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Enlightenment and Digression in Literary Creativity

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Abstract

The Age of Enlightenment laid an enormous emphasis on the ability to reason and to think. Topics of varied interest accelerated the thoughts and reason of the people. Chief among them was the issue of God, which consequently caused many to question the church, while others were concerned with the organization of the Universe, and man's place within the Universe. The first epistle of Alexander Pope's Essay on Man can be considered an articulation of the Enlightenment because it encompasses the above said three major themes which formed the basis of scholarly discussions of the day. While addressing man's ability to reason and think, Pope questions the church and the nature of Christianity, and also speculates about man's place in the world, as a part in the eternal chain of life.

The Age of Reason was marked by the term “enlightenment”, which was its central focus. Pope begins his Epistle One by appealing to the reason of his audience. He writes, “Together let us beat this ample field, / Try to open, what the covert yield!”(9). Pope encourages his audience to use the reason they have been given, to examine those things that have been advised against and to reason those issues which have been kept beyond the human knowledge. He then goes on to write “say first, of God above, or man below, / What can we reason, but from what we know?”(17-18). Here Pope pleads with the ability of his audience to reason, luring them into the 18th century, to seek for evidence in the knowledge they have received, rather than allowing the church to spoon-feed them with knowledge.

During the Enlightenment, people began to question the church for the first time. Pope exemplifies when he writes, “no Christians thirst for gold.”(111). Pope subtly questions the nature of Christianity and that of the Christians by exposing their sinful desire for materialistic life. His words are simple, yet they convey a lot. By acknowledging that the Christians sin, and “thirst for gold,” he asks then why a man is looked down upon if he does not aspire to be a Christian, for Christians are also humans born with the innate human nature to err. Pope was not the only person to question the established institution of church. David Hume writes, “The Truth of Christian Religion is less than the Evidence for the Truth of our Senses...”(6). Many writers during the Enlightenment not only questioned Christianity, but also the religious dogmas in general.

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Epistle One of Pope's *Essay on Man*, is merely one of the literary pieces of the 18th century, which voices its ideas on the subject.

Another issue that Pope, as well as his readers concerned themselves, during the Enlightenment, was man's place within the Universe. Pope addresses the issue when he writes. "Vast chain of being! Which from God began, / Natures ethereal, human, angel, man..."(237-38). Pope expresses his opinion that man's place in the Universe, is within "Nature's chain." Therefore man is simply a link within that chain. Pope's idea that there is a chain or structure to the Universe is representative of the belief of many Enlightenment thinkers, that there is a "best" way to structure things. During the Enlightenment everything was being organized, and classified. From the structure of society, to the structure of Universe, there existed a common belief that organization was the key to produce the "best" of anything.

It is important to examine literature, because literature is often the best reflection of the people during the time in which it was written. Pope's *Essay on Man* was written during the Enlightenment, and reflects the attitudes and inquisitions of the people who lived during that time. Pope addresses man's ability to reason, reason being the central focus of the Enlightenment. He also questions the church, and examines the structure of the Universe, both topics of which were concerns to people during the Enlightenment. The first epistle of *Essay on Man* can serve as an articulation of the Enlightenment because it not only expresses the views that were of concern to Pope, but also to the people of his time.

The Issue of Degraded Writing in the Works of Swift and Pope

The eighteenth century witnessed a major revolution in some ways more profound than the Civil War, it was in the Printing Trade. It was a state of anarchy within which struggling writers, who came from the lower strata, wrote in journals, newspapers, magazines etc. Great consumption of these kinds of writings led to the formation of 'the Grub Street' (a London Street inhabited by literary hacks such as writers of small histories, dictionaries and temporary poems. The term 'Grub Street' is often used collectively for poor and needy authors who wrote for meager sums of money.)

This popular culture, which in the view of historians was created, produced and consumed by people themselves, and acquired an identity which it never had before. Moreover, it was a time of political strife and patriotism which paved way for intense diplomatic feelings. Almost all writers could be bought; even the best of them, with a few exceptions, were in the pay or service of one party or the other. Literature became the handmaid of politics and of state-craft. It was at this time that writers like Swift and Pope wrote satires against hack writers, the tradition introduced by Dryden in his poem *Mac Flecknoe* in which he has mocked and ridiculed writers like whom he regarded worthless (Shadwell, Ogilvy etc) and exalted worthy writers of immense poetic talent (Fletcher, Ben Jonson etc).

Among such satirical works comes that of Swift, in which he has attempted to satirize scholastic and modern incoherence in learning, by his book *A Tale of a Tub*. It can be seen embodying, as the 'Author's Apology' states, the author's intention, its satiric purpose being to expose the corruptions in learning and religion. On the surface level, Swift claims to belong to the community of the hack writers at the Grub Street, and also to conform to the literary practices which they deployed, and to glorify them in a manner such that the glorification becomes only an attack or a mock-exaltation of these very writers. Swift has, in this book, ridiculed various literary practices of his contemporary writers. He has poked fun at the tradition of writing prefaces which became a vehicle for the authors to denounce other writers and indulge in self-praise to assert their own worth. He mockingly says that his work might be criticized for not conforming to this important practice. In a tongue-in-cheek manner Swift claims that he must be given all the privileges which are claimed by other modern writers, for example that of being regarded as remarkably clever, witty or profound where a part of the text is put in a different type, italicized or simply obscure. By this he has only revealed the shallowness of learning and meaninglessness of the works of *modern* writers who unduly received fame by only catering to the craze for cheap and crude entertainment In 'Section V: A Digression in the Modern Kind', under the guise of complementing the moderns and showing them superior to the ancients who are only weak glimmering lights, Swift actually exposes the shallow literature, unprincipled politics and pseudo-scientific pursuits of his contemporaries.

The aim, on the surface, of 'Section VII: A Digression in Praise of Digressions' (A Tale of a Tub) is of defending the modern practice of introducing digressions in the literary works due to lack of raw material that was available to the Greeks and the Romans. However, underneath it Swift's aim is to ridicule the moderns for their deficiencies of knowledge and the style and content of their writings:

*For what though his head may be empty,
provided his book be full, and if you bate him
about the circumstances of method and style
and grammar and invention; allow him but the
common privilege of transcribing from others and
digressing from himself as often as he shall see the
occasion .(93-96)*

Swift, ironically, comments that the number of writers would be reduced if padding was to be spurned. To expose the irrelevance of such digressions Swift asserts that this particular digression can be transferred to any other part of the text if that seems better to the reader.

Apart from satirizing hack writers and their shallow works, Swift has also mocked critics and their false criticism in 'Section III: A Digression Concerning Critics'. He says that unfortunately the only surviving type of critics is that of the "discoverers and collectors of writers' faults" who are described as the descendants of the Greek God Momus, the God of fault-finding. Their minds are so engrossed with the faults of others that their own work exemplifies the very faults they criticize. In the conclusion of the text Swift makes a final gibe at modern writers by saying that:

*"...I have sometimes known it to be writing as
in visiting, where the ceremony of taking leave has
employed more time than the whole conversation
before."(17-18)*

Another writer perturbed by the increasing number of hack writers was Alexander Pope. Pope lived in the age of neo-classicism the principle of which was written to Pope by William Walsh "The best of modern poets in all languages are those that have nearest copied the ancients." Pope himself confirmed this in his 'Essay on Criticism';

*"Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem,
To copy Nature is to copy them."(139-140)*

According to Walsh, the poet's freedom had in

England degenerated into license and a remedy must be sought in 'correctness' and in 'order'. Pope accepted this view and accordingly made correctness in his aim and expressed it at large in 'Essay on Criticism', a didactic poem on the canons of literary taste and style, about the classical precepts of Aristotle and others like Horace. It exhibits clearly the merits and limitations of the eighteenth century poetry.

In another of his literary works, 'The Dunciad', Pope has employed the scheme of castigation of all the literary pretenders of the day. It is a long satire in the form of an epic on Grub Street writers, cheap literary hack writers and even those like Lewis Theobald and Colley Cibber who had incurred Pope's displeasures. As the title suggests ('Dunciad' a coinage from the word 'dunces') these cheap, unworthy writers are reduced to blockheads who produce hollow works. Though brilliantly written, it became a vehicle of Pope's personal malice.

Pope has also tried to distinguish between good and bad poetry in his poem "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot". Poetry in Pope's view is a means of moral uplift, and the poet must therefore be equipped, naturally and by personal endeavor, to write poems to that end. In an important passage (283-304) he tells us that it is a misuse of the art of poetry to slander innocent men and virtuous women. That is why Pope is opposed to a poet like Sporus (or Lord Hervey) "whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys", and whose wit is "all see-saw between that and this." In this poem Pope has also distinguished between good and bad critics. Good critic, according to him is one who possesses "spirit" (courage), "taste" (proper judgement), and "sense" (unbiased approach):

*"Pains, reading, study, are their just pretence
And all they want is spirit, taste and sense."*

*While bad critic is one who merely insists technical
aspects:*

*"Each wight who reads not, and but scans and
spells,*

Each word-catcher that lives on syllables."

(159-166)

Pope has included men like Bentley and Theobald in this category of critics. Pope also condemns the critics who find in an author's work meanings which the author himself never intended as did Bubb Dodington with Pope's 'Epistle to Burlington'.

In 'An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot', Pope has also condemned poetasters and versifiers who visit him to have "My friendship, and a prologue, and ten pound." Pope scoffs at them by saying that they seem to have come from Bedlam (reference to a lunatic asylum at Bethlehem). Here Pope has made a larger comment at the Grub Street writers and also at the prevailing tradition of seeking patrons for material advantages and bribing publishers, with the view of chastising hack writers whom he says are not shaken even by the meanest condemnation. Pope strongly disapproves of plagiarism that these scribblers indulged in. He condemns Ambrose Philips for having stolen the material for his Pastorals. According to Pope, a man who "just writes to make his barrenness appear" should not write at all. He who writes in an inflated, pompous style produces not poetry but fustian and this fustian can be "so sublimely bad" that "it is not poetry, but prose run mad."

According to Swift, the age had degenerated to a large extent. It was a time when factors like politics, religious background and national identity played a major role in determining the altitude of one's career. Both Swift and Pope suffered at the hands of this custom, Swift due to his Irish identity and Pope due to his Roman Catholic background. Both then took up the cause of writing satires with the aim of exposing the hollowness, dullness, irrelevance, lack of profundity,

and low level of the writings of their contemporary writers. Though a tinge of personal spite marks their satirical works, yet one cannot overlook the noble aim with which these two writers wrote - the aim of maintaining high standards of literary creativity.

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