

## POETRY

### *Horace*

*Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht*

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known to us as the Latin poet Horace—contemporary of Augustus, Maecenas, Virgil, Propertius, Vitruvius, and Ovid—was the son of a manumitted slave who earned a modest living as a tax collector, yet managed to procure for his son a first-class education in philosophy both at Athens and Rome. When civil war broke out, following Caesar’s murder in 44 B.C., Horace served in the republican army of Brutus (the losing side) as military tribune, and reports that he ran away. This should be a matter of unqualified satisfaction for all posterity, the poet’s “cowardice” having guaranteed us the whole of his admirable and greatly admired works.

His is a poetry of serenity, balance, perfection of form both prosodic and syntactical. He can be angry, and glad, but usually temperately, and he evinces his capacity for gratitude and contentment with unfailing eloquence. A number of the major English poets, when they have not actually translated him, have written tributes of imitation, such as this one, composed at the age of 12 by Alexander Pope.

#### **Ode on Solitude**

Happy the man whose wish and care  
A few paternal acres bound,  
Content to breathe his native air,  
In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,  
Whose flocks supply him with attire,  
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,  
In winter fire.

Blest, who can unconcernedly find  
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,  
In health of body, peace of mind,  
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep at night; study and ease,  
Together mixed; sweet recreation;  
And Innocence, which most does please  
With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,  
Thus unlamented let me die,  
Steal from the world, and not a stone  
Tell where I lie.

(Apart from other considerations, there can't ever have been many 12-year-olds who could contemplate such isolation, asceticism, and anonymity with calm pleasure.)

Classical Latin poetry was unrhymed, securing its effects by a system of long and short syllables, strategic word order, and devices that an uninflected language such as English can never actually attain. Still, attempts have been made, and one of the most lovely of these is Milton's version of Horace's Ode I.5, possibly composed when the English poet was 18, and bearing the superscription: "*Quis multa gracilis te puer in rose*, rendered almost word for word without rhyme, according to the Latin measure, as near as language will permit." (It should be noted in advance that in ancient Roman times the survivor of a shipwreck customarily acknowledged his debt to the favor of Neptune by placing a dedicatory plaque in the god's temple, along with the clothing in which he had escaped drowning.)

What slender youth, bedewed with liquid odours,  
Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,  
    Pyrrha? For whom bind'st thou  
    In wreaths thy golden hair,  
Plain in thy neatness? O how oft shall he  
On faith and changèd gods complain, and seas  
    Rough with black winds and storms  
    Unwonted shall admire,  
Who now enjoys thee credulous, all gold;  
Who always vacant, always amiable,  
    Hopes thee, of flattering gales  
    Unmindful. Hapless they  
To whom thou untried seem'st fair. Me, in my vowed  
Picture, the sacred wall declares t'have hung  
    My dank and dropping weeds  
    To the stern god of sea.

The knowing, worldly bitterness, the complex contempt both for Pyrrha and her youthful lover, balanced by the shamed confession of the poet's own early folly—this wry music comes through to us despite Milton's archaisms. For all its remoteness, it works more persuasively than the contortions (increased by the addition of rhyme, and the maneuvers required to accommodate it) in a more recent version by C. E. Cox.

Slim, young and essenced, Pyrrha, who  
On roses couched is courtying you?  
    Whom charms in your sweet grot  
    The bright hair's single knot,  
The choice plain dress? How oft he'll sigh  
"False gods, false faith!" with tears, and eye  
    Poor novice, seas that change  
    Storm-lashed to black and strange.  
Who now enjoys you, thinks you gold,  
Dreams you will love him,—still, still hold  
    No hand but his, nor knows  
    Winds change. Alas! for those

Who trust your sheen. On temple wall  
My votive tablet proves to all  
    That Neptune earned his fee—  
    These dripping clothes—from me.

One more version, perhaps still more accessible, yet not for that reason necessarily the best, this by Joseph Clancy.

What slim and sweetly scented boy  
presses you to the roses, Pyrrha,  
    in your favorite grotto?  
    For whom is your blond hair styled,  
deceptively simple? Ah, how often he'll sob  
over your faithless conversions, staring  
    stupidly at the black  
    winds and wild seas. He has you  
now, for him you have a golden glow,  
ever contented, ever loving  
    he hopes, unaware of the  
    tricky breeze. Poor things, for whom  
you glitter before you're tried. The temple  
wall with its plaque serves notice: I  
    have hung my wet clothes up  
    and bowed to the sea god's power.

Readers with shrewd ears will detect from these simple examples some of the problems involved in the translation of Horace's Odes. Here, in the latest translations I know of, is a selection of the odes, by David Ferry.



## *1.5*

What perfumed debonair youth is it, among  
    The blossoming roses, urging himself upon you  
In the summer grotto? For whom have you arranged  
    Your shining hair so elegantly and simply?

How often will he weep because of betrayal,  
    And weep because of the fickleness of the gods,  
Wondering at the way the darkening wind  
    Suddenly disturbs the calm waters.

Now he delights in thinking how lovely you are,  
    Vacant of storm as the fragrant air in the garden—  
Not knowing at all how quickly the wind can change.  
    Hapless are they enamored of that beauty

Which is untested yet. And as for me?  
    The votive tablet on the temple wall  
Is witness that in tribute to the god  
    I have hung up my sea-soaked garment there.

## I.9

See Mount Soracte shining in the snow.  
See how the laboring overladen trees  
Can scarcely bear their burdens any longer.

See how the streams are frozen in the cold.  
Bring in the wood and light the fire and open  
The fourth-year vintage wine in the Sabine jars.

O Thaliarchus, as for everything else,  
Forget tomorrow. Leave it up to the gods.  
Once the gods have decided, the winds at sea

Will quiet down, and the sea will quiet down,  
And these cypresses and old ash trees will shake  
In the storm no longer. Take everything as it comes.

Put down in your books as profit every new day  
That Fortune allows you to have. While you're still young,  
And while morose old age is far away,

There's love, there are parties, there's dancing and there's music,  
There are young people out in the city squares together  
As evening comes on, there are whispers of lovers, there's laughter.

## I.22

The upright man whose conscience is perfectly clear  
Can journey anywhere, unarmed, untroubled,  
Whether it be the burning sands of Sidra,  
Near where the quicksand waits for you under the sea,

Or the frozen Caucasus, or the fabled place  
There are so many monster stories about,  
Washed by the sinister River Hydaspes. For instance,  
Fuscus, there was the summer day when I

Went out of my Sabine house, in the afternoon,  
And wandered in the woods beyond my farm,  
Singing my song about my Lalage,  
Carefree, alone, and utterly unprotected,

When suddenly there was a wolf, more frightening than  
The wolves in the oak tree forests of Apulia  
Or the lions for which Numidia is famous—  
And the wolf ran away from *me*! So let me tell you:

Set me down anywhere, say in a place  
That's entirely lifeless, where not a single tree  
Responds to any breeze, a place the gods  
Have cursed with evil stagnant mists forever,

Or leave me where the sun comes near the earth  
Too hot for any man to be able to dwell there,  
And I will nevertheless go right on singing  
My ardent song in praise of Lalage.

### *III.13*

O clearer than crystal, thou Bandusian fountain,  
To whom it is fitting to bring libations of wine

And offerings also of flowers, tomorrow the chosen  
First-born of the flock will be brought to you,

His new little horns foretelling warfare and love  
In vain, for the warm blood of this child of the flock

Will stain with its color of red your clear cold waters.  
The cruel heat of Canicula the Dog Star

Can find no way to penetrate the glade  
To where you are. Gladly your shady coolness

Welcomes the oxen that come, weary of plowing,  
And welcomes also the wandering pasturing flock.

You shall become famous among the fountains  
Because of my song that praises the ilex tree

That leans above the rocks the babbling waters leap from.

### *III.26*

Experienced in your wars,  
Not long ago I was  
A not inglorious soldier,  
But now upon this wall,  
Beside the effigy of  
Venus, goddess of love,  
Born from the glittering sea,

I place these weapons and  
This lyre no longer fit  
For use in the wars of love.  
Here I offer the torch,  
The crowbar and the bow,  
Siege weapons used  
Against those closed-up doors.

O goddess, queen of Cyprus,  
Queen of sunny Memphis,  
Far from the snows of Thrace,  
All I ask of you  
Is one punishing flick  
Of your uplifted lash  
To sting arrogant Chloë.