‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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23. *The Sixth Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated. To Mr Murray*

Examples: Lines 1–4, 14–15, 18–27, 46–53, 95–96

Pope's last *Imitations* were published in the early months of 1738, followed by two dialogues with the joint title of *Epilogue to the Satires* in May and July of that year. These poems thus represent the culmination and conclusion of his engagement with Horace as a model. Their composition took place during a concerted parliamentary drive by the opposition to Robert Walpole after the death of Queen Caroline in autumn 1737. The failure of that movement was no doubt reflected in the downward momentum of optimism the poems as a whole express. Nonetheless, these works also stand clear as final meditations on the central ethical questions to which Pope's poetry of the 1730s is largely dedicated.

The *Sixth Epistle of the First Book* was the earliest, being published on 23 January 1738 and then included in the *Works* later in the year. The subtitle, 'To Mr Murray', was added only in William Warburton's 1751 edition but there is no reason to doubt its authenticity. Murray had already figured in Pope's version of Horace's 'Intermissa, Venus' ode (see Chapter 20), and, as a rising young lawyer who became Pope's executor, he is a suitable recipient of an epistle that meditates on the value of ethical contributions to public life. After Pope's death, Murray went on to achieve respect and renown as the Earl of Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice and presider over the celebrated 1772 case of the American slave James Somersett, in which Mansfield's conclusion that Somersett should be discharged was based on his judgment that the state of slavery

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is 'so odious' that it is 'incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political' (*Howell's State Trials*, XX, 1816, cols 1–6, 79–82).

Lines 1–4

> 'Not to admire, is all the art I know,
> To make men happy, and to keep them so.'
> (Plain truth, dear Murray, needs no flowers of speech,
> So take it in the very words of Creech.)

Thomas Creech's 1684 translation of Horace was the standard version at the time. Pope actually improves on Creech's rather pedestrian opening triplet in his own sharper couplet, but he retains Creech's crucial literal translation of Horace's keynote word: 'Nil admirari prope res est una, Numici, / solaque quae posit facere et servare beatum' [Not to be surprised at anything is about the one and only thing, Numicius, that can make and keep a person happy]. 'Admirari' is pretty much untranslatable without recourse to some sort of paraphrase. It is, of course, the root of the English word 'admire': hence Creech and Pope take the shortest cut. In effect, the entire poem that follows is Pope's illustration of its full and complicated meaning. The best guarantee of happiness, Pope proposes, is not to be carried away to extremes, to the excesses and temptations that life offers, but to maintain a position of moderate and well-considered detachment. 'Admire' carried a connotation of foolish wonderment. Pursuit of wealth, of political power, of good eating, and of love can each be taken too far. The word 'admire' runs through Pope's poem: lines 11, 21, 28 and twice each in lines 41 and 68).

Lines 14–15

A single deft couplet can be sufficient to puncture the allure of some attractions. The verse, as it were, contemptuously brushes them aside. Should we admire:

> Or popularity, or stars and strings?
> The mob's applauses, or the gifts of kings?

Should we go for popularity? But the second line is set out in a vertical apposition (a term which normally defines placing one substantive or pronoun after another) to the first. Popularity is nothing but the 'mob's applauses'. Or should we aim socially higher, indeed to the very highest, and look for 'the gifts of kings'? What are these gifts? Well, nothing more than 'stars and strings', the truth of those medals and ribbons that constitute decorations of supposed honour. The effect of the couplet is to degrade, to belittle the rewards gained from both ends of society. And because the demeaning phrases occupy either end of different lines, the couplet itself points both up and down. There's no escape from Pope's rhetoric. All 'honour' is equally valueless.

A couplet from an earlier poem, *An Epistle to Cobham* (1734), demonstrates how contrary impulses—aiming high and aiming low—can co-exist in a single person, in this case Philip, Duke of Wharton: 'Though wondering senates hung on all he spoke, / The club must hail him master of the joke' (lines 184–85). This is an intriguingly complex couplet. How do the two lines relate to each other? It reads as bathos: of course, entertaining the club with jokes is a less worthy occupation than delivering speeches to parliament. But, at a subtler level, is there any real difference *ethically*? Do both exhibit a fundamental flaw, desire for 'applause' wherever one goes? Vanity may be an impulse behind either or both, even if one situation is more honourable than the other. What is true (and this is Pope's main point in his depiction of Wharton's character) is that to want both is to demonstrate lack of discrimination.

Lines 18–27

If weak the pleasure that from these can spring,
The fear to want them is as weak a thing:
Whether we dread, or whether we desire,
In either case, believe me, we admire;
Whether we joy or grieve, the same the curse,
Surprised at better, or surprised at worse.
Thus good or bad, to one extreme betray
The unbalanced mind, and snatch the man away;
For virtue's self may too much zeal be had;
The worst of madmen is a saint run mad.

The second repetition of the opening 'admire' occurs in this verse-paragraph, in which Pope most explicitly sets out the argument illustrated by successive examples. He advances the idea that, if the pleasure we gain from pursuing our desires is disappointingly insubstantial, apprehension of not achieving them is as feeble. Wishes and fears are equally paths of folly. We are left in a state of dissatisfaction, torn one way or another. Extremes bring the madness of an unbalanced mind.

To express these ideas within the texture of the poetry, Pope enacts a series of mirror-images, trapping us in cages from which there is no escape. In the first couplet, this is effected by repetition of 'weak' at either end. Whichever way you turn, do not expect anything satisfying. The rhyme words—in the second line the only word, save its indefinite article, left dangling after the 'weak / weak' repetition—themselves forge a feeling of disappointment. Hope may 'spring', but is always destined to the feeble anticlimax of 'a thing'.

The following four lines are threaded through with repetitions of 'whether' and near-synonyms: 'In either case', 'the same'. These couplets leave the most devastating repetition till the end: 'Surprised at better, or surprised at worse'. Warburton at once spotted this. 'Surprised' is a recurrence to the poem's keynote word 'admire', reflecting a good way of translating or glossing Horace's 'nil admirari': do not be surprised at anything. But it also, in line 23, conveys the idea of being taken by surprise, being overcome by something unforeseen. Our deficiencies, our inadequacies, hold us captive wherever we look (Erskine-Hill 1964, p. 141n).

The, well, surprising element of Pope's proposition here is that 'good'—the absolute which can be derived from 'better'—can be just as much a trap as 'bad'. Surely, we might protest, you cannot go wrong seeking tirelessly for whatever we deem good? Oh yes you can, our stern philosopher retorts: if you seek over-zealously for some ideal of virtue, madness may that way lie. As 'admire' can imply folly, so zeal carries connotations of excessive fervour in a cause. Such extremism can lead to destructive conflict: compare *An Essay on Man*'s 'For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight' (see Chapter 11). Sainthood may be its own mark of an unbalanced mind.

Lines 46–53

William Murray is currently in the early stages of a legal career which will lead to considerable fame and honour. Pope here, consciously or not, foresees what in Murray's case will turn out to be, by any measure, a quite dazzling degree of success.

> And what is fame? the meanest have their day,
> The greatest can but blaze, and pass away.
> Graced as thou art, with all the power of words,
> So known, so honoured, at the House of Lords:
> Conspicuous scene! another yet is nigh,
> (More silent far) where kings and poets lie;
> Where MURRAY (long enough his country's pride)
> Shall be no more than TULLY, or than HYDE!

These eight lines conclude a passage about pursuit of success in the legal profession. To achieve renown requires a lengthy period of strenuous study and practice from 'morn to night, at senate, Rolls, and Hall' (line 36). For what? For 'fame' (line 39)? This key word provides Pope with his climactic couplets, announced by the rhetorical question in line 46. The fulcrum of the passage lies at its mid-point, the colon at the end of line 49. The first two couplets define a moralist's double perspective, that even highest achievers can attain only temporary eminence. 'Blaze' perfectly captures the intensity of radiance together with its impermanence: the brighter the flame, the shorter its life. The second couplet then translates 'blazing' energy to the sphere of Murray's career, specifically to the bar of the House of Lords where he had taken early steps towards eventual eminence by pleading on Scottish appeals. The topography of Westminster allows Pope to move adroitly to the nearby Abbey. The gift for 'words', which Murray shares with past heroes of oratory such as Cicero and the Earl of Clarendon (Edward Hyde, historian of the English Civil War and Charles II's Lord Chancellor), is poignantly juxtaposed to the 'silent' tombs that are, now, all that remain of former greatness. The whole passage thus appears 'enigmatic' (Stack 1985, p. 212). There is no questioning Pope's genuine tribute to his friend's talent and ardour, but he sounds a deep note of scepticism which questions the ultimate value of such principled commitment. Is this the fate of extreme virtue in an imperfect world? Should even the

highest good be shunned for a more tranquil moderation? Or is this yielding to treacherous indifference? How can we judge?

Lines 95–96

> If wealth alone then make and keep us blessed,
> Still, still be getting, never, never rest.

This couplet concludes a paragraph (lines 63–96) on pursuit of money as a source of pleasure and status. The word 'wealth' here makes its fourth appearance in the passage, and the couplet serves as an answer to its first occurrence: 'Is wealth thy passion?' (line 69). If wealth is your passion, if you believe that 'wealth alone' can 'make and keep us blessed', the rest of the couplet follows logically. Dogged repetitions in the last line ('still, still'; 'never, never') express restlessness, the frenetic continual activity incurred by a task that cannot be completed. There is always more to be made, more to add to what Pope calls 'thy golden mountain' (line 73). The endless task goes on; there is no rest for the fixated.

The phrasing of the first line also picks up the poem's opening couplet: 'To make men happy, and to keep them so'; 'make and keep us blessed'. Such linguistic repetitions are a notable feature of this *Imitation*. They represent the obsessiveness with which the whole poem is imbued, and their failure ever to attain a satisfactory conclusion demonstrates the fatuity of the endeavour. There is scepticism at the heart of this poem: a warning to the great in however honourable pursuits.