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ALTERNATIVES TO THE CLASSICAL PAST IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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***'sine numine nomina'*: Ausonius and the Oulipo**

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One of the crucial moments -- the *locus classicus*, one might almost say -- of Christianity's rupture with the classical tradition in late antiquity comes in the final correspondence of Paulinus of Nola with his mentor, Ausonius of Bordeaux. The story is a familiar one: after years of exchanging letters, frequently in verse, Paulinus had gone silent and failed to reply. Ausonius' frustration at this break was expressed in a series of increasingly reproachful -- although not entirely humourless -- letters.¹ In one of these, Ausonius concludes with the wish and the prayer that the Boeotian Muses might bring Paulinus back to his Latin:

hanc precor, hanc uocem, Boeotia numina, Musae

accipite et Latiis uatem reuocate Camenis.²

Among the other things he addresses in his eventual reply, the reference to the Muses and the use of *numina* here seems to have brought a particularly stern response from Paulinus. After excusing himself for his tardiness, he begins his response proper with the question: 'Why do you order to return to my affection, father, the Muses I have sent away? Hearts promised to

¹ Both sides of the correspondence are dealt with in detail in Witke (1971) 3–74; see also the accounts in Walsh (1975) 20–4; Trout (1999) 62–85; Conybeare (2000) 151–2; Roberts (1989) 22–4. The sequence and numbering of the letters presented in R. Green (1991) 222–31 and 648–9 seem to me the most plausible, and they are followed here; note that Green also includes Paulinus' replies at 708–19.

² Auson. *Ep.* 21.73–4: 'This I ask for, Muses, Boeotian powers, this I pray: reclaim your poet, call him back to Latium and the Camenae.'

Christ deny the Camenae, nor are they open to Apollo'.³ Paulinus then goes on to comment on the absurdity of Ausonius' prayer, ridiculing his reliance on non-entities such as the Muses in place of the Christian God.⁴ The Muses, Paulinus insists, are *sine numine nomina*: merely 'names without power'.⁵

On the surface, this may seem to amount to 'an artistic manifesto'.⁶ Certainly it seems to set out a firm distinction between classical and Christian poetry, and indeed between classical and Christian culture. Robert Markus saw in this a token of 'a widespread hardening among Christians towards secular learning and letters', and compared the attitude of Paulinus to that of Julian, who had once sought to isolate Christians from engaging with classical culture on broadly similar grounds in his so-called Edict on Education.⁷ In both cases the impediment lay in the extent to which participation in classical culture, and literature especially, necessitated the involvement of the classical divinities. For both Julian and Paulinus, 'the new conceptual and ethical world of Christianity' required a decisive break with the 'pagan' past.⁸ What had been unacceptable as imperial legislation was now embraced as a way forward by (at least) some influential Christians: and where Julian had once stood

³ Paul. Nol. *Carm.* 10.19–20: Quid abdicatas in meam curam, pater, redire Musas praecipis? / negant Camenis nec patent Apollini dicata Christo pectora. The Camenae were Italian divinities, by this time conventionally identified with the Muses: for both Ausonius and Paulinus here they surely connote a potential return to Italy as well as to poetry.

⁴ Paul. Nol. *Carm.* 10.110–12: reuocandum me tibi credam, / cum steriles fundas non ad diuina precatus, / Castalidis supplex auerso numine Musis?

⁵ Paul. Nol. *Carm.* 10.115.

⁶ Witke (1971) 44.

⁷ Markus (1974) 7, 3. For the nature of Julian's law, see especially Banchich (1993).

⁸ Roberts (1989) 38.

accused of misreading the mood of his times, Ausonius instead has come to be criticised for clinging to a ‘cold and conventional deference to the Christian faith’.⁹ Julian’s radicalism is deprecated while that of Paulinus is more often praised.¹⁰

Yet the dispute between Ausonius and Paulinus is not so clear-cut. Firstly, the grand rhetorical opposition between classical and Christian attitudes is partly undermined from the beginning by the fact that this highly literary and classical correspondence is being kept up. Michael Roberts and Dennis Trout have both recognised the ‘seeming dissonance of form and content’ as Paulinus makes his case against classical poetry in elegiacs, iambics and hexameters; for Roberts, the response of Paulinus almost amounts to ‘a sort of literary joke, a parody of rhetoric in which the poet’s point turns out to be quite the reverse of what he is actually arguing’.¹¹ In similar terms, Jennifer Ebbeler emphasises Paulinus’ continued willingness to place Ausonius in the role of *pater* and so to conform to the epistolary conventions long established in this correspondence; she therefore sees no radical break in the relationship, and certainly not one motivated primarily by religion.¹²

The Muses, nevertheless, remain a sticking point; and whether or not Paulinus intended his views to bring an end to his relationship with his former master, intellectually it is difficult to see him as anything other than intransigent on this point. Paulinus soundly rejects the Muses as a divine source of poetic inspiration; indeed, in subsequent poems he would focus on scriptural themes and go on to construct something resembling ‘a

⁹ Dill (1899) 168, quoted in Walsh (1967) 2. Witke (1971) 6 similarly calls Ausonius ‘a conventional Christian’, largely followed by Conybeare (2000) 151.

¹⁰ Thus Conybeare (2000) 151–2 presents Paulinus as ‘at pains to demonstrate to Ausonius that his Christian commitment has changed the scope of language’.

¹¹ Trout (1999) 83, with further discussion at 79–85; Roberts (1985) 276, (1989) 22–4.

¹² Ebbeler (2007) 312.

christological theory of inspiration'.¹³ Nor was this approach unique to Paulinus: it was increasingly common for Christian Latin poets to invoke the Holy Spirit (as did Juvencus) or Christ (as did Proba) in the role of the Muses.¹⁴ Paulinus, however, is not merely stating a preference in his letter but is declaring invalid the approach of Ausonius. Although there was perhaps some sign of friendly intent in his statement of the case in classical metre -- and for all that the real wounds inflicted in this final correspondence were perhaps personal and not poetical -- Ausonius is nonetheless implicitly invited to admit his own obsolescence.¹⁵ Paulinus consigns Ausonius to the (pagan) classical tradition, and rejects his reliance on the Muses in order to break a path for a new Christian poetry.

Nevertheless, there remains something odd about this version of events, and it lies in the emphasis on the Muses. As Charles Witke has pointed out, it requires an unexpected approach to classical poetry: 'If Paulinus really felt that Apollo and the Muses were divine, he is probably the first person to think so in centuries.'¹⁶ This may be to overstate the case, but it is surely true that few poets had ever understood the process of inspiration to be quite so uncomplicated. Indeed, a recent discussion of the place of the Muses throughout classical literature has rightly emphasised 'the intricate games played in the name of inspiration'.¹⁷ To ignore this is to allow Paulinus to set the terms for us as well as for Ausonius: it is to fall into

¹³ Curtius (1953) 235; for the shift in Paulinus' poetry, see R. Green (1971) 18; Trout (1999) 85.

¹⁴ Curtius (1953) 235; for Proba and Juvencus, see especially R. Green (1997), (2004).

¹⁵ Ausonius' accusations of 'impiety' and unflattering references to Paulinus' wife might be assigned a significant role in the collapse of the friendship. Trout (1999) 83 notes that 'the choice of medium' may have 'reassured Ausonius that all was not lost', but also recognises (at 79) that Paulinus' dualist presentation of poetic practice required Ausonius 'to locate himself in only one set of categories'.

¹⁶ Witke (1971) 45.

¹⁷ Spentzou (2002) 22.

the trap that Paulinus has set. For if Ausonius believes straightforwardly in the Muses, he can be criticised as a pagan -- a misguided representative of a dying culture. If, on the other hand, his use of them is dismissed as merely conventional, then this only serves to confirm Christian prejudices against the pagan classics: that the tradition they took part in was not just dying but dead, and that classical poetry in late antiquity could be nothing but bloodless and uninspired.¹⁸ On these terms, Ausonius was either a poet taking inspiration from the pagan gods; or else was uninspired, and so no poet at all.

Paulinus thus collapses into simplicities what in Ausonius -- and in classical poetry in general -- was a rather more complex relationship with the classical tradition. Accordingly, we should not be too ready to accept the picture presented in Paulinus: nor should we too easily accept that Ausonius' engagement with his classical models, and therefore with the Muses, is a sign of religious and cultural conservatism or simply a lack of imagination. Instead, I will argue that, despite demonstrating a profound familiarity with classical conventions, the poetry of Ausonius cannot be straightforwardly labelled as classical. Indeed, at times Paulinus emerges as the more conventional figure -- conventional at least by some measures -- while Ausonius comes to seem the more radical. Ultimately, my intention is to take Ausonius seriously as a poet and as a Christian, and to challenge the frequent assumption that he was disengaged from the social and cultural developments of his time. His work may not fit our expectations of a Christian poet, or indeed of poetry in general -- but, as Nugent has pointed out, the fault in that case may lie in our expectations.¹⁹ At the very least, Ausonius cannot be condemned as nothing more than a bland continuator of the classical tradition.

¹⁸ Thus R. Green (1971) 16 sees the issue from Paulinus' point of view, with the classical Muses appearing not as mere 'figures of speech' but as 'false gods': in which case Ausonius could be condemned either for paganism or for an unthinking reliance on vapid convention.

¹⁹ Nugent (1990) 238–40.

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It is customary to begin any assessment of Ausonius with his dismissal as a serious or talented poet by the vast majority of modern scholars: so that even in 1975, Charles Johnston's sympathetic article on Ausonius in *History Today* could still comfortably note that 'By no standard does Ausonius deserve to be called a great poet'.²⁰ This was a reflection of the general stance of classicists and historians since Gibbon: thus Ausonius was dismissed by W. A. Edwards in the *Classical Journal* of 1909, and ten years on even his Loeb translator, H. G. Evelyn White, could insist that 'the great mass of his verse is negligible'.²¹ The judgement of Gibbon, in fact, had been that 'the poetical fame of Ausonius condemns the taste of his age', and a similar -- if in some ways more generous -- appraisal was offered by Harold Isbell in 1974.²² These more measured assessments at least acknowledge that Ausonius was not in his own time a figure of fun. His poetical renown was recognised and perpetuated by his contemporary Symmachus, whose enthusiasm for this literary connection is palpable: and if in this case we might blame partiality to a friend or political expediency, it is nonetheless clear that subsequent poets valued his work at a high level indeed.²³ His immediate influence can be traced in the works of Claudian, Prudentius and Sidonius Apollinaris, and in Gaul especially his poetry remained important for at least the next few centuries.²⁴ Such a

²⁰ Johnston (1975) 397.

²¹ Edwards (1909) 251; Evelyn White (1919) I vii.

²² Gibbon (1776–88) III 27 n. 1; Isbell (1974) 22–57.

²³ Symm. *Ep.* 1.14.5, 1.31.3; see Sogno (2006) 7–8 for the prominence accorded the exchange with Ausonius in Symmachus' published letters.

²⁴ R. Green (1991) xxxii–xxxiii.

mismatch between his reputation in antiquity and among modern scholars suggests that there is scope for reassessment -- a process pioneered by Gian Biagio Conte in 1987 in his objection to the 'excessively negative valuations of some recent criticism'.²⁵ Since then, of course, there has been the recent and impressive edition of the works of Ausonius by Roger Green, who has perhaps done more than anyone in recent times to encourage scholars to take Ausonius seriously.²⁶

All the same, present opinions about Ausonius, and about the style of late-antique literature in general, suggest a lingering uncertainty as to how exactly it should be approached. Thus in his groundbreaking survey of late-antique aesthetics, Michael Roberts was at pains to describe rather than to explain or defend the authors and artists he cites.²⁷ Around the same time, Georgia Nugent offered a reassessment of Ausonius in far more flattering terms than had previously been attempted, and I have taken up many of her suggestions here -- but although her readings of Ausonius are often fascinating, it is sometimes difficult to see how they could have placed him in the mainstream of late-antique literary culture.²⁸ William Levitan, who a few years earlier had taken a similar approach to the 'experimental' poetry of Optatian Porfyrus, with Ausonius as a comparator, encountered the same difficulty, concluding helplessly that these poets' aesthetic principles represented 'the activity of a madman or at least a neurotic of exceptional virtuosity'.²⁹

Of course, Ausonius can hardly be considered mad -- although it is true that Green feels obliged to remind his readers of Ausonius' political career, and to note that 'it should not

²⁵ Conte (1994) 658; Fontaine (1977) 438–45 is an honourable exception.

²⁶ R. Green (1991).

²⁷ Roberts (1989).

²⁸ Nugent (1990).

²⁹ Levitan (1985) 268.

be assumed that a writer who ends all the lines of a poem with a monosyllable is incapable of running an empire'.³⁰ But if Ausonius is no longer openly regarded as a flagrantly untalented poet, that charge has been replaced instead by implicit or explicit reference to a notable lack of personality or perhaps inspiration. Thus Green talks about the poet's 'circumspection' and the absence of any 'strong literary personality'; and goes on to express qualified agreement with Evelyn White's expression of distaste in his Loeb introduction: 'There is truth in the charge that he was a man lacking in ideas, passion, or revolt, with little breadth of sympathy or strength of feeling. Revolt one should not expect in the fourth century; passion one can.'³¹ Similarly, Conte refers -- not entirely with negative intent -- to the poetry as 'superficial' and 'fatuus' and to the poet himself as 'good-natured'; and what is meant by a lack of ideas is perhaps that Ausonius 'shows a total indifference to the real problems -- social, economic, and political -- that threaten[ed] the soundness of the Empire'.³²

It is the ease with which this characterisation can be built up which interests me -- and to be fair, Green warns against making 'unscholarly inferences' from Ausonius' style.³³ But it seems to have been a frequent temptation for modern readers: so that for W. A. Edwards (in 1909) the character of the poet was transparent: 'As you read his poems the conviction grows that the author is sincere, that he is a man of sound feeling and good heart, that he is on the whole a pretty good citizen and a good man to know.'³⁴ More recently, the same impression

³⁰ R. Green (1991) xxxiii.

³¹ *ibid.* xviii.

³² Conte (1994) 658, 657; that Ausonius lacked poetical ideas is surely not meant -- R. Green (1991) xxiv--xxvi makes generous reference to his use of poetic forms as 'imaginative', and a stronger defence in these terms is mounted by Nugent (1990), especially at 30.

³³ R. Green (1991) xx.

³⁴ Edwards (1909) 252.

struck David R. Slavitt, who, in producing an ingenious and sympathetic set of translations, identified Ausonius as a kind of cousin to ‘those charming performers at the [Yale] Elizabethan club’ in the fifties.³⁵ This cosy and faintly patronising tone seems to derive, as Georgia Nugent has suggested, from a sense that Ausonius makes use of material and methods which modern critics find rather embarrassing: he is praised for a minority of more conventional verse, while the more ‘experimental’ (or ‘gymnastic’) poems are regarded as minor achievements which ought to have been kept to a limited circulation or simply discarded.³⁶ The impression seems to be that Ausonius did have some ability -- that he was, as David F. Bright reluctantly admits, ‘in fact capable of original composition’ -- but that he unforgivably frittered away his time on ‘bizarre experimentation with forms which show ingenuity of a mechanical sort but are, all in all, devoid of merit as *belles-lettres*’.³⁷ Evelyn White made the essential argument explicit: ‘If we could admit for a moment that these and similar matters were legitimate objects for poetic treatment, we should also have to admit that Ausonius was a master of his craft’.³⁸ Ausonius is thought to have wasted or diluted his talent: a highly competent technician, he remained fundamentally uninspired.

Nevertheless, it seems a mistake to condemn Ausonius for his bad verses, and to condemn the fourth century for liking them. Like Nugent and Roberts, and indeed Roger Green, I think the point is to understand the past: and in this case, to understand what

³⁵ Slavitt (1998) xi.

³⁶ Nugent (1990) 238; R. Green (1991) xv, and note also xvi: ‘Modern *grammatici* do such things in private, but their products seldom go further than the classroom or common-room, or perhaps a magazine.’

³⁷ Bright (1984) 82, 79; see also 80, where Bright associates the cento, as practised by Ausonius, with other ‘literary freaks’.

³⁸ Evelyn White (1919) I xxviii, quoted at Nugent (1990) 237.

Ausonius was intending to do. To find out, we should investigate what it was he succeeded in doing, and for that reason it might be useful to keep in mind one particular poem which must be conceded to be, on its own terms, a conspicuous success. His *Cento nuptialis*, in which lines and half-lines of Virgil are reconfigured in the form of an epithalamium, may be strange but is never less than proficient. The self-imposed rules of the cento are adhered to with exceptional skill, and the no less conventional frankness -- even crudity -- of the poem's description of the pleasures of the wedding night is carried off to such good effect that the more timid translators have tended to leave them in the original Latin.³⁹ Some of the impact of this retooling of a classic can be gauged from Slavitt's imaginative translation, which performs the same feat with lines from Shakespeare: thus the consummation begins:

‘What do you here alone? O God of battles!
steel their soldiers’ hearts. His purity
of manhood stands upright, whose dreadful sword
was never drawn in vain. ‘Naked as I am,
I will assault thee!’ Look down. The purple pride
and jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones ...
They are dangerous weapons for maids ...⁴⁰

There is no need to be a scholar of Shakespeare, or of Virgil, to get the joke; and even to the untrained eye, the skill of the poet (and translator) is clear.

In the case of the *Cento nuptialis*, then, we have Ausonius' own account of his intentions, and knowing a significant amount about Virgil and his reception we can gain some

³⁹ As does Evelyn White (1919) I 387–91

⁴⁰ Auson. *Cent. nupt.* 8.1–8, freely translated in Slavitt (1998) 69.

access to the poem's effect. Such an approach to the late-antique cento has been taken in two recent works by Mark Usher (on the Homeric centos of the empress Eudocia) and Scott McGill (on the Virgilian cento).⁴¹ And it is through this work on the cento that something of the aims and effects of the poet can begin to emerge.⁴² Indeed, rather like Ausonius, the cento itself has had to be rehabilitated in recent scholarship. In what seems an argument that might be generalised from the form to the poets who engaged in it, Usher argues that 'strangeness' alone should not deny centos a place in the literary canon; and yet even then he is careful to insist, with an interesting pile-up of adjectives, that they 'are not ... a high work of fine art, but are more akin to folk art'.⁴³ Indeed, Usher goes so far as to label the cento a kind of 'Outsider Art', not only in terms of its reception but in terms of those poets who adopted the form, adding that: 'Artist Outsiders have certain traits in common: they are largely self-taught; they often reuse discarded materials; their work stands outside established canons of taste; the artists themselves are often marginalised socially.'⁴⁴

Yet I am unconvinced that the empress Eudocia, for example, falls into many of these categories, and it certainly seems clear that Ausonius falls into few of them. Indeed, it is more plausible to argue instead that Ausonius' work was the ultimate *insider* poetry. The cosy and clubbable Ausonius was a friend of Valentinian I and the tutor of Gratian; he was made consul and helped members of his family to high office; he was a professor of rhetoric, a highly-trained poet and speaker, and one whose work received an enthusiastic reception in his

⁴¹ Usher (1998); McGill (2005).

⁴² Thus McGill (2005) xv argues that centos substantially advance 'the current scholarship on Virgil's reception' but 'especially help us explore the enthusiasm for light and playful verse composition that abided [in late antiquity]'.

⁴³ Usher (1998) 16.

⁴⁴ Usher (1998) 17.

lifetime.⁴⁵ Ausonius himself can confirm this: in explaining his decision to write the *Cento nuptialis* he explains that it was done at the behest of Valentinian, who had written a cento of his own and had challenged Ausonius to do the same thing.⁴⁶ This cannot be considered folk art: it is the pastime of the most powerful, educated and cultivated members of society.

For all that, it need not be taken too seriously. The idea of leisure, and above all of ‘play’, is an important one here. Ausonius repeatedly in his prefatory letter refers to his cento in terms of a game, and as a *ludus*; McGill too picks out the phrase with which Ausonius describes his cento as *de seriis ludicrum* -- not an absurdity exactly, but ‘a playful reworking of Virgilian poetry’.⁴⁷ It is then ‘a literary game’; but of course the concept of ‘play’ has been appropriated too by modern theorists, from Huizinga to Gadamer, and there is surely a sense in which the cento represents this kind of play as well.⁴⁸ Most notably, the decision to make a joke, or participate in a game, is a conscious one: it may have unintended implications, and those are interesting too, but the rules are self-imposed, and must be consciously submitted to before the game begins. A game, then, implies rules and constraints: and above all, the decision to submit to those constraints. Ausonius, as Evelyn White would concede, was a master of the particular game of the cento: and the decision to write a cento must have been a

⁴⁵ There is a brief account of Ausonius’ career at R. Green (1991) xxiv–xxxii. Fuller accounts are offered in Sivan (1993); Hopkins (1961); Etienne (1962) 235–63, 342–4.

⁴⁶ McGill (2005) 6 sees ‘no reason to doubt’ Ausonius’ explanation; he also points to the more thorough discussion of leisure at Valentinian’s court in Matthews (1975) 49–54.

⁴⁷ Auson. *Cent. nupt.* pref.; McGill (2005) 8; Evelyn White’s translation of *ludicrum* as ‘absurd’ is explicitly rejected at McGill (2005) 166 n. 40.

⁴⁸ Huizinga (1955); Gadamer (1975) 93–9; this understanding of ‘play’ is emphasised both at Nugent (1990) 239 and at McGill (2005) 171 n. 84.

serious and deliberate one. It was hardly a task to be embarked upon by the unprepared or the uncommitted.

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Here we might follow the path established by Nugent and examine whether similar aesthetic decisions are being made in the modern literary world. Certainly the tradition of the cento has continued down to the present day, and it has occasionally attracted critical attention.⁴⁹ In this particular field, however, one literary movement stands out for its dedication not only to the cento but to every kind of formal constraint. This is the Oulipo: a group of (mainly French) writers and mathematicians, formed in the 1960s as an offshoot of Alfred Jarry's *Collège de 'pataphysique* and which, therefore, has its ultimate origins in the Surrealist movement.⁵⁰ 'Oulipo' itself is an abbreviation for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* -- the Workshop of Potential Literature -- and the group is dedicated to the identification of formal systems to help in the creation of literature, including both the revival of older methods and the discovery and invention of new ones.⁵¹ For the Oulipo, the more restrictive a form is, the better: so they

⁴⁹ An account of the tradition is provided in McGill (2005) especially xv-xxv, 1-30; for a general account of the cento beyond antiquity, see Verweyen and Witting (1991); for a famous late-antique example, see Clark and Hatch (1981). There is also a brief account of the cento in Mathews and Brotchie (1998) s.v. 'cento'.

⁵⁰ Roubaud (1998) 37-40. We should not allow these historical relationships to efface some very real differences between the Oulipo and the Surrealists.

⁵¹ By the phrase 'formal system' I mean any kind of constraint that is imposed in the writing of a text, whether it is the fourteen lines and familiar rhyme-scheme of a sonnet or the formal conventions of classical tragedy. Further instances are discussed in Roubaud (1998).

are most interested in the kinds of constraints imposed by advanced maths -- such as combinatorics -- as well as in forms such as the palindrome and the lipogram (in which a particular letter or group of letters is omitted). It is this focus which has produced such notable works of European literature as Georges Perec's *La vie mode d'emploi* and *La disparition*, Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* and Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.⁵²

Writings by and about the Oulipo might therefore help in exploring some of the motives for and implications of choosing to write in such restrictive forms. It may be that the purpose and implications of Ausonius' evident fondness for the cento and other constraints can best be explained in the context of these modern successors. Certainly the connection has been recognised by the Oulipo themselves: for they have already co-opted Ausonius as part of a general policy of recognising -- if only by accusations of 'anticipatory plagiarism' -- various artists and writers who were exploring similar territory in the centuries before the group was officially founded.⁵³ As might be expected, Ausonius is valued by the group not for his more conventional-seeming poetry but explicitly for the more 'experimental' work: he is officially recognised as 'master of the cento', but the broad reach of his work from the *Technopaegnion* to the *Griphus ternarii numeri* is directly appropriate to the Oulipo's artistic concerns.⁵⁴ The parallel seems to me worth exploring. Certainly it may help to answer some of the puzzling questions about the status of Ausonius' poetry -- since in contrast to the Surrealists (for whom chance was the vital element of artistic creation), the Oulipo regards itself as 'anti-chance'.⁵⁵

⁵² These works and their authors are discussed in Roubaud (1998); see more generally Mathews and Brotchie (1998).

⁵³ Mathews and Brotchie (1998) 211.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Attributed to Claude Berge at Motte (1986) 67.

That is to say that, for the Oulipo, art is (or should be) created by the voluntary submission of the author to rules set out in advance. Art may therefore easily seem a game, like the cento; it need not be a matter of pure creation *ex nihilo*, or a matter of divine inspiration.

Of course, it isn't by any means clear that incorporating Ausonius into the Oulipo is a tactic likely to salvage his reputation as a great writer. Georges Perec, in an essay on the lipogram, notes the place in the canon usually assigned to -- shall we say -- 'experimental' authors:

Exclusively preoccupied with its great capitals (Work, Style, Inspiration, World-Vision, Fundamental Options, Genius, Creation, etc.), literary history seems deliberately to ignore writing as practice, as work [ie. labour], as play. Systematic artifices, formal mannerisms (that which, in the final analysis, constitutes Rabelais, Sterne, Roussel ...) are relegated to the registers of asylums for literary madmen, the 'Curiosities'...⁵⁶

That this has been the marginal place historically assigned to Ausonius should be clear. The problem, as Nugent recognised, is that the vast majority of the poet's work 'cannot easily be accommodated by Romantic or Modern conceptions of poetry'.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, we might find ourselves better equipped to understand the aims and the implications of the poetry of Ausonius if we investigate the claims of a different set of aesthetic criteria -- an alternative, unclassical tradition.

This, then, is where the Oulipo can be most useful. Their foundational idea of a workshop for literature was chosen in deliberate opposition to 'the myth of literary inspiration', and they would join modern students of the cento in warning in particular of the 'classicizing prejudice that considers High Literature and the Great Author sacrosanct and

⁵⁶ Perec in Motte (1986) 98.

⁵⁷ Nugent (1990) 238; indeed, these particular works were once dismissed even by Green as 'absurd': R. Green (1971) 14.

scorns odd and secondary works that encroach on these monuments'.⁵⁸ Such a denial of the need for artistic inspiration thus offers a new way of understanding Ausonius: so that, in the *Cento nuptialis* for example, the materials (Virgil) and the method (cento) are both firmly in the public domain, and there is no place for any mystery about the act of artistic creation. Ausonius in this case uses his tools and materials well: he is an excellent craftsman, as even the worst of his critics is compelled to admit.

Similarly, for the Oulipo, and for Perec in particular, the difference between art and craft remains a valid question: 'Why should writing be different from carpentry? Why should Perec not take pieces of wood that had already been turned and reassemble them in his own marquetry? Inherited notions of property were all that stood in the way, and the desire to preserve the sanctity of the artist-prophet ...'⁵⁹ Perec's novella *Un homme qui dort* set out to justify this claim through the use of 'modified unacknowledged quotation' -- a kind of quasi-cento in which the original sources were often intended to go unrecognised.⁶⁰ This aspect of the practice is perhaps what attracted the Situationist International, whose concept of *détournement* may be useful in understanding the purpose and function of centos, whether modern or late-antique.⁶¹ The Situationists defined the problem in terms of artistic and intellectual property and the notion of 'inspiration', but also reveal a concern with dead or dying language and literature: 'The appearance of new necessities outmodes previous 'inspired' works. They become obstacles, dangerous habits. The point is not whether we like

⁵⁸ Motte (1986) 10; cf. McGill (2005) xvii, who later acknowledges the connection between centonists and the Oulipo at 168 n. 55; such a link was also suggested in Carbone (2002) 18, 27; Desbordes (1979) 89.

⁵⁹ Bellos (1993) 362.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 360–3.

⁶¹ *ibid.* 362, making the connection between Perec and the Situationists.

them or not. We have to go beyond them.’⁶² From this perspective, accepting without demur the conventions of the classical tradition -- including the notion of artistic inspiration -- would more clearly merit the charge of a failure of imagination. Conversely, too, a commitment to undermining of accepted canons of taste and a playful attitude towards established conventions might be the more radical stance.

What we see in Ausonius, then, and in a form notably more extreme than in most of his late-antique contemporaries, is precisely such a *détournement* applied to familiar classical texts and conventions. Ausonius seems thoroughly committed to the late-antique aesthetic described by Michael Roberts, in which ‘words are viewed as possessing a physical presence of their own, distinct from any consideration of sense or system ... [and] may be moved like building blocks or pieces in a puzzle to create ever new formal constructs’.⁶³ When applied to Virgil in the form of a cento, this implies a remarkable irreverence. For Ausonius his classical predecessors were a source of familiar material: the classical tradition features ‘neither as a prized collection of antiques nor as a resented inheritance, but merely as the furnishings with which he is at home’.⁶⁴ And yet although this might seem to incorporate him into a (traditional, classical) practice of intertextuality, it remains the case that the bizarre effect of the cento cannot be equated with more conventional ideas of ‘imitation’, ‘citation’ or ‘allusion’.⁶⁵ It matches more closely a literary definition of *détournement* as the practice of ‘appropriating pre-existing artifacts and critically deflecting and historicizing their meanings

⁶² There is, unsurprisingly, no copyright in Situationist texts, so a citation here would be rather against the spirit of the whole enterprise. You will just have to trust me on this one.

⁶³ Roberts (1989) 58.

⁶⁴ Nugent (1990) 249.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* 250.

without effacing them'.⁶⁶ Ausonius, in his more unusual productions, locates himself at one remove from the classical tradition. Indeed, precisely what is so obtrusively late-antique about his work -- his conspicuous commitment to what Roberts would recognise as a 'materialist concept of the literary text' -- is what positions him at the very edge of an acceptable classicism.⁶⁷

His work, in other words, is far from straightforwardly classical. Certainly the effect of much of his poetry is to draw attention to his familiarity with the classical tradition: after all, 'to present a cento is always at one level to trade in cultural capital and to affirm one's highbrow credentials', if only as a demonstration of how well you have learned your Virgil.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, what Ausonius does to Virgil has been understood as less than respectful -- which, as Nugent has argued, has often been taken to mean maintaining a certain 'distance' from the classical text.⁶⁹ Ausonius does not, I think, 'affirm' the authority of Virgil so much as draw attention to it, even while his obscene cento simultaneously 'diminishes the stature of [Virgil's] poetry'.⁷⁰ 'Authority' here is an awkward term, as of course the joke in the cento depends on Virgil's status as the classical Latin poet beyond all others; but it seems to me that the joke must leave Virgil's authority a little more open to question than it had been before.⁷¹ As in certain other Oulipian enterprises, 'something that was banal, secure, and familiar has

⁶⁶ Schnapp (1992) 100.

⁶⁷ Motte (1995) 131–2.

⁶⁸ McGill (2005) xvi.

⁶⁹ Nugent (1990) 248.

⁷⁰ Schnapp (1992) 107; cf. the similar account in Usher (1998) 11.

⁷¹ Thus I believe Slavitt is slightly disingenuous when he describes the rules of the cento as allowing the poet 'to have fun with the basic text ... without being disrespectful of it': Slavitt (1998) 44.

been rendered strange and somehow disquieting'.⁷² After Ausonius, Virgil could surely not be read quite as comfortably as before: what Evelyn White calls the 'perverse ingenuity' of the *Centio nuptialis* is perverse indeed, and serves to destabilise, if only briefly, what may seem to us the 'proper' and 'inviolable' place of Virgil the classical paragon.⁷³

* * *

Witke thus identifies the problem of the engagement with the classical tradition as the most significant question for the study of literature in late antiquity. That is, what must be taken into account is 'the degree to which each poet apprehends and solves the problem of being a Christian who uses the conventions of classical poetic composition, such as Apollo, the Muses, inspiration, and a public detachable persona called into play by the assumption of generically conventional stances'.⁷⁴ This definition of the classical tradition, however, brings out precisely what might be thought most 'Romantic' about it: a focus on a strong literary persona, on 'generically conventional stances' -- presumably those in which form matches content -- and on the importance of inspiration (in regard to which Apollo and the Muses are merely a means to an end). In the process, it defines precisely those aspects of classical literature to which Ausonius has been accused of failing to conform. In this light, Ausonius is

⁷² Motte (1995) 135. The reference is to Harry Mathews' invention of 'perverbs', in which familiar proverbs are put through a set of permutations to result in new phrases, for which the example 'a bird in the hand gathers no moss' should capture some of the effect: see H. Mathews (1976), discussed in Motte (1995) 134ff.

⁷³ Evelyn White (1919) I xvii. Nugent (1990) 248 has Virgil and the classics as less than 'inviolable'; Virgil is called 'the standard of propriety' at R. Green (1991) xx.

⁷⁴ Witke (1971) 1.

revealed as no conservative defender of the classical tradition; on the contrary, his works seem to approach it in a critical and questioning spirit. Rather than continuing to write classicising poetry, Ausonius plays games with the poets of the past: he is thoroughly aware of the classical tradition, but recognises its status precisely as a tradition. He is far from an easy and uncritical acceptance of classical conventions. Instead, he offers a version of the classical which gets the tradition deliberately wrong. In the process he helps to subvert the familiar (Romantic and Classical) tendency to see literature as the product of inspiration -- whether external, through the aid of the Muses, or internal, through the exaltation of the 'creative artist'.

We might therefore see the Romantic and the Classical as alternative paths which nonetheless lead towards a similar conclusion: so that the classical emphasis on the Muses is set against a romantic conception of artistic inspiration, and both exclude the approach of the centonist, ancient or modern. This is the double-bind introduced by Paulinus of Nola, who in writing to Ausonius took for granted the need for inspiration; and if we follow him we have a very limited set of choices. Ausonius must lay claim to either Christian or pagan inspiration -- he must choose between Christ and the Muses; or else he must be admitted to be uninspired, either because the classical tradition could only pretend to inspiration or because Ausonius was no poet after all. But to see his work in the light of the Oulipo's rejection of inspiration opens up a new range of possibilities. That Paulinus required the choice between Christianity and paganism to entail a choice between competing divine inspirations need not imply that Ausonius felt the same; nor need a refusal to make such a choice imply that Ausonius was any less genuine a Christian than those who had, for example, previously spoken up against the

similar restrictions championed by the emperor Julian.⁷⁵ Similarly, the dichotomy put in place by Paulinus should not lead us to accept without argument the idea that Ausonius represents an unimaginative classicism and Paulinus a bold new aesthetic.

Thus to understand the late-antique debate in a more nuanced fashion may require a reassessment of where the major characters stand. For in some respects it was Paulinus who, like Proba and Juvencus, most fully continued the classical approach to poetry. Like theirs, Paulinus' poetry after the break with Ausonius 'self-consciously shunned both the Muses and the poetic *ficta* of the past in favor of Heaven-sent inspiration and scriptural themes'.⁷⁶ Indeed, this work soon came to incorporate all the elements of the classical tradition as outlined by Witke: a concern with the generic appropriateness of form and content, the creation of strong poetic personae, and the concern with inspiration which led to the establishment of Christian replacements for the Muses.⁷⁷ Curtius similarly identified this Christian concern with the Muses as an unexpectedly conservative stance: 'Would it not have been more natural simply to say nothing about the Muses, instead of attacking them or finding ingenious replacements for them (which after all was a way of recognizing their existence)?'⁷⁸ It was Paulinus and his Christian contemporaries and successors who seem unable or unwilling to imagine a new kind of poetry in the absence of vatic inspiration, and who as

⁷⁵ This point has been argued in detail by Roger Green, whose long-standing view is that Ausonius 'should be seen as an example of synthesis in an age when controversy made extreme positions common and noticeable': R. Green (1971) 12, greatly expanded in (1993).

⁷⁶ Trout (1999) 85.

⁷⁷ Witke (1971) 54: Paulinus' views 'presage no purge of the Muses from poetry'. Note also Witke's characterisation of Paulinus as revealing a 'puritanical and old-fashioned outlook' (45).

⁷⁸ Curtius (1953) 241.

Christians felt obliged therefore to reject the Muses in favour of an acceptable alternative. Such a focus on inspiration, while in one sense fundamental, might in another seem merely cosmetic: for it allowed Paulinus to continue to retain all the advantages of his classical training in making as smooth a transition as possible from classical to Christian poet. Indeed, in attitude and effect, the continuity with the classical tradition here is much more marked than it is in Ausonius.

Conversely, it need not be a sign of his conservatism that Ausonius ‘saw nothing incongruous with his formal Christian commitment in his rather obscene epigrams or in his constant manipulation of the traditional machinery of invocation of the gods of poetry’.⁷⁹ For although Witke here refers to a (merely) ‘formal Christian commitment’, his reference to the ‘manipulation of the traditional machinery’ might offer something to set against it: after all, it suggests that Ausonius’ commitment to the classical tradition was in many ways equally formal. Ausonius rarely talks about his Christianity, and his sincerity in that arena cannot be judged.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, his commitment in literature to form at the expense of content -- to the playing of games with the supposedly authoritative classical past -- seems to me undeniable. Rather than condemning as cowardly or insincere this refusal to commit to Christianity or to the classical tradition, we might (and would perhaps better) understand it as representing a deliberate aesthetic and political choice. It allows Ausonius to maintain a careful, ironic distance from the classical tradition. This may not be the mark of a fanatical Christian, but nor does it make him a fantasist trying to revive an extinct or imaginary classical past. Indeed, he might thus be compared in a very different manner to the likes of Paulinus and Proba: for

⁷⁹ Witke (1971) 47.

⁸⁰ R. Green (1991) xxvii–xxviii is non-committal in assessing the length and depth of Ausonius’ Christian commitment; Sivan (1993) 110 is equally circumspect, and cautions that ‘the nature of Ausonius’s Christianity is too often debated with too little profit’.

where they resemble unsubtle zealots, Ausonius emerges as a subtle ironist. And although that can indeed be a disguise for conservatism, it might also allow for a greater complexity: it is usually the case, in the end, that ‘irony’s guns face in every direction’.⁸¹ A refusal to adhere to the familiar conventions, whether traditional and classical or radical and Christian, might itself be a calculated stance, and a kind of commitment.

Thus in dismissing the Muses, in his penultimate letter to Ausonius, as merely *sine numine nomina*, Paulinus was perhaps saying little with which his mentor did not already agree -- or at least, nothing he had not already sufficiently proved in his work. There are references to the Muses throughout Ausonius’ poetry, but at the same time he flaunts his commitment to craftsmanship and to the playing of games: he advertises his ordinariness, and consistently fails to conform to the model of the (divinely) inspired artist. Although Paulinus in comparison comes across as painstakingly sincere in his Christianity, it seems to me that he more than Ausonius is notable for his respect for and obeisance to the classical tradition. This is not necessarily a criticism: certainly it would be no advance to reject a dismissive attitude to Ausonius only to adopt an equally dismissive attitude to Paulinus, and we can perhaps understand Paulinus’ approach too as a deliberate tactic aimed at an audience most prepared to accept Christian ideas when they were couched in a familiar classical form.⁸² Nevertheless, this reorientation of the discussion should allow us to recognise the very complex terrain over which these late-antique debates took place. The Christian is not to be opposed straightforwardly to the classical: and even so apparently ‘classical’ a writer as Ausonius may be understood as operating at one remove from the canonical classical tradition.

⁸¹ Enright (1986) 110.

⁸² As suggested by Walsh (1970) 567–8, in response to the criticisms of Paulinus’ poetry at Mohrmann (1961) 157–60 as ‘the rather tired, imitative, lack-lustre efforts of one trying to mould the Christian beliefs to a traditional vocabulary’.

Despite his contemporary fame, then, Ausonius is arguably a lonely poet in the same way that Ammianus Marcellinus was a lonely historian: the late-antique style he pioneered found few imitators. Indeed, modern readers often seem instead to feel that, with Paulinus, ‘true’ (Romantic, Classical, albeit Christianised) poetry has returned from its fourth-century exile. This is a comfort that Ausonius denies us. His work is frequently strange and disquieting: it is absurd and experimental, artificial and mannered, and can easily be relegated to the cabinet of literary curiosities. And yet if we are to understand the fourth century we must take account of this poetry and seek to make sense of it, and to make sense of the poet’s motives in writing it. It will not be enough to dismiss it as an embarrassment, or as evidence of the final bankruptcy of the classical tradition. Nor will it be enough to call it uninspired, and to disparage Ausonius for his apparent willingness to prostitute his talent. For this work was deliberately undertaken and involved no small expenditure of effort; it was circulated and widely read; and it was recognised as some of the best that the age had to offer.⁸³ If his work seems to us uninspired, it is perhaps because it reveals the presence in late antiquity of a different tradition from the one we have been led to expect: one both resolutely unromantic and, at the same time, remarkably unclassical.

⁸³ R. Green (1991) xxxii–xxxiii gives some credit to this judgement, although he notes that Ausonius’ contemporaries were also given to ranking their colleague with Cicero and Virgil. Some of this may have been disingenuous.

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