

## REVIEWS

*Capti: Fabula Menippeo-Hoffmaniana Americana*. By STEPHEN BERARD. Wenatchee WA: Cataracta Publications, 2012; produced/distributed by AuthorHouse. Pp. 627. Cloth. \$33.83.

This is a novel, in Latin. It is part magic realism, part murder mystery, part cyberpunk, set in Seattle and Los Angeles in the present. Its form, as the subtitle says, is Menippean satire: that is, mixed prose and verse, though rather more prose. The book is complicated, stuffed full of digressions and dreams. The Latinity is excellent, though arguably the most difficult Latin I have ever read; it reads like a hybrid of Salman Rushdie, Neal Stephenson, and Lee Siegel, if they wrote Latin. “Hoffmaniana,” in the subtitle, refers to the German novelist E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822); his novel *The Life and Opinions of Murr, a Tomcat*, is one of the influences on *Capti*, as is the book Hoffmann was emulating, Laurence Sterne’s (1713–1768) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Berard is professor of Latin, Spanish, and German at Wenatchee Valley College, in Washington; director of the Conventiculum Vasintoniense; and a regular contributor to *Melissa*.

The novel itself is 580 pages long, followed by a glossary of unfamiliar words. These include “ADN, acidum deoxyarabinosinucleicum (minus recte ‘deoxyribonucleicum’), sc. illa macromolecula longissima quae cuiusque animantis informationem ad duplicationem biologicam, sive ‘replicationem,’ necessariam in se continet” (608); “quantalis, -e, ad scientiam physicam quantalem (sive ‘quanticam’) pertinens” (609); and “associativus, -a, -um, vox psychologica moderna (Neolatina) ea significans quae attinet ad ‘associationem’ sive ad theorias ‘associativas’ res scilicet psychologicae multiplices explanantes hasque ex aggregatione congregationeque multorum sensuum primorum et stimulorum responsorumque simplicium constare proponentes” (592). While the book does not require really deep background in physics, psychology, or biology, some acquaintance with these areas is useful; some knowledge of recent American pop culture is also handy.

What is the story about? The central figure is Vudius Fava, a dancer and actor. Vudius fascinates the people around him, though to a reader he seems a bit of a cipher. His growing circle of friends, colleagues, and lovers includes Marnia Barry, who treats him when he’s hospitalized for mental illness; Zoltan Hollis, a computer programmer; and Lux Tapia, a psychologist. When Vudius unexpectedly leaves Seattle to make a movie in Los Angeles, Marnia and Lux follow. Various people want to control Vudius, and don’t hesitate to kill people who get in their way.

The simplest way to keep Vudius in line is through his eyeglasses; this is where the magic realism comes in. Vudius has hundreds of pairs of different-colored lenses, each of which acts on him like a different kind of drug. This idea is developed in the early part of the book, then dropped, but it recurs at a crucial moment; it’s also suggested that Vudius’ lenses may work for other people as well.

Meanwhile, various chapters tell us of Roger Bacon, the philosopher (1214–1292; this chapter is in Early Modern English,

with facing Latin translation), of the lost continent of Atlantis, of the Firebird of Russian folklore, and so on. The relevance of these embedded stories to Vudius is not at all clear. As *Capti* is the first book of a projected seven-volume series, *Heptologia Sphingis* (583), perhaps the loose ends will come together as the series goes on.

The plot is thus a bit shaggy, and there are some familiar clichés from soap operas and other melodramas. The story could have been told in 150 or so tightly edited pages. But the story is not entirely the point here (just as it isn’t with *Tristram Shandy*, say, or *Midnight’s Children*). The glory of the book is the exuberant language: this is not Cicero’s Latin, but more like a post-modern Tacitus, a latter-day Lucan, a spiritual descendant of M. Terentius Varro. The first sentence of chapter 10 is sixteen lines long (201). The vocabulary is huge; even aside from the modern terms glossed at the back (most of which are similar to their English equivalents), there are many classical words here that will be unfamiliar, such as *incicur* (which means *saevus*, *immitis*), attested only once in a fragment of Pacuvius. There are descriptions galore: two particularly nice passages are a long, satirical evocation of Seattle (129–32) and a description of LA that would be at home in Hugo or Dickens (285–92). Berard has a good eye for clothing and always tells us what his characters are wearing.

Most of the verse passages are in dactylic hexameters, including many 3- and 4-word lines. The *praefatio ad lectorem* is in elegiac couplets. There are also accentual verses in short rhymed stanzas (the *Dies Irae* form); these are cleverly done, and sometimes more than a dozen successive lines have the same rhyme. Half a dozen passages are in free verse; of course there are no classical or medieval precedents for free verse in Latin, but so what? It seems that the verse passages are Vudius’ own stream of consciousness, though I admit I’m not entirely sure about this.

As a piece of Latin literature, *Capti* is something of a *tour de force*. Its blend of modern form, modern scientific or philosophical motifs, and ancient language is almost steampunk in style. Berard is of course not the first person to write in a second language: Joseph Conrad, a Pole, wrote in English; Samuel Beckett, an Irishman, wrote in French. Latin, in particular, has been a second language for far more writers than ever claimed it as mother tongue, from Ennius to Erasmus and beyond. While I must admit it is somewhat eccentric to write a novel—a long, difficult novel—in Latin in the 21st century, I am perfectly willing to accept this as just one more piece of post-classical Latin literature, to be judged on the same terms as More’s *Utopia* or Barclay’s *Argenis*. On those terms, it succeeds fairly well: it’s more readable than the latter, certainly not in a class with the former.

Could one use this book with a class? Realistically, no: it’s more difficult than anyone in the first 5 or 6 semesters of college Latin could handle. On the other hand, the book will appeal to the sort of geeky student who reads both science and science fiction, has picked up a bit of Elvish or Klingon, and is always digging obscure things out of the library (*credite expertae*). I will be curious to see what the next six volumes are like.

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