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# ALEXANDER POPE'S EARTHWORKS

BY JONATHAN KRAMNICK

*Abstract:* The essay examines Alexander Pope's dual role as poet and land artist through his creation of a grotto at Twickenham and his description of his grotto in verse and letters. With a focus on Pope's practical approach to art, it highlights Pope's ecological aesthetics and his ability to create environments using the different media of words and earth.

In 1719, Alexander Pope moved from Chiswick to Twickenham, some ten miles south of London, where he had acquired and combined several houses and turned them into a Palladian style villa seated on the Thames (figure 1). Soon after his move, he leased five neighboring acres of pasture for a garden. That garden would come to include a shell pavilion, an obelisk memorial to his mother, an orangerie, vineyard, and several rows of willows. When leased, however, the land presented an interesting challenge. Between the five acres and the small plot of his villa lay the thoroughfare from Richmond to Hampton Court. Not wanting to dodge traffic, Pope opted to have a tunnel dug from beneath his house to the other side of the road. He then expanded the tunnel in the mid-section where he discovered a stream, declared his passageway a grotto, and extended the whole in the opposite direction to open onto the lawn facing the Thames (figure 2). For more than twenty years, Pope lined his grotto with shells, stones, fossils, looking glass, and other baubles natural and manufactured. His grotto was an ongoing art project. It entered into his correspondence and poetry, his relationship with friends who shipped him rocks and other minerals, and finally his overall reputation as one who cultivates and defines judgments of taste.<sup>1</sup>

This essay considers Pope as an artist working in two media, as the familiar writer of poetry working with language and the less familiar sculptor of land art working with rocks, shells, dirt, light, and water.<sup>2</sup> I'm interested in Pope's efforts to design environments: virtual or real places of created experience in which one might move around or find repose. I'm interested in his using materials



Fig. 1. Peter Andreas Rysbrack, “An Exact Draft and View of Mr. Pope’s House at Twickenham” (1735). By permission of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Borough Art Collection, Orleans House Gallery.

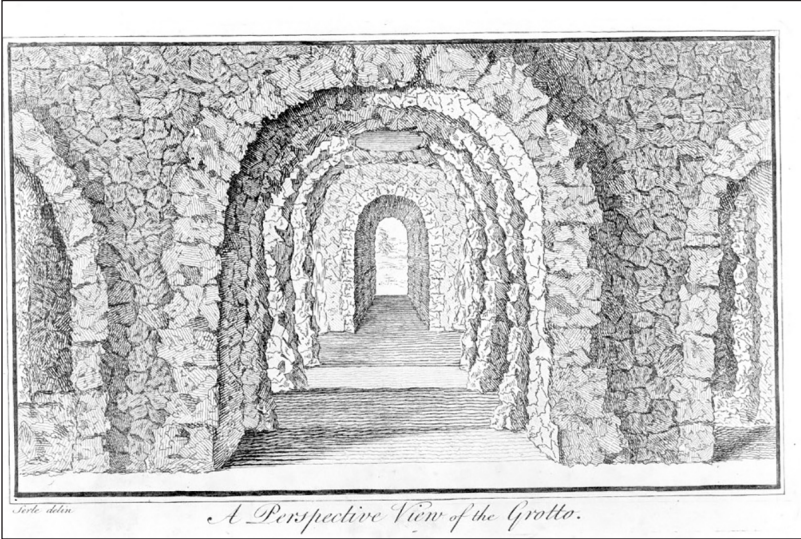


Fig. 2. From John Serle, *A Plan of Mr. Pope’s Garden as it was left at his Death: With a Plan and Perspective View of the Grotto* (1745).

that have texture or color or timbre as well as materials that have rhythm or meaning or syntax. I'm interested finally in the differences between the two media and what it meant for Pope to shift from the one to the other, especially as he attempted to reproduce the experience of his earthworks in written form. I will argue that Pope's ecological aesthetics were premised on movement and on making a world at hand. In doing so, I will take Pope seriously as a theorist of art whose ideas were not only visible in his practice but who made practical activity central to his ideas. For reasons both obvious and interesting, the centrality of practice is easier to see when Pope works with language. His couplets don't so much announce their ideas as enact them; they are what J. Paul Hunter calls "a demonstration of how to read as an exercise in how to think," an exercise that, as Courtney Weiss Smith has put it, "ripples through the medium" of sound and sense, "the material stuff of language."<sup>3</sup> But the same can be said of his work with different kinds of stuff. Pope has much to say about art and nature and perception. He also has much to do with words and rocks and dirt. Across different media, Pope experimented with how aesthetic perception could be understood as a kind of action and works of art experienced as a kind of habitat.

"I have put the last Hand to my works of this kind, in happily finishing the subterraneous Way and Grotto," Pope writes in 1725 to Edward Blount, a friend and fellow Catholic man of letters, of his new, perpetually almost completed project. This was the first appearance of the grotto in his correspondence. In the account that follows, the act of reaching out and making (the putting of his hand) frames and alternates with a more visual and aural register:

I there found a Spring of the clearest Water, which falls in a perpetual Rill, that echoes thro' the Cavern day and night. From the River *Thames*, you see thro' my Arch up a Walk of the Wilderness to a kind of open Temple, wholly composed of shells in the Rustic Manner; and from that distance under the Temple you look down thro' a sloping Arcade of Trees, and the Sails on the river passing suddenly and vanishing, as thro' a Perspective Glass. When you shut the Doors of this Grotto, it becomes on the instant, from a luminous Room, a *Camera obscura*; on the Walls of which all the objects of the River, hills, Woods, and Boats are forming a moving Picture in their visible Radiations: And when you have a mind to light it up, it affords you a very different scene: it is finished with Shells interspersed with Pieces of Looking-glass in angular forms; and in the Ceiling is a Star of the same material, at which when



a Lamp (or an orbicular Figure of thin Alabaster) is hung in the Middle, a thousand pointed Rays glitter and are reflected over the Place. There are connected to this Grotto by a narrower passage two Porches, with Niches and Seats; one toward the River, of smooth Stones, full of light and open; the other toward the Arch of Trees, rough with Shells, Flints, and Iron Ore. The Bottom is paved with simple Pebble, as the adjoining walk up the Wilderness to the Temple is to be Cockle-shells, in the natural Taste, agreeing not ill with the little dripping Murmur, and the Aquatic Idea of the whole place.<sup>4</sup>

As he aims to describe the experience and composition of the grotto, Pope is forced into an intricate ekphrasis. He wants to put into language an encounter with an artwork created in another medium and seated in another location, under a villa and road, between the Thames and his garden. And he wants to angle the ekphrasis so that the new linguistic form makes central the relation between perception and movement. Pope wants Blount to form an image of what it is like to walk around his grotto. He also wants to think about what it means to form an image in the first place, about the conditions and materials and environments of perceptual activity. He wants to do all of this in language that performs a certain modal substitution, giving in the shape and parts of sentences an idea of what it is like to see or touch or hear a work of art not present.

In order to do all this, Pope combines and sifts through several perspectives in what seems to be a set order: first the view from the lawn through the grotto to the garden, then the view from the garden through the grotto to the river, then the view from inside the grotto with the doors shut, then the view from the two porches. Pope moves Blount on a kind of serialized scene taking meant to evoke a switch to sight or sound or touch at various locations in the work. He uses properties of language to substitute for properties of the earth and so create an environment in one medium that sits in for or stands along with an environment in another. The deictic “you” first situates Blount or any other reader inside the grotto as a body located in three-dimensional space, the pronoun gripping onto the shifting context that gives it meaning.<sup>5</sup> Pope then drops the pronoun and turns in demonstrative form to the shape and materials of the grotto. “You” look through the grotto or at the light on its walls, and then “there are” shapes, textures, sounds, and images in agreement with each other and the “natural

taste.” As all this is happening, the “when” modifies circumstance and movement, a sweep through the passageway as you walk and then occasions for different kinds of use, illuminated from within or without, open to the river and garden or closed to both. These linguistic acts of deixis and demonstration finally ensure that the play of light or the movement on the walls or the river have a kind of graspable closeness like the pebbles under one’s feet, the shells at one’s fingers, or the rill in one’s ears.

Pope’s ekphrasis provides an account of a particular perceptual experience and an on-the-fly theory of aesthetic perception alike. The likening of the grotto first to a perspective glass and then a camera obscura links the work to two popular means of imitating or enhancing human vision and two ways of modeling how agents bring the world to perceptual presence. An early kind of telescope, the perspective glass provided a portable and hand-held way to view far-away objects by refracting their image through a mirror-lined tube. Crusoe espied the cannibals on his island through one, and Gulliver reconnoitered Blefesco’s navy through one.<sup>6</sup> The camera obscura, in contrast, provided a stationary means to screen inverted pictures of objects on the wall of a chamber. Both have been taken as emblems for science and modernity, with the camera obscura even standing for what Jonathan Crary calls a “new model of subjectivity” as “isolated, enclosed and autonomous.”<sup>7</sup> Portentous and consequential as they were, however, the devices might simply be viewed as means for getting the world up close while altering its principal substance. Each seems to echo Pope’s own craft of transcoding from one medium to another and one place to another, turning earth to light while moving objects at the distance of the river or hills into the grotto or the sensorium, turning light to words and words to sentences.

Pope’s comments on the camera obscura are especially significant in this regard. Compare his description in the letter to the account of the mind as a camera obscura in Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published some thirty years earlier and very much in Pope’s view as the most widely read and influential work on perception, thinking, and acting of his time. “The understanding,” Locke writes, “is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without: which, would they but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the understanding of a man, in reference to

all objects of sight, and the ideas of them.”<sup>8</sup> Across Locke’s artful litotes lies a difference in motility. The mind is “not unlike” a camera obscura because both project images from the world onto a kind of screen. Were the images inside the camera as stationary as our concepts of worldly things, then the likeness would be even stronger. In slight contrast to this account, Pope takes fond interest in the motion that Locke finds troubling, drawing attention to the movement of the river and hills no less than the boats that pass suddenly and vanish when one looks directly as through a perspective glass. He draws attention also to one’s movement within and across the camera obscura and its connected porches and passageways. In these respects, Pope both depends on and departs from Locke’s epoch-making comparison of perceiving the world to the new technology of projecting its contents. “In bare naked perception,” Locke writes, “the mind is, for the most part, only passive; and what it perceives it cannot avoid perceiving.”<sup>9</sup> Sensory experience begins with being awake and on the receiving end of stimulus. One doesn’t have to move at all. Pope’s attention falls on what comes next. The camera obscura is for him an occasion to think about the activity and experience of a person who moves through an environment at once discovered and created.

One more distinction from Locke is worth our attention here. At the start of the *Essay*, Locke states that his “purpose is to enquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human understanding, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent,” not “to meddle with the physical consideration of the mind.”<sup>10</sup> Such consideration would shift the discussion, he feared, into contentious issues of materialism and out of areas one might know with relative certainty. For Pope to think about how images are made, conversely, is to mull over and meddle continuously with physical considerations. Over the years of putting together his grotto, in fact, Pope remains fascinated with the stuff of his immersive work. In the letter to Blount, his concern is with the shells, looking glass, thin alabaster, and smooth stones that reflect or angle light, coat the floor or stick to the walls. Elsewhere, he focuses more centrally on rocks and minerals, imploring his friends to bring or ship to him samples of spar, quartz, marble, diamond, and much else to line the cave and tunnels. To create a work “like that of nature” and “imitate rather her variety than make ostentation of her riches,” as he wrote to a supporter of the project, Pope made a fine “choice . . . of the materials” themselves.<sup>11</sup> He

joined physical investigation to what was for him the foundational principle of all aesthetics: that art should imitate nature.

As a maxim, the imitation of nature of course ranged widely in Pope's thinking and the period at large. It could mean one write like the ancients or echo an ideal cosmological order or describe events like they occur in the actual world or, as in this case, create works that resemble the surface features of the earth.<sup>12</sup> Only this attempt to imitate nature in its literal substance and variety, however, required one to meddle with the physical composition of nature itself. Pope had in fact been thinking about these matters for some time. Writing in the *Guardian* in 1713, he observed that there is "something in the admirable simplicity of unadorned nature, that spreads over the mind a more noble sort of tranquility, and a loftier sensation of pleasure, than can be raised from the nicer scenes of art."<sup>13</sup> As Joseph Addison had in his *Spectator* series on "the pleasures of the imagination" the previous year, Pope here applies the Lockean picture of sense perception to viewing landscapes and gardens or beholding their representation in paintings or reading their description in words. He is interested in the special kind of pleasure or calm felt in apprehending gardens as much he is in the "rules and provisions" for composing them.<sup>14</sup> This subjective orientation connects Pope's project to aesthetic *philosophy* as it took off from Locke through Burke to Kant, a philosophy that made both evaluative claims about natural or made objects and psychological claims about viewing them.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Pope stands out in this line of thinking because of his attention to the medium and skill involved in creating works of art and eliciting the right kind of response. Despite what he seems to say, his point was not that trees and fields ought to be left alone. The essay was about how to garden, so when he continues that "All art consists in the imitation and study of nature," the idea is to follow such flora closely as you plant and prune.<sup>16</sup> You should avoid topiary at all costs, for example, because mangled nature fails to elicit the calm and pleasant feeling of "all that is beautiful or great."<sup>17</sup> Pope investigates in form and idea how best to use the earth's materials as well as how to acquire an appropriate taste. He examines the craft of shaping as well as the persons apprehending beautiful parterres or great arbors.<sup>18</sup> In Abigail Zitin's terms, he glances at "the shift in scrutiny from the objects of aesthetic experience to its subjects" even as he draws from and returns to the "hands-on activity" of a "practical formalism."<sup>19</sup>

This joining of skill with apprehension thickens Pope's aesthetic theory so that acting and perceiving wrap around each other, the one never far from the other in the creation or experience of artworks. Pope's emphases are distinctive in this respect as well. In Addison's influential appropriation of Locke, aesthetic experience is axiomatically visual and passive. "It is but opening the eye, and the scene enters. The colours paint themselves on the fancy, with very little attention of thought or application of mind in the beholder. We are struck we know not how and immediately assent to the beauty of an object, without ever enquiring into the particular causes and occasions of it."<sup>20</sup> The only activity the subject of aesthetic experience takes on this view is the bare "opening the eye," a slight movement of the body that remains incurious about and uninvolved with the physical makeup of beautiful objects. With the visual anchor thus set, Addison encourages his reader to consider various landscapes at a distance. In contrast, the grotto project and the writings about it encourage us to consider a whole body using all its senses to create and experience a world in reach or under foot. Pope designed the grotto so that if one moved one's head in a certain way the light played off the walls just so, or if one walked or sat in another way the rocks felt rough or smooth. He designed the grotto moreover within and in view of the tight constraints of its location at Twickenham, both natural features of the earth's surface like a river and lawn and built features like a road and garden. Movement on the river or the varying conditions of weather altered not only the experience of the work, but what the work *was* at any moment. The aesthetic was local and dynamic: a moving body enveloped in an artwork; an artwork integrated into an environment. The medium just was not Pope's familiar one of language. It was the literal stuff of the earth: rocks, shells, water, light, and dirt; texture, shadow, timbre, and color.

"I have just received a fine cargo of minerals and spars from Penzance," Pope writes in May, 1740 to Ralph Allen, a friend who made his fortune in the postal system and then purchased a set of quarries around Bath.<sup>21</sup> Pope had already made use of some of Allen's yellow Bath stones on the grotto floor and wall, but here is after something shinier. "I would be glad of a few of the Bristol diamonds," he continues, "to match with the finer Cornish diamonds of which Mr. Borlase has sent me a noble quantity and offers more if I draw upon him."<sup>22</sup> The Borlase to whom Pope refers is William Borlase, a naturalist and collector from Cornwall



who later authored several studies of British geology.<sup>23</sup> The next month Pope would write to Borlase himself that the grotto would “admit of more beauties by the glitter of more minerals” and then go on to describe the look and shape of his still-ongoing art project while pleading for more materials to work with. This letter contains his fullest account of the grotto’s late-stage composition and appearance:

I have managed the Roof so as to admit of the larger as well as smaller pendulous [crystals]; the sides are strata of various, beautiful but rude Marbles, between which run the Loads of Metal, East and West, and in the pavement also, the direction of the Grotto happening to lie so. And I have opened the whole into one Room, groin’d above from pillar to pillar (not of a regular Architecture, but like supporters left in a Quarry), by which means there is a fuller light cast into all but the narrow passage (which is cover’d with living and long Mosse), only behind the two large pillars there is a deep recess of dark stone, where two Glasses artfully fix’d reflect the Thames, and almost deceive the eye to that degree as to seem two arches opening to the River on each side, as there is one real in the middle. The little well is very light, ornamented with Stalactites above, and spars and Cornish diamonds on the edges, with a perpetual drip of water into it from pipes above among the icicles. I have cry’d help to some other friends, as I found my want of materials, and have stellified some of the room with Bristol stone of a fine lustre. I am in hopes of some of the red transparent spar from the lead mines, which would vastly vary the colouring. If you will be extravagant, indeed, in sending anything more, I wish it were glittering tho’ not curious; as equally proper in such an imitation of Nature, who is not so profuse as you, tho’ ever most kind to those who cultivate her. As I procure more ores or spars, I go on enriching the crannies and interstices, which, as my marbles are in large pieces, cramp’d fast with iron to the walls, are pretty spacious and unequal, admitting loads and veins of 2, 3, or 4 inches broad, and running up and down thro’ roof, sides, and pavement. The perpendicular fissures I generally fill with spar. I have run into such detail, that I had forgot to tell you this whole grotto makes the communication between my garden and the Thames. I hope I shall live to see you there.<sup>24</sup>

Reading this letter next to the one to Blount, we see the emphasis turn from projected images and the play of light to the surface properties of minerals themselves: how they glitter, stellify, and have luster. Pope wants to describe what material has which perceptual effect and why. Along with this change from luminosity to rocks,

comes one in aesthetic perspective. Both letters emphasize movement, immersion, and dependence upon location. But where the earlier letter placed Blount in the position of a beholder moving from one part of the grotto to another, viewing the contents from within or looking from within to without, now the central figure is Pope himself assembling his earthworks by hand. The letter is a series of actions in the present perfect with the artist as grammatical subject working with the hard stuff of the earth's service and aiming to direct the water and light that flow across it.

Pope writes of creating his grotto from the materials brought to Twickenham and within the constraints of geography and location. The ekphrasis is of materials at the end of a maker's fingers and a work seated between the river and garden: marble with veins angled to match the east/west direction of the cave; a roof groined like a quarry or stellified with Bristol stones; crannies and interstices filled with ore; mirrors placed to fool the eye. The medial shift from rock to words, however, makes it so we feel not what it is like to stand inside and move about the grotto, as a beholder who inhabits it all at once and for the first time, so much as what it is has been like for Pope to build with rocks and create his work over a long haul. Once again, this is a trick of the linguistic medium not the mineral one. The play of grammatical tense and mood allows Borlase (and us) to experience that long haul in a single reading: the having placed some crystal in some location, expanded some passage, or filled some interstice, what in the actual practice would have taken weeks, months, or even years presented at once as still ongoing activity by means of the skilled use of auxiliary verbs. The occasional turn from present perfect to subjunctive just extends the ekphrasis from what the artist has accomplished to what he dreams of, should Borlase and others be so kind as to send along more materials. The difference is that the linguistic medium here acts as something like an artistic sketch, providing in verbal form a multi-sensory experience that does not yet exist.

With the turn from the beholder to the creator as grammatical and perceptual subject comes a kind of heightening of aesthetic self-consciousness. Where the earlier letter had presented its aesthetic theory naively, as an account of the multi-sensory experience of being inside a fully designed environment, now we get a sense of imitated and cultivated nature as an articulated principle guiding the artist's practice. The maxim of adorned nature is (again) a key tenet of Pope's aesthetic theory, set out in, among other works, *An*

*Essay on Criticism* (1711) and especially the *Epistle to Burlington* (1731), where the successful gardener consults the “genius of the place” to bring out and add to the latent properties of a location.<sup>25</sup> There is not much new in Pope’s use of the maxim here. Rather, the idea that Pope has created “An imitation of Nature, who is not so profuse as you, tho’ ever most kind to those who cultivate her” is meant to express the terms on which artistic making can add to the simple nakedness of the world. While the presence of that maxim in the letter to Borlase doesn’t develop the theory much, it does reveal the extent to which Pope wanted the grotto to be judged on its terms, the extent to which, in other words, he considered the grotto to be a work of art carved from the earth’s bounty and subject to a judgment of taste. This aesthetic language is then all the more remarkable in light of the final turn in the passage, where Pope reminds Borlase of the location of the work and imagines him within it at some future date. There he applies the ultimate terms of art’s apprehension to the contingent features of a peculiar environment made into a singular experience. Pope’s work on the grotto is in this respect like Belinda’s “purer blush” in *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) or Stowe’s “willing Woods” and “intending lines” in the *Epistle to Burlington*.<sup>26</sup> It is an imitation of nature that cultivates and adds to the natural bounty by drawing on and remaining within the limits of the environment: whether an east/west direction that happens to lie just so or a communication between a garden and the Thames.

Later that fall, Pope would adjust his ekphrastic description once again, this time into the more formal register of a poem, his “Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham, composed of Marbles, Spars, and Minerals” (1740). An early version of the poem was first included in a letter to Henry St. John, the Viscount of Bolingbroke and then published the following year in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Two years after that, the poem appeared again in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* as well as a separate quarto pamphlet in revised form. It is, of all remarkable things, a sonnet, one of only two examples of the genre in the Pope corpus. This is the version Pope published for the second time in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and in the quarto pamphlet, the final version of the sonnet at his death:

Thou who shalt stop, where Thames’ translucent Wave  
Shines a broad Mirrour thro’ the shadowy Cave;  
Where ling’ring drops from min’ral roofs distil,

And pointed crystals break the sparkling rill;  
 Unpolish'd gems no ray on pride bestow,  
 And latent metals innocently glow;  
 Approach. Great Nature studiously behold!  
 And eye the mine without a wish for gold.  
 Approach; but awful! Lo the Aegerian grot,  
 Where, nobly-pensive, St. John sate and thought;  
 Where British sighs from dying Wyndham stole,  
 And the bright flame was shot thro' Marchmont's soul.  
 Let such, such only, tread this sacred floor,  
 Who dare to love their country, and be poor.<sup>27</sup>

"Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham, composed of Marbles, Spars, and Minerals." The artful ambiguity of the "composed of" in the title plays on a relation between media. The grotto is composed of "marbles, spars, and minerals" and so is the poem, the first in the hard matter of the earth (the marbles, spars, and minerals themselves), the second in nouns that name the earth (the words "marbles, spars, and minerals"). This medial ambiguity underscores the difference between what a poem and an earthworks sculpture are made from and how one goes about interpreting each in language. As we have seen, anytime Pope attempts to describe or interpret what he is doing with the grotto he is forced into ekphrasis. As the art historian Jas Elsner says of his own interpretive practice, he must "conspire to translate the visual and sensual nature of a work of art into a linguistic formulation capable of being voiced in a discursive argument."<sup>28</sup> He must translate the object "from a thing that signifies by volume, shape, visual resonance, texture into one that speaks within the structures of grammar, language, verbal semiotics."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, anytime I attempt to interpret or say anything about Pope's grotto I am forced into a kind of meta-ekphrasis, relying on Pope's own description or drawings as I attempt to reconstruct what it was like to create or move about the artwork.<sup>30</sup> Whenever I attempt to transform the smooth or rough, radiant or dark, properties of dirt, minerals, water, and light into words that have none of these properties, I attempt, again as Elsner puts it, to entice "the non-verbally responsive object into a state where it is both available as ekphrasis and so angled in its new descriptive form as to be appropriate to the specific argument being made."<sup>31</sup> Thus far I have angled the descriptive form so that it concerns matters of perception and aesthetics. As I have done so, however, I have not

been able to use any of the grotto's raw materials. Rocks and light and water are unavailable for quotation in one's sentences. They can only be pointed to at a distance and across a medial threshold.

The situation with the poem is of course different. Because I practice in the same medium as Pope, I may quote the nouns of the title as I may the lines that follow. The poem is available to me in its bare, raw material in a way that the grotto or things of its nature are not. Literary criticism can reach to works like "Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham" because they are composed of words like "marbles, spars, and minerals" spaced on a title, leading to a sonnet with an arresting image of disinterested aesthetic value at the middle. The poem is a parallel work of art to the grotto, in other words, made from the different medium of language with that medium's characteristic properties of sound and meaning. The sonnet shape just divides Pope's signature line, meter, and couplet into two sestets and a final, epigrammatic volta. From the start of his career, Pope had invited readers to compare his couplets to jewels and crystals, and they have done so ever since.<sup>32</sup> In "Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham," the parallel between poem and subject matter in its literal materiality is not so difficult to see. The rhyme and meter form so many "pointed crystals." In addition to this matching of sound and sense, and at one step further remove, the strict limits of the sonnet form seem perhaps to mirror the constraints of location, the fourteen lines as unalterable as the very river and road on either side of the original earthwork. We can at the very least trace an ekphrasis of light and surface in the first sestet, to the embedded beholder at the second, to the recusant protest at the volta.<sup>33</sup> The poem is a kind of verbal environment and so composes an account of perception that progresses from the glowing and sparkling of things to the walking motion across them.

This is Pope working in the medium of language as he had in the medium of rocks, creating an earthworks poem by hand out of assembled words and the pauses between them. The first sestet acts as a kind of room opened to the view of the reader even before the addressee moves close enough to behold its contents. The rhymed front vowels (Thames, trans, shad), traditionally associated with light, illuminate the cavern so the grotto already shines and mirrors on the approach to its entrance.<sup>34</sup> After this modal switch from sound to sight, the second couplet remains closer to its phonemic materials by bringing out the "rill" on liquid consonants, which



like “ling’ring drops from min’ral roofs distill” as so many rhotics on two lines of pentameter. The lines have a kind of liquidity in the essential, material substance from which they are made while the whole entices perceptual engagement: a grotto made from words, words made from sounds, sounds meant as things. Like the earthworks, the poem alters as you move within it, right up to the jarring command to “approach” and then “behold” what is around you.

This language of beholding makes a strong bid for what we would now call aesthetic autotomy: the idea that art should be judged and appreciated on its own merits rather than valued for its utility. One should “eye the mine without a wish for gold” because “eyeing” works of beauty is payment enough. The grotto and the verses upon it have their own intrinsic value—value in the currency of art—which more than compensates for any value measured in exchange. We have no wish for gold, on the view of the poem, because the mere encounter with it leaves us satisfied enough: poor in money yet rich in experience. The idea of aesthetic autonomy here relies of course on a certain sleight of hand. The beautiful object has another life in exchange, which we are able to resist because we are so captive to its charm. It is gold after all, not a meadow or a painting. This specter of economic interest, however, doesn’t so much undermine as secure its aesthetic counterpart. Because we have no desire to possess the gold that would make us rich, we may adopt the posture of a disinterested judgment of taste. Our judgment ought to be based on the pleasure we take in beholding the grotto and the lines that are upon it even as we reflect on the skill and craftsmanship that have gone into their making. In this respect, “Approach. Great Nature studiously behold” has a different meaning depending on the medium in question. The internal audience is to behold the ekphrastic fantasy of the grotto itself, lodged in the glittering cave of the imagination. At the same time, readers are to behold the “great nature” of the very poem. Pope has asked or commanded us to see the marbles, spars, minerals written out in his lines.

The command to see the grotto is really the command to read the poem, to “see” what Pope has written and so to appreciate the artful use of words: behold this, where that happens and where this is. The bid for aesthetic autonomy is, in this way, also and inseparably a bid for the specificity of medium, the material means by which sculptural and literary works are made. The command

remains with and so draws attention to the verbal material with which Pope here works. Pope is in fact fond of using perceptual commands to direct attention to his medium. We will return to this happening in the sonnet, but first, to get a better sense of how such commands function, some well-known lines from *An Essay on Man* (1735):

See, thro' this air, this ocean, and this earth,  
All matter quick, and bursting into birth.  
Above, how high, progressive life may go!  
Around, how wide! how deep extend below!  
Vast chain of being, which from God began,  
Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,  
Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see,  
No glass can reach! from Infinite to thee,  
From thee to Nothing!—On superior pow'rs  
Were we to press, inferior might on ours:  
Or in the full creation leave a void,  
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd:  
From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,  
Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.<sup>35</sup>

Like the sonnet on the grotto, *An Essay on Man* commands its reader to see something, but what, exactly? The first line of the first couplet trails its demonstratives on a list. See this, this, and this. The referents for these words take momentary shape as they fall into pentameter and then fall away. Pope splashes the couplet with terms that seem to include all of physical creation becoming more solid as it proceeds: air, ocean, and earth. All of creation then seems to undergo constant activity, bubbling with a kind of self-generating life and motion. See the earth and cosmos; read what I have written. Pope repeats and quickens the command to see by reading later in the poem when the object of the perceptual command turns from the chain of being to the chain of love:

Look 'round our world; behold the chain of love  
Combining all below and all above.  
See plastic Nature working to this end,  
The single atoms each to other tend,  
Attract, attracted to, the next in place  
Formed and impelled its neighbour to embrace.  
See matter next, with various life endued,  
Press to one centre still, the general good.  
See dying vegetables life sustain,  
See life dissolving vegetate again<sup>36</sup>

See, look, behold, see, see, see, see. What are we asked to view? The two chains show Pope at his most Lucretian, positing a world always going at it on its own. This tiered, percolating world, however, takes shape in words that serve as model and instance. In the first set of lines, Pope's demonstratives gather to themselves "this" air, ocean, and earth by referring to the lines of his poem as part of the cosmos they are in the process of building. Every "this" points to the "matter" of words gathered, created, extended, and put into motion. Pope draws attention to the shape of the lines and makes a claim about everything in the universe. In so pointing, he calls upon the idea of vision and the promise of a panorama only to turn from both, to reveal "what no eye can see,/ no glass can reach." One doesn't see anything; the poem just is a phalanx of agents coming together to form "the general good." At a moment of heightened importance for the ethical design of the poem, in other words, Pope makes explicit what is the case every time he uses the perceptual command, including, in the second set of lines, the frenzied anaphora binding the chain of love. To behold or see or look in the poem is not to use the senses; it is to follow an indexical cue to a verbal pattern.

That pattern does the work of the philosophy. Because he wants to describe a fundamentally hierarchical chain of being, the first command to perceptual action points to an order structured by prepositions: through, above, around, below, from. The words mark out a set of spatial relations held from a point of view while casting these relations as the graded order of the cosmos. Some entities are above or below others in metaphysical priority, and to pass from the one to the other in description is to move *from* one place to another on a gradient of significance. This movement limns the ultimate structure of reality, which then comes into view and disappears as the lines proceed. At perhaps the nodal point of the verse paragraph, we pause on the lapidary figure of a chiasmus with what Pope calls elsewhere the "isthmus" state of man stretched on the line break between "from infinite to thee" and "From thee to nothing." The prepositional structure of the figure doesn't so much reflect that state, however, as bring its syntax into being. Man is between this and that. In slight contrast, when Pope wants to describe the more effervescent chain of love, the pattern turns to verbs and gerunds. The speaker asks us to see or enjoins us to behold or look at vibrant eros in words that express amatory motion, striving to attach and combine or dying to vegetate

across the compact structure of a couplet. Like vision and its newly enhanced technology of the magnifying glass and telescope, this sort of deixis provides a line to the world. Unlike these sensory modalities, it takes you to that world's essential structure and mode of being. Deixis requires no ekphrastic change. It remains within the same medium. The claim of the poem is just that each medium has access to creation that the other lacks. Made from language, Pope's poem is structured like the world, and by writing he has brought that world to view and added more parts to it.<sup>37</sup>

The chiasmus shows Pope writing out the gradient scale of being in the matter that is at hand to him, bringing the isthmus state to presence by means of the skilled use of prepositions and figure. The anaphora and compressed verb constructions do the same. In his hands, metaphysics and ethics take on a kind of shape. We "see" the isthmus along with the chains of being and love by means of a non-optical vision peculiar to the medium. In a much-admired study of Pope, David Morris argued that *An Essay on Man* aims for "verbal dexterity" in an almost literal sense, molding "words so perfectly chosen that they seem not chosen but found."<sup>38</sup> In something of a throwaway line, Morris continued that the poem's way with "aphorism is an early form of minimal art: reduced any further, its content disappears; expanded, it ceases to be aphoristic."<sup>39</sup> My goal in this essay has been to take comparisons like this seriously. How do words function as a medium for Pope? How do minerals and location? I argued earlier that Pope's work with the grotto consisted in the active manipulation of the stuff of the world, a form of immersion and engagement. I also argued that this work was a native or tacit philosophy of perception assuming both movement and proximity. How close does verbal perception hew to this philosophy? Let us return to the sonnet about the grotto. It is important for Pope that bodies inside the actual grotto move to bring the experience to view. The earthwork is meant to be dynamic rather than held from a single point. The grotto of the poem also houses bodies, first the implied poet figure inspired by the Aegerian muse and then the cascade of Tory notables (St. John, Wyndam, and Marchmont) who find shelter inside from the storm of commerce.<sup>40</sup> These bodies, however, don't move very much. They sit pensive and thinking, their recusant stasis seeming to join the argument for aesthetic autonomy with one for patriotic virtue at the very turn of the volta. The Tory figures are poor because they love country more than money, because they love the "sacred

floor” of the grotto for its own sake rather than for what could be gained from its gold and diamonds. They believe in and stand for intrinsic value: the value of art, the value of country.

Pope does not opt for represented action in the sonnet, and yet he captures and emphasizes action all the same. The Tories behold the riches as they sit. At the same time, the addressee stops, then moves to approach and behold; eyes and then approaches again; stands awful and treads. Movement so happens across the sestet/sestet/volta structure. The “stop” of the first line brings the light and liquid until one approach and then another bend in the final couplet to more subjunctive seaming footsteps. On the one hand, there is pensive and disinterested appreciation; on the other, there is a discretely arranged series of commands to view or move closer or walk within parts of the poem. We can sense the tension between the two most vividly perhaps in a couplet Pope added to the poem but did not keep as he turned it from private correspondence to public verse. Examine Pope’s own copy, in his hand, of the changes he intended to make between the first appearance in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and its publication again two years later (figure 3). This is perhaps as close as we can get to the making of the poem as earthwork, with the poet crossing out and adding words as the sculptor might add spar or remove shells. Most of the changes stuck. The “poets” floor of the penultimate line becomes the “sacred” floor at second publication; Marchmont has “British sighs” while the “grot” remains “Aegerian” rather than “inspiring.” Approach and look however at the attempted but never inserted lines between the metals’ innocent glow and the approach to great nature (figure 4). Pope drafts an additional couplet here. “Thou seeist that Island’s Wealth, where only free, / Earth to her Entrails feels not Tyranny.” The new couplet once again asks us to look at the poem as a proxy and surrogate for the grotto. We see the island’s wealth by reading the lines that embody and substitute for it. The earth is free because we appreciate the wealth without wanting to spend it. Our stance remains within a disinterested judgment of taste that opposes tyranny, a condition of freedom that seeps into the very entrails of the glittering earth from which the work is carved. A third “seeing” frozen in revision.

In this respect at least, the couplet fits within the design of both the poem and the earthwork, as one “pointed crystal” added to others and so expanding the idea of the whole. Pope left no record concerning why he decided not to include the couplet in



The first Impression, Edition of a Copy of Verse made  
 by Mr. Pope in the Grotto at Twickenham, amongst others  
 of English Poets, Painters, Sculptors, &c, consisted with  
 this own Hand Writing, South 1746/47  
 Here, where that Spot where Thami's household  
 Shines a broad Minerva thro' the Madrigal  
 Where ling'ring Vespers pour sweetest Notes & soft  
 and pointed Chrystals break the sparkling Rill,  
 unpolish'd Gems as Lay in Pindar's list,  
 And latent Metals increaseably glow,  
 Here rest that Wealth, where none are poor,  
 Approach! great Nature's beauties behold,  
 And see the Mine without a Wisp for Gold:  
 But rather awful this inspiring Grot:  
 Artless and awful as the Egyptian Grot;  
 Here nobly-praize, S.<sup>t</sup> John Late dead thought,  
 Here British Sigs, from dying Wyndham stole,  
 Here held the honest Peas for Marchmont's Peas  
 And the bright Plumes was just <sup>off</sup> Marchmont's Peas.  
 Here ~~Wyndham~~ the last rights for Liberty  
 Let such, such only tread this <sup>second</sup> Rock's Floor  
 Who dare to love their Country, and be poor.

Fig. 3. Manuscript, "Verses on a Grotto at Twickenham," Beinecke Library, Yale University.

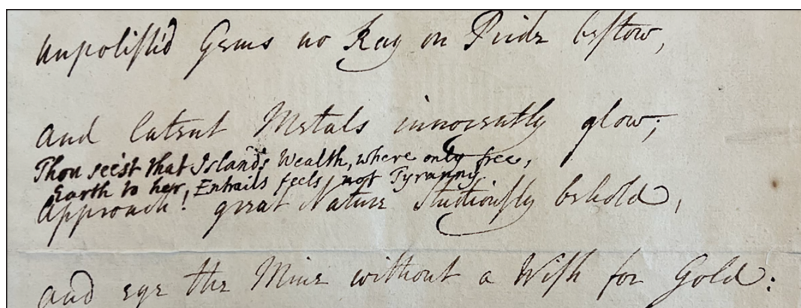


Fig. 4. Detail of manuscript, "Verses on a Grotto at Twickenham," Beinecke Library, Yale University.

any published copies of "Verses." Yet, the decision is not surprising. The manuscript squeezes the couplet between its lines, accentuating the sense in which it is an added bauble—one shiny rock too many perhaps and just as easy to remove as to insert. The couplet itself seems bent to fit, planting a caesura late on the third foot and then spilling the modified "earth" over an awkward enjambment. Were Pope to have left it in, he would have strained or broken the form of the sonnet, needing either to excise a couplet elsewhere for the sake of form or reconcile himself to a fifteenth and sixteenth line that ruptures the opening room.<sup>41</sup> The constraints of couplet and genre are once more like the constraints of location. One must work within the ten beats, the rhyme, and the fourteen lines just as one must work within the Thames, the road, and the angle of light. The manuscript just seems to fix this process in medias res, the couplet wedged in the work, developing its theme of aesthetic disinterest and political refusal while still bearing the marks of an extra rock or bejeweled cornice, something at once burnished for use and easy to discard.

The manuscript draws out a congruence between words and rocks while also providing a slice of Pope's craft. *Put this couplet here, in between these two others. No please don't. The poem looked better before on its own.* Words are like rocks or light and water because they are a compositional medium, elements of a formed whole that meaningfully interact with each other in a verbal or physical syntax. "See" and "behold" point to a group of words with sound or shape or even color akin to the earth itself. Sometimes the effort to seem like or elicit that earth bends in a kind of medial

shift from (for example) light to the suggestion of light by vowel sound. When that happens, the media remain distinct, even as they abut each other in expressive frisson. I have so far traced that bend from words to rocks, water, and light. Pope also and contrarily wanted pieces of the earth to act like words. Consider his habit of attaching place names to rocks as adjectives or proper nouns: “Bristol stone,” “Cornish diamond,” spar from Bath, marble from Plymouth or Penzance. The locutions are frequent enough to stand as a pattern. Their aim is not to elicit the experience of being inside or putting together the grotto. It is the simpler one of linking rocks and stones to places of origin and so indicating what the grotto has brought together. Pope wants to tell his reader that, arranged just so, the earth acts as language. Rocks and gems and minerals may not have lexical meaning in the way that words do, but, like words, they point to areas of Britain. Each rock or gem stands for the region or city of its birth; together, they collocate native minerals in a semi-permanent exhibit, in “this museum” or “study for virtuosi,” as Pope described it to Bolingbroke.<sup>42</sup>

Language and rocks both point, each in its own way. To recognize distinctions between them is to see how Pope works across media to shape environments. I’ve wanted to emphasize this medial component because it reveals the extent to which his verbal and physical environments are crafted forms and created experiences, because it directs our attention to the material with which he worked: words that rhyme or refer; minerals that look or feel. So directed, we understand Pope’s art and his philosophy of art better. I’ve argued that Pope’s writing and earthworks value movement, craft, and the constraints of medium and place. This contribution to the long history of aesthetic theory is not so much in his ideas themselves, I’ve further argued, as the embedding or realization of his ideas in practice. Of course, we have access to that practice in one medium more directly than the other. Pope’s words rhyme or scan or stick together now much as they did in the eighteenth century. In contrast and as he anticipated, the grotto lies in ruins, its gems and shells denuded by generations of the curious, its aperture to the Thames blocked by a school built atop it (figure 5). This loss is easy to lament, but so much was part of the design and illustrates its core aesthetic: an openness to the vagaries of location and sensitivity to the action of others. As always, Pope wanted the project to imitate nature so well that it might add to it. Working deliberately with materials and a location that would



Fig. 5. Pope's Grotto in July 2019, interior view with the opening to the Thames blocked by the Radner School's art studio. Photographed by Cathy Cooper.



Fig. 6. Entrance to Pope's Grotto in July 2019 with rear tunnel extended for the wider road, opening onto a football field. Photographed by Cathy Cooper.



change, with the literal nature of earth and sky and water, change becomes part of what the always-unfinished grotto would be. Such mutable persistence is specific to the medium of literal nature, just as immutable access is specific to the words Pope used to describe the grotto or give it verbal form. Each medium presents skillfully shaped space set for the right kind of movement. Each depends on that action to complete the work and so participate in the craft that is its idea and ideal of beauty.

Pope worked like this in two media. At least in our professional lives, most of us work only in one. Even a write-up of my visit to the grotto ruins would require a turning of earth to words. Writing about rocks is not writing with rocks; writing about words is also writing with words. Literary criticism lives in that strange place of medium coincidence, embedding actual pieces of the work in the work one is making. Like the parts and places of land art, these pieces constrain what one may do with them. They carry with them aspects of meaning and location that come from their first environment. Working to make something from these pieces is no less an art than any other, however, a practice that creates the world to understand and live within it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed history of the grotto's creation, see Anthony Beckles Willson, "Pope's Grotto in Twickenham" *Garden History* 26.1 (1998): 31–59. For the grotto along with the garden, see Mavis Batey, *Alexander Pope: The Poet in the Landscape* (London: Barn Elms, 1999), 55–73; John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting, and Gardening During the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), 58–104; Peter Martin, *Pursuing Innocent Pleasures: The Gardening World of Alexander Pope* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1984), 1–61; and Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Pope 1731–1743* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1979), 3–73.

<sup>2</sup>This essay has no theory of medium, and just uses the term to designate the materials used by an artist to make a work of art. In the present case, these are language (inclusive of sound, syntax, meaning, and much else) and earth (inclusive of water, light, rocks, dirt, and much else). The presence of at least one looking glass only slightly complicates this neat distinction, as glass is manufactured, since the years of the grotto's revision saw Pope increasingly interested in rocks and light alone.

<sup>3</sup>J. Paul Hunter, "Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000), 119; Courtney Weiss Smith, "The Matter of Language; or, What Does 'The Sound Must Seem an Echo to the Sense' Mean?" *ELH* 87.1 (2020), 44, 40.



<sup>4</sup> Alexander Pope, "Pope to Edward Blount," June 2, 1725, in George Sherburn, ed., *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 4 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 1: 296–297. Further references to Pope's correspondence are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> On context sensitivity in deictic as opposed to anaphoric pronouns, see Michael Silverstein, "Deixis and Deducibility in a Wasco-Wishram Passive of Evidence," *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1978), 339–253. On context sensitivity broadly in demonstratives, deictics, and other indexicals, see David Kaplan's canonical "Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics and Epistemology of Demonstratives and other Indexicals," in John Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein, ed., *Themes from Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 481–563.

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 159; Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 38–39. Despite his title, Crary's argument about the Camera Obscura is principally located in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 2.12.17. Further references are to this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Locke, 2.9.1.

<sup>10</sup> Locke, 1.1.2.

<sup>11</sup> Pope, "Pope to William Borlase," 9 March 1740, in *Correspondence*, 4:228.

<sup>12</sup> Lovejoy's classic grouping in outline form of the varied meanings of "imitation of nature" in seventeenth and eighteenth-century aesthetics is as indicative as it is prolix. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, "'Nature' as Aesthetic Norm," *MLN* 42.7 (1927): 444–450.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Guardian* (1713): no. 173, 493–94.

<sup>14</sup> Pope, *The Guardian*, 495.

<sup>15</sup> For recent survey of pre-Kantian, British aesthetic theory, see Thomas Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition, from Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), esp. 11–133.

<sup>16</sup> Pope, *The Guardian*, 497.

<sup>17</sup> Pope, *The Guardian*, 493.

<sup>18</sup> This interest in skill and making—the perspective of the artist who interacts with the material of her work—places Pope in line with sort of practitioner's aesthetics described by Ronald Paulson in *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practice in England 1700–1820* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989) and Abigail Zitin, *Practical Formalism: Abstraction, Technique, and Beauty in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Zitin, 28, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Bond, ed., *The Spectator*, 5 vol. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 3:593. Hereafter abbreviated *S* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>21</sup> Pope, "Pope to Allen," 15 May 1740, in *Correspondence*, 4:239.

<sup>22</sup> Pope, "Pope to Allen," 15 May 1740, in *Correspondence*, 4:239.

<sup>23</sup> See William Borlase, *Observations of the Antiquities Historical and Monuments of the County of Cornwall* (1754), *Observations of the Ancient and Present State of the Islands of Scilly* (1756), and *The Natural History of Cornwall* (1758).

<sup>24</sup> Pope, "Pope to William Borlase," 8 June 1740, in *Correspondence*, 4:245–246.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Pope, *Epistle IV: To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*, in John Butt, ed., *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), line 57.

<sup>26</sup> Pope, *Epistle to Burlington*, lines 63–64; *The Rape of the Lock*, 1:143.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Pope, *Verses on a Grotto by the River Thames at Twickenham, composed of Marbles, Spars, and Minerals*, in *Poems*.

<sup>28</sup> Jas Elsner, “Art History as Ekphrasis,” *Association of Art Historians* 33 (2010), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Elsner, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Or meta-ekphrasis combined with a visit to the ruins (see figure 6) and related discussion.

<sup>31</sup> Elsner, 13.

<sup>32</sup> On the complicated use of jewel imagery in Pope’s poetics see Patricia Spacks, “Image and Method in ‘The Essay on Criticism,’” *PMLA* 85.1 (1970): 97–106. “Jewels, as tiny lights,” Spacks writes, “prepare the way for the idea of light in general,” as both an optical property and aesthetic, ethical value (the lightness of one’s lines and the lightness of one’s actions; neither should be a burden on others) (105).

<sup>33</sup> Mack argues for the presence of two allusions: in the second sestet to Juvenal’s third satire, which pauses at the shrine of Egeria at the start of its long lament about Roman corruption; in the final couplet/volta to the palace of Evander in *The Aeneid*, where Aeneas is asked to scorn riches before entering. The first allusion is undeniable and consistent with the poem’s politics, the second perhaps less so. See Mack, *The Garden and the City*, 72–73.

<sup>34</sup> See Reuven Tsur on vowel color in *What Makes Sound Expressive: The Poetic Mode of Sense Experience* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), 5–7.

<sup>35</sup> Pope, “An Essay on Man,” in *Poems*, (I:233–246).

<sup>36</sup> Pope, “An Essay on Man” (III:7–16).

<sup>37</sup> On the philosophical and political background to Pope’s sense of ordered creation, see Claude Willan, “The Proper Study of Mankind in Pope and Thomson,” *ELH* 84.1 (2017): 63–90.

<sup>38</sup> David Morris, *Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 162.

<sup>39</sup> Morris, 163.

<sup>40</sup> Henry St. John, Viscount of Bolingbroke, former Jacobite and leader of the Tories, Henry Hume Campbell, Third Earl of Marchmont, Scottish MP and member of the opposition to Walpole (ultimately a supporter of the Tories if by legacy not one); and Sir William Wyndham, Tory MP and leader after Bolingbroke’s exile.

<sup>41</sup> In no version of the poem, other than this one in draft, are there any more or less than fourteen lines.

<sup>42</sup> Pope, “Pope to Bolingbroke,” 3 September 1740, in *Letters* v. 4, 262. This description is just before the sonnet.