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Pers. 3.39–43 and the Phalaris legend

Аннотация. Рассуждая о том, как укоры больной совести не дают покоя человеку, который не утратил понимания истинной добродетели, хотя и сошел с ее стези, Персий (3.39–43) приводит два хрестоматийных примера, связанных с Фаларидом и Дионисием/Дамоклом: если бы Юпитеру было угодно наказывать жестоких тиранов душевными муками, то страдания a) того, кого поджаривают в медном быке, или b) того, над чьей головой на роскошном пиру свисает меч, показались бы им пустяками. Традиционное понимание этих строк предполагает сразу несколько сильных логических «перескоков», которые справедливо отметили (хотя не совсем удачно попытались оправдать) Н. Радд и Р. А. Харви. Угрызения совести тиранов сравниваются с физическими страданиями не их самих, но их жертв; при этом ради равновесия двух exempla мучения Дамокла приходится считать изощренной пыткой, устроенной ему Дионисием, — уходя в сторону от того толкования, которое дают эпизоду с Дамокловым мечом Цицерон и Гораций (Дионисий демонстрирует своему подданному, насколько безрадостна жизнь деспота, который ежеминутно страшится покушения). Между тем ходу мысли Персия можно, как кажется, вернуть связность, предположив, что ст. 39 отсылает к той версии Фаларидовой легенды, согласно которой восставшие жители Агригента сожгли тирана в том же медном быке, в котором он сжигал других (ср. в первую очередь Ov. *Ibis* 439–440 — пассаж, близкий Персию в том числе и лексически). При такой интерпретации наказанием за преступления тиранов служит или жестокое возмездие по принципу ius talionis (Фаларид), или постоянный страх этого возмездия, отравляющий жизнь (Дионисий; именно он, а не Дамокл, выведен в ст. 40–41) — однако угрызения совести способны оказаться мучительней и того, и другого.

Ключевые слова: Персий, смерть Фаларида, Дамоклов меч, «Ибис» Овидия

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Articles

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Abstract. Discussing how the reproaches of a guilty conscience haunt a man who has not lost the understanding of true virtue despite having fallen from its path, Persius (3.39–43) alludes to two well-known examples associated with Phalaris and Dionysius / Damocles: if Jupiter wanted to punish cruel tyrants with mental anguish, the sufferings of (a) one who is roasted in a copper bull, or (b) one over whose head a sword hangs, would seem trifling to them. The traditional explanation of these lines suggests several strong logical 'leaps', rightly recognized (but justified with some difficulty) by N. Rudd and R. A. Harvey. The remorse of tyrants is compared to the physical suffering of their victims, not their own; at the same time, for the sake of the balance between the two *exempla*, the story of Damocles is forcibly interpreted as an elaborate torture inflicted on him by Dionysius, moving away from the interpretation that Cicero and Horace give to the episode with the sword (Dionysius demonstrates to his subject what life is like for a despot who constantly fears an assassination attempt). Meanwhile, it seems possible to restore coherence to Persius' thought by suggesting that v. 39 refers to a version of the Phalaris legend according to which the rebellious citizens of Agrigentum burned the tyrant in the same copper bull in which he burned others (cf. first of all Ovid *Ibis* 439–440, a passage close to Persius also lexically). In this interpretation, the punishment for tyrants' crimes is either talionic revenge (Phalaris) or the constant fear of retribution which poisons their life (for it is Dionysius, not Damocles, who is the protagonist of vv. 40–41); but the virtual torment of remorse can be more painful than both.

Keywords: Persius, Phalaris' death, sword of Damocles, *Ibis* of Ovid

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In a powerful passage from his Third satire, Persius speaks of the inner voice that torments a man who has abandoned the path of virtue yet remains perfectly aware of its value (35–43):

> Magne pater divum, saevos punire tyrannos
> haut alia ratione velis, cum dira libido
> moverit ingenium ferventi tincta veneno:
> virtutem videant intabescantque relicta.
> Anne magis Siculi gemuerunt aera iuvenci
> et magis auratis pendens laquearibus ensis
> purpureas subter cervices terruit, 'Imus,
> imus praecipites' quam si sibi dicat et intus
> palleat infelix quod proxima nesciat uxor?

> Great Father of the Gods, be it thy pleasure to inflict no other punishment on the monsters of tyranny, after their nature has been stirred by fierce passion, that has the taint of fiery poison — let them look upon virtue and pine that they have lost her for ever! Were the groans from the brazen bull of Sicily more terrible, or did the sword that hung from the gilded cornice strike more dread into the princely neck beneath it than the voice which whispers to the heart: "We are going, going down the precipice", and the ghastly inward paleness, which is a mystery even to the wife of the bosom? [Conington 1893: 57–59].

In the two examples, the names of legendary tyrants are not given, but the unambiguous details leave no room for guessing: they are two Sicilians, Phalaris of Agrigentum and Dionysius of Syracuse. Both, especially the former, are celebrated not only in the historical but also in the moralistic and rhetorical tradition.[1] The ancient *Phalarislegende* is extensive and well explored;[2] knowledge of the copper bull, where Phalaris roasted his opponents enjoying their moans transformed into mooing by the skillful work of the craftsman, as well as that of the story of the sword of Damocles [Wageningen 1905; Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2008], is among the common ones. Thus, it would seem that we have a typical (though rather atypical for Persius) instance in which the rule *in claris non fit interpretatio* should be applied: in fact, Isaac Casaubon noted *ad loc.*: "Perilli et Phalaridis itemque Damoclis historiae notissimae sunt" [Casaubon 1839: 178], obviously assuming that one who does not know them will not read Persius at all.

I venture to argue, however, that Persius' reference to the Phalaris legend deserves to be clarified. Remorse should punish tyrants (*saevos punire tyrannos*) more severely than their own torments, we would say; but Persius instead speaks of the torments of those who were roasted in a bull or over whom a sword was suspended. Does it appear that the moral suffering of tyrants is compared not to their own physical suffering, but to what their victims experience? For example,

[1] The declamatory implications of Persius' lines are emphasized in [Kenney 2012: 118–119].

[2] Aside from minor contributions, there are two monographic studies on the subject: [Bianchetti 1987; Hinz 2001].

the Spanish humanist Antonio de Nébrija (15th–16th centuries), paraphrasing the passage, begins with "nullus corporis cruciatus ita torquet *male agentes*, ut conscientia vitae crudeliter et per aliorum iniurias actae", but then, reaching the v. 39, proceeds with "*in illo iuvenco inclusi* ‹...› non tantopere ‹...› torquebantur quam mali conscientia sua torquentur" [Del Amo Lozano 2011: 396].

Of course, Persius is by no means a poet we can expect to provide an irreproachable sequence of ideas; moreover, the satirical genre itself, with its tone of informal conversation, jumping from one subject to another, presupposes the disruption of such a sequence by virtue of loose associations, the course of which the reader has to unravel. In our case, however, it is the second example that prevents us from accepting Connington's note regarding v. 35: "*tyrannos*, as inventors of tortures for others, and therefore deserving the worst tortures themselves" [Connington 1893: 57]. In fact, the story of the sword does not at all suggest Damocles' torture: Dionysius arranges that a sword should hang over the head of his feasting courtier, who flatteringly called his master the happiest of men, in order to demonstrate what his happiness is really worth. It is in this vein (i. e. as a spectacular allegory of the tyrant's life full of constant fear, which poisons all enjoyment of wealth and power) that Cicero tells the tale of Dionysius and Damocles in *Tusc.* 5.61–62; and, no less importantly, it is in this vein that Horace, Persius' constant model, alludes to it in *Carm.* 3.1.17–24.[3] This difficulty was explicitly pointed out by R. A. Harvey:

> P[ersius]' co-ordination of this episode with Phalaris' bull is surprising. Dionysius' treatment of his courtier Damocles does not elsewhere represent wanton and regular torture (as does the bull of Phalaris) but is a unique event intended specifically to show the true nature of a tyrant's apparent happiness. It is therefore hardly to be ranked alongside Phalaris' bull. But being concerned with tyrants' cruelty, P. chooses to represent the sword of Damocles, whatever its ultimate intention, as a piece of refined torture [Harvey 1981: 89].

Meanwhile, we have no reason to suspect Persius of carelessly combining the two associations, because the unnamed protagonist of vv. 40–41 is not Damocles, as commentators are forced to assert for the sake of analogy with the victims of Phalaris in v. 39,[4] but Dionysius; this is indicated by *aurata laquearia*

[3] An alternative version of Ammianus Marcellinus (29.2.4: *paria convivis Siculi Dionysii pavitantes, qui, cum epulis omni tristioribus fame saginarentur, ex summis domorum laquearíis, in quibus discumbebant, saetis nexos equinis et occipitiis incumbentes gladios perhorrebant*), whatever its sources [Boeft et al. 2013: 80–81], can hardly outweigh Cicero and Horace, especially given the context of Persius' passage. As Marisa Squillante rightly observed, "nella fruizione tarda dell'episodio di Damocle è dapprima scomparsa ogni allusione al problema della felicità che era l'elemento propulsore dell'invenzione ciceroniana" [Squillante 2007–2008: 251]; in Persius, on the contrary, 'the problem of happiness' is pivotal.

[4] This *opinio communis* is copiously defended by Kissel [1990: 413–414, 416–417]; the difficulties that it causes are well illustrated by N. Rudd: "There is no obvious reason, however, why the guilty man should cry *imus, imus praecipites.* Could it be that the nightmare is an unconscious extension of the preceding picture? From Damocles' fear (sword about to fall overhead) Persius moves to the guilty man fear (I am falling headlong) etc." [Rudd 1977: 67].

and *purpurea cervix*. There would be no reason to emphasize such details if the poet were talking about the mockery of Damocles; but they become significant if, in full accordance with the Ciceronian and Horatian accounts, Persius depicts the torments of the tyrant himself, living under the fear of conspiracy.[5]

This makes me return to Phalaris and draw attention to one curious branch of the *Phalarislegende*. In Ovid's *Ibis* (439–440), among the ingenious curses with which the author showered his adversary, we see that the deposed Phalaris was burnt in the very copper bull in which he had burnt others:

> Utque ferox Phalaris, lingua prius ense resecta
> More bovis Paphio clausus in aere gemas.
>
> And may you, like fierce Phalaris, imprisoned in Pathian bronze,
> bellow as an ox, after the sword has cut off your tongue.

The history of this version was first investigated by Richard Bentley in the second edition of his "unsterblische Dissertation" [Wilamowitz 1921: 36] on the *Epistles of Phalaris*. Accused by his opponent Boyle of ignorance ("Where does he find that Phalaris was burnt in his bull?" [Boyle 1699: 133]), Bentley collected the *testimonia*: in addition to *Ibis* and its scholiasts, he also drew on *Excerpta Politiarum* by 'Heraclides Ponticus' (now identified as belonging to Heraclides Lembus: 69 Dilts = FHG II, p. 233, fr. 37), where it is said that the rebellious people, having overthrown Phalaris, "took revenge on him, burning *also* his mother and friends" (ἐνέπρησε δὲ καὶ μητέρα καὶ τοὺς φίλους). Bentley went on to state, with his usual grim wit, that although Valerius Maximus and Tzetzes give other accounts of Phalaris' execution, yet "how could the Agrigentines forget to burn him? The revenge was so proper and natural, and the thought so very obvious and uppermost; that 'tis hardly credible, they should not burn him in his bull, if they had him alive in their power" [Bentley 1699: 188]. I am, however, ready to sacrifice the scholia to *Ibis* (which may be 'guilty' of an autoschediastic explanation),[6] as well as the controversial — and perhaps corrupt — account of Heraclides Lembus,[7] and, finally, the speculations that ascribe this version of Phalaris' death to Aristotle or Callimachus:[8] indeed, the parallel from *Ibis* alone, which significantly coincides with Persius in the use of *gemere* and *in aere*, is sufficient for my point.[9]

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[5] See [Gildersleeve 1875: 127; Scivoletto 1956: 63] (both scholars refuse to choose between Damocles and the "tyrants generally").

[6] Cf., e. g.: "hanc ille scholiasta sapientiam ex Ovidio sumpsisse videatur" [Ebert 1830: 99]. On the scholia to *Ibis*, which are a complex mixture of genuine material with fabrications and fraud, v.: [Gatti 2014: 111–163]; according to a recent verdict, this "rather strange document ‹...› should be used with caution and suspicion" [Zetzel 2018: 269].

[7] Cf. [Polito 2001: 183–184 (with further bibl.)], and, especially, [Hinz 2001: 56–58].

[8] On Aristotles' 'Ακραγαντίνων πολιτεία: [Hinz 2001: 37 Anm. 91, 56 ff.]; on Callimachus' *Aetia*: [Knaack 1887: 12; La Penna 1957: lii–liii, 82–83; Massimilla 1996: 364].

[9] At first glance, it may seem that this account of Phalaris' death could be result of confusion with a much more widespread legend, according to which the tyrant first used the bull on its inventor Perilaos / Perillus: the moralistic conclusion "so the creator of the deadly machine fell victim to it" (cf. [Harder 2012: 371–376]) might lead someone to think that it was Phalaris himself. However, Ovid was perfectly aware of the fate of Perillus: he mentions it in *AA* 1.653–656; *Trist.* 5.1.53–54; 12, 47.

By assuming a reference to the same legend in Persius, we seem to restore coherence to his thought, freeing him from comments like "the sentence is awkwardly constructed" [Barr 1987: 107]. From the beginning to the end of the passage, the poet speaks not of the torment of the victims, but of the punishment of cruelty suffered by the tyrants themselves. The fate of Phalaris, who mooed in his own bull, or of Dionysius, who lived under the allegorical sword of revenge, weighs upon all despots; but the most effective Nemesis for them might be the voice of their own conscience.

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