

## HORACE, *EPISTLES* 2.1.50–54

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Ennius, et sapiens et fortis et alter Homerus,  
ut critici dicunt, leviter curare videtur  
quo promissa cadant et somnia Pythagorea.  
Naevius in manibus non est et mentibus haeret  
paene recens? adeo sanctum est vetus omne poema.

This passage is imbedded in an argument whose overall direction has always seemed plain enough. It is preceded by a progression of sallies deriding the popular view that Rome's oldest poets were its greatest poets, and it is followed by further satire on popular taste, until Horace finally begins to enunciate his own standards in line 63. But since antiquity commentators have debated what point or points Horace was trying to make within the five-line passage. One puzzle was cleared up when Bentley<sup>1</sup> introduced a question mark after *recens*, thus in effect making Naevius' popularity the subject of an assertion (*non* = *nonne*) rather than of a denial, and adding another name to the roster of overrated antiques. But other problems persist: what is Horace saying about Ennius, and how is that statement related to the remark about Naevius?

This note has turned out to be a sort of nail soup, into the concoction of which have gone objections and advice from Robert Kaster, John Morgan, Otto Skutsch, and Richard Tarrant, as well as from two anonymous referees for *TAPA*; to all I am grateful. It is not so clear that any of them would care to dine on the result, though.

<sup>1</sup> In the following discussion editors and critics are identified simply by surname; full reference are as follows: M. BARCHIESI, *Nevio epico* (Padua 1962) 62–68; R. BENTLEY, *Q. Horatius Flaccus ex recensione et cum notis atque emendationibus Richardi Bentleii*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam 1728); D. BO, *Q. Horati Flacci opera* (Turin 1957); C. O. BRINK, *Horace on Poetry*, vol. 3: *Epistles Book II: The Letters to Augustus and Florus* (Cambridge 1982); also vol. 2: *The 'Ars Poetica'* (Cambridge 1971); H. W. GARROD, *Q. Horati Flacci opera* (Oxford 1901); P. HÄNDEL, "Zur Augustusepistel des Horaz," *WS* 79 (1966) 383–86; A. Kiessling—R. HEINZE, *Q. Horatius Flaccus: Briefe*, 7th ed. (Berlin 1961); F. KLINGNER, *Q. Horati Flacci opera*, 3rd ed., (Leipzig 1959); also "Horazens Brief an Augustus," *SBAW* 195, Heft 5 (1950) 11; D. R. SHACKLETON BAILEY, *Profile of Horace* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982) 77–78; also *Q. Horati Flacci opera* (Stuttgart 1985); O. SKUTSCH, *The Annals of Quintus Ennius* (Oxford 1985); W. SUERBAUM, *Untersuchungen zur Selbstdarstellung älteren römischen Dichter: Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius*, *Spudasmata* 19 (Hildesheim 1968) 98–101; F. VILLENEUVE, *Horace: Épitres* (Paris 1934); A. S. WILKINS, *The Epistles of Horace* (London 1885).

Most commentators believe that Horace is making two parallel but independent comments (Ennius, whether rightly or wrongly, is greatly admired, and Naevius is if anything even more popular than Ennius), and accordingly they punctuate with a strong break after line 52.<sup>2</sup> In lines 53–54, Horace certainly does make the point that Naevius is extremely popular. But his testimony about Ennius' high standing is less clear-cut. In this case, he does not refer to public opinion, but cites the verdict of the *critici*, which he stops short of endorsing. More important, the statement about Ennius' good reputation is relegated to a grammatically subordinate part of the sentence, and further deemphasized by being sandwiched between the subject and verb of the main clause. What Horace puts foremost is the assertion that Ennius "leviter curare videtur quo promissa cadant et somnia Pythagorea."

There is broad agreement about the meaning of "promises and Pythagorean dreams." Horace is alluding to a literary manifesto in book 1 of the *Annales*, where Ennius told of having a dream in which Homer declared that his soul had been reincarnated in Ennius.<sup>3</sup> It is the phrase "leviter curare videtur" which is controversial. Current interpretations of it can be reduced to one or the other of two positions already formulated in the scholia. Porphyrio, followed for example by Bentley, Wilkins, and Klingner, thought it meant that Ennius was "securus iam de proventu suae laudis," confident of his accomplishment as never before, now that critics praise him and archaism is all the rage. But the Pseudo-Acronian scholia, followed by Barchiesi, Suerbaum, and Brink, hold that Horace meant almost the opposite. Contrary to what the critics say, Ennius failed to make good his pretensions: "non ita dicit Ennius, ut Homero similis videatur. nam multa levia et indigna auctoritatis in opere eius inveniuntur."

Although they move to opposite conclusions, both schools of thought presuppose that *leviter* serves as a kind of negative with *curare*: "Ennius has little or no reason to worry" according to the first; "Ennius took little or no trouble" according to the second. Horace might very well have used *leviter* on the model of adverbs like *paulum* and *mediocriter*, which often occur when a writer is trying to nullify an attribute rather than acknowledge its presence. But since the words themselves can obviously be used in either situation,

<sup>2</sup> Brink, Villeneuve's Budé, and Garrod's OCT with a period; Bo and Klingner's Teubner with a semicolon, for example. If lines 50–54 do in fact make roughly equivalent statements about Ennius and Naevius, this passage cannot be taken closely with the five lines immediately following, in which Horace juxtaposes poets with contrasting qualities. (On the interpretation which will be argued in this note, lines 50–54 have still less connection with 55–59.)

<sup>3</sup> Since Horace uses the word *promittere* not just of promises in the narrow sense, but also of the vaunting language with which poets launch their productions (cf. *Serm.* 2.3.6, and *promissor* at *Ars* 138), and since Ennius led off with vaunting declarations in book 7 as well as book 1, it is possible that Horace has both passages in mind, and not just the proem of book 1. That possibility would be strengthened if it were true that the subject of Ennius' dream came up in both proemia, as Skutsch argues on p. 376.

context alone determines which sense they have. A critic who thinks that Horace is denying worry or care on Ennius' part must indicate what elements in the passage justify that inference; the negative is not inherent in the word *leviter*.<sup>4</sup>

To assume that "leviter curare" means "non curare" creates difficulty no matter how one understands *curare*. The main problem with the first interpretation is that it posits a sharp disjunction of time and mood which is not supported by the text. Ennius in the present of the Augustan Age is supposed to be no longer concerned about the fame with which he was preoccupied at the time of his dream a century and a half earlier. Yet all Horace's verbs are present, so that the contrast with some previous anxiety is entirely hypothetical.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if Horace means that Ennius is happy with the reception of the *Annales*, it is oddly indirect to write that he "seems not to care how his dreams and promises turn out." The plain meaning of those words is so far from the sense required that they can only be understood as a paradoxical compression: Ennius does not worry because he has ceased to worry, or because he has no need to worry. Yet there is nothing in Horace's line to alert us to a paradox.<sup>6</sup> And finally, Porphyrio's interpretation makes for obscurity at one other point as well: it leaves the following remark about Naevius hanging in the air. Rhetorically, one anticipates a climax of some sort, but there is no particle or connective announcing the movement from a weaker to a stronger case.<sup>7</sup> The effect of bringing in Naevius seems if anything anticlimactic, because nothing Horace says about him comes up to the description of Ennius as "sapiens et fortis et alter Homerus."

The Pseudo-Acronian notion that the phrase *leviter curare* is meant to castigate Ennius muddles a standpoint which Horace carefully maintains throughout the early part of his diatribe. Down to line 63 his aim is to depict, or more precisely lampoon, popular enthusiasm for the ancients. Only then does he take a judgmental turn ("interdum volgus rectum videt, est ubi pec-

<sup>4</sup> For *leviter* with attributes affirmed rather than denied, cf. Cic. *De Orat.* 3.24, "opinionibus non modo vulgi, verum etiam hominum leviter eruditorum," *Orat.* 20, "alii . . . impoliti . . . , alii . . . faceti, florentes etiam et leviter ornati," *Att.* 2.1.9, "mihi quod defendissem leviter susceperat."

<sup>5</sup> Hence all proponents of this interpretation find that they must help Horace out by adding temporal expressions (like *iam* in Porphyrio's paraphrase) which adumbrate the missing contrast.

<sup>6</sup> The difficulty here might also be posed as a question of Latinity. Porphyrio and his latter-day disciples understand "leviter curare videtur" as meaning something like "seems relieved of anxiety." But even if "leviter curare" could mean "non curare," in ordinary Latin "non curat" does not describe someone who has been relieved of anxiety (that would be "liberatus cura" or the like), but someone who never cared in the first place.

<sup>7</sup> The placement of the name *Naevius* at the beginning of the new sentence is not by itself enough to indicate a climax, since the name of Ennius, against whom Naevius is presumably being set off, was also first in the preceding sentence, and since in any case a subject tends to occupy the initial position. Here again interpreters have had to help Horace out by inserting the missing *et*, *etiam*, or *immo* into their paraphrases.

cat”), and begin to assert his own views about them. Any direct criticism of ancient poets before that is out of place. A further obstacle to Pseudo-Acro’s interpretation is *videtur*, which makes Ennius’ indifferent achievement not simply an assertion by Horace, but a conclusion from manifest facts—a conclusion at which the reader has all the more reason to balk after being told how highly the critics regard Ennius. Though Horace is often polemical, he does not adopt positions for which he gives no reasons. What is supposed to be the basis for his criticism here?

In the information provided down to line 52, there are three possibilities. One is that the estimate of the critics is so obviously perverse that it needs only to be stated in order to be recognized as ridiculous. Horace might have taken this position if Ennius were being held up as a model of technical excellence. But in fact, the qualities which the critics single out are not directly concerned with technique, and they are not obviously false. *Sapiens* suggests Ennius’ knowledge of life rather than of poetics;<sup>8</sup> *fortis* is an epithet that fits the genre of epic regardless of the practitioner;<sup>9</sup> and Ennius’ standing as a second Homer had been a truism<sup>10</sup> for Romans for more than a hundred years, until Vergil’s *Aeneid* finally replaced the *Annales* as the premiere epic of Latin literature.<sup>11</sup> It is most unlikely, therefore, that Horace’s reference to the critics is meant to be purely dismissive.<sup>12</sup>

Some interpreters find the basis of Horace’s criticism in the phrase *leviter curare* itself: “*leviter curare* denotes *incuria* or lack of *ars* . . . the *cura* or *labor* of the New Poets forms the basis of this passage.”<sup>13</sup> But this reading imports ideas which are foreign to the context, and confuses two different uses of *curare*. So far from raising (or even trailing) the banner of the New

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Epist.* 1.2 on Homer’s *sapientia*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Serm.* 1.10.43–44, “forte epos acer / ut nemo Varius ducit.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lucilius 1189 Marx.

<sup>11</sup> Opinions about this line are often colored by the assumption that Horace was writing after publication of the *Aeneid*, for readers who had come to realize Vergil’s immense superiority to Ennius. It is possible that this passage was written after the appearance of the *Aeneid*, but it is by no means certain. Vergil’s poem was not published until some point after the poet’s death in 19 B.C. *Epist.* 2.1 is most commonly fixed to the period 15–12 B.C., but the truth is that we have no good evidence by which to date it; it can have been written at any point between the late twenties and Horace’s death in 8 B.C. If the *Letter to Augustus* is later than the *Aeneid*, it is at most ten years later: not a very long time for one commonplace opinion to supplant another.

<sup>12</sup> Rather than discuss whether or not the epithets in line 50 truly apply to Ennius, interpreters tend to dismiss the critics by lumping them together with the *vulgus*, whose views Horace undoubtedly does challenge throughout the early part of the *Letter*. But it is not true that Horace equates the two groups. Line 51 is the only point at which he refers to literary experts, and he brings them in ostentatiously, using a Greek word that evokes the arcane science of the specialist, as is evident from the materials gathered in Brink’s commentary. Everywhere else Horace makes plain that he is talking about popular, ill-informed opinion: *populus* in line 18, the first-person plurals in 32–33, the imaginary interlocutor of 39 and 43–44, *arto stipata theatro* . . . *Roma potens* in 61, *volgus* in 63, *cuncti paene patres* in 81, *senes* in 85.

Poets, Horace has up to this point not uttered a word about poetic values, other than to deny that quality consists in being old. Furthermore, *ars* and *labor* are inappropriate renderings of *curare* as it used in this passage. When *curare* denotes the effort of “taking care,” it governs an object clause introduced by *ut*, like other verbs of effort. When it is followed by an indirect question, as here, it describes a mental state and means “to feel concern or anxiety.”<sup>14</sup> We have no more reason to think that Horace is talking about poetic *labor* at line 51, than that he is urging Augustus to embrace the Callimachean discipline when he says “*curam redde brevem*” at line 216.

The only other reference point a reader could have for understanding Horace’s criticism lies outside the poem, in the content of the *Annales*. Thus Pseudo-Acro appeals to the notorious fact that Ennius’ epic contains “many things unworthy of a masterwork.” But since Horace does not actually touch on any of those faults here, how can he assume that a mere reference to the *Annales* will conjure up Ennius’ faults rather than his virtues—particularly in an era that is so partial to archaic writers? Elsewhere when Horace criticizes Ennius, he specifies the defect.<sup>15</sup> And sometimes he does not criticize at all, but cites Ennius as a poetic standard.<sup>16</sup> The problem with the Pseudo-Acronian interpretation remains: if Ennius is being criticized here, what makes his failings so obvious that Horace can take them for granted?<sup>17</sup>

Finding no answer to this question before line 52, Heinze realized that the answer must lie in the two lines about Naevius right afterwards, and he therefore placed a colon at the end of 52. What proves the hollowness of Ennius’ pretensions is the fact that, unlike Homer who eclipsed all his predecessors, Ennius did not manage to displace Naevius. This interpretation has been almost universally rejected<sup>18</sup> as too artificial. One may doubt whether it is much more artificial than other interpretations which are current, but it is unsatisfactory. If the point is simply that Ennius’ poem did not oust Naevius’

<sup>13</sup> Brink, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Two propositions have to be distinguished: (1) that Ennius did not *take* care how he wrote, and (2) that he did not *feel* care how his promises turned out. The two propositions might be logically connected, in the sense that (2) is one inference which might be drawn from (1). But linguistically (2) does not mean the same as (1), and logically it does not of itself imply (1); to make the connection, we would require more than Horace says in lines 50–52.

<sup>15</sup> *Serm.* 1.10.54 and *Ars* 259–62.

<sup>16</sup> Explicitly at *Ars* 56–58, and implicitly at *Epist.* 1.19.6–8, where Ennius figures as the Roman Homer.

<sup>17</sup> Certain critics, of whom Barchiesi is representative, take the line that Horace’s statement here must be understood by reference to views expressed elsewhere, most notably in his characterization of Plautus at line 176, “*securus, cadat an recto stet fabula talo*.” But this solution is not worthy of serious consideration. Not only does it ascribe to Horace a method of argument whereby the reason for a statement in one place must be extrapolated from a completely different context, but it assumes that the two contexts are parallel, when the whole issue turns on whether *leviter curare* is in fact equivalent to *securus*.

<sup>18</sup> Händel is an exception.

poem in popular regard, that would seem to be something beyond Ennius' control, and not necessarily related to the quality of his work. Certainly Horace does not believe that popularity correlates with quality as far as other poetry is concerned.

But if Heinze did not solve the problem, he introduced important considerations into the discussion. He saw that *videtur* points to a stated rationale, and he found a new basis for it. He realized that Horace's juxtaposition of three lines on Ennius and two lines on Naevius might have something to do with the fact that Ennius himself had invited comparison with Naevius in the proem to book 7. And he streamlined the thought of the passage, transforming what had seemed to be separate statements into a connected argument.<sup>19</sup> Next to Bentley's question mark, Heinze's colon is the most valuable contribution yet made to the interpretation of these lines.

Nevertheless, the sense imparted by every ministration thus far has seemed so contorted that the most recent therapist has moved from hermeneutic to surgery. Shackleton Bailey replaced *leviter* with *viget et*, so that the sentence reads "Ennius . . . viget et curare videtur quo promissa cadant" ("Ennius . . . is all the rage and held to take good care how his promises and Pythagorean dreams turn out").<sup>20</sup> This solution obviously eliminates all problems about *leviter*, and does not introduce any new problems involving *viget*. It also allows some point of reference for *curare videtur*, in the judgment of the critics. But it has two weaknesses. One is that the point about Ennius' popularity is now made three times, in "*sapiens . . . ut critici dicunt*," in "*viget*," and in "*curare videtur quo promissa cadant*," with no apparent motive for the redundancy. The second problem is with the meaning of "*curare quo cadant*," which Shackleton Bailey evidently translates as an object clause.<sup>21</sup> *Curare* here can only mean "feel concern," not "take care," and it would be an odd way of praising Ennius to say that he seems concerned about whether he did a good job, rather than that he did a good job.

Perhaps a better solution can be found with the help of two considerations which have to do with *leviter*. One is lexical and one is grammatical. As for the first, Horace almost certainly intended to produce a variation on the common locution "*levis cura*."<sup>22</sup> In this as in all its applications, *levis* denotes that which lacks weight. The precise connotations of the word will depend on

<sup>19</sup> This unity of thought is clearly signposted in Horace's text. The closing sentence, "*adeo sanctum est vetus omne poema*," recapitulates the bridge line just before our passage, about the reader who "*miratur nihil nisi quod Libitina sacravit*." Sharp boundaries at beginning and end emphasize the coherence of the intervening material.

<sup>20</sup> The translation and discussion of the text may be found in *Profile*, pp. 76–78; in his subsequent Teubner text, Shackleton Bailey daggered *leviter* and repeated his conjecture in the apparatus.

<sup>21</sup> In his discussion, however, he calls the construction an indirect question.

<sup>22</sup> He uses it himself at *Carm.* 1.14.18; cf. also Prop. 2.12.4, *Ciris* 227, Sen. *Phaed.* 607, Curt. 9.8.25, Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.139, Tac. *Ann.* 14.54.2, 15.36.2, Apul. *Met.* 11.29.

the kind of weight implied in the particular context: the possibilities range from more or less physical ideas of heaviness, mass, and solidity through a series of metaphors like importance, authority, seriousness, steadiness, force, and impact. A *levis cura* is usually a concern which is minor rather than major.<sup>23</sup> But sometimes the implicit standard is seriousness or consequentiality, and then the sense required for *levis* will be closer to “frivolous,” “idle,” or “vain.” Thus in a couplet about Cupid contemplating the folly of lovers, Propertius writes: “is primum vidit sine sensu vivere amantis, / et levibus curis magna perire bona.”<sup>24</sup> Quintilian uses the word similarly in a passage deprecating both fussiness and carelessness in regard to dress: “ut purpurae recte descendant levis cura est, notatur interim neglegentia.”<sup>25</sup>

The *levis cura* which Horace has in mind at *Epist.* 2.1.51–52 is Ennius’ sense of craftsmanship. He means that, to judge by the reaction of Augustan readers, Ennius was pursuing an idle concern with his manifesto about lifting the standards of Roman poetry: that seems plain (*videtur*), because the hoary Naevius whom Ennius mocked has come to be as warmly admired as Ennius himself. Horace sarcastically aligns himself with the contemporary perspective on archaic poetry, criticizing Ennius only for his silly and irrelevant preoccupation with quality, and Naevius not at all.

If it is true that *leviter* expresses an ironic criticism of Ennius’ poetic standards, then it can be brought under the grammatical rubric of the “Adverbium des Urteils.”<sup>26</sup> The peculiarity of these adverbs is that, rather than describing the manner in which an action is done, they applaud or censure the fact of its being done. Logically, what they predicate seems more closely connected with the doer than the deed. When Cicero says “male reprehendunt” at *Tusc.* 3.34, for example, he does not mean that the Epicureans do a poor job of criticizing, but that they are wrong to criticize at all. That *leviter* can be used in the same way is shown by a Lucretian passage arguing that the sea posed no threat before men took to sailing: “nam temere in cassum frustra mare saepe coortum / saevibat leviterque minis ponebat inanis.”<sup>27</sup> As the reinforcing terms *temere*, *in cassum*, *frustra*, and *inanis* make clear, Lucretius does not mean

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Sen. *Phaed.* 607, Tac. *Ann.* 14.54.2, Apul. *Met.* 11.29.

<sup>24</sup> Prop. 2.12.3–4. “Frivolous” is one of the senses on which Ovid plays at *Am.* 3.1.41, “sum levis, et mecum levis est, mea cura, Cupido.”

<sup>25</sup> Quint. 11.3.139. Since a sense akin to “frivolous,” “ineffectual,” or “vain” is crucial to the interpretation I propose at *Epist.* 2.1.51, it may be well to cite some passages in which *levis* is coupled with words which make such notions explicit. For *levis* with *inanis*, cf. Cic. *Amic.* 86, *Orat.* 170, Petr. 2.2; with *vanus*, Livy 3.21.5, Sen. *Cont.* 10.1.11; with *ineptus*, Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.59; with *absurdus*, Cic. *Rep.* 4.4; with *nugatorius*, Cic. *Fam.* 11.2.3.

<sup>26</sup> See Kühner-Stegmann 2.1: 795, sec. 141, note 2; Hofmann-Szantyr, p. 827, para. (d).

<sup>27</sup> Lucr. 5.1002–3. *Leviter* may function as an *Adverbium des Urteils* at Ov. *Met.* 9.622, where Byblis voices the fear that if she fails to renew her advances to her brother, “leviter voluisse videbor” (i.e., “I will seem insincere in having sought his love”). It certainly has that function in Porphyrio’s note on Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.9, “leviter in re tam atroci et piscium et palumborum [Horatius] meminit, nisi quod hi excessus lyricis concessi sunt.”

that the sea “gently” or “fickly” put aside its threats, but that its action was inconsequential, because in those days neither storm nor calm made any difference to men. Taking the adverb in line 51 of Horace analogously,<sup>28</sup> we may translate the passage:

Ennius, though sage and bold—a second Homer, as the professors say—seems frivolous for worrying about the upshot of his pronouncements and Pythagorean dreams: is not Naevius open in our hands and echoing in our heads as if he had written yesterday? So revered is every hoary poem.

One point which still needs explaining is Horace’s citation of the critics: to what purpose have they have been brought into the argument? I have argued above that their views are held up for approbation rather than the opposite, and the reason is that they allow Horace to sidestep a rhetorical pitfall. What he has set out to say in this passage is that the craze for archaic poetry has gone so far that Naevius’ stature now rivals Ennius’. On the one hand, he must remind us that Ennius is better than Naevius. But on the other hand, he cannot afford to make too much of Ennius, who is after all one of the archaic poets who unduly obscure the luster of the modern age. A reference to the critics solves the problem; it is another instance of that tactic whereby Horace buttresses controversial positions by citing authorities on whom he can throw responsibility for selected details.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For other examples of the *Adverbium des Urteils* in Horace, cf. *Serm.* 1.2.90, “hoc illi recte,” and *Ars* 128–30, “tuque rectius Iliacum carmen deducis in actus quam si proferres ignota indictaque.” Brink discusses the construction in his commentary on the *Ars*, apropos of *potenter* at line 40.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Serm.* 1.10.50–55, 76–77, 2.1.62–78, *Epist.* 1.7.37–45, *Ars* 53–59, 461–67.