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CHAPTER 1

Forms of Attention
Time and Narrative in Ecphrasis

Ecphrasis dramatizes a form of attention, the reflective gaze at an object. An ecphrasis also performs an interpretative process with which the reader is made complicit: the strategies of viewing comprehended by an ecphrasis are normative, even and especially when contested. When Marcel, Proust's narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, stands for almost three-quarters of an hour lost in admiration in front of paintings by Elstir, keeping his host and dinner guests waiting, we are invited by Proust's prose not merely to imagine the entrancing paintings, but also to recognize and respect the aesthetic prowess and self-regard of the narrator – as well as to stand at some distance with the author from the narrator's youthful fascination and social indiscretion. It is a passage that highlights aesthetic response as a function of modern social protocol, with Proust's customary self-aware humour.[1] How to stand in front of a picture, how long to look at it, what to look at, and, above all, in what language to articulate a response, are all expressive aspects of the cultural spectacle of ecphrastic performance, in antiquity as much as in *fin-de-siècle* Paris.[2]

In this chapter, I wish to look at how forms of attention become part of the concerns of ancient ecphrastic writing, and how generic form and forms of attention interact. I will begin by focusing on a remarkable body of writing from late antiquity, namely, the works of Paulinus of Nola, a Christian author whose letters and poems have barely entered the scholarly discussion of ecphrasis, let alone the debates around poetic form in late antiquity. His attempt to construct a specifically Christian form of attention opens a fascinating set of questions about self-awareness and ecphrasis, not merely because of his acknowledgement of a literary history in which he works, but also, and more specifically, because he provides a unique

[1] For this 'sweet oblivion' and the narrator's self-proclaimed 'particular brand of superiority', see M. Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, trans. M. Traherne, Harmondsworth (2002: 417–421).
[2] For this spectacle, see e.g. Zeitlin (1994); Goldhill (2001); Feldherr (1998).

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example from antiquity both of an ecphrasis of a portrait of himself, and of an ecphrasis of an ecphrasis. Christian *self-regard* is articulated in an extraordinary manner through the ecphrastic discussion of a portrait of the author and the poems attached to it.

We will then move on from Paulinus (and back in history) to consider how epic and epigram as literary forms construct contrasting forms of attention and (thus) require different types of this interpretative self-awareness. This constructed opposition of the small-scale epigram and large-scale epic will prove foundational also for the following chapters' discussions of epyllion, texts that take shape, it will be suggested, within and against such ideologies of form. The familiar grandeur of epic, in contrast to the small scale of epigram, will also open a pressing question of temporality and aesthetics: we will see how epic and epigram invoke contrasting styles of knowing – specifically, contrasting comprehensions of how an image relates to time.[3]

Third, and finally, we will move on to epigrams (and some further prose) to see how this question of time and narrative is played with in Greek ecphrastic writing; and I use the verb 'played with' to mark the literary self-consciousness, once again, of this engagement with the ecphrastic form, both in the selection of an allegorical statue of *Kairos*, 'Right Time', as subject, and in its styles of description. The claim of this chapter is that an important history of ecphrastic writing can be articulated through the nexus of differing reflections on forms of attention, time and narrative. It will also act as the foundation for questions of scale, and the relation between self-expression and forms of writing, to be explored in the chapters to come.

I

The *de septem orbis spectaculis* attributed to Philo of Byzantium (though almost certainly a text of the late Empire) provides a telling introduction to my argument. In the prologue, the author constructs an extraordinary defence of the power of ecphrasis over and against mere tourism. This is a patently self-serving claim to introduce his description of the Seven Wonders of the World – no need to travel with this book in your hand – but it

[3] Since Lessing, the relation of an image to time has been a recurring theme of modern aesthetics: see Mitchell (1984), partly in response to Steiner (1982) and most recently Grethlein (2017). This book takes back such concerns into antiquity – no surprise to Lessing – but with a quite different range of texts and scope of analysis.

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shows vividly how forms of attention become a significant element of ecphrastic thinking:

> διὰ τοῦτο θαυμαστὸν παιδεία καὶ μεγαλόδωρον, ὅτι τῆς ὁδοιπορίας ἀπολύσασα τὸν ἄνθρωπον οἴκοι τὰ καλὰ δείκνυσιν, ὄμματα τῇ ψυχῇ προσδιδοῦσα. καὶ τὸ παράδοξον· ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ τοὺς τόπους ἐλθὼν ἅπαξ εἶδεν καὶ παρελθὼν ἐπιλέλησται· τὸ γὰρ ἀκριβὲς τῶν ἔργων λανθάνει καὶ περὶ τὰ κατὰ μέρος φεύγουσιν αἱ μνῆμαι· ὁ δὲ λόγῳ τὸ θαυμαζόμενον ἱστορήσας καὶ τὰς ἐξεργασίας τῆς ἐνεργείας, ὅλον ἐγκατοπτρισάμενος τὸ τῆς τέχνης ἔργον ἀνεξαλείπτους φυλάσσει τοὺς ἐφ᾽ ἑκάστου τῶν εἰδώλων τύπους· τῇ ψυχῇ γὰρ ἑώρακεν τὰ παράδοξα.
>
> This is why education [*paideia*] is so amazing and such a gift: it frees a man from travel and reveals beauty from the armchair. It gives eyes to the soul. It's strange: a chap who goes to the sites, sees but once, and passes by and forgets. The precision of the work escapes his notice, and memory is fleeting for organized details. But the fellow who explores through a verbal account a marvel and the working through of vivid experience has a mirror of the whole work of art and retains the imprints of each of the images inerasably. For he has seen strange sights in his soul.[4]

This paragraph puts together an intricate mix of familiar expressions of the Greek intellectual tradition of the later Roman era. It places *paideia* 'culture', 'education' as its central category, as do so many Greek authors from the Roman Empire.[5] It elegantly applies the dynamics of educated paradoxology to reverse the usual value of an eyewitness account over the second-hand experience of reading (recalling the traveller's self-assertions from Herodotus onwards, with his celebrated calculation of which senses are the most persuasive).[6] It manipulates the philosophical, rhetorical and physiological discourse of *phantasia* with its vocabulary of *enargeia*, mirroring and imprinting in the soul: the turn towards the inwardness of the experience of wonder and paradox – 'seen in the soul' – is also typical of later Greek intellectual arguments.[7] But what I find most striking is the contrast between two forms of attention. The person who visits sites, sees them only once, and passes by and into forgetfulness. 'Precision', *to akribes*, a standard criterion of art criticism, is missed, and the memory is

[4] The text is taken from Hercher 1858. The author of this text is clearly not the engineer Philo of Byzantium (third century BCE), and is usually thought to be a fifth-century Christian (despite his happily classicizing discussion of Pheidias' statue of Zeus).
[5] This has been much discussed by recent critics. See Whitmarsh (2001, 2005); Anderson (1989); Swain (1996); Morgan (1998); König and Whitmarsh (eds.) (2007).
[6] See Redfield (1985); Gould (1989).
[7] A long bibliography could be given here: see Goldhill (1994); Imbert (1980); Rispoli (1985); Elsner (1995); Webb (2009) – each with a further bibliography.

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inadequate to keep an organized sense of the different parts of a viewed work.[8] The tourist has a momentary experience, and the reliance on memory guarantees an insufficient grasp of detail or relationships of parts. But the reader of an ecphrasis (such as Philo's book. . .) engages in 'research in/through discourse', *logô historêsas*, and experiences 'the working out of vividness' – that is, who undergoes the rhetorical power of the description to bring sites to life (*enargeia*). The reader can not only perceive the whole work as if in a mirror, but also retains (*phulassei*) ineradicable imprints in the soul. Textuality appropriates the language of sight – the written work is 'like a mirror', and its 'images' imprint the soul – and the book, unlike the gaze, promises a totalizing experience: the *whole* site is captured by a text in a way that vision cannot grasp.[9] The contrast is clear: the visitor's momentary gaze misses details and cannot provide the attention that leads to lasting impressions; the reader seated in his armchair [*oikoi*], however, has the attention of a researcher, and thanks to the vividness of the rhetorician's ecphrastic mastery receives lasting impressions. Narrative is better than seeing; it produces images that last in time; the traveller's flighty gaze contrasts with the reader's profound attention to detail and form. The ecphrasis, as opposed to the mere gaze, offers a temporal lastingness rather than fragmentary and fading perceptions.

Most ancient ecphrases, indeed, as Philo suggests, circulate as pieces of verse (or prose) separate from the object they describe, and which indeed often paradigmatically describe objects that do not have a separate existence in the world, such as Achilles' Shield or the Gates of Carthage. Even where the artwork is known to have existed – Myron's Cow sculpture, say – most scholars have assumed, correctly to my mind, that the epigrams which respond to it circulated as poems, and were read and appreciated without necessarily having any visual contact with the sculpture itself.[10] Ancient ecphrases do not appear to have been used as guidebooks with which to cruise the gallery, even when, as with Philostratus or Callistratus, they have precisely that form (though they never simply describe an art object). Counterexamples of ecphrases actually attached to an artwork are

[8] On *akribeia* (which becomes a Christian technical term for 'strictness'), see Pollitt (1974: 117–125, 351–357); Tanner (2006: 169). There is a hint here of a reversal of the common practice of *Mnemotechnik*, where imagining a building and its details is a key to remembering a *logos*. Here, details of a building are lost because memory fails, and one has to revert to a *logos*.

[9] On the history of 'seeing whole', with specific reference to the *Iliad* and Aristotle, see Purves (2010: 24–64).

[10] See Goldhill (2007); Squire (2010a).

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few and often marginal – and have begun recently to be discussed by classicists at length. There is a unique bilingual stele, probably from the third century BCE, and found in Attica with an inscription in Phoenician and in Greek, which offers a dramatized decoding of the strange and potentially baffling figures represented on the stele itself.[11] There is the tomb of Menophila from Sardis, which has the form of an epitaph that decodes the riddling signs on the tomb, a form found frequently in the Anthology.[12] Two Greco-Roman sites in Italy have artwork with ecphrastic verses attached – the cave at Sperlonga, where a plaque has been added in response to the statues, and the so-called House of Propertius at Assisi, where the first-century Roman wall paintings have Greek poems added at a later stage which comment on and reframe the images.[13] The statue of Memnon in Egypt – a particularly fascinating case – not only has verse graffiti attached to it, but also has verse and prose responses that circulate separately in a touristic culture that reflects my opening discussion of Philo.[14] Along with the House of the Epigrams at Pompeii, these examples have led modern scholars to explore how pictures and poems can frame each other in a complex dynamic of expressiveness.[15]

This dynamic established by texts attached to pictures becomes particularly interesting with the development of Christian art, with its particular relation to Scripture, not least the injunction in Exodus 20 against making graven images. Prudentius' little poems for a series of church paintings from the Bible are called either *Tituli Historiarum* – Titles/placards from histories/narratives – or the *Dittochaion*, which is usually translated as 'Double nourishment' from *oche*, understood thus as 'Double testament' (though I have sometimes wondered whether it couldn't be heard as *ditto – chaion, 'double shepherd's staff'*, in the sense of a double shepherding of the

[11] *IG II* 2836; *IG II*^{2} 8388; *CIS I* 115, pl 21:23, no 120. Stager (2005: 427–428) records from personal correspondence that Frank Cross dates the stele to the late fourth/early third century; Stephen Tracy is another well-known epigraphist. Anti-sumptuary laws of Demetrius play a role in the dating too, where it is assumed that the bilingual nature of the stele allows it to escape the laws against such display for citizens. See Osborne (2011: 124–129); Henzen (1861); Lenormant (1864), Palmer and Sandys (1872), and, more recently, Clairmont (1970) (reprised in Clairmont (1995: III 315)), Bonnet (1990).

[12] Buckler and Robinson (1932); see also (with good pictures) Hanfmann and Ramage (1978: 164, no 245, fig 425). The last couplet is vexed. Prioux (2007: 287–288) provides an apparatus, though the version she prints has the demerit of not making sense. On riddling epitaphs, see Goldhill (1994).

[13] See the fine discussions of Squire (2009: 202–238 (Sperlonga), and 239–293 (Propertius)).

[14] Rosenmeyer (2018) is a superb and full discussion.

[15] Guarducci (1979, 1985); Squire (2007); Bergmann (2007); Prioux (2008); Squire (2009); and more generally Tanner (2006: 205–302).

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viewing flock).[16] These forty-eight quatrains,[17] each written to be placed below a painting in a church, are marked, in the manuscript tradition, as 'titles' or as 'double' – that is, as poems doubling the visual comprehension with a verbal, imaginative direction. The *titulus* creates a double perception, a dynamic between word and image. Each is (to be) affixed to a well-known biblical scene; but each also expands into narrative, and is often a directive towards a Christian interpretive gaze. So – to take a simple but paradigmatic example – quatrain 14 on the grove of Elim in the wilderness reads as follows:

> *Devenere viri Moysi duce, sex ubi fontes*
> *et sex forte alii vitreo de rore rigabant*
> *septenas decies palmas; qui mysticus Aelim*
> *lucus apostolicum numerum libris quoque pinxit.*
>
> The people, led by Moses, arrived at a place where six springs
> And six others too moistened seventy palms
> With glass-clear water. This mystic grove of Aelim
> Also depicted the number of the Apostles in the scriptures.

The picture of the arrival of the Israelites at Elim is to be seen as part of the story of the Exodus (*devenere*, 'arrived' implies a completed stage in the journey). But the twelve springs are glossed as a 'mystic' grove (that is, to be read within a wider theological narrative of transformation), and taken as a symbolic indication of the twelve apostles. Prudentius makes the grove the subject of the verb *pinxit*, 'depicts', 'paints', as if the grove is both subject and object of representation. That is precisely the logic of the figural reading it demands: the twelve trees do indeed *represent* the twelve Apostles; the story of the Hebrew Bible is to find fulfilment in the Christian bible: hence the addition of *scriptis*, by which we are encouraged to see the picture as part of a scriptural reading.[18] The water that nourishes the palms thus slips easily into the symbolic expressivity of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, and his promise of living water in John 4. 10. The stay of the Israelites at Elim had already been invested with significance by Jewish writers: Philo (*Moses* 1.188), and Ezekiel's *Exagoge* describe it in lavish, utopian terms; Josephus (*AJ* 3.9) imagines

[16] See Pillinger (1980: 9–10) on the title of the work. For good general discussion, see Lubian (2015), and for an example of his approach Lubian (2016); Lubian (2014) offers an edition of the collection.
[17] Assuming, with all modern editors, that 169–172 are to be athetized. There are twenty-four poems on the Old Testament and twenty-four on the New, making forty-eight, the number of the books of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.
[18] For a commentary, especially on the numerology, see Lubian (2014: 277–283).

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the feeding of the people from such sandy soil and brackish water as a miracle; the midrashim are happy to see the numbers of fountains as an indication of the tribes of Israel, and the water as the water of the Torah.[19] Prudentius redrafts such reading into a Christian vision. The double testament of the *Dittochaion* is to be found in this doubled figural vision: what is to be seen depends on a Christian temporality where the Christian order is always already anticipated, embodied and fulfilled – as discussed with stunning sophistication by Augustine in *Confessions* xi, where in God's language of creation everything is spoken *simul ac sempiterne*, 'at the same time and eternally', 'in the simultaneity of eternity' (Chadwick), though not everything which God causes to exist by speaking is made *simul et sempiterna*, 'in simultaneity and eternity' (*Conf.* xi 7. 9).[20]

The importance to Christian theology and practice of this dynamic between pictures in churches and directive ecphrastic writing is picked up in my first key example, taken from the poems of Paulinus of Nola, an example which has surprisingly not yet entered the canon for scholars of ecphrasis. Paulinus' twenty-seventh poem contains a fascinating ecphrastic moment. Paulinus not only describes the paintings in a church, but also tells us that they have *tituli*, so that the words can expound what the hand has proclaimed, and so that the ignorant rural Christians, recently and not entirely deprived of pagan pleasures, can feast their eyes on art and gain through this sensory delight some scriptural soul food. That is: first, we have explicit recognition of a specific Christian theology of ecphrasis, as a directive and moulding sermon on pictures which might otherwise involve mere pleasure;[21] but second, and most extraordinarily, we have an ecphrasis of an ecphrasis, a poem describing a poetic description attached to an artwork.

> *propterea visum nobis opus utile totis*
> *Felicis domibus pictura ludere sancta,*
> *si forte adtonitas haec per spectacula mentes*
> *agrestum caperet fucata coloribus umbra,*

[19] See e.g. Numbers Rabbah 1.2 – and other sources cited in Jacobson (1983: 152–166). Bizarrely, Ezekiel makes Elim the home of the Phoenix. The association of water and learning is also made with Moses bringing forth water from the rock, which in turn informs the imagery of Peter drawing water from the rock, common on Roman sarcophagi (see e.g. Evans (1993) with further bibliography). Water imagery is deeply overdetermined. . . Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, one of the most important kabbalists of the sixteenth century, structured the seventy chapters of his book *Elimah Rabbati*, according to the seventy palms of the grove of Elim.

[20] See Chapter 4, p. 133–4.

[21] Two fine recent books on Paulinus supersede earlier work: Trout (1999), and especially stimulatingly for the theology of ecphrasis, Conybeare (2000). See also Herzog (2002c).

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quae super exprimitur titulis, ut littera monstret
quod manus explicuit, dumque omnes picta vicissim
ostendunt releguntque sibi, vel tardius escae
sint memores, dum grata oculis ieiunia pascunt,
atque ita se melior stupefactis inserat usus,
dum fallit pictura famem; sanctasque legenti
historias castorum operum subrepit honestas
exemplis inducta piis; potatur hianti
sobrietas, nimii subeunt oblivia vini.

This is why we thought it useful to enliven all the house of Felix with paintings on sacred themes, in the hope that they would excite the interest of the rustics by their visual display, for the sketches are painted in various colours. Over them are explanatory inscriptions, the written word revealing the theme outlined by the painter's hand. So when all the country folk point out and read over to each other the subjects painted, they turn more slowly to thoughts of food, since the feast of fasting is so pleasant to the eye. In this way, the paintings beguile their hunger, their astonishment may allow better behaviour to develop in them. Those reading the holy accounts of chastity in action are infiltrated by virtue and inspired by saintly example. As they gape, their drink is their sobriety, and they forget their longing for excessive wine. *Carmen* 27. 580–595

Paulinus began his lengthy ecphrasis of the church by offering it as a tour (*veni, pater, et socio mihi iungere passu* 360), a tour which will be an extended trip around every detail (*dum te circumagens operum per singula duco*). With classic ecphrastic gestures, he has repeatedly encouraged viewers to see what he wants to show – *ecce vides* 362; *ecce vides* 387 *aspice* 480; *volo . . . videas* 511–512 – and encourages wonder and joy at the sights. But for a Christian, in the light of the biblical prohibition of graven images, such decorations can never be simply aligned with the history of classical art and ecphrasis (for all the echoes of Virgil in Paulinus' verse).[22] It needs an explanation, as Paulinus declares (542–544):

[22] A canon of the Council of Elvira (early fourth century) had forbidden representational art in churches: but this rule was already slipping. See Trout (1999: 182 n135) for bibliography and discussion; also Conybeare (2000: 95). This is presumably the background to his description of the art in his church as *raro more* 544. Paulinus was influenced in the classical tradition of ecphrasis by his teacher Ausonius (on which, see Nugent, 1990) (as well as his evidently deep reading of e.g. Virgil), but also by the Bishop of Rome, Damasus, who added epigrams to many sites in Rome, creating a sacred landscape of verbal memory. But, as far as I can see, Damasus' epigrams show none of the ecphrastic techniques of Paulinus (see Ferrua (1942) for these largely fragmentary epigrams). It is the combined twin influences of Damasus and the classical tradition that give Paulinus' ecphrases their particularity. On transformative vision as part of Christian theology, see Heath (2013).

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forte requiratur quanam ratione gerendi
sederit haec nobis sententia, pingere sanctas
raro more domos animantibus adsimulatis.

You may perhaps ask what motive implanted in us this decision to adorn the holy houses with representations of living persons, an odd custom.

The answer is that such images lead the rural crowd, who are neither strong in faith nor learned in their reading (*neque docta legendi* 548), to take pleasure in the surrounds of the church, and, as error can creep unnoticed into the simple soul (*mentibus error irrepsit rudibus* 564-5), so through reading the holy stories virtue too can creep up (*subrepit honestas* 593), brought on by examples of piety. The astonishment (*adtonitas/stupefactis*) and pleasure (*grata oculis*), which are typical of the ecphrastic moment, become 'useful' (*utile*[23]) – an appropriation of the standard historiographical and literary opposition between the useful and the sweet[24] – because by reading to one another (*relegunt sibi*) the stories of the pictures, love of food may become a love of fasting, and their gaping mouths can be filled with virtue rather than excessive wine (an image that also hints at the proper wine of the Eucharist). These new *spectacula* are to be a display of Christian value (as Tertullian demanded with such aggressive rhetoric in *de spectaculis*). This ecphrasis is thus an ecphrasis of the paintings, the poems attached to them, and the worshippers reading the images and poems. In this way, the ecphrasis becomes an apologetics fully inscribed within a Christian theology of the role of didactic exemplars. The readers of the poem, led like the addressee around the Church of Felix, are encouraged to see the church and its decoration within a particular model of worship, and we are taught about teaching.[25]

An extraordinary letter of Paulinus vividly depicts this exemplary power of artistic and verbal decoration in church – and, equally significantly, the active religious reframing of pictures by attaching poems to them. This is further precious testimony of the saint's fascination with the work of art and text, but it is surprisingly a text that has barely been mentioned in the literature on ecphrasis. In a letter to Severus, perhaps from 403, Paulinus reacts strongly to the fact that Severus has had a portrait of him painted on the wall of the baptistery of the church at Primuliacum, facing a painting

[23] Cf. *Car* 28 174, *decus utile*. [24] See Hunter (1983: 47–52).

[25] 'Paulinus' account, by contrast [to Virgil's ecphrases], is not textually circumscribed, but by stimulating reflection not only in the fictive viewer but also in the reader, expects to extend its effect beyond the textual into an active response to the world beyond the text' Conybeare (2000: 99).

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of Saint Martin.[26] Paulinus' objection is a test case for the awkward mixture of humility and literary pride in his writing.[27] Paulinus worries that he – his image - has no right to be there at all (*serpentibus et columbis, hoc est nobis et Martino?* 'What have serpents to do with doves – a true comparison of myself with Martin?' *Ep.* 32.2); and finds glory in it for Martin, and recognizes that it was only Severus' deep love of Paulinus that prevents a charge of malice, since the contrast between them exposes him 'to merited contempt once Martin's countenance is sighted . . . demonstrating the heinousness of this absurd comparison', *nos vero potius deformares, quos iure conspecta Martini facie despuendos ad probrum ridiculae comparationis exponeres*. The only possible justification Paulinus can find for the display of the two paintings together is in their contrasting exemplary force of the saintly life of Martin and his own humble insufficiencies. Newly baptized Christians could thus 'simultaneously see the exemplar to follow and the model to avoid', *vitandum et sequendum pariter conspicarentur*. To make this point clear, Paulinus writes a poem to be inscribed on the wall and sends it to Severus:

Abluitis quicumque animas et membra lauacris,
Cernite proposita ad bona facta vias.
Adstat perfectae Martinus regula vitae,
Paulinus veniam quo mereare docet.
Hunc peccatores, illum spectate beati;
Exemplar sanctis ille sit, iste reis.

All you who wash your souls and bodies in this font
should behold the paths set before you for good deeds.
Martin is here so that you may see a model of the perfect life,
whereas Paulinus schools you in how to merit forgiveness.
Look upon Paulinus, sinners; on Martin the blessed.
Martin is the example for the saintly, Paulinus for the arraigned.

Paulinus' poem constructs the two pictures as a strongly marked opposition (which is unlikely to have been the intention of Severus), and demands that the viewers not only see the pictures thus, but be drawn up as such, with the saintly and blessed instructed to stare at Martin, the

[26] The *Life of Martin* – written by Severus – has Martin cite Paulinus as an example of renunciation: *V. Mart.* 25.4–5. While Martin and Paulinus did meet, it seems to have been an inconsequential encounter, even as remembered by Paulinus later (*Ep.* 18.9).
[27] And life: 'Paulinus' renunciation of the world and adoption of monasticism propelled him to further prominence within the social elite and ecclesiastical circles of the Roman West' (Trout 1999: 2). Paulinus was well aware of the potential difficulties: see *Ep.* 40.11 cited in n. 30.

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