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In Pursuit of a Precious Ghost: Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio*

BY SHARON KAEHELE AND HOWARD GERMAN

In the six years since Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio* (1961) was published, it had received little attention from critics; such indifference is puzzling, for this poem, with its imaginative exploitation of a Shakespearean background, is an original work of great merit. Convinced that "there is no change, but only re-creation,"¹ Plutzik uses the characters and events of *Hamlet* as the *donnee* for a long poem in which Horatio describes his efforts to protect Hamlet's reputation during the fifty years after Hamlet's death. Not intended as a narrative sequel to *Hamlet*, the poem accepts the events of the play as if they were historical facts and then describes the continual metamorphosis of the Hamlet story as it passes through the minds and mouths of many types and generations of men. Since all the experiences happen to the narrator-protagonist and deal with the same subject, the thirteen sections of the poem maintain unity despite the extended time-span and lack of a distinct narrative sequence. Embodied in the episodes and made immediate and concrete by the texture of the poetry are Plutzik's ideas about the self, truth, and time; his ideas form a kind of modern Aristotelianism which Plutzik calls the Philosophy of Earth, a philosophy which emphasizes metamorphosis and the interdependence of mind and matter.

The first of these ideas is introduced in the "Prologue," which describes a conversation between Horatio and Bernardo on the night after Hamlet's death; certain that Hamlet's speculations about the meaning of life must now be answered, Bernardo observes that Hamlet will have learned "that the first question answered is—self."² In part, this obscure comment means that each person's truth about the world is restricted to and controlled by his own nature—"self" poses both the questions and the answers for each individual. The validity

of Bernardo's statement is shown in the four scenes of Part I ("What a Wounded Name") when Horatio tries to establish and preserve the biographical and historical "truth" about Hamlet. Horatio encounters a stultifying array of contradictory opinions about Hamlet—a diversity almost equal to that found in the criticism of *Hamlet*. For example, a few days after the carnage at Elsinore, Horatio meets an Ostler, who is ignorant (scholars study "Pluto and Harris Tuttle"), opinionated, lewd, and cynical. According to the Ostler, Hamlet was a mad lecher who often "ploughed" his bouncing doxy, Ophelia, murdered his father, and later poisoned Claudius and the Queen as they lay sleeping. Several years later while in Paris, Horatio converses with a Countess who is engrossed in romances and gallantry; she condemns Hamlet as a "shaggy bear" for having killed the "finely mustached" Laertes, who had set many hearts throbbing in Paris. In the same salon, a Count with fastidious aesthetic standards and an appetite for tales of violence finds the story about Hamlet sufficiently gory but somewhat unconvincing and lacking in finesse. At Wittenberg Horatio meets the voluble Faustus who regards Hamlet as a "philosophical madman" and uses the story of his life ("the truly philosophical/ Event in the mazy chronicle of our times") as the basis for a lecture upon ontology. Finally, forty-three years after Hamlet's death, Horatio talks with Carlus, the Danish Prime Minister, who regards a man like Hamlet as a threat to stability: Hamlet killed a king, and "killing kings is wicked."

These displays of solipsism reveal the importance of the self and indicate that any general agreement about a person or a historical event is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Two of the characters, Faustus and Carlus, have accepted this fact and have consciously adopted distinct attitudes toward the past. Faustus, who possesses a Hamlet-like yearning for "a base/ Within the flux," has an aversion to the material conditions of life ("the stupid hovel of bone and flesh") and finds the truth about Hamlet's life in the abstractions to which it can be reduced. Faustus is thus somewhat like Horatio, whose regard for Hamlet's reputation leads him occasionally to forget the actual Hamlet ("a thing of earth") in favor of "the abstract man . . . the man beyond himself." Furthermore,

Faustus' polarities of Being and Becoming anticipate a dualism somewhat like that of the Philosophy of Earth which Horatio later accepts. But the poem denies Faustus' medieval *contemptus mundi*; Horatio's concern with Hamlet "as a man" refutes Faustus' calloused argument that Hamlet is now only an "abstract symbol before the haughty door/ Of high philosophy." The inadequacy of Faustus' preoccupation with patterns, geometrical figures, and philosophical truths is revealed by his esoteric discoveries in the account of Hamlet's life: he distorts Hamlet's to-be-or-not-to-be speech into an illustration of the opposition between *Sein* and *Werden* and is delighted when he detects in Horatio's narrative details suggestive of the Trinity. This mania of schematizing history and life finally repels Horatio: "As I looked at him, I frankly thought I saw/ A cuttlefish waving a thousand arms./ How should I grasp it before it drained my blood?"

A more dangerous attitude toward the past is expressed by the Machiavellian politician, Carlus, whose similarity to Claudius is implied by his use of phrases which echo those of Shakespeare's king. Since Carlus believes that to praise a regicide is to encourage anarchy, he finds a dangerous meddling with the past in Horatio's preoccupation with Hamlet's reputation. In an attack reminiscent of the *Hamlet* criticism of G. Wilson Knight, Carlus offers his own characterization of Hamlet as "a disgruntled, ambitious fellow,/ Of mysterious, changing moods," who schemed to murder Claudius in order to win the throne. When Horatio challenges Carlus on this judgment, the latter admits that he does not believe it himself, but for him "the question of belief's irrelevant." For Carlus, the merit in his account of Hamlet's character and behavior is that it "takes some unpleasant circumstances/ And explains them in a way that's best for Denmark,/ And so (to skip some steps of schoolmen's logic)/ Is true, if truth there is." Adopting a utilitarian attitude toward the past, Carlus, like the totalitarian ruler, manipulates the facts and writes history for the good of the state and, incidentally, for his own security.

Undoubtedly the poem's most significant comment about biographical or historical truth is found in Horatio's changing attitude toward his plan to create for posterity a portrait that will capture the character of Hamlet. Despite his zealous and

constant defense of Hamlet, Horatio fails utterly to destroy the variety of impressions about Hamlet and to establish as definitive his own concept of his friend. Moreover, Horatio's own image of Hamlet, challenged by so many contrasting points of view, alters with time and becomes less idealistic. He acknowledges that Hamlet "though ample in soul and intellect,/ Hugged a canker of ambition" and that the loss of kingship drove him occasionally to "hack and thrust at circumstance." Faced with all these different opinions and this evidence of change, Horatio finally admits that truth has many faces and that the present is continually modifying the past: "time is the greatest liar. . . .If so,/ The universe is a lie—the crying of hounds/ Whose ever increasing roar is history." Horatio's bitterness at having failed to transfix the reputation of Hamlet is partly assuaged at the end of the poem when he realizes that time effects metamorphoses rather than changes.

While the first part of *Horatio* is written in a poetic but frequently informal style appropriate for dialogue, Part II ("The Shepherd") is written in a vivid narrative style, rich in metaphor and symbol, a style appropriate for the spinning of a folktale with mythic overtones. In Part II Horatio listens to an account of Hamlet's life after folklore has absorbed and modified it. For the shepherds in the audience, the Old Shepherd's narrative is an entertaining folktale with an element of myth—Ambleth, the protagonist, becomes insane and dives into the sea where his ragings are responsible for the sands and turbulence of the sea.³ For the reader, however, the three sections of Part II provide a mythic explanation for certain characteristics of man and society; this myth accounts for the behavior of Hamlet and (by implication) for the conflicts of all men. Several passages in the Shepherd's fable describe a perennial struggle between the Christian King, Humble (the counterpart of Hamlet Sr. in *Hamlet*), and the worshipper of Satan, Fang (the counterpart of Claudius).

Again, on the flame-tipped grass
The two swordsmen are clashing together—Fang
Thrusting, as always forcing the fight, and Humble
Retreating, feinting and stalling, dropping his arm

At the least respite, often peering about him
 Or looking off to the ramparts of God's city
 As if he expected some succor.

(p. 59)

Since several passages suggest that "the flame-tipped grass" (and "the red sands") represents the flesh of man, this battle symbolizes an inner struggle between man's mind (or soul or spirit) and his body. Humble's defeat and the subsequent apportionment of his body among five animals (a fox, wolf, weasel, fish, and eagle) illustrate man's loss of spiritual control and his subjugation by the animal tendencies in his nature. The subordination of the spiritual in man to the animal is also symbolized by the Black Mass, or ritual feast, held by Fang and his animal minions; this subordination is indicated more explicitly when Fang tells his bestial allies that as long as the parts of Humble's body remain separate and within their control, Humble is as "helpless as a wisp of vapor/ To stand athwart my business."

The second section of Part II, which shows the social consequences of this animal domination of self, narrates the wanderings of Ambleth in his efforts to find and gather together the dismembered parts of Humble's body. Like an Ovidian poem "singing of the changes," "The Book of the Metamorphosis" describes the numerous animal and human forms that Ambleth assumes in his search; these transformations imply that the same "Ambleth" spirit resides in man and animal. Ambleth's quest, a search for spiritual unity, discloses that the same conditions prevail in the animal kingdom and the human community—a universal warfare between individuals and the species. Although Ambleth experiences a brief respite in Rome, the city of peace, this lull is quickly broken by the more usual acts of violence and betrayal.

"Now a northerner enters Rome City
 To visit the catacombs where the martyrs are buried
 And inspect the niches behind the mounded skulls."

"Now for a little while in a little field
 The dogs and crickets that live in the nerves of the grass
 Whisper and ask, ask and whisper, sending

A delicate message, like a slow ripple in water,
Beyond their border: 'When? Where? Tell us.' "

"But the wolf pack turns on the wolf in the hills of Scythia.
Beaks suddenly rip at the beak on the cliff.
The long-necked thieves murder the long-necked spy
As he sits at ease after dinner, smacking his lips. . . ."

"Digging, digging. He digs a mine, a well. . . .
And graves, graves, the earth probed with a pick.
War makes many and the black plague more.
He poisons the water and incites the kings to battle. . . ."
(pp. 54-56)

This warfare, which is described here with the exaggeration of fable, is also found in other parts of the poem. Although subtler and less violent, the political struggles between Carlus and his successor, for instance, expose the same animalistic tendencies, tendencies which the metaphors emphasize. For example, during a period when Carlus has been forced to yield his position as Prime Minister, Horatio thinks of him "pacing his acres/ Like a caged fox" and brewing schemes to replace the current Prime Minister, "who is another Carlus. . .most admirable/ At stringing little nooses in the grass/ Or from low branches, or planting forgeries/ To lime his friends in treason." Horatio assumes that Carlus, when he returns to office, will "resume/ His feast on one Horatio."

The Shepherd's tale also examines the effect of time upon the self and suggests that man's awareness of time is as powerful an influence upon his behavior as are his animal qualities: Ambleth, according to Horatio, is not only a wanderer "betrayed by five lusts in body and spirit" but also a man whose intellect harbors a usurper, time "that he grapples with as Jacob with the angel." The importance of both forces is emphasized by numerous details of characterization, symbol, and action. Ambleth is often presented not only as a man harrassed by bestiality and time, but also as a symbol of these forces. For example, the description of him bracing himself, "as if he wielded a scythe," to throw Fang's body into the pool suggests the image of the Grim Reaper; similarly, after his madness, Ambleth is pictured both as a sea monster anxious to annihilate all living things and as an armed warrior moving through the flux—a description re-

calling Shakespeare's Hamlet taking up arms against a sea of troubles. Ambleth has a constant awareness of time, an awareness which is described by an animal metaphor: "the little dogs that bark in his blood/ And, in his nerves, the host of crickets singing." In one scene bestiality and time are presented, by means of symbols, as obstacles or dangers for Ambleth: stumbling through the woods at night, he suddenly realizes that he is trapped when he sees behind him "two burning eyes. . . of a height, seemingly,/ To indicate some beast" and finds ahead of him "a pool which went from him/ Into the darkness as if it meant simply to reach/ The end of the world." Bestiality and time make their most powerful assault upon Ambleth's consciousness when Gerta (the counterpart of Shakespeare's Gertrude) kills herself after informing Ambleth that he has inadvertently committed incest with her and, in killing Fang, has been guilty of patricide; this encounter with mortality and with his own animalism drives Ambleth mad. The extent of his obsession with time is shown by the numerous symbols of time in the description of his madness.

"And Ambleth cried aloud.
But the clock on the wall ticked louder than his cry
And the hands whirled like the spokes of a wheel. He ran
Through the halls of Elsinore screaming — and screaming, down
To the sad ocean, where he felt the tides heaving,
While overhead the sun whisked through the sky
Light as a child's ball. He saw, looking behind,
The wood and the world, where the fox and the wolf still hid. . . .
But the mountains were settling and crumbling, and his heart tolled
Loud as the clock in his dead mother's chamber.
Holding at ready the weapon of Fang, he strode
With eyes open into the dark waves."

(p. 50)

The third section of Part II ("The Harrowing of the House of Eyes") presents a myth which makes clearer the reason for man's preoccupation with time and gives some indication of the causes for his inner struggles. Ambleth's ascent into the world of archangels and guards (a world of Pure Form) symbolizes an attempt to escape from the world of animality in order to live in an abstract or spiritual world

outside time. Ambleth becomes terrified in this world, however, when he loses his familiar sense of time (“Nowhere in that vastness could he catch the littlest yelp,/ Creak, or tick, or whisper”). Consequently he flees to the clock-shaped eyes in the House of God but finds no comfort there since the eyes not only mirror various evil deeds but show him as the perpetrator of these acts. Ambleth’s behavior in the House of God explains why man might feel a maddening ambivalence toward time: man is terrified without the sense of present time, to give him a sense of being. Yet man views time with repugnance because of his awareness of the bestial acts that are enacted within time. One of the consequences of being so dependent upon the self, upon an egocentric awareness, is that man must endure the intrusions of memory and imagination which are inescapably intermingled with consciousness. Ambleth’s discover that each figure in the mirror is “only/ Himself in his damned disguises” both dramatizes the solipsistic nature of man and indicates the universal *potential* for brutality. By his attack on the mirrors, Ambleth shows that man’s inner conflict may arise from a desire to erase from his mind a repulsive act which he has either performed or imagines himself capable of performing.

Most of Part III (“In the Castle at Forstness”) is written in a simple style suitable for Horatio’s final reflections upon his experience. However, one section (“The Place Beyond Scythia”), which describes a vision of Horatio’s, presents the most complex symbolism in the poem. While meditating on the Shepherd’s story, Horatio imagines a battlefield in Scythia, “near the mouth of hell.” The details make clear that the battles are not only external struggles but man’s inner conflicts as well. For example, a warrior in this grim vision suddenly comes “face to face with himself—or at least a thing/ That a mirror might show him at twilight,” and warriors fight in their sleep and “in dream” in labyrinthian corridors whose complexity resembles that of the mind. These warriors often regroup themselves in response to changes in outer reality or their emotions: “as the banners alter, it seems that I see them [the warriors] scatter,/ Group and regroup—as if in a game of chess/ The pieces, by whim or by some law unknown to the players/ Might suddenly change their color.”

Horatio also compares this warfare to a bizarre game of chess in which a player is suddenly told or senses "as a pain in the middle of his head" that the rules are reversed; the player acts under the new rules until "a new charter convulsed him. It follows thus/ That the smell of betrayal is thick in the air of that place,/ The odor of guilt and regret." By means of these details symbolizing the conflicts among the conscious and unconscious forces in man's life, the temporary dominance of one emotion, and the frequent alterations in man's mood, Plutzik makes clear the psychological reason for the many acts of treachery described in other parts of the poem. Horatio also envisions a game in which individuals, seated in a colosseum whose doors are connected by tunnels beneath the arena, are forced to identify masked figures as either Jesus or Judas or to guess which figure will next appear. This game, the Masque of Jesus and Judas, also explains why an individual may be guilty of inconsistency since it shows that people are often forced to make decisions based upon a deceptive external reality or upon their conjectures about the future, perhaps about their own future emotions.

"The Place Beyond Scythia," while reiterating some of the ideas found earlier in the poem, also draws attention, through the use of significant details, to concepts of particular importance in the twentieth century. The following description of the relationship between man and animal in Scythia suggests the Theory of Evolution and its emphasis upon man's animal ancestry.

And what of the closeness of men there to the beasts
 (A thing not seen since Eden, though innocence
 No longer marks the bond). . . .
 When they cry in terror "Father! Father!" they hear
 Only the idiot chatter of bears and apes.

(p. 83)

Similarly, the characterization of the Scythian God directs attention to the modern deification of history—"The God . . . that records all but neither condemns nor pities./ He writes and writes but makes no further comment./ His eyes reflect the crimes of the world." Modern man's introversion, his concern with memory, and his obsession with time are all alluded

to in the following description of the Scythian's "Ague of the Mirror" and "Sickness of the Clock."

A Scythian moon freaks the roofs of the houses
 Within which the strange madmen gather and gesture:
 Whirl like cats to catch the self they were
 A moment past; or walk slow to the mirror;
 Sit down; claw at the mirror to take the image;
 Or run from the image into the streets — where the peddlers
 At every corner, in the taint of that Scythian moonlight,
 Are hawking "Clocks! Clocks!" and the clockmakers
 In the little windows, intent over the tables,
 Pull apart the entrails; put together;
 Tear apart and lift them to their eyes.

(p. 84)

Life is unredeemed for the Scythians, according to Horatio, because "no Prince strides in their midst, blessing the earth/ With his upraised hands or the touch of his holy feet." The Prince referred to in this passage may be Christ, for Horatio on several occasions expresses conventional Christian ideas about the self and time. However, the implications of the poem seem to be more adequately explained by Horatio's "philosophy of earth" than by Christianity. Horatio arrives at his credo when he realizes that Ambleth has a close kinship to Hamlet: both of them have a heart, soul, or mind that is "secretive, labyrinthine, multifarious,/ Full of splendor and darkness. Such a self/ Would regard time as the prison of the self/ And yearn to be. . .the King of infinite space." Musing over the Shepherd's tale, Horatio concludes that he has not given enough attention to man's material being with its unavoidable metamorphosis in death or thought enough about the effect "of the earth upon the high mind, here in this life." His ruminations about the Ambleth in Hamlet help him to understand Hamlet's behavior; at the same time, they lead him to a greater appreciation of Hamlet's importance to man. As the mind enables the individual to obtain a vision of what might be, so the exceptional person provides a society with its dream of what might be; without its Prince Hamlets, a society becomes like that in Scythia. The following summary of Horatio's philosophy refers to man's death and the changes in his physical being and also describes the importance of a

Hamlet (in terms of an Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality) and his inevitable metamorphosis.

And these are the laws .
 Of earth, of the philosophy of dust.
 This is the law by which King Alexander
 (So I have heard) might make an excellent bunghole.
 And Prince Hamlet be sent a-voyaging
 Beyond the shores of possibility.
 —No! Into those very harbors! There was in him
 A principle spurning this wretched Was
 For Could-Be, Might-Be, which Alexander's teacher,
 Throned in a neighbor bunghole, still holds higher.
 Our philosophy of earth perhaps? Oho!
 So all roads lead to Rome — and a sibyl warning:
 "In the egg Hamlet a fowl Ambleth slept.
 Humpty Dumpty must crack when his time comes.
 For the greatest self is that which strives inexorably
 To fill the void of its potentialities. . . ."

(pp. 79-80)

In the last section of the poem Horatio is still concerned about his failure to express a fitting eulogy of Hamlet. Significantly, Horatio's tribute is never uttered explicitly in the poem; it is presented indirectly through a description of his reactions to a midnight walk on the tower at Forstness. While he reminisces about his earlier vigil with Hamlet at Elsinore, Horatio's attention is suddenly captured by the song of a bird flying above the tower; when the bird's song is at its height, a broad-antlered stag appears briefly in the forest below. This experience produces a transformation in Horatio's mood, an exultation which he finds inexplicable: "Who can explain/ From what fugitive grace the heart will take its ease?/ Or find the shy spring from which joy flows?" Instead of having Horatio compose a panegyric of Hamlet, Plutzik has chosen to indicate by means of an aesthetic experience the effect of Hamlet upon Horatio. This use of song to convey an almost undefineable experience argues for the preeminence of art; like life, art involves metamorphoses, but the changes art works upon the raw material of life do not occur by chance.

Plutzik's entire poem, of course, implies the value of art and artists—the Shakespeares who create Prince Hamlets to go voyaging "beyond the shores of possibility." In the same

way that Horatio is transported by the song of the bird and the sight of the kingly stag, countless people have been moved by Shakespeare's artistry in creating Hamlet—several details such as the title of this section (“The Lark at Heaven’s Gate”) encourage the reader to identify the song bird with Shakespeare. Like Horatio, innumerable writers have tried “to tell what thing in Hamlet/ Drew me to him, or made his ghost precious.” In trying to answer this question for himself, Plutzik has not produced a fowl *Ambleth* but *Horatio*; while his poem may not achieve the height of *Hamlet*, it offers the rewards of a very significant work of art.

FOOTNOTES

¹“If Causality is Impossible, Genesis is Recurrent,” *Apples from Shinar* (Connecticut, 1959), p. 9.

²*Horatio* (New York, 1961), p. 4. All subsequent quotations are from this edition; page references follow lengthy quotations.

³A few of the details in the folktale have been taken from earlier versions of the Hamlet story. The tale of Ambleth as an ocean giant is found in the *Prose Edda*, and the names of the characters (Ambleth, Humble, Fang, Gertha) and a few details of action have been taken from Saxo Grammaticus. These sources are discussed in Israel Gollancz, *Hamlet in Ireland* (London, 1898), pp. xii ff. Of course, some of the details of the folktale such as Ambleth’s incest also follow Freudian or mythic interpretations of *Hamlet*.

Words

Like scattered leaves
 I gather you. . .
 One by one,
 I lay you down
 Lovingly,
 Side by side,
 Each small fragment
 Of a page. . . .

—IDA DUNAY