

Alexander Pope and Iconic Versification: Examples of Eighteenth-Century Nominalism

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Review of Simon Alderson, “Alexander Pope and the Nature of Language.” *Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, vol. 47, no. 185, Feb. 1996, pp. 23–34. *EBSCO*.

“A little learning is a dang’rous thing;/ drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring” (ll. 216-217):

Alexander Pope penned these lines in *An Essay on Criticism* while in his early twenties. Because he is a celebrated figure among modern scholars and was a public one during his own time, we might expect Pope’s personal and authorial history to be extensively documented. While this may be true in some respects, the identity of those texts which formed the origins of Pope’s literary style is one glaring exception. Which literary style most inspired Pope? And how does a better understanding of Pope inform our understanding of eighteenth-century literary themes and practices? Simon Alderson answers these two questions, claiming that “the beliefs held by Pope about the nature of language provide a background and context for understanding his practice of iconic versification” (1), which Alderson links with a nominalist position.

Alderson outlines a two-part argument (2), though he does not immediately clarify the connection between the two. First, by drawing on the work of Pope’s biographer Maynard Mack, Alderson scrutinizes Pope’s educational history through specific eighteenth-century grammatical texts, rather than systemic schooling trends of the period. He gives good reason for his strategic choice of the former: i.e. due to Pope being an autodidact, his formative influences come from a self-curated collection of educational texts rather than his attending schools or

academies (1). Second, Alderson sustains the earlier analysis of grammatical texts but with additional consideration of language orthodoxy. By doing so, Alderson contextualizes an otherwise abstract term from his thesis: the “nature of language” (1). Alderson capably provides readers with a roadmap to his essay.

Alderson’s thesis is largely contingent on Warburton’s supposition that two grammatical texts, respectively authored by Gildon and Greenwood, were likely to have been influential to an Alexander Pope in his early twenties. While Alderson notes a significant flaw that could invalidate Warburton’s theory (4), he nevertheless continues adopting Warburton’s ideas without providing supporting evidence of his own. As a result, any claims implicating Gildon’s and Greenwood’s texts in Pope’s literary identity become tenuous. Despite this problematic fact, the article offers readers an edifying analysis of said texts. Readers interested in eighteenth-century language orthodoxy may find several insights here, such as “Gildon’s grammar was the most popular and widely used of the early eighteenth century”(4), or the idea that grammar texts of the period were often contradictory in their attribution to either mentalist or nominalist views because while their content preaches Lockian grammar, they also retained nominalist influences (6). These pronouncements of Alderson’s, while bringing readers no closer to understanding Alexander Pope, do however assert broadly that “the influential linguistic theories of Port-Royal and Locke thus did not prevent...[nominalist views of language] from being transmitted, at a popular level, to the eighteenth-century student (6). While this whole section seems only slightly relevant to Pope at this point in the paper, Alderson’s intertextual analysis clarifies other topics.

Alderson concludes by attempting to show stylistic proximity between Pope’s translations of Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and editions by John Dryden. He gives ample evidence of iconic versification within Pope’s translations, along with a clear explanation of the

concept based on Wallis's imitative phonetic clusters (8): in other words, iconic versification happens when a word sounds like its meaning. Upon revealing the fact that "iconic versification rests, at heart, on a pre-Lockian linguistics" (7), Alderson clarifies Pope's nominalist proclivities, and thus ties back to his argument about Pope's possible grammar textbooks. Alderson, in fact, shows that Pope's editions not only match but improve on Dryden's iconicity (9).

Alderson's preliminary attempt to identify Pope's linguistic wellspring shows readers that educational texts for eighteenth-century writers were saturated with the philosophical perspectives from both camps in the ontological debate. Despite a detailed analysis of Gildon's and Greenwood's grammatical texts, Pope's own use of these volumes remains inconclusive. Instead, Pope's nominalist leanings are better substantiated through Alderson's later revelations regarding Pope's use of iconic versification. Despite its early inconsistency, however, this essay offers readers an interesting foray into eighteenth-century literature on scales of varying magnitude. Iconic versification, a pre-Lockian linguistic device, depicts minute word groupings, biographical knowledge of Alexander Pope helps readers better comprehend a famed writer of the period, and the wider theme of language orthodoxy is substantiated as a vital issue to the period. "Alexander Pope and the Nature of Language" engages readers to see the eighteenth century from a variety of perspectives and is thus a helpful choice for readers interested in Alexander Pope or this time period.

With appreciation for Simon Alderson's remarkable efforts, I share one final observation regarding interpretation of the article's thesis. In essence, the essay demonstrates Pope's nominalist membership is a product of iconic versification, rather than the inverse relation as the thesis claims. This incoherency, as Alderson explains himself, can be attributed to the fact that "Pope did not write widely and systematically on the nature of language" (23). As such, when

tasting this article, I urge readers to reconsider Alderson's thesis statement, as they will most likely conclude the essay to be a valid heuristic for understanding Pope's ontological beliefs and worth their drinking deeply.

Works Cited

Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Criticism. Major Works*, edited by Pat Rogers, Oxford University Press, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central.



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