

DVLCE ET DECORVM: HORACE ODES 3.2.13*)

*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori;
mors et fugacem persequitur virum
nec parcat 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 mori*⁴), 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 προμάχοισι πεσόντα
ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν περὶ ἧ πατρίδι μαρναμένον.

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1) Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*, in *Complete Poems*, ed. J. Stallworthy (London 1983). For Brecht's views cf. P. Witzmann, *Das Altertum* 14 (1968) 55–64.

2) H. Hommel, *RhM* 111 (1968) 219–52.

3) D. Lohmann in *Schola Anatolica : Freundesgabe für Hermann Steinthal*, ed. Kollegium und Verein der Freunde des Uhland-Gymnasiums Tübingen (Tübingen 1989), 336–72.

4) R. G. M. Nisbet, *Omnibus* 15 (March 1988) 16–17.

5) The notion is as old as Homer: cf. *Odyssey* 9.34 ὧς οὐδὲν γλύκιον ἤς 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*: καλόν cannot here imply pleasure as well as moral approval. Another line of Tyrtaeus talks of death in the context of patriotic war as κήρας . . . φίλας, ‘dear destruction’ (fr. 11.6 West)⁶: 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 Satyrus 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:

ὁ δὲ χρηστός οὗτος, ‘Μέγα μὲν’, ἔφη, ‘τὸ ἔργον, ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ φίλου, κἂν ἀποθανεῖν δεήσει, 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)⁷.

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: καλός 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 unlikely⁸), 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

6) Cf. C. W. Müller, *Gymnasium* 96 (1989) 322–4.

7) J. Winkler in B. P. Reardon (ed.), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (California 1989), 219.

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, ἡδιστος γὰρ τοῦ θάνατος / συνθνήσκειν θνήσκουσι φίλοις, “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 propinqui familiares, sed omnes omnium caritates patria una complexa est, pro qua quis bonus dubitet mortem oppetere, si ei sit profiturus?*

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