



The Works Of Alexander Pope Esq.

In Nine Volumes Complete. With His Last Corrections, Additions, And Improvements; As they were delivered to the Editor a little before his Death

Containing The First of his Letters

Pope, Alexander

London, 1751

VI. Some critical observations in English Versification.

Nutzungsbedingungen

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towards the parliament: then I shall certainly be there; and hope by that time you will have finish'd your Pastorals as you would have them appear in the world, and particularly the third, of Autumn, which I have not yet seen. Your last Eclogue being upon the same subject as that of mine on Mrs. Tempest's Death, I shou'd take it very kindly in you to give it a little turn, as if it were to the Memory of the same Lady, if they were not written for some particular Woman whom you would make immortal. You may take occasion to shew the difference between Poets Mistresses, and other mens. I only hint this, which you may either do, or let alone just as you think fit. I shall be very much pleas'd to see you again in Town, and to hear from you in the mean time. I am, with very much esteem,

Your, &c.

L E T T E R V I.

Oct. 22, 1706.

AFTER the thoughts I have already sent you on the subject of English Versification, you desire my opinion as to some farther particulars. There are indeed certain Niceties, which, tho' not much observed even by correct versifiers, I cannot but think, deserve to be better regarded.

1. It

1. It is not enough that nothing offends the ear, but a good Poet will adapt the very Sounds, as well as Words, to the things he treats of. So that there is (if one may express it so) a Style of Sound. As in describing a gliding stream, the numbers should run easy and flowing; in describing a rough torrent or deluge, sonorous and swelling, and so of the rest. This is evident every where in Homer and Virgil, and no where else, that I know of, to any observable degree. The following examples will make this plain, which I have taken from *Vida*.

Molle viam tacito lapsu per levia radit.

Incedit tardo molimine subsidendo.

Luētantes ventos, tempestatesque sonoras.

Immenso cum præcipitans ruit Oceano Nox.

Telum imbelle sine ictu, coniecit.

Tolle moras, cape saxa manu, cape robora, Pastor.

Ferte citi flammæ, data tela, repellite pestem.

This, I think, is what very few observe in practice, and is undoubtedly of wonderful force in imprinting the image on the reader: We have one excellent example of it in our language, Mr. Dryden's Ode on St. Cæcilia's day, entitled, *Alexander's Feast*.

2. Every nice ear must (I believe) have observ'd, that in any smooth English verse of ten

syllables, there is naturally a *Pause* at the fourth, fifth, or sixth syllable. It is upon these the ear rests, and upon the judicious change and management of which depends the variety of versification. For example,

At the fifth.

Where'er thy navy | spreads her canvass wings,

At the fourth.

Homage to thee | and peace to all she brings.

At the sixth.

Like tracts of leverets | in morning snow.

Now I fancy, that, to preserve an exact Harmony and Variety, the *Pause* at the 4th or 6th should not be continued above three lines together, without the interposition of another; else it will be apt to weary the ear with one continued tone, at least it does mine: That at the 5th runs quicker, and carries not quite so dead a weight, so tires not so much, tho' it be continued longer.

3. Another nicety is in relation to Expletives, whether words or syllables, which are made use of purely to supply a vacancy: *Do* before verbs plural is absolutely such; and it is not improbable but future refiners may explode *did* and *does* in the same manner, which are almost always used for the sake of rhyme. The same cause has occasioned the promiscuous use
of

of *you* and *thou* to the same person, which can never sound so graceful as either one or the other.

4. I would also object to the irruption of Alexandrine verses, of twelve syllables, which, I think, should never be allow'd but when some remarkable beauty or propriety in them atones for the liberty: Mr. Dryden has been too free of these, especially in his latter works. I am of the same opinion as to Triple Rhimes.

5. I could equally object to the Repetition of the same Rhimes within four or six lines of each other, as tiresome to the ear thro' their Monotony.

6. Monosyllable Lines, unless very artfully managed, are stiff, or languishing: but may be beautiful to express Melancholy, Slowness, or Labour.

7. To come to the Hiatus, or Gap between two words, which is caus'd by two vowels opening on each other (upon which you desire me to be particular) I think the rule in this case is either to use the Cæsura, or admit the Hiatus, just as the ear is least shock'd by either: For the Cæsura sometimes offends the ear more than the Hiatus itself, and our language is naturally overcharg'd with consonants: As for example; If in this verse,

The old have Int'rest ever in their eye,
we should say, to avoid the Hiatus,

But th' old have int'rest.

The Hiatus which has the worst effect, is when one word ends with the same vowel that begins the following; and next to this, those vowels whose sounds come nearest to each other, are most to be avoided. O, A, or U, will bear a more full and graceful Sound than E, I, or Y. I know, some people will think these Observations trivial, and therefore I am glad to corroborate them by some great authorities, which I have met with in Tully and Quintilian. In the fourth book of Rhetoric to Herennius, are these words: *Fugiemus crebras vocalium concursiones, quæ vastam atque hiantem reddunt orationem; ut hoc est, Bacca æneæ amœnissimæ impendebant.* And Quintilian l. ix. cap. 4. *Vocalium concursus cum accidit, hiat & interficit, & quasi laborat oratio. Pessimi longe quæ easdem inter se literas committunt, sonabunt: Præcipuus tamen erit hiatus earum quæ cavo aut patulo ore efferuntur. E plenior litera est, I angustior.* But he goes on to reprove the excess on the other hand of being too solicitous in this matter, and says admirably, *Nescio an negligentia in hoc, aut sollicitudo sit peior.* So likewise Tully (*Orator. ad Brut.*) *Theopompum reprebendunt,*

dunt, quod eas literas tanto opere fugerit, etsi idem magister ejus Socrates: which last author, as Turnebus on Quintilian observes, has hardly one Hiatus in all his works. Quintilian tells us, that Tully and Demosthenes did not much observe this nicety, tho' Tully himself says in his Orator, *Crebra ista vocum concursio, quam magna ex parte vitiosam, fugit Demosthenes.* If I am not mistaken, Malherbe of all the moderns has been the most scrupulous in this point; and I think Menage in his observations upon him says, he has not one in his poems. To conclude, I believe the Hiatus should be avoided with more care in poetry than in Oratory; and I would constantly try to prevent it, unless where the cutting it off is more prejudicial to the sound than the Hiatus itself. I am, &c.

A. POPE.

Mr. Walsh died at forty-nine years old, in the year 1708, the year before the

Essay on Criticism was printed, which concludes with his Elogy. P.