

# 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

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Volume 18

Article 14

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2011

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### Recommended Citation

Philip Smallwood (2011) "NOT THE HISTORY OF IDEAS Laughter, Music, and Metaphor in Pope's Definition of Criticism," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 18, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol18/iss1/14>

# NOT THE HISTORY OF IDEAS Laughter, Music, and Metaphor in Pope's Definition of Criticism

Philip Smallwood

When in 1952 the American critic R. S. Crane sought to expose the profound theoretical shortcomings persistent in the practice of writing the critical history of 1650 to 1800, it was to an example drawn from the criticism of Pope—from Pope's "Preface" to the *Iliad* of Homer—that he most confidently turned. "The *Preface* becomes intelligible, as a critical utterance, only, I suggest," wrote Crane, "when we have related its doctrinal statements and particular judgments to Pope's specific problem in writing it....And we shall inevitably distort its significance in the history of criticism," he continues, "if we are content simply to extract 'pronouncements' or 'opinions' from it without interpreting these in the light of the special logical situation in which they came to be stated."<sup>1</sup> There is, I suggest,

<sup>1</sup> R. S. Crane, "On Writing the History of Criticism in England 1650–1800" (1953), *The Idea of the Humanities and Other Essays Critical and Historical*, 2 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 2:166.

a lesson of general import for the historian of criticism in this analysis; and it is one simultaneously present for the scholar of Pope. The same consideration could as fairly extend, I here propose, to any historical text embracing texts of criticism taken from the prose and poetry of Pope; and the means best to avoid the distortion that discomforts Crane seems most urgent in the case of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, the didactic poem he composed in 1709 and published for the first time in 1711. This celebrated work of Pope's youth was praised in terms of exceptional enthusiasm, in his 1781 "Life of Pope," by Samuel Johnson, and had also won many admirers (as well as detractors irritated by Pope's precocity) from its advent through the various revisionary changes made in the course of Pope's life.<sup>2</sup> Pope's *Essay* was in the eighteenth century translated (sometimes more than once) both into Latin and the main modern languages of Europe. Its popular axioms ("A Little Learning is a dangerous thing" [line 215]; "To Err is *Humane*" [line 525]; "Fools rush in" [line 625]) have likewise survived as wisdom even when the holistic conception of criticism they are there to serve is lost in the mists of the critical past. Yet the poem's good name has never in total recovered from a tendency to think Pope's first enemies right, and as a work dependent on a conscious transformation of an ancient aesthetic form, it has remained on this count under-analyzed. The principal complaint, common to older and newer detractors alike, is to the effect that the "content" of the *Essay* was for the most part stolen or uninspiringly borrowed; that Pope was, in consequence, dull, uncreative, or unpoetical. By extension Pope failed to appreciate poetry and was himself far short of any critical ideal.

<sup>2</sup> For details of the changes (which are sometimes aesthetically significant) see *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, 1: *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen, 1961). All quotations from the poem are taken from this edition. Line numbers are given in the text.

By no means all initial reactions were condescending or adverse. Henry Felton, Preface to *A Dissertation on Reading the Classics and Forming and Just Style* (London, 1713), was prompted by Pope's *Essay* to remark that: "The true Spirit of Criticism seems to revive" (xii); more striking still is the praise lavished on Pope by the Anglo-Saxon scholar, Elizabeth Elstob, Preface to *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (London, 1715). Elstob referred to Pope as an "exact Master of Criticism" and expressed the hope that Pope's literary understanding might be brought to bear on the translation of Homer (xiii). A similar hope, again in response to the *Essay*, was voiced by Richard Fiddes in *A Prefatory Epistle Concerning Some Remarks to be published on Homer's Iliad* (London, 1714), 9.

The misunderstanding which has permitted this criticism, I will here suggest, derives ultimately from a deflated conception of the poem's "performance as metaphor,"<sup>3</sup> a reduction based not on the "being" of the work, but its "content." But this literalization of the poem as a work of literature exists crucially in tandem with a sense of historical superiority on the part of the present that the poem has itself warned us about: "*We think our Fathers Fools*" (438), writes Pope pertinently. The poem, I suggest, falls victim both to the contracted idea of the history which traditionally shapes the history of criticism in the form of the history of ideas, and to that history's teleologies and structures. Only when the "special logical situation" of Pope's text has been more fully described, I argue, and the poem's historical relation to its sources and reception more subtly exposed, will the work assume a place in the narrative stream of critical history on terms equal to those determined by Crane.

There is, to begin with, the historical transcendence of Pope's music of verse in the couplets of the *Essay*. Pope's laughter-loving conception of criticism, satirically formed, can still arouse laughter in us, while most prominently there is Pope's metaphorical enactment of his poem's propositional life in the *Essay's* work of poetic transcendence.<sup>4</sup> These elements together require, I suggest, a differently valued role for the poem in a differently chaptered critical story, and in the construction of which I am concerned with the *Essay's* immanent history, with its literary and poetic affinities, its transhistorical relations with other criticism and poems. The paradox I have in mind is familiar to theorists of the history of literature, and is that in speaking directly to us, the poem finds its own more truly located historical role. My starting point is the fragmented local doctrines of the poem's celebrated propositions and tags:

So vast is Art, so narrow Human Wit (61)

First follow NATURE... (68)

Then Criticism the Muse's Handmaid prov'd (102)

Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight Faults to find (235)

<sup>3</sup> This is to adapt a phrase from the work of Derek Attridge. See "Performing Metaphor: the Singularity of Literary Figuration," in Nicholas Harrison, ed., *The Idea of the Literary: Paragraph* 28.2 (July 2005): 18–34. Attridge's intuition, to which I appeal in this essay, owes a well-documented debt to the work on metaphor of Jacques Derrida.

<sup>4</sup> See for example David Womersley's introduction to his edition of *Augustan Critical Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest* (297)

*Expression is the Dress of Thought...* (318)

—and so on. These affirmations are generally more famous than the poem they emanate from; but they take second place, I suggest, to Pope's comprehensive "metaphoric" figuration of criticism.<sup>5</sup> Disparate elements from the past are in historical terms made new in the poem and are metamorphosed from their source contexts of criticism and poetry, and from Pope himself. The consequence, in the words of Pope, is to recognize that "what affects our Hearts / Is not th'Exactness of peculiar parts" and that "'Tis not a *Lip* or *Eye* we Beauty call" (244–45). This appeal to the nature of an encompassing oneness, I suggest, is a local propositional symptom of the poem's combining metaphor convened hologrammatically from bits and pieces of rule, hint, nuance, theory, verbal felicity, and thought, and never completely stated in propositional terms. The poem, Timotheus-like, moves, elevates, amuses, compels attention, assuages confusion, rings in the ear, opens criticism up to a world of disparate perspectives, and to conditions within the world itself. Pope's *Essay* is in its transitions, its internal rhythms and range, its "nameless *Graces* that no methods teach" (144), simultaneously a hymn to the ideal value of criticism and a satire on its perpetually absurd reality; and it is in this sense more closely aligned with the second ode on St. Cecilia's day by Dryden, dedicated to the power of music, than with much hitherto in the history of critical theory:

Thus, long ago  
 'Ere heaving Bellows learn'd to blow,  
 While Organs yet were mute;  
*Timotheus*, to his breathing Flute,  
 And sounding Lyre,  
 Cou'd swell the Soul to rage, or kindle soft Desire. (155–60)

Pope may have composed his own "Ode for Musick, on St. Cecilia's Day" (as a rival to Dryden's) in 1708, shortly before writing the *Essay*.

<sup>5</sup> See M. A. R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism: from Plato to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 292: "The form of the work exemplifies and enacts much of its overt 'meaning.' And its power far exceeds its paraphrasable meaning: this power rests on the poetic effects generated by its own enactment of classical literary dispositions and its own organic unity."

But in following these movements, and in responding critically as he enacts the idea of what is required by a critical response, Pope in the *Essay* moves criticism in a new direction—one that is in the non-depreciatory sense “Not for the *Doctrine*, but the *Musick* there” (343).<sup>6</sup>

### \* Metaphor and Metamorphosis \*

It is instructive, in pursuit of this claim, to focus further on the metamorphosis of thought about metaphor in the writings of Pope, and to compare, in the first instance, Pope's conception of the laws of figurative expression with that of Dominique Bouhours, the prominent French critic of the late seventeenth century whose works Pope had studied from youth. In a translation of Bouhours's *La manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit*, published in 1705 as *The Art of Criticism*,<sup>7</sup> the power of metaphor to communicate truth is explained by two disputants in a critical dialogue. Metaphor is in the course of their exchanges defined in its difference from simile (Bouhours's “comparaison”), and an exemplification is sought, marking the difference, from the *Iliad* of Homer. Thus does the modern French critic, who was so fruitfully influential for Pope, reconstitute in the following terms a wisdom on the subject of metaphor consciously derived from the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle. Here first is the French:

Quand Homère dit qu'Achille va comme un Lion, c'est une comparaison: mais quand il dit du mesme Héros, *ce Lion s'élançoit*, c'est une métaphore. Dans la comparaison le Héros ressemble au Lion; dans la métaphore le Héros est un Lion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tom Mason and Adam Rounce, “*Alexander's Feast; or the Power of Musique: The Poem and Its Readers*,” in Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, eds., *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), note that the entry under “Music” in *A Poetical Dictionary; or, The Beauties of the English Poets, Alphabetically Displayed, Containing the Most Celebrated Passages* (1761) “consists in its entirety of a passage from Alexander Pope and a poem by John Dryden”: “Pope's passage (extracted from *An Essay on Criticism*) tells how, in Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*, the master musician, Timotheus, ‘bid alternate passions fall and rise’ and how ‘the world's victor’, Alexander, was ‘subdu'd by sound’. This is followed by Dryden's poem itself, printed in full under the title ‘*DRYDEN'S fine ODE*’” (141).

<sup>7</sup> For an account of this influence see A. F. B. Clark, *Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England, 1660–1830* (Paris: Champion, 1925).

<sup>8</sup> *La manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* (1687; “Nouvelle Edition,” Paris, 1715), 21.

The passage is translated literally enough in *The Art of Criticism*:

When *Homer* says of *Achilles* he went like a *Lion*, it is a Comparison: but when he says of the same *Achilles*, *this Lion darted forth* it is a Metaphor. In the Comparison the Hero is like a *Lion*: in the Metaphor the Hero is a *Lion*.<sup>9</sup>

The point of the example, in both French and English forms, is the counterintuitive perception that successful metaphoric performance is not identical with deception. The nondeceptiveness of metaphor, as part of literature's general claim to contain truth, has frequently occupied aestheticians and modern philosophers of art, and the literature devoted to metaphor within the orbit of aesthetic theory is extremely wide.<sup>10</sup> There is the matter of where, if truth is contained in metaphor, it is normally located, and in the twentieth-century terms of John R. Searle, the history of which Bouhours is a part would here have contemporary use in turning an analytical light on a broad-based failure to distinguish "speaker meaning" from "sentence meaning."<sup>11</sup> Bouhours had written thus in *La manière* of the suggestion that "Metaphor confounds...the *Lion* with *Achilles*, or *Achilles* with the *Lion*": "there is no more falsehood in the one than in the other...[and] he must be very dull, who takes these things literally." Bouhours employs a simile to capture the problem of truth in metaphor:

We may say then that Metaphors are like transparent Veils, thro' which we see what they cover; or like the Habits of a Mask under which the Persons who are disguised are known.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *The Art of Criticism: or, the Method of making a Right Judgment upon Subjects of Wit and Learning*, translated from the best edition of the French by the Famous Father Bohours, by a Person of Quality (London, 1705), 11.

<sup>10</sup> See, in particular, Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (1979; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert J. Fogelin, *Figuratively Speaking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); David Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Eva Feder Kittay, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), ch. 8; and especially Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 14.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Searle, "Metaphor," in Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought*, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Bouhours, *The Art of Criticism*, 12.



In Bouhours, then, we have one eminent expression of the official "theory of metaphor" that Pope had before him as he began his career as a critic and a poet—a precept experienced as part of a dialogue, a respected article of neoclassical critical creed that Bouhours has opened out to further reflection in the elegance of a dialectical form. This insight of criticism on the nature of metaphor moves historically from the rules of ancient Greece, via the social sensitivities of modern France, to animate the interplay between ancient and modern in Pope. And his critical poem by this means helps bridge the gap between sanctified ancient laws, available as an account of classical wisdom in propositional form, and a modern sense of style, good taste, and decorum, both literary and social. Pope, the hostile critics of his *Essay* have thought, had taken the ideas of critical history and had recycled them. His poem is seen accordingly as stitched together from reiterated precepts having low-level status as truth; but in his difference from Bouhours, and in the medium of poetry which plays its part in this difference, Pope offers no formal or propositional definition of "metaphor," and the enduring problem of expression for critics and creators, considered as an issue in the history of critical debate, goes under other and various heads.

### \* "True Wit" and the Enactment of Precepts \*

Within the critical oeuvre of Pope which includes no small part of his poetry, a quantity of letters, his prefaces, and his notes to Shakespeare and Homer, Pope explores by means of metaphor the strange and wonderful overlap between disparate worlds; and his criticism in poetry evokes at the same time a necessary elusiveness in the definition of metaphor. This distinguishes Pope fundamentally from a theorist (however sensitive and stylish) like Dominique Bouhours. "*Conceit* is to Nature what *Paint* is to Beauty; it is not only needless, but impairs what it would improve," writes Pope in an early letter to William Walsh.<sup>13</sup> But Pope's poetical "thought" on the nature of "conceits" subordinates such statements of general import to the practice of performing meaning by means of metaphor, as something more closely akin to the moment in

<sup>13</sup> Pope to Walsh, 2 July 1706, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 1 (1704–1718): 18.



the early letter to William Wycherley where Pope refers to "Critics," satirized later in his *Essay*, as "Birds of Prey" having "a natural inclination to Carrion."<sup>14</sup>

At the point in his *Essay* where Pope recurs to "True Expression" he does not follow Bouhours to say what metaphor is *like*;<sup>15</sup> rather, the fit between the image and its referent, the vehicle and the tenor, the form and the content, with the exactitude of their match, is itself metaphorically played out. Pope, like his own Longinus, "*Is himself* the great sublime he draws" (680). "*True Wit*" accordingly *is*:

Nature to Advantage drest,  
What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Express*. (297-98)<sup>16</sup>

Much of the pleasure of this famous idealization of style is that of a dead metaphor that has lived on. The meaning is found in the suggestions set in train, and in beliefs that are called up about the world which exceed the question of writing well. "*True Wit*," we discover, is in this account more than just "Nature." We are to imagine in a freer way; there is a working through of correspondence not part of the reference of metaphor; we do not ask with Aristotle or Bouhours about metaphorical "truth," but of the success and failure in the method by which figurative language is used to adduce a likeness that has hitherto seemed under-exposed. Perhaps, for example, "Nature" is to be made visible here as a beautiful girl, a serene and exquisitely feminine form dressed lightly to perfection, and alike, in her poetic or metaphoric intension to the natural femininity of "Autumn"—her hair "soft-lifted by the winnowing wind"—in Keats's romantic poem.

Pope in this section of the *Essay* then contrasts that "*False Eloquence*," which is "like the *Prismatic Glass*" (311), and an "Expression" which *is* "the *Dress of Thought*" (318). Wit is Nature and Expression is

<sup>14</sup> Pope to Wycherley, 26 December 1704, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 1 (1704-1718): 2.

<sup>15</sup> For Buckingham (John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave) also, in his 1682 *Essay on Poetry*, "True Wit" had been "*like the Sun*" (l. 12; my emphasis). See David Womersley, ed., *Augustan Critical Writing*, 97.

<sup>16</sup> In the first edition of the poem of 1711, amended in the second of 1713, "ne'er so well *Express*" had appeared as "ne'er before *Express*" (line 301)—a shift in the idea of history Pope brings to criticism that is not insignificant. The full text of the first edition of the *Essay on Criticism* (1711) is conveniently reprinted in Womersley, ed., *Augustan Critical Writing*, 208-29.

dress. The terms of each pair are different, belonging as they do to different logical or categorical types; yet the elements within the pair are interchangeable. They collapse into and interanimate each other; they interact, though their identity is preserved.<sup>17</sup> The fact that both images are conceivable as metaphors, with or without the "like," depends to a large degree on the contextual information we receive from the poem. Not all subject-verb "to be"-complement expressions of equality make metaphors, and not all metaphors depend for their conceptual effect on precise grammatical forms. We take the figures used by Pope metaphorically when they occur as part of a debate about writing linked to the nature of the world. Rhyme, rhythm, grammar and the punctuation of the passages to which they belong connect them to their immediate context. The other and various contexts of the poem where the same terms make their appearance ("Wit" occurs 46 times in the poem) add to the totality of meaning, just as characters in a play are established in different scenes, and where the same speakers, as their character is built up, are viewed in dialogue with different interlocutors and at different times.

The term common in these statements of equivalence is the third-person singular present tense of the verb "to be." The sense of what criticism "is" is symbolic of the whole *Essay* as a vehicle for its *presentation*, as being the making present of the elements of the critical past, and the examples perform as elements within the poetic realization of Pope. As far as Pope's principles are confined to their intellectual value, the *Essay on Criticism* gives the appearance of a time-worn "content" within a newly polished and temporary form. But to assume that the poem is in possession of "content" separated from form, and that such denuded content is the mode of its contribution to history, is radically problematic in the light of Pope's metaphorical conceptualization of "*True Wit*" (297); and it is at odds with his own analysis, therein, of the form/content distinction.

Critical-historical change from Bouhours to Pope may be more satisfactorily traced as a gathering up by Pope of a cornucopia of pre-existing bits and pieces of criticism, the rules, precepts and examples which poetical and critical history supplies, and which need not however

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Lipking, in "Literary Criticism and National Literary History," writes of Pope's reconciliations of opposites as resting on "slippery" terms—a somewhat unwarranted denigration of Pope's deployment of his key concepts in the *Essay*. See *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 484.

be doctrines, nor always propositions, nor for that matter the property of others minds.<sup>18</sup> Pope brings these together into a unity exceeding the totalization of theory. This new kind of unity is the critical and poetic created reality of Pope, and conveys the transition from propositions reiterated in neater forms to *enacting* precepts as experienced poetic events; it authorizes the totality of Pope's view of criticism within which all critical propositions are a subsidiary species of the genus. This "criticism" is both the subject and the object of the poem; its thematic "air" or "refrain" in the musical sense, and is not so much the "content" of the *Essay* more perfectly expressed, but in the nature of its "being." And it is this "being," of which reality the local metaphors bring suggestions to mind, in which both the historical and present meanings of the poem coincide.

Pope defines a personal relation to the content of critical history through his unprecedented conception of precedence in the *Essay*. "This definition is very exact," writes William Warburton in his 1744 editorial and explanatory notes to Pope's lines on "True Wit":

Mr. Locke had defined *Wit* to consist in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together, with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, whereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy. But that great Philosopher, in separating *Wit* from *Judgment*, as he does in this place, has given us (and he could therefore give us not other) only an account of Wit in general: In which, false Wit, tho' not every species of it, is included.<sup>19</sup>

The collaboration between these terms in Pope's *Essay* recalls the mind/body problem in the history of philosophy. Because the sense in which each is part of the same entirety is not determinate, the precise conjunction cannot be ultimately determined. Pope's unification of "Wit" with "Judgment," of form with matter, expresses, we see, an overlap as an ideality. Categories are not created so much as distinctions

<sup>18</sup> Pope (in search of a figurative expression fit for the concept) had written to William Wycherley, 26 December, 1704, that "True Wit I believe, may be defin'd as a Justness of Thought, and a Facility of Expression; or (in the Midwives phrase) a perfect Conception, with an easy Delivery." See *Correspondence*, 1 (1704-1718): 2.

<sup>19</sup> *An Essay on Criticism: Written in the Year MDCCIX, with the Commentary and Notes of W. Warburton, A.M.* (London, 1744), 28.

made, and the presence within the debate of Aristotle and Bouhours, in which the ancient example is itself debated, defines this as an historical process. It is an intervention within the history of poetry and criticism of a genius which in Samuel Johnson's words "collects, combines, amplifies, and animates"<sup>20</sup> the materials of critical thinking which others have left behind.

### ✱ Simile and Metaphor ✱

While the poem, in its capacity as literature,<sup>21</sup> is a special case of the metaphor, it embraces at the same time many and different kinds of figures within its propositional, descriptive, and narrative life. As in the best of his critical writing on other occasions, Pope typically blurs the bounds between simile and metaphor, the latter of which he was usually inclined to call the "image," or sometimes the "comparison." The two kinds of comparison, distinguished by Bouhours, are in Pope's criticism often mutually extending, and grow out of each other. Thus the figure of "Criticism" appears within the poem alongside "Nature" as a personified abstraction; it anticipates the "Allegory of Criticism" in Johnson's *Rambler* no. 3;<sup>22</sup> and it is given the power of agency whose characteristics recall the ministrations of an epic god or goddess; it may therefore serve as the subject of an active verb:

Then Criticism the Muse's Handmaid prov'd,  
To dress her Charms, and make her more below'd. (102-3)

The metaphor that links criticism with sylphic handmaidliness then breaks into a simile in the lines which follow this couplet:

But following Wits from that Intention stray'd;  
Who cou'd not win the Mistress, wooed the Maid;

<sup>20</sup> See Johnson's "Life of Pope" (1781), in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations on their Works*, 4 vols., ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 4:65.

<sup>21</sup> This is to engage an intuition of Monroe C. Beardsley on literary expression as intrinsic metaphor. See *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), ch. 3.

<sup>22</sup> *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate et al. Vol. 3 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 15-19.

Against the Poets *their own Arms* they turn'd,  
 Sure to hate most the Men from whom they *learn'd*.  
 So modern *Pothecaries*.... (104-8)

This irony of history, which is the hatred of those from whom one learns, is prophetic here of Pope's reception by hostile strands of Romantic criticism; it is followed by the famous "simile on the Alps," admired by Johnson, where the run-up to the passage, preparatory to its climax, is metaphoric. The "Muse" fires us:

Fir'd at first Sight with what the *Muse* imparts,  
 In *fearless Youth* we tempt the Heights of Arts,  
 While from the bounded *Level* of our Mind,  
*Short Views* we take, nor see the *Lengths behind*. (219-21)

And again, only with the key word "So" does the passage then transform into the simile proper:

So pleas'd at first, the towering *Alps* we try.... (225)

A similar mingle of simile and metaphor appears in the "Preface" to Pope's translation of the *Iliad* from which we began. Again, after an opening sentence, metaphor, signalled by the word "like," moves into simile and allows the parallel to expand:

Our Author's Work is a wild Paradise, where if we cannot see all the Beauties so distinctly as in an order'd Garden, it is only because the Number of them is infinitely greater. 'Tis like a copious Nursery which contains the Seeds and first Productions of every kind, out of which those who follow'd him have but selected some particular Plants, each according to his Fancy, to cultivate and beautify.<sup>23</sup>

Here again, the metaphor that initiates the passage (Homer's "wild Paradise") can be seen as a truncated simile or an elliptical one.

<sup>23</sup> *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. 7: *Translations of Homer*, ed. Maynard Mack et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 3.

*Metaphor in Shakespeare and Homer*

Pope's commitment to metaphorical austerity led him to try to "improve" metaphors in his edition of Shakespeare, though in ways that were not always enthusiastically received. In Note xxiii of his *Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745), Johnson, who maintained a critical dialogue with Pope throughout his own edition of Shakespeare, otherdrew attention to the imagery of the speech from *Macbeth* beginning: "Here lay Duncan, / His silver skin laced with his golden blood," and he commented thus on Pope's amendment:

Mr. Pope has endeavoured to improve one of these lines by substituting "goary blood" for "golden blood," but it may easily be admitted that he who could on such an occasion talk of "lacing the silver skin" would "lace it" with "golden blood." No amendment can be made to his line of which every word is equally faulty but by a general blot.

Nonetheless, where Pope had been inclined to amend Shakespeare, Johnson's effort was to find meaning in the original expression, and to hypothesize a dramatic motivation:

It is not improbable, that Shakespeare put these forced and unnatural metaphors into the mouth of Macbeth as a mark of artifice and dissimulation, to show the difference between the studied language of hypocrisy, and the natural outcries of sudden passion. This whole speech considered in this light is a remarkable instance of judgment as it consists entirely of antitheses and metaphors.<sup>24</sup>

But it is the translation of Homer, and in particular the notes to that translation, which bring out Pope's most sustained explicit reflections on the imagery of other poets. Metaphor, for example, appears encompassed within the more general term "Comparisons" in Pope in "An Essay on Homer's Battels." In a passage which concludes with the example used by Aristotle on Homer used by Bouhours, Pope defends the practice of the comparison, and notes in terms that apply equally to

<sup>24</sup> *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo. Vol. 7 of *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 23.



metaphor that a comparison (or simile) "is at once correspondent to, and different from the Subject," and he asserts that "it is with the Eye of the Imagination as it is with our corporeal Eye, it must sometimes be taken off from the Object in order to see it the better of the comparison":

The same Critics...that are displeased to have their Fancy distracted (as they call it) are yet so inconsistent with themselves as to object to *Homer* that his Similes are too much alike, and are too often derived from the same Animal. But it is not more reasonable (according to their own Notion) to compare the same Man always to the same Animal, than to see him sometimes a Sun, sometimes a Tree, and sometimes a River? Tho' *Homer* speaks of the same Creature, he so diversifies the Circumstances and Accidents of the Comparisons, that they always appear quite different. And to say Truth, it is not so much the Animal or the Thing, as the Action or Posture of them, that employs our Imagination: Two different Animals in the same Action are more like to each other, than one and the same Animal is to himself, in two different Actions. And those who in reading *Homer* are shock'd that 'tis always a *Lion*, may as well be angry that 'tis always a *Man*.<sup>25</sup>

#### *What Metaphor Is Not*

The contrary face of Pope's appreciation of Homer's metaphor appears in Chapter X (entitled "Of Tropes and Figures") of the 1728 *Art of Sinking in Poetry*, where Pope defines metaphor's "first rule" ironically, as being "to draw it from the lowest things, which is a certain way to sink the highest." And in the succession of examples which then ensues the contrast moves between the plainest of English and metaphorical nonsense absolute:

Who knocks at the door?

For whom thus rudely pleased my loud-tongued gate,

That he may enter?

See who is there.

<sup>25</sup> *Twickenham Pope*, vol. 7: *Translations of Homer*, 254.



Advance the fringed curtains of thy eyes,  
 And tell me who comes yonder.  
 Bring my clothes.  
     Bring me what Nature, tailor to the bear,  
     To man himself denied: she gave me cold,  
     But would not give me clothes.  
 Light the fire.  
     Bring forth some remnant of Promethean theft,  
     Quick to expand th'inclement air congealed  
     By Boreas's rude breath.<sup>26</sup>

—and so on.

There is in the *Art of Sinking* a pattern defining how straight talk sounds in the land of the living, the intelligent, and the sane presented as a standard which has no security; it is defeated time and again by puffed up fine expressions. With each example there is a winding up (the sense) and an explosion (the no-sense) as the comic trigger is pulled, and the chat/backchat rhythms of the passage convey the sense of a sense repeatedly clouded by the fog of pretension. The bathos, when it comes, exactly corresponds with the moment of comic relief.<sup>27</sup> The satirical exposure of the *Essay on Criticism* is enacted similarly through its patterned utterance, and by the unwinding of whole passages of poetry from one page to the next. Pope moves wave-like between solemn awe in the face of past critics and poets, as in the paragraph beginning:

Hear how learn'd *Greece* her useful rules indites  
 When to repress, and when indulge our flights. (92–93)

—to an openness and gaiety of satirical imagery, parody, and *double-entendre*. Critics gone to pot are “like” modern apothecaries who:

taught the art  
 By *Doctor's Bills* to play the *Doctor's Part*. (108–9)

<sup>26</sup> The passage appears under “THE CUMBROUS.” See *Literary Criticism of Alexander Pope*, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 79.

<sup>27</sup> On metaphor's capacity to function in this role see Max Black, “More about Metaphor,” in Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought*, 19–41.

The passage develops the ridicule by casting critics not (now) as scavenging vultures, which is the metaphor used in Pope's early letter to Wycherley, but rather as diminutive moths:

Bold in the Practice of *mistaken Rules*,  
 Prescribe, apply, and call their *Masters Fools*.  
*Some* on the Leaves of ancient Authors prey,  
 Nor Time nor Moths e'er spoil'd so much as they:  
 Some dryly plain, without Invention's Aid,  
 Write dull *Receipts* how Poems may be made:  
 These leave the Sense, their Learning to display,  
 And those explain the Meaning quite away. (110–17)

So much depends on the tone of such passages that Pope's conception of criticism in the *Essay* seems to rest at every turn on visual imagination metaphorically figured in combination with an aural sensibility (the joke, we say, has been "told"). Pope is relying on the qualities of laughter-tending English conversation that is heard today whenever the topic is "mad, abandon'd *Criticks*" (611), and is insisting that the critical and the crass are experienced as mutually embedded. Each critic is sublime in the bliss of his or her self-unknowing. At once the glory of history, criticism is a world of gossip, title-tattle, and minor scandal.

To summarize: comedy, music and the "performance of metaphor" intersect in the *Essay on Criticism* to affirm the poem's "special logical situation" as a work of art and of poetry; if then such values are not instantly grasped by the reader of the poem, their presence as part of the poem cannot be explained without the poem itself being said to have failed. Similarly, so far as it is enjoyed today, Pope's laughter with and at the critics of his own day creates an extra-conceptual *sensus communis* that does not date with the history of thought; and his "Wit," while synonymous with metaphor, encompasses other figures.<sup>28</sup> Correspondingly, in the poetry of the *Essay*, as in the prose of the *Art of Sinking*, Pope's critical stance most effectively ridicules literary theory's "dull

<sup>28</sup> Nothing in Pope's writings takes up explicitly the suggestion, present in various "comparative" theories of philosophical aesthetics, that metaphors are definable as elliptical similes. This is the suggestion, denied by others, that the "like" or "as," of the simile, can be simply taken as read. For discussion of this type of metaphor see Christopher New, *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 81–95.

receits." The spirit of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, itself praised in the poem (693), suggests here the tradition of critical comedy through which Pope's *Essay* is worked out, and his pointed allusion to Persius in the *Essay*<sup>29</sup> engages sources of satirical imagination. But in contrast to modern writing on metaphor, Pope has no "theory" as such. His comprehension is not independent of other related figures that are found in poetic and imaginative writing: comparisons, images, and particularly similes, especially in Homer, who calls forth some of his warmest critical remarks. If, then, the term "theory" must be used of the poem, it is perhaps best employed in the sense that Simon Critchley refers to, when writing generally of humor, as that which is "practically enacted."<sup>30</sup> In this resistance to theory, the *Essay on Criticism* affords a distinctive and textured answer to the perpetual and active question of what "criticism" is. Its "special logical situation" as poetry enables it to stand independent of its status as a classic text in the history of ideas, and to shape the irreducible past of a history of criticism.

<sup>29</sup> Pope's footnote to line 340 in the first edition "But most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's Song" is from Persius, *Satires*, 1.63–66.

<sup>30</sup> See Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).