

## Lecture 5

Latin Criticism

Horace, Quintilian, Seneca

## Living Culture Vs. Museum Culture

### ❖ In Ancient Greece:

- ❖ Homer's poetry was not a book that readers read; it was an oral culture that people sang in the street and in the market place, in weddings and funerals, in war and in peace.
- ❖ The great Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were not plays that people read in books. They were performances and shows that people attended at the tragic festival every year.
- ❖ Greek culture was a "living culture" that sprang from people's everyday life. All the Greeks - old and young, aristocrats and commoners, literate and illiterate - participated in producing and in consuming this culture.

### ❖ In Ancient Rome,

- ❖ Greek culture became books that had no connection to everyday life and to average people.
- ❖ Greek books were written in a language (Greek) that most of the Romans didn't speak and belonged to an era in the past that Romans had no knowledge of. Only a small, educated minority had the ability to interact with these books. It was a dead culture, past, remote, and with no connections to the daily existence of the majority of the population.

❖ In Rome, Greek culture was not a living culture anymore. It was a "museum" culture. Some aristocrats used it to show off, but it did not inspire the present.

Roman literature and criticism emerged as an attempt to imitate that Greek culture that was now preserved in books.

❖ The Romans did not engage the culture of Greece to make it inform and inspire their present; they reproduced the books.

Florence Dupont makes a useful distinction between "Living Culture" (in Greece) and "Monument culture" (in Rome). See her *The Invention of Literature: From Greek Intoxication to the Latin Book*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

### ❖ Horace: *Ars Poetica*

- ❖ Very influential in shaping European literary and artistic tastes.
- ❖ Horace, though, was not a philosopher-critic like Plato or Aristotle. He was a poet writing advice in the form of poems with the hope of improving the artistic effort of his contemporaries.

### ❖ In *Ars Poetica*:

- ❖ He tells writers of plays that a comic subject should not be written in a tragic tone, and vice versa.
- ❖ He advises them not to present anything excessively violent or monstrous on stage, and that the *deus ex machina* should not be used unless absolutely necessary (192-5).

- ❖ He tells writers that a play should not be shorter or longer than five acts (190), and that the chorus "should not sing between the acts anything which has no relevance to or cohesion with the plot" (195).
- ❖ He advises, further, that poetry should teach and please and that the poem should be conceived as a form of static beauty similar to a painting: *ut pictura poesis*. (133-5).

Each one of these principles would become central in shaping European literary taste.

*Ars Poetica*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*. Reference to line numbers

### ❖ **"Sensibility"**

- ❖ At the centre of Horace's ideas is the notion of "sensibility."
- ❖ A poet, according to Horace, who has "neither the ability nor the knowledge to keep the duly assigned functions and tones" of poetry should not be "hailed as a poet."
- ❖ This principle, announced in line 86 of the *Ars Poetica*, is assumed everywhere in Horace's writing.
- ❖ Whenever Horace talks about the laws of composition and style, his model of excellence that he wants Roman poets to imitate are the Greeks.
- ❖ The notion of "sensibility" that he asks writers to have is a tool that allows him to separate what he calls "sophisticated" tastes (which he associates with Greek books) from the "vulgar," which Horace always associates with the rustic and popular:
- ❖ "I hate the profane crowd and keep it at a distance," he says in his *Odes*.

- ❖ Horace, *Odes* (3.1.1) in *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. David West, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 76.
- ❖ In the *Satires*, he refers to "the college of flute-players, quacks, beggars, mimic actresses, parasites, and all their kinds."
- ❖ *Satires*, (1. 2) quoted in Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks Mimes, and Miracles: Studies in the Popular Theatre*, (Cooper Square Publishers: New York, 1963), p. 80.
- ❖ Horace's hatred of the popular culture of his day is apparent in his "Letter to Augustus" where he writes:
- ❖ "Greece, now captive, took captive its wild conqueror, and introduced the arts to rural Latium. The unprepossessing Saturnian rhythm [the common verse of early Roman poetry] went out, and elegance drove off venom. All the same, traces of the country long remained, and they are there today. It was late in the day that the Roman applied his intelligence to Greek literature...he began to enquire what use there might be in Sophocles, and Thespis and Aeschylus."

Horace, "A Letter to Augustus," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, p. 94.

This passage how Horace saw the contact between the Greek heritage and his Roman world.

- ❖ It was a relationship of force and conquest that brought the Romans to Greece. As soon as Greece was captive, however, it held its conqueror captive, charming him with her nicely preserved culture (books).

- ❖ Horace shows prejudice to the culture of everyday people, but he does not know that the culture of Greece that he sees in books now was itself a popular culture.
- ❖ Horace equates the preserved Greek culture (books) with "elegance" and he equates the popular culture of his own time with "venom."
- ❖ Horace's hatred of the popular culture of his day was widespread among Latin authors.
  - ❖ Poetry for Horace and his contemporaries meant written monuments that would land the lucky poet's name on a library shelf next to the great Greek names. It would grant the poet fame, a nationalistic sense of glory and a presence in the pedagogical curriculum.
- ❖ "I will not die entirely," writes Horace, "some principal part of me yet evading the great Goddess of Burials." That great part of him was his books.
- ❖ Horace, *The Odes* (3. 30), ed. J. d. McClatchy, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 243.
- ❖ Horace's poetic practice was not rooted in everyday life, as Greek poetry was. He read and reread the *Iliad* in search of, as he put it, what was bad, what was good, what was useful, and what was not. (Horace, *Epistles*: 1. 2. 1).
  - ❖ In the scorn he felt towards the popular culture of his day, the symptoms were already clear of the rift between "official" and "popular" culture that would divide future European societies.
  - ❖ The "duly assigned functions and tones" of poetry that Horace spent his life trying to make poets adhere to, were a mould for an artificial poetry with intolerant overtone.

- ❖ ❖ Horace's ideas on poetry are based on an artificial distinction between a "civilized" text-based culture and a "vulgar" oral one.

### *Imitating the Greeks*

- ❖ In all his writing, Horace urges Roman writers to imitate the Greeks and follow in their footsteps. "Study Greek models night and day," was his legendary advice in the *Ars Poetica* (270).
- ❖ This idea, though, has an underlying contradiction. Horace wants Roman authors to imitate the Greeks night and day and follow in their footsteps, but he does not want them to be mere imitators.
- ❖ His solution, though, is only a set of metaphors with no practical steps: "The common stock [the Greek heritage] will become your private property if you don't linger on the broad and vulgar round, and anxiously render word for word, a loyal interpreter, or again, in the process of imitation, find yourself in a tight corner from which shame, or the rule of the craft, won't let you move." *Ars Poetica* (130-5).  
Horace's own poetry shows the same contradictions
- ❖ In the "Epistle to Maecenas" he complains about the slavish imitators who ape the morals and manners of their betters:  
How oft, ye servile crew  
Of mimics, when your bustling pranks I've seen,  
Have ye provoked my smiles - how often my spleen!  
(Horace, "Epistle To Maecenas, Answering his Unfair Critics," in *The Complete Works of Horace*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), pp. 360-1.)

In the process of following and imitating the Greeks, Horace differentiates himself from those who "mimic" the ancients and slavishly attempt to reproduce them. Obviously, he does not have much esteem for this kind of imitation and saw his own practice to be different:

I was the first to plant free footstep on a virgin soil; I walked not where others trod. Who trusts himself will lead and rule the swarm. I was the first to show to Latium the iambics of Paros, following the rhythm and spirit of Archilochus, not the themes or the words that hounded Lycambes. Him, never before sung by other lips, I, the lyricist of Latium, have made known. It is my joy that I bring things untold before, and am read by the eyes and held in the hands of the civilized."

(Horace, "Epistle to Maecenas" (21-34).)

- ❖ In imitating the Greeks, Horace claims originality, but the bold claim he makes of walking on virgin soil strongly contradicts the implied detail that the soil was not virgin, since Greek predecessors had already walked it.
- ❖ In addition, as Thomas Greene notes, the precise nature of what Horace claims to have brought back from his "walk" is not clear.  
(Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p.70.
- ❖ However Horace conceives of his imitation of the Greeks, he does a poor job at describing it or articulating its dialectics. Imitation seems to have been only a loose and imprecise metaphor in his vocabulary.



## Horace and Stylistic Imitation

❖ In *Ars Poetica*, Horace also advises the aspirant poet to make his tale believable:

"If you want me to cry, mourn first yourself, then your misfortunes will hurt me" *Ars Poetica* (100-110).

"My advice to the skilled imitator will be to keep his eye on the model of life and manners, and draw his speech living from there" *Ars Poetica* (317-19).

"Whatever you invent for pleasure, let it be near to truth." This is the famous:

"*ficta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris.*" *Ars Poetica* (338-340).

- ❖ This use of imitation denotes a simple reality effect idea. Horace simply asks the writer to make the tale believable, according to fairly common standards. His use of the term and the idea of imitation are casual and conventional. If you depict a coward, Horace advises, make the depiction close to a real person who is a coward.
- ❖ But Horace only had a stylistic feature in mind. As Craig La Drière notes, Horace could not even think of poetry, all poetry, as an imitation, the way the idea is expressed in Book X of the *Republic*, or in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Craig La Drière, "Horace and the Theory of Imitation," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. Lx (1939): 288-300.
- ❖ Horace's ideas about imitating the Greeks and about poetry imitating real life models were both imprecise, but they will become VERY influential in shaping European art and literature
- ❖ the principles of taste and "sensibility" (*decorum*) he elaborates to distinguish what he thought was "civilized" from "uncivilized" poetry will be



instrumental in shaping the European distinction between official high culture and popular low one.

- ❖ Horace's ideas also helped form the conception of literature and poetry as national monuments and trophies.
- ❖ Poetry in Horace's text was subordinated to oratory and the perfection of self-expression. Homer and Sophocles are reduced to classroom examples of correct speaking for rhetoricians to practice with.
- ❖ The idea of following the Greeks, as Thomas Greene notes, only magnified the temporal and cultural distance with them.

## **II. Quintilian - *Institutio Oratoria*.**

❖ From 68 to 88 C.E, he was the leading teacher of rhetoric in Rome. He wrote the *Institutio* as a help in the training of orators.

❖ Sometimes Quintilian justifies the imitation of the Greeks:

"And every technique in life is founded on our natural desire to do ourselves what we approve in others. Hence children follow the shapes of letters to attain facility in writing; musicians look for a model to the voice of their instructors, painters to the works of their predecessors, countrymen to methods of growing that have been proved successful by experience. In fact, we can see that the rudiments of any kind of skill are shaped in accordance with an example set for it (10. 2. 2)."

(*Institutio Oratoria*, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*), references are to line numbers.

### ❖ **But imitation is also dangerous:**

"Yet, this very principle, which makes every accomplishment so much easier for us than it was for men who had nothing to follow, is dangerous unless taken up cautiously and with judgement" (10. 2. 3).

"It is the sign of a lazy mentality to be content with what has been discovered by others" (10. 2. 4).

"it is also shameful to be content merely to reach the level of your model" (10. 2. 7).

### **Quintilian advocates two contradictory positions:**

- ❖ First that progress could be achieved only by those who refuse to follow, hence the undesirability of imitating the Greeks.
  
- ❖ At the same time, Quintilian continues to advocate imitation, and goes on to elaborate a list of precepts to guide writers to produce "accurate" imitations.
  - The imitator should consider carefully whom to imitate and he should not limit himself to one model only.
  
  - He should not violate the rules of genres and species of writing, and should be attentive to his models' use of decorum, disposition and language.

### ❖ III. Seneca

Seneca singles out the process of transformation that takes place when bees produce honey or when food, after it is eaten, turns into blood and tissue. He, then, explores the process of mellification and its chemistry. Did it happen naturally? Does the bee play an active role in it? Is it a process of fermentation? He does not select any one theory to explain the production of honey. Instead, he stresses a process of transformation:

"We also, I say, ought to copy these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading, for such things are better preserved if they are kept separate; then by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us, - in other words, our natural gifts, - we should so blend those several flavours into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came."

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (84. 5-6).

This is what we see nature doing in our own bodies without any labour on our part; the food we have eaten, as long as it retains its original quality and floats in our stomachs as an undiluted mass, is a burden; but it passes into tissue and blood only when it has been changed from its original form. So it is with the food which nourishes our higher nature, - we should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it, otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power."

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (84. 6-7).

- ❖ Latin authors never discuss poetry or literature as an imitation (mimesis); they only discuss them as an imitation of the Greeks.
- ❖ Latin authors are not familiar with Plato's and Aristotle's analysis of poetry. The *Poetics* or Republic III and X do not seem to have been available to the Romans:

"Unfortunately, Aristotle's *Poetics* exerted no observable influence in the classical period. It appears likely that the treatise was unavailable to subsequent critics."

Preminger, Hardison and Kerrane, "Introduction," in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism*, p. 7.

Latin authors used poetry and literature for two things only:

- To improve eloquence
  - To sing the national glories of Rome and show off its culture.
- ❖ This conception of literature will remain prevalent in Europe until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, as future lectures will show.

*best of luck*

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