

CREATION IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES* AND THE LATIN POETS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

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In the Latin poetry of late antiquity, the influence of Virgil is all pervasive. Ovid, typically, comes second, though a distant second. But Ovidian references and allusions recur with sufficient frequency throughout the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries to leave no doubt that both poets and readers were familiar with and continued to derive inspiration from his poetry: to take three examples, in the fifth century (probably), an anonymous poet, writing of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, compares those cities' fall to the crash of Phaethon—the metamorphosis of the Heliads provides a counterpart to the transformation of Lot's wife; in the last decade of the same century, the African poet Dracontius, it has been persuasively argued, employs language from the Ovidian Pygmalion story to describe the creation of Eve; finally, in the second half of the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus, the “last poet of antiquity,” shows an affinity for the Ovidian persona of the *Heroides*, a woman mourning for her separated beloved, though, in Fortunatus's case, the mourner may be a mother for a daughter traveling to a far country to be married (and soon to die), a Christian virgin for her divine bridegroom, or the queen and saint Radegund for her childhood companion and cousin, Amalfrid, in distant Constantinople.¹ In the present paper, though, I shall concentrate on an Ovidian passage that has special resonance for Christian readers, the account of creation at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*.

1 The passages/poems referred to are: *de Sodoma* 107–20, ed. Peiper 1891a.1 (cf. Hexter 1988); Dracontius *de Laudibus Dei* 1.352–458 (cf. Evenepoel 1995.92–96 and 100–01); Venantius Fortunatus *Carm.* 6.5, 8.3, and *App.* 1.

With the maturing of Christian Latin poetry at the end of the fourth century and the abundant exegesis of the early chapters of Genesis, the stage was set for Christian poets to turn their attention to the story of creation.² Although the brief account of the first Old Testament poet, the anonymous author of the *Heptateuchos*, shows no Ovidian influence, Claudius Marius Victorius (Victor), a rhetor from Marseilles writing probably soon after, in the third decade of the fifth century, begins his *Alethia* with a direct challenge to his classical predecessor (*Alethia* 1.1–4):

*Ante polos caelique diem mundique tenebras,
ante operum formas vel res vel semina rerum,
aeternum sine fine retro, sine fine futuri
esse subest cui semper, erat deus unus.*

Before the heavens, the daylight in the sky, and the darkness of the earth, before the shapes of creation, before the world and its seeds, eternal, with no limit in the past and future, was the one God whose existence is forever.³

Compare Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.5–7:

*Ante mare et terras et, quod tegit omnia, caelum
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,
quem dixere chaos.*

Before sea, earth, and the all-enveloping sky, there was one face of nature in the whole world, called chaos.

A century or so earlier, Lactantius had taken issue with the poets, by whom he means Ovid, who say “in the beginning was chaos” (“nec audiendi sunt

2 For a study of these poets, see Gamber 1899, Roberts 1985 covers most of them, but does not discuss the *Metrum in Genesin* in detail because it is not strictly a biblical epic. Herzog 1975 only covers the anonymous *Heptateuchos*. See also Thraede 1962 and Kartschoke 1975. I quote the following editions of the Christian poets of late antiquity: Claudius Marius Victorius *Alethia*, Hovingh 1960; Dracontius *de Laudibus Dei* (hereafter *LD*), Moussy and Camus 1985–88; *Metrum in Genesin ad Leonem papam*, Peiper 1891b.2; Orientius *Commonitorium*, Rapisarda 1970; Prosper of Aquitaine *de Providentia Dei* (hereafter *DPD*), Marcovich 1989.

3 All the translations of the texts cited in this paper are my own.

poetae, qui aiunt chaos in principio fuisse,” *Inst.* 2.8.8).⁴ Claudius Marius Victorius makes the same point by recasting Ovid’s language, substituting *deus* for *chaos*. The use of the Lucretian *semina rerum* also looks back to Ovid’s chaos, of which they were a constituent part (*Met.* 1.9). This sensitivity to doctrinal issues is typical of Victorius; he is the most exegetically aware of the writers of Old Testament biblical epic. Such a polemical correction of a classical predecessor is more typical of an earlier, apologetic phase in the development of Christian Latin poetry.⁵

A second, pseudonymous poem from the middle of the fifth century, the *Metrum in Genesin* (attributed falsely to Hilary of Poitiers), demonstrates greater fidelity to Ovid’s account of creation and of the early history of humankind. Admittedly, the language of the poem is heavily Virgilian; the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* are particularly influential in the poet’s account of the newly created natural world.⁶ The poet praises God for his creation and his plan for humankind by recounting the early events of human history, the Creation, Fall, and Flood. He handles the biblical narrative freely and selectively. The account is structured by a sequence of references to the early sections of the *Metamorphoses*: the earth is settled out from the initial mass (*nigrum chaos altaque moles*, 23), given form by God through the effect of its greater weight (42–43, a Stoic doctrine familiar from Ovid *Met.* 1.29–31);⁷ the features of the natural world gradually emerge as creation takes shape (97–101; *Met.* 1.43–44); God, the *opifex rerum* (121; *Met.* 1.79), creates man, a *felix animal* (125; cf. *Met.* 1.76), to be master of his creation

4 The full passage is: “Nemo quaerat ex quibus ista materiis tam magna, tam mirifica opera deus fecerit: omnia enim fecit ex nihilo. Nec audiendi sunt poetae, qui aiunt chaos in principio fuisse, id est confusionem rerum atque elementorum, postea vero deum diremissem omnem illam congeriem singulisque rebus ex confuso acervo separatis in ordinemque discriptis instruxisse mundum pariter et ornasse.” The coincidences of language make it clear that Lactantius is thinking of Ovid. I quote Lactantius from the text of Brandt 1890.

5 For this type of allusion, see Thraede 1962.1035–36 and Herzog 1975.193–94. For this passage, see also Smolak 1975.353 n. 2, who compares Ambrose *Hex.* 1.2.5.

6 See Pavlovskis 1990. (The poem is falsely attributed to Hilary of Poitiers in the manuscripts.) I am less convinced by Smolak’s arguments (1973) for the significance of Lucretian allusions in the poem. For the importance of the *Metamorphoses* to the poem, see Smolak 1975.353–55.

7 See Speyer 1993.61–62. Ovid refers to this doctrine also at *Met.* 15.240–43 and *Fasti* 5.13; cf. Claudian *Rapt.* 1.251–52. The poet introduces a Christian interpretation into Ovid’s narrative by describing the earth as “settling with its foundations into the sea” (*salò fundata resedit*, 43), a detail derived from Ps. 23:2 and 135:6 (cf. Dracontius *LD* 1.154–55).

(112; *Met.* 1.76–77); after the Fall, a degenerate human race abandons itself to wickedness, warfare, crime, and murder (171–74 and 180–84; *Met.* 1.141–50), deserting honesty/faith (*fides*) and truth (*veritas*, 184—in *Met.* 1.149–50 *pietas* and the virgin Astraea [i.e., justice] abandon the earth); humankind’s punishment is the Flood (185). The poet, in presenting his narrative according to prominent Ovidian landmarks, gives a Christian reinterpretation of Ovid’s text. But the reinterpretation is mutual. Not only is Ovid Christianized, but the Bible undergoes an *interpretatio Ovidiana*.

Ovid’s account of the creation of man found special favor among the church fathers. It is the only passage of Ovid directly cited by Augustine.⁸ In the Old Testament poets, its presence is frequently detectable in the emphasis on man’s upright stature, face turned toward heaven, his domination of the rest of creation, and in the use of the epithet *opifex* or *opifex rerum* to describe God’s activity in creating man.⁹ Claudius Marius Victorius and Dracontius, however, provide particularly striking examples of the *interpretatio Ovidiana* of Genesis when they represent that act of creation as an Ovidian metamorphosis. In Claudius Marius Victorius, God breathes into the earth (“flatuque inmissa vapore / vita rigavit humum,” 1.207–08; *Gen.* 2:7). There follows the transformation (1.208–12):

tellus mollita liquore
partim facta caro est: sanguis, qui lubricus umor,
distendit mollis per nota foramina venas,
et mentis iam plenus homo est terraque repulsus
exilit ac dominum prudens rationis adorat.

The earth, softened by moisture, in part became flesh;
blood, a fluid liquid, forced pliant veins through familiar
openings; now man was possessed of mind, sprang up
from earth and, skilled in reason, worshipped his Lord.

8 Augustine *de Civ. D.* 22.24, Hagendahl 1967.214. The Ovid text is cited by Lactantius *Inst.* 2.1.15 and 2.8.64.

9 Erect stature: Claudius Marius Victorius 1.211–12, *Metrum in Genesin* 114–15, 132–34, Avitus *de Spiritalis Historiae Gestis* (SHG) 1.59, 70, 124, 130; master of creation: *Metrum in Genesin* 112, Dracontius LD 1.331–36; *opifex* or *opifex rerum*: Ausonius *Ephem.* 3.8, *Metrum in Genesin* 121, Avitus SHG 1.76; cf. Dracontius LD 1.434.

Dracontius, in the *de Laudibus Dei*, divides the creation into two stages: first the shaping of the human form from mud (337–39), then its animation by divine *spiritus* (340–48). Here are the relevant lines (*LD* 1.339–46):

Conspicitur nova forma viri sine mente parumper.
 Spiritus infusus subito per membra cucurrit
 et calefacta rubens tenuit praecordia sanguis,
 mox rubuere genae, totos rubor inficit artus.
 Iam cutis est qui pulvis erat, iam terra medullas
 ossibus includit, surgunt in messe capilli.
 Orbe micant gemino gemmantia lumina visus
 et vocem compago dedit nova machina surgens.

For a short while the new form of man could be seen but without mind. Then suddenly breath was infused and coursed through the limbs, red blood took possession of the now warm heart, soon the cheeks were flushed and color suffused every member. Now what was once dust becomes flesh, now earth encloses marrow in bones, now a crop of hair grows on the head. The jewel-like lights of the eyes now gleam with twin circles and the construction gave voice, a new cosmos in the making.¹⁰

The new man now goes on to admire God's creation with his eyes and praise it with his voice. Scholars have noted the influence of the *Metamorphoses* on Dracontius, especially in lines 343–44, with the contrast between present and past states (. . . *est* . . . *erat*, 343) and the antithetical language pertaining to the two conditions (*cutis*, *medullas*, and *capilli*, as opposed to *pulvis*, *terra*, and *messe*).¹¹ More generally, the anatomical itemization is typical of Ovidian metamorphoses (the Vulgate just has “factus est homo in animam viventem,” Gen. 2:7). Claudius Marius Victorius already includes a similar itemization, *caro*, *sanguis*, *mens*. In his attempt to account for the process of

10 *Machina* is regularly used in poetry of the universe (e.g., Dracontius *LD* 2.55 and 196). Hence my translation of *nova machina* here.

11 Evenepoel 1995.92, comparing *Met.* 9.791 and 15.543–44 for the contrast in verb tense, *Met.* 12.615, *iam cinis est*, and Camus in Moussy and Camus 1985–88.1.293. Cf. Haegel 1976.64 and 82–85.

creation and the distinct constituents of the human frame, Victorius shows affinities with Ovid's account of the creation of men and women after the flood. In Ovid, too, the hard raw material is softened (*mollita*, *Met.* 1.402) and the constituents of the human body (in Ovid's case, flesh, bones, and veins) are accounted for (*Met.* 1.408–10).¹²

A second passage of the *Metamorphoses* destined to find favor with Christian poets describes the emergence of natural features in the course of creation (*Met.* 1.43–44):

iussit et extendi campos, subsidere valles,
fronde tegi silvas, lapidosos surgere montes.

He bid plains extend themselves, valleys sink down, woods
be covered with foliage, and rocky mountains rise up.

Already in Ovid the lines show an aspiration for taxonomic (or cartographic) exhaustivity, with landscape features organized on a vertical scale: flat, i.e., standard elevation (*campi*), low-lying (*valles*), and high (*montes*). Only the third clause, *fronde tegi silvas*, escapes this scheme. Such a combination of enumerative exhaustivity (or quasi-exhaustivity), antithesis (between *subsidere valles* and *surgere montes*), and *variatio* is very much to the poetic taste of late antiquity. At the same time, the language, especially the verbs, is tautological: plains by their very nature stretch out, valleys sink down, and mountains rise up. Such apparent redundancy is appropriate, though, for an account of creation, when the defining features of the natural landscape are being fixed. Naming and defining are important parts of the act of creation, as is evident in the preceding lines where the distinction between river banks and sea shores (*ripae* and *litora*) mirrors the creator god's taxonomic obsessiveness (Ovid *Met.* 1.42).

The author of the *Metrum in Genesin* imitates the Ovid passage to describe the newly created earth and its vegetation (97–99).

Planescunt campi, colles tumor arduus effert,
subsidunt valles, florentia prata virescunt
saxaque durantur, pinguis se glæba resolvit.

12 Cf. Pascal 1909.2–3.

Plains lie low, hills swell and rise up on high, valleys sink
down, flowery meadows grow green, rocks are hardened,
the fertile tilth breaks up.

The *Metrum* in *Genesin* retains Ovid's threefold vertical distinction, plains, hills, and valleys, and some of his language (*subsidunt valles*, 98). A second tricolon then complements the first by specifying the type of land found in each landscape zone. Hard rocks are appropriate to mountains (cf. Ovid's *lapidosos . . . montes*). The poet probably intends the "flowery meadows" to be in the valleys and the "fertile tilth" to be that of the plains. This benign view of nature is characteristic of the poet, anticipating agricultural productivity even after the Fall. His allusion to the coming of spring in Virgil's *Georgics*, when "the crumbling tilth breaks up with the Zephyr" ("Zephyro putris se glæba resolvit," *G.* 1.44), helps fix this implied optimism about the postlapsarian world.¹³ In Virgil, the earth's friability is seasonal, in the Christian poet, it is a defining property, originating with creation.

Dracontius of all the Old Testament poets develops most fully the description of the newly-emerging natural world (*LD* 1.157–66):

(humus) cuius pars solvit harenas,
in glæbam pars membra ligat, pars saxa tumescunt
et cautes stant montis apex, pars flumina mergit,
planities pars tensa iacet, pars litora curvat,
pars datur in tumulos, pars aspera rupibus horret,
in scopulos pars certa riget, pars valle profunda
cingitur et colles tumidi iuga celsa supinant
atque humiles campos spatiis aequalibus aptant;
pars data dulcifluis undantes fontibus agri.

Part of the earth broke up into sand, part bound its constituents into tilth, part swells as rocks, and cliffs stand tall as mountain summits, part forms the bed of rivers, part stretches flat as plains, part curves as shores, part grows

13 For the poet's optimism and the significant change of wording from *putris* to *pinguis*, see Pavlovskis 1990.124–26. The hard rocks of the mountains may seem unpromising agricultural land, but they do lend themselves to viticulture, anticipated already in the prelapsarian world ("pampineas celsis texebat collibus umbras," 107; cf. Virgil *Ecl.* 7.58 "Liber pampineas invidit collibus umbras").

into mounds, part bristles rough with crags, and a set proportion hardens into boulders, part is surrounded by a deep valley, and swelling hills throw up lofty ranges and match the plains that lie below with equal extent; part becomes fields quickened by sweet-flowing springs.

The impression of exhaustivity and the extreme fragmentation of the textual surface—the figure of *leptologia*—is characteristic of late Latin poetry in general and of Dracontius in particular, who is cited by Curtius as an extreme example of late antique mannerism.¹⁴ The taxonomic principles underlying Dracontius's mapping of the newly-emerging world are less consistent than in the corresponding passages from Ovid and the *Metrum in Genesin*. The African poet begins by picking up on and taking issue with his Christian predecessor and his use of Virgilian language. While Virgil and the Christian poet had spoken of tilth “breaking up” (*se . . . resolvit*), in Dracontius's version, sand is produced by this fissile process (*pars solvit harenas*); by comparison, tilth results from earth binding together (*pars membra ligat*). The sequence *harenas—glæbam—saxa . . . et cautes* traces three geological possibilities in the newly-created world, organized in terms of increasing density and hardness. The threefold vertical distinction that is so pronounced in Ovid and the *Metrum in Genesin* recurs in Dracontius, though less consistently applied, both in lines 158–60 (the sequence of verbs *tumescunt*, *mergit*, and *tensa iacet*) and in 163–65 (*valle profunda*, *colles tumidi*, *humiles campos*).¹⁵ Dracontius shows the same interest in delimiting and defining features of the landscape as the Ovidian creator god (even to the extent, in lines 161–62, of implying a distinction between *rupes* and *scopuli*). Both the anonymous poet and Dracontius introduce further syntactical and lexical variation into the comparatively regular Ovidian text. For instance, simple verbs give way to circumlocutions (*surgere*, *Met.* 1.44: *tumor arduus effert*, *Met. in Gen.* 97; *extendi campos*, *Met.* 1.43: *planities pars tensa iacet*, *LD* 1.160), and inceptive verbs animate the process of creation (*planescunt* and *virescunt*, *Met. in Gen.* 97 and 98; *tumescunt*, *LD* 158). Dracontius's preference for words from the root *tum-* to describe hills may owe something to the language of the *Metrum in Genesin* (*tumor . . .*

14 Curtius 1953.286. For *leptologia* in late Latin poetry, see Roberts 1989.38–65.

15 For the relation of this passage to Ovid and the *Metrum in Genesin*, see Smolak 1972.384. Speyer 1993.64–65 speaks of Dracontius's attempt to outdo the *Metrum in Genesin*.

¹⁶ It is a favorite of Venantius Fortunatus *Carm.* 1.20.9, 3.10.12, 3.12.1, 7.14.18. For comparable passages of landscape description, see Lucretius 5.492–93 and 1370–75 and Claudius Marius Victorius *Alethia* 2.13–14. Prosper *DPD* 571–74 describes the reversal of such natural features; Paulinus of Nola *Carm.* 6.310–14 employs the same topos in paraphrasing Lk. 3:4–5.

derives from a pact (*foedus*) that presupposes the continuing existence of opposing forces in conflict. In Ovid, the creator god must impose a harmony (*concordi pace ligavit*, *Met.* 1.25) that is represented as putting an end to the conflict. The Christian poet here is closer to Stoic orthodoxy than his classical predecessor: opposing forces are essential to the *concordia* of the universe (e.g., Seneca *Q. Nat.* 7.27.4: “tota haec mundi concordia ex discordibus constat”).¹⁷ Prosper (*DPD* 121–24) explicitly takes issue with Ovid: “Just because created things war with opposed forces and each obstructs the other (*atque aliis alia obsistunt*, 122; cf. Ovid *Met.* 1.18: *obstabatque aliis aliud*), discordant motion nourishes all contrary things (*contraria discors / omnia motus alit*, 122–23), and while one runs counter to another, they all by their activity receive the force of life.”¹⁸ Ovid stands corrected. The passage concludes with Prosper’s adaptation of elemental conflict, now given a benign interpretation as a manifestation of the *concordia discors* of the universe (*DPD* 127–29):

Mollia sic duris, sic raris densa resistunt,
et liquidis solida, et tardis velocia, claro
obscurum obiectum, et dulci contendit amarum.

So the soft opposes the hard, the dense the rare, solid
liquid, swift the slow, the dark is opposed to the clear, and
bitter strives with sweet.

17 For the doctrine, see Bömer 1969–86.1.19–20 (ad *Met.* 1.9), Marcovich 1989.74–75 (ad *DPD* 121–23), and Hovingh 1955.80–81 and 84–86 (ad *Prec.* 29–31 and 38–40). See also Lapidge 1980. The teaching derives from Heraclitus and Empedocles before becoming Stoic orthodoxy. The phrase *concordia discors* or its equivalent is frequent both in classical and Christian authors (first in Horace *Epist.* 1.12.19, of Empedocles). Ovid uses it of the creatures born by heat and moisture after the flood (*Met.* 1.433), a passage quoted by Lactantius *Inst.* 2.9.17.

18 “Quod vero adversis compugnant condita causis / atque aliis alia obsistunt, contraria discors / omnia motus alit, dumque illi occurritur illo, / vitalem capiunt cuncta exagitata vigorem.” On this passage, see Lapidge 1980.826–27. For the authorship of this poem, see Marcovich 1989.ix–xi. The attribution to Prosper has frequently been questioned because of the semi-Pelagian views espoused in the poem: in it the author expresses the hope that the spiritual regeneration of the Christians of Gaul will lead also to an amelioration in the political conditions of his native country. It may well be that the disappointment of this hope led Prosper to question his belief in the power of human will by which that regeneration was to have been achieved. See Lagarrigue 1983 and Roberts 1992.104–06.

The biblical poet Claudius Marius Victorius, writing about the same time, makes the same point: "Some opposed things, if they struggle, obtain a greater peace. So, an ingenious creator, you knit all things into one family from opposed elements" ("contraria quaedam, / si certent, plus pacis habent. Sic omnia dives / conditor adversis etiam cognata elementis / nectis," *Prec.* 37–40).¹⁹

This image of cosmic peace created from the tension of opposites must have had special appeal to Gallic writers of the beginning of the fifth century. Both Orientius (*Commonitorium* 2.159–208) and Prosper (21–60) write feelingly of the confused conditions of contemporary Gaul. Orientius, in a much quoted line, describes the circumstances of his native land: the oppositions constitutive of peace and order have entirely collapsed into an undifferentiated state in which "all Gaul smokes with a single funeral pyre" ("una fumavit Gallia tota rogo," 2.184). There is a continuity between the order of the world and the order of the state. It is scarcely surprising that his account of cosmic harmony at the end of Book 1 concludes with a eulogy of peace in the personal and political realms (1.607–18).

For the late Roman poets, Ovid's description of the warring elements (*Met.* 1.19–20) comes to embody not chaotic disorder but the harmonious tension of opposites constitutive of order as a *concordia discors*.²⁰ Both that passage and Ovid's account of the emergence of natural features (1.43–44) reflect in their fragmented structure and patterns of antitheses combining into a single, self-contained compositional unit the same principle of harmony in opposition that governs the universe. Ovidian chaos serves not only as a persuasive account of the ordered state of the universe but also as a model of poetic composition for the poets of late antiquity: there is a homology between cosmic and political, moral, psychological, and, finally, poetic order.²¹ The principle is of broad application in late

19 Lapidge 1980.827–28. For a later use of this Ovidian passage in the *Occupatio* of Odo of Cluny (879–942), see Wright 1999.74–75.

20 In fact, as modern scholars have often noted, the world Ovid describes in the *Metamorphoses* has more in common with his chaos than with the obsessively delimited universe of the creator god. See McKim 1985.99–101 and 107; cf. Leach 1988.448 and Hardie 1993.60–61. For Ovid's deviation from poetic models in introducing a creator god, see Wheeler 1995.95–96.

21 The other primary application of the notion of harmony in diversity is to music (cf. Quintilian 1.10.12, Boethius *Mus.* 1.3). It is a simple metonymy from music/the lyre to poetry. See Roberts 1989.145. The argument of my book is that such a style—a fragmented

Roman aesthetics. For instance, Paulinus of Nola describes (404 C.E.) a courtyard at the complex he built to honor St. Felix of Nola in which a series of fountain basins differs in style but harmonizes in the colors of marble used (“dissidet artis opus, concordat vena metalli,” *Carm.* 28.35). The ensemble conforms to the principle of diversity or *variatio* (*varie*, 34), but is united by the single water source that flows from the different openings into the capacious basins (“unaque diverso fluit ore capacibus unda,” 36). Similarly, the two basilicas at Nola, the restored *basilica vetus* and the new Paulinian construction, “vie with each other roof-to-roof” (*certant / culminam culminibus*, *Carm.* 28.205–06). The buildings differ in age, but harmonize in appearance (“tectorum dissidet aetas, / concordat species,” 206–07); a single beauty adorns the two works (“decor unus utrumque / ornat opus,” 208–09).²² The principle is formulated by Claudius Marius Victorius, writing of the creation (cited above): “the harmony is all the greater if made up of opposed elements in conflict with each other” (“contraria quaedam, / si certent, plus pacis habent,” *Prec.* 37–38). So in the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus can appeal tacitly to this same aesthetic sense when he describes an altar garlanded with many-colored flowers. The colors “fight” (*pugnant*, *Carm.* 8.7.13) and wage “vegetable war” (*herbida bella*, 14); plants “vie” (*certant*) with each other in the multicolored beauty of their blooms” (*specie varia florum*, 17).²³ Although Fortunatus does not explicitly celebrate unity in diversity as Paulinus does, his description presupposes the same aesthetic. Whether the battle is cosmic, architectural, or floral, in every case, a struggle of opposites is essential to the beauty and harmony of the whole.

compositional surface, articulated by patterns of enumeration and antithesis—is characteristic of the poetry, as it is of the art, of late antiquity. For the moral dimension of God’s creation, see Dracontius *Sat.* 55–60: “Nam deus omnipotens potuit, cum conderet orbem, / tristibus amotis gaudia sola dare, / sed diversa creans et discordantia iunxit / et bona mixta malis et mala mixta bonis. / Sic elementa potens contraria miscuit auctor, / humida cum siccis, ignea cum gelidis.”

22 For the aesthetic principles governing Paulinus’s constructions at Nola, see Junod-Ammerbauer 1978.39–57.

23 The full passage reads: “Aureus ordo crocis, violis hinc blatteus exit, / coccinus hinc rubricat, lacteus inde nivit. / Stat prasino venetus: pugnant et flore colores, / inque loco pacis herbida bella putas. / Haec candore placet, rutilo micat illa decore; / suavius haec redolet, pulchrius illa rubet. / Sic specie varia florum sibi germina certant,” *Carm.* 8.7.11–17. The adjectives *prasinus* and *venetus*, commonly used of team colors in the circus, suggest an analogy with that form of *certamen*, though the verb *stat* fits better a pair of combatants.

In all the passages studied, there is a mutual engagement between classical and Christian texts. Christian authors use the Ovidian narrative of creation to understand and fill out the biblical text, an *interpretatio epica* of Genesis, but they also engage critically with the Ovidian account, subjecting it to a corrective reading inspired by Christian exegesis and, ultimately, by Hellenistic philosophy. Stylistically, the classical poet provides an influential model for Christian poets in their own accounts of creation, all the more so when he demonstrates at the textual level that *concordia discors* that was the principle of harmony in the universe as a whole. Ovid's creation account enjoys, then, a special status in early Christian literature. Such employment of the Bible and classical poetry as sources of mutual illumination is more common with passages from Virgil. In Reinhart Herzog's elaborate categorization of types of reception, this kind of reciprocal interpretation marks the fullest expression of Christian exegetical engagement with classical poetic texts (1975.200).

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