

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CONCEPT OF *MODERATION* IN THE WORKS OF POPE, JOHNSON, VOLTAIRE AND ROUSSEAU

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Distant alike from each, to neither lean,
But ever keep the happy Golden Mean.
Rowe, *The Golden Verses*

One of the commonly accepted ideas of the eighteenth century, shared by writers as dissimilar as Pope and Johnson, Voltaire and Rousseau, is the concept of moderation, or of obedience to the Golden Mean, a concept that pervaded European literature from the end of the Baroque to the first strains of Romantic individualism. As Arthur Lovejoy points out, this “ethics of prudent mediocrity” arose as a consequence of the complex of ideas summed up in the cosmological conception of the Chain of Being, which tended “to make man not unbecomingly sensible of his littleness in the scheme of things, and to promote a not wholly unsalutary modesty and self-distrust.” (1)

Following this line of thought, much of the satire that flourished in England in the first half of the century directs itself to the commonly observable abuses in social and intellectual pursuits, as Pope’s two mock-heroic poems -- *The Rape of the Lock* and the *Dunciad* -- clearly illustrate. In *The Rape of the Lock* Pope criticizes, through Belinda and her equally vain companions, the social mores and the futility of life in the English court at the time of Queen Anne. In brief snatches, among lighter verses, he

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includes lines such as these: “Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,/ Dost sometimes counsel take -- and sometimes Tea,”(2) and, a few lines afterwards, his famous and much quoted couplet, “The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign,/And wretches hang that jurymen may dine” (III, 21-22). In a society where husbands, lap dogs, and good china are pitied alike (III, 158-59), it is only natural for Ill Nature and Affectation to take over and for the following words of Clarissa to be coldly received by Belinda’s friends: “How vain are all these glories, all our pains,/ Unless good sense preserve what beauty gains” (V, 15-16). By urging good humor, virtue, and merit, Clarissa represents the “ethics of the Golden Mean” in a society prone to excesses and intemperance.

In the *Dunciad* Pope ridicules, very much in the manner of Dryden’s “Mac Flecknoe,” what W.K. Wimsatt has termed “the abuses against knowledge” or, in Pope’s own words, “the diabolical power of stupidity.”(3) By satirizing literary figures of the time, such as Colley Cibber and the poet laureate Lewis Theobald, Pope launches a violent attack on pedantry, an attitude that may be summed up in the blessing by the Goddess of Dullness upon her children: “All my commands are easy, short, and full:/ My sons! be proud, be selfish, and be dull” (IV, 581-82).

What the Goddess has urged and what Pope recognizes as the common practice of

his day clearly contradicts the basic principles set up in his early and serious poem *An Essay on Criticism*:

Be sure yourself and your own reach to know,
How far your genius, taste, and learning go;
Launch not beyond your depth, but be discreet,
And mark that point where sense and dullness meet.
(I, 48-51)

Because “unerring Nature” presents an even balance between opposites and fixes the limits to all things, a good critic and a good writer should not consent to pride, “the never-failing vice of fools” (II, 204). And, in two beautifully quotable couplets, Pope proceeds to set down the ethics of the middle state for the contemporary writer:

In words, as fashions, the same rule will hold;
Alike fantastic, if too new, or old:
Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.
(II, 333-36)

Likewise, “The Vulgar thus through Imitation err;/As oft the Learned by being singular” (II, 424-35). Furthermore, as far as the qualities of the critic are concerned, he should prove,

Unbiased, or by favour, or by spite;
Not dully prepossessed. nor blindly right;

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Though learned, well-bred; and though well-bred sincere;
Modestly bold, and humanly severe:
.....
Blest with a taste exact, yet unconfined;
A knowledge both of books and human kind;
Generous converse; a soul exempt from pride;
And love to praise, with reason on his side.
(III, 633-42)

The great literary virtue, therefore, consists in not leaning to either extreme, but keeping instead a balanced and moderate attitude.

But not only in literature did Pope advocate moderation. He was equally concerned with the more general problem of knowledge, and saw in experience the proper counterpart for books. In the Argument of the “Epistle to Lord Cobham,” the first of his *Moral Essays*, he clearly states that for a knowledge of Man, “Books will not serve the purpose, nor yet our own *Experience* singly. General maxims, unless they be formed upon *both*, will be but notional” (p.235). In the “Epistle to Lord Bathurst” he similarly makes an apology of “The due Medium, and true use of Riches” (p.254) against the two extremes of Avarice and Profusion alike. The invention of money has been pernicious to mankind, for “an equal fate betides/The slave that digs it, and the Slave that hides”

(11.109-10). He invokes Lord Bathurst to teach the rare secret of moving between “mad Good Nature” and “mean Self-Love” and

The Sense to value Riches, with the Art
T’ enjoy them, and the Virtue to impart,
Not meanly, nor ambitiously pursued,
Not sunk by sloth, nor raised by servitude;
To balance Fortune by a just expense,
Join with Economy, Magnificence;
With Splendour, Charity; with Plenty, Health.
(11.219-25)

To illustrate this desirable and so seldom reached position, Pope celebrates the Man of Ross, who possessing but a small fortune, nevertheless dedicated his life to good works. In opposition to him, Sir Balaam grows from “A plain good man . . . / Religious, punctual, frugal” (11.342-43) into an ambitious and miserable wretch. Still in this vein, the “Epistle IV,” dedicated to the Earl of Burlington, starts from the same specific argument as to the use of riches, and proceeds to criticize the abuses of the word taste and to make a deep and generalized eulogy of good sense.

Something there is more needful than Expense,
and something previous even to Taste -- ‘tis Sense:
Good Sense, which only is the gift of Heaven,
And though no Science, fairly worth the seven
(11.41-44).

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Whether in architecture or in gardening, man must follow nature and “treat the Goddess like a modest fair, / Nor overdress, nor leave her wholly bare” (11.51-52).

The notions of common sense and moderation receive an even greater attention in the *Satires and Epistles of Horace Imitated*. In the “First Satire of the Second Book of Horace,” as he acknowledges satire as his proper weapon, Pope writes of his intention to “publish the present age” (1.59), and defines himself as

Papist or Protestant, or both between,
Like good Erasmus in an honest Mean,
In moderation placing all my glory,
While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory.
(11. 65-68)

But it is to the “Second Satire” that one must turn for a complete panegyric of moderation and temperance. After exhorting “the virtue and the Art/To live on little with a cheerful heart” (11. 1-1), the poet scorns both gluttony and stinginess, and states:

‘Tis yet in vain, I own, to make a pother
About one vice, and fall into the other:
Between Excess and Famine lies a mean;
Palin, but not sordid; though not splendid, clean.

(11. 45-48)

And, closely echoing the lines of Nicholas Rowe that serve as the epigraph to this paper, Pope further states that, "He knows to live, who keeps the middle state,/And neither leans on this side, nor on that" (11. 61-62). Thus Pope, as the mouthpiece of the most commonly held ideas of the Age of Reason, gave expression to the generalized praise and esteem of temperance, which together with fortitude, prudence, and justice, constituted the foremost virtue of his time.

Samuel Johnson, the other great Englishman famous for his maxims and common-sensical statements, has much to say about the notion of the Golden Mean. Intemperate by nature --he loved to indulge in eating-- and prone to fits of extreme despondency, Johnson struggled throughout his life to put into practice the very principles of moderation that he advocated. As his prayers and meditations clearly reveal, he greatly praised diligence and a regular scheme of life. In "The Vanity of Human Wishes" he discusses old age much in the same manner as Pope, by seeing in it the consequences of youth. Thus for the avaricious "dreaded losses aggravate his pains,"(4) whereas for the few who have lived well "the virtues of a temp'rate prime/Bless with an age exempt from scorn or crime" (l. 291). In one of his *Rambler* essays (No.50) he similarly reconciles the levity of youth with the severity of old age by asserting:

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He that would pass the latter part of life with honour and decency, must, when he is young, consider that he shall one day be old; and remember, when he is old, that he has once been young. In youth, he must lay up knowledge for his support, when his powers of acting shall forsake him; and in age forbear to animadvert with rigour on faults which experience only can correct (p.89).

Experience is indeed for Johnson, perhaps even more so than for Pope, a basic source of learning. In another essay, for the *Rambler* No. 154, he urges that for politics, as for other types of activity, "The first task is to search books, the next to contemplate nature" (p. 120). Experience, or the "nature of things," will furthermore instruct the individual on how to distinguish between more or less desirable vices, for, more practical than Pope, Johnson did not shun all faults alike. He recognized between rashness and cowardice, as between profusion and avarice, a general preference for the first mentioned of the two extremes. Because he truly valued the voice of the people, Johnson saw in those faults either some possibility of future virtue or "some latent principle of merit" (p.77). He asserts, nevertheless, that "To walk with circumspection and steadiness in the right path, at an equal distance between the extremes of error, ought to be constant endeavor of every reasonable being" (p.77). For the difficult task of leading a happy life, he further urges patience and submission at the same time that he carefully distinguishes between those virtues and their degrading counterparts--cowardice and indolence (p.83).

To prudence, Samuel Johnson devotes an entire essay, written for *The Idler* No.57. Nine years after having advocated "an equal distance between extremes," the author seems to have somewhat modified his views:

Prudence operates on life in the same manner as rules on composition; it produces

vigilance rather than elevation, rather prevents loss than procures advantage; and often escapes miscarriages, but seldom reaches either power or honour . . . Rules may obviate faults, but can never confer beauties; and Prudence; keeps life safe, but does not often make it happy (p.199).

In order to better illustrate his ideas, Johnson makes use of a fictitious character, his companion Sophron, who epitomizes the “ethics of prudent mediocrity.” Sophron lives according to some personal principles, the first of which is to run no risks. “Tho’ he loves money,” Johnson writes, “he is of opinion, that frugality is a more certain source of riches than industry” (p.200). Having decided to mind no business but his own, Sophron gives no advice and thus procures no blame. “His punctuality has gained him the

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reputation of honesty, and his caution that of wisdom” (F.200), as he neither praises nor ever censures anybody. And in this way, Johnson concludes, “Sophron creeps along, neither loved nor hated, neither favoured nor opposed; he has never attempted to grow rich for fear of growing poor, and has raised no friends for fear of making enemies” (pp. 2C1-02). There is thus an apparent contradiction between Johnson’s advocating temperance and common sense, and his vehement attack on prudence.

Not until reading *Rasselas* (published incidentally one month before the above mentioned essay) does the reader cease being puzzled. In this narrative work, the question of Prudence comes up again in the debate carried on between Rasselas and Nekayah as to the merits of marriage as contrasted to those of celibacy. After carefully considering the advantages and disadvantages of an early marriage, the Princess recognizes the position so often advocated by Imlac, ““That nature sets her gifts on the right hand and on the left,”“ and she continues,

Those conditions, which flatter hope and attract desire, are so constituted, that, as we approach one, we recede from another. There are goods so opposed that we cannot seize both, but, by too much prudence, may pass between them at too great a distance to reach either . . . No man can taste the fruits of autumn while he is delighting his scent with the flowers of the spring: no man can, at the same time, fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile (pp.666-67).

Closely related to the problem of marriage are Nekayah’s observations as to the affective relationship between members of the same household. Surprised by the great discord she observed within families, the princess comes upon the rivalry and lack of agreement between opposing factions such as parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants. Like Voltaire, who championed tolerance and argued for a fairer legal system, and like Rousseau, who pleaded a more humane treatment for children, Johnson was very much concerned with the abuse of authority and the need for understanding among men. In a very generalized, perhaps exaggerated essay for *The Rambler*, he criticizes legal and parental authority alike, and advocates mercy rather than oppression (pp. 115-19).

The struggle for freedom did, especially in France, play a great part in the history of ideas of the eighteenth century. In the same way that Swift supported in the early part of the century the movement against the political oppression of Ireland by the English, so did Voltaire and Rousseau contribute to setting the ideological basis for the French

Revolution. For Rousseau, as *Julie* or *La Nouvelle Héloïse* illustrates in a more restricted sphere, true liberty consisted of a happy medium between subjection and command. “I flatter myself,” Julie remarks,

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that you have never noticed in my children a trace of domination or authority over the lowest servant, that you have never seen me secretly encourage the false servility which servants tend to show towards children.(5)

Similarly to Johnson, however, Rousseau does not see the middle approach as always conducive to happiness. From an introductory passage to *Emile* come those lines, quite extreme, that “Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (p.55). Later, in asserting the inanity of a college education, he further elaborates on this theme by stating that, “Driven in opposite directions by nature and by custom, and forced to yield somewhat to both, we take a half-way road that leads us to neither goal” (p.61). But, in spite of the markedly revolutionary turn of most of his writings, Rousseau could not avoid being a product of his age as he often argued for a common-sensical attitude between extremes. Though his “nature” is indeed different from the concept held by Pope and Johnson, in arguing for an equilibrium between passion and restraint as the basic source of happiness, Rousseau very much resembled them.

In advocating that physical training should precede intellectual pursuit, Rousseau argues in *Emile* that “Intemperance inflames the passions, and in time wears away the body” (p.76) and that “Temperance and work are the two best physicians in the world,” since as the latter whets the appetite, the former helps keep it under control (p.77). A balance between desires and capacities provides then for Rousseau the ultimate proof of wisdom; it shows the road to true happiness. “The man who is really free,” he asserts, “only desires what he can perform; he can then perform all that he desires” (p. 91). Wisdom consists therefore in “lessening the disproportion between our capacities and our desires, in reducing our inclinations and our powers to a perfect equilibrium” (p.90). How close it comes to Pope’s precepts of the *Essay on Criticism* as he urges both critic and author to limit themselves to what they can understand.

Voltaire proves no less sensible. By satirizing extremes of any sort--be it philosophical or material--he illustrates in *Candide* the universally venerated maxim of “cultivez votre jardin.” In another somewhat less known conte philosophique, *Zadig, or Destiny*, he likewise appears to be propounding the principle of moderation. Zadig, the hero or central character of the tale, selected by the angel Jesrad to learn how to submit to the eternal dictates of Providence, is the epitome of common sense:

Though young and rich, he knew how to restrain his passions; he was free from all affectation, made no pretense of infallibility himself, and knew how to respect human weakness. People were astonished to see that, with all his wit, he never turned his raillery on the vague, disconnected, and confused talk, the rash slander, the ignorant judgements, the coarse jests, and

all that vain babble of words which went by the name of conversation at Babylon . . . He was as wise as man can be, for he sought to live with the wise. Instructed in the sciences of the ancient Chaldeans, he was not ignorant of such physical principles of Nature as were then known, and knew as much of Metaphysics as has been known in any age, that is to say, very little.⁶

Shunning exaggerations in abstract learning as in the more mundane aspects of life, Voltaire was nevertheless specifically concerned with abuses in religious and legal practices. His *Philosophical Dictionary* abounds in lengthy explanations of Fanaticism, Freedom of Thought, Inquisition, Persecution, and Tolerance, to mention only a few of the typically Voltairean entries. He wrote a whole *Treatise on Tolerance*, and his *Commentary on the Book, Of Crimes and Punishment* advocates human concern and moderation in the application of justice.

Because a closer examination of such specific concerns, though within the scope of our analysis, would render this paper much too lengthy, we shall restrict our investigation of Voltaire's thought to the subject of moderation in general and, to end in verse as we have begun, examine his early poem "On Moderation in All Things." His opening lines, though lacking the brilliance of Pope's perfect couplets, are nevertheless fairly quotable:

Fools by excess make varied pleasures pall,
The wise man's moderate, and enjoys them all;
Pleasure and business to combine he knows,
And makes joy terminate in due repose.⁽⁷⁾

In his restriction of what can be appropriately learned and discerned by man, he approaches Johnson's dislike of speculation and urges permanence within the bounds of the Golden Mean:

To all things no one mortal can aspire,
From early youth to know was your desire:
Nature's your book, you strive with curious eye
In nature more than others to descry,
Guided by reason nature try to sound
But set to curiosity a bound (p.301).

Just as in architecture the inside of the structure is concealed by the façade, so in human understanding man's "feeble sight/ Cannot pierce through this veil of darkest night" (p.303). Furthermore, like Rousseau, Voltaire advocates work as the sole means for the attainment of happiness:

Let us not strive of all joys to partake,
But let us pleasure quit, for pleasure's sake;
Who labors hard true pleasure still obtains,
I pity him whom indolence enchains.

True wisdom yields true happiness below,
On earth no harvests without culture grow:
Good by laborious search must here be sought,
Success by industry alone is bought (pp.304-05).

Basically concerned with the pursuit of happiness for all men, eighteenth-century writers, from the fairly elitist Pope to the basically popular Rousseau, from those who subscribed to the concept of the Great Chain of Being to those who refuted it, all endorsed the idea that the proper path toward happiness, or at least toward a good and sensible life, lay between extremes. The Golden Mean remains thus a clear and concise generalization of the principles which characterized the Age of Reason or Enlightenment.

NOTES

- 1) Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 200.
- 2) Alexander Pope, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p.100. All further references to the works of Pope will be to this edition.
- 3) W.K. Wimsatt, ed., *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. xviii.
- 4) Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose* (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1971), p.60. All further references to the works of Johnson will be to this edition.
- 5) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *His Educational Theories Selected from Emile, Julie, and Other Writings* (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.,1964), p.37. All further references to the works of Rousseau will be to this edition.
- 6) Voltaire, *Candide and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), pp. 4-5. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the works of Voltaire will be to this edition.
- 7) Voltaire, *The works of Voltaire*, vol. I (New York: The St. Hubert Guild, 1901), p. 301.

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