

Meaning and the Mock-Heroic: Literary Influence III

WILLIAM CHRISTIE *

... for we have lineal descents and clans as well as other families: Spenser more than once insinuates that the soul of Chaucer was transfused into his body; and that he was begotten by him two hundred years after his decease. Milton has acknowledged to me that Spenser was his original.

—Dryden, Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*¹

In this third essay on literary influence and on the extent to which the meaning of a literary work depends upon other literature, I want to argue that even when a writer plays directly and unequivocally with or against other literature, he or she does so for reasons which are never exclusively literary, and that even if it were possible (which it is not) to read such literary play in an exclusively 'literary' way—and not as ethically, say, or as politically or culturally meaningful—it could only amount to a misreading. Creativity and reading take their origins from sources too various and elusive ever to be limited by the term 'literary', in other words. More important for our purposes, however, is the fact that the numerous and complex needs and desires that bear upon literary choice do so at a specific time and in a specific place and under specific conditions in that eternal present that, once it is objectified and generalized in retrospect, becomes 'history'. Whatever else it may be, an act of literary self-consciousness—of detente or dissent with a past work or writer—is at the same time and necessarily an act of historical self-consciousness. An essay in literary influence is thus an essay

* *William Christie teaches English at the University of Sydney. Earlier essays in this series appeared in Arts in 1995 and 1996.*

both in literary history and in literature's history: in history as uniquely conceived and expressed by literature.

To establish this by way of example, I want to return to the reciprocal and self-reflective relationship between literature and history alluded to parenthetically in my last essay during a discussion of the heroic in Tennyson's *Ulysses*.² Indeed, it is the modern genre of the *mock-heroic* lying behind Tennyson's poem that I plan to discuss. As a strict genre with a comparatively short life in English culture from the late seventeenth to the eighteenth century, with a late florescence in Byron, the mock-heroic maps a critical period in the long revolution that is literary history. As a tendency or conditioned instinct, on the other hand, the mock-heroic has much to say about the evolution of a 'modern' European sensibility—arguably, has much to answer for in that evolution, though how far 'history' constrains literary choice as force of circumstance and how far history is itself nothing other than the choices people make is a moot point.

For the purpose of this essay, then, I want to exploit the ambiguity of the term 'literary influence', taking it to refer not just to literature's influence on literature, but to influences on literature more generally and to the influence that literature itself exerts as well.

I

To argue the significance of the mock-heroic to the modern period is not to deny that it has been with us from the beginning—certainly as long as the heroic itself; even longer, if we were to believe Alexander Pope³—which arguably suggests something anthropological, something about the structure of the human psyche. Hence the 'licensed' mockery of the carnival, for example, as of literary burlesque or travesty, both of which could be said to preserve the authority and respectability of the institutions they mock, even while appearing to subvert them. The ancient commentators who, like Aristotle, extol Homer as at the same time father of the epic in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and father of the mock-epic in the *Margites* must surely have had this ultimate conservatism in mind:

As well as being the most creative poet of high actions, his *mimeseis* in this kind being the only ones that are not only well done but essentially dramatic, Homer also first adumbrated the form of comedy by dramatizing the ridiculous instead of producing invectives; his *Margites* bears the same relation to comedy as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* do to tragedy.⁴

The epic and mock-epic as, respectively, the sublime rendition of 'high actions' and the same sublime rendition of 'ridiculous' actions need not exclude each other, any more than tragedy and comedy need exclude each other, though by and large Classical writers observed what their commentators demanded, which were fairly strict genre distinctions between different plays and poems. The world might tolerate the tragi-comic in their own lives, but not in literature. And it is a commonplace that what for the ancient writers was fairly strict became rigid (and, with that, brittle) in the neoClassical period. The drama of seventeenth-century France is based on prescriptions and proscriptions of form and content so comprehensive and programmatic that the extremes meet: rational exclusion tips over into irrationalism and high or heightened realism into surrealism.

This rigidity is precisely why the choices neoClassicism offered itself and the banners under which it fought its cultural battles seem at first so clearly defined: Nature/Art; tragedy/comedy; high style/low style; refined/rude; regular/irregular; and so on. Of course, every period—every individual—sees things, sees ethical or cultural issues better, more completely than it or he or she is willing or able to say, resorting to a false symmetry in order to foreclose on the complex and the chaotic. It soon becomes apparent, moreover, that the choices neoClassicism offers itself are by no means so clearly defined as they at first appear. Having said this, however, it remains true that no period ever operated so exclusively through simple binary comparisons and contrasts as the neoClassical period. And of all the oppositions within the literary cultural establishment, none generated more heat than the controversy between 'the Antients' and 'the Moderns' informing the mock-heroic.

The Antients were those contemporary commentators who

maintained the superiority of Classical writers and of Classical writings to those of the present (and I shall use the slightly archaic spelling throughout to distinguish them from the Classical writers themselves), seeing excellence as the exclusive province of the past—if only because their priority in time meant that the ancient Greeks and Romans got there first, condemning the world to endless imitation. ‘The Ancients’, to quote Pope,

writ in languages that became universal and everlasting, while ours are extremely limited both in extent, and in duration. A mighty foundation for our pride! when the utmost we can hope, is but to be read in one Island, and to be thrown aside at the end of one Age.

All that is left to us, is to recommend our productions by the imitation of the Ancients: and it will be found true, that in every Age, the highest character for sense and learning has been obtain’d by those who have been most indebted to them. For to say truth, whatever is good sense must have been common sense at all times; and what we call Learning, is but the knowledge of our predecessors. Therefore they who say our thoughts are not our own because they resemble the Ancients, may as well say that our faces are not our own, because they are like our Fathers.⁵

More to the point, this *literary* priority carried with it an often unconscious and certainly rarely itemized valorization of ancient culture and society, a nostalgic orientation which the French referred to as *ancienneté* or ancientness. The Moderns, on the other hand, operated on the assumption that since the period certainly of Homer the morals and manners of European society had undergone such considerable refinement as to ensure its own manifest superiority to the ancient world: ‘Under Louis XIV the French had the courage to consider their own culture a valid model ... and they imposed this view upon the rest of Europe’.⁶

Following the French precedent, the debate between the Antients and the Moderns raged throughout the period in English literary history from the accession of Charles II in 1660 to the death of Alexander Pope in 1744, the period usually and, I think, rightly labelled the Augustan period. The English Augustans shared with their Roman predecessors various assumptions about public and private life and their relations, about statecraft and the

role of eloquence, just as they endlessly imitated Roman Augustan texts—Virgil; Horace; Ovid—while at the same time establishing those texts as central to an English education system that in this respect at least remain unchanged for over two hundred years. If we find none of the imperial order and proud complacency that the term was chosen to encourage and to symbolize, still that order and that complacency were perennially in dispute—like the larger question of the relationship with the Classical past generally. For some the ‘Augustan’ was an ideal, for some an irony; for everyone it was a point of spirited and sometimes quite violent contention.

What is interesting about the war between the Antients and the Moderns for our purposes is that it precisely captures an equivocation and an evolution in contemporary values that we will find registered in Pope’s mock-epics. Battle now is no longer a physical affair, but an argumentative ‘battle of the books’: ‘The life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth’, Pope protested somewhat disingenuously, ‘and the present spirit of the learned world is such, that to attempt to serve it (any way) one must have the constancy of a martyr, and a resolution to suffer for its sake’.⁷ Besieged as he imagines by the insane ministrations and abuse of his contemporaries, Pope conceives of himself as a new kind of soldier—indirectly in *The Dunciad*; directly in the more autobiographical *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*—fighting the good fight for good sense and plain speaking as ‘Universal Darkness’ threatens to cover all. But we will return to alternative heroisms later.

From the point of view of literary influence and of literary self-consciousness, the Augustan period was the period in English literature theoretically most obsessed with distinguishing and characterizing different genres. And of all the genres, the ‘HEROIC POEM, truly such’, as Dryden wrote in the dedication prefixed to his translation of the *Aeneis* (1697), ‘is undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform’.⁸ Paradoxically, however, the period was most obsessed *in practice* with what might be called anti-genres: with poems ‘against’ this or that, like satire, as well as with poems that develop their meaning ‘against’ other genres, like the mock-epic. Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*,

Dryden's *Macflecknoe*, and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714; 1717) and *The Dunciad* (1728–43) were all both. Moreover, it was here, in the mock-heroic *epyllion* rather than in the epic, that the characteristic strength of Pope and his peers lies. Hence the paradox, for the mock-heroic or mock-epic held, like all satire, only a comparatively modest place on the Augustans' own strict hierarchy of literary genres, a hierarchy of genres with a correspondingly strict hierarchy of appropriate styles that was a legacy of the Classical culture it emulated:

EPIC	}	HIGH STYLE
TRAGEDY		
GREATER LYRIC (ODE)		
[LYRIC]	}	MIDDLE STYLE
[VERSE ESSAY OR EPISTLE — Critical/Social/Ethical]		
SATIRE	}	MIXED STYLE
[PASTORAL]	}	LOW STYLE
COMEDY		

The Augustans—and none more than Pope—were certainly familiar with heroic poetry. Pope made translations of the Homeric epics that in turn made Pope, securing for him the title of the greatest living poet and the £5,000-odd with which he built the villa at Twickenham (outside the London limit for Roman Catholics) that has since become symbolic in a variety of ways. If his knowledge of the original Greek appears shaky, the translations prove his mastery over what then passed as the high style. Not surprisingly, moreover, he contemplated an epic of his own wholly on civil and ecclesiastical government and later in his life still mulled over the possibility of a *Brutiad* or epic on the legendary founder of the Roman republic.

The dreamed-of epic remained unwritten, however, and the closest Pope came to the elevated style demanded by the epic remained indirect: in translation, in the mock-heroic itself, and in formal epistles like the didactic *An Essay on Man*. Even his

translation of Homer betrays signs of uneasiness with its heroic subject-matter; there are times in his and Dryden's translations of Homer and Virgil respectively when they 'transform the heroic into the mock-heroic'.⁹ Alternatively, as one might expect of an attempted marriage of formal system ('*Nature Methodiz'd*') with systematic form ('*Nature to Advantage drest*')¹⁰, *An Essay on Man* achieves at its best a cultivated formality and didactic charge, without aspiring to the grand style:

Cease then, nor ORDER Imperfection name:
 Our proper bliss depends on what we blame.
 Know thy own point: This kind, this due degree
 Of blindness, weakness, Heav'n bestows on thee.
 Submit—In this, or any other sphere,
 Secure to be as blest as thou canst bear:
 Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow'r,
 Or in the natal, or the mortal hour.
 All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
 All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
 All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
 All partial Evil, universal Good:
 And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
 One truth is clear: 'Whatever IS, is RIGHT.'

— *An Essay on Man*, I, 281–294¹¹

That Pope 'was in haste to teach what he had not learned', as Johnson said,¹² is less significant than the remoteness of this polite, dignified style from the sinuous, sounding grandeur suggested by the most ordinary mock-heroic lines of *The Dunciad*:

So swells each wind-pipe; Ass intones to Ass,
 Harmonic twang! of leather, horn, and brass;
 Such as from lab'ring lungs th'Enthusiast blows,
 High sound, attemp'ed to the vocal nose;
 Or such as bellow from the deep Divine;
 There Webster! peal'd thy voice, and Whitfield! thine.
 But far o'er all sonorous Blackmore's strain;
 Walls, steeples, skies, bray back to him again.
 In Tot'nam fields, the brethren, with amaze,
 Prick all their ears up, and forget to graze;

Long Chanc'ry-lane retentive rolls the sound,
 And courts to courts return it round and round;
 Thames wafts it thence to Rufus' roaring hall,
 And Hungerford re-echoes bawl for bawl.
 All hail him victor in both gifts of song,
 Who sings so loudly, and who sings so long.
 This labour past, by Bridewell all descend,
 (As morning pray'r and flagellation end)
 To where Fleet-ditch with disemboгуing streams
 Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,
 The King of dykes! than whom no sluice of mud
 With deeper sable blots the silver flood.
 'Here strip, my children! here at once leap in,
 Here prove who best can dash thro' thick and thin,
 And who the most in love of dirt excel,
 Or dark dexterity of groping well...'
 — *The Dunciad*, II, 269-78

The difficulty Pope experienced in composing in the heroic mode of the epic stemmed from no inability to master the form or associated conventions. To begin to explain that difficulty we have to look elsewhere.

II

Before we launch into the significance of the mock-heroic, however, it might be wise first to establish some of the features common to the heroic poetry that had become central to the cultural wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Albin Lesky conveniently summarizes:

The central feature of such poems is the hero, distinguished above all men by courage and bodily strength: his conduct knows no restraint but that of honour—a notion which in primitive times offered few difficulties. The ties of friendship may also be very strong in his mind. The origin and existence of this kind of poetry comes from the existence of a knightly upper class delighting in warfare, hunting, and the pleasures of the table (the latter including the performance of the singer himself). The background of the hero's activities is usually a heroic age—a past which is larger and brighter than the present. There is a naive delight in the physical world, expressed in elaborate descriptions of chariots, ships, arms,

and clothing: the element of magic is largely wanting.... Heroic poetry of this type always claims to be telling the truth: this claim is supported by saying either that the story has been reliably transmitted or that it has been divinely inspired.

The form of the narrative is usually that of verse, the unit being the single line, not the stanza. Speeches play an important part in the tale. Perhaps the most striking feature is the predominance of 'typical' elements of language—stock adjectives and recurrent formulae—and 'typical' scenes—arming for the fray, parting, marriage feasts and funeral rites.¹³

If this was the generic background variously exploited by the mock-heroic, by far the bulk of specific debts and self-conscious allusions were to the *Iliad* of Homer (far less often to *The Odyssey*) and to the *Aeneid* of Virgil, with a nod now and then to Spenser and Milton amongst recent, national versions of the heroic. Even the most cursory glance through *The Rape of the Lock* reveals a catalogue of the 'typical' elements and scenes mentioned by Lesky: epic motifs—the dream (I, 23 ff., cp. *Aeneid*, III, 147 ff.); the dawn (II, 1–4, cp. *Iliad*, VIII; XV; XXIV and *Aeneid*, VII, 25 ff.); arming for battle (I, 129 ff., cp. *Iliad*, XI); the heroic shield (I, 72 ff., cp. *Iliad*, XVIII and *Aeneid*, VIII, 440 ff.); the see-sawing fortunes of battle (III, 65–70, 94–100, cp. *Iliad*, VI, 1–4); the *Nekyia* or descent into the underworld (IV, 15–24, cp. *Aeneid*, VI, 262 ff.)—and devices like the epic simile (III, 81 ff., cp. *Iliad*, XI, 547 ff.) and, another favourite, epic *sententia* (III, 101–4, cp. *Aeneid*, X, 501 ff.).

To give a better idea of just how detailed the parallels were for the contemporary audience, let me take the one example of the Cave of Spleen from the fourth canto of *The Rape of the Lock* and its self-conscious invocation of the underworld of Classical epic—in this case, with specific echoes of the underworld as it was encountered by Aeneas in a passage from Virgil familiar to every educated male amongst Pope's contemporaries, both in the original and in Dryden's translation of 1697:

uestibulum ante ipsum primisque in faucibus Orci
Luctus et ultrices posuere cubilia Curae
pallentesque habitant Morbi tristisque Senectus

et Metus et malesuada Fames ac turpis Egestas,
 terribiles uisu **formae**, Letumque Labosque;
 tum consanguineus Leti **Sopor** et **mala mentis**
 Gaudia, **mortiferumque** aduerso in limine Bellum
 ferreique Eumenidum **thalami** et Discordia demens
uipereum crinem uititis innexa cruentis. . . .
multaque praeterea uariarum monstra ferarum,
 Centauri in foribus stabulant Scyllaeque bifformes
 et centumgeminus Briareus ac belua Lernae
 horrendum stridens, **flamisque** armata Chimaera,
 Gorgones Harpyiaequae et **forma** tricorporis **umbrae**.
 corripit hic subita trepidus formidine ferrum
 Aeneas strictamque aciem uenientibus offert,
 et ni docta comes tenuis **sine corpore** uitas
 admoneat uolitare caua sub imagine **formae**,
 inruat et frustra ferro diuerberet **umbras**.

— *The Aeneid*, VI, 273-81; 285-94¹⁴

Just in the gate, and in the jaws of hell,
 Revengeful Cares and sullen Sorrows dwell;
 And pale Diseases, and repining Age,
 Want, Fear, and Famine's unresisted rage;
 Here Toils, and Death, and Death's half-brother **Sleep**
 (Forms terrible to view), their sentry keep;
 With anxious Pleasures of a guilty mind;
 Deep Frauds before, and open Force behind;
 The Furies iron **beds**; and Strife, that shakes
 Her hissing tresses, and unfolds her **snakes**.
Of various forms unnumbered spectres more,
 Centaurs, and double shapes, besiege the door.
 Before the passage, horrid Hydra stands,
 And Briareus with all his hundred hands;
 Gorgons, Geryon with his triple frame,
 And vain Chimæra vomits empty **flame**
 The chief unsheathed his shining steel, prepared,
 Though seized with sudden fear, to force the guard,
 Offering his brandished weapon at their face,
 Had not the Sybil stopped his eager pace,
 And told him what those empty **phantoms** were —
Forms without bodies, and impassive air.

(trans. Dryden¹⁵)

Now *The Rape of the Lock*:

Here in a Grotto, sheltred close from Air,
And screen'd in **Shades** from Day's detested Glare,
[Spleen] sighs forever on her pensive **Bed** . . .
A constant *Vapour* o'er the Palace flies;
Strange **Phantoms** rising as the Mists arise;
Dreadful as Hermit's **Dreams** in haunted **Shades**,
Or bright as Visions of expiring Maids.
Now glaring Fiends, and **Snakes** on rolling Spires,
Pale **Spectres**, gaping Tombs, and Purple **Fires**: . . .
Unnumber'd Throngs on ev'ry side are seen
Of Bodies changed to various Forms of Spleen.
(IV, 21-3; 39-44; 47-8)

Moving from here back to a passage at the opening of the third canto of *The Rape of the Lock* in which Pope is obviously working the heroic for a satirical purpose, we can gauge the extent to which the 'pretty complete picture of the life of our modern ladies in this idle town' that Pope offered in the poem is implicitly contrasted throughout with the nobler virtues of the classical epic:

Close by those Meads, forever crown'd with Flow'rs,
Where *Thames* with Pride surveys his rising Tow'rs,
There stands a Structure of Majestic Frame,
Which from the neighbr'ing *Hampton* takes its Name.
Here *Britain's* Statesmen oft the Fall foredoom
Of Foreign Tyrants and of Nymphs at home;
Here Thou, Great *Anna!* whom three Realms obey,
Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Tea*.
Hither the Heroes and the Nymphs resort,
To taste awhile the Pleasures of a Court;
In various Talk th'instructive hours they past,
Who gave the *Ball*, or paid the *Visit* last:
One speaks the Glory of the *British Queen*,
And one describes a charming *Indian Screen*;
A third interprets Motions, Looks, and Eyes;
At ev'ry Word a Reputation dies.
Snuff, or the *Fan*, supply each Pause of Chat,
With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.
(III, 1-24)

Just as Hampton Court—‘a Structure of Majestic Frame’ (l. 3)—encloses or frames the political and social activity described, so the narrative of the poem is ‘framed’ (and diminished) by the noble structure or architecture of the epic poem. Epic portentousness descends here, as throughout the poem, to rococo trivialities: ‘Britain’s statesmen oft the Fall foredoom / Of foreign Tyrants’ ... ‘and of Nymphs at home’ (ll. 5-6). The brooding weightiness, exaggerated by the alliteration, is undercut here and throughout by the device of *bathos*—sinking or anticlimax—which is the most characteristic or habitual of all devices in a mock-heroic mode because, by trumping the sublime with the ridiculous, it deftly undercuts the tendency to self-importance and hypocrisy.

So the ‘Counsel’ taken by the Queen becomes as trifling as a cup of ‘Tea’ (l. 8); ‘the Glory of the *British Queen*’ herself shrinks to ‘a charming *Indian Screen*’ (ll. 13–14); ‘various Talk’ and ‘th’ instructive hours’ prove as insignificant as ‘the *Ball*’ and ‘the *Visit*’ of the social round (ll. 11–12). The interpretation of ‘Motions, Looks and Eyes’ (l. 15) by the third sybil suggests both prophecy or ‘auspication’ along with trivial flirtation. (‘Auspication’, strictly, uses the flight or motions of bird to predict the future; the idea of ‘interpreting motions’ is also a *double entendre* involving a decidedly *unheroic* play on scatology: ‘that branch of medical science which deals with diagnosis by means of *fæces*’ *OED*.) So, finally, the death of a ‘Reputation’ (l. 16) uses the notion of honour and the ennoblement and ritualization of death characteristic of the heroic world to trivialize the sort of scandal which in this social world is tantamount to extinction.

Throughout, in other words (to steal a definition of the ‘*Mock-heroick*’ from an anonymous commentator of the 1730s), ‘ridiculous actions are burlesqued, by being related in heroick verse’,¹⁶ creating a comic contrast between form and content. Concomitantly, one finds the occasional ‘dialogic’ interplay at the level of style, where *stilus gravis* or elevated style of the epic is punctured by passages of bathetically ordinary diction, as in the final couplet:

Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.

The mock-heroic is used to mock those pretensions to heroic action or to self-importance characteristic of the satirist's society, whose 'heroes' are driven rather by vanity or egotism and whose amorous or flirtatious 'battles' over trifles are fought with cunning rather than courage. Perhaps the purest of all mock-heroic contrasts is effected by the card game Ombre that immediately follows in the third canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, in which the cards themselves mimic and indeed evoke heroic passions and actions that end only in highlighting the shallowness of the lives of 'the Heroes and the Nymphs' of the early eighteenth-century assembly room:

The *Knave of Diamonds* tries his wily Arts,
And wins (oh shameful Chance!) the *Queen of Hearts*.
At this the Blood the Virgin's cheek forsook,
A vivid Paleness spreads o'er all her Look;
She sees, and trembles at th' approaching Ill,
Just in the Jaws of Ruin, and *Codille*.
And now, (as oft in some distemper'd State)
On one nice *Trick* depends the gen'ral Fate.
An *Ace* of Hearts steps forth: The *King* unseen
Lurk'd in her Hand, and mourn'd his captive *Queen*.
He springs to Vengeance with an eager pace,
And falls like Thunder on the prostrate *Ace*.
The Nymph exulting fills with Shouts the Sky,
The Walls, the Woods, and long Canals reply.
(III, 87-100)

The mock-heroic 'is a means to an end', to quote Ulrich Brioch, 'since its imitation of the epic form provides a comic, ironic or satirical contrast'.¹⁷

III

Brioch is surely wrong, however, when he insists that the intention of these 'purely comic parodies' is 'not to mock their serious literary models'.¹⁸ For there are other ways of reading this absence of the heroic from what is, after all, Pope's own society, and those other ways points in quite the opposite direction

at the same time—as Brioch, incidentally, accedes elsewhere¹⁹—as well as going a long way towards explaining Pope’s inability to master the one genre so unanimously and consistently extolled in neoClassical theory as a poet’s highest aspiration. For if the mock-heroic suggests that Belinda and her society are incommensurate with the heroic, that they lack heroic sentiments and values and heroic grandeur, it also betrays a paradoxical consciousness that heroic sentiments and values are inappropriate, not to say inherently absurd, making equally inappropriate and absurd a nostalgia for the Classical heroic as a Golden Age.

‘For better or worse, the moderns saw that the manners and customs of the age of Louis XIV’—as of the Augustan age in England—‘were not those of the age of the Greek heroes, and that it had different values, both moral and poetical’.²⁰ This much is basic to the historical imagination, however. The perspective that most interests us here is the one that saw heroic manners and customs not as alien but as absurd, for the truth is that the values of the ancient world, specifically its notions of military glory, of honour or saving ‘face’ and other public virtues, were coming under severe scrutiny at the end of the seventeenth century. Witness David Hume, leading ideologue of the Scottish Enlightenment:

... where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition. The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the antient poets, even sometimes by HOMER and the GREEK tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances, and gives modern authors a great advantage over them. We are not interested in the fortunes and sentiments of such rough heroes: we are displeas’d to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confounded.²¹

This Modern position, as well as demanding that the poet know his place historically, sees everywhere a moral and social

refinement that is necessarily reflected in a comparably refined literature. First premise: literature is first and foremost a moral and social activity. Second premise: we are everywhere surrounded by improvements in morality and society. *Ergo*, modern literature has a 'great advantage' over the ancient.

How surprising is it then to see Hume's sentiments regarding the 'rudeness' not to say savagery of the ancient world turning up in the critical commentary of the Augustan poets themselves. Not the least of Dryden's reservations about Homer, for example, was the fact that

He stirs up the irascible appetite, as our philosophers call it, he provokes to murder, and the destruction of God's images; he forms and equips these ungodly man-killers whom we poets, when we flatter them, call heroes; a race of men who can never enjoy quiet in themselves, till they have taken it from all the world. This is Homer's commendation, and such as it is, the lovers of peace, or at least of more moderate heroism, will never envy him.²²

(The poet John Oldham perhaps said it all when he summed up *The Iliad* as '*Grecian Bullies fighting for a Whore*'.²³) So Pope, in the preface to (of all things) his translation of *The Iliad*, asks who could possibly be so prejudiced an Antient as to exaggerate what he calls the 'felicity' of the Classical heroic world, 'when no Mercy was shown but for the sake of Lucre, when a spirit of Revenge and Cruelty reign'd thro' the world, when the greatest Princes were put to the Sword, and their Wives and Daughters made Slaves and Concubines?'²⁴ Here the contrast is implicitly but unmistakably with Christianity ('Mercy' before 'Revenge'), as well as with a post-Chivalric code that respected and maintained the nobility of one's opposition and that exalted women. When Byron exposes the brutality beneath the stylization of the ancient epic in his late essay in the mock-heroic *Don Juan*, the religious and the secular in humankind stand in the starkest possible contrast:

'Let there be light! said God, and there was light!
'Let there be blood!' says man, and there's a sea!²⁵

Most commonly, however, when the likes of Pope 'confest that

in my own opinion the world had mended in some points', the progress they had in mind was conceived of in specifically Enlightenment terms. Thus Pope again, this time in the notes to his translation, censures 'the uncivilized Manners of those Times, when Mankind was not united by the Bonds of a rational Society'.²⁶

Against this, however, we should never lose sight of *ancienneté* or ancientness, which persisted in seeing in the juxtaposition of the contemporary with the ancient heroic world only the ridiculousness of the contemporary: 'so nice, so whining, and so polite'. Almost invariably it is the effeminate corruption of modern society that is exposed by contrast with the noble simplicity. Perhaps the most famous and certainly the most uncompromising of the Antients was a Madame Dacier whose allegiance was inspired by a horror of what she saw as contemporary decadence: 'those Times and Manners seemed so much the more excellent to me as they less resembled those of our own'; 'the Gilding that defaces our Age, and which ought to be taken off, is its Luxury and Effeminacy, which most certainly beget a general corruption in our Souls'.²⁷ This reactionary construction of Mme Dacier's can be identified immediately as informing the mock-heroic as satire in a poem like *The Rape of the Lock*.

The preference of the Antients for what they saw as the Classical world and Classical values later evolved into primitivism, while the position of the Moderns evolved into what might be called a Peacockian anti-primitivism (after Thomas Love Peacock's tongue-in-cheek version of Viconian cultural evolution in *The Four Ages of Poetry*). Both evolved positions associated great literature with the past, when society was simpler: socially and/or philosophically and/or scientifically less sophisticated. According to the primitivists, literature and the arts had since become, like society, over-refined and impotent and needed to regress in order to assist in the recovery of less corrupt, 'original' values. According to Peacock, on the other hand, it was precisely because poetry's mode of expression associated it with a more primitive world that it had become redundant, and should be recognized as such. Literature had reached its maturity in a socially

immature period, become gradually attenuated until finally, in an age of prose and reason and scientific method, unthinkable.

The assault by the Cartesian rationalism of the Moderns on the history and the authority of the heroic poetry of the ancients, the assault that so easily turned against the childishness of poetry generally, was one that continued to leave its mark on culture, eventually provoking the Romantic reaction. Back in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, however, the cogency of the same rationalism explains a further source of controversy over heroic poetry. To the difficulty occasioned by its social and ethical primitivism may be added the difficulty they experienced in dealing with the mythology that was so central to the Classical epic, as to heroic poetry in all cultures.²⁸ It was in heroic poetry that ancient religion was inscribed, but the same gods whose ancient status was equivocal enough could never be more than a mere literary convention for the Modern sensibility. If they were an embarrassment and an encumbrance for the Classical epic, given that their immortality disqualified them from any heroic activity of their own and they had to experience it vicariously through the mortals, how much more of an embarrassment and an encumbrance would they not be in a modern epic?

Moreover, not only was Christianity itself being undermined by the same Enlightenment rationalism, with its corollaries of deism and atheism, but even for the believer, monotheistic Christianity with its Judaistic and Puritan proscriptions against the re-presentation of God put anything approaching cultural parity with the ancient world out of the question. The status of Judeo-Christianity's own mythological narrative, the Bible, did not invite the sort of literary revisionism encouraged by Classical culture, though with the Miltonic precedent in *Paradise Lost* the occasional English poet was encouraged to indict a further testament.

All in all, then, things were looking inauspicious for heroic poetry as the historical sense was being exercised and honed over the turn of the eighteenth century, especially in the classical scholarship of the likes of Richard Bentley and in anticipations

of the cultural anthropology of Scottish Enlightenment historians like David Hume himself. However, where Moderns like Hume emphasized what they saw as the vast cultural divide separating themselves from the ancient writers, the Augustan poets, having acknowledged historical differences, sought to suppress them in search of the ahistorical universal. In spite of their being 'closet-Moderns' in their disapproval of the manners that for Hume constituted an insurmountable aesthetic problem ('this must be allowed to disfigure the poem'), and in spite of the fact that Pope's famous translation 'housebreaks Homer for a more fastidious age' to quote Howard Weinbrot again,²⁹ Dryden and Pope showed no hesitation in maintaining the artistic superiority of Homer and Virgil over any other poet who had appeared since their time. Let them 'contend for the prize of honour betwixt themselves', wrote Dryden immediately after characterizing the Homeric as 'irascible' and murderous, 'I am satisfied they will never have a third concurrent'.³⁰ What disqualified 'the commentators upon Homer' for Dryden and Pope was precisely their historicism; they

had more reading than taste, and were fonder of showing their variety of learning in all kinds than this single understanding in poetry. Hence it comes to pass that there remarks are rather philosophical, historical, geographical, allegorical, or in short any thing than critical and poetical.³¹

Poets, then as now, generally refuse to respect historical differences and write on the confident assumption that they share goals and interests with poets past, even when indulging in the most impatient and radical of revisionary activities. Indeed, it is their very impatience that reflects a refusal to accept that cultures separated by time and space should remain mutually incomprehensible, an assumption implicit in the whole historicist enterprise. 'It was Bentley who saw Homer as a careless rhapsodist, singing for a living in a primitive society long passed', writes Joseph Levine, 'it was Pope who imagined him a poet like Virgil or Milton (or like himself)'.³²

There are, as it turns out, a variety of qualifications that

intervene to make a pure 'ancientness' or pure 'modernness' untenable and help to explain the inconsistencies in the writings of poets like Dryden and Pope. For one thing, as a social and cultural mode the heroic was, ironically, alien to Homer himself, who 'makes it plain that he is telling of a far distant time and of greater men'³³:

And Hector grasped and bore a stone that lay before the gate, thick at the base but sharp at the point; not easily might two men, the mightiest of the folk, have upheaved it from the ground upon a wain—*men, such as mortals now are*—yet lightly did he wield it even alone

— *Iliad*, XII, 445-9 (my italics)³⁴

Whether or not there were indeed giants on the earth in those days, or just a lot of brutal warriors with nothing better to do than throw rocks at each other, Homer could be exonerated because he wrote a good two hundred and fifty years after the event. Pope was one to resort to this strategy, blithely indifferent to the fact that it contradicted many of the things he maintained elsewhere: 'We may infer that Homer was particularly careful not to confound the Manners of the Times he wrote of, with those of the Times he liv'd in'.³⁵

For another thing, epic poetry is first and foremost a mode of writing and only nominally and obliquely a mode of living.³⁶ As a trope of writing, moreover, it is easy to see the heroic ideal as, after all, just that: an ideal. And no less than with the later, chivalric ideal, where the fairy-tale element is more obvious—sometimes painfully so, which surely inspired as it informs Cervantes' *Don Quixote*—the heroic ideal expresses less a history than a dream of history: 'An excellence beyond human scale', to quote Aristotle, 'something heroic and divine, which may be illustrated by the phrase Homer makes Priam use of Hector to express his signal excellence, "He seemed the son of a god, not of mortal man"'.³⁷ Read alternatively as an ideology rather than as an ideal, the same 'excellence beyond human scale' makes the epic hero eminently adaptable to any and every situation by an aristocratic class which is at once the condition and the beneficiary of that idealism. Moreover, again like the chivalric ideal, when the heroic

ideal proves (as it inevitably must) inaccurate and inadequate to the practical business of living and thus needs to be 'supplemented', as it were, that supplementation only appears the more sordid in contrast to the purity of the aspiration, exposing the necessary hypocrisies that are invariably required to sustain the ideal politically and socially. Romantics like Friedrich Schiller would talk of striving 'to produce the Ideal out of the union of what is possible with what is necessary',³⁸ but the mock-heroic was the result of a growing impatience with the ideal, not just as illusory, but also as hypocritical and actively destructive. Which was, of course, where the satirist stepped in, ever vigilant in his or her attention to the follies and hypocrisies consequent upon human idealism.

IV

It is its ambivalence towards martial glory and heroic enterprize that makes the mock-heroic such an eloquent index of the so-called 'progress' on which modernity prided itself—ambivalence, I should stress, rather than mere inconsistency. Even in the depths of the hell represented in *Don Juan* by the siege of Ismail, for example, Byron is able to admire—or is it to envy?—the physical courage and conviction of his characters Juan and John Johnston. If there is a profound cynicism in the poem about what was traditionally considered heroic, in other words, there is also and at the same time a powerful *nostalgia* for the comparatively primitive, martial or masculinist ethos, especially in contrast with the machinations of the feminine. The same ambivalence characterizes Pope's relationship, as satirist and citizen, to Belinda and to her 'idle society' in *The Rape of the Lock*. Insofar as *The Rape of the Lock* is at pains to establish that heroic sentiments and values are remarkably absent from a contemporary society that is insignificant, effeminate, amorous, and secular ('Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux', I, 138) then the mock-heroic can be seen implicitly to deplore the passing of an epic world: grand in action and gesture, masculine, martial, and mythico-religious. And yet for all that, or in spite of all of that, insofar as the epic world can be said either directly and indirectly

to represent (re-present) an historical mode of living, and insofar as it affirms a set of values specific to that mode of living, it was still an uncivilized world in Pope's terms, one quite alien to the 'politeness' and 'refinement' of the culture he shares with Belinda.

If military heroism survived with the wars that made it necessary, even in its attenuated and ritualized chivalric forms it was arguably anomalous in a Christian state. Christ's own teachings under the imperial rule of a Rome that the English Augustans so admired stressed forgiveness, non-violence, indeed wilful martyrdom, rather than the retaliation, martial honour and death in battle required of the classical heroic. As Erich Auerbach points out, the very exaltation of the epic or tragic hero—*la gloire* to seventeenth-century *ancienneté*—'in Christian terms, is nothing other than *superbia*' or pride.³⁹

In the early eighteenth century the notion of honour and its association with a classical heroic, chivalric, and thence aristocratic ethos was very much under dispute for these Christians as well as for rationalist reasons, a dispute precipitated by some infamous, violent duels amongst members of the ruling classes.⁴⁰ Again, Pope tends rather to reproduce than to resolve the issue, determined to have his Classical ideal and his rational Christianity too. On the controversial issue of military glory, for example, in a *Guardian* essay 'On False Critics' he used the continuity between Aeneas and the first Duke of Marlborough—a national hero famous for his success at the Battle of Blenheim (1704) and already the object of epic exaltation—to justify his sense of his own culture as one whose claim to respect lay in its glorious continuity with the classical world:

Now Nature being still the same, it is impossible for any Modern Writer to paint her otherwise than as the Ancients have done. If, for Example, I were to describe the General's Horse at the Battel of *Blenheim*, as my Fancy represented such a noble Beast, and that Description should resemble what *Virgil* hath drawn for the Horse of his Hero, it would be almost as ill-natured to urge that I had stolen my Description from *Virgil*, as to reproach the Duke of *Marlborough* for fighting only like *Aeneas*.⁴¹

Yet we find in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* an all together less flattering comparison of the heroic but now questionable virtues of the same Marlborough (here 'Bestia') with the modest virtues of the poet's honest and industrious father. Having referred to his parents' 'gentle blood' with a gentle irony, Pope answers Arbuthnot's enquiry after their 'fortune' with an abrupt

Their own
And better got than *Bestia's* from the Throne.
Born to no Pride, inheriting no Strife,
Nor marrying Discord in a Noble Wife,
Stranger to Civil and Religious Rage,
The good Man walk'd innoxious thro' his Age.
No Courts he saw, no Suits would ever try,
Nor dared an Oath, nor hazarded a Lie.
Un-learn'd, he knew no Schoolman's subtle Art,
No Language but the Language of the Heart.
By Nature honest, and by Experience wise,
Healthy by Temp'rance and by Exercise:
His Life, though long, to sickness passed unknown,
His Death was instant, and without a groan.
Oh, grant me thus to live, and thus to die!
Who sprung from Kings shall know less joy than I.

— *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, ll. 390-405.

Here Pope betrays a sense of the welcome *discontinuity* between the martial culture of Homer and the more civilized and in this case quietistic world of his father. There is an explicit anti-aristocracy here that takes the form of, amongst other things like ethical autonomy, an anti-bellicosity. Again, Christianity can be and indeed was invoked to shame its pagan inheritance; the equality before God that Christ represents offers a standing challenge to Classical dignity and hierarchy.

In his father as elsewhere—in the figure of his lover Martha Blount in his Moral Essay *Of the Characters of Women*, for example—Pope offers a more democratic ideal of independence, unpretentiousness, familiarity and domesticity, common-sense, and (in characteristically English fashion) affection rather than the insane passions that move Classical (*and* neoClassical) drama and epic. The disproportionate passions that enflame Belinda and

her Amazonian side-kick Thalestris in *The Rape of the Lock* are bizarre because they represent a disproportionately 'heroic' response to a trivial occasion, certainly, but they are bizarre in themselves as well. By and large, people in fact do not respond that way (except in literature). If by chance they do, however—well, they should know better. Clarissa against Thalestris on emotional temperance and perspective is to this extent an anti-heroic voice:

What then Remains, but well our Pow'r to use,
And keep good Humour still whate'er we lose?
And trust me, Dear! good Humour can prevail,
When Airs, and Flights, and Screams, and Scolding fail.
Beauties in vain their pretty Eyes may roll;
Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul.

(V, 29-34)

Moreover, the voice of common sense is the voice, often, of the novelist. Think, for example, of the very different way in which we apply the words 'hero' and 'heroine' to the novel—usually understood as I have written them here within quotation marks and adrift from the epithet 'heroic'. If the novel took over the responsibility for historical narrative and meaningful organization of the world from the epic—Georg Lukács called it 'the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God'⁴²—the novel also took over the burden of ironic anti-idealism carried by the mock-heroic.⁴³ Indeed, because of the precedent and enormous influence of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, one could almost argue that the hero of the novel was a mock-hero from its beginnings and the novel itself a studied critique of any system of ideals, whether ancient epic or chivalric. Witness Pope in a Postscript to his translation of Homer in 1726:

... when rational beings are represented above their real character, it becomes ridiculous in Art, because it is vicious in Morality. The use of pompous expressions for low actions or thoughts, is the *true Sublime* of *Don Quixote*. How far unfit it is for Epic Poetry, appears in its being the perfection of the Mock-Epic.⁴⁴

(It is worth noting, incidentally, that the use of the pejorative 'pompous' makes it a toss up whether it is the social and literary

convention of chivalric romance or the lowness of the actions or thoughts that is the greater impropriety.)

Nor is it just the obvious examples of prose fiction like *Don Quixote*, Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* and *Tom Jones*, and Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Far less self-consciously literary but equally anti-heroic was the more domestic novel that by the end of the eighteenth century was associated almost exclusively with the liberation of women as writers and readers into the market. There is an implicit anti-idealism in the detailed circumstantiality and the comparatively humble characters of the domestic novels. In Jane Austen's novels, quite formal examples of a mock-heroic bathos using a blunt (if not exactly 'slum') realism to undermine forms of literary idealism—in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*, especially—merge with realism as an autonomous or self-justifying mode. The space between the ideal and the real so fruitful for the satirist, in other words, is also the ethical playground of the novel of education, a scene for the anti-heroic compromise of a hero or heroine become a presiding or primary ethical consciousness.

By mocking the heroic, then, Augustan poems like *The Rape of the Lock* can be seen to collaborate with the evolution of the middle-class fiction in the eighteenth century. Swift and Pope and Johnson all at different times attacked 'modernism', with its enthusiasms and its sense of innovation or novelty—just as at different times they attacked 'optimism' as a philosophy, 'progressivism' as an historiography, 'capitalism' as a political economy, and 'individualism' as an ethic. What they saw themselves attacking was nothing less than human pride and presumption and what they invoked was the Christian conviction of an original and ineradicable sin. Yet their work in the mock-heroic—their more or less cynical distrust and deflation of all forms of idealism—ended by contributing to the wholesale redefinition and even dismantling of the Classical heroic values and hierarchies that they elsewhere maintained.

Indeed, no better example of the middling-class values of duty, decency, and industry played out in an ordinary, unheroic world can be found than in the mock-heroic elegies of the eighteenth

century: in the closing lines of Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* on his own father, for example; in the praise Gray heaped on 'the unhonoured dead' in his country churchyard; in Johnson's 'On the Death of Dr Robert Levet', whose anti-hero resists even the heightened diction that Johnson cannot forsake:

Nor, letter'd Arrogance, deny
Thy praise to merit unrefined

— 'On the Death of Dr Robert Levet', ll. 11-2

The merit of the unrefined—or the merit of being unrefined, is it? There are intimations here of a heroism that can only ever exist outside 'literary influence', but that is another story.

V

We have seen that to the extent that the Augustans, with all their allegiance to the Classical epic, were unable willingly to suspend their disbelief and embrace the heroic ideal, was the extent to which they were allied with the rationalism and secularization of the times—if only because, for them, all idealism flew in the face of human corruption. 'The Eighteenth was a *Sceptical Century*', complained the early Victorian historian and sage Thomas Carlyle:

Perhaps, in few centuries since the world began, was a life of Heroism more difficult for a Man. That was not an age of Faith,—an age of Heroes! The very possibility of Heroism had been, as it were formally abnegated in the minds of all. Heroism was gone forever; Triviality, Formulism and Commonplace were come forever....

An effete world; wherein Wonder, Greatness, Godhood could not dwell.

According to Carlyle, the limits the Augustans imposed upon idealism were a product of their own self-limiting scepticism alone. To restore a dignity to human aspiration, Carlyle would rescue heroism, not only from the physical brutalities the classical world, but also from its death by scepticism in the eighteenth century. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the gap between the ideal and the real of the satirist and moral novelist

becomes the site of a Romantic irony, complete with 'heroic' *sehnsucht* and tragic exasperation.

Carlyle was only half right about the eighteenth century, however. 'Scepticism' since the Greeks had in fact offered a version of heroism that was in turn nurtured and valorized by the rationalism of the eighteenth century, a heroism that echoes in the very word 'Enlightenment': a clear-eyed objectivity that accepts dis-illusionment without *angst*. 'To see the object as in itself it really is'.⁴⁵ It is the heroism of the self-affirming 'smile of reason' of Voltaire captured in Prud'hon's famous bust and it was in fact contemptuous of Carlyle's palliative 'Wonder, Greatness, Godhood', seeing them as just so many gee-gaws for the frightened child. In Johnson's version:

Once more, Democritus, arise on earth,
With cheerful wisdom and instructive mirth,
See motley life in modern trappings dressed,
And feed with varied fools th'eternal jest:
Thou who couldst laugh where want enchained caprice,
Toil crushed conceit, and man was of a piece . . .
How wouldst thou shake at Britain's modish tribe,
Dart the quick taunt, and edge the percing jibe?
Attentive truth and nature to descry,
And pierce each scene with philosophic eye.
To thee were solemn toys and empty show,
The robes of pleasures and the veils of woe:
All aid the farce, and all thy mirth maintain,
Whose joys are causeless and whose griefs are vain.
Such was the scorn that filled the sage's mind,
Renewed at ev'ry glance on human kind;
How just that scorn . . .

—*The Vanity of Human Wishes*, ll. 49-54; 61-71⁴⁶

Johnson's Democritus anticipates Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and his twentieth-century progeny, though the specifically Christian pessimism Johnson discovers later in the same poem marks a great difference between Augustan and other forms of scepticism.

A choice between a clarity of vision maintained in the face of a metaphysical emptiness and the desperate piety of Johnson is,

however, irrelevant to the recognition that the eighteenth-century is making its own contribution to a long revolution in the idea or ideal of heroism. Dryden, you will recall, appealed to the 'lovers of peace, or at least of more moderate heroism' when stigmatizing of Homeric brutalities. Another kind or other kinds of hero can be seen as emerging, though the civilizing of Classical heroism by bringing it out of the battlefield and into the social and cultural arena exclusively is unlikely ever to be fully achieved while the battlefield remains the place where life can most easily be sacrificed in service. In the early nineteenth century, Carlyle himself celebrated the advent of one new hero, 'the Hero as Man of Letters':

Never, till about a hundred years ago was there seen any figure of a Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner; endeavouring to speak-forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that.

... this same Man-of-Letters Hero must be regarded as our most important modern person. He, such as he may be, is the soul of all. What he teaches the whole world will do and make. . . . Looking well at his life, we may get a glance, as deep as is readily possible for us, into the life of those singular centuries which have produced him, in which we ourselves live and work.⁴⁷

How new 'this same Man-of-Letters Hero' was is questionable, the contemplative having been active, and actively mythologized, from the beginning. On the other hand, given Carlyle's emphasis on '*Printed Books*', it is reasonable enough to say that, with the likes of Socrates, Diogenes the Cynic, and Democritus as remote ancestors and Montaigne and Bacon as more recent ones, Johnson and Voltaire are among the first literary culture heroes in Europe. Under the influence of Romantic notions of the creative imagination and of the psychic equivalent of the heroic and chivalric pilgrimage undertaken by the Romantic artist —

Bring me my bow of burning gold,
Bring me my arrows of desire;
Bring me my spear, O clouds unfold,
Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from *mental fight*,
Nor shall me sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
On England's green and pleasant land.

—the 'man of letters' becomes more specifically the creative or imaginative artist as the Romantic period conceived of him (again, not without ambivalence).

The degree of contemporary recognition of these new 'heroisms' of the man of letters and, later, of the artist can be measured by the number of those ancillary forms that since the eighteenth century have made up the new cult of the writer—biographies; recollections; table-talk; and so forth. Appropriately, Johnson was himself one of the first literary biographers, sharing in, stimulating, and to some extent satisfying this new curiosity regarding writers, as well as being the subject of the first extensively contextualizing biography in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*—a biography whose *hero*, note, is not a military or political figure, but a literary and cultural figure. It may even be that the newly competitive commercial world of publishing and bookselling in eighteenth-century Britain merely made out of heroism a closed shop, with writers promoting the writer as a new type of hero. But that, too, is another story.

The mock-heroic, then, involves a rather cunning double movement; not only does it use the heroic to mock, but it also mocks the heroic. Both. And if it betrays an indifference about which of the two takes priority—if in Pope we find every possible variation on the theme of literature's relationship with the ethico-cultural history of his Classical predecessors—that can also be understood as a characteristic refusal to resolve an opposition:

Plac'd 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 reas'ning but to err;
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:
 Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;
 Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;
 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 hurl'd:
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

— Pope, *An Essay on Man*, II, 3-18

Each of us, insists Pope, contains within himself or herself the ingredients of the mock-heroic. Certainly there are times when it is hard not to feel—histories of of a reciprocating literature and sensibility like this one notwithstanding—that the Augustans were right about the fact that some things don't change.

Notes

- 1 John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols, London, 1962, II, 270–1.
- 2 See 'Eating Their Words: Literary Influence II', *Arts* 18 (1996): 43–67, (p.51).
- 3 'MARGITES was the name of this personage, whom Antiquity recordeth to have been *Dunce the First* ... The poem therefore celebrating him, was properly and absolutely a *Dunciad*; which tho' now unhappily lost, yet is its nature sufficiently known ... And thus it doth appear, that the first *Dunciad* was the first epic poem, written by Homer himself, and anterior even to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*', in 'Martinus Scriblerus, of the Poem' in Pope's Preface to *The Dunciad*, *The Poems: The One-Volume Twickenham Edition*, ed. John Butt, London, 1963 [hereafter *The One-Volume Twickenham Pope*], p.343.
- 4 In *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, Oxford, 1972, pp.94–5. (Incidentally, what we know and what little we have of the lost *Margites*—*The Simpleton* or *The Demented*—cannot with any conviction be attributed to Homer; some scholars date it 200 years later.)
- 5 'The Preface of 1717', in *The One-Volume Twickenham Pope*, pp.xxv–xxix (p.xxvii).
- 6 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Task, Princeton, N.J., 1953, p.389.

- 7 'The Preface of 1717', in *The One-Volume Twickenham Pope*, pp.xxvi–xxvii.
- 8 *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, II, 223.
- 9 Ulrich Brioch, *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, trans. David Henry Wilson, Cambridge, 1990, p.5.
- 10 The phrases in parenthesis are from Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, ll. 89 and 297 respectively.
- 11 Quotations from the poetry of Pope throughout the article are from *The One-Volume Twickenham Pope*, cited above.
- 12 *Lives of the English Poets*, intro. Arthur Waugh, 2 vols, World's Classics, London, 1906; 1952, II, 322.
- 13 Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, trans. James Willis and Cornelis de Heer, London, 1966, pp.17–8.
- 14 P. Vergilius Maronis, *Opera*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford, 1969, pp.235–6.
- 15 John Dryden, *The Works of Virgil*, London, 1903, p.148.
- 16 *Grub Street Journal*, no. 39, 1 October 1730.
- 17 *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, p.60.
- 18 *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, p.58.
- 19 *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, pp.66–7.
- 20 Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age*, Ithaca and London, 1991, p.131.
- 21 'Of the Standard of Taste', in his *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, rev. ed., Indianapolis, 1987, pp.226–249 (p.246).
- 22 Prefixed to *Examen Poeticum* (1693), in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, II, 167.
- 23 As quoted in Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian*, Cambridge, 1993, p.217.
- 24 *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, the Twickenham Edition, ed. John Butt et al., 10 vols, New Haven and London, 1961–7 [hereafter *Twickenham Pope*], VII, 14.
- 25 *Don Juan*, VII, 41, Oxford Authors edition *Byron*, ed. Jerome McGann, Oxford and New York, 1986, p.631.
- 26 *Twickenham Pope*, X, 392; VII, 326 note.
- 27 See *Madame Dacier's Remarks upon Mr. Pope's Account of Homer* London, 1724, p.10, and John Ozell's English translation of her French translation of *The Iliad of Homer*, in 5 vols, London, 1712, I, xxii.
- 28 For an overview of all cultures, see C. M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry*, London, 1952.
- 29 Howard Weinbrot describes Mme Dacier's perception of Pope in her *Remarks on Mr. Pope's Account of Homer . . .*, translated and printed by Curll in 1724, as of a 'closet-Modern and a grave danger to the

- Ancient cause', *Britannia's Issue*, p.299. For Weinbrot on Pope's housebreaking of Homer, see p.228.
- 30 *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, II, 167.
- 31 *Twickenham Pope*, VII, 82–3.
- 32 *The Battle of the Books*, p.225.
- 33 To quote Albin Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, p.54.
- 34 See the Loeb Classical Library translation of the *Iliad*, ed. A. T. Murray, 2 vols, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1978, I, 577.
- 35 Notes to his translation of the *Iliad*, in *Twickenham Pope*, VII, 236.
- 36 See Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, pp.132–178.
- 37 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145^a 19 ff., as quoted in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. Russell and Winterbottom, p.92n.
- 38 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* [1795], ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Oxford, 1967, p.57 (Letter 9 §5).
- 39 *Mimesis*, p.393.
- 40 See Donna T. Andrews, 'The Code of Honour and Its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700–1850', in *Social History* 5 (October 1980): 409–34.
- 41 'On False Criticks', in *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. Norman Ault, Blackwell, 1936, I, 90.
- 42 *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock, London, repr. 1978, p.88.
- 43 'Parodic stylizations of canonized genres occupy an essential place in the novel', according to Mikhail Bakhtin. See Bakhtin's chapter 'Epic and the Novel' in his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, 1981, pp.3–40 (p.6).
- 44 *Twickenham Pope*, X, 387–8.
- 45 *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Shelston, Harmondsworth, 1971, p.250.
- 46 To quote Matthew Arnold's late formulation, in his 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series*, intro. G. K. Chesterton, London, 1964, pp.9–34 (p.9).
- 47 Quotations from Johnson's poetry here and below come from *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, Oxford and New York, p.316–7.
- 48 *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, pp.235; 236.