Analyzing Urban Space in Pope's Poetry

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Cities are spaces in a constant state of ebb and flow, where clusters of buildings and structures, created by people, suppress the natural world. It is difficult to fathom cities as mimicking the natural world: the buildings which gleam in the sun and neon signs which illuminate the night hardly evoke a sense of an urban lifestyle. Yet in *The Dunciad* (1743), Pope represents cities in a manner that aligns them with the natural world, rather than showing how cities move away from nature. In Pope's poem, the Goddess of Dulness spreads her influence over Britain, unifying both rural and urban spaces. Britain's culture dwindles away as dullness infiltrates the nation. Amidst the chaos and dullness sweeping over the land, Pope depicts the culture within London as fluid, amidst tethering aspects of the city which prevent dullness from completely taking over. In this way, Pope represents London as reminiscent of mountains, which evokes ideas of firmness and endurance. Mountains are relatively fixed and stable, not changing a great deal over time. In *The Dunciad*, Pope depicts London as emblematic of mountains, presenting the city in his text as fixed and not existing separately from the natural world.

Claudia Thomas Kairoff notes Pope was familiar with the idea of spaces being neither urban nor rural, but somewhere in between. In "Living on the Margin: Alexander Pope and the Rural Ideal," Claudia Thomas Kairoff discusses Pope's residence in Twickenham. Kairoff suggests that "Pope spoke quite deliberately as an inhabitant of neither country nor city, but from the margins of both" (16). Pope's residence in Twickenham was not entirely rural, nor was it urban. Instead, his residence existed in a liminal space where he cultivated the notion of "nature as a backdrop for the reflections of a cultured observer, a backdrop to be manipulated by the poet

or garden designer" (Kairoff 21). Pope's portrayal of nature filters into his poetry depicting urban spaces. Pope relies on qualities pertaining to the natural world and infuses them into the urban spaces he portrays in his works.

At first glance, the vast array of towers and buildings that characterizes cities is salient in the context of the space surrounding cities. Cities are composed of structures created by people, clumped together and not existing naturally on their own. When peering down at a city from a distance, it is discernibly different from the surrounding space. The trees and brush that lie on the outskirts of urban spaces mark the transition between cities and the natural environment. Cities are surrounded, enveloped by rural spaces. It is important to note that not all cities are discernible from one another, as it may be difficult to discern the boundary of one city in relation to other cities when two or more exist beside one another. In this instance, we can consider urban spaces, not exclusive to cities, as being enveloped by rural space and sticking out. In this way, urban spaces are not so different from mountains, which tower above land and are noticeable from a distance.

In *The Dunciad*, there is a power hierarchy present within the city, which mimics the ascending shape of a typical mountain. It is crucial to note not all mountains are shaped exactly the same way, but there is a tendency for mountains to gently slope upward, being wider at the bottom and narrower at the top. There is also a typical notion of mountains possessing a singular peak or having one peak that stands above the others. This typical image of a mountain resembles the hierarchy of political power present in the London of *The Dunciad*, where "still Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the First" (book 1, line 6). Pope introduces the idea of a ruler, who presides over a group of individuals. While Kings or Queens can rule over both urban and rural spaces, as their kingdom may encompass a vast area, the hierarchy of monarchy is

especially apparent in Pope's work when he depicts London and the games taking place within the city. Shortly after introducing the idea of rulers who possess power over their subjects, divine figures intersect with the established hierarchy in *The Dunciad* when the narrator states "Dulness o'er all possessed her ancient right" (1.11). The speaker is referring to the Goddess of Dulness, and, according to the speaker, Dulness possesses more power than anyone else, including the rulers previously mentioned who eventually change. We can imagine Dulness as higher up on the mountain, at the top, followed by the real-world rulers and then their subjects. The rulers, who reign for a finite period of time, Pope presents as reigning in a similar manner to each other, embodying the constant, unwavering qualities present in mountains. Mountains are solid, relatively stable, and do not change very rapidly over time, not noticeably growing or shrinking in size. When "Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the First," the speaker is blurring the lines between rulers, between who is who.

The mountainous hierarchy is of course a political satire, critiquing the monarchy during the time *The Dunciad* was published. Pat Rogers notes many critics "[agree] that the earliest version of *The Dunciad* (1728) alludes in some way to the succession of King George II in the previous year" (90). Also, Michael Schaich states "[George II] has gone down in history as one of the duller figures on the British throne" (164). Considering Schaich's notion of King George II as a "dull" ruler, it becomes apparent that Pope's *Dunciad* may have political implications. When viewing the rulers within the context of the mountainous hierarchy within the city, the rulers embody characteristics of mountains. The narrator in *The Dunciad* states "still Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the First" (1.6). There is this idea of consistency, characteristic of mountains, with both rulers ruling as dunces. Perhaps Pope did not agree with the way George

the second was ruling and creating this mountainous hierarchy within the city would allow Pope to take power away from a monarch, who ruled in a way Pope may have disagreed with.

Pope presents the city in *The Dunciad* as a space infused with divine figures who possess power over other individuals, which is not unlike the depictions of Mount Parnassus where the Muses reside ("Mount Parnassus"). The Muses are hardly ordinary or mundane figures; rather, they are supernatural or even divine since they possess the ability to inspire poets ("Mount Parnassus"). Just like the Muses reside on top of Mount Parnassus, inspiring poets, artists, and musicians, in Pope's text the Goddess of Dulness sweeps over the city and influences poets while they are writing. In *The Dunciad,* Bays, appealing to Dulness, says "Dulness! Whose good old cause I yet defend, /With whom my muse began, with whom shall end" (1.165-166). It appears that Dulness has infiltrated the poet laureate's writing and is not met with reluctance. Rather, Dulness is welcomed, desired, appealed to, and is viewed as consistently influencing the poet's work. Essentially, Dulness is a muse and London is her Mount Parnassus.

Various religions and belief systems have associated the sky with divine figures or with heaven. In *The Dunciad*, the Goddess of Dulness bridges the gap between the sky and the earth and, by extension, the divine and terrestrial world, not unlike mountains rooted firmly on the ground and extending skyward. The speaker in *The Dunciad* states

> So spirits ending their terrestrial race,
>
> Ascend, and recognize their native place.
>
> This the Great Mother dearer held than all
>
> The clubs of quidnuncs, or her own Guildhall. (1.267-270)

Here the Goddess of Dulness is a nurturing figure, facilitating and watching over the divine spirits as they ascend upwards. Though it is not clear if these spirits can travel back down to

earth, there is still an image of a sort of bridge being forged between the terrestrial world and the divine world. These worlds are not separate; rather, they are linked by these spirits who pass through them. In this way, urban spaces embody the close proximity that mountains have to the sky, and by extension, the divine world.

Brean S. Hammond in "*The Dunciad* and the City: Pope and Heterotopia" raises questions about how realistic Pope's depiction of London is and what the implications of Pope's constructed London are. Hammond poses the question of "how far literary cities are imaginative constructions and how far, on the contrary, they reflect the material realities of the city at particular stages of historical development" (219). Since writers depict cities in fictional works, we must be open to consider how realistic these literary cities are. Hammond settles by saying "Pope utilizes the reader's personal knowledge of a particular material space, but superimposes on that space events that could not possibly take place within it—events that the reader's very knowledge of the nature of the space renders impossible and impractical" (220).

The reader's knowledge of this material space helps strengthen Pope's satire, especially in the second book while the games are being held. Cities are fundamentally unique, with unique people, places, and buildings laid out in a manner that is not often replicated. They may share some common traits with other surrounding cities, but cities have distinguishing features which make them individually discernible. In the second book of *The Dunciad*, a series of games takes place in the city of London, but there are landmarks noted in the city which would align with Hammond's notion of situating the text within the reader's knowledge of the specific space (Hammond 220). The narrator in *The Dunciad* notes during the games the participants rush "Through Lud's famed gates" (2.359). The text mentions an aspect of the city that is real and this landmark helps situate the games taking place in the city.

Despite containing structures which exist in reality, Pope's text depicts London as a space losing its grip on culture. As the Goddess of Dulness spreads dullness, sense seems to slide away and the manner in which the culture of London seems to slip away may be similar to mountains and how they tend to have slopes. The speaker in *The Dunciad* asks his muse to "Say how the Goddess bade Britannia sleep, /And poured her spirit o'er the land and deep" (1.7-8). There is very strong imagery here of the Goddess of Dulness spreading her influence over Britain. In this description, Britain is a sort of fixed container, while dullness is fluid, gradually filling this container. Dullness does not consume the nation all at once, rather it spreads gradually. The word "pour" evokes a gradual process rather than something that occurs all at once: the British culture is changing, while the empire is asleep or unaware. The way the culture shifts mimics the gradual slope which most mountains possess. Mountains are usually wider at the bottom and narrower at the top. When it rains, water typically would flow down this gradual slope, and this image aligns with the way the Goddess of Dulness is exerting her influence over Britain.

The image of rain is a vital aspect of grasping the influence Dulness spreads throughout the city. Dulness "pour[ing] her spirit o'er the land and deep" is like rainfall at the peak of a mountain. The rain relates to Dulness's influence, and the mountain represents the British empire and, by extension, urbanity. There is a sense of calmness and silence, with Britain being asleep and that serene atmosphere is characteristic of when it rains. Rain itself is not silent, but the noise that accompanies rain is rhythmic and pacifying. The sound of rain can facilitate sleep, since it embodies soothing qualities, but rain can also be dull. When it rains, the sky is usually dark and dreary. The rainwater on the ground can function somewhat as a blanket would, facilitating Britain's slumber.

In the midst of the dullness which has gripped the nation, we see poets unable to find sense. In the first book, the speaker notes Bays "Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there, /Yet wrote and floundered on, in mere despair" (1.119-120). Bays's sense is lost somewhere deep within a body of water, and without "his sense" Bays seems to encounter a great deal of difficulty while writing. When Bays appeals to Dulness for artistic inspiration (1.163-165), he still has not lost his conception of sense; he knows it is there. Pope implies that while the city has been submerged in dullness, there is hope that sense for other poets can be found somewhere within the depths of dullness, beyond Bays's grasp. Poets can write from either urban or rural spaces, but in the second book of *The Dunciad* the games of the publishing industry take place in London. *The Dunciad* largely portrays the city in a very pessimistic way, as giving way to dullness, though there is still hope of finding sense. Similar to mountains which typically cannot be relocated, sense appears as if it cannot be shifted; Bays may not be able to locate sense, but there is this idea of sense existing and it being worth searching for.

The way *The Dunciad* is physically laid out on the page, and the relationship between the text and the footnotes embodies characteristics of mountains. The prominent footnotes in the final version of Pope's *Dunciad* have been speculated by Brean S. Hammond, who notes the "jostling of footnote against text for room on the page" (221). Throughout *The Dunciad* of 1743 there are many footnotes which appear to crowd out the text. Hammond puts forth the notion that "*The Dunciad* is in itself a contested space" (221) especially with the enormous amount of footnotes. In many instances, there are simply one or two lines of text and the rest of the page is consumed with footnotes, while on other pages there is more text than there are footnotes. Even though there is a lack of balance between the text and footnotes, there are small amounts of text which sort of tether *The Dunciad* amidst the footnotes consuming the page. The pages of *The*

Dunciad are, without question, a "contested space" and will always be a "contested space" since the footnotes never fully remove the text, nor does the text fully remove the footnotes. The footnotes can never claim Pope's *Dunciad*, since the minimal text sort of anchors *The Dunciad*. In this way the text of Pope's *Dunciad*, although at times is very minimal, embodies the rigid nature of mountains, which are firm and composed of rock.

Another way Pope's text physically embodies the firmness of mountains is the way Pope presents the text to readers. The titles of each book are *Book the First, Book the Second, Book the Third,* and *Book the Fourth,* and each book also has an argument which comes before the text. The chaos taking place within Pope's London is not capable of affecting this solid structure and firm order. The argument which appears at the beginning of each book also makes Pope's text stable. In this way, Pope's *Dunciad* becomes a firm space from which readers can observe the chaos taking place within the city. As readers progress through *The Dunciad,* there are elements of the text which do not change just like mountains, which tend to endure over time.

By making the city in *The Dunciad* like mountains in a variety of ways, Pope allows readers to contemplate the manner in which dullness influences the city. The culture of London within Pope's text is dynamic and fluid, similar to the characteristic of rain falling on a mountain while the city endures, staying solid and firm. Pope also forces readers to acknowledge that cities do not exist separately from the natural world. Even the manner in which the Goddess of Dulness exerts her influence over Britain resembles rain falling on a mountain. Pope's text offers urban readers a stable conception of cities by comparing cities with mountains, challenging us not to allow dullness to completely extinguish the light within our urban spaces.

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