

RUSH JOB: SLAVERY AND BREVITY IN THE EARLY ROMAN PRINCIPATE

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The upswing in brief forms of literature in the early Roman principate is marked. From Ovid to Velleius Paterculus, Phaedrus to Valerius Maximus, this aesthetic trend seems to transcend genre. Such a phenomenon has thus far been understood as arising from either the pressures of literary tradition or the transformations in the organisation of elite knowledge. This article disagrees. It posits a new prospective causality behind the eruption in brevity, namely the state of slavery and its time-conscious way of being in the world. The article performs a close comparative reading of Phaedrus' *Fables* alongside Velleius Paterculus' *Compendium of Roman History* to show how brevity and its suspension can be understood as formal constraints, acts of service and redemptive aesthetic coping modes – all determined by the historical conditions of enslavement. It concludes with a coda on the general association of poetry with bondage and constraint in the late Republic and early Empire.

liberos homines per urbem modico magis par est gradu
ire, seruile esse duco festinantem currere
Plautus, *Poenulus* 522–3

It's more apt for free men to head through the city at a leisurely pace; I see it as a slave's style to run and rush.

'I have ever maintained the doctrine that my negroes have no time whatever; that they are always liable to my call without questioning for a moment the propriety of it; and I adhere to this on the grounds of expediency and right.' (Slaveowner in U.S. South, quoted in Hanchard (1999) 255)

† Contrary to its subject, this job took its sweet time. I'm thankful for the brilliant graduate student input at Yale Philology Day in 2018, as well as for tough love at the Cambridge Philological Society in 2020 and a sitting session of the St Andrews Centre for the Literatures of the Roman Empire in 2020; all these venues saw airing of early versions. Candida Moss has been an unstinting inspiration through conversation, comment and generous sharing of her own cutting-edge work; ditto Jeremiah Coogan and Joe Howley. Anonymous readers have helped plane the rough edges, even if the end product must still to them remain substandard. Finally, a huge thanks to Charlie Pemberton for undertaking some very helpful last-ditch reference checking, when I happened to be a long way from a library.

Introduction: the brevity of slavery

Historicist literary critics often think of literature as a response to social or political pressure. Context, in this context, is metaphorically conditioned as constraint, the particular historical limits acting through the author to press a work into its peculiar shape. Sometimes critics will even try to speak of literary forms as more direct expressions of this pressure, rather than just vague ‘responses’ or ‘reactions’ or ‘reflections’ of or to it. Take a recent example. Keston Sutherland, a Marxist poet and critic emerging from the Cambridge-based J. H. Prynne school, finds in the recently crystallising poetic form of justified block text stretching across the page a sort of visual exhaust of the overwhelming psychological pressure and squeeze of capital, and the elastic pushback of human subjects against it.¹ This co-ordination of a literary text’s aesthetic and formal features with a lived social reality, under the rubric of constraint or pressure, is part and parcel of the toolkit of Marxising–historicising criticism. And this is more or less the spirit I want to bring to bear in this article, to take another shot at some much-documented-but-underexplained features of early imperial Latin literature: the aesthetic strictures of brevity, and the terminal velocity of being an author in a rush.

The problem – not that it has ever really been accused of being a problem – as I see it is this. At a very particular moment in time, namely the late Augustan and Tiberian periods, Roman authors seem to break into a trending wave of two closely related literary programmes. First, there is brevity, claims to brevity, and a lot of it going around a crew so motley as to include Vitruvius, Valerius Maximus, Velleius Paterculus and Phaedrus.² By brevity, I’ll mean mainly brevity on the macro-scale: the idea of presenting a select and small amount of content from a number of possibilities framed as almost infinite; brevity of content or, in Ciceronian idiom, *breuitas rerum* rather than *breuitas uerborum*, the micro-scale framing of an idea through a pithy *sententia*.³ Secondly, in addition and related to this brevity, there is rush, and claims to rush, *festinatio* and a companion aversion to *mora* (delay). This phenomenon is common to at least two strangely under-compared, near-contemporary texts doing their best to keep to time, Velleius Paterculus and Ovid’s *Fasti*.⁴ While this article will keep only brief room for the latter (partly because the theme has been treated at length elsewhere),⁵ I conjure the *Fasti* here but briefly to point out how ubiquitous these concerns are. It’s not often in literary history that the

1 Sutherland (2015).

2 Brevity in Vitruvius: Oksanish (2016), (2019) 94–118. Valerius: Wardle (2020). Velleius: Woodman (1975); Starr (1980), (1981); Lobur (2007); Bloomer (2011). Phaedrus: Bloomer (1997) 94; Glauthier (2009); Lefkowitz (2016) 499. In the spirit of generosity, we might even extend the brevity trend to Ovid’s couplet-centric *Ibis* (cf. Williams (1997) 90).

3 Cic. *Inv.* 1.28. See Woodman (1975) 278–80 on this distinction in Velleius; Brink (1963) 261–3 on *breuitas uerborum*; and now Whitton (2019) 192–248, on Pliny’s *breuitas* game in *Ep.* 1.20. For an excellent account of *breuitas uerborum* manifesting in Velleian ‘pointed style’ see Oakley (2020) 201.

4 For the dialectic between hurrying and tarrying in Ovid’s *Fasti* see Geue (2010).

5 Geue (2010).

aesthetic programme of a universal history rubs shoulders with that of a Callimachean–Aratean calendar poem. What brings them into contact?

These ‘trends’ have of course been noted before, but usually with the fudging eschewal of causality that is recourse to the concept of literary zeitgeist or fashion – it’s in the air, so people are doing it, so there it is.⁶ If reasons for brevity and rush have been offered, they have occupied familiar territory: in Phaedrus’ case, brevity picked as a sign of devotion to Callimachean principles of shortness/narrowness,⁷ the catch-all explanatory principle of the endlessly reusable Alexandrian influence; in Velleius’ case, brevity and hurry marked as display of cognitive virtuosity, a show of a Roman aristocrat’s ability to dominate historical material by condensing it into a very short compass;⁸ or a way of marking particular narrative urgency or importance through extreme selectivity;⁹ or something imposed by the stylistic obligations of genre, a brevity rooted in the historiographical tradition.¹⁰ A little later in the imperial brevity tradition, ‘rhetorical’ reasons have also been fingered as part of the elite’s self-understanding of verbal constraint under the principate, e.g. the advent of the water-clock (clepsydra), which Domitianic–Trajanic authors either chafe against or embrace.¹¹ Technologically speaking, we might note that ‘table of contents’ and rubrics for maximum accessibility seem to get going properly in the imperial period; this care to make a text ‘consultable’ is also a virtual form of abbreviation.¹² Then again, thinking diachronically, it’s very true that to be or not to be brief was a centuries-old rhetorical debate – so should we simply chalk it up to that?¹³

In this article, I want to push for a different stream of speculative causality. I want to suggest that marked fluctuations between brevity and length, as well as being a means of flaunting poetic or cognitive mastery, are an expression of *being mastered* in the midst of a maturing principate. And perhaps more controversially, I want to argue that brevity and rush don’t come from above, aren’t emerging aesthetic principles parthenogenetically made up by the Roman elite. Rather, they come from below; from the lived experience of the slave, which is then cooked into the experience of the freedperson, whence fed up the chain of command through several layers of mediation. It is the brutal experience of

6 Wight Duff (1963) 71 calls this common brevity a literary ‘fashion’; Woodman (1975) 285–6 logs the brevity common to Vitruvius, Velleius, Valerius and Phaedrus as a ‘trend’, and gestures to its continuation right throughout the first century (and beyond, into later epitomating history, 284–5; cf. now Hudson (2019) on Florus); Starr (1980) 298 talks of ‘the early Empire’s fondness for short, concentrated stories’, and Starr (1981) of the early Empire’s ‘trend toward brevity generally’.

7 Glauthier (2009) 263; cf. Park (2017) 153.

8 Lobur (2007).

9 Bloomer (2011) 94.

10 Woodman (1975) 282–7.

11 Ker (2009); and see now Moss (forthcoming) on the water-clock as a sign of enslavement.

12 See Duncan (2021) 20–1 on Pliny the Elder’s time-saver table of contents (and cf. Howley (2019) on ancient ToC’s in general), Henderson (2002) 112 on Columella’s highly ‘consultable’ text, and for the overall improvements in book design heightening accessibility of information at a glance see Schröder (1999). Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for spotlighting these comparisons.

13 Whitton (2019) 198–9.

being always and ever on *someone else's time*. And yet, as with all forms of political constraint, the experience can also become aesthetically regenerative: having to work within a system throws up creative ways of getting around it. Brevity is at once symptom and treatment.

My method in this article will be a rough and tumble comparison of two contemporary (-ish) texts written in and around the Tiberian period: Phaedrus' *Fables* and Velleius Paterculus' *Compendium of Roman History*. I've chosen this diptych because it represents a pair that couldn't be further apart, generically speaking that is: Aesopic verse fables on the one hand, universal breviarium-style history on the other. But their dissonance in terms of genre underscores their eerie resonance in terms of aesthetics and politics; in other words, what divides them is the dramatic backdrop to the bold relief pattern of what they share. And what they share, in my view, is a remarkable commitment to brevity and pace as ways of expressing the constraints of political subjection. This means of expression comes, I'd argue, through the channel of what we might call slave temporality: the everyday suffering of a lack of control over one's own time; the sense of having the clock set in head office, of having to fall in with an arbitrary and alien beat of the drum that marks out a rhythm of speech and movement that you would never choose yourself. First I'll go through the cluster of slavery, brevity and velocity in Phaedrus; then I'll extend the argument by pushing the relationship between brevity, pressure and Caesarism in Velleius Paterculus; and finally, I'll close with some brief remarks on what the political valences of verse and prose might be in an early imperial Roman scheme of freedom vs constraint, which is a dialectic closely tied to length vs brevity. In this coda, I'll argue that verse itself could be felt as a form of writing inherently expressive of constraint, while prose was once upon a time identified with freedom; and that what we see in Velleius is nothing short of an attempt to inject the constraints of poetry into the world of prose. Even historiography – that most aristocratic of genres – now fallen in scuttling step with the slave.

Running writing

Before getting our hands dirty with the texts, some rolling-up of the methodological sleeves is warranted. Up until recently, the dominant model of understanding the relationship between slave/freedman culture and elite culture in Rome has been something like a trickle-down effect: elites generate the big forms of literature and art, slaves and freedmen ape them, e.g. by producing funerary art that looks like a sad parody of elite excellence.¹⁴ Nowadays, however, the tables are turning a little. Amy Richlin's 2017 book on Plautus, for example, makes a serious and convincing attempt to treat Plautine comedy as an artistic product made by and for slaves, which fact inflects its production and composition in an essential and structural way.¹⁵ Closer to home for our purposes,

¹⁴ On the assumptions of this 'trickle-down' model: MacLean (2018) 18–19.

¹⁵ Richlin (2017).

Rose MacLean's 2018 book *Freed Slaves and Roman Imperial Culture* argues that there was a dynamic exchange between slave/freed and elite cultures during the early Empire: not so much trickle-down and scraping the barrel of leftovers, but a world in which slave/freed and elite were constantly borrowing from and reacting to one another; in MacLean's terms, 'a feedback loop, whereby aristocrats appropriated strategies that ex-slaves undertook in response to societal pressures'.¹⁶ Feel that metaphor of pressure on you yet again. More specifically, MacLean argues in chapter 2 that the experience of slavery started chiming more and more with the Roman elite as they faced their own incipient negotiation with the absolute power of principate. This partly explains the emergence and appeal of a relatively obscure author like Phaedrus, whose fables deal with the horrific consequences of slave–master power relations.¹⁷ But it might also help explain why authors of this period start reaching so unanimously for an aesthetic of briefness and quickness. In my view, these authors are raiding the playbook of the slave, whose special skills always demanded cutting oneself down to size to fit the master's brief. But in textual brevity and rush, there is also a sense that you might outrun the master, a small recuperation of agency right at the moment in which it is most effectively eliminated. Let me explain.

As scholars of African–American slavery such as Michael Hanchard have pointed out (cf. epigraph), whatever other unspeakable things slavery is, it is also the most total deprivation of the right to govern one's own time in the history of human economic systems, which have frankly never been very good at enshrining that right.¹⁸ The control of time was a key technique of enslaver managerial strategy, which generated either a stressful excess of hurry, or a painful surfeit of inertia. Joshel and Petersen beat not about the bush:

In a house or villa, a gesture with the thumb or the snapping of fingers by the master was supposed to put the slave in motion immediately. In general, domestic servants were expected to hustle to obey an order or to complete their assigned tasks; otherwise they stood around waiting.¹⁹

It's perhaps worth noting that while this article focusses on the rush, we await a full treatment of the flip side: the inertial downtime of the enslaved (see also n. 51 below). But this general principle of temporal constraint is a condition of all brands of enslavement. In its most brutal form – say the plantation slavery of the American south – masters or their proxies would set the pace of work with which slaves would have to fall in. But one effective means of infrapolitical resistance, as famously documented in James Scott's *Hidden Transcripts*, would be literally to slow down your work, to drag your feet and

¹⁶ MacLean (2018) 74.

¹⁷ MacLean (2018) 74, 102. Cf. Sciarrino (2010).

¹⁸ Hanchard (1999).

¹⁹ Joshel and Petersen (2014) 43.

thereby reclaim some ownership of time.²⁰ While we shouldn't blindly or blanket assimilate Roman slavery to that of the American south, to me it seems an obvious possibility that the most clichéd figure of the slave at Rome, the stock character of the *senius currens*, is fundamentally about the same loss of time and rhythm, the same forfeiture of metronomic autonomy.²¹ The slave in a constant huff could well be a distortion of a lived social reality that consigned slaves always to rush around in service to the master's timetable.²² Rush or be thrashed. Alternatively, run for your life as the *fugitiuus*, the runaway.²³ There were solemn and chilling reasons why slaves got a bad wrap for running to and fro all the time; nothing says 'societal pressure' like a brandished lash. And nothing says 'pushback' like the impulse to slow things down, or, in desperate circumstances, bolt.

This phenomenon is captured by Plautus (see epigraph) and discussed of late by Timothy O'Sullivan:²⁴ while masters are free to move at their own moderate pace, slaves are constantly running around trying to keep up. Even Plautus himself is swept up into a hurry in Horace's quick precis, i.e. the author is turned into the huffing slave of whom he writes (*Plautus ad exemplar Siculi properare Epicharmi*, *Epist.* 2.1.58). This distinction between slave and free at the level of motion and pace is quite striking,²⁵ but perhaps not quite enough to push for a hard historical connection between slavery and the literary/aesthetic programme of brevity. When quick motion becomes metaphor, and gets applied to writing, the game changes. But to end this preamble, I would like to offer one brief and concrete reality of enslaved experience at this particular historical moment, a reality that I hope will serve as the missing link to clinch the slavery–brevity nexus, or at least ground its possibility. For it is precisely at this time that secretarial slaves of the Roman elite start to be properly engaged in the cognitively demanding business of shorthand dictation. This is nothing if not the sport of mandated *abbreviation*, of writing in a rush to keep up with the master's tongue. Tiro – the slave-freedman avatar of the transition between Republic and principate – supposedly invented the first proper Latin system of shorthand,²⁶ which soon caught on and rolled out for other secretarial slaves. By the time the epitaph of Xanthias was written (*CIL* XIII.8355),²⁷ the trope of the rush-jobbing slave stenographer was well and truly recognisable as conceit:

20 For this and other forms of 'infrapolitical' resistance among slaves and other subordinate groups see Scott (1990) chapter 7. On slowdowns in particular see Hanchard (1999) 254; Johnson (2000) 492.

21 For a brilliant account of the leveraging of 'chronometric violence' as a strategy of domination over the enslaved in the ancient world see Moss (forthcoming).

22 Although see Richlin (2017) 214–16, noting that the running slave routine in Plautus is often an assertion of momentary 'liberty', and a chance to knock superiors out of the way.

23 On running away as an act of temporal repossession among Afro-Caribbean slaves see Johnson (2000) 492.

24 O'Sullivan (2011) 17–18. See also Fitzgerald (2000) 15.

25 Building on Whitton (2019) 246, I wonder if this distinction also explains the rhythm of long–short in Plin. *Ep.* 1.20 and 21 – the first the longest letter in the book, pushing elite discursive luxuriation over brevity; the second a real quickie about slaves.

26 Fitzgerald (2000) 14; Di Renzo (2000) 160.

27 See Courtney (1995) 131, who moots that the inscription could have been written with Ausonius, *In notarium in mind*.

hoc carmen, haec ara, hic cinis
 pueri sepulcrum est Xantiae,
 qui morte acerba raptus est,
 iam doctus in **compendia**
 tot literarum et nominum
 notare **currenti** stilo
 quod lingua **currentis** diceret.
 iam nemo superaret legens,
 iam uoce erili coeperat
 ad omne dictatum volans
 aurem uocari at proximam.
 heu morte propera concidit
 arcana qui solus sui
 sciturus domini fuit.

This poem, this altar, this ash is the grave of Xanthias the slave, taken off by bitter death, already an expert at abbreviating all those letters and words, able to take down with a running pen the words of the running tongue. Already no one could top him at reading; already he was beginning to be called as his master's closest ear, hopping to everything that was dictated by his voice. Tragic that he fell in hurried death, one who would have known his master's secrets.²⁸

William Fitzgerald has already discussed this passage beautifully,²⁹ so I'll keep my comments brief. The main point to note is that the comic cliché of the running slave is here transferred to the slave-stenographer's pen, an implement that must itself run to match the pace of the master's tongue-trot. For this kind of literate-secretarial slave, the writing had to rush, and the key operation enabling the maintenance of a cracking pace was *abbreviation*: transforming letters and words into condensed cipher, *compendia*, shorthand. From Tiro on, a key subjectivity-sculpting experience of the slave in elite Roman households, then, was precisely the experience of *running in writing*. The stress of serving the master's voice, of transcribing him faithfully, of condensing his words at pace. But also the danger, the anxiety, even the satisfaction of *outrunning* the master – of beating him at the game he has set, as this Martial takeaway perfectly encapsulates:³⁰

Notarius
 currant uerba licet, manus est uelocior illis:
 nondum lingua suum, dextra peregit opus.

²⁸ Text from Courtney (1995) (poem 131); translation my own.

²⁹ Fitzgerald (2000) 14–15.

³⁰ See Fitzgerald (2021) 245–6.

(Mart. Ep. 14.208)

Stenographer

Words may run, but the hand is quicker than them:

The tongue hasn't finished its job by the time the right hand has.³¹

I contend that it was partly this process of stenographic abbreviation under duress, as well as its assimilation as an act of active creativity within constraint, that helped detonate the explosion of brevity in the early Roman principate. We could even speculate that the ex-slave Phaedrus learned his brief trade in a similar situation.³² Time then to see what our first *scriptor currens* has to say about it.

Slaving time

Our first convergence of brevity, pace and subjection: Phaedrus' *Fables*. This is an enigmatic corpus of Aesop-based verse animal fables knocked up, we think, either some time in the late Tiberian period after the fall of Sejanus in 31 CE, or – depending on how much store you set by a brief non-reference to Phaedrus in Seneca's *Consolatio ad Polybium* – after 43 CE.³³ Phaedrus is a maddening case not only for dating, but also for authorship; debate still rages as to whether he is indeed who he or the manuscript says he is (a Thracian ex-slave of Augustus), or whether, as in Ted Champlin's famous view, he is an elite Roman lawyer acting the part of a holy fool of a freedman fabulist.³⁴ This dispute is a little inconvenient for our purposes, to say the least, because whether we pick Phaedrus as genuine ex-slave or masquerading aristocrat affects the text's authenticity as a document of slave or freedman subjectivity.³⁵ For what it's worth, Joe Howley's [forthcoming](#) work on Phaedrus makes a very convincing case for the latter.³⁶ But what I would say is that even as elite-refracted rays, this collection still sheds light on a deep association in early imperial Roman culture between slavery, brevity and hurry.

One of the striking features of Phaedrus' weird poetics is that he embeds his fables in structural units that are mostly bookended by first-person prologues and epilogues, as if he were opening and closing his own comic performance. The iambic *senarii* in which the fables are pitched also help us make the connection: this was of course the bog-standard default metre of Roman comedy. It was cast as the metre of *pace*: rapid fire, a

31 Translation mine.

32 See Howley ([forthcoming](#)).

33 Champlin (2005) 102.

34 Champlin (2005).

35 While other recent work has bought into and extended the masquerading theory of Champlin (2005) (Geue (2019) chapter 4), I note with relish some rumbles of resistance to it (e.g. MacLean (2018) 96–7; Howley ([forthcoming](#))).

36 Howley ([forthcoming](#)).

pes citus, as Horace calls it in *Ars poetica* 252.³⁷ So Phaedrus has already picked a verse form that supposedly enables quick expression.³⁸ Most of the time, this metrical commitment to rush is correlated with an equal dedication to brevity, both in theory and practice. In several places,³⁹ Phaedrus flaunts that brevity explicitly. And he usually practises what he preaches, trotting out little poem-fables that are on average no more than 10–15 lines a piece. But, ironically, the place where he sets up a deep theoretical scaffolding for this brevity is also the place where he most outrageously flouts his own law. In the prologue to book 3, a ‘fable of fable’ spun out to a whopping 63 lines in length, Phaedrus gets close to what we might call historicising the origin of fable in the necessities of slave figured speech:⁴⁰

Nunc, fabularum cur sit inuentum genus,
breui docebo. seruitus obnoxia,
 quia quae uolebat non audebat dicere,
 affectus proprios in fabellas transtulit,
 calumniamque fictis elusit iocis. (Phaedrus, *Fables* 3 Prol. 33–7)

Now I’ll explain briefly why the genre of fables was invented. Punishment-prone slavery – since it never ventured to say what it wanted to say – converted its private feelings into fables, and dodged accusations by making up jokes.⁴¹

Slavery’s readiness for punishment forces its forms of speech into weird and wonderful byways, wherein the slave must furtively communicate his true feelings; it is almost as if Phaedrus writes the point into the tiniest details of word-choice, opting for a cloudy and abstract *seruitus* over an actual agent, *seruus*. But the main thing to focus on here is the way that this distorted slave speech is somehow implicitly related to the promise of brevity, *breui docebo*. I would say that the warping of language by the fear of punishment, a warping that results most obviously in what we would call figured speech, also gives rise to a *need to be brief*. The master’s gaze gives us enforced obscurity and indirection of animal anecdotes, yes, of course; but it also legislates brevity as *necessity*, or brevity as *service*.⁴² And while Phaedrus is no longer technically meant to be a slave, we can see the extension of master–slave relations run into the brevity mandates of the patron–client relationship. Earlier in the fable, Phaedrus has told us how little time his new patron

37 On the association of iambs with fast pace see Morgan (2010) 135–8.

38 Although we should also bear in mind the literary history tying the *senarius* to Callimachean iambus, giving us a more of a ‘walking’ metre, a *musa pedestris*: see Cavarzere (2001) 210–12.

39 1.10.3, 2 Prol. 12, 3 Epil. 8, 4.5.2, 4 Epil. 7.

40 Ahl (1984)’s concept of figured speech comes up trumps in scholarship on Phaedrus: see Jennings (2009) 228; Libby (2010) 547; Sciarrino (2010) 242. See Richlin (2017) 338–9 on this passage as paradigmatic of slave ‘double-speech’. For a slightly more redemptive reading of the capabilities of slave speech in this fable emergence myth see Bloomer (1997) 106.

41 Text from Perry’s Loeb; translations my own.

42 This idea of brevity as service comes through particularly clearly in 3 Epil.; see Bloomer (1997) 74.

Eutyclus, the addressee of the book, had to spend on reading him. So Phaedrus is cornered into being brief in order to be read. The irony is that he's not being particularly brief right at this moment.⁴³ I think in a sense he's actually playing the running slave in this routine, through the snappy clash of brief theory combined with lengthy practice; the *seruus currens* was characterised not only by his running, but by his cack-handed attempts to convey information, which tumbled spectacularly into an over-verbose mess.⁴⁴ It's a virtuoso performance – but it doesn't mean the underpinning anxieties weren't real as can be.

At this point, a brief literary-historical sidenote wouldn't go astray. Many have pointed out the connections between Phaedrus and the Horace of the *Satires*.⁴⁵ But commonalities in persona mask a crucial difference in *pace*. While Horace leans into his *musa pedestris*, dispensing long-winded satires in which the movement of the poet is characterised by digression, interruption, delay,⁴⁶ aimless ambling (Sat. 1.6.III: *quacumque libido est, incedo solus*; 113: *pererro*; 122: *uagor*; 128: *otior*), Phaedrus maintains the background pressure of a *seruus currens*. Horace, son of a freedman slinking into Octavian's good books, inscribes his nascent autonomy by taking it slow; Phaedrus, actual freedman of Augustus, is still forced to apply the verbal curb. Independence walks; dependence runs. The transition from triumviral period to fully fledged principate is almost inscribed via the differing speeds and aesthetics of these two closely related genres, satire and fable: the first with the authorisation to take it slow, the second with the imperative to keep up the pace. It is only when Phaedrus allows himself a brief holiday from brevity that we see how far fable has to go to claim walking rights.

As we saw just now, Phaedrus does disrupt brevity and slow the pace in 3 Prologue, one of his most ambitious poems, featuring a self-important autobiographical frame aiming to ape the big Augustan poets.⁴⁷ In the comic clash between a suspension of *brevitas* in practice and its maintenance in theory, the 'humour' of the running slave happens. But my next example is the only place where Phaedrus departs from his commitment to brevity both theoretically and practically. In 3.10, Phaedrus writes about a tricky freedman who almost succeeded in framing a wife with the murder of her husband and son, until Augustus himself stepped in to solve the puzzle with his formidable legal acumen. Our freedman begins the tale with a misdirection of usual brief intentions (*breviter*, 2).⁴⁸ But then he indexes the seriousness of his panegyric to Augustus the wily, fabulist-like interpreter, precisely by suspending his aesthetic of *brevitas* and going big dog with another sixty-line (!) fable.⁴⁹ He wraps it up:

43 This has a lot to do with Phaedrus' upsize poetic ambitions in this fable, as well as the claim to turn the Callimachean track into a road (3 Prol. 38), on which see Henderson (2001) 60–1, 82 and Glauthier (2009) 263–4.

44 Lowe (2009) 226.

45 See Cavarzere (2001) 207; Champlin (2005) 109–10, 117–20; Glauthier (2009) 254–255; Lefkowitz (2016) 490; Park (2017) 148–231.

46 See Gowers (1993).

47 Henderson (2001) 60–1.

48 As Henderson (2001) 41 notes, often this announcement of brevity marks a suspect 'extra length'.

49 See Henderson (2001) 37 for the brevity ring structure here.

haec exsecutus sum propterea pluribus,
breuitate nimia quoniam quosdam offendimus. (Phaedrus, *Fables* 3.10.59–60)

So I've related this at length, because I've annoyed certain people with an excess of brevity.

Above I suggested that *breuitas* could be construed as an act of service to the busy patron, but here we see Phaedrus' real 'master' deforming the aesthetic in the other direction. For if the master – i.e. Augustus, supposedly Phaedrus' former owner – demands it, *breuitas* must be suspended;⁵⁰ he is the one with the power to knock the literary form out of whack, to make Phaedrian *breuitas* bend outwards and upwards towards *pluribus*.⁵¹ We will see this force of Caesar as ultimate master blessed with the ability to shift the aesthetic goalposts later in Velleius Paterculus too – mark it well, the power sets the pace.

The modulation of scope and pace to suit the master's rhythm isn't just about the needs of proportioning in accordance with Augustan panegyric, however. It seems to be much more deeply soldered into the theory of Phaedrian fable, and there are two pieces in particular which really ram this home. The first is the story about the mule and the fly:

Musca in temone sedit et mulam increpans
 'quam **tarda** es' inquit 'non uis **citius** progredi?
 uide ne dolone collum conpungam tibi.'
 respondit illa 'uerbis non moueor tuis;
sed istum timeo sella qui prima sedens 5
cursum flagello temperat lento meum,
 et ora frenis continet spumantibus.
 quapropter aufer friuolam insolentiam;
nam et ubi tricandum et ubi sit currendum scio.'
 hac derideri fabula merito potest 10
 qui sine uirtute uanas exercet minas. (Phaedrus, *Fables* 3.6)

A fly perched on the tongue of a wagon and took a mule to task: 'You're so **slow**' he said, 'why not go **faster**? Watch out or I'll prick your neck with my sting.' The mule replied: 'I'm unmoved by *your* words; but I **am afraid of the guy who's sitting in the front seat regulating my pace with his tough whip**, checking my mouth with a drooly curb. So stop your stupid swagger – I **know when it's the moment to shuffle, or when**

⁵⁰ Henderson (2001) 61–2 (cf. Glauthier (2009) 263) notes the humour and pose in this final ironic apology; true, but my basic point is to note that the suspension of brevity is rooted as an act of service to the (ex-)master.

⁵¹ On the other hand, there is a significant strand of declamatory fiction and indulgence in this episode, and Phaedrus is also piggybacking on Augustus for authority – see the excellent Libby (2010) 554.

to trot.’ With this fable, you could rightly tease someone who vaunts empty threats without real substance.

Bear in mind that the mule or donkey in Phaedrus is often a stand-in for the slave, who is the long-suffering pack-horse of the human race.⁵² Here, the little fly makes a vain attempt to hurry the mule up with threats of bite; the mule remains unflapped, telling us whom he’s really afraid of, the master whipper riding up front. That master very literally controls the mule’s pace with violence or its threat, *cursum flagello temperat lento meum*. As a consequence, the mule has internalised precisely when it’s appropriate to speed up (*currendum*) or slow down, i.e. according to the master’s pump of the break or accelerator. Note also how the whip, symbol of master-power, literally remains ‘slow’ (*lento*) even as it keeps the mule on course. While the servile figure here is not only or exclusively in a rush, we should note that the two extreme possibilities of absolute inactivity or frenetic overactivity harmonise with much testimony about slave experience:⁵³ if you are unable to distribute your own workload, you will inevitably end up having to contend with maddening humps of inertia and slog. No matter which uncomfortable end of the spectrum the beat may fall at, yet again, the master is the governing metronome.⁵⁴

For Phaedrus, I would wager that *brevitas* is the verbal equivalent of being on the trot, under a master’s thumb. The moments at which he explicitly flaunts his *brevitas* make that *brevitas* a form of service to the patron or reader:⁵⁵ in other words, he is attempting to make things short for his superior’s benefit. The shortness is precisely a manifestation of the pressure to please which carries over from the shake of the master’s whip, his gestural or actual violence as the ultimate motivational force. At both 2 Prol. 12 and 3 Epil. 8, for example, Phaedrus frames his *brevitas* as a kind of service to reader or patron, and in the latter case he hopes for a monetary pat on the back in return. Just as fable’s brevity is made a historical consequence of the slave’s restricted speech and limited time, so it continues to be of use for the patronage economy in which our freed Phaedrus is consigned to the hustle. The injunction to brevity, in other words, comes from the patron at the other end, who is an updated version of the master.

Another fable from book 3, this time dealing with the slave-fabulist extraordinaire, Aesop himself, approaches this process of master-set brevity and rush from a different

52 Another mule fable at 2.7; on the donkey as stand-in for the trickster slave, and identification of the animal with the genre itself, see Park (2017) 70–9. The *locus classicus* for the donkey as spirit animal of the slave is Plautus’ *Asinaria* – on the iconic scene in which the slaves ride the master see Richlin (2017) 217–18.

53 While this article is interested mostly in rush, it’s worth a note that ‘waiting’ is also a key feature of slave temporality: Hanchard (1999) 253–6.

54 We could compare the distributed pace of the enslaved *ardalio* (‘fusspot’) of Phaedrus 2.5 – huffing and puffing up front (*concursans*, 2; *anhelans*, 3; *praecurrit*, 18) – with the master Tiberius, travelling at a steady march (*perambulante*, 14) and deeply unmoved by the antics ahead. This fable makes the brutal point that all the energy of the rush job goes to waste, for the master won’t free you just like that (*multo maioris alapae mecum uenunt* ‘with me, slaps of freedom cost a damn sight more’, 25). Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

55 For brevity as reader-focussed service cf. Val. Max. 1. Pref.; Vitruvius 5 Pref. 5; cf. Starr (1981) 173.

angle. Here the link between the master's pressure, verbal brevity and physical rush is made starkly clear. In fable 3.19, Aesop is forced to improvise in sourcing fire for dinner, after his master has ordered him to prepare it earlier than usual. He scoots around the town and rushes back home, but gets waylaid by a busybody chatterbox, whom he disposes of with a killer zinger. Note particularly the economy of time set in motion by the master's arbitrary decision at the beginning, which governs Aesop's motion and speech for the rest of the fable:

Aesopus domino solus cum esset familia,
parare cenam iussus est maturius.
 ignem ergo quaerens aliquot lustravit domus,
 tandemque inuenit ubi lacernam accenderet,
 tum circumeunti fuerat quod iter **longius**
 effecit **breuius**: namque recta per forum
 coepit redire. et quidam e turba garrulus:
 'Aesope, medio sole quid tu lumine?'
 'hominem' inquit 'quaero', et abiit **festinans** domum.
 hoc si molestus ille ad animum rettulit,
 sensit profecto se hominem non uisum seni,
intempestiue qui occupato adluserit. (Phaedrus, *Fables* 3.19)

When Aesop was his master's only help, **he was told to get dinner ready earlier than usual**. He tried several houses for fire, and at last found somewhere to spark his lamp. Since he had taken too **long** and roundabout a way going out, he took a **shortcut** back, and made to return straight through the forum. Some smart-arse from the crowd said: 'Aesop, what's with the lamp in the middle of the day?' 'I'm looking for a human' said Aesop, and headed home **in a rush**. If that idiot took this to heart, he'd definitely see that he wasn't a human in Aesop's eyes – someone who bantered with a busy person **at the wrong time**.

Because Aesop is the only slave his master has in this fable, the power relations stand out in special bold. By the caprice of the *dominus*, Aesop has to get moving quickly, and struggles to complete the task, presumably because it's too early for other neighbouring houses to be on the boil. This annoying and drawn-out work on the way out means Aesop has to really rein it in on the way back. The temporal economy is zero-sum, because Aesop has a given amount of time to complete the task, and exceeds that time on pain of whip. Johannes Park has noted the key marker **breuius** here, which surely aligns Aesop with Phaedrus' poetics.⁵⁶ But no one to my knowledge has noted how this fable goes some way to *explaining* those poetics, and to rooting them in a socio-political causality. Aesop takes a shortcut under pressure; and his manner of speaking follows suit, as the *garrulus* fires a whole trimeter at

⁵⁶ Park (2017) 62.

him, which Aesop skewers with the famous quicker quip, *hominem quaero*. Aesop has no room for manoeuvre here, no space, verbal or physical, to mess around. When political economy governs verbal and bodily economies, efficiency is key. Aesop's brevity and briskness are pushed by the ultimate incentive: keeping the master off his back.

And yet while the verbal economy is born of hard necessity, there is also something impressive about the way this consummate tricky slave makes use of it. In a mere two words – very average words at that, recycled from Diogenes the Cynic⁵⁷ – he manages to land an oversize blow that in some sense takes revenge for the whole miserable condition of enslavement. By saying 'I'm looking for a human', Aesop effectively occupies the role of policing the boundaries of human and non-human, a job normally monopolised by the master precisely to rule the slave beyond the pale. Here Aesop's quip restores him to humanity, while denying it to the *garrulus* who tries to slow him down. (It also makes the meta-point that humans have gone AWOL from this here 'human zoo' – for the genre trucks primarily in the animal).⁵⁸ This may be a displaced form of aggression we would rather see directed at the master, the ultimate author of Aesop's rush. But as a punchline, it shows that brevity can end as modest power redeemed, even if it starts as constraint imposed. Brevity, again, as symptom and remedy.

Let's recap for a moment. I've tried to show so far that Phaedrus' poetics of extreme brevity and high velocity are cast as responses to pressure from the top. Usually, this *seruus currens* turned *libertus currens* is in a rush to service the needs of the person setting the time, i.e. master, patron, reader. But in the special case of 3.10, brevity is *suspended* under the gravitational pull of master Augustus, who prefers time be spent on himself. That is, present and past potentates are the only ones able to slow Phaedrian fable down, but it is also due to them and their looming impatience that Phaedrus is running and talking so fast in the first place. Two fables make that situation clear: the whippable mule of 3.6, and the cross-town bustle of Aesop in 3.19. From this sum of fables, we see that time is the master's game, and that slavery is a state of stressful acceleration and verbal-self-curbing in which the countdown is always on. But from that stress is born the agency of verbal innovation, of creative ways of sticking to time. It is not only the feet or the hands of the slave that can outrun the limits imposed upon them. It is also the tongue.

On Caesar's service, on Caesar's time

The marriage between slavery and brevity, as well as that between service and temporary suspension of brevity, is fairly clear in Phaedrus. Now for the more challenging part of the argument. For the strange thing is that Velleius Paterculus, an author writing just before Phaedrus in the genre of universal history, housed about a million miles from fable, employs the same obsessively observed poetics of brevity. Velleius is famous for

⁵⁷ Diogenes Laertius 6.41.

⁵⁸ Thanks to the anonymous reader for nodding to this.

repeating ad nauseam how the brief compass of his work hems him in and prevents him from going into detail on many things; *brevitas* and *festinatio* are two big buzzwords tied to this.⁵⁹ The major difference from Phaedrus, as I see it, is in the official causality behind this brevity. Whereas Phaedrus subtly implies that brevity comes from socio-political squeeze, Velleius seems to suggest that the miniature dimensions and stringent constraints of his work's form box him into a chronic hustle. Put briefly: in Phaedrus, the master sets the time, and the literary form follows suit; in Velleius, time is the master, and the literary form rules the content, decides what goes in and what stays out. Although, as we will see below, such a formulation becomes more complicated as the agents of narrative control in fact converge with Phaedrus' in 3.10, and both authors end up serving the same masters.

Velleius Paterculus is not antiquity's most fêted, read or even gently raided author, so a few basics as a refresher first. Velleius worked his way up the ranks as a military man in Augustus' last years to become a fairly accomplished senator under Tiberius. His only surviving work – the *Compendium of Roman History* – is a two-book burn through the whole of world history down to the present, signed off (we think) in 30 CE.⁶⁰ The work is fragmentary, particularly book 1, which is acephalous and has a gaping hole seared into its middle. And given that we have lost the beginning, we don't quite know where Velleius chose to begin, nor do we have his preface, where he presumably set out his programme and touched on his watchword scruples of *brevitas* and *festinatio*. What we do know is that Velleius filled out his universal history like a kind of present-centric black hole, where the density of detail increases in direct proportion with the proximity to the present: he starts off tearing through history at a rate of knots and giving only cursory information, but gradually slows down a bit, so that the main mass clusters teleologically around Tiberius' principate.

The slow-down, however, is relative rather than absolute; and Velleius invokes the brief span of his work, its status as a *transcursum* or a 'run-through',⁶¹ even towards the end, often as a way of digging himself out of the obligation to talk about sensitive topics like civil war or Augustus' death.⁶² This shrunken form of the work becomes the ultimate alibi or mode of apology for Velleius. It gets him out of any number of narrative pickles, and in this way the text oddly resembles Ovid's *Fasti*, the poem of the year, which often has recourse to the self-imposed calendrical form to help get Ovid out of talking about certain things, or justify why he has to talk about something at a particular time.⁶³ In fact in Ovid's *Fasti* – a work which also takes major cues from didactic – the poetics of obligation expressed by didactic's

59 On these flagships of the Velleian programme see Woodman (1975) 278–80, 282–6; Syme (1978) 60; Lobur (2007); Bloomer (2011) 94–5, 100–2.

60 See Woodman (1975) 275–82.

61 The first Roman historian to use this term of their work: Starr (1981) 166.

62 Avoiding too much civil war talk with brevity: 2.48; Augustus' death: 2.124. Cf. also Bloomer (2011) 105 on Velleius' long *recusatio* of Pharsalus horrors at 2.52.

63 Geue (2010).

habitual and frequent gerundive is turned from the reader to the author; there are certain things that *have to be mentioned* at a certain place, or *have to not be mentioned* because of time constraints and calendrical form, and the author often invokes these decisions as handcuffs of obligation, narrative actions he is simply forced to take.⁶⁴ One example might be celebrating Augustus' title of *pater patriae* on 5 February: *haec mihi praecipuo est ore canenda dies* (Fast. 2.124); or another when Ovid reigns himself in from a digression and turns back to the topic at hand of the *bona dea*: *quo feror? Augustus mensis mihi carminis huius | ius habet: interea Diua canenda Bona est* (Fast. 5.147–8). In Velleius, the process is similar: the constraints of having to churn through ages and ages of history in a relatively short word limit mean that the author is constantly boxing himself into corners of including or excluding certain details, which inclusions and exclusions are often marked with the necessity of the gerundive.⁶⁵ These authors, that is, both make themselves sweat under time constraints.

When compared with Phaedrus the ex-slave, Velleius' aristocratic position certainly inflects his use of brevity differently. As mentioned above, John Lobur has written nicely of Velleian *brevitas* and *festinatio* as a means of asserting lordly control over unruly (and massive) material. What Lobur doesn't take into account, however, is that these aesthetic principles are presented as *enforced* rather than chosen. We might choose to 'see through' the Velleian rhetoric and write it off as a strategy of humble brag: officially, the tiny dimensions of my work force me to keep things short and hurry up, but in practice I'm showing you how good I am at boiling centuries of information into a few tight paragraphs. But this is only half the story; or at least it only puts the accent on one of two equally stressable syllables. What I want to show below is that brevity is more a device which registers a process of dialectical struggle between external constraint and individual agency under a fresh principate. For the new aristocrat, it is a vehicle for expressing both the 'opportunities' of this still-percolating political form (look how much I can do to express/compress the world in a new guise!) and its constraints (this is not my choice). It is the same essential dialectic as we see in Phaedrus – but inevitably expressed differently, through the mediation of a distinct class perspective.

As with Phaedrus above, so with Velleius: some of the most interesting moments for scrutinising his practice of brevity occur when he's conspicuously *departing* from the commitment, i.e. 'allowing himself' a digression and pause from the relentless pace of compendium history. Right at the end of book 1, there is an indulgent aside through which Velleius advances what we might call his theory of the historical compression of human talent. Velleius here proposes that the history of intellectual production comes in bizarre flurries, so that big talents are always clustered together in waves of simultaneity.

64 For time-conscious narration in the *Fasti* and the imperative to keep on calendrical track, see Geue (2010) 112–116; on the importance of *praeteritio* as master trope of the *Fasti*, Geue (2010) 116–18.

65 For common gerundive constructions like *notandum est* to justify inclusion of content in Velleius see 2.11, 42.1, 52.4, 67.1, 99.4, 103.4, 124.1 (see Woodman's comments ad 67.1). Cf. also *dicenda sint*, 2.55; *sentendum ac praedicandum*, 98; *mandandum est*, 112; *deflenda est*, 119; *finiendum ... est*, 131.

It's worth quoting this section at some length for two reasons: first, because it gives us a nice initial example of Velleian *breuitas* and festination in action, in a moment of their brief suspension; secondly, because I think it illuminates Velleius' views on how literary works are made, and what sorts of 'pressures' they arise from:

cum haec particula operis uelut formam propositi excesserit, quamquam intellego mihi in hac tam praecipiti festinatione, quae me rotae proniue gurgitis ac uerticis modo nusquam patitur consistere, paene magis necessaria praetereunda quam superuacua amplectenda, nequeo tamen temperare mihi, quin rem saepe agitatam animo meo neque ad liquidum ratione perductam signem stilo. quis enim abunde mirari potest, quod eminentissima cuiusque professionis ingenia in eandem formam et in idem artati temporis congruere spatium, et quemadmodum clausa capso alioue saepto diversi generis animalia nihilo minus separata alienis in unum quodque corpus congregantur, ita cuiusque clari operis capacia ingenia in similitudine et temporum et profectuum semet ipsa ab aliis separauerunt? una neque multorum annorum spatio diuisa aetas per diuini spiritus uiros, Aeschylum Sophoclen Euripiden, inlustrauit tragoediam ... adeo quidem **artatum angustiis temporum, ut nemo memoria dignus alter ab altero uideri nequuerint. (Velleius Paterculus, *Historiae* I.16)**

Even though this section of my work has already as good as exceeded the intended form, and although I realise that in my hectic rush, which, in the manner of a moving wheel or a whirlpool or eddy running downstream, never lets me stop, I almost have to pass over vital content more than include unnecessary material, but I can't hold myself back from marking with my pen a topic often turned over in my mind but never refined into clarity with reasoning. For who can marvel enough that the most outstanding intellects in every field come together in the same form and **within the same narrow window of time, and how, just as animals of different species, if enclosed in the same pen or other cage,** still sequester themselves from other kinds and flock together in their own group, so intellects capable of outstanding work of every sort have sequestered themselves from the rest through overlap of time and success? Just one age, a span of very few years, made tragedy famous, through three men of divine spirit, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides ... [Same deal with old comedy, new comedy, philosophy] ... **They appeared in such a narrow corner of constrained time** that no two of them worth a mention could not have seen each other.⁶⁶

Velleius here talks about the form of his work and his attendant narrative haste as a pressing external force like a wheel or a stream; something he is powerless to stop, something he

66 Translation mine.

cannot control⁶⁷ (*temperare* – recall the same verb used of the master’s pacing in Phaedrus’ mule fable above). Nevertheless, the subject of this cluster theory is so powerful that it manages to retard the rollicking *festinatio* for a second. As Velleius sets out his proposition, the language of confinement hits us hard: the clusters of talent are squeezed into tiny space-times, *artati ... temporis, artatum temporum*; that participle, *artatus*, is also used at 2.86 to describe the form of Velleius’ work, its highly restricted scope (*artati operis*). But note also the crucial animal metaphor to describe these dynamics: humans are like penned animals, generally cooped up, but limiting themselves even more by sticking to their kind. Moments in history for Velleius cage certain kinds of animals together; history implicitly becomes a kind of encloser, shutting minds together like farm flock. Time, like Velleius’ work, is itself narrow and squeezed; and it crushes like-minded humans into the briefest of scopes. As an image supposedly celebrating the concentration of human achievement, it is all a bit bleak; artistic leaps forward are whittled away to become the products of crush, contraction, confinement. Indeed, it is as if intellectual history leaps forward only through spasms of such constraint.

Velleius goes on to show how this same scheme of talent-clustering applies to the Romans as well as the Greeks, from historians, poets and orators, right down to grammarians, clay-workers, painters and sculptors. The principle is always the same: ‘that pre-eminence in each phase of art is confined within the narrowest limits of time’ (*eminentiam cuiusque operis artissimis temporum claustris circumdatam*, 1.17) Time, again, is always and inherently a big squeeze for art. Velleius rationalises this compaction of talent through recourse to a theory of mimesis: *ingenium* gives birth to envy and admiration, which spurs imitation and hence clustering of the same kinds of talent. When art forms exhaust themselves at the point where talent becomes inimitable, artists invent new forms through sheer force of crowding. But the way Velleius describes this process is uncannily reminiscent of the way he himself writes history:

et ut primo ad consequendos quos priores ducimus accendimur, ita ubi aut praeteriri aut aequari eos posse desperauimus, studium cum spe senescit, et quod adsequi non potest, sequi desinit et uelut occupatam relinquens materiam quaerit nouam, praeteritoque eo, in quo eminere non possumus, aliquid, in quo nitamur, conquirimus, sequiturque ut **frequens ac mobilis transitus** maximum perfecti operis impedimentum sit. (Velleius Paterculus, *Histories* 1.17)

And just as initially we are inspired to outdo those we consider above us, so, when we have lost hope in being able to overtake them or match them, our enthusiasm flags with our hope, and stops chasing what it can’t achieve, and, leaving behind the material as if it were all taken, it looks for new material, and moving on from that in which we cannot excel, we search out something else for which to strive, and

67 Cf. Lobur (2007) 218 on the negative inflection of these metaphors, by which Velleius ‘seems to indicate that he regrets his constraints or is anxious about his work’.

the result is that our **regular, desultory skipping** proves the greatest obstacle to a polished work.

The quick passing-over and restless onward movement here sound a lot like the rhythm of Velleius' history, which is itself constantly forced to *praeterire* and *transire* or *transcurrere*.⁶⁸ What I think Velleius is saying here, admittedly quite indirectly, is that this flitting movement (*mobilis transitus*) that stands as an impediment to the fully formed work (*perfecti operis*), namely the impediment that is his own narrative technique, is born from a fundamental inferiority, an inability to measure up to the greats of old. In other words: Livy already did as full a job as possible, so now Velleius is forced to skip over everything quickly, for this is the only form of history left to him. Crowded in the corner and picking up the scraps. Those who can't, rush. There is no identification of the power relationship here as a form of slavery, but it is hard not to read this statement of literary inferiority as also a species of political allegory: under the principate, the aristocracy loses hope of being able to equal or surpass the top job; as a matter of necessity it seeks new routes to achievement, updated *materia*; and this searching sweep for novelty necessitates an unstable flitting about, the desultory rush of *mobilis transitus*. So again, in a different field, brevity becomes the response to lost power. And again, the lack of room to manoeuvre also generates something new and aesthetically interesting. Brevity is both a coping strategy and an aesthetic redemption of a new anxiety. *Frequens ac mobilis transitus* may not lead to a perfect work, but it is a compelling method to watch in action.

This cluster view of history, along with the frequent desultory transitions, is surely related to narrative features of Velleian historiography well documented in recent scholarship. First, Velleius' maligned tendency to 'unit composition' – his 'habit of narrating an event in a single unit at a single place, frequently even in a single sentence'⁶⁹ – is constantly cramming history into discrete spaces without much logical connection. Secondly, Velleius' religiously observed narrative principle of 'at the same time'⁷⁰ makes for an endlessly repeated present in which events are happening at once and simultaneously rather than enjoying causal or diachronic development. This squares with Annika Domainko's recent work on Velleius' 'synoptic' sense of history; in her scheme, Velleius both downplays any jarring historical break between Republic and principate, and reticulates the work almost visually into 'a narrative mosaic of biographies of outstanding men'.⁷¹ Brevity enables synopsis on the micro-level: it allows a swift and simultaneous apprehension of many things virtually happening all at once.⁷² But insofar as brevity is an act of cognitive control, it is also an ideological art: at the highest

68 non praetereundus, 1.2; praetereunda, 1.16; nec praetereundus, 2.9; suo praeteritum loco referatur, 2.68. Velleius calls his work a *transcursum* at 2.55, 86, 99. Cf. *transit admiratio* in the next section, 1.18.

69 Starr (1980) 295.

70 Bloomer (2011) 100.

71 Domainko (2018) 73.

72 On the human body as a form of synoptic brevity in Vitruvius see Oksanish (2019) chapter 3.

magnification, each capsule of Velleius' unit composition is designed to smooth over awkward questions of causality; at the lowest, the erasure of the boundary between Republic and principate makes us think that nothing much has happened in Roman history apart from an unbroken succession of Great Men Doing their Thing. Just as Velleius stores an event in a single sentence, so he stores history in the single individual. His great trick is cramming a lot into a little, an act of discipline to arrest questions being asked about what has led to what; brevity provides a formal alibi to elevate simultaneity over causality.

So far, we have run over examples where the constraints shaping Velleius' work, or the constraints he invokes to shape history, are left in the abstract. As the work moves on, however, these acts of constraint are sometimes assigned to more concrete agents. In book 2, we needn't indulge in any editorialising to supply the hands behind the *transitus*. As I said above, often the brief dimensions of Velleius' work offer him a get-out clause, a reason not to talk about something, e.g. swerving out of the full account of Actium at 2.86. But very occasionally, certain agents are allowed to come on and knock Velleius' strict form out of kilter. Two examples of this are, surprise surprise, the first two Caesars: Julius and Octavian. At the point of his first consulship, the first Caesar leaps off the page and literally forces Velleius to slow the hell down and take his time with it:

secutus deinde est consulatus C. Caesaris, qui scribenti manum iniicit et quamlibet festinantem in se morari cogit. (Velleius Paterculus, *Historiæ* 2.41)

Then came the consulship of Gaius Caesar, who now lays claim to me as I write, and forces me to linger on him, despite my haste.

And linger he certainly does: Stephen Oakley has pointed out that the next sentence is one of the most gorgeously and lengthily periodic in all of Velleius.⁷³ At this moment of Caesarian manhandling, we almost have a *poeta creator*-style case of boundary collapse, where suddenly the subjects of Velleius' narrative past start intervening in his writing present.⁷⁴ As Alain Gowing has nicely shown, this is a staging of the *material* itself taking control of the author, and it is bread and butter mannerism for both Velleius and Valerius Maximus: 'it is curious to note how often both Velleius and Valerius picture events as controlling their narrative and how they must occasionally wrestle with their material as though it had a life of its own'.⁷⁵ In fact this is also a dead ringer for a comparable moment in Ovid's *Fasti* book 3, where Ovid is poised to pass over the opportunity to memorialise Caesar's death on 15 March, only to have Vesta step in and directly tell him to recall it.⁷⁶ For Velleius, however, Caesar does the job himself, and

73 Oakley (2020) 230.

74 On this and two other Velleian moments aligning haste and writing see Bloomer (2011) 101–2.

75 Gowing (2010) 255 (emphasis original).

76 Geue (2010) 117.

makes sure to muscle in on his own inclusion. And the language with which he does so is chillingly redolent of the relationship between master and slave. Caesar *manum iniicit*, ‘lays a hand’ on Velleius, which is an idiom meaning ‘to take legal possession of a person as property’; the expression is often used for a master reclaiming a slave on the run.⁷⁷ Velleius doesn’t just place himself as Caesar’s subordinate here, play the loyal aristocrat at Caesar’s narrative service; he abases himself to become his runaway slave, almost his personal writing amanuensis, who is immediately restored to normal service. Caesar fingers his *fugitiuus* and says not so fast: you are mine, and I think you’re forgetting my consulship. Velleius’ maligned loss of narratorial control⁷⁸ is here given a very good reason.

The second example of a Caesar disrupting the form of the work comes on Octavian’s first mention, at the symbolic moment Julius Caesar adopts him in his will. This isn’t quite a suspension of *breuitas* or delay of rush, as was the case with Caesar’s consulship. But it is another way in which a Caesar manages to distort the work, this time by forcing Velleius to give an account of Octavian’s origins, before its rightful narrative place:

Caesaris deinde testamentum apertum est, quo C. Octavius, nepotem sororis suae Iuliae, adoptabat. de cuius origine, etiam si praeueniet, pauca dicenda sunt. (Velleius Paterculus, *Historiae* 2.59)

At that point Caesar’s will was opened, through which he adopted Gaius Octavius, grandson of his sister Julia. I have to say a few words on his origin, even if it comes premature.

While the agent forcing Velleius’ hand is less clear than in the previous passage, the gerundive *dicenda* doesn’t convey an obligation to serve some generic restrictive literary form; it conveys the obligation to serve *Octavian*, right from the beginning, literally as soon as he inherits the mantles of Caesar. Once adopted into the ‘It-family’ of power, Octavian is granted the capacity to throw the work off course by barging in and demanding attention before he chronologically earns it (*etiam si praeueniet*).⁷⁹ As with Phaedrus’ Augustus fable above, so here: the threat to the author’s adoptive scheme, the agent with the power to disrupt Velleius’ commitment to brevity, haste and now ordered chronological treatment, is the Caesar. As Martin Bloomer puts it: ‘The Caesars are something of a narrative magnet, drawing author and reader back to them despite the official course.’⁸⁰ At these moments, Velleius is not serving abstractions like time or literary form; he is serving power, and in Julius’ case, serving to the point of becoming his trusty slave.⁸¹

77 E.g. when Mercury claims the emperor turned runaway slave Claudius at Sen. *Apocol.* 13 (*inicit . . . manum*). See OLD s.v. *inicio* 6.

78 Starr (1980) 299.

79 See Domainko (2018) 80 on Velleius’ fondness of the ‘micro-prolepsis’.

80 Bloomer (2011) 111–12.

81 This merging of time and power is nothing new in discussions of the *Fasti*: see Wallace-Hadrill (1987).

Before we move on to the final section of the article, there are at least three other general senses by which Caesars in Velleius take possession of time, work and ultimately the author. The first is via what we might call the teleology of Augustus and Tiberius. If we ask why Velleius is in such a rush, apart from an abstract bloody-minded devotion to maintaining the scope of brevity, the question necessarily follows: where is he rushing? The answer to that would have to be something like the present day, Caesarism, Augustus and Tiberius. The drive is mercilessly set to this goal, this telos, which gives the compendium some genetics in common with the *Aeneid*, bar the key difference that the telos is actually reached rather than deferred and ghettoised in the future (as in the *Aeneid*). In a sense, there would be neither *festinatio* nor *breuitas* if the urge to reach the principate weren't so pressing.

Secondly, a point about the rate of treatment, to return to something I mentioned above. If you measure by words per year, the compendium's velocity is far from steady. The thumping speed of book 1 slows considerably in book 2; and both within book 1⁸² and within book 2, the pace decelerates from beginning to end (the first twenty chapters of book 2 cover about sixty years of history; the last twenty wallow more leisurely at the business end of the Augustan period and the *floruit* of the Tiberian, covering only twenty-three years, 6 to 29 CE).⁸³ Of course, this structure of thinner past and thicker present is common to many Roman historians. But it is particularly striking in Velleius, because it grates quite directly against the claims of brevity, restricted scope and rapidity found throughout the work. Under the staying and steadying hand of the Caesars, that is, the bustling author slows from a trot to a saunter, till at last, at the very end of the work, he comes to rest in a prayer for the absolute stasis and stability of the principate, forever more, amen (*stator . . . statum . . . statione*, 2.131).

Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously, the monopoly on festination within the narrative itself belongs pretty much exclusively to the Caesars: Julius, Octavian/Augustus and Tiberius are all at different times afforded the opportunity to act swiftly, sharing the very language of *festinatio/festinare/festinanter* that Velleius uses for his practice of telling the story.⁸⁴ In other words: these Caesars are the narrative agents setting Velleius' pace. Quite literally. To add to the point about imitation of 'leaders' above: it isn't so much that Velleius is following in the footsteps of grand literary predecessors, but rather dancing to the beat of the quick Caesarian drum.

Ultimately, Velleius acts out a struggle involving time, form and political power, where the last entity ends up claiming an ever greater share of the first two. Velleian *breuitas* and *festinatio* are not just Bourdieu-esque strategies to show off his elite distinction or 'enhance' 'the appearance of his elite erudition': look how much material I can pre-digest

82 Kramer (2005) 150–2.

83 Starr (1981) 166. Cf. also Oakley (2020) 214–15.

84 Julius: 2.43, 2.50; Octavian/Augustus: 2.59, 2.123; Tiberius: 2.107; on Caesarian festination and Velleius' mimetic sympathy with it see Bloomer (2011) 111–13.

for you, dear reader; only the very best.⁸⁵ This misses both the stress of the rush, and what happens when Velleius' aesthetic frame needs to be suspended for demanding Caesars.⁸⁶ Velleius may avow constant devotion to a temporality and form he has set for himself – doing his own little rush job, swotting away in the corner office of a senatorial historian – but that already claustrophobic temporality and form are eventually elbowed away by the Caesars.

Or perhaps that doesn't quite capture it: as we saw, the excuse of the short-compass work is still available to Velleius well into the Caesar territory of book 2 (e.g. *Actium*, 2.86). Perhaps it is rather the case that the Caesars come to occupy more and more oxygen as narrative sculptors competing and clashing with the 'brief work' impetus to brevity. Ovid's *Fasti* again brings a nice analogy: in that work, surely, the calendar form adopted by Ovid seems to set the pace all the way through; but the Caesars also technically now own the calendar, and they end up barging in, demanding time and content, even when they're not particularly wanted.⁸⁷ In a broader sense, brevity and its suspension are ways of signalling that a new political form is being superimposed on the old, and that the fit is sometimes awkward. New historical forces are mounting their narrative pressure in different ways; Caesars are now deforming the impulse to be brief, but also, sometimes, tearing ahead and setting the pace with their own irrepressible *festinatio*. The common element between Velleius and Phaedrus is seeing Caesar – metaphorical master in Velleius' case, literal in Phaedrus' – bearing new effects not just on what is included, but on how quickly/lingeringly the story is told.

I've tried to show that both Phaedrus and Velleius use *breuitas* and its suspension to indicate genuflection towards a power constraining their literary forms. And this is the key. Both the brevity itself, and the modulation of the brevity under external pressure, stage a *forfeiting of authorial control* that can be tied to the loss of power over pace and time, itself a feature of slavery. The link may be more direct in Phaedrus' case, less so in Velleius'. The class (or avowed class) positions of the two twist their responses in very different ways. But I hope to have shown that the seeds of using slave experience to make sense of political constraint are at least present in trace elements for Velleius, whether that be in thinking about the clustering of historical talent as a kind of claustrophobic animal pen, or in visualising Caesar's clammy hand taking possession of the author himself and his writing pen. I'd like to conclude now with a short excursus on this wider theme of constraint, and how I think it could map onto the verse–prose dyad of this article in more general terms.

85 Lobur (2007) 220–3.

86 Cf. Bloomer (2011) 94: 'only one topic, the Caesars and their enemies, consistently interrupts the quickly-paced historical narrative'.

87 To be fair, this is a feature of certain special characters apart from the Caesars too; cf. Bloomer on the reverse *praeteritio* of Asinius Pollio, part of the 'memorable' that 'keeps tugging at the author's sleeve' (Bloomer (2011) 104). But the Caesars' narrative interventions (esp. Julius' above) are particularly forceful.

Unfree verse

Whether brief or long-winded, fast-paced iambics or hulking spondaic hexameters, there is a sense that verse itself, for the Roman elite, is a way of writing with servility already metaphorically baked in.⁸⁸ One of the central differences between verse and prose for Cicero is that verse is restricted by the shackles of metre, whereas prose is free: *oratio soluta*. At *De oratore* 3.184, the speaker Crassus sets out the distinction starkly:

neque uero haec tam acrem curam diligentiamque desiderant quam est illa poetarum; quos necessitas cogit et ipsi numeri ac modi sic uerba uersu includere ut nihil sit ne spiritu quidem minimo **breuius aut longius** quam necesse est. **liberior est oratio, et plane ut dicitur sic et est uere 'soluta', non ut fugiat tamen aut erret sed ut sine uinculis sibi ipsa moderetur.** namque ego illud assentior Theophrasto, qui putat orationem, quae quidem sit polita atque facta quodam modo, non astricte sed remissius numerosam esse oportere. (Cicero, *De oratore* 3.184–5)

These things don't require such keen attention to detail as they do among the poets; necessity and the metrical forms themselves force them to shut words in a verse so that there's nothing **shorter or longer** – by even the slightest breath – than is necessary. **Prose is freer, and surely the fact that it's called 'loosened' is right – not so it runs away or roams around, but so it's controlled by itself, without chains.** For I agree with Theophrastus, who thinks that a polished and crafted prose has to be rhythmic, but not strictly so, more loosely so.⁸⁹

The language of freedom, necessity and constraint here is fascinating, as is that of brevity and length. The strictures of verse form make every line a zero-sum game, almost as if the author must be poor old Aesop taking a quick way back to compensate for the long way out, that pesky metre demanding a balanced equation every time (*breuius aut longius*). If there is little room for manoeuvre in verse, prose is 'freer', *liberior*, i.e. less slavish – while that doesn't quite mean it can go wherever it likes, it is at least under its own control, reminiscent of a freeborn male, and doesn't carry the indignity of chains (*sine uinculis*); as David Mankin notes in his commentary on the passage, the image seems to be of two kinds of slavery, one verse one prose, with greater or lesser degrees of freedom, rather than slave-verse vs free-prose.⁹⁰ The word *astricte* also carries the sense of brevity, compression and short compass, all bound up tight within it, the retentive adverb of verse paired with the chill laxity of prose (*remissius*). Quintilian later picks up all this language of verse as constraint and reconstitutes it nicely:

88 For a brilliant account of the long historical association between poetry and bondage, see now Brady 2021.

89 Text from Mankin (2011); translations my own.

90 Mankin (2011) ad 184.

praeter id quod solam petit uoluptatem eamque fingendo non falsa modo sed etiam quaedam incredibilia sectatur, patrocínio quoque aliquo iuuari: **quod alligata ad certam pedum necessitatem non semper uti propriis possit, sed depulsa recta uia necessario ad eloquendi quaedam deuerticula confugiat**, nec mutare modo uerba, sed extendere corripere conuertere diuidere **cogatur**. (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.28–9)

Beyond the fact that it [poetry] aims only at pleasure, and pursues it by making up things which are not only false, but implausible too, it is also helped by the following excuse that speaks on its behalf: that it's bound by the strict constraint of the metrical scheme and so can't always use literal language, but is necessarily shunted from the straight path and runs off to certain off-piste forms of speech; and it's forced not only to change words, but to lengthen, shorten, transfer and split them.⁹¹

Poetry is hemmed in by *necessitas* again. It's unable to use rectilinear language; it's driven off the straight and narrow and has to take refuge in the byways of speech, *confugiat*, as if it were a runaway slave; and it's forced, *cogatur*, into bending words into shapes with which prose doesn't have to bother. In other words, its hands are tied. For both Cicero (as Crassus) and Quintilian, then, verse is encountered as a form that is itself distinctly unfree; but in Cicero, we already see that the difference in 'freedom' between the two forms of writing is one of degree rather than kind. Prose is not so much unencumbered aristocrat as it is privileged slave.

Keeping this general pointer in mind, I'd hazard that we can make sense of the two early-principate texts of this article as a turn towards the *literary forms of the unfree*, at a moment in Roman history when slavery was both soaring as an economic reality,⁹² and coming into its own as a metaphor for the Roman elite to frame their own perceived subjection.⁹³ For Phaedrus, what better way to express the constraints of slave or freed status than brief verse fables in the metre famous for being fast?⁹⁴ Thinking of verse itself as constraint might even make us read Phaedrus' claim to versifying Aesop (fable 1.1)⁹⁵ a little differently: not just as a flourish of virtuosity, but also as a boast about finding a more appropriate slavish form in which to package this slave wisdom.

Likewise for Velleius, I wonder if we can see the radicalness of the compendium as consisting in something like an attempt to make a prose that is more akin to verse, to

91 Text from Winterbottom's OCT; translations my own.

92 Scheidel (2005) 66–71 estimates the Italian slave population peaking at 1–1.5 million in the first two centuries BCE, with an implicit decline after; but his numbers tend to be synchronic rather than diachronic, as the constraints of the evidence demand.

93 Roller (2001) chapter 4.

94 Although Morgan (2010) 137 would militate against this, showing the bond between iambic pace, freedom of movement and *libertas* of speech.

95 On which see Cavarzere (2001).

capture something of the new age of constraint. Velleius effects this not only by employing a merciless pace that apes the roaring onward rush of verse, but also by borrowing from the repertoire of Latin poetry through, for example, the rhetoric of the *recusatio*,⁹⁶ or the content-excluding tropes of Ovid's *Fasti*, or the strange obtrusions of first-person voice that seem much more at home in poetry than historiography.⁹⁷ Then there is the whole issue of prose rhythm, which Velleius seems to observe religiously. The rigorous new figures provided by Keeline and Kirby push them to class Velleius as one of the Latin prose stylists most attentive to prose rhythm.⁹⁸ According to their findings, Velleius' history pulses with quite an idiosyncratic fondness for certain clausulae over others (his rate of ending sentences with a double cretic or molossus cretic is off the charts, in case you're interested;⁹⁹ as Mankin says in the introduction to his commentary on *De oratore*, the double cretic is a more 'poetic' clausula pattern than the other common cretic + trochee, because it is a sonic reminder of 'runs' of cretics in Roman drama).¹⁰⁰ While rhythmic prose is of course no standout anomaly for the era, Velleius' particular penchant for it might dovetail with his treasured narrative features of brevity and rush to make the text run more poetically.¹⁰¹ In other words, to make it gallop along under duress.

Brevity, from the bottom up

Whether or not you buy this last point about the different relative measures of 'liberty' and 'constraint' being pickled into the very forms of prose and verse, I hope to have shown that there is a very close connection between the explosive aesthetic of brevity, its moments of marked suspension, and the sense of socio-political squeeze accompanying this historical moment. Plenty of mind has been paid to how the Roman elite of this age twist their go-to Lakoffian metaphor of slavery to describe the experience of living under rogue one-man rule. The evidence is exhaustively and beautifully discussed in Matthew Roller's *Constructing Autocracy*.¹⁰² More critical sensitivity, however, could be invested in studying how that political pressure might find valves beyond these direct and dead-obvious metaphorical vessels. Not so much the usual formulae of 'senators = slaves, emperor = master' then, but the potential for more abstract containers such as style, literary form and narrative pace essentially to host affective meta-data about power and subjection, pressure and pushback. Brevity is the aesthetic, temporal manifestation of a new age of anxiety about slavery and slavishness; but it is also a means of processing it. Ex-slave and

96 Woodman (1975) 287–8.

97 As Oakley (2020) 215 says, Velleius lets 'his authorial voice intrude into the narrative more than any other Latin historian of the classical period'.

98 See Keeline and Kirby (2019) 170, 188–9; cf. Oakley (2020) 215–16.

99 Keeline and Kirby (2019) 189.

100 Mankin (2011) 45.

101 Almost the inverse of Horace's freewheeling prosaic poetry in the *Satires*: see Freudenburg (1993) chapter 3.

102 Roller (2001) 214–33.

aristocrat may have different ways of running away with it, or having to pause mid-run. But the constraint is felt and confronted by both.

In related news, we could envision a criticism of this period writing up its literary history slightly differently. We could make the story here not just about Roman elite authors ‘employing’ innocent metaphors of slavery to capture their experience, but actively sourcing, some might even say stealing,¹⁰³ literary forms and tropes straight from the playbook of slaves and freedmen. Those sectors of Roman society were acculturated to writing briefly, speaking as if they were on the run, and slowing down to pay heed to their superiors when necessary. They had ready-made ways of following the cues of socio-political pressure and time constraints. No wonder brevity became useful for both the Phaedruses and the Velleiuses under the early principate. At this historical moment, slaves and freedmen continued to perform the rush jobs they had always had no choice but to do. And some of those they served, that whiny emerging aristocracy of service,¹⁰⁴ were starting to believe they were clanking kindred chains.¹⁰⁵

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103 While MacLean’s (2018) preferred metaphor for the relation between freedmen and elite culture is usually the benign ‘exchange’ or ‘dialogue’ (cf. 103), she also permits herself the more forceful models of ‘appropriation’ and ‘consumption’ at times (73–4).

104 Veyne (1978); and see now MacLean’s (2018, 55) reprisal of the concept.

105 For a politically committed attempt to separate constraint as metaphor from the historical reality of slavery, and to see how poetry actually written in bondage changes our sense of this metaphor, see Brady (2021).

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