

# Verse in the Early Eighteenth Century, I: Pope, Gay, Swift

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## I. Alexander Pope

In *An Essay on Criticism*, the young Alexander Pope observes that: “True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,/As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance” (ll. 362–3). There is an element of pathos in this elegant couplet from the crippled, dwarfish (from spinal tuberculosis) Pope (no dancer he!). But the larger lesson Pope draws is that writing (and especially verse) is an acquired skill, a professional technique, a hard won mastery. At the same time, Pope links the highest literary craft to the larger cultural and social world compactly evoked in learning to dance, thereby demystifying poetry to some extent as an exalted or privileged cultural practice. Pope’s poem outlines the difficulties of acquiring that skill, dispensing advice not just to would-be critics and appreciators of verse but to poets themselves, who are urged to “First follow Nature” (l. 68), that is to imitate the natural order and regularity of the cosmos, qualities enshrined in the ancient “RULES of old,” which were not, he reminds us, arbitrarily “devis’d” but “discover’d” (l. 88) by the ancient writers. So one must study the classics, especially Homer: “Be Homer’s Works your Study, and Delight,/Read them by Day, and meditate by Night” (ll. 124–5) and Virgil, “And let your Comment be the Mantuan Muse” (l. 129). But the crucial next step from the general imperatives of observing “Nature” and imitating the classics is the hard work of specific poetic elaboration and articulation: “True Wit is Nature to advantage drest,/What oft was thought, but ne’er so well Express” (ll. 297–8), as Pope puts it in a famous summarizing couplet.

Pope’s emphasis is on the form of poetry rather than its content, although among the errors in judgment he condemns is judging “by Numbers,” that is by metrical smoothness (ll. 337–8). Such “tuneful Fools” seek only to please their Ear:

Not mend their Minds; as some to Church repair,  
Not for the Doctrine, but the Musick there. (ll. 342–3)

Overall, however, for Pope poetry would seem to be the art of memorable and forceful “restatement,” as it were. Samuel Johnson remarked to James Boswell in 1781 of Pope’s virtuosity as a poet, as a peerless master of technique: “Sir, a thousand years may elapse before there shall appear another man with a power of versification equal to that of Pope.”<sup>1</sup> In his “Life of Pope” in *The Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), Johnson finds in Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1733–4), a poem he disliked as banal and self-satisfied, an extraordinary triumph of form over nearly empty subject matter, a perfect exemplification of what oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed:

This *Essay* affords an egregious instance of the predominance of genius, the dazzling splendour of imagery, and the seductive powers of eloquence. Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised. The reader feels his mind full, though he learns nothing. . . Surely a man of no very comprehensive search may venture to say that he has heard all this before; but it was never till now recommended by such a blaze of embellishment, or such sweetness of melody. The vigorous contraction of some thoughts, the luxuriant amplification of others, the incidental illustrations, and sometimes the dignity, sometimes the softness of the verses, enchain philosophy, suspend criticism, and oppress judgement by overpowering pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

Pope’s work represents the poetic high point of the first half of the eighteenth century, recognized as such by Johnson, the greatest critic of the latter part of the century. Johnson’s praise of Pope’s skill emphasizes his command of stylistic and tonal variations from dignity to softness; the “contraction” and “amplification” he so admires speak to Pope’s control and sense of pacing, his avoidance of the monotony and clockwork predictability to which the rhyming couplet in lesser hands is prone. At the beginning of his “Life of Pope,” Johnson muses on Pope’s beginnings as a poet who recognized that he was the heir to the style of verse that Dryden had perfected: “Dryden died May 1, 1701 [actually 1700], some days before Pope was twelve, so early must he therefore have felt the power of harmony, and the zeal of genius” (XXIII, 1041). Johnson quotes Dryden on the affinities between poetry and music, the latter being for Dryden “inarticulate poetry,” and thus says Johnson “among the excellencies of Pope, therefore, must be mentioned the melody of his metre” (XXIII, 1225). In his “Life of Dryden,” Johnson quotes Pope’s praise of Dryden in *An Essay on Criticism*: “Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join/The varying verse, the full-resounding line,/The long majestick march, and energy divine.” For Johnson Dryden is nothing less than the inventor of modern English verse in its fullness and metrical sweetness: “Dryden knew how to chuse the flowing and the sonorous words; to vary the pauses, and adjust the accents; to diversify the cadence, and yet preserve the smoothness of the metre” (XXI, 491).

Johnson’s “melody” of versification is, largely, a subjective feature that is hard to pin down (the “smoothness” he speaks of might be a better, less metaphorical term), but one always hears in reading Pope and his great predecessor, Dryden,

language and rhythms that to our contemporary ears sound unforced, invariably eloquent and stylized speech, but restrained and controlled, creating to some extent a cultivated and always urbane voice speaking to us rather than shouting or hectoring. Although bombast and declamatory excess are common enough in lesser eighteenth-century verse, as we shall see, Pope we may say could learn from reading Dryden how to avoid it.

Consider as two examples of what Pope would have absorbed from his predecessor but at the same time altered by his distinctive style. First, here are the opening lines of Dryden's satire, *Mac Flecknoe* (1681), an attack on his rival dramatist and poet, Thomas Shadwell. Flecknoe muses about who shall succeed him as the emperor, as it turns out, of dull and supremely bad writing:

All humane things are subject to decay,  
And, when Fate summons, Monarchs must obey:  
This *Fleckno* found, who, like *Augustus*, young  
Was call'd to Empire, and had govern'd long:  
In Prose and Verse, was own'd, without dispute  
Through all the Realms of *Non-sense*, absolute.

Dryden's poem is a mock-heroic satire, employing in these opening lines the tone and diction of heroic verse (the "melody" or the smoothness that Johnson praised in his verse), with its dignified evocations of timeless truths as they apply to the mortality even of monarchs ironically inappropriate for what will be revealed as inane, utterly worthless and nonsensical writing, and of course in the reference to Augustus Dryden invokes what seems at first like a temporarily resonant equation between Flecknoe's empire of (bad) writing and the Roman empire. But the revelation of the ludicrous incongruity between Augustus and Flecknoe is delayed until the next-to-last word in these lines, the stately and dignified tone never faltering, a tongue-in-cheek, straight-faced irony, a matter of absolute control of the joke. That control continues in the lines that follow a bit later as Flecknoe selects Shadwell as his successor:

And pond'ring which of all his Sons was fit  
To Reign, and wage immortal War with Wit;  
Cry'd, 'tis resolv'd; for Nature pleads that He  
Should onely rule, who most resembles me:  
Sh—— alone my perfect image bears,  
Mature in dullness from his tender years.  
Sh —— alone, of all my Sons, is he  
Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.  
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,  
But *Sh* —— never deviates into sense.

Dryden's poem presents a perfect instance of the rhetorical trick of blame by praise, an evocation of an inverted satiric world where all the characters get everything completely backwards. Flecknoe and Shadwell convict themselves by

their own words. As Dryden renders them, they murder normal literary value and sense but in the process project his and our understanding of those good things. The ironies are perfect in that readers are required to understand that such praise reverses itself into blame in the very utterance. Thematically, Dryden's satire anticipates Pope's campaign years later against those writers he called "Dunces," and his method of attack will be an intensified version of that blame by praise that Dryden employed so smoothly.

For another instance of Dryden's melodic smoothness and easiness that will serve for a contrast with Pope's more elaborate articulations of the couplet, consider his 1684 short elegy on the death of the young poet, John Oldham, which is pitch perfect, simple and straightforward in the telling but rich and subtle in implication and suggestion, both eulogistic and touchingly condescending in his praise of the dead poet, as well as discreetly self-promoting:

To the Memory of Mr. Oldham  
 Farewell, too little and too lately known,  
 Whom I began to think and call my own;  
 For sure our souls were near ally'd; and thine  
 Cast in the same poetic mould with mine.  
 One common note on either lyre did strike,  
 And knaves and fools we both abhor'd alike:  
 To the same goal did both our studies drive,  
 The last set out the soonest did arrive.  
 Thus Nisus fell upon the slippery place,  
 While his young friend perform'd and won the race. (10)  
 O early ripe! to thy abundant store  
 What could advancing age have added more?  
 It might (what nature never gives the young)  
 Have taught the numbers of thy native tongue.  
 But satire needs not those, and wit will shine  
 Through the harsh cadence of a rugged line.  
 A noble error, and but seldom made,  
 When poets are by too much force betray'd.  
 Thy generous fruits, though gather'd ere their prime  
 Still show'd a quickness; and maturing time (20)  
 But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.  
 Once more, hail and farewell; farewell thou young,  
 But ah too short, Marcellus of our tongue;  
 Thy brows with ivy, and with laurels bound;  
 But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around. (25)

Pope's characteristic couplets, as we have already seen, tend to be more end-stopped and more dramatically and elaborately symmetrical than Dryden's, organized most of the time by balanced or antithetical units. Dryden in this poem deliberately avoids the clockwork regularity of the pentameter rhyming couplet; the medial pause or caesura is most of the time barely felt. Dryden also

uses enjambment freely, as most of the lines flow easily into one another (note the triplet in lines 19–21, a complete sentence).

Thematically, this is a Roman elegy, as signaled by its concluding allusions: Marcus Claudius Marcellus (42 BCE–23 BCE) was the nephew and son-in-law of the emperor Augustus who was widely expected to succeed him, since Augustus had no son of his own, and “hail and farewell” echoes a Latin mourning tag, “Ave, atque vale,” remembered by posterity from its use by the Roman poet Catullus. Given the affinities between Dryden and Oldham (that young but “ah too short” lived “Marcellus of our tongue”) that he opens with, the clear implication is that Dryden is Augustus in the empire of (good) writing. And of course in the concluding couplet with its classical vision of Oldham crowned with his poetic laurels Dryden displays what Johnson would call his musical talents, with the resonant final Alexandrine (12 syllables) providing with its slightly longer extent and its organ tones (open vowel sounds – “gloomy ... encompass ... around”) of pathos and dignified mourning.

Dryden was a prolific dramatist, as Pope was not, so this poem features implicit dialogue, as Dryden converses with Oldham’s shade, offering a combination of avuncular praise and muted literary criticism. “O early ripe! to thy abundant store/What could advancing age have added more?/It might (what nature never gives the young)/Have taught the numbers of thy native tongue.” The parenthetical remark is a priceless touch, an aside as it were to the poem’s actual audience. Oldham was the author of metrically rough satires, and Dryden concedes that despite their crudity, they were effective: “But satire needs not those, and wit will shine/Through the harsh cadence of a rugged line./A noble error, and but seldom made,/When poets are by too much force betray’d.” And the second line quoted here is in fact rough and irregular, with the first foot trochaic and the second a spondee, with “rugged” presenting a quasi-onomatopoeia with what in Dryden’s day would have been pronounced with a trilled initial “r” and the doubled “g” sound. Finally, note the delicacy with which Dryden offers a retreat from his critique of the roughness of Oldham’s verses. They have a “quickness,” that is a sharpness of taste, while metrical mastery such as Dryden’s is sweet but “dull.” Such modesty looks merely polite in the context of a poem that is as smooth as silk and hardly dull.

Pope’s relationship to the literature of the classical past is both similar to and distinct from Dryden’s. A graduate of Westminster School in London, where he studied under the legendary and brutally strict headmaster, Richard Busby, and then of Trinity College, Cambridge, Dryden was an accomplished classical scholar, one of whose late achievements was as the definitive translator of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and other classical texts. As a Catholic (barred from the English universities) and as a sickly child and youth, Pope could not attend such schools and was educated at home. His translations of the Homeric epics required help from others who knew more Greek than he, although his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, thanks to Pope’s poetic powers, became the definitive translations for many years. But from his early and precocious pastorals, Pope began to imitate the so-called

Virgilian “rota,” the poetic career that progresses from pastoral and other lesser genres to a grand culmination in epic. He never did write the epic he had long contemplated, although the late version of *The Dunciad* (1743) is a gigantic mock-epic. The poem that best reveals Pope’s relationship to the classical tradition as well as to Dryden’s satiric example is what most readers would judge to be his masterpiece, the mock-heroic *The Rape of the Lock* (expanded from the two-canto 1712 version to the five-canto version of 1714). Both these poems dramatize among other things how incompatible classical epic was with modern life, but the epic frame of reference in both of them also helps to illuminate the absurdities of modern commercial and consumerist society and provides a memorable set of comic contrasts for Pope’s couplets to play with. *The Rape of the Lock* is also the best example of how Pope’s style differs from Dryden’s.

And the poem in its first and shorter two-canto version was truly occasional, written to heal some bad feelings between two Catholic families. A certain Lord Petre had indeed snipped without permission a lock of Arabella Fermor’s hair. A mutual friend of the families and of Pope’s, John Caryll, suggested that Pope write a comic poem about the incident to laugh them out of their quarrel. What Pope devised in 1712 was a mock-heroic version of the Helen of Troy story, and in 1714 he completed the parody of classical epic by adding a whimsical version of spirits from Rosicrucian lore to stand in for the Greek deities who preside over the action in Homer’s *Iliad*. The opening of the poem mimics quite seriously the traditions of classical epic, beginning with the epic question and then the address to the muse:

What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs,  
 What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things,  
 I sing – This Verse to Caryll, Muse! is due;  
 This, ev’n Belinda may vouchsafe to view:

.....  
 Say what strange Motive, Goddess! cou’d compel  
 A well-bred Lord t’assault a gentle Belle?  
 Oh say what stranger Cause, yet unexplor’d,  
 Cou’d make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?  
 In Tasks so bold, can Little Men engage,  
 And in soft Bosoms dwell such mighty Rage? (Canto I, ll. 1–4, 7–12)

With their clear narrative drive and smooth and sometimes learned ironies (line 12 is a translation and adaptation of Virgil’s line about the anger of the goddess Juno in line 10 of the *Aeneid*: “tantaene animis caelestibus irae?”) such as can be observed in the Oldham elegy, these lines could have been written by Dryden. Then Pope has Ariel, the heroine Belinda’s guardian, introduce himself as one of the sylphs, a class of spirits of deceased women who protect young women. Ariel comes to warn her in a dream (as such ambiguous warnings are delivered in classical epics) of a mysterious, hidden-by-heaven, “dread event.” He urges caution and warns specifically: “This to disclose is all thy Guardian can./Beware

of all, but most beware of Man!” (I, ll. 113–14). Belinda awakens, and the dire warning vanishes from her thoughts. The dressing-table scene that follows marks the emergence in the poem of Pope’s signature style at its most elaborate and witty, and is worth quoting at length:

And now, unveil’d, the Toilet stands display’d,  
 Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.  
 First, rob’d in White, the Nymph intent adores  
 With Head uncover’d, the cosmetic Pow’rs.  
 A heav’nly Image in the Glass appears,  
 To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;  
 Th’ inferior Priestess, at her Altar’s side,  
 Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
 Unnumber’d Treasures ope at once, and here  
 The various Off’rings of the World appear,  
 From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,  
 And decks the Goddess with the glitt’ring Spoil.  
 This Casket India’s glowing Gems unlocks,  
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box.  
 The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,  
 Transform’d 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 ev’ry Grace,  
 And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;  
 Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,  
 And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes. (I, ll. 121–44)

This passage is both delicate and elaborately, richly wrought, a parody of a religious rite with Belinda as both goddess and priestess (her maid is the “inferior Priestess”) and also a parodic echo of epic scenes where a warrior is clad in his armor. Here and elsewhere in the poem, Belinda is actually a complex character: shallow, silly, self-absorbed (she adores her own image in the mirror), and artificial (“Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,” a line that demands careful attention, since a blush by definition is either natural or it is not a blush!), but also beautiful to the point of awesome irresistibility (“Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms”). She is also, as many critics have noted, a comically diminished representative in her adornments of eighteenth-century British imperialism, whose jewels and other ornaments are “the glitt’ring Spoil” of European conquest and exploitation of other cultures.

As a verse performance, the passage is a tour de force, with Pope’s handling of the caesura, the break or pause for breath in each line, masterful as well as varied in the rhythm it creates. Most of the time, the caesura occurs about half way through the line, with some notable exceptions and shifts anywhere from

the second and third syllables and even to the eighth syllable in the line. The most striking variation of the caesura comes in line 138, where the list of objects on the dressing table places the caesura exactly in the middle, after the fifth syllable, marking the divide between the alliterative tools of the dressing table and the two written items, one sacred, one very much profane (Billet-doux are love letters): “Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux,” and here the variation is not only a change of pace and rhythm but also a densely satirical moment: the contents of the dressing table in their radical inequality and worth as objects speak to the satiric heart of Pope’s wit. For Belinda in her thoughtless narcissism, this jumble of unequal objects presents an equality, and the larger satiric point of the poem is precisely the comic revelation of such careless disorder and lack of proportion among the inhabitants of Belinda’s world, as Ariel puts it a bit later in Canto II as he addresses the other sylphs to alert them to danger:

Some dire Disaster, or by Force, or Slight,  
 But what, or where, the Fates have wrapt in Night.  
 Whether the Nymph shall break Diana’s Law,  
 Or some frail China Jar receive a Flaw,  
 Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,  
 Forget her Pray’rs, or miss a Masquerade,  
 Or lose her Heart, or Necklace, at a Ball;  
 Or whether Heav’n has doom’d that Shock must fall. (II, ll. 101–8)

The technical rhetorical term for what Ariel presents as equal alternative possibilities – the loss of chastity (“Diana’s Law”) or the crack in a porcelain vase, or a stain on Belinda’s honor or on her dress, etc. – is *zeugma*, whereby in this case the two objects of each verb are grammatically equal but morally askew. This passage intensifies and extends the satiric force of the line about the contents of the dressing table. There are moments when the satire grows even stronger, when the playful ridicule of the moral confusion of Belinda and her friends edges over into something darker. The Baron in a moment from Canto II lusts after Belinda’s locks and plots to seize them:

Th’ Adventrous Baron the bright Locks admir’d,  
 He saw, he wish’d, and to the Prize aspir’d:  
 Resolv’d to win, he meditates the way,  
 By Force to ravish, or by Fraud betray;  
 For when Success a Lover’s Toil attends,  
 Few ask, if Fraud or Force attain’d his Ends. (II, ll. 29–34)

Force or Fraud, Rape or Seduction: the Baron will resort to either, and the last two lines are heavily ironic, as the poem’s narrator simply notes that for this society as well as the determined Baron the crucial moral difference between the two has lost its meaning for most people. And yet the satire in *The Rape of the Lock* is hardly absolute; the characters are silly, shallow, and ridiculous but not

evil, and Belinda is in fact beautiful and desirable. The poem is thoroughly mock-heroic but there are moments when there are heroic resonances in the action and in the language of the poem. Here from the beginning of Canto II as Belinda prepares to travel down the Thames to Hampton Court Palace is how she appears to the lustful Baron, who will soon sever one of her locks:

This Nymph, to the Destruction of Mankind,  
Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind  
In equal Curls, and well conspir'd to deck  
With shining Ringlets her smooth Iv'ry Neck.  
Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,  
And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains.  
With hairy Sprindges we the Birds betray,  
Slight Lines of Hair surprize the Finny Prey,  
Fair Tresses Man's Imperial Race insnare,  
And Beauty draws us with a single Hair. (II, ll. 19–28)

Except for the presiding mock-heroic ironies and the miniature scale of the action, these lines out of context resonate with serious but vague themes worthy of epic discourse such as destructive sexual desire. They also feature the kind of extended simile in the last four lines that is a part of epic verse, linking action in the natural world with what happens in the human world the poem narrates.

In between the two versions of *The Rape of the Lock*, in March 1713, Pope had published *Windsor Forest*, not a satire but a combination of Georgic, loco-descriptive (a celebration of a landscape in the manner of John Denham's influential *Cooper's Hill* [1642]), and imperial prophetic verse in 434 lines that survey Windsor Forest (which Pope knew as a boy) and trace the history of England from the Norman conquest to the present triumphant moment in the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht that ended the long war with France. The poem is dedicated to George Granville, Lord Lansdown, the Tory Secretary of War, as the young Pope began to move in Tory political circles, becoming an intimate of the brilliant Henry St. John, later Viscount Bolingbroke, who had helped negotiate the treaty with France. *Windsor Forest* illustrates the young poet's versatility, from the delicate satire of *The Rape of the Lock* to a political poem in which Pope mythologizes the Stuart dynasty and celebrates England's emerging imperial reach. In the body of the poem, Pope's verse meanders over the forest, providing opportunity for displays of rich description. Here is the most famous and spectacular:

See! from the brake the whirring pheasant springs,  
And mounts exulting on triumphant wings:  
Short is his joy; he feels the fiery wound,  
Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground.  
Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,  
His purple crest, and scarlet-circled eyes,  
The vivid green his shining plumes unfold,

His painted wings, and breast that flames with gold? (ll. 111–18)

.....  
 With looks unmov'd, he [a fisherman] hopes the scaly breed,  
 And eyes the dancing cork, and bending reed.  
 Our plenteous streams a various race supply,  
 The bright-ey'd perch with fins of *Tyrian* dye,  
 The silver eel, in shining volumes roll'd,  
 The yellow carp, in scales bedrop'd with gold,  
 Swift trouts, diversify'd with crimson stains,  
 And pykes, the tyrants of the watry plains. (ll. 139–46)

Even in a poem with clear ideological aims, Pope is always equally intent upon manifesting strictly poetic energies and essentially lyric descriptions, and in these two passages he manages startling visual effects, meant to dazzle the reader rather than to promote an agenda. And at the end of the poem, after a review of the heroes and monarchs who have passed through Windsor, some of them buried at Windsor Castle, “old Father Thames” rises “from his oozy Bed” and delivers a long prophecy of England’s future glories and the triumph of a utopian and commercial Pax Britannica:

Thy trees, fair Windsor! now shall leave their woods,  
 And half thy forests rush into my floods,  
 Bear Britain’s thunder, and her Cross display,  
 To the bright regions of the rising day;  
 Tempt icy seas, where scarce the waters roll,  
 Where clearer flames glow round the frozen Pole;  
 Or under southern skies exalt their sails,  
 Led by new stars, and borne by spicy gales!  
 For me the balm shall bleed, and amber flow,  
 The coral redden, and the ruby glow,  
 The pearly shell its lucid globe infold,  
 And Phoebus warm the ripening ore to gold.  
 The time shall come, when free as seas or wind  
 Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind,  
 Whole nations enter with each swelling tyde,  
 And seas but join the regions they divide; (ll. 383–98)

Imperial propaganda and myth-making though this is, as verse it is beyond reproach, rich in ingenious and visually striking imagery. The metamorphosis of half of the trees in Windsor Forest into British ships, both military and missionary, is startling and apt, as is the concluding conceit in which seas join the regions they now seem to divide, just as Pope’s couplets may be said to divide language but also to join words in new and enriching combinations.

The generic diversity and range of Pope’s work has no equal in his century, although later in the century his star sank as some critics found his work prosy, lacking in lyric fire and poetic intensity, a disparagement that persisted into the

nineteenth century when Matthew Arnold called Dryden and Pope “classics of our prose.” And indeed through the 1730s and into the early 1740s the mature Pope was almost purely a Horatian satirist whose verse dwelt upon political, moral, and aesthetic themes. And in *An Essay on Man* (1733–4) he produced in four books an ambitious philosophical poem. There are, however, two remarkable poems from 1716 and 1717 that reveal another, almost purely lyrical side of his prodigious talent, *Eloisa to Abelard* and *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. The former follows a classical genre and theme, Ovid’s *The Heroïdes* (*The Heroïnes*), or *Epistulae Heroïdum* (*Letters of Heroïnes*), a series of letters written by abandoned or aggrieved heroïnes from Greek and Roman mythology, only in this case it is a twelfth-century heroïne, Eloisa, rather than a classical figure who is writing to her former lover, the theologian Peter Abelard. After the discovery of their illicit affair and marriage, Abelard was castrated by her family and both of them entered monasteries. In his prefatory note to the poem, Pope relates that many years later after reading Abelard’s history of their affair, Eloisa’s passion was reawakened, and the poem is his rendering of her letter to Abelard, a dramatic monologue as much as it is a verse epistle.

With ever-mounting, repetitive, and cumulative fervor from the opening lines (“Yet, yet I love! From Abelard it came,/And Eloisa yet must kiss the name,” ll. 7–8), Eloisa recalls the story of their love and their separation. There is little occasion in most of this poem for the elaborate structuring we find elsewhere in Pope; the verses seek to create an emotional momentum that prizes intensity and pictorial vividness over balance and variety of emphasis. This is Nature decidedly over-dressed, valued because it is what has only rarely been felt and expressed quite so distinctively and powerfully.

Come! with thy looks, thy words, relieve my woe;  
 Those still at least are left thee to bestow.  
 Still on that breast enamour’d let me lie,  
 Still drink delicious poison from thy eye,  
 Pant on thy lip, and to thy heart be press’d;  
 Give all thou canst – and let me dream the rest.  
 Ah no! instruct me other joys to prize,  
 With other beauties charm my partial eyes,  
 Full in my view set all the bright abode,  
 And make my soul quit Abelard for God. (ll. 119–28)

Instead of a prevailing balance within the couplets, Eloisa’s speech is a breathless rush, marked by a dash here and an exclamation point there, a confused memory of an attempt to forget what cannot be forgotten. But when Eloisa a bit later in the poem confronts the paradox of lingering desire amid renunciation, Popeian symmetries and antitheses spring up like mushrooms but without the resolving balance they elsewhere offer:

Assist me, Heav’n! but whence arose that pray’r?  
 Sprung it from piety, or from despair?

Ev'n here, where frozen chastity retires,  
 Love finds an altar for forbidden fires.  
 I ought to grieve, but cannot what I ought;  
 I mourn the lover, not lament the fault;  
 I view my crime, but kindle at the view,  
 Repent old pleasures, and solicit new; (ll. 179–86)

Pope's balancing of Eloisa's emotions gives them a circular exactness and desperately symmetrical aptness; she is caught in the tight antitheses that Pope spins out for her feelings. The Popeian line can dramatize a balance that is in practice a tension and even a contradiction. Moreover, against the backdrop of Gothic vividness Eloisa records how the torments of desire recoil against these ecclesiastical surroundings: "What scenes appear where'er I turn my view?/The dear ideas, where I fly, pursue,/Rise in the grove, before the altar rise,/Stain all my soul, and wanton in my eyes!" (ll. 263–6).

When from the censer clouds of fragrance roll,  
 And swelling organs lift the rising soul,  
 One thought of thee puts all the pomp to flight,  
 Priests, tapers, temples, swim before my sight:  
 In seas of flame my plunging soul is drown'd,  
 While altars blaze, and angels tremble round. (ll. 271–6)

In poetical terms, what is happening as Eloisa evokes so vividly, nay extravagantly or even orgasmically, her sexual turmoil is a lyric confusion, a non-satiric version of the objects on Belinda's dressing table, here the quasi-sublime scene evoked in the last three lines of this passage as religious pomp is put "to flight." The rest of the poem is Eloisa's rapt inconsistency, first urging against reason that Abelard "Snatch me, just mounting, from the blest abode,/Assist the Fiend and tear me from my God" (ll. 287–8), and then just as extravagantly denying that wish: "No, fly me, fly me! Far as Pole from Pole;/Rise Alps between us! and whole Oceans roll!" (ll. 289–90). The poem ends with Eloisa, exhausted from all these feelings and the hyperbolic language that does justice to them, wishing for death and hoping that future ages will find a Bard who will experience what she has: "The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;/He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most" (ll. 365–6).

It would be foolish and presumptuous to read too much into Pope's assigning himself the latter-day task of radical empathy with the tragic Eloisa, although the sickly and deformed poet was still a man who suffered from unrequited sexual passions. In his great satires of the 1730s, the mature Pope is passionate about public and moral issues, but here in his late twenties there is an uncharacteristic lyric urgency that continues into the poem he wrote in 1717, *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, which stands out in his works by virtue of its elusive subject – no one knows who the lady was or if she was a fictional invention – and its unusually intense emotionality, thought by many to have a disguised autobiographical significance. Maynard Mack notes that Pope was

quite ill during the years when the poem was composed, and like other Catholics he was worried that he would have to become an expatriate.<sup>3</sup> The speaker in this case is the poet and his poem is frustrated soliloquizing; that is to say, it becomes, reluctantly, a dialogue with self. The speaker in the startling opening lines is lured by a ghost into a glade, and this elusive figure refuses to explain anything, which is not the way an elegy should begin. Pope's speaker questions the disappearing shade of the deceased lady, who of course cannot answer: "Oh, ever beautiful, ever friendly! tell, / Is it in heav'n a crime to love too well? ... Is there no bright reversion in the sky, / For those who greatly think, or bravely die?" (ll. 5–6, 9–10). Given the mystery that surrounds her death, Pope's speaker by these interrogatives wonders aloud just how to begin the elegizing work. For him the lady is an amatory heroine in the Ovidian mode whose death may signify a heavenly justice and whose brave suicide is an indictment of normal emotional torpor, but he can't of course be certain about how she died, and his scenario is tentative – "From these perhaps (e'er nature bade her die) / Fate snatch'd her early to the pitying sky" (ll. 22–3). This nervous questioning, however, leads to a defiant celebration of the lady's heroic death, despite the lingering uncertainty about its circumstances. These are the two contrasting registers that dominate the first third or so of the poem, with the exaltation of the lady emerging dramatically as the result of the failure of Pope's questioning. As the poem progresses, the speaker blames the lady's uncle for her death, speaking directly to him as he could not to the lady. The extraordinary and inventive curse he invokes for him and his clan (a satiric insertion into an elegy) makes for a strange generic mix and complicates the speaker's tone, as it veers wildly from pathos to indignation.

All this is preparation for the evocation of the lady's lonely burial in exile:

By foreign hands thy dying eyes were clos'd,  
 By foreign hands thy decent limbs compos'd,  
 By foreign hands thy humble grave adorn'd,  
 By strangers honour'd, and by strangers mourn'd! (ll. 51–4)

Such obtrusive repetition in so fluent and inventive a poet as Pope signifies in its insistence an angry intensity whereby normal elegant variation is temporarily neglected for dramatic effect and immediacy. A second and somewhat less obtrusive set of repetitions follows about the superficiality and insincerity of normal mourning – "What tho' no friends in sable weeds appear... What tho' no weeping Loves thy ashes grace... What tho' no sacred earth allow thee room" (ll. 55, 59, 61) – and it serves to introduce and justify the speaker's personal/poetic memorialization of the lady, the part of the poem that constitutes his revisionist elegy:

Yet shall thy grave with rising flow'rs 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'er shade  
 The ground, now sacred by thy reliques made.  
 So peaceful rests, without a stone, a name,  
 What once had beauty, titles, wealth, and fame.  
 How lov'd, how honour'd once, avails thee not,  
 To whom related, or by whom begot;  
 A heap of dust alone remains of thee,  
 'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be! (ll. 63–74)

The transition in terms of voice and emphasis is from indignation to tenderness and, finally, to the full-throated elegiac sentiments announced by the title. But in these last twenty lines the speaker turns to blunt reminders to the lady of the leveling effects of death, although this voice is almost apologetic about the facts of mortality. It is also self-referential, if in a curiously indirect way in the last eight lines:

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung,  
 Deaf the prais'd ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.  
 Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,  
 Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays;  
 Then from his closing eyes thy form shall part,  
 And the last pang shall tear thee from his heart,  
 Life's idle business at one gasp be o'er,  
 The Muse forgot, and thou below'd no more! (ll. 75–82)

Pope calls attention to the effects on himself of his own words – “whose soul now melts in mournful lays” – and as tends to happen in many elegies the poet himself is implicitly mourned as well as the deceased. Traditionally, critics have faulted the poem for the vagueness of the Lady's story as well as for its pseudo-classicizing exaltation of suicide, but these failures in coherence, one can say, are related to its lyric intensity. Pope neglects such matters to focus on the pity of it all and to express feelings that in his case were perhaps projections from his own loneliness and, perhaps, his sexual frustration.

But in the same year, 1717, that he wrote this poem, Pope published at the tender age of twenty-nine *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope*, in four luxurious and expensive volumes, in large folio and crown octavo formats, a presumptuously arrogant gesture, since such titles and collections of work were traditionally reserved for classic and long dead authors. These volumes featured a revealingly nervous, often comically disingenuous, preface. Despite the grandiosity and self-promotion of this lavish, carefully prepared edition, Pope declares that he expects very little from the world where “the life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth,” and so he needs as a publishing poet “the constancy of a martyr, and a resolution to suffer for its sake.” With the straightest of faces, Pope claims that he has written “because it amused me...corrected because it was as pleasant

for me to correct as to write; and I publish'd because I was told I might please such as it was a credit to please." Pope indulges in protective bad faith, evoking a beginning to his poetic career that obscures the hard and dedicated labor of producing his gem-like poems, that replaces his driving poetic ambition with the easy, amused indifference of the gentleman-amateur, which of course Pope had never been and could never become.

But in his preface Pope also makes the point that modern writers need to imitate the ancients in correcting and finishing their works for posterity: "If we can pretend to have used the same industry, let us expect the same immortality," although unlike the ancient writers, Greeks and Romans he means, who wrote in "languages that became universal and everlasting," English writers can expect only "to be read in one Island, and to be thrown aside at the end of one Age." Sentiments like these, as well as the drilling in the Roman literary classics that elite-class males endured at school, made the imitation of those texts an integral part of the literary culture of the early eighteenth century. So many of the major poems that Pope wrote from 1730 until his death in 1744, with the exception of *An Essay on Man*, were in one way or another English imitations or adaptations to modern circumstances and issues of Latin classics and genres, especially his Imitations of Horace and *The Dunciad*. But as the exhortations in Pope's preface to imitate the ancient classics and the warning that such imitations are doomed to eventual ephemerality make clear, the neo-classical imperative in the culture expresses a pathos about the limitations of modern literary expression: as Pope put it in *An Essay on Criticism*: "Our Sons their Fathers' failing Language see, / And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be" (ll. 482–3).

But perhaps these worries about a fading language and distant posterity were merely conventional posturing, since Pope quickly became after 1717 the premier poet of his times, finding in the potential ephemerality of his works and in the differences between classic literature and his own a vivifying defiant energy and memorable persona as an embattled satirist. The last fifteen years or so of Pope's career were devoted mainly to satire, to social, political, and moral commentary and criticism that made him numerous enemies and in the process bore out his characterization in the preface to his 1717 *Works* of the life of a wit as "a warfare upon earth." In 1735 Pope published a poetic autobiography, his *apologia pro vita sua*, "An Epistle from Mr. Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot," written to his friend and physician, John Arbuthnot. The poem is not really an epistle, since Pope in conversation with Arbuthnot looks back at his life and career with a mixture of scorn for his enemies and gratitude to his friends. The comic opening of the poem finds Pope himself the victim of his fame, besieged by would-be poets who want his advice or even his financial support:

Is there a Parson, much bemus'd in beer,  
A maudlin Poetess, a ryming Peer,  
A clerk, foredoom'd his father's soul to cross,  
Who pens a stanza, when he should engross?

Is there, who, lock'd from Ink and Paper, scrawls  
 With desp'rate Charcoal round his darken'd walls?  
 All fly to Twit'nam, and in humble strain  
 Apply to me, to keep them mad or vain. (ll. 15–22)

So Pope wonders in sentimental vein why he ever became a poet:

Why did I write? what sin to me unknown  
 Dipp'd me in ink, my parents', or my own?  
 As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,  
 I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came.  
 I left no calling for this idle trade,  
 No duty broke, no father disobey'd.  
 The Muse but serv'd to ease some friend, not wife,  
 To help me through this long disease, my life,  
 To second, ARBUTHNOT! thy art and care,  
 And teach the being you preserv'd, to bear. (ll. 125–34)

Despite the genuine pathos in these lines, since Pope was truly an invalid and cripple all his life, they are disingenuous, even in fact mendacious, evading the fierce ambition and professional dedication to what was for Pope in no way an “idle trade” and turning a lifetime of triumphant poetic production into therapeutic consolation, a hobby that eased and comforted an invalid and his friends. As Pope claims in his head note to the poem, he was moved to publish his “Bill of Complaint” by attacks not just on his writing but on “my Person, Moral, and Family.” The enemies in question were John, Lord Hervey and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, both of whom had indeed attacked Pope viciously (although Pope gave as good as he got!). As the poem goes along, the circle of his adversaries widens, and the enemies – Thomas Burnet, John Oldmixon, Thomas Cooke, Colley Cibber, John Dennis, Charles Gildon, and many others – are named and shamed.

In the dialogue between them, Arbuthnot wonders several times if his friend and patient is being reckless in his denunciations, warning him to cultivate prudence and to forbear naming “Queens, Ministers, or Kings” (l. 76). Pope responds in turn; the poem is at times a dramatic dialogue:

Whom have I hurt? has poet yet, or peer,  
 Lost the arch'd eye-brow, or Parnassian sneer?  
 And has not Colly still his Lord, and Whore?  
 His butchers Henley, his Free-masons Moor?  
 Does not one table Bavius still admit?  
 Still to one Bishop Philips seem a Wit?  
 Still Sapho [Lady Mary] – “Hold! for God-sake – you'll offend:  
 No names! – be calm! – learn prudence of a friend!  
 I too could write, and I am twice as tall;  
 But foes like these!” One flatt'rer's worse than all. (ll. 95–104)

Pope's self-portrait is heroic; he defends virtue and innocence, and "no honest man" need dread his ire. This line sets up the most memorable moment in the poem, in which Pope raises his satiric intensity to a new height in his denunciation of his *bête noire*, Lord Hervey, as *Sporus*. (*Sporus* was a young boy that the Roman emperor Nero had castrated and married.) But as he is about to launch into his invective, Arbuthnot interrupts – in the middle of a line:

Let *Sporus* tremble – “What? that thing of silk,  
*Sporus*, that mere white curd of ass's milk?  
 Satire or sense, alas! can *Sporus* feel?  
 Who breaks a Butterfly upon a Wheel?” (ll. 305–8)

Pope's answer, his passionate insistence on attacking Hervey despite the danger, is worth quoting in its entirety:

Yet let me flap this Bug with gilded wings,  
 This painted Child of Dirt that stinks and stings;  
 Whose Buzz the Witty and the Fair annoys,  
 Yet Wit ne'er tastes, and Beauty ne'er enjoys,  
 So well-bred Spaniels civilly delight  
 In mumbling of the Game they dare not bite.  
 Eternal Smiles his Emptiness betray,  
 As shallow streams run dimpling all the way.  
 Whether in florid Impotence he speaks,  
 And, as the Prompter breathes, the Puppet squeaks;  
 Or at the Ear of Eve, familiar Toad,  
 Half Froth, half Venom, spits himself abroad,  
 In Puns, or Politicks, or Tales, or Lyes,  
 Or Spite, or Smut, or Rymes, or Blasphemies.  
 His Wit all see-saw between that and this,  
 Now high, now low, now Master up, now Miss,  
 And he himself one vile Antithesis.  
 Amphibious Thing! that acting either Part,  
 The trifling Head, or the corrupted Heart!  
 Fop at the Toilet, Flatt'rer at the Board,  
 Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord.  
 Eve's Tempter thus the Rabbins have exprest,  
 A Cherub's face, a Reptile all the rest;  
 Beauty that shocks you, Parts that none will trust,  
 Wit that can creep, and Pride that licks the dust. (ll. 309–33)

In these lines, perhaps the most brilliant satiric set piece Pope ever wrote, we can observe that Hervey as Pope imagines him is the perfect embodiment for his kind of antithetical wit. If Hervey did not exist in his bisexual amphibious state, Pope would have had to create him. Pope's astonishingly brilliant reply is thus marked, highlighted by Pope himself, as a bravura performance that gives him

enormous pleasure and the satisfactions of revenge on an enemy. He is in a sense laughing at his own jokes and dramatizing his own inventiveness. Nor does he hide, thanks to Arbuthnot's protest, how these purely aesthetic and selfish motives for his invective collide with the obtrusive self-righteousness and moral effectiveness that he claims for himself elsewhere in the poem. Satire, to paraphrase W. H. Auden on poetry, makes nothing happen, and Hervey despite Pope's brilliant invective will stay the same. And in one sense Arbuthnot is right in that despite its brilliance the Sporus portrait is unnecessary, far in excess of what is needed to expose Lord Hervey. Nonetheless, Pope follows the Sporus portrait with a heroic self-portrait:

Not Fortune's Worshipper, nor Fashion's Fool,  
 Not Lucre's Madman, nor Ambition's Tool,  
 Not proud, nor servile, be one Poet's praise,  
 That, if he pleas'd, he pleas'd by manly ways;  
 That Flatt'ry, even to Kings, he held a shame,  
 And thought a Lye in Verse or Prose the same:  
 That not in Fancy's Maze he wander'd long,  
 But stoop'd to Truth, and moraliz'd his song:  
 That not for Fame, but Virtue's better end,  
 He stood the furious Foe, the timid Friend,  
 The damning Critic, half-approving Wit,  
 The Coxcomb hit, or fearing to be hit;

.....

The Whisper that to Greatness still too near,  
 Perhaps, yet vibrates on his SOVEREIGN's ear: –  
 Welcome for thee, fair Virtue! all the past:  
 For thee, fair Virtue! welcome ev'n the last! (ll. 334–45, 356–9)

Pope's self-portrait is not exactly false. Critics have traditionally quoted for their insight into Pope's career the lines about his not wandering too long in "Fancy's Maze" but stooping (a term from falconry, when the bird swoops down on its prey, and the implications of that image are revealing!) to Truth and moralizing his song. Pope marks, accurately enough, his transition from pastoral, Georgic, and playful mock-heroic to satire and its moral and reformist program. But thanks to the presence of a skeptical and cautious Dr. Arbuthnot in this epistle, Pope highlights the problem all satire confronts: how to balance the pure pleasures of attacking one's enemies while claiming a moral imperative and reformist social purpose. After all, we now read Pope's satires, especially long after all his targets are dead and buried, for the satisfactions of exquisitely tuned invective and eloquent rage, what he offers incomparably in the Sporus portrait.

In the 1730s, prosperous from the immense success of his Homer translations and settled at his comfortable house and gardens in Twickenham outside London, Pope published in addition to *An Epistle to Arbuthnot* and the

philosophical *An Essay on Man* a series of thoughtful “epistles,” four verse letters to friends that treated social, moral, and aesthetic issues: *Moral Essays or Epistles to Several Persons: Epistle to Cobham, Epistle to a Lady, Epistle to Bathurst, Epistle to Burlington*, addressed to three aristocratic friends and a lady friend, Martha Blount, with whom Pope was in love. Although these poems deal with general issues – the characters of men, the characters of women, the uses of riches, the nature of good taste, the ideal architectural and landscape gardening styles – they are intensely social, conversations that not only address intimate friends but evoke a world of familiar examples and particular incidents and personalities even as they discuss matters of general interest. Here, for example, is the smoothly conversational and deliberately provocative opening of *Epistle to a Lady*:

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,  
 “Most Women have no Characters at all.”  
 Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,  
 And best distinguish’d by black, brown, or fair. (ll. 1–4)

And when Pope’s satire grows aggressive, almost misogynistic, the tone is level and matter-of-fact, even if the following lines gave great offense in their time and remain controversial for many readers.

In men, we various ruling passions find;  
 In women, two almost divide the kind;  
 Those, only fix’d, they first or last obey,  
 The love of pleasure, and the love of sway.  
 That, Nature gives; and where the lesson taught  
 Is still to please, can pleasure seem a fault?  
 Experience, this; by man’s oppression curs’d,  
 They seek the second not to lose the first.  
 Men, some to bus’ness, some to pleasure take;  
 But ev’ry woman is at heart a rake:  
 Men, some to quiet, some to public strife;  
 But ev’ry Lady would be queen for life. (ll. 207–18)

Controversial and paradoxical assertions like this may serve to remind us that the couplet form at its best in Pope’s hands mandates extreme epigrammatic force and balance, and these lines, especially the last four, are an instance of epigrammatic form at its best, influencing the intensity or extremity of the content. But consider as well the complicated propositions, enforced and illustrated by the balanced structure and accompanying narrative logic of lines 207–14: women are taught by Nature to enjoy “pleasure,” but since they are by “man’s oppression curs’d” (that is dominated and restricted by patriarchy), they seek to dominate in turn (“the love of sway”). So their “natural” bent is increased by their social circumstances, by male oppression. Whether one accepts this

narrative as valid, it is true to the lines' symmetrical logic and in my view highly sympathetic to women's psycho-sexual situation and not misogynistic at all.

These poems and the *Imitations of Horace* from the same period are less personal and histrionic than *An Epistle to Arbuthnot*, their wit sly and more subtle. Historians and critics of satire like to distinguish between Horatian and Juvenalian modes, after the distinct styles and attitudes of the two most important Roman poetic satirists. Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65 BCE–8 BCE) and Juvenal (Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, a Roman poet active in the late first and early second century CE) were often translated and imitated. A contemporary of the emperor Augustus, Horace was not only an acknowledged classic but a widely read school author, whose *Satires*, often in dialogue form, laughed at follies and foibles, whereas Juvenal's satires attack vice and corruption with eloquent denunciation. As Juvenal says, famously, in the opening line of his first satire, *difficile est saturam non scribere*; it is difficult not to write satire.

Pope uses Horatian dialogue and sly ironies most of the time in his satires, but he is capable of Juvenalian intensity and explicit outrage, as we have seen in the Sporus portrait. In fact, in the *Moral Essays* as well as in the Horatian *Imitations* the Horatian/Juvenalian opposition tends to break down. For example, in his *First Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated* (1733), the poet complains to a friend that some think his satire "too bold," while others say it is too "weak." The friend offers this advice:

F. I'd write no more.  
 P. Not write? but then I think,  
 And for my Soul I cannot sleep a wink.  
 I nod in Company, I wake at Night,  
 Fools rush into my Head, and so I write. (ll. 11–15)

This is close to what Horace wrote, except that he says simply that he can't sleep (*verum nequeo dormire*). For Pope, satire is a Juvenalian compulsion enforced by the prevalence of fools and knaves; he evokes a grotesquely vivid scene where fools have a violent energy that the satirist has to match. And yet Pope claims that he is "discreet" and "moderate," choosing his targets carefully. But there are plenty of those targets nowadays in these corrupt financial times:

In moderation placing all my glory,  
 While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory.  
 Satire's my weapon, but I'm too discreet  
 To run a muck, and tilt at all I meet;  
 I only wear it in a land of Hector's,  
 Thieves, Supercargoes, Sharpers, and Directors,  
 Save but our Army! and let Jove incrust  
 Swords, pikes, and guns, with everlasting rust! (ll. 69–76)

But later in the poem, the tone shifts somewhat, as Pope moves toward Juvenalian boasting, after a warning from his friend of the dangers he may run, that he will expose and punish iniquity wherever he sees it:

In durance, exile, Bedlam, or the Mint,  
 Like Lee or Budgell, I will rhyme, and print.  
 F. Alas young man! your days can ne'er be long,  
 In flow'r of age you perish for a song!  
 Plums and Directors, Shylock and his Wife,  
 Will club their testers, now, to take your life!  
 P. What? arm'd for Virtue when I point the pen,  
 Brand the bold front of shameless, guilty men,  
 Dash the proud Gamester in his gilded car,  
 Bare the mean heart that lurks beneath a Star; (ll. 101–10)  
 .....  
 Yes, while I live, no rich or noble knave  
 Shall walk in peace, and credit, to his grave. (ll. 119–20)

Such moral grandiosity is traditionally the satirist's boast and privilege. Pope regularly takes advantage of it, although as here he is generally careful to make such pronouncements part of a dialogue, responses to friends who urge caution and wonder at his confidence. The most violent iterations of this satirical turn can be found in two "dialogue" poems Pope wrote and published in 1738, *Epilogue to the Satires*, *Dialogue I* and *Dialogue II*. These poems are the most convincing instances of genuinely dramatic dialogue in Pope's work, with the Friend giving sensible advice about satiric moderation and caution, and Pope breaking in with angry and impatient objections. The result is self-deprecating high comedy as well as satire:

Come on, then, satire! general, unconfined,  
 Spread thy broad wing, and souse on all the kind.  
 Ye statesmen, priests, of one religion all!  
 Ye tradesmen vile, in army, court, or hall,  
 Ye reverend atheists—  
 F. Scandal! name them! who?  
 P. Why that's the thing you bid me not to do.  
 Who starved a sister, who forswore a debt,  
 I never named; the town's inquiring yet.  
 The poisoning dame—  
 F. You mean—  
 P. I don't.  
 F. You do!  
 P. See, now I keep the secret, and not you!  
 The bribing statesman—  
 F. Hold, too high you go.  
 P. The bribed elector—

F. There you stoop too low.

P. I fain would please you, if I knew with what;

Tell me, which knave is lawful game, which not? (II, ll. 14–27)

In the end, of course, Pope has the last word, and this second dialogue concludes with an almost definitive satiric eloquence that is meant to take one's breath away and to throw Pope's defiance in the teeth of his enemies:

F. You're strangely proud.

P. So proud, I am no slave:

So impudent I own myself no knave:

So odd, my country's ruin makes me grave.

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see

Men not afraid of God afraid of me:

Safe from the Bar, the Pulpit, and the Throne,

Yet touched and shamed by ridicule alone.

O, sacred weapon left for truth's defence,

Sole dread of folly, vice, and insolence! (II, ll. 204–13)

For modern readers, such inflated eloquence may ring false, with the self-righteous satirist having the last powerful (or merely hectoring) word. However, the most effective and attractive of Pope's Horatian imitations for current readers may be *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated, To Augustus*, a masterpiece of slyly defiant, insinuating irony, a reworking in the context of Britain in 1737 of Horace's sincere compliments to the emperor, Augustus. To appreciate just how subversively clever Pope is being in this poem, it helps to know that George II was also christened Augustus, and that unlike the Roman emperor was deeply indifferent to and even contemptuous of literature, his interest in the arts confined to the music of Handel, who was virtually the court composer.

Pope addresses George at the outset with simple flattery and patent sarcasm in that "such": "How shall the Muse, from such a Monarch, steal/An hour, and not defraud the Publick Weal?" (ll. 5–6). But as the opening develops, the flattery grows transparently disingenuous in its exaggerations: "Wonder of Kings! Like whom, to mortal eyes/None e'er has risen, and none e'er shall rise" (ll. 29–30). But Pope switches quickly from sarcasm to an unexpected and seemingly digressive turn, as he notes that the British people are "Foes to all living worth except your own,/And Advocates for Folly dead and gone" (ll. 33–4). This is the beginning of a satirical complaint that only older poets are now valued, and valued for their antiquity: "Chaucer's worst ribaldry is learn'd by rote,/And beastly Skelton Heads of Houses quote" (ll. 37–8). So George is treated to a history of English literature, in which Pope's contemporary readers would have known that he has absolutely no interest, of declining taste from the glamour of the Stuart reign, "the Wits of either Charles's days,/The Mob of Gentlemen who wrote with Ease" (ll. 107–8). But now, echoing the opening of

*An Epistle to Arbuthnot*, Pope describes the current world of demented literary amateurism, where “one Poetick Itch/Has seiz’d the Court and City, Poor and Rich: . . . But those who cannot write, and those who can/All rhyme, and scrawl, and scribble, to a man” (ll. 169–70, 187–8). In due course, this expands to an indictment of public taste, of a degenerate theatrical and literary culture, and again Pope draws out the contrast between George’s England and the Stuart court, where in the lines that Johnson quoted in his “Life of Dryden,” “Wit grew polite, and Numbers learn’d to flow./Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join/The varying verse, the full resounding line,/The long majestic march, and energy divine” (ll. 266–9).

Pope avers to the indifferent king (“Of little use the Man you may suppose,/Who says in verse what others say in prose”) that “a Poet’s of some weight,/And (tho’ no Soldier) useful to the State. . . What better teach a Foreigner the tongue?” (ll. 201–4, 206). (English was George’s third language after French and German.) Pope concludes the poem by returning to the usefulness of poets for immortalizing a king, better he claims than painters or sculptors. The mock-panegyric that follows is in the context of 1737 a devastatingly ironic indictment of what the political opposition considered the supine international policies of the Walpole government:

Oh! could I mount on the Maeonian wing,  
Your Arms, your Actions, your Repose to sing!  
What seas you travers’d! and what fields you fought!  
Your Country’s Peace, how oft, how dearly bought!  
How barb’rous rage subsided at your word,  
And Nations wonder’d while they dropp’d the sword!  
How, when you nodded, o’er the land and deep,  
Peace stole her wing, and wrapt the world in sleep;  
.....  
But Verse, alas! your Majesty disdains;  
And I’m not us’d to Panegyric strains: (ll. 394–401, 404–5)

This is not modesty on Pope’s part but a sneering boast that his lines are nothing less than a deliberate insult: “Besides, a fate attends on all I write,/That when I aim at praise, they say I bite” (ll. 408–9). His ridicule of the lumpish George II is not only satirical blame by praise but the invocation of the master metaphor of Pope’s later satiric career that finds full expression in *The Dunciad*: an elaborate inversion of bad literature and other forms of intellectual incompetence that inflates them into predictions of a comic apocalypse, the end of a culture and a civilization. The peace strategy pursued by Walpole’s government in geo-political affairs is rendered in *Epistle to Augustus*, unfairly of course, as impotence and somnolence (deeply ironic in retrospect, since George II was the last British monarch to lead an army in battle, a victory against the French in 1743 at Dettingen in Bavaria). The attack on George II’s dullness is more than an assault on the unsympathetic Hanoverian dynasty; it is a reaction to what Pope and his friends perceived as a larger cultural decline in British life for which the hapless George/Augustus

stands as an emblem that marks in Pope's career a profound shift from moralizing satirical attacks on individuals to a comprehensive and obsessive attack on his many literary enemies and poetical rivals, lumped together as "dunces," that took the form of a gigantic parodic epic. Indeed, in the opening lines of *The Dunciad Variorum* of 1728 Pope had written: "Still Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the first" (l. 6), and the reference to the two Georges is unmistakable.

*The Dunciad* has a complicated publishing and composing history. It grew out of what might be termed a group project (something of a series of practical jokes) among a group of like-minded friends, Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, Thomas Parnell, Robert Harley, and John Gay, to produce facetious and satiric works about and by an imaginary Dutch pedant they named Martinus Scriblerus, after whom they called their informal club, the Scriblerians. Pope's first version, in three books, was *The Dunciad Variorum* (1728), which featured an elaborate and ultimately tedious parody of scholarly apparatus and critical pedantry. Those three books were revised in 1741 when Pope wrote a fourth book, published in 1742 as *The New Dunciad*. The final version in four books was published in 1743, the year before Pope died. So for nearly twenty years, even though in those years he produced many other works, indeed some of his best, Pope was in effect collecting grievances and grudges, planning revenge on various literary enemies. This is not to say that Pope did not have cause for seeking revenge; the modern reader is bound to be shocked by the ferocity of the invective some of his contemporaries leveled against him. For one example from many, in the notes to Book I of *The Dunciad Variorum*, Pope quotes from John Dennis' *Reflections on the Essay on Criticism* (1711):

A young squab, short Gentleman, whose outward form though it should be that of downright Monkey, would not differ so much from human shape, as his unthinking immaterial part does from human understanding. – He is as stupid and as venomous as a hunchbacked Toad. – a Book through which folly and ignorance, those bretheren [*sic*] so lame and impotent, do ridiculously look very big, and very dull, and strut, and hobble cheek by jowl, with their arms on kimbo, being led, and supported, and bully-backed by that blind Hector, Impudence.

Despite such ad hominem, scurrilous provocations, there is an air of obsession in all of Pope's versions and revisions of *The Dunciad*, which dramatizes an excess of animus and surplus, visceral hatred, as well as in the final version a profound cultural pessimism and literary rage that make it a great if to some extent for current readers a difficult and obscure poem, requiring massive annotation of its myriad contemporary references to forgotten minor writers and in-jokes about them for full understanding.

Nonetheless, the poem repays close study as a brilliant, almost demonic, vision of a world turned upside down, a sort of negative comic sublime. Pope takes the base matter of his literary quarrels, the insults and attacks on his writings and his person, and by means of an intensely imagined mock-heroic

rendering turns his literary rivals into embodiments of a calamitous reversal of every conceivable cultural and moral value. But the impetus for these larger themes is Popeian petulance and personal vengeance on a fairly petty scale. Thus, the hero of *The Dunciad Variorum* is one Lewis Theobald (pronounced and spelled by Pope as “Tibbald”), an indifferent poet and failed dramatist turned textual editor who had earned Pope’s ire with his 1726 edition of Shakespeare, an attack on Pope’s amateurish and ill-conceived edition of the plays: *Shakespeare Restored, or a Specimen of the many Errors as well Committed as Unamended by Mr Pope in his late edition of this poet; designed not only to correct the said Edition, but to restore the true Reading of Shakespeare in all the Editions ever published*. In truth, despite his severe correction of Pope’s edition, Theobald was a much better editor of Shakespeare than Pope, and his edition is important in the move toward a better understanding of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. However, in the final version of the poem, Pope replaced Theobald with a more suitable protagonist, Colley Cibber, the comic actor, theater manager, playwright, and from 1730 poet laureate (as far as Pope and others were concerned also ludicrously unqualified in that capacity, an index of the artistic nullity of the ruling dynasty).

In the opening of Book I of the final version of the poem, we meet Dullness, the goddess who presides over the poem, seated near the London insane asylum, St. Mary of Bethlehem Hospital, nicknamed Bedlam. “In clouded Majesty,” she contemplates what should be the realm of creativity:

Here she beholds the chaos dark and deep,  
Where nameless somethings in their causes sleep,  
’Till genial Jacob, or a warm third day,  
Call forth each mass, a poem, or a play;  
How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,  
How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry,  
.....  
How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;  
How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race;  
How Time himself stands still at her command,  
Realms shift their place, and ocean turns to land.  
Here gay Description Egypt glads with showers,  
Or gives to Zembla fruits, to Barca flowers;  
Glittering with ice here hoary hills are seen,  
There painted valleys of eternal green;  
In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,  
And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow. (I, ll. 55–60, 69–78)

Dullness contemplates with delight a zany world where literary creativity is a degraded and automatic organic impulse in which bad writing proliferates and reproduces by mere natural process (“a warm third day”) rather than by thought or intelligence or knowledge or craft (“genial Jacob” is the printer and publisher

Jacob Tonson, and “genial” is from Latin, *genialis*, productive, relating to marriage). As part of these degraded origins of literary production, copulation between literary opposites creates unnatural issue, contradictory, paradoxical, and inverted unreality that delights Dullness: “With self-applause her wild creation views;/Sees momentary monsters rise and fall” (ll. 82–3).

Dullness then surveys the London literary scene. In each writer “she marks her Image full exprest,/But chief in BAYS’S [Cibber’s] monster-breeding breast” (ll. 107–8). Pope’s description of Cibber is one of the high points of the poem, totally unfair and just as hilarious:

Swearing and supperless the Hero sate,  
 Blasphem’d his Gods, the Dice, and damn’d his Fate.  
 Then gnaw’d his pen, then dash’d it on the ground,  
 Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!  
 Plung’d for his sense, but found no bottom there,  
 Yet wrote and flounder’d on, in mere despair.  
 Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay,  
 Much future Ode, and abdicated Play;  
 Nonsense precipitate, like running Lead,  
 That slip’d thro’ Cracks and Zig-zags of the head;  
 All that on Folly Frenzy could beget,  
 Fruits of dull Heat, and Sooterkins of wit.  
 Next, o’er his Books his eyes began to roll,  
 In pleasing memory of all he stole,  
 How here he sipp’d, how there he plunder’d snug,  
 And suck’d all o’er, like an industrious bug.  
 Here lay poor Fletcher’s half-eat scenes and here  
 The Frippery of crucify’d Molière;  
 There hapless Shakspeare, yet of Tibbald sore,  
 Wish’d he had blotted for himself before. (ll. 114–33)

Pope evokes Cibber as a starving hack writer – rather like Hogarth’s desperate author, scratching his head in his garret, although the actual Cibber was a successful and wealthy actor-manager – seeking inspiration and finding in his imagination absolutely nothing, as he views its comically sublime emptiness, a bottomless void, a “vast profound.” His past works lie around him as incomplete or lifeless human matter. Pope’s satire works by an unforgiving materialistic reduction, with the “creative” acts of his dunces literalized in their reproductive efforts, which give birth to mere embryos, half-formed abortion and afterbirth (“Sooterkins of wit”).

Pope’s satirical attack moves from Cibber’s writing as abortive non-reproduction to his consumption of the works of other authors, since he had in fact (innocently) adapted plays for his company by Fletcher, Molière, and Shakespeare (an updating of *Richard III*). The satire is fiendishly cruel and clever. Cibber the industrious bug sipping, sucking, and snacking on Fletcher’s plays edges over into violent and grotesque appropriation of “crucify’d Molière,” to wounded or even sexually

violated (by both Theobald and Cibber) “hapless Shakespeare, yet of Tibbald sore.” As the first book moves on, the satire slips back into the blander reversals of blame by praise; Cibber’s prayer to Dullness is that she “spread a healing mist before the mind;/And lest we err by Wit’s wild dancing light,/Secure us kindly in our native night” (ll. 174–6). But by the end of Book I of *The Dunciad* a new perspective emerges that will eventually in the remarkable Book IV, which Pope wrote in 1742, shift the satire from personal rage and disgust with bad writing to a political and cultural critique and apocalyptic prophecy that looks to the end of civilization. As she crowns Cibber as her champion, Dullness salutes him and exclaims “Folly, my son, has still a Friend at Court,” as she celebrates the poet laureate who will bring together bad poetry and a corrupt and supine monarchy:

Oh! when shall rise a Monarch all our own,  
 And I, a Nursing-mother, rock the throne;  
 ’Twi’x Prince and People close the Curtain draw,  
 Shade him from Light, and cover him from Law;  
 Fatten the Courtier, starve the learned band,  
 And suckle Armies, and dry-nurse the land:  
 Till Senates nod to Lullabies divine,  
 And all be sleep, as at an ode of thine.’  
 She ceased. Then swells the Chapel-royal throat:  
 ‘God save king Cibber!’ mounts in every note. (ll. 311–20)

In the middle two books of *The Dunciad*, this political theme recedes, as the satire at times grows scabrously uninhibited, with Book II featuring parodies of the epic games, the highlights being a pissing contest and a competition among the Dunces to see who can dive the deepest into the open sewer that ran through London in those days, Fleet Ditch. Book III, however, concludes with a prophecy that returns the poem to politics, with Dullness echoing in a close parody of the lines in the *Aeneid* the predictions for the greatness of the Roman empire that Aeneas hears in the underworld from the Sybil: “This, this is he, foretold by ancient rhymes:/Th’ Augustus born to bring Saturnian times” (III, ll. 319–20). And Dullness goes further, predicting that the future will bring the end of “Learning,” which will “fly the shore” (l. 333). The opening of Book IV deepens that prophecy and for a moment predicts what would indeed happen in two years to Pope himself:

Ye Pow’rs! Whose Mysteries restor’d I sing,  
 To whom Time bears me on his rapid wind,  
 Suspend a while your Force inertly strong,  
 Then take at once the Poet and the Song. (IV, ll. 5–8)

Those “Powers” sum up an all-encompassing degenerative trend in modern life and culture, as Pope registers it with undiminished satiric glee and darkening

apprehension in this concluding book of his poem. Dullness appears once more, as the other forces of darkness and disorder make their sinister appearance. The comic hi-jinks of Book III are nowhere in sight; Pope's tone is somber. "Then rose the Seed of Chaos, and of Night,/To blot out Order, and extinguish Light" (ll. 13–14). The crowd of Dunces swells, "a vast involuntary throng" who "Roll in her Vortex, and her pow'r confess" (ll. 82, 84). There follows a series of appearances by figures who represent the arts, education, scholarship, politics, and the aristocracy. At the very end, Dullness addresses this throng and urges them to "MAKE ONE MIGHTY DUNCIAD OF THE LAND!" (l. 604). And so it happens, as Pope writes the most powerful and utterly serious passage he ever conceived, where satire and tomfoolery are nowhere in sight, his negative epic finds its quite terrifying voice in pure apocalyptic prophecy that is completely unironic. Two years later, Pope was dead.

In vain, in vain, – the all-composing Hour  
 Resistless falls: The Muse obeys the Pow'r.  
 She comes! she comes! the sable Throne behold  
 Of *Night* Primæval, and of *Chaos* old!  
 .....  
 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 heap'd o'er her head!  
*Philosophy*, that lean'd on Heav'n 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 restor'd;  
 Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
 Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
 And Universal Darkness buries All. (ll. 627–30, 639–56)

## II. John Gay

In Book IV of *The Dunciad*, the playful spirit of the satirical mock-heroic with which the poem began turns serious, tragic even, as the difference between the heroic past and the degenerate and degraded present illuminates an apocalyptic future. Mock-heroic verse of the lighter sort is what Pope's and Swift's friend, John Gay, is the absolute master of. In its less distinctive and more conventional

way Gay's work is more representative of the characteristic strategies and moral perspectives and conclusions of a good deal of eighteenth-century verse in the mock-heroic mode. Martin Price has written eloquently of what he calls the "iridescence of the image of man" that the English Augustan poets dramatized. He refers to the following passage from Epistle II of Pope's *An Essay on Man* to illustrate what he means: at the end of a series of paradoxes that define man, Pope concludes thus:

Created half to rise and half to fall;  
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl'd:  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world. (II, ll. 15–18)

About these lines, Price comments: "The first two terms converge on the third; man is a riddle because he is simultaneously glory and jest. The Augustans maintain the iridescence of the image of man; they deliberately create perspectives that shimmer into each other and apart again. The mock form is perhaps the finest means of achieving these double perspectives."<sup>4</sup> Gay's most substantial poem, the mock-heroic (or mock-georgic) *Trivia: Or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716), only partially bears out Price's insight, since it is not a satire in the mode of *The Rape of the Lock* in which the trivial and the serious interact in complex and critical fashion or in which contradictions are balanced in the uneasy tension expressed in Pope's formulation in *An Essay on Man*. *Trivia* is rather a delightful, entirely good-humored and elaborate joke that describes in elevated poetic idiom how to navigate the ordinary perils of the great city as a pedestrian, although it has by the end a mild moral and of course is rooted in the belittling comparison of the heroic past and the prosaic and often comically ordinary or even degraded present that is the essence of the mock-heroic mode. In this regard, in its evocation of particular and familiar urban locales and events, it commands attention for modern readers as Gay's earlier and more precious effort in this mode, *The Fan* (1713), does not. A comparison of these two works may help us to understand the strengths as well as the limitations of the mock-heroic approach to verse.

As the editors of the standard edition of Gay's poems put it, *The Fan* is an imperfect burlesque of epic in that it fails "to fuse the realistic with the classical elements...mock epic with social satire," and yet despite its failings they call it substantially original.<sup>5</sup> As Book I opens, Gay's poem rises from elegant evocations of foreign fans inferior to the folding fan to a call to his muse to celebrate its distinctive power here in England.

I sing that graceful Toy, whose waving Play  
With gentle Gales relieves the sultry Day.  
Not the wide Fan by Persian Dames display'd,  
Which o'er their Beauty casts a graceful Shade;  
Not that long known in China's artful Land,

Which, while it cools the Face, fatigues the Hand:

.....

Stay, wand'ring Muse, nor rove in foreign Climes,  
 To thy own native Shore confine thy Rhimes.  
 Assist, ye Nine, your loftiest Notes employ,  
 Say what Celestial Skill contriv'd the Toy;  
 Say how this Instrument of Love began,  
 And in immortal Strains display the Fan. (Book I, ll. 1–6, 33–38; I, 58)

Gay's verses are fluent, comically inventive, but workmanlike rather than brilliant. Pope was his mentor and model, but he lacks Pope's virtuoso control, his skillful variations of the basic structure of the heroic couplet. The joke, such as it is in *The Fan*, is a mild one, with the folding fan in what follows contrived by Venus in response to a prayer for divine aid from Strepthon, who has been rebuffed by Corinna. Inspired by the peacock's tail, Venus instructs the Cupids who fashion "Female Toys" to create the folding fan. And in the opening of Book II Venus delivers a mock-classical oration on Olympus to the assembled gods, except that the mock part appears only gradually when Venus gets to the fan itself, "this Machine...That shades the Face, or bids cool Zephyrs play" (Book II, ll. 27–8; I, 67). She wants the gods to decide what sort of illustrations will decorate the fan, and her request shows us Gay at his most humorous and delicate, almost as fine as Pope:

Henceforth the waving Fan my Hands shall grace,  
 The waving Fan supply the Scepter's Place.  
 Who shall, ye Pow'rs, the forming Pencil hold?  
 What story shall the wide Machine unfold?  
 Let Loves and Graces lead the Dance around,  
 With Myrtle Wreaths and flow'ry Chaplets crown'd;  
 Let Cupid's Arrows strow the smiling Plains,  
 With unresisting Nymphs and am'rous Swains,  
 May glowing Picture o'er the Surface shine,  
 To melt slow Virgins with the warm Design. (Book II, ll. 39–48; I, 67)

The pleasure that such verse delivers is entirely a matter of performance, elaborate and studied poetical articulations and transformations of simple and mundane affairs, with the last line describing a genteel sort of pornographic process as the erotic scenes on the fan arouse "slow Virgins."

As this last line in the passage suggests, there is in Gay's mock-heroic at its best a serious frame of reference underneath the playful inventiveness. Or rather, the playfulness contains the seriousness without quite nullifying it, since in this case the folding fan and its amorous decorations are part and parcel of female sexuality and its power, which is a joke but in another sense quite a serious matter. The playfulness in poems like this needs to have a seriousness to complement it, needs the heroic or the horrible to sustain itself as the meaningful

alternative. In ordering her Cupids to fashion the new fan, Venus equates modern coquetry (“How are the Sex improv’d in am’rous Arts,/What new-found Snares they bait for human Hearts!” Book I, ll. 205–6; I, 64) with modern warfare’s efficiently thorough slaughtering:

When kindling War the ravag’d Globe ran o’er,  
 And fatten’d thirsty Plains with human Gore,  
 At first, the brandish’d Arm the Jav’lin threw,  
 Or sent wing’d Arrows from the twanging Yew;  
 .....  
 Now Men those less destructive Arms despise,  
 Wide-wasteful Death from thundring Cannon flies,  
 One Hour with more Battalions strows the Plain,  
 Than were of yore in Weekly Battels slain.  
 So Love with fatal Airs the Nymph supplies,  
 Her Dress disposes, and directs her Eyes.  
 The Bosom now its panting Beautys shows,  
 Th’ experience’d Eye resistless Glances shows,  
 .....  
 The fickle Head-dress sinks and now aspires,  
 A tow’ry Front of Lace on branching Wires:  
 The curling Hair in tortur’d Ringlets flows,  
 Or round the Face in labour’d Order grows. (Book I, ll. 207–10,  
 213–20, 223–6; I, 65)

That casual “So” in line 217 to dramatize the “fatal Airs” of modern as opposed to ancient coquettes is startling, a deliberately outrageous, extended equation of modern war and sexual desire and control. The erotic arts of modern dress display the female body and its decorative accoutrements as irresistible, able to deal “fatal Airs” like deadly modern artillery, with the coquette’s hair mesmerizing male onlookers by its fantastic, enthralling, and entangling arrangements. Poetic performance in this case almost literalizes the metaphorical “death” of orgasm that female sexuality can produce in male lovers. Of course, to extract such implications is to violate the comic playfulness of the verse, which in its playfulness contains as harmless or merely amusing the equation between modern war and sexuality.

Most of the latter parts of *The Fan*, Books II and III, comprise Gay’s vivid renditions of the scenes that various deities – Diana, Momus, Minerva – suggest should decorate the fan, with the two goddesses proposing monitory scenes of famous seduced and abandoned women such as Ariadne, Dido and Niobe, and Narcissus (to “warn each Female Breast,/That Beauty’s but a transient Good at best” Book III, ll. 127–8; I, 77), with Momus’ suggestions offering more sexual scenes such as the rape of Leda and Venus’ adultery with Mars as they are caught in Vulcan’s net *in flagrante delicto*. Gay’s renderings throughout are vividly colorful, and *The Fan* is a visual tour de force, and yet it operates on a superficial

and brilliant, indeed dazzling, level. There is no depth of theme, since playfulness and vividness are what Gay aims to provide. Thus, as Venus brings the fan to the lovelorn Strephon, she summarizes what “this bright Machine” will do for “the British Fair.”

The peeping Fan in modern Times shall rise,  
Through which unseen the female Ogle flies;  
This shall in Temples the sly Maid conceal,  
And shelter Love beneath Devotion’s Veil.

.....

As learned Orators that touch the Heart,  
With various Action raise their soothing Art,  
Both Head and Hand affect the list’ning Throng,  
And humour each Expression of the Tongue.

So shall each Passion by the Fan be seen,  
From noisie Anger to the sullen Spleen. (Book III, ll. 171–4, 177–82; I, 78)

*The Fan* renders a caricatured (and conventionally comic) vision of the arts of love and female wiles. *Trivia: Or The Art of Walking the Streets of London*, by contrast, deploys the same mock-heroic poetic perspective to render a messy and often brutal urban reality that many of Gay’s readers would have known intimately. As an actual and in fact accurate guide to the dangers in the streets of London for pedestrians, an urban georgic, *Trivia* is practical as well as playful, self-conscious and ironic about its playfulness as *The Fan* is not. In the poem’s opening lines, Gay modifies the metronomic pace that his couplets are prone to and writes an almost Miltonic introduction:

Through Winter Streets to steer your Course aright,  
How to walk clean by Day, and safe by Night,  
How jostling Crouds with Prudence, to decline,  
When to assert the Wall, and when resign,  
I sing: (Book I, ll. 1–5; I, 135)

And the opening verse paragraph ends with what must be a tongue-in-cheek (again in a Miltonic mood) statement of higher national purpose and ambition:

My youthful Bosom burns with Thirst of Fame,  
From the great Theme to build a glorious Name,  
To tread in Paths to ancient Bard unknown,  
And bind my Temples with a Civic Crown;  
But more my Country’s be the Profit, mine the Praise. (Book I, ll. 17–21; I, 35)

Gay declares and dramatizes in *Trivia* the moral superiority of pedestrian travel in the city. His attack, focused on coaches and sedan chairs, is on the

Luxury and Pride of their owners that allows them to afford and to enjoy such vehicles. Defiantly and with comic chauvinism, he declares that his subject is London, not Paris (“Where Slav’ry treads the Streets in wooden Shoes”) nor Amsterdam, nor Rome, nor Naples (“Where frequent Murders wake the Night with Groans”), nor Venice. And yet this last city, with canals instead of streets, leads to the praise of an older and morally superior London:

O happy Streets to rumbling Wheels unknown,  
 No Carts, no Coaches shake the floating Town!  
 Thus was of old Britannia’s City bless’d,  
 E’er Pride and Luxury her Sons possess’d: (Book I, ll. 99–102; I, 138)

In Gay’s poem a coach is always evidence of Luxury and Pride but often of even deeper moral disgrace and corruption. In Book II, for example, “Proud Coaches pass, regardless of the Moan,/Of Infant Orphans, and the Widow’s Groan” (ll. 451–2; I, 156), while the “Walker” is moved to charity: “His lib’ral Purse relieves the Lame and Blind./Judiciously thy Half-pence are bestow’d,/Where the laborious Beggar sweeps the Road” (ll. 454–6; I, 156). And a few hundred lines later the Walker points out a “bright Chariot...With Flanders Mares, and on an arched Spring” enclosing a “Wretch,” who “to gain an Equipage and Place,/Betray’d his Sister to a lewd Embrace” (ll. 573–6; I, 159). Other coaches contain other knaves and fools and even traitors: “This next in Court Fidelity excels,/The Publick rifles, and his Country sells” (ll. 585–6). Not so the narrator-walker:

May the proud Chariot never be my Fate,  
 If purchas’d at so mean, so dear a Rate;  
 O rather give me sweet Content on Foot,  
 Wrapt in my Vertue, and a good Surtout! (ll. 586–9; I, 160)

And yet despite this exaltation of pedestrian virtue, the poetic highlights of *Trivia* have nothing to do with the exposure of Pride and Luxury among those who sit in coaches. Two scenes stand out for their burlesque richness and amoral comedy. In Book II, the “roving Muse” recalls “that wond’rous Year,/When Winter reign’d in bleak Britannia’s Air” (ll. 357–8; I, 153). And the Thames did freeze over in 1709–10, and again in 1715–16, with booths and fairs erected on the ice, as *Trivia* recounts, along with the tragic history of Doll, the fruit seller who carries her wares in a basket on her head:

Each Booth she frequent past, in quest of Gain,  
 And Boys with pleasure heard her shrilling Strain.  
 Ah, Doll! all Mortals must resign their Breath,  
 And Industry it self submit to Death!  
 The cracking Crystal yields, she sinks, she dyes,

Her Head, chopt off, from her lost Shoulders flies:  
 Pippins she cry'd, but Death her Voice confounds,  
 And Pip-Pip-Pip along the Ice resounds.  
 So when the Thracian Furies Orpheus tore,  
 And left his bleeding Trunk deform'd with Gore,  
 His sever'd Head floats down the silver Tide,  
 His yet warm Tongue for his lost Consort cry'd;  
 Eurydice, with quiv'ring Voice, he mourn'd,  
 And Heber's Banks Eurydice return'd. (ll. 385–98; I, 154)

That intrusive “So,” indicating a simile such as we saw in *The Fan*, marks a gratuitously funny mock-heroic moment, although Doll’s grotesque death has more lines and a more original sound track, as it were. The Orpheus/Eurydice comparison is hardly exact, and the comedy is strained and even pointless. At regular intervals in *Trivia*, in fact, Gay indulges in similar jokes, underlining ordinary urban experience with a classical precedent meant to startle the reader with its inventive incongruity, its deliberate inappropriateness. Thus, to look at two other fairly outrageous examples, Gay’s pedestrian warns readers against risking a quarrel for that position on the pavement nearest the wall “When from high Spouts the dashing Torrents fall” (Book III, l. 205; I, 166) by remembering “Oedipus’ detested State,/And by his Woes be warn’d to shun thy Fate” (ll. 215–16). And later in Book III as Gay evokes a heroic fireman rescuing an infant from the flames, and here the comparison is meant to ennoble the eighteenth-century fireman, “With no less Virtue, than through hostile Fire,/The Dardan Hero [Aeneas] bore his aged Sire” (ll. 367–8; I, 171).

The story of Doll and other similar classically inflected anecdotes appear even more strained and artificial for readers who have come this far in the poem, since they have read the story of an amorous visit to London by the Roman goddess of sewers, Cloacina, who finds love with a “mortal Scavenger”:

..... she saw, she lov'd;  
 The muddy Spots that dry'd upon his Face,  
 Like Female Patches, heighten'd ev'ry Grace:  
 She gaz'd; she sigh'd. For Love can Beauties spy  
 In what seem Faults to ev'ry common Eye. (Book II, ll. 117–21; I, 147)

Like Jove, the narrator has explained, “ev’n the proudest Goddess now and then/Would lodge a Night among the Sons of Men” (ll. 111–12; I, 146). Nine months later, Cloacina returns to London (“The pregnant Goddess (cautious of Disgrace)/Descends to Earth...Alone, beneath a Bulk she dropt the Boy” [ll. 136–7, 140; I, 147]). The boy becomes a “Beggar’s Brat” whose distressful life leads Cloacina to ask her fellow gods “To teach his Hands some beneficial Art” (l. 152), which turns out to be boot blacking. And so Diana provides boar’s bristles for a brush, Phoebus a tripod “To raise the dirty Foot,” Neptune whale oil, and Vulcan soot to blacken the oil. Cloacina’s next descent to earth with these

gifts for her son is a tour de force, the finest and funniest bit of true mock-heroic in *Trivia*. The boy prays to his mother and from out of the “black Canal of Mud” she rises in full regalia to present him with the tools of his new profession:

The Goddess rose amid the inmost Round,  
 With wither'd Turnip Tops her temples crown'd;  
 Low reach'd her dripping Tresses, lank and black  
 As the smooth Jet, or glossy Raven's Back;  
 Around her Waste a circling Eel was twin'd,  
 Which bound her Robe that hung in Rags behind. (ll. 195–200; I, 149)

Unlike his friend Swift, for whom urban filth and disorder provoked rage and disgust, Gay creates touching comedy out of these features of eighteenth-century urban experience at its lowest and most degraded level. In this mock-elegant vision of the goddess, the real and the fanciful are effortlessly blended. The tale of Cloacina and her mortal Scavenger lover is full of sympathy for all concerned. Out of a scatological joke such as those Pope and Swift loved, Gay naturalizes and localizes in eighteenth-century urban experience classical heroic myth to comic and genuinely touching effect.

### III. Swift the Poet

In an almost certainly apocryphal anecdote, although repeated by many and by Johnson in his “Life of Swift,” Dryden is said to have remarked upon reading some of Swift’s earliest poems, “Cousin Swift, you will never be a poet.”<sup>6</sup> We may say that Dryden’s observation sets the critical tone in accounts of Swift’s struggles to begin as a poet and to fashion eventually what would become his distinctive voice. Once that voice emerges, however, the stark contrast (not just stylistic) between his management of his poetic career and Pope’s is instructive, highlighting the two friends’ diametrically opposed conceptions of the nature of poetry and the role of the poet in his career. Swift’s beginnings as a poet could not be more unlike Pope’s precocious literary knowingness and self-promoting ambitions, just as his writing life as a poet has no arc or pattern such as Pope constructed for himself. And indeed the mature Swift had no interest in dramatizing his poetic career, and when he discussed it in “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (c.1739) it was with considerable ironic distance and self-deprecation as he makes a show of his jealousy of Pope:

In Pope I cannot read a line,  
 But with a sigh I wish it mine:  
 When he can in one couplet fix  
 More sense than I can do in six:  
 It gives me such a jealous fit,  
 I cry, ‘Pox take him, and his wit.’<sup>7</sup>

In part, Swift's unsettled and troubled younger years were to blame for his slow start as a poet, but despite his social and economic handicaps he burned with ambitions, both literary and political/clerical. Where Pope was coddled by his financially secure parents and enjoyed what seems to have been an idyllic childhood despite his physical disabilities, Swift was a half-orphan whose father died before he was born and left his son dependent on the kindness of relatives. Anglo-Irish by upbringing but Anglican and fiercely English in origins and sympathies, Swift endured a traditional education at Trinity College, Dublin, where he lived on support provided by friends and relatives.

As all commentators on Swift's early attempts at writing verse have noted with puzzled disappointment, he began with (of all unfortunate choices given his later poetic profile as a satirist and parodist) panegyric Pindaric odes, influenced mainly by Abraham Cowley (1618–67). These youthful efforts are interesting but awkward. They show Swift groping for a style, his beginning as a poet fraught with imperfect imitation of his predecessors. These odes are not only efforts to establish his poetic credentials, as in the "Ode to the Athenian Society" (1692) which exaggerated the intellectual importance of the eccentric bookseller and author John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*, but in the "Ode to the King" (William III) and the "Ode to the Honourable Sir William Temple" (his patron and employer) he sought to please the powerful as he wondered just what to do with his life. Swift himself realized how imperfect his efforts were, as he complains in his letters from those years of his discomfort as a writer of verses, of his lack of confidence in his poetic abilities. He knew these were at best mediocre and derivative poems. The earliest effort with its oddly prosaic complete title, *Ode to the King On His Irish Expedition and the Success of his Arms in General*, features these self-deprecating lines in stanza I:

What can the poet's humble praise?  
 What can the poet's humble bays?  
 (We poets oft our bays allow  
 Translated to the hero's brow)  
 Add to the victor's happiness? (ll. 7–11)

In May 1692, Swift wrote to his cousin, Thomas Swift, complaining of his slowness in writing verses, particularly the poem he was trying to compose, *Ode to Dr. William Sancroft, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*: "I say, I cannot finish it for my life, and I have done nine stanzas, and do not like half of them." And yet even as he notes his difficulties and self-loathing, he confesses that he is "overfond of my own writings...I find when I writt [*sic*] what pleases me I am Cowley to my self and can read it a hundred times over."<sup>8</sup>

But even these awkward odes contain Swiftian moments, touches of satiric disgust and fury, as in the evocation of Louis XIV, "that restless tyrant" in the *Ode to the King*, as a "tennis ball of fate;/This gilded meteor" which

Took its first growth and birth  
 From the worst excrements of earth;  
 Stay but a little while and down again 'twill come  
 And end as it began, in vapour, stink, and scum (ll. 121–2, 126–9)

Passages like this not only illustrate how tentative and uncertain young Swift began as a poet but also how these attitudes and images, in heightened, intensified form, survived when he found his poetic voice, when as many critics have observed he turned from Cowley to the Samuel Butler of *Hudibras* (1663–78), a satire of Puritanism, a work he is said by his friend Laetitia Pilkington to have virtually memorized.<sup>9</sup> Even as the assured and tremendously fluent poet he quickly became, Swift developed what Dr. Johnson called (misleadingly if suggestively) an almost minimalist manner in which there is “not much upon which the critick can exercise his powers.” Moreover, citing an Irish edition of Swift’s works that said he had never taken “a single thought from any writer, ancient or modern,” Johnson calls that exaggerated but true to the extent that “no writer can easily be found that has borrowed so little, or that in all his excellencies and all his defects has so well maintained his claim to be considered an original.”<sup>10</sup>

In *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope imagines the young Roman poet Virgil as he sets out on his career and aspires to write an epic for Rome:

When first young *Maro* in his boundless Mind  
 A Work t’ outlast Immortal *Rome* design’d,  
 Perhaps he seem’d *above* the Critick’s Law,  
 And but from *Nature’s Fountains* scorn’d to draw:  
 But when t’ examine ev’ry Part he came,  
*Nature* and *Homer* were, he found, the *same*:  
 Convinc’d, amaz’d, he checks the bold Design,  
 And Rules as strict his labour’d Work confine,  
 As if the *Stagyrite* o’er looked each Line.  
 Learn hence for Ancient *Rules* a just Esteem;  
 To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*. (ll. 130–40)

The lesson Pope draws from this (invented) anecdote is that all art is imitation of past art and that all good art conforms to certain natural and inevitable laws. The poet (the creative writer in general) never simply begins with his or her unmediated experience but rather with pre-existing possibilities, with choices offered by tradition, culture, history, or even by human nature, what has been labeled the burden of the past. Pope, let it be said, felt no such burden and embraced the challenge. If we think of Pope’s imitations and variations on classic forms in his carefully staged career, we can say that Swift by contrast found his poetic voice and pursued his career in large part by a process of negation and rejection of many aspects of a rule-bound neo-classical orthodoxy concerning the purpose and matter of poetic expression as well as of poetic tradition. Here is

his degrading evocation of the burden of the past in *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* (1733) in which latter-day poets are like the smaller fleas that fleas have:

Thus every poet in his kind,  
 Is bit by him that comes behind;  
 Who, though too little to be seen,  
 Can tease, and gall, and give the spleen;  
 .....  
 Extol the Greek and Roman master,  
 And curse our modern poetasters. (ll. 357–60, 363–4)

In Butler's *Hudibras*, Swift found a rival tradition, what William K. Wimsatt shrewdly identified as the subversive line of "Goliardic-Skeltonic-Scarronian-Hudibrastic" verse that is "Gothic, rude, and beggarly jingle" from which Swift derived "his characteristic freedom and crashing energy."<sup>11</sup> I would add to Wimsatt's evocation of Swift's mature manner the joyful exuberance that infused much of that verse, a continuation of the pleasure and deep satisfaction with his early verse that he reported so ingenuously to his cousin. This pleasure strikes me as manifest (as well as infectious) in Swift's best or most memorable poems, a gleeful, sometimes jeering and provocative, projection of his personality. For one example, here are some lines attacking with laughter and contempt "the nation's representers" from *To a Lady Who Desired The Author To Write Some Verses Upon Her In The Heroic Style* (c.1728–32):

How the helm is ruled by Walpole,  
 At whose oars like slaves, they all pull:  
 .....  
 Safe within my little wherry,  
 All their madness makes me merry:  
 Like the watermen of Thames,  
 I row by, and call them names.  
 Like the ever-laughing sage,  
 In a jest I spend my rage.  
 (Though it must be understood,  
 I would hang them if I could:)  
 .....  
 Let me, though the smell be noisome,  
 Strip their bums; let Caleb hoise 'em:  
 Then apply Alecto's whip,  
 Till they wriggle, howl, and skip. (ll. 169–70, 173–80, 187–90)

As Edward Said put it, writing was for Swift an "event" rather than "art in our sense of the word or as craftsmanship for its own sake."<sup>12</sup> Said also noted that nearly every poem Swift wrote was specifically and pointedly occasional, responses to events that he did not create, making him thereby "preeminently a *reactive* writer."<sup>13</sup> For all that, Swift arranged to have his works, prose and

poetry, published in a collected edition of four volumes in octavo by the Irish publisher, George Faulkner, in 1734–5, expanded to six volumes in 1738. Swift was actively involved in the editing and in soliciting subscribers for the edition.<sup>14</sup> But he does not appear in propria persona, and in a prefatory note (doubtless composed by Swift) the publisher claims that these works may be Swift's, but that he took no active part in reviewing the material: "the supposed Author was prevailed upon to suffer some Friends to review and correct the Sheets after they were printed; and sometimes he condescended, as we have heard, to give them his own opinion." Such evasive playfulness on Swift's part bespeaks his ambivalence about Popeian self-canonization and self-promotion.

Swift might well have been embarrassed by a monumental edition of his writings like those of Pope's, since his poems derived much of their expressive energy from their relationship, both parodic and celebratory, to popular culture. I would argue that Swift developed his poetic manner by virtue of his connection with that culture. As his first biographer, John Boyle, Lord Orrery, claimed, Swift "delighted in scenes of low life. The vulgar dialect was not only a fund of humour for him, but I verily believe was acceptable to his nature; otherwise I know not how to account for the many filthy ideas, and indecent expressions... that will be found throughout his works."<sup>15</sup> Many of his poems depend for a good deal of their vigor on their affinity with that huge mass of popular or demotic verse produced in the Restoration and eighteenth century in Britain; they share with that verse the impetus of the topical and the occasional, and they flaunt their improvisational and performative qualities. Like much of this verse, Swift's is activist, argumentative, and pragmatic; it aims to comment and communicate; it is very much of the moment, although as Pat Rogers points out in his edition of the poems, less than a fifth of the poems that make up his complete works were published in Swift's lifetime, a fact that underlines the deeply informal, unpretentious, and even ephemeral as well as subversive nature of his work, many of them *jeux d'esprit*, addressed often to friends and attacking enemies.<sup>16</sup>

Given their aims and communicative function, Swift's verses aspire to simplicity and directness, the pertinence that particular occasions (often enough involving scatological humor) provided for his distinctive, transforming, and often subversive imagination. But clarity and simplicity are not easy to achieve, and Swift's verses deploy poetic technique and control, as well as implicit thematic depth and even at times cultural resonances and moral seriousness that challenge the crude ephemerality of purely popular poetry. Dustin Griffin alerts us to one of the Horatian mottoes affixed to one of the Faulkner edition's frontispiece: "Ex noto fictum carmen sequar, ut sibi quis/speret idem, sudet multum frustra que laboret/ausus idem," which the Loeb edition of Horace's poems translates, "My aim shall be poetry, so moulded from the familiar that anybody may hope for the same success, may sweat much and yet toil in vain when attempting the same."<sup>17</sup> But the particular and the comically scabrous are in some powerful sense primary and crucial to the spirit of his verses. The circumstances they deliver are

supplemented by Swift's poetic technique and thematic control rather than erased and remain essential to the effect of the verse. At their best, Swift's poems are performances not only in their balancing of high technique, sophisticated control, and low and crude diction or even transgressive emphasis as well as subject matter but also in their immersion in the moment, in the dynamic circumstances and mundane events that provoke the performance itself.

Consider as an early example of such performance *The Problem* (1699), about Sidney, Earl of Romney, who "stinks when he is in love." Swift's poem is unshamedly puerile and vulgar, but he shows his elite status by inventing a learned Rabelaisian joke, whereby among other turns of wit the mainspring of Cupid's bow is made of "an ass's gut" so that "though fixed among the stars,/Doth sympathize with human arse." And this mythological/physiological joke is backed up by a straight-faced if scabrous historical fact:

We read of kings who in a fright,  
Though on a throne, would fall to shite. (ll. 19–20)

Swift's control of the poem's narrative is almost demonic in its playful extension of the initial joke that the Earl's amorous feelings are marked by flatulence. The dramatic scene that follows is incongruously graceful and grotesquely witty, as the ladies,

Ambitious of a regent's heart,  
Spread all their charms to catch a fart!  
Watching the first unsavoury wind,  
Some ply before and some behind. (ll. 35–8)

And amid this parodic ballet, Swift inserts this magnificent couplet, a triumph of scatological eloquence in which the allusive richness of the lines is strikingly, hilariously counterpointed with the grossness of the scene.

My Lord, on fire amid the dames,  
Farts like a laurel in the flames. (ll. 39–40)

Swift's verses over his long life were various and multiple, and again Pat Rogers is a useful guide when he tells us in his introduction to his edition that they "appeared in a confused, intermittent, and largely haphazard fashion,"<sup>18</sup> another link of course with popular poetry, which is opportunistically responsive to events and occasions (as opposed to Pope's oeuvre, which is with great deliberation designed to promote a poetic career and establish an identity in which particular occasions and satiric and moral aims are subordinated to a larger, overseeing literary ambition and self-canonization). Where Pope thought of his poems as building up a monument, a coherent reiteration for his own time of past poetic glories, Swift's poems are a series of events, responses to other events,

many of them private or trivial, and inseparable from them, meant to have local effects, to expose and deride knaves and fools.

But there are some exceptions that demonstrate how Swift could more or less skillfully conform to the poetic decorum of his day. Both *A Description of the Morning* (1709) and *A Description of a City Shower* (1710) appeared in Richard Steele's periodical paper, *The Tatler*, a mainstream publication. And they are written in pentameter couplets rather than in the bouncy tetrameter couplets that he favored in most of his verse. Both of these poems are ironic modern pastorals or so-called town eclogues, with echoes of Virgil's *Georgics*. The modern urban scenes Swift evokes are implicitly and comically placed against echoes of classical idioms. Thus, the opening lines of *A Description of the Morning*—“Now hardly here and there a hackney coach/ Appearing, showed the ruddy morn's approach” — parody the rosy-fingered dawns of classical Homeric epic. The various London scenes in the poem that mark the arrival of a new day are comically unnatural, of course, drawn with a satiric eye for incongruity: the maid who has slept with her master “has flown,/ And softly stole to discompose her own,” and “Duns at his Lordship's gate begin to meet” (ll. 3–4, 13), the morning marked by signs of normal bad behavior rather than by the reassuring repetitions of natural phenomena.

*A Description of a City Shower* is three times longer than the earlier poem and more original in its handling of the ironic urban eclogue perspective. For a startling example, here are lines 13–16, a burlesque rendering of an epic simile to describe some celestial phenomena that turns rain into vomit:

Meanwhile the south, rising with dabbled wings,  
A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings;  
That swilled more liquor than it could contain,  
And like a drunkard gives it up again.

The shower arrives; the poem renders those who seek shelter from it in realistic terms — spattered “females” who pretend to shop, the law student who pretends to be hailing a coach, “The tucked-up seamstress walks with hasty strides,/ While streams run down her oiled-umbrella's sides” (ll. 37–8), an image that edges over into the mock-heroic that continues in the evocation of a beau who impatiently sits “Boxed in a [sedan] chair”:

While spouts run clattering o'er the roof by fits  
And ever and anon with frightful din  
The leather sounds; he trembles from within.  
So when Troy chairmen bore the wooden steed,  
Pregnant with Greeks, impatient to be freed;  
(Those bully Greeks, who, as the moderns do,  
Instead of paying chairmen, run them through)  
Laocoon struck the outside with his spear,  
And each imprisoned hero quaked for fear. (ll. 43–52)

The “beau,” an effeminate fop in the parlance of Swift’s day, is a mock-heroic, decidedly diminished version of the Greek warriors in the Trojan Horse; but those warriors in the Trojan Horse are like modern London street ruffians, “bullies,” thugs, and like the fop who trembles in the sedan chair they quake with fear as they are nearly exposed by Laocoon. Ancient heroic story in these lines is deflated by equation with modern urban life at its most ordinary and trivial; the ironies stretch both ways.

Swift’s poetry is defined by its consistent and utter rejection of conventional forms, attitudes, and pieties. That rejection is at its most intense and coherent in three areas, the political, the aesthetic, and the amatory. For an example of the last, consider the poem *To Stella, Who Collected and Transcribed His Poems* (1727), in which he contemplates the nature of his own verses and those of other, let us call them popular and thoughtless, poets who operate by rote and who evoke their fictional mistresses (“... the goddesses enrolled,/In Curll’s collections, new and old,” ll. 49–50). Such comparison is a frequent emphasis in his verses, which are unsparing in their contempt for amatory literary fictions. Swift’s relationship with Stella (Esther Johnson, his close female friend and possibly his mistress and perhaps his wife), addressed in many poems, is the key to his attitude toward conventional amatory verse. Swift proposes in this poem and in others written for her birthdays to correct the falsities of those romantic fictions that he detests. So he looks back to his earlier poetic tributes to her: “Without one word of Cupid’s darts,/Of killing eyes, or bleeding hearts” (ll. 10–11). Quickly and powerfully, then, this part of the poem turns into an unforgiving attack not just on fake amatory rhetoric and bad love poets who write by rote but on the actual women their banalities romanticize:

Or should a porter make inquiries  
For Chloe, Sylvia, Phyllis, Iris;  
Be told the lodging, lane, and sign,  
The bowers that hold those nymphs divine;  
Fair Chloe would perhaps be found  
With footmen tipping underground;  
The charming Sylvia beating flax,  
Her shoulders marked with bloody tracks;  
Bright Phyllis mending ragged smocks,  
And radiant Iris in the pox. (ll. 39–48)

Swift’s evocation of degraded London low life might well be part of popular verse of the time. The brilliant if disturbing misogynistic fury of these last lines, however, is expressive of emotional depths and a curious complexity that could never be popular. The enormous ironies evoked by adjectives like “fair,” “charming,” “bright,” and, most chilling of all, “radiant” (burning up with venereal disease) are created by the way their conventional flattery is set off or contextualized in a deep way, their horrendous falsity dramatized by the

socio-historical realities of female degradation of various kinds. Beneath Swift's savage contempt for these unfortunate women, there lies I think an ultimate sympathy.

And a bit later in the poem as Swift contemplates Stella's virtues, stressing how qualitatively different they are from the adventitious superficialities and outright distortions that amatory poetry celebrates, he tells the story of one Maevius, a fictional poetaster mentioned by Virgil:

So Maevius, when he drained his skull  
To celebrate some suburb trull;  
His similies in order set,  
And every crambo he could get;  
Had gone through all the commonplaces  
Worn out by wits who rhyme on faces;  
Before he could his poem close,  
The lovely nymph had lost her nose. (ll. 71–8)

Less intense than the previous passage I quoted, this part of the poem might until the cruel last line (the nymph's nose collapses, one of the possible results of the tertiary phase of syphilis) almost pass as popular verse. But what on one level is merely sophomorically crude and jokey becomes thanks to Swift's inimitable handling of these materials, his subjecting them to the force of his ironic juxtapositions, both a shocking expression of personal disgust and a less clear moral protest against what provokes that disgust. Moments like this in Swift's verse, and there are many of them, represent a transformation (but not, I would insist, a transcendence) by intense poetic expressiveness of the immediacy and crudity of popular verse in the early eighteenth century.

The most notorious instance in Swift's verse of his absolute contempt for amatory convention is *The Lady's Dressing Room* (1732), which was also, as Rogers notes, one of his most popular poems. It also provoked a number of poetic rebuttals, including one by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.<sup>19</sup> Readers who knew Swift's verses would have spotted immediately the ironies in the language of the opening four lines:

Five Hours, (and who can do it less in?)  
By haughty Celia spent in Dressing;  
The Goddess from her Chamber issues,  
Array'd in Lace, Brocades and Tissues. (ll. 1–4)

With Celia gone, Strephon decides to explore her dressing room, and what he finds are the by-products of the elaborate makeup that transforms Celia into a "Goddess." Here's a small sample that dramatizes Swift's capacity for raising disgust to an intense level of colloquial negativity, with no poetic diction anywhere in sight, nothing but plain and brutal English:

But oh! it turned poor Strephon's bowels,  
 When he beheld and smelt the towels,  
 Begummed, bemattered, and beslimed  
 With dirt, and sweat, and ear-wax grim'd.  
 No object Strephon's eye escapes,  
 Here, petticoats in frowzy heaps;  
 Nor be the handkerchiefs forgot  
 All varnished o'er with snuff and snot.  
 The stockings why should I expose,  
 Stained with the moisture of her toes; (ll. 43–52)

The climax of the poem arrives, however, when Strephon lifts the lid of Celia's chamber pot: "He lifts the lid: there need no more,/He smelt it all the time before" (ll. 81–2). Part of the joke is the enormity of Strephon's disgust at normal human function, rendered through an elaborate mock-heroic frame of reference, which begins with Swift comparing the odors that come out of Celia's close stool to what escaped from Pandora's box, although there "hope at least remained behind" (l. 88). But Strephon, the narrator explains in the next few lines, is too cautious "to grope,/And foul his hands in search of hope" (ll. 93–4). Nonetheless, Strephon is terminally revolted, "Repeating in his amorous fits, 'Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!'" (ll. 117–18). And now we are told "his foul imagination links/Each dame he sees with all her stinks" (ll. 121–2).

The concluding lines of this poem are worth quoting for the complicated ironies that govern them.

I pity wretched Strephon, blind  
 To all the charms of womankind;  
 Should I the queen of love refuse,  
 Because she rose from stinking ooze?  
 To him that looks behind the scene,  
 Satira's but some pocky quean.  
 When Celia in her glory shows,  
 If Strephon would but stop his nose;  
 .....

He soon would learn to think like me,  
 And bless his ravished sight to see  
 Such order from confusion sprung,  
 Such gaudy *tulips* raised from *dung*. (ll. 129–36, 141–4)

The intense but ironic misogyny in the narrator's solution to Strephon's debilitating and ridiculous disgust is worth examining. The "charms of womankind" are inextricable from their rootedness in humanity at its lowest and filthiest. The narrator is an unillusioned connoisseur of female contradiction, of "gaudy" tulips that grow out of dung, and the difference between him and Strephon is a matter of his amused contempt rather than dizzying abhorrence. His formulation

in the last two lines flirts with blasphemy, with women's cosmetic transformation as a hot house parody of divine creation.

It is revealing to compare Swift's evocation of the dressing table with Pope's description of Belinda's cosmetic transformation in *The Rape of the Lock*. Here are a few lines from that scene in Canto I when Belinda awakens and with the aid of her maid, Betty, is not so much transformed as revealed in the full potential of her beauty:

Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;  
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,  
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,  
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;  
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,  
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes (I, ll. 139–44)

All the key words in this passage are tinged with a gentle if probing irony, informed by the ruling military mock-heroic metaphor: Belinda in her beauty is "awful" (awe-inspiring, that is) and the makeup process that transforms her is like the dressing of a hero in his armor before the battle. Note especially the subtle irony of line 143, where thanks to cosmetics a "purer Blush" arises, as if that most spontaneous of bodily phenomena, the blush, could be made purer by means of the artifice of the dressing table. Where Pope is subtle, his irony as delicate as a scalpel, Swift is powerful and brutal, his furious ironies blunt as a broadsword. For Pope, Belinda is an aesthetic opportunity and moral problem; she is beautiful but self-absorbed and morally unaware. For Swift, Celia (and by extension all manufactured beauties) is a cosmetic fraud and represents aesthetic failure, a "gaudy" tulip rather than a beautiful and natural flower.

For all of its subversive articulation of what some modern critics have called Swift's "excremental vision," *The Lady's Dressing Room* is not as violently misogynistic as a few of his other poems. A notable and deeply disturbing instance is *A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed: Written for the Honour of the Fair Sex* (1731), which surveys the bedtime undressing, a reversal of a dressing-table scene, of a prostitute: "Corinna, pride of Drury Lane,/For whom no shepherd signs in vain" (ll. 1–2). Corinna in Swift's merciless, cold-eyed undressing is completely, grotesquely artificial. Here is perhaps the cruelest part of the poem, a parody of the traditional blazon, an ecstatic and erotic description of a woman's body:

Now dexterously her plumpers draws,  
That serve to fill her hollow jaws.  
Untwists a wire; and from her gums  
A set of teeth completely comes.  
Pulls out the rags contrived to prop  
Her flabby dugs, and down they drop.  
Proceeding on, the lovely goddess

Unlaces next her steel-ribbed bodice;  
 Which by the operator's skill,  
 Press down the lumps, the hollows fill.  
 Up goes her hand, and off she slips  
 The bolsters that supply her hips.  
 With gentler touch, she next explores  
 Her shankers, issues, running sores;  
 Effects of many a sad disaster,  
 And then to each applies a plaster. (ll. 17–32)

The last lines do, however, show a momentary sympathy for long-suffering Corinna, who must put herself back together each morning and who this morning wakes to find that “Puss had on her plumper's pissed” and “Shock her tresses filled with fleas” (ll. 62, 64). Having pitilessly watched her taken apart, the poet despairs of depicting “the anguish, toil, and pain,/Of gathering up herself again” (ll. 69–70). But “the bashful muse” cannot bear to follow up, since to see Corinna dressed in the morning is to “spew,” to smell her to “be poisoned” (l. 74). Except for the subtitle, there is no irony, no complexity in this poem. It expresses pure revulsion at a helpless and hopeless creature. One can read the poem as social commentary, as an unsparing, if exaggerated, view of the physical degradation suffered by London prostitutes in the early eighteenth century. Or it can be read, more plausibly, as repellent evidence of Swift's pathology. His contempt, to put it mildly, was better served poetically and is much more palatable and revealing when it focused on political and literary enemies.

Like Pope, Swift was no friend of the Hanoverian dynasty that assumed the British throne with the death of Queen Anne in 1714. Some of his political poems were so explosive that they could not be published during his lifetime. Among the most incendiary (and amusing and irreverent) of these is *Directions for a Birthday Song*, which Pat Rogers thinks was composed in response to the many celebrations of George II's birthday, on October 30, 1729, and *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* (1732), the latter nearly 550 lines long. Both of these poems, as their titles exclaim, are subversively cynical instructions for how to write verse. They are thus both political and aesthetic satires, attacks on bad government, as Swift saw it, and on sycophantic poetry, especially when it praised that bad government. To read these poems with full enjoyment of the jokes, of course, one has to have read a lot of the bad panegyric verse Swift is satirizing, especially the vapid verse tributes that the new poet laureate, the actor Colley Cibber, produced for each royal birthday and each New Year. Here are some samples from Cibber's *An Ode to His Majesty, for the New-Year, 1730/31* in which Cibber addresses “Grateful Britons”:

Your Plenty, to the Skies, you owe;  
 Peace is your Monarch's Care;  
 Thus Bounteous JOVE, and GEORGE below  
 Divided Empire share.

.....  
 Turn, happy Britons, to the Throne, your Eyes,  
 And in the Royal Offspring see  
 How amply Bounteous Providence supplys  
 The Source of your Felicity!

Behold! in every Face,  
 Imperial Graces shine!  
 All Native to the Race

Of GEORGE and CAROLINE.  
 In each young Hero we admire  
 The blooming Virtues of his Sire;  
 In each Maturing Fair we find  
 Maternal Charms, of softer Kind. (ll. 15–18, 25–36)<sup>20</sup>

Swift's simplicity and directness derive their special power in their day from their contrast with the fatuous exaltations and sycophantic praise of such panegyrics. *Directions for a Birthday Song* is unsparingly brutal in its rejections of their empty flattery:

Thus your encomiums, to be strong,  
 Must be applied directly wrong:  
 A tyrant for his mercy praise,  
 And crown a royal dunce with bays:  
 A squinting monkey load with charms;  
 And paint a coward fierce in arms.  
 .....  
 For all experience this evinces  
 The only art of pleasing princes;  
 For princes love you should descant  
 On virtues which they know they want. (ll. 115–20, 125–8)

A reader nowadays will hardly blink at such honesty, but in 1730 such bald assertions were very dangerous. And it is revealing that the poem was not published, as Pat Rogers notes, until some thirty years after its composition in 1765.<sup>21</sup> *On Poetry: A Rhapsody* was printed in expurgated form as was *To a Lady*,<sup>22</sup> and as Rogers relates, in 1735 various people who facilitated publication of these poems were arrested and Robert Walpole hoped to charge Swift himself. That never happened and the charges against the others were dropped.<sup>23</sup> In *On Poetry* Swift first employs utterly transparent irony as he contrasts Britain's monarch and government with the other European monarchs so different from the Augustus celebrated by Virgil and Horace:

But now go search all Europe round,  
 Among the savage monsters crowned,  
 With vice polluting every throne  
 (I mean all kings except our own)

.....  
 Thus think on kings, the name denotes  
 Hogs, asses, wolves, baboons and goats,  
 To represent in figure, just  
 Sloth, folly, rapine, mischief, lust. (ll. 435–8, 457–60)

The praise of George II is so exaggerated that the reader is instructed to reverse it:

Fair Britain, in thy monarch blessed,  
 Whose virtues bear the strictest test;  
 Whom never faction can bespatter,  
 Nor minister nor poet flatter.  
 What justice in rewarding merit!  
 What magnanimity of spirit!  
 ...  
 Say, poet, in what other nation,  
 Shone ever such a constellation.  
 Attend ye Popes, and Youngs, and Gays,  
 And tune your harps and strow your bays.  
 Your panegyrics here provide,  
 You cannot err on flattery's side.  
 Above the stars exalt your style,  
 You still are low ten thousand mile. (ll. 463–8, 519–26)

Swift's political invective, unlike his misogynist and "excremental" poems, necessarily loses a good deal of its force and pertinence for twenty-first-century readers. The Hanoverians and even Robert Walpole, the powerful minister, were just not as awful or corrupt as Swift and those who agreed with him thought, although the conventional flattery of poems like Cibber's is still deeply embarrassing. But there is one of Swift's poetic political satires that stands out, that retains I would contend its full power: *A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General* is a compact masterpiece of satiric hatred (so brutal and unforgiving that it was not published until after Swift's own death). The oxymoronic title tells you that Swift is overtly reversing and parodying generic decorum, in fact reveling in the subversive trampling on poetic decorum in the colloquial vigor of its opening lines. Here is the entire poem.

His Grace! impossible! what, dead!  
 Of old age too, and in his bed!  
 And could that Mighty Warrior fall,  
 And so inglorious, after all?  
 Well, since he's gone, no matter how,  
 The last loud trump must wake him now:  
 And, trust me, as the noise grows stronger,  
 He'd wish to sleep a little longer.

And could he be indeed so old  
 As by the newspapers we're told? (10)  
 Threescore, I think, is pretty high;  
 'Twas time in conscience he should die.  
 This world he cumbered long enough;  
 He burnt his candle to the snuff;  
 And that's the reason, some folks think,  
 He left behind *so great a stink*.  
 Behold his funeral appears,  
 Nor widow's sighs, nor orphan's tears,  
 Wont at such times each heart to pierce,  
 Attend the progress of his hearse. (20)  
 But what of that, his friends may say,  
 He had those honours in his day.  
 True to his profit and his pride,  
 He made them weep before he died.

Come hither, all ye empty things,  
 Ye bubbles raised by breath of kings;  
 Who float upon the tide of state,  
 Come hither, and behold your fate.  
 Let pride be taught by this rebuke,  
 How very mean a thing's a Duke; (30)  
 From all his ill-got honours flung,  
 Turn'd to that dirt from whence he sprung. (ll. 1–32)

With its compact tetrameter couplets, occasionally slangy diction, and deceptively simple scenes in the first 24 lines, the poem is in part Swift's inspired adaptation of popular verse, with no literary allusions or (until the last eight lines) moral seriousness or direct address to the poetic audience. It is a pure dialogue, implying a series of voices at its beginning that are both gossipy and ironic, delighted by the incongruities of the Duke's death. Note as well the reference to Marlborough's well-known stinginess despite his vast wealth: "he burnt his candle to the snuff," and the scabrous joke about his corpse stinking. The opening lines are a dramatic dialogical marvel, with a speaker responding with mock incredulity to the news from an interlocutor that the Duke of Marlborough has just died, as he notes the massive irony of a "Mighty Warrior" (the phrase itself in mock capitals and heavy implicit scare quotes) dying of old age in his bed. The trick in these opening lines is that the speaker invites us to imagine that interlocutor, who has delivered the news to the speaker of the poem of the Duke's death in bed, of all places. Dialogue in this case is all the more effective for being at first implicit; we hear only one speaker but can imagine the other or indeed others.

A contemporary reader would have known that the government had staged an enormously expensive and elaborate state funeral for the dead Duke, and Swift's poem imagines onlookers ("Behold his funeral appears") and "friends" who speak with devastating irony about the lack of mourning at the funeral

(“he made them weep before he died”). That ironic voice is the subversive response to the official pomp of the funeral. Those thousands upon thousands killed in the wars that made Marlborough the most famous and immensely rich (“his profit and his pride”) general of his time have used up the sighs and tears, so that there are none left for him. The silence is deafening, says Swift’s poem.

Swift’s most brilliant moment comes at the end, as the last eight lines mark a radical shift in tone from the satirically particular (and to that extent ephemeral) to the grandly general moralizing that draws a lesson from the death of Marlborough, the grandest of English grandees. This is a new voice, and one that at first seems magisterial and decorous, indeed declamatory as it addresses readers and posterity rather than the implied dramatis personae of the rest of the poem: “Come hither all ye empty things.” And yet this stern moralizing voice is high so that Marlborough (and other corrupt courtiers like him, in Swift’s view) may be even lower – bubbles floating on the tide of state. And then the closing couplet marks yet another shift in voice, as the Voice of Moral Truth swerves away abruptly from moral declamation to satiric degeneration once again:

From all his ill-got honours flung,  
Turn’d to that dirt from whence he sprung.

“Flung” and “sprung,” irregular English past participles, violate by their very sound, in their clumsy oddness, the smooth decorum of the Voice of Truth, just as the graphic “dirt” instead of the euphemistic “dust” customary in elegies also undercuts the stately moralizing of the previous lines and returns us to satiric attack at its most brutal and unsparing. And not incidentally the motions evoked in these lines – Marlborough’s corpse being flung from his honors, transformed somehow from a national hero in stately repose in his coffin to a corpse rudely returned to the primeval muck and mud from which he is imagined in another awkward moment as springing – all this flinging and springing contrasts with the sonorous outrage of the Voice of Moral Truth in the preceding lines. The ephemeral occasional basis of Swift’s poem, in other words, is both preserved and transcended by his variations on mere satiric attack.

### Notes

- 1 Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 1099.
- 2 Samuel Johnson, “Life of Pope,” in *The Lives of the Poets, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John H. Middendorf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), XXIII, 1219, 1220.
- 3 Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1985), p. 318.
- 4 Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom: Studies in Order and Energy from Dryden to Blake* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 250.

- 5 Vinton A. Dearing and Charles E. Beckwith, eds., *John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Introduction, I, 6. All further references in the text to Gay's poetry are from this edition.
- 6 Samuel Johnson, "Life of Swift," in *The Lives of the Poets, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John H. Middendorf (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), XXII, 977–8.
- 7 Pat Rogers, ed., *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 486, ll. 47–52. All further line references in the text are to this edition.
- 8 *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, in 4 vols., ed. David Woolley (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), I, 110.
- 9 Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*, 2 vols., ed. A. C. Elias (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), I, 55.
- 10 Johnson, "Life of Swift," pp. 1022–3.
- 11 William K. Wimsatt, "Rhetoric and Poems: The Example of Swift," in *The Author in His Work: Essays on a Problem in Criticism*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Aubrey L. Williams (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 232.
- 12 Edward W. Said, "Swift's Tory Anarchy," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 56.
- 13 Said, "Swift as Intellectual," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 78.
- 14 Dustin Griffin, *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 184–6.
- 15 John Boyle, Fifth Earl of Cork and Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift*, ed. João Fróes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), p. 96.
- 16 Rogers, *Jonathan Swift*, Introduction, p. 15.
- 17 Griffin, *Swift and Pope*, p. 189.
- 18 Rogers, *Jonathan Swift*, p. 15.
- 19 Rogers, *Jonathan Swift*, p. 827.
- 20 Colley Cibber, *An Ode to His Majesty, for the New-Year, 1730/31* (London, 1731), pp. 6–8.
- 21 Rogers, *Jonathan Swift*, p. 799.
- 22 For discussion of *To a Lady* see above, p. 55.
- 23 Rogers, *Jonathan Swift*, pp. 867–8.