‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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21. *The Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*

Examples: Lines 72–79, 198–205

This imitation initiates a sequence of four of Horace's *Epistles* published between April 1737 and March 1738: a glorious year, indeed. The last of the 1737–38 imitations is addressed to Bolingbroke, so bringing the cycle back to the beginning of *An Essay on Man* ('Awake, my St JOHN! leave all meaner things / To low ambition, and the pride of kings') and to where the idea of writing imitations of Horace began. As we noted in Chapter 16, it was Bolingbroke who suggested that Horace's *Satire*, book 2, number 1 applied neatly to Pope's own current situation.

In a letter to Jonathan Swift dated 20 April 1733 (cited in Sherburn 1956, III, pp. 365–67), Pope observed that 'You call your satires, libels; I would rather call my satires, epistles. They will consist more of morality than wit, and grow graver, which you will call duller'. Pope may have been deliberately downplaying the more forthright elements of his poems of the 1730s, but there is nonetheless some truth in the contrast he makes between himself and his fellow-Scriblerian. His distinction, at any rate, indicates that he has in mind an intention to align his current work with philosophical and ethical aims.

It is perfectly possible to argue, in any case, that there need be no strict demarcation between the personal pursuit of philosophical enlightenment and the politico-social endeavour of satirical observation. Maynard Mack writes, in the context of Pope's embarking on his essays in Horatian imitation, of how, 'though their immediate political vein runs deep, the poems of the 30's are enabled to be political in a larger sense of that term' (Mack 1969, p. 187). The personal is the political

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and vice versa, given that poetry operates, for both writer and reader, within the 'polis', within society. Pope's embrace of the epistolary mode is a sign of his belief that an extensive series of 'moral' essays will add up to a humane and thoughtful meditation on ideas and experiences of general as well as specific and topical interest.

Lines 72–79

> Years following years, steal something every day,
> At last they steal us from ourselves away;
> In one our frolics, one amusements end,
> In one a mistress drops, in one a friend:
> This subtle thief of life, this paltry time,
> What will it leave me, if it snatch my rhyme?
> If every wheel of that unwearied mill
> That turned ten thousand verses, now stands still.

This four-couplet paragraph is Pope's version of just three lines in Horace's epistle (55–57): 'singula de nobis anni praedantur euntes; / eripuere iocos, venerem, convivia, ludum; / tendunt extorquere poemata; quid faciam vis?' (As the years go by they rob us of one thing after another. They have snatched away jokes, love, banquets, sports. They are trying to wrench poetry away. What shall I do then?).

Pope's line 72 is a close rendering of Horace's line 55; the second couplet is an equivalent of line 56, but with an emphasis on human contacts through extension of one form of relationship in Horace, sexual love ('Venerem'), into two ('mistress', 'friend'); line 77 effectively expresses Horace's third line. Thus, the other lines in Pope's paragraph (73, 76, 78, and 79) bring in additional ideas which intensify time's destructive power, and Pope's self-identification as a man whose life has been committed to writing poetry. The result is a verse-paragraph of considerably more emotional weight than Horace's relatively economical and pointed three lines. It amounts to 'a short, but powerful elegy on time, loss, and the self' (Stack,1985, p. 126).

Time lies at the heart of the lines. This is thanks not only to the central positioning of the abstract noun itself but because of the rhetorical repetition in the opening phrase, 'Years following years', and the appositional phrase, 'This subtle thief of life', which extends the force of 'time' across an entire line. Pope thus gives the paragraph an air

of philosophical observation, albeit a conventional enough one, rather than Horace's more epigrammatic vigour.

However, Pope's definition of his life as being—or having been—entirely given up to poetry constitutes his ultimate and strongest addition. The idea is planted at the opening. 'At last they steal us from ourselves away' fills out an entire couplet whose first line by itself is sufficient to render Horace's first line. The repetition of the verb links the two lines, the duplication echoing that of 'years' and glancing at the core idea of regular reiteration. The final 'stealing' us from ourselves points to mortality, which is the topic of the second couplet. But the second half of the paragraph opens up another meaning, another sense in which our self is stolen from us: loss of our craft, our vocation. A vowel pattern is woven into the poem's movement, guiding us to the key note, of the passage and of the entire epistle: 'steal', 'thief', 'leave', 'wheel'. A wheel in constant motion would, to an initial view, suggest the unvaried tedium of unremitting labour. But this mill—the /l/ consonant links back to 'wheel' as well as forward to its rhyme-word, 'still'—is 'unwearied'. The task of churning out ten thousand verses sounds intimidating and onerous, but it is lack of motion, 'stillness', that is really frightening.

The entire verse-paragraph is, however, kept in a state of rhythmic dynamism by means of Pope's characteristic masterly but lightly-worn command of variety, and by the expressive appropriateness of his line and couplet structures. 'At last they steal us from ourselves away' is one seamless sweep of inevitable movement. The dominant monosyllabic simplicity of its language renders the gesture airily unavoidable, as if it is saying, 'there's no point making a meal of this: time passes until there is no more to pass'. The second couplet, in contrast, divides itself into four clearly demarcated half-lines, so expanding and adding weight (but not so much as to disturb the conversational tone) to Horace's four nouns ('iocos, Venerem, convivia, ludum'). The repetitions of 'one' count out the pleasures even as each is subjected to the simple finality of the verbs: 'end', 'drops'.

In the second half of the paragraph, the theme word 'time' is announced as the climax of a line more strongly marked than the preceding lines by plosive consonants, a derogatory adjective ('paltry') and an accentuated caesura. This is the poet starting to stand up against,

or at least object to, the unstoppable march of the years. The second line of the couplet moves more rapidly. The caesura is lighter, and is placed at the syllabic mid-point of the line, whereas line 76 divides six and four, so throwing the weight onto 'this paltry time'. The more plaintive tone of line 77 may look like a confession of weakness, but it nonetheless ends by setting the next key term, 'rhyme', in appropriately rhyming contrast to 'time'. The final couplet retains its one real break until almost at the end. The 'wheel', that is, maintains its motion—the motion of time and of the writer's tireless activity—until those three final, equally strongly stressed, monosyllables 'now stands still'. The danger, the emptiness into which the paragraph stares, is that of ultimate and irreversible cessation.

Yet, the entire paragraph is a virtuosic if self-depreciatory display of Pope's art. The lines may speak about a poet being deprived of his calling, but they actually attest to the continuing vitality of that artistic endeavour. Pope's momentum—and, after all, there is plenty of the poem left—is at odds with, and so represents an implied rebuke to, the destructive power of time to disarm the writer. Pope's wheel is, for now, far from 'still'. The question implicitly posed ('if I can no longer write, do I still exist?') is stark and potentially final, but the existence of the poem we are reading constitutes, at the very least, a distinct protest. This is Pope at the height of his powers, not about to enter that good night. In his hands, this *Imitation* becomes a study of what writing really means. It is no mere 'amusement' or 'ludum', nor even just a trade; it is the poet's whole existence.

Pope proceeds to match Horace with a witty and sardonic survey of all the present impediments to writing. 'People ask me to write different kinds of poetry, so I end up displeasing most of them' (lines 80–87). 'How on earth can I possibly compose amidst the noise, business and mess of London?' (lines 88–107). 'Poets who flee to the country end up as eccentrics and objects of mockery' (lines 108–26). The next pause for reflection and escape from these and other irritations seems at first sight to represent an acceptance of the inevitable.

> Well, on the whole, plain prose must be my fate:
> Wisdom (curse on it) will come soon or late.
> There is a time when poets will grow dull:
> I'll e'en leave verses to the boys at school:

> To rules of poetry no more confined,
> I learn to smooth and harmonize my mind,
> Teach every thought within its bounds to roll,
> And keep the equal measure of the soul.
>
> lines 198–205

'Trying to write poetry is, in any case, a childish activity.', Pope seems here to say, 'There comes a point where one needs to grow up, look inwards, and concentrate on getting one's mind and thoughts in order.'

The paragraph begins with a shrug of the shoulders accompanied by a choice of the linguistic silence-fillers adopted by those who have either run out of things to say or cannot find a way of saying them clearly: 'Well, on the whole'. The phrase 'plain prose' sets the bar pretty low for what lies ahead, even if Pope weakly tries to dramatize the moment ('my fate') and to elevate it ('Wisdom'). The parenthesis ('curse on it') is equally unconvincing. This has the air of a poet who has run out of energy and ideas. Indeed, there is 'a time when poets will grow dull', and now looks like that time.

The second half of the paragraph begins no more encouragingly. If 'rules of poetry' are to be seen as ways of confining, of imprisoning, thought, then let us release ourselves from them. Let us re-train ourselves. Hence Pope adopts the language of education: 'I learn ... Teach every thought'. But what, actually, is he now setting himself to learn? To 'smooth and harmonize my mind' does not seem that far from the purposes he is ostensibly putting behind him. Is harmony not one of a poet's principal aims; and does not poetry with philosophical ambition seek to bring form and function together in the productive way that, for example, so many passages in *An Essay on Man* do? And where 'Teach every thought within its bounds to roll' may sound uneasily like an acceptance of another form of confinement (one now willingly entered into), its partner line in the couplet ensures that the ending of the paragraph is a long way from its beginning. 'And keep the equal measure of the soul' may retain the generally quiet, decidedly unrhetorical, level of Pope's writing here, but its language and rhythm strike a much more positive note than the earlier one of resignation to the inevitable. 'Soul' fills out the earlier 'mind'; 'measure' sets 'harmonize' within a poetic semantic field; and 'equal' strikes a chord that resounds with Pope's other uses of a word whose relationship with its Latin root in 'aequus'

invests it with genuine philosophical weight. It is indicative that Pope introduces 'equal' here when Horace does not use 'aequus', even though both employ a musical metaphor. (On the significance for Horace of 'aequus', see the *Imitations* of *Satires* book 2, nos. 1 and 2, to Fortescue and to Bethel: Chapters 16 and 17, above.) Horace's equivalent line (144) is 'sed verae numerosque modosque ediscere vitae' ('but to learn the rhythms and measures of a true life'). Pope's version determinedly includes an unobtrusive but clear pointer towards Horace's world-view: more Horatian than Horace.

This verse-paragraph is also one whose combined force is greater than that of its parts. Pope achieves this through adopting a style rarely noted in his verse because it avoids characteristics, rightly celebrated for their intellectual power, to be found in many of his sharper, more satirical, didactic, or ironic poems. The master of the divided line, of the shifting caesura, of the antithesis, of the aphoristic style, avoids all of these in favour of a series of lines flowing with easy grace. This is the quality of the three couplets beginning with 'There is a time'. Pope artfully sets them up by allowing them to play off against the awkward and stuttering first couplet, with its self-consciously mock disgruntlement in an unrhythmical parenthesis '(curse on it)'. The impact of the lines is partly cumulative, in tune with the gentle growth of significant vocabulary leading up to the line, 'And keep the equal measure of the soul'. Natural-sounding euphony lends lyrical support. Vowels tend towards length, notably the long /e/ sounds in 'e'en', 'leave', 'teach', 'keep', 'equal', but also marked in other vowels, such as 'smooth' and, ultimately, 'soul'. The whole passage phonically conveys a move to 'smooth and harmonize'. The sound is the sense.

Herein lies Pope's implicit counter-argument to his ostensible subject, his inability to write more poetry. This is certainly not 'plain prose'. It brings something Pope is not usually recognized for: sheer lyrical beauty. A reader alert to the poem's origins in Horace will get his point forcibly. Horace's poem is an apology for not writing specifically *lyric* poetry. Julius Florus, his addressee here (as he was of the third of his first book of *Epistles*), has complained that the poet has let him down by not sending the 'carmina' ('odes', line 25) he promised. It was after completing his first three books of odes that Horace took up epistles as a form.

The fundamental principle underlying both Horace's *Epistle* and Pope's *Imitation* is that *all* good poetry is the result of artistry. Lines 106–125 of the Horace and lines 153–179 of Pope's imitation take this as their direct subject. Writers of poor 'carmina' (line 106), 'bad rhymers' in Pope's version (line 153), are a joke, and yet they take themselves so seriously. Real artists, those who wish to produce a poem of genuine quality ('qui legitimum cupiet fecisse poema', line 109), take care to be rigorously self-critical and studious of appropriate style: 'Their own strict judges, not a word they spare / That wants or force, or light, or weight, or care' (Pope, lines 159–60). The full verse-paragraph—at 27 lines the longest in the poem—marks its significance by, for example, introducing a relative rarity in Pope's poems, though a common feature of Dryden's, a triplet:

> Pour the full tide of eloquence along,
> Serenely pure, and yet divinely strong,
> Rich with the treasures of each foreign tongue.
>
> lines 171–73

The triplet nobly stretches out to be inclusive, in both its praise of stylistic range and its embrace of the international quality of the English language. Not inappropriately, then, does Pope conclude with a couplet that, taking its cue from a dance metaphor in Horace (line 125), looks back to his own earlier definition of true artistry:

> 'But ease in writing flows from art, not chance;
> As those move easiest who have learned to dance.'
>
> lines 178–79

Pope simply substitutes 'But' for 'True' (in order to fit the sense in context) in his definition of good style in *An Essay on Criticism*, lines 362–63.

The paragraph we have been examining puts these principles in play, with the nonchalance derived from genuine artistry. Yes, we do need to 'learn' (lines 179 and, now, 203) both how to write and how to live. Truly philosophical poetry—as opposed to poetry which attempts to look self-important by writing *about* philosophy—embodies truth within form. Pope's imitation of Horace's *Epistle* is a justification and definition of poetry in the guise of an apology for not writing poetry. The three

Imitations which follow are addressed in turn to 'Augustus'; William Murray; and Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke: that is, King George II; the future Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield; and the politician and philosopher whom for years Pope has admired and respected. The realms addressed could be no higher or more important: royalty, the law, and philosophy. These three poems are among Pope's finest, and triumphantly embody the power of poetry at its summit.