

## Horace: *Carmina*, I, 38. Epicureanism and vegetal symbols

**Abstract:** The correct understanding of an ancient literature text involves – among others – a decoding of the symbols used and an interpretation of their semantic sphere. It is often not enough to consider that a flower, for instance, is a symbol of love, insofar as the various nuances of the concept may be illustrated – mostly in lyrical creations – by different plant symbols. In the following lines, we propose an interpretation of the Horatian poem *Carmina*, I, 38, from the perspective of both the Epicurean morals and the plants mentioned. Furthermore, we propose a Romanian translation of the poem using the original metric system (*Sapphica minor*).

**Keywords:** Horace, *Carmina*, Epicureanism, vegetal symbols, metric system, *Sapphica minor*

### I.

Designed as a whole, the Horatian odes (*Carmina*) represent the most refined expression of lyricism provided by the Venusian poet, though he wrote them when he was young. Judging by the poem that closes the third book, the author himself considered it finished and representative for his entire creation – *Exegi monumentum aere perennius...* (*Carmina*, III, 30). On the date it was published – 23 BC – Horace did not know that he would have to add another book to the *Odes*, upon Augustus' request. Hence, this work comprises four books of poems of unequal size, of which the first two were written before 31 BC, the third between 31 and 23 BC, while the last one between 19 and 13 BC.

The first book contains 38 poems, the second one 20, the third one 30, and the last one 17. The way they were grouped, except for the last book, does not respect the chronological criterion. The author grouped them randomly or maybe following certain criteria known only by him.

### II.

“It is highly probable for Horace to have written his odes to be sung,” Eugen Cizek states (Cizek 1994, 305). This hypothesis is supported mostly by their organization into stanzas; each poem is a remarkable metric success, a model of harmony and balance of expression. In a moment of

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self-overestimating, Horace considered himself the initiator of the “Aeolian songs” (*Carmina*, III, 30, 13) in Latin poetry. His models of preference, in terms of both themes and form, are Alcaeus and Sappho, but Pindar or Anacreon also had some influence upon him. Hence, he had exceptional masters, from whom he learned those metrical structures that he also used for less “Aeolian” themes and motifs, considering that the odes also concern the realities specific to Rome during the reforms of Augustus. The strophe of Alcaeus or Sappho, of Asclepius, or the various types of distichs or monostichs represent the dominant rhythms of the *Odes*. Fairly, a certain theme cannot be related to a certain rhythm, but each meter involves a particular musicality; in the opinion of Horace, it serves better both the intention of the poem and the auctorial sensibility in relation with the approached topic.

Both the selection of a certain vocabulary and the surprising associations of grammatical categories that speculate “the inexistence of a fixed order of words” are related to the melos of poems, too (Cizek 1994, 305). Therefore, the sometimes confusing but never dull order of words is the result of an intertwining with the metrics, to which Horace forces his elegant Latin. Furthermore, the figures of speech, (metaphors, comparisons, metonymies etc) also seem to support the (deeper or funnier) rhythm and tone of each poem.

### III.

According to Pierre Grimal (*apud* Cizek 1994), there are four fundamental themes in the four books of *Carmina*: love, nature, wisdom and the City. In this paper, I am interested in the first and the third theme – love and wisdom – because the poem I am translating and analyzing (*Carmina*, I, 38) encompasses them. The interpretation I have provided for this short poem supports this idea. It has been often and justly stated that in the *Odes* (and elsewhere) Horace proves to be a consistent adept of the Epicureans. Happiness – the purpose of human living – can only be understood from the perspective of ataraxia, (a spiritual state of quiet and calmness that one may attain by detachment from the troubles of the world). Apparently, such endeavour may be undertaken by anyone, but the poet’s insistence upon this motif makes me believe that he viewed it more like a desideratum. You can detach yourself from the troubles of the world by being content with a modest living (*Carmina*, I, 9; I, 20), by renouncing to personal pride (*Carmina*, I, 1), by rejoicing the love and honest friendship of the close ones (*Carmina*, I, 22; I, 27), thus cultivating that salubrious ethics based upon the analysis and dissociation between useful and useless things (*Carmina*, I, 1; I, 9), warding off the fear of death and passage of time (*Carmina*, I, 9), or, very briefly, by adopting an *aurea mediocritas* (*Carmina*, II, 10, v. 5), the “golden mean” between precarious life and extravagant luxury – a genuine “formula” provided by Horace for attaining ataraxia.

#### IV.

“Pleasure is our first and kindred good,” according to Epicurus (*Letter to Menoecus*, 129), it is the “principle and the end of the happy life” (*Letter to Menoecus*, 128). Pleasure must be understood as a double absence: of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. (*Letter to Menoecus*, 131) However, this state is not a *datum*; it may be attained by satisfying our needs, but not all our needs, just those that express the natural needs of both the body and the soul. The same Epicurus teaches that desires are unnecessary, groundless, or natural – the latter are divided, in their turn, into necessary desires (to secure one’s happiness; to prevent the body from suffering; to survive) and natural desires (*Letter to Menoecus*, 127; *Fundamental maxims*, 149). Practical wisdom (φρόνησις) must relate these desires to the good of the soul and of the body; dissociate between them; and select those that must be fulfilled. As the author warns, one cannot live pleasantly without “living wisely, finely, and justly” (*Letter to Menoecus*, 132). Pleasant life and the exercise of wisdom, of good and of justice are mutually presumed. The valuable, namely the wise person is not the one who resizes (like in Procrust’s bed) or even suppresses some of the desires in order to adapt them to a certain lifestyle, but the one who models/lives his life according to the perceived natural and necessary desires. A wise man is persuaded that “what is good is easy to get,” according to the third line of the *tetrabarmakos*. This view is based on a very simple assumption: man’s life is not part of a “superior” life; as such, it must not be considered as submitted to the life of the polis<sup>1</sup> or of the Cosmos, or as a prelude to another life. Indissolubly related to pleasure, happiness is experienced by sober reasoning and by driving out those “opinions” (δόξα) “that cause the greatest trouble in the soul” (*Letter to Menoecus*, 132).

*Carpe diem* – the favourite advice given by Horace (*Carmina*, I, 11) – fully illustrates this perspective; at the same time, it suggests that the individual has the capacity of assuming such an attitude profitably and the right of thus becoming the owner of his own life<sup>2</sup>.

I have already stated above that, according to Epicureans, a wise man fulfils only the natural and necessary desires, but not the other ones. It is worth asking the place of carnal desires in this “asceticism”<sup>3</sup>, while Epicurus himself highlights as poignantly as possible that, along others, “a pleasant life is produced not by [...] enjoying boys and women” (*Letter to Menoecus*, 132). Are not these desires natural? And if they are such, in what subcategory may we include them? Unnecessary? Necessary for happiness, to “keep the body untroubled” or to survive? (Cf. *Letter to Menoecus*, 127) Alternatively, maybe this statement, whereas confusing because it eliminates pleasure from the very place (table or alcove) we would expect to find it most, does not contradict at all the Epicurean doctrine. While exulting pleasure and making it the purpose (τέλος) of life, Epicurus – just like his

disciples – condemned all excesses as generating disquietude. He considered an excess both the passionate love for one person (Cornea 2016, 177-178), and the uncontrolled abandonment to a torrent of impulses. On the contrary, Epicurus points out, pleasures must be measured in order to avoid from choosing “any pleasure,” because without “sober reasoning, searching out the cause of everything we accept or reject” (*Letter to Menoecus*, 132) there is no pleasant life. In other words, whereas pleasure is a purpose per se, pleasant life is still a matter of option, a consequence of a selection operated by practical wisdom, thus superior to philosophy – an occasion for Epicurus to unite pleasure with virtuous life and pleasant life.

## V.

This is practically the suggestion of the brief Horatian poem that I have chosen to translate and comment. The very first line rejects drastically (*odi*, “I hated”) the pleasures that Epicurus had called “empty” (*κενά*), namely neither natural nor necessary: the splendour, the pomp, considered useless for the cultivation of natural pleasures to which human beings may aspire justly, without the risk of inconveniences. In exchange, it is wise to choose a simple, complication-free, natural setting (*sub arta vite*), where one can taste peacefully any kind of wine – “four winters old,” as he demanded from Thaliarchus (*Carmina*, I, 9), “*sec Falern*” (*Carmina*, I, 27) or cheap Sabine wine (*vile potabis ... Sabinum*; *Carmina*, I, 20), which he offered to Maecenas himself.

*Otium* is seen here as a mere moment of detachment lacking even meditation as a rest, as refusal of all activity or implication (*negotium*)<sup>4</sup> in more or less important everyday matters. From this perspective, the two stanzas are an echo of the first poem within the first book *Carmina*, I, 1). In this poem, while addressing to Maecenas, Horace states that these very moments of *otium* separate him from the vulgus (*me ... secernunt populo*) for which fame, desire to become rich or military glory are meanings of life. A glass of wine in a simple setting are, Horace advises, enough of a reason to renounce temporarily to a multitude of concerns.

However, it is not just the wine. This short poem comprises four elements in the absence of which the two stanzas would be a quiet and well-fit advice for a young slave (*puer*) in order to prepare everything for his master’s relaxation moment: the linden, the roses, the myrtle and the vine. Except for the vine, the three other plants are symbols associated with love, but each symbol has a different particularity. A brief incursion into mythology may help us understand them better.

Gaius Iulius Hyginus (*Fabulae*, 138) narrates that, scared of the strange creature that she had just birthed (the centaur Chiron, whose father was Chronos), the sea-goddess Philyra asked Zeus to transform her into another creature; hence, the god turned her into a linden tree. Another legend states

that, while crossing Phrygia, Zeus and Hermes were properly welcomed only in the hut of Philemon and Baucis<sup>5</sup>. Because they wished to reward them for their hospitality, the gods granted them the privilege of dying together, on the same day, as they had lived, thus showing to everyone around an admirable example of fidelity. The death per se was not an ending, but a metamorphosis: Philemon turned into an oak tree, while Baucis into a linden tree. Therefore, in both legends the linden tree is associated with love and time (Chronos). Especially in the legend of Philemon and Baucis, the linden tree is a symbol of steady, durable, long-living conjugal love (a replica of tree longevity), of effort, pleasant to the gods, of maintaining throughout the entire life their spiritual connection. Of course, such option exalts the virtues and subordinated individual life to values that are not related to pleasure.

Similarly, we should analyze the myth of Adonis in order to understand that the rose – associated to the cult of Aphrodite (Venus) – the most beloved flower of the goddess of love, according to Anacreon (*Odes*, 53, 8), was the symbol of love, but of passionate love, which causes pain even if eventually it proves capable of conquering even death. In *Epitaph for Adonis*, Bion of Smyrna says that roses were born from the hero's drops of blood, while anemones were born from the goddess's tears. Another version of the myth mentions that the blood of Adonis created the anemones (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X, 681-739), while roses turned red because of Aphrodite's blood; she had run to save her beloved. In both versions, rose is associated with both love and pain. The same occurred in the afore-cited *Epitaph* by Bion, where Aphrodite, grieving the death of Adonis, laments that “the rose flies his lip” (*Epitaph for Adonis*, line 11).

Seemingly paradoxically, the poem in question is the only one where roses, constantly associated – as one should expect – with feasts and private parties (*Carmina*, I, 36; II, 3; II, 11; III, 19; III, 29), are rejected. In *Carmina*, III, 15 they are not recommended to a middle-aged woman named Chloris; we are not sure of what she is suggested: to give up of feasts and parties, symbolized by the musical instrument (*cithara*), wine and purple roses, maidens' games (*flos purpureus rosae*) and parties (*non citharae decent [...] nec poti vetulam faece tenuis cadit*)? Rose was frequently used for the wreaths of participants to private parties. Because such wreaths had no civic or military glory, Pliny the Elder<sup>6</sup> notes that “The employment of the rose in chaplets is, so to say, the least use that is made of it” (*Naturalis historia*, XXI, 10). Pliny the Elder mentioned earlier the chaplets used as offering to the gods, the Lares, the Manes, or in religious ceremonies.

In the other aforementioned poems, Horace wishes both roses and wine<sup>7</sup>. In this poem, the poet refuses them and he prefers “plain myrtle,” a symbol of erotic pleasure, of carnal desire that despises both fidelity and pain or sacrifice. Like the rose, myrtle was also dedicated to Venera

(Aphrodite): according to a version of the myth, the goddess used myrtle leaves to cover herself from the voluptuous looks of the satyrs. Similarly, out of the three Graces within the cortege of Aphrodite, Euphrosyne was represented holding a myrtle bouquet, while Erato, the muse of love poems, wore a chaplet made of myrtle leaves. To support the interpretation provided for this symbol, we add the Veneralia festival, celebrated April 1 (the Kalends of Aprilis) and dedicated to Venus Verticordia. During the ritual, women adorned the statue of the love goddess with rose flowers; afterwards, covered in myrtle branches, they went to the public baths of men and, after offering incense to Fortuna Virilis, they obtained the “privilege” of hiding their physical faults from men<sup>8</sup>.

As for the vine, a Dionysian /Bacchic symbol par excellence, it suggests gaiety, joy of life, pleasure of enjoying life and forgetting at least for a while all worries and concerns.

Hence, by refusing both the linden tree and the roses and by preferring the myrtle and vine, Horace invites his slave (*puer*) to a moment of relaxation (*otium*), but spiced up with all temptations. Lacking fidelity (a virtue highlighted by Christian faith) and passion (so venerated by romantics), what Horace wants is love/pleasure. The last does not entail responsibility, inner tension; love/pleasure avoids extremes (namely excesses: one love or too many loves<sup>9</sup>) and it can be seen as the golden mean (*aurea mediocritas*) that a wise man adopts in order to attain ataraxia, which is the ideal of Epicureans.

As for the word *puer*, any serious dictionary mentions the love-related connotation of the term, along with the age category to which the noun refers.

There is nothing strange in this interpretation insofar as – irrespective of the popularity of his odes for feminine figures (Lydia, Glycera, Chloe, Lalage, etc) – in the *Epodes* (11, 24) the same Horace complains about his separation from Inachia and he finds solace and even brags about his love for Lyciscus (*amor Lycisci me tenet*). Furthermore, in *Odes* (IV, 1: *Me nec femina, nec puer [...] Ligurine*; IV, 10) he invokes another *puer* called Ligurinus. This type of behaviour – careless would be an understatement from the perspective of Christian morals – may have driven Suetonius to use in *Vita Horatii* the both neutral and ambiguous term of *scortum* (translatable by both “female companion” and “male companion”), though the historian had several feminine terms to choose from: *nam speculato cubiculo scorta dicitur habuisse disposita...*

We will not provide here further detail regarding such practices of *mos maiorum*, despite the fact that the Latin vocabulary fails to make a genuine distinction between gender identity and romantic preferences. It is sufficient to remind that, at least after the conquest of Greece – thus long before the Augustan period – *puer* had become a viable, non-incriminated, socially

acceptable alternative for *cives* (with role-related limitations), practiced in all social settings. In other words, these practices lost their value of reference point in the assessment of a person's morality.

Considering the aim of this paper, it would be more useful to discuss metrics. I have pinpointed above that a certain theme cannot be related to a certain rhythm. I will provide an example in this respect: the stanza *Saphica minor*, for instance, covers in the odes all four major themes: love (*Carmina*, I, 25; II, 4 etc.), nature (*Carmina*, III, 18), wisdom (*Carmina*, II, 10; II, 16), the City (*Carmina*, III, 14; IV, 2). However, the use of a certain metric system confers upon the poem a specific tonality – deeper, funnier, more joyful or more serene – that illustrates the author's perception of the topic and the way he understands to convey it. Therefore, whereas ideas, motifs may be illustrated without any loss even in prose, if one should decide to translate a poem without using the metric system, this would entail a limitation of the author's tone. Furthermore, it would lose a part of the sensibility or of the author's method for conveying this theme (impressed differently in various moments of his life) or the various nuances of the same theme. Naturally, modern languages fail to distinguish between long and short vowels, which are practically the foundation of ancient meters. However, the alternation between accented and unaccented syllables approximates well enough the harmony of the original; hence, the effort is worthwhile.

Instead of conclusions, I have chosen to present the last poem of the first book of the *Odes* (*Carmina*, I, 38), in original and in the metric version that I propose. Our hope is that, in a future edition of the *Horatian odes*, it will replace the version of Titu Dinu (this version is indeed accurate, but it fails to respect the metric requirements).

*Persicos odi, puer, apparatus,  
displicent nexae philyra coronae;  
mitte sectari rosa quo locorum*

*sera moretur.*

Fastul l-am urât de la perși, copile,  
nici din tei cununi răsucite nu-mi plac,  
nu-ncerca să ști roze-ntârziate

unde adastă.

*Simplici myrto nihil allabores  
sedulus, curo: neque te ministrum  
dedecet myrtus, neque me sub arta*

*vite bibentem.*

Rugu-te să nu te-ngrijești de alte,  
simplu mirt s-aduci: sub umbrar de viță,  
mie care beau, chiar și ție, servul,

ni se cuvine.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "... l'epicureismo ... era fundamentalmente un sistema centrato sull'io, su un io che misurava ogni cosa sul vantaggio dell'individuo e che rifiutava al tutto sociale ogni superiorità riguardo all'individuo..." (Maritain 1999, 84-85).

- <sup>2</sup> Andrei Cornea considers it “«the good news» of the Epicurean gnosis” (Cornea 2016, 64).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ascesi della distensione* (Maritain 1999, 84). Cf. also Cornea 2016, 67, 148, 164.
- <sup>4</sup> “The thematic system of the odes encompasses a unitary and far-reaching view, determined by the thematic confrontation between *negotium* and *otium*...” (Nichita 1980, 25).
- <sup>5</sup> A legend later narrated by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 610-724.
- <sup>6</sup> Mentions on the use of roses for guest chaplets are also found in Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, II, 20, 65 or in Marțial, *Epigrammata*, III, 68.
- <sup>7</sup> ...symbols of life, according to Barbara K. Gold (1993, 21).
- <sup>8</sup> To be (more) desired. See Ovid, *Fasti*, IV, 133 sqq. Cf. also Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, XV, 120. For myrtle as a symbol of love, see also Mercatante 2001, sv “Mirto”, where it is stated that Romans associated myrtle with “incestuous and unfaithful love.”
- <sup>9</sup> See note 4 above.

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