

An Essay on Criticism (1711) was Pope's first independent work, published anonymously through an obscure bookseller. Its implicit claim to authority is not based on a lifetime's creative work or a prestigious commission but, riskily, on the skill and argument of the poem alone. It offers a sort of master-class not only in doing criticism but in being a critic: addressed to those – it could be anyone – who would rise above scandal, envy, politics and pride to true judgement, it leads the reader through a qualifying course. At the end, one does not become a professional critic – the association with hired writing would have been a contaminating one for Pope – but an educated judge of important critical matters. Much of the poem is delivered as a series of instructions, but the opening is tentative, presenting a problem to be solved: 'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill/Appear in *Writing* or in *Judging* ill'. The next six lines ring the changes on the differences to be weighed in deciding the question:

But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' Offence,
To tire our *Patience*, than mislead our *Sense*:
Some few in that, but Numbers err in *this*,
Ten Censure wrong for one who Writes amiss;
A *Fool* might once *himself* alone expose,
Now *One* in *Verse* makes many more in *Prose*.

The simple opposition develops into a more complex suggestion that more unqualified people are likely to set up for critic than for poet, and that such a proliferation is serious. Pope's typographically-emphasized oppositions between poetry and criticism, verse and prose, patience and sense, develop through the passage into a wider account of the problem than first proposed: the even-handed balance of the couplets extends beyond a simple contrast. Nonetheless, though Pope's oppositions divide, they also keep within a single framework different categories of writing: Pope often seems to be addressing poets as much as critics. The critical function may well depend on a poetic function: this is after all an essay on criticism delivered in verse, and thus acting also as poetry and offering itself for criticism. Its blurring of categories which might otherwise be seen as fundamentally distinct, and its often slippery transitions from area to area, are part of the poem's comprehensive, educative character.

Addison, who considered the poem 'a Master-piece', declared that its tone was conversational and its lack of order was not problematic: 'The Observations follow one another like those in *Horace's Art of Poetry*, without that Methodical

Regularity which would have been requisite in a Prose Author. Pope, however, decided during the revision of the work to divide the poem into three sections, with numbered sub-sections summarizing each segment of argument. This impulse towards order is itself illustrative of tensions between creative and critical faculties, an apparent casualness of expression being given rigour by a prose skeleton. The three sections are not equally balanced, but offer something like the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of logical argumentation – something which exceeds the positive-negative opposition suggested by the couplet format. The first section (1–200) establishes the basic possibilities for critical judgement; the second (201–559) elaborates the factors which hinder such judgement; and the third (560–744) celebrates the elements which make up true critical behaviour. Part One seems to begin by setting poetic genius and critical taste against each other, while at the same time limiting the operation of teaching to those ‘who have *written well*’. The poem immediately stakes an implicit claim for the poet to be included in the category of those who can ‘write well’ by providing a flamboyant example of poetic skill in the increasingly satiric portrayal of the process by which failed writers become critics: ‘Each burns alike, who can, or cannot write,/Or with a Rival’s, or an *Eunuch*’s spite’. At the bottom of the heap are ‘half-learn’d Witlings, num’rous in our Isle’, pictured as insects in an early example of Pope’s favourite image of teeming, writerly promiscuity. Pope then turns his attention back to the reader, conspicuously differentiated from this satiric extreme: ‘*you* who seek to *give* and *merit* Fame’ (the combination of giving and meriting reputation again links criticism with creativity). The would-be critic, thus selected, is advised to criticize himself first of all, examining his limits and talents and keeping to the bounds of what he knows; this leads him to the most major of Pope’s abstract quantities within the poem (and within his thought in general): Nature.

First follow NATURE, and your Judgment frame
By her just Standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang’d, and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art.

Dennis complained that Pope should have specified ‘what he means by Nature, and what it is to write or to judge according to Nature’, and modern analyses have the burden of Romantic deifications of Nature to discard: Pope’s Nature is certainly not some pantheistic, powerful nurturer, located outside social settings,

as it would be for Wordsworth, though like the later poets Pope always characterises Nature as female, something to be quested for by male poet. Nature would include all aspects of the created world, including the non-human, physical world, but the advice on following Nature immediately follows the advice to study one's own internal 'Nature', and thus means something like an instinctively-recognised principle of ordering, derived from the original, timeless, cosmic ordering of God (the language of the lines implicitly aligns Nature with God; those that follow explicitly align it with the soul). Art should be derived from Nature, should seek to replicate Nature, and can be tested against the unaltering standard of Nature, which thus includes Reason and Truth as reflections of the mind of the original poet-creator, God.

In a fallen universe, however, apprehension of Nature requires assistance: internal gifts alone do not suffice.

Some, to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse,
Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
For *Wit and Judgment* often are at strife,
Tho' meant each other's Aid, like *Man and Wife*.

Wit, the second of Pope's abstract qualities, is here seamlessly conjoined with the discussion of Nature: for Pope, Wit means not merely quick verbal humour but something almost as important as Nature – a power of invention and perception not very different from what we would mean by intelligence or imagination. Early critics again seized on the first version of these lines (which Pope eventually altered to the reading given here) as evidence of Pope's inability to make proper distinctions: he seems to suggest that a supply of Wit sometimes needs more Wit to manage it, and then goes on to replace this conundrum with a more familiar opposition between Wit (invention) and Judgment (correction). But Pope stood by the essential point that Wit itself could be a form of Judgment and insisted that though the marriage between these qualities might be strained, no divorce was possible.

Nonetheless, some external prop to Wit was necessary, and Pope finds this in those 'RULES' of criticism derived from Nature:

Those RULES of old *discover'd*, not *devis'd*,
Are *Nature* still, but *Nature Methodiz'd*;

Nature, like *Liberty*, is but restrain'd
By the same Laws which first *herself* ordain'd.

(EC, 88–91)

Nature, as Godlike principle of order, is 'discover'd' to operate according to certain principles stated in critical treatises such as Aristotle's *Poetics* or Horace's *Ars Poetica* (or Pope's *Essay on Criticism*). In the golden age of Greece (92–103), Criticism identified these Rules of Nature in early poetry and taught their use to aspiring poets. Pope contrasts this with the activities of critics in the modern world, where often criticism is actively hostile to poetry, or has become an end in itself. Right judgement must separate itself out from such blind alleys by reading Homer: 'You then whose Judgment the right Course would steer' (EC, 118) can see yourself in the fable of 'young *Maro*' (Virgil), who is pictured discovering to his amazement the perfect original equivalence between Homer, Nature, and the Rules. Virgil the poet becomes a sort of critical commentary on the original source poet of Western literature, Homer. With assurance bordering consciously on hyperbole, Pope can instruct us: 'Learn hence for Ancient Rules a just Esteem;/To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*'.

Despite the potential for neat conclusion here, Pope has a rider to offer, and again it is one which could be addressed to poet or critic: 'Some Beauties yet, no Precepts can declare,/For there's a *Happiness* as well as *Care*'. As well as the prescriptions of Aristotelian poetics, Pope draws on the ancient treatise ascribed to Longinus and known as *On the Sublime*. Celebrating imaginative 'flights' rather than representation of nature, Longinus figures in Pope's poem as a sort of paradox:

Great Wits sometimes may *gloriously offend*,
And rise to *Faults* true Criticks *dare not mend*;
From *vulgar Bounds* with *brave Disorder* part,
And *snatch a Grace* beyond the Reach of Art,
Which, without passing thro' the *Judgment*, gains
The *Heart*, and all its End *at once* attains.

This occasional imaginative rapture, not predictable by rule, is an important concession, emphasised by careful typographic signalling of its paradoxical nature ('*gloriously offend*', and so on); but it is itself countered by the caution that 'The Critick' may 'put his Laws in force' if such licence is unjustifiably used. Pope here seems to align the 'you' in the audience with poet rather than critic, and in the final lines of the first section it is the classical '*Bards Triumphant*' who remain unassailably immortal, leaving Pope to pray for 'some Spark

of *your* Coelestial Fire’ to inspire his own efforts as ‘The last, the meanest of your Sons’, to instruct criticism *through* poetry.

Following this ringing prayer for the possibility of reestablishing a critical art based on poetry, Part II (200-559) elaborates all the human psychological causes which inhibit such a project: pride, envy, sectarianism, a love of some favourite device at the expense of overall design. The ideal critic will reflect the creative mind, and will seek to understand the whole work rather than concentrate on minute infractions of critical laws:

A perfect Judge will *read* each Work of Wit
With the same Spirit that its Author *writ*,
Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight Faults to find,
Where *Nature moves*, and *Rapture warms* the Mind;

Most critics (and poets) err by having a fatal predisposition towards some partial aspect of poetry: ornament, conceit, style, or metre, which they use as an inflexible test of far more subtle creations. Pope aims for a kind of poetry which is recognisable and accessible in its entirety:

True Wit is *Nature* to Advantage drest,
What oft was *Thought*, but ne’er so well *Exprest*,
Something, whose Truth convinc’d at Sight we find,
That gives us back the Image of our Mind:

This is not to say that style alone will do, as Pope immediately makes plain the music of poetry, the ornament of its ‘numbers’ or rhythm, is only worth having because ‘The Sound must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*’. Pope performs and illustrates a series of poetic clichés – the use of open vowels, monosyllabic lines, and cheap rhymes:

Tho’ oft the Ear the *open Vowels* tire ... (EC, 345)
And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line ... (EC, 347)
Where-e’er you find the *cooling Western Breeze*,
In the next Line, it *whispers thro’ the Trees*... (EC, 350–1)

These gaffes are contrasted with more positive kinds of imitative effect:

Soft is the Strain when *Zephyr* gently blows,
And the *smooth Stream* in *smoother Numbers* flows;

But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,
The *hoarse, rough Verse* shou'd like the *Torrent* roar.

(*EC*, 366–9)

Again, this functions both as poetic instance and as critical test, working examples for both classes of writer.

After a long series of satiric vignettes of false critics, who merely parrot the popular opinion, or change their minds all the time, or flatter aristocratic versifiers, or criticise poets rather than poetry, Pope again switches attention to educated readers, encouraging (or cajoling) them towards staunchly independent and generous judgment within what is described as an increasingly fraught cultural context, threatened with decay and critical warfare. But, acknowledging that even 'Noble minds' will have some 'Dregs ... of Spleen and sow'r Disdain', Pope advises the critic to 'Discharge that Rage on more Provoking Crimes, / Nor fear a Dearth in these Flagitious Times': obscenity and blasphemy are unpardonable and offer a kind of lightning conductor for critics to purify their own wit against some demonised object of scorn.

If the first parts of *An Essay on Criticism* outline a positive classical past and troubled modern present, Part III seeks some sort of resolved position whereby the virtues of one age can be maintained during the squabbles of the other. The opening seeks to instill the correct *behaviour* in the critic –not merely rules for written criticism, but, so to speak, for enacted criticism, a sort of '*Good Breeding*' which politely enforces without seeming to enforce:

LEARN then what MORALS Criticks ought to show,

For 'tis but *half a Judge's Task*, to *Know*.

'Tis not enough, Taste, Judgment, Learning, join;

In all you speak, let Truth and Candor shine ...

Be *silent* always when you *doubt* your Sense;

And *speak*, tho' *sure*, with *seeming Diffidence*

...Men must be *taught* as if you taught them *not*;

And Things *unknown* propos'd as Things *forgot*:

(*EC*, 560–3, 566–7, 574–5)

This ideally-poised man of social grace cannot be universally successful: some poets, as some critics, are incorrigible and it is part of Pope's education of the poet-critic to leave them well alone. Synthesis, if that is being offered in this final part, does not consist of gathering all writers into one tidy fold but in a careful discrimination of true wit from irredeemable 'dulness'.

Thereafter, Pope has two things to say. One is to set a challenge to contemporary culture by asking ‘where’s the Man’ who can unite all necessary humane and intellectual qualifications for the critic, and be a sort of walking oxymoron, ‘Modestly bold, and humanly severe’ in his judgements. The other is to insinuate an answer. Pope offers deft characterisations of critics from Aristotle to Pope who achieve the necessary independence from extreme positions: Aristotle’s primary treatise is likened to an imaginative voyage into the land of Homer which becomes the source of legislative power; Horace is the poetic model for friendly conversational advice; Quintilian is a useful store of ‘the justest Rules, and clearest *Method* join’d’; Longinus is inspired by the Muses, who ‘bless *their Critick* with a *Poet’s Fire*’. These pairs include and encapsulate all the precepts recommended in the body of the poem. But the empire of good sense, Pope reminds us, fell apart after the fall of Rome, leaving nothing but monkish superstition, until the scholar Erasmus, always Pope’s model of an ecumenical humanist, reformed continental scholarship. Renaissance Italy shows a revival of arts, including criticism; France, ‘a Nation born to serve’ fossilised critical and poetic practice into unbending rules; Britain, on the other hand, ‘– a deftly ironic modulation of what appears to be a patriotic celebration into something more muted. Pope does however cite two earlier verse essays (by John Sheffield, Duke of Buckinghamshire, and Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon) before paying tribute to his own early critical mentor, William Walsh, who had died in 1708. Sheffield and Dillon were both poets who wrote criticism in verse, but Walsh was not a poet; in becoming the nearest modern embodiment of the ideal critic, his ‘poetic’ aspect becomes Pope himself, depicted as a mixture of moderated qualities which reminds us of the earlier ‘Where’s the man’ passage: he is quite possibly here,

Careless of *Censure*, nor too fond of *Fame*,
 Still pleas’d to *praise*, yet not afraid to *blame*,
 Averse alike to *Flatter*, or *Offend*,
 Not *free* from *Faults*, nor yet too vain to *mend*.

It is a kind of leading from the front, or tuition by example, as recommended and practised by the poem. From an apparently secondary, even negative, position (writing on criticism, which the poem sees as secondary to poetry), the poem ends up founding criticism on poetry, and deriving poetry from the (ideal) critic.

Early criticism celebrated the way the poem seemed to master and exemplify its own stated ideals, just as Pope had said of Longinus that he ‘Is *himself* that

great *Sublime* he draws' . It is a poem profuse with images, comparisons and similes.