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978-0-521-11923-8 - Horace Made New: Horatian Influences on British Writing from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century

Edited by Charles Martindale and David Hopkins

Excerpt

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## I

## INTRODUCTION

*Charles Martindale*

## I

MANY WRITERS, INCLUDING most of those discussed in this book, and a great many readers, have had a friend – in Quintus Horatius Flaccus. More, perhaps, than any other ancient poet his writings have encouraged, and continue to encourage, reading in terms of what is now sometimes called ‘the poetics of presence’, the belief that literature makes present to us the consciousness and mind of the author behind or beyond the text. But which Horace are we talking about? – ‘Fat, beery, beefy Horace’, as one English scholar called him,<sup>1</sup> or the more elegant courtier and lover preferred by several French critics. Horace has done duty as a quasi-Christian moralist, as a hedonistic enthusiast for ‘a generous bottle and a lovesome she’, as an English landowner and country-gentleman. To Ezra Pound Horace ‘bald-headed, pot-bellied, underbred, sychophantic’ . . . ‘sensuous only in so far as he is a gourmet of food and of language’, had ‘but the clubman’s poise and no stronger emotion than might move one toward a particularly luscious oyster’;<sup>2</sup> but to the impulsive Ben Jonson he was rather ‘the best master both of virtue and wisdom, an excellent and true judge upon cause and reason’ (*Discoveries*, 3204). We might conclude that there are, and always have been, many Horaces, not one Horace. ‘Horace’, it could be argued, is a construction, by readers and reading communities, in terms of specific reading practices, and there are no final grounds, no ultimate courts of appeal, to which we can have recourse to establish the ‘true’ or the ‘real’ Horace among the various images. On this view the history of Horace’s ‘reception’ assumes great hermeneutical importance: whether we like it or not, indeed whether we know it or not, our current images of Horace, our current readings of his poems, are shaped by that history – even to reject a past reading or a past image is, in a sense, to acknowledge its authority, to become enmeshed in its traces. The various poets and writers treated in this volume offer readings of Horace at least as searching as those of modern scholars; but, equally importantly, those readings, widely influential, have also been, directly or obliquely, constitutive of ours.

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It is probably true that some images of Horace have tended to predominate over others, as his works have regularly been appropriated for certain interests and for certain sets of values. Horace is commonly regarded as a 'classic' writer (in several senses of that highly charged term), as an apostle of Reason, moderation, common sense, balance, good taste, as the poet of the middle way, of ordinary decencies, as the praiser of friendship, country life, retirement, privacy, simplicity (it is worth observing how value-laden is every one of these words, how open their meanings to contestation). For example in the 'The Horatians' (1968) W. H. Auden finds Horace's natural modern successors among groups like clergymen –

Among those I really know, the  
British branch of the family, how many have  
found in the Anglican Church  
your Maecenas who enabled  
a life without cumber, as pastors adjective  
to rustic flocks

– or 'organists in trollopish / cathedral towns', or museum curators, and he identifies himself with their ordinariness:

We can only  
do what it seems to us we were made for, look at  
this world with a happy eye  
but from a sober perspective.

In more hostile vein, in John Heath-Stubbs' *Artorius* (1973), the critic Phyllidulus (a thinly disguised Dr Leavis) offers this account of Horace as an Augustan poet:

It was said that Augustus found Rome brick and left it marble – and something analogous occurred to poetry in the same generation. One may happen to prefer brick. Marmoreal is a term that has been applied to the Odes of Horace. If this style be marble, it is a veneer which does not serve to conceal the writer's essential commonplaces of mind – a commonplaceness which infuses likewise the whole corpus of his epistles.<sup>3</sup>

Portraits like Auden's or Phyllidulus' can be defended, but – like all others – they not only accept, or reproduce, certain values, but also depend on foregrounding some elements and downplaying, even erasing, others. Passages from different poems which can support this picture are selected and interpreted in particular ways, and then provide a core around which the other writings are organized. (In the Renaissance the process was facilitated by the existence of *florilegia* and other collections of favourite excerpts from the Latin poets, usually arranged by topic.) Poems, or parts of poems, which fit the picture can then be termed 'typically' or 'characteristically' Horatian;

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at such moments Horace is 'most himself'. Many modern studies of Horace will illustrate these and other tropes of the rhetoric of authenticity used to validate particular images of the poet.

It is possible to construct – again, of course, by judicious selection – a very different image from the one just sketched. Let us look at some of the key elements, and first at the way in which Horace is regarded as a classic writer. Of course his poetry rapidly became part of a dominant canon, and in that sense a 'classic', but the word is often taken to imply the possession of a style which is, in some sense, normative and free from eccentricity and excessive idiosyncrasy. This may be defensible, to an extent, of the hexameter poems (where we can encounter a relaxed *sermo purus*); but what of the *Odes*? It is possible that some of Horace's original readers at least may have found them weirdly experimental.<sup>4</sup> In them we meet a style which combines the arty and the prosaic, along with a highly artificial, mannered word order and a structural wilfulness which can require a reader to strain in the attempt, taxing or vain, to apprehend (e.g. *Odes* 1.7). Some of this can be well illustrated by the end of 2.11 (a *carpe diem* poem, full of evocative images of flux), where Horace uses *scortum*, an 'unpoetic' word for prostitute, to describe the flute-girl Lyde in a passage which concludes with an artfully tangential and intricately wrought description of the woman's hair-style:

quis devium scortum eliciet domo  
Lyden? eburna dic, age, cum lyra  
maturet incomptam Lacaenae  
more comam religata nodo.

Who will entice the shy tart Lyde from her house? Come, tell her to hurry with her ivory lyre, binding her uncombed hair back in a knot, Spartan-fashion.

There is also a tension between the 'modern' subject-matter and the 'archaic' lyric structures and procedures which Horace adapted from Sappho, Alcaeus, Pindar and other early Greek *lyrici*. This process of adaptation was something different from (say) Virgil's use of the hexameter, since there had been a continuous tradition of epic writing in Latin since Ennius. For Horace's *Odes* the main surviving precedents are two Sapphic poems by Catullus. Poem 11 (*Furi et Aureli, comites Catulli*), echoed twice in the *Odes* (1.22; 2.6), anticipates Horace (it can be argued) in the use of contrasted registers and tones, the contrived structural asymmetry, the unexpected turns in the argument, the plangent dying fall.

Partly for reasons such as these it has often been argued that the *Odes* resist adequate translation, since most translators prettify the originals and assimilate them to more ordinary lyric models. A sense of the possible strangeness of Horace's lyric style can be encountered only here and there in translations and imitations: for example, in Milton's metaphrastic rendering

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of the Pyrrha *Ode* (I.5) or Ben Jonson's of 4.I; in Pound's version of I.II, the Leuconoe *Ode* ('Ask not ungainly askings of the end'); in the stiff, convoluted idioms and arch conjunctions of vocabulary in some of Auden's Horatian pieces –

Dearest to each his birthplace; but to recall a green  
valley where mushrooms fatten in the summer nights  
and silvered willows copy  
the circumflexions of the stream

is not my gladness today; I am presently moved  
by sun-drenched Parthenopea, my thanks are for you,  
Ischia, to whom a fair wind has  
brought me rejoicing with dear friends

from soiled productive cities.

(from 'Ischia')

or in Kipling's parody of *Odes* I.I ('There are whose study is of smells': 'Horace, Bk.v. Ode 3'). Kipling starts by reproducing the alien movement of the rhetorical organization which scholars call the priamel, while in the first line the omission of the antecedent is likewise a Latinism (= *sunt quorum*). The combination of prosaic vocabulary in lines 3–4 ('How something mixed with something else / Makes something worse') with the artificial 'increasing without Venus', the presence of such polar contrasts as 'cure, or cause disease' or 'farthest roll and fastest turn', and the deft understatement of the final picture of the poet by his fireside, all reveal an alert understanding of the nuts and bolts of Horace's style.<sup>5</sup>

Or let us consider the question of restraint, balance and propriety. The Cleopatra *Ode* (I.37) may be balanced in its structure (we could analyse the poem as an introductory stanza, followed by approximately three stanzas each for events up to and after Actium, divided by a pair of pivotal similes in stanza 5). But, despite any dialectical character, the *Ode* hardly offers us a moderate account of Cleopatra or a middle way between positive and negative assessments of her; rather Cleopatra is first abused, without any mitigation or remorse of voice, as sexually immoral, drunk, madly elated by success, with her retinue of diseased eunuchs (men unmanned), and then, in an extraordinary tergiversation, which has received various different explanations, she is given the 'male' characteristics of courage, philosophical equanimity and regal stature in the hour of her defeat and death. The partial regendering – *nec muliebriter / expavit ense* ('nor did she fear the sword like a woman') – is the more surprising because, in one of the similes, the doves figuring her are called *mollis* (a word regularly implying effeminacy). The *Ode*, with its excited rhythms, its grand Pindaric sweep and massive final sentence, offers us (on this view) not so much balance or detachment as two bizarrely juxtaposed and opposing stances.<sup>6</sup>

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Certainly Horace's general treatment of women does not always seem marked by 'restraint'. Two *Epodes* (8 and 12) abuse old women by dwelling, with powerful particularity, on their decaying bodily characteristics, repulsive to the male lover.<sup>7</sup> The reference to fellatio (represented in numerous Latin texts as degrading for the performer), at the end of 8, still has some power to shock; the artistic texture of the verse with assonance of the open vowels can enforce on the reader a sensuous collusion: *quod ut superbo provocas ab inguine, / ore allaborandum est tibi* ('to arouse my prick from its proud crotch, you have to work hard with your mouth'). Scholars have various strategies for not incorporating such writing in the category of 'typically Horatian'. Poems like these are called 'exercises' as opposed to 'true (i.e. sincere) poems' (all poems both are and are not in some sense exercises). Their character is assigned to the genre, not to the poet (as though matters of genre were not operative in all Horace's works). Of course the sentiments of these *Epodes* need not be put down to any personal idiosyncrasy of the writer; they can be paralleled elsewhere in Roman invective, in the *Priapea*, for example, in Martial, or in graffiti. But they nevertheless reflect, and helped to perpetuate, dominant images that were part of a discourse about sexuality, something which we might not wish to evade by a merely formalist ruse. More generally (with the exception of 13 which is felt to be closest in manner to an *Ode*) the *Epodes* are treated as immature, an argument not normally used about the *Eclogues*, written by Virgil at a similar stage; anyway Horace continued to abuse ageing flames in powerful verse in the *Odes* (1.23; 4.13). Scholars look round carefully for signs of such 'immaturity'. Fraenkel finds them in *Epode* 6 in the 'lack of discretion and the sense of consistency which distinguish the mature works of Horace',<sup>8</sup> which leads the poet to present himself first as a dog ('of good breed') and then as a bull. Fraenkel seems to have forgotten that in *Odes* 2.5 Lalage is figured as a heifer in the green meadow, and then as an unripe grape. Indeed discontinuous imagery of this kind (perhaps in imitation of Callimachus) is characteristic of much of Horace's most admired poetry. At the end of the Dellius *Ode* (2.3) we have a particularly striking example – destined all to die, we are like sheep gathered into the same fold: our lots will sooner or later be shaken out of the urn; we are bound for the eternal exile on Charon's skiff:

omnes eodem cogimur, omnium  
versatur urna serius ocuis  
sors exitura et nos in aeternum  
exsilium impositura cumbae.

Gordon Williams sees a transition from the *Epodes* and *Sermones* where 'anger, contempt, and amusement are the fundamental emotions (though he often transcends these emotions in both works)' to the maturity of the *Odes*

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and *Epistles* which ‘express a more meditative, more philosophical, more humane attitude’.<sup>9</sup> It would take long to unpack all the unexamined assumptions in these judgements; suffice it to say that in both Dante and Milton anger and contempt fuelled some of their greatest writing, or that denunciation of human wickedness, by Swift (say) or Pope, could be seen as having its own ‘humanity’.

Or again let us take the matter of ‘good taste’. Here there is a distinct danger of constructing a discrete and mystified notion of taste outside historical and cultural contingency and above competing ideologies, something which literary theorists call ‘the fetishization of the aesthetic’. In the poems in which he directly discusses literary matters, Horace in general subscribes to Aristotelian notions of propriety and decorum. But it is not difficult to find fissures in the system. Women are expected to adhere to the decorum of time, and thus, as we have seen, are excoriated for continuing the life of love beyond the years ‘appropriate’ to it. But when the male lover finds that Venus is no respecter of age (*Odes* 4.1), he apparently treats the matter in a very different tone, with wit, sympathy and sentimental pathos. As with ‘life’, so with art. In the *Ars Poetica* Horace criticizes the bad poet who incongruously ‘paints the dolphin in the woods, the boar in the waves of the sea’ (29f). But, in one of the sprightliest of his political *Odes* (1.2), he disregards such advice with a striking picture of the great Flood, when ‘the race of fishes clung to the tops of elm-trees which had once been the well-known haunts of pigeons, and terrified deer swam on the rising flood’.<sup>10</sup> We tend to associate such fantasies more with Ovid and the poets of the ‘Silver Age’, and indeed Ovid describes the Flood in similar terms in *Metamorphoses* Book 1 (293ff). The passage reminds us yet again that Horace can be a more varied writer than he is often given credit for, and that there are many passages in his poems which may not conform to narrower notions of literary propriety. In *Odes* 3.3.12 we read that Augustus will drink nectar ‘with crimson lips’ (*purpureo ore*); in 2.5 Lalage is figured as a heifer unable to bear the weight of the bull rushing into Venus; in 2.20 Horace details his metamorphosis into a swan in grotesque (if humorous) detail. Whatever one thinks of such flourishes (bad taste?), they hardly conform to conventional notions of tasteful writing. A. E. Housman issued a stern warning about the difficulty of using ‘taste’ as a criterion for resolving disputed matters of text:

When Horace is reported to have said *seu mobilibus veris inhorruit adventus foliis*, and when pedants like Bentley . . . object that the phrase is unsuitable to its context, of what avail is it to be assured by persons of taste . . . that these are exquisite lines? Exquisite to whom? Consider the mutations of opinion, the reversals of literary judgement, which this one small island has witnessed in the last 150 years: what is the likelihood that your notions . . . of the exquisite are those of a foreigner who wrote for

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foreigners two millenniums ago? And for what foreigners? For the Romans, for men whose religion you disbelieve, whose chief institution you abominate, whose manners you do not like to talk about, but whose literary tastes, you flatter yourself, were identical with yours . . . It is not to be supposed that this age, because it happens to be ours, has been specially endowed with a gift denied to all other modern ages; that we, by nature or by miracle, have mental affinity with the ancients, or that we can lightly acquire it, or that we can even acquire it at all. Communion with the ancients is purchasable at no cheaper rate than the kingdom of heaven; we must be born again. But to be born again is a process exceedingly repugnant to all right-minded Englishmen. I believe they think it improper, and they have a strong and well-grounded suspicion that it is arduous. They would much rather retain the prevalent opinion that the secret of the classical spirit is open to anyone who has a fervent admiration for the second-best parts of Tennyson.<sup>11</sup>

From such a perspective the appreciation of ancient poetry becomes a more difficult matter than we normally care to acknowledge. A possible response is a hermeneutic approach which concedes that, just as there is no simple return to an originary meaning, so we cannot, indeed should not, abandon our fore-understandings and sensibilities, accepting that Horace has only remained available to us by that long process of mediation and appropriation which constitutes his reception and which is none the less always open and contestable, always capable of further modification, yet in such a way that the new descriptions will contain the traces of previous descriptions.<sup>12</sup> That is indeed what living in 'history' means; we are both constrained and enabled by that complex textual weave we call the 'past'.

Then there is the matter of moderation, of the mean. The phrase *aurea mediocritas*, 'golden mean', from the *central* poem of Book 2 (10.5), has become so familiar that we are apt to forget that it is another Horatian oxymoron, something paradoxical. The mean's meaning is somewhat slippery. When in *Sermones* 1.2 Horace proposes sex with freedwomen and slaves as the Aristotelian mean between sex with married women and sex with low prostitutes, it is hard for us to take the doctrine at its face value. If the extremes were known and fixed, it would be easy to locate the central point, but this way of thinking might sit uneasily with Horace's emphasis on flux. So the mean may rather be a way of finding something to hold on to as a centre in a turning world, of fashioning a life which makes some sort of sense amidst the gyrations and contradictions of experience. The mean would not then be a position of stasis, but would involve movement within an unstable world, as the individual accommodates herself or himself to present conditions (a version of Rorty's 'soft pragmatism'?). As such it need not evince the complacency of some eighteenth-century versions (see e.g. Addison in *Spectator* 464: 'The middle condition seems to be the most advantageously situated for the gaining of wisdom.'<sup>13</sup>) When Charles Jennens (librettist of

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*Messiah*) prepared excerpts from ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’ for Handel to set to music, he added a third part, ‘Il Moderato’, to resolve Milton’s passionate dichotomies. (Handel, who set Milton’s words to some of his most expressive music, found less to inspire him in the banalities of this synthesis, and the final section of the oratorio is frequently omitted in modern performances.) The new text includes the words:

Keep, as of old, the middle way,  
Nor deeply sad, nor idly gay,  
But still the same in look and gait,  
Easy, cheerful and sedate.

That this is offered as specifically ‘Horatian’ wisdom is confirmed by a subsequent couplet:

Who safely steer two rocks between,  
And prudent keep the golden mean.

This is one way in which the Horatian mean has been appropriated. Fortunately there are others. Following Harold Bloom, who argues that all readings can be regarded as misreadings (strong or weak), we might designate the Jennens version a ‘weak misreading’. But even the static view of the mean can be made thrilling, when it is accompanied by a sense of what threatens its stability.

The widespread eighteenth-century view of Horace as a classic and measured writer finds embodiment in the frontispiece to Bentley’s famous edition of Horace, which appeared in 1711 (cover and frontispiece).<sup>14</sup> The design, by the Dutchman Jan Goeree (1670–1731), the son of an antiquary, is set in a wooded grove below Mount Helicon, where, under a laurel tree, a pedestal supporting a bust of Horace forms a shrine which is visited by Apollo with his lyre, while a female figure, probably the lyric Muse Euterpe (or perhaps Minerva, the goddess of wisdom), assisted by winged Genii, decorates the shrine with a garland. A satyr is directed towards Apollo’s action, while in the background we can discern a herm. The whole design must be an allegory of Horace’s inspiration, artistry and fame, but the details admit of various readings. The evergreen laurel presumably signifies eternity and poetic prowess. The satyr perhaps hints at the story of Apollo and Marsyas, frequently interpreted as the victory of intellect over passion. Horace, poet of the middle way, is placed in a mean position between the herm in its dark background and the excessive dazzle at the top of Helicon where the horse Pegasus strikes out the spring Hippocrene with his hoof. It is mildly ironic that this conventional representation of Horace should appear in Bentley’s brilliantly iconoclastic edition. The great scholar’s choice of author was probably pointed: again and again he would show how the received text of Horace, so beloved by the mob of gentlemen-amateurs who wrote at ease, was corrupt or misunderstood.



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It is perhaps easier to justify the dominant image of Horace from the *Sermones*. It is here that the longer passages of ‘autobiography’ – including the more extended descriptions of the Sabine farm – are to be found. Yet even here, in writings about them, a certain selectiveness is evident. *Sermones* 1.2 concerns sex. According to Niall Rudd ‘the main theme . . . is folly opposed to good sense in sexual relations’,<sup>15</sup> and the anodyne word ‘bawdy’ is apt to put in an appearance in accounts of it. Pope, perhaps, was not so sure. He issued, anonymously (‘in the manner of Mr Pope’), an imitation entitled ‘Sober Advice from Horace’ (together with the Latin text and notes by himself attributed to Bentley, which criticize the ‘mistakes’ of the imitator), a work which a leading Pope scholar finds (in contradistinction, in his view, to the original) ‘fairly nasty’ and ‘in the notes if not in the text, pornographic’.<sup>16</sup> On the words *mirator CUNNI CUPIENNIUS ALBI* (so printed), ‘Cupiennius admirer of a white cunt’ (i.e. the cunt of a woman wearing the white *stola* of the *matrona*), translated ‘hoary shrine’, ‘Bentley’ comments: ‘Here the imitator grievously errs, *cunnus albus* by no means signifying a white or grey garment, but a thing under a white or grey garment, which thing may be either black, brown, red, or particoloured.’ As usual Pope’s ironies ricochet. Bentley is mocked for his pedantry and humourlessness, but nonetheless his interpretation of Horace is a persuasive one; Horace’s obscenities are frequently glossed over by readers over-concerned with propriety and ‘morality’, and dishonest in repudiating a fascination with sex.<sup>17</sup> Horace’s ‘unromantic’ attitude to women is often described as typically Roman, and compared to Lucretius’. The comparison is unconvincing. Lucretius’ suspicion of sexuality is fuelled by a fierce philosophic commitment; by contrast when in *Sermones* 1.3.107–8 Horace writes *nam fuit ante Helenam cunnus taeterrima belli / causa* (‘for before Helen a cunt was the most terrible cause of war’), the voice seems rather that of Shakespeare’s Thersites. *Cunnus* functions as a metonymy for woman, who is thereby reduced to this single orifice.

Nevertheless Horatian *causerie*, and in particular the *Epistles*, could provide a model for that eighteenth-century culture-hero, the Man of Sense. In *Spectator* 618 the *Epistles* are characterized as follows (I have italicized some of the words and phrases which carry a particularly strong – if unexamined – ideological charge):

The qualifications requisite for writing epistles, after the model given us by Horace, are of a quite different nature. He that would excel in this kind must have a good fund of *strong masculine sense*. To this there must be joined a *thorough knowledge of mankind* . . . and the *prevailing humours* of the age. Our author must have his mind well seasoned with the *finest precepts of morality*, and be filled with *nice reflections* upon the bright and dark sides of *human life*. He must be a master of *refined raillery*, and understand the *delicacies*, as well as the *absurdities*, of *conversation*. He must have a lively *turn of wit*, with an *easy and concise* manner of expression . . . He must . . . appear a *man of the world* throughout.<sup>18</sup>

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This number is attributed to Ambrose Philips, but the sentiments are Addisonian enough. The *Spectator* and *Tatler* (along with other periodicals) were busy civilizing, and uniting, the nation after the political disasters of the previous century. Tags of Horatian wisdom were frequently quoted, and their ‘flexible, homogeneous forms’ could be seen as the modern prose equivalent of Horatian *sermo*. The manner has been described as ‘eirenic and urbane’, as ‘blandly homogenizing’, operating in the ‘emulsive space of the public sphere’, whose hallmark is ‘its consensual character’.<sup>19</sup> Addison is too anodyne a writer for many moderns, although he has been defended skilfully, and in strikingly ‘Horatian’ terms, by C. S. Lewis as affording ‘some tranquil middle ground of quiet sentiments and pleasing melancholies and gentle humour to come in between our restless idealism and our equally restless dissipations’.<sup>20</sup> What one may miss, perhaps, are the flashes of a deeper melancholy which so attracted Dr Johnson to Horace; thus on 7 August 1777, he wrote to Mrs Thrale: ‘At Birmingham I heard of the death of an old friend, and at Lichfield of the death of another. *Anni praedantur euntes*’ (*Ep.* 2.2.55).<sup>21</sup> Again in the essayists the key words seem ‘fixed’, their meanings wholly given; in Horace their ideological equivalents (it can be argued) are subjected openly to play, mobility, exploration and a sense of discovery. Horace obviously played an important role in the development of the English essay (Swift’s *A Trritical Essay*, a parody of the form, contains several citations from his writings). Cowley’s influential masterpiece, the *Essays*, combines verses both original and translated (including some of Horace’s) and relaxed, ruminative prose: his themes include the shortness and obscurity of life, the joys of solitude and the small of scale, love of the countryside, the nature of contentment – and praise of Horace.

Even the ordinariness of Horace’s life can be challenged. The son of an ex-slave, he rose to become familiar with many of the greatest among Rome’s elite. In his youth he had favoured the Republican cause and fought at Philippi, commonly regarded as one of the decisive battles in world history. He witnessed other events of importance. He may have been with Maecenas at Actium. He apparently accompanied him on a delicate diplomatic mission to negotiate with Antony (*Sermones* 1.5). Chosen by the *princeps* to compose the hymn for the Secular Games of 17 BC, he became virtually poet laureate, a celebrity pointed out in his perambulations through Rome (*Odes* 4.3). Augustus offered him the post of private secretary (*ab epistulis*), which Horace was able to refuse, to the applause of later ages.<sup>22</sup> Such is not the story of Everyman.

This revised portrait of Horace has been offered, not to give a ‘true’ likeness, still less a definitive one, but as a rhetorical ploy, to make the point that poems, like people and the world in general, are endlessly redescribable. And so we may return again, with this presumption in mind, to the problem of Horace’s self-representation.