‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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24. *The First Epistle of the First Book of Horace Imitated. To Lord Bolingbroke*

Examples: Lines 17–22, 23–34, 35–46, 132–33, 177–88

Pope's friendship with Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751), dated back to the days of the Tory administration under Queen Anne. Their precise influence on each other's intellectual development and social thought remains a cause of debate and may well have varied over time. However, of Pope's high regard for his distinguished if controversial senior there can be little doubt. *An Essay on Man* is addressed to him. He also pointed out that the first satire of Horace's second book fitted Pope's present circumstances. The *Imitation* Pope wrote as a result includes an eloquent and warm tribute to him as one who 'mingles with my friendly bowl / The feast of reason and the flow of soul' (lines 127–28). This poem initiated the sequence of *Imitations* that runs through the 1730s. It is fitting, then, that this final *Imitation* should be addressed directly to him. Pope declares this in his opening couplet: 'St John, whose love indulged my labours past, / Matures my present, and shall bound my last! 'As we shall see, Pope closes the poem with another invocation of Bolingbroke, this time in more quizzical fashion, as befits a work that is both probing and marked by self-doubt.

Horace's *Epistle* opens up a new phase in his writing. The early satires and three books of odes behind him, he now dedicates to his patron Maecenas a poem which declares his resolve to turn to matters philosophical and the study of his own self. Pope's *Imitation*, however, marks rather more strongly a sense of an ending. It is not by any means his last work, but those that lie ahead—the two dialogues of the *Epilogue to the Satires* and the fourth book of *The Dunciad*—hark back rather than

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look forward and present an unsettlingly dark conclusion to his life's work.

Pope's poem is in three broad but clear sections. Lines 1–64 form a farewell to poetry and a turn to philosophy. The middle third (lines 65–133: 69 lines in all) consists of an attack on the values and practices of contemporary society. The last fifty-five lines (134–88) focus on 'consistency and the self' (Stack, 1985, p. 265), and sign off with a self-depreciatory joke.

Lines 17–22

> Farewell then verse, and love, and every toy,
> The rhymes and rattles of the man or boy;
> What right, what true, what fit we justly call,
> Let this be all my care—for this is all:
> To lay this harvest up, and hoard with haste
> What every day will want, and most, the last.

Pope is alive to the paradox here: a farewell to verse takes the form of a new poem. Indeed, he wittily enforces and drives it home. Each of his couplets is equivalent to a line in Horace:

> Nunc itaque et versus et caetera ludicra pono;
> quid verum atque decens, curo et rogo et omnis in hoc sum;
> condo et compono quae mox depromere possim.
>
> lines 10–12

> [So now I lay aside verses and other trifles;
> my study and my pursuit are what is true and becoming, and to that I am wholly dedicated.
> I am putting by and composing stores I can draw on later.]

Pope transliterates 'versus' as 'verse' but then extends Horace's 'caetera ludicra' into two nouns, 'rhymes and rattles'. Pope's lines say that verses are merely toys, and his rhymes are only rattles, noisy baubles, or empty chatter. These are not a proper study for a grown man. His additional phrase, 'of the man or boy', points the moral. In similar fashion, the second couplet amplifies Horace's two adjectives, 'verum' and 'decens', into three, and triples his single 'quid' [what]. 'For this is all' provides a summative version of Horace's 'omnis in hoc sum', forging a strong

sense that nothing matters but pursuit of the true and the proper, that all the rest is infantile and trivial.

The third of Horace's lines fuses the literary and the agricultural to express his new resolution of preparing for his future needs. 'Condo' has a range of meanings, from building a city to composing poems to storing up food. 'Compono'—literally 'place together'—contains a similar variety, from composition of verses to dressing properly. Both verbs develop senses of the Latin 'versus', which include a furrow in a field and a line of poetry. In his third couplet, Pope's noun 'harvest' makes the metaphor explicit. The alliteratively breathless 'hoard with haste' anticipates, and is morally reinforced by, the strong final adjective, 'the last'. This note, that all things are moving towards an ending, intensifies the necessity of putting one's life in order. Pope's imitation thus lengthens the Horatian original and gives it added urgency.

Lines 23–34

But ask not, to what doctors I apply?
Sworn to no master, of no sect am I:
As drives the storm, at any door I knock:
And house with Montaigne now, or now with Locke.
Sometimes a patriot, active in debate,
Mix with the world, and battle for the state,
Free as young Lyttelton, her cause pursue,
Still true to virtue, and as warm as true:
Sometimes with Aristippus, or St. Paul,
Indulge my candour, and grow all to all;
Back to my native moderation slide,
And win my way by yielding to the tide.

The relationship between Pope's *Imitation* and the equivalent passage in Horace now becomes dynamically different. The first three lines follow the original stage by stage. Horace begins with the same reported question form: 'ac ne forte roges quo me duce, quo lare tuter?' (line 13) [and indeed lest you should ask who is my leader, in what home I shelter?]. To make his version fit into a single line of English, Pope actually cuts Horace's two nouns to one, instead using the plural form ('doctors', that is, learned people) to introduce the several possibilities that follow. Phonetically, 'doctor' is close to 'duce',

so shadowing the original. Horace's second line, 'nullius addictus iurare in verba magistri' [bound to swear by the words of no master] has achieved cultural significance through its adoption as the Royal Society's motto. Pope again uses a single line, following Horace's grammar and diction in his adjectival past participle ('sworn') and a literal translation ('master'). Pope also takes his storm metaphor from Horace's 'tempestas'.

However, this linear restraint on Pope's part now gives way to expansion. The nine lines which follow and complete the paragraph are his version of four lines in Horace. Whereas Horace presents just two alternatives, Pope unleashes a series of contrasting possibilities. Horace's lines are balanced in form and structure. To paraphrase: now (Latin 'nunc') I am a man of action and plunge into the waves of civic matters. Now ('nunc' again) I slip back quietly to the teachings of Aristippus, and try to make things conform to me, not me to things. Aristippus was a fourth-century philosopher from Cyrene in North Africa, whose doctrine was that pleasure of the moment constituted the greatest good. So, Horace exemplifies his versatility of attitude through two directly opposed modes of life—devoting himself to matters of state or retreating to subjective hedonism: public versus private, external versus internal, subjection to a higher good versus self-indulgence.

Pope begins with a contrast between two kinds of philosophical writer. Montaigne's essays are inquiring, exploratory, and varied; Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) is systematic, organized, and focussed. Montaigne writes as an amateur, a man engaging in argument out of a love of thinking for its own sake; Locke is a professional philosopher whose aim is to produce a full and structured analysis based on sound principles and with clear goals. For Pope, political commitment is more specific than simply acting on behalf of an abstract virtue. To be a 'patriot' in the 1730s was to be independent, detached from a compromised government and inevitably oppositional. For example, George, Lord Lyttelton was a prominent figure in the Opposition to Walpole, strongly associated with the group around Lord Cobham and with the Prince of Wales. He was a friend of Pope and also on good terms with other writers, notably James Thomson of *The Seasons* (1726–30) fame. Pope retains Horace's Aristippus but,

daringly—and, for some commentators, outrageously—sets this pagan philosopher alongside the Christian St Paul, who asserted that 'I am become all things to all men' (I *Corinthians* 10. 33) and that 'I also please all men in all things' (*Philippians* 4. 5). However different their ethical stances might have been, both evoke Pope's 'candour': his disposition to kindness and good intentions. Throughout, he presents himself as easy-going and open-minded.

In these lines, then, Pope advances well beyond incorporation of Horace's ideas to a high level of detailed augmentation. He saves his fullest departure from Horace for his concluding couplet:

> Back to my native moderation slide,
> And win my way by yielding to the tide.

Horace's gloss on Aristippus is that hedonism involves subjecting everything else to one's own desires rather than submitting to the demands of external commitments. Pope reverses such egocentricity by claiming a more understanding and politically sensitive method of entering socio-political waters. It is not studied confrontation that succeeds, but the ability to recognize and work with the flow of opinion: nothing by extremes, everything by self-control; measured and not excessive. Pope is now advancing significantly beyond the bounds set by his model: the poem is taking on a life of its very own.

Lines 35–46

> Long, as to him who works for debt, the day;
> Long as the night to her whose love's away;
> Long as the year's dull circle seems to run,
> When the brisk minor pants for twenty-one:
> So slow the unprofitable moments roll,
> That lock up all the functions of my soul;
> That keep me from myself; and still delay
> Life's instant business to a future day:
> That task, which as we follow, or despise,
> The eldest is a fool, the youngest wise;
> Which done, the poorest can no wants endure,
> And which not done, the richest must be poor.

Having explored their philosophical eclecticism, Pope and Horace both now emphasize how important the task of enquiry remains, despite their

varying degrees of certainty and uncertainty about how to proceed. In his *Imitation*, Pope also maintains and strengthens his intensification of Horace's poem.

Pope's opening progression from day to night to year echoes Horace, though Horace's order is actually 'nox', 'dies', 'annus' (night, day, year). But he goes one better rhetorically by converting Horace's adjectival succession of 'longa', 'longa', 'piger' [slow] into a trio of 'long'-s, each of which is put at the beginning of the line. This emphatic use of anaphora and consequent reversal of iambic metre to trochaic give his lines a quality of remorseless plodding, appropriately slowing the tempo even before he reaches, in line 39, his equivalent of Horace's 'sic mihi tarda fluunt ingrataque tempora' [so slow and thankless for me flow the hours]. Repeated long vowels ('So slow ... moments roll') add yet further resonance and sonorously usher in the line which concludes at the mid-point of the whole paragraph: 'That lock up all the functions of my soul'. Pope's phrasing here is ominously imprecise, but undeniably negative in a manner beyond anything in Horace. Indeed, negativity is, perhaps, as much a consequence of imprecision as of the image of locking up. The poet needs to escape from the day-to-day routine which gets in the way of a proper examination of his modus vivendi, of his inner self, as surely as his writing here needs to advance from its restrictive and tentative present inactivity to something that can give meaning to his existence now, rather than put it off to some vague future.

Pope saves up his most extreme intensification of the original for the last two couplets. Horace's lines are measured and controlled:

> Aeque pauperibus prodest, locupletibus aeque,
> Aeque neglectum pueris senibusque nocebit.
>
> lines 25–26

> [[The task that calls Horace] 'benefits equally the poor, equally the rich;
> and neglect of it will harm equally the young and the old.']

This is classical rhetoric at its purest and calmest. The first line forms a model chiasmus: 'equally / poor / benefits / rich / equally'. These are just five words in the format a/b/c/b/a; nothing spare, nothing wasted,

all in perfect balance. The second line, also of five words, completes a trio of 'aeque', concisely juxtaposes 'pueris senibusque', and comes to rest on the verb 'nocebit' [harm], which sets off the first line's 'prodest' [benefit]. Horace's style and tone propose and express a state of mind and command of language ideally adapted to the measure required to render a philosophical attitude.

Pope doubles Horace's length, rendering each line in a couplet, as he did in lines 17–22. But he reverses the order of Horace's opposites, putting old and young before rich and poor, and his first couplet is a more complicated, denser type of chiasmus than Horace's first line:

> That task, which as we follow, or despise,
> The eldest is a fool, the youngest wise;

Pope is saying that if you pursue the philosophical task, you are wise even if you are very young; if you despise it, you are a fool even if old. So, 'follow' relates to 'youngest wise', and 'despise' relates to 'eldest... fool'. There is neither a steadying central term equivalent to Horace's 'prodest', nor the concise balance of 'aeque pauperibus ... locupletibus aeque'. Pope's final couplet is also a wordier version of Horace: 'Which done, the poorest can no wants endure, / And which not done, the richest must be poor'. Where Horace simply juxtaposes opposites in two words ('pueris senibusque'), Pope sets opposites over two lines ('Which done' / 'Which not done'; 'the poorest' / 'the richest'). In both couplets, Pope transforms Horace's nouns and adjectives into superlatives ('eldest', 'youngest'; 'poorest', 'richest') so that the ideas come across as more extreme. His verse has a more strained feel to it, an intensity suggesting struggle rather than Horatian equipoise and effortful enquiry rather than calm reflection. Semantically, Pope transforms Horace's assurance that the task will profit everyone, rich and poor alike, and his warning that its neglect will harm young and old alike. For Pope, pursuit or neglect of the task will actually alter people. Achievement will make the poor rich and the young mature; lack of accomplishment will make the rich poor and the old foolish. There is an added urgency in Pope's lines. Philosophical inquiry is necessary because failure will be disastrous; while success would be a positive transmutation. There is an awful lot hanging on the outcome.

Lines 132–33

When we reach the middle section of the poem, Horace's satire is aimed at the materialism of the Roman state and people. 'o cives, cives, quaerenda pecunia primum est; / virtus post nummos' (lines 53–54) [O citizens, citizens, the first thing to seek is money, virtue after cash]. Pope has a similarly sardonic view of the city of London. 'Get money, money still! / And then let virtue follow, if she will' (lines 79–80). That little additional subordinate clause, 'if she will', just adds an extra cynical turn to Horace's original irony. By so doing, it initiates a gradual and ultimately climactic intensification of attitude.

Horace observes the workings of a financial system which divorces rewards from merit or even endeavour: 'multis occulto crescit res faenora' (line 80) [for many, fortunes grow by the hidden growth of interest]. Pope turns this into a devastatingly judgmental couplet:

> While with the silent growth of ten per cent,
> In dirt and darkness hundreds stink content.

Horace is detached, a distant observer of the absurdity of a society based on crude monetary principles. Pope's couplet digs down into the filth. This is not merely an abstract contemplation of 'silent growth', the equivalent of 'occulto crescit'; it is precisely concrete ('ten per cent') and vehemently condemnatory. Society operates in not only hidden ways, but modes that are actively foul and soiling. You cannot escape the consequences: you, too, will end up malodorous. And, what is worse, you are quite happy to do so. Pope's plosive consonants ('dirt', 'darkness', 'stink', 'content') spit out contempt.

Lines 177–88

Where, then, is Pope going to see a path out of the mire when he finds it so difficult to maintain philosophical stability? The poem at its end turns back to where it, and all his *Imitations of Horace*, began.

> Is this my guide, philosopher, and friend?
> This, he who loves me, and who ought to mend?
> Who ought to make me (what he can, or none,)
> That man divine whom wisdom calls her own;
> Great without title, without fortune blessed;

> Rich even when plundered, honoured while oppressed;
> Loved without youth, and followed without power;
> At home, though exiled; free, though in the Tower:
> In short, that reasoning, high, immortal thing,
> Just less than Jove, and much above a king,
> Nay, half in heaven—except (what's mighty odd)
> A fit of vapours clouds this demigod.

The phrase 'my guide, philosopher, and friend' is quoted from *An Essay on Man*, 'Epistle 4', line 390. This *Imitation* thus shadows the *Essay* precisely, an address to 'St John' in both first lines and the same resonant acknowledgement of Bolingbroke's significance in Pope's intellectual life in each poem's finale. Pope is clearly signalling that these poems of the 1730s are all part of the same philosophical project: an extensive and free-ranging investigation of our place in the social and ethical world of Enlightenment ideas.

At the end of the present poem, the question 'Is this my guide, philosopher, and friend?' is a response to the first part of the verse-paragraph (lines 161–76). This expresses the idea that, if I turned up dressed all over the place, looking slovenly and disorganized, you would—rightly—laugh at me. But no such odd outward appearance is half as incoherent as my mind. My intellectual confusion—the other side of the coin of that philosophical eclecticism celebrated earlier?—you nevertheless treat as entirely normal. Is this the right reaction of the man to whom I look for guidance, for amendment? Pope's appeal is evidently predicated on the assumption that Bolingbroke alone possesses the power, influence, and intellectual rigour to make the poet into a truly wise man, a 'man divine whom wisdom calls her own'. We might observe that such subservience sits uncomfortably alongside the philosophical independence Pope has claimed and celebrated. Perhaps that proves the point: beneath all the bravado and apparent assurance displayed elsewhere in the poem, notably where he is scathingly critical of the corrupt and morally bankrupt materialism of large parts of contemporary society, Pope is not as intellectually confident as he can pretend to be. We might further note that the use of the adjective 'divine' in line 180 suggests either worrying self-aggrandizement on Pope's part or—more likely if we are familiar with Pope's habitual tendency to self-mockery through bathos—that he is setting himself up for a fall.

The question is: what actually constitutes a wise man? The answer given in the remainder of the paragraph is a figure that brings together features of Bolingbroke himself and of others in Pope's circle of associates. 'Great without title' reminds us that Bolingbroke had been divested of his noble honours when he went into exile following accusations of involvement in Jacobite intrigues. 'Plundered' perhaps recalls the confiscation of Bolingbroke's estates in 1715. 'Free, though in the Tower' does not apply to Bolingbroke, but it does to Robert Harley, his partner in the Tory administration before 1714, who did spend time confined in the Tower of London.

As these resounding assertions of the supreme nature of wisdom and consequent rhetorical paradoxes ('At home, though exiled') proceed, so the passage advances in the level of its claims. Pope appears to be elevating his ideal figure to extreme and even impossible heights, culminating in the daring and riskily vainglorious line, 'Just less than Jove, and much above a king'. Our suspicions are confirmed when Pope draws the curtain on his poem with as sudden and as comic a bathos as any in his work: 'Nay half in heaven'—steady on, Alexander—'except (what's mighty odd) / A fit of vapours clouds this demigod'.

This joke Pope adopts from Horace, where the Latin poet's finale, though much, much shorter and somewhat less irreverent than Pope's, is not without its absurd overstatement and consequent fall:

> ad summam, sapiens uno minor est Iove, dives,
> liber, honoratus, pulcher, rex denique regum;
> praecipue sanus—nisi cum pituita molesta est.
>
> lines 106–08

> [In brief: the wise man is second only to Jove, rich,
> free, honoured, handsome, indeed, a king of kings;
> above all, healthy—unless he's suffering from a cold.]

Horace here characteristically punctures the excessive claims of Stoicism to be able to rise above all human ills. His conclusion reaffirms him as a poet of irony and awareness of the limitations of being a mortal. Horace seems to say, 'just because you think you're a Stoic superman doesn't mean you don't catch colds'. Pope, however, outdoes his Roman model in self-depreciation by aiming the joke at the ideal he has built up of himself (or his own aspirations) rather than at others' ethical idealism.

Pope's linguistic skill and stylistic command are with him to the end of his *Imitations*—note the relapse into colloquialisms and wittily ironic 'mighty' in 'what's mighty odd'—and so, too, is his habitual self-consciousness. All does not bode well, though, for a successful conclusion to his decade-long search for intellectual certainty.