The Latin Origin in Alexander Pope’s Imitation of Horace’s Satire II, ii: A Homily in Praise of Rural Simplicity

By
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This used to be among my prayers – a piece of land not so very large, which would contain a garden, and near the house a spring of ever-flowing water, and beyond these a bit of wood. Horace

( I )

As early as the Renaissance, the classics began to be imitated and translated to English. Imitation and translation, in this sense, provide two texts written in two different languages, and they are the product of two cultural traditions. They grow into each other, involving the confrontation of two literary personalities. Imitations are based on originals from remote times and places, but each one of the two texts has a theme with an obvious contemporary relevance and each; thus, treats a contemporary problem or failing. Nevertheless, imitation does not hinder the new text from having a genuine originality.

Imitation is a process of bringing as much as possible the diction, rhythm, and concentration of the original text without violating the new context of the new poem. This results in striking juxtapositions, which supply force and energy, a re-creation of intellectual and musical power. Part of the effect of imitation is that the reader should be potentially aware of the text from which the poet departs and recognize the variation in the original, it is in need of an intelligent reader to capture the similarities and differences between the two texts. Thus, both its audience and its effect are restricted, as Emile Legouis claims that imitation is “cultivated poetry meant to amuse cultivated persons”.

In the Restoration period, translation from the classical languages into English was of fundamental importance in all sound education. Verse was translated into verse, and certain measures of creativity and mastery were demanded even from a schoolboy’s version. Imitations of the best Greek and Latin writers were expected at school and university. This practice made imitation, for the neo-classical poets and critics, a much more dignified activity than what the romantics believed. The romantics tended to think of the poem as an organic and immediate self-expression without prescription or pre-thinking, “an outpouring of the poet’s psyche more or less controlled”. The neo-classicalists regarded any imitation of the classics as a piece of writing designed to move the reader in a certain way, an example of
craftsmanship. No doubt a great writer finally evolves a style of his own, but he must begin by imitating, as closely as he can, the styles of the best masters. Thus, imitation involves an anti-romantic literary theory in which no treason against the poet’s personality is done.

John Dryden (1631-1700) was the first critic who called imitation ‘the where-is-this-in-the-original ? School’ of poetry. He defines it as “departing freely from the original text to create a new poem in its spirit using the experience of a new age to take the place of earlier material”. This genre was perfected by Alexander Pope (1688-1744) who, according to Maynard Mack, “uses resources of other poets without loss of originality”. “Viewing Pope’s work as a whole”, says Reuben Arthur Brower, “we might describe his poems as translations of various ancient poetic modes, or ‘imitations’ to use the term he would himself have used”. Pope moved forward quite steadily from Virgil to Homer and Horace.

Horace, in particular, was a kind of cultural hero in eighteenth-century civilization. The essayists of the Spectator and the Tatler were, like Pope, writing with Horace over their shoulders. Their style, their function as polite educators, their portraits of the good life in town and country are evidences of the effect of Horace. Writing to George Duckett, Thomas Burnet, for example, found the world of Horace ‘just the same’ as England in the age of Queen Anne (1702-1714):

I am now at my leisure hours reading Horace with some diligence and find the world was just the same then, that it continues to be now.11

It is the kind of life that can be enjoyed in Windsor Forest where one could perceive a charming balance between the city and the countryside, between action and retirement, political ambition and newly acquired wealth. The eighteenth-century gentleman, like Horace, lived in an era of concentration following an era of revolution and civil war, in nations just becoming aware of their imperial role, and cultures enriched by increased leisure and private benefits.

Very early in his poetic career, Pope imitated Horace’s (65-8 BC) Satires, having a new subjective creation of his own. Living between two times: the personal time of the new poem, and the timelessness of the original text, he connected his English consciousness with the Latin consciousness of Horace to create a very unique kind of satire. He modernized Horace’s Satires completely, making contemporary London ancient Rome, and applying to his own time and country all the Latin poet’s allusions to the degree that Horace became “a symbolic figure in Pope’s life and poetry”. Here is, for example, Pope’s attack on Lord Hervey (1696-1743), in the prologue to his Satires and Epistles of Horace Imitated (1733-39). Hervey had infuriated Pope by collaborating with Lady Wortley Montagu (1720-1800) in a cruel attack on him. So, it is not surprising that Pope retaliates savagely, comparing Hervey to Sporus:
Let Sporus\textsuperscript{13} tremble – what? That thing of silk?
Sporus, that mere white curd of ass’s milk?
Satire or sense, alas, can Sporus feel?
Who breaks a butterfly upon a wheel?
Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings: \hspace{1cm} (11-16)
The adaptations are admirably well done, and display Pope’s acuteness and irony in their most refined form. In this point, Pope was highly different from Dryden. Dryden confessed: “the delight which Horace gives me is but languishing”, and he described Horace’s style as “generally groveling”\textsuperscript{14}. He wrote in the heroic-declamatory manner of Absalom and Achitophel, rising his satires to the majesty of the heroic, unlike Pope in The Rape of the Lock, for example, where he masked and modulated the heroic by talking to the reader in a tone that is basically ‘Horatian’. Although it is not easy to define what is the true Horatian, a strict look at Horace’s own poems reflects the conscious way of composition, the fine poise of urbanity, the conversational tone, the power of pungent epigram and lampooning with which he stung his enemies, the affectionate enthusiasm with which he praised his friends, and his fondness of the subject itself. “Horace’s rambling method”, says The Cambridge History of English and American Literature, “lend itself totally to his purpose”\textsuperscript{15}. All these characteristics make Horace an outstanding model of imitation and translation for Pope.

(II)
Quintus Horatius Flaccus was born at Venusia (modern Venosa) on the borderland between Apulia and Lucania. His birth followed the deterioration of republican government, and the transformation of the Roman society. His father, a freedman or an ex-slave who acquired some wealth, was very ambitious for the future of his talented son. He supervised personally Horace’s upbringing and organized for him the formal education that was normally available at Rome only for the sons of the upper classes.\textsuperscript{16} From there he went to Athens, where he studied philosophy and ethics. He was considered an outstanding lyric poet and satirist. The most frequent themes in Horace’s Odes and Epistles are love, pleasures of friendship and simple life, and the art of poetry. Toward the end of his life, he wrote his “Epistola ad Pisones”, which was called in the next century “Ars Poetica” by Quintilian (circa 35-95), the first professor of rhetoric.\textsuperscript{17}

Horace dedicated “Ars Poetica” to a young poet called Piso in which he emphasized the importance of the didactic trend in poetry. He believed that the poet should be a benefactor of society, a function which he regarded as both moral and religious. For him, poets teach or delight, or combine both.

Poets wish either to profit or delight, or to combine enjoyment and usefulness in what they write....
senior citizens attack anything that is not didactic; the aristocratic young bloods turn their backs on poetry that is too austere. He who combines teaching with enjoyment carries the day by delighting and at the same time admonishing the reader. Such work makes for the publisher, crosses the sea, and wins the author a lasting fame. Horace practiced this piece of advice in his Satires, employing his concept of “utility”. It means that he used satire as a means of correction and amendment. The satirist, according to Horace, is usually a man with a serious mission, but he has a mocking tone animated against the evils of his own time. “Perhaps the comic Muse being something of a scurrilous Transcendentalist”, holds Paul Lauter, “needs the cloak of respectable usefulness of satire and correction to step into polite society”. Horace’s Satires belongs to the end of an era in the history of Rome. In 42 B.C. Brutus and Cassius, the major opponents of Julius Caesar, were defeated in Northern Greece where Horace fought at the age of twenty three. This event brought the republic to an end. Horace returned to Italy sad, disillusioned, and penniless. His father died and he sought Octavian’s (later Augustus) favour. He was helped by Maecenas, Octavian’s friend and counselor, who was also a famous patron of literature. Maecenas bought Horace a farm in the hilly Sabine country, beyond Tibur (Tivoli). There Horace devoted himself for writing. During these years, he wrote his Satires, in hexameter verse, where he stated his rejection of public life. When he needed peace, he escaped from Rome to his farm and expressed in several of his poems the joys of simple life. “In Rome”, says Horace, “you long for the country; in the country – oh inconstant! you praise the city of stars”. Thus, he suggests, in his Epodes (30 B.C.), leaving Rome to find a new golden age in the distant islands of the Atlantics.

Although “Horatian satire as a whole”, claims Nial Rudd, “implies a conscious rejection of public life”, this theme is essential and fundamental in his Satire II, ii. This satire includes a free use of dialogue and reported speech, which make it a straightforward diatribe in the sense that the poet speaks to his audience and takes responsibility of what he says. The diatribe has essentially good humour and lightness of touch. One of the most important techniques in the Horatian diatribes is character sketches. So much of this diatribe is based on the character of a south Italian peasant called Ofellus. In Horace’s boyhood, Ofellus owned a small farm near Venusia. Like many others, he was evicted after 42 B.C. The new owner, Umbrenus, allowed Ofellus to run the farm for a regular payment. He is now a smallholder who works as a tenant on the farm that was his own. With his flow of spontaneous discourse, he is seen by Michael Coffey, as “a sage unattached to any school, a man of sturdy common
sense". He represents the man of altered circumstances. In fact, this type of character is not strange to the poet; Horace himself knew the painful state of dispossession. Thus, dramatically speaking, Ofellus becomes a feeble device to represent all the sentiments of Horace himself.

Ofellus, an orthodox stoic, believes that all sins are equal: "paria esse ... peccata". The first serious sin discussed in this satire is when the eye is dazzled by senseless glitter and the mind is inclined in favour of the sham, rejecting what is original. That is why the speaker says let us consider the matter of this satire now, before lunch for amid the splendour of a banquet, one cannot concentrate on the importance of morality. The satirical tone emerges strongly when he says that people are led astray by empty appearances. If one wants to eat, he chooses a peacock in preference to a pullet because the peacock’s coloured tail is a pretty sight. Although he does not eat the tail, and when the two birds are cooked, there is no difference in the meat, one is deceived by their difference in look. Even if there is a difference in flavours, the hungry stomach finds all kinds of food delicious, whether it costs much or less money. Moreover, the poor man’s food has not yet been wholly banished from the tables of the rich: “eggs and black olives still have a place”, says Ofellus. This saying does not contradict Horace’s carpe-diem theme, which he expressed in his Odes (23 B.C.). The enjoyment of life does not mean luxury, rather happiness can only be achieved by a constant awareness that wealth, power, and sensual delight are not better insinuated than contentment. On the contrary, when lost, satisfaction can cause more pain than pleasure.

Structurally speaking, Horace builds his Satires on the pattern of establishing and then varying his themes in order to capture the reader’s attention. Satire II, ii has an opening theme of praising the simple kind of life, which is introduced by the striking hyperbole of the peacock and the comic effect of foolish luxury. This theme is illustrated later on by a series of antithetical references to achieve balance, asserting that the opposite extreme of simplicity, which is avarice, is just as vicious. According to Ofellus, a stingy style of living is quite different from the preference of simple living. So the misers, like Avidienus, Albucius and Naevius, are as comically ridiculed as the spendthrifts. This technique of naming specific people to express the poet’s point of view is called exemplum, which is essential in satire. To the satirist, analogies from history or mythology are used to point out the standard behaviour and morality.

Ofellus wonders why should any good man starve when Trausius, the listener, is rich, and why he does not give some of his vast wealth to the poor people in the country of his birth. No one, according to Ofellus, is bound to stay rich for ever. Any rich man can meet misfortune, so man should be content with little. Ofellus practices this philosophy in his real life. Before his eviction, in the days when he owned his
property, his life was just as simple as it is now. He says:

On a working day I usually ate no more than a shank of smoked ham and green….Whatever troubles lie ahead, this style of living cannot be greatly reduced, and indeed it has remained much the same even though a new occupant is now in residence.

Ownership of the land, for Ofellus, is not granted to anyone. The farm, which is now in the name of Umbrenus, was called Ofellus’. In the future, Umbrenus will be turned out of it by his own worthlessness, his ignorance of the tricks of the law, or by an heir who outlives him. Horace makes a negative portrayal of Umbrenus, a man who does not appear in the poem.

Ofellus mentions later on the benefits of simple living. One of them is good health. Plain food is better than a mixture of delicacies, which will cause the stomach to revolt. Yet, the man who eats sparingly falls asleep at once and rises fresh to his daily business. The body, sluggish from too much eating, weighs down the soul and nails to the earth ‘a particle of the divine spirit’. This reference to ‘the divine’ represents the climax of Satire II, ii, making it one of the best classical homilies; poems that discuss “a moral or religious lecture, a sermon on moral or religious topic, a speech with a moralizing theme”.25

To understand the nature of this homily, one must consider the intellectual climate in which Horace was writing. Horace chose a mode of address, which began with the follies and vices of social behaviour related to food and drink, until he reached to the main moral. The concluding argument, on the precariousness of fortune, the transience of human life, and the absolute domination of death, was drawn from the deepest wells of ancient Roman thought and religion. Ofellus says: “Nature has appointed neither him nor me nor anyone else as master and owner of the land”. He introduces the idea of maternity, which is taken up by the image of nature as ‘mother earth’. Nature, as Horace says, cannot distinguish the just from the unjust, as she distinguishes the beneficial from the opposite. Nature tells us it is wrong to eat nightshade but she says nothing about stealing a cabbage. This brings us back to the stoics and their attempts to turn moral judgments into mathematical equations. For them, stealing a cabbage would be no less serious than robbing a temple. There is nothing less equitable than the equality of sins. More important, it points out to the birth of laws. Like other features of civilization, laws are the product of need. They were worked out by man for his own protection, and since they are in essence social agreements rather than scientific discoveries, they do not fitful all human living conditions.

Nature, here, stands for the stoic belief of the blind fate of man. In ancient nihilistic Rome, the gods were stronger but not necessarily better than human beings, so man had to strive against the cruel gods who predestined him to suffer and finally die. One way of
strife is following the Epicurean belief of escape from pain by contentment and finding pleasure in what man has.

(III)

Pope, like Horace before him, believed that “no writing is good that does not tend to better mankind some way or other”. Hence he intended reform behind the satires he imitated and translated. The success of his translations enabled him to be one of the first professional poets who lived self-sufficient as a result of non-dramatic writing.

Like Horace also, Pope started his life independent in the guardianship of his well-off family. He was born in London as the son of a Roman Catholic linen-merchant. He spent his early years at Binfield on the edge of Windsor Forest, whose green retreats were regarded by Pope as “at once the monarchs and the Muses seats”. His physical defects made him an easy target for heartless mockery, yet he was also one of the greatest poets of ridicule. He was considered a leading literary critic and the epitome of English Neoclassicism.

When Pope was a boy, the Catholics suffered from repressive legislations and prejudices. They were not allowed to enter universities or hold public employment. Thus, Pope had an uneven education, which was often interrupted. Most of his time, he spent reading books from his father’s library. His experience with imitation was very early: “While still at school”, reads the Amazon Web Site, “Pope wrote a play based on speeches from the Iliad”. Pope believed that both poets and critics should come across the classics where the ancients discovered the rules of nature. Thus, “To copy nature is to copy them”, holds Pope. He worshiped both nature and the classical rules which are basically built on nature itself:

Those rules of old discovered not devised Are nature still, but nature methodized; Nature, like liberty, is but restrained By the same laws which first herself ordained. (An Essay on Criticism, 88-91)

The year 1733 was, perhaps, the most prolific in Pope’s life. About the beginning of the year, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751) observed the importance of Pope’s imitating Horace’s second book in English. The suggestion of a friend and the framework of Horace inspired him one of the greatest opportunities of his literary career in which Horace’s original text enables him both to construct his own scheme and to display his skill in imitation and parallelism. In Pope’s imitations of Horace, claims John Burgess Wilson, “the two Augustan ages meet;… and the abuses of the two societies… somehow become identical.”

According to Reuben Arthur Brower, “Horace’s world is not a documentary study of the Age of Augustus, but a poet’s vision of reality”. Nevertheless, Pope and his contemporaries tried to fit their world into Horace’s dream. They Horatianized the reign of Queen Anne. The fantasies of a Roman dinner party and the air of
serenity that lingers about the Sabine Farm as pictured by Horace are translated into an eighteenth-century villa, not too far from town, stocked with the best authors and provided with the most beautiful and useful garden. In fact, Pope’s house at Twickenham is the charming and amusing symbol of a life and a literary career that became progressively an “Imitatio Horati”. In his imitation of Horace’s Satire II, ii, he describes his house saying:

In forests planted in Father’s hand,  
Than in five acres now of rented land.  
Content with little, I can piddle here  
On broccoli and mutton, round the year;  

From yon old walnut-tree, a shower shall fall;  
And grapes, long-lingering on my only wall,  
And figs, from standard and espalier join:  
The devil is in you if you cannot dine.

(135-148)

In his Satire II, ii, Pope reached maturity as a poet of Horatian moral songs. He starts his satire stating a doctrine which is basically derived, as he claims, from the sages and not his own. The doctrine praises those who “live with little and a cheerful heart”. He proceeds after that illustrating and proving the reliability of the doctrine he adopts. Describing his choice of simple life as great ‘virtue’ and ‘art’, he employs the common Neo-classical device of abstractions that he explains later on in more concrete terms. Pope addresses his readers in the Horatian conversational style of direct speech saying:

Let’s talk, my friends, but talk before we dine:  
Not when a gilt Buffet’s reflected pride  
Turns you from sound philosophy aside:  
Not from plate to plate your eyeballs roll  
And the brain dances to the mantling bowl.  

(4-8)

The speaker of this Satire is Hugh Bethel, a close friend of Pope, assuming the character of Horace’s Ofellus. Bethel preaches, in perfect heroic couplets, his sermon, which is “one not versed in schools,/ But strong in sense, and wise without the rules”. He approves his moralizing common sense. Like Ofellus, Bethel is a man of plain and humble personality, feeling the awkward necessity to say a moral lesson by addressing his listeners directly:

Go work, hunt, exercise! (he thus began)  
Then scorn a homely dinner if you can.

(11-12)

In spite of Bethel’s naivety, his name echoes the Biblical ‘Bethel’, which is the ancient city of Palestine. It was important in the Old Testament time and was frequently associated with Abraham and Jacob, or prophetic knowledge. This means that Pope replaces the pagan Ofellus with the Christian Bethel translating the moral song of a pagan Roman into a true Christian homily.
Although Pope deviates from Horace’s classical paganism, he still alludes to ‘Lady Fortune’ as the immediate reason behind the alteration in Bethel’s fate. Like Ofellus, he used to have a very great property, but now he possesses nothing: “My lands are sold, my father’s house is gone”. So he thinks that getting used to live on little may give better chances to man and defend him in his war with the blind workings of ‘Fortune’:

Who thinks that Fortune cannot change her mind
Prepare a dreadful jest for all mankind!
And who stands safest, tell me? Is it he
That spreads and swells in puff’d prosperity,
Or blessed with little, whose preventing care
In peace provides fit arms against a war?

(123-128)

This seems to be a typical Horatian existential view of the domination of fate over man’s life. Yet Pope’s is a traditional Christian homily in which there is no mentioning of an absolute absence of free-will. If lands and houses “have what lords they will”, man can be more defiant in this war with fate when he chooses to live simple life: “He knows to live who keeps the middle state, / And neither leans on this side, nor on that”.

Pope assumes a conversation with a persona he calls Swift who can be a reference to the famous Jonathan Swift, Pope’s friend and fellow satirist. When Swift prays to God that the house would be Pope’s own, he says:

What Property? Dear Swift! You see it alter
From you to me, from me to Peter Walter,
Or, in a mortgage, prove the Lawyer’s share,
Or, in a jointure, vanish from the heir,
Or in pure equity (the case not clear)
The Chanc’ry takes your rents for twenty year:
At best it falls to some ungracious son,
Who cries, my father damn’d and all is my own.

(167-174)

Another contemporary reference is to Pope’s favorite satirical targets: Lady Mary Montagu and Lord Hervey whose ridicule is recurrently evoked in his works using autobiographical outbursts, self-laudation, satire and invective. The Horatian exemplum of avarice is reflected in Pope by Lady Mary and her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu:

Avidien, or his wife (no matter which,
For him you’ll call a dog, and her a bitch)
Sell their presented partridges, and fruits,
And humbly live on rabbits and roots:
One half-point bottle serves them both to dine,
And is at once their vinegar and wine.

(49-54)

In another part of the poem, Pope addresses Hervey as ‘Lord Fanny’ who is all “in the wrong”. This personal satire
proves the mistaken opinion adopted by The Cambridge History of English and American Literature that “the lofty and declamatory moral tone”, in Pope’s Satire II, ii, “is in the manner, rather, of Juvenal”.33 Juvenal’s weapons are wit and humour rather than personal invective, aiming at reforming the world in general, and one of the distinctive features of Juvenalian satire is its generalization to indicate the ludicrous folly, unlike Horace’s personal attack against his opponents. So Pope finds in Horace what he needs, but Pope makes more than an imitation of Satire II, ii. He enlightens Horace’s point of view which is not always clear in the original text and he localizes the Latin thought which is not perfectly natural in English, giving keen pleasure as his master did many centuries ago.

Notes


11 Ibid., p.163.

12 Ibid.

13 Sporus was Nero’s homosexual favourite, a boy to whom he was married in public; appropriately used for Lord Hearvey, a prominent in the court of George II, and especially close to Queen Caroline; a long term confederate of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in attacks upon Pope.

14 As cited in Brower, p.163.


17 Ibid., p.66.

18 Horace, “Ars Poetica”, in History of Literary Criticism, edited by Adnan
Dr. Areej M. Jawad Al-Kafaji  The Latin Origin in Alexander Pope’s Imitation of Horace’s Satire

21 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p.35.
24 Coffey, p.83.
27 Brower, p.164.
29 All references to Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” are derived from History of Literary Criticism.
31 Brower, p.164.
33 “From Steel and Addison to Pope and Swift”, n.p.
34 Kermode, p.120.

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