‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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7. *Eloisa to Abelard*

Examples: Lines 59–72, 85–98,163–70, 263–76

Pope's longest and most turbulent essay in the Ovidian mode was first published in the 1717 *Works*. It is modelled on the *Heroides* (letters from heroines), one of which, *Sappho to Phaon*, Pope had earlier translated. *Eloisa to Abelard* could thus be seen as Pope's original contribution to, and development of, a genre he has already tested, and whose popularity among Ovid's poems from the Renaissance on was second only to that of the *Metamorphoses*. In choosing the story of Eloisa and Abelard, Pope also tuned into a narrative of long-acknowledged power. Peter Abelard was a twelfth-century French theologian who fell in love with his pupil Heloise. When their liaison was discovered, Abelard was castrated and entered monastic life, and Eloisa became a nun. Their letters were highly regarded from their Latin publication in 1616. Pope's source was a prose translation by John Hughes (1713), from a French version. His decision to take on Eloisa's voice makes this Pope's most remarkable essay in empathetic representation.

Lines 59–72

In this verse-paragraph, Eloisa reflects on how she fell in love with Abelard:

> Thou knowst how guiltless first I met thy flame,
> When love approached me under friendship's name;
> My fancy formed thee of angelic kind,
> Some emanation of the all-beauteous mind.
> Those smiling eyes, attempering every ray,
> Shone sweetly lambent with celestial day:
> Guiltless I gazed; heaven listened while you sung;

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> And truths divine came mended from that tongue.
> From lips like those what precept failed to move?
> Too soon they taught me 'twas no sin to love:
> Back through the paths of pleasing sense I ran,
> Nor wished an angel whom I loved a man.
> Dim and remote the joys of saints I see,
> Nor envy them that heaven I lose for thee.

Eloisa here dramatically and viscerally narrates how, for her, Abelard began as an 'angelic' figure (line 61) but became something grander and more powerful—a man. This is the sheer audacity, indeed blasphemy, of Eloisa's testimony. Line 70 expresses her belief in the starkest and clearest terms: 'Nor wished an angel whom I loved a man'. Every word is a monosyllable except 'angel'. That word, originally a definition of Abelard's being, is now consigned to a negative by the first word in the line, 'Nor'; it is replaced by a transparent, frank, and simple statement of the new truth: 'whom I loved a man'. This clause balances the first in syllabic count and rhythmic emphasis: 'wíshed', 'ángel'/'lóved', 'mán'. The slide from 'angel' to 'man' is also phonically eased by the internal half-rhyme of 'an-gel' and 'man'. The change is effected by simply altering the pronunciation of a single vowel. As the Virgilian tag has it, 'facilis descensus averno' [easy is the descent to hell] (*Aeneid*, book 6, line 126), except that loss of heaven (line 72) is gain of love: hell has been displaced.

The middle couplet of the seven lies at the core not only of the paragraph but of the psychological truth behind Eloisa's innocent confession:

> Guiltless I gazed; heaven listened while you sung;
> And truths divine came mended from that tongue.

Abelard's beauty and power were simply greater than those of heaven. Grace and authority now live in a human voice, in human art. The rhyming of 'sung' and 'tongue' is the most daring element in Eloisa's profession, all the more so for the emphatic trochee (reversed iamb) with which the couplet begins: 'Gúiltless'. The subdued physical intimacy of 'tongue' is then exposed by the sensuous 'lips' that follow immediately (line 67). 'Flames' and 'lips' are two of the physically potent words that resound throughout *Eloisa to Abelard*. 'Tears', as we shall see, is another. This is a poem of extremes, obsessive in its repetitiveness. The process

conveyed in Eloisa's narrative is that of a reverse metamorphosis. Man is not transformed into another part of creation, as in the pattern of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but re-emerges as a man from his previous semi-divine appearance. The imagined world of the saints recedes into a 'dim and remote' past (line 71), just as Abelard's true humanity is revealed once Eloisa's original formation of her 'fancy' (line 61) is shown to have been false.

Pope's theological audacity is matched by his linguistic inventiveness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites lines 63 and 64 as examples of the use of 'attemper' to mean 'modify the temperature of', and of 'lambent' to mean 'emitting, or suffused with, a soft clear light' ('attemper' v. sense 2). 'Lambent' derives from the Latin verb 'lambere', meaning a flame licking, or playing lightly on, a surface without harming it. Pope's line is the *OED*'s first citation of this sense being applied to light radiating from a pair of eyes ('lambent' a. sense 1 c). He prepares us for this semantic originality by emphatically placing 'flame' as a rhyme-word in the paragraph's opening couplet. Abelard is the flame which alerts Eloisa's 'pleasing sense'. His 'smiling eyes' moderate the rays of the sun from which the life-force of creation emanates, rendering them 'sweetly lambent with celestial day'.

Lines 85–98

Should at my feet the world's great master fall,
Himself, his throne, his world, I'd scorn 'em all:
Not Caesar's empress would I deign to prove;
No, make me mistress to the man I love;
If there be yet another name more free,
More fond than mistress, make me that to thee!
Oh happy state! when souls each other draw,
When love is liberty, and nature, law:
All then is full, possessing, and possessed,
No craving void left aching in the breast:
Even thought meets thought, ere from the lips it part,
And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart.
This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)
And once the lot of Abelard and me.

These lines represent the high-point of Eloisa's ecstatic hymn to human love.

Love is empowerment. The first two couplets drive home this message with all the force that contempt for conventional manifestations of power can summon. Think of the most dominant forms that temporal authority can take—'the world's great master', 'Caesar'. Think of the symbolic shapes of that power—'throne', 'world'. Think of worldly power as made female-specific—'empress': Caesar's fellow commander, and even, perhaps, commander of him. All are shoved aside in a demeaning *aphaeresis* (suppression of a letter or syllable at the beginning of a word): 'I'd scorn 'em all'. They are simply not worth the bother of a pretence of respect. The 'Not'/'No' emphatic starts to the following lines press home the message.

Love is freedom. An earlier pair of couplets (lines 73–76) declared 'How oft, when pressed to marriage, have I said, / Curse on all laws but those which love has made? / Love, free as air, at sight of human ties, / Spreads his light wings, and in a moment flies.' The present passage follows up this audacious affirmation with a blunt use and repetition of the word 'mistress'. The term here draws fully and unashamedly on its dual sense of a woman with authority over others and a woman who illicitly or unconventionally takes the place of a wife. The stakes are then further raised in lines 89–90: 'If there be yet another name more free, / More fond than mistress, make me that to thee!' The parallel phrases at the heart of the couplet, 'more free, / More fond', are particularly felicitous. The status of mistress is thereby endowed with the strongest possible affection. Sexual freedom is coterminous with the highest possible love. Why is this? Line 92, defining this 'happy state', supplies the answer: 'When love is liberty, and nature, law'. Social bonds, the ties represented in legal process, are inferior to those of 'nature'. Law encases, encumbers, limits; nature frees, lightens, releases. 'Love is liberty' is an aphorism that resounds with truly revolutionary fervour.

Love is mutuality. The effect of such freedom is equality. As neither partner is bound by external, artificial constraints, neither partner can be less or more free than the other. Freedom becomes an absolute, not a condition relative to circumstances or extrinsic pressures. This is a state in which 'souls each other draw' (line 91). 'All then is full, possessing, and possessed' (line 93) embodies in its structure this idea that love so freed becomes entirely defined by love itself: there is no room for

further, peripheral matter. The first four words, 'All then is full', make up the simplest and yet most complete statement of the relationship, with 'all' and 'full' harmonizing appropriately. The metrical weight of the line is thrown onto the longer second half, which is filled out by the heavy active and passive forms of the same word, 'possessing' and 'possessed'. The opposite would be the devastating and elemental emptiness of a 'void'. Complete absorption of the two partners is the result, as Eloisa goes on to assert: 'And if I lose thy love, I lose my all' (line 118).

Lines 163–70

The poem now must change its notes to tragic. For loss of Abelard is indeed what has happened—Abelard as presence and sexual partner.

> But o'er the twilight groves and dusky caves,
> Long-sounding isles, and intermingled graves,
> Black Melancholy sits, and round her throws
> A death-like silence, and a dread repose:
> Her gloomy presence saddens all the scene,
> Shades every flower, and darkens every green,
> Deepens the murmur of the falling floods,
> And breathes a browner horror on the woods.

Loss of love is deprivation of light. Darkness takes over from 'celestial day' (line 64), filling the poem as it does the world because it *is* Eloisa's world: 'twilight', 'dusky', 'Black', 'gloomy', 'Shades', 'darkens', 'browner'. The deity who now inhabits and rules is Melancholy. Her entry is prepared for us as early as the third line of the poem: 'And ever-musing melancholy reigns'. Joseph Warton, the eighteenth-century critic who wrote the first full-length study of Pope's poetry, was sensitively tuned to Pope's painterly personification. Indeed, as a young man in the 1740s, Warton had written a volume of visually aware descriptive and reflective *Odes* (1746). 'The Image of the Goddess Melancholy sitting over the convent, and, as it were, expanding her dreadful wings over its whole circuit, and diffusing her gloom all around it, is truly sublime, and strongly conceived' (Warton 1806, I, p. 315; in Barnard, p. 405). Quoting Warton, Jean Hagstrum in *The Sister Arts*, his classic study of literary pictorialism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poetry, notes how, in *Eloisa to Abelard*, Pope follows Ovid's *Heroides* in

'creating sympathetic landscape as a kind of visual accompaniment to the emotions'. Hagstrum goes on to observe that the potency of the goddess lies primarily in her role as an agent: 'She is not acted upon; she acts. She does not merely share the surrounding gloom; she creates it' (1958, pp. 218–20). Pope's succession of varied verbs translates agency into literary form: 'throws', 'saddens', 'Shades', 'darkens', 'Deepens', 'breathes'.

Pope has visited this territory before, in 'Winter', the fourth of his *Pastorals*. Thyrsis's lament for the loss of Daphne is replete with the language of melancholy that Eloisa now picks up:

> See gloomy clouds obscure the cheerful day (line 30)
>
> In hollow caves sweet Echo silent lies,
> Silent, or only to her name replies (lines 41–42)
>
> The balmy zephyrs, silent since her death (line 49)
>
> The trembling trees, in every plain and wood,
> Her fate remurmur to the silver flood (lines 63–64)
>
> The winds and trees and floods her death deplore (line 67)

Pastoral and pastoral elegy are intimately related: 'Et in Arcadia ego'—'And I, death, am also in Arcady'. Line 166 from our present extract most forcefully imposes on the scene, and so on Eloisa's emotional experience, this intrusion of death into love's world, of elegy into the elegiac epistle: 'A death-like silence, and a dread repose'. Silence, as in 'Winter', is sensory deprivation, not the devotional solemnity due to the setting of a convent. 'Death' and 'dread' make the strongest phonetic connection in the line, combining plosive alliteration with repetition of the same short, uncompromising vowel. However, the line and the couplet come to a close on the softer sounds of 'repose' where the weight is on the long vowel and voiced /z/. The sequence of verbs that follows maintains this blending. For example, the final couplet's verbal parallel of 'Deepens' and 'breathes' chimes its long vowels and brings each word to a voiced ending. A veil is, as it were, spread over the harsh reality, as it so often is in pastoral elegy. The real agency and energy of the poem and of Eloisa's feelings are elsewhere.

Lines 263–76

What scenes appear where'er I turn my view?
The dear ideas, where I fly, pursue,
Rise in the grove, before the altar rise,
Stain all my soul, and wanton in my eyes.
I waste the matin lamp in sighs for thee,
Thy image steals between my God and me,
Thy voice I seem in every hymn to hear,
With every bead I drop too soft a tear.
When from the censer clouds of fragrance roll,
And swelling organs lift the rising soul,
One thought of thee puts all the pomp to flight,
Priests, tapers, temples, swim before my sight:
In seas of flame my plunging soul is drowned,
While altars blaze, and angels tremble round.

Another seven-couplet paragraph matches the first example we examined. Like that early passage, its dramatic effect is to shift the weight of Eloisa's emotion from the divine to the human. Within the convent, at the very holiest of its devotional places—its chapel, its altar—images of Abelard disrupt and disturb Eloisa's vain attempts to commit herself to rituals of worship, to channels of authorized veneration. The fourteen-line structure again allows Pope to locate at its heart the most direct and stark expression of the writer's helpless compulsion: 'Thy voice I seem in every hymn to hear, / With every bead I drop too soft a tear.' The constituent elements of divine worship ('every hymn', 'every bead') are enclosed within vivid and highly personal experience. The first-person pronoun governs each line, and the true object and expression of Eloisa's feelings begin and end the couplet: the 'voice' of Abelard, whose 'tongue' earlier was stronger than the word of God (line 66), and the tears she sheds, which punctuate the poem with the obsessive, incremental force we have earlier noted as a dominant feature of the poem's rhetoric.

The poem is marked by a violent clash of strong opposites, the elements of fire and water. Those recurrent tears are one expression of the latter, enhanced by semantically related images such as sighs. The 'flame' we encountered earlier, also carried in semantically related words such as 'fire' and 'blaze' (for example, the startling line 182:

'Love finds an altar for forbidden fires'), expresses the former. In the present paragraph, both converge in the final couplet: 'In seas of flame my plunging soul is drowned, / While altars blaze and angels tremble round.' As with the most powerful paradoxes, both elements emerge from the union with enhanced energy. Appurtenances of religion—priests, tapers, temples—are lost in the hallucinatory experience of the preceding line ('swim before my sight'). Water swells into 'seas' which drown Eloisa's theologically immortal part, her soul, a metaphor for overwhelming flames that encompass her and the altar before which she kneels.

Eloisa to Abelard is one long cry of painful and ecstatic conflict, sustained by the paradoxes typified by 'seas of flame'. Ovid is, of all classical poets, the one most bound to 'multiple levels of awareness', to perceptions of 'identity and the divided self' (Green, ed. 1982, p. 59). Has any of Ovid's English imitators expressed these divisions more forcefully, more dangerously, than Pope in this poem? Has any English poet voiced more violently a fusion of two selves: Eloisa the wife of Abelard and Eloisa the nun; Eloisa and Abelard, female and male, first- and second-person pronouns? 'Thee' and 'thy' resonate through the paragraph (lines 267, 268, 269, and 273), while the intense subjectivity of 'I' and 'my' counterpoints even more incessantly (lines 263, 264, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 274, and 275). For 'I'—Eloisa—and 'thou'—Abelard—are, at one and the same time, eternally separated and bound together on a wheel of fire.