

Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio* as Postwar Text: Dream-Work, Verse Drama, Underground Myth

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As we walked toward the dock where the ship lay, the ominous murmur of the crowd followed us. As far off as our eyes could see, stretched this vast mass of life, surging against the wall of soldiers that kept open our path. Hate was in the air. In front of us walked the Governor and the Committee of Three. They were side by side, but they did not talk to each other, for words were now futile.... (66)

So Hyam Plutzik, writing as "Anaximander Powell," begins *The Outcasts of Venus*, his 1952 science-fiction adventure novel. Just as Earth and Venus move toward open warfare, a handful of Earth's citizens have negotiated a safe passage out of Venus on a rocketship. What follows is not unexpected in an adventure tale. The rocket is sabotaged, characters are tested against a hostile landscape, deals are struck with partisans who oppose the officials in power, and there is even a nail-biting race toward the protective zone that encircles Earth while pursued by enemy fire. But in all this adventure, Plutzik's central characters never lose sight of the importance of their mission. They never act with the idea of just saving themselves, but always with the necessity of delivering the "outcasts" of the title, the rocket's passengers, out of alien territory and into safe hands on Earth. Especially when Plutzik writes with disarming bluntness that "Hate was in the air," his opening chapter recalls the rescue missions of the 1930s in which group after group of Europeans — Jews, but also left-wing intellectuals and other "undesirables" like homosexuals — eagerly sought passage to America. Too few of those ships, as history reveals, ever found a safe port. But in *The Outcasts of Venus*, civilians caught between warring factions will *not* be abandoned: in this novel of the future, the errors of the past will be rectified.

This "fantasy" text was not the only piece of 1950s-era writing that deliberately recollected contemporary history and politics, but only in the last few years have scholars begun to question the long-standing view that most postwar writers deliberately chose to disengage themselves from political and historical contexts. In 1954, writing in the *Kenyon Review*, Associate Editor Philip Blair Rice set out to characterize a generation "formed successively by depression, war of nerves, war, cold war, the little war and now again cold war." He concluded

that "a generation that has survived all these things" would produce "a literature that cultivates the simplicities of daily life, as a relief from these things" (437). Editors in powerful positions could make their predictions come true by filling their pages with highly-formalized short lyrics, thereby creating the circumstances in which it could seem that poets in the 1950s now took the same pleasure in inserting proper rhymes in their Petrarchan sonnets as they took in planting daffodils in their backyards.

Among the number of poets who fell outside Rice's influential characterization — and as a result, failed to attract the notice they deserved in their own time — Plutzik was a writer who, precisely because he had lived through and participated in the traumatic events listed by Rice, could hardly see poetry as a personal refuge from upheaval. Writing as an urbane observer, in the style of the cosmopolite with a myriad of interests, he designed a poetry that aimed to compress thought and dramatize emotion. He might well have chosen a career as an essayist, or an analytic thinker, or even a pundit, for the material that held his interest always slanted toward the topical. But why resort to so lumbering a form as the analytic prose of an essay when so efficient and emotional a form existed as the lyric? "For T.S.E. Only," for example, from Plutzik's second collection *Apples from Shinar* (1959), allows us to consider the sorrow that Plutzik bears as he contemplates T. S. Eliot's inability to acknowledge the anti-Semitic sentiments that he so heedlessly displayed in his earlier poetry. Nothing else could convey the weight of that sorrow as directly as the refrain that ends each of Plutzik's stanzas: "let us weep together for our exile" (28-29). At the same time as the poem confronts a social problem, it strikingly personalizes it. "For T.S.E. Only" is at once polemic, personal memoir, and elegy. In its breadth, it is typical of Plutzik at his most ambitious.

1

Just as it would be wrong to describe "For T. S. E. Only" as if it were no more than a footnote to literary history, so it would be incorrect to discuss *Horatio* as if it were primarily an ingenious commentary on *Hamlet*, an intellectual entertainment that took up where Shakespeare left off. As a sequel to Shakespeare's play, *Horatio* depends, of course, on inviting our return to the violent series of events that culminated in that Elizabethan drama. But sequels can be, as Marjorie Garber has recently reminded us, not a simple return to a previous work but something more: a compulsive revisitation driven by a desire to reconsider—even to correct, adjust, and

reshape events. The sequel can dramatize the need to get right or come to terms with that which would otherwise exist as a gap or an omission. Garber goes so far as to connect sequel-writing with Freud's view, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of the dream as the product of the sleeper's compulsive return to a moment of trauma. The dynamic of the dream springs from its readiness to cope with that which remains unprocessed, left over as unfinished emotional work, to rearrange "the dream-thoughts into an intelligible and apparently consistent scenario that 'makes sense'" (75).

What is notable about Plutzik's *Horatio*, though, is how often Horatio's long struggle to "make sense" falls short. The significance of that traumatic moment in which Hamlet dies, for Horatio, remains open. The more that death is compulsively revisited, the more it seems to expose the limitations in any of the languages for understanding it. And of course the most overt dynamic in Plutzik's poem is the challenge it continually mounts against the "official version" of narratives. But it is also a challenge that has emotional consequences for those living through the postwar years, all of whom had their own brush with history—as Plutzik did himself, commissioned in 1943 as a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force and assigned to England as an Ordnance Officer. Horatio's obsessions with comprehending the meaning that the past should carry into the present—with transmitting accurately the moral weight of actions necessarily taken in haste—is an effort that was, for Plutzik's own generation, an unavoidable consequence of the war. Wartime adventures came too rapidly and too variously to be understood with anything like completeness at the time they were occurring. What was needed was time that could be devoted to mulling over what had happened and how those events had changed their participants, and what significance it all might have had. Several of the most powerful poems in *Apples from Shinar* approach wartime memories only indirectly, as if they were efforts to contain a reality that was still unbearable: "The Old War" accepts only a degree of actuality when it acknowledges the death of "Ten good men" by transforming the airplane into an "iron sparrow" and describing its crash as a return "Home again to the barley-mother" (1959 10). The long gestation period for *Horatio*—the opening lines of the poem were written in 1945, but the whole was not published until 1961—is in accordance with the very process at the center of the poem.

Certainly that experience of struggle is most evident in part three of *Horatio*, in the five internal monologues in which an aged Horatio wrestles with his traumatic past. Always the loyal courtier, Horatio at seventy understands he has served ten kings in the decades that have elapsed

since Hamlet's death. Yet his achievements are still overshadowed by his overwhelming sense of loss. The question to which he implicitly returns—why did he live and Hamlet die?—is the question posed by the survivor who cannot escape his feelings of guilt. Since the question is unanswerable, it always places the questioner at the brink of an abyss that reveals no pattern to existence and no order to reality. Over such an abyss, Plutzik has his Horatio spin out one speculation after another, and as he rehearses his own considerations, he also moves through the intellectual ruins of the postwar landscape where certainty has evaporated. "Once I at thought truth had a single face," Horatio admits in the first of these monologues. But that idea has been replaced by its opposite in his second monologue—a Hamlet of many selves and no center: "thing of earth, a lover of milkmaids," "the abstract man," "a histrion— / Or worse, a damnable melodramatist," one who loved to play "The part of a madman," even one who loved "To manage the whole troupe." But then this concept of multiple selves is subjected to fierce scrutiny in the third monologue. Here Horatio is unnerved by Hamlet's alternate image, that shadowy and violent "Ambleth" who circulates in the mythic tales of shepherds (in Part Two of the long poem). Startled to recognize a certain kind of accuracy that emerged from stories that he should have been able to dismiss as fantastic, he confesses "A thing that flew / From the dark tongue of the old man has changed me."

As Horatio struggles with dark Hamlet, Plutzik seeds his thoughts with images that resonate for his contemporaries. Wondering if a prophetic vision is buried in the fragments of one of the Ambleth myths, Horatio envisions "A battle that flickers up over the world / As a field of grass takes fire or a dry wood / Bursts into flame." This devastation has unmistakable overtones in the 1950s, for it "touches the farthest atom with its ripples." Parallels in other passages are no less disturbing. Where is the hand of God when the promises he has made to his children seem so distant? Where do we locate the voice that narrates the version of the dark Hamlet—is it in the rule of the mob, "the final brutish mouth / That echoes another mouth," or is it a voice whose "words are whispered by the earth itself" and thus may come from within us?

Yet the self-awareness Horatio struggles to maintain in his third monologue collapses in the crisis of the fourth monologue, a self-conscious examination of self-consciousness. The age is dominated by mirrors and clocks: space is reduced to narcissistic attention and time is reduced to metered moments. When Horatio, in the final monologue and in the last stages of his exhausting meditation, rises and walks out on a parapet, we are dramatically reminded of an

inaugural moment decades earlier. Once again we are soldiers on night patrol at the castle where Shakespeare set the stage for the opening of *Hamlet*. Horatio's visionary glimpse of the powerful stag that emerges from woods, steps into the moonlight, and looks around "like a king" before he re-enters the dark becomes that moment of assurance that Horatio deserves. It is not a ghost, unsettled by despair, which appears to Horatio, but a figure of immense power, as if summoned to attend to the first notes of the singing bird. What makes this conclusion so powerful is its dramatic staging, the sensation of time looping back and providing not simply the illusion of return to a past but an overlay of past with present, as if past moments had now been incorporated into a continuum. As a moment of healing, this is not much after a lifetime of struggle. But it may be all that is possible. And it may be enough for the moment.

2

The drama of this ending recalls just how often Plutzik has shaped *Horatio* so that it depends upon staging moments of confrontation. Although this book presents itself as poetry—everyone speaks in blank verse lines—it is no less clearly a dramatic text. In this respect, *Horatio* takes its place among other works in an informal literary movement that was unique to postwar literary history—the pursuit of verse drama as a form of popular poetry. T. S. Eliot would have been a most conspicuous example of success in this area, for *The Cocktail Party* had opened on Broadway in 1949, followed in 1954 by *The Confidential Clerk*. But Eliot was no isolated example. Reviewing the plays of Christopher Fry for *Poetry* in 1951, Monroe Spears opened with the blanket statement: "Verse drama seems now the one hope of regaining any large audience for poetry" (28).

In the late 1940s and through the 1950s, *Poetry* was tireless in promoting verse drama, regularly announcing in the "News Notes" at the back of each issue the forthcoming productions of the Poets' Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well as similar operations in Chicago and New York. But the audience for these plays was not limited to the handful of theatergoers who quickly filled their tiny production spaces. Every prestigious journal, throughout the 1950s, published verse drama. Richard Eberhart's short one-act plays could be sampled in *Poetry* for March 1951 ("The Apparation") or in *New World Writing* 3 in May 1953 ("The Visionary Farms") or the *Sewanee Review* for Winter 1954 ("Preamble II"). What brought W. S. Merwin home to America in 1956 after living abroad for nearly a decade was a Ford Foundation grant

that enabled the Cambridge Poets' Theater to produce his verse drama *Favor Island* (it would be published in *New World Writing* 12, November 1957). And poets were not the only ones who conceived a future for verse drama. When the papers read at the 1949 English Institute Conference (held that year at Columbia University) were collected, three of the seven were devoted to poetic drama, including the first appearance of a seminal essay by Francis Fergusson that argued that the "poetry" in verse drama did not depend upon such merely decorative additions as passionate speech or elevated diction (Caffrey 50).

Verse drama, in short, was precisely where poetry in the 1950s sought to recapture a central role in shaping cultural discussion. As Archibald MacLeish remarked in his Foreword to the Harvard University Press publication of his 1952 verse drama, *This Music Crept By Me Upon the Waters*, such writing resembled the radio drama of the 1930s in that it offered the promise of a "true theatre for poets; a theatre in which the imaginative ear, not the pedantic eye, would provide the audience; a theatre in which cadence would be heard and image would be confronted and the inwardness of human action might appear: a theatre also in which poetry could regain what it cannot long exist without—a public" (n.p.). Certainly the opening four poems in Part One of *Horatio* seem designed, like almost nothing else in Plutzik's writing, to catch the attention of a wide public. As a cosmopolitan poet, Plutzik could be at times fearless in his willingness to write as an intellectual. He cites a particular equation as a subtitle to his poem "An Equation." The title of his second book, among other things, puns on esoteric geography: Shinar is ancient Sumer, associated with Babylonia, whose alluvial plain was known as Edin. He ends "For T.S.E. Only"—already an insider's text with the initials in its title—in words in French that are not just a quote from the end of Charles Baudelaire's opening poem to *Les Fleurs du Mal* but words that Eliot fashioned into an instrumental moment in *The Waste Land*. Although the first four poems in *Horatio* hardly shrink from intellectual allusions (Hamlet's tutor, for one thing, turns out to be Doctor Faustus), they also delight and entertain with recognizable character types. Fittingly, George P. Elliott elected to reprint these opening poems in his *Fifteen Modern American Poets* (1955), an anthology aiming for wide distribution in colleges.

In his opening poems, Plutzik sketches types whom he can subject to satirical portrayal. The gossiping ostler who is always brushing up against students and others outside his working-class background is quick to produce a tabloid version of events that can entertain his clients. Dr. Faustus as the self-centered academic "star," no doubt someday to be celebrated by an adoring

student, is ready to construct an explanatory framework that can demonstrate his facility with the most current technical jargon. A Countess and her Count display the shallowness of a court society that delights in intrigue. And a heavy-handed Prime Minister draws on the authority of the state to bully Horatio ineptly through a series of crude threats. As amusing as these portrayals are, they never quite fall into just stereotypes that lend themselves to simple dismissal in part because Plutzik has chosen to work with social identities that were particularly problematic in the years after World War II. The ostler's tabloid-version of events recalls the era's panic over mass culture, the sense that large-scale cultural narratives were being crudely repackaged. After all, new media such as television were at once both too simple and too clumsy to react with much subtlety to any events. And Plutzik's version of the star professor points to an academy that appeared to some as being under siege by the G.I. Bill, beleaguered by ex-soldiers and ex-sailors. Administrators had expected these first-generation college students to want practical classes that trained them for a vocation, and they were caught short when so many preferred a Liberal Arts curriculum, choosing the contemplative over the acquisitive life. Would these students distinguish between the charlatan-professor and the authentic-professor? By casting *the Doctor Faustus* in the role of academic superstar, Plutzik suggests that students need cultural capital—the kind of background knowledge that rests on reading plays by Christopher Marlowe—as a shield against the attractions of mere personality. In a similar maneuver, the dialogue exchanged by the Count and Countess resonates with a confidence that, in a fashion sketched by Henry James, borders on the predatory. The immense popularity of James as a novelist in the postwar years is a testament to America's self-conscious new role as a partner with Europe in the advancement of "civilization." How can America lead the civilized world and yet retain the potency of its stubbornness and innocence? Those components, so inextricably tangled in the figure of Daisy Miller, for example, can be dangerous in the wrong context — as Daisy fatally failed to realize. When Horatio casts his eye over the figures gathered at the party and finds that a "sudden, terrible insight / Illumined their locked hearts," he shrinks back in horror. He is only saved from the grave glance and whispering seduction of the Countess by the accidental buffoonery of Monsieur de Pattes. And a similar propensity toward manipulation, and even undercover activity, is of course most strikingly borne out in the figure of Carlus, the Prime Minister who might have seemed the most absurd of all the types in this section had not the convictions that he expresses with such paranoid intensity so closely resembled those of other

authoritarian types who worked behind the scenes, who mocked "schoolmen's logic," and who feared what would happen when "you tempt the populace / With impossible, dangerous dreams." As much as Horatio, at the very close, paces "in easy talk" with the King, it still seems as if considerable power has been localized in the obsessive fears of Carlus.

Plutzik demonstrates the wisdom in Fergusson's observation that what is "poetic" in poetic drama no longer depends upon infusion of impassioned language. His strategy instead is to compress into tight phrases the word-usage habits of his four social types so that the very phrases they speak indict them, whether it is the hostler who is desecrating the names of everyone from Aristotle to Ophelia or Doctor Faustus who is bedazzled by what he takes to be his own adroitness: "What is this Not-To-Be (the obverse of Being) / But only Becoming, a synonym for this life, / Fluid, changing ..." Or the breathless vamping of the Countess or the smug menace of Carlus. With such sketches, Plutzik is effectively playing to an academic audience that brings to his writing a familiarity with its literary predecessors even as he reaches beyond that small circle to a larger audience, broadly educated, concerned about social issues, and ready to perceive that links can be forged between the past and the present.

3

Especially after this parade of sophisticated social types in his opening poems, Plutzik's decision to turn in an opposite direction, to afford us a glimpse of something like an under-class or a laboring-class view, may well be this work's most brilliant turn—though it too is sharply engaged with the issues of its time. In an era when the New Criticism was in its ascendancy, the only serious counterweight to the ahistorical linguistic practice of the New Critics was myth criticism. The case for myth as an omnipresent underpinning for creative endeavors of all kind, but especially poetry, had been made with enormous élan by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948). (Plutzik indirectly acknowledges Graves in one of the poems from *Apples from Shinar*, "The Priest Ekranath," when the speaker notes that the mountain barbarians worship temple harlots whom they call "the White One or the White Lady" [20]). Graves quoted approvingly, in his first chapter, words passed on by Alun Lewis, the Australian poet who had been a victim of the Second World War. The "single poetic theme of Life and Death," Lewis had written, turned upon one question: "the question of what survives of the beloved" (8). Horatio's horrified reaction to the devaluing of Hamlet's reputation in the years after his death thus

suggests how completely the world can destroy the beloved, and Plutzik might well have seen Horatio's role as, in this mythic sense, a poetic one: to discover that which survives and to restore it to prominence.

An allegiance to "the mythic," for some readers such as Philip Wheelwright, became a crucial strategy for poets who hoped to tap into energies that the New Critical emphasis on the linguistic might dissipate. Indeed, the "aesthetic surface" of a work was important only as it offered a promising entrée to "mythic depths" (278-293). But others, like Leslie Fiedler, understood that identifying exactly what constituted "the mythic" was not only a problem but a problem that some poets regarded as compelling in itself. This was especially true for extended sequences. Writing in 1952, Fiedler identified some poets who "can ironically manipulate the shreds and patches of out-lived mythologies, fragments shored against our ruins." These figures (he cited Eliot, Joyce, Pound and Mann) were "writing finally not archetypal poetry, but poetry *about* archetypes, in which plot (anciently *mythos* itself) founds under the burden of overt explication" (272). But even this sophisticated description of myth in poetry fails to capture Plutzik's procedure, which takes an even further step. He wants to suggest, in the tales that the shepherds pass on, the active and ingenious struggles of those who live far from the centers of power. The narratives they produce, as fragments shored against what the shepherds perceive as their ruins, are ultimately revealing. They sharply register those moments in which, if only in a dreamy and fantastic way, the powerful are subverted, or thwarted, or even injured. These tales fantastically garble the events of *Hamlet* as we know them, even as they teasingly employ the names of the players (such as "Fang" for Claudius) such as they appeared in a probable source for Shakespeare, the fifth volume of Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), based on information in Saxo Grammaticus's twelfth-century manuscript, *Historia Danica* (Hubler 183). But that garbling is carefully, even lovingly, explored by Plutzik: it is not a source of error but a sign of adjustments that these tale-tellers make to account for their own relative powerlessness. What is "mythic" in these versions becomes, in Plutzik's handling, a remarkable form of social history, as if any example of folklore, though it may be regarded as an effort to tap into "universal" concepts, in reality reveals a local tradition that posits metaphoric solutions that can be analyzed for the grievances contained within them and that they strive to redress.

In the spirit of Graves, who delights in the multiplicity of myths that all strive to foster subtly different explanations, Plutzik produces one story then another and still another, further

adventures that carry on events into different strata, into different explanatory frameworks. The final variant on Ambleth suggests an imperfect understanding of the tenets of a Christianity whose symbols are still in the process of evolving. With such a sharply historicizing angle of vision, the mythic at once becomes not just a fragmentary tracing of a lost beloved, of a value that is half-forgotten, but a record of the struggle to comprehend one's place as a person in a vast and unsettling universe, where events larger than life threaten one's own sense of understanding.

In the final passage of Part Two, Horatio is unmoored by his brush with these tales. In their irreverence they are of course keenly subversive, intolerant to displays of power. Horatio himself is revealed as not well-equipped to comprehend the humanity in the shepherds' lives, and he is horrified by the round-the-fire conversation that greets his well-meaning attempt to explain that he is the original of the so-called "Honorio" who figured in the tales just told. This concluding scene to Part Two can be read as mocking the mob, exposing the underclass as incapable of understanding the subtle concepts that the dominant class so easily follows. After all, the shepherds quickly turn to chattering among themselves about small details, falling into low humor and easy jokes. But Plutzik arranged the final scenario so that we also appreciate the skepticism with which the shepherds greet Horatio's insistence that he was part of their story. They respond with undisguised hilarity, as if the old man had simply failed to appreciate that they had all been simply listening to stories together, sharing in the pleasure of answering riddles. And like warriors on a bivouac or enlisted men in the field, they turn away from large explanations and joke among themselves, carrying inventiveness along on a smaller scale, in a daily frame. Surely Plutzik is remembering his own days among the all-male society that wartime breeds, but he is also writing generously here, recording what it takes to get through a long night. It is a small moment that becomes surprisingly large, and a reminder of the remarkable range of Plutzik in his entire sequence—a work that is at once as literary and intellectual as any educated reader could desire but which subtly connects with the larger issues of its time. *Horatio* stands still today as a sympathetic response to events so traumatic that their full understanding may consume an entire lifetime.

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