The Edinburgh Companion to

Sidonius Apollinaris

Edited by Gavin Kelly and Joop van Waarden

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SIDONIUS RECEPTION: LATE NINETEENTH TO TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

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THIS CHAPTER WILL chart how, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, a significant number of authors were drawn to rewrite and repurpose Sidonius' unique life story and multifaceted personality from a literary perspective. Sidonius has gradually become a more and more popular figure in narrative fiction, and the protean nature of his experiences and talents has enabled individual authors, each stressing different aspects of his life or character, to present a wide and complex range of 'variations on a theme'. Yet, despite the diversity of their approaches (and a differing degree of sympathy for their subject), these authors are united in depicting certain key aspects of Sidonius' personality, which converge to form the basis of a shared contemporary portrait of their subject.

1 The Revival of Sidonius: 'Decadence', Interbellum, and Auvergnat Regionalism

1.1 'Decadence'

Since the final decades of the nineteenth century, Sidonius Apollinaris, an author almost unknown outside scholarly circles since the Renaissance and often subjected to condescending and highly limiting critical judgements, has gradually emerged into the limelight. By virtue of living a difficult and eventful life at a critical juncture of Late Antiquity, and mounting a sincere defence of cultural values in a period of 'decadence', he has gained a novel degree of relevance and attention.[1]

If one assessment symbolically signals this upturn in Sidonius' fortunes, it is that found in Joris-Karl Huysmans' discussion of the literary tastes of his protagonist Des Esseintes in his 1884 novel *À rebours*:[2]

> Il aimait mieux feuilleter la *Psychomachia* de Prudence . . . , et les œuvres de Sidoine Apollinaire dont la correspondance lardée de saillies, de pointes, d'archaïsmes, d'énigmes, le tentait. Volontiers, il relisait les panégyriques où cet évêque invoque, à l'appui de ses

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[1] 'Bref, il y a un *revival* de Sidoine!' ('In other words, there is a Sidonius revival!'): Wolff (2014c) 260. For the many disparaging assessments of Sidonius in critical history, see Wolff (2014c) 259–60 and Harich-Schwarzbauer (2014) 133–7 (section entitled '"Dekadenz" in der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung des 19. Jahrhunderts'). Cf. also Giannotti (2016) 'Introduzione' §5. For a useful collection of material for the reception of Sidonius, see Joop van Waarden's 'Reception' pages on his Sidonius website, <https:/sidonapol.org>, to which I owe several pointers for this chapter.

[2] See Huysmans (1977) 119–20. Translation Huysmans (1998) 30.

> vaniteuses louanges, les déités du paganisme, et, malgré tout, il se sentait un faible pour les affectations et les sous-entendus de ces poésies fabriquées par un ingénieux mécanicien qui soigne sa machine, huile ses rouages, en invente, au besoin, de compliqués et d'inutiles.
>
> He much preferred browsing through the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, . . . and . . . the works of Sidonius Apollinaris, whose correspondence, studded with witticisms, conceits, archaisms, and enigmas, he found intriguing. He was fond of rereading the panegyrics in which that Bishop invokes, in support of his self-satisfied encomia, the deities of the pagan world, and, in spite of everything, he had to admit to a weakness for the affectations and innuendos of these poems, constructed by an ingenious mechanic who takes good care of his machine, keeping its working parts well oiled, and who if required can devise new ones which are both complicated and useless.

The deliberately provocative nature of what would become one of the most famous and frequently cited modern comments on Sidonius' work unsurprisingly prompted reactions from a diametrically opposed perspective. These substantially conformed to the *communis opinio* on Sidonius – and on many other poets of the Roman 'Decadence' – held by the few who were even aware of their existence and literary production.

In 1886, one of the leading literary critics of his age, Jules Lemaître (1853–1914), in a collection of critical appraisals of contemporary authors, published a virulent attack on 'la folie sensationniste de Des Esseintes' ('the sensationist folly of Des Esseintes'), whom he dubbed 'un maniaque, un fou, ou tout bonnement un imbécile très compliqué' ('a maniac, a madman, or, quite simply, a very complicated imbecile'), doubting strongly that Huysmans had ever really read the authors he mentions.[3]

Another interesting case is Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915), a writer and critic close to the Symbolists. His *Le latin mystique* (first published 1892, with a preface by Huysmans) is a profoundly sympathetic, and influential, re-reading of late antique and medieval poetry, in which he interprets the spiritual turmoil of his own times – the ferment of decadence and mysticism – against the foil of the fragmentation of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity. In this context, he comments appreciatively on the generally maligned Sidonius.[4] Six years later, in the article 'Stéphane Mallarmé et l'idée de décadence', distinguishing sharply between difficultly comprehended originality and uninspired imitation, he shows himself again open to a renewed appreciation of Late Antiquity. He criticises Huysmans, claiming – like Lemaître – that his Des Esseintes (and, by extension, Huysmans himself)[5] had probably never even read the poets he purported to love. There can be no justification, he insists, for trying to pigeonhole both Sidonius and Mallarmé as 'Decadents':[6]

> Un parallèle inexorable s'imposa entre les poètes nouveaux et les obscurs versificateurs de la décadence romaine vantés par Des Esseintes. L'élan fut unanime et ceux mêmes que l'on décriait acceptèrent le décri comme une distinction. Le principe admis, les

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[3] Lemaître (1886), esp. 324–35 (§4). Lemaître is similarly dismissive of Huysmans a little earlier in the essay (in §1): 'M. Huysmans est une espèce de misanthrope impressionniste qui trouve tout idiot, plat et ridicule. Ce mépris est chez lui comme une maladie mentale, et il éprouve le besoin de l'exprimer continuellement' ('M. Huysmans is a sort of impressionist misanthrope who finds everything stupid, dull, and ridiculous. In him, this contempt is like a mental illness, and he feels the need to express it continuously'). See Chevallier (2002) 167–8, who also gives Huysmans' response.

[4] Gourmont (1892) 57–62. See Wolff (2014c) 259.

[5] Cf. Chevallier (2002) 164.

[6] This article, originally published in 1898, is reprinted in Gourmont (1964) 93–107; see Wolff (2014c) 259 (which quotes the extract from pp. 102–3 reproduced above). Wolff adds: 'Huysmans n'avait pas lu les auteurs

> comparaisons abondèrent. Comme nul, et pas même Des Esseintes, peut-être, n'avait lu ces poètes dépréciés, ce fut un jeu pour tel feuilletoniste de rapprocher de Sidoine Apollinaire, qu'il ignorait, Stéphane Mallarmé, qu'il ne comprenait pas. Ni Sidoine Apollinaire ni Mallarmé ne sont des décadents, puisqu'ils possèdent l'un et l'autre, à des degrés divers, une originalité propre; mais c'est pour cela même que le mot fut justement appliqué au poète de *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, car il signifiait, très obscurément, dans l'esprit de ceux-là mêmes qui en abusaient: quelque chose de mal connu, de difficile, de rare, de précieux, d'inattendu, de nouveau.

> A persistent parallel was established between the new poets and the obscure versifiers of the Roman Decadence exalted by Des Esseintes. It was a unanimous effort, and even those who were being denounced accepted the denunciation as a mark of distinction. Once the premise was generally accepted, there were no end of comparisons. Since no one, and perhaps not even Des Esseintes himself, had read these much-derided poets, it was child's play for some journalist or other to liken Sidonius Apollinaris, of whom he was completely ignorant, to Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he did not understand. Neither Sidonius Apollinaris nor Mallarmé is decadent, as they both possess, in differing degrees, an originality of their own; but it is precisely for that reason that the word 'decadent' was applied to the author of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, because, in the minds of those who misused the term, it very obscurely signified something little known, difficult, rare, precious, unexpected, new.

Disappointed in Huysmans, Gourmont, from the second edition onwards, replaced Huysmans' preface to *Le latin mystique* with one written by himself.

In the meantime, a similar reaction had emerged from an essayist writing from a very different perspective, Max Nordau (1849–1923, pen name of Simon Miksa Südfeld). In a widely read and highly controversial series of publications, he denounced contemporary irrationality, nihilism, and artistic degeneration. Tragically, the moral stance of this founding father of Zionism was to pave the way to the Nazi campaign against *entartete Kunst*. Late Latin poets, he claims in *Entartung* (*Degeneration*) from 1892–3, are wilfully being misrepresented by modern decadents:[7]

> The truth is that these degenerate writers [like Gautier, Baudelaire, and Huysmans] have arbitrarily attributed their own state of mind to the authors of the Roman and Byzantine decadence, to a Petronius, but especially to a Commodianus of Gaza, an Ausonius, a Prudentius, a Sidonius Apollinaris, etc., and have created in their own image, or according to their morbid instincts, an 'ideal man of the Roman decadence'.

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dont il parle, il pique ses épithètes sur les analyses de l'*Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters im Abendlande* d'Adolf Ebert, dont le premier tome a été traduit en français en 1883 (*Histoire générale de la littérature du Moyen Âge en Occident*)' ('Huysmans had not read the authors whom he discusses; he lifted his epithets straight from the analyses in Adolf Ebert's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters im Abendlande*, the first volume of which had been translated into French in 1883 as *Histoire générale de la littérature du Moyen Âge en Occident*'). As to the suspicion that Huysmans worked at second hand, Chevallier (2002) 165 is inclined, nonetheless, to give him the benefit of the doubt.

[7] The quotation is from Nordau (1993) 301, translating Nordau (1892–3). See also Amherdt (2013) 23 and de Palacio (2014) 529–31.

While glimpses of Sidonius could be caught in the verses of poets who gravitated between Parnassianism and Symbolism like Laurent Tailhade (1854–1919) and Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925),[8] he also began to figure in classically themed narrative, portrayed precisely as one of those 'decadents and aesthetes' who attracted Max Nordau's opprobrium.[9] As a result, the figure of Sidonius began to be twisted into new and tendentious shapes. One of the most striking examples is the novel *L'Augustule 475–476* (1903) by Aimé Giron and Albert Tozza, which presents a Sidonius 'revu et corrigé en esthète fin-de-siècle' ('revised and corrected into a fin-de-siècle aesthete'), a 'nouvel arbitre des élégances' ('a new arbiter of elegance') who 'médit de tous avec une bienveillance amusée, et profère des aphorismes et paradoxes dignes d'un Oscar Wilde' ('slanders everyone with an amused benevolence and proffers aphorisms and paradoxes worthy of Oscar Wilde').[10] Sidonius is openly depicted here as a protean and disillusioned figure, ready to bend in whatever direction seems opportune. He seems thus to faithfully mirror the cultural milieu which, according to Marie-France de Palacio, produces this characterisation: 'à travers cet être de papier se dessine une interprétation qui est moins personnelle que collective (le fait que l'auteur en soit bicéphale confirme cette lecture possible), reflet fidèle d'un "esprit fin-de-siècle"' ('this paper creature embodies an interpretation which is less personal than collective (the fact that it is a collaborative work confirms this possible reading), a faithful reflection of the "fin-de-siècle spirit"').[11]

In the Germanophobe and nationalistic climate after the defeat of France in 1870, Sidonius was tendentiously framed as the impotent victim of the Barbarians by Édouard Drumont (1844–1917). In *La dernière bataille* (1890), one of a long series of anti-Semitic pamphlets, he projects a decadent end-of-an-era atmosphere both onto his own time and onto Late Antiquity, where Jewish-German internationalism and the Germanic invasions are portrayed as twin manifestations of the evil that destroys, and destroyed, the French nation.[12]

1.2 Interbellum: Buchan, Graves, and Derème

Between World Wars I and II, two works of British fiction in which Sidonius plays an ancillary role are worth mentioning.

First, Sidonius makes a brief appearance in 'The Wind in the Portico', a fantastic tale by Scottish writer and politician John Buchan (1875–1940) published in his 1928 collection

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[8] For Tailhade and Louÿs, see de Palacio (2014) 533.

[9] And which provide the heading for one of the chapters of his *Entartung*: see de Palacio (2014) 530–1.

[10] De Palacio (2014) 531. For Giron and Tozza (1903) see the reading in de Palacio (2014) 531–3, which provides further commentary and quotations. Aimé Giron (1836–1907) was a lawyer and one of the most prolific writers of his time. He first achieved fame with the poetry collection *Le Sabot de Noël*, published in 1863; in his prose, he is often inspired by the history and the legends of his native region, the Velay (Haute-Loire). Albert Tozza (1855–1923), of Corsican origin, was a teacher and the author of historical novels, including *Les jardins du Magnifique* and, together with Aimé Giron, *Antinoüs*. He is best known for his translation (from Latin) of a *Histoire de la Corse* by the sixteenth-century author Pietro Cirneo. *L'Augustule* was written in 1901–2 and credits Sidonius himself with coining the derogatory epithet for the last emperor in one of his vaguely disdainful witticisms; this is quoted in de Palacio (2014) 531 and 535: 'qu'on donne l'Occident, en jouet, au tout petit César, à l'Augustule, souligna Sidoine sur un ton ironique' ('let them give the West, as a plaything, to the tiny Caesar, to the Augustulus, Sidonius observed in an ironic tone'). For further details of this novel and its portrayal of Sidonius, see de Palacio (forthcoming).

[11] De Palacio (2014) 532.

[12] This work has been brilliantly analysed by de Palacio (2014) 525–9, who provides a detailed contextualisation of both the author and the book.

The Runagates Club.[13] Henry Nightingale, a classical scholar, visits a secluded estate to view a neglected manuscript for his critical edition of Theocritus. He learns that Dubellay, the owner, has recently discovered a shrine to the Celtic god Vaunus (associated by the Romans with Apollo) and has rehoused it in his manor. Nightingale humorously suggests that Dubellay rededicate it as a Christian altar and cites an entirely fictional passage in Sidonius, where 'you begin by sacrificing a white cock or something suitable, and tell Apollo with all friendliness that the old dedication is off for the present'.[14] Dubellay hurriedly rejects the suggestion as if Nightingale 'had offended his ears by some horrid blasphemy'. When, however, Nightingale returns for a final look at the Theocritus manuscript in summer 1914, his host's attitude is markedly different. He begs Nightingale to read him the relevant passage from the edition of Sidonius held in the manor's splendid classical library. Realising that Dubellay is in deadly earnest, Nightingale urges him to 'let old Vaunus stick to his altar' and reminds him that 'we're in the twentieth century and not in the third' (p. 137). Dubellay ignores Nightingale's advice, performs the ritual, and is apparently slain by a vengeful Vaunus in the form of a scorching wind. His house and library are burnt to the ground and the invaluable Theocritus manuscript destroyed, but, as Nightingale remarks, 'that didn't worry me much' for 'six weeks later came the War, and I had other things to think about' (p. 147).

The mention of the war clearly situates 'The Wind in the Portico' among the many works in which Buchan treats the 1914–18 conflict as an unleashing of primal or barbaric forces. While the spurious nature of the Sidonius quotation and the incorrect dating of his works might encourage the suspicion that Buchan had little authentic knowledge of Sidonius, Michael and Isobel Haslett have underlined Buchan's classical learning and particularly stressed the influence of Helen Waddell's *The Wandering Scholars* (1927) on his work in the late 1920s.[15] Barnaby (2016) points, in particular, to a passage where Waddell cites Sidonius *Carm.* 10.47–9 in a discussion of Christian writers who poetically bring 'tender' but 'dangerous' pagan gods back to life.[16] Barnaby suggests that this may have reminded Buchan of his youthful reading of Huysmans' *À rebours*, where, as we have seen, Des Esseintes particularly enjoys verses where 'Bishop' Sidonius 'evokes . . . the deities of the pagan world'. It may well, then, have seemed particularly apt for Buchan to introduce Sidonius into a tale which paradoxically warns of the twin dangers of releasing the pagan and atavistic and seeking to suppress or Christianise them.[17]

In his 1938 novel *Count Belisarius*, Robert Graves constructs a fictional character on the model of the historical Sidonius.[18] Van Waarden's Sidonius website provides a useful summary of the most significant textual parallels:[19]

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[13] Consisting largely of tales which appeared in the *London Pall Mall Magazine* between September 1927 and May 1928, *The Runagates Club* was first published by Hodder & Stoughton, London. See Barnaby (2016).

[14] Buchan (1928) 132.

[15] Haslett and Haslett (2009) 21.

[16] Waddell (1954) 43.

[17] I am most grateful to Paul Barnaby for providing me with this section on Buchan. A full version of his article is Barnaby (2017).

[18] Robert Graves (1895–1985) was a poet (*Collected Poems*, 1986), translator, essayist (the author of several studies of myth and religion, in particular *The Greek Myths*, 1955), short-story writer (*Collected Short Stories*, 1991), and author of historical novels (above all *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, both 1934) to which he particularly owed his fame. For *Count Belisarius*, see now, in an edited volume on *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition* (ed. A.G.G. Gibson (2015)), Coulston (2015), and Tougher (2015); Tougher notes, on p. 83, that Graves, in his diary, lists Sidonius among the primary sources he perused.

[19] See <https://sidonapol.org/united-kingdom>. To these we might add an interesting reference at the beginning of ch. 2 ('The Banquet of Modestus'): 'the scene is the dining-room of Modestus's villa . . . Everything is arranged

The figure of Belisarius' uncle Modestus, a verbose *laudator temporis acti* and still a pagan at heart, is loosely modelled on Sidonius:

- '. . . a familiar type of the tinsel-age Roman man of letters' (introduction)
- 'But Modestus could never permit himself to make the least remark without wrapping it in an approved literary allusion, a paradox, or a pun, or all three together' (chapter 1)
- 'I have also inherited a volume of Modestus' poems and another of his painfully composed letters, in the style of Pliny' (chapter 2)
- 'Modestus goes on . . . to point the close resemblance . . . between this villa and the favourite villa of the celebrated author, Pliny' (chapter 2)
- '. . . let me copy out from Modestus' book of poems an example of his Latin hendecasyllabics - the metre that he favoured most. It will show both the weakness and the occasional strength of his verse' (chapter 2).

Even this brief list of traits shared with Sidonius is enough to reveal a subtly ironic move on Graves' part. Having modelled his character on Sidonius (in an ultimately affectionate way), Graves christens him Modestus, which is certainly attested as one of Sidonius' given names, but, read as an adjective, is totally at odds with the character that emerges from his works (and of the fictional Modestus in the novel).[20]

Our survey of interwar literature concludes with the French poet Tristan Derème (1889–1941), one of the main theorists of the 'école fantaisiste', which flourished approximately between 1912 and 1925. In 1931, Derème dedicated a long verse epistle (116 lines in nine stanzas of varying length and metre) to Sidonius, whom he salutes as the epitome of the refined and technically sophisticated poet. He compares his own times and dreams of literary glory with those of Sidonius, polemicising against the new barbarians who have invaded the literary scene (that is, the futurists).

It is worth quoting a brief passage (vv. 65–73):[21]

> Vous pensiez : L'avenir saura-t-il mon langage
> Et méditera-t-il aux phrases que j'écris ?
> Est-ce fini de Rome ? Est-il un pont fragile
> Où passera notre destin,
> Où pour atteindre au bord lointain,
> Parmi le cortège latin,
> Nous marcherons avec les Muses de Virgile ?
> Déjà s'ouvre un autre univers.
> On y scande fort mal nos vers

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exactly in the old Roman style, for Modestus is an antiquarian and makes no mistakes: he can justify everything by quotation from some Latin author or other of the Golden Age.' This passage is useful for tracing a banquet motif which runs from Yonge (1890) to Graves and Marcel (see below, n. 29).

[20] Could it be that Graves' source is Anderson's (1936) first Loeb volume, which would have provided him with all material that could be got from the poems and letters 1 and 2? (private suggestion by Gavin Kelly).

[21] For Tristan Derème, see Aranjo (1996, 2014, with further bibliography), the latter of which also reprints a Latin translation by Geneviève Immè of the second part of Derème's poem on Sidonius (vv. 46–116); cf. Wolff (2014c) 259. Aranjo (2014) 542–5 also presents some poetic texts on Sidonius and his time (*Odoacre*) written by the French poet George Saint-Claire between 1994 and 2005; cf. also Aranjo (1996) 35.

You thought: Will the future know my language
And meditate on the phrases I am writing?
Is this the end of Rome? Is there a fragile bridge
Which our destiny will cross
Where to reach the far side
We shall walk with Vergil's Muses
Amidst the Latin procession?
Another universe is already opening before us
Where our verses are most poorly scanned.

1.3 Jean Anglade and Auvergnat Local Pride

Jean Anglade, a major forerunner of the recent narrative rediscovery of Sidonius, operates on a larger scale. He is author of *Sidoine Apollinaire* (1963), an evocative reconstruction of Sidonius' life, a novelised biography, or rather, one which is rendered more vivid by the use of techniques associated with fiction. He employs Sidonius' own works as his principal source, treating them with scrupulous fidelity and deep respect.[22] I believe that it may be useful to offer a brief precis of Anglade's work here, first because, in a way, it provides a summary of the salient biographical data,[23] extracted from Sidonius himself or contemporary sources, available to anyone embarking on a narrative reconstruction of his personality; and, second, because, as we shall see shortly, it has subsequently been creatively exploited in further narrative reworkings of Sidonius' life and literary career:[24]

> The novel begins by telling the story of the gravediggers who accidentally desecrate the tomb of Sidonius' grandfather (*Ep.* 3.12: [1]). It then covers the years which Sidonius spends in the entourage of Avitus until the emperor is overthrown and Sidonius retires to his estate at Aydat ([2]–[4]). After the failure of the conspiracy led by Marcellinus [5], Sidonius succeeds in bringing the city of Lyon back into favour with Majorian, and becomes part of the new emperor's court ([6]–[7]). A further period of

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[22] Born 18 March 1915, Jean Anglade died in Clermont on 22 November 2017 at the age of 102. His literary production covers a great variety of forms (poetry, narrative, drama, essays, screenplays, translations from Italian), and won a number of prestigious prizes and honours. In particular, he dedicated many works, in a range of genres, to his native Auvergne. In 2000, *Sidoine Apollinaire* was reprinted in the volume *Auvergne encore*, where it is the last of a series of narratives inspired by his beloved region. Anglade also discusses Sidonius in his *Histoire de l'Auvergne*, particulaly in ch. 3, 'L'Auvergne se latinise': Anglade (1974) 55–78.

[23] For greater clarity, I have inserted chapter numbers in square brackets, and, in a small number of cases, a reference to the source in Sidonius himself.

[24] On a side note, Wolff (2014c) 258, after stating that 'En Auvergne Sidoine Apollinaire est toujours resté une gloire locale' ('In the Auvergne, Sidonius Apollinaris has always remained a matter of local pride'), finds Anglade 'peu convaincante' ('unconvincing'), perhaps because he views him solely from a scholarly perspective. He adds: 'Jean Le Guillou, auvergnat d'adoption, est plus amusant: on apprendra par exemple dans son *Sidoine Apollinaire: L'Auvergne et son temps*, que notre auteur était homosexuel' ('Jean Le Guillou, an adopted 'auvergnat', is more amusing: in his *Sidoine Apollinaire: L'Auvergne et son temps* [Le Guillou (2002)], he tells us, for example, that Sidonius was homosexual'). Wolff adds a footnote (n. 42), hypothesising that Le Guillou is basing his opinion on Sidonius' portrait of Theoderic in *Ep.* 1.2.2–3. I note, in passing, that Rouland (1987) 421 explicitly indicates this portrait as a source for the depiction of the Visigothic king (pp. 76–7) in his novel *Soleils barbares*, in which Sidonius plays no role other than as a documentary source (acknowledged in Rouland's notes).

> retreat at Aydat following the fall of Majorian is interrupted by a diplomatic mission to Ravenna and to the new emperor Anthemius in Rome ([8]–[9]), which results in Sidonius being appointed *praefectus urbis*, where he has to deal with the Arvandus affair (*Ep.* 1.7: [10]–[11]). As the Burgundians dominate the region around Lyon, Eparchius, bishop of Clermont, nominates Sidonius as his successor on his deathbed. Soon Sidonius is forced to organise the city's defence against Euric's invading Goths, while Olybrius, Glycerius, and Julius Nepos occupy the imperial throne in rapid succession ([12]–[14]). Chapter [15] bears the significant title *An 475: Munich!*[25] The Auvergne is sacrificed by the episcopal negotiators, and Sidonius writes to Graecus of Marseille to express his discontent (*Ep.* 7.7). Romulus Augustulus succeeds Julius Nepos, but is soon deposed (28 August 476); Odoacer bestows the western imperial insignia upon the eastern emperor. Following periods of exile and captivity at the hands of the Visigoths, Sidonius returns to his duties as bishop, but is disheartened by his son Apollinaris' complicity with Victorius. In the end, when Victorius falls into disgrace, Apollinaris is imprisoned in Milan but manages to escape ([16]–[18]). In his final years, Sidonius sees off a sinister plot by Honorius and Hermanchius to seize the episcopal throne of Clermont, designates Aprunculus as his successor, and, following his death, is venerated as a saint ([19]–[20]).

Anglade is essentially inspired by his genuine love of the Auvergne, and his Sidonius is not made to serve a particular ideology or philosophy of life, but tends rather to be depicted (with a hint of fervent exaggeration) as an exceptional character living in an equally exceptional region, whose life is rightly crowned by his elevation to sainthood. Anglade touches only rarely on the more conceited and narcissistic elements of Sidonius' character, such as when he composes his imperial panegyrics and shows a burning interest in every stage of the preparation of the statue in his honour. But even on these occasions, the tone is moderate and respectful, as if Anglade is indulgently and good-naturedly portraying a minor weakness inherent in human nature.

2 A Hero of Fictional Experiments: Sidonius in Jean Marcel and Denis Montebello

2.1 Jean Marcel

Two highly original and sophisticated narrative experiments have recently presented Sidonius in a new guise. In terms of narratological innovation, Jean Marcel's work is particularly important, employing ironic techniques to distance itself from previous literary portrayals of Sidonius (and even including an explicit reference to Anglade, who makes a brief appearance as one of its characters).

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[25] This brief chapter title involves a peculiar anachronism: Anglade appears to be suggesting an analogy between the treaty that ceded the Auvergne to the Visigoths and the Munich Agreement of 29–30 September 1938, when Italy, Great Britain, and France accepted the German annexation of the Sudetenland. This effectively permitted Hitler to impose his politics of aggression, and is seen as a point of no return in the countdown to World War II. The preceding chapter (*Le résistant*) and the following two (*Le déporté*; *Devant le führer*) also have titles which allude to a World War II context. See Kelly (2016c); see also sect. 3 below.

I have already discussed the French-Canadian Marcel's *Triptyque des temps perdus* in my monograph on the reception of Sts Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.[26] It is a trilogy of novels consisting of *Hypatie ou La fin des dieux* (1989), *Jérôme ou De la traduction* (1990), and *Sidoine ou La dernière fête* (1993). In the third and final novel, Sidonius, held prisoner by Euric, is presented as the witness of a symbolic final day of the Roman Empire: 26 August 476. The feast to which the title refers is hosted by his friend Myron at Narbonne towards the end of 467 to celebrate the publication of a book of poems by Petrus, one of the final sparks of an 'Empire qui n'achevait plus de finir' ('empire that could never finish ending').[27]

The 'last feast' is clearly a symbolic event, capturing the somewhat empty, futile, yet deeply human mental horizons of 'neuf poètes de ce cinquième siècle sans avenir parce qu'il pesait sur lui trop de choses présentes' ('nine poets of this fifth century that held no future as present matters weighed too heavily upon it').[28] It is also, however, a 'symposium' (214: '*convivium* de chez Myron'), after the manner of Graeco-Roman symposiac literature, to close the trilogy's depiction of Late Antiquity.[29]

Even a rapid inspection of *Sidoine ou La dernière fête* reveals elements which clearly show that Marcel is familiar with Anglade (1963). The novel begins with the arrival of a mysterious messenger at the fort where Sidonius is kept prisoner,[30] which recalls a similar moment of suspense at the beginning of Anglade's second chapter. Likewise, there are echoes of Anglade's opening chapter in the prominence given to the episode where the tomb of Sidonius' grandfather is desecrated (p. 100). (With a typical ironic variation, Marcel adds that Sidonius treated the gravediggers so harshly, 'dit-on', that one subsequently died.) Then we suddenly find Anglade directly cited in the novel, and indeed woven into the narrative thread, not only as the author of 'une biographie assez romancée et fort respectueuse de Sidoine Apollinaire' ('a somewhat novelised and highly respectful biography of Sidonius Apollinaris'; p. 119), but also as one of a mysterious coded list of members of a clandestine sect 'qui s'était donné pour mission de restaurer la splendeur et la puissance des druides' ('who had set themselves the mission of restoring the power and splendour of the druids'). The biographer-character makes his appearance in a chapter which uses the history and conflicting interpretations of the stained-glass windows of Clermont cathedral as a pretext to describe various moments of Sidonius' life. Now, the first edition of Anglade's biography contains very fine colour reproductions of the individual window panes. In my view, those reproductions have played a key role in drawing Marcel's attention to this particular episode in the afterlife of Sidonius.

This provides a clear insight into Jean Marcel's methodology. Proceeding from Sidonius' own works and from Anglade's biography, Marcel imbues his subject matter with a violent ironic energy, irreverent and, at the same time, affectionately complicit, finding the most imaginative narrative pretexts to retrieve historical details, which he then twists into new

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[26] Giannotti (2009) 127–31 and 142. Jean Marcel is the *nom de plume* of Jean-Marcel Paquette (born in Montreal in 1941). In the same year as Marcel's *Sidoine ou La dernière fête* (1993) appeared, Élisabeth Szwarc published a children's book in France entitled *Sidoine Apollinaire: Un Gaulois contre les Barbares*, with illustrations by Jean-Michel Payet (Szwarc and Payet (1993)). This tells the story of Sidonius' life, stressing, in particular, his struggles with the Visigoths.

[27] Marcel (1993) 105. On Marcel's trilogy and his Sidonius novel, in particular, see the author's interview with Dominique Garand (Garand and Marcel (1992)), together with Giannotti (2009) and Dion et al. (2005).

[28] Marcel (1993) 196–7.

[29] I wonder whether ch. 2 of Graves (1938), 'The Banquet of Modestus' (cf. above, n. 19), influenced Marcel in his decision to give such prominence to a minor episode, and to draw further attention to it in his choice of title.

[30] Marcel (1993) 14.

shapes in order to present them in a modern and symbolically significant way. Thus segments of narrative emerge from the description, in a scrupulously scholarly style, of the stained-glass windows of Clermont cathedral (chapter 3), or, conversely, via a sort of magic spell, from the mirror that Evodius gives to Euric's wife, Ragnahilda (chapter 5), after having Sidonius' verses engraved in it (verses that Sidonius encloses in *Ep.* 4.8 to Evodius).[31]

As with the second novel of the trilogy, where we are addressed at the start by St Jerome's lion, the beginning takes the reader by surprise. Guided by a star (p. 16), Abraham, a wandering monk from the East,[32] reaches the imprisoned Sidonius. His appearance links the new novel to earlier volumes in the trilogy. In his youth, Abraham of Mesopotamia took part in the killing of Hypatia, and subsequently his travels have brought him into contact with Jerome. Now, bizarrely, he seeks to instruct Sidonius in the doctrine of the Gautama Buddha (p. 21). Then, before disappearing over the horizon, he warns Sidonius of the trauma that he will have to face on that very night of 26 August 476. In fact, as 'prescribed' by Verlaine's 'Langueur' ('Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence, / qui regarde passer les grands Barbares blancs', 'I am the empire at the end of decadence, watching the tall, white Barbarians passing by'), Sidonius, from his prison window in the fortress tower of Livia, will watch history unfold in the form of a long procession of barbarian tribes (p. 34: 'il vit déferler l'histoire par la fenêtre de sa prison').

These are the *gentes* who constitute Odoacer's army, as they prepare to pour into Italy and the heart of the empire (pp. 33 and 53). Clad in his episcopal robes, Sidonius observes them. Marcel has chosen him as the protagonist of the last instalment of his trilogy both as a witness to the symbolic date of 476 (the 'Fall of Rome') and as a symbolic representative of late antique *Romanitas*, an aristocratic intellectual committed to the church and confronted with rampant barbarian hordes and the decay of the values of Roman civilisation. At this point Marcel 'suspends' the narrative for a long digression, part historical, part legendary, on the subject of barbarians, presenting first an anthropological overview and an outline of their evolution, then an ethnographical study of the Germanic tribes, followed by a chronological account of their encounters with the Roman Empire, and finally the story of their conversion to Christianity at the hands of Wulfila, described as 'en quelque sorte une manière de Jérôme à l'usage des confins de la Gothie profonde' ('in a sense a sort of St Jerome of the Gothic borderlands'; p. 45). Marcel has a distinctly ironic yet poetical approach to historical reconstruction. The ironic tone makes the greatest human deeds seem relative, reducing them to petty squabbles viewed from a lofty distance. The poetic element consists of metaphorical images and bursts of fantastic language which bring an air of enchantment to these paltry tales, and restore their vitality by binding them together with a mesh of everyday events and circumstances.

Marcel's narrative proceeds by way of scenes and fragments. For instance, purportedly concerned with describing the pleasures of *otium* at Aydat, the fourth chapter of the novel is really an analysis of the origins of Sidonius' literary (and especially poetic) vocation, conducted with Marcel's characteristic humour but also with moments of profound psychological penetration and poetry. For Sidonius, words were 'la matière même de tout ce qui était' ('the very essence of all that existed') (p. 138), a talisman against the fear of death and to overcome the inevitable painful realisation that life is a great river of atrocities, flowing between brutality, as embodied in the Romans, and cruelty, as represented by the barbarians (pp. 153–4). Then with one of Marcel's customary temporal leaps, the pages devoted to these seven years of sweet repose and privacy are interrupted by a lengthy digression on the hardships encountered by the poet's descendants, his son Apollinaris and grandson Arcadius (pp. 142–50).

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[31] For a suggestive reading of the episode of Ragnahilda's mirror (which, in my view, also draws on the fairy tale *Snow White*), see Dion et al. (2005) 46.

[32] Cf. Sidon. *Ep.* 7.17.

The last party of the book's title is 'la fameuse fête chez Myron', as chapter 6 is headed 'la fête de sa vie!' (p. 190): the surprise party thrown for Petrus, who has finally completed a poetry collection 'qu'il concoctait depuis longtemps dans le plus grand secret' ('that he had long been compiling in the greatest secret'; p. 189).[33] Like the Muses themselves, the nine friends allocate each other academic names and places at the banquet table: Consentius is Homer, Lampridius is Statius, Sidonius is Orpheus, Petrus (in the centre) is Vergil, Anthedius is Horace, Domnulus is Martial, Proculus is Claudian, Severinus is Ennius, and 'Myron était Myron, nous n'en savons rien de plus' ('Myron was Myron, that's all we know about it'; p. 197).

The competitors, 'heureux d'eux-mêmes, ivres de poésie, pour une des dernières belles fêtes de l'Empire' ('delighted with themselves, drunk on poetry, at one of the last real feasts of the empire'; p. 197), must compose the verses in tandem with the other normal activities of a banquet. They proceed, then, to entertain each other with various anecdotes, which once again permit Marcel to recall hitherto neglected fragments of Sidonius' life, such as the story of the Arles satire (*Ep.* 1.11), or the ball-game that leads Sidonius to improvise the immortal quatrain on the *pannus* (*Ep.* 5.17.9–10).

Naturally, victory falls to Sidonius, and the night at Livia with which the novel opens, with its barbarian horsemen of the Apocalypse, is counterbalanced by this exquisite night of poetry (p. 215): 'on venait de vivre la plus grande nuit de tous les temps. Que restait-il d'autre à attendre?' ('they had just lived the greatest night of all time. What else was left to look forward to?'). Leaving Narbonne, Sidonius passes in front of the fort of Livia, the same fort where he will be imprisoned ten years later.

Starting from no particular theoretical premise, but simply driven by inspiration and fantasy,[34] Jean Marcel blows away many of the conventions that govern this type of narrative, and which often box it into unproductive narrative schemes. He thus arrives at positions and stances which are highly innovative from a narratological viewpoint. This aspect of his work has been perceptively studied by Dion et al. (2005). Their essay begins by noting how the unifying theme of the trilogy is the 'end': of the gods, of the empire, of time.[35] The narrative shatters temporal barriers and stretches out into a continuum that brings ancient and modern times close together. As Marcel himself comments:[36]

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[33] Petrus is the former minister of Majorian who will play such a major role at the end of vol. 1 and the beginning of vol. 2 of Castelli's trilogy (see below). As a curiosity, in Azaïs (2011) 106 and 109, the fictional memoirs of Sidonius seem to insinuate that Petrus and the emperor were secret lovers!

[34] As Marcel declares himself in the revealing interview he gave to Dominique Garand while still working on the third 'Sidonian' instalment of the trilogy: 'à vrai dire, moi qui ai passé la plus grande partie de ma vie à analyser les oeuvres des autres, je ne comprends pas grand-chose à la mienne, sinon qu'elle me fut à un moment donné et précis un singulier plaisir, et que ce plaisir est sa seule justification à mes yeux, et son seul sens. Si mes livres ont un autre sens, c'est à vous de le leur donner. Théoricien, oui, mais lorsque je suis en présence de ma page blanche – plutôt de mon écran bleuté –, mes esprits théoriques se dissolvent, et il ne me reste plus que la pure volupté de composer. C'est déjà beaucoup. C'est du moins suffisant' ('to tell the truth, despite spending most of my life analysing other writers' work, I don't understand very much about my own, except that at a particular moment it gave me an extraordinary pleasure, and that pleasure is its sole justification in my eyes, and its sole meaning. If my books have any other meaning, it's up to you to give it to them. Certainly I am a theorist, but when I find myself facing a bare white page – or rather, a blueish screen – my theoretical mind-frame dissolves away, and all that is left is the sheer voluptuous pleasure of creating. That's already a lot. At least it's enough' (Garand and Marcel (1992) 152).

[35] Marcel (1993) 38.

> J'utilise le passé pour ce qu'il est, c'est-à-dire une matrice du présent, une mémoire, c'est-à dire encore une présence. Autrement dit, c'est une sorte d'ascèse qui consiste en une abolition de la distance qui nous sépare du passé: pour moi, ces gens dont je parle sont de parfaits contemporains. Voilà pourquoi je voyage facilement de 1967 au V^e siècle: c'est que pour moi, tout est contemporain.
>
> I make use of the past for what it is: that is to say, a matrix of the present, a memory, or, to put it another way, a presence. In other words, it is a sort of mental effort consisting in abolishing the distance which separates us from the past: for me, these people are altogether our contemporaries. That is why I journey with such ease from 1967 to the fifth century: it is because, for me, everything is contemporary.

In Marcel's view, we live in times where more information is available to us about the past than ever before, but which have seen a fading of our 'memory', by which he means our respect for what has happened before us and our regard for the lessons that it can pass down to us.[37] Even Marcel's rich and systematic scholarly documentation is easily absorbed into his creative play. At times it is openly displayed, at others it is reinterpreted and distorted. It is often shot through with an irony deriving from an underlying conviction that any human assertion – especially those of established 'sources', time-honoured and set in stone – is more ambiguous and complex than we generally tend to think.[38] The wheels of Marcel's invention are constantly exposed, and we are intended to appreciate them as a means of simultaneously exploring the ancient and the modern (and anything potentially universal which might be unearthed in the process).[39] By playfully but systematically wrongfooting his reader, Marcel arrives at a narrative mode which has been described as 'diffracted', hingeing on the multiplication of viewpoints in the epistolary structure of *Hypatie*, on the improbable focalisation through the lion-narrator of *Jérôme*, or on the constant temporal leaps and placing of 'ourselves' on stage in *Sidoine*.[40] The result is a work which is highly polyphonic from a structural perspective, and modern and innovative from an aesthetic viewpoint.[41] At its centre is no longer an orderly sequence of events, but the narrative act itself, coordinating and reinterpreting those events, and leaving ample room for errors, lacunae, and concessions,[42] all viewed with ironic and tolerant comprehension, because such is human life. Consequently, for the past to reinterpret the present, it must offer itself as a kind of laboratory of the soul, that is to say, as 'une forme . . . où la vie, son déroulement et sa mise en fiction se jouent dans l'espace de la pensée, de l'indice et de la logique plutôt que dans celui de la chronologie événementielle' ('form . . . where life, its unfolding, and its fictionalisation are all played out in the sphere of thought, intimations, and logic rather than in the chronological succession of events').[43]

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[36] Garand and Marcel (1992) 135–6; cf. Dion et al. (2005) 38, and also the quotation on p. 36 of the same essay: 'comme le rappelle André Daspre [Daspre (1975) 244], le roman historique représente "non pas une évasion dans le passé mais une explication [du] présent, une vision de [l']avenir"' ('as André Daspre reminds us, the historical novel does not represent "an escape into the past but an explanation of the present, a vision of the future"'). Cf. also Garand and Marcel (1992) 137: 'je pense même que le monde ancien n'est pas encore tout à fait mort, il survit dans le monde qu'on appelle nouveau. Autrement dit, les ruptures de l'histoire ne le sont que dans l'ordre de la représentation – ce sera d'ailleurs le sujet de mon *Sidoine*. Il n'y a pas eu de véritables ruptures' ('I even think that the ancient world is not completely dead yet, it survives in the world that we call new. In other words, historical breaks only exist in the order of representation, which, moreover, will be the theme of my *Sidoine*. There is no genuine break').

[37] See Garand and Marcel (1992) 138–9, where Marcel concludes: 'toutefois, il ne faut pas penser que j'ai un message à ce sujet. Je trouve tout simplement que cette question de la mémoire est importante et j'essaie de lui donner une forme romanesque' ('all the same, you mustn't think that I have a message about this subject. I simply think that this question of memory is important and I try to give it a novelistic form'); cf. Dion et al. (2005) 42.

[38] See Garand and Marcel (1992) 136: 'j'expose toujours qu'il y a dans cette mémoire quelque chose de flou: *on est aussi peu sûrs du passé que l'on est sûrs de la réalité qui nous entoure. Au fond, c'est une mise en doute de la réalité elle-même.* Vous voyez à la longue que tout ce que l'on sait nous vient à travers la déformation de textes' ('I always reveal that there is something hazy about this memory: *we are just as unsure of the past as we are sure of the reality surrounding us. In the end, I am raising doubts about reality itself.* Over time you realise that everything we know comes to us distorted by text': my italics). Cf. also the remarks on 'error' discussed in n. 42 below.

[39] Dion et al. (2005) 44.

2.2 Denis Montebello

Denis Montebello's 1999 novel *Au dernier des Romains* also takes a strikingly free approach to the conventions of the genre.[44] The title itself merits a brief commentary. As is well known, from the 1970s onwards, Classical scholars have gradually come to see Late Antiquity in a new light. It is no longer viewed as simply the decadent terminal phase of a once glorious world, but as a sort of new Antiquity in its own right with its own distinctive features.[45] In this respect, narrative fiction, while showing an ever-growing interest in the culture of this new transitional society, and mining it for parallels with the modern world, has continued to adopt a relatively backward stance. I mean that the idea of decadence, of an irrevocable decline and the crumbling away of ancient grandeur,[46] continues to condition many literary rewritings of this period. It is not easy to identify the most deep-seated reasons why, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, fiction-writers have continued to interpret the third to eighth centuries in this key. Nonetheless, we can readily discern one literary motive in the essentially romantic attractions of a perspective capable of generating highly promising narrative situations rich in pathos, adventure, twists of fortune, and dramatic conflicts (such as civilisation versus barbarism, paganism versus Christianity).

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[40] Dion et al. (2005) 44–5.

[41] Dion et al. (2005) 46: 'toutes ces stratégies semblent pouvoir se résumer à une notion, la *polyphonie* . . . Avec la polyphonie, le roman bio-historique amorce un passage du monologique au dialogique – réel dialogue avec l'histoire, avec les lecteurs, avec les biographés, et dialogue romanesque, poétique, dans la diégèse' ('it seems possible to bring all these strategies back to one idea: *polyphony* . . . With polyphony, the bio-historical novel undergoes a transition from the monologic to the dialogic: a real dialogue with history, with its readers, with its biographical subjects, and a novelistic, poetical dialogue in its diegesis'), or, as they remark later: 'Marcel introduit une forme narrative novatrice, plus enquête ou essai qu'histoire par moments' ('Marcel introduces an innovative narrative form, which at times is more like an inquiry or an essay than history') (p. 48).

[42] In Garand and Marcel (1992), the author explicitly discusses the rich creative possibilities of what we usually classify as 'errors'. He cites, for example, the twist by which 'on a confondu les noms de Gérasimus et de Hiéronimus' ('the names of Gerasimos and Jerome were mixed up'), and the lion from the legend of Gerasimos was thus permanently transposed to that of Jerome (p. 145; cf. also p. 152).

[43] Dion et al. (2005) 47–8. Cf. also the conclusions on pp. 49–50, with further remarks specifically concerning *Sidoine.*

[44] The blurb succinctly introduces the author as follows: 'Denis Montebello was born in 1951 in Épinal. He teaches Classics at La Rochelle and has published several novels and short stories. He has also translated from Latin, in particular Petrarch's *Ascent of Mont Ventoux* and *Letter to Posterity*' (our translation).

[45] Giannotti (2009) 16–18, with further bibliography.

[46] De Palacio (2005) passim, esp. ch. 16.

Within this general picture of decline, writers have focused, in particular, on whatever can be presented as the *last* spark or the *last* stand of a system of values battling extinction. Here too, the main incentive seems to be the possibility of foregrounding symbolic situations or characters, whose terminal nature and precarious position on the edge of catastrophe, or of the overthrow of an entire world, casts them in a particularly moving and significant light. Thus many recent works of fiction set in the Romano-Barbarian world present this idea of a final epiphany in their very title. If we limit ourselves to works connected with Sidonius, then Montebello's novel, together with Marcel (1993)[47] and all three parts of Castelli's trilogy, are cases in point.[48]

Montebello's narrative is initially presented as a letter in which Namatius (the addressee of *Ep.* 8.6) replies to the quintessential 'last of the Romans', Sidonius himself. But Namatius is not only the commander of Euric's fleet, who, from his island base of Oléron, defends the coastline from the raids of Saxon pirates, and devotes himself in his free time to agriculture, to learning, and to somewhat inept and unsuccessful hunting. He is also a mask assumed by Montebello himself, permitting him to assert his own identity as poet and translator, and as a speaker of French rather than Latin (cf. the end of Sidon. *Ep.* 8.6). He writes from the future to the past: his fictional reply to Sidonius is dated 'Oléron, 1999'![49] The narrative unfolds over various chapters which intercut Namatius' point-by-point response to *Ep.* 8.6 with fragments of other letters and poems by Sidonius and with evocations of Sidonius' friends, presented in order of the itinerary that Sidonius lays out for his just-published *libellus* in *Carm.* 24. From around half-way through the book, however, dialogue with Sidonius is progressively and quite deliberately reduced.[50] The novel now turns into a lyrical monologue from Montebello–Namatius which assumes an intentionally labyrinthine and fragmentary shape. Comprised of shards of thoughts and memories, it cannot be made to cohere around a single centre of inspiration and is characterised by an increasingly cryptic experimentation which moves freely across history, or in other words, occupies that continuous present in which 'les poètes sont si rares et les barbares si nombreux' ('poets are so rare and barbarians so numerous'; p. 57).

What is particularly striking is that Montebello draws inspiration from the temporal dislocation typical of the so-called Latin epistolary style, where the writer assumes the perspective of the addressee and thus uses the past tense to describe events which are present for him but will be over when the letter is received. Montebello evokes this rule, yet his Namatius is writing from the future to the past, and if he has to use a past tense, he employs it to refer to events from Sidonius' lifetime, explicitly recognising that his correspondent died many centuries before (pp. 14 and 57). Narrative leaps between time periods, characters, and episodes are facilitated by Namatius' precise geographical location. He is on the ocean shore, looking into the horizon (that is, the future). The sea and the wind bring all sorts of materials to land, and so, to catch a glimpse of the future, but of the past too, it is enough to 'read the beach' (p. 39). As a result, Namatius can introduce Sidonius to Venantius Fortunatus or the Vindolanda tablets.

One of the novel's most important themes is naming and a writer's need to 'grow as close' as possible to his own name. Even the various components of Sidonius' full family name inspire associative fantasies (pp. 9–18, 37, 60, 65, 84). And perhaps Montebello is thinking of his own name too, setting himself the task of raising a 'mountain' of poetic 'beauty' via a progressive rarefaction of logical and historical narrative lines, and a distillation of what, in his view, most matters and will always most matter in human existence.[51]

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[47] But see also Marcel (1989).

[48] See also Fo (2013) 183–4 with n. 12 who coins the labels 'decadimentismo' and 'ultimismo'; Giannotti (2015) 26 n. 26 and context. Cf. also the title of the novel by Manfredi cited below, in n. 78. For Castelli, see sect. 4.2 below.

[49] Montebello (1999) 7.

[50] Montebello (1999) 83, 95, 105.

3 Sidonius as a Component of a Fictional Character: *The Dream of Scipio* by Iain Pears

In his novel *The Dream of Scipio*,[52] Iain Pears interweaves the stories of three fictional characters: one from Late Antiquity named Manlius Hippomanes; a second from the Middle Ages, the troubadour Olivier de Noyen; and finally, from the twentieth century, the scholar Julien Barneuve. Their personal circumstances have many points in common, starting from their shared homeland of Provence and, in particular, the town of *Vasio Vocontiorum* or, as it is now known, Vaison-la-Romaine.

Before looking at the novel in more detail, we must pause to consider the late antique figure of Manlius Hippomanes, whom Pears constructs by blending together traits from a variety of fourth- and fifth-century writers. The individual components that go to make up this character have been analysed with great rigour and precision by Evenepoel (2010).[53] One of Pears' principal models is Synesius of Cyrene (c. 370–c. 413): Manlius is the pupil of a fascinating female philosopher called Sophia, who closely resembles Synesius' teacher Hypatia of Alexandria. Even part of the character's name seems to derive from Synesius: in a brilliant hypothesis, Evenepoel connects the bizarre 'speaking name' Hippomanes (that is, horse-lover) with a known passion of the historical Synesius.[54] It is less clear what led Pears to choose Manlius as a forename.[55]

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[51] For greater detailing of the narrative technique of Montebello (1999), see de Palacio (2005) 412–15, who concludes (p. 415): 'La lettre faussement antique est un prétexte pour remettre en question les lois de l'écriture et de la fiction. . . . La réflexion sur l'écriture peut être délivrée par un "je" en perpétuelle évolution' ('Fake antique letters are a pretext for questioning the laws of writing and fiction. . . . A reflection on writing can be delivered by an "I" that is constantly evolving').

[52] Iain Pears (born Coventry, 1955) is an English art historian and writer educated at Oxford, where he still lives. He is the author of various novels, including a series of detective novels set in the art world (e.g. *The Raphael Affair*, *The Titian Committee*, *The Bernini Bust*, *Giotto's Hand*, *Death and Restoration*). *The Dream of Scipio* was published in 2002. In *The Dream of Scipio*, as in his other more 'literary' novels (*An Instance of the Fingerpost*, *Stone's Fall*, and *Arcadia*), his favourite technique is multiple narratives, either of the same events by different characters (*Fingerpost*, *Stone's Fall* to an extent), or by narrators in different periods but with analogous situations (this work and *Arcadia*).

[53] I should like to express my particular gratitude to Joop van Waarden, who kindly provided me with an English translation of Evenepoel's Dutch original, which would otherwise have been inaccessible to me.

[54] See Evenepoel (2010) §4.4, which provides a detailed survey of the points that Manlius shares with Synesius. The hypothesis on the name, with supporting arguments, occurs at the end of the paragraph (which I quote in van Waarden's English translation: 'one last detail: Synesius was fond of books and horses. From childhood, he had an excessive love of horses: in *Epist.* 105 . . . , Synesius uses the verb "hippomanein" in this context! In *Epist.* 37, he shows himself a true connoisseur of horses, and in *Epist.* 41 . . . , he describes his life as a life of prayer, books, and hunting. Was Pears inspired by this fact (and by letter 105 in particular), when he called the Roman Manlius Hippomanes . . . ? It should be remembered that, since Homer, horses and weapons were characteristic of the aristocracy.'

[55] See Evenepoel (2010) §4.2–3, who is uncertain whether Pears is alluding in some way to Boethius, one of whose forenames was *Manlius*, or to a major Roman family and, in particular, to 'T. Manlius Torquatus, an example of Roman strictness from the 4th century BC. He had his son executed as the latter made a mistake (Livy 8,7); compare how Manlius takes action against his adoptive son Syagrius!' (Of course, Syagrius is one of the names that Pears extracted directly from Sidonius' letters: cf. *Ep.* 5.5 and 8.8.) Gavin Kelly has suggested to me (*per litteras*) that the name of the scholar and consul Manlius Theodorus, dedicatee of one of Claudian's panegyrics, could possibly also have played a role.

Manlius attempts to expound the principal teachings of Sophia, as well as his own personal philosophical and political views, in a neo-Platonic treatise entitled *The Dream of Scipio*,[56] a detail that recalls not so much Cicero as Macrobius, the author of two books of *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*.[57] Other historical characters lend further, less significant traits to Pears' Manlius.[58]

But leaving aside the debt to Synesius, Manlius clearly owes his other main character traits and biographical details to Sidonius Apollinaris.[59] Like Sidonius, Manlius is a rich and powerful aristocrat, a lover of poetry and literature, and the owner of a significant library. He has long been tempted to publish a collection of his own letters, and is capable both of fashioning highly ornate phrases and of reciting them in a manner that delights the ears of his listeners. He is subsequently destined to become a bishop (of Vaison in Manlius' case, consecrated by Faustus of Riez himself), to seek to stamp his own personal authority on his fellow bishops, and to defend the authority of his class in the face of barbarian invasions. He will finally die in the odour of sanctity (triggering a violent contest for his relics). For all these parallels, however, once Manlius is anointed bishop, his cynical opportunism – leading, at times, to acts of ferocious cruelty – takes him in a very different direction from the real-life trajectory of his 'archetype', the bishop-aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris.

But at the same time as providing a model for the tastes and life-experiences of the fictional Manlius, Sidonius also appears in his own right as a historical character in *The Dream of Scipio*. In one episode, Manlius is conversing with his friend Felix, who recalls how a cousin of his, despite being somewhat boorish, has, like Felix himself, sent some of his own peasants to help defend the city of Augustonemetum, that is, Clermont:[60]

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[56] For the title, cf. n. 57 below. The content of Manlius' *Somnium Scipionis* is described in Pears (2002) 303–6, where it is presented as a pagan rejoinder to Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (even though Manlius is a bishop). For the *Somnium*'s relation to the teachings of Sophia, see Pears (2002) 174.

[57] Evenepoel (2010) §4.1 makes two important observations on the title (trans. van Waarden): '(1) as Pears himself says on p. 268, about the title of his novel: the title refers to a dream about Scipio, not to a dream of Scipio; upon seeing the fall of Carthage, Scipio, according to tradition, was overcome by grief, because he realised that Rome, too, one day would fall. It is that fall which Manlius experiences in *TDS* [i.e. *The Dream of Scipio*]. (2) The four works bearing the title *TDS* [i.e. by Cicero, Macrobius, Manlius Hippomanes, and Iain Pears respectively] all have to do with the belief that, in addition to philosophical contemplation, political action is also very important.' Cf. also Evenepoel (2010) §5.4. The theme of civic virtue is important for all three protagonists of the novel (Manlius, Olivier, and Julien): see e.g. Pears (2002) 303.

[58] Towards the end of the novel, for example, an episode occurs which resembles the account by Gregory of Tours (*Hist.* 5.11) of the conversion of five hundred Jews by Avitus, bishop of Clermont from 572 to 594 (see Evenepoel (2010) §4.3). Pears, as ever, plays games with his sources and accuses Gregory of crediting Avitus with a miracle that was really performed by Manlius (Pears (2002) 401–2). And at one point, the figures of Abelard and Heloise also seem to emerge as models: see Pears (2002) 63–4, concerning the correspondence between Manlius and Sophia (cf. n. 69 below). Other real historical figures appear in the course of the narrative, albeit embellished with the occasional creative descriptive trait. The late antique episode, for example, features Ricimer, Gundobad, and Faustus of Riez, who manoeuvres behind the scenes to have Manlius consecrated bishop of Vaison (a ceremony that he conducts himself) (Pears (2002) 118; cf. Evenepoel (2010) §4.1, 4.3, 4.6).

[59] For a systematic overview of their shared traits, see Evenepoel (2010) §4.3 and 4.6. For an interesting precedent for Pears' procedure in Graves (1938), see the extract from van Waarden's Sidonius website <https://sidonapol.org/united-kingdom> quoted above. A discussion of fictional characters more or less faithfully modelled on Sidonius should also mention Steve White's two novels *Legacy* (1995a) and *Debt of Ages* (1995b), an odd blend of fantasy and science fiction (for brief summaries, see, in the reception pages of the Sidonius website, <https://sidonapol.org/other>, s.v. 'United States of America: Fiction)'.

[60] Pears (2002) 11. For Felix see also p. 722 and n. 66 below.

> 'But I haven't, even though Sidonius is one of my oldest friends? Is that how you wish to end your sentence?' Manlius added. It had been preying on his mind greatly in the past few months. The city of Clermont, far to the west, was under siege from King Euric, blocking his desire to grab a stranglehold on the whole of Provence. . . . Indeed it might already have fallen had it not been for Sidonius, who had put himself at the head of the defenses and was refusing to accept the inevitable . . . Now here was Sidonius, brave, foppish, foolish Sidonius, who had decided to take a stand where emperors had failed. He had always had a weakness for lost causes, for grand, heroic but empty gestures.

As a general point, Pears likes to 'show his hand', to engage in a subtle game of allusive hints, and to evoke, quite explicitly, the historical characters on whom he has based important elements of his protagonists. It is also the case, for example, with Sophia, who is clearly modelled on Hypatia, and of Olivier de Noyen, who suddenly falls victim to an amorous passion in Avignon which closely resembles Petrarch's love for Laura.[61]

Analysing the structure of the novel more closely, it is clear that Pears' ideological objective is to show the need to safeguard civilisation and to illustrate how fully men can commit themselves to this noble enterprise, even though they are destined to be thwarted by the blind power of fate (p. 417).[62] Pears achieves this by portraying three fictional characters from different historical periods whose commitment is expressed in different ways. For Manlius Hippomanes, it is embodied in his philosophy and in his political and social engagement as a bishop. He is flanked by Sophia, his enlightened philosophical guide. He may be said to achieve political success (saving his bishopric of Vasio from the Visigoths, at the price, however, of accepting the heavy-handed protection of the Burgundians). Nonetheless, Manlius' achievements are marred by dishonourable compromises. To overcome the resistance of the 'opposition', represented by Felix, he has no hesitation in having his old friend (and fellow bishop) bumped off. Other acts of cruelty dictated by 'raisons d'état' include the persecution of Vaison's Jews (p. 428, but pre-empted earlier; the theme of anti-Semitism unites all three narratives).

Although they win some battles, all three protagonists ultimately fail as evil proves too strong, especially when it is opposed by a 'good' which appeals to humanistic values and traditions, and employs humanistic tools: the philosophical-political treatise *Somnium Scipionis* (Manlius) and philosophy itself (Sophia); poetry (Olivier); painting (Luca Pisano, Olivier's artist-friend from Siena); encyclopaedic culture (the Jewish scholar Gersonides, patron of Rebecca); philology and, once again, the figurative arts (Julien and Julia). The treatment of the Jews, the thread that binds all three narratives together, comes to symbolise the absurdity and gratuitousness of hatred and violence, leading to the bitter conclusion that 'it is the civilised who are the truly barbaric' and, in Julien's story, 'the Germans are merely the supreme expression of it' (p. 417). Despite its distinctly pessimistic message, what is nonetheless particularly striking about Pears' novel is that, unlike many other fictional representations of Sidonius or the Romano-Barbarian world, it does not interpret Manlius Hippomanes' period within a framework of decline and fall. It is a time of destruction, certainly, but it is not portrayed in terms of decadence; if anything, the stress is on heroism and on the refusal to fade into the sunset. Likewise, it is significant that, as with Anglade, the era is portrayed in parallel with World War II.[63]

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[61] See Pears (2002) 51: 'was not Hypatia the greatest philosopher of Alexandria, and a true martyr to the old values of learning? . . . And Sophia's father had been one of her last pupils, and when she died had fled to Marseille, a city less under the sway of religion, for fear that the same punishment would be meted out to him.' And further on: 'Perhaps it was her youthful beauty? Julian Barneuve thought so, at least when he first read the account of this fateful encounter . . . . The pedigree of the anecdote was always suspect, seeming too close to Petrarch's encounter with his Laura to be comfortable' (p. 5).

[62] Cf. also Evenepoel (2010) §5.4: 'personally, I consider this novel as a lively and fascinating reflection on the fragility of civilisation and the ongoing problems of conscience in the exercise of power.' And again at §3.3: 'the basic theme of the novel is gloomy, due to the thought that everything turns out differently from what people expect; the author expressly highlights the absurdity of human planning (see e.g. the lock, pp. 391–2). "Fate" plays a crucial role in the eyes of the author.' On periods of decadence, see Pears (2002) 186–7 (cf. p. 4).

Sharing a location (principally Vaison and the surrounding part of Provence; the town also plays a role in the medieval segment, which is mostly set in Avignon), the three narratives run parallel to each other,[64] and, at many points, intertwine.[65] They are tales in which, as mentioned above, barbarism essentially prevails, despite the protagonists' best efforts, whether these be heroic or dishonest and morally disreputable. Another common thread, in fact, is the theme of betrayal. Limiting ourselves to Manlius' case, he has his friend Felix put to death,[66] and, on another level, forsakes the humanistic and humane teachings of Sophia for pragmatic political reasons (and is then, in a sense, 'excommunicated' by his mentor, who disowns him as a pupil).

In the context of the classically themed novel, authors usually choose between a biofiction centred on a precise historical character,[67] and an invented story woven around a fictional character, who generally navigates through a significant period, coming into contact with many great figures of the time.[68] In Pears, we encounter the middle position: fictional creations who nonetheless share psychological and biographical traits with real historical characters.

Pears, moreover, has a vivid narrative style and an exceptional gift for immersing himself in the events related and bringing them to life for the reader. His lucid intelligence often produces moments of engaging irony, such as when he posits a hypothetical modern analyst grappling with the correspondence between Manlius and Sophia. The letters are lost, but the omniscient narrator has naturally had the opportunity to peruse them and appreciate their worth.[69]

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[63] See above, n. 25.

[64] Cf. Evenepoel (2010) §3. Besides their shared Provençal origins (and birthplace of Vaison), the following elements are emphasised and thematically developed in the portrayal of all three protagonists: their studies (and inclination for the liberal arts); their relationship with their parents and, particularly, their fathers; the overwhelming (albeit, in a sense, 'platonic') amorous passion that defines their existence; their travels (e.g. Pears (2002) 67–76); their habit of bestowing gifts (pp. 58–63); their correspondence (p. 94); their friendships (pp. 98–9); their involvement – as mentioned above – with the Jewish question (for Manlius: pp. 177, 396–401; in Olivier's time, when the Jews are already the object of considerable prejudice: pp. 168–9, 256–7; but are finally defended by Clement VI: p. 438; for the Nazi period, see the Julien narrative passim). All three narratives take place in time of war: World War II for Julien; the final throes of the Hundred Years War for Olivier, entwined with the problem of the 'Babylonian Captivity' of the Papacy at Avignon; the imminent Visigothic invasion for Manlius.

[65] The close ties between the three narratives obviously originate in the *Somnium Scipionis*, inspired by Sophia, written by Manlius, discovered by Olivier, and conserved in the Vatican Library where it is rediscovered by Julien. But there are many other ties as well, which it would take too long to cover in detail.

[66] Another name that probably derives from Sidonius' letters: cf. *Ep.* 2.3, 3.4, 3.7, 4.5, 4.10.

[67] Numerous examples might be cited here, ranging from cultural figures and great politicians all the way through to Christ and the Apostles. For an overview, see Riikonen (1978) and Fornaro (1989). Cf. also Fedeli (1991) and de Palacio (2005). Many examples are discussed in Giannotti (2003, 2006, 2007, 2009).

[68] E.g. Gregory Julian in Robert Raynolds' *The Sinner of St. Ambrose*, which I study in detail in the first chapter of Giannotti (2009), or Flavio Ascanio, the protagonist of Castelli (2009, 2010), who will be discussed later.

In the specific case of Manlius, Pears may progressively lead his protagonist towards dubious 'political' areas and a morality that Sidonius is unlikely to have shared (and is explicitly refuted by Sophia), until, in the end, he becomes a ruthless murderer (executing his own son Syagrius with gratuitous ferocity). Nonetheless, Sidonius clearly provides a model for his personality and environment, and would probably have underwritten both some of the theories that Pears' fictional characters expound and the values that they promote, as, for example, in this particularly significant dialogue between Sophia and Manlius (p. 45):

> 'And you think joining the church will help?' he asked, scarcely keeping the amused incredulity out of his voice. 'Of course not,' she said scornfully. 'I think *running* the church will help. Perhaps even that will accomplish nothing, but at least learning will die with a friend by its bedside, rather than abandoned in a ditch.'

4 A Canonical Sidonius: His Memoirs in Guy Azaïs, his Deeds in Giulio Castelli

4.1 Guy Azaïs

The 'memoirs of Sidonius' ghostwritten by Guy Azaïs merit a rapid overview.[70]

Probably influenced by *Mémoires d'Hadrien* by Marguerite Yourcenar, Azaïs depicts Sidonius at the end of his life looking back over his own existence in a letter-cum-memoir addressed to his friend and contemporary Basilius. Azaïs' work is of no great literary value but is nonetheless significant from two points of view. First, it represents a sort of epitome or commonplace book of the notions that an educated person might form about Sidonius. Second, it shows how a historical figure like Sidonius, while retaining his principal traits and the symbolic role to which he seems predestined, is inevitably 'rewritten' by any author who, consciously or unconsciously, applies his own personal filter, which may have a strikingly distorting effect. Guy Azaïs, in fact, is a former diplomat who occupied a number of important posts.[71] His Sidonius stresses his harsh and rigid school education (*sic*), underlines his father's role in teaching him public diplomacy, and adopts 'diplomatic' perspectives that the real Sidonius is unlikely to have shared. For example, he opines that Honorius should have welcomed, and indeed given his blessing to, the wedding of Galla Placidia and Ataulf. The Goths would thus have been peacefully absorbed into the empire and not become its deadly enemy.[72]

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[69] Pears (2002) 63–4: 'What the analyst would have cooed over was the eroticism of the images presented as abstract philosophy, although he would probably have missed the playful, affectionate lilt of the language.'

[70] The first edition (2008) is entitled *Sidoine Apollinaire, mémoires imaginaires: Récit* ['Sidonius Apollinaris, Imaginary Memoirs: A Narrative']; the second edition (from which I quote here) only gives the author's name in the biographical notice on the back cover, and is directly presented as a work by Sidonius himself: *Sidoine Apollinaire: Que le jour recommence* ['Sidonius Apollinaris: May the Day Dawn Once More'] (2011) (on the cover, but not the frontispiece, the word *Roman* ['Novel'] is added).

[71] The brief bio-bibliographical notice on the back cover of Azaïs (2011) tells us that the author, who is still alive and whose full name is Guy Marie Joseph Gérard Azaïs de La Garde de Chambonas, 'est né en 1942 à Aix-en-Provence. Après des études émérites (Sciences Politiques, puis l'ENA), il devient fonctionnaire aux Affaires Étrangères dans de nombreux pays: Espagne, Cuba, Maroc, mais aussi Bénin, Canada, Colombie ou Angola, comme ambassadeur ou haut-fonctionnaire' ('was born in 1942 in Aix-en-Provence. Having distinguished himself as a student (Sciences Po (Paris), followed by the École nationale d'administration), he worked for the Foreign Office as an ambassador or diplomatic official in numerous countries: principally Spain, Cuba, and Morocco, but also Benin, Canada, Colombia and Angola').

Sidonius' life thus becomes a pretext for Azaïs to relate the long agony of the Roman Empire from his own personal viewpoint.[73] Fully immersed in the character of Sidonius, and only occasionally recalling the narrative pretext with a reference to his nominal addressee Basilius, Azaïs also invents a number of episodes. Sidonius, for example, is present in Rome when it is sacked by the Vandals in 455. He is a guest at the house of the fictional senator Linus, a character who serves to provide support for Sidonius in Rome, and to send him news from the capital when he returns to Gaul. But even such intermittent narrative devices tend to conform to long-established, if not outworn, conventions, as is also the case with many of the descriptive passages and the portrayal of minor characters. A typical example here would be the portrait of Sidonius' future wife Papianella (*sic*), sketched along somewhat hackneyed lines:[74]

> Celle qui allait devenir ma femme, m'apparut alors dans tout l'éclat de sa beauté paisible. Son charme était fait de douceur réservée. Il émanait d'elle une élégante sérénité. Des rares instants où nous nous retrouvions seuls, j'ai retenu le ton enjoué de sa conversation ainsi que son intelligence vive et discrète.
>
> She who would become my wife appeared before me then in all the radiance of her quiet beauty. Her charm consisted in a reserved and gentle nature. She exuded elegance and serenity. From the rare moments that we were alone together, I recall the cheerful tone of her conversation as well as her lively and discreet intelligence.

The reason why the diplomat and public official Azaïs chose Sidonius Apollinaris as his hero and, in some respects, alter ego is perhaps revealed by an improbable – and, from a literary perspective, weak – remark made by Euric to Bishop Epiphanius of Pavia:[75]

> J'ai su par la suite la fière réponse d'Euric aux humbles supplications de l'évêque: 'Ma cuirasse ne me quitte jamais. J'ai toujours mon bouclier à portée de la main, l'épée à mon côté. Mais j'ai trouvé en toi un homme dont l'éloquence est plus forte que mes armes. La langue des romains vaut bien tous nos boucliers et nos javelots'.

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[72] For Honorius and Galla Placidia, see Azaïs (2011) 16. On the diplomatic virtues of Sidonius' father and his teachings on the subject, see p. 19. Other passages where the diplomatic theme is particularly stressed include: pp. 152; 154; 173–5 (where what most interests Azaïs when his protagonist becomes a bishop is the letters that the newly elected Sidonius writes to various important figures to establish healthy relations); 180–1 (the bishop Epiphanius' efforts to reconcile Anthemius and Ricimer); 184 and 206 (the importance of epistolary correspondence); 197 (Euric's release of Sidonius for diplomatic and administrative reasons); 198–9 (Salvianus on a diplomatic mission to Sidonius).

[73] The author fully adopts the traditional perspective of *Untergangsstimmung* discussed above (n. 48 and context). The whole fictional biography is conceived as a final act, written in the last days of his life by a Sidonius who (like Yourcenar's Hadrian) is readying himself for death yet, in the closing lines, can still lament the decline of his own world: 'My religious needs awoke when faced with the decadence of the world in which I had put all my faith from my very earliest childhood' (Azaïs (2011) 209–10).

[74] Azaïs (2011) 36. From a very different perspective – albeit in an equally cursory piece of characterisation – Castelli presents Papianilla as 'una ragazzetta insignificante sui dodici anni' ('an insignificant little girl aged about twelve'), who 'incominciò subito a fare sfoggio di citazioni devote. Sembrava che conoscesse a memoria tutte le vite dei martiri' ('immediately began to show off her knowledge of pious quotations. She seemed to know all the martyrs' lives by heart') (Castelli (2008) 193). It is not obvious why Azaïs felt the need to assign Sidonius two male children – 'Sidoine' and 'Marcus' – rather than three girls and a boy (Apollinaris).

[75] Azaïs (2011) 188–9.

> En des temps différents, ce propos m'eût vivement réjoui en ce qu'il était une sorte d'hommage rendu à ce qui faisait encore, malgré tout, notre supériorité.

> I learned later of Euric's proud response to the bishop's humble pleas: 'My armour is never off. My shield is always at hand's reach, and my sword always at my side. But in you I have found a man whose eloquence is stronger than my weapons. A Roman's tongue is worth all our shields and javelins.'
>
> At another time, these words would have cheered me enormously, as they were a sort of homage paid to what, despite everything, still made us superior.

4.2 Giulio Castelli

Sidonius' story also plays a major part in the monumental fresco of fifth-century life presented in Giulio Castelli's late antique trilogy.[76] Comprised of three substantial novels, *Imperator: L'ultimo eroe di Roma antica* ['*Imperator*: The Last Hero of Ancient Rome'] (2008), *Gli ultimi fuochi dell'Impero romano* ['The Final Sparks of the Roman Empire'] (2009), and *476 A.D.: L'ultimo imperatore* ['AD 476: The Last Emperor'] (2010), this was republished in a single volume in 2013 with the title *Il romanzo dell'Impero romano* ['The Novel of the Roman Empire'].

The first great historical character to emerge and to acquire a profound symbolical, ethical, and political significance is the emperor Majorian. *Imperator* is, in fact, presented as a book of memoirs written by Iulius Valerius Maiorianus in what turns out to be the last year of his life. In the course of the narrative, we learn that Majorian is working on his autobiography in 461 in the city of Arles, where his 'avventura gallica' ('Gallic adventure') started,[77] although the time period covered stretches from 415 (the year of Hypatia's murder at Alexandria) to 458 (when Majorian is recognised as western emperor by his eastern counterpart and introduces his reforming laws). The second and third novels of the trilogy are presented, conversely, as diaries written in old age by the fictional Flavius Ascanius, a nephew of Petrus, the civil servant who acted as Majorian's secretary. The 'memoirs of Ascanius', finalised in 498 in Tintagel in Cornwall, where he has retired following his last battle with the Saxons, provide a sequel, then, to the 'memoirs of Majorian', consisting of a long narrative which goes back to cover the period between 458 and the fateful year 476, subsequently touching more briefly upon other events up to the end of the century.[78]

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[76] Born in Rome in 1938, Giulio Castelli is a journalist, writer, and scholar of late antique and medieval history. He deals with the transition between the classical world and the Middle Ages not only in the trilogy *Il romanzo dell'Impero romano* but also in his 2013 *Il diario segreto di Marco Aurelio: L'imperatore che disprezzava il potere* and his 2014 *L'imperatore guerriero: Il romanzo di Diocleziano, il persecutore*. His other significant works include the 1973 novel *Il Fascistibile* and the 1992 pamphlet *Il leviatano negligente*.

[77] Castelli (2008) 65, 80, and 571.

[78] The final novel and the whole trilogy end in remote Britannia, where Ascanius combats the Saxon invaders alongside Ambrosius Aurelianus – Emrys Wledig in the Britonnic tongue – who is 'il gran re di tutti i Britanni liberi' ('the great king of all the free Britons') (Castelli (2010) 451) and the last descendant of Roman noblemen. Strangely, then, we find ourselves in similar territory to another classically themed novel, Valerio Massimo Manfredi's *L'ultima legione* (*The Last Legion*), which revolves around the overthrow of Romulus Augustulus in 476 and also concludes in Britannia with a fusion of the last remnants of Roman civilisation and the emerging saga of King Arthur. For further details, see Giannotti (2003) 289–97. Ambrosius Aurelianus is also featured in *The Lantern Bearers*, a children's novel by the English writer Rosemary Sutcliff (1920–92). Among his opponents is Vortigern, who also figures in Castelli (2010). It seems reasonable to surmise that Sutcliff's highly successful novel, which is still in print, provided a source of inspiration for Castelli (and perhaps, up to a point, for Manfredi too). For a fuller study of Castelli's trilogy, see Giannotti (2015). (I thank Gavin Kelly for pointing out Sutcliff's book to me.)

If we take Castelli's remarks in the preface to the second volume[79] and apply them to the whole trilogy, there are three possible ways of approaching *Il romanzo dell'Impero romano*: as a historical novel relating events with great accuracy; as an adventure story, where action is an essential ingredient; and as an extended metaphor, where the decadence of the late antique world ultimately reflects the cultural and moral decline of our own times.

First, then, a major feature of the trilogy is its historical exactitude. Castelli is scrupulously exact both in depicting events and in portraying an impressively wide range of prominent historical characters, at least in so far as either can be reconstructed from source materials. Castelli himself, though, acknowledges that the historical approach can only go so far, as there are contradictory accounts of events in the historical sources, and inevitably there are grey areas which force the writer to use his imagination.[80] As a result, the narrative gradually slides into a 'romanzo d'avventura' ('adventure story'),[81] a term which, in my view, is to be understood in the broadest sense, not only implying a greater emphasis on episodes of high drama, but also permitting the author to grasp the narrative opportunities offered by Majorian's childhood and adolescence, and, in the context of the emperor's own autobiographical memoir, allowing for emotional reflections and confessions which would be out of place in a sober account of the facts. The adventure element is particularly prominent, for example, in the chapter where Majorian assumes a false identity to take part in a Byzantine delegation to Geiseric, with the hidden aim of freeing the empress Licinia Eudoxia, the widow of Valentinian III.[82]

As regards a metaphorical reading of the trilogy, there is a pronounced emphasis throughout on political and moral considerations. This element can probably be traced to a personal interest of the author, documented in his 1992 pamphlet *Il leviatano negligente: Potere e inefficienza in Italia* ['The Negligent Leviathan: Power and Inefficiency in Italy'], which Castelli has the bold idea of attributing to Majorian himself in the trilogy, presenting it as a collection of thoughts on the consolidation of personal power and the simultaneous weakening of public authority.[83] Among its most prominent themes, in fact, is the decadence of Rome, for the main task that Castelli's idealised and public-minded Majorian sets himself is to halt such decadence, arrest decline, and redress injustices.[84]

Although it focuses primarily on other fifth-century characters, both historical and fictional (Majorian, the civil servant Petrus, and his nephew Flavius Ascanius), the trilogy gradually but naturally brings the figure of Sidonius Apollinaris to the fore. Based on a highly detailed reading, Castelli extracts historical data and suggestions from Sidonius' letters, integrating them into a rich and varied portrayal of the writer, which stems primarily from his creative imagination.

The physical description of Sidonius is distinctly unflattering: 'con il suo labbro inferiore che gli pendeva sempre' ('with his ever-drooping lower lip');[85] 'era debole e flaccido. Sudava facilmente anche se non era affatto una stagione calda. Arrotava le dentali e le erre' ('he was weak and flabby. He sweated profusely even if the weather was not at all hot. He slurred his dental consonants and his "r"s').[86] And even as a bishop more than ten years later: 'le guance gli cadevano ai lati come grossi bargigli di un vecchio gallo, le borse sotto gli occhi erano bluastre. . . . ansimava tra una parola e l'altra' ('his cheeks hung down at either side like the long wattles of an old cockerel, the bags under his eyes were blueish . . . and he panted between words').[87]

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[79] Castelli (2009) 7–8.

[80] Castelli (2010) 7.

[81] Castelli (2009) 7.

[82] Castelli (2008) 475–87.

[83] Castelli (2008) 263–4, (2009) 124, 201, and 353–5, (2010) 230 and 255.

[84] Among the numerous illustrations of this theme, one might cite the following examples in the first volume: (2008) 326–7, 346–7, 370, 434, 490.

[85] Castelli (2008) 471.

The psychological portrait is more subtle and nuanced, albeit overweighted perhaps towards a picture of Sidonius as a conceited man of letters, who, despite living in a time of great drama, is forever tempted by the trivial and frivolous. The first traits that gradually emerge from this somewhat barbed depiction of Sidonius are curiosity and a habit of asking 'domande in continuazione' ('question after question'), typical of an 'amabile seccatore' ('amiable bore')[88] whose presence can easily become wearisome, causing Petrus to comment ironically: 'l'Urbe è sopravvissuta ai Vandali, ma non sono certo che sopravviverà alle letture pubbliche delle opere di Sidonio' ('Rome survived the Vandals, but I am not sure that it will survive the public readings of the works of Sidonius').[89] He is 'tutto tronfio' ('extremely pompous') to boot and aspires 'ad un ruolo importante, magari nella stessa città di Roma' ('to an important role, perhaps even in the city of Rome itself'); he believes himself a 'candidato a tutto' ('candidate for everything') and is 'il più grande ruffiano dei nostri tempi' ('the greatest sycophant of our age').[90] His two main character traits are egocentricity and vanity. Ascanius recalls how, as a dinner guest, he spent 'due ore ad ascoltare il poeta che parlava di se stesso' ('two hours listening to the poet talk about himself'[91]), while even at Zaragoza, on Majorian's march towards Tarraconensis, Sidonius 'si pavoneggiava tra le matrone e i preti di quel municipio di provincia' ('preened himself before the matrons and priests of that provincial town').[92] He will retain these traits all his life,[93] making him a constant (comically) polemical target for Petrus: 'nessuna bella schiava riuscirebbe a sedurlo se non fosse in grado di procurargli un pubblico plaudente' ('no fair slave-girl would ever manage to seduce him unless she could first find him an enthusiastic audience').[94] Other notable elements that go to make up his personality are aristocratic pride, superficiality, and frivolity,[95] culminating in an image of Sidonius as 'uno splendido vaso cesellato ma vuoto' ('a splendid vase, finely chiselled but empty').[96]

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[86] Castelli (2009) 183.

[87] Castelli (2010) 77.

[88] Castelli (2008) 195 and 220.

[89] Castelli (2008) 472.

[90] Castelli (2009) 122–3 and 315.

[91] Castelli (2009) 397.

[92] Castelli (2009) 58.

[93] As is evident from the following encounter after Ascanius' return from Constantinople to Rome: 'Sidonio era, come sempre, attento soprattutto a se stesso. Si considerava il centro del mondo. Gongolava quando gli dissi che a Costantinopoli le sue opere erano lette e apprezzate. Mi chiese particolari e poi aggiunse che nella capitale d'Oriente il pubblico era più attento che altrove alla poesia' ('Sidonius was, as always, predominantly concerned with himself. He thought the world revolved around him. He was delighted when I told him that his works were read and appreciated in Constantinople. He asked me for details, then added that the public were more devoted to poetry in the eastern capital than anywhere else)' ((2009) 293). See also the description of the public reading of his works in the Basilica Ulpia ((2009) 299).

[94] Castelli (2009) 229.

[95] 'Sidonio non avvertiva la profondità di quanto andava dicendo. Si fermava alla superficie . . . In fondo non gli dispiaceva che la gente misera fosse inselvatichita. La cultura doveva essere limitata a chi sapeva farne uso e la poesia era l'espressione delle anime nobili. Ma per "anime nobili" lui intendeva le "anime dei nobili"' ('Sidonius did not appreciate the profundity of what he was saying. He never looked beneath the surface . . . Deep down, he was not unhappy that the poor were uncultivated. Culture, he though, should be restricted to those who knew how to make use of it, and poetry was a vessel for noble souls. But by "noble souls", he meant the "souls of the nobility"' ((2009) 80).

[96] Castelli (2009) 80.

Viewing the trilogy in its entirety, it is worth noting that, as the story proceeds, the figure of Sidonius undergoes a transformation, and we might surmise that, when writing *Imperator*, Castelli did not fully foresee how far his character might evolve in a positive direction. In fact, after becoming personally acquainted with Sidonius, Ascanius comes to rely on him more and more. As a friend of Majorian and nephew of Petrus, he is adopted as his protégé, subsequently becomes his son-in-law, and will eventually repay the debt by rescuing Sidonius from his plight as Euric's prisoner.

Castelli's trilogy ultimately constitutes a significant step towards broadening public knowledge of the complex and tangled history of the fifth century. It highlights those features of the period which are most appealing from a novelistic viewpoint: love stories, seductions, intrigues, murders, gratuitous cruelty sometimes linked to religious fundamentalism, and sudden reversals of fortune (such as the deaths of Valentinian III and Heraclius). It offers a persuasive picture of the late antique world and largely avoids arbitrariness and anachronism in evoking its mentality. Castelli also skilfully hints at its contemporary relevance by drawing implicit analogies with our own times.[97] Sidonius is portrayed in his historical context as he really was: futile yet, at the same time, culturally committed. As we have seen, the trilogy initially adopts the prevalent historical and literary view of Sidonius, stressing his self-importance and depicting him as a vain, shallow, superficial poet, and as a slave to aristocratic social rituals which seem totally detached from the pressing political and military realities of his day. As the trilogy proceeds, however, Sidonius gradually emerges as a nobler character, one of the few surviving cultured – and culturally committed – figures in those turbulent years.

5 Conclusion

Classically themed novels rarely examine the 'minor' figures of the fifth century, tending to focus rather on an individual of major importance, and, in particular, on great writers such as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Rutilius Namatianus, and Claudian, or female figures such as Hypatia, or, later in the century, Romulus Augustulus with his unique significance as the last emperor.[98]

In this light, it is all the more striking how Sidonius has shifted from being considered an intriguing and elusive *littérateur* to being saluted as a symbol of human and humanistic resistance in a period of decadence, with a growing appreciation of his existential struggles and of his genuine faith in the cultural values that inspired him. And this occurs both directly (Anglade, Azaïs) and indirectly, that is, where Sidonius' own biographical and cultural profile is used to create a fictional character (Pears).

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[97] A good example would be the exceptionally moving and – at the time of writing this chapter – dreadfully topical episode where Thea, Majorian's concubine, tells the tale of her escape with her parents from Biserta on a fishing boat: 'hanno preteso tutto quello che avevamo per portarci in Sicilia . . . Poi mia madre si ammalò. Erano ustioni da sole e le vennero piaghe sul viso. Aveva delle allucinazioni . . . Così loro credettero che fosse appestata, e la gettarono in mare. La gettarono viva . . . Immobilizzarono me e mio padre . . . Uno di loro prese un remo e la colpì. Continuò a colpirla mentre lei tentava di aggrapparsi alla barca. La finirono a bastonate, là in mezzo al mare' ('they demanded everything we had to take us to Sicily . . . Then my mother fell ill. She had sun blisters which turned into running sores on her face. She began to have hallucinations . . . So they thought she had the plague, and threw her overboard. She was alive when they threw her . . . They held my father and me still . . . One of them took an oar and hit her with it. He kept on hitting her while she tried to hang on to the boat. They ended up bludgeoning her to death, right there in the middle of the sea') (Castelli (2008) 143).

[98] Cf. Giannotti (2006, 2009).

If we take all these fictional recreations of Sidonius together, two further elements need to be stressed.

The first is that some of these novels (Anglade, Azaïs, and partly Pears too) tend to dramatise the fall of the Roman Empire as a clash between barbarians and Romans, rather than what most historians would now see in the period – the collapse of the Roman system, in which barbarians played a significant role. This is not the case for Castelli's trilogy, however, where the emphasis falls on systemic failure, so that Majorian (the fictional Flavius Ascanius' master and point of reference) is presented precisely as the 'last' figure capable of reversing the decline and countering the inefficiency of the state apparatus: a 'last' (and wasted) opportunity for regeneration which goes no further than the pages of Majorian's (fictional) treatise *The Negligent Leviathan*.[99]

The second significant element is that, almost invariably, very little space is devoted in these novels to Sidonius' role as a committed Christian, a bishop, clergyman, and future saint. Only Anglade (chapters 13–16 and 18–20) could be said to deal with Sidonius' religious life to any real extent.[100] Elsewhere, it tends to be the political and social dimension of his episcopal role that is stressed (Castelli, but Marcel, too, albeit from an ironically playful and consistently irreverent perspective); this is also the side of the historical Sidonius that Pears most clearly portrays in his fictional Manlius Hippomanes, who is essentially presented as a crypto-pagan, as, for that matter, is Graves' Modestus.

The vision of Sidonius as a noble symbol of political, military, spiritual, and cultural resistance is predictably most apparent in those works (Anglade, Azaïs) which are fundamentally sympathetic towards him. It is also evident, however, in cases where reservations are expressed as to his character and as to the depth of his understanding of his times and ability to analyse them (Castelli), and even where he is systematically debunked and subjected to an irreverent, ironic treatment (Marcel, Montebello).

To conclude, then, it is not only on the scholarly front but also in the literary and creative sphere that the unique life and literary heritage of Sidonius Apollinaris are being rediscovered and explored, in all their unique wealth, at the start of the twenty-first century.

6 Further Reading

I would like to highlight a few general studies on historical fiction and on the topical issue of the blurring of biographical reality and fiction (biofiction). Hannu Riikonen (1978) is fundamental for the role of Antiquity in the nineteenth-century novel, while Marie-France de Palacio (2008) has written an essential contribution on the tragedy of the 'end of empire' as applied in German fiction around 1900. Three important studies for the problem of biofiction are Keener (2001) and Castellana (2015) and (2019).

Translated from the Italian by Paul Barnaby

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[99] See n. 83 and context above. It is harder to characterise the stance adopted on this point in the experimental novels by Montebello and Marcel.

[100] Some elements of Sidonius' life as a Catholic bishop are stressed in the short story by Yonge (1890) discussed in van Waarden's ch. 23, sect. 3.3, in this volume.