M. Atilius Regulus—Making Defeat into Victory: Diverse Values in an Ambivalent Story

Eleanor Winsor Leach

1 Introduction

Within the traditions of Roman exemplarity, the case of M. Atilius Regulus, consul for 267 BCE and suffect consul in 256 BCE who invaded Carthage during the First Punic War, is singular. Any person who, like myself, first encountered this monolithic figure in Horace's fifth Roman Ode, urging fellow senators to oppose a 'disgraceful treaty', before striding resolutely from the senate house toward an anticipated cruel punishment in Carthage, can be surprised, even shocked, to discover the extent of ambiguity and uncertainty that underlies Horace's poignant image. According to Polybius' sober record (1.25–34), two aspects of Regulus' military activity are certain: that he won an initial victory, leading troops to capture Tunis, but, in a second bold essay, was disastrously defeated by Carthage's Spartan ally, Xanthippus, and captured and imprisoned in Carthage where, for lack of further information from the historian, we might assume that he simply died. Had Polybius' word on his fortunes been the last, Regulus would scarcely have been remembered, for death in prison is no good ending for a Roman consul; the majority of commanders who suffered catastrophic defeats had the grace to die on the field with their soldiers, but post-Polybian tradition gives Regulus a chance to redeem his survival and even ennable his captive status through his hypothetical mission to Rome. As Chris Kraus has observed in her paper with Tacitean acuity,\(^1\) reception frequently overtakes factuality where the memory of past deeds comes into play, and the very ambiguity of Regulus' ultimate fortunes allows for a contextual malleability that builds his exemplary status incrementally until it quite surpasses that of the victorious Roman commanders in the First War. This valuation of Regulus will be the subject of my investigation, as positive interpretations come to replace negative, reaching a high point in Cicero and Horace. Likewise Livy, by witness of Florus, would seem to have told an

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\(^1\) Cf. Kraus (ch. 9, 221) in this volume.
ennobling story whose reflections we see in Valerius Maximus and Seneca, among others. Finally Regulus reemerges in full heroic regalia in that massive work of historical revival that Ben Tipping has called Silius’ ‘exemplary epic’.

I will begin with a return to that doubtless most familiar image of Regulus as we see him in the final verse of Horace Ode 3.5, which I consider among the most remarkable closures in Latin poetry (Hor. Carm. 3.5.53–56):

Than [as] if, with contention put to rest, he were leaving behind the prolonged transactions of clients, making his way toward Venafrian territory or Lacedaemonian Tarento.

quam si clientum longa negotia
diiudicata lite relinquaret
tendens Venafros in agros
aut Lacedaemonium Tarentum.

In itself the language is striking in its contrast between vexation and calm. With a prolonged disputation among clients put to rest, the patron has done his part and may leave; going home, we infer, his destination the Ager Venafer—or maybe Tarentum—but Venafrum has in its favor the many iugera of olive orchards whose oil Varro celebrated in his litany of superior Italian products. With its implied transition from city to country, Horace’s picture is in itself a compact celebration of the Roman aristocratic life with the demands of responsibility set against the canonical rustic background, but the figure who

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2 Certainly there is an obligation here to the lines Hom. Od. 12.471–479, in which Odysseus describes his success in escaping Charybdis with the timbers of his shipwrecked boat: ‘But I held on, dead set ... waiting for her / to vomit my mast and keel back up again—/ Oh how I ached for both! And back they came, / late but at last, at just the hour a judge at court, / who's settled the countless suits of brash young claimants, / rises, the day's work done, and turns home for supper—/ That's when the timbers reared back up from Charybdis’ (trans. Fagles 1996). But recollecting this very different scene only enforces the pathos of Regulus, for the simile that enfigures Odysseus' salvation marks Regulus’ turn toward death.

3 Cf. Varro, Rust. 1.2.6: ‘What spelt can I compare with Campanian? What wheat with Apulian? What wine with Falernian? What oil with Venafrian?’ (quod far conferam Campano? quod triticum Apulo? quod vinum Falerno? quod oleum Venafro?) Tarentum is less easy to explain because it had become by Horace’s time a resort, but as Nisbet and Rudd 2004, 82 point out, its Spartan foundation may have seemed appropriate to Regulus’ severely disciplined act.