

Poetry after Pope. Sentimentalism

- a new age: emphasis shifting from the conflict between bourgeois culture and neo-classical high culture: Fielding's synthesis from the neo-classical side; Johnson's synthesis from the side of bourgeois moral seriousness
- a more heterogeneous age than the previous one, but general tendency: internalization, turning inward
 - one aspect of this: conflict no longer in social life but within the self
 - this tendency also in satire: Johnson's *London* (1738) to *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749)

Implore his [God's] Aid, in his Decisions rest,
Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.
Yet with the Sense of sacred Presence prest,
When strong Devotion fills thy glowing Breast,
Pour forth thy Fervours for a healthful Mind,
Obedient Passions, and a Will resign'd;
For Love, which scarce collective Man can fill;
For Patience sov'reign o'er transmuted Ill;

For Faith, that panting for a happier Seat,
Thinks Death kind Nature's Signal of Retreat:
These Goods for Man the Laws of Heav'n ordain,
These Goods he grants, who grants the Pow'r to gain;
With these celestial Wisdom calms the Mind,
And makes the Happiness she does not find.

1. Pope's contemporaries

James Thomson (1700-1748)

- son of a Scottish minister (childhood in rural Scotland, did not see London until he was 25);
- 1726: *Winter* was published — introducing a new type of nature poetry;
- 1730: *The Seasons* (following up the success of *Winter*);

The new elements:

- interest in natural detail (vs. search for the general, universal): a sharp eye for the actual
- interest in the sublime in nature (wildness, primitive energy)
- esp. in subsequent editions the poem was enlarged by the addition of contemplative passages (which taught people not just what to see but also what to feel about what they see);
- blank verse (invoking the Miltonic tradition)
- a poetry of the eye (vs. Romantic nature poetry focussing on the imagination)

Edward Young (1683-1765)

- a recognized satirist in the Augustan tradition
- his most famous and popular poem: *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality* (1742-45)
- an implicit response to Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733): human happiness is not to be found in 'the world' (society), it can only be found inside (the divine in man)

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan The proper study of Mankind is Man. (from <i>Essay on Man</i>)	Man too he [Pope] sung: immortal man I sing; (from <i>Night Thoughts</i>)
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- revising and significantly altering the tradition of didactic poetry (tradition from Dryden to *Essay on Man*): personal element becomes emphatic: lonely speaker and his private problem in the foreground; setting: churchyard at night; gloomy, meditative tone; the sublime; blank verse;
- sprawling, uneven poem

2. Mid-century poets

- several imitators of Thomson and Young:

- o the Graveyard School: e.g. Robert Blair: *The Grave* (1743)
- o didactic poems: Mark Akenside: *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (publ. 1744); Joseph Warton: *The Enthusiast; or, The Lover of Nature* (1744); Thomas Warton: *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747)

A group of young poets consciously seeking to sound a new voice in poetry: Joseph and Thomas Warton, Mark Akenside, William Collins (publishing from the 40's)

- their manifesto: Joseph Warton: *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756)
 - contrast between the poetry of 'familiar life' (in which Pope excelled) and true poetry ('creative and glowing imagination', aspiring to the 'transcendently sublime and prophetic')
 - Pope was a great wit but 'not, assuredly in the same rank with Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton'
- against the hegemony of the heroic couplet: blank verse; + experimenting with other Miltonic forms; the most successful genre: the **ode** (Joseph Warton: *Odes on Various Subjects* (1746), Collins, *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects* (publ. 1746 but dated 1747)
- topics not always personal (e.g. the patriotic ode) but the inspiration and tone are personal
- attempt to generate myth, to add vision to the visible, to excite man to an awareness of his creative (divine) powers
- the sublime, obscurity: as means of elevating the reader to a heightened sense of consciousness

Thou, to whom the world unknown
With all its shadowy shapes is shown;
Who see'st appalled the unreal scene,
While Fancy lifts the veil between:
Ah Fear! Ah frantic Fear!
I see, I see thee near.

(from William Collins: 'Ode to Fear')

- but imagination often gives way to the merely imaginary: Johnson about Collins: he 'delighted to rove through the meanders of enchantment, to gaze on the magnificence of golden palaces, to repose by the waterfalls of Elysian gardens'; these poets were 'eminently delighted with those flights of imagination which pass the bounds of nature'
- deliberate mythmaking, conscious and studied appeal to the unconscious and irrational greatness: 'sublime upon stilts'
- the poetic attitude: sense of belatedness, personal defeat, despair
 - o at times this leads to a truly personal tone:

Thither oft his [Milton's] glory greeting,
 From Waller's myrtle shades retreating,
 With many a vow from Hope's aspiring tongue,
 My trembling feet his guiding steps pursue;
 In vain - such bliss to one alone,
 Of all the sons of soul was known,
 And Heav'n, and Fancy, kindred powers,
 Have now o'erturned the inspiring bowers,
 Or curtained close such scene from every future view.
 (from Collins: 'Ode on the Poetical Character')

- o but often this involves an element of posing, role-acting

3. Examples of the changing literary taste:

Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin Of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)

- the sublime pertaining primarily to poetry (as opposed to painting which is the realm of the beautiful)

'astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.'

'The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness; and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness. The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind;'

'hardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.'

Edward Young: 'Conjectures on Original Composition' (1759)

4. Thomas Gray (1716-1771)

- the most accomplished poet in the age
- family: 5th out of 12 children, but the only one who survived infancy
- 1725-34: Eton very happy period; friendship with Horace Walpole, Richard West and Thomas Ashton;
- 1734: Peterhouse, Cambridge
- 1738: Walpole invites him to accompany him on the Grand Tour (France, Italy); 1741: quarrel with Walpole (not made up until 1745)
- 1741-42: London – first great creative activity inspired by the renewed friendship with West; 1742: death of West at 25 – 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College', 'Ode to Adversity', 'Sonnet on the Death of Richard West'
- 1742: return to Peterhouse, retired life; 1756 he moved to Pembroke College
- 1757: refused the Laureateship; from 1768: professor of modern history
- 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (finished in 1750 at Stoke Poges): a great success; his greatest poem
 - o Graveyard theme sublimated into a perfectly controlled poem
 - o Simple life of rural people juxtaposed with greatness: a common theme elevated to a new height of general human appeal (stanzas 20-23 especially praised by Dr. Johnson)

Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
 Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,
 The place of fame and elegy supply:
 And many a holy text around she strews,
 That teach the rustic moralist to die.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
 E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

- from 1752 working on his Pindaric odes: "Progress of Poesy" and "The Bard" published in 1757
- Mixed reception of the odes: he virtually ceased writing original poetry
- All the poems published in his lifetime amount to less than 1,000 lines, still considered by his contemporaries to be the greatest poet of the age

These poets often mentioned as 'poets of sensibility': **sentimentalism**

- a vehement, often defiant assertion of the value of man's feeling: the power to feel is man's essential strength;
- often theatricality in the display of emotion; at times a self-congratulatory sense of nobility;
- sentimentality expresses a trust in man's feeling: key figure: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78)

James Boswell (1740-1795)

- son of a Scottish nobleman;
- legal career postponed by a tour of Europe (previously a visit to Johnson)
- Boswell settled to a legal career in Scotland but he kept a *Journal*: sentimentality at its best:
 - sense of uniqueness: sees himself (like Rousseau) as mysterious and inexhaustible;
 - openness to every nuance of feeling; delicacy in observing fugitive sentiments and revealing gestures; a willingness to record what others repress;
 - expression of the need to feel to the utmost the sentiment of being; to be assured that one has a soul
- by the mid century: the fad of the sentimental
- the critique of the sentimental: a counter-current that distrusted man's feeling (e.g. Edward Gibbon)

Lawrence Sterne (1713-1768)

- family: son of Ensign Roger Sterne
- family constantly on the move as his father was reassigned;
- at ten he was sent to a grammar school and never saw his father again;
- studied at Jesus College, Cambridge: 1737 BA, 1740 MA;
- 1738: ordination; lived as a country clergyman at Sutton;
- 1741: marriage to Elizabeth Lumley; unhappy marriage;
- 1759: first two books of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*: an immediate success both in London and on the continent; ninth volume published in 1767;
- enjoyed being lionized in London and on the continent;
- 1768: *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* – a novel by a famous man

- Sterne's achievement: he took the London fad of the sentimental and made it into an international obsession
—What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life, by him who interests his heart in everything, and who, having eyes to see what time and chance are perpetually holding out to him as he journeyeth on his way, misses nothing he can *fairly* lay his hands on.—

—If this won't turn out something—another will—no matter—'t is an assay upon human nature—I get my labor for my pains—'t is enough—the pleasure of the experiment has kept my senses and the best part of my blood awake, and laid the gross to sleep.

I pity the man who can travel from *Dan to Beersheba*, and cry, 'Tis all barren—and so it is; and so is all the world to him, who will not cultivate the fruits it offers.

- theoretical interest in sensibility:

— Dear Sensibility! Source inexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows! Thou chainest thy martyr down upon his bed of straw — and 'tis thou who lift'st him up to Heaven! — Eternal Fountain of our feelings! — 'tis here I trace thee — and this is thy "DIVINITY WHICH STIRS WITHIN ME;" — not that, in some sad and sickening moments, "MY SOUL SHRINKS BACK UPON HERSELF, AND STARTLES AT DESTRUCTION;" — mere pomp of words! — but that I feel some generous joys and generous cares beyond myself; — all comes from thee, great — great SENSORIUM of the world! Which vibrates, if a hair of our heads but falls upon the ground, in the remotest desert of thy creation.

- awareness of the presence of the physical and commonplace that sensibility tends to overlook:
Shame on the world! Said I to myself. — Did we but love each other as this poor soul loved his ass — 'twould be something. —

The concern which the poor fellow's story threw me into required some attention; the postilion paid not the least to it, but set off upon the pave in a full gallop.

The thirstiest soul in the most sandy desert of Arabia could not have wished more for a cup of cold water, than mine did for grave and quiet movements; and I should have had an high opinion of the postilion had he but stolen off with me in something like a pensive pace. — On the contrary, as the mourner finished his lamentation, the fellow gave an unfeeling lash to each of his beasts, and set off clattering like a thousand devils.

[THE CONQUEST.] Yes, — and then — . Ye whose clay-cold heads and luke-warm hearts can argue down or mask your passions, tell me, what trespass is it that man should have them? or how his spirit stands answerable to the Father of spirits but for his conduct under them?

If Nature has so wove her web of kindness, that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece, — must the whole web be rent in drawing them out? — Whip me such stoics, great Governor of Nature! said I to myself:— wherever thy providence shall place me for the trials of my virtue; — whatever is my danger, — whatever is my situation, — *let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man, — and, if I govern them as a good one, I will trust the issues to thy justice;* for thou hast made us, and not we ourselves.

As I finished my address, I raised the fair fille de chambre up by the hand, and led her out of the room:— she stood by me till I locked the door and put the key in my pocket, — and then, — the victory being quite decisive — and not till then, I press'd my lips to her cheek, and taking her by the hand again, led her safe to the gate of the hotel.