‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS

https://www. openbookpublishers. com

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372#resources

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

Cover image: Michael Dahl, 'Alexander Pope' (ca. 1727), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Pope_by_Michael_Dahl.jpg

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

12. *An Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington*

Examples: Lines 23–38, 57–64, 113–20, 191–94

The *Epistle to Burlington*, published in December 1731, was the first poem written in Pope's plan for a philosophical magnum opus, a grand survey of the ethical, political, and social concerns defining a mature and enlightened account of human beings and their place within creation. This epic for the modern age was to be constructed out of a series of individual works. Parts answering parts would slide into a whole. It was an ambitious undertaking, and its scope and its constituents changed and developed as the 1730s proceeded. It may never have achieved a final shape, but the sets of major poems produced—the *Epistles to Several Persons*, *An Essay on Man*, the *Imitations of Horace*—represent a substantial accomplishment in themselves. And, indeed, it may be argued that, like the Enlightenment itself, its status as an ongoing project is fitting for its underlying principles. Miriam Leranbaum's *Alexander Pope's 'Opus Magnum 1729–1744* (1977) remains the standard and definitive account of the design and implementation of the scheme.

Although the *Epistle to Burlington* eventually became the fourth of the four *Epistles to Several Persons* in the 1735 *Works*, its position in order of composition is instructive. It is Pope's major contribution to a debate on creativity and represents a keystone definition of the magnum opus's aesthetic structure. The poem's subtitle is 'Of the Use of Riches'; its principal role is to define, in Pope's inimitable comic manner, an artistic formula for judgement. In Pope's poetry, art itself is always paramount.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372.13

Lines 23–38

You show us, Rome was glorious, not profuse,
And pompous buildings once were things of use.
Yet shall (my Lord) your just, your noble rules
Fill half the land with imitating fools;
Who random drawings from your sheets shall take,
And of one beauty many blunders make;
Load some vain church with old theatric state,
Turn arcs of triumph to a garden-gate;
Reverse your ornaments, and hang them all
On some patched dog-hole eked with ends of wall,
Then clap four slices of pilaster on't,
That, laced with bits of rustic, makes a front:
Or call the winds through long arcades to roar,
Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door;
Conscious they act a true Palladian part,
And if they starve, they starve by rules of art.

The opening couplet of this verse-paragraph is an epigrammatic statement of principles at the heart of the neo-Palladianism espoused by Burlington and championed here by Pope. 'You'—Burlington—'show us' because he, together with William Kent, had published the designs of Inigo Jones and Andrea Palladio in, respectively, 1727 and 1730. Jones was the earliest English advocate of Palladianism, as exemplified by his designs for the Queen's House at Greenwich. Palladio's own *Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (1570) were the standard reference work for the English Palladian Revival movement of the early eighteenth century (see Harris 1994, chapter 1).

The couplet's economy exemplifies the first element of its proposition: Rome, the architectural centre of classicism, showed that buildings could be 'glorious'—magnificent in their visual splendour—without spilling over into the grandiose. Poetry, by analogy, achieves beauty of form by eschewing verbosity. To avoid meanness, it is not necessary to embrace extravagance, as happens in the cautionary fictional example of Old and Young Cotta in Pope's next epistle, *To Bathurst*. There exists a golden mean, a state of equipoise between extremes.

The second line defines another element of the foundation principle. 'Pompous' buildings—splendid, magnificent buildings—can, at the same time, be 'things of use'. Classicism is defined by a capacity to

balance beauty with utility, to combine a regard for visual pleasure with practical value. That we have to pause to remind ourselves of the core meaning of the word 'pompous' is itself an implicit acknowledgement of how easily human endeavours to attain splendour can slide into ostentation. Indeed, the history of the word 'pompous' demonstrates the precariousness of such balance: the negative meaning of 'exaggerated display, vaingloriousness' has accompanied the 'good' meaning from the beginning of its usage in the late medieval period (see *OED*, 'pompous', adj., senses 1 and 2). 'Facilis descensus averno', as the Virgilian tag has it. Today, of course, the derogatory meaning has triumphed, and its alternate virtually disappeared.

The couplet in its entirety enacts a proper predominance of good taste over bad. Its statement of a negative—'not profuse'—is squeezed into three syllables, bracketed away by its succession of positive clauses ('You show us', 'Rome was glorious', 'pompous buildings once were things of use'). That brief negative is trenchantly answered by the blunt rhyme-word that concludes the end-stopped couplet: 'use'. The conjunction of beauty and utility was a maxim familiar from its Horatian source in the *Ars Poetica*, the third of the three epistles in book 2: 'omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariterque monendo (lines 343–44) [he who mixes the useful with the pleasant wins the vote, charming and advising the reader in equal measure]. Horace is advocating an economical fusion of instruction and delight when writing in the didactic mode. Pope's application of the idea to the practical business of building is duly effected in a couplet that displays the very axiom in action within his own poetic formulation: Burlington and Pope, each in his own sphere, show how to do it.

This principle is implicit throughout Pope's epistle, as in his immediate response to the excessive scale on which Timon's villa is constructed ('What sums are thrown away!', line 100) and his wry observation of Timon's library ('In books, not authors, curious is my lord; / To all their dated backs he turns you round', lines 134–35). As the poem approaches its finale, Pope re-states his main theme in another end-stopped couplet: 'Tis use alone that sanctifies expense, / And splendour borrows all her rays from sense' (lines 179–80). Such pragmatism is, as we saw in Chapter 11, echoed at the social level in *An Essay on Man*: 'For forms of government let fools contest; / Whate'er is best administered is best'

('Epistle 3', lines 303–04). Cut the superfluous theorizing: what makes people's lives better is a properly functioning system. The true value of books lies in their content—the author's words—not in the date and quality of their binding. Timon strips books of their human reference, so reducing them to inactive material objects. Buildings are places for people to live in, and people respond best to whatever best serves their needs and adds pleasure to their lives.

Would that life were that simple and straightforward. We get only as far as the second couplet in our paragraph before gentle notes of satirical comedy slide in: 'Yet shall (my lord) your just, your noble rules / Fill half the land with imitating fools'. The parenthesis has a touch of mock-solemn deference, and 'noble' quietly puns on Burlington's rank. Pope remains delicately hesitant, but fools rush in without observing any caesura or any decorum. The rhyme of 'noble rules' and 'imitating fools' is a telling wound. And not only are the fools many and we, my lord, few; but 'one beauty' engenders 'many blunders'. You may condemn the fools' lack of taste, but you cannot deny their industry.

The imitating fools are energetic in their misapplied activity, and they are versatile in the scope of those misapplications. These range from inappropriate choice of decoration for the function of the building ('Load some vain church with old theatric state') to abuse of enhancing materials ('Reverse your ornaments'); from inappropriate use of whole structures ('Turn arcs of triumph to a garden gate') to misplaced architectural structures ('call the winds through long arcades to roar'). Pope's range of language matches the wild reach of the fools' imaginative disarrangement: from demeaning nouns ('dog-hole', defined in *OED* as a 'hole fit for a dog; a vile or mean dwelling or place, unfit for human habitation') to disrespectful verbs ('clap'); from startling oxymorons ('vain church') to slangy colloquialisms ('on't'). At the heart of the fools' perverse activity lies a repeated lack of attention, an inability—or refusal—to apply the care required for art to emerge. So, the drawings they take from Burlington's architectural sheets are 'random', ornaments are put on back to front or in reverse, and 'rustic' (rough-hewn) stonework is cut up into small interlaced 'bits' rather than used as contrasting blocks within an overall surface.

The paragraph's final couplet rounds off the entire farrago. The fools' ignorance of what they are doing is exposed by the undermining

implications of 'act' and 'part'. There is a world of difference between conscious enactment of noble principles and unauthentic game-playing. Rules of art—the last line picks up on those 'noble rules' placed in ironic rhyme to 'fools' at the beginning—are rendered absurd by being invoked as justification for self-destructive squandering of riches. Like the crazed creatures who are gathered into Dulness's vortex in book 4 of *The Dunciad*, the fools suffer from an incapacity to see how parts should answer parts to 'slide into a whole' (line 66). Everything is left in pieces. But, unlike the sleep-walkers to oblivion in that later, devastating, satire, these representatives of chaos are alert, busy, and unflagging. It is all so exhausting.

How, then, is order to be restored and the integrity of Burlington's example re-established? At the centre of the next paragraph (lines 39–46) lies the word 'sense'. It concludes the fourth line and begins the fifth, so acting as amid-point fulcrum: 'Something there is, more needful than expense, / And something previous even to taste—'tis sense: / Good sense, which only is the gift of heaven'. To exemplify the power of good sense to reinstate order, Pope turns to another art-form, one that frequently accompanies architecture: landscape gardening, or the arrangement of the grounds of a building to match and support architectural forms:

Lines 57–64

> Consult the genius of the place in all;
> That tells the waters or to rise, or fall,
> Or helps the ambitious hill the heavens to scale,
> Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;
> Calls in the country, catches opening glades,
> Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades;
> Now breaks, or now directs, the intending lines,
> Paints as you plant, and as you work, designs.

The syntax of this eight-line paragraph repairs the centrifugal flight to chaos in the 'imitating fools' passage. It restores order by defining a proper and respectful relationship between human activity and natural principles. The result is integrity of vision, a harmonious hierarchy which embraces creation and creativity.

The principal means by which Pope renders this is his choice and placement of verbs. The would-be landscape gardener is addressed directly by the imperative 'Consult'. The verb derives from Latin 'consulere', with its central meaning of taking counsel. Legal connotations are to the fore in its English application, but the Latin verb was equally open to religious usage. Pope's 'genius of the place' is his classically conscious version of *genius loci*, the attribution to place of a spirit, an inherent principle of animation. This idea of taking advice from the quasi-divine ordering within a landscape reverses the imitating fools' wanton and self-defeating imposition of their solipsistic and hubristic irrationality on whatever they touch. 'Consult' enhances a contrary humility: our first duty is to observe the proper order of creation, in which whatever force does animate nature is respected and acknowledged. The whole line serves to reset human deference and return calm to the fools' aimless bustling. The analogy also serves, discreetly, to re-establish Burlington's authority in the sphere of architecture. He is, as it were, the 'genius' of modern neo-Palladianism; his editions of Jones and Palladio were the aesthetic movement's authoritative texts to be consulted and not ripped asunder.

From this point on, all the principal verbs in the paragraph are those for which 'the genius of the place' is subject. These represent the advice we should seek to follow. The sequence of verbs is semantically varied to reflect the particular aspects of nature addressed. For example, the verbs in the second couplet are set in parallel across the lines ('Or helps', 'Or scoops'), but are antithetical in meaning as the features of landscape are opposites. Hills reach towards the skies, and can be metaphorically rendered as aiming high, as if animated by hope. 'Scoops', by contrast, elegantly breaks into the ground with an orderly motion implicit in 'circling'. The couplet in its entirety balances rising and descending ground as nature always does: a rise looks forward to a matching declivity in a visually harmonious created landscape. The role of human activity is to respect and co-operate with the resultant symmetry, and Pope's lines follow in their simultaneous balance and antithesis.

Pope deploys these verbs in varying and gently accelerating rhythm: one per line in 59–60 ('helps', 'scoops'), doubling up in 61–62 ('Calls/catches', 'Joins/varies'). This restrained increase in pace as the paragraph proceeds reaches its climax in the final couplet, where

human agency is explicitly brought into proper relationship with the forces of animating nature. Pope appropriately reserves his most stylistically intense and virtuosic rhetoric for this couplet: his art rises to the challenge of an aphoristic conclusion. The first line follows the dual verb format of the preceding couplet and connects both to an object ('intending lines'), which strikes an inspired and appropriate classical note. 'Intending' has its roots, via French 'entendre', in Latin 'intendere', meaning to stretch out, to endeavour to attain, to purpose (*OED*, 'intend', v. 2, sense 5). Latin applied it to various semantic fields, starting from the literal reaching out of arms towards or in the direction of an object of wish or attention. Most significantly for Pope's purposes, 'intending' referred to the cognate ideas of turning one's thoughts or attention to a fitting end. Horace, for example, writes of directing the mind to one's studies: 'animum studiis'. In Pope's context of visual experience, the implied direct object is 'eyes', from the Latin 'intendere oculos'. So, the lines of nature lead our eyes in an expressive and intentional direction.

This classicism prepares for the final line of the paragraph, where Pope sets out one of his favourite structures, a chiasmus. Here the two verbs deriving from the genius of the place are located at the beginning and end: 'Paints', 'designs'. Human corresponding activity is enclosed within these twin verbs: 'as you plant, and as you work'. The key semantic and philosophical point is that humans take on the humble and laborious roles, while truly artistic activity is the sphere of the animating spirit infusing the whole. 'Paints' and 'designs' ordinarily operate within the realm of human creativity. Within the wider vision of this paragraph, that principle is transferred to its proper agent. Human activity is put in its place: valuable and satisfying, but secondary. Humility (in contrast to the fools who are 'Proud to catch cold', line 36) is restored. It all makes sense, really. So, the first line of the next paragraph picks up that word, which by now has gathered together its physical and mental meanings (what we perceive visually and what we grasp intellectually) and chimes the line with a central definition of harmony: 'Still follow sense, of every art the soul, / Parts answering parts shall slide into a whole' (lines 65–66).

However, Pope's satirical mind cannot leave matters there. It is not that easy to shake off a desire to give rein to, and simultaneously deride,

the objects of satire that paradoxically are its bread and butter as well as its poison. The *Epistle to Burlington* has seen off one set of fools and restored 'nature' (line 50) and Burlington to their rightful places. But there is still room for the biggest fool of the lot. A tour of Timon's villa makes up the largest part of the poem (lines 99–168). It was also, in its time and for long afterwards, the poem's most controversial section, as gleeful gossips and curious commentators ventured at guessing the model for Timon. Time alone has allowed the likely truth to emerge: that the vulgarians' vulgarian was a fictitious composite rather than a specific target.

The principal ironic message of Pope's account of Timon's estate and house is that the hubristic scale of his villa and gardens has, as its direct consequence, a diminution of the human, and, so, of Timon himself. Pope's reference to Brobdignag (line 104), the land of the giants in his friend Swift's recently published *Gulliver's Travels*, makes the point while also connecting this section of the poem to the satirical ends of the Scriblerus Club. The giant fool is really a 'puny insect' (line 108), like the devotees of Dulness who swarm around their Great Mother in book 4 of *The Dunciad* (see Chapter 26).

A specific satirical point is made in the course of the description of his gardens. However hard you try to get fools to think straight about an aesthetic principle, their infinite variety will twist it out of shape again:

Lines 113–20

His gardens next your admiration call,
On every side you look, behold the wall!
No pleasing intricacies intervene,
No artful wildness to perplex the scene;
Grove nods at grove, each alley has a brother,
And half the platform just reflects the other.
The suffering eye inverted nature sees,
Trees cut to statues, statues thick as trees.

Harmony and its Palladian architectural equivalent, symmetry, are the ideals underlying a balanced view of the place of humans within nature, but trust a fool to grab the wrong end even of this stick. Harmony, in short, may have distortion as its obvious opposite, but it also has monotony

as its lop-sided extreme. The true ideal is an Aristotelian golden mean, as Pope frequently reminds us. For example: 'Like good Erasmus in an honest mean, / In moderation placing all my glory, / While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory', *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated* (lines 66–68.)

Timon knows that proportion lies at the heart of taste. He may even have read Pope on this very topic in, say, the St. Peter's section of *An Essay on Criticism* (lines 247–52). But he has missed a crucial element of true classicism, as surely as the imitating fools who snatch randomly from Burlington's designs. The aim and definition of true beauty are the 'joint force and full result' of all constituent parts (*An Essay on Criticism*, line 246). Yes, a wall is an essential element in, well, a walled garden. Simply building four walls and leaving it at that, however, is to confuse parts with whole. At first glance, Pope's use of the verb 'perplex' as the counterbalancing effect of 'pleasing intricacies' may itself appear perplexing if read in its more common negative sense of 'confuse'. However, Pope is here digging into his language to expose its own intricacy. Latin 'perplexus' can indeed mean 'confused', but it also means 'intricate', as 'plexus' was used of a plaited, interwoven texture, such as a garland of flowers. The straight lines of a wall require to be set off by the variation of pattern plantings bring.

The final couplet of these lines invokes chiasmus to perform its other, satirical, function, matching its primary creative use, as in 'Paints as you plant, and as you work, designs' (see above, line 64). In 'Trees cut to statues, statues thick as trees', artistic taste is, as its preceding line has it, 'inverted' rather than positively illustrated. Back in 1713, Pope had written an essay in the *Guardian* (no. 173, 7 September 1713) mocking the fashion for topiary work, shaping of plants into sculptural forms. Here, Pope adds an inverse distortion by telling us that Timon crowds his actual, stone statues together as if they were a grove of trees. Statues, being three-dimensional works of art, require space for the viewer to observe them from all perspectives. If you cannot do this, then, again, the artistic event is stripped of all its elements. The aesthetic values of trees and statues have been inverted in a mutually negating act of ignorance. Pope's highly compressed chiasmus is as sharp in its expression as Timon's garden is obtuse in its.

Lines 191–94

You too proceed! make falling arts your care,
Erect new wonders, and the old repair;
Jones and Palladio to themselves restore,
And be whate'er Vitruvius was before:

This final paragraph returns, after the satirical centre of the poem, to where we began: with a direct address to the Earl of Burlington. 'You show us', 'You too proceed'. Focus now, though, is on Burlington's active involvement in the public sphere. The poem has dealt with the theory, the 'noble rules' which he has set out in his editions of the designs of Inigo Jones and Andrea Palladio. But Burlington is not just a mere theorist. He is himself a practising architect, one who builds, who engages in the real world, and so puts his ideas to the test. 'Proceed!'—progress, march on—is the imperative now.

The future works, which the poet both hopes and expects will enrich the architecture of contemporary Britain, are to be solidly based on a full and proper understanding of the achievements of the past. These lines provide the pedigree. Vitruvius was the Roman architect who built the Augustan city. Palladio's work in Renaissance Italy was itself based on Vitruvian precedent; and Jones has initiated the revival of classicism in seventeenth-century England. Now the responsibility moves on to our present eighteenth century. This endeavour will include and improve the past—'the old repair'—and, at the same time, 'erect new wonders'. Neo-classicism is a present acknowledgement of its responsibility to tradition and to the future. Pope's poem sets this out, and, in this radiant finale, brushes aside the fools whose stupidity has been so witheringly and wittily exposed. He, too, begins the 1730s with *The Dunciad* of 1729 behind him and engages on his task of building an epic for the new age. He, too, proceeds. Confidence and optimism are to the fore here. But will those fools confess their defeat and stay away? Does their presence as objects of satire at the heart of this poem's manifesto remain a worrying, niggling reminder?