‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS

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11. *An Essay on Man*

Examples: 'Epistle 1', lines 1–6, 17–34, 77–90; 'Epistle 2', lines 1–18, 59–60, 133–34, 275–82; 'Epistle 3', lines 303–06; 'Epistle 4', lines 387–98

The poems considered in Chapters 1 to 10 are products of the first two decades of Pope's career, the 1700s and 1710s. The focus from now on will be on poems of the early 1730s and mid-1740s, a period in which Pope wrote an astonishing series of masterpieces. It is worth noting, however, that he was by no means inactive during the 1720s. Indeed, he engages on a number of large-scale and significant projects. He edited the poems of Thomas Parnell (1721). He followed up his translation of Homer's *Iliad* with a translation of the *Odyssey*, sharing the task with his friends William Broome and Elijah Fenton. He produced an edition of Shakespeare (1725), with controversial outcomes. Lewis Theobald, a prolific and versatile writer and translator, responded with *Shakespeare Restored: or, a specimen of the Many Errors . . . Committed . . . by Mr Pope* (1725). In punishment for such impudence, Pope put Theobald in a pair of poetic stocks by making him chief of the dunces in *The Dunciad* (1728), where he mockingly called him 'Tibbald'. Pope revised and expanded *The Dunciad* in the 1740s, replacing Theobald with Colley Cibber. We shall look extensively at both versions in Chapter 26.

The four epistles that make up *An Essay on Man* were published successively in February, March, and May 1733, and January 1734. A letter from Bolingbroke to Swift tells us that Pope had actually completed the first three epistles by August 1731 and was working on the fourth (cited in Mack, III, Part 1, 1950, pp. xiii–xiv). Pope added to the first collected edition of these epistles (1734) a short introduction entitled 'The Design'. He there explains that *An Essay on Man* is intended

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to be only 'a general map', tracing the extent, limits and connection of 'the greater parts'. The 'particular' will be 'more fully delineated in the charts which are to follow', that is, a further series of epistles on which he was currently engaged. Extending the geographical metaphor, Pope adds that, in the *Essay*, he is 'opening the fountains, and clearing the passage'. The later poems—he had, in fact, already published the epistles to Burlington and Bathurst, with Cobham to follow—will trace the course of individual 'rivers' and 'observe their effects'.

Pope supplies a prefatory summary of all four epistles comprising *An Essay on Man*. He calls them 'Arguments' or 'Contents': a concise table of the philosophical propositions of each section. The first epistle examines 'the nature and state of man, with respect to the universal system'. The other three epistles consider the human being as an 'individual, and as a member of society'. A *précis* here of the content of each of the epistles will provide a framework within which a reading of selected passages may be fruitfully carried out.

'Epistle 1'

Humanity's place is considered within the order of creation. The whole depends on the co-existence of all its parts, so there must be a settled place for humankind within the larger system. Disruption arises whenever there is desire for movement. Such a will derives from pride or presumption. We need to accept our role and adopt an appropriate humility.

'Epistle 2'

Acceptance of the limits of human perception and understanding necessarily includes admitting our lack of knowledge of higher forms of creation and, *a fortiori*, of the creator or creative force itself. At the heart of our divided nature ('Created half to rise, and half to fall', line 15) is the co-existence within our nature of reason and passions. These passions are forms of 'self-love' (line 93). Reason, by contrast, is a 'God within the mind' (line 204). By self-love, Pope does not mean what we today might understand by the term, that is, a selfish concern with our own being. Rather, he intends something closer to 'self-fulfilment', or a

principle which provides us with the energy to activate ourselves (see John Laird, *Philosophical Incursions into English Literature* (1946), cited in Mack, ed., *TE*, III, part 2, 1950 p. 62). This antithesis between aspirational and regulatory elements within human nature is traditional and long lasting: see, for example, Cicero's *De Officiis*, I, xxviii.

Reason is powerless to prevent or oppose whatever forms of passion rule in each of us as individuals, but it can, and does, 'rectify' (line 163) them through whatever virtue is possible within our nature, the 'virtue nearest to our vice allied' (line 196). Each person's individual fusion of vice and virtue, good and ill, is part of the divine pattern which co-ordinates the whole. 'Each individual seeks a several [particular, separate] goal, / But HEAVEN's great view is one, and that the whole' (lines 237–38).

It is worth observing at this stage that Pope pursues and illustrates these philosophical positions with touches of humour that lighten the mood, and with lines blending elements of the serious and the comic. Consider, for example, the poetic shrug of the shoulders in lines 221–24 (the Orcades are the Orkneys; Zembla is Novaya Zemlya, an archipelago off Russia's arctic coast):

> But where the extreme of vice, was ne'er agreed:
> Ask where's the north? At York, 'tis on the Tweed;
> In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
> At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where.

'Epistle 3'

At its halfway mark, the poem pauses on its central truth: 'The universal cause / Acts to one end, but acts by various laws' (lines 1–2). It then launches into its next argument, that the same principle—the mixed nature of individual people is formed into a whole by 'heaven'—also operates at the level of society, including political and religious organisations. 'Self-love' and 'social' are co-existent in the 'state of nature' (line 148), and co-operative in human society. What is 'instinct' (line 170) in birds and animals is copied by human 'art' (line 169). Thus, the entire 'general frame' of creation confirms that 'self-love and social' are 'the same' (317–18).

'Epistle 4'

The subject of the final epistle of the poem is the nature and state of man, with respect to happiness. The principle argued in the earlier epistles is also productive of happiness: it resides not in any individual but is more general. So, happiness cannot derive from material goods or the gifts of nature, as these are not equally distributed. Nor does happiness follow from human actions, because 'ills or accidents ... chance to all' (line 98). Rather, Pope endorses a traditional ethical principle: 'Act well your part, there all the honour lies' (line 194). Achievements such as public renown are ephemeral, as are all *outcomes* of human activity. Indeed, happiness lies only in the exercise of virtue *for its own sake*: 'Know then this truth (enough for Man to know) / 'Virtue alone is happiness below' (lines 309–10).

In short, the ideas presented in *An Essay on Man* are neither new nor arresting. They are gleaned from a variety of sources, classical, scientific, theological, and philosophical. Many of them have commonly appeared in literary forms, whether poetry, books of ethics, or popular essays, such as *The Spectator* and other journals have provided. Or, at least, more or less close versions of the ideas have so appeared. *An Essay on Man* is an amalgam, a large-scale gathering of Enlightenment ideas—in the widest sense, as some are inferential and experiential while others (notably that of the universe being a hierarchical chain of being) are *a priori* and derivative. Mack's *TE* volume provides full reference to sources and parallels (1950). It is the force of Pope's poetry that energizes these and fuses them into a formal entity of remarkable intensity and expressiveness, rising at many points to magnificence.

Further, there is an inherent tension in the philosophical mode of proceeding in the poem between, on the one hand, the *a priori* assumptions of the theory that Pope proposes with respect to the nature and structure of the universe, and, on the other hand, the empirical method to which the illustration and application of the theory are committed. See 'Epistle 1', lines 17ff: we can only reason 'from what we know' and we can only see, and therefore judge and argue from, what our position within the system permits; from this we 'reason' or 'refer'—i. e. operate via logical inference or analogy (lines 17–20). The *a priori* assumption is, of course, not Pope's invention; it is an inherited

and traditional conception. See the introduction to Mack, ed., *TE*, III, part 1, 1950, pp. xli–xlvi; Willey 1940, chapter 3.

This tension is, however, consistent with the direction of Pope's writing as a whole. At the heart of his method lies a flexible capacity to maintain two attitudes or points of view and to express them in the complexity of his use of language, structure, and verse form. The truth is rarely pure and never simple because our lives exist within a multiplicity of contingencies. A single vision is therefore rarely, if ever, a possible or defensible response to experience; and poetry must accurately reflect this. This is why, for all its philosophical naiveté, if that is not too strong a way of putting it, the theory adopted by Pope in *An Essay on Man* is highly creative and appropriate for his mature vision. Its shortcomings and limitations constitute an essential element of his material, since naïve philosophical theories (like naïve political theories) are a part of the epistemology that surrounds us. This paradox arises at the very outset of the poem:

'Epistle I', lines 1–6

Awake, my ST JOHN! leave all meaner things
To low ambition, and the pride of kings.
Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die)
Expatiate free o'er all this scene of Man;
A mighty maze! but not without a plan.

Pope begins the poem with a grand gesture, countered by a confessional intimation of humility. The opening couplet's exclamatory clarion call to Bolingbroke is resonant and gloriously dismissive of the ephemera of political and public engagement. As such, it is highly fitting for its addressee. Bolingbroke's career, like that of Robert Harley, his colleague in the Tory administration of 1710–14, embodied the vicissitudes of the pursuit of power. Secretary of State in that government, he enjoyed authority and influence. But then, with the Hanoverian accession, Bolingbroke lost all power, became the object of legal action, and fled to continental Europe to join the Pretender's court. His exile ended with the granting of a partial pardon in 1723 and a re-entry into political struggle along with the opposition to Walpole. After the failure of that

movement, Bolingbroke was to retire again in 1735. Pope's appeal to him to place philosophical observation and reflection above the business of the state may be seen as a prophecy and, ultimately, a vindication of scholarship and ethical investigation over the diurnal realm of day-to-day governance.

Line 2's oxymoron, 'low ambition', gives rhetorical expression to this challenging attitude: the paradox is that aiming for the heights of power is actually tantamount to descending into the pit of mean activities. This is what people such as kings, and, by extension, their acolytes–the politicians–do. 'Pride' in this social context is ethically dubious. The gauntlet is thrown down: pride and ambition are really meaner than the noble task of philosophical investigation. To 'expatiate'—to engage and speak at length, and to range at will—is a nobler activity, and an expression of freedom in its enjoyment of liberty of thought rather than the narrow focus enjoined by political humdrum. The Latin root of 'expatiate' is 'spatium', that is, 'space'. 'Expatiari' thus means 'to walk about'. Pope opens up the poem's landscape for free exploration.

However, a parenthesis is placed between exclamation ('Awake, my ST JOHN!) and appeal to join with the author in this nobler task ('Let us ... expatiate'). 'Since life can little more supply / Than just to look about us and to die' casts a tone of disillusion over lofty assertion. Pope's vocabulary here is notably monosyllabic in advance of the trisyllabic 'expatiate'. In this, and in its chastening message, lies another and equally important rejoinder to assertive 'pride'. Genuine humility involves acknowledging the severe limits to knowledge inherent in the human situation. These contrary couplets lay down parameters within which Pope's philosophical venture will divagate. *An Essay on Man* is at once his most declarative affirmation of truth and a continual avowal of inadequacy. We know, and we do not know, in equal measure. The poem will wander freely and, by so doing, expose contradictions which a more controlled or orthodox method might be tempted to ignore or wish away.

In the first edition of 'Epistle I' (1733), the sixth line—at first sight rather oddly—ran 'A mighty maze of walks without a plan'. Apparently, some, or even many, readers interpreted this wording as indicating that there was no order, no system, to the 'maze'; whereas Pope's real meaning was more carefully nuanced than this. A maze does, indeed,

have a 'plan' in the sense of a scheme of arrangement (*OED*, 'plan' sb., sense 2): this, after all, is what a maze in the Hampton Court, human-made, sense does have. What the maze of the universe does not have is a ready-made chart or drawing for human beings to consult at ease (*OED*, 'maze', sb., sense 1). It must, I think, be admitted that Pope's original phrasing was, at least, not entirely clear. At any rate, he altered it to 'but not without a plan' in the first collected edition of 1734.

William Empson cites the couplet in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1953) as an example of his seventh type, that of full contradiction, but one in which, actually, both the original and revised readings 'are very nearly the same: a *maze* is conceived as something that at once has and has not got a *plan*' (p. 204). As Mack explains clearly in the *TE*, it all depends on which meaning of plan you see (Mack, ed., III, part 1, 1950, p. 12). It does have a plan in *OED's* sense 2 'a scheme of arrangement'; but it might not have a plan in *OED's* sense 1, 'drawing, sketch, or diagram'—or the plan might have been lost, or at least not be in your possession.

Mazes are tricky things; and trickier still are human powers of perception and interpretation. Actually, as this small textual problem turned out, there could scarcely have been a more relevant and salutary beginning to what is, arguably, Pope's most ambitious and yet most problematic poem. As Pope himself wryly observes in many of his poems, human ambition is bound to end in failure or, at least, to encounter difficulties not readily overcome. The real achievement of *An Essay on Man* is to enact in its style, form, and language the simultaneous existence of that which is grand in humankind and that which shows up all too clearly our limitations. That is the meaning of both its model—the universe itself—and our intellect, our attempts to understand it.

'Epistle I', lines 17–34

Say first, of God above, or Man below,
What can we reason, but from what we know?
Of Man what see we, but his station here,
From which to reason, or to which refer?
Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known,
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.
He, who through vast immensity can pierce,
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,

> What other planets circle other suns,
> What varied being peoples every star,
> May tell why Heaven has made us as we are.
> But of this frame the bearings, and the ties,
> The strong connections, nice dependencies,
> Gradations just, has thy pervading soul
> Looked through? Or can a part contain the whole?
> Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,
> And drawn supports, upheld by God, or thee?

The argument is 'that we can judge only with regard to our own system, being ignorant of the relations of systems and things' (Mack, ed. *TE*, III, part 2, 1950, p. 9). The eighteen lines are divided by punctuation into three six-line sentences, each subdivided into couplets with either a comma or a question mark at the end of each. This structure produces a frame that is both clear in its whole and intricate in its parts.

Clarity is most obvious where Pope's manner is at its most expository, particularly in the first sextet. Here, he keeps his vocabulary at its simplest and his syntax at its most direct. There is little or nothing to get in the way of, or to adorn, the plain argument. A prose paraphrase could scarcely be more explicit: 'we can only argue from what we know, and what we know is restricted to what we can see from where we stand'. The syntax admits only slight variations from the very plainest, such as the inversions of the third line ('of Man what see we' rather than 'what see we of man' and the fifth ('worlds unnumbered' reversing adjective/noun order). These are felt as scarcely more than the slightest of tremors, very low on the syntactic Richter scale. As for vocabulary, the one word which may give us slight pause is 'station'. It holds a number of technical applications that may echo relevantly: to surveying or astronomy, say. But these are simply two among several significations deriving straight from the word's direct etymological meaning: the place where we 'stand'. The commonest thread through the six lines is the very simplest, the pronoun 'we' and its grammatical variant 'our'. Pope's habitual poetic manner is, accordingly, at its most restrained, the metrical balance of the fourth line ('From which to reason, or to which refer') just gently reminding us that he is still there. In the main, we are simply all in it together.

However, in the second sextet, the perspective shifts. 'We' are relegated to the very end, the concluding item of a sentence wholly dominated by an opposite subject, 'He'. It is possible, as Mack's volume of the *TE* notes, to take 'He, who' to mean 'only that man'—implying that there is no such man—but I think most readers naturally take it to refer to 'the God' in the earlier lines (vol. 3, part 1, 1950, p. 15). 'He' is certainly granted a grander sentence structure, an epic-like deferral of the main verb for six lines while the syntax spans several sub-clauses. These are granted, too, an altogether grander vocabulary, the cumulative force of which is to stress plurality as a reverse of the human single point of view. So, 'vast immensity' boldly goes into tautology, for display purposes; repetition ('worlds on worlds', 'system into system', 'other planets ... other suns') showily outshines our monochrome state; and verbal variety ('pierce', 'see', 'observe', 'tell') conveys excitement and discovery.

The third sextet now crowds its 'frame', its structural equivalent of the massive structure of the universe, with metaphors. Architecture is, indeed, the principal field of reference ('bearings', 'ties', 'gradations'), as the lines explore the multiple interconnections which hold together in various ways the many parts that, together, constitute the whole. Three rhetorical questions, *via* a sardonic address to a solitary reader ('thy pervading soul'), reinforce the lesson in humility. Pope seems to say, 'You, you see, are but one small part, and no part can possibly aspire to the vision required to see the whole. Are you absurdly presumptuous enough to imagine that you are the viewer, let alone the architect, of this great and complex construction?'

To ram home this stark message, Pope's language at the very end reverts to the expository method of the beginning of the paragraph. His questions 'Can a part contain the whole?' and 'Is the great chain ... upheld by God, or thee?' resume a largely monosyllabic and direct level of vocabulary that circles back to 'What can we reason, but from what we know?' The lesson is emphatic and determinate, and it firmly puts us in our place. And yet the paragraph's broad range of perspective has been conveyed through the medium of language, and language, too, that has been put together by a single being, the poet himself. The texture of the poem, its own frame, has indeed been created by a metaphorical architect; and one whose area of reference and variations

of style—even within this relatively short passage—are enterprising and impressive. This, after all, is a didactic poem, one which aims to stamp its magisterial force on its subject—even when that subject is the limitations of human capacity. A presumptuous task in itself? The very next line of the poem (line 35) begins with an exclamatory 'Presumptuous Man!' 'Presumptuous? *Moi*?'

'Epistle I', lines 77–90

Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate,
All but the page prescribed, their present state;
From brutes what men, from men what spirits know:
Or who could suffer being here below?
The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed today,
Had he thy reason, would he skip and play?
Pleased to the last, he crops the flowery food,
And licks the hand just raised to shed his blood.
Oh blindness to the future! kindly given,
That each may fill the circle marked by Heaven;
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.

This paragraph is the opening of the third section of the epistle, the argument of which, as Pope's résumé runs, is that 'it is partly upon [man's] ignorance of future events, and partly upon the hope of a future state, that all his happiness in the present depends (Mack, ed., TE, III, part 1, 1950, p. 9). The great chain of being—the theory that creation is a fixed hierarchical structure—entails each stage being inferior to those above and superior to those below. The devastating implications of this for humankind will be explored strongly in epistle two. For the moment, Pope begins by setting out the limitations the model necessitates for all sentient life. The fourteen-line paragraph is structured in three parts. The first four lines set out the proposition that all parts of creation are formed to know only their 'present state', which differs according to their place on the scale. The next four lines provide an exemplum, the lamb's ignorance of what human beings know. The final six lines present the wider context, that is, the 'kindness' of a structure in which 'God' alone—as the top of the scale—has knowledge of everything. This four/

four/six structure resembles a couplet-based version of sonnet form (quatrain, quatrain, sestet).

At first, Pope's manner is, again, expository. It is when he reaches his exemplum that his language changes. 'Dooms' brings with it dark associations, and, what is worse, those connections uneasily involve human beings' actions. 'Riot' in the sense of revelry usually comes with baleful attributes and uncomfortably implies that, if this is indeed all written in the 'book of fate', it is we who are inscribing at least some of the disturbing consequences. The 'bleed/blood' repetition marks the event as inescapably painful. The addition of 'licks the hand' provides a dramatic touch difficult to dismiss as merely sentimental. There is, too, a further level of (in this case, unstated) implication. If the lamb is ignorant of what we are about to do to it, what are we ignorant of that may be done to us?

The paragraph's final lines declare a perspective that ought to be reassuring. Heaven/God's eye is 'equal' as a temperament in musical terminology is equal: the semitones of creation, so to speak, are evenly located. But also, the eye of the beholder of all things is even in its regard for what it oversees. Thus, the relatively greater or lesser within the scale are flattened to a single level when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Items that appear larger or smaller from one perspective appear uniform in significance, value, and meaning from another. Add the fragility of, in the final example, 'a bubble', and desperate vulnerability is transmitted to 'a world'. Mack defends Pope from such disturbing implications by glossing the line 'A hero perish, or a sparrow fall' as an allusion to verses in St Matthew's gospel: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows' (Matthew 10. 29–31; Mack, ed. TE, III, part 1, 1950, p. 24. Shakespeare refers to the same biblical text in Hamlet's observation that there is 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow (*Hamlet*, act 5, scene 2). It is possible that Pope intends a reader to pick up this echo. Jesus's words are comforting, and specifically include the notion of value to that end: God is present even when a single sparrow falls, and a human being is of much more value than many sparrows. So, Mack argues, Pope's point is that 'God's providence embraces both

sparrow and man, and not ... that man and sparrow are of equal value' (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, ed. by Mack, p. 24n). Pope's line is carefully divided into two equal metrical halves, separated by a comma: five syllables in each, and matching stresses ('A hero pérish, or a sparrow fáll'). God's 'equal eye' is transferred to the page as a demonstration of His universal vision, not as a challenge to hierarchy. However, by juxtaposing heroes and sparrows in the metrical texture of his verse, Pope at the same time admits a sense of equivalence. Are heroes clearly of more importance than sparrows, or is such evaluation a philosophical (or even cultural) assumption dictated by the chain of being model, but uncomfortably felt, rhythmically, to be in conflict with the line of poetry as we see it, read it, hear it? I suspect most readers will detect ambiguity here. Pope's syntax and versification allow both interpretations as valid, if incompatible. Rather than seeing this as an inadvertent error of expression, should we not respond positively to it as a creative demonstration of a mind expatiating freely, and so able to contemplate co-existence of contraries?

'Epistle II', lines 1–18

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is Man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the stoic's pride,
He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;
In doubt his mind or body to prefer,
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;
Still by himself abused, or disabused;
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

'The proper study of mankind is man' is a famous and memorable example of Pope's aphoristic style. An aphorism is language at a point where it cannot be revised. To paraphrase David Morris (1984, pp. 161–65), it is succinct, sharpened, honed to such a state that it achieves a crystalline quality of finish where any further attempt to improve it would appear impossible, or self-defeating. The result is a statement offering a convincing intellectual and linguistic finality, representing or proposing the last word, all that need be said. That this is one complete line of verse, a pentameter with no real caesura, assists such an expression: it is whole, a complete sentence and line with no intruding fussiness, and its verb is that of the most direct and simple definition ('is'). Its most important word, 'man', is where it comes to rest. This is, after all, the poem's declared topic, and so the line also justifies the entire work. The subject of the sentence, 'proper study', is boldly assertive and semantically assured: an 'essay' is a form of 'study' with aspiration to some kind of scientific certainty, and a 'proper' study sets out to reveal the constituents that are inherent within, proper to, its topic. This exact etymological sense of 'proper' (from the Latin *preposition*) was the original English meaning, and still resounds in our word 'property': that which belongs to a person or, as here, the whole of mankind. We are searching for that which is essential within ourselves and our human nature.

And yet a 'study' is also a rough sketch, a preliminary outline, an initial drawing. Pope, the enthusiastic amateur artist, knew this, as he also knew that such a sketch might, if luck is with the artist, capture a rapid essence of its subject with a vitality and brevity perhaps lost in a more 'worked' version. Pope's line, then, has an admirably finished surface, but also a marvellously concise and direct vigour that may, or may not, get to the heart of the matter. The aphoristic style manifests both possibilities. Its rhetorical completeness masks, or can mask, what Morris calls a 'potent contradiction': it 'convinces us of a completeness it cannot ultimately deliver' (1984, p. 163). Perhaps 'might not' rather than 'cannot'? Only the whole poem can fully answer that question, but even in the microcosm of this one line both completeness and something like its inverse are hauntingly present. 'The proper study of mankind is man'. Well, yes, it would be, wouldn't it? 'Man', after all, is integral to 'mankind'. Is this really a statement of the obvious, a tautology? To

define the sentence's complement as an answer to a prepositional phrase in its subject looks a little like going round in a circle. Is this to achieve 360-degree perfection, or simply to end up where we began, with no progress made?

A further feature of the aphoristic style is, for Samuel Johnson, 'inexactness and inexplicitness'. He wrote in the essay on the *Bravery of the English Common Soldier* (1760) that 'in all pointed sentences some degree of accuracy must be sacrificed to conciseness'. Johnson, the great essayist, after all should know: he is famously no slouch himself at the pointed sentence, as this pointed sentence demonstrates. Paradoxically, inexactness is one of the great strengths of successful aphorisms because they contain 'an undisclosed reservoir of sense that a single reading cannot exhaust' (Morris 1984, p. 165). An aphorism without such implicit, if initially concealed, truth is its most extreme opposite, an opposite that pretends to be the real thing: a truism or a cliché where all is explicit and, as Morris puts it, 'gives up all of its sense at a single glance'.

An earlier lover of aphorisms, Francis Bacon, wrote that they represent 'a knowledge broken', and so 'invite men to inquire further' (Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), cited in Johnston 1974, pp. 135–36). True aphorisms represent the 'pith and heart of sciences', he explained, because they are expressions emptied of exemplification and illustration. By cutting away these adjuncts, only the core observation is left. This exposure enables a reader to see the idea plain and unencumbered, and so question it. The discontinuity lurking in the true aphorism, the 'degree of accuracy' sacrificed to conciseness, is precisely that which demands continuing, and continual, enquiry. It is, as Dustin H. Griffin writes of the whole vision of *An Essay on Man*, 'both pattern and puzzle' (Griffin 1979, p. 162).

Further, there is the so-far-unexamined business of context. In an essay—as opposed to a sound-bite—there is always context. In Pope's *Essay*, context is inescapable: no line is an island entire unto itself, for it always has a simultaneous life as half of a couplet. 'The proper study of mankind is man' is the response to 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan'. That opening line is, in several ways, an antithesis of its partner. Rather than offering a polished completeness, it foregrounds its caesura by its division into two separate clauses, with two separate verbs, at the

fourth syllable. The first clause is, yes, a truism, one repeated time after time from classical times to the Renaissance (see Mack, ed., *TE*, III, part 1, 1950, pp. 53–54n), so often as to have been shorn of any real prompt to enquiry. The second clause is, by contrast, one to bring a reader up short. Though still a familiar idea, it is both a stimulus to real thinking and a joke. As Samuel Johnson has shown us, the real essayist—from Montaigne onwards—is both completely serious and self-depreciatingly aware of the absurdity of what is being proposed. Pope's clause is profoundly aware, and genuinely sceptical, of any theodicy: claiming an ability to observe and define (through our senses) a 'God' is a presumption, a typical manifestation of that primitive human fault, one which Pope's satirical muse is repeatedly and remorselessly committed to explore: pride. You cannot even calculate a notional 'God' by *a priori* methods, as is shown in Samuel Johnson's humorously savage exposé of the basis of the 'great chain of being'—the philosophical cliché lying behind much of the material of book 1 of *An Essay on Man* and Johnson's immediate target, Soame Jenyns's prose version of the theory. For no step up from a finite number can ever get us to infinity. Pope really knows this: hence 'scan' as the rhyme-word of the line, its point of rest. What else has he been doing but putting the theory into scansion? Poets are no less absurdly proud than the rest of us; but good poets know they are subject to pride; and great poets make that knowledge the subject of their poetry.

Pope's verse operates by means of an intricate maze of half-lines, lines, and couplets; but it also operates by larger structures, by verse-paragraphs built up from individual couplets. The second epistle of *An Essay on Man* begins with an enigmatic but assertive couplet. It is only when we read it along with the remaining sixteen lines of what has become one of his most celebrated and awe-inspiring paragraphs that we can begin to see a fuller picture. As T. S. Eliot wrote of Milton's verse-paragraphs, 'the full beauty of the line is found in its context' ('Milton II', *On Poetry and Poets*, 1957, pp. 157–58; cited in Ricks,1963, p. 28).

The eclectic force that galvanizes this verse-paragraph into extraordinarily powerful vitality is a deep paradox, one that burrows into the entire passage and then expands within it. A massive collection of the strongest possible assertions, expressed with all the certainty rhetoric can muster, is put at the service of demonstrating that everything, just

everything, we know about ourselves is a matter of the deepest doubt. We do not just suspect we may be unsure about ourselves; we are totally certain that we are profoundly ignorant of ourselves. This is because everything we know is negated, or counterbalanced, by its opposite. The result is not an equipoise of controlled, human and philosophical—in the general sense—checks, but a highly disruptive set of contrapositions.

Pope draws on a quiverful of rhetorical figures in order to inject his paragraph with all the force of dynamic variation. The topographical metaphor of an 'isthmus' (line 3) puts humankind onto tenuous, vulnerable ground on which the succeeding dance of intellectual death will be performed. A pair of oxymorons, 'darkly wise' and 'rudely great' (line 4), occupy equal space within the second line of this couplet, with 'great' serving as a sardonic rhyme with 'middle state'. This phrase, or a version of it, is usually in neo-classical poetry a positive, representing the moderate 'golden mean' which comes down to us from Aristotelean ethics. Now Pope attenuates it so that it conveys something far less comfortable: a 'state' neither one thing nor the other.

The third couplet uses strong anaphora ('With too much ...') to introduce not a mutually reflective parallel, as this syntactic pattern usually does, but antithetical abstract nouns ('knowledge', 'weakness') which are matched against a counter-set of antitheses. Sceptics claim that we know nothing; but we do know something, as the paragraph keeps hammering home. The problem is that this something is profoundly negative and disturbing. Conversely, stoics claim that, by the force of reason, we are able to take control of our being and remain invulnerable to all circumstances. But, in reality we lack the strength of intellect and character to adopt this behaviour, and so the stoics' claims are exposed as mere 'pride'—itself a moral failing, as in 'presume not God to scan'.

The imitative syntax of lines 6 and 7, where the couplet rides over the end-stopping that marks the rest of the paragraph's versification in order to dangle as dangerously as our intellectual/topographical plight, introduces a triadic syntax. 'In doubt' (lines 7–9), as well as emphatically sounding a keynote for the paragraph, aims its destructive dart at three different but related propositions: that we know when and how to take action, that we can define our nature, and that we can distinguish our essential being. The second and third of these shots are particularly telling in the light of our habitual self-definition. Are we

really made in God's image, as supposedly benevolent modes of faith assure us? And the entire idea of the 'great chain of being', consisting of comfortingly equal steps in a steady-state universal model (the very model that the first epistle of *An Essay on Man* has itself been insisting on), is set in question because its location of humankind as right in the middle ('this isthmus of a middle state') is the very cause of our sense of constant displacement. That we are, in some sense, 'divine' pulls us in one direction; that we are in another sense 'animal' pulls us in the contrary direction. This is not equipoise, but a constant strife of conflicting dislocations.

The chiasmus of lines 9–10, the fifth of the nine couplets and so the mid-point of the paragraph and its own isthmus, articulates with complete clarity the hopeless self-contradiction in which we find ourselves. If we 'prefer' our mind, we rely on its power of 'reason'; but that is fatally undermined by continual error. If we 'prefer' our body, we put our faith in that which, we know for certain, is temporary, destined to corruption.

Lines 11 to 14 assert that human faculties are flawed however we use them. Our 'reason'—the noun links back to the central couplet—is employed either 'too little, or too much'. If the former, we fail to think a question through; if the latter, it teases us out of thought. In either case, our final state is ignorance. The neat balance of 'too little, or too much' is a deception, not a resolution: like the great chain of being, its structure proposes a balance, a place of stillness, denied by its implementation. Then, our thoughts and feelings—our mind and body—impinge on each other, leaving neither pure. The result is confusion, just as a state of self-deception and realization of our fallacy are constantly ('still') in a rotation whereby we end up where we started, or swinging back and forth like a pendulum. We need to note here that 'abuse' and 'disabuse' both have specific senses. To 'abuse' has a meaning that the *OED* defines as obsolete, its last citation being, by chance, 1734, the year in which the fourth and final epistle of *An Essay on Man* was published. It signifies, as a reflexive and passive verb, to 'be deceived, mistaken' (*OED*, v. 4b). The contrary verb, 'disabuse', has remained in regular English usage, with an active meaning of 'freeing from abuse, error or mistake'. The *OED*, curiously, cites Pope's line in its entry for 'disabuse', but not that for 'abuse'.

A straight antithesis opens the final four lines of the paragraph. 'Half to rise' and 'half to fall', like the earlier 'darkly wise' and 'rudely great', occupy equal physical spaces within a balance of two half-lines. Thus, they appear, formally, to promise equipoise; however, they actually signify constantly opposite forces, reflecting yet again on the unresolvable paradox of the chain of being's joke (in bad taste) on us. The second line of the couplet follows up the consequences of this fatal division. We are both 'lord of all things' (the tone of irony aimed at our 'pride' is unmistakable in the context) and 'a prey to all'. This contradiction carries over into the last couplet, 'sole judge of truth' complementing 'lord of all things' in meaning and tone, and 'endless error' spelling out the consequences of being a prey to everything, including our own capacity for self-delusion: that is, our state of abuse, our natural attraction to being deceived. The verb which closes line 17 is striking: 'hurled' vigorously and forcibly throws us into error: it is not a gentle fall, but a fall on the grand scale of Milton's rebel angels:

> Him the almighty power
> Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky
> With hideous ruin and combustion down
> To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
> In adamantine chains and penal fire,
> Who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms.
>
> *Paradise Lost*, book 1, lines 44–49

We have met this strong verb, and its rhyming partner, 'world', back in 'Epistle 1', lines 89–90: 'Atoms or systems into ruin hurled, / and now a bubble burst, and now a world'. The two contexts share a similar tonal quality; both are examples of Pope's style at its grandest and most gestural. In the earlier passage, the couplet resoundingly completes a paragraph marked by rhetorical crescendo. In the opening of 'Epistle 2', however, the power implied in the verb is, though highlighted by its position as rhyme-word in the couplet, a momentary flash of anger. The tone of the very last line is, as is more habitual for the sophisticated and sceptical eighteenth-century poet, wry and self-conscious, not engaged and unrelenting as is his distinguished predecessor's. 'Glory' picks up, phonically as well as semantically, the earlier 'lord'; 'jest' is mockingly self-aware (there are no jokes in the Milton passage describing the fall of Satan); and 'riddle' ends the paragraph with a big question-mark

or a sign of unknowability (there is no such uncertainty in Milton's narrative). Perhaps this comparison sums up as well as any other the difference between the great English epic of the seventeenth century and the new, enlightened ethical examination which is Pope's attempt to construct an epic whole from many parts.

'Epistle 2', lines 59–60

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

This couplet sets out concisely the different basic, essential functions of the two principal factors the *Essay* defines in man, 'Self-love' and 'Reason'. They are stated at the beginning of each line, and are so placed in antithesis and also joined together in the spatial configuration of the couplet.

The self-love line is energised by rhythmic invention, irregularity, and vitality. Two caesuras, marked by two commas, produce an unusual 2/5/3 rhythm and point up emphatically the opening hyphenated noun. Strongly vital language adds vigour. 'Spring' is a term from watch-making, and is widely applied to human psychology (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, ed. by Mack, p. 62n). But it also suggests 'spring' as a source of water and so life. 'Acts', that is, to move to action, to impel, is a strong verb that sustains motion. This is coming to life, beginning, the life-force itself. The reason line is, conversely, rhythmically smooth, with no caesura. Its language is logical and abstract ('comparing'), while continuing the watch-making imagery ('balance'). The line's calm itself complements and balances the energy of its partner.

'Epistle 2', lines 133–34

> As Man, perhaps, the moment of his breath,
> Receives the lurking principle of death;

This is an example of how Pope can infuse an idea with devastatingly forceful expression. The first line hesitantly ('perhaps') sets up the proposition; then the second powerfully delivers it. The verb 'receives' makes us the passive objects of action: our very first breath takes in, accepts the inevitability of our last breath. We die from the moment of

our inception. A single adjective ('lurking') sums up the dark, insidious truth that the 'principle of death' is lying malevolently in wait for us. The couplet enacts their inevitable co-ordination in the rhyme ('breath/death'), which traps the lines into an inescapable bond.

'Epistle 2', lines 275–82

Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,
Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw:
Some livelier plaything gives his youth delight,
A little louder, but as empty quite:
Scarves, garters, gold, amuse his riper stage;
And beads and prayer-books are the toys of age:
Pleased with this bauble still, as that before;
Till tired he sleeps, and life's poor play is o'er!

Sitting alongside passages of rhetorical splendour and portentous import, the poem frequently presents lines of a very different character. These reflect a pull towards the comic or satiric that Pope's muse so often exerts. A laugh, or at least a smile, is usually not far away. In the context of *An Essay on Man* such passages are not simply incidental. On the contrary, they are essential exemplifications of man's state as the 'glory, jest and riddle of the world' (line 18). It is jest time.

Like a miniature version of the seven ages of man, this four-couplet paragraph skips through four stages, the child, the youth, the (delicately if ironically put) 'riper' man, and old age. The effect is to render each of his activities, at every point, equivalent in their triviality and emptiness. Do we learn, do we mature ('riper'), do we grow? No, we remain distinctly immature, wedded to the farcical and meaningless. This parody of the notion of progress allows Pope to indulge in a few short, sharp, satirical cuts. Sashes worn by doctors of divinity are belittled as 'scarves'; garters are reduced from noble symbols of the Order of the Garter to just plain garters without the 'Order'; the rosary of Catholic observance is shown up as, empty of meaning, merely a few beads. Each is as much a bauble, a mere plaything for immature minds, as the rattle and straw with which we begin our journey through life.

There is a theatrical element here as well. Our most famous 'Seven Ages of Man' speech is found in *As You Like It*. 'Riper' summons up Edgar's consolatory, or resigned, aphorism in *King Lear*: 'ripeness is

all'. 'Life's poor play' explicitly echoes Macbeth's final soliloquy in act 5: 'Life's but ... a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage'. All these Shakespearean instances of belittlement point to echoes in other poems. So, the child's toy will be found again in his dismissal of verse as 'rhymes and rattles of the man or boy' in another poem addressed to St John, Pope's *First Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated* (line 18); and the reduction of 'all the world's a stage' to the level of farce is also enacted in the finale to *The Dunciad*, in both versions. The running idea, then, is that life has no real essence or existence; rather, a sham display of vacuous insignificance. Jokes can be serious.

'Epistle 3', lines 303–06

> For forms of government let fools contest;
> Whate'er is best administered is best:
> For modes of faith, let graceless zealots fight;
> His can't be wrong whose life is in the right:

The couplets are parallel in syntax. The first lines set up the subject ('government', 'faith') through parallel syntax ('For ...') and semantic equivalence ('let fools contest', 'let graceless zealots fight') whereby the verbs are synonyms; the second lines are, by contrast, varied in syntax, but both represent the poet's answer to the implied questions, what constitutes the 'best' form of government and the 'best' mode of faith. 'Best' and 'right' are the two clinching rhymes, in response to the synonyms of 'contest'/'fight'. In both cases, the answer is that the 'best' is that which produces the best practical outcome. The poetry avoids engaging in theoretical or ideological disputation in favour of a pragmatic conclusion. Note that Pope does not say that there is no difference between the various 'forms of government' and 'modes of faith'; but that such differences are meaningless or insignificant when considered apart from their effects upon the actual lives of people. Pope himself explicitly made this distinction in a manuscript note (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, ed. by Mack, appendix B, p. 170). There is, he contends, no point in wrangling or speculating about forms of government unless the 'preferred' form is 'well and uprightly administered'; and, equivalently, modes of faith are only of significance if they have a beneficial effect on how a believer acts. It is the moral outcome that matters, not the

belief itself. In secular and religious, and theoretical and ideological areas, Pope's argument has earlier philosophical points of reference: Aristotle's *Politics*, the Cambridge Platonists and Sir William Temple (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, ed. by Mack, pp. 123–24 n and appendix B). As is commonly the case, Pope is not thinking originally, but is producing concise, economical, and memorable expressions of existing thought: 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. His arguments are nonetheless strongly significant in terms of their meaning: Pope is always on the side of the pragmatic and sceptical of the abstract. In this he is in tune with the main tenor of Enlightenment thought. His couplets are fine, and representative, examples of his unparalleled capacity for intense and economical expression. Consider the epigrammatic power of simple linguistic repetition ('is best ... is best') and contrast ('wrong ... right'). Further, the couplets enact the meaning of Pope's statement. Whereas the language attributed to those who do spend their time mired in political and religious dispute is divisive, about conflict ('contest'; 'fight'), Pope's couplets resolve the lines into rhyme, the language of harmony and reconciliation. So 'contest' leads to 'best'; and 'fight' to 'right'. The rhythm, the movement of the couplets are expressive of their meaning.

'Epistle 4', lines 387–98

When statesmen, heroes, kings, in dust repose,
Whose sons shall blush their fathers were thy foes,
Shall then this verse to future age pretend
Thou wert my guide, philosopher, and friend?
That urged by thee, I turned the tuneful art
From sounds to things, from fancy to the heart;
For wit's false mirror held up Nature's light;
Showed 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.

For his finale, Pope concisely brings together the central messages of each epistle. Lines 394 to 397 accord each book in turn a single line. The first epistle sets out the fixed, immutable structure of creation according

to the traditional idea of the chain of being, or the scale of nature. Human beings occupy their allotted place, which they must accept. 'Whatever is, is RIGHT' (epistle 1, line 294), and to challenge this is to give way to pride. The second epistle defines two ruling agencies within individual men and women: 'Self-love, to urge, and reason, to restrain' (epistle 2, line 54). Modes of self-love we call our passions, which move us to action; reason is the force that controls. In the third epistle, Pope expands these definitions to encompass our roles within society, and finds that 'self-love and social' are the same essential forces ('Epistle 3', line 318). In the fourth epistle, happiness is shown to lie within virtue alone; virtue for its own sake and not its consequences, as these are acted upon by ills or accidents over which we have no control ('Epistle 4', line 310).

This quartet of summaries at the poem's close is preceded by invocation of the term which marks the condition of our being: 'Nature' is the 'natural' state of humanity, of both our own selves and our earthly context. And the quartet is rounded off by a re-statement of the guiding aphorism for any proper study of our existence: 'Know then thyself' ('Epistle 2', line 1). This, then, is Pope in magisterially didactic mode: the essayist signing off his work.

But there is much more than such succinct messaging in *An Essay on Man*. In spite of Pope's stern denial in line 393, there is much 'wit' to the poem. It just all depends what we understand by 'wit'. Etymologically, the word signifies knowledge, but it has come to cover many wider connotations, some positive, some negative, and some questionable. Wit can be, line 393 asserts, a false mirror, a distorting image or reflection: itself a reflection, it may be, of our desire to assert our own brief authority over our perceptions, to mould them into forms that may please but really flatter to deceive. On the other hand, as Pope himself will imply in Dr Busby's speech in the fourth book of *The Dunciad*, 'rebel wit' can be the very principle of our intellectual being: not so much an aspect of our pride in the sense of presumption but of our pride in the possibilities of genuinely enlightened agency: our nature's 'light', as line 393 itself allows. There are gradations and subtleties within our intellectual being, and the poem needs to show this if it is to reveal in its fullness our nature.

And there is something else, too, which shines through and mitigates the rigours of what might, if dogmatically asserted, become a cage for our fixed position within the scale of being. By making happiness available to humans, the concluding sections of 'Epistle 4' warmly assure us, the universal cause offers a benign and welcome message. The purpose of the human soul in its individual and social being begins and ends in 'LOVE OF GOD, and LOVE OF MAN' ('Epistle 4', line 340). A word that resounds through the ending of the poem is 'friend' ('Epistle 4', lines 367, 373, 390). Fittingly, its final statement is in the moving and celebrated appeal to the poem's addressee and patron. Pope proclaims (the core meaning of 'pretend', from Latin 'praetendere'—literally to 'hold out before') Bolingbroke as 'my guide, philosopher, and friend'. From Pope's earliest poems onwards (see *An Essay on Criticism* in Chapter 3) through all his later epistles, friendship has been his continuing solace, inspiration, and—in the true sense—pride.