

JOHN DENNIS

THE AGE OF
POPE

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The Age of Pope (1700-1744):*

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PREFACE

The *Age of Pope* is designed to form one of a series of Handbooks, edited by Professor Hales, which it is hoped will be of service to students who love literature for its own sake, instead of regarding it merely as a branch of knowledge required by examiners. The period covered by this volume, which has had the great advantage of Professor Hales's personal care and revision, may be described roughly as lying between 1700, the year in which Dryden died, and 1744, the date of Pope's death.

I believe that no work of the class will be of real value which gives what may be called literary statistics, and has nothing more to offer. Historical facts and figures have their uses, and are, indeed, indispensable; but it is possible to gain the most accurate knowledge of a literary period and to be totally unimpressed by the influences which a love of literature inspires. The first object of a guide is to give accurate information; his second and larger object is to direct the reader's steps through a country exhaustless in variety and interest. If once a passion be awakened for the study of our noble literature the student will learn to reject what is meretricious, and will turn instinctively to what is worthiest.

In the pursuit he may leave his guide far behind him; but none the less will he be grateful to the pioneer who started him on his travels.

If the *Age of Pope* proves of help in this way the wishes of the writer will be satisfied. It has been my endeavour in all cases to acknowledge the debt I owe to the authors who have made this period their study; but it is possible that a familiar acquaintance with their writings may have led me occasionally to mistake the matter thus assimilated for original criticism. If, therefore – to quote the phrase of Pope's enemy and my namesake – I have sometimes borrowed another man's 'thunder,' the fault of having 'made a sinner of my memory' may prove the reader's gain, and will, I hope, be forgiven.

J. D.

Hampstead,
August, 1894.

THE AGE OF POPE

INTRODUCTION

I

The death of John Dryden, on the first of May, 1700, closed a period of no small significance in the history of English literature. His faults were many, both as a man and as a poet, but he belongs to the race of the giants, and the impress of greatness is stamped upon his works. No student of Dryden can fail to mark the force and sweep of an intellect impatient of restraint. His 'long-resounding march' reminds us of a turbulent river that overflows its banks, and if order and perfection of art are sometimes wanting in his verse, there is never the lack of power. Unfortunately many of the best years of his life were devoted to a craft in which he was working against the grain. His dramas, with one or two noble exceptions, are comparative failures, and in them he too often

'Profaned the God-given strength, and marred the lofty line.'

In two prominent respects his influence on his successors is

of no slight significance. As a satirist Pope acknowledged the master he was unable to excel, and so did many of the eighteenth century versemen, who appear to have looked upon satire as the beginning and the end of poetry. Moreover Dryden may be regarded, without much exaggeration, as the father of modern prose. Nothing can be more lucid than his style, which is at once bright and strong, idiomatic and direct. He knows precisely what he has to say, and says it in the simplest words. It is the form and not the substance of Dryden's prose to which attention is drawn here. There is a splendour of imagery, a largeness of thought, and a grasp of language in the prose of Hooker, of Jeremy Taylor, and of Milton which is beyond the reach of Dryden, but he has the merit of using a simple form of English free from prolonged periods and classical constructions, and fitted therefore for common use. The wealthy baggage of the prose Elizabethans and their immediate successors was too cumbersome for ordinary travel; Dryden's riches are less massive, but they can be easily carried, and are always ready for service.

In these respects he is the literary herald of a century which, in the earlier half at least, is remarkable in the use it makes of our mother tongue for the exercise of common sense. The Revolution of 1688 produced a change in English politics scarcely more remarkable than the change that took place a little later in English literature and is to be seen in the poets and wits who are known familiarly as the Queen Anne men. It will be obvious to the

most superficial student that the gulf which separates the literary period, closing with the death of Milton in 1674, from the first half of the eighteenth century, is infinitely wider than that which divides us from the splendid band of poets and prose writers who made the first twenty years of the present century so famous. There is, for example, scarcely more than fifty years between the publication of Herrick's *Hesperides* and of Addison's *Campaign*, between the *Holy Living* of Taylor and the *Tatler* of Steele, and less than fifty years between *Samson Agonistes*, which Bishop Atterbury asked Pope to polish, and the poems of Prior. Yet in that short space not only is the form of verse changed but also the spirit.

Speaking broadly, and allowing for exceptions, the literary merits of the Queen Anne time are due to invention, fancy, and wit, to a genius for satire exhibited in verse and prose, to a regard for correctness of form and to the sensitive avoidance of extremes. The poets of the period are for the most part without enthusiasm, without passion, and without the 'fine madness' which, as Drayton says, should possess a poet's brain. Wit takes precedence of imagination, nature is concealed by artifice, and the delight afforded by these writers is not due to imaginative sensibility. Not even in the consummate genius of Pope is there aught of the magical charm which fascinates us in a Wordsworth and a Keats, in a Coleridge and a Shelley. The prose of the age, masterly though it be, stands also on a comparatively low level. There is much in it to attract, but little to inspire.

The difference between the Elizabethan and Jacobean authors, and the authors of the Queen Anne period cannot be accounted for by any single cause. The student will observe that while the inspiration is less, the technical skill is greater. There are passages in Addison which no seventeenth century author could have written; there are couplets in Pope beyond the reach of Cowley, and that even Dryden could not rival. In these respects the eighteenth century was indebted to the growing influence of French literature, to which the taste of Charles II. had in some degree contributed. One notable expression of this taste may be seen in the tragedies in rhyme that were for a time in vogue, of which the plots were borrowed from French romances. These colossal fictions, stupendous in length and heroic in style, delighted the young English ladies of the seventeenth century, and were not out of favour in the eighteenth, for Pope gave a copy of the *Grand Cyrus* to Martha Blount.

The return, as in Addison's *Cato*, to the classical unities, so faithfully preserved in the French drama, was another indication of an influence from which our literature has never been wholly free. That importations so alien to the spirit of English poetry should tend to the degeneration of the national drama was inevitable. For a time, however, the study of French models, both in the drama and in other departments of literature, may have been productive of benefit. Frenchmen knew before we did, how to say what they wanted to say in a lucid style. Dryden, who was open to every kind of influence, bad as well as good, caught a

little of their fine tact and consummate workmanship without lessening his own originality; so also did Pope, who, if he was considerably indebted to Boileau, infinitely excelled him. That, in M. Taine's judgment, would have been no great difficulty. 'In Boileau,' he writes, 'there are, as a rule, two kinds of verse, as was said by a man of wit (M. Guillaume Guizot); most of which seem to be those of a sharp school-boy in the third class; the rest those of a good school-boy in the upper division.' And Mr. Swinburne, who holds a similar opinion of the famous French critic's merit, observes, that while Pope is the finest, Boileau is 'the dullest craftsman of their age and school.'¹

With the author of the *Lutrin* Addison, unlike Pope, was personally acquainted. Boileau praised his Latin verses, and although his range was limited, like that of all critics lacking imagination, Addison, then a comparatively youthful scholar, was no doubt flattered by his compliments and learnt some lessons in his school. Prior, who acquired a mastery of the language, was also sensitive to French influence, and shows how it affected him by irony and satire. It would be difficult to estimate with any measure of accuracy the effect of French literature on the Queen Anne authors. There is no question that they were considerably attracted by it, but its sway was, I think,

¹ M. Sainte-Beuve, the greatest of French critics, frankly acknowledges his indebtedness to Boileau, whom he styles Louis the Fourteenth's 'Contrôleur Général du Parnasse.' 'S'il m'est permis de parler pour moi-même,' he writes, 'Boileau est un des hommes qui m'ont le plus occupé depuis que je fais de la critique, et avec qui j'ai le plus vécu en idée.' —*Causeries du Lundi*, tome sixième, p. 495.

never strong enough to produce mere imitative art. While the most illustrious of these men acknowledged some measure of fealty to our 'sweet enemy France,' they were not enslaved by her, and French literature was but one of several influences which affected the literary character of the age. If Englishmen owed a debt to France the obligation was reciprocal. Voltaire affords a prominent illustration of the power wielded by our literature. He imitated Addison, he imitated, or caught suggestions from Swift, he borrowed largely from Vanbrugh, and although, in his judgment of English authors, he made many critical blunders, they were due to a want of taste rather than to a want of knowledge.

A striking contrast will be seen between the position of literary men in the reign of Queen Anne and under her Hanoverian successors. Literature was not thriving in the healthiest of ways in the earlier period, but from the commercial point of view it was singularly prosperous. Through its means men like Addison and Prior rose to some of the highest offices in the service of their country. Tickell became Under-Secretary of State. Steele held three or four official posts, and if he did not prosper like some men of less mark, had no one but himself to blame. Rowe, the author of the *Fair Penitent*, was for three years of Anne's reign Under-Secretary, and John Hughes, the friend of Addison, who is poet enough to have had his story told by Johnson, had 'a situation of great profit' as Secretary to the Commissions of the Peace. Prizes of greater or less value fell to

some men whose abilities were not more than respectable, but under Walpole and the monarch whom he served literature was disregarded, and the Minister was content to make use of hiring writers for whatever dirty work he required; spending in this way, it is said, £50,000 in ten years.

It was far better in the long run for men of letters to be free from the servility of patronage, but there was a wearisome time, as Johnson and Goldsmith knew to their cost, during which authors lost their freedom in another way, and became the slaves of the booksellers. It is pleasant to observe that the last noteworthy act of patronage in the century was one that did honour to the patron without lessening the dignity and independence of the recipient. Literature owes much to the noblest of political philosophers for discovering and fostering the genius of one of the most original of English poets, and every reader of Crabbe will do honour to the generous friendship of Edmund Burke.

II

The lowest stage in our national history was reached in the Restoration period. The idealists, who had aimed at marks it was not given to man to reach, were superseded by men with no ideal, whether in politics or religion. The extreme rigidity in morals enjoined by State authority in Cromwell's days, when theological pedantry discovered sin in what had hitherto been regarded as

innocent, led, among the unsaintly mass of the people, to a hypocrisy even more corrupting than open vice, and the advent of the most publicly dissolute of English kings opened the floodgates of iniquity. The unbridled vice of the time is displayed in the Restoration dramatists, in the Grammont memoirs, in the diary of Pepys, and also in that of the admirable John Evelyn, 'faithful among the faithless.' Charles II. was considered good-natured because his manners, unlike those of his father, were sociable, and unrestrained by Court etiquette. Londoners liked a monarch who fed ducks in St. James's Park before breakfast; but an easy temper did not prevent the king from sanctioning the most unjust and cruel laws, and it allowed him to sell Dunkirk and basely to accept a pension from France. The corruption of the age pervaded politics as well as society, and the self-sacrificing spirit which is the salt of a nation's life seemed for the time extinct among public men.

When Dutch men-of-war appeared at the Nore the confusion was great, but there were few resources and few signs of energy in the men to whom the people looked for guidance. A man conversant with affairs expressed to Pepys his opinion that nothing could be done with 'a lazy Prince, no Council, no money, no reputation at home or abroad,' and Pepys also gives the damning statement which is in harmony with all we know of the king, that he 'took ten times more care and pains in making friends between my Lady Castlemaine and Mrs. Stewart, when they have fallen out, than ever he did to save his kingdom.'

There was nothing in the brief reign of James, a reign for ever made infamous by the atrocious cruelty of Jeffreys, that calls for comment here, but the Revolution, despite the undoubted advantages it brought with it, among which must be mentioned the abolition of the censorship of the press, brought also an element of discord and of political degradation. The change was a good one for the country, but it caused a large number of influential men to renounce on oath opinions which they secretly held, and it led, as every reader of history knows, to an unparalleled amount of double-dealing on the part of statesmen, which began with the accession of William and Mary and did not end until the last hopes of the Jacobites were defeated in 1746. The loss of principle among statesmen, and the bitterness of faction, which seemed to increase in proportion as the patriotic spirit declined, had a baleful influence on the latter days of the seventeenth century and on the entire period covered by the age of Pope. The low tone of the age is to be seen in the almost universal corruption which prevailed, in the scandalous tergiversation of Bolingbroke, and in the contempt for political principle openly avowed by Walpole, who, as Mr. Lecky observes, 'was altogether incapable of appreciating as an element of political calculation the force which moral sentiments exercise upon mankind.'²

The enthusiasm and strong passions of the first half of the seventeenth century, which had been crushed by the Restoration,

² Lecky's *England*, vol. i. p. 373.

were exchanged for a state of apathy that led to self-seeking in politics and to scepticism in religion. There was a strong profession of morality in words, but in conduct the most open immorality prevailed. Virtue was commended in the bulk of the churches, while Christianity, which gives a new life and aim to virtue, was practically ignored, and the principles of the Deists, whose opinions occupied much attention at the time, were scarcely more alien to the Christian revelation than the views often advocated in the national pulpits. The religion of Christ seems to have been regarded as little more than a useful kind of cement which held society together. The good sense advocated so constantly by Pope in poetry was also considered the principal requisite in the pulpit, and the careful avoidance of religious emotion in the earlier years of the century led to the fervid and too often ill-regulated enthusiasm that prevailed in the days of Whitefield and Wesley. At the same time there appears to have been no lack of religious controversy. 'The Church in danger' was a strong cry then, as it is still. The enormous excitement caused in 1709 by Sacheverell's sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral advocating passive obedience, denouncing toleration, and aspersing the Revolution settlement, forms a striking chapter in the reign of Queen Anne. Extraordinary interest was also felt in the Bangorian controversy raised by Bishop Hoadly, who, in a sermon preached before the king (1717), took a latitudinarian view of episcopal authority, and objected to the entire system of the High Church party.

Queen Caroline, whose keen intellect was allied to a coarseness which makes her a representative of the age, was considerably attracted by theological discussion. She obtained a bishopric for Berkeley, recommended Walpole to read Butler's *Analogy*, which was at one time her daily companion at the breakfast-table, and made the preferment of its author one of her last requests to the king. She liked well to reason with Dr. Samuel Clarke, 'of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,' and wished to make him Archbishop of Canterbury, but was told that he was not sufficiently orthodox. Theology was not disregarded under the first and second Georges; it was only religion that had fallen into disrepute. The law itself was calculated to excite contempt for the most solemn of religious services. 'I was early,' Swift writes to Stella, 'with the Secretary (Bolingbroke), but he was gone to his devotions and to receive the sacrament. Several rakes did the same. It was not for piety, but for employment, according to Act of Parliament.'

A glance at some additional features in the social condition of the age will enable us to understand better the character of its literature.

III

It is a platitude to say that authors are as much affected as other men by the atmosphere which they breathe. Now and then a consummate man of genius seems to stand so much above his

age as for all high purposes of art to be untouched by it. Like Milton as a poet, though not as a prose writer, his 'soul is like a star and dwells apart;' but in general, imaginative writers, are intensely affected by the society from which they draw many of their intellectual resources. In the so-called 'Augustan age'³ this influence would have been felt more strongly than in ours, since the range of men of letters was generally restricted to what was called the Town. They wrote for the critics in the coffee-houses, for the noblemen from whom they expected patronage, and for the political party they were pledged to support.

England during the first half of the eighteenth century was in many respects uncivilized. London was at that time separated from the country by roads that were often impassable and always dangerous. Travellers had to protect themselves as they best could from the attacks of highwaymen, who infested every thoroughfare leading from the metropolis, while the narrow area of the city was guarded by watchmen scarcely better fitted for its protection than Dogberry and Verges. Readers of the *Spectator* will remember how when Sir Roger de Coverley went to the play, his servants 'provided themselves with good oaken plants' to protect their master from the Mohocks, a set of dissolute young men, who, for sheer amusement, inflicted the most terrible punishments on their victims. Swift tells Stella how he came

³ The epithet is used in the Preface to the First Edition of Waller's *Posthumous Poems*, which Mr. Gosse believes was written by Atterbury, and he considers that this is the original occurrence of the phrase. —*From Shakespeare to Pope*, p. 248.

home early from his walk in the Park to avoid 'a race of rakes that play the devil about this town every night, and slit people's noses,' and he adds, as if party were at the root of every mischief in the country, that they were all Whigs. 'Who has not trembled at the Mohock's name?' is Gay's exclamation in his *Trivia*; and in that curious poem he also warns the citizens not to venture across Lincoln's Inn Fields in the evening. Colley Cibber's brazen-faced daughter, Mrs. Charke, in the *Narrative* of her life, describes also with sufficient precision the dangers of London after dark.

The infliction of personal injury was not confined to the desperadoes of the streets. Men of letters were in danger of chastisement from the poets or politicians whom they criticised or vilified. De Foe often mentions attempts upon his person. Pope, too, was threatened with a rod by Ambrose Philips, which was hung up for his chastisement in Button's Coffee-house; and at a later period, when his satires had stirred up a nest of hornets, the poet was in the habit of carrying pistols, and taking a large dog for his companion when walking out at Twickenham.

Weddings within the liberties of the Fleet by sham clergymen, or clergymen confined for debt, were the source of numberless evils. Every kind of deception was practised, and the victims once in the clutches of their reverend captors had to pay heavily for the illegal ceremony. Ladies were trepanned into matrimony, and Smollett in his *History* observes, that the Fleet parsons encouraged every kind of villainy. It is astonishing that so great an evil in the heart of London should have been allowed to exist

so long, and it was not until the Marriage Act of Lord Hardwicke in 1753, which required the publication of banns, that the Fleet marriages ceased. On the day before the Act came into operation three hundred marriages are said to have taken place.⁴

Marriages of a more lawful kind were generally conducted on business principles. Young women were expected to accept the husband selected for them by their parents or guardians, and the main object considered was to gain a good settlement. It was for this that Mary Granville, who is better known as Mrs. Delany, was sacrificed at seventeen to a gouty old man of sixty, and when he died she was expected to marry again with the same object in view. Mrs. Delany detested, with good cause, the commercial estimate of matrimony. Writing, in 1739, to Lady Throckmorton, she says, 'Miss Campbell is to be married to-morrow to my Lord Bruce. Her father can give her no fortune; she is very pretty, modest, well-behaved, and just eighteen, has two thousand a year jointure, and four hundred pin-money; *they say* he is cross, covetous, and threescore years old, and this unsuitable match is the *admiration of the old and the envy of the young!* For my part I *pity her*, for if she has any notion of social pleasures that arise from true esteem and sensible conversation, how miserable must she be.'⁵

Girls dowered with beauty or with fortune were not always

⁴ Messrs. Besant and Rice's novel, *The Chaplain of the Fleet*, gives a vivid picture of the life led in the Fleet, and also of the period.

⁵ *Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Delany*, vol. ii. p. 55.

suffered to marry in this humdrum fashion. Abduction was by no means an imaginary peril. Mrs. Delany tells the story of a lady in Ireland, from whom she received the relation, who was entrapped in her uncle's house, carried off by four men in masks, and treated in the most brutal manner. And in 1711 the Duke of Newcastle, having become acquainted with a design for carrying off his daughter by force, was compelled to ask for a guard of dragoons.

Duelling, against which Steele, De Foe, and Fielding inveighed with courage and good sense, was a danger to which every gentleman was liable who wore a sword. Bullies were ready to provoke a quarrel, the slightest cause of offence was magnified into an affair of honour, and the lives of several of the most distinguished men of the century were imperilled in this way. 'A gentleman,' Lord Chesterfield writes, 'is every man who, with a tolerable suit of clothes, a sword by his side, and a watch and snuffbox in his pockets, asserts himself to be a gentleman, swears with energy that he will be treated as such, and that he will cut the throat of any man who presumes to say the contrary.'

The foolish and evil custom died out slowly in this kingdom. Even a great moralist like Dr. Johnson had something to say in its defence, and Sir Walter Scott, who might well have laughed to scorn any imputation of cowardice, was prepared to accept a challenge in his old age for a statement he had made in his *Life of Napoleon*.

Ladies had a different but equally doubtful mode of asserting

their gentility. On one occasion the Duchess of Marlborough called on a lawyer without leaving her name. 'I could not make out who she was,' said the clerk afterwards, 'but she swore so dreadfully that she must be a lady of quality.'

There was a fashion which our wits followed at this time that was not of English growth, namely, the tone of gallantry in which they addressed ladies, no matter whether single or married. Their compliments seemed like downright love-making, and that frequently of a coarse kind, but such expressions meant nothing, and were understood to be a mere exercise of skill. Pope used them in writing to Judith Cowper, whom he professes to worship as much as any female saint in heaven; and in much ampler measure when addressing Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, but neither lady would have taken this amatory politeness seriously. Thus he writes after an evening spent in Lady Mary's society: 'Books have lost their effect upon me; and I was convinced since I saw you, that there is something more powerful than philosophy, and since I heard you, that there is one alive wiser than all the sages.' He tells her that he hates all other women for her sake; that none but her guardian angels can have her more constantly in mind; and that the sun has more reason to be proud of raising her spirits 'than of raising all the plants and ripening all the minerals in the earth.' He will fly to her in Italy at the least notice and 'from thence,' he adds, 'how far you might draw me and I might run after you, I no more know than the spouse in the song of Solomon.'

This was the foible of an age in which women were addressed as though they were totally devoid of understanding; and Pope, as might have been expected, carried the folly to excess.

Against another French custom Addison protests in the *Spectator*, namely, that of women of rank receiving gentlemen visitors in their bedrooms. He objects also to other foreign habits introduced by 'travelled ladies,' and fears that the peace, however much to be desired, may cause the importation of a number of French fopperies. But the proneness to follow the lead of France in matters of fashion is a folly not confined to the belles and beaux of the last century.

If a chivalric regard for women be an indication of high civilization, that sign is but faintly visible in the reigns of Anne and of the first Georges. Sir Richard Steele paid a noble tribute to Lady Elizabeth Hastings when he said that to know her was a liberal education, but his contemporaries usually treat women as pretty triflers, better fitted to amuse men than to elevate them. Young takes this view in his *Satires*:

'Ladies supreme among amusements reign;
By nature born to soothe and entertain.
Their prudence in a share of folly lies;
Why will they be so weak as to be wise?'

and Chesterfield, writing to his son, treats women with similar contempt... 'A man of sense,' he says, 'only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them as he does with a

sprightly, forward child; but he neither consults them about, nor trusts them with, serious matters, though he often makes them believe that he does both, which is the thing in the world that they are proud of... No flattery is either too high or too low for them. They will greedily swallow the highest and gratefully accept of the lowest.'

Nearly twenty years passed, and then Chesterfield wrote in the same contemptuous way of women in a letter to his godson, a 'dear little boy' of ten.

'In company every woman is every man's superior, and must be addressed with respect, nay, more, with flattery, and you need not fear making it too strong ... it will be greedily swallowed.'

Even Addison, while trying to instruct the 'Fair Sex' as he likes to call them, apparently regarded its members as an inferior order of beings. He delights to dwell upon their foibles, on their dress, and on the thousand little artifices practised by the flirt and the coquette. Here is the view the Queen Anne moralist takes of the 'female world' he was so eager to improve:

'I have often thought there has not been sufficient pains in finding out proper employments and diversions for the fair ones. Their amusements seem contrived for them, rather as they are women, than as they are reasonable creatures; and are more adapted to the sex than to the species. The toilet is their great scene of business, and the right adjustment of their hair the principal employment of their lives. The sorting of a suit of ribands is considered a very good morning's work; and if they

make an excursion to a mercer's or a toy-shop, so great a fatigue makes them unfit for anything else all the day after. Their more serious occupations are sewing and embroidery, and their greatest drudgery the preparations of jellies and sweetmeats. This I say is the state of ordinary women; though I know there are multitudes of those that move in an exalted sphere of knowledge and virtue, that join all the beauties of the mind to the ornaments of dress, and inspire a kind of awe and respect as well as of love into their male beholders.'

The qualification made at the end of this description does not greatly lessen the significance of the earlier portion, which is Addison's picture, as he is careful to tell us of 'ordinary women.' Much must be allowed for the exaggeration of a humourist, but the frivolity of women is a theme upon which Addison harps continually. Indeed, were it not for this weakness in the 'feminine world' half his vocation as a moralist in the *Spectator* would be gone, and if the general estimate in his Essays of the women with whom he was acquainted be to any extent a correct one, the derogatory language used by men of letters, and especially by Swift, Prior, Pope, and Chesterfield may be almost forgiven.

It was the aim of Addison and Steele to represent, and in some degree to caricature, the follies of fashionable life in the Town. That life had also its vices, which, if less unblushingly displayed than under the 'merry Monarch,' were visible enough. 'In the eighteenth century,' says Victor Hugo, in his epigrammatic way, 'the wife bolts out her husband. She shuts herself up in Eden with

Satan. Adam is left outside.'

Drunkenness was a habit familiar to the fine gentlemen of the town and to men occupying the highest position in the State. Harley went more than once into the queen's presence in a half-intoxicated condition; Carteret when Secretary of State, if Horace Walpole may be credited, was never sober; Bolingbroke, who practised every vice, is said to have been a 'four-bottle man;' and Swift found it perilous to dine with Ministers on account of the wine which circulated at their tables. 'Prince Eugene,' he writes, 'dines with the Secretary to-day with about seven or eight general officers or foreign Ministers. They will be all drunk I am sure.' Pope's frail body could not tolerate excess, and he is said to have hastened his end by good living. His friend Fenton 'died of a great chair and two bottles of port a day.' Parnell, who seems to have been in many respects a man of high character, is said to have shortened his life by intemperance; and Gay, who was cosseted like a favourite lapdog by the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, died from indolence and good living.

It may be questioned whether there is a single Wit of the age who did not love port too well, like Addison and Fenton, or suffer from 'carnivoracity' like Arbuthnot. Every section of English society was infected with the 'devil drunkenness,' and the passion for gin created by the encouragement of home distilleries produced a state of crime, misery, and disease in London and in the country which excited public attention. 'Small as is the place,' writes Mr. Lecky, 'which this fact occupies in English history,

it was probably, if we consider all the consequences that have flowed from it, the most momentous in that of the eighteenth century – incomparably more so than any event in the purely political or military annals of the country.⁶

The cruelty of the age is seen in a contempt for the feelings of others, in the brutal punishments inflicted, in the amusements then popular, and in a general contempt for human suffering. Public executions were so frequent that they were disregarded; and criminals of any note, like Dr. Dodd, were exhibited in their cells for the gaolers' benefit prior to execution; mad people in Bedlam, chained in their cells, also formed one of the sights of London. As late as 1735 men were pressed to death who refused to plead on a capital charge; and women were publicly flogged, and were also burnt at the stake by a law that was not repealed until 1794. Of the heads on Temple Bar, daily exposed to Johnson's eyes in his beloved Fleet Street, we are reminded by an apposite quotation of Goldsmith; and Samuel Rogers, the banker-poet, who died as recently as 1855, remembered having seen one there in his childhood. The public exhibition of offenders in the pillory was not calculated to refine the manners of the people. It afforded a cruel entertainment to the mob, who may be said to have baited these poor victims as they were accustomed to bait bulls and bears. Every kind of offensive missile was thrown at them, and sometimes the strokes proved deadly.

⁶ Lecky's *England*, vol. i. p. 479.

Men who could thus torture a human being were not likely to abstain from cruelty to the lower animals. The poets indeed protested then, as poets had done before, and always have done since, against the unmanly treatment of the dumb fellow-creatures committed to our care, but their voices were little heeded, and even the Prince of Wales visited Hockley-in-the-Hole, in disguise, to witness the torturing of bulls. 'The gladiatorian and other sanguinary sports,' says the author of the *Characteristics*, 'which we allow our people, discover sufficiently our national taste. And the baitings and slaughters of so many sorts of creatures, tame as well as wild, for diversion merely, may witness the extraordinary inclination we have for amphitheatrical spectacles.'⁷

The majesty of the law was maintained by disembowelling traitors, by cutting off the ears, or branding the cheeks of political offenders, and by the penalties inflicted on Roman Catholics, and on Protestant dissenters. Men who deemed themselves honourable gained power through bribery and intrigue. It was through a king's mistress and a heavy bribe that Bolingbroke was enabled to return from exile; Chesterfield intrigued against Newcastle with the Duchess of Yarmouth; and clergymen eager for promotion had no scruple in paying court to women who had lost their virtue.

Never, unless perhaps during the Civil War, was the spirit of party more rampant in the country. Patriotism was a virtue

⁷ Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, vol. i. p. 270.

more talked about than felt, and in the cause of faction private characters were assailed and libels circulated through the press. Addison, who did more than any other writer to humanize his age, saw the evil of the time and struck a blow at it with his inimitable humour. The *Spectator* discovers, on his journey to Sir Roger de Coverley's house, that the knight's Toryism grew with the miles that separated him from London:

'In all our journey from London to his house we did not so much as bait at a Whig inn; or if by chance the coachman stopped at a wrong place, one of Sir Roger's servants would ride up to his master full speed, and whisper to him that the master of the house was against such an one in the last election. This often betrayed us into hard beds and bad cheer; for we were not so inquisitive about the inn as the innkeeper; and provided our landlord's principles were sound did not take any notice of the staleness of his provisions. This I found still the more inconvenient, because the better the host was, the worse generally were his accommodations; the fellow knowing very well that those who were his friends would take up with coarse diet and hard lodging. For these reasons, all the while I was upon the road, I dreaded entering into an house of anyone that Sir Roger had applauded for an honest man.'⁸

Against the party zeal of female politicians Addison indulges frequently in humorous sallies. He assures them that it gives an ill-natured cast to the eye, and flushes the cheeks worse

⁸ *Spectator*, No. 126.

than brandy. Party rage, he says, is a male vice, and is altogether repugnant 'to the softness, the modesty, and those other endearing qualities which are natural to the fair sex.'

'When I have seen a pretty mouth uttering calumnies and invectives, what would I not have given to have stopt it? how have I been troubled to see some of the finest features in the world grow pale and tremble with party rage. Camilla is one of the greatest beauties in the British nation, and yet values herself more upon being the virago of one party than upon being the toast of both. The dear creature about a week ago encountered the fierce and beautiful Penthesilea across a tea-table; but in the height of her anger, as her hand chanced to shake with the earnestness of the dispute, she scalded her fingers, and spilt a dish of tea upon her petticoat. Had not this accident broke off the debate, nobody knows where it would have ended.'

The coffee-houses in which men aired their wit and discussed the news of the day were wholly dominated by party. 'A Whig,' says De Foe, 'will no more go to the Cocoa Tree or Ozinda's than a Tory will be seen at the coffee-house of St. James's.' Swift declared that the Whig and Tory animosity infected even the dogs and cats. It was inevitable that it should also infect literature. Books were seldom judged on their merits, the praise or blame being generally awarded according to the political principles of their authors. An impartial literary journal did not exist in the days when Addison 'gave his little senate laws' at Button's, and perhaps it does not exist now, but if critical injustice be done in

our day it is rarely owing to political causes.

One of the most prominent vices of the time was gambling, which was largely encouraged by the public lotteries, and practised by all classes of the people. This evil was exhibited on a national scale by the establishment of the South Sea Company, which exploded in 1720, after creating a madness for speculation never known before or since. Even men who like Sir Robert Walpole kept their heads, and saw that the bubble would soon burst, invested in stock. Pope had his share in the speculation, and might, had he 'realized' in time, have been the 'lord of thousands;' in the end, however, he was a gainer, though not to a large extent. His friend Gay was less fortunate. He won £20,000, kept the stock too long and was reduced to beggary. The South Sea Bubble and the Mississippi scheme of Law which burst in the same year and ruined tens of thousands of French families, afford illustrations on a gigantic scale of the prevailing passion for speculation and for gambling.

'The Duke of Devonshire lost an estate at a game of basset. The fine intellect of Chesterfield was thoroughly enslaved by the vice. At Bath, which was then the centre of English fashion, it reigned supreme; and the physicians even recommended it to their patients as a form of distraction. In the green-rooms of the theatres, as Mrs. Bellamy assures us, thousands were often lost and won in a single night. Among fashionable ladies the passion was quite as strong as among men, and the professor of whist and quadrille became a regular attendant at their levees.

Miss Pelham, the daughter of the prime minister, was one of the most notorious gamblers of her time, and Lady Cowper speaks in her *Diary* of sittings at Court, of which the lowest stake was 200 guineas. The public lotteries contributed very powerfully to diffuse the taste for gambling among all classes.⁹

One of the most powerful exponents of the dark side of the century is Hogarth, who makes some of its worst features live before our eyes. So also do the novels of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett. Differing as their works do in character, they have the common merit of presenting in indelible lines a picture of the time in its social aspects. It may have been, as Stuart Mill asserts, an age of strong men, but it was an age of coarse vices, an age wanting in the refinements and graces of life; an age of cruel punishments, cruel sports, and of a political corruption extending through all the departments of the State.

But it would be a narrow view of the age to dwell wholly on its gloomier features, which are always the easiest to detect. If the period under consideration had prominent vices, it had also distinguished merits. Under Queen Anne and her immediate successors, home-keeping Englishmen had more space to breathe in than they have now, and trade was not demoralized by excessive competition. No attempt was made to separate class from class, and population was not large enough to make the battle of life almost hopeless in the lowest section of the community. If there was less refinement than among ourselves,

⁹ Lecky's *England*, vol. i. p. 522.

there was far less of nervous susceptibility, and the country was free from the half-educated class of men and women who know enough to make them dissatisfied, without attaining to the larger knowledge which yields wisdom and content. To say that the age was better than our own would be to deny a thousand signs of material and intellectual progress, but it had fewer dangers to contend with, and if there was far less of wealth in the country the people were probably more satisfied with their lot.¹⁰

To glance at the century as a whole does not fall within my province, but I may be permitted to observe that in the course of it science and invention made rapid strides; that under the inspiring sway of Handel the power of music was felt as it was never felt before; that in the latter half of the period the Novel, destined to be one of the noblest fruits of our imaginative literature, attained a robust life in the hands of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett; and that, with Reynolds and Gainsborough, with Romney and Wilson, a glorious school of landscape and portrait painters arose, which is still the pride of England. It will be remembered, too, that many of the great charitable institutions which make our own age illustrious, had their birth in the last. The military genius of England was displayed in Marlborough and in Clive, her mercy in John Howard, her spirit of enterprise in Cook, her self-sacrifice in Wesley and Whitefield, her statesmanship in Walpole, in

¹⁰ According to Hallam the thirty years which followed the Treaty of Utrecht 'was the most prosperous season that England had ever experienced.' —*Const. Hist.* ii. 464.

Chatham, and in William Pitt. In oratory as everyone knows, the eighteenth century was surpassingly great, and never before or since has the country produced a political philosopher of the calibre of Burke. What England reaped in literature during the period of which Pope has been selected as the most striking figure, it will be my endeavour to show in the course of these pages.

PART I.

THE POETS

CHAPTER I.

ALEXANDER POPE

It is not unreasonable to call the period we are considering 'the Age of Pope.' He is the representative poet of his century. Its literary merits and defects are alike conspicuous in his verse, and he stands immeasurably above the numerous versifiers who may be said to belong to his school. Savage Landor has observed that there is no such thing as a school of poetry, and this is true in the sense that the essence of this divine art cannot be transmitted, but the form of the art may be, and Pope's style of workmanship made it readily imitable by accomplished craftsmen. Although he affected to call poetry an idle trade he devoted his whole life to its pursuit, and there are few instances in literature in which genius and unwearied labour have been so successfully united. It is to Pope's credit, that, with everything against him in the race of life, he attained the goal for which he started in his youth. The means he employed to reach it were frequently perverse and discreditable, but the courage with which he overcame the obstacles in his path commands our admiration.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744).

Alexander Pope was born in London on May 21st, 1688. He was the only son of his father, a merchant or tradesman, and a Roman Catholic at a time when the members of that church were proscribed by law. The boy was a cripple from his birth, and suffered from great bodily weakness both in youth and manhood. Looking back upon his life in after years he called it a 'long disease.' The elder Pope seems to have retired from business soon after his son's birth, and at Binfield, nine miles from Windsor, twenty-seven years of the poet's life were spent. As a 'papist' Pope was excluded from the Universities and from every public career, but even under happier circumstances his health would have condemned him to a secluded life. He gained some instruction from the family priest, and also went for a short time to school, but for the most part he was self-educated, and studied so severely that at seventeen his life was probably saved by the sound advice of Dr. Radcliffe to read less and to ride on horseback every day. The rhyming faculty was very early developed, and to use his own phrase he 'lisp'd in numbers.' As a boy he felt the magic of Spenser, whose enchanting sweetness and boundless wealth of imagination have been now for three hundred years a joy to every lover of poetry. Something, too, he learned from Waller and from Sandys, both of whom, but especially the former, had been of service in giving smoothness to the iambic distich, in which all of Pope's best poems are written. Dryden, however, whom when a little

boy he saw at Will's coffee-house – '*Virgilium tantum vidi*' records the memorable day – was the poet whose influence he felt most powerfully. Like Gray several years later, he declared that he learnt versification wholly from his works. From 'knowing Walsh,' the best critic in the nation in Dryden's opinion, the youthful Pope received much friendly counsel; and he had another wise friend in Sir William Trumbull, formerly Secretary of State, who recognized his genius, and gave him as warm a friendship as an old man can offer to a young one. The dissolute Restoration dramatist, Wycherley, was also his temporary companion. The old man, if Pope's story be true, asked him to correct his poems, which are indeed beyond correction, as the youthful critic appears to have hinted, and the two parted company.

The *Pastorals*, written, according to Pope's assertion, at the age of sixteen, were published in 1709, and won an amount of praise incomprehensible in the present day. Mr. Leslie Stephen has happily appraised their value in calling them 'mere school-boy exercises.' Not thus, however, were they regarded by the poet, or by the critics of his age, yet neither he nor they could have divined the rapid progress of his fame, and that in about six years' time he would be regarded as the greatest of living poets. The *Essay on Criticism*, written, it appears, in 1709, was published two years later, and received the highest honour a poem could then have. It was praised by Addison in the *Spectator* as 'a very fine poem,' and 'a masterpiece in its kind.' The 'kind,' suggested

by the *Ars Poetica* of Horace, and the *Art Poétique* of Boileau – translated with Dryden's help by Sir William Soame – suited the current taste for criticism and argument in rhyme, which had led Roscommon to write an *Essay on Translated Verse*, and Sheffield an *Essay on Poetry*. The *Essay on Criticism* is a marvellous production for a young man who had scarcely passed his maturity when it was published. To have written lines and couplets that live still in the language and are on everyone's lips is an achievement of which any poet might be proud, and there are at least twenty such lines or couplets in the poem.

In 1713 *Windsor Forest* appeared. Through the most susceptible years of life the poet had lived in the country, but Nature and Pope were not destined to become friends; he looked at her 'through the spectacles of books' and his description of natural objects is invariably of the conventional type. Although never a resident in London he was unable in the exercise of his art to breathe any atmosphere save that of the town, and might have said, in the words of Lessing to his friend Kleist, 'When you go to the country I go to the coffee-house.'¹¹

The use, or as it would be more correct to say the abuse, of classical mythology in the description of rural scenes had the sanction of great names, and Pope was not likely to reject what Spenser and Milton had sanctioned. Gods and goddesses

¹¹ Some qualification may be made to these statements. Pope took pleasure in landscape gardening on the English plan, as opposed to the formality of the French and Dutch systems, and the design of the Prince of Wales's garden is said to have been copied from the poet's at Twickenham.

therefore play a conspicuous part in his description of the Forest. The following lines afford a fair illustration of the style throughout, and the sole merit of the poem is the smoothness of versification in which Pope excelled.

'Not proud Olympus yields a nobler sight,
Though gods assembled grace his towering height,
Than what more humble mountains offer here,
When in their blessings all those gods appear.
See Pan with flocks, with fruits Pomona crowned,
Here blushing Flora paints th' enamelled ground,
Here Ceres' gifts in waving prospect stand,
And nodding tempt the joyful reaper's hand;
Rich Industry sits smiling on the plains,
And peace and plenty tell a Stuart reigns.

Pope, who was never known to laugh, was a great wit, but his sense of humour was small, and the descent from these deities to Queen Anne savours not a little of bathos.

In 1712 Pope had published *The Rape of the Lock*, which Addison justly praised as 'a delicious little thing.' At the same time he advised the poet not to attempt improving it, which he proposed to do, and Pope most unreasonably attributed this advice to jealousy. In 1714 the delightful poem appeared in its present form with the machinery of sylphs and gnomes adopted from the mysteries of the Rosicrucians. Pope styles it an heroic-comical poem, and judged in the light of a burlesque it is

conceived and executed with an art that is beyond praise. Lord Petre, a Roman Catholic peer, had cut off a lock of Miss Arabella Fermor's hair, much to the indignation of her family and possibly of the young lady also. Pope wrote the poem to remove the discord caused by the fatal shears, but its publication, and two or three offensive allusions it contained, only served to add to Miss Fermor's annoyance. 'The celebrated lady herself,' the poet wrote, 'is offended, and which is stranger, not at herself but me. Is not this enough to make a writer never be tender of another's character or fame?' But Pope, whose praise of women is too often a libel upon them, was not as tender as he ought to have been of the lady's reputation.

The offence felt by the heroine of the poem is now unheeded; the dainty art exhibited is a permanent delight, and our language can boast no more perfect specimen of the poetical burlesque than the *Rape of the Lock*. The machinery of the sylphs is managed with perfect skill, and nothing can be more admirable than the charge delivered by Ariel to the sylphs to guard Belinda from an apprehended but unknown danger. The concluding lines shall be quoted:

'Whatever spirit, careless of his charge,
His post neglects, or leaves the fair at large,
Shall feel sharp vengeance soon o'ertake his sins,
Be stopped in vials, or transfixed with pins;
Or plunged in lakes of bitter washes lie,
Or wedged, whole ages, in a bodkin's eye;

Gums and pomatums shall his flight restrain,
While clogged he beats his silken wings in vain;
Or alum styptics, with contracting power,
Shrink his thin essence like a rivelled flower;
Or, as Ixion fixed, the wretch shall feel
The giddy motion of the whirling mill,
In fumes of burning chocolate shall glow,
And tremble at the sea that froths below!"

Another striking portion of the poem is the description of the Spanish game of Ombre, imitated from Vida's *Scacchia Ludus*. 'Vida's poem,' says Mr. Elwin, 'is a triumph of ingenuity, when the intricacy of chess is considered, and the difficulty of expressing the moves in a dead language. Yet the original is eclipsed by Pope's more consummate copy.'¹²

Many famous passages illustrative of Pope's art might be extracted from this poem, but it will suffice to give the portrait of Belinda:

'On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore,
Which Jews might kiss and infidels adore;
Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
Quick as her eyes and as unfixed as those;
Favours to none, to all she smiles extends,
Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
Bright as the sun her eyes the gazers strike,
And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.

¹² Elwin and Courthope's *Pope*, vol. ii. p. 160.

Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:
If to her share some female errors fall,
Look on her face and you'll forget them all.'

The *Temple of Fame*, a liberal paraphrase of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, followed in 1715, and despite the praise of Steele, who declared that it had a thousand beauties, and of Dr. Johnson, who observes that every part is splendid, must be pronounced one of Pope's least attractive pieces. Two poems of the emotional and sentimental class, *Eloisa to Abelard* and the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* (1717), are more worthy of attention. Nowhere, probably, in the language are finer specimens to be met with of rhetorical pathos, but poets like Burns, Cowper, Wordsworth, and Tennyson can touch the heart more deeply by a phrase or couplet than Pope is able to do by his elaborate representations of passion. The reader is not likely to be affected by the following response of Eloisa to an invitation from the spirit world:

'I come, I come! prepare your roseate bowers,
Celestial palms and ever-blooming flowers.
Thither, where sinners may have rest, I go,
Where flames refined in breasts seraphic glow;
Thou, Abelard! the last sad office pay,
And smooth my passage to the realms of day;
See my lips tremble and my eye-balls roll,

Suck my last breath and catch my flying soul!
Ah no – in sacred vestments may'st thou stand,
The hallowed taper trembling in thy hand,
Present the Cross before my lifted eye,
Teach me at once and learn of me to die.'

The music or the fervour of the poem delighted Porson, famous for his Greek and his potations, and whether drunk or sober he would recite, or rather sing it, from the beginning to the end. The felicity of the versification is incontestable, but at the same time artifice is more visible than nature throughout the Epistle, and this is true also of *The Elegy*, a composition in which Pope's method of treating mournful topics is excellently displayed. The opening lines are suggested by Ben Jonson's *Elegy on the Marchioness of Winchester*, a lady whose death was also lamented by Milton. These we shall not quote, but take in preference a passage which is perhaps as graceful an expression of poetical rhetoric as can be found in Pope's verse.

'By foreign hands thy dying eyes were closed,
By foreign hands thy decent limbs composed,
By foreign hands thy humble grave adorned,
By strangers honoured, and by strangers mourned!
What though no friends in sable weeds appear,
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year,
And bear about the mockery of woe,
To midnight dances and the public show?
What though no weeping Loves thy ashes grace,

Nor polished marble emulate thy face?
What though no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallowed dirge be muttered o'er thy tomb?
Yet shall thy grave with rising flowers be drest,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast;
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While angels with their silver wings o'ershade
The ground, now sacred by thy reliques made.'

For some years Pope had been brooding over and slowly labouring at a task which was destined to add greatly to his fame and also to his fortune.

In 1708 his early friend, Sir William Trumbull, had advised him to translate the *Iliad*, and five years later the poet, following the custom of the age, invited subscriptions to the work, which was to appear in six volumes at the price of six guineas. About this time Swift, who by the aid of his powerful pen was assisting Harley and St. John to rule the country, made Pope's acquaintance, and ultimately became perhaps the most faithful of his friends. Swift, who was able to help everybody but himself, zealously promoted the poet's scheme, and was heard to say at the coffee-houses that 'the best poet in England Mr. Pope a Papist' had begun a translation of Homer which he should not print till he had a thousand guineas for him.

He was not satisfied with this service, but introduced the poet to St. John, Atterbury, and Harley. The first volume of Pope's

Homer appeared in 1715, and in the same year Addison's friend Tickell published his version of the first book of the *Iliad*. Pope affected to believe that this was done at Addison's instigation.

Already, as we have said, there had been a misunderstanding between the two famous wits, and Pope, whose irritable temperament led him into many quarrels and created a host of enemies, ceased from this time to regard Addison as a friend. Probably neither of them can be exempted from blame, and we can well believe that Addison, whose supremacy had formerly been uncontested, could not without some jealousy 'bear a brother near the throne,' but the chief interest of the estrangement to the literary student is the famous satire written at a later date, in which Addison appears under the character of Atticus.¹³ It is necessary to add here that the whole story of the quarrel comes to us from Pope, who is never to be trusted, either in prose or verse, when he wishes to excuse himself at the expense of a rival.

Pope had no cause for discontent at his position; not even the strife of parties stood in the way of his *Homer*, which was praised alike by Whig and Tory, and brought the translator a fortune. It has been calculated that the entire version of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the payments for which covered eleven years, yielded Pope a clear profit of about £9,000, and it is said to have made at the same time the fortune of his publisher. Pope, I believe, was the first poet who, without the aid of patronage or of the stage,

¹³ See the Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.

was able to live in comfort from the sale of his works.

He knew how to value money, but fame was dearer to him than wealth, and of both he had now enough to satisfy his ambition. Posterity has not endorsed the general verdict of his contemporaries on his famous translation. He had to encounter indeed some severe comments, and Richard Bentley, the greatest classical scholar then living, must have vexed the sensitive poet when he told him that his version was a pretty poem but he must not call it Homer. By this criticism, however, as Matthew Arnold has observed, the work is judged in spite of all its power and attractiveness. Pope wants Homer's simplicity and directness, and his artifices of style are utterly alien to the Homeric spirit. Dr. Johnson quotes the judgment of critics who say that Pope's *Homer* 'exhibits no resemblance of the original and characteristic manner of the Father of Poetry, as it wants his awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected majesty,' and observes that this cannot be totally denied. He argues, however, that even in Virgil's time the demand for elegance had been so much increased that mere nature could be endured no longer, that every age improves in elegance, that if some Ovidian graces are, alas! not to be found in the English *Iliad* 'to have added can be no great crime if nothing be taken away.' Johnson was not aware that to add 'poetical elegances' to the words and thoughts of a great poet is to destroy much of the beauty of his verse and many of its most striking characteristics. As well might he say that the beauty of a lovely woman can be enhanced by a profusion of trinkets,

or that a Greek statue would be more worthy of admiration if it were elegantly dressed. Dr. Johnson says, with perfect truth, that Pope wrote for his own age, and it may be added that he exhibits extraordinary art in ministering to the taste of the age; yet it is hardly too much to affirm that in the exercise of his craft as a translator he is continually false to nature and therefore false to Homer.

On the other hand his *Iliad* if read as a story runs so smoothly, that the reader, and especially the young reader, is carried through the narrative without any sense of fatigue. It is not a little praise to say that it is a poem which every school-boy will read with pleasure, and in which every critical reader who is content to surrender his judgment for awhile, will find pleasure also. Mr. Courthope in his elaborate and masterly *Life of Pope*, which gives the coping stone to an exhaustive edition of the poet's works, praises a fine passage from the *Iliad*, which in his judgment attains perhaps the highest level of which the heroic couplet is capable, and 'I do not believe,' he adds, 'that any Englishman of taste and imagination can read the lines without feeling that if Pope had produced nothing but his translation of Homer, he would be entitled to the praise of a great original poet.'

Pope's editor could not perhaps have selected a better illustration of his best manner than this speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus, which is parodied in the *Rape of the Lock*. The concluding lines shall be quoted.

'Could all our care elude the gloomy grave,
Which claims no less the fearful than the brave,
For lust of fame I should not vainly dare
In fighting fields, nor urge the soul to war,
But since, alas! ignoble age must come,
Disease, and death's inexorable doom;
The life which others pay let us bestow,
And give to fame what we to nature owe;
Brave though we fall, and honoured if we live,
Or let us glory gain, or glory give.'

We may add that neither its false glitter nor Pope's inability – shared in great measure with every translator – to catch the spirit of the original, can conceal the sustained power of this brilliant work. Its merit is the more wonderful since the poet's knowledge of Greek was extremely meagre, and he is said to have been constantly indebted to earlier translations. Gibbon said that his *Homer* had every merit except that of faithfulness to the original; and Pope, could he have heard it, might well have been satisfied with the verdict of Gray, a great scholar as well as a great poet, that no other version would ever equal his.

All that has been hitherto said with regard to Pope and Homer relates to his version of the *Iliad*. On that he expended his best powers, and on that it is evident he bestowed infinite pains. The *Odyssey*, one of the most beautiful stories in the world, appears to have been taken up with a weary pen, and in putting it into English he sought the assistance of Broome and Fenton, two

minor poets and Cambridge scholars. They translated twelve books out of the twenty-four, and so skilfully did they catch Pope's style that it is almost impossible to discern any difference between his work and theirs. The literary partnership led to one of Pope's discreditable manœuvres, in which, strange to say, he was assisted by Broome, whom he induced to set his name to a falsehood. Pope as we have said, translated twelve books, while eight were allotted to Broome and four to Fenton. Yet he led Broome, unknown to his colleague, to ascribe only three books to himself and two to Fenton, and at the same time the poet, who confessed that he could 'equivocate pretty genteely,' stated the amount he had paid for Broome's eight books as if it had been paid for three. The story is disgraceful both to Pope and Broome, and why the latter should have practised such a deception is unaccountable. He was a beneficed clergyman and a man of wealth, so that he could not have lied for money even if Pope had been willing to bribe him. Fenton was indignant, as he well might be, but he was too lazy or too good-natured to expose the fraud. Broome had his deserts later on, but Pope, who ridiculed him in the *Dunciad*, and in his *Treatise on the Bathos*, was the last man in the world entitled to render them.

The partnership in poetry which produced the *Odyssey* was not a great literary success, and most readers will prefer the version of Cowper, whose blank verse, though out of harmony with the rapid movement of the *Iliad* is not unfitted for the quieter beauties of the *Odyssey*.

In 1721, prior to the publication of his version, the poet had agreed to edit an edition of Shakespeare, a task as difficult as any which a man of letters can undertake. Pope was not qualified to achieve it. He was comparatively ignorant of Elizabethan literature, the dry labours of an editor were not to his taste, and he lacked true sympathy with the genius of the poet. Failure was therefore inevitable, and Theobald, who has some solid merits as a commentator, found it easy to discern and to expose the errors of Pope. For doing so he was afterwards 'hitched' into the *Dunciad*, and made in the first instance its hero. The "Shakespeare" was published in 1725 in six volumes quarto. 'Its chief claim,' Mr. Courthope writes, 'to interest at the present day, is that it forms the immediate starting-point for the long succession of Pope's satires... The vexation caused to the poet by the undoubted justice of many of Theobald's strictures procured for the latter the unwelcome honour of being recognized as the King of the Dunces, and coupled with Bentley's disparaging mention of the Translation of the *Iliad* provoked the many contemptuous allusions to verbal criticism in Pope's later satires.'

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A striking peculiarity of Pope's art may be mentioned here. He was able only to play on one instrument, the heroic couplet. When he attempted any other form of verse the result, if not total failure, was mediocrity. It was a daring act of Pope to suggest by his *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*, a comparison with the *Alexander's*

¹⁴ Elwin and Courthope's *Pope*, vol. v., p. 195.

Feast of Dryden. The performance is perfunctory rather than spontaneous, and the few lyrical efforts he attempted in addition, show no ear for music. The voice of song with which even the minor poets of the Elizabethan age were gifted was silent in England, though not in Scotland, during the first half of the eighteenth century, or if a faint note is occasionally heard, as in the lyrics of Gay, it is without the grace and joyous freedom of the earlier singers. Not that the lyrical form was wanting; many minor versifiers, like Hughes, Sheffield, Granville, and Somerville, wrote what they called songs, but unfortunately without an ear for singing.

In this short summary and criticism of a poet's literary life it would be out of place to insert many biographical details, were it not that, in the case of Pope, the student who knows little or nothing of the man will fail to understand his poetry. A distinguished critic has said that the more we know of Pope's age the better shall we understand Pope. With equal truth it may be said that a familiarity with the poet's personal character is essential to an adequate appreciation of his genius. His friendships, his enmities, his mode of life at Twickenham, the entangled tale of his correspondence, his intrigues in the pursuit of fame, his constitutional infirmities, the personal character of his satires, these are a few of the prominent topics with which a student of the poet must make himself conversant. It may be well, therefore, to give the history in brief outline, and we have now reached the crisis in his fortunes which will conveniently

enable us to do so.

In 1716 Pope's family had removed from Binfield to Chiswick. A year later he lost his father, to whose memory he has left a filial tribute, and shortly afterwards he bought the small estate of five acres at Twickenham with which his name is so intimately associated. Before reaching the age of thirty Pope was regarded as the first of living poets. His income more than sufficed for all his wants. At Twickenham the great in intellect, and the great by birth, met around his table; he was welcomed by the highest society in the land, and although proud of his intimacy with the nobility, 'unplaced, unpensioned,' he was 'no man's heir or slave,' and jealously preserved his independence. 'Pope,' says Johnson, 'never set genius to sale, he never flattered those whom he did not love, or praised those whom he did not esteem,' and he was, we may add, in this respect a striking contrast to Dryden, who lavished his flatteries wholesale.

With a mother to whom he was tenderly attached, with troops of friends, with an undisputed supremacy in the world of letters, and with a vocation that was the joy of his heart, – if possessions like these can confer happiness, Pope should have been a happy man.

But his 'crazy carcass,' as the painter Jervas called it, was united to the most suspicious and irritable of temperaments, and the fine wine of his poetry was rarely free from bitterness in the cup. Pope could be a warm friend, but was not always a faithful one, and even women whose friendship he had enjoyed suffered

from the venom of his satire. He was not a man to rise above his age, and it would be charitable to ascribe a portion of his grossness to it. Voltaire is said by his loose talk to have driven Pope's good old mother from the table at Twickenham; Walpole's language not only in his home at Houghton, but at Court, was insufferably coarse; and Pope wrote to ladies in language that must have disgusted modest women even in his free-speaking day. His foul lines on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, to whom he had formerly written in a most ridiculous strain of gallantry, and to whom he is said to have made love,¹⁵ cannot easily be characterized in moderate language. Lady Mary had little delicacy herself, but the poet, who thought himself a gentleman, had no excuse for abusing her. Excuses indeed are not easily to be offered for Pope's moral defalcations. His life was a series of petty intrigues, trickeries, and deceptions. He could not, it has been said, – the conceit is borrowed from Young's *Satires*– 'take his tea without a stratagem,' and knew how to utter the loftiest sentiments while acting the most contemptible of parts.

The long and intricate deceptions which he practised to secure the publication of his letters, while so manipulating them as to enhance his credit, were suspected to some extent in his own age, and have been painfully laid bare in ours. It is an amazing story, which may be read at large in Mr. Dilke's *Papers of a*

¹⁵ 'Lady Mary,' says Byron, 'was greatly to blame in that quarrel for having encouraged Pope... She should have remembered her own line,'"He comes too near who comes to be denied.'"

Critic, or in the elaborate narrative of Mr. Elwin in the first volume of his edition of *Pope*. It will be there seen how the poet compiled fictitious letters, suppressed passages, altered dates, manufactured letters out of other letters, and secretly enabled the infamous bookseller Curll to publish his correspondence surreptitiously in order that he might have the excuse for printing it himself in a more carefully prepared form. The worst feature of the miserable story is the poet's conduct with regard to Swift, his oldest and most faithful friend. On this subject the writer may be allowed to quote what he has said elsewhere.

'Years before, Swift, who cared little for literary reputation, and never resorted to any artifice to promote it, had suspected Pope of a desire to make literary capital out of their correspondence, and the poet had excused himself according to his wonted fashion. After the publication by Curll, he begged Swift to return him his letters lest they should fall into the bookseller's hands. The Dean replied, no doubt to Pope's infinite chagrin, that they were safe in his keeping, as he had given strict orders in his will that his executors should burn every letter he might leave behind him. Afterwards he promised that Pope should eventually have them but declined giving them up during his lifetime. Hereupon Pope changed his tactics and begged that he might have the letters to print. The publication by Curll of two letters (probably another *ruse* of Pope's) formed an additional ground for urging his request. All his efforts were unavailing until he obtained the assistance of Lord Orrery, to whom Swift was

at length induced to deliver up the letters. There was a hiatus in the correspondence and Pope took advantage of this and of a blunder made by Swift, whose memory at the time was not to be trusted, to hint, what he dared not directly assert, that the bulk of the collection remained with the Dean, and that Swift's own letters had been returned to him. We have now irresistible proof that the Dublin edition of the letters was taken from an impression sent from England and sent by Pope. Nor was this all. The poet acted with still greater meanness, for he had the audacity to deplore the sad vanity of Swift in permitting the publication of his correspondence, and to declare that "no decay of body is half so miserable."¹⁶

That he had many fine qualities in spite of the littlenesses which mar his character one would be loath to doubt. Among his nobler traits was an ardent passion for literature, a courage which enabled him to face innumerable obstacles – 'Pope,' says Mr. Swinburne, 'was as bold as a lion' – and a constant devotion to his parents, especially to his mother, who lived to a great age. There are no sincerer words in his letters than those which relate to Mrs. Pope. 'It is my mother only,' he once wrote, regretting his inability to leave home, 'that robs me of half the pleasure of my life, and that gives me the greatest at the same time,' and the lines expressing his affection for her are familiar to most readers. Truly does Johnson say that 'life has among its soothing and quiet comforts few things better to give than such a son.'

¹⁶ *Studies in English Literature*, p. 47. —Stanford.

Among his lady friends the dearest was Martha Blount, the younger of two beautiful sisters, of whom Gay sang as 'the fair-haired Martha and Teresa brown.' They came of an old Roman Catholic family residing at Mapledurham, and were little more than girls when Pope first knew them. With the elder sister he quarrelled, but Martha was faithful to him for life, and when he was dying it is said that her coming in 'gave a new turn of spirits or a temporary strength to him.' Swift, as we have said, was one of the warmest of Pope's friends, and his letters to the poet are by far the most attractive portion of the published correspondence. He visited him at Twickenham more than once, and on one occasion spent some months under his roof. Bolingbroke, his 'guide, philosopher, and friend,' who for a time lived near to him at Dawley, was a frequent guest, so also, in the days of their intimacy, was Lady Mary, who had a house at Twickenham. Thomson the poet, too, lived not far off, and was visited by his brother bard, whom Thomson's barber describes as 'a strange, ill-formed, little figure of a man,' but he adds, 'I have heard him and Quin and Patterson¹⁷ talk so together that I could have listened to them for ever.' Arbuthnot, one of the finest wits and best men of his time, who, as Swift said, could do everything but walk, was also a faithful friend of Pope; so was Gay, and so was Bishop Atterbury, who, as the poet said, first taught him to think "as becomes a reasonable creature."

¹⁷ Quin (1693-1766) was the famous actor, and Patterson was Thomson's deputy in the surveyor-generalship of the Leeward Isles, and ultimately his successor.

James Craggs, who had been formerly Secretary of State, and was on the warmest terms of intimacy with the poet, resided for some time near his friend in order to enjoy the pleasure of his society. When in office he proposed to pay him a pension of £300 a year out of the secret service money, but Pope declined the offer. Statesmen and men of active pursuits cultivated the society of the poetical recluse, and Pope, whose compliments are monuments more enduring than marble, has recorded their visits to Twickenham:

'There, my retreat the best companions grace,
Chiefs out of war, and statesmen out of place,
There St. John mingles with my friendly bowl,
The feast of reason and the flow of soul,
And he whose lightning pierced the Iberian lines¹⁸
Now forms my quincunx and now ranks my vines.'

Among Pope's associates was the 'blameless Bethel,'

' – who always speaks his thought,
And always thinks the very thing he ought,'

and Berkeley who had 'every virtue under heaven,' and Lord Bathurst who was unspoiled by wealth and joined

'With splendour, charity; with plenty, health;'

and 'humble Allen' who

¹⁸ The Earl of Peterborough, the meteor-like brilliancy of whose actions forms one of the most striking chapters in the history of his time.

'Did good by stealth and blushed to find it fame;'

and many another friend who lives in his verse and is secure of the immortality a poet can confer.

The five volumes which contain the letters between Pope and his friends exhibit an interesting picture of the times and of the writers. The poet's own letters, as may be supposed from the thought he bestowed on them, are full of artifice, and composed with the most elaborate care. Every sentence is elaborately turned, and the ease and naturalness which give a charm to the letters of Cowper and of Southey are not to be found in Pope. His epistles are weighted with compliments and with professions of the most exalted morality. 'He laboured them,' says Horace Walpole, 'as much as the *Essay on Man*, and as they were written to everybody they do not look as if they had been written to anybody.' Pope said once, what he did not mean, that he could not write agreeable letters. This was true; his letters are, as Charles Fox said, 'very bad,' but some of Pope's friends write admirably, and if there is much that can be skipped without loss in the correspondence, there is much which no student of the period can afford to neglect. 'There has accumulated,' says Mark Pattison, 'round Pope's poems a mass of biographical anecdote such as surrounds the writings of no other English author,' and not a little knowledge of this kind is to be gleaned from his correspondence.

In the years spent at Twickenham Pope produced his most characteristic work. It is as a satirist that he, with one exception, excels all English poets, and Pope's careful workmanship often

makes his satirical touches more attractive than Dryden's.

'To attack vices in the abstract,' he said to Arbuthnot, 'without touching persons, may be safe fighting indeed, but it is fighting with shadows;' and Pope, under the plea of a detestation of vice, generally betrayed his contempt or hatred of the men whom he assailed. No doubt the critics and Grub Street hacks of the day gave him provocation. Pope, however, was frequently the first to take the field, and so eager was he to meet his foes that it would seem as if he enjoyed the conflict. Yet there were times when he felt acutely the assaults made upon him. 'These things are my diversion,' he once said, with a ghastly smile, and it was observed that he writhed in agony like a man undergoing an operation. The attacks made with these paper bullets, not only on the side of Grub Street but on his own, show very vividly the coarseness of London society. Courtesy was disregarded by men who claimed to be wits and scholars. Pope held, perhaps, a higher place in literature in his own day than Lord Tennyson has held in ours, for the best beloved of Laureates had noble rivals and friends who came near to him in fame, while Pope, until the publication of Thomson's *Seasons*, in 1730, stood alone in poetical reputation. Yet he was reviled in the language of Billingsgate, and had no scruple in using that language himself. Late in life Pope collected the libels made upon him and bound them in four volumes, but he omitted to mention the provocation which gave rise to many of them. Eusden, Colley Cibber, Dennis, Theobald, Blackmore, Smyth, and Lord Hervey are among the prominent criminals

placed in Pope's pillory, and the student of the age may find an idle entertainment in tracking the poet's thorny course, while he gives an unenviable notoriety to names of which the larger number were 'born to be forgot.'

In 1725 Swift had written to Pope advising him not to immortalize the names of bad poets by putting them in his verse, and Pope replied to this advice by saying, 'I am much the happier for finding (a better thing than our wits) our judgments jump in the notion that all scribblers should be passed by in silence.' How entirely his inclination got the better of his judgment was seen three years later in the *Dunciad*. The first three books of this famous satire were published in 1728. It is generally regarded as Pope's masterpiece, but the accuracy of such an estimate is doubtful. So heavily weighted is the poem with notes, prefaces, and introductions that the text appears to be smothered by them. It was Pope's aim to mystify his readers, and in this he has succeeded, for the mystifications of the poem even confound the commentators. The personalities of the satire excited a keen interest, and much amusement to readers who were not included in Pope's black list of dunces. At the same time it roused a number of authors to fury, as it well might. His satire is often unjust, and he includes among the dunces men wholly undeserving of the name, who had had the misfortune to offend him. To place a great scholar like Bentley, an eloquent and earnest preacher like Whitefield, and a man of genius like Defoe among the dunces was to stultify himself, and if Pope in

his spite against Theobald found some justification for giving the commentator pre-eminence for dulness in three books of the *Dunciad*, his anger got the better of his wit when in Book IV. he dethroned Theobald to exalt Colley Cibber. For Cibber, with a thousand faults, so far from being dull had a buoyancy of heart and a sprightliness of intellect wholly out of harmony with the character he is made to assume.

That he might have some excuse for his dashing assaults in the *Dunciad*, Pope had published in the third volume of the *Miscellanies*, of which he and Swift, Arbuthnot and Gay were the joint authors, an *Essay on Bathos* in which several writers of the day were sneered at. The assault provoked the counter-attack for which Pope was looking, and he then produced the satire which was already prepared for the press. In its publication the poet, as usual, made use of trickery and deception. At first he issued an imperfect edition with initial letters instead of names, but on seeing his way to act more openly, the poem appeared in a large edition with names and notes.

'In order to lessen the danger of prosecution for libel,' Mr. Courthope writes, 'he prevailed on three peers, with whom he was on the most intimate terms, the good-natured Lord Bathurst, the easy-going Earl of Oxford, and the magnificent Earl of Burlington, to act as his nominal publishers; and it was through them that copies of the enlarged edition were at first distributed, the booksellers not being allowed to sell any in their shops. The King and Queen were each presented with a copy by the hands

of Sir R. Walpole. In this manner, as the report quickly spread that the poem was the property of rich and powerful noblemen, there was a natural disinclination on the part of the dunces to take legal proceedings, and the prestige of the *Dunciad* being thus fairly established, the booksellers were allowed to proceed with the sale in regular course.¹⁹

The *Dunciad* owes its merit to the literary felicities with which its pages abound. The theme is a mean one. Pope, from his social eminence at Twickenham, looks with scorn on the authors who write for bread, and with malignity on the authors whom he regarded as his enemies. There is, for the most part, little elevation in his method of treatment, and we can almost fancy that we see a cruel joy in the poet's face as he impales the victims of his wrath. Some portions of the *Dunciad* are tainted with the imagery which, to quote the strong phrase of Mr. Churton Collins, often makes Swift as offensive as a polecat,²⁰ and there is no part of it which can be read with unmixed pleasure, if we except the noble lines which conclude the satire. Those lines may be almost said to redeem the faults of the poem, and they prove incontestably, if such proof be needed, Pope's claim to a place among the poets.

'In vain, in vain, – the all-composing Hour

¹⁹ *Life of Pope*, p. 216.

²⁰ 'Pope and Swift,' says Dr. Johnson, 'had an unnatural delight in ideas physically impure, such as every other tongue utters with unwillingness, and of which every ear shrinks from the mention.'

Resistless falls; the Muse obeys the Power.
She comes! she comes! the sable Throne behold,
Of Night primæval and of Chaos old!
Before her Fancy's gilded clouds decay,
And all its varying rainbows die away.
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
The meteor drops, and in a flash expires,
As one by one at dread Medea's strain,
The sickening stars fade off the etherial plain;
As Argus' eyes by Hermes' wand opprest,
Closed one by one to everlasting rest;
Thus at her felt approach and secret might,
Art after Art goes out, and all is Night.
See skulking Truth to her old cavern fled,
Mountains of Casuistry heaped o'er her head!
Philosophy that leaned on Heaven before,
Shrinks to her second cause, and is no more;
Physic of Metaphysic begs defence,
And Metaphysic calls for aid on Sense!
See Mystery to Mathematics fly!
In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.
Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
And unawares Morality expires.
Nor public Flame, nor private, dares to shine;
Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All.'

The publication of the *Dunciad* showed Pope where his main strength as a poet lay. That the writers he had attacked, in many instances without provocation, should resent the ungrateful notoriety conferred upon them was inevitable. In self-defence, and to add to the provocation already given, he started a paper called the *Grub Street Journal*, which existed for eight years – Pope, who had no scruple in 'hazarding a lie,' denying all the time that he had any connection with it.

His next work of significance, *The Essay on Man*, a professedly philosophical poem by an author who knew little of philosophy, was published in four epistles, in 1733-4. Bolingbroke's brilliant, versatile, and shallow intellect had strongly impressed Swift, and had also fascinated Pope. It has been commonly supposed that the *Essay* owes its existence to his suggestion and guidance. The poet believed in his philosophy, and had the loftiest estimate of his genius. In the last and perhaps finest passage of the poem he calls Bolingbroke the 'master of the poet and the song,' and draws a picture of the ambitious statesman as beautiful as it is false. In Mark Pattison's Introduction to *The Essay on Man*,²¹ which every student of Pope will read, he objects to the notion that the poet took the scheme of his work from Bolingbroke, observing that both derived their views from a common source.

'Everywhere, in the pulpit, in the coffee-houses, in every

²¹ Clarendon Press, Oxford.

pamphlet, argument on the origin of evil, on the goodness of God, and the constitution of the world was rife. Into the prevailing topic of polite conversation Bolingbroke, who returned from exile in 1723, was drawn by the bent of his native genius. Pope followed the example and impulse of his friend's more powerful mind. Thus much there was of special suggestion. But the arguments or topics of the poem are to be traced to books in much vogue at the time; to Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* (1711), King on the *Origin of Evil* (1702), and particularly to Leibnitz, *Essais de Théodicée* (1710).'

In admitting that Pope followed the impulse of a more powerful mind, Mr. Pattison asserts as much perhaps as can be known with certainty as to Bolingbroke's influence, but it is reasonable to believe that the close intercourse of the two men did immensely sway the more impressionable, and, so far as philosophy is concerned, the more ignorant of the two. Mr. Pattison also overlooks the fact that Pope confessed to Warburton that he had never read a line of Leibnitz in his life. That the poet acknowledges his large debt to Bolingbroke, and that Bolingbroke confesses it was due, is all that can be declared with certainty. That which makes the *Essay* worthy the reading is the fruit, not of the argument but of the poetry, and for that Pope trusted to his own genius.

His attempt to 'vindicate the ways of God to man' is confused and contradictory, and no modern reader, perplexed with the mystery of existence, is likely to gain aid from Pope. Nominally

a Roman Catholic, and in reality a deist, apart from poetry he does not seem to have had strong convictions on any subject, and was content to be swayed by the opinions current in society. In undertaking to write an ethical work like the *Essay* his ambition was greater than his strength, yet if Pope's philosophy does not 'find' us, to use Coleridge's phrase, it did appeal to a large number of minds in his own day, and had not lost its popularity at a later period. The poem has been frequently translated into French, into Italian, and into German; it was pronounced by Voltaire to be the most useful and sublime didactic poem ever written in any language; it was admired by Kant and quoted in his lectures; and it received high praise from the Scotch philosopher, Dugald Stewart. The charm of poetical expression is lost or nearly lost in translations, and while the sense may be retained the aroma of the verse is gone. The popularity of the *Essay* abroad is therefore not easily to be accounted for, unless we accept the theory that the shallow creed on which it is based suited an age less earnest than our own.²²

Pope has no strong convictions in this poem, but he has many moods. On one page he is a pantheist, on another he says what he probably did not mean, that God inspires men to do evil, and on a third that 'all our knowledge is ourselves to know.' Nowhere in the argument does Pope seem to have a firm standing, and De Quincey is not far wrong in saying that it is 'the realization of

²² No doubt many distinguished foreigners who appreciated the beauty of the poem had read it in the original.

anarchy.'

Read the poem for its poetical merits and you will forget its defects. Pope was a superficial teacher, but direct teaching is not the end of poetry. *The Essay on Man* is not a poem which can be read and re-read with ever-growing delight, but there are passages in it of as fine an order as any that he has composed on more familiar subjects. Pope was, as Sir William Hamilton said, a curious reader, and the ideas versified in the poem may be traced to a variety of sources. Students who wish to follow this track will find all the help they need in Mr. Pattison's instructive notes, and in the comments attached to the poem in Elwin and Courthope's edition. In his Introduction Mr. Pattison observes that 'the subject of the *Essay on Man* is not, considered in itself, one unfit for poetry. Had Pope had a genius for philosophy there was no reason why he should not have selected a philosophical subject. Didactic poetry is a mistake if not a contradiction in terms. But poetry is not necessarily didactic because its subject is philosophical.'

It is always difficult to define the themes suitable for poetry. Many theories have been formed as to the scope of the art, and poets have been amply instructed by critics as to what they ought to do, and what they should avoid doing. The theories may appear sound, the arguments convincing, until a great poet arises and knocks them on the head. In a sense every poet of the highest order is also a philosopher and a prophet who sees into 'the life of things.' Whether a philosophical subject can be fitly represented

in the imaginative light of poetry is a matter for discussion rather than for decision. In the case of Pope, however, it will be evident to all studious readers that he was incapable of the continuous thought needed for the argument of the *Essay*.

'Anything like sustained reasoning,' says Mr. Leslie Stephen,²³ was beyond his reach. Pope felt and thought by shocks and electric flashes... The defect was aggravated or caused by the physical infirmities which put sustained intellectual labour out of the question.'

Crousaz, a Swiss pastor and professor, who appears to have competed with Berkeley for a prize and won it, attacked Pope's *Essay* for its want of orthodoxy, and his work was translated into English. The poet became alarmed, but had the good fortune to find a champion in Warburton, who for the rest of his life did Pope much service, not always of a reputable kind. We shall have more to say of him later on, and it will suffice to observe here that Warburton, who through Pope's friendship obtained a good wife, a fortune, and a bishopric, was not a man of high character. His sole object was to advance in life, and he succeeded.

The *Moral Essays* as they are called, and the *Imitations from Horace* are the final and crowning efforts of the poet's genius. They contain his finest workmanship as a satirist, and will be read, I think, with more pleasure than the *Dunciad*, despite Mr. Ruskin's judgment of that poem as 'the most absolutely

²³ Stephen's *Pope*, p. 163.

chiselled and monumental work "exacted" in our country.'²⁴ It is impossible to concur in this estimate. The imagery of the poem serves only to disgust, and the spiteful attacks made in it on forgotten men want the largeness of purpose that lifts satire above what is of temporary interest, making it a lesson for all time.

Pope's venom, and the personal animosities which give the sharpest sting, and in some instances a zest, to his verse, are also amply displayed in the *Moral Essays* and in the *Imitations*, but the scope is wider in these poems, and the subjects allow of more versatile treatment. They should be read with the help of notes, a help generally needed for satirical poetry, but it should be remembered always that editorial judgments are to be received with discretion and not servilely followed. There is perhaps no danger more carefully to be shunned by the student of literature than the habit of resting satisfied with opinions at second-hand. Better a wrong estimate formed after due reading and thought, than a right estimate gleaned from critics, without any thought at all.

According to Warburton, who is as tricky as Pope himself when it suits his purpose to be so, the *Essay on Man* was intended to form four books, in which, as part of the general design, the *Moral Essays* would have been included, as well as Book IV. of the *Dunciad*, but to have welded these *Essays*, which were published separately, into one continuous poem would neither have suited Pope's genius nor the character of the poems; and

²⁴ *Lectures on Art*, p. 70, Oxford.

how the last book of the *Dunciad* could have been included in such an *olla podrida* it is difficult to conceive. The poet was fond of projects, and this, happily for his readers, remained one. The dates of the four *Essays*, which are really Epistles, and appeared in folio pamphlets, run over several years, but were afterwards re-arranged by Pope. That to Lord Burlington, *Of the Use of Riches* (Epistle IV.), was published in 1731, under the title, *Of False Taste*; that to Lord Bathurst, *Of the Use of Riches* (Epistle III), in 1732; the epistle to Lord Cobham (Epistle I.), *Of the Knowledge and Characters of Men*, bears the date of 1733; and that To a Lady (Epistle II.), *Of the Characters of Women*, in 1735. Pope wrote other Epistles, some at a much earlier period of his career, which follow the *Moral Essays* but are not connected with them. Of these one is addressed to Addison, two are to Martha Blount, for whom the second of the *Moral Essays* was written; one to the painter Jervas, originally printed in 1717; while another, a few lines only in length, was addressed to Craggs when Secretary of State. Space will not allow of examining each of the *Essays* minutely, but there are portions of them which call for comment.

The first *Moral Essay*, *Of the Knowledge and Characters of Men*, in which Pope enlarges on his theory of a ruling passion, affords a significant example of his incapacity for sustaining an argument, since Warburton, to use his own words, entirely changed and reversed the order and disposition of the several parts to make the composition more coherent. That he has succeeded is doubtful, that he should have ventured upon such a

task shows where Pope's weakness lay as a philosophical poet. It is the least interesting of the *Essays*, but is not without lines that none but Pope could have written. *The Characters of Women*, the subject of the second *Essay*, was not one which the satirist could treat with justice. He saw little in the sex save their foibles, and the lines with which it opens show the spirit that animates the poem:

'Nothing so true as what you once let fall;
"Most women have no character at all,"
Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguished by black, brown, or fair.'

The satire contains one of Pope's offensive allusions to Lady Mary, and the celebrated portrait drawn from two notable women, the Duchess of Buckingham and Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, from the latter of whom the poet, at one time, despite his unquestionable love of independence, received £1,000. The story, like many another in the career of Pope, is wrapped in mystery.

Pope took great pains with the *Epistle Of the Use of Riches*. It was altered from the original conception by the advice of Warburton, who cared more for the argument of a poem than for its poetry. The thought and purpose of the *Essay* are defective, notwithstanding Warburton's effort to clear them, but these defects are of slight moment when compared with the brilliant passages with which the poem is studded. Among them is the

famous description of the Duke of Buckingham's death-bed which should be compared with Dryden's equally famous lines on the same nobleman's character.

'In the worst inn's worst room, with mat half-hung,
The floors of plaster, and the walls of dung,
On once a flock-heel, but repaired with straw,
With tape-tied curtains never meant to draw,
The George and Garter dangling from that bed
Where tawdry yellow strove with dirty red,
Great Villiers lies – alas! how changed from him,
That life of pleasure, and that soul of whim!
Gallant and gay, in Cliveden's proud alcove,
The bower of wanton Shrewsbury and love;
Or just as gay at council, in a ring
Of mimic statesmen and their merry King.
No wit to flatter left of all his store!
No fool to laugh at, which he valued more.
There, victor of his health, of fortune, friends,
And fame, this lord of useless thousands ends.'

There is also a covert attack in this Epistle upon the moneyed interest represented by Walpole, and on the political corruption which he sanctioned and promoted. Yet Pope knew how to praise the great Whig statesman for his social qualities:

'Seen him I have, but in his happier hour
Of social pleasure, ill exchanged for power;

Seen him uncumbered with the venal tribe,
Smile without art and win without a bribe.'

Epistle IV. pursues the same subject as the third, and deals mainly with false taste in the expenditure of wealth, and with the necessity of following 'sense, of every art the soul.' In this poem there is the far-famed description of Timon's Villa, and by Timon Pope was accused of representing the Duke of Chandos, whose estate at Canons he is supposed to have held in scorn after having been, as he acknowledges, 'distinguished' by its master. That would not have deterred Pope from producing a brilliant picture, and his equivocations did but serve to increase suspicion. Probably he found it convenient to use some features of what he may have seen at Canons while composing a general sketch with no special application. The *Moral Essays*, it may be added, are not especially moral, but they are full of fine things, and form a portion of Pope's verse second only to the *Imitations from Horace*.

These *Imitations* are introduced by the Prologue addressed to Dr. Arbuthnot, a poem of more than common brilliancy, and also more than commonly venomous. Nowhere, perhaps, is there in Pope's works so powerful and bitter an attack as the twenty-five lines in the Prologue devoted to the vivisection of Lord Hervey, which we are forced to admire while feeling their malevolence; nowhere is there a more consummate piece of satire than the twenty-two lines that contain the poet's masterpiece, the

character of Atticus; and nowhere, I may add, are there lines more personally interesting. Portions of the poem were written long before the date of publication, and this is Pope's excuse, a rather lame one perhaps, for printing the character of Atticus and the lines on his mother after the death of Addison and of Mrs. Pope.

'When I had a fever one winter in town,' Pope said to his friend Spence, 'that confined me to my room for some days, Lord Bolingbroke came to see me, happened to take up a Horace that lay on the table, and in turning it over dipt on the first satire of the second book. He observed how well that would hit my case if I were to imitate it in English. After he was gone I read it over, translated it in a morning or two, and sent it to press in a week or fortnight after. And this was the occasion of my imitating some other of the satires and epistles afterwards.'

Bolingbroke did his friend a better service in giving this advice than he had done with regard to the *Essay on Man*; and the six *Imitations*, with the Prologue and Epilogue, which are among the latest fruits of Pope's genius as a satirist, are also the ripest.

Warburton, writing of the *Imitations of Horace*, says: 'Whoever expects a paraphrase of Horace or a faithful copy of his genius or his manner of writing in these *Imitations* will be much disappointed. Our author uses the Roman poet for little more than his canvas; and if the old design or colouring chance to suit his purpose, it is well; if not, he employs his own without scruple or ceremony.'

This is true. Pope makes use of Horace when it suits his convenience, but never follows him servilely, and quits him altogether when his design carries him another way.

It was inevitable that he should exercise this freedom, since, as Johnson has pointed out, there will always be an irreconcilable dissimilitude between Roman images and English manners. Moreover, the aim of the two poets was different, Pope's main object being to express personal enmities and to give an exalted notion of his own virtue.

In the opening lines of his First Satire Pope follows Horace pretty closely. Both poets complain that some persons think them too severe, and others too complaisant; both take the advice of a lawyer, Horace of C. Trebatius Testa, who gives him the pithiest replies; and Pope of Fortescue. Both complain that they cannot sleep, the prescription of a wife and cowslip wine being given by the English adviser, while Testa advises Horace to swim thrice across the Tiber and moisten his lips with wine. Throughout the rest of the satire Pope takes only casual glances at the Roman original, and if in the Second Satire the English poet follows Horace in the first few verses in recommending frugality, and in the advice to keep the middle state, and neither to lean on this side or on that, the resemblance between the poets is seldom striking, and the spirit which animates them is different, – Horace being classical, and therefore open to the apprehension of all educated readers, while Pope is in a sense provincial, and, as I have already said with reference to the *Dunciad*, cannot be fully enjoyed or

even understood without some knowledge of the time and of the men whom he lashes in his satire. The Sixth Epistle of the First Book of Horace, which Pope attempts to imitate, is, as Mr. Courthope observes, 'incapable of imitation. Its humour, no less than its philosophy, belongs entirely to the Pagan World.' In a general sense it is also true that Horace's style, whether of language or of thought, will not bear transplanting. Indeed, whatever is most characteristic and most exquisite in a poet's work is precisely the portion which cannot be clothed in a foreign dress.

'Life,' said Pope, 'when the first heats are over is all down hill,' and with him the downward progress began at a time when most men are still standing on the summit. Never was there a more fiery spirit in so weak a body. He suffered frequently from headaches, which he relieved by inhaling the steam of coffee. Unfortunately he pampered his appetite and paid a heavy penalty for doing so. Every change of weather affected him; and at the time when most people indulge in company, he tells Swift that he hid himself in bed. Although he sneers at Lord Hervey for taking asses' milk he tried that remedy himself, and he frequently needed medical aid. In his early days he was strong enough to ride on horseback, but in later life his weakness was so great that he was in constant need of help. M. Taine, whose criticism of Pope needs to be read with caution, indulges in an exaggerated description of his bodily condition, observing that when arrived at maturity he appeared no longer capable of existing, and styling

him 'a nervous abortion.' The poet's condition was sad enough as told by Dr. Johnson, without amplifying it as M. Taine has done. 'One side was contracted. His legs were so slender that he enlarged their bulk with three pairs of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean.' After this forlorn description of the poet's state it is a little grotesque to read that his dress of ceremony was black, with a tie-wig and a little sword. A distorted body often holds a generous and untainted soul. This was not the case with Pope, and the sympathy he stood in so large a need of himself, was seldom given to others.

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