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# 1

# Introductory

A. Be sure *your self* and your own *Reach* to know, 48
How far your *Genius*, *Taste*, and *Learning* go;
Launch not beyond your Depth, but be discreet,
And mark *that Point* where Sense and Dulness *meet*.
Nature in all things fix'd the Limits fit,
And wisely curb'd proud Man's pretending Wit . . .

A perfect Judge will *read* each Work of Wit 233
With the same Spirit that its Author *writ*,
Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight Faults to find,
Where *Nature moves*, and *Rapture warms* the Mind;
Nor lose, for that malignant dull Delight,
The *gen'rous Pleasure* to be charm'd with Wit . . .
In Wit, as Nature, what affects our Hearts 243
Is not th'Exactness of peculiar Parts;
'Tis not a *Lip*, or *Eye*, we Beauty call,
But the joint Force and full *Result of all*.
Thus when we view some well-proportion'd Dome,
(The *World's* just Wonder, and ev'n *thine O Rome!*)
No single Parts unequally surprize;
All comes *united* to th'admiring Eyes;
No monstrous Height, or Breadth, or Length appear;
The *Whole* at once is *Bold*, and *Regular*.

From *An Essay on Criticism* (1711)

This passage from Pope's poetry embodies some of the central paradoxes of his work. A modern reader would sense at once that there is energy and richness here, but that present-day usage of terms such as 'Nature', 'Wit', 'Genius', 'Taste' and 'Sense' prevents him from fully appreciating them. The confident authority with which Pope refers to these terms as if they were permanent points of reference, touchstones that must outlast time and change, was possible only in an age of political and cultural stability. Pope shared with other cultivated Englishmen of the early eighteenth century a sense of being 'Augustans', living in an enlightened age in which literature had reached the highest point of purity and refinement. His best poetry expresses the living values of that age, and demonstrates how a good writer can



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simultaneously speak to and for his society: representing those values, he can at the same time extend and criticise them.

Dictionary definitions help us to understand those values better than current usage can. 'Genius', for instance, which we would interpret as an extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, meant for Pope and his contemporaries a natural ability or quality of mind. 'Taste', which for us would be probably limited to the way we dress ourselves or furnish our houses, ranged much more widely for Pope, who used it to signify the faculty of perceiving and enjoying excellence in art, literature and the like. 'Sense' meant natural understanding and intelligence, practical soundness of judgment. But the two words that recur throughout Pope's work are 'Nature' and 'Wit'. We see from the definition supplied above that both 'Genius' and 'Sense' were regarded as *natural*; like a good many of the philosophical and critical terms Pope uses, these words derive their meanings from the Augustan view of 'Nature' as the inherent dominating power or impulse by which action or character is determined, directed or controlled. Here, as often in eighteenth-century poetry, 'Nature' is personified: as a kindly but strict goddess, who places 'curbs' upon ambitious critics, she provides the moving force behind great literature (line 236). The later, more familiar use of the word 'Nature' to include the features and products of the earth itself as contrasted with those of human civilisation, does not operate in poetry until the Romantic period. For Pope 'Nature' was still an all-inclusive term, covering the impulses of man and animals, plants and winds, streams and planets alike, the diversity of which filled him with a sense of wonder at the magnitude of the power that could order and control them all. To a poet who sees 'Nature' at work in every part of the world around him, a gentleman discussing politics and literature in a London coffee-house is as 'natural' to his proper environment as a hunter fitting an arrow to his bow must be in a forest.

'Wit', originally meaning 'the mind', has many extensions, most of which were in operation at the time Pope wrote. The word could mean the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general, or practical talent, skill or ingenuity. In the seventeenth century 'Wit' went further than cleverness, to include that quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thoughts or expressions calculated to surprise or delight by their unex-

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pectedness. A 'wit' was a person of superior mental capacity; possessed of judgment and discretion, he had a talent for saying brilliant (and true) things in a sparkling way, and a lively fancy that made his conversation a delight to his friends and associates. Opposed to 'Wit' is 'Dulness', and the critic who cannot appreciate works of true 'wit' is appropriately 'malignant' and 'dull'. It is an antipathy we recall when we read Pope's *Dunciad*, and find a literary 'world' divided between the forces of Wit and light and those of Dulness, darkness and evil.

A good many of Pope's words have lost levels of meaning in coming down to us: 'admiring', for instance, once conveyed more than appreciation, it involved sensations of stunned surprise leading to profound, even awe-struck pleasure. The true critic's heartfelt approval was won, therefore, by 'well-proportion'd' work that reflected 'Nature', the 'natural' order of a harmonious universe, and – an appropriate simile for an English Augustan writing in the period when St Paul's Cathedral both represented and influenced current ideals of architectural dignity and beauty – the 'regulated boldness' of Palladian architecture (lines 247–52).

Let us look at some other examples of Pope's poetry:

B. Oft when the World imagine Women stray, 91
The *Sylphs* thro' mystick Mazes guide their Way,
Thro' all the giddy Circle they pursue,
And old Impertinence expel by new.
What tender Maid but must a Victim fall
To one Man's Treat, but for another's Ball?
When *Florio* speaks, what Virgin could withstand,
If gentle *Damon* did not squeeze her Hand?
With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part,
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart;
Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive,
Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive.
From *The Rape of the Lock*, I (1714)

C. – On superior pow'rs 241
Were we to press, inferior might on ours:
Or in the full creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd:
From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.
And if each system in gradation roll,
Alike essential to th'amazing whole;

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The least confusion but in one, not all
That system only, but the whole must fall.
Let Earth unbalanc'd from her orbit fly, 251
Planets and Suns run lawless thro' the sky,
Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurl'd,
Being on being wreck'd, and world on world,
Heav'n's whole foundations to their centre nod,
And Nature tremble to the throne of God:
All this dread ORDER break – for whom? for thee?
Vile worm! – oh Madness, Pride, Impiety!
From *An Essay on Man*, I (1734)

D. 'Odious! in woollen! 'twould a Saint provoke, 242
(Were the last words that poor Narcissa spoke)
No, let a charming Chintz, and Brussels lace
Wrap my cold limbs, and shade my lifeless face:
One would not, sure, be frightful when one's dead –
And – Betty – give this Cheek a little Red.'
From *An Epistle to Lord Cobham* (1734)

Taken together, passages A, B, C and D present a view of the world and man's place in it very different from present-day ideas. Passage A, advising writers to *limit* and *curb* their ambitions, stresses caution to a degree that must irritate those who believe literary expression must be 'free' and unfettered by rules if it is to convey personal opinion and experience naturally and spontaneously. Pope's view of the carping critic as a 'malignant' growth on literature would seem an exaggeration to a reader who does not share the Augustan view of literature as an expression of universal, 'natural' order. The ironic thanks in passage B that society beauties are preserved by their own frivolity for the respectability of marriage might seem pointless now, when marriage itself has been called in question. Can we claim with Pope's confidence in passage C that there is a creator-God at the centre of our universe? And the satire on feminine vanity carried to death's very door might seem irrelevant in an age when morticians are almost indistinguishable from beauticians, and the use of cosmetics is no longer reserved for ladies of fashion or the actress who was the model for Pope's 'Narcissa'. Finally, the medium of all four passages is the rhymed 'heroic' couplet, completely at odds with present literary practice except in the hands of the occasional academic poet who uses it for special purposes. Can the modern reader find anything to interest him here? The themes

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of Pope's poetry seem to refer to a vanished past and to values long dead and forgotten; can they interest any beside academics and antiquarians?

If the passages are read again, this time as poetry and not merely for their subject matter, probably the first thing to secure our attention would be the passionate engagement of the poet's emotion in passage C. This begins in an orderly, reasoned manner like that used to expound literary criteria in A. But at about line 251 – as the sense that the great system of natural order he has described is in danger of destruction enters the poet's consciousness – the poem seems to take wings, rising rhythmically upon one destructive image after another until a climax is reached in line 256 –

> And Nature tremble to the throne of God.

If we turn now to the passage from Book IV of *The Dunciad* quoted in Chapter 9, pages 145–6, we see that the remarkable energy generated in each passage derives from the same source, a vision of an all-pervading world order, and horror at the thought of its destruction. Since we write with greatest sincerity and skill about what interests or moves us deeply, since we know from our reading that writers become vague when they write about things that concern them only in an abstract and general way, is not the texture of the verse in passage C (a piece of verse that describes an abstract system of values) surprising in its power to make us visualise, hear and feel what is being described? The heightened imagination that produces the caving-in image of collapse in

> Heav'n's whole foundations to their centre nod

and masterly management of rhythm that effects the transition of mood in the last two lines – what are we to make of these? One can understand a dedicated poet getting angry, eloquent, even prophetic about the collapse of literary values, but what is one to think of a poet who writes with such feeling and technical mastery about a system of abstract philosophy?

The movement of Pope's verse, its verbal exactness and precise imagery are the most dependable proofs that he was intensely moved, imaginatively and emotionally, by neo-classical ideas about the universe current in his age, and that he turned them into something of his own. From the energy generated by his

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passionate grasp of these ideas (see Chapter 7, in which his expression of them in *An Essay on Man* is considered) spring the currents that connect the main source of power with other aspects of his experience as man and poet. Abstract as the rules set out in passage A are, we can see that the ideas behind them harmonise with the general scheme of the universe described in passage C. Passages B and D achieve their ironic effect because a code of values is implicit in each. By all the rules of reason and order, the behaviour of the 'tender maids' and of 'Narcissa' lack decorum. A woman's heart was not meant to be a 'moving Toyshop' – that it has become one is an offence against Nature, *human* nature as well as the more universal sense Pope generally has in mind when he uses the word. 'Poor' Narcissa's vanity is, similarly, an offence against Nature, deserving no pity from the poet nor sentimental tears from the reader.

Pope's poetry draws its raw materials from life in his time. We could compile a fairly comprehensive picture of social and literary life in eighteenth-century England from the details in his poems. He is his age's most representative writer, so much at ease in the literary modes of his time that he was compelled to sacrifice neither personal nor artistic integrity in order to write. It was an age of rules, of accepted genres in life as well as in art and literature, and Pope reaches in his work the heights of skill and significance possible to those who work within such accepted contemporary limits. As we have seen, he wrote passionately-felt poetry in exposition and defence of the moral and artistic values that guided him and other cultivated men of his time. Order was for him an ideal, an organising principle that amounted to a moral necessity, and he saw Wit, Sense, Taste, Reason and Decorum as the means by which that morally-directed Order maintained its proper control of human values and behaviour.

If we examine passages A to D again, referring this time to the poems from which they are taken, we discover that, personal as some of them seem and revelatory as they are of Pope's approach to his own poetry, they are all what we call 'genre' pieces. Passages A and C are from 'essays', versified treatises intended to instruct and/or debate. Passage D is an 'imitation' (a transformation into English contemporary idiom) of the work of the Latin poet Horace. Passage B is from a poem in the genre of the 'mock-heroic', deliberately modelled in structure and aspects of

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its technique on Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, and relying for its fullest effect upon the reader's familiarity with the original. So they are all 'public' poems, belonging to established forms or patterns recognisable by Pope's contemporaries, and gaining in value by being so recognised.

Pope's concept of 'originality' was therefore not ours. 'Epistles', 'Essays', 'Imitations', 'Satires', 'Epic Poems' – these were well-defined kinds of poetic expression, each with a set of rules. The poet's 'originality' had to work within those rules, his invention bending them to his own purposes. To Pope the rules derived from ancient poetic practice were not as restricting as they came to seem to later writers. To him the rules were 'useful', indeed – as we see in passage A – even 'natural'. As aids to writing well, the rules set out in *An Essay on Criticism* (see Chapter 2) provided a useful framework, but were not necessarily an end in themselves. Pope shows himself careful to abide by them in his apprentice work (see the discussion of his *Pastorals* in Chapter 2) but he recognised early that the gifted writer could and must 'snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art'. It is not that a great writer could ignore the rules, but that a Shakespeare, a Milton, a Dryden – or a Pope – wins through to this 'Grace' by reaching *in the same direction* as the less gifted observers of the rules, until he is carried by his 'genius' across the level of mere adherence to which their limited talents restrict them, into the realm where genius, expressing itself, expresses also that 'Nature' on which the rules are based.

Pope's meticulous adherence to generic rules when writing the most personal of poetry gives some modern readers the puzzling impression that he projects quite different personalities in successive poems. In his *Essay on Man* (1730), for example, he seems to adopt the posture of moralist and teacher. The *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, however, written only a year later, contains a portrait of a contemporary as a double-tongued, abnormal oddity –

> His Wit all see-saw between *that* and *this*, 323
> Now high, now low, now Master up, now Miss,
> And he himself one vile Antithesis.

Two years after creating this clever caricature, in 1733, Pope says in the *Imitation of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace* that his dearest wish is to expose himself to the judgment

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of his age as frankly and openly as he judges his own friends and enemies. How is the reader to reconcile these 'personalities' which seem to cancel out one another? If there is a 'real' Pope in one of these poetic personalities, what are we to say of the others? There is a further problem: on occasion – especially in Pope's maturest work, such as the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* and the *Imitations of Horace* – these differing 'personalities' speak successively in the same poem.

The different 'faces' or 'voices' of Pope have been described by scholars and critics as *personae*, masks that separate the audience/reader from the real person who wears and manipulates them. But *personae* is a term associated with acting, and with the special device used by writers to project a certain kind of personality into a fictional world (a good example is Swift's use of his character, Lemuel Gulliver, in *Gulliver's Travels*). The word carries overtones of pretence, falsehood and ambiguity that should not be linked with the work of a dedicated *poet* of the kind Pope often declared himself to be. A writer of fiction or a dramatist necessarily works behind the scenes; his purposes must be achieved indirectly, through skilful manipulation of his characters. The poet's procedure is different, being more open and direct in its expression of a personal point of view. Part of his integrity must depend on his power to express with greater and greater intensity of truth, feeling and perception, his sense of life. His growth as a poet depends on the single-mindedness and success with which he strives for such true expression. And pretence and falsehood have nothing to do with this kind of effort.

> I love to pour out all myself, as plain 51
> As downright *Shippen*, or as old *Montagne*.
> In them, as certain to be lov'd as seen,
> The Soul stood forth, nor kept a Thought within;
> In me what Spots (for Spots I have) appear
> Will prove at least the Medium must be clear.
> In this impartial Glass, my Muse intends
> Fair to expose myself, my Foes, my Friends;
> Publish the present Age, but where my Text
> Is Vice too high, reserve it for the next . . .

So wrote Pope in his *Imitation of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*. The 'impartial Glass' into which wine is to be poured is like the 'medium' through which the truth about the poet and his society will be revealed. The parallel shows how

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aware Pope was that in poetry the truth about a writer must always appear, whether consciously or not. The image he uses is of a clear crystal goblet of old wine: the wine of this poet's personality is both mature and unadulterated, in the connoisseur's sense of the words 'old' and 'downright'. The glass is held up to the light, and turned slowly in the hand of an appreciative and well-judging gentleman, a true 'Augustan'. The idea bears some relationship to that other image in which Dryden somewhat patronisingly referred to the poetry of a great predecessor: 'Chaucer, I confess, is a rough diamond, and must be polish'd ere he shines.' Pope followed Dryden's example in 'polishing' Chaucer to the requirements of refined eighteenth-century tastes (see Chapter 2). To shine, to give off and reflect light (which is, in both contexts, synonymous with 'Truth') is the true function of the poet. And what Pope did, or thought he was doing, for Chaucer, life itself did for Pope.

The mention of Dryden in connection with Pope's poetry – and especially in connection with its essential 'truth' – should lead us back in time to their literary ancestor, Milton. Pope and Milton wrote very different 'kinds' of poetry, but they agreed in their notion of the poet's calling as a heaven-directed one, with Truth as its goal. Preparing themselves for a future as great poets was not only a matter of collecting, studying and practising technical skills, but also of developing the kind of personality that would reflect and transmit the truth about life and be itself clear enough of serious flaws to be able to do so. Milton reflected ironically in *Lycidas* that he had kept himself from the degenerating influences of courtly amatory poetry, only to find his own high aims clouded over with doubts and fears at the news of the untimely death of his friend and fellow-poet, Edward King. This is matched by Pope's equally ironic inclusion of the poet's ceaseless pursuit of his Muse in a list of misguided human activities in the *Essay on Man* (II, 261–70). At times both poets met with doubts and discouragements, but both recovered. And Pope, who inherited Milton's poetic legacy through Dryden, strengthened it into an active tradition that passes after his death to George Crabbe and Byron. Pope's poetry is therefore a very important literary meeting-point, as well as the expression of individual genius. And although there is another, minor, poetic tradition that comes from Spenser and the minor Milton, to be carried on

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by Gray and Collins through Keats to Tennyson, the greatest strain of English poetry is that to which Pope belongs, and which he does so much to strengthen and enrich.

In its integrity as much as in its technical virtuosity, Pope's poetry reveals him to be Milton's heir. The impression that its variety reflects a chameleon-like personality resolves into a truer picture when the poetry is read chronologically. Over years of constant writing, the poems present a matchless record of what happens when experiences of varying intensity strike upon a poet's imagination as revelatory truth. The impact of experience, registered and recorded ('reflected'), resembles the chipping of a diamond and its subsequent polishing to reveal a facet, that facet adding its own brilliance to the results of other successive impacts of fresh experience. So the bewildering variety of poetic 'personalities' resolve themselves into the complex personality of a great poet developing over forty years of continuous authorship.

For this reason a chronological approach to Pope's poetry is useful, and is followed in this book. Each of the poems considered in the following chapters can stand by itself: it is the authentic expression of a poet's total personality at a particular period. But all – and especially the later poems – gain if we have previous acquaintance with the verses Pope made earlier. Even the most finished of his poems is so intimately related to the original experience that, reading it, we re-live the experience with him. And it is worth remembering that the *writing* of a poem was for Pope an experience too; we shall examine later several poems where the doubts, uncertainties, near-failures and ultimate triumphs in the *writing* are recorded as faithfully as the original experience. Our response to the brilliantly coruscating personality and the assured technical skills revealed in the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* will be more valuable if we have watched Pope battle for his psychological and artistic balance in writing the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, and appreciated the deliberateness with which those technical skills were sought and exercised in apprentice work like the *Pastorals*, and even *The Rape of the Lock*. To read his poems in the chronological order of their publication is to become witnesses to the process by which a great poet is made. This is possible for us because of the intensity with which Pope dedicated himself to Poetry, and therefore to Truth.

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