

Fiction, or Imaginative Truth: Poetic and Dramatic modes in Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio*

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Presented at the ALA 2011 Jewish American
& Holocaust Literature Symposium
Miami Beach, Florida

My discussion of *Horatio* is organized around two themes, both having to do with the formal relationship between Plutzik's poem and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is the central but not the only source upon which Plutzik draws. In composing the middle section of the poem, "The Shepherd," Plutzik went back to some of the same sources in Danish mythology which supplied Shakespeare with the narrative material for *Hamlet*. I don't go into "The Shepherd" much in this essay because I am more concerned with the relationship between the reader's experience of both the poem and the play as texts, and with poetry and drama as different but related literary modes. This is the first theme. The second has to do with those points at which we find the greatest traffic between the two texts, the beginnings and the endings of each. Therefore my discussion gives the most attention to Section I, "What a Wounded Name," and Section III, "In the Castle at Forstness."

At the very end of *Hamlet*, as the prince succumbs to the king's poison, he makes a final request of his friend: "Horatio, I am dead, / thou liv'st. Report me and my cause aright / to the unsatisfied."¹ After protesting his desire to die at Hamlet's side, Horatio reluctantly accepts the charge. In *Horatio*, a long poem in three parts, Plutzik imagines and explores Horatio's undertaking in retrospect: the poem is narrated by the elderly Horatio fifty years after the prince's death, describing encounters over the course of his long life in which he has seen Hamlet's story change, becoming intriguing gossip, philosophical case study, and myth, none of them coming close to the truth as Horatio knew and promised to establish it.

The poem *Horatio* engages a field of questions about the relative uses and methods of poetry and drama applied to particular themes, for instance the dissemination and protection of history—specifically, the true history of a man's life. It asks whether a true history is possible, or even desirable, which in turn asks what, exactly, that history is, and how it is to be made and

1 *Hamlet* 5.2.281-2 (The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Greenblatt).

preserved. *Horatio* explores these questions by taking as its “historic” source material perhaps the most famous play there is—we all “know” it, in some measure. But *Hamlet* is, in part, a play about using fictions to uncover truth: Hamlet uses players, performance, antic dispositions as tools in his investigation. In *Horatio*, Hyam Plutzik brings the dramatic mode to task as a method in the pursuit of truth. While the scenes that it recalls carry a dramatic flavor, Horatio's monologue is not dramatic, for it has no audience, so it must be poetry. This is not to say that poetry occurs only when drama fails for lack of audience, for poetry requires a commitment no less strenuous but of an entirely different kind, which involves only the self.

The quest on which Hamlet sets him, to “report my cause aright to the unsatisfied,” inevitably fails, but in that failure Horatio finds a new quest; he finds that the first question answered is—not always the first question asked. And so he learns that answers, in whatever order they are discovered, can lead to new questions, while any unanswered questions need not paralyze the quester.

What makes *Horatio*, which is unequivocally a monologue, a poetic not a dramatic one, is the fact that Horatio as speaker of this poem has no audience. Horatio as character in *Hamlet* has an audience when he says, at the very end of the play,

[HORATIO] give order that these bodies
 High on a stage be placed to the view;
 And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
 How these things came about. So shall you hear
 Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
 Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;
 And in the upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on th'inventors heads. All this can I
 Truly deliver.²

Fortinbras, whom Horatio is addressing here, is not his audience but his scene partner. The audience is sitting in the house. The passage sounds remarkably like the prologue to *Hamlet*, if it had one, and the sole purpose of a prologue is to enjoin the audience's attention by offering no more than a tiny piece of the story, while promising more to come. The exchange of that promise for the audience's confidence that something more is yet to come, a confidence that must persist for as long as that something is withheld, is the essence of what is dramatic. Neither the audience

2 *Hamlet* 5.2.321-9 (The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Greenblatt).

nor the performer can come first in this relationship; it must be fully collaborative, for the promise and the attention are each supplied on condition of the other's being fully tendered. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard's Player says to the hapless duo: "I recognized you at once—as fellow artists. For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, the same side of two coins." An audience is "the single assumption which makes [the Player's] existence viable," without which the Player might as well be "pouring [himself] down a bottomless well."³ Conversely, without a performer to receive their attention, an audience ceases to be and reverts to a incidental gathering of humans.

Whereas the dramatic mode necessitates committed collaboration among a multitude (where as few as two persons can be a multitude), the poetic depends on the solitary individual's commitment to his own experience of the text. Once again, a performer lacking an audience is not therefore a poet; he is merely human. Transformation from merely human to either performer or poet requires a full commitment to the undertaking as performer or as poet. It is easy to forget the difference because "the dramatic" is frequently used as a metaphor to describe what is poetic; Robert Frost wrote that

A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of the page for the ear of the imagination.⁴

Here, the dramatic is a relationship between a speaking entity—the "speaking tone of the page" or text—and a listening entity—"the ear of the imagination." The speaking tone, like the "ear of the imagination," is supplied by a reader in the encounter with the text. Without the act of reading to imbue them, poems are nothing but marks on a page. The poet Robert Pinsky makes a related point:

Poetry . . . has roots in the moment when a voice makes us alert to the presence of another or others. It has affinities with all the ways a solitary voice, actual or virtual, imitates the presence of others. Yet as a form of art it is deeply embedded in the single human voice, in *the solitary state that hears the other and sometimes recreates that other*. Poetry is a vocal imagining, ultimately social but essentially individual and inward.⁵

3 Tom Stoppard. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

4 Robert Frost. "Preface to *A Way Out*." *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. New York: Library of America, 1995.

5 Robert Pinsky. *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2002.

The phrase I want to highlight--*the solitary state that hears the other and sometimes recreates that other*—describes a state achieved by reading. Poets, I think—and I have heard several poets say so, ironically, at public readings—write for no audience but themselves, but the act of creating verbal utterance conjures a listener where none exist otherwise.

Horatio challenges us to consider the poetic and the dramatic as different modes employed by artists in pursuit of understanding, each with its different means, methods, and outcomes, but to do so without ascribing any greater value or efficacy to the one or the other. There is no value comparison between a poem and a play on the grounds of mode; I'm not certain where value can be measured except comparatively, on a personal basis, with regards to pleasure and understanding afforded by the experience of one work as to another.

Consider where *Horatio* begins. I mean the question in two ways: literally, what happens in the opening lines? but also, what incited Plutzik to write the poem? The latter cannot often be answered of poems, but sometimes it can at least in part, when as in this case the project invokes another piece of literature with which we are familiar. *Horatio* is one of countless works made throughout the last four centuries that adapt a Shakespearean source. Shakespeare scholar Kenneth Gross offers a generous survey of such works in his essay “Telling Stories: A Note on *Horatio*,” and he describes these works as having “sought both a ground and an opening in the original plays.”⁶ In Hamlet's dying request, Plutzik found a knot of questions, such as: How would Horatio go about the task? where would he begin? what troubles might he encounter on the way? who are “the unsatisfied?” what satisfaction do they seek, and to that end, what have they come up with on their own? how would Horatio confront them?—and many more questions besides, but ultimately: What did Hamlet's request mean? Answers to these questions would not be found in the text of *Hamlet*, which is why, for Plutzik, they constitute an opening in Gross's terms. The play is the ground, or background, of the search: its world and material, but not its limitation. The reader of *Horatio* must be familiar with *Hamlet*; a knowledge of Shakespeare's play as history is part of the problem out of which *Horatio* takes its course. This is suggested in an undated set of notes to a lecture reading that Plutzik gave sometime before he finished the poem, where he claims that he is “Indeed using *Hamlet* as if it were historical fact.”⁷

So in terms of literary context, *Horatio* begins at the end of *Hamlet*. In terms of its own

6 Kenneth Gross. “Telling Stories: A Note on *Horatio*” (Unpublished). p. 6

7 Needs Citation (Plutzik Papers)

narrative, the poem begins at the end of its narrator's life: "It is fifty years since the prince Hamlet died,"⁸ reads the first line. Further, such as the poem is in a sense an account of Horatio's life since Hamlet's death, an account which we may say parallels the life, we can suppose that the poem begins at its own ending. Horatio's lifelong quest has failed: "A friend one time gave me a task to do / and I did not do it,"⁹ he says near the end of the poem, and because of this failure he sets out on another, entirely different quest, an investigation of self. Some of those questions that motivated Plutzik to write the poem pester Horatio also; he is not here making another attempt to tell the story of Hamlet. Rather, he is trying to understand why he has failed, and asking this question causes him to reconsider what Hamlet meant by the request. He entertains the morbid possibility whether Hamlet, confronted with the catastrophic scene for which he was largely responsible, merely wished to prevent yet another innocent death, and that of a loyal friend, on his account: "Ah, dear friend," says Horatio,

I see the trick
That love put in your soul in your agony
In that last instant as the red sands ran.
The poison was at my hand; you sensed my purpose.
And when I spoke, you knew my resolution
Was staunch for dying. There was but one appeal
Could stay my will: a final cry for succor,
That I be guardian of your honor and name.¹⁰

Horatio reasons that Hamlet would never wittingly consign Horatio to live on for his (Hamlet's) sake when Hamlet himself could not live; the good prince would never "condemn a friend to the hateful prison he fled."¹¹ Thus he finds an intentional paradox in the charge: seeing that Horatio wished in a fit of passion to die for him, Hamlet instead urged Horatio to continue life *for him*, and that this was a trick, played in order to save Horatio, that Hamlet actually hoped his friend would see through in time—time enough for Horatio's grief to subside, so that he may discover life for himself, instead of dying young for another, needlessly.

Horatio, of course, conjures all of this. He has no way to know what Hamlet really meant. But it is a fiction he can believe in, and therefore is a potentially liberating discovery. On the one hand it seems Horatio's tragedy that his life has largely passed before he comes to this

8 Hyam Plutzik. *Horatio. The Collected Poems*. Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, 1987. p. 125

9 Ibid. p. 190

10 Ibid. p. 191

11 Ibid. p. 192

realization; an old man, he can no longer even make the circuit of his lands. He has lived his life in a needless, futile pursuit, and although now he might be free to live more purposely for himself, there is little life left for him to do so. Yet on the other hand, it is never too late; even a moment of purposefulness outweighs a lifetime of wasted energy, and the joyful relief of this understanding is felt in the poem's final lines:

The parkland that stretched from the wall was gracious with moonlight
 With occasional great trees that threw long shadows,
 For the moon was low in heaven. Who can explain
 From what fugitive grace the heart will take its ease?
 Or find the shy spring from which joy flows?
 Bird, though my ears were at first closed to your mercy,
 The night was doubtless already sweetened by your voice,
 For your first note carried a mid-note's richness—
 A violet poised on the knowledge of its own ascension.
 You sang for a time in the shadows at the head of the stairs
 As if to yourself, and fluttered over the stage
 To a new perch in the dark and sang there,
 And traversing the moon's edge flew to the height
 And sang, while a great stag came out of the woods,
 Broad-antlered, approaching slowly on the moonlit field,
 And looked around him like a king and re-entered the dark.
 Bird, you brushed my sleeve as I came to the stair.¹²

It may seem odd that, while I proposed to discuss the beginning of the poem, I have mostly been talking about the end, but in the case of *Horatio* it is necessary to consider both together. By beginning with its narrator's declaration of the long passage of time, the poem, which is a personal account of things past, reaches toward its ending; likewise the ending of the poem gestures back to its opening.

The Prologue recalls a scene between Horatio and Bernardo that occurs the night immediately after the bloody events at the end of *Hamlet*. It implies a setting-out: “And you, Horatio,” Bernardo asks, “What will you do?’ / ‘Fulfill a dead man's final wish,’”¹³ Horatio replies. A doubling occurs on multiple levels: first, there are two Horatios, the young and the old, and both are setting out, albeit on two different quests. Bernardo, speaking of Hamlet in the Prologue to the young Horatio, is also (unbeknownst to him) speaking of the old Horatio here:

¹² Ibid. p. 211

¹³ Ibid. p. 126

“At last, after a sum of meaningless days,
 He took up the gage, and now, the new ghost,
 He finds that the first question answered is—self.”¹⁴

The poem—that is, Horatio's personal account—is an investigation of self through retrospective analysis of things seen, heard, and done. “I myself am my own mystery,”¹⁵ declares Horatio, bringing to mind a note of Milton's Satan struggling for his own measure of self-knowledge in *Paradise Lost*. Bernardo's reappearance at the end of the final section ensures this link with the poem's opening: the ancient Horatio takes a break from his writing to step out into the night air on the castle wall where he sees—“Bernardo! / You stand there while we wait a midnight bell— / And there, when we speak of the dreadful deeds of a day!”¹⁶ In this line, especially the use of present tense in “we speak,” the poem is able to leap back in time even as it continues its forward march: Like the pseudo-prologue at the end of *Hamlet*, in its last lines *Horatio* invites us to reread, to make the story over again, which will at once be a move forward in time through the new telling and backward in time to the beginning of the story.

Between this overlapping opening and closing scene is the account of Horatio's encounters, all of which are potentially dramatic, but he fails to participate in them according to the needs of drama. That is, he fails to collaborate with his potential audiences toward the creation of a shared fiction, because instead he tries to foist upon them his version of the historical truth. I will say more about these failed efforts in a moment. Broadly speaking, the pattern is the same in each instance. No amount of persuasion can make an audience give their attention when they are not willing to surrender their autonomy to the multitude; neither can a performer achieve any utterance of lasting impact if he does not cater to the interests of his audience. Failing this, Horatio fails as a dramatist all his life, but in the end he finds a different success as a poet.

The poetic mode and the dramatic mode are each the asking of a question or a number of questions. Some questions are answered before others, no matter what order they are asked in. It is only at the end of his life, facing death, that Horatio begins his account of his failed enterprise: his account gives no satisfaction to assuage his grief of failure, but he learns a few things about himself. And this is of all the value in the world to Plutzik as poet as it is to us as readers. While we can feel his tragedy because we sympathize with his grief over the loss of his friend, which

14 Ibid. p. 126

15 Ibid. p. 190

16 Ibid. p. 211

complicates the matter, what do we care that Horatio failed in a pursuit that we, at least, realize is impossible? This is the value of fiction, that it can answer a question, any question, and allow us to move forward even while other questions remain unanswered. It makes little difference in what specific direction we move, so long as it is forward.

As a young man setting out to establish the true story of Hamlet's role in the bloody events at Elsinore, Horatio unconditionally believes in the crisp reality of a phantom. The truth of Hamlet as he has it is, to the rest of the world, a jewel irrecoverably lost. So married to this nonexistent jewel, Horatio spends his life pouring himself down a bottomless well, just such an audience-less player as Stoppard's fears to become. Horatio, however, doesn't see that the jewel is lost; believing that he holds it tight in his fist, he would hold it up for the world to see and know, not realizing that what they see is the empty hand of a raving, obsessed old man.

Because they cannot see Horatio's version of Hamlet, the other figures in the poem—the ostler, Faustus, the Parisian Count and Countess, Carlus—each conjure their own, and each such a one as suits and is a product of the respective sphere in which these characters thrive. Thus, one after another, Horatio contends with the Hamlets of vulgar hearsay, of academic ostentation, of high-society intrigue, and of political muscling. Each in their sphere, these Hamlets serve their authors' purposes that are limited to that sphere. For the ostler, Hamlet's is a racy tale fit for travelers' entertainment, which is always mixed with his business efforts. Faustus finds gleaming pedagogical prizes waiting to be dug out of the story's objects as symbols. The sultry Countess looks through the tale to see a lusty enticement not in the dead prince but the living Horatio. Carlus, the king's advisor, sees only a mad regicide in the prince, and an annoying political liability in the now-old Horatio's doggedness to vindicate him.

Horatio's desire is to obliterate these (as he sees them) false Hamlets and replace them all with one, the true Hamlet, to exist forever in all worlds. This is impossible because if, for example, Horatio and the ostler were to share a common view of Hamlet, it would have to accord with both of their worlds, in other words their worlds would have to become one, to some extent; the only way for them to accomplish this would be to both step out of their own respective existing world and together make a new one. This is what happens in the theatre: performers and audience alike leave their known and separate worlds behind to enter into a shared space where together they undergo a drastic transformation, an accomplishment which requires the willing participation and extreme effort of both parties. Not only is Horatio failing to elicit that participation from his interlocutors, he is unwilling to make that effort himself.

In “Faustus,” the second section of the first part (“What a Wounded Name”), Faustus offers a useful piece of wisdom, before his pedagogical furor becomes overbearing and then ridiculous in one of Plutzik's characteristically flavorful metaphors, mixing humor with the darker tones of the scene: “As I looked at him, I frankly thought I saw / A cuttlefish waving a thousand arms”¹⁷. This is the doctor of German legend who receives treatment most famously in the plays of Marlowe and Goethe. According to the legend, Faustus sells his soul to Mephistopheles in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. His damnation somewhat undermines the doctor's credibility in Horatio's mind. Nevertheless, his words will always have some merit to us as readers, as they must as well for Horatio. Faustus muses on the famous “to be or not to be:”

'To be' or 'to *become*'—do you get the meaning?
 What is this Not-To-Be (the obverse of Being)
 But only Becoming, a synonym for this life,
 Fluid, changing, the thoughts of a child or a woman—
 While Being's eternal, synonymous with Not-Being
 In the vulgar sense, that is, with Death?

And further:

If Being and Becoming are the horns
 Of our friend's [i.e. Hamlet's] dilemma—a lovely cuckoldry—
 And, as I said, Becoming means this life,
 Profuse in its vanity and brief as grass,
 Then Being must imply some higher state.
 Therefore the alternative lies not
 As between Being—life—or Becoming—death—
 But rather as between the higher life,
 The philosophic, where man takes on eternity,
 Is one with Idea; and the opposite:
 This petty life of circumstance—dead kings,
 Tedious councilors and lecherous queens
 And ghosts in the cellarage. We know the choice
 Lord Hamlet made.”¹⁸

That choice was for Becoming: in Shakespeare's play, the prince's entire universe is “the petty life of circumstance,” and two dead kings, his father and his uncle (the one is dead, the other he wants dead), the lodestone and engine of his action. Horatio, on the other hand, would make the

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 140

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 137-38

other choice for Hamlet: he wants Hamlet to Be as an interminable Idea. But Horatio fails to make a necessary separation. He wants the Idea to be indistinguishable from the man. Unfortunately, men are “brief as grass,” they die; ideas, on the other hand, have their being in imagination, and can be eternally remade, with the right effort.

Horatio's devotion to historical truth manifests in his pursuit of a bodied idea, which is a contradiction in terms. He may finally concede this at the end of the poem, which is at once a tragic resignation and a liberating discovery. What we as readers of both *Horatio* and *Hamlet* may surmise is that while the historical truth of Hamlet is neither possible nor desirable, there is rather an imaginative truth in Hamlet that we can and do perpetuate, have done so for centuries, and will continue to do. Hamlet the man is, in fact, a fiction, and in fiction's purpose may lie whatever people hope to find when they speak of truth. The cardinal rule of fictions is that in order to be known and used they must be repeatedly remade: the poem reread, the play performed again in a different city by different actors for a different audience. Thus the pursuit of imaginative truth drives us to action, and whether we choose poetry or prose or drama or science does not matter; what matters is attention to the questions we are asking. So we write, read, conduct our research, and create institutions that make these pursuits possible, to give them arenas, to support the lonely quester after a jewel that won't exist unless he create it. Hyam Plutzik agreed: in his application for a Ford Foundation grant in (YEAR?), he wrote: “Once . . . I thought of poetry as being in some sense antagonistic to science and philosophy. . . . Now I see that though the three disciplines do have exclusive methods, and in part exclusive areas, they actually cover the same ground. The matter of poetry, the matter of science, and the matter of philosophy are complementary facets of the same world. To blur one of them is to spoil the jewel.”¹⁹

19 Ibid. p. xii. (Quoted in the foreword by Anthony Hecht.)