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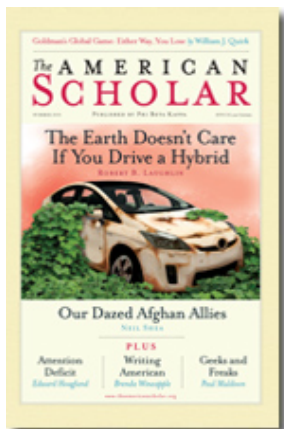
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## Rome's Gossip Columnist

*When the first-century poet Martial turned his stylus on you, you got the point*

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By Garry Wills



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**M**artial—Marcus Valerius Martialis, c.40–c.102 C.E.—was a provincial, though from a province, Spain, rich in grains and in human talent. He came to the imperial center, Rome, to get fame and fortune by his art of ridicule. He won the fame, at least, though he had at times to crawl for it—as did his fellow Spaniards, Seneca, Lucan, and Quintilian. He crawled a bit more nimbly than they, since Nero arranged the deaths of Seneca and Lucan. Martial got to Rome just as Nero's reign was ending, but he had to live through a long reign of the repressive emperor Domitian (81–96 C.E.) He dodged and flattered well enough to get safely back to Spain, late in his 50s, where he praised his escape to primitive bliss—until he had to give up the pretense. He yearned back toward the city, cesspool though he called it. He had to have material for his satire.

He was like later gossip columnists, out night after night prowling for what they can devour by denouncing. He is a Walter Winchell in elegiac distichs. Or, more properly, he is like the gossip columnist in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, who makes a living off the absurdities and vices of his own society by mocking them. He is a complicitous critic, half enjoying what he sneers at, mixing entertainment with revulsion. He is a reforming voyeur, a compromised Savonarola. It is a complex role, not reducible to any one of its components.

What connection might Martial have with modern America? Well, like the Romans, we Americans celebrate rural virtue while wallowing in urban vices. Augustus, in founding

the empire, pretended to be saving the republic. This set up an endless round of antinomies, of people professing simple pieties while indulging in complex depravities—the very people Martial homed in on with his radar for pretense and masquerading. Romans ostentatiously disavowed the depravity, real and supposed, of Greece, of “Oriental” cults and fads, while jostling each other to get at that forbidden fruit.

Of course, other cultures have felt the same stresses and rumblings, and I do Martial no service by comparing him with Winchell. Gossip columnists have come in much more artistic forms. A Swift, a Pope, a Dryden have played the court tattletale and raised their snide whisperings to a kind of cosmic thunder over the end of civilized behavior. Pope turned the heroic couplet into a literary guillotine. Head after head rolled away from his exquisite apparatus. Here goes Lord Hervey's noll:

Fop at the toilet, flatterer at the board,  
Now trips a lady, and now struts a lord.

And here goes Addison's:

Like Cato, give his little Senate laws,  
And sit attentive to his own applause.

Or those of fading dowagers:

A sop their passion, and their prize a sot;  
Alive ridiculous, and dead forgot.

And here he dispatches his critics:

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see  
Men not afraid of God, afraid of me.

Martial, too, is a master of the quick dispatch (8.54):

You're beautiful and sinful—in a trice  
I'd settle for less looks to get less vice.

Just as quick (11.66):

How can this slippery son of a bitch,  
With all his vices, *not* be rich?

Or (12.20):

Of course we know he'll never wed.  
What? Put his sister out of bed?

Or (2.38):

What, Linus, can my farm be minus,  
When it successfully lacks Linus?

Or (3.9):

His verse was meant to strike me low



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But, since *he* wrote it—who will know?

Some translators of Martial feel that to be modern, to be authentic, they must not resort to things as forced and artificial as regular meter, stanzas, rhyme. But if that is how they feel, they should steer clear of ancient epigram, whose whole appeal lies in a studied formality. To have any force at all, epigram must add artifice to baser urges. In English we lack most of the resources of such artifice—the endlessly interlockable verbal patterns of an inflected language. We lack that form's verbal architectonics. If we give up tools that offer even partial recompense for the loss of such structure, the Englished epigrams lose their focus. Martial was as focused as a predator stalking its prey. His light but hard-hitting lines blend low matter with high polish, the intimate and the impersonal, the tough and the graceful. They pick up dung with silver tongs.

The point of some epigrams is to get close enough in the early lines to deliver a sudden stab in the last. Over and over, the tone can seem praising, luring the victim in for a final vicious swerve to strike home (4.84):

Men seek Thais  
From North and South,  
And she's a virgin—  
All but her mouth.

The epigram toys with its victim, as cats play with mice (4.87):

Cold Bassa leans and coos  
At baby's little shoes.  
Shows warmth of heart?  
No, masks a fart.

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But at other times, instead of wanting to get near enough for intimate betrayal, the epigrammatist does not allow others to get near him. A prize example comes from Catullus, who wrote epigrams rarely but superbly—as in this response to an overture from Julius Caesar:

Join your party?  
I might,  
mighty Czar,  
Could I remember  
quite

who you are.

That cool brushoff makes Samuel Johnson look clumsy and overheated when he spurns Lord Chesterfield's offer of patronage. The supreme statement of a haughty distance may be Martial 1.32:

Mister Sabidius you pain me.  
I wonder (some) why that should be  
And cannot tell—a mystery.  
You inexplicably pain me.

Catullus could fight dirty, not with brass knuckles but golden knuckles:

For veritable man I cannot pass?  
Then what's that down your mouth and up your ass?  
I thrust into the right receptacle—  
For what you say is not acceptable.  
You claim my verses seem effeminate  
In what they hint and what they boldly state.  
But poets are not what they write for others.  
Their lives may meet the standard of their mothers.  
I write not for the young, combustible,  
Forever ready and all lust-able.  
I want to bring back ancients who were young—  
My lines reanimate the feebly hung.  
You think I've aged into the latter class?  
Then what's that down your mouth and up your ass?

Martial, too, could fight dirty (6.36):

A bent huge nose, a monstrous cock to match—  
Curved, each into the other, what a snatch!

The epigrammatists dignified such exercises by claiming disgust at social decline or aberration. They even claimed a noble lineage. As Homer founded epic, epigram had a legendary forebear in the seventh-century Greek poet, Archilochus. As Horace put it in *The Poet's Craft*:

Archilochus made anger keep its head,  
And killed men metronomically dead.

Of course, one could not openly rebuke an emperor in Martial's repressive era, when poets survived (if they did) by a studied (only slightly snickering) sycophancy. Like his friends and fellow Spaniards Seneca and Lucan, Martial had to calculate the least degree of abasement he could get away with, alternately chafing at the boundaries and knuckling under. Martial, under Domition, could not venture even veiled subversion, but like most of his contemporaries he welcomed the brief respite under Nerva (96–98 C.E.). Earlier, with Titus (79–81 C.E.), he seemed genuinely enthusiastic. He wrote a series of little poems to celebrate that emperor's opening of his amphitheater (later called the

Colosseum). Though it is a myth that Christians were fed to lions in that huge colander of blood, the combat of gladiators with each other and with beasts was sufficiently bloody, and Martial expresses a fan's delight in the mayhem. He was a Roman after all, and how can the author of epigrams question any art of cruelty? He admires the way a huge animal can be defeated with nothing more substantial than fisherman's gear (*Spectacles* 11):

Rolled over in the bloody dust,  
The bear can make no freeing thrust.  
The thin compulsion of a net  
Is firm in gauzy layers set.  
So beasts can, though they soar in air,  
Come netted earthward, like the bear.

For Martial, the epigrammatist was a retiarius. He at least half meant his abject praise of Titus as the Master of the Games (*Spectacles* 31):

My hurried style no criticism raises—  
One never errs in hurrying your praises.

Despite such kowtowing to the forms of patronage, Martial likes to undermine most forms of convention. Ancient poets liked Catullus's picture of a girl lamenting her pet bird, a sentimental scene from Greuze. Martial will seem to indulge the same device, only to reveal its sexual subtheme in one line.

7.14

Fate humbles her, she's lost her pet—  
No bird by soft Catullus sung,  
No dove plunged to a hell of jet,  
Whose praises stretch the poet's lung.  
Rather, a boy of few years yet,  
A mite—already mightily hung.

Everything in Martial's short insult poems exists for the final thrust. We are meant to respond as the Venetian friar did when stabbed by Vatican henchmen: "I get the point" (*stilo*). English translations sacrifice other things to get to the essential. This often makes the translation more economical than its original, since Martial's preliminary fencing is done with tools we cannot use.

Martial belonged to the educated class that, in the Roman Empire, could live by patronage and art, so long as one did not challenge the established system (as Ovid and Lucan did). There was little danger of that with Martial, since he was a social conservative, as are most satirists who castigate "deviants" (Juvenal and Persius in the ancient world, Pope and Waugh later on). Martial seems daring because he pushes conventional limits, but he does it for conventional standards. His poems are bisexual in the accepted way of his time, praising pliable boys and frisky women, but he upholds classical misogyny and the view that the only decent homosexual relation is that of an active male adult and a passive boy. Other relationships, including any between women and women, are treated as shameful—as are all forms of oral sex (fellatio as well as

cunnilingus, whether performed by males or females).

For Martial, the highest virtue is friendship, and the greatest wrong is betrayal of friends. His frequent attacks on the patronage system (by which he lived) focus on the way most patrons failed to rise to the level of friendship they professed. Treating men of power as friends keeps him from thinking he has to accept their political programs. The deepest statement of his values may be this (5.42):

A thief can rifle any till,  
 A fire with ash your home can fill,  
 A creditor calls in your debt.  
 Bad harvest does your farm upset.  
 An impish mistress robs your dwelling,  
 Storm shatters your ships in water swelling.  
 But gifts to friends your friendships save.  
 You keep thus always what you gave.

He dwells often on the complex etiquette of gift giving and gift receiving, loans extended and loans unpaid. He celebrates his and his friends' birthdays. (He was named Martialis for his own birth in March, the month of Mars.) His misogyny did not prevent him from accepting a villa in Spain from a woman patron, and his apolitical life did not keep him from sycophancy to the emperors. The greatest moralists know how to cut moral corners. We like them still when they attack the other hypocrites in their world.

**N**ot all of Martial's epigrams are satirical or insulting. He often pays tribute—to a friend, a hero, a landscape. One of the heroes he celebrated was Cato the Younger's daughter, Portia (1.42):

Of Brutus's end when frantic Portia learned,  
 Her friends hid weapons while for death she yearned.  
 She cried, "Who keeps me from my chosen date?  
 Like Cato's daughter I shall earn my fate."  
 Deprived of arms, she took coals from the fire,  
 And, swallowing death, achieved her last desire.  
 Vainly to keep her from the sword they tried—  
 Some forms of steel are not to be denied.

He could pay a friend this gracious compliment (1.39):

If ancient virtues could abound,  
 If wisdom were with goodness found,  
 If learning did with vigor thrive,  
 And loyalty were still alive,  
 If challenged honor were defended,  
 And gods were not by stealth offended,  
 If any of these things were true—  
 Where find them, Decius, but in you?

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To avoid crass flattery, he can turn a wry compliment (12.51):

Friend Gullible, so often taken in,  
Lacks our familiarity with sin.

He could be tender, as in this lament for a little slave (5.34):

My parents in the Underworld! I send  
This servant girl—take care and gently tend,  
Console her past the terrifying shade,  
Keep her of circling horrors unafraid,  
For she, alas, was only six days shy  
Of six years when too soon she came to die.  
Protect her as she plays her childhood games,  
And lisps, as she was wont, our names.  
Earth, sadly mounded on this gravesite new,  
Press lightly on her, as she did on you.

His only tender love poems are pederastic, like this (10.42):

Your hint of beard just barely is,  
It is a froth, a breath of fizz.  
A sunbeam or a wandering breeze  
Displaces it with ease.  
Girls brush it with a dainty thumb  
That sweeps the down off from a plum.  
And when you give me kisses free,  
Your shadowy beard dusts off on me.

The classical view of pederasty was the opposite of ours. We accept gay sex between consenting adults, but consider sex with minors to be child abuse. The latter was the ideal for Martial.

**B**ut for all his softer or more lyrical epigrams, Martial will always be best known for his insult poems, the dirtier the better. He often attacks promiscuity, here with a typical twist at the end (7.30):

Barbarian hordes on mass you fuck,  
Odd types into your bed you tuck.

You take on blacks and Asian forces,  
 And Jews, and soldiers, and their horses.  
 Yet you, voracious Roman chick,  
 Have never known a Roman dick.

Here is the insult parliamentary (6.23):

You want my cock at full attention  
 If sex you casually mention?  
 No matter how you coax men's tools,  
 Hand "makes a motion" face overrules.

And this is the insult histrionic (6.6):

Your lady's with the art scene all aglow:  
 To theater she is devoted so  
 That, after screwing each star in the show,  
 To players of the "smallest parts" she'll go.

And here is as far as insult can go (7.18):

Your face entices, and your thighs—  
 Why are you shunned by all the guys?  
 Because when in your cunt they drill,  
 Its liquids clack and gurgle shrill.  
 It makes eternal squish and squeal  
 Of gibberish without repeal.  
 To keep your lovers from their balking,  
 Just teach the thing to do some talking.

It is often said that epigrams should be sampled one or a few at a time. Martial thought so, too. He wrote (10.1):

If this book seems too long,  
 Just read from it one song.  
 In this way, whittling it  
 By reading bit by bit,  
 A little book with ease  
 You make it, as you please.

We know what kind of reader Martial wanted, what effect he aimed for, from another of his own poems (6.60):

He reads my verses, just to be in fashion,  
 But finds himself whipsawed by sudden passion.  
 He frowns, then chortles—chokes at what he reads—  
 And calls it the most infamous of screeds,  
 Then pales, as he were under some indicting—  
 You've got him, poems! That's what I call writing.



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