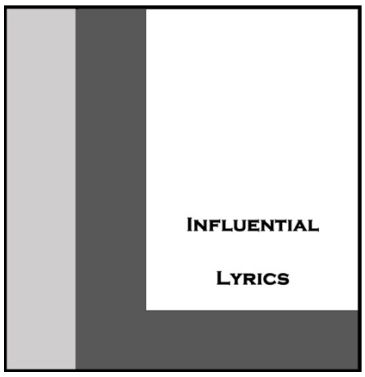

Series 1, Number 8

Alexander Pope
1688-1744

From *Essay on Criticism* (lines 297-98; 337-57)

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.
. . . . . .
But most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's song,
And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong;
In the bright Muse tho' thousand charms conspire,
Her Voice is all these tuneful fools admire;
Who haunt Parnassus but to please their ear,
Not mend their minds; as some to Church repair,
Not for the doctrine, but the music there.
These equal syllables alone require,
Tho' oft the ear the open vowels tire;
While expletives their feeble aid do join,
And ten low words oft' creep in one dull line;
While they ring round the same unvary'd chimes,
With sure returns of still expected rhymes.
Where-e'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"

In the next line, it “whispers thro’ the trees;”
If crystal streams “with pleasing murmers creep,”
The reader’s threaten’d (not in vain) with “sleep.”
Then, at the last and only couplet fraught
With some unmeaning thing they call a thought,
A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

PODCAST (https://influential lyrics, etc.).

Topics & Terms

- Neoclassical (Augustan) poetry
- Heroic Couplet
- Alexandrine

Lines to remember...

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress’d,
What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d.

Podcast Script

Alexander Pope, from *Essay on Criticism*

The present podcast is something of a deviation for *Influential Lyrics*. Rather than focusing on a single, short, self-contained lyric poem, I’ll be focusing today on an excerpt from a longer work called *Essay on Criticism*, written and published in the early 18th century by Alexander Pope. By way of introduction, let me explain why I’ve included this episode.

The previous poems featured on *Influential Lyrics* follow a largely chronological path with a tiny selection of poems from the 16th and 17th centuries. The next series of poems will pick up in the late 18th century with the British Romantics and their precursors. So what happened to the early 18th century? Well, this was the so-called Neo-Classical period (or sometimes the Augustan period) in English literary history, a period when mainstream poetry tended more toward longer, often satirical works, verse essays, and translations of the classics—especially the epics of Homer and Virgil. One aspect of this historical moment was an increasingly prominent view that the English language itself had been perfected to such a degree that it too was capable of such epic achievement in literature. The classical languages, though, relied on a completely different metrical structure than is fitting for English. (Homer's epics, for example, are in a meter called dactylic hexameter which is hopelessly tedious in the more accentual English language.). But what had developed over the previous two+ centuries of English was the iambic pentameter line—ten syllables divided into five iambic feet like this: ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum. Here's a line from Pope by way of example: talking of good literature, Pope says that such literature expresses [quote] "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed."

Ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum
What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed

To really understand the aesthetics of poetry from this period (and of subsequent periods as well!) one has to internalize this metrical structure. It's a bit like the way a musician (or even just somebody who sings sings along with the radio) needs to internalize the time signature – like 4/4 time or 3/4 time. It's an ongoing pulse that lends structure and phrasing to the melody. Similarly, this iambic pentameter meter works to shape the musical phrasing of the lines of poetry.

Okay, so now we've got the standard iambic pentameter line…so what do we do next? Well, the neo-classical method is to put two of these lines together into a couplet, making sure (1) that the two lines have a decisive rhyme, and (2) that the lines are "end-stopped." Here's the full example from Pope's poem:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

Notice the emphatic rhyme words at the line endings: "dress'd" and "express'd." Notice too, that there is a syntactic pause at the end of the first line and a full stop at the end of the second. In other words, each of these two-line packages contains a complete sentence (or at least an independent clause). The intonation rises toward the end of the first line, and the second line closes the phrase with a sort of punch line. The two lines together form what came to be called a "heroic couplet," so called because—so the thinking went—it was a form adequate to expressing heroic epic poetry. It was an English version of the great classical models. And the clipped, self-contained quality of these

couplets makes for an epigrammatic, easily quotable style—which is, no doubt, why Alexander Pope is the second most quoted poet in the English language, second only to Shakespeare.

So now we have a sense of what these heroic couplets are and the basic "rules" which govern their composition. I have to put "rules" in scare quotes. These "rules" should be descriptive rather than prescriptive (as the saying goes). They *describe* the generic form of the heroic couplet, but they don't claim that anything that doesn't fit the form is therefore a mistake. Rather, the generic form is really a pattern of metrical expectations that truly capable poets can manipulate in order to provide variety, emphasis, and aesthetic pleasure. To follow through on the musical analogy, a song in 4/4 time doesn't require exactly four equally accented quarter notes in each measure—that would be numbingly boring! As if listening to the steady click of a metronome was the aesthetic equivalent of a Beethoven Piano Sonata! Anyway, Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is in part a satire on those bad poets and bad literary critics who take the "rules" as a prescriptive measure for literary quality. His point will be clear, I think, if we work through a few lines from the poem. So here is a section in which Pope castigates bad poets and bad critics. It may not make much sense at first, but I'll follow with a more detailed explication.

[poem]

So there you have it… Alexander Pope's sneering attack on bad critics and worse poetry. No doubt the passage will need some explanation, so let's take it section by section. Believe it or not, it's really very funny…once you get the joke…and it's a *tour-de-force* in Neoclassical poetics.

Pope begins by refering to "most" readers who are poor judges of poetry:

> But most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's song,
> And smooth or rough, with them, is right or wrong

These bad critics—think of the 18th-century equivalent of Amazon reviewers—pass judgment on their reading simply by "Numbers." In other words, they count the syllables per line and make sure the accents match up perfectly with the iambic pentameter standard, ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum ta Dum. If the poem fits the pattern perfectly, then it's deemed to be "smooth"; if it doesn't, then it's "rough"—and for these bad critics, "smooth or rough" is "right or wrong." Their whole assessment of a poem's quality depends solely on metrical conformity.

But watch what happens in the next section:

> In the bright Muse tho' thousand charms conspire,
> Her Voice is all these tuneful fools admire;
> Who haunt Parnassus but to please their ear,

Not mend their minds; as some to Church repair,
Not for the doctrine, but the music there.

This passage starts off "smoothly" enough with what appears to be a perfect pentameter couplet: "In the bright Muse tho' thousand charms conspire, / Her Voice is all these tuneful fools admire." To paraphrase: although poetry has a "thousand charms," the "tuneful fools" (that is, the bad critics) admire only the sound of the lines (i.e. the "Voice" of the muse). This couplet, in other words, largely reiterates the sense of the first couplet, chastising those reader/critics who focus only on "proper" meter and rhyme.

But then, when we're expecting to go on to the next self-contained, end-stopped couplet, Pope hits us with a "who" clause refering back to the "tuneful fools." It's the "tuneful fools" "Who haunt Parnassus but to please their ear, / Not mend their minds." Let me explain: Parnassus is the mountain in Greece which, in classical mythology, was the home of Apollo and the muses—the ultimate source of imaginative poetry. The "tuneful fools" hang around Parnassus, but not to gain some enlightenment or wisdom; rather because they just like the music. Pope then offers an analogy: these bad readers are like people who go to church not for some spiritual guidance, but simply because they like the music. In Pope's words, "as some to Church repair, / Not for the doctrine, but the music there." Metrically speaking, Pope is breaking all the "rules." The expected end-stop after the second line actually spills over into the "Who" clause that begins the next couplet. There is an apparent full stop in the middle of the fourth line (after "minds") rather than at the end of a couplet. And then, consider the rhyme scheme. The first couplet has "conspire / admire" and that seems perfectly sound. But the next lines end with "ear," "repair," and "there." The "ear" rhyme is an ambiguous slant rhyme. It's a bit like the "-ire" in "aspire"; but it's also a bit like the "-air" in "repair." What's more, there is one extra line here, making the last three lines a tercet instead of a couplet.

Oh the horrors! Is Pope is so bumblingly incompetent that he can't compose a "proper" heroic couplet? Hardly. On the contrary, Pope is breaking all the rules as a way to illustrate just how empty, how "dull" (to use Pope's language) the poetry is that takes the "rules" as prescriptive. To take a slavishly regular, "smooth" sort of poetry as the standard of quality is to encourage dullness and cliché. Everything begins to sound the same with little metrical variety, no subtle cadences, no musical nuance. Hence, Pope's rule-breaking is exactly the point. He is writing great and witty poetry as a way to satirize those poets whose only concern is conformity to some abstract standard.

Pope doubles down on this critique in the following couplets. We can work through these more briefly.

These equal syllables alone require,
Tho' oft the ear the open vowels tire;

Bad poets strive for "equal syllables"—that is, for syllables the fit uniformly into the pentameter pattern, but this requires similarity in the vowels in those syllables. Pope makes a joke about this in the second line. "Open vowels" are sounds like a long O or E or I, so Pope writes a ghastly line with too many such sounds—thus comically illustrating the aesthetic critique. The next couplet follows a similar satirical strategy:

> While expletives their feeble aid do join,
> And ten low words oft' creep in one dull line;

The "expletives" refers to little poetic phrases like "Ah me…" or "Alas!" etc. which bad poets sometimes use to help them fit their words to the meter. The "low words" are short, single-syllable words which can also be handy filler if you're only counting syllables. 'Problem is, you can end up with a wretched line of poetry made up of ten such words…. Like "And ten low words oft' creep in one dull line." (It's another prosody joke!)

Next, Pope sets his satirical sights on the sort of clichés that are inevitable if all one is doing is trying to make the rhymes perfect and the lines metrically unvaried. Pope writes…

> While they ring round the same unvary'd chimes,
> With sure returns of still expected rhymes.
> Where-e'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"
> In the next line, it "whispers thro' the trees;"
> If crystal streams "with pleasing murmers creep,"
> The reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with "sleep."

This may be a little puzzling if you're just listening and not reading the poem, but what Pope is doing is quoting some absolutely conventional phrases—like "the cooling western breeze"—which, of course, is followed by it "whispers through the trees." These are the "unvary'd chimes" of "still expected rhymes" that Pope bemoans. And the last couplet here is especially funny: "If crystal streams 'with pleasing murmers creep,' / The reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with "sleep." The poetry is so utterly predictable and dull that it puts readers to sleep.

And this takes use to the final four lines of the focal passage:

> Then, at the last and only couplet fraught
> With some unmeaning thing they call a thought,
> A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
> That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

To fully "get" Pope's joke here, you'll need to know about one other convention of neoclassical poetry. It was common, in the period, to end sections of a long poem with a 12-syllable line called an

"Alexandrine." The idea was that the longer line would lend a sense of closure to at least a significant section of a longer poem made up of a series of heroic couplets. But, as Pope points out, this also produces a false sense of having said something profound…when maybe there was nothing profound about it—it was just "some unmeaning thing." Still, we end up with an absolutely horrid, 12-syllable line like "That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along."

By this point, I'm sure you've got the basic idea behind Pope's critique of bad poets and bad critics (as he sees them). There is plenty to take issue with in Pope's philosophy of poetry—and much of the poetry we'll be considering in the next few episodes is a reaction to the neo-classical formality so clearly exemplified by Pope—but a familiarity with, even an affinity for, Pope's technique offers as clear an understanding of the fundamentals of English prosody as you'll find anywhere. He's well worth a careful study, and toward that end I've included some citations and links in the show notes and the website. I hope you'll explore this poetry, and I hope as well that you'll stop in again for the next episode of Influential Lyrics!

I welcome any comments and suggestions you would care to provide in the podcast comments, on the website, or via email to kyle@influentiallyrics.com. As always, I'll append another reading of the Pope excerpt after the closing music. See you next time on *Influential Lyrics*!

Further Reading

Cox, Octavia. "Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*: Analysis and Close Reading." YouTube, 2020. < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqPHvnsqAIE >. (A useful companion to the present podcast, Cox offers a comprehensive look at Pope's technique.)

Mack, Maynard. *Alexander Pope: A Life*. W. W. Norton with Yale UP, 1986. (A classic not only in its coverage of Pope, but in the whole genre of literary biography. It's long, but brilliant.)

Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Criticism. Written in the year MDCCIX*. Hathitrust. < https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008665504 >. (Facsimile of an early printing of Pope's book.)

Streim, Alex. "The Heroic Couplet." Chapter 16 in *An Introduction to Poetic Forms*, edited by Patrick Gill. Routledge, 2022. (Excellent overview of the heroic couplet as a poetic form with frequent reference to Pope's use.)

"Alexander Pope." Wikipedia. < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Pope >. (This Wikipedia overview is quite good, with a particular section on the *Essay on Criticism*.)

ETC....

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