CHAPTER TWO

SOCIETY, IAMBIC RAGE, AND SELF-DESTRUCTION
(EPODES 1–7)

The first of the Epodes feature an iambic marching off to war. “Rage armed Archilochus with the iamb, the appropriate meter” (Archilochum proprio rabies armavit iambo, Ars 79). This warring mentality gains momentum through the first seven epodes until rage and its invective infect all levels of Roman society, so that individuals are in conflict within themselves and Romans battle against each other. No one is satisfied; everyone violated.¹ There will be lighter moments, but overall these will be dominated by an iambic that announces a fragmented society. This is the time for Horace’s iambic.

Complicating Loyalties (Epodes 1–4)

Horace starts by complicating friendship. Epode 1 gives no indication that his loyalty for Maecenas is anything but genuine, and that is the problem.² If Horace’s “friendly” (amice) first address to Maecenas poises his iambics “on the brink of the battle of Actium,”³ then it also balances Actium on the edge of each person’s own patronage: civil conflict played out because of social obligations:

Ibis Liburnis inter alta navium,
amice, propugnacula,

¹ Compare Girard’s (1972: 49–57) sacrificial crisis, which precipitates tragedy: “As in Greek tragedy and primitive religion, it is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos . . .” (51). In Horace’s iambi, Rome’s internal crisis grows out of twin killing twin (epode 7), the ultimate symbol for a crisis of distinctions and the menace non-differentiation engenders (Girard: 57–67).

² Horace represents his decision to follow Maecenas as a conscious choice (quid nos, v.5), which is an essential ingredient in the ancient conception of friendship (cf. Cic. Am.).

³ So Oliensis (1998: 64) begins her chapter, “Making faces at the mirror: the Epodes and the civil war.” Barchiesi (2001: 141), while also quoting Oliensis, designates the Epodes “civil-war poetry.” He warns against interpretations that artificially divide political from private poems.
paratus omne Caesaris periculum
subire, Maecenas, tuo.

5 quid nos, quibus te vita si superstite
iucunda, si contra, gravis?

roges tuum labore quid iuvem meo
imbellis ac firmus parum:
comes minore sum futurus in metu,
qui maior absentis habet,
ut adsidens inplumibus pullis avis

20 serpantium allapsus timet
magis relictis, non, ut adsit, auxili
latura plus praesentibus.

libenter hoc et omne militabitur
bellum in tuae spem gratiae,

(epode 1.1–6, 15–24)

Go you will, friend, on Liburnian galleys among ship-towers, ready, Maecenas, to match Caesar’s every danger with your own. What about me, whose life is worth living only if you survive, otherwise burdensome?

Perhaps you ask how any labor of mine might help yours, since I am passive and weak? At least as your companion I will suffer less fear, since with separation fear grows, as a bird, devoted to her fledgling chicks, fears the slippery serpent sliding near more when she has to leave her brood, even though when right there with them her help avails no more. Gladly will I fight this and every war to earn your favor.

Horace is a genius at first words, and ibis sets the mood and problem for the poem and the entire collection—Sturm und Drang.4 Horace does not open with safe anonymity. He cuts loose with a second person address to his friend and patron, which heads Maecenas straight into war. “You will fight, because Caesar is going to war; and because you will go, I

4 Horace’s first words often encapsulate the whole. Ibis, epode 1 (“You will go”), introduces a song that announces a voyage to Actium, travels to the ends of the earth when the poet declares that he will follow Maecenas anywhere, journeys back from war to Horace’s country retreat, and ends in the world of comedy. The movement of the whole, from warring to laughter, epitomizes the tensions conveyed in Horace’s iambic praxis. Note also qui fit, S. I.1 (“how does it happen that”): the question sets the tenor for all of Horatian satire, which lampoons people for their lack of common sense in every day living; omnibus hoc vitium, S. I.3 (“everyone has this fault”): a critique on the Stoic principle that all sins are equal; lupis et agnis, epode 4 (“wolves and lambs”): class conflict over the success of an upstart slave; mollis inertia, epode 14 (“effeminate idleness”): Horace is too love-sick to finish his iambics for Maecenas; altera, epode 16 (“second”): a second rant against the destruction civil war brings to another generation; parcius, C. I.25 (“more infrequently”): a curse on Lydia who is losing her sex appeal, which she should realize since fewer lovers are calling at her door; intactis, C. III.24 (“untouched”): the damning nature of money and greed, both better left alone.