



‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 William Hutchings



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

William Hutchings, *‘Wit’s Wild Dancing Light’: Reading the Poems of Alexander Pope*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of this image is provided in the caption and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

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

13. *An Epistle to Allen, Lord Bathurst*

Examples: Lines 161–62, 187–92, 203–04, 209–12, 223–28,
249–50, 263–68, 299–310

Pope's planning for a large-scale study of ethical, philosophical, economic, and sociological principles began at least as early as 1730. The *Epistles* to Burlington and Bathurst were the first two individual contributions, alongside the lengthier composition of the four epistles of *An Essay on Man*. Given Pope's perennial tendency to revise drafts and to attend to appropriate times for publication, it is difficult to ascertain exact completion dates. The Bathurst *Epistle* is theoretically closely linked to the Burlington *Epistle*, as studies of the use and abuse of wealth in, respectively, the newly rich merchant classes and the aristocracy. By delaying publication until 1733, Pope signalled an equally important relationship between the specific and personal Bathurst poem and the philosophically ambitious *Essay on Man*. The *Epistle to Bathurst* was published on 15 January 1733; the first epistle of *An Essay on Man* on 20 February that year, closely followed by its second and third epistles.

That link is textually emphasized by clear cross-references, as in the first of the following extracts. These have been selected to describe, broadly, the shape of the poem's argument.

The Maxim: Lines 161–62

Extremes in nature equal good produce,
Extremes in man concur to general use.

Pope here adopts the aphoristic manner frequently seen in *An Essay on Man*. He thereby effects a stylistic interplay between the two poems,

which would have been a crucial integrating factor for the magnum opus, had it been completed. The role of an aphorism is to express an idea in its most concentrated form (Chapter 11's examination of *An Essay on Man* contains a full discussion of aphorisms.) A single line of verse is perfect for this; its separate and integrated state is rendered both visually by naturally embracing a single syntactic unit and by the empty spaces preceding and succeeding it on the page. When made one half of two such lines in an end-stopped couplet, as here, the force of each line is enhanced by the other's contiguity. The semantic relationship between these two lines wavers between similarity and antithesis.

'Nature' is different both from 'man' and from a larger whole of which 'man' is a part. 'Man' thus 'fills out' (the etymological meaning of 'complement') a space within 'nature'. The subjects of the two lines then lead to antithetical predicates. Extremes in nature—the 'reconciled extremes of drought and rain, seedtime and harvest, life and death, change and permanence ... on which, in the traditional view, the well-being of the world is founded' (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, ed. by Mack, p. 79)—balance out to create the 'equality' that is creation's equilibrium. Extremes in man, as the poem will go on to illustrate, form a series of opposites, such as the miser and the prodigal. As far as these individuals are concerned, there can be no reconciliation: they are either one or the other, as in the characters of Old Cotta and Young Cotta (see below). Only at the social level may they be seen as 'concurring' to 'general use'; and, even there, it is arguable that the outcome is mutual destruction rather than any form of social balance.

Pope's careful choice of verb, here, is telling. To 'concur' originally meant to 'run together violently; to come into collision' (*OED*, 'concur', *v.* 1; from the Latin 'currere', meaning 'to run'). The latest usage in this sense cited by the *OED* is 1692, a date close enough to Pope's poem to suggest that its shock waves might still be felt rippling through, even as the more modern sense of 'combine in action', 'co-operate' (*OED*, sense 3) was becoming firmly established. Telling also is Pope's metrical variation between the two lines. The pause between subject and predicate in the first line is at the halfway mark, dividing the line into two equal parts. An equivalent pause in the second line divides it into four and six syllables. Both are, of course, common rhythmic divisions and are

therefore felt as variations rather than violent disruptions; and both lines divide the stresses into two in the first part, three in the second. The couplet as a whole, then, ends in harmony.

But the differences remain as at least a tremor. Especially is this so when compared with the couplet's fellow in *An Essay on Man*: 'Extremes in nature equal ends produce, / In man they join to some mysterious use' ('Epistle 2', lines 205–06). The first lines in both poems mean the same: the 'ends' produced by nature are 'good'. However, the second line in *An Essay on Man* means something different. Pope's theory there is that a single human being can, or does, contain at least the potential for both extremes to mingle to some degree. As Mack asks, 'in an ambitious statesman, how much is desire for self-aggrandizement and how much is public spirit'? (*TE*, III, part 1, 1950, p. 80.) This is a mystery indeed. The more philosophically inclined *Essay* digs somewhat deeper as a result of its argument that human beings are a compound of self-love and reason: two forces that pull in opposite directions. The *Epistle to Bathurst* is less searching, more concerned to entertain and amuse with a series of portraits of comic or satirical types. However, both couplets end up in the same place: 'use', a link between the *Epistles to Burlington* and *Bathurst*, both of which have as their sub-title, 'Of the Use of Riches'. These variations between the *Epistles* and the *Essay* perhaps provide a clue to how Pope might have wanted his complete magnum opus to have looked. By building it up through bringing together differing genres, and so differing voices, Pope would have presented an intellectual epic appropriate for a modern, diverse world.

The Examples: Old Cotta and Young Cotta: Lines 187–92,
203–04, 209–12

Like some lone Chartreux stands the good old hall,
Silence without, and fasts within the wall;
No raftered roofs with dance and tabor sound,
No noontide-bell invites the country round:
Tenants with sighs the smokeless towers survey,
And turn the unwilling steeds another way:

lines 187–92

When Pope turns from general maxim to specific examples, his poetry shifts from abstract to concrete. His example of the tendency of generations to swing from one extreme to the opposite is a fictional one of Old and Young Cotta. We can feel Pope relaxing into a mode he finds congenial: the comic portrait. The verse expands from aphoristic economy into satirical extravagance. His language sparkles with the glee of inventing and representing, cartoon-like, the sights and sounds of human absurdity.

To depict Old Cotta's miserly frugality, Pope reaches for the old country-house ideal of charity and hospitality as exemplified in poems such as Ben Jonson's *To Penshurst* (1616), a paean to the social conscience and generosity of the Sidney family. This social vision rested on the duty and responsibility of the great and the good to serve as the hub of a well-ordered community in the 'country' (in the sense of the surrounding area, the estate). In terms of *An Essay on Man*, such behaviour exhibits a chain of social order, which 'Connects each being, greatest with the least' (*An Essay on Man*, 'Epistle 3', line 23).

Old Cotta, alas, has mislaid his principles, abandoning 'his fortune and his birth' (line 177) as surely as his manor. His 'good old hall'—Pope's adjectives summon up the glib nostalgia of a creed conveniently agreeable to those favoured by fortune—instead adopts the isolationism ('lone') of a Carthusian monastery, whose contemplative austerity acts as an anti-type, rather daringly for a Catholic writer, however notionally so. 'Silence', appropriate for a place of prayer and meditation, is set against the 'dance and tabor' of social pleasures or the inviting 'noontide-bell'. Everything at Cotta Hall is framed in negatives, in absences: no sounds, no merriment, no invitations, no warmth (the 'smokeless towers' that would indicate a once-vigorous and welcoming hearth). Repulsion replaces attraction, turning away displaces warm greeting. And it is not only his tenants who face rejection: Cotta is turning his back on the traditional role that alone can sustain and justify such a social model.

Cotta's son, however, inverts his father's frugality into flagrant displays of indulgence. But it is narrowly focussed indulgence:

Whole slaughtered hecatombs, and floods of wine,
Fill the capacious squire, and deep divine!

lines 203–04

Old Cotta's monkish habits sink beneath 'hecatombs' (literally, the sacrifice of a hundred cattle or oxen in Greek or Roman feasts) and 'floods of wine'. Young Cotta's pagan rituals and extravagance replace his father's austerity and isolationism. He shares his plenty with a narrow (in range, if not in girth) and dubious set, secular and ecclesiastical, far removed from the idealized society summoned up by long-lost country-house principles.

Nor is Young Cotta's sense of national duty accurately aimed:

The woods recede around the naked seat,
The sylvans groan—no matter—for the fleet:
Next goes his wool—to clothe our valiant bands,
Last, for his country's love, he sells his lands.

lines 209–12

Such is his 'zeal for that great house'—the House of Hanover, now reigning in the person of George II—that he despoils his own house of its estate's natural resources. Pope's irony is precise and remorseless: the 'country'—now in the sense of the nation—receives from Young Cotta the gifts of the entire estate which traditionally (and rightly if one subscribes to the code) ought to furnish and maintain the wealth and health of 'the country' in that earlier sense of the surrounding neighbourhood (line 190).

Pope's language is also tellingly precise. The 'sylvans groan' in the multiple senses of the men and women who live in the woods as foresters, the creatures whose habitat is thereby destroyed, and the symbolic deities or spirits of the woods. The resonance of classical mythology joins with modern economic and environmental well-being to lament their destruction in the service of national naval and military glory. But what price a 'country' devastated at the altar of the 'country'? Cotta's own resultant bankruptcy follows logically: he has sold out, sacrificed himself for that chimera; his actions are both generally and personally destructive. The structure of the lines of verse, too, is put under stress. The dashes that appear in lines 210 and 211 break up the rhythm in stylistic sympathy with the plight of the groaning sylvan and the empty pastures.

The Mean: Bathurst: Lines 223–28

To balance fortune by a just expense,
 Join with economy, magnificence;
 With splendour, charity; with plenty, health;
 Oh teach us, BATHURST! yet unspoiled by wealth!
 That secret rare, between the extremes to move
 Of mad good nature, and of mean self-love.

Addressees of Pope's epistles generally represent a standard by which the comic or tragic failures can be measured. Allen, Lord Bathurst was one of the twelve peers created by Queen Anne in 1712 to ensure a majority for her Tory government. Pope addresses him as both a close personal friend of long standing and a public, political figure (Mack 1985, pp. 371–73). He stands as a generous, living counter to the wildly fictional parodies of Old and Young Cotta.

Pope's poetry accordingly reverts from the spirited burlesque manner of the two paragraphs on the Cottas to poetry which measures out the calming influence of his friend. The opposite of the Cottas' destructive extremes is simply and directly stated: 'balance', 'between the extremes'. Words and phrases are organized in the lines so that they effortlessly occupy places that represent spatial and rhythmic equilibrium: 'economy'/'magnificence' are ample words of the same metrical form; 'With splendour, charity'/'with plenty, health' expand into phrases that fill out a complete line through exactly balanced syntax; 'Of mad good nature, and of mean self-love' are prepositional phrases shaped, with the conjunction, into equal halves—whether the reading voice stresses two syllables in each (mád, náture; méan, lóve) or three ('mád good náture'; 'méan sélf-lóve'). Harmony is welcomingly soothing after the disruptive hustle and bustle of the lengthy Cotta passages. The poem could, one feels, end here. Indeed, some of Pope's epistles, such as *An Epistle to a Lady*, do use their direct appeal to addressees as a satisfying resolution. The overtly ethical language Pope uses ('virtue' in line 220; 'self-love' at the close of the paragraph) ensures an elevated tone and set of references. But, in fact, the poem is little more than halfway done: 228 out of 402 lines. Further exemplification and exploration seem to be demanded. Why is this?

The Exemplar: The Man of Ross: Lines 249–50, 263–68

Lord Bathurst stands at the top end of the social and economic spectrum. Pope neither hides nor apologizes for this, so forestalling one obvious objection to the implication that Bathurst and his privileged like are specially fit and able to exhibit gracious and rational behaviour. Bathurst has the ‘sense to value riches’ (line 219), and our extract is full of words emphasizing his blessed position within modern society: ‘fortune’, ‘magnificence’, ‘splendour’, ‘plenty’, ‘wealth’ (note the quiet, so quiet as to pass almost unheard, ‘yet’ before ‘unspoiled by wealth’ in line 226). ‘It’s all very well for you, Bathurst, enjoying the prestige of your status and the lustre of your Cirencester estate’, we may well murmur. Pope—no heir to privilege himself, and never a landowner—is ready with a due response:

But all our praises why should lords engross?
Rise, honest Muse! and sing the MAN of ROSS.

lines 249–50

The verb ‘engross’, highlighted as the rhyme word, is subtly cogent here. Its primary meaning in the context is ‘occupy, take up’; it suggests the thought ‘why should we spend all our time, and all our poem, praising aristocrats, of however recent formation?’. ‘Engross’, though, also has a specific financial meaning and one not without an ambiguously moral side. It means ‘to buy up wholesale’, from the French phrase *en gros*, signifying ‘in one whole’. As the *OED* notes, the English verb particularly implies the business practice of buying up ‘the whole stock, or as much as possible, of (a commodity) for the purpose of “regrating” or retailing it at a monopoly price’ (‘engross’, *v.* 2, sense 3). This sense was very much in contemporary usage and could be extended to include land: the *OED* cites Swift and Arthur Young, the eighteenth-century English writer on agriculture, as examples. It is a rather uneasy word to apply to substantial landholders, however virtuous.

Step up, then, the ‘Man of Ross’. Pope wrote his own note to identify the real-world figure who inspired the character. ‘The person here celebrated, who with a small estate actually performed all these good works ... was called Mr John Kyrle. He died in the year 1724, aged 90, and lies interred in the chancel of the church of Ross in Herefordshire’.

Howard Erskine-Hill's *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope* (1975; pp. 15–41) provides further information on Kyrle.

Behold the market-place with poor o'erspread!
 The MAN of ROSS divides the weekly bread:
 He feeds yon alms-house, neat, but void of state,
 Where age and want sit smiling at the gate:
 Him portioned maids, apprenticed orphans blessed,
 The young who labour, and the old who rest.

lines 263–68

Direct and simple acts of charity invite a direct and simple style of narration. Pope's depiction of Kyrle is itself 'neat, but void of state'. Verbs are undramatic but precise ('divides', 'feeds'), nouns humble but with their own dignity ('man', 'bread'). Actions are fair and even-handed, young and old equally benefiting as the bread is equally distributed. Everything is in proportion in a supportive society, where maids with their dowries and orphans with their apprenticeships are granted what they need for taking their place within a stratified but clear social organization. The result is equilibrium, measured out like the weekly bread and the balance of 'The young who labour, and the old who rest'. This is a functioning society underpinned by deeds, not a philosophical system of abstractions.

But is this all, well, idealized if not outright naïve? Yes, it is, in the way that pastoral presents an unpretentious and artless image of nature by means of a graceful and felicitous style. That is what makes an ideal standard by which any blemish or insufficiency can be measured. An exemplar is a model, a pattern for imitation, which is what the Man of Ross offers within the structure of the poem. Antithesis and severe logic demand an equivalent representation of a ruinous extreme, and the poem soon provides one.

The Warning: 'great Villers': Lines 299–310

In the worst inn's worst room, with mat half-hung,
 The floors of plaster, and the walls of dung,
 On once a flock-bed, but repaired with straw,
 With tape-tied curtains, never meant to draw,
 The George and garter dangling from that bed
 Where tawdry yellow strove with dirty red,

Great Villers lies—alas! how changed from him,
 That life of pleasure, and that soul of whim!
 Gallant and gay, in Cliveden's proud alcove,
 The bower of wanton Shrewsbury and love;
 Or just as gay, at council, in a ring
 Of mimicked statesmen, and their merry king.

This is George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1628–1687), Pope's actual anti-type to the real figure of John Kyrle. Here, again, Pope supplies his own note: 'This lord, yet more famous for his vices than his misfortunes, after having been possessed of about £50,000 a year, and passed through many of the highest posts in the Kingdom, died in the year 1687, in a remote inn in Yorkshire, reduced to the utmost misery.'

Pope's picture of the declined and debauched aristocrat is painted with precision and abundance perfectly matched to its structural role as encapsulating all that is the opposite of the Man of Ross. The latter, Pope tells us, performed his charitable actions on an income of 'five hundred pounds a year' (line 280). Buckingham's fortune was a mathematically convenient hundred times greater (the adverb 'about' is Pope's apologetic nod to the lure of approximation). So, the scene depicted is a distillation of anti-pastoral, ironically located against wry invocation of the language of its idealized opposite ('gay', 'bower').

Pope does not hold back, giving rein to his developed sense of the grotesque. It is not enough that the scene of the Duke's degradation is the worst inn: it is the worst room you can find there. Think of the worst, then think of something worse. Everything is askew, a riot of imbalance and squalor. The mat, itself a coarse fabric, is precariously only 'half-hung'. The flock-bed is bad enough, as a crude decline from fashionable feathers to bits of cloth of any sort; 'repaired with straw' takes it down a further step. Curtains need tape to keep them together, but then they can't even be drawn, anyway. As for the walls, other products of the stable make do.

Pope's couplet about Villiers's 'George and garter' sums it all up. The article of clothing no longer graces an elegant leg to represent the highest order of English knighthood; it 'dangles' uncertainly from the wretched bed, displaced and demeaned. Its gold buckle and emblem of 'Honi soit qui mal y pense' embroidered in gold (*OED* 'garter', sb., sense 2) are now mockingly matched to the bed's 'tawdry yellow' fighting for

pride of place with 'dirty red' (best not to enquire further). It is all a far cry from the insouciant, cavalier balance of 'That life of pleasure, and that soul of whim' and the 'merry King'—Charles II—whose notorious behaviour served as model and excuse for his society. 'The mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease' is how Pope will sum up the 'wits of either Charles's days' (*The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, lines 107–08). Now, he proceeds, there is 'No wit to flatter' (line 311) the lonely, exposed, and rejected Duke of Carolean misrule.

The vigour with which Pope depicts his debauched nobleman is compellingly attractive, even as its materials are nauseatingly repellent. This combination is at the heart of those forms of satire that plunge all too deeply into human ugliness. It is paradoxical, but true. And truthfulness is Pope's aim. But where does this leave a poem whose maxim is 'Extremes in man concur to general use'? What on earth could be the 'general use' served by Buckingham? An answer to this question requires us to step back from the immediate and particular to the context and the whole. This is true of the *Epistle* taken by itself, where ideal and antitype belong equally to the form of the complete poem. And it is true of the larger project of Pope's 1730s corpus. The challenge to us is as ambitious as it was to him.