A Passage to Oblivion: Memory in Odes Book 2

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Book I of the Odes ends with an explicitly private, sympotic poem -- I.38. Book III begins with the explicitly public, political Roman Odes. In the intervening twenty poems, Horace’s voice and persona artistically shift in a variety of ways. Prominent among these artistic developments is the poet’s artistic re-remembering of his own political past. A sense of personal pain and grief, as well as political pragmatism, motivate a kind of poetical forgetting. Driven by these factors, Horace banishes his love for Republicanism from his poetry, and replaces it with hostility. The poet enacts his own oblivion through the themes of lyric -- wine, love, and poetry. This forgetting serves as artistic preparation for the Roman odes. Motivated by both personal pain and political caution, Horace poetically forgets his Republican past through the sympotic themes of Book II of the Odes, which ultimately allows him to poetically engage the political world in which he finds himself.

I. Motivations

Emotional pain most strongly motivates Horace to forget his politics. For one thing, the personal losses he suffered during the Civil War receive significant attention in Ode 2.1. Following the martial storm of stanza 5, a single image emerges: the “undefeated spirit of Cato.” Cato alone stands forth from the terror of war, unconquered in his Stoic virtus. The image both displays the poet’s admiration for the old Republican, and implies how his death would impact the poet. Second, language of death and burial permeates Odes 2.1. In line 28, Horace describes his Republican comrades as “Inferías Iugurthae,” funeral offerings to Jugurtha. In the poem’s final stanza, Horace warns his Muse to sing of lighter subjects, in order to escape the “Ceae neniae.”

In stanzas 8 and 9, a series of rhetorical questions gradually immanetize Horace’s losses. The fields of battle are “fatter with Latin blood.” A few lines later, the image becomes even more personal: blood stains the “Daunian sea,” a reference to Horace’s fatherland, Apulia. Civil wars does not rob faceless soldiers of their lives; these are the poet’s own countrymen. Finally, at the end of the series, the poet laments “What shore now lacks our blood?” Gone are the Latins and the Apulians. A plaintive “we” replaces them. The blood that stains the shores
of Greece and Italy belongs to the poet, too. Personal language of death and loss indicates the degree of Horace’s personal pain -- a pain he longs to forget, as the end of 2.1 indicates.

Beyond the pain which the memory of the wars causes, Horace’s metaphors for civil war invoke sheer terror. In the 5th stanza of 2.1, the “flash of arms” and “thunder of horns” simulate the the flash of lightning and the roar of thunder. The visual and auditory implications of the description of battle stir up a thunderstorm within the poem. This storm of words picks up the image of the flood, which Horace uses elsewhere (Odes 1.2), and which he will use of the Republican faction in Odes 2.7. The images of water for civil war find expression in 2.1 as well: the slaughter of Roman citizens stains the seas in the 9th stanza. The literal flood of blood, one of the images which expresses Horace’s pain, evokes the fear he feels almost as strongly. Finally, in lines 31 and 32, the poet describes the “noise of Hesperia’s downfall.” This war seems poised to continue in this vein, recalling and commenting explicitly on the events of the past wars. However, after building the pain and pathos so brilliantly throughout the poem, Horace turns aside at the final stanza, in order to “seek limits on a lighter string.” Horace seeks to escape such painful memories. Notably, the memories which seem to bring the most pain are all tainted, in one way or another, by Horace’s old political sentiments; all that Horace wants to forget are tied intrinsically to the Republican ideology.

II. Representations of Forgetting

In Odes 2.1, Horace develops a dichotomy of remembering, but longing to forget. Throughout the ode, he recalls various aspect of his Republican past. His allusion to Cato, and buried allusions to other Republican leaders jog memories of a lamented war. The imagery of implicit storm and explicit flood evoke the pain and fear of all the bloodshed. Horace seems poised to continue in this vein, recalling and commenting explicitly on the events of the past wars. However, after building the pain and pathos so brilliantly throughout the poem, Horace turns aside at the final stanza, in order to “seek limits on a lighter string.” Horace seeks to escape such painful memories. Notably, the memories which seem to bring the most pain are all tainted, in one way or another, by Horace’s old political sentiments; all that Horace wants to forget are tied intrinsically to the Republican ideology. Horace longs to forget not only the past, but the allegiances it represents. Indeed, Horace’s longing to forget finds no better representation than his plea to Pollio to “let [his] Muse be absent only a little from the theatre.” Horace not only portrays why he
wants to forget in 2.1, but also takes the first steps in that forgetting.

Horace's exhortation to Pompeius in *Odes* 2.7 explicitly warrants Horace's poetic forgetting of his past. The exhortation, while addressed to his friend, might as well apply to Horace for a few separate reasons. It was Pompeius "with whom...[Horace] broke the delaying day with Malobathrian wine." As Horace reminds his friend, they both nearly died together when Brutus led them at Phillippi. Horace notes that "with you I experienced Phillippi and swift flight." They both fought, faced death, and fled from Phillippi. Given that the officers suffered the toils of war together, it is evident that they shared similar political opinions. They only differed in that Horace managed to escape the horrors of war, while Pompeius was "sucked back" into the grips of civil strife. Now, after Pompeius has been granted amnesty, he finds himself in a similar situation to Horace after he was rescued -- that is, the loser in an ideological conflict, miraculously rescued from death, and seemingly without a conception of how to face his new world. While not the same, the two are extraordinarily similar -- similar enough for the advice Horace now gives Pompeius to be formed from Horace's own experience. The parallels between the two link Horace's poetic persona to the advice he gives Pompeius.

Horace's exhortation to Pompeius lays out the program for his own forgetting of the past. It is at this point, the exact midpoint of the three books of odes, that Horace fulfills the dreams of expressed in 2.1. He commands Pompeius to lie down beneath the Laurel tree. This setting of peace provides a respite from the memories of war, much as the "lighter string" did in line 40 of *Ode* 2.1. This flight from reality represented in the poem is the first stage in forgetting. Horace's use of "oblivioso...Massico," forgetful Massican wine, is the most crucial piece of evidence. Commager argues that "oblivioso suggests...that the time has come for Pompeius to forget...his militant Republicanism, as Horace himself had done" (Commager 171). In a setting of peace, through wine, Horace's poetic companion will forget his old politics -- the same old politics which haunt Horace the man. Horace the man can never forget what he experienced; but Horace the poet, in the location symbolic of the inner world of poetry, through a wine which he mentions repeatedly in that poetry, can forget it. Horace urges his friend to lay out a feast owed to Jove. It seems likely that Jove here represents Augustus, especially since Horace has a habit of representing Augustus in the form of
various gods. This being the case, the instruction to prepare a sacrificial banquet for his greatest enemy implies a forgetting of that enmity.

Horace’s treatment of various Republican figures provides strong evidence for his poetic forgetting. In Ode 2.1, Horace had shown vast respect for the figures of the Republican side -- even mourned them. Cato alone emerged from the storm of civil war, distinguished by his “atrocem animum.”21 Indeed, Fraenkel asserts that Horace never lost his admiration for the old senator.22 His description of the “descendants of the conquered” in that same Ode is an allusion to Quintus Metellus Pius Scipio, who forefathers were consistently victorious in Africa.23 His comparing Scipio to an “inferia Iugurthae” implies the tragedy of his death. The “whirlpool” and “floods” of Odes 2.1 refer to Sextus Pompey, the last great Republican hero.24 In short, 2.1 takes a tone of real respect and reverence for Republican figures, significant or not.

It would be difficult to find a figure more strongly associated with Republicanism than Marcus Brutus: his forefathers had cast out the Tarquins; his dagger had helped lay Caesar low; he had commanded the Republican forces at Phillippi along with Cassius. Thus one might expect Horace to treat him with the same respect and reverence he pays to Cato, Scipio, and Sextus Pompey. Horace owed more to Brutus than to any of them: Brutus had raised him up, commanded him in war, and fought with him in battle. However, Horace treats his mentors memory with flagrant disrespect. Nisbet and Hubbard suggest that the “deducte” of line 2 implies incompetence on Brutus’ part.25 Similarly, they suggest that Horace’s use of “bruto” suggests the adjective “brutus, -a, -um,” meaning “stupid, slow-witted.”26 Moreover, Horace had treated the philosophy of those leaders, Stoicism, with some respect; after all, Stoicism had made Cato “atrocem,” which might be translated as “unconquerable.” However, in the version of Phillippi that Horace presents in 2.7, Brutus’ Virtus, and the philosophy which aimed at it, lie shattered on the field of battle.27 There is a sense of mocking irony here as well. Brutus, after all was characterized by unbending stoicism, just like Cato, the great Republican. Brutus died on the field at Phillippi, because he would not bend. Horace gave way, and still lives to cherish his beloved Massican wine. In sum, Horace has lost the reverence and respect for his old cause that characterized his style at the beginning of the book. With his credo of forgetfulness has come the artistic embodiment of that
forgetting, for Horace has banished the ideology and leaders of his old political party from his memory.

Horace’s use of flood imagery, and the changing meanings thereof, complement his portrayal of Republican leaders. In Odes 2.1, the imagery of water and flood is mostly neutral, with a slight tendency towards republican support. For the most part, Horace uses images of flood and water to highlight the grief and pain which the civil wars cause, as in “Quod mare Dauniae, non decoloravere caedes.” Here, the blood of Horace’s countrymen stains the sea -- but there is no implication of which side they fought on. As mentioned above, Nisbet and Hubbard suggest that the language of the sea alludes to Sextus Pompey, the admiral who led the last remnants of the Republican faction until his death. While this seems correct, it only slightly hints at Republicanism, and lacks the ardent Republican sentiment of horace’s description of Cato, or even the tragedy of Metellus Scipio’s death. While the allusion might be intentional, it is by far the weakest of the three. Hence, while there is a very slight strain of Republicanism in the language of sea and flood in Odes 2.1, the imagery is mostly neutral.

By contrast, Horace’s image of the sea 2.7 is less ambiguous. The poet writes “A wave swallowing you with raving swells carried you back into the war.” Much like the language of 2.1, this image of the ocean might pick up on the role of Sextus Pompey. However, unlike the neutral role of 2.1, here the sea is explicitly hostile. The sea robs Horace of his first and dearest friend. Moreover, it is characterized by “aestuousis fretis.” “Aestuousus” connotes storminess, commotion, and anxiety. The sea, here, is a starkly negative force. However, given that Horace and Pompeius faced the same challenges, and Horace found himself delivered from the storms of war, its tide cannot be called irresistible. Horace accepted defeat, embraced the Augustan regime, and so found peace, the poem claims. No physical circumstance drew him back into the war; why, then, should physical circumstance have drawn back his closest friend, who fought, fled, and surrendered by his side? It could not have. Only an internal force, a stronger sense of ideology could make Pompeius keep fighting. The tide, then, is no whirlpool of war, sucking Pompeius back into itself. Instead, it is the ideological current of a stronger Republicanism that leads Horace’s friend back into the war. The characterization of the flood has not only become hostile; it has become hostile explicitly to Republicanism. Instead of an unfortunate aspect of the scene, the flood has a force of its own. The fact that Horace
sets his patron Mercury, who elsewhere represents Augustus, in opposition to this hostile flood emphasizes the identification of the raging wave with republican sentiment.

The imagery of the sea reflects Horace’s forgetting of his Republicanism. It began as a relatively neutral image in 2.1, with a slight favoritism towards the republican side. In 2.7, Republicanism become a raging, stormy vortex that robs Horace of his friend. Only Augustus’ intervention saves the poet from the same maelstrom. “Rursus” lends a sense of regression to the image. Republicanism is not only dangerous; Horace suggests that it is politically backwards, antiquated, and outpaced. The fact that Horace ever held republican sentiments is artfully forgotten; the idea that he ever admired the great Republican leaders is lost. The forgetful Massican wine consigns Horace’s memories of his old politics to oblivion.

III. The Nature of Misremembering

Horace’s forgetting of his past is an explicitly artistic, poetic construct. Clearly, it cannot be autobiographical; memory of the past informs Horace’s poetry far too much for him to ever forget it. In Odes 2.1 and 2.7, the poet elucidates his reasons for longing to forget, and then forgets his past in the context of the poetry. He forgets his Republican ideals were ever his own, that he admired the principled Republicans he mocks in 2.7, and even that he had any enmity towards Augustus, whose imperial program brought about the final death of the Roman Republic. Each of these forgettings on a poetic level serves also as a renunciation.

The nature of these memory-based renunciations is essentially sympotic. It is through the conceits of Lyric poetry that Horace as the poetic voice is able to first escape, and then wholly forget, his republican past. This idea finds its expression in the final stanza of 2.1, when Horace “[seeks] limits on a lighter string.” At the very start of Book II, light, lyrical poetry provides an escape for the poet. Not until 2.7, though, do sympotic themes find their full, forgetful force. In urging Pompeius to forget, Horace asks him to lie down beneath the laurel tree, in a scene starkly similar to Odes 1.38. Once in peace, Horace orders Pompeius to drink the forgetful wine, and pour out perfumes from their containers. The perfumes, particularly when supplemented by Horace’s mention of Venus later in the poem, draw an element of the erotic into the symposium. Ultimately, Horace implies that poetic forgetting is
effected through the traditional themes of lyric poetry -- wine, women, and song.

Importantly though, these are not mere recantations of the ideology Horace once professed. For one thing, Horace is motivated to forget by a combination of pain, grief, and fear. Recanting his views might well have appeased the fear Horace’s poetic persona feels. However, it cannot eradicate the grief of losing his comrades, or the pain of watching his country tear itself apart, the pair of which most strongly motivate his poetic forgetting. Merely rejecting the ideology of a dead Cato does not break Cato’s hold over the poetic voice. In 2.1, while still retaining traces of Republicanism, Horace has certainly begun to question the validity of the ideology. Yet, there remain traces of Republicanism in 2.1, like his admiration for Cato, expressed by the ambiguous “atrocem animum.” Only by forgetting these in the context of the poetry can Horace remove the taint of Republicanism from his poetry. In order to lay out a feast for his savior, Pompeius must first drain the memory-wiping Massican wine, and forget his enmities. The poetic voice of Horace must do the same.

Motivated by both pain and fear, Horace uses the traditional themes of lyric poetry to effect an artistic forgetting of his Republican sentiments. The first Ode of Book 2 expresses the personal pain and grief that drive the poet. Onomatopoetic images of destruction showcase the fear which complements grief. Horace’s first ode of Book 2 expresses Horace’s longing to escape the pain of his memories; the seventh ode of the same book enacts that vision. Book I of the Odes at least tolerated Republican interpretations, and did not shy from criticisms of Augustus. Book 3, however, begins with six panegyrics to Rome and to the Augustan state. By 3.4 and 3.5, Augustus has become a god on earth, guarded by the Muses, and distinguished for clemency and kindness. There is no suggestion of subversion in Book 3 as there had been in Book 1. The forgetting of past politics effects this change. The politics of Odes 1 have drowned in the wine of Odes 2. Subdued to the demands of the state, the politics of Odes 3 are little more than lifeless nationalism.
Bibliography


Notes

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