

SPECULATIVE HISTORICISM¹

In his review of West's *Carpe Diem* in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* W. S. Anderson found that the notes suffered from an excess of 'speculative historicism'; and that the young would be indifferent to this in their study of Horace's *Odes*.²

I was amazed. I had thought it obvious that a large part of our task was to read the poems in their historical context, and that in order to do this we had to make a historical study of the period in which they were produced and to set our findings against passages in the poems. Sometimes allusions in the poems to historical events are straightforward and incontestable. At other times they are more subtle and indirect, and speculation is inevitable. It may be fanciful, reckless, worthless, and perhaps West's in *Carpe Diem* is of that sort, but that does not condemn the practice. Judicious use of historical speculation has led to great advances in the understanding of Horace in recent years.

The article of E. J. Will on *Odes* 1.4, is a spectacular example.³ L. Sestius was born about 73 BC. Before he was 30 he was marshalling some splendid ships for Brutus (*navigia luculenta ... Sesti*, Cic. *Att.* 16.4.4). Sestius amphoras from the pottery works near Cosa have been found over a wide area of the western Mediterranean, including hundreds in a wreck or wrecks at Grand Congloué off Marseilles. Every spring when the sailing season started, Sestius'; ships would have been hauled down the slipways with their bottoms nicely dried out, (2) *trahuntque siccas machinae carinas*, to carry the amphoras, bricks, and tiles which produced his wealth. Hence (14) *O beate Sesti*. In line 8 the burning Vulcan is visiting the furnaces in his foundries, *officinas*, but *officina* is also the standard term for a pottery factory and OF is often stamped on bricks and amphoras. The burning blacksmith is an amusing comparator for Lucius Sestius the pottery tycoon. The towers of kings are seen in the ode at line 14. Sestius' father had a villa near Cosa (Cic. *Att.* 15.27.1 implies as much) and at Cosa there are several turreted villas, of which one of the largest and best preserved is at Sette Fenestre. Hence the turrets of kings,

¹ This is a lightly edited version of a paper delivered on 3rd September 1998 at the Durham conference on 'Augustan Poetry and the Traditions of Ancient Historiography'. The *Histos* readers were John Moles and Tony Woodman and the editor was John Moles.

² D. West, *Horace Odes I: Carpe Diem* (Oxford 1995); *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 1996.04.37.

³ *ClPh* 77 (1982) 240-5.

(14) *regumque turres*, where *regum* is an amusing comparator for the plutocratic Sestii. This luxurious estate is then forcefully contrasted with the cramped lodgings Sestius can expect on death, (17) *domus exilis Plutonia*. With the amphoras went wine, and the Sestii traded in wine. Hence (18) *regna vini* in the ode. So far the details fit, some better than others, but there is no doubt that these historical speculations have thrown new light on the poem. The danger with this approach is not to know where to stop.

Some speculations are implausible. There is, for example, an inscription LUC.LU.SE. on an amphora found in a town residence in Cosa. LU.SE is Lucius Sestius and LUC could be Lycidas. But it could also be Lycaon, Lycisca, and several other names. Even if it did stand for Lycidas, it would not be credible that this Lycidas, perhaps a business partner of Sestius or foreman of works in his potteries, was also the lover mentioned at the end of the ode, (19) *nec tenerum Lycidan mirabere*. For one thing, very few people land the job of being foreman before they reach the age of puberty. No. Sestius had not slept with the foreman of his brick-works, and even if he had, Horace would not have celebrated the event in this poem. The lesson of this example, unhelpful as it may be, is that in such speculations, some details are significant and others not.

In this field I personally have learnt most from Nisbet and Hubbard. To take just one example, in *integer vitae*, 1.22, when the pure are said to need no armour even if they cross the sultry Syrtes, NH add to our sense of the philosophical flavour of this ode by adducing the famous march of Cato the Younger round the Great Syrtes from Benghazi to Leptis, some 700 miles in 30 days at the head of 10,000 armed troops.⁴ This is a historical event. It is one speculation that Horace had it in mind as he wrote this poem which appeared 24 years after the event. It is another that it would have occurred to the minds of contemporary readers. Though neither speculation is confirmable, each is plausible and each adds to our sense of the philosophical flavour of the poem. And to its political significance. Cato the Younger was a saint and martyr of the Republic, and the first emperor saw some advantage in allowing his poet to praise *atrocem animum Catonis* in *Odes* 2.1.24.

In the second book of the *Odes* NH's stress on the careers of the addressees has been a powerful and beneficial influence on subsequent work. A probative example is in 2.1.6, where Horace describes Pollio's *Historiae* as a work full of the dangerous die, (6) *periculosae plenum opus aleae*. When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he quoted Menander's *ἀνερίφθω κύβος*, 'let the die be cast'. A senior staff officer present at that moment was C. Asinius Pollio. As NH abundantly show, the opening of this ode is full of evocations of Pollio's

⁴ R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes I* (Oxford 1970) 265-6.

history, and it seems that Pollio had a penchant for the vivid anecdote.⁵ It is an enrichment of our understanding to know what Caesar said at the very moment of a decision which changed the course of Roman history, to know that Pollio was with him, and to speculate that *Odes* 2.1.6 would be understood with this knowledge by Horace, Pollio, and contemporary readers. It is much more risky to speculate that Pollio was at Caesar's elbow at that moment and heard him say ἀνερρίφθω κύβος. The risk is taken by West.⁶ I see that speculation as unfounded, but harmless.

All this is so obvious that it should not need to be stated. The problem is not whether speculative historicism is a good thing, but how we should assess speculations which link Horace's *Odes* to historical evidence.

In an attempt to work out some criteria I look at a couple of the weakest of West's speculations in *Carpe Diem*. *If* 1.14 is about the ship of State (and that is a big *if* in the presence of Tony Woodman),⁷ its last stanza cries out for a connection to a moment of time:

nuper sollicitum quae mihi taedium,
nunc desiderium curaque non levis,
interfusa nitentis
vites aequora Cycladas

Not long ago you were a worry and weariness for me,
and now you are a deep love and longing.
So steer clear of the seas swirling
round the shining Cyclades.

(I translate *cura* as 'love' to differentiate it from *sollicitum*.)⁸

The state (and l'état c'était Auguste) had been a great cause of anxiety in the weary civil war which culminated at Actium. Whatever time *nuper* refers to, Augustus is still absent. This is implied by *desiderium*, a word which will be used of Augustus' absence at 4.5.15-16, 'So does your faithful fatherland, stricken with longing, look for its Caesar', *sic desideriiis icta fidelibus quaerit patria Caesarem*. It seems that the war is over, Caesar is still away from Rome, and there is a danger that the Ship of State will be swept back into a new war, (1-2) *O navis, referent in mare te novi fluctus*. All this *could* have been said several

⁵ R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes II* (Oxford 1978) 9.

⁶ D. West, *Horace Odes II: Vatis Amici* (Oxford 1998) 5.

⁷ A. J. Woodman, *ClPh* 75 (1980) 60-7.

⁸ *Carpe Diem* (n. 2) 64 ff.

times in the twenties, for instance when Octavian was campaigning in Illyria or Alexandria, but these were mopping-up operations, and scarcely merit this degree of concern for his safety. Nor do they conform to the desperate condition of the ship in lines 1-10. In 26-5 Augustus fought an arduous campaign in Spain, but that never threatened the Ship of State, and besides, it was a campaign Augustus chose to undertake. He was not exactly swept back into war.

Kukula has suggested another possibility.⁹ In 30 BC when Octavian went to Samos after Actium, he had not been long in Samos when grave news reached him from Italy. The veterans (whom he had disbanded in Italy after Actium) were mutinous and even Agrippa could not handle them. Midwinter though it was, Octavian hurried back to Brundisium. Official deputations flocked to greet him. So did the veterans, but not so amiably. Concessions had to be made. Octavian agreed to distribute land, fully realising the storm of unpopularity that might break out round him. This was the very action which had led to the war of Perugia. This particular crisis blew over, but at the time it was menacing enough to force Octavian to sail about 600 miles across the Mediterranean in January from Cyprus to Brundisium, *referent in mare te novi fluctus*. And a course from Samos round the southern tip of Greece to Brundisium goes through the middle of the Cyclades, *interfusantentis vites aequora Cycladas*. In the event, ships of his flotilla foundered in two storms off Greece and his own flagship lost its rigging and broke its tiller (Cassius Dio 51.3-4 and Suetonius, *DA* 17.3-4). There is no mention of the Cyclades in the work of Alcaeus, who inspired this poem (326). Why do these islands so remote from Italy appear in the closure of this poem?

An obvious answer is that they are named as a meaningless geographical particularity. There is no shortage of such particularities in Latin poetry. But how much better this poem becomes in 23 BC if the Cyclades are not simply classicising padding, but actually call the minds of contemporary readers back to that moment in recent history when Octavian's life and the whole future of Rome *under* Octavian was in danger. And how much more effective as panegyric, if this would have been read as an allusion to Octavian's escape from that danger, and a reminder of the adroitness and expedition with which he dealt with the crisis. As panegyric, it is oblique, ingenious, in short, Horatian. The speculation is dangerous. But *dulce periculum*. It makes the poem so much better.

These two examples of speculative historicism demonstrate again the use and misuse of detail. In 1.4 a person whose name begins LUC is somehow connected with the manufacture of bricks in Sestius' *officina*. In 1.4 a person called Lycidas is also Sestius' lover. I have just declined to make any connec-

⁹ R. C. W. Kukula, *Wiener Studien* 34 (1912) 237-43.

tion between these details. In 1.14 the Ship of State is advised to avoid the Cyclades and I have just pounced on that detail to suggest that the poem is alluding to Octavian's voyage from Samos to Brundisium. Is there any means of assessing whether or not a detail justifies historical speculation? There is no standard test. Every instance has to be considered on its merits. The first detail is non-specific because it leads to the implausible; the second *may* be specific because it leads to a plausible interpretation of the poem.

Another unprovable historical speculation is stimulated by 1.7.17-32.¹⁰ The sky is not always dark with rain:

...sic tu sapiens finire memento
 tristitiam vitaeque labores
 molli, Plance, mero, seu te fulgentia signis
 castra *tenent* seu densa *tenebit*
 Tiburis umbra tui. Teucer Salamina patremque
 cum fugeret, tamen uda Lyaeo
 tempora populea fertur vinxisse corona,
 sic tristis adfatus amicos ...
 'nil desperandum Teucro duce et auspice Teucro
 certus enim promisit Apollo
 ambiguum tellure nova Salamina futuram.
 o fortes peioraque passi
 mecum saepe viri, nunc vino pellite curas.
 cras ingens iterabimus aequor.'

...so should you, Plancus, be wise and make sure
 to put an end to misery and life's toils
 with mellow wine, whether you have to stay in camp
 among glittering standards or at some future date
 stay in the shade of your beloved Tibur. Teucer when in flight
 from Salamis and his father still put
 a garland of poplar leaves on his head, so they say,
 and spoke these words to his grief-stricken friends:
 'Fortune is kinder than my father. Wherever she leads us,
 friends and comrades, we shall go. There is no need to doubt
 while Teucer is your leader and Teucer takes the auspices.
 For Apollo has promised and he does not lie,
 that in a new land there will be a second Salamis.
 You are brave men, and you have often suffered
 worse than this with me. Now drive away your cares with wine

¹⁰ *Carpe Diem* (n. 2) 30 ff.

Tomorrow we shall sail again upon a broad sea.’

In 32 BC Plancus abandoned the camp of Antony: *seu te ... castra tenent* (Horace could be drawing an analogy with Teucer being driven away by his father). He returned to Italy, presumably to live reconciled to Octavian in his home at Tibur: *seu densa tenebit Tiburis umbra tui* (Horace could be likening that to Teucer’s foundation of a second Salamis in Cyprus, *ambiguam*, a strange word, *ambiguam tellure nova Salamina*). Teucer dons a crown of poplar leaves (since white poplar is frequently associated with Hercules, Horace could be hinting at the cult of Hercules in Tibur. For his connections there see NH).¹¹ On the face of it, the fit is not good, but it may be better than it looks. In 27 BC it was Plancus who proposed the name Augustus for Octavian. In 22 BC he would be censor. This ode would then be read as a compliment from Horace to a senior member of the Augustan circle. The most important and memorable event in his life had been his abandonment of Antony in 32 BC, the moment when he saw the light. If that is the dramatic date of this ode, this poem could have been meant as a vindication offered by Horace. Plancus, who had fought for Antony, would then stand with men like Sestius, who had served under Brutus, and was proscribed rather than betray him, and men like Pollio, Dellius, and Pompeius, who had sided with Antony or declined to fight for Octavian, all of whom were welcomed into the Augustan *concordia*, and this ode would be another contribution of Horace to the poetry of reconciliation. Plancus seemed to some to be *morbo proditor* (Velleius 2.83.1), but Horace would then be meeting that slur by assimilating his betrayal of Antony to the cruel hounding of Teucer by his father Telamon. The mythological paradigm is not an exact fit, but in defence it could be urged that in 23 BC what everybody knew about Plancus was that the betrayer of Antony was in line to become censor under Augustus in 22 BC.

Perhaps now the great closure takes on a new resonance. As Plancus sailed away from Antony with his entourage in 32 BC (an entourage obviously in need of the sort of encouragement Teucer gave to his), he was setting sail upon the vast ocean of Augustan forgiveness and favour. The misfits of the analogy are then to be read as tendentious attempts by Horace to present the betrayal in the most favourable terms possible, as rejection -- Teucer was driven away by his father; Plancus left Antony. Again the political interpretation posits oblique, calculated panegyric on the part of Horace, and again this is all unconfirmable speculation, but a point in its favour is that it links the mythological *paraenesis* on Teucer at the end of the poem with the addressee Plancus in the middle. Without some such speculation

¹¹ Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 4) 90.

Nisbet and Hubbard are driven to posit rather feeble links: one, the *tristitia* of Plancus and Teucer; two, the advice given *to* Plancus and given *by* Teucer to drown *tristitia* in wine.¹²

In this delicate business of deciding whether a historical element is alluded to in a poem, perhaps a principle is emerging. The allusion may seem to be slight, swift, and indirect, but may still be a useful speculation if the historical element to which it may allude would have been a matter of concern to contemporary readers. Plancus' betrayal of Antony in 32 was topical in 23 because of his forthcoming appointment as censor in 22. Sestius, the supporter of Brutus in 43 BC appears in a place of honour in *Odes* 1.4 after odes addressed to Maecenas, Augustus and Virgil, and he was topical because in 23 BC he was appointed *consul suffectus*. Octavian's escape from death on his voyage to prevent a mutiny in 30 BC was topical in 23 because of the perils he faced in 23.

Horatian scholars commonly try to date the Odes of Books 1-3. This is a tricky business. First there is the dramatic date. The Sestius ode in the spring, the Ship of State in 30 BC, the Plancus ode in 32. But these dates give no clue to the actual date, or rather, to the period of composition. Horace probably worked on odes from about a decade before 23 BC.¹³ His advice to the Pisones in *Ars Poetica* 388-9 is to put away what they write for eight years, *nonum premantur in annum*. He presumably followed this principle with some of his own odes, and who is to say that he did not take a poem out of the box every now and then and touch it up? The period of intermittent composition of some these poems is therefore for about 10 or a dozen years before 23 BC. There is a third date and it applies to all of them. These are poems of 23 BC. Horace was an operator. He did not take up an old poem and include it in a carefully judged place in this ground-breaking collection of lyric poems for the Augustan Renaissance without making sure that what it said was what he wanted said in 23 BC. All of these odes are in that sense poems of 23 BC. In this discussion 23 BC means, of course, some time in 24-22 BC. *Adhuc sub iudice lis est*.

These groping attempts to find some method in this area show the complexity of arguments from chronology. This emerges again in the third book, particularly with the repeated condemnation of sexual licence, as in 3.18-33, 6.17-48, and 24.25-36. The sexual terms in 3.4.59-80 send a clear message—*matrona Iuno, rore puro, integra temptator Orion Dianae virginea domitus sagitta, incontinentis nec Tityi iecur, amatorem*. It was once easy to explain this emphasis on sexual licence in terms of a failed attempt by Augustus to pass marriage laws

¹² Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 4) 93.

¹³ Nisbet and Hubbard (n. 4) xxviii.

in 28 BC. This explanation no longer automatically satisfies after Badian's article which denied this attempt and dated the *Leges Iuliae* to 18 BC. *Adhuc sub iudice lis est*,¹⁴ but the dating is not crucial to the issue. Whatever happened, Augustus did not wake up one morning in 18 BC and promulgate the *Leges Iuliae*. The basic tenet, that moral reform was an essential part of the Augustan settlement, had been in the minds of Augustus and his advisers for some time, and Horace had access to these advisers. Whatever happened or did not happen in 28 BC, in 23 this policy must have been under discussion in the Augustan circle and, even if the laws had not been passed, these men would have known that they would be unpopular. If Badian is right, in Horace's condemnations of sexual license he is defending Augustan ideology in advance of the legislation of 18 BC, and in advance of his own eulogy of the *Leges Iuliae* in the *Carmen Saeculare* of the following year.

Similarly, near the end of the second Roman ode (3.2.25), *est et fideli tuta silentio*, a translation of Simonides fragment 582, ἔστι καὶ σιγῆς ἀκίνδυνον γέρας (Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Augusti* 7), we do not know when Augustus quoted this fragment to Athenodorus, but the chronology does not matter. Horace conversed with Maecenas. Horace well knew that Maecenas trusted him to preserve total confidentiality, *ut unum scilicet egregii mortalem atlique silenti* (*Satires* 2.6.57-8). Horace would have known that Augustus prized this discretion in his associates, enough to invite Horace to become his secretary. Whether Augustus' remark to Athenodorus antedates the writing of this ode or not, we all have favourite tags. It is difficult to believe that Augustus had never used this one before in Greek. When Horace translated it into the Alcaic metre at the end of the second Roman Ode, he knew perfectly well its importance to Augustus and its relevance to his own position as *cliens* and *amicus*. Note *fideli*, added by Horace to the Greek.

At the beginning of this paper I referred to W. S. Anderson's view that the young would be indifferent to such historical speculation because it is so far from their needs and interests, so irrelevant to their own lives, and that this is therefore no way to approach the poetry of Horace. I have not noticed this in my own experience of teaching, and if I had I would have fought it. It would be easy to teach Horace by studying what is relevant to the lives of teacher and taught, by descanting on Horace's views on universals, on time, on ageing, on love and death. But that way boredom does lie, because Horace has nothing to say about these matters that today's young people do not learn for themselves in adolescence.

¹⁴ E. Badian, 'A Phantom Marriage Law', *Philologus* 129 (1985) 82-98; G. Williams in Raaflaub and Toher (edd.), *Between Republic and Empire* (Berkeley 1990) 255-75 and K. Galinsky, *Augustan Culture* (Berkeley 1996) 131.

On the other hand, historical speculation, with all its pitfalls, is a sound technique to add to the armoury for understanding Horace. It is a good ingredient in a course for the young precisely because it is *not* 'relevant'; to their own lives. We live clamped into our own social and intellectual vices, and the value of poetry, history, and other fictions, is that they transport us from these microclimates, our villages of time and space, and make it possible for us to live briefly in the brains of others. We read Horace not to pore over replicas of our own concerns and receive counselling on our own problems, but to grasp a little extra life, to be in a different world with a great man. But silence is a key element in encomiastic decorum; as Gregson Davis writes, 'An essential aspect of that achievement is the consummate art of knowing when to stop'.¹⁵

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¹⁵ G. Davis, 'Silence and Decorum: Encomiastic Convention and the Epilogue of Horace *Carm.* 3.2', *Classical Antiquity* (1983) 9-26 at 22.