



## Nature, Wit, and Invention: Contextualizing *An Essay on Criticism*

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### Abstract

This article contextualizes the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and his other literary essays in order to elicit Pope's contributions to the neoclassical norm. Exploring the aesthetic interchanges between Pope and his predecessors and contemporaries, I endeavor to show how Pope's poetry and prose have tackled the difficult task of unifying antithetical categories of invention and judgment into the Johnsonian "general nature."

Key Words: Alexander Pope, nature, neoclassicism, decorum, wit,

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In the history of English literature there is perhaps no poet whose fame has suffered more dramatic ups and downs than that of Alexander Pope (1688–1744). In his own age he was deemed the very personification of Muse herself, the most "poetical," most refined poet, as Samuel Johnson asked: "If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?" (1984, 752) In the nineteenth century, with the rise of Romanticism, critics such as Coleridge and Hazlitt, believing in the overflowing of one's powerful feelings, certainly thought that poetry was not to be found in Pope. Pope, if a poet at all, was condescendingly called by Hazlitt as a poet of "art" instead of a poet of "nature" (cited in O'Neill 1972, 17). Only Byron boldly claimed that Pope's versification was "perfect" and he was "the moral poet of all civilization" (cited in O'Neill 1972, 18). Byron, however, was not a critic, and his admiration for Pope had but the weakest influence during the *Sturm und Drang* movement in the early nineteenth century England when Wordsworthian expressionism had won over the politically committed poets such as Shelley and Byron himself. How could Pope's notorious toryism and justification of status quo stand the sweeping aftermath of French Revolution and the Europe-wide struggle against the ancient regime? Pope belonged to the last generation of civil peace and religious tolerance which could afford the reading public necessary patience and understanding to appreciate such works as *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and *An Essay on Man* (1733–34).

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Victorian critics went further in depreciating Pope. Matthew Arnold's relentless deprivation of Pope's title of a poet perhaps is still ringing in the minds of Pope's critics today: "Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose" (cited in O'Neill 1972, 21). Pope still remained a second-rate poet or a quasi-poet until the 1930s, when Edith Sitwell, feeling that contemporary English poetry had fallen into a chaotic situation, advocated Pope's "rhetoric and formalism" in her biography *Alexander Pope* (1962, 13). W. H. Auden also refuted the charge of Romantic critics that Pope's language is unpoetical and that his poetry unemotional (1972, 25). The modern reevaluation of Pope began shortly after Sitwell and Auden's re-initiation of formalism, and since then critics have put both the content and form of Pope's works under much scrutiny. His ideas on art, philosophy, politics, and women, and the imageries, metaphors, ironies and other stylistic features in his poetry have attracted the investigations from such scholars as George Sherburn, John Butt, Austin Warren, Maynard Mack, and Pat Rogers.

One way to approach Pope's writings is to regard his poetic genius as a "pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age," to use William Hazlitt's epithet on Wordsworth (1960b, 3). The religious wars in mid-seventeenth century had become a distant memory; Satanic rebellion in Milton's time and courtly debauchery in Dryden's had only supplied the table-talks of the rising bourgeoisie. There seemed to be relative peace, order, and moderation in Queen Anne's reign in England. What followed were reconsiderations of the previous opinions on God, the outside world, and man himself. Englishmen came to realize that neither ostentatious Roman Catholicism nor morally rigid Protestantism was the right spiritual guide for them. Already averse to extremisms, especially in religion and politics, English critics began to seek a possible mean in the ideal of life, and found it in Anglicanism. The spirit of the time was neither passion nor asceticism, but calm weighing and sensible balancing in daily life. Pope had synthesized and organized the major moral assumptions of his age into his *Essay on Man* (1734) to follow the publication of *An Essay on Criticism*.

The concept of a natural mean finds its manifestations not only in Pope's cosmology and ethics (Feng, 2008) but also in his literary criticisms; as he was the leading poet of his time, whatever he had to say about moral philosophy, he articulated it in an artistically acceptable form. In fact, Pope developed his aesthetic doctrines much earlier than he formulated his whole system of ethics. His *Essay on Criticism*, published in 1711, won immediate applause from such important critics as Joseph Addison, who acclaimed the poem a "Master-piece" (1970, 252). A precocious genius, Pope ventured to lay down rules for the writing and judging of poetry, just as what Aristotle and Horace would do, when he was no more than twenty years old. Pope's literary criticism embodies the same Aristotelian mean that characterizes his moral writings, e.g., *An Essay on Man* and *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Exalting "nature" as the ultimate standard for literary criticism, Pope advocates stylistic propriety and seeks to reconcile the two conflicting critical approaches prevalent in his time: invention and judgment. Quite consistent with his well-stratified cosmology, the poetical decorum which Pope conceives as the order in art corresponds to the appropriateness of every creature's specialty to its own unmistakable place on the great Chain of Being. Pope's unification of invention and judgment is a continuation, or a literary reproduction, of his ethical reconciliation of passion and reason. His aesthetic principles are largely derived from his moral philosophy, a phenomenon not surprising to aestheticians since Immanuel Kant, who theoretically prepared the transition from neoclassicism to Romanticism.

Before discussing the subtle meanings of those eighteenth-century concepts such as decorum, invention, and judgment, we first ask what sort of rationale lurks behind Pope's

recommendation of these critical standards and to what purpose Pope proposes a natural mean that asks for propriety and suitability. The answer seems obvious when we examine Pope's notions of art, and more particularly, his writings on poetics. It is rather a neoclassical cliché that art imitates nature: "*Unerring Nature*, still divinely bright . . . / At once the *Source*, and *End*, and *Test of Art*" (1961, 170–3). But it is hardly the same nature that Wordsworth imitates in *The Prelude*. It seems more likely that Pope's "nature" denotes human nature rather than the external world qua the conglomerate of organic and inorganic objects, waiting for the poet's psychic projection. And what Pope imitates in poetry is more of an urban man than a rustic man.

Eighteenth-century readers may find that Pope's pastorals are only thinly disguised human comedies in cities and towns. It is not that Pope does not describe blooming flowers, lovely trees, blowing winds, floating clouds, and murmuring streams—there are plenty of them in his work. It is only that in these seemingly natural objects, Pope seldom, if not at all, has that throbbing empathy characteristic of Romanticism. Pope, capable of "seeing into" the nature of things without really feeling them himself, does not "see" heaven in a wild flower, nor could the meanest flower give him thoughts that lie "too deep for tears." The external nature is rationalized and demystified in Pope as the boundary between the external and the internal world is clearly drawn. As Pope says, the proper study of mankind is man, so for him the proper object of literary imitation is what Aristotle says in *Poetics*, "men in action" (1970, 20). Instead of vomiting out "lava of imagination" like Byron or tracing out the light of the "lamp" of mind, Pope faithfully holds up a "mirror" to human nature, imitating, as it were, the "empirical ideal" (Abraham 1977, 49, 52, 31, 35). Pope's mannerisms may seem unnatural to Romantics such as Wordsworth and Rousseau, but sentimentalism, which appeals to Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, would also strike a neoclassical mind as unnecessarily primitive.

Unlike Aristotle, who in *Poetics* implicitly denies the moral function of art, Pope follows the Horatian dictum that poetry *aut prodesse aut delectare*—it instructs and delights. In his "Observations on the *Iliad*" (1715–20), assuming that the aim of Homer's *Iliad* is to "instruct," Pope makes the bold claim that "if the reader does not observe the morality of the *Iliad*, he loses half and the nobler part of its beauty" (1965, 135). In another place, Pope concludes that the major moral lesson he gleans from *Iliad* is that "we should avoid anger, since it is ever pernicious in the event" (136). Pope himself seldom depicts natural sceneries without dropping hints, and sometimes, explicit expositions, of morality—witness his *Pastorals* (1709) and *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Pope proves to be a good student of John Denham, for whose *Cooper's Hill* (1655) he praises the poet's skill to blend "descriptions of places and images" with "reflection upon moral life or political institution" (136). The fact that Pope devotes his late career almost exclusively to satires reveals his concern with the big issue of morality. De Quincey's distinction between literature of knowledge and literature of power, setting aside the anachronism, would seem an illicit dichotomy to Pope.

For Pope, what remains at stake of artistic reproduction is the question of how to imitate "men in action" so as to effectively inculcate moral lessons into the reading public. Pope shows his preference for a golden mean or a harmony in his cosmology and moral philosophy, and not surprisingly, he tends to be eclectic in aesthetics. Horace has already told us that the best way to move the audience is to imitate with verisimilitude. "If you wish me to weep," Horace wrote, "you must first feel grief yourself" (1970, 53). Pope, a devoted disciple of Horace, invites his fellow poets to follow the rule of mean in order to reach this verisimilitude in the poetic process. In choosing the style, Pope recommends simplicity, which he considers to be the "mean between ostentation and rusticity" (1965, 123). Stylish simplicity does not exclude necessary

ornaments since Pope prefers stylistic suitableness to puritanical economy: “’Tis a great secret in writing to know when to be plain, and when poetical and figurative” (123). In *An Essay on Criticism*, he says almost the same thing: “Expression is the *Dress of Thought*, and still / Appears more *decent* as more *suitable*” (1961, 318–9).

In choosing the subject, Pope has reinforced his belief of “the proper study of mankind is man” by stressing the conformity of the object of imitation to mundane human experience. Why does he exclude the fantastical, the mystical, the supernatural, the non-natural, or anything on the edge of experiential world as the proper object of imitation? Samuel Johnson’s “general nature,” in his comment on Shakespeare, may provide an illuminating footnote to Pope’s procedure (1970, 208). In neoclassicism, the willing suspension of disbelief runs contrary to the edifying function of literature: how can a reader learn from the representations he does not willingly believe? Pope’s comment on Homer is pertinent here: “what [Homer] writes is of the most animated nature imaginable” (1965, 108). Pope implies that the “imaginable” here refers to what is imaginable to a “common reader” instead of to the private and even idiosyncratic passion of the poet himself. What is imaginable to Coleridge—a possessed ancient mariner or a certain Khan seen in a dream—can hardly be imaginable to the neoclassical, controlled mind. Even if Pope’s fancy can compete with that of Coleridge, it seems improbable that such fancy in poetry would appeal to critics such as Addison, Steele, Bolingbroke, and Shafetsbury, who more or less stood for men of good taste at that time. “Good sense” still had a deciding influence on the taste of most of the readers and the creative activity of artists in the early eighteenth-century England. Pope himself is a product of such spirit of the time as he says, “*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was Thought, but ne’er so well Exprest*” (1961, 297–8). Innovations in art lie in forms, not in contents, and Pope here had just heralded Russian formalism that flourished in the early twentieth century.

In *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope absorbs and rearticulates the concept of decorum, which was formed in the Grecian-Roman period and went on to underpin much of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neoclassical criticism. The idea of a literary decorum can be traced back to Aristotle, who first expounded the unity of plot and the importance of probability of imitation. For Aristotle, decorum was more of an implicit assumption than a manifest principle. Horace accepted Aristotle’s judgment and gave the first formulation to the concept of decorum, or appropriateness, of dramatic style: “A subject for comedy refuses to be written in verses suitable for Tragedy. In a similar way, the banquet of Thyestes could not be related in lines suitable to ordinary life and hence appropriate for Comedy. Let each style keep the place to which it belongs” (1970, 52).

For Horace, dramatists should respect decorum of each genre, tragedy, comedy, epic, satire, and should never mix them up. Moreover, the delineation of dramatic characters should be appropriate so as to give verisimilitude to imitation: “you [poets] must mark the characteristics of each period of life and present what is fitting to the various natures and ages” (Horace 1970, 53). The young man, then, should be presented as playful, energetic, impulsive, while the old man, nostalgic, slow, physically weak, and just as each creature has its proper position on the Chain of Being, the representation of each character here also shares the same fitness. The importance of Horatian decorum, of genre as well as of character, lies in its influence on neoclassic critics like Boileau and Dryden, both were Pope’s predecessors. Dryden’s English translation of Boileau’s *L’Art Poétique* (1674) came in 1683, five years after the publication of his own *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). These two pieces encapsulate the main assumptions of neoclassicism in seventeenth-century France and England: realistic imitation of nature, high

probability of plot, and decorum in genre and diction. Pope must have read them both, for in his own criticism Dryden and Boileau are seen rather frequently.

To begin with, Pope's poetic decorum has three major denotations. First, it means appropriateness of style to the subject matter; second, it emphasizes the proportion of the part to the artistic whole; and finally, it recommends pureness and plainness of poetic diction. The quotation from Horace best explains what propriety of style is. Besides tragedy, comedy, and epic, there are some other minor genres: satire, pastoral, ode, elegy, epigram. Neoclassical critics, e.g. Boileau and Hobbes, all proclaim that poets should conform to the rule of each genre. According to Hobbes, the English society in the seventeenth century had three major hierarchical layers: court, town, and country, so correspondingly there should be three genres: tragedy for the court, epic for the town, and pastoral for the country. Hobbes strongly criticizes confusion in genre, for example, in epics: "Of the Indecencies of an Heroick Poem the most remarkable are those that shew disproportion either between the persons and their actions, or between the manners of the Poet and Poem" (1963, 302).

Pope follows the Hobbesian classification of style—tragedy, epic, and pastoral, and in *An Essay on Criticism* he emphasizes the importance of suitability of style to subject:

Expression is the Dress of Thought, and still  
Appears more decent, as more suitable . . .  
For diff'rent Styles with diff'rent Subjects sort,  
As several Garbs with Country, Town, and Court. (1961, 318–9, 322–3)

Like a gentleman who chooses his clothes to meet different occasions, literary style also follows certain conventions in order to be accepted by the reading public. The literary taste of the early eighteenth century was largely urbane and commonsensical, as the poets of that time, the reading public as well, treat Homer, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, Pindar, and Theocritus as the model of ancient genres. It seems that "the ancients" have laid down the rules for each genre, and what is left for "modern poets" is to follow, and if possible, to emulate these paradigms. Warning against any deviation from generic decorum, Pope likens inappropriate "Conceit" expressed "in pompous Words" to a "Clown" in "regal Purple" (320–1). This clearly echoes Samuel Butler's earlier caricature of Protestant pedantry in *Hudibras* (1663): "It was parti-colored dress / Of patched and piebald languages" (2000, 95–6). Pope here ridicules the fruitless use of archaism to achieve a certain "style": "Some by old words to fame have made pretense . . . / Such labored nothing, in so strange a style, / Amuse the unlearn'd, and make the learned smile" (324–7). This, again, reveals Pope's debt to Butler who mocks the grandiose style of Sir. Hudibras: "'Twas English cut on Greek and Latin, / Like fustian heretofore on satin" (97–8).

Apart from recommending suitability of style to genre, Pope also emphasizes the necessary resonance between the poetic rhythm, "the *Sound*," and the subject, "the *Sense*" (365). The Italian critic Marco Girolamo Vida, hailed by Pope as the "Immortal *Vida!* on whose honor'd Brow / The Poet's *Bays* and Critick's *Ivy* grow" (705–6), anticipates Pope in these lines:

When things are small the terms should still be so,  
For low words please us when the theme is low.  
But when some giant, horrible and grim,  
Enormous in his gait, and vast in every lime,  
Stalks towering on, the swelling words must rise  
In just proportion to the monster's size;

If some large weight his huge arms strive to shove,  
The verse too labors; the thronged words scarce move. (1951, 804)

But Pope's own expression on the matter of sound and sense could be more resonant:

Soft is the Strain when Sephyr gently blows,  
And the smooth Stream in smoother Numbers flows;  
But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,  
The hoarse, rough Verse should like the Torrent roar:  
When Ajax strives some Rock's vast Weight to throw,  
The Line too labours, and the Words move slow. (366–71)

This is exactly what Pope means by “sound must seem an echo to the sense” (365). The consonance “s” and “m” in line 367 suggests gentleness and smoothness of a murmuring stream, while the assonance of “loud,” “sounding,” “Shore,” “hoarse,” and “Torrent roar” sounds epically sonorous. In his “Observations on the *Iliad*,” Pope praises Homer’s genius in uniting sound and sense: “There is a great beauty in the versification of this whole passage in Homer. . . . The fall of the elm, the tearing up of bank . . . are all put into such words that almost every letter corresponds in its sound and echoes to the sense of each particular” (1965, 145). In another place, Pope says that “[Homer’s] expression is never too big for the sense, but justly great in proportion to it,” admitting that “[Homer] had not only the richest head but the finest ear in the world” (114–5). By uniting style and subject, sound and sense, Pope aims at the decorum of poetic diction, which puts him exactly along with such neoclassical critics as Vida, Boileau, and Hobbes.

The second meaning of decorum as proportion of parts to the whole in Pope’s literary criticism indicates, however, the influence of another important Renaissance critic, Ben Jonson. Of course, many of Jonson’s ideas on drama and poetry come from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, especially, unity of plot in tragedy and epic. Jonson exalts the harmonious proportion of the part to the whole in imitation of man’s action, what he calls “Fable,” as the chief task for epic poets. While agreeing with Aristotle that an imitated action should have “a *beginning*, a *mid’st*, and an *end*,” Jonson further stresses magnitude: “there is requir’d a certain proportionable greatness, neither too vast nor too minute” (1963, 289). The unity of plot, however, does not exclude the possibility that action may be “compos’d of many parts,” but “it [action] begins to be one as those parts grow or are wrought together” (290). Without the whole, the “same end,” the parts will go wandering; without the parts however, “it is not the whole” (290, 292).

Echoing Jonson while anticipating Hegel, Pope thinks that beauty lies in the whole, which is built up resonantly by various parts. But Pope’s aesthetics, unlike Jonson’s stylistics, has its cosmological source. As the well-stratified “Nature” remains the highest standard of literary judgment for Pope, the proportion in a poem accordingly reflects the proportion in nature, just as microcosm inside man mirrors macrocosm in outside nature. Beauty in Wit, like in Nature, is not “th’ Exactness of peculiar Parts,” but “the joint Force and full *Result* of *all*” (Pope 1961, 244–6). Pope uses the image of the Roman Catholic church to illustrate the proportion in nature:

Thus when we view some well-proportion’d Dome,  
(The World’s just Wonder, and ev’n thine O Rome!)  
No single Parts unequally surprise;  
All comes united to th’ admiring Eyes;  
No monstrous Height, or Breadth, or Length appear;

The Whole at once is Bold, and Regular. (247–52)

On Pope's Chain of Being, every creation of God is subordinated to a higher one, functioning towards a general symphony in the universe, so the proportional subordination of parts to the whole in a Roman Catholic church similarly conveys an aesthetic effect that comes from mirroring the rounded heaven itself ("Dome"). Poets are like painters, who should "trace the *naked Nature* and *living Grace*" (293–4). Poetry, then, is supposed to catch that regularity (law) in nature just as painters in a Catholic church. To "follow NATURE" (68) in criticism simply means discerning the balance, the proportion, and the mean in nature and applying them to literary judgment.

The aesthetics of proportion is the criticism of beauty rather than of faults. If the artistic work achieves certain resonant beauty as a whole, even though it has "trivial Faults," Pope thinks, "Applause . . . is due" (258). He laughs at those "*Verbal Critick*" (261) who are "fond of some subservient Art," and "make the *Whole* depend upon a *Part*" (264–5). The "subservient Art" refers to the fastidious caviling of linguistic details: grammar and spelling for example. In explaining Pope's "*Verbal Critick*," the Twickenham editors quote Warburton that the "verbal critic" here was not "used in its common signification, who retails the sense of single words; but of one who deals in large cargo's of them without any sense at all" (Audra & Williams 1961, 269). The "verbal critics" are those who only see the individual trees but are blind to the beauty of the forest as a whole, for the whole may depend on the parts but never on any *single* part. As Francis Bacon said, "A man shall see faces, that if you examine them, part by part, you shall find never a good; and yet all together do well" (1985, 190), Pope similarly asks critics to "Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight Faults to find, / Where *Nature* moves, and *Rapture* warms the Mind" (235–6).

Besides appropriateness of style to subject, proportion of parts to the whole, Pope's decorum also means the pureness or "plainness" of language and the avoidance of any unnatural conceits. Like Samuel Johnson, Pope satirizes the "metaphysical poets" who favor far-fetched conceits (metaphors) to the degree of fanaticism: "Some to *Conceit* along their Taste confine," Pope writes, "And glitt'ring Thoughts struck out at ev'ry Line" (289–91). In pursuing the similarity between objects in nature, metaphysical poets have forsaken, maybe unnecessarily, the easy path of writing. For Pope, figurative language is quite compatible with the naturalness of diction, but if one of them occasionally conflicts with another, then the pureness of language must be preserved and "glittering" metaphors, similes, and hyperboles, deserted. Like an "unskillful" painter, metaphysical poets "hide with *Ornaments* their *Want of Art*," and "with *Gold* and *Jewels* cover ev'ry part" (295–6). To illustrate what is called "poetic plainness," Pope draws analogy from nature, again: "As Shades more sweetly recommend the Light," he writes, "So modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit" (301–2). In comparing Virgil's pastorals with those of Theocritus, Pope allows the latter to "excel all others in nature and simplicity" (1965, 95). This again recalls Bacon's dialectic of foreground and background, a Renaissance economy of artistic representation: "Virtue is like a rich stone, best plain set" (1985, 189).

Pope's emphasis on the naturalness of language well reflects the trend towards stylistic simplicity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. J. E. Spingarn, in his preface to *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, details the movement against the "metaphysical perversion of style" in seventeenth century and how this anti-rhetorical trend persists into the eighteenth century (1957, xxxvi). Like Thomas Sprat who advocated a "naked" language for the English Royal Society, Daniel Defoe, talking about founding a similar English Academy, said, "The work of this society should be . . . to establish purity and propriety of style, and to purge it from

all the irregular additions that ignorance and affectation have introduced” (3). The “irregular additions” refer to the use of fantastic metaphors, allusions and so on.

In *The Tatler* (Sept. 28, 1770), Jonathan Swift inveighs against the “Refinements” in polite writing—the insupportable overuse of breaks, abbreviations, elisions, and monosyllables, which he deems as the sign of “Barbarity” (1963, 147). Swift’s urbane temperament leads him to condemn certain new words, *Mob*, *Banter*, *Bamboozle*, *Kidney*, as intolerable. Swift asks the Tatler to “make Use of your Authority as Censor . . . [to] expunge all Words and Phrases that are offensive to good Sense, and condemn those barbarous Mutilations of Vowels and Syllable” (148). Swift deems “Simplicity” in style as the “best and truest Ornament of most Things in human life” (148). This neoclassical principle of naturalness and simplicity in language would exert its influence through the whole century. For example, in the middle of the century, David Hume uttered his concern for the fantastic style in writing: “Too much ornament is a fault in every kind of production. Strong flashes of wit, pointed similes and epigrammatic turns . . . are a disfigurement, rather than any embellishment of discourse” (1932, 623). The “strong flashes of wit” immediately echo Pope’s “glittering thoughts”: both have overused figures of speech and proved to be false approaches towards sensible writing.

Though Pope’s decorum covers a wide range of connotations, i.e., appropriateness of style, resonant proportion, and simplicity in poetic diction, it nevertheless can be boiled down to a single principle: naturalness. As the epitome of God’s creative spirit, nature provides the best model for man’s conduct, and literature, according to neoclassical realism, is nothing but an imitation of men in action. “*Unerring Nature*” imparts “Life, Force, and Beauty” to all creatures and also functions as the “*Source*, and *End*, and *Test of Art*” (1961: 70–3), Pope says. Nature has endowed human beings with reason and common sense, so when readers discern the discrepancy between a literary subject and its style, they cannot help laughing because they immediately find out that it does not conform to the order of things. This is how humor creeps into our life, and this is also why Pope says that archaism in poetry would only “make the Learned *Smile*” (327). Languages may evolve with time, but nature as an eternal artifice of God hardly changes at all. In other words, the modes of imitation may change, but its object remains the same throughout ages. The task of an artist is not to search for outlandish expressions such as archaism or euphuism, but to ponder how to “find out the latent cause of conspicuous beauty” (Reynolds 1971, 287), and to represent that beauty in the most suitable artistic form.

In the discussion of Pope, the word “wit” is perhaps the most misunderstood and misused one. The evolutions of the meaning of a single word “wit,” as Spingarn says, “parallel the general changes of literary taste in the nation” (1957, xxxi). In English Renaissance, wit generally denotes a person’s whole intellectual capacity. After Ben Jonson, wit becomes “identical with the imaginative or rather fanciful element in poetry” (xxx). However, Hobbes refuses to demote wit to fancy but tries to incorporate judgment into it:

The contrary to [dullness] . . . is that quick ranging of mind . . . which is joined with curiosity of comparing the things that come into the mind, one with another . . . in which men place the excellence of fancy and from whence proceed those grateful similes, metaphors, and other tropes . . . or else in discerning suddenly dissimilitude in things that otherwise appear the same. And this virtue of the mind is that men attain to exact and perfect knowledge; and pleasure thereof consisteth in . . . distinction of places, persons, and seasons, and is commonly termed by the name of judgment. . . . both fancy and judgment are commonly comprehended under the name of wit. (Hobbes 1966, 168)



Hobbes insists on a larger interpretation of wit that compromises the antithetical fancy and judgment, quickness and liveliness in figurative language, and the ability to discriminate suitable tropes from unsuitable ones. Hobbes's stress on the complementing nature of fancy and judgment has a deciding influence on Pope's idea of wit as a combination of invention with judgment.

Pope first makes a distinction between false wit and true wit. False wit, as Pope conceives it, is wit for wit's sake, sacrificing the resonance of the whole to meet the ingenuity of a part. False wit is fancy pushed to extremity, exemplified by Wycherley's *Miscellany Poems* (1704), which E. N. Hooker comments as "wit gone mad" (1951, 231). Wycherley turns blind to Pope's advice of literary decorum, filling his poems with "an avalanche of simile and metaphor, a breathless flow of whim and fancy" (Hooker 1951, 231). When Pope satirizes those who are "Pleas'd with a Work where nothing's just or fit; / One glaring Chaos and wild Heap of Wit" (291–2), he may have in mind poets like Wycherley. False wit is an unnatural mode of writing in the neoclassical context, for it excludes the regulating and organizing function of any literary rules or conventions. False wit in Pope's aesthetics corresponds to Epicureanism repudiated in his ethics—both overemphasize the emotional side of human nature, and both fall short of a comprehensive understanding of nature and man. By enshrining artists' individual passion, false wit has reduced art to mere egocentric, and more often eccentric, representation of "general nature."

"True Wit," on the contrary, is "Nature to Advantage drest" (Pope 1961, 297). It is the ability, like Joshua Reynolds's masterful hand, to draw the nameless grace of nature through delicate mixture of colors, or, like Homer's "living words," to represent man in action in vivid imagery (Pope 1965, 114). True wit, deemed by La Rochefoucauld to be inseparable from judgment, "like Light, pierces into the very Bottom of Things, observes all that ought to be observed there, and discovers what seemed to be past anybody's finding out" (cited in Hooker 1951, 240). Pope's predecessor John Dryden, in one place, defines wit as "the propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject" (cited in Jensen 1969, 126). For these writers, wit has become a synonym for good sense, the intellectual acuteness in observing the relationship between objects, forming ideas about them and expressing these ideas in a poetic form with appropriate style. Pope's conception of wit shares similarity with that of La Rochefoucauld and Dryden in his emphasis on the inclusion of reason and judgment. "Some to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse," Pope states, "Want as much more, to turn it to its use" (1961, 80–1). In his correspondence with Wycherley, Pope disagrees with the latter's reduction of wit to fancy; he writes that "in the better notion of wit, considered as propriety, surely *method* is not only necessary for perspicuity and harmony of parts, but gives beauty even to the minute and particular thoughts" (1965, 30).

Pope's wit therefore embraces the double meaning of inventive imagination or fancy and the management of rational faculty in designing a whole and bringing the parts decorously to that whole. Such a wit, a genius as rare as Homer or Virgil, often causes bitter envy and even resentment from his contemporaries: "*Pride, Malice, Folly*, against *Dryden* rose" and "*Zoilus* . . . would start up" when Homer "lift[ed] his awful Head" (Pope 1961, 458, 464–5). Pope himself was attacked almost by the whole Grub Street, which was notoriously immortalized in *The Dunciad* (1728, 1743). "The life of a wit is a warfare upon earth" (Pope 1965, 25).

Under the superintending "wit" that is hard to obtain, invention and judgment work like passion and reason: two conflicting elements striving towards the same goal of successful artistic creation which is "imitating nature." Both invention and judgment are important in their

own ways and should be equally considered by artists. Invention is the sine qua non of any piece of artwork, supplying the poet with inspiration, warming up his creative faculty, giving “to airy nothing a local habitation and a name,” so to speak (Hazlitt 1960a, 388). In Pope’s own words, invention “furnishes Art with all her materials, and without it judgment itself can at best but steal wisely . . . Whatever praise may be given to works of judgment, there is not even a single beauty in them but is owing to the invention” (1965, 107). Inventive imagination gives animation to literature, preventing it from dullness, what Pope loathes most and satirizes all the time relentlessly. Pope himself highly praises Homer’s invention in his “Preface to the Translation of the *Iliad*” (1715), even at the risk of rendering his status of a neoclassic spokesman dubious. Pope thinks that invention resembles the “poetical *fire*,” which is “so forcible in Homer that no man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads him” (1965, 108). Pope further compares Homer’s invention with that of Virgil, Milton, and Shakespeare, concluding that “in Homer, and in him only, it [the poetical fire] burns everywhere clearly and everywhere irresistibly” (108). Homer’s imagination in plot, speeches, descriptions, images, similes, and versifications, to Pope, is supreme: “Homer not only appears the inventor of poetry, but excels all the inventors of other arts in this, that he has swallowed up the honor of those who succeed him. What he has done admitted no increase, it only left room for contraction or regulation” (108).

Pope’s unreserved admiration for Homer’s “poetical *fire*” seems to contradict his criticism of fancy and his insistence on poetical decorum. But if we understand that Pope’s decorum, instead of prescribing a rigid, impassive, and dull formula for poetry, actually emphasizes the suitability of style to subject, then it becomes clear that he admires Homer’s poetical imagination because of its appropriateness to the sublime subject. Homer is unequalled because in such a magnanimous, elevated epic as *The Iliad*, his descriptions and dictions are accordingly diversified and truly sublime. Homer’s invention, Pope thinks, far exceeds the fancy of those seventeenth-century metaphysical poets like Wycherley in that “what [Homer] writes is of the most animated nature imaginable” (1965, 108). Homer’s fancy seldom runs wild and deviates from nature to the degree of destroying the architecture of the whole, but serves to vivaciously imitate the actions of different kinds of characters. In Homer, invention and judgment, two elements often at strife, are brought together under the ideal of “following NATURE,” and serve “each other’s *Aid*, like *Man and Wife*” (82–3). In “Observations on the *Iliad*,” Pope’s comment on Homer’s descriptions of characters manifests his idea of the complementing effects of invention and judgment under the general principle of poetical decorum: “As Homer’s invention is in nothing more wonderful than in the great variety of characters with which his poems are diversified, so his judgment appears in nothing more exact than in that propriety with which each character is maintained” (138).

There are critics who think that Pope has failed to “reconcile [nameless grace] with a more rigid system of ‘rules’” (Isles 1972, 264). Pope’s reconciliation of Longinian sublimity, exemplified by Homer’s spontaneity and imagination, and judgment and good sense embodied by neoclassical rules, does succeed in some way, if an unchanging natural order is taken into consideration. Claiming that “*Nature and Homer were . . . the same*” (Pope 1965, 135), Pope treats Homer as the model of both epical sublimity and neoclassical rules which are inherent in the imitation of nature. Since passion and reason must be harmonized somehow in human psyche by “following nature,” so imagination and good sense in poetry and art could also be brought to the same goal. Extremity in ungoverned invention and fancy lead to chaotic “*Heap of Wit*” (292), while rigid judgment can also “decline to coldness” (117). If invention corresponds to the “ruling passion” that gives impetus to one’s action, then judgment is no doubt the “reason” that channels and regulates this wild creative force. Since nature abounds in

both liveliness and orderliness, to copy nature simply means to apply both invention and judgment in the poetic process. Samuel Johnson's comment best summarizes Pope's grand synthetic project:

Of his intellectual character the constituent and fundament principle was good sense, a prompt and intuitive perception of consonance and propriety. . . . But good sense alone is sedate and quiescent quality, which manages its possessions well, but does not increase them; it collects few materials for its own operations, and preserves safety, but never gains supremacy. Pope had likewise genius; a mind attractive, ambitious; and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imaging something greater than it knows; always endeavoring more than it can do. (1984, 733–4)

Being a poet of “consonance and propriety” is far from being a mediocre one. The Horatian epithet that “neither gods nor stones allow poets to be mediocre” must be a catchphrase deeply rooted in Pope since his youth. Having a balance between invention and judgment sets no limit to a poet's genius; rather, it exhorts him to fly “higher” in stylistic invention, only that this invention remains non-esoteric. Pope's is not a formula full of shoulds and should-nots (perhaps to beginners of poetry it is so, but to greater poets it is rather flexible), nor a recipe for the cooking of any passable verse, but a hornstone to whet one's perception and expression of the world. To achieve this goal, Pope has sought to combine two formative forces of art making, imagination and execution, directing them towards the task of evoking general nature in its diversity. For small wits like Wycherley, synthetic capability is badly needed, and for great wits like Homer and Virgil, it is seldom absent.

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