‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-300-0
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-301-7
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-413-7
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-414-4
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-415-1
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-673-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0372

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

9. Homer, *The Iliad*

Examples: Book 12, lines 371–96; Book 8, lines 371–74

Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* was printed by Bernard Lintot in instalments from 1715 to 1720. Pope organized a private subscription for its publication, attracting 575 names. It proved to be a reputational and financial success, establishing him as the foremost poet of his age and going much of the way to ensure his independence of means. Homer's *Odyssey* followed in 1725–26, with even more subscribers, though this time Pope himself translated only twelve books, the other twelve being quietly allotted to two assistants, William Broome and Elijah Fenton. The result was still a considerable sum in profits.

A fully representative account of the Homer translations would require a book of its own, and lies outside the remit of the present study. However, some indication of their quality will, I hope, provide at least an introductory sketch of Pope's achievement in what was his principal task over a decade. We shall therefore examine two examples from the *Iliad*, which represent two of the most important elements of Homer's epic.

The first, Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus on the battlefield in book 12, is of particular interest for two reasons. Pope had originally translated it, as part of a longer *Episode of Sarpedon*, in Jacob Tonson's 1709 *Miscellanies* (the collection in which his *Pastorals* also appeared) and incorporated it, with a few small changes, in the final complete *Iliad*. Secondly, it was the model for Clarissa's speech in *The Rape of the Lock*, which, as we have seen, Pope added to that poem in the 1717 *Works*.

Homer's *Iliad* is 'relentlessly martial in tone and detail' (Kirk 1985, p. 374). It derives from and enunciates a heroic code: status within a martial society is dependent on maintenance of specific (male) qualities by which, and by which alone, 'honour' is achieved. That status

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372.10

demands endurance of—indeed, pursuit of—every possible trial of those qualities. The greater the crisis, the more necessary a response. A man in a leadership position must—as a matter of duty, of self-esteem, and of social reputation—demonstrate that he can yet again rise to meet the new challenge.

The Iliad's 'style as a whole, together with the treatment of situations and characters, remains severe and dignified, as might be considered appropriate to a heroic age and a heroic standard of values' (Kirk 1985, p. 74). Nowhere is such a style exemplified more powerfully than in the Trojan Sarpedon's exhortatory oration to Glaucus. His speech is positioned at the mid-point of the poem, and constitutes the epic's classic definition of its code. The principal question at the heart of that code is 'What is a man's life worth?' (Jones, 2003, p. xiv). Pope's decision to translate this speech so early in his career is, as much as his *Pastorals*, a submission for recognition as the newly emergent voice in English poetics. Both are direct challenges to existing acknowledged excellence. In the case of Sarpedon's speech, that ground was held by Sir John Denham, whose *Cooper's Hill* (1642) also reigned supreme over the topographical/reflective poem. Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713; see Chapter 4) would soon respectfully match and surpass that model as well. After three lines of introduction ('Thus to Glaucus spake / Divine Sarpedon, since he did not find / Others as great in place as great in mind.'), Denham's version of the speech occupies twenty-six lines:

> Above the rest why is our pomp, our power,
> Our flocks, our herds, and our possessions more?
> Why all the tributes land and sea affords,
> Heaped in great chargers, load our sumptuous boards?
> Our cheerful guests carouse the sparkling tears
> Of the rich grape, whilst music charms their ears.
> Why, as we pass, do those on Xanthus' shore
> As gods behold us, and as gods adore?
> But that, as well in danger as degree,
> We stand the first; that when our Licians see
> Our brave examples, they admiring say,
> Behold our gallant leaders! These are they
> Deserve the greatness, and unenvied stand,
> Since what they act transcends what they command.
> Could the declining of this fate (oh, friend!)
> Our date to immortality extend?

> Or if death sought not them who seek not death
> Would I advance? Or should my vainer breath
> With such a glorious folly these inspire?
> But since with Fortune Nature doth conspire,
> Since age, disease, or some less noble end,
> Though not less certain, doth our days attend;
> Since 'tis decreed, and to this period lead
> A thousand ways, the noblest path we'll tread,
> And bravely on till they, or we, or all,
> A common sacrifice to honour fall.

Denham's distinguished translation is marked by division of its argument into four clear stages, which follow Homer's original structure scrupulously while allowing the verse to breathe outwards to the measure of the heroic couplet mode that Denham, among others, did so much to normalize as the standard form for the age.

Lines 1–8 ('Above the rest ... as gods adore') define the status quo, that is the dominant positions presently occupied by Sarpedon and Glaucus in their realms; positions that are—here Denham follows Homer precisely—tantamount to apotheosis. This is the premise of which Sarpedon rhetorically demands the cause with a trio of 'why's (lines 1, 3, and 7). These directly follow Homer's original.

Lines 9–14 ('But that ... what they command') supply the answer to these rhetorical questions through an introductory 'But that'. Their status is the result of their deserts (line 13), realized by their continuing demonstration of merit through action (line 14). Denham's introduction of the sonorous idea of 'transcendence' is his inspired strengthening of the Homeric original.

Lines 15–19 ('Could the declining ... these inspire') switch the rhetoric to the subjunctive mode. 'Were it possible, my friend, that our renunciation of this status could perpetually defer our mortal end, would I propose that we should now advance to the front ranks of combat?'

Lines 20–26 ('But since ... honour fall) respond with another 'But' (line 20, echoing line 9). Another trio—the three 'since's (lines 20, 21, and 23) matching the 'why's in the opening section, but transforming them from questions to statements of causes derived from unquestionable facts—picks up the earlier statement of principle at the heart of the speech: 'Since what they act transcends what they command'. Just as our status has been earned by unwavering commitment to great action,

Sarpedon is saying, so the unyielding reality of our mortality demands that we choose the noblest mode of advancement towards death.

Pope had earlier praised Denham's 'strength'—his emphatic and concise style—in *An Essay on Criticism* (line 361). Here, the forceful propulsion and integration of his argument constitute a self-definition of the language required for a vigorous statement of the martial mode. Heroic couplets, we may say, embody the heroic code. They are the appropriate dress for a celebration of valour.

Pope's equivalent act of bravery is to march onto Denham's ground. It is no coincidence that his version of Sarpedon's speech is also of twenty-six lines.

Book 12, lines 371–96

'Why boast we, Glaucus! our extended reign,
Where Xanthus' streams enrich the Lycian plain?
Our numerous herds that range the fruitful field,
And hills where vines their purple harvest yield,
Our foaming bowls with purer nectar crowned,
Our feasts enhanced with music's sprightly sound?
Why on those shores are we with joy surveyed,
Admired as heroes, and as gods obeyed,
Unless great acts superior merit prove,
And vindicate the bounteous powers above?
'Tis ours, the dignity they give to grace;
The first in valour, as the first in place;
That when with wondering eyes our martial bands
Behold our deeds transcending our commands,
Such, they may cry, deserve the sovereign state,
Whom those that envy dare not imitate!
Could all our care elude the gloomy grave,
Which claims no less the fearful and the brave,
For lust of fame I should not vainly dare
In fighting fields, nor urge thy soul to war.
But since, alas! ignoble age must come,
Disease, and death's inexorable doom;
The life which others pay, let us bestow,
And give to fame what we to nature owe;
Brave, though we fall, and honoured if we live;
Or let us glory gain, or glory give!'

Pope clearly has learnt much from his predecessor: his implied claim to deserve equal status (let us say, his poetic equivalence of Glaucus's unspoken acceptance of Sarpedon's exhortatory challenge) entails not an evasion of, or alternative to, the example set by Denham but an inclusion of it and an extension of its literary achievement. Thus, he follows Denham in the basic structure of the speech but offers various forms of rhetorical strengthening or enhancement.

His opening 'Why' is taken direct from the triad of 'Why's in Denham's first section, and so sustains the Homeric original. But Pope restricts himself to one repetition, at line 377, and makes room, within the same number of lines as Denham (eight), for a greater degree of descriptive resonance. Denham's bare list of 'Our flocks, our herds, and our possessions' (line 2) becomes 'Our numerous herds that range the fruitful field' (line 373). The verb here adds not just variety in linguistic forms but an enriching sense of movement and extension (cf. 'extended', line 371), while the phrase 'fruitful field' acts as a poetically concentrated expression of creativity. The Trojan princes' rule is vitally productive, and Pope wants to emphasize this from the start, rather than wait, as Denham does, until his fourth line before expressing the richness of their lands ('load our sumptuous boards'). Pope's promotion of the river Xanthus from Denham's seventh line to his second, together with the added fecundity of the plural 'streams' and the verb 'enrich' (again, promoting Denham's 'rich' from his sixth line) provides further strengthening. Pope, moreover, adopts Denham's use of concise and expressive word order within lines and couplets but gradually enhances Denham's model in order to build towards the extraordinary dynamic at the climax of Sarpedon's speech. So, Pope takes Denham's 'As gods behold us, and as gods adore' (line 8) with its verbal parallelism and metrical equivalence (two stresses and five syllables in each half-line), and transmutes it into his own 'Admired as heroes, and as gods obeyed' (line 378). He retains his predecessor's parity of metre but alters the word-order to the sharper structure of a chiasmus. By so doing, he draws attention to his more discriminating variation of language than Denham's simple repetition of 'gods'. The Trojan leaders are loved as heroes (and so mortals), for which 'admired' is the *mot juste*, and are revered as gods (and so accorded immortal status), for which 'obeyed' is a verb that adds a touch of fear to veneration.

Pope then ensures that his verse is kept vibrant through modulation of syntax. For example, four lines further on, he deploys parallel rather than chiastic syntax in 'The first in valour, as the first in place' (line 382). Denham had (equally successfully) varied his verse, after the alliterative parallelism of 'as well in danger as degree', by emphatically holding the word 'first' over to a strongly concise half-line, 'We stand the first'. Both poets are alert to the power of variation. In further discreet recognition of his predecessor, Pope incorporates a stroke of genius. Denham's line 'Since what they act transcends what they command' becomes, with minimal variation, 'Behold our deeds transcending our commands'. Even the verb is taken from Denham's 'Behold our gallant leaders' with only a shift from imperative to simple present.

It is in the concluding six lines that Pope attains the peak of his semantic and structural enhancement. He retained these lines in his complete *Iliad* without any changes from his first (1709) version of them:

> But since, alas, ignoble age must come,
> Disease, and death's inexorable doom;
> The life which others pay, let us bestow,
> And give to fame what we to nature owe;
> Brave, though we fall; and honoured if we live;
> Or let us glory gain, or glory give!

Sarpedon's appeal is founded on a view that we in our lives face alternatives: to submit passively to the inevitable or to act with spirit to wrest fortune into our own hands. An extended paraphrase of the final two couplets will demonstrate how economically Pope manages both to contain the thought and to give it full value through resonant implications: 'Other people (reluctantly) surrender their life as a duty when required to do so. Let us (freely) present it as a gift. Nature demands that each of us resign his life to it (as the source and end of existence). Let us give our life to fame. If we fall in combat, we gain the glory of being renowned for our courage. If we triumph in combat, we shall be honoured for the remainder of our life and beyond. Let us either gain glory through victory, or grant that glory to the man who is victorious over us in a free act of generosity'.

The verbs in the third line of the extract are presented as alternatives in a subtle extension of antithesis. To 'pay' is to 'render (something that is due)'; to 'surrender (something figured as owed, e. g., one's life)' (*OED*,

pay v. 7a). To 'bestow' is to 'confer as a gift, present' (*OED*, bestow, v. 6). 'Bestow' is thus a joyful and positive stronger version of 'pay': the difference puts the bestower in a position in control of the transaction, seizing fate rather than simply paying up when required to do so. It is a movement from passivity to activity—the essence of heroism as a belief underlying what it is to live rather than merely exist.

The second line of this couplet follows by a similar semantic contrast-cum-extension of its verbs, 'give' and 'owe'. To bestow implies a willing 'gift', while to pay implies a due rendering of a debt, that which we 'owe'. However, the verbs in the second line are put in reverse order to the verbs in the first line. They thus form a chiasmus across the couplet: 'pay'/'bestow'/'give'/'owe' (abba). The second line is itself also chiastic, with the two antithetical nouns 'fame' and 'nature' located within the two verbs. We 'owe' our life to 'nature' and so we all must surrender it in re-payment. But if we take control of the process and give our life freely to 'fame', we—to a degree—defeat the power of nature by granting it to an abstract force that extends beyond the individual's life to something of broader meaning, a kind of afterlife through memorialization. The extraordinary subtlety here is that the second line is *grammatically* a chiasmus, but *semantically* an antithesis across the line: 'give to fame / 'to nature owe'. This line is, therefore, the crux, the very heart of Pope's intense stylistic compression.

The third and concluding couplet pursues this intensity into a summary expression of Sarpedon's alternatives, thus maintaining while varying a high level of rhetoric appropriate to such an exhortatory speech. Its overall structure is another chiasmus: if we 'fall' we 'give' glory to another warrior; if we 'live' we 'gain' glory for ourselves. Within the individual lines, the order is simply antithetical: 'brave, though we fall' / 'honoured if we live'; 'glory gain' / 'glory give'. Pope's repetition of the verb 'give' across the two couplets equates giving to fame with giving glory to another warrior. The implication is that giving glory to our victorious adversary constitutes another way of giving our lives to fame through an act of supreme generosity. Victory or defeat, whichever shall be the case, both yield the renown due to heroic endeavour. The epic poem that enshrines this definition of true fame is Homer's. The translation that enables the vision to be read and acknowledged by other people in other times and other places, however, is Pope's. The

great translation extends the span of the great original and, by so doing, shares in an act of literary glory.

Both Homer's lines and Denham's translation emphatically locate the heroic code as a response to the ineluctable fact of human mortality. The narrative of *The Iliad*—and of *The Odyssey* and then Virgil's *Aeneid*—has at its heart a vision of the human and divine worlds functioning alongside each other and interacting with each other. Epic values are thus shared, entered into by both realms. Both have, in their own ways, to be asserting their presence, their values and, indeed, their frailties in a continuing struggle. For humans, however, such a continual combat has limits. Their epic values are founded on a willing embrace of inevitable defeat, the acceptance of the tragic. This is heroic but also futile. Humans know this: to maintain status they must engage in relentless battle, but no-one can win every battle. Also, the divine realm, with or against which humans fight, lacks any wider moral vision. The human condition is to be both isolated and heroic. Pope sets up the extraordinary finale to Sarpedon's speech with an intensification of Denham's rendering of Homer's acknowledgement of the inevitability of death. He adopts the word 'disease' from Denham, but places it at the head of a direful march: 'Disease, and death's inexorable doom'. Pope indeed sees and convincingly expresses the tragic nature of epic as an existential basis for human action.

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Heroic style, then, is the major mode in *The Iliad*. However, the poem's texture is varied by liberal use of its celebrated similes. There are over three hundred of these, which, according to Peter Jones's calculations, occupy about 1100 lines or 7 per cent of the whole. They range in type from short similes with a single point of comparison to more extended examples in the form of 'as when Y happens, so X happened'. As Jones observes, they frequently occur at 'moments of high emotion, drama and tension'. Pope's similes 'introduce worlds of peace and plenty into a martial poem' and 'impose the unchanging world of nature on temporary, fleeting human existence, dignifying and adding significance to it' (Jones, 2003, pp. xxxvii—xxxviii).

Book 8, lines 371–74

> As full-blown poppies, overcharged with rain,
> Decline the head, and drooping kiss the plain;
> So sinks the youth: his beauteous head, depressed
> Beneath his helmet, drops upon his breast.

The Trojan hero Hector is here at the height of his power and achievements. His eventual death at the hands of the Greek hero of the poem, Achilles, in book 22 represents the key, tragic turning point of the entire epic. At present, though, Hector appears to be invincible. The Greek warrior Teucer launches two arrows at him, but both miss their target, inadvertently killing instead two other Trojans. The first of these is Gorgythion, another of the sons of Priam, the king of Troy. E. V. Rieu's classic Penguin prose translation records the simile that illuminates Gorgythion's death thus (1950, p. 136):

> As a poppy's head tilts to one side, weighed down in the garden by its seed and the showers of spring, so Gorgythion's head, weighed down by his helmet, dropped to one side.

William Cowper's blank-verse translation (1791), which was consciously intended as a rejoinder to Pope's freer version, aims to combine a more faithful account of the original with dignity of style conferred by judiciously selected and placed poetic techniques:

> As in the garden, with the weight surcharged
> Of its own fruit, and drenched by vernal rains
> The poppy falls oblique, so he his head
> Hung languid, by his helmet's weight depressed.

Notwithstanding his intention to distance himself from the precedent, Cowper is content to follow elements of Pope's translation. Like him, Cowper manages his version in four lines; he follows the Homeric formula—broadly, for he moves the position of 'so'—into-line sections ('As ... so'); and he adopts vocabulary from Pope. 'Surcharged' is the equivalent of 'overcharged', and each has 'depressed'. Cowper also borrows from Miltonic epic practices. He reverses prose syntax: 'with the weight surcharged / Of its own fruit', rather than 'surcharged with the weight of its own fruit'. He fuses adjectival and adverbial functions into a single word: 'languid' is an adjective in form, but adverbial in

position. Such registers of language and variations of syntax add formality, dignity, and resonance. This is, the style tells us, a moment of poetic force appropriate to the epic context.

Before directly addressing Pope's own version, I would like to extend our present range of reference by introducing a twenty-first century perspective, with a view to considering how different ages might locate ancient epic within modern cultural conditions and concerns.

Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011) explicitly avoids any claims to be a 'translation' of the *Iliad*. Instead, she distils the poem to a remorseless catalogue of its multiple acts of violence and seemingly never-ending destructive cycle of retribution. Through its unflinching record of voluntary victims and studied objectivity of narrative stance, Oswald's poem lays bare the consequences of the heroic code. It is neither a glorification of battle nor an easily-donned anti-war fabric. It is much more authentic and revealing than either posture: it *is* the code in its stripped and unvarnished state. But it is also something infinitely richer. Oswald alternates the succession of killings, where she observes and follows their narrative order, with lyric sections where Homeric similes are extracted and diffused through the texture of the work. These focus on natural rhythm: falling of leaves, swell of water, growth and decay of flowers, the cycle of seasons. They serve as welcome and recurrent moments of repose where one style (direct and stark) is replaced by another: gradated versions of beautiful and elegiac refrain, usually in reiterated stanzaic forms. Further, they also make human activity a part of nature over an extensive time period, thereby—without any overt commentary, for none is necessary and any would be intrusive—exposing human littleness and even irrelevance.

The effect of Oswald's engagement with its Homeric original is not to patronize it by pretence of moral superiority, but, on the contrary, to bring out something vital at the very core of *The Iliad*. The conflicting yet co-existing poetic styles of *Memorial* express both the magnetic and mechanical drive of its male-centred warrior code and its powerful concomitant voices. Her version of the poppy simile, which follows the death of Gorgythion, runs:

> As if it was June
> A poppy being hammered by the rain
> Sinks its head down

It's exactly like that
When a man's neck gives in
And the bronze calyx of his helmet
Sinks his head down

Oswald 2011, p. 32

Oswald's stanza—for as such it is presented typographically—is then echoed by an exact repetition, so that the moment is paused upon, granted a moment of stillness within the hectic action around. It occupies a very different poetic world from Cowper's. Line lengths vary between four and ten syllables. All punctuation is omitted, so that only the spaces at the ends of each line—the words, as it were, temporarily entering into emptiness—are left to invite breath pauses. We have neither blank verse nor the formality of Pope's pentameter couplets but something freer, less precise.

However, self-consciously prosaic formulations, notably, 'It's exactly like that', reduce the level of poeticism. Yet the result is certainly not simply 'prosaic'—understated, yes, but still discreetly, quietly offering controlled expression. The seven lines are as symmetrically shaped as Pope's, and more so than Cowper's, since the latter, as we have noted, shifts his 'so' to mid-line, whereas Oswald places her extended simile marker ('It's exactly like that') in the middle line of the seven. Her whole stanza is unified by poetic techniques, always deployed so as to produce the lightest of touches. Subdued echoes are brought by para-rhymes (or half-rhymes), that is, agreements of consonants with variation of vowels: 'June'/'down'; 'gives in'/'down'. Triple rhythms of the form unstress/unstress/stress predominate, sometimes given impetus by an initial shorter, two-syllable starter: 'As if it was June'; 'by the rain'; 'Sinks its head down'; 'It's exactly like that'; 'When a man's neck'; 'of his helmet'. These are not aggressively marching anapaests but more gentle rhythms. The near-repetition of the third and seventh lines provides closure to each half of the stanza and, more emphatically, to the stanza as a whole.

These techniques result in a distinctly elegiac note, a plangency appropriate for a moment of death. Most strikingly, however, Oswald adds a further level of imagery to her broad simile. She does so symmetrically, with a metaphor in each half. These metaphors within a simile are significantly related. The first is 'hammered', an intensification

of the strength of the rain and an anticipation of—also in the second line of the triplet—the 'bronze calyx of his helmet'. Rain is transformed into a smith's hammer, while the product of this mechanical activity, the warrior's helmet, is rendered as the shape of a calyx, the outer casing of a closed poppy-head. The botanical term is characteristic of Oswald's precision of vocabulary. The season, as in Homer, is spring. June contains the longest day, but high summer is usually thought of as July and August. June is certainly before the late summer and autumn flowering of poppies. The 'hammered' helmet actually becomes, fuses with, the incipient flower. That figure identifies—to use the common critical terminology—vehicle and tenor: that is, the literary image we encounter in the poem (the poppy's calyx) and what the poet is describing by means of that image (the helmet). The image 'carries' the meaning over to illuminate the plain object. The martial world is thereby softened into the natural world. The warrior's head is subsumed within nature; his life is ended before its flowering, its potential denied.

Pope's two couplets give equal substance to both sides of the simile:

> As full-blown poppies, overcharged with rain,
> Decline the head, and drooping kiss the plain;
> So sinks the youth: his beauteous head, depressed
> Beneath his helmet, drops upon his breast.

The young man's helmet reflects in inverse shape the poppy-flower, rather than the calyx of spring. As Rieu does in his modern prose translation, Pope repeats the word 'head'. But, by doing so within a strong march of /d/ sounds across the couplets ('Decline', 'drooping', 'depressed', 'drops'), Pope emphasizes the connection between poppy and warrior. The death of the youth and the weighing down of the poppy—itself caused by a natural force, and one vital to its initial existence—are merged into a single process. The human (and Pope's adjective 'beauteous' adds pathos to emphasise the human) is not just imaged in the natural; in striking anticipation of Oswald's modern viewpoint, it becomes part of the natural. War and water, death and life-giving, are strikingly fused. Human violence (of which Pope's preceding succession of nouns and verbs—'weapon', 'pierced', 'drenched in royal blood'—gives full rendition) becomes part of a pattern by which earthly processes enfold each other, however unlike their aims and functions. The blow is not exactly softened—although the verb 'kiss' does this

to some extent—but is brought into, contained within, a larger whole. Even Pope's use of the plural (poppies) in place of the Homeric singular quietly adds to that sense.

Pope, like Oswald after him, adds to and re-envisages the original. A new age requires a new heroism. Pope's decision to apply the essence of Sarpedon's speech on the nature of truly heroic honour to Clarissa in the final canto of *The Rape of the Lock*—a decision he took while engaged on his *Iliad* translation—assumes, we can now see, major significance. Pope's translation re-locates epic to the sphere of human potential and human vulnerability within nature, and, in the case of *The Rape of the Lock,* specifically female experience within society. Alice Oswald's 'oral cemetery', its 'antiphonal account of man in his world'—to cite her own prefatory words—does something similar yet wholly original. Both, in their own ways, remain faithful to the inner voice of the original while adapting to 'a new audience, as if its language ... was still alive and kicking' (Oswald 2011, p. 2).