‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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4. *Windsor Forest*

Examples: Lines 105, 111–18, 23–24, 327–28

Of all Pope's early poems, *Windsor Forest* (1713) most deliberately pursues the Virgilian sequence of *Pastorals*—artfully conventional nature poems—leading to *Georgics*—complex poems about labour in the contemporary countryside elevated by mythical and historical references. Virgil's *Georgics* concludes with a recollection of his youthful dallying with the arts of peaceful rural life, a time when shepherds sang under the shades of the spreading beech tree. Virgil here quotes the opening line of his first eclogue, 'Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi' [Tityrus, you lie under the shade of a spreading beech]. Pope imitates Virgil's textual trick by making the final line in *Windsor Forest*, 'First in these fields I sung the sylvan strains', a quotation similar to his opening line of 'Spring': 'First in these fields I try the sylvan strains'.

Windsor Forest, then, from time to time pauses to pick up on other early poems. Its 'happy the man' passage (lines 235–58) defines the tasks of ideal retirement as including, among the 'duties of the wise and good', to 'observe a mean, be to himself a friend, / To follow nature, and regard his end' (lines 250–52). The idea of following nature is straight out of *An Essay on Criticism* (see line 68), and friendship is a recurrent theme of the third part of that poem, where Pope explores the nature of the true critic and the history of criticism. The exact chronology of these early poems is actually hard to determine, and Pope's own clarifications only muddy the waters. Openness and secrecy often jostled for priority in Pope's commentary on his writings, as in his life. *Windsor Forest* was published in 1713, and the latter part, in which the Treaty of Utrecht is celebrated, is usually taken to date from some time in 1712 despite Pope's own note giving 1710 as the date for that later section, lines 291 onwards.

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When exactly the earlier sections were written remains obscure, and, in any case, Pope was an assiduous reviser of his work. So, it is a somewhat fruitless task to attempt a precise chronology. It may well be that, to some extent at least, these early works emerged from entwined plans and shared causes. Poets—like critics and readers—are allowed to be at work on several schemes at the same time, despite literary historians' fondness for clear chronology. Echoes across works may even have been planned from the outset, as the philosophical implications of Nature overlap with nature as literal environment.

Line 105

Thus (if small things we may with great compare)

Pope's reflections from work to work begin with small details. They invite readers to take a momentary pause in reading one poem to recall another. This line translates *Georgics*, book 4, line 176. It appears in the midst of a minute description of the natural activities and work of bees as an ingenious and complex model of an organised society: 'Non aliter, si parva licet componere magnis' [not otherwise, if it is permitted to compare small things with great]. Pope's borrowing introduces an analogy between a hunter seizing his prey and the military conquest of a town. His invocation of Virgil brings the authority of the classical master to bear on a disturbing comparison between the human world and that of our fellow animals. Pope's rural sports passage, which follows on and provides another version of the seasonal structure he employed in his *Pastorals*, permits running parallels between war and hunting, the past and present, and Normans and Stuarts. At a wider level, the idea of comparing 'small' with 'great'—and often thereby opening up potential confusion between them—is taken up across poems. It is the source of the principal factor enabling Pope's mock-heroic poetry. For example, in canto 2 of *The Rape of the Lock*, Belinda's guardian sylph Ariel ponders what 'dire disaster' may threaten her on this day: 'Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law, / Or some frail china jar receive a flaw' (lines 103–06). At first sight, this reads as bathos, the second line's triviality a descent from the first's seriousness. Will she lose her chastity—a moral, physical and psychological action, even more so if we recognize the simmering potential danger implicit in the 'rape' of the poem's title

(see Chapter 5)—or will an ornament be slightly damaged? But if the two lines are taken together, as their composition of a rhyming couplet virtually necessitates, are we to take the outcome to be comparison rather than contrast? In the decorative and glittering world of Hampton Court, human beings flirt with metamorphosis into exotic and valuable commodities, and a 'flaw' may be both a physical rent and a moral failing. The couplet's second line may be read as a metaphorical expression of its first as easily as a contrast to it.

Windsor Forest's autumnal hunting expedition is set alongside the capture of 'some thoughtless town' by British troops. Is the entrapment of a game-bird a relatively trivial incident when set against, say, the seizing of Gibraltar in the War of Spanish Succession? Are not the conflicts of the Marlborough campaigns on an altogether greater level, in size and significance? Or are they really, as Pope's line proposes, events that, however different in scale, invite comparison as being expressions of a similar human trait: an impulse to violence?

Lines 111–18

> See! from the brake the whirring pheasant springs,
> And mounts exulting on triumphant wings:
> Short is his joy; he feels the fiery wound,
> Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground.
> Ah! what avail his glossy, varying dyes,
> His purple crest, and scarlet-circled eyes,
> The vivid green his shining plumes unfold,
> His painted wings, and breast that flames with gold?

Here is destruction in action. The verse-paragraph sharply sets up the hunter's killing of a pheasant as both an example and an emblem of the human world's arbitrary and savage attack on what nature has designed as beautiful and full of life. The poem intensely and precisely describes its object for its own sake, but it also implies through it a wider 'general truth' (Brower 1963, p. 54). As he often does, Pope divides his eight lines into two quartets, each opening with a monosyllabic exclamation, the first excitedly demanding that we bear witness, the second, in contrast, lamenting for loss.

He ensures that his emblematic image packs a strong punch by filling the lines with reiterative and emphatic forms of language. In the first

couplet, the verbs are dynamic and vigorous: 'springs', 'mounts'. The participial qualifiers are full of motion: 'whirring' denotes the sound of the bird's rapidly beating wings, and 'exulting' conveys vehement joy combined with energetic action (the Latin root of the word is 'saltare', 'to leap'). The trisyllabic adjective 'triumphant' encapsulates that glorious moment, which is at once demolished by a cruel stress on 'Short' and this couplet's monosyllabic economy. It then builds up a sequence of cumulatively forceful alliterative words: 'feels', 'fiery', 'Flutters', 'blood', 'beats'. Within four lines, the pheasant's leap for joy ends by beating the ground.

The second quartet loads its description with vibrant colour, as if a pre-run for Keats's intense delineation of the serpent in the first part of his *Lamia* (1820; lines 47–56): 'glossy', 'purple', 'scarlet', 'vivid green', 'shining', 'flames with gold'. These are all designed to intensify effect through heightening of language: the greater the beauty of life, the more distressing and shameful it is for that life to be wantonly destroyed. The rhetorical question ('Ah! what avail …') picks up a celebrated equivalent, a dying ox in Virgil's third *Georgic*: 'quid labor aut benefacta iuvant?' (line 525) [what do his toil or good deeds avail him?]. There, the ox dies in the act of labouring in the fields for human benefit; here, still worse, the pheasant is an arbitrary victim of mere human sport.

However, *Windsor Forest* is about more than killing. It opens with a long paragraph devoted to a rhapsodic description of the varied landscape of Windsor Forest itself, which is—idealistically, some might say outrageously—likened to the paradisal 'groves of Eden' (line 7). Harmony is now the keynote. For example, the following couplet presents a concise account of a prospect from the forest to far hills:

Lines 23–24

> Here in full light the russet plains extend:
> There wrapped in clouds the blueish hills ascend.

Pope gives us a representation and poetic mirror of a landscape where opposites are gracefully and elegantly reconciled, visually and linguistically. Each term in the first line has its syntactic equivalent in the second: 'Here'/'There'; 'in full light'/'wrapped in clouds'; 'the russet

plains'/'the blueish hills'; 'extend'/'ascend'. So exact is the equivalence that each stage of the lines' progress follows syllable for syllable. The rhyme couples each opposite—successively foreground/background; light/shade; earth-coloured horizontals/sky-coloured verticals; concluding verbs expressing stretching forward and upward—into an interlocking whole. Nature in this vision is a contemporary version of prelapsarian idealism. The world is not yet broken, or, rather, is restored to a long-lost state. Such present peace is the state of contemporary Britain, lines 41–42 declare:

> Rich Industry sits smiling on the plains,
> And peace and plenty tell, a STUART reigns.

In an earlier period of Norman rule, England was marred by all that is the opposite of the present state: discord, violence, and oppression. The next fifty lines of *Windsor Forest* give extended and judgemental expression to the savagery of these years of barbaric rule, before order is restored and 'Fair Liberty, Britannia's Goddess rears / Her cheerful head, and leads the golden years' (lines 91–92). *Windsor Forest* is a poem of stark contrasts, of which the historical is the most politically charged.

Lines 327–28

Much later, the poem returns to a clear and unambiguous assertion that the present, with its Stuart reign, has restored absolute harmony:

> At length great ANNA said—'Let Discord cease!'
> She said, the world obeyed, and all was peace!

Couplets 41–42 and 327–28, separated by nearly three hundred lines, thus constitute a statement and re-statement of the same polemical claim: that 'peace' is the current state because, and only because, Queen Anne is the active voice ('great ANNA said') of Stuart rule. In political terms, Pope is referring to the Treaty of Utrecht, signed on 11 April 1713, which ended the many years of European wars involving British participation through the Duke of Marlborough and his Whig supporters. Queen Anne's quasi-divine status is clearly present in the way in which Pope expresses her command that discord cease in an echo—dare one say, even close to a parody?—of the creative fiat in Genesis, chapter 1.

As we noted in this book's Introduction, the vividly contemporary world of *The Rape of the Lock*, where the heroine, Belinda, forms her resolution at the card table, presents an unambiguous parody: 'The skilful nymph reviews her force with care: / 'Let spades be trumps!' she said, and trumps they were' (canto 3, lines 45–46. See also Chapter 5). From one perspective, hunting and card games are smaller, and so less significant, events than the battles to which they are compared. From another perspective, they embody similar human traits: violence, a compulsion to destruction. If the latter is true, then Queen Anne's 'Let Discord cease!' and Belinda's 'Let spades be trumps!' may be triumphant exclamations, but prove to be only partial or temporary resolutions. Discord lives on in *Windsor Forest*'s hunting scenes, and in the 'rape' of Belinda's lock of hair.