

A Loving Discourse? - Horace's "Ars Poetica"

The idea of literary criticism as an urgent and intimate discourse with the reader is as valid as - but not more valid than - the idea of criticism as a cool, disinterested appraisal and logical establishment of principles. The Epistula Ad Pisones (circa 12 B.C.) of Horace is usually interpreted as an example of the second kind of criticism, "a mere frigid academic enshrinement of traditional cliché",¹ or at the best an excellent example of derivative, detached and prescriptive critical theory. It is possible, however, to see the letter - to which the title "The Art of Poetry" was later given - in a quite different light if it is placed within the context of its age. It appears then what is somewhat extravagantly called "a loving discourse" with the father and two sons of the Piso family, and also with all the aspiring writers of the first generation of the Roman Empire.

One must wipe entirely from one's mind any impression gained of Horace from French and English neo-classicists. Boileau in his Art of Poetry and Pope in his Essay on Criticism found in Horace only what they considered useful for their age. Every period of literature and cultural activity has certain deficiencies or excesses that the criticism of that age aims at correcting. What Pope was attempting to correct were the extravagances of Metaphysical conceit and what he considered the formless voluptuousness of the Restoration theatre. His success of course led to the opposite extreme of narrowness and propriety that Wordsworth and Hazlitt tried to correct.

So it is with Horace. The Epistle to the Pisos was not written as an ars - which meant a formal systematic treatment of a subject more akin to our idea of a scientific investigation - but as a didactic epistle. This was an important literary form in the early Roman Empire. It was written not cynically or shallowly, but with a definite purpose in mind. That purpose was to correct certain tendencies and deficiencies in Roman literature that had manifested themselves since the end of the Republic. Cicero, writing in 60 B.C., had in mind a climate and level of achievement quite different from that which Horace knew in 12 B.C. The extravagance, material pre-occupations and soullessness that characterized the decline of the Roman Empire were beginning to manifest themselves to sensitive and perceptive minds. They were particularly evident to Horace who had passed his most idealistic and impressionable years under the old Republic. Horace was the son of a freedman and fought as a commissioned officer in Brutus's army. He was fortunate enough not to have died gloriously at Philippi, and unfortunate enough to have to survive the death of the standards and way of life that he had fought to preserve. When he wrote at the age of twenty-three, "I lost everything at Philippi," he was not referring to his rank or material fortune.

At the time he wrote the Epistle to the Pisos, Horace had turned down offers from the Emperor Augustus to accompany him as an official poet in an expedition to the east. He had given up poetry for philosophy. This decision may have been due partly to the more contemplative attitude of

older age and partly to a feeling that his creative powers were declining. There is a wistfulness in the Epistle which should not be confused with the tedium vitae attitude of much of his earlier poetry. He suddenly exclaims:

But what is the point of it all! So I will play the part of a whetstone, which can put an edge on a blade, though it is not itself capable of cutting. 2

This reminds one of Coleridge writing Biographia Literaria after the decline of his creative powers, and his sad remark that poets only talk when they can no longer sing.

Horace was well aware that, with the exception of Virgil and Catullus, both of whom were dead when the Epistle was written, Roman literature after the Republican era was very short in real genius. There was a fair amount of talent, however, and talent is a rather dangerous thing in an age of ease and growing luxury. Things come easily to the talented, but they are not impelled to go deeply, especially when there are no really great issues to be confronted or causes to be taken up. The facility with which talented people achieve a kind of polished and limited success makes completely untalented people feel that they can do it too. There were in 12 B.C. innumerable writers in Rome of no talent who constantly failed to achieve even the limited standard of the talented, and the criteria of literary excellence were steadily declining. This was the situation in which the epistle was written.

Horace says that both genius and training are necessary in a poet; but as we see by the prescriptive nature of this epistle he realized that training was better than nothing and that in any case genius cannot be taught. Horace's intention throughout the Epistle is to point out in no uncertain terms that to be a poet is not as easy as his audience thinks. There is no such thing as instant genius.

The more vigorous and expansive treatment of the art of poetry given by "Longinus" a century or two later would have been quite unsuitable for Horace's audience. It would simply have confirmed them in the way they were going - confirmed their belief that art was easy, all one needed was the will and the time, and to let oneself go. Horace's comment on pseudo-hippy poets of the Roman Empire is still relevant:

Because Democritus believes that native genius is worth any amount of piddling art, and will not allow a place on Mount Helicon to poets with rational minds, a good many will not take the trouble to trim their nails and their beards; they haunt solitary places, and keep away from the public baths. For they will gain the repute and title of poets, they think, if they never submit to the ministrations of the barber Licinus a head that all the hellebore of all the Anticyras in the world could never reduce to sanity. 3

Horace may have lacked great genius, but at least he was aware of this, which was more than some of his audience would admit about themselves, despite the fact that they produced no evidence of even Horace's limited

genius. But Horace does not place a conservative stress on not over-reaching one's talent. In the Epistle he gives advice that may improve a minor talent but will not impede a truly original genius.

Horace spends much time discussing the Roman theatre because it profusely exhibited the faults of the art of its time. Cary, speaking of the decay of Latin drama in the first century B.C., says:

The early promise of Roman poetry was not fulfilled in one of its principal branches. Though the theatre had firmly established its hold on the favour of the Roman public, the plays sank back to the level of mere amusements. The blame for this relapse falls mainly on the play-goers. The cosmopolitan rabble which now filled the auditorium at Rome lacked the intellectual stamina to follow out a drama with a carefully constructed plot. Even Plautus had to be cut to hold the flickering attention of these later audiences.⁴

As for the play-wrights, some boasted that they composed a five-act drama in three days. Bearing in mind then the state of the theatre in Horace's day, it is possible to see something more than timidity and mediocrity in his insistence on returning to early classical models for the drama. Instead of outlandish and colossal never-seen-before stage productions, Horace suggests tradition, consistency, as the best way to reach the cosmopolitan rabble. Do not play down to them, he insists. Give them something that is simple and recognisably real and life-like. Avoid the freakish, and have no action distinguished only for its violence.

The criticism that Horace offers only frigid academic precepts may be easily countered. The first section of the letter is simply a strong appeal for organic unity in literature. He would not be raising the question of hybrid literature if poets in Rome had not been unsuccessfully attempting to write it at the time.

The famous phrase "Ut pictura poesis" does not stand in isolation as is assumed when it is used to prove some point. It is not, as Lessing later showed, an observation that poetry and painting are analagous arts, but that they resemble each other in that some productions of both will bear close scrutiny, others are better seen at a distance; some will retain their appeal for a long time, others make their best impression when seen for the first time. Varying standards of excellence are to be found in both.

Horace is often attacked because he placed so much weight on the concept of decorum. His idea of decorum, however, is not one of simple propriety dictated by things which are "nice", pleasing and conservative. An appeal to that which is fitting and suitable does not imply that the conservative mode will always be the fitting mode. At times what is suitable may be something quite revolutionary. Decorum is a philosophic concept, not a matter of mere taste. As Horace says: "The source and fountain-head of good writing is wisdom".⁵ Moreover he does emphasize originality by indicating how difficult it is to achieve true originality, not mere freakishness, which any fool can achieve. "It is hard to treat in your own way

things that are common among mankind", ⁶ he warns, and adds that a true poet is more rightly occupied in writing a drama on a traditional heroic theme than in producing novelties to amuse shallow minds. Originality of plot, even now, is hardly an important criterion by which we judge a novel or play. Horace did stress originality of treatment, for it is in what he does with a theme that the true independent genius of a poet is seen.

Again, what is far more important than a startlingly new plot is language that is perfectly adapted to the theme. Horace supports contemporary writers like Virgil and Varius who were using new and recently-coined words. "It has always been permissible, and always will be, to issue words stamped with the current mint-mark," and he continues wistfully, "We are destined to die, we and all things ours . . . all mortal things will perish, much less will the glory and grace of speech live for ever."⁷ Horace is commenting here not only on changes in vocabulary, but also on changes in ideas - in the passing of concepts. In the Empire the earlier Republican concepts of *pietas*, *virtus* and *libertas* had gone for ever. Standing in the transition period between the two eras, Horace was aware of these changes in a way that the next generation never would be. He is warning the young Pisos that the ideas and vocabulary which seem so vital and fresh to them are destined also to die. New words may be used if one uses them judiciously, and with a weight of true meaning in them, but new words for the sake of novelty, or the introduction of current preoccupations for the sake of fashion, will soon date one's work.

Horace did not have in mind a timid and conservative standard of achievement. His was a search for perfection, as can be seen from the following lines:

I shall try to write poetry, so fashioned from recognised components that anybody might hope to achieve the same success, but would sweat tears of blood and struggle in vain to emulate me; so great is the power of perfect order and relationships in art, and so great the beauty that arises from perfect balance. ⁸

Horace does not think that writing may be undertaken in a languidly artistic mood: he asks for complete involvement of the self. "If you wish me to weep, you must first feel grief yourself", he says, and finds cold beauty in art inadequate; the poem must carry the reader with it through its ability to reach his soul. ⁹

Perfection is not achieved overnight, particularly by the poetasters to whom the Epistle is written. Horace enjoined the young men to put their work away for nine years before they attempt to publish it, not in the hope that the poems will mature like good wine, but in the hope that the poets will do so. As he feelingly remarks: "What you have not published you may destroy; but once your words have been sent out they cannot be taken back." ⁹

The final paragraph of the Epistle describing the insane poet is usually read as derisive criticism of the inspired genius. This description is not of the same order as the description of the long-haired dirty hippy quoted

above. Horace knew that he was not himself an inspired genius, but the final lines of his Epistle point out to the Pisos that it is not a comfortable thing to be a real poet.

. . . I shall tell you about the death of the Sicilian poet. Empedocles, desiring to be held among the immortal gods, coolly leapt into the flames of Etna. And poets should have the right and power to destroy themselves. If you save a man against his will it is like murdering him. This is not the first time he has tried, and if he is saved he will not at once become a mere man and put aside his love of death and fame. Nor is it very clear why he continues to make verses. Has he defiled the sacred ashes of his fathers, or sacriligiously violated a holy place? Certainly he is raving mad, and like a bear, if he has been strong enough to break the bars that confine him, he makes the learned and ignorant alike flee from his harrowing recitals. If he catches a man he holds him and reads him to death, like a leech that will not let go until gorged with blood. 10

What Horace is saying with his dry irony is something like this: "a poet is someone possessed, my dear Pisos, and does not always look a gentleman. He is more often an object of distaste and amusement than of reverence. The poet, like Empedocles, may destroy himself in his search for divinity. Perhaps he goes insane with the guilt of questioning hallowed principles and institutions. Consider now, very carefully, if you want to be one of these."

Horace borrowed most of the ideas for the Epistle from an earlier writer, Neoptolemus of Parium: but the emphasis he gives it is his own. The tone of the Epistle is not light cynicism or superficial didacticism. The work is an understatement, made necessary because he knew he was speaking to a generation that would misunderstand him if he spoke in any other way. The poets of his day needed inspiration, but they needed to be inspired to greater efforts of self-criticism. What Horace advocates in fact, are not the middle-class virtues of timidity, restraint and mediocrity, but the old patrician ideals of the Republic—harmony, simplicity, perfection in holding a tension between the individual and the group (that is, between originality and tradition in literature), between what is unique to one writer and what is derived from the common fund. There is a graceful self-deprecation in the "Ars Poetica" which is not found in Pope's Essay on Criticism. Horace seems to be aware of a poetry of a higher kind than that which he is here attempting to bring within the reach of the young writers of his day.

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References

1. "Epistula ad Pisones and the poetry of antiquity", The Times Literary Supplement, 14 May, 1971.
2. Horace, Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica, ed. H. Fairclough, (Heinemann, Harvard University Press, 1966). Lines translated from Ars Poetica, lines 303 - 305.
3. Ibid. lines 295 - 301.
4. M. Cary, A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine, (Macmillan, London, 1947), p. 463.
5. Horace, Ars Poetica, line 309.
6. Ibid. line 128.
7. Ibid. lines 58 - 69.
8. Ibid. lines 240 - 243.
9. Ibid. lines 389 - 390.
10. Ibid. lines 463 - 476.