

## THE GENIUS OF POPE.

It can be easily shown that although the Restoration inaugurated in England an age of prose, yet the position of poetry as the chief and natural medium for pure literature was still accepted almost without question. For that reason Pope was taken in his own day to be the undisputed head and front of English letters. His contemporaries probably felt, as we feel, that Swift's was immeasurably the greater genius; but they held, and held rightly, that Pope in his work was the true representative of what has come to be called the Augustan literature. The two works in prose dating from that period which have sunk deepest into the mind of the race—*Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*—were written by men who stood outside the main literary movement; for Defoe never at any time attained a place in the great literary coterie of which Swift, while he kept in touch with England, was a brilliant member; and Swift wrote *Gulliver* when lonely and rebellious in Ireland, thinking his own thoughts. Now the distinctive characteristic of the Augustan literature is that we have no longer in a book the mind of an individual, but the mind of a Society finding expression through the mouth of one of its members. It was a natural result of that



intellectual ascendancy of France, which at this time made itself so strongly felt; for the Frenchman is always social rather than individualist; and, at least in criticism, men had come to take their beliefs from France.

The cardinal point in these beliefs was that literature admitted of rules, which had been first formulated by Aristotle, after him by Horace, and finally by Boileau; and consequently, that the first duty of a writer was to be correct; to conform in poetry not only to the laws of grammar and of rhyme, but to certain other canons of taste hardly less definite. It is true that Milton, in no way touched by French ideas, attached importance to the Aristotelian criticism, and that in his *Samson* he worked on a Greek model. But then Milton knew Greek a great deal better than Pope knew any language but his own. In nothing is Pope more typical of his school than in constant lip-homage to the ancients whom he had never read. He translated Homer, it is true, but he founded his rendering mainly on other versions; he knew Virgil somewhat, but was evidently deaf and blind to the note of lyricism which pervades Virgil as it pervades the work of all great poets. What he did know was Horace; but all that he saw in Horace was the admirable expression of a sententious philosophy, the work of a "great wit." The word "wit" recurs perpetually in Pope's writings; it represents the goal of his ambitions; and he has defined it in a characteristic couplet:

True wit is nature to advantage dressed:  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.



But the function of a poet is not to separate and crystallise into compactness the common thought; it is rather to link it to infinities of association, to send it out trailing clouds of glory; to show the "primrose by the river brim" or the "flower in the crannied wall" as a single expression of forces making for beauty that sweep through the cosmos. Shakespeare abounds in sententious utterance; for instance:

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

But here, apart from the large harmony of sound, apart from the intrinsic beauty of the words, is their dramatic fitness in Prospero's mouth, when his fairy masque fades suddenly, and he evokes the solemn images of all that we take to be least dreamlike, ending with "the great globe itself, yea all that it inherit." We cannot separate his aphorism and feel that we can see all around it, as we can with any characteristic utterance of Pope's, such as:

What can ennoble sots or fools or cowards?  
Alas! not all the blood of all the Howards.

If one can assert anything positively in criticism, it is that Pope's ideal of poetry is unpoetic. But it does not follow that Pope was not a poet. That he was a great writer no one will deny. The disservice which Pope did to English literature—and it has been much exaggerated—is that he used his authority to formulate as possessing universal validity the rules which it suited his own genius to observe. His first



study was to be "correct;" to make the expression of his thought sharply defined in form, and completely intelligible; to exhaust in each phrase the content of his own meaning. Now, this is much easier to do if the thought is limited in volume, and Pope was never troubled with more thought than he could express. The words of the great poets came to us charged with suggestion; they convey more than they utter. Pope also can suggest, can hint by innuendo; but the innuendo is definite as the voice of scandal—as here :

Not louder shrieks to threat'ning heaven are cast  
When husbands or when lapdogs breathe their last.

But he is never, at his best, able to do more than give perfect expression to a brilliant observation, so concise and logical, that it would seem to admit perfectly of translation into any language, losing nothing but the clench of rhyme; though here and there some individual colour given to a word might baffle rendering :

Narcissa's nature, *tolerably* mild,  
To make a wash, would hardly stew a child.

Yet it sometimes happens that the master of prose can beat him on his own ground. "Who are the critics?" says Mr. Phoebus in Lord Beaconsfield's *Lothair*. "The critics are those who have failed in literature or in art." That is happier than Pope's lines :

Some are bewildered in the maze of schools,  
And some made coxcombs nature meant but fools.  
In search of wit these lose their common sense,  
And then turn critics in their own defence.



It is seldom, however, that Pope can be excelled in condensation and the happy turn of a phrase. His workmanship everywhere approaches perfection. The inherent weakness of his poetry is, as Mark Pattison has pointed out, that the workmanship often outvalues the matter; that our admiration is compelled for the expression of a mean sentiment, a half-truth, or an ignorant fallacy. To his mastery of style Pope united no store of knowledge, no wide and lofty range of feeling. When his matter is intrinsically valuable apart from expression it consists in reflections upon the human life with which he was in contact socially. He is the poet of Society, and his observation, if acute, is often petty and malicious to a degree that spoils our pleasure in his triumphant mastery of language.

Yet if ever a man had a right to clement consideration, Pope was he. Externally, circumstances were kind to him. Born in 1688, the son of rich and kindly parents, he was stinted for nothing; his amazing precocity was in all ways encouraged. The *Pastorals*, which he published at the age of twenty-one (though much of them was written in boyhood), earned applause, and two years later his *Essay on Criticism* fixed his fame, and brought him into close personal relations with the leaders of taste. But to offset all this was the abiding misery of his physical disabilities. Dwarfish and deformed, he went through life in "one long disease." The stigma which deformity sets on a face in hard drawn lines of pain is often an evidence of tense intellectual power and resolute will; but it



often also indicates dangerous temper. Pope had much of the dwarf's traditional malice and long-minded resentment. His life was a long triumph, unaffected by political changes (for he stood outside of parties); but it was marred by the temper which made him see hostility where none existed, and poisoned every scratch of criticism; so that the most famous things in his work are bound up with the memory of literary feuds. Yet he inspired deep friendship. No letters in the world show a warmer feeling of one man for another than those which Swift wrote to him and about him.

Pope was best known in his own day by his translation of Homer—the most profitable book, financially, to its author that had ever been published in England. His most pretentious work, the *Essay on Man*, abounds in much-quoted distichs and is singularly barren of real thought. Those poems of Pope which the average reader to-day is likely to enjoy are first, the *Essay on Criticism*; secondly, the *Rape of the Lock*; and thirdly, the *Moral Essays*. To these may be added some superb passages in *The Dunciad*.

The *Essay on Criticism* will always please by sheer cleverness, and nothing could exceed it as a formal expiration of that age's æsthetic tenets. But its arrangement into headings and sub-headings like the model prize essay is too obvious, and even its cleverness is the precocious talent of immaturity.

Pope was never young. Yet something of the glow of youth is to be found in his exquisite *Rape of the Lock*



(written at the age of twenty-four) which can be best compared to one of those *Fetes Galantes* in which Watteau depicts a group of fine ladies and gentlemen taking their pleasure, and depicts it with a rich mastery of style which gives a dignity to the slight and artificial subject. The comparison, however, is inadequate, for throughout Pope's description, even while it conveys the very flutter of a fan, there runs an undertone of trenchant raillery. Here is Belinda at her first arising on the fatal day :

And now, unveiled, the toilet stands displayed,  
Each silver vase in mystic order laid.  
First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,  
With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.  
A heavenly image in the glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears ;  
The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,  
Trembling begins the sacred rites of pride.  
Unnumbered treasures ope at once, and here  
The various offerings of the world appear ;  
From each she nicely culls with curious toil,  
And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil.  
This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,  
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.

The tortoise here and elephant unite,  
Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white,  
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,  
Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux.  
Now awful beauty puts on all its arms ;  
The fair each moment rises in her charms,



Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,  
And calls forth all the wonders of her face ;  
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,  
And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.  
The busy sylphs surround their darling care,  
These set the head, and those divide the hair,  
Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown ;  
And Betty's praised for labours not her own.

For ten years (1715-1725) after the *Rape of the Lock*, Pope was busy with his great work of translation ; and during all these years he accumulated grudges against men who had vexed him by criticism a successful rivalry. Once his hands were free, he turned to a sweeping revenge, and, after three years polishing published *The Dunciad*, perhaps the greatest monument that a man ever erected to his petty personal resentment. It is characteristic of him, both as artist and man, that he was not content with the first publication, but issued a revised version twelve years later, when Colley Cibber, displacing Theobalds on the throne of Dulness, showed for a second time that Pope's notion of the arch-dunce was a potential rival. But most of his victims, competitors in the trial games instituted by the presiding goddess of Stupidity, are only remembered by his allusions ; the work cannot be read without detailed commentary ; and, like all satires applied to trivial dislikes and insignificant persons, the *Dunciad* has passed out of general knowledge. Yet it abounds in superb passages, of which one may be cited, describing a new labour of the competitors after the trial by braying :



This labour passed, by Bridewell all descend,  
 (As morning prayer and flagellation end)  
 To where Fleet-ditch with disemboгуing streams  
 Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,  
 The king of dykes! than whom no sluice of mud  
 With deeper sable blots the silver flood.  
 "Here strip, my children! here at once leap in,  
 Here prove who best can dash through thick and thin,  
 And who the most in love of dirt excel,  
 Or dark dexterity of groping well."

But the mere technical mastery in expressing unworthy hatred gives no man a long lease of posterity's ear. Pope survives as a satirist by those *Moral Essays* (couched in the form of Epistles to persons of distinction) which deal with particular examples of general themes. Here is a part of the passage in which he illustrates the persistence of a ruling passion:

"Odious! in woollen! 'twould a saint provoke,"  
 (Were the last words that poor Narcissa spoke)  
 "No, let a charming chintz, and Brussels lace  
 Wrap my cold limbs and shade my lifeless face:  
 One would not, sure, be frightful when one's dead—  
 And—Betty—give this cheek a little red."

Here again from the essay on the characters of women, is a sketch of what many take to be a type known only to-day:

Flavia's a wit, has too much sense to pray;  
 To toast our wants and wishes, is her way;  
 Nor asks of God, but of her stars, to give  
 The mighty blessing, "while we live to live."  
 Then all for death, that opiate of the soul!



Lucretia's dagger, Rosamonda's bowl.  
Say, what can cause such impotence of mind ?  
A spark too fickle, or a spouse too kind ?  
Wise wretch ! with pleasures too refined to please ;  
With too much spirit to be e'er at ease ;  
With too much quickness ever to be taught ;  
With too much thinking to have common thought :  
You purchase pain with all that joy can give,  
And die of nothing but a rage to live.

There is no end to things in Pope as good and as quotable, and, perhaps one may say, as little known. What everybody does know is the portrait which he drew of "Atticus," and published when Addison was dead.

It is worth while to compare this with Dryden's sketch of Shaftesbury. Achitophel's ill qualities as statesman are first depicted with damning emphasis ; but, as a real offset there follows the passage that praises the upright judge. Pope, on the other hand, leads off with his eulogy, saying of Addison what all the world said, and saying it better : then after this ostentation of impartiality comes the subtle onslaught, stab upon stab, with the venom of contemptuous ridicule left in every wound. The passage has been taken, and rightly, for Pope's most typical achievement in poetry : beside it we can put nothing from him but the fiercer attack on Sporus (Lord Hervey), or the close of the *Dunciad* which celebrates the final triumph of the Dull. These are the things of which we feel that verse is an essential part ; that emotion so vibrant demands metrical expression. Such other passages as the eulogy of



“The Man of Ross,” a Welsh philanthropist, need the verse,—  
form in another sense ; without it they would be insignificant.  
But Pope’s poetry, where it has the character of true poetry, is  
always the utterance of a strong passion—the passion of hate.  
And herein he differs from many other satirists, but above all  
from the greatest of all British satirists, his friend Swift,  
in that his hatred was not for principles but for persons ; not  
for man or men, but this or that individual. Literary and  
social jealousy is the strongest of all his feelings. All the  
more wonderful is it that the friendship between him and Swift  
should have lasted out life in both, though tried by so severe  
a test as collaboration and partnership. But the credit of this  
belongs, I think, not to Pope.

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