

LUDVIG HOLBERG, *NIELS KLIM'S JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD*



A Partial Translation

By Peter Fisher

The two chapters here presented form part of a translation I have begun of Ludvig Holberg's Latin novel Nicolai Klimii iter subterraneum. In this section Niels has landed in the underworld country of Potu inhabited by mobile, talking trees, and in unwittingly climbing into her branches, outrages one of their noblewomen, for which he is put on trial. Although Niels is committed to custody, the prince commands that he be taught their language and then brought to the court. By describing the customs, pastimes and judicial system of the Potuans Holberg is able to satirize European institutions of his own day.

Introduction

Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) was born in Bergen, Norway, but, like Niels Klim, came to Copenhagen as an impecunious young man, and although he travelled widely in Europe, made this city his home for the rest of his professional life. His name is most likely to be known to non-Danes from Grieg's *Holberg Suite*, but in Denmark his comedies are still popular on the stage. He has been likened to a Danish Molière, and indeed, during the first season of the Danish National Theatre after it opened in 1722, works by the the two dramatists were performed alternately; by 1730 Holberg had published twenty-five Danish comedies before the theatre closed at the accession of Christian VI, who with his pietist views looked askance on all dramatic productions.

However, Holberg's career had a much larger span. Having graduated at the University of Copenhagen at the age of nineteen, he spent time in Germany, Italy, France and Holland, as well as his native Norway, and in 1706 journeyed to England. Here he stayed for two years, most of the time in Oxford, where he earned a living by tutoring and teaching music, and where he started writing. During his career he wrote equally fluently in

¹ The translation is of the Latin text edited by Kragelund, 1970.

Danish and Latin, comprehending a wide variety of topics: history, law, philosophy, theology, verse and prose satire, and autobiography, as well as his popular stage-plays; his talents were recognized by the academic world when he was appointed to the chair of metaphysics, later of public eloquence, and later still, in 1730, of history and geography at Copenhagen.

Niels Klim's Journey to the Underworld, a social and political satire in the form of a Latin novel, which must have been inspired by *Gulliver's Travels* since it contains a number of parallels with this work of Swift, was brought out anonymously in Leipzig in 1741. The decision to publish it abroad was perhaps partly due to its attack on religious intolerance and the subsequent fear of Danish censorship, but also no doubt with an eye to a European readership; and in fact it was very soon translated into German, Dutch, French, English and, eventually, Danish.

Niels, having graduated with a theology degree at the University of Copenhagen, returns to Bergen, where he devotes himself to scientific studies. These lead him to investigate the cave at the top of Mount Fløyen just outside the city, but during his exploration he accidentally falls down to another universe beneath the earth. Having countered an attack in the air by a winged griffin, he is unable to draw his sword from its body, and is dragged with it to the surface of the planet Nazar. The following extract begins at this point. Later the prince interrogates Niels about life in the upper world and forms a poor opinion of European *mores*. Niels, to his dismay, is assigned the post of court courier. The Potuans' laws, constitution, manners and beliefs, including their religion, are reported and Holberg uses these features to show up the follies of his contemporaries, especially official intolerance. Travelling to other underworld countries he gains repute in Martinia for introducing the periwig, and is elected king of Quama because he organizes the state and introduces war machinery to enable its citizens to conquer their neighbours. Finally rebellion forces him to flee, he hides in a cave and eventually finds himself in Bergen once more, where he lives out the rest of his life as a sacristan.

Sometimes the bizarre conduct he witnesses in the underworld countries he visits mirror those of Holberg's countrymen. But Niels, like Gulliver, is very proud of his earlier accomplishments, and boasts naïvely about the fine institutions and customs of the world he has left. In Potu he arouses horror in his master by his accounts of life on the earth above, and the author uses the contrast with this Utopian land to expose, employing a somewhat more genial satire than Swift's, the shortcomings of Danish, and European, society.

There have been four previous translations into English. An anonymous version came out soon after the original work, in 1742, and is in good, plain

English of the period, generally accurate, though occasionally omitting odd phrases which the writer considers inessential. Another anonymous version appeared in 1828. This is an excellent, spirited translation, very readable and accurate. A third, by John Gierlow, was published in 1845; I have not had access to this, but according to Ehrenkron-Müller, 1935, xii, 312-3, it is much abbreviated from the original. An interesting curiosity is a partial translation, just over two chapters, which Thomas De Quincey made in the 1820s from Baggesen's Danish translation of 1789. Creating an adaptation rather than a translation, the author omits and expands at will, aiming at a readable English equivalent rather than a literal rendering.

The present translation was undertaken purely out of interest and pleasure and I completed about a third of it, but had to leave it when I was enrolled as part of a team engaged in translating the Latin letters of Thomas Bartholin, the seventeenth-century Danish physician.

Holberg's Latin style reflects the best features of vernacular European languages in the eighteenth century: perspicuity, simplicity and smoothness. His vocabulary is extensive and colourful but seldom out of the ordinary and it is exceptional to find him using a word like *sparta*, 'a commission' (see note 4). A translator always faces the challenge of selecting the right register. The narrator here is an educated young man, lately out of university, and this calls for a familiar, lively, reasonably colloquial style. Hence at the beginning of the novel he complains of being *aeris inops*, 'short of cash', and when the Potuans put him in prison awaiting sentence, he says with wry humour that he expected shortly to be fetched from it as if *e cella promptuaria*, 'from a storeroom'. He occasionally plays on words, as when he returns from Copenhagen, *doctior quidem, sed non ditior*, 'better educated, but no better off'. Potuan announcements need to be put into a stiffer officialese. Passages of verse quoted from classical authors have kept the same lineation, line-length and absence of rhyme, but no attempt has been made to imitate ancient metres. Overt references to contemporary Danes, like the unpleasant croaking voice of Niels Andersen at the beginning of Chapter 2, are few and should present no problems for non-Danish readers.

CHAPTER II

Landing on the Planet Nazar

Once I had completed my aerial voyage in this fashion and touched that sphere safe and unharmed (for the speed with which the griffin was initially borne along had grown weak as its strength evaporated), I lay motionless for a long while, waiting to see what new occurrence should befall me when the

day dawned. I then noticed my former fragility returning, and that I needed both sleep and food, so much so that I was seized with regret at having rashly thrown the bread away. My mind exhausted by miscellaneous worries, a deep sleep at last stole over me. I had been snoring away, as far as I could judge, for two hours, when a fearful bellowing, which had been disturbing my rest for some time, in the end completely dispelled my sleep. While I slept various bizarre visions had flitted about in my brain. I seemed to have come back to Norway and to have been relating my adventures then to my fellow-countrymen. Next I fancied that I was in the Fanekirke, on the outskirts of Bergen, listening to the singing of the deacon, Niels Andersen, whose stentorian voice struck my ears in its usual dismal manner. Therefore, the instant I awoke, I believed the barking of this man had broken my slumbers; but standing nearby I saw a bull, and concluded it was its bellow that had shattered my repose.

Soon I was gazing about everywhere with anxious eyes, and, as the sun rose, I looked upon green meadows and fertile fields in all directions. Trees were also visible, but, what was strange to see, they were moving, despite the fact that the air was so still it could not stir even the lightest feather. When the lowing bull made straight towards me, I was panic-stricken and cast round for a means of escape; amid that fear I caught sight of a tree standing nearby, and tried to climb it. But as I clambered up, it emitted a shrill, sharp cry like that of an angry woman, and in a moment I received a slap as if from an extended palm, with such force that giddiness seized me and I tumbled headlong to the earth. This blow felt as though I had been struck by lightning and, very soon ready to give up the ghost in my terror, I heard mutterings all about me and the sort of hubbub that echoes round market-places and stock-exchanges at their busiest. As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw encircling me a whole living forest and the plain filled with trees and bushes, where recently barely six or seven had been apparent. It is scarcely possible to describe the turmoil which all these events excited in my brain, and to what extent my mind was unsettled by these apparitions. I supposed now that this was a waking dream, now that I was being tormented by ghosts and besieged by evil spirits, and now other even sillier ideas.

However, I was not given time to investigate these moving objects or their causes, for in a moment another tree came darting up and lowered a branch, of which the end was clothed with six buds, like so many fingers. With these it raised me from the ground, and, though I shouted protests, removed me bodily, accompanied by countless trees of various species and various sizes. They gave out sounds and murmurs that were certainly utterances, but foreign to my ears, and apart from the words *Pikel Emi*,

which were quite often repeated, there were none I could retain in my memory. I heard presently that these words indicated an ape of unusual form; for they surmised that I was an ape from the shape of my body and my deportment, though somewhat different in appearance from the long-tailed monkeys which this land breeds. Others took me for a denizen of the firmament, who they believed had been conveyed there through the air by a bird, since the annals of this planet bear witness that such an event once occurred. But I only learnt this after some months' interval, after I had become thoroughly versed in the language of the Underworld. In the present state of affairs, through my fright and bewilderment I had lost track of myself and could not conceive what to make of these living, talking trees, or where this procession, conducted with slow, measured steps, was leading to. The sounds of their speech and muttering, however, which rolled right across the fields, suggested a certain anger and resentment; and indeed their wrath had been generated against me with very good reason. The tree I wanted to climb when I was fleeing from the bull was the wife of the judge who administered justice in the nearest city, and the status of the injured party had exacerbated my misdeed; she was not just a simple woman of the common sort, whom I had elected to vex in public, but, it appeared, a lady of the first rank. A display of this kind was an unwonted abomination to such a mild and decorous race.

Finally we reached the city to which they were conducting me as a prisoner. It was no less remarkable for its stately buildings than for the elegant arrangement and symmetry of its districts, streets and squares. The houses were so high and striking that they resembled palaces. The squares swarmed with strolling trees, which, on meeting their acquaintances, greeted one another by sinking their branches, and the more branches they lowered, the greater proof was it of respect and deference. So, when they caught sight of an oak who, as it happened, was just emerging from a house of some grandeur, all the other trees lowered the majority of their branches and retreated backwards, from which one was entitled to guess that this individual was of more consequence than the lower orders. It quickly became clear to me that it was the city's judge, and indeed the one whose wife I was said to have offended. In a moment I was swept right up into this same judge's house, where the gate was immediately shut behind my back and the doors bolted, so that I saw myself as a candidate for the treadmill. This fear was notably increased by three sentinels stationed outside the doors, who seemed to be keeping guard; each one was armed with six axes, corresponding to the number of its branches, for all their branches were like arms and all their buds served as fingers. I observed that at the top of their trunks were heads, not unlike those of human beings, and instead of roots I

saw that each had two feet, although these were quite short, which meant that the natives of this planet walked along with tortoise-like steps. Hence, if I were freed, it would have been easy for me to escape their hands, since it appeared that I was superior to them in the speed with which my legs could move.

To cut the matter short, I now perceived clearly that the inhabitants of this planet were trees which were endowed with reason, and I marvelled at the variety in which Nature delights when she designs living creatures. These trees are not the same height as ours, since most of them scarcely exceed the normal stature of a man; some were smaller so that you would have said they were flowers or shrubs, and these I supposed were children. It is astonishing what mazes of speculation these phenomena led me into, how many sighs they drew from me, and how deep a nostalgia for my homeland, then most precious to me, entered my breast. Though these trees seemed to me to live in fellowship, enjoying the benefit of speech and provided with some appearance of reason, enough to call them, up to a point, rational creatures, I was doubtful whether they could be compared with human beings; I refused to believe that justice, mercy and the other moral virtues found any place among them. Battered by these tumultuous thoughts, I felt my heart shake, and floods of tears flowed from the well-springs of my eyes to cascade down my face. But after I had given way to my grief in this way and turned to womanish weeping, there entered the room my personal guardians, whom I looked upon as lictors by reason of their axes.

Preceded by these I was conducted through the city to a prominent house situated in the centre of the main square. I saw myself then as having attained the rank of dictator, greater than a Roman consul, for only twelve axes were borne in the retinue of the consuls, whereas my progress was encompassed by eighteen. On the portals of the building to which I was being escorted was a relief of Justice,² fashioned in the shape of a tree and holding a pair of scales in one branch. It was represented in the form of a young woman, of powerful appearance, with keen, bright eyes, and striking in her noble sadness, which was neither meek nor defiant, but dignified. Hence it was quite apparent to me that this was their senate-house. I was brought into the assembly-hall, whose paved floor gleamed with its chequer-work of marble; there I saw a tree, high on a golden chair, which looked like a tribunal, together with its assessors, six to the right, six to the left of it, installed on as many neatly-ordered seats. The president was a palm of medium height, but among all the other judges it was remarkable for the

² In Holberg's time there was a depiction of Justice in Copenhagen Town Hall.

diversity of its leaves, tinted with various colours. Twenty-four officers were ranged round on either side, and each one was armed with six axes. It was a shocking sight for me to behold, since from all this weaponry I predicted that they must be a bloodthirsty race.

At my entry the senators rose, stretched their branches high in the air and, after performing this ritual act, sat down again. When all were seated I was placed before a bar halfway between two trees, whose trunks were clad in sheepskins. I reckoned they must be advocates, and indeed, that is what they were. Before they began to plead their cases, the president's head was draped with a patchwork of black cloth. Shortly afterwards the counsel for the prosecution gave a short speech, which it repeated three times; the defending counsel responded with equal brevity. Their pleas were followed by half-an-hour's silence. Then the president removed the covering that veiled its head, stood up, and, lifting its branches once more towards the stars, formally pronounced certain words, which I judged to contain my sentence. As soon as it had finished speaking, I was dismissed and led back to an ancient prison, from which I foresaw that I must shortly be fetched as if from a storeroom to face the lash. Left to myself there, in recalling to mind all my experiences, I laughed at the stupidity of this race; for they appeared to me more to have acted out a play than administered justice, and all that I had seen, including their gestures, trappings and method of procedure, seemed more appropriate to a theatrical show and the scenes of a pantomime than to a serious court of Justice. Then I praised the good fortune of our own world and the superiority of Europeans over all other peoples. Yet although I condemned the insensibility and obtuseness of this subterranean race, I was forced at the same time to admit that they should be distinguished from dumb animals. The splendour of their city, their well-proportioned buildings and other features plainly showed that these trees were not bereft of reason, nor were they totally uncultivated in the arts, especially those of technology. However, I believed that this land was innocent of all virtue and nobility.

While I was thus communing silently with myself, a tree entered, holding a pointed instrument in its hand. After unbuttoning me at the chest and baring one of my arms, it very deftly pierced me in the middle of a vein. When it had drawn off what seemed a sufficient quantity of blood, it bound up my arm with equal dexterity. Having performed its task in this way and studied my blood carefully, it went off as though filled with a silent wonder. All this strengthened the notion I had formed of this race's stupidity. However, as soon as I had learnt their subterranean language and everything had been explained to me, my disdain turned to esteem. Those court proceedings, which I had rashly condemned, were expounded to me as

follows. From the shape of my body they had concluded that I was a dweller in the firmament. It had appeared that I wished to assault a respectable married woman of the highest rank, and for this outrage I had been dragged to the court as a defendant. One of the advocates had magnified my offence, demanding the punishment due by law; but the other, without interceding against the penalty, had advised a postponement of the sentence until my identity, nature and place of origin were known, and whether I was a brute creature or a rational being. Furthermore I learnt that stretching out their branches was a customary ritual before a case was submitted for judgment. The advocates were swathed in sheepskin to remind them to be blameless and upright in the execution of their roles. And indeed all of them there are honest and upright, proof that it is possible for a well-ordered state to be furnished with honourable, decent barristers. Harsh laws have been passed against legal charlatans, so that there is no ready cloak for trickery and deceit, no condoning of falsehood, no escaping with abuse, nowhere any kind reception for audacity, nor any shelter given to imposture. It was customary for them to repeat their words three times owing to their slowness of comprehension, a trait which distinguished the inhabitants of this land from other peoples; for few were granted the faculty of understanding what they had just read through, or to apprehend something they had only heard once. Those who grasped the subject straight away were thought to be devoid of the power of discrimination, and for this reason were rarely admitted to high, authoritative employments. They had learnt from experience that the state was unstable in the hands of individuals who were very quick to comprehend matters and who were termed by the populace 'great minds'; those who were slow, however, and were scornfully called 'dull' were found to have settled the disorders caused by the first sort. All this was paradoxical, yet when I reflected seriously upon it, it did not seem totally ridiculous to me.

Certainly an account of the president stirred in me the deepest amazement, for it was an unmarried woman, a native of that locality, whom the prince had appointed as the *kaki*, the supreme judge of that community. Among this race no discrimination between the sexes was observed in the apportionment of offices, but after a selection had been carried out, the duties of the state were bestowed on those most qualified to handle them. In order to assess each individual's competence and mental endowments, colleges were set up, whose wardens or overseers were called *karatti*, a word which properly signifies investigators or inspectors. Their task was to examine the competence and strengths of each person, to probe thoroughly into the characters of the young, and, having made their inspection, each year to give the prince an indication of those who should be recruited to

public offices and at the same time to show how each one could be of most benefit to its country. After receiving this list, the prince had the names of candidates entered in a book, which would enable him to remember and, as it were, keep before his eyes those he might advance to vacant employments.

The above-mentioned young woman had received a glowing testimonial from the *karatti* four years previously and on the strength of this the prince had appointed her to preside over the senate in the city of her birth. This is a hallowed and invariable practice among the Potuans, following their belief that the conditions of a place are best perceived by those born and bred there.³ Palmka (the young woman's name) had graced this post⁴ with the highest credit over a span of three years, and was considered the shrewdest tree in that whole city; for such was her slowness of comprehension that she had difficulty in grasping anything, unless it was repeated to her two or three times. Nevertheless, when she had once grasped something, she grasped it thoroughly, and would elucidate any question with such deep discernment that her utterances were all taken as so many oracles.

Justice she could weigh in the twin dishes of the wavering scales, and distinguish the straight from adjacent deviance, even when the rule deceived where the edge was bent.⁵

Hence every decision pronounced by her in the space of four years had been ratified and eulogized by the Potuan Supreme Court. Therefore this ordinance that promoted the inferior sex, one which I had condemned at first glance, seemed not wholly preposterous once it was submitted to closer inspection. I thought to myself:

'What if the wife of our judge in Bergen were to declare judgments instead of her husband? What if advocate Søren's daughter, a young woman endowed with eloquence and outstanding gifts of mind, were to preside over court proceedings in place of her foolish father? Our legal system would not suffer unduly from it, and perhaps Justice might not receive a drubbing as often as she does.' I further considered that because cases in European courts are judged so hastily, those rushed decisions, made on the spur of the

³ However, in VIII.11 we are told that cases were normally judged far away from their place of origin, in order to prevent bribery or nepotism.

⁴ The Latin word is *sparta*, 'a commission', and, according to Kragelund, is taken from a common saying in Greek: *Σπάρταν ἔλαχες, τούταν κόσμει* (Sparta is your allotted task. Make the most of it!). Holberg uses the same word again at VII.23, and several times in his autobiography (e.g. Holberg, 1965, 34, 1.12). Kragelund believes that the portrait of Palmka is based on Queen Christina of Sweden.

⁵ Virtually the same as Persius, *Satires* IV.10-12.

moment, would not escape the reproach of the censor if they were subjected to stricter perusal.

I shall now go on to explain everything else. This, I have heard, is the point of the bloodletting. If anyone has been convicted of a crime, instead of flogging, maiming or execution he is sentenced to the severing of a vein, so that it may thereby become clear whether his offence is traceable to wickedness or to an imperfection of the blood or of the humours, and whether it can be put right by such a procedure; in this way these tribunals aim more at correction than punishment. This correction however in some sense represented a punishment, in that there was a certain dishonourable stigma attached to undergoing this operation as a consequence of the judge's decision. If anyone lapsed a second time, he was pronounced unworthy of citizenship and was generally banished to the firmament, where all were accepted without distinction. But more has to be said shortly about such exile and its nature. The reason for the instant astonishment of the surgeon who opened my vein when he saw the blood is as follows: the inhabitants of this planet, instead of blood, have a clear, transparent liquid flowing in their veins, and the clearer it is, the greater sign is it of purity.

I became more thoroughly acquainted with all these matters when I had been properly instructed in the language of the Underworld, and once I had mastered this I began to sustain a more lenient opinion of that race, on whom I had thoughtlessly passed a somewhat harsh judgment. Although I had presumed these trees to be dull and obtuse on first view, I soon realized that they were not totally devoid of human feeling and consequently offered no danger to my life; I was strengthened in this expectation when I saw that food was brought to me twice every day. The meals commonly consisted of fruit, herbs and vegetables; for drink there was a clear juice, unsurpassed in its sweetness and delicious taste.

The judge who held me in his custody soon reported to the prince or sovereign, whose residence lay not far from this city, that by chance there had fallen into her hands a certain creature which was rational, but of strange appearance. Excited by the novelty of this occurrence, the prince commanded that I should be taught their tongue and afterwards sent to his court. I was given a language teacher, under whose guidance I made such rapid progress during the space of six months that I could subsequently converse quite readily with the natives. When I had dispensed with my apprenticeship and the rudiments of the subterranean tongue, a new injunction was brought from the court as to my further tuition; the order came for me to be admitted to the city's college, so that the *karatti*, or inspectors, there might examine my intellectual abilities and see in what sphere of education I showed the greatest promise. All these instructions

they carried out painstakingly; however, while I was at this stage, no less attention was paid to my body than to my mind, and they were particularly concerned that I should take the shape of a tree, as far as could be managed; to this end they fitted a number of supplementary branches to my person.

While all this was going on, each evening when I returned from the college my host kept me busy with different discussions and questions. He listened with extreme satisfaction as I talked of my experiences on this journey to the Underworld; but what amazed him most was an account of our earth and the vast sky which surrounded it, dotted with countless stars. He listened to everything intently and eagerly; yet he felt no little shame at my description of the trees in our world, which were inanimate and immobile, standing fixed to the ground by their roots; and finally he looked at me with some displeasure when I declared that our trees, after being felled, were used to heat ovens and cook meals. Nevertheless, once he had thought over the matter seriously, his anger gradually cooled and, stretching all his five branches towards the heavens, he marvelled at the judgments of the Creator, whose secret ways are so manifold; afterwards he listened attentively as I recounted other aspects of our world. As soon as his wife, who until now had shunned my company, learnt the real cause of my being hauled to justice, and understood that I had been misled by her shape, that of a tree, which in our own globe we frequently climb, she abandoned all her mistrust and became reconciled with me again. Even so, unwilling to reopen a recent wound when our friendship had just begun to knit, I did not join in conversation with her unless her husband was there, and made it his wish.

CHAPTER III

A Description of the City of Keba

In the meantime, while I was pursuing my early studies, my host conducted me round the city to show me everything that was especially fine and noteworthy. We walked unhindered and, what was particularly remarkable to me, without any encounter with the inhabitants; it is quite different there than with us, where people come rushing in crowds to feast their inquisitive eyes on anything strange. The citizens of this planet have little appetite for novelty and only seek objects that are well established. The name of this city is Keba and among the townships in the principality of Potu it holds second place. Its denizens are so serious and sensible that you would have called every one of them a councillor. The place is a most noble home for old age, since nowhere is so much deference accorded to years, nowhere are the elderly more respected; their authority rests not only in their opinions, but also in their will. I was surprised that such a prudent, sober-minded race should delight in dramatic contests, comedies and entertainments, because

these seemed quite at odds with their seriousness. Remarking on this, my host said,

‘Throughout this principality we take our shares of gravity and merriment by turns,

and with Jove’s aid we subdue gloomy Saturn.’⁶

Among other excellences of this principality permission to enjoy harmless pleasures had been established, for these were believed to strengthen the mind and prepare it to undertake irksome duties; such pleasures were also thought to disperse those black clouds and moods of melancholy which are the wellsprings of so many riots, mutinies and crooked schemes. Guided by this attitude, they punctuate their more solemn activities with games and frolics, yet mingling sternness with good humour in such a way that the former does not deteriorate into gloom, and the latter into wantonness. However, I noticed with some annoyance that they rated the practice of disputations on the same level as entertainments and stage-plays. At set times of year, after staking wagers and fixing a prize for the undisputed winners, the contestants were matched like pairs of gladiators, under much the same rules as when we organize fights between game-cocks or animals that are equally fierce. Hence it is the custom for rich individuals to maintain disputants, as we do hunting-dogs in our world, and to train them in the art of disputation or dialectic, so that they become equipped and verbose enough for the traditional contests which take place each year. So, a certain wealthy citizen by the name of Henochi had in three years amassed 4000 *ricatu*, a huge sum, from the prizes won by one such disputant, whom he kept for this purpose, and more than once, as his owner, had been offered excessive amounts by those who regularly made profit from this sort of activity; none the less he had so far refused to sell his treasure, from whom he had gained so much annual revenue. Possessed of an amazing fluency of tongue, this character would demolish, erect, change square to round, boom with the snares of dialectical sophisms and syllogisms, and, by distinguishing, subsuming and determining, knew well how to frustrate every single opponent and reduce him to silence at his pleasure.

Several times I attended shows of this kind and suffered utmost distress of mind, for I thought it irreverent and improper to transform such noble tasks, which habitually grace our academies, into stage performances. Besides, when I remembered how I had three times taken part in a public disputation to the wildest applause and thereby earned a laurel crown, I could scarcely restrain my tears. Yet it was not their practice of disputation

⁶ Persius, *Satires* V.50. Astrologically speaking, Jupiter, the bringer of jollity, counterpoises the grimness of Saturn.

that made my gorge rise, but the manner of it. Certain inciters were engaged, called *cabalcos*, who would prick the flanks of the disputants with pointed instruments whenever they observed them flagging in their attack, in order to inflame them again and renew their drooping powers. I omit other details which are embarrassing to recall and which I found reprehensible in such a refined race. Apart from these disputants, whom the inhabitants of the Underworld laughingly label *maskabos* or wranglers, they held other contests between four-footed animals, both wild and tame, and between particularly ferocious birds, all of which were presented to spectators at a set fee. I enquired of my host how it could be that a folk endowed with such discernment could degrade those lofty activities to exhibitions in the arena, since in them opportunity for eloquence was provided, truth revealed, and wits sharpened. He answered that those contests had once been highly regarded in barbarous ages, but, as they had finally come to learn by experience, disputation was more inclined to stifle truth, youths were made flippant, disturbances arose from it, and genuine studies were clamped, so that practices of this sort had been shifted from the universities to the stadium; and the outcome had taught them that young students mastered their skills more rapidly through silence, reading and reflection. Nevertheless I was not convinced by his reply, however plausible it might sound.

In this city there was a university or academy, where the liberal arts were taught in an appropriate and highly serious manner. I was conducted by my host into the auditorium of this educational institution on a day appointed for the creation of a *madic* or doctor of philosophy. The act was performed without any ceremony, apart from the fact that the candidate gave a learned, elegant lecture on a particular problem in physics; having discharged this function he had his name entered by the president of the university in a register of those who take pleasure in the duty of public teaching. When my host asked me how gratified I was by these proceedings, I replied that the occasion appeared to me far too dry and spiritless compared with our own graduation ceremonies. I explained further that, among us, masters and doctors are normally created after they have previously given undoubted proof of their powers of disputation. Frowning his brow at this, he asked about the conduct and character of the disputations and how they differed from those of the Underworld. I answered that they generally turned on quite learned, abstruse subjects, in particular those which pertained to the customs, languages and dress of two ancient peoples who had once achieved the highest success in Europe; I gave him to understand that in three scholarly disputations I had dealt with the antique sandals worn by both these races. As soon as he heard this, my host gave such a loud guffaw that

it echoed round the whole house. Startled by this din, his wife came rushing in demanding with some puzzlement to know the reason for his mirth. However, I had become so angry that I did not deign to reply, since I thought it shocking that he should react to such important, serious concerns with derisive laughter. But when eventually her husband had enlightened her on the matter, she burst into peals of merriment no less loud than his. This incident circulated swiftly through the entire city, giving rise to recurrent smirks, and the wife of one of the councillors, disposed to hilarity, was so tickled by this story that she almost split her sides with repeated shrieks of glee. Because she caught a fever and died shortly afterwards, she was thought to have contracted the fatal disease through this unrestrained laughter and the resultant overtaxing of her lungs.

The true cause of her death is not very clearly established; only mutterings of that kind were heard. In other respects she was a lady of sterling character, the efficient mother of a family, and had grown seven branches, a rare trait in that sex. Consequently all good trees were upset by her death. She was committed to earth in pitch darkness outside the city boundaries, carried out to burial in the clothes in which she had been found dead. There is a legal stipulation that no one should be buried within the city, since they believe that the air grows contaminated through the exhalations from corpses. A further stipulation decrees that the dead must not be borne to the grave accompanied by a prominent retinue and with sumptuous accoutrements, presumably because they are soon to become food for worms. All these ordinances I considered pretty sensible. Memorial services for the dead are customarily held and funeral orations delivered, but these are simply plain exhortations to live a proper life and set a picture of mortality before the audience's eyes. Orders are given for supervisors to attend so that they may observe whether the speakers reduce or magnify beyond their true desert the memory of those deceased. As a result Underworld orators are very sparing with panegyrics, for a penalty has been laid down for those who lavish excessive praise exceeding the person's merits. Not long afterwards I was present at such a funeral and I enquired of my host the circumstances and position of the dead magnate whose memory was being honoured. He replied that it had been a farmer, whom death had seized while he was journeying towards the city. So I, who had been recently mocked by these inhabitants of the Underworld, in my own fashion laughed just as immoderately and with some vigour hurled back the shafts which they had launched against Europeans.

'Well now,' said I, 'why don't you stand on a podium and praise cows and bulls too, seeing they're the comrades and brothers-in-arms of your

peasants? They'll supply the same sort of material for a speech, considering they do the same sort of job as those who turn the furrows.'

My host bade me restrain my mirth, informing me that farmers in those parts were held in the highest esteem owing to the dignity of the calling in which they laboured, and no walk of life was considered more honourable here than that of agriculture. Hence any honest peasant, the conscientious father of a family, was hailed as the feeder and protector of townfolk. It was normally with this in mind that about the beginning of autumn, or in the month of Palm, when the farmers make their way to town with a large fleet of wagons laden with corn, to a fanfare of trumpets and the sounds of a band the city magistrates come to meet them outside the city gates, whence they are escorted into the municipality in a triumphant ceremony. I was flabbergasted at this explanation, harking back to the lot of our own farmers, who groan beneath the yoke of a detestable serfdom, and whose work we regard as dirty and ignoble compared with that of other professions which cater for our pleasures, such as those of cooks, sausage-makers, perfumers, dancers, etc.

In fact a little later I revealed this to my host, but under an assurance that he would keep it to himself, for I was afraid that the inhabitants of the Underworld might pass too perverse a judgment on the human race. He promised silence and then took me with him to the hall where the funeral oration was to be given. I must admit that I had never heard anything more genuine, more truthful, and freer from any semblance of flattery; and this funeral speech seemed to me a prototype on which all orations of this kind should be modelled. The speaker first gave a survey of the dead man's virtues, and shortly after that listed his faults and shortcomings, as a reminder to the audience that they should draw a lesson from these with regard to themselves. On our return from the hall we were met by an offender, who was attended by three guards. He had recently, by judicial sentence, undergone the arm-punishment (their name for letting blood from a vein), and now he was to be hustled into the city's public infirmary. When I asked the reason for his condemnation, the reply came that he had disputed openly on the subject of God's qualities and essence; this was forbidden in those lands, where prying disputations of that nature were regarded as rash and senseless to such a degree that they could not be associated with creatures of undisturbed mind. Their custom was therefore, after blood-letting, to confine these hair-splitting disputers in the common jails, as if they were mad, until they stopped raving. Consequently I said quietly to myself:

'Ah! What would become of our theologians here, those we see squabbling every day about the quality and attributes of the Deity, the nature

of spirits and other mysteries of that order? What fate would overtake our metaphysicians, who plume themselves on their transcendental pursuits, imagining that their wisdom surpasses that of ordinary folk, and indeed, that they are very close to the gods. Surely because of the laurel crowns, academic hoods and doctor's caps with which they are adorned in our countries, they would be opening up a road to prison for themselves or putting themselves in line for the infirmaries!

These and other details, which appeared to me highly illogical, I observed at the time of my apprenticeship. Eventually by order of the prince there came a time specified for me to depart from the college to the court, brandishing a testimonial. I forecast brilliant eulogies and dazzling recommendations for myself, relying partly on my own talents, since I had mastered the speech of the Underworld more rapidly than expected, partly through the influence of my host and the acclaimed rectitude of the arbiters. At length my testimonial was handed to me and I opened it, quivering with delight, eager to read my praises and, as a result, to know what my destiny was to be. However, as soon as I read it, I was thrown into a fit of rage and despondency. The letter of recommendation was couched in these words:

In obedience to Your Serene Highness's command, after carefully training him in our college we send this animal, lately dispatched from another world, who calls himself a 'man'. Following thorough tests of his abilities and an investigation of his character, we find him quite educable and of very quick understanding, but so awry in his judgment that, owing to his impetuous nature, he can scarcely be counted among rational creatures, and still less ought he to be allowed access to any important employment. Nevertheless, because he surpasses all of us in his fleetness of foot, he will be able to discharge the duty of court courier with efficiency. Dispatched from Keba College, in the month of Briars, by Your Serene Highness's most humble servants.

NEHEC. IOCHTAN. RAPASI. CHILAC.

This letter had me drenched in tears and I approached my host, begging him in the most abject manner to add his influence so that he might wring a milder credential from the *karatti*, and to show them my academic testimonial, in which I am hailed as a gifted citizen of outstanding quality. He retorted that such a testimonial was of some value in our world, where perhaps greater account was taken of the shadow than of the trunk, of the bark than of the pith, but these carried no weight here in Potu, where one penetrated to the inner core of circumstances; he furthermore encouraged me to bear my lot stoically, especially since a testimonial could neither be annulled nor altered. In their country there was no offence more serious than

to proclaim unwarranted virtues. However, in order to apply a poultice to the wound

he uttered words that might assuage
my grief and dispel a large share of my sickness:
'Disdain the foolish things you admire and crave.
Who is not ruined by power and its exposure to deep
envy? The long, illustrious table of honours
sinks him; for the man who covets excessive distinctions
and chases excessive riches there is built a lofty
tower with many storeys, whence the plunge
is lengthier, the triggered, headlong fall immense.'

He added further that no such outcome was to be apprehended from mean and indifferent circumstances. As to the *karattis'* testimonial, he gave assurances that my arbiters were at once extremely clear-sighted and irreproachable, and could neither be bribed with gifts nor swayed by threats to diverge a nail's breadth from the truth; for this reason there should be no grounds for suspicion in this case either. At last he frankly admitted that for some time my feebleness of judgment had been clear to him and that he had rapidly concluded from my copious memory and quick understanding that I was not the wood from which a Mercury could be made, and, as a consequence, because of my singular lack of discrimination, I was incapable of meeting the demands of any major post. He told me he had gathered from my reports and my account of European people that I

Was born in a country of fools beneath a baneful sky.

Apart from that he gave an effusive protestation of his friendship, and urged me to prepare myself for the journey without delay. I followed the advice of this eminently sensible person, particularly since there was no alternative, for I considered it would be rash to flout the prince's orders.

Therefore I launched myself upon the journey, accompanied by several bushes who had left the college at the same time as I, and who were being dispatched to the royal seat for the same purpose. Our guide to the route was one of the older *karatti*, or overseers, who, because he was worn out by age and troubled with bad feet, rode on a bullock. It is unusual here to use any conveyance, and only the old and decrepit or the sick enjoy this privilege, even though the inhabitants of this planet had a better excuse for it than we do owing to the difficulty and slowness of their progress. I remember, when I had once described our various means of transport, that is to say, horses, chariots and the little boxes in which, packed like luggage, we are carried through the city, the people of the Underworld smiled at my account, especially when they heard that neighbours did not normally visit one

another except when they were cooped inside a coach or small box and whisked away through the streets and squares by two very high-spirited quadrupeds. Owing to the slow walking-pace under which these rational trees labour, we were forced to bestow three days on this journey, even though the distance between Keba and the capital was scarcely four miles, whereas if I had been alone, I should have accomplished it in a single day. True, I was pleased that what I gained by my feet made me vastly superior to the inhabitants of the Underworld, but at the same time miserable because my physical advantage was about to condemn me to a mean and lowly occupation.

‘I could wish that I struggled under this same inadequacy in walking as these denizens of the Underworld,’ said I, ‘since this weakness in itself would allow me to avoid the slavish and degrading function chosen for me. Hearing this our leader said:

‘If Nature had not somehow compensated for your defects of mind with your physical superiority, we should all look on you as a useless burden upon the earth, for your swift apprehension causes you to see only the rinds of things, not their kernels; and as you have only two branches, you are much less capable of any manual work than the people of the Underworld.’ When I had listened to all this, I thanked God for the greater efficacy of my feet, perceiving that without this strength I should scarcely be ranked among rational beings.

As we were *en route*, I saw with no little amazement that the inhabitants were so bent on their work that none paused from his efforts to look at our passing troupe, or thought it worthwhile to cast his gaze round, even though a sight like this was rare. Yet when their day was finished and their customary labours had been discharged, they devoted themselves to games and all kinds of mental relaxation, while the chief magistrate turned a blind eye to these activities, believing such amusements sustained their bodies and minds, and judging that they provided creatures with no less nourishment than food and drink. For the following reasons, among others, my spirit derived the utmost pleasure from making the journey. The appearance of this region is very beautiful. Imagine some amphitheatre, one such as Nature alone could fashion. Where Nature had been less lavish, all had been filled out by the skill of the inhabitants, who were spurred on in their rustic labours to cultivating and decking the fields through rewards put forward by the magistrate; anyone who let his field run to ruin was stripped of his land.⁷ We passed through many admirable villages, which, because of their

⁷ Literally, became an *aerarius*, a citizen who owned no land but paid tax based on an assessment of his property. Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* IV.xii.1.

frequency, had the look of one continuously joined city, uniting together over a wide area to present a single aspect.

However, we were pestered by wild monkeys, who, wandering everywhere on to the roads and mistaking me for one of their kind owing to my shape's resemblance to theirs, repeatedly pounced on me and pinched me. I could not quell my anger and exasperation at this, especially since I realized that this scene gave the trees grounds for laughter; for I was being conducted to the court (the prince had given this command) in the same clothes as I had worn when I descended on this planet, and holding the hook in my right hand, so that he could view the apparel of our world and the implement which had first enabled me to land there. The hook was useful to have ready in order to try to beat off the hordes of monkeys that were attacking me, but it was of no avail; more came to take the place of those who fled, so that at every moment I was forced to assume a fighting stance.

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