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Pope's "Dunciad" Explained

Pope's Dunciad: A Study of its Meanings by Aubrey L. Williams

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POPE'S "DUNCIAD" EXPLAINED

POPE'S DUNCIAD: A STUDY OF ITS MEANINGS. By Aubrey L. Williams. London. Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1955. Pp. ix-162.

MR. Aubrey L. Williams' book offers the reader a penetrating and exhaustive study of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, a work which, although considered by many modern critics Pope's masterpiece, is today still relatively unknown and little read. It had been a fashion for a long time after Pope's death to relegate Pope and his *Dunciad* to a kind of literary inferno where any critic might with impunity and with general approval belabor both poet and work with all manner of intemperate and uncomplimentary adjectives. Pope's enigmatic personality was subject to much misunderstanding with the generations that came after him, and the deliberately contrived air of mystification with which Pope surrounded the publication of his *Dunciad* did nothing to lessen the hostility of many contemporaries and of numerous subsequent critics. In the Romantic age especially, with its sentimentally humanitarian coloring, Pope's robust satire and hearty lampooning of inferior writers were hardly calculated to enlist enthusiastic approval. To many of these Romantic critics, the *Dunciad* on a merely surface level seemed to present no more than the irresponsible attack of a self-righteous bully on hundreds of the hapless victims of his waspish misanthropy. And as the names of these pilloried dunces faded into history, the significance of their duncery as envisioned by Pope was lost sight of and only the surface froth of venom and spite seemed to survive.

Since the 1930's, however, when Dame Edith Sitwell published her sympathetic biography of Alexander Pope, a process of re-examination and revaluation has been going on and critics of our day have in general tended to be more kindly affected towards Pope and his *Dunciad*. The flinty contours of previous Popean caricatures have gradually softened to more humane proportions. Mr. Williams' book is in the vein of this more recent tradition.

Mr. Williams tells us in his preface and introduction that his "main effort has been critical and interpretative" and that his "emphasis has been placed on the positive qualities of the *Dunciad*." Mr. Williams is too honest a critic to close his eyes to Pope's personal shortcomings, or to dismiss with cavalier naïvete the legitimate objections to Pope's satire. Mr. Williams does

contend however that the older critics (intent on the historical milieu of Pope's satire and outraged by the moral strictures of a poet who was himself, in their opinion, not above moral blame) too easily carried over their moral condemnation of Pope's character to their critical evaluation of his art. These older critics were in effect saying that an immoral man cannot write a good poem. Biography and esthetics, art and morality had once again gotten hopelessly tangled up. By putting therefore his emphasis on positive esthetic criticism and by bringing to the fore again values and meanings in the *Dunciad* which have in the past been disregarded or not clearly understood, Mr. Williams is able to discriminate the issues and allow a dispassionate examination of Pope's poetic art. As a result, although Pope's character is not positively vindicated (this was never the writer's intention) the *Dunciad* does emerge in Mr. Williams' analysis as a splendid piece of artistic satire, rich in positive content, imaginatively brilliant, and full of valid poetic values.

Mr. Williams' study is organized on the basis of the four editions or versions of the *Dunciad* put out by Pope in the space of twenty-five years. These four versions are each subjected to very minute critical and interpretative analysis. Words, meanings, analogy, structure, tone, method, conventions, parallels, symbolism, satiric content—all are evaluated in the light of Pope's intentions, of the poetic practice of Pope's age, of the historical circumstances that are relevant to the poem, and of the philosophical, educational, and moral ideas of the Augustan era. By tracing the affinities and relationships of the *Dunciad* with other literary models, particularly with the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*, Mr. Williams is able to show with persuasive logic how Pope gradually diminished the element of personal abuse in the first edition and developed in the later versions the more positive and enduring values of his satire. The reader is made to see how Pope was able to subdue the evidences of personal vindictiveness and direct his creative effort towards the broader, less personal and more elevated attack on the apparent threat posed by the dunces to culture and morals in the climate of the eighteenth century.

Eschewing guess-work and a priori deductions, Mr. Williams bases his conclusions and interpretations on fully documented material, among them the notes and comments of Pope himself. One cannot but admire the thoroughness and sharp insight in Mr. Williams' explication of the text—the fullest that this reviewer has seen. Passages of the *Dunciad* that seemed at first blush so un-

promising are in Mr. Williams' handling made to yield such rich harvests of meaning that one is almost tempted to wonder whether the writer is not reading his conclusions into Pope's work. But full documentation and skill in interpreting the material make it difficult for the reader to withhold his nod of approbation. Previous acquaintance with the text of the *Dunciad* is helpful but not indispensable for a proper appreciation of Mr. Williams' study. Copious citations from the *Dunciad* enable even the beginner to follow and concur with Mr. Williams' many well-argued conclusions.

The author's painstaking effort to provide pertinent context for his interpretations fills many pages of the book with scholarly reconstruction of many phases of the eighteenth-century intellectual life. These interesting sidelights, besides supplying valuable information, help the reader, even at this distance, to arrive at a sympathetic understanding of Pope's high purposes in his decision to satirize so bluntly the literary perversions of his age. This thoroughness of treatment and a lucidly pleasant style combine to make Mr. Williams' book a valuable aid to any student of Pope and of the eighteenth-century generally. And if further commendation is wanted, it might be mentioned in passing that in its original version as a dissertation Mr. Williams' book was awarded the John Addison Porter Prize at Yale University where the author is assistant professor of English.

ANTONIO T. LEETAI

THE HOLY SHROUD

THE SHROUD OF TURIN, By Werner Bulst S.J., translated by Stephen McKenna C.Ss.R. and James J. Galvin C.Cs.R. Bruce. Milwaukee. 1957.

IS the Shroud of Turin the linen cloth in which the body of Our Lord was wrapped when it was laid in the tomb? That is the question that comes up when one undertakes to treat about that ancient linen cloth preserved in Turin, with its two life-sized images of the back and front of a man that was crucified, crowned with thorns and had his right side wounded with a spear.