‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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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

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

22. *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated. To Augustus*

Examples: Lines 81–83, 95–102, 107–14, 189–200

Pope's *Imitation* of the first *Epistle* of Horace's second book was published on 25 May 1737, a month later than his version of the second *Epistle*. However, the poem seems to have been written during the year 1736. George II, whose second name, Augustus, made him an irresistible candidate for a version of Horace's address to his Emperor, left England for Hanover and his new mistress, Madam von Walmoden, on 22 May 1736. George's lengthy visits to his Electorate were a cause of significant displeasure among opposition politicians in his kingdom. Pope waits only as far as his second couplet before seizing his prey, celebrating how you 'Your country, chief, in arms abroad defend, / At home, with morals, arts and laws amend' (lines 3–4). It would have taken no subtle cynic to read Pope's couplet as a satirical swipe at George's absence from home and the 'arms abroad' he was enjoying. Another reason to date the poem to 1736 is that Pope made one of his frequent visits to Bevis Mount, near Southampton, in the spring of that year. He had maintained for many years a friendship with Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough, a military man who had retired on the accession of George I. His connections with Bevis Mount appear to have continued after Peterborough's death in 1735. Pope wrote to his friend William Fortescue on 21 September 1736, 'there [Bevis Mount] ... [I] began an Imitation of the finest [*Epistle*] in Horace this spring; which I propose to finish there this autumn' (cited in Sherburn, IV, 1956, p. 33). Jonathan Swift wrote to Pope, thanking him for his complimentary lines (lines 221–28), on 9 February 1737. This suggests that Pope had sent him at

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372.23

least these lines, if not the whole poem, in either late 1736 or early 1737. So, it looks as though Pope was writing *Epistle* II, 1 around the same time as he was writing *Epistle* II, 2. The two *Imitations*, then, quite likely constituted a joint project. They are, after all, two of only three epistles in Horace's second book, and the third is the celebrated *Ars Poetica*. All three are about writing, the role of poets within contemporary society, and the ethical tradition they inherit. Why should their work be taken seriously? How do they relate to their predecessors, and what is their place in the present?

Epistles II, 1 is a substantial poem, easily the longest of the Horatian *Imitations*. It would, surely, be irreverent to address the monarch in any slighter form? Its argument, therefore, is leisurely, extensive, and sustained. Poets have 'some weight', line 203 politely suggests, even if not everyone might be easily persuaded. George II himself was notoriously impervious to learning and literature (Mack 1967, p. 130). Pope's *Epistle* has traditionally been read as an ironic attack on George, with the emperor Augustus serving as a model for comparison and contrast. But some critics have argued that reservations about the Roman Augustus were held in the eighteenth century: he may have been regarded as more like George than once assumed. On this debate, see Weinbrot (1978), Erskine-Hill (1983), and Stack (1985, chapter 8). It is certainly the case that poetry and those in power have not always been natural bedfellows. Poets, therefore, need to be humble supplicants for a little attention from their monarchs; and a vein of modest self-depreciation runs appropriately through the poem. If some readers might be tempted to read into this attitude a degree of ironic self-consciousness, let it be upon their own heads, shall we say? Pope's argument is, broadly, as follows. 'People tend to consider writers of earlier ages superior to those of the present; yet why should that be the case? After all, even the supposed greats of the past were not without their faults and failings. These days, it is true, anyone seems to think they can be a poet. However, there is no need to be concerned about this, since poets are pretty harmless creatures. May I, though, respectfully propose that we poets may be of some use, even if tastes seem to have declined over time. Some monarchs, indeed, have encouraged the arts. I, therefore, am here writing this to you, and I would dearly love to be good enough to rise to a level fit for your great status. Alas, I fear I may not be.'

Lines 81–83

The public fame of acknowledged great writers of the past is regularly based on truisms or clichés:

> In all debates where critics bear a part,
> Not one but nods, and talks of Jonson's art,
> Of Shakespeare's nature, and of Cowley's wit.

These attributes had become, by Pope's time, almost automatically attached to their names. Milton's *L'Allegro* (1645) is the classic instance:

> Then to the well-trod stage anon,
> If Jonson's learned sock be on,
> Or sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child,
> Warble his native wood-notes wild.
>
> lines 131–34

Pope gently subjects the terms to an implied critique. The passage's quality of a mechanical list is part of this undermining and is supported by his diction. 'Nods' is a gesture intending—on the part of the nodder—to show sagaciousness, but Pope is aware of the word's other connotations. He had used the verb twice in the finale to book 2 of the 1729 *Dunciad Variorum*, where a pair of clerks read aloud from the works of John ('Orator') Henley and Sir Richard Blackmore in response to the goddess Dulness's challenge to her acolytes to try to keep awake. None, alas, can resist the soporific power of 'my Henley's periods, or my Blackmore's numbers' (line 338):

> Thus oft they rear, and oft the head decline,
> As breathe, or pause, by fits, the airs divine:
> And now to this side, now to that they nod,
> As verse, or prose, infuse the drowsy god.
>
> lines 361–64

> Who sat the nearest, by the words o'ercome
> Slept first, the distant nodded to the hum.
>
> lines 369–70

Later, in the 1742 fourth book of *The Dunciad*, Pope would employ a similar double dose as Dulness leads a complete lapse into unconsciousness:

> More she had spoke, but yawned—all nature nods:
> What mortal can resist the yawn of gods?
>
> lines 605–06

> Wide, and more wide, it spread o'er all the realm;
> Even Palinurus nodded at the helm.
>
> lines 613–14

So, the implication of 'Not one but nods' in line 82 of the present poem is that everyone signals thoughtless assent to the recitation of 'Jonson's art', 'Shakespeare's nature', and 'Cowley's wit', as if they were responding in their sleep. It certainly is not much of a 'debate' where all so readily concur with the commonplaces. The monosyllabic chiming of the simple clause 'Not one but nods' adds to the banality and shows critics' inability even to consider what the generalized nouns 'art', 'nature', and 'wit' actually mean. Proper literary criticism, including Pope's own in his *Essay on Criticism*, has spent considerable time examining the shades of meaning of these complex terms. Explication and amplification, qualification, and questioning—these are what real debate would require.

In any case, Pope's argument proceeds, the people are prone to unthinking and unreliable judgements. 'All this may be; the people's voice is odd, / It is, and it is not, the voice of God' (lines 89–90). Such an observation does seem, prima facie, to point in the direction of an irresolvable scepticism, putting into question the possibility of arriving at any kind of conclusion, however notional. Pope, however, at once probes such nihilism. It is possible to meet between the trenches if the public would admit that the old writers were giants of literature in their own way but are not above critical scrutiny.

Lines 95–102

> But let them own, that greater faults than we
> They had, and greater virtues, I'll agree.
> Spenser himself affects the obsolete,
> And Sidney's verse halts ill on Roman feet:
> Milton's strong pinion now not Heav'n can bound,
> Now serpent-like, in prose he sweeps the ground,
> In quibbles, angel and archangel join,
> And God the Father turns a school divine.

These are not just Pope's judgements. His assertion about Spenser's language echoes the Ben Jonson he has cited as himself a victim of standard evaluations: 'Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language' (Johnson, *Timber: or Discoveries* (1640), ed. by Parfitt 1975, p. 428, lines 2237–38). His reservations about Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) follow on from Dryden's preface to *Sylvae* (1685): 'Milton's *Paradise Lost* is admirable; but am I therefore bound to maintain that there are no flats amongst his elevations, when 'tis evident he creeps along sometimes for above an hundred lines together? Cannot I admire the height of his invention, and the strength of his expression, without defending his antiquated words, and the perpetual harshness of their sounds? 'Tis as much commendation as a man can bear to own him excellent; all beyond it is idolatry' (Watson 1962, I, p. 32). In a passage which is carefully looking for a *via media* between extremes of absolute judgement, between ancient and modern, between popular and tempered views, Pope is linking his present ideas to those of his predecessors. Reconciliation and tradition are locked within a vibrant poem; the contemporary shakes hands with the past.

Pope's lines absorb the language and metaphors of past judgement ('affect'; 'sweeps the ground'), but refresh them into his own distinctive style. Thus, the balance of 'now ... Now' in the third couplet introduces the strongest of antitheses in 'heaven ... serpent-like' within a clear and economical metaphor of height and depth. The whole couplet is, meanwhile, harmonized by the 's' and 'p' reiterations. In a stylistic variation, the fourth couplet is structured by a chiasmus of bathos. A 'school divine' engages in scholastic theology, a study which had accrued connotations of dogmatic, tediously meticulous scrutiny; while 'quibbles' imply legalistic and pedantic attention to purely verbal ambiguities and arguments. Proficients of both activities really belong not in an epic poem but in the mock-epic world of *The Dunciad*. In Pope's couplet, these demeaning terms trap within them the notional *personae* of Milton's heroic poem. These are sharp, even acerbic, but witty and snappy judgements within an overall poised syntax and couplet form. It is possible, the verse tells us, to be critical without losing sight of the value of measured commentary. It is not the least of poetry's achievements to conduct itself in a civilized manner.

Lines 107–14

But for the wits of either Charles's days,
The mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease;
Sprat, Carew, Sedley, and a hundred more,
(Like twinkling stars the miscellanies o'er)
One simile, that solitary shines
In the dry desert of a thousand lines,
Or lengthened thought that gleams through many a page,
Has sanctified whole poems for an age.

Literary history, like any other category, can produce its own golden-age mythologies. One such is that of the 'cavalier' poet, penning his (it is always 'his') lyrics with spontaneity and nonchalance, whether in reaction to puritan sclerosis or loss of authority during the 'commonwealth', or in response to Restoration liberty. Here is another subset of the meanings of 'wit': not so much the sharp thrusts of informed opinion ('wit' as deriving from *witan*, the Old English verb 'to know') as the self-appointed clowns of lightly-worn ignorance. Pope spears them in a single line: 'The mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease'. The *OED* cites the line under its definition of 'mob' (*sb*. 1. 4), as signifying a 'promiscuous assemblage of people; a multitude or aggregation of persons regarded as not individually important'. The implied lack of discrimination is apposite: compare the goddess Dulness's welcome to the unthinking use of images in writing, 'She sees a mob of metaphors advance' (*The Dunciad*, 1729, book 1, line 65; 1743, book 1, line 67). But 'mob'—a late seventeenth-century coinage of an abbreviated 'mobile vulgus'—also carries the sense of 'lower orders; the uncultured or illiterate as a class' (*OED*, 'mob', *sb*., sense 1. 2). That tends to be the general 'cavalier' view of the rest of the population, whether the base illiterates or the solemn professionals as disparaged by the true 'amateur' who has no vulgar need to think of money when putting pen to paper. Pope reverses the terms: the 'gentlemen' constitute the real 'mob', all equally indistinguishable and undistinguished. They write 'with ease', with 'facility as opposed to difficulty' (*OED* 'ease', *sb*. 4.b, under the general definition of 'comfort', 'absence of pain or trouble': Pope's line is again included as a citation). But 'with ease' also implies 'in comfort', unrestrained by any need to work for a living. These are the sons of privilege, complacent in their inviolability. Pope,

we recall, had to make his writing pay in order to maintain a living, as did Samuel Johnson, who was making his way to London to join the ranks of would-be professional journalists and writers even as Pope was writing his *Imitations* of Horace.

Pope turns the tables on such idlers by demonstrating, in these very lines, that the real professional writer can produce 'easeful' poetry—poetry that moves with smooth rhythm, with a genuine stylistic nonchalance—while also being precise and honed to sharp perfection. The 'mob' may come up with one telling simile in their work (on the principle, presumably, of monkeys accidentally hitting the right keys), but Pope can not only turn a simile back on them ('Like twinkling stars'), but throw in a related metaphor while he is at it: the 'dry desert' of dull and lifeless obscurity. The result is a creatively supple piece of comic writing, lines which humorously mimic the mob's facility, subtly undermine its assumed superiority, and demonstrate real wit (humour derived from knowledge). And he can 'ease' the lines into the wider satirical context of his address to George Augustus. 'Don't worry, George,', he seems to be saying, 'poets are just idle nobodies, out of place in the new Hanoverian order, and so of no use or threat; except that I know exactly what I'm doing—if you had the wit to pay attention.'

Lines 189–200

Yet, sir, reflect, the mischief is not great;
These madmen never hurt the church or state:
Sometimes the folly benefits mankind;
And rarely avarice taints the tuneful mind.
Allow him but his plaything of a pen,
He ne'er rebels, or plots, like other men:
Flight of cashiers, or mobs, he'll never mind;
And knows no losses while the muse is kind.
To cheat a friend, or Ward, he leaves to Peter;
The good man heaps up nothing but mere metre,
Enjoys his garden and his book in quiet;
And then—a perfect hermit in his diet.

To paraphrase, 'Now, I don't want you to think that I'm lecturing you. Hence my deferential 'sir'—I hope you noticed. Yet (I know I'm using rather a lot of qualifying conjunctions, but, well, there's quite a lot

that needs qualifying). I do want—at the risk of repeating myself—to reassure you that, although the country and the town may be teeming with would-be poets ('one poetic itch / Has seized the court and city, poor and rich', lines 169–70), they are all quite harmless. Indeed, as long as you allow them their toys ('his plaything of a pen'), they will stay out of trouble and be no bother.'

Pope's rhetoric here is directed at diminishing the status of poets and poetry. Writing, he wants to persuade George Augustus, is a childish pursuit. To prove the point, he makes up his own address with easeful lines, often stripped of awkward caesuras ('Allow him but his plaything of a pen'), and pointed by significant phonic echoes. So 'plaything of a pen' is succeeded in the following line by 'plots', as the work of 'other men'. These others are disruptive types, such as the 'cashier' of the South Sea Company, Robert Knight, who, after the notorious Bubble burst, fled the country upon being found guilty of breach of trust by the House of Lords. They are 'mobs' in a more sinister sense than the old 'mob of gentlemen'. The Hanoverian dynasty had scarcely begun when the 1715 first Jacobite rebellion was hatched, and rumours of plots were—like mobs—never far from fearful apprehension.

Poetry, by contrast, need cause no concern. A disparaging adjective 'mere' (line 198) both qualifies and phonically merges into 'metre', a noun that, in any case, reduces poetry's status to mechanics of prosody. The phrasal verb 'heaps up' further demeans poetry by implying that writing is simply a matter of piling up words by the shovelful. No skill or artistry is required. The rhyme with 'Peter' emphasizes by antithesis poets' harmlessness. The real villains are the Peter Walters of this world, who accumulate wealth, heap up gold, by deceitful and even criminal means. Pope had earlier referred to this common butt of satirists in *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, line 3, and in *The Second Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, line 168 (see Erskine-Hill 1975). 'You do not need to concern yourself about mere poets.'

Harmlessness is a value lying at the core of the final couplet of this verse-paragraph, as it is frequently in Pope's self-projection in his Horatian *Imitations*. The paragraph's concluding rhyme, 'quiet / diet', links repose and innocence to lack of excess in lifestyle. It is a retirement myth, of course, and, as such, is open to accusations of being yet another of those poses adopted by poets to present themselves in a favourable,

modest light. It is just what a wary but gullible monarch would wish to hear. Pope knows full well that this is the case, and he wants a really alert reader to gather the force of his irony. Now is the time for Pope to move on and speak to the truly intelligent and worthy in his final two *Imitations*, which are addressed to the lawyer William Murray and the statesman Viscount Bolingbroke. The first opens 'Not to admire', a literal rendering of Horace's 'nil admirari'. This was also the motto on Bolingbroke's coat of arms. Thus, Pope deftly unites two meritorious friends from different generations, the young aspiring barrister and the mature philosopher. 'Meaner things' can be left to the 'pride' of mere 'kings', as Pope earlier declared to Bolingbroke in the opening couplet of *An Essay on Man*.