

## THE DUNCIAD: BOOK THE FIFTH

With a grateful bow to Alexander Pope, author of *The Dunciad* in Four Books (first published in 1743), the following lines were composed on the re-election of President Richard M. Nixon in November of 1972.

### Argument

In the first four books, the poet has described the coming of the Goddess Dulness and the establishment of her reign in Britain. Ensuring as it has a profound sleep in the literary, intellectual, and political life of that country, the reign of Dulness has been entirely untroubled. Now she looks abroad to expand her empire. In the ruler of a nation to the west, she recognizes a descendant of her beloved Colley Cibber, who, because of his truly stupefying imbecility, was once a king in her realm. But just as Zeus grew up to surpass his father Cronos, so this descendant of Cibber has already proven himself greater than Cibber himself. In the mind of the goddess, he eclipses not only Cibber but also Lewis Theobald, another grand old dunce. Like a great mother, therefore, Dulness takes this new child in her arms. She christens him anew, lulls him to sleep, and fills his mind with dreams of glorious devastation and conquest in Asian lands. In sleep, too, she tells him of the incantation “peace, freedom, self-determination,” which, when ritualistically reiterated at regular intervals, will magically induce sleep in the minds of his subjects. Some of these subjects, growing immune to the magic, seek to awaken the others. Their champion St. George emerging from the west at first disturbs the child of Dulness, who mistakes him for a knight. But the Goddess herself instantly recognizes the newcomer

as one of her very own lambs, and hence no threat to her reign. The newcomer with his flock described. The sullyng of his fleece, the dissolution of his promises, and the sequent effect of this dissolution, recounted. How then, by using two of her most brilliant inventions, the computer and the television set, the Goddess puts the nation to sleep on election day, and reinstates her favorite on his throne. The book concludes with an impassioned tribute to the chief and his henchmen, a brief prevision of the wonders to come, and a paean of praise to the Goddess of Dulness for not only establishing her empire in the west, but also ensuring its glorious future.

Now after aeons passed of sable night,  
 When *Albion* was favored with her blight,  
 Say Muse! how Dulness stirred her leaden hands,  
 And flapped them westward to the *evening lands*.  
 See, see! through thick and grey Atlantic skies,                   5  
 To states once new, now old and fat, she flies.  
 'Tis they have drawn her, they have done her will,  
 Just by their love of being govern'd ill.  
 But most she loves their chief, the *wily owl*,  
 Great Cibber's great-great grandson, dark of jowl:                   10  
 To him she flies, and takes him in her arms;  
 On him she pours her soft maternal charms.

Cibber no more her lap capacious fills,  
 Nor Theobald more her milk insipid swills;  
 Her drooping dug she lets a new mouth lick,                   15  
 And gently fondles her beloved Dick.

*Malvolio* mine! she cries, my darling child!  
 No more be Richard, but *Malvolio* styled.  
 Your will is bad, and that is good, my son:  
 The fairest dreams are out of nightmares spun.                   20

Of Asian conquest now *Malvolio* dreams,  
 Of burning hamlets, and of widow's screams;  
 This Malvo's eye, and that his ear delights;  
 They give him comfort through his days and nights.  
 For *self-determination* does he fight,                   25  
 Himself determined that his way is right.  
 He wants to keep South *Lilliputia* free,  
 A fact that any dunce can plainly see.  
 The North would make the South its bidding do;  
 The South wants only freedom to serve Thieu.                   30  
 South Lilliputs there are who hate his laws,  
 But they are false, untrue to freedom's cause;  
 They want to help the North enslave the South,

And drive the noble liberators out.  
 So all of Lilliputia must be purged: 35  
 The North, the South, the mountains, deltas scourged.  
 His pilots therefore defecate with ire;  
 They void themselves of bombs and liquid fire.  
 On everything that lives and breathes they strike,  
 They drop their bombs on friend and foe alike. 40

‘Tis sad that many of their friends they kill,  
 But damn the price, the prize is greater still.  
 Should all the country into ashes fall,  
 The flag of freedom still must govern all.  
 And when they see that napalm’s truly kind, 45  
 We’ll win the battle for their hearts and minds.  
 So let the stars and stripes triumphant be:  
 Our Asian friends, though slaughtered, will be free.

Malvolio’s heart is great, though oft maligned;  
 He badly wants a treaty to be signed. 50  
 For *Tanya*, lonely Tanya does he sigh,  
 While shedding bombs on sickbeds from the sky.  
 On prisoners of war he speaks, his captured men:  
 “We’ll get ‘em back,” he pledges, “when we can!”

He offers earnest hope to wives and moms;  
 He drops some words of peace, and then more bombs. 55

But soft! some churls there are who like him not,  
 Who boldly charge that he is full of rot:  
 Who say he lies, and burns and bombs and kills  
 For nothing but the love of doing ill. 60

Like Dulness' self, unto the west they gaze,  
 Where sunset leaves the prairie its last rays.  
 Thence comes their hero, full of simple charm,  
 With lance of righteous anger in his arm.  
 All hail, St. George, knight errant of the day, 65  
 Who comes the dragon of the war to slay.

Malvolio bridled: who was this rude knight?  
 This upstart threatening his noble fight?  
 The Goddess stroked his stubble black, and smiled:  
 She knew the milk-white knight for her own child. 70

As soon as she espied him, she did cry,  
 "This *lamb* will lead us *out* of slaughter? Fie!  
 He is my own, though sometimes my disgrace:  
 The white-fleeced changeling of a black-fleeced race.  
 Prepare, my son, for wonders yet untold: 75

You soon will see him grazing with my fold.

Sweet Dulness, yea! Now hast thou spoken true!

*Cassandra's* self was not more wise than you.

Though white sheep oft from black ones widely roam,

Full soon to Dulness they come trotting home. 80

Behold the white sheep with his motley flock,

All gathered grandly for some woolly talk:

Old rams there are, and young, and *shrieking ewes*:

Some gay, some mad, some nude, some wearing shoes.

'Twas there that sheepish George first stained his fleece, 85

As he, high minded! learned to shove for peace.

The meekin' George, of gentle lofty mind,

Pushed ewes and rams, and drove them from behind;

His rams throughout the flock applied their sway,

To see that every sheep went George's way. 90

But as he made them his, they made him theirs,

And dyed him in their cravings and their cares.

With pot and amnesty they rubbed his side,

And in abortion too they dipped his hide.

Then forth he came, not quite a spotless ram:

Their slightly muddied, off-white little lamb.

O lavish lambkin, darling of our day,  
 Left lovely droppings in his lamby way!  
 A thousand dollars pledged to everyone;  
*A thousand promises* to Eagleton. 100

Alas, as droppings will, these turned to earth:  
 We soon discovered just what they were worth.  
 But he was ours, dear George, our darling still!  
 And if he erred, he erred not of his will.  
 To err is human, to forgive divine; 105  
 “Forgive him! said the goddess, “he is mine.”

So Dulness dear, who rude coercion shuns,  
 You bade us freely choose between your sons.  
 And those who did not wish a knave to rule  
 Found sweet relief in voting for a fool. 110

Election day arrives, the voter learns;  
 No need to vote, just wait for the returns.  
 For well before the voting day is done,  
 Computers will decide just who has won.  
 A dozen votes their appetites will sate; 115  
 From wind and straws they’ll make a head of state.

When evening comes, we wend our homeward ways,  
 We set our dials, we seat ourselves, and gaze.  
 Hail Television! great unwinking eye,  
 Unsleeping *Cyclops*, born to stare and pry! 120  
 Your commentators nightlong vigils keep,  
 To bring us tallies, losses, wins, and sleep.  
 You stare at us, and we stare back at you,  
 Till all dissolves in grey, dear Dulness' hue.  
 Reporters out of news, but still in sight, 125  
 Report their yawns to viewers through the night.  
 Their words at last become a drowsy drone,  
 And sleep returns Malvolio to his throne.

Hail to the chief! and to his henchman too!  
 Staunch Spiro! Lamb of Dulness! *Agnus* true! 130  
 The boldly bumptious bombast of his voice  
 Makes doughty dunces everywhere rejoice!  
 His chief we love for pious, wholesome chat:  
 For damning pot and puffing dear sweet Pat.

But past is prologue, and its good grey scum 135  
 Is but a foretaste of the blight to come.



At hand is peace, the tunnel's end we sight:  
 Just round the corner is the clear black night.  
 One day quite soon we'll make the fighting cease;  
 (Until we do, the bombing must increase), 140  
 And when we sign the treaty—there, it's done!  
 We'll say of course that it is we who've won.  
 We will have won for Thieu the right to sway  
 All by himself—and for at least a day.  
 That thousands shall not quite have died in vain, 145  
 He will perhaps a week securely reign;  
 And then to show he's strong and free and fine,  
 He will himself determine to resign.  
 Thus shall he prove that we did never kill  
 To force the Lilliputs to do our will. 150  
 Pure self-determination was our care;  
 What Thieu determined was his own affair.  
 For principle alone we maimed and killed;  
 Whatever's lost, our aim has been fulfilled.  
 So shall we go, with triumph in our hands, 155  
 To spread our principle to other lands:  
 To Lilliputia's neighbors, now in sight—  
 Just waiting for the helping hand of blight.  
 From small to great, from great we thus proceed

To greater still, as all the world we lead. 160

To greater bombs, and more strikes than before,

To greater debt, and ever wider war.

Dear Dulness, then, in loving worship viewed,

Accept, oh please! our heartfelt gratitude:

That all our longings, all our hopes and prayers, 165

Should win at last thy blessing: four more years!

### NOTES

2. *Albion*. The ancient name of Britain, here used to give the learned commentator an opportunity to display his learning.

4. *evening lands* The learned poet alludes to the prescient work of the great Oswald Spengler, whose *Untergang des Abendlands* foretold the coming of the reign of Dulness to the western hemisphere.

9. *wily owl* Commonly considered a symbol of wisdom, the owl is in fact the stupidest of birds. He is here called “wily” because of the skill with which he conceals his stupidity.

17. *Malvolio* Literally, “bad will.” This particular Malvolio should not be confused with the unpleasant steward in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, who wore cross garters and was Puritanically hostile to cakes, ale, and

merriment. The Malvolio of this poem wears no cross garters and is hostile only to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

27. *Lilliputian* A purely imaginary realm.. What happens to it in the poem is quite beyond the bounds of possibility.

51 *Tanya* A young Russian girl who had the good fortune to be in Leningrad at the time of the German siege, during which all other members of her family were killed. In his speeches, Malvolio has often expressed the hope that with his help, every child in Lilliputia will share Tanya's good fortune.

78 *Cassandra* In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the prophetess who foretells the fall of Troy.

83 *shrieking ewes* Here the generally learned poet seems to display an unaccountable ignorance of sheep, since neither rams nor ewes are capable of producing anything resembling a shriek. Furthermore, the epithet "shrieking" is singularly inappropriate for these particular ewes, who bore such tender pastoral names as Bella, Gloria, and Germaine. I am therefore disposed to believe that "shrieking" is the result of compositorial error, and that the correct word here is "screaming."

100 *thousand promises* The result of an unfortunate misunderstanding.

After newspapers reported that Senator Thomas Eagleton (McGovern's first choice as his running mate) had been treated for alcoholism, McGovern was widely quoted as having said that he supported his Eagleton "1000 percent." The presence of the number 1 in this figure was the result of a typographical error. The true figure was "0000 percent."

120 *Cyclops* In Homer's *Odyssey*, the one-eyed giant who imprisons Odysseus and his men in cave and threatens to eat them one by one. Odysseus stupefies him with wine one night and plunges the burning point of a stake into his eye. The Cyclops of the poem is stupefied (and stupefying) almost every night, but no one has yet plunged a stake into its eye.

BEGINNING OF A REVISION FOR THE RE-ELECTION OF GWB  
(2004)

Now after aeons passed of sable night,  
When *Albion* was favored with her blight,  
Say Muse! how Dulness stirred her leaden hands,  
And flapped them westward to the *evening lands*.  
See, see! through thick and grey Atlantic skies,           5,  
To states once new, now old and fat, she flies.

'Tis they have drawn her, they have done her will,  
Just by their love of being govern'd ill.  
But most she loves their chief, the cowboy king,  
To him she flies, and folds him in her wing.  
Dear Dubya has become her life's great work:  
'Tis she who taught him how to strut and smirk.  
"Dear Dubya mine!" she cries, "upon my word!  
You are the reincarnate George the Third!  
These states forsook your namesake for a worse:  
They chose instead their General, George the First.  
Your father, George the Second, gave me hope  
But kept his wars within a narrow scope:  
Constrained by scruples, he would only stand  
To snatch Kuwait from Saddam's feeble hand.  
He called his mighty, fearless forces back  
And stopped far short of conquering Iraq.  
But you—dear George the Third—have launched a war  
That keeps us fighting daily, more and more!

