

POPE ON THE UPSWING

THE TWICKENHAM EDITION OF THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE, Vol. IV : IMITATIONS OF HORACE, Ed. by John Butt (Methuen, 15/-).

THE POETICAL CAREER OF ALEXANDER POPE, by Robert Kilburn Root (Princeton University Press and Humphrey Milford, 11/6).

Even those who cannot help an inner sinking when they contemplate the enshrinement of poets in monuments of scholarship will agree that the new edition of Pope, of which Volume IV is the first to be issued, seems likely to justify itself. Pope is pre-eminently a poet who calls for a scholarly apparatus, and Elwin and Courthope didn't make a final job of it. The apparatus in the present volume has been introduced with judgment. The reader will be glad to have the original texts of Horace and Donne set, page by page, over against Pope's 'imitations'; the necessary information about each work is handily placed; and intelligent economy has been exercised in the matter of footnotes.

Yet the prominence of the footnotes gives an edge to the question whether three sentences above a damaging concession wasn't made at Pope's expense. Actually, when the volume containing the *Dunciad* appears the proportion of footnotes to text in, say, Book III of that poem will probably turn out to be not notably less, and I do not think that, there, any adverse conclusion should be admitted. Nevertheless, a reading of the present volume does bring home to one that a great deal of Pope's work was of its time in a way that irremediably impoverishes its life for us: too great a part in it is played by topicalities and particularities that must now remain mere references to footnotes. The brilliance is everywhere, but the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* is the only piece in the book of which one can unhesitatingly say that it deserves to be current as a poem of classical standing and an illustration of Pope's genius.

The very positive culture that saw itself as Augustan, and expressed itself characteristically in the habit of 'imitation' didn't bring the best out of Pope. Wide-ranging as were the freedoms he permitted himself, 'imitation' didn't favour the controlling

and directing of the dispersed effects of his satire by dominant drives of interest ; it favoured, rather, a weak discursiveness, an exasperating bluff of continuity, and some of the less agreeable manifestations of Pope's interest in couplets.

The cultural advantages represented by the Horatianizing appear rather in work not included in this volume ; in, for instance, the best of the Moral Essays—notably in the one of which Professor Root says (p. 184) :

' When one thinks of the *Epistle to the Earl of Burlington* it is the picture of Timon's villa, rather than the didactic thesis that utility and good sense are the indispensable foundation of good taste, that at once springs to the memory.'

Of the ' didactic thesis ' Mr. Root says no more. Yet the most remarkable thing about the epistle—that which makes it representative of Pope's greatness—is the way in which the malicious vivacity of the passage on Timon's villa passes, with perfect sureness, into the solemn didacticism of those closing paragraphs in which the substance of the ' thesis '—

'Tis Use alone that sanctifies Expense,
And Splendour borrows all her rays from Sense

—is realized imaginatively in a rich, varied and triumphant poetry. This poetry, the more significant by reason of where it comes, could have been written only by a great poet whose imagination was informed, and whose pen controlled, by a fine and generally shared ideal of civilized order—an ideal that had some basis in actuality. No analysis of Pope's art that doesn't lead to such considerations as these can come near his greatness or even do justice to his technical skill and his cleverness.

So it is that, though Mr. Root gives a good deal of space to discussing Pope's technique, he doesn't really get much said. He rightly insists on the variety of the Augustan couplet as handled by Pope, but is unable to go far in describing the nature and conditions of that variety. His book, in fact, is not what the dust-jacket says it is,

' a new interpretation and a fresh appraisal for modern readers of a famous poet whose reputation is now very decidedly on the upswing ' ;

it is, rather, a now familiar kind of evidence that the change in taste that set in two decades ago has made itself felt even in conservative academic preserves.

Mr. Root's acceptance of Pope is complete, and the worst of complete acceptance is that it precludes appreciation. To show equal enthusiasm for the *Essay on Man* and the *Dunciad* is not really to advance the recognition of Pope's genius. Mr. Root calls attention to the prejudices and preferences of nineteenth-century taste that stand (or stood) between Pope and recognition—

' not a few modern readers, I imagine, would think that the temper of satire is alien to that of poetry '

and

' A generation ago literary historians of the eighteenth century spent much of their time in hunting for so-called " precursors " of romanticism '

—but, in the traditional way, he brackets the *Unfortunate Lady* with *Eloïsa* (they are ' in substance, if not in execution, romantic '), which no one could do who recognized the extraordinary distinction of the *Elegy*. True, of this he adds that

' Its literary virtues spring not from Pope's heart, but from his exquisite mastery of the art of poetic expression ' ;

but then (with Lytton Strachey and other good company) he finds the well-known couplet,

Lo! where Mæotis sleeps, and hardly flows
The freezing Tanais thro' a waste of snows,

worth exclaiming upon (and analysing) as an instance of that mastery. And the passages he quotes as ' poetry of a high order ' have usually little to distinguish them but an obvious poeticality.

But he has at any rate, while presenting his lecture-audiences (one presumes) with a useful selection of relevant information, exhorted them to find Pope a living and lively poet—though I myself think Pope better served by one's confining one's enthusiastic recommendation to a comparatively few things, *e.g.*, the *Elegy on the Unfortunate Lady*, *Epistles III* and *IV* in the *Moral Essays*, the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* and the fourth book of the *Dunciad*.

As already intimated, Volume IV of the new edition contains the 'versifications' of Donne's satires, and this relevant passage from the Introduction (p. 42) seems worth quoting:

'Pope's attention to Donne's *Satires* should not give any cause for surprise. Though he and his contemporaries may not have read Donne with the enthusiasm with which we read him to-day, certainly they read him. Tonson, the publisher, considered that there was sufficient demand for a new edition of the poems in 1714; and fifteen of them are found in Dryden's *Miscellany*, the most popular and representative anthology of the period, re-issued for the fifth time in 1727. Spence records that Pope held Donne's poetry in high repute . . .'

The liking for Donne may be correlated with this comment on Milton, which Spence also records (Mr. Root quotes it):

'The high style, that is affected in so much blank verse, would not have been borne, even in Milton, had not his subject turned so much on such strange out-of-the-world things as it does.'

How habitual was the Augustan assumption regarding the proper relation between poetry and the spoken language may be gathered from the following couplet, which occurs in the 'imitation' of Horace Ep. I, Lib. II, but is Pope's unprompted contribution:

What will a Child learn sooner than a song?
What better teach a Foreigner the tongue?

That last argument could hardly have occurred to a defender of the Poet in the nineteenth century. It is of the essential strength of Pope that the point could seriously have been made of his own best poetry.

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