‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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6. *Epistle to Mr Jervas*

Examples: Lines 13–14, 21–22, 39–46, 47–54

Pope's *Epistle to Mr Jervas* was first published in a 1716 edition of John Dryden's translation of Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy's verse treatise *De Arte Graphica*. It is not the very first of his verse epistles to appear, as the *Epistle to Miss Blount, with the Works of Voiture* had been published in 1712 under the title *To a Young Lady*. However, both poems, together with the *Epistle to Miss Blount, on her Leaving the Town after the Coronation*, emerge from the same period of Pope's life. All three share a relaxed familiarity, a sense of friends engaged in amicable, civilized, and respectful interchange. We shall look more closely at the two Miss Blount poems when examining the later *Epistle to a Lady*, whose addressee is Martha Blount. The Jervas epistle serves as a good introduction to a genre which increasingly takes centre stage as Pope's writing career unfolds. The poem also belongs here because it continues topics that have emerged in the *Pastorals*, *An Essay on Criticism*, and *Windsor Forest*, notably friendship (the word 'friend' appears three times in the poem, at lines 1, 21, and 52), artistic apprenticeship, and mortality—the 'Et in Arcadia Ego' strain encountered in 'Winter'.

As a verse epistle, it takes its place within a classical and Renaissance tradition which combines, in varying degrees, elements of formality and informality. These include choice of verse form (for example, octosyllabic lines favour a more relaxed, even colloquial, mode of address than do decasyllabic lines), handling of verbal register along a spectrum of familiarity, tendency towards private confidences or public declarations, and how far a clearly defined structure is maintained.

Charles Jervas (1675–1739) was a portrait painter who had studied under Sir Godfrey Kneller. After Kneller's death in 1723—Pope wrote

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the epitaph for his tomb in Westminster Abbey—Jervas succeeded him as court painter. Acclaimed by Richard Steele in the fourth number of *The Tatler* (1709), Jervas probably met Pope through Whig connections. During 1713, Pope lived in Jervas's London home and took painting lessons from him. For a full examination of Pope's interest in and relationship with the visual arts, see Brownell (1978).

Lines 13–14

> Smit with the love of sister-arts we came,
> And met congenial, mingling flame with flame;

The *Epistle to Mr Jervas* testifies to a personal relationship and shared experiences resulting from mutual respect of an artist in one medium for a fellow-artist in another. The notion of poetry and painting as sister arts dates back to classical antiquity and was revived in the Renaissance. Dryden in an epistle to Sir Godfrey Kneller wrote that 'our arts are sisters' (line 89). For a full analysis of Dryden's contributions to the sister arts tradition, see Hagstrum 1958, chapter 7. The 'sister-arts' produce their mirror-image in two brothers in art, each of whose nature and enthusiasm reflects the other's. The two 'flames' are strands of a metaphorical thread which begins with 'Dryden's native fire' in the first paragraph (line 8) and continues into the third paragraph in 'Fired with ideas of fair Italy' (line 26). Each 'flame' is the dynamic result of 'love'. The two phrases containing these assertions of energy deriving from fellow-feeling begin and end the couplet: 'Smit with the love', 'mingling flame with flame'. Within them lie direct and unfussy verbs: 'we came', 'met'. Again, Pope works into his poem a significant linguistic sequence: forms of 'we' and 'our' occur eight times between lines 13 and 35. 'Congenial' combines adjectival and adverbial meanings to define Jervas and himself as kindred spirits who, working together, generate creative activity of a force consistent with 'flame'. Pope is saying that he and Jervas were both fired up by a spirit they recognized in each other. In the sister arts, two men discover brotherly affection and affinity.

Lines 21–22

> How oft review; each finding like a friend
> Something to blame, and something to commend?

As well as likeness, a strong element of integrity and individual autonomy is asserted. The paragraph that begins 'Smit with the love of sister-arts we came, / And met congenial, mingling flame with flame' ends with a staunchly honest corrective to such claims of intense fellow-feeling. This is the third and last of a series of couplets (lines 17–22) bound together by triple repetition of 'How oft' at the beginnings. The effect is cumulative and emphatic, and here adds an element of formal structure within generally relaxed communication. Pope's pattern is rigorously open-eyed and unsentimental. Where the first of the trio reads like a holiday diary ('How oft in pleasing tasks we wear the day, / While summer-suns roll unperceived away?') and the second attests to a growing creative partnership ('How oft our slowly-growing works impart, / While images reflect from art to art?'), the third couplet steps back in a gesture of objectivity and—in another sense—reflection. A modern cliché, 'critical friend', hovers over the main verb, 'review', with its connotations of full and objective judgment. And the balanced second line of the couplet represents a process of measured and equal honesty, an admirable and respectful confirmation that, after all, it is the two men's commitment to their art that takes precedence even over their strong admiration for each other as brothers in art.

Such clarity and honesty of judgment extend into the second section of the poem. Pope's warm conviction of the triumphant power and value of the arts attains its climax in the couplet 'Thence endless streams of fair ideas flow, / Strike in the sketch, or in the picture glow' (see lines 39–46, below). From this point, he modulates his tone from celebration to meditation. Pope displays an objectivity that brings a more measured, even humble, reflection on the limitations of art itself. The poem's finale, then, is an extended commentary on the wider, public rather than private, topic at the heart of the matter.

But, before we reach the epistle's solemn conclusion, the third and fourth paragraphs rhapsodically celebrate the inspiring influence of classical and Renaissance Rome and its artefacts on the imaginations of

Jervas and Pope, painter and poet. Here is the fourth, which opens with a reference to Dufresnoy's treatise.

Lines 39–46

How finished with illustrious toil appears
This small, well-polished gem, the work of years!
Yet still how faint by precept is expressed
The living image in the painter's breast?
Thence endless streams of fair ideas flow,
Strike in the sketch, or in the picture glow;
Thence beauty, waking all her forms, supplies
An angel's sweetness, or Bridgewater's eyes.

How admirable, Pope is saying, how carefully worked, how preciously prepared is Dufresnoy's poem! But, however well written, no verbal set of instructions can possibly match the sheer vitality of great visual art. Verbs and participles carry the main line of energy: 'living', 'flow', 'Strike', glow', 'waking'. The third couplet is the climax, its very form embodying Pope's warm conviction of the triumphant power and value of the painter's art. 'Thence endless streams of fair ideas flow' expansively fills out a complete line without a pause, its metaphor expressive of unstoppable continuity and its phonic move from short vowels ('Thence endless') to long ('streams ... fair ideas flow') giving physical force to pent-up energy being released. The succession of /v/ and/f/ sounds ('of fair ... flow') helps hold together that moment of relaxation. In contrast, the line's rhyming partner, 'Strike in the sketch, or in the picture glow', uses chiasmus to distinguish between the vigour of the preliminary drawing and the luminous colour of the final painting. So, the two verbs dominate: 'Strike' being given added emphasis by reversal of the regular iambic metre elsewhere retained and 'glow' attracting the element from its rhyming partner to express the liquidity of light.

However, despite all its evocation of life, and the power of art to convey a sense of life, there is one counterforce that cannot be resisted. The paragraph ecstatically ends with a focus on the semi-divine image of 'Bridgewater's eyes', a phrase which concisely (and conveniently) continues the liquid metaphor into naturally glowing light. But the woman herself—Elizabeth, Countess of Bridgewater, daughter of the

famous Duke of Marlborough—has, even as Pope's epistle celebrates her name, recently succumbed to the deadly curse of smallpox. So, the poem's animated tone is equally suddenly brought to an untimely stop.

Lines 47–54

> Muse! at that name thy sacred sorrows shed,
> Those tears eternal, that embalm the dead:
> Call round her tomb each object of desire,
> Each purer frame informed with purer fire:
> Bid her be all that cheers or softens life,
> The tender sister, daughter, friend, and wife:
> Bid her be all that makes mankind adore;
> Then view this marble, and be vain no more!

Here, the first couplet's 'eternal' recalls the earlier 'endless', but those flowing streams are turned into tears. 'Embalm' then buries the departed within the unremittingly cold rhyme of 'shed'/'dead'. This, the fifth paragraph, is the poem's key transition. The 'name' Bridgewater brings the poem to its temporary halt, and death into the Arcadia of art.

Funereal images then suffuse the language. A melancholy succession of 'embalm', 'tomb', 'marble', marked by alliteration and long vowels, invites us to approach and 'read' the name on that marble tomb. It is Bridgewater, a woman whose demise demands the poet's invocation of a 'muse' of sorrows. The word 'name' is also the entire poem's final destination. It completes an epistle—an address from one living name to another, Pope to Jervas—which has celebrated the names of those distinguished artists (Raphael and company), contemporaries (Marlborough, Worsley), and poetic élite (Myra, the assumed name of the addressee of love lyrics by Pope's patron, George Granville; Pope's own 'Belinda' from *The Rape of the Lock*; and his actual muses, Teresa and Martha Blount), who people the poem with indelible bonds of art and life. Thomas R. Edwards trenchantly defines as a chief feature of Pope's poetic manner 'a balance between opposing feelings and points of view, a sustained mediation in the case of *Jervas*, between the idea that art is a consolation for time and the idea that art can preserve painfully little when held up against our personal losses' (Edwards 1963, p. 5). The poem's mostly celebratory mood thus ends in humility: 'Alas, how little from the grave we claim! / Thou but preserv'st a face, and I a name'.