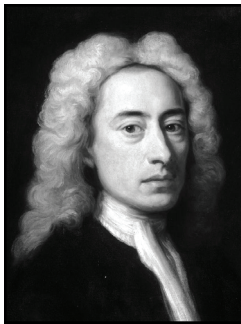


PUTTING A SPIN ON IT ALEXANDER POPE (1688-1744)



Like Jonathan Swift, his younger friend Alexander Pope is a man of extraordinary gifts who has to struggle against heavy obstacles to make them fruitful. While Swift is fatherless, poor and Anglo-Irish, Pope is crippled, chronically ill, and a Roman Catholic. As a Catholic, he can neither attend a university nor take part in public life, but he wins his way as the leading poet of his age, and by laboring for years over his collaborative translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he eventually attains financial security.

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Scrutinising a soon-to-be published collection of Pope's and Swift's correspondence, their mutual friend Lord Orrery sees nothing in Pope's letters that need be omitted, but notes that "In the dean's are some sharp sayings of a very high nature, and what may give room for his enemies to alarm, if not to molest him." Orrery here pinpoints the essential difference between the letters of the two satirists. Swift, often driven by a cold fury at humankind's self-inflicted suffering, can pour his whole self into his letters, while Pope, who in his poems can bite at his enemies like a ferocious dog, creates through his correspondence a sanitized self-portrait.

In the eighteenth-century press, literary controversy is pursued in a spirit that would hardly be tolerated today. Not content with assailing his views and denigrating his poetic abilities, Pope's enemies provoke his rage by mocking his stunted body and making unjustified attacks on his character. On his part, Pope acts with a deviousness for which he cannot escape blame. Thus he deceives—or tries to deceive—even his most cherished friends into thinking that he has had no part in allowing the disreputable publisher Edmund Curll to get possession of his letters, that he bears no responsibility for the printing of correspondence between himself and Swift, and that he is not the author of the risqué poem "Sober Advice to Horace." He is equally unscrupulous in denying that his treacherous

attacks on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu under the name of Sappho are directed at her.

In manoeuvring Curll into issuing a volume of his supposedly purloined letters, Pope's aim is to have an excuse to publish, in 1737, his own "authentic" collection—which is not, in fact, authentic. It is designed to reinforce the effect of his 1735 poem "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" in painting a well-laundered self-portrait. Through his letters, he seeks to persuade others—and himself—that he is a better man than he is. Though he will not face up to his vices, the virtues that he claims he really does possess. He is a devoted son, a charitable man, with rare exceptions a loyal friend, and a faithful if rationalistic Roman Catholic for whom the disabilities of Protestants in Italy are as loathsome as those of Catholics in England. Repeatedly, Pope asserts that it is better to be a good man than a good poet, though when his lifelong friend John Caryl sends him his grandson's verses, he maintains that a young man's being a good poet "is no small thing, and, I believe, no small earnest of his being a good man." On his own part, he tries hard to believe that his only serious ambition is to be a virtuous human being. To Caryl he writes in 1716:

As for myself, who am a single, unconcerned, and independent creature in the world, who have no interests at my heart but those of mankind, — a general good-will to all men of good-will, — I shall be content to wear away a life of no importance in any safe obscurity.

In 1741 he tells the Earl of Marchmont, "I am determined to publish no more in my lifetime ... I never had any uneasy desire of fame or keen resentment of injuries." Yet while he is ready to boast to the poet Aaron Hill, "I do know certainly, my moral life is superior to that of most of the wits of these days," he is aware he is no saint and looks up to the purer virtue of his co-religionists and dear friends John Caryl and Hugh Bethel. Other friends with whom he conducts notable correspondences are the distinguished lawyer William Fortescue; the handsome Roman Catholic sisters Teresa and Martha Blount; the businessman and philanthropist Ralph Allen; his fellow writers Jonathan Swift, John Gay and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; the statesman and Deist philosopher Lord Bolingbroke; his patron the second Earl of Oxford; and the great builders and landscape gardeners Lord Burlington and Lord Bathurst. As Maynard Mack observes, Pope has "an unusual talent for friendship." The most prized of all his friends are Swift, Gay and Bolingbroke.

Of the poet's letters to most of these correspondents, we happily possess either the manuscripts or posthumous printed texts, but some—espe-

cially most of those to Swift – survive only in the versions in his purportedly “authentic” collections. Enough manuscripts of letters in these volumes are extant to show that Pope heavily doctored those he published, frequently combining portions from different ones, ascribing some to the wrong addressee, and less culpably making stylistic revisions. He is a James Howell caught in the act.

Yet in an age of great letter-writers, Pope has a worthy place among the lesser practitioners of the art, and as he ages, his skill increases. Many of his early letters expound his thoughts on a subject and hardly seem to be addressing a specific individual: with very little trimming they could stand as periodical essays. His later letters chronicle most of his major preoccupations and do much to create a picture of his daily life. In times of political crisis, he fears the implementation of harsher measures against Roman Catholics, and he long nurses a fierce resentment at the Government’s banishment of his friend Bishop Atterbury on account of the latter’s Jacobite sympathies. The burden of translating Homer and of editing Shakespeare haunts him for years as he feels he has “become, by due gradation of dulness, from a poet, a translator, and from a translator, a mere editor.”

Pope’s tender and slightly flirtatious friendship with the sisters Teresa and Martha Blount, women of his own generation, survives his falling passionately in love with the married Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. When the latter leaves England in 1716 to accompany her husband to Turkey, he is terrified for her safety, and he even has thoughts of travelling to Italy when she is there. After she returns to Britain, the friendship between them is broken – a plausible story is that she bursts into laughter when the stunted little man makes an open declaration of love – and he swings from adulation to abuse. In time Pope is also alienated from Teresa Blount, who seems, after the death of her father, to start acting the tyrant over her aged mother and her younger sister while conducting a relationship with a married man. The younger sister, Martha, remains the poet’s closest female friend; there are even rumours that they are secretly married although Pope is almost an invalid, as the many references in his letters to his fevers, headaches, and troubled stomach remind the reader. Writing to Caryll, the godfather of Martha, he laments that her loyalty to her family prevents her from escaping from her sufferings.

During the fifteen years from 1718 to 1733, Pope lives in dread of losing his mother, and he tends her with the utmost care, which involves curtailing his journeys to stay in friends’ houses. In the correspondence, we follow the ups and downs of his emotion as she repeatedly sinks and rallies: he watches her, he writes as early as 1718, “with such a solemn pious kind of officiousness as a melancholy recluse watches the last risings and fallings of a dying taper.” By the time she expires, he is also grieving over

the poet Gay's decease and Swift's continued exile in Ireland and is longing for the temporary residence of Lord Bolingbroke – "the greatest man I ever knew," he assures Ralph Allen, "and one of the best friends" – to become permanent.

While Pope sorrows over the absence of those he loves, he shows a good-humoured resignation to the infirmity of what he can call "my own carcase (very little suited to my soul) my worst enemy." His fragility makes travelling over uneven roads a grave hardship, and without a companion an impossibility. It does not, happily, suppress his ardour for practising the art of landscape gardening in the five acres he rents beside the Thames at Twickenham. Referring to his recent counsel to Lord Bathurst, he writes to Ralph Allen in the autumn of 1736,

I am now as busy in planting for myself as I was lately in planting for another; and I thank God for every wet day and for every fog that gives me the headache, but prospers my works.

Pope especially delights in the famous Grotto that he constructs under the road bisecting his land and that he adorns with glittering minerals and an alabaster lamp. Here he can retreat and imagine that he has withdrawn from the degeneration that he likes to insist has overtaken the present age. To the statesman James Craggs, he complains in 1715 that "the spirit of dissension is gone forth among us ... old England is no longer old England, that region of hospitality, society, and good humour. Party affects us all." Nine years later, he informs a son of Baron Digby that in London, "Instead of the four cardinal virtues, now reign four courtly ones: we have cunning for prudence, rapine for justice, time-serving for fortitude, and luxury for temperance."

Besides bereavements and his ill health, the experience of aging probably helps to sour Pope's later outlook on the world. To Swift he laments:

You ask me if I have got any supply of new friends to make up for those that are gone? I think that impossible, for not our friends only, but so much of ourselves is gone by the mere flux and course of years, that were the same friends to be restored to us, we could not be restored to ourselves to enjoy them.

Pope seems also to be vexed by his need to reply to attacks on his religious orthodoxy following the publication of his ambitious poem *An Essay on Man*. To one ardent admirer, the writer Henry Brooke, he declares in 1739:

I sincerely worship God, believe in his revelations, resign to his dispensations, love all his creatures, am in charity with all denominations of Christians, however violently they treat each other, and detest none so much as that profligate race who would loosen the bands of morality, either under the pretence of religion or free-thinking. I hate no man as a man, but I but I hate vice in any man; I hate no sect, but I hate uncharitableness in any sect.

When Bishop Attenbury vainly suggests he become a Protestant and advises him to read “the best controversies between the churches,” Pope replies:

Shall I tell you a secret? I did so at fourteen years old (for I loved reading, and my father had no other books) ... and the consequence was, that I found myself a Papist and a Protestant by turns, according to the last book I read. I am afraid most seekers are in the same case, and when they stop, they are not so properly converted, as outwitted.

Scattered through Pope’s correspondence are memorable individual letters enriched by his touches of humour and power of description. As might be expected from the poet of *The Rape of the Lock*, he can strike a playful note. Wishing the Blount sisters good Catholic husbands, he reminds them of the pleasures of an allowance for their personal needs and pleasures:

O pin-money! dear, desirable pin-money! in thee are included all the blessings of woman! In thee are comprised fine clothes, fine lodgings, fine operas, fine masquerades, fine fellows. Foh! Says Mrs. Teresa, at this last article—and so I hold my tongue.

Many of the letters concern the publishing of his works, and to entertain the Earl of Burlington, Pope skewers his publisher Bernard Lintot in an imaginary dialogue between Lintot and himself when they meet on horseback in Windsor Forest. “My Lord,” Pope begins his letter, “if your mare could speak, she would give you an account of what extraordinary company she had on the road; which since she cannot do, I will.” After asking Pope to translate an ode of Horace into English verse, Lintot complains he is too slow, and when Pope asks him how he manages the translators he employs, he replies:

Sir, those are the saddest pack of rogues in the world: in a hungry fit, they’ll swear they understand all the languages in the universe. I have known one of them take down a Greek book

upon my counter, and cry, Ah, this is Hebrew, I must read it from the latter end. By G-d, I can never be sure in these fellows, for I neither understand Greek, Latin, French, nor Italian myself.

Pope can also convey his real experience of travel, as he does when he writes to Teresa and Martha Blount of his journey to Oxford in 1717:

having passed through my favourite woods in the forest, with a thousand reveries of past pleasures, I rid over hanging hills, whose tops were edged with groves, and whose feet watered with winding rivers, listening to the falls of cataracts below, and the murmuring of the winds above ... About a mile before I reached Oxford, all the bells tolled in different notes; the clocks of every college answered one another, and sounded forth (some in deeper, some in softer tone) that it was eleven at night.

Very different from Oxford, with its “old walls, venerable galleries, stone porticoes, studious walks, and solitary scenes,” is the city of Bath. In 1714 Pope admits to Martha:

I have slid, I cannot tell how, into all the amusements of this place: my whole day is shared by the pump-assemblies, the walks, the chocolate-houses, raffling-shops, plays, medleys, &c.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is also a beneficiary of the poet’s descriptive skill when Pope sends her his observations on “a genuine ancient country seat eighty miles from London”:

You must expect nothing regular in my description of a house that seems to be built before rules were in fashion.... A stranger would be grievously disappointed who should ever think to get into this house the right way; one would expect after entering through the porch to be let into the hall; alas! nothing less; you find yourself in a brewhouse. From the parlour you think to step into the drawing-room; but upon opening the iron-nailed door, you are convinced by a flight of birds about your ears, and a cloud of dust in your eyes, that it is the pigeon-house.... Over the parlour window hangs a sloping balcony, which time has turned to a very convenient penthouse. The top is crowned with a very venerable tower, so like that of the church just by, that the jackdaws build in it as if it were the true steeple.

Despite Pope’s later feud with Lady Mary, his letters show his capacity for love and for friendship, his pleasure in travel, and his delight in land-

scape gardening. They embody his concern for his reputation and reveal his sometimes devious literary conduct. His way of coping with his physical disability and his suffering from bereavements also have a place in them. However, for a picture of the whole man, so rich in virtues and vices, we must turn to his poetry. There we find in full measure his loyalties and his waspishness, his faith and his scatology, and above all his vision of the perpetual struggle of civilization – material, intellectual, and moral – to sustain itself against the encroachment of barbarism and depravity.