

THE VERBAL ART OF HORACE'S  
*ODE TO PYRRHA*

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Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa perfusus liquidis urget odoribus grato, Pyrrha, sub antro? cui flavam religas comam,	4
simplex munditiis? heu quotiens fidem mutatosque deos flebit et aspera nigris aequora ventis emirabitur insolens,	8
qui nunc te fruitur credulus aurea, qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem sperat, nescius aurae fallacis! miseri, quibus	12
intemptata nites. me tabula sacer votiva paries indicat uvida suspendisse potenti vestimenta maris deo.	16

Because of its richness of description and elegance of language, Horace's *Ode to Pyrrha* (1.5) has understandably attracted considerable attention from interpreters and critics. The efforts of these scholars have by and large focused upon the more prominent features of the poem, among which are its imagery, diction, word placement, thought development, levels of expression, and place in the tradition of erotic poetry.<sup>1</sup> Yet

<sup>1</sup> Among the more recent scholarly efforts concerned with these dimensions of the ode can be included E. A. Fredrickmeyer, "Horace's Ode to Pyrrha (*Carm.* 1.5)," *CP* 60 (1965) 180-85; V. Pöschl, "Die Pyrrhaode des Horaz (c. 1, 5)," *Hommages à J. Bayet*, ed. M. Renard and R. Schilling, *Coll. Latomus* 70 (1964) 579-86; M. C. J. Putnam, "Horace, *Carm.* 1.5: Love and Death," *CP* 65 (1970) 251-54; K. Quinn, "Horace as a Love Poet: A Reading of Odes 1.5," *Arion* 2 (1963) 59-77; and the book of M. Owen Lee, *Word, Sound, and Image in the Odes of Horace* (Ann Arbor 1969). In addition, the appropriate passages in

equally impressive, if more difficult to explore, is Horace's use of the latent poetic resources of grammar, of which he seemed keenly aware and which he skillfully exploited to full advantage in this love poem. This paper examines the internal structure of this ode, particularly its grammatical forms and constructions, with the intent of gaining a deeper understanding of a neglected but essential dimension of the poet's art.

It should be mentioned at this point that the method of analysis used in this paper grows out of the work of the Russian Formalists and Prague Structuralists and takes as its point of departure the basic fact that in poetic language the verbal materials used to build up the speech sequence are organized according to the principle of equivalence. In other words, in poetry one expects to find the various elements of language, such as sounds, syllables, words, phrases, and grammatical constructions, *repeated*, for it is out of these equivalent units that poetic utterances are composed. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is meter, which is simply the repetition of some fixed rhythmic unit. The concern of this paper is to explore the presence of this principle of equivalence on the level of grammar.<sup>2</sup> One final preliminary remark: I have omitted some words and rearranged others, where necessary, so as to make clear the most important grammatical relationships in the sentences.

The five sentences which constitute the largest units of grammar in this ode are organized into a tightly knit symmetry. The pivotal point in this formal design is occupied by the third, centrally positioned, exclamatory sentence, which describes the inevitably tragic circumstances that the future holds for the anonymous youth who is enjoying the amorous company of the many-sided Pyrrha. This key statement is preceded on the one hand by two questions (the first and second sentences) and followed on the other hand by two declarations (the fourth and fifth sentences). Both of the questions seek to learn the identity of the youth, while the two assertions serve as somewhat oblique responses to them. On the basis of formal similarities these four sentences fall into two pairs of conversational units (the second and fourth sentences and the first and fifth sentences respectively), which are symmetrically placed around the pivotal third sentence and in each of which the two members complement each other as question and answer: *cui religas flavam comam?*<sup>2</sup>~*miseri, quibus nites . . .* and *Quis puer urget te?*<sup>2</sup>~*sacer paries indicat me . . .* These coupled sentences offer pieces of information which help to clarify the issue at hand as well as illuminate the poet's intent: to reveal that beyond

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the commentaries of R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes I* (Oxford 1970), and H. P. Syndikus, *Die Lyrik des Horaz I* (Darmstadt 1972), should be noted.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller explanation of this approach to poetry, see the following articles of Roman Jakobson: "Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (New York 1960) 350-77; and "Poezija Grammatiki i Grammatika Poezii," *Poetics* (Warsaw 1962) 397-418.

his apparent curiosity in the identity of Pyrrha's current lover, his prediction of the boy's future grief is based upon his own personal experience as a victim of her frequently changing affections.

In addition to the symmetrical arrangement of sentence structures, grammatical parallelisms and thematic similarities also bring together the initial and final sentences with elements of the third sentence so as to form an interlocking network of grammatical components. Thus the first sentence and the complex subordinate clause of the third sentence are primarily concerned with the present circumstances surrounding the youth's romance (*Quis puer urget te?~qui nunc fruitur te . . .*). Likewise, both the main clause of the third sentence and the fifth sentence show through the use of the same rough-sea metaphor a preoccupation with non-present (i.e., past and future) situations that unhappily contrast with the lover's current joys (*flebit fidem mutatosque deos et emirabitur aspera aequora~me suspendisse uvida vestimenta . . .*).

In the third sentence Horace develops a striking contrast between the present and future stages of the boy's relationship with Pyrrha. Each of this sentence's two major clauses is concerned primarily with the description of one of these two temporal situations. Thus the main clause offers a glimpse of the reality which the boy will experience in the future, while the subordinate clause is preoccupied with his present hopes and expectations. The poet's treatment of these two situations is tied to the internal design of their respective grammatical constructions. The independent main clause, which asserts the inevitable certainty of the boy's sorrow, is a model of unity and coherence, in which almost all of the grammatical elements have been carefully integrated with each other. The two conjunctive elements *-que* and *et* bind together the two future-tense verbs and three direct objects in such a way that both of the subject's actions embrace all three objects. But the intricately constructed dependent subordinate clause, which unveils the instability of the present situation by sharply undercutting the boy's optimism, lacks the neat coordination of sentence-parts characteristic of the main clause and seems by contrast highly fragmented, despite some superficial similarities. Even though the repeated pronoun *qui* joins each of the two smaller relative clauses of the subordinate clause to the preceding main clause and thus reinforces the link between present hopefulness and future sorrow, the two relative constructions and their verbs are not connected to each other. Likewise, within the second relative clause the two embedded structures (*qui semper vacuam, semper amabilem sperat*) of the indirect discourse construction are grammatically separated from each other. In other words, the absence of connectives linking the smaller constructions of the subordinate clause makes the language seem choppy and disjointed; this unevenness of language betrays the hopes and wishes of the youth. In short, the grammar of the contrasted main and subordinate clauses of this pivotal sentence mirrors the sense.

There is in this poem one particularly important grammatical construction which occurs three times and which consists of a noun phrase in either the nominative or accusative case coupled with another noun phrase in the ablative case. These parallel structures are *puer perfusus liquidis odoribus* (1–2), *aequora aspera nigris ventis* (6–7), and *paries sacer votiva tabula* (13–14), and when they are juxtaposed, the poem's meaning becomes clearer. In the ode's initial sentence the youth is placed in the romantic context by means of the first occurrence of this construction, but, not surprisingly, Pyrrha's presence in this setting is only minimal. She also seems to be absent from the future, for none of the three direct objects of the third sentence's main clause patently points to her, but in fact the third direct object, i.e., the second instance of this structure, is a descriptive counterpart of the boy's earlier characterization; it vividly expresses through the sea metaphor the girl's true nature. Pyrrha may appear *simplex munditiis*, but under the surface she is really *aspera aequora*—more complex, stormy, and dangerous. In the poem's final sentence, Horace is intentionally *not* particularized by an equivalent construction, because unlike the presently entrenched youth he has deliberately removed himself with an oath from any further association with her. Thus it happens that the sacred wall, which holds the only remaining tangible evidence of the poet's now defunct relationship with the girl, is described by the third occurrence of this key construction.

The pairing of the second and fourth sentences as question and answer is prompted by their approximate structural similarities. More specifically, the connection between the interrogative sentence and the relative clause of the fourth sentence is affirmed by their identical second person singular subject. While there are clearly other likenesses between the two constructions, such as a subject modifier (*simplex munditiis* and *intemp-tata*) and an indirect object (*cui* and *quibus*), it is the differences which are most informative. Instead of naming a specific youth in response to the interrogative *cui*, the poet chooses to make an identification with the descriptive adjective *miseri*, the grammatical form and meaning of which are revealing: the shift in number from singular to plural confirms the already suspected plurality of Pyrrha's lovers, whose distinctive feature is their unfortunate experiences with the girl. In addition, the dissimilar predicates of these two constructions (*flavam religas comam* and *nites*) specify verbal activities which point in opposite directions. In the question the subject-person acts inwardly upon a part of herself; the action of the transitive verb is essentially reflexive. In the answer the intransitive verb denotes an action which moves outwards and away from the subject. Interestingly enough, there is an almost causal relationship between the girl's efforts at self-beautification and her radiant presence. In neither instance do her actions directly affect her suitors. The peripheral position to which the lover(s) are relegated is grammatically reflected by the

dative case forms *cui* and *quibus*. Pyrrha's self-centeredness stands in marked contrast to the youth's actions (*urget*, *fruitur*, etc.), which grammatically govern animate and inanimate objects external to himself. And while in the second and fourth sentences there is some interest in Pyrrha's appearance, she remains, unlike the boy, descriptively unattached to the romantic setting of the grotto; she lives in a world devoid of these constraints.

The important bond between the opening and closing sentences of this poem is suggested by the repetition of the same underlying syntactic pattern: Noun Phrase Subject + Transitive Verb + Pronominal Direct Object. To the initial question *Quis puer urget te?* the poet responds with the unexpected answer *sacer paries indicat me*. When these juxtaposed sentence kernels are examined out of context, they identify Horace as the present lover of Pyrrha, but the subsequent embedded sentence of the indirect discourse construction with its perfect tense infinitive *suspendisse* quickly clarifies the identification: Horace *was* a suitor of the girl, but his bad experience led him to swear off further contact with her. This two-fold revelation—the identification of himself as one of the girl's lovers and the disclosure of a sworn oath to separate himself from her—is effected by the pronoun *me*, which the grammatical rules of Latin permit to be both the direct object of *indicat* and the subject of *suspendisse*. Once the connection has been established between the first and fifth sentences, the fully developed contrast between the presently engaged youth and the battered but wiser poet-lover becomes apparent. In the initial sentence the two grammatically parallel phrases *multa in rosa* and *grato sub antro* not only provide the natural context of the romance, but spatially position *puer* (and *te*) in synecdochic relation to it with the prepositions *in* ("in") and *sub* ("down" or "beneath"). By contrast Horace's declared separation from the girl in the final sentence is underscored by the recurrence of these two words as prefixes of the compound verbs *indicat* and *suspendisse*, but their meanings are now antonymic (i.e., "out" and "up") to what they signified earlier. The abundance of descriptive words tying the boy, but not Pyrrha, to the romantic setting of the first sentence is brought into relief by the complete absence of attributive words characterizing *me* in the last sentence. Thus both the girl (*te* in v. 1) and the poet (*me* in v. 13) remain apart from their respective contexts. In other words, the poet's selection and distribution of adjectival words mirror the poem's sense. Lastly, an ancient custom finds its way into the closing sentence: sailors who survived a dangerous sea voyage dedicated their clothes in gratitude to Neptune, god of the sea. Horace cleverly joins this traditional gesture to the sea metaphor describing Pyrrha's true nature. The drenched state of the *uvida vestimenta* can be easily traced back to its cause—*aspera aequora*: these two structures are the only two neuter plural noun phrases in the ode. The reiteration of

meanings through either repeated words or synonyms further enriches the poet's gesture. The deity (*deo*) to whom he has made a dedication is not related to those remote, transformed gods (*mutatos . . . deos*), whom the youth will lament in the future. Rather, the poet's protecting benefactor is ruler of the sea (*deo potenti maris*) and its seemingly unpredictable moods (*aspera aequora*). The oath, then, appears to be not only a decision to terminate his relationship with Pyrrha, but also a defiant show of strength in opposition to the destructive forces of Pyrrha's nature.

In summation, this carefully constructed lyric poem displays a complex pattern of repeated and alternating structures on various grammatical levels. It is in large part through this vehicle of poetic grammar that Horace is able to give shape so effectively to his purpose.