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DEFLATING THE *ODES*: HORACE, *EPISTLES* 1.20*

Epistles 1.20, the last poem of its book, begins with an elaborate joke on the entry of Horace's book of epistles into the world and ends with a well-known σφραγίς describing the poet himself. It will be argued here that this final poem recalls and subverts the pretensions of two earlier final poems in Horace's own *Odes*, and that its good-humoured depreciation of Horace himself is matched by a similar attitude towards his previous grand poetic claims as a lyric *vates*.

Epistles 1.20 begins with a number of ambiguous word-plays, well brought out by Fraenkel,[1] which are based on a comparison between the book being sent to the booksellers for public circulation and a young slave going for sale/prostitution in the market-place. One such play occurs at line 10:

carus eris Romae donec te deserat aetas.

Here there is a clear use of the erotic τόπος of fading beauty: the boy/book will be in favour as long as his looks last.[2] But there seems to be a further point: the twin notions that the boy/book will be subject to the ravages of time (hence the temporal 'aetas', in the sense of ἥβη, 'bloom of youth', is used rather than a more descriptive term such as 'forma') and that he/it will soon fall from grace at Rome look suspiciously like a comic inversion of Horace's double claim at the end of the third book of the *Odes* that time will not destroy the glory of his poetry, and that it will be read in Rome and Italy (particularly in Horace's own region of Apulia) for as long as Rome itself lasts (*Odes* 3.30.1–12):

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, dum Captolium
scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex.
dicar, qua violens obstrepit Aufidus
et qua pauper aquae Daunus agrestium
regnavit populorum...

Thus the fate of the *Epistles* seems to be a light-hearted play on that previously and portentously envisaged for the *Odes*.

References to the *Odes* appear to continue in the fate of the boy/book once he/it has lost its youthful bloom (11–13):

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[1] Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 356–9. The Editors of *CQ* point out that the image of the book as prostitute may derive from Callimachus, *Ep.* 28.3 Pf. μισῶ καὶ περίφοιτον ἐρώμενον (in a context of literary polemic), something made more probable by the apparent use of the same epigram in lines 4 and 5 of the epistle – cf. n. 3 below.

[2] Cf. Nisbet and Hubbard's introduction to *Odes* 1.25. This particular erotic τόπος is not in fact brought out by Fraenkel; it is noted by R. S. Kilpatrick, *The Poetry of Friendship: Horace Epistles I* (Edmonton, 1986), p. 104 n. 10. In his discussion of *Epistles* 1.20 (pp. 103–5) Kilpatrick notes a few of the parallels with *Odes* 2.20 and 3.30, but like the other scholars who have spotted them does not develop these similarities.

contrectatus ubi manibus sordescere vulgi
coeperis, aut tineas pasces taciturnus inertis,
aut fugies Uticam aut vinctus mitteris Ilerdam.

Having been sullied ('contrectatus' again involves a sexual pun) by the handling of the 'vulgus' at Rome, the book will either rot silently with book-worms or be relegated to the ignorant provinces of Africa – neither an enviable fate. All three of these elements seem again to subvert the grand fate of the *Odes*. First, the mention of the 'vulgus' raises a general contrast: in the *Odes* the 'vulgus' or 'populus' commonly represents the kind of person from whom Horace wishes to distance himself as a select and sublime lyric poet, most famously at the beginning of the Roman Odes (3.1.1 'odi profanum vulgus et arceo') but elsewhere too (*Odes* 1.1.29, 2.16.37–41).[3] Second, the bathetic detail of the hungry book-worms intent on destroying the poet's work seems to pick up and invert a particular detail of *Odes* 3.30 – the image of the edacious shower ('imber edax') which will be powerless to consume Horace's poetic monument (3.30.3). Third and perhaps most telling is the notion of relegation to the provinces: as Macleod has noted,[4] the idea of the boy/book fleeing or being transported to the god-forsaken cities of Africa surely recalls Horace's lofty claim that he and his poetry, in the guise of a swan, will be known throughout the world (2.20.13–20):

iam Daedaleo notior Icaro
visam gementis litora Bosphori
  Syrtisque Gaetulas canorus
    ales Hyperboreosque campos.

me Colchus et qui dissimulat metum
Marsae cohortis Dacus et ultimi
  noscent Geloni, me peritus
    discet Hiber Rhodanique potor.

The substitution in the epistle of export to a two-bit province, ending up (so Horace continues) as an aid to the teaching of spelling, for fame at all four points of the compass would seem to be a deliberate and humorous deflation of Horace's own previous grandiose claims for the *Odes*.

Such deflation of prominent previous claims in the more elevated medium of lyric poetry continues in the description of Horace himself in the concluding σφραγίς section of the epistle. There the book is told to report on its author in the province of its relegation (20–3):

me libertino natum patre et in tenui re
maiores pennas nido extendisse loqueris,
ut quantum generi demas virtutibus addas:
me primis Urbis belli placuisse domique...

The conjunction of Horace's stress on his humble origins, his friendship with the great, and the ornithological metaphor irresistibly recalls the opening of *Odes* 2.20, containing a similar σφραγίς (1–8):

[3] This exclusivism derives from Callimachean poetics – cf. Nisbet and Hubbard on *Odes* 1.1.32; similar Callimachean exclusivism is alluded to in lines 4–5, where it is rejected by the boy/book ('paucis ostendi gemis et communia laudas) – for the small but select audience ('paucis'), cf. Callimachus fr. 1.29ff. Pf., for the scorning of the common ('communia' = δημόσια) *Ep.* 28.4 Pf.

[4] C. W. Macleod, *Horace: The Epistles* [verse translation with brief notes], Instrumentum Litterarum 3 (Rome, 1986), p. 58.

non usitata nec tenui ferar
penna biformis per liquidum aethera
vates, neque in terris morabor
longius, invidiaque maior

urbis relinquam. non ego pauperum
sanguis parentum, non ego quem vocas,
dilecte Maecenas, obibo
nec Stygia cohibebor unda.

Here the effect is one of undermining the lyric passage. Instead of a swan spreading no humble wing ('non usitata nec tenui ferar/ penna'), Horace now describes himself as a chick who opened wings too large for his humble nest ('maiores pennas nido extendisse'), deflating the grandiloquence of his earlier claim. The description of his low origin is also more down to earth: in lyric mode he is 'pauperum/ sanguis parentum', a poetic euphemism for the facts revealed in the epistle, 'libertino natum patre', blunt words with which Horace himself had clearly been taunted at Rome (*Sat.* 1.6.45–6):

nunc ad me redeo libertino patre natum,
quem rodunt omnes libertino patre natum.

Even Horace's relations with the great are treated in a less elevated fashion: the warm mention of friendship with Maecenas in the ode ('ego quem vocas, dilecte Maecenas') is summarized more forthrightly in the epistle as 'primis urbis belli placuisse domique'. Though 'belli' here would seem to add the glory of the friendship of Augustus, constantly warring away from Rome in the decade before the publication of the first book of epistles, to that of Maecenas, who characteristically stayed at home ('domi'), 'placuisse' suggests rather more than 'dilecte Maecenas' does the ingratiating attitude of an inferior to a superior[5] – we may compare Horace's own advice to the quasi-parasite Scaeva in *Epistles* 1.17.35–6:

principibus placuisse viris non ultima laus est:
non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum.

The overall effect of these contrasts is a wry and self-depreciating humour characteristic of the Horace of the *Epistles*, shooting down his previous pretensions about himself in much the same manner as he undermines his earlier grandiose claims for his poetry.

The final section of the σφραγίς appears to continue this tendency (24–8):

corporis exigui, praecanum, solibus aptum,
irasci celerem, tamen ut placabilis essem,
forte meum si quis te percontabitur aevum,
me quater undenos sciat implevisse Decembris
collegam Lepidum quo dixit Lollius anno.[6]

Here there is an evident general contrast with Horace's descriptions of himself in *Odes* 2.20 and 3.30, both of which claim high dignity for the poet and his work; here in the *Epistles* we see the human side of Horace, his unprepossessing physical appearance,

[5] Nisbet and Hubbard *ad loc.* claim that 'vocas' stresses Horace's client status as one at Maecenas' call; this has some truth, but an invitation from such a figure also conferred recognition and distinction, as Horace was well aware – cf. *Sat.* 1.6.47, Fraenkel, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 299–300.

[6] 'Dixit' is to be preferred to 'duxit' here, as in Shackleton Bailey's Teubner text; both have MS. support, but 'dixit' is the technical term for the report of the election of a colleague by a magistrate and is highly appropriate here in this formal Roman context – cf. Livy 37.47.7, Th. Mommsen, *Römische Staatsrecht*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig, 1887–8), i.217–18.

his petty traits and characteristics and his essential fallibility, and the details ring true.[7] This is a far cry from the constructor of a monument to outlast the Pyramids, or the kind of figure apt for metamorphosis into a poetic swan. A similar contrast is raised in the last two lines of the poem. Here Horace brings in both time and Rome with the mention of the consular year in which he reached his forty-fourth birthday; this seems a pointed reversal of both *Odes* 2.20 and 3.30, for in both these poems Horace saw himself as transcending the limits of time and mortality (2.20.5–7 'non ego... obibo', 3.30.6 'non omnis moriar'), and in 2.20.5 he envisaged leaving the cities of men ('urbis relinquam'), including no doubt the city of Rome. Thus Horace in the poetic seal to his first book of epistles presents himself as a clay-footed mortal tied to the earth and the city, and this is to be seen as a kind of humorous antidote to his claims for poetic greatness and immortality in the *Odes*.

It remains to suggest explanations for Horace's change in self-presentation from *Odes* to *Epistles*. It cannot be due to a change of mind over time, for the first book of *Epistles* is being written soon after the issue of the *Odes* (cf. *Epistles* 1.13, despatching a copy of the *Odes* (*carmina*, 17) to Augustus). Nor is it due to a sudden access of modesty or to a swift re-assessment of his recent poetry: Horace makes clear in *Epistles* 1.19. (32–3) that he remains proud of his poetic achievements in the *Odes*, and his humorous self-deflation is unlikely to indicate a loss of belief in himself as a lyric poet. Two interconnected reasons suggest themselves, the first linked with the characteristics of Horatian *sermo* in general, the second with the requirements of the first book of *Epistles* in particular. Horace's *sermones* consistently present an author who is literarily unambitious and who from time to time even claims that he is not writing poetry;[8] a light-hearted attitude to the same poet's far more ambitious and grand pose in the *Odes* befits and adds to this image. The same applies in general terms to the first book of *Epistles*, which are of course *sermones* (Horace includes them under this label at *Epistles* 2.1.250); but they also have an explicitly philosophical content and purpose (cf. *Epistles* 1.1.11–12), which, though it is not always taken wholly seriously by the poet, must determine to some extent the way in which he presents himself. The *persona* of a fallible and mortal poet prepared to deflate his own previous pretensions is surely a more effective conclusion to a book of friendly and intimate philosophical chat than that of an imposing *vates*, just as in the mild protreptic of the book itself the picture of Horace as a far from perfect philosopher[9] is both more realistic and more encouraging to his addressees than the pose of an uncompromising sage.

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[7] Horace's quickness of temper is perhaps seen at *Sat.* 2.3.323 and 2.7.35; for his premature grey hair, which may have a literary tinge, cf. Nisbet and Hubbard on *Odes* 2.11.14.

[8] Cf. *Sat.* 1.4.41–2, *Ep.* 1.1.10, *Ars Poetica* 306, Macleod, op. cit. (n. 4), p. xv.

[9] Cf. *Ep.* 1.4.15–16, 1.6.67–8, 1.8.3–12, 1.15.42–6, 1.17.3–4.