

HORACE, ODES, I. 32

*Poscimus. si quid vacui sub umbra
lusimus tecum, quod et hunc in annum
vivat et pluris, age dic Latinum,
barbite, carmen.*

The purpose of this paper is to decide (*a*) what is the nature of the *Latinum carmen* which Horace asks of his lyre and (*b*) to show how the suggested interpretation of these words fits into the interpretation of the poem as a whole. E. Fraenkel (*Horace*, 172) rightly insists that *quod et hunc in annum | vivat et pluris* depends on the *quid* of *si quid vacui sub umbra | lusimus tecum* and not on *Latinum carmen*. For Horace to make the words depend on *Latinum carmen* would, as Fraenkel says, amount almost to setting a trap, and Horace is not guilty in his Odes and Epodes of this sort of thing. Fraenkel proceeds (*op. cit.*, 173 f.): 'The current interpretation of this ode shows that by means of one or two slight and apparently harmless retouches it is possible to give the impression that Horace is contrasting some former lyrics of his written in a light vein and independently of Alcaeus, with the songs of a higher strain which, inspired by the Lesbian poet, he now intends to produce.' Fraenkel is right in thinking that no contrast is intended between the earlier poems and the *Latinum carmen*. For (*a*) as Fraenkel points out (*op. cit.*, 173), in a prayer of this sort the worshipper normally asks the deity to repeat something he has done in the past. Horace is therefore likely to ask for the same sort of song from his lyre. (*b*) If Horace wants to stress the difference between his previous songs on trivial themes and the *Latinum carmen*, it is, if not illogical, at least injudicious to refer to the former as *quod et hunc in annum | vivat et pluris*. (*c*) If the *Latinum carmen* is to be different from the former lighter pieces, why say that the lyre on which it is to be played is that of Alcaeus who *Liberum et Musas Veneremque et illi | semper haerentem puerum canebat | et Lycum nigris oculis nigroque | crine decorum*, especially when Alcaeus had written

songs on more serious themes which might have been mentioned here? (d) Wickham (*The Works of Horace*³, Vol. I, 112) paraphrases *Latinum carmen* as 'music for Roman ears', i.e. the poem is to be *gravis* enough for a Roman. But when Horace elsewhere uses the word *Latinus* in such contexts it seems to refer purely to language, cf. *Epist.*, i. 3. 12; ii. 2. 143; i. 19. 32; *Serm.*, i. 10. 20. Horace in fact is saying to his lyre: 'Although you are Greek' (this is implied by the Greek word *barbitos*) 'give us on this occasion a Latin song as you have done on previous occasions'. He does not mean that this is this particular lyre's first performance in Latin.

What sort of poetry is Horace referring to here? Fraenkel (*op. cit.*, 174) says: 'It will indeed be necessary to discard the idea that Horace is concerned here with a special type of poetry, with *παίγνια nugae, ludi*. But it does not follow that we have to deprive *lusimus* of its proper meaning. A reliable way to the understanding of *lusimus tecum* is shown by the preceding words *vacui sub umbra*', i.e. he means Horace would describe himself as *vacuus* when engaged in any kind of poetry and the verb *ludere* can be used of any poetic activity on Horace's part. Fraenkel goes on (*op. cit.*, 175): 'If Horace speaks of his early 'Lesbian' poems as products of his *ludere*, he does so not because he wishes to describe them as pieces of light, unpretentious poetry as distinct from more exacting works, but probably because he wishes to set his playing with the *barbitos* against the background of *labores* and everything that the ordinary Roman would regard as *res seria*'. Would Horace use the words *vacuus* and *ludere* in this way? It seems unlikely. In *Odes*, iv. 9.9 out of a number of poets *lusit* is applied only to Anacreon and the subjects of his poems are listed:

*nec, si quid olim lusit Anacreon,
delevit aetas; spirat adhuc amor
vivuntque commissi calores
Aeoliae fidibus puellae.*

Virgil in *Georgics*, iv. 565 uses *lusi* of his less serious poems the *Eclogues*: *carmina qui lusi pastorum*, cf. *Ecl.*, i. 10 and *Hor.*, *Sat.*, i. 10. 37. Furthermore would Horace describe himself as *vacuus* if he were engaged on serious poetry? In *Odes*, i. 6 he is contrasting his work with that of the Epic poet Varius and he says of himself (17-20):

nos convivia, nos proelia virginum

*sectis in iuvenes unguibus acrium
cantamus vacui, sive quid urimur
non praeter solitum leves.*

Horace's use elsewhere then of the words *ludere* and *vacuus* suggests that there is at least doubt as to whether he would use them of a poet engaged in any kind of poetic activity. Stanza 3 of our poem suggests that here in fact he has *nugae* in mind. Horace there lists the subjects of Alcaeus' poems, omitting from the list the *σασιωτικά*. Surely he is here trying to justify himself for writing poems on the themes he has listed; writing poems on these themes was important enough for Alcaeus to do it even amid the distractions of war, and therefore it is important enough to justify Horace in doing so. The fact that he mentions only these themes suggests that they were the exclusive themes of *si quid lusimus* and also of the *Latinum carmen* which, as I showed above, was to have the same themes. Horace's situation *vacui sub umbra* is contrasted with that of Alcaeus

*qui ferox bello, tamen inter arma
sive iactatam religarat udo
litore navim.*

But though their situations are different the themes of their poems are the same. Horace's point is not that these themes are in themselves important but that poems on them are. The reason why Horace omits the *σασιωτικά* from his list is that he is trying to demonstrate on evidence taken from the life of Alcaeus the importance of songs on love and wine. Horace begins by referring to such poems in the first stanza in language which at first sight suggests an idler frittering away his time. Their importance is demonstrated as the poem proceeds.

Fraenkel (*op.cit.*, 175 f.) has a slightly different interpretation: "The fundamental idea of this ode seems to be that the writing of lyrics, in particular the writing of Alcaean lyrics as Horace understands it, has the power to lift the poet above the care and toil of his life. The idea accounts for the incompleteness of what Horace, in the two central stanzas, says about the poetry of Alcaeus; certain serious themes which are prominent in the work of Alcaeus and accordingly emphasised in Horace's Hades ode (ii. 13) are here pushed into the background... Nothing is here said of the *σασιωτικά*. This omission serves to intensify the contrast between the Lesbian poet's harassed life and the

triumphant freedom of his art; his drinking songs and love songs show his mind unruffled by all he had to endure and prove by their very ease that to him poetry was *laborum lenimen*. On this we may make the following comments. (a) On this interpretation, Horace's suppression of the truth about his hero's life is so obvious that it weakens the intellectual structure of the ode. If possible therefore we should see whether we can avoid attributing to him such a suppression made for this reason. (b) Fraenkel seems to think that Horace is here painting a picture of a poet involved in strife against his will and passively enduring its hardships whilst his mind is intent on his art. But can we get this from the Latin? *inter arma* might be used of a merely physical involvement but *Lesbio... civi* suggests a poet alive to his responsibilities as a citizen and *ferox bello* certainly indicates that Alcaeus is to be taken as emotionally involved in war. (There may in fact be an allusion to the *στασιωτικά* in *ferox bello*; these poems after all were evidence that he was *ferox bello*.) What Horace is saying here is 'Despite the fact that Alcaeus was involved both emotionally and physically in war, even in this situation, he thought it worth while to write poems on love and wine'. (c) If Horace wanted to prove the triumphant freedom of the poet's art, and that, to him, poetry is a *lenimen laborum* the *στασιωτικά* would have provided just as good evidence as poems on love and wine. It is the *writing* of poetry that is relevant to the point Fraenkel thinks Horace is making, not its subject-matter; the triumphant freedom of a poet's art is shown by the fact that amid the distractions of life he can transmute his experience, of whatever kind, into poetry. (d) On this interpretation, the connection between stanzas 2 and 3 and the rest of the ode is not close; Horace is going to write in the same metre as Alcaeus, this leads him to think of the poet's life and this gives him the idea that poetry is a *laborum | dulce lenimen*. (e) Is Horace in this ode thinking of the effect of poetry on the poet and its power to lift him above the care and the toil of his life? Horace can scarcely claim in this ode that it is for him a *laborum lenimen* when he has described himself in the first stanza as writing *vacui sub umbra*. Moreover the words immediately before *o laborum | dulce lenimen*, namely *dapibus supremi | grata testudo Iovis* refer to the effect of the poem on the audience, and so it may be that it is to the audience that the poem is being described as a *dulce lenimen*. This sense can be fitted into the poem. Horace in the first stanza describes himself as writing poems on lighter

themes (*lusimus vacui sub umbra*). From this we might dismiss him as an idler with nothing better to do. Even here, however, there are hints that the poems resulting are of importance. For (a) the words *quod et hunc in annum | vivat et pluris* suggest they are of importance to other people; if the writing of such poems is merely a *lenimen* to the poet, there is no reason why they should survive at all and (b) the fact that Horace addresses his lyre, even in the first stanza, in language normally used in praying to a god (see Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, 168 ff.) suggests that the productions of an instrument addressed with such respect are important. In the second and third stanzas Horace produces evidence to show that his productions *vacui sub umbra* are important; Alcaeus thought it worth while to write on such themes even amid the distractions of war. The final stanza states explicitly why such poems are important. They possess an intrinsic, aesthetic value (*o decus Phoebi*) and they also give pleasure and solace to the audience. In the first stanza Horace surprised us by addressing as a deity an instrument he proposed using to sing of trivial themes. In the rest of the poem he establishes the importance of his activity. Having done so, he can at the end of his poem, with *mibi cumque salve | rite vocanti*, triumphantly again use a mode of address reserved for a god; he has proved to us that his lyre deserves this mark of respect.

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