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# INTER IMPERIUM SINE FINE: THULE AND HYPERBOREA IN ROMAN LITERATURE

Lewis Webb<sup>1</sup>

## *The Northern Other*

The Far North fascinates. From antiquity to today, explorers, scholars, and poets have characterized it as ‘other’, ‘exotic’, or ‘different’. An exemplar is that of the celebrated Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, who went on a long journey from Edo to the northern interior of Honshu in the late seventeenth century CE and captured his experiences of this journey in his *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). In this work, he composed a haiku that illustrates the allure of the Far North:

風流の (fūryū no)  
初やおくの (hajime ya oku no)  
田植うた (taeuta).

(The beginning of all art | in the deep north | a rice-planting song).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Han Baltussen, Eleanor Betts, Jacqueline Clarke, Peter Davis, Ida Östenberg, and Jonas Liliequist for their helpful advice and encouragement. All remaining errors are my own. Classical citations in this chapter follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and *Oxford Latin Dictionary* standards where possible. All Latin is drawn from the PHI Latin corpus, unless otherwise stated; these texts are not included in the bibliography. Where relevant, and for consistency’s sake, I elect to use *v* over *u* in Latin quotations. All translations are cited for the first translation only.

<sup>2</sup> Bashō, *Bashō’s Journey*, ed. by Barnhill, p. 55.

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**Lewis Webb** is a PhD candidate in Ancient History and Classical Archaeology at the University of Gothenburg and Umeå University in Sweden. His research interests include gender, status, and religion in Republican Rome.

For Bashō, art begins in the Far North. In this chapter, I uncover how other authors, namely those of Roman antiquity, were equally fascinated by the Far North and its ‘otherness’ or alterity.

In historical and philosophical discourse, the term ‘other’ is often used to describe the narrative or embodiment of difference; that which is alien or unfamiliar, someone or something to be denigrated or demonized.<sup>3</sup> Alterity or ‘otherness’, often constructed or imagined as specific qualities outside civic frameworks, had various permutations in antiquity, including ethnic, political, cultural, gender, or moral. Scholars of antiquity have long studied alterity, in literature and material cultures, in order to emphasize the importance of a centripetal norm to ancient societal structures.<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarship has focused on the literary utility of alterity for Greek and Roman authors.<sup>5</sup> This scholarship has shown that these authors would deploy alterity to construct exotic or utopian environments, comment on the socio-political milieu, fit the needs of their genre, and fashion identities for dramatic or rhetorical effect.<sup>6</sup> In effect, literary alterities are tools of transformation and re-imagination.<sup>7</sup> Notably, there was a significant interplay between Greek and Roman alterities; for example, Roman authors would frequently draw on Greek alterities and reshape them within a Roman context, adapting them to changing cultural needs.<sup>8</sup>

Two common manifestations of Northern alterity in Greek and Roman literature are Thule<sup>9</sup> and the land of the Hyperboreans.<sup>10</sup> Thule was an island reputed to be to the far north of Britain, while Hyperborea was a fabled land beyond the North Wind. The Hyperboreans, long-lived, fortunate, and followers of Apollo, feature heavily in Greek texts ranging from archaic poetry to

<sup>3</sup> See: Lacan, *Écrits*; Said, *Orientalism*; Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations*; Pagden, *Worlds at War*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*; Dauge, *Le Barbare*; Cartledge, *The Greeks*; Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*; Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal*; Hall, *Hellenicity*; Harrison, *Greeks and Barbarians*; Isaac, *The Invention of Racism*.

<sup>5</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*; Rosen and Sluiter, *Valuing Others*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*.

<sup>6</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, but see esp. pp. 3–5, 9–114 [Greek], 115–96 [Roman]; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, pp. 32–58.

<sup>7</sup> Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, pp. 3–5, 115–96.

<sup>8</sup> Bittarello, ‘The Construction of Etruscan “Otherness”’; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, pp. 115–40, 343–57; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, pp. 32–117.

<sup>9</sup> Gk. *Θούλη* and L. *Thule/Thyle/Tyle*.

<sup>10</sup> Gk. *Υπερβόρειοι* and L. *Hyperborei*.

historiography and to geography.<sup>11</sup> Thule, however, may have been discovered by the Greek explorer Pytheas of Massalia (modern Marseille) in the fourth century BCE. In a work now lost to us, he claims to have journeyed to Thule, an island he located to the far north of Britain.<sup>12</sup> This claim was later revisited and contested by a multitude of Greek and Roman authors throughout antiquity.<sup>13</sup> Recently, James Romm, Timothy Bridgman, and Rhiannon Evans have comprehensively explored the utopian and religious implications of Hyperborea and its inhabitants; Stan Wolfson and Barry Cunliffe have assessed the evidence for Pytheas's journey to Thule and beyond; and Henry Wijsman, Katherine Clarke, Romm, and Wolfson have underscored the political dimensions of Thule in the early Roman Empire.<sup>14</sup> In this chapter, building upon these studies and those that address alterity in Greek and Roman cultures, I analyse these narrative manifestations of the Far North (Thule, Hyperborea) in Roman literature in order to chart the ways in which they shape and reflect Roman identities.

As various scholars have argued, Hyperborea in Greek literature tends to be portrayed as a utopian and religious location occupied by a fortunate people, while Thule is a contested geographic marker.<sup>15</sup> This chapter will show how these northern alterities are refashioned by Roman authors from Catullus to Sidonius Apollinaris (first century BCE to fifth century CE). In particular, we will see that Thule and Hyperborea are shaped and reshaped into positive and negative symbols of autocratic ambition and Roman identity. I ultimately conclude that, in Roman literature, Thule and Hyperborea are not fixed concepts of northern alterity, but are instead mutable and metonymic.

<sup>11</sup> For sources and commentary, see: Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 60–67; Evans, 'Searching for Paradise', p. 295; Bridgman, *Hyperboreans*. See also Sandin, 'Scythia or Elysium?' in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Pytheas apud Polybius, *Historiae*, 34. 5; cf. Strabo, *Geographica*, 2. 5. 8; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 2. 187.

<sup>13</sup> For sources and commentary, see: Whittaker, 'The Problem of Pytheas' Thule'; Chevallier, 'The Greco-Roman Conception of the North'; Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 121–71; Cunliffe, *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas*; Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*.

<sup>14</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 60–67, 121–71; Wijsman, 'Thule Applied to Britain'; Clarke, 'An Island Nation'; Evans, 'Searching for Paradise', p. 295; Bridgman, *Hyperboreans*; Cunliffe, *Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas*; Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*.

<sup>15</sup> For commentary, see: Whittaker, 'The Problem of Pytheas' Thule'; Chevallier, 'The Greco-Roman Conception of the North'; Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 60–67, 121–71; Evans, 'Searching for Paradise', p. 295; Bridgman, *Hyperboreans*; Cunliffe, *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas*. See also Sandin, 'Scythia or Elysium?' in this volume.

## Rome and the Far North

From the waning days of the Republic to the end of the Western Roman Empire, Roman authors deployed Thule and Hyperborea in texts across multiple genres, including poetry, astronomy, tragedy, geography, history, and rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> Broadly, Thule and Hyperborea referred to places or peoples in the Far North, but the terms were multivalent. What is clear is that these bywords for the Far North had demonstrable literary currency from Catullus to Sidonius Apollinaris. Roman authors used these terms fluidly to construct utopian,<sup>17</sup> dystopian,<sup>18</sup> and mythical<sup>19</sup> landscapes as well as geographic markers for their texts.<sup>20</sup> Thule is not characterized as a utopia within Roman literature; the Roman authors tend to follow the Greek precedent of using it as a geographic

<sup>16</sup> Hyperborea: Catullus, *Carmina*, 115. 6; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3. 57. 12; Virgil, *Georgics*, 3. 196, 3. 381, 4. 517; Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 16; Hyginus, *Poetica astronomica*, 2. 15. 6. 4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 356; Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 1. 13. 5, 3. 36. 3; Lucan, *Bellum civile*, 5. 23; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 89. 2, 6. 34. 3, 6. 35. 1, 6. 55. 5, 6. 219. 6; C. Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 8. 210; Statius, *Thebais*, 1. 693, 5. 390, 12. 650; Martial, *Epigrammata*, 4. 3. 5, 7. 6. 1, 8. 78. 3, 9. 45. 1, 9. 101. 20; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8. 6. 66; Juvenal, *Saturae*, 6. 470; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11. 24. 11; Pomponius Porphyron, *Commentum in Horati Carmina*, 2. 20. 16. 1; Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2. 240; *Panegyricus de tertio consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 56; *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 3. 256; *Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 26; *Carmina minora*, 31. 8; Servius, *In Vergilii Aeneidos libros*, 3. 98. 4, 4. 146. 4, 10. 179. 7, 10. 350. 3, 10. 350. 8, 11. 532. 12, 11. 858. 4, 12. 366. 3; *In Vergilii Bucolicon librum*, 8. 27. 3; *In Vergilii Georgicon libros*, 3. 196. 1, 3. 381. 2; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, 5. 493. Thule: Virgil, *Georgics*, 1. 30; Seneca, *Medea*, 379; Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 57. 1; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 2. 187; 2. 246; 4. 104; 6. 219; Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 597, 17. 416; Statius, *Silvae*, 3. 5. 20, 4. 4. 62, 5. 1. 91, 5. 2. 55; Tacitus, *Agricola*, 10. 6. 2; Juvenal, *Saturae*, 15. 112; Ampelius, *Liber memorialis*, 6. 12. 5; Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, 22. 9; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum*, 18. 6. 1; Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2. 242; *Panegyricus de tertio consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 53; *Panegyricus de quarto consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 32; *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 3. 156; *De bello Gothico*, 204; Prudentius, *Hamartigenia*, 881; Rutilius Namatianus, *De reditu*, 1. 499; Servius, *In Vergilii Aeneidos libros*, 4. 103. 14; *In Vergilii Georgicon libros*, 1. 30. 3, 1. 30. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 36; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, 3. 196, 3. 381; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 356; Prudentius, *Hamartigenia*, 881.

<sup>19</sup> Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3. 57; Virgil, *Georgics*, 4. 517; Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 16; Hyginus, *Poetica astronomica*, 2. 15. 6. 4; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 356; C. Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 8. 210; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11. 24. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ampelius, *Liber memorialis*, 6. 12. 5; Solinus, *Collectanea rerum meorabilium*, 22. 9; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum*, 18. 6. 1.

marker, and the poets characterize it as ‘the last place on earth.’<sup>21</sup> These authors, unlike their Greek predecessors, rarely represent Hyperborea as a utopia. Instead, they focus on using Thule and Hyperborea as literary lenses on Rome and its autocrats.

All of the texts I will examine were written under autocrats whose ambitions and conquests shaped the world around them. The image of Alexander the Great cast a particularly long shadow over these texts.<sup>22</sup> Roman authors interrogated Alexander and his ambition, and he was a model for Julius Caesar and Augustus.<sup>23</sup> The Ocean was used as a symbolic boundary term to signify Alexander’s and Julius Caesar’s desire for conquest;<sup>24</sup> Thule and Hyperborea were used similarly as foci of Roman autocratic ambition and *imperium* (power, empire). By highlighting the significant place of these terms in encomia to and criticisms of autocrats and their agents from Julius Caesar to Majorian, I will show that Roman authors used these malleable symbols of northern alterity to valorize and critique Roman and autocratic identities. I will also show that boundless desire is a leitmotif that echoes throughout these narratives.

### *Imperium sine fine: Encomia*

Suitably, our encomia begin with Virgil, who fashions Thule into a symbol of praise. In his *Georgics*, he uses the term as part of a hymnlike encomium to Octavian (sc. Augustus), where remotest Thule stands for the expanse of Octavian’s future *imperium*: ‘tibi serviat ultima Thule’ (Ultima Thule bow down to you).<sup>25</sup> Here, Virgil predicts future victories and apotheosis for the young

<sup>21</sup> As Wolfson insightfully notes, see Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, pp. 14 n. 1, 49. Wolfson points out that the poets place *Thule* at the end of their verses as if to represent the ends of the earth.

<sup>22</sup> For the influence of Alexander on Roman literature and *Romanitas* in the Late Republic and Empire, see Spencer, *The Roman Alexander*.

<sup>23</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4. 31; Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 7; *Divus Augustus*, 18, 50. See Stewart, ‘Inventing Britain’.

<sup>24</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4. 31; Seneca the Elder, *Suasoriae*, 1; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 3. 8. 16; *Institutio Oratoria*, 7. 4. 2. See: Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*. pp. 121–71; Stewart, ‘Inventing Britain’, pp. 2–10.

<sup>25</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, 1. 30, trans. by Lembke. Context: ‘You equally, Caesar, though we don’t yet know which cohort | of the gods will soon enroll you - whether you’ll wish to keep | cities safe and care for our lands, so the great circling world will | take you as source of earth’s fruits and master of seasons, | placing Venus’ wreath of myrtle around your temples; | whether you

Octavian; he valorizes Octavian's (and Roman) boundless desire for conquest, which encompasses even *ultima Thule*.<sup>26</sup> This discourse looks forward both to the famed scene in the *Aeneid*, where Jupiter promises Venus that he will give Aeneas (and his Roman descendants) empire without end, *imperium sine fine*,<sup>27</sup> and to Anchises's prophecy of Augustus's supremacy in the *Heldenschau* (pageant of heroes) of the *Aeneid*.<sup>28</sup>

hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,  
 Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet  
 saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva  
 Saturno quondam, super et Garamantas et Indos  
 proferet imperium; iacet extra sidera tellus  
 extra anni solisque vias, ubi caelifer Atlas  
 axem umero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum.<sup>29</sup>

(Here's the man you've heard promised to you so often, he's here now:  
 Caesar Augustus, born of a god, who will one day establish  
 all through the farmlands of Latium once, long ago, ruled by Saturn,  
 Ages of Gold. He'll extend Roman power beyond far Garamantes,  
 East beyond India too, to a land that lies under no mapped stars,  
 Outside the paths of the year and the sun, where sky-bearing Atlas  
 Spins on his shoulders the blaze of the star-studded orb of the heavens.)

In the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, Virgil predicts that Augustan (and Roman) *imperium* and ambition will be boundless, extending to and even beyond the very limits of the known world, from the northern limits, *ultima Thule*, to lands

shall come as god of the vast sea, and sailors worship | only your holy spirit, Ultima Thule bow down to you' (Virgil, *Georgics*, 1. 24–30). For the identification of Caesar with Octavian and commentary on the poem's encomiastic nature, see: Thomas, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*, pp. 68–74; *Virgil's Georgics*, ed. Lembke, p. 79; Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 158–62.

<sup>26</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 158–59.

<sup>27</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1. 279. Context: 'I [Jupiter] am imposing no bounds on his realm, no temporal limits. | Empire that has no ends is my gift' (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1. 278–79, trans. by Ahl). Virgil explicitly connects Augustus with empire without end later in the *Aeneid* (Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 792–97). On *imperium sine fine* here, see, for example: O'Hara, *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy*, pp. 132–34, 162; Kennedy, 'Virgilian Epic', p. 146.

<sup>28</sup> On the *Heldenschau*, see, for example: Grebe, *Die vergilische Heldenschau*; O'Hara, *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy*, p. 131; Pandey, 'Reading Rome from the Farther Shore'. For bibliography and a recent assessment, including connections between these passages, see: Kondratieff, 'Future City in the Heroic Past'. Cf. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 160–61.

<sup>29</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 791–97.

unmapped, *extra sidera tellus*;<sup>30</sup> indeed, in the *Heldenschau*, Anchises foretells that Augustus's deeds shall outdo those of even Hercules and Bacchus.<sup>31</sup> Essentially, *ultima Thule* as a manifestation of the Far North is part of Virgil's rich encomiastic palette. By deploying Thule in his *Georgics* in a triumphalist manner and foreshadowing *imperium sine fine*, Virgil valorizes autocratic ambition and promotes the topos of boundless desire.

Horace echoes this positive reading of the Far North in his *Odes* 2. 20 by using Hyperborea to refer to the boundlessness of his poetic immortality and Augustan *imperium*. In this poem he seems to employ Plato's image of Orpheus transforming into a swan<sup>32</sup> and Ennius's image of Homer transforming into a peacock<sup>33</sup> to construct his own poetic metamorphosis into a swan,<sup>34</sup> announcing that his fame flies over even the plains of Hyperborea:

iam Daedaleo notior Icaro  
visam gementis litora Bosphori  
Syrtisque Gaetulas canorus  
ales Hyperboreosque campos.

(Already more famous than Icarus, son of Daedalus,  
I shall visit, a harmonious bird, the shores  
of the moaning Bosphorus, the Gaetolian Syrtes,  
and the Hyperborean plains.)<sup>35</sup>

Horace may also have drawn on the elegaic poet Theognis's metaphor of flight as fame.<sup>36</sup> His metamorphosis while still alive<sup>37</sup> serves to highlight his own desire for poetic immortality and transcendence, while simultaneously outlining the extent of Augustan *imperium*.<sup>38</sup> Here, the poet plays with the idea of

<sup>30</sup> Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, pp. 160–62.

<sup>31</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 801–05.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Respublica*, 10. 620A.

<sup>33</sup> Ennius, *Annales*, frags 3, 11 (Skutsch).

<sup>34</sup> Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 1–4, 10. See Erasmo, 'Birds of a Feather?'

<sup>35</sup> Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 13–16, trans. by West. The poet links himself with Pindar, who he later describes as the Dircean swan (Horace, *Odes*, 4. 2. 25).

<sup>36</sup> Theognis, *Elegiae*, 1. 237–54. See: Commager, *The Odes of Horace*, pp. 308–11; Garrison (ed.), *Horace*, pp. 289–90.

<sup>37</sup> Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 9–13.

<sup>38</sup> Explicit in Horace, *Odes*, 2. 20. 17–20. See: Commager, *Odes of Horace*, pp. 308–11; Garrison, *Horace*, p. 289; Erasmo, 'Birds of a Feather?', pp. 373–76.



Hyperborea as a form of self-valorization<sup>39</sup> but echoes Virgil's triumphalist discourse on Augustan dominion.<sup>40</sup> Virgil and Horace set Latin literary precedents for the use of Thule and Hyperborea as positive symbols of autocratic desire.<sup>41</sup>

In poems dedicated to Domitian and his agents, the poets Silius, Statius, and Martial echo Virgil's and Horace's use of Thule and Hyperborea. Silius and Statius write Thule into (ostensibly) positive discourses on autocratic ambition. In his *Punica*, Silius recrafts Jupiter's *imperium sine fine* speech from Virgil's *Aeneid*, writing Domitian into a long line of Roman victors.<sup>42</sup> Silius's Jupiter predicts Vespasian's victory over Thule, 'pater ignotam donabit vincere Thylen' (the father of that family shall give Rome victory over Thule, unknown till then),<sup>43</sup> and promises that Domitian will outdo the exploits of his father (Vespasian) and brother (Titus), 'at tu transcendes, Germanice, facta tuorum' (but you, Conqueror of Germany, shalt outdo the exploits of your father and brother)<sup>44</sup> and 'hic et ab Arctoo currus aget axe per urbem' (he shall drive the triumphal car through Rome after conquering the North).<sup>45</sup> In so doing, Silius implies that

<sup>39</sup> It is tempting to read Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 356–59 as a pointed barb at Horace's poetic transformation and flight over Hyperborean plains. Here, in the prosopopeiac voice of Pythagoras, Ovid recounts and discredits a tale of persons transformed into birds by plunging into the waters of Hyperborean Pallene: 'The tale is told how in the northern steppes (*Hyperborea*) | of far Pallene people plunge nine times | into a marshy mere and then their skin | grows downy feathers; that seems past belief' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 356–59, trans. by Melville). Hardie suggests that Ovid is drawing on Empedocles as a model for Pythagoras's teachings, and signalling his close connection to Pythagoras as Lucretius did with Epicurus; see Hardie, 'The Speech of Pythagoras'. Perhaps too, in the voice of Pythagoras, Ovid's critique of Horace has more force.

<sup>40</sup> For a famous treatment of Virgil, Horace, and Augustus, see Duckworth, 'Supplementary Paper'. For a recent cautious assessment, see Thomas, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*, pp. 1–73.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, p. 14 n. 1, where he notes that Virgil begins a tradition with Thule that echoes throughout Latin poetry.

<sup>42</sup> 'A warrior family [the Flavians], reared on the berry that grows in the Sabine land, shall increase the fame of the deified Julii. The father of that family [Vespasian] shall give Rome victory over Thule, unknown till then [...]. But you, Conqueror of Germany [Domitian], shall outdo the exploits of your father and brother [...]. He [Domitian] shall drive the triumphal car through Rome after conquering the North' (Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 597–614, trans. by Duff, modified by author). See: Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, p. 138, where Thule is recognized as having a symbolic resonance in this triumphalist discourse.

<sup>43</sup> Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 597.

<sup>44</sup> Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 607.

<sup>45</sup> Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 614. On this encomiastic language, see: Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule*

Domitian is the greatest of his line; Thule and the Far North are symbols of Flavian and Domitianic desire for conquest. Similarly, in a consolatory poem to the widow of Abascantus, Domitian's *ab epistulis*,<sup>46</sup> Statius suggests that Domitian 'videt ille ortus obitusque, quid Auster | quid Boreas hibernus agat' ('sees east and west, what the South Wind is about and [...] the wintry North')<sup>47</sup> and links him with 'quantum ultimus orbis | cesserit et refugo circumsona gurgite Thule' (how far the world's end has retreated and Thule surrounded by her roaring reflux),<sup>48</sup> implying that Domitian's gaze is all-encompassing, and that he desires and is able to control the very limits of his empire.<sup>49</sup> In the following poem,<sup>50</sup> a panegyric to the youth Vettius Crispinus, Statius encourages Crispinus to follow the martial example of his celebrated father, Vettius Bolanus, a former imperial governor of Britain, by evoking his entrance into Thule:

tu disce patrem, quantusque nigrantem<sup>51</sup>  
fluctibus occiduis fesso usque Hyperione Thylen  
intrarit mandata gerens quantusque potentis  
mille urbes Asiae sortito rexerit anno.<sup>52</sup>

(Learn of your father: in what greatness he entered Thule darkling in the waves of sunset, where Hyperion comes weary, bearing his commission; how greatly too he governed the thousand cities of mighty Asia for his allotted year, given tempering command.)

*and Caledonia*, pp. 49–55; Penwill, 'Damn with Great Praise?'; Henriksen, *A Commentary on Martial*, p. xxii, 22, 170–71; Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, p. 138. Penwill underscores the potential for irony in this encomia, but this does not detract from the encomiastic use of northern alterity here.

<sup>46</sup> Flavius Abascantus was Statius's friend and a freedman in charge of Domitian's imperial correspondence (*Augusti libertus ab epistulis*); see Statius, *Silvae*, 5. *praef.*

<sup>47</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 1. 81–82, trans. by Shackleton Bailey.

<sup>48</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 1. 90–91. See: Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, pp. 48–49.

<sup>49</sup> On Domitian's control over the world and encomiastic language in Statius's *Silvae*, see: Newlands, *Statius' Silvae*, pp. 18–27; Brunetta, 'Strategies of Encomium', p. 127.

<sup>50</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 2.

<sup>51</sup> There is a textual issue in the manuscripts here. Avantius emends *nigrantem*, while Courtney proffers *negantem*, see: Courtney, 'Problems in the *Silvae*'. I will not enter the arguments here, as they have no bearing on this chapter, but will adopt Avantius's *nigrantem* to follow Shackleton Bailey's translation.

<sup>52</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 2. 54–57. For Statius and Vettius Crispinus, see Nauta, *Poetry for Patrons*, pp. 216–17. For a comparison between Statius's and Tacitus's image of Vettius Bolanus, see Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, pp. 88–97.

Thule (as a proxy for the Far North) is to be conquered and controlled by emperors and their agents; it is a symbolic landscape on which imperial power is writ large. Equally, in Martial's epigrams, we find Hyperborea used as a symbol of Domitian's northern conquests and the apotheosis of his deceased child:<sup>53</sup> Martial's Domitian has borne 'victor Hyperboreo nomen ab orbe' (victorious a name from the Hyperborean world),<sup>54</sup> meaning here the honorary title *Germanicus* that Domitian adopted owing to his campaign against the Chatti;<sup>55</sup> Horace's *Hyperborei campi* have been conquered by Domitian. Notably, Martial evokes the encomiastic colour of Virgil's *Heldenschau* by emphasizing that Hercules's acts do not match Domitian's: 'Herculeum tantis numen non sufficit actis' (Hercules's divinity does not match such exploits).<sup>56</sup> Domitian's martial prowess and ambition exceed all boundaries. Here, these poets demonstrate how important the idea of *imperium sine fine* was for Flavian autocrats and how persistent the motif of boundless desire became.

In the Late Empire, Claudian, Rutilius Namatianus, and Sidonius Apollinaris craft elaborate panegyrics to the last of the Western Roman autocrats wherein Thule and Hyperborea are again positive symbols of autocratic ambition. In a biting invective against Flavius Rufinus, Claudian has Stilicho's soldiers claim that they will follow Stilicho wherever he goes 'vel Hyperboreo damnatam sidere Thylen' (even as far as Thule lying icebound beneath the polestar),<sup>57</sup> and that wherever Stilicho is, 'haec patria est' (there is my fatherland).<sup>58</sup> Here, Virgil's Thule and Horace's Hyperborea are both connected with the *imperium* of Stilicho and *patria* (home, fatherland); northern alterity, empire, and autocratic ambition intertwine with Roman identity. Claudian frequently uses Thule and Hyperborea as lenses on empire and ambition. In a panegyric on Stilicho's consulship, he paints Stilicho as the protector of Rome, acclaims

<sup>53</sup> 'For he [Domitian] is wont with dripping locks to weary the stars of Hyperborean Bootes and ignore Helice [Ursa Major]. Who sports with dry waters and plays games from heaven? I suspect these snows come from Caesar's [Domitian's] child'; Martial, *Epigrammata*, 4. 3. 5–8, trans. by Shackleton Bailey. See Martial, *Book IV*, ed. by Soldevila, pp. 108–11.

<sup>54</sup> Martial, *Epigrammata*, 9. 101. 20.

<sup>55</sup> For this title, see Henriksen, *A Commentary on Martial*, pp. 23–26, 183. For an encomiastic reading of this, see p. xix, 22, 26–27, 166–84, esp. 183.

<sup>56</sup> Martial, *Epigrammata*, 9. 101. 23. On this Virgilian echo, see Henriksen, *A Commentary on Martial*, pp. 166–71.

<sup>57</sup> Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2. 240, trans. by Platnauer. For an encomiastic reading of Thule in Claudian, see Freeman, *Ireland and the Classical World*, pp. 103–06.

<sup>58</sup> Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2. 246.

that ‘veluti patriis regionibus utitur hospes [...] quod cernere Thylen | lusus et horrendos quondam penetrare recessus’ (the world is our home [...] and that to visit Thule and explore its once dreaded wilds is but a sport),<sup>59</sup> and invokes Virgil’s *imperium sine fine*, declaring that ‘nec terminus umquam | Romanae dicionis erit’ (nor will there ever be a limit to the empire of Rome).<sup>60</sup> In this same spirit, he praises Theodosius’s and Honorius’s desire for conquest in a panegyric on the latter’s third consulship, declaring that Theodosius was an object of dread to ‘ratibus impervia Thule’ (Thule to where no ship can sail) and that ‘fregit Hyperboreas remis audacibus undas’ (his adventurous oars broke the surface of the northern seas).<sup>61</sup> Essentially, Claudian uses Thule and Hyperborea to praise the *imperium* of Stilicho and Honorius and their desire for conquest.<sup>62</sup>

In a mode reminiscent of Statius’s praise of Vettius Bolanus, Rutilius Namatianus uses Thule to praise Victorinus, his friend and a former *vicarius* (imperial administrator) of Gaul, acclaiming his authority in distant lands as a model of Roman rule:

conscius Oceanus virtutum, conscia Thule [...]
   
extremum pars illa quidem discedit in orbem,
   
sed tamquam media rector in urbe fuit

(Well did the Ocean know his merits, well did the Far North know them [...] that region is parted from us far as earth’s most distant bound, but was its ruler as it might have been in the heart of Rome).<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, Sidonius Apollinaris uses Hyperborea to praise the unceasing and boundless conquests of Majorian.<sup>64</sup> These later poets draw on and embellish

<sup>59</sup> Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 3. 155–57.

<sup>60</sup> Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis*, 3. 159–60.

<sup>61</sup> Claudian, *Panegyricus de tertio consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 53, 56, trans. by Platnauer.

<sup>62</sup> On this reading, see: Freeman, *Ireland and the Classical World*, pp. 103–06.

<sup>63</sup> Rutilius Namatianus, *De reditu*, 1. 499, 503–04, trans. by Duff and Duff. On Victorinus and Rutilius, see Drinkwater and Elton, *Fifth-Century Gaul*, pp. 69, 93, 230.

<sup>64</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, 5. 493. Hyperborea is invoked in a discussion about the Huns: ‘Only one race denied you obedience, a race who had lately, in a mood even more savage than usual, withdrawn their untamed host from the Danube because they had lost their lords in warfare, and Tuldila stirred in that unruly multitude a mad lust of fighting for which they must needs pay dear. Hereupon, having scarce laid down your arms, you take them up again; as when the Thracian women fill the frosty land of the Ciconians with Theban troops of revellers, and on the fields by the Strymon or over the slopes of the Rhodope, or where cloudy Hismarus rolls Hebrus down amid the Hyperborean rocks to the sea’; Sidonius Apollinaris,

Virgilian and Horatian models to praise the autocrats of their world; to them, the Far North stands for Roman rule and boundless desire for conquest.

### *Nimium audax: Criticisms*

I turn now to criticisms, which begin with that most invective of Latin poets, Catullus. In Catullus 29, the poet savages the acquisitiveness and *luxus* (excess, extravagance) of Julius Caesar's military officer Mamurra on the British campaign; in so doing, he also attacks Caesar.<sup>65</sup> Within this invective, he invokes the remoteness and distance of Britain as the location for this activity: 'ultima Britannia [...] ultima occidentis insula' (remotest Britain [...] far island of the west).<sup>66</sup> Here Catullus sets the Latin literary stage for using remote landscapes as spaces for interrogating the actions of autocrats and their agents.<sup>67</sup> It is in a similar critique of Mamurra in Catullus 115 that we are introduced to the Hyperboreans; in this poem, Catullus sarcastically compares the size of Mamurra's estate with Croesus's riches,<sup>68</sup> the Ocean and the land of the Hyperboreans: 'usque ad Hyperboreos et mare ad Oceanum' (far as Oceanus's sea and the Hyperboreans).<sup>69</sup> Here Catullus intimates that Mamurra's acquisitive desire does not match his ability.<sup>70</sup> In this poem, Catullus establishes Hyperborea as a negative symbol of boundless desire.

Seneca and Lucan transform the triumphalist discourse of Virgil and Horace into subversive critiques of autocratic ambition. In his *Medea*, Seneca adroitly turns Virgil's image of *ultima Thule* into a symbol of autocratic acquisitiveness in the mouths of his Chorus;<sup>71</sup> such acquisitiveness is boundless, 'nec sit terris

*Carmina*, 5. 485–93, trans. by Anderson, modified by author. On Sidonius, encomiastic language and Majorian, see: Mathisen, 'Sidonius on the Reign of Avitus'; Rousseau, 'Sidonius and Majorian.' Note Rousseau's suggestion that the poem contains guarded criticism of Majorian.

<sup>65</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Iulius*, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Catullus, *Carmina*, 29. 4, 13, trans. by Lee.

<sup>67</sup> Stewart, 'Inventing Britain', p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Bacchylides's poem on Croesus and his Apollonian transportation from the pyre to the land of the Hyperboreans: Bacchylides, *Epinicia*, 3. 23–62.

<sup>69</sup> Catullus, *Carmina*, 115. 6. For commentary on this poem and *usque ad Hyperboreos* in particular, see: Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*, p. 499; Fordyce, *Catullus*, p. 402; Pavlock, 'Mentula in Catullus 114 and 115'.

<sup>70</sup> For this reading, see Pavlock, 'Mentula in Catullus 114 and 115'.

<sup>71</sup> Seneca the Younger, *Medea*, 364–79. [Chorus:] 'These days the sea has yielded, | and endures all laws. | No need of a boat framed by Pallas, | bringing home princely rowers, | a

ultima Thule' (and Thule not be the farthest of lands).<sup>72</sup> *Ultima Thule* is used to illustrate how distant lands and the Ocean have been subdued by Roman *imperium*, and how this is an aggression against and a perversion of the natural order that would lead to chaos.<sup>73</sup> Seneca implies that the conquest of distant lands is a form of overreach or hubris; he criticizes such trans-Oceanic conquest as too audacious, *nimum audax*,<sup>74</sup> and links violence and plunder across the Ocean with punishment and destruction, drawing on the Phaethon myth as an analogy.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps here, it is the *type* of conquest that matters: for Seneca, conquest sanctioned by an autocrat is driven by ambition and hubris. It is tempting to interpret this text as a critique of Neronian acquisitiveness. Seneca elsewhere uses Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and seafaring conquest as symbols of reckless ambition.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps, like Livy,<sup>77</sup> Seneca deems autocratic conquest of the Alexandrian or Caesarian type as ill-motivated in comparison to conquest mediated by the Senate.<sup>78</sup> Lucan's *Bellum civile* also contains elements that are critical of autocratic ambition.<sup>79</sup> Lucan inverts Virgil's triumphalist *imperium sine fine* into a symbol of dominance and pessimism.<sup>80</sup> His hymnic apostrophe to Nero in the proem of Book 1 is transformed into biting criticism by Book x,<sup>81</sup>

famous *Argo*: | any little rowboat wanders over the deep. | All boundaries are removed, and cities | have established their walls in new lands. Nothing is left where it once belonged | by a world open to access. | The Indian drinks the cold Araxes, | Persians the Albis and the Rhine. | There will come an epoch late in time | when Ocean will loosen the bonds of the world | and the earth lie open in its vastness, | when Tethys will disclose new worlds | and Thule not be the farthest of lands' (trans. by Fitch). On this connection, see Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> Seneca the Younger, *Medea*, 379.

<sup>73</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 168–71; Littlewood, *Self-Representation and Illusion*, pp. 167–68.

<sup>74</sup> Seneca the Younger, *Medea*, 301.

<sup>75</sup> Seneca the Younger, *Medea*, 599–615.

<sup>76</sup> Seneca the Younger, *Quaestiones naturales*, 5. 18. 4, 5, 10–12; *Epistulae*, 119. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 9. 17–19.

<sup>78</sup> Romm, *Edges of the Earth*, pp. 168–71.

<sup>79</sup> For discussion, see Lucan, *De bello civili*, ed. by Roche, pp. 4–10; Casali, 'The *Bellum Civile*'; Reed, 'The *Bellum Civile*'.

<sup>80</sup> Lucan, *Bellum civile*, 1. 670–72: 'The peace we long for brings a master. Rome, prolong your chain | of disaster without a break and protract calamity | for lengthy ages: only now in civil war are you free' (trans. by Braund).

<sup>81</sup> Whether or not this hymnic praise in the proem is ironic or critical is a matter of considerable scholarly debate. For bibliography on this debate, see: Lucan, *De bello civili*, ed. by

wherein he draws critical links between the autocratic ambition and desires of Alexander and Julius Caesar.<sup>82</sup> As part of this discourse, he has Lentulus invoke Hyperborea in Book v as a symbol of the extent of Roman *imperium* and expansion:

nam vel Hyperboreae plaustrum glaciale sub Ursae  
vel plaga qua torrens claususque vaporibus axis  
nec patitur noctes nec iniquos crescere soles,  
si fortuna ferat, rerum nos summa sequetur  
imperiumque comes.<sup>83</sup>

(For whether Fortune carries us beneath the icy wagon  
of Hyperborean Bear or where the burning zone  
and clime enclosed by heat lest neither nights nor days  
grow unequal, rule of the state will attend us,  
and power will be our companion.)

If we situate this Hyperborean manifestation within Lucan's broader anti-Neronian and anti-expansionist discourse, this ostensibly positive statement about the extent of Roman *imperium* rings hollow.<sup>84</sup> In the *Bellum civile*, symbols of conquest and expansion become negative symbols of autocratic desire;<sup>85</sup> the Nile episode in Book x is a classic case.<sup>86</sup> For Lucan, conquering Hyperborea and the Nile is *nimum audax*. Seneca and Lucan echo Catullus's biting critique of Mamurra's boundless desire.

The geographer Pomponius Mela and the historian Pliny generate positive visions of Hyperborea that can be read as subtle criticisms of autocratic control.<sup>87</sup>

Roche, pp. 5–10. Roche tends towards reading the proem as part of Lucan's systematic criticism of Nero and autocratic ambition, see also pp. 5–10. Cf. Ahl, *Lucan*, pp. 35–54; Henderson, 'Lucan'; Leigh, *Lucan*, pp. 23–26, 55–58, 62, 282, 290–91. *Contra*, see: Lucan, *Civil War*, ed. and trans. by Braund, pp. xiv–xvi; Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 2; Grimal, 'Eulogy of Nero'. Here, I follow Roche in reading the praise as part of Lucan's broader critical aims, given that lines like Lucan, *Bellum civile*, 1. 24–32, 35, 47–50, 63–66, 120–57, 670, 2. 227–32, 284–325, and 3. 108–14 suggest that he worked criticism in from the beginning.

<sup>82</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 152–56; Manolaraki, 'Noscendi Nilum Cupido'.

<sup>83</sup> Lucan, *Bellum civile*, 5. 23–27.

<sup>84</sup> Reed, 'The *Bellum Civile*', pp. 24–26.

<sup>85</sup> Manolaraki, 'Noscendi Nilum Cupido', pp. 153–54.

<sup>86</sup> Lucan, *Bellum civile*, 10. 268–75.

<sup>87</sup> Pomponius Mela locates the Hyperboreans in Scythia beyond even the Amazons (Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 1. 12–13); indeed, he suggests they live 'beyond the North Wind,



They render Hyperborea as a northern utopia, drawing on Greek precedents, and use Thule as a symbol of the Far North.<sup>88</sup> Amidst this, they present positive pictures of Hyperborean suicide; this discourse is not found in the Greek precedents. Pomponius and Pliny describe a pastoral utopia that has six months of night and day and is populated with a long-lived happy people, who offer Delian Apollo their first fruits, and who happily kill themselves to end their long lives.<sup>89</sup> Pomponius and Pliny may be valorizing aristocratic suicides,<sup>90</sup>

above the Rhiphaean mountains, and under the very pole of the stars, where the sun rises' (Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 36, trans. by Romer). In his *Naturalis historia*, Pliny lauds the great conquests of Rome and presents a world tamed by the *pax Romana*, see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 14. 2–3, and commentary, Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History*, pp. 2, 5, 15, 24, 50, 69; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, pp. 59–88 (but note Woolf's cautions against viewing the *Naturalis historia* as entirely apostrophic). Therein, Pliny replicates and refashions a series of Greek and Roman accounts of *Hyperborea*. He draws on several Greek authorities, including Hecataeus, to briefly locate Hyperborea in Scythia (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 6. 34–35; 6. 55; 6. 219), but his ethnographic account of the Hyperboreans is far more elaborate. See Avdagic, 'The North in Antiquity', in this volume.

<sup>88</sup> Pomponius briefly mentions Thule as one of the distant islands of Britain (Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 52), and, as with Hyperborea, notes its different patterns of light and darkness, including bright nights in the Summer and dark nights in the Winter. Pliny's accounts of Thule (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 2. 187; 2. 246; 4. 104; 6. 219) are fairly bare toponymic descriptions that draw on Pytheas and Isidorus; in these accounts he locates the island of Thule six days north of Britain, explains how it has an alternating six months of nights and days (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 2. 187; 4. 104; 6. 219), and refers to it as the most remote of island (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 104). He also locates Thule close to Hyperborea in Scythia (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 6. 219), as Pomponius.

<sup>89</sup> Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 36; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4.89. Pomponius: 'The Hyperboreans inhabit groves and forests, and when a sense of having been satisfied by life (rather than boredom) has gripped them, they cheerfully wreath themselves in flowers and actually throw themselves into the sea from a particular cliff. For them that is the finest death ritual' (Pomponius, *De chorographia*, 3. 36, trans. by Romer). In this passage, Pomponius seems to draw on the utopian models of Hyperborea crafted by Pindar (*Pythian odes*, 10. 29–44), Herodotus (*Historiae*, 4. 32–55) and Hecataeus (apud Strabo, *Geographia*, 15. 1. 57) to paint a picture of a fortunate and pious people, see Evans, 'Searching for Paradise', p. 295. Pliny: 'Death comes to them only when, owing to satiety of life, after holding a banquet and anointing | their old age with luxury, they leap from a certain rock into the sea: this mode of burial is the | most blissful; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 89, trans. by Rackham). Pliny draws explicitly on Pomponius. He paints a picture of a utopian pastoral landscape, located beyond the Rhiphaean mountains and beyond the North Wind (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 89), that is populated with a happy people, *gens felix* (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 4. 89), who offer their firstfruits to Delian Apollo, and who commit suicide at the ends of their lives.

<sup>90</sup> Pomponius may betray his Stoic and perhaps familial confluence with Seneca here, see: *Description of the World*, ed. by Romer, pp. 3–4; Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History*, pp. 120–21.



a theme that finds analogues in Livy, Seneca, Tacitus, Plutarch, and other authors.<sup>91</sup> They do not make a clear link between autocratic tyranny and suicide, as Livy and the others, but their careful silence is pregnant. Murphy has shown that Pliny in particular sets the Hyperboreans up as a utopian community on which to project desires;<sup>92</sup> their happy suicides provide a window into Pliny's complicated milieu. While Pliny certainly lauds Roman power in his work,<sup>93</sup> his use of the Far North to talk about happy suicides betrays a wistfulness for an altered state. Pomponius and Pliny provide us with a window into life in Rome under Claudius, Nero, and Vespasian; suicide was, perhaps, one of the only ways for aristocrats to free themselves from autocratic control.

In the *Agricola*, the Roman historian Tacitus uses an encomium to Agricola, his father-in-law, to criticize Domitianic tyranny. He paints Britain as a place at the edge of the earth where Agricola is free from Domitianic control, free to be virtuous, heroic, and truly Roman.<sup>94</sup> Here he creates a semi-fictitious landscape populated by ferocious barbarians<sup>95</sup> that Agricola has circumnavigated and governed with bravery, mercy, and no desire for praise.<sup>96</sup> This is in stark contrast to his savage criticism of Domitianic tyranny and acquisitiveness,<sup>97</sup> out of which emerges the tyranny of the emperor's gaze, 'praecipua sub Domitiano miseriarum pars erat videre et aspici [...] saevus ille vultus' (a special torment under Domitian was to see him watching us [...] that savage gaze),<sup>98</sup> recalling

<sup>91</sup> Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 1. 58–59; Seneca, *Epistulae*, 58. 34–35, 70. 14–15, 24; Tacitus, *Annales*, 16. 19; Plutarch, *Cato Minor*, 68–71. For commentary and other authors, see: Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History*, pp. 120–25, 128.

<sup>92</sup> Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History*, pp. 120–28.

<sup>93</sup> Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History*. But again note Woolf's cautions against an entirely apostrophic reading; see Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, pp. 59–88.

<sup>94</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 10–19. See: Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, p. 91.

<sup>95</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 11–12, 16. Britain was, in fact, well populated and urban; this is a Tacitean fiction; see Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, p. 91.

<sup>96</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 18–19. See, for example: 'So, after they had petitioned for peace and surrendered the island [Mona], Agricola was now regarded as a famous and a great man: on his entry into the province, a period which others spend in pageantry and soliciting attention, he had preferred toil and danger. Agricola did not exploit his success to glorify himself but described his campaign and victory as "keeping a conquered people under control." He did not even use laurel-wreathed dispatches to report on his action. But the very act that he disguised his fame actually made him more famous'; Tacitus, *Agricola*, 18. 6–7, trans. by Birley.

<sup>97</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 1–3, 44–46.

<sup>98</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 45. 2.

Domitian's gaze and control in Statius's *Silvae*, 'videt ille ortus obitusque' (he sees east and west).<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the gaze is related to Thule: amidst an account of Agricola's circumnavigation and subjugation of Britain's north-western islands, Tacitus refers to the observation or discernment of Thule — 'dispecta est et Thule, quia hactenus iussum, et hiems adpetebat' (Thule was thoroughly viewed, as well, but no more, for the fleet's orders were to go no further, and winter was approaching)<sup>100</sup> — and to the sea as a barrier to rowers: 'sed mare pigrum et grave remigantibus perhibent ne ventis quidem perinde attolli' ('it is reported, however, that the sea there is sluggish and difficult for the rowers, and is not even stirred up by the winds as happens elsewhere').<sup>101</sup> Here Thule stands for the limits of Roman conquest and as a boundary that was not and should not be crossed by Agricola.<sup>102</sup> For Tacitus, Agricola is a man who knows his limits; his desire is not boundless, unlike Domitian's. North was a positive space where a Roman could be a Roman, free from autocratic control. Virgil's *imperium sine fine* is entirely inverted here; for Tacitus, it is at the boundaries of the empire that true *Romanitas* (Roman identity) resides, where ambition is tempered and the tyrant's gaze absent.

### *The Mutable and Metonymic North*

Roman authors used Thule and Hyperborea as mirrors to reflect their thoughts about Rome and its rulers. The Far North stood for the limits of Roman desire and power; it was a malleable literary space that could both herald a cherished

<sup>99</sup> Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 1.81. On Statius's *Silvae* and Tacitus's *Agricola*, see Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, pp. 88–97. Wolfson argues that Tacitus inverts Statius's positive image of Vettius Bolanus (Statius, *Silvae*, 5. 2) at Tacitus, *Agricola*, 8.1, 16.5 in order to praise Agricola. Tacitus is clearly interested in inversion in the *Agricola* (of Domitian's gaze, of the character of Vettius Bolanus, of Virgil's *imperium sine fine*, of what it is to be Roman).

<sup>100</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 10. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*, 10. 6. For commentary on this passage, see: Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*; Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, pp. 138–39. Wolfson argues for a different reading of this passage, namely, that Agricola's fleet did reach Thule (the Shetlands in his reading), see: Wolfson, *Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*, pp. 29–34. In order to read it in this manner, he argues for a manuscript transcription problem, which has been criticized by Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, p. 139. In particular, Wolfson ignores the force of *hactenus* ('thus far and no farther' or 'only' according to Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, p. 139) and the notion of human (orders) and natural forces (winter and the sea) as barriers.

<sup>102</sup> Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 148–49. For Thule as primarily symbolic here, see Woodman and Kraus, *Tacitus: Agricola*, p. 138.

Augustan ideal and deplore autocratic acquisitiveness. Virgil and Horace praise Augustus's boundless desire for conquest and inspire numerous poets to echo this motif, whilst Seneca, Lucan, and Tacitus raise the spectre of hubris and destructive ambition. Textual echoes abound; Virgil's encomiastic *ultima Thule* and Horace's Hyperborea are embellished, expanded, and inverted, with *imperium sine fine* emerging as a unifying theme. In the examined instances, authors do not denigrate the northern 'other'; instead, to borrow Erich Gruen's phrase, 'it is not rejection, denigration, or distancing — but rather appropriation'.<sup>103</sup> Thule and Hyperborea, recurrent manifestations of northern alterity throughout Greek literature, were appropriated and transformed by Roman authors, not to disparage or praise northern societies, but as a self-reflexive discourse on Roman *imperium* and autocrats. Essentially, Thule and Hyperborea were not particularly dystopian or utopian spaces for Roman authors but, instead, were useful metonyms for Rome. Northern alterity was a powerful literary tool, for the 'edges of the world and the empire were good to think with'.<sup>104</sup>

We have seen that Roman authors used Thule and Hyperborea as metonyms for Rome and its rulers. The mutability of these terms allowed them to both praise and criticize Roman and autocratic identities. The very limits of the earth were linked with boundless desire; Rome expanded and so too did the ambitions of its rulers. For Roman authors, writing about Thule and Hyperborea was a way to raise questions about the tension between acquiring *imperium sine fine*, empire without end, and being *nimum audax*, too hubristic. The vitality and longevity of these terms demonstrate the centrality of these ideas to *Romanitas*.

In closing, I offer my own verse inspired by the Far North in Roman literature as abundantly mutable and metonymic, a fascinating landscape wherein Roman identities could be interrogated, praised, and critiqued:

of lands furthest north,  
within empire without end,  
Aeneadae sing.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*, p. 92.

<sup>105</sup> Sons of Aeneas, sc. Romans.

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