



‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’  
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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## 25. *Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogues I and II*

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Examples: I, lines 29–32; II, lines 12–15, 78–93, 208–13

The first of this pair of poems was published on 16 May 1738 under the title of *One Thousand Seven Hundred and Thirty Eight: A Dialogue Something like Horace*. The second followed just two months later. The two were printed together in the 1739 *Works* as *Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogue I and Dialogue II*. Together, they constitute something of an *envoi* to Pope's 1730s poems and his engagement with Horace. Indeed, they represent a stage close to the end of his career. The only major poem to come was the fourth book of *The Dunciad*, in 1742.

Can they, then, be called a culmination or a retrospective? In the form of dialogues between *P.* and *Fr. / F.* [Friend], they debate numerous questions that confront an eighteenth-century writer. These include whether satire should be general or actually name names, whether the stance taken should be cautious and ingratiating or forthright and aggressive, and what, finally, should be the role and function of satire in a socio-political environment that appears, from the perspective of the Opposition to Robert Walpole's government, to be entering a dark phase. Signs of cultural twilight were the passing of the Licensing Act in 1737, regarded by opponents as an attempt to stifle free speech by submitting new theatrical works to prior scrutiny and the collapse of attempts to defeat Walpole in parliament. On a personal level, the 21 May 1738 marked Pope's fiftieth birthday: a time for reflection?

*Dialogue I, lines 29–32*

Pope's friend advises him to be more delicate in his dealings with those in power. To paraphrase: after all, your Horace was discreet in his satires, thanks to his 'sly, polite, insinuating style' (line 19), which gave pleasure at the imperial court. Why not go and see Sir Robert? Pope replies:

Seen him I have, but in his happier hour  
Of social pleasure, ill-exchanged for power;  
Seen him, uncumbered with the venal tribe,  
Smile without art, and win without a bribe.

These are delicately balanced lines, reflecting his friend's advice to be cautious in calm and controlled language and verse-structure. As many contemporaries, however critical of Walpole's political actions, conceded, he could be as gracious as anyone would wish at the private level. When both were younger men (Walpole was the elder by twelve years), he had responded positively to Pope's application on behalf of another man. (See *TE*, IV, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1953, pp. 299–300n.). Pope scrupulously distinguishes between Walpole's 'happier hour / Of social pleasure' and his later political presence. The real villains, Pope implies, are the 'venal tribe': a case of power being corrupted by those lesser people attracted to it. Yet, the last of these four lines is devastating in its satirical thrust. Bribery was notoriously rife in government circles in the 1730s, though it was hardly unique in that respect. Everybody knew this, but to state it so bluntly in a couplet that makes 'bribe' the final, rhyming word is another matter. The uncertain textual status of that couplet shows Pope's consciousness of his audacity or, at least, risky forthrightness. Omitted from the first printed version, 'bribe' was restored in the *Works* edition. The accusation is, however, stated in a manner which actually looks back to a lost time of innocence rather than dwelling on present corruption. But one implies the other: the past is viewed through the prism of the present. That is the couplet's own 'art', its graceful phrasing of disgraceful actuality.

*Dialogue II, lines 12–15*

*Dialogue I* argues temperately for satire's value in condemning the growth of corruption, of villainy, in the body politic, concluding with a resounding personal commitment on Pope's part: 'Yet may this verse

(if such a verse remain) / Show, there was one who held it in disdain'. *Dialogue II* proceeds to justify the adoption of such an assertive and challenging manner. The first question the new poem addresses is whether it is right and effective for satirical writing to draw attention to specific individuals as examples of corrupt behaviour. His friend adopts a cautionary approach, telling Pope that 'none but you by name the guilty lash' (line 10), and advising him:

F. Spare then the person, and expose the vice.  
 P. How, sir! not damn the sharper, but the dice?  
 Come on then, satire! general, unconfined,  
 Spread thy broad wing, and souze on all the kind.

The first couplet economically sets the poet's reply alongside the friend's recommendation. Its balanced form invites a reader to see equivalence between two pairs of short clauses: 'Spare ... the person' / 'not damn the sharper'; 'expose the vice' / '[damn] the dice'. Syntactic and metrical echoing of this kind is characteristic of Pope's mode of expounding an argument. This, I observed in the Introduction, is a thoughtful procedure: argument by concurrence, by reflective harmony. A voice of reason is expressed through balanced structure. The mind, like the poetry, is at ease with itself. But exactly the same kind of structure can be used antithetically, to draw attention to circumstances in which terms reinforcing or closely shadowing each other are replaced by incompatibility. Such dissonance can range from lesser to greater, from the introduction of some qualification to outright contradiction. We have only to turn to, say, the extraordinary opening paragraph of the second epistle of *An Essay on Man* to see such rhetoric in powerfully expressive action. Rhymes now take on an ironic resonance, their auditory consonance being disturbed by internal semantic disharmony.

Interpretation, then, of structural patterning involves us in two simultaneous activities: recognition of form and questioning of meaning. The context within the specific poem adds a further dimension. Individual couplets, particularly end-stopped couplets, will frequently contain their own self-sufficient rationale. But they will also usually be enhanced or qualified by the couplets that precede and succeed them. Here the relationship between the echoing terms in the two lines seems to represent an organized counterpoint. It is as if the first speaker knocks a ball over the net into the second speaker's court; and the latter

responds by knocking it directly back again. We at once understand that they are taking different sides, but also that they are doing so under the rules of the game. So 'person' is answered by 'sharper'—a person, that is, who cheats another by taking advantage of simplicity or innocence—and 'vice' is answered by 'dice'—gambling with dice being a form of activity of, let us say, dubious moral quality and one open to a sharper's manipulation. The friend and the poet are taking different sides: one for restraint in keeping the 'person' anonymous, the other for revealing names. But they both agree on the framework within which such difference of opinion operates. We may, perhaps, expect the passage as it proceeds to elaborate propositions on either side until one wins the point by virtue of superior weight of evidence or deployment of argument.

However, Pope's response actually shifts the terms of reference. 'Sharper' is not simply anyone, but someone who engages in vicious activity. By using the word in place of the friend's neutral 'person', Pope imports 'vice' into the noun. 'Dice' are left to represent a metonymy, the material objects of the gamester's trade. By means of this sleight of hand, the line 'How, sir! Not damn the sharper, but the dice' itself exposes the inadequacy of the friend's proposition. It also addresses what had become something of a commonplace in ethical writing. For example, the Latin epigrammatist Martial had claimed that the method of his works was to 'spare the person and speak of vices' ('parcere personis, dicere de vitiis', *Epigrams*, book 10, no. 33). Such a formula, Pope implies, lets the person off too lightly and reduces satire to bland statements of the obvious, bordering on tautology: to attack a vice for being a vice. Far from merely knocking the ball back over the net, Pope's reply changes the angle and wins the point.

The second couplet then forces home his advantage. Its image is that of a hawk swooping on its prey, to 'souze' (or 'souse', as it is more commonly spelled) being defined by *OED* as 'to stoop down; to descend with speed and force' ('souse', v 3, sense 1). To argue in favour of 'general' satire is to advocate attacking 'all the kind' or the 'genus', that being the Latin root of the word 'general'. The image exposes the absurdity of such an action: a hawk actually swoops on a particular victim. Satire, then, can only be effective if it can seize individual examples of the kind or genus.

Pope goes on to tease the friend by tempting him into exposure of his share of natural, if not entirely admirable, human curiosity. Pope does this by setting off a series of unnamed figures:

*P.* The poisoning dame—*F.* You mean—*P.* I don't. *F.* You do.  
*P.* See, now I keep the secret, and not you!  
 The bribing statesman—*F.* Hold, too high you go.  
*P.* The bribed elector—*F.* There you stoop too low.

lines 22–25

By now, the friend's strait-laced recommendation of general commentary lies in the pieces comically dramatized in the chopped-up lines. Game, set, and match.

### *Dialogue II, lines 78–93*

Pope restores dignity and seriousness to the poem by turning satire on its head to show its principled alternative: praise of those participants in public life who have maintained, and who do maintain, the finest traditions of social engagement and ethical standards.

Oft, in the clear, still mirror of retreat,  
 I studied SHREWSBURY, the wise and great:  
 CARLETON's calm sense, and STANHOPE's noble flame,  
 Compared, and knew their generous end the same:  
 How pleasing ATTERBURY's softer hour!  
 How shined the soul, unconquered in the Tower!  
 How can I PULTENEY, CHESTERFIELD forget,  
 While Roman spirit charms, and Attic wit:  
 ARGYLE, the state's whole thunder born to wield,  
 And shake alike the senate and the field:  
 Or WYNDHAM, just to freedom and the throne,  
 The master of our passions, and his own.  
 Names, which I long have loved, nor loved in vain,  
 Ranked with their friends, not numbered with their train:  
 And if yet higher the proud list should end,  
 Still let me say, 'No follower, but a friend.'

In this passage, the first three couplets salute four names from the immediate past, the second three couplets acknowledge present

politicians, and the final two couplets round off the lists by defining Pope's personal attitudes and relationships to them.

Charles Talbot, Duke of Shrewsbury, had figured significantly in the invitation to William of Orange to take over the crown, and served in various ministerial roles under William and Mary, and then under Queen Anne. He also voluntarily resigned from such posts, indicative of his creditable lack of personal ambition and his desire to balance private and public life. Henry Boyle, Lord Carleton, uncle of the third Earl of Burlington, also served under William and Anne. James, Earl Stanhope, took part in proceedings against those guilty of corruption in the South Sea Bubble scandal. They were all moderate politicians, whether of Whig or Tory leanings. Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, was acknowledged for his dignified and resilient behaviour when imprisoned in the Tower of London for his Jacobite sympathies. He was associated with the Scriblerus Club, and Pope was called as a defending witness in his trial in the House of Lords.

William Pulteney was widely acknowledged for his oratorical powers in the House of Commons. Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Chesterfield, was an active politician in the reigns of George I and George II, gaining particular acclaim for his speeches in the House of Lords. In 1737 he led an unsuccessful attack on the Licensing Bill for restricting the liberty of the theatre. Later, in 1741–42, both Stanhope and Pulteney were influential in the eventual fall of Walpole. Chesterfield was also author of the famous *Letters to his Son* (written from the 1730s, published 1774). John Campbell, Duke of Argyle, had fought under Marlborough (hence 'the field'), was prominent in securing the Act of Union with Scotland, and was in the current Opposition to Walpole. Sir William Wyndham had been Chancellor of the Exchequer under Queen Anne and was a leader of the Tory Opposition and an ally of Bolingbroke, Pope's mentor and friend.

The historical details (of which the above is just a sketch) are important because they explain how and why Pope selects them for his roll of honour, and because their qualities and achievements (and failures) demonstrate that it is possible, indeed praiseworthy to take part in political activity at the highest level while attracting a considerable degree of general recognition and respect, even when some activities are controversial in nature.

Pope's conversion of this political capital into a dignified and orderly succession is the poetic equivalent of that dignity, that worthiness. He achieves this through various means, linguistic, structural, syntactic, rhythmical. Thus, the capitalization of the names awards them a textual prominence to match their public station. The allocation to figures of the past of eulogistic but concise epithets ('wise', 'calm', 'noble', and the like) echoes the restrained language of proper epitaphs. The lines are throughout carefully structured yet, under strict limits, varied. So, whereas the first couplet names Shrewsbury within its second line as a man whose wisdom makes him a fitting object of study in Pope's retirement, the next couplet inverts the syntax by balancing two names and their attributes ('CARLETON's calm sense, and STANHOPE's noble flame') before bringing them together in harmonious relationship ('the same').

The third couplet, on Atterbury, changes the tone from scholarly to exclamatory and sets off a trio of anaphoric 'How'-s. That rhetorical gesture links the first list, of those former greats now departed, to the second list, of present heroes. The two contemporaries distinguished for their powers of oratory are joined together as inheritors of classical virtues: 'Roman spirit', 'Attic wit'. In the middle couplet of the second list, Argyle, a soldier and statesman, is given an appropriately dramatic (but still highly economical) metaphor: 'the state's whole thunder'. Finally, Wyndham is accorded a description ('The master of our passions, and his own') that reflects what Pope, in a note, defines as Wyndham's 'ability and eloquence'—his power to affect *our* emotions—and his 'utmost judgment and temper'—his power to control *his own* emotions.

The quartet that rounds off the passage, and the whole verse-paragraph, is topped and tailed by key nouns, 'Names' and 'friend'. 'Friend' is given added impetus by line 91, which carefully distinguishes the ideal, mutual relationship that Pope is asserting from another kind of relationship, that of a follower in a 'train'. That alliterative contrast—'follower', 'friend'—is the 'proud' and assertive climax where Pope dares to, as it were, ennoble himself through his association with a powerfully distinguished set of individual men who have served, and are serving, the state in just causes and the exercise of due virtue.

Friendship is a theme that runs consistently through Pope's work. It plays a prominent part in his early masterpiece, *An Essay on Criticism*;

it connects his epistles to Teresa and Martha Blount; it is there in his tribute to his instructor in painting, Charles Jervas; it is central to the three-way relationship between poet, addressee and subject of common mourning in the *Epistle to Robert Earl of Oxford*, written as a tribute to Thomas Parnell for inclusion in a volume of Parnell's works. It is also there in the entire Scriblerus Club of which Robert Harley, Parnell, and, of course, Pope himself were members. It binds together the epistles of the 1730s, which form a major element in the separate but interrelated poems of that decade; it underpins particularly the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*: 'Friend to my life! which did not you prolong, / The world had wanted many an idle song' (lines 27–28) and it gratefully and gracefully brings together the large span of *An Essay on Man* and the finale to Pope's set of *Imitations of Horace* under the aegis of dedication to Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke as 'my guide, philosopher, and friend'. Pope is widely known as a satirist, and he accumulated many enemies; but it is equally important to observe that he attracted many friends, and frequently celebrated friendship in his poetry.

*Dialogue II, lines 208–13*

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see  
Men not afraid of God, afraid of me:  
Safe from the bar, the pulpit, and the throne,  
Yet touched and shamed by ridicule alone.  
O sacred weapon! left for truth's defence,  
Sole dread of folly, vice, and insolence!

Winifred Nowottny comments on the first couplet of this extract that 'such a remark if made in real life would be unlikely to be received with anything other than social embarrassment'. Her fundamental point is that poetic diction—and, indeed, the use of vocabulary in any oral or written situation—is affected by the context in which we encounter it. However, on top of that basis, she observes that poetry enjoys a set of freedoms not available to people in real life. Many and complex restraints surround how we behave in social situations. 'A poem, in so far as it is a fiction uttered by a poetic 'I', is not tied to any context save the context the poet himself articulates in the poem' (Nowottny 1962, pp. 41–42). In addition, poetry, by virtue of its history, of the expectations that our previous reading of it brings, and of its capacity for independent and

surprising interjections under the conditions of contemporary contexts and the experience of the individual writer, is particularly charged with an electric force. That is what makes it so exciting to read.

In the *Dialogues* constituting the *Epilogue to the Satires*, Pope has built up a powerful set of pressures on the quality of contemporary public life and on the ethical duty and responsibility of writers (and, indeed, all of his readers) to respond judiciously, creatively, and—if and when necessary—heroically. All of this energizes the assertive voice of the climax formed by these lines. They attribute failure to the regular instruments of social polity: the legal system, organized religion, and political consensus at the highest level. These derogations have left only ('alone', 'sole') that shaming power of vigorously challenging language as a defence of 'truth'. Pope declares his own total commitment to that challenge—hence the remarkable degree of personal exposure and affirmation enacted here. 'Pride', a term which in other contexts can invoke moral condemnation (as in the exordium of *Epistle 2* of *An Essay on Man*), becomes a moral necessity, an inspiration, and a badge of honour. The 'weapon' possessed by the 'I' addressing us now is language alone, but language at its powerful height. Similar conditions have charged many writers in our tradition, and may again. Poetry, as the voice of tradition and the individual, exercises its own unavoidable call to arms. It is no surprise that the major poem left for Pope to write, the fourth book of *The Dunciad*, will have language itself as its principal subject.

