

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

POPE AND DULNESS

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I

THE strangeness of Pope's *Dunciad* is a quality that often gets lost from sight. During the last few decades criticism has worked so devotedly to assimilate the poem and make it more generally accessible, that, inevitably perhaps, we may now have reached the point of distorting it out of its original oddity. The *Dunciad* is both a work of art and something else: it is, or was, a historical event, a part of literary and social history, an episode in the life of Pope as well as in those of his enemies. And its textual complications—the different versions it went through—present unwieldy problems to editor and critic alike, which add to the difficulty of seeing clearly what it is. When the *Dunciad* is mentioned do we think of one, or more than one, poem? And do we include the elaborate editorial apparatus supplied by Pope, or do we suppress it, as being inessential? Is it in fact necessary to understand Pope's references to his now often totally obscure contemporaries? The *Dunciad* is so deeply immersed in history—the final version contains references or allusions to about two hundred actual persons—that its status as poetry is problematical, and has perhaps always seemed so.

In so far as the poem has been read at all, and it has surely never been widely read, the real critical effort has been to find in it some coherent meaning independent of its dead personalities. In the nineteenth century one tendency was to see the poem so much in terms of Pope's private character, to see it so confinedly within the context of his war with Grub-street, that it was impossible to take seriously any of its supra-personal, cultural pretensions. In this period the *Dunciad* was, so to speak, under-generalized. In recent years, on the contrary, a prevalent temptation—or so it seems to me—has been to over-generalize it, or to generalize it in a dubiously valuable way. I am thinking of the current tendency to praise the poem for taking a stand against barbarism on behalf of civilization, and to argue that,

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since such cultural issues are always with us, Pope has given expression to a permanent dilemma. The *Dunciad* may then be compared—indeed has been—with Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. The implication is that we read Pope as we might read a cultural or educational treatise, with a view to finding some guidance for practical activity. There is of course something to be said for this approach, for there is a genuine Arnoldian side to the *Dunciad* which comes out especially in the fourth Book, and no doubt general issues such as these may legitimately arise from a discussion of the poem. But it may be doubted whether they are the reasons why we read the poem in the first place, or, more important, why those of us who enjoy the poem return to it.

To say so much is certainly not to be ungrateful for such a scrupulous and thorough work of scholarship as Aubrey Williams's *Pope's Dunciad: A Study of its Meaning* (1955), despite some reservations one might feel about the limited sense in which 'meaning' is being used here. In their study of Pope's 'meaning' Aubrey Williams and those who share his approach confine their attention to Pope's deliberate artistry, his conscious intentions so far as these can be ascertained; and for their purpose they are quite right to do so. They emphasize the intellectual qualities of the *Dunciad* and those parts of it which comprise statement or allegory or approximate to either. And in such a treatment the great fourth Book rightly gets pre-eminent attention. And yet it is possible to read the *Dunciad* again and to feel that there is something else to say, that such accounts of the poem's 'meaning' do not wholly tell us what it feels like to read, and that the first three Books especially have a good deal in them which seems to elude such treatment.

The *Dunciad* on the page is a formidable *object*, dense, opaque, intransigently and uncompromisingly itself. Its apparatus of prefatory material, voluminous annotation, and after-pieces helps to create something like a spatial sense of the area occupied by the central object, the poetic text. One can indeed contemplate it as something with real physical dimensions. Just as the Lilliputians one day found the sleeping man-giant Gulliver within their kingdom, so Pope's contemporaries can be imagined as discovering this strange offensive object, lying in a public place like an enemy weapon or a ponderous missile: essentially not a set of abstract verbal statements but a thing, to be walked around and examined, interpreted, and possibly dealt with. Certainly the *Dunciad* when printed simply as a

poetic text, without its surrounding paraphernalia, is not quite itself; it has lost something of its solid three-dimensional presence. This impression that the *Dunciad* makes of being a thing, an object, is important to our sense of a quality with which I shall be particularly concerned here: its energy. When we read the poem we can, I think, sometimes feel that there is great energy and vitality in it, that Pope transmits formidable waves of power which affect us emotionally and psychologically, and that this aspect of the poem's impact—its emotional and psychological effect—is not really accounted for in those descriptions of the *Dunciad* which seem to have now become widely accepted. Works of satire can often seem more emotionally straightforward, the sources of their power less mysterious than they really are. And when, as in the *Dunciad*, the verse is crammed with the names of actual persons and with references to real events, the poetic end-product may all seem a triumph of the controlled will—and of nothing else.

If Pope were in complete control of his material, it would be easier than it is to speak of the unity of the *Dunciad*. For critics still debate whether it is one poem in four Books, or two in three and one. Ian Jack concludes that Pope shows 'a fundamental uncertainty about the subject of the poem, a fatal indefiniteness of purpose'.<sup>1</sup> He has been challenged by H. H. Erskine-Hill,<sup>2</sup> who finds a satisfying unity of purpose in the final four-Book version; but although his argument is a highly interesting one he does not, to my mind, altogether dispose of Ian Jack's original objections. But whatever one thinks about this question, there can be no doubt that the poem did go through several stages after its first appearance in print, that Pope did change his intentions to some extent, and that this happened with no other of his major poems with the exception of that other mock-heroic *The Rape of the Lock*. Uncertainty of purpose—if that is what it is—is not the same thing as mysteriousness, but these external considerations might be borne in mind when one tries to account for the *Dunciad*'s strange power. Pope himself may not have been clear what it was he wanted to do.

Like some other great works of its age, like *A Tale of a Tub* and *Clarissa*, the *Dunciad* seems to engage us on more than one level.

<sup>1</sup> *Augustan Satire* (1952), 134.

<sup>2</sup> 'The "New World" of Pope's *Dunciad*', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, vi (1962); reprinted in *Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope*, ed. Maynard Mack (1964).

The first level one might describe as a level of deliberate artistry: the poet works in terms of play of wit, purposeful allegory, triumphantly pointed writing, in all of which we are made aware of the pressure of a highly critical and aggressive mind. But on another level the poetry works more mysteriously and obscurely: one seems to see *past* the personal names and topical allusions to a large fantasy-world, an imaginative realm which is infused with a powerful sense of gratification and indulgence. The first level is primarily stimulating to the mind, while the second works affectively in altogether more obscure ways. It is indeed relevant here to recall Johnson's remark about the 'unnatural delight' which the poet of the *Dunciad* took in 'ideas physically impure'—a notion to which I shall return.

It seems altogether too simple to think of Pope as a defender of cultural standards confronting an army of midget barbarians. It might be nearer the truth to regard the *Dunciad* as having something of the quality of a *psychomachia*, to see Pope as dramatizing, or trying to reduce to order, his own feelings, which were possibly more divided and mixed than he was willing or able to acknowledge. In what follows I shall be using several approaches to justify the feeling that the poem is often more deeply ambiguous than Pope's overt purposes suggest; and I use several routes because there are different ways of explaining and describing this state of affairs.

## II

I shall begin by observing that the Scriblerus Club has a markedly retrospective, even somewhat archaic, character for the reign of Queen Anne. In an age much given to club activity this one stands out for certain qualities which recall nothing so much as the circle of More and Erasmus: not only literary cultivation and critical stringency but an almost conspiratorial intimacy and high spirits. The admiration in which Swift held More and the reverence which Pope more than once expressed for Erasmus are too well known to need insisting on: *Gulliver's Travels* is, of course, an example of Utopian fiction, while in one or two respects (which I shall return to) Pope's *Praise of Dulness*, the *Dunciad*, recalls *The Praise of Folly* (and was dedicated to Swift just as *The Praise of Folly* was to More). But more generally the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries seem to have been much engaged in taking stock of the early and middle sixteenth century, the age of the New Learning and the Reformation. Bishop Burnet wrote a great

*History of the Reformation* and translated the *Utopia*; during Pope's lifetime *The Praise of Folly* was available in two new versions, Samuel Knight's *Life of Erasmus* appeared in 1726, and Nathan Bailey's standard translation of the *Colloquies* in 1733, while a few years earlier (1703–6) the *editio princeps* of Erasmus's collected works had been published at Leyden. Montaigne was newly translated by Cotton in 1685, and the great Urquhart–Motteux translation of Rabelais—an important event for Augustan literature—was finally completed in 1708. The *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* were not translated, but were reprinted in 1710, dedicated to Steele. And Pope himself edited a selection of Latin poetry of the Italian Renaissance. Indeed when Pope wrote the first *Dunciad* in the 1720s, he was not (as readers fresh to the poem often suppose) simply scoring off his enemies by adapting a few of the incidents in Virgil, Milton, and others to the degraded setting of contemporary Grubstreet—although he did of course do this. But he was also fusing together certain other traditional kinds of writing, some of which had previously been associated with prose. Pope's concern to preserve the names of men who would, most of them, otherwise have been forgotten is comparable with the intention of the authors of the prose *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* (1515, 1517). And their satirical interest in obscure men in turn gains definition from such a work as Petrarch's *De Viris Illustribus*, with its characteristic Renaissance concern with true fame. Petrarch, who stands on the threshold of the Renaissance, seems to have invented the concept of the Dark Ages: at the end of his epic poem *Africa*—the first Renaissance neo-classical epic—he affirmed the hope that the dark age in which he was fated to live would not last for ever: posterity would emerge again into a radiance like that of antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Pope, at the end of the Renaissance, closes the cycle: his poem ushers in an age of darkness more profound than any envisaged by Petrarch:

And Universal Darkness buries All.

The connections of the Augustan satirists, including Pope, with the early and high Renaissance probably deserve more attention than they have yet received.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Theodor E. Mommsen, 'Petrarch's Conception of the Dark Ages', *Speculum*, xvii (1942), 226–42; quoted by Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm, 1960), 10.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the third of Oldham's *Satires upon the Jesuits* was modelled on George Buchanan's Latin satire against the Franciscans, *Franciscanus*. See *Poems on Affairs of State*, ii, 1678–81, 44, ed. Elias F. Mengel, Jr. (Yale, 1965).

More precisely, it is becoming increasingly clear<sup>1</sup> that the *Dunciad* owes something to a literary tradition whose chief classical exponent was Lucian. In the sixteenth century Lucian was particularly associated with More and Erasmus, who both translated some of his satires and whose *Utopia* and *Praise of Folly* were in part Lucianic in inspiration; and the same is true of the *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* and Rabelais's *Gargantua* (except that in them Erasmus's own influence is also important). These Christian humanist works have all caught something of the Lucianic flavour: an elusive scepticism, a vein of cool, ironical fantasy, and an irreverent critical spirit, which has often been attacked as merely reductive and irresponsible.<sup>2</sup> (Especially useful to More and Rabelais was Lucian's way of describing the manners of fabulous peoples, so as to produce an unsettling sense of relativity.) The Lucianic mode might be epitomized as a serio-comic style, in which the extent to which the writer is in jest or earnest is often left deliberately unclear.

There is one direct connection between this serio-comic tradition and the *Dunciad*. During the Renaissance a classical *genre* was revived which was not especially Lucianic, although Lucian did contribute to it. This *genre* has been given the name *adoxography*: the rhetorical praise or defence of things of doubtful value. The writing of such perverse or paradoxical *encomia* had been a recognized rhetorical exercise in antiquity, and was enthusiastically taken up again in the Renaissance. A bulky collection of such writings, in Latin, appeared in Hanover in 1619, and was followed by other editions; it was edited by Caspar Dornavius and called *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Socraticae Joco-Seriae*.<sup>3</sup> It includes elaborate rhetorical praises of such things as hair (and baldness), gout, deafness, poverty, fleas, lice, and so on; Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* is included, since that work belongs to this *genre*; so is Lucian's *Encomium of the Fly*.<sup>4</sup> There are, interestingly, several poems in praise of Nothing—interesting because they form precursors of Rochester's famous poem *Upon Nothing*, which is itself probably an important formative

<sup>1</sup> See Aubrey Williams and H. H. Erskine-Hill, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> The use made of Lucian by Erasmus and More is fully discussed in H. A. Mason's *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period* (1959).

<sup>3</sup> See A. S. Pease, 'Things without Honor', *Classical Philology*, xxi (1926), 27–42; quoted by Charles Osborne McDonald, *The Rhetoric of Tragedy* (Massachusetts, 1966), pp. 89 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Pope's insect-winged Sylphs perhaps owe something to Lucian's Fly. Lucian's *Podagra* (Gout) formed the basis of a poem, *The Triumphs of the Gout*, by Pope's contemporary Gilbert West.

influence on the *Dunciad*.<sup>1</sup> (Pope's imitation of it, *Upon Silence*, comes into the same *genre*; and, as is well known, Pope helped to improve Wycherley's 'adoxographical' poem *A Panegyric of Dulness*.) Also included in this collection are several works of a rather different nature, which treat indecent or 'scatological' subjects.<sup>2</sup> Considerable verbal ingenuity is lavished on these scurrilous *nugae*, and one is strongly reminded of some of the effects of mock-heroic: the treatment is ludicrously verbalistic, the tone earnest, the style solemnly elevated and necessarily much given to circumlocution. What further anticipates Swift and Pope—and among Pope's poems the *Dunciad* in particular—is the combination of scholastic method with gross and indecent subjects. The result is a manner or tone which might be called a learned puerility.

I remarked that the *Dunciad* can be seen as Pope's Praise of Dulness, a work which, at however great a remove, owes something to *The Praise of Folly*. Mr. Erskine-Hill has convincingly described Pope's ambiguity of response towards the 'world' of Dulness created in the *Dunciad*, and has related Pope's Goddess Dulness to Erasmus's Folly. Structurally, too, *The Praise of Folly* may have helped Pope to organize his poem. Erasmus's Folly is presented as a kind of universal principle: every one is in some sense a fool, and Erasmus's ironical understanding of the multiple applications of *folly* as he uses it allows him to embark on a survey of mankind from which no walk of life is exempt. Between Erasmus and Pope came Rochester, whose poem *Upon Nothing*, for all its brevity, is similarly all-inclusive or potentially so, since every one and everything contains the principle of 'nothingness'. Like Erasmus's Folly and Rochester's Nothing, Pope's Dulness is a fundamental principle of being, and the phrase 'great Negative' which Rochester applied to Nothing could equally be applied to Dulness. The concept of Dulness becomes for Pope a structural device which makes possible a certain kind of poem: its inclusiveness allows him to treat a wide variety of subjects so that in the *Dunciad* he managed to write a poem which impinges on

<sup>1</sup> V. de Sola Pinto suggested a connection between the two poems in 'John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester and the Right Veine of Satire', *Essays and Studies*, 1953. Dornavius's collection includes Passerat's *Nihil*, which was quoted in full (apparently from memory) by Johnson in his *Life of Rochester*.

<sup>2</sup> Such things as *Podicis encomium*, *Latrinae querela*, and *Stercoris encomium*, and several pages each under the titles *Problemata de Crepitu Ventris* and *De Peditu Eiusque Speciebus*.

much more than its subject would seem to promise. F. R. Leavis's phrase, 'a packed heterogeneity', which occurs in his essay on the *Dunciad*, very aptly characterizes it.<sup>1</sup> In one of Pope's prefatory pieces to the *Dunciad* he says: 'And the third book, if well consider'd, seemeth to embrace the whole world.' *The Praise of Folly* also embraces the whole world, and like the *Dunciad* it could be indefinitely extended: the structure is a capacious hold-all. The author does put an end to it, but it is possible to imagine it given repeated additional material, as Pope found with his poem. In this respect—its tendency to accumulate additional material—the *Dunciad* foreshadows two other works which share a relation to the Lucianic Rabelaisian tradition: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Byron's *Don Juan*. Neither is finished, and in theory both could be (and in a sense were) extended for as long as the author lived. In the case of *A Tale of a Tub* and the *Dunciad*, part of their power seems to derive from the appeal, inherent in the subject-matter, of formlessness: both authors are overtly hostile to the chaotic threat embodied in their subject, but both betray a strong interest, indeed fascination, in it. In this they are interestingly different from Sterne and Byron, who are frankly delighted by the rule of accident, the unpredictable flow of things, which is perceived as the principle of Nature, the inexhaustible source of organic form. The attitudes of Swift and Pope are more divided: hostile on the face of it, but in their over-all treatment of the subject more equivocal.

The point I want to stress is this. The traditions and *genres* of writing which I have just been referring to were of a kind to exert a two-sided influence. They could be liberating, but they could also be unstabilizing; they could help a writer to realize his creative impulse, but they might do so at the expense of his rational equilibrium. His powers of judgement might be compromised by a spirit of reckless, possibly generous, irresponsibility.

### III

A comparable influence, liberating but in some ways unsettling, might be ascribed to the mock-heroic kind itself, to which of course the *Dunciad* belongs—if it belongs to anything.

It is in the first place remarkable that some of the best imaginative writing from the Restoration to about 1730 is mock-heroic or burlesque or in some way parodic in form. The mock-heroic has been very fully discussed in terms of its literary

<sup>1</sup> 'The *Dunciad*', in *The Common Pursuit* (1952), p. 95.



conventions, its comic use of epical situations, characters, diction, and so on, but the secret of its fascination remains not wholly accounted for. These mocking parodic forms had been available to English writers since the sixteenth century, but they have usually taken a very subsidiary place in the literary scene. But in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries they seem to move to the centre of things: they attract writers of power. The result is such works as *Mac Flecknoe*, *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Battle of the Books*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *The Beggar's Opera*, as well as, on a lower level, Cotton's *Virgil Travestie* and his versifications of Lucian, and such burlesque plays as Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, Gay's *What D'you Call It*, and some of Fielding's farces. Certainly no other period in English history shows such a predilection for these forms. Why were so many of the best writers of the time drawn to mock-heroic and burlesque? No doubt it is useless to look for a single comprehensive answer, but a partial explanation may be sought by considering the time, the age, itself.

The period from the Restoration to Pope's death was one whose prevailing ethos was avowedly hostile to some of the traditional uses of the poetic imagination. It disapproved of the romantic and fabulous, and saw little reason for the existence of fiction. 'The rejection and contempt of fiction is rational and manly': the author is Dr. Johnson, writing in 1780,<sup>1</sup> but the attitude was common, even prevalent, during Pope's lifetime. The literary world into which the young Pope grew up was, it seems fair to say, relatively poor in imaginative opportunities. The poets writing immediately before Pope were without fables and without myths, except those taken in an etiolated form from classical antiquity; they seemed content with verses that made little demand on the imaginative life of their readers. It is suggestive that in his final collection of poems, *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), Dryden drew away from contemporary manners and affairs with versions of Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer: the fabulous and romantic are readmitted through translation and imitation. Otherwise the literary scene as Pope must have viewed it as a young man was, at its best, lucidly and modestly sensible; but in feeling and imagination it was undeniably somewhat impoverished. What characterizes the literature of the Restoration is a brightly lit, somewhat dry clarity, a dogmatic simplicity; it is above everything the expression of an aggressively alert rational consciousness.

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Addison*.

Something of this imaginative depletion can be observed in the structure of single poems. If we leave Milton aside, the poetry of the Restoration with most life in it suffers from a certain formal laxity: there is brilliance of detail but often a shambling structure. Parts are added to parts in a merely additive way, with often little concern for the whole: poems go on and on and then they stop. The poets often seem too close to actual social life, as if the poetic imagination had surrendered so much of its autonomous realm that they were reduced to a merely journalistic role; their longer poems seem to lack 'inside'. At one time Milton thought of Dryden as 'a good rimist, but no poet'. And T. S. Eliot's words still seem true of much of Dryden's verse: 'Dryden's words . . . are precise, they state immensely, but their suggestiveness is often nothing.'

In such a period the mock-heroic and burlesque forms seem to minister to a need for complexity. The mock-heroic, for example, gave the poet the possibility of making an 'extended metaphor', a powerful instrument for poetic thought—as opposed to thought of more rationally discursive kinds. It allowed him entry into an imaginative space in which his mythopoetic faculties could be freed to get to work. And yet, while offering him a means of escape from a poetry of statement, from a superficially truthful treatment of the world around him, it at the same time seemed to guarantee his status as a sensible adult person—as a 'wit'—since what arouses laughter in the mock-heroic is precisely a perception of the ludicrous incongruities between the heroic fabulous world of epic and the unheroic, non-fabulous world of contemporary society. Presumably few people nowadays think that the essence of mock-heroic is really mockery of the heroic, but neither is simply the reverse true: mockery, by means of the heroic, of the unheroic contemporary world. It would be truer to say that the mock-heroic poet—at his best, at any rate—discovers a relationship of tension between the two realms, certainly including mockery of the unheroic present, but not by any means confined to that. It might be nearer the full truth to think of him as setting out to exploit the relationship between the two realms, but ending up by calling a new realm, a new world, into being.<sup>1</sup> And this new realm does not correspond either to the coherent imagined world of classical epic or to the actual world in which the poet and his readers live and which it is ostensibly the poet's intention to satirize. It is to some extent self-subsistent, intrinsi-

<sup>1</sup> This is the argument of H. H. Erskine-Hill.

cally delightful, like the worlds of pastoral and romance. In various ways it gratifies an appetite, perhaps all the more satisfyingly for doing so without the readers' conscious awareness. And in any case, mock-heroic, with its multiple layers of integument, its inherent obliquity, was temperamentally suited to a man like Pope, who 'hardly drank tea without a stratagem'.

Before coming to the *Dunciad* I should like to glance at Pope's first great success in mock-heroic, *The Rape of the Lock*. It takes 'fine ladies' as its main satirical subject, and the terms in which the satire works are explained in Ariel's long speech in the first canto. Since the sylphs are the airy essences of 'fine ladies', Ariel's object is to impress such young ladies as Belinda with a sense of their own importance and to confirm them in their dishevelled scale of values:

Some secret Truths from Learned Pride conceal'd,  
To Maids alone and Children are reveal'd:  
What tho' no Credit doubting Wits may give?  
The Fair and Innocent shall still believe.

Pope characteristically blurs his moral terms, so that his own position as a man of good sense is represented by the ironical phrases 'Learned Pride' and 'doubting Wits', whereas the empty-headed young girls have access to 'secret Truths': they are 'Fair and Innocent', they shall have faith. Such faith abhors any tincture of good sense, for fine ladies are characterized by an absence of good sense. They are preoccupied with their own appearance, with the outward forms of society, and—it is suggested—with *amours*. 'Melting Maids' are not held in check by anything corresponding to sound moral principles; they are checked only by something as insubstantial, or as unreal, as their 'Sylph'. Mere female caprice or whim prevents a young girl from surrendering her honour to the importunity of rakes. Pope is working on a double standard: as readers of the poem we enjoy the fiction of the sylphs, but the satire can only work if we are also men and women of good sense who do not confuse fiction with fact—so that we do not 'believe in' the sylphs any more than we 'believe in' fairies. Judged from this sensible point of view, the sylphs are nothing, thin air. So in answer to Ariel's question, 'What guards the purity of melting Maids?' our sensible answer is 'Nothing': if a young lady rejects a man's improper proposal it is simply because—she doesn't want to accept it: she is restrained by her 'Sylph'. For the principles of female conduct are not rational: they are, as

Ariel says, 'mystic mazes', and sometimes mere giddy inconstancy will happen to keep a young lady chaste.

When *Florio* speaks, what Virgin could withstand,  
If gentle *Damon* did not squeeze her Hand?  
With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part,  
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart . . .

and so to the conclusive irony:

This erring Mortals Levity may call,  
Oh blind to Truth! the *Sylphs* contrive it all.

What is the nature of Pope's poetic interest in 'fine ladies' in *The Rape of the Lock*? From the standpoint of men of good sense—the 'doubting Wits' of Ariel's speech—such women are silly, vain, and ignorant. They are of course badly educated: they may be able to read and write a little, but their letters, ludicrously phrased and spelt, will only move a gentleman to condescending amusement. (As Gulliver found with the Lilliputians: 'Their manner of writing is very peculiar, being neither from the left to the right, like the Europeans; nor from the right to the left, like the Arabians; nor from up to down, like the Chinese; but aslant, from one corner of the paper to the other, like ladies in England.') This at least is how women, or many of them, often appeared in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*—and how they appeared to Pope to the extent that he was a satirist. However, simply because women were less rational than men, they were also, from another point of view, more imaginative because more fanciful than their male superiors. They were more credulous, more superstitious, more given to absurd notions. For if gentlemen, or 'wits', were creatures of modern enlightenment, women could be regarded as belonging to the fabulous dark ages. Accordingly what women, or women of this kind, provided for a poet like Pope, a poet working in a *milieu* of somewhat narrow and dogmatic rationalism, was a means of entry to a delightful world of folly and bad sense. For although Pope as a satirist pokes fun at them, he is yet as a poet clearly fascinated by them. Women are closer than men to the fantastic and fabulous world of older poetry, such as that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is precisely the 'fantastic' nature of women that allows Pope to create his fantastic, fairy-like beings, the sylphs. *The Rape of the Lock* is full of the small objects and appurtenances of the feminine world which arouse Pope's aesthetic interest: such things as 'white curtains', combs,

puffs, fans, and so on. This world of the feminine sensibility is one which offers a challenge to the larger world of the masculine reason. The man of good sense might laugh at it, but he could not destroy it; and to some extent he had to recognize an alternative system of values.

The subject I have been keeping in mind is the more general one of the imaginative appeal of mock-heroic, and what I have just said about the poetic attraction of the feminine world applies also, with certain modifications, to the attraction of the *low*. The age in which Pope lived seems to have been markedly aware of the high and the low in life as in literature. The high level of polite letters, indeed the contemporary cult of politeness, and the genteel social tone of the Augustan heroic couplet seem to have coexisted with a strong awareness of what they left out below. That is to say, in this period of somewhat exaggerated politeness, correctness, rationalism, there existed a correspondingly strong interest in the low, the little, the trivial, the mean, the squalid, and the indecent—to the extent of giving all these things expression in imaginative writing. The structure of mock-heroic and burlesque forms provided a means of getting at this kind of material and thus gratifying a desire which might otherwise have been hard to reconcile with the poet's and his readers' dignity as sensible and adult men and women. For all Pope's and Swift's different intentions, one can discern something distinctly similar in Pope's sylph-attended young ladies and Swift's Lilliputians: Pope's young ladies have something of the aesthetic fascination of children's dolls, while the Lilliputians—as when the army parades on Gulliver's handkerchief—call to mind in a rather similar way the nursery world of toy soldiers; they are both enchantingly *below* our own level. *The Rape of the Lock* and Gulliver's Voyage to Lilliput are undoubtedly remarkable creative efforts: in Pope's case his poem for a good many of his readers (and not necessarily the undiscerning many) has represented the climax of his fictive powers: it has an achieved roundness, a plenitude, and an affectionate warmth, for the absence of which nothing in his later poems compensates. And yet in both works—this is a matter I shall take up later—the creative impulse seems close to something childish or childlike in the minds of their authors.

#### IV

It is easy enough to see how Pope came to value the *little* in the form it took in his earlier mock-heroic poem: the feminine

and the absurd. More problematical is the use he makes of the *low*, especially in the form it takes in the *Dunciad*: the gross and the obscene. I want to consider mainly the first three books, which are mock-heroic in a way in which the fourth is not. Each of these books treats a different aspect of Dulness as Pope imagined it, and does so through an appropriate action or setting. The result is to create in each book one or two large composite images which—such is the interest with which Pope invests them—are exciting, or disturbing, or even exhilarating, to contemplate. However, as I suggested earlier, we can be said to contemplate these images only obliquely, since what engages the foreground of our attention is the luxuriantly profuse detail of the poem's verbal activity. Our minds are stimulated and energized by a ceaseless flow of wit, word-play, allusion, and so on, which exercise a control over us almost hypnotic—and particularly important is the arresting use of proper names. Obliquely, however, we are made aware of these larger images, and it is these that I want very tentatively to investigate.

Book One presents the Grub-street poet in his setting: Grub-street, a night town of poverty, hunger, mercenary writers, and urban squalor. As usual Pope is at his happiest as a poet when dealing with a body of material which had been frequently used before: he can then treat it allusively, confident that his readers will be familiar with the *kind* of material he is alluding to. Pope came at the end of forty or fifty years of an Augustan tradition which had taken the topic of bad mercenary poets as itself a poetic subject; the result was some poetry of a startling intensity. Pope could of course take for granted the most famous of Grub-street poems, Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe*; he would certainly have known, even if some of his readers might not, Oldham's *Satyr Concerning Poetry* and Swift's *Progress of Poetry*; while Juvenal's Third Satire, which Oldham had imitated, and which Pope quoted in one of his notes to the *Dunciad*, supplied the authoritative classical version of the 'Cave of Poverty and Poetry'. Oldham's imitation of part of the Juvenal includes the following:

The moveables of <i>P—ge</i> were a Bed For him and 's Wife, a Piss-pot by its side, A looking-glass upon the Cupboards Head, A Comb-case, Candlestick and Pewter-spoon, For want of Plate, with Desk to write upon: A Box without a Lid serv'd to contain	}	[Pordage]
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Few Authors, which made up his *Vatican*:  
 And there his own immortal Works were laid,  
 On which the barbarous Mice for hunger prey'd. . . .

Some lines from Oldham's *Satyr upon a Printer* contain more Grub-street imagery, and end with a horrifying simile:

May'st thou ne'er rise to History, but what }  
 Poor Grubstreet Penny Chronicles relate, }  
 Memoirs of *Tyburn* and the mournful State }  
 Of Cut-purses in *Holborn's* Cavalcade,  
 Till thou thy self be the same Subject made.  
 Compell'd by Want, may'st thou print Popery, }  
 For which, be the Carts Arse and Pillory, }  
 Turnips, and rotten Eggs thy Destiny. }  
 Maul'd worse than *Reading*, *Christian*, or *Cellier*,  
 Till thou, daub'd o'er with loathsome filth, appear  
 Like Brat of some vile Drab in Privy found,  
 Which there has lain three Months in Ordure drown'd.

Images such as those of the hack writer's garret, the book-seller's stall or post—

The meanest Felons who thro' *Holborn* go,  
 More eyes and looks than twenty Poets draw:  
 If this be all, go have thy posted Name  
 Fix'd up with Bills of Quack, and publick Sham;  
 To be the stop of gaping Prentices,  
 And read by reeling Drunkards, when they piss . . .<sup>1</sup>

—the whole underworld of prostitute, thief, and gamester merge in Pope's mind with such images as the following (from an ironical dispraise of learning):

Let *Bodley* now in its own ruins lie,  
 By th'common Hangman burnt for Heresie.  
 Avoid the nasty *learned* dust, 'twill breed  
 More Plagues than ever Jakes or Dunghill did.  
 The want of Dulness will the World undo,  
 This learning makes us mad and Rebels too.<sup>2</sup>

The *Dunciad's* original connection with Theobald, the restorer of Shakespeare, entailed admitting into the poem the dulness of learning—the world of silent libraries, unread tomes, the

<sup>1</sup> From Oldham's *Satyr Concerning Poetry*. Quotations from Oldham are from the 1710 edition.

<sup>2</sup> From an elegy on Oldham by T. Wood, dated 1684, in *Remains of Oldham*, 1710. Pope uses the phrase 'learned dust' in *Dunciad*, iii. 186, a parallel not noted by Sutherland.

brains of scholars laden with unusable *data*—and mixing it with the socially different *milieu* of Grub-street. Indeed in the person of Theobald, as far as Pope was concerned, the two worlds were actually united: he was a learned emendator, treading in Bentley's footsteps, but he also wrote pantomime *libretti* to keep himself alive.

This is the world which Pope so allusively and economically re-creates in the first Book of the *Dunciad*. The question arises: why does this Grub-street imagery arouse such an intense response? The Grub-street mythology, which fuses together the concerns of 'high', polite literature with material poverty and every sort of personal deprivation, produced—one may conjecture—a peculiar thrill in Pope and his contemporaries, one which may still be felt, to some extent, by a reader of his poetry. (A single line in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*—'Lull'd by soft Zephyrs thro' the broken Pane'—brilliantly evokes the whole of this mythology.) No doubt merely to glimpse such misery, degradation, and squalor produced a fascinated shudder in some readers. But in Pope's handling there is more to it than that. The condition of Grub-street's inhabitants was, above all, one of deprivation: a state of physical need combined with a state of mental vacuity. We may consider the two constituents separately.

Pope exposed himself to a good deal of adverse criticism, on moral and humanitarian grounds, for taking poverty as a subject for satire. He defended himself in various ways: by citing the authority of Juvenal, or, more often, by claiming that what he was attacking was the *pride* of dull writers who had only their own lack of self-knowledge or their dishonesty to blame for landing themselves in a condition which might otherwise be pitiable. But these high-minded professions of Pope do not wholly carry conviction: one may at least feel that there must have been more to it than that. The literary treatment of poverty in Pope and his predecessors seems to have something in common with the harsh comic treatment of hunger or even starvation which is a common feature of Spanish literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the constant stress on pangs of hunger, bellies emptily rumbling, and so on, which we find in Spanish drama and picaresque fiction. Oldham, Pope, and the others find the subject funny, but also—it seems—in some way interesting and stimulating.

One of the aspects of the Grub-street setting which they give marked attention to is that of ludicrous physical discomfort: the



material conditions of life press with a harsh and unwelcome force on the hack writer's consciousness; the unlovely objects which furnish his garret loom large in his vision of the world—and the fact that they do so is given mirthful emphasis for us because the Grub-street hack is, after all, attempting to write *poetry* in this setting: he is 'Lull'd by soft Zephyrs thro' the broken Pane', or as Oldham put it:

And there his own immortal Works were laid,  
On which the barbarous Mice for hunger prey'd.

What the Grub-street setting does is to force into violent antithesis the notions of body and mind by showing the etherially spirited poet of tradition yoked to a clumsy machine of a body which constantly craves to be fed, clothed, warmed, and cleaned. Such a poet drags out a doleful existence—which we are invited to find funny—in a world of unsympathetic *objects*, an environment totally hostile to and unsuggestive of mental and literary activity. The traditional garret setting seems to make the writing of poetry—any poetry—absurd; it derides it. And it derides it, it calls in question the necessity of its existence, by insisting on the primacy of matter, mere things, mere bodies. The Grub-street myth is primarily a Restoration creation: it has some classical prototypes, but it makes its full appearance in English poetry in the satires of Marvell, Rochester, Oldham, and others, and it may be that its strong appeal is to be related to the rise of the new philosophy with its strong bias against the poetic and the imaginative. Such poets as Oldham may have seen in the reduced condition of the Grub-street poet as they imagined him, a grotesque reflection of the impoverishment of themselves. And so the peculiarly radical nature of the challenge put to the poet by the Grub-street myth was one to arouse powerful and mixed feelings: an intense curiosity (possibly unconscious of its own motive), intense mirth, and perhaps a vague feeling of alarm. There seems at times something almost hysterical in the violent response of such a poet as Oldham.

But there is another side to the subject. Poverty reduced the hack poet to a man struggling for survival amidst unfriendly objects; and one way in which Pope and his predecessors exploit the Grub-street theme is to insist on the gross materiality of *poems*, to focus attention on the poem not as a mental artefact but as so many pages of solid paper, something that can be eaten by mice, burnt for fuel, used for 'wrapping Drugs and

Wares' (Oldham), lining trunks (Pope), or, as Oldham put it, addressing the hack poet:

Then who'll not laugh to see th' immortal Name  
To vile *Mundungus* made a Martyr flame?  
And all thy deathless Monuments of Wit,  
Wipe Porters Tails, or mount in Paper-kite?<sup>1</sup>

Both Oldham and Rochester degrade poetry further even than this by zestfully comparing it to excrement—a peculiarly Restoration conceit. Of course the satirical target in such passages is ostensibly *bad* poetry, but the satirical strategy is such as to involve good poetry—poetry of whatever quality—along with it. In the *Dunciad* Pope too uses this theme, but with less intensity than the Restoration satirists. The action of Book One takes place, we may say, in the archetypal Grub-street night, with Cibber writing in his garret surrounded by the fragments of his literary efforts:

Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay,  
Much future Ode, and abdicated Play;  
Nonsense precipitate, like running Lead,  
That slipp'd thro' Cracks and Zigzags of the Head . . .

and later, in despair, he addresses some of his literary works (his 'better and more christian progeny') before consigning them to the flames:

Ye shall not beg, like gratis-given Bland,  
Sent with a Pass, and vagrant thro' the land;  
Not sail, with Ward, to Ape-and-monkey climes,  
Where vile *Mundungus* trucks for viler rhymes;  
Not sulphur-tipt, emblaze an Ale-house fire;  
Not wrap up Oranges, to pelt your Sire!

—the last line one of Pope's brilliant effects of agile concentration. Poems ('papers of verses') had frequently been made to wrap foodstuffs in satires before Pope, but to make them wrap oranges for theatre audiences to use as missiles is a new refinement. Pope uses the theme of the materiality of literary works with much less emotional involvement than his Restoration forebears, but the topic still has enough life in it to arouse him

<sup>1</sup> There was a strong element of realism in this topic. Cf. an observation by T. J. B. Spencer: 'The demand for waste paper, for a variety of domestic and other uses, has, until comparatively recent times, been heavy and continuous and urgent and far in excess of the supply. The consequences for English literature have been serious.' ('Shakespeare v. The Rest: The Old Controversy', *Shakespeare Survey*, xiv (1961), 81.)

to considerable artistic excitement. His treatment of Cibber here is less ferocious than Oldham would have made it, but more elaborate and ingenious. And Pope's verse is of course rhetorically orchestrated, shaped, and climaxed in a fashion beyond Oldham's reach.

This aspect of the Grub-street setting has to do with the hack poet's physical need, his uncomfortable awareness of his physical environment. The other aspect I mentioned concerned the poet's own *mental* poverty. To some extent what I have said of the materiality of poetry has already touched on this. For the bad poet's mental vacuity, his mental dulness, is imagined in terms of solid inert matter, heaviness, retarding friction, torpor, and so on, in a manner learnt from Dryden's example in *Mac Flecknoe*. The whole topic has been admirably treated by D. W. Jefferson.<sup>1</sup> Like Dryden, Pope is keenly stimulated by images of solidity and inertness—he has a remarkably sensitive insight into insensitivity.

I am suggesting that images such as these of the sordid and the grossly material are as exciting to Pope as they are repulsive. The deprived social underworld of Grub-street presented a challenge and stimulus to a poet who was placed in a position of social comfort and even superiority; as did the spectacle of insensitivity to a mind acutely sensitive. In both, the poet of consciousness and wit can be said to be contemplating a form of the mindless. A further related aspect of Pope's treatment of Dulness might be called the challenge of the unconscious to a mind keenly conscious, perhaps even over-confidently so. This is an area of my subject about which I want to remain tentative, and which I will approach somewhat obliquely.

There is in the further dim recesses of the *Dunciad* a region of Dulness, created for us by hints and allusions, which is an important element in the imaginative impact of the poem. It is there in Cibber's address to his literary offspring:

O! pass more innocent, in infant state,  
To the mild limbo of our Father Tate:  
Or peaceably forgot, at once be blest,  
In Shadwell's bosom with eternal rest!

as well as in single lines like that describing the poets of Grub-street:

Sleepless themselves, to give their readers sleep

<sup>1</sup> 'Aspects of Dryden's Imagery', *Essays in Criticism*, iv (1954), 20–41.

or the dunce's 'Gothic Library', where

high above, more solid learning shone,  
The Classics of an Age that heard of none.

This is an elusive region, but recognizable to anyone familiar with the poem: a vast dim hinterland of book-writing, book-reading, and book-learning, not so much a dream of learning as a nightmare of dead knowledge. This striking fantasy seems essentially a late-Renaissance phenomenon, something peculiar to a period not too far removed from the first age of print to have altogether lost its sense of the power and objectivity of printed books, but so late in the era of humanism that its sense of the closing of a cycle was very strong.<sup>1</sup> Milton had said that 'books are not absolutely dead things', and that a good book was 'the precious life blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life'. Pope, in effect, shows that bad books too do not die, but if they do not achieve the empyrean of fame they are at least consigned to an eternity in limbo, a place of soft, gently decaying verbal matter—'the mild limbo of our Father Tate'. Pope is sounding the great Augustan theme—it is of course a lasting pre-occupation of humanism—of the use of knowledge: how to make knowledge live by making it useful to the real business of living. Cibber, about to burn his own literary productions, says they are

Soon to that mass of Nonsense to return,  
Where things destroy'd are swept to things unborn

—and an obscure region is evoked where things not dead, but dormant or only potentially alive, maintain their phantom-like existence. They lurk in a kind of lumber-room of the mind, useless and irrelevant, in a manner comparable to the physical fate of the dead in Rochester's powerful line: 'Dead, we become the Lumber of the World'.<sup>2</sup> (The word *lumber*—'old furniture'—like *frippery*—'old clothes'—is a favourite with Augustan writers, and is often given imaginative definition by the oppo-

<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan ends *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) with a discussion of the *Dunciad*. He declares that 'the first age of print introduced the first age of the unconscious', p. 245.

<sup>2</sup> From *The latter End of the Chorus of the second act of Seneca's Troas, translated* (*Poems*, ed. Pinto, 49). The couplet quoted above is, as Sutherland points out, adapted by Pope from the same poem:

And to that Mass of Matter shall be swept,  
Where things destroy'd, with things unborn are kept . . .

site concept of *use*. Pope finds a place for both words in the *Dunciad*.<sup>1</sup>)

There is, I think, a strange intensity in these glimpses into a limbo of the mind, not altogether explained by the Augustan commonplace concerning useless knowledge. Pope seems to be communicating here, however obscurely and momentarily, a sense of non-conscious life—a form of vitality which is alien to the conscious mind and felt to be a threat to it. It is of interest that the word *unconscious* first makes its appearance in English a few years before the *Dunciad*;<sup>2</sup> and indeed Pope's own image in Book Two of an 'unconscious' pool is a suggestive one:

No noise, no stir, no motion canst thou make,  
Th' unconscious stream sleeps o'er thee like a lake.

In this connection—Pope's poetic interest in mindlessness, which is one form of Dulness—Lancelot Law Whyte's book *The Unconscious before Freud* (1962) is illuminating: its theme is 'the development of European man from overemphasis of self-consciousness to recognition of the unconscious'.<sup>3</sup> Especially valuable in Whyte's book is his anthology of sayings from writers of the two and a half centuries before Freud. Pascal is quoted: '... never does reason override the imagination, whereas the imagination often unseats reason', and the remark has its value in this context. Another, which would certainly have been known to Pope, is from Dryden: '... long before it was a play; when it was only a confused mass of thoughts, tumbling over one another in the dark; when the fancy was yet in its first work, moving the sleeping images of things towards the light. . . .'<sup>4</sup> The *Dunciad* seems to have a peculiarly rich commerce with this twilight zone where intuitions have not yet

<sup>1</sup> For a late example (1791) of *lumber* in a context concerning the use of learning, cf. Boswell's summing up of Johnson's character at the end of his *Life*: 'But his superiority over other learned men consisted chiefly in what may be called the art of thinking, the art of using his mind; a certain continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew, and exhibiting it in a clear and forcible manner; so that knowledge, which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding, was, in him, true, evident, and actual wisdom.'

<sup>2</sup> According to the *O.E.D.* *unconscious* is first recorded in 1712: Sir Richard Blackmore uses it several times in his poem *The Creation*, of which the seventh Book is concerned with the operations of the human mind.

<sup>3</sup> Whyte's book is quoted by McLuhan, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> From an epistle To Roger, Earl of Orrery, prefixed to *The Rival Ladies* (1664) (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 1962, vol. i, 2).

been polished and clarified into an acceptable good sense. For what Pope as a deliberate satirist rejects as dully lifeless his imagination communicates as obscurely energetic—states of being densely, but often unconsciously, animated. Pope himself was undoubtedly committed to defending conscious mental alertness, vigilance, keen critical activity. Yet the poem as a whole makes us aware of the possibility of another tenable attitude, the value of what the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth called, in speaking of the mind's powers, 'a drowsy unawakened cogitation'.<sup>1</sup> In *The Castle of Indolence* (to take a slighter poem than the *Dunciad* and a far simpler case, but one not far removed in time) Thomson eventually works round to a useful moral recommending 'Industry', but what is agreed to be the best part of the poem celebrates the allure of 'Indolence'. Nearly a hundred years after the first *Dunciad* Keats was to take the theme much further so as to make plain the association of Indolence, or Dulness in one of its senses, with artistic creativity.

# V

I take my last ambiguous image of Dulness from a part of the poem which has hardly been the most popular or appreciated: the second Book. This Book, which describes the heroic games of the dunces, is the most notorious part of the poem, perhaps the most notorious part of all Pope's works. Here the satire against the booksellers, critics, patrons, and Grub-street writers takes the form of making them go through ludicrous actions of a humiliating and even disgustingly sordid nature. At least, this is one way of looking at it—although a way which takes a rather external view of the actual working of the poetry. For this is not, I think, what it feels like to read. What the Book communicates is a curious warmth, a gusto, even a geniality—which, notably, G. Wilson Knight has testified to and 'described'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Pope lavished a good deal of work on this Book, and most of it is admirably written. He might have been expected

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Whyte, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson Knight notes that 'there is a strange and happy absence of the sadistic. The comedy is not precisely cruel: the dunces are all happy, are not shown as realizing their absurdity, and are allowed to maintain a certain physical, though ludicrous, dignity'. He further comments on Pope's 'delicate emotional and sensuous touch, felt in the softness, the nature-tone, of the whole atmosphere'. See *Laureate of Peace* (1954), pp. 61, 62. In his essay on the *Dunciad*, in a discussion of a passage in Book Four, F. R. Leavis remarks on 'the predominant feeling, which, in fact, might fairly be called genial'.

to have shied away from it himself when he revised the *Dunciad*. But far from that, he carefully improved it, and added to it, making it the second longest of the four Books.

First of all, what is the dominant effect of Book Two—apart from its indecency? Some of the power of its imaginative conception comes from the fact that the action now moves out of the Grub-street garret into the more publicly exposed setting of the City of London, but a city fantastically simplified, seen as in dream. This is London seen as Lud's-town—or Dul-town, as Pope brings out in a couplet in the 1728 version (its leaden thud was sacrificed in the recasting):

Slow moves the Goddess from the sable flood,  
(Her Priest preceding) thro' the gates of Lud.

'Dul-town' is inhabited not by starving poets but by vividly felt, if faceless, presences who are sometimes infantile and sometimes maniac. (The notion of an *infant* can be related to the *Dunciad*'s verbal and literary concerns through its literal meaning: 'a person unable to speak or use words'.)

Wilson Knight has remarked on the absence of cruelty in this narrative of the games. On the contrary, every one is having a wonderful time, for within the imaginative world of the poem no one is conscious of humiliation. These dunces are, in fact, like unabashed small children—but children viewed with the distance and distaste of the Augustan adult. The world they inhabit is, like that of early infancy, wholly given to feeling and sensation, and so all the activities are of a simple physical nature: they run races, have urinating, tickling, shouting, and diving competitions, and finally vie with each other in keeping awake until 'the soft gifts of Sleep conclude the day'. The poetic atmosphere is soft and delicate, the feelings expressed by the dunces playful, occasionally petulant, but essentially affectionate. As a satirist Pope is of course degrading his enemies: all the characters are given the names of actual persons. Yet, as usual, the poetry is doing something more interesting than a narrowly satirical account would suggest. What it is doing, in part, is creating a world free of adult and social restraints. 'Here strip, my children!' cries their mother Dulness at one point, and they strut about naked, play games, quarrel, and shout, as free of inhibition and shame as any small infant. Pope evokes the unrestrained glee of childhood, its unthinking sensuality (as in the tickling match) and the deafening noise made by children at play:

Now thousand tongues are heard in one loud din;  
 The monkey-mimics rush discordant in;  
 'Twas chatt'ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb'ring all,  
 And Noise and Norton, Brangling and Breval . . .

The world of Book Two seems in many ways a version of pre-literate infancy, and to enter it is to experience a primitive sense of liberation. Not only is it innocent; it is completely without self-consciousness: again Pope's poetic concern is with a form of unconscious vitality. The comparison of the dunces with small children, however, is only implicit; it does not exhaust the whole of the poetic image. The dunces are, after all, not in fact children, and in so far as they are adult they call to mind the inhabitants of Bedlam, madmen resembling small children in being without restraint and without manners. Bedlam is one of the places which Pope is careful to include on his simplified map of London: in the first Book it is said to be close to the 'Cave of Poverty and Poetry' which is Cibber's Grub-street residence. In this second Book the implicit Bedlamite metaphor becomes more insistent. (One of the prints in the early editions of *A Tale of a Tub* gives an intensely dismal picture of Bedlam hospital: naked madmen lie chained on filthy mattresses in a large cell, while being peered at through grills by members of the public.)

Let me give an example of a dunce who combines qualities of infantility with the manic energy of a madman. This is Blackmore in the shouting competition:

But far o'er all, sonorous Blackmore's strain;  
 Walls, steeples, skies, bray back to him again.  
 In Tot'nham fields, the brethren, with amaze,  
 Prick all their ears up, and forget to graze;  
 Long Chanc'ry-lane retentive rolls the sound,  
 And courts to courts return it round and round;  
 Thames wafts it thence to Rufus' roaring hall,  
 And Hungerford re-echoes bawl for bawl.

It is as if this dunce has grown to a figure of Brobdingnagian size, or as if the City has shrunk to the dimensions of a toy-town with a child standing astride over it. Aubrey Williams's account of this passage is a good example of his method. He shows that the place-names mentioned here are chosen to mark Westminster's boundaries, so that the voice of Blackmore the 'City Bard' resounding all over Westminster represents the invasion of the West End by dulness.<sup>1</sup> His commentary is helpful and entirely

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., pp. 36-8.



convincing, but such an account may have the effect of shielding us from the full impact of the image as Pope has conceived it. For the image of deafening, gigantesque noise—as of a giant *shouting* over London—is, though comic, a disturbingly powerful one; and although it has an allegorical meaning which we should know, the image itself in all its rude force ought, it seems to me, to come first. This after all is what one remembers after reading the Book: the games themselves, not what they ‘stand for’; the poetic fiction is primary.

No doubt most readers of Pope will never do other than shrink from this second Book. But if one is willing to explore it, one beneficial result might be a clearer perception of Pope’s extraordinarily rich, but undoubtedly very strange, sensibility. It seems possible that the impression of an unusual degree of creative release given by such parts of the *Dunciad* as these is due to Pope’s being able to indulge intense feelings of an infantile nature by taking advantage of the permissive decorum of mock-heroic. There is a quality of complicity in the writing—‘Heav’n rings with laughter’ (ii. 121), and the mirth seems to include both poet and reader—that makes it hard to bear in mind that, from the ‘satirical’ point of view, such writing is supposed to show Pope making a fierce retaliatory attack on his enemies. But so often this other point of view, which occasionally finds expression in Pope’s own notes, seems to belong to a quite different mood and spirit. One of Pope’s notes to the second Book opens in a tone of high moral indignation: ‘In this game is expos’d in the most contemptuous manner, the profligate licentiousness of those shameless scriblers. . . .’ But the corresponding part of the poem reads:

See in the circle next, Eliza plac’d,  
Two babes of love close clinging to her waist . . .

The poetry, as Wilson Knight says, has a ‘nature-tone’, and it seems not altogether absurd to find here a certain real tenderness—of course set against the incongruously risible circumstances, but none the less a modifying element in the full poetic effect. In a similar way the account of the mud-diving and the encounter with the mud-nymphs is, as several critics have remarked, strangely attractive, and has the effect of robbing the huge open sewer of Fleet-ditch, the actual scene of the action, of its horrible offensiveness. The effect is quite un-Swiftian, not nasty in the reading. In a related way such a passage as the following achieves an inimitably Popian beauty:

Thro' Lud's fam'd gates, along the well-known Fleet  
 Rolls the black troop, and overshades the street,  
 'Till show'rs of Sermons, Characters, Essays,  
 In circling fleeces whiten all the ways:  
 So clouds replenish'd from some bog below,  
 Mount in dark volumes, and descend in snow.

This draws its vitality from its absorption of 'base' matter into forms pleasurable to contemplate and from an attitude to experience which refuses to find anything repulsive or offensive: the 'disagreeables' are evaporated.

But the element of the obtrusively childish and dirty in this part of the *Dunciad* remains an issue to be faced. Pope often seems to have been attracted to indecent or equivocal subjects, as if he derived a stimulus from affronting conventional good taste: indeed, of all the considerable English poets he remains perhaps the one with the greatest power to shock—no doubt partly because the social restraints which make the sense of shock possible are themselves powerfully represented in his verse. However we may respond to this side of Pope, it does not seem helpful to call it 'immature', since it may well have been an indispensable part of his creative temperament. Indeed Pope might have been a less comprehensive poet, even a less balanced one, without it. It has been suggested that during this period 'various forms of play and irresponsibility may have been a chief outlet for the poetic impulse';<sup>1</sup> and certainly without their disconcertingly childish side not only Pope but also his fellow Scriblerians Swift and Gay would be considerably less forceful and original writers. Ambrose Philips's undistinguished, if innocuous, little poems addressed to children (such as those written for the Pulteney girls: one is dated 1724, another 1727, the years immediately preceding the first *Dunciad*) were mercilessly attacked and parodied (e.g. by Henry Carey as well as by Pope<sup>2</sup>), presumably because they contravened the current assumption that childish feelings might be indulged obliquely in comic and parodic forms but not expressed directly in all their unwitty vulnerability. For the Augustans, Pope included, mock-heroic provided the perfect protective form for the expression of

<sup>1</sup> William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), p. 217, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Pope refers to Philips's 'Infantine stile' in his note to 1728 *Dunciad*, iii. 322. Chapter xi of *The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727) had dealt with 'The Infantine', 'where a Poet grows so very simple, as to think and talk like a child'. Cf. also Pope's reference to Philips in a letter to Swift, 14 December 1725 (*Correspondence*, ii. 350, ed. George Sherburn).

childish feelings, since (as I suggested earlier) its built-in critical apparatus served to absolve the poet from a possible charge of too outrageous an irresponsibility. Similarly such versicles as Henry Carey's and Pope's Lilliputian Odes (written, for the most part, in lines of two and three syllables respectively) take advantage of the Lilliputian fiction for writing of an undiluted frivolity.

## VI

In what I have been saying I have been deliberately stressing one side of Pope's genius: the peculiar *energy* of his poetry and its power to excite. I want finally to add a few remarks on this subject from a rather different point of view.

The *Dunciad* is so often discussed simply in terms of its topics, its ideas, attitudes, literary conventions, etc., or its individual effects of wit—its grotesque metaphors, its low puns, its studiously indecorous diction—that it might seem that the poem as a whole was fully accounted for. Yet something more fundamental seems to escape such discussions: everything that can be included under the idea of *form*—the over-all shape of the poetic experience, the contributions made by Pope's use of the couplet, the paragraph, the episode and each Book of the poem. When Pope is writing well, the verse moves with a strong purposefully directed energy, the couplets are pointed, the paragraphs draw to a climax, and the individual Books each have a true conclusion—they do not merely stop. The couplets, for example, are never allowed to succeed each other in a merely additive way; instead they are held firmly in place in the verse paragraph, and the paragraph itself often follows a large rhythmic curve which makes possible a dynamic verse movement. When read with a sympathetic mimetic co-operation, such verse has an exceptional capacity to arouse nervous excitement. However, this energy sometimes has an ambiguous effect, which may be such that an account of the poem which stays too close to its satirical paraphrasable meaning may distort the real effect of the poetry.

In his liking for exuberant or agitated movement, for vehement emphasis, and for intense surface vivacity, Pope reveals himself as baroque in sensibility; as he does in his nervous sense of tempo, especially at those moments when he gathers speed for an overwhelming climax.<sup>1</sup> Among English poets in

<sup>1</sup> One of the most impressive of such climactic movements, the conclusion to the *Epilogue to the Satires*, *Dialogue 1*—the 'triumph of Vice'—was compared by Joseph Warton to a painting by Rubens.

this one respect his true predecessor is Crashaw, whom Pope had read carefully and used, although it is not necessary to suppose that he needed Crashaw to discover these qualities in himself: there were numerous other influences. But nowhere in seventeenth-century English poetry except in the *Hymn to Saint Teresa* and the magnificent, and in some ways curiously Popian,<sup>1</sup> *Music's Duel*, can one find a comparable verve and ardour, such an acute response to sensory experience, or such a flamboyantly dynamic sense of movement.

These qualities are to be found in all Pope's greater poems, not least in the work he was engaged on immediately before the first *Dunciad*: the translation of Homer. This, in its energy, its sustained 'elasticity' (Pope's term<sup>2</sup>), and in the way in which its personages are so often posed in brilliant theatrically lit *tableaux*, can certainly be seen as an outstanding example of the late baroque sensibility in poetry. In a comparable way the fantastic action of the *Dunciad* also allowed Pope to devise forms amenable to baroque taste. Some baroque art seems designed to express movement or animation almost for its own sake; and Dulness, as imagined by Pope—anarchic, 'busy, bold, and blind'—encouraged the invention of such effects as those in the passage I have already quoted:

'Till show'rs of Sermons, Characters, Essays,  
In circling fleeces whiten all the ways:  
So clouds replenish'd from some bog below,  
Mount in dark volumes, and descend in snow

—with its repeated swirling movement, an effect which receives a number of variations:

Not with more glee, by hands Pontific crown'd,  
With scarlet hats wide-waving circled round . . .

and

As man's Mæanders to the vital spring  
Roll all their tides, then back their circles bring . . .

<sup>1</sup> The account of the tickling contest in Book Two of the *Dunciad* possibly owes something to *Music's Duel*. Pope perhaps remembered Crashaw's reference to tickling: 'that tickled with rare art / The tatling strings' (47–8). Pope's line 212, 'And quick sensations skip from vein to vein' may recall Crashaw's 'then quicke returning skipps / And snatches this againe' (32–3), while his phrase 'the pleasing pain' (211) is reminiscent of some of Crashaw's peculiar interests.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Dunciad*, i. 186.

The sensibility which took pleasure in these and similar effects informs the entire poem, and, despite all the personal and topical allusions and all the brilliant local explosions of wit, sets going (in the first three Books at least) a powerful current of feeling; at times the larger movements take on a demonic momentum. This may be felt particularly in the concluding phases of the Books, which are given an emphasis as if each Book were a self-contained poem.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his career the endings of Pope's poems are conspicuously strong and deeply felt: indeed some of his poems sound at their conclusions an almost apocalyptic note—a desire to relate the poetic subject to ultimate ends. In the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* the poet finally anticipates his own death, the end of time for himself, while in *Eloisa to Abelard* the heroine looks forward to as far in the future as her story will be read—which may again be interpreted as the end of time. And *The Rape of the Lock* has an ending whose startling power has to do with its looking forward to the death of Belinda, and again to an eternity made possible by poetry. In the *Dunciad* the first and third Books both end on sustained climactic movements; both record, in a high incantatory strain, a visionary moment when the order of things as they are, appears to be dissolving to give place to a totally different order. In the first version Book Three (originally, of course, the final Book) ends with the uplifted strains of Settle's prophecy—in the last line of which Pope's own name is introduced—before entering upon the great Conclusion to the whole poem. And this Conclusion is an ending in the grandest possible sense: the end of Nature itself.

The Conclusion to the *Dunciad* is uninterruptedly solemn and sublime: indeed its sublimity may be felt to be somewhat disconcertingly absolute. It seems entirely in keeping with the mode of the poem that we do not, perhaps, quite know how to take it; and indeed in the first version a note by Pope introduces a sense of wavering or qualification into the reader's mind.<sup>2</sup> In the same version the poem ends with a couplet which 'contains' the vision of 'Universal Darkness' and consigns it to the realm of false dreams:

'Enough! enough!' the raptur'd Monarch cries;  
And thro' the Ivory Gate the Vision flies.

<sup>1</sup> Book Two is an exception: it cannot end with a powerful climax, since it shows the dunces falling asleep—although the falling asleep is in itself an elaborate set-piece.

<sup>2</sup> 1728 *Dunciad*, iii. 337.

But in the final version of 1743 the Conclusion is no longer framed by this couplet, but ends uncompromisingly with

Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
And Universal Darkness buries All.

And there is no note here to suggest that the poet is not fully committed to what his poem is saying. The Conclusion has become a final, grandiose, annihilating gesture, sublime but also grotesque—for it is surely hugely disproportionate, not really prepared for in terms of the poem's own fiction. Moreover it has the effect, not uncommon in baroque paintings, of overflowing the bounds of the frame so as to engulf the spectator. Pope is of course cornering the reader, forcing upon him an acknowledgement of his responsibility, pulling him into the world of the poem—by making the poem reach out to him. But even here, it seems to me, where Pope is at his greatest as a poet of prophecy and lament, our feelings are not simple, nor simply tragic, and in one part of our minds we move through the Conclusion with a powerful sense of pleasure: the emotional drive of the poem, its baroque afflatus, seem to require a consummation as absolute as this. Pope's imaginative desire for completeness, for making an end, is here fused with his poetic delight in images of cataclysmic destruction. It is an important part of his greatness as a poet that he could not only recognize, judge, and repudiate the anarchic but feel within himself its vitality and excitement, and communicate what he felt. So it is here in the Conclusion. The poet at once succumbs to and defies the power of Dulness; and what destroys the world completes the poem.

#### APPENDIX

##### THE CONCLUSION TO THE *DUNCIAD*

It has apparently not been noticed that as a poetic unit the Conclusion to the *Dunciad* was probably, though in a very general way, modelled on Ovid's account of the coming of the Iron Age (*Metamorphoses*, i. 125–50).

In Book One Pope had written of Dulness:

Here pleas'd behold her mighty wings outspread  
To hatch a new Saturnian age of Lead. (27–8)

To which he appended a note: 'The ancient Golden Age is by Poets stiled *Saturnian*: but in the Chymical language *Saturn* is Lead. She is said

here only to be spreading her wings to hatch this age; which is not produced completely till the fourth book.' Pope here probably has in mind Ovid's account of the four ages (Gold, Silver, Brass, Iron), so that the Golden Age of Dulness—Pope's 'new Saturnian age of Lead'—corresponds to Ovid's last, and worst, Iron Age.

The best-known version of the *Metamorphoses* in English was that in heroic couplets (1626) by George Sandys, whom Dryden had called 'the best versifier of the former age' (*Preface to the Fables*). Pope had read Sandys's translation as a child and had 'liked [it] extremely' ('Spence's *Anecdotes*', ed. James Osborn, 1966, vol. i, 14). Sandys translates the coming of the Iron Age as follows (it is not, as it happens, a particularly good specimen of his style):

Next unto this succeeds the *Brazen Age*;  
 Worse natur'd, prompt to horrid warre, and rage:  
 But yet not wicked. Stubborn *Yr'n* the last.  
 Then, bluslesse crimes, which all degrees surpast,  
 The World surround. Shame, Truth, and Faith depart:  
 Fraud enters, ignorant in no bad Art;  
 Force, Treason, and the wicked love of gain.  
 Their sails, those winds, which yet they knew not, strain:  
 And ships, which long on loftie Mountains stood,  
 Then plow'd th'unpractis'd bosome of the Flood.  
 The Ground, as common earst as Light, or Aire,  
 By limit-giving Geometry they share.  
 Nor with rich Earth's just nourishments content,  
 For treasure they her secret entrailles rent;  
 The powerful Evill, which all power invades,  
 By her well hid, and wrapt in Stygian shades.  
 Curst Steele, more cursd Gold she now forth brought:  
 And bloody-handed Warre, who with both fought:  
 All live by spoyle. The Host his Guest betrays;  
 Sons, Fathers-in-law: 'twixt Brethren love decayes.  
 Wives husbands, Husbands wives attempt to kill.  
 And cruell Step-mothers pale poysons fill.  
 The Sonne his Fathers hastie death desires:  
 Foild Pietie, trod underfoot, expires.  
*Astraea*, last of all the heavenly birth,  
 Affrighted, leaves the blood-defiled Earth.

(I have quoted from the edition of 1640, page 2.) There is no doubt that Pope used Book One of the *Metamorphoses* elsewhere in the Conclusion, since his note to lines 637–8—

As Argus' eyes by Hermes' wand opprest,  
 Clos'd one by one to everlasting rest;

—refers to the source in *Metam.* i. 686–7, 713–14.

Ovid's description and Pope's Conclusion share a concern with a rapid decline or degeneration in human life. In structure too they have a good deal in common: like so many of the great set-pieces in the

*Metamorphoses*, this one proceeds by enumerating circumstances line by line, working by accumulation to a climax—a procedure adapted here by Pope. But only the first twenty-six lines of Pope's Conclusion (627–52) are modelled on Ovid: his final four lines, in which Dulness is apostrophized, are his own invention:

Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;  
 Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
 Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
 And Universal Darkness buries All.

The fact that Sandys's verse paragraph also fills twenty-six lines suggests that Pope used Sandys, rather than the original Latin, as a structural model. Moreover Pope's lines 649–52 are close in substance and tone to the last four of Sandys, and in the case of one line (650)—which was, in fact, added only in the final version—has one identical word, also in the final position:

Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,  
 And unawares *Morality* expires.  
 Nor *public* Flame, nor *private*, dares to shine;  
 Nor *human* Spark is left, nor Glimpse *divine*!

Of course the effects made by Ovid's description and Pope's Conclusion are very different. Pope transforms Ovid's description by substituting his own more abstractly metaphysical circumstances and building up to a far grander climax. But quite as important is the placing of each passage within the poem as a whole. In Pope's hands the Ovidian set-piece is removed from its place within the seemingly endless sequence of the *Metamorphoses* to a position right at the end of a long poem, unsoftened (in the final version) by any narrative framework, and left to make its full impact in all its massive abruptness.

Pope's Conclusion (unlike Johnson's in *Rasselas*) is a conclusion in which *everything* is concluded. And just as the whole poem works up to the great Conclusion, so the Conclusion itself works up to the immensely resonant last line:

And Universal Darkness buries All.

The line had an earlier form, in which Pope tried out 'Dulness' and 'cover' in place of 'Darkness' and 'buries'. Sutherland also notes three lines in Pope's *Iliad* which anticipate it (iv. 199, vi. 73—he wrongly cites 199—and xii. 80); and Constance Smith in a note, 'An Echo of Dryden in Pope' (*Notes and Queries*, n.s. xii, 1965, 451), suggests as a closer parallel, line 117 in Dryden's 'Last Parting of Hector and Andromache' from *Iliad*, vi:

And Universal Ruine cover all

—only this parallel having the words *Universal* and *cover* (which Pope had used in the 1728 *Dunciad*). Two other parallels that I would add are from Crashaw's *Music's Duel*, 156:

A full-mouth *Diapason* swallowes all



and from Creech's translation of Manilius's *Astronomicon* (1697, p. 52):

*Earth* would not keep its place, the *Skies* would fall,  
And universal Stiffness deaden *All*.

There are no doubt other examples of this form of verse-sentence, with a similarly placed verb and a final *All*. These lines are all concerned with striving to accomplish something absolute and final—to swallow, cover, deaden, bury, *all*; their quasi-erotic energy is very characteristic of baroque sensibility. Among the poets who use this form of line, however, Pope achieves unquestionably the greatest effect. In his final version of the *Dunciad*, by virtue of its perfect phrasing and by being placed last in a long poem, the line reaches what seems an ultimate degree of intensity.