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JOHN POMFRET'S "THE CHOICE", OR (RE)-INVENTING EMPIRE

Abstract: The present paper intends to re-read the popular neoclassical poem "The Choice", written by (the now forgotten) John Pomfret at the dawn of the eighteenth century, and to demonstrate how it both fulfils and subverts several requirements of its genre. The paper contends that eighteenth-century pastoral poetry often served the purpose of recommending, rather than condemning the "vulgar" concerns of public and city life. The poetry of "retirement", popular in an age of growing commerce, industry and Empire, was meant to assuage the guilt of enterprising spirits and give a gentlemanly varnish to an England hungry for consumption and expansion. While Pomfret's poem certainly plays its part in such a narrative and comforts the anxieties of a business-oriented society, it also undermines the illusion of its "gentility", an aspect which will be exposed in a deconstructive close-reading of the text, employing Derrida's concept of aporia. The paper will also look at the poem from a socio-cultural perspective, relying on the ideas of eighteenth-century scholars such as Ian Watt, John Sitter, Ros Ballaster, Paula R. Backscheider and others.

Keywords: *neoclassicism; eighteenth-century poetry; poetry of retirement; deconstruction; imperialism.*

Inaugurating the 1926 edition of the *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse* (edited by David Nichol Smith), John Pomfret's best-selling poem, "The Choice" (1700), makes a curious first impression. At first glance, the "choice" in the poem's title refers to the poet's preference for a quiet life at a small countryside estate: "If Heav'n the Grateful Liberty wou'd give,/ That I might Chuse my Method how to Live ... Near some fair Town, I'd have a private Seat,/ Built Uniform, not Little, nor too Great" (Pomfret, lines 1-2, 5-6). The speaker places the entire poem under the providential will of God, acknowledging the fact that

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this project of quiet living is at the moment only imaginary, which is why his verses are structured on many conditionals: "I'd have a Clear, and Competent Estate" (line 34), "I'd have a little Vault" (line 53), "I'd Chuse two Friends" (line 76), "I'd be Concerned in no Litigious Jar" (line 140). The speaker is telling us that *if* he was given liberty to choose, this would be his ideal situation. In this way, the poem is both an admission of personal desires and values, and a skilfully-drawn hypothetical reality. Yet, the "choice" at the crux of the poem becomes far more complicated and *complicating* when we take a closer look at its linguistic and socio-cultural implications. What is left unsaid in the speaker's "choice"? Why does a quiet life of retirement in the countryside pose problems? The following paper will attempt to answer those questions as well as investigate to what extent Pomfret's poem undermines the Augustan values it seeks to advance. The paper will also look at how the poems' persuasive rhetoric both shapes and frustrates the project of Empire at the dawn of the eighteenth century.

In his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781), Samuel Johnson remarks on the popularity of Pomfret's poems by stating that he "has always been the favourite of that class of readers, who, without vanity or criticism, seek only their own amusement" (60) and that his poem "The Choice", in particular, "exhibits a system of life adapted to common notions, and equal to common expectations; such a state as affords plenty and tranquillity, without exclusion of intellectual pleasures" (60). Who are these readers who seek "only their own amusement" and what are the "common notions" and expectations that the poem supplies? Finally, why does Johnson affirm that "no composition in our language has been oftener perused than Pomfret's "Choice" (60)?

One of the signs of economic growth and renewed stability after the Stuart Restoration was the development of reading for pleasure. With the rise of capitalism and the division of labour, there was a new push in English society towards individual contentment and leisure-seeking (Watt 61). Women of a middle station who had been relieved of heavy domestic chores thanks to manufacturing could partake in leisure reading (Watt 44) and many members of the lower classes, such as domestic servants and apprentices were beginning to enjoy the benefits of literacy and leisure (Watt 47). Because books and periodicals were cheaper and there was more money and free time to pursue them, the middle classes began to look for a particular kind of reading experience that represented their interests and values. The literature of the time certainly addressed a wider audience of people of varying education (Watt 48), but it

vacillated between instruction and entertainment, as more readers sought to find a mixture of “religious and secular interests” (Watt 50). For many of the “upwardly mobile”, reading was aspirational, and they preferred to read about the aristocracy and the gentry in order to better imitate them. (Downie 66) However, the most appropriate manner for the aspirational bourgeoisie to ‘imitate’ the gentry was to conceal secular interests behind religious and spiritual ideals which came to define the so-called Augustan Age. The “common notions” which Johnson had alluded to earlier in his description of Pomfret’s poem refer to the common ideals and beliefs of the era, centred on a “common sense” discourse of reason, moderation, “balance, order and well-measured poetics.” (Henke 8) After many revolutions, revolts and religious differences, British society required unity and consensus, formalized in the language of politeness and “common sense,” (Henke 5) but also in the appreciation of the “timeless value of ancient classical literature as the highest form of poetic art” (8). Classical art bore the stamp of “timeless consensus,” (8) which is why the period following the Restoration and a great deal of the ensuing century has been dubbed as Augustan.

The problem with these lofty Augustan ideals is that they were constantly being undermined by their very proponents. In the realm of letters there was the threat of “modern writing” (the novel being one such modernity) which fuelled many “ancients vs. moderns” debates at the turn of the century (Henke 9). In the realm of everyday life, there was the threat of the rising middle class and their previously noted ‘secular interests’. This was an age of commerce, industry and empire-building, but it was also codified as the age of politeness, good breeding, and timeless classical values, where writers and intellectuals were attempting “to make the polite religious and the religious polite.” (Watt 51) No matter how business-oriented, eighteenth-century society craved the appearance of gentility. Under these circumstances, literary productions were required to perform several functions at once, both affirming societal concerns, while also providing an escape from their more ‘worldly’ ramifications. Hence, many of the elevated ‘genres’ of the time, such as tragedy and poetry, were expected to maintain their Augustan elegance and airiness, while also offering moral support and confidence in the national project. Indeed, as Paula Backscheider notes, this period of letters distinguishes itself by its diversity of genre, its increasing self-scrutiny, and the writers’ “rising sense of the relationship between a nation’s global reputation and its literature.” (505) Not only is the eighteenth-century

writer-poet aware of the global stage, but he has a public role as a “spokesperson and analyst for the culture” (Hunter 18) and his poetry is usually less lyrical and more politically inclined, focusing on public and social topics. (18) Though the poet may describe his personal experiences, these must once again serve a social rather than lyrical or emotional purpose. (Hunter 18) Given the public nature of poetry, John Sitter also underlines its complicated relationship with the “empire’s wealth” and its “conquerors” (2), seeing as many poets did not feel that they could criticize the present, preferring to allude to a distant future where corruption and the decay of morals might be addressed openly, since “the poet [could not] safely or fruitfully tell all the truth here and now” (5). Even the most celebrated poet of his age, Alexander Pope, whose cutting satire had made many victims, was reticent to criticize England’s dominance abroad, choosing to cast its more pernicious actions in a hopeful light, believing that his country could become a bringer of peace: “Oh stretch thy Reign, fair *Peace!* from Shore to Shore/ Till Conquest cease, and Slav’ry be no more.” (qtd. in Sitter 2)

What can be said then of nature and rural poetry in the aftermath of the Restoration? Nature poetry has always been a means of escape and retreat from the corruption of city life and worldly affairs: whether it be Horace or St. Francis praising the goodness of nature, or Renaissance poets celebrating the ideal of a rustic Arcadia, nature has long been considered Man’s closest connection to Eden (Williams 583). Late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century English poetry follows this classical model, depicting nature as a preferred retreat from corrosive city life, though it is not nature’s beauty or emotional sublime that is being underlined, but rather its model of simplicity and goodness as part of one’s moral and social improvement. (Williams 583) In fact, it is not really ‘nature’ which is being celebrated, but rather the constructed idea of nature in an orderly ‘landscape’, namely the classical English landscape (Fulford 109). Indeed, this is the period where the traditional ‘rolling hills’, ‘green pastures’ and ‘oak trees’ become enshrined in national consciousness as patriotic symbols for the endurance of Englishness itself (109). “National power” is deeply entwined with the land: the health of the soil and oaks, for instance, was interpreted as a sign of England’s victory over its rivals (Fulford 113).

Such a politically charged view of nature is easy to understand in a period where land and landed property was being concentrated in “fewer and fewer hands” (Coward 293). Small-scale farmers were quickly disappearing as more and more land was enclosed and privatized under the prerogative of landlords,

big farmers, and the landed gentry (293). Large landowners dominated the countryside and chased labourers to the city, where they joined the middle classes in forging new professions (294). Under the pressure of urbanization, the ideal of retiring from the world to the countryside became something of a national obsession (Williams 587), so much so that Pomfret's "Horatian wish for rural retirement" was "much imitated throughout the century" (Goodridge 265). The nostalgic yearning for a pastoral escape was rather ironic, because the same people who had been forcibly removed from the countryside and into the city were now aspiring to possible 'retirement' in the countryside after amassing enough wealth in their professions. Indeed, this new "landscape of nationalism" (Fulford 109) expressed itself most eloquently through a materialization of nature. Many "gentlemen-poets [shaped] a national and imperial order from the landscape of England" (109), where the 'retreat to nature' focused more on the estate of the landed gentleman than the idyllic bosom of nature itself. The aspiring middle classes who now had more money to spend and more leisure time to read could dream about countryside bliss in the shape of such an estate, even though the likelihood of their achieving it was quite small. Therefore, many poems of 'retirement' rarely dealt with nature proper. More often than not, they reaffirmed and, at the same time, elevated the 'secular interests' of the Augustan Age.

Turning now to Pomfret's poem, we may look at the way "The Choice" accomplishes the task of proliferating the spiritual and material values of its age, while at the same time undermining the very edifice it tries to uphold. The first half of the poem is very much preoccupied with telling us that the countryside estate the speaker has in mind is, above all things, modest and frugal:

Near some fair Town, I'd have a private Seat.
Built Uniform, not little, nor too great:
Better if on a rising Ground it stood;
On this side Fields, on that a neighb'ring Wood,
It should within, no other Things contain,
But what were Useful, Necessary, Plain:
Methinks 'tis Nauseous, and I'd ne'er endure
The needless Pomp of Gaudy Furniture ...
I'd have a Clear, and Competent Estate,
That I might Live Gentilely, but not Great:

Re-writing, Re-imagining the Past (III)

As much as I cou'd moderately spend,
A little more, sometimes t'Oblige a Friend (Pomfret, lines 5-12, 33-36)

The speaker makes clear that he finds “pomp” and gaudiness not only in bad taste (“Nauseous”), but incompatible with gentle living and a moral and useful life. Whatever wealth he has amassed and which can sometimes be used “t'Oblige a Friend” must be spent moderately and must not be displayed in an ostentatious manner. In fact, affluence must be concealed behind dignified simplicity and plainness. His estate must be neither little nor too “great”, adhering to that famous ‘middle state’ which Robinson Crusoe’s father once praised as the ideal condition of life. We can see here not only typical Protestant values (“Useful, Necessary, Plain”), but also the Augustan desire for elegance, balance and elevation (“built Uniform”; “a Clear, and Competent Estate”). Nature itself must abide by a particular aesthetic harmony: “On this side Fields, on that a neighb’ring Wood”. The countryside “Seat” must not be too remote, but rather “near some fair Town”, which suggests that the speaker may move away from busy society, but not too far from its sphere of influence, as the estate must encapsulate the moral and societal standards of its time.

Nature is brought up again in the shape of the manicured grounds comprising “a little Garden, grateful to the Eye” (Pomfret, line 13), the adjective “little” once more underlining the modesty of the environs and their owner. There is mention of a “Cool Rivulet” (line 14) which runs by the garden: not a river, but the diminutive and humble “Rivulet” on whose “delicious Banks a stately Row/Of Shady Limes or Sycamores should grow” (lines 14-15). We may observe an interesting juxtaposition between the more indulgent description of the “delicious Banks” and the return to order and harmony represented by the “stately Row” of trees. The pastoral fantasy must draw strength from the elegant design of the ancients, which is why here the poet inserts the image of a “silent Study” (line 17) which should be positioned in the vicinity of the river and the trees as a place of learning and contemplation, graced with “all the Noblest Authors” such as “Horace and Virgil, in whose Mighty Lines/Immortal Wit, and Solid Learning shines” (lines 18-19). Indeed, the pleasures of spirit and mind are celebrated and prioritized. The speaker condemns any bodily excess of gluttony and greed:

A Frugal Plenty shou'd my Table spread;

Re-writing, Re-imagining the Past (III)

With Healthy, not Luxurious Dishes Fed
Enough to Satisfy, and something more
To Feed the Stranger and the Neighb'ring Poor ...
My House shou'd no such rude Disorders know,
As from high Drinking consequently flow.
Nor wou'd I use, what was so kindly giv'n,
To the Dishonour of Indulgent Heav'n (Pomfret, lines 43-46, 63-66)

Food and drink must be moderately consumed, and there should be enough victuals to feed the master of the estate but also to provide for the less fortunate, in a manner befitting a gentleman. The phrase "Frugal Plenty" is a perfect summation of the poem's ethos. The "Choice" assures the audience that they can still amass "plenty" of wealth while being abstemious. As Bernard Bernatovich argues, the poem promises that "a man can enjoy his plenty in a moderate way while controlling his desires for more wealth" (42). Desire, however, is the crux of the problem. How can one manage one's desires while also having "Enough to Satisfy"? David Morris points out that the poem "employs strategies of containment" (226) in order to moderate and remove desire, which, for the Augustan poet, is the enemy of happiness (226). However, Morris adds that such a "minimalist solution" does not resolve the "uneasiness of desire" (226), because poetry and desire are often entangled (226). It is precisely this "uneasiness of desire" that the poem unwittingly illustrates in its second part.

The speaker does not wish to be alone on his bucolic estate. He mentions that he would ideally have two male friends to keep him company:

Well Born, of Humours suited to my own,
Discreet, and Men, as well as Books, have known;
Brave, Gen'rous, Witty, and exactly Free
From loose Behaviour, or Formality;
Airy, and Prudent, Merry but not Light,
Quick in Discerning, and in Judging right ...
In Reas'ning Cool, Strong, Temperate, and Just;
Obliging, Open, without Huffing Brave,
Brisk in Gay Talking and in Sober, Grave (lines 78-83, 85-87)

Re-writing, Re-imagining the Past (III)

The poet goes on at length about the various qualities of these male friends, qualities which must always strike a perfect balance between extremes and which must vary in circumstance. The poem underlines the necessity for piety and prudence: the friends must abstain from “loose Behaviour” and they must not be prone to lust or revenge (line 90). Once more, desires among men are muted and vices foiled. So far so good. Up to this point, Pomfret has managed to ‘sell’ the fantasy of retirement to a society that feels uncomfortable about its very busy, enterprising life. The poem offers the illusion that, at any moment, one may drop one’s vulgar concerns in the city or in the budding colonies and dedicate oneself to a life of contemplation and frugality outside the bounds of corrupting society. This illusion is precisely what was required in the new age of commerce, industry, and Empire-building in order to cement its prestige as an age of reason, good taste, and entirely ‘gentlemanly’ acquisition of capital. “The Choice” allows the aspiring English gentleman, whose estate and lands depend very much on unsavoury commerce, even the selling of human beings, to continue participating in this business-oriented society, while reassuring him that his true self belongs to the morally and spiritually pure life outside of society.

If Pomfret had stopped here, the illusion would have been complete and undisturbed, but the element which threatens to topple the edifice and reveal the emperor’s nakedness is the addition in the last part of the poem of a female presence, namely a female companion. The speaker wishes very much to spend some of his hours with a sweet, witty, and chaste young woman:

Would bounteous Heaven once more indulge, I'd choose
(For who would so much Satisfaction loose,
As witty Nymphs, in Conversation, give,)
Near some obliging, modest Fair to live;
For there's that Sweetness in a Female Mind,
Which in a Man's we cannot hope to find ...
I'd have her Reason all her Passions sway;
Easy in Company, in private Gay:
Coy to a Fop, to the deserving free,
Still constant to her self, and just to me.
A Soul she shou'd have, for Great Actions fit;
Prudence, and Wisdom to direct her Wit (lines 98-103, 107-112)

From the beginning, the speaker underlines that there is no carnal interest in this arrangement, for it is the “Female Mind” which attracts him above all, and his ideal vision of femininity would necessarily have her “Passions” held under control by “Reason”. This young woman would be the epitome of female goodness, “Coy” in public, but “Gay” in private, prudent and wise and perfectly “modest”. She would also strike a perfect Augustan balance between being too chatty and too silent. Indeed, the poet takes on an almost paternal tone as he remarks that he would prefer for her to “not seem reserv’d, nor talk too much;/ That shews a want of Judgment and of Sense:/ More than enough is but Impertinence” (lines 118-20). Such a tone is hardly surprising in a century where, despite the emergence of many female writers who helped birth the novel and contributed to the socio-political debates of the day (Runge 276), women were often seen as decorative and fragile beings, in need of being disciplined by their male betters in the form of “gallantry”, “whereby men protected and exerted authority over compliant, elegant, but clearly subordinate women” (Runge 278). The poet, thus, wishes for the woman to converse with him on his own terms, as too much talking in the female sex seems to suggest vice. Ros Ballaster notes that loquaciousness in women was often connected to promiscuousness and silence with virtue, since “the closed female mouth [signified] the intact and defended female body” (78). The speaker of the poem insists that no such promiscuity is present in his female friend; her conduct would be “Regular” (line 121) and “No Censure might upon her Actions fall” (line 126). Moderation is once more highlighted in his interactions with this “Fair” companion:

To this Fair Creature I'd sometimes retire,
Her Conversation would new Joys inspire ...
But so Divine, so Noble a Repast
I'd seldom, and with Moderation, taste.
For Highest Cordials all their Virtue loose,
By a too frequent, and too bold an Use:
And what would Cheer the Spirits in Distress;
Ruins our Health, when taken to Excess (lines 129-139)

Though we are given to understand that all the speaker wants from this young woman is polite and spiritual conversation (described as a “Divine” and “Noble Repast”), even such divinely sanctioned and innocent pleasures may run

to excess and lose their virtue, if used too frequently, because the companion is female. Though the poet warns against excess, here the poem exceeds itself and stumbles into the territory of complicated desires: simply put, just who is this shadowy female companion supposed to be? She is not an illicit lover, because the speaker is heavily preoccupied with establishing her virtue, but she is not the wife and mistress of the estate either, since her company must be infrequent and she is not always welcome there. Though she is a prized “Cordial”, the female companion must be consumed sparingly. As such, she is a thing in-between: neither wife nor mistress, but a young virgin who can afford to spend time alone with a gentleman bachelor and not be ruined. Such a thing was not possible or proper in eighteenth-century England. Bernatovich argues that the public would have appreciated Pomfret’s “moderation” in being neither vulgar nor prudish in his rendition of this “admirable lady” (156), but the Augustan virtue of moderation becomes, in this case, an uncomfortable and unsanctioned ambiguity.

This ambiguity had real-life consequences. John Pomfret was not only married at the time he published this poem, but was a rector and member of the clergy with ambitions of rising in the Church (Johnson 60). However, his ambitions were cut short by his most popular poem, since Dr. Compton, the bishop to whom he applied for investment, considered that “The Choice” promoted living in sin with a woman (Johnson 60). In a twist of dramatic irony, because Pomfret was obliged to stay longer in London to defend his name and rectify the situation, “he caught the small-pox, and died in 1703, in the thirty-sixth year of his age” (Johnson 60). Extraordinarily, the shadowy figure of the young female companion inadvertently led to his death. This is an extreme consequence of going against the rules of the establishment. In the case of women, Augustan society did not abide moderation or compromise, but required extremes: mistress or wife, and nothing in between. The great irony is that Pomfret innocently portrayed the young woman’s presence as a great balm against the assaults of society: “no surly Care/ Would venture to Assault my Soul, or dare/ Near my Retreat to hide one secret Snare” (lines 131-133). The “Retreat”, even as a fantasy or hypothetical choice, is not possible. Desire must be curtailed and controlled, particularly in the realms of conscience and imagination. The woman’s presence in the poem is a site of unreconciled desires; she summons excess and ruin because she cannot be categorized properly. In this way, the image of the female figure acts as an “aporia”, a point of blockage

and indecision within the text, what Derrida described as an impasse which “recurrently duplicates itself interminably, fissures itself, and contradicts itself without remaining the same” (16). The more one tries to analyse the female companion, the more one stumbles upon contradictions and “fissures” within the fabric of “The Choice” and what it stands for. Thus, what Morris referred to as the “uneasiness of desire” (226) is present not only in Pomfret’s poem but in eighteenth-century poetry as a whole (226). The attempt to elide or conceal desire through innocent hypotheticals and veiled euphemisms only serves to underline its destabilizing effect, an effect which would only be fully explored with the advent of Romanticism at the end of the century.

At the start of the eighteenth century, when “The Choice” was published, England was in the early stages of building the Empire, of inventing it wholesale as an inevitable part of its national destiny. While this task of national invention was taking place, there was a simultaneous process of reinvention. The development of an Empire usually takes violent, invasive forms, which is why Augustan literature and culture tried to recast the national project as a gentlemanly preoccupation. However, as Pomfret’s poem and destiny inevitably reveal, the values of this society are always on the brink of exposure, as England vacillates between invention and unraveling.

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