

INTRODUCTION

Between them, schoolboys and poets define the range of attitudes towards the odes of Horace, and in a sense embody the change that may occur in most any reader towards this group of poems that have, since they were first published, been considered the epitome of lyric poetry. One's first brush with them can be memorable, but for all the wrong reasons. It was Byron who wrote, "Then farewell, Horace—whom I hated so." The classroom ruins Horace. No one has better described the dry horror than Rudyard Kipling in his story "Regulus," published in 1908, where timorous boys are drilled and humiliated by the martinet memory makes out of any demanding teacher. Mr. King, the Latin master, has young Beetle in his pincers. Beetle is standing before the class, translating Horace's great ode, the fifth poem of the third book, that tells the story of the Roman general Regulus, whose sense of duty leads to his death. A thrilling fable and a vivid poem are all reduced to sawdust in the mouth.

'*Credidimus*, we—believe—we have believed,' he opened in hesitating slow time, '*tonantem Jovem*, thundering Jove—*regnare*, to reign—*caelo*, in heaven. *Augustus*, Augustus—*habebitur*, will be held or considered—*prae-sens divus*, a present God—*adjectis Britannis*, the Britons being added—*imperio*, to the Empire—*gravibusque Persis*, with the heavy—er, stern Persians.'

'What?'

'The grave or stern Persians.' Beetle pulled up with the 'Thank-God-I-have-done-my-duty' air of Nelson in the cockpit.

'I am quite aware,' said King, 'that the first stanza is about the extent of your knowledge, but continue, sweet one, continue. *Gravibus*, by the way, is usually translated as "troublesome."

I can remember that sort of scene in my own education. To the young eye, Horace is a chore, and his poems must seem like those noble statues in the corridors of the Vatican Museum, for centuries considered paragons but today often scurried by.

Lucky readers, however, return to Horace later in life and find what they could not earlier see—a whole world elegantly suspended in poems that brim with a wisdom alternately sly and sad. In this, the fortunate ones resemble the poets. Down the centuries, writers have been exhilarated by Horace’s example, and turned to his poems as an inspiration for their own. It takes a certain need, a certain knowingness that comes with age. There is another classroom scene, quite different from Kipling’s, that makes the point. It was May of 1914, and Cambridge undergraduates were crowded in to hear A. E. Housman lecture on Horace. The trees outside were heavy with blossoms, and no doubt most of the students—so many of them soon to die in the Great War—could recite Housman’s own poem, “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough. . . .” Tenderest of poets, Housman was an intimidating, sarcastic teacher. The subject of his lecture that day was the seventh ode of the fourth book, one of Horace’s most famous and melancholy: *Diffugere nives, redeunt iam gramina campis*. Housman took it apart and put it back together in a brilliant display of scholarship. Then, the account continues, he looked up at the class—the first time he had deigned to notice them in two years—and in an eerily quiet voice said, “I should like to spend the last few minutes considering this ode simply as poetry.” With deep emotion, he read the poem aloud, first in Latin, and then in his own peerless English translation.

The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws
And grasses in the mead renew their birth,
The river to the river-bed withdraws,
And altered is the fashion of the earth.

The Nymphs and Graces three put off their fear
And unapparell'd in the woodland play.
The swift hour and the brief prime of the year
Say to the soul, *Thou wast not born for aye.*

Thaw follows frost; hard on the heel of spring
Treads summer sure to die, for hard on hers
Comes autumn, with his apples scattering;
Then back to wintertide, when nothing stirs.

But oh, whate'er the sky-led seasons mar,
 Moon upon moon rebuilds it with her beams:
Come we where Tullus and where Ancus are,
 And good Aeneas, we are dust and dreams.

Torquatus, if the gods in heaven shall add
 The Morrow to the day, what tongue has told?
Feast then thy heart, for what thy heart has had
 The fingers of no heir will ever hold.

When thou descendest once the shades among,
 The stern assize and equal judgment o'er,
Not thy long lineage nor thy golden tongue,
 No, nor thy righteousness, shall friend thee more.

Night holds Hippolytus the pure of stain,
 Diana steads him nothing, he must stay;
And Theseus leaves Pirithous in the chain
 The love of comrades cannot take away.

The students grew uncomfortable, and thought they saw tears in the old man's eyes. "That," they remembered him saying in the tone of a man betraying a secret, "I regard as the most beautiful poem in ancient literature." He turned abruptly and hurried out of the room.

Poets before and since have been as similarly moved by Horace's gravity as they have been enchanted by his insouciance. John Milton once translated the famous fifth ode of the first book, one of literature's most beguiling and wry love poems. It is addressed to a former mistress named Pyrrha, and Milton—proud to have rendered it "according to the Latin measure, as near as the language will permit"—begins it this way:

What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odours,
Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,
 Pyrrha? For whom bind'st thou
In wreaths thy golden hair . . .

The poet seems to have had this passage in mind when, in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*, he describes Adam and Eve in Eden:

These, lulled by nightingales, embracing slept,
And on their naked limbs the flowery roof
Showered roses.

The mention of nightingales reminds one of Keats sitting under a tree, a volume of Horace open on his knee, reading the start of the fourteenth epode:

Why a soft numbness drenches all my inmost senses with deep oblivion,
As though with thirsty throat I'd drained the cup that brings a sleep as
low as Lethe . . .

And then he started his “Ode to a Nightingale”:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk . . .

It is not merely the ravishing lines that attract the poets. It is the temperament: not so much Horace as the Horatian. W. H. Auden saw a flock of Horatians scattered through history, people who fled crowds, traffic noises, blue-stockings, and millionaires, to content themselves in obscure positions, desiring only a genteel sufficiency, content to impress only their friends and their dogs. Auden goes on about the type, and then addresses the old poet himself:

Enthusiastic

Youth writes you off as cold, who cannot be found on
 barricades, and never shoot
either yourselves or your lovers.

You thought well of your Odes, Flaccus, and believed they
would live, but knew, and have taught your descendants to
 say with you: “As makers go,
compared with Pindar or any

of the great foudroyant masters who don't ever
amend, we are, for all our polish, of little
 stature, and, as human lives,
compared with authentic martyrs

like Regulus, of no account. We can only
do what it seems to us we were made for, look at
this world with a happy eye
but from a sober perspective.”

In a way, Auden’s Horatian strain is a note many poets—once they’ve put aside their singing robes, once they think of themselves as craftsmen rather than as bards, once they attend the world as a surgery and not a party—long to strike, and in their maturity often do. Wisdom and its hard lessons have become their goal: what cannot be had, what must be let go, the whole economy of desire and power.

From Ben Jonson to Robert Lowell, from Sir Philip Sidney and Robert Herrick to William Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Basil Bunting, our leading poets have been drawn to bring over individual odes into English. (There have been notable amateurs as well, like John Quincy Adams and William Ewart Gladstone.) Some, like Alexander Pope, are naturals; his imitations of the epistles are one of English poetry’s chief glories. Dryden too catches Horace’s tone so exactly and carries it so felicitously into English that this part of his paraphrase of III.29 seems to belong to our language:

Happy the man, and happy he alone,
He, who can call to day his own:
He, secure within, can say
To morrow do thy worst, for I have liv’d to day.
Be fair, or foul, or rain, or shine,
The joys I have possest, in spight of fate are mine.
Not Heav’n it self upon the past has pow’r;
But what has been, has been, and I have had my hour.

Never before, though, have the leading poets of the day assembled specifically to translate all the odes. The versions here have been specially commissioned for this book, and together are a unique occasion. There have been brave individuals intent on doing the whole job themselves, but this collaborative effort brings different imaginative energies to bear on a joint project and is a rare treasure. Horace, in fact, thought of himself as a translator, and considered his true distinction to have been a “gift for turning Greek verse into Latin,” an ability to adapt old ways to new times. It was in that spirit that the poets in this book worked. The results, inevitably, vary in ways the work of a single hand would not. Some poets worked close to the Latin bone, sometimes in the original me-

ters. Others wrote more freely: Horace's stanzas are reshaped, rhymes are added or free verse deployed, the looser rhythms of English verse dominate. This is as it should be. *Horace, The Odes* is not offered as a crib, but as a series of collaborations, a meeting of minds. Any translation will depart from the precisions of the original; the point is to head not down the rutted prosaic road but along fresh routes. This book draws on three dozen remarkable sensibilities, each in command of a formidable technique, yet able to submit that talent to Horace's own preoccupations, his brooding sense of belatedness and guilt as he surveys the course of empire and the claims of mortality. In fact, the variety of tone to be heard in these translations matches the mercurial shifts in mood and response the Latin poems themselves exhibit. The pairings of poem and translator were deliberate, and made in the hope of creating interesting juxtapositions. To have an American poet laureate write about political patronage, to have a woman poet write about seduction, an old poet write about the vagaries of age, a Southern poet about the blandishments of the countryside, a gay poet about the strategies of "degeneracy" . . . these are part of the editorial plot for this new book.

A few poets, pleading their fuzzy memories of old Latin classes, begged off, and even those who accepted my invitation did so with a certain hesitation. After all, the poetic challenge is daunting. Nietzsche once referred to Horace's work as a "mosaic of words in which every word diffuses its force by sound, position and idea, right and left, over the whole." But then, each had been asked because of his or her mastery of English rather than of Latin in the enterprise "to make the Echo equall with the voice," and there was no one who did not in the end remark to me on the literally thrilling time spent with Horace's lines, with his world, with his voice, with his incomparable command of the moral and emotional stakes. The book you hold now in your hand is the result of, again and again, one poet confronting another, each of our contemporaries alone with the man who first gave us the lyrics by which we have understood the nature and duty of poetry itself.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus was born on December 8, 65 b.c. in the town of Venusia, in the remote province of Apulia, near the heel of Italy. It was an arid, rocky, impoverished area, and the boy's prospects were dim. His father had been a slave, whether a kidnapped foreigner or a prisoner of war we don't know. By the time Horace was born, however, his father had been freed. Though the poet never mentions his mother, several times in his work he writes of his admiration for his father. How a freedman accumulated enough money to educate his son remains a mystery. Horace himself tells us his father was "poor on a meager farm"; there is other evidence that he may have worked as an auctioneer's agent

or dealer in merchandise. In any case, whether he sold the farm or was a resourceful entrepreneur, he was determined to give his young son the best possible education. He took his money and moved the boy to Rome, where he was sent to the finest schools. Horace never forgot his stern tutor Orbilius, who applied the cane and drilled the boy in Homer. But neither did he ever forget his father, who, if he spoiled the boy, still sought for his son a strong moral discipline. As Horace later wrote in one of his *Satires*:

My clothes, and the servants following me,
would seem to anyone, passing in the crowd, so rich,
they must have come from an old and proud inheritance.
And he himself, most incorruptible of guardians,
escorted me to all my teachers. Thus he kept me
pure—the first reward of virtue—not only in deed,
but pure even from the slightest shadow of disgrace.

To finish his education, Horace was next sent to Athens. He studied philosophy, Plato as well as the Stoic and Epicurean teachings. More crucially, he studied the old literature—Pindar, Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon—and even wrote poems in Greek himself, acquiring thereby a mastery of the intricate meters and tonal nuances that distinguished Greek literature from its plainer Roman copies. Greek literature, it might be said, became his homeland: a familiar, beloved landscape. From the Greeks he learned that power resides in discipline; that a sophisticated technique alone possesses the subtle buoyancy to rise above the ordinary; and that wisdom, rather than finesse or sincerity or bluster, is finally the true source of poetic strength.

While in Greece, though, he was caught up, as young men are, in the political events of the day. Julius Caesar had been assassinated, and Horace was drawn to the struggling republican cause. He enlisted as a military tribune in the doomed army of the exiled Marcus Brutus, fought at Philippi, and later wrote of himself as if he were a character in Homer: that, trembling in the great battle, he dropped his shield and had to be rescued by Mercury, who wrapped him in a mist to save his life. His father having died in the meanwhile, he returned to Rome in disgrace, his property confiscated. But by 41 b.c., following Octavian's general amnesty, Horace had secured for himself a position as a scribe in the civil service.

It was during this period that he published his first poems, his *Epodes* and early *Satires*. Their suave sarcasms drew the attention of readers and of other poets, most notably the young Virgil, who befriended Horace and, in 39 b.c., helped introduce him to Rome's rich taste-maker and patron, the estimable

Maecenas. Some months passed before an overture came, but Maecenas, impressed by the poet's promise, soon granted him an income sufficient to quit his post and move to the outskirts of Rome. The town of Tibur—present-day Tivoli—became a green retreat from which he ventured to the capital to observe the rush of its tumults, intrigues, and follies, and to which he returned to brood over human foibles. In addition to providing him with the leisure to write, Tibur was a moral perspective, the golden scale in which the values of urban glamour and rustic peace-of-mind could be weighed. "In Rome," he wrote, "my fancy blows me to Tibur, and in Tibur to Rome." It was here that he worked on his *Odes*. It was here that—in contrast to Pindar's example, say, the sky-storming swan—he worked like a bee, as he says in IV.2 (here in Philip Francis's 1746 translation):

Thus when the Theban Swan attempts the Skies,
A nobler Gale of Rapture bids Him rise;
But like a Bee, which through the breezy Groves,
With feeble Wing and idle Murmurs roves,
Sits on the Bloom, and with unceasing Toil
From Thyme sweet-breathing culls his flowery Spoil;
So I, weak Bard! round Tibur's lucid Spring,
Of humble Strain laborious Verses sing.

Even Tibur made its demands, and Maecenas, sensing that the poet's delicate health and need for privacy were threatened, deeded to Horace, then thirty-two years old, a farm eight miles further away from Rome, in the Sabine hills. This is a property that Horace, in turn, made immortal, most notably in the verse epistles he wrote to friends some years later. It was a working farm, with a foreman and eight slave-laborers (whom Horace himself worked beside), with livestock, as well as orchards and fields he rented to tenants, and it produced a modest income that allowed him to live comfortably. That Horace's father once owned a farm is a tender irony. That a man who had once fought against Octavian had now come to admire him, even volunteer to return to the army to fight the rebellion of Antony that culminated at Actium, only shows how the emperor and his advisor Maecenas had won over the most intelligent of citizens. It seems to have been during this period that the emperor wrote a letter to Maecenas, one sentence of which was retrieved and quoted by Suetonius. Augustus asked his friend to persuade Horace to serve as his private secretary: "Up to the present I have been able to conduct my own private correspondence; but now I am exceedingly busy and am none too well and I should like to deprive you of our

friend Horace. Accordingly, he will come away from your table where he accepts your favors gratis to my palatial board and aid me in my correspondence.” Refusal must have been difficult, but Horace, perhaps mindful of his father’s enslavement, did refuse the emperor’s order into service, itself a form of noble slavery, with its blandishments and privileges. He may well be referring to his refusal in III.16, a poem addressed to Maecenas: *iure perhorru / late conspicuum tollere verticem* (“with reason I shrank from raising my head to be seen afar”). Instead, for seven years, from his thirty-fifth to his forty-second year, Horace continued working on his odes.

That a poet who began as a cynical satirist should next turn to the creation of exquisite lyrics may just signal a poetic gift coming at last to its true maturity. Horace had labored for a considerable time—and a time of momentous public events—over his odes, which, when read together, display a remarkable variety and finish. Under the guise of different addresses—the occasional, the political, the didactic, the erotic, the elegiac—he wove a single lyric tapestry on which plays the light and shade of human experience. He indulges private reveries and historical meditations; his friends are praised, his enemies derided; his loves, both women and men, are teased or scorned, longed for or lost. And every song proclaims his Roman Alexandrianism, his preference for an urbane, lapidary ingenuity. When at last, in 23 b.c., he gathered eighty-eight poems together, divided among three books, and published the scrolls of his masterwork, he chose as the last poem in the series a tribute to his own powers and to their achievement:

*Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius,
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum.
non omnis moriar multaque pars mei
vitabit Libitinam: usque ego postera
crescam laude recens.*

This monument will outlast metal and I made it
More durable than the king’s seat, higher than pyramids.
Gnaw of wind and rain?

Impotent

The flow of years to break it, however many.

Bits of me, many bits, will dodge all funeral,
O Libitina-Persephone and, after that,
Sprout new praise.

(*trans. Ezra Pound*)

It seems, though, that this most important and influential book of lyric poems ever published was not especially well received by the Roman public. In any case, Horace himself was disappointed with their reception, as he says in one of his epistles:

Now shall I tell you why the ungrateful reader praises
my work and loves it at home, but disparages it in public?
I do not whistle up the winds of popularity
by giving lavish parties, handing out trashy gifts.
I cannot hear and criticize distinguished authors
on lecture-platforms and in meetings of professors.
“Hence these tears!”

(*trans. Gilbert Highet*)

But more discriminating readers—including the emperor himself—realized that they had been offered an incomparable gift, a work that had literally transformed Latin poetry. Augustus asked that Horace compose yet another book of odes, and ten years later, in 13 B.C., the poet published the fourth book—which opens, as if gently to mock his own enterprise, with the protest of an old lover against the renewed assaults of passion and romance. The entire book is tinged with resignation and the shivers of mortality.

Earlier, Augustus had also commissioned Horace to compose the *Carmen Saeculare*, the so-called Centennial Hymn, to be sung on June 3, 17 B.C. by a chorus of virgins and boys on the Palatine at the great public celebration of secular games meant to commemorate the span of Roman power and of its apogee under the emperor. It is the only one of Horace’s poems written for public performance, and in his fourth book of odes Horace—always a contemplative, private, even retiring poet—refers to himself in newly civic terms as “a performer on Rome’s lyre.” Though this poem is usually placed beyond the traditional canon of his odes, it shares with them not only a technical virtuosity but a concern for the passage of time. Addressed to Apollo and Diana, the protectors of Roman grandeur, the poem looks back to the city’s heroic past and heaven-sent

responsibilities as a legacy to be guarded by its citizens and guided by its emperor. Governance, whether in one's private life or in the public sphere, is often the focus of Horace's lyrics, and when Pope remarked of Horace that he "judg'd with *Coolness* tho' he sung with *Fire*," he is pointing to a tension that can create a poem or should rule the state.

Towards the end of his life, he turned to finishing the twenty-three *Epistles* addressed to various of his friends. Taken together, these poems contemplate the golden mean with the graceful wit of a sensible hedonist, a superstitious *raisonneur*. As verse letters, their tone is intimate, dominated by his personality's genial astuteness rather than by the strictures of any philosophy. In these poems above all, as Pope said, "*Horace* still charms with graceful Negligence, / And without Method *talks* us into Sense." He lived out his days on his farm and died, at the age of fifty-six, on November 27, 8 b.c. At the end of his first book of *Epistles*, he had addressed his own work. "Go, little book," he wrote—

say I was born in poverty of a father once a slave,
but stretched my wings far beyond that humble nest:
what you subtract from my descent, add to my virtues;
say that I pleased the greatest Romans, in war and peace;
say I was small, and early grey, and loved hot sunshine,
swift to anger and yet easy to pacify . . .

(trans. Gilbert Highet)

His patron and friend Maecenas had died two months earlier, and on his deathbed had written to the emperor commanding Horace and begging Augustus to "think always of him as you do of me." Suetonius tells us that Horace's last thoughts were of his two most faithful readers: on his deathbed, too weak to sign his will, he asked that his estate be given to Augustus, and that his body be buried near that of Maecenas.

The very word *ode* conjures the stiff, exclamatory celebrations of Pindar. Actually the word Horace himself used to describe these poems was *carmina* or "songs," but to call them "odes," as literary history has, conveniently emphasizes their ironic relationship to an older tradition. Where Pindar praised the victorious athlete, Horace clucks over the hapless suitor or retiring rustic; instead of hymns to honor a glistening prowess, Horace will suggest another cup of wine in the shade. It's not that he took his duties lightly. He can boast of his vatic role, as he does in III.1: *carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus*

puerisque canto (“Priest of the Muses, I sing for young men and maids a song not heard before”). And in the first six odes of Book Three, the so-called “Roman Odes,” Horace addresses himself rigorously to the history and ambition of Rome, or the Augustan vision of it, while recalling its bloody struggles and stern sense of duty. In poems that would have pleased his own strict father, and that undoubtedly gratified his paternal emperor, the poet wags a disapproving finger at the decline of old-fashioned standards—the very sort of straightforward moralizing that the rest of his poems, if not mock, then blithely ignore.

Any English translation of these poems, sadly, will smooth their textures and thereby flatten their effect. What the translations lack is the extraordinary versatility of Horace’s line. This derives in part from his uncanny sense of rhythm and from his dramatic perspectives. How easily he moves from distant setting to intimate feelings, from literal event to figurative implication, from public discourse to private allusion, from scene to mood—as in the famous I.9, which shifts from a cold mountain vista to sweet whispered nothings, from frozen streams to a mere finger. Or watch how, in I.37, the celebrated ode about the downfall of Cleopatra, he edges away from gloating over the mad queen’s death to an admiring account of her suicide, which itself allows her a triumph over her Roman enemies. Horace’s own sympathies? As usual, they sidle between the extremes, darting, dreaming, delving.

Horace’s poetic line also has the advantage of Latin. Unlike its inflexible English equivalent, the Latin line has the syntactical sinuosity granted by a language driven by inflection rather than placement. English words gather their meanings by their position within a sentence; Latin words, construed by their endings, can be put wherever a poet deems them most interesting. The architecture of lines is everywhere apparent in Horace’s poems. Their word order is compressed and febrile. Let one example stand in for countless others. At the end of one of his most memorable and affecting poems, the first ode of his last book, his plea to Venus for an end of passion, he is dreaming of the young Ligurinus, fleeing the poet’s embraces. In the dream, the boy is running across the great arena, the Campus Martius, and then, suddenly, is engulfed by the sea. It is, first of all, a convincing dream, with all the eeriness and symbolic dissolves we might expect to discover in a desperate lover’s unconscious. But on top of that, Horace can place his words in an infinitely expressive manner. The final stanza in its original goes:

*nocturnis ego somniis
iam captum teneo, iam volucrem sequor
te per gramina Martii
Campi, te per aquas, dure, volubilis.*

“In dreams, now I hold you fast, now run after you over the field of the Campus Martius, oh hard-of-heart, and through the roiling waves.” One look at the stanza and you can see the careful repetitions and contrasts. The *ego* in pursuit of *te*, and again *te*. No sooner (*iam*) had than again (*iam*) lost. And in the last line, the phrase *per aquas, dure, volubilis* puts the hardened youth between the watery terms *aquas* and *volubilis*, which can mean revolving or changeable or fluent. What is fluent, of course, is the poet’s own speech, useless against the hard silence of vanishing desire—and embedded in it.

These kinds of antitheses and subtle correspondences are entirely characteristic of Horace’s style, as he moves among his small paradoxes. The tone of these odes glides from the stricken to the sentimental to the skeptical, giving the poems their melodramatic edge and psychological interest. At the same time, the poet’s voice is detached, coolly apart. It is the detachment of the lyric voice itself, able to contain emotion but formally exacting about its consequences. We can hear this most obviously in those magical phrases that have become commonplaces, what Tennyson once called

jewels five-words-long
That on the stretched forefinger of all Time
Sparkle for ever.

And it is there we look for the *balance* that Horace’s double-seeing is constantly in search of. But underneath the apparent acceptance of nature’s course, stripped of false desires and fond illusions, is something else—what Goethe called “*eine furchtbar Realität*,” a dark realism. It is death that haunts all of these poems. It is death—as this son of a slave would know—that levels all men and eliminates privilege, reducing each to “dust and dreams.” It is death that is the spur to small pleasures. It is death that is the doorway into and out of heartache.

For all the ritual pieties of his day, Horace lived in a secular society, and when he invokes the empty formulas of divinity he is speaking of forces within us—love or power, violence or compassion, resignation or defiance. Gods and nymphs come and go in our minds as impulses or fancies. Few poets have been able to hold them for a moment, to watch and appreciate them, to render them with such an estranging elegance, to reason with us about unreason. His is the wisdom of years, the chilling consolation, the brilliance that reveals and reminds. Cloaked now in English, he walks out among us. Let him pluck your sleeve and tell his story. When you next look up, everything will have changed.