This paper is a parallel reading of Horace, *Carmina* 2.20, and Baudelaiure's *Le Cygne* and *L'albatros*, illustrating various modern understandings of 'classical' and 'anti-classical' as aesthetic concepts. Scholars have contrasted Baudelaire's modernist aesthetics of *spleen* with Horace's Augustan classicism. *Spleen*, as a state of melancholy closed to the future and oppressed by memories of the past, is described by imagery of decay and death in *Le Spleen*, and the the image of the exiled swan bathing in dust in *Le Cygne* is an ironic reply to earlier uses of the swan as a symbol of sublime beauty and poetry. The story of the swan evokes a number of ancient poetic texts, among which Horace's poem C. 2.20 (the poet's metamorphosis into the immortal bird), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (creation of man) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (Andromache's exile). A sensitive reader of these texts will be disposed to see that they only partially conform to the aesthetic ideals of modern classicisms (French classicism, Winckelmann and neoclassicism, classicism of classical scholars etc.). Instead, they are – like Baudelaire's own poetry – aesthetically ambiguous and able to provoke oscillating sensations of tragic and comic, beautiful and ugly, sublime and grotesque.