

S. K. Egorova
(St. Petersburg State University)

VISUAL ASPECTS OF INTERPRETING HORACE'S LYRICS

Using the example of Horace's lyrics, the article discusses the interaction between the visual and the linguistic in a literary work. In the introduction we raise the question whether it is possible to use the concepts of 'focus' and 'background' for describing the structure of a literary text, be it a whole poem (*Epod.* 2) or single passages where the shift of focus emphasizes a detail, e. g. in an enumeration (*Carm.* 1, 15, 11–12).

Then, three passages are considered where the interpretation can be helpfully based on visual experience. The epithet *flavus* describing Tiber (*Carm.* 1, 2, 13 a. o.) is an *epitheton ornans* and is hardly a euphemism; the combination *alta nive* in *Carm.* 1, 9, 1–2, means rather 'deep' snow, as one can judge after a glance at the shape of Monte Soratte, described by Horace; the adjective *vitreus* (*Carm.* 1, 17, 20 a. o.) used by the authors of the 1st cent. BC depicts the mould-pressed glass of that period and means 'glittering' rather than colour qualities – 'blue', 'greenish', 'semi-transparent' – typically referred to in later works.

Keywords: focus/background concept, Horace, Latin color epithets, 1st book of Odes by Horace, poem structure.

С. К. Егорова
(Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет)

Визуальный аспект интерпретации лирики Горация

В статье на примере лирики Горация рассматриваются вопросы взаимодействия визуальной и языковой стороны художественного произведения: предлагается наряду с другими терминами, предназначенными изначально для описания изобразительного искусства, применить концепцию фокус/бэкграунд (первый план/фон) и термин «смещение фокуса» для описания как композиции стихотворения в целом (*Epod.* 2), так и отдельных приемов, призванных усилить эффект (*Carm.* 1, 15, 11–12). Во второй части приведены три случая (*Carm.* 1, 2, 13; 9, 1–2; 17, 20), при комментировании которых целесообразным представляется визуальное знакомство с географическими и материальными реалиями.

Ключевые слова: focus/background, Гораций, латинские термины цветообозначения, «Оды» I кн., композиция лирического произведения.

Introduction

It is well known that «seeing is believing» and that it is better to see once than to read a hundred times. Let me offer three examples

of passages where the interpretation becomes far more definite thanks to a visual elaboration. For these purposes, my choice of Horace was guided by his being familiar both to me and to the audience, the same applying also to the majority of examples from the 1st book of his *Carmina*. Meanwhile, Horace may be considered an average poet in terms of visuality, as compared with Ovid for example, whose poems contain far more visual details (see von Albrecht 1994: 639), especially colour epithets.

Many terms used now for describing a literary work have their origin in visual art. An 'illustrative' example, a 'vivid' image, a 'nuance', a 'contrast'¹, and the 'backdrop'² are just a few examples³. In this regard, it is interesting to ask whether the **focus/background concept** is applicable to describing the structure of certain passages or the composition of the whole poem⁴. At first glance this kind of relationship seems to be quite common⁵ and needs no special explanation. Nevertheless, the structure of some poems and passages becomes more distinct if one perceives the **shift of the focus** in formatting or even in the poet's whole plan, as in the first example – the *Epode 2*. It contains a long praise of country life (verses 1–66) which at first sight appears to be quite serious⁶. But the poem reaches an unexpected conclusion: it turns out that all the speech belongs to Alfius the moneylender⁷, who demands the lent money back⁸ on the Ides – to buy an estate where he will enjoy all the pleasures of country life – and... lends it out again on the next

¹ Some observations on visual contrast in Horace's lyrics were made by Tamara Korykhalova (Korykhalova 1982).

² On Horace's using a preliminary enumeration (priamel, priamella) as a 'backdrop' for the main point see Egorova 2015, 228.

³ In the passages in question at least one poetry technique, that of contrast (or contraposition), has a visual component where it is reinforced with visible details: the dual nature of the woman/sea in the famous *Carm.* 1, 5 is expressed with a dark/light opposition: *nigris ventis* (v. 7) – *te aurea* (v. 9), *nites* (v. 13). A similar opposition depicts two possible stages for an elderly commander in *Carm.* 1, 7, 19–21: *seu te fulgentia signis castra tenent seu densa tenebit Tiburis umbra tui*.

⁴ I will not use this concept for studying syntax or word order as it does not seem promising for this particular text.

⁵ E. g. spring as background and brevity of human life as a focus point (*Carm.* 1, 4); security for an unarmed person as background and love of Lalage as a focus point (*Carm.* 1, 22), and so on.

⁶ One may compare it with the end of the 2nd book of Virgil's *Georgics*.

⁷ For more examples of this technique see Watson 2003: 77.

⁸ ...*omnem redegit Idibus pecuniam*, i.e. the principal, not only a sum of interest.

possible day. Thus the whole poem, instead of a sincere eulogy of country life, turns out to be a satirical poem on the contradiction between past (and therefore inevitably idealized) and modern ways of life, irony being the crucial point of the poem.

The easiest way to describe the technique used here is to consider a shift of the focus⁹. The reader begins looking at the whole text from another perspective and an idyllic landscape gets its 'frame' (a modern Alfius could keep it on his desk).

1. *Flavus Tiberis* (*Carm.* 1, 2, 13; 1, 8, 8; 2, 3, 18)

Since the time of Ancient grammarians, *flavus* 'yellow' (or 'yellowish', 'tawny') as an epithet of Tiber was considered a euphemism in the place of *limosus* or *turbidus* (Kiessling, Heinze 1958: 13; Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 25). Though for *Carm.* 1, 2, 13 one may assume that the colour of the river during a flood was described in that way¹⁰, the other passages show that it is the usual state of the Tiber's water, mixed with sand and silt: in *Carm.* 1, 8, 8 the poet mentions swimming exercises, while *Carm.* 2, 3, 18 stresses the position of an expensive villa (on the right bank of the Tiber).

This *epitheton ornans* enters the poetic tradition in that very period: if Virgil uses the epithet *caeruleus*, far more common for rivers (*Aen.* 8, 64), and in *Aen.* 7, 31, where *flavus* appears, specifies the cause of the unusually yellowish colour (*multa flavus harena*), Horace and Ovid (*Fast.* 6, 228) use the adjective *flavus* without any clarifications¹¹.

⁹ Another example of a shift of the focus is minor, but contains an interesting correlation of concrete and abstract objects nevertheless. In *Carm.* 1, 15, 11–12 Paris hears about the gods preparing to besiege Troy: *...Iam galeam Pallas et aegida / currusque et rabiem parat*. Nisbet and Hubbard call *rabies* 'fury' «another weapon» with its position on the «edge of the expression being a mark of heightened style» (Commentators mention no close parallel to such enumeration, a possible example for Horace being a zeugma [*Il.* 4, 447, see also Ovid. *Met.* 13, 544], Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 194). Meanwhile, something in this passage draws attention to the abstract object named last among concrete ones. In my opinion, this case may also be described as containing a shift of focus – the poet goes from the goddess's armament to her fury, which is stressed as her most formidable weapon.

¹⁰ One of the following years: 27, 23, 22, or 15 AD (Mayer 2012: 65).

¹¹ Visual examples:

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tevere#/media/File:Fiume_tevere.JPG;

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tevere#/media/File:Tevere_foce_aerea_2005_0817.jpg (accessed on 20.03.2019).

As one can see in reality or in photos, the Tiber indeed has a very specific appearance, its water being yellowish green – in general quite pleasant – especially the tints in the estuary where the Tiber's water mixes with the sea. Neither modern Romans nor their great ancestors speak of it with any distaste, pointing it out as a feature of their region, so that it is not a euphemism, but a usual *epitheton ornans*.

2. *Alta stet nive candidum Soracte (Carm. 1, 9, 1-2)*

In this well-known winter landscape, translators have to make a decision¹², whether the adjective *altus* means 'deep snow' or 'snow high on the mountain'? With snow, *altus* usually means 'deep': Hor. *Epod.* 6, 7 (of a hunting dog ready to chase an animal in any conditions) and Verg. *G.* 1, 310, where deep snow is a mark of the midwinter. This meaning corresponds well with the verb *stare*, which stresses «fixity and strength» (Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 118) and suits the shape of Monte Soratte¹³.

Monte Soratte is not very high¹⁴, but rather «wide» with one ridge making a certain accent; after a snowfall the mountain looks *as if sinking in deep snow*.

3. *Vitreum Circen (Carm. 1, 17, 20)*

In *Carmen* 1, 17 the poet invites Tyndaris to spend time in a pleasant manner and, among other activities, to sing:

... Dices laborantis in uno
Penelopen vitreamque Circen.

The epitheton *vitrea*, 'made of glass', 'resembling glass', was surprising already for Ancient grammarians (Porph.: *parum decore pro candida*; Ps.-Acro: *aut pulchram aut procurato lucentem nitore aut mari vicinam*).

The most important point for understanding the meaning of *vitreus* here is that in Horace's times Roman glass did not look as we imagine it now: blown glass technology was being introduced since the middle of the 1st cent. BC, but there was no mass

¹² Sometimes commentators suggest following Latin lexical pattern and leave this point without distinction (Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 118).

¹³ Visual example: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuKEuWJnhw7/> (accessed on 20.03.2019)

¹⁴ It is c. 600 m high (but it is situated on a plateau of 200 m) and of course has no glacier.

production of semi-clear glass vessels of green or blue-green colour, which *inter alia* leads some scholars to the idea of Circe's affinity to the sea¹⁵. The mould-pressed (also called mosaic) glass of the period was multicoloured and not transparent¹⁶.

Nisbet, Hubbard and, probably, Mayer take into account this peculiarity of the period¹⁷, but they view the samples of early Mediterranean glass as being «complex, distorting, enigmatic»¹⁸, while the component of *glittering* was left without much attention¹⁹.

Meanwhile the usage in Horace's works confirms the meaning 'glittering as glass': *Serm.* 2, 3, 22 *vitrea fama* (of a military glory²⁰), *Carm.* 3, 13, 1 *splendidior vitro* (of a stream – unlike sea water, it has no colour as such, but sparkles and glitters); *Carm.* 4, 2, 3 *vitreo ponto* (of the sea in the myth of Icarus)²¹.

The same meaning was mentioned by both ancient commentators (*candida* and *procurato lucentem nitore*, see above).

¹⁵ Although figures of Circe and Calypso are sometimes "combined (Stat. *Silv.* 1, 5, 15; Claud. *Pros.* 2, 54), Circe is not a sea goddess.

¹⁶ Visual examples: Fr. of core-formed glass items, 1st cent. BC (Kunina 1997: 14–15); Mosaic mould-pressed bowl, late 1st cent. BC – early 1st cent. AD (Kunina 1997: 94). The same item is represented also in a later publication (Kunina 2004: 11–12), with the technique described in detail at p. 10.

¹⁷ «Perhaps he had in mind the cloudy glow of Roman glass... The word remains as mysterious as the woman» (Mayer 2012: 151). Nisbet and Hubbard call this type «millefiori glass» (Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 224–5).

¹⁸ Which makes Circe a «femme fatale in the dark wood» (Nisbet, Hubbard 1970: 224).

¹⁹ Though Nisbet and Hubbard add: «The meaning of glittering is no doubt present» (*Ibid.*).

²⁰ In my opinion, there is no need to see the meaning of fragility here, though this case seems quite close to Publilius' fr. 189: *Fortuna vitrea est – tum cum splendet frangitur*.

²¹ In this passage *vitreus* cannot be a colour epithet. In Augustus' period this adjective characterizes: sea and river water (Verg. *G.* 4, 350, Ovid. *Met.* 5, 48), dew (Ovid. *Am.* 1, 6, 55), frost (Ovid. *Ep.* 10, 7). Once it may denote 'purple' (otherwise also 'glittering'), Var. *Men.* fr., 313, of luxurious (probably purple) clothes: *quam istorum quorum vitreae togae ostentant tunicae clavos* (Nonius: *pertenuae et perlucidum quidquid est auctoritate veterum dici potest*) (Cèbe 1987: ad loc.). Ovid (according to Deferrari 1939), most attentive to colours, uses it only as meaning 'made of glass' (*Ars* 2, 208, of a *latrunculi* piece), while his *Metamorphoses* (the very beginning of the 1st cent. BC) contains the first mention of a clear glass (still with a specification: *Met.* 4, 355 *claro vitro*). The usage 'resembling glass in colour', i. e. 'greenish blue' (German *glasgrün*) is to be stated since the middle of 1st cent. AD (e. g. Plin. *HN* 9, 100, of sea urchins). On usage in later Roman poetry see Budaragina 2007.

In favour of interpreting *vitrea* as 'glittering', 'shiny', 'splendid', one may also add that this epithet is quite appropriate for the image of an alluring mistress in contrast with Odysseus' wife.

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