

Pierre Laurens, *La dernière muse latine: Douze lectures poétiques, de Claudien à la génération baroque*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008. Pp. xvii, 327. ISBN 9782251443539. €27.00 (pb).

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[Table of Contents is listed at the end of the review]

This is a fascinating book, designed for a wide range of readers. The author, Pierre Laurens, is a well-known scholar, professor emeritus at the Sorbonne. Among his main areas of interest are the epigrammatic tradition from the Hellenistic age to the Renaissance and Neo-Latin poetry, i.e., Latin poetry from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the present. To the latter the present book contributes twelve essays on Latin poets, from Claudius Claudianus (4th century) to Richard Crashaw (17th century). Seven of the essays have been previously published and are reprinted here with some slight changes; five are previously unpublished. Rather than a collection of *scripta minora*, however, the book belongs to the tradition of collected essays representing a cycle of lectures delivered in specific circumstances and related to the author's particular idea of literature, in this case lectures given by Laurens at the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa in February 2007, where six of the chapters were discussed. The volume shows many features of the lecture tradition: a sense of oral fluency, coupled with an expressive vivacity; chapters which are not strictly consequential, but tied together by recurring elements; a specific focus on the presentation of authors and texts; great importance given to the translations, which almost compete with the original texts; a clear parallelism among texts from different centuries; a select but up-to-date bibliography, which does not aim at completeness but is focused on what, according to the author, directly concerns his topic.

The first essay can be taken as a representative example of the author's interests and methodology. It concentrates on a cycle of seven Latin (and two Greek) epigrams by Claudius Claudianus, concerning a crystal ball enclosing a drop of water. According to Laurens, the epigrams form a unity and do not simply involve the idea of "variation on a theme", nor are they exploiting the artistic possibilities of the *ekphrasis*, as is usually said; indeed, they aim to describe the substance of the crystal and the unity of the depicted object (according to the ancients, rock-crystal was ice hardened by excessively intense freezing). As a consequence, the epigrams try to replace the real object with words and to create through words an entity as solid and complicated as the real one, in which hardened ice (crystal) and fluid ice (water) are mixed together. This means that, according to Laurens, the nine epigrams are different steps leading the reader to appreciate how water freezes or ice thaws and the one turns into the other. It also means that, like the Bible, natural phenomena can be read equally in two different ways: both literally (a crystal ball enclosing a drop of water, an extraordinary but futile object) and -- more deeply -- positing that inclusion, mobility and contiguity beget a general incredulity about the principle of identity, so that readers are forced to reflect upon the uninterrupted transformations of things into one another. If this is true, Claudian is not to be regarded any more as a pure artist or as a follower of the art for art's sake doctrine, but rather as a philosopher or a didactic poet, interested in the rules that establish the fluctuation and the progress of ideas, and in everything that can explain how an abnormal fact becomes normal. But Laurens goes even further; he thinks that through these epigrams Claudian

also expresses what poetry is, or should be. Like the described crystal ball, poetry is imperfect and undefined between two contraries, an oxymoron, a liquefied object dominated by an inside movement that seems irrational, but is not. And, similarly, poetry is marvellous to the reader even when explained, because it preserves an external lucidity (the crystal sphere) and an internal opacity (the water), and yet it is precisely the opacity that explains the external lucidity and allows it to shine. With this interpretation Laurens has established a new image of Claudian's poetry. There is a minor price to be paid: variations from John Barrie Hall's text (Leipzig 1985) are not always exactly pointed out; Laurens quotes Alan Cameron's seminal book on the poet (Oxford 1970), but he neither accepts, nor discusses, Cameron's textual conclusions; he also quotes the recent edition of the *Carmina minora* by Maria Lisa Ricci (Bari 2001), but he apparently ignores Ricci's long article on the same epigrams, published in "InvLuc" 15/16, 1993/1994, 269-283, where they are also considered as a unity, with different conclusions deduced from the premise. I will not regard these faults as major, though, since they are the obvious consequence of what I have said about the form and the tradition to which the book belongs. Through the twelve chapters Laurens develops some ideas of his own and does not lose time considering other details. Thus, he can convey many original judgements and describe more than a millennium of Latin poetry in a deliberately cursory fashion.

Now it is time to give a full idea of the contents of the book.

Chapter II discusses two compositions: the first is a poem attributed to Marbod, bishop of Rennes from 1096 to 1123, describing the twelve gems that according to St. John's *Apocalypse*, 21,19-20 adorn the walls of the celestial Jerusalem (Alain Michel's text is reprinted with few variations); the second comprises five out of eight strophes from an anonymous poem about the evening, conserved in Munich (*Clm* 4660 = *Carmina Burana* 62, 12th century). Laurens thinks that such compositions are not to be considered school exercises or simple examples of lyric poetry, now based on rhyme instead of syllabic quantity as before, as has been claimed. They certainly disclose a poetic activity of minor value, not much esteemed at present (but also not much understood). Nevertheless, they are important because, with a classical vocabulary and a great number of classical and post-classical associations, they display rhythm, some sound-play, stylistic effects and a new emphasis on a formal repertoire now completely renewed and charged with allegorical and lyrical nuances. This is particularly evident in the case of Marbod's text, because the twelve gems are perfectly material things with their proper recognizable qualities, virtues and varieties (as well as magical powers), but at the same time they are also mystic symbols of the virtues that give glory to a perfect Christian and to the celestial Jerusalem, the city of all perfect Christians. It is a new kind of allegory, Laurens says, for which the poet, instead of bestowing material consistence on ideas, transforms the material things into images and representations of ideas.

Chapter III is devoted to Francesco Petrarca's acute sensibility for words and rhythmical patterns. The so-called "Codice degli Abbozzi" (*Vaticanus Latinus* 3196, a copy of Petrarca's *Rerum vulgariarum fragmenta* with autograph annotations and corrections), the Vergilian manuscript preserved in the Ambrosian Library in Milan with annotations by the Italian poet himself, a few letters and essays and his Latin poem *Africa*, partially edited by Laurens in 2006, reveal how much Petrarca's choices and judgements were dictated by either the sound or the meaning of poetry. This is also true in the metrical field: even if the commentary by Servius and the late antique *Artes* suggested the necessity of standardizing the Vergilian hexameter, Petrarca realized the importance of its technical features and tried to compose a verse as similar to that of Vergil as possible, with the

exception of the predominance of dactyls over spondees. The chapter provides rich examples for these assertions, through a full scrutiny both of Petrarch's Latin poem and the annotations in the *Codex Laurentianus* "Acquisti e Doni" 441 (the basis of Laurens's edition).

The following chapter is concerned with the Italian poet's *Epistula ad Horatium* (*Rerum Familiarium libri XXIV* 10, ca. 1365). By writing a fictitious letter in 138 minor Asclepiads to the ancient and (by him) much read poet, Petrarch collected many themes and lexical expressions connected with Horace. In so doing, he became a master of the "allusive technique", since he used the Horatian formulas and words with freedom. Readers have to complete and to judge Petrarch's text according to these implicit allusions and free quotations. Laurens also suggests that the letter foreshadows Politian's *Silvae*, the poetic introductions that the Florentine humanist wrote as prefaces to his academic classes in the 1480s. This might be true, but cannot be demonstrated. In 1480 Politian was in Mantua, before returning to Florence and beginning his academic career, where he composed his *Orfeo*; in the same town the Roman humanist Pietro Marso published a poetic *Silva* entitled *Andes* as an introduction to his lessons on Vergil. The history of this genre, perhaps, is still to be written.

In chapter V we reach the High Renaissance. The three poet-readers referred to in the title of the book are Coluccio Salutati (*De laboribus Herculis*, ca. 1391), Julius Caesar Scaliger (*Poetices libri*, especially the fourth book, posthumously published in 1561) and Iovianus Pontanus (*Actius*, 1507). They have in common a keen interest in poetic versification and rhythm, which they regarded as the soul of poetry (Scaliger, IV, 7). In his allegorical reading of the Hercules' myth Salutati argues that the harmony of the sky is represented by the rhythmical harmony of the Latin metres, above all by the hexameter with its mathematical distribution of *longa* and *brevia*. According to Scaliger, poetry is a mimesis of the real world, and the rhythm, the metre, the juxtaposition of consonants and vowels, the syllables, the pauses and the *intervalla*, all together are elements of *ethos* and *pathos*. Sounds are important, too; other rules concern word order, the quantity of the syllables, their schemes, the length of single words. The duty of a critic is to reveal these schemes, to explain them and to judge the talent and the technical (and moral) ability of the poet who is being commented on, his aptitude for creating new meanings. This is true for Pontanus as well: according to him the aim of poetry is to astonish the reader as in Baroque theories. That is why all three authors worship Vergil, because Vergil accomplished the mixture of rhythms, words and sounds better than any other poet, using them to attract the reader's attention through *varietas* and *voluptas*.

Chapters VI and VII, respectively, focus on Michael Marullus' *Nenia* 2,1-13 (text by Alessandro Perosa, Zurich 1951, ca. 1500) and Johannes Secundus' *Basium II* (ca. 1535, posthumously published in 1539), two Renaissance masterpieces. As Laurens points out, references to Latin poets abound in both of them, but these texts are distinctive mainly in terms of composition and originality. Marullus, a soldier-poet born in exile, looks at his country, Greece, from the Italian coast of the Adriatic and dreams about it (he will never visit it, since it is under Turkish dominion). Marullus' text reflects the Horatian *Odes* as closely as possible: the result is a mix of emotional feelings, a tension between the longing for home and the longing for adventure, in a tone of deep melancholy. At the same time, Marullus gives voice to the idea of a personal curse that keeps him away from his country and that produces a universal pessimism about human society as a whole – another homage to Horace and his civil poetry. Johannes, too, expands a few trite *topoi* in his composition (the link between *eros* and *thanatos*; the death by love; the reunion of lovers

after death; their voyage to the infernal regions in the same boat; the conjugal unity between vines and elm-tree), but he renews them by combining the ancient works with medieval and humanist sources, transforming the kiss into the reason why the lovers die.

In antiquity Anacreon was regarded as a legendary poet, and even before the publication of his (now doubtful) *Anacreontea* in 1554 by Henri Estienne many humanists tried to compete with him. Pontanus, Politian, Johannes Secundus, Julius Caesar Scaliger and Estienne made various efforts to create a flexible and short metre to express the erotic subjects and the minimal style of the Greek poet, but they were defeated by the poverty of the Latin language. The hero of chapter VIII is Caspar Barth, well known for his commentaries on many Latin poets and for the *Adversaria*, one of the last and biggest commentaries of the Late Renaissance (1624). Barth was also a distinguished poet, the author of *Amabilium libri IV* (1612) and *Amphitheatrum Gratiarum* (1613): he is the only one who succeeded in imitating Anacreon's style, inventing many new words, a few "jeux de mots", and a quantity of compound words suggested to him by Plautus. The miniature themes, the virtuous metrical dexterity, the large quantity of figures of speech creating an internal rhythm, the lexical richness increased by the invention, composition and variation of the common vocabulary are also marks of Barths's originality and of a new interest in the Latin language.

The next two chapters are devoted to the Italian Jesuit Mario Bettini. Two works are the subject of the first: the once well-known pastoral tragedy *Ludovicus, tragicum silviludium*, published in Parma in 1622, but composed in 1612, and the *Hilarotragoedia satyropastoralis Rubenus*, published in 1614, but written around 1605. The titles and the subtitles of these compositions reveal the originality of Bettini's work. But as Laurens explains through the examination of a few verses of both works, the uniqueness of the poet rests in his ability to manage unexpected metaphors. This ability is based on three important characteristics: the analogical process by which different things are put together; the "agudeza" of the author and of his expected readers; the tendency to anthropomorphize nature and natural things. In Bettini's view, poetry is an accumulation of metaphors, and each metaphor has to draw the best from the semantic possibilities of a given idea. Bettini is a true pioneer of the Baroque era; even if he wrote in Latin, not in the vernacular, he was connected with Giovan Battista Marino and a contemporary of Luis de Góngora, the renowned champions of this kind of poetry. A poem by Bettini is also the main topic of the tenth chapter. The theme is the nightingale. Celebrated by Pliny as *avis musica* "par excellence", at the beginning of the seventeenth century the nightingale was extolled for its skill by both men of science and poets, among them Bettini, but also Marino and Famiano Strada, a Jesuit poet who taught at Rome, ca. 1617, and Richard Crashaw (*Musick's Dwell*, 1646). Bettini's poem attracts our attention by the onomatopoeic sounds derived from the hoopoe's song in Aristophanes' *Birds*, but developed by the new poet with astonishing freedom and ability.

The last two chapters continue to dwell on the 17th century. The first one is twofold. It opens with a study of a text by the French Jesuit Antoine Chanut. It is a fragment of a longer poem, *Praecipua septem Augustissimae Virginis mysteria* (1650-1657), a riddle to celebrate the mirror. The tradition of this genre (duly reconstructed by Laurens) is mainly based on metaphor, though it often employs synecdoche, metonymy, and oxymoron. What makes this text different from all the others and from its ancient models is its theological value. Even after its solution, the riddle is not really solved. The mirror is an image of the Holy Virgin, *speculum sine macula*: this idea connects the poem with the Baroque tradition of religious sermons, labelled "une sophistique chrétienne" by Marc Fumaroli. According to

Laurens *Le Miroir sans tache* by Joseph Philère (or Filère, 1636) is the prose equivalent of Chanut's text. But with a difference: the prose writer aims at demonstrating and persuading, whereas the poet tries to astonish and to persuade. The second part of the chapter is focused on dew as a symbol of God. Laurens examines a few instances of this theme, in particular a poem by Andrew Marvell, probably inspired by Sinesius of Cyrene and Gregorius of Nyssa, and certainly by St. Paul, *Phil.* 3,12-14. A poet contemporary with Marvell, Richard Crashaw, is the central character of the last chapter. His *Bulla* is an actual development of the Latin phrase *Homo bulla*. A man and his soul are nothing, a non-existing thing, encapsulated in a mortal body. Bubbles are a metaphor for many things: they are amazing, made of simple ingredients, a non-existing thing, but with an extraordinary effect; their splendour is mixed with illusion. And so is the man, and so is poetry. Crashaw's text is made of the same stuff: it is mimesis of what has no consistence, the description of a marvellous object that does not last for more than a few seconds. But bubbles can be made of soap, too. And soap bubbles are usually notable for their colours, as iridescent as the rainbow. In the same century Robert Hooke and (a few years later) Isaac Newton were studying light and its refraction. They demonstrated scientifically that colours are not a reality, but illusion and appearance; the same themes, from a different point of view, were addressed by the metaphysical poets (see now M. Emmer, *Bolle di sapone. Tra arte e matematica*, Torino 2009).

In sum: this is an outstanding book, full of ideas, suggestions, and information for every reader. The vitality of Latin poetry is easily demonstrated by Laurens's examples, as is its continuity from ancient times to the modern era. For many centuries Latin was the *lingua franca* of Europe, and Laurens convincingly demonstrates that Neo-Latin poetry was not inferior to the vernacular. In fact, there was no break between Latin poetry and the hegemonic culture of the new ages. A few misprints are easily detected, but they do not affect the book and its neatness; at the end, the avid reader is only hungry for more.

Contents

- pp. ix-xvii = "Préface" + "Abréviations";
- pp. 1-25 = "L'eau dans la pierre. Étude de neuf épigrammes de Claudien", originally published (with a different title) in "BAGB" 45, 1986, 344-367;
- pp. 27-57 = "Deux gemmes médiévales", published here for the first time;
- pp. 59-85 = "Musiques de l'*Africa*" ("Conférence" 18, 2004, 425-446);
- pp. 87-108 = "Étincelles d'un brasier sublime. De la Lettre à Horace (Petrarque, *Familiares*, 24, 10) à la *silve* politianesque", originally published in *Petrarque épistolier*, Paris 2004, 119-134;
- pp. 109-138 = "Trois lectures du vers virgilien (Coluccio Salutati, Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, Jules-César Scaliger)", originally published in "REL" 79, 2001, 215-235;
- pp. 139-156 = "Voci dell'anima", in French, previously unpublished;
- pp. 157-174 = "La barque des amants (Janus Second, Madrid, 1535)", previously unpublished;
- pp. 175-203 = "Le désir de l'Anacréon perdu", published with a different title in *La poésie grecque antique*, Paris 2003, 203-221;
- pp. 205-243 = "Un atelier latin baroque", previously unpublished;
- pp. 245-263 = "Variations sur le chant du rossignol", previously unpublished;
- pp. 265-298 = "Peintures spirituelles: L'énigme du miroir", previously published in *Mélanges Marc Fumaroli*, Genève 2008, 371-384 + "Rêverie sur une goutte de rosée", published in *Mélanges Alain Michel*, "Helmantica" 50, 1999, 465-476;
- pp. 299-319 = "*Flos aeris* ou le poème inépuisable", originally published in "REL" 70, 1992, 187-202;
- pp. 321-327 = "Index nominum" + "Table des matières".