THE ACTIVE READER IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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This article proposes that literature in classical antiquity involved a more active role on the part of the reader than we are accustomed to today. Rather than surrender himself to the text, or enter a fictional world, the reader was expected to engage with the author and, as it were, share in the creation of a work's meaning and effects.

reading / active reader / reader's role / interpretation

Este artículo propone que el lector tenía en la literatura de la antigüedad clásica un papel más activo que el que en general tiene hoy en día. En vez de simplemente rendirse al texto, o sumergirse en un mundo de ficción, se esperaba que el lector entablara un diálogo con el autor y participara activamente en la creación del significado y de los efectos de la obra literaria.

lectura / lector activo / papel del lector / interpretación

How do we read? Proust, in a famous passage, describes a scene in which Marcel curls up with a book: "I had stretched out on my bed, with a book, in my room which sheltered, tremblingly, its transparent and fragile coolness from the afternoon sun, behind the almost closed blinds.... It was hardly light enough to read.... The dark coolness of my room related to the full sunlight of the street as the shadow relates to the ray of light."[1] Marcel is alone with his book, withdrawn from the outside world. The scene is reminiscent of Ian Watt's account, in his seminal study, *The Rise of the Novel*, of the conditions under which the English realistic novel came into being: a "characteristic feature of the Georgian house is the closet, or small private apartment usually adjoining the bedroom.[2] Typically, it stores not china and preserves but books, a writing desk and a standish"

[1] *Swann's Way* (Pléiade: Paris, 1954), p. 83.
[2] Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957.

(p. 188). Samuel Richardson was the prophet of this new way of writing and reading: "his readers found in his novels the same complete engrossment of their inner feelings, and the same welcome withdrawal into an imaginary world vibrant with more intimately satisfying personal relationships than ordinary life provided, that they had afforded Richardson in the writing" (pp. 195-96). The result is that, "ceasing to be conscious of the printed page before our eyes we surrender ourselves entirely to the world of illusion which the printed novel describes. This effect is heightened by the fact that we are usually alone when we read, and that the book, for the time being, becomes a kind of extension of our personal life" (p. 198).

The experience of reading, and of writing, described by Proust and Watt is not universal, although to us, brought up to read silently and in private, it may seem entirely natural. In a largely oral culture, or a world in which texts were chiefly written to be declaimed aloud, the interaction between text and recipient, whether as auditor or as reader, may well have been very different. I believe that in ancient Greece and Rome it was in fact different, although of course there were important changes over time and doubtless too variations among local groups and classes. Nevertheless, there were certain shared reading practices, broadly speaking — shared not only by readers but also by writers, who thus naturally produced texts with such a readership in mind. More specifically, I believe that ancient readers, and audiences in general, were not the passive recipients indicated by Watts, who retreat "into an imaginary world" and "surrender entirely to the world of illusion." On the contrary, they read, and were taught to read, critically, judging as they went and engaging the text in argument, as it were. People read and listened actively, wresting authority over the text from the writer. Of course, we can and do read that way as well, when we so wish. But in classical antiquity, as I hope to show, readers expected texts to offer challenges, not just passive pleasure, and writers fashioned their works for such a public. As a result, texts tended to be provocative and to invite comment and even disagreement. If this is so, then recognizing the fact may help us to understand better how classical texts work, and what they may demand of us as active readers.

Toward the end, I shall examine briefly some texts that illustrate, as I believe, the kind of reader that I have indicated, but it is best to begin with some explicit statements on reading. First, then, let me adduce a well-known passage, which I propose to read from an unusual angle. In his dialogue, *Phaedrus* (275D4-E6), Plato has Socrates remark:

> I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same

> may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. (trans. Jowett)

The passage is part of a critique of the written as opposed to the spoken word, or more specifically of dialogic exchange as opposed to long speeches that do not permit cross-questioning in the style of the Socratic elenchus: written texts are just a further step in the direction of monologue. But I should like to raise a different point: who ever thought of putting a question to a speech, or expected a book to reply and defend itself? Plato writes as though a written text were somehow a stand-in for a living author, which one might interrupt and put to the test in the course of reading.

Now, this desire might reflect Plato's — or Socrates' — own preference for give and take in conversation, rather than a more general attitude toward reading. So let us look now at a second passage, in much the same spirit, that is perhaps less well known; it is a letter to Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, attributed to Isocrates (*Epistles* 1.1-3):

> If I were younger, I would not be sending a letter, but would have sailed here myself and be speaking with you. But since the occasion of my youth and that of your affairs have not coincided in time, but rather I have already given over, whereas your affairs have now reached their apogee, to the extent possible in the present circumstances I shall attempt to indicate to you my views about them. Now, I know that it makes a great difference for those who are undertaking to give counsel that they not produce conversation via letters, but that they be present themselves, not only because one may more easily speak with someone face to face about their affairs than make their meaning clear through letters, nor because all people trust what is said more than what is written, and give a hearing to the former as advice, but to the latter as compositions. In addition to these points, in conversations if something that is said is not understood or not believed, the speaker, being present, can defend against both by explaining the argument. But in the case of letters and writings, however, if something like this should happen, there is no one there to correct them. For since the one who wrote them is absent, they are bereft of anyone to help them. But since, in fact, you are going to be the judge of them, I have every expectation that we [= Isocrates and his letter?] shall be seen to say what is appropriate. (my trans.)

Note that Isocrates, as much as Plato, seems to expect that readers will find all sorts of meanings in written texts, and that the problem an author faces is not that of encouraging response but rather of controlling interpretation. The worry is not that readers will fail to interrogate the work, but that they will do so without proper respect for or understanding of the author's intentions.[3]

Let me now jump forward almost half a millenium in time, to Plutarch's early pedagogical treatise, *How a Youth should Listen to Poems*. Plutarch frankly instructs students to challenge statements by classical poets which they regard as inappropriate. When a character in a play by Sophocles asserts that "profit is pleasant, even if it comes from falsehoods" (fr. 749), Plutarch himself answers back as though the dramatist were present in the room (21A): "but in fact we heard you say that 'false statements never bear fruit'" (fr. 750). Plutarch does not suppose that Sophocles himself holds the better view, since the object of his essay is precisely to protect the young against the potentially baneful effects of poetry, which can only be avoided by adopting a critical distance from it and contesting its authority. Plutarch records an incident in which Timotheus, in singing of Artemis in the theater, applied to her the epithets, "mad, possessed, inspired, raging" (fr. 3), upon which a certain Cinesias shouted out in reply, "may your daughter turn out like that!" (22A). Plutarch's model for reading, or for listening to recitations, is precisely to talk back to the text, to interrogate it, to expose its inconsistencies and fallacies. To this end, Plutarch seeks to undermine young people's confidence in poets and in heroes such as Achilles and Agamemnon, and encourages them not just to celebrate their virtues but also to detect their flaws (25E). In sum, "one must not tremble and bow down before everything like a coward, or superstitiously as in a temple, but rather be habituated to shouting out boldly, 'wrong!' and 'badly done!,' just as much as 'right!' and 'well done!'" (26B).

It would appear that these lessons were well learned. As adults, these students, or others like them, cheerfully interrupted speeches when they spied a flaw or simply an occasion for a joke. Pliny (*Epistles* 6.15.1) reports that one Passennus Paullus started a poem in a recitation with the words *Prisce, iubes* ("Pricscus, you bid..."). His friend Iavolenus Priscus was present and blurted out "I bid nothing of the sort" (*ego vero non iubeo*).[4]

[3] Cf. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachussets Press, 1999): 6: "Every act of reading ... constitutes a different interpretation of the text directly conditioned by the reader. The positive aspect of this (despite Plato's reservations) is that the book enjoys the freedom to 'roll' in all directions: it lends itself to free reading, interpretation and use."

[4] Text in Courtney *Fragmentary Latin Poets* p. 371; for a more elaborate example, cf.

In his essay, Plutarch is offering advice for the instruction of his own son and that of a friend, who is the addressee. Although Plutarch's approach to teaching may be innovative in some respects, his emphasis on questioning the text conforms broadly to what we know about ancient educational practice. As Raffaella Cribiore points out,[5] students were expected to recognize unusual vocabulary, mythological references, and historical allusions in works they read (pp. 207-09), and to answer queries such as "Who was the father of Hector" (p. 209). Cribiore observes that "*Erôtêmata* ('questions'), which often occur in grammatical texts of late antiquity and the Middle Ages ... derived from pedagogical methods that were always employed in ancient classrooms" (209). At a higher level, we have a Homeric text in which a student had been asked "to distinguish the narrative parts of the book from the speeches," and "wrote in the margin the names of various speakers and the indication 'the poet' in a rough hand."[6] René Nünlist, in a forthcoming book on literary theory in the scholia,[7] notes that one critic, in connection with scene changes in Homeric epic, writes rather "in the style of a teacher" when he "urges the reader to search where the storyline had been dropped" (schol. T *Il.* 1.430c). Nünlist quotes another scholium (bT *Il.* 24.605b) on Achilles' use of the Niobe paradigm in *Iliad* 24, which runs: "In a rhetorical manner [Achilles] inverted the order of his narrative. 'Eat! For Niobe too <ate>.' 'Who is she?' 'The one whose twelve children were killed.' 'By whom?' 'By Apollo and Artemis.' 'Why?' 'Because of her arrogance.'" Nünlist remarks of this passage: "The vivid analysis of 24.602-8 in the form of questions (Priam) and answers (Achilles) reminds one of ancient school exercises and again suggests that concept and terminology are rooted in catechism literature and rhetoric." To take one more example, this from the scholia to Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* (ad 1.224-6a Wendel):

> If Pelias sent them [the Argonauts] into danger, why did his son [Acastus] go along? He [i.e., Apollonius] says that he did so despite the fact that his father was unwilling. Demagetus, however, says that Pelias ordered

Seneca *Epistles* 122.10-13, and Gerhard Binder "Öffentliche Autorenlesungen: Zur Kommunikation zwischen römischen Autoren und ihrem Publikum," in Gerhard Binder and Konrad Ehlich, eds., *Kommunikation durch Zeichen und Wort* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier = Stätten und Formen der Kommunikation im Altertum IV. Bochumer Altertumswissenschaftliches Colloquium 23, [1995]), 265-332.

[5] *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[6] Pp. 141-42; cf. n. 53 to p. 142: "A few Homeric papyri present this feature," with references.

[7] *The Ancient Critic at Work: Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

> the Argo to be constructed with weak bolts, so that it would quickly destroy them; but Argus did the opposite, and Acastus boarded because he regarded the builder as trustworthy.

Now, this kind of class-room question and answer exercise is not unique to classical antiquity, though it has fallen out of fashion in modern progressive pedagogy. Yet it helped to shape, I believe, the way readers responded to texts more generally. The very existence of the commentary form is predicated on this kind of minute interrogation of a work, the explication of a text line by line or passage by passage. We philologists may be less conscious than others of how odd a format it is, since it has survived in our field up to today. Yet we do not normally have at hand an independent extended commentary, such as that by Servius on Virgil or by Donatus on Terence, when we read modern literature, even in the case of more remote writers such as Shakespeare, though the text may be accompanied by some notes on vocabulary. The same style is employed also in philosophical commentaries, such as that by Aspasius on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, written in the middle of the second century AD, just a little later than Plutarch. Aspasius quotes Aristotle, for example as saying "ethical virtue is about pleasures and pains" [1104b8-9], and remarks: "One might question in what sense ethical virtue is about pleasures and pains. For intellectual virtue surely is not.... How then can ethical virtue be about pleasures and pains? Is it like the case of instruments, as one might say that the art of flute-playing is about flutes, or the art of carpentry is about the axe and the saw and other tools? Or is it rather like subject and matter, in the way that the musical art is about melody, and the geometric art is about magnitude?"[8] Young people — for they are surely the audience to whom Aspasius, Donatus and Servius addressed their commentaries — were trained to look for conundrums and seek solutions, whether in works of philosophy or of literature. There is every reason, moreover, to suppose that the critical techniques apparent in the commentary tradition were developed much earlier, indeed at least as far back as the age of the sophists.[9]

[8] Heylbut 42.13-18, trans. David Konstan, *Aspasius, On Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 1-4, 7-8* (London and Ithaca NY: Duckworth and Cornell University Press, 2006), modified.

[9] Cf. Han Baltussen, "Plato *Protagoras* 340-48: Commentary in the Making?," in Peter Adamson, Han Balthussen, and M.W.F. Stone, *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic & Latin Commentaries*, Vol. 1 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2004 = *BICS* Suppl. 83.1), who argues convincingly that the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras over the meaning of a poem by Simonides is evidence of a tradition of literary exegesis at this early date, and anticipates the methods of commentaries. Cf. also Han Baltussen, "From Polemic to Exegesis: The Ancient Philosophical Commentary," *Poetics Today*: Special Issue: Philosophy and Genre (forthcoming).

The reader, or auditor, was engaged also in the capacity of judge or jury in a wide variety of rhetorical contexts. Of course, this was the case with speeches delivered in the law courts or the assembly (or in Rome the senate), but the rhetorical display pieces that were so popular under the Roman empire invited the audience to assume this role as well. Ruth Webb observes that in declamations "the 'I' of the speaker refers to the character for the duration of the declamation as the speaker places himself and his audience imaginatively in the past situation. The present tense within the speech refers to the assumed historical moment, 'here' refers, in most cases, to Athens and the Athenian assembly."[10] And she adds: "The declaimers' audiences were not like the modern audience in a proscenium arch theatre.... By contrast, the audience of a declamation were deeply implicated in creating, not just accepting, the fictions that were played out before them. They were the 'you' plural of the speech, they played the role of the jury or assembly whom the persona adopted by the declaimer sought to persuade and the speaker's present was therefore their present." This extraordinary capacity for identification, and sense of direct participation in the discourse pronounced by another, was again enabled by training in the schools: "For every student who recited, who briefly became Demosthenes, there would have been others practising listening to Demosthenes. The rhetorical schools taught that listening (*akroasis*) was not a question of passively receiving the transmitted words. Theon emphasises the active role of the listener in school, just as Plutarch does for the audience of philosophical lectures whom he characterises as 'having a share in the speech' (*koinônos tou logou*) and as the speaker's collaborator (*sunergos tou legontos*) [Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* 45E]." As Raffaella Cribiore observes (p. 223), "the 'mental acrobatics' required by the [school] exercise developed not only verbal ability but also an almost unfailing precision in analyzing the pros and cons of cases." Indeed, the obstreperous interruptions or *thorubos* on the part of jurors, which Socrates decried in his *Apology*, may have had rather the function of spontaneous commentary, like applause or booing in the theater.

I should like to suggest further that the expectation of active participation on the part of the public conditioned the way authors and orators composed their works. Theophrastus, for example, affirmed that a speech is more persuasive if it omits some things, and leaves it to the listener to supply what is missing: "for by catching on to what has been omitted by you, he becomes not just part of your audience [*akroatês*] but also a witness [*martus*]

[10] "Fiction, Mimesis and the Performance of the Greek Past in the Second Sophistic," in David Konstan and Suzanne Saïd, eds., *Greeks on Greekness: The Construction and Uses of the Greek Past among Greeks under the Roman Empire, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* Supplement Volume 29 (2006).

on your side" (cited in Demetrius *On Interpretation* 222 = Theophrastus fragment 696 Fortenbaugh). In the same vein, Porphyry, quoted in the scholium bT on *Iliad* 449a, explains that poets do not tell everything but leave some matters to be understood, for example that a character has picked up a spear which he laid aside earlier, or washes his hands after a meal as well as before it, even though only the latter is mentioned. Writers could count on a readership or audience that was almost obsessively attentive, whether in regard to narrative detail or the evaluation of an argument, and was prepared to respond to and fill in the text.

Classical literature gives evidence, I believe, of having been composed with such a critical public in mind. I offer here only a very few illustrations, but I hope they will give an idea of what I mean. I start with Virgil. The *Aeneid* begins with a summary of the hardships that Aeneas has endured since the destruction of Troy, because of the "ever-remembering resentment of cruel Juno" (*saeuae memorem Iunonis ob iram*, 1.4), and the first paragraph concludes (v. 11) with the rhetorical question: "can divine minds harbor such resentments?" (*tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*). I do not mean to diminish in the least the poignancy of this sudden apostrophe to the reader, but I nevertheless imagine a teacher in a Roman school pointing his stick at one student after another and asking: "Well, can they?" The stick would find immediate use in the case of an inadequate reply. My point is that readers are invited at the very beginning of the epic to judge the motives of characters, mortal and divine alike, as they proceed. Virgil does not seek to provide a definitive answer, but to pose a dilemma: the anwer is to be filled in or pondered by the reader, who expects just such a challenge. In the finale of the poem, the reader is again left to decide whether Aeneas is right or wrong to have slain Turnus in a fit of rage. The modern debate over whether Virgil meant to criticize or approve his hero, and indirectly Augustus, is misguided to the extent that it does not recognize the space that the poet has deliberately left open for his audience.[11]

Ancient literary genres frequently cast the reader in the position of a judge. A case in point is the practice among classical historians of inventing speeches on both sides of a question. Plato's dialogues are another example, as indeed is the dialogue genre in general, which has all but died out in our time. There survives a Greek philosophical work called the *Dissoi Logoi* or "Speeches on Either Side," which has a rhetorical counterpart in the *Tetralogies* of Antiphon: these are sets of four speeches, probably composed as school texts, which present arguments, distilled to the bare essentials,

[11] One might adduce here as a text-book example Aeneas' emergence from the underworld, at the end of *Aeneid* 6, through the gate of false dreams, which has puzzled students surely since antiquity — and, I would argue, was meant to do so.

for both the prosecution and the defense. The prescribed debates or *agônes* in Old Comedy, and their only slightly less formal counterparts in tragedy, exhibit the same tendency to situate the spectator in the position of judge. These resemblances have been noticed by scholars, of course. But I should like to call attention to a particular subset of such verbal contests, in which a judgment is inscribed in the text — but it is one that the reader is not expected to approve. The reader's response is thus not just invited but downright provoked.

In the debate between the stronger and the weaker argument in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, it is the weaker argument — the one in favor of dissolute pleasure and chicanery instead of honest virtue — that wins the day. A more subtle case is Thucydides' account of the debate over the fate of Plataea (3.53-67), in which the Thebans and the Plataeans debate the fate of the conquered city before five Spartans, who act as jurors (*dikastai*, 3.52.3, 3.68.1). The Plataeans remind the Spartans of their service to Greece at the time of the Persian invasions, and accuse the Thebans of Medism, that is, siding with the foreign enemy. In reply, the Thebans cunningly charge the Plataeans with what they call "Atticism" (3.64.5), as though loyalty to Athens were a comparable form of treachery. No Athenian audience could possibly agree; but the Spartan judges accept the Theban argument that service to Sparta alone is the relavant criterion, and exterminate the Plataeans (3.68.1).[12]

To take one last example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.253-59), a debate is raging among the gods over whether Diana went too far in turning Actaeon into a stag so that he would be devoured by his own hunting dogs, for the accidental offense of having stumbled upon her at her bath. Ovid writes:

> There were voices on both sides: some believed that the goddess had been more violent than was fair, whereas others praised and called it worthy of her fierce virginity.
>
> *
>
> rumor in ambiguo est: aliis violentior aequo
> visa dea est, alii laudant dignamque severa
> virginitate vocant: pars invenit utraque causas.

[12] Cf. Harvey Yunis, *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 201: "considered on its own, Thucydides' narrative mostly presents a polished surface that claims to report events as they occurred. The speeches, on the other hand, by calling attention to the absent author and his meaning, invite interpretation." For further discussion of this debate, see F.S. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 213-16.

One might have expected a verdict here, or at least an attempt to find a middle ground. In fact, however, Ovid continues:

> Only Jupiter's wife did not indicate aloud whether she blamed or approved, since she delighted in the destruction of the house that descended from Agenor and transferred her concentrated hatred from Jupiter's Tyrian concubine [i.e., Europa] to the allies of her race.
>
> *
>
> sola Iovis coniunx non tam, culpetne probetne,
> eloquitur, quam clade domus ab Agenore ductae
> gaudet et a Tyria conlectum paelice [= Europa] tranfert
> in generis socios odium. (256-59)

Which position does the reader approve? Hardly that of Juno, which is manifestly partial. The condemnation of Diana, then? Again, I imagine the teacher inviting his pupils to debate the issue, perhaps in the form of a *suasoria* or rhetorical set piece in which they take now one side, now the other.

Roland Barthes, in a famous essay, describes "two systems of reading."[13] One of these races along, whereas the other "skips nothing; it weighs, it sticks to the text, it reads, so to speak, with application and transport." Barthes understands the second kind of reading as "suited to the modern text, the limit-text," as opposed to the classical nineteenth-century novel ("read *all* of a novel by Zola, and the book will drop from your hands; read fast, in snatches, some modern text, and it becomes opaque"). I do not mean to characterize ancient literature as "modern," but there is a sense in which it was designed to invite an analogous type of close and engaged reading. Ancient readers read, as it were, with pencil in hand, taking notes in the margins (this is just what scholia are). Guglielmo Cavallo affirms: "The most usual way of reading in Byzantium was intensive reading, even if it was done in various ways.... Intensive reading was practiced as much by intellectuals, who often, and again and again, were bent over learned texts as they performed at the intersection of reading and writing, as by ordinary readers."[14] Cavallo notes (18) that already in antiquity,

[13] *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 12.

[14] *Lire à Byzance* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006); trans. from Italian by P. Odorico and A. Segonds (7): "la manière de lire la plus ordinaire à Byzance est la lecture intensive, même si elle est faite de diverses manières (relecture, apposition de notes de commentaire, paraphrases, transcription, *excerptio* écrite de morceaux choisis). La lecture intensive est pratiquée tant par l'intellectuel, qui mainte et mainte fois se penche sur ses textes savants en opérant au croisement entre lecture et écriture, que par le lecteur ordinaire." Seen in this light, the ancient practice of assembling volumes of quotations (or chrestomathies), often for pedagogical purposes, like Stobaeus'

grammarians and rhetoricians such as Dionysius Thrax (1.1.5-6) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*On Imitation* 31.5.7) used the expressions *anagnôsis entribês* or *epimelês* to designate an "attentive reading," as opposed to a superficial one. And he concludes (70) that "the learned man read his texts pen in hand [plume à la main]," with a view to emending them, providing commentaries, scholia, and notes, and to register alternative readings in other manuscripts — or, I would add, arranging such items as epigrams or excerpts from drama or oratory to one's own taste.[15]

Craig Kallendorf has recently examined marginal notes in early printed editions or incunabula of classical texts, and argues that these traces of elementary classroom activities help us to understand the outlook of Renaissance readers.[16] Kallendorf identifies two kinds of marginalia: those dealing with basic grammar and vocabulary, and those that consider the moral content of the text. As Mathilde Skoie puts it in her review of the book (in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*), "The personality of the reader comes most to the fore when disagreeing with the text, as the annotations of the resisting reader often show a passionate contest between reader and writer." Kallendorf concludes by observing (128): "Contemporary reader-response theory has taught us that the meaning of a classical text like Virgil's poetry rests not in the timeless intention of the author, but in a negotiation between text and reader that is very much timebound."

Ancient Greek and Latin literature was demanding, both technically and for its ethical implications. It deliberately left questions unresolved and challenged the understanding and the judgment of the reader, who in turn was trained and expected to play an active part in, as it were, constituting the text. This kind of give and take was likely characteristic of early oral performance. As Dwight Reynolds reports of modern Egyptian epic recitation (179): "A transcribed performance of *Sîrat Banî Hilâl* does not resemble the orderly, neat lines we are accustomed to seeing on the pages of the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*. Instead, audience members voice approval or disapproval, take advantage of brief pauses between lines to shout compliments and exclamations, at times even compete with the poet for

Anthology, take on a different appearance: they are not simply stodgy collections of edifying materials, but the reader's rearrangement of the materials encountered in disparate contexts.

[15] Cf. William A. Johnson, "The Posidippus Papyrus: Bookroll and Reader," in Katherine Gutzwiller, ed., *The New Posidippus: A Hellenistic Poetry Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 70-80; Regina Höschele, *Die blütenlesende Muse: Textualität und Poetik antiker Epigrammsammlungen* (Diss. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München).

[16] "Marginalia and the Rise of Early Modern Subjectivity," in Marianne Pade, ed., *On Renaissance Commentaries* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2005 = *Noctes Neolatinae: Neo-Latin Texts and Studies* 4), 111-28.

attention with jokes and witty remarks."[17] Reynolds notes that "In midperformance poets may test the audience with quick questions: 'Who's saying this?'..., 'And who does he meet?'" Thus, the "poets directly question the audience..., which again forces direct vocal participation" (184). The interrogations are not so different from those we have encountered in the scholia to ancient epics. With the transition to writing, the oral character of performance was never entirely lost; on the contrary, reading was a public act, most often carried on in company.[18] There was no radical discontinuity between the practices of the active reader and the active auditor.

I would like to conclude with a passage from the Christian bishop Synesius, who lived at the end of the fourth century (*Dio* 18.1-5), which gives, I think, a good picture of the way a reader might address a text in classical antiquity:

> Often, I prefer not to wait for the outcome of a book to derive some good from it, but I lift my eyes and wrestle with the writer, letting not a moment go by but giving myself over to the occasion, and, as if reading on, I string together from my own mind what I think follows, and then I test what is said against what is written. And I am frequently aware of having chanced upon the same thought and the same wording. It has also sometimes happened that I have hit the argument, and what may stray from the wording nevertheless very much approximates the harmoniousness of the composition. And even if the thought was different, it was still something suitable, at all events, to the man who created the book, and one of which he would not have disapproved if he had argued it. And sometimes I know I've encountered noble and worthy people, when I had some composition in my hands, and when they asked me to read to them to hear it in common, I did so. When it was suitable, now and then, I would devise something and recite it — not having prepared it, by the God of Discourse, but rather whatever occurred to me I entrusted to my mind and tongue. Then indeed there arose a great uproar, and applause broke out among those who praised that man whose composition it was, and not least for the very additions I had made. Thus the god made my soul a soft wax tablet for the what was imprinted in the words or characters.

Fecha de recepción: 02/11/07

[17] Dwight Fletcher Reynolds, *Heroic Poetic, Poetic Heroes: The Ethnography of Performance in an Arabic Oral Epic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[18] See William A. Johnson, "Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000) 593-627, esp. pp. 615-24.