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Horace Odes 1.10: A turning point?

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RESUMEN

José Carlos Fernández Corte ha argumentado en esta revista que Horacio *Odas* 1.10 marca la conclusión de la serie de diez odas. En este artículo, sugiero que es mejor concebir *Odas* 1.10 como un poema de transición. En *Odas* 1.11, podemos percibir signos claros, por medio de juegos de palabras metaliterarios, de que este poema es continuación del grupo anterior y, a la vez, marca un nuevo comienzo.

Palabras clave: Serie de poemas. Transición. Metaliterario.

SUMMARY

José Carlos Fernández Corte has argued in this journal that Horace *Odes* 1.10 marks the end of a ten-ode series. In this paper, I suggest that *Odes* 1.10 is better perceived as a pivot or turning point, and that *Odes* 1.11 indicates, by means of metaliterary puns, that it is both continuous with the preceding set and constitutes a new departure.

Keywords: Poetic series. Turning point. Metaliterary.

In an article that is at once subtle and cogent, José Carlos Fernández Corte has recently argued that the first ten poems of Horace's *Odes* 1 constitute

a subsection of the book, with the tenth Ode providing closure to the set¹. In this brief note, I should like to provide an additional argument (and some further evidence) in support of Corte's claim, and at the same time suggest a slight modification to the way he formulated it.

Corte adduces three kinds of evidence in favor of taking *Odes* 1.1-10 as a unit. First, cc. 1-9 are all in different meters, while 10, in sapphics, repeats the meter of 2: metrically, 10 thus serves to close the set. That the responson is between the last and the second poem of the series, rather than the first, is unexceptional. We have an example of the practice in *Odes* 1.10 itself, in which the closing lines of the final stanza —*superis deorum/ gratus et imis*— indicate closure by echoing the opening lines of the second stanza: *magni Iovis et deorum/ nuntium* (*deorum* in the same *sedes*). Or again, we may observe how, in the fourth book of the *Odes*, the final poem (4.15), in which Horace proclaims his talent for love lyric as against the higher demands of epic, answers to the second poem (4.2), in which the poet contrasts his modest verses with the magniloquence of Pindaric epinician. The first ode of the fourth book, by comparison, simply announces Horace's return to love poetry.

Second, Corte notes that groups of 10 poems were characteristic of Augustan poetry, e. g., Virgil's *Eclogues*, Horace's own *Satires* 1, and, we may add, the first book of Tibullus' elegies. To indicate how an initial series of ten poems might form a subsection of a larger collection, Corte, developing an argument by Alessandro Barchiesi², points to the first ten poems of Horace's *Epodes*. We might remark too the way in which the last of Propertius' elegies (4.11) forms a coda to the preceding ten poems of the fourth book.

Finally, in terms of content, Corte notes that c. 10 itself ends with a characteristic formula of closure: the contrastive pairing of *superis... imis* (19-20; Corte cites, among other studies of poetic closure, the important contribution of P. H. Schrijvers)³. What is more, there is an intertextual reference to the end of the *Iliad* in vv. 13-16 (Hermes leading Priam to Achilles' tent) and possibly also to the end of the *Odyssey* in 17-20 (Hermes leading the suitors's

¹ J. C. Fernández Corte, «El final de las "odas del alarde" (Odas I. 1-10)», *CFC-Elat* 19 (2000) 63-77.

² A. Barchiesi, «Alcune difficoltà nella carriera di un poeta giambico: Giambico ed elegia nell'epodo XI», in R. Cortés and J. C. Fernández Corte, edd., *Bimilenario de Horacio* (Salamanca, 1994) 127-38.

³ P. H. Schrijvers, «Comment terminer une ode?», *Mnemos.* 26 (1973) 140-59.

shades down to Hades); these allusions precisely in two last stanzas of c. 10 thus lend an air of finality to the ode. In the third place, and most important, there are internal cross-references within c. 11 both to c. 1 and to c. 6, the mid-point of the series, which latter itself constitutes, in Corte's phrase, a kind of «proemio in mezzo».

First, let me offer the additional argument in support of Corte's thesis. The opening verses of c. 11 read: *Tu ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi finem di dederint, Leuconoe*. Of course, the poem goes on to make clear that Horace is discouraging Leuconoe from consulting astrologers (*nec Babylonios temptaris numeros*). But the abrupt advice concerning ends at the very beginning of the ode makes excellent poetic sense if we suppose that Horace's reader (like Leuconoe herself, perhaps) might have been tempted to interpret c. 10 as a kind of finale. The injunction, «Don't inquire about my end», carries the implicit or metaliterary suggestion that what preceded might in fact have been perceived as a *finis*. But of course, c. 11 itself demonstrates by its very existence that the book is not over.

Indeed, the very fact that *Odes* 1 does not stop at this point, but rather goes on, invites us to read c. 10 not simply as a terminus but rather —and this is my modification of Corte's thesis— as a pivot or transition, serving both as a conclusion to the first subsection and an introduction to what follows. And what god is better suited to serve as a turning point than Mercury, Hermes *strophaios* (cf. Aristophanes *Plutus* 1153-54 with scholia ad 1153: ἔστι δὲ [sc. *strophaios*] ἐπώνυμια Ἑρμοῦ)? He is the god who both leads souls down to Hades and reawakens them with his magic wand (17-20; cf. *Odyssey* 5.47-48≈24.2-4) —the god of death but also of resurrection, the latter being precisely his function in the fifth book of the *Odyssey*, where Hermes mediates the release of Odysseus from eternal imprisonment on the island of Calypso.

In respect to content, too, the tenth ode both terminates the first segment of the book and launches the next. On the one hand, c. 11 alters the message of its predecessor. If Mercury is the god who, par excellence, crosses borders and renders them permeable in both directions, inducing sleep with his wand but also opening the eyes of men, in c. 11 Horace insists that life is fleeting and death permanent; hence the injunction, *carpe diem*. On the other hand, c. 11 alludes to themes that have already been broached in the earlier series. Most explicitly, 1.11.6-7 (*et spatio brevi spem longam reseces*) clearly echoes 1.4.15 (*vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam*), both poems insisting on the irrevocable brevity of life.

There is one further point. If c. 10 is the first in Book 1 to repeat the meter of an earlier ode, c. 11 itself, as Corte notes, introduces yet another new meter, the Greater Asclepiadean. There is a sense, then, in which c. 11 resumes the experimental *variatio* of the first nine poems, and thus belongs, despite the apparent terminus represented by c. 10, to the opening series. Here too, c. 10 seems to signal both the closure of the first set and, simultaneously, its continuity with what follows. Once again, moreover, Horace himself seems to indicate the complex nature of the transition in c. 10 by way of a pun in the opening verses of c. 11. Carlos Corte, who was kind enough to encourage me to publish this coda to his earlier paper, has pointed out to me that Horace may be playfully highlighting his own metrical virtuosity when he cautions Leuconoe: *nec temptaris numeros* —«Do not try your hand at numbers», i. e., meters, as Horace himself has been doing so innovatively right up to this point.

If we thought, then, that c. 10, because it repeats the Sapphic meter of c. 2, marked an end to the brilliant game of metrical variation and to the opening series of ten odes, Horace seems to be saying, we were wrong: *ne quaesieris quem mihi finem*.