

An Analysis of Matthew Green's "The Spleen"

"The Spleen" was written by Matthew Green as an epistle to Mr. Cuthbert Jackson and, according to A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry¹, Green did not intend it to be published. Matthew Green uses the concept of 'spleen' from Greek humoral medicine – the black bile produced by the spleen was thought to cause melancholy and depression. In "The Spleen," Green lists many ways to guard against depression, emphasizing a life of moderation and a balance between reason and passion, and his argument is further emphasized by the balance between his organized rhyme scheme (the 'reason' in his writing) and the casual tone and disorganized nature of the poem ('passion').

The main purpose of Green's poem is to enumerate measures to prevent the depression and despondency caused by spleen. Green's method is comparable to another writer of the time, George Cheyne, and both pieces give a series of recommendations on the best way to live a happy life. An example of one of Green's many remedies for depression is shown when he writes, "To cure the mind's wrong bias, spleen, / Some recommend the bowling-green" (89-90). One component of a life of moderation is modest exercise, and thus Green lists this as one of the methods for alleviating melancholy. Green's advice to readers is very similar to that of Cheyne, who writes in The English Malady that "Such a course of life must necessarily beget an ineptitude for exercise...Persons as live in the manner mention'd, are most subject to such complaints" (52). Cheyne states that those who do not exercise are more likely to suffer from what he sees as a major problem in England: melancholy, depression, and associated illnesses. Green's "The Spleen" was a new form of scientific poetry, for the focus on the body and ways of staying healthy had rarely been addressed in poetry before. Also, both "The Spleen" and The English Malady look at socio-cultural causes of disease, an idea that was most likely groundbreaking in eighteenth century medicine. "The Spleen" presents ideas on how to cure melancholy, an attribute

¹ A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry, James Sutherland, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1948.

viewed by both Green and Cheyne as detrimental to a happy and productive existence. Green suggests with his list of cures to spleen that a modest, temperate life is the best way to guard against the pitfalls and provocations of melancholy.

Green uses figurative language near the end of “The Spleen” to illustrate his belief in reason’s ability to restrain passion, and this balance is seen as a key way to maintain control over life. Green likens feelings of passion to melancholy and thus maintains that it is necessary for reason to mediate and stand above human passion. Green writes, “At helm I make my reason sit, / My crew of passions all submit” (816-817). The metaphor compares the author directing his life to the directing of a ship, advising the faculties of reason to take the central command. The poet goes further when he warns “Tho’ pleased to see the dolphins play, / I mind my compass and my way” (826-827). The pleasure associated with some forms of passion (such as enjoyment from observing natural scenes) can have some benefit but should not distract an individual from the course at hand. Instead of allowing himself to get lost in the realm of imagination, Green wishes to use reason to navigate a course through nebulous and ill-defined ideas.

Green uses the rhyme scheme, rhythm, and meter of “The Spleen” to further advance his argument that reason protects an individual from melancholy. Other poets of the early eighteenth century also use these devices to make their poetry more appealing to the reader and allow for a better ordered piece. For example, Alexander Pope, uses rhyming couplets to successfully illustrate his ideas on reason in An Essay on Man. Pope writes “Say first, of God above, or man below, / What can we reason, but from what we know” (1.17-18). Pope uses concise, witty lines to convey his grand idea of the limit of reason and human understanding, and his writing puts a large emphasis on the appearance of order. Green’s “The Spleen” is also comprised of rhyming couplets and, though they have neither the breadth nor the clarity of Pope’s couplets, they do allow for a memorable closed verse form and lend themselves well to Green’s flashes of wit. For example, Green writes that some recommend “hilly walks; all exercise; / Fling but a stone, the giant dies” (91-92). Green is conveying a simple point, yet he does it in a neat and fashionable

way. Even the small exercise of throwing a stone will defeat the melancholy of the spleen, likening the image to that of David and Goliath. The rhythm and meter of “The Spleen” is iambic tetrameter, another device used to enhance the clarity of the argument and help the reader to follow along. Iambic rhythm best follows the patterns of natural speech and the shorter lines of the tetrameter help to keep the tone light. Perhaps by using stylistic characteristics that emphasize the rationality and lucidity of the argument, Green hopes to stress his idea of the importance of reason. The rhyme structure, rhythm, and metrical form of “The Spleen” give clarity to Green’s writing and represent the “reason” in his poem.

Though the rhyming scheme and other elements of style add a sense of order to Green’s writing, the poet moderates this through the overall form and tone of “The Spleen”. The disorganized train of ideas and the self-conscious casualness of Green’s writing serve to underscore his idea of moderation in all realms: he balances what he considers to be his words of reason with his flighty manner of writing. In the first ten lines of “The Spleen”, Green writes:

This motly piece to you I send,
Who always were a faithful friend,
Who, if disputes should happen hence,
Can best explain the author’s sense,
And, anxious for the publick weal,
Do, what I sing, so often feel.

The want of method pray excuse,
Allowing for a vapour’d Muse;

Nor, to a narrow path confin’d,
Hedge in by rules a roving mind.

As evidenced by the first two lines of “The Spleen”, Green initially sent the piece to a friend instead of publishing it for a wide audience, and this may partially explain the informal tone of the poem. The use of the word “motly” (an older version of the word “motley”) implies that Green recognizes his poem as being discordant and disorganized in style. Green apologizes for his manner of writing by saying, “The want of method pray excuse, / Allowing for a vapour’d Muse” (7-8). Green confesses that “The Spleen” is unorganized and rambling in structure, listing

ways to live the contemplative life yet interspersed with side thoughts and tangents. Green argues for his associative manner of writing in the lines: “Nor, to a narrow path confin’d, / Hedge in by rules a roving mind” (9-10). Instead of following a strictly ordered layout, Green’s poem is more a random walk of ideas, unconfined by any structure or logical ordering. Green does not intend to write a strict scientific analysis of the problem of melancholy, as evidenced by his lines, “First know, my friend, I do not mean / To write a treatise on the spleen” (33-34). Instead, Green assumes that readers wish to know “how I do myself demean / In stormy world to live serene” (41-42). Green does not intend “The Spleen” to be a strict scientific analysis of the problem of melancholy but a loose description of how he himself lives and guards against spleen. Green’s apology for his “want of method” at the beginning of “The Spleen” differs from the work of Pope, who in An Essay on Man placed a section describing the scientific design and arguments of his piece before the presentation of his poetry. Pope makes a point of laying out all of his arguments in a coherent, organized fashion, thus emphasizing the use of reason as a tool to aid understanding and help readers to follow his progression of ideas. The difference between Pope and Green’s structure of argumentation is evident: the style of writing in “The Spleen” is more based on “passion” and the whims of the poet than the formal, ordered structure of Pope’s work. The structure and style of argumentation in “The Spleen” counteracts the order imposed by the rhyme scheme, demonstrating Green’s belief that a balance of passion and reason is beneficial both in life and in writing.

In “The Spleen”, Green suggests that a moderate, balanced life—a life not overwhelmed by either reason or passion—is the cure for the illness of melancholy. Green conveys this idea both thematically and through the structure of his poem, for the contrast of Green’s organized rhyme scheme with his casual, unorganized flow of ideas exemplifies the balance of reason and passion that he recommends for life.