

Caring for the Domus: On the Evolution of Eco-poetics in the West

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This intimate non-fiction essay traces a lineage of Western eco-poetics and ecological thought to its ancient Roman origins by calling upon David Ferry's inspired translations of Horace's Odes, and reading them in light of the philosophical imperatives described by David Orr, Wendell Berry, and other important thinkers, in order to formulate an understanding of how the ongoing environmental crisis is ultimately a crisis of the human spirit. Through creating a linguistic mosaic of Horace's didactic wisdom enmeshed with current sustainability dialogues and personal experience, the essay lays bare the connections and contingencies between poetry, virtue, sustainability, and ecological existence.

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Caring for the Domus: On the Evolution of Ecopoetics in the West

Jesse Curran

In *Earth in Mind*, a bold, radical, and vitally important environmental studies book, David Orr's chapter on virtue has always been my favorite. In my heart, I think of the environmental crisis as one of moral perception.

*Virtue, rejecting everything that's sordid,
Shines with unblemished honor, nor takes up office
Nor puts it down persuaded by any shift
Or the popular wind; virtue shows the way*

*To those who deserve to know it, disdain the crowd,
Taking its flight to heaven on scornful wings;
And he who knows what good faith means, he too
Will be rewarded.¹*

I admire *Earth in Mind* - and deeply admire Orr's willingness to level contemporary cultural critiques while also recognizing their previous articulations in rich intellectual traditions. And while he notes that it has become unfashionable to talk about virtue these days, as a reader and teacher devoted to his words, I work to make it fashionable with my students and in my classroom.² Increasingly, I find students thirsting for a safe place where they can talk about what it means to be a good person, a healthy person, a happy person. And because I teach poetry, this is all rather easy. The classics are, if nothing else, instructive of virtue. And young people, if nothing else, desire a sense of belonging.

¹David Ferry, trans. *The Odes of Horace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 161.

²David Orr, "Virtue," in *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 2004), 60.

Ambitious Phraates is king of Cyprus again?

Virtue dissents from the crowd that calls him happy.

Virtue teaches the proper names of things,

*Expelling the wrong.*³

But why has it become so unfashionable to talk about virtue? Orr explains that in the ancient world “[v]irtue was regarded, first, as an exercise in participation and fulfillment of the obligations of membership in a community that was embedded in a larger cosmic order.”⁴ Perhaps it is community that is lacking, or perhaps the ancient concept of “cosmic order” has been replaced with “human order” imposed upon a cosmic scale, a shift which, at its very essence, places humanity at the forefront of universal existence rather than our being but one small part of an unfathomably larger system. Perhaps virtue is so unfashionable now because of the very contemplation, participation, and obligations it necessitates. Still so, incomprehensible waste and pollution from human overconsumption are damaging our planet in terrifying ways, while the media, malls, smartphones, and supermarkets deprive my culture of connection with any kind of cosmic order. And because in the course of my short lifetime a vast societal shift from communities of virtue to virtual communities has developed, discussions of virtue seem vital and increasingly urgent. On a personal level, I try to understand climate change, species depletion, deforestation, and global poverty as reasons to practice more mindful, compassionate ways of being a human being - to practice radically different ways of being a human being. This is not necessarily easy. The challenges are enormous and the implications are entangled. When I lose my way, I start with the words themselves. “Sustainability” etymologizes from *sustinere*, *sub*, up from below, and *tenere*, to hold up; to hold up from below, to support, and to bear. Sustainability suggests endurance. We must endure our condition. We must learn how to breathe where we are. We must start at the level of the cells.

It is hard. But all of this must be endured,

And by endurance what can never be changed

³Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 107.

⁴Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 61.

*Will be at last made easier in the heart.*⁵

Our lives are human lives; they are rife with grief, disillusionment, and suffering. But still, most of us want to live good lives. “Ecology” etymologizes from the *oikos*. In Latin, the *domus* - the dwelling, the household, the abode.⁶ Ecological thinking begins with intimate identification with our household, which may exist in multiple and varied forms. From the vastness of the earth to the vastness of a single mind, we dwell within our sense of the *domus*. For many of us, our household is both dwelling and those who dwell within. America is a land of households. It is something many of us know intimately, and so, seems a logical place to start. Many of us are fiercely loyal to our families, often the core members of our households. But sometimes our families become isolated, alienated, and cut off from other families. Television and social media draw people away from one another. Material worry and predatory lending have created competition where there might be cooperation. Taking care of our specific *domus*, however, is only one step. In order for humans to transcend the crisis that we currently confront, the household needs to be seen as a much more encompassing metaphor. In order for us to reconnect with the cosmos, households must once again evolve into communities. Horace knew of the household, how to be content with what is, and how important it was for the heart to sing local praises.

Maecenas, when you come to visit me

You will share with me from ordinary cups

⁵Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 65.

⁶Ecocritics often comment on the resonant implications of exploring these etymologies and the ways in which the roots account for the physical structure as well as the inhabitants who reside within. For example, Jean-Francois Lyotard calls attention to the sense of domesticity implicit in the Latin *domus* and Greek *oikos*. He ultimately positions the *oikeion* in opposition to the *politikon*: the “opposition between the *oikeion* and the *politikon* exactly matches up to that between the secluded on one side and the public on the other” (Laurence Coupe, *The Green Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 135). In this essay, I derive my primary understanding of the etymology of “ecology” from Robert Pogue Harrison’s exploration of the deep reaches of these roots. As he writes, “In Greek, *oikos* means ‘house’ or ‘abode’ - the Latin *domus*. In this sense *oikos* and *logos* belong together inseparably, for *logos* is the *oikos* of humanity. Thus the word ‘ecology’ names far more than the science that studies ecosystems; it names the universal human manner of being in the world. As a cause that takes us beyond the end of history, ecology cannot remain naïve about the deeper meaning of the word that summarizes its vocation” (Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 200-201). For Harrison, the heart of ecology implies the intrinsic bond between nature and culture, or between place and people.

*The Sabine wine my household has to offer,
The local table wine of the neighborhood.*

*I put it up myself in a Grecian jug
On the very day, dear friend, when you came back,⁷*

Horace's famous assertion that poetry "wants to instruct or else to delight; / Or, better still, to delight and instruct at once"⁸ is true, and within this matrix happens a profoundly important form of learning. The experience of reading poetry is paradoxical - at once highly subjective, yet also connected to something penetratingly essential, something that has to do with the intrinsic worth of each human life. Poetic production may be thought of as analogical to biodiversity - the more individuated voices added to the mesh, the richer each voice becomes. And then, certain voices endure and become part of our language, our points of reference, our implicit sensibility. These enduring poets say something about us - and continue to speak to us, to guide us. They are our eco-poets. Eco-poetry is not poetry about nature, but poetry, as all poetry is on some level, about the nature of relation. Among other qualities, poetry depends upon rhetorical situations - upon one person addressing an audience or listener. It is about places, situations, and moments in time; it concerns the intimacy of such exchanges and opens a space for consolation. It seeks to educate, cultivate, and nurture the human heart. As a man almost always writing to his friends, Horace is one of Western culture's most enduring poets of relation. He was a dutiful poet and his lines cut swiftly to the essence of life, impelling us to rejoice. Horace is an eco-poet.

*What links me to the gods is that I study
To wear the ivy wreath that poets wear.
The cool sequestered grove in which I play
For nymphs and satyrs dancing to my music*

⁷Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 57.

⁸David Ferry, trans. *The Epistles of Horace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 175.

*Is where I am set apart from other men—*⁹

Right here on suburban Long Island, right now, in the 21st century, Horace has invited me to change my life. He has instructed me as to how the power of poetry might help open the space for my heart to leap. The same might be said for Rilke's archaic Apollo and the reassuring insistence of the poem's famous final turn: *You must change your life.*¹⁰ Horace asks his readers to change their lives. Some of his poems are elegies, mourning life's tragedies. Other poems are more didactically edifying, teaching direct lessons and reminding us to take care of our homes, actions, and words. They offer advice, a pat on the shoulder, an invitation to sit down, to have a glass of wine under a tree, to slow down, and to enjoy the afternoon. Horace's poems engage us, they keep us safe even as they deliver news of our certain mortality and remind us that our grandest ambitions are compost in the end. He reminds us not to get ahead of ourselves and cautions us to be mindful. Right now, our environmental situation necessitates we change our perceptions and behaviors. It necessitates we shift our scales and begin to accept how enmeshed our lives are. The great eco-poets create a space for this to happen. Horace creates a space for this to happen.

All of us together

Are being gathered; the lot of each of us

Is in the shaking urn

With all the other lots, and like the others

Sooner or later our lot

Will fall out from the urn; and so we are chosen to take

Our place in that dark boat,

In that dark boat, that bears us all away

⁹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 5.

¹⁰Stephen Mitchell, trans. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 61.

*From here to where no one comes back from ever.*¹¹

For many people, myself included, the process of conceiving of and reacting to climate change responsibly concerns relocating the ego, with its fears and uncertainties, in the context of cosmic scales. Rather than changing the world, I find it necessary to change myself and evolve my relation to the world. First, I needed to accept the Buddhist trifecta. I will get sick. I will get old. I will die. This is grounds for taking each moment very seriously, yet also, not so seriously. Buddhism is but one of many paths that direct individuals to relocate the ego within a cosmic scale. As human work, this lesson has been reinterpreted for millennia. It was Thoreau's work at Walden - as he journeyed inward to confront the human condition and the facts of life - his study of the Stoic philosophers underpinning his attempt to "stand right fronting and face to face with a fact."¹² And the bottom-line fact is mortality. Horace knew this and he repeated the point over and over again with inarguable certainty. *You are going to die.* The fact that determines all other facts.

When things are bad, be steady in your mind;

Dellius, don't be

Too unrestrainedly joyful in good fortune.

*You are going to die.*¹³

So then what? When we see that we are going to die, as well as all whom we love, what do we do? What do our own lives look like? Is this an excuse for throwing caution to the wind? For being destructive? For not taking responsibility for our bodies, communities, and environments?

It's better not to know.

Either Jupiter says

This coming winter is not

¹¹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 111.

¹²Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹³Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 109.

*After all going to be
The last winter you have,
Or else, Jupiter says
This winter that's coming soon,
Eating away the cliffs
Along the Tyrrhenian Sea,
Is going to be the final
Winter of all*¹⁴

Horace says “no” in what has become one of contemporary culture’s most unfortunate literary misreadings. A misreading that explains much about where we find ourselves now, with oceans rising, the atmosphere thinning, the population exploding, and the media-driven corporate engine telling us that invasive technologies will heal us. *Carpe diem*¹⁵ is perhaps the most well-known expression in Horace’s vast production, yet “seize the day” is neither a battle cry nor an outburst of capitalist zeal. I am drawn to the lines that proceed the famous words: *Be mindful; take good care of your household. The time that we have is short.*¹⁶ Horace is not telling his friend Leuconoe to party hard or forget about tomorrow. Instead, he instructs Leuconoe on what to do in order to be a good person, and further emphasizes the point by warning that “the time that we have is short,” so get to it, as this work must be attended. Ferry translates the Latin *sapias* as, “be mindful,” a choice that permeates throughout the body of work and reflects the Epicurean essence of Horace’s poems. The fate of the future depends upon one’s choices today. This shift in temporal authority is immense. It is the shift from tragedy to comedy. It is the shift from fear to love, from apathy to engagement, from alienation to belonging, from blame to responsibility, from anxiety to endurance - and perhaps most timely, from destruction to sustainability. Since we are going to die, we must be mindful; we must take care of our household. The time that we have is short.

¹⁴Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 33.

¹⁵Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 32.

¹⁶Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 33.

Be mindful.

Take good care of your household.

The time we have is short.

Cut short your hopes for longer.

Now as I say these words,

Time has already fled

Backwards away—

Leuconoe—

Hold on to the day.¹⁷

There are many people actively taking on experiments and practices of sustainable living - people who are working to take good care of their households. I am surrounded by living examples; the new agrarianism is flourishing. People are changing their lives and are holding on to the day. I am thinking of my friends John, a writer, and Shannon, a nurse, who live in the Adirondacks and dedicate their spare time to learning things our generation never had to learn. They have a cider mill, a sugar shack, and a pantry full of garden preserves from out of another century. Another friend left Wall Street after 9/11, sold his brownstone apartment in Brooklyn - and invested in a farm in Cambridge County, just outside of Saratoga. He raises Hereford hogs and sells the meat at the Union Square farmer's market. I am also thinking of the many people who choose to support Community Supported Agriculture food share programs, food co-ops, and farmers' markets. Among my peers, there is a sincere interest in healthy food, equitable food, local food. In my community, in coffee shops, libraries, playgrounds, classrooms, taverns, and parks, there is talk of the common good. A new agrarianism is flourishing, and virtuous motivations lie at its heart.

It wasn't like this at all in Cato's time

Or Romulus's time. Our fathers' ways

Were not these ways. Nobody minded then

¹⁷Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 33.

That his holding was nothing more than a little farm.

*They thought more than about the common good.*¹⁸

In my case, in an old fishing village on the north shore of Long Island, my agricultural ideal is manifested through my husband's small business. He designs, builds, plans, plants, and maintains organic vegetable gardens in suburban yards. After commuting into the city for many years as a foundation contractor, Dylan one day realized, as so many do, that the commute was quite literally killing him. He was done. And so, Home Organic Gardening Service (HOGS) was founded. Although he makes far less money now, he can sleep at night. He's recovering those years that he lost in transit. Every day, he practices as a gardener, a steward of the soil, a planter of fruit trees, and a steady advocate of transitioning lawns into gardens. Within three years, he has installed over a hundred gardens - from Gatsby-style estates on Long Island's Gold Coast to working class suburban front yards to a terrace garden in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. He has installed composting systems, rain catchment systems, and hoop houses to extend the growing season. He has spoken at local libraries, yoga studios, college campuses, pharmaceutical companies - and I've caught him quoting Horace to a room of senior citizens asking about how to keep the weeds down. The idea is simple enough: so many lawns, such wonderful climate, such a need to connect people to food. And most importantly, gardening and sustainable agriculture teach virtue. It's a way of changing your life.

Those virtuous

Romans were taught how to use the Sabine hoe

To till the soil

Of their father's farm and at their mother's call

To carry in

The cut wood when on the hill the shadows shifted

As the sun went down.

*It was the hour of rest for man and beast.*¹⁹

¹⁸Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 139.

¹⁹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 181.

Perhaps HOGS is not really even a business, or is a business so motivated by education that it deconstructs most expectations of what businesses do. The common landscaping model, which exploits poorly paid and unskilled laborers, cannot affirm Dylan's implicit moral ethic. There is no mindfulness there. And so, he does most of the labor with his own two hands. Next year he will not work at the Gatsby-style estate because the owner of that Gold Coast mansion wants the garden in theory, but does not care to integrate it into her awareness and heart. Her hands will never get dirty. And so Dylan and I spend our days reordering values and priorities along these lines. We work on learning skills our parents never taught us - preserving pickles and sauces, drying peppers and herbs, washing greens, and making soups. It is not always easy, this work of manifesting philosophy to action. There is often an acute self-consciousness of the distance between ideal and practice, as well as the contingencies of how each individual interprets the practical application of those ideals. How does one bring the words "business" and "morality" together? What does this negotiation look like when the cost of living on Long Island is exorbitant? How does one live in the suburbs and simultaneously change their fundamental patterns? The questions are daunting and seemingly endless. But we still need to ask them.

The more the money grows the more the greed

Grows too; also the anxiety of greed.

Maecenas, glory of simple knighthood, this

Is the reason I myself was always afraid

Of too much ambition and of rising too high.

The more a man can do without, the more

*The gods will do for him.*²⁰

Growing a garden, having a connection with one's own food, as Wendell Berry has explained for

²⁰Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 211.

decades, is as good a place as any to start building a sustainable future. Growing our own food plants us firmly within the cosmic order; we enter the poetic space of the Georgic. It is among the most local of local actions. Helping a garden grow is a way of cultivating virtue and can be a way of practicing what it means to be a good person. It also encourages a reverence for food and a sense of seasonal ritual - taking pleasure in the simple acts. And while Horace has been accused of being a hedonistic lush, his love of wine and seasonal celebration feels more to me like quiet reassurances of rustic virtue than selfish indulgence. It is within a long and established history of beloved philosophers and poets that Horace, while embracing the ancient idiom *in vino veritas*, continually reminds us to not take ourselves so seriously. Sustainability does not imply that we must lose quality of life. On the contrary, it reminds us of what quality of life is and how to cultivate it with care.

Accept the gift of pleasure when it's given.

Be willing for now to be a private person,

Unworried about the city and how it's doing.

*Put serious things aside.*²¹

Horace's message is consistent: from a certain perspective your life is not so grand and complex. If you worry too much about your state of affairs, you will lose the ability to fully experience the wonders of life. But this is not an excuse for recklessness. Indeed, it is the very reason to care. Don't get ahead of yourself. Your well-being is only as good as your family's, your community's, your nation's. Your well-being is only as good as the food you are growing and the relationships you nurture. Work hard with equanimity and virtue for the right things and then, relax, partake of a bit of wine grown in the neighboring field and watch the sun go down. Make love in your garden. Give thanks for your breath. Be a dignified and playful human being. Don't lose sight of these blessings.

Come, stretch your weary legs out under this tree;

Let's dedicate a feast to Jupiter

²¹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 187.

*Just as we told each other we'd do someday.
I've got good food to eat, good wine to drink,
Come celebrate old friendship under the laurel.*

My reverence for wine and food came into my life when I studied in Siena for a semester as an undergraduate. After graduation, I went back to Italy as soon as I could and spent summers volunteering on farms, mainly in Tuscany. I worked on my Italian and took pleasure in just being there. I fell in love with biodynamic farming, the Slow Food Movement, and cooperative supermarkets - all the while tying grapes, pruning olives, digging potatoes, bottling wine, and jarring pesto. I spent several weeks on a farm outside of Torino where two retired urban workers had decided to give up their jobs in the city to become farmers, running a small business that jars specialty organic sauces and antipasto preserves. I never saw people work so hard. I spent months with a couple outside of Florence who are dedicated to converting an inherited family estate into an *agriturismo* and biodynamic farm system. The land had grown grapes and olives for hundreds of years and they are working to maintain its integrity. More recently, I stayed in the hills outside of San Gimignano for a week with two young parents, who have also relinquished careers and are now making their own bread, wine, and oil. While it is easy and tempting to romanticize this all, the memory of their struggles and tensions is still fresh. I remember that their lives are no freer of bills, markets, and fatigue. Their lives, after all, are still human lives. However, these people, who took me into their homes with open arms, maintain a philosophical awareness, a conscious choice, and a personal investment in their conceptions of virtuous living. They mindfully work to make the old ways of life new. As for me, I had tasted something. I got the smell of the vineyard in my soul. I saw people who were able to be sincerely passionate about their work in the world. I saw a living form of rustic simplicity. I saw people changing their lives.

*The splendid lot of the riches of Africa
Mistakenly thinks he's better off than I,*

*With my little farm whose crops I'm certain of,
And my little quiet stream of pure brook water.²²*

²²Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 213.

I am an unlikely candidate for the classical poets. I never heard Latin in a Catholic mass and my high school French never made it far into the land of conditional and subjective constructions. While for centuries the highly educated learned their Latin from translating Horace, I speak a vulgar-vineyard Italian, learned around dinner tables and practiced out in the fields. An Italian of distinguishing between *canaiolo* and *cabernet*, of *aglio* and *olio*, of pears and candlelight, and of comparing Silvio Berlusconi to George W. Bush. It's a language of explaining, *sono vegetariana di New York. Sono grata per tutto*. Otherwise, I'm a state-schooled suburbanite from a working-class family. Why is this poetry so beguiling?

Torquatus, don't pin your hopes on living forever.

The changing year gives you fair warning not to;

So does that hour that takes away the daylight;

Winter's cold air melts into the warmth of spring;

Then spring is trampled down under the summer;

Summer is buried under the apples of autumn;

And winter comes back in with its ice and cold.

Yet after a time, and time and time again,

The moon restores itself in the nighttime sky.²³

Several years ago, my cousin committed suicide. When I heard the news, I went down to the beach and sat facing the sun. The summer solstice had just passed and the long days were getting warmer, but I felt a biting November in my heart. It was the only suicide of a close relation that I have ever experienced, and the grief vacillated between an intense heaviness and a bewildering and visceral emotional pain. His life had not been easy; his mother had suffered from breast cancer for the majority of his years, and his parents' marriage fell apart in the midst of her illness. He was only thirty-two years old and had been suffering from depression for years. He had been in and out of psychiatrists' offices and was prescribed a staggering array of pharmaceutical drugs. He was my cousin, and I had known him my entire life. The grief and

²³Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 285.

shock were akin to a bad dream, and with suicides, there is added shame and anger. But my pain was negligible in comparison to that which poured out of the eyes of others - his brother, my aunt, my parents, his friends. The hurt I saw in their eyes came from deep within - and the silence surrounding us was palpable. As for me, I could not shake the image that had formed of his final moments. I just saw him hanging there.

*The night is falling; the shades are gathering around;
The walls of Pluto's shadowy house are closing you in.*²⁴

I took David Ferry's translation of the *Odes* down to the beach and watched the late afternoon light blaze across the water and let it warm my flesh. I took the book out from the beach bag and read it alone, in heavy silence. I needed someone to tell me what to do and how to think. Horace was with me, only too willing to oblige.

*Each one of us must leave the earth he loves
And leave his home and leave his tender wife
And leave the trees he planted and took good care of.*²⁵

I had been reading Horace prior to my cousin's death, mainly in the kitchen while waiting for a sauce to simmer or pasta water to boil, having just returned from my twelfth trip to Italy, closing another chapter in my exploration of family farms and enduring landscape. I was basking in my Italy of soft stone and healthy soil. I was riding a high tide. The book of *Odes* was kept open on the kitchen table. Horace was with me, instructing me on what to do and how to think.

*Always expect reversals; be hopeful in trouble,
Be worried when things go well. That's how it is
For the man whose heart is ready for anything.*

²⁴Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 15.

²⁵Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 137.

*It's true that Jupiter brings on the hard winters;
It's also true that Jupiter takes them away.
If things are bad right now, they won't always be.*²⁶

Such is life. One day, slicing tomatoes in pure pleasure. The next day, mourning the most bewildering of acts. *Bewilder* - to be led astray - to be led into the wild.²⁷ Herein lie my personal reasons for studying literature, for reaching toward it. Amidst radical uncertainty, literature presents opportunities for empathetic identification, counsel, and compassion. Through words it reveals wisdom beyond words. It teaches how to be a good person, even, especially, in the face of our bewildering existence. At the center of sorrow, one finds a quiet beauty in the pervasive rhythms of the world. Poetry, like grief, heightens the senses - each leaf trembles and each azalea blossom seems impossibly flush. Poetry touches the infinite, and its worth is immeasurable. It was poetry Horace gave me.

It is poetry you love.

*It is poetry I can give, and I know its worth.*²⁸

Looking back, I can see how that June Horace was guiding me across the highest of heights and the lowest of lows. Horace was on both sides of the solstice. Horace was teaching me equanimity.

*Flowers don't bloom forever; and as for the moon,
It never stays the same. The brightness dims.
Why weary yourself staring into the dark,
Trying to see what eyes are unable to see?*²⁹

²⁶Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 127.

²⁷I am also thinking of David Ferry's most recent book of poetry, *Bewilderment*, a beautiful collection of poems that exemplifies the power of song in the perplexing face of pain, fear, and loneliness.

²⁸Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 287.

The Ancient Greeks expressed mental equanimity through the concept of *ataraxia*, a state of mind that is unperturbed and tranquil; *ataraxia* suggests inner peace. It is what so many of us are after, and it can provide a philosophical means of mediating our most destructive societal compulsions: competition, consumerism, overconsumption, addiction, etc. It can also address the paralyzing anxiety we feel from awareness of our mortality. But *ataraxia* takes work. It asks us to practice acceptance and is both process and product. As Robert Pogue Harrison so perceptively puts it, “[A]*taraxia* is in fact a highly cultivated state of mind, one whose attainment requires systematic discipline, education, and unconditional devotion to the ‘true philosophy’ of Epicureanism.”³⁰ While not strictly and solely Epicurean, Horace’s odes explain well its tenets, as they intimately touch the contingencies of human desire for steadiness that can endure suffering. This poetry teaches me to not stare too long into the dark, but rather to turn my face to the sunlight, to take care of what I can, and to put my anxieties aside.

It is wise of the god to conceal in the dark of the future

Whatever it is that is going to come to pass.

The god is amused at our anxieties.

Take care of things you need to take care of today.

*Everything else is as if borne on the Tiber.*³¹

We can think of philosophies of virtue as therapeutic philosophies. In Buddhist philosophy, equanimity, or *upekkha* in Sanskrit, is one of the divine virtues - and perhaps surpasses *ataraxia* in its concern for collective well-being. But in the West, as Martha Nussbaum explains, the Epicureans, Sceptics, and Stoics “all conceived philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life. They saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose

²⁹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 129.

³⁰Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 74. I am deeply indebted to Harrison’s chapter “The Garden School of Epicurus,” and his exposition and bibliographic notes on Epicurean philosophy and the concept of *ataraxia*. Indeed, this essay is dedicated to Harrison’s work on gardens, for providing an elegant line between scholarship and praxis - between poetry and experience.

³¹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 251.

arts could heal many perverse types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery.”³² Philosophy as immersion, compassion, and a process of addressing and healing human suffering. Philosophy inextricably tied to meditative practices. As Epicurus explains, “Let us show our feeling for our lost friends not by lamentation but by meditation.”³³

*Virgil, many are they who mourn for him,
But none like you who mourn so, ceaselessly.
Your pious grief, alas, can never persuade
The gods to alter the terms that gave him life.*

*Suppose you were able to play the lyre
Even more skillfully than Orpheus played it,
Causing the very trees to listen to him,
What good would it do? Could the music restore*

*Blood to the veins of the empty shade of one
Who has died?*³⁴

In those days after my cousin’s suicide, Horace’s words were certainly doing the work of a compassionate physician. But there was more. If the philosopher is the compassionate physician, then who shall the poet be? Perhaps the poet will emerge as an intimate friend. Among Horace’s closest friends was Maecenas, his patron and great source of emotional strength.

³²Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 174.

³³Quoted in Stephanie Mills, *Epicurean Simplicity* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003), 182. I am also indebted to Mills’ powerful meditation on the relationship between Epicurean philosophy and contemporary sustainability praxis.

³⁴Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 65.

Neither the gods nor I

Desire that you should go

Before me into death.

Your friendship is the thing

My life most glories in.

*It is what most sustains me.*³⁵

In reading Horace's odes, I get the sense that he was a good friend. So many of his odes are addressed to his companions, offering advice, humor, and consolation. And of course, Virgil and Horace were friends, sharing in the patronage of Maecenas and sharing affection for poetic language and the Italian landscape. As Sam Hamill quotes Carolyn Kizer on Chinese poetry: "It teaches us the value of friendship. / And you may not believe it, but that's far / more important than husbands, wives, even / children. Because what are you if you are / not first of all a friend?"³⁶ Friendship is an ancient virtue, treasured by the Epicureans not only because it enabled *ataraxia*, but also because, as Harrison writes, "nothing sweetens the flavor of life as much as good companionship."³⁷ Without friendship, there is no intimacy. Without friendship, there is no community. Without friendship, there is no reason for poetry.

Bring Virgil, your charge, the other half of my heart,

*Safely to the place where he is going.*³⁸

When Dylan and I had decided upon marriage, we were determined to keep our focus on existential concerns of love, life, family, and friendship, while avoiding at all costs forces of commodification, consumption, and media-generated statements of conformity. Elopement seemed a natural option and Italy already had our hearts. During the months prior to eloping, we read Ferry's translation of *The Georgics* aloud to one another over dinner. It was symbolic of

³⁵Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 145.

³⁶Sam Hamill, *Dumb Luck* (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2002), 11.

³⁷Harrison, *Gardens*, 76.

³⁸Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 11.

something, perhaps of the type of life we are building together. As usual, I took notes in the margins, translating Virgil into a means of daily guidance: *pay attention, expect reversals, keep your senses open, our condition is to work, stay close to the day, pay homage, be deferent, celebrate the seasons, it has never been easy*. Virgil's *Georgics* are a treasure trove of ecological virtue, and page after page offer songs of deference, humility, connectedness, steady work, and observation. And perhaps most importantly, they are poems of ecological pride - songs of gratitude to the *patria* - to the land that sustains - to the land that endures.

This is the place where Jove

Kindly permits the spring

To last for a long time

And kindly permits the winter

To be as mild as can be.

Septimius, Tarentum

And the blessed hills around it,

The countryside of my childhood,

*Summon you and me.*³⁹

We chose Siena and got married in the Palazzo Pubblico, which still houses wedding documents from the 14th century. After our civic ceremony, Barbara, my former art history professor, who was in attendance, gave us a personal tour of the famous frescos adorning the main hall. We spent the most time admiring Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government*, from the early 14th century. The fresco represents the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and charity - and is part of a larger narrative of the balance between city and country. As Barbara was explicating Lorenzetti's influence and relevance from medieval history to modern times, I made eye contact with Dylan and thought *this is it* - this is why we came here to do this. This is our work in the world. This was Virgil's Italian landscape, this was Horace's sense of the *domus*. This was a place that has endured in our cultural heritage; we were standing in the center of an intellectual tradition that felt real to us. I had had the same tour as a twenty-year-old, but ten years later the figures were newly illuminated in my eyes. They speak to Italy's on-going civic

³⁹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 119.

sensibility. Siena is a place of dignity and pride. Passionate regionalism is still very much a part of Italian agriculture and cuisine and is reflected in strict policies concerning food processing and management. It is no surprise that the Slow Food movement was born in Italy and thrives there and that our farm-to-table wedding feast was a familiar pleasure there rather than a trendy exception. Sometimes it is easy to forget how essential the Italian landscape was to the ancient Roman poets - and how the wisdom of their words endures today.

“O blessed guardian, grant that there may be

Long-lasting holiday for Italy.”

Thus the prayer we make when the day begins;

*Thus with our wine we pray when the sun goes down.*⁴⁰

I don't mean to suggest that the motion toward *ataraxia* is easy. Some days it feels like I am swimming against the tides, attempting to mediate the self-defeatism of being an adjunct professor on an academic job market in a profession that is constantly declaring itself dead or dying. Teaching courses in environmental literature and sustainability can be equally daunting - introducing students to mind-boggling problems to which there are no easy answers. There is an acute awareness of our living in a socio-economic environment that thrives on competition and an increasing reliance on technology to communicate and feign social intimacy. And there are the inner negotiations; the self-consciousness of a young writer just beginning to send ten years of quiet writing off to the presses. To make what is essential to my inner self exposed to public perception, and available to the world, is its own challenge. Despite this all, a commitment to *ataraxia* reminds me to be mindful, to hold on to the day.

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

⁴⁰Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 279.

*As evening comes on, there are whispers of lovers, there's laughter.*⁴¹

Whatever the day might bring, at night Dylan and I prepare our garden vegetables. Our meals have become ceremonial. We light candles, we toast a glass of table wine, we eat slowly. We spend our evenings in conversation - the highest Epicurean pleasure. We express reverence for our food, for the process of preparing our meals, and gratitude for how our lives allow us the occasion for such pleasure. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, and so we give thanks for today. We write it down in our hearts. We exist in the moment of eating, of conversation, and of being together.

All you need to do

Is adorn your little home-made

Images of the gods

With rosemary and myrtle.

So long as the hands are pure

The offering is made with

You need do nothing more

Than lay upon the fire

An offering of meal

*And crackling country salt.*⁴²

The finest translated works have an essential quality that allows them to proceed with grace and honesty, transcending time and culture with wisdom and humility, even as they ask us to dwell in uncertainty, recognizing the impossibility of their task. David Ferry has made Horace

⁴¹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 29.

⁴²Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 228-229.

and Virgil accessible as never before. For some time, I have been attempting to work up the eloquence to thank him for his translations, which, in particular, seem to hold a critical contemporary resonance. Why does he choose the phrase “the middle way” and the word “mindful”? Ferry’s choices touch the meditative quality of the Horatian sensibility and tap into a poetic-philosophical ethos that can guide us today. They lay bare Horace’s virtue ethics and reveal the resilient eco-poetic roots of modern western thought. Ferry makes the poems real and relevant once again. For this, I am grateful.

That man does best

Who chooses the middle way, so he doesn’t end up

Living under a roof that’s going to ruin

*Or in some gorgeous mansion everyone envies.*⁴³

We can critique Horace’s moral ethic if we like; we can discount it fully because we know that he held slaves and drank wine. We may call him privileged, indulgent, and lazy. And while doing so, we might also look to our own lives and ask ourselves by which moral ethic we navigate, and perhaps, at that moment, we may even muster the courage to consider the slave labor and devastating environmental impact upon which most of our food, clothing, and technological gadgetry depends. We can examine our own anxieties to own more than we need, to travel in search of happiness, to numb our minds with smart devices, to replace real health and beauty with health and beauty products, to watch television rather than commune socially, and to keep busy and entertained so as to avoid the effects of this grasping. Ecological thinking implies we are complicit in everything. And so, when I look at my life, I end up returning to virtues like patience, equanimity, friendship, and gratitude. I return to being present, right here, right now. I return to Virgil’s simple mantras, his daily repetitions. *Pay attention, expect reversals, keep your senses open, our condition is to work, stay close to the day, pay homage, be deferent, celebrate the seasons, it has never been easy.* These words of wisdom and a few deep deliberate breaths bring mindfulness and clarity to even the most challenging of situations. They guide me and prepare me for what is to come.

⁴³Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 127.

*Why do we try so hard to own so much?
Why go south in the winter to find the sun?
Who ever went away to a foreign country
And got away from himself?*

*Care scrambles aboard the rich man's brass-trimmed yacht;
Outruns the swiftest horses; outruns the deer;
Is swifter than Eurus, the squall-wind, driving the clouds,
Raising a sudden storm.*

*Let the heart rejoice in whatever it has right now;
Don't worry about whatever might come in the future;
Turn it aside with a smile. There's no such thing
As an absolute guaranteed bliss.⁴⁴*

It is for this attention to mindfulness practices that I referenced Sam Hamill earlier. Although borne of a different tradition of meditation, Hamill's life work also affirms an underlying humility - a poetry that resonates as meditative eco-poetic practice. Hamill's work expresses a resilient capacity to endure and face the hard facts of life. He writes, "I / invest in the certainty of my own death / no time to squander and no need to rush."⁴⁵ There are others whose lifeworks epitomize eco-poetic practice. William Stafford comes to mind, a self-admitted poet of praise who woke early every morning to take a jog and then write with the rising sun. For Stafford, the "greatest ownership / of all is to glance around and understand."⁴⁶ Mary Oliver also exhibits this daily practice - her forays into the Blackwater woods or down the Provincetown coastline time and time again reveal her wonder with the world. Her perceptions are inexhaustible. These are writers of elegies and odes, poets of the seasons. Their lifework is fieldwork, full of daily dedications and affirmations of virtue. The ideal made real in the flesh.

⁴⁴Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 141.

⁴⁵Hamill, *Dumb Luck*, 91.

⁴⁶William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul: Greywolf, 1998), 108.

Poets of pilgrimage and praise. Poets of endurance, who teach us to love, to alleviate sorrow, to be mindful, and to sustain.

Love only as it is fitting; do not desire

That which you ought not to have. Phyllis, listen to me:

You are the last of my loves; there will be no others.

Come, learn a new song and sing it to me, for song

*Is the means, in your beautiful voice, to alleviate sorrow.*⁴⁷

Although many modern critics have challenged the classics because the culture from which they emerged celebrated war and empire, held superstitious rituals involving virgins and sacrifice, and had customs involving human bondage, servitude, and patriarchy, there is still much of value to be found in their ancient pages. There are connections that transcend time and geography and firmly root themselves within the human heart. The essence of these enduring texts rings relevant now as it has for millennia. They have endured because of their delightful deployment of needed wisdom and because they encourage intimate conversations about virtue. As I write, such conversations are happening around the world - in classrooms and on community boards - amongst neighbors and friends. When we wonder what the environmental humanities are, we can think about the tradition of didactic poetry. Beyond what might be in or out of academic fashion, we collectively ask questions concerning the common good. What this looks like in literary studies is a return to a comparative sensibility, a desire for an inclusive humanism, which favors diversity above all else. It looks like a patient multiplicity and signals a return to practical and translatable ethics. Will this be our hardest work? Perhaps, but it is also our greatest responsibility. It is happening now. It happens when we choose to believe in the genuine goodness of people. It has to do with mindfulness and an attempt to slow down. It has to do with comfort in uncertainty and making proper use of the gifts we have been given. It has to do with locating a cosmic scale.

It isn't the man who owns a great many things

Who's rightly called blessed; the man is blessed who knows

⁴⁷Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 287.

What it means to make a proper use of the gifts

The gods have given, and knows

What hardship is and how it is to be borne;

Who's more afraid of shame than he is of death,

And who's not afraid to give his life for his friends,

*Or for his native country.*⁴⁸

While virtue ethics is obviously essential to sustainability, so too is poetry. So integral, in fact, that it runs the danger of being overlooked. The tradition of didactic poetry is flush with wisdom and counsel delivered with subtlety and complexity. Whatever happens in the trying years ahead, as the ramifications of industrial capitalism continue to reveal themselves and as we encounter ethical questions surrounding the continued modifications of life through technology, we might take some time to read poetry and practice living virtuous lives, tend to our *domus*, and strengthen our communities. We might remember how important it is to be a good friend and to know the seasons of a place, taking notice of its flora and fauna. We can offer gratitude for slow food and delight in the gift of conversation. We can recite one of Horace's poems around the dinner table and recall our ability to change our lives.

But as for me, my simple meal consists

Of chicory and mallow from the garden

And olives from the little olive tree.

Apollo grant that I be satisfied

With what I have as what I ought to have,

And that I live out my old age with honor,

⁴⁸Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 293.

*In health of mind and body, doing my work.*⁴⁹

As for me, I've stopped punishing myself. I've come to recognize my sense of belonging in the *oikos*, the Staffordian comfort of the journal and the classroom, and the swift line of poetry's reaching from inner depths to outer expanse. My self-consciousness, which used to feel paralyzing, now finds the necessary strength to guide action that engages in this place, at this time. In health of mind and body, I keep working. I meditate on my own mortality and feel gratitude for friendship and for what comes from the garden; these things I know for sure.

Happy the man who has earned the right to say:

*"I've lived my life; there may be storms tomorrow,
Maybe fair weather. Nobody knows for sure."*⁵⁰

Milia Gratiar Quintus Horatius Flaccus. Publius Vergilius Maro. David Ferry. David Orr. Henry David Thoreau. Robert Pogue Harrison. Stephanie Mills. Martha Nussbaum. Sam Hamill. Mary Oliver. William Stafford.

⁴⁹Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 83.

⁵⁰Ferry, *The Odes of Horace*, 253.

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