

# Alexander Pope and his Idea of Nature [ I ]

## —Methodical Nature—

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### Introduction

When thinking about the nature of human beings, we can never evade but must face the two opposing worlds inside ourselves: the rational (reason) and the emotional (passion, feeling). It depends on the individuality which element exceeds the other. It is no exaggeration to say that we are more or less distressed by this opposition from the time when our ego is awakened until our death.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) has always been considered an Augustan classic. Dominique Secretan says:

[Pope] plays with words better than any of his contemporaries. The classic gives way to homo ludens. This homo ludens is not a joker, but a creator of form: he in-forms the tragedy of Racine and the Misanthrope. He combines sensitivity and intuition with the pure intellect and its attendant verbum.

Pope remains the supreme Augustan classic, because he was an impure classic. [emphasis added.]<sup>1)</sup>

In his form and technique of writing, it is true that Pope's intellect precedes his sensitivity. But the statement that Pope is a classic does not mean that his reason always exceeds his passion. In his attitudes towards literature, we can point out not only the rational and universal, but also the emotional and individual, which we can consider to be the principles of Romanticism.

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<sup>1)</sup> Dominique Secretan, *Classicism*, The Critical Idiom 27 (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 52.

It is said that during the eighteenth century reason loses its authority over the idea of nature and that sentiment takes the place of reason.

‘Nature’ may be conceived rationally or emotionally. Indeed the history of the idea in the eighteenth century can be described in the most general terms as its development from a rational into an emotional principle. Nature and Reason are normally associated in the earlier part of the century, Nature and Feeling in the later. This change is associated with the growth of the cult of sensibility, the substitution of ‘je sens, donc je suis’ for ‘cogito, ergo sum’, the increasing value attributed to impulse and spontaneity, and the decreasing importance attached to pure reason.<sup>2)</sup>

The word ‘nature’ sounds rather vague, but the idea of nature has been considered on such bases as the religious background (the Creation), the two opposing concepts of nature: *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, human nature, nature as landscape (external world) admired by the Romantics and the Impressionists, and the material, de-humanized nature as the objects of science.

In Pope’s life we can acknowledge the three stages of his comprehension of nature. They are methodical nature (nature as a stable norm to follow), external nature (nature as landscapes) and human nature. As mentioned before, even if he is an intellectual classic, Pope can never evade but must face the opposing elements of the rational and the emotional in himself.

It seems to us that the idea of nature is nothing else but a place for Pope where his reason is confronted by his emotion and feelings. His methodical nature can be interpreted as a deputy of his reason, and his external nature represents his taste for landscape gardening and his emotional world.

Then what kind of role does his idea of human nature play? Can Pope synthesize the rational and the emotional finally? I would like to make an analysis of Pope’s three natures from the viewpoint of his struggling ego—reason vs. emotion, and to follow the process in which the evolution of his idea of nature occurred.

But in this paper particularly, as a first step, his idea of methodical nature will be examined.

### Methodical Nature

In explaining the historical process of the concept of wilderness, Roderick Nash firmly claims that wilderness is a state of mind and is what men think it is.<sup>3)</sup> As in the case of wilderness, nature is a difficult

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<sup>2)</sup> Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background* (1940; Peregrine ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 198.

<sup>3)</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1982)

concept to explain fully in a few words. We have classified Pope's idea of nature into three categories: methodical nature, external nature and human nature. For Pope, methodical nature is fundamental and serves as principles of classicism.

(i) a stable norm to follow

*An Essay on Criticism* (1711) is one of Pope's earliest published works. In it he offers a clear definition of methodical nature:

First follow Nature, and your Judgment frame  
By her just Standard, which is still the same:  
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,  
One clear, unchang'd, Universal Light,  
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,  
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art. (ll.68-73)<sup>4)</sup>

Here nature is grasped as a stable norm to follow. Its attributes of immutability and unchangeability are emphasized.

During the age of Neoclassicism, the universal concept of literature was based upon the standard of unerring nature. This standard was considered to be the same with what had been found by the ancients.<sup>5)</sup> In his accounts of Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70-19 B.C.), Pope echoes the idea that the imitation of the classical works is identified with that of nature.

When first young Maro in his boundless Mind  
A Work t'outlast Immortal Rome design'd,  
Perhaps he seem'd above the Critick's Law,  
And but from Nature's Fountains scorn'd to draw:  
But when t'examine ev'ry Part he came,  
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same:

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<sup>4)</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all parenthetical references to Pope's poetical works are to *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, eds. John Butt et al., 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939-69). The numbers of the lines are placed in brackets.

<sup>5)</sup> William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), pp. 316-18.

Convinc'd, amaz'd, he checks the bold Design,  
And Rules as strict his labour'd Work confine,  
As if the Stagyrite o'erlook'd each Line.  
Learn hence for Ancient Rules a just Esteem;  
To copy Nature is to copy Them. (ll. 130-40)

The immutability of methodical nature cannot be separated from the idea that man is always the same.<sup>6)</sup> Pope is convinced that the universal exists in classical literature, and explicitly states his ideas on the imitation of the ancients in "The Preface" to *The Works* (1717).

All that is left us is to recommend our productions by the imitation of the Ancients: and it will be found true, that in every age, the highest character for sense and learning has been obtain'd by those who have been most indebted to them. For to say truth, whatever is very good sense must have been common sense in all times; and what we call Learning, is but the knowledge of the sense of our predecessors. Therefore they who say our thoughts are not our own because they resemble the Ancients, may as well say our faces are not our own, because they are like our Fathers: . . .<sup>7)</sup>

The idea of methodical nature is not considered to be out of date in the course of time. The attributes of changeability and novelty do not seem to belong to this idea.

Those Rules of old discover'd, not devis'd,  
Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz'd;  
Nature, like Liberty, is but restrain'd  
By the same Laws which first herself ordain'd.

(*An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 88-91)

Although Pope acquired little formal schooling—one of the causes of which was his weak constitution—and his knowledge of French and Greek was not so perfect as to satisfy Voltaire (François Marie Arouet,

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<sup>6)</sup> In *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1678), Thomas Rymer says:

Certain it is that Nature is the same, and Man is the same: he loves, grieves, hates, envies, has the same affections and passions, in both places, [Ancient Athens and London] and the same springs that give them motion. What mov'd pity there will here also produce the same effect.

J.E. Spingarn, ed., *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. II (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1957), p. 184.

<sup>7)</sup> Norman Ault, ed., *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, I (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), p. 293.

1694-1778) and Richard Bentley (1662-1742),<sup>8)</sup> he was conversant with classical literature. Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711), whose *Lutrin* (1674) is supposed to have influenced Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714),<sup>9)</sup> makes much of the important role of reason in *L'Art Poétique* (1669-74):

Quelque sujet qu'on traite, ou plaisant, ou sublime,  
Que toujours le Bon sens s'accorde avec la Rime.

.....  
Au joug de la Raison sans peine elle [la rime] fléchit,  
Et loin de la gesner, la sert et l'enrichit.

.....  
Aimez donc la Raison. Que toujours vos écrits  
Empruntent d'elle seule et leur lustre et leur prix.<sup>10)</sup>

Reason and methodical nature play the same role to serve as the principles of classicism. Methodical nature represents Pope's intellectual and rational ego.

The historical process of the idea of nature follows course from reason to sensibility (emotion). The external nature which we are to examine later gives the revolutionary aspect. But in regard to reason, we must not overlook the difference between English classicism and that of France.

In his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), John Dryden (1631-1700) highly appreciates the introduction of tragicomedy on the English stage, which is against the rule of clear distinction among the genres held in French classicism.

. . . I acknowledg that the French contrive their Plots more regularly, and observe the Laws of Comedy, and decorum of the Stage (to speak generally) with more exactness than[sic.] the English. . . and in the mean time cannot but conclude, to the honour of our Nation, that we have invented, increas'd and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the Stage then was ever known to the Ancients or Moderns of any Nation, which is Tragicomedie.<sup>11)</sup>

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<sup>8)</sup> Cf. George Sherburn, *The Early Career of Alexander Pope* (1934; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 40-41. Leslie Stephen, *Alexander Pope*, English Men of Letters Series (1888; rpt. New York: Ams Press, 1968), pp. 4-6.

<sup>9)</sup> Cf. Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (London: Oxford U.P., 1967), p. 315.

<sup>10)</sup> Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Épîtres, Art Poétique Lutrin*, ed. Charles-H. Boudhors (Paris: Société Les Belles Lettres, 1967), p. 82. (Chant I)

<sup>11)</sup> H.T. Swedenberg, Jr., ed., *The Works of John Dryden*, XVII (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), pp. 44, 46.

The subtitle of *The Rape of the Lock* is “an heroi-comical poem.” This shows that the clear distinction among the genres is not so strictly kept. As Leslie Stephen says, the rules of French Classicism could not be completely transplanted in the mentality of the British.

The classical models, as interpreted by French critics, had the appearance of giving just the system of abstract rules founded on common sense which was required by the artist. There were difficulties, indeed, in accepting the French empire. The old English tradition remained throughout the century. Hume and Gibbon might prefer Racine to Shakespeare; but English writes in a blind way continued to protect against the chains imposed upon them. The rules of epic poetry and the law of dramatic unities never fairly established themselves.<sup>12)</sup>

When we examine closely Pope’s use of the word ‘nature’ in *An Essay on Criticism*, it does not always mean methodical nature as a norm to follow.

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,  
When Nature moves, and Rapture warms the Mind; (ll.233-36)

Here nature can be identified with emotion. And the next ‘naked Nature’ is used to signify external nature.

Poets like Painters, thus, unskill’d to trace  
The naked Nature and the living Grace,  
With Gold and Jewels cover ev’ry Part,  
And hide with Ornaments their Want of Art. (ll. 293-96)

## (ii) concordia discors

While establishing the intellectual and rational ego through the idea of methodical nature, Pope does not neglect the emotional world as his themes of literature. *The Pastorals* (1709) is a study that imitates such

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<sup>12)</sup> Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Smith Elder, 1881), II, 354. Harold S. Wilson also says; “ In England, the literary norm of ‘nature’ does not become externalized as a fixed canon of correctness during the Renaissance.” in “Some Meanings of ‘Nature’ in Renaissance Literary Theory,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2 (1941), 430-48.

classics as Theocritus (c. 310-250 B.C.), Virgil, Edmund Spenser (1552?-99) and Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86). In its second part, *Summer*, a shepherd who falls in love with Alexis is described in the peaceful scenery of the country.

Ah wretched Shepherd, what avails thy Art,  
To cure thy Lambs, but not to heal thy Heart!  
.....  
But see, the Shepherds shun the Noon-day Heat,  
The lowing Herds to murm'ring Brooks retreat,  
To closer Shades the panting Flocks remove,  
Ye Gods! and is there no Relief for Love?  
But soon the Sun with milder Rays descends  
To the cool Ocean, where his Journey ends;  
On me Love's fiercer Flames for ever prey,  
By Night he scorches, as he burns by Day. (ll. 33-34, 85-92)

It can be acknowledged that Pope's interest in external nature in his early years comes to fruition in *Windsor-Forest* (1713). Pope was born in London. But around 1700, he moved to the countryside—Binfield in Berkshire. The environment must have had a great influence on young Pope, who was born and raised in the City.

Away from Binfield in all directions, but particularly to the south and east, the royal forest of Windsor stretched for miles. Encompassing at least a hundred thousand acres, it was not a forest as most of us today think of forests; it was a mixture of individual woods and woodland rides with pasturage and meadow, scatterings of grove and coppice, and immense dark reaches of heathery moor, punctuated sometimes by green belts of farms with neat hedgerows and pollarded willows along the banks of drainage ditch or stream, and sometimes by outcroppings of bush and bracken so tall and dense that even deer, not to mention smaller game, could hide in them and shake off pursuers.<sup>13)</sup>

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<sup>13)</sup> Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1985), p. 54.

Pat Rogers also regards the work, *Windsor-Forest* as a cornerstone in Pope's career. Cf. *Pope and the Destiny of the Stuarts: History, Politics, and Mythology in the Age of Queen Anne* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005)

His country life in Binfield is echoed in the descriptions of landscape in *Windsor-Forest*.

Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,  
Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,  
Not Chaos-like together crush'd and bruis'd,  
But as the World, harmoniously confus'd:  
Where Order in Variety we see,  
And where, tho' all things differ, all agree.  
Here waving Groves a checquer'd Scene display,  
.....  
There, interspers'd in Lawns and opening Glades,  
Thin Trees arise that shun each others Shades.

[emphasis added.] (ll. 11-17, 21-22)

In his intellectual world, Pope perceives the universal and immutable beauty of methodical nature, but through his own experience at Binfield he becomes aware of the real and changeable beauty of external nature. It can be said that Binfield leads Pope to his gardening in Twickenham.

In the above quotation, we must pay attention to the phrase, "the World, harmoniously confus'd." It is not the world harmoniously organized. The world here means the external nature. The beauty of landscape which Pope is going to communicate to the reader is concordia discors. Pope's "Order in Variety" theory is to play an important role in his idea of nature.

Pope treats the theme of earthly love in *The Pastorals*, but the same theme is treated more dramatically in *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), in which we can see that Eloisa is so distressed by her struggling ego, reason vs. passion.

Love, free as air, at sight of human ties,  
Spreads his light wings, and in a moment flies.  
.....  
Before true passion all those views remove,  
Fame, wealth, and honour! What are you to Love?  
.....  
Oh happy state! when souls each other draw,



When love is liberty, and nature, law:  
All then is full, possessing, and possest,

(ll. 75-76, 79-80, 91-93)

In this poem, passion (emotion) takes precedence over reason. The word 'nature' does not signify the conventions of society, nor does it suggest methodical nature. It is based on pure sensibility and originates from the natural human heart. But Eloisa's love for Abelard cannot be fulfilled. Her sorrowful heart overlaps the dreary landscape.

The darksom pines that o'er you' rocks reclin'd  
Wave high, and murmur to the hollow wind,  
The wandring streams that shine between the hills,  
The grots that eccho to the tinkling rills,  
The dying gales that pant upon the trees,  
The lakes that quiver to the curbing breeze;  
.....  
Where round some mould'ring tow'r pale ivy creeps,  
And low-brow'd rocks hang nodding o'er the deeps.

(ll. 155-160, 243-44)

Here landscape does not serve merely as a setting. It reflects like a mirror the heart of the heroine. One of Pope's few female friends, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), in 1716 left for Turkey with her husband. *Eloisa to Abelard* describing the lover's separation is, as Elwin and Courthope account,<sup>14)</sup> far from Pope's own mental experience. But the poem shows us the existence of Pope's "sensitive, fanciful, and romantic disposition"<sup>15)</sup> belonging to his emotional world.

### (iii) translation of Homer

Sustained by the idea of methodical nature, great importance is attached to the imitation of the ancients. The translation of Homer fulfills Pope's intention to imitate them.

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<sup>14)</sup> *The Works of Alexander Pope*, eds. Whitwell Elwin and W.J. Courthope, 10 vols. (1871-89; rpt. New York : Gordian Press, 1967), V, 134-35. Hereafter this edition is identified by the abbreviated title, *E-C*.

<sup>15)</sup> *E-C*, V, p. 128.

But his way of translation is not what we regard as translation of the classics in our modern sense. The following is one of the examples of what Pope's translation is like. In this scene the King of Troy, Priam asks Achilles to let his son's (Hector's) body be recovered after Hector, a brave Trojan hero was killed.

Ah, think, thou favour'd of the Pow'rs Divine!  
Think of thy Father's Age, and pity mine!  
In me, that Father's rev'rend Image trace,  
Those silver Hair, that venerable Face;  
His trembling Limbs, his helpless Person, see!  
In all my Equal, but in Misery!  
Yet now perhaps, some Turn of human Fate  
Expells him helpless from his peaceful State;  
Think from some pow'rful Foe thou see'st him fly,  
And beg Protection with a feeble Cry,  
Yet still one Comfort in his Soul may rise;  
He hears his Son still lives to glad his Eyes;  
And hearing still may hope, a better Day  
May send him thee to chase that Foe away. (Pope's trans. Bk. XXIV, ll. 598-611)

The following is another translation of the same scene in our modern sense:

'Remember your own father,  
Achilles, in your godlike youth: his years  
Like mine are many, and he stands upon  
the fearful doorstep of old age. He, too,  
is hard pressed, it maybe, by those around him,  
there being no one able to defend him  
from bane of war and ruin. Ah, but he  
may none the less hear news of you alive,  
and so with glad heart hope through all his days  
for sight of his dear son, come back from Troy, . . . (trans. R. Fitzgerald)<sup>16)</sup>

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<sup>16)</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, *The World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1984), p. 434.

Compared with Fitzgerald's, which is a translation of Homer's in our modern sense (literally word by word),<sup>17)</sup> Pope's translation is somewhat his own. In order to make the image of the aged King (his son, Hector was the counterpart of Achilles) much clearer, Pope tries to pile up the features of the old man; rev'rend image, silver hairs, venerable face, trembling limbs and the helplessness; which cannot be found in the original. Following what Dryden says, we can say this is an example of "amplification" which is admitted in the category of paraphrase.

Thanks to the translation of Homer, Pope could earn his own living,<sup>18)</sup> which was quite rare in those days. Pope's translation is, in a sense, more than an amplification (paraphrase) because his deviation from the original is something really free and flexible. Pope explains what the word 'translation' means for him in his preface to *The Iliad*.

It should then be consider'd what Methods may afford some Equivalent in our Language for the Graces of these in the Greek. It is certain no literal Translation can be just to an excellent Original in a superior Language: but it is a great Mistake to imagine (as many have done) that a rash Paraphrase can make amends for this general Defect; . . . It is not to be doubted that the Fire of the Poem is what a Translator should principally regard, as it is most likely to expire in his managing: . . .

(Preface, pp. 17-18)

When we think of the idea of methodical nature, it is true that the world of classics is something to follow as a norm, and it plays an important role. But unlike the French style, Pope's already deviated from the standard, so to speak.

## Conclusion

For Pope, methodical nature can be interpreted as a deputy of his reason. Normally, we can say that methodical nature can be regarded as a stable norm to follow. But English (neo- or psudo-) classicism is no

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<sup>17)</sup> Dryden explains three categories of translation as follows:

All translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads: First, that of Metaphrase, or turning an Authour word by word, and Line by Line, from one Language into another. . . . The Second way is that of Paraphrase, or Translation with Latitude, where the Authour is kept in view by the Translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly follow'd as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not alter'd. . . . The Third way is that of Imitation, where the Translator (if now he has not lost that Name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence[sic], but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases.

John Dryden, "Ovid's Epistles," *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker and H.T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1956), I, 114-15.

<sup>18)</sup> In *Imitations of Horace* Pope says "But (thanks to Homer) since I live and thrive, / Indebted to no Prince or Peer alive," (II, ii, ll. 68-69).

longer the identical to French classicism. The trend of the time is steadily and surely moving towards the value of Romanticism. As we have seen, even in his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope's use of the word 'nature' is not at all times methodical.

Along with the idea of a stable norm to follow, Pope already started to think about the concept of *concordia discors*. While paying respect to the western classics as a high standard of literary achievement in his translation of Homer, Pope makes much of the fire of the poem—the essence of the poem. It is true that Pope's heroic couplets can be said to be the zenith of his skill, the perfection of classicism. But we can never neglect his deviation from the strict standard to be freer, to be much closer to the essence, the main theme of the work.

It seems to me that Pope's quality of impure classicism has been evident from the very beginning, and this is to be examined further at the next stage of analysis concerning the other two categories of his idea of nature: external nature and human nature.