An Essay on Criticism

BY ALEXANDER POPE

Introduction

Alexander Pope, a translator, poet, wit, amateur landscape gardener, and satirist, was born in London in 1688. He contracted tuberculosis of the bone when he was young, which disfigured his spine and purportedly only allowed him to grow to 4 feet, 6 inches. Pope grew up on his father's property at Binfield in Windsor Forest, where he read avidly and gained an appreciation for the natural world. Though he remained in ill health throughout his life, he was able to support himself as a translator and writer. As a Catholic at that time in Britain, he was ineligible for patronage, public office, or a position at a university.

A sharp-penned satirist of public figures and their behavior, Pope had his supporters and detractors. He was friends with Jonathan Swift, Dr. John Arbuthnot, and John Gay. Pope's poems include the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" and the mock epic "The Rape of the Lock." To read his work is to be exposed to the order and wit of the 18th century poetry that preceded the Romantic poets. Pope primarily used the heroic couplet, and his lines are immensely quotable; from "An Essay on Criticism" come famous phrases such as "To err is human; to forgive, divine," "A little learning is a dang'rous thing," and "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

After 1718 Pope lived on his five-acre property at Twickenham by the Thames. He cultivated a much-visited garden that contained a grotto, and featured the formal characteristics of a French garden and the newer more natural "English" landscape style.

Pope wrote "An Essay on Criticism" when he was 23; he was influenced by

Quintillian, Aristotle, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and Nicolas Boileau's *L'Art Poëtique*. Written in heroic couplets, the tone is straight-forward and conversational. It is a discussion of what good critics should do; however, in reading it one gleans much wisdom on the qualities poets should strive for in their own work. In Part I of "An Essay on Criticism," Pope notes the lack of "true taste" in critics, stating: "'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none / Go just alike, yet each believes his own." Pope advocates knowing one's own artistic limits: "Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet, / And mark that point where sense and dullness meet." He stresses the order in nature and the value of the work of the "Ancients" of Greece, but also states that not all good work can be explained by rules: "Some beauties yet, no precepts can declare, / For there's a happiness as well as care."

In Part II, Pope lists the mistakes that critics make, as well as the defects in poems that some critics short-sightedly praise. He advocates looking at a whole piece of work, instead of being swayed by some of its showier or faulty parts: "As men of breeding, sometimes men of wit, / T' avoid great errors, must the less commit." He advises against too much ornamentation in writing, and against fancy style that communicates little of merit. In his description of versification, his lines enact the effects of clumsy writing: "And ten low words oft creep in one dull line," and "A needless Alexandrine ends the song, / That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along." In Part III, Pope discusses what critics should do, holding up the "Ancients" as models, including Aristotle (the "Stagirite") who was respected by the lawless poets: "Poets, a race long unconfin'd and free, / Still fond and proud of savage liberty, / Receiv'd his laws; and stood convinc'd 'twas fit, / Who conquer'd nature, should preside o'er wit."

PART 1

'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill
Appear in writing or in judging ill;
But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' offence
To tire our patience, than mislead our sense.
Some few in that, but numbers err in this,
Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss;