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 Edited by Alfred S. West, M.A.  
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## INTRODUCTION.

### I.

#### THE METAPHYSICAL AND CLASSICAL SCHOOLS OF ENGLISH POETRY.

THE fervour which found expression in the poetry of the great Elizabethan writers passed away. 'The national life grew chill, and the feelings of the poets also chill. Then the want of art in the style made itself felt. The far-fetched images, the hazarded meanings, the over-fanciful way of putting thoughts, the sensational expression of feeling, in which the Elizabethan poets indulged, not only appeared in all their ugliness when they were inspired by no warm feeling, but were indulged in far more than before. Men tried to produce by extravagant use of words the same results that ardent feeling had produced, and the more they failed the more extravagant and fantastic they became, till at last their poetry ceased to have clear meaning. This is the history of the style of the poets from the later days of Elizabeth till the Civil War<sup>1</sup>.'

The characteristics of this style of poetry are described and illustrated by Johnson in his *Life of Cowley*<sup>2</sup> :—

'About the beginning of the seventeenth century, appeared a race of writers that may be termed the Metaphysical poets<sup>3</sup>... The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show

<sup>1</sup> Brooke, *Primer of English Literature*, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> *Lives of the Poets*, 'Cowley,' pp. 8—10.

<sup>3</sup> Mr Courthope (*Pope's Works*, 'Life,' Vol. v. p. 51) claims for Pope the invention of the name. In Spence's *Anecdotes*, Pope is reported to have said, 'Cowley, as well as Davenant, borrowed his *metaphysical* style from Donne.'

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their learning was their whole endeavour ; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they wrote only verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear ; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.

‘ If the father of criticism [Aristotle] has rightly denominated poetry τέχνη μιμητική, “an imitative art,” these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets ; for they cannot be said to have imitated anything : they copied neither nature nor life ; neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect...

‘ This kind of writing, which was, I believe, borrowed from Marino<sup>1</sup> and his followers, had been recommended by the example of Donne, a man of very extensive and various knowledge, and by Jonson, whose manner resembled that of Donne more in the ruggedness of his lines than in the cast of his sentiments.

‘ When their reputation was high, they had undoubtedly more imitators than time has left behind. Their immediate successors, of whom any remembrance can be said to remain, were Suckling, Waller, Denham, Cowley, Cleveland, and Milton. Denham and Waller sought another way to fame, by improving the harmony of our numbers...Cowley adopted the metaphysic style, and excelled his predecessors, having as much sentiment and more music. Suckling neither improved versification nor abounded in conceits. The fashionable style remained chiefly with Cowley ; Suckling could not reach it, and Milton disdained it<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mr Courthope remarks that ‘ Donne wrote before Marino had acquired his great reputation,’ and that ‘ writing precisely similar in character prevailed at the same period in every country of Europe that could boast of a literature.’ (*Pope's Works*, Vol. v. p. 53.) No doubt the taste for a style abounding in conceits was in that age widely spread. But at any rate it was Donne ‘ who in England first gave it full expression—who was its first rigorous and effective and devoted spokesman.’ (Ward’s *English Poets*, Introduction to *Donne* by J. W. Hales, Vol. i. pp. 558—9.)

<sup>2</sup> A chronological note may be found useful at this point :—

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METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF POETRY. 3

Johnson applied to the poets of this stamp the term 'metaphysical,' because their work was beyond or outside nature; 'they copied neither nature nor life.' Instead of interpreting for us nature and the facts of human life in such a way as to stir our emotions, they analysed phenomena in the spirit of philosophers. 'But a yet more notable distinction of this school than its philosophising, shallow or deep, is what may be called its fantasticality, its quaint wit, elaborate ingenuity, far-fetched allusiveness; and it might better be called the Ingenious or Fantastic School. Various and out of the way information and learning is a necessary qualification for membership....Eminence is attained by using such stores in the way to be least expected. The thing to be illustrated becomes of secondary importance by the side of the illustration. The more unlikely and surprising and preposterous this is, the greater the success<sup>1</sup>.'

In the *Spectator*<sup>2</sup>, Addison exemplifies what he describes as 'mixed wit' from the poems of Cowley, whom Johnson pronounces to have been 'almost the last of that race and undoubtedly the best<sup>3</sup>,' and of whom Clarendon declared that he had 'made a flight beyond all men<sup>4</sup>.'

'Cowley, observing the cold regard of his mistress's eyes, and at the same time their power of producing love in him, considers them as burning glasses made of ice; and finding himself able to live in the greatest extremities of love, concludes the torrid zone to be habitable. When his mistress has read his letter written in juice of lemon by holding it to the fire, he desires her to read it over a second time by love's flames. When she weeps, he wishes it were inward heat that distilled those drops from the limbec. When she is absent, he is beyond eighty, that is, thirty degrees nearer the pole than when she is with him. His am-

Shakespeare, 1564—1616; Marino, 1569—1625; Donne, 1573—1631; Ben Jonson, 1573—1637; Waller, 1605—1687; Milton, 1608—1674; Suckling, 1609—1641; Cleveland, 1613—1658; Denham, 1615—1668; Cowley, 1618—1667; Dryden, 1631—1700; Pope, 1688—1744.

<sup>1</sup> Ward's *English Poets*, Hales's Introd. to *Donne*, Vol. I. p. 558.

<sup>2</sup> No. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Cowley*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Autobiography*, Vol. I. p. 30.

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## INTRODUCTION.

bitious love is a fire that naturally mounts upwards ; his happy love is the beams of heaven, and his unhappy love flames of hell. When it does not let him sleep, it is a flame that sends up no smoke : when it is opposed to counsel and advice, it is a fire that rages the more by the wind's blowing upon it. Upon the dying of a tree in which he had cut his loves, he observes that his written flames had burnt up and withered the tree. When he resolves to give over his passion, he tells us that one burnt like him for ever dreads the fire. His heart is an *Ætna*, that instead of Vulcan's shop incloses Cupid's forge in it. His endeavouring to drown his love in wine, is throwing oil upon the fire. He would insinuate to his mistress, that the fire of love like that of the sun, (which produces so many living creatures), should not only warm, but beget. Love in another place cooks pleasure at his fire. Sometimes the poet's heart is frozen in every breast, and sometimes scorched in every eye. Sometimes he is drowned in tears, and burnt in love, like a ship set on fire in the middle of the sea.'

And all this playing with fire and flame for the sake of a fair creature who never existed outside of Cowley's imagination,—a mere poetical 'Mrs Harris'!

But Cowley shall speak for himself. This is how he sings 'of Anacreon, continuing a lover in his old age':—

'Love was with thy life entwined,  
 Close as heat with fire is join'd ;  
 A powerful brand prescribed the date  
 Of thine, like Meleager's fate.  
 Th' antiperistasis of age  
 More enflam'd thy amorous rage.'

Let us take an example from Donne. 'To the following comparison,' says Johnson<sup>1</sup>, 'of a man that travels and his wife that stays at home, with a pair of compasses, it may be doubted whether absurdity or ingenuity has the better claim:—

'Our two souls, therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must go, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
 Like gold to airy thinness beat.'

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Cowley*, p. 17.

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METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF POETRY. 5

If they be two, they are two so  
 As stiff twin compasses are two;  
 Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show  
 To move, but doth if th'other do.  
 And, though it in the centre sit,  
 Yet, when the other far doth roam,  
 It leans and hearkens after it,  
 And grows erect as that comes home.  
 Such wilt thou be to me, who must  
 Like th' other foot obliquely run.  
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
 And makes me end where I begun.'

Carew gives us a tasteless conceit in his epitaph on Sir Thomas Wentworth's daughter:—

'And here the precious dust is laid,  
 Whose purely tempered clay was made  
 So fine that it the guest betrayed.  
 Else the soul grew so fast within,  
 It broke the outward shell of sin,  
 And so was hatched a cherubin!'

The drying up of brooks from a failure of their springs suggests to Cleveland's imagination nothing more picturesque than a prosaic metaphor borrowed from an attorney's office:—

'As an obstructed fountain's head  
 Cuts the entail off from the streams,  
 And brooks are disinherited.'

Once more, Lovelace, in his verses on 'Ellinda's Glove,' describes the glove as 'a snowy farm with five tenements; he has visited there to pay his daily rents to the white mistress of the farm, who has gone into the meadows to gather flowers and hearts. He then changes his image, and calls the glove an ermine cabinet, whose alabaster lady will soon come home, since any other tenant would eject himself, by finding the rooms too narrow to contain him. The poet, therefore, leaves his rent, five kisses, at the door, observing, with another change of figure, that though the lute is too high for him, yet, like a servant, he is allowed to fiddle with the case<sup>1</sup>'

<sup>1</sup> Ward's *English Poets*, Introduction to *Lovelace*, by E. W. Gosse, Vol. II. pp. 181—2.

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At the age of seventeen Dryden wrote an *Elegy Upon the Death of Lord Hastings*, his old school-fellow at Westminster, and in it he surpassed the most pedantic of the metaphysical writers on their own ground. Of the young nobleman he declares that—

‘His body was an orb, his sublime soul  
 Did move on virtue’s and on learning’s pole:  
 Whose regular motions better to our view  
 Than Archimedes’ sphere the heavens did show.’

Lord Hastings had died of smallpox. Dryden’s description of the malady affords wide scope for the display of his precocious subtlety and erudition. The disease is ‘the very filthiness of Pandora’s box’; its spots soil the victim,—‘our Venus,’—‘one jewel set off with so many a foil.’ The eruption resembles rose-buds, ‘stuck in the lily-skin about’:

‘Each little pimple had a tear in it,  
 To wail the fault its rising did commit;  
 Which, rebel-like, with its own lord at strife,  
 Thus made an insurrection ’gainst his life.  
 Or were these gems sent to adorn his skin,  
 The cabinet of a richer soul within?’

These are the extravagances of a clever school-boy who exaggerates the vices of his models,—extravagances from which Dryden gradually set himself free. At length popular taste changed and looked with disfavour upon excesses which had formerly been admired. About the time of the Restoration, the Metaphysical School of poetry disappeared.

It would be unjust, however, to suppose that none of the poetry written during the interval between the death of Elizabeth and the Restoration was characterised by anything better than these conceits,—these ‘novel turns of thought, usually false, and resting on some equivocation of language or exceedingly remote analogy’.<sup>1</sup> Cowley, Denham, and Waller bestowed increased attention upon versification, and handled metre with greater rigour.

In France the influence of Boileau, La Fontaine, Bossu, and

<sup>1</sup> Hallam, *Literature of Europe*, Vol. III. p. 255.

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METAPHYSICAL SCHOOL OF POETRY. 7

Rapin was making itself felt. French writers recognised the importance of a finished style and sought to obtain correctness of form by imitating the classical authors of antiquity. A similar critical movement occurred in England, and from the time of the Restoration till the end of the seventeenth century it received guidance and stimulus from the French school. Dryden's was the master-mind that helped it forward in our own literature. He discussed questions of criticism in his prose essays and exemplified in his later verse the application of rules of composition to the poetic art. The work of Milton, 'our one first-rate master in the grand style<sup>1</sup>,' was alien to the spirit of the age, and found no imitators. He had fallen 'on evil days and evil tongues'; his 'Muse dwelt apart.' Dryden was the man of the hour.

The school of poetry which had Dryden for its pioneer found in Pope its most distinguished exponent. It is variously described as the 'Critical school,' because it submitted to the stringent rules imposed by literary criticism; as the 'Correct school,' because it aimed at that conciseness and finish of expression in which 'correctness' was supposed to consist; as the 'French school,' because its characteristic features were thought to be due to French influence; as the 'Classical school,' because it aimed at attaining the first rank in literary style by copying the examples furnished by Greek and Roman writers of the first rank whose works are called 'classics'; or as the 'School of Pope,' because in Pope it reached its climax.

This classical school of poetry, which marked a reaction against the metaphysical school, was destined itself to be overthrown. Owing to its adherence to rigid and frigid conventional rules, it became artificial and cold. Owing to its lack of warm feeling and of interest in nature, it failed to satisfy the cravings with which men turn to poetry for inspiration and support. But it did good service in maintaining that artistic form was necessary to poetic style and in showing that artistic form was attainable.

<sup>1</sup> M. Arnold, *Mixed Essays*, p. 267.

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Even while Pope's popularity was at its height, signs of protest appeared against the limitations of the classical school. The poetry of natural description was warmly welcomed when Dyer's *Grongar Hill* was published in 1726 and Thomson's *Seasons* in 1730. Dyer wrote in flexible octosyllabics and Thomson in blank verse. Shenstone returned to the Spenserian stanza for his *Schoolmistress*, 1742, and Thomson for his *Castle of Indolence*, 1748. Collins's little volume of *Odes*, published in 1746,—'a still-born immortal,' according to Mr Swinburne,—contained the work of 'a poet who was content to sing out what he had in him—to sing and not to say, without a glimpse of wit or a flash of eloquence.' Gray has recourse to natural scenery to illustrate his reflexions on human life in the *Elegy*. Goldsmith, indeed, uses the decasyllabic couplet, and is to this extent the pupil of Pope, but he abounds in picturesque touches drawn from rural scenes. And when we reach Cowper and Crabbe we see that the revolt against conventionalism is complete<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The emperor Augustus possessed a taste for literature and bestowed a wise and liberal patronage upon Roman authors. Virgil and Horace were among the poets who enjoyed his favour. As the Augustan age was the most brilliant period in the history of Roman literature, the term has been applied to periods which were considered similar in the literary history of other countries. So the reign of Louis XIV. has been called the Augustan age of French literature, and the reign of Anne the Augustan age of English literature.

The writers of Anne's day produced nothing to merit this eulogy. Their principal service consisted in the development of our modern prose. Their poetry was often, in Taine's words, 'only more elaborate prose, subjected to the restraint of rhyme' (*History of English Literature*, Vol. III. p. 356). Nor is the application of the term justified by any bestowal of royal bounty. It is true that some of the poets filled high positions under government. 'There were great prizes,' says Thackeray, 'in the profession which had made Addison a Minister, and Prior an Ambassador, and Steele a Commissioner, and Swift all but a Bishop' (*English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 521). But these prizes were bestowed as rewards for political services, and not from any desire to promote the dignity of the literary calling.



## II.

## WAS POPE A POET?

‘It is surely superfluous,’ says Dr Johnson, ‘to answer the question that has once been asked, Whether Pope was a poet; otherwise than by asking in return, If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found? To circumscribe poetry by a definition will only shew the narrowness of the definer, though a definition which shall exclude Pope will not easily be made<sup>1</sup>.’

Warton comes to the conclusion that the largest portion of Pope’s works ‘is of the didactic, moral, and satiric kind, and consequently not of the most *poetic* species of poetry; whence it is manifest that good sense and judgment were his characteristic excellences, rather than fancy and invention; not that the author of the *Rape of the Lock*...can be thought to want imagination; but because his imagination was not his predominant talent<sup>2</sup>.’ In the Dedication of his treatise Warton says, ‘The sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy. What is there transcendently sublime or pathetic in Pope?’ And again: ‘A clear head and acute understanding are not sufficient alone to make a *poet*: the most solid observations on human life, expressed with the utmost elegance and brevity, are *morality*, not *poetry*....It is a creative and glowing *imagination—acer spiritus ac vis*—and that alone, that can stamp a writer with this exalted and very uncommon character, which so few possess, and of which so few can properly judge<sup>3</sup>.’

Mr Lowell replies that ‘it is plain that in any strict definition there can be only one kind of poetry, and that what Warton really meant to say was that Pope was not a poet at all<sup>4</sup>.’ And

<sup>1</sup> *Lives of the Poets*, ‘Pope,’ pp. 431–2.

<sup>2</sup> *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, Vol. II. pp. 401–2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. I. pp. ii., vi.

<sup>4</sup> *My Study Windows*, ‘Pope,’ p. 375.

the same view is taken by Mr Courthope. 'To say that one species of poetry is more *poetic* than another, is like saying that one species of horse, the race-horse, is more *equine* than the carriage-horse or the hunter<sup>1</sup>.'

Perhaps this retort is hardly so convincing as it seems. There is generally some danger in accepting an illustration in place of an argument. If we borrow our figure from the boudoir instead of borrowing it from the stable, the anomaly vanishes. A lady's bracelet may be made of gold of 9-carats or of 18-carats, and we should be justified in saying that the hall-marked specimen of 18-carat manufacture is more *golden* than its Brummagem 9-carat counterpart.

This is a mere juggling with words, however, quite out of keeping with our present inquiry, which is serious. Whether or not we choose to call Pope a poet is a matter of small moment, but to consider what the characteristics of poetry actually are and to determine the extent to which these characteristics are present in Pope's writings may be a useful exercise.

Let us see whether Matthew Arnold will be of any aid to us in the investigation. 'There can be no more useful help,' he says, 'for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently...Take of Shakespeare a line or two of Henry the Fourth's expostulation with sleep :—

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast  
 Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains  
 In cradle of the rude imperious surge...

<sup>1</sup> *Pope's Works*, 'Life,' Vol. v. p. 367.