Beginning at the End in Imperial Greek Epic*

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'Whilst the beginning of a book may get all the glory, it's the ending that really stays with you.'
– *The Stylist*, '100 best closing lines from books'

'There is no real ending. It's just the place where you stop the story.'
– Frank Herbert

Epic by its very nature is a literature of origins. Replete with topics of genealogy, family trees, famous forefathers and anxious sons, and the product of an oral tradition based self-consciously on continuity and repetition,[1] from its earliest foundations the epic song forms a crucial space for contesting multiple forms of tradition and change. As George Steiner notes, in the epic world 'the successor poet is always answerable to the original, because it puts at eminent risk the stature, the fortunes of his own work.' – a power game played for the highest stakes.[2] Here I trace this story of epic and the origin beyond its usual endpoint: to the outer limits of the

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[1] The *Homeridai* of Pindar's *Nemean* 2 make this concept most explicit. See Nagy (1996): 62, Hardie (1993): 14-18, Greensmith (2020): 228.

[2] Steiner (1989): 13. Cf. Hardie (1993): 118-19.

mainstream classical canon, and to the neglected final verses of still under-considered works. I focus on three poets from the Greek imperial period – Quintus Smyrnaeus, Triphiodorus and Colluthus – who offer major witnesses to epic's jagged relationship with its 'origins' in Late Antiquity. My ultimate aim is twofold. First, to reveal how later Greek epic constructs and displays the crucial intersection between poetic tradition and cultural politics which lies at the heart of this era. And second, to show how in their forceful claim (or better, re-claim) to the origins of their literary mode, these discrete poems reveal some marked similarities, which suggest for this period of epic, diverse though it is, the beginnings of a powerful, imperially-inflected poetic programme.

I. The Newness of the Old in Imperial Greek Epic

How unique to imperial Greek epic is its concern with issues of origin? The question is a live one. Precisely given the genre's innate hospitality to ideas about 'the start', any moves made by these poets must take their place within the long and entangled history of all ancient hexameter verse. This status of epic as a literature of origins can be further divided into three parts: three interrelated routes through which the idea of the origin is articulated through epic.[3] The first could be termed 'literary' – all poets who strove in various ways to establish a direct link with older forms of the genre by obscuring and erasing the poetic tradition in between: to take just a few paradigmatic examples, from Homer himself and his relationship to the bardic tradition, to Apollonius and his distinct double approach to the Homeric epic past,[4] to Ennius'

[3] I trace these routes in only the broadest of terms here, to orient my analysis to come.

[4] As analysed in e.g. Goldhill (1991), Klooster (2017) and most recently Phillps (2020). Klooster ((2017):64) aptly summarizes: whilst Homeric epic is placed from the start of the *Argonautica* distinctly in the past (a topic for earlier singers, 18-19), through the towering presence of the quasi-eternal god Apollo Apollonius also points 'to the essential *continuity* of the past, rather than its being absolutely walled off from the present.'

Pythagorean self-connection to the founder of the epic form.[5] Secondly, epic concerns itself with what we might call 'material' origins: discussions of *aetia*, genealogies, the beginnings of things (heroes discussing their forefathers, 'digressions' about peculiar landmarks, birthplaces or hometown in the moment before otherwise unknown soldiers are slain). These concerns are given explosive treatment in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which takes Callimachus' miniaturising *Aetia* and mutates them into a long, continuous *pepertuum carmen*, where even the origins themselves (*coeptis Met*. 1.2) are open to unending transformation (*mutastis Met.* 1.2). Finally, epic uses origins to shape itself as foundational. This drive can be detected as far back as Hesiod's double account in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days* about how the narrative of the past grounds the present, but finds its most intense, actively political articulation, of course, in Vergil. The *Aeneid* self-consciously takes the founding of Rome (*condere Romam*) and encases it in the foundational glory of Aeneas, the paradoxically 'new' ancestral hero: Rome's success, and successors, are rooted in him, and in his *epic*.

Thus, origins are indeed everywhere in epic. And yet imperial Greek epic stands out and stands apart because of how strikingly it activates and *combines* all three of these ideas. As has been vastly expounded for imperial Greek prose, this was an age intensely self-conscious about its relation to 'the before', which manifested itself in both a reverence for antique models and new constructions: ethnic identities, educational and religious institutions, and political interactions with, even among, the Romans. David Konstan and Suzanne Säid deftly summarise the effects of such a worldview: 'continuities were perceived and invented, differences were grafted onto the past to create new figures, in the way that grids on two superimposed transparencies

[5] See Zeitlin (2001): esp. 235-6, and Hardie (1993): 103.

produce elaborate and unexpected moiré patterns.'[6] The poetry, above all the epic, of this age offers a different route of entry into these issues. Imperial Greek epic does not engage with its heritage – supremely, Homer, always the primary model and source – at a critical distance; it resurrects its original literary mode, returning back *directly* to Homer's style, language and time-scape. These works, in other words, combine the literary origins of returning to the 'first' epic narrative with the 'material' origins of the Homeric text – its idiolect, language and formulaic building blocks – in order to provide a powerful commentary on the foundational genealogy of Rome.

My epics for consideration are a dynamic trio for charting this connection. The three texts range from the third to the sixth centuries C.E.; from the definitively Christian to the saliently or suspiciously non-Christian; from fourteen books to four hundred lines. However, they are united by a direct return to the mythical setting of Troy: these authors all re-stage their appropriation of Homer by inserting themselves within or behind the narrative space opened up by his poems. The importance of these techniques has been increasingly recognised by critics: much rich scholarship from the past two decades has read these poems as powerful testimonies to the literary cultural concerns of their times.[7] However, such readings have mainly occurred in isolation: that is, they focus on each poem individually, with analyses clustered around certain 'key' passages. First and foremost among such passages are the epics' beginnings, which are currently 'getting all the glory.' Openings of epics are of course moments where programmatic flourishes are strongly on display, and recent work has drawn

[6] Konstan and Säid (2006): xi-xii.

[7] On Quintus, see e.g. Baumbach and Bär (edd.) (2007), Bär (2009), Maciver (2012), Scheijnen (2018), Carvounis (2019) and Greensmith (2020). On Triphiodorus, Miguélez-Cavero (2013) and Maciver (2020). For Colluthus, Cadau (2015), Morales (2016), Goldhill (2020) and Formisano (forthcoming).

frequent attention to how imperial Greek poets use their starting verses in the style of the hyper-reflexive Alexandrians to establish their text's poetic agendas.[8] Imperial Greek epic middles are also now moving into spotlight. Such analyses have occurred both in the spirit of Contean 'proems in the middle'[9] (of which both Quintus and Nonnus make use) and, more conceptually, through considering what it means to compose an epic in the Homeric 'middle', whose plot bridges the gap between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or tells parts of the Trojan story which Homer omitted to sing.[10]

Yet how these epics end needs much more interrogation. As has been well discussed for other classical and particularly Latin literature, endings are crucial for assessing how authors mark and measure their relationships with their own work, their models and their cultural context. As Don Fowler's thoughts and second thoughts on closure underscore, endings offer equally important spaces as beginnings and middles for 'self-reflexive commentary.'[11] The reflexive *topos* of closure returns with a new and different insistence in imperial Greek hexameter, appropriated to tell a very different story (or, perhaps better, set of stories) about the relationship between the contemporary and the original in the Greek world 'under' Rome. To

[8] On Quintus' opening: Schenk (1997), Bär (2009), Maciver (2012), Greensmith (2020). On Triphiodorus', Tomasso (2012), Maciver (2020) and Goldhill (2020). On Nonnus', Vian (1976), Shorrock (2001), Geisz (2017): 9-15.

[9] Conte (1992).

[10] See Maciver (2012) and Greensmith (2018) on Quintus' late proem; Geisz (2017): 16-35 on Nonnus' second proem, and on Quintus' 'poetics of the interval', Greensmith (2020).

[11] Fowler (1989) and (1997). Cf. also Smith (1968), Hardie (1993), Martindale (1993) and other contributions in Roberts, Dunn and Fowler (edd.) (1997).

consider afresh how and why these imperial poets choose to return to Homer and to Troy, we must now begin to think with their ends.

II. Troy and the Precarity of Empire

Before examining these endings in detail, a striking feature shared by all three passages must first be addressed. In their closing scenes at Troy, Quintus, Triphiodorus and Colluthus each make dramatic use of 'the view from afar.' We are left (or almost left) with a zoomed-out image of the city, a panoramic shift away from the narrative present. In the *Posthomerica*, as Troy burns, sailors watching from sea remark on the changing nature of fortune: 'the once prosperous city of Troy is in flames' (Q.S.13.471-2). In Triphiodorus' account of the same episode, he imagines how Troy will be viewed from a different sort of distance: 'And even there was smoking Ilium made a great monument to her dear citizens.' (682-3). Colluthus ends by combining these moves of space and time: Cassandra watches from high above the city as Paris leads Helen into Troy, which signalled the beginning of the end for her people (389-94).

This device is in one sense a standard prospect in ancient epic: views from Olympus, walls or mountains are frequently employed to grant a wider or different perspective on the plot and its characters.[12] However, when applied specifically to Troy, at the start or in the midst of its destruction, it gains another crucial dimension. In a famous vignette, Diodorus Siculus (via the now-lost report of Polybius, preserved in the *Excerpta Constantiniana*) describes how, as Scipio watched the destruction of Carthage from a distance, he cried out verses from Homer:

[12] See e.g. de Jong and Nünlist (2004), Purves (2010), Lovatt (2006), Fuhrer (2015), de Jong (2018) and O'Sullivan (2019).

'A day will come when sacred Troy will fall, and Priam and his people' (32.24). These lines are spoken twice in the *Iliad*: once when Agamemnon optimistically looks forward to the conquest of Troy as Menelaus lies wounded (*Il*.4.164-5) and once when Hector, back inside his city, forebodes its dark final fate (*Il*. 6. 448-9). In the mouth of Scipio, the words thus offer a profound form of temporal 'long-perspective', a deeply layered sense of the transience of empires. As Denis Feeney remarks: 'He sees the fate of Rome in Carthage and Troy is the model for both.'[13] However, as the two original Iliadic quotations reveal, this modelling does not have one monolithic interpretation. These Homeric denote both the prediction of victory and the inevitability of defeat, and both meanings lie latent in the Roman imperial 'prophecy'. As pre-emptive celebration meets proleptic despair, Homer's Troy is revealed to contain within it the powerful potential for relief, resolution, resignation and regret.

In their choice to activate this motif, all three writers reveal their deep awareness of this cultural complexity of Troy: an awareness of how its final days and its downfall can signify a contemporary self-perspective, but also of the multiplicity of meanings that such a constructed perspective may assume. Quintus, Triphiodorus and Colluthus shape the ending of their epics to stake their claim in this open-ended, self-repeating discourse; offering reflections both eerily familiar and revealingly different from Scipio's Carthaginian cry.

III. Quintus: Homeric Open-Endings

We now turn to the last phases of the *Posthomerica*. Quintus' poem tells in fourteen books the events of the Trojan war from after the death of Hector to the shipwreck of the Greeks, seemingly filling the 'gap' between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Its lexicon is almost 80% Homeric;

[13] Feeney (2007): 55.

it favours Homeric stylistic features like similes and ecphrasis; and it even re-incorporates defining set pieces such as the shield of Achilles. In a delayed proem, Quintus makes a claim actually to *be* Homer: he describes himself tending sheep in Smyrna, one of Homer's famous mythological birthplaces (12.306-13). The very first word of the epic – which begins without an opening proem – is 'when' (εὖτε), signalling its status not as a new beginning, but as an Iliadic continuation. It is not difficult to see what has prompted critics ancient and modern to declare Quintus 'the most Homeric' of poets: he inscribes a relationship to his primary model that is overwhelmingly close. However, the ending of the *Posthomerica* takes this closeness in a different direction, and derails some of the neat associations of continuation set up in the poem's earlier parts.

Quintus seems to signal the end-game of his epic as early as in its opening lines; foreshadowing the fire of Troy, which is soon really to occur. (ὡς ἤδη στονόεντι καταιθομένης πυρὶ Τροίης, Q.S.1.17). As the text does draw to its close, this signal is revealed to be false. The *Posthomerica* does *not* end with the sack of Troy. After the city falls – in the penultimate book– the poem continues on its way. This extension beyond the sack on the one hand fits perfectly with Quintus' agenda as a poet in the Homeric middle, since the narrative continues past the fall of Troy to bring the reader up to the start of the *Odyssey*. Indeed, the real final book (Q.S.14) contains a marked increase in Odyssean allusions: multiple *poly*-compounds, ἀτασθαλίη (e.g. Q.S.14.435) and many terms for cunning and contrivance. The last lines of the whole poem also read as a preparatory gloss on the *Odyssey*'s start:

…οἱ δ᾽ ἐνὶ νηυσὶν
Ἀργεῖοι πλώεσκον, ὅσους διὰ χεῖμα κέδασσεν·
ἄλλῃ δ᾽ ἄλλος ἴκανεν, ὅπῃ θεὸς ἦγεν ἕκαστον,

ὅσσοι ὑπὲρ πόντοιο λυγρὰς ὑπάλυξαν ἀέλλας. Q.S.14.665–8

Meanwhile those Argives still aboard ship sailed on, as many as had been scattered by the storm; and they arrived in different places, where a god guided each one, as many as had survived the voyage through that disastrous storm.

ἔνθ᾽ ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες, ὅσοι φύγον αἰπὺν ὄλεθρον,

οἵκοι ἔσαν, πόλεμόν τε πεφευγότες ἠδὲ θάλασσαν· *Od*.1.11–12

Now all the rest, as many as had escaped sheer destruction, were at home, safe from both war and sea.

However, Quintus also makes another competing claim with his final book: that his poem does not end with the *Odyssey* at all. The *nostoi* still have to happen before we get to that start of the *Odyssey*: this Iliadic continuation requires another continuation before it bridges the Homeric gap. Quintus emphasises this point in the other imagery and language of his last scenes: the Odyssean tone is mixed with alternative, unsettling voices. The parting image of the storm, whilst on the surface a clear allusion to the *Odyssey*'s central drama, creates a sense of transition, not completion. Tempests in epic are most often used to turn the narrative, or mark a point of changed direction: Odysseus, Aeneas, Jason and even Paris[14] are all blown onto new heroic courses by them. Here, however, we do not get to this new course: the storm just rages on as we wait for the *Odyssey,* still. In the poem's final panoramic vision, the specific catastrophe of the storm which triggers the *Odyssey* is refracted back into the wider history of myth:

…καί τις ἔφη· 'τάχα τοῖον ἐπέχραεν ἀνδράσι χεῖμα,

ὁππότε Δευκαλίωνος ἀθέσφατος ὑετὸς ἦλθε,

ποντώθη δ᾽ ἄρα γαῖα, βυθὸς δ᾽ ἐπεχεύατο πάντῃ.' Q.S.14.602–4

[14] See Colluthus 206-10.

And someone said: 'It must have been a storm like this which was unleashed on mankind when Deucalion's mighty deluge came to inundate the earth and cover everything with deep waters!'

The reference to Deucalion marks a deep sense of antiquity, and removes some of the directness of the recourse to the *Odyssey* in this elemental turn of events: this has all happened before and *will happen again.*

In one sense Quintus ends with a flagrant self-contradiction, in that he seems to undermine the notion of tight Homeric interstitiality upon which he has built his poetics. However, the final scenes also show how these two competing ideas can be reconciled – of bridging Homer's works in a linear, teleological sense and leaving them open in a more elliptical way. Quintus achieves this reconciliation using material drawn from Homer himself. Just as *Odyssey* 23 for many ancient critics represented the neater, more natural ending of that epic, so too does Quintus make his penultimate book the false climax of the poem. Q.S.14 then harnesses all of the awkward closure *resistance* of *Odyssey* 24. The final lines contain an emphatic echo of the *Odyssey*'s last book:

....ἀλλὰ τὰ μέν που

ἀθανάτων ἐτέλεσσε κακὸς νόος· οἱ δ' ἐνὶ νηυσὶν

Ἀργεῖοι πλώεσκον ὅσους διὰ χεῖμα κέδασσεν· Q.S.14.654–6

Such it seems was the result of the immortal gods' resentment. Meanwhile those Argives still aboard ship sailed on, scattered by the storm.

This statement evokes Athena's attempts to enact closure on the *Odyssey*'s final battle (*Od.*24.473-7): the appeal to Zeus' νόος, lamentation about the πόλεμον κακόν (*Od.*24.473), and intervention to ensure a peaceful *telos* (*Od.*24.502) are all signalled in Quintus' ἀθανάτων ἐτέλεσσε κακὸς νόος. But this resolution in the *Odyssey* is *not* neatly achieved. A loaded

counterfactual suggests how things could have gone another way: καί νύ κε δὴ πάντας ὄλεσαν καὶ ἔθηκαν ἀνόστους,/εἰ μὴ Ἀθηναίη..., 'And now they would have slain them all and cut them off from returning [literally: made them *nostos*-less], had not Athena…' (*Od.*24.528-9). And in Odysseus' final act in the poem, the danger that his rage will continue is partially fulfilled:

> σμερδαλέον δ᾽ ἐβόησε πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
>
> οἴμησεν δὲ ἀλεὶς ὥς τ᾽ αἰετὸς ὑψιπετήεις. *Od.*24.537–8

Then much enduring, godlike Odysseus roared terribly; and gathering himself together he swooped upon them like an eagle lofty in flight.

This outburst jars with the narrative's attempts to reassure us of a final peace (*Od.*24.545–8), and provides a parting reminder of what was stressed in Tiresias' prophecy: that the *nostos* is not the end of Odysseus' turbulent adventures. By ending his own work with an allusion to these upheavals, Quintus asserts that in disrupting the closure of his epic he is returning to, and reworking, something originally Homeric. Not ending properly with the *Odyssey* is, ultimately, a new Odyssean form of ellipsis; pushing to the limits the hallowed or hackneyed idea of *Homeron ex Homerou.* Now, this incessant return to Homer may seem to be a highly depoliticized stance, and indeed many scholars have been reluctant to see any active engagement in the poem with Quintus' own imperial time.[15] And yet Scipio's quotation of Homer provides a powerful reminder of how cultural conflict between empires is always already formed as a trope of repetition, and the story and language of Homer's Troy is at the core of this vision. By rooting his whole 'new' inter-Homeric narrative in precisely this story and this language, Quintus drives the effects of such repetition to the forefront. The deep

[15] See discussion of the history of scholarship in Baumbach and Bär (2007): introduction, with further comments in Greensmith (2020): ch. 1.

literary past is resolutely not over, and not irrelevant; and so being 'still Homer', this ending shows, emerges paradoxically as a deeply contemporary, imperial Greek *modus scribendi.*

IV. Triphiodorus: Fast Forward, Pull Back

About a century after the *Posthomerica*, Triphiodorus penned a hexameter poem also richly steeped in Homeric language, which also narrates the sack of Troy. Unlike Quintus' fourteen books, this poem tells its tale in under seven hundred lines. In fewer verses than most single books of Homer, the story is over and done with. It provides a characteristic example of what in modern literary criticism is known as an epyllion: little epic.[16] 'Little epic' is in one sense an oxymoron – epic by nature is anything but diminutive – and since there is no Aristotelean or other ancient version of this typology, scholars remain divided over whether it should be considered a type of ancient literature at all. Triphiodorus' text seems distinctly to address just such issues of genre and form: to draw attention to its own 'oxymoronic' status as a miniature epic. This knowingness is clearest in the proem. Treating the sack of Troy as a tired, completed story, Triphiodorus resolves to accelerate through his version: the justification for re-telling the original saga is found in the rejection of indulgent delay:

> τέρμα πολυκμήτοιο μεταχρόνιον πολέμοιο
> καὶ λόχον, Ἀργείης ἱππήλατον ἔργον Ἀθήνης,
> αὐτίκα μοι σπεύδοντι πολὺν διὰ μῦθον ἀνεῖσα
> ἔννεπε, Καλλιόπεια, καὶ ἀρχαίην ἔριν ἀνδρῶν
> κεκριμένου πολέμοιο ταχείῃ λῦσον ἀοιδῇ. 1–5

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16 See Baumbach and Bär (2012) and Fernandelli (2012), with further bibliography.

Of the long-delayed end of the laborious war and of the ambush, even the horse fashioned of Argive Athena, straightway tell to me in my haste, O Calliope, remitting copious speech; and the ancient strife of men, in that war now decided, resolve with speedy song.

However, in the ending of his poem, Triphiodorus does not simply re-endorse these reflexive aims. He qualifies them and begins to turn away. He builds towards his conclusion by mobilising more beginnings:

πᾶσαν δ᾽ οὐκ ἂν ἔγωγε μόθου χύσιν ἀείσαιμι
κρινάμενος τὰ ἕκαστα καὶ ἄλγεα νυκτὸς ἐκείνης·
Μουσάων ὅδε μόχθος, ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἅπερ ἵππον ἐλάσσω
τέρματος ἀμφιέλισσαν ἐπιψαύουσαν ἀοιδήν. 664–7

All the multitude of strife and the sorrows of that night I could not sing, distinguishing each event. This is the Muses' task; and I shall drive, as if it were a horse, a song which, wheeling about, grazes the turning-post.

Like Quintus in Q.S.13, he creates a strong ring composition with his own opening: the lexical tags τέρμα and κρίνω return, and the entire plot of the poem is collapsed into a programmatic simile: 'I shall drive as if it were a horse.' Such moves are securely in the realm of the poetics of miniaturisation and speed heralded by the proem. However, the passage also tests the limits of this poetics. By deferring authority to the Muses and disavowing his ability to sing the coming trauma (633-8), Triphiodorus squarely evokes the *Iliad's* second Muse-call. A far cry from his anti-Homeric rushing in the opening, here is an unapologetically reverential Homeric echo, an echo of a passage in only the second book of the long, long *Iliad*, and which prefaces an infamously long and intricate list – where Homer has no intention of remitting copious speech. Triphiodorus is refusing, with Homeric faux-humility, to tell the whole long song of Troy, but in the very process of this refusal he is also pausing briefly to indulge it.

This tense double reading continues throughout the closing sequence. Triphiodorus rushes past many key events in the destruction of Troy. The Trojans' deaths are dealt with in a quick simile (ἰχθύες ὡς ἁλίῃσιν ἐπὶ ψαμάθοισι χυθέντες, 675), turning them into the suitors of the *Odyssey*, lying like fish piled on the beach (*Od*.22.383-8). However, unlike in the original Homeric simile, now there is no drawn-out slaughter narrative preceding this demise. The captivity of the Trojan women and children is also fulfilled in just two lines:

…σὺν δὲ γυναῖκας

ληιδίας σὺν παισὶν ἄγον ποτὶ νῆας ἀνάγκῃ. 678-9

And with them they carried off by force captive wives and children together unto the ships.

The plot of Euripides' *Troades* and Andromache's biggest Iliadic fears are all over in a flash. Likewise, the sacrifice of Polyxena, so central to Achilles' amorous Homeric aftermath, is dealt with in two verses, the instigative Iliadic μῆνιν now safely overcome.

οἱ δὲ Πολυξείνης ἐπιτύμβιον αἷμα χέαντες,

μῆνιν ἱλασσάμενοι τεθνειότος Αἰακίδαο 686-7

The Achaeans poured the blood of Polyxena over the tomb of dead Achilles to propitiate his wrath.

However, these speedy moments meet with a much more lingering conclusion:

αὐτοῦ καὶ μέγα σῆμα φίλοις ἀστοῖσιν ἐτύχθη

Ἴλιος αἰθαλόεσσα… 683-4

And even there was smoking Ilium made a great monument to her dear citizens.

In Triphiodorus' 'view from afar', compressed and depersonalised, the panoramic perspective unfolds not just through space but also through time. The curt αὐτοῦ καί makes this a perversely present-tense prolepsis: Trojan monumentality is emerging in the here-and-now. And yet as the aorist passive ἐτύχθη makes clear, the commemorative power of Troy is a feat

which, by the third century C.E., has already been achieved – through Triphiodorus and so many before him. By returning to the original moment when such power was ignited, Triphiodorus ensures that the inevitable change in *political* fortunes which the city paradigmatically represents is also brought to the fore. The *sema* of Troy is offered as a floating consolation for its present narrative destruction, but this comfort is also left hanging: on-going, destined for repetition, and thus (despite the aorist) resoundingly incomplete.

Triphiodorus uses his ending, like Quintus, to perform crucial self-contradictions: his quick poem is actually not so quick; the monumental vision of Troy is constructed in tiny language; and this Homeric fast-forward is not strictly teleological at all. Speeding through what is already accomplished but pausing during this rush to consider what is at stake; the inevitability of the conclusion versus the suspense and surprise of the moment — all of these ideas are centralized by Triphiodorus, and via the trope of panoramic Troy, they are revealed implicitly to be expressive of his contemporary position too, as an imperial writer navigating the heady racing of the third century political track. Here again we have politics expressed *through* poetics, as Triphiodorus makes literary form his method of self-expression; a powerful reminder that there is far more to the epyllion than fun and games with speed.

V. Colluthus: Prophetic Returns

This story of endings concludes with another epyllion, later in historical time but mythically earlier. Colluthus was from Lycopolis in the Egyptian Thebaid, and his floruit, according to the Suda, was under the Emperor Anastastius I (491-518 C.E.). His account of the rape – or abduction, or seduction – of Helen returns to the origins of this most canonical conflict. Colluthus repeatedly foregrounds concepts of primordiality and inception, asking from the outset: 'what was the primeval beginning (ὠγυγίη...ἀρχή) of the feud?' (10). But he also makes

clear that this beginning belongs to the past. As Eris hurls her apples at the wedding of Peleus, there begins a series of events which from the point of view of the reader is part of collective memory and has long since 'already' occurred:

ἤδη δ' Ἑσπερίδων χρυσέων ἐμνήσατο μήλων·
ἔνθεν Ἔρις, πολέμοιο προάγγελον ἔρνος ἑλοῦσα
μῆλον, ἀριζήλων ἐφράσσατο δήνεα μόχθων. 59–61

Already now she recalled her golden apples of the Hesperides. Then Strife took the fruit, the harbinger of war, the apple, and devised the plans for conspicuous woes.

This poem also brings us into a definitively different phase of imperial history. Colluthus writes after the so-called 'conversion' of the empire to Christianity, the subsequent shift of the centre of power to Constantinople, and in the reign of an emperor who was deeply involved in ecclesiastical politics and who, as is suggested by his name, was *born* a Christian, marking a new phase in the ruling genealogy of imperial Christianity. Yet Colluthus has not attracted the same syncretistic excitement amongst imperial epic scholars as Nonnus, whose twin poems on Dionysus and St John's Gospel have spurred much discussion about the collusion of 'pagan' and 'Christian' poetics.[17]. Once more, it is the ending that reveals Colluthus' important voice in these discussions, at its loudest and most troubling.

Colluthus, like Triphiodorus, revels in off-piste detail. Taking advantage of his familiar cyclic story and miniature form, he rushes past obviously pivotal moments (e.g. the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; Paris' reaction when he sees Helen for the first time) and focuses instead on unconventional, even bizarre elements, such as the character of Helen's daughter Hermione,

[17] See Shorrock (2011), Spanoudakis (ed.) (2014) and Accorinti (ed.) (2017). The only two major religiously engaged discussions of Colluthus to date are Morales (2016) and Goldhill (2020).

what Paris saw on his voyage to Sparta, and what the wind did to his hair once he landed. The poem's final verses, however, take us in a new misdirection:

ὣς ἡ μὲν πολύδακρυς ἐς ἠέρα φωνήσασα,
μητέρα μαστεύουσα, μάτην ἐπλάζετο κούρη.
καὶ Κικόνων πτολίεθρα καὶ Αἰολίδος πόρον Ἕλλης
Δαρδανίης λιμένεσσιν ὁ νυμφίος ἤγαγε νύμφην.
πυκνὰ δὲ τίλλε κόμην, χρυσέην δ᾽ ἔρριψε καλύπτρην
Κασσάνδρη νεόφοιτον ἀπ᾽ ἀκροπόληος ἰδοῦσα.
Τροίη δ᾽ ὑψιδόμων πυλέων κληῖδας ἀνεῖσα
δέξατο νοστήσαντα τὸν ἀρχέκακον πολιήτην. 386–94

So she spoke with many tears to the air, and seeking for her mother wandered in vain. And to the towns of the Cicones and the straits of Aeolian Helle, into the havens of Dardania the bridegroom brought his bride. And Cassandra on the acropolis, when she beheld the new-comer, tore her hair and flung away her golden veil. But Troy unbarred the bolts of her high-built gates and received on his return her citizen that was the source of her woe.

Colluthus ends his largest digressive section (Hermione's feelings about her mother leaving, which have taken up the previous seventy lines) quickly and almost casually. Then, in a mere two lines he dispenses with the most central plot piece of all – Paris bringing Helen to Troy. We get no physical description of either of these notoriously beautiful people: they are not even named, just reduced to their controversial metonymies (νυμφίος and νύμφην). We hear nothing about the Trojans' reactions to seeing this amazing arrival: rejecting the 'later' gossip of the Trojan elders at the Iliadic *Teichoscopia*[18] Colluthus allows them no focalisation, no

[18] A scene of which Colluthus elsewhere makes great use, e.g. 268-77.

words. Instead, this reaction is deflected into another viewer: Cassandra, who sees this 'newcomer' as she watches from up high. It is Cassandra, not Helen, who gets the aesthetic description (her hair and her golden veil, flung using the same verb, ἀνεῖσα, as Triphiodorus uses to ask his Muses quickly to release their song [3]). And it is through Cassandra's eyes that we see the poem's final sinister vista.

The language of these parting lines (392-4) is electric. νεόφοιτος is an extremely rare word, whose only other attested use in poetry is in an anonymous sepulchral epigram of unknown date describing the air through which Icarus fell – another doomed mythological journey (*AP* 7.699.1-2). Here it describes Helen, but its proximity to Cassandra reminds us that it can also refer to her downfall: she will later be the newcomer in Argos, when Agamemnon leads her 'home.' ἀρχέκακος occurs only once in Homer, again in connection with Paris: to describe the ships built for him, which 'became the source of woe for the Trojans and for himself' (*Il*.5.62-3). Answering and glossing his opening question (what started this feud? [10]), Colluthus moves the focus from conflict to character – offering a different version of the Helen-centred blame narratives of the Trojan war. νοστήσαντα evokes another archetypal homecoming: via the paradigmatic vocabulary of the *Odyssey* (*nostos*), it merges the fates of Helen, Cassandra, Paris, Agamemnon and Odysseus into one matrix. But the politicised language (ἀκροπόληος, πολιήτην) adds another contemporary set of referents. Whilst both words are perfectly Homeric, their potential also to hold a more Hellenocentric significance (*the* Acropolis, political citizenship) enables them simultaneously to point forward to Greece's 'future'; a heyday which itself, from Colluthus' sixth century Egyptian perspective, is in the past; distant or reformulated – *not the same*.

Colluthus in these closing lines is at his most knowingly pre- and post- Homeric. Cassandra herself has a long history of embodying this double temporality: as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

most hauntingly conveys, she instantiates both the possibilities and the traumas of being cursed with a wider chronological perspective. Here she *silently* articulates this conflicted prophetic position. Colluthus uses her, most obviously, to offer a wry nod to his late inheritance of this storyline (Cassandra does not need to speak because we have 'already' heard her in tragedy, and yet her lack of speech is also itself an Aeschylean nod: the Cassandra of the *Agamemnon* spends an agonisingly long time on stage before she talks, and her first sounds are not words at all, just noise [*Ag.* 1072]). But he also makes her mark a political positionality. As she pertinently but powerlessly watches a scenario unfold in which she is an actor as well as a spectator, Cassandra provides an emblem for Colluthus' own poetic stance. A belated author of early Troy, watching the current Christian empire turn along its shaky collision course, he writes a tale which strikes at the intersection of both of these worlds. The ability for one figure to encompass multiple narrative strands, the meaningful interchangeability between different characters, plots or lexical symbols are ideas of profound potential relevance to a writer of Trojan epic in the Christian sixth century. These old and new positions can typologically refract one another *and* call one another into question; in what, like Scipio's quotation, can emerge as a celebratory expression of anticipation, or an uncomfortable sense of repeated decline.

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Beginnings are where epic programmes are launched; and yet endings are where the true reflection on this programme begins. These three epics contain no direct contemporary 'commentary', no stated imperial context, no overt Graeco-Roman politics. However, in their final moments, the poets most definitively make this silence speak. In their resolutely open-endings, they allow themselves an ironic, even cynical critique of their own literary challenges, laying bare the consequences of writing 'age-old' cyclic Greek epic in the Roman world, and using the mythological capital of the Trojan past *as* an alternative commentary on imperial time. The poems' recessive, inverting stance therefore does not amount to a hermetic a-

historicism – using origins to write depoliticized poetry, and taking refuge in the distant literary past against the realities of the Roman present. The pluralism expressed in all three epics – the amalgamative approach to pre-Homeric beginnings and Odyssean open-ends – instead provides another powerful reminder to reduce our scholarly obsession with the resistance-filled narrative of *Graecia Capta*. Placed in the context of the variability of self-positioning and self-expression in Greek thought in Late Antiquity, these attempts to defy a linear relationship with Homer reveal something more than traditionalism at play: a pointed attempt to slip outside of boundaries (of genre, chronology and even religion) and to profess an identity that cannot be contained. So, as we stand at our own critical distance, gazing from afar at this vast and variegated corpus, if we can detect this anti-teleology running through the works, then we may be approaching a distinct image of a Greek epic of empire *now*.

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