

Winter is Coming: Horace *Odes* 1.9

Much ink has been spilled on *Odes* 1.9 in the last 50 years, and while our understanding of the poem has much improved in that time, a few problems remain. Chief among these is the third stanza, which is either largely ignored, or misunderstood. In the past, despite the fact that the winter scene Horace depicts seems altogether motionless, the mention of the storm has prompted several critics to think either that a storm has just passed or that the weather is currently stormy. Although Rudd (1960) attempted to put an end to this view, West (1995: 42) still had to repeat the point 35 years later: “Horace says sententiously, ‘When winds stop blowing, trees stop shaking’, meaning of course that unpleasant things do not last forever. [...] It does not mean that the wind is blowing.” The Latin is clear: Horace expresses a general law here, and most have understood it as West does, even when they sense the problem, as Nisbet and Hubbard (1970: 121) do: “...Horace keeps the traditional reference to storms, though strictly speaking it does not suit the weather of the first stanza.” Support for this understanding comes generally from two sources, Alcaeus fr. 338 V and Horace’s own *Epodes* 13. While the Alcaeus fragment contains no gnomic statement of the sort we get in *Odes* 1.9, there are several overlapping details and verbal parallels and the poem is regularly seen as Horace’s chief model for 1.9. *Epodes* 13 shares with the Alcaeus fragment the injunction to drink in response to a storm outside; it shares with *Odes* 1.9.9-12 a very similar gnomic statement: *cetera mitte loqui: deus haec fortasse benigna / reducet in sedem vice*. We could, as some do, point also to other passages in Horace, where weather phenomena (such as storms and winter snow and cold) are invoked to prove that bad weather does not last forever (e.g. the first two stanzas of 2.9 *non semper imbres*...; 2.10.15-18: *informis hiemes reducit / Iuppiter, idem / summovet. non, si male*

nunc, et olim / sic erit). All this is fine and good, but the problem remains: if 1.9.9-12 is of a piece with these others, and means, in effect, “storm and troubles alike will blow over”, then the gnomic statement neither fits setting of the poem—which depicts a calm and motionless winter scene—nor does it suit the message of the poem, which most agree is: “Enjoy yourself while you can [i.e. in erotic activities]; you will not always be able to.” There is perhaps a second oddity: if the meaning of lines 9-12 is as most take them, why does Horace combine sea and land? The point would have been just as clear had he set the storm on land, or instead stayed at sea to describe the calmed waters. Regarding the first issue, we could conclude that Horace has rather unsuccessfully combined two traditional poetic themes, as Nisbet and Hubbard (1970) imply; as to the second, we could see in this move from sea to land an artistically combined polar expression or complex example of the *schema Horatianum* (Mayer [2012]; Schmidt [1990=2002 335-379]). Neither of these seems particularly satisfactory.

What we want is a general rule in 1.9.9-12 that corresponds in a meaningful way to the rest of the poem and the advice Horace gives to the young Thaliarchus. I will argue for a new interpretation of this stanza, that Horace has in mind a particular period of calm sea to which these lines refer: the Halcyon Days, traditionally associated with the winter solstice. A reference to winter—especially the dead of winter—in the third stanza works well with the preceding description of the winter scene. I will further suggest that Horace, in switching from the calmed sea to its effect on trees, should trigger a recognition of the metaphorical *topos* of comparing love to a storm wind, familiar from Sappho fr. 47, Ibycus fr. 286 and elsewhere. Understood in this way, the third stanza remains gnomic in character, but its meaning and symbolic overtones cohere better with the rest of the poem as a whole. Thaliarchus is enjoined to make the best of his youth and engage in erotic activities while he can, for he will one day be too old for them;

Horace's general rule presages the coming of Thaliarchus' winter and the loss of his erotic "spring".

Bibliography

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