

Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism": Neoclassicism and Criticism

by

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The criticism often heard about Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" is that in the poem Pope shows no formative theory of criticism. Actually, the poem devotes its large part to explaining the desirable attitudes of a critic; and the theory of criticism, which the title of the poem purports to furnish, is discussed only in the first two-hundred lines. Studded with many images and allusions, the poem appears as a medley of various ideas and seems difficult for one to grasp at once its total import. In addition, some words in the poem present a sort of ambiguity; for instance, wit, Nature, grace, taste, judgment, sense, rule, and genius appear with a variety of meanings and complex neoclassical concepts. To understand the poem well one needs to examine the subtle meanings of those words and see how they combine as a whole.

This study hereafter will explore the literary and historical significance of Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" and attempt to examine his conception of criticism, focusing on the neoclassical idea of Nature—that is, the eighteenth-century conception of the universe.

Recent criticism on the poem tends to concentrate on two points: one deals with the significance of Pope's treatment of wit, and the other treats the poem as a work of "criticism" on criticism. The following will discuss these two points.

First, about wit: in the poem Pope uses "wit" about fifty times, far more frequently than such other neoclassical terms as taste, sense,

pride, and grace. In "Pope on Wit: The 'Essay on Criticism'" Edward N. Hooker emphasizes that in the poem Pope tries to defend "wit" rather than to formulate a theory of criticism.¹ Hooker says that Pope saw the importance of the high aesthetic quality of wit and attempted to preserve it. There was a danger of the extinction of genuine wit: "In an age when the utilitarian and scientific movement had grown to giant size, an art which pleased by confounding truth and deceiving men was bound to be viewed with hostility. All wit came under attack";² also, "in actual practice, wit became increasingly associated after 1690 with the strange, novel, and surprising."³

Although in "An Essay on Criticism" Pope uses "wit" with several meanings (implying, for instance, fancy, genius, "heaven's light," a clever remark), he seems to have had a definite idea of what "wit" was when he composed the poem. According to Hooker, in his letter dated November 29, 1707, Pope called wit as "propriety."⁴ As the probable time of the composition of "An Essay on Criticism" is known to be either 1708 or 1709 and its publication is 1711, evidently the idea that wit is "propriety" was in Pope's mind when he composed the poem. However, "propriety" is also John Dryden's definition of wit. Critics therefore argue that "An Essay on Criticism" displays nothing but a motley of the contemporary ideas of Pope and the old literary rules of ancient poets and critics and that he may have simply borrowed Dryden's definition of wit.⁵ This may be the case; but what is significant is, as Hooker stresses, that the poem shows Pope's attempts at reexamining wit and explaining the important relationship of wit and criticism. Pope regards the intellectual power of wit as similar to the discernible power of judgment necessary for criticism.

The other trend of recent criticism on "An Essay on Criticism" is to treat it as a critique on the theory of criticism. David B. Morris asserts, for example, that the poem is "an original and significant contribution to the history of critical theory."⁶ Stating that Pope "offered English criticism the theoretical foundations of an authentic art," Morris maintains that Pope established the practical criticism of judgment.⁷

Without recourse to "authority and taste," Pope needed to search for a theoretical standard which would validate judgment. Ultimately Pope discovered the standard in Nature, which he believed is "just" and "unerring." In this respect, he may stand opposite to Dr. Johnson, whose critical standard for a work of art is "taste." Pope perceived that Nature's standard provides rules applicable to the basis of criticism and that the rules are the same as the ancients like Homer and Virgil showed. He advises therefore to follow the rules of the ancients, for "to copy Nature is to copy them."⁸

Morris sums up the content of the poem as follows: "Part 1 consistently treats the act of judgment within a context of universal, certain, permanent, theoretical values. In parts 2 and 3, however, Pope moves from establishing theoretical absolutes to exploring particular, variable, practical aspects of critical activity."⁹ In short, Morris says that Pope created the criticism of judgment, established the validity of judgment, and provided a workable theory of criticism.

In the above, the different treatments of "An Essay on Criticism" have been reviewed: Hooker focuses on wit with a historical approach; Morris on judgment emphasizing Pope's theoretical criticism. To understand well the relationship between wit and judgment, however, one needs to examine the poem in detail and see what Pope actually meant it to be. For this purpose, Pope's idea of Nature becomes an important clue, because to him Nature appears as the source of wit and judgment.

Stylistically, the poem consists of three parts of heroic couplets. Part I, the first two-hundred lines, concerns the theory of criticism. Pope says that as poets should by nature have "true genius," so critics must have "true taste." Most people "have the seeds of judgment in their mind" (20), and this natural gift must be developed by the study of Nature and by that of the ancients and their rules. Also the critic must be aware of his personal limitation: "Be sure yourself and your own reach to know, / How far your genius, taste, and learning go" (48-49). The critic must also know various rules of Nature, which should be his standard, as Nature is the source of poetic imagination. Pope thus

accounts for Nature:

Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty must to all impart,
At once the source, and end, and test of art.

(69-73)

Pope accepts the idea that art is imitation and the essential part of art belongs to Nature. But what is exactly Nature? First, "Nature affords at least a glimmering light" (21), which implies some kind of intuitive power; and the power is often vulnerable to false learning: "some made coxcombs Nature meant but fools" (27). In lines 68 and 69, Nature is a personified universal standard: "First follow Nature, and your judgment frame / By her just standard, which is still the same." Also Nature means a landscape or some mysterious power external to man; but, more often and importantly, Pope uses it to imply the divine and cosmic order of the universe. Nature is the ideal of art and the source of wit for a poet and the source of judgment for a critic. With its order Nature fixes rules, and the critic must learn to form his judgment in accordance with those rules while always conscious of his limitation: "Nature to all things fixed the limits fit" (52), which line reflects the idea of the Great Chain of Being.

Pope sees in the works of the ancients the rules of Nature, which he calls "Nature methodized" (89). Nature and the ancients are considered identical: "Nature and Homer were, he [Virgil] found, the same" (135). As "to copy Nature is to copy them" (140), the good critic must learn the rules of the ancients. But, at the same time, the critic must be cautious about slavish imitation and know the overall qualities of the ancients in order to shape his "maxims" with sound judgment. To Pope, as wit and judgment are married, so are the true genius of the poet and the true taste of the critic. Ideally, the true critic must have the genuine power of both wit and taste. Regarding the critic's work as similar to the poet's, Pope may be said to have tried to elevate the position of

literary criticism to a higher stage of art.

Additionally, Pope says that there are beauties of art unable to be expressed by rules—for instance, grace—so that the best advice is “Moderns, beware! or if you must offend / Against the precept, ne’er transgress its end” (163-164).

Part II illustrates the practical laws and methods of judgment needed by a critic. First of all, Pope considers pride as “the never-failing vice of fools” (204) to cause poor judgment. It is also important for the critic to know his weak points. Inadequate learning misguides the critic: “A little learning is a dangerous thing” (215). The critic must take a literary work as the total unity of many small parts: “In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts / Is not the exactness of peculiar parts” (234-244). Perfect art is rare, so the critic should not cavil but try to seek the artist’s intention. No critic can condemn a work of art because it gives nothing that he desires to see.

Other critics are so preoccupied with style and language that their judgment is shallow. False eloquence and gaudy colors attract their attention, obscuring deep thought; conversely, true expression is decent and decorates thought with a proper dress. The critic must be aware of pretentious or archaic words and style intended merely for false pride. Many critics seem to be misled to judging by versification: “smooth or rough with them is right or wrong” (338). It is therefore important not to be deceived by the appearance of a work. Lines 344-383 show Pope’s digression to demonstrate “representative meter.”

The true critic must avoid also the extremes of excessive praise or extreme slander. Free from personal taste, he needs to be open-minded about trifle matters and pay attention to important points. Pope advises not to confine personal taste to a particular sect whether foreign or native, ancient or modern; nor should the critic be deluded by fashionable cults. He must have the courage to fight against “pride, malice, folly” (458) and pass judgment independent of authoritative sanction. Lastly, subjectivity—personal preference—must be watched, for it often leads the critic to a wrong judgment; what is necessary is

that the critic should put aside envy, fame, and self-love. "Good nature and good sense must ever join" (524), so he must have good self-control; and he must shun the vices of obscenity and dullness.

Part III describes the ideal character of a critic. Pope says that an ideal critic must share the role of not only a judge but also of a moral critic. Taste, judgment, and learning are not enough to make a good critic; truth and impartiality are also necessary. The critic ought to be modest: "Be silent always when you doubt your sense, / And speak, though sure, with seeming diffidence" (566-567). Furthermore, he must be careful in teaching, because "blunt truths more mischief than nice falsehoods do" (573). In addition, he should not fear in pursuing truth.

The critic without good taste and judgment and with excessive pride and impertinence is no value; so is the critic trained only with bookish knowledge. The true critic must have an exact taste and "a knowledge both of books and humankind" (640). Finally, Pope catalogues ancient critics as models to be imitated and shows the different qualities of their characteristics. The poem ends reminding the critic again of the importance of humbleness against pride.

Thus far, the content of the poem has been briefly examined; then, from the above explication, how should the poem be best judged? Does the poem lay an emphasis on wit as Edward N. Hooker maintains, or does the poem present a theoretical literary criticism as David B. Morris refers to? In fact, different as their approaches are, their subject matters—wit and judgment—are interrelated. To Pope wit and judgment are complementary:

Some, to whom Heaven in wit has been profuse,
Want as much more to turn it to its use;
For wit and judgment often are at strife.
Though meant each other's aid, like man and wife.

(80-84)

Both wit and judgment are kindred, springing from the superb wisdom of Nature. Accordingly, what becomes important for man is to under-

stand Nature well.

Concerning the significance of "An Essay on Criticism," Ralph Cohen says that the poem is "composed with the self-consciousness of a historical tradition and the poet's and critic's role in applying this tradition to his own age."¹⁰ Martin C. Battestin states that the poem "expresses most explicitly and memorably the philosophical and aesthetic assumptions of the age."¹¹ The two critics point out the very important aspects of the poem. Cohen pays attention to the historical tradition of the poem, and Battestin sees the poem as showing Pope's examination of the neoclassicism of his age. That Pope is conscious of the neoclassical spirit is beyond doubt, because he follows the conventional idea of neoclassicism; he considers that art is the imitation of Nature and that the works of the ancients, in which Nature has reflected itself, are the ideal of imitation. However, to Pope, what is more important than just following the aesthetic tradition of the ancients is to examine the conception of literary art of his period and establish the proper standard of literary criticism.

Significantly, finding artistic standards for criticism in Nature, Pope realizes that Nature, which is the universal order, is not only the source of art but also that of judgment; Nature provides, as it has done so in the ancients, good and sound rules for judgment. In Nature are manifested harmony, balance, and limitation with the "creative act of divine Reason."¹² This is also, as Battestin says, "a cardinal assumption of Augustan aesthetics."¹³ Above all, Pope's reexamination of the conception of Nature means an inquiry into the neoclassical idea of Nature. (Man is part of Nature, and Nature is considered to mirror itself in man. Geoffrey Tillotson says that Nature was regarded as relevant to humankind and as having "a strictly human connotation."¹⁴ In his efforts to assimilate Nature, man finds that Nature provides some rules. Pope stresses the importance of learning the same rules manifested in the works of the ancients.)

What is most significant is that Pope attempts to establish a unique literary criticism appropriate to the need of his age, blending the

traditional aesthetic conception of art with the neoclassical idealism of Nature. In Pope's mind the ideal form of criticism is found between art and Nature, between the human artist and the divine; in the unity of art and Nature the good senses of aesthetic expression and critical judgment are established. Just as art is part of Nature, the criteria of critical judgment belongs to Nature.

"An Essay on Criticism" is a splendid literary work displaying the unique fusion of the Augustan idea of the universe (Nature) and the artistic tradition of the ancients. The poem appears significant when it is seen particularly in the historical and the critical standpoints of eighteenth-century English literature. Though the poem deals more with the criticism of artifice for a critic than the theoretical criticism of art, it has succeeded in establishing the standard of judgment applicable to literary criticism and presenting, instead of regularizing a theory, a practical touchstone for a literary critic.

Notes

1 Edward Niles Hooker, "Pope on Wit: The 'Essay on Criticism,'" in *Eighteenth-Century English Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. James L. Clifford (New York: Oxford UP, 1959). Hooker traces the historical change of the definition of wit and describes how Pope tried to establish the status of true wit in the age of reason. Hooker stresses that "those who would like to understand his views of the literary art (and of criticism, its complement) must read the 'Essay on Criticism' with a fuller awareness of its historical setting" (p. 59).

2 Hooker, p. 44.

3 Hooker, p. 57.

4 Hooker, p. 57.

5 With respect to Pope's indebtedness to the ancient tradition of poetry, however, David B. Morris sees Pope's unique invention in "An Essay on Criticism": "The originality of Pope's Essay, in its mixture of tradition and innovation, becomes more apparent when we compare his theory with the established critical positions." *Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 49.

6 Morris p. 48. In contrast with Morris' view, however, James Reeves sees no

originality of Pope in "An Essay on Criticism": "Pope was evasive because he was unoriginal. He had no critical principles of his own to put forward, and was concerned above all to impress his readers with a dazzling show of verbal pyrotechnics." *The Reputation and Writings of Alexander Pope* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), p. 134.

⁷ Morris, p. 55.

⁸ "An Essay on Criticism," line 140. The text is cited from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), pp. 2194-2211. Hereafter line numbers will be indicated in parentheses.

⁹ Morris, p. 55.

¹⁰ Ralph Cohen, "Pope's Meanings and the Strategies of Interrelation," in *English Literature in Age of Disguise*, ed. Macimillian E. Novak (Berkeley: U of California P. 1977), p. 111.

¹¹ Martin C. Battestin, *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974), p. 141.

¹² Battestin, p. 84.

¹³ Battestin, p. 83.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Tillotson, *On the Poetry of Pope* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1938), p. 18.