DANCING AT THE END OF THE ROPE: OPTATIAN PORFYRY AND THE FIELD OF ROMAN VERSE

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Some three hundred years after Virgil and more than a thousand after Homer, at the end of pagan antiquity, lived the extraordinary poet Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, a contemporary of Constantine.[1] Little remains aside from his poems to relieve the obscurity of his life, but what sparse evidence there is has suggested that he may have been born in Africa, that he was proconsul of Achaea probably before 306, and that he was exiled possibly in or shortly after 315.[2] The circumstances of his exile are entirely unknown although, of course, there have been conjectures, a leading one that he was the victim of the same political conflict that saw the downfall of Rufius Volusianus.[3] But we do know that during the enforced leisure of exile, this public man wrote the bulk of his extant poems, a collection of twenty appeals, panegyrics, and celebrations of Constantinian themes that, delivered into the imperial hands in the fall of 324, apparently had its effect: early in 325 Optatian was recalled and ended his career, at least so far as the record shows, as prefect of the City of Rome for two short terms in 329 and 333.

 Most of his poems, as I have mentioned, were addressed to Constantine. The remnant is a short miscellany of consolations, religious

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[1] There have been three critical editions of his work in modern times: L. Mueller (Leipzig 1877); E. Kluge (Leipzig 1926); G. Polara (Turin 1973) — I. *Textus adiecto indice verborum*, II. *Commentarium criticum et exegeticum*. All citations in this essay are from Polara's edition. I will not here be concerned with the exchange of letters between Optatian and Constantine, whose authenticity is challenged by Polara (see his comments at 1.xxxi-xxxii) and defended by T. D. Barnes, "Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius," *AJP* 96 (1975) 173-86 (see especially 174, note 4).

[2] The evidence has been most recently sifted by Barnes (above, note 1), whose account in the main I follow.

[3] This conjecture was first put forward by E. Groag, "Der Dichter Porfyrius in einer stadtroemischen Inschrift," *WS* 45 (1926/27) 102-9, who suggested also that Optatian was a relative of Volusianus. Barnes (above, note 1) 186 accepts the conjecture while rejecting the familial relation. For the psychological conditions of Optatian's exile, see the verse conjectures of Prentiss Moore, "Porfyry in Exile," *Poetry* 143.2 (November, 1983) 85-86.

devotionals both Christian and pagan (Bede complained generally of
Optatian's works that they were unsuitable for the faithful *quia pagana
erant*),[4] reflections on writing verse; and there are some fragments
without context. Frankly, the poems make entirely unremarkable, even
banal reading—competent verse for the most part[5] but repetitive and
very tired. But it is not *reading*, as the word is commonly understood,
that the poems invite; rather *wonder*, to say the least, at the appalling
genius responsible for them, a genius that won Optatian a fair measure
of renown, if we can judge from the testimonia, and allowed his work to
survive the Middle Ages scattered in some two dozen copies.[6] Optatian
is not a good poet; he is not even a bad poet. His poems are prodigies,
monsters in the literal sense. They are extreme and elaborate examples
of the ancient technopaegnion, a type of literary *grande pirouette* that
first appears in the West in the third century BCE and has had a very
long history not only in Europe but in literate cultures throughout the
world.[7] And in this history, the figure of Optatian looms large. In fact,
of all similar writers of every age and race, Optatian is supreme: this, at
least, in the opinion of one of his editors, Lucian Mueller.[8] We may be
inclined to humor an editor's partiality, but I, for one, would be very
much surprised if in this judgment Mueller were mistaken.

   The term technopaegnion has come to mean a figurative or shaped
poem, but in its only ancient occurrence, Ausonius used the word in
the mid-fourth century as the title of a series of non-figurative poems,
metrical toys in which each verse ends with a monosyllable. Another
example of this non-figurative verse play is Optatian's own Poem 15,
which we can take as an introduction to his work:

> Alme, decus mundi summum, rector pius orbis,
> Auguste, invicta populos virtute gubernans

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[4] Beda, *De arte metrica, de rythmo* (*GL* 7.258).

[5] In one of the rare discussions of Optatian's verse in English, N. W. Helm, "The *Carmen Figuratum* as shown in the works of Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius," *TAPA* 32 (1902) xliii–xlix, indulgently remarks (xlix):

> On the whole, Optatianus pays careful attention to his verse-construction
> and prosody, although some weak points appear, which, however, are
> more the faults of the time than of the man.

[6] Both the testimonia and a review of the manuscripts can be found in Polara's edition (above, note 1).

[7] I know of no comprehensive account of this literary phenomenon in antiquity, although occasionally anthologies of the better-known examples appear in print, the most recent being L. Simonini and F. Gualdoni, *Carmi figurati greci e latini* (Pollenza-Macerata 1978). Mr. Dick Higgins of Barrytown, New York is at present compiling a monumental bibliographical check-list of all of the world's pattern poetry.

[8] L. Mueller, *De re metrica poetarum Latinorum praeter Plautum et Terentium* (Leipzig 1894[2]) 588.

iustitia, imperii nationum, Constantine,
effrenatarum moderamine pacificator,
quem divus genuit Constantius induperator,   5
aurea Romanis propagans saecula nato,
heu nimis ad caelum properans, ni liquerit ille
aeternum auxilium invictum iustumque piumque,
alme pater patriae, nobis te, maxime Caesar,
    Ausoniae decus, o lux pia Romulidum.   10
Est placitum superis tunc haec in gaudia mundi
perpetuis bene sic partiri munera saeclis;
    sidera dant patri, et patris imperium,
sancte tibi. Magnae data tu lux aurea Romae.
Ista canit ruris tibi vates ardua metra.   15

A scholiastic note accompanying this poem in most of the manuscripts[9] shows these *ardua metra* to be a gallery of devices. The first line is composed entirely of disyllables, the second of trisyllables, the third of tetrasyllables, and the fourth of pentasyllables. The fifth line reconsiders this progression with a sequence of one-, two-, three-, four-, and five-syllable words. This last is an example of the so-called rhopalic or "club-shaped" verse, for which ancient grammarians found a precedent in Homer *(Iliad* 3.182):[10]

    ὦ μάκαρ Ἀτρείδη, μοιρηγενές, ὀλβιόδαιμον.

If, in the sixth line of Optatian's poem, the final word maintains its position, the rest of the verse can be inverted without affecting its rhythm or sense:

    saecula propagans Romanis aurea nato.

This is simply the result of the metrical symmetry of the first four words—dactyl/molossus/molossus/dactyl. But something the commentary does not indicate is that with selective inversion of the dactyls and molossi in the line, there exist four metrically identical permutations of this one verse:

    aurea Romanis propagans saecula nato

    saecula Romanis propagans aurea nato

    saecula propagans Romanis aurea nato

    aurea propagans Romanis saecula nato.

The seventh line is an efficient exhaustion of the parts of Latin speech— exclamation, adverb, preposition, noun, adjective, conjunction, verb, and pronoun—, an example of the verse called in Greek *teleion,* "com-

[9] The scholia to Optatian, possibly of Carolingian date, are included in Polara's edition (above, note 1).
[10] Cited by Marius Plotius Sacerdos, *Ars grammatica* 3 (*GL* 6.505–6).

plete."[11] All the words in Optatian's eighth line are in the same case, and, as the scholiast suggests, the line would retain its metrical integrity employing any one of Latin's cases or even any combination of them all.[12] The ninth line, read forward, is a hexameter, and also read backward:

> Caesar maxime te nobis patriae pater alme.

The tenth is a pentameter, forward or backward:

> Romulidum pia lux o decus Ausoniae.

But the eleventh line, a hexameter, when inverted, becomes a pentameter:

> mundi gaudia in haec tunc superis placitum est.

Taken together, lines twelve and thirteen form an elegiac couplet, and so they remain read backward:

> imperium patris et patri dant sidera saeclis
>   munera partiri sic bene perpetuis.

The final pair of lines introduces a new meter: hexameters both, read backward they become the species of Ionic verse known as Sotadeans:

> Romae aurea lux tu data magnae tibi sancte
> metra ardua vates tibi ruris canit ista.

Although such reversible verses as these last five were recognized as a specific formal type in antiquity, there seems to have been no standard term for them. They were called *reciproci*, *recurrentes*, *anacycli*, or *anastrephonta* by late grammarians and scholiasts;[13] and when Quintilian

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[11] See W. J. W. Koster, *Traité de métrique grecque* (Leiden 1953²) 76. Koster offers an example from Homer (*Iliad* 22.59):

> πρὸς δ᾽ ἐμὲ τὸν δυστῆνον ἔτι φρονέοντ᾽ ἐλέησον.

[12] So at least does Polara understand an ambiguous scholium (above, note 1) 2.92.

[13] *Reciproci*: Marius Victorinus, *Ars grammatica* 3.7 (*GL* 6.113–14); Diomedes, *Ars grammatica* 3 (*GL* 1.516–17); Servius, *De centum metris* 9 (*GL* 4.467). *Recurrentes*: Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistles* 8.11.5 and 9.14.4–6. Sidonius applies the term also to palindromic verses and gives these examples (*Epistles* 9.14.4):

> Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor

and

> sole medere pede, ede perede melos.

Anacycli: in suprascript. cod. Salmas. ad *Anth. Lat.* 81 = Optatian 28. *Anastrephonta*: in suprascript. *A.P.* 6.314. For the multiple terminology, see also E. Flores and G. Polara, "Specimina di Analisi di 'Versspielerei' Latina," *Rendiconti dell'Accademia di archeologia, lettere, e belle arti di Napoli*, nuova serie 45 (1969) 111–36, especially 113, note 7.

mentioned them in the first century, he applied no term at all, content only to cite examples from *quendam non ignobilem poetam*.[14]

Some of the devices in Optatian's fifteenth poem seem trivial. They are used, however, with greater sophistication in other poems. And in another, more important way, this poem is not typical of Optatian's work. (We will return to this below.) But even so, it allows for a few general remarks about all his poetry. First, in none of the lines does the wit depend on the reference of its words. This is true of all technopaegnia: writing no longer functions primarily as the record of speech but as the medium of a linguistic artifact whose interest lies in an aspect of language extrinsic to its reference, usually a sensory aspect. The poems of course make sense, but the impulse to verbal mimesis is conspicuously weak. Then, we can notice Optatian's conception of the atomistic nature of language. Not only does he treat each line as an individual entity, or at most as half of a pair, but he doggedly analyzes the flow of speech into its elemental constituents—the appositional phrase, the syllable, the metrical unit, the finite parts of speech lifted from a student's grammar: with justice, Optatian could speak of his poems as "chains."[15] But when language, relieved of ordinary referential or mimetic impulses, is understood to be a combination of discrete particles, as it is here, it suggests that the generation of new statements, new linguistic possibilities, will rest solely on the mechanical re-combination of the same particles, subject only to the modes of syntax and, in the case of verse, meter. A third general point about Optatian: his poems demand just such re-combination. Lines must be read backward; metrical elements transposed; nouns considered in grammatical cases other than those in which they appear; individual elements of one line isolated and, as will become apparent in other poems, re-combined with isolated elements of another to form new patterns. There are, therefore, more verses in Optatian's poetry than a mere line-count will reveal: each poem also contains a number of inherent permutations of itself, a number of potential dispositions. And there are more grand designs than there are poems. The effect of his most impressive compositions is that of Islamic art, in which design is superimposed on design, astounding the eye and baffling insight with the complex pro-

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[14] *Institutio oratoria* 9.4.90:

> quo fit ut iisdem verbis alii atque versus fiant, ut memini quendam non
> ignobilem poetam talem exarasse:
>> astra tenet caelum, mare classes, area messem.
> hic retrorsum fit sotadeus; itemque e sotadeo retro trimetros:
>> caput exeruit mobile pinus repetita.

[15] *Vinculum/vinclum*, as in 10.18, 21.4, and 25 *passim*. Optatian called the constituents of his poems *elementa* in 3.35, 20b.9, 26.6; *singula* in 25 *passim*; and *scrupea*, often with the double meaning of "difficult bits," in 3.27, 6.14, 10.9, 19.24, and 25 *passim*.

liferation of geometric possibilities, each configuration and each configu-
ration of configurations subordinated in the end to the one that integrates
the rest and is simple.[16] This is not to suggest that Optatian's poems are
enigmas to stymie the reader—the rules that govern re-combination of
elements are plain enough, and any puzzles there are were set for the
poet, not his audience—only that they require contemplation as if worlds.

But what kind of worlds?

I mentioned above that the fifteenth poem is not altogether typical
of Optatian, and it was in the following way that I meant. Poem 15
focuses interest on formal problems that are strictly local, problems of
manipulating language and meter within a particular context. But in his
other pieces, Optatian characteristically designed structures that address
certain issues fundamentally involved in the workings of abstract form
itself, specifically the difficult relationship between the demands of ex-
pansion and limit. These other structures also raise a question which
Poem 15 ignores about the nature of the range of potential dispositions
inherent in each poem, and in general they show themselves capable of
enclosing the whole set of possibilities, that is, capable ultimately of
bounding the poem. This is done in a variety of modes and through a
variety of means which we can illustrate.

Poem 25 is one piece that virtually explodes under the reader's eye.
It begins with the verses

> Ardua conponunt felices carmina Musae
> dissona conectunt diversis vincula metris
> scrupea pangentes torquentes pectora vatis
> undique confusis constabunt singula verbis.

Each of these lines consists of the same combinations of dactyls and
molossi as the sixth line of Poem 15, and, like 15.6, each is capable of
permutation, examples of which follow the quatrain. Words may simply
be shuffled in their proper line, as in

> Carmina felices conponunt ardua Musae
> vincula diversis conectunt dissona metris
> pectora torquentes pangentes scrupea vatis
> singula constabunt confusis undique verbis. (5–8)

Or they can change position with words of similar metrical form in other
lines, as in

> Ardua constabunt torquentes carmina Musae
> dissona conponunt conectunt vincula metris
> scrupea confusis diversis pectora vatis
> undique felices pangentes singula verbis, (9–12)

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[16] A good introduction to the impressive geometry of this tradition is K. Critchlow,
Islamic Patterns: An Analytic and Cosmological Approach (New York 1976).

or

> Singula confusis pangentes undique Musae
> pectora diversis felices ardua metris
> vincula conectunt constabunt scrupea vatis
> carmina conponunt torquentes dissona verbis, (33–36)

or

> Scrupea diversis pangentes pectora Musae
> ardua confusis felices carmina metris
> undique torquentes constabunt singula vatis
> dissona conectunt conponunt vincula verbis. (69–72)

The manuscripts that include this poem also include a scholiastic note declaring there to be a total of eight-four such verses which, of course, comes nowhere near exhausting all the possibilities, a considerable though not astronomical and certainly finite number.[17] The question arises, In what does the poem consist and where does it end? This is in the first instance a genuine historical problem since some manuscripts include only the first four lines of the poem while all the others agree on a version of seventy-two lines. The most recent editor, Giovanni Polara, has found reason to suppose a lacuna of two quatrains in the archetype of the longer manuscripts,[18] raising the total to eighty lines; but nothing justifies the scholiast's claim of eighty-four. What process of reasoning led to the number eighty-four, or to eighty, or seventy-two? And whose process, Optatian's or a later reader-copyist's?[19] This historical question becomes also a question of reading. Is the poem to be understood as consisting only of the first four thematic lines, or as

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[17] The fullest discussion of this scholium is by Flores and Polara (above, note 13) 116ff. The authors also determine the total number of possible lines to be 3136 by assuming the perfect equivalence of each dactyl to every other and each molossus to every other. I have reservations, however, about this assumption and therefore this total. While the permutations of these lines extant in manuscript do not respect a distinction among any of the molossi, they seem to respect a distinction between one set of dactylic words (*ardua*, *dissona*, *scrupea*, *undique*) and another (*carmina*, *vincula*, *pectora*, *singula*): no individual manuscript line contains more than one dactylic word from each set, no line, for example, such as

        ardua conponunt felices dissona Musae.

If this distinction can be raised to the level of a general rule, the number of possible verses is reduced to 1792. For guidance through the mathematics of this problem, I am grateful to Richard A. Levitan of the University of Pennsylvania.
[18] See Flores and Polara (above, note 13) 120ff.
[19] Whatever and whosoever the process, the number seventy-two became accepted relatively early in the manuscript tradition. Imitating the structure of this poem, the ninth-century monk Dicuil used seventy-two permutations for a composition of his own. See M. Esposito, "An Unpublished Astronomical Treatise by the Irish Monk Dicuil," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 sect. C (1907) 378–447.

expanding to comprehend all their possible variations whose record
would fill so many sheets of valuable parchment or so many seconds of
valuable computer time?[20] Should the lines that follow the initial qua-
train be understood as arbitrarily selected instances of what was consid-
ered an open-ended process of variation? Or do they comprise a gesture
of exhaustion, and are they limited then to a possible twenty quatrains
only to match the number of words available, ending thereby with an
appropriate sense of symmetry and finality? I have no way to answer the
questions raised in these terms, but can suggest instead that the poem
consists of the finite set of twenty words together with the specifiable
rules according to which they can be re-arranged. Borrowing a term
from number theory, we can call the poem a *field*.[21]

The problem of expansion and limit can be approached from a
different perspective in another poem that gives more attention to the
nature of the rule of transformation, Poem 28:

> Blanditias fera Mors Veneris persensit amando,
>   permisit solitae nec Styga tristitiae. . . .

> Omnipotens pater huic semper concessit amori,
>   fecit nec requiem tot sibi fulminibus. . . .

> Purpureus tibi flos vultum non pinguet, Iacche,
>   monstrat nec mitem frons nova laetitiam. . . .

> Occubuit minor his fractis et viribus aestu
>   torpuit oppressus Amphitryoniades. . . .

> Incaluit iuba hoc externis ignibus ardens
>   fortius; ardorem Sol sibi congeminat. . . .

> Deposita face Nox quaesivit lumina Phoebes
>   vulnera sed blandus haec tenet Endymion. . . .

> Armipotens deus hoc suspirat pondere vulnus
>   ferrea nec rabies aut furor exsuperat. . . .

> Inpatiens Venus est, silvas dum lustrat Adonis,
>   carpit si Martem, iam cui conveniat? . . .

Sonic elements in the poem point to a rough symmetry: *Venus* and
Martem in the last couplet echo *Mors Veneris* in the first, with an inver-
sion of nominative and oblique cases; *armipotens* in the next-to-last
echoes *omnipotens* in the second; *incaluit* in the fourth-to-last echoes

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[20] In December 1977, the entire set of permutations was programmed for computer by
Glenn English of Austin, Texas, and printed for the first time in its history and also the
last, I am confident.

[21] The mathematical term "field" has been applied with great success to literary phenom-
ena by E. Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London 1952); H. Kenner, "Art in a Closed
Field," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 38 (1962) 596–613, and *The Stoic Comedians* (Berkeley
1962); and S. Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Balti-
more 1979), especially at pages 171–95.

occubuit in the fourth. But, as the typography indicates, the whole poem is not included here. In manuscript, each couplet is followed by another, its inverse, also metrically correct; hence:

> Blanditias fera Mors Veneris persensit amando,
>   permisit solitae nec Styga tristitiae.
> Tristitiae Styga nec solitae permisit, amando
>   persensit Veneris Mors fera blanditias.

And so forth. This operation is familiar. Here, though, it is no longer potential but realized and with a ruthless simplicity: the whole poem has generated its double. This metrical symmetry goes beyond the sonic symmetry in being both thorough and exacting, and it allows the poem a certain sufficiency. As it stands, the poem is complete; and, though, conceivably, it may be extended through an indefinite series of couplets or quatrains, its physical boundaries, unlike those of Poem 25, do not affect its character any more than the length of a doubly-mirrored hall affects the transverse reflection of light. The mode of limitation of this poem is formal, and it arises from the singular rule of transformation imposed, a rule which, regardless of the number of times the transformation is carried out, will accommodate no element not already included: the inverse of a line's inverse is the original line. A mathematician might see in Optatian's Poem 28 a set closed under the operation of inversion. We can call it a *closed field*.[22]

Another mode of limiting the poem is of special importance:

> Iamnunc sub axe placido, beate princeps,
> mundo favente populis, serene, iustis,
> numen salubre, tribuens triumpha victor,
> faustis perenne dominans amore saeclis,
> ibit quietus Oriens, salutis auctor.
> Dextra superne domini favente votis,
> omen regentis placitum subire gaudet;
> praestat serena radians vigore virtus
> mundi remota superis videre sanctis,

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[22] Contrast the use of a similar structure in a couplet attributed to George Buchanan:

> Laus tua, non tua fraus, virtus, non copia rerum
>   scandere te fecit hoc decus eximium.

Alerted perhaps by a prosodic flaw (fēcīt hōc), a reader may reverse the lines to discover:

> Eximium decus hoc fecit te scandere rerum
>   copia, non virtus, fraus tua, non tua laus.

I have not been able to find in Optatian a comparable use of metrical symmetry to open rather than close a poem to a new meaning. For the couplet, see H. H. Hudson, *The Epigram in the English Renaissance* (Princeton 1947) 119. For the flaw as signal of a higher and more secure literary order, see "Plexed Artistry: Aratean Acrostics," *Glyph* 5 (1979) 55–68.

numen salubre moderans sub orbe totum,
nutu favente supero ubique vincens,
solus, beate, dominans per omne saeclum.

In each line of Optatian's Poem 13 the words are arranged with a metri-
cal symmetry around a central anapest.[23] When the lines are inverted,

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P R I N C E P S B E A T E P L A C I D O S V B A X E I A M N V N C
I V S T I S S E R E N E P O P V L I S F A V E N T E M V N D O
V I C T O R T R I V M P H A T R I B V E N S S A L V B R E N V M E N
S A E C L I S A M O R E D O M I N A N S P E R E N N E F A V S T I S
A V C T O R S A L V T I S O R I E N S Q V I E T V S I B I T
V O T I S F A V E N T E D O M I N I S V P E R N E D E X T R A
G A V D E T S V B I R E P L A C I D V M R E G E N T I S O M E N
V I R T V S V I G O R E R A D I A N S S E R E N A P R A E S T A T
S A N C T I S V I D E R E S V P E R I S R E M O T A M V N D I
T O T V M S V B O R B E M O D E R A N S S A L V B R E N V M E N
V I N C E N S V B I Q V E S V P E R O F A V E N T E N V T V
S A E C L V M P E R O M N E D O M I N A N S B E A T E S O L V S
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Poem 13 (inverted)

the meter remains unchanged, and something else happens. So long as a
poem is considered a sonic artifact with duration in time, grounded in
the human voice, its basic constituent remains the intoned phrase,
numberless in variety as vocal gestures are numberless. When, how-
ever, it becomes a visual artifact with extension in space, it is capable of
a much more radical analysis, at least in those languages with an alpha-
betic convention of representation. The elementary particle becomes the
individual letter, one of only "a couple-dozen squiggles," as John Barth
has called them.[24] Drawing from the limited domain of the Roman
alphabet, Optatian has set out a field of 383 letters arranged in twelve
lines. Within the field, the arrangement is neither random nor egalitar-
ian. The letters form intelligible words, the words form intelligible
sentences disposed according to a metrical scheme; and the initial and
final elements of each line have a greater importance than the rest and
are subject to an additional rule. Isolated and recombined with the initial
and final elements of the other lines, they must yield an acrostic and a
telestich announcing the poem's recipient, PIVS AVGVSTVS CON-
STANTINVS.[25] The apprehension of the poem in a visual mode has
other consequences as well. The parastichs, distinguished—as are all
similar figures in Optatian—by red ink in both the manuscripts and, we
know, the autograph,[26] limit quite actually the poem's two-dimensional
extension in space; horizontally to the area within the files of red let-

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[23] This is Polara's understanding of a confusing scholium (above, note 1) 2.86.

[24] John Barth, *Chimera* (New York 1972) 8.

[25] This figure, like all the verbal figures in Optatian's poetry, is noted by the anonymous
scholiast.

[26] See Optatian's Poem 1.8.

ters, and vertically to the number of lines required to complete the parastich phrase. Also, and more important, the poem reaches an end in the blank margin that envelopes it. And within the confines of this margin, the poem is a plenum of letters. Here is neither ambiguous limit nor ambiguous expansion: the visual mode reveals these antinomies to be necessary complements, as together they define the plenum.[27]

These then are the worlds—visual, spatial, full, finite, and bounded—that Optatian constructed for most of his poetic career. In the corpus there are few figurative poems of the classic type in which the outer margin surrounds an identifiable form—Poem 27, for example, consisting of fifteen hexameters which, each a single letter shorter than the one previous, take on the shape of Pan-pipes; or Poem 26, whose two dozen iambic trimeters are arranged as an altar; or Poem 20, a tripartite poem of hexameters and iambic dimeters forming a water-organ whose longest pipe contains just twice as many letters as its shortest in tribute to the ratio of the octave. But most of the poetry involves configurations within the boundaries of the work. And of these, Poem 13 with its double file of hierarchically distinguished letters is among the least finely articulated and the least impressive.

There is, for example, Poem 16, which distinguishes four files of letters. The first of these files yields a dedicatory acrostic, read easily enough as DOMINO NOSTRO CONSTANTINO PERPETVO AVGVSTO. But the other three yield apparent nonsense, until it is understood that, like the ambiguous drawing made famous by Gombrich which is seen now as a rabbit, now as a duck,[28] their elements bear a double aspect. Set in Latin hexameters, they are of course letters of the Roman alphabet. Raised, however, from this ground to trace a vertical path through the poem, they also change their linguistic orientation and must be considered Greek; the Roman H becoming Greek *eta*, Roman C *sigma*, Roman P *rho*, Roman X *chi*, Roman A *alpha*, *delta*, or *lambda*, and so on. In this way they form three hexameter verses of their own, each thirty-eight letters long, intelligible in Greek:

NEIMEN COI BACIAEY XPICTOC KAI COIC TEKEECCI
TIMION EYCEBIHC KPATEEIN APETHC TE BPABEION
EYNOMIHC APXEIN TE KAI AYCONIOICIN ANACCEIN

Νείμέν σοι βασιλεῦ Χριστὸς καὶ σοῖς τεκέεσσι
Τίμιον εὐσεβίης κρατέειν ἀρετῆς τε βραβεῖον
Εὐνομίης ἄρχειν τε καὶ Αὐσονίοισιν ἀνάσσειν

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[27] Optatian himself has used forms of the verb *pleo* to describe his verse-making at 3.34, 5.26, 6.30, 21.9, and in the figure of 22.

[28] E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, revised edition (Princeton 1961) 5.

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DISSONACONEXISAVDETCOMPONEREVERBIS
OMINEMENSELATABONOIVVATINCLYTALINGVAE
MVNERAGRAIORVMMVSAMODVLANTENOVARE
INQVEVICEMVERSVCECINITQVAEFORTELATINO
NVNCALIOTEXTVGRAECORVMINCARMINADVCI
ORDINEVTINDVPLICEMNECTATVRLITTERAVOCEM
NVNCAGEFECVNDAERESERENTPVLCHERRIMAMVSAE
ORESONETDOCILICHELYSINCLYTACARMINAPHOEBI
SPEMRERVMIVSTVMQVECANAMSVMMAMQVESALVTIS
TEDOMINVMBONADONADEITEMAGNEPARENTEM
ROMANVMGRATVMQVEORBEMTIBIMAXIMESEMPER
OMNIAQVODCERTARESPIRANTMENTEQVIETEM
CVMPLACIDISPECTENTHOSTILESMILLETRIVMPHOS
OMNIAPLENABONISTVACONSTANTINEQVIRITES
NILSIBICREDIDERINTKARVMMAGETEDECVSORBIS
SERVATOSTYRIISESEMPERVINDICEDEXTRA
TEDOMINOEXVLTANTTRANQVILLISKARIORVRBI
AFRICATEMPORIBVSPOTITVRSERVATAQVIETE
NVNCSEFELICEMNVNCSESVBNVMINISARCE
TVTAMQVODCARTHAGODECVSVENERABILEGESTAT
IVREPVTATTANTVMFATISLVXINCLYTAPRAESTAT
NOBILETEDOMINONOMENSPESETDECVSALMVMEST
OMNISABARCTOISPLAGAFINIBVSHORRIDACAVRO
PACISAMATKANAETCOMPERTAPERENNIAIVRA
ETTIBIFIDATVISSEMPERBENEMILITATARMIS
RESQVEGERITVIRTVTETVASPOPVLOSQVEFEROCES
PROPELLITCAEDITQVEHABENSTIBIDEBITARATA
ETTVAVICTORESSORSACCIPITHINCTIBIFORTES
TEQVEDVCEINVICTAEATTOLLVNTSIGNACOHORTES
VNDIQVETECOMITATADEIPIANVMINASVMMI
OMNIBVSVLTOREMPRAEBENTETIVRAFIDEMQVE
ALMETVASPECTANTRESPONDENTOMNIAVOTIS
VNDIQVEPAKATISSALVATORMAXIMAREBVS
GAVDIAPRAESTABISDABISOTIAVICTORINORBE
VIRTVTVMMERITISVICENNIAPRAECIPEVOTA
SAECLORVMCREVITGEMINOSPESCAESARECERTA
TVQVEOSANCTEPARENSOLIMPOSTMILLETROPAEA
OLVXAVSONIDVMDISPONESCEPTRANEPOTVM
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Poem 16

    A bi-lingual poem such as this points to a breakdown of the clean atomistic structure posited above for Optatian's work. Under the demands of competing linguistic contexts, the atoms—letters here—lose any univocal meaning and threaten to dissolve instead into a congeries of individual pen-strokes. Narrowing interest on the smaller, "subatomic" components leads only to difficulties. What independent existence can these scratches have? What is there to distinguish a meaningful stroke of the pen from any random mark?—a problem shared not only by paleography and computer-enhanced photography but by all reading as well. The poem itself calls for another procedure, for expanding rather than narrowing the scope of interest, directing attention away from an ambiguous element and toward the larger textual pattern in which it participates—here, toward the unambiguous hexameter verse. In the non-figurative poems, a similar movement prompted our use of the concept of the field, compounded of element and rule but of a different, essentially simpler character than both. In the figurative

poems, letter and context collaborate in a patterned ensemble—visual analogue of the field—which, as the context considered widens, grows notionally more complex and spatially greater until it encompasses the whole poem, integrated and entire.

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PRODENTVRMINIOCAELESTIASIGNALEGENTI
CONSTANTINEDECVSMVNDILVXAVREASAECLI
QVISTVAMIXTACANATMIRAPIETATETROPAEA
EXVLTANSDVXSVMMENOVISMEAPAGINAVOTIS
AEMVLAQVAMCLARIIGENITORISCALLIOPEAE
COMPOSVITTALINVNCMENSPERFVSALIQVORE
VERSIFICASHELICONINGAVDIAPROLVATVNDAS
CLEMENTIQVENOVVMNVMENDEPECTOREVERSET
NAMQVEEGOMAGNANIMIDICAMNVMEROSACANENDO
SCEPTRADVCISGAZZAENOBISDATGRAECIADONA
SAECLAQVEBLEMMYICOSOCIALILIMITEFIRMA
ROMVLALVXCONDIGNANOVISFLORENTIAVOTIS
VOTOSCRIPTACANOΘALIMARSCARDINETECTO
IAMBELLISTOTVMMΘSEVMPERPLECTERECIVEM
VTPATEATRVBICONPARILIPETITAETHERAIVRE
NVNCFELIXPROPRIOSPAKISMESCRVPEAVISVS
IAMSTIMVLATSIGNISEXVLTANSMVSANOTARE
GAVDIALAETVSNVNCPERMENOTATAVIAPHOEBVS
RETITOQVOQVETEXTANOVOCANELAVREAPLECTRO
ARTENOTISPICTAFELICIASAECVLAPLAVDENS
SICAESTVSVATESFIDODVCEPYTHIECARPENS
NVNCTVTVSCONTEMNATSVMMEPROCAXEGOVERO
NVNCMARESIGAEVMVALEAMBENEFRANGEREREMO
CARBASANOCTIFERVMTOTVMSISCRVPEATENDO
PVLPITADEPORTANSVISAMCONTEXERENAVEM
MVSASINITCONIVNCTATVOSPESINCLITAVOTO
MENTEMPERTORTVMFESSAMNONFRANGATHIVLCO
LAVSMEAFICTAPEDESTANSMAGNAMOLEDOCENDI
SIGNAPALAMDICAMLAETISSIMAFLVMINESANCTO
MENTEBONACONTEMNATSVMMISCVMSIBIAGONEM
VOTISPOSTFRACTVMMARTEMCLEMENTIAREDDET
SICNOBISLECTOQVOCRESCVNTAVREASAECLA
MOXLATIOVINCENSIAMBISVICENNIAREDDES
CARMINEQVAEPIETASMIRODENOMINEFORMET
FLORENOTANSVOTVMVARIODATPAGINAFELIX
AVGVSTAESOBOLISMEMORANSINSIGNIAFATA
IVDICETEVELTESTEPIOCONDIGNAPARENTIS
IVNGENTVRTITVLISFELICIAFACTANEPOTVM
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Poem 19

One spectacular demonstration is Optatian's Poem 19. In the figure of this redoubtable contrivance, Optatian has set the XP on an oared vessel with the letters VOT (for VOTA) in the background. The letters that form the Christogram begin an elegiac couplet in Greek whose first line commences at the upper left-hand part of the cross, continues diagonally to the lower right; then from the lower left to the upper right, around the curve of the P; and then down vertically ending with the N that has already done service twice before:

THN NAYN AEI KOCMON CE AE APMENON EINI NOMIZIN

Τὴν ναῦν δεῖ κόσμον, σὲ δὲ ἄρμενον εἰνὶ νομίζιν

Its second line takes up with the theta and omicron-upsilon compound (in Latin considered as T and Y), continues down to the deck of the ship, and then along its tiller:

ΘΟΥΡΟΙC TEINOMENON CHC APETHC ANEMOIC

Θούροις τεινόμενον σῆς ἀρετῆς ἀνέμοις

At the prow begins a hexameter in Latin that continues along the deck to end at the stern:

Navita nunc tutus contemnat, summe, procellas.

Or another possibility:

Nigras nunc tutus contemnat, summe, procellas.

Or another, running along the deck, down to the keel by a diagonal path, and around the stern:

Tutus contemnat summis cumulata tropaeis.

Or another that begins at the rostrum and runs up to the deck by a diagonal to the stern:

Pulsa mente mala contemnat, summe, procellas.

The letters comprising the oars begin another variation:

Spe quoque Roma bona contemnat, summe, procellas.

Finally, the letters of the background VOT yield the disyllabic series:

Roma felix floret semper votis tuis.

Here is the thrift of Optatian's combinatory method, in its re-use of letters as Latin and Greek and in its re-use of words: in the Latin hexameters of the figure alone, five verses from only seventeen words. And here too is its prodigality, not only in the redundance of these lines but in a redundance of the figure as well. There is a small region of symmetry in the poem in which the letters comprising the ship's deck match the letters of its keel and also match the letters of the diagonals connecting them. This symmetry allows some of the variant hexameters a number of variant paths along which they can be read: combinatory verse with a combinatory itinerary, a reflex of this odd linguistic economy. What can become an awkward enumeration of possibilities, however, can also be expressed as the simple pattern provided by the poem's figure. The figure acts as a visual map of the combinatory possibilities, a diagram apprehended whole and at a glance.

In many of Optatian's poems, a visual figure is supported by the formal device of symmetry to provide a means of integration and rein-

force the methodological closure of the artifact. Poem 22, for example, presents a square with sides of thirty-seven letters, its figure of a lattice

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M I R V M O P V S E S T C V N C T O S E T T A L E S E D E R E V E R S V S
S I C Q V E L O C A R E H E D E R I S P A V L V M T V D I E R O G A T V S
M O X A D E S E N Q V O R S V M R A P I E S Q V I P R A E B E O F I X A S
S V M T V V S E T P R I M I S T V A D I S C I M V S V T T R I A F E L I X
N E C F A L L A X T R I B V E N S A V D A C I I N M V N E R E C L A R V M
A E Q V I P E R E S A N I M V M N V N C C L I O C A R M I N A F I R M E T
Q V I P O T E R V N T P A N G I P O N A M C E V S T A M I N A N O R M A S
Q V A E V E R R A N T S E S E Q V A E V I N C V L A M I T I A C V R E N T
T V D A B I S H A S V I R E S T V A R V R S V M C O S E R E P R A E M I A   9
A V S I B V S I N M A G N I S L A E T A A D C O N T R A R I A C V R R A S
A O N I D V M N A M F O N T E G R A V I M I C A T A R S N O V A V E N I S
I M M A N E S T P R O R S V M A M P L E X V A V T T O T O C I V S O R A S
P R O S P I C E R E P L A N T A R E M O D O S I N M I T T A T V T I T V M
E T P R O I I E C T A N E C E T C O N S V M T O I N G L O R I A L I B R O
S I S A P I V N T E T N O S T R A C V I S V C C R E S C E R E A C V M E N
P R A E S O L I D V M D E N S V M Q V E A N I M I D E D V C E R E V I V A
C O N G R V E R E C E R N A N T S T V D I O S E Q V I B O N A C A L L E S
L E G I B A B S T R V S I S Q V O D C A R M I N A C O N S P I C O R A T E   18
B L A N D E A N I M I I V D E X Q V I M O R I B O M N I A G I S A V C T V   19
P R A E M I R O O S T E N D I S S T V D I A I N R E C T O R E P O L I T A
T R E V S I C O L A S Q T V O S A V C T V S L A E T A B I L E S V M E N S   21
I N T V I T V M Q V O P R O S P E R A F A C T A A C G A V D I A D O N E S
P V B L I C A N I L P R I V S E S T Q V O D V I E T N O M I N E C V R A S
F A S S I T S I D O N I I S E N S V M I N P E N E T R A L E P A T R O N I
N O S C E R E Q V A E P O S S I S I S I L L I C N I T O R O C I T E R E I V S
C O N D I T V R A B S T R V S A G E N E R O S V M C O G E R E C E N S V M
P A V P E R I E F L A G R A N T G E M I N I S N O V A G A V D I A V O T I S   27
D I V E S A P O L L I N E I S D E A V R A T F O E D E R A P L E C T R I S
H I C N O V I T L A V D E S D O C T V S Q V A E Q V E O M I N E T A N T O
S V N T P R A E V I S A B O N I S T V D E X T E R P R O T I N V S E S T O
C V M S A N C T I S I N S I S T E F I D E F E S T I N V S I N A M P L V M
C L E M E N T I H A E C N V T V A V G V S T V S T I B I D O N A B E A T A
L A V D A T O T R I B V E T T E C O N S V I E P R A E M I A C O M P L E T
H I N C T V A T V N C F E S T I S N O T I S E X N O M I N A P L A V S V S
P L V R I M V S A C P R V D E N S R E R V M Q V I S T O R P E A T V S V S
D E G E N E R I A B S P E M O L I T A P L V S I N G R V I T H I N C I A M
S V S C I P E V O T O A L A C R I H O C M V N V S V I R B O N E C L A R E
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Poem 22

symmetrical about four axes. Poem 22 is the most attractive poem in the corpus; the restrained exuberance of the figure and its verses are especially appealing:

Mixta per amfractus diducunt carmina Musae,
seu cancellatos spatia in contraria flexus.
    Seriem paramus ordinare acrius;
    amor poesis spissa gaudet exigi.
    Possit coire docta rerum limite.
    Opus tuetur non necata parcitas.
        Speciosa sancta cultu,
        bene picta Musa metris
        breviter fluas ut isto
        opus est per arta coetu.

Audeo plenas
edere formas:
picta notabo
iura Camenis.

It is fair to note, however, that its authenticity has been questioned[29]
chiefly on the basis of its irregularities. Line 9 contains an abbreviation
of *co(n)sere*, lines 18 and 19 have abbreviations of *legib(us)* and *mori-
b(us)*, and line 21 abbreviates the enclitic *-que* as *-q;*. These are stan-
dard abbreviations easily enough accommodated in poetry like this that
has so thoroughly abandoned the oral mode, and Optatian has employed
similar shortenings in other poems: AUG for *Augusto*, for example, in
the figure of Poem 5. But in line 27 there is a unique instance in his
poems. Unblinking but perhaps with some embarrassment, Optatian
simply fudged with the addition of a supernumerary letter: the phrase
gaudia votis just will not fit. But this human failing, this flaw in the woof
of the text, we may be inclined to forgive. It is true also that in this
poem there are some uncharacteristic turns of phrase, but on the whole
its language is not so idiosyncratic as to warrant suspicion; and, consid-
ering the extreme difficulty of this type of writing and the individuality
of the problems posed by each composition, we would do best to sus-
pend judgment on this objection to its authenticity as well.

In some poems the visual symmetry of the figures is augmented by
a verbal symmetry, as in Poem 6, a square like Poem 22, but of thirty-
five letters. The symmetrical figure of this poem, intended to represent
two armies locked in battle, consists of two interlocked verses, each
repeated, whose visual arrangements mirror each other:

Dissona Musarum vinciri stamine gaudens
grandia conabor Phoebeo carmina plectro.

Their metrical form is familiar—two molossi framed by two dactyls with
a final spondee—and familiar too is their symmetry of possible exchange
realized so thoroughly in Poem 25. Here, though, Optatian has taken
advantage only of the metrical and grammatical equivalence of the lines'
first words. In the upper and lower left-hand corners of the poem, there
is a bifurcation of the figure that allows each line to be read with either
opening, efficiently doubling the number of verses interwoven in the
poem:

Dissona Musarum vinciri stamine gaudens
grandia conabor Phoebeo carmina plectro.

Grandia Musarum vinciri stamine gaudens
dissona conabor Phoebeo carmina plectro.

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[29] By G. Polara in the introduction to his edition (above, note 1) 1.xxix−xxxii. His argu-
ments are also rejected by Barnes (above, note 1) 174, note 4.

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MARTIAGESTAMODISAVDAXIMITATASONORIS
MVSAPEREFFIGIEMTVRMARVMCARMINATEXIT
ETNVNCAGMENAGITQVINOSVBLIMITERECTVM
MVSIGENOSPATIVMSEPTENOMILITEDISTANS
NVNCEADEMVERSORELEGENSVTCVMQVEMEATV
MITTITINAMFRACTVSNONVNALEGECATERVAS
DISSONACOMPONIDIVERSOCARMINEGAVDENS
GRATANIMISFLEXVDOCILIDEPERPETEMETRO
ORSAITERVMFINISOCIANSCONFINIACONTRA
PRAEPONENSORSISNVLLODISCRIMINEMETRI
QVINETIAMPARTESMEDIAESVAMVNIADOCTAE
EXPEDIVNTVERSISVICIBVSNAMFINESEDVNO
QVAMVISAMBIGVOSCVRSVSETDEVIACLAVDIT
OSTENTANSARTEMVINCIRISCRVPEAPRAEBET
SARMATICASSUMMESTRAGESETTOTAPERACTA
VOTAPRECORFAVEASSVBCERTOCONDITAVISV
FACTORVMGNARVMTAMGRANDIADICEREVATEM
IAMTOTIENSAVGVSTELICETCAMPONACRVORE
HOSTILIPOSTBELLAMADENSARTISSIMATOTO
CORPORAFVSASOLOSVBMERSASAMNEREPLETO
VICTRIXMIRETVRTVRBASACIEMQVEFEROCEM
PLVRIMACONARERPHOEBEOCARMINEGAVDENS
MARGENSISMEMORAREBONICAELESTIAFACTA
INTROITVSETBELLALOQVIPERCVLSARVINIS
QVISDEVICTAIACETGENSDVROMARTECADVCA
TESTISMAGNORVMVICINABONONIAPRAESENS
SITVOTICOMPOSEXCISAQVEAGMINACERNENS
DETIVGACAPTIVISETDVCATCETERAPRAEDAS
GRANDIAVICTORIMOLIMVRPROELIAPLECTRO
DICERENECSATISESTVOTVMSICOMPLEATORE
MVSASVOQVAECVMQVEPARATSVBLEGESONARE
SCRVPOSISINNEXAMODISPERFECTACAMENIS
VVLTRESONAREMEISETTESTISNOTATROPAEA
DEPICTISSIGNAREMETRISCVMMVNERESACRO
MENTISDEVOTAEPLACARINTFATAPROCELLAS
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Poem 6

The development of symmetry and complexity in Optatian's poetry reaches its culmination in his Poem 18. In this poem Optatian has set out a field of 1225 letters arranged in thirty-five lines of thirty-five letters each. The letters of its first and last lines and of its first and last files are distinguished from the others and bind the field strictly and symmetrically in a square that consists of four instances of the same verse. Within this square and set at forty-five degrees to it is a second square of distinguished letters comprising two other hexameters. Two crosses also span the poem, its two diagonals and its central line and file, whose letters together comprise four more hexameters. A figure, then, of four-fold symmetry articulates the field with seven verses, each of whose initial, final, and central elements is the first letter of the Roman alphabet:

Alme, tuas laurus aetas sustollet in astra

Auguste florem pietas iuvat arma tropaea

Aonii frutices pietas iuvat ubere glaeba

Aurea victorem pietas sonat ubere lingua

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ALMETVASLAVRVSAETASSVSTOLLETINASTRA
LVCETVASIGNESFASTVSSINELIMITECONSVL
MARTESERENVSHABESREIECTOMVNIAGRAIVM
ETMEDIPRAESTASINCENSVMSCEPTRAREDIRE
TORVAGETASCAMPOCLARVSVTLVMINAPERDIT
VVLTCVRVOTVRMAEFELIXSVACOMMINVSICTV
ARMENIIDVXFERRELEVISSOLTEQVOQVEPILA
SICETVICTAREFERTEXORTOSDACIAFRANCOS
LEGETVVSTONSORHENVSTIBIGERMINATEXVL
AGMINATELORVMSVBEANTQVIMVRMVREBELLA
VINCEREFLORENTILATIALESSARMATADVCTV
REXTIBIPOSSEGETASVISODATLIMITEVLTOR
VIDITTESVMMVMCOLVMENQVAVELIFERAESTV
SERVSINOCEANIPRESSITIVGANYSIAPONTVS
ATQVERVDISRADIISCITLVXEXORTATROPAEA
ENGAVDENTPIETATEALTISPARSPERPETEAGE
TVVATEMFIRMESDICTVSTENVNCLYRACANTET
AVCTADEOVIRTVSMVSASMAGISORNATAPERTA
SOLVMVOTANOTISLATESVAROMVLADATPLEBS
SANCTATVISCLIOPERMISCETVOTATROPAEIS
VISITVRETCRESCITPICTORVMGRATIACANTV
SITVISVICINISPERTHYLENGRATIAPOLLENS
TALISFIXASVISSIGNISLYRAMVNERAGESTAT
ORSAPARIVATESQVAPERFERTDELIERYTHMO
LVMINEMVRICEOVENERANDVSDVXERITVTSOL
LEGIBVSVTIANITENEASAVVSORBETRIBVNAL
EGREGIOSTITVLOSPIETATISHABEBISAMORE
TOTFRETAPACISAPEXMVTARIMVNEREGAVDET
INDIACLAVIGERILATIVMVVLTTANGERENAVI
NILEVSMESSORSVATRADITCASTRAVELAGMEN
ARCTOSQVAMCARPINOSCETVIXHAEMVSINORA
SICISTISCVLTVSINREMCVRVANTIBVSENSES
TENIVEAIVVATARCEFRVIPONTIDECVSAVGET
ROMASORORVETERESTVSCOSQVOSORETVEMVR
ALMETVASLAVRVSAETASSVSTOLLETINASTRA
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Poem 18

> Aonios latices pietas iuvat armaque diva
>
> Aurea lux vatum silvae mihi praemia serva
>
> Aucta deo virtus Musas magis ornat aperta.

This is one way to see the figure—the field within the field—and one way to read its lines: there are others. For example, the upright cross may instead be considered as two right angles with a common vertex: running down to the center of the field and across to the right, then, is a new verse:

> Aurea lux vatum silvas magis ornat aperta;

and across to the center and then down is yet another:

> Aucta deo virtus Musae mihi praemia serva.

The diagonal verses may be considered instead as a V and its mirror image symmetrical about a central, horizontal axis, yielding an additional two hexameters:

Aurea victorem pietas iuvat armaque diva

Aonios latices pietas sonat ubere lingua.

But examples abound, for the figure is so constructed that, in fact, *every* path of hierarchically distinguished letters a reader chooses to follow, beginning with the opening of *any* hexameter and ending with the close of *any* other, yields a sensible and metrically competent hexameter line. Because of some regions of symmetry in the letters of the figure, not all the verses will be distinct, to be sure; but, nonetheless, through this field of thirty-five lines there are over fifty paths and more than forty additional and unique hexameters. Here, at the culmination of his peculiar enterprise, Optatian has presented a work of difficult and marvellous complexity, of intense articulation and precise equipoise. Here is a work of thorough design, a perfect system in which every element, every line, every word, every letter has its proper place determined, even over-determined, by a number of competing criteria, orthographic, lexical, syntactic, metrical, and (such as it is) stylistic. Here again in this triumphant artifact—for triumph it is despite any reservations entertained about its worth—is the proof and behind that the necessity of the poet's method, his sharp limitation of resources and his management of these resources for new statements, new patterns, what in a different context Lévi-Strauss might call "tinkering" or "*bricolage*."[30] With this method anticipating by eleven hundred years the invention of movable type, Optatian achieves an effect usually reserved for writers after Gutenberg; for here is a literary phenomenon of a special kind, a voiceless text, a static construction or simultaneous design. There is no way to recite this poem, no way in which it can unfold itself through time, revealing dynamic shifts and development of pattern line by line, beginning to end. It is apprehended whole, its parts making their appeals constantly and all at the same time. The poem does, however, make a different use of time, as a third dimension through which a reader can investigate the two-dimensional space before him, tracing its paths, re-orienting its figure, and revealing its systematic coherence with his attention section by section as he sees fit.

We have presented the visual aspect of Optatian's verse as a response to a set of purely formal problems: the connection in fact appears inevitable, given the nature of abstract form as a structure of co-existing parts and the nature of the spatial dimension in which vision oper-

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[30] See C. Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris 1962). The methods of linguistic analysis from which Lévi-Strauss's anthropological methods derive were first formulated in the extraordinary early researches of Saussure on anagrams in Latin verse, now most accessible in J. Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots: Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris 1971), translated by O. Emmet as *Words Upon Words* (New Haven 1979).

ates.[31] If this seems to have involved emptying (or nearly emptying) the poems of their semantic content, we hope it is clear that in doing so we have accepted Optatian's invitation and followed his lead. It is interesting to note, then, how an earlier generation found in Optatian precisely the opposite procedures, identifying his formal complexity as a mode of symbolic representation and attributing the weightiest significance to his smallest gesture. The seventeenth-century Jesuit, Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, wrote:[32]

> Plotinus called the world the Poetry of God. I add, that this Poem is like a labyrinth, which is read in every direction, and gives intimation of, and points to, its Author. Among the poetical devices of antiquity were celebrated Theocritus' flute, the egg, wings, and hatchet of Simias of Rhodes. But above all the Panegyric which the Poet Porphyrius addressed to the Emperor Constantine is most cunning and incomparable, and was celebrated by St. Jerome, Fulgentius and Bede. . . . All this Panegyric consists of seventeen most artfully contrived labyrinths, where one verse joins and is knitted together with another in different manners, and the praises of Caesar are celebrated in all parts, by the beginnings, the middles and the ends of the lines, and crosswise, from the first letter of the first line to the last letter of the last line, and then by combining crosswise the remaining letters of the lines between the first and the last, the second letter of the second line, the third of the third, etc., so as to form a thousand other sentiments in the praise of Caesar. So do I imagine the world to be a Panegyric of God.

[31] The ancient issue of the relationship of space and abstract form was given a new impetus in the literary studies of the twentieth century by J. Frank in his "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *Sewanee Review* 53 (1945) 221–40, 433–56, 643–53, reprinted in his *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1963). In his essay "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980) 539–67, W. J. T. Mitchell has invoked Leibniz's definition, *"spatium est ordo coexistendi,"* as a particularly useful concept of space in formulating the problems posed by the important category of abstract form, literary structure. (Leibniz's definition appears in his *Initia rerum metaphysica* and is quoted on p. 543 of Mitchell's essay.) Mitchell finds Leibniz's notion radically compatible with literary form (p. 543),

> because its spatial conceptions are both relational and kinematic, allowing for multiple orders of data in complex relationships. . . .

A similar argument within the context of Stoic doctrine has been put forward by C. Imbert, "Stoic Logic and Alexandrian Poetics," translated by J. Barnes, in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, ed. M. Scholfield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (Oxford 1980) 182–216.

[32] *Oculta Filosofia de la Sympatia, y Antipatia de las cosas, artificio de la naturaleza, noticia natural del mundo, y segunda parte de la Curiosa Filosofia* (Barcelona 1645) Ch. XI: "El mundo es un laberinto poetico. Tratase de los laberinto de Porphyrio poeta," first edition (Madrid 1633) 106. Quoted in M. Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (Rome 1964²) 19–20. Nieremberg's reference is apparently to Optatian's Poem 18, but, unable to consult his original edition, I cannot account for his numbering the "labyrinths" as seventeen; of course, his "thousand other sentiments" is an exaggeration.

By setting Optatian Porfyry within a context of Neoplatonic thought, Nieremberg has sought to recover him for one of the early modern period's own cultural projects. This project compounded ancient Neoplatonism with magic, alchemy, and an articulate occultism to produce (among other things) a vivid new tradition of pictorial verse, whose major vehicle was the emblem-poem.[33] Submerging the distinction between the capacity of an image to represent an object in the visible world and its capacity to act as a symbol of an idea, the tradition enabled a poet both to reveal and interpret a cryptic and transcendental reality.[34] Since this reality is essentially beyond speech, another medium is necessary for its revelation. The physical arrangement of letters, the formal arrangement of the parts of a literary composition, their close association with a spatially displayed picture—all become, in the hands of a properly inspired artificer, the means to present the unseen mechanisms of an intricate and divinely-ordered cosmos: the poet becomes a magus and the surrogate of God.

Nieremberg's view of Optatian is tempting, and already we have been tempted so far as to speak of his poems as "worlds." But are we bound to see the poet through a Neoplatonic lens? While Optatian may have been instructed by commonplaces derived from Neoplatonism (or Stoicism or Aristotelianism),[35] something still jars. In his Poem 21, Optatian has set out a figure of concentric diamonds distinguished presumably, like his other figures, by contrasting ink. The letters of the inner diamonds spell out the hendecasyllable HIC VERSVS VARIO COLORE DISPAR. It is not the wit of this line, if wit it is ("Mais si, c'est une pipe"), that should make us pause before fixing Optatian in the tradition of a divinely-inspired Neoplatonic poet; and it is not its

[33] For a discussion of these poems, see F. A. Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century,* Studies of the Warburg Institute 15 (1947), especially pp. 131ff.; and M. Praz (above, note 32) which also contains a comprehensive bibliography. M. Klonsky, *Speaking Pictures: A Gallery of Pictorial Poetry from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York 1975), somewhat indiscriminately sees the entire European tradition of pictorial poetry in the light of renaissance Neoplatonism. For a good account of Nieremberg's immediate literary and intellectual context, see M. J. Woods, *The Poet and the Natural World in the Age of Gongora* (Oxford 1978).

[34] E. H. Gombrich, "*Icones Symbolicae*: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 11 (1948) 163–92, discusses the renaissance treatment of these ideas. J. A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden 1976), discusses their foundation in antiquity.

[35] Imbert (above, note 31) provides a theoretical basis in Stoicism for the literature of late antiquity which brings into special prominence the relationship between spatial and verbal structures. J. Onians, *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic Age: The Greek World View 350–50 BC* (London 1979), places the development of figurative poetry in the third century BCE in the context of Stoic allegorization and the Aristotelian psychology of vision: see especially his third chapter, "Allegory, Images, and Signs," pp. 95–118. Neither writer, it should be clear, mentions Optatian.

redundance, a prod to the double-take of recognition that may lead a reader to transcendental truth: it is the line's gaudy triviality. This is not the sacred art Nieremberg implies. Though perfectly designed, these poems are not microcosmic images of a design absolute, ineffable, or in any way more real. Optatian's is a more modest endeavor, the thoroughly secular and intensely human activity of *ars*, "joinery." It begins modestly, neither with universal principles nor intuitions culled at random, but with a fixed set of givens, as arbitrary as the letters of the alphabet are arbitrary, and then proceeds to turn this set to account by means of method rigorously and exhaustively applied.

A modest endeavor to be sure, but one on a preposterous scale. It is finally the extremity of these poems that commands attention. With the possible exception of Sisyphus, antiquity has no more compelling paradigm of expended effort than the poet Optatian moving his own stones to and fro in these unprecedented mosaics. The slogan "The hard part is making it look easy" — *ars est celare artem* — is entirely out of place here. As impressive as the poems are as finished products, they are irresistibly more impressive as activities. How much time, how much intellectual labor, how many discarded versions, how much paper, how much ink has been so conspicuously consumed for this gigantic enterprise? And finally, to what purpose and under what strange compulsion?

The figure of Sisyphus again comes to mind. But if Optatian has kin in the literature of the West, I can think of no closer relation than the title character of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, who has his own method of coping with stones:

> I took advantage of being at the seaside to lay in a store of sucking stones. They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally among my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets, these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. But this solution did not satisfy me fully. For it did not escape me that, by an extraordinary hazard, the four stones circulating thus might always be the same four. In which case, far from sucking the

> same sixteen stones turn and turn about, I was really only suck-
> ing four, always the same, turn and turn about. But I shuffled
> them well in my pockets, before I began to suck, and again,
> while I sucked before transferring them, in the hope of obtaining
> a more general circulation of the stones from pocket to pocket.
> But this was only a makeshift that could not long content a man
> like me. And the first thing I hit upon was that I might do better
> to. . . .

This continues for six whole pages of small print, at least in one paper-
back edition,[36] until:

> And deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a
> different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end
> of time. For they all tasted exactly the same. And if I had col-
> lected sixteen, it was not in order to ballast myself in such and
> such a way, or to suck them turn and turn about, but simply to
> have a little store, so as never to be without. But deep down I
> didn't give a fiddler's curse about being without, when they were
> all gone they would be all gone. I wouldn't be any the worse off,
> or hardly any. And the solution to which I rallied in the end was
> to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one
> pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or
> threw away, or gave away, or swallowed.

Molloy is a man at the end of his rope or, in one respect at least,
every-man at the end of every-rope. What is left to humans without the
possibility of transcendence is a peculiar exhaustion of experience,[37]
again and again and again to re-arrange the finite resources of their
limited universe on the short road from seaside to perdition. It is futile
of course, but the only game in town. The writer must write: Molloy
calls method "a bodily need." But the radical combinatory poetry of
Optatian arises also in part from a particular literary situation. As poet,
Optatian was a latecomer, as Harold Bloom might call him,[38] and a
latecomer *in extremis*. How many hexameters had been composed in
that millennium since Homer? And how many even since Virgil had
written the best of which the Latin language proved capable? How does
a poet add to the store? Amid this fullness, Optatian, poet-in-exile, took
up the task to list, to count, to exhaust one by one the possibilities
offered to him by his linguistic culture, and to arrange them as tesserae
in his closed-field mosaics, the impasse of final, perfect form.

[36] *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York 1965)
69ff.
[37] For this as a literary condition, see John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion,"
The Atlantic 220.2 (August, 1967) 29–34; and G. Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman
Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley 1978), especially at pp. 193–213, 254–71, and
293.
[38] See his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York 1973).

It was perhaps the activity of a madman or at least a neurotic of exceptional virtuosity.[39] It was certainly not the only activity conceivable under the circumstances. But if Optatian's poetry seems eccentric in its methods and single-minded devotion to order, the nexus of related problems it identifies and addresses—the problems of expansion and limit, of fullness, and of closure—this nexus lies squarely in the center of the Roman verse tradition, the shape of whose history it in large measure helped determine. From its inception, Latin was a "secondary literature," relying heavily on the already completed store of earlier texts: though separated by some six hundred years, the Homeric translation of Livius Andronicus and the Virgilian centos of Ausonius and Proba are strikingly similar responses to a perennial problem. And as the tradition developed, the sociology of Roman literary language placed increasingly severe restrictions on the stock of linguistic resources available to its poets,[40] a process in which the poets themselves collaborated. The greatest practitioners of Roman verse—Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Catullus, Terence—were also the great refiners, the great limiters of vocabulary, syntax, meter, theme, defining the imposing set of prohibitions that constituted literary decorum. But at the same time the poets had to respond to the situation they helped create. When Ovid wrote in the *Ars Amatoria* his stunning combinatory jingle, *Semibovemque virum semivirumque bovem* (2.24), he had years before already declared a premature end to Latin erotic elegy, in such poems as *Amores* 1.9:

> Militat omnis amans, et habet sua castra Cupido;
>   Attice, crede mihi, militat omnis amans.

Two lines, a combinatory couplet, ring-composition, and the poem is both formally and thematically complete, but not, of course, over. Twenty-two couplets follow as post-script, laboriously defining all the ways a lover, indeed, is like a soldier, complete with mythological exempla. The list, the summary, the quick usurpation of material that swells his own pages and reduces any poem that follows to helpless parody—this is the characteristic Ovidian response.[41] When Terence took over the stage from the

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[39] Compare the claims of M. Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts* (New York 1967) 34:

> Man is inflamed by a rage for order, and the more he fails in controlling
> his environment, the more the flames of that rage consume him. It is the
> damaged personality, it is the neurotic, it is above all the psychotic whose
> behavior exhibits an uncontrollable and passionate rage for order.

[40] For this phenomenon in late antiquity, see the excellent sociolinguistic analysis of E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, transl. R. Mannheim (New York 1965), especially at pp. 249ff. and p. 334.

[41] For Ovid as enumerator, see also *Metamorphoses* 10.90–106, where he lists no fewer than twenty-six varieties of trees in Orpheus' grove, and 3.206–41, where the three dozen dogs of Actaeon's pack are all mentioned by name.

heirs of Plautus, he restricted comic vocabulary, the variety of comic meter, and the range of plot situations, reducing, one would think, the possibilities of the Roman theater. What he substituted was a re-arrangement of the comic field, setting his material in two interfering systems proceeding from antagonistic moral premises; and in this way Terence produced the first ironic comedy of which we have record.[42]

The history of classical Latin verse may well be the history of progressive closure, progressive limitation, progressive capitulation of mimesis to design. But if the necessity imposed upon Roman poets of repeatedly plundering the closed field of their literary culture turned them into technicians of the finite—as characteristically Roman as the engineers, political managers, and jurists who were the best exemplars of their civilization—, the course of Roman verse is not on that account a headlong race into mindless chatter. Its evolution is the evolution of design, its motion not an imaginative expansion but, as with Terence, a continual re-orientation of the field and a re-examination of the activity of making sense. If this seems abstract, it is the poets, remember, who provided Roman culture with its most sophisticated abstraction, its literary form.

Optatian brought poetry to an impasse by exhausting its possibilities as he saw them. Centuries earlier, Rome's greatest poet did the same. Fifty lines before he would put aside poetry forever, Virgil wrote:

> non lingua valet, non corpore notae
> sufficiunt vires nec vox aut verba sequuntur. (*Aen.* 12.911–12)

It was the genius of a certain type of artistic tradition to accept neither impasse as a termination. The stones of Constantine's Arch were filched from earlier monuments, and the marble bones of Rome itself were chopped for a thousand years to raise the buildings of Europe.[43]

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[42] In the forward to his edition of Laurence Echard's seventeenth-century translations, *The Comedies of Terence* (Chicago 1962), Robert Graves has affected surprise at the irreconcilable brutality of Terence's plays and his reputation for "moral values." Douglass Parker, in the very careful and eloquent introduction to his translation of *The Eunuch* (see *The Complete Comedies of Terence*, ed. P. Bovie [New Brunswick, N.J. 1974] 147–52), points out the dissonance of plot and ethical characterization in that play. This dissonance—what I call in the text "irony"—can be extended to Terence's other plays. J. Wright discusses Terence's dislocation of what he calls "the unified Roman comic tradition" on the scale of style and scene construction in *Dancing in Chains: The Stylistic Unity of the Comoedia Palliata*, Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome 25 (1974), especially at pp. 127–51.