

Horatian Hints of a Hereafter

Appreciation of Horace is ever changing. His humanity is so genial, his appeal and his sympathies so universal, that each succeeding age is apt to see in him a reflection of its own varying mood and its own inconstant mind. Altered belief begets altered interpretation.

Here is a Victorian view of Horace's outlook on Life and Death :

‘With all his melancholy conceptions of the shadow-land beyond the grave, and the half-sportive, half-pathetic injunction, therefore, to make the best of the passing hour, there lies deep within his heart a consciousness of nobler truths, which ever and anon finds impressive utterance, suggesting precepts and hinting consolations that elude the rod of Mercury, and do not accompany the dark flock to the shores of Styx :

“Virtus recludens immeritis mori
Coelum negata tentat iter via.”

Thus we find his thoughts interwoven with Milton's later meditations; and Condorcet, baffled in aspirations of human perfectability on earth, dies in his dungeon with Horace by his side, open at the verse which says, by what arts of constancy and fortitude in mortal travail Pollux and Hercules attained to the citadels of light.¹

The modern interpretation insists that Horace had no belief in survival after bodily death. Of many such interpreters one is L. P. Wilkinson : he writes of the repeated assertions of Horace that death closes all.² Having searched for those ‘repeated assertions’, I can find none.

II

*damna tamen celeres reparant caelestia lunae,
nos, ubi decidimus
quo pater Aeneas, quo Tullus, dives et Ancus,
pulvis et umbra sumus.*

(Odes, IV, 7).

1. *The Odes and Epodes of Horace*, edited by Lord Lytton. William Blackwood and Son, 1869, pages XVII and XVIII.

2. *Horace and his Lyric Poetry*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1946, p. 35.

This is the middle stanza of an ode of which the main theme is that life is short and death inevitable. That is the central idea, but there is more in the ode than that. *pulvis ET UMBRA sumus*—that was not written only of dust in the tomb. *mors* is death, and in this ode *immortalia ne speres* can mean no more than that Horace counsels Torquatus, to whom the ode is addressed, not to hope for exemption from death. Horace's assertion here is that death is inevitable; not that death is final. The significance of the words *et umbra* should not be ignored.

The *solvitur acris hiems* ode (I, 4) is another in which Horace ponders Life and Death. A comment on this by K. F. Quinn, Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies, University of Melbourne, is published at page 741 of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1962 edition). 'The philosophical commonplace,' says Quinn, 'formally provides a thread to link the rich imagery of the first part of the poem with that of the second part, tuning the simple sensuousness of the imagery with pervading attitudes of irony and melancholy.' What precisely Quinn means by the 'philosophical commonplace' he does not explain. If he means merely the aphorism that death is inevitable, that would be a trite and vapid commonplace: a biological rather than a philosophical commonplace.

It is right, of course, to appreciate the rich imagery, the simple sensuousness and the attitudes of irony and melancholy. But criticism should not stop there: criticism should go on to ask whether the imagery, the sensuousness, the irony and the melancholy are there for their own sake or for a purpose beyond themselves. The line and a half *iam te premet nox fabulaeque Manes et domus exilis Plutonia* has an imagery of its own, sombre and shadowy, the purport of which criticism should not blink. As that rich and sensuous imagery symbolizes things corruptible and mortal, so this contrasted imagery must symbolize things incorruptible; things of which death is not the end but may be the beginning. Has criticism considered whether this ode, taken as a whole and with due regard to all its imagery, may be the poetic expression not of a trite aphorism, but of what E. M. W. Tillyard might call a Great Commonplace ?³

Wilkinson's book has a section on Life and Death, wherein he refers to the trend of contemporary feeling in Rome as opposed to 'the common view of Classical Greece'. By the contemporary Roman feeling he means the view taken in a mourning Rome, a Rome stricken by thirty years of civil

3. *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, Chatto and Windus, 1945, pages 39 ff.

strife, a Rome in which, he says, 'the unbelievable horrors and injustices encouraged a wishful belief in a compensation hereafter'. And by 'the common view of Classical Greece' he means, presumably, the view that death closes all—the view with which Horace's 'repeated assertions' are alleged to agree. If that was indeed the view of Classical Greece, it was a view Greek Plato for one did not share. Has critical interpretation attempted to inquire whether Horace, master-eclectic that he was, may have used seemingly incompatible Greek and Roman elements for the purpose of combining them in a new and luminous Græco-Roman amalgam? If old Cato could temper his cold virtue with heady wine, why should not young Horace seek to mellow his 'Classical Greek' with a contemporary Roman vintage?

An exquisite Græco-Roman blend is Odes, I, 10—*Mercuri, facunde nepos Atlantis*. The tale of theft of Apollo's cattle was a Greek invention, and the humorous reference to that early roguery of the god Mercury is characteristically Greek. But Mercurius stealing souls through the passage from earth to Hades and settling them there in happy dwellings, *laetis sedibus*—this is contrary to the view that death closes all; this is in tune with the trend of contemporary Roman feeling. France in the throes of its Revolution, the France of Marquis de Condorcet, would know that feeling well.

Horace's repeated assertion is not that death closes all, but that life is short and death inevitable. Yet with this recurring theme, revolving round it like a constant satellite, is always a surmise of something after death; something which he keeps intimating by means of the figurative language he employs. —*iam te premet nox fabulaeque Manes et domus exilis Plutonia*. In Odes, II, 14, when the satellite emerges from the circumfusile gloom, it appears in the fulness of a stanza loaded with imagery not of this world:

*visendus ater flumine languido
Cocytus errans et Danaï genus
infame damnatusque longi
Sisyphus Aeolides laboris.*

That bodily death is in one sense final—final in the sense that the life gone out can never be called back into the same body—Horace was never in doubt. Therefore, he could look with dignified resignation on the death of a dear friend, Quinctilius Varus—

*durum, sed lenius fit patientia
quicquid corrigere est nefas.*

(Odes, I, 24).

To the stern fact that death inevitably awaits all who taste the fruits of earth, *quicumque terrae munere vescimur*, Horace was perfectly resigned. *linquenda tellus et domus et placens uxor*—land, home and wife must all be left behind. But there are things not of earth which he had learned to enjoy and did not mean to abandon. And if *carpe diem* was his motto through life, if he was always for making the best of the passing day, it is not unnatural that he should hope to do likewise with the long Plutonian night.

He once narrowly escaped death under a falling tree. Recovering himself, he sits down and writes an ode (II, 13). Death that takes a man off his guard is more horrible, he says, than the death which a soldier may ward off in the hour of battle or the death from which a sailor may protect himself in time of tempest. So horrible was the death that had nearly got him. But what then? Even in death he would not cease to follow what has been the loadstar of his life. Death, even if it had claimed him, would not stop his ear from drinking in the music of shipwreck and war, the melody of Sappho and the larger-sounding strain of Alcæus :—

*utrumque sacro digna silentio
mirantur umbræ dicere; sed magis
pugnas et exactos tyrannos
densum humeris bibit aure vulgus.*

Fanciful this may be; humorous pleasantry it may be. And yet—*ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?*

III

*te maris et terræ numeroque carentis arenæ
mensorem cohibent, Archyta.*

(Odes, I, 28).

This is the opening sentence of a problem poem, a poem weighted with sombre presage of a world outside the rational and normal. The first syllable of that word *Archyta* is a metrical abnormality (a long syllable where prosodial regularity requires two short ones), whose macabre echo moans back, as it were, in the fifth foot of the hexametre *me quoque devexi rapidus comes Orionis*.

The ode teems with involuted problems. 'No ode in Horace', wrote Lytton, has been more subjected than this one to the erudite ingenuity of conflicting commentators; nor are the questions at issue ever likely to find

a solution in which all critics will be contented to agree.⁴ Was the ode composed as a dialogue between the ghost of Archytas and a voyager? Was it a dialogue between a moralizing live voyager and the ghost of a dead seaman? Or, is the whole poem assigned to the ghost of a shipwrecked and unburied man, who moralizes over Archytas and the certainty of death? This last supposition is the one both Lytton and Wilkinson have adopted.

Then there is the problem of Tithonus. On Tithonus, according to an ancient myth, Aurora, goddess of the dawn, had conferred the gift of immortality. But without eternal youth, his inability to die became an insupportable burden, from which he found release by being turned into a grasshopper. That being the old myth, how comes it that in this ode Tithonus is cited as one of those who died? So perplexing can this puzzle be to some that pedantry may even find itself impelled to go puling to the Pleiades for a solution.

Based on mythology too is the drowned voyager's problem. His belief is that, unless his bleaching bones receive even a symbolic burial, his *umbra* must stay debarred from its proper resting-place beyond the Styx. This was the problem that troubled also the soul of Virgil's Palinurus. (*Aeneid* VI, 365 to 371).

What could have Horace's purpose been in uniting these two problem-breeders—the myth about Tithonus and the mythical notion about the efficacy of burial rites—in the solemnity of a sepulchral monologue? Has criticism given due thought to this question?

Horace's way with the old myths is not to explode but to exploit them. Adapting the myth about Zeus visiting Danaë in a shower of gold, he interprets it to mean that a seducer, by the expedient of bribing the guards, had gained access to the girl (*Odes* III, 16). The Tithonus myth too may require a figurative interpretation. As Midas learned to loath his golden touch, so Tithonus, schooled by sad experience, came to regard his unending senility as a bane rather than a boon. *longa Tithouum minuit senectus* (*Odes* II, 16). The truth underlying the myth is that exemption from bodily death is not something so be desired. Therefore, *immortalia ne speres*.

4. *op. cit.*, page 92.

And yet *immortalia spero* is the burden of this dead man's monologue. All the concern he displays over his unburied bones is rooted in his hope of ultra-Stygian immortality. And herein lies the most thought-teasing of all in this ode. How has criticism faced the challenge: Wilkinson's criticism appears to face away from it. 'I suspect,' he says, 'that Horace is once more looking ironically at human inconsistency.'⁵

Where is the inconsistency: Irony there certainly is. The drowned man speaks under the influence of two distinct beliefs: one is that all must die; and the other is that man is potentially immortal. The one is rational; the other is not. And the irony lies in displaying the dramatic impact of the irrational on the rational.

Lady Macbeth is rational enough when she bids her husband—

*Go get some water
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.*

(*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 2).

At the time she speaks these words the blood on his hands is fresh. A few minutes rational treatment with H₂O washes it all away, leaving not a trace behind. And yet—

Yet here's a spot. . . . Out, damned spot. Out, I say . . . Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

(Act V, Scene 1).

It is a different Lady Macbeth—a tormented, sleep-walking, utterly irrational Lady Macbeth—who talks now. And the retrospective irony of the irrational shatters the rational.

Akin to this is the retrospective irony latent in the words of Horace's monologist. His truism that all must die is plainly rational. But when he proceeds to disclose his views about immortality and the efficacy of burial rites, he has passed into the realm of the irrational. Here too is retrospective irony; here too is the irony of an irrational utterance being pregnant with profounder truth.

⁵ *op. cit.*, page 114.

Strange it is that Wilkinson's comment on the Archytas ode is not in the section dealing with Horace's attitude to Life and Death, but in a later chapter entitled *Attitude to Poetry*. This ode, says Wilkinson, has revealed itself as an expression of the sepulchral epigram-form. Wilkinson's criticism, then, if one may judge from this, reaches no deeper than the outward form: it fails to ponder the substance. Wedded as he is to the notion that Horace had no belief in survival after bodily death, Wilkinson must of necessity avoid facing the fact of Horace's monologist being one whom Horace imagines as a survivor of bodily death.

The drowned man says that all must die: the great Archytas died; the 'immortal' Tithonus died; he (the drowned man) also has died. Yet here he is, surviving bodily death, still nursing the inalienable hope of immortality. This ode could hardly be the work of a poet who had abandoned all hope of survival after bodily death.

According to Sellar 'Horace does not, like Virgil, meet the thought of inexhaustible melancholy with 'the vague hope of a spiritual life hereafter'.⁶ No; Horace's is no vague hope. In poem after poem image after image gives shape to his vision of pure souls in the calm of blest abodes:—

*tu pias laetis animas reponis
sedibus, virgaque levem coerces
aurea turbam, superis decorum
gratus et inis.*

(Odes, I, 10).

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6. *Horace and the Elegiac Poets* by W. Y. Sellar, Oxford at the University Press, (1924 impression), page 43.