

Introduction

Looking back over the last fifty years or so of criticism and scholarship in the field of Latin poetry, one sees a progressive extension of interest forward in time from the canonical authors of the late Republic and earlier years of the reign of Augustus. First, Ovid was rescued from his modern demotion to the status of a late-coming and not very serious, albeit highly proficient, poet. The new *aetas Ovidiana* shows no sign of running out of steam. The same is true of the slightly more recent rediscovery of the claim to sustained critical attention on the part of poets of the Neronian and Flavian periods. And now no Latinist can fail to be aware of an upsurge of interest in the Latin poets of late antiquity, in particular of what is sometimes called the “Theodosian renaissance” of the late fourth and early fifth centuries A.D., matched by a corresponding investment of energies in Greek poetry of the later empire. Yet literary scholars have been rather slow, compared to our colleagues in ancient history and art history, in coming to view late antiquity as equally deserving of attention as the earlier periods. When it comes to undergraduate and graduate syllabuses, late antique poetry is still for the most part invisible. I would like to hope that the present contribution might help to further the cause of late antique Latin poetry among a wider audience.

This book is primarily a literary study, with a recurrent focus on the reception in late antique Latin poetry of poetry of the late Republic and early empire, chiefly from Lucretius and Catullus through to the Flavian epic poets. I make no attempt to be comprehensive in charting this very important episode in the history of the reception of earlier Latin poetry: thus Roman comedy is mentioned only very occasionally, and Juvenal, whose satire enjoyed a revival in readership in the fourth

century, is notable mostly by his absence.¹ Virgil has a privileged place, partly a reflection of my own long-term interests, but also an index of the quasi-divine status accorded to Virgil in late antiquity (as in later centuries). Ovid also looms large.²

What further unites the several chapters is an attention to two large questions. Firstly, how differently do texts on Christian subjects and texts on non-Christian subjects respond to the earlier tradition? And secondly, do late antique poets rework the tradition through what is an identifiably “late antique” poetics and aesthetic? In both inquiries I have ended up stressing continuities rather than discontinuities, a revisionist position that I was not aware of having consciously formulated when I first decided a few years ago to undertake a major project on late antique Latin poetry.

The relationship of Christian poetry to the omnipresent pagan models has naturally been much discussed, along a spectrum from accommodation and assimilation, through transformation, to contrast-imitation and finally to polemical supersession.³ Models of a radical disjunction between the purposes and practices of Christian poets, on the one hand, and, on the other, of poets writing within the pre-Christian tradition (many of whom were themselves Christian) have been developed in particular by German scholars: Reinhart Herzog, arguing for the “heteronomy” of biblical poetry,⁴ and Christian Gnllka, and his students, applying a model of *chrēsis*, the “proper use” of non-Christian texts and traditions by Christian writers and readers.⁵ While the radical difference in ideology between pre-Christian and Christian culture is something new in antiquity, and leads at an extreme to professions of the need for Christianity totally to reject the existing literary institutions, in practice Christian beliefs and pagan literary traditions coexist with various degrees of ease or unease. The resulting continuities and discontinuities between Christian and earlier non-Christian texts can in fact largely be considered using the terms that structure discussions of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* within the pre-Christian Greco-Roman literary tradition. The issue of how Christian doctrinal sincerity sits with the use of the resources of traditional poetry is perhaps not all that different from the long-standing debate over the relationship of poetry and philosophy in the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius, who proposes something like a model of the “proper use” of the charms of traditional poetry in order to inculcate his countercultural philosophical truths.

On the second large question, concerning periodization,⁶ there is a now well-established genre of books and essays that set out to define a late antique aesthetic

1. On Persius and Juvenal in late antiquity, see Sogno 2012.

2. For a recent study of the reception of Ovid in late antiquity, see Fielding 2017.

3. Good overviews of the issues and the various positions can be found in Lühken 2002, 20–23, 269–84.

4. Herzog 1975.

5. Gnllka 1984, 2012; Kirstein 2000, 14–19 (a succinct exposition of Gnllka’s *chrēsis*).

6. In general on the possibility and legitimacy of periodization in literary history, see Perkins 1992.

or a late antique poetics. Michael Roberts's 1989 *The Jeweled Style* remains the most influential single intervention. Its propositions of an attention to glittering detail, of a privileging of the part over the whole, of a rhetorical focus on ekphrastic vividness rather than larger structures, have not so much been superseded over the last thirty years as given new spins, reinvigorated by a postmodern privileging of the fragmentary.⁷ My own reading of these texts operates within a horizon of expectations that is for the most part not very different from that within which I read early imperial Latin poetry; I find that these texts respond adequately and interestingly when thus approached. There are certainly differences, not least of which is the introduction of Christian subject matter into the inherited forms. There are also new, or newly popular, forms: the cento, Optatian's figured poems, Ausonius's *technopaegnia*, but these do not form the bulk of the poetic output of late antiquity. The "Theodosian renaissance" is a modern label, but it serves usefully to point to the resumption, if that is historically correct, or continuity, if it is not, of the modes and practices of earlier Latin literature. Blanket definitions of a late antique aesthetic or poetics seem to me to be more of a hindrance than a help. Change there certainly is, transformation even, but not sufficient, in my view, to arrive at something qualitatively quite other. This is particularly the case with allusion and intertextuality, where I am not persuaded by various attempts to diagnose a quantum shift in writers' and readers' responses to earlier texts.⁸ Some useful perspective may be lent by reflection on the history of criticism of what was once called "Silver Latin," but is now more often referred to, more neutrally, as "post-Augustan" or "early imperial" Latin poetry. Blanket labels such as "mannerist," "rhetorical," and "episodic," which were applied to the productions of a period as a whole, are now for the most part a thing of the past. I venture to suggest that the persistence of attempts to define an overarching "late antique poetics" is a sign of the relative youth of studies of late antique Latin poetry.

Chapter 1, "Farewells and Returns: Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola," is a detailed reading of a famous correspondence between Ausonius and his erstwhile pupil Paulinus of Nola, which I use to introduce major themes and questions that will occupy me in the rest of the book: the Christian appropriation and transformation of non-Christian values; the prominence of paradox in late antique discourse; an

7. Roberts 1989. For recent updates and modification of Roberts, see Formisano 2007; Hernández Lobato 2012; Pelttari 2014; J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato, "Notes towards a Poetics of Late Antique Literature," in Elsner and Hernández Lobato 2017, 1–22. Earlier essays in defining the essence of late antique poetry include Charlet (1988), who discerns the "combination of neo-classicism and neo-alexandrianism in the triumphalist expression of Constantino-Theodosian ideology" (74); and Fontaine (1977), who sees the hybridism of a mingling of genres as typically late antique.

8. E.g., Pelttari 2014; Kaufmann 2017.

interest in figures of reflection and echo; the ideology and theology of novelty, renovation, and transformation; the question of what is (or is not) typically late antique, and typically Christian, in practices of allusion and intertextuality; late antique Virgilianism and Ovidianism. Chapter 1 serves as the longer introduction from which I refrain in these briefer opening remarks. In this exchange of letters Paulinus announces that he is renouncing the pagan Muses to devote himself to a more committed form of Christianity than he had hitherto pursued. Ausonius complains that his student and friend is turning his back on his duties to his “father” and attempts to recall him to their shared homeland of Gaul and to their shared pursuit of the life of cultivated men of letters. The correspondence is often taken as a charged moment in the conflict between Christianity and the lifestyle of an elite trained in a pre-Christian culture. It is not an episode in any standoff between Christianity and paganism: Ausonius was a Christian, and it is not of Paulinus’s religious beliefs per se that he complains, but rather of his desertion from a shared culture. However, Paulinus exploits that same literary culture in his poetic epistolary responses to Ausonius. A brief glance forward in time reveals that in his newly committed life as a Christian Paulinus continues to work within the framework of this allusive poetics; discussion of other poems by Paulinus in later chapters reinforces the point.

Chapter 2, “Virgilian Plots: Public Ideologies and Private Journeys,” examines the uses to which large-scale Virgilian narrative structures, primarily those of the *Aeneid* and the fourth *Eclogue*, are put in late antique poetry of empire and salvation. Virgil is also an important point of departure for the themes of the following three chapters. In chapter 3, “Cosmos: Classical and Christian Universes,” I return to matters that interested me in my first book, *Virgil’s Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium*, and focus on the projection of cosmic struggles between order and disorder onto history both secular and sacred. Here the important models are above all Virgil and the Virgilian tradition. Political and theological factors conspire to heighten what might be called the “cosmic sense” of late antiquity. That sense is acutely aware of the threat posed to harmony and concord on the political and spiritual levels by forces of disharmony and discord, an opposition that reflects cosmic *concordia* and *discordia*. Virgil and other Augustan poets, writing after the resolution of long years of civil war through the establishment of the principate, situate the eruptions of discord in Roman history within philosophical constructions of a dynamic of order and disorder, in particular the pre-Socratic Empedocles’s identification of Strife and Love as the principles that regulate the cosmic cycle. Late antiquity displays something of an obsession with *concordia* and *discordia*, fueled by both historical and, now, theological rather than philosophical considerations. This is the subject of chapter 4, “Concord and Discord: *Concordia Discors*,” where I also develop Michael Roberts’s insightful identification of the variety-in-tension of *concordia discors* as a distinguishing feature of late antique poetics.

Virgil's literary-historical position as a leading member of the second generation of the "new poets" of the first century B.C., and his contributions to the Augustan ideology of restoration and renewal, make of him an important representative of a poetry and poetics of the new. In the past, late antiquity has sometimes been viewed as the old age of classical antiquity, a period of decline and decadence. Chapter 5, "Innovations of Late Antiquity: Novelty and *Renouatio*," examines the period's own investment in ideas of renewal and novelty, both in the ideology of empire and in the Christian theology of making new. One of the most potent symbols of renovation and rebirth is the phoenix, an old exhibit in the history of paradoxography that is burnished up for new purposes in late antiquity. A heightened interest in paradox has been identified as typical of many late antique writers. In chapter 6, "Paradox, *Mirabilia*, Miracles," I ask the question of how justified is the enduring judgment that in non-Christian texts paradox is the mark of a frivolous playfulness, in contrast to Christian uses of paradox to express the deepest mysteries of the faith.

Chapter 7, "Allegory," explores selected aspects of the vast topic of allegory in late antiquity. A key text in the history of personification allegory is Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, a fervently Christian poem that is also one of the most Virgilian productions of the period. Christian allegory articulates specifically Christian constructions of history and meaning, but at the same time employs linguistic and figurative procedures that converge with, and, in some cases, derive from, allegorical practices in earlier and contemporary texts on non-Christian subjects.

Finally, in chapter 8, "Mosaics and Intertextuality," I scrutinize and critique the frequent use of the metaphor and image of the mosaic in discussions of late antique poetry (and art), with reference both to an aesthetic and to a model of intertextuality. My conclusion is that the image obscures more than it clarifies.