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HE

Our theme tonight is the nurturing of genius. Some of those who possess it, like Mozart or Shakespeare, seem to flourish without forethought or care. Most of the gifted must cultivate their powers, though they may suggest—and even believe—that the natural force which created their brilliance also disciplined it. But a few of those who go far beyond normal accomplishment not only use a carefully-mastered craftsmanship but are eager to write about what they have learned. The greatest of them was a man who chose a narrow framework for the expression of his art, but, by ardent labor, so expanded its scope that his thought influences the lives of all of us—literary artists, scholars, or common folk. He was, it has been said, "easy to hate, but still easier to quote." He was equally easy to love, and it is well to begin this account with the story of one who did so.

I

When Edith Sitwell was eleven years old, she was required to memorize *Casabianca,* the poem which begins: "The boy stood on the burning deck whence all but him had fled." The Victorian era has been noted for the vio-

lence of the revolutions mounted against it, but perhaps not even the emotion which motivated Marx or Freud was stronger than the choked fury of little Edith when compelled to master this piece of verse. Her revolt took an interesting form: She fell deeply in love with the next poet whose work she read. He seemed to her to be incomparably graceful, blending profundity of feeling with mastery of content and sureness of touch. For him, she developed a lifelong crush excessive even in a school-girl but odd indeed when expressed by the awesome Dame Edith, whose intimidating force in English letters led her to call herself "an electric eel in a pond of catfish."

By the age of forty-three, though the flame of her adoration had still not dwindled to a steady glow, she was able to set down a biography of the man she worshipped. The frontispiece is an engraving of a slender and willowy but very mature Edith, gazing deeply into the eyes of a bust of her hero, and wreathing him with a garland of laurel. The object of her adulation was, she concedes, a "little, deformed creature," a "crippled hunchback" who was "liable to bursts of fury," who was "tortuous in his dealings" and "capable of suppressing or altering passages in his letters which might not exhibit him in the light in which he wished to appear," who was "uncandid" and who lived "in an atmosphere of spells, enchantments, and fairy tales," many of them created by himself. And yet, she adds, he was a "creature of genius," "the purest of our artists," "beyond all praise," "perhaps the most flawless artist our race has produced," and with "the most subtle and sensitive feeling for beauty of form" of any English writer. She speaks glowingly of "the greatness,

the fire, the supreme music" of his poems. All this is said before she has reached the twentieth page of her long book—and her ardor increases as she proceeds.

Many other literary artists have had as pronounced a view as Dame Edith of her hero, though some have stressed the positive and some the negative side of his work and character. Even in the nineteenth century when his reputation fell so low that Matthew Arnold and others denied that he was a poet at all, he had his defendants. Lamb said he could read him "over and over forever." Thackeray called him "the greatest literary *artist* that England has seen." Chesterton believed that "in all the forms of art which peculiarly belong to civilization, he was supreme." Countless other authors and critics have found new depths in the work of the master, flying to his defense, celebrating his virtues, regarding him with astonishment, and, in generation after generation, starting up again the drum beats of praise.

In recent years, as literary criticism has become a major industry, the mills of the academic gods have ground his work exceeding fine. The earnest reader is now provided abundantly with treatments and special approaches to his life, his character, his poetic technique, his documentary sources, and his literary debts and associations. Every year from thirty to fifty studies are centered on him and his work. His narrow shoulders have lifted many a scholar to the doctorate or even to academic tenure.

It cannot be said that large numbers of common readers are intimately familiar with his poems. But his words and thoughts pervade our culture, so that, in addition to the

high road travelled by one genius recognizing another and the low road of the researcher into roots and sources, the by-way of chance leads less-specialized men and women to him. Again and again some occurrence calls up that line or pair of lines which states a point of view so perfectly that no other words can say it so well. He aimed at precisely that effect. See how much better he put the thought than I have just done:

> True Wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;

He can thrust himself into our consciousness anywhere. We wander across an ancient Greek plain, straggling along behind the guide. He seats us on the rocks, points to a disagreeable-looking seeping-up of moisture, says that it is the Pierian Spring, and starts off on one of his rigid recitations. But our minds wander. The Pierian Spring. Where have we heard of it? Surely not in this Homeric context of sea-blue sky or rust-brown boulders. A sentence shapes itself: "Drink fully or avoid the Pierian Spring." Not right. Not right at all! Then suddenly it comes, perfect and full-blown:

> A little learning is a dangerous thing;
> Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.

Again: years after an elective course in Shakespeare, we remember and quote with righteous approval reinforced by age the rhymed couplet with which Polonius ended his speech to Laertes:

> Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
> Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.

We are told that we have mis-identified the quotation. We scoff, we back our memory with money, and we lose the

money. For it was not Polonius who said it nor Shakespeare who wrote it.

Again and again the examples come:

For Forms of Government let fools contest;
Whate'er is best administered is best:

To err is human, to forgive, divine.

Men must be taught as if you taught them not,
And things unknown proposed as things forgot.

Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

Nature, and Nature's laws, lay hid in night,
God said, *Let Newton be!* And all was light.

For Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread.

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutored mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind.

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.

Then, for more than a few readers, his shadowy figure moves from the rear of the stage to full center. Take my case: I was idling along the shelves of a book-store after lunch one rainy day, avoiding an over-hasty return to work. A book with a bright yellow cover caught my eye. I reached over to pick it up, a passerby jostled my elbow, the book dropped to the floor into a puddle of water left there by a dripping umbrella, and, at the same moment, the clerk caught my eye and, with a frown, moved severely toward me. An astonishing combination of events: the color, the movement, the passerby, the puddle, the stern glance, the sinking realization that I would have to buy the book. It must all have been chance—or so my literal mind insists. But back at my desk, as I looked idly at my

new purchase, a hunchbacked figure rose from its pages, flicked the tails of his greatcoat, fixed me with his viperish glare, and, in his melodious voice, began to put his marvelously compressed bits of wisdom into the larger contexts in which they first appeared.

It is the brilliant writing itself which most fascinates the reader, whether he views it as a number of perfectly framed one- or two-line statements or as a group of epic essays and narratives. But two other elements add to its author's compelling power. His character was so arresting that it colored everything he thought and said and all that has since been thought or said about him. And his was a talent so laboriously perfected that he stands forever as the model of the self-taught genius. Not for him the instant careless perfection, the unblotted line. He got the effect of spontaneity, but he worked very hard to do so.

Perhaps it is this last attribute which has so powerfully attracted later authors, particularly poets, who, like the members of any other profession, are deeply interested in shoptalk. How can words and pauses, vowels and consonants and punctuation marks, lines, meters, and rhythms, allusions and references, all be brought together into that harmonious whole which expresses an idea and a mood with the greatest possible feeling of freshness and originality? Perhaps nobody has ever achieved this universal aspiration more perfectly than Dame Edith's darling.

II

He was born in 1688, the only child of his parents' union, and he lived for 56 years. All his life was spent in

England, most of it in London or in the countryside not far away. He had only a sketchy schooling, but his self-taught learning was prodigious. He never married, but he had a multitude of friends and acquaintances—and of enemies. He was a Roman Catholic at a time when the members of that faith were subjected to unceasing restraints and persecutions. Yet the chief obstacle which both nature and society required him to surmount was the grotesqueness of his body, a fact which no man who knew him could forget and we must constantly remember.

His father had a curved spine and his mother had racking headaches; he inherited both, the doctors of the time said learnedly. When he was three, he was knocked down, trampled, and gored by a cow. Beginning at the age of twelve, he had a progessive degeneration of the spine. At his full growth, he was only four feet, six inches high. His contemporaries said that he had a "little, tender and crazy carcase," that he was a "young, short, squab gentleman," and that he was "protuberant behind and before." Dr. Johnson reported that

> When he rose, he was invested in bodice made of stiff canvas, being scarce able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender, that he enlarged their bulk with three pair of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean.

His head was noble but ravaged with suffering. Sir Joshua Reynolds reported that "he had a large and very fine eye, and a long handsome nose; his mouth had those peculiar

marks which always are found in the mouths of crooked persons; and the muscles which run across the cheek were so strongly marked as to appear like small cords." Roubiliac, who modeled a bust of him, noted that "his countenance was that of a person who had been much afflicted with headache," and went on to say that even if he, Roubiliac, had not been told of this suffering, he would have detected it by "the contracted appearance of the skin between the eyebrows."

The poet was tiny, he was misshapen, he was in constant pain, he was a member of a persecuted religious group—and he was very far from being purified into saintliness by his suffering. Dr. Johnson's analysis of the darker side of his character occupies ten close-packed pages, and even those who loved him most could not close their eyes to his faults. He was vain, demanding, self-indulgent, constantly engaged in intrigues, capriciously resentful, miserly, snobbish, deceitful, and discontented. He had no firm conception of the truth so far as the facts of his own life were concerned and was ready to conceal, to embellish, or to lie to aid his reputation. He spent much of his genius in savage and vindictive warfare, sometimes attacking men so inconsequential that they are now remembered only because of his hatred. His great passages of invective are the purest distillations of literary vitriol imaginable. One celebrated quotation will illustrate the point:

> Sporus, that mere white curd of Ass's milk? . . .
> Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
> This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings;
> Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
> Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys: . . .

Eternal smiles his emptiness betray,
As shallow streams run dimpling all the way.
Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
And, as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks;
Or at the ear of *Eve,* familiar Toad,
Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies . . .
Amphibious thing! that acting either part,
The trifling head, or the corrupted heart,
Fop at the toilet, flatterer at the board,
Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord.

Without resorting to example, let it also be said that the poet was sometimes obsessed with the orifices of the body and their discharges, with venereal diseases and disorders, and with the more extreme effects of nausea. He called himself a spider and he could be a poisonous one.

But while no valid balance sheet of his or any other man's character can be drawn, it must be said that few men of his time had a larger or more diverse circle of friends and acquaintances than did he. Some were attracted by his great fame, but many were drawn by his kindness, his luminousness of discourse, or his considerateness. He was a faithful friend, he disciplined himself far more than he did other people, and he could be very kind to those in trouble or in need.

He was also a man of hard shrewd business sense. He had to be, for his father left him little or nothing, his religion (which his name called constantly to mind) barred all customary roads of advancement or compensation in government or the established church, and his

misshapen body was too weak to allow any imaginable work other than that he actually undertook. He was the first man of letters to earn his livelihood—indeed, to make a small fortune—solely by the royalties which came from the sale of his works. Earlier authors had inherited or married money, had lived on the favor of rich patrons, had had governmental or religious sinecures, or had starved. He was fortunate enough to appear just at the time when publishers had built up enough wealth to permit them to undertake substantial ventures and to pay their authors appropriately. He took full advantage of his situation. The publishers helped him become famous by the age of twenty-five; then he used his fame to drive shrewd bargains with them. His modest wealth permitted him to be fiercely independent. He rejected the patronage offered him by noblemen and politicians, even when they promised to keep their benefactions secret. He refused large bribes from those who wanted to buy immortality by being mentioned in his work. He did not want to have it influenced or even thought to be influenced by any person or party, for, as Dr. Johnson so justly asked "Of what could he be proud but of his poetry?"

III

The most extraordinary fact about his literary artistry was the narrowness of its framework. He could have used any of the vast array of poetic forms created in the classic tradition in which he was firmly rooted or by the English and continental authors whose work he knew so well. But not for him the variety offered by Homer, Horace, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton. All his notable work was cast in the simple framework of the rhyming

couplet, each line made up of five iambic feet. He had only two lines of ten syllables each to work with and the final syllables of each pair of lines must have the same sound. Occasionally, to show his virtuosity or to make a point, he would add an extra syllable or cut one out; or he would shift the meter or use an extra foot; or he would resort to assonance rather than rhyme. But mostly he limited himself to uniform sets, each one made up of twenty syllables. A single poem might have hundreds or even thousands of couplets, every one of them separately fashioned and then linked in a smooth flow of meaning with all the others. He once spoke with amusement of a "fellow that spent his life in cutting the twelve apostles in one cherry-stone," but his own form of expression sometimes seems almost as limiting as that of the sculptor. His accomplishment lay in the infinite variety he achieved, for he made the poetic couplet truly heroic.

The constant use of this one form, even in his masterful hands, can lead to monotony. The tripping rhymes and rhythms, the cadence which seldom breaks its step and is used to deal with both the loftiest and the meanest thoughts of man, causes many readers finally to flee, pursued by the incessant tinkling of the beat. In a moment of despair he may even have had the same feeling. "I should be sorry and ashamed," he wrote, "to go on jingling to the last step, like a waggoner's horse, in the same road, to leave my bells to the next silly animal that will be proud of them."

But to the sensitive ears of his poetic followers, he seemed to enlarge the unvarying structure until it com-

prehended the universe, producing an endless array of nuances of rhythm, speed, and depth, and catching every mood of man and nature from the glistening insubstantiality of a cobweb to the thunder of doom. He could write

> The sprightly Sylvia trips along the green,
> She runs, but hopes she does not run unseen;

But he could also write

> She comes! she comes! the sable Throne behold
> Of Night primeval and of Chaos old!

IV

Having chosen this form, he devoted his life to its perfection, beginning early in his childhood. His was an isolated home near Windsor Forest and his parents were simple folk. His father gloried in his capacity to grow artichokes and his mother's portrait reminded Dame Edith "of all kind, homely things—of cold sheets and home-made bread and butter, and sweet dews on a field of cowslips, and moonlight that is smooth and cold as amber." (I do not know who painted this remarkable portrait.) But the parents of the solitary boy had standards. His father was not often pleased by his early poems. "These are not good rhymes" he would observe and require the boy to do them over. Later that son would write

> . . . my Father taught me from a lad,
> The better art to know the good from bad:

By his own testimony, not always reliable, there was never a time when he did not plan to be a poet.

> Why did I write? what sin to me unknown
> Dipped me in ink, my parents', or my own?

As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.

By the age of twelve, he had already achieved his ambition to see the great Dryden. Not too many years later, he was himself famous. But the intervening years, like those which were to follow, were filled with the incessant labor required to perfect his powers. With only indifferent instruction, he had mastered the rudiments of a classical education. His Catholicism barred him from good schools or from a university career. The cultivation of his genius lay almost entirely in his own hands and at his own initiative. How did he do it?

V

One way was to seek out men and women who had had broad worldly experience and probe deeply into their minds and memories. His extraordinary talent for reaching the hearts of those who could help him was first demonstrated when Sir William Trumbull, a sixty-year-old ex-Ambassador and minister of state settled down near Windsor, admired the artichokes, and was at once seized upon by the teen-age poet so powerfully that the learning, wit, and worldliness of the older man were drawn into the mind of the younger. Another close associate was William Walsh, a Member of Parliament but also a poet, who not only taught his young friend about the world but also constantly urged him to revise and correct his work—and was as a consequence later apostrophized:

Such late was Walsh—the Muse's judge and friend,
Who justly knew to blame or to commend; . . .
This praise at least a grateful Muse may give:

> The Muse, whose early voice you taught to sing,
> Prescribed her heights, and pruned her tender wing.

Trumbull and Walsh were but the first of the lifelong line of intimates who knew the world and could interpret it. Beyond them lay the great country houses of England and the literary lights of London.

In one area of life the budding poet needed particular instruction. He soon moved into a free-and-easy open-spoken society whose interest could not long be held by dainty pastorales and hymns to rural nymphs. And so he sought out the company of rakes and ladies of the town, perhaps to gain an understanding of the lustier human passions, perhaps to feel the vicarious thrill which may have been the only kind his grotesqueness allowed. After a disastrous experience or two in company with young sports, his companions tended to be the older gallants. They could accept the poet, smile at his sniggering pretensions to share their amorous adventures, and kindly protect him—as younger men had not—from being put to the test of performance.

He had a wide acquaintance among gentlewomen and with a few the relationship became both close and long. Its exact nature in each case has never been accurately defined. Though he constantly suggested that his liaisons were of the closest physical sort, the ardor of his letters tended to increase with his distance from his feminine correspondent. The society of his own age gossiped about him—could he or couldn't he?—and modern Freudians have learnedly dissected the complexity of his emotional attachments with a vivid explictness perhaps better known

to them than to him. When one remembers his physical presence, it is possible to believe that, no matter how strong his passions, nothing very intimate ever transpired. He was, perhaps, a safe man in whom a woman could confide for, in the ordinary way, he could neither offer a hope nor pose a threat. Meanwhile he could probe deep into her emotions and viewpoints, building insights and perceptions to be revealed in his poetry.

He also had close and continuing association with his fellow professionals. With the older men, such as Wycherley and Congreve, as well as with more contemporary figures, such as Addison, Steele, Swift, Gay, and Voltaire, he discussed the nuances of poetry and gained the advantages of comparison, criticism, collaboration, and occasional competition. His contact with these men was sometimes casual, as when they met one another at dinners or in the coffee-house intellectual society of the time. It could also be very close, as when he spent weeks on end with Walsh studying ancient and modern poetry. That was an era, too, when literary men were much given to forming clubs to discuss and criticize one another's work. The young man from Windsor soon joined in and through his whole life remained a member of one or another study circle. Even when a group of poets met to lampoon hilariously the failings of their lesser contemporaries, each taught the others what not to do.

VI

However much the poet's erudition might be enlarged or his skill refined by association with other people, study

and writing are solitary pursuits and their hardest lessons must be self-taught.

The boy was bookish and the man remained so, poring over both ancient and contemporary volumes, acquiring that knowledge of both classical and modern sources which would be reflected in his poems. His "appetite for knowledge" was "too eager to be nice," according to Doctor Johnson, and in borrowing ideas from Bolingbroke or editing Shakespeare, the poet showed his lack of scholarship. But he read avidly, and the results of that reading were all too clear in his early work. Like many another budding author, he began by imitation and by experiments in technique. Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, he was hard at work on an epic poem of which he later said "there was Milton's style in one part and Cowley's in another, here the style of Spenser imitated and there of Statius, here Homer and Virgil, and there Ovid and Claudian." This work he later destroyed, probably prudently, as he came to realize that the task of the poet is to be original.

Most writers who reach this conclusion turn away from their models and seek inspiration wholly in themselves. But there is a diametrically opposed way of work which requires the discovery of the fundamental principles of an art and their study and conscious use. Such was the aim of the young genius. The public, he well knew, expected poetry to rise solely through inspiration and liked to think that "fluent Shakespeare scarce effaced a line." But so far as he could read the ancient masters of literature, "They constantly applied themselves not only to that art, but to

that single branch of an art, to which their talent was most powerfully bent." As for himself, he freely confessed his need to take pains: "I have served myself all I could by reading; . . . I made use of the judgment of authors dead and living; . . . I omitted no means in my power to be informed of my errors, both by my friends and enemies."

His major learning period began at the age of twenty and was a truly adult education. Warburton, who knew him, describes it in this way:

> . . . he went over all the parts of his education a-new, from the very beginning, and in a regular, and more artful manner. He penetrated into the general grounds and reasons of speech; he learnt to distinguish the several species of style; he studied the peculiar genius and character of each language; he reduced his natural talent for poetry to a science, and mastered those parts of philosophy that would most contribute to enrich his vein. And all this, with such continued attention, labour, and severity, that he used to say, he had been seven years (that is, from twenty to twenty-seven) in unlearning all he had been acquiring for twice seven.

The work which made the young poet famous was a report on his continuing researches into the essence of a poetic style and he returned to this topic again and again, giving its rules, showing their application, and ridiculing the bores and dunces who did not follow them. His age self-consciously patterned itself on the life, literature, and art of the Roman era of Augustus, believing that the lessons of the ancients had been forgotten and that no new canons had arisen to take their place. The announced purpose of the young poet was to give form and style to

poetry, to study the unchangeable laws of language which provide opportunity, challenge, and discipline to those who follow them. Lord Bolingbroke, the great Tory leader, reinforced the poet's aim, assuring him that Homer had laid the groundwork of art in Greek, Virgil had established Latin, and that, while English was still in flux, the young man from Windsor would "contribute to fix it" and so "deserve to be translated three thousand years hence into languages perhaps as yet unformed."

The recipient of this advice thought he could perceive the true source of poetic art. It was "nature." Modern scholars have counted the number of times he used the word and have elaborated the semantic variations of its meaning as derived from its context. We cannot here follow all these twists and turns. In general, he held that all life has an inherent harmony which man must seek to understand.

> 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.

Some of Nature's universal truths have been revealed, particularly to poets.

> Those Rules of old discovered, not devised,
> Are Nature still, but Nature methodized;
> Nature, like Liberty, is but restrained
> By the same Laws which first herself ordained.

One must therefore learn those rules by study, by application, and by constant experimentation.

But he, who had been told to "fix the language," must seek to interpret Nature by discovering the new rules

which govern poetic statement, particularly when Nature speaks English. This he did in abundance and detail. Thus, he said, "monosyllable lines, unless very artfully managed, are stiff, or languishing: but may be beautiful to express melancholy, slowness, or labor." He objected to "the repetition of the same rhymes within four or six lines of each other, as tiresome to the ear through their monotony." He noted that in a ten-syllable line, there is usually a pause after the fourth, fifth, or sixth syllable and said that "to preserve an exact harmony and variety, the pause at the fourth or sixth should not be continued above three lines together, without the interposition of another; else it will be apt to weary the ear with one continued tone, at least it does mine." For each kind of poetry he sought to write, he was careful to establish the particular principles; thus he prefaced his early pastorals with a discourse on the rules which he had followed in writing them. Again and again he stressed his belief that a poet can learn only by studying the greatest masters:

> Be Homer's Works your Study and Delight,
> Read them by Day and meditate by Night,
> Thence form your Judgment, thence your Maxims bring,
> And trace the Muses upward to their Spring.

Later generations have tried to trace his own genius upward to its spring. Scholars have worked over almost every line, drawing diagrams, making comparisons, and deriving principles which are sometimes too rarefied to be easily understood. A particularly fruitful field has been the comparison of various drafts of some passages. He left behind his work sheets and many versions of his poems;

the task of comparing them has never ceased to fascinate his successors. Thus a rough draft of one important couplet reads:

> The stern Pelides' rage, O goddess, sing
> Of all the woes of Greece the fatal spring.

The finished version was

> The wrath of Peleus' son, the direful spring
> Of all the Grecian woes, O goddess, sing!

To Dame Edith, "The reason for most of these alterations is obvious. The 'i' sound in Pelides, quickly followed by the 'a' in rage, unhinge the line by giving too violent a lifting movement to the middle of the line. The word 'direful' with its huge fiery smoky sound, is obviously better, in its place in the line, than the smaller and rather tinny sound of 'fatal,' which is not heavy enough."

His profoundest rule of composition was one to which he referred in many places and applied with unparalleled mastery throughout the whole body of his work. Its most celebrated statement was:

> The sound must seem an Echo to the sense;

The use of this principle within the limitations of the simple rhyming couplet gave him full opportunity to display his virtuosity. Thus, in three successive couplets, he conveys tranquility, storm, and toil.

> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
> And the smooth stream in smoother number flows;
> But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
> The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too labours, and the words move slow.

He seemed capable of catching the sound of almost any mood or phenomenon:

> The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!
> Feels at each thread, and lives along the line:

> Shut, shut the door, good John! Fatigued, I said,
> Tie up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead.

> A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
> That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

> Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,
> And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:

> The Muse but served to ease some friend, not Wife,
> To help me through this long disease, my Life;

The poet must keep all such rules as these, grand or small, vigilantly in mind if he would retain his powers, for the very action of time will otherwise erode them.

> Years following years, steal something every day,
> At last they steal us from ourselves away;
> In one our Frolics, one Amusements end,
> In one a Mistress drops, in one a Friend:
> This subtle Thief of life, this paltry Time,
> What will it leave me, if it snatch my rhyme?
> If every wheel of that unwearied Mill
> That turned ten thousand verses, now stands still?

Thus it was that the researches of the poet and his effort to illuminate principle lasted all his life as he set ever more lofty goals for himself:

> Late as it is, I put myself to school,
> And feel some comfort, not to be a fool . . .
> Not to go back, is somewhat to advance,
> And men must walk at least before they dance.

VII

But while he could teach anybody how to walk, neither he nor anyone else could teach the untalented how to dance. He knew this truth from his own experience, for he long studied the art of painting from his friend Jervas. Now Jervas had no shadow of a doubt concerning his own brilliance. To amuse himself he once copied a painting of Titian; when he saw how much the imitation excelled the original, he remarked "Poor little Tit, how he would stare!" Yet not even Jervas could help the poet learn how to paint. "I comfort myself," he wrote his friend Gay, "that I have not broken the commandment, for my pictures are not the likeness of anything in heaven above, or in earth below, or in the waters under the earth."

However important his processes of education and self-education, the essence of his success cannot be found within them. His work stood firmly on the high plateau of poetic rules and principles to which he had so laboriously climbed, but his own achievement was a peak which towered high above it. If there are rules which governed his ultimate art, neither he nor any of the multitudes of his admirers has known how to express them. He met the last highest test which he himself set.

> Let me for once presume t' instruct the times,
> To know the Poet from the Man of rhymes:
> 'Tis he, who gives my breast a thousand pains,
> Can make me feel each Passion that he feigns;
> Enrage, compose, with more than magic Art,
> With Pity, and with Terror, tear my heart;
> And snatch me, o'er the earth, or through the air,
> To Thebes, to Athens, when he will, and where.

Byron, also crippled but different in every other way from the little genius, once called him "the most *faultless* of Poets, and almost of men" and later said "I have always regarded him as the greatest name in our poetry." His appeal, in his own time, as now, is so broad that it can be felt by both the sophisticated and the simple.

About 1740, the young Joshua Reynolds went one day to a crowded auction to attend a sale of pictures. Standing near the front, he presently noticed a bustle at the rear, and heard the name of the poet whispered throughout the room. The company drew back in awe and made a passage for the little man who labored his slow way forward, bowing to right and to left. Joshua Reynolds saw him plain and clear, touched him, and never forgot the magnificence of the moment.

One summer, perhaps in that same year, a villager and his son were walking on a path near Twickenham when they passed a tiny hunchback in drab and ancient clothes limping to some unknown destination. "Poor man!" said the boy, filled with pity. "Poor man!" his father exclaimed; "that is no poor man. It is the great Mr. Alexander Pope."

CYRIL O. HOULE

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