**SIGNS OF LIFE?
STUDIES IN LATER GREEK POETRY**

Edited by Katerina Carvounis and Richard Hunter

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Signs of Life?
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LITERARINESS AND LEVELS OF STYLE IN EPIGRAPHICAL POETRY OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Gianfranco Agosti

1. Introduction

Nowadays, scholars usually speak of a 'renaissance' of poetry in the Greek literature of late antiquity, underlining at the same time the new relevance of poetic communication in late antique society and the renewal of our interest in this not so well-known production of late Greek literature.¹ Renaissance and related terms are, of course, effective ways to describe the flowering of Greek poetry from the fourth to sixth centuries CE, so long as this does not undervalue the importance of continuity (which is not the same as tradition). Even the most significant innovation in late antique Greek poetry, namely the so-called 'Nonnian manner' or 'modern style',² stems from a longtime sedimentation and perfecting of linguistic and stylistic features which can be traced back to the Hellenistic age. Albert Wifstrand, in his seminal book of 1933, already pointed to this major fact, which Mary Whitby has systematically dealt with in an important article of 1994.³ Moreover, recent studies demonstrate that for a proper understanding of late antique poetry one must take into account Christian poetic production as well, which stands four-square within the traditions of Greek literature (in spite of the fact that *classical* = *pagan* is an equation which dies hard for some classicists).⁴ In the present paper both pagan and Christian epigrams will be considered to equally represent the aesthetics of late antiquity (or *estetica antico-bizantina*, to use Averincev's terminology).⁵

Such remarks hold true *a fortiori* for a field like the epigraphic production of the Imperial period and late antiquity. Though the historical interest and the literary value of single epigrams have been adequately acknowledged, we still need an *overall* evaluation of epigraphic poetry as both literary and stylistic phenomenon.⁶ We need an extensive examination of epigraphic poems against the background of highbrow poetry, in order to verify exactly their *literariness* (according to Jakobson's terminology) and *audience* response. Such a critical procedure was already invoked by Averil Cameron for the epigrammatists of the age of Justinian, although in order to reach a proper understanding of literary epigrams: 'They [viz. Agathias and his friends] were not writing in a vacuum. There was a lively background of contemporary inscriptional epigram against which their poems must be judged'.⁷ More recently Alan Cameron reminded us of 'the thousands of inscriptional epigrams, many of great interest and high quality', adding that epigraphic publications are 'seldom consulted by literary scholars'.⁸ There are some objective reasons for such underestimating of epigraphic materials, of course. First of all, the dispersion of publications, a problem that only recently has been partially solved by the completion of Mer-

kelbach and Stauber's *Steinepigramme*: thanks to this collection, which adds to previous important works,⁹ we have now at our disposal an extremely valuable working tool, although one not devoid of imperfections.¹⁰

Another difficulty, well-known to all those who, even episodically, have dealt with these texts, is establishing their date: highly formalised texts, as epigraphic poems often turn out to be, are in fact difficult to date in the absence of external evidence. This also affects the proper identification of formal models and intertextual relationships. For example, inscriptional epigrams displaying 'modern style' elements are usually dated by editors *post Nonnum* (i.e. after the mid-5th century), on the presumption that the epigraphic poet imitates Nonnus. But this is not always the case: things are rather much more complicated. In fact, it is often difficult to choose among the categories of imitation, forerunning or sharing of a common style and language in their making—a style and a language eventually brought to perfection by Nonnus.¹¹

In this paper I will deal with the problem of literariness in epigraphic poems; with the awkward mixture of prosodic flaws and affected poetic style; with the role of audience of epigraphic poems; with a peculiar feature of *mise en page*. All these aspects of the lively background will help us, I think, to understand better the lively Indian summer of later Greek poetry.

2. On the 'lively background' (the background of mediocrity?)

According to Russian formalists, 'failure can sometimes be as important a factor in literary dynamics as success'.¹² Only a few scholars would hesitate to assign late antique inscriptional epigrams to the realm of *failure*, I fear. Even texts that are usually more studied, as funerary epigrams or the epigrams for governors, are rarely taken into account for their literary aspects.¹³

In terms of sociocultural history, such an attitude is exposed to the drawback of leaving out an important part of late antique poetry that had an immediate and lively impact on its audience. From the perspective of the history of literature, the analysis of epigraphic poems could help not only to evaluate better late epigraphic poetry from the literary point of view; it would also provide a better understanding of some developments and features of 'highbrow' literature. In particular, all this might enable us to assess within a wider context the impact of 'modern style' in late antique culture.

To begin with a simple, yet significant, example, let us examine some literary features of the well-known Hormisdas inscription in Thessaloniki. It was carved in bricks in the tower of the East city wall, to celebrate the accomplishment of the fortifications (mid-5th c. CE, if we accept the identification of Hormisdas with the *Praefectus Praetorio Orientis* of 448–450 CE):¹⁴

τείχεσιν ἀρρήκτοις Ὁρμίσδας ἐξετέλεσσε
τήνδε πόλιν μεγάλην χεῖρας ἔχ(ω)ν καθαρά[ς].

Accomplishing unbreachable walls Hormisdas fortified
this great city, maintaining pure his hands.

The diction of the epigram shares many features with contemporary poetry, such as ἐξετέλεσσε/τήνδε πόλιν μεγάλην,¹⁵ or χειρὰς ἔχ(ω)ν καθαρὰ[ς], which is typical of praise of governors.¹⁶ In the first line, the use of a solemn *versus tetracolos* is noteworthy, even if it is not infrequent to find such a hexameter in epigrams that celebrate buildings.¹⁷ The four-word hexameter was increasingly employed in the fifth and sixth century by Nonnus and his followers; it became thus a distinctive feature of the ‘modern style’. On account of such a diffusion, some scholars have cast doubts upon its real expressive value,¹⁸ but in the case of our example, as well as with other epigraphic examples, it is no doubt employed purposely.¹⁹ The verse pompously extols the building: the style is raised to higher dignity also by the *enjambement* with the following hemistich.²⁰ Moreover, each of the first three words is trisyllabic and the heaviness of successive spondees is lightened by B₁ caesura²¹ (according to Nonnian trends). On the other hand, the proparoxytone at the end of line 1 reveals that the author was not completely aware of the Nonnian rules.

The preference for the modern style was likely to have been in line with the patron’s wishes. On the other hand, such a text, carved upon a wall (along a single, continuous line of nine metres—the reason why the first editors failed to recognise the metrical nature of the text), was intended to reach a wider audience. Did the audience appreciate the emphatic value of the *tetracolos* and the high diction of the text? We can reasonably assume, I think, that the balance between nouns and epithets (3:3) and the presence of literary forms enabled occasional readers to realise that the inscription was a ‘highbrow’ text. As for the metre, one should take into account the oral performance of such inscriptions. This is a crucial question, for it concerns the idea we have about the real perception of poetry in late antiquity. In my view, ordinary readers (i.e., people who did have some education, but were not part of the small *élite* of truly erudite *literati*) recognised hexameters (or elegiac) poems on the basis of their vocabulary, of their turn of phrase and of their overall structure, mainly the caesura and the paired colon structure of the verses. But we shall return to this question at the end of the paper.

It would be interesting to analyse another encomiastic epigram, of five hexameters,²² from Thessaloniki: *AP* 9.686 = *I.Chr.Mac.* 87 Feissel (4th/6th c. CE):

Ἦνορέης ὀλετῆρα ὑπερφιάλου Βαβυλῶνος
καὶ σέλας ἀκτεάνοιο δίκης Βασίλειον ὕπαρχον,
ξεῖνε, νόῳ σκίρτησον ἰδὼν ἐφύπερθε πυλάων.
εὐνομίης ποτὶ χῶρον ἀριστογένεθλον ὀδεύεις,
βάρβαρον οὐ τρομέεις, οὐκ ἄρρενας ἀρρενοκοίτας.
ὄπλα Λάκων, σὺ δὲ τείχος ἔχεις βασίλειον ἄγαλμα.

It is the destroyer of the valour of insolent Babylon,
 the light of incorrupt justice, the prefect Basilius,
 you are seeing above the gate: exult in your heart!
 You are going to the place of good government, mother of excellent
 sons:
 do not fear the barbarian or men who bed with men.
 The Spartan for a wall has his arms, but you have the royal image of
 Basilius.

These verses do not strictly follow ‘modern’ rules, as the presence of two pro-paroxytone clauses immediately reveals, but nonetheless the epigram is composed in what was perceived as high style. It opens, again, with a four-word hexameter, has only feminine caesurae, employs terms and expressions typical of ‘modern’ poetry such as ὀλετήρ, ἀριστογένεθλον, οὐ τρομέεις,²³ and concludes with a wordplay on the name of the *laudandus*.

Thessaloniki in late antiquity was still a centre of good culture, and in any case high functionaries like Hormisdas or Basilius could afford to hire a cultivated poet to honour them. One wonders about the level of epigraphic poetry in the small centres at the periphery of the empire. Two epigrams from a small town NE of Apamea, on the Syrian *limes*, offer a good starting point for reflection. They celebrate the defensive works to protect a *domus* against the Saracenes’ attacks. Quotations from the Psalms invoking divine protection are followed by two impeccable hexameters:²⁴

εἰρήνης δόμος εἰμὶ βαθυκτεάνων ναετήρων
 λαϊνέαισι πύλαισιν ἀπήμονα τέκνα φυλάσσω.

I am the house of the peace that protects the children
 of the rich inhabitants by its doors of stone.

In these verses the poet, not unaware of the ‘modern style’,²⁵ uses a rare term such as βαθυκτεάνων (derived either directly from Nonnus, or from an *onomasticum poeticum*),²⁶ which embellishes the variation of a well-known passage—almost a proverb—from Euripides’ *Kresphontes*.²⁷ The distich is followed by two further inscriptions, the first of which is in hexameters and close to the modern style, the second one in iambs.²⁸ The authors (οἱ τοὺς στίχους, *IGLS* IV 1600.4) belonged to the same family; they were learned and able to quote Euripides, Menander,²⁹ and—for us more importantly—Nonnus. Here is the text of the hexametric epigram according to Feissel:³⁰

ἡ Τριάς, ὁ θεός, πόρρω διώκει τὸν φθόνον.
 Εἰκὸν ἐπουρανίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Λόγε, μελίχιον φῶς,
 ὃς Χριστὸς τελέθει, ὃς ἡ ἐδείματο κόσμον ἀλήτην

ὄλβον ἐμοὶ προΐαλλε, πλεὴν χάριν ἄφθιτον αἰεῖ.
 Χριστὸς ἀειζῶων λυσι[ι]πήμονα χεῖρα κομίζει.
 τοῦνεκεν οὐ τρομέο[ι]μι κακορρέκτοιο μενοινάς
 δαίμονος, οὐδ' ἀνδρὸς στυγερὸν καὶ ἀθέσμιον ὄμμα.
 Νεύμασιν ὃς μούνοισι θε[ι]μεῖλια πήξας γαίης,
 ῥίζας τ' οὐρανίας καὶ ἀτρυ[γ]έτοιο θαλάσσης,
 τόνδε δόμον λιτομαί σε, ἡ [κ]αὶ ἐσσομένοισιν ὀπάζοις
 [εὖ]διον ἀστυφέλικτον, ἡ [ἀ]οίδιμον αἰὲν ὀράσθαι.

Might Trinity, God, chase away Envy!
 Image of heavenly God, Word, gracious light,
 you who are the Christ, you who built the wanderer world,
 send forth to me happiness, your eternal grace.
 Christ ever-living offers his hand that ends sorrow.
 So, I could not fear eager desires
 Of the devil, nor the hateful and impious eye of men.
 You who only with your will established earth's foundations,
 and the roots of heaven and of unharvested sea,
 I pray you to give this home to future generations,
 gracious, unshaken and always famous to see!

The author knew contemporary poetry well.³¹ The metrics are generally 'flawless', except for some prosodic mistakes due to pronunciation; there are no paroxytones at verse-end, only three verses display B₁ caesura, spondees are in the first two feet. These two inscriptions provide us with valuable information about the literary history of the period, information made much more important as it comes from a small town on the periphery. Surprisingly enough, their authors seem to be well acquainted with Nonnus' *Paraphrase of St John's Gospel*, and more surprisingly they make quotations from Empress Eudocia's hexametric paraphrase of St Cyprian's legend and from the *Metaphrase of the Psalms* attributed to Apollinarios.³² As for Nonnus, evidence of the *Nachleben* of the *Paraphrase* is scanty, even though the poem was known by Musaeus and Dioscorus of Aphroditon³³ and later, sporadically, in the Byzantine age.³⁴

To these examples we can add a less surprising (in virtue of its Egyptian origin),³⁵ but no less interesting text, *SEG* 24.1243: two columns of a long funerary epigram in hexameters, now in Greifswald.³⁶ I reproduce here a part of 23 verses preserved in the first column (of the second one only the initial letters of 12 verses survive), according to *SEG* with some slight corrections:

[. ἐμ]οὶ ποθέοντι φιλαίτατον αἰὲν [ἐταῖρον]
 [σώματο]ς ἀμπλακίης ἀλλότριον, ᾧ ἐπιχαί[ρει]
 [φαιδρῶς] μειδιῶν ἀγαθὸς θεὸς εἰ καὶ ἀχεύ[ω],
 [λυπη]ρῆς στοναχῆς ἀποπαύομαι, ὡς ἐδιδάχ[θην].
 [ὡς γὰρ] ὑποδρηστήρες ἀειζώοιο Θεοῖο

10

[θλιβό]μενοι γελόωντες ἔτι ζώουσι θανόντες
 [καὶ γοε]ρῶν καμάτων ἀντάξια δῶρα λαχόντες
 [ἤδη κακ] κεφαλὰς στεφάνους φορέοντες ἐτοίμους
 [τῶν μογ]ερῶν λήθοντο πόνων, παύσαντο δὲ δίψης
 [εὐνῶς μ]ειδιόοντα Θεοῦ θεὸν υἱὸν ἰδόντες 15
 [θυμοῦ ἐξ] ἀυχήμεντοις ἐπεγγελεύοντες ἀνίη
 [λυπηρῇ κα]τὰ γαῖαν ἐπὶ χρόνον αἰνὰ παθόντες
 [χῶρον ἀν] οὐρανίον πανακήρατον ἔλλαχον εὐχος
 [ὥς σὺ καμῶ]ν ἐπὶ βαιὸν ἀκήρατον ἤρπασες εὐχος.
 [οὐ μὴν γὰρ τ]έθνηκας, ὅτ' ἔπλεο πιστὸς ὁπάων 20
 [τῆς Ἀγίας Τ]ριάδος ζωαρκέος οἶος ἐτύχθης
 [δοῦλος ἐὼν ἄκμη]τος ἀνηνάμενος χθονὸς ἔργα
 [καὶ πιστοὺς ἐδίδα]ξας ἀπηνέα δαίμονα φεύγειν.

...to my desire always a loved companion
 foreign to body sins: blessed God rejoices in that
 cheerily smiling, even if I sorrow
 I cease from painful groan, as I was taught.
 As the servants of ever-living God
 even in affliction smile and still living die
 receiving worthy gifts for their mournful labours,
 and wearing on their heads crowns ready
 they forgot their grievous toils and cease to be thirsty
 when they see the God Son of God with a benign smile,
 from the proud hearth they exult over painful affliction,
 on the earth suffering terribly for a while
 but obtain all uncontaminated glory in the heaven;
 so you having suffered for a while reached a pure glory.
 You did not die, because you are a faithful attendant
 of the Holy Trinity ever-living, just as you have been
 when you were an unwearied servant, refusing the works of this
 world,
 and taught the faithful to escape the cruel devil.

The epigram is devoted to a pious person, of proved and orthodox faith (according to the allusion to the Holy Trinity at 19-23); he was probably engaged in pastoral activities, and is compared to martyrs. Metrics and style are close to Nonnus,³⁷ and this led the first editors to suggest a date around the mid-5th century CE. This poem is one of the very few Egyptian inscribed texts in 'modern style': the poet was evidently educated in an environment where this peculiar style was taught. In the light of the presence of Nonnian syntagms I would be inclined to assign the epigraph rather to the end of the century.

This epigram is one of the first witnesses to the reception of Nonnus' Christian poem in the poet's homeland. Inscriptional epigrams that show the influ-

ence of the ‘modern style’ are relatively more frequent in the Near East: some of them constitute the higher level of the ‘lively background’ of literary epigrams in the fifth and sixth centuries.³⁸ Others help us to cast in a proper light the diffusion of such a style. Let us briefly examine an example offered by a new text of the 6th century CE (*SEG* 53.1737), from Elaiussa Sebaste (Cilicia):³⁹

ὅστις ἐμὸν παρὰ σῆμα τεὸν ἰ ποδὸς ἵχνος ἐρείδεις
 ἔνθα μινυνθαδίην Ἀνατολί{ι}ν με βλέπεις·
 ἢ γόνον ὠδίνουσα τέκον θανάτοιο τελευτήν
 κείμαι δ' ἄρτιτόκος ἀνδρὶ [λι]ποῦσα γόους.

You, whoever you are, who plant your foot near to my tomb,
 where you see me, short-lived Anatolia.
 Giving birth I generated the end that is my death,
 and so, having just given birth, I lie, leaving only grief to my husband.

Opening with an evident quotation of Callimachus (*ep.* 21.1 Pf. ὅστις ἐμὸν παρὰ σῆμα φέρεις πόδα),⁴⁰ the diction is clearly influenced by contemporary style, even though there are no borrowings to the best of our knowledge from particular literary models:⁴¹ at line 2 the adjective μινυνθάδιος, at line 3 γόνον ὠδίνουσα do have a modern flavour.⁴² But it is the end of line 1 that is particularly significant, since ἵχνος ἐρείδεις is a Hellenistic rarity that became common in late antique poetry.⁴³ According to the characteristic *Abundanz* of late poetical language ποδὸς ἵχνος means simply ‘foot’, as we know from the poems and the petitions by Dioscorus of Aphroditō.⁴⁴ In the epigram from Elaiussa Sebaste the syntagm clearly has the same meaning. Oddly enough, the superfluous addition of the possessive adjective τεόν, preceding the high-level clause ποδὸς ἵχνος ἐρείδεις, creates an effect of heaviness revealing that the poet was not totally in control. Such cases are in fact relatively frequent and show that ‘(occasional) presence of modern stylistic features’ would often be a more appropriate label than ‘imitations of Nonnus’.

This holds true also for texts which are apparently influenced by Nonnian poetry. Let us take an inscription from Aphrodisias, *IAph2007.1.196* = *SGO* 02/09/13 (5th/6th c. CE):

πατρὶς Ἰωάννην πρωτόθρονον ἀνέρα βουλῆς
 στήσεν δεξαμένη θρεπτήρια πολλάκι πολλά.

The fatherland set up this image of Ioannes, who has the first seat in
 the Council
 having received many repayments for his rearing.

The first line echoes a Nonnian *unicum*, *Par.* 11.190 εἰς ἔν ἀγειρομένων πρωτόθρονος ἔζετο βουλῇ.⁴⁵ The adjective occurs also in *Dion.* 8.166 μήτερ Ἐνυαλίοιο, Διὸς πρωτόθρονε νύμφη (Hera): it is in fact a Callimachean term (*Dian.* 228), used also by Colluthus 153 (apparently from Nonnus).⁴⁶ But an epitaph from Gaza, *SGO* 221/05/02 (569 CE) shows the same *iunctura* πρωτόθρονος, ὦ φίλε, βουλ[ῇς]. Now, since the dactyl between πρωτόθρονος and βουλῇ is different in the three occurrences (*Par.* and the two epigrams), it seems reasonable to guess that the epigraphic poets are not making a Nonnian quotation: both they and Nonnus are varying a common model.⁴⁷

3. Bad metrics, fragments of good poetry, or the dark side of the ‘Jeweled Style’

As we have seen, the analysis of the diction of epigraphic poems is useful in order to assess more properly the diffusion and the effects of the ‘modern style’ on a literature intended for a larger (and even less cultivated) audience, as epigraphic poetry was. On the other hand, this lively background could help us to understand better some peculiar features of Nonnus’ and his followers’ style. One of these is the new form of the hexameter: late poetry is characterised by highly refined metrics, which is the result of a series of severe laws and restrictions taking also into account the role of stress accents.⁴⁸ And yet metrics is always considered one of the crucial points of the *failure* of epigraphical poetry. In the Imperial age and in late antiquity, no doubt, there are innumerable epigraphs with prosodic and metrical flaws: in many cases it is not easy even to decide whether the author really had the aim of composing in metre or not. Scholars usually consider such epigrams as the lowest level of late antique literariness: they are seen as the evidence of ‘decadence’ of late literature.

The low stylistic (and metrical) quality of a large amount of those texts is beyond question, of course. Nevertheless it would be convenient, I think, to remember that *our* point of view does not necessarily correspond to that of a late antique audience. Epigraphic texts had first and foremost pragmatic functions and they were a rich and complex medium for displaying and communicating information. Inscriptions were devised to be seen and to be read aloud (as their arrangement very often suggests): in short, they were ‘spoken texts’, as recent research has fully shown.⁴⁹ As a consequence, we must always take into account the oral *performance* of epigraphic poems and emphasise the audience response. It would be fruitful for such an approach, I think, to examine firstly a peculiar phenomenon, namely the insertion of poetic *tesserae* into prose, from this point of view: it is the opposite (or the dark) side of the precious style in highbrow poetry.

Combination of prose and verse is not exceptional as such. What is striking in some late antique inscriptions is the syntactical tie between prose and poetic elements. In archaic and Hellenistic epigraphy prose and verses were neatly

(and graphically) separated. In late antiquity the border between the two *media* became less rigid.⁵⁰

The insertion of *dactylic features* into a prosaic inscription is quite common. A neat example is *SGO* 21/13/01 (Samaria-Sebaste, Palestine; 4th/5th c. CE), an inscription that celebrates a new sanctuary: the text begins with four dactyls and continues in prose:

Χρ(ιστ)έ, ἄναξ κόσμοιο μεγασθενέ[ς], βοήθη Σ[τ]εφάνῳ κτλ.⁵¹

Christ, powerful Lord of the world, help Stephanos etc.

The dactylic opening was clearly intended to lend greater dignity to the inscription. Another example is *SGO* 22/14/03 (Zorava, Arabia; 515/6 CE), an inscription that celebrates the transformation into a church of a pagan temple. Its first part is in accentual metrics,⁵² followed by prose: but the beginning of this second part is a hexameter:

ἄνῃρ τις φιλόχριστος ὁ πρωτεύων Ἰωάννης, Διομήδης υἱός, ἰ
ἐξ ἰδίων δῶρον κτλ.

a man loving Christ, the noble John, son of Diomedes, (gave) a gift from his properties etc.

This good *incipit* can boast noble poetic models (cf. e.g. Theocr. 23.1 ἄνῃρ τις πολύφιλτρος).

Even more interesting are the cases where dactylic sequences or *cola* alternate with prose at random, with no identifiable criterion. For example, *SGO* 16/33/02 (Phrygia, imperial/late period; inscription on an altarpiece):

ἐνθάδε ἐγὼ κεῖμαι, Μέλλιος Τελέσφορος, ἄωροθλανής, ἐτῶν
πέντε)
κὲ τόνιδαι μ' ἔτευξε τάφλον ὁ πατήρ μου {α} ἰάτελεσφόρος.
ἤλπισα εἰς ταύτην ἰ χάριν βωμῷ γραπτῷ σ' ἐπικονμεῖσθαι.⁵³
τὸν γὰρ χρόνον οὐκ ἐξετέλεσα.

Here I lie, Mellius Telesphorus, untimely dead, five years old and this tomb was made by my father who is now without Telesphorus.⁵⁴
I do hope that for this you can adorn me with an altar and a picture (?), as I could not accomplish my time.

I reproduce the verse division proposed by Merkelbach-Stauber. However, one might also print the whole text as prose: I do not find any rule in it, except for the accidental use of poetical *iuncturae* and *cola* (such as ἐνθάδ' ἐγὼ κεῖμαι—the epigraph has the *scriptio plena* —, or τόνδε μ' ἔτευξε, οὐκ ἐξετέλεσα). The

writer was able to reproduce standard poetical echoes, to make a wordplay on the child's name (Τελέσφορος/ἀτελεσφόρος), even to employ highbrow terminology (as ἀωροθανής). On the other hand, however, his diction is awkward (especially that of line 3) and the thought not totally clear.

A quite similar example is offered by an epitaph in the form of a *Dialog-Gedicht* from Roman Corinth (2nd/3rd c. CE), recently re-edited:⁵⁵

Δημητρία χαῖρε. πῶς δύνομαι χαίρειν προλιποῦσα φῶς
καὶ γλυκυτάτους γονῖς τετραέτην ζήσασα χρόνον;
καὶ ἐνθάδε νέα οὔσα πρώτη τε ἐγὼ κατοικῶ
ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς τὸ γλυκὺ φῶς μέχρι που τὸ ἱμαρμένον ἔλθῃ.

Farewell, Demetria.—How can I fare well, if I left the light
And my parents after living four years?
and here I dwell, young and in my early life,
but you in the sweet light until the day decided by Fate should come.

As the editor pointed out, there is no consistent metrical structure: we can only recognise poetic syntagms, as προλιποῦσα φῶς,⁵⁶ or in the fourth verse the beginning ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς and the clause τὸ (ε)ἱμαρμένον ἔλθῃ.⁵⁷ The author meant apparently to write a 'poetic' text to honour the young Demetria.

The first ten verses of a funerary epigraph from Tanagra (GVI 1952, Boeotia, 5th c. CE) display more or less regular hexameters (verse 8 is actually a pentameter), whereas lines 11 to 15 are filled up with prosodic flaws, so that I would incline to consider the last two lines as just prose. Here are lines 12-15:

ἄνθρωπε, ἔτ' ὑπερθεν ἐὼν μὴ πάτει τοὺς ὑπένερθεν
μηδὲ μὴν ἀμπαυόμενος ἐφίζανε τοῖς φθιμένοις
τῶν δ' αὐτῶν καὶ σὺ μεθέξεις, ὧν αὐτὸς δρᾶν οὐκ ἐφυλάξω,
οἴσεις δὲ τάδε πάντα, ὅταν σὲ λάβῃ ἔννυχος ἡώς.

Man, you who are in the upper world do not tread people who are
below,
And do not have a seat upon the dead, taking your rest:
you will receive back the same things you did not avoid to do,
you will suffer all these things, when nocturnal dawn catches
you.

Surprisingly enough, the epigram ends with the adonean⁵⁸ ἔννυχος ἡώς, a peculiar clause of 'modern style', and a precious oxymoron at the same time,⁵⁹ as clearly shown *inter alios* by Paul the Silentiary *Descr.* 809 ἐννύχιον Φαέθοντα. Such poetical embellishments were evidently more widespread than we might expect.

The love for precious poetic words and for magniloquent beginnings is the easiest aspect of the taste for details, so widespread in late antiquity, that Michael Roberts successfully defined as the ‘jeweled style’ and that appears also in the new syncretistic aesthetics of late antique art (for example in the re-use of *spolia*, as Jaś Elsner has brilliantly argued).⁶⁰ Some of the previously alleged examples could show the influence of documentary practice: documents became more and more sophisticated and stuffed with literary quotations, as it is clear from Egyptian petitions. Dioscorus of Aphrodito, for instance, does not hesitate to insert Nonnian quotations (besides Homeric and Menandrian ones) in his petition, in order to increase pathetic effects: in *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67002 III.4 ἀγραυλοῖσι μηλονόμοις (‘rustic shepherds’) comes from Nonnus, *Dion.* 15.18 μηλονόμων ἀγραύλον...δέπας (‘rustic pot of the shepherds’); again, in *P.Cair.Masp.* I 67020.6 ἀπὸ Διὸς γένους λελάχατε αἶμα (‘you got your blood from the family of Zeus’) is an adaptation of *Dion.* 47.598 εἰ Διὸς ἔλλαχες αἶμα (‘if you have in you the blood of Zeus’).⁶¹

More importantly, the coexistence of imperfect prosodies (even not so imperfect) and highbrow expressions was a widespread phenomenon, not only in epigraphical texts. The new Christian poems of the so-called *Codex Visionum* (*PBodmer* 29-36, second half of 4th c. CE) provide good evidence of such a discrepancy; in the fifth century the empress Eudocia composed ambitious poems, like the epic paraphrase of St Cyprian’s legend, with a prosody that is far from the classical standards.⁶² Such a prosody does not necessarily mean lack of culture: Damascius in his *Life of Isidorus* (fr. 48a Athanassiadi) records that his master, one of the paramount intellectuals of his age, though well versed in poetry did not pay much attention to formal features and asked his pupil to correct metrical defects and whatever went against the correct rhythm:

ὕμνους ὅσους ἔγραψεν...τοῖς δ’ ἔπεσιν οὐ πάνυ συνηρμοσμένους,
ἀλλὰ τούτων ὅσον ἄμετρον ἀπέβαινε καὶ ἄλλως οὐ κατὰ τὸν πρεπῶδη
ῥυθμὸν ἐμοὶ ἐπανορθοῦσθαι ἐπέτρεπε.

all the hymns that he wrote...(were) not properly arranged to the epic style, but he gave me to amend whatever went against metre and did not follow correct rhythm.

All this may also suggest that in particular cases the disordered assembling of *cola* was intentional: this is probable in the case of magniloquent preambles with hexametric features, as in *SGO* 22/14/03, quoted above, where the hexametric *incipit* comes after accentual verses.

How to evaluate, then, celebratory epigrams that show literary ambition coupled with ‘faulty’ metrics? Take for example *SGO* 17/08/03 (Sydima, Lycia; 391/2 CE), an inscription with the *cursus honorum* of Flavius Eutolmius Tatianus, *PPO* and consul in 392 CE: thirteen lines that surely had a metrical structure, according at least to the poet’s intentions. Although some lines give

rather the impression of simple prose, the last two are hexameters: this suggests that the poet had exactly the intention to compose hexameters (i.e., the most convenient form for such an honorific inscription). This was the opinion of the first editors (Franz, Kaibel, Grégoire); the attempt by Merkelbach to interpret the lines as Sotadean verses⁶³ has not found general favour and the traditional opinion has been recently supported by Kassel and Livrea.⁶⁴ As a matter of fact, in the first hemistichs it is possible to recognise, by and large, ‘correct’ *hemi-epes*, whereas some doubts persist as far as the *enoplians* are concerned. There is scanty trace of *enjambement* and every line tends to be a self-contained unity; the author makes Homeric quotations (v.6b = *Il.* 10.213) and his diction is clear enough. I feel uneasy about calling this a ‘bad’ poem.

4. Ordinary Poetry

The study of poetic insertions in prose contexts, or in poems characterised by defective metrics, brings about a wider definition of what was perceived as ‘poetic style’ in late epigraphic texts. The classicistic perspective, we have seen, that considers these epigrams from the point of view of the observance of classical (hellenistic) norms, catches only one side of the sociocultural role of epigraphic discourse in late antiquity and risks devaluing or dismissing a great part of epigraphic texts. After having seen epigrams in high style (i.e., close to the modern style) and epigrams which belong to the opposite side of the stylistic spectrum, we could wonder if it is possible to define an ‘ordinary’ level of epigraphic poems.

To answer, we turn now to a literary genre, where style levels appear clearly perceptible, namely ekphrastic epigrams. Culture and the social role of patrons have a crucial point in this kind of inscriptional epigram. For example, the inscribed poems from Constantinople from the early decades of the 6th century are of high level and close to the ‘modern style’: *AP* 1.10 (hexameters for the church of St. Polyeuktos), 1.12-17 (elegiacs for St Euphemia), the epigram inscribed in the church of St Sergius and Bacchus (hexameters), *AP* 9.696-697 and 1.97-98 (for the building work of Theodore), 9.656 (on Anastasius’ Chalke). These contrast with the epigrams from Jerash (*SGO* 21/23) or from Nikopolis, which are rather written in traditional Homeric style.⁶⁵

Let us take a look at an epigram that has been recently discovered,⁶⁶ which features a style we can describe as ‘ordinary’: *SGO* 22/35/02 (Nabatea, Kana-tha, 5th c. CE), on behalf of the bishop Cassius Epiodorus:

εὖχεο νῦν πρώτιστα καὶ εὐξάμενος πάλιν <ἀθρεῖ>
τέρπεο ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδὼν πολυδαίδαλα ἔργα
νηοῦ τειμήεντος ὃν ἀκαμάτοισιν ἐπ’ ἔργοις
Κάσσιος Ἡπιόδωρος ἐπίσκοπος αἵσιμα εἰδὼς
σπουδῇ καὶ ταχύτητι ὑποστὰς ἐξετέλεσεν

5

Πατρὶ Θεῷ καὶ παιδὶ καὶ ἀγίῳ πνεύματί τε ξύν.
 οἶος δ' ἐκ δαπέδου κλυτοεργέος ἦραρε κόσμος
 ἐκταδὸν ἀργεννήσι φα(ε)ινόμενος πλακέεσσι,
 κείουσιν εὐρύθμοις ἀμφισταδόν· ἐνθάδε πάντες
 εὐχὰς ὁμοῦ τελέουσιν ὅσοι Χριστὸν δοκέουσιν· 10
 νηοῦ δ' αὖ μετόπισθεν ἐπ' αὐχένι πείονι γαίης
 πύργους ἀστερόεντας ἐδείματο καλλιθεμείλους·
 οἱ μὲν ἴσοις κανόνεσσιν ἀπ' ἀλλήλων βεβαῶτες
 διπλοοὶ ἐξ ὁμόθεν γλυπτοὺς ἀνέχουσι τένοντας
 τῶν δὲ μάλ' ἀγλαίῃ πολυήρατον εἶδος ἐχούσας 15
 Πνεύματος ἐξ ἀγίου πελιάδας ἀμφὶς ἀνέλκ[ει].

First of all, address your prayer now; and then, having prayed, observe.

Delight yourself seeing the skilful works
 of the precious Church which thanks to unresting labours
 Bishop Kassius Epiodorus, who has right knowledge,
 accomplished zealously and quickly
 with the aid of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
 From the famous elaborated ground the ornament fits
 outstretched, resplendent with bright slabs of stone,
 with blank columns around from each side: here all people
 who believe in Christ say their prayers.
 In the rear of the Church on the neck of rich earth
 the Bishop built magnificent towers that reach the stars:
 they, rearing at the same height and distance,
 both hold together carved tendons,
 which have lovely and dazzling form,
 holding up doves from the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to compare this poem with the ekphrastic epigrams from Constantinople mentioned above, dating from the first half of the sixth century. All of these epigrams, as recently demonstrated by Mary Whitby, are written according to the 'modern' style, with more or less accurate Nonnian metrics (there are some minor flaws, due to proper names); their authors knew one another's work, as lexical connections demonstrate. In comparison with these high-class poems, the epigram from Kanatha, which is earlier by one century, is a work of lower level. Metrics do not follow Nonnian rules (proparoxytones at 8 and 10), even though B₂ is prevailing (11x) and spondees are always in the first or second foot; there are only two sequences of two spondees (3; 9, where they are separated by caesura), three examples of bucolic caesura, and one prosodic awkwardness at 6. Some features of the language show that the author was aware of the 'modern' ekphrastic style, but not skilled in it. For instance, the second part of 15 πολυήρατον εἶδος ἐχούσας is a traditional verse-end,

whereas ‘modern’ style prefers the variation πολυδαίδαλον εἶδος + verb [never ἔχειν] or noun.⁶⁷ On the other hand there are two four-word hexameters (8 and 12). The author knows traditional themes, like that of the building which rises to heaven (12: cf. *AP* 1.10.52 νέρθεν ἀναθρώσκων καὶ αἰθέρος ἄστρα διώκων, ‘jumping from the ground and aspiring to the heaven of the stars’); or that of brightness (cf. *AP* 1.10.50 πολυδαίδαλον αἴγλην), that here alludes also to the light of baptism.⁶⁸ This text, although technically less accomplished, is comparable to *AP* 1.8 (for Sts Peter and Paul), which features the same *topoi* (for example, at 7 τερπέσθω δὲ ὁρῶν κάλλος καὶ δώματος αἴγλην, ‘[the viewer] should rejoice when he looks at the beauty and brightness of the church’).

Of the same stylistical level is also *IGLS* XIII 9119a-d = *SGO* 22/45/05 (Bostra, Arabia, 5th c. CE), for a church:

[δόγμα]τος ὀρθοτόμου ταμίης καὶ ὑπέρμαχος ἐσθλός,
ἀρχιερεὺς θεόπνευστος ἐδείματο κάλλος ἄμετρον
[Ἀντίπατ]ρος κλυτόμητις ἀεθλοφόρους μετ’ ἀγῶνας,
κυδαίνων μεγάλως θεομήτορα ἀρθρον ἀγνήν
Μαρίαν πολύῦμον ἀκήρατον ἀγλαόδωρον.

Dispenser of the right doctrine and valorous champion,
archbishop inspired by God, Antipater built this extraordinary
beauty,
famous for his skill, after victorious contests,
greatly glorifying the Mother of God, the pure Virgin,
Mary rich in hymns, untouched, bestowing splendid gifts.

Just a few remarks will be sufficient to demonstrate that this is a refined poem. In spite of two proparoxytones at verse-end, there is only one spondee; at 2 the adjective θεόπνευστος is typical of late Christian poetry, especially of Gregory of Nazianzus and Nonnus; at 5 the poet uses a precious adjective, ἀγλαόδωρος;⁶⁹ there is also a *tournure* close to Nonnian style at 3 ἀεθλοφόρους μετ’ ἀγῶνας (*Dion.* 48.177 ἀεθλοφόρον μετὰ νίκην and 10.419 διδύμων πρώτιστος ἀεθλοφόρων ἐν ἀγῶνι). Furthermore, the epigram ends with a tetracolos and an assonance of α.

Another interesting case comes from the western world, a funerary Greek epigram in honour of an Egyptian physician, written on a wide white marble board discovered under the floor of the basilica of the Holy Apostles in Milan. It can be dated back to the 4th/5th c. CE on paleographical grounds:⁷⁰

ἐνθάδ’ ἀριζήλοιο Διοσκόρου | ἔπλετο σῶμα
οὐ μέλιτος | [γ]λυκίων φθόγγος ἔην | στόματος. |
ιητροῦ τάφος εἰμὶ Διοσκόρου, | ὃς διὰ τέχνην
πολλάκι κάμνοντας ρύσα[το κ]αὶ θανάτου.
οὗτος παντοίης σοφίης ἐπὶ τέρματι ἐλάσας

5

ἐνθάδε σῶμα | λιπὼν ἐς παράδισον ἔβη. |
 ἐνθάδ' ἀνὴρ κεῖται τέχνης Παιήονος ἵδρις,
 μύθῳ καὶ | χάρισιν πάντας ὑπερπτάμενος
 τοῦνομα πατρὸς ἔχων Διόσκορος· ἦν δ' ἀπὸ πάτρης
 Αἰγύπτου ζαθέης, ἣ δὲ πολὺς τὸ Γέρας. 10
 hic est ille situs Dioscorus, ill[a]qu[e] | lingua
 conticuit, mell[e] dulcior | ille sonus.
 [de]p(ositus) XII Kal(endas) [Dece]mbres.

Here lies the body of renowned Dioscorus, whose tongue
 Was sweeter than honey in his mouth.
 I am the tomb of Dioscorus, who thanks to his art
 frequently saved many from death.
 Such a man, who arrived at the limits of all culture
 having left his body here, went to Paradise.
 Here lies a man expert of the art of Paieon,
 who flies beyond everybody for eloquence and grace,
 who had his father's name, Dioscorus. His fatherland was
 divine Egypt, his hometown Gerrass.
 Here lies the well-known Dioscorus, and are now silent
 his tongue and his voice sweeter than honey.
 Laid to rest 20 November.

The epigram⁷¹ celebrates Dioscorus, who had the same name as his father, and who was surely a well-known, learned physician. The second line of the epigram underlines the sweetness of his speech, implicitly comparing him to the Homeric Nestor: *Iliad* 1.247-49, is evidently the model.⁷² Such a common quotation is not a sign of poetic smallness: the wish of ennobling the departed through a literary reminder that everybody knows can be often found in inscriptional epigrams (we have seen another example in the epigram from Elaiussa-Sebaste, p.197 above). This is one of the most ordinary aspects of the 'jeweled style'. What patrons required was not a particularly expressive refinement, but a clear and acknowledgeable literary quotation. As in many epigrams dedicated to physicians⁷³ an essential *topos* is the exaltation of the *laudandus*' technical skills. Lines 3f., διὰ τέχνην/πολλάκι κάμνοντας ῥύσα[το κ]αὶ θανάτου, refer to that. Among the parallels,⁷⁴ a surprising consonance with a fragment of a hexametric hymn to Asclepius by Aelius Aristides is especially noteworthy. At *Or.* 49.4 Aristides says that he dreamed that the poem (one of his earliest ones) was being sung by some schoolchildren in Alexandria):

πολλοὺς δ' ἐκ θανάτοιο ἐρύσατο δερκομένοιο
 ἀτραφέεσσι πύλησιν ἐπ' αὐτῇσιν βεβαῶτας
 Ἰαίδεω.

...and many he saved from death that looked upon them
as they stood at the gates immovable of Hades.⁷⁵

I obviously do not think that it is a real quotation, but simply the use of an expression that was probably more widespread than we had expected. In any case, that is a further sign of the high literary level of Dioscorus' epigram, where his nature of *μουσικὸς ἀνὴρ*, more than his professional skills, is praised (in fact in the Latin distich only his eloquence is remembered).⁷⁶ The epigram draws the portrait of a highly talented and learned man, one of the many skilled Egyptians (Alexandrians)⁷⁷ who pursued brilliant careers all over the Mediterranean.⁷⁸ He was a *iatrosophist*, a typical figure of Alexandrian medicine: a doctor who was at the same time a philosopher and a rhetor.⁷⁹ Since Egypt in the fourth and fifth century is not only the homeland of medicine, but also of poetry, it does not seem too hazardous to think that Dioscorus' sweet eloquence might express itself in poetry: in late antiquity rhetoric and poetry were considered two sides of the same coin.⁸⁰

5. *Mise en page and orality*

In the previous pages I insisted on taking into account the aspect of communicative function that epigraphic poetry had in late antiquity, regardless of the judgement we usually give of its stylistic results. At the end of this paper I would like to return to metrics, especially 'modern' metrics, to verify its eventual role in epigraphic communication.

It is quite usual to read that the late hexameter, as used by Nonnus and his followers, was an artificial verse, reserved for a small public of highly cultivated readers. That may be true for the end of the sixth century and for the Byzantine Middle Ages;⁸¹ but recent studies have shown dramatically that one cannot explain the emergence of Nonnian style and metrics otherwise than in terms of evolution and response to the condition of literary communication in late antiquity.⁸² Nonnian hexameter was a verse primarily conceived to be performed, as its deep structure reveals. It was a verse with little variation, with a stress accent at the end (showing the audience that the verse was about to end) and at the main caesura, and with a loss of *synapheia* at the caesura. All its features tend to build a paired colon structure, with the minimum possible rhythm patterns: the result is an extremely monotonous verse according to our sensibility, but a rhythmical structure easily recognisable to a late antique public. The poetry of Nonnus and his followers was still a poetry to be recited, as the subjects clearly show (*ekphraseis*, *patria* etc.).⁸³ This is not surprising at all, since oral performance of poetry, and of literature in general, addressed both to large and small audiences, was the norm in late antiquity;⁸⁴ spaces for public reading are familiar from contemporary sources that mention lecture halls, theatres, rooms for school declamations, and even temporary open-air structures. A good

example of such spaces has been offered by the excavations of the *auditoria* at the *quartier* of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, which could serve on occasion as classrooms, halls for public lectures and places for declamations.⁸⁵

Little research has been done on epigraphic poetry, as far as the aspect of its performance is concerned.⁸⁶ How was the audience supposed to read and receive inscriptional poems? It is not easy to decide to what extent readers were able to recognise literary models (especially in the case of quotations or allusions to modern poets, such as Nonnus or his followers)⁸⁷ and we should evaluate every single case: nor can we suppose that every reader perceived metrical niceties and refinements of the ‘modern style’. But if we think of the deep structure of the late hexameter outlined above, we can assume that epigraphic poems were read aloud, paying attention to the main features of such a structure. Among these features caesurae were perhaps the most important⁸⁸ and as such they were clearly perceived by the audience. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the *mise en page* of many inscriptional epigrams of the 4th/6th centuries, which clearly tend to arrange verses by dividing the lines at the caesurae.

Some of them are composed in the modern style, just like two epigrams from Gadara that celebrate the renovation of a public building (*SGO* 21/22/02 and 21/22/03 respectively; 491-518 CE), and where every verse is broken exactly at the main caesura:

ὄν χρόνος ἡμάλδυνεν | ἐλίσσόμενος κατὰ κύκλον |
στήσεν Ἀναστάσιος | βασιλεὺς μεγάλωνυμος ἥρως |
σπουδῇ Ἀλεξάνδροιο | περίφρονος ἡγεμονῆος |
Καίσαρῆς ναετῆρος | ὃς ἔλλαχεν ἡνία Νύσης.

The building that Time, turning in the round of the years, destroyed,
Emperor Anastasius set up, renowned hero,
thanks to the care of Alexander, wise Governor,
inhabitant of Caesarea who held the reins of Nysa.

Μούκιος Ἀλέξανδρος | πανυπείροχος ἡγεμονέων |
θέσκελον ἦνυσεν ἔργον, | ὃν ἔτρεφε Καίσαρος ἄστρῳ
δεξάμενος μέγα δῶρον | Ἀναστασίου βασιλῆος.

Mucius Alexander, powerful Governor,
accomplished a divine work, whom nourished the town of Caesar,
having received a great gift from the Emperor Anastasius.

In an epigram from Beresaba, with a Nonnian quotation at line 1 (21/07/01, 5th/6th c. CE),⁸⁹ the same *mise en page* is observed, except for the fourth verse (unless the engraver understood ἀργὶ φίλων as two separate words):

ὄφθαλμοί, τί τὸ θαῦμα; | πότε' ἐνθάδε κόσμος ἐτύχθη; |
 τίς βροτὸς ἠύρατο κάλλος, | ὃ μὴ πάρος ἄσπετος αἰών; |
 Ἀντίπατρος τάδ' ἔτυξε | καὶ οὐρανὸν—ἴλαθι—δεῖξεν |
 ἡνία χερσὶν ἔχων ἀρηιφίλων στρατιάων.

Eyes, what is this wonder? When was such a glory made here?
 Who was the mortal who found a beauty that infinite Time did not
 before?
 Antipater made this and showed it to the sky—God, be gracious—
 Holding the reins of armies dear to Ares.

The same attention to the caesurae can be observed in an epigram preserved in the manuscript tradition (*AP* 9.800-801: to be regarded as one text), once inscribed on a column from the Philadelphion of Constantinople, as Denis Feis-
 sel recently demonstrated by interpreting the scanty remains of the inscription:⁹⁰

[Ταῦτα λόγοις ἀν]έθηκεν | [ἐκὼν Μουσῆλιος] ἔργα,
 [πιστεύων καθ]αρῶς, | [ὡς Θεός ἐστι Λ]όγος.
 [Μουσείου τὰ μὲν αὐτὸς] ἐτεύξα[το,] | [πολλὰ δὲ σώσα]ς
 [ἐστῶτα σφαλερῶς ἴδρ]υσεν ἀσφαλέως.

These works Muselius dedicated cheerfully to words,
 in pure belief that God is Word.
 He built parts of the Museion himself; many other parts,
 which were ready to fall, he saved and strengthened firmly.

Separations at the main caesura appear also in texts from the western world, as in an epigram from Syracuse (unfortunately impossible to date precisely: 'late imperial period', according to editors):⁹¹

Perpenna(m) Roman(um)/u(irum) c(larissimum) cons(ularem) p(opulus)
 Syrac(usanus).

[Π]ωμανοῦ πρᾶπίδεσσι | [Συ]ρηκοσίων τόδε ἄστυ |
 ἐκ καμάτων ἀνέπνευσε | καὶ ἔ[δρα]κεν ἵαρος ὥρην· |
 τοῦνεκα λαινέην μὲν | ἀνεστήσανθ' οἱ ἄριστοι |
 εἰκόνα, τῆς σοφίης δὲ | καὶ ἐν στήθεσιν ἔχουσαι.

The people of Syracuse in honour of Perpenna Romanus, *vir clarissimus*
 and *consularis*:

Thanks to the wise heart of Romanus this town of Syracusans
 Takes breath from its pains, seeing again its spring:

for this reason noble citizens set up a statue
of stone, keeping in their heart the intellectual image of him.

The *mise en page* where verses are usually divided at the main caesura (or at C₁, more rarely C₂)⁹² is good external evidence that in late antiquity people still had a clear perception of the rhythmic breaks of the verse, especially at the main caesura. The study of epigraphic poems helps us to better understand not only the evolution of Nonnian style, but also Nonnian reformation of the shape of the classical hexameter: the poet's attention to the main caesura (whose role was also defined by stress regulation) was intended to emphasise a point of the verse that was perceived as particularly characteristic. It is another proof that Nonnian metrics was designed to keep the hexameter as a means of communication.

To sum up, the importance of epigraphic poetry for the understanding of the renewal of poetic production in late antiquity is, in my view, invaluable. Epigraphic epigrams allow us to verify the diffusion of the 'modern' style of Nonnus and his followers, giving also good reasons to explain why such a style was so successful: it was not simply a high literary style, but answered the needs of communication even among less cultivated audiences. This is quite evident from epigrams inscribed with a *mise en page* that observes the main caesura—the main break of late dicolic hexameter—,⁹³ which was perceived as characteristic in performance and in reading aloud. But this holds true also at the level of style. Poetic flavour, ostentation of noble and recognisable models, insertion of poetic *tesserae* were essential features of epigraphic poems and as such they appear also in texts composed by poets of mediocre education. Many of these texts show a presence of modern stylistic features, which can be each time literary quotations of Nonnus or general echoes of his peculiar language. Some epigrams, on the other hand, combine linguistic skill with defective prosody and metrics. Both these categories, as well as the ordinary poems (I focused especially on ekphrastic epigrams), represent the lively and diversified background against which highbrow poetry can be better analysed. Whatever our judgment of the value of epigraphic poems might be, they were considered to be poems by their authors and their audiences, and they are an essential part of the renaissance of poetry in late antiquity.⁹⁴

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NOTES

1. For recent surveys see Alan Cameron (2004, 2007); Agosti (2006a), with further bibliography.

2. I prefer to adopt this definition, in order to avoid the ambiguous term 'Nonnian school': Agosti and Gonnelli (1995) 291f; Gonnelli (2003) 7f.

3. Wifstrand (1933); Whitby (1994).
4. On the contribution of Christian poetry to the formation of 'modern style' see Agosti and Gonnelli (1995); Agosti (2009).
5. Averincev (1988); see also the important remarks by Averil Cameron (2006) 11-28.
6. I have dealt with epigraphic poems in some previous works: Agosti (1997, 1998, 2005c, 2007, 2008a).
7. Averil Cameron (1970) 18.
8. Alan Cameron (2004) 331.
9. Merkelbach and Stauber (1998-2004). Other valuable collection are Peek (1955), Bernand (1969), Alan Cameron (1973), Moretti (1979), Reynold, Roueché and Bodard (2007); Samama (2003) is a useful collection of the epigrams on doctors. Needless to say, the starting-point for every literary research in late epigraphy are the works by Louis Robert, among which Robert (1948) is particularly relevant for the history of late epigrams.
10. In spite of the great amount of materials collected and cursorily commented upon in Merkelbach and Stauber (1998-2004), a complete edition of late antique and early Byzantine epigrams is still an urgent *desideratum*. E. Sironen has announced a project on non-funerary epigrams; see Sironen (2003). An invaluable research tool is Feissel (2006). The present writer and Enrico Mag-nelli are preparing a commented edition of epigraphic and literary epigrams of late antiquity and Byzantium devoted to poets (*Epigrammata Graeca de Poetis = EGPoet*).
11. Agosti (2005c, 2007).
12. 'Literature, the Formalist argued, is not a succession of masterpieces. One cannot understand the evolution of literature or assess any period in its history without taking note of the second- and third-rate. For one thing, masterpieces can be recognised as such only against the background of mediocrity. For another, failure can sometimes be as important a factor in literary dynamics as success' (Erich [1969²] 261).
13. Among the recent literature that devoted much more attention to these problems, the article by Whitby (2006b), on metrics, style and authorship of the epigram from St Polyeuktos is particularly relevant.
14. *IG* X 2.1.43 = *SEG* 27.306 = *I.Chr.Mac.* 89 Feissel. See Feissel (1989) 89; Fiaccadori (2003) 196f., 243; Agosti (2005c) 1-3.
15. *API* 43.3 (Smyrna, after 551 CE).
16. Cf. *AP* 7.672.3 (Corinth, 6th c. CE) οὐχ ὅσιων κτεάνων καθαρὰς ἐφυλάξατο χεῖρας.
17. For other examples see the *incipit* of the magniloquent description of Anastasios' Chalkè in *AP* 9.656.1 οἶκος Ἀναστασίου τυραννοφόνου βασιλῆος (cf. Tissoni [2000] 30-36); *IGLSyr* XIII 9119 = *SGO* 22/42/05, 3 Ἀντίπατρος κλυτόμητις ἀεθλοφόρους μετ' ἀγῶνας and 5 Μαρίαν πολὺνμον ἀκήρατον ἀγλαόδορον (Bostra, 5th c. CE); *SEG* 38.1537 = *SGO* 22/35/02, 8 ἑκταδὸν ἀργεννῆσι φα(ε)ινόμενος πλακέεσσι and 12 πύργους ἀστερόεντας ἐδείματο καλλιθεμεῖθλους (Kanatha, Arabia, ca. 400), and in the fourth century the epigram on Antiochia's cathedral 111 Preger = *IGLSyr* 832 = *SGO* 20/03/03, 2f. οὐρανίαις ἀνῆσι πανεῖκελα παμφανόοντα/Κωνσταντείου ἀνακτος ὑποδρήσσοντος ἐφετμαῖς; for the Polyeuktos epigram see Whitby (2006b) 176f.
18. On the expressive force of *tetracolos* see, for example, the opposite views expressed by Gruzelier (1993), XXVIII; Dewar (1996) 178; Whitby (2006b) 176; Vian (2003) 215-19; Agosti (2004) 38-40.
19. A significant epigraphic example is *AP* 1.10, on which see the excellent discussion by Whitby (2006b).
20. See Bassett (1919).
21. I.e. the masculine caesura according to Fränkel's terminology: see Fränkel (1968³).
22. The stichic hexameters began to be more popular from the end of the 2nd century onwards: see Wifstrand (1993) 151-77.
23. Ὀλετήρ is a Homeric *hapax* (*Il.* 18.114), occasionally used by Nicander (*Ther.* 735), Antipat. Sid. (*AP* 6.115.3 = *HE* XLVII), Opp. *Hal.* (thrice), [Opp.] *Cyn.* (3.264), Greg. Naz. (*AP* 8.33.5), then loved by Nonnus (twenty-four occurrences); ἡνορέης ὀλετήρα Βαβυλώνας is the 'modern' way of saying ὀλλυμένην Βαβυλώνα, an expression used in an epigram on Justinian's equestrian statue (*API* 63.1). ἀριστογένεθλον is a *hapax*, cf. Nonn. *D.* 20.53 ἀριστογόνοιο. οὐ τρομέεις: cf. Nonn. *D.* 25.353 οὐ τρομέοις (*et al.*).
24. See Feissel (1998) 116-36. Here I am resuming, with some additions, the more detailed analysis in Agosti (2005c) 14-18.
25. For the clause of line 1 see, for example, Nonn. *D.* 13.196 ἐπειγομένων ναετήρων, 13.222 πολυγλώσσων ναετήρων, 23.96 φθιμένων ναετήρων, *P.* 4.194 ἀναινομένων ναετήρων. cf. *SH*

958.13 Μήδοισι βαθυκτεάνοισι, Nonn. *D.* 12.126 βαθυκτεάνω δὲ ρέεθρῳ (upon which Paul. Sil. *AP* 10.74.1 = 36 Viansino μήτε βαθυκτεάνοιο τύχης κουφίζεο ροίζῳ depends).

26. For the attestations of these terms see n.25 above; further examination in Agosti (2005c) 15.

27. Fr. 453 Kannicht = 10 Jouan-van Looy εἰρήνα βαθύπλουτε/καλλίστα μακάρων θεῶν./ζήλός μοι σέθεν ὡς χρονίζεις ('Peace, with your depths of wealth, most beautiful of the blessed gods, I yearn for you, since you delay your arrival'). See now *P. Köln* X 398, 15-16 (preserving the reading καί at v.1).

28. *IGLS* IV 1599 = *SGO* 22/05/06; *IGLS* IV 1600 = *SGO* 22/05/07.

29. *IGLS* IV 1600 = *SGO* 22/05/07.11.

30. Feissel (1998) 121 (the first line is iambic).

31. ἐπουρανίοιο θεοῦ (2): cf. Nonn. *P.* 1.134, 5.70; κόσμον ἀλήτην (3): cf. Nonn. *D.* 1.399, 32.54, *P.* 9.29, 15.105, 16.74; Χριστὸς ἀειζῶων (5): = [Apol.] *Met. Pss.* πρ. 110, Nonn. *P.* 1.34, 201; κακορρέκτοιο (6): cf. Eud. *Cypr.* 2.374; ἀνδρὸς στυγερόν καὶ ἀθέσμιον ὄμμα (7): [Apol.] *Met. Pss.* 36, 14 ἀνδρὸς...ἀθέσμιον; νεύμασιν ὅς μούνοισι (8): cf. Nonn. *D.* 3.48 νεύμασι θεσπεσίοις ἰθύνεται ἵχνια φωτός, *P.* 17.11 νεύμασιν ὑμετέροισι τό μοι πόρες, Jo. Gaz. 1.159 νεύμασιν ἀτρέπτοισι; θεμείλια πῆξας (8): Call. *Ap.* 58; Nonn. *P.* 17.14, *D.* 5.50, 17.135, 43.3; [Apol.] *Met. Pss.* 96.8 θεμείλια πάντοσε γαίης, 88.22 θεμείλια θήκατο κόσμου, 103.18 θεμείλια πῆξας (and *AP* 9.808.2 [Cyrus?]) θεμείλια καρτερὰ πῆξας; for ἀστυφέλικτον (11) see e.g. *P.* 18.48. The use of the rare λυσιπῆμων at v.5 (only in [Orph.] *H.* 2.11 λυσιπῆμονα χεῖρα κομίζει, 59.20 [Μοῖραι] λυσιπῆμονες, *Anacreont.* 50.10 West λυσιπῆμων τότε Βάκχος (Pierson: codd. λυσιπαίγμων) is also noteworthy.

32. Other epigrams from the Syrian *limes* show a more traditional diction. For instance, *IGLS* II 296 (Anasarcha, second decade of the 5th century CE), reedited and commented by Feissel (2002) 209-20, has some 'modern features' in metrics (only B₁ caesura, a four-word hexameter, spondees only in the first two feet), but the vocabulary is quite exclusively Homeric.

33. See Gelzer (1975) 297f.; Fournet (1999) 678-80. Dioscorus is the only one who quotes the little known *Metaphrase of the Psalms*. Now, the local poets from I'gaz seem to have the same background as Dioscorus: next to the 'classics' (Homer, Euripides, Menander) their scholarly education focused on Biblical poets of the mid fifth century CE.

34. Especially in the tenth and twelfth centuries: see the bibliography collected by Gonnelli (2003) 7-21; Magnelli (2004) 184-87; Agosti (2005c) 2. The circulation of the *Paraphrase*, however, can be better estimated thanks to some epigraphs from Aphrodisias, as I tried to show elsewhere (Agosti [2005c] 19-21).

35. The exact provenance is unknown; the epigram is not reprinted in Bernand (1969).

36. Cf. Keil (1961); Ferrua (1991) 84; a re-edition (not very useful) is offered by De Martino (1997). I am preparing an extensive work on this epigram: for its place in the history of the 'long epigram' in late antiquity see Agosti (2008a) 682f.

37. There are no proparoxytones at the end of the verses; the anaphora of 18f. is typically Nonnian (see the material collected by De Stefani [2002] 165 on *P.* 1.87, and by Agosti [2003] 509f. on *P.* 5.139f., both with further bibliography). As for the language, note at least ἀειζῶοιο Θεοῦ (10): Nonn. *P.* 1.202 = 19.38 = 20.143 ἀειζῶοιο Θεοῦ; ἥρπασες εὐχος (19): *D.* 44.285 ἥρπασας εὐχος; χθονὸς ἔργα (22): Nonn. *P.* 3.154; ἀπηνέα δαίμονα φεύγειν (23): *P.* 19.114 ἀπηνέας ἀνδρας ἐλέγχων.

38. For a good example from Scythopolis see *SEG* 49.2084a πόνων ἐγκύμονι τέχνη, with Magnelli (2005b).

39. *Ed. pr.* by E. Borgia and M.H. Sayar in Equini Schneider (2003) 538-40.

40. *Via* Greg. Naz. *AP* 8.188.1 ὅστις ἐμὸν παρὰ σῆμα φέρεις πόδα, ἴσθι με ταῦτα?

41. At 3 the periphrase θανάτοιο τελευτή dates back to [Hes.] *Sc.* 357, but it is a quite common syntagm in epigraphic poetry (variants: θανάτοιο τέλος/τέρμα).

42. Cf. Nonn. *P.* 4.151 δαῖτα μινυνθαδίην; 6.107 μινυνθαδῆς ἀπὸ φορβῆς; 18.32 μινυνθαδίου...ὄλβου; *D.* 5.42* = 36.480* φύλοπιν ὠδίνουσα, 9.236 ὠδίνοντα γενέθλην, *et al.*

43. Zenodot. *AP* 7.315.3f. = *HE* III 3642f. GP κούφον ἐρείδει/ἴχνος, and then Nonn. *P.* 5.31 ἴχνος ἐρείσας; *D.* 10.151, 361, 368, 18.15* (ἴ. ἐρείδων as in 42.54); [Pampr.] fr. 1r18 Livrea; Paul. Sil. *S. Soph.* 296 ἴ. ἐρείσει, *Amb.* 223 ἀναθρώσκων τις...ἴ. ἐρείση, Georg. Pisid. *de Vit. Hum.* 82 Gonnelli ἵσταται ἐν πελάγεσσι καὶ ἐς βυθὸν ἴχνος ἐρείδει.

44. *Carm.* 1.11 F. and *P.Cairo Masp.* I 67009 r° 5-6. See Fournet (1999) 467 on Diosc. Aphrod. *Carm.* 2.12 πόδας ἰχνῶν.

45. For πρωτο- compounds see Agosti (2003) 540 on *P.* 5.175.

46. In the Aphrodisias epigram πρωτόθρονος βουλῆς is the epic translation of πρωτεύων (the *laudandus*, John, was one of the πρωτεύοντες of the municipal Council).
47. The fact that in Nonnus the *iunctura* is a *unicum* could reveal that he is quoting a model: Agosti (2005c) 20f.
48. See Wifstrand (1933), Vian (1976), Jeffreys (1981), Whitby (1994), Agosti and Gonnelli (1995), Lauxtermann (1999), Magnelli (2008).
49. See Papalexandrou (2001); Cavallo (2006) 54.
50. For earlier examples see *SGO* 04/24/13 (Philadelphia, Lydia; 1st/2nd c. CE) Παυλῖνος ἥρως δομοτέκτων ἐνθάδε κεῖται· καὶ ἰ μετέπειθ' ἱερὴ μήτηρ σώλπειρα νέων ἀνδρῶν τε γυναικῶν ('prose with poetic terms' according to Merkelbach and Stauber): but could also scan prosastic beginning + adonean + 5da^Λ + hem (*Il.* 9.134 ἀνδρῶν ἡδὲ γυναικῶν).—For similar examples in Latin epigraphs see Cugusi (1996) 395. It is also worth mentioning the interesting *PTurner* 8 (2 CE), which has surely an iambic sequence, put in ἔκθεσις, followed by prose (the beginning is very difficult to interpret: *cr* and *3ia*, according to M. Haslam).
51. Similar cases are: *SGO* 10/02/97 (Caesarea, Paphlagonia; 218 CE; epitaph), five dactyls at the beginnings, then prose; *SGO* 10/02/98 (Caesarea, Paphlagonia; imperial age), one hemistich, then prose; *SGO* 11/06/02 (Laodicea, Pontus; 4th c. CE) dactyls, then prose.
52. Maas (1910) 11 n.2.
53. Read μ' ἐπικοσμεῖσθαι.
54. But it is also possible to interpret the wordplay as 'who could not accomplish my education'.
55. Rife (2008). The epitaph was carved on a block later reutilised in the Church of Dormition at Steiri.
56. Cf. e.g. *IGBulg* I² 222.12, *IGLSyr* 13.1 9393.11.
57. 'Segments of the last line fall into dactylic hexameter, and they might have been meant to form a hexameter', Rife (2008) 134.
58. —[~]—x (cf. West [1982] 30).
59. Agosti (1998).
60. Roberts (1989); Elsner (2004) 271-308.
61. See Fournet (1999) 261-64; (2004) 67-70.
62. Agosti and Gonnelli (1995) 333-53, with further bibliography.
63. Merkelbach (1978).
64. R. Kassel *ap.* *SGO*; Livrea (1997) 44: 'a curious *pastiche* neither poetic nor prosastic.'
65. For the Homeric epigram that comments upon the mosaic floor in the Basilica A of Nikopolis see Kitzinger (1951) 101-03; Agosti (2004-5) 358f.
66. See Donceel (1987). At the end of line 1 I adopt the correction by Magnelli (2007) 40.
67. Hes. fr. 10a.32 πολυή[ρατον εἶδος ἐχούσα~ cf. 10a.45 M-W = *HHom. Cer.* 315 πολυ-ή[ρα]τον εἶδος ἐχουσάν (πολυήρατον εἶδος also in [Opp.] *Cyn.* 1.366, 2.231); for πολυδαίδαλον εἶδος see Nonn. *D.* 1.23, 16.49, 36.304, 36.340, 43.246, 43.409; also in *SGO* 01/12/11 = *SEG* 44.886.5 (Halikarnassos, end of the 5th c. CE); Eud. *Cypr.* 2.120.
68. Cf. Nonn. *P.* 3.6 βαπτίσματος ἐνθεον αἶγλην, and 5.2 λίθων ἐτερόχροον αἶγλην (referring to Jerusalem's Temple, see Agosti [2003a] 274-83).
69. Epithet of Demeter in *HHom.Cer.* 54, 192, 492; three occurrences in Nonnus (*D.* 7.85, 12.263 [Dionysus], 19.44 [Methe]), but never at the end of the verse, as it happens on the contrary in our epigram.
70. *GVI* 1907; *SEG* 34.1003; 493 Samama.
71. The term 'triple-epigram' would be a more correct definition, according to the text's three-fold partition: 1f. (translated also into Latin), 3-6 and 7-10 (the repetition of ἐνθάδε at 7 clearly marks the beginning of another epigram).
72. Τοῖσι δὲ Νέστορ/ῆδυεπὴς ἀνόρουσε λιγύς Πυλίων ἀγορητής,/τοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ γλώσσης μέ-λιτος γλυκίων ῥέεν αὐδὴ ('among them sweet-words Nestor sprang up, the clear-voiced orator from Pylos, whose voice ran from his tongue sweeter than honey').
73. As can be easily seen in the recent collection by Samama (2003).
74. For such a phrase one can compare another epigram for a doctor, *IG IX* 1.881 = 078 Samama (Corcyra, 2nd c. CE), lines 3f. ἐσθλὰ δαεῖς Παίωνος ἀλεξητήρια νόσων/οἷς πολλοὺς θανάτου ῥύσατο καὶ καμάτων ('knowing well the valid remedies which keep off diseases, by which he saved many people from death and evil').
75. See Bowie (1989) 218.

76. Culture and literary ambitions of physicians are not rare: on learned doctors see Samama (2003) 77f., with further bibliography.

77. The reading γέρας (10) has been variously interpreted by scholars (but the only reasonable translation of it would be: 'our city was his glory'). Feissel (1984) discovered the physician's true hometown, recognising in γέρας the name of Gerra/Geras, a small town not far from Pelusium. Therefore we can reconstruct Dioscorus' career: after his birth in Gerra and his studies in Alexandria, he proceeded to Milan, as a probably well-known physician. Local people might have had difficulties in recognising the name of his hometown. It is also possible that in the use of ΓΕΡΑΣ there was an intentional *double entendre* by the epigrammatist, to point out that it was in Milan that he had reached the apex of his career. See Feissel (1984) 559.

78. For example in the second half of the fifth century Agapius, known from Damascius' account, had studied 'the ancient language beyond the measure of ordinary' (*Life of Isidorus* F 127a At.) and was admired as a prodigy by notables in Alexandria for his 'all round culture': ὅμητο γὰρ ἀπὸ πάσης τῆς παιδείας [cf. v.5 of our epigram, παντοίης σοφίης.] ζητητικός τε καὶ κριτικός ἠβούλετο εἶναι γραμματικῶν τε καὶ ῥητορικῶν καὶ συλλήβδην εἰπεῖν ἐδόκει τετράγωνος εἶναι καὶ ἦν τὴν σοφίαν ('for he possessed an all-round culture, wishing to be at once a researcher and a critic in both grammar and rhetoric. And to sum up, he appeared "square" in wisdom and actually was so'). After Zeno's persecution against pagans Agapius decided to go to Constantinople, where he set up a philosophical and medical school (*Life of Isidorus* 107). For earlier examples of doctors praised for their culture see the epitaph of Barbas (Paphlagonia, 2nd/3rd c. CE) 321 Samama, Βάρβαν κατὰ τὴν παιδεί[α]ν καὶ ἰατρικὴν οὐδενὸς δεύτερον κτλ. ('Barbas, in culture and medical skill second to nobody, etc.'): or 493 Samama (Ostia, 3rd c. CE) for Hyginus, defined εἰητῆρ ὁ <π>άνσοφος ('highly wise doctor').

79. Gasco (1998) 46f.

80. As some other doctors in the Imperial age, Dioscorus was probably also a Μουσάων θεράπων ('servant of the Muses'; cf. Theocritus, doctor and poet, 329 Samama [Nikopolis, Armenia, 3rd c. CE]; or Asclepiades, 294 Samama [Aezani, Asia Minor, 2nd/3rd c. CE]).

81. But in the tenth century the funerary epigram for Michael, *syncellos* of Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus, was composed in Nonnian style, what presupposes acquaintance with Nonnus' poetry among the cultivated readers of Hagia Sophia as well as the will to exhibit a high literary culture in an inscriptional (i.e. very visible) poem: cf. Sevckenko (1987); Gonnelli (2003) 15f. with further literature.

82. See especially Jeffreys (1981), Agosti and Gonnelli (1995), Agosti (2006a), Magnelli (2008).

83. For this analysis of the late hexameter see Wifstrand (1933); Jeffreys (1981) 315-19; Agosti and Gonnelli (1995) 356; Lauxtermann (1999) 71-73.

84. See Cavallo (2006), with copious bibliography on the subject; focused on the Byzantine erotic novel but full of useful material wisely interpreted is the article by Agapitos (2006). On late poetry and oral performance see Agosti (2006a) 40-60.

85. Among the recent contributions Cavallo (2007) 151-56 and Majcherek (2007) 11-49, are particularly useful in this perspective.

86. An admirable exception is the article by Papalexandrou (2001).

87. But this is a point not to be underestimated, since Nonnus soon became a poet read at school, as Dioscorus of Aphrodito dramatically shows (cf. n.33 above for Dioscorus' culture).

88. Agosti (2003a) 61-80.

89. ὀφθαλμοί, τί τὸ θαῦμα; comes from Nonn. *D.* 1.93 (see the commentary by Vian [1976] 140).

90. Feissel (2003) 502 n.20: 'La longueur des lignes est délibérément inégale, selon la place variable des césures dans les hexamètres...et dans les pentamètres.... Conditionnée par la métrique, la mise en page imposait au lapicide de dilater ou de resserrer ses lignes, de 19 lettres à la ligne 1 jusqu'à 29 lettres à la ligne 7, sans compter les *vacat* plus ou moins importants à la fin de certaines lignes (2, 6 et 9) et probablement au début de certaines autres (3, 4 et 6).'

91. *IG* XIV 14; Manganaro (1958-9) 18; see also Manganaro (1994) 79-95.

92. According to Fränkel's terminology (see n.21 above).

93. Cf. Jeffreys (1981) 315-19, Agosti and Gonnelli (1995) 356, Lauxtermann (1999) 71.

94. I wish to thank Katerina Carvounis and Richard Hunter for inviting me to the conference (and for their patience), and Alessandro Bausi, Alessandro Linguiti and Enrico Magnelli for their comments on the first draft of this paper.

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