16. THE UNITY OF MARTIAL’S EPIGRAMS

Lindsay C. Watson

In the first, theoretical section of his Verstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigram (“Desultory Remarks on the Epigram”), published in 1771, G.E. Lessing posed the question “What is an epigram?” Rejecting Batteux’s view that an epigram is a poem which expounds “an interesting thought, presented felicitously and in a few words”, a breve uiuidumque carmen, “a short and lively poem”, to use Martial’s phrase (12.61.1), Lessing arrived at a far more circumscribed position, one which reflected his perception that it is form, rather than subject matter, which defines an epigram: an epigram, he stated, consists of two parts, an Erwartung, “set up”, in which the reader’s curiosity is aroused regarding some noteworthy or unusual phenomenon, and an Aufschluss, “conclusion”, in which the author presents his own, often witty, comment on, or explanation of, the foregoing. The Erwartung, in Lessing’s schema, corresponded to the monument or object upon which epigrams were originally engraved; the Aufschluss to the inscription, or epigram proper, carved upon the physical object, which by its verbal content satisfied the interest of the passer-by, aroused by the sight of the physical structure. Lessing was not the first to propose that an epigram typically exhibits a bipartite structure. But what distinguished him from his predecessors is his insistence on the absolute centrality of this division to the functioning of an epigram. So wedded intellectually was Lessing to the dogma of the bipartite structure that he explicitly denied the label “epigram” to poems exhibiting only one of his two constituent parts, i.e. an Erwartung but no Aufschluss, or

---

1 Lessing 1771, 67–103.
2 Lessing 1771, 69.
3 Lessing 1771, 69.
4 He names as his predecessors in this regard Julius Caesar Scaliger, Vavasseur and Batteux: cf. Barwick 1959, 3, and for further proponents of bipartition, Weinreich 1926, 10–1.
vice versa:⁵ such pieces were, to his mind, no true representatives of the genre, merely *Aftergattungen*, “bastardised instances”, of it.⁶

Of all the ancient epigrammatists, it is Martial, whom Lessing viewed as the supreme practitioner of the genre, who most closely conforms to the pattern which he erected: his schema is manifestly derived from the bipartite structure typically to be found in Martial’s *Epigrammata*, above all his satiric epigrams; for Lessing was reluctant to allow that Martial’s sententious (and perhaps his epideictic) pieces could be classed as genuine epigrams.⁷ That it was the scoptic pieces which served as Lessing’s theoretical paradigm is put beyond doubt by his requirement that the *Aufschluss* should consist of an unexpected or pointed conclusion,⁸ for this is precisely the most distinctive characteristic of Martial’s satiric pieces, as in the following instance from Book 11.

```
Multis iam, Lupe, posse se diebus
pedicare negat Carisianus.
Causam cum modo quaerent sodales,
uentrem dixit habere se solutum.⁹
```

(Mart. 11.88)

Carisianus says, Lupus, that he has been unable to sodomise for many days now. When his friends recently asked him why, he said that he was suffering from loose bowels.

Here the concluding disclosure that Carisianus is suffering from diarrhoea explodes the illusion, nurtured by *pedicare* (“sodomise”), that Carisianus plays a sexually active role, unmasking him, shamefully, as the penetrated rather than the penetrator.¹⁰ Also in conformity with Lessing’s view of the ideal epigram is the characteristically Martialian brevity of the final gibe, for “terseness”, he said, “must be the first and foremost characteristic of the *Aufschluss* of an epigram”.¹¹

Lessing’s analysis, then, is crucially keyed to the Martian technique of the surprise ending which radically recontextualises the sense

---

⁵ Lessing 1771, 73–83.
⁶ Lessing 1771, 73, 77.
⁷ Lessing 1771, 73–4.
⁸ Lessing 1771, 73, 82, 99–102.
⁹ Cf. Mart. 11.40.
¹⁰ For the shame which attached to a Roman male’s playing the receptive role in sexual intercourse, see Walters 1997.
¹¹ Lessing 1771, 91.