

Horace

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That a poet should survive two thousand years is not remarkable. Whatever changes two thousand more may bring about, they will not affect the standing of Homer or of Virgil. '*Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.*' If you survive your first thousand, the others will fall into line. But that a poet writing two thousand years ago should today be the helpmate and spokesman of humanity is in the nature of a miracle. It can be accounted for only by the fact that Horace was a man wholly disillusioned, and wholly good-tempered.

No word in our language has been so misused in the past nineteen years as the word 'disillusionment.' It has come to mean the perpetual grouch of men still deeply resentful that the World War was not in the nature of a garden party, and that the World Peace was not a highway to Utopia. Every crime and every folly have been excused on this ground. Even the kaleidoscopic divorces of Reno, the suspension of privacy, the repeal of reticence, have been accounted for by the disillusionment of youth at the way the world was run when it was too young to run it, as the natural result of a war which saw greater acts of heroism and of supreme self-sacrifice than had ever before purified the souls of men.

The disillusionment of Horace was not of this order. It meant that he had awakened from the noble dreams of youth to the equally noble realities of manhood. He saw life as a whole, and this educational process taught him that it is not easy to find happiness in ourselves, and that it is not possible to find it elsewhere. Reason, moderation, content, a wide mental horizon, a firm foundation of principle – these were the gifts of the gods (and Horace revered his gods) to men of good purpose and sobriety.

His upbringing was of the best. His father, though but a freedman who had received his name, Horatius, either because he had been the property of some member of the patrician family of Horatii, or because his birthplace,

Venusia, was part of their vast estates in Apulia, was sanely ambitious for his promising young son. He took him to Rome to be educated – an extravagance he could ill afford – provided for him liberally, and watched over him with care. We hear nothing of the mother, so presumably she was dead. Rome was more concerned with the functions of motherhood than was Greece. She could not have endowed the world with her two great gifts, the sanctity of the family and the majesty of the law, she could not have given to it, as she did, a life morally worth the living, if she had not looked sharply after her women, emphasizing their duties rather than their privileges. But she was far from being a matriarchy like the United States. She was not a nation of husbands, but a nation of men. The foundation of the family was the father. He had undisputed authority, unshared responsibility, and often unlimited devotion.

Certain it is that Horace pays a tribute of gratitude to the father who begrudged him nothing that it was in his power to give. He permitted the boy to be freely flogged by his severe master, Orbilius, having the male parent's insensitiveness in this regard; but he protected him alike from folly and from misdoing. 'He kept me chaste,' wrote Horace in after years, 'free from shameful deeds, and from the breath of dishonour.'

His Roman schooling over, young Horace was sent to Athens, still the thrice superb teacher of the world; and there, free from his father's restraining hand, he did what all young men of spirit have done since the beginning of time – he went to the wars. The profitless murder of Julius Caesar had brought Brutus to Greece. Horace, being twenty-two, an age singularly sensitive to oratory, joined the republican army, and was given the post of military tribune – a circumstance usually mentioned as proof of his talent, but which seems rather to indicate a shortage of trained soldiers. If we may trust to his recollections, as embodied in his lines to Pompeius Varus, his military experiences were not altogether unpleasant. There were hours of relaxation to compensate for hours of peril:

*'Full oft we sped the lingering day,
Quaffing bright wine as in our tents we lay,
With Syrian spikenard on our glistening hair.'*

It is an agreeable picture of campaigning; but the curtain fell on the desolate field of Philippi. Brutus and Cassius died by their own hands; and Horace, convinced that his was not a military genius, profited by the general amnesty to return to Rome.

It was a hard home-coming. His father was dead, his small estate in Venusia had been confiscated – which was to have been expected – and he himself was under suspicion as a pardoned enemy of the state. He had much to live down, and he had much to build up. He secured his daily bread by working as a scribe in the quaestor's office, and he began his career as poet. Naturally he began it by writing satires. What else should a brilliant and bitterly disappointed young man have written? And just as naturally he regretted many of these satires when time had brought him reason.

We all remember how Byron strove to blot out of existence his outbreak of ill-temper, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,' and how he found out that as soon as English readers discovered they could no longer get that particular poem they were all possessed by a desire to have it. Horace would have liked to blot out his early satires. They were not his *métier*. The concentrated anger of Juvenal or of Swift was utterly foreign to his nature. Swift was a great and powerful humorist, and Juvenal was esteemed a wit; but in their two souls 'rage accumulated like water behind a dam,' and burst into devastating floods. Horace had not even the tenacity of wrath which made an indifferent poet like Lucilius a fairly great satirist; but in its place he had a gift which was slowly maturing – a balanced and delicate irony, playful but with a rapier's point. The charming picture of country life, simple, serene and self-respecting, which the moneylender, Alfius, contemplates with unctious but decides not to live, is a perfect example of the ironical, of the laughter that is so low-pitched it seems – for one mistaken moment – to be kindly. As admirable in its more worldly way is his epistle to the young Tiberius, heir to the throne, introducing a persistent acquaintance who will not be set aside. This is the ninth epistle of the first book. As there are few of us who have not suffered a somewhat similar experience, its study cannot fail to be of service.

In the fifth epode we find the first direful picture of the witch, Canidia, a singularly disgusting person. It is at once the most tragic and the most

dramatic poem that Horace ever wrote. Curiously dramatic, for it opens with the outbreak of terrified anger from the patrician child who has been trapped into the witches' den, there to die in slow torment for the better making of a love philtre; and it closes with the curse which the doomed boy hurls at his destroyers. Fear has left him, and fury has taken its place. He bids the hags remember that no magic can alter right and wrong, or avert retribution. He, dying at their hands, will pursue them to their shameful deaths. The rabble will pelt them with heavy stones, and fling their unblessed bodies to the wolf:

*'This shall my parents see,
Alas! surviving me.'*

Horace was always concerned with witches and sorcerers; but the trend of his mind was sceptical. He reached the sane conclusion that they were malignant but impotent.

All this time he was making friends of an agreeable order. The reign of the great Augustus, even the consulship of the great Octavius, was singularly favourable to brilliant young men. Rome was extravagant and immoral; but it was full of artistic and intellectual fervour. Horace's personality was charming, his attainments were remarkable. Virgil, whose own estate had been confiscated and restored, was his intimate companion; and it was Virgil who presented him to Maecenas, the minister and confidential adviser of Octavius. From this introduction and the friendship that followed sprang one of the most perfect interchanges of gifts the world has ever known. Maecenas gave Horace a farm in the Sabine hills, and the very modest independence he desired. Horace gave Maecenas an immortality that can never be disassociated from his own. The more we think about it, the more sure we are that the fates – kindly for once – put these two men in the same place at the same time for the perfecting of their lives.

Augustus would have taken the accomplished young poet for one of his own secretaries, and would in all likelihood have treated him with the generosity he lavished upon Virgil; but Horace, lacking ambition, was not of the stuff out of which good courtiers are made. His political views had undergone a sobering change. He began to understand the mighty mission of Rome; the

need of her to hold the western world together; her policy of conciliating and amalgamating conquered nations; her 'thrice-hammered hardihood' which nothing human could resist. No pride of citizenship ever equalled hers; and even her politicians still retained some measure of disinterested patriotism. Her monumental achievement, her lasting gift to the world she ruled, was law.

In the strengthening of imperial Rome, Maecenas played an important role. He was of Etruscan descent and a very great gentleman, scholarly, hospitable, public-minded. Where the superb basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore now stands, there stood his villa. Thither Augustus when ill had himself carried, to recover in purer air and more spacious quarters than his own palace, simple and plain, afforded him. The self-indulgence of the Roman emperors had no example in him. Since the lamentable Ides of March which saw the murder of Caesar, Maecenas had guided, supported, and restrained Caesar's nephew and heir. Many are the stories told of him, the most characteristic being that of his prompt action in the Forum when Octavius in an unrelenting mood was sentencing one political offender after another to death. Unable to approach the tribune on account of the crowd that surged about it, Maecenas wrote on his tablets, *Surge tandem Carnifex!* ('Butcher, break off!') and flung them straight into the ruler's lap. Octavius read the words, rose silently, and quitted the judgment seat which he had been pronounced unworthy to fill.

Under the protection of Maecenas, Horace lived his life serenely, and his talents ripened to perfection. His lovely odes gave the same delight then that they give now; his Roman soul venerated what was admirable, and strove for what was attainable. He spent the best months of the year in the country, where, unhurried by engagements and unharassed by acquaintances, he wrote with delight and deliberation. Like Marcus Aurelius, he was able to be alone; but he was far too wise to make of himself that lopsided thing called a recluse. He felt with Montaigne the rare delight of dividing his life between the solace afforded him by nature and the stimulus afforded him by men.

It must be admitted that he had uncommon luck in his dealings with both. Most of us could live in stable harmony with nature if our meeting place were a beautiful and fertile corner of Italy. What did Horace know of

the malignant nature that rules supreme over wilderness and jungle, desert and swamp? What of disastrous nature hurling tornadoes and dust storms at her helpless children? What of relentless nature that hates a farmer, and sends sodden floods, or blighting droughts, or armies of pestiferous insects, to ruin him? The casual fashion in which the poet alludes to unfavourable weather conditions proves how small a part they played in his life. Not for nothing has Italy been called the sweetheart of the world. Horace's farm was small, thirteen hundred feet above the sea, and surrounded by beautiful woods. It produced corn, olives and vines, though he thought poorly of the wine made from its grapes. It was managed by a bailiff, and cultivated by five families of freedmen. All its owner had to do was to eat and drink its products. He had also eight slaves to wait upon him, and, like most Roman slaves, they had uncommonly little to do. Even his modest meals of pancakes, lentils, and peas were served to him by three young slaves, smiling boys with whom he occasionally conversed. It was what was then called the simple life; but, as compared with the crude and elemental thing which goes by that name in this our land today, it is recognizable as the austere luxury of a very cultivated poet.

Rome, too, had its simplicities as well as its grandeurs. The citizen who stepped from his silken litter into a Roman street might be tripped into the gutter by one of the pigs that, like the happy Plantagenet pigs of London (at a later date), enjoyed unmolested the freedom of the city. Horace preferred on the whole the free and roving pig to the free and roving dog. The pig was at least sane. The dog might be rabid, and snap at him as it ran by. His satires, which grew at once keener and kinder as he approached his thirty-sixth birthday (they were given to the world collectively in 29 B.C.), describe for us the follies and extravagances of Rome; and, as unmitigated seriousness is always out of place in human affairs, these follies and extravagances amuse us as they amused the satirist two thousand years ago, as they must always amuse as well as instruct the student of human nature. It was from Horace that Thackeray learned how to people the canvas of 'Vanity Fair.' 'To Thackeray,' says Sir Theodore Martin, 'Horace was a breviary.'

‘Out of Plato,’ says Emerson, ‘come all things that are still written or debated among men of thought.’ And if this be true, we may add one word more. Out of Horace come most things that are still enjoyed and respected by men of feeling. The clear-sighted do not rule the world, but they sustain and console it. It is not in human nature to be led by intelligence. An intelligent world would not be what it is today; it would never have been what it has been in every epoch of which we have any knowledge. Horace had no illusions on this score. He did not pass his life in ignorance of the ills about him. Men lived on their elemental instincts then as now. They wanted to keep what they had, or they wanted to get what their neighbours had, just as they do today. Horace knew this, and he invented no fancy phrases to decorate a bald fact. To understand life was, indeed, a classic form of consolation, a mental austerity which Pope failed to take into account when he wrote:

*‘Horace still charms with graceful negligence,
And, without method, talks us into sense.’*

Yet the little Queen Anne man had a deep admiration for the poet who distilled philosophy from life, and whose counsel of perfection is based upon the feasibility of performance. There was none of Goethe’s ‘negative and sceptical neutrality’ about Horace. He knew that Rome was the best possible means for ordering a large fraction of humanity. He knew that discipline at home and invulnerability abroad were necessary for this end. He loved with a passionate intensity of devotion the greatness of Roman traditions, and the memory of the mighty dead. Two notes of admonition he struck. One is in the tenth ode of the second book, where he warns Licinius, and through him all Romans, of the un wisdom of plotting against the state: ‘Reef your sails while there is yet time.’ The other is the third ode of the third book, one of the great Alcaics on which the fame of the poet securely rests. In it Juno herself sings the praises and the triumphs of Rome – Rome destined to unite the severed countries of the world, provided only that she paid no heed to her own rabble (Horace and Shakespeare held the same opinion as to the intelligence of mobs), and curbed her own cupidity:

*‘Riches the hardy soldiers must despise,
And look on gold with undesiring eyes.’*

It is not clear why this ode is held by most commentators to refer to the hidden treasure of Darius (which, by the way, still awaits discovery). It seems to allude merely to the gold which all men knew to be buried deep in mines, and which wise men believed had much better be left there.

‘The understanding sadness of Horace,’ says Edith Hamilton, ‘tempers the gaiety of his verse into something infinitely endearing.’ The sobering truth which he bore ever in mind he expressed with customary terseness:

*‘We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest.’*

Therefore he sang unceasingly the praises of sweet content which springs from ‘those deep regions of self where the issues of character are decided.’ This tenderness combined with disillusion has made him a helpmate for two thousand years. Cheerfulness and melancholy can be, and usually are, equally odious; but a sad heart and a gay temper hold us in thrall. Even the amatory odes, which are so perfect and so unweighted by passion, have in them an undertone of regret. Commentators, always immersed in sentiment, have concluded that Cinara was to Horace what Lucy was to Wordsworth – a lost love and a lasting memory. But all we know is that she died young, and that Horace regretted with tempered sadness her early loss:

‘I am not the man I was under the reign of Cinara.’

Lucy has no rival in the field. Cinara shares the canvas with shy Chloe, and false Neacra, and forward Glycera, and heartless Barine, and that accomplished flirt, Pyrrha,

‘Plain in her neatness’

and Lydia, the lady of an ode as fragile and as flawless as a butterfly, which has been entitled in English ‘The Reconciliation.’ It has been translated by many lovers of Horace, never better perhaps than by Ben Jonson, though its sentiment is far from the direct and powerful emotions of the Elizabethans and of their immediate successors. It accords with the grace of the cavaliers, the playtime of the Restoration. Sir Charles Sedley should have translated it. Lovelace might have written it. Horace opens the dialogue. He is reproachful,

but far from downcast, as he reminds Lydia that once he was her chosen lover. Lydia replies with spirit that when she reigned in his heart and in his song she asked no happier fate; but that she is not prepared to play second fiddle to Chloe. Horace admits the impelling power of Chloe, her sweetness, and her skill with the lyre. Of course his heart is hers. Lydia, not to be outdone in inconstancy, avows her love for Calais, Calais the son of Ornytus, a youth so engaging she would gladly die for him. Horace, an old hand at the game of love, asks what would happen should he discard bright Chloe, and return a suppliant to his earlier love. Lydia, in a suspiciously sudden surrender, responds with a cry of joy: though Calais be fairer than a star, and Horace inconstant and rough as the sea,

‘Yet should I wish to love, live, die with thee.’

Horace, like Virgil, remained contentedly unmarried. He had the uneasy married lives of Augustus and of Maecenas by way of warning. His interest in women was an undertone. The stifling problem (it is called a problem) of sex which excites half the world to frenzy, and bores the other half to extinction, resolves itself in his hands into its simplest elements. His great emotions lay elsewhere, and he held even his great emotions in control. The supreme Roman virtue was patriotism – to serve the state and to die for it. Yet in what temperate language Horace clothes his maxims, the very triteness of which proves them immortal. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Not a flourish! Not a gesture! Yet life becomes a thing of value and of sweetness because men can renounce it with dignity. And there is nothing in the written history of the world to outstrip Horace’s description, in the fifth ode of the third book, of Regulus returning to Carthage: ‘Tis said he put away his chaste wife’s kisses and his little children, as one bereft of civil rights, and bent his gaze upon the ground till he should strengthen the Senate’s wavering purpose by advice never before given, and turn his steps to exile.’

Next to the unswerving loyalty to Rome came the love which Horace bore his friends, and, above and beyond all other friends, to Maecenas, whose bread he ate, and whose heart he held in his keeping. ‘Remember,’ said

the dying Maecenas to the Emperor Augustus, who stood sorrowing by his bedside, ‘remember Flaccus as you would remember me.’

There was no need for this entreaty. In three weeks Horace followed his friend, and was buried by his side on the Esquiline Hill. This was as he had always foretold. ‘When the blow falls it will crush us both; and to whatever bourne you lead the way, I shall follow.’ Fifty-seven years the poet had lived, enjoying the ripeness of middle age, and escaping the frosts that ensue. He had achieved the utmost renown that Rome could give. A great lyric poet; a philosopher whose epistles embody all pagan wisdom and a perfect understanding of humanity. The writer of the Secular Hymn had become the arbiter of taste, the spokesman of the Emperor, the persuasive exponent of a reasonable life, the clear, sad thinker who led no man astray. His death was so sudden that he had no time to summon a scribe and dictate a will. Therefore he made it orally, bequeathing his modest estate to the Emperor. Such wills held good in Roman law, where many simplicities survived; but, in view of the uncertainties attendant upon men’s recollections, it was wise to leave all to the throne. If ever an oral will was sure to be remembered rightly, it was when Augustus was the heir.

Horace not only revered his gods, but he believed that he had been kindly treated by them. He was disposed to see something above and beyond nature in the protection afforded him. When he was a little lost child in the forest, and the leaves drifted upon him as he slept, he felt sure that the birds had covered him, as in later years they covered the hapless Babes in the Wood. The falling tree that grazed but did not harm him, the wolf that turned from path when he was wandering in the Sabine hills, composing an ode to Lalage – these things did not happen by chance. Maecenas, too, had in his day been snatched from danger; but mighty Jove conceived it his duty to look after Maecenas; whereas

*‘Pan, who keeps watch
O’er easy souls like mine,’*

had turned smiling to the aid of Horace. Therefore it behooves Maecenas to build a shrine and offer tribute; but Horace will sacrifice a young lamb to the sylvan god.

The poet was the most hospitable of men. He dearly loved the companionship of friends; and, having a perfectly correct sense of values, he saw no reason why Maecenas should not leave his stately home, which so far exceeded in splendour the Emperor's palace, and spend his birthday by the Sabine fireside, where Virgil had been content to sit. The preparations for his coming were of a joyous rusticity. Horace does not appear to have had the furniture polished, as when the advocate, Torquatus, came to visit him; but the silver vessels were burnished brightly, garlands were gathered, the altar wreathed with sacred leafage, the kitchen fires roared hospitably, and a jar of Alban wine, nine years old, was waiting to be unsealed. Horace had the poorest possible opinion of water drinkers, and was convinced that not one of them ever wrote a song that lived.

It behooved the poet to be out of the way a goodly portion of his time, because he was too much wanted in Rome. Maecenas wanted him and the Emperor wanted him; and these two august and powerful men thought it right that they should have what they desired. Horace thought otherwise. He clung tenaciously to his liberty, and he achieved it because he stood ready to sacrifice, if need be, all luxuries, comforts, and pleasures for its sake. He would not write his verse and he would not live his life to order. In a very determined and very delicate fashion he makes this known to Maecenas in the seventh epistle of the first book. He has left Rome for a week and he has stayed away a month – greatly to his friend's displeasure. After all, the month was August, and August is a season when anyone would be well advised to stay away from Rome. Horace says so plainly. It is the season, he writes, when the first figs and the mounting sun keep the undertaker busy. His health requires the cooler air, and, what is more important, his soul requires the freedom to make its own choice. 'Every man must measure himself by his own rule and standard.'

With Augustus the task was more difficult. The Emperor wanted to be sung, and he wanted to be sung in an intimate and homely strain. Horace wrote his most noble odes to celebrate the triumphs of Rome. He wrote charming songs to celebrate the peace and plenty which Augustus ensured to the Romans: 'The ox roams the pastures in safety, Ceres makes plentiful the

crops, the sea is calm, the shrines are sacred, the home is unpolluted.' He also wrote the Secular Hymn at the instigation of the ruler. But that was as far as he would go. He never lessened the distance between the Emperor and the subject. He never affected an easy intimacy with the throne, though Augustus had asked him mockingly if he were ashamed of such a friendship. We cannot conceive him addressing the Caesar as the courtiers of Charles the Second addressed their easygoing monarch. And in all this he was more than worldly-wise. He was safeguarding his own self-respect, and preserving a fine and delicate standard of personal honour.

Of the poet's second home at Tibur we know little save that he loved it, and that it was surpassingly beautiful. The villa probably belonged to Maecenas, who slept more sweetly to the sound of falling waters, and Horace lived in it, off and on, for nineteen years. The Franciscan monks, with that unerring eye for beauty which all the religious orders have displayed, built the monastery of San Antonio on the site of his villa. It stood on the borderland between the Sabine country and the Campagna. Catullus, who lived near by, was wont to say that if his friends wished to mock at him as a rustic, they called him a Sabine. If they wished to imply that he was a gentleman, they called him a Tiburtine.

For Tibur, now Tivoli, is an older city than Rome, and was once its equal. In its earlier phase it was a city of smiths who fashioned and sharpened swords for the perpetual warfare of the day. The surrounding soil is more fertile than in the hill country. It grows better vines and more abundant crops. If Horace missed the Fountain of Bandusia, that leaping cascade which he was wont to climb so far to see, and to whose guardian deity he sacrificed a flower-decked kid, he had in its stead the falling waters of the Anio; the Cascata Grande, not then the torrent now, and the lovely Cascatelle streaming down the hillside in broken threads of silver. The orchards of Tibur were wet with spray, and the Tiburtine Sibyl delivered her oracles to the sound of many waters. Even Italy had nothing better to give. Small wonder that Horace wrote with a sigh of content, 'May Tibur, founded by Argive wanderers, be the home of my old age and my final goal.'

The scholars of the last century believed firmly that the classics offer us both a training for life and a help in living it. This they hold that Horace has had on humanity, and his fashion of speech is such that educated youth gladly accepts his spokesmanship. We are told that a hundred years ago most public-school boys in England, and almost all Etonians, knew their Horace if they knew nothing else. It was not unusual for a lad of intelligence to have most of the odes by heart. The twentieth century has many new voices (some of them very insistent), but no one of them speaks to us with the accent of Horace. Hugh Macnaghten, for many years a master at Eton, and a translator of the classics, tells us a pleasant story in this regard. In the second year of the World War he had a letter from a former student, Henry Evelyn Platt, then fighting in France. It requested – of all things in the world – a copy of Horace, a small book, ‘with perhaps a crib for the hard words,’ and it gave the reason why. Young Platt was one of three Etonians in that line of trenches, and they had recently been joined by a Harrovian who was always quoting Horace. The Etonians were not so preoccupied with the deadly details of their lives as to be indifferent to this challenge. Come what might, they would reread their Horace for their own satisfaction, and for the honour of Eton.

Surely the soul of Horace, wherever it is located, was made glad by that letter. It was just what he had foretold. Death for the pagan was a dismal thing. The bright gods dwelt on Olympus; but they shared their bliss with none, and the realm of Pluto was but a poor exchange for Athens or for Rome. But Horace knew that he would triumph over death. *Non omnis moriar* (‘Not all of me shall die’). He spoke as prophets speak, piercing the future. While Rome lived, he would live. ‘As long as the Pontiff climbs the Capitol with the silent Vestal by his side, I shall be famed, and beyond the boundaries of Rome I shall travel far.’

‘Barbarians unborn my name shall know.’

We know it and are glad.