

Literary Cannibalism from Seneca to the Renaissance

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1. The (so-called) “digestive metaphor”: Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) *Epistulae Morales* 84.5-7

“We see that nature does this in our own bodies without any of our effort: the food which we take in, as long as it retains its own nature and swims around intact in the stomach, is a burden; but when it has been changed from what it was, only then does it transform into strength and blood. The same situation occurs regarding things which nourish our innate talents, we should maintain that whatever we ingest is not allowed to remain intact, so it isn’t foreign to us. We must digest it (*concoquamus illa*), otherwise it will enter the memory but not our innate talent” [all translations are my own].

cf. Quintilian (c. 35-100 CE) *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.19: “We must moreover return to and reconsider what we have read, and just as we break apart food by chewing it and nearly liquefying it in order to digest it more easily, thus reading must be committed to memory and imitation, not in a raw state but softened and, as it were, ground down by much repetition”; Macrobius (c. 370-440 CE) *Saturnalia* 1pr.7: “We should produce the same effect with things that nourish the mind. We should not allow what we have consumed to stay intact, lest it belong to someone else; instead it should be digested into a certain arrangement” (*in quondam digeriem concoquantur*).

2. Renaissance examples: Ben Jonson (1572-1637) *Discoveries* (1641), in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (London: Penguin Classics, 1996): 448:

A skilled poet must “be able to convert the substance, or riches of another poet, to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very he [*sic*], or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the principal. Not, as a creature, that swallows, what it takes in, crude, raw, or indigested; but, that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment.”

cf. Petrarch (1304-1375) *Familiars* 1.8.23, 22.2.12, 23.19; Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494): good imitators “digest” and fully/bodily incorporate a range of predecessors (*concoxeris*) as a means of successful *imitatio* (*Prosatori latini*, ed. Garin (Milan and Naples, 1952), 902-4). Erasmus (1466-1536) *Ciceronianus*, in *Opera*, ed. Mesnard, vol. 1-2 (Amsterdam, 1971): 704: The goal should be “not just attaching to your speech whatever beautiful thing pops up, but transporting it into the mind itself just like into a stomach”; Celio Calcagnini (1479-1541): successful *imitatio* requires lengthy training in absorbing earlier writers in a manner “approximating digestion” (*quasi concoxerit*) (*Trattati*, ed. Weinberg, vol. 1 (Rome, 1970), 213). Montaigne (1533-1592) “De

l'institution des enfants" (*Les Essais* I.26): "It's an indication of rawness and indigestion to regurgitate food in the same condition it was swallowed. The stomach has not done its job unless it has changed the form and condition of what was given to it to cook"; Joachim Du Bellay (1522-1560) *Deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse* (1.7): "If the Romans...did not attend to the labor of translation, by what means could they thus enrich their language, even up to almost matching the Greek? Imitating the best Greek authors, transforming themselves into them, devouring them; and, having digested them well, converting them into blood and food..."

3. Reading-as-eating:

Cicero (106-43 BCE): reading/study as a form of "sustenance" for character-building (*Brutus* 126); his own writing is a "feast of learning" for his "ravenous" audience (*Topica* 25). Lucretius (c. 99-55 BCE) compares his poetry to honey masking the bitter taste of the philosophical message his poem espouses (*De rerum natura* 1.936-42). Horace (65-8 BCE) as a disgruntled "chef" of poetic genres (*Epistles* 2.2.61-4): "with such varying tastes, they demand totally different things. What should I give them? What shouldn't I give? You refuse what another orders; what you desire is no doubt distasteful and bitter to the other two." Classical authors post Seneca (e.g. Pliny *Letters* 3.5; Quintilian *IO* 1.8.6, 8; Macrobius *Sat. praef.* 1-6). Petrarch (*Fam.* 22.2): "I ate in the morning what I would digest in the evening, I devoured as a boy what I would ruminate upon as an older man. I have so thoroughly absorbed these writings, that they have been implanted not only in my memory but in my marrow." Montaigne needs no literary ornamentation, he wants the "living marrow" of the speech as *entrée* upfront ("Des livres," *Les Essais* II.10): "I need no appetizer or sauce: I can eat the meat quite raw." Francis Bacon (1561-1626), *Of Studies*: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested [*sic*]: That is, some books are to be read only in partes; others to be read, but cursorily, and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention." Gabriel Harvey (c. 1550-1630) couldn't stomach any of Thomas Nashe's poetry, as he tells us in *Pierce's Supererogation*: "I have seldome tasted a more unsavory slaumpump of words, and sentences in any sluttish Pamfletter."

4. The "corporeality" of literary texts:

corpus as a "body of work" (*OLD* s.v. *corpus* 16a). Book terminology: the scroll came wrapped in a "skin" of parchment; the papyrus roll's edge was the "forehead"; the manuscript itself was rolled around the "navel." Ancient rhetorical handbooks referred to the structure and sections of a speech through corporeal signification (*corpus, membra, caput*, etc.). Macrobius described his entire literary *corpus* as a neatly constructed assemblage of body parts (*Sat.* 1.1.3); cf. Horace *Ars P.* 1-12, *Sat.* 1.4.57-62; Seneca's stylistic parataxis creates, for Quintilian, a "dismembered" and incoherent literary *corpus* (Quintilian *IO* 10.1.130). Quintilian called Demosthenes' speeches "muscular" (10.1.76). The satirist Persius (34-62 CE) accuses fellow poet Accius' poetry of being "veiny" (1.76); he dubs Pacuvius' play *Antiope* "warty" (1.77-9). Jonson (*Discoveries*, in Parfitt, *Ben Jonson*, 436): "We say it is a fleshy style, when there is much periphrasis, and circuit of words; and when with more than enough, it grows fat and corpulent ... It hath blood,

and juice, when the words are proper and apt, their sound sweet, and the phrase neat and picked.” Erasmus *Ciceronianus*, in Mesnard, *Opera*, 631 argues that the best imitators must revive not just the phrasing, vocab, and lexical tics of a model, but their very life-force: brains, flesh, veins, sinews, bones, bowels, blood, breath, etc.; Petrarch, in a “letter” to the long-dead Quintilian, describes his fragmentary manuscript of Quintilian’s *IO* as the “dismembered limbs of a beautiful body” (*Familiarium Rerum Libri* (1351), in *Le familiari*, eds. Rossi and Bosco, vol. 4 (Florence, 1933), 241). Cf. Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) *Poggi Epistolae*, vol. 1 (Florence, 1832): 28; Gabriel Harvey (c. 1550-1630) *Ciceronianus*, 49: imitators who only reproduce flashy tropes and phraseology but not argumentation and structure create a beautiful and elegant literary “body,” but one lacking vitality, etc.

5. *Imitatio*, violence, and conspicuous engagement:

Violence: Ps-Longinus *On the Sublime* (13.4-5) on Plato’s openly antagonistic relationship with his predecessor Homer. Pliny (c. 23-79 CE) imagines future generations “fighting it out” with him (*NH*, praef. 21). Quintilian (10.2.9-10) preferred contentious *imitatio* to simply “following in the footsteps” of predecessors. Cf. Calcagnini (“Super imitatione commentatio” in Weinberg, *Trattati*, 219-20). Petrarch (*Fam.* 23.19) suggests authors blend their sources like bees making honey from flowers, but stresses the outcome should be “new and better.” Conspicuous *imitatio*: The elder Seneca (54 BCE-39 CE) notes that the Roman poet Ovid imitated material from his predecessor Virgil not thievishly, but openly, with the intention of being recognized for his transformative poetics (*Suas.* 3.7). Petrarch (*Fam.* 22.2) hammers home the value of open, not secret imitation of forebears. Macrobius’ method of precise verbal reproduction cast in a new *context* (his major break from Seneca) highlights the source-text conspicuously. Marco Girolamo Vida (c. 1485-1566): alerting the (ideal/educated) reader to literary allusions allows the competition to go on without being missed (*De arte poetica* 3.228-30): authors “burning with desire to compete with the ancients, delight in snatching from the hands of the defeated even material which has for a long time been their possession, but which is badly construed, and making it better.”

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