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Dr Johnson and Mr Pope: 'An Ornament from an Inconvenience'

The following is a revised transcript of a talk given at Dr Johnson's House, London on 15th March 2018 by Dr Emrys Jones, Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture, Kings College London.

I'm very grateful for this opportunity to speak about Pope's grotto and about why its preservation is such a worthy cause. Through it one also preserves—more than preserves: restores—Alexander Pope's name and his work. Thinking about Pope in light of his grotto allows us to break him out of the polite prison that his orderly rhyming couplets sometimes seem to fashion for him. It clarifies his status as spokesperson for an era caught between rationalism and superstition, modern artifice and classical simplicity. I want to talk today about how Pope resembled his grotto, or it resembled him; how both came into being through a series of paradoxes: the eccentric made fashionable, the solitary made public, the inconvenient refined, as Dr Johnson writing later in the eighteenth century would have it, into ornament. And I think that by exploring those paradoxes, we can go some way to explaining not only Pope's significance for his own era, but also the challenges implicit in speaking for him today, the reasons that he can be so ubiquitous in our culture, one of the most quoted figures in literary history, and at the same time little recognised, often perceived as remote from us, and lacking the emotional depth or richness of a Shakespeare, Milton or Wordsworth.

It's probably worth pointing out at this stage a few basic facts about Pope, his life and his career. He was at once the most celebrated poet of early eighteenth-century Britain and a lifelong outsider, barred from most aspects of public life, including the poet laureateship and university education, due to his Catholic faith. He eventually settled in Twickenham partly because it was fashionable, but also because it was just about as close to London as Catholics could legally reside at a point in time when anti-Catholic paranoia was rife. It is incredible that Pope nevertheless met with such extraordinary success. From his early mock-heroic *The Rape of the Lock* to his massively popular translation of *The Iliad* and on to his later, more biting satires, he managed to harness the power of a burgeoning print marketplace that he simultaneously treated with suspicion and at times outright hostility. Pope was in many ways deeply conservative, nostalgic for older modes of aristocratic patronage, but at the same time he revelled in his independence and the freedom to offend that this granted him. Independence was at the root of his Catholicism too, perhaps alongside a measure of contrarianism. One never senses in Pope's work that he was particularly wedded to Catholic doctrine; he was just as liable to be attacked by his enemies for something bordering on deism. But Pope's parents were Catholics and out of loyalty to them he bore all the opprobrium and inconvenience of that identity too. Born in 1688, the year of Britain's Glorious Revolution which had expelled the Catholic-

sympathising James II, Pope's life from the outset was bound to be a politically and spiritually awkward one. I'll reiterate: it was an astonishing accomplishment that he sculpted such an acclaimed public career from this awkwardness; even more astonishing when one takes into account his physical incapacity, the childhood illness that stunted his growth and left him open to attacks throughout his life as a misshapen, grotesque creature: a being who was, in the cruel words of his enemies Lord Hervey and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "no more for loving made than to be loved".

Still, most of these fascinating, painful details don't tend to be at the forefront when people encounter Pope and his work today. Readers might come across one of his neat, aphoristic phrases and assume him to be a neat, aphoristic kind of poet, someone with the wit to observe that "a little learning is a dangerous thing", but not the warmth to speak to our hearts as the Romantic poets do or to shape our view of human nature as Shakespeare so often does. In Dan Brown's popular novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, Pope becomes a lame punchline for a riddle—I won't bother you with the details, but suffice it to say, the book doesn't do justice to Pope as anything more than a cypher. I find it ironic that one of the pieces of Pope's poetry most prominently celebrated in twenty-first-century popular culture should be a passage hailing the value of obscurity and oblivion:

How happy is the blameless Vestal's lot!

The world forgetting, by the world forgot.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!

Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd[.]"

That's taken from 1717's *Eloisa to Abelard*, a relatively early work that I'll be discussing from a few perspectives today. Pope's Eloisa finds solace in the idea of anonymity, a blamelessness at odds with the exceptionality of her desire. Is she ultimately willing to surrender her love for the disgraced and castrated preacher Abelard? For all that she speaks of resignation repeatedly throughout Pope's poem, she ends up yearning for the tomb she will come to share with her tragic lover; she describes the memory of their story persisting into a future time when the tears of pilgrimaging lovers will not only pay them homage but may be tasted—so that the lovers, to quote, "drink the falling tears each other sheds".

I'm sure that Pope, like Eloisa, was in fact less than enthused with the prospect of being "by the world forgot"; I don't think he'd have particularly enjoyed the way his name crops up in dear old Dan Brown's magnum opus. The "eternal sunshine" that Pope describes through Eloisa is not his chief bequest to us; nor would it be a desirable or memorable one. His legacy is actually very far from spotless. Despite our own culture's tendency to flatten and reduce a poet to his or her most charming or quotable lines, it is the blemishes, the moments of cruelty or passion, the metrical irregularities or the strange follies—grottoes!—that make Pope live for me. There may be such blemishes even in those apparently smooth and serene lines quoted above. "Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind, / Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd." It's beautiful. But I wonder if the virtuous amnesia that Pope and Eloisa describe there is meant to be admirable or horrifying. Pope's use of "accepted" also has a challenge embedded in it, perhaps a bit of heresy. The prayers of the blameless are only accepted because they are easy to fulfil, easier certainly than Eloisa's unspeakable worldly desires. Is it only spotless minds that have the luxury of an untroubled faith in the power of prayer? Pope doesn't quite come out and ask the question, but it's there in the background, like a memory of Milton's Satan, disparaging the very concept of such faultless and forgetful devotion.

I wanted to spend time exploring these small surprises and points of friction in Pope's language because I think it's an important way of understanding why exactly he's

interesting as a poet. It shows how he could make himself memorable and problematic despite his consistent use of what looks to us like a strictly ordered, symmetrical poetic form: the heroic couplet. We also see him giving fuel to his own legacy even in those moments when he seemed to be divesting himself of such ambitions. At various points in his poetry, he fantasises about withdrawal from society or about being entirely forgotten by the world; this is almost always a mechanism for him to be more effectively remembered. At the start of 1735's *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, he instructs his servant to "Shut, shut the door", to "Tye up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead"; but we are of course with him inside, there is no real retreat from the public eye because the reader is still invited to share in his escape. In the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, published the same year as *Eloisa to Abelard*, Pope concludes his account of a passionate young woman's suicide by linking his reputation to hers and by anticipating the dissolution of both: "Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung; / Deaf the prais'd ear, and mute the tuneful tongue." It's quite the humble brag. I've already quoted that line from *Eloisa to Abelard* about the lovers who drink each others' tears while mourning the eponymous couple. The image reminds me of something written by the twentieth-century French philosopher, Jean-Marie Benoist, and quoted in translation by his friend, Jacques Derrida: one must not taste another's tears, he says for "the act of tasting the tear is a desire to reannex the other". Regardless of what one thinks of Derrida's school of literary theory, I think that quotation captures something of the stance that Pope so often adopts himself: his poetry as a means of annexing experience, laying claim to a private idea or a self-deprecating gesture, then constructing from it a thoroughly, aggressively public sense of the poet's own celebrity.

This might make it sound like I disapprove, but to be honest I love Pope's hypocrisy and his drive to colonise our poetic sympathies. It anticipates the work of the Romantic poets far more than they would probably have liked to admit; Wordsworth, Keats and most of their contemporaries wanted to distance themselves from Pope as much as they could. At the same time, Pope's attitude makes him a very different writer from Dr Johnson. They both led lives of physical discomfort and both managed to attain pre-eminence in their fields despite considerable eccentricity, but Johnson didn't have Pope's egotism, his talent for manipulation or his stomach for insincerity. This comes through powerfully in Johnson's *Life of Pope* (1779), where he praises the poet but observes in him, to quote, "an appetite to talk too frequently of his own virtues". He notes that on the evidence of his published correspondence, Pope must have been an exemplary friend, for they exhibit, to quote, "a perpetual and unclouded effulgence of general benevolence, and particular fondness." Still, Johnson can't keep a note of suspicion from creeping in. "There is, indeed," he writes, "no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse." Sophistication. Yes, Pope was more sophisticated than Johnson in the sense that he couldn't be said to value truth and plainness consistently for their own sakes. It is no surprise then that Johnson was least impressed by Pope in those works where he aspired to some kind of moral or emotional authority. There was no way that Johnson could bring himself to believe in these performances. The *Essay on Man*—Pope's great, self-confounding philosophical tract of 1733—is condemned by Johnson as vacuous, perhaps dangerous. "Never," he writes, "were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised." Of the *Elegy to an Unfortunate Lady*, which I've already mentioned, he writes that "Poetry has not often been worse employed than in dignifying the amorous fury of a raving girl." In short, Johnson saw Pope as too often irresponsible in the application of his literary gifts. Those very inconsistencies and glimmers of artifice that I've been praising as Pope's great assets are in Johnson's *Life* quite regularly condemned as egregious faults—despite Johnson's general admiration for the poet's many accomplishments.

This brings us back to Johnson's words about the grotto. I don't think that he is comfortable with Pope's architectural creativity, what it represented or what it purported to represent. He writes of the poet that, "being under the necessity of making a subterraneous passage to a garden on the other side of the road, he adorned it with fossile bodies, and dignified it with the title of a grotto; a place of silence and retreat, from which he endeavoured to persuade his friends and himself that cares and passions could be excluded." Johnson's scepticism shines through—both in his implication that the title of grotto is some unearned, artificial label applied by Pope to his innovation; and in the insinuation that the site was not entirely convincing, either to the poet or his guests, as a place of retreat. He continues: "A grotto is not often the wish or pleasure of an Englishman, who has more frequent need to solicit than exclude the sun; but Pope's excavation was requisite as an entrance to his garden, and, as some men try to be proud of their defects, he extracted an ornament from an inconvenience, and vanity produced a grotto where necessity enforced a passage." For Johnson, making sense of the grotto and justifying it in some manner is inherently bound up in the business of explaining Pope himself, coming to terms with whether this four-foot-six, severely disabled Catholic was quite the proper Englishman or not. I do sympathise with Johnson's instinct that hiding away from the sun isn't always a sensible response to the British climate; what he doesn't acknowledge is that Pope's vanity was itself appealing, and didn't need to be excused through necessity. With his grotto Pope was, as he often did in his poetic career, tapping into the conflicting impulses of his era, setting trends or at least anticipating them. The fashion for imaginative landscaping that would see elaborate shrines and mock-classical temples built at Lord Cobham's Stowe in the 1730s and would see Queen Caroline herself, wife of George II, construct a grotto at Richmond—this was a fashion that tied Pope to the tastes and amusements of his times. Far from somehow being at odds with British culture, Pope was involved in shaping it; what Johnson saw as faults—an interest in the grotesque, perhaps even a portent of the Gothicism that would later make its mark on the development of the novel form and on architecture—can look to us as quintessentially English.

Let's look just a little more at what Johnson has to say about the grotto. He writes: "It may be frequently remarked of the studious and speculative, that they are proud of trifles, and their amusements seem frivolous and childish[.]" Johnson was right that Pope could be proud of his own frivolity, but he is wrong to dismiss that as secondary or subordinate to the poet's more important work. "What mighty contests rise from trivial things," Pope writes in the second line of *The Rape of the Lock* (1714). It's a poem that builds a whole absurdly epic conflict around the unauthorised snipping of a lock of hair. It's easy to see Pope's mention of mighty contests as purely ironic then, a frivolous outburst in itself. But it also works quite well as a genuine description of Pope's poetic method and the course of his career. Although I am a great admirer of his more sober philosophical poems, I have to admit that he always seems most comfortable, with himself as with his public, when he is building up to insight from seemingly trivial beginnings, lavishing care on the apparently childish until one can see maturity in it. Perhaps it is for this reason that Pope's attempts at a serious epic poem—a work focusing on the Trojan refugee and mythical founder of Britain, Brutus—never came to anything. Again, I'd say that Pope was like his grotto: capable of being sincere and insincere at once, both drawn to the potential uses of solitude and aware of the performative potential of flippancy and eccentricity.

These two sides of the grotto, and of Pope himself, are visible when we look at the similar sites that are imagined in his works. In *Eloisa to Abelard*, the convent in which Eloisa is confined becomes a kind of cavernous structure:

Relentless walls! whose darksome round contains

*Repentant sighs, and voluntary pains;
Ye rugged rocks! which holy knees have worn;
Ye grotts and caverns shagg'd with horrid thorn.*

The last line is a paraphrase of Milton; if the cavern that Eloisa inhabits is a strangely metamorphosed, strangely wild vision of the well-ordered nunnery, it is also a cavern of literary reference where the possibility of the amnesiac's eternal sunshine is already blotted out by literature's own complicating, reminding power. Elsewhere Pope openly acknowledges the potential for both silliness and self-indulgence in the idea of the cave. In *The Rape of the Lock*, like *Eloisa to Abelard* written prior to the construction of his own grotto, he describes with great relish and imagination the journey of the gnome Umbriel to the Cave of Spleen:

*Here, in a Grotto, sheltred close from Air,
And screen'd in Shades from Day's detested Glare,
She sighs for ever on her pensive Bed,
Pain at her Side, and Megrim at her Head.*

It's one of the most fantastical episodes in a highly fantastical poem. The personified Spleen—a misogynistic amalgam of what Pope saw as female vices—is surrounded by weird creatures, animated teapots and jars that wouldn't be out of place in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. The solitude of the cavernous retreat is a joke, an affectation, a logical impossibility. By virtue of human nature's own inclination for self-contradiction, the cave can never be truly silent or still.

I have really only scratched the surface of Pope's contradictions and the ways that those were encapsulated in his grotto. An area that I've focused on in much of my own research is the peculiar way that Pope could pride himself on his capacity for friendship and at the same time treat this friendliness as an abstract virtue, often publicising it for his own benefit. Johnson goes some way towards corroborating this with his report of Pope's final words: "There is nothing that is meritorious but virtue and friendship, and indeed friendship itself is only a part of virtue." There is a danger that the friendships themselves, the everyday negotiations and misunderstandings and compensations of a relationship, get lost behind the great philosophical idea of friendship that Pope proposes there. Far from seeing it as weakening Pope's claims to our attention and affection, I once more see something endearing in these hints of hypocrisy. Just as the grotto could be solitary and sociable, private and public, serious and ludicrous, Pope himself was forever torn between introvert and extrovert impulses. It is this version of Pope, so suspect in Dr Johnson's eyes, that is sometimes hard to glimpse through the refined and compact exterior of his favourite poetic form. It is a version of Pope that I would like to see more fully represented and appreciated in our culture today.