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Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Horace Satires 1.2

Satires 1.2 is often entitled either “Moderation in All Things” (Rolfe) or “In Moechos” (Anthon). This duality in title reflects not only the shifting focus of Horace’s diatribe, but also a certain asymmetry between the putative message of the satire and an exorbitant position it constructs for its audience. The majority of the satire consists of a series of vignettes that narrate (on the denotative level) an oscillation between what Freud would call the pleasure and the reality principles—between the desire for pleasure and the attempt, in the name of pleasure, to avoid pain. Yet the discourse of the satirist always exceeds the terms of this oscillation.

Take Tigellius, for example, generous to all the flute-girls and mountebanks that swarmed the Roman street. His opposite number, in order to avoid the charge of prodigality, would not give a penny to a cold and hungry friend (1.2.1-6). Here, we have mirror opposites, the miser and the spendthrift, each in pursuit of pleasure and either social recognition (benignitas) or the evasion of social pain (prodigalitas).

But there is something more: Tigellius is dead. Amidst the flute players and peddlars of quack remedies, the low pleasures of the teeming street, is a corpse, and yet that corpse forms part of our enjoyment. The humor doesn’t function without it, and the pairing of Tigellius with the anonymous miser’s amicus on the verge of perishing from cold and hunger collapses without the presence of Tigellius’ dead body.

This structure is repeated throughout the satire. No real hope for moderation exists, since people in pursuit of the pleasure principle inevitably overcorrect in their encounter with the reality principle: vitant stulti vitia, in contraria currunt (24). A set of alternatives is presented, but always with a moment of excess, a moment of obscene material enjoyment that cannot be folded back into the simple logic of alternating and contraries and an ideal middle point. Nil medium est: Maltinus wears his tunic too low, his opposite number too high. What “sticks out” is precisely the inguen obscenum (1.2.25). The search for moderation leads us to images of albi cunni (1.2.36), anal rape (1.2.44), talking penises (1.2.68-72), and an admonition to rape a slave boy or girl whenever a raging erection threatens (1.2.116-18). In each case, the denotative lesson contains a surplus of sadistic enjoyment for the audience that affirms its separation from the overt limits marked out by the narrative and invites it to take pleasure in that very distance.

This is only natural since, as Freud tells us and Lacan confirms, the reality principle is not really opposed to the pleasure principle, but is its reflex, a kind of mirror image. Only a position beyond the pendulum swings between these complementary principles could be separate, could embody the negative inert presence that is the death drive.

Those deadly moments of excess constitute not only what many commentators have noted to be the coarser aspects of the satire (e.g., talking penises), but also the sites where direct appeal is made to the audience’s desire. Contrary to the satire’s message of moderation, the audience is invited precisely to enjoy the sadistic aggression that Freud

sees as an externalization of the death drive, of that which is “beyond the pleasure principle.” In this way, the satire enacts its own motto, nil medium est (1.2.28) in the most radical sense. Not only do people not observe the mean (aurea mediocritas, Odes 2.10.5), but ultimately there is no mean—only the poet’s invitation to meanness.