

The Poetics of Late Latin Literature
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Introduction

Notes towards a Poetics of Late Antique Literature

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Abstract and Keywords

The introduction to this volume addresses three main issues. First, it provides a critical reassessment of the discipline of late antique studies, going back to its very foundations and revealing its historical, cultural, and political biases. Secondly, through presentation and discussion of the aesthetic/poetic paradigm of late antique literature and art proposed by the editors, it sets forth the conceptual frame underlying the whole volume. To this end, notions like metaliterary twist, hybridization, poetics of the uncommon, culture of *spolia*, appropriationism, era of interpretation, cumulative aesthetics, poetics of the fragment/detail, and the like, are briefly explained and discussed with the aid of a number of representative examples. Last but not least, it explores the intriguing topicality of late antique culture in its problematic relationship to the postmodern world. As is customary, the introduction also presents and justifies the volume's aim and structure and the topics discussed by the contributors.

Keywords: Aesthetics, cultural change, early Christianity, late antique art, late antique literature, late antique studies, poetics, postmodernity, religious change

THE AESTHETIC CHANGES IN LATE ROMAN LITERATURE SPEAK to the foundations of modern Western culture. The dawn of a new way of being in the world and of experiencing reality, one that most Europeans and Americans still consider their own, is to be found, not in the distant Antiquity of Greece nor in the golden age of a Roman Empire that spanned the Mediterranean, but more

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fundamentally in the original and problematic fusion of Graeco-Roman culture with a new and unexpected foreign element—the arrival of Christianity as (soon to be) an exclusive state religion.[1] This fusion of cultural continuity with religious transformation creates the enduring excitement of one of the more turbulent periods of human history. This is not to question the relevance of Homer and Vergil, Plato and Seneca, Demosthenes and Cicero, Thucydides and Tacitus, for forging many of our most cherished humane values and cultural assumptions. Nevertheless, there is an inescapable pre-Christian otherness in all these classical texts which stands between us and any simple claim to being their direct descendants.[2] Antiquity, in other words, is not wholly ours. European culture in the Christian era is something radically different from its illustrious **(p.2)** pre-Christian precursors and something radically new. It was the Christian appropriation and sometimes violent reformulation of the centuries-old legacy of Antiquity that made it ours, by creating a powerful cultural construct—a vortex of conflictive creativity—which is still largely in force today.

Despite the weight of a rhetorical tradition of modern continuity with Antiquity that has been in place since the Renaissance, one may argue that Western civilization emerged from a crisis of identity rather than from an affirmation of cultural hegemony. In literary terms, we might see this as the result of a self-conscious yet questioning sense of the burden of the past (a kind of "baroque")[3] rather than as emerging from any monolithic metanarrative inherent in classicism. In part, late antique sensibility is rooted in a clash of conflicting civilizations, intensified by the increasing and always menacing presence of certain unwanted guests (such as the Huns or the ubiquitous Germanic invaders —Vandals, Goths, Visigoths) who were ultimately welcomed into the mix of post-Roman cultures across Europe and North Africa. The fraught cultural atmosphere produced some of the most remarkable works of literature of the ancient world, from Augustine's *Confessions* to Ausonius's *Mosella*. As Ernst Robert Curtius wisely remarked, all Western literature, from Shakespeare to Cervantes, from Dante to Goethe, from the *chansons de geste* to T. S. Eliot, depends on and cannot be understood without the Latin writing of this period[4]—which was anti-classical, challenging, and unconventional. In too much modern scholarship, that challenging anti-classicism has led to late Roman literature being mistreated or simply ignored by critical prejudice. The principal goal of this volume, comprising fourteen newly written essays by a series of experts in the field, is to offer a way into this foundational literature and to prise open the vibrant, complex and too often misunderstood poetics that underlay and made possible the cultural revolution of the later Roman world. **(p.3)** There is no doubt that, without a real insight into the intricacies of late antique literature, we cannot comprehend the nature of an age that forged—and ultimately *invented*—what we are.

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I.1. Late Antique Literature, Christianity and Classical Scholarship

In the surge of scholarship on Late Antiquity in the last couple of generations, stimulating new approaches and developments have changed our understandings of the period's history, archaeology, art history, philosophical and theological creativity, religious history, and cultural complexity—not least extending the scope of the period as a meaningful historical nexus to as late as 1000 AD.[5] Late Antiquity has been, alongside the study of the reception of classics in later eras, one of the two great flowerings of the field of classical studies in the last twenty years or so, with the rise of new journals and a plethora of innovative scholarly approaches.[6]

In this resurgence, the literary study of late Roman poetry has been the poor relation—less developed as a specific field within the bigger picture of Greek and Latin literature and much less integrated within the larger narrative of continuity and change that has intertwined material-cultural with historical research, than any other field within late antique studies. In substantial part, this has been due to an old prejudice among traditional classical philologists against the supposed second-rate-ness of Latin and Greek poetry in the Christian era, a prejudice not shared by those historians who work on Ammianus, Cassius Dio, and Procopius (for instance) or those literary critics who have made the study of the ancient prose romance one of the most vibrant fields in classical studies in the last couple of decades.[7] The resistance to many aspects of late poetry is exemplified by D. R. Shackleton Bailey's remarkable decision to exclude the Latin centos from his edition of the Latin Anthology, as if these poems were so bad and so derivative as not to merit edition or even presence in the new Teubner of the major Latin collection of shorter poems, despite their place at **(p.4)** the front of the key codex Salmasianus as well as in several other manuscripts.[8] The distaste for late Latin has extended to a distrust of pseudepigrapha, pastiche, and forgery (an interesting field in fact, recently revalorized by Peirano 2012) and the creative extension of poems by later hands, as in the case of the poem *de anima* (*Anth. Lat.* ed. Reise (1906) 1.2 no. 489), whose first three lines were composed by Augustine and published in his *City of God* 15.22, as discussed in this volume by Gillian Clark.

It is as if modern classicists have collectively and over perhaps a century reacted against a series of very specific qualities which mark out the literature of the later Roman empires, both Greek and Latin, as distinctive and remarkable. These qualities include the conscious awareness of rhetorical performance, extending (as discussed in the chapters by Roger Rees and Catherine Ware) to a real interrelationship of poetry and panegyric (the latter being hardly a popular genre in the modern era); this is a feature scarcely absent from late Republican and Imperial poetics, but it has a greater explicit self-consciousness in the fourth and fifth centuries, perhaps in part dependent on the awareness of and play with earlier tradition. Still more significant for the distaste of a discipline—classics—founded to foster the love of, and to affirm continuity with, Graeco-Roman

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literary tradition is the particular self-reflexive sense of late Roman writing as being both within that tradition and yet outside of it. Late Latin literature is an extraordinary composite of two qualities—*homage* to a glorious literary culture, deeply appreciated, and *resistance* to its fundamental pagan underpinnings. This conflict of homage and resistance to the past comprises the Catch-22 of the late antique poet as educated classicist but also as Christian. Late antique poetics, in other words, possessed a very particular and distinctive set of responses to the burdens and anxieties of antique influence.[9] It not only bore the weight of a great tradition whose original masters (Homer, Ennius, Vergil) were deemed better poets than their modern successors, but it was also beset by a deep ambivalence about that tradition. For the essential paganism of classical literature and its distinctive position as articulating the essence of paganism through literate education were in deep conflict with the Christianity espoused by almost all the major writers from the fourth century and after. Of course, the range of responses to this underlying conflict was varied—from the mild and *apparently* unproblematic fusion of Christian and pagan elements, fostered by an overwhelmingly classical school curriculum,[10] to the flat refusal to invoke the inspiration of the **(p.5)** Muses,[11] which were by no means to be regarded as harmless or strictly literary.[12] Yet Christian faith might be confronted, on the part of many a well-educated Christian, with distaste—even aversion—for the dullness and poverty of the biblical style,[13] whose new cultural significance undermined the foundations of classical literature.[14] This diversity of responses confirms the pervasiveness of the identity crisis shaping late antique culture as a whole.

Modern classics, developed in the Enlightenment as an alternative educational system to the theological curriculum (which was itself founded in Late Antiquity), has always been in profound discomfort with the kind of Christian **(p. 6)** hegemony that late Roman literature was trying to establish within the classical tradition.[15] So modern resistance to the literature of the period is not surprising: it is in the end a kind of self-hatred of the Christian intellectual heritage that so many classical philologists, brought up with the Christian culture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, have turned to Antiquity in order to wish away.

I.2. The Poetics and Aesthetics of Late Antiquity

As is discussed in a number of chapters in this volume, one of the striking aspects of late Latin literature is the ways exegesis is intimately interconnected with poetics.[16] Introductions and commentaries—both verse prefaces (such as those discussed by Stephen Harrison) and prose frames (as in Scott McGill's account of the works of Ausonius)—specifically address the issues at stake in the writing of poetry; textual exegesis becomes a dominant genre that shapes both the production and the reception of literature; panegyric exploits poetry; all forms of writing are highly indebted to rhetorical training (with many of the classiest poets, such as Ausonius or Pacatus, also being among the major orators

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and rhetorical teachers, and others, such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Lactantius, being major writers, preachers, and theological intellects). Discourse and dialogue (and especially the emergence of a specifically Christian way of doing both), in other words, were not only central to the late antique reinvention of culture but became the object of self-conscious attention.[17] Late Antiquity, in its extremely creative revision and audacious revaluation of its Graeco-Roman and Jewish roots, can rightly be described as an "era of interpretation"[18] or as an "age of the preface" (as suggested in this book by Scott McGill).[19] In short, the late Roman world was a time when literature itself became one of literature's main concerns.

This striking metaliterary twist stemmed in part from an unprecedented *mise en crise* of the very notions of language and representation (as proposed by Hernández Lobato in this volume), a problem which seems to underlie and determine almost every aspect of the culture of its era and thus constitutes one of its most genuine expressions. Language, which had been taken for granted as a given beyond question, became an obsession in the late Roman world as the whole rhetorical edifice of pagan Antiquity was recalibrated to articulate **(p.7)** Christian truths. To see this in terms of elite Christians and pagans—their invectives and apologetics and the absence of a pagan revival in response to Christian hegemony—which has been the thrust of the most recent major monograph on late antique literature (Alan Cameron 2011), is perhaps correct in relation to the narrow religious politics of the time; but this is reductive and limited as a thesis of cultural transformation. The last centuries of the Western Roman Empire witnessed not only the birth of a fully fledged semiotics (one of Augustine's major contributions to Western thought) and a far-reaching apophatic theology (which boldly and controversially denied the ultimate capacity of human language to access or convey reality) but also the progressive emergence of a radically questioning literature which was set to become an ideal vehicle for the challenges and anxieties of an era in continuous reformulation. Therefore, the self-reflexive commentarial qualities of the poetic developments of late antique Latin—the move to allegory,[20] for instance—supply a deep and empathetic, if in certain respects distanced, review of the classical tradition from a series of great writers utterly committed to its canonical status. But they also offer a penetrating cultural commentary on the time, which needs to be integrated into the bigger historical picture by scholarship that is not primarily literary in its focus.

While earlier eras of literary revival—the Hellenistic period in ancient Greek, the flowering of Latin literature in the late Republic and early Empire, or the "Second Sophistic" efflorescence of Greek letters in the Imperial Roman world—are important stages in the development of classicism and the reception of Antiquity, arguably Late Antiquity is the cardinal point at which modern models of classicism and reception were forged. For it was in the post-Constantinian period that an active and deeply learned commitment to the literary past was

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juxtaposed with the fundamental distancing born of Christianity: reception is always as much the mark of distance as it is of the desire for emulation and continuity. It is precisely in the newly defined Christian context, which enacted a fundamental fissure with the Graeco-Roman past in terms of religious, social, cultural, and sexual mores, that the nature of the cultural assimilation of the ancient tradition (as continuity with the past) was transformed radically from previous forms of reception. For in Late Antiquity, for all the urge to continuity with previous culture, the frame of the enactment of continuity was profoundly transformed by Christianity, a faith always eager to assert its radical novelty and the new world order brought about by the coming of Jesus.[21] The classical tradition as we know it—from the Middle Ages, via the Renaissance and neoclassicism **(p.8)** to modernity, in all forms of cultural epiphenomena from prose and verse to art and architecture, from law and government to urban planning and decoration—began when pagan Antiquity ended, at the point of Christian hegemony in the very period and in the very literature with which this book deals. In its often problematic relationship to its two cultures of origin (the Graeco-Roman and the Jewish), early Christianity developed an original and highly characteristic cultural dynamics based on the ideas of alterity, "otherization," and appropriation.[22] This novel attitude, sustained and justified by a twofold interpretation of Moses's plundering of the treasures of the Egyptians (alternately identified either with the pagans, whose philosophy and rhetoric had to be used in support of the new faith, or with the Jews, whose Bible had been conveniently purloined as the "Old Testament"),[23] set the foundations of one of the most outstanding features of late antique culture as a whole: appropriationism.

The self-consciousness of late Roman literary production and its irrepressible drive for appropriation are not only important in their own right, but they mirror other forms of cultural self-reflection in the period, especially in art and architecture. The use of architectural and sculptural *spolia* borrowed from objects made in the past and recycled wholesale in monuments (from large-scale buildings like the church of Saint Sabina in Rome or the arch of Constantine [figure I.1] to much smaller artefacts like the eighth-century cross of Desiderius in Brescia) has similarities to the use of literary *spolia*,[24] such as the segments of Vergilian lines employed in centos or the many quotations from famous earlier texts scattered in speeches and poems.[25] Such *spolia* (both literary and material-cultural) both are an intrinsic part of the new late antique text or monument and stand out in their own right as quotations of, or items from, the hallowed past.[26] Nevertheless, the idea of paying homage to Rome's golden days did not always dominate these curious patchworks. They could be used as ironic devices aimed at appropriating the literary past in a playful and even irreverent manner (as in Ausonius's vivid description of defloration on a wedding night made up of a series of rearranged lines from the chaste Vergil)[27] or as ideological tools to **(p. 9)** reverse or to cap pagan values (as in the case of Christian centos). But centos

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and *spolia* are only the most evident exponents of a much broader phenomenon: an incipient "aesthetics of the fragment" (Hernández Lobato 2012: 257–317) that covered a wide range of cultural manifestations, from the antiquarian dismemberment of the past in the form of anthologies, verse-by-verse commentaries, or all kinds of heterogeneous compilations to the emergence of a well-established cult of relics (Cox Miller 1998 and 2009: 42–61; Elsner 2000).

The imitation of *spolia*, objects made in Late Antiquity but emulating the forms and styles of earlier work (such as the roundels of the rising and the setting sun on the arch of Constantine, figure I.2, or many a gem cut in imitation of classical intaglios), resembles the rich texture of pastiche, "forgery," and emulation of late Latin verse.[28] Again in both poetry and art, antiquarian forms are **(p.10)** **(p.11)** an essential element of the text or object that has been newly constructed, and deliberate antiquarian gestures signalled not only a knowing acknowledgment of the past but also the panache to create something that could pass for a literary or artistic relic. Most interestingly, all these cultural practices entail a self-conscious blurring of the classical boundary between copy and original and a considerable weakening of the notion of authorship.[29]



Figure I.1. The arch of Constantine, north side, 312–15 AD, Rome. Sculptural *spolia* on this side include the four oblong panels from an arch of Marcus Aurelius, as well as the four statues of Dacians from a monument of Trajan in the Attic, and the four roundels from a hunting monument of Hadrian on the two sides of the central passageway (cf. figure 1.31). Architectural *spolia* include the columns and much of the decorative cornice.

Photograph: J. Elsner.

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The emerging taste for all kinds of “exquisite miniatures” represents another meeting point of late antique literature and art.[30] While the literary arena was increasingly dominated by a plethora of old and new microgenres (such as epigrams, dedicatory inscriptions, *ekphraseis, propemptica*, epitaphs, *genethliaca*, thanksgivings, riddles, erotic poems, sermons, *passiones*, church dedications, *acta martyrum*, hagiography, prefatory epistles, and so on), a wide range of tiny, beautifully crafted objects was gradually shaping a new way of conceiving material culture: finely carved ivory diptychs, intricate silverware, delicate cameos, convoluted glassware, decorated gowns enacting a real “revolution of dress” (Marrou 1977: 14), lavishly illuminated manuscripts. The “cumulative aesthetics” (Elsner 2004: 304–9) underlying all these kinds of art works can be easily recognized in many well-known features of the late antique literary praxis: its so called jeweled style (Roberts 1989a), its unrestrained “cataloguing passion” (Wedeck 1960: 6), the “aesthetic atomization” (Hernández Lobato 2012: 381–3) leading to an emancipation of the isolated word as the new basic unit of literary creation (a phenomenon studied in depth by Isabella Gualandri in this volume) and composition by a series of semi-autonomous medallions (Fontaine 1977: 428–9). All these phenomena, resulting in an unprecedented miniaturization of taste, ultimately stem from a pervasive



Figure I.2. The arch of Constantine, east side. The large landscape relief panel at the top, as well as the statues beside it, are *spolia* from the period of Trajan. The central roundel is Constantinian but imitates the shape, size, and embedded placement of the Hadrianic roundels on the north and south of the arch (cf. figure 1.31).

Photograph: J. Elsner.

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"aesthetics of detail" that privileges the part over the whole and breaks up the literary/artistic experience into a kaleidoscope of sharp close-ups.[31]

The network of allusion and intertextuality of late Roman literature and its formal as opposed to substantive or content-related use (as argued by Helen Kaufmann) has numerous parallels in the mythology-related, classicizing works of late antique silver plate and ivory, whose meanings might be actively pagan in senses somewhat removed from those of earlier Antiquity but are more likely to be forms of Hellenizing antiquarianism—one thinks for instance of the Parabiago plate, the Corbridge Lanx (figure I.3) or the Symmachorum ivory panel (figure I.4) now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).[32] These **(p.12)** traditions of allusion operate both in relation to the *forms* of ancient art, including naturalism, and to its non-Christian mythological *subject matter*—for instance, in the Projecta casket from the Esquiline Treasure, with its sexy nude Venus in naturalistic style, juxtaposed against a Christian inscription. They run rich and late into Byzantium (beyond the tenth century certainly) via the magnificent surviving traditions of woven textiles from Egypt to ivory boxes like the Veroli casket in the V&A (figure I.5) and rare decorated glassware like the Hercules cup from Byzantium now in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice.[33] In both text and image, this late antique tradition has been dubbed Hellenism on the Greek side of the late Roman world, but it is equally strong in Latin literature and visual culture, at least until the sixth century.

Christian (mis)readings, sometimes allegorical,[34] of pre-Christian *texts* (famously the late antique readings of Vergil's Fourth Eclogue to signal the **(p. 13)** **(p.14)** coming of Christ[35] or Fulgentius's interpretation of the *Aeneid* as an allegory of the ages of man)[36] are no less potent for the interpretation of earlier *objects*. We have evidence of a statue of Asclepius in Constantinople interpreted as a Christian bishop, for instance.[37] The juxtaposition of an image of Christ with the mythological theme of Bellerophon killing the Chimaera on the mosaic floor of the late Roman villa at Hinton St Mary in Britain (figure I.6) offers the potential for



Figure I.3. The Corbridge Lanx, silver, second half of the fourth century AD. Found in Britain. The iconography, including Apollo and Artemis, is paganizing but obscure. It may have strong pagan intimations but is more likely to be antiquarian.

Photograph: British Museum.

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allegorical interpretation of the pagan theme in Christian terms or of syncretism between pagan and Christian in a form that is hardly orthodox by the standards of the church. The creation of visual designs in words in the poetry of Optatian Porfyry (discussed here briefly by Gualandri and at length by Michael Squire) can be seen as an artistic instantiation in verbal form of the potential for allegory and hidden meanings both within the created world and within the formal poetics of the classical tradition.[38]



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Figure I.4. The Symmachorum ivory panel, about 390 AD. Both in style and subject matter this is a highly classicizing object showing a priestess sprinkling incense on an altar.

Photograph: Victoria and Albert Museum.



Figure I.5. The Veroli Casket, ivory box of the tenth century AD, probably from Constantinople. Highly classicizing style and iconography is used here for a mythological subject with Dionysiac figures in an antiquarian context.

Photograph: Victoria and Albert Museum.

But Optatian's visual poems can also be seen as an example of a characteristically late antique trend: the taste for formal experiment and a mistrust of **(p.15)** the classical compartmentalization of art and literature. This sensibility brought about what might be called an "aesthetics of hybridization"[39] that operates simultaneously on two levels: as an "*intra*systemic hybridization" (i.e. working within the limits of literature),[40] it eroded or even abolished the traditional boundaries between literary genres, styles, registers, and conventions, thus producing unclassifiable masterpieces such as Ausonius's *Mosella* or Rutilius Namatianus's *De reditu suo* (discussed by Marco Formisano); as an "*inter*systemic hybridization" (i.e. combining materials from different artistic realms),[41] **(p.16)** it was prone to merge image and text under the form of visual poems, *ekphraseis*, illuminated manuscripts, highly textualized images,[42] objectualized texts,[43] and so forth. All these practices—profoundly challenging and innovative in relation to earlier Latin poetics yet deeply genuflective to the tradition at the same time—ultimately derive from the burden and anxieties of the canon. They are a creative response to the sense that the major paths of literature had proved exhausted and the masterworks of the past were discouragingly unbeatable. As a consequence of what might be called this "epigonal" awareness, late antique poets embarked on a "poetics of the uncommon" (Gualandri 1979: 83), aimed at dazzling their discerning—and often overcritical—audiences by means of a lavish display of rhetorical fireworks. After all, literature should not be taken too seriously, as poets like Ausonius and Sidonius never tire of repeating in their witty and often ironic prefaces, distancing themselves from the highbrow poetic statements of their classical predecessors yet at the same time indulging the playful character of their own flamboyant trifles. This self-ironic twist, widespread in literature and brought to its peak in Ausonius's dry wit, is conspicuously absent—with rare exceptions—

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from the visual arts, something probably due to the constraints imposed by the employment of visual culture in the service of aristocratic, imperial, or ecclesiastical propaganda.[44]

What a careful grasp of the literary material adds to the range of artistic productions of Late Antiquity is a careful working out of the issues and contradictions of change and continuity on the level of a deeply antiquarian and well-educated elite. That evidence is essential to any cultural history fully committed to extrapolating the dynamics of social change in Late Antiquity as its actors and participants perceived and experienced it. What the poetics of Late Antiquity offers the historian is a sophisticated commentary from within the culture on the formal and thematic complexities of cultural change that is simultaneously affectionate and antiquarian in relation to the past and sufficiently distanced from the past to be able to see it with an unusually sceptical clarity.



Figure I.6. Large mosaic floor from a late Roman villa at Hinton St Mary, in Dorset (cf. also figure 1.26). The main room has Christ in the central roundel, with images of vegetation or hunting with dogs in the lunettes and of the four seasons or the four winds in the corners. The smaller room has more hunting scenes, with Bellerophon and the Chimaera in the main medallion.

Photograph: British Museum.

(p.17) I.3. The Cultural Frame

In the great book where the notion of Late Antiquity was first convincingly flagged over a century ago,[45] Alois Riegl argued that all the epiphenomena of the period (not only the painting, sculpture, architecture, and arts and crafts on which his main chapters focused but also law, philosophy, theology, and poetry) were the product of a single cultural drive—psychological, social, shared by both producers and viewers—what he called *Kulturwollen* or, in relation to material art, *Kunstwollen*.[46] The concept has proven both controversial and fundamental in the discipline of art history, dominating the development of that field in the 1920s and 1930s particularly and giving rise to fundamental contributions from some of the greatest of all art historians.[47] The still current scholarly model of art as reflecting cultural mentalities or expressing the energy of its time is effectively a form of *Kunstwollen*, without the concept being named explicitly.

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Notably many of the principal discussions of late antique art in the second half of the twentieth century have been profoundly under the spell of the model of a period-related drive to art and other epiphenomena,[48] and the classic book on late antique poetry of the last generation—Michael Roberts's *The Jeweled Style*—certainly saw poetic production as operating in a fundamental homology with visual and artistic production. Likewise, the sense of an all-encompassing psychological problematic, embedded in the culture itself as a drive to its transformation, has informed such important and influential historical accounts of the shift to Christianity as E. R. Dodds's *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965).

We do not, however, need to resort to collective psychology or cultural drives or the urgency of a historically situated generative impulse to explain what is undoubtedly a remarkably wide cultural phenomenon of transformation both within the classical tradition and looking beyond it into medieval culture. Rather, it is the transformed frame within which the Roman Empire (and culture itself) now operated that is the key factor in generating transformed literary and artistic responses to the world. That changed frame is the demand of the late empire both to be traditionally classical and to be Christian. The typical late **(p. 18)** antique writer (not only the poets but also the theologians, orators, and historians) and the typical late Roman patron of the visual arts were educated in the great heritage of *paideia*, with its complex of rhetorical training, its immensely rich literary and artistic offerings, reaching back as far as the Homeric past on the Greek side and the Republic on the Roman and including the wealth of mythological subjects and stories that make up that tradition.[49] But they were also Christian—with some exceptions and many fewer after the fourth century (one thinks particularly of Julian, Libanius, and Symmachus as key pagan voices). Many of the Christian writers (especially those who became bishops, like Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola, and Augustine on the Latin side or like Basil, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nazianzus on the Greek) were themselves part of that extraordinarily energetic and brilliant group of Christian intellectuals who drove the transformation of Imperial culture in such a short time towards an exclusively Christian state.

The cultural frame—simultaneously Roman, reaching back in seamless tradition for over a thousand years (Philip the Arab had celebrated the millennium of the Roman Empire in 248 AD), and Christian—meant that there was an inevitable and fundamental conflict of identities and a profound challenge to individuals to find a comfortable place in determining their own identity within this context.[50] The options were many, from the kinds of syncretistic accommodations preached by Mani in the third century (which were condemned and ruthlessly persecuted by the church), via the attempt to preserve a pagan identity in the philosophical schools and among some of the aristocracy, to all forms of Christianity, from the broadly tolerant and inclusive to the vituperatively exclusivist and persecutory. The poetics of the period shows the working out of this cultural conundrum from

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different angles and among writers effectively in dialogue with each other and with the past. Such a poetics is inevitably inconsistent—or, we may say, multifarious—since it exhibits the multiplicity and range of options in a highly rhetorical context where polemic and apologetics were normal forms of communication and cultural discourse. We have, as moderns, to be particularly sensitive to our own broad resistance to many of the issues fundamental to intellectuals in the period of Late Antiquity—especially the centrality of religion (where most modern scholarship is resolutely secularist) and the centrality of a deeply antiquarian commitment to earlier culture (where so much of modern artistic experience is about the rejection of old forms).

(p.19) I.4. Postmodern Late Antiquity/ Late Antique Postmodernity

Given the problematic nature of late Roman classicism—always performing an act of homage but at the same time in conflict (both formally and substantively) with pre-Christian models of thought and expression—it is no surprise that the advocates of late antique culture have often looked to the contemporary avant-garde as their model and justification for Late Antiquity. At the end of the nineteenth century, Riegl explicitly cited a positive assessment of modern aesthetics against classicizing academicism in art as a justification for late antique styles.[51] A century later, Jacques Fontaine described late antique literature as a baroque *avant la lettre*.[52] Likewise, one may draw attention to some aspects of postmodernity (which has been provocatively described as Europe's most recent form of mannerism)[53] as a helpful prism through which to see late antique literature. Many of the bold and sometimes even bizarre features of late antique art and literature have striking correlations in our own time. For example, the (often ironic) cataloguing passion of late antique literature—as expressed in Ausonius's caustic catalogues of fish,[54] monosyllables,[55] or dead Trojans;[56] in Sidonius's disconcerting catalogue of negations (explored by Hernández Lobato's contribution); or in the lively enumerations of single words discussed in Gualandri's chapter—has had its twentieth-century counterpart in works like Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, Bern and Hilla Becher's mock-archival photographs (1965–91), Christian Boltanski's *Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1991) or Borges's famous encyclopaedic list, which was the inspiration for Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (1966). The blatant appropiationism inherent in late antique centos (such as that discussed by Elsner) compares with works like Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Passagenwerk* (1927–40),[57] Roland Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours* ***(p.20)*** *amoureux* (1977),[58] Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980),[59] or even the popular pastiche-jukebox of a film like *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). The deliberate choice to make light of literary subject matter, which was to inspire ironic odes on a hand towel[60] or the best day for nail-cutting[61] or the alleged subtleties of the words "yes" and "no"[62] shares with pop art, "ready-mades," and Dada an interest in raising awkward questions about the limits of art and the conventionalities of what is traditionally assumed to be artistic. The twentieth-century linguistic turn

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has its late antique counterpart in the problematization of language and representation, as expressed in Augustine's semiotics, in the apophatic theology of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, or in the pervasive "poetics of silence" discussed in Hernández Lobato's chapter.[63] This book is an invitation to discover the inspiring topicality of late antique literature and the ways it might become an unsuspected ally for a deeper and richer understanding of the writing of today's world.

I.5. Summary of the Essays

This volume of collected papers attempts, for the first time in English-language scholarship, to tackle the specificity and complexity of late antique Latin literary aesthetics; its aim is to redefine a territory which has been largely ignored in the overwhelmingly historical and archaeological emphasis of late antique studies. Contributors have been encouraged to deal with general aesthetic phenomena and literary trends within the period, as well as focusing on given texts or authors, and to relate their conclusions to new methodological frameworks or unexplored connections between different expressions of late antique creativity.

This journey through the cultural foundations of Western civilization begins with three contributions on some of the most innovative and surprising formal features of late antique literature (characterized as a whole by an unprecedented experimentalist drive): the undermining of the boundary between image and language in Optatian Porfyry's visual poetry (Michael Squire), the combination of different meters in a single poem (Franca Ela Consolino) and **(p. 21)** the emphasis on the single, isolated word as a new unit of aesthetics (Isabella Gualandri). The second section focuses on the way late antique literature related to its past through novel forms of that most traditional of Roman literary tropes, intertextuality.[64] Helen Kaufmann proposes a new theoretical frame aimed at distinguishing the different modes of intertextuality operating within late antique literature (from the traditional content-related model to a new form-related one), while Jaś Elsner explores the peculiarities of the cento as Late Antiquity's quintessential expression of unbridled intertextuality. The central section of the volume, acting as a kind of thematic hinge, examines the unprecedented metaliterary and self-referential twist which characterized late antique letters as a whole. Marco Formisano revisits three of the best known late Latin poems (Ausonius's *Mosella*, Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*, and Rutilius Namatianus's *De reditu suo*) to explore their shared quasi-allegorical reflection on their displacement from tradition. Scott McGill and Stephen Harrison discuss the programmatic considerations of two of the most influential late antique authors (Ausonius and Claudian) as performed by their prefaces. Jesús Hernández Lobato detects a pervasive "poetics of silence" that questions the pertinence of language and literature in the works of Sidonius, Fulgentius, Augustine, Ausonius, Rutilus Namatianus, and the anonymous writer of the *Peruigilium Veneris*. The volume's fourth part explores how this new literature relates to the outer world, in particular to the very

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centre of Imperial power. Roger Rees and Catherine Ware focus on the study of prose panegyric, showing, on the one hand, the progressive fusion of the traditional conventions of prose and verse and, on the other, the quasi-encyclopaedic character of a genre which seemed set to become the sum of all. The last section deals with the most crucial sociocultural transformation of the era—the irruption of Christianity. It offers three different but complementary approaches to the complex issue of the emergence of a specifically Christian literature, from the underground symbolism of Lactantius's hymn to the phoenix (Michael Roberts) via the enlightening responses of Boethius and Prudentius to the traditional quarrel between philosophy and literature (Marc Mastrangelo) to Augustine's hugely influential reflections on the viability a fully fledged Christian poetry (Gillian Clark).

The book's challenge, within a picture of continuity and change, classical traditionalism and Christian innovation, is both to literary critics of Antiquity and to students of Late Antiquity more broadly to take on board the insights **(p. 22)** and self-reflexive critiques of late Roman writing as a model for helping us think through late antique culture in a wider interdisciplinary perspective. The key point is that late Roman literature's own obsessions with and intense commentaries on the cultural fissures and discursive conflicts of its own epoch not only are among our surest historical guides to the interpretation of the period from within its own resources but are also fundamental to the attitudes developed towards Late Antiquity by its inheritance, even if they have been underacknowledged.

Notes:

(1.) By the end of the fourth century, anti-pagan legislation had established the exclusivity of Christianity—at least as a public official religion.

(2.) Cf. Marías 2000: 8–9: "This is quite different from the case of those ways of life which bear a considerable resemblance to our own but which are separable from Christianity. Here differences are perceived that in a certain way are 'unexpected' for they appear against a backdrop of similarity or commonality. It is not a question of 'remote' ways of life such as the African, Chinese, Indian, or pre-Columbian American, but of those in 'proximity' such as the Greek or the Roman, those which belong to us insofar as they are included in our own reality. In such cases we come to see that we are in the presence of another *configuration* of life, that we are dealing with a different perspective, but yet one that is not foreign to us because it is included in our own. Thus it appears to us as somehow incomplete because it lacks something we ourselves possess and which we count on spontaneously and almost without thinking. These different perspectives surprise and disturb us, not for what they possess but for what they lack from our standpoint. They seem to be missing essential elements that are a part of our reality. […] In reading a text that is foreign to Christianity, either because it was written before the Christian era or because it belongs to a society

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that has not known or received the Christian faith, it may be obvious that the writing is admirable, perhaps even essential to our own condition. Yet at the same time one discovers in it a *strangeness* arising from the absence of something we bear within us which determines our vision of reality and our manner of perceiving, projecting and hoping."

(3.) Late antique literature has been intriguingly described as "a late Latin Baroque" (Fontaine 1998b: 49) and as the final and most radical stage of "the ancient Roman Baroque" (Fontaine 1998a: esp. 34–41).

(4.) Cf. Curtius 1953: viii and 13: "[My book] seeks to serve an understanding of the Western cultural tradition in so far as it is manifested in literature. It attempts to illuminate the unity of that tradition in space and time by the application of new methods. In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary, and happily not impossible, to demonstrate that unity. But the demonstration can only be made from a universal standpoint. Such a standpoint is afforded by Latinity. Latin was the language of the educated during the thirteen centuries which lie between Virgil and Dante. Without this Latin background, the vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages are incomprehensible. […] No stretch of European literary history is so little known and frequented as the Latin literature of the early and high Middle Ages. And yet the historical view of Europe makes it clear that precisely this stretch occupies a key situation as the connecting link between declining Antiquity and the Western world which was so very slowly taking shape."

(5.) The case for a Late Antiquity that extends to the end of the first millennium AD has recently been made by Fowden (2014: esp. 49–91), with a discussion of earlier models at 18–48. The apostle of the long Late Antiquity is Brown 1971. For what is currently the more usual c. AD 250–800 model, see, e.g., Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar 1999.

(6.) One thinks for instance of *Antiquité tardive* (from 1993) and the *Journal of Late Antiquity* (from 2008). On reception studies, see, e.g., Kallendorf 2007, and Hardwick and Stray 2008; new journals: the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (from 1994) and the *Classical Receptions Journal* (from 2009).

(7.) For instance, Whitmarsh 2008, for a recent summary, and the many papers in the journal *Ancient Narrative*.

(8.) See Shackleton Bailey 1982, with some discussion in Elsner's chapter in this volume.

(9.) On the seminal notion of the "anxiety of influence," see Bloom 1975.

(10.) On the essential unity of Christian and pagan literature, see, e.g., Fontaine 1998c (who states that Christianity and Classical Antiquity are one and the same

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thing), and Alan Cameron 2004b: esp. 339–44. According to Cameron 2004b: 342–3: “Classical mythology was one of the indispensable components of a liberal education. It always had been, and in this area at least the Christianization of the Roman state made no difference. It was indispensable for any reader of the poets, and of much other classical literature; also most contemporary poetry and oratory as well. […] Most recent studies have accepted that it was possible, then as now, to be a sincere Christian and yet write on secular rather than Christian subjects. For most lay Christians, classical culture, culture based on the poets and ancient mythology, was the only culture there was.” On the weight of classical education, see, e.g., Marrou 1982: 299–329, and Brown 1992: 35–70.

(11.) See esp. PAUL. NOL. *carm.* 10.19–46. This explicit rejection of the Muses, driven by a wish to refound poetry on Christian grounds, is reiterated by other late antique authors: IVVENC. 1.25–7, PRVD. *cath.* 3.26–30, SIDON. *carm*. 16.1–5, PAVL. PETRIC. *Mart.* 4.245–50, VEN FORT. *Mart.* praef. II 37–40, CORIPP. *Iust*. 1.7–13, BOETH. *cons.* 1.1.26–41. Shorrock 2011: 13–48, provides an analysis of the phenomenon by introducing the notions of the “poet of Christ” and the “poet of the Muses,” two different literary *personae* available to late antique authors: “The first [poetic ‘personality’], as exemplified by Paulinus of Nola, presents a new poet of Christ who declares a noisy and absolute breach with the traditions of the Classical world (poetic dissent); the second, exemplified by Ausonius, is the poet of Muses who is consciously positioned within a tradition that stretches back to Virgil and Homer (poetic descent). […] In both cases […] the positions adopted cannot be taken at face value: for the poet of Christ, the rhetoric of difference and rupture masks a significant degree of similarity and continuity with the Classical tradition; for the poet of the Muses the rhetoric of similarity masks a significant degree of difference and rupture” (Shorrock 2011: 45–6).

(12.) Cf. the comments of François Paschoud on Alan Cameron 1977 (at Cameron 1977: 40): “Je ne crois pas que la culture et la littérature profanes fussent totalement innocents aux jeux des chrétiens. Si Jérôme a mauvaise conscience d’être ‘cicéronien’, c’est que les auteurs profanes sont les porte-drapeau d’un système de valeurs, d’une vision de l’histoire et du monde qu’un chrétien ne pouvait que condamner à maints égards.” See also Shorrock 2011: 36: “That writers felt it necessary to emphasise time and again the silence of the oracles suggests that the theme of prophecy and inspiration continued to exert a powerful influence, that the traditional routes to divine knowledge still presented a challenge and threat to a newly emerging Christian age. After all, why make an issue over something that is no longer an issue?”

(13.) HIER. *epist.* 22.30: *Post noctium crebras uigilias, post lacrimas, quas mihi praeteritorum recordatio peccatorum ex imis uisceribus eruebat, Plautus sumebatur in manibus. Si quando in memet reuersus prophetam legere*

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coepissem, sermo horrebat incultus *et, quia lumen caecis oculis non uidebam, non oculorum putabam culpam esse, sed solis.*

(14.) See on this Auerbach 2003: 154: “But the question of style became really acute when the spread of Christianity exposed Holy Scripture, and Christian literature in general, to the aesthetic criticism of highly educated pagans. They were horrified at the claim that the highest truths were contained in writings composed in a language to their minds impossibly uncivilized and in total ignorance of stylistic categories. […] It [i.e., Holy Scripture] had created an entirely new kind of sublimity, in which the everyday and the low were included, not excluded, so that, in style as in content, it directly connected the lowest with the highest.”

(15.) Cf. Formisano 2014: esp. 9.

(16.) A reflection on this phenomenon can be found in Gualandri 1995, and now Pelttari 2014: 12–44.

(17.) On discourse, see esp. Averil Cameron 1991; on dialogue, Averil Cameron 2014, contra Goldhill 2009: 1–11.

(18.) Hernández Lobato 2012: 91–107.

(19.) On the cardinal role of prefaces in late Latin poetry, see Pelttari 2014: 45–72.

(20.) E.g. Herzog 2002: 115–77, on varieties of exegesis and metaphor in late Latin literature.

(21.) Cf. Rev. 21:5: “Then he who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold! I am making all things new!’ ” (translation: *The New English Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1976).

(22.) See Hernández Lobato 2010a (revised and expanded in Hernández Lobato 2012: 76–126).

(23.) On this multipurpose exegesis of Exod. 12:35–6 and its impact on the early Christian cultural praxis, see Hernández Lobato 2012: 120–6. For some of the ways this worked in early Christian visual culture, see Elsner 2011.

(24.) See Elsner 2000: 175–8.

(25.) On late antique centos, see the extensive bibliography provided in J. Elsner’s contribution to this volume.

(26.) The literature on *spolia* is vast. One might begin with Settis (1986), Pensabene and Panella (1993–4), de Lachenal (1995), Kinney (1995 and 1997),

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Poeschke (1996), Hansen (2003), Bernard, Bernardi, and Esposito (2008), Brilliant and Kinney (2011).

(27.) AVSON. *cento* (Green 18).

(28.) On late Latin *pseudoepigrapha*, see Peirano 2012.

(29.) The cultural phenomenon is redolent of, indeed ancestral to, Roland Barthes's "death of the author": Barthes 1977.

(30.) See Elsner 2004: 287, and 293–303.

(31.) See Hernández Lobato 2012: 318–401.

(32.) See Elsner 1998: 186–97.

(33.) See Chatterjee 2013, on the Veroli Casket; Cutler 1974, on the San Marco cup.

(34.) On the notion of "misreading," see Bloom 1975: esp. 95: "There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry."

(35.) It is worth mentioning that the emperor Constantine himself subscribed so enthusiastically to this reading that he even used part of it in his speech to the "Assembly of the Saints" (now appended to the Eusebian *Vita Constantini*), thus acting as a fully fledged Christian exegete. Cf. Courcelle (1957), Nisbet (1978), Benko (1980), Bernardi Perini (1999–2000 and 2001), and Barnes (2001).

(36.) FVLG. *Virg. cont.*, briefly discussed by Hernández Lobato in this volume.

(37.) The relevant texts are Leo Grammaticus 257 and Symeon Magister 692, with Mango (1963: 63) and Bassett (2004: 148 n. 16).

(38.) On the "openness" and "layered meanings" of many late antique poems, see Pelttari 2014: 73–114.

(39.) Hernández Lobato 2012: 466–518.

(40.) Hernández Lobato 2012: 468–70. This terminology is based on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, on which see Even-Zohar 1990.

(41.) Hernández Lobato 2012: 468 and 470–518.

(42.) That is the case of the newborn Christian iconography, often conceived as a kind of textless illustration. In J. Elsner's words (2004: 284): "Christian images illustrated, commented upon, reformulated a textual canon, while pagan images were contributions in their own right to an undogmatic culture of relatively unfixed mythical narratives. The viewer's relation to a prior text (always posited by Christian art) and to the initiations and dogmas implied by Christian belief

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was a remarkable and radical innovation in Roman visual culture. It created of every viewer a potential exegete." Cf. Hernández Lobato 2012: 481–4.

(43.) Hernández Lobato 2012: 485–9.

(44.) Of course, irony and propaganda do not usually belong together, regardless of the artistic discipline selected towards goal. Late antique panegyrics (including those written by an author as playful and self-ironic as Sidonius Apollinaris) provide a good example of this golden rule in the literary realm. An in-depth discussion of this problem can be found in Hernández Lobato 2012: 239–45. On the gradual loss of irony in late antique visual arts, see Elsner 1995: 10 and passim.

(45.) See Giardina 1999: 157–9; Ghilardi 2002: 119–20, 126; Elsner 2002b; Liebeschuetz 2004: 254–5; James 2008: 20–1; Inglebert 2012: 1; Fowden 2014: 26–7 and 42–4.

(46.) Riegl 1901: 209–17, translated as Riegl 1985: 223–34. On Kunstwollen, see, for instance, Olin 1992: 71–2, 129–53; Neher 2004; Elsner 2006b.

(47.) Key interventions include Panofsky 1981 (published in 1920); Panofsky 2008 (published in 1925); Wind 2009 (published in 1925); Sedlmayr 2001 (published in 1929); Panofsky 2012 (published in 1932); Kaschnitz-Weinberg 2016 (published in 1929).

(48.) For instance, L'Orange 1965; Bianchi Bandinelli 1971; Kitzinger 1977.

(49.) For *paideia* as an explanatory model for late antique culture, see, e.g., Brown 1992: 35–70; Kaldellis 2007: 31–7, 56–8, 127–34, 144–51, 321–5; van Hoof 2013. For a critique, see Elsner 2013.

(50.) Famously, Jerome became feverish over his guilt complex about disliking the dullness of biblical style and admiring the pagan classics and saw God himself reproaching him for being a Ciceronian instead of a real Christian (HIER. *epist.* 22.30).

(51.) Riegl 1985: 55–6: "what is most startling is to recall that our most recent art is essentially based on optical perception and particularly on momentary coloured impression, as with late Roman art. The Constantinian *Kunstwollen* accordingly appears virtually identical with our own very modern *Kunstwollen*." Cf. Wickhoff 1900: 54–60.

(52.) Fontaine 1998a and 1998b, discussed in note 3.

(53.) Eco, 1984: 66: "I believe that postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category—or better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating. We could say that every period has its own

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postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism (and, in fact, I wonder if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as a metahistorical category).” On postmodernity as a “neo-baroque,” see Calabrese 1992.

(54.) AVSON. *Mos.* 85–149. On the ironic and deconstructive character of this catalogue, see Hernández Lobato 2012: 391–4.

(55.) AVSON. *technop.* (Green 25).

(56.) AVSON. *epit.* (Green 12).

(57.) For an English translation see Benjamin 2002.

(58.) For an English translation see Barthes 1978.

(59.) This global best-seller was translated into English in 1983.

(60.) SIDON. *epist.* 5.17.10. On this poem see La Penna 1995, and Hernández Lobato 2012: 233–8.

(61.) AVSON. *ecl.* 18 (Green). To make it even more caustic, the second part of this twofold poem refutes the first one.

(62.) AVSON. *ecl.* 21 (Green).

(63.) For a postmodern approach to late antique poetics, see Nugent 1990 (restricted to Ausonius), and Hernández Lobato 2012 (with more examples).

(64.) On intertextuality, see, e.g., Conte and Barchiesi 1989; Edmunds 1995 and 2001; Barchiesi 1997; Wills 1996; Fowler 1997; Hinds 1998; Bécares et al. 2000; Hutchinson 2013. For an exhaustive intertextual analysis conducted on a late antique author (Ammianus), see Kelly 2008.

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