

Reading a Horatian Ode

Stephen Harrison

First of all, the text of the famous poem *Odes* book 1.22, with the fine new translation by David West, just published in the World's Classics (*The Complete Odes and Epodes*, Oxford, 1997):

*Integer vitae scelerisque purus
non eget Mauris iaculis neque arcu
nee venenatis gravida sagittis,
Fusee, pharetra,
sive per Syrtis iter aestuosas sive
facturus per inhospitalem
Caucasum vel quae loca fabulosus
/ambit Hydaspes.
namque me silva lupus in Sabina
dum meam canto Lalagen et ultra
terminum curis vagor expeditis
fugit inermem,
quale portentum neque militaris
Daunias latis alit aesculetis
nee lubae tellus generat, leonum
arida nutrix.
pone me pigris ubi nulla campis
arbor aestiva recreatur aura,
quod latus mundi nebulae malusque
Iuppiter urget,
pone sub curru nimium propinqui
solis in terra domibus negata:
dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo,
dulce loquentem.*

The man who is pure of heart and innocent of evil
needs no Moorish spears, Fuscus,
nor bow nor quiver heavy
with poison arrows
whether he is setting out across
the sultry Syrtes or inhospitable
Caucasus or lands licked
by the fabled Hydaspes.
As I wandered far from my farm
in Sabine forest singing of my Lalage
without a care to burden me, a wolf ran away from me,
unarmed as I was –
such a monster as warrior Daunia
does not feed in her broad oak-woods,
nor does the land of Juba, dry nurse of lions,
bring it to birth.
Set me on barren plains
where no summer breeze revives a tree,
in a zone of the earth oppressed by clouds
and a hostile Jupiter;
set me under the very chariot wheels of the sun
in a land where no man can build a home –
I shall love my Lalage sweetly laughing,
sweetly speaking.

Structuring stanzas

As always with Horace's *Odes*, we can make a useful beginning by looking at the structure of the poem: all Horatian odes, whatever their differing metres, are written in the same structural units, four-line stanzas, and it is usually worth looking at how the grouping of stanzas affects the architecture of the poem. *Odes* 1.22 falls clearly into three equal parts: the opening picture of the man pure of heart travelling safely in distant parts (stanzas 1 and 2), the central anecdote of Horace's encounter with the wolf near his Sabine farm (stanzas 3 and 4), and the final description of Horace's potential emigration to hazardous climates (stanzas 5 and 6). The thematic links between these structural parts are equally evident: the opening and closing sections are about exotic travel, the middle one about an incident on home soil, a neat sequence by which the Italian 'middle' is sandwiched between the two discussions of much more distant locations. We here see in operation at structural level what the first-century A.D. critic Quintilian called Horace's *curiosafelicitas*, 'painstaking felicity', his ability to achieve a pleasant sense of a rounded and satisfactory poem through intense attention to detail.

Heroic marches

This attention to detail, and its importance for the poem's overall effect, is clear as we move through the text, a journey which has a number of surprises. The opening pair of stanzas suggests that the poem is going to contain serious moralizing about the protection that virtue can give an individual; the picture of the great man crossing the Syrtes, the great deserts of North Africa, recalls a famous desert march in that area by the heroically virtuous Cato the Younger in 47 B.C., during the civil war of Caesar and Pompey. Another great hero, Alexander the Great, is behind the references to the Caucasus and the river Hydaspes, both areas which could be associated with his extraordinary military career which so fascinated the Romans – the Hydaspes, a river in the modern Punjab, was the location at which Alexander defeated the Indian king Porus with his elephants in 326 B.C. As in a Hollywood Western, the rugged and mysterious character of the landscape reflects the toughness and determination of the pioneering heroes who conquer it: the Syrtes are *aestuosas*, 'sultry', making men sweat, the Caucasus is *inhospitale*, 'inhospitable', unwelcoming to those who come to it, and the river Hydaspes is so distant it is known only from stories (*jabulosus*, cf. *fabula*).

Back down to earth (and the Sabine estate)

This grand heroic opening, with its references to great military marches and philosophic virtue, is then characteristically deflated in stanzas 3 and 4 by Horace's anecdote about himself, the first surprise of the poem. The scene shifts from exotic foreign locations to Horace's Sabine estate (we should not call it a farm, since it is clear from the *Satires* that the property contained several small farms), an intimate and domestic Italian location, and to a much less heroic scenario: Horace is singing of his latest girlfriend Lalage, and consequently wanders absent-mindedly beyond the boundaries of his own property (*terminum* in the Latin suggests a boundary-stone). This accidental expedition of Horace clearly parallels the great pioneering marches of the poem's opening in a humorous way: Cato and Alexander march to the ends of the earth with heroic purpose, challenging and extending the borders of the known world, while the lovesick Horace, singing of his current girlfriend Lalage (of whom more below), wanders without realizing it just beyond the much more small-scale borders of his own small estate. His mind is set on the frivolous topic of love, not the serious business of military action and world conquest.

An unheroic encounter

The main idea linking the first two sections of the poem is that of travel free from worry the philosophical and military hero marches purposefully to the ends of the earth without fear owing to his great courage and virtue, but Horace's unintended mini-march is also without fear (*curis ... expeditis*). This situation is owed not to his outstanding personal qualities (after all, he is only mooning around), the gods wherever they go, an idea found in the Latin love-elegy of Propertius and Tibullus, contemporary with Horace's *Odes* and to which the *Odes* often make reference (usually in a far from serious way). That all is far from serious here is confirmed by the story about the wolf, frightened off by Horace's singing of Lalage (we recall the Cacophonix of the *Asterix* stories); though there were (and still are) wolves in Italy, the point of this episode is not to record an actual incident but a symbolic one. Like the story which we find in another *Ode*, 3.3, about the baby Horace wandering away from his nurse in the woods and being saved by birds who covered him with leaves to save him from wild animals, this is surely an amusing assertion that the poet is special, to be miraculously respected even by the fiercest creatures. We might be tempted to think that this is a serious point, but the context of Horace's vague wandering suggests that this is not the right way to look at it; this feeling is increased by stanza 4, where the wolf, like the fish who gets away from the angler, is built up into the most extraordinary creature, bigger than any creature in the forests of Daunias, the area of Apulia in Italy where Horace grew up, and larger even than the proverbially large and ferocious lions of North Africa (the land of Juba). This is surely protesting too much. And of course there is no real encounter with this fabulous creature. The heroes of stanzas 1 and 2 can meet exotic dangers and overcome them, but the less heroic Horace, when peril threatens, fortunately needs to take no action, since the wolf simply runs away. He has no weapons (*inermem*), but this suggests that he would simply have run away if he had been paying attention and if the wolf had not run away first, not that he

would have acted like Hercules in strangling the wolf with his own hands. The whole episode is surely meant to be amusing, a contrast with the grand opening rather than a serious token of Horace's greatness. The world of Horace's erotic *Odes* is not the world of conquest and heroism, though that is what the first two stanzas led us to expect.

Proposed expeditions?

This mention of North Africa at the end of stanza 4 brings us back to Horace's supreme control of structure. The move within stanza 4 from the Sabine estate to another part of Italy and then to North Africa prepares the reader nicely for the proposed distant travels of the last two stanzas, travels which we have already seen echo and balance the heroic marches in distant parts celebrated in the first two stanzas, closing the poem (as often in Horace) with an echo of its beginning. Having compared his local ambling with famous mighty expeditions, Horace now *in* fact does propose foreign journeys of his own, to equally tough landscapes which in their different ways differ dramatically from the temperate climate naturally preferred by the Mediterranean Greeks and Romans – the vast and misty steppes of Central Asia where summer never comes, and the sunbaked lands of Aethiopia where summer never stops. But these travels are in fact purely hypothetical: the repeated *pone me*, 'place me', is not really a command, it is equivalent to a conditional, 'if you place me': there is no chance at all of Horace, the man who potters around the woods of his Italian estate, going on a trip to the ends of the earth. Thus the real travels of the opening are nicely undercut by the unreal travels of the close: Horace can imagine in moments of romantic exaggeration that he will sing of Lalage in all possible locations, but he has not the least intention of changing location. He is not a Cato or an Alexander, merely a poet amusingly describing his supposed love-sickness. This is a poem about love, not virtue and conquest.

Love for Lalage?

And it is with love and the beloved Lalage, mentioned for the second time, that the poem closes. 'Dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo, / dulce loquentem', 'I shall love my Lalage sweetly laughing, sweetly speaking'. We have come a long way from the heroic posturing of the opening to this close, where the poet displays himself as the lover dedicated to his girlfriend. But his promise to love her is interestingly empty: Lalage, with whom the poet is here apparently so smitten, reappears in no other poem, and even here she seems a sketchily-described and insignificant character. The only personal trait she is allocated is that of a pleasant voice and laugh, a characteristic mirrored in her name – *lalagein* in Greek means 'to chatter'. This kind of use of Greek names in Horace is a common technique: for example, the famous Pyrrha of *Odes* 1.5 has a Greek name which means 'of a ruddy colour', indicating her red-gold hair which has an important role in the poem. Lalage is simply yet another in the catalogue of different erotic partners which the poet of the *Odes* presents: the erotic world of these poems is a world of many loves, an explicit and obvious contrast with the contemporary world of Roman love-elegy, mentioned above, where the poet presents himself as having a single, obsessive passionate love-affair, and with the world of Catullus in the previous generation of Roman poets, who similarly characterizes himself as dedicated to love for Lesbia. In fact, the words *dulce ridentem*, 'sweetly laughing', are a quotation from a famous love poem of Catullus describing Lesbia (Catullus 51); the Horatian poem characteristically takes this element from a Catullan poem of passionate desire for Lesbia, the dominant, central figure of Catullus' love-poetry, and turns it into a brief, almost flippant characterization of a girl who appears only once for a brief cameo role. This is love of a kind, but love in the Horatian ironic style.

Thus *Odes* 1.22 shows Horace at his best: a clever and symmetrical construction, careful and neat thematic links within the text, and a fundamentally ironic and typically Horatian approach to grand pretensions of any kind, whether in philosophy, military conquest, or the poetry of love.

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