Essay on Criticism

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Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

- Alexander Pope is an English essayist, critic, and satirist. He can be regarded as one of the greatest poets of Enlightenment. He was born in Roman Catholic family in 1688. Alexander Pope started writing poetry when he was 12. Actually, first major contribution of Pope to the literary world is *An Essay on Criticism*, which is published in 1711. When he wrote *An Essay on Criticism* he was 23. Then, in 1712 he wrote *The Rape of the Lock*, which is known as his most popular poem.

- Pope has also some translations. For example, he translated Homer's *Iliad* in the period of 1715-1720. After this translation, he was encouraged and start to translate the *Odyssey* (1725-1726).

- *The Dunciad* (1728), is the moral and satiric poems which is written by Pope. His other major poems are Moral Essays (1731-1735), Imitations of Horace (1733-1738), *The Epistle to Arbuthnot* (1735), the *Essay on Man* (1734), and an expanded edition of the *Dunciad* (1742).

- In his works, Pope deals with directly the major religious, political and intellectual problems of his time. He used the heroic couplet.
Pope's 'Essay on Criticism'

- Divided into three different parts
- Part I – indictment on false critics
- Part II - Obstacles to good criticism
- Part III – Wisdom of true critics
Part I

- The first part opens by describing the ways literary critics can actually cause harm. Pope argues that critics must be both careful and humble when critiquing a piece of literature, for the writing of bad criticism actually hurts poetry more than the writing of bad poetry does.
- Pope points out that each critic has his or her own opinion, and, if applied incorrectly, a critic can actually censure a talented writer.
- However, Pope argues that if a critic is honest, doesn't fall prey to envy and listens to the seeds of understanding that are naturally a part of him or herself, one can become a wise critic. The Greeks came to understand poetry through following the rules of nature, argues Pope, and contemporary critics must do the same.
• This section offers general principles of good criticism (and of poetry—since criticism for Pope means determining the *merit* of a work rather than its *meaning*, understanding the principles of good criticism means understanding the rules for good poetry and vice versa).

• The problem: Judgments are partial, and true taste is as rare as true genius. Some critics go astray through false learning, others through envy of wit. Self-awareness is therefore a crucial quality for a critic: "Be sure yourself and your own reach you know."

• First solution: "First follow Nature" (68-87). (*Nature* here means something like "the universe as God created it" or "that which is permanently true.")

• Second solution: learn the "rules of old," i.e. the precepts of poetry and criticism set down by the classical Greek and Roman authors or deducible from their literature (88-140). Take care, however, not to follow the rules slavishly, but rather "know well each ancient's proper character," especially Homer.

• One reason to be flexible in applying the rules: there are "beauties yet no precepts can declare." Great writers can break the rules successfully. Modern poets should take care, however, that if they break a rule they should "ne'er transgress its end".
Part 1 is Pope’s heavy indictment of false critics. He suggests that critics often are partial to their own judgment, judgment deriving, of course, from nature, like that of the poet’s genius. Nature provides everyone with some taste, which may in the end help the critic to judge properly. Therefore, the first job of the critic is to know himself or herself, his or her own judgments, his or her own tastes and abilities.

The second task of the critic is to know nature. Nature, to Pope, is a universal force, an ideal sought by critic and poet alike, an ideal that must be discovered by the critic through a careful balance of wit and judgment, of imaginative invention and deliberate reason.

The rules of literary criticism may best be located in those works that have stood the test of time and universal acceptance: namely, the works of antiquity. Pope points out that, in times past, critics restricted themselves to discovering rules in classical literature, whereas in his contemporary scene critics are straying from such principles. Moderns, he declares, seem to make their own rules, which are pedantic.
Part II

• Pope describes some of the ways that critics develop bad judgment, the chief of which is pride. The key to avoiding this is to know your own faults and limitations. Moreover, critics must study well and focus on conventions passed down from the masters of poetry.

• Pope warns, however, that critics must be careful of becoming slaves to the rules and conventions that others have developed and to not let the popularity of an author misguide a critic's appreciation of an author's work.

• One of the products of adhering too closely to conventions is that critics become fascinated with extremes and forget the essential truth that beauty and good poetry are made up of the combination of all of their parts, rather than each part by itself.
• Flaw #1: “Pride” (201-214) The biggest pitfall, in criticism as in just about everything else.

• Flaw #2: "little learning" (215-232). A little learning makes critics susceptible to pride, by making them think they know more than they do. (Pope is not praising ignorance here; the cure for the pride of little learning is more learning, which teaches the scholar how little he or she knows.)
• #3: "a love to parts"--i.e. emphasizing one aspect of a poem at the expense of all others (233-383). A critic SHOULD, instead, "read each work of wit/With the same spirit that its author writ"; "Survey the whole" and "regard the writer's end" (233-252).
  • an absurd example of "a love to parts": for Don Quixote, a poem is no good unless it has a combat in it (267-284).
• part #1: conceit (elaborate, clever tropes) (289-304).
• part #2: eloquence of language (305-337), as opposed to the ideas the language is supposed to express. One example: archaic language (324-336).
• part #3: "numbers," i.e. meter (337-384). Included in the section is a dazzling display of metrical craft--note how the lines exemplify what they're talking about.
• #4: love of extremes (384-393)
• #5: liking only "one small sect," e.g. foreign writers, British author, ancients, or moderns, as opposed to approving of merit wherever it is found (394-407).
• #6: judging authors according to the opinions of others rather than the merit of the work. E.g.:
  • judging the name rather than the work (412-413).
  • worst case: judging the work on the basis of social rank (414-424).
• #7: conversely, prizing novelty above everything else (424-451).
• #8: valuing only those works which agree with one's own point of view, are written by member of one's own party, are written by friends, etc. (452-473). Envy plays a big part here.
• Some premises arising from the above: "Be thou the first true merit to defend," even though we cannot expect modern writers to endure as the ancients did (474-493).; don't let yourself succumb to envy (494-525). Be generous: "To err is human, to forgive divine."

• But shun "provoking crimes" such as obscenity and blasphemy. Here too, however, one must take care not to "mistake an author into vice" (556-559).
Part III

• **In the third part**, Pope offers some wisdom that critics should follow. Once again, Pope emphasizes the importance of humility and studying deeply, particularly studying those poets and critics who truly understand poetry and follow nature.

• Pope then reflects on the ups and downs of literature and literary critics since Greek culture, explaining how the understanding produced by the Greeks and Romans was lost and is only beginning to be appreciated again.
• Pope gives the basic characteristics of a good critic. A critic should have a good knowledge, taste, judgment and objectivity.
• Moreover, there is another characteristic, which is more important than others, of a good critic. The characteristic is being friendship. "Be silent always when you doubt your sense; And speak, though sure, with seeming diffidence:"
• If a critic is not sure about his/her opinion, he/she must not speak on a work. On the other hand, a critics should speak, argue with self-confidence.