AN INTERPRETATION OF HORACE, SATIRES I. 3. 117–124

ad sit
regula, peccatis quae poenas irroget aequas,
ne scutica dignum horribili sectere flagello,
nam ut ferula caedas meritum maiora subire
verbena non vereor, cum dicas esse pares res
furta latrocinis, et magnis parva mineris
falce recisurum simili te, si tibi regnum
permittunt homines.

These lines contain a well-known crux, and, in order to square sense with syntax, all editions that I know, including one French and one German, construe ut caedas (120) substantively, as complementary to id or illud understood, which is then the direct object of non vereor, so that there is a sort of anacolouthon which excuses the syntax, and saves Horace from the charge of having used ut where he should have used ne. The passage is then translated, 'For of your beating with the cane one who has deserved heavier blows, of this I am not afraid ...'. But editors also point out that Horace is usually very careful about the idiom after verbs of fearing, cf. Sat. II. 1. 60, I. 4. 31, and this led Palmer to conjecture nunc for non in 121 with the meaning 'for as matters stand at present, I fear there is no chance of your merely caning ...' which saves the syntax and gives a sense consistent with the passage; but it is difficult to see why nunc should have become non, and non sounds right.

The purpose of this note is to suggest that we need make no excuses for the syntax, but should translate the Latin according to the regular usage of the idiom, and get a meaning not at all inconsistent with the context. Horace says we ought to have a standard which imposes fair penalties for misdemeanours, lest we should punish with the terrible scourge one who deserves only the whip, that is, lest we impose too severe a punishment. He then continues, 'For I am not afraid that you will fail to beat (ut—ne non) with the cane one who has deserved heavier blows, since you say ...' i.e. you will at least beat such an offender, even if with the milder instrument. The punishment is now too lenient, but the offender is at least punished, as he is bound to be under a system which regards all offences as equal, and is more prone to err on the side of severity.

It may be objected that this interpretation does not give as good an antithesis as the traditional one. I think this is only apparently so. Horace says, 'Let us have a standard, to avoid excessive punishment'. Then, turning to inadequate punishment, he says, according to the traditional view, 'You will never give this, because, in your view, all offences are equal, so you are bound to give severe punishment for them all'. According
to the interpretation put forward here he says, 'I am more concerned with the danger of excessive punishment than with its opposite because, with your stern views, you are bound at least to punish the culprit, even if inadequately'. I think Horace may also be thinking less about the contrast between excessive and inadequate punishment than about the gradation of the instruments flagellum, scutica, ferula. Juvenal (VI 479) mentions the three together, as Palmer points out.

If the traditional interpretation is to be retained, as giving the better sense, then I suggest Horace may have written nam ferula caedas, with omission of ne, on the analogy of cave, cura etc., and that ut may be a gloss.

The view given above takes the text as it is and interpretation as it might be. I have to thank Prof. Fordyce of Glasgow University for pointing out that it does not notice A. E. Housman’s proposal, not mentioned in standard texts including the O.C.T., to place a full stop at aequas and then transpose ne and nam ut, so that ut and ne have their proper meanings after non vereor. Through the kindness of Dr. Dilke, once of Rhodes University, I have been able to read a photostat of Housman’s article (J. Philol. xviii (1890) p. 8) and in it one finds the customary cogent argument, the well set-out case, so that one is tempted to say 'Eureka' and feel that these are perhaps the ipsissima verba Horati. I find three reasons for not doing so:

1. The transposition is a transposition, something bold and, in this case, fairly drastic, assuming as it does that all our MSS. repeat a mistake.

2. The resulting asyndeton flagella, ne does not seem to me in Horace's manner in such passages. Contrast, for instance, the two passages referred to above:

Sat. II. 1. 60

O puer, ut sis
vitalis metuo, et maiorum ne quis amicus
frigore te feriat.

and Sat. I. 4. 31.

ne quid
summa deperdat metuens aut ampli et reimet.

3. The passage seems to me to flow better as it stands. I admit this feeling could be due to familiarity; but I don’t think in this case it is so. Horace seems to me, with the mention of regula, to have moved away from the Stoics for a while, and to be thinking more of Aristotle’s mean, with its corresponding excess and deficit. Cf. for a similar thought, Sat. I. 1. 106:

est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines,
quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum.

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