

*‘By what fine ties hath GOD connected things  
 When present in the mind; which in themselves  
 Have no connection?’*

*The Pleasures of Imagination*  
 Book III, 462–4

### Introduction, or ‘The Design’

‘We have inherited the myth of a radical generic breakdown in European Romanticism that in fact never happened.’<sup>1</sup> It was once the case that Romanticism was assumed to be a great flash of originality within the history of poetry – a wholesale rejection of the preceding generations of verse, one that replaced reason with passion, formal completeness with fragmentation, human society with nature, beauty with the sublime. There was Enlightenment rationality, then there was Romantic imagination. There was Pope and the balanced heroic couplet, then there was Wordsworth and stately blank verse. In each case, the latter is always posited as a reaction against and a rejection of the former. Stuart Curran, in his groundbreaking study of Romanticism’s relation to its own literary past by way of ‘connotative’ designations of genre (the hymn, the ode, the elegy, the romance), suggests that such inherited ‘myths’ of a break between the Romantic poets and their direct predecessors is a product of Romanticism’s own self-mythologizing. The quest for originality of expression is indeed a hallmark of Romanticism, and it is no doubt a product of what Harold Bloom influentially called the ‘anxiety of influence’ shown by writers and poets towards that which came before.<sup>2</sup> Such an idea is contained in William Blake’s statement that ‘I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans.’<sup>3</sup> A century before Modernism and the Poundian maxim to ‘*make it new*’, Romanticism was already promoting poetic novelty by forcing a distance between itself and its recent past.<sup>4</sup>

Curran continues his reflections on Romantic myth-making by observing that the narrative of such a ‘breakdown’ with ‘its own logic of cultural determinism has essentially distorted our perceptions of both Romantic literature and culture’. In what Jerome McGann has influentially termed ‘the Romantic ideology’, there is a tendency in scholarship towards reproducing in critical writings the very terms and ideals that Romanticism set out to establish – perhaps

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935).

uncritically so.<sup>5</sup> This matters because even where we might imagine we are reading against the grain of Romanticism's myth-making, we might very well still be reinforcing its alleged split from the eighteenth century. The word 'Romanticism' – not itself a product of the Romantic-period writers but of their subsequent critics – sets into motion the conception of the Romantics as historically distinct within the traditions of literature, and strangely so: 'Romanticism' in modern academia is both an essential hinge and a double misfit, forming the overlapping middle term between eighteenth-century literature and the Victorian period. Thus, it is not quite at home in either of the 'long' centuries between which it falls.

It would be true to say that the narrative of Romanticism as a clean break from eighteenth-century verse cultures has been overturned. There are abundant sensitive studies of the debt the Romantics owe to mid-eighteenth-century poets including Edward Young, Thomas Gray, William Cowper, and Christopher Smart, as well as the earlier extra-Augustan poet James Thomson.<sup>6</sup> Yet though it can be imagined that Romanticism owes something to that group of writers who are sometimes even grouped together in survey courses as 'proto-' or 'pre-' Romantics, it remains difficult for scholarship to imagine anything other than a complete rejection by the Romantics of Augustan-era verse, and especially of Alexander Pope. Beth Lau, opening a short essay on Keats's poetic precursors, offers the view that 'the literary movement we call Romanticism was shaped in significant ways by a rejection of Augustan and celebration of Renaissance poetry and aesthetics'.<sup>7</sup> The view is familiar and it is backed up by the abundant evidence that Keats admired Spenser and Milton but did all he could to 'get as far as possible in the opposite direction of the Pope school'.<sup>8</sup> It is demonstrably true that Keats's poetry in particular was responsive to Pope's poetry and what Keats, under the influence of Leigh Hunt, would label the 'rocking horse' poetics of the Augustan heroic line.<sup>9</sup> Such a response was in the spirit of Romanticism more broadly, with Wordsworth's remarks against 'poetic diction', in the celebrated 'Preface' to his

<sup>5</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Such studies often place Wordsworth at their centre as a lynchpin of high Romanticism. See, for instance, Tess Somervell, 'Mediating Vision: Wordsworth's Allusions to Thomson's *Seasons* in *The Prelude*', *Romanticism*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2016), pp. 48–60; Stefan H. Uhlig, 'Gray, Wordsworth, and the Poetry of Ordinary Life', in *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry*, ed. Ross Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 33–56; Tim Fulford, 'Wordsworth, Cowper and the Language of Eighteenth-Century Politics', in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Woodman (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 117–33.

<sup>7</sup> Beth Lau, 'Poetic Precursors (2): Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope', in *John Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Bailey, quoted in *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), vol. 2, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> John Keats, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 63, l.186.

collection with Coleridge the *Lyrical Ballads*, clearly designed as a response to Pope. Pope was the dominant figure of his generation – roughly the period of literature from 1710 to 1750 – and as such he became emblematic of Romanticism as a point of attack that could serve to differentiate the new poetics of Romanticism from what came before. And yet Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* indicates that the forces of reaction and reception are not mutually exclusive and that even those forebears to whom a writer is most aggressive – or especially those ones – can be seen to provide blueprints for understanding the work of the subsequent generation of writers. The Romantics, it might be said, protest too much and all that protestation against Pope masks the depth of their debt to Augustan verse practices. Likewise there is every chance that the movement we call ‘Augustan’ might be less cohesive than we once imagined, and that the principles for which it is best known and that most clearly mark it out against Romanticism – balance, harmony, order – are not always as present as we might suppose.

This Element is an attempt to reconstruct just one of the ways in which a major aspect of Pope’s poetic vision resurfaced in Romanticism by focussing on what I come to call his philosophy of appearances: how the world seems to be and how that semblance can or cannot be denoted by language. My case study for tracing the lineage of those ideas is a single work by a single mid-century poet: Mark Akenside’s *Pleasure of Imagination*. I argue that Akenside is singularly instructive in uncovering the debt to subsequent poetry of Pope’s approach to verse-form philosophy, even where, as in Akenside’s blank verse, some of the hallmarks of Popean poetry are absent. Akenside, like many of the later Romantics, took up blank verse as a conscious movement away from the end-stopped heroic couplets that dominated the first half of the eighteenth century and that were practically synonymous with Pope. Yet many of Pope’s best modern readers have found in his rhythms a far greater complexity and subtlety than stereotypes of Augustan ‘balance’ or ‘harmony’ would suggest. Pat Rogers has noted, for instance, the ‘conversational’ rhythms of Pope’s couplets and the enormous flexibility the heroic form afforded Pope in drawing together styles and genres of poetry, even as his work accords to an Augustan mode of anti-Miltonic ‘correctness’.<sup>10</sup> John Sitter equally works his reading of Pope’s style around the principle of *decorum*, or ‘the idea that different occasions call for different kinds of behavior’; thus it is more appropriate to think that ‘Pope wrote in many voices’ than that his metres were mechanically monotonous.<sup>11</sup> That plurality of voices has leant itself to a rich critical tradition of unfolding the complexities rather than the harmonious

<sup>10</sup> Pat Rogers, *Essays on Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> John Sitter, ‘Pope’s Versification and Voice’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 37–48, p. 37.

simplicity in Pope's poetic voice over the past century.<sup>12</sup> It is that complexity that reopens the question of a positive influence from Augustan to Romantic poetry, and it is that which helped shape Akenside's vision of the universe and his poetic reconstruction of the world. Specifically, I argue that Pope, Akenside, and the Romantic poets are all alike concerned with appearances: with the appearance of the world, with the appearance of poetry, and finally with poetry's appearance in the world. Most recently, scholars including Tom Jones and Courtney Weiss Smith have shown that Pope's poetic language is itself complex in that it at once celebrates the artificiality of its own images and structures whilst also forming a relation with nature's images. Pope's work opens up a conversation about natural and artificial language, calling attention to poetry's own artificial character even as it appears to represent the structures of the natural world. As Weiss Smith shows, Pope's suggestion that poetry's 'Sound' can 'seem an Eccho to the Sense' is at once a natural analogy (echoes are a physical, material production) but also artificial – the semblance in play in what 'seems' to be in his poetry. In that spirit, I read semblance as a Popean product in Akenside's work and world and show how his equally complex picture of the universe – which at once affirms its own poetic artifice whilst wishing to present or represent divine nature – was Romanticism's chief debt to him. Thus through the poetic and philosophic connection of appearances, Romanticism is not at odds with all of Pope's work and thinking but is in one sense a direct successor of his ideas and working in his tradition.

It is important to stress that I am not claiming that Akenside is the only poet to take up the pressure Pope placed on appearances and artificiality and that he was thus Romanticism's only viable source for such thinking. That would be to overstate the case when what I am presenting is in fact one case study and a single telling of a story – a story told in three parts – of poetry's contribution to a discourse of appearances that was elsewhere taken for granted in Enlightenment-era philosophy. To read Akenside as a mid-century connector between Pope and Romanticism is to present one way of understanding a richer relationship between the two extreme ends of the eighteenth century and its schools of poetry than simply one of outright rejection or mythological break. *The Pleasures of Imagination* is here exemplary in that it puts into practice verse theories, literary aesthetics, and philosophical ideas in large part influenced by Alexander Pope, a poet whose name was in Akenside's day practically a byword for Neoclassical poetry. But the poem also cast its own enormous, though widely varying influence across key Romantic poets, including Wordsworth,

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Maynard Mack, 'On Reading Pope', *College English*, vol. 7, no. 5 (1946), pp. 263–73; Howard D. Weinbrot, *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); J. Paul Hunter, 'Form As Meaning: Pope and the Ideology of the Couplet Form', *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1996), pp. 257–70.

Coleridge, and Keats. It participates vitally in ‘the tradition of deistic verse-philosophising’ that Seamus Perry has associated with Pope and Wordsworth alike and in the development of the ‘creative imagination’ that James Engell has charted across the long eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, it also opens up the notion of a vital overlap between the aesthetic and epistemological projects of Neoclassical and Romantic poetry. *The Pleasures of Imagination* is a complicating element that calls out the illusion in any binary understanding of those movements, highlighting deeply significant continuities that are all too easily elided by the Romantics’ own myth-making. Central to my argument is the fact that *The Pleasures of Imagination* connects poets like Pope with the high Romantics in that it is a sustained attempt to ‘do’ philosophy in verse: it makes no attempt to dress up pre-existing ideas culled from prose-philosophical works in new clothing, but rather stages first-hand a dynamic performance of the kinds of original truths poetry can attain. These are truths that largely relate, fittingly enough, to appearances: to how the world ‘appears to be’ and to the nature of art and poetry themselves as special kinds of appearances in the world. This was a lesson Akenside inherited above all, as I will show, from Pope’s *Essay on Man*, and in turn he provided fuel for Romantic attempts to understand man, the universe, and the fit between the two within the medium of poetry and its appearances.

Mark Akenside was born in Newcastle in 1721, a year after the final print run of Addison and Steele’s popular *Spectator* newspaper and two years after Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess* created the market and public appetite for that most modern literary form, the novel. Akenside grew to maturity in a period when poetry, along with other artistic and cultural practices, was dominated by classical influences – what we now term the Augustan or Neoclassical period in literary history – and in which the rise of fictional and non-fictional prose forms alike forced a rethinking of the role of poetry in society. The Horatian ode enjoyed renewed popularity, poetic and critical practices were influenced by texts like Longinus’s *On the Sublime*, and by far the most dominant measure in English poetry was the classically derived heroic couplet: the pairing of lines of five beats and five feet bound one to the other through the use of terminal rhymes. The most successful poet of the period bar none was Alexander Pope, whose great philosophical poem the *Essay on Man* was published between 1733 and 1734, and whose name became a byword for the meticulous metrical art of the heroic couplet. Pope is widely

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Perry, ‘Wordsworth’s Heroics’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2003), pp. 65–73, p. 65; James Engell, *The Creative Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

received as the perfecter of the couplet – its greatest and most skilful proponent – and the most prominent poet of his day. He was to prove influential to the young Akenside, who (like the much later Keats) originally trained as a physician but showed yearnings towards a life of poetry from a young age; he published his *A British Philippic* in 1738 when he was aged just eighteen. Akenside published his *Pleasures of Imagination* in 1744 to immediate success and he worked and reworked the poem across the remainder of his life. An incomplete five-book version of the work under the title *The Pleasures of Imagination* appeared in 1772; though the title is only slightly changed, the poem is, as Akenside's foremost modern editor has remarked, 'very different' indeed to the earlier work.<sup>14</sup> With that difference in mind, except when explicitly stated, this Element is concerned with the original poem titled *The Pleasures of Imagination* – that which gained Akenside lasting fame within his lifetime, and the most often consulted by his Romantic readers. The poem itself exemplifies the mid-eighteenth-century tendency towards long blank-verse poetry with an emphasis on philosophic speculation, comparable to the earlier *Seasons* by James Thomson or to Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts* of 1742–5. It is a work of theodicy – a sustained attempt to explain and justify the world as God's creation – but also a work of natural scientific and philosophically empiricist exaction. Indeed, it is in its apparently deistic marriage of philosophical and religious perspectives that *The Pleasures of Imagination* stands alone within the landscape of eighteenth-century verse.

One of Akenside's signal achievements in the *Pleasures* was the strong pressure he exerted on individual lines of poetry and on variety as a central principle in the prosody of blank verse. It's in that sense that Akenside is a part of the long narrative in the history of verse that connects Milton and the blank-verse lines of his *Paradise Lost* with Romanticism. Generally speaking, that narrative leapfrogs over Augustan verse altogether given that Augustanism is characterized by anti-Miltonic orderly syntax and by the structuring principle of rhyme – and that presents one reason why Akenside might be thought of as an early Romantic but less as a late Augustan. Indeed, the resonances between Milton, Akenside, and Romanticism run deeper than verse form alone and Dustin D. Stewart's recent *Futures of Enlightenment Poetry* places all three figures in conversation on the topic of Enlightenment conceptions of the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite that movement in verse away from Pope's couplets, this Element argues that the substance of Akenside's lines was formed in

<sup>14</sup> Dix in Mark Akenside, *The Poetical Works of Mark Akenside*, ed. Robin Dix (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996), p. 18. All subsequent references to Akenside's verse and prose refer to this edition.

<sup>15</sup> Dustin D. Stewart, *Futures of Enlightenment Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

response to Pope's poetics and Akenside takes up the idea of the long philosophic poem in terms that would have direct bearings on later blank-verse works like Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* or *The Prelude*. I argue across this Element that Akenside's debt to Pope and the Romantics' debt to Akenside can be understood in terms of a preoccupation with appearances. A major strain of Enlightenment philosophy, centred on the tradition of British empiricism, can be understood to be concerned with the way the world seems to be. The development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of what we now term correspondence theories – theories of mind and world, or theories of truth that concern the balancing of mental pictures with external facts – led to highly influential models of the relation of mind to external appearances such as John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1690. (One of the best accounts of the historical development of correspondence theories of truth and Locke's role in that development, that of Richard Rorty, is also a thoroughgoing critique of such theories from the perspective of modern pragmatist philosophy.)<sup>16</sup> Correspondence theories also, though, led to Hume's brand of scepticism; the possible distance or difference between ideas in our minds and objects in the world left wide room for doubt and cast the reality of the world beyond our perceptions into question. It was in this culture (though prior to Humean scepticism) that Pope's *Essay on Man* addressed the world as it is experienced by men. Akenside in turn drew on Pope's *Essay* when setting into motion his own poem on the fit between mind and world, but the *Pleasures of Imagination* adapts Pope's programme by fixating on the slipperiness of appearances between what the world seems to be and what it really is. Akenside's work opens up the richness of representational knowledge, which depends upon the mind 're-presenting' images in the world and therefore offers its own direct lines of parallel with artistic making and poetic representation. Such richness and difficulties, which remain finally equivocal in Akenside, lead directly to Romanticism's own discussion of art and appearance.

This Element comprises four short sections, each designed to get at a different aspect of Akenside's unique position as a poet suspended, in history and in influence, between the mainstreams of Neoclassical verse cultures and high Romanticism in the British tradition. Each section can be read on its own terms or as part of the Element's larger argument concerning the philosophical connections and continuities of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. In that sense it broadly aims to make accessible to students, or to readers new to the questions

<sup>16</sup> See 'Mirroring' in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 129–64.

with which this Element grapples, the major movements in poetic history between roughly the 1710s and 1810s. By focussing on those two intertwined phenomena – of appearances in the history of ideas and the role poetry played in that history – it also aims to offer a revitalized look at the period that will aid scholars who are already familiar with questions of reception and influence in the Neoclassical and Romantic period, and it extends the scholarly work done on Akenside and on his role within poetic history and tradition of the longer eighteenth century.

With this in mind, Section 1 focusses on the influence of Pope’s *Essay on Man* on Akenside’s poem, comparing their approaches to long philosophical poetry and their attitudes towards certainty, uncertainty, and the world of appearances. It builds on recent work on Pope to offer a brief reading of his philosophical poem the *Essay on Man*, reading it as an exemplary poem that concerns itself with the difference between how the world is and how it seems and the important consequences of that distinction for morality and for theology. Following this, Section 2 offers a reading of *The Pleasures of Imagination* on its own terms, aiming to understand the role of what Akenside calls the ‘appearances in the world around us’ in his poem and synthesizing that philosophical project – a project hinged upon the difficulty of identifying the difference between what *is* and what *seems to be* – with the resourcefulness of blank verse.

Section 3 departs from the *Pleasures* itself to look at its reception in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for whom Akenside’s poem was a major and lasting influence in his early years as a poet. Akenside’s use of terms like ‘plastic’ – now made all the more remarkable thanks to its treatment by Paul H. Fry in a well-known reading of William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley’s famous article on ‘The Intentional Fallacy’,<sup>17</sup> – would be instrumental to Coleridge’s own development of the ‘esemplastic imagination’. Section 4 then builds on the particularities of Coleridge’s reading of Akenside to consider the broader Romantic reception of the *Pleasures of Imagination*, especially in terms of its verse-form philosophizing on the nature and experience of appearances. This involves consideration of the Wordsworthian blank verse and the Keatsian ‘liberal’ couplet and the relation of those forms to philosophical thinking. I also argue in Section 4 that Keats’s well-known notion of negative capability and its insistence on ‘uncertainties’ are pre-empted by what Akenside called the imagination’s ‘pleasures’, which include a kind of joy in not knowing or remaining uncertain, as well as in knowing; as Section 1 shows, that lineage of ideas concerning uncertainty and appearances was set into motion by Pope. We broadly find, in the Romantics who were familiar with

<sup>17</sup> Paul H. Fry, *Theory of Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 67.

Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination*, philosophic reflections on the status of mind and world, and the fit or misfit between the two, that waver between two positions: the world as mind-dependent and the world as entirely independent of the mind. This poetics of equivocality, often understood as a hallmark of Romantic verse, constitutes the lasting legacy of Akenside's philosophical poem and its own debt to Pope.

Akenside as a figure has never been too far away from the canon of English literature, yet scholarship dealing with his work can seem surprisingly scant for all that. In recent memory, he has been championed by Robin Dix, who has done more than any other scholar to promote Akenside's work as a subject worthy of modern critical study. As well as editing a collection of essays on Akenside, Dix's major achievements include writing the invaluable *Poetical Works of Mark Akenside* and the critical biography *The Literary Career of Mark Akenside*. Before Dix, Akenside was best served by Harriet Jump, whose various essays on Akenside's writings offer new understandings of his social milieu and bring to attention previously unacknowledged manuscript versions of his poetry. Jump was also instrumental in shaping current conceptions of Coleridge's debt to Akenside in her important essay 'High Sentiments of Liberty: Coleridge's Unacknowledged Debt to Akenside'.<sup>18</sup> The present study of Akenside's influence on Coleridge in Section 3 is in turn indebted to Jump's work, and it also draws on seminal work by Geoffrey H. Hartman and more recent scholarship by David Vallins and Nicholas Reid.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Reid has influentially argued that Akenside was 'an important source for Coleridge, with his characterisation of Nature as the divine language, his exploration of models of reading and the presentation of a positive function for art as a part of that reading process, and the beginnings of the Romantic movement towards the internalisation of Christ'.<sup>20</sup> This Element is also indebted to Kirk M. Fabel's essay on *The Pleasures of Imagination*, which has done more than any other work to place the poem within the broader intellectual history of eighteenth-century aesthetics beyond Addison's influence.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Harriet Jump, 'High Sentiments of Liberty: Coleridge's Unacknowledged Debt to Akenside', *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 28, no.2 (1989), pp. 207–24.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Reflections on the Evening Star: Akenside to Coleridge', in *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartmann (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 85–131; David Vallins, 'Akenside, Coleridge, and the Pleasures of Transcendence', in *Mark Akenside: A Reassessment*, ed. Robin Dix (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 156–82; Nicholas Reid, 'Coleridge, Akenside, and the Platonic Tradition: Reading in *The Pleasures of Imagination*', *Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture*, vol. 80, no. 1 (1993), pp. 31–56.

<sup>20</sup> Reid, 'Coleridge, Akenside, and the Platonic Tradition', p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Kirk M. Fabel, 'The Location of the Aesthetic in Akenside's *Pleasures of Imagination*', *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 1 (1997), pp. 47–68.

Akenside's poem was a literary sensation within his lifetime and, from the perspective of modern literary studies, it falls conveniently close to the mid-century; in terms of date of publication alone it offers a glimpse at verse cultures as they sat between Neoclassicism and Romanticism. This Element aims to show that what the poem can tell us about the poetry that inspired it and that it inspired is not simply what changed between Pope and the Romantics, or what was made different. Rather, it offers a uniquely instructive set of case studies in influence, continuities, and connections across the full length of the eighteenth century and beyond. These connections, as I show across the pages that follow, are thematic but also rhythmic and philosophic. Resituating Akenside at the fore of our conceptions of eighteenth-century poetry is thus invaluable when it comes to trying to understand how a phrase like 'eighteenth-century poetry' can refer equally to Pope's punishingly precise verse practices and the more fluvial movements of Wordsworth's verse and to the flexibilities of Keats's rhymes. Indeed, this Element argues that the one naturally stemmed from the other, and by turning to Akenside's verse we might begin to understand how such a lineage might be possible.

### 1 Philosophic Backgrounds: Pope's *Essay* and Akenside

When thinking of Akenside as a connective element poised between Neoclassical poetry and Romanticism, it is necessary in particular to begin with the poetry to which Akenside himself looked back, to which he was responding in his own verse, and from which he drew deep inspiration across his career as a poet. This opening section therefore looks to the poetry of Alexander Pope, the principal figure in poetry from shortly after the death of Dryden until the so-called Age of Johnson, from the 1710s to the 1750s and beyond, and the man widely credited with perfecting the heroic couplet. In particular I am interested in what modern readers often hail as Pope's crowning achievement, the philosophic poem the *Essay on Man* – a work that cast a long and lasting shadow across subsequent poetry, and not least the *Pleasures of Imagination*. I first reconstruct Akenside's awareness of Pope and the role Pope himself played in launching Akenside's career. I then illustrate the parallels between Pope's preface to the *Essay on Man* – a note on his philosophical intentions but also on the uses of verse in philosophizing – and Akenside's comparable preface to the *Pleasures on Man*. I then offer a brief overview and analysis of Pope's *Essay*, showing the ways in which its poetic-philosophical method were to influence Akenside. It is this understanding of Pope and of poetics that is carried forward across the rest of the Element.