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DOI: 10.26106/45ZF-5G09

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF IN HORACE'S *ODE* I.24

Why blush to let our tears unmeasured fall
For one so dear? Begin the mournful stave,
Melpomene, to whom the sire of all
Sweet voice with music gave.

And sleeps he then the heavy sleep of death,
Quintilius? Piety, twin sister dear
Of Justice! naked Truth! unsullied Faith!
When will ye find his peer?

By many a good man wept, Quintilius dies;
By none than you, my Virgil, trulier wept:
Devout in vain, you chide the faithless skies,
Asking your loan ill-kept.

No, though more suave than the bard of Thrace
You swept the lyre that trees were fain to hear,
Ne'er should the blood revisit his pale face
Whom once with wand severe

Mercury has folded with the sons of night,
Untaught to prayer Fate's prison to unseal.
Ah, heavy grief! but patience makes more light
What sorrow may not heal.

(transl. John Conington)

I.

Ode I.24 by Horace – described by David Porter as being one of the few “truly tragic”¹ in the collection – is about a real event and – like Virgil’s journey to Greece (the subject of the *Propempticon* to Virgil [I.3]) – made a huge impact on the poet. This event was the death of Quintilius Varus, who was a dear friend of his. Quintilius Varus was the addressee of *Ode* I.18 and there are references to him in the poet’s other works.²

As we now know, this poem was included in the first volume of the *Odes* as part of a planned sequence presenting the consecutive stages of human life. *Odes* I.23 and I.25 – preceding and following *Ode* I.24 – are devoted to the subject of love. The former deals with the feelings of young people, while the latter deals with those of older people. *Ode* I.24 deals with the difficult subject of the death of a close friend and in particular the grief that follows such a loss.³

Quintilius Varus, who died prematurely in 24 BC, was a member of the inner circle of the writers of the so-called Golden Age of Latin poetry – a group which had connections with the court of the Emperor Augustus. The dead man’s relations with Horace were not confined to social circles, but also encompassed artistic matters. He was a harsh, yet – as scholars now believe – “constructive” critic of his friend’s poetry.

In the ode which he devoted to Quintilius Varus, Horace speaks of him as an impartial reader and reviewer of his poems who pitilessly pointed out every imperfection, while encouraging the poet to improve whatever needed improving:⁴

*Quintilio siquid recitares: “Corrige, sodes,
hoc” aiebat “et hoc”; melius te posse negares,
bis terque epertum frustra; deler iuebat
et male tornatos incudi reddere versus.*
(l. 438–441)

*If you ever read Quintilius anything, he’d say:
‘Oh do change this, and this.’ If, after two or three
Vain attempts, you could do no better; he’d order
Deletion: ‘return the ill-made verse to the anvil.’
(transl. A.S. Kline)⁵*

¹ See D. H. Porter, *Horace’s Poetic Journey. A Reading of Odes 1–3*, New Jersey 1987, p. 85.

² See Hor. *Ars*. 438–444; Hor. *Carm.* I.18.1; Hor. *Ep.* 5.74. As *Varius*: Hor. *Sat.* I.5.39–42, 93; Hor. *Sat.* I.6.55; Hor. *Sat.* I.9.23; Hor. *Sat.* I.10.44.81; Hor. *Sat.* II.8.21.63.

³ See H. F u q u a, *Horace Carm. 1. 23–25*, “Classical Philology” 63, 1 (Jan., 1968), p. 45.

⁴ See M. E. C l a r k, *Quintilius’ Ethos as Critic of the Poet: Horace, AP 438–44*, “Classical World” 85, 3 (Jan.–Feb., 1992), pp. 229–231.

⁵ H o r a c e, *Ars Poetica, or: Epistle to The Pisos*, transl. A. S. K l i n e, [online] https://www.poetry-intranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.php#anchor_Toc98156253 [accessed on: May 26, 2020].

Quintilius Varus was a friend not only of Horace, but also of Virgil, who in Eclogue 6 (which would appear to have been dedicated to Quintilius himself and not, as some scholars claim, to Alfenus Varus)⁶ proclaims that trees in the sacred grove will sing his praises: *'tis of you, Varus, our tamarisks shall sing, of you all our groves (te nostrae, Vare, myricae, / te nemus omne canet*, lines 10–11)⁷. Interestingly, there is a similar motif in Horace's *Ode* I.24, where, however, it is Virgil who – like a modern Orpheus – sings the praises of his deceased friend while the trees listen to his lament in silence: *No, though more suasive than the bard of Thrace / You swept the lyre that trees were fain to hear (Quid si Threicio bandius Orpheo / auditam moderere arboribus fidem?*, lines 13–14).

This might have been an uncanny coincidence, although – given the timing of the publication of both works (*Ode* I.24 was written around 24 BC, while the *Eclogues* were written between 42 and 37 BC) – Horace may well have made a conscious reference to the Eclogue which his friend Virgil had dedicated to Varus while the latter was still alive. This might well have been the reason for the peculiar reversal of Virgil's motif in Horace's *Ode* I.24, though there is not enough proof to allow us to say with any certainty that the allusion was made deliberately.⁸

Eclogue 6 and *Ode* I.24 share three other similarities. The first is the motif of muses which is to be found in both works. *Ode* I.24 begins with an apostrophe to Melpomene that calls on her to celebrate the deceased Varus with a lament, while in Eclogue 6 the poet refers to his “rustic” or bucolic muse: *now will I woo the rustic Muse on slender reed (agrestem tenui meditabor hirundine musam*, line 8).

The second of these similarities is the motif of Orpheus, which is also present in both works. Virgil merely makes a passing mention (*not so do Rhodope and Ismarus marvel at their Orpheus – nec tantum Rhodope miratur et Ismarus Orphea*, line 30), whereas Horace greatly expands this motif, comparing Virgil in mourning to the legendary Thracian bard (*Quod si Threicio blandius Orpheo / auditam moderere arboribus fidem?*, *Ode* I.24, 13–14).

An interesting interpretation of this passage has been put forward by Philip Thibodeau,⁹ who – on the basis of Horace's comparison of Virgil to Orph-

⁶ See e.g. H. J. Rose, *The Eclogues of Vergil*, Berkely 1942, p. 229. The issue of two Varuses (with a settlement for Quintilius) has been described in detail by Emma A. Hahn. See E. A. Hahn, *The Characters in the Eclogues*, “Translations and Proceedings of the American Philological Association” 75, 1944, pp. 233–236. The literary context indicates however, that Varus in *Eclogue* 6 and Varus in *Ode* I.24 might be the same person.

⁷ All translations of the Eclogue 6 – H. R. Fairclough, [online] <https://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilEclogues.html#6> [accessed on: May 26, 2020].

⁸ Regarding Horace's allusions to Virgil, see L. Herrmann, *Virgile à Athènes d'après Horace*, “Revue des Études Anciennes” 37, 1, 1935, pp. 16–17.

⁹ See P. Thibodeau, *Can Vergil Cry? Epicureanism in Horace Odes 1.24*, “Classical Journal” 98, 3 (Feb.–Mar., 2003), p. 247.

eus¹⁰ – draws attention to the parallel: Virgil – Orpheus, Quintilius Varus – Eurydice. There are limits to the “magical” power of Virgil’s poetry: although it can move trees (just like the songs of Orpheus), it cannot bring our lost loved ones back to life.¹¹ Here, however, the comparison of Virgil to Orpheus on the one hand and of Varus to Eurydice on the other is not purely aesthetical (in the sense that it is a beautiful analogy extolling Virgil’s exceptional poetic talent). In the context of the whole work, the *intentio textus* stemming from this parallel serves to further emphasize the emotional bond that existed between the deceased and his artistic friends, as well as the extent of their grief.

The portrait of Virgil in the throes of such deep pain has been interpreted in various ways. Some scholars, such as Akbar Khan, interpret *Ode* I.24 as being a work that is critical of Virgil, whom Horace chides for exercising “insufficient control over his emotions.”¹² Thibodeau also detects some criticism here, though he sees it not as an expression of personal animosity between the poets, but rather as a display of Horace’s Epicurean honesty towards Virgil, whose lament would be seen as being unnecessary by any Epicurean.¹³

Such a reading of *Ode* I.24 is based on the fact that in two other mournful *Odes* (I.33 and II.9), Horace does criticize lamenting addressees for their lack of restraint in displaying emotion.¹⁴ In *Ode* I.33 he chides the elegist Abius Tibullus for his excessive indulgence in sorrow after the loss of his beloved Glycera, while in *Ode* II.9 he advises Valgius to end his long period of mourning after the premature death of his young friend Mystes. However, the events described in these two works did not personally involve the lyrical subject (i.e. the poet himself). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in *Ode* I.33 we are dealing not with true mourning, but with “mourning” used as a metaphor (mourning that is not funereal, but erotic),¹⁵ whereas in *Ode* I.24 Horace is referring to an event that also affects him personally.

In the context of Horace’s professed Epicureanism and his reproachful rhetorical questions, one might think that Virgil had been wasting his time by allowing himself to be immersed in the depths of despair. However, such an interpretation of Horace’s poem is quite clearly at odds with the meaning of the (equally rhetorical) question which is to be found in its first two lines: are there any limits to the pain

¹⁰ The use of the Orpheus motif in a mournful poem was not Horace’s innovation. It had been used before in *Alceste* of Euripides (line 965nn.), see G. P a s q u a l i, *Orazio lirico*, Firenze 1920, p. 255.

¹¹ See P. T h i b o d e a u, op. cit., p. 247.

¹² See A. K h a n, *Horace’s Ode to Virgil on the Death of Quintilius: 1.24*, [in:] *Why Horace? A Collection of Interpretations*, ed. W. S. A n d e r s o n, Waco, IL 1999, pp. 78, 80.

¹³ See P. T h i b o d e a u, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁴ See M. L o w r i e, *Lyric’s “Elegos” and the Aristotelian Mean: Horace, “C” 1.24, 1.33 and 2.9*, “Classical World” 87, 5 (May–June, 1994), p. 377.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

caused by the loss of a loved one? (*Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus / tam cari capitis?*, lines 1–2). Here the lyrical subject clearly speaks from the heart and seems to fully identify himself with the chorus of grieving friends, while Virgil only comes to the foreground in the third strophe, after the rhetorical questions posed in the first two strophes. Notwithstanding the critical overtones of the words addressed to Virgil, Horace would not seem to be treating him as being a person who is expressing an inappropriate attitude towards unhappiness (and whose morale therefore needs to be strengthened by means of a poetic and philosophical *vituperatio*), but rather as a person who is grieving over the loss of a close friend.

In his role of key mourner – the representative of a group of poets who are immersed in grief after the sudden death of a valued friend and critic – Virgil becomes not merely a mourning companion, but (to a certain degree) an object of observation in the eyes of his author-friend, almost like a statue of Orpheus lamenting Eurydice, accompanied by the captivating sounds of his lyre – an attitude that has been immortalized in song by Horace the Epicurean.

II.

Ode I.24 begins with a strophe expressing Horace's deep grief over the loss of a friend. He refers to the deceased man using the tender term *carum caput* – literally “dear head.” This part of the work depicts the feeling of emptiness and yearning that is typical of mourning and that psychologists call the depression stage.¹⁶ Despite the identical name, it does not share many similarities with depression as a disease, though it can take on a pathological form and develop into clinical depression.¹⁷ The emotionally charged rhetorical question: “Can shame and temperance somehow deter the immensity of grief for the deceased?” (*Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus / tam cari capitis?*, lines 1–2) concerns this stage of bereavement, when those who are mourning allow themselves to be dominated by their emotions. Horace's poem becomes an outlet for these feelings: “Begin the mournful stave, Melpomene” (*Praecipue lugubris / cantus, Melpomene*, lines 2–3).

The next strophe of the ode contains an element of incredulity and even indignation: “How is it possible that Quintilius, so loved by his friends, fell into the eternal sleep to never wake again?” (*Ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor / urget?*, lines 5–6). “Will there ever be a man to match the humility, honesty and fidelity of the deceased” (*Cui Pudor et Iustitiae soror, / incorrupta Fides, nudaque Veritas / quando ullum inveniet parem?*, lines 6–8)? The emotions expressed in this strophe match another stage

¹⁶ See E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving. Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney 2005, p. 20.

¹⁷ See L. Grinberg, *Guilt and Depression*, transl. Ch. Trollope, London–New York 1992, p. 129.

of mourning, which psychologists call denial.¹⁸ This definition is also quite misleading: in the case of people who are terminally ill, denial means pretending that the condition which has been diagnosed simply does not exist,¹⁹ whereas in the case of people grieving over the death of someone close, denial merely refers to the stage during which they cannot come to terms with the loss of their loved one. A typical phrase used by people in mourning is: “I can’t believe he is dead.”²⁰ Horace’s rhetorical question – full of disbelief – has exactly such a meaning: “And sleeps he then the heavy sleep of death, Quintilius?” (*Ergo Quintilium perpetuus sopor / urget?*, lines 5–6).

The third strophe, which is central to the ode as a whole, presents the reactions of the dead critic’s acquaintances to the news of his untimely death. Horace concentrates mainly on Virgil, whose emotional ties to the much lamented Quintilius Varus are no lesser than his own. In vain, Virgil pleads with the gods to return Quintilius, who in the past interceded with them on his behalf: “Devout in vain, you chide the faithless skies, Asking your loan ill-kept”²¹ (*Tu frustra pius, heu, non ita creditum / poscis Quintilium deos*, lines 11–12). He feels cheated by the gods. As a pious (*pius*) person, he entrusted his friend to the gods, asking for their benevolence and care, only to have him snatched away from the world of the living. This may constitute yet another reference to Virgil’s Eclogue 6: *To Phoebus no page is more welcome than that which bears on its front the name of Varus (nec Phoebus gratior ulla est quam sibi quae Vari praescripsit pagina nomen*, lines 11–12). The gods, however, seem to understand this as a request for the exact opposite: instead of taking Quintilius into their care, they “take” him from Virgil as a kind of a horrific gift. That is why the lyrical subject complains with bitterness: *non ita creditum* – “a loan ill-kept.”

The third strophe therefore matches that stage of grief which psychologists call bargaining.²² People who are grieving often ask themselves the question: “what would happen / what would have happened if I ...?,” tormenting themselves simultaneously with accusations that it was their own irresponsible behaviour that contributed to the death of their loved one. This is how the lyrical subject feels – and Virgil with him. They both feel cheated and even mocked by the gods, as if their naïve “entrusting” of Quintilius Varus to their care had led to his death. This strophe also contains an element of anger,²³ which is very conspicuous further on in the poem (strophe four and the middle of strophe five), when the lyrical subject expresses his frustration by

¹⁸ See E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁹ See S. Scott, *Delay in seeking help*, [in:] *Cambridge Handbook of Psychology, Health and Medicine*, ed. S. Ayers et al. (2nd edition), London 2007, p. 71.

²⁰ See E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, op. cit., p. 8.

²¹ The *tu frustra pius [...] poscis* contains an ambiguity – it can mean both “devout in vain [...] asking” and “devout [...] asking in vain.”

²² See E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, op. cit., p. 17.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

means of two consecutive rhetorical questions: *though more suasive than the bard of Thrace you swept the lyre that trees were fain to hear, what comes of it?* (*Quid si Threicio blandius Orpheo / auditam moderere arboribus fidem?*, lines 13–14) and *Should the blood revisit his pale face, whom once with wand severe Mercury has folded with the sons of night, untaught to prayer Fate's prison to unseal?* (*Num vanae redeat sanguis imagini / quam virga semel horrida, / nn lenis precibus fata recludere / nigro compulerit Mercurius gregi*, lines 15–18).

Horace also uses language that is emotionally very intense and is at the same time full of clear contrasts: the phrase *vana imago* (the pale face) stands in opposition to the word *sanguis* (blood); similarly, the word *fides* (lyre) stands in glaring contrast to the phrase *virga horrida* (severe wand) describing Mercury's wand – which godly attribute is used by the “guide of the souls.”²⁴

Here we may also note that the Latin noun *fides* is a homonym of the word “faith,” which in the context of the aforementioned futility of Virgil's prayers and the alleged perversity of the gods gives this contrast a meaning that is even stronger and more emotional. On the one hand, there is the lyre or the faith of the poet Virgil, while on the other, there is the relentless, cruel judgment of the gods.

The last two strophes of the poem exhibit a surprisingly different tone. There is no anger, sadness or frustration in them. Instead, they are full of truly philosophical, Epicurean tranquility: *Heavy grief, but patience makes more light, what sorrow may not heal* (*durum: sed levius fit patientia / quicquid corrigere est nefas*, lines 19–20). Interestingly, these strophes also coincide with the last stage of grief, which is commonly known as acceptance.²⁵ Horace advises Virgil to come to terms with the misfortune as soon as possible, as this will allow him to close a painful chapter that prevents him from feeling the joy of life. As he concedes, however, this is by no means an easy task.

A careful reading of *Ode I.24* – not only in its original, historical context, but also taking into account the findings of modern psychology – shows that many centuries before the five stages of mourning were defined by modern psychology, the Roman poet Horace had instinctively distinguished them, basing his remarkably accurate portrayal on his insightful observations of Virgil, who was also unable to come to terms with the death of their mutual close friend. At the same time, the image of a bard stricken with grief inspired Horace to turn Virgil into an almost allegoric figure: a second Orpheus.

Translated by Jacek Smycz

²⁴ See M. J. Putnam, *The Language of Horace's "Odes" I.24*, “Classical Journal” 88, 2 (Dec., 1992 – Jan., 1993), p. 128. Additional information regarding Mercury's wand, see J. Rüpke, *Merkur am Ende: Horaz, Carmen I.30*, “Hermes” 126, 4, 1998, p. 448; P. Thibodeau, op. cit., p. 247.

²⁵ See E. Kübler-Ross, D. Kessler, op. cit., p. 24.

SUMMARY

Long before modern psychology classified and explained the five stages of mourning, the Roman poet Horace made an intuitive portrayal of these stages in his *Ode* I.24, which was written on the death of his friend Quintilius Varus. In this poem, Horace describes the consecutive phases of grief in bereavement – nowadays defined as depression, denial, bargaining, anger and acceptance – with remarkable accuracy.

KEYWORDS:

Horace, Quintilius Varus, Virgil, *Ode* I.24, the five stages of grief, psychology

PIĘĆ STADIÓW ŻAŁOBY W *ODZIE* I.24 HORACEGO

STRESZCZENIE

Na długo przed wyszczególnieniem przez psychologów pięciu etapów żałoby rzymski poeta Horacy instynktownie uczynił to w swojej *Odzie* 1.24, napisanej po śmierci przyjaciela, Kwintyliusza Warusa. W utworze tym poeta bardzo trafnie scharakteryzował kolejno stadia depresji, zaprzeczenia, negocjowania, gniewu oraz akceptacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

Horacy, Kwintyliusz Warus, Wergiliusz, *Oda* 1.24, pięć faz żałoby, psychologia