

Teaching Alexander: Inspiration in *An Essay on Criticism*

Faizan Arif

“And if the means be just, the conduct true,
Applause, in spite of trivial faults, is due.”

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 257-58

Who is a critic? More importantly, who is a reliable critic? What qualifies a person to weigh various works of art, judge their quality, and recommend them to the broader public or damn them to obscurity? These are big questions that twenty-three-year-old Alexander Pope tackles in a small poem called *An Essay on Criticism*. However, while its title betrays that the central concern of the poem is a discussion of literary criticism and its practitioners, the poem, through its many little detours – to the source of creative inspiration, the envious hearts of hateful critics, and the mind of the ideal critic – provides a bird’s eye view of Pope’s larger philosophies of life and art. Indeed, as the poem shows, it might be misleading to use the word “philosophies,” since for Pope, art and life are tightly connected and may well be covered by just one philosophy; Pope considers that knowledge about art feeds knowledge about life and vice versa. Thus, moral character and literary expertise are character traits that inevitably clump together. The ideal critic is the ideal man. Through balancing this equation between literature and life, the speaker of the Pope’s poem becomes the highest authority, the ultimate arbiter of merit, whether it be expressed in actions or in ink, and it renders a truly hopeful verdict for the young, yet untested Alexander Pope.

To clearly see the connection that Pope constructs between art and life, it is necessary to understand his perspective on literary criticism. This being an essay about criticism, Pope speaks

exhaustively on the topic. Near the beginning of the essay, however, Pope's speaker suggests that creating criticism and art are closely related acts:

In poets as true genius is but rare,
 True taste as seldom is the critic's share;
 Both must alike from Heaven derive their light,
 These born to judge, as well as those to write. (lines 11-14)

Artists and critics are drawing inspiration from the same fountain: "heaven." Criticism is thus a form of artistic expression, no less than poetry or drama. This equivalence allows Pope's views on criticism to be construed as his views on art. If he makes certain demands of criticism, they can be taken to mean that he is making those demands of art and vice versa. This is the first link in the chain¹ that Pope is assembling throughout the poem: the link between art and criticism. It is essential to grasp all of these links in order to appreciate the larger equivalences that Pope carefully constructs throughout the poem, such as the equivalence between art and life.

For Pope, the connection between art – criticism included – and life is fundamental to the existence of each. The vitalizing engine of existence is also the propelling force of art:

First follow Nature, and your judgment frame,
 By her just standard, which is still the same:
 Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
 One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
 Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
 At once the source, and end, and test of art. (68-73)

¹ Not to be confused with Plotinus's "Great Chain of Being"

The standard by which we must measure art is the force that animates everything. From wherever life springs, springs art, and art is seeking to imitate this life-giving force. Thus, the chain is extended with another link, this time one that binds together art and life. Since criticism is bound to art, the three are equivalent in Pope's view. For Pope's speaker, a literary critic's task is not just to evaluate works of art, but primarily to comprehend this elusive but powerful force that is coursing through the invisible veins of reality. The critic is, quite literally, a prophet, someone capable of listening to the laws that drive and govern reality. This practice of listening Pope holds to be a means of ascension.

Pope's speaker does not view artistic inspiration as a segment of a human life; for him, honoring this kind of inspiration is the ultimate means for ascension:

High on Parnassus' top her sons she showed,
 And pointed out those arduous paths they trod;
 Held from afar, aloft, th' immortal prize,
 And urged the rest by equal steps to rise. (94-98)

Art is literally a higher calling: it invites its practitioners to ascend. It is through the study of poetry that a person can correctly "form" their "maxims" (126). Thus, exposure to art is the highest form of moral education and producing it is equivalent to ascending to ever better character. Pope also imbues artistic inspiration with a personality, using the standard possessive "her" for the muse; artistic inspiration is a great mentor who encourages people to ascend in life and in art. The intended audience for this promise is the crowd of aspiring artists, including literary critics, and there will be an "immortal prize." The practice of criticism, thus, is not just about engagement with great works of art. Its rewards are not just limited to an ever finer literary expertise. It is a process of refinement, with each proper and honest work of criticism scraping

away a critic's capacity for dishonesty and bad behavior. And this is the third link, the one that binds together criticism and character. The three links in the chain are not just physically connected; just like in a chain made of iron, the links are conductors. If heat or electricity is applied to one, the others receive it as well. Similarly, if we strive to master criticism or art or life, we will inevitably be mastering all three. This implicit tenet of Pope's philosophy illuminates the sense behind the qualities he later attributes to the ideal critic.

Near the opening lines of the poem, as Pope's speaker elaborates on the travesty that is literary criticism in his time, he points to his imaginary standard that is behind his judgment. Interestingly, the adjective he uses for this ideal critic is "noble" (47), a word which denotes moral qualities more than it does literary expertise. This is the very first instance in the poem of the connection between our ability to create or judge great art and to live a great life. The speaker says to this critic:

Be sure yourself and your own reach to know
 How far your genius, taste, and learning go;
 Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,
 And mark that point where sense and dullness meet. (48-51)

The qualities that he is encouraging an aspiring critic to possess – humility, self-awareness, and self-control – have a lot of generality. More precisely, we often discuss these are qualities in a moral context. Yet, they are here serving as prerequisite character traits for being a good literary critic: to do the job of commenting upon other pieces of art well, it is essential to be a good person. Throughout the work, Pope makes the portrait of this noble critic more detailed, unceasingly clarifying the traits of the ideal critic.

The noble critic's task is, first and foremost, to learn to see clearly, to discern the finer aspects of reality. Criticism is an extension of the fundamental human activity of sight:

I know there are, to whose presumptuous thoughts
 These freer beauties, ev'n in them, seem faults.
 Some figures monstrous and mis-shaped appear,
 Considered singly, or beheld too near,
 Which, but proportioned to their light or place,
 Due distance reconciles to form and grace. (169-174)

To judge a work of art properly is similar to correctly positioning yourself when viewing an object. If you fixate on a part of a chair, you might fail to keep the whole in mind, and this failure will distort your judgment of the quality of that chair. The goal is to view wholes:

In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts
 Is not th' exactness of peculiar parts;
 'Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
 But the joint force and full result of all. (243-246)

The analogy of the chair is quite appropriate, for Pope explicitly states that he holds the same principles of aesthetics to be at play both in what we describe as beauty in the external world and what moves us in great art. The critic, thus, if they are living up to Pope's standard, is a person who can read a work of art and judge it in its entirety and is also capable of seeing wholes in life. They are capable of seeing adversity as a whole, joy as a whole, and life as a whole. The picture of the critic that emerges from this description is that of a person very much at peace with the way things are; they are sagacious and farsighted. As the poem proceeds, Pope's language becomes increasingly explicit in the task of painting a character portrait of the ideal literary

critic, to the point where it becomes difficult to tell whether he is describing the ideal human being or the ideal critic; the chain that Pope has been assembling elsewhere in the poem starts to coalesce into one solid, living mass, forming the core of the imagined critic, speaking to their multidimensionality as a human being: their ability to live well and judge art well, but also their sensitivity to wholes.

Pope's ideal critic is not a bookish snob. They are a truly connected human being, very much capable of understanding and serving the people around them:

A perfect judge will read each work of wit
 With the same spirit that its author writ:
 Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find
 Where nature moves, and rapture warms the mind. (233-236)

Pope's critic approaches a work of art with consideration towards the intention that fueled the creativity behind it. They hold in mind the link between the art and the artist, as they begin the delicate task of judging its quality. They are generous when it comes to forgiving "slight faults" and sensitive to the "nature" in the work and the "rapture" that it may produce in the reader. Thus, they are invested in the mission of living well and joyfully. The ideal critic has truly fine sensibilities and is generous in judgment:

But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,
 Still pleased to teach, and yet not proud to know?
 Unbiased, or by favor, or by spite:
 Not dully prepossessed, nor blindly right;
 Though learned, well-bred; and though well-bred, Sincere;
 Modestly bold, and humanly severe:

Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
 And gladly praise the merit of a foe?
 A knowledge both of books and human kind;
 Generous converse; a soul exempt from pride;
 And love to praise, with reason on his side? (631-642)

Pope's frequent allusions to the ideal critic culminate in this extremely detailed portrait, which almost completely neglects delving into the literary expertise of the critic. Pope's critic is socially intelligent, candid, and humble. As David Alvarez says about this character sketch, "The ideal critic must be self-reflectively open to others, neither absorbed into the social whole nor isolated in singular pride" (116). This choice of focus, on the critic's character traits instead of his literary expertise, fully reveals Pope's thoughts on the connection between art and life. For Pope, life is the stuff that art attempts to describe, copy, or elucidate. To judge art well, therefore, we must be fully acquainted with what it is trying to imitate: living. Even though Pope most explicitly draws this equivalence near the end of the poem, it illumines the poem as a whole. All the while that the speaker in the poem was describing the ideal portrait, he was doing a self-portrait.

The tone that the speaker takes in the poem is consistently pedagogical. He is addressing people who do not share in his wisdom or experience, and he has many things to prescribe: "Let such teach others who themselves excel, / And censure freely who have written well" (15-16). Here, the speaker exhorts those who have excelled in art to teach others, simultaneously placing himself among those who have excelled, as the lines quoted above are themselves thoroughly pedagogical. The verse has an encouraging tone, with the speaker showing a sure confidence. It

is reflecting a tendency of the ideal critic, for the speaker is clearly “pleased to teach.” The speaker returns to instructing an audience of artists:

For wit and judgment often are at strife,
 Though meant each other’s aid, like man and wife.
 ‘Tis more to guide, than spur the Muse’s steed;
 Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed. (82-85)

The speaker is describing the psychology of artistic production, urging artists to keep the two faculties of “wit” and “judgment” as counterbalances in the creative process. He is speaking from the position of someone who knows the process well and sees it from a vastly experienced perspective. The speaker thus lives up to his own exhortation to teach eagerly, but in doing so, he positions himself as an expert.

Much of the poem deals with describing the various kinds of artists and critics, giving the speaker plenty of lines of verse in which to demonstrate his “knowledge...of...human kind” (640):

Each burns alike, who can, or cannot write,
 Or with a rival’s, or an eunuch’s spite.
 All fools have still an itching to deride
 And fain would be upon the laughing side.
 If Maevius scribble in Apollo’s spite,
 There are, who judge still worse than he can write. (30-35)

For Pope’s speaker, bad and overly critical literary criticism is often the domain of the envious who have been unsuccessful in engaging in artistic pursuits. As Pat Rogers comments in the notes to a collection of Pope’s poems, Pope is responding to “criticism as a major branch of

literary activity,” a recent development (580). Even in the infancy of the new literary field it appears there were enough practitioners for there to be plenty of bad, envious critics.

Recognizing them is part of the interpersonal wisdom that Pope’s speaker embodies as an ideal critic, whether or not the real-life young Pope himself felt envy of better-known poets. Slowly and subtly, the speaker starts to embody each of the idealized traits.

Several times in the poem, the speaker asserts that humility is central to the character of a good critic. He urges critics to know their “reach,” to “launch not beyond [their] depth,” and to “mark that point where sense and dullness meet” (48, 50-51). He gives a dire warning about “pride, the never-failing vice of fools” (204). He urges critics to be “modestly bold, and humanly severe” (636). As he is making these prescriptions, the speaker is living up to them himself. He says: “Music resembles poetry, in each / Are nameless graces which no methods teach, / And which a master-hand alone can reach” (143-145). Here, the speaker relinquishes the pleasure of precise instruction for honest communication of the unteachable aspects of creative production. He urges aspiring artists to be, in David Alvarez’s words, “open...to the irrational, productive power of language, a potentiality that always exceeds the rationality of the rules that govern art and criticism in the public sphere” (102). He is clear on the point that certain incommunicable aspects of quality art are accessible only to masters. It is a clear acknowledgement of the limits of his knowledge, an act which embodies the self-awareness and humility that he prescribes to other critics. Yet, in accordance with the description of the ideal critic, this is an acknowledgment that is both humble and bold. It is confident about what it asserts, but it asserts uncertainty. At least on this point, the link between the speaker’s prescription and action and Pope’s own conduct is tenuous at best. As Gregori writes, “Pope [in publishing a collection of his works at the age of twenty-nine] was building a monument to himself and sought to elevate

his status to that of a classical author” (4). Pope, in other words, was not the humblest of men; later in life, he promoted his work extensively. However, it is precisely this seeming dissonance between Pope’s own conduct and the prescriptions of the poem’s speaker that reveals that, while the speaker is certainly informed by Pope’s biography, the speaker is not actually Pope himself. At a point in the poem, the speaker talks of himself or his author in the third person, “That on weak wings, from far, pursues your flights;/ Glows while he reads, but trembles as he writes” (197-198). The speaker refers to Pope as an aspiring and nervous artist pursuing mastery of the muse. This distancing of himself from the speaker reveals Pope’s implicit belief about the subject of his poem: the ideal critic is an ideal. It is something to be pursued. It is not Pope; it is his deepest aspiration, and in this poem, he lets his aspiration take on a personality and speak to him. From this perspective, the poem represents Pope’s monumental effort to inspire himself.

Thus, the speaker of the poem is Pope’s internalized mentor, one that is instructing him and other aspirants at Pope’s career stage on how to ascend from his currently humble poetic skill to the “ancient altar,” that houses the great classical poets that Pope revered (181). However, the instruction is not limited to technical matters, to the construction of good poetry. The instructor is also sentimentally engaged with the poet, trying to assure him that he will eventually ascend to the heights that he so desires, “For rising merit will buoy up at last” (461). As Miklós Péti says, “By evoking the hard, but eventually victorious fates of his ‘poetic fathers,’ the speaker marks a possible career model for all meritorious persons in general—and for himself in particular” (566). The speaker is thus promising Pope the heights of creative success, by pointing to other successful poets of the past. In this sense, *An Essay on Criticism* is a profoundly personal work. It is a window into Pope’s early career, how the young poet was talking to himself before he became wildly successful. It is Pope’s imagined older self calling his

younger self forth, urging him to step into ever higher poetic ability, consoling him that he belongs.

A truly sweeping work, *An Essay on Criticism* is almost an experience in travel. It takes flight to many different destinations, from the formation of character to the construction of verse, whisking the reader along with it. All of these flights of imagination make clear the contiguous nature of the landscape below. Life and landscape, personality and prose, and art and aspiration are neighboring countries. Nowhere is this clearer than in the speaker of the poem. At once biographical and distant from the writer, the speaker is a glimmering ideal of artists. Yet, despite the fact that it is an ideal, it is deeply connected to the writer, to his troubles, his persecution, and his pride. The speaker is an artistic creation, but he/it is also molded by the vicissitudes and joys of Pope's own life. It is art and life.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Alvarez, David. "Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* and a Poetics for 1688." *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700*, vol. 39 no. 1, 2015, pp. 101-123. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/rst.2015.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/rst.2015.0013).
- Gregori, Flavio. "Alexander Pope: A Poet on the Margins and in the Center" *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. i-xliv, *EBSCO*.
- Péti, Miklós. "'Envy'd Wit' in *An Essay on Criticism*." *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, vol. 52 no. 3, 2012, pp. 561-583. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/sel.2012.0031](https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2012.0031).
- Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Criticism. Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, edited by Pat Rogers, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 17-39.
- Rogers, Pat. Notes. *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, pp. 575-709.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Faizan Arif, 2019

Available from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/eng420>