Edward Rushton and Alexander Pope: poets in opposition?

*Abstract*

On the face of it, Edward Rushton (1756-1814) should have been in the vanguard of a politicised Romanticism, and this should have entailed rejection of the literary forms, values, and diction of the uncrowned poet laureate of the British *ancien regime*, Alexander Pope (1688-1744). In fact, however, Rushton appears to have read Pope more keenly than he read his Romantic contemporaries, and his embedded quotations from the earlier author show not rejection so much as a turn away from irony towards civic urgency. This paper points out some surprising coincidences of idea and feeling between the two poets, and provides a counter-narrative to the Romantic opposition to Pope.

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O

n 29 August, 1807, the Liverpool poet and bookseller Edward Rushton wrote to his friend John Hancock, editor of the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, in response to an enquiry after his sight.

Early in May I submitted to a fifth operation, it was neither so long nor so acute as some of the former, yet it was attended with considerable inflammation. In a few days the inflammation subsided, and gave me a glimpse of that world from which I have been excluded for more than thirty years. I can now wander in the country for half a dozen miles by myself; I can visit the docks and pier, and perceive the moving scenery around me; nay, with the assistance of a glass, I can read thirty or forty pages in a folio edition of Pope, and what is still more interesting to my feelings, I can distinguish the features of my family. The pleasure arising from all these, particularly the latter, you will more readily imagine than I can describe. [Rushton 2014, p. 199]

Rushton is that rare person in the period: someone whose eyesight actually got better, in this case, from blindness to at least a version of actual sight. As well as returning him to the world of the Liverpool marine, in which he had grown up, it returned him to the world of books, which, in the shape of Commodore Anson’s *Voyage round the World* (1748) had inspired his original boyish urge to go to sea in the late 1760s. Blinded by infection caught on a slaving ship, he was not in fact without books: out of his four shillings a week of paternal maintenance, his early biographers tell us, he contrived to spend two or three pence in paying a boy to read to him. His programme of reading in these years (the 1770s), recorded by his friend William Shepherd, indicates something of what was perceived (by a Unitarian clergyman) as a respectable canon at the time: Addison, Steele, Johnson and «the other celebrated English essayists»; voyages, travels and history; «the best poets», whoever you might take these to be; Shakespeare; and Milton, including the political prose [Shepherd 1824, p. xv]. This is the only external testimony to Rushton’s self-directed reading history. Rushton seems to have been wedded to a curiously Augustan version of literature, of a kind we might not expect within the normal paradigms of literary history. A man who, returned painfully to sight in 1807, opens a large-print Pope in something like the same way he looks for the first time at his wife and children, is doing something counter to our sense that by that date the phenomenon we call Romanticism was leading the field; Wordsworth’s substantial collection of *Poems in Two Volumes* appeared in 1807, and is now regarded as one of the landmark texts of that movement; but Rushton did not apparently rush to view that book with his new visual competence.

Of course, Rushton was not in fact limited to the journalism and poetry of almost a decade earlier. We know he read other relatively contemporary writers, because he wrote about them. In 1787 Rushton published a quotation-rich elegy on Thomas Chatterton, who had absconded from duty in that other West-coast slaving port, Bristol, to pursue his own version of the *Distrest Poet* narrative to its fatal conclusion in London in 1770. In 1796, Rushton’s «Elegy» on Burns carefully inhabited the verse-form (and to a more limited extent, the dialect) of Burns’s «To a Mountain Daisy», first published in 1786. As, latterly, a bookseller in Liverpool, up to his death in 1814, Rushton must have been aware of many other books, though we have little direct evidence for what he sold (as opposed to what he published, for which we have advertisements).

Few writers have been so acutely aware of the revolutionary history inside the literary phenomena of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the loss of the American colonies, the French revolution, nationalist insurgencies across Europe, the radical agitation of the 1790s, the rise of Napoleon and the military struggle to defeat him, the effect of the wars on sailors, and the desperate struggle for the abolition of slavery. Rushton lived, wrote, published and promoted publications through decades of fierce political crisis. But of Romanticism and its narratives, Rushton appears to have been totally oblivious. Even though he published, at Liverpool, several undeniably lyrical ballads around the same time that Wordsworth and Coleridge were publishing their supposedly landmark collection at Bristol, his own 1798 moment was the failed Irish rising and the «Mary le More» songs that allegorise it (politically-engaged versions of Wordsworth’s «The Mad Mother» or «The Thorn», from *Lyrical Ballads*, perhaps). He never mentions Coleridge or Wordsworth (though Rushton’s son, also Edward, a barrister, reformist politician and magistrate, met and conversed with Wordsworth in 1832).[[1]](#footnote-1) Rushton’s poem «Toussaint to his Troops», a vigorously-imagined speech of hortatory militarism voiced through the revolutionary rebel leader, displays no cognisance of Wordsworth’s compensatory sonnet to Toussaint Louverture, published in national newspapers in 1803.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though he often writes on exactly the same revolutionary themes as Blake, Rushton appears never to have heard of him. The one Romantic-era poet Rushton definitely knew was Robert Southey, who visited his shop in 1808, acquired a gift copy of the 1806 *Poems* and wrote Rushton a letter offering him a favourable reception in the Lake District, as a fellow radical; Rushton would denounce in bitter terms the ideological treachery of the laureate Southey’s *Carmen Triumphale* of 1814 in one of his last poems, «Lines addressed to Robert Southey», so he was definitely reading, and hating, some contemporary poetry [see Dellarosa 2014, Chapter 4].

But Rushton did not (and does not) easily fit the Romantic construction of literary history, which is a form of highly-selective hindsight, operating on a complex and slow-moving sequence. This is not because Rushton was out in the sticks at Liverpool – though it is fair to say that no-one regarded Liverpool as a «Romantic» city. Rushton was provincial, as indeed were the Lake Poets, but not parochial; he was implicated in networks which ran from Belfast to Manchester and Edinburgh as well as London, and with a surprisingly wide reputation in America, where he was on occasion mistaken for Byron [see Rushton 2014, p. 324]. In fact Pope continued to exert a strong canonical force during the revolutionary decades, even, occasionally, amongst the founding fathers of the breakway American nation, such as Alexander Hamilton, who published imitations of Pope and quoted freely from him [see Chernow 2004, pp. 24, 34, 38, 71). Joseph Warton might have begun the process of demolishing the monument with his *Essay* *on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (1756-1782), but that did not prevent him from publishing a nine-volume edition of Pope’s *Works* in 1797 (the year of Rushton’s *Expostulatory Letter to George Washington*) which displays, in fact, considerable admiration alongside elements of critique. Rushton’s volume of *Poems* came out in 1806, as did another, ten-volume edition of Pope’s *Works*, by the clergyman and sonnet-revivalist W. L. Bowles. This was hostile enough to Pope’s personal and poetic character to provoke, eventually, Byron, whose first poems were published in the same year. In the year of Byron’s own death in 1824, a posthumous edition of Rushton’s poems and prose was compiled by his friends and family and, by another coincidence which is not really a coincidence so much as a confluence of trends, took its place alongside yet another edition of Pope, this time by a figure very close to Rushton, William Roscoe, whose 10-volume edition and relatively benign biography of Pope reminds us that Romanticism had not actually eclipsed Pope at all.

Rushton’s was clearly an engaged body of work, reading and responding to urgent contemporary matters, yet continuing, without regarding it as odd, to engage with poetry from an earlier age. In editing the work for Liverpool University Press, alongside the work of Pope for the Longman Annotated English Poets series, I found myself continually noticing echoes of several earlier poets, and obliged to identify such phrasal coincidences as somewhere on the spectrum between definite allusion and unconscious memorial borrowing. We can tentatively suggest, on this evidence, that Rushton’s «best English poets» were probably Milton, Pope, Thomson, and Gray. On the always-equivocal evidence of apparent borrowing and recollection, it is probable that he had read some poems by Tobias Smollett, Robert Anderson, John Langhorne, and many others. One of his most often-quoted sources, or apparently most often-quoted sources, is, in fact, Pope, the only writer amongst Rushton’s sources not in practical terms committed to a version of the «sublime» which would eventually constitute a main pillar of Romanticism. Taking a cue from Rushton’s own identification of Pope as the dedicated maker of the text to handle and read on the return of his sight, what follows presents an exploration of what the pre-eminent poet of a past Augustanism might have meant to the defiantly outspoken poet of a more revolutionary era.

II

It is at once obvious that the Liverpool-based marine poet had very little in common, biographically, with the self-made literary aristocrat of a Twickenham estate: the Thames was not the Mersey. Rushton «stood like a rampart, and spoke like an oracle», we are told [see Rushton 2014, p. 14]; Pope was something under five feet high, as he drily puts it «not a giant quite» and suffered from curvature of the spine.[[3]](#footnote-3) Pope was a Catholic, staunch in his outsider status if not in particular tenets of faith; Rushton was at the Quaker-Unitarian end of the spectrum, like others in the Roscoe circle. Pope was comfortably off to begin with and perhaps the best-paid author of his time; Rushton struggled to make a living until bookselling (a profession Pope loftily regarded as very low) rescued him. Rushton made it once to London; Pope did not «ramble» to Liverpool, nor ever give any sign he was aware of its existence. Rushton had been round the world; Pope never left the country. Rushton was one of the loudest of the abolitionists; in *Windsor-Forest* (1713), Pope celebrated the treaty of Utrecht, which contained the clause relating to the *asiento des negros*, which promoted the trade in slaves which led to Rushton’s direct witness of the slave trade (and to his blindness). Pope wrote in heroic couplets, for an audience well versed in classical allusion and suggesting equal social footing with aristocrats; Rushton wrote in ballad metre about sailors called Will or Ben or Edward and their sweethearts, Lucy or Kate or Susan. Pope never married; Rushton was the anxious father of five and promoted a vision of small-scale domestic harmony (though his imagery often appears to channel that version of the ghostly family glimpsed by the childless Thomas Gray).[[4]](#footnote-4) Pope’s intellectual circle was that of the Tory wits; Rushton’s, that of the radical debating societies; one was thought of as Jacobite; the other as Jacobin. Rushton has some curmudgeonly humour and some lighter, tavern-style pieces, but his irony is a more direct thing, as when he quotes the libertarian slogans of George Washington back to him in his *Expostulatory Letter* of 1797, to chide him for keeping slaves while talking liberty; it is irony, but not as Pope knows it.

At the same time, it is surprisingly easy to undo this apparently unending binary opposition. At a personal level, Pope, while not blind, had significant sight problems, and he has been considered, in modern terms, as in some sense disabled [Nicolson and Rousseau 1968; Deutsch 1996]. If Pope, using his literary success, side-stepped the normal modes of publication and set up his own printer and publisher, Rushton certainly had privileged access to the same world, not only through his bookshop but through his friendship with the poet-printer John M’Creery, who collaborated on several individual poems in the 1790s and printed Rushton’s 1806 volume. Rushton might be a «labouring-class» poet to modern editors [e.g. Burke 2003] but his first independent poems were published as quarto pamphlets, exactly in the same way as high-status poems (including Pope’s) in the first half of the eighteenth century, and his volume of 1806 appeared without the smear of patronage which attached itself to so many of the earlier exemplars of the phenomenon, from Stephen Duck to Ann Yearsley. If ballads were (at least in theory) demotic, Pope and his Scriberian friends were certainly not above helping themselves to demotic forms, especially when their point was urgent and political, and Gay’s «Black-Ey’d Susan» ballad, on a theme close to Rushton’s «Will Clewline», indicates that they could also write something in that popular line relatively unaffected by the caustic soda of irony.

Indeed, at one unexpected node of historical trends, Rushton and Pope actually appear alongside each other, as writers of hymns, on a single sheet printed by M’Creery around 1798 in aid of the Liverpool Blind School which Rushton had a hand in founding in 1791; the six hymns are all anonymous, but one of them turns out to be Pope’s «The Dying Christian to his Soul» and at least one of the others is ascribed in pencil to Rushton [see Rushton 2014, pp. 271-2]. The two poems are not in the same mode – Rushton’s is a topical fundraiser, Pope’s a hymn of joyous resignation – but it is a striking collocation across the expected divisions of history. Both, however, liked to see themselves as oppositional figures, speaking truth to power, enhancing the cause of what they saw as British «liberty», and by and large Rushton put his name to his key pieces, as Pope did. If Rushton was shot at for his views, Pope went about with pistols and dogs. Each used poetry to vent frustration and challenge, risking arrest and prosecution as they did so. Both might be said to have derived poetic energy from outsider status, to have been in some sense happier in opposition. Each used poetry to celebrate civic virtue; each denounced anyone they considered villainous, and each did so by name, including some flamboyant opposition to the Poets Laureate of their respective ages (Cibber and Southey). Like Pope, if for different reasons, Rushton was «Unplaced, unpensioned, no man’s heir, or slave». [*The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated*, 116]

From another perspective, we might contradict the earlier formulation and say that in one sense the Thames *was* the Mersey, since London was the third slave port of the country, with Bristol and Liverpool, and Pope’s 1713 vision of British commercial expansion actually found fruition in these western ports. Though the extent of Pope’s knowledge of and support of the slave trade ushered in by the Treaty that his poem celebrated is still a matter of debate, there’s at least some evidence that his poem emphasised the right to freedom in a way which actually helped the abolitionist cause begun promoted by poets nearly three quarters of a century later [see e.g. Richardson 2004, chapter 5, and Rogers 2005, pp. 237-9].

II

In 1787 Rushton produced something dramatically out of kilter with polite verse of the late eighteenth century in the shape of a set of four *West-Indian Eclogues* explicitly designed to influence opinion against the whole institution of slavery. It was one of a surprising clutch of such endeavours emerging from the slaving port of Liverpool as indeed from Bristol at more or less the same time. The «Advertisement» to the *Eclogues* concludes «One moral, or a meer well-natur’d deed | Doth all desert in Sciences exceed», a couplet not ascribed, and perhaps not all that well known. It is in fact from one of the dedicatory poems to Pope’s *Works* of 1717 (that by John Sheffield, Duke of Buckinghamshire). Rushton adopts the motto in attempting to claim that the poetry explicitly does what Pope is supposed by Sheffield (in the course of a more gentlemanly salute to his friend’s general moral standing) to do. Rushton had other models for Pastoral, of course, not least the «African» eclogues of Chatterton, and he is clearly engaging also with the colonial Georgic of James Grainger’s *Sugar Cane* (1764); he might have been aware of the possibility that Pope had himself planned a set of ‘American Eclogues’ [Warton 1756, p. 11]. These poems evince textual accumulations of various kinds. Nonetheless, their basic textual signal is fairly clear: even without the oddly recherché quotation from Sheffield, we know that the *Eclogues* are trying to do something with the neoclassical form that might have been held to have reached a sort of perfect terminus with Pope’s *Pastorals* of 1709 [on Rushton’s use of the literary form see further Dellarosa 2014, chapter 5]. They come as a set of four; they are set at Morning, Noon, Evening and Night (though not quite in that order); they are in heroic couplets, a form which Rushton rarely uses elsewhere; and they are roughly of the same order of magnitude as Pope’s. They self-consciously marry a known form with a new landscape (far as Windsor is from Jamaica); they are heavily researched (in Rushton’s case in relation to natural and political history in particular). They are made up of dialogues between men except for one (male) soliloquy; they use repeated refrains; and the final one is about death, though in Rushton’s case this is not a wintry end-of-year death but a vengeful, rebellious bloodbath – a reason for dropping the whole set from the edition of 1806 and only reprinting the first three in the posthumous edition of 1824 (Pope’s set always stands proudly among the early items in his Quarto *Works*).

In effect what we have is the evocation of a potentially paradisal scene of natural history, fatally poisoned in actuality, in which Arcadian shepherds are replaced by the plantation slaves of Jamaica. The effect is the reverse of Scriblerian: this is not a «Newgate Pastoral» endeavour, in which a perverse comedy emerges from the unstable fusion of antipathetic elements, but an attempt to represent the voiceless Africans of the plantations as having the same kind of emotional lives and ties as the conventional lovers of the pastoral world, with the oppressions of love supplanted by the brutal atrocities of the slavery regime. These displaced Africans are every bit as high-minded and articulate as the shepherds of Virgil or Pope; when one of them, Jumba, asks «what now does life supply» [«Eclogue the Second», 63] he is surely responding with a new question to Pope’s easeful «Life can little more supply» overture to the *Essay on Man* [I. 3-4]. There is perhaps a further connection to Pope in Rushton’s use of the keyword «sable» to describe his black characters. This is also a favourite word of Pope’s, perhaps most relevantly here in *Windsor-Forest*, where in the final ecstatic prophecy of a redeemed future, Pope imagines that

… the freed Indians in their native groves

Reap their own fruits, and woo their sable loves [409-10]

As already indicated, the role of that poem in supporting, decrying, pussyfooting round or being pointedly troubled about the *asiento* clause has been a controversial matter in recent Pope scholarship, particularly in relation to this image. Pope is fond of «sable» because of its double nature – at once a heraldic, epic and valuable version of blackness, as here with the «sable loves», and alternately a superbly ironic way of reminding everyone that the

«silver» Thames can also look completely «sable» (with filth) at times [e.g. *The Dunciad*, II. 274]. For Rushton, «sable» is only ever *nobly* black, a means to code dark skin as not a negative aspect of the human but as something inherently high-status. Here in the *Eclogues* are living examples of enslaved Africans nobly attempting to woo and defend their sable loves against the sexual and political rapacity of white slavers. Rushton never uses sable any other way: the potential irony is stripped out by the pressures of history.

In the same year as *West-Indian Eclogues*, Rushton produced *Neglected Genius*, which was often marketed with the *Eclogues*. This was also a protest poem, as the subtitle suggests: «Tributary Stanzas to the Memory of the Unfortunate Chatterton», the protest here being about the failure of everyone, but particularly Horace Walpole, to use their wealth to support the downtrodden writer. This is one of the motley troop of ‘Rowley’s ghost’ poems, though it was, according to an impressed Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the best of them [see Rushton 2014, p. 246]. It now comes across as heavily strident, particularly because its accusations against Walpole (neglect and hypocrisy) came to seem overblown and erroneous quite quickly, and Rushton himself drastically redrafted the verses for his 1806 volume. This is another heavily-researched poem, packed out with prose notes and flamboyantly bedecked with quotations. Amongst those which are not particularly identified are several which appear to be from Pope. When Rushton celebrates Chatterton as «England’s shame and boast» [48] he is recalling Pope’s approving lines on Erasmus as «The glory of the Priesthood, and the shame! » from the *Essay on Criticism* [694], for example. The poem comes with an epigraph: «T’ insult the dead, is cruel and unjust» – ascribed simply to «Odyssey», but *Odyssey* here means Pope’s translation (though that particular line is XXII. 450, in a book drafted by Elijah Fenton). We might indeed also pause on the title itself. Though complaints about the neglect of the talented by the rich were endemic in a period in which traditional patronage began to be supplanted by more straightforward commercial patterns of authorship, the actual phrase «neglected genius» appears to emanate from Pope’s *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* [256-8]:

[…] for they left me Gay;

Left me to see neglected genius bloom,

Neglected die, and tell it on his tomb…

So far, so consonant, but Pope’s poem of course places that tribute amidst a series of sections of satire in which the literary market, and indeed the institutions of patronage and criticism, come to seem a lot less conventional. Rushton keeps his tone of lament and invective constant throughout, purifying Pope’s incorrigible friend Savage as a fit fellow genius for Chatterton’s ghost to consort with in Bristol, where he had died in gaol: a gesture neither Pope nor Samuel Johnson, both of whom did what they could for Savage, could have contemplated without irony. There are however a few signs of alignment towards the satiric world of Pope, and also of Johnson, who might well have agreed with the vision of a world in which unmonied «Genius often droops, while Dulness lords it round» [108], Dulness being one of Pope’s key categories of stigma. Pope could have smiled at Rushton’s sarcastic reading of «these enlightened times, | When Bards are known from Men of Rhimes» [33-4], with its echo of the «man of rhyme» in the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 13. But when Rushton speaks of Bards, he does so in the manner of Gray’s 1757 Ode *The Bard*, not of the «supperless» and comically self-designated «Bard» of Pope’s *Dunciad* [I. 109], and there is none of Pope’s irony about the «man of rhyme» walking leisurely forth from the Mint, on arrest-free Sunday, to cadge a dinner off him. For Rushton, the Bard should be given a dinner by the man who has means.

As in Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes* (and to a lesser extent in Pope), penury holds you back, whereas a wealthy author is automatically admired. Rushton writes

But mark the World, let wealthy Witlings raise

The decorated Lyre, and all applaud the Lays… [83-4]

He is perhaps recalling Pope’s subtly ironic lines from the *Essay on Criticism*:

What woeful stuff this madrigal would be,

In some starved hackney sonneteer, or me?

But let a lord once own the happy lines,

How the wit brightens! how the style refines!

Before his sacred name flies every fault,

And each exalted stanza teems with thought! [420-5]

But Rushton’s poem is *all* about the oppressions of the wealthy, whereas in Pope much of the irony is actually against the «starved hackney sonneteer», who cannot always be aligned with «me», and who is soon to star in *The Dunciad*. Rushton’s sympathies lie more often with the starving hack, a neglected genius without access to politically-withheld funds.

III

These two early poems draw on a wide range of Popean recollection, including the *Essay on Man*, on the face of it an unlikely source for Rushton. To reverse the perspective for a moment, however, and look at the fallout from that single poem of Pope, is to see that Pope’s theodicy offers Rushton a series of moments of poetic torque across the range of his writing. Rushton’s sympathies were loosely Deist, and many of the echoes of Pope one hears derive from the *Essay on Man*, Pope’s least «Catholic» and most ecumenical piece of doctrine, though not much of the poem’s philosophical optimism survives in Rushton’s one indubitable reference to its philosophy: in a letter of 1812, he makes direct allusion to Pope’s «Whatever is, is right», perhaps the most quoted (and controversial) line of the poem [I. 294], in pointing out the uselessness of this kind of advice to one like himself, recently widowed and otherwise bereaved by the loss of a daughter [see Rushton 2014, p. 199].[[5]](#footnote-5) Rushton appears to steer clear of the political and religious thematics of the poem, in a way which could be construed as misdirectional: when he writes, in his «Song, Sung at the celebration of the anniversary of the French Revolution, at Liverpool, July 14, 1791», of liberty,

’Cross the huge snowy alps, to a region once dear,

May the soul-lifting influence be hurl’d;

May its radiance the whole human family cheer,

And may tyrants be banish’d the world …

We might be inclined to recall the hurled/world rhyme in *Essay on Man* [I. 89-90], where God views:

Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,

And now a bubble burst, and now a world …

Or from the same poem [I. 253-4], where threats to a providential system from human aspiration produce a vision of chaos :

Let ruling Angels from their spheres be hurled,   
Being on being wrecked, and world on world …

Rushton, however, takes out the sense of distortion of scale that Pope has in his vision of the extremes that only God can see «equally» without disturbing a cosmic harmony, accepting that political disorder is the necessary consequence. In fact Pope also uses this rhyme almost as a self-parodic referent in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* [87-8], attacking Codrus’s disengaged neutrality: «Pit, box, and gallery in convulsions hurled, | Thou standst unshook amidst a bursting world». Rushton’s is a much more straightforward call to arms, without Pope’s sense of antithesis, balance and (in certain cases) satiric support for necessary order. Similarly, in the densely allusive tributary «Elegy» to Burns, when Rushton writes of Burns watching the «sly, slow, supple mind» of potential patrons minding their own purses when they should be helping him, he is calling on Pope’s satiric vignette about political calculation from *Essay on Man*, IV. 225-6:

No less alike the politic and wise,   
All sly slow things, with circumspective eyes…

But in Rushton’s revamp of the image, Burns exerts a sort of sentimental tax on the reader, quite different from the effect of Pope’s sharp and generalised sneer. When Rushton writes of a recently-deceased friend that «Life’s poor play is over», he may be recalling Macbeth’s «Life’s a poor player» speech, but he is probably doing it through the medium of Pope’s own allusion to the end of life in *Essay on Man*, II. 282: «Life’s poor play is o’er’, exactly the same words, but stripped of Pope’s satiric hauteur and imbued instead with straightforward human sympathy.

IV

Other connections and comparisons suggest themselves across the oeuvre of both poets. Pope and Rushton were both born in commercial environments, the City of London and the Port of Liverpool, and both were carefully anti-mercantile in the majority of their writing, promoting instead a kind of civic philanthropy which transcends self-interest. Here is Rushton seeking an image for the graspingly commercial context in which he has found an unexpected beauty in the shape of a Robin’s song:

Sweet are thy notes, yet minds intent

On life’s prime object – cent. per cent.

Heed not thy soft delicious strain… [«To a Redbreast», 31-3]

We are probably hearing a reminiscence of the line, «one abundant shower of cent per cent» which descends, demonically, on Pope’s Sir Balaam in the *Epistle to Bathurst* [372], though here used with only the faintest irony to demarcate an entire and locally very prominent class, as opposed to Pope’s narrative of headlong self-destruction. Rushton’s lyric tale «The Throstle», in which a miser destroys a bird’s nest to protect his cherries, centres on a character, Gripus the miser, probably recalled from Pope’s use of the name in the *Essay on Man* [IV. 279-80]:

Is yellow dirt the passion of thy life?

Look but on Gripus, or on Gripus’ wife.

«Yellow dirt» is another phrase which crops up in Rushton, for example in his denunciation of Washington’s keeping of slaves while presenting himself as the apostle of political liberty – he accuses Washington of mere avarice in the end, a devotion to «a few thousand pieces of paltry yellow dirt», in the last sentence of the *Expostulatory Letter*. Rushton also speaks, in *The Dismember’d Empire*, 170, of the European enemies of Britain during the American war as «mean, designing knaves, | To craft, and yellow dirt, eternal slaves» [169-70]. The moral principle here constitutes one direct alignment with Pope, especially given that Pope runs the knave/slave rhyme through the second Dialogue of the *Epilogue to the Satires* [205-7], accepting, with a crucial variation of emphasis, his interlocutor’s accusation that he is, for a poet, «strangely proud»:

So proud, I am no Slave:   
So impudent, I own myself no Knave:   
So odd, my Country’s Ruin makes me grave.

The essence of Pope’s poetic position is to be *not* the knave-slave combination; explicitly in Pope, implicitly in Rushton. We could compare also *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated*, 115-6, where Pope has the same rhyme in grounding the ethos of poetry on a similar self-presentation; Rushton pushes the rhyme out, as it were, from a personal self-implication to the world that is his primary target.

This is not, of course, to erase the necessary contrasts between writers who, at the extremes of their potential alignments, could be considered as an equivocal divine-right Tory on the one hand and a republican Whig on the other; sometimes the coincidence of phrasing reveals an opposition of attitude, as in the poems of Rushton known as «The Fire of Liberty» and «The Fire of English Liberty». Here Rushton draws on what looks like Pope’s understanding of the myth of the Norman yoke in *Windsor-Forest*; and Liberty is one key term that they certainly share an interest in, though they are hardly exclusive in doing that. But William III, monarch of the Glorious Revolution, does not lurk under the stone of irony in Rushton’s poems as he does in Pope’s «William» references – he is more straightforwardly a Whiggish superhero of redemptive liberty, something Pope would never have countenanced. Rushton’s *party* politics have little correspondence with Pope’s: what they have in common is a strong sense of oppositional stance, the idea that the poet is better off outside the system than inside it, and that poetry must speak truth to power – not to mention a certain disgust at the mechanisms for getting into parliament, expressed generally by Pope and particularly by Rushton even when Roscoe is surprisingly elected as a Liverpool member in 1806 [see Rushton 2014, p. 197, and Pope’s *Epistle to Bathurst*, 393-4].

The two writers might, however, be said to share a patriarchal concern with the position of women, emerging proto-feminism and revolutionary debate notwithstanding. In Rushton’s case, this is a more or less unvarying contention that women require protection from the rapacity of other men (usually rich and powerful men, which is how it is aligned with his general theme of oppression). Rushton’s poem «The Shrike», an anxious example of this theme, ends with the words «reputation dies! » i.e. when a woman is seduced, which appears to echo Pope’s «At ev’ry word a reputation dies», i.e. in the pernicious world of gossip specifically about women, in *Rape of the Lock* [III. 16]. Rushton’s general position in such poems has its equivalent in Pope’s biographical practice of attempting to intervene in the cases of women from his circle who were in some kind of trouble with men, particular in his early years [Rumbold 1989, chapter 4]. This overt masculinity probably has some compensatory element in each case (Pope’s diminished physical state, Rushton’s blindness considered in symbolic light).

However, the poetic effects of sympathy are complexly laid out, and more so in Pope’s case than Rushton’s. Rushton has, as might be expected, several poems which touch on issues of sight, including one straightforwardly called «Blindness», as well as several other oblique mentions of the matter, such as his reference to the «lynx-like beam» of eyesight enjoyed by the predatory Halcyon or Kingfisher in his poem of that name. The lynx was proverbial, of course, but Rushton could be remembering specifically Pope’s oppositional image of a spectrum of eye-power, from «The mole’s dim curtain, and the lynx’s beam», *Essay on Man*, I. 212; or, indeed, Pope’s self-presentation, already alluded to, in *The First Epistle of the First Book of Horace, Imitated* [49-50]:

Weak though I am of limb, and short of sight,

Far from a lynx, and not a giant quite ….

When Rushton recovers enough sight to read these lines of Pope on his own account, and writes a long poem of gratitude to the surgeon (Benjamin Gibson) who carried out the operations, there is a sense in which his concluding lines hand over the business of imagining feeling in a way presaged by a Popean source:

She who has long her Seaman mourn’d

As laid beneath the waves at rest,

Yet now beholds the bark return’d

And once more folds him to her breast;

Oh! She who thus has been distress’d,

And thus the highest bliss has known,

Oh! She my woes can fancy best,

And judge my transports by her own.

[«Stanzas on the Recovery of Sight», 81-8]

This was in fact a situation that Rushton had imagined several times, e.g. in «The Return», one of his more optimistic marine ballads; but it has here, in this unusually personal poem, the flavour of something else as well:

And sure if fate some future bard shall join

In sad similitude of griefs to mine,

Condemned whole years in absence to deplore,

And image charms he must behold no more;

Such if there be, who loves so long, so well;

Let him our sad, our tender story tell;

The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;

He best shall paint ’em, who shall feel ’em most.

[«Eloisa to Abelard», 359-66]

While Pope buries himself in Eloisa’s image only to ventriloquise a metapoetic fast-forward to his own implied signature, Rushton more simply becomes one of his own heroines as a way of imagining the authentic speech of personal emotion - otherwise a surprisingly rare aspect of Rushton’s work, and another element which distinguishes what he did from mainstream Romanticism.[[6]](#footnote-6) Again, Rushton takes a complex effect in Pope and finds a more direct way to present it to a new public in a new context.

V

The echoes of Pope I am discerning in Rushton are not, I think, just random poetic flotsam, part of the circulating library of public-domain poetic diction. It is also not a matter of a sort of Stephen-Duck-like failure to do more than regurgitate the poorly-digested style of a few poetic masters in an effort to sound like a poet should. I am describing here essentially a process of de-ironisation, of taking away the frame in which ambivalent poetic phrasing is interpreted and making it do a more public, accessible sort of work. Rushton splices the phrasing of Pope with the popular street ballad and the result is the opposite of Scriblerian: not an unstable hybrid but a highly directional utterance. Rushton helps himself to what he wants from the available discourses and canonical vocabularies in order to serve an urgent and focused purpose of political reform.

Rushton betrays no sense that Pope has become controversial, or even that one should admire him «no more than is proper», as Marianne and Willoughby do in chapter X of Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). He appears not to be reading Warton’s *Essay* on Pope, of which the second volume came out in 1782, or Johnson’s *Life* of Pope (1781), which defended the poet prophylactically against the emerging Romantic critique. There is no Bloomian anxiety of influence about Rushton of the kind identified by Robert Griffin in the case of Wordsworth: his Oedipal complex is healthily focused on his actual father, a toe-the-line conservative. He is not troping Pope in stealthily subversive ways, consciously or otherwise, in order to claim priority or redirect the flow of influence through inflections of misreading [Griffin 1995]. There were other ways of continuing, in the Romantic era, to engage with Pope, beyond a choice between ever more diluted Scriblerian imitation and a contest for mastery of occupied poetic ground, and Rushton’s repositioning of some of his predecessor’s images, forms and phrases constitutes a powerful mode of non-appropriation.

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1. *Letters of a Templar*, 1820-50, ed. W. L. Rushton, London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1903, p. 122. For extensive discussion of the formal and ideological links between Rushton and Wordsworth, including connections between Rushton’s ‘Lucy’s Ghost’ and ‘The Thorn’, see Dellarosa 2014, Chapter 2, esp. pp. 71-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rushton’s poem may have been written before Toussaint was captured, as it envisages an approaching battle with the French forces sailing towards St. Domingue, whereas in Wordsworth’s sonnet Toussaint is pictured in a prison cell; for further commentary, including links to ‘The Thorn’, see Dellarosa 2014, Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The First Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated* (1737), 50; quotations from Pope’s poems are from Pope 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Compare stanza 6 of his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* with Rushton’s «Will Clewline», 11-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson had scornfully reviewed the philosophy of Pope’s poem in his *Life* of Pope and had written a sober episode quite close to the experience described by Rushton in his *Rasselas* (1759), chapter XVIII. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rushton’s fondness for pensive female ghosts, in poems such as «Lucy», perhaps owes a little to Eloisa and her proto-Gothic companion of the «Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady» however reinforced by more recent examples in *Lyrical Ballads*. The sense of «deplore», i.e. «lament», that Pope uses here, recurs frequently in Rushton as a standard emotional marker. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)