

Neo-Classical Poetics
in Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*
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Introduction

When Samuel Johnson ascribed to a new work “such extent of comprehension, such nicety of distinction, such acquaintance with mankind, and such knowledge both of both ancient and modern learning as not often attained by the maturest age and longest experience,” he was speaking of young Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), written when he was about twenty, and published when he was only twenty-three years old (in Mack 177).¹ Others have not been as generous in their comments about the prodigy’s efforts. One history of criticism textbook describes the work rather ingloriously: “There are repetitions and inconsistencies, some conventional pronouncements along with injunctions of lasting value; but nowhere . . . are the principles organized into a coherent whole, and no cut-and-dried theory [of criticism] therefore emerges” (in Morris 145).² Despite this harsher pronouncement, Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*

¹ Johnson’s evaluation of Pope’s *Essay* has been upheld if for no other reason than that so many of the work’s *bon mots* have established noteworthy careers in daily household English. As Mack observed (177), “Pope will sometimes manage a verbal maneuver so simple in appearance, so breathtaking on reflection, that the common sense of mankind has plucked it out of the poem and made it a part of speech: ‘A *little Learning* is a dang’rous Thing’ (205); ‘To err is *Humane*; to Forgive, *Divine*’ (525); ‘For *Fools* rush in where *Angels* fear to tread’ (625). And several more. Next to Shakespeare, we may recall, Pope has contributed more to our common language than any other poet. It is a gift not lightly to be dismissed.”

² One primary complaint against the work is that it plagiarized the ancients. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu offered this old-style comment: “I admired Mr. Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* at first very much, because I had not then read any of the ancient critics, and did not know that it was all stolen” (in Williams 209). Also, De Quincey’s remarks in the seventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1842) set the pace for many future diagnoses of the work: “It is a collection of independent maxims, tied together into a fasciculus [small bundle] by the printer, but having no natural order or logical dependency: generally so vague as to mean nothing” (in Morris 145). John Dennis’ immediate and hostile response to Pope’s contribution is perhaps the most celebrated. Clark tells the story (30-31): “The ‘*Essay*’ provoked an almost immediate attack and a vitriolic critique by John Dennis in his *Reflections Critical and Satyrical, upon a late Rhapsody, call’d An Essay upon Criticism*. This abusive monograph was apparently

stands as a monument to the principles of English neo-classical poetics which revered the works of the ancients, recognized the validity of classical criteria and *genres*, and desired to see the ancient criteria and *genres* applied to the eighteenth century English literary scene (Isles 262). For this reason and others, many believe that *An Essay on Criticism* makes an original and significant contribution to the history of critical theory (Morris 146).

Pope divided the work into three parts. Part one is an extended theoretical defense of the very possibility of valid criticism which draws on Nature and the tradition of the ancients. The second part details the traits that could hinder fruitful criticism and lead to errors in critical judgment. The final section presents the intellectual and moral virtues which facilitate the critic's craft. My goal in the following pages will be to itemize and explain the principal principles of neo-classical criticism as these have been deposited in Pope's noble work.

Principal Principles of Neo-Classical Poetics in Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*

Part One

There are many concepts regarding literary criticism that are instantiated in the first part of Pope's *Essay*: the problem of bad writing and criticism, and the greater danger of the latter to the public; the rarity of genius and taste in poets and critics respectively; the impairing of the capacity of critical judgment by unsound education; the causes for the multitude of literary critics (those who can't write, judge!); and the critic's need to know the limits of his genius, taste, and learning in the exercise of criticism. But two themes stand out above the rest: the role of "Nature" in the art of poetics and

written because of two couplets in Pope's poem: 'T'were well, might Criticks still this Freedom take; But *Appius* reddens at each Word you speak, And stares, *Tremendous!* with a *threatning Eye*, Like some *fierce Tyrant* in *Old Tapestry!* (ll. 584-87). Since Dennis' play *Appius and Virginia* had failed upon production in 1709, the crusty old critic took Pope's lines to refer to himself and evidently felt they were an attempt to discredit his critical position."

criticism, and the role of the ancient poet/critics as the exemplars for contemporary literary activity. Each of these principles needs to be explicated in some detail.

What is the basis for literary composition and the practice of criticism? What provides the common ground and gives guidance for both? For Pope, the answer was found in a specific eighteenth century understanding of the honorific term and concept of NATURE.

First follow Nature and your judgment frame
 By her just standard, which is still the same:
 Unerring NATURE, still divinely bright,
 One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
 Life, force, beauty, must to all impart,
 At once the source, and end, and test of Art.
 (Lines 68-73)

Nature is the “ultimate authority” (Williams 219) in Pope’s *Essay*, and is presented here as that canon or standard to which both “wit” (creative poetic and literary expression) and critical judgment are to conform. Authors and critics are to write and to judge according to the clear, unchanged, and universal light—just standards of inerrant Nature. In literature and criticism, Nature is all-significant as its source, as its aim, and as its test. Art is from Nature, unto Nature, and by Nature. But what, exactly, does Pope mean by this all-encompassing concept? Williams expresses the eighteenth-century, neo-classical understanding of this doctrine in these terms.

Fundamental to “neo-classical” thought about Nature is the conception of a cosmos which, in its order and regularity and harmony, reflects the order and harmony of the Divine Mind of its Creator. . . . Man can perceive this order and rule in Nature because he has a rational soul made in the image of that Nature’s Creator. . . . In the view which prevails in the period “Nature” is the manifestation in the visible creation of the Order and Reason behind all things, a reflection of the medieval view that the likeness of God is imprinted in the very matter and organization of the universe (219-20).³

³ Williams goes on to point out the Cartesian, Deistic, Stoic and Christian sources of this conception of Nature. He writes (220), “Whatever influence Descartes may have had on this view of Nature, and however it may have been appropriated to Deism, its roots lie deep in the pagan and Christian past, nourished by the Stoic doctrine of the Logos and by traditional Christian contemplation of God as mirrored in His creation.”

Pope's purpose here, of course, is not to offer praise to Nature, but to propose to wits and critics alike that it is by Nature that they are to frame their judgments. Nature provides the just and changeless standard which ensures felicitous compositions and accurate judgments. Nature provides absolute and necessary criteria for all artistic endeavor, and the justification of such activity is sustained by Nature's universality, permanence, presence, and power.

The language of Pope's text (as well as the language of this commentary) is noticeably vague, a fact for which Pope was frequently censured. John Dennis in his *Reflections* (cf. page one, note two) complained that Pope should have said exactly what he meant by Nature, and stated precisely what he intended by writing and judging according to Nature (Williams 219). Pope did expand on his thought in the next pericope (or unit of text) when he suggested that the process of composing and critiquing according to Nature was exemplified by the art and rules of the ancients.

Those Rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;
Nature, like Liberty, is but restrained
By the same Laws which first herself ordained.
(Lines 88-91)

Ancient literature manifests Nature's rules, for as bard of Twickenham wrote in line 135, "Nature and Homer were, he found, the same." To draw principles of literature from these venerable works would be, for all practical purposes, to draw them from Nature. They were "Nature still, but Nature methodized," and hence applicable to the present context. Since Nature's aesthetic principles were embodied in the rules and texts of civilization's patriarchal poets and critics, Pope admonished his readers to "hear how learned Greece her useful rules indicts, When to repress, and when to indulge our flights" (92-93). The guidelines of the Greek authors, once ascertained, would enable English men of letters to know when to limit and when to give way to their creative impulses. For poetry and criticism to be excellent, it must conform to Nature, and the

clearest indication of the aesthetic laws of Nature was found in the primordial Greek writers. Study and follow them: "Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem; To copy nature is to copy them" (Lines 139-40).

This conception leads nicely into the second most important neo-classical principle in the first part of Pope's *Essay*, namely the role and importance of the ancients, especially Homer and Virgil, as models for literary and critical activity. This is only logical and may be expressed syllogistically: (1) Nature is the source and justification of literary works of art. (2) The works of the ancients are the embodiment of Nature. (3) Hence, the works of the ancients are the source and justification of art. (4) Therefore study them. Pope, of course, put it poetically:

You then whose judgment the right course would steer,
 Know well each ANCIENT'S proper character;
 His Fable, Subject, scope in every page;
 Religion, Country, genius of his Age:
 Without all these at once before your eyes,
 Cavil you may, but never criticize.
 Be Homer's works, your study and delight,
 Read them by day, and meditate by night;
 Thence form your judgment, thence your maxims bring,
 And trace the Muses upward to their spring.
 Still with itself compared, his text peruse;
 And let your comment be the Mantuan Muse.
 (Lines 118-129)

While others had counseled young writers to read their literary elders as exemplars, here Pope so admonished for a unique purpose, namely to ascertain fixed, universal standards as the manifestations of Nature which serve as the foundation for literary composition and as the validation of judgments in criticism. "In isolating nature and the classics as universal standards for validating the possibility of individual judgment, Pope . . . offered English criticism the theoretical foundations of an authentic art" (Morris 152).

In concluding Part One of his *Essay*, Pope is so taken with the natural goodness of the primeval authors that he has difficulty restraining himself in declaring their praise. The religious nature of their veneration is not only transparent, but also significant literarily. “Here in worship before a common altar, divisions and sects and quarrels in criticism are forgotten as men unite in a single congregation. The learned from all climes and ages bring . . . their incense to a common shrine. . . . Pope’s verse . . . rises in full response to the inspiration his age received from a glorious past, a past which was both an inspiration, and a reproach, to the present” (Williams 229).

Hail, Bards triumphant! born in happier days;
 Immortal heirs of universal praise!
 Whose honours with increase of ages grow,
 As streams roll down, enlarging as they flow;
 Nations unborn your mighty names shall sound,
 And worlds applaud that must not yet be found!
 Oh may some spark of your celestial fire,
 The last, the meanest of your sons inspire,
 (That on weak wings, from far, pursues your flights;
 Glows while he reads, but trembles as he writes)
 To teach vain Wits a science little known,
 T’ admire superior sense, and doubt their own!

We see, then, that Pope’s poetics in *An Essay on Criticism* begin with reflections on a golden age, those “happier days” suffused with the “clear, unchang’d, and Universal Light” of Nature, the creator and source of all literary truth and value, with whom the first men, the literary Adams—Homer and Virgil—are in spiritual union, serving one another.⁴ Part One is Pope’s poetic and literary analogue to Genesis and Creation, and his “doctrine was that the world of Man was created perfect in Adam; since the Fall of

⁴ The following words of Vasari in the Preface of his *Lives of the Painters*, which express a special aspect of the doctrine of primitivism, provide a historical insight and context into Pope’s own thought. Vasari writes: “. . . the first men, being less removed from their divine origin, were more perfect, possessing a brighter intelligence, and . . . with Nature as a guide, a pure intellect for master, and the lovely world as a model, they originate these noble arts, and by gradually improving them brought them at length, from small beginnings, to perfection” (in Williams 227).

Man . . . his world has been in a process of progressive decay; it follows therefore that ancient men who lived nearer the state of perfection could be and make things more nearly perfect than any modern. . . ” (Griffith in Williams 227-28).

Appropriately, Part Two of Pope’s *Essay* documents the fall of literary man. The former glory of the Republic of letters is besmirched. Pope’s own literary paradise is lost and now littered with the rampant vice that retards true critical judgment. The account begins with a reflection on “pride”—the cause of the original fall, the source of the decays in human nature, and thus in the arts.

Part Two:

In his description of the “fall” of criticism in his own or any age, Pope assumed the role of a prophet, and spoke as the critic of critics. He cited what he believed to be the characteristics of misguided acts of criticism—“the causes which conspire to blind Man’s erring judgment, and misguide the mind” (Lines 201-02). In addition to pointing out vices, in most cases Pope offered counsel to critics that they might be restored to their true vocation. He surveys no less than fifteen foibles—the deadly critical sins—too many, obviously, to be discussed here.⁵ I will focus on the issues of pride and envy which may be regarded as the “capital” sins of the profession.

⁵ The causes hindering true judgment are these: (1) Pride, 201-14; (2) Limited learning, 215-232; (3) Judging by parts, not by wholes, 233-288; (4) Excessive dependence upon wit, 234-304; (5) Excessive dependence upon language, 305-338; (6) Excessive dependence upon versification, 339-383; (7) Given to extremes of being too easy to please, or too hard to admire, 384-393; (8) Fallacious allegiance/partiality to the ancients or the moderns, 394-407; (9) Basing criticism on the responses of the people (*consensus gentium*) or the identity of the writer (*ad hominem* positive or abusive), 408-423; (10) Criticizing always contrary to the vulgar masses for purpose of individualism/singularity, 424-429; (11) Inconsistent, hypocritical, waffling criticisms, 430-451; (12) Parochial or party spirit criticism based on values of the critic’s own group, 452-465; (13) Criticism based on envy and spite, 466-507; (14) The rejection of envy, and the exhortation to good nature and common sense, 508-525; (15) The proper use of severity by critics, 526-559.

For Pope, pride was “the never-failing voice of fools” (Line 204). When a critic lacks the acumen necessary for his task, often times the lacunae is replaced with *hubris*. Or, as he put it in *Essay on Man*, “Each want of happiness by hope supplied, and each vacuity of sense by *Pride*” (II. 285-86, italics added). Only sober reasoning would return the supercilious to a right and true estimate of things. Since we are myopic and self-blinded, we should embrace friend and enemy alike in order to form a true estimate of ourselves. In Pope’s phrases,

Pride, where Wit fails, steps in to our defence,
 And fills up all the mighty Void of sense.
 If once right reason drives that cloud away,
 Truth breaks upon us with resistless day.
 Trust not yourself; but your defects to know,
 Make use of every friend—and every foe.
 (Lines 209-14)

However, there is the possibility that pride will refuse to be squelched, and instead produce an offspring—envy, the vice with which Part Two of Pope’s lecture concludes. In his *Essay on Man*, in commending virtue as the means to happiness, Pope described and denounced envy by saying that the virtuous man was “never elated, while one man’s oppressed; Never dejected, while another’s blessed” (IV. 323-26). This, however, is the temptation of the prideful critic: to rejoice at a wit’s failings, and to weep at his success. Such behavior is the mark of a writer dominated by self-love and poetic jealousy. It is an unhappy sport, a foolish game among contending wits, that Pope said destroyed genuine criticism. Nonetheless it is to these “base ends” and “abject ways” that men are moved by that “sacred lust of praise.”

Now, they who reach Parnassus’ lofty crown,
 Employ their pains to spurn some others down;
 And while self-love each jealous writer rules,
 Contending wits become the sport of fools:
 But still the worst with most regret commend,
 For each ill Author is as bad a friend.
 To what base ends, and by what abject ways,
 Are mortals urged through sacred lust of praise!

(Lines 514-521)

Pope, an astute observer of human nature, knew what envy could do: “ ’Tis what the vicious fear, the virtuous shun, By fools ’tis hated, and by knaves undone!” (Lines 506-07). Envy is a destroyer and must be abandoned, and one means to that end was to be quick to recognize the genuine accomplishment in another: “Be thou the first true merit to befriend: His praise is lost, who stays till all commend” (Lines 474-75). But most of all Pope recommended an extirpation in the critic of the thirst for glory since its quest would end up despoiling the man. The purging of this vice would be the result of the combination of character and reason, but weaknesses must be recognized and forgiveness bestowed.

Ah ne’er so dire a thirst of glory boast,
Nor in the Critic let the Man be lost.
Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human, to forgive, divine.
(Lines 522-25)

In any case, pride is the chief of the critic’s sins. As Clark points out in this biblico-theological comparison, “Just as pride can be the most subtle of the sins that separate man from a true understanding of God, it can stand between the critic and nature, reason, and judgment. . . . Thus the sin of pride in a critic corresponded to the sin of not ‘following Nature’ (in art). . . . [Furthermore] the other faults in critics enumerated in the rest of Part II spring from pride in one realm or another: imperfect learning; judging by parts of a poem, not by the whole; partiality to ancients or moderns; prejudice; singularity (individualism); inconstancy; political bias; and envy...” (36). Thus, the vocation of poetry and criticism—established in the golden classical era of Homer, Aristotle, and Virgil, and now fallen through the capital offenses of pride and envy, must be cleansed of its defects and restored to its natural capacities and virtues that it might fulfill its aesthetic and social functions. This restoration of the poet/critic is the theme of Part

Three of Pope's *Essay*, and contributes, according to Williams, to the larger design of the poem as its climax (225).⁶

Part Three:

What is a "redeemed" critic? What does he look like in character and ability? For questions like these, Pope exhorts in the first line of this section to "Learn then what MORALS Critics ought to show" (Line 560). The use of this term "MORALS" foreshadows the serious ethical tone of this entire section which forms a fitting conclusion to the poem's overall pattern which has stressed the loss of poetic and critical virtue and the need for its recovery. As Williams writes, "The ruin which entered the larger world, and inevitably invaded the world of art, was the result of moral failure. Restoration of the decays in critics and in criticism must be based, then, on moral reformation. Without such reformation the genius of a critic may always be used for petty and malicious ends" (231).

Since it is but half of a critic's task to know, Pope, with telegraphic efficiency, itemizes the five fundamental moral virtues of a critic. One, truth and candor: "'Tis not

⁶ Williams (224-27) has pointed out that several of Pope's poetic and critical colleagues, drawing on themes supplied by Christian theology, had already set in consciousness the need for the recovery of poetry and the arts from a state of decline and decay. Antedating this epoch, John Milton, in his essay *On Education*, had said that "the end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents. . . ." All art and education, from Milton's perspective, was redemptive in scope and purpose. Similarly, John Dennis, in his *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) argued that "the great Design of Arts is to restore the Decays that happen'd to human Nature by the Fall, by restoring Order." Dennis' call for a reformation of the art of poetry had already been sounded by his predecessor Henry Reynolds who likewise called for a restoration of the poetic arts from their state of indigence according to the model possessed in the ancients themselves. This conclusion follows: "Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is an exhortation to an age, one which parallels almost exactly, in the sequence of its three parts [1: golden classical era, 2: present day fall and decay, 3: restoration], such traditional exhortations to reformation and restoration as those of Dennis and Reynolds. Only perhaps when the poem's kinship with such earlier exhortations is clearly recognized can one fully comprehend the *Essay*, not only as a great critical document, but also as a rich and complex poem with its own grand design."

enough, taste, judgment, learning, join; In all you speak, let truth and candor shine” (Lines 561-62). Two, modesty: “Be silent always when you doubt your sense; And speak, though sure, with seeming diffidence” (Lines 566-67). Three, good breeding: “Without good breeding, truth is disapproved; That only makes superior sense beloved” (Lines 576-77). Four, sincerity and generosity of advice: “Be niggards of advice on no pretence; For the worst avarice is that of sense. With mean complacence ne’er betray your trust, Nor be so civil as to prove unjust. Fear not the anger of the wise to raise; Those best can bear reproof, who merit praise” (Lines 578-83). Five, restraint: “Tis best sometimes your censure to restrain, And charitably let the dull be vain” (Lines 596-97).

Unfortunately not all have succeeded in recovering these traits, and so Pope presented a description of an incorrigible poet and a contumelious critic. Of the former he wrote, “What crowds of these, impenitently bold, In sounds and jingling syllables grown old, Still run on Poets, in a raging vein, Even to the dregs and squeezings of the brain” (Lines 604-07). And of the latter “mad abandoned” critics, Pope spoke disdainfully: “The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read, With loads of learned lumber in his head” (Lines 612-13). In their arrogance and impetuosity, no poet or playwright is protected from their cavil, for some critics are fools, and “Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread” (Line 625).

Over against these negative examples, Pope provides a grandiloquent description of his model poet/critic. Pope’s paradigm of poetic and critical virtue is a *tour de force* for the oxymoron in that his paragon is able to reconcile the tensions between multiple binary oppositions and bring them together into an authentic and homogeneous whole. Hence this critical virtuoso is, among other qualities, knowledgeable yet humble; learned yet well bred; well bred yet sincere; modest yet bold; humane yet severe; closed yet open; theoretical yet practical; loving yet rational. Pope inquired regarding the whereabouts of this literary maven.

But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,
 Still pleased to teach, and yet not proud to know?
 Unbiased, or by favour or by spite;
 Not dully prepossessed, nor blindly right;
 Though learned, well bred; and though well bred, sincere;
 Modestly bold, and humanly severe:
 Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
 And gladly praise the merit of a foe?
 Blest with a taste exact, yet unconfined;
 A knowledge both of books and human kind;
 Generous converse; a soul exempt from pride;
 And love to praise, with reason on his side?
 (Lines 631-42)

Where is this man, Pope asks? In history past! Pope concludes the *Essay* with a survey which traces the transmission of the cultural treasure of critical excellence from time to time and place to place. Moving from the East to the West and from the ancient to the modern, the light of Nature first illuminated the critics of Greece and Rome (Aristotle, Horace, Dionysius, Petronius, Quintilian, Longinus). Then after the darkness and ignorance of the Middle Ages, civilization and the arts next shone brightly in Italy, faded again only to reappear in France and England (Erasmus, Vida, Boileau, Roscommon). "It is an argument by which Pope suggests that, throughout the course of time and despite time's deteriorations, there have been great, and good, critics whom the men of his own age might propose to themselves as patterns for 'imitation'" (Williams 232). With these critical heroes to emulate, Pope suggested that poetic restoration might be achieved.

Conclusion

Creation, fall, redemption: this basic biblical schema provides the paradigm for Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*. Just as the focus of the biblical narrative is on the salvaging of a sin-wrecked creation, so the movement of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is toward the restoration of a fallen classical poetics for eighteenth century England. This parallel supplies substance and shape to the *Essay's* grand purpose and

design. And in both the Scriptures and in Pope, the goals of cosmic and poetic restoration are ones for which we can and must give thanks.

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