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KINETIC METAPHORS IN ALEXANDER POPE'S *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*, *ESSAY ON MAN*, AND *THE* *DUNCIAD*

MICHAEL SZCZEKALLA

When Edmund Curll made “Pope’s Head” his shop sign “to hang him in effigy” so that the poet’s “falsehood” and the publisher’s “veracity” might be revealed to all spectators, the wily entrepreneur thought he could boost his book sales by undermining Pope’s prestige. Until fairly recently, most critics tended to side with the latter and wrote his enemies off as dunces, the legitimate victims of Pope’s satirical verse. Yet in the last two decades it has almost become fashionable to point out that Pope not only betrayed some of the same vices as the targets of his satire, but that

his greatest poems are fraught with contradictions, either logical or ideological. Therefore it is about time to reexamine the Popeian paradoxes of reason and passion, altruism and self-love, the classical and the carnivalesque, fertility and corruption, elite and popular culture.

To be sure, as a philosophical poet, Pope's reputation was not uncontested even among his contemporaries. His metaphysics seemed vulnerable to charges, then equally damaging, of shallowness and heterodoxy. In his attempt to sever the compromising connection with Bolingbroke, his friend and editor Warburton ran the risk of making Pope appear a philosophical dunce. With varying degrees of sophistication, critics from Samuel Johnson to A. D. Nuttall have questioned his stature as a *poeta doctus* while praising his poetry. Moving from *The Rape of the Lock* via the *Essay on Man* to *The Dunciad*, this essay takes a different stance. It tries to see Pope as a critic of culture whose contradictions should not be explained away by calling them tensions. They deserve our critical attention as they reflect Pope's awareness of "the instability and insufficiency of all systems,"¹ which finds its expression in a variety of kinetic metaphors employed—paradoxically—to evoke the idea of stability and exorcise the fear of decline. By denying what they seem to express, these metaphors betray the deepest worries of a poet whose confidence rested on his being a consummate practitioner of his art and on little else.

* "The wretch shall feel / The giddy motion of the
whirling wheel" *

Cleanth Brooks, one of the best critics of Pope as a writer of mock epics, prefers *The Rape of the Lock* to the *Essay on Man* on the grounds that, in the earlier poem, Pope is a much better realist.² This observation may appear somewhat paradoxical as it explicitly refers to the poem's "machinery," the myth of the sylphs, which Pope claims to have derived from the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits. Admittedly, with "the iridescent little myth of the sylphs" as Brooks chooses to call it, Pope has recourse to the supernatural, though "reduced, of

¹ Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); cited by Brian Young, "Pope and Ideology," in Pat Rogers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131.

² Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 88.

course, to its flimsiest proportions." Not even Belinda, the poem's heroine, seems to believe in their existence. For all their exertions on behalf of their mistress, Ariel and his tiny militia cannot prevent the rape of the lock. They might as well not exist. To the attentive reader, their ontological precariousness is already made obvious in Ariel's minatory speech on the morning of the fatal day on which the rape occurs:

Whatever spirit, careless of his charge,
 His post neglects, or leaves the fair at large,
 Shall feel sharp vengeance soon o'ertake his sins,
 Be stopp'd in vials, or transfix'd with pins;
 Or plung'd in lakes of bitter washes lie,
 Or wedg'd whole ages in a bodkin's eye:
 Gums and pomatums shall his flight restrain,
 While clogg'd he beats his silken wings in vain:
 Or alum styptics with contracting power
 Shrink his thin essence like a rivell'd flower:
 Or, as Ixion fix'd, the wretch shall feel
 The giddy motion of the whirling wheel,
 In fumes of burning chocolate shall glow,
 And tremble at the sea that froths below!³ (II, 123–36)

Describing the forms of punishment meted out to those who have been negligent of their duties, Ariel produces an inventory of a lady's boudoir. All the instruments of torture can be found on her dressing table. Yet the references to cosmetics and sweet beverages render the excruciating torments risible. This effect is intensified rather than lessened when Ariel alludes to the fate of Ixion, once, we are supposed to remember, a mighty sovereign in Thessaly, who had, like Tantalus, outraged the gods, and was in consequence sentenced to Tartarus, there to be tied with serpents to a wheel which a strong wind drove continually round and round. What is missing here, most readers would maintain, is a sense of proportion—a critical observation that can, of course, be extended to the entire poem with its central incident, the rape of the lock.

The poem's most important feature seems to be its movement from the trivial to the all important and back again. Hence its fondness for zeugmatic connections:

³ Quotations from Pope's poems come from Alexander Pope, *Collected Poems*, ed. B. Dobrée (London: Dent, 1980). Henceforth cited intratextually.

Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
 Or some frail china-jar receive a flaw;
 Or stain her honour or her new brocade;
 Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade;
 Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;
 Or whether Heaven has doom'd that Shock must fall.

(II, 105-110)

However, if "much ado about nothing" suggests itself as an appropriate comment on Lord Petre's offense, the Shakespearean ambiguity should not be suppressed. To put it crudely, the poem is after all about the "war of the sexes," which even Brooks admits when discussing the poem's complete acceptance of courtly conventions.⁴ The poem, he writes, allows us to see through them and, at the same time, wants us to acknowledge their charm. This insight leads us directly to the "paradox of beauty-worship." Belinda is a goddess who "puts on her divinity at her dressing table" (I, 83), where all the precious utensils are to be found, which can be used for purposes of embellishment or torture, as the occasion demands:

Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here
 The various offerings of the world appear;
 From each she nicely culls with curious toil,
 And decks the goddess with the glitt'ring spoil.

(R I, 129-32)

As a moralist in the disguise of a Marxist, Linda Brown takes a dim view of Belinda's daily rituals. "Puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux" (I, 138)—this kind of listing, she tells us, usually occurs in mercantile discourse. According to her, the poem is vitiated by imperialism and commodity fetishism. Hence the frequent use of zeugma in *The Rape of the Lock*. It shows a failure of discrimination bordering on moral insanity.⁵ The charms of the morning ritual are entirely lost on this critic. It is difficult to deny that *The Rape of the Lock* invites such criticism. Decking herself with the "various offerings of the world," the "glitt'ring spoil," Belinda takes everything for granted. Unencumbered by guilt, she can lose herself in the contemplation of her future exploits at court where she

⁴ Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, 91.

⁵ Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2985), 11-18.

Burns to encounter two adventurous knights,
At ombre singly to decide their doom. (III, 26 f.)

We have to say at least this much on behalf of the older critic that we do not need Marxism to see through such chivalric disguises, the protective colorings of "naked interest." Let us therefore inflate Brooks's claim with hyperbole and call Pope a realist who can cope with the great thinkers from Plato to Marx. It may help to remember that it is Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, who denounces beauty-culture as a spurious art, which panders to the vices of the body as rhetoric does to those of the soul. The body needs medicine as the soul needs philosophy, which is dedicated to the task of eliciting truth by cross-examination, whereas oratory is worse than useless. Its sole purpose consists in condoning misdeeds. However, though Socrates sets a great store by the elenctic method, we should not forget how the *Gorgias* ends. The elenchus is complemented by a hortatory speech (*paraenesis*) in which Socrates becomes a storyteller who gives us a mythical account of the afterlife. The souls of the deceased await their judgment. They must be tried naked before they either end up on the Blessed Isles or are consigned to Tartarus (523e), a prospect Pope can contemplate in amused horror:

As Ixion fix'd, the wretch shall feel
The giddy motion of the whirling wheel,
In fumes of burning chocolate shall glow,
And tremble at the sea that froths below!
(II, 133-36)

Ariel's menacing words ignore the fact that the sylphs cannot get hurt. Being of an airy substance, they always regain their physical integrity even if cut in twain by a pair of scissors (III, 151 ff.). Real disasters belong to the human sphere though the poem's zeugmatic strategy, its "failure" to discriminate, seems to extend the illusion of sylph-like invulnerability. Thus even the heroine's spiritual torments can be made fun of. Ixion gyrating on a wheel is the proper emblem for the poem's lack of existential seriousness—the reverse side of its realism and/or obeisance to courtly conventions. It is in the *Essay on Man* that Pope attempts a Socratic, i.e., an ethical turn, though, his critics might say, with the intellectual equipment of a Callicles.

✱ “Self-love, the spring of motion, acts the soul; / Reason’s
comparing balance rules the whole” ✱

The young Athenian aristocrat Callicles belongs to the ancient defenders of self-love and the right to defy conventions. He posits an antithesis between human and natural law (*nomos* and *physis*) whereas Socrates assumes that the moral order in a good person mirrors the principle of order which unites all things in the universe. Callicles does not like being cross-examined and rather testily reacts to the “verbal traps” laid by Socrates (489b). Distinctly modern, though neither siding with Mandeville nor with Shaftesbury, the *Essay on Man* settles for a compromise expressed in a kinetic metaphor:

Self-love, the spring of motion, acts the soul;
Reason’s comparing balance rules the whole.

(EM II, 59 f.)

Yet the speaker of the poem shows the same irritability as Callicles, which, in the great philosophical dialogues always indicates an argumentative malaise. Like Hume’s Cleanthes,⁶ he is probably incapable of admitting defeat. This may not be very surprising as the enterprise he has embarked upon could hardly be more ambitious. He wants to outdo both Lucretius and Milton, his distinguished precursors, and therefore distances himself not only from the former’s “natural system of ethics” but also from the “closure of dogma” we find in the latter’s Christian epic.

Though a follower of Epicurus, Lucretius had the self-confidence of a poetic innovator blazing “a trail through the pathless tracts of the Muses’ Pierian realm.”⁷ He repeatedly argues for the primacy of the senses. This proto-empiricism was congenial to Pope, which should not come as a surprise as it makes sense particularly for a poet. It can easily accommodate for concrete imagery and myth, witness the invocation of Venus at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura* or the “machinery” of *The Rape of the Lock*. Yet it does not allow Pope to connect, in good Socratic fashion, the spring of motion in the human soul with the motions of the universe, as Lucretius would have known. To the extent Pope is bent upon a theodicy, he stands in need of a different epistemology.

⁶ Michael Szczekalla, “Philo’s Feigned Fideism in Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998): 82.

⁷ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, translated by R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 2005), 95.

In Part X of Hume's *Dialogues*, Philo, the sceptic, almost triumphantly states the problem of the Deity's supposed benevolence and omnipotence: "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?"⁸ Philo is completely at ease here. In the preceding parts, he was driven hard, or so he says, to refute the argument from design, to maintain his scepticism in spite of the "irrefutable" evidence of design. Certainly, he succeeds in showing that the argument, as it is put forward by Cleanthes, rests on a tenuous analogy between a human artisan and a divine creator. It amounts to nothing more than a weak hypothesis with little explanatory power. But our knowledge of human misery is simply overpowering. No one in their right mind can deny the reality of human suffering. It is therefore impossible to reconcile the double assumption of divine omnipotence *and* benevolence with the reality of human life as we perceive it. We can but emphasize either attribute at the expense of the other.

The *Essay on Man* was meant as an answer to Epicurus and the sceptics that came to succeed him. Pace Harry Solomon, its principal purpose is to give us a theodicy.⁹ Pope, however, was not a philosopher like Leibniz, Shaftesbury, Hume, or even Bolingbroke, and his smooth couplets shun the rigour of philosophical discourse. He does not delve into "technical" problems and discuss the validity of analogical reasoning, but seems to prefer urbanity and irony to a "slavish" obedience to the canons of logic. And though he does not really advance beyond a Lucretian proto-empiricism, he is conscious of his rhetorical success.

In the Western world, there were or still are basically two ways between which we have to make our choice. We can tell a story—the story of man's fall from grace, which contains the possibility of redemption. Or we seek help from philosophers. Pope avails himself of the theory of the *plenum*, which assumes that a benevolent creator has transformed every possibility into an actuality. The result is a hierarchical universe, in which imperfection, because necessary, is no imperfection at all. Thus evil is explained away. Telling a story is the traditional, orthodox, or Christian version of a theodicy. The theory of the *plenum* is the modern, i.e., eighteenth-century alternative. Milton was a traditionalist, Pope is a modern, though, in the end, he wants

⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. M. Bell. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 108ff.

⁹ Harry M. Solomon, *The Rape of the Text* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 38.

to have it both ways. His philosophical account is complemented by an un-Christian narrative.

When, in the exordium of the first Epistle, he exhorts his friend Bolingbroke and himself to “vindicate the ways of God to man” (I, 16), the phrase is not only a conscious Miltonic echo, but a manifestation of his claim to superiority. It proved an embarrassment to all those who, like Warburton, wished to defend Pope’s orthodoxy. The two theodicies are fundamentally irreconcilable. Thus Pope wants to explain evil and therefore makes use of the theory of the *plenum*, which allows him to expatiate on the Great Chain of Being. If, however, the right answer to “whence is evil?” is a story, one must be content with a story and not ask for an explanation. A narrative is a just a narrative. Pope may be criticised for having used false premises or bad logic. Milton’s mythological account of evil met with criticism of a very different kind. He shows us a God who is given to caprice though there is, admittedly, no predestinarianism in *Paradise Lost*. On the contrary, after Adam has eaten from the forbidden fruit we hear God say, almost apologetically: [N]o decree of mine / Concurring to necessitate his fall, / Or touch with lightest moment of impulse / His free will.”¹⁰

Milton’s impeccable Arminian credentials notwithstanding, Pope’s optimism succeeds against the bleak theology of a sterner age. It could not survive the irony of Voltaire. It may even be considered inferior to Johnson’s more orthodox resignation in *Rasselas*, to say nothing of Hume’s deconstruction of natural theology. Pope, one might argue, had a presentiment of disaster. Thus he denounces the pride of reason and invokes the spirit of humility before, in a powerful rhetorical crescendo, he concludes that we are not to find fault with the Creation as it is but our ignorance that makes us assume that there is any imperfection in the mighty design:

And spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right. (EM I, 293 f.)

Yet here Pope does not merely argue beyond his proto-empiricist epistemology, he does not argue at all. Instead he makes bold assertions in brilliant couplets. The invective against “erring reason” sounds almost Christian. Warburton should have been pleased. Even the proud thinker, Pope seems to say, must submit his intellect: “[E]tiam philosophus debet captivare

¹⁰ John Milton, *Milton, Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 189.

intellectum in obsequium Christi,"¹¹ to quote, from the vast literature one could have recourse to here, Etienne Tempier, a medieval Bishop of Paris, who was the theological watchdog of the Sorbonne's unruly arts faculty. Pope uses the traditional language for his own purposes: "to reason right, is to submit" (EM I, 164). Yet humility is a slippery word and even pious Christians may be caught unawares giving a strange direction to their protestations of humility. Thus, what Pope says in Epistle I of the *Essay*, and then goes on repeating, amounts in fact to something like "submit to my world view if you want to avoid the mortal sin of pride." It may never have occurred to him that his own system can be considered an instance of reasoning pride.

Voltaire, though an admirer of the *Essay*, could dismiss the theory of the *plenum* in a rather offhand manner. He asks how this theory can be reconciled with the fact of extinct species and surmises that the theory appeals to those who are fond of hierarchies, especially those of the Church. He emphatically denies it to have any foundation in experience or reason.¹² There is, however, one good use to which the theory may be put. It helps Pope to reject the claim, made by Bacon in his allegorical reading of the myth of Prometheus, that man is the final cause of the universe.¹³ Thus Pride boasts, "'Tis for mine: / For me kind Nature wakes her genial power, / Suckles each herb, and spreads out ev'ry flower" (EM I, 132-34). Ridiculing our pretensions to knowledge, Pope insists on a transcendental scheme of things: "Go, wiser thou! and in thy scale of sense, / Weigh thy opinion against Providence" (EM I, 113ff.). Having stressed our limited capacity, but unwilling to endorse scepticism, Pope turns to ethics.

The beginning of Epistle II recalls Pascal's aphorism "Il ne faut pas que l'homme croie qu'il est égal aux bêtes, ni aux anges,"¹⁴ though urbanity and irony have replaced the latter's sense of despair. For Pope, man is not in need of grace and redemption. Instead he insists on the harmony of reason and self-love:

Two principles in human nature reign;
Self-love, to urge, and Reason, to restrain (EM II, 53 f.)

¹¹ Kurt Flasch, *Aufklärung im Mittelalter? Die Verurteilung von 1277. Das Dokument des Bischofs von Paris* (Mainz: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989), 113.

¹² Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), 107-9.

¹³ Francis Bacon, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. J. M. Robertson (New York: Books for Libraries Press), 848

¹⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. L. Brunschvigg (Paris: Flammarion, 1976), 161.

Pope rejects the Stoic denigration of the passions. He assumes that, in our moral constitution, virtues and vices are so inextricably entwined that “virtue’s ends” may be raised from “vanity” (EM II, 245), a statement which brings him close to the cynicism of Mandeville, although it does not prevent him from declaiming against those to whom virtues and vices are “unreal.” Reason is still seen as a “weak queen” (EM II, 150). A final judgment on “man’s striving” is suspended. Yet garters and gold, beads and prayer-books are compared to a child’s rattle (EM II, 276–81).

When, in Epistle III, Pope comes to discuss man’s relation to society, he introduces the pagan myth of a state of nature. Unlike Hobbes’s version of it, Pope’s is thoroughly Arcadian, a blessed state, “the reign of God” (EM III, 148). This recourse to a myth of decline, however, gets him involved in stark inconsistencies. He conflates story telling and philosophical argument, the two versions of the theodicy, and optimistically concludes Epistle III with the observation that God and Nature “bade self-love and social be the same” (EM III, 318). There is no genuine information on the aetiology of evil. To borrow the title of Stanley Fish’s book on *Paradise Lost*, man must have been “surprised by sin.”

Epistle IV treats of happiness and tells us why we are on earth. It makes the claim that happiness is available to everybody, irrespective of his or her station in life, and that the learned are hidebound and ignorant. (We may, perhaps, assume that this excludes them from happiness.) Insisting on hierarchy (“Order is Heaven’s first law” [EM IV, 49]), Pope is bound to say that happiness does not consist in externals. He wants to equate it with virtue. All that is required of us is “thinking right, and meaning well” (EM IV, 32) and this appears to be tantamount to taking “Nature’s path” (EM IV, 29).

The recommendation to follow Nature is of course question-begging and Nuttall, in his study on the *Essay*, calls it an “intellectual placebo.”¹⁵ Pope does not even say what he means by “Nature” but vacillates between different ideas of it. He uses “Nature” as a purely descriptive term for the myriad activities that may be observed in the world we live in. Yet he also invokes Nature as *natura naturans*, nature-engendering nature, or “plastic Nature” (EM III, 9), as he likes to call it, thereby referring to a serious though discredited philosophical doctrine or, perhaps, endorsing poetic vitalism. The conclusion of the entire poem suggests that he wants to settle for the larger claims on behalf of Nature as he

¹⁵ Anthony David Nuttall, *Pope’s “Essay on Man”* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 142.

For Wit's false mirror held up Nature's light;
 Show'd erring Pride,—Whatever is, is right!
 That reason, passion, answer one great aim;
 That true self-love and social are the same;
 That virtue only makes our bliss below;
 And all our knowledge is,—Ourselves to know.
 (EM IV, 393–98)

Reason is no longer the Stoic *ratio recta*, but not yet “instrumental reason” as it was to become for Hutcheson¹⁶ or the “slave of the passions” as Hume was to maintain.¹⁷ But the direction seems to be clear:

On life's vast ocean diversely we sail,
 Reason the card, but passion is the gale. (EM II, 107 f.)

Pope, perhaps unwittingly, maintains a delicate equilibrium between tradition and modernity by not defining his concepts. If we want to learn what happens once self-love, the spring of motion, is no longer restrained by reason's comparing balance, we must turn to the mock-apocalyptic vision of *The Dunciad*.

✱ “As clocks to weight their nimble motion owe, / The wheels
 above urg'd by the load below” ✱

If the *Essay on Man* stands for broad daylight, *The Dunciad* represents night—the Cimmerian darkness of “uncreation.”¹⁸ It is a critique of popular culture, sciolism, and corrupt creativity in the form of a mock-apocalypse. Yet it should not be called an outright denunciation. Its central ambivalence has found expression in a horologic metaphor that draws our attention to a “mechanical netherworld,” without which the “loftier operations” of high culture could not be sustained:

¹⁶ Wolfgang Leidhold, *Ethik und Politik bei Francis Hutcheson* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1985), 15.

¹⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 416.

¹⁸ Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope, A Life* (New York: Norton, 1985), 540.

As clocks to weight their nimble motion owe,
The wheels above urg'd by the load below. (I, 183 f.)

Book I opens with a conventional epic formula, the invocation of Dulness and her son:

The Mighty Mother, and her son, who brings
The Smithfield Muses to the ear of Kings,
I sing. (I, 1–3)

Pope's mockery already begins with the place name. Smithfield refers to the London meat market where Bartholomew Fair was held, a location hardly compatible with the dignity of the *Aeneid*. Right from the beginning the poem also alludes to *Paradise Lost* and to high politics. Thus Dulness is associated with Sin, the offspring of Satan's depraved sexuality (I, 10–16).¹⁹ The dunces, we may assume, are of the devil's party. And so, by implication, are the Hanoverian monarchs. "Dunce the second" is said to reign like his predecessor "Dunce the first" (I, 6). Both are held responsible for the alleged decline of English culture.

At the beginning, Dulness takes up residence in the "cave of Poverty and Poetry" (I, 34) near Bedlam to adopt Colley Cibber as her true representative. Cibber's abortive productions, which are compared to freaks of nature, and his Gothic library are mockingly described. Having appointed the Lord Mayor's Day to elect the successor to the late Eusden, who "thirsts no more for sack or praise" (I, 293), she reviews a long line of poets (I, 100–03). Though it does not take her long to choose, there is little time for rest because she has to interfere when Cibber tries to burn his unsuccessful productions. Having extinguished the fire with a particularly dull volume of poetry, she anoints him with opium, a well chosen substance, as he has little to do from now on. This seems to be an inversion of the traditional epic device of a goddess inciting the hero to action. And yet neither the dunces nor Dulness are unproductive. Some exertion is required to produce soporific literature. Without the virtues of fortitude, temperance, and prudence (I, 47–51), the dunces could neither endure poverty nor hostile criticism for long. After the coronation, Dulness wants Cibber to seek friends at court. Thus the action of the poem is made clear: Dulness will ultimately regain her

¹⁹ See Paul Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (London: Routledge, 2000), 132.

empire by leading the representatives of low culture from their dismal Grub Street lodgings to the seat of government in the West End, a movement from the City to the Court.

At the opening of Book II, we find Cibber seated on his throne—a complex allusion to Milton's Satan, the coronation of George II, as well as the mock coronation of Richard Flecknoe.²⁰ "The proud Parnassian sneer, / The conscious simper, and the jealous leer, / Mix in his look" (II, 5–7). Then the Queen proclaims "high heroic games" (II, 18) and we see an endless band of dunces pouring forth either to participate or to watch. In the first game two booksellers, Curll and Lintot, race for the possession of a poet, whom they can exploit. Pope takes revenge on the former for the unauthorized publication of youthful "rakish" letters. Curll, who was once pilloried at Charing Cross, a woeful incident Pope does not forget to mention (D II, 3), slides on the contents of Corinna's chamber pot, a lady implicated in the illicit printing of Pope's private letters to Henry Cromwell.²¹ Curll prays to Jove. The prayer is graciously returned, "[s]igned with that Ichor which from gods distils" (II, 92). This proves an invigorating experience: "Renewed by ordure's sympathetic force" (II, 103), Curll rises again. The publisher seems to derive a sexual kick from human waste. No wonder, he also wins the next game and gains the writer Eliza Haywood, an oversized Juno, whereas Osborne, his new competitor, wets himself and has to rest content with the second prize, a china Jordan. The disgrace is well deserved. He once tried to sell pirated copies of Pope's *Iliad*. Infantile pleasures delight the dunces most. Thus a tickling contest and a braying competition come next. After so much hilarity, the dunces can no longer restrain themselves. They strip and dive into the mud of Fleet-ditch. In mockery of epic conventions, they embark on an underworld voyage. The Irish publisher Smedley, who had heaped abuse on both Swift and Pope, is sucked in by mud-nymphs. Finally, there is something for the critics as well—a reading marathon during which everyone is overpowered by sleep. Lethargy is valued most. But what about the authors ridiculed? Pope is not merely concerned with popular entertainment here. How can he be so unappreciative of philosophy or professional scholarship as well? Why do Toland and Tindal send us to sleep (see also III, 212)? Brean Hammond has pointed out the significance of class in the writings of the Scriblerians.

²⁰ Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide*, 135.

²¹ Catherine Ingrassia, "Dissecting the Authorial Body: Pope, Curll, and the Portrait of a 'Hack Writer,'" in Catherine Ingrassia and Claudia N. Thomas, *More Solid Learning: New Perspectives on Alexander Pope's "The Dunciad"* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 156.

Bentley qualifies as a dunce because he is not a gentleman. The dunces are "tradesmen and artisans *manqué*, who lack the financial independence to set up as men of letters."²² Curll, who could see through such pretense, addressed Pope as a fellow businessman.

Book III begins with a scene of reincarnation as part of Cibber's vision. He is dreaming on his mother's lap, his head sprinkled with Cimmerian dew. He sees dunces returning from the underworld. Like Aeneas meeting his father Anchises, he encounters his poetic forebear Alkanah Settle and is first granted a vision of the triumph of Dulness over science in the course of history, and then, after having reviewed an assembly of dunces, a "pantomime apocalypse."²³ The historical vision, which stretches from ancient China via medieval Christianity to eighteenth-century Europe, may be decoded as a manifesto of enlightened pessimism. The apocalypse pokes fun at contemporary staging conventions, especially a childish delight in machinery. When Cibber betrays naïve wonder he is told by Settle,

Son, what thou seek'st is in thee! Look, and find
Each monster meets his likeness in thy mind. (III, 251 f.)

This, too, is a Miltonic echo. It parodies Milton's great insight into the interiority of evil. At the same time, it is a ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace and undignified. Miltonian pathos is transformed into Popeian bathos. Having listened to the final prophecy the enraptured Cibber has had enough and "through the iv'ry gate the vision flies" (III, 340).

In Book IV Cibber shows himself to be as unheroic as George II. He does not even seem to awake from his soft repose. Before her final victory, Dulness rewards her supporters. Science, Wit, Logic, Rhetoric, and Morality already lie enchained at the foot of her throne while Opera, "a harlot form" (IV, 45), is sliding softly by. Pope denounces it as illegitimate entertainment, because it dissociates sound from sense, although he later exempts "Giant Handel" (IV, 65) from his criticism of this art form. Pope also has considerable reservations about the "love of words." Thus Dulness longs for a monarch as pedantic as the first Stuart and pleads for the "Right Divine of kings to govern wrong" (IV, 188), as if political equalled philological aberrations. So much for Pope's alleged Jacobitism! James's spurious learning leads on

²² Brean Hammond, *Pope* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 126.

²³ Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide*, 140.

to a review of education and scholarship—the central focus of this book.²⁴ Traditional schoolmen fed on Aristotle are quite to the taste of Dulness. Most educators already belong to her camp. And though in Book IV Pope is more concerned with duncehood as a generic phenomenon (see *ibid.*) than with settling old scores, it is here that the critics Crousaz and Bentley get a thrashing. Pope ridicules the latter's philological "minuteness" implying that this scholar is incapable of a more integrated view of ancient culture. In fact, all the dunces are obsessed with "minuteness," an attitude which leads to "the reverse of the questing, cosmic vision of the *Essay on Man*."²⁵ Yet Pope also distances himself from Lucretius's view of the gods and Shaftesbury's Theocles. Neither Epicureanism nor Platonism seems to offer any answers. There is also little hope for the sons of the cultural elite. The venerable institutions of learning are not very likely to teach them the right things. Those who undertake the Grand Tour can hardly do worse. Apart from contracting venereal diseases, they lose the last remnants of their classical education on the very sites of ancient culture. The conclusion of the poem is bathetic:

Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
And universal darkness buries all. (IV, 655 f.)

According to Laura Brown, *The Dunciad* indicates, "in the very context of its condemnation," the fulfilment of Milton's vision of "the progressive energy of bourgeois culture."²⁶ Thomas Jemielity comments on the movement of history toward a millennium of darkness.²⁷ Most readers would probably side with the latter view. Yet for all his denunciation of duncery, Pope must have delighted in describing its moral and artistic failures—if failures they be. What he has to say on the shamelessness and aggressiveness of low culture has been distilled into commonplaces of cultural criticism. The dunces are bound to wreak havoc. Thus there is a "mob of metaphors" (I, 67) advancing from the cave of poetry like frenzied predators. Where, however, does all this lambasting of "bad" writers and their literary productions lead to? There are so many genres in which the "hacks" have excelled. Pope simply could not have written *The Dunciad* without sapping their creative

²⁴ Hammond, *Pope*, 144.

²⁵ Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide*, 145.

²⁶ Brown, *Alexander Pope*, 155.

²⁷ Thomas Jemielity, "Consummatum Est: Alexander Pope's 1743 *Dunciad* and Mock-Apocalypse," in Ingrassia and Thomas, "More Solid Learning," 188.

energy—a paradox that seems to reveal a lot about the high culture of the Augustan Age. No wonder modern critics are so fond of unmasking the uneasy coexistence of Pope's "aristocratic pretensions" with his "entrepreneurial instincts,"²⁸ which also makes them plead for a reappraisal of men like Cibber or Curll. Whatever may be said on behalf of the Laureate Cibber or the publisher Curll, it is the former who is allowed to state the ultimate paradox of Pope's cultural criticism by using the beautiful horologic metaphor which has already been referred to:

As clocks to weight their nimble motion owe,
The wheels above urg'd by the load below:
Me Emptiness, and Dulness could inspire,
And were my Elasticity, and Fire. (I, 183–86)

Though, in *The Dunciad*, the broadening of culture toward the inclusion of bourgeois art and criticism triggers off a mock-apocalyptic vision, Pope seems prepared to acknowledge this process as a source of creativity. *Flectere si nequeo superos Acheronta movebo*—"if Heav'n thou canst not bend, / Hell thou shalt move" (III, 307). Even though this ostensibly refers to the denizens of Grub Street, it also reveals something about the poet who had taken up residence at Twickenham. Without the exuberant imagination of *The Dunciad*, which owes so much to the victims of its satire, Pope could hardly have succeeded in exorcizing the specter of decline.

²⁸ Hammond, 130.