



**HAL**  
open science

**”How to conclude? A poetics of contrast and paradox in  
Book 9 and especially in Epist. 9,13-16 by Sidonius  
Apollinaris”**

Annick Stoehr-Monjou

► **To cite this version:**

Annick Stoehr-Monjou. ”How to conclude? A poetics of contrast and paradox in Book 9 and especially in Epist. 9,13-16 by Sidonius Apollinaris”. International conference and workshop ”The Stumbling Texts (and Stumbling Readers) of Late Latin Poetry (Lector, quas patieris hic salebras!)”, org. by Markus Kersten, Ann-Kathrin Stähle, Christian Guerra, Sep 2021, Basel, Switzerland. hal-03371217

**HAL Id: hal-03371217**

**<https://uca.hal.science/hal-03371217v1>**

Submitted on 8 Oct 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*Lector quas patieris hic salebras*

Basel (2021.10.01)

Version 1 before communication 2021.10.30

HOW TO CONCLUDE?

A POETICS OF CONTRAST AND PARADOX IN BOOK 9 AND ESPECIALLY IN  
*EPIST. IX,13-16* BY SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS

Annick.Stoehr-Monjou (Université Clermont-Auvergne)

Annick.Stoehr-Monjou@uca.fr

## Introduction

Today's star singers can't seem to put an end to their final farewells and tours. Just like them, Sidonius Apollinaris, a great figure of the Gallo-Roman literary circle of the years 455-482, has difficulty finishing his epistolary work; by an effect of Ring composition, he clearly shows his desire to conclude the first seven books: the last letter of book 7 is addressed to Constantius, to whom he addressed letter I, 1 : *A te principium, tibi desinet* (*Epist. 7, 18, 1*).

Then at the request of Petronius (*Epist. 8, 1*) he adds an 8th book, with the last letter (*Epist. 8, 16*) dedicated to Constantius, like in book 7: this 2nd effect of Ring composition clearly evidences his intention to conclude this new set of 8 books. The content of the last letter of book 8 is moreover very explicit on his will to come to an end: *Iam uenitur ad margines umbilicorum, iam tempus est (...) finire* (*Epist. 8, 16, 1*), *etsi tacere necdum, coepimus certe taciturne* (§3).

Yet at the request of Firminus, he adds a 9th book, and we may wonder how he is going to conclude his epistolary work this time, since he won't publish anything after that. I will first study the composition of Book 9 and the joggles that Sidonius introduces in order to show that the last four letters (*Epist. IX, 13-16*) can be read together as the peroration of his epistolary work, a paradoxical peroration since he writes about poetry.

## Part I: book 9 as a conclusion

### 1. *Auctoritas* of Pliny et Horace

In Book 9, Sidonius uses a third Ring composition as Firminus is the dedicatee of the first and the last letters, which Sidonius emphasizes:

*Epist. 9, 16, 1 Si recordaris, domine fili, hoc mihi iniunxeras, ut hic nonus libellus peculiartier tibi dictatus ceteris octo copularetur.*

Now Firminus is a man of the younger generation (*domine fili*), unlike Constantius who is an old friend. The whole of Book 9 could indeed be read as his literary testament to posterity. A clue suggests that this time Sidonius really decided to drive his work to a conclusion: he uses the verb *cludere* only in the first person in the brief conclusion to the last letter (*Epist. 9, 16, 4 si ... opus prosarium clauderimus*).

Writing a ninth and final book brings Sidonius closer to the nine books of the correspondence of his great model, Pliny the Younger, who by the way was mentioned in the first letter of his

correspondence (Ep. 1, 1, 1), and is mentioned one last time in the first letter of book 9<sup>1</sup>. Firminus points out this model to him:

*Epist. 9, 1, 1: eo quod Gaius Secundus, cuius nos orbitas sequi opere pronuntias, paribus titulis opus epistulare determinet.*

Pliny's auctoritas therefore justifies the publication of book 9, which could unbalance his correspondence:

*Epist. 9, 1, 1: indecentissimum est materiae unius simplex principium, triplices epilogos inueniri.*

'[it is] highly improper that the same body of material should have one single beginning and three epilogues' (transl. Anderson)

Sidonius is well aware that these 3 'goobies' (*triplices epilogos*) are beginning to be conspicuous, yet he does not give up on them. Like Mathisen suggests, one can suppose Sidonius's editorial project evolved, first following Symmachus and then Pliny the Younger. But Sidonius chooses to keep the first two conclusions and this deserves our attention. I will come back to this later on. Finally, the use of the words *unius simplex* juxtaposed reminds us of Horace who, in the *Letter to the Pisons/Ars poetica*, recommends composing a work that forms a whole and is one:

Hor. ars 23: *Denique sit quod uis, simplex dumtaxat et unum.*

We believe this shows that Sidonius is careful that book 9 should keep some unity, and we have ground to think so, for this line comes just after another one explicitly quoted by Sidonius in a key passage of the last letter of the book - its brief conclusion. After inserting a long poem, Sidonius says he is returning to prose:

*Redeamus in fine ad oratorium stilum materiam praesentem proposito semel ordine terminaturi, ne, si epilogis musicis opus prosarium clausurimus, secundum regulas Flacci, ubi amphora coepit institui, urceus potius exisse uideatur. Vale.*

Sidonius Epist. 16.4: 'In conclusion, let me return to prose style and so bring my present material to an end according to the plan which I determined at the outset: if I round off my prose with a poetic epilogue, there would be the a risk in doing that, according to Horatian precepts, the moulded wine jar could turn out to be a pitcher instead. Farewell'. (transl. Anderson with modifications).

Hor. ars 21-22 *amphora coepit / institui: currente rota cur urceus exit*

Hor. ars 23: *Denique sit quod uis, simplex dumtaxat et unum.*

What we have here is a final Ring composition based on the Horatian precepts of unity through a return to prose. It can be read in the macrocosm of the epistolary work as Silvia Condorelli has remarked (between the first and the last book) and in the microcosm of book 9 (between the first and the last letter).

## 2. The unity of Book 9 also lies in poetics of contrast and paradox.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pliny the Younger is quoted 7 times: as *Gaius Plinius* : Epist. 1,1,1; 8,10,3; as *Plinius*: 2,10,5; 4,3,1; 4,22,2; as *Gaius Secundus*: 4,22,2; 9,1,1).

As in other books, Sidonius alternates letters of recommendation and prayers (4, 5, 6, 8, 10), which are shorter, and letters with a literary subject (1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 12-16). Letters 2-11 are addressed to bishops, letters 12-16 are addressed to friends. Sidonius praises the style of bishops Faustus of Riez (9, 3 and 9, 9) and Remi of Rheims (9, 7), declaring it could make them proud (Ep. 9, 7, 4; 9, 9, 9), which he criticises in Remi but not in Faustus<sup>2</sup>. Sidonius arranges some letters paradoxically in order to emphasise the contrast between them:

*Epist.* 9, 3: the roads are dangerous; it would be more prudent to stop exchanging letters and keep silent: *curam potius assumere contiscendi* (§1)

On the contrary, in *Epist.* 9, 4: he expresses a desire for more intense epistolary communication and in *Epist.* 9, 5, he is delighted that, now peace has returned, letter exchanges are again possible<sup>3</sup>.

Instead of seeing contradictions in this, I suggest we consider these antitheses as concrete examples of the 'jolts' his reader may come across in Sidonius's writing. He talks about them in *Carmen* 9 as we know (*Carm.* 9, 15 *Lector quas patieris hic salebras*)- and I find this number 9 very symbolic, I will get back to this.

Sidonius uses a word of this family (*salebras*) for the last time in letter 7 to Bishop Remi of Reims. Sidonius starts the letter by mentioning a journey between Clermont and Belgium, which allowed Remi's declamations to be delivered to him. In §2, Sidonius expresses high praise of Remi's style; in §3, he points out that the reader's understanding is never challenged, that no combination of words is an obstacle, *salebrosas iuncturas*. This mention of joggles is part of the metapoetic image of the road<sup>4</sup>, discreetly brought in by the mention of the journey<sup>5</sup>.

One of the qualities of Remi's eloquence is thus the absence of joggles, words run smoothly:

*Ep.* 9,7.3 *Structura ... lectoris linguam inoffensam decenter expediat, ne salebrosas passa iuncturas per cameram palati uolutata balbutiat; tota denique liquida prorsus et ductilis, ueluti cum crysrtallinas crustas aut onychintinas non impacto digitus ungue perlabitur, quippe si nihil eum rimosis obicibus exceptum tenax fractura remoretur.*

This praise of Remi's style sounds like a manifesto of ideal writing; yet, paradoxically, Sidonius suspects that Remi derives pride from it: *suspikor, domine papa, propter eloquium exundans atque ineffabile (uenia sit dicto) te superbire* (*Epist.* 9, 7, 4).

As for himself, and in contradiction to the pride which is criticised here but considered legitimate for Faustus (*Ep.* 9, 9, 9 *sed iam nec ipse frustra superbis, utpote intellegens tibi inesse*

---

<sup>2</sup> *Epist.* 9, 7, 4 *suspikor, domine papa, propter eloquium exundans atque ineffabile (uenia sit dicto) te superbire* ; *Ep.* 9, 9, 9 *sed iam nec ipse frustra superbis, utpote intellegens tibi inesse uirtutem sic perorandi*

<sup>3</sup> *Epist.* 9, 3,1: *curam potius assumere contiscendi* ; *Epist.* 9, 4,1: *propositae sedulitatis officia sectari, quae cum reliquis commeantibus tum praecipue Amantio intercurrente geminare cum quadam mentis intentione debemus* ; *Epist.* 9, 5,1 *post pacis initam pactionem (...) apices nostri incipient commeare crebri, quoniam cessant esse suspecti.*

<sup>4</sup> The word *salebra* means first 'joggles' of a road, a river, then of the style. Three poets use it three times or more (or *salebrosus* etc.) in one of these significations : Martial, Paulinus of Nola and Sidonius.

<sup>5</sup> Remember Sidonius explicitly associates the conditions of travel and writing in the prelude to the famous poem commissioned for Queen Ragnahilde (*Ep.*4, 8, 1-3).

*uirtutem sic perorandi*), Sidonius declares that he is not capable to comment Scriptures. This refusal is gradually explicit in the letters, first to a count, then to a bishop. Indeed, he tells Arbogast, Count of Trier, to ask other more competent bishops to comment on the Scriptures (*Epist.* 4, 17, 3). Then he refuses to write a commentary on the Scriptures **bishop Euphronius** asked him for, because he considers himself unworthy of the job, incapable of matching Augustine (*Epist.* 9, 2, 2).

In other letters, Sidonius also refuses to write a contemporary History (*Epist.* 4, 8; 8, 15). But in Book 9 he adds a new element: his religious dedication is now incompatible with writing poetry. The topic of renouncing poetry was absent from books 1-8: Sidonius wrote verses for the church of Lyons, for the epitaph of brother Abraham (*Epist.* 7, 17); however, *Epist.* 8, 4 prepares the reader for the change: Sidonius declares it is time for him to write serious things:

*Epist.* 8, 4, 3, *modo tempus est seria legi, seria scribi deque perpetua uita potius quam memoria cogitari*

This can be interpreted as giving up poetry, as in the same letter he exhorts his friend Consentius, who writes verse, to embrace a religious life.

### 3. Letter 12 as a *praefatio*

In book 9, letter 12 is a turning point to the last letters, as it is written entirely in prose (as in letters 1-11) but is no longer addressed to a bishop; what is more, it introduces the theme of poetry central to letters 13-16. Thus, the use of the words *carmen*, *poema*, *poeta*, *uersus*, *metrum canere* and *cantare* in book 9 is strictly limited to letters 12-16. For Mathisen e. g., the letters 12-16 seem to build a 'collection within the collection'. For Egelhaaf-Gaiser, *Ep.* ix. 12, 'may be read as a kind of exordium to this letter-cycle'. I personally believe letter 12 is not only 'a kind of exordium' but a real *praefatio* to the last 4 letters, which form a coherent whole, antithetical to letters 1-11 for: the addressees belong to the younger generation; the theme is poetry; Sidonius makes internal references, in letter 15 to letter 13, and in letter 16 to letter 15: Gelasius asks him for verses in a prose letter (*Ep.* 15) - and Sidonius admits to having sent such a letter to Tonantius (= *Ep.* 13); as Firminus appreciated the iambs sent to Gelasius (*Ep.* 15), Sidonius is going to send him Sapphic verses<sup>6</sup>; these 4 letters are the only ones in book 9 to contain inserted verses, which again contrasts them with letters 1-12; the alternation of prose/poetry/prose expresses here a strong thematic and stylistic unity; the ultimate paradox is that the emphasis is on a conclusion (three words express this: *in fine*, *terminaturi*, *clausurimus*) which is in prose (*ad oratorium stilum*, *opus prosarium*):

*Epist.* 16,4 : *Redeamus in fine ad oratorium stilum materiam praesentem proposito semel ordine terminaturi, ne, si epilogis musicis opus prosarium clausurimus, secundum regulas Flacci, ubi amphora coepit institui, urceus potius exisse uideatur.*

As Margot Neger has shown, this is also a way of inserting the poem into the letter and not the other way round.

Because it is in prose, letter 12 makes the 'prosimetry' of letters 13-16 more obvious and foreshadows their poetic intention: hence its role of *praefatio* in the sense of the period, and as Sidonius used it through heterometry.

---

<sup>6</sup> Letter 15, 1 *quia scilicet Tonantio meo ad parem causam futuras usui litteras bimetas miserim*) he refers to letter 13 addressed to Tonantius; Letter 16, 3: *quia tibi nuper ad Gelasium uirum sat benignissimum missos iambicos placuisse pronuntias, per hos te quoque Mytilenaei oppidi uernulas munerabor*) he refers to letter 15 addressed to Gelasius.

Book 9 is built so as to play with effects of opposition and paradoxes. Sidonius wants to quit but he publishes a last book; he has renounced poetry yet he publishes verses; and where he dwells mainly on poetry, he insists on concluding with prose, using a poet as back-up. The final poem of *Epist.* 9, 16 has often been considered as Sidonius's poetic will: but if we accept that Sidonius has arranged *Letters* 13-16 into a unified whole, they can be read as peroration not only in book 9 but in all of Sidonius' correspondence: besides, amplification (4 letters instead of one) is indeed a rhetorical feature of peroration which aims at creating *pathos*.

## Part II. Poetics of antithesis and paradox in Letters 13-16

In letter 12, S. declares he had to give up poetry 12 years before (9, 12, 2: *postquam in silentio decurri tres olympiadas*), as soon as he embraced religious functions:

*Epist.* 12, 1 : *primum ab exordio religiosae professionis huic principaliter exercitio renuntiaui.*

*Epist.* 12, 3 : *scilicet ante praesentis officii necessitatem.*

Book 9, however, concentrates the highest number of inserted poems: 6 out of the 17 in books 1 to 9 (and 51.7% of the quoted verses); it also contains three of the shortest poems (two of 1 line and one of 2. lines in *Epist.* 9, 14) and the two longest poems (*Epist.* 9, 13, 5: 120 lines; 9, 16, 3: 84 lines.). How does he justify this paradox? And what does he tell us about his conception of poetry and writing in general?

### 1. Composition of letters 13-16

<i>carm.</i> = <i>epist.</i>	destinataire de la lettre	destinataire du poème	Nature-contenu du poème
36 = 9,13,2	Tonantius	Tonantius	28 lines <i>sed tu... / uis</i> (v. 5-6) asclepiads like the 1st ode of Horace
37 = 9,13,5		Guests	120 lines <b>improvised</b> during a anacronic ionic dimeters
38 = 9,14,6	Burgundio	Burgundio	2 examples of 1 retrograde verse- probably not by Sidonius Pentameters
39 = 9,14,6			2 <b>improvised</b> lines before a torrent elegiac couplet
40 = 9,15,1	Gelasius	Gelasius	55 lines <i>iubes amice</i> (v. 5) senary iambs
41 = 9,16,3	Firminus	Firminus	84 lines, parting <i>recusatio</i> , sapphic verses, stanzas

The four young addressees are honoured with the gift of a letter with a poem: thus are they all 'double' addressees (in grey) - only two other men receive a letter with a poem, Evodius (*Epist.* 4,8) and Lampridius (*Epist.* 8,9). Sidonius delicately arranges letters 13-16, making them work on contrasting effects (cf. the table)

He places old verses (in red) between new ones (in blue). Letter 13 contains one of each: what we have here is internal antithesis. Letters 13-14 form a whole (there are 2 inserted poems) and contrast against each other by the length of the poems. Letters 15-16 are a unit too (they contain a new poem) and they differ by the theme of the poem: in letter 15 the poem comments on writing iambs, in letter 16 the poem represents a parting from poetry.

Letters 13-15 are another sub-unit: at the centre there are the two pentameters of *Carmen* 38, perhaps not by Sidonius; framing them are *carmina* 37 and 39, which are improvised verses; then framing the whole are *carmina* 36 and 40, where the addressee is spoken to (*carm.* 36, 5-6: *sed tu... / uis; carm.* 40, 5: *iubes amice*).

Finally, what Sidonius wants in this peroration is to offer a brilliant grande finale before he remains silent for good. This is proved by the systematic variety of the metres (various colours in the table) he carefully chooses.

## 2. Justifying the publication of poems: interweaving paradoxes

Sidonius uses the well-known *topos* of being asked by the recipient (which corresponds to ancient social codes, cf. *Epist.* 16, 3 *nam quotiens liber quispiam scribi cito iubetur...*). Answering this request is both complying and being polite. He is even embarrassed he forgot to insert a letter sent to Gelasius in his work, which he corrects with letter 15: ***Probas (...) me deliquisse ; deliqui, quippe qui necdum nomine tuo ullas operi meo litteras iunxerim*** (Letter 15, 1).

This double pattern (order/obedience) is announced in letter 12, and then repeated insistently:

*Epist.* 9, 12, 1 ***carmina a nobis nunc noua petat***

*Epist.* 9, 12 ***nefas etiam tibi negari***

and again in:

*Epist.* 13, 2, ***hoc poscis, ut ... Asclepiados ... transmittam. Pareo iniunctis***

*Epist.* 13, 2, v.6 ***uis ut nostra dehinc cursitet orbita***

*Epist.* 13, 4 ***carmen nobis... compisatum sedulo exposcis***

*Epist.* 14, 4 ***Igitur interrogas... ut celer explicem***

*Epist.* 15, 1 ***senariolos aliquos plus requiris***

*Epist.* 15, 1, v. 55 (dernier) : ***amor timere nescit : inde parui***

*Epist.* 15,2 ***ob impleta quae iusseras...***

*Epist.* 15, 2 ***ceterum mihi si similia post iusseris, quo queam fieri magis obsequens***

*Epist.*16, 1 ***hoc mihi iniunxeras, ut hic nonus liber....***

*Epist.*16, 1 ***Sponsio impleta est, non quidem exacte, sed uel instanter***

*Epist.* 16, 2 ***nil retardatus quin actutum iussa complem***

*Epist.* 16, 3 : ***per hos te quoque Mytilenaei oppidi uernulas munerabor***

Sidonius first repeats he will not write new poetry, which is underlined by the futur tense *dictabo, temperaturum*:

*Epist.* 12, 2 ***tam pudeat nouum poema conficere quam pigeat ; § 3 epigrammata recentia modo nulla dictabo***).

*Epist.* 12, 3 ***petens ne tu sis eatenus iustitiae praeuaricator, ut me opineris numquam ab huiusmodi conscriptione temperaturum***.

But he does not actually stop. The duties of *amicitia* and, above all, although this is not explicit, his passion for poetry, take precedence over his religious duty first mentioned in 9, 12.

This duty of obedience is also paradoxical if we consider the following: Sidonius wants to be seen as a *magister*. First, the younger generation asks for his opinion and praises him<sup>7</sup> and in return, he provides them with literary advice, encouragement and reassurance (*Epist.* 13, 4; 14, 8-9). Sidonius is a famous poet, known especially for his mastery of metre. Tonantius asks him for asclepiads (*Epist.* 9,13,2 *Praeter hoc poscis, ut Horatiana incude formatos Asclepiados exerceare, transmittam*), Gelasius asks for iambic senaries (15, 1 *senariolos aliquos plus requires*): the two (new) poems he offers them concern metre. Burgundio asks him for explanations on retrograde verse (*Epist.* 14, 4-6; §4 *recurrentes uersus*); Sidonius gives a detailed answer, proudly comments on the layout of his poem (*syllabatim mirere rationem*) and is aware he is passing on knowledge - even though he phrases this in the negative (14, 6 *ceterum pompam, quam non habent, non docebunt*). He also plays with the variety of the verses he chooses, some of which are very rare. The ancient poems were improvised, which proves he completely masters verse<sup>8</sup>

Being a *magister*, he can afford without any shame, to "recycle" his verses and draw from his archives<sup>9</sup> :

*Epist.* 9, 12, 3: *litteras si quae iacebunt uersu refertae*

He humorously refers to his 20 year old verses that mice have poked holes in and compares himself to Ulysses, or copies 'bits of mouldy texts'...:

*Epist.* 13, 6 : *Tales enim nugas in imo scrinii fundo muribus perforatas post annos circiter uiginti profero in lucem, quales pari tempore absentans, cum domum rediit, Vlixes inuenire potuisset.*

For now I bring to light about twenty years after they were written some trifling verses which have been lying at the bottom of a book-case, nibbled full of holes by the mice - the sort of stuff that Ulysses might have found on his return after an absence of like duration'

With this comparison, we can ask us if there is not a play, a fiction when he says that he 'recycles'. The question is not the truth but the importance for Sidonius to say it and the image of himself he gives.

*Epist.* 16, 2 *si quod schedium temere iacens chartulis putribus ac ueternosis continebatur, raptim coactimque translator festinus exscripsi,*

'I copied out hastily and under pressure, working in a fury of transcription, all the bits of writing that lay about the random in crumbling worn-out papers' (tr. Anderson)

The last letters also express (here and elsewhere) his obsession about the passing of time...

However, this image of *magister* is not limited to his poetic talent; his office as bishop leads him to give other advice: without too much illusion (13, 3 *ut qui adhuc iuuenis*) Sidonius encourages Tonantius to devote himself to pious narrations (13, 3 *religiosis, quod magis*

---

<sup>77</sup> Tonantius for example: *Epist.* 9, 13, 1 *ut poetarum me quibusque lectissimis comparandum putes, certe compluribus anteponendum*)

<sup>8</sup> 13, 4 : *subitus effudi* ; 14, 5 : *unum distichon meum... quod de riuulo lusi* ; 14, 6 *dum magis ripam quam uadum quaero, tali iocatus epigrammate*

<sup>9</sup> At the end of book 8 he declares he has nothing left in stock worthy of publication  
*Epist.* 8, 16, 3 *Nam per armariola et zotheculas nostras non remanserunt digna prolatu.*



*approbo, narrationibus uaca*); we also note the mention of God or religious subjects in letters 13-16 (13, 5, v. 103; 14, 2; 16, 2 *peragratis forte dioecesisibus*; 16, 3, v. 61 sq: martyrs).

Another paradox: Sidonius repeats, following the *locus humilitatis*, that he is no longer trained<sup>10</sup> to write verse because he has devoted himself to prose:

*Epist. 9, 13, 2 : Pareo iniunctis, licet, si umquam, modo maxime prosario loquendi genere districtus occupatusque.*

*Epist. 9, 16, 3, v. 49-50 ad epistularum / transtuli cultum genus omne curae*

Here he uses the image of cooling (*Epist. 9, 13, 2 Denique probabis circa nos plurima ex parte metrorum studia refrigescere*), in contrast to the image of the (warm) anvil on which he worked for poetry (13, 1 *Horatiana incude formatos Asclepiadeos*).

In the 4 letters, Sidonius uses the metaphors of the road, the boat or the torrent to speak of style:

13, 2, v. 5-6 :

*sed tu per Calabri tramitis aggerem*

*uis ut nostra dehinc cursitet orbita*

13, 5, v. 89-91 (Petrus) : *bimetra quod arte texens / iter asperum uiasque / labyrinthicas cucurrit.*

9, 14, 5 : *de riuolo lusi, qui ... inundauerat, quamquam depositurus insanam mox abundantiam (= copia uerborum)*

9, 16, 3, v. 1-4 *iam per alternum pelagus loquendi / egit audacem mea cymba cursum / nec bipertito timuit fluento / flectere clauum.*

9, 16, 3, v. 16-17 *Nos tamen rectam comite arte proram, / nil tumescentes ueriti procellas*

He also underlines how difficult it is to write and recite verse by referring to stammering and hesitation:

13, 2, v. 17 *ni crebras titubet propter epistulas)*

15, 1, v.17-19 *mihī pecten errat nec per ora concaua / uaga lingua flexum competenter explicat / epos*

There is a subtle set of variations on the *salebrae* of *Carmen 9, 5*. For Petrus, these difficulties come from the double writing of prose and poetry. Sidonius also mentions the chariot of Bacchus stumbling over bumps in the ground (*Carmen 22, 35 tum salebris saliens quotiens se concutit axis*), opposed to the well-ordered procession of Apollo which he joins: Sidonius thus evokes two opposing styles which he brings together. In the prose preface to the epithalam for the philosopher Polemius, he says he shall abandon the softness of epithalam for the vigorous and very painful style specific to philosophy (*Carm. 14, pr. 1 omīssa itaque epithalamii teneritudine per asperrimas philosophiae et salebrosissimas regulas stilum traxi*). In these two examples, and in letters 13-16, Sidonius illustrates this stylistic opposition which he takes from Martial, who criticises Chrestillus because he disapproves of verses 'running on a soft path' and praises only those 'rolling through crags and rocks' (*Epigr. 11, 90, 1-2: carmina nulla probas molli quae limite currunt / sed quae per salebras altaque saxa cadunt*): at that time *salebrae* pertains to the epic, to the sublime, and to a 'manly', vigorous style, as *mollis* and the "pointe finale" (v. 8 *dispeream ni scis mentula qui sapiat*) suggest.

---

<sup>10</sup> 9, 15, 1 *Nam metrum diu infrequentatum durius textitur* ; 9, 15, 2 *ignosce desueta repetenti...* ; 9, 15, 2 *raritatis indulgentiam.*

Doing so, Sidonius interweaves patterns and creates the paradox of extreme modesty and refinement: in practice, he concludes his correspondence both dramatically and gloriously. We can read between the lines the passion for poetry: the play on the verb “to sing” shows that he cannot help writing poetry:

*Epist.* 9, 13, 6 : *ecce dum quaero quid cantes, ipse cantavi*, ‘in seeking something for you to sing, I have myself sung’ (transl. Anderson).

- We can see the joy of exuberant speech: he uses “chatter” (9, 15, 1 *garrulitate suspensa*); but other elements characterise his poetry, like **antitheses**, **uarietas** (9, 13, 2, v. 12-13 *uarii carminis... uiolis multicoloribus*; 9, 13, 5, v. 86 *uario strepunt in actu*), **brilliance** (13, 5, v. 14-15 *rutilium... / rutilasque...*) and **pompa** (accumulation: 9, 13, 5, v. 37-39 *Cytisos, crocos, amellos, / casias, ligustra, calthas, / calathi ferant capaces*) etc;

- the grande finale of this firework: 5 different metres, 4 correspondents; a letter sent to Tonantius, quoted in *carmen* 24 where Sidonius sends his book visit his friends- including the father of the *doctus Tonantius* (1.24), is an indication of the link between book 9 and *carmina* 9 and 24.

- the insistence on opposing prose and poetry (13, 2, v. 28 *in primis rigidus, mollis in ultimis*; 13, 5, v. 7 etc.) - coupled with their respective values (seriousness/playfulness: *nugae, ludicris, ludere...*) in 4 letters where he specifically associates prose and poetry (and implicitly *salebrae*) - expresses an painful inner struggle that he cannot in fact express explicitly. He conceptualizes *litteras bimetas* before the silence:

*Epist.* 9, 13, 2, v. 22 *declamans gemini pondere sub stili*

*Epist.* 9, 13, 5, v. 7-8 in *utraque disciplina / satis instructus auctor* (about Petrus)

*Epist.* 9, 13, 5, v. 89 *bimeta quod arte texens* (about Petrus)

*Epist.* 15, 1: *litteras bimetas*

Let’s conclude...

Writing a ninth book also allows Sidonius to make a symbolic connection with *carmen* 9 and the long *recusatio* of what he does not want to write (which is serious), and in *epist.* 9, 12-16 he renounces lighter writing, while not really knowing how to give up on it...

When he notes that he’s concluding his correspondence for the third time (9, 12,1 *triplicis epilogis*), Sidonius presents himself as a reputed author who is concerned about passing on his knowledge to the younger generation - all the more so as his son Apollinaris scorns belles-lettres (*Epist.* 9, 1, 5); yet he also admits to being somewhat opposed to the duty of silence and expresses the tension between duty and passion: Sidonius knows what path he should take as a bishop but he does not really manage to step in it: his refusal to comment on the Bible gives evidence of this; when he arranges the last book he dismisses the bishops in order to turn one last time to the young people who admire him for the talent he himself agrees he has.

At the autumn of his life, Sidonius does not refer to conversion, the evangelical image of the joggling road smoothed by the Messiah according to the prophecies of Isaiah and John the Baptist:

Cf. Vulg. Luke 3, 5 *Omnis uallis implebitur et omnis mons et collis humiliabitur Et erunt praua in directa et aspera in uias planas*

(Transl. King James Bible: Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth)

Sidonius does not choose the paradox of extreme modesty and refinement for mere reasons of taste or for the sake of playing. The poetics of paradox, already visible in the "preface", is the only way for him to express an inner struggle (cf. pathos of the peroration) between poetic vocation and episcopal duty, while leaving posterity a work which he hopes will not be devoured by mice...