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Latin Literature between Text and Practice

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SUMMARY: This paper contains an appeal to situate the study of Latin literature within a history of embodied practices. Art history, anthropology, and cognitive science can all contribute to a decentering of texts and textuality, and texts can be analyzed for their role in the organization of human beings' capacity for mimesis. Latin literature is a case study of the ongoing relationship between embodiment and symbolization.

CHANGES IN CRITICAL METHOD—my own or anyone else's—are less interesting to me than consistencies. After all, critical method is not something one picks up or puts down according to fashion but a tool for finding answers to longstanding questions, personal or collective, specific or general. Indeed, the insistence on diversity or plurality in method for its own sake is a manifestation of a postmodern ideology (I use the word deliberately) whose own connections to consumerism, deracination, and enclosure of the *res publica* are long overdue for scrutiny and resistance.

In my own case, what has remained consistent over the past two decades is an interest in the relationship between texts and practices. Texts are what we study as philologists, but they are and always have been embedded in networks of practices. Indeed, the fantasy that the world is a text, or that there is nothing outside of text, can be understood as an acute manifestation of what Vico long ago called "the conceit of scholars"—that is, the assumption that what one studies, however well and thoughtfully, explains everything.[1] It is also an intensification of the post-Enlightenment habit of, in the words of Mark Johnson (138), "peeling away" the semiotic from the embodied, of fo-

[1] On Vico's two conceits—of scholars and of nations—see Grafton's introduction to Vico.

cusing on signs to the exclusion of experience. To take but two examples of the extremes to which this peeling away has been carried within our profession, we might consider Calvert Watkins' claim (9) that "the totality of [poetic] themes may be thought of as the culture of a society," or Katharina Volk's remark (19) that "everyone knows that the *cano* in *Aeneid* 1 is just a topos. . . . [Rome is] a literate culture, where poetry is mainly read." In the first case we are left wondering what has happened to agency, practice, ritual, artifact, politics, law, etc.—all the other activities and objects that might be said to constitute culture. In the second, we are asked to ignore a whole body of research suggesting that "to read" in the Roman world (as, indeed in our own, *mutatis mutandis*), is a practice, entailing a specific, historically constituted set of relationships of body to voice, speaker to listener, male to female, master to slave, owner to object, and so on.[2] This is not to say that the study of themes or forms or intertexts or allusions is in itself objectionable. But let us not pretend that it is something more than what it is. And let us, in particular, pay attention to the constitutive exclusions that enable the study of textuality.

The tension between embodied experience and symbolization preoccupies a range of academic disciplines today and might be explored from any of a number of perspectives. As an historian, Paul Connerton speaks of the need to integrate the study of incorporating and inscribing practices. For him, the memory of a society is as likely to be carried in gesture, dress, ritual, and the like as in its surviving texts. The former type of memory may be less readily accessible to the historian, but that does not make it less important; to the contrary, Connerton argues, inscribing practices are less susceptible to critique and thus to easy transformation within a society. It is at moments of crisis that they change—and are thus available for observation. Art historians, not surprisingly, have long been concerned with the relationship between practices of marking, drawing, painting, sculpting, etc. and the construction of meaning through representation. Indeed, Whitney Davis in a study of prehistoric cave art has gone so far as to argue (61) that it is the practice of replication—the "complex program of identities and similarities reproduced differentially"—that makes representation possible. Students of ritual, such as Roy Rappaport, find in the combination of bodily performance, production of artifacts, and ritualization of speech that constitutes ritual across a wide array of cultures a key evolutionary strategy, one that usefully limits the human capacity for deceit and imagination generated by the use of language and

[2] See, e.g., Valette-Cagnac, Gamel, Wachter, Johnson; the bibliography is extensive.

the capacity for bodily mimesis.[3] The recognition of the role of bodily mimesis in culture has characterized anthropology virtually from its outset, and indeed may well have inspired the return to the study of embodiment in other disciplines, such as linguistics, art history, and psychology (Rampley). Finally, cognitive science has come to take the relationship between embodiment and consciousness, as mediated by mimesis and symbol-storage (both internal and external), as one of its central areas of investigation. For Merlin Donald, it is mimesis, rather than language, that is most closely associated with the emergence of human consciousness. It is mimesis, rather than language, that first gave human beings the "capacity to trade representations with one another and to create a public representational space" (116). "Mimesis was a self-sufficient cultural adaptation in itself. It could not look ahead to language, and it stood very well on its own, securing the foundation of the pyramid of human culture. Its vestiges persist today, as the unspoken foundation of all cultures" (269).

Perhaps the most provocative discussion of the relationship between mimesis and what we might call semiosis is to be found in the essays of Walter Benjamin, composed during the 1930s.[4] In a few short pages Benjamin anticipates much of the study outlined in the preceding paragraph, while highlighting another aspect of the relationship as well. For Benjamin writes in response not only to the anthropological researches of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rampley) but also to the emergence of new mimetic practices and technologies such as photography, sound recording, and filmmaking. Intuitively Benjamin grasped what cognitive scientists would later come to explore in detail, namely, the ways in which new modes of mimesis and new technologies of symbolization reshape human subjects. No doubt Benjamin, who died in 1940, would have agreed with Merlin Donald, who wrote in 2001 that "the essence of the modern condition is the proliferation of deliberately engineered sources of experience" (316). Where he would have had problems, I suspect, is with Donald's equivocation over the relationship at any given moment in history between mimesis and semiosis. For example, at one point Donald writes, "but language did not devalue or displace mimesis. It serves a different function in society. The mimetic body language, prosody, and ritual of life continue, but under the control of a new mythic mantle" (296–97). But how, we might ask, can it be said that mimesis was not displaced or devalued if it is now under new control? Donald only compli-

[3] Rappaport; cf. Bell.

[4] See in particular "On the Mimetic Faculty" and "Doctrine of the Similar" in Benjamin 1999.

cates his own account when he proceeds to state, "There is no doubt where the power lies in traditional societies. It lies with language and the common cultural myths it generates" (297). Donald thus seems to imagine a forward momentum, from mimesis to language, without the latter eliminating the former. (In this respect he describes on a large scale a process similar to that invoked by classicists who speak of literacy replacing orality—as if such a thing were possible.) But Benjamin's account, like that of his interpreter Michael Taussig, is more subtle, describing an ongoing interrelationship between mimesis and language while also encouraging exploration of the organization of mimesis under varying historical circumstances. In a sense, Benjamin leaves open the question of the political and historical relationship between mimesis and semiosis, or embodiment and symbolization, even as he intimates that it is key to understanding modernity, and more specifically modernity's collapse into fascism.

It seems to me that the student of Roman literature is uniquely positioned to contribute to the history of mimesis, in particular in its fraught relationship with semiosis. Precisely the question that Volk (and she is hardly alone!) dismisses is the question that most interests me about the Romans. And my interest arises both from my own experience with the objects and practices of Roman culture—dating at least to my doctoral dissertation (Habinek 1985) on the relationship between practices of punctuation, delivery, rhythmical patterning, and the like, and the production of style in texts—and from a kind of Benjaminian "flashing up" of the relationship between contemporary culture and Roman culture, especially during the late republic and early principate.[5] The problematical relationship between embodied performance and textual symbolization is at the heart of Latin literature. Which controls which? Whose mantle, to evoke Donald's metaphor, is embracing whom? To what extent, and how, is each organized by larger forces within society? Is literature one instance among many of Davis' dictum (4) that "by 'culture' we simply mean socially coordinated replicatory histories," or does it have the capacity to set in motion, even to coordinate, new replicatory histories? It is precisely because Latin literature is both oral and literate, both textual and embodied, both intimate and spectacular that it constitutes such a valuable case study of relations between mimesis and semiosis. Moreover, the tactics that were used by certain sectors of Roman society to organize the mimetic and semiotic potential of Latin literature have provided influential models for successive waves of organization—right on up to the present. And the

[5] On the "flashing up" of contact between two historical moments see Benjamin 1968: 253–64. For a general description of Benjamin's historical aims and methods see Schwartz.

agencies generated by the ritualization of speech and mimesis that constituted Latin literature were themselves empowered to shape Roman and—by extension—much of Western history as well.[6]

In my 1998 study, *The Politics of Latin Literature*, I consider, in effect, the organization of semiosis (although one chapter, entitled "Writing As Social Performance" briefly considers issues of embodiment). In a forthcoming book, *The World of Roman Song: From Ritualized Speech to Social Order*, I consider more explicitly the organization of mimesis internal to Latin texts. In particular my reexamination of the terminology of singing, speaking, and playing leads me to conclude that Roman readers and writers collaborated in precisely the sort of "peeling away" of meaning from experience that Johnson and others see as characterizing the later Western tradition. In their case, the break between mimesis and semiosis, with the corresponding privileging of the latter, is articulated as a liberation of the voice from the body. The poet "plays" (and *ludus* almost always has an element of embodiment, of submission to bodily procedures or rhythms established by someone else) in order to be able to "sing." As possessor of authorizing voice, he is differentiated from others (chiefly slaves and women) who are thereby constructed as possessors of bodies and only bodies, that is, bodies without voices. Naturally there are countervailing tendencies within Roman culture, which must also be explored. But even these "further voices," as far as I can tell, paradoxically adhere to bodiliness: thus slaves communicate through imitation of animals, and women's song, especially *nenia*, is associated with rituals of sacrifice and death, i.e., the management of the body.

What may surprise some about "my approach" to Latin literature is that for all that I try to situate my research within the broadest possible historical and conceptual frameworks (the historical tension between mimesis and semiosis, the organization of mimetic and linguistic capabilities, the construction of mythical or ideological mantles, the creation of replicatory histories, the authorization of social fractions, practices of ritualization, etc.), my method is really quite conventional: careful (I hope!) study of words and phrases in context, supplemented where appropriate by a comparable close analysis of artifacts (the latter in more recent work and work in progress). But perhaps this is no surprise at all, for if I am not mistaken, there has long been within classical studies a tension between those who would turn philology in on itself—that is, confuse the method (close analysis of language) with the object of study (language that can be closely analyzed)—and those who

[6] "Ritualization" is a key concept that I borrow from Bell and discuss in some detail in Habinek 2005.

would use it as one means, indeed a necessary one, for constructing a history of practice, an exploration of what Catherine Bell calls the "unity of consciousness and social being" (75). Names that come to mind as part of this alternative history of classical philology include Vico, Comte, Marx, Nietzsche, even Benjamin in his way. Since I have only begun to investigate this possibility, I will leave off here. Still, it is gratifying to think that the philology of the future (cf. Porter) may well be a philology of the past.

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