'WIT'S WILD DANCING LIGHT'
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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14. *An Epistle to Sir Richard Temple, Lord Cobham*

Examples: Lines 23–30,184–85, 256–61

The *Epistle to Cobham* was the third of the four *Epistles to Several Persons* to be written, but it was placed first in the group in the 1735 *Works* and subsequent editions. The Twickenham editor, F. W. Bateson, argued that Pope wrote specifically to take that leading position, as part of his emerging magnum opus (*TE*, III, part 2, p. xxxiv). Its first publication date, 16 January 1734, ties it very closely to *An Essay on Man*, the fourth and final epistle of which came out just eight days later.

That the *Epistle* makes minimal reference to its addressee, as compared with the other three (Burlington, Bathurst, and Martha Blount), also suggests that its aim was more to set out general principles than to make full use within its argument of that addressee's private character or public status. Lord Cobham acts as a suitable figure for Pope to reach for, given the eulogy for Cobham's landscape garden at Stowe he had written in the *Epistle to Burlington*. However, compared with the significant role played by Burlington in his poem, and, in particular, the resonant finale where Pope hails and encourages him as a force for good, Pope's nod towards Cobham in the *Epistle*'s last two couplets has, unusually, a somewhat perfunctory air.

In the revised 1744 quarto edition, the so-called 'deathbed' edition, some changes were made in the order and structure of a number of verse-paragraphs (Rogers 2006, p. 655). Critics have disagreed about the extent to which William Warburton was responsible for these alterations, and the declining Pope merely acquiescent. Editions thereafter differ. The Twickenham follows the original, 1734, version;

whereas the Oxford editors, Herbert Davis and, later, Pat Rogers, took the 1744 route. Given the likelihood that the 1744 text was prepared with at least some consideration of the lapsed magnum opus project (*An Essay on Man* was also prepared for a 1744 edition), the following extracts employ that revised order.

Lines 23–30

> Our depths who fathoms, or our shallows finds,
> Quick whirls, and shifting eddies, of our minds?
> On human actions reason though you can,
> It may be reason, but it is not man:
> His principle of action once explore,
> That instant 'tis his principle no more.
> Like following life through creatures you dissect,
> You lose it in the moment you detect.

The eight-lined paragraph is not structured as two complementary quartets, as Pope often chooses to do in such paragraphs. Rather, it has the more ambiguous form of a large chiasmus. The middle four lines spin abstract terms around in self-negating order. You can exercise your reason on 'human actions', but, if you do, you end up cherishing your 'reason' but letting 'man' slip away. You end up with a negative: 'it is not man'. Within this self-defeating process, the word 'reason' suffers a belittling diminution conveyed by the change in auxiliary verbs: yes, you 'can' reason if you want to, but, though it 'may' be what you intended, its inability to do the business leaves it a weakened possibility. The two uses of the word 'reason' uneasily fill the centre of a chiastic couplet: 'human', 'reason'/'reason, 'man'. In the second of the middle couplets, too, the word 'principle', proudly up front in the first line, is relegated to a negative as it crosses to the conclusion of the second line: 'his principle no more'. Once again, you have lost it (see line 30, above).

Chiasmus is the most semantically flexible of rhetorical figures, its cross-over pattern allowing either a satisfying sensation of parts agreeably falling into place or a jarring feeling of disjunction of meaning. The two outer couplets enclosing the shifting abstracts of lines 25–28 provide, respectively, one metaphor rapidly exemplified in four variations ('depths', 'shallows', 'whirls', eddies') and one simile threading its way through. The first couplet leaves our minds out of

their depth, lost in contrary movements. The final couplet phonically connects a self-defeating process ('Like', 'life', dissect') with a self-defeating outcome ('lose', 'detect').

How, then, can we learn anything about what makes human beings think and act? The poem's proposed solution is that, although our principles for action may be hard to grasp and their unceasing variability difficult to keep up with, everyone has, however lost in the *mêlée* of apparent contradictions, a single 'ruling passion' (line 174). Track that down, and you have the 'clue' that 'once found, unravels all the rest' (line 178). The word 'clue', originally 'clew', meant a ball of yarn or thread, which could be used to 'thread' one's way into or out of a maze or labyrinth.

After the statement of this principle, Pope applies it to a series of actual and fictional figures, varying his tone from comic to tragic. The first, and longest, such example is Philip, Duke of Wharton, whose highly public career as poet, Catholic convert, and gentleman of pleasure had come to an untimely end with his death in 1731 at the age of thirty-three. His ruling passion Pope defines as 'lust of praise' (line 181), which motivated his behaviour without any discrimination of the value of that praise when heterogeneously sought and gained.

Lines 184–85

> Though wondering senates hung on all he spoke,
> The club must hail him master of the joke.

Wharton's gift for effective oratory is applied to contrary ends in contrasting contexts. Pope's satirical scalpel dissects by means of a tellingly sharp antithetical couplet. Senates, gatherings of the most distinguished voices in the *polis* (at least theoretically), are set against 'the club'. Pope may be thinking here of the notorious Hell Fire Club, of which Wharton was reportedly a member, rather than the (at least theoretically) more sedate environments of London clubs. The verbs 'hung' and 'hail' phonically link the exercise of power to both stages. The concluding rhyme-words of each line, 'spoke' and 'joke', play the (again, at least theoretical) dignity of a parliamentary speech against the triviality of making a crowd laugh. Thus, apparently contradictory behaviour is linked by the pursuit of rhetorical renown, no matter where or why or to what end. A strength declines into

a weakness because of an absence of judgement, an unhealthily random employment of a real gift.

Lines 256–61

At the other end of the tragic/comic spectrum is this concise and witty imaginary death-bed scene between a rich man and his legal representative:

> 'I give and I devise' (old Euclio said,
> And sighed) 'my lands and tenements to Ned.'
> Your money, Sir; 'My money, Sir, what all?
> Why,—if I must'—(then wept) 'I give it Paul. '
> The manor, Sir?– 'The manor! hold,' he cried,
> 'Not that—I cannot part with that'—and died.

Legal terms ('devise'—to assign by a will—and 'tenements'—lands, properties) provide the formal and serious context. Old Euclio, however, is unable to respond with due dignity. Pope disrupts the rhythm of his lines and couplets to dramatize the breaking up of Euclio's rational grasp on realities. The passage concludes with death converted into bathos, a radical diminution of solemnity into farce. We are left with a sense of the sheer absurdity of human attitudes of mind and behaviour, conveyed by a poet with a gift for comic scenarios.

There is something unsatisfactory about the *Epistle to Cobham.* The 'ruling passion' (line 174) is briefly asserted, and appears conceptually at odds with the main tenor of the various character sketches and scenarios. As Brower puts it, the ruling passion explanation 'is attempted only in a small number of examples, and then applied quite mechanically and perfunctorily', and most of the poem 'demonstrates the deceptions of appearance, the difficulty of getting at reality' (Brower 1959, pp. 260–61). If 'life's stream' will not 'for observation stay' (line 37), and 'Not always actions show the man' (line 109), how can we get to the stability required for defining a fundamental 'reality'? The poem is really far more concerned to illustrate the sheer unpredictability and absurdity of humankind; and it is to these depictions that its vitality and energy are principally directed. The poem's paradox is that it lives most fully when it is itself engaged in dissection. This is what gives it comic and satiric force. No wonder that both the real Wharton and the fictional Euclio were both, as the poem was published, dead.