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Lector, quas patieris hic salebras!

The Stumbling Texts (and Stumbling Readers) of Late Latin Poetry

Ausonius's prefacing letters: paradigmatic or parasitic paratext?

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La quintessence du livre est écrite dans sa marge, J. Greus, *Zyriab*, 1993.

Many of Ausone's poems, especially so-called technical ones, are inserted within the letters addressed to the poet's friends. These letters often act as preface and are an autographic paratext that needs to be considered.

Ausone's situation of communication is quite different from that of his predecessors or even from that of Claudien, his near contemporary. In Claudien's major poems, the prefaces in elegiac distichs are meant to be recited, while Ausone considers his own work mainly from a written approach and in a reading context that is not an aulic one.

Prefaces function as paratexts in so far as they are openly presented as such and highlight the generic nature of the texts they frame. Indeed, in his prefacing letters, most of which are written in prose, Ausone uses the vocabulary of poetry (*uersus*, *uersiculus*, *nugae*, *libellus*) to designate his work:

Besides, the particular feature of Ausonian paratext is the organic link it weaves with the text that follows it: it creates a constant movement of to-and-fro between the those two instances thanks to the use of deictics and modalizers which places from the start the author of the preface and the reader in the same referential universe. Prefaces and poems are not autonomous, which is an important poetic element. Some poems, notably the Griphe, cannot be understood without their prefaces: reading them is required if one is to fully understand- and even be able to read- the poems.

Our corpus will mainly consist of prefaces that are letters which function as prose paratexts to the poems that follow them. The various direct addresses to the reader or the book will not be included, as they appear to have a somewhat different goal: they correspond rather to a topical discourse of recommendation from the poet to his book. Both Ausone's collection of epigrams and his preface to the Eglogues start with prosopopeias to his books, and letters 9 and 19 are presented as sent to far away addressees (Probus is in Smyrna, Paulin in Spain)

Contemporary criticism has shown the progressive modification in the part played by prefaces with the evolution of the author's status and the advent of prefaces written by editors, which were de facto instrumental in depriving of any relevance the encomiastic function of liminary texts. In that regard, apprehending paratexts from late Antiquity is relatively simple since there are not several auctorial instances. However, given that Ausone worked on the edition of his works himself, asserting that his prefaces are contemporary with the poems they go with is difficult.

Who are Ausone's correspondents?

Diverse though they may be, they belong to the social and cultural elite and form a network in which interactions, exchanges but also poetic production develop. The way the elite created and publicized social norms to which its members were expected to adhere is perceptible through these epistolary exchanges, the aim of which is not to inform but to fulfill a social and cultural ritual. This community follows specific rules which condition, it is to be noted, its self representation, since the exchanges are adapted to the addressees' intellectual status and since the technical perfection of the message is thus a message in itself. In the specific case we are dealing with, what unites the various addressees is Ausone's injunction to be his first readers given their social authority - and it can thus be said that their reading constitutes the very source of communication - and to read in an active way without any kind of indulgence.

Prefacing letters: a paradigm

In Ausone's works, the prefacing paratext is paradigmatic in so far as it fulfills more or less 2 of the major functions of a preface.

First, whether or not it bears a title, the prefacing letter must make the addressee/reader pay attention by appealing to his curiosity and by asking for his benevolence. Ausone does it through two extremely rhetorical topics which are the praise of the addressee and the ethos of humility.

In Ausonius's works, the invocation to the muses and the motif of the divine nurse, so popular in late Antiquity, have disappeared. The addressee/reader is not extolled for his power, his political role or his financial patronage the way he is in Horace's or Martial's works. Rather, the various addressees are all in their way elements that compose the portrait of the ideal reader. Drepanius is acknowledged as a *suerus lecor*, a *doctus vir (Ludus)*, Paulus is celebrated for his *ingenium et facundia (Techn.)* as well as his sincerity and affection.

Theon ((ep. 14 a) is a demanding reader (*respondeas nouissimae cantilenae, qui illam nouiciam silentio condemnasti*). For Ausonius, the reader must be a very cultured *amicus* able to write poetry himself and endowed with extensive knowledge of history, grammar, linguistics and philosophy.

The celebration of those addressees goes hand in hand with the discourse of humility which is omnipresent in Ausone's texts. It is one of the elements of *captatio beneuolentiae*, the latter being in itself an unavoidable "threshold" to use Genette's vocabulary, but it is to be noted that it is in a playful context that this discourse is used to its utmost degree, when Ausone sends to his friends his poetical experiments with constrained writing. Ausone resorts to vocabulary that is specific to Latin elegy and lyric poetry and uses the lexical field of *ineptiae* and *nugae* to characterizes his work. For instance, he tells Symmaque in the preface to the *Griphe* that the poem *latebat iter nugas meas libellus ignobilis*. In the preface to the *Centon Nuptial*, the poem is called a *friuolum et nullius pretii opusculum*. In the *Cupido Cruciatu*s the poet evokes his *ineptia poetandi* in his liminary text. The ethos of humility is sometimes carried to its limit and Ausone's discourse then becomes self-deprecatory: he insists on the unfinished, trivial and unworthy character of his work. In this regard, the preface to Drepanius, written in verse)((*Praef. 4, G*) is especially noticeable as it contains and concentrates all the derogatory adjectives Ausone applies to himself:

At nos illepidum rudem libellum, burras quisquilias ineptiasque credemus gremio cui fouendum ? Inueni-trepidae silete nugae.

Although it is not part of the corpus studied here, that preface, which S Mattiacci has analyzed using the angle of the belittling lexicon, is an enlightening example of how the manipulation of the *locus humilitatis* contributes to the guiding function fulfilled by the paratext when it sets the reader's expectations. It comes as no surprise that editors have questioned the place of that liminary text in the Ausonian corpus. Peiper, Seeck, Evelyn-White and Prete have considered it to be the preface to the *Eglogues*. For his part, Green places it in the small corpus of the varied prefaces because he deems that the *Eglogues* and their seemingly metaphysical tone are on the whole too serious for Ausone to have included there that preface fraught with literary references and built on self deprecation. However, it seems to us that putting that very playful liminary text at the forefront of a collection that deals numerous times two themes which are largely echoed in Ausone's work, namely games on figures and considerations on popular philosophy, indicates precisely how consistent that poetry is.

Secondly, Ausone's prefaces aim at clarifying the poems that follow them and at guiding the reader by multiplying reading indications and explanations supported by the use of performative verbs (*quaerere, iurare, permittere, dicere*) The poet clearly defines reading orientations, especially in poems with writing constraint. Beside the technical aspect which will be evoked later on, Ausone evokes the motif of the writing conditions to limit any equivocal reading.

Ausone uses a topic that is frequent, especially in the imperial era, when he says he is writing in the middle of the night. Indeed, Seneca *Ep, 8, 1* explains he uses part of the night to read, Aulu-Gelle entitles his work *Nuits Attiques* and places it thus under the sign of the night as he mentions it in his preface. As to Quintilien, he explains the best time for the orator to compose is at night (10,3,26), in what he calls the ritual of *lucubratio*. As for Ausone, he uses the multiple possibilities offered by the topic. He claims to be writing at night not because his official duties leave him little time, which was Pliny's argument for instance, or because of his will to work industriously, as said in his preface to the *Fastes* written for Hesperius. The poet writes at night because of the context that is his.

Thus, in his prefacing letter to Griphe, Auson explains the poem was composed at dinner time during a military campaign :

In expeditione quod tempus, ut scis, licentiae militaris est, super mensam meam facta est inuitatio, non illa de Rubrii couiuiio, ut Graeco more biberetur, sed illa de Flacii ecgloga (...)

The poet does not mention that moment to court the addressee's indulgence but to incite him to project himself in the universe (be it fictive or not) of *festivitas* the poet and his audience were in when the *Griphe* was composed if he wants to apprehend the poem. In letter 19a, the topic's aim is different: Ausone thanks Paulin for the oil and brine he sent him and offers in return some iambs he wrote on the spur of the moment but of little worth, written at night :

Isti tamen (...) spatio lucubratiumculae unius effusi quamquam hoc ipsi de se probabunt, tamen nihil diligentiae ulterioris habuerunt.

Writing at night is here synonymous with writing fast. The result of writing in haste was, notably for Stace, the production of occasional and minor poetry (cf preface to book I) which he claimed to be just that. That is definitely not the case for Ausone: he does not consider the iambs addressed to Paulin as unpolished or unfinished. Indeed, the reader is made to understand it is quite the opposite.

Those two examples demonstrate how Ausone diverts the theme of nocturnal writing to lead the reader in a specific direction. This is also the case in the prefacing letter to *Centon Nuptial* which justifies the poetic production by an extra necessity, that of fulfilling an order. Ausone evokes a work, based on Virgilian material, that Valentinien had required: he claims it was written in haste, partly by night, because the emperor wanted to engage in a literary joust with our poet :

Hoc tum die uno et addita lucubratione properatum modo inter liturarios meos cum repperissem.

The situation the poet was in was delicate, as he could neither surpass the prince for fear of being insolent nor show himself to be inferior to him for fear of acting as the vilest of flatterers

Quam scrupulosum hoc mihi fuerit, intellege ; neque anteferri uolebam neque posthaberi, cum aliorum quoque iudicio detegenda esset adulatio inepta, si cederem, insolentia, si ut aemulus emerem.

Ausone refuses to be the emperor's rival: quite skillfully, he prefers to include him in the poetic game and to indicate in the preface that what really matters is the poetic prowess that cento is. His claim is supported by the emphasis laid on the speed at which the poem was composed: it only took him a few late hours of work to write a cento good enough not to suffer at all from the comparison with a work by the prince of poets, technically speaking, given its specificity and originality. What the insistence on speed highlights here is his technical skill and his erudition, as should be clear for the addressee or any other reader. Indeed, the tone becomes didactical, as if the poet wanted to teach how to compose a cento to the addressee (who did not need such advice) :

Et si pateris ut doceam, docendus ipse, cento qui absoluam.

The Ausonian paratext consisting in a prefacing letter thus aims at helping the reader apprehend the specific type of poetry a cento is. Yet, the reader can feel this reading orientation is but a veil to hide the poet's intention: there is something else behind it.

A parasitic paratext ?

Let's consider the structure of this prefacing letter. It can be divided into two parts which may seem redundant or may at least give the impression that one is the expansion of the other. Indeed Ausone's first definition of the cento *centonem uocant qui primi hac concinnatione*

luserunt is little relevant except in so far as it underlines how weak the genre is. The second part focuses on a much more technical level and details very precisely the rules of the cento, its metrics, the proper themes to use and the varied possibilities of assemblage. It ends up with the re-patriation of the word *concinnatio* which was at the beginning of the first definition but which is now positively connoted:

Sed peritorum concinnatio miraculum est, imperitorum iunctura ridiculum. Quo praedicto scies quod dego posteriorem imitatus sum.

What is implied in the prefacing letter, once the topics of humility and hasty composition are decoded, is that if the rules edicted by Ausone are respected, no cento will meet the criteria of that technical challenge - no cento that is, except for the *Cento Nuptial*:

Hoc ergo centonis opusculum ut ille ludus tractatur, pari modo sensus diuersiut congruant, adptiua quae sunt, ut cognata uideantur, aliena ne interluceant ; arcessita ne uim redarguant, densa ne supra modum protuberent, hiulca ne pateant .

Really apprehending the Ausonian paratext therefore requires the addressee to adopt a position in which he is able to suspect that the true reasons for the paratextual discourse are quite different from the openly evoked ones.

This applies also to the preface to the *Griphe* and to the *Technopaegnon*, for which Ausone composed two prefacing letters, one to Pacatus and the other to Paulin. In those paratexts, Ausone reiterates his refusal of the polish and *levitas* of style in favour of the *carmen incomptum*. He therefore produces a technical discourse which is more developed in the second preface: the stake is not this time to assemble lines by Virgilium but to build a poem based on an assemblage of monosyllabs.

Versiculi sunt monosyllabis coepti et monosyllabis terminati. Nec hic modo stetit scrupula difficultas, des accessit ad miseriam connectandi, ut idem monosyllabon, quod esset finis extremi uersus, principium fieret insequentis. (...) Laboraui tamen, ut haberet aut historicon quippiam aut dialecticon.

If the reader does not go beyond the poet's statements, he will be able to appreciate the poetic prowess but will undoubtedly stumble when considering the interest of such a prowess and will risk being bored, as the poet himself advances: « *o mora, o poena* » ! *rem uanam quippe curauit : exigua est et fastiditur ; inconnexa est et implicatur, cum sit aliquid, uel nihili deprenditur.*

The long prefacing letter to the *Gripheis* is in a way the ultimate product of the genre: indeed it concentrates all the elements of the Ausonian liminary text. The reader can easily identify them : protestation of humility, denigration of the object that has been produced, information on the circumstances of composition (by night, during a military campaign), literary references and technical manual of poetic experimentation. To which can be added a detailed etymological play on the title. However, the feeling of exhaustivity produced by the tricolon that concludes the preface may leave the reader somewhat baffled:

Postremo si etiam tibi obscurus fuero, cui nihil neque non lectum est neque non intellectum, tum uero ego beatus, quod affectaui, assequar, me ut requiras, me ut desideres, de me cogites.

His surprise only increases when at the end of the poem he understands the *Griphe* is not at all the enigma he expected, or rather that it is an enigma the solution of which he had not expected.

Besides, Ausone writes even more clearly than in the *Centon Nuptial* or in the *Techno* about the technical limitations of the exercise- or at least the limitations he set to himself- as he claims to have deliberately passed over quite a few fields:

Quam multa enim de tenario sciens neglexi : tempora et personas, genera et gradus, nouem naturalia metra cum trimetris, totam grammaticam et musicam librosque medicinae, ter maximum Hermen et amatorem primum philosophiae Varronisque numeros et quicquid profanum uulgus ignorat.

Besides, Ausone writes even more clearly than in the *Centon Nuptial* or in the *Techno* about the technical limitations of the exercise- or at least the limitations he set to himself- as he claims to have deliberately passed over quite a few fields:

Citation latine

This statement is once again a playful twist: while the whole work deals with number three, the statement unfolds using first a binary, then a ternary rhythm and finally an accumulative rhythm with 4 elements. When one takes a closer look, the enumeration of Ausone's supposed oversights matches the themes about number three that Ausone deals with in the *Griphe* but one is a listing and the other is its amplified development which becomes an epitome. Ausone said that, when it came to enigmas *alius alio plura inuenire potest : nemo omnia*. Yet, he seems to have considered all of the possible compositions of number three , intertwining Greek and Latin cultural traditions with classical literary references to classical authors (Plautus, Terence, Catullus, Cicero, Horace , Virgil, Martial) . The aim of that dizzying

intertwining which makes the reader stumble is to highlight not only how difficult an exercise writing that preface is but also what skill and artistic variety it requires.

The prefacing text is thus a complex object that requires attention and care from the reader. If the addressee/ reader wants to unveil it, he needs to do exactly what Ausone did when he "recovered" his poems and brought them to light. Just like Euclion's rooster, which is mentioned in the *Griphe*, he must scratch the surface, go deeper, shake off the obvious and avoid the traps laid by the poet. The topos of humility then acquires quite another dimension: Ausone wishes for a critical reading of the reader that goes beyond his first impression and that validates his work. In a way, he pleads for multi-levelled reading, which indicates how modern he is.

How did the community in which Ausone's poetic creations circulated react? Did the readers follow the poet's injunctions? That we cannot actually say, given the scarceness of the elements related to reception .

However, wanting to decide how the addressee is to read the work (*sic ergo examen pro materia et pro tempore (Griphe)*) and inciting the reader to produce his own paratext are indications of a mirror-like exchange. Indeed, the reader's skill in entering the poem reflects above all the poet's skill and genius.