POPE’S
HORATIAN
POEMS
For his epistles,
say they, are weighty and
powerful; but his bodily presence is
weak, and his speech contemptible.

II COR. 10:10
POPE’S
HORATIAN
POEMS

By

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MEIS DEBETUR
Preface

This book is an attempt to read some eighteenth-century poems; it is much more a learning experiment on my part than any sort of finished criticism. Such value as it may possess seems to me to rest less in the answers it gives than in the questions it asks, less in the questions than in the poems it asks them of.

I am grateful to the editors of ELH for permission to reprint the Fortescue essay, which appeared, in slightly different form, in that journal.

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T.E.M.

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POPE’S
HORATIAN
POEMS
Introduction

All translation I suppose may be reduced to these three heads. | First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another. Thus, or near this manner, was Horace his "Art of Poetry" translated by Ben Jonson. The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered. The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if he now has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases.¹

Despite the fact that Dryden's distinctions are familiar enough to amount almost to cliché, they have only infrequently been applied seriously in any criticism of Pope's Imitations of Horace, where they would seem to be particularly useful.² This is not, I suggest, because of any limitation inherent in the distinctions themselves, but more directly in this case because readers have been unsure of the precise nature of the "words and sense" that Dryden frees the poet to vary and forsake, and all too often because they have been almost completely unaware of what is involved in the "groundwork" on which he is to build.³ Our one thing needful has been, and is, an investigation of the Horace the eighteenth century and Pope saw or thought they saw—it amounts to the same thing—in the satires and epistles. Only in this light can Dryden's remarks start making sense when applied to Pope's poems.
Recent critical studies of Pope have sought to define his poetic accomplishment in terms of a broadened awareness of what the eighteenth century called wit and what we more pretentiously label mythopoeia. We have moved beyond ideas of decorum and form as final explanations of what happens in a Pope poem, beyond an understanding of Pope's artistry as an exercise in laughter and style. That his achievement can be located in wit, we are still agreed; but it now seems clear that the fullest significance of Pope's poetry must be found in that more serious meaning the Augustans attached to wit: the ability to discern and articulate—to "invent" in the classical sense—the fundamental order of the world, of society, of man, and to express that order fittingly in poetry.

The following study concerns itself with the serious ethical and aesthetic content of the Imitations of Horace, with what they say about Pope's view of his world and his art. It tries to discover how Pope used the Horace his culture gave him and to understand the nature of the wit of these poems. It is, quite simply, an investigation of what the Imitations of Horace are about.

1. Preface to the Translation of Ovid's Epistles, in Essays of John Dryden, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, 237; The Poems of John Dryden, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), I, 182. All quotations from Dryden's prose will be taken from Ker; all quotations from his poetry will be taken from Kinsley.

2. In fact, criticism of these poems has tended to be directly antithetical to the spirit of Dryden's remarks; most often the Imitations have been considered from the standpoint of their validity as translations, and praised or condemned, according to the reader's bias, for slavishly following or cavalierly abandoning Horace. Samuel Johnson's was the first major criticism of these poems as a group, and his comments established the tone and basis of most subsequent appraisals: "The Imitations of Horace seem to have been written as relaxations of his genius. This employment became his favorite by its facility; the plan was ready to his hand, and nothing was required but to accommodate as he could the sentiments of an old author to recent facts or familiar images; but what is easy is seldom excellent: such imitations cannot give pleasure to common readers. The man of learning may be sometimes surprised and delighted by an unexpected parallel; but the comparison requires knowledge of the original, which will
likewise often detect strained applications. Between Roman images and English manners there will be an irreconcilable dissimilitude, and the work will be generally uncouth and party-coloured; neither original nor translated, neither ancient nor modern" (Lives of the English Poets, ed. George Birkbeck Hill [3 vols.; Oxford, 1905], III, 278).

3. This has been largely due to critical failure to consider the differences between the twentieth-century and the eighteenth-century view of Horace. Our contemporary critics have tended to see Horace as a fellow spirit, as a "cultivated man of the world," urbane, sophisticated, sensitive, unmarked by a sense of sin—all of which, as I hope the next chapter will show, is far from the eighteenth century's conception of him. An important exception to this attitude is Aubrey Williams' perceptive essay, "Pope and Horace: The Second Epistle of the Second Book," in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature, ed. Carroll Camden (Chicago, 1963), pp. 309–22.