

Donum Jovis

This was written just for fun, and read to a Horace class, 1980

Last Tuesday night I had a very interesting dream. I had gone to bed at my usual time, and was just lying there thinking of nothing in particular when suddenly Mercury appeared at the foot of my bed. I recognized him by his winged hat, which he had not taken off. I suppose that gods don't have to observe the amenities of mere mortals. Goodness knows how he got into the room; I had not heard the door open. Anyhow, there he stood, as handsome as I had always heard that he was, and as matter-of-fact as usual. He, of course, did not bother to say hello; he just moved right into the business for which he had come.

"Jupiter," he said, "has decided to give you a special reward for your many years of devotion to the Classics. We gods used to have a standard reward we handed out to mortals: we granted the fulfillment of any one wish a person might make. But we learned from sad experience that you mortals are very foolish in what you ask for. So Jupiter decided to give you something less dangerous. You may have three hours to spend with any one of the Roman writers you choose. When the clock strikes eleven (five minutes from now), you will be in another room, and you will find there the writer you have chosen." And as mysteriously as he had appeared, Mercury faded into thin air.

I began thinking of the Roman writers I knew well enough to feel comfortable with. Five minutes was not long for evaluating them and picking out one. It would be interesting to talk with Cicero or Lucretius, but I was never very scholarly, and I was afraid that I could not carry on an intellectual or philosophical conversation on their level. In other words, I was afraid that I would bore them. Suetonius, on the other hand, was just the opposite -- too shallow and gossipy for my taste. I get enough of his kind of talk from my contemporaries every day. Tacitus? Brilliant, but too depressing. Martial or Juvenal? Too nasty. They would likely find a way of insulting me just for disturbing them. Pliny would be a pleasant fellow to talk with, but his egotism had always bothered me a bit. Livy or Ovid would have some fascinating stories to tell, but it was their "books", not the people who produced those books that had always attracted me. Catullus? Too much engrossed in the emotions of youth, which I now recalled pleasantly but vaguely. Plautus or Terence? Each delightful in his own way, but neither one the person whose conversation would give me the "greatest" satisfaction. Vergil? I hesitated a few minutes before discarding his name. I have loved Vergil for many years. I have never grown tired of his vivid word pictures, his delicate similes, his tone of *lacrimae rerum*. But Vergil was so shy, especially with women, and I had a feeling that it would take more than three hours for us to develop a relaxed atmosphere in which to talk freely.

I was going over this list just to make sure that I had not overlooked someone whom I would regret missing. But all the time in the back of my mind, I "knew" who it was that I would choose. "Nobody" else appealed to me, both as a person and as a writer, so much as Horace. I was thinking of how I had always wished that I could meet him, when the clock started striking eleven. And suddenly there he was, at a door which I had never noticed before in my room. His eyes were twinkling, as I knew they would, and on his face was a half-smile.

"We have little time," he said, "so let's get into our 'visiting' room while we may."

I suggested that it would be pleasant if we sipped some sherry while we talked. (I remembered that he was far from being a teetotaler). But he shook his head.

"Nothing," he said firmly, "can compare with my Falernian. I have been saving a jar of it for a long time for some special occasion, and this seems as good a time as any to use it. No use letting my heirs get their hands on it."

As I went toward the door, he said to me, "If you thought I was so great, why didn't you ever present a paper about me? As I recall, you have presented papers on Vergil, on Martial, on Ovid, and many other Roman writers, but never one on me."

I was startled and a bit chagrined to realize that he was telling the truth. I finally managed to say, "You know, it is very difficult sometimes to talk about someone you love and admire as much as I admire and love you [I was proud of my chiasmus]. Words are so cold and lifeless."

"It's all right," he laughed. "I was only teasing." And the door closed behind us.

The room we were in was ideal for a pleasant visit. Soft background music was coming from somewhere. Two very comfortable chairs were on either side of a small table that held two glasses. And in front of us a blazing fire burned in the fireplace. (I recalled how Horace had always been piling more logs on the fire in his poems).

"I have always wanted to tell you," I said, "how much I enjoy your poetic style -- the delightful variety of meters, the rhetorical devices, especially your little trick of having words in one line go with corresponding words in the next line, and your uncanny sense of the exact way to best express an idea. Your poems simply can't be adequately translated into another language. Why, even our great poet Milton printed your poem about Pyrrha alongside his translation, because he felt that his version lacked something."

He smiled as he poured our wine and replied, "You don't really think that my words came automatically, do you? I believe that the hardest part of writing is making what you say seem natural. That is the basic difference between the amateur and the artist. Each works hard at his craft, but the reader can sense the struggle in the amateur; the artist's work looks so simple and easy. I have never told anybody else this, but you wouldn't believe the number of drafts my lyrics went through before I felt that they were polished enough to be published."

I have no idea what transpired during the next few hours.

You know how you lose all sense of time when you are having fun. Also, the Falernian, somewhat more potent than my sherry, may have contributed to the rose-colored haze that I was in. All I know is that, as I heard the clock striking two, I was staring into the fire when I felt a gentle kiss on my forehead. I turned to look at Horace, and found that I was alone in the room, with an empty wine jar on the table beside me. I turned quickly toward the door to see where he had gone. And suddenly I found myself lying in my bed in my own room, alone. The strange door was no longer even there.

This must have been a beautiful dream. It couldn't have really happened -- could it?