

13. The Coming of Spring in Catullus 46 and Horace, Odes I. 4 and 1.9: April 4-8

I have translated three classical Roman poems which convey the delight everyone naturally feels at the arrival of spring and which, in Horace, flow into melancholy reflections on human mortality. They were composed by the two poets who are rightly regarded as the greatest lyric poets of ancient Rome, Catullus (dates uncertain: ?85- ?55 B.C.) and Horace (65-8 B.C.)

Catullus 46

*Now spring brings back a warmth that has no chills,
Now the raging of the equinoctical sky
Falls silent before the mild West Wind's breezes.
You must, Catullus, leave behind these Phrygian lowlands
And the fertile plain of sweltering Nicaea,
But let us speed to Asia's renowned cities.
A-flutter with anticipation, my mind now longs to roam,
Now my feet grow strong and eager with wanderlust.
Dearest colleagues, friends, goodbye!
We all set out together from far-off Rome;
Different journeys will take us back home.*

Catullus died a premature death, about the circumstances of which we know nothing (even the dates of his birth and death are uncertain), but he left behind a treasury of more than a hundred poems, a few very long—the longest, a kind of mini-epic which runs to 408 lines—many others short, some consisting of only a couplet. We may assume that after his death his poems were collected and carefully arranged by a friend for wider circulation. Catullus' short poems are especially popular. They are poems of love and friendship but also of angry recrimination and even the nastiest possible invective. There are many excellent modern translations available of his entire work, with quite a few of which I am familiar. I especially like the one of James Michie; however, I am offering a fresh translation.

This poem is about the coming of spring as experienced by Catullus during the year when he served as a member of the staff and entourage of a governor of a Roman province in what is now modern Turkey (Asia, for which the poet wants to set out was the name of one such province). It is one of his many attractive and expressive friendship poems. Catullus might tease and josh his friends in some of these, but it is obvious that his best friendships never went sour.

Horace, Odes 1.4

*Winter's grip is loosening at the welcome turn of spring and the West Wind
As windlasses haul empty hulls to the sea.
Cattle no longer feel contented in their stables nor the farmer by his hearth,
And no morning frosts are leaving a white sheen on the fields.
Now Cytherean Venus leads the dance under a moon hanging high,
And hand in hand nymphs and beauteous Graces,*

*With rhythmic feet, stamp the ground, while busy, glowing Vulcan
Tends the massive forges of the Cyclopes.
Now 'tis time to wreath our glistening locks with green myrtle
And with flowers borne by the unshackled earth;
Now 'tis time to make sacrifice in shadowy groves to Faunus,
Whether he demands a lamb or a kid if he prefers.
Pale Death kicks with impartial foot against the poor man's hovel
Or the magnate's towering palace. O blessed Sestius,
The brief sum of our lives forbids us to enter upon far-reaching hopes.
Soon Night and the ghosts of tall tales will hold you fast,
In the exiling, alien abode of Pluto; once you have arrived there,
You'll not reign as the king of the wine with your dice-throw,
Nor will you gaze in wonder at the boy Lycidas, over whom now all young men
Are on fire and soon the girls, too, will be a-glow.*

Horace, Odes 1.9

*Look how Soracte rises there glittering bright
with deep snow and trees straining hard can bear
no longer their loads, while streams
are frozen with jagged ice.*

*Unfreeze the cold, pile plentiful logs
on the hearth, and be all-generous, Thaliarchus,
as you pour the aged Sabine wine
unwatered from the jar.*

*Entrust all else to the gods; once they've calmed
the winds battling it out over the raging waters,
then cypress and old forest
mountain ash are shaken no more.*

*Avoid searching to discover what tomorrow will bring
and whatever more of life Chance gives make sure
to count it as gain. So do not spurn
sweet love, dear boy, nor the dance,*

*As long as grey-haired, grumpy old age stays away
from your verdant youth. Now 'tis time to seek out
piazzas and open spaces, with soft
whispers at nightfall's appointed hour.*

*Now 'tis time for a girl hiding in nook and cranny
to let her winsome laughter be her tell tale,
with a band next pulled off her arm
or from a teasing, coquettish finger.*

Odes 1.4 is very similar to *Odes* 4.7, which, more now than a century ago, the English poet and classical scholar A.E. Housman told a class at Oxford University he regarded as the most beautiful poem to have come down to us from Greco-Roman Antiquity. For me, 1.4 has a slight edge over 4.7 because in imagery and detail it is more vivid. For this reason, it is of 1.4 I decided to make a fresh translation. Over the centuries, it has been a much translated poem; the 1960's translation by James Michie is my favourite; in fact, the second line of my translation is lifted from his, although otherwise the translation is entirely my own.

As he himself he is not slow to pride himself on, Horace is the supreme master of adaptation, to the great challenges posed by the Latin language, of the numerous metrical forms of lyric poetry the Greeks bequeathed to the Romans—Catullus had already been an important predecessor in this respect. For *Odes* 1.4, Horace uses the so-called Fourth Archilochian, a series of couplets in each of which a seven-foot line is followed by a five-foot one. It is very difficult to replicate this exactly in English, but the reader will notice that in my translation in each couplet a long line is followed by a shorter one. In addition, the number of couplets is the same as in the Latin text.

Notes on the following words or phrases in my translation: “Cytherean”—from or belonging to the island of Cythera in the Aegean Sea, where the cult of the goddess of Venus was especially prominent; “Graces”—minor goddesses, usually three in number, all beautiful young women who attended upon Venus; “Vulcan”—the god of fire and the blacksmith of the gods whose workshop was said to be located beneath Mount Etna in Sicily; “Cyclopes”—one-eyed giants and Vulcan's assistants; “Faunus”—the god and protector of animals; “Sestius”—this addressee may be the Roman consul of 23 B.C.; “Pluto”—the ruler of Hades, the Underworld; “reign as the king of the wine with your dice-throw”—a Greek or Roman drinking party often had someone in charge who decided, often by means of a throw of the dice, at which strength the wine was going to be consumed in each round of drinking, since wine was made and sold in concentrated form and then usually diluted with water for actual consumption; “Lycidas”—an invented Greek name also used earlier by Vergil in his pastoral poetry.

Odes 1.9 is justly admired for its poetic artistry. Unlike 1.4, its word-pictures are entirely naturalistic; there are no details drawn from myth or religious cult. From a sharply etched setting of a harsh winter, it moves into a vivid anticipation of spring. The poet is at his farm, a gift from his friend and patron, Maecenas, in the Sabine hills north of Rome, with a young man as his guest; Horace is looking outside and inviting the other to do the same. The details of the wintry scene are perhaps somewhat exaggerated. That the 691 metres high Mount Soracte should be clad in snow in mid-winter is no surprise, but frozen-over streams may be a more a picture of the imagination. The detail of “jagged ice” (*acuto...gelu*) suggests floes of ice floating in the water rather than a thick cover of ice. However, it may be an exceptionally harsh winter which would make its presence felt especially in the uplands.

The anticipation of spring goes hand in hand with a celebration of youth, as does

also the ending of 1.4, all of this overshadowed by the familiar Horatian theme of *carpe diem* (“pluck the day”) also prominent in the other poem. Thaliarchus is an invented Greek name, meaning “master of the feast.” It is fitting that in a celebration of youth and the anticipation of spring the young man should be pouring the wine, rather than his host, the middle-aged poet.

The metrical form of 1.9 is the so-called Alcaic stanza, a favourite of Horace in the *Odes*, with two longer lines followed by two shorter ones. I have done my best my best to replicate it to some degree. James Michie 's—as is his translation of the *Odes* as a whole—is a particularly fine translation, but I offer mine as a fresh one.