

ARNOLD BRADSHAW

1 HORACE'S BIRTHDAY AND DEATHDAY

In every human life there are two days of special significance – birthday and deathday. The first is marked with a rubric in the diary, while the second lurks unknown among all the leaves of the year. In Rome birthdays were noted and celebrated throughout life and sometimes afterwards,¹ but deathdays were less liable to leave a permanent mark, unless the deceased was an emperor or a Christian saint. Cases where an individual's precise dates are recorded are rare, and of all Latin authors up to the fifth century AD only five – apart from Caesars and saints with literary pretensions – appear to qualify.² Horace is one of the few, and it seems worthwhile to review the evidence for his lifespan and to examine what he himself had to say about his beginning and his end.

THE TRADITION

The dates commonly quoted in modern biographical notices are derived from the *Vita* which is ascribed with plausibility to Suetonius and which ends with the following passage (unamended):

Natus est VI Idus Decembris L. Cotta et L. Torquato consulibus [8.12.65], decessit V Kal. Decembris C. Marcio Censorino et C. Asinio Gallo consulibus [27.11.8] post nonum et quinquagesimum annum herede Augusto palam nuncupato, cum urgente ui ualetudinis non sufficeret ad obsignandas testamenti tabulas. humatus et conditus est extremis Esquiliis iuxta Maecenatis tumulum.³

Centuries ago critics pointed out that the interval between birth and death amounts, not to 59, but to 57 years (counting by the *fasti*, not by the stars); they ascribed the error in the text either to Suetonius or (more often) to the copyist. How this arithmetical problem is to be resolved, whether by emendation or other means, will be considered later.

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YEAR OF BIRTH

The year at least is confirmed by Horace's own statements, of which there are three:

- (a) tu uina Torquato moue consule pressa meo (Epod. 13.6)
 (b) O nata mecum consule Manlio (Carm. 3.21.1)
 (c) forte meum siquis te percontabitur aeuum
 me quater undenos sciat impleuisse Decembris
 collegam Lepidum quo duxit Lollius anno [21 BC].
 28 v.l. dixit (Epist. 1.20.26–8)

The third of these, the final lines of Book 1 of the *Epistles*, signalling his age at the point of writing, is valuable as giving an approximate date for the publication of that book as well as an indication of when Horace, for the first time, abandoned lyric. The other two references, in *Epod.* 13 and *Carm.* 3.21, are more specifically references to his birth-year and they merit particular attention.

The two poems were probably separated by some years, but they share certain characteristics. First of all their excellence has been widely recognised. Epode 13 in particular is a great favourite, being often described as the best, the most elegant, the most ode-like of the epodes.⁴ Not surprisingly it has received a good measure of critical attention;⁵ it has also raised considerable controversy, in particular over its supposed relation to early Greek lyric models and its date.⁶

A more insistent question which can hardly be ignored, however wary we may be of 'the autobiographical fallacy', is whether the poem is related to some episode in the author's life. The arguments threaten to be interminable, but many commentators do at least agree that the storm appears to be symbolic as well as real; that Horace and his friends⁷ are dismayed by some historical crisis; that the poem proclaims the power of wine and song to mitigate misery. The message is given added authority by repeating it in the words of a semi-divine teacher of heroes and strengthening it by contrast, for, if these sweet alloquies of the sick heart relieve one who is doomed, how much more must they lighten the spirit of those whose fortunes may yet be restored!

The lesson both in its content and expression suits Horace's role as a poet in the sympotic tradition, but has the poem anything to do with the events of his own life? Poets live by their imagination; they can people their poems with invented characters taken from life or literature; they are actors who can put on any masks and play any part they wish. But, if *persona* and wearer are revealed as identical, it is fair to assume that

we are face to face with the real man. That is precisely what happens in line 6, for, when a character speaks of his birthday (such is the implication of *meo*) and it is the birthday of the author, pretence is at an end. It is this detail which encourages us to take Epode 13 seriously as part of Horace's life. Claims that the poem is based on a Greek model do not deprive it of personal significance, for the poet would be likely to imitate an original which matched his own experience.

If the voice is Horace's own, where is he speaking from and when? What predicament could have produced anxieties so dreadful and literally monstrous (*solicitudinibus*) in the lives of Horace and his companions, and how could their situation be analogous to that of Achilles? The simple answers which satisfy many are: we don't know and the convivial cure is analogue enough. But there is at least one point of resemblance between Horace's company and the Homeric hero which is emphasised: youth. For the former *dumque uirent genua | et decet* (4–5) is a conventional phrase, but an adolescent Achilles is something of a novelty.⁸ For all who had been brought up on Homer, Achilles was the supreme warrior and the model of bravery in battle. The Achilles of Epode 13 is nothing of the kind: he is not yet a man of war; he is a boy still under tutelage, and no school-leaver was ever given a final report with grimmer prognostics. His teacher with supernatural perception gives him no promise of glory but only the prospect of death in an unpleasant-sounding foreign land. Could this remarkable picture have any relevance to Horace and his friends? It certainly could if they were young soldiers fearful at the prospect of going into battle for the first time.⁹

Now the only military phase in Horace's career for which there is unquestionable evidence occurred when, at the age of 22, he followed his fellow-student at the Academy in Athens, Marcus Junius Brutus, and took up arms against Octavian and Antony in the campaign which ended at Philippi in 42 BC.¹⁰ It is not surprising that since at least the sixteenth century Epode 13 has been linked with that experience.¹¹ Acceptance of that link does not however allow any safe conclusion about the date of composition, for the sensations of a young man going off to war do not quickly fade from his mind; he might have written the poem long after the event.

Claims have, however, been made that he may also have been involved in other military service at a later date, and, if any of these were justified, we should have to consider whether the epode could relate to the action concerned. The evidence depends upon the interpretation of four passages, two identified with specific campaigns (the war against Sextus Pompeius and Actium), and two of general import. In *Carm.* 3.4.26–8 Horace says he was saved from death on three occasions: *non me Philippis*

uersa acies retro, | deuota non exstinxit arbos, | nec Sicula Palinurus unda. We know about Philippi and the falling tree but the third adventure is mysterious. The explanation of Ps.-Acro is: *Promuncturium est Siciliae, non a Palinuro Aeneae gubernatore dictum, sed [ab] Hannibalis, ubi redeuntem se Horatius de Macedonia periclitatum dixit, qui est et nauibus periculosus locus.* Clearly there is confusion here between Pelorus and Palinurus (both capes and helmsmen),¹² while the statement that Horace's misadventure occurred when he was returning from Greece may be merely a guess.¹³ Some commentators believe that Horace is referring to the occasion in 36 when the greater part of Octavian's fleet was destroyed in two storms off Cape Palinurus on the Lucanian coast between Velia and Buxentum. Maecenas must have been present on this occasion, as it is recorded that he was later sent back to Rome to prevent panic, and Horace, by now accepted as *comes* and *amicus*, might well have been in his patron's entourage.¹⁴ Whether this solution is more plausible than the explanation of the scholiast is a matter of opinion.

The belief that Horace was present at Actium is based on Epode 9. This poem has generated an enormous controversy among scholars determined to extract from it all – and sometimes more than all – that it can yield because, by an unfortunate accident, it has been given a role for which it was neither intended nor suited as a contemporary historical record of a momentous battle.

Here it is best to concentrate on asking whether Horace was present, but this in turn depends on Maecenas' movements, for, if Maecenas was there, as in the case of the naval mishap in 36, Horace might have been expected to accompany him. On the likelihood of Maecenas' presence at Actium learned opinion is divided, the choice depending to some extent on the credence attached to some halting verses of dubious date, the first *Elegia in Maecenatem*.¹⁵ Some critics have even argued that Epode 9 is a vivid eye-witness account, virtually 'a running commentary' of what the poet saw.¹⁶ The assertion that the narrative indicates autopsy is attractive but it is open to obvious objections. First, it must be admitted that an imaginative writer is capable of picturing a scene vividly as if he had been there. Second, any description of the battle of Actium composed shortly after the event was bound to be based on the accounts of participants, for the circle in which Horace moved must have been full of men who were eager to say, 'I was there and I'll tell you all about the great deeds *quorum pars magna fui*'. More specific doubts are raised by details of the ten lines (11–20) relating to the battle. The first six of these present what is hardly the description of an eye-witness; it is more like an emotive portrayal of the enemy designed to stimulate anger and disgust. This is not a war-correspondent's snapshot but a grand dramatic painting.

Elucidation of the next four lines which contain *the only elements of action* is made difficult by the crux at the beginning of 17 and uncertainty about the precise significance of 19–20. However these problems are resolved, arguments that this short passage must have been written by a man on the spot are tendentious.

There remain the two passages of general import which have been thought to refer to Horace's military service after Philippi: *Epist.* 1.20.23 and *Carm.* 2.6.5–8.¹⁷

In the final epistle of Book 1 Horace proudly declares *me primis urbis belli placuisse domique*. It has been asserted that Horace is referring to his own performance in the field but would not have dared to include the tyrannicide Brutus among *primis urbis*. Unfortunately the line is doubly ambiguous and may have been intended to be so. Though it is preferable to take *belli domique* with *placuisse* it cannot be shown that it would be absolutely wrong to take it with *primis*. Even in the former case the statement that he was a favourite of leading men in wartime is not the same thing as saying he was a soldier; moreover the assumption that the Republican leaders must be excluded from *primis urbis* is questionable and historically false; the army in which Horace served was not a rabble led by a Spartacus. It is to the point that in none of his references to this episode in his life does Horace express shame or repentance for having been on the losing side.

On *Carm.* 2.6.5–8 Wistrand observed: 'Now if Horace's only personal experience of war was with Brutus' army in 43–42 BC, would it then have been possible for him to say – twenty years after he had last seen active military service – that he was now tired and wished that his military labours might finally come to an end in Tibur or Tarentum?'¹⁸ But Horace is not talking about *now* in a matter-of-fact fashion; he is adopting a pose and using Homeric and possibly Alcaic language to imagine how he would like to end his days when he is an old man looking back on the adventures of a lifetime. We cannot extract a campaign-record from a daydream of a future state.

Finally, though arguments from silence are dubious, if Horace really did witness action on the winning side, it is astonishing that he never says so explicitly. As early as *Sat.* 1.6.48 he was ready to admit his involvement with the losers; we might have expected him to emphasise later presence in the train of Octavian, especially as he suffered from social carping until in the end he secured unquestionable pre-eminence as a poet.

To sum up, on the basis of his own testimony Horace definitely served in the campaign which ended at Philippi; if certain speculative interpretations are correct, he might also have been involved in a naval disaster of the Sicilian war and he could have been at Actium. We are left with

a certainty and two possibilities which are simply guesses. The choice between these three occasions as the background for the epode may be narrowed when *Carm.* 3.21 is considered.

The ode *O nata mecum consule Manlio* is a superb one (even though Fraenkel ignores it). It is in a sense a delightful adaptation of the hymn form (I wish to avoid the usual word ‘parody’, which suggests mockery of the model and is in this case misleading). The deity ostensibly addressed turns out to be a wine-jar: ‘My dear twin-sister bottle born in 65’.¹⁹

The poet invites the reader to laugh at the form, not the faith: the joke is in the structure not the content, which is sensible, even wise, and respectful of both men and gods. It is certainly not a frivolous or irresponsible poem. There are several serious aspects: first, it is addressed to one of the great aristocratic commanders and orators of the Augustan Age, M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus, and in encouraging this very distinguished man to enjoy the benefits of wine Horace recognises that he is soaked in Plato and offers him a very serious-minded exemplar – Cato, that paragon of severity, who is said often to have warmed his virtue with the juice of the grape.²⁰ Secondly, and this is a point which commonly goes unremarked, the end of the poem is cast in a genuinely religious form: in the final stanza Horace brings in Bacchus, Venus, the Graces as good companions, and Apollo to let in the light. The position of the poem may also be significant, for it is followed by two essentially religious and serious odes.²¹

Thirdly the wine is very special. It is Massic, which is one of the best varieties, and this is obviously an ancient vintage. Are we to take it, then, that emphasis on age is the main point in describing the wine-jar as coeval with the author? In their enthusiasm to rework Norden, commentators have tended to assume so and to hurry past the first line. But what makes it uniquely valuable is that it is an *Horatian* wine, and now that really means something; in the interval since Epode 13 was written ‘Château Horace’ has arrived – it is one of the great brand-names and so forms a significant part of the priceless compliment which Horace is paying to Messalla. The word ‘priceless’ is apt because in *Odes* 1–3 there are hints and in Book 4 incontrovertible evidence that Horace knew he had something enormously valuable to give – or more likely to sell – to anyone he names: immortality.²² The tone of this ode, however, suggests a genuine friendship rather than commerce. Was there some personal reason for offering Horace’s birthday vintage to Messalla?

One possibility is that Messalla too was born in 65. There is general agreement that Jerome’s date for his birth, 59 (linked incidentally with Livy), is too late, and 64 has been preferred because the similarity of the names of the consuls of the two years provides an explanation of the confusion in Jerome’s *tumultuarium opus* – Caesar and Figulus (64)

and Caesar and Bibulus (59).²³ While a birthdate in 65 cannot be entirely excluded there are objections: the explanation for Jerome's error disappears and the description *nata mecum* stresses the birthdate of the author not the addressee. One thing is clear and that is that Horace begins *Carm.* 3.21 with a back-reference to his earlier poem, Epode 13. It can hardly be accidental that these two poems contain the only two references to the poet's year of birth and that those references are in the form of a precious vintage. Did this have special significance for Messalla?

Although they achieved eminence in very different fields Horace and Messalla shared one notable experience in that both fought for the tyrannicides against Octavian.²⁴ They had been *commilitones* in the camp of Cassius and there is at least a strong presumption that they knew each other there and that their friendship dated from that period. If, as I have argued, Epode 13 is linked with Philippi, there is a good case for suggesting that, when Horace came to write *Carm.* 3.21 as a complimentary poem to his former companion in arms, he repeated the reference to the wine of the year of the consul L. Manlius L. f. Torquatus to remind his friend of the earlier poem which poignantly expressed their feelings at that critical moment in their lives. Horace's coeval wine is the Massic of remembrance.²⁵ Like many of Horace's hints this one is subtle and tactful and in no way compromises the public figure to whom it is addressed.

It is of course conceivable that Messalla and Horace were together in a later campaign – in the Sicilian War or at Actium – and that we simply lack the evidence to connect them, in which case Epode 13 could be taken to refer to that event, but the claim that *Carm.* 3.21 contains a reminder is no less valid. Once again the choice is between a probable association based on testimony and two possibilities which are purely speculative.

BIRTHDAY

Horace wrote many 'occasional' poems and he might have been expected to use his birthday – as distinct from his birth year – as an occasion. It is suggested here that he did exploit it in a fashion which has not hitherto been recognised.

To approach the matter indirectly I point to one undoubted birthday poem, the ode in Book 4 centred on Maecenas' birthday, *Carm.* 4.11, *Est mihi nonum superantis annum*. It is the ode in which Horace addresses Phyllis, the last of his loves, the girl with the irresistible singing voice, of which the final stanza is a clear signal that his career as a lyric poet is drawing to its ultimate close.

Like many elements in Book 4 the poem is reminiscent of earlier work, and the obvious precursor is *Carm.* 3.28, *Festo quid potius die*. This ode is short and apparently simple, but it is by no means trivial; it is a very important poem, if for no other reason than that it was the last love poem and the last religious lyric Horace intended to write – or more accurately to present to his readers, for I have no doubt that at the time he considered his lyric work to be complete.²⁶

Its position points to its significance. It is enclosed between two massive odes, the first of which is the longest of the odes concerned with love and the second is the longest ode to Maecenas, the whole group being followed by the monumental final poem of the lyric collection. Place alone does not of course prove the importance of *Festo quid potius die*, for the insertion of a frivolous piece might be defended as a cushion between two heavy poems, but the prominent position invites the reader to look closely in case there is a deeper meaning beneath the smooth and glittering surface.²⁷

The key has been provided by Viktor Pöschl, who pointed out that in this poem Horace is using one of the oldest poetical metaphors, which is based on the analogy between transient day and passing life and especially between evening and old age.²⁸ For the ageing Horace the sun is already past the zenith, and he feels a desperate urgency as his own evening approaches; prudence must be thrown to the winds and, before it is too late, the precious old wine must be snatched from store; it is time to sing the final hymns to the gods, the last ode to love, and at the end a dirge to darkness.²⁹ The message is plain: soon the lyre and the songs which accompany it will be heard no more.

Once the underlying meaning of the ode is seen to be a moving valediction to lyric and to life, it becomes clear that it must have been specially composed for its position at the close of the lyric corpus and was not an earlier piece placed there when the poet was arranging his poems for final publication. But why on earth did Horace choose Neptune as the god to celebrate in his last lyric party? Apart from anything else, he was the one god who had no sense of humour, hardly likely to attract Horace's devotion. Surely Phoebus, Bacchus, Venus, Mercury, or the Muses would have been more appropriate.

The usual answer is that the festival of Neptune was on 23 July, a hot time of year, so it provides an excuse for boozing – *adduxere sitim tempora*. This is weak to the point of inanity, considering the position and grave implications of the ode, for it invites us to believe that this twilight lyric arose from an incidental occasion which had no personal or political significance. Besides, Caecuban is a most precious wine, preserved for celebrating Battles of Actium and the suicide of lewd Egyptian queens; it is not lemonade for summer picnics.³⁰

Why Neptune? The question is never asked because the answer given above has seemed so obvious: summer heat is at its height and Horace felt thirsty, so he calls urgently for drink in a simple sympotic-erotic piece; there were, after all, Lesbian precedents.³¹ This is a case where the wrong answer has suppressed the right question. Why Neptune?

Neptune is a mysterious god in the Roman pantheon and almost nothing is known about the July festival of Neptune – rather less in fact than the notes of commentators suggest. Ovid's account of the junketings in honour of Anna Perenna have nothing to do with the case.³² One might speculate that the reference is to another festival at which Neptune was honoured, associated perhaps with Actium or Augustus' birthday, but this is essentially a personal poem:³³ Horace is playing his own lyre not blowing the trumpet of state.

In religion above all *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit* and Horace is pre-eminent among Latin poets in avowedly writing Greek poems in Latin. His Neptune is Poseidon, and the place to look for our answer is in Greece, and particularly in Athens, where, like many educated men of means, Horace spent some time in higher studies. There is no evidence of the length of his stay at the Academy but it is probable that he was there for a considerable period, learning to *want* to distinguish true from false – *scilicet ut uellem curuo dinoscere rectum* (*Epist.* 2.2.44). He may have had a Roman diary in his luggage, but it is reasonable to assume that when in Athens he had to do as the Athenians did and used the local calendar; in which case he must have recognised that the month of the winter solstice, corresponding roughly to his birthday month of December, was called the month of Poseidon. He would also have observed that Poseidon was honoured on the eighth day of every month and, as all the surviving evidence indicates, in 'Poseidon' the festival of the god occurred on the eighth day of the month, the day of his birth.³⁴ It should not cause surprise that, when he came to write what he intended to be his last love lyric, the follower of Sappho and Alcaeus and the other seven Greek lyric poets of the canon, was thinking half in Greek, and mixing his drinks, so to speak – Falernian with Chian.

A birthday is a time to look back, a time to pause, a time to change. To which of Horace's birthdays should we attach this poem? I surmise his 43rd. In antiquity there were many more ways of distinguishing the ages of man than the simple threefold division of the sphinx.³⁵ Horace himself once described four ages (*Ars P.* 153–78), but stricter, more sophisticated systems were in vogue. Several of the most popular among Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans were based upon the number seven, the magical, sacred, astronomical number seven.³⁶ For example, Hippocrates, according to Censorinus, divided life into seven phases of seven years, which

