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Horace's Ars poetica as Pure Poetry

In discussions of Horace's *Ars Poetica* (from now onwards simply *Ars*) it is a commonplace and sometimes an unspoken premiss that it is a didactic poem, a text in and through which Horace tries to teach one or two young Roman aristocrats how to compose poetry. It is also usually called an epistle; it has been frequently published as part of book 2 of the *Epistulae*.[1] Generic categories might not be among the most fashionable concepts in recent literary criticism, but they still seem to have some productive force, especially the idea that a literary genre depends at least partially on the communicative situation staged in or by the text. The position of the speaker is supposed to be different in a letter than in a didactic poem, but a nice epistolary chat does not preclude the sender's showing off his knowledge of the topic under discussion, or trying to convince the receiver about controversial points. *Epistles* 2.2, the letter to Augustus, usually is not regarded as a didactic poem, which hardly means more than that modern readers sense the epistolary features more than the didactic ones. Although it also discusses literary themes, literary history and cultural politics, the presence of the emperor as an addressee tends to make one cautious to imagine a communicative situation in which he is lectured, since the characteristic unbalance of power in didactic poems (see Konstan 1993, p. 12) would be in harsh contrast with the actual ones.

However, as soon as Alessandro Barchiesi had the intellectual courage to imagine such a situation in his 'experimental reading', defining didactic poetry as broad as having any kind of addressee and any kind of intention to instruct them (Barchiesi 2001, p. 79), both that poem and Ovid's *Tristia 2* could be regarded as seriously teaching Augustus a lesson on poetry, namely «its instability of meaning» (Barchiesi 2001, p. 102). What I would like to do in this paper is to prove that in Horace' *Ars* the presence of the addressee(s) and the intention to instruct are also unstable, which may under-

[1] This tradition goes back to the sixteenth century. According to Frischer 1991, pp. 5-16, it is an ill founded, recent, since not ancient, tradition, but it seems quite old to me, something that readers of today cannot simply disregard.

mine its otherwise ubiquitous didactic attitude. First I will analyze the passages where teaching is the explicit topic of the discourse; read as self-referential declarations, they seem rather ironic: *Ars* as a didactic poem obviously contradicts its own ideals of teaching. In the second part of this paper I will focus on the apostrophes to prove that they do not support the didactic interpretation. They either are rhetoric devices to make the argumentation more vivid without staging a didactic situation or create and simultaneously undermine that situation.

Serious teaching in epistolary prose had a long tradition in the classical literature with such important canonical pieces as Epicurus' letters, Seneca's *Epistulae morales,* or some of Cicero' letters that have the size and the ambition of essays. Therefore a verse epistle can easily come close to teaching, especially in Horace's case, since a didactic trait is almost ubiquitous in his poetry. In many odes, the speaker gives advice to the addressee on the basis of his superior general knowledge or explains some notions from Epicurean ethics.[1] This is also usual in the first book of the *Epistles*. A teaching or preaching pose is of basic importance for many pieces of the *Satires*. The borderline between an epistolary poem with didactic features and a didactic poem in epistolary form cannot easily be drawn.

The didactic interpretation of the *Ars* has a very long tradition, implied in the separate textual tradition of the poem and the very fact that it has a title (especially this of all titles, attested already in Quintilian). Such a tradition cannot be disregarded as wrong: it necessarily explains some potential readings of the text (cf. Jauss 1970). The teaching pose, the intention to instruct, however, can have innumerable variations and levels of intensity. On the basis of impression, which seems rather general today, that ancient didactic poetry is not really serious about the intention of teaching (of course with the remarkable exception of Lucretius), the poetic discourse of the *Ars* may solicit a closer look. It definitely contains certain places where it seems that the speaker's intention is really not so much to teach as to chat or to give a show of his theoretical knowledge of poetics. That may still be regarded as legitimate atti-

[1] It is also true that the didactic pose seems rather tricky in many odes. As Nisbet and Hubbard put it: «his **paraeneses** inculcate virtues he represents his patrons as already possessing.» (Nisbet, Hubbard 1978, p. 52). The teacher does not want the addressee to learn what he teaches, but to realize that he does not need to be taught those important pieces of wisdom.

tude in didactic discourse (especially in epistolary form), but there are also places where the speaker seems rather to demonstrate his talent for creating poetry.

There are two places where teaching itself is discussed in the *Ars*. In ll. 306-308 the speaker presents himself as a (would be) teacher of poetry.

> munus et officium, nil scribens ipse, docebo,
> unde parentur opes, quid alat formetque poetam,
> quid deceat, quid non, quo uirtus, quo ferat error.

It is tempting to interpret this sentence as an act of self-allusion to the *Ars*, since the speaker seems to reflect on his present activity. David Armstrong explained the seven questions in ll. 307-308 as a kind table of contents for the third part of the *Ars* (Armstrong 1993, p. 186).[1] This self-referential interpretation, however, is challenged by Horace's declaration that he writes nothing himself. The speaker *is* writing a poetic text that says he writes nothing. This is rather similar to those proverbial Cretans who always lie, or to the young Ovid promising never to make a single verse. Of course we may try to find a way out by supposing that Horace did not regard a *sermo* as a real poem, or writing one as creating poetry, but the text does not actually say he writes no *poetry*. If we stick to this idea, we must regard *Ars* not as a *sermo,* or something like the *nugae* of Catullus, but definitely *nothing*. And then we can translate the utterance as follows: «And I personally will teach (how to make poetry) through writing (this) nothing». This obviously vicious circle is so ironic and playful that it makes the overt utterance «I am not writing here, I am teaching» convertible into «I am not teaching here, I am writing».

The situation becomes even more complicated if we take into consideration the context of the sentence under discussion. The whole passage refers to the theory of inspired poets (allegedly going back to Democritus)[2] and to those who use an uncivilized

[1] Armstrong thinks that the allegedly didactic purpose is undermined by the way these questions are answered in the poem: «the answers [...] are not at all what one would expect from the model of other ancient treatises on rhetoric and poetry, and the answer to the last is a delightfully literal joke.» (ibidem)

[2] From the preserved fragments of Democritus it can hardly be proved that he thought something even similar (cf. Murray 1981 and Ford 2002, 161-172). There is, however, an ancient tradition that interprets his ideas this way. Cicero offers two testimonies for that interpretation: *Negat enim sine furore Democritus quemquam poetam magnum esse posse, quod idem dicit Plato* (*de diu.* 1.80); *Saepe enim audiui poetam bonum*

public appearance to advertise their madness as a proof of poetic genius. Horace, through seemingly accepting the idea that insanity is necessary to produce great poetry and admitting that he himself is not qualified for that since he regularly cures his bile imbalance, makes a joke here. Because *nil tanti est:* nothing is worth it. This 'it' refers to both insanity and an uncivilized appearance. Since he is not willing either to perform the public role of the mad poet or become genuinely mad in order to qualify for that role, he has to say goodbye to poetry and be a critic. What we have here is another vicious circle. Taking the role of a teacher followed from accepting the theory that poetic madness or divine possession is the exclusive source of poetic greatness, but if this theory stands, poetry cannot be taught. The first step of the reasoning can stand:

- Premise 1: only mad poets can achieve great poetry;
- Premise 2: I am neither mad nor willing to get crazy;
- Conclusion: I will not write.

However, the second step is already absurd: If as a not-mad person I cannot create poetry I will teach others to do it. What such a teacher might teach should be focused on methods of soliciting divine intervention, probably through not taking care of their bile imbalance. Let us not consider how unwelcome that teaching would have been in the circle of the Pisones (cf. Oliensis 1998, pp. 199-223). Our teacher, however, does not give instruction on how to be a possessed bard, but starts to discuss after this declaration that the ultimate source of appropriate writing is philosophy: *Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.* A person who started teaching poetry because he subscribed to the idea that madness or rather insanity is the only source of poetry declares that the main source of writing is thinking or being sane.[1] He cannot be serious. Probably he is still writing.

The other passage (rather famous) about teaching is formulated as if in reference to my initial questioning of the didactic nature of the *Ars*. «Poets want either to teach or to entertain or both at the same time» *(Aut prodesse uolunt, aut delectare poetae, / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere uitae)*. Here, in ll. 335-337, Horace seems to

neminem — id quod a Democrito et Platone in scriptis relictum esse dicunt — sine inflammatione animorum exsistere posse, et sine quodam afflatu quasi furoris (*de or.* 2.46.194).

[1] According to Rudd *sapere* means «moral sense» here (ad loc.). However it can also mean philosophy (since *sapiens* equals philosopher) or being normal or smart. We should also take into consideration that *recte* can be attached both to *scribendi* and *sapere*.

be teaching how to teach, giving his advice in the second person singular, and with the future imperative characteristic of didactic utterance. «Anything you teach, must be short, so that the docile minds should perceive what is concisely formulated and remember it accurately».[1] If that is the way to teach, the purpose of the *Ars* cannot be didactic, since it is not short at all. The longest piece in Horace's *œuvre*, and definitely longer than something to be kept in mind, however docile the mind.[2] It can, however, still aim to be a poem that both teaches and entertains, and hence gets all the votes. According to the principles explained here, the teaching passages must be very short, and therefore only some epigram-like lines could be counted as such: lines like *quidquid praecipies, esto breuis*. Many such sections of the *Ars* became well known truisms of western literary theory, but however many they are, they account for only a small portion of the long poem. Is everything else pure entertainment? Such a point could hardly be defended. Let me discuss two possible objections. 1. According to Rudd, «H. is here talking of a particular type of usefulness [...] viz. the didactic passages in a play» (Rudd, ad v. 337). If it is so, the requirement of shortness does not need to be applied to his own teaching. This interpretation from dramaturgy is based, I suppose, on ll. 338-340, where the entertaining elements are explained and where comedy seems to be the object of discussion. This is indicated by notions such as plot, probable fiction, and most of all by *fabula,* which can be a term for 'play':

> ficta uoluptatis causa sint proxima ueris:
> ne quodcumque uolet poscat sibi fabula credi
> neu pransae Lamiae uiuum puerum extrahat aluo.

I am not convinced. If the explanation of entertainment focuses on one particular case, i.e., fictive plots in plays, it does not necessarily mean that the whole passage refers exclusively to plays. Comedy may be the most obvious example of entertainment, and in this dichotomy of the useful and the entertaining, fiction can be justified only by being amusing; but Horace is quick to point out that

[1] According to the suggestions of Rudd's commentary the translation should be something as follows: «Anything you teach, must be short, so that the listeners' minds should get what is said perceptively and fast, and remember it firmly».

[2] The poem seems simply too long to Oliensis (1998, pp. 218-221); so long that its speaker 'Horace' becomes similar to the chatterer Pest of *Satires* 1.9 that talks his victims to death, or even the leech.

unbelievable horror stories are tasteless and therefore should not be subsumed in the category of entertainment. Fiction, however, just like the term *fabula*, can be interpreted also outside the realm of the theatrical arts. And the sentences concluding this passage speak explicitly of written literary communication, not theatre. The poet entertains a reader (*lectorem*), and it is a book that makes money for the publishers (*hic meret aera liber Sosiis*). 2. If we look at the indirect context, a demarcation of teaching and entertaining in the passage 333-346 cannot but be biased. Even if we say that the first three lines contain the main theoretical declaration and a useful piece of advice, what comes next is not pure entertainment or a series of playful variations on a theme. It explains, and perhaps deepens, the theoretical insight, the core of which has been learned by the western critical tradition not from the concise introductory formulation, but rather twisted out of the more complicated l. 343 *dulce et utile*.

The insight that our text cannot be divided into purely didactic and purely entertaining lines, sentences or passages is hardly shocking; but if this is the case, the *Ars Poetica* as a didactic poem contradicts its own principle that teaching must be short. This is a 14-line passage, the didactic content of which has been discussed – but does it provide any kind of pleasure too? If one appreciates the art of *uariatio*, it definitely does. It contrasts two concepts or aspects of poetry, whose denominations and grammatical forms it incessantly varies:

- *aut prodesse aut delectare* (infinitives)
- *et iucunda et idonea* (neuter plural adjectives used as nouns)
- *quidquid praecipies/ficta uoluptatis causa* (dependent clause/participle)
- *expertia frugis/austera poemata* (adjective-noun clusters)
- *miscuit utile dulci* (neuter singular adjectives used as nouns)
- *delectando pariterque monendo* (gerunds).

The six pairs offer six syntactic and semantic variations on the same theme, giving the passage the air of a stylistic *tour de force*. The only repetition in vocabulary is the verb *delectare*, whose appearance in the first and the last variations create a frame, nicely contrasting the disjunctive first opposition with the final resolution which connects them. The concept of teaching and entertaining simultaneously connects the last pair with the second too. This makes the frame more convincing. The starting declaration was formulated as a description of three categories: poets do either A

or B, or both A and B. The dissection of the field into three categories does not seem to imply any value judgement. When the frame closes the passage it reflects the introductory categorization as a question («Which is the best option?») and answers it («The third: doing both»). This repetition of the verb *delectare* also performs its own art of variation, both through the chiastic word order and the syntactic variation of saying 'both' differently from l. 334.

I find this show of talent for the richest poetic expression delightful. And I cannot say that this passage is similarly insightful as a discursive text. On the one hand, it offers a powerful formula that contrasts two possible kinds of poetic effect on readers or listeners, but in explaining both issues it seems rather superficial and broad, especially when attaching preferences for each aspect of poetry to the age of the listeners in ll. 341-342. It cannot be so simple that the old accept only the useful, while the young only the delightful poetry. The aspects themselves, as notions, are not really clear. Are we actually being told what kind of usefulness it is to which the speaker refers?[1] Should we suppose practical advice about business life or moral teaching? *Expertia frugis*, as the opposite of the useful, seems to imply the former, while *austera poemata*, as the opposite of the delightful, the latter. If the not-delightful equals the useful, which is not necessary, but is suggested by the adjective's general implications and the contrast implied in the structure of the sentence: the old will probably like the *austera poemata*, while the young will not reject the *expertia frugis*. Otherwise the pleasure of the text is not necessarily opposed to austerity.

Even if the old like austerity, does it mean that they do not enjoy it? Do they find it useful? Are the old taught by useful poetry, or they like it because they want the young to be taught? What is the relationship of fiction and delight? Why fiction is the only topic explained in connection with the aspect of delight? Probably because fiction cannot be useful, therefore its only purpose in poetry must be the pleasure it imparts. But many ancient and modern theoreti-

[1] Not only modern readers can require an exact definition of usefulness in poetry. «Philodemus accuses Neoptolemus, as he did Heraclides, of not making clear what sort of benefit he demanded» (Asmis 1995, pp. 150-151). If we find Horace's formulation similarly vague as Neoptolemus's is supposed to have been, that does not mean that Horace was influenced rather by Neoptolemus than Philodemus, who criticised Neoptolemus for this very vagueness. It only means that Horace would take into consideration those ideas on usefulness that were not only proclaimed by Heraclides and Neoptolemus, but also had the air of official discourse.

cians think that fiction can be useful, that it can teach readers, especially through its moral dimension. The clause *ficta uoluptatis causa*, however, does not necessarily mean that all what is invented *(ficta)* is invented to delight (*uoluptatis causa*). It may mean that, but it also can be interpreted as implying a binary opposition inside fiction. If it is the case, the text explains something about what is invented to delight, but does not say a word about what is invented to instruct (if there are *ficta praecepti uel frugis causa*). The unexplained, foggy nature of the opposed notions is a weakness in a discursive text, but suggestive open discourse can be attractive in poetry. It may solicit the activity of the readers to fill gaps, to follow the infinite play of the ideas activated by poetic allusiveness. And the flashes of various theoretical possibilities enrich the poetic discourse with a flow of vibrant images.

I took it for granted that the combination of useful and sweet is the suggested as the best option for poetry, but in David Armstrong's interpretation «getting all the votes» does not imply more than popularity in a wider audience, which is not vital for great poetry. On the basis of a comparison with Philodemus' ideas on poetry as imitation of real teaching discourse, i.e., philosophy, he concludes that what makes poetry great is *dulce* alone, and *utile* is merely an extra option (Armstrong 1993, p. 224). I cannot see anything in this passage of the *Ars* that degrades popularity or suggests that a larger audience is not an aim worth trying to achieve, although we can remember *Sat.* 1.10.72-75, where the ideal of a small, exclusive group of readers is formulated along with the disinterest in the admiration of the mob (*turba*). Armstrong, however, actually interprets the Philodemus fragments and with a simple gesture transfers the results to the text of Horace. I would like to count on the possibility that Horace could proclaim ideas slightly different from those of Philodemus. Armstrong also suggests that *utile* and *dulce* have different effects described in an *abab* pattern in ll. «343-347»: «what is *utile* insures the less critical public's purchase of the book from the booksellers, what is *dulce* [...] insures the poetry's immortality as a giver of pleasure» (Armstrong 1993, p. 225).[1] It would be surprising if a poem's wide popularity depended on its instructive content rather than its delightfulness. Something

[1] This argument is compromised by the strange quotation strategy: Armstrong indicates ll. «343-347» as quoted, while he actually quotes 341-346 omitting l. 344, which surely confuses this *abab* pattern as somewhat like *abbaab* that is hardly a pattern.

that would contradict our primary experience of literary success. It is, however, hardly deniable that the formulation of the huge success with the three aspects of financial income, dissemination in space and durability forever has an ironic, playful air. Especially the first aspect, and not only because the income will belong to the booksellers, not to the poet, but also because it so obviously contradicts the attitude of the previous passage 323-332 that castigated the Roman education because of its material nature, its focus on *cura peculi*. The speaker is supposed to have had that kind of education too, and it may be therefore that he measures literary success by the money the poem makes.

If I want to scrutinize the speaker's intentions as regards teaching, the most obvious candidates for passages worthy of a closer look are the apostrophes, i.e., the places where the speaker addresses someone, either one person or several people. An epistle cannot exist without an addressee, but it seems a personal addressee was a precondition for ancient didactic poems too. I cannot teach generally: I have to teach [a] *you* (cf. Konstan 1993, pp. 11-12). When a direct addressee is missing in Ovid's erotic teaching, this absence can be interpreted as a sign of the poems' parodic or at least playful nature (Hardie 2000, p. 137). The first sentence of the *Ars* calls the addressees *amici*; the second *Pisones*. This group is explained in l. 24 as *pater et iuuenes patre digni*. Three addressees seems a bit too many for a didactic poem, and it is hard to read the whole text as if it is continuously addressed to these three. L. 366 addresses only the older son, and it seems probable that from that line on he is the only addressee of the poem. This final part can be interpreted as teaching a poet not so much to create poetry, but rather to *perform* the role of a poet in high society (cf. Oliensis 1998, pp. 198-223).

There are numerous apostrophes where an addressee is given advice, but these can seldom (and hardly ever must) be identified with the Pisones, or with any one of them. In ll. 19-23, someone is addressed in the second person singular, or rather two verbs in the second person singular appear in three sentences. Still, nothing proves that the subjects are identical. In the first sentence a painter is addressed, a person who can be hired to paint votive panels; the second represents the activity of a potter without addressing him; the third offers a sort of generalizing summary: *Denique sit, quod uis, simplex dumtaxat et unum*. The second person singular seems to imply an impersonal subject here, just like the first person plural in the next sentence, *Maxima pars uatum decipimur specie recti*,

or the first person singular one sentence further: *Breuis esse laboro, obscurus fio*. All these forms of address look like rhetorical apostrophes that embellish poetic expression with vivid variations rather than linguistic signals of a communicative situation or a speech act. The address «father and sons» follows the phrase «we poets», but the relation of the categories poets/Pisones or we/you is far from clear. The former may subsume the latter («we poets, as you know, since you are poets too…»), or at least a part of the latter (if only the youngsters – all or only one – are poets). This, however, is not necessary, since the speaker can address the Pisones about his own class of person («poets») while not including them («we poets, as you *don't* know, since you're *not* poets...»). If we take the latter position, the text can still be interpreted as teaching; it does not, however, teach how to create, but rather how to appreciate poetry.

Most apostrophes over the course of the entire poem seem to imply a general addressee; their rhetorical function is not to stage a situation of advice-giving to an addressee, but to lend a certain dynamism to the flow of reasoning. The poem's real addressees seem to listen as if from outside. Let me consider the relation of address to teaching in three more passages. In l. 153 the speaker introduces a new theme, as if sharing the secret of successful playwriting:

> Tu, quid ego et populus mecum desideret audi.

This *Tu* apparently wants to compose drama, and he is given a piece of advice in l. 156: a character's age-characteristics should be properly represented. Then 18 lines describe the 'Ages of Man' before repetition of the advice creates a frame. This series of commonplaces will probably not contribute significantly to the perfection of a playwright. On the one hand, they suggest that the theatrical public wants their prejudices reassured, and therefore the parade of generally accepted commonplaces might suggest that any innovative idea about age-related human behaviour is unacceptable in the theatre. On the other hand, despite the explicitly non-innovative character of this passage on the level of thought, it is brilliantly written. Another *tour de force* is performed, as though to prove that any material, however jaded, can be presented with poetic glamour. The relatively long and exquisitely written passage is hardly necessary if a didactic purpose is to be fulfilled. Rather, the didactic frame – with the *you*-address which may or may not refer to any of the Pisones – gives an opportunity poetically to embellish a partly theoretical topic.

All the Pisones are addressed in l. 235, but they are not 'taught' there:

> Non ego inornata et dominantia nomina solum
> uerbaque, Pisones, Satyrorum scriptor amabo...

The following passages discuss what vocabulary should be used in satyr plays. The addressees are distinguished from those who actively intend to compose such plays.[1] Presenting the latter group in the first person singular is surprising, and not so much because Horace never wrote satyr plays, but rather because no one else had written them for centuries, and then never in Latin. Instructions on a dead genre? The *Ars Poetica* does not teach here either how to write or to read; it teaches literary history.

There is one passage, however, which directly addresses the elder of the young Piso brothers, giving a piece of personalized advice about literary activity. The advice is preceded by a complaint about the situation that many members of the Roman elite produce poetry, as if a higher social status qualified one to do so. They write bad or mediocre poetry, although only poetry of the highest quality is justified. The addressee of this complaint seems to share the main characteristics of the criticised group, since he himself is a wealthy aristocrat and wants to write. Does the speaker want to dissuade him? It would not be polite or tactful.[2] But of course there is a way out: this Piso, despite being rich, might still be an excellent poet. L. 385 may imply this, or may not.

> Tu nihil inuita dices faciesue Minerua,
> id tibi iudicium est, ea mens.

I translate the sentence without the ablative absolute, which is always tricky: «Due to your taste and intellect, you will not say or create anything». We may suppose that the phrase *inuita Minerua* has a qualitative meaning: «you will not write anything bad, anything in a way of which Minerva doesn't approve», but it may well be causative: «you will not [or even "should not"] write anything, because Minerua does not want you to». And what follows sup-

[1] According to Oliensis 1998, p. 203, even the hypothesis that a Piso could write something in the comic genres would have been an insult.

[2] Armstrong thinks that the whole poem is a possibly polite and tactful dissuasion: a young member of the elite declares the wish to become a professional artist, and the family makes him meet a professional of the highest renown «to realize the limitations either of his talent or of the artistic life itself» (1993, pp. 210-212).

ports this idea of general dissuasion: «however, if you ever *do* write anything…». The real advice then follows: «if you write something, be sure not to publish it». It is shaped in a more roundabout way, to be sure. «If you write something», says Horace, «you should first show it to three reliable [or "notoriously censorious": Frischer 1991, p. 68][1] critics»; and even if they approve, wait nine years before you publish. Then, at least, it will not be a problem for a long time.

If dissuasion is the main purpose of the discourse on the communicative level, the text can also be interpreted as a show of poetic excellence designed to intimidate possible imitators. It does not want to teach you how to create great poetry, but to prove how difficult it is.

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[1] Although this characterisation of all the three critics to be asked for approval depends on Frischer's identification of the father with Piso Caesoninus, which is far from being accepted generally. Cf., e.g., Armstrong 1993, pp. 199-202.