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I

JOHN SITTER

Introduction: the future of eighteenth-century poetry

Because accounts of eighteenth-century English poetry so commonly stress either its supposed preoccupation with the past or its immersion in the topical present, it may help to begin by speaking of its future. Many of the period's poets did write with a "neo-classical" eye on the classical past, especially Latin models, as indeed did most Renaissance writers. Similarly, many seem to have considered the pressure of present political events one of poetry's larger concerns, as several of the chapters in this book testify, and thus wrote often on timely subjects. But perhaps more distinctive of the eighteenth-century poets than their sense of the past and appetite for news – traits which we partly share – is their tendency to look toward the future.

In our time the future has long since absconded from poetry, moving into the precincts of science fiction, and even there frequently shrouded in dystopian dread. It is difficult to imagine serious poets today invoking posterity, making predictions, or addressing a citizenry of the future. Precisely because we seem to have lost the future as a dimension of meaning in so much of our discourse and perhaps in poetry especially, the temporal expansiveness of eighteenth-century poetry can be alien and salutary. Salutary not because it is always optimistic about the future – many of its most powerful glimpses of futurity are darkened – but because it assumes a larger theater of human action and significance. Most immediately, an appeal to the future makes a claim that one's moment is of moment. More profoundly, it assumes that there will *be* a human future, whose inhabitants might understand the claimants and find their words and deeds interesting.

Early-eighteenth-century writers were sometimes capable of making such claims while simultaneously regarding them ironically. Joseph Addison, for example, celebrates military victories over the French in *The Campaign* (1705) with the earnest hope that his poem "may tell posterity the tale." But Addison also tells the still current joke about the man who balks when asked to contribute to the good of future generations, complaining "We are always doing something for posterity, but I would fain see posterity do something

for us" (*Spectator* 583). Jonathan Swift's greatest poem, *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, seems addressed in large part to posterity, but the same Swift had earlier observed "how free the present age is in laying taxes on the next. *Future ages shall talk of this: This shall be famous to all posterity.* Whereas, their time and thoughts will be taken up about present things, as ours are now."¹

We might begin with a distinction between poems (or parts of poems) *about* the future and *for* the future, although the distinction often blurs. Into the first category fall most poems of praise and optimism, panegyrics on the present, predicting the importance of current events or at least the promising direction of the current of events. Thus Pope's *Windsor-Forest* (1713) proceeds from the recent accession of Queen Anne – "And Peace and Plenty tell, a STUART reigns" – to the imminent signing of the Treaty of Utrecht (ending the divisive War of Spanish Succession on terms profitable for England) and on to the prediction of British imperial greatness. Speaking through the voice of Father Thames, Pope imagines Britain as the "World's great Oracle in Times to come" (line 382). Such optimism often begins but does not end only in nationalism:

Oh stretch thy Reign, fair *Peace!* from Shore to Shore,
Till Conquest cease, and Slav'ry be no more:
Till the freed *Indians* in their native Groves
Reap their own Fruits, and woo their Sable Loves . . .

(lines 407–10)

Predictions of British dominance usually assume British benevolence. John Dyer, in *The Fleece* (1757), is less subtle than Pope, wholly convinced that Britain "ne'er breaks / Her solemn compacts, in the lust of rule," and confident that the woolen trade will enrich shepherds as well as traders:

Ye too rejoice, ye swains;
Increasing commerce shall reward your cares.
A day will come, if not too deep we drink
The cup which luxury on careless wealth,
Pernicious gift, bestows . . .

(IV, lines 661–62, 669–73)

But by the mid century some poets had begun to feel that empire's wealth was already compromising the conquerors' future. In "The Revenge of America" (1755), for example, Joseph Warton has the spirit of the South American Indians envision "all Europe's children curst / With lucre's universal thirst."²

Optimistic predictions are less common than warnings and in general less

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successful poetically, although William Collins manages a vaguer, more palatable political hopefulness in the two most political of his *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* (1746). The “Ode to Mercy” prophesies that “Thou, Thou shalt rule our Queen, and share our Monarch’s Throne!”, while at the close of the “Ode to Liberty”

Our Youths, enamour’d of the Fair,
Play with the Tangles of her Hair,
Till in one loud applauding Sound,
The Nations shout to Her around,
O how supremely art thou blest,
Thou, Lady, thou shalt rule the West!

It is probably not accidental that Collins’s better poems (such as “Ode to Evening” and “Ode on the Poetical Character”) are agnostic or anxious regarding the future, although just why darker prophecies tend to brighten poetry is not an easy question. In any case, most of the more impressive accounts of the future envision darker days ahead, even – as in the famous ending of Pope’s *Dunciad* – an imminent “universal Darkness” that “buries all.”

Whether *The Dunciad* is seriously intended *for* the future or muses *about* the future as a way of shaming the present has often divided readers who regard it as arguably Pope’s greatest work or as the expense of poetic spirit in a waste of topicality. The question need not be so divisive, since there is no reason the poem might not be pointed in both directions, or why either direction necessarily makes for better poetry. Clearly many poems have endured that were not explicitly addressed to the future, and even more clearly the presumption that posterity will be interested may prove absurd. But it is striking how many major and minor eighteenth-century poems do at least partly attempt to speak beyond the immediate audience to an indeterminate future readership. In Pope, as we shall see, the gesture is so frequent as to be nearly a signature; but other writers, satiric and non-satiric, also appeal to future judges.

Thomas Gray as well as Swift writes a poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), in which the undervalued poet is memorialized for later ages. *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* is Swift’s complexly comic attempt to create his own elegy and eulogy in poetry and, especially through its numerous footnotes, to leave the “true history” of the times for posterity. Swift’s notes, unfortunately cut in many modern reprints, are an essential part of the work and aim to right the record as well as identify individuals. When Swift’s putatively “impartial” spokesperson sketches him in lines such as these,

“In exile with a steady heart,
 He spent his life’s declining part . . .
 His friendship still to few confin’d
 Were always of the middling kind . . .”

(lines 431–32, 435–36)

each couplet is footnoted. Swift annotates “exile” with this account of his appointment to the deanship of Dublin’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral: “In Ireland, which he had reason to call a place of exile; to which country nothing could have driven him, but the Queen’s death, who had determined to fix him in England, in spite of the Duchess of Somerset, &c.” The second couplet points to an explanation that “In Ireland the Dean was not acquainted with one single Lord Spiritual or Temporal. He only conversed with private gentlemen of the clergy or laity, and but a small number of either.” Information like this would have been of some rhetorical force for Swift’s contemporaries but seems written as well for an imaginary time capsule.

Charles Churchill’s less familiar satire, *The Farewell* (1764), exemplifies an interesting mixture of prediction, warning, petition, and curse. Speaking as alienated patriot, Churchill wonders (lines 339–68) whether in “some not distant year” a “damned aristocracy,” looking “on freedom with an evil eye” will seek to “divide the people and the throne” and eventually “destroy them both.” Churchill’s satire is not only omnidirectional but anticipatory:

Should there be found such men in after-times,
 May Heav’n in mercy to our grievous crimes
 Allot some milder vengeance, nor to them,
 And to their rage this wretched land condemn.

Such appeals to “after-times” are a way of criticizing present-times, of course, and frequently on two counts. First, a “vision” of the future may work to show the danger or degradation of a current condition. Thus at the close of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770), the poet not only sees the effects of the current depopulation of the countryside but foresees its results:

Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,
 I see the rural virtues leave the land . . .
 Downward they move, a melancholy band,
 Pass from the shore, and darken all the strand.
 Contented toil, and hospitable care,
 And kind connubial tenderness are there . . .
 And thou, sweet Poetry, thou loveliest maid . . .

(lines 399–400, 403–6, 409–10)

While many, such as Samuel Johnson, dissented from Goldsmith’s conviction that urbanization and “luxury” would ruin the country, even Johnson

was ready to predict the impermanence of commercial structures, contributing one of the closing lines of the poem, warning “That trade’s proud empire hastes to swift decay.”

A second way in which an appeal to the future may criticize the present is by announcing that the poet cannot safely or fruitfully tell all the truth here and now. “Publish the present Age,” Pope declares, “but where my Text / Is Vice too high, reserve it for the next” (*The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*, lines 59–60). Those words were published in 1733; five years later, Pope appended a note to the two poems in dialogue now called *Epilogue to the Satires* that, like many of Swift’s notes, seems wholly directed to future readers, although hardly so: “This was the last poem of the kind printed by our author, with a resolution to publish no more; but to enter thus, in the most plain and solemn manner he could, a sort of PROTEST against that insuperable corruption and depravity of manners, which he had been so unhappy as to live to see . . . Ridicule was become as unsafe as it was ineffectual.” Indeed, all of the first dialogue seems transformed into a sort of letter to posterity by the poet’s closing turn from present vice to eventual vindication: “Yet may this Verse (if such a Verse remain) / Show there was one who held it in disdain.”

Readers of Pope generally associate his invocation of the future with a growing pessimism that culminates in the poetic apocalypse of *The Dunciad*, a gloom in which neither

public Flame, nor *private*, dares to shine;
Nor *human Spark* is left, nor Glimpse *divine!*
Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor’d;
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And Universal Darkness buries All.

The long road leading from the “Great *Anna*” who takes tea and counsel at Hampton Court in *The Rape of the Lock* (first published in 1712) to the “great Anarch” of *The Dunciad* (completed in 1743) does wend through much political disillusionment on the part of Pope and his friends. But it also maps some strong imaginative continuity, for Pope’s use of the future connects nearly all the poetic genres he attempted. In fact, a closing prediction or petition concerning the future of the subject at hand is Pope’s most characteristic way of concluding a poem, from the start of his career to the end. We have already looked at the prophetic close of *Windsor-Forest*. *The Rape of the Lock* ends with the declaration, gallant but genuinely predictive, that Belinda and her hair will be immortalized by the poem: “This *Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame, / And mid’st the Stars inscribe *Belinda’s Name!*”

Lesser known early poems also end with predictions. *The Messiah* (1712) is an explicitly prophetic poem, an account in Virgil's manner of Isaiah "Rapt into future Times" (line 7) as he foretells the birth of Christ. The *Epistle to Mr. Jervas* (1716) ends with a declaration that Jervas's portraits of the Countess of Bridgewater "shall warm a future age," even lasting "a thousand years," and that "soft *Belinda's* blush" – Jervas painted Pope's comic heroine – "shall . . . forever glow." Pope's tragic heroine, Eloisa, closes her dramatic struggle by predicting that "some future Bard shall join / In sad similitude of griefs to mine" (*Eloisa to Abelard*, lines 359–60), a forecast from the twelfth century of Pope's situation in 1717. In the same year the speaker of the "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" looks forward to his own death: "Ev'n he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays, / Shall shortly want the gen'rous tear he pays" (lines 77–78). *Shall* is the operative word in all of these endings. The complimentary epistle "To Mr. Addison, Occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals" (1720) imagines a time when English commemorative coins will, like those of Rome, enshrine national heroes: "Then future ages with delight shall see / How Plato's, Bacon's, Newton's looks agree" (lines 59–60).

By the time Pope wrote his great ethical and satiric poems in the 1730s, the turn toward the future was deeply characteristic. Not only the dark cultural prophecies of the end of his career (the *Epilogue to the Satires* and final *Dunciad*) but works such as *An Essay on Man* and most of the *Epistles to Several Persons* (1731–35) end with disclosures of what *shall* follow. When a "future age" recognizes the true worth of Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (still in political disgrace when Pope addressed *An Essay on Man* to him), the descendants of his enemies "shall blush" for their ancestors while the poem itself "shall . . . / Pursue the triumph, and partake the gale" of Bolingbroke's resuscitation. The respective addressees of the *Epistle to Burlington* and the *Epistle to Cobham* shall "proceed" (imminently) to revive the nation's architecture and die (distantly) while praying for its political salvation. Martha Blount, to whom the *Epistle to a Lady* is addressed, has no "Tyrant" of a husband in her life but does have, "the world shall know it, / . . . Sense, Good-humour, and Poet." Even in his modernization of the fourth satire of John Donne, Pope manages to invoke posterity. Pope turns Donne's immediate wish that the author not be ignored or prosecuted for his rough heterodoxy – "yet some wise man shall, / I hope, esteeme my writs Canonically" – into a more remote appeal: "However, what's now *Apocrapha*, my Wit, / In time to come, may pass for *Holy Writ*."

William Cowper, a poet for whom *Holy Writ* was a terrifying text, gives us an interesting perspective from near the end of the century on the poetic use of the future. Often convinced that the Final Judgment could not be far

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off, “in these, the world’s last doting years” (*Charity*, line 604), Cowper finds the role of poetic prophet attractive – and fraught. In the long conversational poem *Table Talk* (1781) Cowper sees a corrupted England probably doomed to lose its grandeur – “Ninevah, Babylon, and ancient Rome, / Speak to the present times, and times to come” – and its freedom, as tyranny “Gives liberty the last, the mortal shock; / Slips the slave’s collar on, and snaps the lock” (lines 432–33, 476–77). At this point, the interlocutor breaks in to ask whether the now “lofty” poet pretends to “prophesy” as well as “preach.” Cowper gives a complex answer. On the one hand, he claims a vatic role for the poet, reminding readers that “in a Roman mouth, the graceful name / Of prophet and of poet was the same” (that is, *vates*) and that the inspired poetic mind is far-seeing:

when remote futurity is brought
Before the keen inquiry of her thought,
A terrible sagacity informs
The poet’s heart; he looks to distant storms;
He hears the thunder ere the tempest low’rs;
And, arm’d with strength surpassing human pow’rs,
Seizes events as yet unknown to man
And darts his soul into the dawning plan.

Yet Cowper then insists that his own poetry lacks such prescience and abruptly disavows the role he has just described so energetically: “But no prophetic fires to me belong; / I play with syllables, and sport in song” (lines 479, 492–99, 504–05).

A similar ambivalence regarding visionary poetry dominates the end of *The Task*, the blank verse poem of over 5,000 lines that Cowper began in the fall of 1783 as a playful assignment (a friend suggested he celebrate the invention of the sofa, the ostensible subject of book 1) and published in 1785 after having brought much of earth and heaven into view. Toward the end of the poem’s sixth and final book, Cowper warms to the subject of the Second Coming and then checks his flight:

Sweet is the harp of prophesy. Too sweet
Not to be wrong’d by a mere mortal touch;
Nor can the wonders it records be sung
To meaner music, and not suffer loss. (VI, lines 747–50)

This time, Cowper forges ahead, if not with the “terrible sagacity” described in *Table Talk*, with conviction.

But when a poet, or when one like me,
Happy to rove among poetic flow’rs
Though poor in skill to rear them, lights at last

On some fair theme, some theme divinely fair,
 Such is the impulse and the spur he feels
 To give it praise proportion'd to its worth,
 That not t'attempt it, arduous as he deems
 The labor, were a task more arduous still. (vi, lines 751-58)

Yet the future now available to Cowper's imagination is not political or cultural but heavenly, as he turns in most of the remaining 250 lines to contemplate apocalyptic harmony. It would take William Blake, in the 1790s and after, to try to bring the tasks of political and spiritual prophecy together in poetry.

Whatever eighteenth-century poetry imagined of the future, its actual relation to posterity has been problematic for much of the past two centuries. Since the rise of Romanticism, prevailing literary premises and habits have predisposed many readers to underestimate the poetic richness of many eighteenth-century works. It is common for poetry of the period to wear its imagistic and metaphoric complexity lightly, so to speak, downplaying rather than advertising its potential intricacies. When Samuel Johnson describes the Persian hero Xerxes retreating in ignominy and a "skiff" after his defeat by the Greeks at Salamis, one of the few details given is the lone boat's "encumbered oar" (*Vanity of Human Wishes*, lines 248-49). It is possible to read the poem many times before grasping the imaginative horror of a boat rowing through and over the bodies of the dead.

Such miniature dramas are waiting to be *produced* by active readers, much as the script of a play is brought to life by imaginative interpretation, and the full realization of these effects often requires a readiness to go beneath the placid surfaces of eighteenth-century urbanity. When Swift writes, in *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, that "Her end when Emulation misses / She turns to Envy, Stings and Hisses" (lines 35-36) it is left to the alert reader to see as well as hear, to see the images as well as hear the jaunty epigram. If we take only one or the other – only the round jest or the flickering personification of Emulation contracting into Envy – something deeply characteristic of the period will be lost: its intuition of playfulness as part of poetic behavior. "For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery," Christopher Smart wrote in praising his cat Jeoffrey in the astonishing *Jubilate Agno* (1758-63), adding shortly after, "For he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly." The expressive ideals of poets in the Romantic tradition – which is to say most poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – have tended to value "gravity" or "waggery" alternately rather than the mixture Smart found so arresting. Thus, modern readers may find it difficult to grasp simultaneously the satiric ridicule and imaginative wonder of a poem such

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as Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, or to understand that the same poet could see a single event with pathos and irreverence at the same time. When two farm laborers who were about to be married were killed during a sudden lightning storm Pope wrote two sentimental and somewhat heroic epitaphs for them. He also wrote, more privately, this couplet with a punning reference to venereal disease:

Here lye two poor Lovers, who had the mishap
Tho very chaste people, to die of a Clap.³

To one sort of sensibility such doubleness is ethical duplicity, and we still hear its irritation in some critical writing on Pope. A more fruitful approach recognizes psychic alternation as humanly interesting and hesitates to overestimate – or oversimplify – “sincerity” as a poetic virtue. This is not to say that eighteenth-century poets themselves were indifferent to sincere expression; Samuel Johnson's impatience with Milton's *Lycidas*, for example, and with much of the poetry of the witty “Metaphysical” poetry from Donne to Cowley was a complaint against inauthentic emotion. But it may be that the vantage point of postmodernism, which tends to regard the boundaries both of the self and the “poetic” as unfixed, permeable, and always artificial, now allows us a more open engagement with the multi-voiced poetry of the eighteenth century.

The following chapters, accordingly, presuppose little except that it is time to seek fresh approaches to the range of English poetry written between about 1700 and 1790, that the relation between past achievement and future readers is now to be negotiated anew. The past always requires introduction and explanation, but its more demanding requirements are imagination and empathy. We have tried, while providing helpful backgrounds and frameworks for understanding eighteenth-century poetry, to keep in view the potential excitement of both recognition and resistance. In literary as in other kinds of meaningful travel, the challenge is to be at once ready to recognize kinship and appreciate the alien. If we sense no similarity we soon long for home; if we grasp no strangeness we might as well not have set out.

NOTES

- 1 *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis et al., 14 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939–68), 1, 243.
- 2 Joseph Warton's “The Revenge of America” appeared in 1755 in volume IV of the important miscellany (anthology) edited by Robert Dodsley, *A Collection of Poems*; it is also available in John Wooll, *Biographical Memoirs of the late Rev Joseph Warton* (1806), p. 158.
- 3 Pope's several versions are available in the one-volume Twickenham Edition, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, rev. 1973), pp. 462–63.