Alexander Pope (1688-1744)
Excerpts from The Dunciad

TO DR. JONATHAN SWIFT

BOOK I

ARGUMENT
The Proposition, the Invocation, and the Inscription. Then the original of the great
Empire of Dulness, and cause of the continuance thereof. The College of the Goddess in
the city, with her private academy for Poets in particular; the Governors of it, and the
four Cardinal Virtues. Then the poem hastes into the midst of things, presenting her, on
the evening of a Lord Mayor’s day, revolving the long succession of her sons, and the
glories past and to come. She fixes her eye on Bayes, to be the Instrument of that great
event which is the Subject of the poem. He is described pensive among his books,
giving up the Cause, and apprehending the Period of her Empire. After debating
whether to betake himself to the Church, or to Gaming, or to Party-writing, he raises an
altar of proper books, and (making first his solemn prayer and declaration) purposes
thereon to sacrifice all his unsuccessful writings. As the pile is kindled, the Goddess,
beholding the flame from her seat, flies and puts it out, by casting upon it the poem of
Thulé. She forthwith reveals herself to him, transports him to her Temple, unfolds her
Arts, and initiates him into her Mysteries; then announcing the death of Eusden, the
Poet Laureate, anoints him, carries him to Court, and proclaims him Successor.

The Mighty Mother, and her son who brings
The Smithfield Muses to the ear of Kings,
I sing. Say you, her instruments the great!
Call’d to this work by Dulness, Jove, and Fate;
You by whose care, in vain decried and curst,
Still Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the first;
Say how the Goddess bade Britannia sleep,
And pour’d her Spirit, o’er the land and deep.
In eldest time, ere mortals writ or read,
Ere 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 idiot gave,
Gross as her sire, and as her mother grave;
Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind,
She ruled, in native anarchy, the mind.
Still her old empire to restore she tries,
For, born a Goddess, Dulness never dies.

O thou! whatever title please thine ear,
Dean, Drapier, Bickerstaff, or Gulliver!
Whether thou choose Cervantes’ serious air,
Or laugh and shake in Rabelais’ easy chair,
Or praise the Court, or magnify Mankind,
Or thy griev’d country’s copper chains unbind;
From thy Bœotia tho’ her power retires,
Mourn not, my Swift! at aught our realm requires.
Here pleas’d behold her mighty wings outspread
To hatch a new Saturnian age of Lead.

Close to those walls where Folly holds her throne,
And laughs to think Monroe would take her down,
Where o’er the gates, by his famed father’s hand,
Great Cibber’s brazen, brainless brothers stand;
One cell there is, conceal’d from vulgar eye,
The cave of Poverty and Poetry:
Keen hollow winds howl thro’ the bleak recess,
Emblem of Music caus’d by Emptiness:
Hence bards, like Proteus long in vain tied down,
Escape in monsters, and amaze the town;
Hence Miscellanies spring, the weekly boast
Of Curll’s chaste press, and Lintot’s rubric post;
Hence hymning Tyburn’s elegiac lines;
Hence Journals, Medleys, Merceries, Magazines;
Sepulchral Lies, our holy walls to grace,
And new-year Odes, and all the Grub-street race.

In clouded majesty here Dulness shone,
Four guardian Virtues, round, support her throne:
Fierce champion Fortitude, that knows no fears
Of hisses, blows, or want, or loss of ears:
Calm Temperance, whose blessings those partake,
Who hunger and who thirst for scribbling sake:
Prudence, whose glass presents th’ approaching jail:
Poetic Justice, with her lifted scale,
Where, in nice balance, truth with gold she weighs,
And solid pudding against empty praise.

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.
Here one poor word a hundred clenches makes,
And ductile Dulness new meanders takes;
There 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;
How Time himself stands still at her command,
Realms shift their place, and Ocean turns to land.
Here gay description Egypt glads with showers,
Or gives to Zembla fruits, to Barca flowers;
Glitt’ring with ice here hoary hills are seen,
There painted valleys of eternal green;
In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,
And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow.
All these, and more, the cloud-compelling Queen
Beholds thro’ fogs that magnify the scene.
She, tinsel’d o’er in robes of varying hues,
With self-applause her wild creation views;
Sees momentary monsters rise and fall,
And with her own fools-colours gilds them all.
’T was on the day when Thorold, rich and grave,
Like Cimon, triumph’d both on land and wave
(Pomps without guilt, of bloodless swords and maces,
Glad chains, warm furs, broad banners, and broad faces):
Now Night descending, the proud scene was o’er,
But lived in Settle’s numbers one day more.
Now Mayors and Shrieves all hush’d and satiate lay,
Yet eat, in dreams, the custard of the day;
While pensive Poets painful vigils keep,
Sleepless themselves to give their readers sleep.
Much to the mindful Queen the feast recalls
What city swans once sung within the walls;
Much she revolves their arts, their ancient praise,
And sure succession down from Heywood’s days.
She saw with joy the line immortal run,
Each sire imprest and glaring in his son.
So watchful Bruin forms, with plastic care,
Each growing lump, and brings it to a bear.
She saw old Prynne in restless Daniel shine,
And Eusden eke out Blackmore’s endless line;
She saw slow Philips creep like Tate’s poor page,
And all the mighty mad in Dennis rage.
In each she marks her image full exprest,
But chief in Bayes’s monster-breeding breast;
Bayes, form’d by nature stage and town to bless,
And act, and be, a coxcomb with success;
Dulness with transport eyes the lively dunce,
Rememb’ring she herself was Pertness once.
Now (shame to Fortune!) an ill run at play
Blank’d his bold visage, and a thin third day:
Swearing and supperless the hero sate,
Blasphemed his gods the dice, and damn’d his fate;
Then gnaw’d his pen, then dash’d it on the ground,
Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!
Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there,
Yet wrote and flounderd on in mere despair.
Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay,
Much future Ode, and abdicated Play;
Nonsense precipitate, like running lead,
That slipp’d thro’ cracks and zigzags of the head;
All that on folly frenzy could beget,
Fruits of dull heat, and Sooterkins of wit.
Next o’er his books his eyes began to roll,
In pleasing memory of all he stole;
How here he sipp’d, how there he plunder’d snug,
And suck’d all o’er like an industrious bug.
Here lay poor Fletcher’s half-eat scenes, and here
The frippery of crucified Molière;
There hapless Shakspeare, yet of Tibbald sore,
Wish’d he had blotted for himself before.
The rest on outside merit but presume,
Or serve (like other fools) to fill a room;
Such with their shelves as due proportion hold,
Or their fond parents dress’d in red and gold;
Or where the pictures for the page atone,
And Quarles is saved by beauties not his own.
Here swells the shelf with Ogilby the great;
There, stamp’d with arms, Newcastle shines complete:
Here all his suff’ring brotherhood retire,
And ’scape the martyrdom of jakes and fire:
A Gothic library! of Greece and Rome
Well purged, and worthy Settle, Banks, and Broome.

But, high above, more solid Learning shone,
The classics of an age that heard of none;
There Caxton slept, with Wynkyn at his side,
One clasp’d in wood, and one in strong cow-hide;
There, saved by spice, like mummies, many a year,
Dry bodies of Divinity appear:
De Lyra there a dreadful front extends,
And here the groaning shelves Philemon bends.

Of these, twelve volumes, twelve of amplest size,
Redeem’d from tapers and defrauded pies,
Inspired he seizes: these an altar raise;
A hecatomb of pure unsullied lays
That altar crowns; a folio Commonplace
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.

Then he: ‘Great tamer of all human art!
First in my care, and ever at my heart;
Dulness! whose good old cause I yet defend,
With whom my Muse began, with whom shall end,
E’er since Sir Fopling’s periwig was praise,
To the last honours of the Butt and Bays:
O thou! of bus’ness the directing soul
To this our head, like bias to the bowl,
Which, as more pond’rous, made its aim more true,
Obliquely waddling to the mark in view:
Oh! ever gracious to perplex’d mankind,
Still spread a healing mist before the mind;
And, lest we err by Wit’s wild dancing light,
Secure us kindly in our native night.
Or, if to Wit a coxcomb make pretence,
Guard the sure barrier between that and Sense;
Or quite unravel all the reas’ning thread,
And hang some curious cobweb in its stead!

As, forced from wind-guns, lead itself can fly,
And pond’rous slugs cut swiftly thro’ the sky;
As clocks to weight their nimble motion owe,
The wheels above urged by the load below;
Me Emptiness and Dulness could inspire,
And were my elasticity and fire.

Some Dæmon stole my pen (forgive th’ offence),
And once betray’d me into common sense:
Else all my prose and verse were much the same;
This prose on stilts, that poetry fall’n lame.
Did on the stage my fops appear confin’d?
My life gave ampler lessons to mankind.
Did the dead letter unsuccessful prove?
The brisk example never fail’d to move.
Yet sure, had Heav’n decreed to save the state,
Heav’n had decreed these works a longer date.
Could Troy be saved by any single hand,
This gray-goose weapon must have made her stand.
What can I now? my Fletcher cast aside,
Take up the Bible, once my better guide?
Or tread the path by venturous heroes trod,
This box my Thunder, this right hand my God?
Or chair’d at White’s, amidst the doctors sit,
Teach oaths to Gamesters, and to Nobles Wit?
O bidd’st thou rather Party to embrace?
(A friend to party thou, and all her race;
’T is the same rope at diff’rent ends they twist;
To Dulness Ridpath is as dear as Mist;)
Shall I, like Curtius, desp’rate in my zeal,
O’er head and ears plunge for the Commonweal?
Or rob Rome’s ancient geese of all their glories,
And cackling save the monarchy of Tories?
Hold—to the Minister I more incline;
To server his cause, O Queen! is serving thine.
And see! thy very Gazetteers give o’er,
Ev’n Ralph repents, and Henley writes no more.
What then remains? Ourself. Still, still remain
Cibberian forehead, and Cibberian brain;
This brazen brightness to the ‘Squire so dear;
This polish’d hardness that reflects the Peer;
This arch absurd, that wit and fool delights;
This mess, toss’d up of Hockley-hole and White’s;
Where dukes and butchers join to wreath my crown,
At once the Bear and fiddle of the town.
   ‘O born in sin, and forth in folly brought!
Works damn’d or to be damn’d (your father’s fault)!
Go, purified 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.
Ye shall not beg, like gratis-given Bland,
Sent with a pass and vagrant thro’ the land;
Not sail with Ward to ape-and-monkey climes,
Where vile Mundungus trucks for viler rhymes;
Not sulphur-tipt, emblaze an alehouse fire!
Not wrap up oranges to pelt your sire!
O! pass more innocent, in infant state,
To the mild limbo of our Father Tate:
Or peaceably forgot, at once be blest
In Shadwell’s bosom with eternal rest!
Soon to that mass of nonsense to return,
Where things destroy’d are swept to things unborn.’
   With that, a tear (portentous sign of grace!)
Stole from the master of the sev’nfold face;
And thrice he lifted high the Birthday brand,
And thrice he dropt it from his quiv’ring hand;
Then lights the structure with averted eyes:
The rolling smoke involves the sacrifice.
The opening clouds disclose each work by turns,
Now flames the Cid, and now Perolla burns;
Great Cæsar roars and hisses in the fires;
King John in silence modestly expires:
No merit now the dear Nonjuror claims,
Molière’s old stubble in a moment flames.
Tears gush’d again, as from pale Priam’s eyes,
When the last blaze sent Ilion to the skies.
Rous’d by the light, old Dulness heav’d the head,  
Then snatch’d a sheet of Thulé from her bed;  
Sudden she flies, and whelms it o’er the pyre:  
Down sink the flames, and with a hiss expire.

Her ample presence fills up all the place;  
A veil of fogs dilates her awful face:  
Great in her charms! as when on Shrieves and Mayors  
She looks, and breathes herself into their airs.  
She bids him wait her to her sacred dome:  
Well pleas’d he enter’d, and confess’d his home.

So spirits ending their terrestrial race  
Ascend, and recognize their Native Place.  
The clubs of Quidnuncs, or her own Guild-hall:  
Here stood her opium, here she nursed her owls,  
And here she plann’d th’ imperial seat of Fools.

Here to her chosen all her works she shows,  
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:  
How index-learning turns no student pale,  
Yet holds the eel of science by the tail:  
How, with less reading than makes felons scape,  
Less human genius than God gives an ape,  
Small thanks to France, and none to Rome or Greece,  
A past, vamp’d future, old revived, new piece,  
’Twixt Plautus, Fletcher, Shakspeare, and Corneille,  
Can make a Cibber, Tibbald, or Ozell.

The Goddess then o’er his anointed head,  
With mystic words, the sacred opium shed.  
And lo! her bird (a monster of a fowl,  
Something betwixt a heideggre and an owl)  
Perch’d on his crown:—‘All hail! and hail again,  
My son! the promised land expects thy reign.  
Know Eusden thirsts no more for sack or praise;  
He sleeps among the dull of ancient days;  
Safe where no critics damn, no duns molest,  
Where wretched Withers, Ward, and Gildon rest,
And high-born Howard, more majestic sire,
With fool of quality completes the quire.
Thou, Cibber! thou his laurel shalt support;
Folly, my son, has still a Friend at Court.
Lift up your gates, ye princes, see him come!
Sound, sound ye viols, be the cat-call dumb!
Bring, bring the madding Bay, the drunken Vine,
The creeping, dirty, courtly Ivy join.
And thou! his Aid-de-camp, lead on my sons,
Light-arm’d with Points, Antitheses, and Puns.
Let Bawdry, Billingsgate, my daughters dear,
Support his front, and Oaths bring up the rear:
And under his, and under Archer’s wing,
Gaming and Grub-street skulk behind the King.
‘Oh! when shall rise a monarch all our own,
And I, a nursing mother, rock the throne;
‘Twixt Prince and People close the curtain draw,
Shade him from light, and cover him from law;
Fatten the Courtier, starve the learned band,
And suckle Armies, and dry-nurse the land;
Till Senates nod to lullabies divine,
And all be sleep, as at an Ode of thine?’
She ceas’d. Then swells the Chapel-royal throat;
‘God save King Cibber!’ mounts in every note.
Familiar White’s, ‘God save King Colley!’ cries,
‘God save King Colley!’ Drury-lane replies.
To Needham’s quick the voice triumphant rode,
But pious Needham dropt the name of God;
Back to the Devil the last echoes roll,
And ‘Coll!’ each butcher roars at Hockley-hole.
So when Jove’s block descended from on high
(As sings thy great forefather Ogilby),
Loud thunder to its bottom shook the bog,
And the hoarse nation croak’d, ‘God save King Log!’