

Things Fall Together:
The Ascent of Chaos and the Obliteration of Meaning in Pope's 1743 *Dunciad*

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Departmental Honors in English
THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

Submitted and Pledged:

Corey B. French

Approved by:

Professor Kelly Malone

Accepted for Departmental Honors in English

Pamela Royston Macfie, Chair
Easter Term, 2010

For the faculty of the Sewanee English Department,
who taught me to read wisely and well
and who serve as my truest inspiration

It is tempting to consider Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* of 1743 as little more than a summation of Pope's own professional grudges, a veritable grotesquerie compiled at the end of a long career of garnering enemies. In short, the poem may seem to present itself as trivial from a critical standpoint, offering little more than an annotated list of those who had at some point slighted Pope.¹ However, such a view cannot account for the intensity of poetic vision that pervades the poem. There is an overarching dramatic—almost theological—structure in the poem that seems particularly unsuited merely to an ephemeral attack, one more volley in the internecine critical battles of Eighteenth-Century London literary culture. If Pope had meant *only* to shame his opponents, surely, we may imagine, he could have done so without adopting the expansive mock-epic framework that he chooses to employ.

Rather, perhaps there is a more serious intent at work in the poem that belies the initial frivolity of its Fleet-Ditch diving matches and the sound of the “posterior Trumpet” (4.71). Perhaps we are meant to see not only Pope's opponents—the Bentleys and the Cibbers and the Curlls—but also what these Dunces typify: namely, the endemic decline of taste, of learning, and of morality. In his introduction to the poem in the *Dunciad Variorum*, Martinus Scriblerus explains that Pope “lived in those days, when...Paper also became so cheap, and Printers so numerous, that a deluge of authors cover'd the land” (344). The appropriation of diluvian imagery to describe the proliferation of authors in Pope's time is particularly apt here, for it echoes the broader critical concerns of the poem. The *Dunciad* presents a world that is at the very cusp of being subsumed into chaos and brought to ruin by its own philistine and pedantic tendencies. The world of the poem is one in which liberal learning, which should properly be

¹ Donald T. Siebert is the chief expositor of this notion that the *Dunciad* is not to be read seriously. In his essay “Cibber and Satan: The *Dunciad* and Civilization” (1977), he attacks the notion that we are to see the Dunces as embodying some form of evil. Rather, he asserts, “the consistent attitude of Pope towards the dunces is one of laughter” (208-9). Later in the essay I will contend with this reading in greater depth.

concerned with broadening the mind, is debased to a continual narrowing of vision, a persistent inward focus. It is also a world in which the established literary hierarchy yields to the anarchic impulses of popular taste. What Pope presents in the poem is a serious vision of moral decay, couched in the language and imagery of the apocalyptic. The poem becomes a type of eschatological text in which the decline of taste emblemizes the decline of morality and in which chaos is finally ascendant.

I.

The poem opens with an invocation to the “Mighty Mother” (1.1) Dulness, a figure of chaos whose origin myth frames the whole poem within a perverse cosmogony. That Dulness is initially portrayed as an explicitly maternal figure should come as no surprise, for Dulness will throughout the poem be associated with a type of debauched fecundity, ever issuing forth deformed and misshapen prosodic progeny. However, as Thomas Faulkner and Rhonda Blair note, the appellation “Mighty Mother” imports a much more significant classical allusion into the poem. Faulkner and Blair suggest that “Mighty Mother” alludes to the cult of the *Magna Mater*, Cybele, the primordial chthonic goddess whose worship “is primarily associated with eunuch priests, frenetic dancing, wailing, and the noise of clashing cymbals and the tympanum” (220). As Cybele, Dulness embodies the principle of chaos in the poem, a type of frenzied ecstasy. Pope’s description of Dulness’ ancient origins renders her connection to chaos even clearer:

In eldest time, e’er mortals writ or read,
E’er Pallas issued from the Thund’rer’s head,
Dulness o’er all possess’d her ancient right,

Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night:
 Fate in their dotage this fair Ideot gave,
 Gross as her sire, and as her mother grave,
 Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind,
 She ruled, in native Anarchy, the mind. (1.9-16)

Of immediate interest is that Dulness has her origins in a time “e’er mortals writ or read.” Ironically, in a poem so ostensibly concerned with matters of literary taste, the controlling initial image is pre-literary in nature. If we consider written language as imposing some intelligible structure on time and our own intangible ideas, it should concern us that the poet invokes a goddess who is congenitally ignorant of that structure. Indeed, Dulness precedes not only written language but also the birth of Pallas Athena, the traditional emblem of wisdom. Dulness is an “Ideot,” bereft of reason and wisdom, and yet “possess’d” of the regions of the mind. The description of Dulness’ particular attributes—“Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind”—descends from the initial tetrasyllabic “Laborious” to a disyllabic “heavy” to a succession of plosive monosyllable *B*s, the effect of which mimics the stammering speech of the “Ideot.” The total effect of these lines is to frame the extent of Dulness’ empire—an empire, ironically, of “native Anarchy.” Clearly, Dulness is a figure of chaos and obscurity; descended from “eternal Night” she sits in “clouded Majesty” (1.45) upon her throne.

Pope’s portrayal of Dulness’ palace further evinces this connection between the goddess Dulness and the threat of chaos; the passage echoes both Dante’s Ninth Circle and Spenser’s Cave of Error. Dulness holds court at Bedlam Hospital, the notorious London insane asylum “where Folly holds her throne” (1.29). The seat of Dulness is “The Cave of Poverty and Poetry” (1.34), a place of decidedly allegorical signification where “Keen, hollow winds howl thro’ the

bleak recess,/ Emblem of Music caused by Emptiness” (1.35-6). Dulness’ poets will necessarily unite both “Poverty” and “Poetry” in their craft, for their verse is born of the insipid winds that are the motive force in the cave. Of course, this description of Dulness’ cave lashed by “hollow winds” recalls another infernal cave at the very depth of Dante’s *Inferno*, where the “wind was strong” (34.8), produced by the relentless—and fruitless—beating of Satan’s wings in Judecca. This description of Dulness’ cave as fundamentally hollow further recalls “Errours den” (1.1.13.6) in Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*. Spenser’s cave is likewise “hollow” (1.1.11.6) and dark, echoing the nature of error itself, which is inherently dark and insubstantial as a consequence of its exclusion from the truth. Both allusions tinge the Cave of Poverty and Poetry with decidedly hellish undertones, illustrating a certain damnable malignity that lies at the heart of Dulness’ project to “hatch a new Saturnian age of lead” (1.28).

However, the parallels with Spenser’s Cave of Error do not end with mere physical correlation; indeed, both Error and Dulness become types of gross and chaotic progeneration. The central image of Spenser’s Cave of Error is the dragon Error herself who, half-woman and half-serpent, gives birth to

A thousand yong ones, which she daily fed,
Sucking upon her poisonous dugs, eachone
Of sundry shapes, yet all ill favoréd. (1.1.15.5-7)

Here Error manifests herself as a perverted archetype of fertility and maternal sustenance. Her numerous offspring feed from her “dugs,” yet the result is not salutary in the least: Error’s progeny are distorted, anarchic, unnatural. They consist of “sundry shapes” and appearances, but each has its origin in Error. Like Error, Dulness shelters her own monstrous brood in the cave:

Here she beholds the Chaos dark and deep,

Where nameless Somethings in their causes sleep,
 ‘Till genial Jacob, or a warm Third day,
 Call forth each mass, a Poem, or a Play:
 How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,
 How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry,
 Maggots half-form’d in rhyme exactly meet,
 And learn to crawl upon poetic feet. (1.55-62)

There is something of the biblical Creation at work in these lines, for Dulness begins by peering into “Chaos,” which is “without form and void” (King James Version, Gen. 1:2), and witnesses the “nameless Somethings” slowly distinguish themselves from the surrounding chaotic wastes. However, as each shapeless and indistinct “mass” begins to assume an independent identity, it becomes not an emblem of order redeemed from chaos, but a maggot, amorphous and grotesque. As in Spenser, each new “spawn” feeds not on nourishing mother’s milk but on its own excremental surroundings. These repulsive progeny remain dormant until “genial Jacob, or a warm Third day” awakens the impulsive energy within them. John Butt’s note on this line indicates that Jacob Tonson, a prolific publisher of his day, is “genial Jacob,” while the “warm Third day” refers to the practice of setting the profits of the third day of a play’s run for the author (354). In both cases, the line echoes Pope’s fear of the uncritical promulgation of new texts prompted by the increased availability of the printing press, hearkening back to the “deluge of authors” (344) Scriblerus notes in his introduction. However, the reference to the “warm Third day” could also implicitly allude to Christ’s Resurrection, itself a calling forth and liberation from the chaos of sin and death. Yet the resurrection of Dulness’ Easter in no way benefits humanity, for, unlike the resurrected Christ bursting forth from the grave in his dazzling

array, the resurrected “mass” is “half-form’d” and unable to utter more than the “cry” of their “Ideot” (1.13) mother. What is clear in this passage is that Dulness, though she may be the “Mighty Mother” (1.1) is an image of defective maternity. As Thomas Edwards notes, this image of Dulness as monstrous mother “implies a ghastly subversion of the normal processes of conception and growth,” which should compel the reader to “shrink from bad writing as urgently as from unnatural birth and growth” (114). There is no possibility of sustenance from Dulness; to do her homage is necessarily to end up morally “half-form’d” (1.61).

Pope further depicts the depravity that motivates and supports Dulness’ empire by offering a list of Dulness’ “Four guardian Virtues” (1.46), each of which is a perverted version of the four cardinal virtues. Fortitude, no longer the courage necessary to persevere against temptation, becomes “Fortitude, that knows no fears/ Of hisses, blows, or want, or loss of ears” (1.47-8), the shamelessness to resist critical censure. Temperance here is the particular virtue of those “Who hunger, and who thirst for scribbling sake” (1.50); purely involuntary, this duncical temperance echoes the twinning of poverty and poetry earlier. Prudence holds up the “glass [to present] the approaching jayl” (1.51), which is presumably debtor’s prison, reflecting that the Dunces’ “prudence” contributes no true moral discernment. Finally, there is Justice, “with her lifted scale,/ Where, in nice balance, truth with gold she weighs” (1.53), revealing that for the Dunces economic concerns enjoy the same priority as the demand for veracity.

What Pope depicts in these duncical virtues that “support [Dulness’] throne” (1.46) are the virtues of the consummate hack, the writer whose chief end is not to represent external truth but to enlarge his coffers. Laura Brown in her book *Alexander Pope* indicates Pope’s preoccupation with the commodification of the text and the “capitalization of literary culture” (130), of which these virtues are a necessary part. Indeed, Brown goes so far as to assert that this

concern “main explicit enterprise” (130) of the poem is to depict and attack this notion of the literary text as merely one more commodity, another of many “Journals, Medleys, Merc’ries, Magazines” (1.42), each no more able to establish any sort of permanence than the others. Pope fears that the unchecked proliferation of texts for profit—reflected in his use of the words “mass” (1.58) and “Somethings” (1.56) to describe them—without any sense of critical hierarchy or distinction threatens to plunge literary culture back into the “Chaos dark and deep” (1.55) whence it sprung. When the “solid pudding” (1.54) of gold becomes an apt substitute for poetic truth, the poet betrays his role as a mimetic ethicist whose proper aim should be to represent reality in such a way as to allow the reader to make moral inferences. As Leopold Damrosch notes, these “hack writers are very like insolent servants or an insolent mob, and their challenge to traditional literary hierarchy is a sort of popular insurrection” (125). However, a “popular insurrection” against a seemingly oppressive hierarchy is not the glorious populist uprising it may initially seem: for Pope’s Augustan audience, the very notion of a hierarchy implied a discernible, rational order through which meaning could be communicated. The “insolent mob” threatens to prescind the possibility of meaning altogether by upending the notion of why poetry ought to be composed at all. No longer is the purpose to present what Johnson terms “just representations of general nature” (241) but to make a quick buck, to engage in a type of literary prostitution.

Consonant with this notion of the mercenary end of the Dunces is the further execration of their poetry as somehow unnatural, resulting in a “jumbled race” (1.70) of malformed offspring. The vivified poetic “Maggots” (1.61) spring to life and present a pageant for Dulness in which

motley Images her fancy strike,

Figures ill pair'd, and Similes unlike.
 She sees a Mob of Metaphors advance,
 Pleas'd with the madness of the mazy dance:
 How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;
 How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race. (1.65-70, 77-8)

There is a certain playful quality to these lines as they present images of various tropes marshaled forth in parade. However, there remains something darker at work here: these lines unequivocally summon forth the image of chaos itself, of the unnatural and irrational. If the literary text ought in some way to manifest natural order, then the “Figures ill pair'd, and Similes unlike” reflect a purely artificial incongruity that does not find its origin in the mirror of nature. Indeed, the line itself is divided in half by a medial caesura that forces the “Figures ill pair'd” from the “Similes unlike,” which echoes further the disunity at the heart of the Dunces’ verse. There seems to be no order in the pageant at all as the “Mob of Metaphors” participates in the “madness of the mazy dance”; the repetition of the *M* sound in the couplet—and especially the alliteration of “madness” and “mazy” in the subsequent line of the couplet—lends a certain jovial, almost frenetic, quality to the lines. In “Farce and Epic get a jumbled race” we find another image of distorted fertility as Tragedy and Comedy, Farce and Epic give rise to what John Sitter terms “generic confusion” (6), a creative failure to distinguish among discrete genres. Of course, if we are mindful of the Aristotelian idea that the poetic work has some affective end in mind for its audience—that tragedy, for instance, aims at presenting “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” (55)—then to conflate and mix genres poses significant problems. The work can no longer issue in the evocation of certain emotions but generates only confusion, a sort of affective chaos. Throughout these lines we do

not find an image of *concordia discors*, of an harmonious disarray that conduces ultimately to some sort of implicit order. Rather, we have *discors*, and *discors* alone.

Yet Pope here attacks not only the farrago of genres the Dunces employ but also their penchant for creating patterns of imagery with no recourse to the natural world. In the Dunces' poetry we find

How Time himself stands still at [Dulness'] command

Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land.

...

In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,

And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow. (1.71-2, 77-8)

Most obvious here is the almost farcical way in which the Dunces manipulate time and the seasons. So intent are they on presenting their "painted vallies of eternal green" (1.76) that they dispense with any rational verisimilitude in their depiction of nature. Yet there is something more sinister at the heart of these comical lines; namely, the problem lies in the Dunces' unwillingness to reconcile their poetic creations to the innate, predefined framework of nature. Rather than accept the limits of the natural seasons, of time, and of geography, the Dunces impose their own order upon external reality, conjuring forth a world more pleasing to them. The necessary consequence that the Dunces choose to create verse that is obstinately unnatural. In a way, the duncical confusion of the seasons is an attempt to usurp the Creator's power, to appropriate the right to delimit and define the natural dispensation.

Some might argue that there is a critical precedent for such unnatural acts as these: Sir Philip Sidney notes in his *Apology for Poetry* that it is within the poet's power, "lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, [to] grow in effect another nature, in making things either better

than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature” (188). That is, the poet can create a “golden” world that somehow supersedes nature’s “brazen” (188) world.

However, Sidney would not perhaps go so far as to endorse the strange worlds of the Dunces.

He asserts that “Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth” (189); which is to say, the poet remains on some level accountable to nature, at least when he purports to be depicting nature accurately. The poet, then, must obey the terms of poetic decorum.² John Sitter notes that, while the “heavy harvests nod[ding] beneath the snow” (1.78) may initially amuse us, “there is a serious premonition of the consequences of confusion” (11) at work here. He asserts that in these lines Pope “manages to suggest imagistically that violations of artistic decorum are really violations of Nature, that they are fundamentally unnatural” (11), a point that is not far from Horace or Aristotle. These passages indicating a confusion of the seasons implicate earlier passages pointing to unnatural and chaotic births, and the “fragrant chaplets” (1.77) of December are merely one of the “Mob of Metaphors” (1.66) or a “half-form’d” (1.60) maggot that haunts the Dunces’ verse with the perpetual threat of chaos.

Finally, Dulness appears out of this confusion to embrace the unseemliness of the mad spectacle, and we find her enshrouded in a cloudy haze, reflecting her insulation from reality. Dulness, the “cloud-compelling Queen” (1.79), looks upon the parade “thro’ fogs, that magnify the scene” (1.80). These miasmatic and obscuring “fogs” that surround Dulness are consonant with her being born of “eternal Night” (1.12) and reflect the “confused State of Mind” (1.n.15) that typifies Dulness itself. Yet Dulness’ “fogs” do not merely occlude her vision; they “magnify

² Indeed, Horace makes this point about poetic decorum in the *Ars Poetica*, “If a painter should decide to join the neck of a horse to a human head, and to lay many-colored feathers upon limbs taken from here or there, so that what is a comely woman above ended as a dark, grotesque fish below, could you, my friends, if you were allowed to see it, keep from laughing?” (79). While not quite “fragrant chaplets” (1.77) wafting on December air, the point is well taken.

the scene” and distort her perception of external reality. Later in Book One this “veil of fogs dilates her awful face” (1.262), showing that these clouds, the exemplary emblem of duncical dim-wittedness, embody the misapprehension and misrepresentation of reality in the Dunces’ work. According to Edwards these clouds come to represent a complete isolation from reality: he notes that Dulness “is majestic and terrifying because one can’t see her true size and shape clearly. But her obscurity also ridicules her, for she herself cannot see through the veil, which isolates her from reality and understanding” (119). Dulness and her acolyte Dunces “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12) yet without appreciating that some truer reality lies beyond.

Dulness appears dressed in a gaudy array, reflecting the tendency of Dulness’ poets to emphasize rhetorical artifice over substantive expression. Dulness reveals herself “tinsel’d o’er in robes of varying hues” (1.81) and

With self-applause her wild creation views;
Sees momentary monsters rise and fall,
And with her own fools-colours gilds them all. (1.82-4)

Here again we find creative agency ascribed to Dulness, making her once more into a demiurgic deity, calling forth a “wild creation” populated with “momentary monsters” rather than strict hierarchic order. Dulness, dressed in “robes of varying hues,” manifests the chaos and what Sitter terms the “generic confusion” (6) of the scene over which she presides. There is something vivacious, even scintillating, about this scene: the duncical creations blaze forth and disappear as Dulness bestows her “tinsel.” The scene reminds us that Dulness is the “Mighty Mother” (1.1) Cybele, a figure of ecstatic frenzy and frenetic energy; she is, as Bentley notes, “a ruling principle not inert, but turning topsy-turvy the Understanding” (1.n.15) and foreclosing the possibility of meaning through this fruitless exertion.

This notion of Dulness' gilding her "wild creation" (1.82) recalls *Spectator* 63 in which Mr. Spectator dreams of the "Region of False Wit," ruled by the "goddess of Falsehood" (238) and replete with strange figures. Mr. Spectator looks around the Region and describes it thus:

There was nothing in the Fields, the Woods, and the Rivers, that appeared natural.

Several of the Trees blossomed in Leaf-Gold, some of them produced Bone-Lace, and some of them precious Stones. The Fountains bubbled in an Opera Tune, and were filled with Stags, Wild-Boars, and Mermaids, that lived among the Waters; at the same time that Dolphins and several kinds of Fish played upon the Banks, or took their Pastime in the Meadows. (238)

Like the "robes of varying hues" (1.81) in which Dulness garbs herself, the Region of False Wit clothes itself in ostentatious finery of "Leaf-Gold" and "precious Stones," a specious means through which to hide the want of substance beneath. There is much in common between Mr. Spectator's Region of False Wit and the confused realms engendered in the Dunces' poetry. In the same way that the "Ocean turns to land" (1.72) under Dulness' rule, in the Region of False Wit "several kinds of Fish [play] upon the Banks." Just as the "Mob of Metaphors" (1.67) marches forth in Dulness' parade, Mr. Spectator witnesses a "Regiment of *Anagrams*" and a "Body of *Acrosticks*" (239) arrayed in Falsehood's service. Both the Region of False Wit and Dulness' "mazy" (1.68) landscapes represent a mimetic failure, an inability to body forth the truth in a congruous fashion. In both cases, the consequences are decidedly unnatural, strange, and monstrous. The only recourse left to the Dunces and False Wits is to bedizen their verse with rhetorical flourishes—the "precious Stones" of the literary mind—to conceal this failure. If, as Pope notes in his *Essay on Criticism*, "*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest*" (297), here is all of the dress with none of the advantage.

Ultimately, we find that the goddess Dulness is the emblem of unnatural chaos and empty spectacle. If we may borrow for a moment a postmodern phrase, she is the signifier of an absent signified, hidden beneath her “clouded Majesty” (1.45), never reaching beyond herself for the truth. All that she utters is spoken by an “Ideot” (1.13), “full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* 5.5.27-8). In its depiction of the Goddess of Falsehood, *Spectator* Number 63 offers another illustrative analogy with the goddess Dulness. Mr. Spectator watches as the Goddess of Falsehood’s true nature is revealed: “The Goddess of FALSEHOOD was of a Gigantick Stature, and advanced some Paces before the Front of her Army; but as the dazzling Light, which flowed from TRUTH, began to shine upon her, she faded insensibly; insomuch that in a little Space she looked rather like a huge Phantom, than a real Substance” (241). We might imagine that the goddess Dulness, cloaked as she is in “eternal Night” (1.12), “fogs” (1.80), and her “robes of varying hues” (1.81), would equally evanesce away in the face of the truth. This “Phantom” Dulness is able only to beget “momentary monsters” (1.83), ephemeral eruptions of less sense than sound.

II.

Pope now turns to Colley Cibber, who comes to embody the animalistic fertility and the ceaseless proliferation at work in the goddess Dulness. The portrait of Cibber begins with a further elaboration on the notion of Dulness as a type of demiurge: Dulness “marks” within each Dunc “her Image full exprest” (1.107), echoing Genesis 1:26 in which God forms humankind in his own image. Yet Cibber manifests the image of Dulness more perfectly in his “monster-breeding breast” (1.108) and in doing so bodies forth the same grotesque progenerative urge we

have seen in the “Maggots half-form’d” (1.61). Lines 107 and 108 unite together the “Image” of Dulness with the “monster-breeding” impulse, and it is clear that to bear the mark of Dulness is to be ontologically bound up in her acts of “wild creation” (1.82). Pope immediately offers a glimpse of this “monster-breeding” in Cibber as he works at his craft:

Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay,
 Much future Ode, and abdicated play;
 Nonsense precipitate, like running Lead,
 That slipp’d thro’ Cracks and Zig-zags of the Head;
 All that on Folly Frenzy could beget,
 Fruits of dull Heat, and Sooterkins of Wit. (1.121-26)

Medial caesuras punctuate and divide the first three lines of the passage, echoing the halting and abortive process by which Cibber attempts to bring his poetic vision to fruition. However, when Cibber finally achieves the “running Lead” of creative insight, the subsequent two lines open up, coursing on with the sibilant *Zs* of “Zig-zags” and the fluid, fricative *Fs* of “Folly Frenzy.” In these lines Pope shows that Cibber’s skull is a decidedly ill-wrought urn from whose fissures rivulets of “Nonsense precipitate” freely flow. What results from this effluence are “Sooterkins of Wit”—tiny, mouse-like creatures³—a trivial result for such great labor. In depicting Cibber’s rejected creations as “Embryo” and “Abortion,” Pope shows that Cibber himself *becomes* the “Mighty Mother” (1.1), the very image of debauched and misbegotten fertility. We must recall that this is not the first appearance of *embryo* in the poem: it occurs earlier when Dulness begets her “spawn” that “quick in embryo lie” (1.59) only to issue forth as “Maggots half-form’d” (1.61). Clearly Pope intends us to read Cibber and Dulness as somehow substantially *one* in an

³ John Butt describes the sooterkin as being “A joke upon the Dutch women, supposing that by their constant use of stoves, which they place under their petticoats, they breed a kind of small animal in their bodies, called a sooterkin, of the size of a mouse, which when mature slips out” (B 1.n.126).

almost theological or metaphysical sense, for, if Cibber evinces the “Image” of Dulness more particularly—even more perfectly—than the other Dunces, it makes sense to call him the “Antichrist of wit” (2.16), for he becomes the anointed Son of the Mother. Indeed, in collapsing the distinction between mother Dulness and mother Cibber, Pope depicts a Cibber who is, as Sitter claims, “a kind of archetype of literary confusion growing inevitably into a more comprehensive natural confusion” (16). By participating in the malformed and monstrous reproductive drive of Dulness, Cibber shows that all of Dulness’ empire ultimately aims at the propagation of chaos.

Since Cibber is the “chief” (1.108) acolyte—indeed the very image—of Dulness, he necessarily partakes of the ecstatic exercises that attend the worship of the *Magna Mater* and in doing so manifests the irrational abandon associated with Dulness. The remainder of Book One following Pope’s initial depiction of Cibber centers around Dulness’ rites and her anointing of Cibber as “Bedlam’s Prophet” (3.7). Sinking in the “vast profound” (1.118) of his own poetic impotence, Cibber constructs an altar to Dulness consisting of “Dry Bodies of Divinity” (1.152):

Of these twelve volumes, twelve of amplest size,
 Redeem’d from tapers and defrauded pies,
 Inspir’d he seizes: These an altar raise:
 An hecatomb of pure, unsully’d lays
 That altar crowns: A folio Common-place
 Founds the whole pile, of all his works the base:
 Quartos, octavos, shape the less’ning pyre;
 A twisted Birth-day Ode completes the spire. (1.155-62)

Robert Griffin notes the parallel between Cibber's erection of an altar to Dulness and Elijah's erection of an altar in I Kings 18:24 ff. Griffin notes that "Both altars are composed of twelve units, stones in one case and volumes in another" (440); the allusion to Elijah here foists upon Cibber a vatic office, making him the priest and forerunner of Dulness herself. There is something more to this biblical allusion, though. We also find Abraham building altars to the Lord in Genesis, where the erection of an altar is tied to Abraham's sojourn to the land the Lord promised him. Twice during his journey into the promised land, Abraham constructs an altar to the Lord.⁴ These altars become not only an emblem of God's promise to Abraham and his children but also a concrete manifestation of God's sovereignty and dominion over the land. In building these altars, Abraham is in some sense claiming the land for God in God's name. For Cibber to erect an altar to Dulness, he must necessarily affirm the power of Dulness and of her "old Empire" (1.17). This slight tincture of Abrahamic allusion looks forward to Book Four, in which Dulness will ascend and take possession of her land—the land that Cibber has marked out and claimed in this altar. Yet beyond these Old Testament parallels, Pope seems also to glance back at another literary altar—George Herbert's "The Altar." Herbert's shape poem, which appears in the rough shape of an altar on the page, was a frequent object of ridicule during the Eighteenth Century; indeed, in the Land of False Wit in *Spectator* 63, Mr. Spectator describes "an *Altar* of a very odd Make, which, as I afterwards found, was shaped in that manner, to comply with the Inscription that surrounded it" (238). Likewise, in *MacFlecknoe*, Flecknoe describes a "peaceful province in acrostic land" (206) where his son "mayst wings display and altars raise" (207). Cibber's raising an altar to Dulness implicitly connects him to the cloying "art" of the shape poem tradition and the broader realms of Dulness' aesthetic empire. Cibber

⁴ Cf. Gen. 12:7-8, as well as Gen. 13:18

becomes the hierophant of Dulness, a priest of the mysteries of the *Magna Mater* whose raising the altar to Dulness serves as a concrete realization of Dulness' power and presence in the world.

Cibber invokes Dulness' aid in his creative endeavors, culminating in the "sacrifice" of a birthday ode on the altar, an action that possibly has its roots in Chaucer's Physician's Tale. In the Physician's Tale, a father Virginius murders his daughter Virginia to prevent her pollution at the hands of the evil judge Apius. Virginius defends his intended sacrifice of his daughter as a means of preserving her maiden chastity. He tells Virginia: "Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame,/ That thou most suffre" (6.214-5). The logic of the proposition that it is preferable to kill one's child as a means through which to protect her from sin or "shame" is, of course, egregiously faulty, though Chaucer's Physician seems to have no trouble with it, suggesting that the point of his tale is "how synne hath his merite" (6.277). That Cibber portrays his sacrifice of the birthday ode in terms similar to those Virginius chooses to justify the sacrifice of his daughter is Pope's wink to the knowing reader. Cibber begins the sacrifice with an apostrophe to the chosen victim, one of his birthday odes:

'O born in sin, and forth in folly brought!

Works damn'd, or to be damn'd! (your father's fault)

Go, purify'd by flames ascend the sky,

My better and more christian progeny!

Unstain'd, untouch'd, and yet in maiden sheets;

While all your smutty sisters walk the streets. (1.225-30, 241-2)

Of course, the ode remains "Unstain'd" precisely because it remains unsold. Cibber depicts successful works as being prostitutes after a fashion, "walk[ing] the streets" to garner income for their authors (who are implicitly compared to pimps). He portrays the sacrifice of this ode as a

means through which to preserve inviolate the maidenhood of his “more christian progeny.” This line of reasoning—justifying a sacrifice as a means of protecting the virginal integrity of one’s child—is essentially the same as that of Virginius. We find through this allusive similarity with Chaucer’s tale that not only is Cibber a figure of unnatural misbegetting, but there exists as well a latent threat of violent dissolution in him, of the abuse of logic for debased ends.

Pope surrounds the moment of Cibber’s anointing as the “Chosen” (1.273) of Dulness with images reminiscent of the ancient mystery religions, thus turning him into a bacchant of sorts and an apostle of ecstatic unreason. When Dulness absconds with Cibber to her “sacred Dome” (1.265), she leads him into what we can assume to be the very adytum of her temple where “Here stood her Opium, here she nurs’d her Owls,/ And here she plann’d th’ Imperial seat of Fools” (1.271-2). The reiteration of *here* in the couplet lends an almost liturgical sanctity to the space, indicating with an anaphoric urgency the numinous *presence* of the place. This brief description of the temple moves immediately into the revelation of Dulness’ “works”:

Here to her Chosen all her works she shews;
 Prose swell’d to verse, verse loit’ring into prose:
 How random thoughts now meaning chance to find,
 Now leave all memory of sense behind:
 How Prologues into Prefaces decay,
 And these to Notes are fritter’d quite away. (1.273-8)

This process of admission into the temple and the subsequent demonstration of objects of some mystical importance—here the confused “works” of Dulness—echo the process whereby initiates into the Eleusinian rites learn the central mysteries of the cult. In his history of the Eleusinian cult, George E. Mylonas describes the central ritual of the mysteries, in which the

initiate is first admitted into the Telesterion—the central temple of the rites—prior to his undergoing the mystagogical instruction (278-279). After entering the temple, a hierophant would reveal the *deiknymena*, the “things shown,” to the initiate using the illumination of a holy fire (Mylonas 273). The mysteries into which Dulness initiates Cibber are precisely those of unnatural confusion. The couplet at lines 273 and 274 particularly reflect and incarnate this confusion in the text: in line 273, “Here” quite literally loiters into “her...her” while “she” swells to “shews.” The antimetabole of *prose* and *verse* in line 274 interweaves, and collapses the distinction between, the two radically different linguistic forms in the same way that “Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land” (1.72). In the couplet at lines 277 and 278 Pope even gives us a myth of descent in miniature as “Prologues” are diminished by parts into mere “Notes” in the same way that the Golden Age of truth devolves into a “Saturnian age of Lead” (1.28).

What is clear in Dulness’ mysteries is that they are the concrete manifestation of the confusion and corruption that lies at the very root of who Dulness is. John Sitter contends that Dulness’ “sacred Dome” (1.265) functions as a precise nexus between Dulness and her son Cibber: “the Dome functions as an ontological objectification of all that Pope’s Cibber has come to represent. Not only is it a place where monstrosities are on exhibit, but it is also a confused and indeterminate realm by its very nature; or, rather, it is the preternatural equivalent of Cibber’s neither-this-nor-that nature” (18). The episode in the Dome is the apotheosis of Cibber, which affirms that his “monster-breeding breast” (1.107) is the true “Image” (1.106) of Dulness, that he truly is the “Antichrist of wit” (2.16). Of course, we must not forget that *Christ* derives from the Greek for “the anointed” (OED), so the chrismation of Cibber with Dulness’ “sacred Opium” (1.288) makes him literally Dulness’ Christ. Following his consecration, Cibber is

invested with “the drunken Vine” (1.303) and the “creeping, dirty, courtly Ivy” (1.304); both the “Vine” and the “Ivy” are emblems associated with Bacchic worship and its frenzied rites. Once Cibber has been initiated into the rites of Dulness, he becomes what Sitter terms “a catalyst for dissolution” (18), the very principle of the disintegration of meaning and the descent into chaos.

Let us return for a moment to the passage describing Dulness’ “works” (1.273), especially its invocation of prologues “fritter’d quite away” into “Notes” (1.277), which here seems an almost self-conscious reminder of the sprawling scholarly apparatus that lies beneath the text of the poem itself and serves as an emblem of ever-present chaos. In her essay on Pope’s “Poetic Spaces,” Cynthia Wall notes that, even before we delve into the notes themselves, we are immediately aware of the way in which they “*overwhelm* the space of the page” (59). She claims that this “is *exactly* what Pope wants to do: to clutter up textual space with a ‘vast weedy sea of commentary,’ to create visual chaos, to poise clean, sculpted lines of poetry above a seething sewer of septic voices” (59). Wall’s reading here of the scholarly apparatus as yet another concrete manifestation of Dulness’ chaotic “works” (1.273) is eminently sensible. It should come as no surprise that “Notes” (1.277) are integral to Dulness’ revelation of her mysteries to Cibber; indeed, in this mechanism we recognize the objective threat of “verse loit’ring into prose” (1.274). In some ways the footnotes serve as the textual embodiment of the Cave of Poverty and Poetry, the rudimentary substrate in which Dulness herself resides, a latent and ever-present threat of dissolution and the “decay” (1.277) of meaning. Wall sees the footnotes as a type of quarantine in which the pedants may be sequestered away from the body of the poem: “The teeming subspace of intertextuality gives a proper home to those who cannot understand ‘delicate satire.’ The kennels of the page, where the dunces’ spite bacterializes into a nastiness that seems to overrun the original poem, in fact poetically—and historically—contains it” (61).

However, despite Pope's best efforts to exorcise the potential dissolution of poetic meaning, Dulness and "Universal Darkness" (4.656) are finally triumphant.

Throughout Book One we find that there is a consistent focus on frenzy and confusion as integral to Dulness' reign. Beginning with her origin myth, Dulness remains throughout the book a sinister symbol of meaninglessness, of the dismantling of sense and reason in favor of homogeneous chaos. And homogeneity, as we shall see, is the chief way in which Dulness seeks to undermine and foreclose the possibility of meaning. When all things diminish into a shapeless, formless, indistinct chaos, there is no possibility of distinguishing one thing from another—the very essence of meaninglessness. With the addition of Cibber, we begin to see the way in which this chaos manifests itself. In his "monster-breeding breast" (1.108) we find that, as Sitter notes, "artistic deformity is at once the mirror and source of actual deformity" (35), of a broader moral deformity that seeks to corrupt the fabric of meaning and civilization itself.

III.

The whole effect of the heroic games in the Second Book of the *Dunciad* is to manifest universally the fruitlessness that characterizes the duncical enterprise. Ranging from a race to catch a phantasm to a urinating contest to a noise-making contest, each of the "high heroic Games" (2.18) the goddess Dulness ordains to celebrate the coronation of Cibber reflects on some level the purposelessness and confusion we have previously seen in Book One. However, while in Book One the proliferation of unnatural confusion was confined mostly to Cibber, here the confusion becomes a broader debasement that spreads through the whole City of London through the gangs of Dunces.

At the beginning of Book Two, we find Cibber enthroned as Dulness' king in a passage that, while ostensibly lionizing the Dunces-king, actually works further to emphasize Cibber's artistic thievery. Just as Satan at the beginning of Book Two of *Paradise Lost* sits "High on a Throne of Royal State, which far/ Outshone the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*" (1-2), so Cibber sits "High on a gorgeous seat, that far out-shone/ Henley's gilt tub, or Fleckno's Irish throne" (2.1-2). The textual parallel here is not merely allusive but deeply parodic, and this appropriation of Milton helps to deflate Cibber by contrast. However, it is no surprise that Pope so flagrantly borrows from Milton at this moment. In attempting to invest Cibber with some kind of dignity on his "gorgeous seat," Pope resorts to the same poetic tactics of a Cibber who has in the previous book found joy in the "pleasing memory of all he stole" (1.128). The use of the Miltonic parody here allows Pope to indulge in a playful ironizing at Cibber's expense and ensures that Pope keeps his reader focused on the utter disingenuity at the heart of Dulness' empire. In order to attain any sort of eminence, Cibber must do so solely by stealing and defrauding the works of other authors.

However, this passage quickly gives way to a description of Cibber's countenance that thoroughly undermines whatever dignity was to be gained from the Miltonic parallel of Cibber enthroned. Cibber displays "The proud Parnassian sneer,/ The conscious simper, and the jealous leer" (2.5-6), a thorough "Mix" (2.7) of visages, each of which contradicts in some way the other two. There is a direct link in this description between Cibber and Milton's Satan. In Book Four of *Paradise Lost*, when Satan first looks upon Adam and Eve together, he views them "with jealous leer malign" (503). The poem resonates with a further parallel from Book Four of *Paradise Lost*: at the conclusion of Satan's "Farewell Hope" speech, Milton's narrator notes that

Thus while he spake, each passion dimm'd his face
 Thrice chang'd with pale, ire, envy and despair,
 Which marr'd his borrow'd visage, and betray'd
 Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld. (114-117)

In Milton's Satan, this rapid shift among conflicting expressions externalizes the inward anguish of the fallen angel; however, in Cibber, the same emotional farrago manifests a more insidious intent. John Sitter notes the way in which this admixture of facial expressions "extends the visual reality of underlying confusion in the poem," serving as a "subtle representation of indiscriminateness where the medium is both message and mission" (28). In this way, then, Cibber's face here serves as an emblem of Dulness' broader intent, which is no less than the spread of the natural confusion we have seen throughout Book One. The effect of this parallel with *Paradise Lost* is to reveal Cibber to be a figure of Satanic disorder and anarchic chaos whose face betrays on some level his own ends. Indeed, the allusive parallels here are so close that Cibber himself seems to *become* Milton's Satan.

Prior to the footrace, Dulness undertakes to fashion a poet out of thin air, an act that recalls Dulness' creative agency in Book One while emphasizing the insubstantiality of her creative acts. The creation of this "Poet's form" (2.35) also serves as a type of blazon of the quintessential Duncie, stylizing and emblemizing the duncical poet and his virtues:

She form'd this image of well-body'd air;
 With pert flat eyes she window'd well its head;
 A brain of feathers, and a heart of lead;
 But empty words she gave, and sounding strain,
 But senseless, lifeless! idol void and vain!

Never was dash'd out, at one lucky hit,
 A fool, so just a copy of a wit. (2.42-8)

This passage inverts the biblical account of the creation of humankind. In Genesis, God creates humanity in his own “image” (1:26), and He “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (2:7). Here, however, the poet “phantom” (2.50) is not the true, self-reflective image of divinity but a mere fraud, a “fool” that is a mere “copy of a wit.” Dulness fashions this “image” not from the solid, substantial clay of the earth but from “well-body'd air”; likewise, rather than inspiring her creation with the “breath of life,” Dulness merely fills it with “empty words” and “sounding strain.” In comparing the Genesis account of God’s creation to the account here of Dulness’ creation, we find once again that Dulness is chiefly a creator manqué whose fruits are little more than debauched copies of reality rather than the thing itself. Just as Cibber’s works are fraudulent plagiarisms of other authors, “sipp’d” and “plunder’d snug” (1.129) from his sources, it seems that all of Dulness’ creative acts work on some level to counterfeit rather than imitate in the truly mimetic sense. Thomas Edwards links this phantasmic creative act to the final foreclosure of meaning in the end of the poem: “Dulness’ power to make something out of nothing foreshadows her final making nothing out of everything. It is only a short imaginative leap to the ‘re-creation’ of the universe into garish parodies of its proper form” (121). The true danger lies in Dulness’ ceaseless creative vitality: she and her acolytes—the “deluge of authors” (344)—are endlessly progenerative, capable of ever bringing forth new and monstrous images that will eventually drown out and subsume the truth.

The noise-making contest further emphasizes the chaotic indistinctness represented in the Dunces and helps also to reflect further the threat of duncely literary production. In announcing

the contest, Dulness calls upon her followers to “learn...the wond’rous pow’r of Noise” (2.222). The Dunces respond in kind, and the result is one of the most onomatopoeic passages in the poem:

Now thousand tongues are heard in one loud din:
 The Monkey-mimics rush discordant in;
 ‘Twas chatt’ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb’ring all,
 And Noise and Norton, Brangling and Breval,
 Dennis and Dissonance, and captious Art,
 And Snip-snap short, and Interruption smart,
 And Demonstration thin, and Theses thick,
 And Major, Minor, and Conclusion quick. (2.235-42)

These lines are extraordinary in themselves for the way in which they so perfectly manifest the cacophony of the noise-making contest through the use of the alliteration of a whole range of consonantal sounds. The central passage of the contest itself constitutes one whole sentence, echoing the ceaseless trumpeting of the multitudinous voices, and becomes an almost polyphonic chorus of noise. Also of interest is the way in which the Dunces use the elements of logical proof—“Theses thick/ And Major, Minor, and Conclusion quick”—to sound forth in disarray. Pope seems to suggest here that the Dunces’ use of logic is little more than vain sophistry whose purpose is only to create a great noise rather than to move systematically toward the truth. Logic for the Dunces is only another voice in the fray, meriting no special consideration or attention. John Sitter notes the way in which these logical elements become “part of an auditory pattern of turgid cacophony which actually represents physically the frenzied confusion it describes” (30); in other words, the Dunces care nothing for the sense but

only for the sound. Syllogistic logic becomes in the hands of the Dunces mere “jabb’ring” (2.237), and the sense of their utterances decays into noise in the same way that “Prose swell’d to verse” and “verse loit’r[ed] into prose” (1.274) in the previous book. The panoply of duncical voices is so powerful that it takes the rigors of systematic logic and reduces them to nonsense.

Yet the most apparent symbol of the confusion and chaos at the heart of Dulness’ reign in Book Two is the muck and mire that so thoroughly pervade the book. In the footrace, Curll slips in a “lake” (2.69) of urine and ends up “Obscene with filth” (2.75), and it is only after a prayer to Cloacina, the Roman goddess of the sewer, that he arises “from th’ effluvia strong...and scours and stinks along” (2.105-6), ultimately vanquishing Lintot though “brown dishonours” (2.108) besmear his face. Yet the Fleet-ditch diving match offers a more extensive depiction of the role of dirt in Book Two. Prior to the match, Dulness implores her followers to prove “who the most in love of dirt excel” (2.277) and “Who flings most filth” (2.289). The Dunces respond with childlike fervor:

Next plung’d a feeble, but a desp’rate pack,
 With each a sickly brother at his back:
 Sons of a Day! just buoyant on the flood,
 Then number’d with the puppies in the mud.
 Ask ye their names? I could as soon disclose
 The names of these blind puppies as of those. (305-10)

These lines draw a connection between the Dunces’ descent into the mud and Pope’s ultimate inability to distinguish among the divers. It also suggests, of course, that the poets are not themselves worthy of notice and sink into deserved obscurity. The murky depths of Fleet-ditch

obscure and obliterate the distinctions among the divers, so much so that they become no different from the “puppies in the mud.” Here we see that the Dunces themselves have become “nameless Somethings” (1.56) in the primordial chaos of the Fleet-ditch mud. This mud seems to serve as the embodiment of this undifferentiated chaos that, as we have seen, so typifies Dulness herself. John Sitter notes that “It is not so much because of their connotation as because of their physical composition and consistency that slime and excrement provide the proper media for the dunces’ confused activity” (26); indeed, it is the very tendency of muck and mire to cover and render indistinct whatever they come into contact with that makes the mud such a fitting emblem of Dulness.

IV.

In Book One, we saw the way in which the depiction of Dulness’ command centered mostly on the person of Cibber. In Book Two, though the epic games leave “unpeopled half the land” (2.20), the games and the subsequent descent of sleep confine themselves solely to Dulness’ followers. However, in Book Three Dulness grants Cibber a vision of the universal establishment of her empire, of a “new world to Nature’s laws unknown” (241) that will subdue and destroy the realms of earthly order, plunging the whole once more into dark chaos. This is, of course, the world that will ultimately manifest itself at the end of Book Four, and Pope grants us here a foretaste of Dulness’ apocalyptic triumph. Book Three moves the action of the poem even further toward a universalizing of Dulness’ reign.

However, Book Three does not concern itself merely with this sort of chiliastic prophesying; rather, the poem offers the full breadth of Dulness’ demonic salvation history, from

its origins in China to its ultimate fulfillment in Cibber. Aubrey Williams terms this vision of the spread of Dulness' "sable flag" (3.71) around the globe a *translatio stultitiae*, a translation of foolishness, a play on the medieval and Renaissance trope of the *translatio studii*, "the idea of a transplantation from age to age and from country to country of cultural treasure" (44). The traditional manifestation of the idea is that all true learning originated in Eden and then spread westward to Jerusalem and ultimately to Greece, Rome, and finally Britain. Implicit in the idea of the *translatio studii*, of course, is the notion of historical contingency, that all knowledge ultimately derives primarily from one's antecedents via what Williams terms "a great cultural stream" (44). Certainly we may see how this notion is, as Williams claims, "a historical perspective precious to the Augustans" (48) who sought to revive Classical taste and learning. Yet Pope turns the idea on its head in Book Three. No longer is this westward expansion one of edification and light but of destruction and darkness. The "great cultural stream" is no longer a cool, clear Parnassian brook but Fleet-ditch, polluted with excrement and its "tribute of dead dogs" (2.272). This is the necessary consequence of the spread of Dulness' reign: it must result in the dismantling of tradition, of contingency, of humility. What is left is a type of self-creation in which a "new world" (3.241) springs forth as monstrous and unnatural as the "Maggots half-form'd" (1.61) in Book One.

The image of Lethe at the beginning of Book Three serves as a fitting symbol for this obliteration of the past. By the shores of Lethe Old Bavius sits, ready to "dip poetic souls" (3.24) into the waters; Settle urges Cibber to consider his origins:

Behold the wonders of th' oblivious Lake.

Thou, yet unborn, hast touch'd this sacred shore;

The hand of Bavius drench'd thee o'er and o'er. (3.44-6)

The image of Bavius drenching the inchoate Cibber “o’er and o’er” is in itself deeply humorous—as though this were a baptism that would not quite take. However, the Lethean image works as a perfect analogue to the duncical project, whose precise goal is the complete erasure of poetic tradition in its “oblivious Lake,” a phrase which recalls once again the image of the “deluge of authors” (Pope 344) that sweeps everything into indistinctness. For Cibber to have undergone such thorough lustrations, of course, indicates that his mind is a true *tabula rasa* of sorts, free from the influence of external sources of wisdom. Yet the Dunces as a whole remain blissfully ignorant of their literary predecessors, forever fixated on “The Classics of an Age that heard of none” (1.148). It is this very ignorance that converts the *translatio studii* into the duncical *translatio stultitiae*.

The vision that Dulness grants to Cibber echoes the satanic darkness that reveals the violence at the heart of the spread of Dulness. In a passage that almost directly echoes Christ’s temptation in the desert, Settle invites Cibber to “Ascend this hill, whose cloudy point commands/ Her boundless empire over sea and lands (3.67-8) from which Cibber might view “her sable flag display’d,/ And all the nations cover’d in her shade” (3.71-2). In St. Matthew’s Gospel, Satan takes Christ up “an exceeding high mountain” where he shows him “all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them” (Mt. 4:8). The allusive connection is clear, and yet there is no temptation of Cibber here; his participation in the dispensation of evil is a *fait accompli*. Cibber is already the “Antichrist of wit” (2.16), a figure of satanic dissolution on some level. Yet as Settle begins to unfold the origins of Dulness, matters take a darker turn:

Far eastward cast thine eye, from whence the Sun

And orient Science their bright course begun:

One god-like Monarch all that pride confounds,

He, whose long wall the wand'ring Tartar bounds;
 Heav'ns! what a pile! whole ages perish there,
 And one bright blaze turns Learning into air. (3.73-8)

We require a textual note to explain that this “god-like Monarch” is Chi Ho-am-ti, “Emperor of *China*, the same who built the great wall between *China* and *Tartary*, destroyed all the books and learned men of that empire” (A 3.n.69). This passage does much to elucidate the nature of Dulness, for we find here that Dulness has its origins in a violence that is rendered not just against “Learning” but against humanity itself, an horrific extirpation of “whole ages.” The “bright blaze” is one of the first explicit associations of light with the ends of Dulness in the poem; ironically, however, this brightness conduces only to a more profound darkness. This passage also implicates Cibber’s sacrifice of the birthday ode in Book One, yet the sacrifice involved in this passage is more ominous, even apocalyptic. The most illustrative image in this passage is the “long wall”; like the river Lethe, the Great Wall dissevers the Dunces from any source of knowledge extraneous to themselves, isolating them from tradition. Indeed, the clauses of line 77 are themselves walled in, isolated from one another. This intellectual isolation can tend only and ultimately toward solipsism, toward the belief that one may exercise some creative control over the preexisting order of the world rather than humbly receiving it. This is not the first instance within the poem of such solipsism, either. In Cibber’s extended soliloquy prior to the sacrifice in Book One, he declares, “What then remains? Ourselves. Still, still remain/ Cibberian forehead and Cibberian brain” (1.217-8). Here again, the clauses of line 217 are cut off, isolated from one another; the line centers on “Ourselves,” on Cibber as the *fons et origo* of his own existence, without tradition or antecedent. It is in the very nature of Dulness to wall itself in, to refuse to engage or contend with anything beyond itself. Moreover, it seems there are

certain ethical implications in the Great Wall passage: there is a connection here between duncical intellectual immurement and the horrors of the “bright blaze” (3.78). Pope seems to indicate a moral component to the spread of Dulness’ reign that may have consequences far beyond a mere ignorance of Virgil. To neglect one’s intellectual heritage is to neglect the moral virtues that have been ramified over the centuries in that heritage; therefore, it seems, there is a decidedly violent subtext to the ascent of the Dunces. Indeed, this idea will fully unfold in Book Four.

This solipsism of the *translatio stultitiae* works itself out most fully in the climax of Settle’s revelation in which he reveals a “new world” (3.241) to Cibber, a vision which is a chaotic perversion of the New Jerusalem in the Revelation to St. John. Prior to the emergence of the “new world,” there is a frenzy of cosmological disorder. We watch as a “sable Sorc’rer” (3.233) conjures forth a terrifying chaos:

All sudden, Gorgons hiss, and Dragons glare,
 And ten-horn’d fiends and Giants rush to war.
 Hell rises, Heav’n descends, and dance on Earth:
 Gods, imps, and monsters, music, rage, and mirth,
 A fire, a jugg, a battle, and a ball.

‘Till one wide conflagration swallows all. (3.235-40)

This is an extraordinary passage for the way in which it powerfully manifests the ecstatic, even demonic, confusion of the vision. The first three lines consist entirely of short, parataxic phrases—subject-verb pairings that impel the action of the lines forward. The compacted proximity of so many verbal phrases not only imbues the lines with a visceral, vital urgency, but it also whips up a delirium of confusion with hissing, glaring, rushing, rising, and descending.

Yet then the lines themselves succumb to this self-same frenzy; they lose their verbs entirely and become an almost unbroken succession of monosyllables and disyllables that course one into the other, lending the passage a sort of infernal impressionism. Indeed, the only disyllables in lines 238 and 239 are “monsters,” “music,” and “battle,” each of which is focused in the center of the line. As we have seen from our discussion of Book One, “monsters” is a word that is deeply connected with the unnatural fecundity of Dulness and the Dunces. And with the juxtaposition and alliterative coupling of “monsters, music” in line 238, we get a true sense of what Pope implicates in these lines: the Dunces themselves produce monsters’ music—the cacophonous, discordant noise that we heard in the noise-making contest of Book Two. Line 239 almost collapses back into itself and is the shortest line in the passage. At this very moment when the prosody seems ready to shrink to mere phonemic utterances, a hellish “conflagration” erupts and consumes everything. Here again there is a “bright blaze” (3.78) associated with the spread of Dulness’ empire, yet this “conflagration” is no more salubrious than before. Pope concentrates the entire force of this passage in evincing the confusion, the chaos, the infernal monstrosity that typifies the duncical enterprise. Yet this passage is not merely Pope’s conjuring up a demonic fantasy; it has some basis in fact. Pope notes that the cosmological confusion of “Hell rises, Heav’n descends, and dance on Earth” was “actually represented in *Tibbald’s Rape of Proserpine*” (A 3.n.233). Pope here mocks the *spectacle*, the emphasis on trivial entertainment entirely divorced from reality. The spectacular is, of course, an eminently duncical form of amusement because it does little more than titillate the senses and imparts no moral edification. Spectacle confuses the mind in empty delight, making it a fitting entertainment for Cibber.

Immediately following this spectacular vision a new world rises forth that, though seemingly more benign, is equally chaotic. This is an apocalyptic vision in which “Mere

anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Yeats 184), and which ultimately gives way to the birthing of a “new world” that is as chaotic as the demonic vision:

Thence a new world to Nature’s laws unknown,
 Breaks out refulgent, with a heav’n its own:
 Another Cynthia her new journey runs,
 And other planets circle other suns.
 The forests dance, the rivers upward rise,
 Whales sport in woods, and dolphins in the skies;
 And last, to give the whole creation grace,
 Lo! one vast Egg produces the human race. (3.241-8)

This “new world,” we may presume, is born from the chaos of the “wide conflagration,” and the description seems to bear this out. Certainly, these lines are much more lyrical than the previous passage, yet they are no less confused. This passage seems to recall almost completely the “Chaos dark and deep” (1.55) of Book One in which “Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land” (1.72) and where “In cold December fragrant chaplets blow” (1.77). The vision of forests dancing, humanity springing forth from a “vast Egg,” and dolphins swimming in the skies is no less unnatural, no less confused. Yet in Book One these disordered “Realms” were confined to the “mazy dance” (1.68) in honor of Dulness; here the confusion is universal, the product of a cosmogonical upheaval. There is an allusion here to the Revelation to St. John in which the evangelist sees “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1), the glory of which is the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). And at the center of this “new earth” is “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22), the source of being and order, the transcendent manifestation of love and truth. The evangelist’s description of the New Jerusalem implies its ordered-ness, that God’s

providential wisdom ultimately holds sway and ordains all things well. There is none of that order in Dulness' "new world"; rather, there is a strange confusion, a chaotic uneasiness in the way in which the "rivers upward rise" and the "planets circle other suns." The "vast Egg" also has its origins in stage spectacle as well: as Pope notes, "In another of these Farces *Harlequin* is hatch'd upon the Stage, out of a large Egg" (A 3.n.244). The extraordinary frivolity of a character's being born from an egg perfectly encapsulates the essential reality of Dulness' "new world." All that exists here is "joy innocent of thought" (3.249), devoid of reason or sense. There seems to be no center here, no motivating law—only movement with no purpose or end. This "new world" merely reaffirms and renders universal what we already know from Book One about Dulness and her monstrous progenerative capacity.

V.

In Book Four, we finally move to the poem's apocalyptic conclusion in which Dulness is finally triumphant over taste and reason and in which the possibility of meaning is finally and ultimately prescinded. We have seen throughout the poem this movement toward the universalization of Dulness' reign, beginning in Book Two as the thronging crowd of Dulness' followers "leaves unpeopled half the land" (2.20). In Book Three we are granted a vision of the spread of Dulness' empire, which is here brought to fruition in her final triumph. Dulness' world is one in which the First Cause has yielded to the second (cf. 4.644), where the umbrageous and the leaden has supplanted the airy and the light. Though Pope may seem primarily to attack the proliferation of dunces whose contributions to verse and to scholarship are seen as trivial and immaterial, there is a much deeper end to his claims, for Pope here decries the very end of

tradition, of a recognition that one's success and ability is wholly contingent upon the accomplishments of the former ages. What Pope portrays is the myth of self-creation, the idea that the poet and the scholar should "See all in *Self*, and but for self be born" (4.480). What dominates Book Four of the poem is a consistent fixation on the attenuation of vision, the narrowing of the mind to accommodate the ends of Dulness. In the end of this book, Pope offers a haunting and apocalyptic vision in which Dulness triumphant overcomes the light of wisdom and of true knowledge. In many ways, Book Four works as a key to the poem as a whole, for in this book Pope offers an eschatology of Dulness, in which the steady narrowing of the scholarly mind in Bentley, the schoolmaster, and the naturalists mirrors—and causes—the burgeoning demise of morals, the refusal ultimately to acknowledge the transcendent and ineffable truth that motivates all Creation.

The course of the whole book traces a descent into chaos; the book frames the opposition of light and darkness, yet the darkness evidently dominates even from the first lines. The poet beseeches Dulness to "Yet, yet a moment, one dim Ray of Light/ Indulge, dread Chaos, and eternal Night" (4.1-2), illustrating that darkness itself is already ascendant. Indeed, these lines recall and invert the second epic invocation of *Paradise Lost* in which the poet apostrophizes "holy light" (3.1) and seeks to express it "unblam'd" (3.3). This invocation implies that darkness itself must assent to the expression of the poet's "Ray of Light," must relent from its own established ubiquity. Of course, there is the sense here that the poet's verse is somehow tied to light and, therefore, participates in the truth on some level; however, it should be noted that this is not the only "Ray" in the earliest lines of the book. The poet describes that "Now flam'd the Dog-star's unpropitious ray,/ Smote every Brain, and wither'd ev'ry Bay" (4.9-10), a distinct

undermining of the whole notion of the ray of light as somehow opposing the encroaching darkness. For here is a “ray,” yet one allied with the “eternal Night.”

In his use of *ray* again in this context of madness, Pope collapses the opposition of light and darkness from the very inception of Book Four; here we see that madness and darkness’ dominion is such that it subverts light itself to darker ends. The lines themselves even seem to imply that it is this “unpropitious ray” of light that is the efficient cause of the rise of darkness, for it is after the appearance of the Dog-star that “Then rose the Seed of Chaos, and of Night” (4.13). It seems that the light of madness gives rise to night itself, an odd twinning of light and darkness that further collapses the distinction between the two opposites.

This subversion of light to darkness is reflected once more in the depiction of the rational disciplines subjected to the sway of Dulness (4.21-34), a seemingly ironic hierarchy that exists in the midst of unformed chaos. However, Pope’s depiction of the enslavement of “*Science*,” “*Wit*,” “*Logic*,” “*Rhet’ric*,” and “*Morality*” (4.21-27) before the throne of Dulness establishes a type of distorted order and has clear echoes in Plato, especially his notion of the hierarchic soul. In Book Four of his *Republic*, Plato posits that three warring natures comprise the soul: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational. Plato hierarchizes these natures, placing the rational nature above both the spirited and the appetitive. We are chiefly concerned here with the rational and the appetitive portions of the soul, for it is the dialectic opposition of these two natures that seems to be at work here. For Plato, if the appetitive, irrational nature subverts the rational nature, the fundamental harmony of the soul yields to discord. In this scene we have the subjugation of chiefly rational pursuits—namely, science, wit, logic, rhetoric, and morality—to pursuits that are rationally defective in some essential way, though they may participate on some level in the rational. “*Sophistry*,” “*Chicane*,” “*Casuistry*,” and “*Mad Mathesis*” (4.25, 28, 30)

each has some share in the rational; however, each debases and abuses reason in such a way as to render those rational ends fruitless. These “disciplines” do not actually seek out the truth but, rather, counterfeit the appearance of truth to achieve desired ends. Indeed, the reference to “Mad” mathematics implies a wholly irrational component to Dulness’ disciplines, which further suggests the fundamental disorderedness of Dulness’ virtues.

But beyond merely further implicating the chaotic in the nature of Dulness, the reverberations of Plato’s tripartite soul have significant political implications for the reign of Dulness. From the first lines of the poem, Pope ties taste to power, for it is the goddess Dulness and “her son who brings/ The Smithfield Muses to the ear of Kings” (1.1-2). Dulness requires the avenues of the courtly power in order to propagate her duncely virtues. Indeed, as Alvin Kernan argues, these initial lines merely encapsulate the way in which each successive episode of the poem “shows the spread of debased and false artistic standards to further areas of English life and culture” (257). The infection of the court with the works and ideas of the “Smithfield Muses” will inherently be reflected throughout English society as a whole through a sort of “trickle-down” descent of dullness and its concomitants. Plato is again helpful in understanding the significance of the corruption of the court for the whole of English life, for, in Plato’s framework, the state of the individual soul can have profound political ramifications. In the *Republic*, Plato establishes what I will call an anthropo-political homology, which is to say that the relative order or disorder within an individual’s soul reflects and affects the relative order or disorder within society as a whole. For, as Plato notes, “One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other” (443d); that is to say, justice is the result of the harmony of divergent natures both within the soul and within society. If there is such a subjection of reason to appetite within the

soul of the court, within the “ear of Kings” (1.2), then the whole of English society stands to suffer accordingly. And since Dulness’ “virtues” are eminently anti-rational, then it stands to reason that, insofar as those virtues find acceptance within the court, madness and disorder will reign, and the “Mighty Mother” (1.1) will have brought her will to fruition.

Book Four provides myriad examples of the ways in which this irrational disorder manifests itself in English civil life through Dulness’ followers; one of the most prominent of these acolytes is Richard Bentley, a textual scholar who concerns himself with ancient manuscripts. The figure of Bentley provides a means through which to understand how Dulness is brought forth in each of her minions, as he illustrates perfectly the narrowing of the mind that accompanies the spread of Dulness. Bentley, the “mighty Scholiast” (4.211), is capable of reducing even Horace and Milton (4.212) to dullness and insipidity. Addressing Dulness, Bentley exhorts:

Roman and Greek Grammarians! know your Better:
 Author of something yet more great than Letter;
 While tow’ring o’er your Alphabet, like Saul,
 Stands our Digamma, and o’er-tops them all.
 ‘Tis true, on Words is still our whole debate,
 Disputes of *Me* or *Te*, of *aut* or *at*,
 To sound or sink in *cano*, O or A
 Or give up Cicero to C or K. (4.215-22)

Here Bentley evinces quite well the duncely virtue of pedantry, of being so intensely focused on niggling over minute textual details so as to lose sight of the text as a whole. Bentley’s art is unmitigated reductive affectation, devoid of scholarly charity or breadth. The lines themselves

seem almost to collapse inward, becoming progressively shorter the further Bentley proceeds in describing the finer points of his trade. Furthermore, each line from 218 onward is almost entirely monosyllabic, emphasizing the sort of banal plodding that typifies Bentley's work. The textual issues are frivolous in themselves, a smattering of quibbles over individual sounds and the discovery of the digamma. Kernan admits that "in one way [Bentley's] careful study of texts can be viewed as a valid extension of the scientific spirit to literary problems" (263); however, this single-minded obsession with minutiae can be dangerous if it fails to move beyond itself. While the discovery of the digamma may have been a propitious innovation for textual scholarship, Pope sees a profound deficiency in making it the *telos* of the intellectual life. Such a focus as Bentley's, Kernan argues, succeeds in debasing "that traditionally moral activity, the reading and explanation of great literature...into quibbles over grammar and pronunciation" (263).

This argument is, of course, not new: the idea that the right interpretation of literature has an educatory and a moral value is as much Aristotle's, Augustine's, and Sidney's as it is Pope's, but it serves Pope well in his examination of Bentley. The idea of literature as *mimesis*, as an imitation of reality, is one of the most ancient ideas of literary criticism, and it necessarily flows from the mimetic principle that the correct reading of literature is in some way morally formative. Pope here seems implicitly to invoke this idea in his presentation of Bentley's scholarship, for it seems impossible that one should derive any moral edification from the study of Cs and Ks (4.222). Indeed, Bentley asserts that "The critic Eye, that microscope of Wit,/ Sees hairs and pores, examines bit by bit" (4.233-4); however, such a deeply narrowed lens cannot but preclude the overarching moral value of a work in favor of considering "How parts relate to parts" (4.235), exclusive of the whole. For this is the essence of Bentley's pedagogical purpose,

to “stuff the head/ With all such reading as was never read” (4.249-50); that is, to remain merely “On Learning’s surface” (4.242), never examining in any detail the underlying structures of meaning where truth may be found. To read in such a way is to remain blithely unaffected by the spirit of the text.

Though Bentley is perhaps the supreme example of the reductive tendency of Dulness, there are yet other followers, such as the schoolmaster, who display this attenuating faculty just as well. There is the schoolmaster, the “shudd’ring horror” (4.143) of his pupils, who expounds that

Since Man from beast by Words is known,

Words are Man’s province, Words we teach alone.

When reason doubtful, like the Samian letter,

Points him two ways, the narrower is the better (4.149-52),

echoing Bentley’s obsessive focus on reductive detail. Here again, there is much discussion of “Words” yet no discussion of meaning. Words are words, useful only insofar as they can serve to “load the brain” (4.157) in purposeless masses, residing there to be recited at will—and even then, quickly forgotten (4.165-6). As with Bentley, the schoolmaster is guilty of divorcing words from context, of stranding them alone merely as *things*, as items to be accrued and memorized. These lines, punctuated as they are by medial caesuras, give the sense of that divorce, a sort of halting dualism that prevents the lines from being read continuously, forcing each side of the line apart like “the Samian letter.” In some contexts, the “narrower” way might be preferable (cf. especially Matt. 7:13-14); however, here the emphasis resides in the narrowing of sense, especially of the moral sense, an inversion of the idea that it is the narrow way that leads to salvation.

Like the schoolmaster, Pope's butterfly collector and botanist reflect this urge to accumulate. They, like the other naturalists of whose parade they are initially a part, invest objects with value insofar as they can be taxonomized, collected, named. Like the words of Bentley and the schoolmaster, "A Nest, a Toad, a Fungus, or a Flow'r" (4.400) to the naturalists serves no greater purpose than to be studied, to be submitted to the process of naming and categorizing, and to be added to a collection. To return for a moment to our earlier discussion of the Platonic theory of the soul, the butterfly collector and botanist evince almost perfectly the appetitive, possessive quality of the irrational soul. They both seek more and more to consume and to gather without any overarching purpose or goal. In them the end of reasonable science—the systematic and methodical study of causation—is subverted to mere accrual. This impulse toward commodification once again illustrates the inability of Pope's dunces to appreciate the totality of what it is they are studying, for this narrowing of the sense—the application of the "microscope of wit" (4.233)—exemplifies the scientific need to decontextualize, to rob the subject of meaning.

But there is an even greater collapse at work here, and that is the collapse of distinction between the naturalists and their subjects. There is a type of dehumanization at work in this episode, as both the butterfly collector and the botanist possess "earnest zeal,/ And aspect ardent" (4.401)—visages that betray a "lust" (4.415) that consumes them and debases them to an animal-like madness. This debasement reflects the ambivalence that exists between the naturalists and their subjects throughout the episode. The naturalists in the beginning of the passage are bedecked in "weeds and shells fantastic" (4.398) and are described as "Locusts" (4.397), clearly blurring the distinction between the scientist and the object of study. The botanist personifies his carnation, naming it Caroline (4.409); however, this act of naming, far from making the botanist

an Adam-like master of Creation, invests the carnation with human quality, establishing further the slippage of roles between the subject and object here.

In all three of these episodes, there is a sense of contraction and collapse at work here, an ironic inversion of the way in which Dulness has spread like a virus throughout the land, ultimately driving toward the final and ultimate collapse, the descent into total darkness. From the beginning of Book Four, a “strong impulsive gravity of Head” (4.76) draws Dulness’ followers—the “vast involuntary throng” (4.82)—deeper and deeper into “her Vortex” (4.84). The image here of a great centripetal force impelling the followers ever closer to the center of the vortex is an apt metaphor for the progress of Dulness, for, despite the rapid expansion of Dulness through the kingdom and the court, the ultimate action of Dulness tends finally toward nothingness, toward collapse. Kernan notes the irony of the vortex image, for as “The turbulent outer lip swirls round and round growing ever larger and engulfing more and more” (262), that which is in the vortex is drawn inward toward the “pinpoint of nothingness” (262). This action certainly characterizes the scholarly pursuits of Dulness’ intellectuals: in broadening their “pale of Words” (4.160), they are paradoxically making their knowledge more and more precise, limiting their perspective and destroying their ability to transcend minutiae.

This great movement inward conduces toward the final lines of the poem, the cataclysmic descent of darkness over the land, which in itself is another ironic paradox of expansion that is in itself a collapse. The end of the poem begins with the goddess Dulness’ great yawn (4.605-6), a yawn that spreads out like some insidious and pestilential air over all of England, spreading first over “Churches and Chapels” (4.607) before proceeding to the schools (4.609) until “Lost was the nation’s sense” (4.611). Clearly here there is a reworking of the trumpet blasts in the Revelation of St. John, and Pope’s version offers a much more quiescent portent of the end of

days. Furthermore, the yawn seems appropriate because of the way in which the mouth must shape itself in order to yawn: it must make a zero, the very symbol of nothingness.

The final lines of the book recapitulate in many ways the imagery of its earliest lines, for here we have a reemergence of the image of the stars, of the enslavement of the rational disciplines, of the preeminence of “eternal Night” (4.2). As “*Night Primæval, and...Chaos old*” (4.630) engulfs the land, the “sick’ning stars fade off th’ ethereal plain” (4.636), and the darkness subsumes even the Dog-star (4.9) of the opening lines, the one image of light—albeit defective light—truly available in this book. Here we are asked to “See skulking *Truth* to her old cavern fled,/ Mountains of Casuistry heaped over her head” (4.641-2), which recalls “*Logic, gagg’d and bound*” (4.23) of earlier. And finally “Universal Darkness buries All” (4.656), resounding in answer that “dread Chaos” permit “one dim Ray of Light” (4.1-2). In many ways, it seems, the book collapses back upon itself with the reiteration of these images from earlier. As Bogel asserts, this structural collapse—“the erosion of structure and the abdication of the mind” (846)—is Pope’s intention in the end, for he uses this destructuring to “present an image not of the undifferentiated (even if it were possible) but of the undoing of structure by undifferentiation” (846). The difference here is critical. The terror of these final lines rests in its depiction of a return to chaos, a fall into the darkness. As noted earlier, Dulness works mightily to assert her power, to usurp the seat of sovereign reason and the light of truth, and here we see the fruits. This is a returning of the world to darkness, an undermining of all meaning, and the structure of the poem affirms this.

The final image of the “uncreating Word” (4.654) and the return to “CHAOS” (4.653) reflects for Pope an eschatology of pedantic chaos, in which the dissolution of reality itself is occasioned and caused by the destruction of meaning. As Kernan argues, “there is an anti-

creation, or uncreation, myth running through *The Dunciad* which inverts the creative acts described in Christian myth” (257); the “*Fiat Lux*” (257) of Genesis here becomes the very antithesis of light in which no “*human Spark* is left, nor Glimpse *divine*” (4.652). What is most significant about this darkness is its absolute uniformity. The collapse of meaning and of sense that was particularized in the episodes of Bentley, the schoolmaster, and the naturalists is here universalized into an absolute irrationality and meaninglessness. This complete uniformity, in which all words, all things are the same is the fruit of a materialistic tendency towards commodification in which all things are just that—things. The butterfly collector could just as easily collect flowers, just as the botanist could just as easily store up poems in his mind. The collectors do not accumulate these things for their intrinsic value but, rather, merely to collect. It is when this tendency toward the denial of irreducible value exists on the level of an entire society that problems emerge, according to Pope. As Bogel notes, “Far worse than intellectual laziness, or sham art, or moral evil, for Pope, is the inability to tell these from their opposites” (852); when one loses sight of the reality overarching these *things*, one succumbs to the relativism of the “Universal Darkness” (4.656). And yet this ignorance of basic reality springs only from the attenuation of focus, the limiting of scholarly broadness that desires to “See Nature in some partial narrow shape,/ And let the Author of the Whole escape” (4.455-6). It springs from the reading of texts for grammatical cruxes rather than for meaning, from the memorizing of poems merely to *have* them. It seeks ultimately to “Make God Man’s Image, Man the final Cause” (4.478), for when one cannot see beyond the immediate, beyond the surface, the apprehension of ultimate truth becomes impossible. From an eschatological standpoint, this inability to discern the truth and to differentiate among the First and the secondary causes is the

end, for this cannot but result in the absolute darkness of solipsism and death. For Pope, it seems that this failure inevitably causes the final descent into utter darkness.

In the end, however, the major problem with the final book remains determining precisely how seriously Pope intends us to read his moral critique and the apocalyptic vision. Robert Griffin argues that the poem works both as a serious indictment of the moral failings of the dunces and as a comic lampooning of the science age, for “Irony and serious vision are not by necessity mutually exclusive” (436). Donald T. Siebert asserts, however, that the “opinion that the dunces are truly evil and threatening” (204) is fundamentally flawed. Siebert claims that it is frivolous to imagine that we are to view a group of people whom Pope depicts so farcically as the very “manifestation of some theological or metaphysical evil, as a real threat to the goodness and order of God’s universe” (206). For Siebert, the depiction of the dunces is so radically irreconcilable with the apocalypse they bring that it cannot be read seriously. However, Griffin—quite rightly so, I think—believes that Pope can have it both ways. If the best satire is, as Kernan explains it, the lampooning of “the overly optimistic belief in progress which ignores the hard realities and inevitable complications of life” (255), then Pope’s satire can be both a vicious excoriation of modern science embodied in the dunces and a lighthearted mockery of his enemies. Neither of these options necessarily precludes the other, and Siebert is quite incorrect in trying to assume that one cannot have a morally serious work conveyed humorously. Pope can have his apocalypse and mean it, even while winking at us from behind the scenes. Ultimately, Pope’s *Dunciad* stands as a stunning arraignment of those who desire to subject the ultimate and eternal truth to a facile-minded seeking after shiny things. The scholars of Book Four embody the incorrigible human tendency toward excessive self-love and self-involvement, toward believing that all that matters is what is readily apprehensible to the senses. And while

Pope presents Bentley, the schoolmaster, and the naturalists as variations on a theme of excessively narrowed vision leading toward ultimate dissolution and un-fulfillment, the theme finds its heart in the myth of Narcissus. Pope's dunces are just as much a school of Narcissuses, so transfixed by their own reflections that they cannot see the glorious world beyond them; they languish in a condition of essential darkness.

VI.

The final apocalypse of Pope's *Dunciad* implies a moral vision that extends far beyond the mere condemnation of poor taste, wanton spectacle, and hack art. These things are not moral evils in themselves; however, each threatens to dis sever its participants in some way from the real. Indeed, there seems to be a problem here of false *mimesis*: if the duncical "arts" are those in which "Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land" (1.72) or in which "Whales sport in woods, and dolphins in the skies" (3.245), then there is a fundamental disconnect between those arts and ultimate reality. When Dulness fabricates a poetic phantasm out of thin air, she manifests the essentially fraudulent nature of her creations. I have touched briefly on the relationship between mimetic art and moral development in Book Four, yet I now wish to extend this discussion to the whole poem as a means of understanding exactly why the threat of the Dunces is so significant. In order for art to help rectify the human will, it must necessarily correspond on some level to empirical reality. For instance, though I have no experience of the political intrigues of *Hamlet*'s world, the play still motivates certain moral questions in whose consideration I can involve my own experiences and reality. True *mimesis* implicates both the particular and the universal in a way that permits the reader to engage himself in the discursive moral framework of the text and thereby to derive some edification from this engagement. The

Dunces' literary productions, however, offer no opportunities for such moral development: they are sensational, spectacular, confused. This utter divorce from reality ultimately drives the descent into "Universal Darkness" (4.656) at the end of the poem, for the final end of Dulness' work is the perpetuation of moral ignorance.

The reference to Dulness' "uncreating word" (4.654) in Book Four illustrates even further the evil that the Dunces represent, for it echoes and inverts God's creative Word spoken eternally in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Prologue to St. John's Gospel, the evangelist writes that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things were made by him" (1:1, 3); here we find that the utterance of God in the Word is inextricably bound up not only with God's creative agency but also with his very Being. The Word is the source and summit of being itself, the metaphysical center of all Creation. Yet the Word also serves as a principle of order. In the Creation account of Genesis 1, we find an almost litaneutical repetition of God's "Let there be" followed by the bringing to fruition of God's will; God's word establishes order from chaos, bringing forth form and shape from nothingness. Dulness' word, however, can do no such thing. In Book One, Dulness, too, summons forth her creations from "Chaos dark and deep" (55), yet these are not the formally ordered creations of Genesis but "new-born nonsense" and "Maggots half-formed" (1.59, 60). Furthermore, God's word aims at differentiation: He separates "the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:4) and "the waters from the waters" (Gen. 1:6) and "the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (Gen. 1:7). The principle of the ordered universe resides chiefly in the discrete separation of one thing from another; in this way, meaning becomes possible because, rather than a confused disorder, everything enjoys a certain distinct reality. However, in Dulness' universe, characterized as it is by the "madness of the mazy

dance” (1.68), such order is an impossibility. All that remains is what John Sitter terms “generic confusion” (6). There is a center in Dulness’ universe, yet it is not the Word; the Word has been drowned beneath the “deluge of authors” (Pope 344). The only center here is that which lies at the center of the “Vortex” (4.84), the very image of dissolution.

Ultimately, there is a certain satiric irony that vindicates Pope against the forces of Dulness and disorder, a means through which, in the very act of writing this poem, he exorcises the possibility of “Universal Darkness” (4.656) finally achieving triumph. The chief irony of the poem, of course, is that Pope describes the decay of poetry into indistinctness and confusion in a highly formal poetic and rhetorical structure. As Frederic Bogel notes, though Dulness may aim at “the undoing of structure by undifferentiation,” the rhetorical edifice of the poem serves “to call forth from that unrestrained combinatory inertia structures and elements that will retain, if only for a while, something of distinctness” (847). Pope asserts a framework of order against the impulsive urge toward disintegration and in doing so helps to prevent this dissolution in some way. Furthermore, Pope’s frequent use of allusive invocation helps to involve the poem in a broader poetic tradition, a type of order firmly opposed to the disintegrating tendencies of duncical chaos. By referencing the Bible, Milton, Spenser, Chaucer, and others, Pope implies that his work is in some way superior to those “Classics of an age that heard of none” (1.148). The “tradition” of the Dunces is the salvation history in Book Three: it has its origins in violence and isolation, an unwillingness to see beyond the self. It is the very act of making allusion that Pope fears will be lost in the rise of Dulness’ empire. If the poetic tradition is what Aubrey Williams calls the “great cultural stream” (44), then the “deluge of authors” (Pope 344) will simply flood it out. It seems, then, that this constant fixation on invoking and recalling the past becomes a bulwark for Pope against the encroaching demise of tradition and learning and the

moral issues involved in this demise. The question ultimately becomes whether the *Dunciad* is sufficient in itself to stave off the rise of Dulness' empire, whether the *Dunciad* has not become just another voice among the multitude. We live in an age of blogs and sound-bites, decentering and de-privileging—a veritable universal noise-making contest. It seems, then, the *Dunciad* is no less relevant, its problems no less urgent, than in 1743.

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