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PREPOSTEROUS POETICS

The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity

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University of Cambridge

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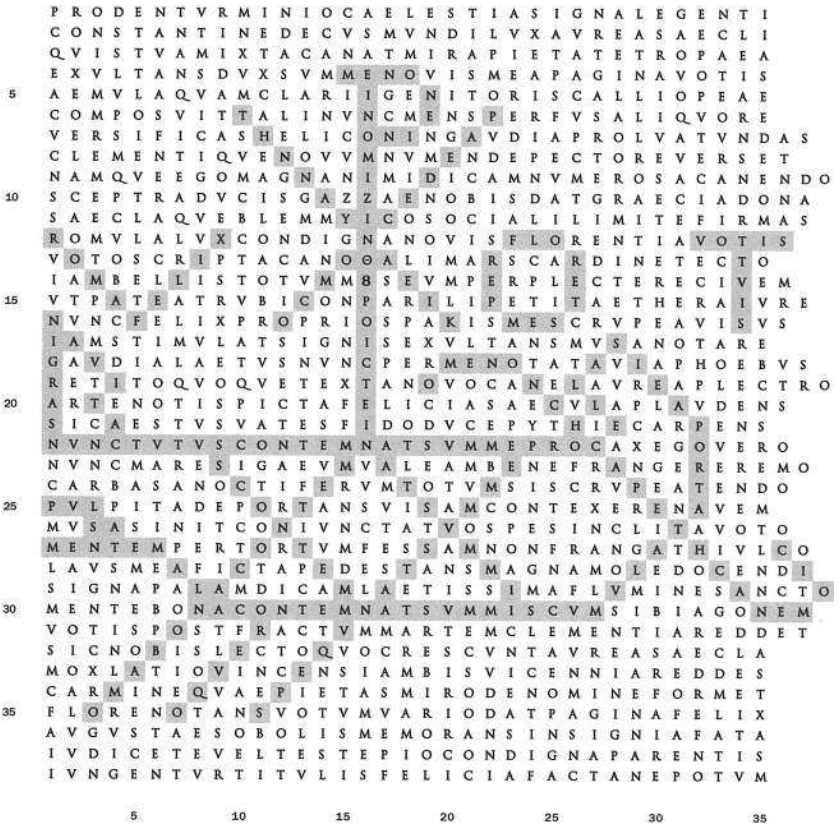
Preface

The 'unspeakable' Optatian has been repeatedly denigrated as the fourth-century writer who most painfully embodies a corrupt or trivializing turn to 'pure form' – where meaning threatens to become 'secondary to the display of surface artistry (played out on the level of the poetic line, word and letter)'.[1] 'Unspeakable' is Alan Cameron's judgement,[2] but I suspect he did not intend the word to be as richly ironic as it now seems, for if there is any poet in antiquity whose work challenges the usual rule that poetry and prose are expected to be read aloud, it is Optatian, whose oeuvre is literally unspeakable. His poems take the form of grids of letters (*carmen cancellatum*) which can be read – indeed are designed to be read – in multiple directions, and which can also encode patterns of letters that also spell out images of ships or the Chi-Rho symbol of Christianity in and across the grid. (Even the Chi-Rho is made up of letters which spell words that can be read – in this case, most bizarrely of all, Greek words transliterated into Latin, adding another palimpsestic layer of readerly engagement, another form of double reading, another temporality of interpretation).

This is flamboyant visual poetry, beyond even the *technopaignia* of Hellenistic cleverness, that must be seen, and seen in different directions, over time. It sits between pictorial representation and verbal significance – and challenges the temporality and the singularity of what can be said.[3] His poetry may talk in traditional terms of 'song', 'music' and 'metre', but it cannot be turned into the linear performance such tradition expects. He even writes a quatrain (poem 25), where the twenty words can designedly be shuffled to create further verses – so that one manuscript, following the

[1] Squire (2017) 99 – whose wonderful analysis I follow here. See also Hose (2007); Levitan (1985); and now the fine collection of Squire and Wienand eds (2017).
[2] Cameron (1980) 134.
[3] For a translation, see Squire (2015: 108–114). For the religious significance of the Chi-Rho, see Squire and Whitton (2017: 91–95).



rules for expansion given by a scholiast, has expanded the four lines into seventy-two hexameters.[4] If the rules for such expansion that are laid down in the scholia are followed, one modern scholar has calculated that in fact 1,792 verses can be produced;[5] if the rules are slackened so that the last word of each line can also shift place, but the metrical shape of the quatrain is maintained, another scholar (with too much time on his hands) has determined that more than 39 billion semantically coherent lines (some more coherent than others) can be produced from the twenty words.[6] The expanding experience of continually shifting meaning, subordinate to the

[4] See Squire (2017: 89). [5] See Levitan (1985: 251 n17).
[6] The excellent Peltarri (2014: 78). This sort of *pilpul* has become a *topos* for scholars of Optatian: see also Letrouit (2007).

act of making sense (in all senses), is dizzying to the point that the artifice of meaning production becomes the artwork's meaning.[7] Yet this dizzying does not merely demand wonder. The question of whether a Christian message appears from these letters and shapes, and whether the Christian message is also about how a Christian message emerges in and from the fragments of the material world, is prompted by the very intermedial materiality of the text's form. Which way to read – *how* to read as much as *in what direction* – becomes a foundational question in encountering Optatian.[8] A question, that is, of how form requires performance. The form of Optatian's artwork demands an intense and continuing form of attention (or an instant act of dismissal), but he is certainly not to be read aloud.

For generations of classical scholars, Optatian has had bad press. Cameron's insult may seem overdetermined in an amusingly unaware manner, but it is nothing if not typical in its dismissiveness.[9] Even the fact that Optatian appears to have written a book of such poetry and sent it to the emperor, Constantine, who wrote back, and indeed brought Optatian back from exile on the strength of the book, has not yet led to Optatian taking up an iconic place in the history of the cultural politics between the centre of power (*il principe*) and the elite artist (*il poeta*) in the Roman empire.[10] The failure of Ovid to sway Augustus with his elegiacs from Tomis has always fitted so much more easily into the privileged model of the doomed, romantic artist, suffering for his art (even when Ovid's poetry, like the late verse of Wordsworth, seems closer to sycophancy than speaking revolutionary truth to power).[11] The instrumental success of Optatian's unspeakable writing seems an embarrassment for both art and power.

Yet, in recent years, Optatian has begun to find a more illustrious place in critical opinion. In particular, for both Aaron Pelttari and Michael Squire, and for the authors collected together by Squire and Wienand, thanks to their careful reading and sophistication of argumentation, Optatian has been understood to raise a set of aesthetic questions that speak sharply to modernity, and thus assimilate him to the most insistent issues of contemporary theory: How to interpret? What is the physical experience

[7] Brilliantly discussed by Squire (2016).
[8] Optatian, which Derrida would have loved, is made for puns in French about *sens*.
[9] Florid insults catalogued in Squire (2017: 25–27).
[10] For the letters between Optatian and Constantine, see Polara (1973: 1: 1–6); Jerome *Chron* ad ann. 329 records the story. For *il poeta and il principe*, see Barchiesi (1994).
[11] For the relation of Optatian and Ovid on exile, see Brouhat (2017).

of reading? How does reading relate to time and difference? What is the link between the visual, material text and the production of sense? What is surface meaning and how do we progress beyond it?[12] But, equally importantly, Optatian also thus opens a vista on to the cultural politics of late antiquity. The claim by Michael Roberts that the Latin poetry of late antiquity is distinguished by its 'jewelled style' has been smartly combined by critics with a heightened interest in a poetics of scale, and further linked with the productive idea that just as *spolia* make monuments out of the shattered fragments of the military past, so poetry of late antiquity shores the fragments of past literature into a monument of present spectacular self-assertion.[13] Such a broad view of the poetics of late antiquity can provide a frame in which Optatian has seemed a striking limit case, and thus a fascinating paradigm of the key vectors of the artistic activity of its era (rather than a vivid demonstration of freakish futility). In short, Optatian's commitment to 'pure form' fits well now with the contemporary critical fascination with form.

The questions of the poetics of scale, the fragmentation and reconstruction of literary tradition, the temporality of making sense (and the making sense of temporality), will indeed all return as thematic nexuses in this book, along with the relation between surface meaning and interpretation in a context where Christianity is arguing for its place at the cultural table. Indeed, we shall also return to the importance of intermediality and materiality in Christian discourse, a materiality that grounds humans in the fallen fleshliness of mortality, but which longs for the transcendence of spirit. But the reason for starting with Optatian stems precisely from the question he poses so vividly of how to think about the politics and aesthetics of form in late antiquity – my subtitle (the preposterous poetics will have to wait for now. . .). For it is not possible to appreciate the purchase of these more recent re-evaluations of Optatian in terms of form unless they are set against the modern history of the idea of form.

'Form' has a remarkably complex recent development as a critical term, a narrative that is all but obscured in most writing about antiquity. But it is certainly not by chance that at least some of the contemporary re-evaluation of Optatian comes from scholars trained in art history. When Roger Fry helped to introduce the notion of formalism from European art circles to British audiences just before the First World War – a moment

[12] Squire (2017); Peltarri (2014); Squire and Wienand eds (2017); each with further bibliography.
[13] Roberts (1989); on *spolia* as a model, see Elsner and Hernández Lobato (2017); Formisano and Sogno (2010).

taken as foundational in the journey towards abstraction – it is indeed a juncture repeatedly seen as the triumph of 'pure form' (Fry's iconic phrase, the very words Michael Squire tellingly uses to cue such history in his rehabilitation of Optatian).[14] Immanuel Kant's insistence in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that pure judgements of beauty were made 'according to mere form', and 'properly concern only form' proved seminal for the subsequent development of aesthetic arguments; but, through the late nineteenth century (thanks in part to simplified readings of Kant), Kant's linkage of the form of art and aesthetic experience found radical and more popular expression in the 'art for art's sake' movement.[15] Fry's appreciation of 'pure form' is explicitly an heir to these trajectories; and it privileges a purely abstract art to match. The rejection of mainstream Victorian art in favour of the Impressionists is part of this teleological journey towards abstract expressionism. Formalism – or formalist modernism – is, in this story, a necessary victory over mere representational fancy, or what Fry called 'an insistence on trivial verisimilitude'.[16] Fry was well aware of the work of Riegl, whose idea of *Kunstwollen* was integral to his understanding of formalism, and Riegl's intensive and deeply influential work on late antiquity brings the study of formalism in modern art history back to this book's central focus: the transition from classical to Christian art in late antiquity is theorized to support modernism's formalist vocation.[17] It is within this history of the necessity – not the triviality – of formalism that Optatian is valued now, precisely for his sophisticated engagement in the space between the representational signs of language and the abstract signs of the materiality of letters, lines, shapes. 'Semantically meaningless units of text acquire sacred significance to the contemplative reader'[18]: pure form can thus become theologically meaningful. The focused use of letters as disruptive signs in modern art, from René Magritte to Cy Twombly (and its influence on music and other art forms) may be able to find a distant, lost ancestor in the *carmen cancellatum*.[19] The late antique poetics

[14] See the essay on Fry's formalism in Fried (2014: 195–223), and, most recently, the exceptional work of Rose (2019).
[15] See Rose (2017) for the response to Kant; and Rose (2019) for its development in Fry. A far longer history of aesthetics – before Baumgarten – has recently been proposed by Dyrness (2019), extending the celebrated work of Belting (1994). The quotations from Kant are from Kant (2000) 114.
[16] Fry (1932: 68). [17] See, in particular, Elsner (2003, 2004, 2006).
[18] Heath (2010: 539). She cites the *gematria* used in Barn. 9. 7 and Clem. Al. *Stro.* 6.11.84.
[19] As noted explicitly by Orban (1997: 22); see also Morley (2007), and for the musical scores Kotz (2007). For this understanding of Twombly, see the outstanding study by Jacobus (2016).

of Optatian can now make specific sense within the agenda of modernism's privilege of formalism.

Art history may provide one narrative of form, and the critics' use of the image of *spolia* for textual production is a token of the will to bring material culture of late antiquity closer to its literary work.[20] In literary criticism, however, a different trajectory comes into play. For our purposes here, a rather longer and more intricate story can be said to culminate in the late nineteenth century, which made form – in multiple forms – a central term of cultural discourse across Europe. One trajectory can be drawn, for example, from Shaftesbury's marvellous expression, 'the forms which form', which was translated into the German milieu by Hamann with the language of *Bildung*, which in turn strongly influenced Eberhard, who taught Schleiermacher; and it is against Schleiermacher's – and others' – commitment to *Bildung* (and its institutionalized role in the Humboldtian universities) that modern notions of *Lebensform* take shape.[21] Yet Hegel, as ever for the nineteenth century, remains a looming presence in this history, not least because of his hugely influential articulation of three art forms – symbolic, classical and romantic, a system in which his privileging of Greek antiquity insists on 'the authentic reality of the idea of the classical art-form'.[22] This is an argument that makes the link between art history and literary criticism pressing, as it makes the transition from the classical a crucial turning point. (Thus Riegl's art history, influenced by Hegel, takes late antiquity as its prime test case.)[23] Indeed, so important was the idea of form for the nineteenth century across Europe in the wake of Hegel that Georg Simmel could see the whole project of literary modernism as 'a struggle of life against form *as* such, against the principle of form'.[24] Simmel had a case. As Angela Leighton and Kirstie Blair have analysed most incisively, and Meredith Martin and Yopie Prins have extended with regard to poetic metre, the notion of form had become instrumental and normative in the interconnected regimes of literary criticism, religious regulation, social manners and architectural understanding – and even, through the idea of organic form, biological

[20] A move anticipated in the current fascination with *lithika*, poems about gems and stone, prompted by the new Posidippus: Gutzwiller ed (2005); Elsner (2014); see also Squire (2011), Petrain (2014).

[21] See especially Horlacher (2003). Wittgenstein's hugely influential use of the term Lebensform is taken in a different direction by Agamben (2013), which also goes back to late antiquity for its grounding. On Schleiermacher's role, I have learnt in particular from Jackson-Ravenscroft (2019).

[22] Hegel (1970 [1835]: 1: 393). See James (2009); Rutter (2010); Kottman and Squire eds (2017); each with extensive bibliographies. Hegel's influence on Riegl is undoubted: see, with further bibliography, Neher (2004).

[23] See Elsner (2006). [24] Simmel (1918: 11). See in general Jay (1993).

science.[25] Indeed, the way in which form crosses these different territories of cultural authority makes it especially labile as a critical term, a shifting and linking way of perceiving, rather than the fixed structure it is often taken to indicate. So, it seems evident to Charles Kingsley that firm faith requires firm form in poetry, as it requires proper form in liturgy: 'a poetry of doubt . . . can never possess clear and sound form, even organic form at all. How can you put into form that thought which is by its very nature formless?'[26] Walter Pater here is a paradigmatic figure: bridging literature and art history, experimenting with form, discussing form – and fascinated, not least in *Marius the Epicurean*, by late antiquity's transition between the classical and the Christian, a move he conceptualized through his deep reading of Hegel. So Pater wrote: '*Form* . . . is everything.'[27] For the Tractarians, the proper forms of worship required architectural transformation, which could in turn be regarded as a 'form of poesie', and which transformed the cityscapes particularly of Britain but of France and Germany too.[28] 'Forms of worship' became an increasingly fraught source of contention in Victorian Britain, as, indeed, architectural reform enacted a transformation of the cityscape, and the forms of poetry, especially metre, took on a new cultural insistence.[29] To change the shape and organization of a church went hand in hand with changing the order of service and thus the spiritual life of the worshipper. When Tennyson said 'I dread losing hold of forms', he was, as Blair notes, talking about religious order, for all that his grasp of poetic form was iconic.[30] Through such changes, 'good form' – how to behave in society – also became a heightened and contentious arena, not to mention educational reform (what happens in the form room), another major Victorian crisis. Form, that is, the key term of my subtitle, comes trailing clouds of intense and productive dissension,

[25] Leighton (2007); Blair (2012); Prins (1999) (2000); Martin (2012); also Caroline Levine (2006, 2007). The Russian Formalism of Viktor Shlovsky is often taken as a starting point for literary formalism, rather too enthusiastically, important though he proved. Maslov (2015) shows this influence strikingly in classics. Raymond Williams (1977), extending Shlovsky into more cultural areas, and Wolfson (1997), working from Romantic poetry, have been particularly influential on recent discussions of formalism.

[26] Kingsley (1853: 460), discussed by Blair (2012: 1); on Kingsley and classics, see Goldhill (2011a: 251–258), with bibliography. On poetic style as faith, see now Hurley (2018).

[27] Pater (1893: 8). On Pater see the fine collection in Martindale, Evangelista and Prettejohn eds (2017).

[28] Blair (2012: 51–84). On architectural reform I have had my say in Goldhill (2015b: 138–183); on the international development of heritage see the outstanding Swenson (2013).

[29] On forms of worship and architecture see White (1962); Bentley (1978); Brooks and Saint eds (1995); Yates (1999); Goldhill (2015b: 45–51).

[30] Blair (2012: 6).

especially from the era when our current institutions of literary criticism were taking shape. Form, to use the language of the race track (or the prison), has form.

In recent decades in classical criticism as in other literary domains, form has again become a focus of attention.[31] For many years, especially when paired naively against content, a turn to form was troped negatively as 'mere formalism' (the influence of modernism here, as Simmel defined it, is patent). The inevitable and well-taken backlash against the opposition of form and content has led to a recognition of how form and ideology are mutually implicative; indeed, as Frederick Jameson insists, there is an 'ideology of form'.[32] This has been particularly productive in genres that have a strong institutional and generic identity, such as epinicean poetry or tragedy in the classical city. Victoria Wohl, for example, has argued with great acumen precisely for the political purchase of form in Euripidean tragedy, as, for Leslie Kurke, Glenn Most, Evelyn Krummen and others, the form of epinician narrative has itself been seen as part of the dynamics of reciprocity and the construction of fame in a way that self-consciously goes beyond the earlier and more restrictive formalism of Elroy Bundy.[33] Exploring the logic of digressions in Herodotus' construction of the politics of cultural difference and self-representation, as a mode of historical explanation, has changed the perception of the normativity of his writing – as has the tension between the models of intellectual analysis and the tragic narrative of Thucydides' account of the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian war.[34]

This book, however, while it recognizes and builds on such criticism's ability to combine aesthetic and political argument, necessarily takes on a more flexible and extended perspective on form. It goes beyond the focus on single genres and institutions in two particular ways. First, it looks at particular modes across different genres. So, in chapter 1, ecphrasis, which is recognized as a mode of writing in ancient theoretical texts (that is, a recognized *form*, if you will, but not a genre), and, with a different

[31] See for helpful and incisive accounts of so-called new formalism, Levinson (2007); Attridge (2008). Caroline Levine (2006, 2007) is instructive on the link between form and socio-cultural history, central to this book. Neer (2005) argues elegantly for a 'worldly – that is, political – formalism' (26) in art history. It is surprising that Grethlein (2017: 37) writes: 'Neither in literary scholarship nor in Art History is form held in high regard'. See below n30.

[32] Jameson (1981: 141).

[33] Wohl (2015); also Goldhill (in press); Kurke (1991); Most (1985); Krummen (1990); Bundy (1986). Maslov (2015) links this Pindaric interest with Russian formalism. Quint (2018) is exemplary of a turn to form in Latin literary criticism.

[34] Hartog (1998) and more generally (2015); Rood (1998); Greenwood (2006); Dewald (2005).

organization of ideas, in modern theory too, is analysed as it takes shape in different genres and across different social and historical contexts. It looks thus not just at the different enactments of a mode in different genres – the formal aspects of difference, as it were – but also at the varied ideological affordances that such a mode takes on in these different generic frames. In the same way, what happens to the tropes of love poetry when they are restructured in the form of an epyllion is part of chapter 2. In these discussions, the poetics of scale, and the temporality of making sense, also come to the fore. Second, where much of the best work on form in ancient literature has focused, as I have mentioned, on particular genres or particular works, in this book, however, I also discuss the interrelations *between* different forms: how epyllion, epic and epigram take shape in dynamic relation to each other and work self-consciously in the space between generic affiliation and a look over the boundary to different forms. This is not a question of the *Kreuzung der Gattungen*, a standard modern critical recognition of Hellenistic poetry's hybridity (which is also keenly relevant to the polyphonous voice of tragedy in the city, which takes into its goat-song world different genres of singing and speaking),[35] but rather a double understanding that literary history is also cultural history, and texts are formed within a broad – cross-generic – literary culture. Here, the fragmentation and reconstruction of literary tradition becomes a key issue. This volume looks at prose and verse, in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic and across a range of social and political contextualizations. It focuses primarily on textual sources, but in many cases on textual sources that are about material culture – sculptures, paintings, buildings: as with the modern history of the category of form, the link between art history and literary history is integral to the development of late antique culture. *Form*, then, provides a central and linking question of the various chapters to come: and for me it is essential to see how form is both an aesthetic and political issue. Or, most simply, the question of form is a question of how aesthetics has a purchase in the social and cultural issues of the day. As we will see, this is no simple matter.

In several of my chapters, texts that are not familiar parts of the canon will be analysed and, indeed, made central to my arguments about the politics and aesthetics of form in late antiquity. These recognitions or rehabilitations are in their turn part of the contemporary re-evaluation of the full range of writing of late antiquity. As Optatian has come into

[35] See e.g. Swift (2010); Andujar, Coward and Hadjimichael eds (2018); or for e.g. legal rhetoric (from a large bibliography) Goldhill (1997); Buxton (1982); Hesk (2000).

view, now differently because of the changing sense of form, so too texts which have been treated by mainstream classical scholarship as marginal to aesthetics (Paulinus of Nola, say; *Joseph and Aseneth*; the first four books of the *Palatine Anthology*) require such re-evaluation. This is not simply a question of changing taste, or appropriating antiquity to modern trendy ideas. What I am seeking to do is to find a language of criticism to talk of the poetics of late antiquity that is capable of responding to the new social and political conditions of late antiquity and its new styles of literary production – and which does not merely reproduce the Hegelian teleology of the journey towards modernity, or the less grounded avatars of such teleology that insist on the secondariness or belatedness of the post-classical.

Late antiquity, then, is the final term of my subtitle, and I will resist defining it with as much design as I have resisted offering a definition of form. Late antiquity, like form, is a critical term where the historicization of its development is crucial to its significance (it is a modern term, of course: no one knew they were living in late antiquity).[36] It is well known that the nineteenth century's obsession with both classical Greece and Republican Rome had the effect of creating a model of a literary and cultural Golden Age, which constructed later literature as epigonal ('silver', 'corrupt', 'degenerate' and so forth). The invention of the term Hellenistic (a process in which the historian Johann Gustav Droysen was instrumental),[37] and its application to a period of history created a stadial interstice between classical and imperial Greek, in the same way as 'Silver Latin' became a foil to 'Golden Latin Artistry'.[38] From the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the increasing separation of classical studies and theology, and the concomitant ideologically charged and aggressively regulated distanciation between the Christian texts of antiquity and the texts of dominant Greco-Roman culture, institutionalized a double and doubly distorted vision of ancient Greek and Latin writing. Such a vision – and its normative basis is clear enough, if immensely complicated in its institutional praxis and intellectual functioning – drove a wedge between Christian or Jewish writing and other writing in the ancient city, and oversimplified affiliations into 'Christian', 'Jewish', 'Pagan', where

[36] The best discussion of the term is Herzog (2002d) who traces its nineteenth-century roots. See also e.g. Brown (1998, 1992); Bowersock, Brown and Grabar (1999); Rousseau ed (2012); Cameron (2012) – and many other books which specify late antiquity as their frame.
[37] Momigliano (1994: 147–161).
[38] I use Golden Latin Artistry just to cite my verse composition teacher, *honoris causa*, Patrick Wilkinson: Wilkinson (1963).

boundaries were in reality not only more fluid than such simple and rigid terminology suggests, but also policed in quite different ways in different times, places and communities. What is more, curricula – and the scholarly work that fed such curricula – put fences also between what came to be ossified as the medieval and the ancient.

'Late antiquity' has developed most recently as a critical term in order to cross those boundaries productively. In terms of periodization, although arguments have continued to simmer about its range of dates and topography, late antiquity as an idea requires a recognition of a continuum between the Empire, the gradually Christianized Empire, and the medieval era (and the interactions that took place not only across the Empire but also with a world beyond the boundaries of the Empire). Particularly in the West, where Latin provides an unbroken tradition through to the Renaissance (and beyond, it might be claimed), rupture – even and especially in the Foucauldian sense – has come to seem a modern imposition on more complex patterns of tradition, inheritance and gradual transformation.[39] Even in the Greek East too, where as late as the twelfth century in Byzantium, novels were being written in homage to the novels of the imperial era, themselves replete with Homeric and other literary heritages, Byzantium's rediscovery of Hellenism is being seen as an intricate process of constructed tradition.[40] Equally importantly, the term late antiquity has allowed studies that have reconnected the intermeshed world of the cities and literary cultures of the first six centuries of the common era. From Clement in Alexandria negotiating classical literature for a Christian readership and Christian writing for a non-Christian audience (or Philo, earlier, for Jews), through Josephus bringing Jewish scriptures in a fully Hellenized mode to a Roman audience, to Jerome struggling with his love of Cicero, or Augustine with his passion for Virgil, or Synesius converting to become a bishop but never deserting Plato, through to the *Palatine Anthology* collecting Christian and very unChristian epigrams in tenth-century Byzantium, the interfaces and interactions between intellectuals of different and often complexly fissured affiliations have become a key way of understanding the milieu of ancient culture.[41] The extremist, separatist, ideologues – Christian, Jewish or pagan – are not so much the norm, as a violent and loud cry against the mixed and fluid society in

[39] The new Cambridge University Press series edited by Catherine Conybeare, called *Cultures of Latin*, is designed to emphasize this point.
[40] Kaldellis (2007a). [41] See e.g. Eshelman (2012); Sandwell (2007); Boyarin (2009).

which they usually found themselves. Late antiquity is a polemical term, then, designed to recalibrate a scholarly perception of the transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian institution, and its continuation into Medieval Europe. As Herzog has outlined, how late antiquity has been conceptualized is formed by a teleology of modernity, an Hegelian inheritance.[42]

I have given 'late antiquity' as a marker in my subtitle, partly because the majority of the material discussed in the book is late imperial (to use a traditional chronological schema), but it will become immediately clear that late antiquity is used with an even more lax sense of temporality than usual. The six chapters travel across much of Greek and Latin literature – it is hard to write about any Greek without thinking about Homer – but the primary focus of each chapter includes texts that may be as early as the first century and run as late as the tenth century (as Garth Fowden encourages us, my scope runs the millennium from 'Augustus to . . . Avicenna'[43]). But each chapter is also concerned with the construction of tradition, both in the writing of a text and in its circulation – how texts are located in a sense of time by writers and readers. It is for me important that a text such as the pseudepigraphic *Joseph and Aseneth*, subject of the fifth chapter, which may have been first written even before the first century, takes on its significance (also) as it is re-read and rewritten in different communities especially across the next six centuries, as it circulates and is reformulated; its treatment by scholars in the twentieth century also reveals a great deal about the continuing, ideologically inflected religious reframing of antiquity (the condition in response to which late antiquity became a potent affordance of critical discourse). So, too, the *Palatine Anthology*, a collection of the tenth century CE is replete with epigrams from the third century BCE onwards, and in its palimpsestic reordering is thus also layered with a *history* of aesthetics as well as its own contemporary agenda. One difficulty – or delight – when working with these late antique texts is that any attempt to specify a temporally bound cultural moment always has to take a detour through the active construction of tradition, in affiliation and distanciation from the texts and perspectives of the past.[44] The logic of *spolia* requires such a dynamic and shifting gaze – to recognize a triumph of contemporary assertion that is nonetheless made up out of the fragmentation and reconstruction of the privileged paradigms of the

[42] Herzog (2002d). [43] Fowden (2010: 5).
[44] Up until modernity, of course. For the reception of late antiquity, see now Malm and Cullhed ed (2018).

past. Late antiquity offers a particularly rich example of how being of one's own time demands such a complex positionality. I use the term 'late antiquity' in my subtitle, therefore, not just to indicate the predominance of later texts in this book, but also to mark the book's commitment to acknowledging the impact of a fissile and competitive cultural frame for the production and consumption of these texts. This is a self-positioning of the book as a contribution to a reading practice informed not just by Reception Theory but also by new studies of manuscript transmission and the performativity of literary texts within divisive, dissenting and multiple affirmative social and cultural frames. 'Late antiquity' is intended to cue a world where Christians, Jews and so-called pagans cohabited in real or imaginary proximity, and developed their thinking in (real or imaginary) dynamic interaction between communities, and where affiliation – what allows someone to be called or call themselves a Christian or a Jew or a Greek or a Roman – can flare between aggressive and aggressively policed self-determination and a far more labile and uncertain commitment, normed by a long tradition of civic life, imperial structures, and the exigencies of a society undergoing significant social, political and religious transformation. Amid such a hybrid social mix, there were also groups who formed or projected communities that were stridently separatist, culturally, intellectually and physically (such as the Essenes in Palestine, say). Yet even in the case of the nascent rabbinical communities, the Jewish intellectuals instrumental in the formation of the Talmud and represented in it, how rigorously ignorant of the surrounding and dominant cultures their writing can remain is a vexed issue, for them and for subsequent generations of scholars, where all too often contemporary ideological understandings of social or intellectual separation (or purity) affect scholarly analysis.[45] Many of the texts to be discussed in this book are not regularly included in the curricula of classics courses, even on late antiquity. Part of the aim of the book is to see how such texts also contribute to our understanding of the cultural politics of late antiquity – to see the poetics of late antiquity in its full richness and variety.

The book is entitled 'Preposterous Poetics' after the fourth chapter, which looks specifically at Nonnus. Nonnus of Panopolis – the most influential Greek poet of the fifth century – captures much of what excites me about this era. Nonnus wrote a forty-eight-book epic, the *Dionysiaca*, which is a wild and rambunctious epic about the pagan god

[45] Boyarin (2015); Hayes (2002); Lapin (2012); Kalmin (2006); Rubinstein (2003); Hezser (1997); Lieberman (1942, 1950); Schwartz (2001a, 2009).

Dionysus. Its flair for interlocked and overlapping narratives, its bold redrafting of Homeric idiom, and its sexy, aggressive, conflict-strewn storyline was strikingly influential on later antique poetry – and is fundamental for understanding the temporality of narrative in late antiquity. What makes such an epic all the more remarkable is that Nonnus' other great work is a Paraphrase of the Gospel of John – into hexameters, full of philosophical phrasing. That is, Nonnus' Paraphrase takes the *koinê* Greek of the Gospels – the simple language of the people (a deeply freighted idea, for sure) – and turns it into the highest cultural language of Homeric verse, the highly artificial poetic tradition of 1,300 years earlier, which he further recreates and re-versifies as the language of philosophical thought. Nonnus typifies the cultural battles over the registers of Christianity in late antiquity. How does Christianity relate to what it dismissed as paganism, while relying on the institutions, literature and language of the Empire it had taken over? How does the privileged language of 'paganism' find a place within the new structures of Christian cultural value? How philosophical, how simple, is the language of Christianity to be? How is his self-positioning, his affiliation, enacted between an epic on a pagan god and a theologically informed verse redraft of a Gospel? How, in short, is such literary writing to find its place in time, and thus contribute to the cultural expression of the era? The term 'preposterous' is used – it is a good example of the search for a new language for late antique poetics – to indicate specifically how Nonnus' epic writing embodies a practice and theory of temporality. It marks how – under pressure, I argue, from Christian theorizations of time and practices of typological reading – Nonnus is prepared to imagine a world where mythic narratives swirl into versions of each other, where the chronology of these narratives becomes easily reversed so that the stories of the before come after, and where what has not yet happened is always already prequelled in the narratives of the past or the here and now. Hence – with due regard to the etymology of the term – the choice of 'preposterous'. The preposterous is, the chapter argues, a mark of Nonnus' specifically late antique Dionysiac poetics.

Nonnus, then, is a hero of this book. But in his case above all, it will also be apparent that this book makes no claim to exhaustive or comprehensive coverage. It is designedly essayistic: a short book on a large topic. Each of the six chapters introduces and explores a particular, major problem of the aesthetics and politics of form in late antiquity, and each does so through a particular and selective range of texts – from what is, after all, by far the biggest archive of Greek and Latin from antiquity. (There is more imperial

Greek epic than epic from all other periods put together.[46]) There are, however, also many links between the thematic concerns of the different chapters. Some I have already mentioned. So, the poetics of scale – how big or how small a poem should be, what is the aesthetic impact of such condensation or expansion – returns in the relation between epic, epyllion and epigram that runs through the first four chapters. If Homer can be 'in a nutshell', what of a love story? How much culture do you need to be cultured? What form of attention does the miniature demand? The poetics of fragmentation – the dissolute poetics of the epyllion, the discrete refusal of interconnectedness in an anthology, the disjunctive narrative argumentation of the Talmud – fragmentation, that is, as an exercise in form, links especially Chapters 2, 3 and 6. How coherent and thus formative is the past? The corollary effort to construct a cultural tradition and fit one's own work into it is an area of contested cultural self-assertion that is evident in each chapter, and is especially important in the interfaces between professed Christian, Jewish and 'pagan' literature (where tradition becomes a particular battle-ground for cultural dominance). The dismissiveness with which much of the literature of late antiquity has been treated by modern scholars is also prompted by the self-consciousness of the weight of tradition demonstrated by the texts of late antiquity themselves, always ready to see themselves in time: what makes the texts of late antiquity in their own eyes modern is explicitly raised in Chapter 3, and the sense of a fragmented and precarious tradition in and against which the performance of self-positioning tales place, echoes through all the chapters. How narrative time is reorganized by the vectors of Christianity and rabbinical Judaism, even in texts which appear to eschew any direct gestures of religious affiliation, dominates the last three chapters. That the organization of narrative time should follow from a heightened concern with a fragmentation of tradition should seem self-evidently significant. The mode of ecphrasis, as alluded to earlier, becomes a fundamental form through which the question of what perspective is to be taken on the culture of the past is articulated in late antiquity: how to see, and how to write what one sees, is a question of what perspective is to be taken on the art-work: how to direct a vision of what matters. In each case of these thematic nexuses, the question of the aesthetics of form leads directly and necessarily to a cultural politics of form: this is how literary form becomes a contributing and normative element of *Lebensform*. Form becomes an

[46] A field that is rapidly changing: see the outstanding contributions of Kneebone (in press); Greensmith (in press).

engaged performance of cultural self-positioning. Such literary writing plays a crucial role, it is argued, thus, in the cultural and political transformations of late antiquity: this is how aesthetics and politics are mutually implicative.

Preposterous Poetics: The Aesthetics and Politics of Form in Late Antiquity aims, then, to use a specific lens – that of shifting ideas of form in late antiquity (and in contemporary criticism) – to explore how literary works contribute to the social and cultural transformations of the era. The book insists that the aesthetic and the political collaborate in such transformations: that literary form contributes to the making of *Lebensform* – not just as a general claim, but specifically with regard to the developments of late antiquity that have been so crucial to the ongoing history of Western culture. That so many of the texts I will discuss have not been made fully a part of the discussion of how late antiquity takes shape is regrettable testimony, this book argues, to the impoverishment of the understanding of it that has resulted from previous generations of disregard, especially of the role of its Greek literature in such cultural transformations. These essays are intended to contribute, then, to an ongoing debate about how the culture of late antiquity develops and why literary form matters in such a historical process.

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