

How to Live: The Moral and the Social

In 1700, the first year of a new century, John Dryden, not long before his death, composed *The Secular Masque*. At its conclusion, a group of mythological figures occupies the stage, reflecting in derogatory terms on the historical period immediately past. The final chorus ends,

'Tis well an Old Age is out,
And time to begin a New.

New ages do not necessarily coincide with new centuries, yet years ending in double zeroes carry special imaginative weight. We want to believe that something important will happen as a century changes, although, inevitably, much remains the same. Let us begin our story, then, at the arbitrary starting point of 1700, a year that saw the publication not only of Dryden's *Masque*, with its skepticism about the past ("Thy Wars brought nothing about; / Thy Lovers were all untrue") and its implicit optimism about the future, but also of John Pomfret's enormously popular poem, *The Choice*, a work that holds in some respects to the distant past, although its large readership endured through much of the century to come.

Pomfret's subject, a favorite one in the eighteenth century, is the choice of life: how an individual man might determine the best circumstances and the best conduct available to him. The topic would have had particular urgency in 1700, less than sixty years after the English had executed their king, Charles I, in the immediate aftermath of a cataclysmic civil war. It would be hard to exaggerate this event's traumatic repercussions. To kill a king, a figure whose divine right to govern had long been a matter of general conviction, and to do so as a result of purportedly legal judicial determination: such an act not only overturned centuries of tradition; it also created new uncertainties. Who

2 *How to Live: The Moral and the Social*

could be trusted, if not the king? What could be counted on, if not the monarchy's continuity? Was the execution of Charles I justice or sacrilege? Such questions lingered long after the deed itself.

The 1642 execution did not produce a stable government. England became for a time a commonwealth, governed by Oliver Cromwell under the title of Lord Protector. By 1660, however, Charles II, son of the executed monarch, returned to the throne, to be succeeded in 1687 by his Catholic son, James II. Two years later, the so-called Glorious Revolution deposed James in favor of his sister Mary and her husband, William of Orange, Protestants both, who remained on the throne as the new century began. James, however, was still alive and well in France, and some believed him the rightful king. If the English felt uncertain of the monarchy's stability, they had reason.

The political forces that generated this confused sequence of rulers had religious and moral aspects as well. Antagonism between Protestants and Catholics shaped the rebellion against James II. Catholics had become a small minority in England; the decision to expel a Catholic king reflected a strong majority view. More deeply disturbing, because more widely divisive, was the split that had produced the civil war. On one side, the so-called Puritans represented Protestants who dissented from the doctrine of the Church of England, following stricter moral and more rigid doctrinal principles. The Cavaliers, who supported the monarchy of Charles I, espoused more moral permissiveness and laxer theological discipline than did their opponents. Aristocrats predominantly, although not invariably, supported the Cavaliers and the king; the Puritans attracted wide advocacy among commoners. Thus class interests as well as theological ones worked to generate conflict.

The Puritans won the war, but eighteen years later the Cavaliers triumphed, with the return of Charles II. A long, painful struggle had in a sense resolved nothing. The conflicts at issue in the mid-seventeenth century, between different forms of belief, different modes of conduct, and different class allegiances, remained alive at the beginning of the eighteenth century. A personal choice of life could thus be understood as a political commitment. Many, however, might hope for a kind of choice that could separate them from politics. The proliferation of poetry about the subject, although it seemed to concern individuals, in fact had large social implications.

The Choice sets forth details of what purports to be Pomfret's personal choice. No practical restrictions limit his imagining. He conjures

up an ideal situation, in which friends remain ever faithful and agreeable, a mistress both intelligent and attractive is at his disposal, no wife or children impede his pleasures, the natural environment abounds in delights, and he possesses as much money as he desires.

With the fierce civil war just behind them, the English would have found a vision of gratifying and peaceful noninvolvement especially appealing. More to the point, they would find poetry articulating such a vision attractive. The poetry of the Restoration (the period beginning in 1660, when Charles II ascended the throne; the term loosely designates the last forty years of the seventeenth century) had included much political verse, often fiercely partisan about religious and national matters, and much bawdiness. Cynicism often controlled poetic utterance. Thus Samuel Butler, at the beginning of his popular *Hudibras* (1663), could write of England's agonizing civil war, not long past:

When *Civil Dudgeon* first grew high
And men fell out they knew not why;
When hard words, *Jealousies*, and *Fears*
Set Folks together by the ears,
And made them fight, like mad, or drunk,
For Dame *Religion*, as for Punk [prostitute],
Whose honesty they all durst swear for,
Though not a man of them knew wherefore . . .
(1–8)

Religion had been a matter of life and death, yet the poet felt free to suggest that men who killed and were killed did not even know why they fought.

Pomfret's tone of reflective seriousness, his respectful claims of piety, and his insistent modesty differentiate him sharply from poets like Butler, or the often obscene Rochester, or even the poet laureate Dryden in his characteristic rhetorical dignity. Unlike such important Restoration figures, he appears to make few claims on his readers, demanding neither cynicism nor large tolerance. *The Choice* provides easy reading.

Like many poems that followed it, though, it is less simple than it seems. For one thing, it bears a complicated relation to literary tradition. As classically educated eighteenth-century readers would notice, Pomfret drew on the verse of the great Latin poet, Horace, as a model. An ideal of rural retirement informs many of Horace's epistles, which

may turn, implicitly or explicitly, on a contrast between the corruption of the court and the innocence of the country. Inasmuch as Pomfret could be seen as alluding to Horace, he might be seen also as commenting on the relative corruption of public men – not only courtiers, but also politicians. *The Choice* advocates opting out.

Closer to Pomfret's historical moment were the many country-house poems of the seventeenth century that celebrated a luxurious version of the rural retreat. A poet writing in 1700 could plausibly expect his readers to notice both his allusions to and his differences from such models. The differences help to locate Pomfret's achievement. Ben Jonson, writing *To Penshurst* in 1616, praised the estate as a place of plenty, rich in provisions for hospitality. Here he describes the catching of fish and game to supply the table:

The painted partrich lyes in every field,
 And, for thy messe [meal] is willing to be kill'd.
 And if the high-swolne *Medwaye* fail thy dish,
 Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,
 Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net,
 And pikes, now weary their own kinde to eat,
 As loth, the second draught, or cast to stay,
 Officiously [dutifully], at first, themselves betray.
 Bright eeles, that emulate them, and leape on land,
 Before the fisher, or into his hand.

(29–38)

The fanciful notion that birds and fish alike demonstrate eagerness to be killed for the master's table animates the verse, creating a bizarre vision of coordinated activity, the animal world unified in happy self-sacrifice, as fish from the Medway River or from the estate's ponds rush into the net and eels leap into the fisherman's hand. Jonson offers this not as literal description, but as a metaphor of abundance, one of many such images in the poem.

Pomfret traffics in no such exaggeration. Avoiding the extravagance of much seventeenth-century poetry, he stresses the modesty of his desires, in this respect resembling Horace: he wants a house "Built Uniform, not little, nor too great" (6), containing only things "Useful, Necessary, Plain" (10), the capacity to live "Genteelly, but not Great" (34), and so on. Frequent invocations of "Heaven" remind us that the speaker seeks to govern himself by Christian imperatives. The poem

ends by imagining a death as peaceful and harmonious as the life that has been evoked. "Then," it concludes, "wou'd my Exit so propitious be, / All men wou'd wish to live and dye like me" (166–67).

This final couplet consolidates abundant earlier suggestions that, despite the speaker's proclaimed moderation, his fantasy has its own extravagance. Everyone, everywhere would realize it if they could, once they perceived its perfection. Above all, the vision Pomfret offers speaks of human harmony. Not only the nation as a whole but also, frequently, individual families had found themselves divided by opposed political views that became causes for bloodshed during the civil war. *The Choice* imagines male friends "Not prone to Lust, Revenge, or envious Hate; / Nor busy Medlers with Intrigues of State" (90–91); a female companion "Civil to Strangers, to her Neighbours kind, / Averse to Vanity, Revenge, and Pride" (121–22); and a self "concern'd in no litigious Jarr, / Belov'd by all, not vainly popular" (140–41). It provides a detailed alternative to division.

The harmonious verse of *The Choice* reiterates the ideal of harmony and thus emphasizes the poem's import. Like most of his contemporaries, Pomfret wrote in heroic couplets: ten-syllable lines rhymed successively and patterned by iambic meter, a sequence of unstressed followed by stressed syllables. "'Most Women have no Characters at all': this, the second line of Alexander Pope's *An Epistle to a Lady*, exemplifies the regularity and easy emphasis of iambic verse. Even within such regularity, though, much variation flourished. In Pomfret's hands, the couplet became a soothing form. *The Choice* moves smoothly. Its rhymes (lend–spend, contain–Plain, Row–grow) seldom surprise and never shock. Each couplet typically encapsulates a complete thought, yet the larger sense proceeds through several couplets, following readily recognizable logical patterns. Although the poem generates little urgency – nothing is obviously at stake – the verse draws the reader along, placing few obstacles in the way. The rhythm never slows us down; the meaning develops so clearly that we rarely need pause to ponder. The poem feels inevitable, an effect achieved both metrically and logically.

It comes as no surprise, given the emphasis on straightforwardness in all its devices, that Pomfret's poem offers little opportunity and makes no demand for profound exegesis. It does not depend heavily on symbolism; its meanings appear to lie all on the surface. Yet the pressure of the counterfactual suggests a level of complexity in addition to that

of the poem's relation to classic and vernacular tradition. *The Choice* begins with the word "If," which locates all that follows it in the realm of conceptual possibility rather than that of actuality. Everything depends on "Heav'n," which may grant – or, more probably, refuse to grant – individuals a choice of life. Typically, human beings have little choice about their economic circumstances. The vision of ideal existence that the poem constructs therefore accretes poignancy: it has not been realized, and its conceivable realization hinges on an act of divine benevolence.

The poem, then, knows itself to be fantasy. In this context, the tension between the declarations of moderation and the desire for perfection assumes special meaning. The speaker often formulates his wishes in terms of negatives: "not little, nor too great"; "no other Things . . . But what are Useful"; "Genteelly, but not Great"; "healthy, not luxurious"; "no such rude Disorders"; "not Uneasy," and so on. He thus calls attention to the fact that he's not requesting too much. In the context of his knowledge of that portentous "If" at the beginning, his awareness that free choice is a stupendous gift, he must be careful – he knows, after all, that he is asking for an enviable mortal condition.

In the company of his chosen friends, the speaker writes, he "cou'd not miss, / A permanent, sincere, substantial Bliss" (ll. 95–96). The word *Bliss* carries powerful overtones. It suggests the divinely ordained happiness of heaven as well as, conceivably, the transcendent satisfactions of erotic love. Pomfret's envisioned life promises delights more enduring than those of love, more immediate than those of heaven. *The Choice* articulates the precise nature of the happiness it promises: "substantial" in its accumulation of particulars; permanent because its endurance is essential to the vision; sincerely imagined and sincerely longed for. Yet the longing remains poignant in its historical context, not only because of the vision's counterfactual nature but also because of the national circumstances that would have made it seem especially difficult to realize. It is not surprising that readers avidly purchased and perused a poem that fully specified a happy ideal, one that might provide material for dreams if not for realization.

The Choice articulates a model of a good life. It has little autobiographical bearing, except as fantasy: the poet was married when he wrote his encomium of an existence without human encumbrances. It participates, though, in a lively eighteenth-century tradition. If it seems escapist in its emphatic rejection of public life, it chooses escapism as

a deliberate alternative to internecine strife. The good life, at Pomfret's historical moment, might plausibly seem the life of opting out.

In the twenty-first century, poetry would seem a peculiar genre for advice about life. We turn, rather, to self-help books, or to biographies and autobiographies for possible models of conduct, or conceivably to novels for delineations of imagined life choices. In the first third of the eighteenth century, though, novels had not developed into an important genre, nor had biography and autobiography, beyond narratives of conversion. Conduct books flourished, recommending proper behavior for specific situations, but they did not deal significantly with fundamental choices beyond, say, a young woman's decision about what man to marry.

Readers turned to poetry for investigation of such matters as how one should live not primarily because of the absence of other resources, but rather because they believed poetry a particularly authoritative literary mode. The assumption that verse dealt with important concerns permeated literate society. Moralists would soon complain that novels dwelt only on love; no one could say that about verse. Poetry aspired to educate, even to reform, both individuals and society at large. It considered philosophical issues, politics, and morality, but also how to shear sheep or grow cucumbers. It criticized governments and inveighed against such social habits as tea-drinking and gambling. And it dared to claim authority even about such fundamental matters as how a man should live in order to go to heaven.

The convention that allowed poets to hold forth on such subjects permitted them on occasion to say unexpected things. For an extreme example, we might consider Sarah Fyge Egerton (1670–1723), whose assertive utterances about the female situation ring with outrage about the limited choices open to women. Her implicit prescriptions about the proper conduct of female life emerge indirectly, almost entirely through her expressed indignation at things as they are.

Shall I be one of those obsequious Fools,
That square their lives by Customs scanty Rules;
Condemn'd for ever to the puny Curse,
Of Precepts taught at Boarding-school, or Nurse,
That all the business of my Life must be,
Foolish, dull Trifling, Formality.
Confin'd to a strict Magick complaisance,

And round a Circle of nice visits Dance,
 Nor for my Life beyond the Chalk advance.
 (*The Liberty*, 1–9)

Shall I be one of those fools, she asks, going on to specify the nature of the fools in such a way that the noun becomes synonymous with “respectable young women.” *The Liberty* answers the question most eloquently by asking it in those terms. Its speaker finally specifies, with some bravado, how she proposes to differ from others of her sex, but she holds forth no hope that her kind of behavior will be imitated.

Unpredictable adjectives fill urgent needs in the opening lines of *The Liberty*. *Obsequious* establishes the outrage that permeates the poem. Women’s folly perhaps consists in their obsequiousness, their servile compliance; or perhaps women are fools because they are forced to be compliant. In any case, the poem’s speaker loathes folly and obsequiousness, whether or not they are identical. But the targets of her anger, as conveyed by the adjectives, become less predictable as she continues her discourse. “Customs scanty Rules”: *scanty* meaning “deficient in extent, compass, or size.” From a woman’s point of view, the deficiency of the rules intended to govern her inheres in their limitation. Inadequate in their imagining, they limit her possibilities in ways echoing their own limitations.

Yet more unexpected is “strict Magick complaisance.” As a glance at any conduct book will reveal, “complaisance,” or willingness to please, was insistently recommended to eighteenth-century women, whose capacity to please others would largely determine their fates. The only kind of power legitimate for women, complaisance might have the metaphorically magic capacity to transform their destiny – but a capacity that, Egerton’s phrasing emphasizes, can operate only within strict bounds. The poem’s speaker, therefore, resents even the resources she has: too scanty, too strictly regulated, all part of what she tellingly alludes to as “the puny Curse”: trivial in conception and in articulation, yet as potent as any prophet’s imprecation in deforming women’s lives.

I hardly know whether to admire more the energy or the economy of the phrasing through which Egerton conveys her sense of the female plight and of a female response to it. The poem’s resolution is equally striking. *The Liberty* continues specifying restraints on women, with the speaker increasingly articulate about her own defiance of them:

Some boast their Fetters of Formality
Fancy they ornamental Bracelets be,
I'm sure they're Gyves and Manacles to me.
(26–28)

Then she concludes by forthrightly stating her intentions:

I'll blush at Sin, and not what some call Shame,
Secure my Virtue, slight precarious Fame.
This Courage speaks me Brave, 'tis surely worse,
To keep those Rules, which privately we Curse:
And I'll appeal to all the formal Saints,
With what reluctance they indure restraints.
(47–52)

The firm separation of sin and shame and the scorn for mere reputation give way to a conclusion marked by increasing self-assertion and defiance. The speaker declares her own courage, suggesting it as self-justification. Distinguishing between sin, which conscience detects, and the shame responsive to pressure from without, she insists on her virtue, even though she implicitly rejects concern for the reputation of virtue. In the final couplet, she appeals ironically for support from “all the formal Saints.” The noun *formality* has appeared twice earlier, both times with a negative weight: we have encountered the “Trifling [and] Formality” that define the business of a good girl’s life and the “Fetters of Formality” that bind her. The formality of the “Saints” now alluded to presumably refers to the precision and rigorous observance that marked many Puritan sects of the period – some of which, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, referred to their own members as saints. If such “saints” responded to the speaker’s appeal, they would have to throw off the hypocrisy that, to her mind, characterizes them: enduring restraint without complaining, they hide in practice the reluctance they actually feel. The voice of the poem, celebrating its own courage, declares integrity by self-revelation instead of concealment, and the poem glorifies its speaking out, even while tacitly acknowledging the isolation implicit in such defiance of social norms.

Like Pomfret, Egerton offers no direct advice about the proper way to lead one’s life. She speaks only of how she herself would want to live, implying the meretriciousness of female lives conducted purely by social standards. Although *The Liberty* presents itself as intensely

personal, it too is inflected by immediate political actualities. Religious politics, which had played a large role in the civil war, colors the poem's choice of reference. More inclusively, gender politics – a concept that, of course, had not yet been formulated – shapes the entire work. Egerton's dissatisfaction focuses on the impossibility of living a personal life apart from social constraints. The individual life, virtually all eighteenth-century poems on the subject acknowledge, necessarily takes place within society, and society implies the pressures of a specific time and place. Few before her had articulated the same perception, but Egerton points out that those pressures impinge with special force on women.

The loudest poetic voice offering recommendations about conduct was that of Alexander Pope, who even in his early *Essay on Criticism* (written about 1709, when the poet was 21 years old) constructed an ideal figure to model the way a good man would behave.

But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,
 Still pleas'd to teach, and yet not proud to know?
 Unbiass'd, or by favour, or by spite;
 Not dully preposses'd, or blindly right;
 Tho' Learn'd, well-bred; and tho' well-bred, sincere;
 Modestly bold, and humanly severe?

(631–36)

Meaning infuses form here, and form shapes meaning. The six lines exemplify how flexible and powerful an instrument the heroic couplet provided for eighteenth-century poets. The lines comprise a single interrogative sentence (the question mark at the end of the first couplet does not in fact mark a sentence's end) that establishes a set of crucial characteristics and defines relationships among them.

Those relationships depend centrally on balance and antithesis, enacted by as well as stated in the verse. Different conjunctions (*or . . . or, Not . . . nor, Tho' . . . and*) together with the adverbial pairing *Still* (here meaning *always*) and *yet*, enforce a single point: the good man harmoniously incorporates a series of paradoxically related qualities. The shifting rhythms and pace possible within the iambic pentameter couplet emphasize meanings. Thus in the first line, the iambic structure underlines *can*, the line's most important word. The fact that the hypothetical good man has the capacity to give wise counsel differentiates

him immediately from all those capable of no such thing. Alone among the six lines, this one evokes no contrast. It moves, therefore, more deliberately than the others. The monosyllable that inaugurates the next line, *Still*, unlike the other monosyllabic first words, has sonorous weight lending it so much emphasis that "Still pleas'd" sounds like a spondee, a metrical foot in which both words carry equal emphasis. The final line echoes, with a difference, the same device, placing the initial accent on the first syllable, this time to create a trochaic foot, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. Line 635 sounds longer than line 636, though it contains the same number of syllables. The variations in word length and number of words (e.g., line 632 contains only one-syllable words, ten words altogether; line 636, with two three-syllable words, comprises only five words) contribute to the variety in sound among couplets all written in a single form.

Variety is the message as well as the medium: the good man incorporates a great deal. His boldness is modest, his severity humane. He gives instruction gladly, without taking pride in all he knows. His learning does not interfere with his courtesy, and his courtesy derives from genuine impulse rather than from hypocrisy. Such ideas demand pondering, and so does the verse that contains them. Heroic couplets can seem deceptively simple, and one might assume their monotony. The assumption would be wrong. Although they insistently proclaim their harmony, although their structure emphasizes their balance, they demand close attention to the range of possibilities they can incorporate and to the ways those possibilities contribute to meaning.

Pope's characterization of his hero continues, but these few lines suffice to suggest its tone of authority (despite its rhetoric of questions), its moral vocabulary, its skillful manipulation of form, and its insistence on the compatibility of manners and morals. The three couplets begin the poem's description of the ideal critic, but nothing separates the good critic from the good man.

The fact that Pope could plausibly advance such an argument, claiming identity between the propriety and virtue necessary for the critic and that suitable for a good human being, suggests the status of both poetry and literary criticism. The *Essay on Criticism* can plausibly assume the high seriousness of poetry and criticism as human endeavors. In the face of unsettling political possibility, it recommends the life of the mind. Although Pope's subsequent moral criticism did not necessarily equate literary activity with other modes of behavior, the

expertise of his verse always implicitly attested his moral authority: the precision and grace of couplets can hint of the discipline and integrity of a life.

Like all satirists, Pope works most often by means of negative examples. Multiplied instances of lives badly lived, often violating moral imperatives behind a façade of social compliance, gradually shadow forth a complex counter-image of virtuous existence marked by both the resistance Egerton advocates for herself and a more elevated version of the ease for which Pomfret yearns. In his *Essay on Man* (1733–34), Pope considered humankind (“man”) in the context of the entire created universe, mocking the presumption that enables a human being to consider self in all respects more important and more percipient than the rest of the animal creation and that allows “man” to forget his own insignificance in comparison to the God Who created him. As part of what was originally a large philosophic project linked with the *Essay*, the poet also produced four “moral epistles” about specific human characteristics. Epistle IV, addressed to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, subtitled “Of the Use of Riches,” exemplifies the force and pointedness with which Pope denounces deviations from proper behavior and argues for a strenuous version of the good life.

“Strength of mind is Exercise, not Rest,” Pope wrote in the *Essay on Man* (2: 104). The life he both implicitly and explicitly recommends demands constant exercise of moral intelligence. Such intelligence can and should operate in every realm of human endeavor. Landscape design and architecture provide the nominal subject for much of *Epistle to Burlington*. Description of an estate referred to as “Timon’s Villa” occupies many lines.

Greatness, with Timon, dwells in such a draught [plan or scheme]
 As brings all Brobdignag before your thought.
 To compass this, his building is a Town,
 His pond an Ocean, his parterre a Down:
 Who but must laugh, the Master when he sees,
 A puny insect, shiv’ring at a breeze!
 Lo, what huge heaps of littleness around!
 The whole, a labour’d Quarry above ground.

(103–10)

What huge heaps of littleness: the line conveys a moral judgment rather than a physical description. The ocean-sized pond and the town-sized

house are literally huge but metaphorically tiny, even as Timon himself, "Smit with the mighty pleasure, to be seen" (128), remains despite his imagining of his own importance nothing but a puny insect. All the appearances he has created fail to provide the fundamental aesthetic satisfactions of order and appropriateness. Schemes substitute for achievement: the grand conceptions rather than the aesthetic effects of his landscapes and buildings matter to Timon. Therefore what has been calculated as awe-inspiring only creates the chaotic impression of a quarry where workers have accumulated random heaps of rocks.

Brobdignag, to which Pope refers in the second line quoted, is the land of giants where Gulliver finds himself in the second book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). To Gulliver's eyes, the physical appearances of this country seem grotesque. The scale is wrong, to normal human perception. Just so with Timon's villa – but the scale by which Pope measures is not only physical. Poor design becomes a metaphor for the meretricious life. One explicit standard for design and life alike is what Pope calls "Sense" – a quality assigned to the model woman at the end of *An Epistle to A Lady*, one recommended in *The Rape of the Lock*, an attribute that *Epistle to Burlington* declares only "the gift of Heav'n, / And tho' no science, fairly worth the sev'n" (43–44). Good sense prevents excessive display. It insures that riches are employed productively rather than wastefully. It extends a man's awareness of responsibility from the private to the public realm: this poem that appears to concern individual architectural choices ends with a vision of the virtuous man becoming advisor and enabler for kings, helping to create a harmonious empire. Here too, in other words, a poet finds that a person's choice of life bears on politics as well as personal contentment. More consistently than Pomfret or Egerton, however, Pope advocates a kind of personal responsibility that always extends outward. The good critic of the *Essay on Criticism* acts and is judged in relation to others, and the pattern continues: Pope's poetry assesses its subjects in their social functioning.

The examples provided by these three poets suggest sharply different ways of imagining the good life: as retreat, as defiance, as responsibility. But three such imaginings hardly exhaust the moral doctrines poetically recommended in the first thirty-five years of the eighteenth century. Poets might also, for instance (as they would throughout the century), recommend understanding life under the aspect of eternity.

Isaac Watts's hymns, many of them still sung in Protestant churches, remind their readers that human beings exist not only for their own immediate satisfaction and not only in relation to other humans, but also in relation to God. Indeed, Pope and Pomfret offer the same reminder, despite their stress on the social. Pope's notes to *Burlington* call attention to the importance of Providence as a force in the poem, and his account of Timon's villa lingers on the chapel, effectively desecrated both by lush ceiling paintings and by a dean who "never mentions Hell to ears polite" (150). Pomfret acknowledges at the outset of *The Choice* his dependence on Providence. Neither poet, though, dwells on the human relation to God as fundamentally important to the conduct of life, and neither allows himself potentially controversial specificity.

Even poets whose repertoire included social verse on occasion wrote about the urgency of Christian responsibility, often under the guise of discussing their own experience. Anne Finch (1661–1720) provides an especially compelling case in point, with poems purporting to narrate her own history. One called *Fragment*, which indeed displays a fragmentary form, begins *in medias res*, with a "So," never elucidated. It announces its subject as the soul:

So here confin'd, and but to female Clay,
ARDELIA'S Soul mistook the rightful Way.
(1–2)

It reports, however, Finch's worldly career (in several other poems as well she refers to herself as "Ardelia"): her youthful desire for "vain Amusements" (5), giving way to "Ambition" (6), which leads her to life at the court of James II. When James is deposed, she shares in his "Ruin" (14) and subsequently turns her thoughts toward heaven, aspiring, as she writes, "Tow'rds a more certain Station" (18). All her efforts – prayers, ecstatic thoughts, meditation on her faults, retirement – prove vain, though:

These, but at distance, towards that purpose tend,
The lowly Means to an exalted End;
Which He must perfect who allots her Stay,
And That, accomplish'd, will direct the way.
(24–27)

The poem then dwells at some length on the glories of heaven, concluding,

Rest then content, my too impatient Soul;
Observe but here the easie Precepts given,
Then wait with chearful hope, till Heaven be known in Heaven.
(37–39)

The poem's speaker divides herself into "Soul" – *impatient*, therefore a less than perfect soul – and other-than-soul. Like the speaker of Egerton's passionate outpouring, she offers no overt advice or criticism to others. For most of *Fragment* – indeed, until those final three lines – she refers to herself in the third person, but not until she uses a first person pronoun ("my") does she provide any injunction. Yet the advice she offers herself is, from a Christian perspective, universal, and the career she narrates in many respects typifies that of the upper class young woman. (The unusual aspect of the speaker's trajectory is only her connection with a deposed monarch.) As long as her desire for heaven resembles the "Ambition" that made her aspire to a place at court (as "Tow'rds a more certain Station she aspires"; 18), it too only declares its own futility. She has been "instructed by that Fall" (16) – a king's fall and her own, faintly corresponding to the original Fall – but the lesson fails to impart the crucial knowledge of her own insufficiency.

When she achieves that knowledge, it becomes the most important lesson she can teach. By using herself as a case history, emphasizing the vanity of her attempts to find earthly satisfaction, evoking the "restless Cares, and weary Strife" (28) of worldly existence, and dwelling on the joys of heaven, "that wond'rous City" (36), she constructs a vivid argument for trust in and submission to God and disarms potential opposition. By using theological language ("Paradice," "the flaming Sword") for her attachment to the royal court, she emphasizes the terrible error of misplacing value. The frequent jerkiness of her couplets (in striking contrast to Pope's smoothness) dramatizes her agitation, implicitly contradicting her simple assertions of faith. In contrast, the alexandrine (a six-stress iambic line) that concludes the poem, the line about waiting in cheerful hope, slows into an achieved, appropriate, and persuasive serenity. The poem demonstrates unworthy and worthy ways to live and dramatizes the difficulty of making the proper choice between them.

Yet it gains much of its power from the poignancy of the personal. The movement from the image of confinement “but to female Clay” to the “cheerful hope” of the concluding line, with its restrained evocations of disappointments along the way, conveys a triumphant progress, but one attended by painful experience. Individual, personal tribulations mark the effort to lead a good life. The reward, *Fragment* insists, justifies those tribulations but does not eliminate their pain.

In a poem called *On Affliction*, which also dwells on tribulation, Finch begins with the personal and moves to the general, reversing the development of *Fragment*. The poem contains three five-line stanzas, with alternating rhymes of iambic pentameter and a final drawn-out line in each stanza that adds two more syllables. Those hexameter lines mark significant pause and emphasis. Each of them, like the concluding alexandrine in *Fragment*, evokes the glory of God, in contrast to the emphasis on earthly pain elsewhere in the poem.

Finch contrasts the power of reason, here enlisted in the service of faith, with the weakness of flesh, an inlet to suffering. Reason assures her that affliction constitutes a test and measure of faith. The final stanza summarizes the poem’s argument, although it alone cannot convey the complexity of its tone:

Affliction is the line, which every Saint
 Is measur’d by, his stature taken right;
 So much itt shrinks, as they repine or faint,
 But if their faith and Courage stand upright,
 By that is made the Crown, and the full robe of light.
 (11–15)

This confident assertion develops only as a result of the speaker’s embrace of suffering. At the poem’s opening, her position seems tentative, as her “tender flesh” (1) wars with her reason. She stresses the hardness of the rock on which she lies and mentions the rod that chastises her, the bitter cup she must drink. The two first stanzas dramatize a process of reinterpretation that allows the forceful concluding generalization – which, in effect, allies the suffering speaker with “every Saint.”

Again, the poem provides no overt advice. It illustrates, however, a struggle that must feel familiar to many if not all Christians, that between experience and faith. In this lyric the experience of pain wars with the

unverifiable conviction that suffering leads to heavenly glory. The poem's effect depends upon its evocation of both "affliction" and the will to transcend it. It not only preaches a doctrine of submission and belief; it also shows the effort demanded by adherence to such a doctrine, illustrating psychological processes of faith. Once more, Finch offers herself as test case. Far from insisting on the uniqueness of her suffering, as we might expect in a lyric poem, she resolutely generalizes from her pain, achieving the assertiveness of the final stanza by virtue of her realization that hers is not a special case. Finch teaches others how to live by dramatizing the process of her own learning.

When she adopts Pomfret's tactic of evoking an ideal existence (*The Petition for an Absolute Retreat*), her imaginings focus on the inner life and on a complex relation with the natural world. "Give me," she begins, in the imperative mode –

Give me O indulgent Fate!
Give me yet, before I Dye,
A sweet, but absolute Retreat . . .

She stresses the lack of difficulty she will enjoy, there "Where the world may ne'er invade" (20). Her table will be spread with food from nature; she will "covet" only fruit; she will dress in harmony with nature; she will share her life with a loving partner; she will draw morals from nature; she will have a single friend. Her reflections lead her to meditate on the human position in the universe. The final section begins,

Let me then, indulgent Fate!
Let me still, in my Retreat,
From all roving Thoughts be freed,
Or Aims, that may Contention breed;
Nor be my Endeavours led
By Goods, that perish with the Dead!
(258–63)

The absence of the kinds of thought and aim that belong to the world of earthly striving allows room for better thoughts, better aspirations.

Here are the poem's final lines:

Give me, O indulgent Fate!
For all Pleasures left behind,

Contemplations of the Mind.
 Let the Fair, the Gay, the Vain
 Courtship and Applause obtain;
 Let th' Ambitious rule the Earth;
 Let the giddy Fool have Mirth;
 Give the Epicure his Dish,
 Ev'ry one their sev'ral Wish;
 Whilst my Transports I employ
 On that more extensive Joy,
 When all Heaven shall be survey'd
 From those Windings, and that Shade.
 (280–93)

The poet's subject, she insists, continues to be pleasure. If she has given up many conventional sources of delight, she claims for herself the prospect of "more extensive joy" in the contemplation of heaven. As my earlier quotations from the poem indicate, the imaginative movement of this final sequence duplicates and intensifies that of earlier passages that begin with the invocation of "indulgent Fate." Thought and feeling repeatedly move from the worldly to the heavenly: first, only a retreat from the world; later, contemplation of the unsatisfactory nature of "aims" and "endeavours" focused on earthly matters; finally, scornful dismissal of lesser goals like courtship, applause, and mirth in favor of heaven's lasting satisfactions. The poem, in other words, systematically assesses the nature of available pleasures in order to settle on the most gratifying. It concentrates on the divine not as a matter of duty but as the highest form of indulgence.

By choosing to write in four-stress lines rather than the iambic pentameter couplets characteristic of much momentous poetry in her time, Finch suggests a kind of self-deprecation, hinting that her verse will not make serious claims on the reader. She uses her tetrameter lines to considerable effect, demonstrating how she can slow them down or speed them up at will. The briskness of "Give the epicure his dish" – which lacks the unstressed syllable that would ordinarily begin an iambic line – contrasts sharply with the leisurely, almost voluptuous movement of "that more extensive joy" as the poem achieves certainty, the assurance that heaven can indeed be "surveyed" from the absolute retreat the speaker desires.

In the poems about life choices that we have considered, physical circumstances and "practical" choices provide starting points or emblems

for psychological or spiritual states and determinations. Twenty-first-century advice, direct or indirect, about life decisions might involve pondering vocational objectives or promising financial rewards. Pope, in contrast, considers an affluent life cause for contempt, if affluence is not properly employed; Pomfret and Finch alike imagine a life of limited occupation as providing a more certain medium of happiness than busier existences could do. Egerton's speaker wants to transcend her society rather than to fit into it. Imagining ease (physical, spiritual, or both) or meditating resistance, valuing ideal community while retaining a certain skepticism about the nature of actual human relations, cogitating about heavenly as well as earthly responsibilities, these poets find varied ways to represent the possibilities of how one should or can or might live. In their variety and in their high seriousness, they suggest the scope of a concern that preoccupied many of their contemporaries and that would also engage their poetic successors.

A consistent preoccupation with the vexed dynamic of the social and the personal, however, underlies the variety of these poets' production. Whether or not they engage directly with social problems, they convey their awareness of being embedded in a social matrix. At one extreme, Egerton struggles with the restrictiveness of social expectation and convention. At the other, Pope sets himself apart as social critic. Pomfret and Finch imagine ideal circumstances outside of society, but such imagining depends on awareness of precisely what they wish to exclude. Only individual solutions, all four suggest, can resolve social ills. Living within the so-called "peace of the Augustans," a time of relatively little national and international tumult, they lived still in the shadow of tumult recently past and in awareness of dire potential within existing social structures. Directly or indirectly, they acknowledged the dilemmas created by the operations of self-interest as opposed to the public good.