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“In Thy Cedarn Prison Thou Waitest”: Johnson’s *Ionica* and Uranian Intertextuality

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The following is a close reading of William Johnson’s poem “An Invocation,” examining the ways in which it demarcated for the Victorian Uranians a unique positionality, a positionality in which intertextual referencing served as a means of sharing and expressing their pederastic desires while yet maintaining a protected stance in a world hostile to those desires, a stance as relevant today as when Johnson constructed his image of Comatas’ cedarn chest a hundred and fifty years ago.

William Johnson (*later* Cory), who was educated at Eton and King’s College, Cambridge, returned to Eton in 1845 as a Classics master, and taught there until he was dismissed in 1872 for exercising a pederastic pedagogy which Timothy d’Arch Smith describes as a “brand of passive inversion” (d’Arch Smith 1970: 6). While at Eton, Johnson had an “ability to pick out apt and sympathetic pupils,” which, although praised educationally, created “a less palatable, deeper-seated reputation of a wayward personality who ‘was apt to make favourites’” (d’Arch Smith 1970: 4). Among his “favourites” were boys who would later distinguish themselves as Uranians, such as Howard Overing Sturgis, whose novel *Tim* is the tale of a love affair between two Eton boys; Reginald Baliol Brett (second Viscount Esher), whose collection of poems *Foam* is overshadowed by Johnson; Archibald Philip Primrose (fifth Earl of Rosebery), who later became the British Foreign Secretary, as well as a patron of the Uranian circle in Venice; Oscar Browning, who himself returned to Eton as a master, only to be dismissed in 1875 under the same cloud as Johnson; and Digby Mackworth Dolben, a “Christian Uranian,” whose influence over the group is only pitifully acknowledged, though he is memorable for his collection of poems posthumously edited by his friend and distant cousin, the then Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, and for serving as the muse for Gerard Manley Hopkins.

That a number of young Etonians appreciated Johnson’s affections and returned them bountifully was a feature of his pedagogy that fostered enemies among his fellows. While yet

at his beloved Eton, Johnson left his mark upon the Uranian movement, a movement which was, in many ways, his creation – or, in the phrasing of d’Arch Smith, “Cory gave the Uranians at once an inspiration and an example” (d’Arch Smith 1970: 11). Johnson’s influence sprang, in part, from the verses of his *Ionica*, a “classic paean to romantic pederastia” (Dowling 1994: 114), privately published in a limited edition by Smith, Elder & Co. in 1858, and supplemented by *Ionica II* in 1877, privately printed by Cambridge University Press. This book constitutes a blazon and an apologia of the pederastic pedagogy for which he would be banished from Eton:

And when I may no longer live,
They’ll say, who know the truth,
He gave whate’er he had to give
To freedom and to youth. (“Academus,” 37-40; all his poetry from Johnson 1905)

To youth, Johnson bestowed his passions for literature, art, and *carpe diem*, passions he often found reciprocated by his favoured Etonians. To freedom, Johnson bestowed a bittersweet renunciation, recognising that youth well-cultivated led to a flight of liberation from all who had mastered it, even through love – an inevitability Johnson characterises with greater finesse than does Hopkins, for Hopkins is plagued with fears for his beloved bugler boy whose “fresh youth [is] fretted in a bloomfall all portending / That sweet’s sweeter ending” (“Bugler’s First Communion,” 30-31; all his poetry is from MacKenzie, ed. 1990). Johnson writes:

Why fret? the hawks I trained are flown:
'Twas nature bade them range;
I could not keep their wings half-grown,
I could not bar the change.

With lattice opened wide I stand
To watch their eager flight;
With broken jesses in my hand
I muse on their delight. (“Reparabo,” 13-20)

Johnson understood that, beyond Eton’s latticework, dangers awaited his young hawks, dangers they would have to face alone, though the possibility of their wounded return seems almost wished for by the falconer-poet:

And, oh! if one with sullied plume
Should droop in mid career,
My love makes signals: – “There is room,
Oh bleeding wanderer, here.” (“Reparabo,” 21-24)

These lines bespeak far too much humanity and nobility for readers to dismiss Johnson’s sentiments as merely maladjusted, psychotic, immoral, sinful, fringe, objectionable, and/or intrusive, despite the fact that his verses reject the system of controls over the body that Victorian culture attempted to instil (and ours still does) – those permanent “jesses,” those “mind-forg’d manacles” – drawing into question many of the established tenants of Victorian culture (and of our own), providing an affront which fronted issues about love, youth, and freedom normally taken as categorical.

The salient features, dynamics, disparities, considerations, avoidances, and silences that surround this "suspect" aspect of human existence, the aesthetic, emotional, and erotic expression of which, even today, properly warrants the title Lord Alfred Douglas bestowed upon it over a hundred years ago – "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name" – are no more compactly elucidated than in Johnson's "An Invocation," which begins:

I never prayed for Dryads, to haunt the woods again;
More welcome were the presence of hungering, thirsting men,
Whose doubts we could unravel, whose hopes we could fulfil,
Our wisdom tracing backward, the river to the rill;
Were such beloved forerunners one summer day restored,
Then, then we might discover the Muse's mystic hoard. (1-6)

Uncharacteristic for a poetic invocation, the above begins by asserting what will *not* be invoked – the hetero-erotic Dryads, those female spirits presiding over groves and forests when not pursued about their bower of bliss by lusty Satyrs. Not that Johnson spurned the Satyrs, for "more welcome [than the Dryads are] the presence of hungering, thirsting men," those "whose hopes," Johnson admits, "we could fulfil" – though his "could" is noteworthy and emphasised by repetition. Johnson dares to invoke, to vocalise a preference not for the "river" of manhood but for the "rill" of boyhood. Although Johnson asserts that the source of his own poetic inspiration, his Hippocrene, is found in the Helicon of male hearts – "And lo! a purer fount is here revealed: / My lady-nature dwells in heart of men" (with "purer" a pun on the Latin and French word for "boy") – it should be noted that what flows therefrom is not a "river" but a puerile "rill," for these lines hold sway in a poem titled "A Study of Boyhood" (39-40).

This passage further implies that if humanity were to treat culture with the same technique Hopkins employs in "Inversnaid" – an "inverse made in verse" – we would find "our wisdom tracing backward, the river to the rill," tracing backwards to the font of Western culture, to the Hippocrene of poetry, to the "Muse's mystic hoard," to the pederastic love that, for the Uranians, would increasingly constitute their pride and their defiance, a conception of themselves as the inheritors of a "more authentic" Western culture than their contemporaries understood, as Walter Pater would later expound at length in his *Renaissance*. In a passing comment on Matteo Palmieri's *La Città di Vita*, Pater demarcates a position outside of society for himself and his defiant Uranian followers – many of whom had passed through Johnson's tutelage, at least textually – by lending symbolic virtue to the human "incarnation of those angels who, in the revolt of Lucifer, were neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies," those scurrilous free spirits whom Dante relegates to the Vestibule of Hell as "unworthy alike of heaven and hell [...] [occupying instead] the middle world" (Pater 1980 [1893]: 336-38). As Pater recognises, the positionality of the Uranians would likely remain that of the ultimate outsiders, forever boxed, partly of their own accord, inside the vestibule of Western society, if not of Hell.

By invoking the myth of Comatas, Johnson encapsulates this "boxed" positionality more profoundly than Pater does through his own middling vestibule. Comatas, a young goatherd of Thurii on the gulf of Tarentum in southern Italy, after espying the nine Muses amidst their dance, sacrificed a goat in their honour: such an act is a Homeric triviality, almost an expectation, save that the goat was not his own, but his master's. Comatas' enraged master (clearly an early Capitalist) sealed the goatherd within a cedarn chest, hoping to starve him to death. Fortunately for the coffered goatherd, the Muses not only got his master's goat but also his goad. Moved by Comatas' devotion, the Muses thwarted his death-sentence by sending bees to feed him honey through a slight crack in the cedarn chest. Ever the Classicist, Johnson

absconds this Grecian tale, transforming it into a fable of pederastic positionality, Victorian “Otherness,” and Uranian continuity:

Oh dear divine Comatas, I would that thou and I
Beneath this broken sunlight this leisure day might lie;
Where trees from distant forests, whose names were strange to thee,
Should bend their amorous branches within thy reach to be,
And flowers thine Hellas knew not, which art hath made more fair,
Should shed their shining petals upon thy fragrant hair. (“Invocation,” 7-12)

That this allusion has submerged subtlety may seem difficult to appreciate, especially after the contents of the cedarn chest have been duly divulged – however, this poem was intended for a different readership than modern Victorianists, for a readership educated at Eton and/or Oxford in a “Greats curriculum” based on the close reading of Greek and Latin texts, a readership which would have appreciated with John Addington Symonds that “paiderastia, or boy-love, was a phenomenon of one of the most brilliant periods of human culture” (Symonds [1901]: 1), the Greco-Roman. Johnson’s direct address to Comatas would have been far more allusive to his Eton/Oxford coterie than it would to most readers today, however scholarly, relying as it does on a Hellenistic intertextuality that Mark Andreas Seiler intricately analyses for an entire volume, his conclusions summarised by Robert Schmiel below:

Intertextual reference and self-reflexivity make clear that, in the Komatas fable, bees and honey are metaphors for poet and poetry. It is then apparent that the central story of Lykidas’ song is a parable of sublimation [...] Of what sort is this spiritual poetry which has the power of the real in that it allows the enclosed Komatas to survive? It is the enveloping Other, the complement of existence in a chest. [...] [Various writers of the period] illustrate what we have found to be characteristic of the relationship between the poetry of Callimachos and Theocritos, reciprocal poetic reference, metaphorically the “nourishing” and “being-nourished” of Alexandrian poets. (Schmiel 1998)

Or, as Seiler himself explains in a passage less erudite than most:

From references to older texts, the poet’s own, and those of his contemporaries, elements of meaning accrue to the new text which are not accidental but essential for an understanding of the work’s intent. The reciprocal reference between contemporary poets in particular is presented here in the center of the initiation-poem of the *Thalysia* with the familiar metaphor of bees and honey; the reciprocal nourishment of Komatas and the bees is a metaphor for the dialectical principle of intertextuality. (as quoted in Schmiel 1998)

To appreciate the choiceness of Johnson’s allusion, one must recognise that the tale of Comatas was, for Alexandrian poets, a “parable of sublimation,” of “nourishing” and “being-nourished” by honeyed poetry, especially when one is forced to survive within “the enveloping Other, the complement of existence in a chest,” an existence only made tolerable through “the dialectical principle of [poetic] intertextuality.” This process – a process in which the “elements of meaning accrue to the new text which are not accidental but essential for an understanding of the work’s intent” – facilitated a discrete complexity among its practitioners, a complexity rarely appreciated, attempted, or furthered, for its honeycomb is only filled through patient artistry, as Hopkins suggests: “Patience fills / His crisp combs, and

that comes those ways we know” (“[Patience, Hard Thing!],” 13-14). For the Uranians, this complexity was necessary for the sublimation of their sexuality into poetry and prose, a patient filling of the crisp honeycomb which resulted in the mastery of a number of strategies for fulfilling what-cannot-be-fulfilled amid denials, scrupulosities, and beliefs; amid ethical, legal, and religious restrictions; amid the concern of Western culture (in general) and Victorian culture (in particular) to limit physical intimation and actualisation of homoerotic and pederastic desires.

William Johnson fully recognised the dangers inherent to the pederastic flora cultivated in his *Ionica*, flora which would find itself “leafing” and “interleafing” in the lives and textual “leaves” of others, a space where Johnson and Comatas seem to be holding a reading party like those in the idylls of Theocritus:

Then thou shouldst calmly listen with ever-changing looks
To songs of younger minstrels and plots of modern books,
And wonder at the daring of poets later born,
Whose thoughts are unto thy thoughts as noon-tide is to morn;
And little shouldst thou grudge them their greater strength of soul,
Thy partners in the torch-race, though nearer to the goal. (“Invocation,” 13-18)

Johnson is assured that Comatas would be moved through a range of emotions – “with ever-changing looks” – were he to see the Uranian artistry that Johnson had nourished: the “songs of younger minstrels” like those of his Etonian students Brett and Dolben; or the “plots of modern books” like those of his student Sturgis. Reminiscent of the bee-carried honey of Alexandrian intertextuality, Johnson’s *Ionica* had become a hoard of honeycomb, a supply of nourishment to sustain others in their solitude, in the cedarn chest where Western culture hopes to starve their desires. At best, Comatas could but “wonder at the daring of poets later born,” wonder at the intertextual exchanges between his “partners in the torch-race, though nearer to the goal.”

This image of a torch-race seems pat, simplistic, almost clichéd – therein resides its opacity and its opulence. As with the allusion to Comatas, such pejoratives seem befitting, but only until the metaphor is set into a Grecian context. Johnson is eliciting in his Classically educated audience thoughts of the ancient Olympic Games, a voyeuristic spectacle of nude, oiled youths sporting about, garlanded by admiring gazes from the farthest reaches of the Hellenic world. Only in the context of those appreciative gazes, garlands of laurel, and the immortality of sculptured marble – the Greek form of pederastic permanence – does this torch-race emblazon its true import. For Johnson, a Victorian Comatas, such a torch-race kindled his hope for a pederastic victory he did not expect himself to see, a hope expressed on several occasions in *Ionica*, Johnson forecasting that his beloved Etonians, honey-fed on his *Ionica*, would take up his pen, string his lute, brandish his sword, further the intertextuality that he had begun.

The fourth stanza of “An Invocation” prefigures the cataloguing of homoerotic and pederastic ancestors that constitutes the entirety of Pater’s *Renaissance* and much of Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, those elaborate catalogues of ancestral artists and philosophers who shared this “temperament,” lovers constituting a continuum passing through Plato, Michelangelo, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Winckelmann. It is in this vein that the following should be considered:

As when ancestral portraits look gravely from the walls
Upon the youthful baron who treads their echoing halls;
And whilst he builds new turrets, the thrice ennobled heir

Would gladly wake his grandsire his home and feast to share;
So from Ægean laurels that hide thine ancient urn
I fain would call thee hither, my sweeter lore to learn. (“Invocation,” 19-24)

By simile, Comatas has become the Uranian “grandsire,” Johnson the Uranian “sire,” and the young baron – like a Viscount Esher or Earl of Rosebery – the inheritor of the poetic halls they have left behind, the architectonic residue of their lives. Although turrets are the most phallic of architectural forms, the “new turrets” that the young baron adds are less important here for their erotic contours than for the distant vistas they provide. These turrets are an apt description of the voyeuristic posturing that is the hallmark of Uranian verse – a construction of vistas, a proximity to the object of desire without that distance being defeated, at least artistically – a temperament Johnson captures through addressing his beloved boy as “Idol, mine Idol, whom this touch profanes” (“Sapphics,” 13). This is the “elevated” or “turreted” positionality that Johnson shared with Pater and Hopkins (and that Wilde never understood), a state in which fevered passion is transmuted into eroticised friendship, devotion, and poetry.

However, the sustained solitude of being confined within a cedarn coffer emboldens Johnson, despite the honey, to suggest an escape:

Or in thy cedarn prison thou waitest for the bee:
Ah, leave that simple honey, and take thy food from me.
My sun is stooping westward. Entrancèd dreamer, haste;
There’s fruitage in my garden, that I would have thee taste.
Now lift the lid a moment: now, Dorian shepherd, speak:
Two minds shall flow together, the English and the Greek. (“Invocation,” 25-30)

Curiously, the penultimate line of the poem labels Comatas a “Dorian shepherd,” which would draw a snide retort from any Classicist that “Comatas was a goatherd; the shepherd was Lacon” – though Johnson is intentionally “mistaken” here, exercising a prurient revisionism, making an intertextual allusion to Theocritus’ fifth *Idyll*, a contest in hexameter couplets between the goatherd Comatas, who boasts of the girls whose favours he enjoys, and the shepherd Lacon, who boasts of the boys. Besides the fact that Comatas’ cedarn box provides an apt parallel to Uranian positionality, Johnson’s discretion also warrants that he not be seen spending a summer afternoon discoursing with Lacon, the great defender of actualised pederasty. Nevertheless, by intentionally mislabelling Comatas a “shepherd,” Johnson discretely alludes to Theocritus’ idyllic debate between Comatas and Lacon, a debate over the respective virtues of the love of women and of boys. More salaciously, this mislabelling suggests that, despite winning the singing contest, Comatas was nonetheless “won over” by Lacon’s claims for the preference of pederastic “shepherding,” with Comatas giving up his goats and girls and becoming instead an avid shepherd of boys. Most readers would never have noticed this act of revisionism; a few pedants would have squawked about the “mistake”; but none (as far as I can tell) have ever praised the poet for the brilliance that this simple change displays, an overarching command of intertextual nuance. “An Invocation” concludes with an appeal for the use of this fluid intertextuality, an appeal that is also the most concise elucidation of pederastic pedagogy that a Uranian ever penned – “two minds shall flow together, the English and the Greek.”

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