

ANDREA CUCCHIARELLI (trans., comm.). *Orazio. L'esperienza delle cose (Epistole, Libro I)*. Letteratura universale Marsilio, 317, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2015, 182 pp., € 14.00 (pb). ISBN 978-88-317-2312-1.

The format of the book is compact (small pages), and its overall size stylishly slender (a mere 182 small pages). This is a series where hard choices have to be made, since all that has to be said has to be said with precision, and much else that might be said has to be merely hinted at, if not completely left aside. Andrea Cucchiarelli is a prominent scholar of Latin literature whose (by now rather long) history of writing insightfully on a wide range of topics in the field, but with a particular on-going interest in Horace, has made him one of the few scholars who is a 'must read' in whatever he writes, but especially when he writes on Horace. The book's title *L'esperienza delle cose*, though not intended meta-poetically, is appropriate to Cucchiarelli himself, because it describes not only the life experience that Horace draws upon in *Epistles* book 1 to develop a working philosophy of freedom and contentment for his own use (a didactic work, aiming at the poet's own self-improvement, taking the form of letters to others: not an all-encompassing 'On The Nature of Things', in other words, but one individual's experience of those things, and his coming to terms with them), it speaks also to Cucchiarelli's own long experience with the writer of these letters: Horace, the craftiest poet that Rome would ever produce. That long experience in dealing with Horace in all his many genres, meters, and moods, is on full display in the book. And it is that wide-ranging expertise and deep experience that makes this book rise well above the tight limits that have been put on it to keep it so appealingly readable and small.

The book begins with a series of introductory reflections on the poet's determination, announced in the opening lines of the first epistle, to detach himself from his old life as an overly busy and involved man and a famous performer, in order to pursue wisdom and achieve peace of mind. The connection between that desire for emotional detachment and renewal and the letter form itself is brilliantly explored in these pages, where it is argued that the epistolary genre is neatly matched to the self-detachment that the writer wants to achieve, since the letter form itself marks out a distance between the writer and his addressees. The addressees of these letters, mostly young Romans who are launching themselves into their careers at the time when these poems are written, are 'involved' in their busy worlds in ways that the poet once was, but no longer is. The distance that separates 'them' from 'him' is a physical space that these letters are made to cross. But it is also a gap that

separates Horace from his addressees in terms of time lived and experience gained; a gap that separates Horace from his old self, allowing him to see himself for what he once was, and to mark the silliness of all those 'things' that he once thought so all-important. From this seasoned perspective, the poet's old passions, as taken up with anew by his many friends (Lollius, Celsus, and even Tiberius), look silly and absurdly overblown. They are as child's play, and 'games' that the poet once enjoyed. And yet, as Cucchiarelli points out, the distance that Horace has gained from experience has not turned him into a misanthrope who can no longer sympathize. The advice that he offers in these poems is neither condescending nor doctrinaire. Doctrine, it turns out, is something that he no longer finds terribly useful. It is, rather, a load he can no longer bear, and that he does not wish to load on anyone else. Instead, the advice that he passes on to his addressees derives from his own experience, and it is well meant, as from an older friend to his young admirers, whom he wants to help out. No scolding elder or ideologue, the man who writes these letters is genuinely curious about the doings of his addressees, and he expresses concern for their well being. And he rather wishes that he were young again himself.

The short introductions to each poem are an extremely helpful guide not only to the themes, persons and structures of the poems, but to their larger function within the book. Cucchiarelli is especially good at charting swings in tone and shifts in attitude from poem to poem (as from poems 8 to 9 to 10), and he does not worry too much about who some of the more mysterious addressees actually 'are' since the poems themselves give us just enough information to assign them characters and functions within the poems where they appear. Many of the themes sounded in the book's excellent introduction are revisited in the commentary that follows. The line-by-line analysis is clear, concise, and helpful. But it also bursts with fresh surprises, often tucked away in well-travelled places where one least expects to find them. One such surprise came in my encounter with the note on the famous motto, *nil admirari*, in the first line of letter 6. In the poem's introduction, and in the explanatory notes on line 1, readers are alerted not only to the philosophical principles behind the phrase, with the usual cf.'s regarding Epicurean *ataraxia* and Stoic *apatheia*, but to the importance of the phrase's un-assignability: in the end, no particular school can claim ownership of *nil admirari*, since the idea that it conveys belongs to many schools where it takes many forms.

In developing this point, Cucchiarelli draws a connection between the phrase's negative formulation and the poet's determination, also negatively construed, to not commit himself to any particular philosophical creed (*nul-lius addictus iurare in verba magistri*, 1.1.14). He indicates that Horace in these poems has a habit of figuring his philosophical project in negative terms. That penchant for negative construal, though it is easily lost sight of

(and, in fact, I have never seen it pried into before) is extremely important. It suggests that the project of these poems is not about finding and taking on new ideas, but of jettisoning bulky and unhelpful ones. It is about not getting lost in the weeds of doctrinal elaboration. Having this pointed out changes the way one reads the book as a whole. With it, one realizes that philosophical learning is itself part of the problem that needs to be sorted through and solved by the book, as much as it is the solution to the poet's woes. Horace does not need more philosophy, he needs less of it! It is part of the load that he carries into these poems and that he is determined to lighten, paring down to what is useful in the present. In advising Numicius that *nil admirari* is just about the one and only thing that he needs to keep in mind for a happy life, the poet is demonstrating to his young addressee how he has pared things down to the bare minimum from the unwieldy bulk of learning (Epicurean, Stoic, Pythagorean, and so on) that stands behind the un-assignable phrase, and he is also pointing out how 'stunned amazement' is exactly wrong approach to take towards philosophical learning itself.

The loads that the poet seeks to shed in the course of the book are many, and they include the trappings and expectations of the life that Horace lived as a celebrity in the city, especially in the aftermath of the publication of his *Odes* (books 1-3). As seen through the jaded but healing retrospective of *Epistles* book 1, the poet's 'spectacular' success (noting the ludic and gladiatorial metaphors of the opening lines of 1.1) had brought him more toil and worry than happiness. His life as a sought-after celebrity had taken a toll: he had become overworked and overfed, prematurely grey, and rather fat. To lighten his load the poet must reconnect with some of the advice that he gave to others in his *Sermones*. Cucchiarelli's commentary is very attuned to these connections with Horace's earlier works. Already in "Return to Sender: Horace's *sermo* from the *Epistles* to the *Satires*," in G. Davis (ed.), *A Companion to Horace*, Malden: Blackwell, 2010: 291-318, Cucchiarelli treated readers to a preview of his commentary by reading book one of the *Epistles* as a sustained re-thinking of matters covered in the *Sermones*. That sensitivity to the multiple ways that the poet's earlier hexameter poems figure into, and are finished off by his letters to friends is one of the more important and enlightening features of the commentary. Cucchiarelli knows the *Sermones* very well, and it shows in nearly every page of the commentary (for a typically fine example see his note connecting *principibus placuisse viris* of 17.35 not only to 20.23 *me primis urbis belli placuisse domique*, but to *S.* 1.6.62-3 *magnum hoc ego duco / quod placui tibi*).

To shed the bulk of what weighs him down, Horace must, above all, find a way to say 'no' to Maecenas. After all, it is Maecenas who is behind Horace's political wherewithal, his celebrity, and his wealth. He is the one who has fed him fat. The seventh letter puts on vivid display the difficulties of saying 'no' to his illustrious patron, who now wants to load him with yet more

gifts, along with all the unseen obligations that go with those gifts. It does this most memorably through the parable of little fox that gets stuck in the grain bin, and the story of the once-happy Volteius Mena who is made miserable by the gifts that are given to him by his generous, but demanding patron, Philippus. In introducing the poem, Cucchiarelli points out that the letter presumes a 'summons' from Maecenas ('una sollecitazione') asking Horace to return to the city, and he points out not only that Maecenas was wont to apply significant pressure to his poets in order to get what he wanted (noting the *haud mollia iussa* of Virg. *G.* 3.41; it would have been nice to see this connected to the *non laeve iussa Philippi* in v. 52), but that, back in his younger days, Horace was willing to drop everything to respond to a last-minute summons from Maecenas. These larger memories of Horace's long experience with Maecenas, as remembered from *Sermones* 2.7.32-4, and helpfully pointed out by Cucchiarelli in his introductory remarks on *Epist.* 1.7, both contextualize and add further dimensions to the poet's response to his patron's summons. They help us see Horace acting determinedly, and tending to his own needs, in ways that he either could not, or would not before. In putting Maecenas off until the snow flies, Horace is not merely asking his patron for more time; he is asserting himself, speaking to Maecenas in forthright ways that he had never spoken to him before. He is speaking to his patron in ways that show just how far he has come. Put differently, the polite refusal of the poem's opening lines shows Horace in the act of shedding his load. In the end, his struggle in this poem is not with Maecenas (Maecenas had always been pushy, and he was used to getting what he wanted), it is with himself.

Surprises like the ones described above are many in the line-by-line commentary. Other notes that I found particularly helpful and insightful include the gloss on *Actia pugna* at 1.18.67, where the discussion turns from the grandiose *naumachiae* that were staged by the triumvirs and emperors to staged sea-battles of a more limited, 'domestic' kind, such as one sees fancifully pictured on a painted frieze from the remains of a Roman villa that once stood on the grounds of the Villa Farnesina (a stone's throw from Caesar's aquatic amphitheater in Trastevere), and that is now on display in the Museo Nazionale Romano. The commentary on 1.19, the last true 'epistle' of the book, is extremely helpful in that it shows how the first twenty lines of the poem concern issues of imitation as much as they do issues of poetic inspiration, and water versus wine. I think *temperat* in line 28 might have been helpfully connected to issues of mixing water and wine (it is a common wine-mixing metaphor in Horace, and elsewhere), but the note that follows on *pede mascula Sappho* in the same verse is an impressive and convincing exploration of the letter's most singularly difficult phrase, rightly connecting the ablative *pede* to *mascula*, in the sense of 'maschia nel piede' ('manly in her foot' or 'step,' i.e. she leaves deep pioneering tracks of her own for others

to follow). At first glance, the translation of *conviva tribulis* with 'il misero convitato della tribù' at 13.15 looks off the mark. But the note explicating the phrase makes clear that the adjective 'misero' is not only defensible, but necessary, and that it comes from insights brilliantly observed. Cucchiarelli explains that the man of humble means in this line is confused and out of his league: he does not know how the protocols of a formal dinner operate, and he has no servant to carry his shoes. The note shows a deep sensitivity towards all the cultural information and angst that is packed into the touching picture that Horace paints in the line. One sees a similar sensitivity towards rich meanings packed into tight spaces in the clever translation of *premunt* with 'asfissiano' ('asphyxiate') at 1.5.29. The translation combines the two basic senses of the verb (*OLD premere* 9 'crowd'/'press' and 26 'choke'/'squeeze the breath out of') that Horace has put to work in tandem to describe the 'choking' stench that wafts from a *triclinium* that is 'crowded' too tightly.

The poems that are the topic of this volume are packed with meanings that cannot possibly be explored in full. And yet they need to have their fullness acknowledged. Andrea Cucchiarelli has found a way to do this, saying all the most important things that need to be said, without getting lost in the weeds. Like Horace, he has mastered the art of jam-packed precision. Despite whatever popularity the book achieves as a prominent contribution to a compact popular series, it is, above all, a serious contribution to the scholarship of Latin literature. As good as you will find anywhere.

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