by Harry C. Rutledge

Classical Latin Poetry: An Art for Our Time

*tum canit, errantem Permessi ad flumina Gallum
Aonas in montis ut duxerit una sororum,
utque viro Phoebi chorus adsurrexerit omnis*

—Vergil, Sixth Eclogue

This essay is a broad discussion of the artistic climate of our times and of the possible meaning of classical Latin poetry for these times. The view presented is a broad one, for I have come to have an increasingly eclectic appreciation of literature and the whole "world of art," and to see that world as a unity. I hope to show my concern for the immediacy, the pertinence, of classical Latin poetry for our time. I want to discuss Roman poetry of the "Golden Age" as it both affects and is affected by our life today. Though I shall restrict myself to illustrations from the poetry of the late first century B.C., a similar presentation could be made of other classical literature. In order to see how Roman poetry is related to the artistic climate of the twentieth century, in particular to the present artistic climate of the United States, we need to examine the nature and the composition of this climate. Obviously, we cannot examine the present without a consideration of a number of its artistic and cultural antecedents. No discus-
sion of the American artistic climate would be complete without a consideration of our European connections.

To begin, let me suggest that the work most characteristic of the temper of this century is the novel by Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*. This complex work intertwines the history of the Devil-beset musician, Adrian Leverkühn, with the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. Employing that total awareness of history and adroitness of narrative that we admire so much in Vergil, Thomas Mann weaves together a picture of Germany in Adrian's lifetime (the first part of this century) with Germany during the Second World War. In addition, Thomas Mann depicts Leverkühn's development as a modern artist whose work resembles that of Arnold Schönberg. The climax of the story comes in the scene where Adrian has invited his friends to a private recital of his new oratorio *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus*. To the consternation and horror of the assembled party, Adrian proceeds to confess his past sins and his compact with Satan. The scene concludes with the following passage in which Adrian is speaking:

“But since my time is at an end, which aforetime I bought with my soul, I have summoned you to me before my end. . . . I beseech you hereupon, ye would hold me in kindly remembrance. . . . All this bespoke and beknown, will I now leave to play you a little out of the construction which I heard first from the lovely instrument of Satan and which in part the knowing children sang to me.”

He stood up, pale as death.

“This man,” in the stillness one heard the voice of Dr. Kranich, wheezing yet clearly articulate: “This man is mad. There has been for a long time no doubt of it, and it is most regrettable that in our circle the profession of alienist is not represented. I, as a numismatist, feel myself entirely incompetent in this situation.”
With that he too went away.

Leverkühn, surrounded by the women, Schildknapp, Helene, and myself, had sat down at the brown square piano and flattened the pages of the score with his right hand. We saw tears run down his cheeks and fall on the keyboard. . . . He spread out his arms, bending over the instrument and seeming to embrace it, when suddenly, as though smitten by a blow, he fell sidewise from his seat and to the floor.

The collapse of Adrian Leverkühn is dramatic and sensational. There are those readers who might find it extravagant. In fact, however, the fall of Adrian is just as logical and is prepared for as thoroughly as the fall of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*, Phaedra in *Hippolytus*, Pentheus in *The Bacchae*, or Dido in the fourth book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*. The scene is dramatic in the grand classic style, but though we could find further parallels in classical Greek literature, it is only in Roman poetry that we have in the Latin language the display of such a tragedy as that of Mann’s novel. Before I pursue, however, the significance of Roman poetry in comparison with modern literature, or before I claim too strongly that Adrian Leverkühn is symbolic of our age, let me describe the world of art that we have today and then relate the poetry of Rome to this world.

It has been the age of “the nightmare cry of Dada.”5 As Calvin Tomkins has observed, Dada, a movement that began about 1916, was “first and foremost a revolutionary state of mind, a violent assault on all accepted values.”6 A product of the First World War, Dada produced in its adherents the feeling that “these humiliating times have not succeeded in wrestling respect from us.”7 This attitude, expressed by Hugo Ball, a German conscientious objector, is one that we have repeatedly heard in recent years. The world situation
has improved very little since 1916, and the arts are still in a revolutionary state; thus we are still hearing the cry of Dada. Many of us may not realize it, but we are living among Dada’s reverberations today, which at least partially accounts for what appears to be the continuous decline of the still widely admired cultural and artistic values of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The advent of Dada signaled the withdrawal of the creative artists of Europe and America from the Cult of Beauty. The world was rotten, and it was the task of art to reflect that world. The high priest of Dada was the painter Marcel Duchamp, who was capable of putting a mustache and goatee on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and of entering a toilet fixture, signed by himself, in an art exhibit. More serious and more prolific was Pablo Picasso, whose shocking and hideous pictures of women painted in the 1930s show his own disenchantment both with the state of affairs in Spain and in a Europe plainly headed for a holocaust.

It was in the 1940s that Paris and London ceased being the art capitals of the Western world and New York assumed her present regal ascendancy. It was in New York during the forties, after the outbreak of the Second World War, that the painter Jackson Pollock developed the expressionism of such European artists as Wassily Kandinsky and Oskar Kokoschka into painting for the sake of painting, “action painting.” With the unveiling of Pollock’s *Blue Poles* in 1953, the requirement that painting should be representational was declared null and void. This picture, a major example of the new megalography (Monet’s water lily sequences are among the first such specimens of modern art), is energy and action on canvas; it is color and dynamism
for themselves, because there is nothing that is solid in
the painting except, perhaps, the dancing “blue poles”
themselves.

*Blue Poles* and Dada are related, and both, as sug-
gested by my reference to Monet, have origins in the
years prior to 1916. We are unrealistic if we fail to rec-
ognize the central position in the history of this century,
and in this century’s artistic and intellectual temper, that
is held by the First World War. Here in 1972, it is
very clear that the massive and complex problems that
have beset the world since 1930 all stem from older
issues that were germinating before the First World
War and were not settled by that conflict. It has been a
century, seven decades so far, of revolt and rebellion.
The mold of European civilization that began with the
reign of Caesar Augustus and continued until the reign
of Edward the Seventh, though punctuated by such
major developments as the rise of Protestantism, the
collapse of the monarchy in France, and the Industrial
Revolution, remained, in a remarkable way, the same.
In this world the powerful and the obedient were easily
distinguished. In the arts, for the most part, accepted
taste and artistic direction were set up by the people of
wealth and culture, who took their example and stan-
dards from the noble heyday of Athens, Rome, Florence,
and Paris. The Cult of Beauty, as would have been
understood by both the Platonists and the Neo-Platonists,
was supreme.

There were a few vocal critics of this universal stan-
dard. The most notable, I think, was the Marquis de
Sade, whose works are a negation of normal Western
standards. To the Marquis de Sade the universally
admired human being who is imbued with physical
beauty combined with a sense of morality, meant noth-
ing. But the works of de Sade were banned for more
than a century after his death in 1814 and had little overt influence until recent years.

More widespread criticism of the standards of the past and serious concern with its burden began in Europe in the 1880s. In painting, it has been suggested, the revolt is marked by the work of Paul Gauguin, whose *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888) is like no picture seen before in Europe\(^\text{12}\) (at least in the nineteenth century), because neither its form nor its iconography has any immediate significance for the observer. The revolt against tradition and the old Cult of Beauty that Gauguin had begun was advanced especially by Matisse, who as a leader of a new group of artists nicknamed *les fauves* brought painting even further away from traditional representation.\(^\text{13}\)

Today, with the perspective and scholarship of sixty years to help us, we can see how radical and influential Matisse’s paintings of the 1910s were, particularly the two-dimensional *Harmony in Red* (1908–9) and those deceptively simple pictures, now in the Hermitage, *Dance* and *Music* (1910). These extraordinary innovations in painting were paralleled in music by Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, performed for the first time in 1913.\(^\text{14}\)

In literature there began at the same time a similar reaction to the social standards of the past and a questioning of the old presentation of the human condition,\(^\text{15}\) a presentation related mainly to the aristocracy or upper bourgeoisie. The new spirit is shown most strikingly by two novels, Robert Louis Stevenson’s masterpiece *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Stevenson makes a probe into human nature, and Wilde criticizes the leisured class with a severity that is totally at variance with the depiction of life found in earlier
Victorian work. Nothing could be farther removed from the attitude of such a high Victorian work like Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857) than Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. Jackson Pollock and all the members of the "New York School" could only approve of those seminal observations in Wilde's preface to his novel: "All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors." "All art is quite useless."

It was, however, the First World War that launched irrevocably the cultural and aesthetic revolution in whose whirlpool we are still struggling. The First World War, we can now see clearly, brought about "the death of Europe." It was, furthermore, after 1918 that, slowly but surely, the cultural center of the West began to shift from Paris and London to New York. Paris, of course, continued to be an important center, though in the 1920s it was the Americans in Paris—Gertrude Stein and her circle, Hemingway, and the Fitzgeralds—who were a dominant element. After the Second World War, Paris once again assumed something of her old influence and position, especially in philosophy. The recently published diaries of the American musician and Francophile, Ned Rorem, describe a postwar Paris that is attractive, though the elegant circle of the Countess de Noailles has much of the genteel tone of Mme de Vionnet's group in James's *The Ambassadors*. Missing is the exuberance of Gertrude Stein and of the earlier *belle époque*. In painting the work in France of both Matisse (who died in 1954) and Chagall was still of the greatest importance. But since the Second World War, no city has had such advantages from municipal and private patronage of the arts as New York City. In my opinion New York is today what Rome was in the age of Herodes.
Atticus and the Antonines; London and Paris are in the position of Athens in the second century A.D. It was the emigration of European intellectuals and scholars and the first prominence of the “New York School” of painting in 1940 that made our “new Rome” and this country the active heirs of an exhausted Europe.

More fundamental, however, than this transfer of cultural leadership and authority from one city to another was the irreparable damage that was done to traditional values by the catastrophe of the First World War. Only gradually has the damage been understood. In 1959 Hugh Kenner could refer to “the death of Europe.” In 1971 nobody would quarrel with Walter Kerr’s statement that “the back of our world has been broken, we have heard the snap, whatever we see as we turn the next corner will in itself be as bizarre as a Bosch or a Swift could wish it.” 17 It has taken us fifty years to recognize and understand that the standards of the nineteenth century, represented primarily by unquestioning acceptance of vested authority whether in government or art, have become moribund.

One artist who saw clearly what was happening and appreciated the changes, however unhappy, that were taking place before his very eyes was T. S. Eliot; the work, The Waste Land, published in 1922. With this major poem Eliot anatomized the state of the postwar West and demonstrated that literature, too, was about to go the way of painting and music. (Literature is ever the most conservative of the arts.) The literature on Eliot is almost Vergilian in proportion, and I have listed in an earlier essay some of the more penetrating and helpful critiques. 18 Moreover, it is not my intention here to do more than remind you of the importance of Eliot as critic and observer. Like Vergil, like Janus, Eliot looked behind and ahead in the sharpest possible way in his
poetical description of the state of Europe, the “death of Europe,” in *The Waste Land*.

This utterly engrossing, fascinating poem reflects, and yet breaks with, the past; it blends the historical past with the historical present; it freely combines the majestic mythological prophet Tiresias with a pathetic stenographer and her coarse “young man carbuncular”; mixes such grandiloquent phrases as “The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne” with the lingo of the music hall “Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said, / What you get married for if you don’t want children?” And through it all we move from the awesome death wish of the Sibyl at Cumae, in “April . . . the cruelest month,” to an expression of both hope and grace: “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / . . . Shantih shantih shantih.”

It seems to me that *The Waste Land* is the most original and modern work of art of the century. In this poem there are representations of ordinary life and the use of ordinary language (one is reminded of the novel use of unelevated language in the poems of Lucilius and Catullus); at the same time there are gorgeously colored descriptions (the burnished throne and the church of Magnus Martyr) worthy of Chagall or Stravinsky. There are violent transpositions that are like the switching of channels on a television set or the multisensory narrative of a modern novel like William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959), or the jagged streaks and flashes of paint employed by the expressionist painters. And in the dramatic scenes that deal with vulgar life so theatrically, there are the seeds of episodes found later in the plays of Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee.

On the other hand, though Eliot’s work is typical of the creative work of the twentieth century and though
there is much that is strikingly novel and wonderfully immediate for the social and intellectual mood of "the years l'entre deux guerres," Eliot proves in *The Waste Land* that the burden of the past need not be intolerable, that the past very much has its still important uses. Throughout this century, at least since 1910, all too many writers and artists in the other arts have been weighed down by the burden of the past and, in a wildeyed search for novelty, have often succeeded in producing only what is ephemeral. As W. Jackson Bate observes in discussing the intellectual malaise of the eighteenth century in England, there are many similarities to be found in that era and our own. Today there is the same attraction to primitivism, a search for "escape from drab complexity into color and vigor, the yearning for simplicity," the presence of "fatigue and depression that so often seem to accompany success." 20
The careers of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Ernest Hemingway, among others, illustrate the last point particularly. The present widespread concern with world conditions and the retreat of countless young people into a primitive and simple way of life are documented facts. The arts of today plainly "mirror the greatest single cultural problem we face, assuming that we physically survive: that is, how to use a heritage, when we know and admire so much about it, how to grow by means of it, how to acquire our 'identities,' how to be ourselves." 21 Eliot clearly and cogently, more definitely than other modern artists who continued to be influenced by classicism, for example, either Picasso or Yeats, has shown us "the present-day vitality of the classical tradition," 22 and he demonstrated this vitality in his superbly original *The Waste Land*.

The fact remains, however, that although Eliot's modern idiom has been very influential, his classicism has
been little imitated. And so today, we find ourselves agonized by the classical languages' "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." Many artists will not tolerate the burden of the past; many devotees of the classics are only too like Thomas Mann's Dr. Kranich, the numismatist, who found himself appalled by the *furor* of Adrian Leverkühn and went away, feeling himself entirely incompetent in this situation.

But I would suggest that Greco-Roman literature, especially Roman poetry, has never been more pertinent. Indeed, I know of no time besides the present, except the age in which the poetry was written, when Roman poetry has had more to say to humanity, or when the conditions of society would allow a deeper, more honest, and open appreciation of the subject matter of classical Roman poetry.

It is a commonplace of the classroom that in modern art we have a return of "Alexandrianism," and that the esoteric nature of such poems as those of Cummings, Eliot, Stevens, and Yeats, or paintings like those of Willem de Kooning, recall the private approach to art employed in the last three centuries before Christ. I have no doubt that Apollonius and Lycophron would comprehend the method and the manner of modern poetry; the later Hellenistic artists, especially the sculptors, would understand the problems involved in abstraction, whereby the plastic arts are pushed to their very limits. Both eras have experienced novelty produced for the sake of novelty, art for the sake of art. It is easy to see T. S. Eliot, with all his learning, invention, and authority, as the new Callimachus.23

To be more precise, we need to see that many of the characteristics of the years from 1910 to the present are very like problems and attitudes prominent in the first century B.C. Some of these problems and attitudes are:
the widespread sense of futility and despair, of helplessness; the passion for novelty; a yearning to escape; an egocentrism or fascination with the self that borders on a sentimental self-absorption. Particularly prominent then and now is the hatred of war, an attitude to which so many patriots have in their turn violently reacted. In addition, as in the Hellenistic sculptors' representation of the sensual (whether Aphrodite or a drunk old woman) or the writers' depiction of the tormented (whether Catullus's Ariadne or Vergil's Dido), so in recent years have we beheld the utterly candid presentation of human nature. The stage has offered particularly conspicuous examples of this new candor, beginning, we might say, with Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890), continuing with O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (1926), and later in Williams's powerful *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* (1956), and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962).  

We find ourselves today, I venture to suggest, with a greater understanding of human nature and a greater compassion than have been generally exhibited in any other age. The experience of the past sixty years, the age of Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Mahatma Gandhi, and T. S. Eliot, has made our era particularly receptive to the famous line of Terence: *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* (*Heauton Timorumenos* 77). And we can also assent more knowledgeably than our ancestors to Vergil's line: *Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt* (*Aeneid* 1. 462). The experience of the last sixty years has given many of our writers a remarkable understanding of the vagaries of the human condition and a sense of tragedy that hitherto were the special attributes of observers like Thucydides in the late fifth century and Vergil in the late first century B.C.
The world of classical Greece, especially the ages of Homer and Pericles, has always had a great immediacy and pertinence. For this reason Greek studies have always been more popular, more fashionable, than Latin studies; and Greek literature has always seemed to be easier to teach than the literature of Rome. It was in 1939, with the publication of Sir Ronald Syme’s *The Roman Revolution* (one of the most illuminating and influential studies in the classics completed in this century), that the world of Rome, particularly the first century B.C., began to be seen as an age remarkably like our own. In our own country several pioneering historians and literary scholars have complemented Syme’s work: among others Bernard M. W. Knox, Paul MacKendrick, Lawrence Richardson, Jr., and Lily Ross Taylor have been Ariadne leading us through the labyrinth of Roman history and literature. With their help we have come to a state of revelation, in seeing how very similar to our own were the values and problems of the first century B.C. As was the case for Aeneas when he came to the mural in the Temple of Juno that depicted his past in the Trojan War, so too have we experienced the shock of recognition. To be more specific, though we would be wrong to attempt to draw exact parallels, we have come to see how very maladjusted society was in Italy in the first century B.C. The economic depression of the 1930s and the outbreak of World War II resemble similar situations in the first century B.C. The people of wealth, privilege, and selfishness (or public irresponsibility) were present in classical Rome as well as in the Russia of Nicholas II, or in Harding’s America, or in the Weimar Republic. The desire of people of an inferior social and economic status to improve their lot, as in the cases of Spartacus and his band or some of the followers of Catiline, re-
sembles a similar longing seen in recent decades in this country, in Germany, in India, and in Africa. The “new deal” of Caesar Augustus and the “welfare state” that he inaugurated bear resemblances to the regimes of both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Benito Mussolini. It was the perspicacious Syme who first stated in plain language the ways and means of Caesar Augustus. Not that this revelation should spoil our appreciation of the Augustan accomplishment. That world was so sick that it could not get any worse, and only drastic remedies could possibly help.

For the literary critics, the candid view exercised by Syme in 1939 was reinforced by the new approach to the criticism of poetry as advocated particularly by John Crowe Ransom in his *The New Criticism* of 1941. Soon thereafter, classical scholars began to be interested in Greek and Roman poetry as pure poetry, without such a strong emphasis as before on the biographical, sociological and historical aspects of the poems.

Of course, it is a coincidence that the year 1940 is a pivotal one for classical scholarship, literary criticism, and the beginning of the “New York School” of painting. We might also regard 1940 as a very important one for our arch-poet, T. S. Eliot, considering that his play *The Family Reunion* (based on *The Oresteia*) was published in 1939; “East Coker,” the second of the *Four Quartets*, appeared in 1940, with the work concluded by “Little Gidding” in 1942.

What we have here, in the years around 1940, is a combination of circumstances that began quite separately but became related. The rise of fascism, the continuing influence of the Dada movement, the widespread yearning for a truly original development in art, the need for a new approach in literary criticism, all were circumstances of the 1930s that, it appears to me, were
accentuated and pushed into maturity by the new collapse of Europe in 1939–40. I would not want to say that the war was the only catalyst for these rumbling intellectual movements. Certainly, however, Eliot’s *Four Quartets* owe not a little to the state of Europe at that time; the *furor* of Germany and her resulting agony are at the heart of *Doctor Faustus*; and the world at war gave abstract expressionism a new impetus and a new validity. Very like the first century B.C., this century has been a time of chaos and flux, for years on end. Yet, out of the confusion and the rubble, some remarkable works of art have emerged. Whether these works will prove to be as significant for their own age and for the future as the *De Rerum Natura*, the *Aeneid*, or the “Laocoön” remains to be seen. Moreover, our international conflicts have not come to a definite conclusion as did the conflicts of the first century in 31 B.C. Nor has the new Augustus yet appeared.

Nevertheless, our era is strikingly similar to the earlier Hellenistic Age both in political circumstances and in artistic trends. Both eras have been caught up in a passionate enthusiasm for artistic novelty and originality; in both periods there has been an obsessive fascination with the individual personality; both centuries have brought men to a deep appreciation—owing to intimate experience—of tragic occurrences and tragic developments.

Let me illustrate briefly how particularly interesting in the 1970s are some works of literature from the Golden Age of Rome. I want to point out the modern character of these works both in attitude and in pertinence, and to suggest that the temper of our times is ideally suited to the proper appreciation of some of these Roman works that have not always been well received or properly understood. My illustrations will be
from the poetry of Horace, Lucretius, and Vergil, but not the brilliant and ever appealing Catullus, whose novel contributions have been discussed by so many critics, notably Kenneth Quinn in his *The Catullan Revolution* (rev. ed., 1969).

Turning first to Horace, whose delicate, subtle, richly suggestive, tantalizingly allusive poems now support the weight of almost innumerable critical essays and books, I will refer only to one poem, the first Ode of the Fourth Book:

*Intermissa, Venus, diu*  
*rursus bella moves? parce, precor, precor.*

“The wars of love . . . spare me Venus, I beg you spare me.” Published in 13 B.C., when Horace was fifty-two, the poem and the book it introduces appeared at the apogee of the reign of Augustus, the year the Senate voted the erection of the Ara Pacis. This poignant unsparing poem knows no peace. The poet begs the relentless mother of Love (mater saeva Cupidinum) to work her ways on a young man, one who (ingenuously) wants to be in love. By such a worshipper, Venus will find herself richly honored by the Alban Lake in a shrine of citron wood. But the poet knows only too well that this goddess is “la belle dame sans merci”; and, besides, “I grow old . . . I grow old.”

The last two stanzas, the final eight lines of the poem, are among the most quiveringly sensual, disarmingly poignant lines in all Latin poetry:

*Sed cur heu, Ligurine, cur*  
*manat rara meas lacrima per genas?*  
*cur facunda parum decoro*  
*inter verba cadit lingua silentio?*  
*nocturnis ego somniis*
iam captum teneo, iam volucrem sequor
   te per gramina Martii
campi, te per aquas, dure, volubiles.

“But, but why, oh why, Ligurinus, does a tear now and
then slip down my cheek? Why does all my brilliant
talk suddenly stop, indiscreetly? In my dreams at night
one moment I hold you fast, in the next I pursue you
racing over the field of Mars and then, unyielding one,
through rushing waters.”

In 1911 Lord Dunsany, the translator of the Odes
for the Everyman’s Library edition (1961), refused to
deal with the last eight lines of the poem saying: “As
a convinced Unionist and, usually, an admirer of
Horace, I am very reluctant to prefer Mr. Gladstone to
him, but I do so on this one occasion, and I follow Mr.
Gladstone in not translating the unpleasant last lines of
this ode.” 29 We are, for the most part, past that stage;
and in the modern climate that takes love as love, just as
it was in antiquity from Sappho to “Longinus,” we can
deal with Horace’s poem today honestly and as it de­
serves.

The poem is typical of the quicksilver mind and art of
Horace in which several views are always simultaneously
entertained. Steele Commager’s analysis of the poem is
generally as penetrating and understanding as is his
treatment of other odes. I do not think, however, that
Horace for one moment is the conventional miser amator
in this poem. Commager’s own reversal a few lines later
brings him to the truth when he says, “The overwhelming
sensuousness of the final image irretrievably banishes not
only Horace’s earlier excuses but the whole atmosphere
of stylized complaint as well.” 80 Whether or not this
poem reflects Horace’s own experience has no bearing
on our appreciation of the poem. But certainly the poem
can be taken as the perfect expression of loveless man at middle age, whether the person be Horace, Gustave von Aschenbach (Death in Venice), or Blanche Dubois (A Streetcar Named Desire). Horace's poem deals with human nature with all the understanding and honesty that characterize more recent writing, and I am thinking particularly of the work of Conrad Aiken, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Dylan Thomas. The terms posture and convention are contemptible ones today. Although there is much artifice in the poetry of the Augustan period, particularly in the work of Ovid and Tibullus, the great writing, full of art, rises above artifice; and Horace is one of the great writers. His sometimes humorous, sometimes serious, but always accurate delineation of the human condition is just as compelling today as it was in the first century B.C.

Horace's poem begins with a reference to Venus and ends with the Field of Mars. Venus and Mars, Love and War, Love and Death. Let us move backward in time to Lucretius, whose incomparable poem begins with the famous invocation to Venus and ends with a description of the merciless plague at Athens in 430 B.C. In Lucretius's deep concern with the physical world, in his quest for knowledge, in his passion to understand everything, and in his scientific humanism, he is one of the most modern of ancient authors, though only quite recently has his work begun to be understood. In Lucretius's pursuit and praise of the dynamic and the concrete, of action, choice, and commitment, in his zeal for the authentic and his denunciation of unauthentic existence, he is the most compelling "existentialist" of all the classical poets and philosophers.

It is his passion for reality and rationalism and the honor he pays to the physical world that make Lucretius important to the modern reader. It is in Lucretius that
we come to feel the distinction between "sensuous" and "sensual," because though Lucretius loves the physical world, he despises lust. In his poet's desire to depict Life, he equates Life with Venus herself in his prologue (1. 1–49). Thereafter, Lucretius generally avoids mythological analogues in order to keep to the facts of Life. His praise of decent marriage is plain (4. 1195–1224). But in his love of ratio Lucretius hates furor in any form and so despises sensual self-indulgence (4. 1073–1191).

As an observer of the phenomena of life, Lucretius is unsurpassed. What finer, sweeter observation is there than his pertaining to evaporation and the gradual dissolution of hard objects:

\[
\text{denique fluctifrago suspensae in litore vestes}
\]
\[
\text{uvescunt, eadem dispansae in sole serescunt.}
\]
\[
\text{at neque quo pacto persederit umor aquai}
\]
\[
\text{visumst nec rursum quo pacto fugerit aestu.}
\]
\[
\text{in parvas igitur partis dispergitur umor}
\]
\[
\text{quas oculi nulla possunt ratione videre.}
\]
\[
\text{quin etiam multis solis redeuntibus annis}
\]
\[
\text{anulus in digito subter tenuatur habendo,}
\]
\[
\text{stilicidi casus lapidem cavat, uncus aratri}
\]
\[
\text{ferreus occulte decrescit vomer in arvis,}
\]
\[
\text{strataque iam vulgi pedibus detrita viarum}
\]
\[
\text{saxea conspicimus; tum portas propter aena}
\]
\[
\text{signa manus dextras ostendunt attenuari}
\]
\[
\text{saepe salutantum tactu praeterque meantum.}
\]

Such a joy in life! "Wet clothes, the familiar ring grown thin, the iron plow in the earth, the hand of the statue repeatedly touched by the faithful." The sixteenth century was not without such appreciations, nor was the nineteenth; but the fervent directness of Lucretius fits in especially well with the attitudes of the twentieth. If the
passage just quoted needs any elucidation at all, I should do so with a poem of Richard Wilbur, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," which has these excited lines:

“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Sensuous, but not sensual. Lucretius’s poem is antithetical to that part of the modern mood typified by the work of Henry Miller. That there are many admirers of Henry Miller, but even more of his idiom, cannot be denied. But in other writers what appears to be the Milleresque spirit is deceptive. The greatest literature of recent years, though concerned with the sensual, more often than not contains, in fact, a plea for rationalism and control. The parable is obvious in the story of Adrian Leverkühn and his pursuit of the Hetaera Esmeralda. Those who feel that Lady Chatterley's Lover is the model for our liberated era should reread the very end of the book, Mellors's letter to Constance, and notice how Mellors really advocates the temperance and the achieving of a beauty in physical love that is supported by Lucretius in Book Four of De Rerum Natura. The tragedy of the hedonistic Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous novel has always been apparent. The wretchedness of the flamboyant Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald themselves, partially due to their voracious hunt for pleasure, has recently been drawn with new clarity by Nancy Milford in her biography, Zelda (1970).

Lucretius is unflinchingly and relentlessly honest. His description of life is perfectly faithful to the facts. There is no delusion, no sham in his poem. He depicts the cycle of creation and destruction. The description of
death in the form of the plague, at the end of the poem, is simply a truthful conclusion of Lucretius's "Hymn of Life." It is not, however, a discouraging ending; the careful reader will realize that the cycle will begin anew immediately. On the other hand, it is certainly true that one leaves the poem with a sense of humility and an appreciation of moderation as the natural principle of all human action.  

Man will be foolish; life is tragic; but the cycle of life goes on. At the end of Doctor Faustus, though we are filled with pity for the unhappy Adrian, there is one consoling thought: his music will be immortal. *Non omnis moriar.*

And so to Vergil, the most Roman of Latin poets, whose masterpiece the *Aeneid* has an extraordinary immediacy for us and our times. It is Vergil's works that most fully reflect the turbulence in both art and life of the late Hellenistic Age. Thus in the parallels that I have worked out between the first century B.C. and the twentieth century A.D., it is Vergil to whom I have been leading as the most classical of poets, the one that is of constantly universal interest.

I cannot possibly do justice to Vergil in only these concluding pages. The Vergilian bibliography has become impossible for one person to master; but it is noteworthy that some of the most influential studies have appeared in the last ten years: Viktor Pöschl's, as translated into English in 1962 (originally published in German in 1950); Brook's Otis's in 1963; Michael Putnam's in 1965; and Kenneth Quinn's in 1968.  

As I observed earlier, it has been since the publication of Syme's *Roman Revolution* (1939) that we have begun to take a searchingly honest view of Augustan Rome and to analyze the real, the underlying feelings of the writers of that period. Our own disillusionment that began at the end of the Second World War has deeply affected
our study of the arts. Many critics and scholars can work only with the feeling quoted previously of the German conscientious objector Hugo Ball: "These humiliating times have not succeeded in wrestling respect from us." It has been in recent years, then, that the melancholy of our condition has made many critics acutely sensitive to any such pessimism in the works of the Greek and Roman writers. In the face of so much divided public opinion on the issues of our time, we have become deeply conscious of, and sensitive to, "the outsider," with the result that it has occurred to many of us, I am sure, to write supplementary essays for Colin Wilson's famous book so as to include such ancient figures as Achilles and Aeneas, Euripides, Catullus, Vergil, and Propertius. All these figures might well answer the question in Wilson's Shavian epigraph, "You feel at home in the world then?" with a reply "(from the very depths of his nature): No." 40

Vergil has three memorable characters who represent his poetry at its essence and who have a symbolic value for both Vergil's time and ours: Tityrus, Orpheus, and Aeneas. Tityrus, whom we see as a benevolent shepherd playing a flute at the beginning of the First Eclogue, is all of us who, by some virtue or by the grace of authority, are spared the more difficult involvements, decisions, and agonies of life. He is Lucretius's philosopher standing in his isolated tower as life surges about him (De Rerum Natura 2. 1-4); he is Horace in his reducta valle (Odes 1. 17. 17); he is Matisse rejoicing in life despite life. Tityrus is perfectly aware of the arid plain behind him and has seen London Bridge falling down; still, today, he sits upon the shore (cf. The Waste Land 424-27).

Orpheus, whose entrancing yet appalling history is the end of the Georgics, is Adrian Leverkühn. Here is the
artist, seeing all and suffering everything, who dies in torment but whose work transcendently survives. Orpheus, Adrian—here is Man, in our century, enduring more than any character of Kafka and not really understanding why he should deserve such punishment. In the passionate, innovative, anguished lives of Hart Crane, Jackson Pollock, Dylan Thomas, and Virginia Woolf, we have had Vergil’s Orpheus among us in recent years. As after Adrian’s death in any asylum, we remember the music, so in Orpheus’s violent death we remember the music that caused Hell itself to stand still (Georgics 4.481–84).

The Aeneid is the supreme artistic achievement of the Hellenistic Age. It embodies the literary and artistic ideals and goals of the last three centuries before Christ. At the same time, Vergil fulfills his desire, announced in the prologue of the third book of the Georgics, to give up novelty for the sake of novelty. In the Aeneid Vergil does create a classical masterpiece equal to such Greek classics as Homer’s Iliad, Aeschylus’s Oresteia, and Sophocles’ Theban cycle. Vergil’s dream of erecting a marble temple—a regular Parthenon—beside the Minicius River in Roman Italy (Georgics 3.12–18), before which he will parade as a triumphant charioteer, that sublime dream, is realized in his epic poem.

The passionate actions, richly colored backgrounds, highly individualized portraits, frustrated love, a world in turbulence, a highly charged atmosphere of tragedy—all these attributes of Hellenistic art, the same attributes of the great art of our time, are found in the Aeneid. In the first six books are particularly sharp reflections of the artistic climate of Vergil’s day, the climate of late Hellenistic art. It was a climate that favored highly original uses of traditional forms, whether the forms of Homer or of Callimachus (from the second of whom
Vergil was removed by more than two hundred years). The *Georgics* are a model production of that late Hellenistic taste. With the *Aeneid*, however, Vergil brought late Hellenistic art to its highest possible development.

There is nothing in ancient literature to equal the color, the flash, the sustained atmosphere of excitement, and the swift but impressive action of the first six books of the *Aeneid*. Here is Vergil’s most arresting contribution to literature, and here Vergil excels the great and original contributions made by Catullus in the epyllion of poem 64 as well as his own tour de force in the Aristaeus epyllion at the end of the *Georgics*. Vergil’s narrative art has never been excelled, and subsequent European literature owes everything to Vergil. In the *Aeneid* we have the consummate achievement, the ultimate show of originality, the *Blue Poles*, of the Hellenistic Age. Borrowing everything from the past, as do Mann, Joyce, and Eliot, like these writers Vergil goes on to achieve the height of originality and to give a new direction to art as did Picasso, Matisse, and Jackson Pollock.

Let me, however, recall some of the particularly Hellenistic features of the poem. For one thing, Iopas’s song of the seasons (1. 740–46) recalls the work of the great Alexandrian scientist-poets Aratus and Eratosthenes. In Book 2, the Laocoön scene (2. 199–233) seems to be based on the famous statue itself, which, though possibly not in Rome as yet, Vergil undoubtedly knew by reputation. Dido, whose melodramatic background we hear of in Book 1, is a superbly composite figure whose great scenes come in Book 4. She is at once Clytemnestra, Medea, and Phaedra from classical Greece; but Vergil’s rendering of the Tragic Queen, the *domina infelix*, would have been impossible without Apollonius’s Medea and Catullus’s Ariadne (Poem 64).
In Book 6 Hellenistic science and philosophy are briefly but distinctly acknowledged in Anchises’ speech to Aeneas describing the workings of the universe. Vergil’s indebtedness to Lucretius is clear time and time again. Behind all the dramatic action of the first six books looms the shadow of the Rome and the Italy that are to be (just as in Eliot’s *Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*, there are always present London and England). This great emphasis on City and Society, on the undeniable fact of man’s membership in a society, is a particular contribution of Vergil to late Hellenistic literature; and it is this contribution that makes Vergil’s *Aeneid* such a substantial bridge between antiquity and modern times.

Anchises’ speech about the universe and the life of the soul owes as much to Plato as to Lucretius. The end of the Sixth Book, with its depiction of the future glories of Rome’s Italian past and her Augustan present, leads us from the Odyssean first half of the poem to its Iliadic denouement. Here Vergil recovers and creates anew (in Latin at the end of the Hellenistic Age) the atmosphere of Homer’s war-torn plain and its proud reckless leaders; here anew and just as poignantly is the keening of the *Trojan Women*; here is a man—so much an anti-hero—as tortured and beleaguered as Orestes but with as fixed and determined a purpose as Oedipus. Vergil re-creates and infuses with a special Italian vitality the sense of tragedy, the presence of tragedy, that characterize Greek classicism.

It is the character of Aeneas to which we today can particularly respond. Whereas there is starkness, and thus the two-dimensionality of a vase painting, in such figures as Achilles, Hector, Oedipus, and Phaedra, there is in Aeneas all the complex roundness of a Hellenistic statue. We are constantly aware of his many sides and
thus find him both as fascinating and as elusive as a portrait by Picasso in which the sides of the face are presented all at once. The technique of modern fiction that combines conversation, the inner thoughts of the conversants, and the narrator’s analysis, has become a familiar one. This achievement of literary three-dimensionality can be seen in the later novels of Henry James, certainly in Joyce, and, later, in Virginia Woolf and Lawrence Durrell. We watch Aeneas, we hear him speak, we learn of his thoughts that are contrary to his words, we hear others describe him. Only gradually does the whole man appear, and there are surprises in his character even at the end of the poem. We never really know the complicated Aeneas any more than we know anyone else. In addition to this complicated characterization, there is Vergil’s method of freely blending the past with the present—Agamemnon’s Greece, primitive Italy, and Augustan Rome. There is the poet’s highly subjective handling of his characters (as Brooks Otis has described so well); and there is the complicated web of allusions both to literature and to history. This depiction of man in his every facet has been one of the important innovations in the writing of this century, with a most Vergilian example to be seen in John Fowles’s novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), in which some characters of Victorian England are carefully observed from our point of view.

Of course we would expect the complexity of modern life, often nightmarish, to be reflected in contemporary art. The presence of the past, our awareness in recent years of the whole world, the ubiquitous conflicts among cultures, our educational system that will often bring a young mind into contact with Cambodia and Nigeria before it really has come to grips with, shall we say, Rome or Boston—the kaleidoscope that is the modern
world—is to be found, though perhaps on a smaller scale, in the world of Vergil. Aeneas the wanderer, committed to a cause he only gradually understands, forced to move from one world to another, hungry for peace and rest but unable to find either one, passionate yet dutiful, sluggish yet ambitious, eager to please but determined to hold his own—Aeneas is the kind of complex man whom the twentieth century has produced in equally complex circumstances. Vergil's representation of such a multifarious world with all his allusions, his flashbacks, his acceptance of contradictions, actually anticipates the modern approach in the novel, the film, and in poetry.

At the end of the epic Aeneas stands over the dead body of Turnus, whom he has killed. Turnus is a tragic figure, but he is tragic as Pentheus is, not Oedipus. His determination to assert himself, to go against the wishes of King Latinus himself, is his tragic flaw. A careful reading of the three great prophecies in the poem (1. 257–96, 6. 756–392, 8. 626–728) shows that Vergil did believe in the greater good to be realized from the union of Trojans and Latins, and that the death of Turnus did not mean the destruction of the world of Italy, that world of wilderness combined with pastoral order. Moreover, when you step back from the poem and consider it as a whole, you see that Aeneas did not succumb to the forces of violence and irrationality. The death of Turnus is not a triumph, but a regrettably necessary solution.

With Aeneas we leave Adrian; in Aeneas we have a greater man. Our own anguished and disillusioned times, of which Adrian Leverkühn is especially symbolic, have, however, seen occasionally and with favor a pius Aeneas. In addition to several living men there has been Celia Coplestone and her search for satisfaction in Eliot's The Cocktail Party; there has been the nobly
self-effacing Seymour in the tales of J. D. Salinger; there has been the old poet Nonno and his song of courage in Williams’s play Night of the Iguana. To have the bravery, the loyalty, the perseverance, the ultimate selflessness of Aeneas; the determination to make the best of adversity and to unravel the ambiguities all around us; to love something and to be zealous in the pursuit of that love—many of us have had such aspirations. On the other hand, the breathtaking turbulence and challenges of the twentieth century have made us all familiar with the similar exasperations, despair, and cloudy triumphs of Aeneas.

It is in the world of art that we find our problems and our selves defined. The description, delineation, and explication provided by the poets, novelists, sculptors, and painters of this century are unusually sensitive and exact. For some of the answers, at least, we need only to be aware and to look, because much understanding is to be found in the world of art. We need not, however, end our questioning and our search for clarification in contemporary works. There is an equally valid and cogent understanding of life in the work of the poets of classical Rome.

1. I am indebted to Mr. David Heimann, of the University of Colorado, for help in planning this essay, and to Mr. Frederick Nicklaus, of the Columbia University Press, for his criticism of the completed draft.

2. The phrase is stimulatingly used by Henry Steele Commager in his The Odes of Horace (New Haven, Conn., 1962) as the title of chapter 6.


4. Ibid., p. 503.
6. Ibid., p. 57.
7. Ibid., p. 56.
8. Ibid., p. 39.
13. There are many studies on this subject, but Dorra, *Years of Ferment*, pp. 26–36, presents an excellent summary.
14. An adequate cultural history of the twentieth century may be an impossibility; there are so many threads to be both separated and brought together. A step in the right direction is Barbara Tuchman’s synthesis of the years 1890–1914, *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War* (New York, 1966).
15. Of course this movement began earlier, and it has been frequently discussed. Flaubert’s *Mme Bovary* (1857), condemned at publication, later enjoyed a *succès de scandale*. Only recently have the novels of Charles Dickens come to be regarded as the masterpieces of social criticism that they are. See Steven Marcus, “Dickens after One Hundred Years,” *New York Times Book Review*, 7 June 1970, p. 1. Henry James entered the fray in 1886 with his *Princess Casamassima* (for the best evaluation see Lionel Trilling’s essay in *The Liberal Imagination*, [New York, 1950]), the same year in which Stevenson published *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.
19. Though Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared in the same year, it is not so strikingly original a work of literature as it at first might seem. Certainly, the famous "stream-of-consciousness" technique can be found to have its antecedents in certain passages in such advanced novels as James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904).


22. This phrase was the title of a conference sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies at Indiana University, 22–23 January, 1958. The papers presented there have been collected and edited by Whitney J. Oates, *From Sophocles to Picasso: The Present-day Vitality of the Classical Tradition* (Bloomington, 1962).


24. Of course the novel, the major art form of our century, has lately manifested the same candor, particularly with the decline of censorship that began with the publication by Grove Press in 1961 of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. But the novel is an art form to be enjoyed privately. The new candor in the theater and in the film is a more conspicuous example of the new attitude.


27. It is noteworthy here and pertinent to the latter part of the present essay (as related to Vergil's development) that Eliot's work became increasingly classical, both in manner and in significance. Eliot's movement from the romanticism of alleys, rose gardens, and retreats of the alienated individual to a classicism that insists on the relation of art to life is well traced by Marion Montgomery, T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the American Magus (Athens, Ga., 1969), esp. pp. 26–29, 90–97.


30. Commager, The Odes of Horace, p. 294. But even recent criticism has its blind spots. It is hard to see how anyone could regard these concluding lines as an "amusing surprise-ending" as does the usually helpful Gordon Williams, Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry (Oxford, 1968), p. 557.

31. A corrective is offered by David West's Reading Horace (Edinburgh, 1967). His observations on how the Soracte Ode "has been destroyed by the critics" (p. 3) and reduced "to a shambles" (p. 8) are a little strong since, in fact, one finds himself easily forgetting the criticism but never forgetting the poem. The most helpful of contemporary critics have been Commager, The Odes of Horace, and Eduard Fraenkel, Horace (Oxford, 1957). For West's sensible remarks on Odes 4.1 see pp. 134–36.


33. For these terms of definition see Maurice Friedman, The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader (New York, 1964), pp. 3–4. Once again, however, the classical authors are practically unacknowledged. In Friedman's group of "Forerunners" he includes only Heraclitus.


36. Things of This World (New York, 1956), p. 5. Wilbur's poem is a good parallel for the simple, straightforward passage
from Lucretius. If one wanted to pursue Lucretius's "existentialism" and use deeper modern parallels, of course, he would want to refer to the work of Rainer Maria Rilke, particularly to _Das Stundenbuch_ (Leipzig, 1905), repr. in vol. 2 of _Gesammelte Werke_ (Leipzig, 1930). Rilke's poetry is both "expressionist" and "existentialist" and, therefore, closely related to the artistic developments of this century; but the present essay, as a mere sketch of twentieth-century trends, can only emphasize the more obviously influential figures and works.

37. Most interesting is the change from devotee of Miller to stern critic made by Lawrence Durrell as shown in _A Private Correspondence_ ed. George Wickes (New York, 1963). Of Miller's book _Sexus_, Durrell writes: "The moral vulgarity of so much of it is _artistically_ painful" (p. 265). Of Jack Kerouac and other such writers whom Miller admired, Durrell is compelled to say: "They need a week at a French lycée to be taught to think and construct" (p. 348).

38. Minadeo, _Lyre of Science_, p. 110.


40. Colin Wilson, _The Outsider_ (Boston, 1956), p. ii. The epigraph is from Bernard Shaw's _John Bull's Other Island_, Act IV.


42. Cf. Wormell, "The Personal World of Lucretius," pp. 64-65, and n. 23, p. 69, in which he cites the earlier researches of Bailey and Merrill.

43. Michael Putnam, _Virgil's Pastoral Art: Studies in the Eclogues_ (Princeton, N.J., 1970), has interesting remarks (esp., p. 393) to make on the presence of Rome in those poems. Unfortunately Putnam allows the same oddly negative interpretation of the world of Rome to intrude as he showed in his _The Poetry of the Aeneid_, a book that has made a number of other critics view the _Aeneid_ as being on a "long day's journey into night." Our own harsh times and ruinous wars have at least partly prompted the pessimistic views of these critics, whose works are the ultimate extension, as it were, of Syme's presentation of Augustus.

45. It would not be appropriate to give here a detailed study of the character of Aeneas. Essentially my understanding of Aeneas at the end of Book 12 is that of Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*, pp. 380–81.