Cato the Censor and the Beginnings of Latin Prose

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Conclusion

In many ways the ongoing debate over the early formation of Latin literature has done much to reveal the predicaments that derive from the ‘discursive’ make-up of concepts like authorship, text, literature, and genre. Methodologically, ‘discourse’ draws its force from the feeling of groundlessness and groundedness that it triggers: on the one hand it undermines the unity of signs and the relationship between signifier (parole) and signified (langue); on the other hand it circumscribes the world within the limits of language. In the study of Latin literature the equation between ‘discourse’ and ‘text’ has helped the construction of literary histories and the theorization of intertextuality; however, this equation encounters notable limitations when the area of investigation exceeds the sphere of literary meaning and includes embodied experience.¹ This study has attempted to deal with these limitations by trying to strike a balance between how we apprehend late-third- and early-second-centuries B.C.E. Latin texts today and how their production affected and was affected by the recognition patterns of their authors and the receiving public of the time. For this purpose I relied on notions of selfhood that encompass bodily and spatial dimensions.

The notion of subjectivity that I have employed draws on the idea that in the Roman context personhood was shaped by different experiences of

¹. On this issue from the perspective of neuroscience, see Bryson 2003.
the world and rested upon the development of a keen sense of the body’s connectedness with a socio-cosmological reality in which things have meaning in themselves. This connectedness was not achieved through the creation of significations that were detached from the material aspect of the world; rather, it was based on the discovery of and adherence to a socio-cosmological order materially perceived. Thus, I see agency as being predetermined by a person’s place in this order and conceive of knowledge as being attached to this person’s ability to grasp socio-cosmological relations and make them discernible through the body. In the Roman context the term that best encapsulates the power that derives from both is auctoritas. In this study I have argued that the degree of auctoritas enjoyed and achieved by an author determined his choice of forms, themes, and modalities of writing; in turn, forms, themes, and modalities of writing made manifest the author’s positioning in the world and affected the reception of his texts. On this score, rather than simply summarizing the argument of the previous chapters, I thought it best in this conclusion to draw out some open-ended points.

My first point is that the coincidence between the establishment of Latin poetry and the translation activities of professional immigrants invites considerations of the histories of geographical displacement and social adaptation that informed poetic aestheticism in Rome. To take into account these histories seems prima facie irrelevant since the self-confident relationship that Latin poetry establishes from the outset with the Hellenistic tradition promotes the overall impression that poetry helped these immigrants to transcend effortlessly (and painlessly) barriers of language, class, status, and traditions. In her seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak asks whether it is possible for the subaltern to speak especially after intellectuals have been reporting what s/he says for generations. Rather discouragingly, she suggests that access to the ‘subaltern consciousness’ might be gained not through what is in the texts but through the gaps, silences, and contradictions that these texts bear. To work through textual gaps, silences, and contradictions is what classicists do already on a daily basis: not only can they get their hands on a very limited number of texts, but many of the texts that have survived the shipwreck of time are shards embedded in the reports of others. Accordingly, to strip away the accretion of meanings built over time and to see antiquity as an objective reality is

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2. I am here drawing on the typological distinction between ‘meaning cultures’ and ‘presence cultures’ outlined by Gumbrecht (2004: 78–86).
3. Spivak 1988
fraught with problems that are unsurmountable.\footnote{For a reflection on these problems from the point of view of reception theory, see Martindale and Thomas 2006: 9–10.} In light of this, trying to get at the consciousness of an author and passing a representation of it as a faithful reconstruction would mean to doom oneself to failure.

What I have done has been to think about the effects that the migratory experiences of the early poets may have had on their perception of the world without pretending to uncover their ‘true’ or even ‘essential’ consciousness. I have also asked whether their fictional constructs could say something about the way these poets perceived their being in the world through identification with or dissociation from them. With this in mind, I have reread some of the places in the texts where self-reference seems to emerge, following up my desire to come to a better understanding of the possibilities and constrictions that loomed over them as well as the associated costs and gains that they derived from their translating/transformational skills. I have argued that these poets manipulated Greek literary texts in order to make Rome their home and capitalized on elite desires of socio-cosmological mastery already in place. I have also raised the possibility that their crafts allowed for multiple reflections and identifications in the face of Rome’s geopolitical expansion, demanding memorialization and adjustments of identificatory boundaries from the body politic.\footnote{I draw here on the comments of one of the anonymous readers of my manuscript.}

My discussion includes also an account of how poetry was appropriated into elite practices through mimicry and subjection, giving, perhaps, the impression that I have worked all along with the assumption that socio-political power always trumps cultural power. In reality, I have operated from only four ideas: one, that immigrants do not always want or even find it easy to assimilate and conform, to seamlessly translate themselves and their knowledge into the society that hosts them just because that society offers them opportunities; two, that the immigrants’ original sites of self-making are often infused with tensions and inconsistencies because they themselves include coexisting and contradictory ways of life and social organizations; three, that their multiple identification with and versatility in multiple traditions can be perceived as menacing, confusing, and irresistible. This perception triggers a wide range of responses in the receiving culture and opens up an equally wide range of possibilities. Fourth and last, the acceptance or welcoming of immigrants by the sociopolitical powerful in the hosting society does not always dovetail with a social embracing of them as equals; if so, this embracing is rather possessive and is aimed at containing and exploiting the power inherent in the expanded
knowledge of the world that immigrants inevitably carry. Translation studies and reflections on global identities may provide classicists with some useful materials for trying to make sense of Roman translation practices. In turn, classicists can offer some innovative insights in those areas of scholarly inquiry and are presented with a unique opportunity for coming to terms with classics as a multifarious and multicultural discipline, and with the translating practices that foster it.6

My second point is that Cato the Censor is most famous for his ambiguous relationship with both poets and Greek culture. On the one hand, he sneers at the encroachment of poetry and its practitioners on elite defining practices and resists the impact of Greek literature on the social formation of this elite; on the other, what remains of his writings make clear that he was well versed in Greek literature and adopted poetic imagery and formalities. This seemingly contradictory attitude opens up a whole set of interpretative possibilities, especially once we fully acknowledge that bilingualism, if not trilingualism, must have been a long existing reality among the Italian and Roman elites.7 For one thing, it forces us to rethink the impact that the turns and twists of language and culture performed by the early poets had on the receiving end. In my view, Cato’s ambivalent positioning explains a lot about the charm that these poets embodied and exuded; at the same time, it reveals the strategies that Cato adopted in order to compensate for his novitas and to valorize his auctoritas. As a result, Cato’s choice (and invention) of Latin prose emerges as overdetermined, arising from multiple factors. Some of these are implicated in his own social and political existence.

My third point is that no discussion of early Latin prose can be fully appreciated without taking into account the carmen and the problems that it elicits. As challenging as it is already to work with highly fragmentary (and neglected) materials, the pervasive presence of formalities bracketed under the rubric of ‘carmen style’ that these materials embed makes for more than one complication. I will only mention the two that, in my view, are most conspicuous. The first has to do with the fact that we just do not have enough material to be able to generically organize its manifestations; in fact, it would appear that there was nothing generic about it especially if by generic we mean something similar to that which Latin poetry has got us accustomed. The second complication derives from the little attention

6. For a recent attempt in this direction, see Lianeri and Zajko 2008. For focused work on translation practices in the ancient Mediterranean, see McElduff and Sciarrino 2011.
7. Cf. Adams (2003: 9–14) for anecdotes about elite bilingualism (Latin and Greek) and the problems associated with its interpretation.
given to the *carmen* as a cultural form manifesting a person’s alignment with and mastery of a socio-cosmological reality in which humans occupy a particular space and act according to specific codes of conduct. In light of this rather unfamiliar perception of the world, any resurrection of the *carmen* seems to hit the field as a repressed memory. The psychological imagery that I am using is undoubtedly unpleasant but not inappropriate if the traditional association of the *carmen* with the primordial is given concentrated consideration. For some classicists, this resurrection may be haunted by memories of the Fascist revival of ancient Rome as an energizing myth for constructing a new national greatness. For others, it may threaten the sense of security that Latinists have been able to achieve by working hard on the reception of well-documented traditions through extended texts. For yet others, it may mean to indulge in the deluded desire to experience a past untainted by modernity. Whatever the case, this book is an invitation to use the study of archaic Latin prose as an occasion for reflecting on the assumptions that we go by.

To return to the *carmen* through the formalities and the memories that are inscribed in the texts attributed to Cato the Censor, as I have tried to do, is a way to shed its primordial connotations and to acknowledge a perception of reality that goes under as soon as we resist it. I hope to have succeeded in articulating a notion of ‘literature’ that better describes the textual landscape of the time and that helps account for generic distinctions in practical terms. This notion defies any disembodied sequence of literary production and consumption by foregrounding a number of variables as additional factors that affected both authors and receivers. These include the temporal relationship between the production of a text and its consumption, the modes in which a text is apprehended, and the scenarios that inform its content and form.

Finally, my decision to leave undiscussed the extensive work done on the formation of the Greek prose tradition has nothing to do with a deliberate attempt to jettison the numerous insights that they have to offer. Rather, I felt that their potent explanatory power would have led me to make extensive analogies and therefore to clutter my view of the object of my inquiry. At this point, however, a few remarks are in order. It is clear that just as in other contexts, in Rome the emergence of Latin prose was chronologically secondary to versified cultural forms that enjoyed an aura of authority derived from their connection with a superordinary reality.

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While these cultural forms tend to be methodologically clustered under the rubric of poetry, my study clarifies that Latin prose evolves out of and draws on the socio-cosmological power that the *carmen* (both a pre-poetic and nonpoetic cultural expression) was believed to exude. This means that the *carmen* is an additional factor that cannot be disregarded and a cultural form that helped Cato disown poetry and yet to exploit it all the same. By observing the emergence of Latin prose, the social secondariness of both poetry and its practitioners, the scriptic nature of their practices, and the metrical laws by which they abided enter our purview in ways that shed important light on Roman cultural practices in general and the Latin definition of prose as *verba soluta* (loosened words) in particular. In relation to its earliest attestations, this definition does not bring Latin prose closer to the unsophisticated and underdeveloped; rather, it expresses its socio-political primacy over poetry and the *auctoritas* strenuously achieved and wielded by its inventor.