

CANDIDUM SORACTE: WAS HORACE COLOR-BLIND?

by
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1. Introduction

I got the idea for this article by reading Horace. Not just once, but numerous times over the years, ever since I discovered him, back in the '40s, attending a Jesuit High School, where he was regarded with some suspicion, especially by our Latin teacher (a Jesuit himself), whose competence in Latin was rivaled by his moral scruples. As a result, we were only allowed to read carefully 'castigated' editions, thus being deprived from enjoying some of the finest verse in Latin poetry.

Later on, when I taught Latin (substituting Horace for the all-too-easy and pedestrian C. Nepos) to those junior Jesuits who already had a solid foundation in the language, I came up against the same bowdlerizing scholars' restricted editing and reading policies. Somehow, I managed to obtain a more or less complete edition of the poet's work, from which I carefully culled some not-too offensive passages, so I could show those young monks at least the beginning of the road to Latin perfection and moral perdition.

Ultimately, and much later, it fell into my lot to teach an advanced Latin class, called 'Latin Conversation', in my own university (at that time still named for its city, the insular metropolis of Odense; the name has since been changed to 'University of Southern Denmark' – a misnomer if ever there was one). Since almost all of the students were more or less tongue-tied in Cicero's beautiful idiom, I decided to loosen them up a little bit by bringing to class some nice extracts from Horace for discussion and conversation. I made up what I hoped would be attractive thematic headings, such as 'Horace and Women' (a very rich repository of juicy tidbits), and 'Horace and Men' (a little less extensive, but no less interesting). Then there was 'Horace and Wine'; this implied going to the 'sources' and figuring out what kind of wines still might be available and/or drinkable, such as the Falerno, to-day classified as a 'DOC', with the epithet 'del Massico', and on its way to a

three-star grade (cf. Johnson 1994:117). And finally, some classes were devoted to the theme of 'Horace and Colors', which thus came to be the direct inspiration for my current piece.

The way I went about my research in connection with this teaching was quite impressionistic; but even as impressions go, I ended up with some rather strong ones. For one thing, Horace did not seem to have consciously 'colored' his verse; in any case, his palette looked rather limited to me. So the thought struck me that he might have been color-blind – which had actually been my original assumption, before I started to sort out and write down my musings. The principal (and in a way transcendental) problem turned out to be, of course, what it would take to determine color-blindness in a person over 2,000 years dead.

2. Horace: a color-blind poet? A first approach

What at first blush seemed to be a straightforward (albeit somewhat naive) query turned out to be, when examined at closer quarters, a potential quagmire of unwarranted assumptions and interculturally (not to omit cross-era-wise) skewed fits. Even assuming that color-blindness did exist in Horace's times (and there seems to be no reason to doubt that), the question still remains if the people of those times considered such a 'blindness' as a deficit in humans, or even whether they were at all aware of the phenomenon.

Discussions of this kind are intimately related to the discourse on how we (mentally and physically) represent reality. For the classical authors, as for their contemporaries, this question mostly was a matter of what Plato used to call 'imitation' (*mimesis*), understood as the human endeavor to emulate the real world in thoughts and words or in pictures. The criterion for successful 'imitating' was, naturally, the degree to which the result was 'true' to life.

Clearly, in painting, the proper use of colors played a major role in this effort, inasmuch as they helped create that sensation of faux reality for which the best classical painters were famous (the well-known story of the contest between the rival classical painters Zeuxis and Apelles may serve as an example).¹ However, when it came to describing reality in words, the contribution of the colors to the goals

of such 'realism' did not really seem all that important. On the contrary, the use of colors and color imagery seemed to be related, to a large extent, to metaphoric and metonymic usage of color terms; alternatively, it could even function as a form of what Jacqueline Clarke calls 'social commentary' (2003:299).²

In our own times, we find a similar tendency to consider 'derivative' uses of color terms as primary (or at least more important), compared to their 'literal' uses. This tendency is prevalent especially in literary studies; Clarke's 2003 study (p. 6) refers to earlier work, in particular a study by Edgeworth (1992), who divides the literary usage of color terms into six categories:

- *formulaic* (repeat phrases, such as the famous *flavus Tiberis, passim* in Horace; see below)
- *functional* (expressing some important aspect of the narrative)
- *allusive* (referring to usage by earlier authors)
- *decorative* (adding an embellishing detail)
- *cumulative* (when color terms appear in clusters; Edgeworth's own work on Virgil (1992) makes extensive usage of this type of occurrence, which, however, seems of minor importance in the study of Horace's works)
- *associative* (linking together episodes in the work).

As we see, none of the above terms (with the possible exception of Edgeworth's 'decorative' category) covers what I call a literal, descriptive (that is, 'mimetic') use of color terms. The next section will develop this point in more detail.

3. *Horace and Nature*

As I said, none of Edgeworth's categories listed in the previous section seem particularly apt to describe what one could call a 'simplistic-naturalistic' use of color terms. Such a use of color describes what is 'out there', without any allusions or associations either to occurrences within the text or to outside literary authorities or conventions. As regards Horace, what I'll be primarily looking for is the way the poet

'paints' his experiences, based on his vision and other senses, and how he expresses himself in words, employing terms of color and colorful verbal pictures. Secondly only, I'll touch upon what these colors may 'mean' in a derived sense, that is, metaphorically or even metonymically; these aspects of Horace's color use have been admirably covered by authors such as Nisbet and Hubbard (1970, 1978), Garrison (1991), and most recently Clarke (2003).

To illustrate the difference between the two approaches, compare, as contrasting instances, the poet's pictorial use of the term *candidus*, 'white', in the famous ode depicting Mount Soracte in winter:

*Vides ut alta stet nive candidum
Soracte ...* (Od. I, 9, 1-2),

with the distinctly metaphorical use of the same adjective in a quite different setting, as when Horace praises the 'honest mind', *candidum ingenium*, or refers to a 'dazzling girl', *puellae candidae*, in one of his Epodes (11, 11; 11, 27)

Similarly, among the occurrences of terms for 'black', we find a frequent term, *niger*, literally depicting a black state of affairs; here, forests, hills, smoke, waters, foliage, hair, eyes, teeth, even nails, etc. may be called 'black' (for an extensive listing, see below, section 4.3). We may then compare this usage with the non-literal use of the same word for the sun, for fires, for the netherworld (Orcus), where 'Mercury's black herd' (i.e. the ghosts of the dead; Od. I, 24, 18) reside; similarly, we find the East wind, called 'black Eurus' (Epod. 10, 5), Meriones (a 'black' person, perhaps on account of his deeds; Od. I, 6, 15), and so on. Compare also the frequent metaphorical use of another of the words for 'black', *ater*, as in *atra cura* 'black worry' (Od. III, 1, 40), *morti atrae* 'to black Death' (Od. I, 27, 13), *atra fila* 'the black threads' (spun by Fate) (Od. II, 3, 16), and so on.³

It is my impression that Horace, in his descriptive (or 'decorative') use of color terms, uses a rather meager palette, especially in his descriptions of nature (which, as we will see, revolve around the key terms of 'black' and 'white'). While this theoretically could be attributed to a lack of perception on the part of the poet, the jejune expressions could equally well be due to a corresponding lack of need. Under this

interpretation, painting in words is thought of as secondary to the creation of 'real' pictures, as performed by the painters; the primary aim of the poets' verbalization was not the representation of some natural phenomenon, but the steering of the recipients' perceptions and emotions towards a certain reception. And in this *ars poetica* of verbal painting, the color words as such did not yet fulfill the all-important role that they would come to play much later, when the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to emulate their colleagues, the painters, by expressing themselves directly in the language of colors and related expressions.⁴

Even with these reservations and caveats (and, for the time being, bypassing the question of a possible physical human condition called color-blindness), we may gather some evidence from Horace's works for what one could call his *literary* color-blindness. Horace, in his description of the Adriatic Sea or a winter's day in the mountains, focuses on immediately available contrasts (primarily between black and white: compare *nive candidum Soracte* with *ater sinus Hadriae*); as will emerge from the discussion of the data below, this is a pervasive, not an isolated feature of his work. But even in the poet's 'tropical' uses of color (in metaphor or metonymy), the predominance of these contrasting non-colors is evident: whereas the 'whites' are used to express pleasant feelings or positive traits, as in *nota cressa* 'a white [i.e. positive] mark' on the calendar (Od. I, 35, 10), the 'blacks' are prevalently related to more negative surroundings (cf. *atra Cura* 'black Worry' (personified as a goddess; Od. III, 1, 40).⁵

4. *The data*

4.1. Introduction

The following analysis is based on a lexical breakdown of Horace's verse, mainly the *Odes* and *Epodes* (in addition, the *Carmen Saeculare* and a single one of the *Sermones*, I, 9, have been scanned for color terms).

I have looked for lexical items having to do with color. These were mostly adjectives, such as the equivalents of English 'white', 'black', and so on; occasionally, also verbs (many of them inchoative)

and other, derived terms have been taken into consideration (the English equivalents of inchoative verbs are words like 'redden' or 'incandescent').

The 140 lexical occurrences resulting from my search are listed alphabetically below in their respective categories, each with a minimal context, so that their proper semantic value becomes clear; sometimes, the contexts have been expanded for better understanding. All terms have been translated and/or paraphrased.

Following the initial alphabetical listing, the individual terms have been grouped into these major functional categories:

Geography and Nature
Body Parts and Bodies
General Objects
Related Usage (mostly Metaphorical)
Unspecified.

4.2. Color terms in Horace

There follows a listing of the 42 color terms and color related words in the Horace corpus on which this study is based.

albus, albicare, albescere 'white, be/become white'
ardens 'burning, red-hot'
ater 'black'
aureus 'golden'
caeruleus 'blue'
candidus, candens 'white, gleaming'
canus, canities 'white(ness)' (orig. of hair)
ceruus 'wax-colored'
coruscus '(red-)flickering'
cressus 'white' (orig. color of chalk)
eburnus 'white' (orig. ivory-colored)
flavus 'reddish-yellow, blond, auburn'
fulvus 'brownish yellow'
furvus 'dark-colored'

igneus 'fiery-red' (orig. red-hot as of fire)
lividus '(blue-)black'
luridus 'greenish-yellow'
luteus 'yellow(ish)'
niger 'black'
nitor, niteo, nitidus 'shine/ing'
murreus 'dark golden'
niveus '(snow-)white'
pallidus, pallor 'pale(ness)'
pullus 'dark, somber'
purpureus 'purple'
ravus 'yellowish gray'
roseus 'pink'
ruber, rubens, erubescere 'red, turn red'
stercor 'dirty brown' (orig. color of crocodile manure)
viola 'purple or yellowish' (orig. color of the violet)
viridis, virens 'green, fresh'
vitreus 'resplendent' (orig. color of glass)

4.3. A breakdown of color collocations by categories

4.3.1. Geography and Nature

albus: albus Notus 'the white, i.e. South wind' (maybe 'clearing the skies'; cf. the Greeks' *nótos*, the present-day scirocco or mistral) (Od. I, 7, 15-16)

albus: stella alba 'a white, i.e. dazzling star' (Od. I, 12, 27-28)

albus: alba populus 'the white poplar' (Od. II, 3, 9)

albus: in album alitem '[changed] into a white bird' (most likely a swan, cf. *canorus ales* 'the singing bird' in l. 15) (Od. II, 20, 10)

albus: album caprum 'a white goat' (Od. III, 8, 6)

albus: albus ... Iapyx 'the white Iapyx' (i.e. a favorable, or clean, cloudless wind, cf. Od. I, 3, 4) (Od. III, 27, 19-20)

Cf. the derived verb *albicare* 'be, appear white': *nec prata canis albicant pruinis* 'and the fields are no longer white with hoarfrost' (Od. I, 4, 14)

ater: atra nubes 'a black cloud' (Od. II, 16, 2)

- ater: atra nube* 'with a black cloud' (Od. III, 16, 2)
ater: atra nocte 'in the black night' (Epod. 10, 9)
ater: atris viperis 'from black snakes' (Od. III, 29, 43-44)
ater: ater ... sinus Hadriae 'the black bosom [i.e. gulf] of the Adriatic Sea' (Od. III, 27, 18-19)
aureus: sidus aureum 'the golden star' (Epod. 17, 41)
candidus: nive candidum Soracte 'Mt. Soracte white with snow' (Od. I, 9, 1-2; Soracte is a mountain visible from Horace's villa near Tibur, the present Tivoli)
candidus: nive candidam Thracen 'Thracia white with snow' (Od. III, 25, 10)
candidis ... stellis 'with (your) white [i.e. clear] stars' (Od. III, 15, 6)
canus: canis ... pruinis 'with white hoarfrost [rime]' (Od. I, 4, 14)
flavus: flavum Tiberim 'the yellow [muddy?] Tiber' (the river that runs through Rome) (Od. I, 2, 13)
flavus: flavum Tiberim 'the yellow Tiber' (Od. I, 8, 8)
flavus: flavus ... Tiberis 'the yellow Tiber' (Od. II, 3, 18)
lividus: lividos ... racemos 'the bluish-black grapes' (Od. II, 5, 10-11)
niger: nigris ... ventis 'by the black winds' (Od. I, 5, 7)
niger: nigris silvis 'by the dark forests' (Od. I, 21, 7-8)
niger: nigri ... colles 'the black hills' (Od. IV, 11-12)
niger: nigro ... fumo 'from black smoke' (Od. III, 6, 4)
niger: nigro ... gregi 'to (his [i.e. Mercury's]) black herd' (i.e. the netherworld population) (Od. I, 24, 18)
niger: aequoris nigri 'of the black waters' (Od. III, 27, 23)
niger: nigro ... Orco 'the black Orcus [netherworld]' (Od. IV, 2, 23-24)
niger: nigrae ... frondis 'of its black [i.e. dark] foliage' (Od. IV, 4, 59)
niger: niger ... Eurus 'the black [i.e. not favorable] Eurus [East wind]' (Epod. 10, 5)
niger: nigris ... barris '(fit) for black elephants' (Epod. 12, 1)
niger: nigrum ... solem 'a black sun' (Serm. 9, 71)
pullus: pulla ficus 'the dark [i.e. ripe] fig' (Epod. 16, 46)
pullus: pulla myrto 'over the dark [i.e. somber] myrtle' (Od. I, 25, 18)
purpureus: mare purpureum 'the purple sea' (Od. II, 12, 2-3) (Cf. Homer's *oínopa pónton*)
purpureus: flos purpureus 'purple flower' (Od. III, 15, 15)

purpureus: purpureis ... oloribus 'with your [Venus] purple swans' (Od. IV, 1, 10)
ravus: rava lupa 'a gray she-wolf' (Od. III, 27, 3)
ravus: ravos ... leones 'the yellowish-gray lions' (Epod. 12, 33)
rubens: Luna rubens 'the red-shimmering Moon' (Od. II, 11, 10)
ruber: Oceano rubro 'to the Red Sea' (Od. I, 25, 32)
virens: hedera ... virenti 'by the green ivy' (Od. I, 25, 17-18)
virens: virentis campos 'the greening fields' (Od. II, 5, 4-5)
virens: virens ... flamma 'the green [i.e. lively] fire' (Epod. 17, 33)
viridis: viridi sub arbuto 'under a green bush' (Od. I, 1, 3)
viridis: viridis colubras 'green [poisonous] snakes' (Od. I, 17, 8)
viridis: viridi ... myrto 'with green [i.e. fresh] myrtle' (Od. I, 4, 9)
viridis: viridis Cragi 'of green Cragus' (a mountain in Lycia) (Od. I, 21, 8)
viridis: viridi ... Venafro 'in green Venafrum' (now Venafrò, a town in Campania) (Od. II, 6, 15-16)
viridis: virides lacertae 'the green lizards' (Od. I, 23, 6-7)
viridis: viridi ... pampino 'with green [i.e. fresh] vine' (Od. III, 25, 20)
viridis: viridi ... pampino 'with green [i.e. fresh] vine' (Od. IV, 8, 33)
vitreus: vitreo ... ponto 'to the clear sea' (Od. IV, 2, 3-4)

4.3.2. Body Parts and Bodies

albus: albo ... umero 'with (her) white shoulder(s)' (Od. I, 5, 19)
albus: bubus ... albis 'by white oxen' (Carm. Saec. 49)
albus: capillus albus '(your) hair (is) white' (Epod. 17, 18)
 Cf. *albescens*: 'whitening' *albescens ... capillus* '(one's) hair turning white' (Od. III, 14, 25)
ater: atro dente 'with a black tooth' (Epod. 6, 15)
ater: dens ater 'a black tooth, black teeth' (Epod. 8, 3)
ater: atro ... cruore 'by the black blood' (Epod. 17, 31-32)
candens: candentis umeros '(your) white [i.e. splendid] shoulders' (Od. I, 2, 31)
candidus: candidos umeros 'white shoulders' (Od. I, 13, 9-10)
candidus: candidae cervici 'on (your) white neck' (Od. III, 9, 2-3)
candidus: puellae candidae 'for a dazzling maiden' (Epod. 11, 27)
canus: canos ... capillos 'white hair' (Od. II, 11, 15)

- canus: vigilum canum* 'the white-haired guard' (Od. III, 16, 2)
- cereus: brachia cerea* 'wax-colored [i.e. nicely pale, white] arms'⁶ (the Romans did not appreciate a suntan, neither for men nor for women) (Od. I, 13, 2-3)
- flavus: flavam comam* 'auburn hair' (Od. I, 5, 4)
- flavus: Phyllidis flavae* 'of blond Phyllis' (Od. II, 4, 14)
- flavus: flava Chloe* 'reddish-blond Chloe' (Od. III, 9, 19)
- flavus: in Ganymede flavo* 'in blond Ganymedes' (Od. IV, 4, 4)
- fulvus: niveus ... cetera fulvus* '(having a) white (mark on its forehead), the rest (being) reddish brown' (said of a calf) (Od. IV, 2, 59-60)
- fulvus: fulvae matris* 'of (its) brown-yellow mother' (a lioness) (Od. IV, 4, 14)
- fulvus: fulvus Lacon* 'the tawny Spartan' (a breed of sheep- or cattle-dog) (Epod. 6, 5)
- lividus: livida ... brachia* 'black-and-blue arms' (bruised from training) (Od. I, 8, 10-11)
- lividus: dente livido* 'with a blue-black tooth' (Epod. 5, 47)
- luridus: luridi dentes* '(your) yellowed teeth' (Od. IV, 13, 10-11)
- luridus: pelle ... lurida* 'with yellow pelt' (Epod. 17, 22)
- luteus: pallor luteus* 'a yellowish pallor' (Epod. 10, 16)
- murreus: murreum ... crinem* '(her) golden hair' (Od. III, 14, 22)
- niger: nigris oculis nigroque crine* 'with (his) black eyes and black hair' (Od. 1, 32, 10-11)
- niger: dente ... nigro* '(with (your) black [i.e. ugly] tooth [i.e. teeth]' (Od. II, 8, 3)
- niveus: niveo colore* 'by (her body's) snow-white color' (Od. II, 4, 3)
- niveus: niveum ... latus* 'the white flank' (Od. III, 27, 25-26)
- niveus: niveus ... cetera fulvus* '(having a) white (mark), for the rest being reddish brown' (said of a calf) (Od. IV, 2, 59-60)
- purpureus: purpureo ore* 'with (his) mouth purple [from wine?]' (perhaps said of Augustus) (Od. III, 3, 12)
- roseus: cervicem roseam* '(his) rosy neck' (Od. I, 13, 2-3)
- ruber: rubro sanguine* 'with (its) red blood' (Od. III, 13, 6)
- viola: tinctus viola pallor* 'made up in pale yellow' (i.e. the color of the flower; Garrison 1991:311) (Od. III, 10, 14)
- virens: virentis Chiae* 'of the green [i.e. lush] woman from Chios' (Od. IV, 13, 6-7)

viridis: viridis ... comas 'the green [i.e. watery] hair' (of the Nereids; Od. III, 28, 10)

4.3.3. General Objects

albus: albo panno 'by a white cloth' (Od. I, 35, 21-22)

ater: atris ignibus 'with black flames' (Epod. 5, 82)

aureus: aureo cornu 'with (your) golden horn' (said of Bacchus) (Od. II, 19, 29-30)

aureus: virga ... aurea 'with (your) golden scepter' (said of Mercury) (Od. I, 10, 18-19)

aureus: aureis ... culullis 'from golden goblets' (Od. I, 31, 10-11)

eburnus: eburna ... cum lyra 'with (your) ivory-colored lyre' (Od. II, 11, 22)

coruscus: igni corusco 'with red-flickering fire' (Od. I, 34, 6)

ruber: rubros ... pannos 'the [blood-stained] red rags' (Epod. 17, 51)

4.3.4. Related Usage (Mostly Metaphorical)

albus: albus ... pallor 'a white paleness' (Epod. 7, 15)

ardens: Vulcanus ardens 'red-hot Vulcan' (Od. I, 4, 8)

ater: morti atrae 'to black Death' (Od. I, 27, 13)

ater: atrum venenum 'black [i.e. deadly] poison' (Od. I, 37, 28)

ater: fila ... atra 'the black threads' (spun by Fate) (Od. II, 3, 16)

ater: atras ... auris '(its) black [i.e. ugly] ears' (Od. II, 13, 34-35)

ater: ater ... Cocytos 'the black Cocytus' (a netherworld river) (Od. II, 14, 17-18)

ater: atra Cura 'black Worry' (personified as a goddess) (Od. III, 1, 40)

ater: atras curas 'black worries' (Od. III, 14, 13-14)

ater: atrae ... curae 'black worries' (Od. IV, 11, 35-36)

aureus: te .. aurea 'you, the golden (maiden)' (Od. I, 5, 9)

aureus: auream ... mediocritatem 'the golden middle road' (Od. II, 8, 5)

aureus: aureo ... plectro 'with (your) golden [i.e. divinely inspired] plectrum' (Od. II, 13, 25-27)

aureus: tempus aureum 'the golden age' (Epod. 16, 64)

caeruleus: caerulea pube 'by the blue-eyed soldiery' (i.e. the Cimbri and Teutones, according to Garrison 1991; see further Section 7, below) (Epod. 16, 9).

candidus: candidum ... ducem 'a shining leader' (Epod. 3, 9-10)

candidus: candidum ... ingenium 'the sincere mind' (Epod. 11, 1-12)

candidus: candide Maecenas 'my noble friend Maecenas' (Epod. 14, 5)

Cf. *canities ... morosa* 'cranky white-hairedness' (i.e. 'old age', as opposed to *virens* for 'youth') (Od. I, 9, 17)

creesus: cressa nota 'a white [i.e. festive] mark' (on the calendar) (Od. I, 35, 10)

furvus: furvae ... Proserpinae 'of somber Proserpina' (Od. II, 13, 21)

igneus: igneam ... aestatem 'the red-hot summer' (Od. I, 17, 3-4)

lividus: lividas ... obliviones 'black forgotten memories' (Od. IV, 9, 33-34)

niger: nigrum Merionem 'the black [i.e. infamous] Meriones' (historically, the companion at Troy, and later bane, of Idomeneus, the Cretan king) (Od. I, 6, 15)

niger: nigrorum ... ignium 'of the dark fires' (Od. IV, 12, 26)

nitens: nitentis ... Cycladas 'the dazzling white Cyclades' (Od. I, 14, 19-20)

nitidus: nitido ... adultero 'the dazzling adulterer' (Od. III, 24, 20)

nitidus: nitido curru 'in (the Sun's) splendid course' (Carm. Saec. 9)

nitor: Glycerae nitor splendentis 'splendid Glycera's dazzling whiteness [i.e. beauty]' (Od. I, 19, 5-6)

pallidus: pallida mors 'pale Death' (Od. I, 4, 13)

purpureus: purpureo colore 'with (Autumn's) purple color' (Od. II, 5, 12)

rubens: rubente dextera 'with (his) [i.e. Juppiter's] reddening [i.e. fiery] right hand' (Od. I, 2, 2-3)

Cf. *non erubescendis ignibus* 'because of fires that should not make [you] turn red' (viz., a passion that you need not be ashamed of) (Od. I, 27, 15-16)

virens: donec virenti canities abest 'as long as (you), while greening [i.e. being young], can keep old age away' (addressing 'Thaliarchus') (Od. I, 9, 17)

vitreus: vitream Circen 'the [crystalline, i.e.] splendid Circe' (Od. I, 17, 20)

4.3.5. Unspecified

mare ... decoloravere caedes 'the slaughter has changed the color of the sea' (Od. II, 1, 35)

nullus color '(buried money has) no color' (Od. II, 2, 1)

amissos colores 'its [the wool's] lost colors' (Od. III, 5, 27)

liquidis ... coloribus '(he [scil. Parrhasius] painted) with wet colors' (Od. IV, 8, 7)

color ... rosae 'the color of the rose' (Od. IV, 10, 4) (Cf. *roseus* in Section 4.3.2, above)

color stercore fucatus 'color-coated with [crocodile] manure' (Epod. 12, 10-11)

5. Analyzing the distribution

5.1. Preliminaries

Looking at the words for colors that we find displayed in Horace's verse, it strikes us immediately that the overwhelming majority of color terms have to do with various expressions for 'black' and 'white'. For 'black', the front runner is *ater*, with 17 out of 140 total tabulated occurrences; runner-up is *niger*, with 16 occurrences. If we consider *lividus* '(blue-)black' as a legitimate representative of this color,⁷ we can add its 4 to the total to obtain 37 tokens of terms for 'black'. Adding the two occurrences of *pullus* 'dark' gives us a total of 39 out of 140, or 27.8%.

As to Horace's expressions for 'white', we find a truly 'dazzling' array of terms, eight altogether.⁸ The 'real' colors are best represented: the most frequently used term is *albus*, with 11 occurrences (13 if we include its derivatives such as *albescere*, *albicare*); but *candidus* is very frequent as well: 9 occurrences (10 including *candens*). This adjective is often used metaphorically as well (meaning 'splendid', 'honest', and so on). Quite popular, too, are *canus* (with *canities*) and *nitidus* (with related items), totaling 4 occurrences each. The next in line, *niveus*, has 3 occurrences, while *pallidus* (including *pallor*) shows 2. A few single occurrences such as *cereus*, *cressus*, *eburnus* bring up the rear. Altogether,

the words for 'white' and its cognate color shades account for 39 out of the total of 140 occurrences of color terms, or 27.8%.

The third most frequent color term found in our corpus is 'green', mainly represented by the adjectives *viridis* and the 'fossilized' participle *virens* (lit. 'greening'), used metaphorically as a synonym for 'young'. Altogether, the 14 occurrences of the words for 'green' make up 10.0% of the total color vocabulary.

Among the remainder of the color terms, we find a few less frequent expressions; many of these are single occurrences, so-called *hapax legomena*. Most conspicuous in this connection is the unique occurrence of the word for 'blue', *caeruleus*, on which I will have more to say below, in Section 7. A number of terms for 'mixed' colors are also encountered, most of them belonging in the yellow-brown and/or darker bands of the spectrum. Thus, we have *fulvus* 'brownish-yellow', *furvus* 'dark, brown', also used metaphorically in the sense of 'ominous', *lutens* 'yellow(ish)', *luridus* 'yellow(ed)', also used metaphorically: 'sinister', *murreus* 'golden brown', *ravus* 'yellowish gray', and so on. Note also the remarkable occurrence of the substantive *stercus* 'manure', used to signify a brownish color, as in *color stercore fucatus* 'a color due to the application of (crocodile) manure'.⁹

Unusually few occurrences (at least in a modern perspective) are found of terms for 'red': we find *ruber* only three times (adding the derivatives *rubens*, *erubescere*, we reach a total of 6). In addition, there is a single occurrence of *roseus*, as well as a mention of *color rosae*, likewise once. I will come back to this phenomenon below.

A number of the color terms are based on derivation from substantives, such as *aureus* 'golden' (from *aurum* 'gold'; 8 times), *purpureus* 'purple' (from *purpura* 'the color purple'; 4 times), *vitreus* 'clear, splendid' (from *vitrum* 'glass'; twice), *cereus* 'wax-colored' (from *cera* '(bee) wax'; once), *igneus* 'fiery' (from *ignis* 'fire'; likewise once), and so on.

Sometimes, Horace uses a paraphrase, perhaps in an effort to capture an unusual or 'loaded' color; an example is found in the expression (quoted above) from the Epodes (12, 10-11): *color stercore fucatus*. Another example is the 'flowery' paraphrase of the term for 'yellowish',¹⁰ apparently derived from the substantive denoting *viola*, the violet. Here, a more unusual flower name than the somewhat trite *rosa*

has been employed for greater effect: *tinctus viola pallor* 'made up in a yellowish pallor' (said of a person's face; Od. III, 10, 14).

5.2. A world in black and white

Given the preponderance of the terms for 'black' and 'white', below, I will first list the occurrences of these words according to their major collocations. Here, I will use the groups that were established earlier, in Section 4.1.

Black

Category Geography and Nature 19

ater 5

niger 11

lividus 1

pullus 2

Category Body Parts and Bodies 8

ater 3

niger 3

lividus 2

pullus 0

Category General Objects 1

ater 1

niger 0

lividus 0

pullus 0

Category Related Usage (mostly Metaphorical) 11

ater 8

niger 2

lividus 1

pullus 0

Category Unspecified 0

Black All 39 (if excluding Metaphor: 28)

White

Category Geography and Nature 11

albus 7

candidus 3

canus 1

nitidus 0

niveus 0

pallidus 0

ceruus 0

cressus 0

eburnus 0

Category Body Parts and Bodies 10

albus 4

candidus 4

canus 2

nitidus 0

niveus 0

pallidus 0

ceruus 0

cressus 0

eburnus 0

Category General Objects 7

albus 1

candidus 0

canus 0

nitidus 0

niveus 3

pallidus 1

ceruus 1

cressus 0

CANDIDUM SORACTE: WAS HORACE COLOR-BLIND?

eburnus 1

Category Related Usage (mostly Metaphorical) 11

albus 1

candidus 3

canus 1

nitidus 4

niveus 0

pallidus 1

ceruus 0

cressus 1

eburnus 0

Category Unspecified 0

White All 39 (if excluding Metaphor: 28)

Adding up the figures for Black and White (and their related terms), we obtain the following:

Instances of all color terms for each of Black and White: 39.

(If we collapse the three first categories (Nature, Body and Object) into one, non-metaphorical, 'descriptive', category, the result for this joint category is likewise 28 occurrences for Black and 28 for White).

On a total count of 140 color terms in our corpus, this means that taken together, the colors black and white are represented by in all 78 instances out of 140, or 55.7% of the total. (If we want to restrict ourselves to the purely descriptive, non-metaphorical usages, the tally stops at 56, or 40.0%). By way of comparison, the next most frequently occurring color term, 'green' (*viridis* and related terms), has only 14 occurrences, out of which 4 are non-descriptive; this term accounts for a mere 10.0% (respectively 7.1%) of the total number of color words.

Clearly, the black and white colors (including their shades and nuances, such as *pullus* for 'black' or *nitidus* for 'white') account for the vast majority of color words, both in descriptive and in non-

descriptive (metaphorical and/or metonymical) usage. The question is now how to interpret these findings.

6. *Was Horace color-blind?*

With the reservations given above concerning the (cross-)cultural significance, both of terms for colors and of terms related to colors (such as in the expression 'color-blind'), there seems to be no reasonable doubt that Horace, in his depiction of nature and people, *really* saw what he was referring to by his overwhelming use of expressions denoting the colors 'black' and 'white' or their cognates. As far as the other colors are concerned, we may likewise *a priori* assume (by default, as it were) that what he wrote was what he saw (or occasionally, wanted to see); still, the problem remains that (with the possible exception of *viridis* 'green'), there aren't that many other colors mentioned in the first place and that second, many of these are being used rather schematically and conventionally.

In fact, some of the most beautiful descriptive passages in the Odes make reference precisely to either or both of the colors 'black' and 'white' (cf. the already quoted *Vides ut alta stet nive candidum / Soracte*, from Od. I, 9, 1-2, or the equally beloved, elegant Spring Ode from Book I, *Solvitur acris hiems ...*, where the poet describes the post-wintery fields as no longer white with rime: *nec prata canis albicant pruinis*; Od. I, 4, 4). And when Horace ridicules former flames, now saddled with the weaknesses of age, we have little trouble seeing Lyce's, Barine's, and other former mistresses' bad teeth adorned with the epithet 'black' (either *niger* as in Od. II, 8, 3, or *ater*, as in Epod. 6, 15 and 8, 3, or *lividus*, as in Epod. 5, 47).¹² Similarly, his characterization as 'black' of the Adriatic Sea, that common graveyard of Roman sailors, especially during the raging storms of autumn (cf. Od. II, 14, 14): *ater sinus Hadriae* (Od. III, 27, 18-19), seems particularly appropriate.

When it comes to the other colors, however, the poet seems not always capable of painting a convincing picture. As for the occurrences of 'green' (*viridis*, *virens*), the next most frequent item on our list, they are mostly standard. We don't have to use much imaginative force to represent fields or bushes (or even lizards: *virides lacertae*, Od. I, 23, 6-7)

as 'green', while plants such as ivy and myrtle and the ubiquitous vine are green by nature (cf. Od. I, 25, 17-18; I, 4, 9; II, 25, 20; IV, 8, 33; and *passim*). In addition, many of Horace's 'greens' are clearly metaphorical (denoting 'youth', mostly) and carry little original, descriptive value (in the sense defined above).

Moreover, among the adjectives that are used to represent what one could call 'true' colors, we find quite a few that are decidedly conventional, even to the extent that they figure in a fixed, 'locked' combination Adj+N, where the adjective functions as the classical trope called *epitheton ornans*, popular ever since Homer. Thus, we find regular references to the 'yellow(ish) Tiber' (*flavus Tiberis*, e.g. Od. I, 2, 13; I, 8, 8; II, 3, 18) – an epithet that certainly makes sense if one thinks of the Tiber's (even today) muddy waters,¹³ but which nevertheless had been a standard attribute since the days of Ennius (from whom Horace probably borrowed it).¹⁴ In the same vein, we encounter a mention of the sea as being 'purple' – one is immediately reminded of Homer's standard expression *oînops pōntos* (Odyssey ε 132 and *passim*); here, the occurrence of the qualifying adjective is as familiar and expected as is Horace's use of *clarus* in e.g. *claram Rhodon aut Mytilenen* (Od. I, 7, 1) – itself a direct replica of Homer's expression *Lakedaimona dān* (Odyssey δ 702, ε 20 and *passim*). Similarly, *virens* in *donec virenti canities abest* 'as long as your hair hasn't turned white yet, young man' (Od. I, 9, 17) or in *virentis Chiae* 'of the lush woman from Chios' (Od. IV, 13, 6-7) has very little to do with the color 'green' as such. As to the Nereids' 'green hair' (*viridis ... comas*; Od. III, 28, 10), the jury is still out: maybe their hairdos are thought to be 'green by association' (with the 'greenish' water)?

There are a few places where the colors outside the white-black gamut seem to have been used with some precision. One instance is an occurrence of *lividus* where Horace, referring to grapes, qualifies them as 'blue-black' (*lividos ... racemos*, Od. II, 5, 10-11); in another, a fig is mentioned as *pulla* (Epod. 16, 46) – this adjective, too, properly belongs in the 'dark' part of Horace's color spectrum, as we have seen earlier. Finally, in a number of cases an unexpected color turns out to be less than descriptive-pictorial, e.g. when Venus's 'purple swans' (Od. IV, 1, 10: *purpureis oloribus*) turn out to be more 'splendid' than really 'purple'.¹⁵

7. *How blue the sky ...*

One of the more astonishing features of Horace's color usage in his descriptions of nature is the absence of any reference to the sky as being 'blue'. This may be a common characteristic of Roman poetry (cf. Clarke 2003:47ff. on *caeruleus*), but the fact remains that the sky's blue brightness does not seem to have evoked any poetic resonance in our poet. One banal explanation could be that the Romans didn't have any chance to see the blue sky, due to their persistent use of firewood for cooking and heating, which could have resulted in a massive brownish haze over the city (akin to what one sees when approaching a modern Far Eastern city such as Bangkok or Beijing from the air). But then again, Horace did not suffer from such restrictions in his country residence, and he was certainly able to see his beloved Mt. Soracte, unimpeded by the smoke clouds of the far-away *Urbs*.

Another possible explanation would draw attention to the fact that, while the Romans in general (as we have seen) often used Nature in their poetry to reflect their states of mind, they apparently did not, in this connection, feel obliged to render the true colors of natural objects or humans faithfully and/or completely. In particular, they may not have thought of the sky's blue color (or the corresponding mental imagery) as a suitable expression for their thoughts and feelings.

Also, even if the sky happens to be blue, as it is usually the case (with the proviso mentioned above) in Mediterranean countries, one perhaps doesn't pay too much attention to this fact. The almost idolatrous veneration for blue skies and golden sunlight that characterizes Nordic people is totally absent from the mentality of those whose relationship to sun and skies is of a more restrictive and restricted character. To imagine the modern activity of sunbathing as occurring in a classical environment seems as ridiculous as it is anachronistic, and we have to travel hundreds of years (in fact, all the way to eighteenth-century Goethe) to find a link between the sun's appearance in the blue skies and one human's mental state – in this case, a re-emerging belief in God ("Die Sonne scheint heiss, und man glaubt wieder einmal an einen Gott"; thus Goethe in his *Italienische Reise*, upon descending into the Italian plains from the foggy and icy Northern mountains [1786]).¹⁶

So, one wonders. The only occurrence of the word for 'blue', *caeruleus*, in my corpus is the one in Epod. 16,9, where Horace talks about the *caerulea pubes*, 'the blue-eyed soldiery', apparently referring to the Germanic tribes that nearly overran Rome in the 2d century B.C.¹⁷ Moreover, not even the sea was blue for Horace, as far as we know; the epithets he uses ('black', 'purple', 'shining', 'red') are more in line with the established patterns originally due to Homer and later Virgil, as we have seen in the examples above (the 'purple sea', the 'black Hadria', and so on). And of course, Horace would not have been personally in contact with those 'blue-eyed' Germans – he is merely referring to a long-standing historic-literary tradition.

8. Other colors

The absence of one of our modern, primary colors from Horace's nature palette is all the more telling, given that another color, red, is also represented very sparsely. Actually, the only time we really 'see red' in his poems is when he mentions his beloved *Fons Bandusiae*, the well-spring he apostrophizes as being of 'more than crystal-like splendor' (*splendidior vitro*; Od. III, 13, 1), and to which he promises to sacrifice a young billy-goat the next day: *cras donaberis haedo* (Od. III, 13, 3). It is this animal's red blood that will adorn the clear waters of the spring (*inficiet tibi / rubro sanguine rivos*; Od. III, 13, 6-7).

The other words having to do with the color 'red' are all of a less distinct character: the Moon is called *rubens* 'red-shimmering' (Od. II, 11, 10), but so is Jupiter's right hand, said to throw fiery bolts of lightning on the City: *rubente dextera* (Od. I, 2, 2-3). In another context, we find a certainly metaphorical, maybe even metonymical, derived use of 'red' as the color of shame (*non erubescendis ignibus* 'by the flames [of a passion] that you shouldn't have to be ashamed of' (because the object of your desire is a slave girl) (Od. I, 27, 15-16). Vulcan is said to be *ardens* ('burning, red-hot') when he stokes up under his workshops: *Vulcanus ardens / urit officinas* (Od. 1, 4, 8); elsewhere the summer is referred to as *igneus* 'red-hot, fiery' (Od. I, 17, 3-4).

Apart from the case of the sacrificial kid in Od. III, 14, mentioned above, the only other 'objectively' descriptive use of the word for 'red'

occurs in the 17th Epode, where Horace ironically characterizes a reluctant mistress, Canidia, by referring to her jumping out of childbed in pursuit of more interesting exploits, even while the midwife still is busy washing the blood-stained sheets: ... *tuo / cruore rubros obstetrix pannos lavit*, ... (Epod. 17, 51).¹⁸ And the use of *ruber* in *Oceano rubro* (Od. I, 25, 32) may be better explained, in its context of geographical locations, as a fixed expression, cf. our 'Red Sea'.¹⁹ Finally, the derived word *roseus* (from *rosa*) is neither color-specific (the rose is also said to be *flos purpureus*), nor other than conventionally descriptive, as in *color rosae* (Od. IV, 10, 4); cf. the mention of Telephus' 'rosy neck', *cervicem roseam* (Od. I, 13, 2; incidentally, a *hapax* in my corpus), which is every bit as conventional as the poet's later reference to Lydia's *candidae cervici* (Od. III, 9, 2-3).

Many of the other color terms that we find in Horace have too limited,²⁰ or too conventional a distribution to be of much use when it comes to evaluating the poet's 'feel' for nuances of color. As an instance, take the word *fulvus*, 'brownish-yellow', traditionally used to denote the color of a lion's (occasionally a dog's) pelt. True enough, Horace uses the term three times for animals: a lioness, *fulvae matris* (Od. IV, 4, 14), a calf, said to be brown except for a white mark: *niveus videri, cetera fulvus* (Od. IV, 4, 14), and a Spartan cattle dog, *fulvus Lacon* (Epod. 6, 5).²¹ In line with other color *hapax legomena*, however, such a usage does not reveal too much about the way these colors were attributed 'normally' (i.e. outside their fixed environments).²²

9. Conclusion

Having considered the varying usage that Horace makes of the available color terms in his poetic language, two thoughts present themselves as perhaps worthy of being taken home and kept for further thought.

One reflects the fact that there is indeed a great numerical disparity between the terms being used for 'regular' colors and those from the predominantly black/white scale. Over one half of all the color terms found fall into this latter category, whereas other color terms (among them some very common ones, such as the words for

'blue' and 'red') are represented only once or sporadically; still others, among these the many words for 'blurred' colors such as yellowish-red, grayish-yellow, and so on, occur mostly in certain isolated, predictable environments (often as *epitheta ornantia*).

On the other hand, the 'true-to-life' depiction of Nature with which we have become familiar ever since Antiquity, and which certainly was much appreciated among the Greeks and Romans as far as painting goes, does not seem to have triggered a similar need when it comes to writing and 'pictorial', literary description. Many of the color words I've registered (over one third of the total occurrences) are used in a metaphorical sense; among the ones used for description, not many correspond to what we see as 'true' colors. For instance, we wouldn't learn, from reading Horace, whether the skies were actually perceived as 'blue' by the Romans.²³

Concluding, then, I cannot prove, or even reasonably maintain, that Horace was color-blind in the strict, contemporary sense of the expression. What we do seem to have noticed is that his use of the color spectrum is certainly different from ours, and that this difference manifests itself especially in the different treatment of the descriptive aspects of his poetry, where black and white dominate. Perhaps one could venture the conclusion that Horace's hypothetical color-blindness was culturally imposed, at least in part, and that his treatment of the other colors lacks in variety because he seems to have been perfectly content with the effects he could obtain by 'painting' in black and white. After all, even in our own days, the effects realized in older 'B&W' movies often widely surpass the results of an intensified chase for a 'truer', life-like coloring in more modern products. The trouble is that even a successful chase does not guarantee an artistically satisfying catch; a motif's beauty is not automatically enhanced by objects being painstakingly depicted in all minute details. Horace paints with a light stroke, giving us, rather than a blueprint, an outline. Situations, happenings, and relationships are visualized in tones of light and dark, in shades of density, rather than in a panoply of assorted colors. The things that remain unsaid, such as the 'missing' colors, are left for us, the readers, to fill in for ourselves. This opening towards a 'readerly cooperation' (Mey 2000) is among the features that make Horace's work unique, and truly *aere perennius* (Od. II, 30, 1).

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Notes

1. The two Sicilian master painters, Apelles and Zeuxis, are reported to have engaged in a contest for the title of 'Supreme Painter'. The criterion was naturalness. Apelles painted a *nature morte* with fruits, done so well that one member of the jury was tempted to grab a fig and taste it – he only got his hands dirty, of course. But Zeuxis was even more proficient: he painted a floral composition that was so true to nature that a bee mistook the flowers for real and got stuck in the wet paint. (As recounted by the Greek philosopher-linguist Diodorus Siculus).
2. One should also remember, as Clarke remarks, that 'the Roman response to certain colours and colour terms may have been different from our own' (2003:3). On this, see also Steinmayer's and others' (2000) discussion on the Classics website.
3. It is by no means a coincidence that the illustrative examples here almost spontaneously came out in 'black and white'; more on this later. For naturalistic usage of *ater* (as in *ater sinus Hadriae* 'the Adriatic Sea's black waters' (Od. III, 27, 18-19), see Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, below.
4. The 19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud is a good example of this trend.
5. Compare that even in the Bible, 'black' carries these connotations. The Bride in *Canticle* defiantly proclaims her beauty despite her blackness: 'I am black but comely, ye daughters of Jerusalem' (*Cant.* 1:5).
6. Or 'clear, smooth' (Garrison 1991:223).
7. *Ater* and *lividus* carry additional connotations such as 'doom' and 'malice'.
8. The terms for 'dazzling', such as *splendidus*, *splendens*, *fulgens*, etc. have not been included in the spectrum for 'white', although one could argue that they might have their proper place here, especially in view of the contrasts that Horace makes use of in relation to other colors. (Cf. Od. III, 13, where the glittering splendor of Horace's favorite spring (*fons Bandusiae*, *splendidior vitro*) contrasts with the red blood (*rubro sanguine*) of the animal to be sacrificed to/in it).

9. Norwegian similarly has a commonly recognized (though highly restricted) metonymical term for this color: *bæsjebrunt*, literally 'shitbrown' (a color often used in older farm houses for painting floors etc.).
10. Thus according to Garrison (1991); for divergent opinions, see Clarke (2003:123, 170).
11. *Furvus* 'dark, somber' could perhaps have been counted here as well; for 'white', one could have included such terms as *splendidus* or *splendens* 'splendid' (see footnote 8).
12. As Nesbit & Hubbard remark, for Horace, bad teeth are the 'hallmark of decaying courtesans' (1978:125).
13. *Teste*, among others, Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood, who, in her 2000 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin*, lets the heroine, during her honeymoon stay in Rome, remark on 'the Tiber floating along, yellow as jaundice' (p. 304).
14. I am indebted to Steve J. Willett for this observation.
15. Clarke mentions that many scholars have 'downplayed' the value of this color word and instead, suggest that we translate *purpureus* as 'gleaming' or 'silver' (said of swans). Clarke herself does not buy into this, however (2003:292).
16. The author wants to thank Kirsten Albjerg who spotted a major, persistent error in this Goethe quote.
17. Clarke (2003) does not mention this occurrence in her conspectus of color terms, where she lists only examples of *caeruleus/caerulus*, derived from Catullus and Propertius (pp. 47-49). Garrison (1991) specifically refers to the invasion of the Cimbri & Teutones in 101 B.C.
18. Neither this occurrence has been noted by Clarke under *ruber* (2003:139-141).
19. As does Clarke (2003:140).
20. As mentioned earlier, a number of them are *hapax legomena*.
21. Clarke (2003:91) does not refer to this passage in her listing for the adjective. However, she does quote an earlier mention by André (1949:133), who asserts that the color *fulvus* is traditionally ascribed to lions, especially in Virgil (Clarke 2003:165).
22. Examples include *murreus*, *luteus*, *furvus*, *creesus*, and others. For instances of their usage, see the listing in section 4.3.
23. Some other Roman poets do have a few references to this specific color, when it comes to the heavens above; 'blue' is also sometimes used for the color of the sea (cf. Clarke 2003:47).

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