

Sounds, Patterns, and Meaning in Horace, *Odes* 4.7

Critics of Horace's *Odes* 4 have tended to view the collection as a monument of poetic mastery and showmanship. For Porter (1975, 1987), the "recurrent motifs" of *Odes* 4 show us Horace's skill at creating a coherent collection from diverse subject matter. For Putnam (1986), Horace is the master teacher, "the guardian and invigorator as well as the redirector of poetic forms and language" (281). For Johnson (2004), the collection is about the continuity of Horace's lyric agenda and persona. Whereas these representative approaches see *Odes* 4 as a collection of poems about poetry, I demonstrate the political and ideological weight of Horace's literary bravado through a close reading of *Odes* 4.7 at the level of the phoneme. Building upon the work of David Masson (1955), I argue that the recurrent sounds and patterns in the poem represent an attempt to recover an order lost in a world of chaos. To do so, I reassess the formal elements of the poem and consider how sounds convey meaning beyond syntax and grammar. My method of reading thus offers a way of recovering political significance from poetic tropes like alliteration, anaphora, and rhyme.

An example of this feature of the poem and my analysis can be shown through the sound /ɜrit/ in *Odes* 4.7.9-12 (*frigora mitescunt Zephyris, ver proterit aestas / interitura, simul / pomifer autumnus fruges effuderit, et mox / bruma recurrit iners.*) The rhyme across tenses of *proterit* (present) and *effuderit* (future perfect) pushes us forward at the same time (*simul*) as we are momentarily held up by "death" (*interitura*, literally "about to die") in the line. Line 11 itself enacts the passage of time, as autumn progressively bears its fruit (*pomifer*) and loses it (*fruges effuderit*) in the course of the line in an ABAB' pattern: "fruit" (*pomi-*) | "bring forth" (*-fer*) | "fruit" (*fruges*) | "shed" (*effuderit*). At the end of the stanza, winter rushes back in with *recurrat*.

In *recurrat*, we hear /3rit/ again—a sound which in a few lines has developed through an act of wearing away (*proterit*), death (*interitura*), and shedding (*effuderit*).

The stanza itself represents the cycle of the year—we go from *frigora* back to *bruma*—and the effect of the repeated /3rit/ both complicates and reinforces this perception. In this stanza, the cycle of nature is reified in language as a pattern that repeats. Four lines move us through four seasons without discrete breaks, and the flow from one into the other is made less perceptible by a repetition that suggests some element of the previous season is always retained. As the thought of the stanza progresses through the cycle of seasons, the recurring /3rit/ suggests a continuity in the midst of change. This is an important feature of the poem because it underscores the tension between the ephemerality of human life and the continuous cycles of nature. Thus this stanza's phonetic patterns and its more explicitly linguistically communicative elements are engaged in a dialogue with one another that enacts *in nuce* the disparity between the finality of death and the constant renewal of nature.

In this way, the language of this stanza highlights “the tension between the ideology of permanence and the underlying forces tending to historical change” that define the Augustan achievement (Hardie 1992: 61). Thus a significant consequence of my reading is that it reconfigures the role of poetry with respect to politics. The poetic effect is a reflection in language of the “proper order” that Augustus can guarantee for the world in the final poem of the collection (*ordinem / rectum evaganti frena licentiae / iniecit*, 4.15.9-11). By revealing this function of phonetic patterns, we can see that a poem like 4.7, which is not explicitly political, has much to contribute to our understanding of how socio-political turmoil is reconciled in poetic language.

Bibliography

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