

THE MAD POET IN HORACE'S *ARS POETICA*

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28 1. INSPIRATION AND THE POET'S SOCIAL POSITION

Horace's *Ars poetica* discusses many topics, sometimes with abrupt changes and without establishing clear sequential or logical connections between themes. At the first glance the problem of (not) thinking does not seem central to the *Ars*. According, however, to some quite recent attempts to interpret the poem in context, it may be.

Aristotle is regarded as the founding father of literary criticism as a discipline (or the western literary system in general, cf. Miner) because he developed the method of discussing poetry within a completely rationalised frame of thought. This frame is mostly determined by his ethics, and therefore the conscious human decisions play crucial role in the analysis of tragic plots while fate or gods' intervention, however important they seem to some readers of ancient tragedy, are only marginally mentioned, if ever. It may be true that Horace's *Ars* is a capricious text, written with brilliance and humour, that plays games with the role of its constructed speaker both to undermine the teacher's position and to destabilize the addressees' situation, but it seems to share Aristotle's intellectual approach to poetry insofar as it teaches, lectures, describes some rules and explains reasons why they were invented and how they work. However, he also discusses some unconscious, automatic, irrational aspects of poetic creation. It is probably also a difference of importance that he tends to speak of literature (including production, criticism, and reading) in social context.

The latter is partly the consequence of the situation the poem stages, traditionally understood as follows: a poet speaks to a young member of the Roman aristocracy, who wants to be a poet, about poetry. Maybe to dissuade him through demonstrating how difficult it is to create great poetry, and how superfluous is every effort that results in poetry less than great. Whether a real commitment to poetry as a vocation was

compatible with the social position of a member of Rome's highest social élite seems doubtful (cf. Oliensis 199-223). Some literary genres were more or less monopolized by authors of senatorial rank (like historiography, treatises on agriculture, etc.), and we know of many aristocrats who composed poems as a pastime. They seem to have carefully selected the genres in which they tried their talent. Augustus is known to have started and left unfinished a tragedy called *Ajax* (Suetonius, *Aug.* 85: *Nam traegodiam magno impetu exorsus, non succedenti stilo, abolevit quaerentibusque amicis, quidnam Ajax ageret, respondit, Aiacem suum in spongeam incubuisse*). Tragedy, a genre sharing the top of the generic hierarchy with epic, was probably acceptable from a Roman aristocrat, while comedy was not, and that Julius Caesar forced Laberius to perform the *mimus* he wrote, for which act he had to lose his equestrian rank, can be regarded as a punishment for writing a mime (cf. Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.7). The least we can say is that writing mimes meant so basic loss of authority that he could be forced to act on stage (or be given an offer he could not refuse). Therefore, when a young Piso was taught how to create poetry, the careful selection of a genre and the social implications of possible roles of poets must have been discussed in detail. The poet's social position among the élite was also vital for Horace himself. He was a poet who worked within that milieu, as a client, or rather a 'friend' of powerful representatives of the élite. He was not, however, one of them. His positioning of the poet's role in relation to the élite code of behaviour seems problematic in many texts of his oeuvre (cf. Oliensis *passim*). The always delicate relationship to the aristocratic addressees of the odes, the careful selection of weak butts for his jokes in the epodes and the satires, and the repeated discussions of the social function of comic literary genres in satires, epistles, and the *Ars poetica* suggest a deep involvement in this theme. In the *Ars poetica* Horace's persistent questions about the social standing of the poet come together with one of the basic questions of that particular poem, namely about the sources of poetic greatness, in the case of the 'inspired' mad poet that receives special attention there.

To understand Horace's position towards poetic madness, or rather the unconscious, irrational aspects of creating and receiving poetry, we should take into consideration that Aristotle's *Poetics* or the peripatetic tradition was not his only point of reference. He explained his ideas in the context of the Hellenistic literary theory, in which irrational elements of both poetic production and consumption were fiercely discussed. Therefore in this discussion, I will begin with the context of Horace's literary thinking as current scholarship sees it, and then analyse the consequences of this view for our reading of the *Ars poetica*, and especially for our understanding of the way the question 'Is thinking necessary for good poetry?' is presented in the poem.

2. THE CONTEXT OF HELLENISTIC THEORY

2.1. THE LINK TO ARISTOTLE

Not many ancient treatises on literary theory have survived. Two of them, Aristotle's *Poetics* and the *Ars poetica* by Horace, were treated, from the 17th century onward, by Neo-Classical poetics as its fundamental texts. The interpretation (or interpretability) of Horace's verse treatise has been profoundly influenced by this later appropriation. But the idea that Aristotle and Horace express and elucidate similar ways of looking at literature derives fundamentally from an ancient witness. Porphyrio, who wrote a commentary on Horace's oeuvre at around 200 AD, begins his comments on the *Ars poetica* with the declaration that it summarizes the most important themes of a book by Neoptolemus of Parium (*In quem librum congegissit praecepta Neoptolemi τοῦ Παριανοῦ de arte poetica, non quidem omnia, sed eminentissima*. Porphyrio, *Commentarii in Horatii Artem poeticam*, ad v. 1.), which assigns Horace's poem to the family of Peripatetic treatises on literature.

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Two further circumstances made it easy to connect Horace to Aristotle. The first is that tragedy is the literary genre both of them address the most. There are some sentences in Horace that seem to be translated from Aristotle, e.g. *καὶ τὸν χορὸν δὲ ἕνα δεῖ ὑπολαμβάνειν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν, καὶ μόνιον εἶναι τοῦ ὅλου, καὶ συναγωνίζεσθαι* (1456a25-26) ~ *actoris partis chorus officiumque uirile defendat* (193-194). Not only do both sentences express the same idea ("The chorus must be regarded as one of the actors," trans. W.H. Fyfe), they also contain equivalent expressions. *Pars* (part) appears to be an elegant calque for the Greek *μόριον*, transposing its literal meaning ("it should be an integral *part* of the whole") into a specially theatrical context implied in the word's Latin usage ("it should play the *part* of one actor"). It goes without saying that the notions *chorus* and *actor* (*τὸν χορὸν* ~ *chorus*; *τῶν ὑποκριτῶν* ~ *actoris*) are also equivalent. The second circumstance that made the Aristotle-Horace connection viable is the *e silentio* argument that, until recently, little was known about the scholarly or philosophical works on literary theory written in the period between them. This situation was mostly caused (in addition to the general causes responsible for the loss of ancient Greek literature) by the Greek cultural movement called Atticism, which originated in the city of Rome in the 1st century BCE and which chose the Attic prose of the 5th and the 4th centuries as its ideal, and in consequence regarded the products of the Hellenistic period, which were written not in the Classical dialects but in *koinē*, the common tongue of the immense eastern territories Hellenised by Alexander's conquests, as degenerate. The basic hypothesis was that the loss of freedom resulted in moral decline, expressed also in the deterioration of literary language. Therefore Hellenistic prose texts stopped being copied, which in turn destroyed their chances of survival unless a text discussed a topic left untouched by classical writers (Dihle 62-72).

2.2 PHILODEMUS

This situation, however, has somewhat changed in the last two decades, at least in the field of literary theory, since the recent breakthrough in the reading of the Philodemus-papyri from Herculaneum. Although the rolls were found as early as in 1753, it was only about twenty years ago that more or less comprehensible Philodemus texts began to emerge. The remains of his works, in black letters on carbonised papyri, were not subjected to microscopic examination until 1970 (Armstrong, “The Addressees” 197, n. 20); on the other hand, only the inner parts of the papyrus rolls can be scrutinized directly: the old, standard procedure of cutting the burnt book-rolls apart destroyed the outer parts layer by layer after copying. Our texts of Philodemus depend on the so-called *disegni*, drawings made by early 19th-century draughtsmen who registered the order of the copies made by them, but were unable to establish the proper order in which the fragments should be read. The first useful method of establishing that order was perfected only quite recently (Janko, “Reconstructing” 70-73; for more details see Janko, “Introduction” 48-119).

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When Book Five of Philodemus’ *On Poems* was first published by Jensen in 1923, it had the effect of attaching Horace still more strongly to the Peripatetic tradition. The papyrus contained a summary of the work of Neoptolemus, a Peripatetic theoretician of the Hellenistic period. If it clarified little else, Jensen’s text at least revealed that Neoptolemus has distinguished three aspects of the literary work, which he called *poēma*, *poēsis*, and *poētēs*. The first was interpreted as a broad category that effectively corresponded to the modern notion of ‘content’; the second to ‘style and diction’; and the third evidently had something to do with the person of the poet. One can easily find this trinity in the *Ars poetica*; moreover, it allows us to fit the poem’s rather capricious argumentation into a stable, tripartite framework. On this view, Horace first discusses *poēsis* (1-118), then *poēma* (119-285) and finally *poētēs* (Brink 94-106). According to a more recent analysis (Porter 102-117 and 145-146), *poēsis*, rather than diction and style, represents the equivalent of Aristotle’s *mythos* (plot): a concept that includes all the meaningful elements of poetry, while the second concept, *poēma* (which happens to be implied in the first but not vice versa) refers to the quantitative elements: still, this account, according to which Horace tackles *poēma* and then *poēsis*, produces only a reversal of themes, but not a fundamentally new approach to the structure of the *Ars*.

The text of the Epicurean Philodemus formed the main source of our knowledge on the Peripatetic Neoptolemus, and thus allowed critics to bridge the gap between Aristotle and Horace by proving the continuity of an Aristotelian tradition in poetics. Otherwise, it seemed unlikely that the Epicureans could have contributed significantly to the theory of poetry, since Epicurus’s contempt for poetry was notorious: he suggested that his followers should avoid it as a harmful temptation. The Epicurean aversion to reading and writing poetry was well known from ancient sources, but it is exactly the example of Philodemus, an Epicurean philosopher who wrote quite

elegant epigrams and a series of treatises on poetics, that prompted some scholars to read those sources with a fresh eye, to try to find out what Epicurus' teaching really was. According to more recent interpretations of the passages in his writings which are relevant to the question, Epicurus objected not to poetry in general, but rather to an involvement so deep that it affected the tranquillity of the soul. On the one hand, listening to poetry is, he said, a great pleasure—in his opinion, a pleasure that the philosopher should not decline; on the other hand, he thought that only a philosopher would be truly able to judge poetry (Asmis). If this was so, Epicurus moved the emphasis in poetics from the moral dimension dominant not only in Plato but also in Aristotle, to the topic of aesthetic pleasure.

This, however, does not mean that Epicurus and his followers believed that enjoying poetry could be described as a purely acoustic pleasure. In his writings, Philodemus argues against several 'formalists' of the Hellenistic period who thought that it is exclusively the sounds (mostly the vowels) that cause pleasure in listening to poetry (cf. Janko, "Introduction" 154-89). He emphasises the role of thought in aesthetic pleasure, but says also that the aim of poetry is the pleasure it imparts, rather than the thoughts it expresses. According to Philodemus, music, rhetoric, and poetry are similar to the art (*tekhnē*) of a cook, which does not aim to satisfy basic natural needs but to add sophisticated cultural joy. The art in rhetoric is not about rational persuasion (which belongs to the realm of politics), but rather discovering new forms of entertaining expression; similarly, he writes, poetry is not about what it may teach (Armstrong, "The Impossibility" 215-217; the relevant passages are as follows: *On Music* 4 col. III. 24-35 Kemke; *On Rhetoric* 2 col. II.1. 45 Longo; *On Poems* 5 *passim*). If I quoted Horace's rather unimportant statement (which was probably quite outdated in his time) on the role of the chorus in tragedy to show a connection to Aristotle, let me refer here to lines 374-378, which may connect Horace to Philodemus in a crucial aspect. Horace here explains why mediocre poetry is unacceptable: because poetry belongs in the category of sophisticated luxury. You can live without it, but it has been invented to pleasure the spirit, therefore to perform its task it must be excellent. Poetry is situated in the context of a banquet (*gratas inter mensas*, 374; *cena*, 376) and is compared to music, perfume, and desserts: if these are not of really good quality, it is better to dine without them. The poet is also contrasted to a lawyer: not only the best lawyers, but even mediocre ones can still be useful, but a mediocre poet is useless, since he is supposed to pleasure the spirit. Such ideas are more strongly connected to Philodemus' Epicurean aesthetics than to the mimetic tradition of Peripatetic thought on literature.

Philodemus of Gadara is a suitable writer to bridge the gap between Aristotle and Horace for other reasons as well. On the one hand, Book 5 of *On Poems* reads like an anthology of Hellenistic literary theory. Philodemus wrote in a polemical style: he summarized the opinions of others and then rebutted them, and this, the last book of the treatise *On Poems*, seems an overview of the material discussed in the preceding books (Janko, "Introduction" 191-92). On the other hand, Philodemus' personal

network in Italy joins him at least indirectly to Horace. His library was found in a house that very probably belonged to the Piso family, and his whole career in Italy (around Naples and maybe in Rome) was financed by Piso Caesoninus (Frischer 65-67; Armstrong, "The Addressees" 192). The *Ars poetica* is addressed to three Pisones (a father and two sons). Horace's best friends belonged to the inner circle of Philodemus' disciples: one of his moral treatises was addressed collectively to Vergil, Varius, Quintilius, and Plotius Tucca; Horace regarded himself as the fifth member of their Epicurean group (Armstrong, "The Addressees" 196-197). It is not impossible that Horace met Philodemus in person: Horace joined Maecenas' circle in 39 or 38, and Philodemus is known to have still been alive in 40 (Janko, "Introduction" 6-7). In one of his Satires, Horace quotes an epigram by Philodemus (*Sat.* 1.2.121: *Illam "post paulo", "sed pluris", "si exierit uir" / Gallis, hanc Philodemus ait sibi, quae neque magno / stet pretio neque cunctetur cum est iussa uenire*. The original epigram by Philodemus has not been preserved).

Therefore it seems more logical to link Horace's aesthetic ideas to Philodemus than to his Peripatetic adversary. Two previous attempts to do so (by Bernard Frischer and David Armstrong) led to almost opposite results. In his highly provocative book, Frischer admitted that the *Ars* contains only the ideas of Neoptolemus, but he tried to prove that they are not presented affirmatively but as a parody; in his opinion, the *Ars poetica* is a long satire in which a peripatetic schoolmaster is endlessly lecturing, and the more the unreliable speaker shares of his aesthetic ideas, the more ridiculous they appear. Armstrong interpreted the *Ars poetica* as an exposition of Philodemus' ideas, which does not, of course, necessarily exclude irony. Not many were persuaded by Frischer, but he made scholars face the difficult nature of the text. Today no one can read the *Ars* in the Neo-Classical way as a univocal and serious utterance by a speaker, identifiable with the biographical author, who teaches a fixed system of poetic rules.

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3. POETIC MADNESS

3.1 HORACE 1: MADNESS AND POETIC GREATNESS

As Horace represents it, theories of the poet's inspired madness (*μανία*) were popular in contemporary Rome. This popularity was based on the theory that divine inspiration is the exclusive source of poetic greatness, an idea said to go back to Democritus. The formulation he gives it is, as is usual in the *Ars*, rather paradoxical, since it is impossible to tell if the poets Horace is criticising are actually crazy, behaving intentionally as if they *were* mad, or if they have *intentionally gone crazy* to secure for themselves the renown of true poetic greatness:

Because Democritus believed talent a greater
Blessing than poor old technique, and barred sane poets
From Helicon, a good few don't care to trim their nails
Or beards, haunting secluded spots, shunning the baths.

(295-98, trans. Klyne)

(Ingenium misera quia fortunatius arte / credit et excludit sanos Helicone poetas /
Democritus, bona pars non unguis ponere curat, / non barbam, secreta petit loca,
balnea uitat.)

These poets, mad or inspired, cultivate an uncultivated appearance, *because of* what Democritus told them. This causality seems to imply a rational decision, but the following explanation suggests these men are really and incurably mad:

Surely a man will win the honour and name of poet
If only he doesn't entrust Licinus the barber,
34 With a noddle that three Anticyras couldn't affect! (299-301)

(nanciscetur enim pretium nomenque poetae, / si tribus Anticyris caput insanabile
nunquam / tonsori Licino commiserit.)

This madman does not get the prize of a poet's reputation from the incurable madness itself, but by not trying to cure it. Would it make a difference if he went to the barber and got some medicine? All the commentators explain the phrase *tribus Anticyris caput insanabile* as 'incurable'. The *tres Anticyrae* may mean 'three times the output of Anticyra': a town famous for hellebore, a lethal poison administered, as medicine, to the mentally ill. It can also, therefore, mean 'hellebore cures'. If three such cures do not help, nothing will. One might, however, suppose that what is not curable by three treatments might be cured by four or five. One should at least try. These mad poets, however, cherish their madness and avoid any attempt at a cure. There *is* a rational element in this situation, an intentional decision to stick to madness. It is, therefore, at least possible that the 'mad poet' developed his madness intentionally, since the speaker continues as follows:

Ah, fool that I am, taking purges for bile each spring!
Otherwise no one would compose better poems: it's really
Not worth it. (301-4, translation modified)

(O ego laeuis / qui purgor bilem sub uerni temporis horam! / Non alius faceret meliora
poemata; uerum / nil tanti est.)

This 'Horace' could be a great poet if only he were mad, but he is cautious enough to undertake preventive treatments every spring. According to ancient medical theory, madness was caused by an excess of black bile affecting the healthy balance of the four body humours; this could be purged with hellebore. Celsus wrote that spring was the best season to make superfluous black bile exit the body through diarrhoea and vomiting, the usual effects of hellebore. He also wrote that the medicine cannot

be given if the body is dehydrated, and that it does not always help the sick but always harms those who are healthy (Celsus 2.13.3). If, therefore, the ‘mad poet’ only pretends to be ill, he is right not to go the barber’s. In his commentary Rudd suggested that the whole idea of the incurable nature of that madness appears in free indirect discourse: the utterance is not directly said by the main narrator, but he freely quotes the words of the criticised “mad” poet (Rudd *ad loc.*), who does not only present a physical show of a mental illness, he is also continuously speaking of it.

When the main speaker says “it’s really not worth it,” one cannot decide what he actually renounces. Does he prefer mental health to poetic greatness? Or cultivated appearance, which makes the daily contact with the greats of Rome possible, to a madness show, which can provide the renown of a great poet? The playful nature of this discourse is highlighted by the following paradox, that the speaker has decided to be a critic instead of a poet: he wants to teach and not to write anything; in highly polished poetry he claims that he is writing ‘nothing’ (*munus et officium, nil scribens ipse, docebo*, 306).

3.2 DEMOCRITUS 1: ENTHUSIASM

Of course it is a legitimate question if Democritus really thought that only madmen could create great poetry. Since very few fragments of that so-called pre-Socratic (although he actually was Socrates’ contemporary) philosopher’s aesthetic writing survived, it is not easy to answer, although it is hard to expect such an extreme position from a clever thinker. Actually we have two fragments on the topic, which should be interpreted in the context of his other ideas. His explanation of Homer’s achievement reads: “Homer, since he had a divine nature, created the orderly beauty (*kosmos*) of all words” (Ὅμηρος φύσεως λαχὼν θεαζούσης ἐπέων κόσμον ἐτεκτήνατο παντοίων, VS 68 B 21). On the one hand, it is clear that something divine is necessary, although it is hard to figure what, exactly, this ‘inspiration’ is, since the word *θεαζούσης* expressing the divine influence, or the ability to accept it does not occur in any other Greek text (Janko, “Introduction” 367, n. 8). On the other hand, the achievement may imply some craftsmanship involved, since the verb (*tektainomai*) is used of carpenters and smiths, and *kosmos* is an ordered structure (cf. Lanata 261-2; Koster 24; Russell 72-73; Ford 169). The latter is not necessary: the implied orderliness can be the direct consequence of divine intervention, if regarded as an achievement humans are incapable of, but the expression *kosmos epeon*, the orderly structure of words, occurs several times in 6th and 5th century literature, from Solon to Pindar, to describe the poem as an object of aesthetic pleasure, a coherent, ornamental, beautiful whole (Ford 170). The other fragment is a half sentence that seems to discuss especially the source of poetic greatness: “what a poet writes with inspiration and divine spirit, must be beautiful” (Ποιητῆς δὲ ἄσσα μὲν ἂν γράφῃ μετ’ ἐνθουσιασμοῦ καὶ ἱεροῦ πνεύματος, καλὰ κάρτα ἐστίν, VS 68 B 18. Here the expressions describ-

ing divine inspiration, *enthousiasmos* and *hieron pneuma*, are more familiar). One supposes that the rest of the sentence said something about poetry written without inspiration, namely that it is not ‘beautiful’. From these tantalizingly short remarks it does not necessarily follow that Democritus regarded divine inspiration as the exclusive source of poetic greatness, although it is a source for sure.

Some modern interpreters regard Democritus as proclaiming poetic madness as the only source of good poetry, but divine inspiration does not necessarily mean madness. Inspiration can be interpreted as divine possession (Havelock 156), but it is not a concept ever attested before Plato, who might have been the first to think that poets do not know what they are saying (Murray 38). As Penelope Murray summarised her findings: “poetic inspiration in early Greece...was particularly associated with knowledge, with memory and with performance; it did not involve ecstasy or possession, and it was balanced by a belief in the importance of craft” (Murray 60-61). Those who understand the inspiration mentioned in Democritus’ fragments

36 as ecstatic madness gesture towards a view of the philosopher acquired through the persistently distorting lens of an ancient tradition determined by Plato, Cicero—and Horace himself to be sure. In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E.R. Dodds summarizes the evidence as follows:

The first writer whom we know to have talked about poetic ecstasy is Democritus, who held that the finest poems were those composed μετ’ ἐνθουσιασμοῦ καὶ ἱεροῦ πνεύματος, “with inspiration and a holy breath,” and denied that anyone could be a great poet *sine furore*. (82)

Cicero mentions Democritus in two works, emphasising the *furor poeticus* as a necessary source of poetic greatness without referring to any other source, skill or training. The Latin original of one of these two passages reads: ‘Negat enim *sine furore* Democritus quemquam poetam magnum esse posse, quod idem dicit Plato’ (*De diuinatione* I. 80: ‘Democritus says that no one can be a great poet without being in a state of frenzy, and Plato says the same thing,’ trans. W.A. Falconer. Cf. also *De oratore* II, 46, 194). My italics make it clear that when Dodds in his seminal book described the role Democritus played in development of the idea of poetry as divine possession, he actually combined a sentence by Democritus with one by Cicero.

The interpretation that “a temporary state of divine possession” (Most 339) was a necessary and sufficient precondition of poetic excellence for Democritus has been widespread, but such conclusion cannot be easily drawn from the fragments. We could choose to regard the Cicero text as an additional fragment, supposing he knew more of Democritus than we do. But we actually do know that Democritus wrote many treatises on the linguistic and poetic expression, which in fact suggests that he regarded the poetic creation as rationally discussable and not the doing of unscrutinisable divinity. What we know of his materialist philosophy makes it rather probable that the inspiration, the “sacred breathing” into the poet must be of material nature, “the influx of something airlike and volatile that puts the poet’s soul in such

a condition...that the poetry it produces will be correspondingly fine and powerful” (Ford 169).

The fragments we have do not explicitly exclude the idea that there may be other sources of poetic greatness, but we *can* clearly see why Democritus’ ideas permitted an argument which concluded (even if in Horace’s extreme or even parodic formulation) that only mad poets can be great. If divine inspiration causes poetic madness, this can hardly leave much room in the creative process for reason and technique. If ‘poets compose by inspiration, not by art’ (Janko, “Introduction” 175, n. 3), they do not need to think, and only the mad ones can achieve anything, since only they are able to partake in the full divine *enthusiasmos*.

3.3 DEMOCRITUS 2: THE AFFECT OF SOUNDS VS. HORACE 2: THE AFFECT OF THOUGHT

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There is, however, another link between Democritus and the issue of not-thinking in the field of poetry. Philodemus’ main target in *On Poems* was the euphonic theory, the origins of which were Pythagoras’ musicology and Democritus’ atomism. Democritus not only thought that letters are to poems what atoms are to the physical world (cf. Armstrong, “The Impossibility” 224), but also wrote on the musical effects of different letters or speech sounds (Janko, “Introduction” 175). Since he regarded the human perception, including hearing, as material, it was logical to conclude that the different sounds (and their different combinations) have different effects on the human soul, which is also material (Ford 163-165, also cf. Delatte 50-51). If the effect of poetry is localized on the level of letters, thinking about it will bring no enjoyment to the listener. But this is not what Philodemus thought, since one of the main goals in his literary criticism, according to Richard Janko, was ‘to defend the autonomy of poetry’ against musicology, and ‘the integrity and importance of content’ against the idea that both tune and words together have a purely aural effect (Janko, “Introduction” 190).

Horace seems to agree with Philodemus: after the declaration that he has stopped writing because only mad poets are qualified to do so, and he does not want to be mad, he underlines the importance of rationality in a series of rapid thematic sections. He starts with this axiom: ‘Wisdom [or philosophy] is the source and fount of excellent writing’ (309). Then he concludes:

Often a play with fine bits, good roles,
Though without beauty, substance or art, amuses
The public more, and holds their attention better,
Than verses without content, melodious nonsense. (319-22)

(Interdum speciosa locis morataque recte / fabula nullius ueneris, sine pondere et arte,
/ ualdius oblectat populum meliusque moratur / quam uersus inopes rerum nugaeque

canorae.)

What was translated as “good roles” actually may mean something more connected with ethics or moral philosophy, or at least with audience expectations of human behaviour. A *morata recte fabula* is obviously a play in which the *mores* (manners, morals, ethics?) are somehow right: properly represented (if manners) or correctly evaluated (if morals). It is very probably that content which makes the play more pleasurable than melodious nonsense that lacks proper content. If we compare the manners mentioned here with the catalogue of manners to be staged in passage 153-201, we have to conclude that audience expects representation in harmony with rather flat common-place clichés about behaviour in accordance with age and social position. Pure aural pleasure is not enough, some right thoughts about human behaviour are also necessary, even if the aim of poetry seems to be to delight listeners here too.

38 Horace repeatedly emphasises that thinking, the communication of thoughts, is not the main objective of poetry. A poem is born and invented to pleasure the spirit (377, see above), and Horace’s survey of the social functions poetry has performed from mythical times to the present culminates in the installation of theatrical performances as “relaxation from tedious work” (406). However, it should also be clear that complete nonsense and stupid horror stories do not amuse exactly because they are unbelievable and the listeners cannot and will not switch off their thinking in order to be amused (338-40). This statement contradicts a rather general cultural experience (namely, that people do like stupid stories), and Aristotle also had a lot to say about the possible function of and excuses for the marvellous. Horace probably activates here an undercurrent argument of the *Ars* about the social stratification of the aesthetic experience. It is the cultivated audience of fine taste that poets should entertain, and not those who may enjoy ghost stories.

The deterioration of early Greek tragedy was caused, he seems to suggest, by the low demands of the Attic rural population who visited the urban festivals and were unable to appreciate the previous, more exclusively urbane taste (207-13). However, he speaks to high born gentlemen of Rome, and therefore he tries to emphasise that the impressionable and naive audience of old times is no excuse for the tasteless gestures of the old Roman poets when they are read today. Thinking, we can see now, plays a role both in the production and consumption of poetry, since both interact in the literary system Horace is speaking about. But how can poets meet the requirements of the sophisticated literary taste Horace is attempting to communicate? Although he explains in a rather long passage that both talent and art are necessary for successful poetic creation (the theoretical part is 408-18; practical advice then follows), what is repeatedly emphasised all along is the importance of learning and rational preparation both for the poetic vocation in general, and then for every individual poem (or line in a work). A poet should choose his topic and his genre on the basis of a rational evaluation of his own talent—then the elaboration will be easy (38-41). First, think a lot, so you can then write without thinking. Whoever has learned ethics can

create proper characters easily (309-18). There are many rules in poetry, and a poet must know them (86-88). It was hardly ever questioned in Antiquity that the greatest poetic achievement belongs to Homer, and the *Ars poetica* gives no exceptions to this judgement. It seems, however, important that in his appreciation of Homer Horace (in sharp contrast to the Democritus fragments) never mentions inspiration or talent, only thought (*cogitat*, 144), properly made decisions (*rectius*, 140) and deliberate consideration (150).

Even if poetic creation is said to be automatic after proper rational preparation, laborious work is also needed to give a work its final form, which is described with words like 'coercion' (*coerluit*, 293). The excesses of talent should be restricted by thinking and taste.

3.4 HORACE 3: POETIC MADNESS AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

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Poetry aims to entertain its listeners, but thought plays a primary role in the enjoyment it offers. Therefore it is hardly probable that a mad poet could create excellent poetry. But there is one more reason. In the last passages of the *Ars*, Horace seems to suggest that poetic greatness is a kind of collective achievement. Nobody can publish good poems without consulting friends and critics before giving his work its final form. And it is here that Horace's previous problem with poetic madness reappears in the discourse: only reasonable people can adapt their behaviour to the Roman elite code. This code not only prescribes rules for personal hygiene, hairstyles, etc., but also the way the poet and his critics should interact during the process of creating the work. A poet must listen to the critique of other members of the elite before publication. He should discuss poetic possibilities rationally, and react to criticism reasonably. It goes without saying that such a social practice would be superfluous and ridiculous if divine inspiration was the exclusive source of poetic excellence. Horace closes his poem by staging a mad poet whose behaviour seems the consequence of his refusal to interact with others in the process of composition. If the poem, or at least its second half, contains advice to a young member of the Roman aristocracy, the message is that one should avoid the role of 'mad poet', which not only makes one untouchable as a leper (453), but also prevents poetic greatness. The behaviour of the critic Quintilius exemplifies this social process of creating poetry. If someone refuses to follow his advice, he stops discussing the given poem, and 'lets you admire your poetry alone without any rival' (*sine rivali teque et tua solus amares*, 444). If you fail to check the audience's response to your poetry and adapt it to their expectations, you will be the only one who likes it. Poets, it seems, cannot do without an audience. Everybody will try to avoid listening to such poetry; but poets who trust either divine inspiration or their personal literary taste are described as hunting desperately for listeners. They are excluded from society, nobody cares if they live or die. But this punishment for unsocial behaviour (i.e. refusing to cooperate in poetic

creation) is not enough for Horace. He not only represents these 'madmen' pariahs, but also as inhuman. In the very final passage, poetic madness is represented as the consequence of divine vengeance for terrible crimes committed in the past. The mad poet is not inspired, but punished by the gods for a sacrilegious act. Horace first denies his ability to be (or become) a proper human being (*nec fiet homo*, 469), then compares him to a furious bear, and eventually he simply describes him as a leech who sucks his listener's blood. Mad poets act like dangerous, harmful animals, and their poetry does not cause the joy it should aim at, but rather suffering.

Does the desperate 'mad poet' behave this way because he does not think? Or does he have a plan in his eagerness for listeners and fame? Interestingly enough, two words that mean 'cleverness' or 'wisdom' appear frequently in the finale of the *Ars poetica*. The broad literary history presented here, which begins with mythical singers and ends with the invention of the theatrical arts, narrates a development from poetry as divine jurisdiction, to poetry as leisure (391-407). In the middle of the catalogue of the various achievements of divine poets from mythical times, it is said that 'This was once wisdom' (*Fuit haec sapientia quondam*, 396, trans. Rudd *ad loc.*), which may, on the one hand, contrast the wisdom or philosophy of the dawn of humanity to the recent (or not so recent) Platonic type, which was previously said to be source and fount of excellent writing (*Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons*, 309); and which, on the other, emphasises that the renown of 'divine poets' was based on their *sapientia*, which was both wisdom and legislation. *Sapientia* reappears in rather a profane version in line 456, where the mad poet (*uesanus poeta*) is feared and avoided by those who have common sense (*qui sapiunt*). According to lines 445-452, the true friend (the 'good and wise man') is a rigorous critic of your poetry. The word used for wisdom here (*prudens*) emphasises caution and inductive thinking; etymologically it is *pro-uidens*, 'looking ahead'. The 'good and wise' friend is rigorous because he foresees that the poet would suffer shame later if he is not pushed to perfect the poem now. *Prudentia*, however, reappears later as an alleged characteristic of the mad poet who has fallen into a pit. When somebody tries to help him, 'I' would say: 'Who knows if he didn't do that on purpose (*prudens*), and doesn't want to be saved?' (462-463). The meaning of the word is trivialised, but it is also a witty pun: the poet did not fall in the pit because he was looking at the stars or was immersed in his inner vision, not seeing what was on the ground, but saw perfectly what was ahead and even thought he could pre-see the citizens' reaction. The accident, like Empedocles' jump into the Etna, is a *prudent* strategy in his quest for poetic fame. 'Mad poets' do think, but outside the socially acceptable, cooperative frames. Let them die, sounds the final advice, because such suicidal energies, if impeded, could be easily transformed into the destructive force of bad poetry.

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