Abstraction, reference, and the dualism of Pope’s ‘Dunciad.’

by Blakey Vermeule

Alexander Pope’s poem ‘Dunciad’ is flawed rather than enhanced by its duality of language and content. Despite successive attempts by other authors to salvage the poem’s continuity, it fails to achieve coherence due to the abstraction of language needed for object reference. This abstraction interferes with the poem’s ability to generate material effects on readers.

Like most metaphors, the Dunciad (1728-1743) is supposed to engage us on two semantic levels: first, what the poem says; second, what it implies or subtly impresses upon us. The two levels can be described according to the common binarisms found in recent literary theory: for example, presence/absence, conscious/unconscious, manifest content/latent content, overt meaning/hidden power. Or they can be described as awesome and ineffable: “The Dunciad,” muses Helen Deutsch, “like a ruined building in a classical garden, mesmerizes like an ‘Ornament and Curiosity on dead bodies.’” Emrys Jones has reflected carefully on the situation, and I borrow the terminology of “two levels” from him:

Like some other great works of its age... the Dunciad seems to engage us

on more than one level. The first level one might describe as a level of

deliberate artistry: the poet works in terms of play of wit, purposeful

allegory, triumphantly pointed writing, in all of which we

are made aware of the pressure of a highly critical and aggressive mind. But

on another level the poetry works more mysteriously and obscurely: one

seems to see past the personal names and topical allusion to a large

fantasy-world, an imaginative realm which is infused with a powerful

sense of gratification and indulgence. The first level is primarily

stimulating to the mind, while the second works affectively in

altogether more obscure ways.

I have already used the vocabulary of two levels to liken the Dunciad to a metaphor, but we might, by a simple translation, liken the poem to language itself, to a dream, or to the human psyche. Yet what strikes us about the Dunciad from Emrys Jones’s and almost every other substantive description of it is that the two levels do not interpenetrate: they remain separate, each untranslated by the other. Unlike most metaphors, then, the tenor and vehicle of the poem seem mutually indifferent if not exclusive. Sensuousness (‘primarily stimulating to the mind’) and abstraction (working “in altogether more obscure ways”) do not flow between the two levels, but flow instead between each level and some discrete capacity of the reader’s. Whereas terms for metaphor in literary theory describe a fusion of sensuous and abstract, the vocabulary of two levels leaves us with no mechanism for explaining why the Dunciad is not simply two different poems inhabiting the same space.

This article will show that the pervasive mode of interpreting the Dunciad is dualist, holding it to be two unfused poems. Such a reading is not something we impose to explain the poem’s aesthetic difficulty (even failure). Earlier this century, the poem’s undigested doubleness was indeed considered an embarrassment for aesthetic criteria by formalists in Pope studies. Various formalist bandages were applied to cover up the poem’s holes, yet these were redolent of special pleading on behalf of organic unity. The dualism results not from our attempts to salvage sublimity within the poem’s localism but from the very impossibility of Pope’s historical project. Any mode of reading, from the most formalist to the most historicist, will fail to make the poem coherent because Pope failed to make the poem coherent. This incoherence, this unknitting of a continuous authorial intention, is no trivial matter. It is not the result of slippages in language, of the independent career of the poem’s words; nor is it the case that a continuous poetic intention is in some light sense impossible. If any general feature of language is to blame, it is that words do not hook onto the world. And the poem’s fascination only increases when we adopt a charitable stance toward Pope’s intentions, understanding his massive attempts to suture words and the world. The poem’s dualism results from Pope’s ambitious and increasingly strident desire to engage in reference; why this project should fail is the question my article seeks to answer.

Without much reflection, we can see that Pope failed in his
ambition. He meant his poem to have material effects on real people, to "rid [him] of these insects."(5) Lytton Strachey wrote appreciatively, if figuratively, that our having been born after Pope means that "we run no danger of waking up one morning to find ourselves exposed, both now and forever, to the ridicule of the polite world—that we are hanging by the neck and kicking our legs, on the elegant gibbet that has been put up for us by the little monster of Twit'nam."(6) Yet Pope never stopped revising, despite the straightforward mode of reference he practiced in the poem's early drafts. Why not? Pope never felt sure his work was done, the gibbet erected, the victim hung—if he had, the Dunciad would have been done, the poem spent. Instead, the little monster's poem grew into a big monster, its "universal darkness" effectively swallowing—as critic after critic has noticed—the little monster himself. And suddenly the final draft begins confusingly to refer to events and people long past with a fresh, almost manic, energy.(7)

Pope almost certainly faced two insurmountable barriers to reference, one generic, one linguistic. The Dunciad may have practical failure built in: it is widely acknowledged that satire bakes no bread, nor does it unseat any governments.(8) The second barrier to reference is markedly general, having little to do with the Dunciad itself. According to the empiricist linguistic tradition that begins with John Locke, abstraction is unavoidable when we seek to refer to objects. Following out this line, we could shape the thought this way: abstraction of language causes a complicated failure of poetic reference; this in turn causes the poem's failure to achieve material effects on real people.(9)

I. ABSTRACTION AND REFERENCE

Allow me to examine this latter hypothesis at length. Proper names play the same role in Pope's Dunciad that they play in eighteenth-century theories of language: they anchor the poem in its particularity, just as for Locke and Berkeley proper names anchor words to the world first and last. A corollary is that proper names play the same role with respect to generality in Pope's poem as in these philosophical systems. A special case of reference, proper names convey meaning within the system as a whole where meaning becomes locked into the figurative aspects of language. This essay describes the resulting oblique relationship between the system and its initial "building blocks," that is, between general terms and proper names, which at its uneasiest becomes a relationship between two different orders of language, one figuratively and one causally connected to the world.(10) In essence, this relationship places some words, which have meaning, in tension with others, which have reference.

This conflict between meaning and reference seems most vital and most intractable in light of critique—Berkeley's critique of Locke's Essay concerning Human Understanding (1690) in the opening pages of Principles of Human Knowledge (1710), and Pope's revisionary critique of the Dunciad (1728) and Dunciad Variorum (1729) in the New Dunciad (1742) and Dunciad in Four Books (1743). All of these critiques name the source of the tension between meaning and reference as a variant of abstraction: abstraction is the mode by which the particular becomes the general, but it is also an ambiguous and self-contradictory feature of human psychology—one whose necessity Berkeley doubts in a thought-experiment about a "solitary man" who "shall never have had occasion to make use of universal signs for his ideas."(11) Here the analogy between Pope's poetic and an empiricist philosophical interest in the relation between particular and general terms hardens. The analogy between Pope's early Dunciads and Locke's system looks surprisingly apt when we realize that both writers distinguish between abstraction and figurativeness (a special variety of abstraction), and that both are committed to naming the latter as the true cause of rupture between reference and meaning.(12)

I will return to Pope's uneasiness on this point later; Locke's uneasiness is somewhat easier to summarize. Locke's system initially accommodates both particular and general terms; he posits no essential conflict between reference and meaning.(13) He distinguished between abstraction and figure, seeking to understand the process by which proper names become general terms while stripping words of their sophistical power to "interpose themselves so much between our understandings and the truth which it would contemplate and apprehend that, like the medium through which visible objects pass, their obscurity and disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our eyes and impose upon our understandings."(14) For Locke, abstraction is the process that moves us seamlessly from the particular to the general, while figurativeness, a "perfect cheat," is the condition that prevents us from returning back down the same road.(15)

From the earliest framing of the Dunciad to its final revision, Pope was vexed by how to translate figurative into causal language, meaning into reference. That they remain untranslated is the true origin of a widespread formalist view, cited earlier, that the Dunciad is aesthetically problematic. For if a poem has two incommensurable orders of language within it, one roughly corresponding to poetry and the other roughly corresponding to reference, it fails by definition to achieve internal consistency. The lack of internal consistency has been a surprisingly fertile source of anxiety for Pope's critics. Historically, formalist critics have been optimistic
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about Pope’s aesthetic success, arguing that he eventually discarded all of the poem’s undigestible matter, or what his nineteenth-century editor called the “inference(s) which Pope chose to found on the real actions of the various persons whom he satirizes,” in favor of a higher, more sublime, aesthetic.(16) In the poem’s early versions, so the argument goes, the poetic and the merely personal rival each other for space: personal satire and invective sit uncomfortably alongside material that Pope recycles from the Bible, Virgil, and Milton. Tending to prefer the Bible, Virgil, and Milton to “giant libel,” most critics have discovered that in the last two versions of his poem (1742 and 1743) Pope committed an especially Virgilian maneuver.(17) He turned away from a low pastoral focus on hacks and dunces toward an epic focus on the sublime; he maturely substituted “theology for Grub-street” and “metaphysics for mock-heroic.”(18) As Reuben Brower put it, “Pope, we might say, found in the New Dunciad the poem he had been half-consciously writing ‘toward’ for some ten or fifteen years.”(19)

Can we really think of the “two levels” as coming together in the 1742-43 poem? Arguments that Pope made progress toward a unified poem seem borne out by his relative lack of hostility toward actual persons in the New Dunciad, the wealth of names in the earlier version having faded to ghostly blanks useful only for filling out the meter: “Great Shades of **, **, **, *”(20) Did Pope then simply lose the desire to correct the Dunces? Did his growing friendship with the clergyman William Warburton, whom he appointed his literary executor, allow him to seek a higher moral ground?(21) Or did he find such a slyly successful method of satirizing people that their identities have simply eluded generations of editors? His Twickenham editors note, for instance, that many Dunces in later versions of the poem never have been successfully identified (Twickenham 5:xxxii).

A case in point concerns the manifest difficulties in interpreting Paridel, "a lazy, lolling sort" whom Dullness finds "stretched on the rack of a too easy chair" (Twickenham 5:376). Paridel seems motivated not by satire but only by his difference from Spenser’s wandering squire Paridel in book 3 of the Faerie Queene. The latter’s restlessness in turn is not the antithesis to idleness but thematically appropriate to his Trojan lineage and connection to Brute, Aeneas’s descendant and founder of Troy-novant (i.e., the City of London, seat of an increasingly mobile finance capital and of Dullness herself). A plausible interpretation would be that Pope uses the name Paridel to highlight how far he has fallen from the principle of epic motivation in Spenser. Epic motivation, on this view, is antithetical to the obscurity of the Dunce--his distance from the Aeneas figures in books 1 and 4, and his appearance in the poem after Dullness has left the City of London and claimed her seat at the palace of St. James--makes him seem a figure for lack of motivation. Are we to understand instead that Pope has someone definite in mind, a person whose identity would clear up the obscurity of the allusion and render such interpretive activity moot?

I argue that Pope neither gave up his aim of satirizing particular people nor began to speak in some obscure Spenserian code. Instead, he paradoxically embraced his enemy, adopting the very abstraction that he had been battling as a feature of language in earlier versions of the poem, even divesting it of its pictorialism, its figurativeness, its concrete particulars. We know that Pope never abandoned his satirical aim: in the decade or so between the publication of the old and new Dunciads, he visibly sought a more intense way to achieve an effect on his targets than just referring to them by name (or personal attributes), a practice he optimistically called “hunting one or two from the herd.”(22) In the New Dunciad, abstraction produces the effect that a wealth of particulars had failed to deliver. To Hugh Bethel, Pope wrote the following account of the New Dunciad: “And to give you ease in relation to the event of my poem; which, dealing much in General, not particular satire, has stirred up little or no resentment. The it be leveled much higher than the former, yet men not being singled out from the herd, bear chastisement better, (like gaily slaves for being all linked in a string, & on the same rank).”(23) The New Dunciad, being general rather than personal, has failed to stir up the usual resentment; is this because it is a less effective piece of satire? Or, as Pope implies, is the lack of response to it evidence that it is a more effective piece of satire? If the latter is true, its greater effectiveness seems to have something to do with deindividuation: the poem’s persons are stripped of their individuality and subordinated like “gaily slaves.” By 1742 Pope embraced abstraction in order to get around language’s figurative habit of not referring to things, not, as readers as different as William Warburton and Colley Cibber thought, because he finally had to admit the impossibility of corrective satire.

To understand why Pope embraced abstraction in the New Dunciad, we must understand how his letter to Bethel both continues some of his earlier obsessions and reverses some of his earlier poetic procedures. At each stage of the composition of the whole Dunciad sequence, Pope claimed to have increased the satiric pressure on his targets, who were neither fictional characters nor personified abstractions, but real people whose characteristics could be checked against Pope’s representations. Pope’s obsession with correction had not lessened since 1726 when he wrote Peri Bathous, arguably the first piece in the enlarged Dunciad sequence. Yet if in 1742 his poetic procedure can be described as
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obscurersessentialism, in 1726 it can only be described as enlightening specificity. In Peri Bathous he defines obscure authors mostly by using recognizable parts of their names: "The Eels are obscure Authors, that wrap themselves up in their own Mud, but are mighty nimble and pert. L.W.L.T.P.M. General C"--"L.W." is clearly Leonard Welsted, and so forth. This technique of using names to point to specific persons depends on the empiricist hypothesis that particulars refer most intensely, and that proper terms, having no general applications, are the most particular terms of all.

This empirically based technique seems to have been Pope's ruling hypothesis through at least the mid-1730s. For example, in 1734 he defended personal satire against John Arbuthnot, who so disapproved of the practice that he half-seriously made its abandonment a condition of his continuing friendship with Pope. Pope wrote: "To attack vices in the abstract, without touching persons may be safe fighting indeed, but it is fighting with shadows. General propositions are obscure, misty, and uncertain, compared with plain, full and home examples: precepts only apply to our reason which in most men is but weak: examples are pictures, and strike the senses, nay raise the passions, and call in those (the strongest and most general of all motives) to the aid of reformation."(24)

Pope's defense of particular satire is notable partly because in the letter to Bethel eight years later (quoted above), he uses identical terms to argue for an opposite point of view. In the earlier letter, clarity of reference is a feature of particulars; correction comes about through greater clarity of reference and therefore through greater particularism. Pope's initial hypothesis about satiric effects is that the more particular he can be about a person the more closely he refers to that person; the more closely he refers to him or her the stronger the example he or she makes; the stronger the example the person makes the greater his or her motive (and that of Pope's readers) for "reformation."

Pope took a strongly particularist line in the prefatory advertisement to the Dunciad Variorum (1729): "Of the Persons it was judged proper to give some account: for since it is only in this monument that they must expect to survive... it seemed but humanity to bestow a word or two upon each, just to tell what he was, what he writ, when he lived, or when he dy'd. If a word or two more are added upon the chief Offenders; 'tis only as a paper pinned upon the breast, to mark the Enormities for which they suffered; lest the Correction only should be remembered, and the Crime forgotten" (Twickenham 5:8-9). How then did Pope come to reverse himself by substituting for a description of the condition of actual people a question about their condition: What is it to be a person? We sharpen this question when we realize what a great barrier abstraction erects against the kind of reference Pope intended, indeed how closely most theories of satiric correction entail a fantasy of being able to tack words directly onto the world by pinning a paper to a breast. Yet however powerful it is, this particularist fantasy contains the seeds of its own destruction.

When Pope abandons his particularist line, deciding to subtract instead of adding attributes, he leaves us with the following puzzle. Stripping a person of her attributes may be a hostile gesture; yet if one strips away too many attributes, a person ceases to be recognizable as a person; therefore the gesture no longer seems hostile but merely misguided. How, then, did Pope come to think that stripping people of all of their attributes was the best way to refer to the essence, not just of the kind or species, but of the particular persons reading his poems? How, in short, did Pope come to see abstraction as a way to achieve the very intensity of effect that particular references were formerly meant to deliver?

To answer this question we need to understand Pope's successive attempts (corresponding to successive versions of the Dunciad and to movements within each version of the poem) to tightly tether satiric correction to reference. We also need to understand his Lockeian level of frustration with the pull of language toward figure, which imposes itself between the word and the world, deforming reference. Finally, we must try to understand how in the final drafts Pope's desire to have satire connect with its target, or to have meaning coincide with a referent, ends up promoting a situation in which it looks as though the world outside the poem has been annihilated.

II. REFERENCE AND THE DESCRIPTIVE CONTENT OF PROPER NAMES

It is a curious fact that Pope's optimism about proper-name references takes the same form as his pessimism about them. "Great Shades of **, **, **, ** (1742) is visually indistinguishable from many lines in the 1728 Dunciad, whose blanks were filled in by later versions of (and some spurious "keys" to) the poem: "**, **, **, and **, the wretches caught" (Twickenham 5:xx). Pope's Twickenham editors suggest that he was initially anxious about legal recriminations (Twickenham 5:xx), but a well-known loophole in eighteenth-century libel law specified that "innuendo," or "any word the referent for which was not immediately obvious when the word was taken out of context," did not count as evidence of a satirist's libelous intention.(25) At first Pope thought that by naming names he could attain perfectly indexical references without producing any knowledge of those referents: "I would not have the reader too much troubled or anxious, if he cannot decipher them; since when he
shall have found them out, he will probably know no more of the Persons than before” (Twickenham 5:206). In distinguishing between catching the wretches and characterizing them, Pope distinguishes between reference and meaning. Yet I think the 1742 edition imagines the Dunces as fictional characters (“great shades”) because Pope found it impossible to make his references stick. To borrow terminology from a recent account of fictionality in the eighteenth century, it is not that the Dunces are ontological nobodies, although we cannot find that out from reading the Dunciad. Rather, we are increasingly forced to fall back on characterizing them as social or intellectual nobodies while remaining agnostic about their real existence. A reader of all the poem’s versions might find herself witnessing the birth of a fictional mode, as proper names gradually become unstuck from the Dunces’ real selves. (26)

As it happens, modern philosophy has sponsored at least four distinct ventures in proper-name theory, each of which has been committed to figuring out how proper names stick to their referents. They are (chronologically): the no-sense theory (J. S. Mill), sense theories (Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell), identifying (cluster) description theories (John Searle), and rigid designation/historical explanation theories (Saul Kripke, Keith Donellan). All presume the uniqueness of proper names: unlike general names such as “cow” and “jelly,” which designate a plurality or a class, proper names designate only one object. Does this uniqueness entail a special set of rules for reference? Locke thought of general terms as the divergent case requiring explanation and rules; proper names are straightforwardly particular terms fitted to the particularity of things. (27) Yet post-Lockean philosophers have had no such confidence, unanimously finding that meaning is an obstacle to instead of a guarantee of true proper-name references. Thus Mill argues that proper names are necessarily meaningless—words become proper names as soon as they shed their connotations; they stop being proper names as soon as they acquire them again. (28) At the other end of the line, Kripke has argued that proper names are analytically true of their bearers whether or not any related identifying description can be found to be true of them. Thus the name ‘Aristotle’ just refers to the person whose name that was, whether or not it is true that the person was the author of the works of Aristotle or responsible for any of the deeds commonly ascribed to him. (29)

John Searle’s theory is the closest of all to Pope’s practice; we can see the difficulties with Searle’s theory by looking also at the difficulties Pope faces in the Dunciad Variorum. Heir to the empiricist tradition, Searle holds an “identifying description” theory, arguing that proper-name references are fixed through a set of descriptive phrases associated with a name. (30) The name ‘Aristotle’ means that person who fulfills any set of descriptions: the teacher of Alexander, Plato’s top student. We thus have to imagine a name surrounded by a cluster of descriptions as a planet is surrounded by satellites. Any single one of these descriptions could turn out to be untrue, but if the entire set turned out to be untrue or if under historical investigation it comes to be replaced by a different set, ‘Aristotle’ would come to mean the person who performed the set of actions newly associated with his name. The identity of the planet is thus determined by the configuration of its satellites.

Searle’s is the only theory that states that the meaning of a proper name determines its referent (Frege’s states that the meaning of a proper name is identical with the object for which it stands). (31) Yet because such a determination is contingent rather than necessary, it leaves open a significant area for doubt. I single out Searle’s theory because if satire corresponds to any one of these theories, it corresponds to his; understanding this, we have a way of explaining why satire is potentially always general rather than personal. A problem with Searle’s view might be put like this: even when grouped into clusters, identifying descriptions can always fall wide of their mark. One can multiply identifying descriptions to an infinite degree without being sure that one has picked out the correct referent. Finally, even if one nails down all the relevant identifying descriptions of Aristotle and feels confident that the person referred to has a definite extension of those properties, one could always find out that Aristotle was an obscure Venetian nobleman of the fifteenth century. (32) Extension strongly predicts but can never guarantee intention. (33)

Translated into terms of art, Searle’s problem means that one can never be sure one has caught the right wretch; paraphrastic descriptions are exactly that—they speak around the person in question. Boileau shrewdly observes a certain “explicitness” in Horace’s practice of naming his targets: “Horace is not contented with calling people by their names; he seems so afraid they should be mistaken, that he gives us even their sir-names; nay tells us the trade they followed or the employments they exercised’d: ‘We were glad to leave (says he) the town of Fundi of which one Ausidius Luscus was Praetor, but it was not without laughing heartily at the folly of this man, who having been a clerk, took upon him the airs of a senator and a person of quality.’ Could a man be described more precisely?”(34) Horace does indeed describe Ausidius precisely by giving us explicit directions about how to find him if we so desire. Similarly, in Pat Rogers’s vision of the Dunciad, Pope gives us a startlingly accurate street map of London and “fastidiously precise directions” to the homes of hack writers, complete with copious descriptive detail.
substituting for street numbers not yet in use. Yet, Boileau’s final question seems to ask, has this explicitness picked out the poem’s referents or only looked as if it had done so?

This question points us to the Dunciad Variorum, which seems designed to answer two sorts of doubt about reference. The first is straightforwardly the doubt about whom Pope meant to name in the 1728 version of the poem, the one with the names left blank. Pope claimed to be writing the Dunciad Variorum as a key to the earlier poem. Such a key is necessary because authors of spurious keys had written incorrect names into the blanks, and Pope had thus inadvertently taken aim at the wrong targets:

It will be sufficient to say of this Edition, that the reader has here a

touch more correct and compleat copy of the Dunciad, than has

hitherto appeared: I cannot answer but some mistakes may have slipt

into it, but a vast number of others will be prevented, by

the Names

being now not only set at length, but justified by the authorities and

reasons given. I make no doubt, the Author’s own motive to use real

rather than feign’d names, was his care to preserve the Innocent from

any false Applications; whereas in the former editions which had no

more than the Initial letters, he was made by Keys printed here, to hurt

the inoffensive; and (what was worse) to abuse his friends, by an

impression at Dublin. (Twickenham 5:8)

The case would be trivial if the 1728 version had provided no descriptive information about those to whom the blanks referred (other than, say, metrical cues), but, in fact, the blanks were incorrectly filled in despite a high degree of descriptive explicitness. For example, Dullness anoints Tibbald’s head “And lo! her Bird (a monster of a fowl! / Something betwixt a H*** and Owl) Perch’d on his crown!”

In the earlier edition, a note appended to this line reads: “A strange Bird from Switzerland,” suggesting that H*** is John James Heidegger, a Swiss theatrical impresario described as “the most ugly man that ever was formed.” Yet because a Dublin edition had Hungerford (a lawyer and M.P.) for H***, Pope was made to add “a word or two more”: “A strange bird from Switzerland, and not (as some have supposed) the name of an eminent Person, who was a man of parts, and as was said of Petronius, Arbiter Elegantiarum” (Twickenham 5:92).

Pope’s initial note nudges his readers into picking out a name; he presumes that our stock of connotations-in-common is sufficiently predictable that we will supply the right name; yet he can deliver no guarantees. A foreign, independent-minded (or rebelliously disrespectful) group of readers ignore the clues, settling on another referent and setting in motion a train of connotations that becomes a permanent part of the poem’s textual apparatus. The poem thus canonizes its own misreads as connotations are heaped on connotations and two equally plausible referents compete for our attention. Moreover, as Aubrey Williams writes, the Variorum’s notes exert a “continuous dehistoricizing pressure” on any single name, which “tends to attract to itself, to pull in, any suggestive meanings the poet may place in its vicinity.”

Swift envisioned this escalating scenario when he read the 1728 Dunciad. He warned Pope against relying on his readers’ common stock of connotations precisely because they would fail to grasp the poem’s denotative reference; their failure, willful or not, would open the poem to their subversive misreadings: “The notes I could wish to be very large, in what relates to the persons concerned; for I have long observed that twenty miles from London nobody understands hints, initial letters, or town-facts and passages; and in a few years not even those who live in London. I would have the names of those scribblers printed indexically at the beginning or end of the poem, with an account of their works, for the reader to refer to .... I insist, you must have your asterisks filled up with some real names of real Dunces.”

The first doubt the Dunciad Variorum seems meant to answer is whether identifying descriptions deliver the right name; the unsatisfactory answer is that at most, they can nudge us in the direction of supplying it ourselves, and they open the poem to our misreadings. The second doubt is potentially much more serious: whether the name of any Dunce can deliver the person of the Dunce—a doubt, in short, about whether proper names refer at all. By analogy to the first doubt, we ought at most to suppose that names only point us toward the right person, not help us fasten onto him. But if we are correct about the second doubt, the
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consequences for poetry are severe. The existence of the first doubt injures one particular poem, causing it to grow excrescences to cover its bruised spots. But the existence of the second doubt admits the inefficacy of corrective satire, thus nullifying the poem’s purpose. Pope’s fantasy is to pin a paper to the breast of each miscreant. Yet figurative language is such that we may always transfer our interest from the breast to the paper pinned to it, consigning ourselves to the realm of connotation and of general satire. This doubt takes us into the territory of fiction: Does it make any difference to the poem that it satirizes real people as opposed to creating composite portraits or fictional characters?

It is important to recognize that, prior to the most recent historicist turn (of which more in a moment), most twentieth-century criticism of the Dunciad has answered the last question with an emphatic “No!” Some of Pope’s own statements also lead us to think that he would have answered that question negatively, although for reasons of his own. Pope wrote, for example, “Whoever will consider the Unity of the whole design, will be sensible, that the Poem was not made for these Authors, but these Authors for the Poem: And I should judge they were clapp’d in as they rose, fresh and fresh, and chang’d from day to day, in like manner as when the old boughs wither, we thrust new ones into a chimney” (Twickenham 5:205-6). Pope’s comment wittily produces further satire: first, there is nothing distinctive enough in any of the Dunces to individuate them, and second, only a person as touchy and self-absorbed as Colley Cibber would be stupid enough to take personally a set of descriptions originally intended for Lewis Theobald.

This is crucially different from the defense of Pope mounted by twentieth-century formalists that the poem’s connotative pressures overwhelm its denotative ones, that the poem’s Dunces are representations divided from the historical persons who may have borne a striking resemblance to them. (39) Two well-known accounts of Pope’s poetry have argued that proper names are rhetorical abstractions from their referents in order to defend Pope against the charge of literary libel. Both Maynard Mack and William Wimsatt identify Pope’s proper names not with real people but with the figurative heights his poetry is capable of attaining, arguing that people enter the satire only to be whisked up into a free play of connotation. I quote from Wimsatt, who takes these Variorum-like lines from the “Epistle to Arbuthnot”:

Yet ne’er one sprig of laurel graced these ribbalds,
From slashing Bentley down to pidling Tibbalds.

(Lines 163-64)(40)

His comment here is that “the words sprig and piddling play a part too in proving what it means to have a name like that.” (41) Wimsatt makes sense of Pope’s satire by emphasizing the linguistic banishment of real people and his argument seems confirmed by the following lines quoted by Mack to the same effect:

Twas chatter’ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb’ring all,
And Noise, and Norton, Brangling, and Breval,

Dennis and Dissonance

(Twickenham 5:128)

Both Mack and Wimsatt strongly separate meaning (the new connotations liberated by the placement of proper names in a metonymic chain) from reference. Both identify poetry with the former, with the connotative rather than the strictly denotative or referential aspects of his names, a view that frees poetry from the merely personal and local.

I have been outlining a pervasive formalist reading of the poem in which satire is always general because the very nonreferentiality of proper names consigns us to the realm of emblem; that reading needs now to be broken down into different parts and assessed. Everybody on the formalist side of the equation agrees that proper names do not refer to persons outside the poem, and that what is important about them is the range of connotations they evoke. (The neo-empiricist theories of proper-name reference that I canvassed earlier lend tacit support for this formalist view). Yet while one school—roughly Mack, Wimsatt, Aubrey Williams—thinks that meaning is liberated by giving up the fantasy of reference, another thinks that meaning is constrained by giving up reference. Laura Brown, a proponent of the latter view, thinks that proper names in the poem are essentially separate from the persons they represent, and that they attract connotations to themselves; but she also thinks that the poem’s formalism operates at a cost to meaning itself. She writes: “When proper nouns, noises and abstract qualities are listed as if they were objects, nothing can retain its autonomy, and here not only the persons of the dunces but human actions and discourse itself are reified.” (42) Not only does the poem’s formalism produce meaningless noise, but it does so disastrously by imitating the very materiality from which it is abstracted: in making abstract entities look like material ones, the poem’s inside comes to resemble its outside (reified).

If the formalist argument splits between producing meaning and occluding meaning, what about the antiformalist reading of the poem that says that the poem’s context determines its meaning? Support for this reading
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comes directly from the poem’s revision history, especially from Pope’s care about getting the names just right, as though he were fighting language’s very tendency to slide around a bit. Support comes also from the Variorum apparatus with its cacophony of competing authorities explaining who’s who (as though such explanations are just the response an interpreter ought to have to the poem); and it comes from a long-standing critical truism about the Dunciad, namely that its intense worldly engagements make it a difficult poem for readers outside Pope’s literary culture to interpret. This truism still circulates in the work of historically minded critics, who nevertheless cite Swift’s complaint and other contemporary comments that strongly suggest that the poem was difficult for readers inside Pope’s literary culture as well. My own view is that Swift’s comment is symptomatic of the way readers have responded to the Dunciad since its publication: the poem tempts us to think there is a further inner circle to which someone else must have privileged access; interpretation is thus an activity that someone else out there, possessing a key, must be practicing (as Pope wrote in the advertisement of the Dunciad Variorum, “The reader cannot but derive one pleasure from the very Obscurity of the persons it treats of, that it partakes of the nature of a Secret, which most people love to be let into, tho’ the Men or the Things be ever so inconsiderable or trivial” [Twickenham 5:8]). This last thought depends on the further presumption that since this is a poem, there must be a way to interpret it; in a historicist climate, one temptation will be to think that the best way to figure out what a poem means is to research its referents. (43)

III. REFERENCE AND ANTIREFERENCE

To test these hypotheses, let us examine the portrait of James More Smythe, who plays such an important, albeit passive, role as the main prize awarded in the contests of authors, stationers, and booksellers in book 2 of the Dunciad Variorum. I choose book 2 because the very difficulty of differentiating fictional from literal agents is patently connected to interpretation. Reuben Brower (a polemical formalist) has contrasted book 2 with book 4, finding the former wanting because its very openness to the world outside the poem infects the poem’s agents, who come to seem thin and underrepresented: “The main weakness of Book 2 is obvious. We find it hard to care about the objects of the satire, in part, because they are so inadequately dramatized and so little ‘present’ in the poetry. In part, too, because Pope rarely lifts our attention to the large moral and aesthetic concerns that give dignity and meaning to the satire of Book 4 (where it is worth noting, the characters are more often fictional and symbolic).” (44) Yet what exactly is the source of this porousness? One answer is that the characters in book 2 seem inadequate by some standard of fictionality that we can all recognize, perhaps one that comes into being around the time of book 4 (the early 1740s). A better answer is that the poem’s characters seem inadequate by whatever standard we adopt. If we try to figure out who they are only by looking around inside the poem, we will soon happen upon glaring patches of indeterminacy; if, on the other hand, we slavishly fill in the background of each Dunce, his representedness in the poem mocks our efforts.

James More Smythe is a case in point. The dissipated More Smythe died in 1734 at the age of thirty-two. In the late 1720s, he provoked Pope by borrowing some lines and appending them to his play The Rival Modes. Pope had initially granted and then withheld permission, but More Smythe (Smythe was a name “borrowed” from his maternal grandfather on promise of a legacy) used the lines anyway and boasted about it in print. More Smythe thus becomes a rather complicated allegory of “Plagiary” – plagiarism not simply as a textual matter, but as a matter of various appropriations, including bodily ones. Pope was interested in More Smythe as a target, producing a small epigram in the early 1730s and an epitaph for him. (45) The epitaph is notable for comically expressing the very angst about satiric reference that began to afflict Pope around this period:

Here lies what had nor Birth, nor Shape, nor Fame;

No Gentleman! no man! no thing! no name!

Never was dashed out, at one lucky hit,

A fool, so just a copy of a Wit;

So like, that criticks said and courtiers swore,

A wit it was, and called the phantom, More.

(Twickenham 5:99-101)

More is simultaneously a textual representation (a "copy") and a grotesquely inflated body; insubstantial and fat, his body formed from air and a container for hollow space. Yet whether he is a fat man or a phantom depends on one’s position inside or outside the poem: the starveling bards who heft him up feel not his hollowness but his weight, while to the audience of classifying "criticks" More is merely "a copy of a Wit." Notice that it is these represented readers of the poem who "call" the phantom "More," as though dubbing him with a proper name from their own (imaginary) milieu. The portrait thus represents itself as being the sort of thing that has an outside, while remaining agnostic about the relationship between such apparent
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references and the portrait’s "actual" referents.

To complicate matters, Pope explains in a note how this representation counts as an allegory of Plagiary. He quotes from Aeneid 10 a passage in which Juno seeks to protect Aeneas’s foe Turnus from harm in battle by making him believe that he has conquered Aeneas. Juno thus disguises herself as Aeneas, challenges Turnus to a fight, and allows herself to be chased off. She "made/bodless/shape of spectral mist / In likeness of Aeneas, weird and strange, / Adorned the image with Dardanian arms / And matched the godlike hero’s shield and plume, / Gave unreal words, a voice without a mind, / A way of walking, modeled after his."(46) On the face of it, James More Smythe is the Aeneas figure, Dullness is Juno, and the Booksellers fighting to get a piece of the phantom are Turnus. But this "key" makes interpreting the figure rather difficult—it implies a heroic distance between the real James More Smythe and his phantom equivalent to that between Aeneas and Juno’s impersonation of him. In an action modeled unironically on that of her Latin predecessor, Dullness makes a fictional representation of More Smythe by straightforwardly copying him—outside the poem, More is a wit, inside the poem he is a copy of a wit. But if this is the reason that More counts as an allegory of Plagiary, then every Dunce must also count as an allegory of plagiary, and the phantom More is at once overly generalized and nonsensical (how do we account for the overall theme of the portrait, which seems to be the strange cubism of his body?). It would make more sense to ignore some of the notes directing us to interpret him as "Plagiary" and instead to follow other notes (predictably those written by the connotation-loving Scriblerus) directing us to interpret him as "stupidity" because his name, More, is derived from the Greek moros. Yet this doesn’t help us out much either, since such punning is little more than name-calling. Far from making sense of the phantom More in formal terms, the connotations of his name provide us with a short stick to beat him with. Even if our sophisticated instincts about language make us skeptical about whether the stick will find its target, we must assume a target outside the poem to be hit. So we scrutinize the apparatus notes for clues, and find the portrait described in terms of a rather elaborate chiasmus: "Our author [was] obliged to represent this gentleman as a Plagiary, or to pass for one himself. His case indeed was like that of a man I have heard of, who as he was sitting in company, perceived his next neighbour had stolen his handkerchief. 'Sir' (said the Thief, finding himself detected) ‘do not expose me, I did it for mere want: be so good but to take it privately out of my pocket again, and say nothing.’ The honest man did so, but the other cried out, 'See Gentlemen! what a Thief we have among us! look, he is stealing my handkerchief'” (Twickenham 5:101). As a third "key" to the figure, this story leads us to understand the complicated dance of permission and borrowing as a chiasmus, so that More is not so much impersonating himself as he is impersonating Pope. Pope confirms this by saying that he could either represent More as a plagiarist or let himself be represented as one; either More is a phantom of Pope or Pope is a phantom of More. More seems powerfully attracted to the poetry of chiasmus: the lines of Pope’s that he steals are studded with that particular rhetorical figure. In trading the lines back and forth, Pope and More become locked in a dynamic that imitates the formal technique used in the very text in dispute.

A complicated dialectic of inside and outside, materiality and immateriality, structures More’s portrait, connecting the reader’s position to aspects of the representation that become available according to her interpretive agenda. More changes dimension as we weave in and out of the poem: the farther inside the poem we go, the flatter More becomes, but the more he also becomes two-dimensional (a caricature). The farther outside the poem we go, the more he becomes both a literary imitation and a rich figure for Pope himself. Wherever we choose to locate ourselves (and Pope tantalizingly provides bait for us to snatch at one starting point or another), we are soon forced to confront the uncomfortable fact that our line of sight makes some of More’s features clearer and others more opaque. The very difficulty of hammering out an interpretation has as a theme the interrelation of particular and general: the particular location yields a general sense of the portrait that is then frustrated by stray and insistent particulars. The phantom More is a character who is oddly meaningful with respect to certain attributes and meaningless with respect to others. The peculiarity of this situation is connected with the difficulty of figuring out what genre he belongs to: personifications, allegories, character progresses are determinate with respect to some properties and indeterminate with respect to others (and demand as a minimal requirement of the genre that each of the extant attributes relates to an overall theme). Even characters marked as realistic can be so described, as in this fascinating recent contribution to the way we think about the difference between fictional characters and real persons: “In the case of ‘Sherlock Holmes’ we get an incomplete, possible, non-existent object, some of whose nuclear properties are: being a detective, catching criminals, smoking a pipe, etc. Typically, fictional objects will be incomplete, for the body of literature in question will not determine all of their properties. For example, it is not true that according to the Conan Doyle novels, Holmes had a mole on his left leg, nor is it true that according to those novels he didn’t have a mole on his left leg... he is indeterminate with respect to that property” (emphasis in original).(47) By contrast to Sherlock Holmes’s mole, the phantom More is tantalizingly marked as a real person, his
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indeterminacy a set of blanks a clef that the poem's readers could fill in by historical investigation. But were we to take that route, we would not get very far in figuring out what the portrait means, since Pope blocks a clef questions off from questions of the portrait's meaning. Crucially, the portrait's meaning resists investigation: the more one tries to investigate it, the less meaningful it becomes (three "keys" and untold numbers of hypotheses later). We must rest content with our initial intuition that the portrait is a mix of meaning and nonsense, of conceptual clarity and incoherence. We must finally be chastened by the realization that what the More portrait means is relative to our shifting perspective (among other things, this explains why the portrait can be shown to provide limited but very real justification for each of the lines of Pope criticism canvassed above, from pure formalism to pure contextualism).

What I am proposing is that with the figure of More, Pope starts to reorient his satiric portraits so that they become objects existing in their own space, their apparent referentiality reduced to just another attribute. This reorientation happens, ineluctably, by stripping particulars of their authoritative grip on the real. Abstraction is the force that strips particulars of authority, creating a defensive shine around its newly won territory. The portrait of More defeats the distinction between reference and meaning by making apparent reference just one more source of meaning and not an especially privileged one. In the New Dunciad, Pope will take this development to its logical conclusion, evacuating his abstract entities of any recognizable pictorialism and thus bearing witness to the final defeat of figure by abstraction.

IV. THE NEW DUNCIAD--PRIVATE MEANING

Berkeley said of Locke's theory of how we frame universals that it is the "tacking together of numberless inconsistencies."(48) This statement could serve as a description of character portraits, such as the phantom More, in the Dunciad Variorum. It could equally serve as a description of the scientific ethos of the New Dunciad, where "numberless inconsistencies" do not shape themselves into recognizable portraits:

Prompt at the call, around the Goddess roll
Broad hats, and hoods, and caps, a sable shoal:
Thick and more thick the black blockade extends,
A hundred head of Aristotle's friends.

(Twickenham 5:360)

In the New Dunciad, particulars, the raw materials acted upon by Dullness's "force inertly strong," do not come from outside the poem; instead, they are recognizable as those rhetorical figures, such as metonymy, long associated with Pope's poetic mastery. In addition to staging a retrospective of his own rhetorical tools, it is significant for two reasons that Pope chooses metonymy to represent the particulars that get swept up into a black blockade. First, metonymy marks a part/ whole relation, thus suggesting that the particular only makes sense in relation to the general. Second, by orienting the part to the whole, Pope voids the power of particulars to individuate: the Dunces are individuated in New Dunciad less than at any other stage in the Dunciad sequence, in part because their attributes (broad hats and caps) do not pick them out personally but negate their difference by pointing directly to their collective essence. The folding inward of particulars has a Newtonian-Lockean analogue. Pope and Warburton include a note explaining that the "force inertly strong" of Dullness that converts "broad hats" into a "black blockade .... alludes to the vis inertiae of matter, which, though it really be no power, is yet the foundation of all qualities and attributes of that sluggish substance" (Twickenham 5:340). A more scientifically tendentious way of putting the same thing is to say that accidents do not signify essences but are identical with them.

The fact that attributes are no longer a means of individuation, or a sign of anything at all, helps explain why the transition from the Dunciad of the 1720s to the Dunciad of the 1740s is a transition from a figurative mode to a nonfigurative mode. Yet abstraction is at the core of both modes. When critics used to think about such things, they argued that abstraction is the favored style of a neoclassical aesthetic while debating back and forth about whether neoclassical abstraction was at heart figurative or nonfigurative. Their arguments presupposed massive developments in the philosophy of language: historically, they argued, a neoclassical aesthetic depended on the Lockean reorientation of the relation between particular and general terms and other similar shifts.(49) So far my argument has confirmed this older style of thought about cultural change: what I have said about Pope does not distinguish his interest in linguistic abstraction from any other applied instance of Locke's insights. But abstraction has many different uses in art, even in a movement as hard to define and defend as neoclassicism. In the New Dunciad, Pope reorients his interest in abstraction from language to the entire material and immaterial realm. No longer is abstraction essentially a linguistic matter, leaking out onto persons from the descriptive connotations of their proper names. Now it is the ruling code of the representational field, the fate of the human and nonhuman physical world at the hands of Dullness.

Dullness achieves two principal effects consistent with
abstraction. First she reduces difference to sameness, "With the same Cement, ever sure to bind/We bring to one dead level ev'ry mind" (Twickenham 5:370). Second, she unhooks words from the world: words refer only to themselves, and the process of making their meaning explicit does not involve searching out their hidden truths but, rather, "explaining a thing till all men doubt it." "Words are man's province, Words we teach alone," and Pope invents a striking image for expounding them: "So spins the silk-worm small its slender store, / And labours till it clouds itself all o'er" (Twickenham 5:369).

On reference: if Dullness reorients objects and persons to a unified field, then it makes no sense to seek objects and persons outside the field. Does this mean that Pope has abandoned his extensive interest in the ways of reference? Certainly the poem's contemporary readers thought so, and expressed what amounts to a longing for its return. The Universal Spectator for April 3, 1742, cites a sampling of town opinion: "The Censure they pass is, that the Satire is too allegorical, and the Characters he has drawn are too conceal'd: That real Names should have been inserted instead of fictitious ones" (Twickenham 5:xxxi). The authors of the Universal Spectator are seeking the usual distribution of figurative and literal across the inside and outside of the poem; they fail to find it because Pope has collapsed them together. Attributes do not point to an essence, just as connotations do not now signal an external referent. Yet this reduction of the poem's "two levels" to one does not by itself produce a conceptually external referent. What is the poem's "fictitious names" does not make the names any easier to interpret. In fact, the contrary holds: the end of reference signals the beginning of new, more intensely private forms of meaning. Now that particulars have lost their status as signs of the real, even the most public of names are reduced to objects of private obsession. A case in point occurs during one of the poem's longest set pieces, a Dunce's lament over his dead carnation CAROLINE, killed by a zealous birder indifferent to the fate of the "rose or carnation" beneath his bird (Twickenham 5:382). The meaning of the Dunce's grief, and of his rival Dunce's murderous carelessness, is the same. The first Dunce carefully husbands his flower, spreading its leaves within a paper collar and "throning it in glass" for better viewing, calling forth the praise of maids and youths. In a blazing public tribute to his queen, he names his flower after her, but as soon as he does so, his flower is killed. His obsessions blind him to the fact of his flower in the natural world, and to alternate perspectives, such as those of nectar-hunting birds. The second Dunce, a scientist who pledges his allegiance to the undisguised "naked fact," kills through absorption in his own particular.

What these Dunces murder through their private obsession is the public name. This tale matches some others scattered throughout the poem as an allegory of the privatization of meaning. Pope, increasingly subject to many of Dullness's other effects, falls victim to this one, too. Some proper names stand out boldly and clearly against the background of the "involuntary throng"--Chesterfield, Atterbury, Murray. We soon realize that Pope floats the names of friends, members of the Walpole opposition, belatedly praising them for their opposition to the "force inertly strong" of Dullness, who blots out distinctions between "true and false in individuals." To be praised is to have failed: in order to be named, a person must already have succumbed to Dullness. Read in light of Pope's private praise for failed public names, the Dunce with his CAROLINE becomes oddly aligned with his author. It seems out of place to celebrate the completion of Pope's intentions in a poem that so profoundly thematizes the "uncreating word"; with the passing of reference, we might find ourselves mourning the passing of meaning as well. The "two levels," however frustrating to some, keep meaning in play by keeping the hope of reference alive.(50)

We nevertheless ought to doubt that Pope became cured of his fantasies of reference, however much it may have looked to his contemporaries as though he grew blindly absorbed in private meaning. Although Colley Cibber, upon getting wind of his hypostatization into king of the Dunces, mocked the existential futility of Pope's gesture ("You seem angry at the rain for wetting you; why then do you go out in it?") (51) nevertheless I have quoted above Pope's letter to Hugh Bethel proclaiming the New Dunciad as a stealth weapon because it is unrecognizable as such. And, in fact, during the 1730s, his period of intensifying political satire, Pope grew more interested in hitting targets in verse, even to the extent of fantasizing about literally chasing them out into the crowd like stones, Pope might have been pleased by the historical survival of his reputation as a poet able to produce material effects on real people. De Quincey wrote: "Pope finds himself unable to resettle the equilibrium in his nervous system until he has taken out his revenge by an extra kicking administered to some old mendicant or vagrant lying in a ditch."(53) But perhaps the pathos of his case is hit better by the poet Thom Gunn reflecting on...
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occasional verse: "Later I had for a while a theory of poetry as 'loot,' a prize grabbed from the outside world and taken permanently into the poet's possession. But of course it isn't taken, it continues out there in the world living its own independent existence, stepping from the tubetrain at a later stop, coolly unaware of all the furor it is causing." (54)

(1.) For reasons that will become clear in this article, I believe we can hazard a comparison between the Dunciad and the structure of metaphor as influentially (and controversially) described by Donald Davidson. The relevant aspect of Davidson's account is his stark distinction between the meaning of a metaphor and its use. What metaphors mean is "what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (p. 245). Metaphors are therefore not ambiguous. Instead of a hidden or secondary meaning that it is the goal of interpretation to make explicit, metaphors contain a "hidden power" (p. 264) that can push us to notice certain states of affairs and can thus accomplish or bring something off for the author in addition to the meaning it communicates (p. 255). Throughout this article I intend my use of the terms 'reference' and 'meaning' to describe a distinction in Pope that loosely corresponds to Davidson's distinction between 'hidden power' and 'meaning'. See "What Metaphors Mean," in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford, 1984).

(2.) Helen Deutsch, Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p. 180. In a chapter called "Disfigured Truth and the Proper Name," Deutsch takes up questions about the epistemological effects of Pope's naming practice in his Horatian imitations. In a wonderful formulation, Deutsch inserts a third term into Pope's conflation of "reform" and "chastise" in his letter to Arbuthnot: "Pope reveals that his task is neither to reform, nor to chastise, but rather to enforce: the concept serves as a middle term which allows the satirist to execute a logical couplet equating the two previous definitions--reform and chastise--between which Arbuthnot had distinguished" (p. 193). Enforcement, she writes, is analogous to Pope's desire to "touch" persons. I agree with Deutsch that "enforcement" is Pope's ideal, but the burden of this article is to show him finally skeptical about attaining it.


(4.) Two spirited cases of special pleading: (1) "My thesis will be that even in these apparently very personal poems, we overlook what is most essential if we overlook the distinction between the historical Alexander Pope and the dramatic Alexander Pope who speaks them." Maynard Mack, "The Muse of Satire," in Collected in Himself. Essays Critical, Biographical, and Bibliographical on Pope and Some of His Contemporaries, ed. Maynard Mack (Newark, N.J., 1982), p. 57. (2) On book 4: "If Pope had written the whole of the Dunciad in a mode of such complexity and such inclusive moral and intellectual implication, he would indeed have produced an ironic 'long poem'... that might rank with Paradise Lost in integrity of vision and design. And there are enough traces of this poem in earlier books to tempt us into believing that he really succeeded." Reuben Brower, Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion (Oxford, 1959), pp. 325-26.


(7.) Dustin Griffin writes: "Opera was already out of fashion when Pope attacked it in the Dunciad, and Walpole already fallen when the four-book version of the poem appeared in 1743. Cibber was in no real way discredited (in the eyes of his contemporaries, anyway) by Pope's attacks on him." See 'Venting Spleen," Essays in Criticism 40 (1990): 130.

(8.) Griffin writes: "Satire--in Greece, Rome, or Augustan England--did not bring down tyrants, or even discredit public figures, any more than it made people reform or laughed foolish fashions off the stage" (ibid.). He proposes that we read satire as expressing complicated psychological attitudes about power: for an individual satirist, satire relieves burdensome feelings of bitterness. Writing the Dunciad may have helped Pope vent his spleen, but he could never have intended that it do so. At most, the poem's therapeutic effect could have provided balm for the sting of repeated verbal failures.

(9.) David Morris writes: "Satire, cut off from its former resources, came to seem almost antipoetic: transitory, local, limited, inessential, and eventually unintelligible" (Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense [Cambridge, Mass., 1984], p. 214). Yet his very helpful discussion of personal satire in late Pope successfully reclaims it from its apparent triviality by linking it both to the traditions of formal verse satire and to pain as a serious dimension of ethical life.

(10.) For a brief but illuminating discussion of the 'building-block' theory of meaning and reference, see...
Donald Davidson, "Reality without Reference," in Inquiries into Truth and Representation (n. 1 above), pp. 219-20. Davidson cites early British empiricists as the clearest exponents of building-block theories.


(13.) Pace Paul de Man, who finds that Locke's examples of general terms are symptoms of an "ethical tension" related to the inescapable conclusion that in condemning figure, Locke must condemn language in general. See "The Epistemology of Metaphor," in Sacks, ed., pp. 19-20.


(15.) Elaborations of the Lockean semiotic by J. S. Mill, Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, John Searle, and criticisms of it by the Anglo-American "physicalists" Saul Kripke, Gareth Evans, and Keith Donellan, suggest that Locke should have been more aggravated than he was by the incommensurability between words that are causally "true of" their bearers and words that are figuratively "true of" their bearers. At the fountainhead of Locke criticism, George Berkeley promoted the idea of a necessary opposition between particular and general by subjecting the mode—abstraction—by which one is supposed to yield to the other to a scorching skepticism in the spirit of Locke's own attacks on figure.


(19.) Brower, p. 332.

(20.) Alexander Pope, The New Dunciad: As it was Found in the Year MDCCXII With the Illustrations of Scriblerus and Notes Variorum (London, 1742), line 537.

(21.) At least this is the hypothesis of W. L. MacDonald, Pope and His Critics: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Personalities (London, 1951), p. 201. MacDonald correctly concludes his discussion of the Dunciad by noting that Warburton seems to have participated in Pope's personal satire when it suited his own needs, and that "apart from advising Pope to add the New Dunciad to the older poem, Warburton made no contribution towards an interpretation of the Dunciad as general satire" (p. 211).


(23.) Correspondence, 4:396 (May 21, 1742).

(24.) Alexander Pope, in Correspondence, 3:419 (July 26, 1734).

(25.) c. R. Kropf, "Libel and Satire in the Eighteenth Century," Eighteenth-Century Studies 8 (1974/75): 159. Kropf gives a succinct account of the literary strategies (including abstract pictorialism and definite descriptions) Augustan authors used to avoid libel laws especially intended to encourage general rather than particular satire. I have never found any evidence that Pope was seriously threatened with a libel suit. Even when libel laws were invoked against the publishers and sellers of Swift's poems, the cases quickly fell apart, as John Fischer's painstaking research has shown. See John I. Fischer, "The Government's Response to Swift's 'An Epistle to a Lady,'" Philological Quarterly 65 (1986): 3359, and "The Legal Response to Swift's 'The Public Spirit of the Whigs,'" in Swift and His Contexts, ed. John I. Fischer et al. (New York, 1989). In light of governmental disinterest, Pope was rather unceremoniously reduced to complaining to Arbuthnot that "To be uncensored and to be obscure is the same thing." Pope, Correspondence, 3:419 (July 26, 1734). Pope never lost hope that he had some practical interest in obscuring the names of the Dunces: he covered himself on his daily walks from Twickenham to Richmond with two pistols and a ferocious-looking Great Dane.

(26.) I am referring to Catherine Gallagher's recent work on fictional discourse in Charlotte Lennox's The Female

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(29.) Saul A. Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), esp. pp. 23-70. Realizing that some appeal to context is useful in determining the referents of proper names (how else could we distinguish among the various Aristotles?), Gareth Evans and Keith Donellan have filled out Kripke’s hypotheses about rigid designation to include a “historical explanation” of the way proper names come to refer to people or objects in the absence of related identifying descriptions. Rather than being true of a bearer because an associated description is true of the bearer, a proper name is linked in a causal, historical chain back to the first person or object who fits its reference. Gareth Evans, “The Causal Theory of Names,” in Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds, ed. Stephen P. Schwartz (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), p. 197.


(31.) For Searle’s explanation of and objection to Frege’s theory of naming, see “Proper Names and Descriptions,” in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1972), pp. 488-89.

(32.) Kripke, p. 27.

(33.) This is consistent with empiricism generally, and, in fact, Searle’s view has been traced historically to the Lockeian semiotic, which posits a metonymic relationship between general terms and their identifying descriptions. Hilary Putnam describes Lockeian reference this way: “On the traditional view, the naming of say, ‘lemon,’ is given by specifying a conjunction of properties. For each of these properties, the statement ‘lemons have the property P’ is an analytic truth; and if [P.sub.1], [P.sub.2],... [P.sub.n] are all of the properties in the conjunction, then ‘anything with all of the properties [P.sub.1]. is a lemon’ is likewise an analytic truth.” Quoted in “Introduction,” in Schwartz, ed., p. 14. Kripke argues forcefully that a statement like “anything with all of the properties [P.sub.1]. is a lemon” is not an analytic truth (Kripke, pp. 74-75).


(36.) See Sherburn’s note to Pope’s letter to the earl of Oxford, June 17, 1728, in Correspondence, 2:502 (n. 22 above).

(37.) Williams (n. 17 above), p. 67.

(38.) Swift to Pope, Correspondence, 2:504-5 (July 16, 1728).

(39.) This article’s narrow focus on representational changes internal to the Dunciad sequence itself has meant that I have not explored the potentially fascinating topic of the poem’s generic affiliations with the scandal narrative.


(43.) Pat Rogers’s writing on the Dunciad presents perhaps the clearest example of roman a clef thinking. He writes: “In 1730 one navigated by given features of the landscape, most of which played an obvious part in the religious, legal, or commercial life of the city .... Similarly, one navigates the satire of Pope, Gay or Swift with the help of these conspicuous directional aids: now become moral landmarks, they carry special associations, broadly sociological or historical—which help to underpin the satire.” Grubstreet: Studies in a Subculture (London, 1972), p. 6.
Abstraction, reference, and the dualism of Pope’s ’Dunciad.’

(44.) Brower (n. 4 above), pp. 332,335.

(45.) I am indebted to Joshua Scodel for bringing these verses to my attention.


(50.) My interpretation of the philosophical tradition of reference, and of Pope’s relation to it, places me in disagreement with a different tradition, one that celebrates poetic language as distinct from reference. Geoffrey Hartman writes: “Naming, like counting, is a strong mode of specification. It disambiguates the relation of sign to signified, making the proper term one end and the thing that is meant the other.” Beyond Formalism (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1970), p. 352.

(51.) Colley Cibber, A Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope (London, 1742), p. 13.

