A NEW LOOK AT ENGLISH AUGUSTAN POETRY*

I

For almost two centuries eighteenth-century poetry—a half-dozen masterpieces excepted—has been under a cloud of varying size and density but of constant import. Even when this poetry has not been specifically dismissed on charges of artifice and conventionality, it has been benignly neglected in favor of the sort which seems to reflect back into us those extreme emotional states made peculiarly our own by modern history—strain, personal and collective guilt, hysteria, madness. The few eighteenth-century poems we have thought it right to treasure have been largely those projecting neurotic emotional states. It is significant that the part of Pope we now like best is the apocalyptic—indeed, the proto-Blakean—climax at the end of the Dunciad. Our current overvaluing of pariahs, victims, and expellees of all kinds leads us to consider Cowper's Castaway as «the greatest lyric of the eighteenth century», just as our weakness for disorder and excess turns us from Gay's Trivia towards Smart's Jubilate Agno and A Song to David.

In dealing with the poetry of the century and a half running from 1660 to 1800, we have thus winkled out the very few poems that happen to nourish our own unease and self-contempt; what remains we have left as if it were all of a piece, and that piece thoroughly inert and bland. We have acted as if four generations of poets are to be condemned to the galleys on a charge of, first, exhibiting sanity and poise, and second, admitting, even proclaiming, the influence on them of prior poets and of a live tradition. But it may be time now to take a new look, to inquire into the grounds of our neglect of eighteenth-century poetry and to see if those grounds are really adequate.

Right now seems to me the moment for a new look, for we now have available a sense of art and its relation to the actual quite different from the sense of those things presiding when this body of poetry was being progressively disvalued. It used to be thought that all poetry recommended itself by

its sincerity and personality, by its closeness to the unique life of its creator. But our current sense of art has been complicated and sophisticated by such critical landmarks as Harry Levin’s essay «Literature as an Institution»; E.H. Gombrich’s Art and Illusion; Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism; and most recently, E.D. Hirsch’s Validity in Interpretation. What these all remind us is this: that any kind of art, just because of its conspicuous distinction from the natural and the accidental, is much more conventionalized and institutionalized than we may have imagined. Our focus has shifted from the individual talent to «the tradition», which is to say that we are now able to appreciate the sheer beauty and intellectual interest of «period» forms, styles, and procedures with which the individual personality has little to do. We are developing a new appreciation of artistic cunning and even duplicity: hence our fondness for modern writers like Nabokov and Borges. When we do locate a «lifelike» self in a work of art, we are likely to identify it as a performer, as what Susanne Langer would call a «virtual self», gifted less at unbuttoned disclosures of its uniqueness than—like an Augustan poet—at saying what ought to be said. What we are doing in all this is rehabilitating the values of Wilde’s The Decay of Lying (1889). Anticipating the Frye who asserts that «Poetry can only be made out of other poems», Wilde writes: «Life and nature may sometimes be used as part of art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions». And this insight allows us to penetrate to the heart of Augustan poetry.

Tutored by Wilde and his alert modern followers, we have learned to distrust theories of naive representationalism in art. We see more easily now than a generation ago that poetry is not «made of» ideas, opinions, emotions, urges, or even convictions; it is made immediately and artistically of syllables, poetic feet, known diction of various kinds, lines, stanzas, all crossed by stock figures and turns, all the poetically conventions enlisted by all poets to make their work «sound right». Our modern recognition that poems are really little theaters of illusion and performance suggests that we are groping towards an attitude about people that was taken for granted in the eighteenth century. I refer to the feeling for human limitation, the sense that human motive, no matter how diverse and particular, can manifest itself only within given forms. These forms are made and ratified by a tradition, not by ourselves. In short, men and even poets can do just so much.

These principles of art we have reached by long and hard thinking and debate. But what we have really done in all this laboring is to arrive back at an understanding of art very close to the one animating and shaping Augustan poetry.

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In taking a new look at Augustan poetry, the first thing to do is to assign a useful meaning to the word Augustan. We must begin by recalling that in 1660 «education» meant one thing pre-eminently—Latin education. Everyone who read and wrote in late-seventeenth-century England knew the Latin classics, and everyone liked to exercise his knowledge by drawing parallels between current events and ancient history. It was thus perfectly in order for the survivors of the English civil wars to conceive of the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 as analogous to the new start betokened by Augustus sixteen centuries earlier. Thus with more hope than pedantry Charles II was often referred to as «Augustus» and the «restored» London over which he presided as «Augusta». The consciousness of the monarch as Augustus persists with gradually accreting irony through the reign of the Hanoverians. As a satirist Pope was fortunate that the disappointing George II bore Augustus as one of his names: this enabled Pope to «imitate» The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace—where Horace flatters Augustus on his bravery and taste—as if George II represented no failing off. In the same way the persistence of the Augustus myth is what makes possible many other exercises in ironic let-down, of which Johnson's One Colley Cibber is a neat little example.

As distinguished from mid-seventeenth-century poetry, the poetry we can designate as Augustan is written within a consciousness of taking place in a safe environment, or at least an environment, like that in Gay's Trivia, where the threats are interesting and amusing rather than really terrifying. English poetry which deserves to be called Augustan assumes a world so well lighted and stable that menaces to its felicity can be kept at bay largely by satire or clarity or honesty or belittlement. This is why a poem like Edward Young's Night Thoughts will strike us as undeniably an eighteenth-century poem, but not an Augustan one. I don't want to say that certain internal or psychological threats are not recognized by the Augustan poem: Green's The Spleen is an argument to the contrary. But what an eminently Augustan poem like The Spleen says is that boredom, melancholy, and anxiety can be overcome by readily available public means—social exercises, good sense, a sense of humour.

Perhaps Augustan poetry is less definable as work produced during a certain period of time—critics are always arguing whether the English Augustan Age comprises merely the last forty years of the seventeenth century, or continues through 1745, or extends even to the time of Byron, Crabbe, and the Anti-Jacobins—than as a poetry which behaves in certain ways and not others. Perhaps certain poetic gestures—while undeniably «eighteenth century»—can be taken as indicators of the non-Augustan. The use of triple meters, the fact is that it almost never does, and that is why things like Cowper's
The Poplar Field and Goldsmith’s Retaliation are outside the Augustan tradition. Outside it also are Spenserian imitations, like Thomson’s Castle of Indolence, Shenstone’s Schoolmistress, Beattie’s Minstrel, and Burns’s Cotter’s Saturday Night: too «merely» English, too local, too Gothic, like Chatterton’s pseudo-medievalisms. Poems in excessively local dialects (much of Burns again) are outside the tradition: too distant from the requisite Roman tone. In the same way, poems about or addressed to children are out. So are hymns or «divine songs»: the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon’s Decline and Fall will suggest why. Although it stays well this side of viciousness—the Pound of the usura Cantos could never be mistaken for an Augustan—this poetry tends to take neither tenderheartedness nor self-pity for its domain. As it becomes sentimental it grows the less «Augustan». Rhyme, especially couplet rhyme, seems essential to this poetry: it is the readiest way of recognizing the debt of human thought to artificial techniques of analysis and order. It may be largely because they are unhymned that we miss the true Augustan tone in long didactic blank-verse poems like Thomson’s Seasons or Cowper’s Task.

All these exclusions imply important Augustan characteristics: an unillusioned but not hopeless focus on the idea of man in general; a sense of history—including literary history—as primary reality; an urge towards public speech; an instinct for irony; a fondness for themes or effects involving a significant duplicity; a loathing of metaphysics; a contempt for France (compare the Roman disdain for the Barbarians); a devotion to urban themes treated urbanely; and skill in contriving a cool expressive surface which often disguises a fairly rowdy center: Pope’s Rape of the Lock is an example, and so is Pomfret’s Choice, beneath whose straight-faced, well-bred exterior lurk some very interestingly irrational and human little sexual fantasies.

There is yet another way Augustan poetry identifies itself. It is conscious of itself as a New Poetry, a Modernist poetry, distinctly an advance on the kind of poetry it displaces. It is hard now to appreciate how revolutionary, «progressive», and generally refreshing a poetry in heroic couplets must have seemed when it was new, what a bold, inventive departure it must have appeared after a surfeit of blank verse in the seventeenth century. And its themes as well as its techniques must once have quickened the heart. After all that concern with ambitiousness in Shakespeare and Milton, how novel and refreshing to read a new poetry clearly depicting ambition as a curse, celebrating retirement, rejoicing over the blessed unlikelihood of change! After all that anxious psychic troubling, those tormenting uncertainties and dark paradoxes in Herbert and Donne, how exciting to advance out into clarity and light! A new world was under construction, and the poet as one of its artificers. The situation will remind us of the literary scene in the thirties. Heady stuff!

If this new world was sketched out at the Restoration, it was colored, finished, and varnished by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the accession
of William and Mary in 1689. For it was to those events that most people in
the eighteenth century enthusiastically ascribed the establishment of "the
constitution", which is of course not a document but a principle. It is a prin-
ciple which has large consequences for Augustan poetry.

The principle was called "constitutional" first because it was essential,
the *sine qua non* of the body of the reformed state; and second because it was
openly understood and agreed to by all constituents, foisted by power or cun-
nning upon none. It meant a restoration of the sacred scheme of harmoniously
competing oppositions dating even from Magna Carta but perverted during
the seventeenth century by excesses now from the throne, now from the
church, and now from the populace. As it was often understood, the parties to
the 1689 constitution are essentially three: Crown, Peers, Commons. But it
was as often understood that the productive oppositions encouraged by the
constitution involve two parties—sometimes Crown and Peers against Com-
mons, sometimes Peers and Commons against Crown. What supports the state
providing not just nourishment but the very principle of its life, is the balance
of power achieved when each party guards its own prerogatives. The consti-
tutional principles implies an almost magical generation of harmony out of
difference. The principle of productively competing powers reveals itself every-
where in Augustan poetry. It may not be going too far to see this principle
as the equivalent in aesthetics and daily imaginative life of Newton's con-
ception of universal physics. Contemporary thinkers understood Newton to
say that heavenly bodies maintained their orbits by participating at once in
two opposing forces, inertia and gravity. Inertia is what, in the absence of
atmosphere, keeps a planet energetically pursuing its course. The gravity
exerted by a heavier body is what competes with inertia to regularize the
planet's course into an orbit. The principle is one of perfect equipoise between
two opposite forces.

In a crucial passage in the *Essay on Criticism* Pope appropriates this
principle and makes it fructive for poetry and criticism. His example of mar-
velous equipoise is the dome designed by Michelangelo for St. Peter's. The
stones are able to do their work because they participate at once in the force
urging them downward and the torque urging them inward. The result of
this marriage between vertical and lateral is that—Glory be!

The whole at once is bold and regular.

Boldness is purchased without messiness, and regularity exacts no cost in
dullness. In poetry the corollary of boldness is *wit*; of regularity, *judgment*.
Though meant to be each other's aid, they are often at strife, it is true; but
they are at strife not like strangers or proclaimed enemies but like man and
wife. The pressure of opposites is generative. In the *Essay on Man* the counter-
parts of *wit* and *judgment* are *passion* and *reason*, and in life the «one great
aim» answered by their proper encountering is coherence and contentment,
just as in poetry and art the equipoise of wit and judgment ends in harmony and clarity.

This presiding image of productive oppositions permeated every corner of Augustan life. Even the new competition between Tory interests and Wig interests, landowners' wealth and traders' wealth, could be seen to be «natural» because it seemed to imitate the methods not only of Newton's universe but of a more accessible physical nature as well. As Sir John Denham says of nature in Cooper's Hill,

Wisely she knew the harmony of things
As well as that of sounds, from discord springs.

Pope resumes this conception in Windsor Forest:

Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,
Here earth and water seem to strive again;
Not Chaos-like together crushed and bruised,
But as the world, harmoniously confused.

And it is likewise «natural» that Denham and Pope celebrate the naturalness of competitive harmony in heroic couplets, the most ostentatiously binary of verse forms. In a successful Augustan poem, as in a successful poem anywhere, the technical means are entirely harmonious with the total import.

III

One problem in reading Augustan poetry is recovering something of the sense of genre appropriate to it. Poets of all times and places, of course, are conscious of the «kind» of poem they're writing and sensitive to what is «done» and «not done» in that kind. Even the popular modern lyric of confession or wry self-annotation, whether written by Ginsberg or by Sylvia Plath, is a specific «kind» with stricter conventions than we might realize at first: i.e., it must not rhyme; its meter must be more or less concealed; it must use largely a demotic diction, rejecting the diction associated with «literary» poems; and it must give the impression that it is an all but accidental effusion, «slipping out» rather than planned.

But if the conventional character of all poetry requires all poets to write in «kinds», the eighteenth-century poet has a heightened generic consciousness. For one thing, he writes in the age of Linnaeus, when the act of analysis and classification is first beginning to dominate—and very excitingly, too—science and psychology. For another thing, he has had an education in the ancient classics and shares without question the classical commitment to a finite number of poetic kinds and of clear and crucial divisions between them. It is a matter of «knowing where one is».

Much of the meaning in Augustan poetry lies in sensing the genre the poet is working in and—more importantly—sensing the poet's attitude toward
the fact that he is working in that genre. Sometimes he simply respects his
genre, like Ambrose Philips in *The First Pastoral*. But very often he satirizes
it, like Swift in *A Love Song in the Modern Taste*. And sometimes, like Gay
in his mock-pastoral *Shepherd's Week*, his attitude is remarkably complex:
Gay does ridicule the genre of pastoral, of course, but he also manages to
register a wistful recognition that the fault is perhaps less in the genre than
in an age which has had to see to it that the genre has become inappropriate.
That is, one can say unspoken things by adhering to or satirizing or inverting
or playing in and out of a recognized genre constituting an element in a re-
cognized system. One can say things that one cannot say—or must say by
means more prolix and obvious—in the absence of such a system.

Augustan poems perform in an environment sustained by a genre system
that was once well known. The poems will perform for us if we can accustom
ourselves to identifying genres like these:

1. The *Neo-Georgic*: a long, loosely ordered poem praising the country-
syde or, more often, some specific bucolic place and frequently celebrating
some political institution or social arrangement which the scenery appears to
propose or validate. The tone of the neo-Georgic is earnest: irony is foreign
to it. Examples are Waller's *On St. James's Park*; Denham's *Cooper's Hill*;
and Pope's *Windsor Forest*.

One of the pleasures of knowing where one is within a public genre
system is the ease with which one can invert, parody, or travesty any of the
genres. The general solemnity of the neo-Georgic invites the relief, indeed,
the counterpoise, of the

2. *Mock-Georgic*, like Swift's *A Description of a City Shower* or Gay's
*Trivia*. Here the city is praised ironically as if it were the country, or the poet
discourses georgically without appearing to notice that what he's describing
is the city, not the country. In the process social and political institutions are
depicted with something less than admiration. The reader appreciates what
is going on only because he knows, and assumes the value of, the « straight »
kind from which the mock kind is deviating.

3. *Pastoral*: a necessarily superficial depiction of ideal shepherds in an
ideal setting. Example: Ambrose Philips, *The First Pastoral*. Sometimes
changes are worked for the sake of novelty, as in Collins's *Persian Eclogues*,
where images of heroism, terror, and the sublime take over the job of ideal-
ization. As with the neo-Georgic, the earnest idealism of straight pastoral
prompts the deflations of the

4. *Mock-Pastoral*, like Gay's *The Birth of the Squire*, a travesty of Vir-
gil's *Pollio*. Gay's *Shepherd's Week* is the best-known mock-pastoral in Eng-
lish. It is tempting to regard Swift's *A Description of the Morning*, where
street cries replace pastoral bird-song, as participating in this mode. And one
can see that Crabbe's *The Village*, for all the solemnity of its disclosures, is
still disclosing the unideal in rural life and thus has one foot in the mock-
pastoral convention. As *The Village* reminds us, a very great deal of eighteenth-century writing, in prose and verse alike, is really engaged in the mock-pastoral enterprise.

5. **Ode**: a poem praising something. The two main kinds are the **Pindaric** and the **Horatian**. The Pindaric (like Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast*, in praise of the power of music) is generally written in lines and stanzas of unpredictable length. It aspires to an illusion of warmth, passion, and sublimity. The Horatian (like Pope’s *Ode on Solitude*) is cool where the Pindaric is warm: line-lengths are uniform and stanza shapes are predictable. The inversion of ode is, in one sense, satire, defined as a poem dispraising something. But a nearer mock form is

6. **Mock-Ode**: an example of the mock-Pindaric ode is Cowper’s *An Ode: Secundum Arten*, which sets itself the task of «going too far» within the genre of the Pindaric ode and thus revealing the sawdust within. An example of the mock-Horatian ode is Jane Brereton’s *On Mr. Nash’s Picture*, although here the mockery is directed not at the genre itself but at the luckless object of the mock-praise.

7. **Elegy**: a lament for the death of someone (or something) held to be especially praiseworthy. In the personal elegy, an actual person is lamented (Dryden, *To the Memory of Mr. Oldham*). In the heroic elegy, a fictional person is lamented as a way of implying praise for heroic conduct (Pope, *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*). In the general elegy, mortal mankind itself is the subject (Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*; Johnson, *Translation of Horace, Odes*, IV, vii). The attentive reader of Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village* will perceive how close it is to general elegy. Whatever the type, as genre elegy is necessarily solemn. As before, solemnity generates levity, and we have the antithetical genre of

8. **Mock-Elegy**, or **Satric Elegy**: sometimes the conventions of elegy (like its high moral didacticism) are the target of satire here, as in Gray’s *Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat*. Sometimes the poem works more simply by memorializing some person unworthy of so laborious a memorial (Parnell, *An Elegy to an Old Beauty*; Goldsmith, *An Elegy on that Glory of Her Sex, Mrs. Mary Blaize*). And sometimes, as in Swift’s *A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General*, both the conventions of elegy and the pretended distinction of the deceased are exposed.

9. **Song**: what the Augustan tradition has instead of «lyric». A song is a brief utterance in stanzas praising frivolously love, wine, women, idleness, or gross personal independence. The song is often addressed to a woman, and by convention it must be superficial. Examples are Cowley’s *Drinking*; Prior’s *In Imitation of Anacreon*; Burns’s *I Murder Hate by Field or Flood*; and Blake’s *How Sweet I Roamed from Field to Field*. The inviolable conventions are hyperbole and implicit insincerity. The palpable distance of song from the
realities of life (most often conceived of as very ordinary, if not rather squalid) sends the satiric intellect to the

10. Mock-Song: short, stanzaic, superficial, and frivolous, but now in dispraise of love, wine, women, idleness, or personal independence. Examples are Sedley’s *Advice to the Old Beaux;* Fenton’s *Olivia;* Pope’s *Two or Three;* Lyttelton’s *On Her Pleading Want of Time;* and Johnson’s *A Short Song of Congratulation.*

11. Epitaph: like elegy, a lament for someone, but conceived as if designed to be inscribed on a monument and read by strangers passing by. It must thus be short (marble-carving is costly), striking, and simple, available to all regardless of sophistication or literary culture. Examples: Pope, *Epitaph on Mr. Gay;* Johnson, *Epitaph on Claudy Phillips.* Like elegy, epitaph must be earnest. It thus generates its deflationary anti-type, the

12. Mock-Epitaph, in elaborate praise of persons unworthy of it. An example is Prior’s *An Epitaph,* memorializing a couple whose life has come as close to non-existence as is humanly possible. An adjunct to the irony in Prior’s mock-epitaph is that the poem is visibly too long to be inscribed or read with patience by a foot traveler: it thus tends to stimulate smiles about the genre as well.

A complete survey of Augustan poetic genres would specify the following as well: Epistle, Theatrical Prologue and Epilogue, Satire, Mock-Epic, Moral Narrative (after either Ovid or Aesop), Verse Essay, Inscription, and Epigram. But in my list of twelve we find something of great interest, that is, the presence of so many and so vital mock- or inverse genres.

We perceive that the world this system conducts us into is an intellectual and psychological environment where one thing proposes its opposite, where one poetic kind operates with a consciousness that its inverse kind, capable of shattering all its pretensions to seriousness and High Art, lurks very close nearby. In art as in law, it is a world of adversary proceedings. But it is more than a matter of coarse oppositions. Take pastoral and anti-pastoral: they are less litigants at law than friendly neighbors. Each depends on the other for the fullest effect of what it does. And if you cancel out the excesses of either you postulate a « norm », just as Augustan satire implies a Ciceronian ethical norm equidistant from two opposed extremes (e.g., lubriciousness vs. chastity; prodigality vs. stinginess).

What this system of genre antitheses implies is that it is at the vital center that men find their real lives. The system is another way Augustan poetry celebrates the great political and social principle of counterpoise. Whether we look at it thematically, generically, or technically, the world of the poetry reflects what is taken to be real in eighteenth-century polity. It is again the constitution that Augustan poetry is about.
IV

Once we are accustomed to a scheme of genres more palpable and significant than the one we normally notice, we face a further problem in reading Augustan poetry, its characteristic—and to us rather odd—sound system and texture. When we consider the matter, of course, we realize that every historical poetry has its own special sound system, and that every one is to a degree «unnatural»—that is how we are able to identify the poetry as «poetry». But what makes Augustan poetry seem especially foreign to us, as remote sometimes as Egyptian art, is not just the way is deploys its pert couplet rhymes. Its prosodic or rhythmical system strikes us as especially «unnatural».

The essential of this prosodic system is of course a strict limitation of the number of syllables per line, and, what is more, the constant advertisement of this limitation by verbal contractions that strike us as somewhat embarrassing. A line in a heroic couplet has strictly ten syllables—or, should the final word constitute a double rhyme, eleven. This means that words of too many syllables must be reduced to fit. The standard way of doing this is to elide a vowel, as in Pope's

And turn th'unwilling steeds another way,

where we, as modern readers, must not cheat and say «the unwilling» but hurl ourselves fully into the atmosphere of the poem and say «thunwilling». The effect was treasured by the Augustans: it is that of beautifully fixed and rigid grid (the paradigm of the couplet conceived as always of twenty syllables only) contrived by the human mind after long labor as a container of otherwise accidental verbal material. The container does not expand to fit what it contains: it defines, sharpens, clarifies what is put into it.

In the original texts the contractions of Augustan poetry are generally indicated by apostrophes. But even when they're not the reader is expected to be so deeply imbued with a feel for the strict syllabic limitation of the line that he contracts automatically, each time noticing and admiring the way «poetry» has the power to determine and control what is virtually a new form of language, a special creation. We will never recover an adequate understanding of Augustan poetry until we learn to delight in saying «im-méed-jut» for immediate, «ex-páy-shut» for expatiate, and «náw-shus» for nauseous.

V

Another obstacle standing between us and Augustan poetry is its special dictions. In the Essay on Criticism Pope implies that the reader is supposed to recognize three kinds, the low, the middle, and the high:

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... different styles with different subjects sort,
As several garbs with country, town, and court.

As Pope's figure suggests, the three dictional styles are ideally as distinct from each other as the three styles of dress: «sport clothes» for the country, «suits» for the city, and «black (or even white) tie» for highly formal occasions. The low or «sporty» style is the one much used by Swift. It involves words like  *stink, spittle,* and *bit* (meaning swindled) deriving from slang or the jargon spoken by criminals and illiterates. The middle style is roughly that of, say, Pope's *Essay on Criticism* or Addison's *Letter from Italy*: it approximates the language of intelligent and educated men when relaxing and conversing not as professionals but as gentlemen.

These two styles seem familiar to us: we use them ourselves, and we are skilled in making points by shifting from one to the other. It is the third, the high or dinner-jacketed, that makes us a bit uncomfortable. This is the style—in part—of Pope's *Windsor Forest*. Its most conspicuous sign is periphrasis, or, as it is loosely (and naively) called, «poetic diction» (naively because all poems use a poetic diction). Periphrasis is like *kenning* in Old English poetry, where the sea is often spoken of as *the whale road*. In the Augustan high style, a young man working in the countryside is not a shepherd or farmer: he is a *swain*. (In the low style, as it enters Gay's *Shepherd's Week*, for example, he would be a *lout*.) A gun used for hunting is a *tube*. Fish are *the scaly breed*. Hunting is *the sylvan war*. Part of the pleasure aimed at by the periphrases of the high style is the pleasure of metaphor. Part is the delight sophisticated people take in anything clever and elegant and well planned. Part is surely analogous to the pleasures offered by «dressing up» or attending masquerades. And—at last for the eighteenth-century reader—part is meant to derive from memories of similar procedures in certain well-known Roman poems, especially the *Georgics*.

Although the three styles can be thus distinguished, they are distinct only in theory, never in practice. The middle style, of course, is the one that dominates in any poem (except occasional sports like Swift's *A Love Song in the Modern Taste*); and the diction deviates throughout towards low or high consistently as the occasion (that is, the genre) requires. Sometimes, but only for comic effect, we get the low and the high in the same poem: the *Dunciad* is a good example. And sometimes we get them in the same line, as in this passage from Gay's *Trivia* describing the speed with which a thief caught in the act runs through the London streets:

So speeds the wily fox, alarmed by fear,
Who lately *filched* the turkey's *callow care*.

*Filched* is thieves' jargon, and thus very «low»; *callow care* points in quite the other direction, directly to Virgil, and is thus very «high». «Joco-
serious»—the word used by Matthew Green in The Spleen to describe sophisticated tavern conversation—is an accurate term for such an effect, an effect which, we should notice, reflects again the Augustan pleasure in something like counterpoise.

Such effects are possible only in a poetry so conscious of styles and what they imply as the Augustan. If one has a «known» and appropriate style for a poem, one has the invaluable artistic option of deviating from it expressively, just as in a more or less regular system of meter the poet has more opportunities for expressive variation than in the absence of such a known grid. This is to say that you have to have a high style so you can have a low one. A well-known illustration of the principle is what Swift does in the last line of A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General. The writer of a straight, rather than a satirical, elegy would use the middle style here, leaning occasionally toward the high. He would solicit our respect for the subject of the elegy and at the same time remind us of our own mortality by describing the deceased as now

Turned to that dust from whence he sprung.

Dust is high. Transforming the line into one fit for a satirical elegy is a matter of replacing the expected word in the high style with the unexpected one in the low, as Swift triumphantly does:

Turned to that dirt from whence he sprung.

VI

A final oddity about Augustan poetry is the clarity of its metaphors. The condition towards which all Augustan metaphor aspires is simile, of all figures the one which proclaims most unambiguously the actual distinction of the two things compared. Typical is Pope’s figure of wit and judgment colliding generatively, like man and wife; or his figure of different styles for different subjects, as different clothes suit different social environments. Figurative procedures in Augustan poetry are analytical operations. While entertaining a momentary idea of resemblance, the poet never forgets the real distinctness of the things compared. Unlike the practice in Renaissance poetry, where one metaphor shades into another, Augustan metaphors appear singly, without overlapping. That is, once a figure is fully deployed, it will be closed down before another is allowed to enter. Like Augustan genre system, Augustan metaphorical practice is a way of recognizing the ultimate separateness and discreteness of things. Lines of division are crucial and cannot be wished away, even in the boldest performances of the imagination.

Certain dominating metaphors, recurring over and over, seem to encapsulate the moral meaning of Augustan poetry. One favorite figure is that
of the hapless foot traveler ironically misled by systematic «Reason» or some other self-induced perversion of intelligence. Another favorite is the figure of warfare, which embodies the Augustan conception of life as risky moral action. Another is the image of clothing, suggestive not merely of styles but of all inherited human institutions. Images of noxious or contemptible insects suggest the appeal to even the most progressive Augustan mind of the preceding century’s Christian convictions about the Fall of Nature.

But the most meaningful dominating metaphor in this body of poems is the image of the poem as a work of architecture. Dryden says, «‘Tis with a poet, as with a man who designs to build». Augustan poems are put together the way a building is constructed. Most importantly, their materials are found somewhere outside the singular consciousness of the maker. The materials are found sometimes in Nature—that is, the world of permanent social and psychological value existing outside the perceiver—and sometimes in other poems of the same «kind». One either quarries the building material or «borrows» it from structures already built. One ends with a poem very like a public building accessible to all, a construction which is stylistically less an «expression» of its maker’s personality than an embodied average of public ideas about what such a building should be. It is significantly an image of Augustan architecture—in the strictest sense—that Johnson finds most appropriate to his enthusiasm over Dryden’s achievement in reforming English poetry. In the Lives of the Poets Johnson writes: «Perhaps no nation ever produced a writer that enriched his language with such variety of models. To [Dryden] we owe the improvement, perhaps the completion, of our meter, the refinement of our language, and much of the correctness of our sentiments. By him we were taught sapere et fari, to think naturally and express forcibly ... What was said of Rome adorned by Augustus may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden: lateritiam invent, marmoream reliquit. He found it brick, and he left it marble». That, written only ten years before the Fall of the Bastille, is quintessentially «Augustan».

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