DULCE ET DECORVM: HORACE ODES 3.2.13*)

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori; 
mors et fugacem persequitur virum 
nec parcit imbellis iuventae 
poplitibus timidoque tergo. (Hor. c. 3.2.13–16)

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori is one of Horace’s best known lines, and one of his least well understood. Its frequent appearance on war memorials has led to sardonic and bitter reactions from such as Wilfred Owen and Bertolt Brecht1), and modern scholars as well as poets find it difficult to accept that Horace could have claimed that it is in any sense enjoyable for a man to die fighting for his country. The most extensive scholarly account of this line has argued that such a death can only be pleasant in the sense of gaining the gratitude and admiration of fellow-countrymen2); more recently, one writer regards dulce et decorum as encapsulating the naive view of the young and eager Roman puer of the poem’s opening stanza rather than the attitude of the poem’s speaker3), while another ingeniously conjectures that Horace originally wrote dulci decorum est pro patria mori4), with the quality of sweetness comfortably transferred from death to the fatherland, a much more familiar notion5). The purpose of this note is to argue that both the traditional text and the natural sense of the line are correct, and that Horace may plausibly be credited with the thought that patriotic self-sacrifice gives pleasure to the sacrificing individual.

The two crucial and interconnected factors here are the deployment of parallel passages for the poet’s statement and close consideration of the context of the line. Standardly quoted by commentators is Tyrtaeus fr. 10 West 1–2:

τεθνάμεναι γὰρ καλὸν ἐνὶ προμάχοις περὶ ἀνδρὸς ἀγαθὸν περὶ ἡ πατρίδοι μαρνάμενον.

*) My thanks to Prof. R. G. M. Nisbet for valuable help and criticism, and to Prof. C. W. Müller for kindly drawing my attention to his article cited in n. 6 and the passage quoted in n. 8.

2) H. Hommel, RhM 111 (1968) 219–52.
5) The notion is as old as Homer: cf. Odyssey 9.34 ὎ς οὔδεν γλύκιν ἢ πατρίδος.
“For it is noble for a good man to die falling in the front ranks when fighting for his fatherland”.

But, as has been pointed out, this parallels the conventional thought *decorum est pro patria mori*, not the exceptional *dulce et decorum*: *καλὸν* cannot here imply pleasure as well as moral approval. Another line of Tyrtaeus talks of death in the context of patriotic war as *κῆρος . . . φίλας*, ‘dear destruction’ (fr. 11.6 West): while this offers some degree of parallel for *dulce*, it is the conjunction of *dulce et decorum* which causes the problem.

However, some aid may be afforded by a passage from a Greek novel written some two hundred years or so after the appearance of *Odes* I–III, and perhaps for that reason never before brought to bear in this context. At Achilles Tatius *Leucippe and Clitophon* 3.22.1 the slave Satyros is recounting to the novel’s hero Clitophon a daring trick by which he and Clitophon’s friend Menelaus managed to save the heroine Leucippe, and puts words into Menelaus’ mouth in the course of his tale:

ō δὲ χρηστὸς οὗτος, Ἄμα μὲν’, ἔφη, ‘τὸ ἔργον, ἀλλά ὑπὲρ φίλου, κἂν ἀποθανεῖν δεῆμη, καλὸς ὁ κίνδυνος, γλυκὺς ὁ θάνατος’

“And this worthy gentleman answered, ‘It is a large undertaking, but in the name of friendship, the risk is surely right, and even if we must die in the doing, such a death would be sweet’” (tr. Winkler).

Here is a passage like Horace’s where a self-sacrificing death is said to be both glorious and sweet for the sacrificer because of love for the death’s beneficiary, in this case a friend (Clitophon) rather than one’s country. The evaluative language is also noticeably similar to Horace’s: *καλὸς* matches *decorum* as many have already argued from Tyrtaeus (above), while *γλυκὺς* provides a crucial parallel for the problematic *dulce*. Leaving aside the question of whether Achilles Tatius could be echoing Horace directly, which seems rather unlikely, the passage surely shows that Horace’s notion is acceptable in at least one other ancient source: the statement in Achilles Tatius is clearly presented in the typically gnomic manner of the Greek novel as a principle for the reader to admire.

The sentiment of *Odes* 3.2.13 can thus be paralleled to some degree in ancient literature by a prospective *Liebestod* for a friend. Indeed, the fact that the supreme sacrifice may be pleasant if made for a friend seems a helpful notion in the context of this particular Horatian ode, for this is a poem which begins by urging the hardy youth of Rome to learn to treat the tough circumstances of patriotic war

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8) No scholar writing on Achilles Tatius has suggested that he anywhere echoes Roman poetry, though such imitations have been argued for in other Greek novelists – cf. R. L. Hunter, A Study of Daphnis and Chloe (Cambridge 1983), 76–7. Somewhat similar to the passage in Achilles are the words of Evadne at Euripides Suppl. 1006–7, ἥδιστος γὰρ τῷ θάνατος / συνθήνοσαι θήνοσμοι φίλας, “for the sweetest death is to die together with dear ones who are dying”, where the sweetness of death comes from dying *with* one’s dear ones rather than *for* them: the similarity, as Prof. Müller suggests to me, may indicate that Achilles’ source may lie in Greek drama.
precisely as a friend (1–3 angustam amice pauperiem pati / robustus acri militia puer / condiscat): the step from treating patriotic hardship as a friend to treating one’s country as a friend through patriotic service is not a dramatic one. Thus dulce et decorum est pro patria mori seems a natural sentiment in context: pro patria mori is here dulce because the patria is regarded as a dear one, for whose sake death may be pleasant to an individual. This is no quirky view, but derives from the loftiest strains of Roman morality, where patriotism was claimed to be the strongest personal bond, resembling in kind but overriding in strength the claims of both family and friends, and meriting the ultimate sacrifice when required. This comes out most clearly in Cicero De Off. 1.57: cari sunt parentes, cari liberi propinquii familiares, sed omnes omnium caritates patria una complexa est, pro qua quis bonus dubitet mortem oppetere, si ei sit profiturus?

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καὶ δοσια[ς] ἑτὸν διατάγας εἰς τὸν πενταετήριον τῶν μυστηρίων κόσμον,

οἶ {to}

to τῶν ἀναλομάτων καίρος τάν ποντευμέναν αὐτῶ φιλοδοξίαν καὶ εὖ-

σέβησαν ἐπεθεὶσεν.

οἶ {to} τε litteras seclusi: OTOTE lapis: ὦτ' ὦ τε Hodot: ὦ τὸτε Merkelbach

René Hodot, in his editio princeps of this text, segments the stone’s OTOTE as ὦτ' ὦ τε, arguing soundly that “καίρος, le sujet d’επεθεὶσεν, doit être accompagné de l’article, qui lui-même doit être précédé d’un subordinatif”, but is perturbed by the elision of ὦτε and the anacoluthon². In fact, Hodot preserves the text at too high a price, as does Merkelbach, whose reading ὦ τὸτε³, adopted by the SEG, leaves the clause without any syntactical connection to the rest of the sentence and strains the construction of τὸτε. ὦ τε gives passable grammar, with τε as a


²) Hodot 172–73.
³) Merkelbach 36.