

WINTER 2018

ARION

A JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND THE CLASSICS

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Cold Copulars: Notes Toward a Horatian Stevens

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QUINTUS HORATIUS FLACCUS and Wallace Stevens may seem strange bedfellows, but they are often mine. If for no other or greater reason than this, they have become each other's as well. I happen to believe that there *are* other and greater reasons for mingling these two poets, but I wish to make clear at the outset that the present commentary upon their poetic manifestos is first and foremost personal.¹ If I shall have succeeded, to some degree, in illuminating the scholar's dark, all the better. If not, may the darkness at least be visible.

What, besides my bed, do Horace and Stevens share?² Several precursors, to be sure. Among the Greeks, they count as mutual begetters Homer, Empedocles, and Plato;³ among the Romans, Catullus, Lucretius, and Vergil constitute a common patrimony.⁴ More essential, however, is their profound interest in the existence and lineage of so lofty and slippery an idea as sublimity. Though he prefers to refer to it as "nobility," Stevens, like his Longinian forebear, takes this capacious concept to mean something like "our spiritual height and depth."⁵ Such a characterization calls to mind a further similarity between the two poets: both are notoriously evasive, not least when probing the sublime. It is precisely this probing and evasion that, for me, most closely links Horace's *Ars poetica* and Stevens' "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Both masquerade as didactic works, but are, above all, godless texts, poems of the earth, and songs of self. Both are divided into three parts: the *Ars*, if Philodemus is to be trusted, comprises sections on *poema*, *poesis*, and *poeta*;⁶ "Notes," at least according to its own headings,

treats the necessity of the supreme fiction's being abstract, changing, and giving pleasure.

This commentary, too, is tripartite: each section takes as its jumping-off point a selection of cantos from the corresponding section of Stevens' poem. My sole and simple aim is to enhance appreciation of the two works in question by interpreting them in each other's light—light for which they themselves seem to clamor. Horace's forward-facing *Ars* does, after all, present itself as a letter to future poets, while the backwards-glancing first word of "Notes" (the conjunction "And") logically entails something prior. Stevens' intricately evasive first word introduces one question ("for what, except for you, do I feel love?") while also implying another: to what is the present poem being conjoined? A full answer might, in the language of the poem itself, be: to "the whole / the complicate, the amassing harmony" of supreme fictions (that is, sublimities) upon which Stevens' nervous sensitivity has at one time or another fallen. A partial and more demonstrable answer is Horace's *Ars*, whose very first verb (*iungere*, to join) heralds a similar preoccupation with the idea of juncture. And so, let us turn now to the poems themselves.

I. PROPOUNDING ABSTRACTIONS

THE CONJUNCTION which stands, Janus-like, at the head of "Notes" respects Homeric precedent by whisking its attentive reader *in medias res* (*Ars* 148).⁷ The poem proper, however, begins in the beginning, thereby bowing to an altogether different tradition:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
 Of this idea nor for that mind compose
 A voluminous master folded in his fire.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
 Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
 That has expelled us and our images . . .

The death of one god is the death of all.
 Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
 Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
 A name for something that never could be named.
 There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
 Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
 In the difficulty of what it is to be.

“Begin, ephebe,” the Sage of Hartford declares, adopting a didactic tone reminiscent of Horace’s initial injunction to his own youthful audience: *Credite, Pisones* (Believe me, Piso boys, 5). Stevens’ initial emphasis on perception may likewise have roots in his precursor’s poem: to his own ephebe the Roman poet says, *quidquid praecipies esto brevis, ut cito dicta / percipiant animi dociles teneantque fideles* (whatever precepts you offer, be brief, in order that docile minds may swiftly perceive and faithfully retain your sayings, 335–36). Stevens, that most erudite of elephants, appears to perceive the wordplay here (*praecipies* ~ *percipiant*) and to permit it to ramify in his own first canto: “perceiving” ~ “inconceivable” (lines 1 and 3), “suppose” ~ “compose” (7 and 8), “Phoebus” ~ “ephebe” (16). Such wordplay confers upon the two poems a unity of the sort assiduously evaded in the opening of the *Ars* but nonetheless recommended at the close of its first section: *denique sit quiduis, simplex dumtaxat et unum* (let [the work of art] be whatever you wish, but at

least let it be a single **homogeneous** whole, 23). Horace's *simplex* denotes "simple, plain, uncompounded, unmixed" (*Lewis & Short*, s.v. 1)—deceptively, since the *Ars* as a whole strives vehemently (at least on the surface) against all such descriptors. According to Brink's magisterial commentary, *simplex* is the opposite of *uarius* (diverse).⁸ It is also, in a different sense, the opposite of the word upon which Stevens alights at the end of his first canto: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the **difficulty** of what it is to be." Like the *Ars*, "Notes" both violates its own dictum (by assigning a name to that which it claims must not be named) and invites us to contemplate the difficulty of things which appear simple: "to be" ought to be simple, consisting as it does of just two monosyllables and free from such attachments as we have already seen clinging to "Begin." That it is not, however, is clear enough from the complex syntax in which this infinitive is couched: "what it is to be" may be parsed as either "that which being entails" ("is" as copula) or "that which it will be" ("is" as auxiliary in a future periphrastic construction). Existence, Stevens seems to say, always has been and always will be difficult. Why should poetry be otherwise?

Horace, in his own discussion of beginnings, appears to concur: *inceptis grauibus plerumque et magna professis / purpureus, late qui splendeat, unus et alter / adsuitur pannus* (On to weighty and grandiloquent beginnings is often sewn a purple patch or two, to lend some splendor, *Ars* 14–16). The purple patch represents easy, low-hanging fruit, fine for apple-pickers but to be forgotten by aspiring poets. Why, then, does Stevens, in the tercet below, take the bait?

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber

Does not "purple Phoebus" inaugurate a *purpureus pannus* (a purple patch) of the sort proscribed by Horace? Indeed, the two phrases occur in closely corresponding locations within

their respective poems' lengthy ambits (*Ars* 15–16, "Notes," 14). Note, too, the painterly aura of the Stevensian lines, the purple and umber shades which bring us back to the first idea—or at least the first grammatical subject—of the Horatian poem (the *pictor*, or painter, in line 1). What is more, both the *Ars* and "Notes" imbue their purple patches with an aural splendor: with Horace's alliterative *cum lucus et ara Dianae / et properantis aquae per amoenos ambitus agros . . . describitur* (when Diana's grove and altar and the course of the river rushing through pleasant plains is described, 16–18), compare the gentle hum of Apollo's slumbering "in autumn umber." What Stevens gives us here is, quite literally, a twin to Horace's own purple patch, a sonorous sun-god to complement his precursor's moon-goddess.

What do these purple patches portend? Nothing short of divine death in the case of "Notes" and divine dearth in the case of the *Ars*. Both poems, as I read them, are essentially godless. To the best of my knowledge, this is not a descriptor previously attached to the *Ars*, and yet this longest of Horatian poems (476 lines) really does keep the celestial volume to a divine minimum. Granted, there is mention of Apollo in line 407, but there he is merely the vocal accompanist to the lyric Muse (*cantor Apollo*), no far-shooting, silver-bowed superhuman intervening in mortal affairs, and no savior as back in the day of Horace's *Satires* 1.9. And granted, there are a couple of references to Diana, first for local decoration (as indicated above), and later as a circumlocution for lunacy (*iracunda Diana*, 454). But like her brother, in Horace's poem Diana is a god in name rather than in deed. Be that as it may, divinity is not so much absent from the *Ars* as it is relocated: just a few lines before we hear of *cantor Apollo*, we encounter *diuinis uatibus* (godly bards, 400), who themselves look ahead to the figure of Empedocles (on whom more below). "Poetry," to quote Stevens in another poem, "must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns." Perhaps it is already beginning to do so in Horace's *Ars poetica*.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" is more unabashedly godless and iconoclastic than is its Horatian precursor. It alludes to the same deities as does the *Ars*, but reduces them to their solar and lunar aspects, turning them into one of the many opposite pairs upon which "Notes" depends. The godless stance of the Stevensian poem is clearest in a syllogism that we readers are left to complete: Our poet gives us (A) "The death of one god is the death of all," and (B) "Phoebus is dead, ephebe." From these two propositions we deduce (C) All gods are dead. This godlessness is crucial to both the *Ars* and "Notes," for it leaves Horace and Stevens free to fill the space vacated by divinity, to justify the ways of would-be gods (Empedocles and Canon Aspirin), and in so doing to become themselves not-unbecoming men that strove with gods.

The first canto of "Notes" delights in washing ("in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven / That has expelled us and our images") the film from our feeble, Phoebus-loving eyes. As I see it, the sixth canto—arguably the poem's most perplexing—performs a similar purificatory function. This time, however, "Notes" is not content merely to scrub away the gods, gunk, and grime that have accumulated on the image of the first idea. Rather, it seeks to call into question both the image itself and our perception thereof:

Not to be realized because not to
Be seen, not to be loved nor hated because
Not to be realized. Weather by Franz Hals,

Brushed up by brushy winds in brushy clouds,
Wetted by blue, colder for white. Not to
Be spoken to, without a roof, without

First fruits, without the virginal of birds,
The dark-blown ceinture loosened, not relinquished.
Gay is, gay was, the gay forsythia

And yellow, yellow thins the Northern blue.
Without a name and nothing to be desired,

If only imagined but imagined well.

My house has changed a little in the sun.
The fragrance of the magnolias comes close,
False flick, false form, but falseness close to kin.

**It must be visible or invisible,
Invisible or visible or both:**
A seeing and unseeing in the eye.

The weather and the giant of the weather,
Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air:
An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.

There is, in these twenty-one verses, much that deserves elucidation, but I have bolded and will discuss in isolation only those particulars that seem to me to impinge upon the question of the Stevensian poem's relation to its Horatian precursor. At the center of this canto's eighth line is the strange word "ceinture," meaning "a girding, encompassing, or encircling; enclosure, environment, compass, embrace, 'girdle'" (*OED* s.v. 1a). What is it doing here? Why is it dark-blown? Why is it loosened, not relinquished? On these questions past commentators have, so far as I am aware, said nothing to satisfy the reason and little to satisfy the imagination.

The word "ceinture" is literally central to its verse and figuratively central not only to its canto but also to "Notes" as a whole. As such, it merits our close attention. I hear, muffled beneath the words "dark-blown ceinture," the phrase "dark-brown center." The latter points both backward ("There was a muddy centre before we breathed") and forward ("the angel . . . / Forgets the gold centre") in the poem. The notion of centrality is prominent throughout "Notes," occurring for the first time in the introductory octave ("For a moment in the central of our being / The vivid transparence that you bring is peace") and for the last time in the penultimate canto of "It Must Give Pleasure" (where we see a leaf "spinning its eccentric measure").⁹ Enter Horace, whose

notion of *aurea Mediocritas* (the golden mean, *Odes* 2.10.5) I take to underlie all of this Stevensian centrality—to be, in fact, the “gold centre” which the Canon Aspirin’s necessary angel can forget but which the poet himself cannot. Only when we near the end of “Notes” do we hear Stevens successfully evading his precursor’s golden mean. Hitherto focused on centrality, the poem finally swerves in the direction of eccentricity. At the same time, the notion of moderation is not relinquished, but loosened, taking up residence in the word which “eccentric” is made to modify: “measure.” Stevens’ move away from the “gold centre” in “Notes” is reminiscent of Horace’s emphatic denunciation of *mediocritas: mediocribus esse poetis / non homines, non di, non concessere columnae*” (for poets to be middling is a thing which neither men nor gods nor billboards allow, *Ars* 372–73). As Philip Hardie puts it in his own notes upon these Horatian lines, “*mediocritas* is not *aurea* . . . when it comes to poetic achievement.”¹⁰

In the “amassing harmony” of Stevens’ poem “ceinture” has other implications as well. Another “crypt word”—a term coined by John Shoptaw to denote “verbal material recoverable from but not (wholly) present in the poetic text and *marker* for the word(s) echoing or tracing this material on the page”¹¹—which appears hitherto to have escaped the intelligence successfully is the French *peinture*, itself derived from the Latin noun *pictura* (a painting). Hence Franz Hals and all of the painterly language that permeates Stevens’ most abstract canto: “brushy winds,” “wetted by blue,” “colder for white,” “yellow, yellow thins the Northern blue.” Hence “dark-blown,” a strange compound whose second element suggests glass-blowing (not to mention seeing through a glass, darkly), but whose first element brings us face to face once more with the painter’s palette. Hence “loosened, not relinquished”: the poem’s initial painterly aura (“Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest”) resurfaces and reminds us of what is probably the *Ars poetica*’s most famous dictum (*ut pictura poesis*, 361).

There remains at least one more layer of paint to be peeled away here, and, as so often in Stevens, it involves a return to etymological roots: “ceinture,” an awfully uncommon word, comes from the Latin verb *cingere* (to gird), a derived form of which figures prominently in Horace’s own discussion of abstractions (*abdita rerum*, 49). According to the *Ars*, abstractions sometimes necessitate words never before heard by the “kilted” (*cinctutis*, 50) Cethegi. Like “ceinture,” *cinctutis* is a strange word. As Brink comments, it is “probably a Horatian coinage, humorously apt in this passage.”¹² Through the word “ceinture” and all that it encompasses—center (plus *aurea Mediocritas*), *peinture* (plus *pictura*), and (*mirabile dictu!*) *cinctutis*—“Notes” loosens but does not relinquish its grip on the *Ars*.

After girding his most abstract canto in Horatian garb, Stevens attempts to throw an invisibility cloak over it. Alas, this cloak turns out to be no less tainted than “ceinture.” In the lines of the *Ars* immediately preceding those containing the play on *praecipere* and *percipere*, Horace makes a grand claim about poets’ intentions: *Aut prodesse uolunt aut delectare poetae / aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere uitae* (Poets wish either to be of use or to please, or at one and the same time to say things which are both pleasant and suitable, 333–34). From here appears to spring the Stevensian formulation “It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both.” The words have changed but the idea has not: *either* A or B, or (on second thought) *both* A and B. Both statements are chiasmic, each in its own way. Although the later poem’s emphasis on revelation and concealment may seem a far cry from its precursor’s focus on profit and pleasure, it is merely an abstractification of an idea implicit in the *Ars*, a poem which conceals at least as much as it reveals—or, as Ovid might articulate the matter, a poem in which *ars adeo latet arte sua* (art hides by means of its own art, *Met.* 10.252). And if this explanation fails to satisfy, consider Horace’s own assertion: *Ut pictura poesis . . . / haec amat obscurum, uolet haec sub luce uideri* (As painting, so poetry

. . . one painting is enamored of obscurity, another would fain be seen in broad daylight, 361–63). *Ut Ars* “Notes.”

2. COMPOUNDING CHANGES

THE SECOND SECTION of Stevens’ poem (“It Must Change”) would, at first glance, appear to have more in common with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* than with Horace’s *Ars poetica*. Thus does Srikanth Reddy, in a fascinating discussion of digression, summarize its ten cantos’ mercurial contents:

the old seraph’s vigil in the park; a cartoon-President’s oafish fiats against time; an ekphrasis on the statue of the General du Puy; a Whitmanian meditation on opposites; an elegy for a planter in the tropics; a wild song of a Shelleyan sparrow; the poet alone among lilacs by moonlight; the failed epithalamion of Ozymandias and Nanzia Nunzio; a modernist *De uulgari eloquentia* that seeks to reconcile “the imagination’s Latin” with our “lingua franca et jocundissima”; and an eventual return to Stevens’ beloved park bench, his “Theater of Trope.”¹³

To bring out the Horatian underpinnings of “Notes,” I will limit myself to just two of these cantos. First up is Stevens’ “Whitmanian meditation on opposites,” the splendid canto iv:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.
Morning and afternoon are clasped together

And North and South are an intrinsic couple

And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
That walk away as one in the greenest body.

In solitude the trumpets of solitude
Are not of another solitude resounding;
A little string speaks for a crowd of voices.

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men

Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
Sister and solace, brother and delight.

There is nothing quite like this in the *Ars*. But just as “ceinture” was key to Stevens’ Horatianism in the previous section of “Notes,” so is “cold copulars” crucial here. Since it was Harold Bloom who first aroused my suspicion about (and thereby occasioned my sustained meditation upon) this phrase, I introduce my own observations by way of his:

The key lines about solitude rely upon the strange use of the word “copulars”; doubly strange, first because “copular” is an adjective, and second because a copula, though in Latin it means a “link” or “bond,” in English just means a verb that identifies the subject and predicate of a sentence with each other, the verb almost always being some form of “be.” Stevens is playing upon the verb “copulate,” which is from the same *copula* for link or bond. “Cold copulars” linguistically can join just about anything to anything else, which ought to make us a little suspicious of all the dependencies, origins, embraces, forthcomings, and clasplings together that cluster in this canto.¹⁴

Bloom is surely right to be suspicious. Like a man on a woman, day on night, the imagined on the real, so Stevens on Horace is here dependent: underlying his “cold copulars” is a phrase from the *Ars* almost as famous as the *purpureus pannus* (15–16) and the *ut pictura poesis* (361) already men-

tioned: *In uerbis etiam tenuis cautusque serendis / dixeris egregie, notum si callida uerbum / reddiderit iunctura nouum* (In finely and carefully stringing words together you will have spoken outstandingly, if a clever collocation makes a known [*notum*] word new [*nouum*], 46–48). What is Stevens’ “cold copulars” if not a ravishing and exemplary misreading of Horace’s *callida iunctura*? In Latin, *callida* with two *ls* of course means “clever”—not to be confused (unless confused well) with *calida* of a single *l*, meaning “hot.” The canto above gives us, in place of a “hot *iunctura*,” a cold one, “copular” being a calque upon *iunctura* and “cold” sounding not unlike *cal(l)ida*. (*Les voyelles ne font rien, n’est-ce pas?*) The clever collocation “cold copulars” is, then, the particular rapture that comes from Stevens’ reception of Horace.

The very next canto of “It Must Change,” if I am reading it aright, transforms the Horatian *painter* into a (still rather painterly) *planter* in (where else?) the tropics, the zone of twists and turns. But our search for further Horatian tones in “Notes” points us onward to canto ix, where Stevens provides a rationale for his clever collocation:

The poem goes from the poet’s gibberish to
The gibberish of the vulgate and back again.
Does it move to and fro or is it of both

At once? Is it a luminous fluttering
Or the concentration of a cloudy day?
Is there a poem that never reaches words

And one that chaffers the time away?
Is the poem both peculiar and general?
There’s a meditation there, in which there seems

To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or
Not apprehended well. Does the poet
Evade us, as in a senseless element?

Evade, this hot, dependent orator,
 The spokesman at our bluntest barriers,
 Exponent by a form of speech, the speaker

Of a speech only a little of the tongue?
 It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he seeks.
 He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,
 To compound the imagination's Latin with
 The lingua franca et jocundissima.

In this canto's last two lines, we find another (and better) way of describing the role played by a clever collocation like "cold copulars," a phrase that beautifully compounds the imagination's (Horatian) Latin with Stevens' own vulgar coinage "copular." What is more, *jocundissima* harks back to the *Ars poetica*'s pronouncement about the poet's desire to say pleasing things (*iucunda . . . dicere*, 334), a pronouncement recalled (as we have already seen) in the language of canto iv. In this highly metamorphic section of "Notes," Stevens makes a change from the positive (*iucunda*) to the superlative (*jocundissima*) degree. Such an alteration is highly appropriate in a poem about a "supreme" (< *supremus*, itself a superlative) fiction, and may also be a jocose gesture of poetic one-upmanship. From canto ix, we may conclude that "Notes" alludes to the *Ars* not merely for the sake of being clever. Stevens' engagement with his precursor is, rather, a key component in his project of forging a jocund juncture between reality and the imagination.

3. EXPOUNDING PLEASURES

THE FINAL SECTION of Stevens' poem is far the most pleasing, and its chief glory is a figure Horatian to the core: Canon Aspirin. I began this commentary by suggesting that both the *Ars* and "Notes" are godless texts, poems of the earth, and songs of self. Nowhere is this clearer than in the casting and

casting-away of the Canon in the last few cantos. Earlier commentators have focused upon this figure's indebtedness to Milton's Satan, but an altogether more profound influence seems to me to be Horace's Empedocles, whose attempted leap to divine heights ends in a bathetic fall into fiery Etna.

Lest we ourselves leap to conclusions about the Canon's source, it would behoove us to recall Stevens' initial injunction:

Never suppose an inventing mind as source
Of this idea nor for that mind compose
A voluminous master folded in his fire.

Before suggesting various ways in which a certain voluminous master folded in his (volcanic) fire does indeed lie behind the Stevensian character, let us first consider the names that this character bears. "Aspirin" (< *aspirare*, to aspire) may seem fairly easy to explain, for well does such an appellation suit the sublime quester to whom it is attached. But surely we ourselves ought here to aspire to greater interpretative heights—or, to frame this ambition in terms of the imagination's Latin: *ad astra per aspera* (to the stars through difficulties)! As it turns out, an alternative etymological explanation for the Canon's name lies in the Latin adjective *asper* (harsh). Likewise harsh (*acerbus* rather than *asper*) is the declaimer (*recitator*) who figures prominently at the end of Horace's *Ars* (474). It seems hardly coincidental that the Stevensian character is also, by virtue of both his name and his actions, a harsh declaimer. Indeed, his first entrance onto the stage of "Notes" is marked by the words "the Canon Aspirin declaimed." If such an explanation seems overly ambitious, at least it is true to the Stevensian character's spirit.

Somewhat harder to account for is the name "Canon," since it possesses a range of meanings from which Stevens, finding himself in a predicament not unlike that faced (in canto vi) by the venerable Canon himself,

had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things
 That in each other were included, the whole,
 The complicate, the amassing harmony.

I here pass over those meanings—ecclesiastical, musical, and literary-critical—upon which past commentators have dwelt,¹⁵ and take up instead those which have gone unappreciated. Consider, for example, this definition (now obsolete) and its accompanying citation in the *OED* (s.v. 1): “Ornamental rolls, sometimes indented, sometimes plain, or straight, laid like sausages round the ends of the legs of breeches,” as in “By thy dangling pantaloons, / And thy ruffling port cannons.” These dangling pantaloons seem to have informed Stevens’ “major man” (he of the “sagging pantaloons” in the final canto of “It Must Be Abstract”), just as these ruffling port cannons seem to have shaped major man’s counterpart in this final section of “Notes.” Even more relevant, however, are two further definitions: first, “a canonical epistle” (*OED* s.v. 3), of which Horace’s *Ars* furnishes a shining example; second, “a deep gorge or ravine at the bottom of which a river or stream flows between high and often vertical sides” (*OED* s.v. 5). To this latter meaning I will return, but for now I would like to offer one further explanation of “Canon,” an explanation possible even without the aid of a lexicon.¹⁶ When he first appears in Stevens’ poem, Canon Aspirin is optimistic both about his abilities in general and about the achievability of his particular fantasies: “It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible.” But his name ends in a negation, a dying fall: Canon. In the end, Señor Aspirin’s imaginative reverie is interrupted by the voice of the poet: “Angel, / Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound.” Thus, in the name “Canon” fuse once more “the imagination’s Latin” (here in the vulgate “can”) and “the lingua franca” (here in Latin *non*). To his character’s “cannot” the poet replies (as if in canon to the earlier anthem “possible, possible, possible”) “can to” in his poem’s last three *cantos*.

Here, then, is canto VIII of "It Must Give Pleasure,"
Stevens' "luminous melody of proper sound":

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,

Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and
On his spredden wings, needs nothing but deep space,
Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,

Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,
Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?
Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,
And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:
I have not but I am and as I am, I am.

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

Having strayed from the Stevensian poem's Horatian underpinnings in order to consider Canon Aspirin in the light of his own poem, I return now to the *Ars* for the elucidation its ending offers. At the end of this epistle (457–66), we trace a trajectory similar to that of the canto above:

hic, dum **sublimis** uersus **ructatur** et errat,
si ueluti merulis intentus **decidit** auceps
in puteum foueamue, licet "succurrite" longum

clamet "io ciues," non sit qui tollere curet.
 si curet quis opem ferre et demittere funem,
 "qui scis an prudens huc se proiecerit atque
 seruari nolit?" dicam, Siculique poetae
 narrabo interitum: deus immortalis haberi
 dum cupit Empedocles, **ardentem frigidus** Aetnam
insiluit.

If the mad poet, **with his head aloft**, whilst **disgorging** his verses and wandering off, like a fowler intent on blackbirds falls **down** into a well or ditch, however much he shouts "Help me, citizens!", not a soul would care to help him up. If anyone should care to offer assistance and send **down** a rope, I'd say "How do you know he didn't hurl himself hither on purpose, not wishing to be saved?" and I'll tell the tale of the Sicilian poet's demise: how Empedocles, while wishing to be considered an immortal god, **leapt coolly into burning** Etna.

The angel that Canon Aspirin dreams up is "in his cloud," much as Horace's mad poet is *sublimis* (with head aloft, focused on the heights). This angel "leaps downward," much as the *Ars* moves downward (via the verbs *decidit* and *demittere*), and just as Empedocles leapt down *insiluit* (where the downward motion is conveyed by a dramatic enjambment).

Other correspondences between these figures are more nebulous but no less worthy of consideration. Note, for example, how the Stevensian angel seems to be, at the end of canto VII, "a beast disgorged," while the Horatian madman *ructatur* (disgorges). I mentioned earlier that one of the many meanings of "canon" is "a gorge." Here, the angel is *disgorged* precisely insofar as he (it?) has been let loose (fired?) from the Canon Aspirin's imagination. But "disgorge" is every bit as loaded a word as "canon." Once more, then, to the *OED*, where we find the verb defined as follows: "to eject or throw out from, or as from, the gorge or throat; to vomit forth (what has been swallowed)" (s.v. 1a); and, a more figurative usage, "to discharge as if from a mouth; to empty forth, *esp.* to give up what has been wrongfully appropriated" (s.v. 1b).

The Stevensian verb may therefore be said to disgorge the Horatian verb *ructatur*. As for the phrase “gold centre”: in addition to regurgitating the Roman poet’s *aurea Mediocritas*, these words, hovering as they do right over the word “warm,” may also faintly suggest *cold* center and thereby evoke Horace’s *ardentem frigidus*. Such a connection would pave the way for another later on in the same line, where “motionless motion” could very well recall Horace’s oxymoronic *concordia discors* (which appears in the Empedoclean context of *Epistles* 1.12) and *symphonia discors* (which occurs at *Ars* 374, just one line after Horace’s pronouncement about the unacceptability of mediocre poets).

Although I believe that it is from all these (hot-)cold copulars that the particulars of Horatio-Stevensian rapture come, there is also a larger point that I would like to make here about the picture that I have been at pains to paint of the Canon Aspirin and his Empedoclean roots. It is, quite simply, that both fallen figures serve to enlarge the stage for human action and poetic achievement. Since philosophers like Empedocles and clergymen like the Canon cannot effect a satisfying union between reality and the imagination, it is poets who must do so. Poets expand our vocabularies and the space in which our minds can roam; poets bequeath unto us a heightened, deepened, and otherwise enhanced reality; poets transfer to us something of their own rich inner worlds, and, in so doing, help us to live our lives. In the end, Horace’s Empedocles cannot be a god. Stevens’ Canon Aspirin, as his name suggests, cannot aspire to those clouds whence his disgorged angel gazes down at the abyss. Nonetheless, these figures of overleaping ambition can leave their respective poets in a postlapsarian world in which it is possible to be “satisfied without solacing majesty,” in which it is noble to strive toward a supreme fiction.

Godless though they be, the *Ars* and “Notes” both celebrate this sublime sufficiency and become their poets’ songs of self. With the Horatian passage below (*Ars* 58–62)

licuit semperque licebit
signatum praesente nota producere nomen.
ut **silvae foliis** priuos mutantur in annos,
prima cadunt, ita uerborum uetus interit aetas,
et **iuuenum ritu** florent modo nata uigentque.

To poets it always has been and always will be permitted to issue words bearing the mint-mark of the day. As the **forests** change their **leaves** yearly, the first fall, so the old age of words passes away, and those just born flourish **like youths** and are strong.

compare its “eccentric” Stevensian offshoot (canto ix), deeply conscious of its late bloom:

Whistle aloud, too weedy wren. I can
Do all that angels can. I enjoy like them,
Like men besides, like men in light secluded,

Enjoying angels. Whistle, forced bugler,
That bugles for the mate, nearby the nest,
Cock bugler, whistle and bugle and stop just short,

Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing
Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:
One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a **wood**.

And we enjoy **like men, the way a leaf**
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master.

Just as Horace's "didactic" treatise on the art of poetry ultimately teaches the Piso boys "what he can do and they cannot,"¹⁷ so does "Notes" culminate in the first-person speaker's confident assertion of his own ability: "I can do all that angels can." Each of the passages above is a wonderful exfoliation of the Western canon's prime simile: "As are the generations of leaves, so those of men" (*Iliad* 6.146). Both passages feature forests: with Horace's *silvae*, compare Stevens' "wood." But there is something unexpected about the later poet's sylvan scene: namely, its table. Has not this furniture been constructed (figuratively speaking) out of his precursor's timber? If so, Stevens' verbal carpentry is not merely a tribute to honor a fallen "tree" (i.e., a memorial for a poetic ancestor), but also a trophy to mark a felled one (i.e., an emblem of Stevens' superior poetic achievement). Similarly double-edged is the phrase "like men," a not altogether modest maturation of Horace's "like youths." But to return to both poems' relation to the *Iliad* and to the tradition that it inaugurates: that which each of the passages above does is sing its poet's potential "in spite of blazoned days." Just as Horace delights in his ability to produce words bearing the mint-mark of his day, so does Stevens delight in his "eccentric measure," in his masterful spinning-out of enjambed verses.

I have already suggested a few ways in which the *Ars* and "Notes" are both godless works and songs of self. It remains for me to support my initial claim that they are also "poems of the earth." I begin this brief defense with Horace's epistle, the first word of which is *humano*, from the adjective *humanus*, itself sharing a root with *humus* (earth, ground, soil). The poem's opening scene presents us with a monstrous amalgam of earth-dwellers: humans first (the "rational" being figured through its head), quadrupeds next ("inferior" beings figured through a lower part of the body, the neck), then birds of the air, and, finally, fishes of the sea. Ellen Oliensis has offered one compelling interpretation of the ways in which the *hirudo* closing out the poem responds to

the monstrous hybrid which opens it:

Whereas the opening scene contained deviance within the person of the inept painter, it is Horace himself, no other artist intervening, who authors the grotesque composite figure—joining the metaphor of a leech to the simile of a bear—that deforms the poem's end. And whereas the monstrous painting is framed on one side by the "human head," on the other by Horace's sensible *amici*, nothing supervenes to contain or control the final image of the poem. Horace's *Ars* as a whole thus repeats the trajectory of the monstrous painting, moving from top to bottom, from head to tail-end, from human to animal, from *humano* to *hirudo*, its mocking echo.¹⁸

I happen to find this interpretation quite compelling, but let me nevertheless suggest an alternative. Might not the leech succeed in uniting that which was formerly and ridiculously disjointed? After all, this creature has suckers on both ends. Compare the lures, the *captationes*, at either end of the *Ars*. Unlike that hybrid of hybrids at the poem's beginning—the centauric-Scylla and Scyllean-centaur whose head and foot could not be related to a single form (*nec pes nec caput uni / reddatur formae*, 8–9)—the leech is so perfectly balanced that there is, quite simply, no need to make heads or tails of it. Though it is unclear whether Horace was aware of the fact, the leech is also a hermaphrodite (thus uniting male and female) and an amphibian (thus linking terrestrial and aquatic zones). I would even venture to propose that behind the *hirudo* lurks the crypt word *hirundo* (which has in fact insinuated itself into some critical editions of Horace's works). *Hirundo* denotes not only "swallow" (OLD s.v. 1) but also "flying fish" (OLD s.v. 2). The *hirudo* may thus be said to mix into a harmonious (if somewhat nauseating) whole the disparate parts of the *Ars poetica*'s opening figure, to evoke creatures of the earth, sky, and sea all at once. That "Notes" is likewise a "poem of the earth" hardly requires scholarly explication. Simply regard these affectionate words from the final canto of its third and final section: "I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo." By the time "Notes" concludes,

the imperfect earth has become the poet's paradise.

CODA

HAVING OPENED this commentary by juxtaposing the beginnings of the Horatian and Stevensian poems in question, I would like, in closing, very briefly to compare their ends. The final canto of "It Must Give Pleasure" concludes with the words "You will have stopped revolving except in crystal." Compare what may well be the last words Horace ever wrote (*Ars* 474–76):

indoctum doctumque fugat recitator acerbus;
quem uero arripuit, tenet occiditque legendo,
non missura cutem nisi plena cruoris hirudo.

The harsh declaimer routs learned and unlearned alike; but anyone he has seized he holds and reads to death, not about to release the skin except when full of blood—a leech!

To Stevens' "except in crystal" compare Horace's words and sounds that stick: "except [*nisi*] when full of blood [*cruoris*]." Next, consider these same Horatian words in light of the coda to "Notes":

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his **Virgilian** cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
They are a plural, a right and left, a pair,
Two parallels that meet if only in

The meeting of their shadows or that meet
In a book in a barrack, a letter from Malay.

But your war ends. And after it you return

With six meats and twelve wines or else without
To walk another room . . . Monsieur and comrade,
The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, **the sounds that stick,**
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or **lives on the bread of faithful speech.**

"Virgilian cadences" is something of a red herring here, for it puts the spotlight on the "wielder of the stateliest measure" rather than on that measure itself. Though dactylic hexameter is the only meter in which Vergil composed his major works (*Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*), it is also the meter in which Horace is generally believed both to have launched and to have completed his poetic career (with the *Satires* and the *Ars poetica*, respectively). That Horace is in fact the more prevalent precursor here is clear enough from the line "How gladly with proper words the soldier dies," an allusion to the famous *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country, *Odes* 3.2.13). That it is, more specifically, Horace's "Virgilian cadences" in the *Ars* which here have the stronger purchase on Stevens' imagination is suggested first by the leech-evoking "sounds that stick, / Inevitably modulating, in the blood," then by the words on which "Notes" finally comes to rest: "or lives on the bread of faithful speech." Lives on the bread—a kind of parasite, no? Not with a leech does Stevens conclude, but, leech-like nonetheless, with "speech."

NOTES

1. My perusal of the Stevensian corpus has revealed no fewer than seven explicit references to Horace. Since, however, the present commentary is concerned with places where Horace is *not* mentioned by name, I leave the presentation and analysis of these references to a future project of larger scope.

2. For a less provocative framing and answering of this question, see Hardison and Golden, *Horace for Students of Literature: The "Ars Poetica" and Its Tradition* (Gainesville, FL 1995), 325–36.

3. For Stevens' appraisal of Homer and Plato, see Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York 1997), 922. For the influence of Empedocles, see David Tompsett, *Wallace Stevens and Pre-Socratic Philosophy: Metaphysics and the Play of Violence* (New York 2012), 115–16.

4. Stevens names Catullus and Lucretius in his correspondence, while Vergil receives repeated mention throughout his writings. The mature Stevens is likely to have relied primarily upon English versions of classical texts, but in his youth he did study Greek and Latin. For a sketch of the poet's educational background, see Paul Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (New York 2016), 5–24. Whatever his relation to classical literature may have been, Stevens maintained throughout his life an intimate acquaintance with the Latin dictionary of Lewis and Short, a copy of which he sent, along with the first edition of *Harmonium*, to Robert Frost. In a letter accompanying these gifts, he expressed his hope that the lexicon's use would give Frost as much delight as it had given him. For the details see Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 40.

5. Kermode and Richardson (note 3), 664. Cf. the Longinian characterization of sublimity as "a certain art of height or depth" (*Subl.* 2.1). Stevens' "supreme" is in fact cognate with the word for sublimity in the title of the Longinian treatise (*Peri hypsous*).

6. On the structure of the *Ars* in general and on Philodemus' account in particular, see Andrew Laird, "The *Ars Poetica*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Horace*, ed. S. J. Harrison (Cambridge 2007), 132–43.

7. The title of Stevens' poem echoes a line from the very center of Horace's *Ars* (line 240 of 476): *ex noto fictum carmen sequar* (I'll pursue poetry fashioned from familiar elements).

8. C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: The "Ars Poetica"* (Cambridge 1971), 104.

9. For further reflections on the poem's apparent preoccupation with middles, see Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge 1969), 172.

10. Philip Hardie, "The *Ars poetica* and the Poetics of Didactic," *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 72.1 (2014), 51.

11. John Shoptaw, "Lyric Cryptography," *Poetics Today* 21.1 (2010), 223.

12. Brink (note 8), 142.

13. Srikanth Reddy, *Changing Subjects: Digressions in Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Oxford 2012), 7.

14. Bloom, *Wallace Stevens*, 193.

15. For these associations see especially Bloom (note 14), 205 and Cook (note 4), 254–55.

16. Stevens himself did not own a copy of the *OED*. Nevertheless, he did make use of a copy available at the Connecticut State Library. For further details see George Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge and London 1986), 133.

17. Ellen Oliensis, *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority* (Cambridge 1998), 198.

18. Oliensis (note 17), 215–16.



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