Horace’s Liquid Voice

Introduction

If Commager (2009) and Davis (2007) have argued that wine is a proxy for poetic voice in Horatian poetry, I would like to expand this characterisation to liquid in general. Moving beyond just wine to a ‘fluid’ conception of poetic voice can foreground the diverse and changing positionalities Horace takes up in his poetry and the ways he is ‘coloured’ and influenced by his surroundings. Liquid not only represents the way Horace is acted upon by his social-political context and addressee: by ‘drinking,’ ‘draining,’ and ‘drawing’ in, but also something which he produces: it ‘flows’ or ‘pours’ out of him – and we as listeners ‘drink’ at the springs of his immortal poetry.

Epodes 9 and 14 begin by Horace drinking in wine or cups of oblivion and within his poetry he is subsequently softened, stained, polluted, made drunk, and even nauseous, but he also has the power to transform meanings and engender his own confusions, like wine, to pollute and stain, like blood, or, as in *Odes* 3.13, to give new life like a spring. Foregrounding a ‘liquid’ dimension to these poems and others reveals both how Horace’s poetic voice is always fluid, reflective of, and transformed by his political, social, and poetic contexts and how the tides of meaning in his poetry always shift in relation to his addressee. The poetic voice is ‘fluid’ because it always arises out of interaction between author, addressee, and reader: it is both enacted upon and transformed but it also possesses the ability to enact and transform. My analysis will expand a liquid characterisation of the poetic voice beyond just wine-drinking to foreground this broader fluid relation of affectivity.

A ‘Coloured’ and Fluid Poetic Voice Flows Out

Commager positions wine in Horatian poetry as an acknowledgement that ‘life continually flows away’ and as a proxy for the poet’s thought (2009, pp. 33-34, 42). Davis too locates the drinking symposium as a site of ‘consolation for the harsh exigencies of human life’ (2007, p. 212). Wine-drinking becomes a symbol of the ‘lyric worldview’ which, by first acknowledging the transiency and ‘ephemeral nature of human existence,’ provides consolation ‘in the here and now’ (2007, p. 214). In drinking wine, there is a ‘seizing of the present’ and a release from cares of past and future (Commager 2009, pp. 42, 48). Wine represents the poet’s commitment to the ‘immortality of an eternal present’ that is free from the ‘temporal world itself’ (Commager 2009, p. 49). It is a physical manifestation of Culler’s

‘lyric now:’ the present moment as something which is constantly unfolding and enacted by the evocation of the poet (2015). Wine and the symposium as a site of interaction, moreover, foreground the relational quality of the poetic voice: it is something which is shared and poured between companions. Against the ‘flowing’ away of time, a present moment is born relationally between those engaged in the act of drinking and conversing. The motif of wine-drinking foregrounds the lyric present as something which takes place and is performed in a ‘moment of address’ – that is, it takes place in a relation between a speaking subject and a listening audience with the capacity to be affected and maybe even to respond (Culler 2015, p. 207).

Odes 1.38 is an example of a tightly-wound Horatian poem of *ars* whose sense unfurls and lands on the very closing image of Horace sitting at leisure, under narrow vine (*sub arta vite*), drinking wine (*me…bibentem*) (7-8). While at first this poem seems like a simple presentation of Horace’s poetic aesthetic, this wine-drinking Horace, and his poetic voice, is not divorced from these relations of affectivity. The poem begins by rejecting elaborate finery and luxuries: Persian trappings (*Persicos…apparatus*) and crowns interwoven with inner bark (*nexae philyra coronae*) (*Odes* 1.38.1-2). Horace both asks the servant boy (*puer*) to send away the search for it and asserts he cares not that he takes the trouble to be attentive (*sedulus*) (*Odes* 1.38.3,6). Yet, as much as Horace rejects these things for a position of simple leisure: of drinking by himself in nature, this position is actually dependent on and in relation to the labour of his servant, whom Horace positions as present and attendant: *te minstrum* (*Odes* 1.38.6). *Odes* 1.38 is not only paradoxically elaborate in its elevated vocabulary, like *Persicos,* but also finely-wrought in its tightly-packed syntax, interweaving meaning just like those *nexae…coronae* (Commager 1995, p. 117). By the labour of the slave, which allows Horace to sit drinking and pursue the leisure necessary to produce his poetry, we are granted *textually* the pleasures Horace purports to hate and reject in the name of simplicity (Fitzgerald 1989, p. 90). Horace here implicates his own poetic activity with the social contexts that sustain its production; its production and our subsequent pleasure from it rely on the labour of its addressee, a slave. What seems like a simple but pleasurable poem of *ars* ending in wine-drinking turns out to be ‘coloured’ and enabled by his addressee and their social relation.

If the *fons Bandusiae* of *Odes* 3.13 represents the springs of Horace’s poetry and the power of the poet to give new life, Hexter advocates for its opening characterisation as *splendidior* to be translated not as ‘more transparent’ but instead as ‘more reflective’ (1987, p. 138). The

fons' surface can passively reflect and mirror its surroundings; however, more significantly for Hexter, a translation of *spendidior vitro* as more reflective (rather than more transparent) than glass reveals poetry as something which is both clear and opaque: by possessing a surface appearance and hidden depth of meaning, it simultaneously reveals and conceals (1987, pp. 138-139). Like Hexter's translation of *splendidior, Odes* 1.38, as well as Horace's poetic voice in general, is reflective of his social, political, and poetic contexts. When we move past 'surface' meanings, this relation is not simple, transparent, and easily negotiated; instead, it takes place in a dynamic interaction whereby the poet 'drinks in' and is 'coloured' by his surroundings and he takes up these dynamics physically: he is stained and made soft, drunk, and even nauseous. These coloured and stained – never-transparent – waters in turn flow out of our poet and in their reading evoke and transform something within our ourselves.

However, how can we move beyond just wine to characterise the Horatian poetic voice if Horace himself distinguishes in *Epistles* 1.19 between wine-drinkers and water-drinkers? Horace writes that no poems are able to please nor to live long which are written by water-drinkers (*quae scribuntur aquae potoribus*) (*Epistles* 1.19.2-3). Instead, Horace associates poets with Liber and writes that the *dulces…Camenae* smell of wine in the morning (*vina fere oluerunt mane*) (*Epistles* 1.19.4-5). Horace locates wine-drinking not only as a site of poetic inspiration but also as a marker of *ingenium* and the ability to add one's own 'colour' to poetry. Water-drinkers, in contrast, are *imitatores* that follow models slavishly: if Horace became pallid and lost his 'colour' (*pallerem*), they would still drink (*biberem*) his bloodless cumin (*exsangue cuminum*) (*Epistles* 1.19.17-19). Horace uses 'wine-drinking' and 'water-drinking' to establish a dialect between poetry which is 'coloured' and full of one's own poetic voice against that which is transparent and a slavish copy. However, moving beyond just wine to include other liquids shifts the focus not onto their transparency but onto the *processes* of their colouring – as when the *fons Bandusiae* is 'stained' with blood and consequently pours out new life – and foregrounds the affective and relational nature of the Horatian poetic voice.

The Poet Imbibes and Spits Out

In *Epodes* 9, Horace drinks in wine and subsequently 'spits out' a Bacchic mixed civil war poem of inversions and confusions that collapses into *fluentem nauseam* (35). This poem, moreover, is a generically mixed one (*mixtum*), combining the sound of the lyre with that of pipes and Dorian with Barbarian rhythms (*Epodes* 9.5). Giusti argues that Horace takes up

both musically and thematically in his 'Dithyrambic iambics' a Bacchic poetics of mixture and 'doubling' (2016, pp. 137-140). Bacchus is a 'dual god' and figure of confusion, whom Horace imbibes, and subsequently this Bacchic-Horace dissolves and perverts the boundaries and distinctions that take place in his poem (2016, pp. 132,136). Here chains are removed from slaves and instead threaten the city, soldiers serve Eunuchs, and Gauls sing the name of Caesar (*Epodes* 9.9-18). There is no distinguishing between Romans, friends, and enemies as these categories collapse and leak into each other: the enemy (*hostis*), having been conquered (*victus*), changed (*mutavit*) his mourning cloak (*sagum*) for a scarlet one (*punico*), that is, the cloak of the *imperator* (*Epodes* 9.27-28) (Mankin 1995, p. 177). However, here the Latin word for scarlet, *punico*, suspiciously resembles 'Punic' and recalls Rome's greatest enemy: Carthage. One's fellow Roman is transformed through civil war – and through Horatian poetic wordplay – into a foreign enemy. If for Oliensis 1998, the always destabilising and closure-resistant poetics of the *Epodes* as a whole speak to the uncertainty and instability inherent in civil war, *Epodes* 9 is about the uncertainty that comes after Octavian's victory in Actium. Horace and Maecenas may be described in the beginning as happy (*lateus* 2, *beate* 4) and ready to celebrate with *Caecubum* (1), but by the end, Horace is already drinking and calling for even larger cups (*capaciores…scyphos* 33); wine is repositioned from a joyful celebration to that which holds together fluid nausea and could ease anxiety and fear (*Epodes* 9.33-36). Horace moreover ends with a deliberately ambiguous genitive: *curam metumque Caesaris rerum* (*Epodes* 9.37). Are we trying to quell with wine 'anxiety on behalf of' or 'fear arising from' the affairs of Caesar (Mankin 1995, p. 181)? Equally is drinking the cause of our confusion and *fluentem nauseam* or is it a source of relief from the uncertainties of civil war?

In *Epodes* 9, we, just like the Roman-enemy, and Horace himself by his own ever-changing and tumultuous political context, are carried on *incerto mari* (32). Wine-drinking in this *Epode* addressed to Maecenas operates slightly differently than in *Odes* 2.19, where Horace addresses, and thus invokes, Liber as a god with the power to 'bend' rivers and seas (*tu flectis amnes, tu mare barbarum* 17). In *Odes* 2.19 Horace equates his happy state of confusion by a heart full of Bacchus (*plenoque Bacchi pectore* 6) with poetic production and creativity (Batinski 1991, pp. 369-371). Liber becomes a symbol of *ingenium,* maddening inspiration, and the poetic power to 'bend' one's surroundings (Batinksi 1991, p. 367). In *Epodes* 9, however, Horace does not just drink wine, become inspired, and then spit out a poem that bends and inverts meanings and creates confusions around civil war; he himself is already

embroiled within and made confused by these uncertain tides of politics. The poetic voice of *Epodes* 9 is best described not just by wine and its drinking but as an experience of *fluentem nausem* itself*:* while Horace imbibes then engenders new, topsy-turvy, and fluid meanings, he is also carried along, acted upon, and made nauseous, that is, sea-sick, by the uncertain sea of his civil-war context – and so are we.

The Poet Drains and is Drenched

Epodes 14 begins with *mollis inertia* (soft lethargy) having poured out (*diffuderit*) oblivion into Horace's innermost senses (1-2). Horace next takes up the first person and drains (*traxerim*) cups leading out *Lethaeos…somnos* (*Epodes* 14.3-4). Oblivion both *pours out* into Horace's body, and he *drinks in* cups of liquid oblivion: the forgetful waters of the river Lethe. By the end, Horace is himself made soft and liquefied: *me macerat* (*Epodes* 14.16). In contrast to the *pulchrior ignis* of his addressee, Maecenas, by whom Maecenas is burned (*ureris*), Horace's own love makes him 'soft' (*Epodes* 14.13). Having begun the 'hard,' 'biting' invective of the *Epodes*, the softened and lethargic poet-in-love is unable to lead (*adducere*) the *promissum carmen* to an end (*ad umbilicum*) (*Epodes* 14.7-8).

Horace also employs similar liquid imagery in *Odes* 1.5 to describe being in love. Love is likened to surviving a sea-storm: the inexperienced lover will marvel at seas rough (*aspera…aequora*) by dark winds (*nigris…ventis*) (*Odes* 1.5.6-7). Horace, having fallen for this slender (*gracilis*) boy drenched (*perfusus*) in liquid perfumes (*liquidis...odoribus*) and having survived these seas of love, however, is retired now: he has hung up his moist (*uvida*) clothing (*Odes* 1.5.1-2,14). Horace here does not only describe love as a liquid whose stormy waters he is tossed on and whose perfumes press on him, but also as something which 'liquifies' and soaks him, making him and his clothes damp and soft. *Odes* 1.5's statement of 'retirement,' like *Epodes* 14's statement against iambic closure, bounds this discourse of softening and soaking with the activity of poetic production. Horace ends with an indirect statement alluding to himself as 'written': the temple wall by means of a votive tablet (*tabula...votiva*) is what indicates (*indicat*) that Horace has hung up (*suspendisse*) his moist clothing (*Odes* 1.5.13-14). This Horace made soft is itself a subject of writing and a subject which spurs his poetry.

This softness is not just self-disparaging in comparison to the interwoven discourses of military hardness, masculinity, and potency in the *Epodes* – ones which Maecenas as an

addressee embodies in direct contrast to the poet. As for instance, in *Epodes* 1, where Horace wants to follow Maecenas to war but writes that war is for *non mollis viros* and that he is *imbellis ac firmus parum* (unwarlike and not strong enough) (1, 16). The discourses of softness that take place in these two poems also connote a different kind of strength, a potency tied to poetic production and the Callimachean poetic aesthetic that this drenched boy, *gracilis* (slender) and *simplex munditis* (effortless in graces) embodies (*Odes* 1.5.1,5). In contrast to Maecenas, a paradigm of masculinity and military hardness, who offers grand sacrificial offerings (*uictimas aedemque uotiuam*), Horace offers something different (*Odes* 2.17.30-31). His sacrifice is a humble lamb (*humilem…agnam*): his muse is slender, and his poetry is small but finely-wrought (*Odes* 2.17.32) (Santirocco 2009, p. 112). The production of Horace's poetry moreover takes place not in the public-political world of *negotium* but in sites of poetic withdrawal, like in *Odes* 1.5's *grato…antro* (3). Yet, as much as Horace stages 'softness' as an alternative aesthetic and thus a form of poetic retreat – from the completion and closure of the *Epodes,* from war, civil and foreign, and from the public political sphere –, this softness is 'fluid' and mutable. Horace as the poet-in-love draining liquid cups and being drenched, becomes 'soft' in another way: he is 'affected' by rather than hardened to his surroundings. I would thus like to add another dimension to the Horatian aesthetic and dialect of softness which negotiates between different types of masculinity, poetic and military forms of potency, and public and private cares. Softness, when it takes up a liquid and fluid dimension, can also connote a relation of affectivity. Just as complete poetic retreat is an unrealisable fiction for a poet enabled and effected by his surroundings, the Callimachean ideal of 'softness' is not a 'pure' aesthetic for Horace but one that can be stained and made his own: blood, life, and love can leak into and transform not only Horace's metapoetics but also his relations with addressee and reader.

The 'Stained' Poet Pours out New Life… and We Drink in

Odes 3.13 begins addressed to the *fons Bandusiae*. Commager argues that Horace is not just inspired by the *fons*, as in traditional Greek poetic imagery locating the Muses in springs, but actually inverts this relation: the poet breathes life into the *fons*, makes it speak, and immortalises it (1995, p. 324). The apostrophe to the *fons Bandusiae* foregrounds poetry as an act of invocation, whereby speaking to and invoking the *fons,* Horace makes it come alive (Culler 2015, p. 223). Apostrophe is how Horace brings the *fons* into the immortal, never-ending present of the poetic moment and 'lyric now' (Culler 2015, p. 226). The poem is not just *about* ritual but through its 'performance' and 'enunciation' in the lyric now it itself is a

process of ritual enactment and a making sacred of the *fons* (Culler 2015, p. 226). It is though Horace's verse, and by him speaking: *me dicente* (14), that the *fons*' chattering (*loquaces* 15) waters come alive to us (Commager 1995, p. 324). If the *fons* as the subject of passive verbs (*donaberis* 3) at first feels distant and far-away, by the end, Horace 'closes' this distance: the *fons* becomes the subject of active verbs (*praebes* 12, *fies* 13) and even 'speaks' back (Hexter 1987, p. 138). The sound of Horace's final lines mirrors its own sense and enacts the sonic quality of the spring, and its syntax flows out unevenly just like the 'tumbling' of the spring's waters (*lymphae desiliunt* 16) over the rocky caves (*cavis…saxis* 14-15) (Morgan 2009, p. 140). Moreover, for Hexter, the positioning of *me dicente* signals that this distance has been fully closed and the poet and *fons* have 'become one in the poem' (1987, p. 139). The fountain itself and Horace's poem speaking about the fountain collapse into the same thing: the *fons* is 'alive' so long as it is addressed and spoken about in Horace's poetry. '*Me dicente*' launches Horace from the future tense: *fies nobilum* (13) (you will become noble) into the present: *desiliunt* (16) and repositions this immortality as arising from the 'lyric present' of poetic evocation. This hymn is thus not only an ode to the fountain itself but also an ode to the incantatory and immortalising power of poetry (Commager 1995, p. 323).

If the flowing *fons* represents the evocative and life-giving power of the Horatian poetic voice, scholars have also investigated this body of water metapoetically. The ritual, and sacrifice of the goat-kid, is what makes the *fons* sacred and creates this eternal fountain of poetry, but it is also an act of staining. The '*gelidos…rivos'* (cool waters) syntactically surround the '*rubro sanguine'* (red blood) that pollutes and discolours it (*Odes* 3.13.6-7) (Wilson 1968, p. 293). The life of the *haedus*, *venerem et proelia destinat* (5), is cut off short – *frustra* (6) – and it's warm, coloured, and life-giving blood leaks into the cool (*frigus* 10), clear (cf. *splendidior vitro* 1) spring. Its stylistically pure and clear (code for Callimachean) waters have become intermingled and stained with the life-cares of the goat-kid (Curley 2003, p. 281). Horatian poetry is transformed from a site of cool, shady, and private leisure, a site of reprieve from the work-realm of the *flagrantis Caniculae* (9), and instead takes up the 'blood-stained' character of epic and its themes of *venerem et proelia* (Mader 2002, pp. 54-55). For Mader, this 'staining' is an act of generic mixture – of combining lyric with epic matters (2002, p. 57). However, for Curley this taking up of grander themes in lyric poetry signals not just an intermingling but a transformation away from a private Callimachean to a more public Alcaic aesthetic under Augustan politics (2004, p. 137).

However, I would like to problematise the initial 'cleanness' or 'purity' of Horace's Callimachean aesthetic. As previously discussed, Callimachean poetics not only recalibrates 'softness' as a strength through its discourses of the 'slender' and 'finely-wrought' but Horace in turn subversively and playfully issues 'hard' iambics from that self-positioning of softness. As much as Horace claims that *mollis inertia* disables him from reaching iambic closure, the very nature of iambic is 'self-perpetuating' and closure-resistant because it continually opens up new meanings and one invective attack only leads to another (Oliensis 1998, p. 95). Callimachean softness then is not opposed to or cleanly separated from iambic poetry but can even take up its invective character. Horace's Callimachean aesthetic is itself worked upon and modified by civil war impulses. Horatian softness, moreover, I have argued takes up this affective quality through liquid imagery like '*uvida*' (*Odes* 1.5.14) and '*macerat*' (*Odes* 14.16). If we understand that the waters of the *fons Bandusiae* are not 'more transparent' but rather 'more reflective' (*splendidior*) than glass, these Callimachean waters were never completely pure, clear, and without colour to begin with. Horace is not a 'slavish imitator' but makes the Callimachean aesthetic ideal his own. His lyric poetry is not a 'pure' but an 'affective' body of water, one where the poet, just like the goat-kid sacrifice, pours his life *into* his poetry, and consequently we get new life *out of* the flowing springs of his poetry. The waters we readers 'drink in' may seem clear on the surface, just as the labour of the poet and the slave can make the finely-wrought *Odes* 1.5 feel simple and effortless; however, in reality, these waters are never 'pure' but always-already reflective of and 'coloured' by the poet and his environment. *Odes* 3.13 then is not a discussion purely about metapoetics because Horatian metapoetics are never 'pure' and divorced from these other contexts. This poem instead foregrounds and enacts the poetic *process* of evocation and the fluid relations between poet, addressee, and reader, which do not take place in a poetic vacuum but instead, being embedded within and stained by social-political contexts, are enacted as public ritual. We see in real time how Horace's sacrifice infuses life into his addressee, the *fons*, but also how this coming to life unfolds over the poetic moment of our own reading. We 'drink in' Horace's words and restage the sound of the tumbling, chattering waters, and we too are brought in, affected, and 'stained' in the process.

Conclusion

Moving beyond wine to the liquid voice in general foregrounds the poetic voice as a fluid relation and process of affectivity. The poet is worked upon by waves of fortune and the uncertain sea of civil war, but he also is bound up in personal relations with servants, loves,

friends, and patrons, with whom he drinks and spills blood in war, for whom his love liquifies him and makes him soft, or by whose labour he is served wine and enabled to write poetry. Our poet, already bound up in these affective relations, in turn, pours out 'coloured' waters that give new meanings and new life – we drink at the springs of this poetry and are transformed in the process.

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