‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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17. *The Second Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated. To Mr Bethel*

Examples: Lines 45–48, 61–66, 129–50

'Bethel's sermon': Moderation

The larger part of the satire, published in 1734, is given over to Bethel's oration in praise of traditional virtues and avoidance of extremes (lines 11–128). These qualities are woven into the structure of the verse in various ways. An excessively self-indulgent lifestyle, marked by an absurd pursuit of rich food and gourmandism, is set against an equivalently relentless and irrational frugality (lines 17–44 and 49–60; and compare Old Cotta and Young Cotta in the *Epistle to Bathurst*). The outcome of Bethel's account of such mutually defeating modes of life is his praise of temperance, which occupies lines 67–90, framed by a direct opposition of 'temperance' (line 67) and 'intemperate' (line 90). Then a vision of the good old days of sturdy countrymen's habits is contrasted to a critique of urban modernity (lines 91–122). In all this, Bethel—an old friend of Pope's and member of the Burlington circle in Yorkshire—speaks as a bluff, self-avowedly sensible landowner, a contemporary up-market version of Horace's no-nonsense, blunt Ofellus. Pope calls Bethel's speech a sermon, a transliteration of Horace's 'sermo', which actually means speech or conversation. Bethel's principal concern is to draw clear lessons from his observations and examples of flawed human behaviour.

> 'Tis yet in vain, I own, to keep a pother
> About one vice, and fall into the other:
> Between excess and famine lies a mean;
> Plain, but not sordid; though not splendid, clean.
>
> lines 45–48

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The voice is that of a plain-speaking man, as plain as the 'mean' he defines. He speaks colloquially, his first line topped and tailed by an informal abbreviation ('Tis) and a blunt register (pother, meaning fuss, disturbance), each within two-stress verbal constructions ('Tis yet in vain; to keep a pother). Between them, 'I own' curtly takes responsibility for Bethel's adherence to, and expression of, the absurdity of extremes. He will not fall into the trap of being so occupied avoiding 'one vice' that he ends up in 'the other'.

The second couplet is more elevated in language, more stately in structure, and more moralizing in attitude. The two extremes of 'excess' and 'famine' spread across the line to end in their 'mean', a resolution which forms an impressive assertion. The second line presents, as a complement, the most complex structure of the four, its elevated status lying in its echo of a time-honoured and often imitated original, the 'Thames couplets' in Sir John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642):

> O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
> My great example, as it is my theme;
> Through deep yet clear, though gentle yet not dull;
> Strong without rage, without o'erflowing full.
>
> lines 189–92

Denham's lines constitute the rhetorical high-point of his poem. They express desire for a moderate attitude to be adopted between a lazy, 'frozen', absence of principled or committed statesmanship and a zealous, 'torrid' (line 140), pursuit of political aims at any cost. Published as it was in the year Civil War finally broke out after a lengthy period of tense and strained relations between King and Parliament, Denham's poem carries a clear and relevant political message. These lines endow the principle with timeless authority. By locating his ideal within the natural world, Denham distances it from the contingencies of human-created artifice, thus according it an external validity and status. The values it celebrates flow through the observable world. Poetically, his balanced syntax embodies the principle in his expression of it. Pope's version of them follows his model, taking it a step closer to exact symmetry: five syllables either side of the medial semicolon; two or three stresses in each half-line, depending on how a voice internally speaks the line. The chiastic order by which the simple, monosyllabic

positive terms ('Plain'; 'clean') encircle the opposed negative terms ('not sordid'; 'not splendid') and forms a mirror structure, a reflection of controlled yet natural balance. The four lines as a group thus rise rapidly from a colloquial manner to a relatively grand and formal style. Conciseness is a feature of their trenchancy, their aphoristic quality. Their position within the poem, separating a satirical description of one extreme, gourmandism, from that of its complementary opposite, frugality, makes them the pivotal lines within Bethel's sermon.

A paragraph later, Pope reverses his stylistic modulation in the service of another statement of the desirability of seeking a mean that balances extremes. This time, he begins with the more formal assertion and moves to a looser exemplification:

> He knows to live, who keeps the middle state,
> And neither leans on this side, nor on that:
> Nor stops, for one bad cork, his butler's pay,
> Swears, like Albutius, a good cook away;
> Nor lets, like Naevius, every error pass,
> The musty wine, foul cloth, or greasy glass.
>
> lines 61–66

The first couplet here nonchalantly displays an unostentatious rhetorical command of the idea it expresses. The opening assertion joins simple diction to ellipsis ('He knows [how] to live') so as not to waste words. A subordinate construction ('who …') then pauses at the end of its first clause, so making the key phrase, 'the middle state', come to rest appropriately at the couplet's mid-point. The second line then rocks back and forth in illustration of how to find balance ('neither … on this' / 'nor on that'). The remaining couplets present first one extreme of domestic regime—excessive fastidiousness and controlling behaviour—then the other—sloppy disregard of basic cleanliness. These examples quickly slip into comic mode with a trio of snappy adjective/noun phrases: 'musty wine', 'foul cloth', 'greasy glass'. This is writing that effortlessly combines precision and organized syntax with light-touch humorous observation and implicit judgement. This is the satire's dominant tone: a laid-back, uncensorious and amused reflection on the absurd human propensity to self-harming extremes.

Pope's Frugal Living

Pope changes the later section of Horace's satire. Ofellus continues his speech to the end of the poem. Horace adds just a brief insertion to tell us that, as a small boy, he knew Ofellus when his wealth had not yet been reduced, and that Ofellus's simple style of living was as much in evidence then as it is now (lines 112–115). Pope completely takes over the poem through to its conclusion, Bethel's example providing his model. Here is Pope's transitional passage:

> Thus BETHEL spoke, who always speaks his thought,
> And always thinks the very thing he ought.
> His equal mind I copy what I can,
> And as I love, would imitate the man.
> In South Sea days not happier, when surmised
> The lords of thousands, than if now *excised*;
> In forest planted by a father's hand,
> Than in five acres now of rented land.
> Content with little, I can piddle here
> On broccoli and mutton, round the year;
> But ancient friends (though poor, or out of play)
> That touch my bell, I cannot turn away.
> 'Tis true, no turbots dignify my boards,
> But gudgeons, flounders, what my Thames affords:
> To Hounslow Heath I point and Banstead Down,
> Thence comes your mutton, and these chicks my own:
> From yon old walnut-tree a shower shall fall;
> And grapes, long lingering on my only wall,
> And figs, from standard and espalier join;
> The devil is in you if you cannot dine:
> Then cheerful healths (your mistress shall have place)
> And, what's more rare, a poet shall say grace.
>
> lines 129–50

Pope's portrait of his modus vivendi follows on from the bluff nonchalance of Bethel's examples, 'imitating' his friend in easy and open admiration ('as I love'). This is the poet in self-depreciating mode, confessing his (relative) poverty: a rented five acres in contrast to the grandeur of 'lords of thousands'. His produce is all home-grown or locally sourced, acknowledged in the throw-away manner of a twenty-first century right-on colour magazine culinary writer. His manner of

speaking matches his posture. Colloquial diction strikes a comic note. 'Piddle' is a verb meaning to trifle or toy with something, from a task to one's food. The *OED* describes it as 'always depreciatory' (v., sense 1) Pope refuses to take himself seriously or to claim any significant achievement or self-importance. Informal abbreviation ('Tis true') and chatty phrasing ('The devil is in you') keep the tone light. And yet there is more than a hint of harmless pride in the declarative nature of his projected self-image—a touch of 'look at me; see how humble I am'. It is a manner not always absent from modern-day life-style experts, but with Pope it is all a conscious part of the humour with which he presents his speaker, his shadow-self. For the relative lowliness of the fare on offer—mutton, not lamb; gudgeons and flounders, not turbots—comes with the gesturing of ownership, self-sufficiency, and a not unimpressive display of provision. A horn of moderate-plenty, a cornucopia of the middle state, showers down on us like walnuts from his tree. 'Yes, I might live simply', he seems to say, 'but there's lots of it and it's all my own.'

Ethical instruction in the manner of Aristotelian advocacy of a golden mean teaches us to discriminate between bad pride and good pride. The former is vainglory, boastfulness. The latter is a justified assertion of due dignity. To stoop to excessive display of humility is to enter the moral world of the Uriah Heeps and the Mr Collinses of literature, where professed humility paradoxically morphs into insidious pride. Pope's avoidance of such a lapse ensures due ethical integrity. Old friends are welcome to share his feast, and the poet will say grace. These are virtues of which it is right to be proud. Yet Pope can see the humour, the self-consciousness, which peeps out when actually saying this. But, after all, saying so is what ethical poets do; if they do not, they are not doing their job properly.

Comic tone is a principal means of ensuring that such acknowledgement and observation of a writer's ethical duty comes across engagingly. The poem's structure, whereby the principal role is accorded to Bethel/Ofellus and the writer (Pope/Horace) follows and imitates, is another deflecting mechanism. This order of proceeding also allows the moral assertion of Pope's contribution to flow naturally, unjarringly, from his model's—in two senses, for Pope the speaker is modelling himself on Bethel, while Pope the writer is imitating Horace. Bethel and Horace make a good team: modern Yorkshire and classical

Roman, like a neo-Palladian villa designed by John Carr on the basis of Burlingtonian principles, join to form a whole. The result is, in a word, integrity.

Bethel is defined as a model of individual integrity in the couplet that links the conclusion of his speech to Pope's essay in self-definition: 'Thus BETHEL spoke, who always speaks his thought, / And always thinks the very thing he ought.' Here, the location of 'thought'/'thinks' at the heart of the couplet sets reasoned behaviour at the core of ethical endeavour and justifies the use of speech (Bethel's and, now, Pope's) as a means of declaring principles. This is an unchanging ('always'/'always') truth. Bethel's achievement of a balance between thought, speech and action Pope summarizes as 'equal': 'His equal mind I copy what I can, / And as I love, would imitate the man.

As we noted when reading Pope's Fortescue satire, the adjective 'equal' is the equivalent of one of Horace's key ethical terms, the word 'aequus'. The Latin word literally means a place that is even, level, flat (*aequum* as a noun means a 'plain'). By transference, 'aequus' thus refers to anything that is on the level, so is fair, just, right. Of a mind it signifies calm composure, a due balance, in the face of the temporary state of human life—for both 'lords of thousands' and Pope himself, who owns 'five acres now of rented land'. This is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Pope did not own his celebrated Twickenham house and symbolically designed garden: they were leased from Thomas Vernon. Pope's poem embodies the only response which maintains a rational and composed response: that modelled by Bethel and Horace. As the final couplet of this *Imitation* declares: 'Let lands and houses have what lords they will, / Let us be fixed, and our own masters still.'