Death, Morality, and Verb Construction in Odes 2.3

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Introduction

Horace's Odes 2.3 has proven difficult to critics such as Woodman as a result of three seemingly distinct aspects: a traditional Epicurean moral lesson, a pastoral scene, and a lament about death's inevitability

Through a consideration of the most atomic aspects of the poem, it's diction and inflection, it is evident that there is nothing accidental or disorganized about the poem. Verbs are critical in forming a backbone that unifies the poem.

Horace has used inflectional choices to construct a precise progression through the poem, that dwells on the transition between present and future, between life and death, while at the same time as the speaker instructs the listener to avoid excessive pleasure, constantly impending doom reveals the futility of this endeavor.

The Future Tense

Previous scholarship defines the purpose of an ode to be a focus on the present (Barber). On one hand, the speaker creates a concrete presence with lines such as *13-14*.

> Huc vina et unguenta et nimium brevis
> flores amoenae ferre iube rosae
>
> *Order someone to bring to here wine and oils and the blossoms of the beautiful roses, too short-lived*

At the same time, striking future verbs such as *moriture*, *cedes*, and *impositura* create an underlying tension that connects the pull to the future with the pull of death.
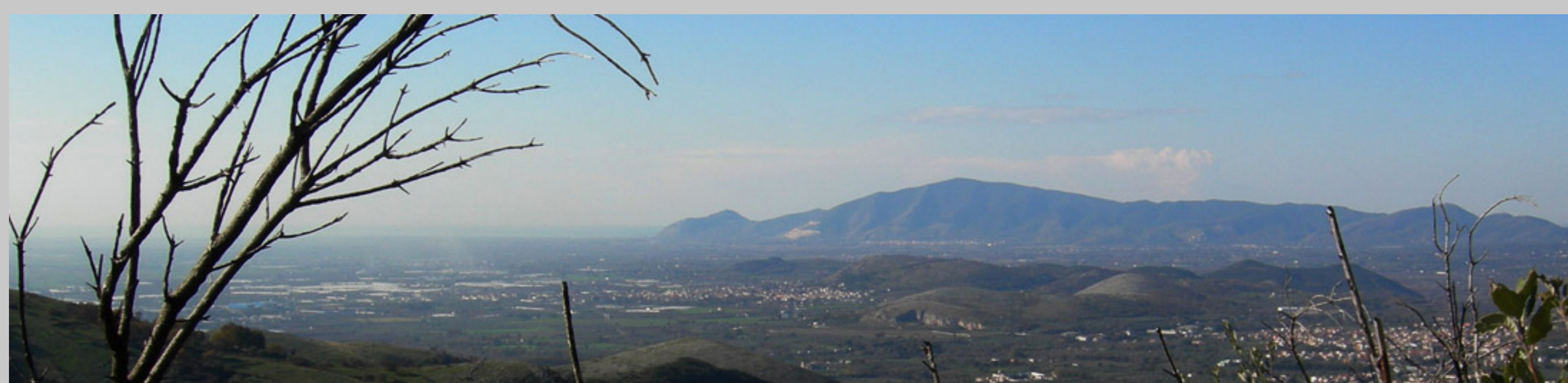
Mt. Falernus, now Mt. Massico, was the source of the prized Falernian wine, which in 2.3 exemplifies pleasure and presence. [Photo credit: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Montemassico.jpg#/media/File:Montemassico.jpg]

Tense Structure and Ring Composition

Each strophe in *Odes 2.3* displays a clearly defined tense that most of the verbs in it follow. Overall, the strophes follow the progression shown below.
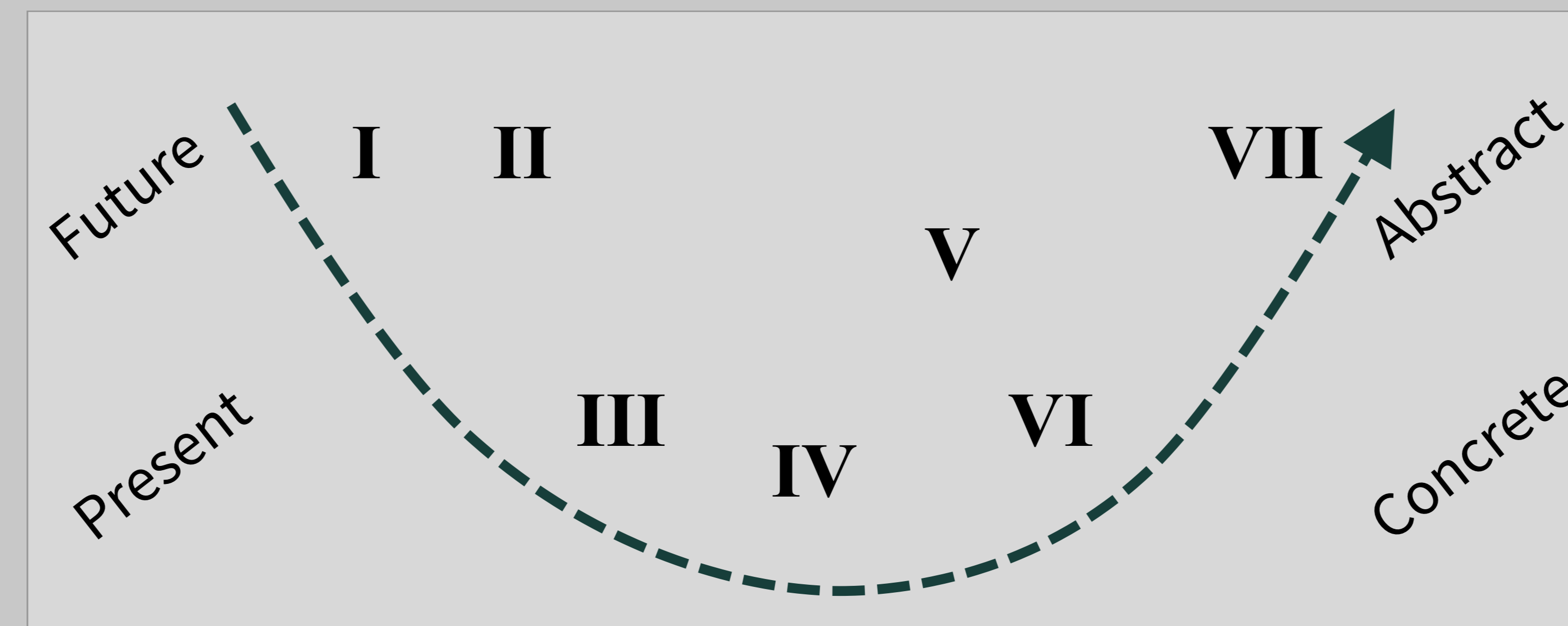
In addition to this progression, there is a ring composition formed by *moriture* in the first strophe and *exitura* and *impositura* in the last. This formation ties together the ends of the poem, despite fairly different subject matters, with the promise of imminent death. It also physically encapuslates the center of the poem, described in the previous section, so that the blissful images of wine and flowers are surrounded by looming death.

This doom is specifed in the grand reveal in *25-29*, resolving the tension discussed earlier as the future and present become one.

> omnes eodem cogimur, omnium
> versatur urna serius ocius
> sors exitura et nos in aeternum
> exilium impositura cumbae.
>
> We all are herded to that same place, the urn is turned, gravely and rapidly, for all of us, and our lot is soon to be cast, soon to place us in the skiff to eternal exile.

The River Styx is a concrete representation of the doom which permeates 2.3. [Photo credit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Styx#/media/File:Doré_-_Styx.jpg]

Voice and Mood

Beyond tense, other markers such as voice and mood can enhance the effect of the poem.

The passive is used, as in *omnes eodem cogimur*, to indicate the loss of agency after one's demise. It is reminiscent of the vocabulary used in sheep herding, but without a clear subject shepherd, it is final and ominous.

Two imperatives, *memento* and *iube*, appear in different contexts and usages. While *memento* is abstract and non-specific, used to introduce the moral lesson with which the poem begins, *iube* is concrete and immediate, used "to enforce presence rather than look to the future" (Barber 344).

Conclusion

These choices in diction, tense, mood, and voice unify the poem and produce an underlying backbone for its thematic progression. It demonstrates to the listener that death is inevitable and looming, thereby adding uncertainty to the Epicurean lesson presented at the beginning.

Through analysis of the poem's syntactic properties, the modern reader can better understand the poem's full effect on a contemporary listener, and find that the seemingly unexpected aspects of the poem are, in fact, inevitable.

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