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Some Ancient Notions of Boredom

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There is no need to apologise for a discussion of ancient concepts of boredom. Through fifteen hundred years of Western culture the notion of boredom has been a vital one. Ranging from dark age and medieval monastic *acedia*, from the “English disease” of the seventeenth, eighteenth centuries and the French Enlightenment, from the *mal de siècle* of nineteenth century Europe, to the “nausea” and alienation of twentieth century existentialists and Marxists, the concept has had a long and powerful history.¹ It is a history, furthermore, of literary and sociological significance. (As much felt, that is, as written about.) The topic did not have the same importance for the ancients as it does for moderns. Yet there are references to the concept in ancient literature. These provide the justification for my paper.

In spite of its ubiquity the notion of boredom—in ancient or modern literature—is very hard to pin down. The meaning seems to shift with the centuries and, even within these centuries, to shift according to the sensibility and the age of the person using it. It is, however, a notion which most eras take for granted. Definitions, therefore, must come first. The concept of boredom cannot be isolated in ancient contexts unless we are sure of that to which we are referring. Here are some of the definitions which are currently in use.² The bulk of these are, because of the obvious danger of anachronism, inapplicable to the ancient world. Thoroughness, however, demands at least a partial listing.

1. A sense of boredom or simple tedium may be the result of, say, being shut up too long. It is also the case that people can be as “boring” as situations. In people an excess of long-windedness, for example, or an unwillingness to vary a long practised routine is often described as “boring.”

¹ See Kuhn's book cited in Note 2 and M. Bouchez, *L'ennui: de Sénèque à Moravia* (Paris 1973).

² Some of these definitions may be found in R. Kuhn's *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton 1976) 3–13.

(A "bore," of course, may also be a person who is judged socially inept or socially inferior.)

2. Kuhn describes a state which he terms *horror loci*.³ Typically this state of mind is seen in a rich man who hurries to his country house only to become bored with this. He then hurries quickly back to his city house where the same thing happens all over again. This state of restless dissatisfaction does not necessarily imply the more "spiritual" conditions described below. Indeed it may indicate nothing more than a low tolerance to boredom of the type described above.

3. There is another type of boredom, sometimes described as a spiritual boredom or ennui, which can infect a whole life. In some cases *horror loci* could be seen as a manifestation of this condition. This type of emotion is perhaps more familiar from the literature of the nineteenth century where it was termed the *mal de siècle*. It has had a sort of an afterlife in the conditions suffered by Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée* or by Mersault in Camus' *La Peste*, or by Dino, the protagonist of Moravia's *La Noia*. Such conditions are surely related to alienation in the Marxian sense—reification as it is sometimes called. This is the sort of thing which an assembly line worker may suffer.⁴

4. There is also depression.⁵ In the psychological sense depression (or, as Aristotle termed it, melancholy) can resemble boredom or ennui. But they are not really the same thing. The ancients and the moderns view depression as an illness and do not confuse it with boredom. Spleen, the "English Disease" prevalent in eighteenth century England and in the French Enlightenment, is perhaps more readily identifiable with depression. So too is *acedia*, the monkish "demon of noontide," that destructive sense of depression so feared by the medieval cleric. Depression and melancholy, since they are to be distinguished from boredom, are not to be the subject of this paper.

Such a listing, as is obvious, is procrustean and exclusive. (Where, it might be queried, is Durkheim's anomie? Can simple boredom not result from depression?) Yet without some attempt at the categorisation of the emotion of boredom any attempt to discuss its ancient manifestations is

³ See Kuhn, *op. cit.* in Note 2, 23. Kuhn does not state whence the term is derived. It seems to resemble such "English" Latin as *horror vacui* (on which see the entry in the *OED*) for which it could be a rough sort of antonym. The condition, at least in ancient literature, is alluded to more than once. Kuhn's term, which I will use henceforth, seems to me to be as good as any other.

⁴ The "bored housewife" syndrome is probably irrelevant here. Kuhn (*op. cit.* in Note 2, 7) links this to a type of sense deprivation: "unconscious goals, aspirations and ideals . . . are maintained in this state of boredom, but the ability to reach them is interfered with by the repression of these goals and the rejection of substitutes that all seem inadequate."

⁵ For histories of which see R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London 1964), and Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholy and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven 1986). Worth consulting in a more general sense is Bennett Simon, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1978).

doomed. In the following pages some of the contexts in which boredom is alluded to will be discussed. The intention is to determine in what ways, if any, such contexts mirror the conceptualisations of the emotion which are reproduced above.

Perhaps at the very outset a list of the ancient terms used to describe boredom is in order. Their location in a text will help to focus the discussion. In Greek there is ἄλυσ and its verbal forms ἀλύω, ἀλυσθαίνω, ἀλύσσω, ἀλυστάζω etc., and nouns (and their verbal forms) such as ἀπάθεια, ἀκηδία,⁶ ἀπληστία, ἄση, κόρος, πλησμονή or, in some contexts, verbal forms such as ἀνιάω, ἐνοχλέω or τρυφάω. In Latin there are words such as *taedium* and related forms, *fastidium* and related terms, *otium*, *satietas* and related forms, *vacare*, *fatigo*, *defatigo*, *defetiscor* etc., *torpor* and related forms, *languidus* and related terms, *desidia*, *inertia*, *ineptia*, *piget* and related forms, *hebes* and related forms, *obtundo*, *molestus*, *odiosus*, *odium*, *vexo* and so on. The list could be extended, but, as is probably obvious, most of these terms are mere approximations.⁷ They do allow, however, a few conclusions to be drawn. The term used to describe "boredom" in Greek is not at all common and, with the sense of "boredom," is late. *Taedium* is the best of the Latin terms, but it lacks concision. Its lexical ambit is far wider than the English "boredom" (or, for that matter, terms in modern languages such as *l'ennui*, *la noia* or *Langweile*). Speaking lexically, therefore, the ancient notion of boredom was not a precise one. But this observation needs to be tested against the ancient descriptions.

In Greek of the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods, references to boredom are very hard to find. They are, furthermore, conjectural. Here is a fairly typical example. It is from Plato, *Symposium* 173c, and occurs soon after the beginning of the dialogue. After stating that he knows of nothing which gives him greater pleasure than discussing philosophy, Apollodorus continues to say: . . . τοὺς ὑμετέρους τοὺς τῶν πλουσίων καὶ χρηματιστικῶν, αὐτὸς τε ἄχθομαι ὑμᾶς τε τοὺς ἐταίρους ἐλεῶ, ὅτι οἷσθ' ἐτι ποιεῖν οὐδὲν ποιοῦντες.

Dover⁸ interprets the use of the word ἄχθομαι in this context as "bored." This is doubtless correct, but it remains an interpretation: "wearied" or even "annoyed" might have done. Notice too that Dover's imputed sense of "being bored" here is comparable only to the simple emotion described as number one above. It would be incredible to maintain that Greeks did not feel such an emotion.

⁶ I doubt that this word can be satisfactorily included within this list, notwithstanding the famous medieval sense. The sole example which may be relevant is Cic. *ad Att.* 12. 45. For the problems associated with the word in this context see Shackleton-Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus*, vol. 5 (Cambridge 1966) 337-38.

⁷ In some contexts yawning might denote boredom. One could add to the list, therefore, χάσκω in Greek, and in Latin *oscito*, *oscitatio* and *hio*.

⁸ In his *Plato: Symposium* (Oxford 1980) 79.

In Pindar (and frequently in oratorical literature) a fear is expressed that a lengthy text may induce in the listener the emotion of κόρος. At first sight the word may seem to imply boredom. Closer examination will show that, as with Plato, such an assumption is conjectural. Here from Pindar, *Pythian* 1. 81–83, is a typical reference to this fear:⁹

καιρὸν εἰ φθέγξαιο, πολλῶν πείρατα συντανύσαις
ἐν βραχεῖ, μείων ἔπεται ᾧμος ἀνθρώ-
πων· ἀπὸ γὰρ κόρος ἀμβλύνει
αἰανῆς ταχείας ἐλπίδας·

What is the state of mind referred to here? Does "satiety" entail "boredom" or "weariness?"¹⁰ Or could it even entail, as Burton¹¹ maintains, "some sort of offensive action." The κόρος may be the product of excessive long-windedness, which may produce weariness. Or such fulsome praise may rouse the envy of the audience and thus bring hostility against the addressee. In other contexts the result of κόρος may be the weakening of the force of the speaker's argument (defence, accusation, request etc.).¹² It is not easy to decide which emotion is being appealed to. All three emotions may be referred to. The point, however, is that in Pindar (and in later contexts) the emotion is not made precise. Having only words upon which to make deductions one must conclude that the imprecise labelling meant, as far as boredom is concerned, an imprecise perception of the emotion. Pindar and the orators, therefore, offer no help.

Two other passages which may profitably be compared are *Iliad* 24. 403 and Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, 804–08. Both passages are instructive in a negative way. Both describe situations which, on first reading, seem to allude to boredom. Indeed, boredom might be expected in such situations. Yet, on closer reading, neither context mentions the emotion. This may well indicate the regard in which this mental state was held. In the former Hermes, pretending to be one of Achilles' Myrmidons, is speaking to Priam. He states that the Achaeans will begin fighting the Trojans at dawn.

⁹ Other examples may be seen at *Pythian* 8. 32, at *Nemeans* 7. 52 and 10. 20.

¹⁰ Eur. *Med.* 245 offers an analogous instance but uses the word ἄση. Medea is in the midst of her great monologue on the role of women in Greek society:

ἄνθρωπος δ', ὅταν τοῖς ἐνδον ἄχθῃται ξυνών,
ἔξω μολὼν ἔπαυσε καρδίαν ἄσης.

Whether ἄση refers to "satiety," "weariness" or plain "boredom" is impossible to say. (Notice too the use of ἄχθομαι).

¹¹ See Pindar's *Pythian Odes* (Oxford 1962) 107: "The risk of κόρος is always present in his thoughts: it is not merely a passive state of mind in an audience but a positive emotion that may issue in some sort of offensive action." On the rhetorical force of κόρος see E. L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica*, UCPCP, 18 (1962) 13, 40, 74 ff.

¹² The *topos* had a long history. Compare, from amongst the many possible examples, Isocrates, *Panegy.* 7; Ovid, *Pont.* 3. 7. 3; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 100. 11; Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 8. 6. 14; 10. 1. 31 and Rutilius Namatianus, *de red.* 2. 3. This rhetorical *topos* never clearly distinguishes between boredom, weariness and offence.

They have had enough of waiting (ἀσχαλώσι γὰρ οἶδε καθήμενοι). Their leaders can no longer restrain them. One might have expected Hermes to express some notion of boredom here—it might be expected to be implicit in καθήμενοι. Yet ἀσχαλώσι is a precise word. It demonstrates that the soldiers were not “bored,” but vexed at having to wait. We might have preferred them to be bored. In the passage from the *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Achilles has just come on stage and addresses the chorus. He asks for Agamemnon and seems to complain about the delays they are enduring, bottled up at Aulis. These are his words:

οὐκ ἐξ ἴσου γὰρ μένομεν Εὐρίπου πέλας.
οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῶν ὄντες ἄζυγες γάμων
οἴκους ἐρήμους ἐκλιπόντες ἐνθάδε
θάσσουσ' ἐπ' ἅκταις, οἱ δ' ἔχοντες εὐνίδας
καὶ παῖδας.

The key words are θάσσουσ' ἐπ' ἅκταις, which are occasionally interpreted as referring to the boredom of being bottled up. Yet, on closer examination, this does not seem to be what Euripides is saying. The soldiers may be sitting by the shore; but their attitude is likely to be one of impatience to get on with the war and to get back to their deserted homes which will need their care. Boredom, in both passages, seems latent in the descriptions. Yet this is not what was really chosen for emphasis.¹³

Recourse to the dictionary listed occurrences of ἄλυσ or ἄλύω casts no doubt upon the suspicion that for Greeks of this period boredom was a neglected emotion. The *LSJ* offers two early uses of the word where the meaning seems to be “boredom” or “ennui.”¹⁴ The first comes from the Epicurean philosopher Metrodorus.¹⁵ Metrodorus links the verb ἄλύω with the words ἐπὶ τῶν συμποσίων. The context is fragmentary but Metrodorus seems to be referring to the tedium which can be induced by a bad drinking party. Lacking a context it is difficult to state anything with confidence. Yet here it seems not unreasonable to interpret the reference to boredom as being of the simple type. Zeno, as reported by Clement of Alexandria (von Arnim, *SVF* i, p. 58), uses the word in a manner which may be appropriate to simple boredom, or so suggests the *LSJ*. To judge from the following lines it may be better to gloss the word ἄλυσ as “annoyance”: ἀπέστω δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν μυροπωλίων καὶ χρυσοχοείων καὶ ἐριοπωλίων ἄλυσ καὶ ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἐργαστηρίων, ἔνθα ἐταιρικῶς κεκοσμημέναι, ὥσπερ (αἱ) ἐπὶ τέγουσ καθεζόμεναι, διημερεύουσι.

Taken on their own the passages and contexts discussed above can prove nothing. The knowledge, however, that the contemporary term for boredom

¹³ Compare Plutarch, *Eumenes* 11—which is discussed below. Here Plutarch makes much of the boredom suffered not just by the cooped up soldiers, but also by the cooped up animals.

¹⁴ Epicurus (fr. 496) may refer to the emotion, if not use the term ἄλυσ. See Note 34 below.

¹⁵ Papyrus Herculanensis, 831. 13, ed. A. Körte.

was rarely used, and that the mental state was rarely described or alluded to, does allow us to note a tendency to ignore the emotion. Perhaps judging it trivial, Greeks of these periods did not dignify it with frequent reference.¹⁶

For the first unequivocal description of boredom we have to wait for Lucretius. Lucretius *DRN*, 3. 1053–75¹⁷ is a famous passage. Its depiction of the anxious, bored lives of the Roman rich¹⁸ was imitated later by Horace and by Seneca. Lucretius' ennui-ridden individual tires of being at home, goes out, returns again dissatisfied; he hurries from his city house to his country home to escape the sense of anxiety and ennui only to find the same experience awaiting him in the country. The key lines are *DRN*, 3. 1060–67:

exit saepe foras magnis ex aedibus ille,
esse domi quem pertaesumst, subitoque <revertit>,
quippe foris nilo melius qui sentiat esse.
currit agens mannos ad villam praecipitanter,
auxilium tectis quasi ferre ardentibus instans;
oscitat extemplo, tetigit cum limina villae,
aut abit in somnum gravis atque oblivia quaerit,
aut etiam properans urbem petit atque revisit.

Lucretius seems to blame the unsettled emotions of his wealthy Roman on a fear of death.¹⁹ Presumably Lucretius means that the desire for a change of place of habitation reflects a hope that novelty will assuage or distract the fear of death. That *horror loci* is being described is manifest. That boredom is at issue is made obvious by the use of the words *oscitat*.

Lucretius' diagnosis of the cause of *horror loci* is doubly interesting. It may demonstrate his unwillingness to accept that such a simple emotion as boredom could cause such havoc in a life. Thus it may reinforce the suspicion that boredom was not a state taken very seriously in the ancient world. Furthermore Lucretius *DRN*, 1053–75, being such a confident portrait, suggests that the emotional state of his wealthy man was not uncommon. Bailey²⁰ remarks that "boredom and restlessness were a

¹⁶ Arist., *Ach.* 30 has Dicaeopolis, as he waits for the assembly to convene, listing a series of discomforts. Amongst the words appears the perfect tense of *χάσσω*:

στένω κέχηνα σκορδινῶμαι πέρδομαι,
ἀπορῶ γράφω παρατίλλομαι λογίζομαι.

It seems to me most probable that this is a reference to boredom (cf. ἀπορῶ).

¹⁷ According to Klibansky, *op. cit.* in Note 5, 356, in the tract on melancholy of Agrippa of Nettesheim, Lucretius is said to be a melancholic (as are Hesiod, Ion, Tynnichus of Chalcis and Homer.) The assertion is unprovable. However, it makes more sense than the assertion of Kuhn, *op. cit.* in Note 2, 25 ff., that Lucretius was subject to ennui.

¹⁸ Their probable wealth is stressed by Kenney, *Lucretius, De rerum natura: Book III* (Cambridge 1971) 239.

¹⁹ So Bailey, *Titi Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (Oxford 1947) vol. 2, 1171, and Kenney, *op. cit.* in Note 18, 239.

²⁰ *Op. cit.* in Note 19, vol. 2, 1171.

characteristic of Roman life at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire." Whence he drew this information I am unsure—though doubtless his observation is correct in spite of the paucity of contemporary evidence. Yet the passage must point to its prevalence. It deserves to be noted, however, that in spite of the probable prevalence of this type of emotion, Roman literature of this and later periods makes few references to the emotion.²¹ That in itself is surely significant. The Roman valuation matches that of the Greeks. The experience may have been another matter.

At this point attention must be directed backwards, chronologically speaking, to an important relic of one of Ennius' plays, the *otium* fragment from the *Iphigenia*. From an historical point of view this fragment ought to have been treated before Lucretius, antedating the *DRN* as it does by well over one hundred years. Its imputed purpose, a description of *horror loci*, is simpler to judge when viewed in the light of Lucretius' unequivocal description.²² The sense of v. 199–202 of this fragment may point to the type of emotion whose symptoms Lucretius inveighs against in the Roman rich. The fragment (XCIX, v. 195–202 in Jocelyn) follows:

otio qui nescit uti
 plus negoti habet quam cum est negotium in negotio.
 nam cui quod agat institutum est †in illis† negotium,
 id agit, <id> studet, ibi mentem atque animum delectat suum;
 †otioso initio† animus nescit quid velit.
 hoc idem est: em neque domi nunc nos nec militiae sumus.
 imus huc, hinc illuc; cum illuc ventum est, ire illinc lubet.
 incerte errat animus, praeter propter vitam vivitur.

Otium could conceivably be interpreted here as boredom—although the use is doubtless punning. The chorus of soldiers may be telling us that *otium* ("ease") can quickly become "boring" or "wearying" (*otiosum*). Thus it is with them. They go here and there (like Lucretius' rich man) but cannot settle (*incerte errat animus*) nor derive satisfaction from life (*praeter propter vitam vivitur*). It needs to be observed, however, that the manuscript readings are crucial. Jocelyn's text,²³ reproducing the *codices*, tends to remove the sense of "boredom" by reproducing the less comprehensible reading *otioso initio* rather than Lipsius' widely accepted *otioso in otio*.²⁴

²¹ As a rhetorical demonstration of this point we could point, for example, to Cicero's letters of 59, say, *Att.* 6. 9 and 11, which do not mention or describe boredom. One might have expected them to. Similarly one might have expected Ovid in Tomis to be consumed by the emotion. Yet his *Epistulae ex Ponto* contain no such references (cf. *Ex Ponto* 1. 5. 8, 43–44; 3. 4. 57).

²² Farquharson in his *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Antoninus* (Oxford 1944) vol. 2, 514, implies the link between this passage and Lucretius.

²³ Which is the one reproduced here: *The Tragedies of Ennius* (Cambridge 1967) 112 and 333 ff.

²⁴ On this fragment and *otium* see J. -M. André, *Recherches sur l'otium romain* (Paris 1962), and, more generally, *L'otium dans la vie morale et intellectuelle romaine* (Paris 1966). See too

As read above the fragment seems to have more to do with laziness (a "lazy beginning?") or indecisiveness than with boredom. When one makes a lazy start, the fragment could be saying, one does not know where one is. Begin indecisively then things continue that way and a task becomes laborious.²⁵ The chorus of soldiers could be referring, therefore, not to any sense of *horror loci* (which seems unlikely in their occupation) but to the indecisiveness which has overtaken them due to poor initiation and direction.²⁶ It is doubtful, therefore, that this fragment offers any assistance in pinning down Roman notions of boredom.

Horace, perhaps unlike Ennius, seems to reflect Lucretius' description of *horror loci*.²⁷ In Stoic or Epicurean contexts such as *Satires* 2. 7. 28–29, in *Epistles* 1. 8. 12; 1. 11. 27 and 1. 14 Horace inveighs against the victims (himself included) of this type of ennui. *Satire* 2. 7 reports a dialogue between Horace and one of his slaves, Davus. Taking advantage of the freedom of speech allowed slaves during the Saturnalia, Davus upbraids his master for philosophical pusillanimity. The basic notion of the poem is that only the wise man is free. Davus the slave is in fact the true free man, while free Horace is in reality a slave. One of Davus' demonstrations of Horace's lack of freedom hinges upon *horror loci*: this is expressed in v. 28–29. Like Lucretius' wealthy man, Horace is unable to find contentment in either the city or the country.

Romae rus optas, absentem rusticus urbem
tollis ad astra levis.

The emotion, not perhaps as acute as that described by Lucretius, is none the less of the same order. In *Epistles* 1. 14 it is Horace giving the advice, this time to his *vilicus*, who longs for the excitements of the city life which he has willingly abandoned for the farm. The dissatisfactions which Horace's slave feels are a type of *horror loci* and are comparable to those denounced by Davus in *Satires* 2. 7. Note also that the solution to the problem of the *vilicus*, according to Horace, is hard work. The implication

Jocelyn, *op. cit.* in Note 23, and O. Skutsch, *Studia Enniana* (London 1968) 157–65 (a reprint of his *Rh.M.* 96 [1953] 193 ff. article.)

²⁵ The reading *otioso initio* is defended by R. J. Baker, "Well begun, half done: *otium* at Catullus 51. 13 and Ennius, *Iphigenia*," forthcoming. Baker interprets the phrase as an ablative of attendant circumstances and cites Cic. *de leg.* 3. 37 (*hoc populo* etc.) as a comparable construction. The reading does produce a scanable half line (the first two metra of this trochaic septenarius are comprised of two trochees followed by two anapaests) provided one allows hiatus between *initio* and *animus*.

²⁶ Exactly the same point could be made of the use of *otium* in the final stanza of Catullus 51. Here indecisiveness or laziness could have been the trouble rather than boredom. (See R. J. Baker, "Propertius' Monobiblos and Catullus 51," *Rh.M.* 124 [1981] 312–24.) If one accepts Lipsius' emendation, however, it is a different matter. Horace, *Odes* 2. 16, seems to refer neither to boredom, laziness nor indecisiveness. See Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 211 ff.

²⁷ See Kenney, *op. cit.* in Note 18, 241.

is that the emotion is normal and doubtless afflicts many. Horace does not suggest that it is a result of a fear of death.

Epistles 1. 11, addressed to a Bullatius, who was travelling abroad and, the poem seems to suggest, who was prone to the disorder described in *DRN* 3. 1053–75, again uses the image of *horror loci*. Like *Epistles* 1. 8, which will be discussed shortly, this poem presents Bullatius' problems as symptomatic of a larger problem. V. 25–30 summarise:

... nam si ratio et prudentia curas,
non locus effusi late maris arbiiter aufert,
caelum, non animum, mutant qui trans mare currunt.
strenua nos exercet inertia: navibus atque
quadrigis petimus bene vivere. quod petis hic est,
est Ulubris, animus si te non deficit aequus.

The (*strenua*) *inertia* —a synonym for *taedium*—is certainly a form of boredom, but one whose consequences are most apparent in *horror loci*.²⁸ The solution to the problem is the exercise of *ratio* and *prudentia* and the resultant possession of an *aequus animus*. The cure is philosophical. It needs to be stressed that Horace's opinion of *horror loci* seems to differ from that of Lucretius. The incessant desire for change, which this emotion reflects, is symptomatic for Lucretius of a deeper malaise, the fear of death. Novelty distracts one from the fear, whilst sameness is inclined to encourage it. Horace does not appear to see anything so sinister in *horror loci*. For him it is a typical human emotion which can be cured by common sense and hard work.

Epistles 1. 8. 11–12 seems to continue the idea. Here it is Horace describing himself:

quae nocuere sequar, fugiam quae profore credam;
Romae Tibur amem ventosus, Tibure Romam.

In this short poem, however, Horace's inability to be content with his lot is the result not so much of a lack of philosophical conviction as of his own psychology. In v. 9–10 he describes himself as locked into a perverse frame of mind which generates the *horror loci*:

fidis offendar medicis, irascar amicis,
cur me funesto properent arcere verno.

Whether Horace's condition is better characterised as ennui or depression (melancholy) is a moot point.²⁹ I believe that it is melancholy, not ennui.

²⁸ The notion is also picked up in *Odes* 2. 16. 18–20: *quid terras alio calentis / sole mudamus? patriae quis exsul / se quoque fugit?*

²⁹ Klibansky, *op. cit.* in Note 5, 50, reports Rufus of Ephesus, who wrote not much later than Horace, as describing a melancholic as "bloated and swarthy; plagued by all manner of desires, depressed . . . ; cowardly and misanthropic; generally sad without cause, but sometimes immoderately cheerful; given over to various eccentricities, phobias and obsessions." Is this

What is important is that the emotion (here termed metaphorically as *veternus*)³⁰ has been complicated and expanded to the point that it has become almost spiritual. The condition, alternatively, is close to that of the seventeenth century melancholy, spleen, or to that of the nineteenth century ennui. As in so many instances, however, no clear-cut reference to boredom is apparent.

In Seneca's writings the notion of boredom appears frequently. Its range of connotations is broad and seems to stretch from simple boredom to a type of boredom which reflects that described by Horace in *Epistles* 1. 8. Boredom can become so all-pervasive as to sour one's whole approach to life. Similarly broad is Seneca's use of the key term *taedium*: the word can mean anything from "disgust" or "weariness" through simple boredom to full-blown ennui. Seneca's perception of the emotion, speaking textually, represents something new.

Simple boredom is referred to, for example, at *Nat. Quaest.* 4 A. Praef. 2, and at *Ep. Mor.* 40. 3. 6 and 70. 3. 7. The latter pair may be cited as representative. Speaking of a style of speech which is too slow Seneca suggests that the "boredom" (or "weariness") caused by halting speech induces an audience to lose interest: *nam illa quoque inopia et exilitas minus intentum auditorem habet taedio interruptae tarditatis*. . . . In the second passage, *Ep. Mor.* 70. 3. 7, Seneca is using a nautical metaphor. He contrasts the reactions of sailors to slow and to speedy voyages. Sailors trapped into the first type of passage are wearied by the boredom induced by the windlessness: *alium enim, ut scis, venti segnes ludunt ac detinent et tranquillitatis lentissimae taedio lassant, alium pertinax flatus celerrime perfert*. Notice that the term used here for boredom is *taedium*.³¹ Such a use of the word *taedium* is clearly linked to its common use meaning "weariness" or "disgust."³²

Seneca repeats some of the notions of *horror loci* which are familiar from Lucretius and Horace. One could cite, above all, *Ep. Mor.* 28, which refers specifically to Horace, *Epist.* 1. 11. 27, and expands, Stoic fashion, on this notion throughout the letter. The opening couple of sentences of the letter are indicative of the theme of the whole: *hoc tibi soli putas accidisse et admiraris quasi rem novam, quod peregrinatione tam longa et tot locorum varietatibus non discussisti tristiam gravitatemque mentis?*

Horace? Ross S. Kilpatrick, *The Poetry of Friendship: Horace, Epistles I* (Edmonton 1986) 38–39 argues that Horace is the victim of melancholy.

³⁰ Kiessling-Heinze, begging the question, compare ἀκηδία in Cic. *ad Att.* 12. 45, on which see Note 6 above.

³¹ The OLD (s.v. *taedium*) allows the meaning "ennui" for *taedium* only when it stands without the genitive. This seems to me to be unnecessarily prescriptive. This is especially so in the case of the second of the two citations above. A meaning "boredom" seems as apposite.

³² See amongst others, *Ep. Mor.* 56. 9. 5; 59. 15. 8; 100. 11. 5; *de ira* 3. 1. 5. 6, or *de beneficiis* 2. 5. 2. 7; 2. 11. 6. 2; 6. 16. 6. 2 or 7. 2. 4. 2.

animum debes mutare, non caelum . . . The theme is repeated with variations in *ad Helv.* 12. 3. 4, where Seneca refers to the extremes to which the rich will go to avoid *taedium*. In this case they vary their bored lives by imitating the poor: *nec tantum condicio illos temporum aut locorum inopia pauperibus exaequat; sumunt quosdam dies, cum iam illos divitiarum taedium cepit, quibus humi cenent et remoto auro argentoque fictilibus utantur.*³³ Somewhat the same theme is repeated in *Ep. Mor.* 18. 7. 3, where the rich are seen to attempt to escape *taedium* through luxury. Seneca, though a professed Stoic, seems to have more in common with Lucretius than Horace. In *Ep. Mor.* 28 the cause of *horror loci* is seen to be a fear of death. Novelty can distract from this fear, but the real cure rests in the eradication of fear through philosophy.

Boredom (or *taedium* as Seneca usually terms it) can spoil a whole life. Seneca seems fully conversant with the emotions described by Horace in *Epistles* 1. 8 and with the larger problems indicated by Lucretius' *horror loci*. The invasive *taedium* which produced the *horror loci* outlined above is one example. The emotion outlined in *Ep. Mor.* 24 seems stronger again. It can be so powerful as to lead to suicide. The passage (*Ep. Mor.* 24. 26), though lengthy, requires quotation in full.

Quosdam subit eadem faciendi vivendique satietas et vitae non odium sed fastidium, in quod prolabimur ipsa inpellente philosophia, dum dicimus: "Quousque eadem? Nempe expergiscar dormiam, <edam> esuriam, algebo aestuabo. Nullius rei finis est, sed in orbem nexa sunt omnia, fugiunt ac sequuntur. Diem nox premit, dies noctem, aestas in autumnum desinit, autumnus hiemps instat, quae vere conpescitur: omnia sic transeunt ut revertantur. Nihil novi facio, nihil novi video: fit aliquando et huius rei nausia." Multi sunt qui non acerbum iudicent vivere, sed supervacuum.

(Notice that in this passage the word *taedium* does not appear. It is replaced by *satietas*, *fastidium* and, most remarkably, by *nausia*).³⁴ Seneca's portrait of boredom has taken the pervasive, souring but limited emotion of Lucretius and Horace to its logical extreme. *Horror loci* has become so severe that it influences all portions of life. The victim is left with but one alternative: *multi sunt qui non acerbum iudicent vivere, sed supervacuum*. This can only be suicide.

³³ Compare *Ep. Mor.* 100. 6 and Martial 3. 48.

³⁴ The term *taedium* is used earlier in the letter (24. 22): *Obiurgat Epicurus non minus eos, qui mortem concupiscunt, quam eos, qui timent, et ait: "Ridiculum est currere ad mortem taedio vitae, cum genere vitae, ut currendum ad mortem esset, effeceris."* The sense is the same. The quotation is reproduced by Usener, *Epicurea* (repr. Rome 1966) as fr. 496 of Epicurus' remains. It would be useful to know what Epicurus said and to have a context. This might alter the conclusions concerning the earlier Greek conceptions of the emotion. As it stands, Seneca may be guilty of distortion.

Before leaving Seneca perhaps some mention should be made of the fascinating dialogue *de tranquillitate animi*.³⁵ The dialogue is addressed to a young Annaeus Serenus, who complains of a condition which, at the outset of the dialogue, seems to resemble at times melancholia at times boredom. Soon afterwards (1. 4) the emphasis of the dialogue shifts from the physiological to the moral. Serenus complains that he is unable to choose between a life of luxury and a life of frugality, between a public and a private life, and so on. In spite of frequent references to *taedium vitae* and *displicentia sui*³⁶ the thrust of the dialogue is to diagnose and to correct this state of mental equivocation and to replace it with a state of philosophical tranquillity. The concern of the dialogue is only tangentially with boredom.

It is, after Seneca, Plutarch who provides the most useful set of references to the notion of boredom.³⁷ To judge from the occurrences of the word ἄλυσ, he preserves part of the range of the meanings evident in Seneca. There are in Plutarch several references to the simple form of boredom.³⁸ *Eumenes* 11. 3 provides the clearest example. In this passage the effect of the close confinement of besieged forces is described and Eumenes' attempts to alleviate the feeling of ἄλυσ which was taking hold of the soldiers. The crucial clause is this: . . . οὐ μόνον τὸν ἄλυν αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τῆς ἀπραξίας μαραινομένων ἀπαλλάξαι βουλόμενος, ἀλλὰ καὶ . . . Here boredom is the result above all of inactivity (ἀπραξία). Like *taedium* the word also may have the sense of "distress" (see *Brut.* 5) or even "depression" (see *Mar.* 78). As far as I can see, however, there are no common references in Plutarch to *horror loci*.

Perhaps the most startling reference to boredom occurs in *Pyrrhus* 13. Pyrrhus, after becoming regent of Epeirus and later of Macedonia, withdrew from the latter possession in disappointment at the disloyalty of his subjects. It was in description of this point of his life that Plutarch makes his reference to "boredom." The passage deserves quoting in full:

Τότε δ' οὖν εἰς Ἡπειρον ἐκπεσόντι τῷ Πύρρῳ καὶ προεμένῳ Μακεδονίαν ἡ μὲν τύχη παρεῖχε χρῆσθαι τοῖς παρούσιν ἀπραγμόνως καὶ ζῆν ἐν εἰρήνῃ, βασιλεύοντι τῶν οἰκείων· ὁ δὲ τὸ μὴ παρέχειν ἑτέροις κακὰ μὴδ' ἔχειν ὑφ' ἑτέρων ἄλυν τινὰ ναυτιώδη νομίζων, ὥσπερ ὁ Ἀχιλλεὺς οὐκ ἔφερε τὴν σχολήν . .

Boredom—to the point of nausea—did not allow Pyrrhus to enjoy his retirement. He was only content, according to Plutarch, when doing or receiving mischief. To alleviate the boredom Pyrrhus launched himself on a new round of military activities at the end of which he lost his life.

³⁵ Kuhn, *op. cit.* in Note 2, 31, insists incorrectly that the concern of this dialogue is ennui. See too Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford 1976) 322.

³⁶ See, for example, 2. 6. 2; 2. 10. 2; 2. 11. 4; 3. 1. 1; 3. 6. 2 and 17. 3. 7.

³⁷ Other instances, but scattered ones, exist. See, for example, *Martial* 12. 82. 14, which refers to the boring importunities of a man seeking a dinner invitation.

³⁸ Amongst others one could cite *Eum.* 11, *Ant.* 51, *Pyrrh.* 16, *Tim.* 14 and *Rom.* 5.

Boredom, therefore, and its avoidance is seen as the motivating force in Pyrrhus' life. Whether or not Pyrrhus is telling us historical truth is irrelevant—nor do we have any means of ascertaining the state of Pyrrhus' psychology. What is vital is Plutarch's perception of the emotion. Boredom, like the *mal de siècle*, has become a spiritual malady and is seen as capable of devouring a whole life.

The century following Plutarch, as expected, provides further references to boredom. There is, for example, Diogenes of Oenoanda (fr. 25 Chilton) referring to the fickle and bored manner in which passers-by read his work. Or Aelian (*Varia Historia* 14. 12) singling out the king of Persia who, to avoid boredom when travelling, kept a knife and a piece of linden wood for whittling. Farquharson, the editor of Marcus Aurelius, argues for the presence of a reference to ennui, precisely *horror loci*, in 2. 7 of the *Meditations*.³⁹ The passage is as follows:

Περὶ σπᾶι τί σε τὰ ἔξωθεν ἐμπίπτοντα; καὶ σχολὴν παρέχε σταντῶι τοῦ προσημανθάνειν ἀγαθόν τι καὶ παῦσαι ῥεμβόμενος. ἤδη δὲ καὶ τὴν ἑτέραν περιφορὰν φυλακτέον· ληροῦσι γὰρ καὶ διὰ πράξεων οἱ κεκηκότες τῶι βίῳ καὶ μὴ ἔχοντες σκοπόν, ἐφ' ὃν πᾶσαν ὁρμὴν καὶ καθάπαξ φαντασίαν ἀπευθύνουσιν.

The expression οἱ κεκηκότες τῶι βίῳ may indeed be a very condensed way for describing the aimless Roman aristocrat. The expression, however, does not allow of easy interpretation. It may well refer to a spiritual ennui. That it may also refer to *horror loci* is uncertain.

As a topic worthy of serious consideration boredom must wait for the fourth century, the next period of great cultural revival. Reference in this period, however, has inexorably been altered by Christianity. The focus, through the work of men such as the Christian mystic Evagrius or of St. John Chrysostomos, is now on the deadly sin of *acedia*, the depressed condition which led anchorites to despair of god.⁴⁰ It has been indicated previously that *acedia* may better be considered as depression. But demonstration of this point is beyond the scope of this paper.

There are several conclusions which may be drawn from this brief survey. The first and most obvious is that the ancients were subject to boredom. But there are qualifications which need to be made to this assertion. Greek literature down to the Hellenistic period lacks reference to anything more than the simplest form of boredom. Indeed the word boredom only seems to appear in the fourth century. Serious or unequivocal consideration of boredom begins in the first century B.C. in Rome, but here it is limited to the less complex form of *horror loci*. It is in the first and second centuries A.D. that a spiritual form of boredom is first referred to. This is apparent in the works of Seneca and then Plutarch. Boredom in

³⁹ Farquharson, *op. cit.* in Note 22, vol. 2, 514.

⁴⁰ The most recent discussion of this topic is contained in Jackson, *op. cit.* in Note 5, 46–77.

Seneca is seen as an emotion which effects not only sporadically but can spread to influence one's every waking action. It can become a spiritual disease. Plutarch, to judge from his life of Pyrrhus, was quite familiar with the concept. In Seneca and Plutarch, therefore, there seems to be the beginnings of the modern concepts of the emotion. Why the early empire should mark the inception of such an emotion is another question.

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