

## HORACE, *EPISTLES* 2. 2: INTROSPECTION AND RETROSPECTIVE

The epistle to Florus (*Ep.* 2. 2) has usually been grouped with the epistle to Augustus and the *Ars Poetica*, partly because of its length, which sets it, like the other two, apart from the letters of the first book, and partly because of the common interest in literary theory which is manifested in all three. These poems have always been the subject of controversy; but 2. 2 has received less attention than the others, perhaps because the elegance and humour of the poem, which have been so often praised,<sup>1</sup> have eclipsed the possibility that it may have something to say, especially about Horace himself, his personality and his changing allegiances to philosophy and poetry. The object of this paper is to offer a reading of 2. 2, not as a piece of autobiography, nor as a mosaic of conventional motifs, but as an examination by Horace of his own poetry and poetic aims, in which he is testing and criticizing his own achievement, and himself. In this he continues one of the most attractive and impressive practices of the earlier book of epistles.<sup>2</sup>

Horace here abnegates his role as a lyric poet, and this is generally taken literally as placing the poem quite precisely between the completion of *Epistles* 1 and Horace's resumption of lyric writing in the *Carmen Saeculare* and *Odes* 4.<sup>3</sup> But more important is the way in which Horace in *Ep.* 2. 2 itself expresses a judgement about his own poetic ambitions. The philosophic themes of the *Epistles* and the more frivolous lyric subjects ('iocos, Venerem, convivia, ludum', 2. 2. 56) which he presents as the essence of his *Odes*, are both aspects of Horace's poetry and personality; the question is whether one should be considered more valid than the other in the poet's own mature judgement, whether Horace should in fact have outgrown either or both kinds of poetry. In this poem, then, it is important not only that he renews the renunciation of poetry and the gay life which he made at *Ep.* 1. 1. 10–11, but also that this decision is to some extent forced on him, and reluctantly made (2. 2. 55–7).

The epistle to Florus not only echoes the rejection of poetry in the first epistle of book 1; it is also rich in reminiscences of many themes of the first book, and more broadly of all of Horace's earlier poetry. The poem is almost a reprise of familiar Horatian motifs. Thus we find the description of the inspired bard,<sup>4</sup> the medical metaphor for philosophy,<sup>5</sup> the references to Horace's own farm,<sup>6</sup> the plea for

<sup>1</sup> As by M. J. McGann, *RhM* 97 (1954), 343–58; C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry*, 1 (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 184–5; G. Williams, *Horace, G&R New Surveys* 6 (1972), 40.

<sup>2</sup> See especially *Ep.* 1. 8. 2 ff.; 1. 15. 16 ff.; C. W. Macleod, *JRS* 69 (1979), 16 ff.

<sup>3</sup> So Wilkins and Kiessling-Heinze (p. 195) in their editions of the *Epistles*; Williams, op. cit. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Lines 77–8; cf. *Carm.* 1. 1. 30–2; 2. 19. 1 ff.; 3. 4. 65 ff.; 3. 25; n. 19. But the description of the bard 'somno gaudentis et umbra' (78) rather undercuts Horace's dignified excuse, and brings out the theme of lethargy which runs through the poem (cf. n. 14).

<sup>5</sup> Lines 146 ff.; cf. esp. *Carm.* 2. 2. 13 ff. and Nisbet-Hubbard ad loc.; *Ep.* 1. 1. 23–40, 1. 2. 34, etc.; also below, n. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Lines 160 ff.; the vilicus Orbi is a local figure (Kiessling-Heinze on 160). Cf. *Carm.* 1. 17, 2. 3, 3. 18, 3. 29; *Serm.* 2. 6; *Ep.* 1. 10, 1. 14, 1. 16. 1 ff.; 1. 18. 104 ff. In general in Horace, and especially in the epistles, the farm and the countryside are symbols of security and moral integrity: cf. M. J. McGann, *Studies in Horace's First Book of Epistles* (Brussels, 1969), pp. 58 ff., 66–75; J. C. Bramble, *Persius and the Programmatic Satire* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 29–30, 62–3.

moderation and the simple life,<sup>7</sup> the contrasting picture of the tiresomeness of life at Rome,<sup>8</sup> the theme 'property is given only for use',<sup>9</sup> the figure of the resentful heir,<sup>10</sup> and the poet's consciousness of advancing years and fading pleasures.<sup>11</sup> In some of these passages the recurrence of motifs seems so marked that deliberate reminiscence may be suspected. Certainly Horace's redeployment of themes already treated in his earlier work should not be taken as indicating a vacuity of thought; still less does it follow, if a poet constantly returns to the same themes, that this itself demonstrates their unimportance to him, or their conventionality.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the persistent themes reflect the poet's preoccupations; and the poet chooses his genre and how to use it, rather than allowing it to dictate to him.<sup>13</sup> In this paper I make what seems to me a natural assumption, that increasing age and the form and purpose of his future poetry were subjects that mattered to Horace.

The letter is from the start a kind of apology, like 1. 1 or more remotely 1. 7, for a failure on Horace's part to oblige his friend by sending him a letter. In the manner of ancient discussions of etiquette, this is treated as an ethical failure (note especially 21 'talibus officiis prope mancum'; 25 'mendax'; and cf. Sen. *Ep.* 106. 1), which is made all the more evident by Horace's prolonged excuses. But this opening immediately presents us with a paradox, which again recalls *Ep.* 1. 1. For if Horace is now writing, however apologetically, to Florus, then he is to some extent redeeming the failure to which he calls repeated attention. But at the same time he is resuming the practice of poetry, with all its difficulties, and also its limitations. The inconsistency is heightened when we ask what exactly Florus expects of Horace; in line 22 it is an 'epistula', in line 25 'carmina' (cf. 59). The ambivalent status of the poem is surely deliberate, for here, as in the earlier book of epistles, Horace is not consistently concerned to choose between poetry and philosophy, but seeks a way to reconcile the two.

The apologetic simile with which the poem begins offers a defence on the grounds that Florus, like the purchaser of a delinquent slave, has been warned of Horace's defect; but the analogy is imprecise, for in Horace's case the warning and the fault are both his own, and if his self-knowledge was sufficient to predict his behaviour, his failure to correct it is more culpable. Horace is further equated with the slave-boy by a number of details: 7 'litterulis Graecis imbutus'; 9 'quin etiam canet indoctum sed dulce' (which, however, is what Horace has *not* done for Florus); and also significant is line 8, 'argilla quidvis imitaberis uda', which indicates that the slave is malleable, capable of being educated into more dutiful behaviour. In the terms of the analogy, so too should Horace reform himself, but instead he seems complacent in his present state, cheekily declaring 'you should have expected this'. Nor are his motives for not having written anything more respectable than mere laziness (contrast the grief that

<sup>7</sup> Lines 147–8, 175–82, 190–2; cf. esp. *Carm.* 1. 20, 1. 31, 1. 38, 2. 10, 2. 11, 2. 16, 7 ff., 2. 18, 3. 1, 3. 29, 9–16; also *Serm.* 1. 6, 104–28, 2. 1. 71–4, 2. 2 *passim*; H. J. Mette, *MH* 18 (1961), 136 ff.; Bramble, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–64.

<sup>8</sup> Lines 65–76, 84–105. Compare above all *Serm.* 1. 9, especially for poetic rivalry and backbiting (further, Nisbet–Hubbard on *Carm.* 2. 20. 4); also *Serm.* 2. 6, 20–64, where also Horace's superiority to the city spirit of vanity and competition is open to question: see line 32. Similar is 2. 7, 29–35. For city vs. country cf. *Ep.* 1. 7, 1. 10, 1. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Lines 158–74; see Nisbet–Hubbard on *Carm.* 2. 14. 24 (esp. *Serm.* 2. 2, 129 ff.)

<sup>10</sup> Lines 175–6, 191–2; see Nisbet–Hubbard on *Carm.* 2. 14. 25, esp. *Ep.* 1. 5. 13 f.

<sup>11</sup> cf. n. 23 below, and text. Note also Horace's consistent pose as an elderly man in the love-poems of the *Odes*, e.g. 1. 5, 2. 4, 22–4, 2. 5, 3. 14, 3. 26.

<sup>12</sup> A position sometimes approached by Nisbet and Hubbard in their commentary on the *Odes*, e.g. 1., pp. v–vi, xxii *init.*, xxv–vi.

<sup>13</sup> *contra* Nisbet–Hubbard, 1., p. xxvi *init.*

prevents Catullus in poems 65 and 68a); indeed, Horace even devalues his former poetic work as inspired purely by poverty and necessity. The praetor's high-minded phrase to the soldier in line 37 indicates that the latter's inactivity is disloyal and dishonourable. So too Horace's mercenary motives for writing poetry (51 ff.) were unworthy of a true poet and a friend.

Of course these assertions must not be taken as solemn confessions; but the lively humour of the poem does not preclude a serious ethical point, all the more so as this is not the last reference to Horace's self-satisfaction and inactivity. He tells us he would now rather sleep<sup>14</sup> than write verses (54), that he is impatient with the regular grind of attending court or paying calls (67 ff., cf. 84 ff.), that poetry cannot be composed amid the din and bustle of Rome. Yet as a moralist, Horace had declared that surroundings are of no significance to our state of mind,<sup>15</sup> and ought surely to know the connected lesson of Seneca's fifty-sixth letter, that noise and disturbance without should not affect the peace within (cf. *de Ira* 2. 25).

Again, Horace in lines 109–25 sets formidably high aesthetic and moral standards for poetry; but he has also participated in the flattering exchanges between poets, which are the very opposite of candid and constructive criticism (see esp. *Ars P.* 416–52), and which are regularly mocked in the Satires.<sup>16</sup> Although he claims that he wants to abandon such sessions (104–5), and will look no longer for others' compliments, this is still only envisaged as a *future* withdrawal (105 'obtorem'). And although to resign from this contest of mutual admiration may in itself be creditable, Horace offers nothing to put in its place. He describes the way in which a dedicated poet (109) will labour over his compositions, then takes the reader by surprise by 'opting out' of this too, on the grounds that it demands too much trouble and effort. He prefers to be satisfied with his own, less ambitious poetry, however bad it is (126 ff.). Thus mutual flattery is replaced by a still more pernicious self-flattery.

Moreover, the censorial imagery applied to true poetry has infused an ethical element into the process of writing<sup>17</sup> (note especially 109 'legitimum', 110 'honesti', 112 'indigna', 114 'penetralia Vestae', 117 'priscis', 120 'puro', 122 'luxuriantia... sano', 123 'virtute carentia'); so that when Horace abandons the attempt to live up to these standards, he is neglecting a duty, as he did with Florus before. But here the new dignity and moral authority given to the poet suggests that he is guilty of betraying a greater social and patriotic duty (esp. 114 'Vestae', 117 'Catonibus atque Cethegis', 121 'fundet opes Latiumque beabit').

In the other literary epistles Horace sets demanding standards for the poet, who is, or should be, a morally upright citizen and educator of his society. This is particularly clear in *Ep.* 2. 1. 118–44, where poetry should revive the natural virtue that was present in early times (cf. *ibid.* 103–7, 139 ff.; also *Ars P.* 391–407).<sup>18</sup> These passages allude to the achievement of Horace's own lyrics and *Carmen Saeculare* (esp. 2. 1. 124–38). But whereas in the letter to Augustus he maintained the proud claim that, ideally, a *vates* is 'utilis urbi' (124), political and social topics are virtually excluded from the letter to Florus. Horace's patrons receive no mention, nor does

<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of sleep and torpor is regularly applied to moral sluggishness, unwillingness to wake to one's responsibilities: e.g. 1. 2. 27–31, Heracl. B73, Arist. *Protr.* fr. B83 and 90 During, *Magna Mor.* 1185a 10 ff., Sen. *Ep.* 53. 7–8, Pers. 3. 1 ff., 58 ff., M. Aur. 4. 46, 6. 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ep.* 1. 11, esp. lines 22 ff.; cf. *Carm.* 2. 16, 17 ff., *Serm.* 2. 7. 111 ff., *Ep.* 1. 14. 13–14.

<sup>16</sup> *Esp. Serm.* 1. 4. 73–4. *Locus classicus* for literary and philosophical criticism of the practices of *recitationes*: Mayor on Juv. 3. 9.

<sup>17</sup> For such techniques of transfusion see Bramble, *op. cit.*, chh. 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Brink, *op. cit.*, pp. 224–5, 235, and his commentary on *Ars P.* 391 ff.; E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), p. 391.

Augustus himself except in the reference to Philippi (46–9). This has its corollary in the attitude Horace adopts to poetry. The standards set in 2. 1 and in this letter at lines 109 ff. are too high to be comfortable: it is easier to abandon any notion of ‘sapere’ (128) and to dwell in contented madness, placid delusion (126, cf. 128 ff.). But this poetic delinquency involves losing all prospect of communicating with and pleasing other readers; Horace is not only lowering poetic and ethical standards, but sinking into self-satisfied indifference. The ethical note of the censor-imagery is sustained by the verb ‘sapere’, which must have significance in a philosophic epistle, still more so as sanity and madness are metaphors constantly applied to philosophic understanding as opposed to ignorance of moral truths.<sup>19</sup> Horace’s behaviour, then, is more than the languor of a littérateur; it is self-indulgence and abnegation of responsibility (cf. 1 ff., 67 ff.).

The simile which follows (128–40) reinforces this point, once again through the device of an inexact analogy. For although the Argive madman was annoyed to lose his illusion, he appears not to have known it *was* one until cured. Horace, on the other hand, is well aware of his ‘gratissimus error’ (140), and knows that poetry to which he does not devote the back-breaking effort described earlier will be worthless. Moreover, the Argive is said to have fulfilled all his other social ‘munia’ to the letter – which Horace himself, as we have seen, has not.

With line 141 the poem abruptly turns to the theme of philosophic self-reform, as Horace concludes that poetry should be left to the young and that he should have recourse to self-communion, meditation on moral themes (cf. *Serm.* 1. 4. 133 ff.; *Sen. de Ira* 3. 36; *M. Aur. Meditations*).<sup>20</sup> But the very fact that this is part of a poem qualifies Horace’s rejection of poetry and makes his determination questionable, as in 1. 1.<sup>21</sup> And this is not the only way in which the separation and opposition of poetry and philosophy is made doubtful; for ‘sapere’ in 141, recalling the use of the same word in 128, points to a connection between these pursuits. If Horace neglects the less important of the two, how likely is he to make the greater efforts necessary for philosophic wisdom and health?

The opening lines of this section (141–4) recall a theme quite common in Augustan poetry, that philosophy is a proper pursuit for one’s old age (cf. *Virg. Geo.* 2. 475 ff.; *Prop.* 3. 5; and Horace himself in *Ep.* 1. 1. 1 ff.). Such statements commonly appear in *recusationes*, in which philosophy provides a foil to the poet’s self-deprecating account of what he is in fact going to do.<sup>22</sup> In this poem Horace does not follow the conventional pattern, but there is none the less a tension between his past career and his present ambitions, with age and imminent death hanging over both.<sup>23</sup> But even now, as we might expect from the movement of the poem so far, Horace the *proficiens* is a slow learner and can approach philosophy only through poetry. And if, instead of seeking to prove (as in the letter to Augustus) that the poet can be ‘utilis urbi’, Horace is now trying to find ways in which his poetic gifts can be useful to *himself*

<sup>19</sup> See *SVF* 3. 657 ff.; *Cic. Paradoxa* 4; *Hor. Serm.* 2. 3; N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 173–88. For the mad poet, a devaluation of poetic inspiration, see *Ars P.* 453–76 and Brink ad loc. For the related ideas of disease and blindness, see Bramble, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> See also H. Chadwick, *RLAC* x. 1056; A. Oltramare, *Les Origines de la diatribe romaine*, (Lausanne, 1926), pp. 55, 178.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Macleod, art. cit. 22.

<sup>22</sup> See Nisbet-Hubbard on *Carm.* 1. 6. 2. 12; S. Commager, *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study* (New Haven and London, 1962), pp. 34 ff.; D. C. Innes, *CQ* n.s. 29 (1979), 165–71. Note also *ps.-Virg. Catal.* 5; *Donatus, vit. Virg.* 129 Hardie (probably derived from *Geo.* 2. loc. cit.); *Lyne on Ciris* 1 ff.

<sup>23</sup> This is a dominant theme of all Horace’s later poetry: see e.g. *Carm.* 4. 1, 7, 10, 11. 31 f.; *Ars P.* 60 ff., and Commager, op. cit., pp. 264 f.

(cf. 141 'utile'),<sup>24</sup> then it is appropriate that he should recall the style, topics and imagery of his earlier *Satires* and *Odes*.<sup>25</sup>

Yet this self-imitation itself is now made to highlight a deficiency in Horace's method; for he now launches into a series of diatribal clichés, loosely connected, on the theme of avarice, very comparable to passages such as *Serm.* 1. 1. 38 ff. or 2. 3. 82–175, *Ep.* 1. 1. 52 ff. or 1. 2. 44 ff.<sup>26</sup> There is nothing novel here – and what has the lust for property and wealth to do with Horace (cf. line 182)? A topic suitable enough when addressing the acquisitive Iccius (1. 12), or the Roman populace in general (*Serm.* 1. 1) seems to have little relevance to a poet who has already told Florus that, having escaped poverty, he would rather sleep than acquire more (51–4).

The conclusion of the poem, however, administers an unexpected shock, and reveals that the moralist is, after all, in control of the poetry. Previously Horace has been claiming both contentment (182, 190–2) and consistency (199–200), and while he does not adopt a tone of outright superiority (see 203–4), his serenity and self-satisfaction come oddly from a *proficiens* (cf. *Sen. Epp.* 72 and 75. 8 ff., esp. §14). The claims to consistency and peace of mind also seem contradicted by the earlier part of the poem. All this surely suggests that Horace is again lapsing into that state of self-deception and satisfaction with an easy aim which he earlier preferred in relation to poetry; in other words, that his state at 195 ff. is not necessarily an improvement on his attitude at 126–40.

Lines 205 ff., however, undercut this mood with a new, fierce expression of impatience, awakening the conscience and forcing the writer to a new self-awareness. If one moral hurdle has been crossed, that need not have been the hardest, and there are countless others to come. Horace here succeeds in the task which he sidestepped as regards poetry, that of inculcating full self-knowledge. He performs for himself (cf. n. 24) the service which the Argive citizen's friends performed for him. Moreover, a particular moral concern is now brought into prominence, and one which is supremely relevant to Horace's own case, as avarice was not. This is the preoccupation with death and old age (cf. n. 23), which need to be faced with the same equanimity with which Horace is ready to face loss of possessions.<sup>27</sup> In the string of questions at 205 ff. the topic of age occurs three times (207 'caret mortis formidine et ira?', 210 'natalis grate numeras?', 211 'accedente senecta'), and the poem culminates by facing the prospect of death, this topic having previously been glided over (55–7), approached indirectly, or treated impersonally (171–9, 191; cf. 142). Horace, therefore, as a moralist forces himself to face the subject he has tried to avoid, and as a poet makes it endurable to himself,<sup>28</sup> through a delicate mixture of affectionate humour and dignified rationality.

<sup>24</sup> cf. *Ep.* 1. 18. 107 'et mihi vivam'; *ibid.* 101 'quid te tibi reddat amicum' (pointed at the end of a sermon on a cruder kind of amicitia). Ancient moralists regularly concentrate on their own moral deficiencies and how to correct these: see e.g. *M. Aur.* 10. 4, 10. 30, 10. 37 and Farquharson *ad loc.* This should not be viewed as selfishness, but as a response to the greatest and most immediate challenge. Further, Macleod, *art. cit.* 21.

<sup>25</sup> As suggested above, pp. 1–2 and nn. 4–11. For examples of self-imitation in Augustan poetry see F. Cairns in *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature*, ed. D. West and T. Woodman (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 124–5. Similarly in another of Horace's poetic 'retrospects', *Ep.* 1. 19, the vigour and pugnacity (esp. lines 10–20) may recall his imitation of Archilochus, about which he is there writing: notice especially the reference to 'bilem' in line 20; bile and equivalents are characteristic of the fury of the iambist or satirist, cf. *Epode* 11. 16; *Ars P.* 79; *Juv.* 1. 79.

<sup>26</sup> For avarice as a stock theme of diatribe and satire, see H. Herter, *RhM* 94 (1951), 1–42; Mayor on *Juv.* 14. 139; Kindstrand on *Bion*, fr. 35.

<sup>27</sup> On Epicurean and Horatian attitudes to death see C. W. Macleod, *G&R* 26 (1979), 25 ff.

<sup>28</sup> cf. 1. 1. 33–40; *Ars P.* 343–4. For Horace and his addressees both poetry and philosophy are a source of solace and instruction.

The imagery of the final lines, as Horace prepares to 'leave the feast',<sup>29</sup> is as rich and significant as any of the noblest passages on death in the *Odes*. Firstly, the image of the symposium recalls the setting of many of the *Odes*, and metaphorically expresses Horace's abandonment of the *ludus* of lyric poetry.<sup>30</sup> But life itself is a kind of play, a triviality, to the philosopher, whose true profession is preparation for death (Pl. *Phaedo* 67d, Epicurus, fr. 250, Cic. *Tusc.* 1. 74, Sen. *Ep.* 70. 18, Epict. *Ench.* 21, etc.); and not only the abandonment of lyric but the end of life is in mind here. And since the lines also bring to a close the second book of the *Epistles*,<sup>31</sup> and may well be intended as Horace's 'last word' to his readers, they end appropriately on a note of farewell ('tempus abire tibi est'), which preserves an ambiguity between resignation of poetry and acceptance of death, the two connected themes which govern the poem.

So Horace in the final years of his life still presents himself as an amateurish philosopher and an imperfect man, and still maintains an uneasy balance between poetry and philosophy, which can only rarely be combined. Others still expect of him the kinds of poem in which he previously excelled (22, 55 ff., 59–60, 86, 91, 99–105); but in this most refined epistle Horace succeeds in reshaping his earlier styles to a new end, combining the intensity and rich imagery of his lyrics (see especially 171–9, 197–8, 208–16) with the probing self-analysis of his moral epistles. And in the end he resists the temptation to compose second-rate poetry of a superficial attractiveness, pleasing to the flatterers and the mob; instead, he rises to the creation of a poem that lives up to his own artistic and moral standards, however uncomfortable they may be to the poet and his readers (cf. 124, 128, 138–40). For the poem poses a question of priorities that we all have to face: the choice of our preferred pastimes and professions, and the amount of effort we are prepared to put into each – decisions which become more anxious and harder to realize as life goes on.<sup>32</sup>

Worcester College, Oxford

R. B. RUTHERFORD

<sup>29</sup> For the history of this image, and many examples, see Kindstrand on Bion, fr. 68.

<sup>30</sup> cf. *Ep.* 1. 1. 10 'versus et cetera ludicra pono'; Nisbet-Hubbard on *Carm.* 1. 32. 2.

<sup>31</sup> The evidence of the manuscripts (see e.g. Brink's commentary on the *Ars Poetica*, p. 14) does not support the view that the second book of epistles should include the *Ars* (as maintained by e.g., Williams, op. cit. (n. 1) 38 ff.).

<sup>32</sup> I am happy to acknowledge my debt to the teaching and example of Colin Macleod. I have also been helped by discussions with Stephen Halliwell and Victoria Harris.