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## THE DIVINE CHILD IN VIRGIL.

### II.

IN the former part of this study <sup>1</sup> it was pointed out that the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil, with its hope and confident prophecy of a better age which had already surely begun, was only one indication, though the most striking one, of a dawning hope, which was spreading in the Roman Empire. This poem was also the first clear and articulate expression of that hope; and indubitably exercised considerable influence in giving form and definition to the vague emotion which was stirring in the popular mind, felt by many, and expressed by one great writer.

The Fourth Eclogue had its origin in an interesting episode of literary history; and, if it were regarded solely from the literary point of view, it might almost be called an occasional poem. But what might have been a mere occasional poem in the hands of a lesser poet, became in passing through the mind of Virgil a work of far wider and higher character. It is, however, essential to a right comprehension of this Eclogue that it should be studied in its origin. Only in this way can its relation to the popular conceptions of the time be understood.

It was through the relations between Virgil and Horace, so friendly and for the latter so important, that this poem

<sup>1</sup> *EXPOSITOR*, June, 1907. On p. 555 l. 11 "unsuitable" should be corrected to "suitable." I made a change in the form of the sentence at the last moment, and failed to carry out the change consistently through the whole sentence, thus reducing it to nonsense; but probably readers would make the correction for themselves.

of Virgil's took its actual form.<sup>1</sup> Horace was an officer, who served in the army of Brutus and Cassius, and took part in the disastrous battle of Philippi, which wrecked the aristocratic and republican party, late in the year 42 B.C. He fled from the rout of Philippi and returned to Italy, where he found that the estate at Venusia which he had inherited from his father had been confiscated and assigned (like many other Italian estates) to the soldiers of the victorious armies. He came to Rome, where, as he says,

Bereft of property, impaired in purse,  
Sheer penury drove me into scribbling verse.

The metropolis was the only place which offered at that time a career to a young man conscious of literary power, and compelled to seek a living thereby. Horace had now neither property nor patron nor influential friend. As an adherent of the defeated and unpopular party, the young poet's career was doubly difficult; and we could not suppose that his republican and aristocratic sentiments were blazoned by him in Rome when he settled there. That these sentiments were now concealed by him is proved by the fact that he found employment as a clerk in one of the government offices: a pronounced aristocrat would not have received, and would hardly have asked, such a position.

Horace's mind was not that of a zealot or an extremist. He had fought for the side which he believed in, and he accepted the result of the fight. The question for him was settled, and he now accommodated himself unreservedly to the new situation. Moreover, he had unquestionably lost his faith in his former party, from causes at which the historian can guess without any difficulty. He recog-

<sup>1</sup> The thought must have been simmering in the mind of Virgil, but the form was suggested as a reply to a poem of Horace. My own personal view is that the two poems inaugurated the personal relations and intimate friendship of the two poets.

nized that it was incapable and dead, and that Rome had nothing to hope from it, even if it had been successful in the fight. Every reader of his works knows that such was his feeling, and such was the widespread feeling of the Roman world. Men recognized that the degeneration of the Mediterranean world had proceeded one stage further, and that the republican party had failed decisively to govern the Empire which it had conquered. Horace represents the general opinion of the pagan world. He stands in the world of men, not above it (as Virgil did); he expresses the sentiments of the world from a sane, common-sense point of view; and, as he emerged from penury, he attained a high level of wisdom, propriety and self-respect in his outlook on the world and a singularly lofty level of easy and graceful yet dignified expression of popular philosophy and worldly experience. From him we gather the best side of popular sentiment and popular philosophy, as they were trained in the stern school of life.

In one of Horace's poems the popular estimate of the situation in which the Roman world was placed found full expression. This poem is the Sixteenth Epode, which stands at the end of the first period of his literary activity and prepares the entrance on his second period. In the first period he was the hungry wolf, the impoverished and disappointed writer, who had felt the injustice of the world and was embittered by his experience. In the Sixteenth Epode he pours forth unreservedly the disappointment, which he and the people generally felt about the existing situation of the Roman world. The long civil wars had sickened and disgusted the popular mind, except in so far as they had brutalized it into positive enjoyment of the apparently endless series of intestine wars and massacres, each more bloody than its predecessor. The Roman Empire and Roman Society were drifting steadily towards ruin,

and their motion onwards towards the abyss was becoming ever more rapid.

This consciousness of degeneration and approaching ruin generally turned to utter despair. No hope was apparent. The Roman people had outgrown its old religion, and had found no new religion to take its place. Hence there was no religious consolation for it, no God to whom it could look for help and salvation. To which of the deities should the Roman people turn : what prayer would avail to importune Vesta and the old Divine patrons of the State and compel them to help the city and the Empire in their need ? So asks Horace in the second Ode of the first book, a poem written at a considerably later date, when he thought he had found a new god and a present help. But in the first period of his literary work he had no hope. He had not even a political party to which he could join himself and for which he could fight. He had lost his old faith in the Republican party, and found nothing to replace it ; the mind of man craved for the help of God, and there was no God known to it. So Horace consoled himself by an excursion into the land of fancy and of dreams. The Romans, as he says, had now only one chance left, They could abandon their country, and go far away from Italy into the Western Ocean, to find that happy land of which legend tells and poets sing, where the Golden Age of quiet and peace and plenty is always present, because here the degeneration which had affected the whole Mediterranean world had never begun. And so the poet calls upon all true men and good patriots to abandon their country, to desert Rome, and sail far away into the Atlantic Ocean, seeking a "new world to redress the balance of the old world," to dwell in

The rich and happy isles

Where Ceres year by year crowns all the untill'd land with sheaves,

And the vine with purple clusters droops, unpruned of all her leaves ;  
Where the olive buds and burgeons, to its promise ne'er untrue,  
And the russet fig adorns the tree, that grafishoot never knew ;  
Where honey from the hollow oak doth ooze, and crystal rills  
Come dancing down with tinkling feet from the sky-dividing hills ;  
There to the pails the she-goats come, without a master's word,  
And home with udders brimming broad returns the friendly herd.

For Jupiter, when he with brass the Golden Age alloy'd,  
That blissful region set apart by the good to be enjoy'd ;  
With brass and then with iron he the ages sear'd, but ye,  
Good men and true, to that bright home arise and follow me !<sup>1</sup>

Evidently, this fanciful description of the Golden Age in the Western Isles, with the advice of the Romans to take refuge there, does not express any serious belief. Horace and the popular mind generally had no cure to suggest for the malady of the State. To them the world of reality had sunk beyond salvation, and human life had degenerated into a riot of bloodshed and strife. Only in dreamland was there any refuge from the evils of actual life. Horace is here only "the idle singer of an empty day," singing in the brief interval between the last massacre and the next one. There is no faith, no belief, no reality, in the poem, because the poet had no religion, while the popular mind knew in a vague fashion that God alone could help now. Despair was seeking a moment's oblivion, and cheating itself with the false words of hope in this poem.

But, while there is no reality in the proposed remedy, no one can doubt or has ever doubted that the poem is political, and touches on the real facts of the Roman situation. This was what the people thought and felt and vaguely said. The old Rome could not stand : the Republican and aristocratic party, which had fought to maintain the old Rome, was mistaken and practically dead, and its policy had

<sup>1</sup> From the translation of Sir Theodore Martin.

utterly failed. The poem is really the expression of a despairing acquiescence in the tyranny of the Triumvirate and the autocracy of the coming Empire. This was the reluctant and despairing view with which Tacitus a century later (and many for whom Tacitus speaks) regarded the government of the Flavian Emperors: a Republican constitution, though the best, was too good for the Roman people, and the autocracy was the only government that was practically possible. And, after a similar fashion, in the Sixteenth Epode Horace abandoned definitely his Republican views, to dream about freedom and to acquiesce in the slavery of Imperialism.

For our purpose the most important feature of the Epode is its expression of the general opinion that no salvation could be hoped for except through some superhuman aid. Man, left to himself, had degenerated and must degenerate. The almost universal pagan view was to that effect; and history confirms it. St. Paul makes this view the starting point for his philosophy of history: God alone can give help and preserve true civilization. In this the Apostle of the Gentiles agrees with the almost universal Gentile thought. What he adds to it is the evangel of the way, revealed first to the Hebrews imperfectly, now perfectly to all men.

We see, then, that the opinion of Virgil stands by itself, practically solitary in pagan literature. How did this idea of hope of an immediate and present salvation through a new-born child take form in his mind?

It may be assumed, for the moment, that chronology and general conditions permit the supposition that Virgil's poem started from and gave the answer to Horace's.<sup>1</sup> The late

<sup>1</sup> The Book of Epodes was not published collectively till 30 B.C.; but it is a well-established fact that important single poems like this were known earlier.

Professor Kiessling, of Berlin, pointed out that Virgil in this poem caught up and echoed two of Horace's phrases. It seems beyond doubt that

nec magnos metuent armenta leones

is not independent of Horace's

nec rivos timeant armenta leones;

and similarly that Virgil's

ipsae lacte domum referent distenta capellae ubera

has some connexion with Horace's

illic iniussae venient ad muletra capellae  
refertque tenta grex amicus ubera.

Two contemporary poets, known to one another, each (as we may be certain) familiar with the other's work, do not write in this way by accident. The resemblance is intentional, and was regarded, both by themselves and by the world, as a compliment paid by the imitator to the imitated. The question might be raised, however, which was the imitator; and there is a certain probability, *a priori*, that Horace, as the younger and less distinguished, was the imitator; for we know of other places, in which beyond doubt that was the case. But in this instance Kiessling concludes that Virgil was the one who echoed Horace; and his reasoning from internal evidence seems conclusive.<sup>1</sup> Moreover Virgil's poem was written in the year 40 B.C., and (as is universally accepted) in the latter part of the year whereas Horace's poem, which arose through the horrors and suffering of the bloody Perusian war and expresses the feeling of repulsion excited thereby in the poet's mind, can hardly be placed later than the early months of 40 or the end of 41 B.C. The imitation is a graceful compliment paid by the older and more famous poet to his young and as yet little

<sup>1</sup> I write far from books; and it is many years since I read Kiessling but I think the above statement is correct.



known contemporary. We can appreciate how much the compliment meant to Horace ; and we can understand how the language of his Ode addressed to Virgil is not hyperbolic, but perfectly sincere and well-deserved. It was the kindness and courtesy which Virgil showed to Horace when he was still struggling with poverty that endeared him to the latter ; and this spirit of kindness and courtesy prompted Virgil to pay this graceful compliment, which may be regarded as the beginning of the friendship between the two poets. That friendship opened the door of society to Horace. After a time Virgil introduced him to Maecenas, who became his patron and intimate friend. In the sunshine of moderate prosperity his character expanded and blossomed into the genial temper of his maturer work. A deep gulf caused by a profound difference of tone and spirit, separates that maturer work from his earliest work. While he was struggling amid hard fortune, he was bitter and narrow. What he quickly became after he met Virgil, the world knows and appreciates.

Now, looking at the Fourth Eclogue from this point of view, let us place it beside the Sixteenth Epode, and see what meaning it gathers from the collocation. Horace had said that no hope for the Romans existed, except that they should abandon Italy and Rome, to seek a happy life in the islands of the Western Ocean. Virgil replies that the better age of which Horace dreams is here in Italy present with them, now just beginning. The very words in which Horace had described a fabulous island and a legendary Golden Age are applied by Virgil to describe Italy as it will soon be, as the child already born in Italy will see it. What are mere fanciful marvels when told about an unknown isle of the Ocean become real in the imaginative vision of Virgil, for they are being now realized in Italy under the new order, through the power of the peace and good order and wise

administration, settled government and security of property, which have been established in the country.

Reading the two poems together, and remembering that they were written within a year of one another by two friends, one cannot doubt that they were companion and contrasted pieces, responding one to the other. They say to Rome respectively : " Seek your happiness by fleeing far into the Western Ocean " ; and " Your happiness is now being wrought out before your eyes in Italy." A glance suffices to show the intention to any one who has eyes to see. But in literary criticism inability to see more than one has been taught and habituated to see is the most striking feature of the most learned scholars.

Virgil is the prophet of the new age of Italy. He was always thinking about Italy and imagining what it might be made by the application of prudence, forethought, and true knowledge. The subject of the Georgics is to describe what Italy might become, if agriculture were wisely and thoroughly carried out. " You have all you need in Italy, the most beautiful and the best country of the whole world, if you will only use it right." The intention of the poem is to force this lesson home to the Roman mind.

The practical and skilful administration of Augustus appealed to Virgil. He saw that Augustus had wise plans, and skill to carry them into effect. He was a convinced adherent and apostle of the Emperor. The union of science and government had made the Mediterranean world fertile. The science had originally been supplied by the theocratic order, when the accumulated experience and growing wisdom of a people was concentrated at the hieron of each district, where the Goddess educated and guided, nourished and tended her people. The union of science and government was now beginning to make Italy perfect under the new Empire ; that union would soon destroy every noxious

plant and animal, produce all useful things in abundance from the soil, tame all that was wild, improve nature to an infinite degree, make the thorn tree laugh and bloom with flowers : it would naturalize in Italy all that was best in foreign lands, and thus render Italy independent of imports and so perfectly self-sufficient that navigation would be unnecessary.

In this last detail we have one of those startlingly modern touches, which so often surprise us in Roman literature. Virgil would have no free trade. The ideal he aimed at was that Italy should depend on itself alone, and not on sea-borne products. His ideal is here different from and narrower than the Imperial. He does not think of binding the lands of the whole Empire into a unity, as the Emperors desired ; he wishes only that Italy should learn to produce everything for itself and that thereafter the "estranging sea" should separate once more the lands, and navigation should cease. He probably had not thought of all that was implied in this ideal.

That the Fourth Eclogue stands in close relation with the new Empire is obvious. It is the wise new system of rule that is to produce these blessed results for Italy. But there is as yet no trace of the autocratic idea in the poem. Augustus is neither named nor directly alluded to.

Virgil thinks of the continuance, in an improved form, of the old Roman system of constitutional government by magistrates (*honores*), of the political career open to all Romans in the old way, and of the military training which was the foundation and an essential part of the Roman education. War must continue for a time, in order that the young Roman may be educated in the true Roman fashion. But it will be foreign war, carried on in the East ; new Argonauts must explore and conquer and bring under the Roman peace the distant Orient ; a new Achilles was sailing

for another Troy in the person of Antony, who was charged with the government of the whole East and the conduct of the Parthian war. The triumvirate, Antony, Augustus<sup>1</sup> and Lepidus, was not in appearance an autocracy; it was, in name at least, a board of three commissioners for establishing the Republic, professedly a temporary expedient to cure the troubles of the state. To speak or think of a single Emperor, or to connect the salvation of Rome with any single human being, was treason to the triumvirate, and was specially out of place at the moment when Virgil was writing, shortly after the peace of Brundisium had established concord and equality between Antony and Augustus. In the Eclogue a more obvious allusion is, in fact, made to Antony than to Augustus, for every one at the time recognized Antony in the new Achilles who was starting for an eastern war: the Provinces east of the Adriatic Sea were under Antony's charge, and a Parthian war was in progress.

But, while Antony is more directly alluded to, the thought that incites the poem and warms the poet's enthusiasm is the wise and prudent administration of Italy by Augustus. That is the real subject. The enlightened forethought of Augustus and Agrippa made their rule the beginning of a new era in Italy; and Virgil looked forward to a continuous growth in the country.

Still less is there any dynastic thought in the Fourth Eclogue. The idea that an expected son of Augustus, or the son of any other distinguished Roman, is alluded to, is anachronistic and simply ridiculous. Every attempt to identify the young child mentioned in the poem with any

<sup>1</sup> For convenient reference we may use by anticipation this title, which was not bestowed till January 27 B.C.; it marked a great step forward in the personal and autocratic rule of Augustus, and a noteworthy step in the way towards his deification.

actual child born or to be born has been an utter failure, and takes this Eclogue from a false point of view.

Least of all is there any idea in the Fourth Eclogue of deifying either Augustus personally or a son of his who might hereafter be born.<sup>1</sup> That view is not merely untrue to the existing facts of the conjoint government and the union of Augustus and Antony. It misunderstands and misrepresents the development of the Imperial idea and the growth (or growing perversion) of thought in Rome; it places Virgil on a plane of feeling far too low; it is a hopeless anachronism in every point of view. Schaper, in a very interesting paper, pointed out many years ago that the deification of Augustus and his son and his dynasty was wholly inconsistent with the composition of the Eclogue so early as B.C. 40. The paper was convincing and, in a certain way, conclusive. But instead of drawing the inference that the deification of the dynasty is a false idea, read into the poem under the prejudice caused by the development of history in the years following after A.D. 40, he propounded the impossible theory that the poem was composed at a later time, i.e., in the period ending June B.C. 23, when Augustus was governing no longer as triumvir, but as consul, and was practically sole master of the Empire, though maintaining the Republican forms and the nominal election of another consul along with himself. To support this theory, Schaper eliminated the allusion to Polio's consulship, which fixes the composition to the year 40 B.C., reading *Solis* instead of *Polio*.<sup>2</sup> To make this theory possible chronologically, and reconcile it with the date of

<sup>1</sup> The idea of some literary critics is that the poem celebrates the birth of an expected son, who unfortunately for the poet turned out to be a daughter. This idea is really too ludicrous for anyone but a confirmed literary and "Higher" Critic. A poet does not work so; even a "poet laureate" could not work under such conditions.

<sup>2</sup> As he pointed out, the correct spelling of the name was Polio, and not Pollio.

publication of the Eclogues not very long after 40 B.C., Schaper supposed that the Fourth Eclogue was composed at a later date and inserted in a revised second edition of the Eclogues.<sup>1</sup>

These impossible buttresses of Schaper's theory were universally rejected; the faults of his paper distracted attention from its real merits; and the perfectly unanswerable argument from which he started was tacitly set aside, as if it shared in the error of the theory which he had deduced from it.

The truth is that the poem belongs to an earlier stage of thought than the worship of Augustus; and the Divine idea in it was still so vague that it was readily capable of being developed in accordance with subsequent history. But it was equally capable of being developed in a different direction and in a nobler and truer style. Had the Pauline idea of Christianity as the religion of the Empire been successfully wrought out during the first century, the Fourth Eclogue would have seemed equally suitable to that line of development. The later popular instinct, which regarded the poem as a prophecy of the birth of Christ, was not wholly incorrect. The poem contained an inchoate idea, unformed and vague, enshrining and embodying that universal need which indicated "the fulness of time" and the world's craving for a Saviour. The Roman world needed a Saviour; it was conscious of its need; it was convinced that only Divine intervention could furnish a Saviour for it. Paul was fully aware that this universal craving and unrest and pain existed in the Roman world; and he saw therein the presage of the birth of Divine truth. "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain until now."

The political side of the Fourth Eclogue is emphatically

<sup>1</sup> Two others, the Sixth and the Tenth, were also supposed by Schaper to have been composed for the enlarged second edition:

marked, and was indubitably recognized universally at the time. It suited the situation, and it glorified the wise policy of Augustus. We are not blind to it. But the significance of this aspect should not blind us to the fact that this alone is quite insufficient to explain the genesis and the full meaning of the poem. Professor Mayor here seems to us to be in the right, as has been argued from additional reasons in the first part of this paper. Virgil had learned something from Hebrew poetry and specially from Isaiah—indirectly, as Professor Mayor thinks, through the rather low-class medium of the Sibylline verses—more directly, as we think, through the medium of a Greek translation of Isaiah.

The Hebrew idea of a growth towards a happier future through the birth of a Divine child was simmering in his mind, when Horace's despairing poem declaring that no happiness for Rome could be found except in voluntary exile to the Islands of the West caught his attention, and drew from him a reply. As a convinced and enthusiastic supporter of Augustus, he declared that peace and happiness was being realized in Italy by the wise rule of the Triumvir. With this he interwove the almost universal thought of his contemporaries that Divine aid alone could afford real and permanent improvement in the condition of the state; and this Divine aid expressed itself to him in the form that he had caught from the Hebrew poetry.

Whom then did he think of as the child? He must have had some idea in his mind. There can be no doubt as to this, if we simply look at the genesis of the Imperial cult. The power of that cult lay in a certain real fact, the majesty and dignity and character of the Roman people, which was assumed to be represented by the Emperor as the head of the state. Augustus permitted worship of himself only in the form of a cult of "Rome and Augustus." To a Roman

like Virgil in B.C. 40, the Divine child, who embodies the future of Rome, who has to go through the education of war and magistracies (as the poem declares), could only be "Rome," i.e., the Roman people collectively, the new generation of Rome, born under happier auspices and destined to glory and advancement in power and in happiness. As Virgil elsewhere apostrophizes the one Roman as typical of the race and its destiny,<sup>1</sup> and as Macaulay imitating him uses the same figurative speech, "Thine, Roman, is the pilum," to paint the Roman racial character, so here the Latin poet, with the Hebrew thought of a child in his mind, can describe the birth and infancy of the child as really taking place with the usual concomitants.

There was more than this in Virgil's poem, more than he was fully conscious of; but this he had in his mind. He did not see, what we can now see, that there was placed before the Empire a dilemma and a necessity. It was a necessity that a new religion should arise for the consolidation of the Empire. There was proposed for the Empire by Paul the new religion of Christ. The Emperors, in refusing the proposal, were inevitably driven to lay stress more and more upon the Imperial religion and the Imperial God. It is not always fully realized that this cult was not very much insisted on until the reign of Domitian, under whom the opposition to Christianity was first developed fully to its logical consequences. Augustus, who instituted the Imperial cult as a support of the state, was always a little ashamed of it; and his successors had something of the same feeling, until Domitian began to take a real pleasure and pride in it.

W. M. RAMSAY.

<sup>1</sup> In the famous line, often quoted, *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento.*