb; trash has been and is still being imputed to the poet. So too with 'hit', 'unfelt', 'reviv'd', 'o'er-thrown', 'blacken'd', 'libell'd', 'pictur'd', and so on. Each of these words could be expanded into a full predication. The pattern would be: 'I do not feel these blows', and 'They continue to libel my person and to depict my physical appearance.' But Pope's refusal to commit himself to such a positive assertion is deliberate; the poetry gains because it leaves the reader with an agentless process of denunciation and terrorism. A sinister third-person anonymity attaches to the oppressors of Pope – they are everywhere. If the satirist had come straight out and named his enemies, the impression would be so much the less threatening. Speaking of the passive voice in a different context, Christine Brooke-Rose has well said: 'The very helplessness of the subject, even in metaphoric relation to the verb, emphasises the instrumental ... force of the indirect object which is really responsible for the metaphoric change.'¹¹ Similarly, Pope uses an implied passive, built into the actual syntactical function of the participle, to convey his own open, though not vulnerable, position before the onslaughts of his detractors. Once more, grammar enacts a complete human situation. If not quite 'a little tragic plot', the repetitive construction does much in its own structural identity to make Pope's imaginative point.

This kind of pseudo-parallelism is among the commonest effects of Pope's verse. There is likewise a pseudo-antithesis, an opposition which turns out to be less and less complete the longer it is sustained.

¹¹ Brooke-Rose, pp. 229–30. The same writer comments, 'Pope... really lets himself go with verbs. He uses proportionately more intransitive verb metaphors than any other poet' (p. 235). Even where the strict grammatical form is not that of a verb, Pope often manages to get an active propulsive force into other parts of speech.

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In a short form this trick can be seen when Pope unleashes his famous couplet on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu:

From furious *Sappho* scarce a milder Fate,
 P-x'd by her Love, or libell'd by her Hate...¹²

Here the grammar supplies a suggestion of alternatives, but the sense is clearly 'it's all the same either way'. Pope is fond of such spurious adversative constructions: in the epistle *To Augustus* we get

But those who cannot write, and those who can,
 All ryme, and scrawl, and scribble, to a man. (187-8)

There *ought* to be a difference between the two groups, Pope is saying, but in practice they both contribute to the flood of unwanted book-making. Similarly, at the end of that harsh yet beautiful vision of the condition of woman, which Pope inserts in his *Epistle to a Lady*:

See how the World its Veterans rewards!
 A Youth of frolicks, an old Age of Cards,
 Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,
 Young without Lovers, old without a Friend,
 A Fop their Passion, but their Prize a Sot,
 Alive, ridiculous, and dead, forgot! (243-8)

Pope employs what is generally called the antithetical style, yes. But he does so assert an equivalence rather than an antimony. The alternatives set out on either side of the caesura ought to be contradictory: the sad reality is that they are not contradictory at all. As a result the perversity and mutability of this world stand forth all the more plainly. Life, in belying the expectations of the heroic verse form,¹³ exposes the shallow optimism of those who look to find human felicity wherever they go. The last line but one, with its beautiful

¹² Hor. *Sat.* II.i.84-5. There is a kind of alliterative chiasmus here, very common in Pope: cf. 'Riches that vex, and vanities that tire.' The only reference to such a device I have seen is that of F. W. Hilles, 'Johnson's Poetic Fire', *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. F. W. Hilles and H. Bloom (New York, 1965), p. 72.

¹³ Tillotson writes that the Augustans 'saw man as an oxymoron, a cross-hatching, a contradiction in terms... To say what they saw inevitably required the couplet' (*Augustan Poetic Diction*, p. 15). Arguably the last sentence overstates the matter. But in any case it is clear that the couplet is capable of expressing both massive certainties and prim compromise. According to W. H. Auden ('Pope', *From Anne to Victoria*, ed. B. Dobrée (London, 1937), p. 100), 'no form will express everything, as each form is particularly good at expressing something. Forms are chosen by poets because the most important part of what they have to say seems to go better with that form than any other; there is generally a margin which remains unsaid...' In my view Pope often gains effects by playing off what the couplet *seems* to assert against what reality proclaims. For brief but excellent comments on the passage from the *Epistle to a Lady* quoted in the text, see Allan Rodway, 'By Algebra to Augustanism', *Essays on Style and Language*, ed. R. Fowler (London, 1966), pp. 63-9.

phonetic architecture, carries within its own grammar the clue to the entire technique. Really the word 'but' is a fraudulent usage. The genuine link to connect such indistinguishable fates would be 'and'. In the final line, however, there is an authentic choice offered. Such an old age of tedium and dishonour may be a living death. But presumably most women would prefer to be alive and ridiculous than dead and forgotten. The conjunction we might have anticipated in this case is 'but'. That the connotations of such basic linguistic particles has been blurred is no accident. This is the grammar of paradox, these are the language-games played by satire.¹⁴

In Chapter X of *Peri Bathous*, Pope indulged himself in a little fun at the expense of Lee, Ambrose Philips, Blackmore, and others, with a section called 'The Antithesis, or Seesaw'. The trope was defined as the figure 'whereby Contraries and Oppositions are balanced in such a way, as to cause a reader to remain suspended between them, to his exceeding delight and recreation'.¹⁵ The examples cited show that Pope had in mind a sort of mechanical oxymoron – 'The Gods look pale to see us look so red.' Pope himself never fell victim to this functionless mode of opposing things, any more than he did to the mindless parallelism which lesser writers exacted from the couplet form; except that, as Peter Dixon has neatly illustrated, he can employ 'deliberately mechanical balance and repetition' for a special purpose.¹⁶ We rarely see Pope 'cultivating expressive forms for their own sake'.¹⁷ He resists the easier, more automatic effects of the heroic couplet in favour of a more inward method. Once more the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* will provide an instance:

Yet then did *Gildon* draw his venal quill;
 I wish'd the man a dinner, and sate still:
 Yet then did *Dennis* rave in furious fret;
 I never answer'd, I was not in debt:
 If want provok'd, or madness made them print,
 I wag'd no war with *Bedlam* or the *Mint*. (151-6)

¹⁴ For interesting comment on the use of these conjunctions, cf. Barish, p. 17; Brooke-Rose, pp. 80-7, 303. John Dennis senses in an obscure way Pope's fondness for pseudo-linkage, whereby 'he seems to take pains to bring *something* into a Conjunction Copulative with *nothing*, in order to beget *nothing*'. See his *Remarks on the Rape of the Lock* (1728), extracted by J. D. Hunt (ed.), *Pope: The Rape of the Lock A Casebook* (London, 1968), p. 64. On Pope's deceptive use of the word 'but', see A. L. Binns, "'Linguistic" Reading', in Fowler, p. 125.

¹⁵ Quoted from Wimsatt, *Pope*, p. 334.

¹⁶ Peter Dixon, *The World of Pope's Satires* (London, 1968), p. 88. See also p. 96, on the 'persistent balancing of the half-lines' in an imitation of Donne, so as to mime 'the minuette-like progression of... court ritual'.

¹⁷ Wimsatt, *Johnson*, p. 49.