

A Short Introduction to *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*

—Amitabh Roy

Original text: Alexander Pope, *Works* (1735). E-10 3938 Fisher. Rare Book Library (Toronto).

First publication date: 1735

Composition date: 1734

Form: Heroic Couplets

The real greatness of a lifelong bachelor, namely, Alexander Pope lay in his literary labours. He knew 'small Latin and less Greek', but fate did not deny him an all dominating love for the craft of poetry. In Pope's poetry, we find all the qualities of classical writers like objectivity, accuracy, restraint, simplicity, dignity, serenity, repose, reason, etc. Still he cannot be termed a pure classical poet. Rather he can well be defined as a leader of neoclassical school of poetry in English literature. Pope's poetry is didactic in nature and therefore it is satirical.

Between 1731 and 1735, he produced his 'Epistles', the last of which is addressed to Arbuthnot. This poem is also known as the prologue to the 'Satires'. The "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a poem written and completed in the summer of 1734. Pope, Gay, Swift, Arbuthnot and Thomas Parnell formed the Scriblerus Club in 1712. The aim of the club was to satirise ignorance and pedantry in the form of the fictional scholar Martinus Scriblerus. Pope's major contribution to the club would be "Peri Bathous, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry" (1728), a parodic guide on how to write bad verse. Dr. John Arbuthnot was a physician and was known as a man of wit. He was a member of the Martinus Scriblerus Club, together with amongst others Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift and John Gay. He was formerly the physician of Queen Anne.

In the summer of 1734 Arbuthnot, realizing that he was dying, wrote to the poet cautioning him about his satiric attacks on powerful individuals; on August 25 Pope replied: "I determine to address to you one of my Epistles, written by piecemeal many years, and which I have now made haste to put together: wherein the question is stated, what were

and are my Motives of writing, the objections to them and my answers." As Pope's letter would suggest, some of the passages were written earlier and some of them—e.g., the Atticus portrait—published earlier.

In 1733 Pope began to produce his miscellaneous *Imitations of Horace*, 11 translations and adaptations of Horace's Odes, as well as *Satires and Epistles*. Effectively a prologue to these satires was *An Epistle to Doctor Arbuthnot*, the most brilliantly produced rhetorical presentation that Pope ever achieved. Addressed to his dying friend, the scholarly physician who had in turn looked after the poet and who had been a fellow Scriberian, these verses embody the ideals of refined friendship, good sense and honesty as well as offer a series of sweltering verse portraits.

An Epistle to Doctor Arbuthnot reviews Pope's own literary career as the foremost poet of England for a long time as well as a feared satirist and includes the famous portraits of Lord Hervey ("Sporus") and Addison ("Atticus"). The common idiom "Damn with faint praise" originates in this poem. Though commonly seen as a conversation by some critics, this is not a conversation between Pope and Arbuthnot, as it is entitled 'Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot.' Having the word 'epistle'—which means letter—in the title clearly means that the poem is a letter to his doctor, who is absent in the poem, but appears to be there because, as Pope is writing, his friend comes alive on the page. So we, the readers, may feel that Pope is talking directly to Arbuthnot, but he isn't physically present in the poem.

The poem's internal audience—Arbuthnot—is geographically absent. This poem is an example of the 'Epistilian' dialectic, where the speaker is alone when he writes, but creates an audience through the letter he is writing. Arbuthnot is merely a personality on the page. There is never a direct address to the Doctor, as he is away from Pope.

The poem may be defined as a formal satire though we can find some traits of indirect satire in it also. Pope is on the whole closer to the Horatian mode in his formal satires, specially in their tone and their ostensibly open minded dialogue. We find the features like abrupt opening, free variation of style, absence of formal transitions from one part to another etc. in the poem.

Pope addresses his close friend Dr. Arbuthnot preserving a colloquial strain throughout the poem. The lines come upon one another in a rattling speed and with variety:

"Good friend, forbear! you deal in dang'rous things. I'd never name queens, ministers, or kings; Keep close to ears, and those let asses prick; 'Tis nothing"—Nothing? if they bite and kick?"

An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot has the sweet variety of conversation and the half conversation of internal monologue. It rises to the heights of indignation or praise of virtue. Pope intends *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* as his apology as a poet who deserves to enjoy privacy as an individual and dignity as a poet. Thus it has become his apology for one's own life. The poet upholds the office of the poet as something pious and is hurt to find it stripped of its native dignity in the hands of poetasters and hack-writers. He puts up his own person as an innocent, sacred man and a born poet. Thus the person of Pope within the poem is but a literary persona.

An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot is a work of polarities between fawning admirers and hateful detractors, as Pope puts it "If foes, they write, if friends, they read me dead". Yet the friend lies between these extremes, opposing both in the process.

In *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* moral virtue is emphasized from the start, in Pope's polite treatment of irritating fans. As narrator, Pope is playing a stylized character, but is doing so using real events from his life. More importantly, as an oratorical satirist he can only justify his position by representing himself as truly virtuous. Sometimes he does this in rhetorical statements that are themselves unconvincing:

"Not Fortune's Worshipper, nor Fashion's Fool, Not Lucre's Madman, nor Ambition's Tool, Not proud, nor servile, be one Poet's praise, That, if he pleas'd, he pleas'd by many ways; That Flatt'ry, even to Kings, he held a shame, And thought a Lye in Verse or Prose the same."

The purity of Arbuthnot's character is a positive value that Pope presents in the poem. He is an embodiment of values which the poet seeks to uphold, and this is why he has been chosen as recipient of the letter itself: "Dr Arbuthnot is the poet's true friend, the antithesis of the false flatterers and hostile itself: "Dr Arbuthnot is the poet's true friend, the antithesis of the false flatterers and hostile parasites whom play and profit on Pope's reputation. Friendship is a moral virtue in a world where, in Pope's picture generally, moral virtue does not exist."

The masterly satiric portrait of Addison under the name of 'Atticus' has become immortal creation of Pope in satiric art:

"Who but must laugh, if such a man there be? Who would not weep, if Atticus were he?"

Pope presents Addison as an unscrupulous, hypocritical poet who intrigues to keep away his dearest ones out of a nervous apprehension of intrigue and supercession. He is like a selfish autocratic ruler who does not allow his kith and kin near his throne. Pope's presentation of Addison

may be considered artistically superb but it is far from actuality. It does not expose a jealous Addison, rather a jealous Pope. It was Addison who first recognized Pope's genius for poetry but Pope did not like some of his well meant counsels. His ego was hurt and therefore he opted this biased representation of Addison which has received both artistical praise and historical criticism.

As a knife headed satirist, Pope is merciless and directs each of his arrows directly as well as sharply to his enemies. He never misses the weaknesses of his enemies. Pope's satire becomes very dark indeed as he descends to the stark deeps of scurrility in the 'Sporus' passage on Lord Hervey:

"Let *Sporus* tremble—What? that thing of silk, *Sporus*, that mere white curd of ass's milk? Satire or sense, alas! can *Sporus* feel? Who breaks a Butterfly upon a Wheel?"

Pope uses all repelling images to describe Lord Hervey in the 'Sporus' passage—ill-smelling, blood-suckling, a painted child of dirt, a well trained spaniel, a puppet speaker and ultimately a Satan. In this way Pope goes on choosing indecent and barbed epithets and images. Lord Hervey's excellence as an orator and accomplished man of cultured has just been ignored by Pope. The use of venomous satiric devices by Pope has shown his deepest distaste for Lord Hervey.

Pope was certainly inspired by Dryden and he recognized the fact by terming him an 'icon'. But his independent style as a satirist made him a different poet with his own identity. We can recall what Johnson had said in this regard:

"He professed to have learned his poetry from Dryden, whom, whenever an opportunity was presented, he praised, through his whole life with unvaried liberality; and perhaps his character may receive some illustration, if he be compared with his master."

Pope was not content to satisfy; he desired to excel, and therefore always endeavoured to do his best. He examined lines and words with minute observation, and retouched every part with indefatigable diligence. A master of using heroic couplet, Pope became a national figure when he died in the year 1744.

Bibliographies

Primary Works

- (i) Reginald Harvey Griffith, *Alexander Pope: A Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1922-27).
- (ii) David Foxon, *English Verse 1701-1750: A Catalogue of Separately Printed Poems with Notes on Contemporary Collected Editions*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975). Pope's publications are covered in vol. 1, pp. 613-35.

Secondary Works

- (i) J. V. Guerinot, *Pamphlet Attacks on Alexander Pope 1711-1744: A Descriptive Bibliography* (London: Methuen, 1969).
- (ii) Wolfgang Kowalk, *Alexander Pope: An Annotated Bibliography of Twentieth-Century Criticism 1900-1979* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981).
- (iii) Cécilia L. Lopez, *Alexander Pope: An Annotated Bibliography* (Gainesville, Univ. of Florida Press, 1970). Entries are annotated, and reviews of books and articles, where available, are noted.
- (iv) Donald C. Mell, Jr., "Alexander Pope (1688-1744)," in *English Poetry, 1660-1800: A Guide to Information Sources* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1982), pp. 282-334.
- (v) David Nokes, "Pope, Alexander (1688-1744)," in *An Annotated Critical Bibliography of Augustan Poetry* (New York: St. Martin's; Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989), pp. 109-29.
- (vi) J. E. Tobin, *Alexander Pope: A List of Critical Studies Published from 1895 to 1944* (New York: Cosmopolitan Science and Art Service, 1945).