CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY

VOLUME LXVII, NUMBER 2

April 1972

HORACE AND TIBULLUS

MICHAEL C. J. PUTNAM

Two of Horace's most incisive and witty poems, *Odes* 1. 33 and *Epist.* 1. 4, are addressed to a certain Albius. Because of correspondence especially between the latter poem and what we know of his life (from poetry and *vita*), the recipient is usually taken to be the elegist Albius Tibullus. Each poem can (and initially should) be read separately, and biographical conjectures are of little critical moment in any case. But an elegist, whose temperament battens on constant rehearsal of past suffering and aloof contemplation of unexperienced realities, seems to lurk in the background. He is likely to be Tibullus, seen through Horace's eyes. There may be something to gain from treating the poems in conjunction.

I.

Albi, ne doleas plus nimio memor
immitis Glycerae, neu miserabilis
decantes elegos, cur tibi iunior
  laesa praeniteat fide.

insignem tenui fronte Lycorida
Cyri torret amor, Cyrus in asperam
declinat Pholoen; sed prius Apulis
  iungentur capreae lupis,

quam turpi Pholoe peccet adultero.
sic visum Veneri, cui placet imparis
formas atque animos sub iuga aenea
  saevo mittere cum ioco.

ipsum me melior cum peteret Venus,
grata detinuit compede Myrtale
libertina, fretis acrior Hadriae
  curvantis Calabros sinus.

The Ode is a polite lecture from lyric to elegiac poet on the complexities of human relationships. Overcalculation, says Horace, is impossible. The basic rule of the game is expect the unexpected, be ready for involuntary as well as voluntary reactions away from one's ordinary procedures and affections. In the first three stanzas Horace seems to yield more and more to the commonplace (to lull us intellectually into the opposite stance he would have us ultimately believe). But in stanza four he announces, with honest humor, that he too, the apparently aloof purveyor of spiritual medication to his poet friend, is no stranger to the sexual realities which his sage analogies have hitherto sketched. The poem is a splendid example of Horatian artistry. At the risk of overintellectualizing with a heavy hand a brilliantly light poem, I should like to look at its verbal structure in some detail.

Tibullus, true to the elegist's form, sorrows unceasingly for fickle Glycera. He bases his life on memory and continued grief. Horace sees him as deliberately exaggerating his pain (*plus nimio* is nearly hyperbolic). He mourns the (implied) comparison between age (himself) and youth (the rival), between his faithfulness and Glycera's unsteadiness. He notes his rival's greater "charm" (*praeniteat* may refer to mental, physical, and moral virtues in any or all combinations). We might assume that Horace's point was "nothing *plus nimio*," μηδὲν ἄγαν, but it is the oxymoron *immitis Glycerae* which sets the tone for what follows. Glycera, untrue to her sweet name, is in reality unripe (physically) and pitilessly unkind (spiritually). She would not do for Tibullus in any case.

That he was nevertheless drawn to her, however, leads the way to the second stanza (5–7): "insignem tenui fronte Lycorida / Cyri torret amor, Cyrus in asperam / declinat Pholoen . . ." Lycoris loves Cyrus; Cyrus loves Pholoe. But Pholoe will sin as soon as wild goats mate with Apulian wolves (7–9): ". . . sed prius Apulis / iungentur capreae lupis, / quam turpi Pholoe peccet adultero." This last seems an *adunaton*, something that will never happen. Wolves are the natural enemies of goats, even wild goats, and prey destructively on them, we might first assume. But this is exactly what does occur in Venus' world (10–12): "sic visum Veneri, cui placet imparis / formas atque animos sub iuga aenea / saevo mittere cum ioco." The reverberation of *iungentur* in *iuga* is arranged with strict purpose. The mating of opposites is part of love's game. Wolves and goats get along willy-nilly when pressed into service by Venus. Her yoke must be made of bronze, not wood, however, to keep such disparate elements under strict control. Like the union of opposites that she perpetrates, this is a *saevus iocus*, a joke that is no joke at all (which, as another oxymoron, is linguistically to say the same thing).

Verbal details, in particular a series of puns on proper names, enrich the general plan. Both wolves and goats were constant symbols in antiquity for ardent sexuality. The connotations of *lupa* in Latin need no comment. For goats we need only take note of the daughter of Chloris (perhaps another or even the same Pholoe): "illam cogit amor Nothi / lascivae similem ludere capreae" (*Odes* 3. 15. 11–12). At least on one purely physical level, the opposites are not opposites at all. In fact the first name we meet, Lycoris, "wolf-girl," is preparation enough for the appearance of *lupi* in the supposed *adunaton*. She is "outstanding" for something "thin." (This is itself a virtual oxymoron. A narrow brow was a sign of beauty in ancient Rome. Does it also follow that she was rather hirsute, as befits her nomenclature?) Cyrus does not return her love, but instead is magnetized by Pholoe who is *aspera*, "harsh." If we think back to the Cyrus who makes bold appearance in *Odes* 1. 17, we will be prepared for a certain discord between himself and his love. There Horace assures Tyndaris, ". . . nec metues protervum / suspecta Cyrum, ne male dispari / incontinentis iniciat manus . . ." (*Odes* 1. 17. 24–26). The name Cyrus may conjure up the spectacle of a barbarian potentate, but its meaning in Greek, "strength," "power," is more likely part of Horace's verbal intention. Cyrus pays no attention to Lycoris but instead veers, involuntarily or not, from the straight line (which in his case may have meant love for Lycoris and certainly implies a loss of inner firmness) toward "rough" Pholoe. And once more we have a secondary verbal play to abet the primary meaning. Pholoe was a mountain in Arcadia on the border of Elis, notorious in legend as a haunt of Centaurs. No wonder, then, that she is "rough." Apart from the erotic sense, the epithet is fully applicable to a wild piece of terrain (toward which Cyrus bends from his regular path) and especially to a mountain which harbors creatures which are a combination of beast and man, half human and half animal. Such a forced conjunction of things innately antipathetic is exactly part of Venus' cruel joke.

Sooner shall female wild goats be joined with wolves than Pholoe will sin with a base adulterer ("quam turpi Pholoe peccet adultero"). Knowledge that such a yoking is in prospect makes the phrase instructive. We tend to connect the word *pecco* with some moral aberration (Cicero's definition goes: "peccare est tamquam transilire lineas"), but the literal meaning, "trip," "stumble," is also in the foreground here. Horace uses it of an old horse (*Epist.* 1. 1. 8–9): "'solve senescentem mature sanus equum, ne / peccet ad extremum ridendus et ilia ducat.'" For Pholoe to stumble, that is to be unable to continue on the road she intended, is by now nothing new in the poem. We can (and on one level we should) give a moralistic tone to *turpi* and *adultero*, appropriate companion words to *peccet*. *Turpis* could well mean "base" (looking to Cyrus' potential bad behavior) and *adulter* imply that he was leaving some more permanent liaison. But *turpis* could just as clearly refer to low birth or physical ugliness (a subject of consequence in the next and last stanza) while *peccare* and *adulter* are exampled in Horace simply as "love" and "lover." The former is the implication of the poet's words to the brother of Opuntian Megilla (*Odes* 1. 27. 16–17: ". . . ingenuoque semper / amore peccas"), and *adulter* has no deeper sense than *amour* at *Odes* 1. 36. 19: ". . . nec Damalis novo / divelletur adultero / lascivis hederis ambitiosior." Hence, looking at the phrase as a whole, if the *adunaton* does not happen, we are tempted to see everything in a moralistic way (Pholoe will never sin with a deceiving adulterer). If the *adunaton* does actually occur (as Venus' action portends), the words mean only that Pholoe is likely to "falter" with a new lover of less charm or lower social standing than herself, and this, Horace has already shown us, would be nothing out of the ordinary.

Horace himself is not immune to his own artistic reasoning (13–16):

> ipsum me melior cum peteret Venus
> grata detinuit compede Myrtale
> libertina, fretis acrior Hadriae
> curvantis Calabros sinus.

Who is this better Venus? Better than whom? The Venus who delights in uniting the unlikely? Better than Horace himself or his present love? Better in respect to attributes of mind or body or both? Better for reasons of personal congruity, or social standing, or monetary worth? This is an unusual Venus in any case because, true to a basic metaphor in the poem but strange for love, she was directing her course to him, seeking him out, acknowledging her involvement. Instead of this Venus, however, we have Myrtale, apparently a "worse" affection. But her name, because the myrtle associates her directly with the goddess of love, symbolizes a more likely Venus in terms of the poem's intent. She held him back (*detinuit*), meaning, we assume, that Horace, like Cyrus and Pholoe before him, was about to set out on his way with a love that was somehow more *à propos*. But life is not like this (at least for the poet as he writes). Horace is no different from his creations—and from his elegist friend.

He makes the point with a final series of oxymora. Myrtale, in terms of social standing, was a *libertina*, a freedwoman, once a slave. Yet, varying the metaphor of Venus, yoker of unequal beasts, she "enslaves" the poet with fetters. The bondage, however, unlike literal slavery, is *grata*, a pleasant loss of freedom, even though Myrtale herself is *acris*, sharp of character, galling like the abrasive wounds emotional fetters might cause. *Compes* is apt for another reason as well. Binding the feet will keep the poet (at least for the moment) from wandering afield to greener pastures. It puts him as a final example in the tradition of Cyrus who "veers" from one love to another, and of Pholoe who "stumbles" on her emotional way. And Horace is the most securely fastened!

The word *acrior* is itself used in an ambivalent manner. It is ordinarily applied to a lover's "grief," the bitter effects of an unhappy affair, or to the goddess who inflicts them. Like *aspera* Pholoe before her, Myrtale is becoming a type of Venus. But a sharp love is one which is in some sense unsatisfactory; we should expect someone *acris* to be brusque and uninvolved. Ironically, however, like the *melior* Venus of line 13, she too seeks out the poet. She holds and tames him. Moreover, if we may rely on the etymological connection between *fretum* and *ferveo-fervidus*, she goes about her work with "seething" passion. Bitter she may be on the one hand, but in reshaping the Horatian shore, she approaches with feeling. Hence the paradox of the word is the paradox of the person, a further, witty example of the union of oppositions within any given individual.

The final spectacle of Myrtale, the wild Adriatic *curvantis Calabros sinus*, serves as summary and confirmation. In this particular round of the eternal battle between land and water, specifically as Calabrian bays submit to Adriatic waves (and Horace to Myrtale), the latter has the upper hand. It bends what was once rigid. The metaphor is often applied to the taming of a slave. Virgil uses the adjective *curvus* to describe an elm, tamed to the shape of a plow (*Georg*. 1. 169–70): "continuo in silvis magna vi flexa domatur / in burim et curvi formam accipit ulmus aratri." Philosophically it could form part of a distinction between straight and crooked reasoning (*Epist*. 2. 2. 43–44): "adiecere bonae paulo plus artis Athenae, / scilicet ut vellem curvo dignoscere rectum . . ." In an amatory context, the verb *curvo* has the sense of "make yielding," that is, "move" in an emotional manner. All these intimations, amatory, social, philosophical (*formas atque animos* again), converge to suggest one general observation about life which Tibullus could now make, for education as well as consolation. Love joins inequities together, physical along with mental. This means that between two people, the set of oppositions could be quadripartite. Beyond this, life (and the poetry that tells us of it with honesty) is a series of unexpected tropes. In poetry the literal and figurative are in constant conjunction and competition. In life nothing, especially the singing of sad songs, mourning lost loves and time's passage, can or should be done continuously. The only paradigm for life is constant change in the emotional contours of existence. It is a principle that nothing, especially of an erotic nature, is "straight," normative, secure. The elegist who harps on sorrow in the search for time past misses the challenge of life's antinomies by not allowing himself to be "rounded," to bend with the moment's changing impetus even when this involves yielding to the sharp or turning toward the bitter, even when brighter prospects are apparently in store. The superficies of life is deceptive and things are not necessarily what they seem. External beauty may hide cruelty; ugliness may mask nobility. In the duel between appearance and reality, rarely are *forma* and *animus*, physical and spiritual, external and internal, appropriately mated in any given individual.

Elegy is by nature comparative ("now" is regularly seen in the prospect of "then") but in a melancholy tone which looks to the passage of time in contemplating the loss of youth and beauty and the crumbling of love's faith. Change is ever for the worse. Horace suggests to Tibullus something deeper and ultimately more reassuring, something closer to a lyric than an elegiac impulse (the literary pose is in part the personal stance as well). Become a lyricist, like Horace, and take love easy. Look to the future and, in the process, expect the unexpected, in the knowledge that the only true stability in love is variability. This is Horatian humor at its most humane, exemplifying the strength to see in perspective infinite variations of emotion and countless types of personality which arouse them. The final graceful touch is to avow wittily one's own participation in the same game.

II.

Albi, nostrorum sermonum candide iudex,
quid nunc te dicam facere in regione Pedana?
scribere quod Cassi Parmensis opuscula vincat
an tacitum silvas inter reptare salubris
curantem quidquid dignum sapiente bonoque est?
non tu corpus eras sine pectore: di tibi formam,
di tibi divitias dederunt artemque fruendi.
quid voveat dulci nutricula maius alumno,
qui sapere et fari possit quae sentiat et cui
gratia fama valetudo contingat abunde
et mundus victus non deficiente crumina?
inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras
omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum:
grata superveniet, quae non sperabitur hora.
me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises,
cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege porcum.

Epistles 1. 4 also opens with immediate address to Tibullus. The recipient of Horace's letter is a *iudex*. In appraising his friend's *Sermones*, Tibullus displays the taste and standards necessary to judge quality. Punning lightly on his name (*nomen omen*), Horace sees him as *candidus*, clear in his thinking, forthright and honest in his opinions whether they be positive or negative. But immediately after the apostrophe, and with a certain irony, we begin with Horace to ponder the doings of his subject, who is himself an intellectual. He lives (at least as Horace chooses to envision him) in one of the more deserted areas of the Alban hills, amidst healthful woods. He is a theoretician and aesthetician, devoted to two endeavors, writing and thinking (each offering an aloof, abstract preoccupation). It makes little difference what the *opuscula* of Cassius of Parma were (since he was a lampooner of Octavian and the last surviving murderer of Julius Caesar, it is reasonable to see them as satiric in tone and conservative in attitude). To portray Tibullus as involved in two prime aspects of a *vita contemplativa*, removed from the bustle of Rome, is Horace's purpose.

He has received gifts in abundance (6–11). One of these gifts, the ability not only to think wisely but to express in words what he feels ("qui sapere et fari possit quae sentiat"), conspires with Tibullus' own thoughts as he paces his healthful forest, pondering what is worthy of a good and wise man (*sapiente bonoque*). The poet and his mental attitudes are at one with each other, in Horace's appreciation. We are reminded of the elder Cato's definition of an orator as *vir bonus dicendi peritus*. But Horace sees in his friend three attributes—first wisdom, then the strength to utilize it in one's moral conduct, and finally the ability to project it verbally. Horace is reminding (or enlightening) Tibullus that he is one of those rare individuals who could influence his moral stance through his intellectual virtues, who combines theory and practice, knowing and doing, in the conduct of his life. The past tenses may imply that he has lost the power so to evaluate himself in spite of such gifts. Perhaps he is in danger of losing the gifts themselves. At the very least the chronology, from the gods' gifts at birth (which are associated with the past) to a nurse's prayers for the newborn to the imminence of future death, is of some moment. But, in spite of divine benediction and nourishing affection, the recipient himself alone can have the wisdom truly to exploit his potential.

He has been showered with an amazing list of other blessings. He possesses riches in abundance which allow his manner of living to be generous. He has physical beauty (*formam*), taste (*artem fruendi*), style (*gratia*), reputation (*fama*), health (*valetudo*). Above all he combines within himself a *corpus* and *pectus* which complement rather than challenge each other. Exterior does not belie interior. Unlike the ill-mated lovers of *Odes* 1. 33—ill-mated within their individual selves as well as with each other—Tibullus has *forma* and *animus* which match, while each is also of the highest quality and the man himself is able to take advantage of a well-endowed social status.

This should mean that this cultured intellectual, a poet with the creative power to speculate and comment upon universals, should have balancing appreciative insights into human instincts and individual psychological needs, into the passions that inform any personality. Horace's next words, abruptly positive following three questions, suggest otherwise (12–14): "inter spem curamque, timores inter et iras / omnem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum: / grata superveniet, quae non sperabitur hora." With mention of hope and sorrow, fear and anger, we enter deep into the world of the *psyche* itself. These are important polarities of human emotions, negative and positive, receptive and assertive, introvert and extrovert, which far transcend the easy distinctions between mind and body Horace has proposed earlier. Above all it is the idea of ultimate death which Horace commands his colleague to contemplate. Horace is preaching a form of existentialism to his poet friend. The true philosopher (or poet, for that matter) is not the dedicated contemplative who watches the spectacle of life from a detached vantage. Rather he analyzes human passions in depth, recognizes the irrationality which permeates existence, and boldly faces the fact of death. Only by so doing can one live with fully heightened sensibilities, enjoying each moment for what emotional adventures, good or bad, it contains, yet always with the premonition that such moments will be cut off quickly and irrevocably. This is another paradox of the Horatian wit, that awareness of death magnifies appreciation of life's variety. And, ironically, true contemplation of the fact of mortality makes those who accept Horace's message less rather than more "serious," more capable of accepting life's foibles with benign sympathy and penetrating interest (which is one definition of a true sense of humor).

And this is to realize and accept lightly the same picture of emotional variety which *Odes* 1. 33 presents. If anything is orderly in life (besides the inevitability of death), it is a constant sense of rearrangement. Philosophers are always seeking patterns in and proposing rationales for existence (or, more negatively, wondering why they do not occur). Tibullus, according to Horace's portrait, is one such person, whether meditating in the security of Pedan woods or yielding to unceasing self-pity. In either case such metaphysical musings betray a certain lack of understanding of nature's changeability and suggest a withdrawal from life's rhythms which in a poet is not above suspicion. For Horace, the true "philosopher" espouses rather than bemoans life's variability, accepting the tension of opposites rather than imposing reasonable yet impersonal schemata on existence.

The Epistle, like the Ode, ends with Horace turning matters toward himself (15–16): "me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises, / cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege porcum." Tibullus, as we sense in both poems, needs to laugh, and Horace conjures up an appropriately humorous portrait of himself as an Epicurean pig—fat, sleek, well-manicured. Horace is no monotonous brooder on personal sufferings but a mere philosophical "animal," claiming attention only for virtues of the body, not the mind. He is someone, in other words, who, by realizing life's flexibility and deep seriousness (present emotion, ultimate death), cannot take himself too seriously at any given moment. To combine serious commitment with humorous detachment is the lesson Horace reads Tibullus in both poems.

The autobiographical equation of Horace with a pig is a purposive comic device splendidly worked out, with the dramatic power that only its position at the end can grant. For one thing it is quite unexpected. Horace lightens the melodrama of his best podium manner by turning things in on himself. Even if the pig is educated (he is an Epicurean, after all), he is still an animal, and any device that calls attention to the physical aspects of a person is comic. This is what writers on humor term "degradation" (though upgrading by comparison to objects of higher quality also has the same result): the visualizing of something in less dignified terms than it deserves. The mere shape, sounds, and propensities of a pig are diverting—the more so for having Horace, the philosopher-poet, the most exacting of craftsmen, metamorphose himself into this most indolent of animals. With engaging incongruity the deep thinker becomes a creature of the common herd, interested only in his skin and the fat it encloses. He is a superficial animal at best, but he has one fetching characteristic unknown to most pigs: he likes the way he looks, and he wants people to notice. He is, after all, *nitidus*, sleek to himself (pleasantly oily) and shiny to others, worthy of their attention as a special beast.

The metaphor turns our thoughts back for a moment into the body of the poem, to the spectacle of Tibullus "creeping silently among his healthy woods." The implicit comparison with a snake suggests someone who goes slowly along, perhaps in circles. There is one documented use of *repto* in connection with a person walking deep in contemplation, the spectacle Horace conjures up of Tibullus over in Pedum. But the implied comparison between Tibullus, the snake, and his porcine friend intimates something else. The snake is by nature a paradigm of the devious. It lurks hidden, out of sight of the world. This would mean, in a person, someone who is both unaccounting and unaccountable, even slightly sinister. When Cicero, at one of the saddest moments of his life, feels the need for complete escape from the world around him, he writes to Atticus from his property at Astura: "In hac solitudine careo omnium colloquio, cumque mane me in silvam abstrusi densam et asperam, non exeo inde ante vesperum. Secundum te nihil est mihi amicius solitudine" (*Att.* 12. 15). There is an irony, then, in Horace's application of the adjective *salubris* to Tibullus' woods. Perhaps for Tibullus they are in a certain way healthy, by offering an escape from Rome or, less productive, by fostering tendencies to evade reality already latent in the poet and visible to his acute correspondent. What Cicero finds *densam et asperam*, Tibullus finds, for different and (ironically) less healthy reasons, *salubris*.

The comic juxtaposition with the pig puts the matter lightly. In the darkness of his quiet woods, the escapist serpent Tibullus can creep along, "healthily" evading confrontation with life. The pig Horace revels in his shimmer. His shiny neatness is a joy to behold. He espouses, indeed craves, the glare of life which Tibullus shuns. The difference between the two should in itself be an object lesson to Tibullus on the multitude of diverse personal types which together form the relationships of this world. The funny vision of the philosopher-pig should bring the brooding elegist out of himself. But Horace makes a more subtle point which he hopes will not elude his friend, namely that in reality Tibullus, not Horace, is the comic character, in a double way. In the first place he is unsocial. In the second, as we learn from *Odes* 1. 33, he is rigid, unbending, unable, in Horace's view, either to look clearly at himself or examine dispassionately his relations with others. And both separatism and inelasticity rank high in Bergson's list of traits which lend themselves most easily to comic characterization. Horace's wisdom, therefore, proposes laughter as the best corrective for Tibullus' ailments in each poem. *Odes* 1. 33 takes subtle note that humor, not sadness, lies in the clash of opposites and in the idea of paradox. *Epistles* 1. 4 suggests that there is greater "health" to be found in realistic amusement at one's own foibles and acceptance of life's vividness than in escaping under some darkening shade. In both cases humor is the saving grace, one which Horace possessed in abundance.[1]

BROWN UNIVERSITY

1. I am grateful to Professors Katherine Geffcken and Kenneth Reckford for their comments.