

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE IN ENNODIUS OF PAVIA*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the metaliterary statements that pervade the oeuvre of Ennodius of Pavia (A.D. 474–521) in order to reconstruct his underlying conception of language: its nature, power, function, limitations, and dangers. This new perspective provides a more nuanced insight into the paradoxical poetics of the author as well as his final renunciation to literature after his appointment as bishop of Pavia.

Keywords: Ennodius of Pavia; Late Antiquity; Latin literature; metaliterary statements; philosophy of language; crisis of logocentrism

Late antique literature had a penchant for undermining its own foundations, for calling itself into question. Language, its raw material, had indeed begun to be felt as something extremely paradoxical, even problematic. After the devastating crisis of the third century, the once unquestioned logocentrism of the Graeco-Roman world—perhaps the main legitimating metanarrative of classical antiquity¹—began to disintegrate. Language was no longer perceived as a privileged instrument of access to reality but rather as a distorting veil, a deceptive mask, in short, a hindrance to full comprehension of what things really are. This kind of reflection, frequent in Neoplatonic mysticism,² is a central part of the new Christian worldview: it can be easily detected in the nascent apophatic theology, the philosophy of language of Gregory of Nyssa, the semiotics of Augustine of Hippo, or the hesychastic praxis of the Desert Fathers.³ It is however interesting to see how this type of approach emerges with the same force in authors further away from philosophical speculation or asceticism, imbued with a kind of poetics of silence.⁴

Such is the case of the prolific writer Magnus Felix Ennodius (474–521), an emulator of the preciosity of Sidonius Apollinaris and one of the key figures of late Latin literature.⁵ At a time when reflection on language permeated practically all manifestations of thought and writing, Ennodius was probably the author with the greatest density of

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¹ On the concept of metanarrative ('métaréclit') see J.-F. Lyotard (transl. G. Bennington and B. Massumi), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984).

² See e.g. P. Hadot (transl. M. Chase), *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago and London, 1993) and S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge, 2000).

³ For a complete list of related cultural epiphenomena see J. Hernández Lobato, 'Late antique foundations of postmodern theory: A critical overview', in S. Schottenius Cullhed and M. Malm (edd.), *Reading Late Antiquity* (Heidelberg, 2018), 53–4.

⁴ J. Hernández Lobato, 'To speak or not to speak: the birth of a "poetics of silence" in late antique literature', in J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato (edd.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature* (Oxford, 2017), 278–310.

⁵ The key editions are W. Hartel (ed.), *Magni Felicis Ennodii opera omnia* (Vienna, 1882) and F. Vogel (ed.), *Magni Felicis Ennodii opera* (Berlin, 1885). Quotations follow Hartel's conventions and Vogel's Latin text. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine. On Ennodius as a public

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metaliterary declarations. His works seem indeed to speak scarcely of anything but themselves. Ennodius maintains a problematical, tense, and often contradictory relationship—albeit never entirely traumatic—with literature in an attempt to make it compatible with his ever deeper religious vocation. This constant tension, the subject of previous studies,⁶ changed and modulated over time until, as a result of his becoming bishop of Pavia, it led to his total abandonment of all literary activity. This article will concentrate not so much on the eternal controversy between pagan poetry and Christian vocation (with their derived pairings of rhetoric/simplicity, vainglory/humility and delight/usefulness), but on the attitude of Ennodius to a problem which is preliminary and much more fundamental: that of language itself. Which conception of language underlies the writings of Ennodius? How did he face the questioning and problematization to which *logos* was being subjected? To what extent can this aspect of his work help us to elucidate the major aesthetic and intellectual concerns of the time and to better understand the poetics of Ennodius himself?

1. THE CONCEPTION OF HUMAN LANGUAGE IN ENNODIUS

The question of the origin of human language already emerges in the earliest surviving work of Ennodius: the prosimetrical *dictio* declaimed in 496 in honour of the bishop Epiphanius of Pavia (*Carm.* 1.9).⁷ In the prose preface to the work, language is said to be a *gift* from God (*Carm.* 1.9 praef. 4: *quos donauit lingua*) to be placed at his service as a sign of gratitude.

This idea is developed in greater detail in *Opusc.* 9, a magnificent prose prayer to God on the occasion of the blessing of the Paschal candle. The beginning of the work (*Opusc.* 9.1–2), strongly reminiscent of Sallust, recognizes the Godhead as ‘the maker of this fascinating instrument’ (*stupendi huius opifex elementi*) which distinguishes us radically from animals. Refusal to place this gift at the service of its creator would put us in our dumbness on the same level as the wild beasts devoid of the grace of articulated language:

It is right and just, it is truly right and just that we pay for what we have received from You, oh Lord, at least with the price of our voices (*pretio uocis*). And although our language can in no way respond to the benefits of its creator with a discourse at the same level, as it has been created, it wishes to place itself at the service of the divine ministry. As while other animals are notoriously slow with their obscure senses, in this human creatures flourish thanks to divine predisposition: only they are capable of feeling the Creator in a fuller way. They would therefore

figure see S.A.H. Kennell, *Magnus Felix Ennodius: A Gentleman of the Church* (Ann Arbor, 2000). On his literary works, see F. Gasti (ed.), *Atti della prima giornata ennodiana* (Pisa, 2001); F. Gasti (ed.), *Atti della terza giornata ennodiana* (Pisa, 2006); E. D’Angelo (ed.), *Atti della seconda giornata ennodiana* (Naples, 2003); S. Condorelli and D. Di Rienzo (edd.), *Quarta giornata ennodiana. Atti della sessione ennodiana del Convegno Auctor et Auctoritas in Latinis Medii Aevi litteris* (Cesena, 2011). On his religious poetry see C. Urlacher-Becht, *Ennode de Pavie, chantre officiel de l’Église de Milan* (Turnhout and Paris, 2014).

⁶ See R.A. Rallo Freni, ‘Atteggiamenti topici nel programma poetico di Magno Felice Ennodio’, in *Scritti in onore di Salvatore Pugliatti*, vol. 5 (Milano, 1978), 832–58; G. Vandone, ‘Status ecclesiastico e attività letteraria in Ennodio: tra tensione e conciliazione’, in F. Gasti (ed.), *Atti della prima giornata ennodiana* (Pisa, 2001), 89–99; G. Vandone, *Appunti su una poetica tardoantica: Ennodio, carm. 1,7–8 = 26–27V. Introduzione, traduzione e commento* (Pisa, 2004).

⁷ On this work, influenced by Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 16, see F.E. Consolino, ‘Prosa e poesia in Ennodio: la *dictio* per Epifanio’, in F. Gasti (ed.), *Atti della terza giornata ennodiana* (Pisa, 2006), 93–122.

deserve to be rightly considered equal to the dumb beasts if they forget this divine gift [of language], keeping to themselves, as if they were unable to speak, the benefit which heaven has granted them. In the same way as sin is absolved if you have nothing to offer in mystical holocausts, likewise the fact of taking something away that must be presented as an offering is worthy of expiation. Those who never speak by nature and those who do not return to their maker the gift of the word must be subjected to a similar judgement. Therefore, oh Lord, *maker of this fascinating instrument*, we believe that with this humble tribute we are returning to you a small part [of our debt] on being aware that we owe it to you in its entirety.⁸

But the fact that language is a divine gift does not mean that it is intrinsically good. Ennodius recognizes three essential and rather disturbing characteristics of human language: first, it is an incredibly versatile gift, capable of fulfilling functions—acts of speech—of a diverse nature; second, it is governed by its own laws which are both independent and specific, which means that language and reality are essentially disassociated and their relationship is never univocal but rather problematical; finally, in itself it is morally ambiguous (or to express this in a more Nietzschean manner, ‘extra-moral’)⁹ as it can serve as a vehicle for both truth and falsehood, both virtue and vice, both reality and fantasy, and both prayer and blasphemy.

In the first, programmatic epistle of his collection (*Epist.* 1.1),¹⁰ Ennodius expresses with great plasticity his sincere amazement at the unimaginable variety of tones, registers, and functions inherent in human language, that most chameleonic and many-sided of tools:

Deus bone, in quantos se usus diues lingua dispergit! Cum uoluerit, saeuit ut bestia, currit ut fluiuius, fluctuat ut profundum et, quamcumque fucatis uerborum imaginibus pingit speciem, ueri adstipulatione repraesentat.

Dear God, the richness of language ramifies into so many uses! When it wishes, it gets angry like a wild beast, it flows like a river, it comes and goes like a deep sea, and any appearance it draws with its colourful verbal images is made present with a stamp of reality.

Language is not only a highly versatile instrument but also extremely powerful: it is capable of depicting (*pingit*) any scene (*quamcumque ... speciem*) with touched-up colourful verbal images (*fucatis uerborum imaginibus*) which produce in us the false impression of having the entity described *present* before our eyes (*repraesentat*), thus giving our spirit the same assent and conviction that would be generated by the actual object (*adstipulatione ueri*).¹¹ Hence its greatness and its danger: its capacity to

⁸ A similar approach to literary language as a token of gratitude can be found at the beginning of Ennodius’ *Laus litterarum* (*dictio* 12), in which the author encourages his addressee Arator to thank the personified *Litterae* for their gift: *ab eloquentiae dote radiantibus reddenda sunt litteris quae debentur, quia, sicut gratuitum munus et opes et animum indicat largitoris, ita accepta denegari auaritiam et impudentiam reserat supprimentis*. I owe this reference to *CQ*’s reader.

⁹ As in his famous essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*, written in 1873.

¹⁰ The missive is addressed to young John, the son-in-law of Olybrius, the recipient of *Carm.* 1.8, on which see Vandone (n. 6 [2004]), 99–166. Olybrius died suddenly in 504, *terminus ante quem* of both compositions.

¹¹ *a(d)stipulatio* refers to the idea of an assent between two or more people (A and B) who agree on an element C which is foreign to them. The *TLL* s.v. defines it as *assensio, approbatio, confirmatio, commedatio*. This figurative use has a legal origin: the simple form *stipulari*—etymologically ‘breaking a straw or *stipula* to mark a promise’ (cf. *Isid. Etym.* 5.24.30)—soon acquired the technical sense of ‘obliging to assume the firm commitment to do something stipulated in a contract’. The associative preverb *ad-* (*ad-stipulari*) collectivizes this demand (‘joining someone’s demand’), which refers to a prior agreement between the set of *adstipulatores* (A and B). Forcellini (*Totius latinitatis lexicon*, s.v. *astipulor*) defines the literal sense of this verb with great precision: *astipulor* [est] *alicui stipulanti et spondenti quidquam accedo simulque stipulor*. Hence the figurative sense of ‘assent, agreement,

persuade, move, delight and deceive. Language is not therefore either a reflection of reality or the path to truth but rather a communicative tool capable of creating the appearance of reality, i.e. capable of creating the presence (*repraesentare*) in our conscience of something effectively absent (either because it is temporarily unavailable or because it does not exist at all). Language is to a certain extent independent of the contents it transmits, with which it maintains a permanently problematical link. One can easily perceive the intellectual mark of Augustine of Hippo: 'By means of words—Augustine polemically states in his dialogue *De magistro* (11.36)—we learn nothing but words, or worse still the sound and din of words' (*uerbis igitur nisi uerba non discimus, immo sonitum strepitumque uerborum*).

A good example of this separation between language and reality is provided by *Epist.* 1.6.¹² In it Ennodius humorously reproaches his recipient Faustus for having disguised with the torrent of his eloquence the mediocre attractions of the region of Lake Como to such an extent that his description far exceeds the experience which direct contemplation of the reality described can imprint on the spirit of the spectator:

You grow, o provinces, owing to the cultivation of letters (*cultura sermonum*): everything that the reader has admired in you is due to language (*oris est quicquid in uobis lector stupuit*) [...]. The merit of unfolding the riches of eloquence (*diuitias facundiae ... ostentare*) to describe realities unworthy of praise has been much greater than would all these benefits of nature have been, should they have been really granted. Nevertheless, let us hope that Our Lord in heaven, who granted you this capacity, will protect your gifts forever. If I have written all this here, it is not because I think differently to you, but so that through these words the reader may know that it is better to get to know Como by reading about it through your pen than by actually visiting it (*Comum per stilum uestrum melius esse legere quam uidere*)¹³.

Reality and literature move along different paths. The actual Como and the literary Como are two independent entities and to a great extent irreconcilable. By means of his own ironic *uituperatio* of the lake, Ennodius shows that literature may ruin the beauty of a traditionally admired natural landscape in the same way that it was capable of extolling it to the highest level of idealization. In both cases the real lake remains inaccessible.¹⁴ The 'appearance' which literature 'represents' to us (for good or for ill) does not correspond to the reality of the landscape: it provides an image, a ghost, a sham.

Ennodius' well-known phrase *ueritas est quodcumque pro ueritate narratis*, 'the truth is anything that you present as truth' (*Epist.* 2.13.4, addressed to his friend Olybrius) should therefore not be interpreted literally, but rather within the context of his peculiar conception of language.¹⁵ The word (particularly the literary word) is

accordance' which predominates in the noun *adstipulatio* which derives from it (Forcellini: *translate est omnino assentior; alterius sententiam approbo et confirmo*). The *adstipulatio ueri* of Ennodius therefore implies a prior agreement between speakers who coincide in demanding—in *stipulating* (in a kind of implicit contract)—that language fit reality. Despite this 'stamp of reality' which it leads us to assume, language, as Ennodius reveals, insists on violating time and time again the terms of the contract. The nature of the word/object link is therefore merely conventional, the product of a social contract, or a shared self-delusion.

¹² On this letter see B.-J. Schröder, 'Diuitias facundiae... ostentare: osservazioni sulla lettera 1, 6 Hartel (=10 Vogel)', in E. D'Angelo (ed.), *Atti della seconda giornata ennodiana* (Naples, 2003), 127–35.

¹³ Ennod. *Epist.* 1.6.3–7.

¹⁴ On the artificialization of reality through literature cf. J. Hernández Lobato, *Vel Apolline muto. Poética y estética de la Antigüedad tardía* (Bern, 2012), 246–55.

¹⁵ On this passage of *Epist.* 2.13 cf. B.-J. Schröder, *Bildung und Briefe im 6. Jahrhundert: Studien zum Mailänder Diakon Magnus Felix Ennodius* (Berlin, 2007), 102–4.

able to turn into truth—of *incarnating* in the awareness of its recipient—whatever is narrated as such. We are dealing again with the phenomenon of the *adstipulatio ueri* (*Epist.* 1.1.2).

However, language is not always capable of overcoming reality. Like any other human gift, language is intrinsically limited: it cannot aspire to represent everything, not even imperfectly. Many things—especially the most important ones—are beyond its capacity and simply unrepresentable. The human voice falls silent in the face of the ultimate *raison d'être* of all things, as is indicated in the opuscle devoted to the blessing of the Paschal candle: *nil hic habet uox humana quod consecret, ubi totum dirigit superna cognatio* ('The human voice has nothing to immortalize here, where everything is governed by divine harmony').¹⁶ God is simply inexpressible: *Quis te uel dignus aut facundus laudator eloquitur, cuius terminata distributio succedenti uarietate fit gratior, quo iubente dulcior lux est, quod aliquando desinit, quam si iugiter permaneret* ('What panegyrist, however worthy and eloquent, can describe You, whose work, once its distribution is completed, becomes more pleasant owing to its successive variety; You, owing to whose mandate light, in that it sometimes turns into darkness, is more tempting than if it were to last forever?').¹⁷ But the limitations of language are not confined to the intangible domain of the divine. The immensity of creation and its ineffable beauty inevitably surpass the limitations of human language (and even those of understanding itself). We read the following in the panegyric of Theodoric (*Opusc.* 1.18.82):¹⁸

If, wishing to enumerate the ornaments of the vault of heaven, I tried to describe (after contemplating the glow of the Ursa Major) the beauty of the skies with insufficient language (*inpotenti lingua*), the darkness of human language (*mortalis obscuritas*) would withdraw before the divine splendour and the spark of my humble words (*humilium scintilla sermonum*) would have been insufficient (*non sufficeret*) to capture the illumination of the sunlight. In the same way, the writing of this discourse, which has borne witness to my obedience, reveals at the same time my incapacity (*inparem*).

Perhaps because it belongs to an order completely different to that of reality, language is essentially extra-moral. This is stated with particular clarity in *Dictio* 10.2–3, written in about 504 as a kind of 'thanksgiving to the master of grammar, when Partenius (sic) discoursed brilliantly' (*gratiarum actio grammatico quando Partenius bene recitauit*):

In the same mouth (*uno ... ore*) the praises of tyrants and those of good governors are sung; there is no difference between the praises of those who deserve them and of those who merely assume them. And if the severe capacity of discernment of those who judge should not weigh up carefully the motivation of the discourse (*dicendi causas*), the fervour of those who applaud, which also reaches those who do not deserve it, will not allow the establishing of any kind of difference (*nullum ... discrimen*). The substance of the declamations which are heard is not measured by listeners according to the language, but with the heart (*non ... lingua, sed pectore*). In short, one thing is to listen benevolently and with pleasure to who is reciting and another to approve the motivation with which he recites.

The same thing can be said of the science which regulates the production of language: rhetoric. This is equally beyond morality—the categories of truth and falsehood, reality

¹⁶ Ennod. *Opusc.* 9.6.

¹⁷ Ennod. *Opusc.* 9.5.

¹⁸ For a commentary see C. Rohr, *Der Theoderich-Panegyricus des Ennodius* (Hannover, 1995) and S. Rota, *Panegirico del clementissimo re Teoderico* (opusc. 1) (Rome, 2002).

and fiction, vice or virtue, are irrelevant to its satisfactory operation. Recall the famous passage of the *Paraenesis didascalica* (*Opusc.* 6.17) in which Rhetoric, personified as a rather brazen maiden, describes herself and her activities in words which are not exactly edifying:

RHETORICA.

*sit noster tantum, non stringunt crimina quemquam.
nos uitae maculas tergimus artis ope.
si niueo constet merito quis teste senatu,
cogimus hunc omnes dicere nocte satum.
et reus et sanctus de nostro nascitur ore:
dum loquimur, captum ducitur arbitrium.
lana Tarentinae laus urbis, gemma, potestas,
quid sunt ad nostrum iuncta supercilium?
qui nostris seruit studiis, mox imperat orbi.
nil dubium metuens ars mihi regna dedit.*

RHETORIC:

Crimes do not suffocate anyone, provided that this someone is mine.
I, with the help of my art, cleanse the stains of life.
If anyone keeps his merits as white as snow (the senate is my witness),
I compel all to say that he is a son of the night.
Both the guilty and the saint are born of my mouth:
While I make use of the word, free will is taken prisoner.
Wool (the pride of the city of Taranto), precious stones, power,
What are these if they fall into the hands of my haughty disapproval?
He who devotes himself fully to my study will soon dominate the world.
This art, which will not fear any uncertainties, has given me kingdoms.

This work of controversial interpretation¹⁹ is a prosimetrical epistle²⁰ giving a warning to two young laymen, Ambrosius and Beatus, who, after having undergone training with Ennodius in Milan, were travelling to Rome to complete their studies. Ready to draw up a kind of pedagogical programme for his young recipients, the author gives the floor on several occasions to personifications of various Christian virtues (Modesty, Chastity and Faith) and academic subjects (Grammar and particularly Rhetoric, whose words reveal a disturbing amorality and lack of concern for the truth and justice of the causes which it supports). The absence of Dialectics (also known as Philosophy) is significant in this context: being directly related to the ideas of *sapientia* and *ueritas*, this absent science would therefore have been more in keeping with the new ideal of Christian life

¹⁹ On the *Paraenesis didascalica* see R.A. Rallo Freni, 'Le concezioni pedagogiche nella *Paraenesis didascalica* di Magno Felice Ennodio', in R. Franchini (ed.), *Umanità e Storia. Scritti in onore di Adelchi Atisani*, vol 2: *Letteratura e storia* (Messina, 1971), 109–26; R.A. Rallo Freni, *La Paraenesis didascalica di Magno Felice Ennodio con il testo latino e la traduzione* (Messina and Firenze, 1981²); J.C. Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satire* (Baltimore and London, 1993), 164–75; G. Moretti, 'L'*Epistula didascalica* di Ennodio fra Marziano Capella e Boezio', in F. Gasti (ed.), *Atti della prima giornata ennodiana* (Pisa, 2001), 69–77; G. Moretti, 'Ennodio all'incrocio fra allegoria morale e allegoria dottrinale', in I. Gualandri, F. Conca, R. Passarella (edd.), *Nuovo e antico nella cultura greco-latina di IV–VI secolo* (Milano, 2005), 307–28; V. Zarini, 'Allégories et "dissidence" dans la *Paraenesis didascalica* d'Ennode de Pavie', in A. Rolet (ed.), *Allégories et symboles: voies de dissidence? De l'Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Rennes, 2012), 227–42; L. Mondin, 'Sullo scrittoio di Ennodio: la trama allusiva della *Paraenesis didascalica* (*opusc.* 6 = 452 Vogel)', in L. Cristante, V. Veronesi (edd.), *Il calamo della memoria VII* (Trieste, 2017), 147–82.

²⁰ Moretti (n. 19 [2001]), 71 prefers to refer to it as *Epistula didascalica*. The paratext *Paraenesis didascalica* was not coined by Ennodius, but by Simmond in his edition of 1611.

embraced by Ennodius at that time, after the serious illness which almost cost him his life that same year (511). It was not for nothing that dialectics was the third leg of the *triumm* deriving from the *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* of Martianus Capella, and the protagonist of the *Consolatio philosophiae* of Boethius, which was modelled to an extent on the literary precedent of Ennodius' *Paraenesis didascalica*.²¹

At the close of the *Paraenesis didascalica* appears one of Ennodius' favourite play on words; it is based on the polysemy of the term *oratio* (traditionally 'discourse, piece of oratory', but in a Christian context 'prayer'): *ego si pomposa oratione non ualui, oratione uos memor professionis adiuiui*, 'as far as I am concerned, if I have been unable to help you with my pompous oratory, I have been able to do so remembering my profession [of deacon] by means of prayer'.²² This final opposition between *pomposa oratione* and *oratione* excuses Ennodius to his recipients for the ineptitude of the piece: language may have failed him, but prayer never will. Zarini sees in this comparison an attempt to 'réconcilier les deux sens d'*oratio*' so often contrasted in previous works.²³ However, said opposition, a central part of the discourse of the *Eucharisticum* (written in that same year 511),²⁴ is maintained here with even more force. More than producing a biting parody on academic training,²⁵ it is probable that the author's intention with such a singular *Paraenesis* was to establish his personal distance from this curriculum of lay education to which his young recipients were about to devote themselves, dominated by the most empty and amoral Rhetoric. Compared with this didactic-literary model (which for so many years had been cultivated by our author with undisguised fervour), the Ennodius of 511 was prepared to fail in the *pomposa oratio*, aware that it is only in this way that he would triumph in the *oratio*-prayer. In the *Paraenesis didascalica* he appears to be describing—not without criticism and irony—a path perhaps suitable for others (his young lay disciples) but inadequate for himself. His kingdom is now of another world, as shown by the missive sent to Arator in the same year²⁶ and by his own touching *Confessions* (known as *Eucharisticum de uita sua*).²⁷ After a decade of hesitation, it seems that prayer (silence) was finally to triumph over oratory (language).

It does not appear that at any time in his long literary career Ennodius considered language as a gateway to truth, given that one and the other belong to two clearly differentiated ontological orders, the convergence of which, if it occurs, is merely accidental. At the most, language may place itself at the service of truth as an occasional

²¹ On the possible influence of the *Paraenesis didascalica* on the *Consolatio philosophiae* of Boethius see Moretti (n. 19 [2001]).

²² Ennod. *Opusc.* 6.26. On the contrasting Christian and pre-Christian senses of the term *oratio* cf. *TLL* s.v.—an entry tellingly structured in two main semantic blocks: 'CAPVT PRIVS: *cum notione dicendi* i. q. λόγος [...] CAPVT ALTERVM: *cum notione precandi*, i. q. *precatio* (t. t. *christ. inde ab* ITALIA, TERT., cf. *sub uoce orare*)'.

²³ Zarini (n. 19), 238. Vandone (n. 6 [2001]), 92–3 quotes the parallels of *Epist.* 1.16.4 to Florianus and especially *Epist.* 3.24.3–5 to Mascator (cf. Schröder [n. 15], 181–3).

²⁴ Remember the *orandi fastidium* / *perorandi cupiditas* pairing (*Opusc.* 5.7) already mentioned.

²⁵ Relihan (n. 19), 164–75 (see 165: 'The *Paraenesis* is in fact an ironic handbook of spiritual and scholastic virtues, and its affiliation with Menippean satire [...] may now be readily affirmed'). One of the key concepts of Relihan's analysis of the work is 'self-parody.'

²⁶ Ennod. *Epist.* 9.1, which concludes with this inevitable categorical statement: *ego ipsa studiorum liberalium nomina iam detestor*. On the vicissitudes of the relationship between Ennodius and Arator cf. V. Zarini, 'Ennode et Arator: une relation pédagogique et son intérêt littéraire', in P. Galand-Hallyn and V. Zarini (edd.), *Manifestes littéraires dans la latinité tardive: poétique et rhétorique* (Paris, 2009), 325–42.

²⁷ Ennod. *Opusc.* 5.

vehicle of noble and just causes or a persuasion mechanism, so as to bring believers to the light of faith. The opposite is however equally possible. Once again, the patristic, particularly the Augustinian, influence can be perceived: *per artem rhetoricam et uera suadentur et falsa* (August. *Doctr. Christ.* 4.2.3).

2. *PRO FACVNDIA SILENTIVM*: IS IT STILL LICIT TO SPEAK?

For Ennodius, human language is a gift from God which distinguishes us from other animals; as such it is characterized by functional versatility, ineluctable limitations, and moral neutrality. Its relationship with the reality it claims to represent is merely illusory (or at least conflictive): it not only distorts (for good and for ill) the entities it evokes but also possesses the immense power of conjuring up in our mind as ‘real’ whatever it wishes to enunciate, regardless of whether it is true or false, existing or imaginary. Finally it is capable of persuading, moving, and deceiving, which confers it an extraordinary operative capacity not without moral implications. Given these characteristics of human language, Ennodius is forced to approach the crucial problem of its legitimacy: when it is licit (and even necessary) to speak and when the most Christian thing to do is to keep silent.

The choice is no longer between poetry and prose (whose respective profiles merge, becoming more blurred than ever),²⁸ nor even between pagan and Christian imagery, but between language and silence. As Consolino points out, already in his infancy as a writer Ennodius ‘extends to prose that justification for composition that in earlier Christian authors concerned only poetry’.²⁹ Prose is as much in need of justification (i.e. as called into question) as poetry.³⁰ Perhaps for this reason, Ennodius’ traditional renunciation of literature deriving from his becoming bishop of Pavia—anticipated as a kind of literary testament in the *Eucharisticum de uita sua* of 511—involved not only poetry and those more frivolous genres that were less in keeping with his new ecclesiastical dignity (as had occurred for example in the case of Sidonius Apollinaris, who never ceased his considerable epistolary production),³¹ but rather literature *tout court*. It does not appear to be a coincidence that Ennodius ‘fell silent’ completely from the year 513. Nothing of what he must have written after that date would ever see the light of day, possibly as a result of the author’s express desire.³²

²⁸ Cf. Rallo Freni (n. 6), 846: ‘confusione operata da Ennodio tra poesia e retorica, che si identificano tra di loro per il dominio dell’elemento formale ed oratorio che caratterizza entrambe’.

²⁹ Consolino (n. 7), 93–4.

³⁰ This essential conceptual unity between prose and poetry is maintained throughout his work, as is shown by Vandone (n. 6 [2001]), 90–1 in relation to the *Eucharisticum*.

³¹ Of the nine books of *Epistles*, only the first two antedate his episcopacy. On Sidonius’ renunciation of poetry as a result of his appointment as bishop see *Epist.* 9.12.1, analysed by I. Gualandri, *Furtiva lectio: Studi su Sidonio Apollinare*, (Milano, 1979), 30–3 and P. Cugusi, ‘Un’epistola recusatoria di Sidonio’, *BStudLat* 20 (1990), 375–80. For the Platonist and early Christian rejection of poetry see M. Mastrangelo, ‘The early Christian response to Platonist poetics: Boethius, Prudentius, and the *Poeta Theologus*’, in J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato (edd.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature* (Oxford, 2017), 391–423, especially 393–400.

³² Cf. Kennell (n. 5), 214: ‘The question of why we have so much documentation, official and private, from Ennodius’ diaconate while his episcopal papers went altogether missing cannot be easily answered. But surely it had something to do with having been kept in two different separate locations [sc. Milan and Pavia]. But if Ennodius wished his episcopal writings to be preserved after his death, his will would probably have been respected. The disappearance of all these late documents seems deliberate—almost a declaration of principles. I contend that it should be primarily related to the

Ennodius' position regarding the admissibility of literature evolved throughout his career. In his early years one can perceive an undisguised desire to 'save' literature, to justify it. This is not surprising: as Ennodius himself confessed towards the end of his literary career, at that time writing a good poem raised him to seventh heaven and even made him feel part of the angelical choirs themselves.³³ His unbridled loquacity and the sophistication of his style made him irksome even for the most refined and exquisite ears: [*ego*] *qui doctis supra inscitiam garrulitate displiceo*, '[I] who displease the learned more by my verbosity than by my ignorance'.³⁴ It is not therefore surprising that for the young Ennodius of the prosimetrum in honour of Epiphanius (his earliest surviving work), *otiosum silentium* was as reprehensible as *otiosus sermo*, understanding by the former the unjustifiable renunciation of treating pious themes to redound to the greater glory of the Creator.³⁵ As Consolino notes, both in this and other similar works 'the dilemma between silence and speech is resolved in favour of the latter thanks to the authority of Scripture'.³⁶ Word prevailed over silence. The resolution of this dilemma fifteen years later, when he wrote the famous *Eucharisticum de uita sua*, would be exactly the opposite.

But the reasoning in favour of the word was not only based on the authority of biblical texts (particularly on the well-worn *tempus tacendi et tempus loquendi* of *Ecclesiastes* 3.7) and on the condition of *uates* of its inspired authors,³⁷ but on the conception of language as a gift from God. This divine gift, capable of separating man from animals, must be placed at the service of the Godhead, his ministers, and his church whenever the occasion demands it (*Carm.* 1.9 praef. 4): ... *quos donauit lingua ... scriptum est enim: 'dominus dedit mihi linguam eruditionis' [Isaiah 50.4]. quando oporteat sermonem dicere? oportet nunc, ut censeo; et ad loquendi tempus ostium cordis aperitur*. Similar reflections can be found at the beginning of his *Opusc.* 9, the blessing of the Paschal candle.

This unresolved tension between silence and words is a constant theme throughout Ennodius' works, and fluctuates over time. Vandone recognizes in the texts written in about 502–3, that is, during the period immediately after his ordination as deacon in Milan, a particularly virulent and aggressive attitude towards *eloquentia* and literature.³⁸ This fierce criticism, as Vandone points out, 'would be understood as the "good intentions" of the newly-consecrated man, [and] the rejection of eloquence would be the outward manifestation of a change of heart, necessarily interior'. Be that as it may, soon afterwards we can perceive a relaxing of this strict attitude and a relapse in the pleasures of literature, so dear to Ennodius' aesthetic sensitivity. Only the serious illness he suffered in the year 511 (which inspired his most moving and most personal work, the *Eucharisticum de uita sua* modelled on Augustine's *Confessions*) and his subsequent

intellectual debate about the pertinence of language (in keeping with Ennodius' own personal evolution) discussed in this paper.

³³ Ennod. *Opusc.* 5.5–6.

³⁴ Ennod. *Epist.* 3.24.1.

³⁵ Ennod. *Carm.* 1.9 praef. 3. This clever opposition, as is shown by Consolino (n. 7), 100, n. 27, is taken from Ambrosius.

³⁶ Consolino (n. 7), 100–1.

³⁷ Cf. F. Bordone, 'Ennodio e la conversione dell'eloquenza. L'hymnus sancti Cypriani (*carm.* 1.12H = 343V)', *Athenaeum* 101 (2013), 621–68, especially 656–63.

³⁸ Vandone (n. 6 [2001]), 92–3 puts forward as prime examples of this tendency *Epistle* 1.16 (to Florianus), 2.6 (to Pomerius) and 3.24 (to Mascator). At the beginning of 503, in *Carm.* 1.8 to Olybrius, on which see Vandone (n. 6 [2004]), this line of rejection with regard to literary praxis continues.

appointment as bishop of Pavia tilted the scales in favour of silence. Only then did silent prayer get the better of verbose oratory once and for all. From that moment on, not a single word of Ennodius—either prose or verse—would be bequeathed to posterity.

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