

Stuffed Bodies and bad taste: Persius and the poem made flesh (II)

1. The body of the text: brief history of a metaphor

- A. Bear in mind discussions so far of the imagined corporeality of poetic metres in Rome: the metrical as human ‘foot’ (*pes*); ‘muscular’, ‘hairy’, ‘virile’ hexameter epic; Ovid’s imagining of the pentameter as an effeminate, castrated or female body; iambic metres as aggressive and penetrating; scazons as ‘limping’, ‘disabled’ iambs; satire (*satira*) is a ‘mixed dish’, a ‘mincemeat’, as well as being connected with the festival of the Saturnalia, where bawdy verse accompanied feasting.
- B. In the Greek tradition, Plato was perhaps among the first to introduce this figure. See e.g. *Phaedrus* 264c (the body of a speech has to be healthy, have all its parts in the right place). Compare Cicero *de Oratore* 2.325.
- C. The figure becomes pervasive in Roman writing from Cicero onwards. Roman rhetorical terms are often bodily: writers talk of the ‘limbs’, ‘joints’, ‘body’ and even ‘blood’ of an oration or a poem (cf. Horace’s *disiecti membra poetae*, at *Sat.* 1.4.62, describing the conversion of poetry into prose as dismemberment.); beginnings of arguments, passages or speeches are ‘heads’ (*capita* = our ‘capital letters’, and ‘chapters’). Tacitus remarks that a beautiful speech, like an attractive body, should not be marred by bulging veins or be too skinny, so that you can see the bones (*Dialogus* 21.8).
- D. In Petronius’ *Satyricon*, 1.3, bad rhetoric is described as ‘honey balls of words sprinkled with poppy seed and sesame’ (corresponding to one of the actual dishes in Trimalchio’s *cena*, ‘dormice rolled in honey and sprinkled with poppy-seed). At *Satyricon* 118.6, capable poets are described as being ‘full’ of literature. Wit in Latin is ‘salt’ (*sal*), and works of art have a ‘flavour’ (*sapor*): the verb ‘to have knowledge of’ or ‘to have sense/discernment’ (*sapio*) means fundamentally ‘to taste, savour, taste/smell of’. Do browse E.Gowers’s (1993) *The Loaded Table*, and V.Rimell’s (2002) *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction*.
- E. Roman writers like making a meal of poetry, especially in the genres of (verse/Menippean) satire, comedy, epigram and iambic poetry: remember Horace *Epodes* 3, in which the Horatian persona was ‘victim’ of Maecenas’ own iambically aggressive garlic dish; see also (for starters) Catullus 13, Horace *Sat.* 2.4 and 2.8, Martial *Epigrams* 10.48. . Poetry that imagines itself as food (of whatever kind, luxury or cheap, tasty or bland) is also toying with the prospect of its own ephemerality and vulnerability (see *Epistles* 2.1.265-70, below); it pushes ironically against the metaphors of monumentality and survival, of healthy, non-Oedipal patrilinearity. Persius’ implication in his *Prologue* that we envisage ‘tradition’ not as poet sons honouring poet fathers but rather as sons refusing to procreate and instead feasting on their fathers’ bodies, takes this provocation as far as it can go.

- F. Post-Augustan Latin epicists like Lucan and Statius revel in making their odd syntax and word-combinations enact the chopping up of bodies and the mingling of wounded bodies on the battlefield (you might like to think about how Greco-Roman militaristic epic treats vulnerable bodies differently, or even celebrates them as vehicles for the sublime...)
- G. Horace in *Ars Poetica* 1-8 characterises the bad (embarrassing, funny) work of art as a melange of misplaced body parts (sounds like expressionism, or surrealism!), and writes that the bad poem/ book lacks unity, so that ‘neither head nor foot can be restored to a single body’. Nb, Persius’ *Satires* interact intensively with the *Ars Poetica* as well as with Horace’s *Satires*: see esp. Bartsch (2015).
- H. For reading/studying literature involving not just consumption but a process of digestion, see e.g. Persius’ fellow Stoic Seneca *Letters* 84, where Seneca compares studying a range of different works to the activity of bees, which pluck nectar from flowers and transform it into honey (‘the foods we have eaten, while they retain their original quality and float about undigested in our stomachs, are burdens; but when they have been transformed from what they were, they then are converted into energy and blood:... so we should not allow the foods with which our minds are fed to remain whole, lest they remain someone else’s. We should digest them, otherwise they will enter the memory but not the mind.’84.6-7). Digestion is transformative. The stomach is a lab. Yet Persius envisages the process in much more grotesque terms: his poets like to *believe* they are making honey, but the truth is far less sweet...
- I. See the recent *New Yorker* sketch by Jena Friedman (Jan 9, 2017) for the latest instalment in satire’s ‘making a meal of’ society, with a piquant Persius-esque twist.

Questions for discussion:

- ❖ Do you think the ‘recipe’ and ‘boiling pot’ metaphors are effective in the *New Yorker* sketch, and do they make you think differently about the rise of Donald Trump? Think of at least three reasons why, paying close attention to the text – especially to style, tone, structure, images, puns.

Persius Satire 1 (P = satiric voice, H = heckler. Line numbers correspond to Latin)

(P) O troubled humanity! O the emptiness of life!

(H)– Who wants to read about that? (*quis leget haec*) - is Persius quoting Lucilius?

(P)– Are you asking me? No one, by Hercules!

(H)– No one?

(P)– No one or two.

(H)–That’s wretched, pathetic.

(P)– Why? Because noble ‘Trojans’ and their women Romans as *Trojans...?!!*

Happen to prefer Attius Labeo’s *Iliad* to my verse? (Labeo wrote a literal trans. of the Homeric epics)

Nonsense. If turbid Rome weighs something lightly 5

Don’t go looking for a fault in the scales, don’t look

Beyond yourselves. For who at Rome lacks – O if I

Could say it! – and I might, gazing at our grey heads,

And this sad life of ours, and whatever we play with

Now we’ve left off marbles, and smack of gravity. 10

Then, then – forgive me (I’d rather not, but how can I

Help it?) I’ve an impudent streak – I’d have to hoot!

We scribble something grand, behind closed doors,

One in verse, another in prose that only a generous

Lungful of air can exhale; it being what, combed

Neatly, in a white toga, wearing your birthday ring 15

Of sardonyx, you’ll read to the audience from your

Tall seat, while you gargle with water to rinse your

Fickle throat, with an orgasmic tear in your eye (*patranti ocello*)¹

Then you’ll watch as grown men tremble, their sober

Manner and tranquil voices gone, as your poetry stirs 20

Their loins, your rhythmic verse works away inside.

So, old man, you compose tit-bits, for others’ ears

To make even your decrepit skin and bones cry ‘Stop!’?

(H)– Why study, if this ferment, this wild fig that has taken 25

Root within, can’t burst forth in passionate eruption?

(P)– Behold, pallid decrepitude! What a way to behave!

Is knowledge nothing unless others know you know?

(H)– But it’s lovely to be pointed out, to hear: ‘It’s him!’

Is it nothing to be a text for hundreds of curly-headed lads?

(P)– Look, the sated scions of Romulus, are no sooner asking, 30

Over the wine, what sacred poetry has to say, when he rises,

A hyacinth coloured cloak round his shoulders, to stammer

Some rancid nonsense through his nose, squeezing out

Songs about Phyllis, Hypsipyle, some bardic tear-jerker,

Stumbling over the words on his oh-so-delicate palate. 35

The great approve: are the poet’s ashes happier now?

Does the tombstone settle more lightly on his bones?

The guests applaud: will violets spring then from his

Embers, out of the tomb, from those fortunate remains?

(H)– You mock too much, you look down your nose at me. 40

But who’s without the desire to earn the people’s praise (lit ‘earn the public’s mouth’);

Leave behind work worthy of preservation with cedar-oil,

Not doomed to end as wrapping for mackerel or incense?

You, whoever you are, you whom I’ve created to present

¹ Could Persius possibly be alluding to Lucilius fr.335W, where he describes an ejaculating penis ‘bursting into tears’? (*et laeva lacrimans muttoni absterget amica* / ‘But with his left-hand lover he wipes the tears from his cock’)?

The opposite case, if by chance something good emerges **45**
 From my writing – a rare bird that would be – but if it does,
 I'm not anxious for praise. Not because I'm made of iron,
 But because I refuse to consider your 'bravo' and 'lovely'
 As the be-all and end-all of endorsement. Examine that
 Cry of 'lovely' thoroughly: and what does it not embrace?
 Isn't the *Iliad* there, that *Iliad* by Attius, who gets drunk **50**
 On hellebore? And all those little elegies dictated by our
 Dyspeptic lords? In short whatever's scribbled on couches
 Of citron-wood? You know how to serve up warm tripe,
 Make a shivering client the gift of a second-hand cloak,
 Then say 'I love the truth, tell me the truth about myself.' **55**
 How can I? Do you want me to say you're talking rubbish,
 Baldy, you with your fat belly sticking out a foot and half?
 O, bi-faced Janus, never suffering gestures behind your back;
 Pecking storks; nor wagging hands imitating donkey's ears;
 Nor a hanging tongue like some Apulian dog dying of thirst! **60**
 But you, of patrician blood, you who must do without eyes
 In the back of your head, come see the grimaces behind you.
 What's the popular view?
 (H)– What indeed, but that poetry at last moves in a measured way,
 So that the links flow smoothly through critical fingers. Bravo,
 To the poet, who knows how to lay out a line with one eye shut, **65**
 As if he were stretching a plumb-line! Whether he aims to talk
 Of morality, luxury or the banquets of kings, the Muse grants
 Him ample matter.
 (P) Behold, we're teaching people now to pen **70**
 Heroic sentiments who used to dabble in Greek foolishness,
 Not artful enough to paint a grove, to praise rich countryside,
 Its hearths, baskets, pigs, and its burning hay at the Palilia,
 The land of Remus, and of Cincinnatus, polishing his plough
 In the furrow, his flustered wife dressing him as a dictator
 In front of the oxen, the lictor bearing the ploughshare home! **75**
 Nowadays one will linger over Dionysian Accius' dry tome,
 Others do likewise over Pacuvius, and his warty Antiope,
 'Her melancholy heart besieged by troubles.' When you see
 Bleary-eyed fathers pouring this sort of education into
 Their sons, need you question where the stew of language **80**
 On their tongues derives from, or that disgraceful rubbish
 Your young knights on the benches exult in? Aren't you
 Ashamed you're unable even to defend some white-haired
 Old client on a charge, without needing to hear that tepid
 'Nicely done'? They tell Pedius: 'You're a thief!' What **85**
 Does Pedius reply? He frames the charge smoothly as an
 Antithesis, and is praised for expressing it all so skilfully:
 'How lovely, that is!' Lovely, that? Isn't it mere flattery,
 Roman? Should I be stirred, and toss a penny to every
 Shipwrecked sailor who sings a song? Isn't that how you **90**
 Sing, with a picture of you in a crushed boat, by your side?
 Whoever wants to move me with his lament will show
 Genuine tears, not some tale he's drummed up overnight.
 (H) – Yet elegance and harmony has been added to raw measure.
 Here's how 'Berecynthian Attis' learned to do line-endings,
 Thus: 'The dolphin that sliced through cerulean Nereus,'
 And: 'We stole a flank of the long chain of Apennines.' **95**

(P) ‘Arms and the man’! isn’t this foaming juice on a rich rind,
As good as that old corky branch with its swollen bark!
So what about all that effete lax-postured recitation then?
(H) ‘Their savage horns rang with the calls of the Bacchantes,
And Bassaris, leaving, with the head torn from a proud **100**
Calf, the Maenad, who directs the lynx with an ivy-cluster,
Cry, Euhoë, over and over, while the far echoes resound.’
(P) Would that exist, if a vein of our father’s balls pulsed in us?
That feeble stuff swims in our saliva, ‘Maenad’ and ‘Attis’ **105**
On our moistened lips; there’s no smashing the bookcase
To pieces here, no flavour here of those bitten fingernails.
(H)– But why must you savage delicate ears with bitter truths?
Take care lest the thresholds of the great grow cold towards
You: here there’s only this endless noise of a dog snarling. **110**
(P)– Well then, as far as I’m concerned then, everything’s fine.
I’ll not delay you. Bravo to all, all’s well, you’re marvels!
Does that satisfy you? ‘No one permitted to kick up a stink,
Here!’ you proclaim. Put up the warning sign, twin snakes:
‘This place is sacred, lads, piss outside!’ I’m off. **Lucilius**
Tore into the place, targeted you, Lupus and Mucius, broke **115**
A canine on you. And crafty **Horace** touched on every fault
In a smiling friend and, once admitted, toyed with the heart,
Clever at dangling people from his briskly-shaken muzzle.
No way I can whisper it? In secret? Down a hole? Nowhere?
Yet I’ll bury it here. I’ve seen, I’ve seen them, little book; **120**
Is there a single one that lacks ass’s ears? That’s my secret,
That’s my so slight jest, but I’ll not barter it with you
For an *Iliad*. Whoever grows pale at Aristophanes’ anger,
That grand old man, or Eupolis, or is fired by bold Cratinus,
Glance at this too, maybe you’ll like to hear what’s **distilled (decoctius).** **125**
I want readers with cleansed ears, fired by such stuff, not
Some wretch who delights in poking fun at Greek sandals;
A one-eyed man who loves to call another man ‘One-eye’,
Who thinks he’s something, full of provincial importance,
Because at Arretium, as aedile, he ruled on half-measures, **130**
Not some crafty fellow who’s used to jeering at maths
On the abacus, or diagrams drawn in the furrowed dust,
One ready to howl with delight when some insolent whore
Tugs at a Cynic’s beard. To them I’d recommend reading
Posters in the morning, a novel, say Callirhoe, after lunch.

2. On the mouths of men (*os virum/populi*): evolution of a trope

A. Persius *Sat.* 1.40-1

an erit qui velle recuset
os populi meruisse et cedro digna locutus
linquere nec scombros metuentia carmina nec **tus**?

‘Do you mean to tell me that any man who has uttered words worthy of cedar oil will disown the wish to have earned a place on the mouths of men and to leave behind him poems that will have nothing to fear from mackerel or from spice?’

B. with Horace *Epistles* 2.1.264-70:

I don't want oppressive attention, nor to be shown
Somewhere as a face moulded, more badly, in wax,
Nor to be praised in ill-made verses, lest I'm forced
To blush at the gift's crudity, and then, deceased,
In a closed box, be carried down, next to 'my' poet,
To the street where they sell incense, perfumes, pepper (*tus et odores et piper*),
And whatever else is wrapped in redundant paper.

C. Ennius, *Epigrammata* 9-10 Warmington

volito vivus **per ora virum** / 'I will fly alive on the mouths of men'.

D. Horace *Odes* 2.20.1-5

non usitata nec tenui ferar
penna biformis per liquidum aethera
vates neque in terris morabor
longius invidiaque maior
urbis relinquam.

‘On no common or feeble wing shall I soar in double form through the liquid air, a poet still, nor linger more on earth, but victorious over envy I shall leave behind the cities of men.’

E. Horace *Odes* 3.30

Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique **situ** pyramidum altius, situs (noun) = site, large structure, neglect, decay
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo inpotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum. 5
non omnis moriar multaue pars mei
vitabit Libitinam; usque ego postera
crescam laude recens, dum Capitolium
scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex.

Dicar, qua violens obstrepit Aufidus 10
 et qua pauper aquae Daunus agrestium
 regnavit populorum, ex humili potens
 princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos
 deduxisse modos. sume superbiam
 quaesitam meritis et mihi Delphica 15
 lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam.

(**I have erected a monument** more lasting than bronze and loftier than the Pyramids' royal **pile**, one that no biting rain, no furious north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages' flight. I shall not altogether die, but **a mighty part of me** shall escape the death-goddess. On and on I shall grow, ever fresh with the glory of after time. So long as the Pontiff climbs the Capitol with the silent Vestal, I, risen high from low estate, where wild Aufidus thunders and where Daunus in a parched land once ruled over a peasant folk, shall be famed for having been the first to adapt Aeolian song to Italian verse. Accept the proud honour won by their merits, Melpomene, and graciously crown my locks with Delphic laurel.')

F. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.875-9

parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis 875
 astra ferar, **nomenque erit indelebile nostrum**,
 quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terris,
ore legar populi, perque omnia saecula fama,
 siquid habent veri vatum praesagia, **vivam**.

Yet **in the better part of myself** I shall be carried immortal far beyond the lofty stars and **my name shall be immortal**. Wherever Rome's power extends over the conquered world, **I shall be read on the lips of men**, and – if there is any truth in the prophecies of poets – through all the ages **I shall live** in fame

Questions for discussion

- ❖ Does Persius reject the conventional ambition to live on in the mouths of men?
- ❖ Can Persius' audience/readers be immune from the penetrative performances satirized in this poem? Or in other words, does Persius offer us the possibility of *not* being one of Rome's effeminate, soft bodies? Can we unthink and move beyond his pornographic vision of literary engagement?