

The Synesthetic Onion in the *Satires* of Horace and Lucilius

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (1966: 34-5)

I present a fine case of **colored hearing**. Perhaps “hearing” is not quite accurate, since the color sensation seems to be produced by the very act of my orally forming a given letter while I imagine its outline. The long *a* of the English alphabet (and it is this alphabet I have in mind farther on unless otherwise stated) has for me the tint of weathered wood, but a French *a* evokes polished ebony. This black group also includes hard *g* (vulcanized rubber) and *r* (a sooty rag being ripped). Oatmeal *n*, noodle-limp *l*, and the ivory-backed hand mirror of *o* take care of the whites. I am puzzled by my French *on* which I see as the brimming tension-surface of alcohol in a small glass. Passing on to the blue group, there is steely *x*, thundercloud *z*, and huckleberry *k*. Since a subtle interaction exists between sound and shape, I see *q* as browner than *k*, while *s* is not the light blue of *c*, but a curious mixture of azure and mother-of-pearl.

2. Hor. S. 1.5.27-33 (text from Gowers 2012)

*huc venturus erat Maecenas optimus atque
Cocceius, missi magnis de rebus uterque
legati, aversos soliti componere amicos.
hic oculis ego nigra meis collyria lippus* 30
*illinere. interea Maecenas advenit atque
Cocceius Capitoque simul Fonteius, ad unguem
factus homo, Antoni non ut magis alter amicus.*

Noble Maecenas was to come to this place and Cocceius, each sent as envoys regarding important matters, accustomed to reconcile feuding friends. **Here I, suffering from inflamed eyes**, smear black ointment on my eyes. Meanwhile Maecenas arrived along with Cocceius and Fonteius Capito, a gentleman to his fingertips, so that Antony has no other greater friend.

3. Hor. S. 1.5.48-9

*lusum it Maecenas, dormitum ego Vergiliusque;
namque pila lippis inimicum et ludere crudis*

Maecenas went to play, and Vergil and I went to sleep, for playing ball is harmful **to the bleary-eyed** and the dyspeptic.

4. Hor. S. 1.4.7-13

facetus
*emunctae naris, durus componere versus,
nam fuit hoc vitiosus: in hora saepe ducentos,
ut magnum, versus dictabat stans pede in uno.* 10
*cum flueret lutulentus, erat quod tollere velles,
garrulus atque piger scribendi ferre laborem,
scribendi recte.*

(Lucilius is) witty, with a well-blown nose, and a tireless composer of verses. For he was flawed in this way: he often dictated 200 verses per hour while standing on one foot, as though it were a big thing. When he flowed muddy, you'd want to take away whatever there was. He was loquacious and too lazy to take up the task of writing – (or rather) writing well.

5. Luci. fr. 195M = 217W (text from Warmington 1967)

lippus edenda acri assiduo ceparius cepa

An onion grower (or onion eater? onion seller?) is **bleary-eyed** from constantly eating the pungent onion.

6. Var. Men. 63 (text from Kent 1951)

avi et atavi nostri, cum alium ac cepe eorum verba olerent, tamen optime animati erant

Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, although their **words smelled** of garlic and **onion**, were high-spirited men

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