

## WRITTEN ON THE BODY: ANIMATED OBJECTS AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON* 9\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article combines allegorical, symbolic and metaphorical readings with modern theoretical approaches (primarily, affect theory) to explore the representations of objects and bodies within Peristephanon 9. In Prudentius' poem, the tortured body of Cassian overlaps with the tormented soul of the poet; the written text is both a co-actor in Cassian's death and a vehicle for the perpetuation of his extra-textual memory. Figurative language provides words and concepts with new meanings so that a pen can transform into a sword, writing into torture. Through a process of materialization and resemantization, the physical objects become agents in the narrative construction.*

**Keywords:** Prudentius; *Peristephanon*; metaphor; figuration; symbol; text; body; objects; agency; affect theory

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines how physical and abstract objects, as well as the figurative notion of the text as a body, both shape and become protagonists of the narrative within Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 9. By using Prudentius' poem as an exemplary case-study, my analysis engages with, and develops, existing scholarship that has explored aesthetic dynamics in late antique Latin literature through postmodern and metapoetic approaches.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I take as a starting point Cox Miller's examination of *Peristephanon* 9, where she establishes a link between Prudentius' emotions and the objects and bodies within the poem.<sup>2</sup> Building upon Cox Miller's interpretation, this piece reconsiders Prudentius' poem through a variety of hermeneutical approaches—especially allegorical, metaphorical and symbolic readings—and draws on modern theoretical views that stress the agentic, 'vibrant', role of objects.<sup>3</sup> The focus on the intrinsic 'vitality' of objects sheds new light on how inanimate entities can reflect,

\* This piece develops from a presentation I gave in Italian at *Titubanti Testi* 3. I thank Marco Formisano as the organiser of *Titubanti Testi* and Francesco Lubian as my main interlocutor and discussant, as well as the attendees for their helpful questions and feedback. I owe special thanks to Marco Formisano and Paolo Felice Sacchi for reading and providing feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to *CQ*'s editors for their support throughout the process, and to the anonymous reader for their very detailed feedback and constructive criticism. Finally, I thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for providing me with financial support.

<sup>1</sup> These approaches start with Nugent's seminal article on Ausonius and postmodern theory (S.G. Nugent, 'Ausonius' "late-antique" poetics and "post-modern" literary theory', *Ramus* 19 [1989], 26–50) and find more recent exemplifications in J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato (edd.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature* (New York and Oxford, 2017), where contributors explore late antique Latin literature through metapoetic and new theoretical readings.

<sup>2</sup> P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2009), 91–2.

<sup>3</sup> I draw especially from J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC and London, 2010).

and influence, human feelings and emotions.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, objects such as pens, tablets, the ink, a martyr's tomb and the martyr's image on the tomb, all participate in the actions of human characters within *Peristephanon* 9, and affect and shape the subjects' personal stories—namely, the author's (and main character's) autobiographical narrative.

A hymn dedicated to St Cassian, *Peristephanon* 9 provides a graphic and gruesome description of the saint's murder, which is perpetrated by his students. The centrality of objects in Prudentius' text demonstrates not only that 'non-human bodies' become active agents within the martyrdom through metaphorical processes, but also that their 'anthropomorphization' contributes to the construction of the poem.<sup>5</sup> The peak of this agency is articulated by the reconceptualization of the book, either in the form of writing support or in the form of the written literary work, as an animated object. Cassian's students use their pens (*stilis*, 14, 44) and their 'notebooks', or rather writing tablets (*pugillares ... ceras*, 15), to strike and kill their teacher, thereby endowing these objects with the (co-)responsibility for the saint's death.<sup>6</sup> Along with their literal (that is, material) force, the writing tablets have a metaliterary and metaphoric connotation, making their agency multilayered. The students' notebooks hypostasize the notion of the book as a literary work, which in this context is represented precisely by Prudentius' work, the *Peristephanon*. As both a material object and a literary artefact, the text thus holds a double meaning: its concrete role as a murder weapon intersects with the figurative and narrative agency of the literary work. Not only is the text concretely responsible for the murder of Cassian but it also *tells* Cassian's story, thus becoming a proxy of the author—Prudentius—himself. This analysis uncovers new angles of this process of resemantization and reattribution of an agentic role to objects, which originates from figurative dynamics that are intrinsic to *Peristephanon* 9.

## 1. (AFFECT) THEORY, CONTEXT AND APPROACHES

Before diving into the text of *Peristephanon* 9, it is beneficial to provide some indications on my use of modern theory, and how that intersects with Prudentius' poem as well as with late antique Latin literature more broadly. While drawing from several strands of new materialism, primarily affect theory (but also object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, posthuman philosophy and ecocriticism), this article also benefits from other approaches, particularly allegorical, symbolic and metaphorical readings of Prudentius' text. Affect theory and germane theoretical approaches have become increasingly popular in recent decades as fruitful hermeneutical tools to interpret literary

<sup>4</sup> On objects' agency, see Bennett (n. 3), 122: 'I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, reshape the self and its interests.'

<sup>5</sup> See Bennett (n. 3), 122.

<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated by A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford, 1989), 242 and P.-Y. Fux (ed.), *Les sept passions de Prudence (Peristephanon 2. 5. 9. 11–14): Introduction générale et commentaire* (Fribourg, 2003), 321–2, Prudentius inaugurates the hagiographic tradition of Cassian's martyrdom. According to M. Corsano, 'Un maestro ed i suoi allievi: l'inno IX del *Peristephanon* prudenziano', in R. Palla, M.G. Moroni, C. Crimi and A. Dessi (edd.), *Clavigero nostro. Per Antonio V. Nazzaro* (Pisa, 2014), 65–72, at 66–8, Prudentius' account of Cassian's martyrdom merges the Christian tradition with classical sources, particularly Livy 5.27 (the Faliscan schoolmaster) and Sen. *Clem.* 1.15.1 (the Roman knight Tricho).

texts. Several aspects of affect theory—such as the notion of emotions as biological and quasi-corporeal affections that interact with culture, ideas and objects—have been profitably applied to modern and contemporary literary texts;<sup>7</sup> however, affect theory has seldom been employed to explore Classical and late antique Latin literature.<sup>8</sup> My analysis of the agency of objects in *Peristephanon* 9 using a new materialist lens builds upon the concept of the fluidity of boundaries between subject(s) and objects, as well as upon the interconnection between emotions, objects and processes.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, conceptions of emotions as embodied experiences, along with a certain notion of the *affective* and spiritual value of objects, are not new to ancient and late antique culture. Indeed, the influence of Christian ideas made the overlap of the material and the spiritual an intrinsic aspect of late antique Latin literature, where we find a progressive centralization of bodies and material objects as both physical elements and spiritual agents.<sup>10</sup> During the ‘material turn’ that occurred in Late Antiquity, the physical world is re-evaluated for its religious significance.<sup>11</sup> The body, and especially the body of the martyr, can become a means to discover god: its spiritual resonance is enhanced by the belief that it was alive once and will become alive again through resurrection. Similarly, objects such as relics can be embedded with a spiritual value. This prominence of material objects and the human body (‘a thing among things’, as Merleau-Ponty would put it)<sup>12</sup> brings about massive use of visuality and pictorialism in late antique literary texts,<sup>13</sup> which are increasingly populated by descriptions of objects, ecphrastic

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. S. Ahern, *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text* (New York, 2019); A. Houen (ed.), *Affect and Literature* (Cambridge, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> This theoretical angle has found profitable applications in the analysis of Greek literature and culture: see D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto, 2006); B. Holmes, ‘Situating Scamander: “natureculture” in the *Iliad*’, *Ramus* 44 (2015), 29–51; M. Mueller, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago, 2016); A. Purves, ‘Feeling on the surface: touch and emotion in Fuseli and Homer’, in S. Butler (ed.), *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception* (London and New York, 2016), 67–86; M. Telò, *Aristophanes and the Cloak of Comedy: Affect, Aesthetics, and the Canon* (Chicago, 2016); M. Telò, *Archive Feelings: A Theory of Greek Tragedy* (Columbus, OH, 2020); M. Telò and M. Mueller (edd.), *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (London, 2018). Concerning Latin literature, a limited number of examples can be mentioned, which show an interest in objects’ agency and embodied emotions, without necessarily referring to affect theory (or related theoretical strands): D. Lateiner, ‘Nonverbal behaviors in Ovid’s poetry, primarily *Metamorphoses* 14’, *CJ* 91 (1996), 225–53; S. Hinds, ‘Essential epic: genre and gender from Macer to Statius’, in M. Depew and D. Obbink (edd.), *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 221–44; R. Utard, ‘Rhétorique de l’*actio* et de l’affect dans le discours indirect chez Tacite’, *Rhetorica* 22 (2004), 1–23; K. Volk, ‘Manilius’ cosmos of the senses’, in S. Butler and A. Purves (edd.), *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses* (Durham, 2013), 103–14; J. Devereaux, ‘The body as metaphor in Latin literature’, in P. Meineck, W.M. Short and J. Devereaux (edd.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory* (London, 2019), 169–88. For affect theory in Late Antiquity, see J. Feros Ruys, M.W. Champion and K. Essary (edd.), *Before Emotion: The Language of Feeling, 400–1800* (London, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> See B. Massumi, *The Power and the End of the Economy* (Durham, NC, 2015); E. Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (London and Durham, NC, 2014); G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London, 2017), 59–102 and 149–93; see Massumi’s definition of affect (which he also calls ‘intensity’) as ‘embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested . . . at the surface of the body, at its interface with things’ (B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* [Durham, NC, 2002], 25).

<sup>10</sup> Cox Miller (n. 2); Elsner and Hernández Lobato (n. 1), 1–18.

<sup>11</sup> Cox Miller (n. 2), 3.

<sup>12</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and mind’ (transl. C. Dallery), in J.M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception. And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL, 1964), 159–90, at 163.

<sup>13</sup> Cox Miller (n. 2), 7–17 and *passim*.

digressions.<sup>14</sup> Ecphrasis leads to ‘aesthetics of hybridization’,<sup>15</sup> implying a blending of text and objects, a development of metaliterary discourse, as well as an increase in the figurative potential of writing vis-à-vis the Classical period. As objects enclose multiple meanings beyond, and at the same time within, their materiality, figuration becomes dominant in the aesthetics of late antique literary production, with a prominence of allegories and personifications.<sup>16</sup>

As the author of the *Psychomachia* (notably, a poem that stages a battle between personified virtues and vices), Prudentius is familiar with techniques of allegorization and personification, which he turns ‘into a continuous and self-coherent narrative’.<sup>17</sup> Alongside articulating the new tendencies featuring in late antique cultural discourse at large (including the centrality of materiality, the blending of the spiritual and the corporeal, and increased use of figuration), *Peristephanon* 9 complicates the relationship between narrative and figurative discourses, between the human body as *sōma*, a physical entity, and as *sēma*, a symbolic object. This complexity originates mainly from two factors: the high degree of autobiographicalism of *Peristephanon* 9, which gives rise to various narratological levels and layers of interpretations for the reader, and the increased affective value of bodies and objects within the poem;<sup>18</sup> and the emphasis on material, metapoetic and aesthetic dynamics of writing, which are at the foundation of a figurative representation and personification of the text.<sup>19</sup>

A collection of fourteen hymns dedicated to Christian martyrs, the *Liber Peristephanon* features, besides Cassian (9), Lawrence (2), Eulalia (3), Hippolytus (11), Peter and Paul (12), among others. Along with the obvious interest in the symbolic and religious meaning of the martyrdom, the *Peristephanon* is characterized by a remarkable emphasis on gruesome descriptions of the martyrs’ tortures, which are often unrealistically amplified.<sup>20</sup> The martyrs die and are finally welcomed into heaven only after lengthy tortures and agonies, thereby demonstrating an exceptional

<sup>14</sup> For observations on ecphrasis and late antique ecphrastic techniques, see e.g. S. Goldhill, ‘Forms of attention: time and narrative in ecphrasis’, *CCJ* 58 (2012), 88–114.

<sup>15</sup> Elsner and Hernández Lobato (n. 1), 15.

<sup>16</sup> For a definition of allegory, see Quint. *Inst.* 8.6.44–59 (with A. Pelittari, *The Space that Remains: Reading Latin Poetry in Late Antiquity* [Ithaca, NY and London, 2014], 85–8): *allegoria, quam inuersionem interpretantur, aut aliud uerbis, aliud sensu ostendit, aut etiam interim contrarium* (‘Allegory, which is translated as inversion, expresses one thing by its words and either something else or, sometimes, even the opposite thing by its sense’). Concerning personification, I side with Dressler, who maintains that ‘there is no exact equivalent to the modern idea of personification in ancient literary theory but rather several parallels’ (A. Dressler, *Personification and the Feminine in Roman Philosophy* [Cambridge, 2016], 68), such as prosopopoeia, apostrophe and anthropomorphism. The general idea of personification is conveyed by what is defined as *conformatio*: *conformatio est cum aliqua quae non adest persona configitur quasi adsit, aut cum res muta aut informis fit eloquens, et forma ei et oratio adtribuitur ad dignitatem adcommodata aut actio quaedam* (‘Conformatio is when some person that is not there is figuratively represented as though it were, or when a mute or shapeless thing becomes eloquent, and shape and speech are attributed to it, or a kind of action, in accord with its social standing’, *Rhet. Her.* 4.66.1, with Dressler [this note], 69).

<sup>17</sup> Pelittari (n. 16), 90.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, Fux (n. 6), 55–61 indicates the poem as the first in an autobiographical travel sequence.

<sup>19</sup> Cox Miller (n. 2), 56–7; see also 62–73 for more general observations on the interactions between text and body in late antique literature, as well as the discussion on relics in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*. For metapoetic discourse and materiality in *Peristephanon* 9, see I. Fielding, ‘Elegiac memorial and the martyr as medium in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*’, *CQ* 64 (2014), 808–20.

<sup>20</sup> On controversial readings of Prudentius’ poetry, see M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993), 4. In her monograph, M.A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1989) stresses Prudentius’ ambivalent attitude towards the Christian religion. For the relationship

degree of physical resistance. This insistence on torture and corporeal pain aims to underscore the martyrs' devotion to the Christian faith, which implies endurance and self-abnegation.

Despite its prominent religious focus, the *Peristephanon* is significantly informed by classical Latin poetry, particularly Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Seneca. This relation has been widely investigated and acknowledged based on intertextual and thematic analyses, as well as on broader studies regarding the circulation of classical texts in Late Antiquity and postmodern readings.<sup>21</sup> Developing these approaches through a multilevel interpretation, in the next pages I show how *affects*—the intensity of feelings, perceptions and actions that arise from the human subject<sup>22</sup>—are transferred to material objects, and vice versa. The figurative language contributes to recasting Cassian's martyrdom as a violence perpetrated by both animate (human) and inanimate agents. The connection between mind, body and physical objects in *Peristephanon* 9 is exemplary in shedding light on the dynamics of co-participation and co-experience of humans and objects, textuality and narrative, which can be found in late antique Latin literature.

## 2. POETRY AND (QUASI-)ANIMATED OBJECTS

*Peristephanon* 9 is one of the poems of the collection where Prudentius' autobiographical references are most prominent.<sup>23</sup> This first-person involvement characterizes the beginning and the end of the poem with a ring-composition.<sup>24</sup> However, for the most part of *Peristephanon* 9, the authorial voice of the poet fades away. This narratological vacuum makes space for the story of the sexton, an internal character within the narrative.<sup>25</sup> The departure of the authorial voice brings the narrative to the forefront, which, through figuration, contributes to making the literary work appear as an autonomous and agentic force. The interaction between narrative and figurative processes, which reveal the 'vitality' of non-human bodies and forces, enhances the metaliterary value of Prudentius' poem. In *Peristephanon* 9, figuration finds expression in a particular rhetorical trope, *aequiuvocatio*, whereby the meaning of words or expressions that are normally used to indicate a certain concept or activity is expanded through metaphorical language and accordingly readapted to a different context, which, in the case of this poem, mostly pertains to the materiality of the saint's body and relics, as well as to the physical tortures. The use of other stylistic and syntactic devices, particularly hypallage and hyperbaton, produces further overlap between the literary and the visual, the body and the text, the author and the martyr (*Perist.* 9.1–12):

between Christian and pagan sources in Prudentius' poetry, see Palmer (n. 6); P. Romano, 'Il rapporto tra cultura pagana e cristiana nell'opera di Prudenzio', *RCCM* 53 (2011), 263–84.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Malamud (n. 20); C. O'Hogan, *Prudentius and the Landscapes of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2016); P. Hardie, *Classicism and Christianity in Late Antique Latin Poetry* (Cambridge, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> For the notion of subject in the Roman world, see Dressler (n. 16), 59–68.

<sup>23</sup> See also *Perist.* 2.530–84: Prudentius celebrates Lawrence and his tomb, referring to his own prayers and devotion; *Perist.* 11.1–22: while introducing Hippolytus' martyrdom, Prudentius mentions that he happened to be in front of his tomb, which recalls the ekphrasis of *Peristephanon* 9.

<sup>24</sup> For the alternation between Prudentius' voice and the sexton's narrative, see C. Kässer, 'The body is not painted on: ekphrasis and exegesis in Prudentius *Peristephanon* 9', *Ramus* 31 (2002), 158–74, at 158–9.

<sup>25</sup> On the parallels between the sexton and a pagan priest, see Palmer (n. 6), 115.

Sylla Forum statuit Cornelius; hoc Itali urbem  
 uocant ab ipso conditoris nomine.  
 hic mihi, cum peterem te, rerum maxima Roma  
 spes est oborta prosperum Christum fore.  
 stratus humi tumulto aduoluebar, quem sacer ornat                   5  
 martyr dicato Cassianus corpore.  
 dum lacrimans mecum reputo mea uulnera et omnes  
 uitae labores ac dolorum acumina,  
 erexi ad caelum faciem, stetit obuia contra  
 fucis colorum picta imago martyris                                   10  
 plagas mille gerens, totos lacerata per artus,  
 ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem.

Cornelius Sulla established a Forum, and so the Italians call the town, after its founder's name. Here when I was travelling towards you, Rome, the world's capital, there sprang up in my heart a hope of Christ's favour. I was bowed to the ground before the tomb which the holy martyr Cassian honours with his consecrated body. While in tears I was thinking of my wounds, all labours of my life and stinging pains, I lifted my face towards heaven, and there stood confronting me a picture of the martyr painted in colours, bearing a thousand wounds, all his parts torn, and showing his skin broken with tiny pricks.<sup>26</sup>

Prudentius tells us that, while travelling to Rome, he stopped in a city nearby, Forum Corneli (Perist. 9.1–2), the present-day Imola. There, he stumbled upon Cassian's tomb, which was decorated with a portrait of Cassian himself, representing Cassian's martyrdom. Through the epichastic narrative of the sexton, whom Prudentius meets in front of the tomb, the poet gathers the full story of Cassian's martyrdom. By explaining the content of the portrait (from line 17 onwards), the sexton's narrative brings to life the representation of the saint, transforming it into a speaking image. Like the figurations of vices and virtues in the *Psychomachia*, the *imago* (line 10) on the tomb of the saint becomes a persona and speaks via the sexton, who represents the metamorphosis of the image into its physical and 'vibrant' embodiment—a human proxy for Cassian's portrait.<sup>27</sup> As the catalyst for the narration, Cassian's tomb and his portrait upon it are thus the first agentic objects within the poem.

The prominence of personified, anthropomorphic and highly symbolic objects, such as Cassian's portrait and tomb, interacts and coexists with Prudentius' autobiographical involvement at the beginning of the poem, which is denoted by the personal pronoun *mihi*, along with the first-person singular subjunctive form *peterem* (3). Along with emphasizing the authorial voice through first-person narration, lines 3–4 also refer to the poet's journey to Rome, which he had likely undertaken in truth.<sup>28</sup> As we shall see in more detail later, the authorial persona features again in the last lines of the hymn, in which Prudentius holds the tomb (*conplector tumulum*, 99), cries and thinks about his troubles. By recounting that he prostrated himself on the ground in an act of veneration, Prudentius makes a concrete and material reference to the tomb of the saint: *stratus humi tumulto auoluebar, quem sacer ornat | martyr dicato Cassianus corpore* ('I was bowed to the ground before the tomb which the holy martyr Cassian honours with his consecrated

<sup>26</sup> For the text and translation (with changes) of the *Peristephanon*, see H.J. Thomson (ed. J. Henderson), *Prudentius. Against Symmachus 2. Crowns of Martyrdom. Scenes From History. Epilogue* (Cambridge, MA, 1953).

<sup>27</sup> Bennett (n. 3), *passim*. For a martyr's painting as 'a book speaking from the wall', see Cox Miller (n. 2), 3.

<sup>28</sup> H. Tränkle, 'Der Brunnen im Atrium der Petersbasilika und der Zeitpunkt von Prudentius' Romaufenthalt', *ZAC* 3 (1999), 97–112 dates Prudentius' visit to Rome in A.D. 395–7; see also Palmer (n. 6), 23–4.



body', 5–6).<sup>29</sup> The word *tumulo*, together with the reference to the ground (*humī*), hypostasizes the materiality of the saint's body, which is buried beneath the earth. This emphasis on material details (see also *corpore*, 6) establishes a symbolic link between the authorial voice (Prudentius) and Cassian's presence, which conflates the physical (his corpse or the envelope of his corpse, the tomb) and the spiritual, the symbolic meaning of Cassian's martyrdom and his body as a relic.<sup>30</sup> As a blunt object and a lifeless body, respectively, Cassian's tomb and corpse release *affective* energy, in so far as they influence Prudentius' feelings and emotions. Through their spiritual and religious significance, both the tomb and the martyr's body also prompt Prudentius' physical actions, thereby simultaneously acting upon his body and soul. Informed by material and pictorial details, the scene produces multiple layers of interaction between physical elements and spiritual meanings, between the autobiographical subject of the poet and the object of the narration, between living and non-living (yet persisting) beings. In other words, these objects are equal partners with the human character(s) in producing meaning. The tomb and the remains of the saint are 'vibrant', since they disclose and articulate Prudentius' feelings, which then translate into the written text.<sup>31</sup>

In the introduction to their volume on *Material Ecocriticism*, Iovino and Opperman observe that the interaction between human and non-human agents generate new narratives, which blur the boundaries between the (literary) text and reality. Non-human objects concur in the formation of meanings, thus becoming part of a longer written narrative, which encompasses human and non-human elements, thereby becoming 'storied matter'.<sup>32</sup> In this passage from *Peristephanon* 9, two objects, the tomb and Cassian's lifeless body, hold both agency and emotional force, as they influence and hypostasize Prudentius' feelings and concrete actions. Moreover, the agency of Cassian's dead body has also influence at the textual level. The fragmentation of the saint's body, which becomes the central focus of the poem in the following lines, is anticipated and materialized by the syntactic construction of lines 5–6. By interrupting the syntactic continuity of the two lines, the hyperbata of *sacer ... martyr ... Cassianus* and *dicato ... corpore* evoke the tormented and fragmented status of the martyr's body. Therefore, the body of the saint overcomes its borders in multiple ways: as emotional and spiritual agent, it influences Prudentius' state of mind (see the references to his troubles at lines 7–8); as physical agent, it shapes Prudentius' bodily acts (see, for example, Prudentius' bowing to the ground at line 5, as well as lifting his face at line 9); as textual agent, it determines the syntactic arrangement of the lines.

The fragmented status of Cassian's body and its overlap with the subjective experience of the poet further develop at lines 7–12. Prudentius states that, while pondering his own spiritual wounds (his sins), labours and stinging pains (*uulnera, labores, dolorum acumina*), he came across the image of the saint.<sup>33</sup> Prudentius' *uulnera*,

<sup>29</sup> For a parallel between Prudentius' attitude in these lines and St Lawrence's worshipper in *Perist.* 2.530–6, see F. Lubian, 'Lo spazio, lo sguardo, la voce: intertestualità e intermedialità nel *Peristephanon* 9 di Prudenziò', *Lexis* 38 (2020), 285–304, at 288–9, with relevant bibliography.

<sup>30</sup> For Prudentius' emotional involvement, see C. O'Hogan, 'An intertextual journey in Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 9', *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014), 270–88, at 275.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett (n. 3), 30 and *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> S. Iovino and S. Oppermann (edd.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington, IN, 2014), 8–10; also S. Oppermann, 'From ecological postmodernism to material ecocriticism: creative materiality and narrative agency', in S. Iovino and S. Oppermann (edd.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington, IN, 2014), 21–36.

<sup>33</sup> The *iunctura* of *dolorum acumina* literally means 'the spikes of pain', but it must be understood metaphorically as 'intense spiritual suffering'. According to Lubian (n. 29), 289 (with bibliography),

‘wounds’, anticipate, both conceptually and figuratively, Cassian’s wounds. This liminality between Prudentius’ interior or spiritual *uulnera* and Cassian’s exterior or physical wounds is enhanced by the substantives *labores* and *acumina*, which can denote both physical and psychic suffering, thus representing an example of *aequiocatio*.<sup>34</sup> Alongside stressing the overlap between interiority and exteriority, these references also emphasize the centrality of visual perception and recognition, which feature prominently throughout the entire hymn. As described by Prudentius’ writing, the image allows us, *qua* readers, to *visualize* the body of the saint before it appears in full detail through the narration of the sexton.<sup>35</sup> This interaction between poetry and picture articulates the permeability and intercommunicability of expressive means—image and text.<sup>36</sup> In this passage, the image has become written text through Prudentius’ poetry—whereby Cassian’s portrait is described. In the sexton’s narrative, as we shall see, the text will turn back into the image of the saint through the description of his tormented body.

*Peristephanon* 9 thus translates the blending of the spiritual and the material that features prominently in late antique Latin literary production into an interchange between emotions and physical sensations. Developing the late antique interest in metaliterary dynamics and material objects, the poem explores the physical effects of the written text on the human body and soul. The poetics of *Peristephanon* 9, in other words, can physically affect both the readers and the characters within the poem.<sup>37</sup> Prudentius, as character, is visibly moved by the saint’s portrait and tomb, and by the sexton’s narrative at the end of *Peristephanon* 9 (99–106), which sidelines Prudentius as author. For a moment, the reader forgets about the existence of Prudentius *qua* author and focusses on the effects of the poem (in which the sexton’s narrative is included) on Prudentius as character, who kneels and embraces the saint’s tomb: *pareo, conplector tumulum, lacrimas quoque fundo, | altar tepescit ore, saxum pectore* (‘I obeyed, holding the tomb as well as shedding tears, warming the altar with my lips, the stone with my breast’, 99–100). Playing with the knowledgeable reader’s ability to uncover multiple meanings and narratological levels, Prudentius (as poet) implies that he (as character) was emotionally and physically touched by his own poem, which further affirms its agentic and metaliterary force. Meanwhile, another character, Cassian, is physically touched by the text in its most material form—namely, as the text written by his pupils upon their wooden tablets.<sup>38</sup> Thus, *Peristephanon* 9 overcomes the boundaries of its textual form in

the mention of the *uulnera*, *labores* and *dolorum acumina* denotes Prudentius’ self-identification with Cassian.

<sup>34</sup> See *TLL* 1.459.3–461.2 s.v. *acumen*; 7.2.789.26–797.68 s.v. *labor*; *OLD* s.v. *uulnerus*.

<sup>35</sup> For the active involvement of readers in the process of literary creation and interpretation in late antique Latin literature, see Peltari (n. 16).

<sup>36</sup> On the use of different narrative and visual media within Prudentius’ poetry, see Kässer (n. 24), 158–74; D. Shanzer, ‘*Argumenta leti et ludibria mortis*: ekphrasis, art, attributes, identity, and hagiography in late antique poetry’, in V. Zimmerl-Panagl and D. Weber (edd.), *Text und Bild* (Vienna, 2010), 57–82, at 62–4; Fielding (n. 19), 808–20; Lubian (n. 29), 289–90.

<sup>37</sup> In a recent article about touching and tactile experiences within the *Aeneid*, Mairéad McAuley builds upon Borges’s references to the ‘materiality’ of the *Aeneid* to demonstrate that the poem not only touches its readers metaphorically but also creates an imaginary contact between poet and reader across the centuries; see M. McAuley, ‘*Dextrae iungere dextram*: the affective dynamics of touch in the *Aeneid*’, *Vergilius* 67 (2021), 239–74, with bibliography.

<sup>38</sup> For the parallels between Cassian’s fragmented body and Prudentius’ textual fragments, which are put together to reconstruct the stories of the martyrs, see Fielding (n. 19), 814–20. For the textualization of Cassian’s body, see Roberts (n. 20), 144–5; J. Ross, ‘Dynamic writing and martyrs’ bodies in Prudentius’ *Peristephanon*’, *JECS* 3 (1995), 325–55, at 337–8; S. Goldhill, ‘Body/politics: is there a history of reading?’, in T.M. Falkner, N. Felson and D. Konstan (edd.), *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue* (Lanham, MD, 1999), 89–120, at 117; L. Schmieder, *Deskription*



two ways, the metaphorical (or metaliterary) and the literal (or material): it touches Prudentius (the character) and the reader for its content, while also touching Cassian by hitting him as the text written on the wax tablets that are thrown by Cassian's pupils. The poem's liminality between literary and material dimensions further enhances the 'aesthetics of hybridization' that features prominently in ecphrastic digressions from late antique Latin literature,<sup>39</sup> changing the figurative potential of writing into actual materiality.

Before the complete story of the martyrdom is narrated, our first meeting with Cassian has thus already occurred at the figurative and visual levels, through the encounter with his tomb (containing his corpse) and image. At line 9, Prudentius observes that the martyr's portrait was standing in front of him (*stetit obuia contra*), after he had lifted his face towards the sky (*erexi ad caelum faciem*).<sup>40</sup> While the image of the saint has clearly always been there from the very start of Prudentius' narration, the sudden and unexpected encounter between the *imago* and the poet evokes an epiphany. In the expression *stetit obuia contra ... picta imago martyris* (9–10), the image is the subject of the sentence: as such, the *imago* actively stands and makes its apparition before the poet (*stetit*).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the material emphasis on the 'colours' (*fucis colorum*, 10), which is an example of *enargeia*, makes the portrait (the sudden epiphany) more evident and tangible. This syntactic and lexical arrangement suggests that Prudentius personifies the *imago* and provides it with agency. Through figurative language and rhetorical devices, an object (the image), which usually undergoes an action, holds its own agency and overcomes (or anticipates) human activity, imposing its presence on the viewer (Prudentius) and forecasting Prudentius' (and the sexton's) narrative. By standing in front of Prudentius, the image also materializes itself before the reader, penetrating and impregnating the entire poem through its allegorical and narrative force. The image and the sexton's explanation of the image are the starting point of Cassian's story.

Upon his encounter with the image of the saint, Prudentius describes Cassian's wounds through participles, without breaking the syntactic continuum, as we see at lines 11–12: *plagas mille gerens, totos lacerata per artus, | ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem*.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the poet's spiritual and emotional *uulnera* ('wounds'), *labores* ('troubles', 'labours') and *dolorum acumina* ('stinging pains') from lines 7–8 transform into Cassian's concrete and physical wounds. The saint's wounds are displayed by his portrait; in turn, Cassian's portrait is described (and will be explained in the following lines) through the sexton's narrative, which is ultimately included in Prudentius' poem, *Peristephanon* 9. The image of the saint endows a certain degree of emotional intensity, in so far as it affects Prudentius' feelings, along with those of the potential readers of Prudentius' text.<sup>43</sup> This emotional intensity of the saint's image is proleptically

*und Metapoetik in der spätantiken lateinischen Dichtung: Untersuchungen zur literarischen Beschreibung bei Claudian, Prudentius und Ausonius* (Berlin and Boston, 2022), 156.

<sup>39</sup> Elsner and Hernández Lobato (n. 1), 15.

<sup>40</sup> For the intertextual parallels between Cassian's *imago* at *Perist.* 9.9–11 and the appearance of Hector's ghost in the *Aeneid* (2.277–9), see O'Hogan (n. 30), 279–80.

<sup>41</sup> See Lubian (n. 29), 290.

<sup>42</sup> For this description of the saint's image as a 'mise en scène dramatique', see G. Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard, 'Paulin de Nole et Prudence: deux conceptions du rapport entre textes et représentations figurées au début du V<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Pallas* 93 (2013), 185–206, at 195–6; Kässer (n. 24), 159 reads lines 11–12 as an ecphrasis. For Prudentius' emotional involvement in his ecphrastic description of Cassian's image, see R. Franchi, 'Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 9 e 11: il potere dell'*ekphrasis* e il processo di cristianizzazione', *Adamantius* 26 (2020), 229–43.

<sup>43</sup> In a similar way, when analysing the vitality of objects within Aristophanes' drama, Telò (n. 8 [2016]), 40 and 85–7 observes how the *chlaina*, the cloak, affects the characters' feelings, and

anticipated by Prudentius' own metaphorical *uulnera, labores* and *dolorum acumina*. Even before the image is introduced—or, to put it better, even before it introduces itself—the portrait's emotional charge permeates the atmosphere of the poem, influencing and assimilating the words that Prudentius chooses to describe his own spiritual suffering. The 'wounds', the 'troubles' and the 'stinging pains' not only qualify Prudentius' state of mind metaphorically but are also suitable to describe the saint's physical torments materially. By anticipating both the semantics and the spiritual meaning of the martyrdom and its narrative content, the image within the text—or, more specifically, the *enargeia* from the image that is transferred to the words—affects the construction of the text itself.

This combination of image and literary text multiplies the narrative and figurative levels within the poem. The description of Cassian's portrait features a certain degree of 'intermediality', in Fielding's words—the blending of multiple narrative media.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the reader is enabled to visualize the image of the saint through different means—the literary text and the image described within it. Concurrently, the text of Prudentius has a prismatic effect on the saint's portrait. *Peristephanon* 9 refracts Cassian's image and depicts it with 'colours' (*fucis colorum*, 10), thereby modifying and amplifying its figurative power and narrative potential.

The coexistence of narrative means, figurative meanings and focalizations (Prudentius as poet; Prudentius as character; the reader), along with the inclusion of the sexton's narrative within Prudentius' poem, produces an overlap between the agency of the sexton *qua* character within the narration and the agency of the portrait, and therefore of Prudentius' *liber* as vehicle of that narration. Prudentius' narrative releases emotional forces, which affect both the readers and Prudentius as character within his own story.<sup>45</sup> This emotional force is embodied and materialized by the sexton, who functions as animated proxy for both the image and the narrative, thereby translating the agency of the literary work into lived experience. As we shall see in the next section, through this agency, the saint's visual and textual narrative overcomes the boundaries of the text and reaches its readers across time and space.<sup>46</sup>

### 3. THE BODY OF THE TEXT: AGENCY AND MATERIALITY

The overlap between narrative and figurative levels, along with the blurring of the boundaries between the textual object and the human narrator, brings about fluidity in the relationship between materiality and spirituality, between the described object and the describing medium, between signified and signifier, to put it in semiotic terms. The coexistence of different spheres is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather expresses literary and cultural tendencies that were progressively developing in the late antique period—namely, the emergence of materiality and metapoetic discourse, as well as of allegorization and symbolism. One of the most striking examples of how the symbol is

influences their actions. By becoming a performative object, the cloak acquires a quasi-human agency, thereby determining the characters' behaviours within the narrative.

<sup>44</sup> Fielding (n. 19), 811, who draws on M. Dinter, 'Inscriptional intermediality in Latin elegy', in A. Keith (ed.), *Latin Elegy and Hellenistic Epigram* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011), 7–18.

<sup>45</sup> For some observations on the overlap between the *corpus* of the saint and the body as text in late antique literature and culture, see Cox Miller (n. 2), 63–7.

<sup>46</sup> For a similar discussion on (literary) objects releasing affective energy, see Mueller and Telò (n. 8), 1–2; on how literature plays a role in the formation of the world's materiality, and shapes the interpretation of bodies and matter as texts, see Iovino and Oppermann (n. 32), 4–6 and *passim*.

embedded in late antique poetic discourse is Optatian's poetry, wherein the disposition of words and lines within the poems graphically reproduces Christian symbols or signs.<sup>47</sup> With the *Psychomachia*, Prudentius also questions and reconceptualizes the terms of the distinction between content and representation, concrete and abstract, somatic and semantic, *res* and *signa*. In *Peristephanon* 9, we observe the transformation of *res* in *signa*, which is a widespread pattern in Christian literature, and at the same time the materialization of *signa*, whereby Cassian's portrait, the written text, and even Prudentius' poem become *bodies*.<sup>48</sup>

At lines 10–12 (... *imago* ... | *plagas mille gerens, totos lacerata per artus, | ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem*; see full text and translation above), through a hypallage, the *imago*—and not the martyr—bears the wounds (11); the image, rather than Cassian's body, is perforated (by tiny pricks). This attribution of the wounds to the *imago* leads to a breach in the distinction between the image and the body of the saint, which articulates the overlap between Cassian's tortured body and the body of the text. The transformation of the (literary) text into a blunt object fully happens at a later stage of the poem (from lines 13–16 onwards), as the pupils (*innumeri* ... *pueri*, 13) use their writing tablets to hit Cassian's body, thereby actualizing the harmful as well as material potential of the text.<sup>49</sup> This material agency of the text is anticipated by the visual (and metavisual) role of the saint's image: since the *imago* shows some features that would normally pertain to the body of the saint, it temporarily replaces and hypostasizes Cassian's wounded body. In other words, the image absorbs and incorporates Cassian's suffering. Accordingly, the *imago* amplifies and projects the saint's suffering onto the readers, thereby affecting their feelings. This transmission of sensations from Cassian to the image also forecasts the overlap between Prudentius' and the reader's feelings in response to the sexton's story (*Perist.* 9.13–20):

|  |    |
|--|----|
| innumeri circum pueri, miserabile uisu,          |    |
| confossa paruis membra figebant stilis,          |    |
| unde pugillares soliti percurrere ceras          | 15 |
| scholare murmur adnotantes scripserant.          |    |
| aedituus consultus ait: 'quod prospicis, hospes, |    |
| non est inanis aut anilis fabula;                |    |
| historiam pictura refert, quae tradita libris    |    |
| ueram uetusti temporis monstrat fidem'.          | 20 |

Countless boys round about (a pitiful sight!) were stabbing and piercing his body with the little styli with which they used to run over their wax tablets, writing down the droning lesson in school. I appealed to the sexton, and he said: 'What you are looking at, stranger, is no vain or old

<sup>47</sup> On visuality and pictorialism in Optatian's poetry, see M. Squire, 'POP art: the optical poetics of Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius', in J. Elsner and J. Hernández Lobato (edd.), *The Poetics of Late Latin Literature* (New York and Oxford, 2017), 25–99; also M. Squire and J. Wienand (edd.), *Morphogrammata/The Lettered Art of Optatian: Figuring Cultural Transformations in the Age of Constantine* (Paderborn, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> In *De catechizandis rudibus* 2.3, Augustine focusses on the 'materiality' of the sign, which hinders and at the same time initiates communication. To communicate one's anger, for instance, it is often not enough to express it through words, since words are dependent on many factors, such as the language employed. Anger is thus more easily communicated by the facial expression that accompanies the words uttered: it is through this process of materialization that anger is reconceptualized as a sign.

<sup>49</sup> For the intersection between body and text, see Fielding (n. 19), 811 and 815–16; see also J. Clarke, 'Pain, speech and silence in Prudentius *Peristephanon* 5 and 9', *VChr* 74 (2020), 4–28, at 11–12.

wife's tale. The picture tells the story, which is recorded in books and displays the honest assurance of the olden time.'

While the reference to the *innumeri* ... *pueri* is certainly emphatic, it also very effectively conveys the idea of Cassian's defencelessness. Moreover, *soliti* enhances the discrepancy between the normal use of the *pugillares* ... *ceras* and their distorted use as weapons. The students were using their wax tablets to annotate Cassian's words, perhaps without truly understanding them, as the expression *scholare murmur* suggests.<sup>50</sup> These lines present another example of *aequiocatio*, whereby the meaning of writing is expanded through figuration, and accordingly recast into a different activity, physical torture. In other hymns, such as *Peristephanon* 3, which is dedicated to Eulalia, Prudentius points out that the wounds left on the body of the saint by the executors should be taken as signs from Christ (*Perist.* 3.136–40):

'scriberis ecce mihi, Domine.  
quam iuuat hos apices legere  
qui tua, Christe, tropaea notant!  
nomen et ipsa sacrum loquitur  
purpura sanguinis eliciti.'

'And now, o Lord, you are written on me. How beneficial to read these letters, which record your victories, o Christ! The scarlet colour itself of the blood that is drawn speaks your holy name.'

If read vis-à-vis this reference from *Peristephanon* 3,<sup>51</sup> *Perist.* 9.13–16 implies that Cassian's wounds represent the evidence of his faith in Christ, and accordingly of his sanctity. By carving letters upon the saint's body, the pupils' styli write a text, which is echoed and re-enacted by an actual literary text, Prudentius' poem. *Peristephanon* 9 perpetuates the memory of the pupils' writing, along with Cassian's martyrdom, thereby granting him eternal glory. Therefore, the body of the text appears extremely malleable and metamorphic. Through the mediation of the *imago*, and accordingly of the sexton's words, the pupils' writing tablets change into Prudentius' poem, which extends its boundaries beyond its author.<sup>52</sup> Relevant to the metamorphic nature of the text, when discussing *The Book of Mandeville*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen underlines the centrality of the book *qua* material text (and manuscript) that travels across centuries, thus entering human history.<sup>53</sup> Both as material object and as literary artefact, the book becomes the main actor in the formation of the narrative it embeds. In the process of textual transmission, the book is read, copied and reread multiple times, so that its story proliferates through its various versions and interpretations. Interacting with other objects and processes, the book becomes comparable to a 'body in motion', which reshapes and determines the reality it belongs to.<sup>54</sup> In *Peristephanon* 9, the agency of the written text amplifies as the book merges with Cassian's body, both as a concrete blunt object and as an abstract symbolic narrative means, whereby the portrait of the saint is explained.

<sup>50</sup> The adjective *scholaris* is rare in Latin literature and indicates something 'pertaining to school' (*OLD* s.v.); for *murmur*, see *OLD* s.v.

<sup>51</sup> On the metaphorical meaning of this stanza, see J. Clarke, 'Female pain in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*', *CQ* 71 (2021), 386–401, at 392–3.

<sup>52</sup> This phrasing draws on R. Barthes (transl. R. Miller), *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York, 1975), 29–35 and *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> J.J. Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, 2015), 153–60.

<sup>54</sup> Cohen (n. 53), 154.

Just as the portrait suddenly appeared in front of Prudentius at line 9, so the sexton is introduced abruptly in the narration (*aedituus consultus ait*, 17) as another epiphany, which strengthens the visionary atmosphere within the previous lines.<sup>55</sup> Addressed by the ‘foreigner’ (*hospes*, 17), the sexton remarks that what Prudentius is observing (*prospicis*) is not an *inanis aut anilis fabula* (‘a vain, old wife’s, tale’, 18).<sup>56</sup> While the verb *prospicis* further stresses the visual aspect of the image, the word *fabula* polemically emphasizes the difference between the truth of Cassian’s martyrdom and the fiction of other kinds of *fabulae*, for example the theatrical. Similar to the narrative of Cassian’s martyrdom, the *fabulae* from Roman theatrical performances are violent and bloody; distinct from Prudentius’ poem, Roman *fabulae* are not trustworthy.<sup>57</sup> By adding that the ‘picture reports/tells the story’ (*historiam pictura refert*, 19), the sexton underscores once again the ‘intermediality’ of the poem, whereby a story is told through different representative and narratological means.<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, the expression *historiam pictura refert* further articulates the dynamics of figuration and the narrative circularity of *Peristephanon* 9: the hymn shows the (saint’s) picture; the picture shows the story; and the narrative of the sexton (who is a personification and hypostasis of the saint’s portrait) interprets and explains the picture. The narrative is also handed down in the books (*tradita libris*, 19), which confirm the ‘true faith’ (*ueram . . . fidem*, 20) of the ancient time (*uetusti temporis*, 20): *historiam pictura refert, quae tradita libris | ueram uetusti temporis monstrat fidem*. In this passage, the Latin word *fides* has multiple layers: it can be interpreted literally, as ‘assurance’, with reference to the truthfulness of Prudentius’ poem; it can also be translated more broadly as ‘faith’, with reference to the proper spiritual feeling.<sup>59</sup> The Christian faith is confirmed by *Peristephanon* 9 (and the sexton’s narrative within it), which features Cassian as a witness of Christianity—a martyr, by definition. Accordingly, the ‘books’ (*libris*) transmitting Cassian’s narrative have generally been interpreted as a reference to other hagiographical writings that are not extant.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, ‘the books’ can also function as a proleptic and metapoetic allusion to Prudentius’ *liber*, which, along with other sources, will preserve the saint’s memory.

Moreover, by referring to other possible sources, Prudentius constructs plausible evidence for the saint’s narrative, thereby aligning himself with the highly programmatic posture of Christian poets and with later hagiographical texts. While the first piece of evidence (the books) is real, the other, the sexton’s narrative, is fictive. This combination of fictional and real (that is, literary and historical) evidence amplifies the narrative potential of Prudentius’ words, as well as their reliability and trustfulness.<sup>61</sup> The co-responsibility in the perpetuation of the saint’s memory further supports the interpretation of Prudentius’ *liber* as an agentic force (see *tradita libris*, 19), which overcomes the

<sup>55</sup> On the expression *aedituus consultus*, see Kässer (n. 24), 166.

<sup>56</sup> See *TLL* 2.69.30–71, s.v. *anilis*.

<sup>57</sup> According to O’Hogan (n. 21), 57, the word *fabula* establishes a connection with Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, particularly given the attribution of Cupid and Psyche’s narrative to the category of *aniles fabulae* at 4.27. While M. Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore, 2008), 47 notes a juxtaposition of history and *fabula*, Lubian (n. 29), 297–8 maintains that Prudentius has the sexton stress the opposition between the deceitful *fabulae* and the truthfulness, and orthodoxy, of Cassian’s martyrdom.

<sup>58</sup> Fielding (n. 19), 808–20.

<sup>59</sup> See P. Hardie, ‘Martyrs’ memorials: glory, memory, and envy in Prudentius *Peristephanon*’, in S. Kyriakidis (ed.), *Libera Fama: An Endless Journey* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016), 166–92, at 180.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Perist.* 1.73, 11.9–10; see Lubian (n. 29), 297.

<sup>61</sup> On the combination of different sources for Cassian’s narrative (the books, Prudentius’ poem, the sexton’s explanations), see Kässer (n. 24), 167.

boundaries of time, space and authorial agency to keep the memory of Cassian's martyrdom alive, while emphasizing his sanctity. Therefore, the agency of the literary text is articulated by its ability to perpetuate the saint's memory throughout the ages, as it is handed down through generations. Concurrently, this agency is expressed by the transformation of the text into a blunt object, whereby Cassian's students kill their teacher. At lines 47–50, Cassian starts bleeding after being hit by his students, who throw their wax tablets onto him: 'the page, broken by the blow, becomes red and wet' (*rubetque ab ictu curta et umens pagina*, 50)—with a syntactic focus on the *pagina*, which is the subject of the sentence.<sup>62</sup> A metonymy for the writing support (the wax tablet), the *pagina* represents the text, which is the main agent in the perpetuation of Cassian's memory and martyrdom.

After being hit by the wax tablets, the body of the saint literally and concretely turns into the body of the text. This concrete transformation of the (human) body into a literary text brings about a distortion of the writing process, and subverts modes and techniques of personification. In normal writing practice, the *stilus* acts upon the wax tablet, thereby leaving its signs upon it and modifying its material aspect;<sup>63</sup> in a personification, the literary text embodies an abstract or concrete object, thus figuratively becoming a person. By contrast, in the case of Cassian's martyrdom, it is the writing tablet that leaves its signs on the body of the saint by causing him to bleed, with the saint's blood functioning as ink; it is the body that produces a text—and not vice versa. Accordingly, the usual dialectic between the agent that accomplishes the action (the pen) and the patient that undergoes the action (the wax tablet) is here entirely subverted: the wax tablets are those which *impress* the saint's body. While actively causing Cassian's death, the wax tablets also bear the evidence and signs of the pupils' violent attacks, which are hypostasized by the blood that stains them.<sup>64</sup>

The *pagina* thus appears as a negative agent, in so far as it pierces the saint's body. Concurrently, it is also a positive agent, as it perpetuates the memory of Cassian's martyrdom through the blood that is left on it. Owing to its broader connotation as the material support for the written text, the *pagina* also articulates the perpetuation of Cassian's memory through Prudentius' *liber*. After the blood poured out of Cassian's wounds has transformed his body into a macabre writing tool, in the lines that follow (51–4), the saint's body changes back into a writing support, which is cut by the *stili* and their tips (*acumina*, 51) (*Perist.* 9.51–4):

inde alii stimulos et acumina ferrea uibrant.  
qua parte aratis cera sulcis scribitur,  
et qua secti apices abolentur et aequoris hirti  
rursus nitescens innouatur area.

Others again launch at him the sharp iron pricks, the end with which by scratching strokes the wax is written upon, and the end with which the characters that have been cut are rubbed out and the roughened surface once more made into a smooth, glossy space.

<sup>62</sup> Lubian (n. 29), 300 defines the image of Cassian's body as the actual page ('vera e propria pagina') written by the *pueri*.

<sup>63</sup> Regarding writing practices in the Classical and late antique periods, see e.g. O. Pecere, *Roma antica e il testo* (Rome and Bari, 2010); S. Ammirati, *Sul libro latino antico. Ricerche bibliologiche e paleografiche* (Pisa and Rome, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> Kässer (n. 24), 169–71 remarks on how Cassian's body is 'annotated' forever, as the memory of the signs onto his body is preserved by Prudentius' poem; for the 'body-as-text metaphor' (with particular reference to lines 69–72), see Clarke (n. 49), 21.



This passage depicts the body of the saint as a writing surface, which is etched by the tips (the same *acumina* that were causing Prudentius to suffer at line 8) of the *stili* and is cleared by their bases. Throughout the poem, Cassian's body maintains this semantic and conceptual liminality between the human body and the writing, or written, body.<sup>65</sup> As Bruno Latour would put it, the written text becomes an 'actant' in the construction of the narrative, and accordingly in the perpetuation of Cassian's memory.<sup>66</sup> At lines 69–70, one of the students refers to the *stilus* as *ferrum*, adding that it was his teacher who provided him and the other students with weapons (*armasti manus*, 70)—namely, the *stili* and the tablets. Merging the literal and the metaphorical, the word *ferrum* creates another *aequiuocatio*, thus making this passage particularly ambivalent. Given the context, *ferrum* here indicates the stylus, but in Latin *ferrum* is also a well-known word to indicate a sword (or, more generically, any piercing weapon).<sup>67</sup> Previously, through a similar process, the word *agmen* (35), which in a military context would indicate an 'army', was employed in reference to the class of Cassian's students. The semantic ambivalence of *ferrum* underlines once again the break of distinctions between the notion of body/*corpus* as both a human body and the body of the text. The former is usually pierced by sword; the latter must be impressed upon and etched by the pen (*stilus*). Both the sword and the pen can be indicated by the Latin word *ferrum*, which Prudentius has the students use.

The complete overlap between physical violence and the writing process occurs at lines 72–4, where one student ironically observes that Cassian cannot be angry at his pupils for writing (*quod scribimus*, 73), as this is what he has taught them: *non potes irasci, quod scribimus; ipse iubebas | numquam quietum dextera ut ferret stilum* ('You cannot get angry with us for writing; but you were the one who bade us never let our hand carry an idle stylus', 73–4).<sup>68</sup> While the student is practically right, his observation ignores one important detail: ironically, the writing act is not happening on the wax tablet, as during Cassian's classes; it is now happening on the body of the saint. By developing the overlap between text and body, this comment further articulates the fluidity of the writing support, and the writing process, that features prominently within this poem.

The blending of different forms of texts, figurative meanings and narrative means (picture and text) can also be found at the end of the poem. After speaking of Cassian's martyrdom, the sexton shifts the focus back to the saint's portrait: *haec sunt, quae liquidis expressa coloribus, hospes, | miraris, ista est Cassiani gloria* ('This is what you wonder to see painted with liquid colours, stranger: this is the glory of Cassian', 93–4).<sup>69</sup> The sexton's words and story succeeded in explaining and contextualizing the image in terms of contents and symbols. Cassian's portrait, along with his blood, which is impressed on the wax tablets, represents the glory of his martyrdom (*Cassiani gloria*, 94). Since Cassian's glory is perpetuated by *Peristephanon* 9, Prudentius' writing is both antithetical and complementary with respect to the students' writing, which is etched onto Cassian's body. By writing through their tablets and *stili* (that is, leaving their

<sup>65</sup> Speaking of *Peristephanon* 11, Fielding (n. 19), 811 observes: 'Prudentius seeks to reproduce the medium of the martyr's body in textual form.'

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. B. Latour, 'Technology is society made durable', *The Sociological Review* 38 (1990), 103–31.

<sup>67</sup> *TLL* 6.1.576.1–586.42 s.v. *ferrum*.

<sup>68</sup> For a comparison between the teacher's writing and the pupil's writing on Cassian's body, see Kässer (n. 24), 169. For these lines as specimen of a teaching context in the late antique period, see C. Laes, 'Teachers afraid of their pupils: Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 9 in a sociocultural perspective', *Museion* 16 (2019), 91–108, at 101–2.

<sup>69</sup> For the Christian and religious meaning of *gloria*, see *TLL* 6.2.2061.57–2086.74.

marks) on the saint's body, the students bring about his death along with his eternal glorification.<sup>70</sup> Prudentius collects the metaphorical *stilus*, the legacy, from the hands of Cassian's students, but he uses it to preserve Cassian's memory rather than to end his earthly existence. Accordingly, Prudentius' poem establishes a fracture, but at the same time a continuity, between the students' writing and his own poetry.

Alongside Cassian's memory, *Peristephanon* 9 also perpetuates Prudentius' fame as a poet. By re-entering the narration as character (see line 99–end), Prudentius creates a ring-composition with the beginning of the poem, which was also characterized by the presence of the poet. After embracing Cassian's tomb, Prudentius discloses his fears and his hopes of a future good (*spem futuri . . . boni*, 104). Convinced that Cassian will listen to his words, Prudentius goes back home and celebrates the saint (*Cassianum praedico*, 106): this celebration is actualized and hypostasized by *Peristephanon* 9.<sup>71</sup> Prudentius' gesture of embracing the saint's tomb is another expression of the importance of material objects within the poem. As the place where Cassian rests, the tomb holds an affective value: along with Cassian's portrait, the tomb contributes to the perpetuation of the saint's memory through its concrete and material presence. Besides the tomb, the preservation of Cassian's narrative is guaranteed by the quintessential agentic object within the poem: Prudentius' poem itself, *Peristephanon* 9.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown that the text holds material and figurative, as well as literary and metaliterary, agency, and is responsible for the preservation of the signs of Cassian's martyrdom. While the wax tablets are marked with the saint's blood within the literary fiction, *Peristephanon* 9 bears witness to Cassian's martyrdom in reality, across the centuries. Moreover, the overlap between the text and the human body leads to the progressive humanization of the text, which becomes an agentic force. Together with human characters, the objects are therefore co-actors within Cassian's narrative, and accordingly contribute to the construction of Prudentius' poem. In turn, we see the textualization of bodies within *Peristephanon* 9, where objects have agency precisely because of figuration—namely, their inclusion within a system of meanings. Embedded with semiotic potential, the objects (the *tumulus*, the image of Cassian's body, the writing tablets) thus act as *signa*. In *Peristephanon* 9, the quintessential Christian paronomasia *sēma/sōma* acquires a new significance, as the distinction between word and body is overcome. The text has become the body; the text is the body.

*The Australian National University*

SIMONA MARTORANA  
[simona.martorana@anu.edu.au](mailto:simona.martorana@anu.edu.au)

<sup>70</sup> Kässer (n. 24), 169–70; see also Fielding (n. 19), 810.

<sup>71</sup> Kässer (n. 24), 171; Lubian (n. 29), 290; Schmieder (n. 38), 178.