

Horace - Ode I-34

Post by "Joshua" of October 28, 2020 at 2:11 PM

Horace's first collection of Odes was published around 4 years into the reign of Augustus. The political climate may inform our reading of No. 34, translated here by Christopher Smart (1722-1771):

ODE XXXIV.

AGAINST THE EPICURIANS.

A remiss and irregular worshiper of the gods, while I professed the errors of a senseless philosophy, I am now obliged to set sail back again, and to renew the course that I had deserted. For Jupiter, who usually cleaves the clouds with his gleaming lightning, lately drove his thundering horses and rapid chariot through the clear serene; which the sluggish earth, and wandering rivers; at which Styx, and the horrid seat of detested Tænarus, and the utmost boundary of Atlas were shaken. The Deity is able to make exchange between the highest and the lowest, and diminishes the exalted, bringing to light the obscure; rapacious fortune, with a shrill whizzing, has borne off the plume from one head, and delights in having placed it on another.

In Latin:

XXXIV

Parcus deorum cultor et infrequens,

insanientis dum sapientiae

consultus erro, nunc retrorsum

vela dare atque iterare cursus

cogor relictos: namque Diespiter 5

igni corusco nubila dividens

plerumque, per purum tonantis

egit equos volucremque currum,

quo bruta tellus et vaga flumina,

quo Styx et invisī horrida Taenari 10
sedes Atlanteusque finis
concutitur. Valet ima summis
mutare et insignem attenuat deus,
obscura promens; hinc apicem rapax
Fortuna cum stridore acuto
sustulit, hic posuisse gaudet.

Smart's title for the Ode does not appear in the Latin text—whether it was his own invention, or the legacy of a long tradition, I do not know. By any road, Horace does seem to be addressing the philosophy of Epicurus, particularly as it relates to *Fortuna*, providence and the gods. I have the Loeb edition at home, which I shall consult this evening.

In the mean time, I'll be looking for clues in the text that might indicate a political motivation. Horace was on the 'wrong side' in the Civil War, as you may remember, and though he was granted amnesty he paid dearly for it. His father's estate near Venusia was claimed by the regime for the resettlement of veterans.

I have two major questions at this time;

Did Horace abandon Epicurean philosophy to satisfy Augustus, and his claim of Divine Right?

Is his reference to Fortuna, and the mighty being laid low, a subtle hint of satire suggesting that a like fate could await the new regime?

Post by “Joshua” of October 30, 2020 at 12:08 PM

My mind is running on two tracks right now, and this observation might serve a point in the Divinity megathread. I'll post it here since I've already started.

I've suspected that this Ode might contain allusions to Lucretius, and a footnote in the Loeb edition seems to confirm it. Notice the following passage;

Quote

For Jupiter, who usually cleaves the **clouds** with his gleaming lightning, lately drove his thundering horses and rapid chariot through the **clear serene**;

Compare to Lucretius in Book VI (Leonard);

Quote

Again, why never hurtles Jupiter

A bolt upon the lands nor pours abroad

Clap upon clap, when skies are cloudless all?

Horace must certainly notice that by seizing on one counter-example he is misrepresenting the broad Epicurean case against divine intervention. But it serves to illustrate a point; if we are too specific about the divine, we invite nitpicking. If we are too vague, we invite unrestrained speculation.

Lucretius says in Book 1 (Leonard again);

Quote

Whence he to us, a conqueror, reports

What things can rise to being, what cannot,

And by what law to each its scope prescribed,

Its boundary stone that clings so deep in Time.

A large measure of our project, then, must be to mark that boundary. If the study of divinity starts to lead where the philosophy cannot and should not go, we have to say as much.

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 30, 2020 at 1:13 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

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Beautifully said! I think one of the greatest strengths of Epicureanism is that those boundaries/protections are in place. It is pretty unique. There are limits that serve the telos and prevent the creation of yet another organized religion.

Post by “Cassius” of October 30, 2020 at 3:29 PM

I dunno, I think you guys are off in useless speculation. Why would you care about arcane rules of reasoning like limits and boundaries, and how to weigh conflicting evidence? Don't you know that you're supposed to leave that to the Academic Experts, and that the only thing that matters about Epicurus is that the greatest pleasure is the absence of pain? Don't you know realize that all you have to know to be a true Epicurean is that you need to barricade yourself in a cave, drink only water and eat only a little cheese, reduce your bodily experiences to the smallest possible amount, concentrate on asceticism, and ignore the rest of the world?

Boy you guys have been drinking from the wrong fountain!



Post by “Don” of October 30, 2020 at 3:34 PM

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LOL