Martial and the Epigram

LIFE AND EVIDENCE

Marcus Valerius Martial was born at Bilbilis, in Hispania Tarraconensis, on 1 March in some year between A.D. 38 and 41 (this and other biographical notices come to us from his own verses and from a letter of Pliny the Younger). In 64 he went to Rome, where he found the generous support of the most conspicuous Spanish family in the capital, the family of Seneca, which introduced him into good society. He became acquainted with Calpurnius Piso and the circles of the senatorial opposition to Nero, whom the emperor in 65, as a result of the Pisonian conspiracy, would bloodily suppress. For some years thereafter he probably led a modest life, pursuing his poetic activity as a client. He must have won a certain notoriety, since in 80 he composed (probably on commission from people at court) and published a collection of epigrams celebrating the inauguration of the Flavian Amphitheater. The work won for him the appreciation (including monetary appreciation) of the new emperor Titus. From 84–85 he began to publish his poems regularly. Success smiled upon him, and he also held honorific posts: he was military tribune, and thus achieved equestrian status. He came into contact with eminent people—the future emperor Nerva, for instance, and writers such as Silius Italicus, Pliny the Younger, Quintilian, and Juvenal—but this did not bring him a steady income (in antiquity, copyright did not exist, so only the bookseller profited from the sale of books). He complains repeatedly of the hardships he suffered and the difficulties he experienced in finding patrons and sponsors who were ready to offer him recognition and support.

In 87–88, annoyed by city life, he left Rome to stay at Forum Corneli (today Imola) and other cities in Emilia, but after a short time he returned to the capital. He left it again, definitively, in 98, when he decided to return to his native Bilbilis (Pliny the Younger helped him by paying for his voyage). There he found the tranquillity he was seeking but also the pettiness of a provincial atmosphere, and he missed the turbulent life of Rome. Disappointed and still unhappy, he died at Bilbilis around 104.

WORKS

We possess a collection of Martial's epigrams divided into twelve books that were written and gradually published from A.D. 86 to 101–102. The

body of the collection is preceded by another book with about thirty epigrams *(Epigrammaton Liber),* composed independently (as was said) in 80 and known today as the *Liber de Spectaculis* or *Liber Spectaculorum.* Two other books (usually referred to as books 13 and 14), which are also independent, follow. These are, respectively, the *Xenia* and the *Apophoreta,* published in 84 and 85. They consist of very short inscriptions, each one a single couplet, which, like labels on an object, accompany presents of varying sorts given on the occasion of the Saturnalia (the *Xenia,* or "gifts for guests") and gifts presented to guests at banquets (the *Apophoreta,* or "carry-outs"). The present arrangement of Martial's complete works probably is that of an ancient edition made after the author's death.

The meters vary: along with the elegiac couplet, which is the most common, the Phalacaean and scazon are frequent, but other meters are found as well. The epigrams also vary in length, ranging from a single couplet (or even a single verse) to ten or more verses and even to twenty, thirty, or forty. In arranging the epigrams in books, Martial distributed them in a balanced and varied way, paying attention to their meter and length and being alert especially to avoid repetition and dullness. There are in total over fifteen hundred epigrams, with about ten thousand verses altogether.

1. THE EPIGRAM AS REALISTIC POETRY

Coexistence of epic and epigram in the Flavian period

An important aspect of the literary culture of the Flavian period, which is characterized by a climate of moral restoration, is the movement back towards the highest poetic genre, the epic (Statius, Silius Italicus, Valerius Flaccus). Yet the period also witnesses the popularity and notable success of a genre such as the epigram, which, as Martial himself attests (12.94.9), is regarded as the humblest of all.

Epigram as commemorative and as occasional poetry

The epigram originates in the archaic period of Greece, where its function (the name itself means "inscription") was essentially commemorative. Epigrams were engraved, for instance, on tombstones or on votive offerings, in order to record a person, a monument, a famous place or event (e.g., Simonides' famous epigram over those who fell at Thermopylae). In the Hellenistic era, however, the epigram, though preserving its characteristic brevity, frees itself from its epigraphic form and practical purpose. Now it is a type of poem suitable for occasional poetry, suitable for fixing, within the compass of a few verses, the impression of a moment or of a small, everyday happening (this is the function performed by the sonnet or the lyric in modern poetry). The subjects are often light (erotic, sympotic, satiric-parodic), but more traditional subjects are also found, such as funereal poetry, sometimes in the gently parodic form of an *epicedion* for small animals. The *Garland of Meleager,* which later passed into the *Anthologia Palatina,* is the document that best illustrates the nature and popularity of epigram in the Hellenistic period. In Latin poetry the epigram did not have a great tradition, and little of what there was has come down to us. Except for Catullus, we know virtually nothing of the poets whom Martial

points to as his *auctores* (Domitius Marsus, Albinovanus Pedo, Lentulus Gaetulicus). It is true, moreover, that apart from professional poets, many politicians wrote *versiculi* (as Pliny the Younger attests); for them, epigrammatic poetry was little more than a refined way of enjoying their *otium,* almost a pastime without great ambitions to literary dignity. Only with Martial's work, in fact, does the epigram find artistic recognition. Thus a minor poetic form, once courtiers and patrons allow it a legitimate space in which to fulfill its destiny, readily becomes an element of social etiquette and in the end acquires independent value and artistic dignity also.

But it should not be forgotten that in the Rome of the early Empire the Greek epigram also flourished notably; it should be enough to recall the publication of the *Garland of Philip* in the time of Caligula and the success of Lucillius's witty epigrams in Nero's time. A few decades before Martial began his activity the epigrammatic genre had become very popular, the courtly function (the epigram could lend itself to an act of homage or to accompanying a gift, as happens in the *Garland of Philip*) alternating with the possibility of jesting and playful entertainment (the case of the witty epigrams).

Catullus's epigrams

At Rome Catullus valued the brief form, already given a special place by Callimachean poetics, as the one most suitable for expressing feelings, tastes, and passions (i.e., the subjects of private life), as well as for being a device of lively polemical attack (the epigram was exploited for this purpose by other neoteric poets also). Martial makes the epigram his exclusive genre, the sole form of his poetry, because he values highly its flexibility, the ease with which it suits the many aspects of reality. The variety and the mobility of a lively genre such as epigram are the qualities Martial polemically contrasts with the qualities of the noble genres, epic and tragedy, with their serious tones and much abused contents, those trite mythological stories that were so far removed from the reality of everyday life.

Martial's epigrams and closeness to everyday life

It is precisely its realism, its closeness to actual life, that Martial claims as the distinctive mark of his poetry (*hominem pagina nostra sapit* [10.4.10]), and he proudly regards this as confirmed by the enormous acclaim with which the public received it. In his epigrams the public could find the concise evocation of a spectacular event (as in the *De Spectaculis*), or the idea for a *bon mot,* a clever poetic tag, to accompany a gift for a friend or a guest (as in the collections of *Xenia* and *Apophoreta*), or the commemoration of actual events, of important moments in the life of the various recipients, such as births, weddings, holidays, celebrations, and so on. In other words, the public found in the epigram their own experiences filtered and ennobled by an artistic form possessing flexibility and potent expressiveness. It is, in short, a poetry that combines practical usefulness and literary amusement, painting an incisive and variegated picture of everyday reality with all its contradictions and paradoxes.

Success and the subjects of Martial's epigrams

Martial and the diverting spectacle of the world

Martial observes the spectacle of reality and of the various people who occupy its stage with a distorting glance. He accentuates their grotesque features and reduces them to recurring types (parasites, vain people, plagia-

rists, misers, swindlers, legacy hunters, petulant poetasters, dangerous doctors, etc.). Deformation and grotesqueness are the result of a representation from close up, an optical effect that, like the witty epigram, focuses upon individual persons and features in isolation, denying them background and contours—as if, in order to show them better, they were wrenched out of context, as if they were suspended in a vacuum, "de-realized," so to speak. The poet's attitude, however, is that of an alert but mostly detached observer who rarely engages in moral judgment or condemnation. His is a social satire without harshness (*parcere personis, dicere de vitiis* [10.33.10]), and he prefers laughter to indignation at the absurd spectacle of the world in which he finds himself. For that reason, all the more does he occasionally like to contemplate, by contrast, a life of simple, natural pleasures, of tranquil recreations and sincere affections (see, e.g., 1.55 and 10.47), a dream that sometimes takes on the idyllic features of his Spanish homeland (1.49, 10.96).

2. THE MECHANISM OF WIT

Prevalence of the comic-satiric element

The subjects of Martial's epigrams are varied and embrace the whole of human experience. Some are rooted in tradition (such as the funerary epigram, of which Martial presents us with examples of great delicacy), while others deal more closely with the poet's personal experiences (many epigrams are literary polemic, in which Martial explains his poetic preferences or laments the decline of literature and patronage) or with the social usage of the day (e.g., the celebratory epigrams or those that flatter the emperor Domitian).

Martial's epigram in general develops the comic-satiric aspect more than the tradition had. In this he follows a tendency already begun by an earlier writer of epigrams, Lucillius, a Greek poet of the Neronian period, who had given much space to persons with conspicuous physical defects and to social types whom he represented comically, and he thereby joined the Roman satiric tradition, which was attentive to the analysis of social usage and quick to sketch its most characteristic representatives. But Martial also changes several formal techniques of Lucillius, for instance, the technique of the closing quip, the witty remark that brings the brief course of the thought to a brilliant close. The tendency to localize the wit in the ending was already perceptible in the Hellenistic epigram, but Lucillius had developed it and Martial perfected it. In his hands the epigram acquires a typical physiognomy and form; it becomes a comic mechanism constructed around the *fulmen in clausula,* the parting thrust. This trait goes along with that taste for the *pointe* that was so dear to the rhetoric of the day (Seneca the Elder had already collected a number of significant examples). The compositional forms are varied but can generally be reduced to a recurring mode, which has led critics from Lessing on to establish a typical scheme for the epigram: a first part describes the situation, the object, or the person, creating in the reader the tension of expectation, and the last part, with an effect

The technique of the closing quip

Typical scheme of the epigram

of surprise *(aprosdoketon),* releases that tension in a paradox, a brilliant flare that it sends up.

Martial's realistic language

A preference for realistic poetry such as Martial practices and repeatedly affirms is naturally accompanied by a language and a style that are similarly open to the liveliness of colloquial manner and to the richness of everyday vocabulary. In addition to words for humble, ordinary realities, Martial often enjoys introducing extremely obscene words (obscene realism is an important aspect of his poetry, which he feels called upon to justify through the motif, already found in Catullus and Ovid, of the distinction between art and life: *lasciva est nobis pagina, vita proba* [1.4.8]); the expressive force of these words is sometimes enhanced by his skill at collocation. But a flexible poet such as Martial can alternate the most varied forms of expression, passing from tones of sober clarity to others that are more elegant and even precious (particularly noteworthy is his parodic use of the solemn phrases of famous poetry). In this context, his celebratory and flattering epigrams are an important document of the mannered language employed at court and in the realm of the official culture. What we find, then, is a richness in modes of expression that corresponds to the multiplicity of subjects and reproduces the flexibility and the variety of the real world that the epigram sets out to interpret.

Variety of tones in Martial

3. LITERARY SUCCESS

Antiquity

Martial's popularity was immediate and long-lasting. Hadrian's adoptive son, Aelius Verus, called Martial his Virgil. In late antiquity Martial exercised an enormous influence upon such poets as Ausonius, Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Luxorius; it is Martial who mediates Catullus to late antiquity and the Middle Ages. From the fourth to the sixth centuries he is quoted often in grammarians, from Victorinus, Charisius, and Servius up through Priscian and Isidore of Seville. There are traces of at least three ancient editions of his epigrams, from one of which, prepared in 401 by Torquatus Gennadius, descends one family of medieval manuscripts.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, Martial was not a school author but still circulated, less, however, in his own right (there are only about fifteen medieval manuscripts) than in anthologies, which emphasized his *sententiae* and transmitted (often uncharacteristic) moralistic fragments. Starting in the twelfth century, he became an important model for the popular genre of medieval epigram. But the medieval Martial was not always one we would easily recognize. The archetype had provided some of the epigrams with titles that were misleading or on occasion absurdly mistaken. One family of manuscripts tried to expurgate all traces of heterosexual obscenity (remaining, however, generously hospitable to homosexual ones). And a legend followed by such authors as John of Salisbury, Walter Map, Conrad of Mure, and Vincent of Beauvais attributed the authorship of the transmitted poems to an apocryphal Martial the Cook.

Renaissance and later

Boccaccio, who discovered a manuscript of Martial, helped contribute to his popularity in the Renaissance, which increased dramatically starting in the second quarter of the fifteenth century; there are about 130 Renaissance manuscripts. It was Martial, more than Catullus or even the *Greek Anthology,* who provided poets such as Pontano and Sannazaro a model for new ways to write epigrams. The numerous ribald and obscene epigrammatists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries look back to him as their chief model. And it was with the apogee of the genre of epigram in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries that Martial's own fortunes reached their highest point. English poets from Ben Jonson to Pope imitated him and sought ways to reproduce in English language and meter the effects of concision and point he had perfected in Latin. In German literature, Martial's polemical and demystifying wit was much admired and imitated by the epigrammatic poets of the seventeenth century and later by Lessing. But not everyone admired Martial: Andreas Navagero objected so strongly to his immorality that once a year, on a day dedicated to the Muses, he solemnly burnt a copy of his epigrams.

The last major poets to be strongly influenced by Martial were Goethe and Schiller, who in 1796 published the *Xenia,* three hundred satirical epigrams on contemporary literature, philosophy, and politics. Thereafter, with the collapse of aristocratic society and the unprecedented expansion of the reading public, the genre of epigram, together with the conditions upon which it had depended, declined. And with it declined Martial's own popularity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is an Oxford text of Martial by W. M. Lindsay (Oxford 1903) and Teubners by W. Heraeus, revised J. Borovskij (Leipzig 1976), and D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Stuttgart 1990). The Loeb is by W.C.A. Ker (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass. 1919–20, rev. ed. with complete English translation 1968). The only complete commentary is the German one of L. Friedländer (Leipzig 1886), but there are good editions of book 1 by M. Citroni (Florence 1975, Italian) and P. Howell (London 1980) and of book 11 by N. Kay (London 1985).

There is a recent comprehensive study in English by J. P. Sullivan, *Martial the Unexpected Classic* (Cambridge 1991). In German note esp. R. Reitzenstein, *Epigramm und Scholion* (Giessen 1893), O. Weinreich, *Studien zu Martial* (Stuttgart 1928), K. Barwick, *Martial und die zeitgenössische Rhetorik* (Berlin 1959), and E. Siedschlag, *Zur Form von Martials Epigrammen* (Berlin 1971); in French, P. Laurens, *L'Abeille dans l'ambre: Célébration de l'épigramme de l'époque alexandrine à la fin de la Renaissance* (Paris 1989; see also his article "Martiale et l'épigramme grecque du 1er siècle antique," *REL* 43 [1965] 315–41); and in Italian, C. Salemme, *Marziale e la poetica degli oggetti* (Naples 1976). Three articles in English by P. White have been influential: "The Presentation and Dedication of the *Silvae* and Epigrams," *JRS* 64 (1974) 40–61; "The Friends of Martial, Statius, and Pliny, and the Dispersal of Patronage," *HSCP* 79 (1975) 265–300, and "*Amicitia* and the Profession of Poetry in Early Imperial Rome," *JRS* 68 (1978) 74–92. See, however, for some corrections, M. Citroni, "Pubblicazione e dediche dei libri in Marziale," *Maia* 40 (1988) 3–39, and note R. P. Saller, "Martial on Patronage and Literature," *CQ*

33 (1983) 246–57. Several other articles by Citroni are important; see esp. "La teoria lessinghiana dell'epigramma e le interpretazioni moderne di Marziale," *Maia* 21 (1969) 215–43, and his article on Martial in the *Dizionario degli scrittori classici* (Milan 1988) 1297–1312.

On Martial's extensive *fortuna,* see Sullivan, *Martial the Unexpected Classic,* and Laurens, *L'Abeille dans l'ambre.* Howell's edition of book 1 is particularly useful; see also T. K. Whipple, *Martial and the English Epigram from Sir Thomas Wyatt to Ben Jonson* (Berkeley 1925).

Gian Biagio Conte

Latin Literature

A HISTORY

Translated by Joseph B. Solodow

Revised by Don Fowler and Glenn W. Most

1994

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
BALTIMORE AND LONDON