HORACE, CARM. 1.9—AN ANALYSIS*

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Vides ut alta stet niue candidum
Soracte nec iam sustineant onus
siluae laborantes geluque
flumina constiterint acuto.

dissolue frigus ligna super foco
large reponens atque benignius
deprome quadrimum Sabina,
o Thaliarche, merum diota.

permite diuis cetera, qui simul
strauere uentos aequore feruido
deproeliantes, nec cupressi
nec ueteres agitantur orni.

quid sit futurum cras, fuge quaerere, et
quem Fors dierum cumque dabit, lucro
appone, nec dulces amores
sperne puer neque tu choreas,
donec uirenti canities abest
morosa. nunc et campus et areae
lenesque sub noctem susurri
composita repetantur hora,
nunc et latentis proditor intimo
gratus puellae risus ab angulo
pignusque dereptum lacertis
aut digito male pertinaci.

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Horace's Soracte Ode has been the subject of much recent discussion.\(^1\) This paper is therefore only an attempt to bring together the various ideas, feelings and thoughts in the poem into a systematic 'reasoned account'.\(^2\) Moreover, the poem needs to be discussed from beginning to end as it moves and develops.

In approaching any poem the reader is called upon to respond to the words, images, sounds, movement, thoughts and feelings in the poem. This response may be spontaneous or follow only after considerable study and reflection. But it must always be an imaginative response. A good poet leads his reader along a certain line of thought, evoking certain responses by means of carefully chosen words and images. When the reader writes down his sub-logical responses in logically arranged words, he must restrict himself to what is relevant to the poem as a whole. To get to the essentials in a poem, he must analyse his responses to individual words from beginning to end, in the order in which they were intended to impinge on his mind; he must ignore any peripheral suggestions not continued in the poem, thus gradually concentrating down to the central meaning. In this way one may arrive at an idea of how the poem fits together as an organic whole, and also why it is poetry. In this way, too, one is less in danger of too subjective an interpretation.

Ode 1.9 is far more than a nature poem. It is perhaps the most richly suggestive and imaginative of all Horace's poems. And it must be approached as such—and not as a kind of calendar with a description of winter and a glimpse of summer, prefaced with a pretty Christmas card opening stanza.

The poem opens with suggestions of remoteness and solitude. *Vides* places the reader at a distance from the scene described,\(^3\) and the following words, *ut alta stet niue candidum/Soracte*, bring the distant mountain progressively into sharper focus, clear and concrete. Though *alta* goes grammatically with

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2. Cf. D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays* (Penguin, 1950), 217: 'Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing.'

3. The opening of the poem is an adaptation of Alcaios fr. 90 D, but the poem as a whole is far more than a collection of 'several passages of great beauty, among them some happy adaptations of Alcean motifs' (Fraenkel, 176f.). Horace develops the poem along his own lines. Cf. A. Kiessling—R. Heinze, *Q. Horatius Flaccus, Oden und Epoden* (Zürich, Berlin, 11. Auflage, 1964); G. Pasquali, *Orazio Lirico* (Firenze, 1920), 75–86; Rudd, *AJP* 1960,386–92.
niue, its meaning of 'high' associates it with Soracte, just as candidum is associated with niue. The device is used elsewhere by Horace (e.g. in C. 2.3.9 and 3.12.6f.: cf. the commentaries). The mountain scene is portrayed as aloof, solid, solitary. The isolated position of the word Soracte itself suggests this solitude. Then there is the suggestion of cold in niue and candidum, together perhaps with the idea of barrenness, sterility. But Soracte is a great deal more: the force of the verb stet (in the middle of the line) and the very position of Soracte demand the reader's attention, and, as we shall see, lift the snow-covered mountain into symbolic significance. One cannot help feeling the sheer physical size of Soracte, imposing and overpowering, strong and vividly present before our eyes.4

A new aspect enters the scene: the trees struggling under the weight of the snow: nec iam sustineant onus/silvae laborantes (2-3). Here the ideas of great toil, struggle and even pain are suggested in the words sustineant onus and laborantes. The green of the trees has been covered by the sterile whiteness of the snow,5 and the weight has forced the trees to collapse and become still (nec iam sustineant onus). The suggestion of cold is continued in gelu (3), the suggestion of nature becoming still and static under the onslaught of the cold is continued in flumina constiterint (4), and acuto (4) again contains the idea of pain.

The overall picture presented by the first stanza is an outdoor, vast and impersonal winter scene, with which are connected the ideas of remoteness, solitude, sterility, toil and pain, and a static stillness. We feel that it must all

4. Commager, 273, avoids defining the symbolic significance of Soracte. At the risk, however, of substituting abstract generalisations for the symbols and images, one must take note of what they mean, suggest or evoke. Commager would have done well to mention some of these 'responses or interpretations' and to analyse the symbolism of Soracte. Sullivan, AJP 1963.290-4, objects to the 'strained search for symbolism.' Wilkinson, as long ago as 1937, recognised the symbolic nature of much in the poem (in a paper 'Overtones in Horatian Lyric', read at a meeting of the Philological Society at Cambridge on May 13th, 1937, and published in a summarised form in the Cambridge University Reporter, June 1st. I am indebted to Mr. Wilkinson for this information). Musurillo, 137f., associates uncertainty with Soracte. But Soracte is the only certainty, death. Those who do not recognise Soracte as a symbol remain at the problem as to whether Horace can actually see the mountain from where he is writing. C. P. Burger, Aere Perennius, Scherts en Ernst in de Oden van Horatius ('s-Gravenhage, 1926), 137-43, tried to solve the problem by assuming that this ode was an answer to a poem by Thaliarchus complaining of the cold, and that Horace is consoling him with the encouragement that summer's pleasures will soon return. Apart from the strong probability that Thaliarchus is an imaginary person, it contributes little to our understanding of the essential meaning of a poem to introduce such extraneous assumptions. For further discussion, cf. Rudd, AJP 1960.392. Commager, 272 n. 31, mentions that Soracte was associated with the underworld. Lewis and Short gives also Sauracte (cf. Sanskrit svar = heaven; cf. serenus).

5. Rudd, AJP 1960.373f., objects to Cunningham's argument (CP 1957.101) that the trees under the snow must be evergreens, and that the stanza therefore contains a green as well as a white imagery. But whether the trees are evergreens or not is of no consequence. If they are not green now they were green once. There is both a green and a white imagery.
be symbolic, and we wait for the poet to give us a hint as to its meaning.

The second stanza presents a totally different scene, though it is connected with the first by being set also in winter (dissolue frigus); but now the setting is indoors. Whether it is the same winter or not makes no difference whatever. Immediately there is action (a striking contrast with the static scene in the first stanza) suggested by the strong imperatives dissolue and deprome at the beginning of their lines (5 and 6), and also by large reponens (6). This vigorous activity, moreover, is connected with warmth (foco) and wine (quadrimum Sabina . . . merum diota, 7–8), and an atmosphere of conviviality and companionship: Thaliarchus, master of good cheer, of festivities, is, as a deliberate coinage, a kind of image (cf. Pyrrha, C.1.5; Chloe, C.1.23). The whole scene is warmer, more generous (large) and less harsh (benignius, 6) than the cold, sterile and forbidding atmosphere of the first stanza. The indoor scene is friendlier, more intimate and inviting. There is something warm about the four-year-old Sabine wine, and there is an implied contrast between its warm and rich colour and that of the cold and sterile whiteness of the snow. We know from Horace's other poems that he uses wine as a symbol of the enjoyment of life in the present. Here, together with the other constituents, the wine helps to create the impression of the joy and warmth of life. But, whereas the main symbol of the first stanza, Soracte, has an eternal aspect, the main symbol of the second stanza, the Sabine wine, is fleeting and momentary.

After two strikingly contrasting stanzas of highly imaginative and suggestive expression, Horace suddenly changes, in the third and fourth stanzas, to more direct statement. We are now presented with the moral and with the hint as to the meaning of the symbolic language.

In lines 9–18 Horace advises us to enjoy life while we can, to leave everything else to destiny, not to brood over the future, to enjoy each day as an extra gift to our life-span, to love and dance while we are young and before troublesome old-age overtakes us. This is the well-known carpe diem theme frequent in Horace's poetry. It places the poem on a deeper level, giving to the natural description of the first and the indoor description of the second stanza a moral significance. But in this more explicitly moral section there are implicit links with the previous ideas: the stilling of the winds (strauere ventos, 10), the boiling sea (aequore feruido, 10), the struggle and battle (deproeliantes, 117 and agitantur, 12), which refer back, respectively, to the static nature of the first stanza, the warmth and movement of the second

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7. J. Marouzeau, 'Horace artiste de sons' (Mnem. 1936–7.92) quotes this word as an example of Horace's use of long words 'pour exprimer la duree ou l'etendue.' Here the word suggests 'la grandeur de la lutte.'
stanza, and the struggle and action in each stanza, that of the first defeated and static, that of the second vital and confident. But a new element enters the poem in lines 11 and 12 with the reference to the two types of trees, *cupressi* and *orni*. The idea of trees has already been suggested in the general *silvae* (3). Here they are introduced for a definite purpose, and they have been placed at the end of their lines to make sure that the reader notices them. The cypresses, of course, introduce the idea of death, and the *orni*, mountain-ashes, link up with the only mountain in the poem, Soracte. But the *orni* are described as *ueteres* (12). We therefore have the chain of thought: Soracte—cypresses (death)—mountain-ashes (old). Here is the hint to the symbolic meaning of Soracte and the scene it dominates in the first stanza: age and death. This link is more firmly established by the explicit reference to *canities morosa* (17–18), where the reader cannot help remembering *candidum* (1) and *laborantes* (3) and all they suggest.

If the first stanza then represents age and death, the second must represent youth and life. This is also established by another set of associations: *lucro* (14) suggests richness; *appone* (15) and *sperne* (16) recall the action of *dissolue* and *deprome* in the second stanza: *dulces amores* (15) and *choreas* (16) suggest, like the wine of the second stanza, the enjoyment of life. And, in the midst of these suggestions, there is the important clue of *puer* (16), which is in direct contrast to *ueteres* in the same position in line 12. A further connection is *uirenti* (17), which recalls the greenness implied in *silvae* (3). Green and white are being set against each other, as *uirenti canities* are syntactically juxtaposed to symbolise and summarise the eternal conflict of age and youth (*deproeliantes*, 11, is an important word in this respect). The white represents old age, the green youth (*uirenti* also contains the root *uir* = man).

Then, as if to shake off the thoughts of age and death, lingering on in the suspended *morosa*, Horace suddenly plunges into the present with its joys and pleasures. The strong *nunc* (repeated in line 21, also in an emphatic position) does not signify a change of season, but a change of thought and attitude. Horace is not being inconsistent. What follows may be a spring or summer setting, but it does not necessarily contradict the winter setting of the opening. Horace is thinking in images and terms of cold and warmth,

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8. Rudd, *AJP* 1960.386–92, gives a full analysis of the third stanza as a metaphor of 'the change from turbulent anxiety to calm cheerfulness.' Wilkinson, 131, sees the storm as 'the storm of life, and the calm as the calm of death.' Cf. also Commager, 271. A. Y. Campbell, *Horace: A New Interpretation* (London, 1924), 224ff., and Cunningham, *CP* 1957.100ff., see a reference to spring in this stanza and to summer in the two final stanzas.

9. Cf. Commager, 271 n. 29 for evidence and further connections with death. For Nussbaum, *Latomus* 1965.135ff., the cypresses represent 'the obscure and lonely', the ashes the 'great ones of ancient family'. Such exact identification is unnecessary: *cupressi* and *ueteres orni* simply introduce into the poem the first explicit ideas of death and age.

10. Pasquali, 81ff., points out that the external landscape reflects internal 'stati di animo'.

11. Cf. Cunningham, *CP* 1957.102; Rudd, *AJP* 1960.387; Commager, 271. The 'inconsistency' between the beginning and the end of the poem has troubled scholars.
and, since he has opened the poem with winter, it is only natural that he should want to close it with spring or summer. It is as simple as that. He has already introduced warmth in line 5 with foco, but that is not a true opposite of winter as age and youth are opposed. The poem’s progress and logic simply demand an ending with a warm season, spring or summer. And he associates it with youth, the spring of life, the joy of life and the present moment (cf. quid sit futurum cras fuge quaerere, 13). With the sudden transition at nunc (18) Horace turns all his attention to particular moments in young lives, moments which only exist here and now in the present, without regard for the future.

Associated with youth are also companionship and friendship, ideas implicit in the convivial atmosphere of the second stanza. Now they become explicit in campus and areae (18), which signify public places where people meet. Horace then narrows this companionship and friendship down to love, a relationship between two people only (19–24). Love has also been introduced into the poem in dulces amores (15) as one of the joys of youth. Here it is implied in the vague lenes sub noctem susurri (19) and the scene in the last stanza. But with this vagueness something new comes to the fore: the idea that the pleasures of youth, and youth itself, are fleeting. This has been anticipated by the wine-image in the second stanza. Here the lenes susurri are vague and insubstantial; and sub noctem suggests the passage of time, and seems to add a secretive and sinister note to the joy of young love. The idea of movement, at first suggesting the vitality and vigour of youth, has now become a movement towards age and death. This irony is also present in the emphatic composita hora (20): an hour has been set or fixed, but it cannot be retained; it is only an hour, a small unit of time in eternity; it is fleeting; one cannot really fix it. One can only try to recapture it, try to find it again and again, desperately but in vain (repetantur, 20). We begin now to understand fully the significance of Socrate and its powerful domination of the scene: Soracte alone is permanent and eternal; it is almost a threat, stunning the scene around it, formerly rich and green, into static and barren cold and whiteness. And it is the cold and pallor of death. For death alone is permanent and eternal.

In the last stanza we are presented with an intimate and human scene: a young man and woman in a corner somewhere (whether in the Campus Martius or in the room in the second stanza makes no difference) secretly courting, the man bold, the girl coyly demure. But again, in the apparently companionable (intima, 21) and happy (gratus risus, 22) situation, there are undertones of something sinister and tragic. From what is she hiding (latentis, concerned with a literal logic. Thus Fraenkel, 177, finds the two sections ‘incongruous’. This is often the result of a refusal on the part of a critic to assume the integrity of the artist and to believe that such apparent inconsistencies are often intentional. What is important is to try to decide why Horace here changes to spring, and not whether he is right or wrong in doing so. The basic unity of the poem is now generally recognised.
21)? From the public eye? From her parents? From life itself? Or from death?
We are not supplied with the answer, but the note of uncertainty, of some­thing sinister and dark, is unmistakable. The very next word, proditor, continues this impression with the idea of betrayal. Who or what is the proditor? This time the answer is given—gratus risus (22), laughter, happiness, the enjoyment and joy of youth in the present moment. The idea of the transience of joy and youth has become a betrayal of joy and youth. In the very moment of happiness and youth there is a betrayal to pain and death. The cypress trees, though they have the green of youth and vitality, signify death. The future, no matter how one tries to flee (fuge, 13) or forget it, is inherent in the present; age and death are inherent in youth and life. The present, with all it entails, is limited to a particular place and a particular time (intimo ab angulo, 21–22; composita hora, 20). Inevitably youth and life will be overwhelmed just as the green trees are overwhelmed by the snow of age and death.

Youth seems blind to this. But instinctively a desperate attempt is made to fix the progress of time (composita hora), to postpone age, to prolong the present moment of time. Youth wants something definite and solid, something that can be kept, and finds it in a forfeit plucked from a reluctant finger or arm (23–24). Pignus recalls lucro (14), and both are placed on an ironical level by contrast with lenes susurri (19); dereptum (23) is violent, almost cruel, and suggests the desperate grasping at life; and male pertinaci (24), emphatic and hard and final, suggests also the attempt to prolong the moment in the present. Youth clings to life as this man and girl cling to the pignus. But in this very act there is already the inevitable loosening of the hold which is not strong enough (male pertinaci). And therein lies the pathos and tragedy.

But the poem is not all gloom and morbid moralising. The humour and gaiety in the second and last stanzas save the poem from any such sentimentality and pessimism. And Horace makes it quite clear, especially in the direct language of the two middle stanzas, that he is advocating an enjoyment of and joy in life, despite, or even because of, its transience. The moments of life are precious (lucro, pignus) and must be saved up (appone, 15) and not spurned (nee sperne, 16). We must cling to life despite the futility. It is this very futility and transience that make life richer and more precious, just as the warmth and richness of the fire and wine in the second stanza are all the more precious and inviting because of the cold and barrenness outside. It is man’s duty to live life; all else is God’s: permitte diuis cetera, 9.

It remains now to consider the poem as a whole. We have seen its progress

12. Commager, 53f., has recognised the ‘deliberate self-betrayal’, and the complex syntax and word-placing. Wilkinson, 40, does not go far enough in describing the last stanza as ‘a quiet, homely ending.’ There is something restless in this ambiguous and complex stanza.

13. Rudd, AJP 1960.389, describes the poem as ‘a happy composition.’
from the vast, impersonal, cold and external natural scene of the first stanza to the small, intimate, warm and internal human scene of the last stanza, through a succession of remote and close-up glimpses of nature and life. But it is not a progress of literal logic; it is rather a logic of associated ideas, images and moods, in other words, a deep and internal logic.

That this is an intensely imaginative poem can be seen in the sustained imagery, fully realised and controlled throughout. There are two main sets of images: cold-age-death and warmth-youth-life, the former with its toil and pain, static and barren solitude, and permanent aspect, the latter with its vitality and joy, vigorous and rich conviviality, and transient aspect. Horace supplements this imagery with a secondary imagery of colours (white and green), trees (woods, cypresses and mountain-ashes) and liquids (rivers, wine and sea). But they are not tabulated in two separate columns. They are interwoven, first clearly in alternating stanzas (the first and second), but then in a more subtle and complex way to suggest the complex relationship and conflict of youth and age, the latter becoming progressively more inherent and explicit in the former. The last four stanzas contain images and ideas belonging to both sets of associations. There is a duplicity and profound irony in the ambivalence of images such as the wine and trees, which suggest on the one hand joy and vitality, and on the other transience and death. Even the fire of the second stanza is such an ambivalent image, being warm but also fluid and transient. This fire, moreover, as already suggested, is not the true opposite of the winter of the first stanza. The fire in the hearth is an artificial, man-made heat—part of man’s attempt to ward off the cold of death, an idea which becomes more explicit in the final stanza.

As often in Horace’s poetry profound thought and a wealth of suggestion are contained in a simplicity of diction and quiet music, in charming and evocative description. Horace’s own feelings are inherent in the poem in so far as he too is human and prone to ageing. It seems as if, in line 18, he tries to shake off the thoughts of age and death. But, ironically, they creep in again, now more persistent and explicit (19–24). Horace has sublimated and externalised in richly symbolic language his own thoughts and feelings in order to make them valid and representative of the thoughts and feelings of all mankind.

14. On the structure, cf. Commager, 271 f.; Collinge, 65 ff., 163; Rudd, AJP 1960.386-92. Cunningham, CP 1957.101 f., remarks on the difference between nature’s cyclic movement from winter to summer, and man’s linear progress from youth to age. This is a basic irony and pathos in the poem. Cf. Catullus 5.4-6.
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