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Weapons of the (Christian) weak: pedagogy of trickery in Early Christian texts

Abstract: Confrontational behaviors do not tell the whole story about resistance. Among other things, Jesus of Nazareth seems to have taught his disciples how to cheat the dominant. What the *reddite Caesari* scene probably depicts is a peasant prophet befuddling some proxies of the ruling class by playing dumb and making riddles. This teaching was not lost. Double-sided expressions, ambiguous speeches, and code-switching practices are found throughout early Christian literature, where they feature as polysemic figures suggesting forms of noncompliance other than life-threatening acts and gestures of negation. Building on Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry, James C. Scott's theory of infrapolitics, and Michel de Certeau's analysis of poaching, this paper browses through Early Christian texts in order to unearth a "pedagogy of trickery" – i.e. possible instructions about how to take advantage of the susceptibility of the dominant elite in the here and now and how to get away with it.

1 Introduction: how non-compliant were the early Christians?

Rethinking the dissidence of early Christians is no easy task since it affects a whole social imagery. In fact, when searching through the past for bright examples of resistance to socio-political and cultural domination, Western-educated people rarely ignore the case of the early Christians in the catacombs¹ and circuses of the ancient Mediterranean world. Widespread both outside and inside academia, this time-honored cultural assumption about the early Christians' unconventionalism² ensures that concepts such as "voluntary servitude"

¹ See, for example, Martin Scorsese's last movie (*Silence*, USA 2016).

² This assumption can serve different, even conflicting, worldviews and political agendas. Quietist positions can find in early Christian escapism a model for their inward-looking attitudes and their stances of ideological disenchantment and socio-political aloofness. Secular and Christian liberals regularly laud the "Christian difference" as a quintessential trait of the historical religion that harbored modern secularism, since it presupposes an inner tabernacle of freedom that denies the claim to obedience of any overwhelming temporal power. Finally, searching for credible figures to revive the post-'89 revolutionary agenda, radical leftist thinkers are particularly keen on buying into Paul's political theology; its messianic core has

(Boétie 1975 [1576]), or Gramsci-styled formulae such as “hegemonic incorporation” (Gramsci 1971), could never impinge on the commonplace representation of the early follower of Jesus as an *underground* worshipper: a strong-willed practitioner of an unauthorized cult besieged by hostile powers. Admittedly, it would not be possible to disprove this popular narrative by demonstrating that early Christians were, all things considered, conformist people who would have scored high on Adorno’s “Authoritarian Personality” test (Adorno et al. 1950, 744–783). No qualified team will ever be able to assess a sufficient cross-section of these past believers in order to determine their degree of uncritical receptivity to the material and symbolic power of Roman apparatuses.

However, what is impossible to deny is often equally impossible to demonstrate conclusively. For instance, when looking at the most recent research on this topic, it seems that the image of the confrontational, “protesting” type of early Christian martyr, that is, the very opposite of a conformist individual showing an “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950, 774–776 and 771), no longer predominates. Quite the contrary, the current trend in non-apologetic scholarship is to confine the exercise of the existential option of martyrdom to intermittent, local, and small-scale episodes before 250 CE, supplemented by short periods of legislative and judicial repression after 250, the duration and intensity of which vary from West to East. While the Christian rights to the invention of martyrdom (practice and discourse) are still debatable,³ the historical import of such faith-signaling events has been considerably reduced⁴ and the reliable literary accounts limited to a handful of artfully manufactured narratives (Moss 2013, 16).⁵ Martyr-making appears now to have been anything but a priority for Roman rulers. Rather, making-up martyr texts stands out as a major group-building and protreptic strategy among pre-Constantinian Christian writers, on the one hand, and a critical advertising and political enterprise for post-Constantinian religious leaderships (Grig 2004), on the other. Historians engaged in emptying the martyrdom scene resort not only to textual criticism but also to sociology and theory of identity (Rebillard 2012; Boin 2015). Crude numbers, too,

been turned into an insurgent headquarters from which reverence to territorializing forces is resisted and by reference to which a world-shattering culture can take its bearings.

³ See the three representative positions of Bowersock 1995, Boyarin 1999, and Van Henten and Avemarie 2002.

⁴ According to Bremmer, a time-honored practical principle still drives the scholarly debate on the number of martyrs: “somewhat simplifying, we can say that the less sympathetic a historian is to Christianity, the lower the number of martyrs will be” (Bremmer 2010, 20).

⁵ For the slippery notion of authenticity in relation to this literature, see most recently Rebillard 2017.

weigh heavily on the decreasing importance attributed to historical martyrdom: as long as one admits that “intensity is not the cruising speed of everyday life” (Veyne 2000, 65), “quieter Christians” who “juggled” (Boin 2015, 5) between Rome and Jerusalem must have outnumbered their more militant fellows, the “rigid” types and the border-makers.

Of course, the relativization of martyrdom as a confrontational behavior does not necessarily lead to the complete normalization of pre-Constantinian Christ religion as a conventional movement with no critical quality. The list of nonconformist early Christian icons is long. What about the ascetics, the virgins, and the overgenerous donors? Above all, what about the apocalyptics?⁶

However mimetic its language, and however symmetrically authoritarian its ideology might appear (Pippin 1992; Royalty 1998; Moore 2006), there are still reasons to credit apocalyptic literature with discomfiting the well-adjusted (Maier 2002), capitalizing on “relative deprivation” (Collins 1984),⁷ and, eventually, calling for (more) justice against differently interpreted forms of oppression.⁸ On the one hand, a religious script does not have to harbor feminism and preach social egalitarianism (Elliott 2002) to be deemed subversive by power-holders; on the other, doomsayers and millenarian authors are fairly unambiguous in claiming that Christ religion must have no part in the conventionally customized Mediterranean culture. No matter their interested use of apocalyptic literature to gain authority – for instance, by advertising a persecuted self as a “viable identity” and writing “relatively elite literary product[s]” (Rollens 2019) – the fundamental idea is that being Christian is being dissident while being insurgent is not an option.⁹

Flashing an impending end, oppositional apocalyptic literature was designed to bolster radical one-sided spirits who were attuned to the welcomed event. By contrast, scenarios of doom offered very few instructions for the routines of daily life that would occur “in the time that remain[ed]” (1Cor. 7.29; see

6 For a sketch of the “apocalyptic opponent” as an early Christian “style of political subjectivation,” see Urciuoli 2017, 686–688.

7 For a critique, see Reed 2010, 120–124.

8 For an overview of recent research arguing that specific violent social or political conflicts lie behind Revelation’s contours, see Rollens 2019.

9 Rhetorically inflated figures (see e.g. Tertullian, *Apology* 37.4–8), Christian mutineers are imaginary to the point that no real Christian uprising has left a trace in our sources. Assuming its historicity, the interpretation of the popular riot in Carthage reported by the *Passion of Lucius and Montanus* (second half of the 2nd century; see *Pass. Montan.* 2.1), as a situation in which some Christians acted forcefully as a group in response to the execution of their bishop (Cyprian), is far from convincing. See Rebillard 2012, 57, *contra* Barnes 2010, 86–92. The riot is dated to 259 CE.

Agamben 2005). Furthermore, the implications of apocalyptic scripts for the here-and-now were hardly rebellious: while providing the dominated believers with religious compensation, these visions of cosmic upheaval offered the Laodicean-like “rich” (*Apoc.* 3.17) a last chance “to discover oneself in trouble” (Maier 2002, 33)¹⁰ and eventually attain salvation by supplying churches with material income and other patronage benefits.¹¹ Seen from this perspective, even a belligerent book like the canonical *Apocalypse* of John was no manual for day-to-day guerrilla actions and counter-conducts. Practical everyday resistance, past and present, needs more handy and flexible weapons than the destructive arsenal of the four horsemen. It demands resources for imaginative actions that apocalyptic imagination fails to provide, due to its excess of utopian spirit, structural fixation on binarism, and lack of timing. Cosmic dramas usually have nothing very instructive to say about how to take advantage of the dominant elites’ susceptibility here and now and get away with it. Far from investing impulses and projects of rage in an open confrontation, early Christian apocalyptic texts worked as “revenge banks” that stocked believers’ “thymotic” savings for the soothing of wounds and the cooking of indignation.¹² The show-down is deferred until victory is assured. In the meanwhile, the daydream of a world turned upside down could even operate as a source of encouragement to continue to bend and maintain the necessary façade of conformity.

Having made this point concerning martyrs and apocalyptics, I would prefer not to dwell further on other prestigious categories of early Christian dissidence in order to test each against expectations. Rather, I will turn to a different approach, one that favors a *praxeological insight into non-confrontational forms of resistance*. There are two reasons underlying this shift of perspective.

First, a more systematic conceptualization of Jesus followers’ *non-confrontational* counter-conducts will help in revealing the most common features of their non-conformism and in weighing their practical significance. The aim is to show that disobedience was not confined to a spatially segregated and periodically erupting rumor concerning the transience of the Roman social order. Nor was it

¹⁰ Maier 2002, 33.

¹¹ This seems to be the practical aim of the doctrine of a post-baptismal repentance in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Rome, second quarter of the 2nd century CE). For the *Shepherd* as an apocalyptic text supporting religious authorities, see Frankfurter 1998, 431.

¹² “The Christianization of the wrath of God leads to a transcendent bank for the purpose of depositing deferred human thymotic impulses and deferred projects of rage whose global design lies beyond the conceptual horizon of the employees of these banks. [...] The bank undertook these transactions in the form of speech acts, which emphasize the existence of divine rage as well as the reasons to take it seriously” (Sloterdijk 2010 [2006], 99).

limited to the sort of contemptuous retreats pursued by dropouts, as if Christian dissidents “t(ook) up residence” in a sort of religious Grand Hotel Abyss facing Greco-Roman absurdity.¹³

Second, a more *praxis-focused* approach to the non-compliance of the early Christians will ensure that early Christ religion appears less introspective than a “feel-good spirituality” (Carrette and King 2005), less pacifying than a provider of “cathartic adjustment(s) to existing social conditions” (Gardiner 2000, 160) and less submissive than a politically sanitized way of signaling distinction via religious consumption (Martin 2014). What this analytical strategy has to offer is the uncovering of a “pedagogy of trickery” that was safer than martyrdom but much more timely than cosmic revolution, more flexible than fury, and more modest than reclusion.

Aside from banking on rage and sponsoring life-disparaging investments, Christian texts store tricks and offer counselling services that can be used to cheat the power(s). In a nutshell, they teach *micro-resistance*. In the last three decades of research on the early Christians, three authors in particular have helped historians to begin the work of uncovering such a pedagogy of trickery: Homi K. Bhabha with his theory of mimicry, James C. Scott with his surveys of infrapolitics, and Michel de Certeau with his focus on tactics, poaching, and everyday cunning. An Indian postcolonial theorist, an American anarchist political scientist, and a French Jesuit philosopher and social scientist, each of these authors has already been brought to bear by other scholars working on the detection of dissent. This paper sets out to bring these *three major chords together* in order to produce a hermeneutical *arpeggio* called “early Christians’ micro-resistances”.

2 Mimicries

Ever since Daniel Boyarin began to transfer Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial take on the Lacanian notion of mimicry (Bhabha 1994 [1984], 85–92) to modern Jewish and ancient “Judeo-Christian” culture, the use of the language of “mimicry” and its cognates (e.g. “mimic man”) has spread quite rapidly among scholars of early Christian literature. These categories have shed light on “the ways that the most apparent complicity with the colonizer turns into resistance” (Boyarin 1997,

¹³ Thus, the famous derisive description of the Frankfurt School given by Georg Lukács (1971, 21).

271–312; also Boyarin 1999). Yet such a spread of mimic men,¹⁴ mimetic discourses, and replicating practices could not help but amplify the original thorny issue of agency that underlies Bhabha's concept. As Robert Young put it in *White Mythologies*, "is Bhabha describing a forgotten moment of historical resistance, or does that resistance remain inarticulate until the interpreter comes . . . years later to 'read between the lines' and rewrite history?" (Young 1990, 190). To put it another way, is the colonial subject's mimicry conscious or subconscious (Segovia 2005, 12)? And, if the latter is the case, is it dug up and charted, or rather desired, sought after, and projected back onto the text by the exegete? The impression that the subversive potential entrusted to the first mimic Christians is often less a previously undetected textual message than a *previously unintended* exegetic production bespeaks the same "ambivalence" that Young and others have pointed to.

A supplementary, though related, difficulty lies in the scope and significance of such resistances. Looking for cracks in hegemonic discourses, alternative histories in teleological narratives, and discursive disturbances in established textual systems, the postcolonial understanding of apparently pacifying Christian texts as mimicries of imperial/colonial relations of domination has certainly rescued a wealth of resistance. Textual materials hitherto viewed either as politically conciliatory, such as the portrait of the Roman Empire in the first chapters of the *Gospel of Luke* (Jacobs 2012, 31–34), or as politically neutral, such as the geographic itinerary of Paul's journeys in *Acts* (Nasrallah 2008), have been seen through the lens of mimicry, politicized (anew), and turned into oppositional scripts.¹⁵ Yet, at the same time, the postcolonial perspective on early Christian texts might also have ended up over-estimating the threats that the ambivalence, mimicry, hybridity, and so on, of early dominated subjects posed to the dominants, eventually making "such resistance powerless" in the face of the imperial systems as a whole (Boer 2005, 16). After all, when everyone mimics, nobody flatters and consents anymore, because everybody *can be said to be* subtly engaged in reproducing the hegemonic appearance by avoiding breaking the surface of compliance. This explains why scholarship can either eulogize (as parodies and mockeries) or chastise (as supportive duplications) early Christian replicas of

¹⁴ For Justin as a mimicker, see Nasrallah 2010, 122.

¹⁵ Stagnant forms of scholarly consensus within the Western interpretive tradition have thus been challenged by "recovering, reasserting, and reinscribing identities, cultures, and traditions that colonial Christianity had erased, suppressed, or pronounced 'idolatrous'" (Moore and Segovia 2005, 6).

Roman systems of meanings, thus wavering strikingly between positive and negative understandings of mimicry.¹⁶

In view of these difficulties, I will focus here on a particular case of early Christian mimicry that presents at least three advantages. First, being a normative construct, it is clearly conscious. Second, it is graspable by contemporary fellow Christians as a between-the-lines pedagogy of everyday camouflage. Third, the disturbing effect of mimicry on the authority of the dominant discourse is expected to be put to use in daily micro-resistant acts.

5. For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection or through the thought of meddlesome people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvellous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory. They marry like everyone else and have children, but they do not expose them once they are born. They share their meals but not their sexual partners. They are found in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but participate in the life of heaven throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world.

6. To put the matter simply, what the soul is in the body, this is what Christians are in the world. The soul is spread throughout all the limbs of the body; Christians are spread throughout the cities of the world. The soul lives in the body, but it does not belong to the body; Christians live in the world but do not belong to the world. The soul, which is invisible, is put under guard in the visible body; Christians are known to be in the world, but their worship of God remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul and attacks it, even though it has suffered no harm, because it is hindered from indulging in its pleasures. And the world hates the Christians, even though it has suffered no harm, because they are opposed to its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, along with its limbs; Christians love those who hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, but it sustains the body; Christians are detained in the prison of the world, but they sustain the world. The soul, which is immortal, dwells in a mortal tent; Christians temporarily dwell in perishable surroundings but await that which is imperishable in the heavens. The soul grows stronger even when mistreated by what the body eats and drinks; Christians increase daily even when punished. God has appointed them to such a position, and it would not be right for them to abandon it.

(*Diognetus* 5–6; trans. Ehrman 2003, 139–143)

16 For the *Gospel of Mark* as a negative example of “colonial mimicry” that reinscribes colonial domination, see Liew 1999.

Scholars have read chapters 5 and 6 of the *Epistle to Diognetus* (around 200 CE) as a little early Christian masterpiece in either appeasing (Norelli 1991, 33–35) or challenging (Rizzi 1996) Roman affirmative political theologies. The question has been whether the text is here buttressing or undermining Stoic-like elite discourses of identity formation, in which a “universalizing . . . language of ethnicity” (Perkins 2009, 29) is deployed to create a cosmopolitan subject position that aligns with the social order. My argument is that, if taken as mimicry, such an uncanny portrait of the Christian presence in the Roman-ruled world may escape the alternative poles of these two readings. Neither an ideological reinforcement via imitation nor a theological debasement via mockery, this text “heeds the colonizer’s preemptory injunction to imitation, but in a manner that constantly threatens to teeter over into mockery” (Moore 2005, 87). Moreover, rather than the semiotic potential of the text for modern readers (Rizzi 1991), or the articulation of its identity-making strategy through juxtaposing racial and cultic languages (Buell 2005), what is important for my purposes is *the way* in which the text puts the ambivalence of mimicry into practice *at the time* and *for insiders*.¹⁷

Taken as a guide for living and making a living as a Christian by eluding (too) watchful eyes, the practical core message of *Diognetus* can be rendered, in Bhabha’s terms, as the desire to be the “subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86). Here to “be” concretely and comprehensively means to “talk”, “wear”, “marry”, “run a business”, “eat and drink”, “conform to the public-political rules of the game”, and so on. Eulogized as a “marvelous and admittedly paradoxical (*thaumastên kai homologoumenôs paradoxon*)” lifestyle, the Christian difference is nothing but this ambivalent production of a “slippage”, an “excess”, and a “difference” (Bhabha 1994) with respect to behavioral standards. In *1 Corinthians* 7.29–31,¹⁸ Paul, too, had sponsored a normative messianic identity that produced mimic effects. Yet the *Diognetus* departs from Paul’s interim pedagogy of *hos mē* (“as if . . . not”) in that the slippage-effect produced by mimicry is signified in a much less eschatological

¹⁷ For *Diognetus*’ “devious route between affirmation and denial”, see Lieu 2004, 234–235. Building on the examinations of the text by Lieu and Buell (2005), but drawing contrasting conclusions to them, Perkins makes explicit reference to Bhabha’s description of mimicry. Yet she mobilizes it in a more general way to account for the identity-making strategy pursued by the text.

¹⁸ “I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away” (*1 Corinthians* 7.29–31).

manner.¹⁹ Since the end of the Roman-dominated world is not impending, mimicry more directly relates to what Bhabha calls “ironic compromise” between the dominant discourse’s synchronic “demand for identity [and] stasis” and the diachronic counter-pressure of history, which implies “change and difference” (Bhabha 1994). The narcissistic expectations of Roman elites, rather than anti-Roman messianic hopes, account for the ambivalence of the Christian identity advertised by the text.

In principle, Roman rulers, their local proxies, and their intellectual *chiens de garde*, refused to treat Christians like other religious groups and traditions, insofar as Christ-believers, in turn, refused to conform to the required standards of religious recognition. No matter how “cosmetically conspicuous” they were, non-Roman religions were expected to be “functionally identical” (Martin 2014, 50) when it came to *obsequium* to the state. Tapping into the established trope of the “heavenly citizenship” (Urciuoli 2013, 216–222), the Christian camouflage displayed by *Diognetus* capitalizes precisely on the forked nature of this Roman-sponsored, formatted imagery “of the Other deprived of its Otherness” (Žižek 2003, 96). It takes place within “this area between mimicry and mockery, where the ... civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (Bhabha 1994, 86).

Two considerations can be added. First, even though a bold “coming out” strategy is not recommended, the text neither advertises a “situational” Christian identity (Rebillard 2012; following Lahire 2011) nor suggests that its audience attempts to “pass for” non-Christians (Boin 2015; following Goffman 1961). What the little tract actually promotes is an all-encompassing Christianness whose *imperative* and *unaffected* quality consists precisely in being, all the time, a *partial* figuration of what Roman elites want human identity to be. The markers of “sameness” (language, clothing, diet, marriage, and reproduction strategies) are fully onstage, whereas the traits of “not quite-ness” are mostly invisible to the public eye, as they map onto the blind spots of the Roman representation system. Features indexing Otherness, such as the treatment of infancy, sexual habits, and other moral imperatives, are dictated by a transcendent law-source whose nature the Roman law-givers may have difficulty working out on a criminal base and efficiently prosecute. Second, the text shows no divided self-perception, since there is no *essential* identity behind the mask. Christianness is no double-faced recital of split personalities²⁰ but, rather, a partial (everyday) presence

¹⁹ See the only plain and vague reference to the *parousia* in *Diognetus* 7.6.

²⁰ In the sense of both the Sartrean notion of “bad faith” (Sartre 2003 [1943], 70–94) and Fanon’s “white masks” (Fanon 1967 [1952]).

whose *trompe-l'oeil* is only possible against the “mottled background” (Bhabha 1994, 85) of Roman disciplinary authority.

Concretely, such a mimic agenda for an everyday untroubled Christian life can serve two different (and class-related) purposes: (a) it might help deter wicked gossips from potentially raising social issues that could lead to material harassments;²¹ or (b) it could make tricky career paths possible. I will focus only on this latter aspect.

The full integration of Christ believers into the economic life of the Roman Empire is a historical given. Even Tertullian, who can hardly be said to be a myopic sympathizer of Roman domination, extols the industrious lifestyles of Christians (Tertullian, *Apology* 42.1–3). Conversely, the role that some Christ-believing individuals actively played in the more specialized business of public-political administration is much less intuitive. This prejudice is mainly due to the one-sided nature of the extant sources, which show an almost perfect alignment between a few early Christian religious leaders’ statements about Christians’ indifference/hostility towards politics and some even fewer non-Christian authors’ complaints about their political disengagement.²² Nevertheless, it can be proved that being politically responsible, while remaining a Jesus follower within increasingly clergy-dominated congregations, was a sensible option, a feasible task (see Urciuoli 2018), and precisely the kind of business that required a few tips about mimicry.

My argument is that *Diognetus* provides a record of such a practical knowledge. The pretty obscure statement that Christians “participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners (*metechousi pantōn ōs politai kai panth’upomenousin ōs xenoi*)” has been interpreted in a variety of ways. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French Catholic scholar and anti-Nazi militant, Henri-Irénée Marrou, interpreted the phrase as an invitation “not to shirk public-political responsibilities, yet to accomplish them with aloofness (*détachement*)” (Marrou 1951, 63).²³ If interpreted this way, *Diognetus* would represent the sole Christian text before Constantine that covertly sympathizes with the public-political engagement of believers, albeit not unquestioningly. It

²¹ For the relation between the urban layout and density of Greco-Roman cities and the quick spread of rumors, see Maier 2020.

²² On the Christian part see Tatian, *To the Greeks* 11.1; Tertullian, *Apology* 38.3; 46.13; *The Pallium* 5; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.6; Origen, *Against Celsus* VIII 75. On the “non-Christian” part see the fictive Caecilius (in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8.3); Celsus (in Origen, *Against Celsus* VIII 75). On this issue, see Urciuoli 2017, 667–670; Urciuoli 2018, 48–96.

²³ Marrou’s translation reads as follows: “Ils s’acquittent de tous leurs devoirs de citoyens, et supportent toutes les charges comme des étrangers”.

is worth noting that Diognetus, the formal addressee symbolizing the target audience of this speech, is a person defined as “most excellent (*kratiste*)”, which is to say that he might stand for the kind of educated and well-off people who potentially pursue local career goals by sitting on councils and serving their towns.²⁴

Yet what could an “aloof engagement” mean in practical terms? I suggest that the anonymous author is recommending a general attitude towards politics that consists in avoiding both careerist behavior and nonpolitical escapism. The former impels the individual to run for prominent offices and magistracies that might end up jeopardizing any religious concern they have for a heavenly citizenship; the latter might catch the eye of the individual’s social peers by casting suspicion on their detachment and their possible ideological motivations for escaping civic duties. Therefore, the best option is a kind of backseat political presence, away from the spotlight and as harmonized as possible with the background.²⁵ A possible textual parallel for this sort of camouflage strategy is offered by some of Seneca’s instructions for a safe retirement motivated by the desire to undertake a philosophical retreat:

Now I return to the advice I’d begun to give you, that your retreat should be unobtrusive. You needn’t label yourself ‘Philosophic Recluse’. Give your purpose another name (*non est quod inscribas tibi philosophiam ac quietem: aliud proposito tuo nomen inpone*): call the motive ill-health, bodily weakness, indolence. To make a vaunt of your seclusion is ostentatious in idleness. Some animals conceal themselves by making a network of their own tracks round their actual lair, and so must you, or you’ll never be rid of pursuers.

(Seneca, *Letters* LXVIII 3–4; trans. Barker 1932, 233)

Seneca seems to make explicit what our author only adumbrates. Whatever the reasons for shying away, precautions should be taken to ensure that *mimicry* (“a difference that is almost nothing, but not quite”) does not overtly turn into *menace* (“a difference that is almost total, but not quite”; Bhabha 1994, 91) and end up being criminally treated as such.

3 Politics of disguise

In many academic fields it is common to think of socio-political order and disorder in terms of simple alternatives. Either people accept and acquiesce in the established order

²⁴ Despite being aware of the elasticity of the title, Marrou (1951, 255–256) takes it literally as an official translation of the Latin *egregius vir* and makes Diognetus a Roman procurator.

²⁵ I sketched out this set of strategies in Urciuoli 2018, 267–301.

or they protest and rebel. In the absence of rebellion, people are assumed to have been relatively content (the ‘happy slave’).

(Horsley 2004, 7)

This, Richard Horsley continues, was largely the way in which biblical scholars used to think of the power dynamics of elite and non-elite interaction before James Scott’s work on domination and resistance began to find its way across the discipline’s border. Shortly before Jacob Taubes’ radical politicization of Paul began to question the apostle’s alleged social conservatism and fuel his reappraisal by leftist European philosophers (Taubes 1993),²⁶ Scott-driven understandings of Jesus and his earliest followers had already vindicated them from the intermittent charge of political quietism.²⁷ The “vast territory” between quiescence and revolt, which Scott calls “infrapolitics of the powerless” (Scott 1990, XIII), was no more a waste- and/or indecipherable land. Mediating between symbolic products and material-life circumstances, socio-spatially sequestered and culturally “cooked” emotional reactions to domination (e.g. indignation, anger, humiliation, fantasies of revenge) began to surface and matter (Scott 1990, 119). In consequence, as in the case of “mimic” texts, several liberating messages stored in supposedly traditionalist – or traditionally sanitized – materials have been unsealed.

James C. Scott has sharpened his pivotal categories in the course of time. His classic volume *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1990) presents a stronger theoretical orientation with respect to Scott’s initial location of popular resistance in the slippage between the peasants’ normative values (“little tradition”) and the corresponding patterns of the same society’s urban elite (“great tradition”, Scott 1977). While basically cataloguing the non-elite forms of resistance into two main categories (declared and undeclared), the book proposes a cross-cultural and trans-historical dyad of *concealed types of dissent*: the “hidden transcript” and the “politics of disguise”.²⁸ The former takes place offstage, the latter onstage. Together they represent the two low-profile registers through which dominated people say what they think about the power-holders but are too intimidated to express openly. In the time since 1990, studies on resistant meanings and practices in New Testament materials and early Christ religion

²⁶ See Badiou 2003; Agamben 2005; Žižek 2003. For a critical overview, see Crossley 2010, 99–114. Also Caputo and Alcott 2009.

²⁷ See e.g. Horsley 1987 and 1989; Horsley and Hanson 1985; Crossan 1991. See other references in Horsley 2004, 2.

²⁸ The latter includes both the anonymous and the ambiguous onstage versions of the former. See Scott 1977, 18–19 and 136–182.

have begun to value the potential importance of these categories (Horsley 2004; already Wimbush 1997; West 1999).

Since my interest in the micro-resistances of Jesus followers is only coterminous with Scott's rethinking of resistance as "impression management in power-laden situations" (Scott 1990, 3), the analysis here will be restricted to the arts of disguise and, among them, to those attributed to, or performed by, *non-anonymous individuals*. Contrary to the boldness of anonymous singular and mass actions, these "partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version(s) of the hidden transcript" take place "in public view but (are) designed to have a double meaning" (Scott 1990, 19). The underlying idea is that Christian texts store techniques of deception, ritual codes, instructions on how to play dumb, ask riddles, and utter veiled and double-sided sayings that are rooted in an inexpressible hidden transcript of resistance. This scattered pedagogy of trickery could be appropriated by readers and adapted to their circumstances, *either according to or against* the purposes of the texts themselves. As with mimicries, what I am really interested in is the personal gain that vulnerable Jesus followers could achieve by tapping into this material when confronted with all kinds of annoying, undesirable, or risky social interactions with more powerful non-Christians.²⁹

3.1 Consenting is not conforming

A good starting point may be the following passage from the *Martyrdom of Peter*, originally belonging to the non-canonized *Acts of Peter* (Asia Minor, end 2nd century CE). It describes a group of Roman power-holders conspiring to execute the apostle Peter as a troublemaker:

As they planned this, Xanthippe heard of the conspiracy which her husband had with Agrippa and sent word to Peter to inform him so that he could leave Rome. Also the other brethren, together with Marcellus, exhorted him to leave. Yet Peter said to them: 'Shall we run away (like slaves), brethren?' And they said to him: 'No, but as long as you can still serve the Lord, please stay alive for our sake'. Persuaded by the brethren, Peter left Rome alone by saying: 'None of you will come with me, but I will go away alone and in disguise (*metamphiasas to schēma mou*)'.

(*Martyrdom of Peter* 6.1–3. My translation. Greek text: Zwierlein 2009)

²⁹ There is no way to grasp the onstage comedy without gaining access to the offstage (Scott 1990, XII). It should be clear, however, that, contrary to Scott's materials, offstage opinions here are almost all we have. Not only is there a documentary predominance of the hidden over the public transcript, but the representation of onstage situations is also manufactured according to what Christian writers consider to be of interest to the offstage audience.

In his Scott-inspired book on martyrdom, Boyarin interprets Peter's abortive attempt to escape from Rome in disguise as a refutation of "tricksterism" (Boyarin 1999, 45). This is certainly correct since, in the following scene, Jesus appears to Peter immediately outside the gate of Rome and counters him with a riddling performance in order to convince him to walk back and accept crucifixion (*Martyrdom of Peter* 6.4). In contrast to Peter's abandoned attempt, tricksterism is, indeed, much more suited to the successful stereotyped stratagems that, around that time, other non-canonized *Acts* were ascribing to Christian aristocratic women tormented by wicked and sexually voracious husbands (Perkins 2002).³⁰ Note that, whereas such female tricksters are eulogized as heroines of a faith preserved through cunning – that is, mainly via camouflage and mistaken identity –, Peter's escape in disguise is stopped, as he is assumed to be cheating his Savior along with the heathens.

The orientation of the hagiographical agenda towards the famous "*Quo Vadis* scene" (P: "Lord, where are you going?"; J: "I go to Rome to be crucified") should not obscure the fact that Peter's brethren raise some sound arguments in favor of tricksterism that may be summarized as follows: to dodge martyrdom by camouflage and/or by flight is a sensible behavior to adopt if one wishes to keep on serving the Lord. This choice is especially commendable for people who have social – i.e. parental, financial, ecclesiastical – responsibilities (see *Martyrdom of Peter* 7.1). Even more important for my purposes is that, overcome by a heroic self-sacrificial resolution in the text, such a textually articulated hesitation can lean towards life-preserving options *outside* texts.

At the same time as its author was penning the *Acts of Peter*, the question of the proper behavior under "persecution" was already "an active issue among Christians" (Boyarin 1999, 45).³¹ Religious leaders and writers did not necessarily agree on the answer to this question.³² Referring to these debates, Boyarin hints at the unenthusiastic attitudes to martyrdom ascribed to some conventionally

30 Peter is also wanted for having brainwashed Roman *matronae* with the idea of sexual abstinence. See *Martyrdom of Peter* 4–5.

31 It is, incidentally, now clear that most Christians who neither fled nor hid did not necessarily play the confrontational role of Scott's "Baaad Nigger" (Boyarin 1999, 50; Scott 1990, 41): they simply conformed to the requirements of their circumstances.

32 Note the diverging positions on flight taken by Tertullian (*Antidote for the Scorpion's Sting* and, even more radically, *Flight in Persecution*) and Cyprian (*The Lapsed* 3 and 10). For faithful hagiographic justifications of Cyprian's actual flight under Decius, see Pontius, *Life of Cyprian* 7.

labeled “Gnostic” groups (Boyarin 1999, 59).³³ Largely, but not exclusively, reported by anti-Gnostic contemporary testimonies,³⁴ this alternative Christian discourse on the insanity of verbal confession and provocative deaths is of considerable interest. First of all, it shows that Christians who *consented* did not necessarily *conform*. More interestingly, it also suggests that what ancient polemicists and modern apologists repetitively chastised as “theology of cowardice” (Orbe 1956, 268), and what secular specialists now more dispassionately and accurately describe as a “toning down of Christian sociopolitical deviance” (Williams 1996, 105; analogously Filoramo 2000, 45–46), can be interpreted as the offstage script of a public and non-actionable politics of trickery. Trained by the anti-martyrdom and anti-sacrificial wisdom expressed in texts such as the *Testimony of Truth*, the *Gospel of Judas*, and other lost treatises (Pagels and King 2007, 56), some “spiritual” believers were in a position to stage this tricksterism in the public eye. In the *Testimony of Truth*, we read:

The foolish – thinking [in] their heart [that] if they confess, ‘We are Christians,’ in word only (but) not with power, while giving themselves over to ignorance, to a human death, not knowing where they are going nor who Christ is, thinking that they will live, when they are (really) in error – hasten towards the principalities and the authorities. They fall into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them. For (if) only words which bear testimony were effecting salvation, the whole world would endure this thing and would be saved. [But] in this way they [drew] error to themselves.

(*Testimony of Truth* [NHC IX,3] 31.22–32.19; trans. Giversen and Pearson 1990, 450–451)

In an attempt to resolve the incongruity between so-called world-rejecting worldviews and socio-political quiescence on an everyday practical level, some scholars have opted to dismiss the former (Williams 1996, 103–106). According to this view, far from being radically antisocial recluses, Valentinians and others with similar ideologies, such as those addressed by the *Testimony of Truth* (end 2nd century – beginning 3rd century CE) were socially adequate people who “‘fit’[ted] in more comfortably with surrounding society” than did

³³ At the same time, in order to sharpen his argument for a normative contrast between the “orthodox” Christian stance towards martyrdom and the rabbinic Jewish openness to tricksterism, Boyarin *de facto* restricts the analysis of this “antimartyrdom discourse” to the statements and deeds of the rabbis: “Rabbinic Jews and Christians were debating the same question of deception, flight, or martyrdom through the third century, but only Christian textuality seems bound to answer the question ‘Quo vadis?’. For the Rabbis, the destination can remain open” (Boyarin 1999, 66).

³⁴ See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 24.6 (on the disciples of Basilides); III 18.5; IV 33.9 (on Valentinian groups); Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* IV 16.3 (on Valentinians?); IV 81.1–83.2 (on Basilides); IV 71–72 (on Heracleon); Tertullian, *Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting* 1.5 (on “Gnostics” and Valentinians), etc.

other Christ-believing groups. Their distaste for martyrdom was only one piece of evidence among others. Insofar as they did not show up on the public stage as radical deniers of the Roman public transcript of reverence, these individuals manifested themselves as more hegemonically incorporated than other “more rigid” Christians (Williams 1996, 105, quoting Frend 1954, 29).

Yet the excerpt reported above may suggest a slightly different understanding of these “unheroic conducts” (Boyarin 1997). In situations of local hostility, or even state-sponsored “persecutions”, in which people have even less control than usual over what happens in their lives, socio-political compliance cannot be gauged but offstage, that is, out of the power-holders’ eyes. Moreover, once forced to stage their feelings, individuals can perform acts of acquiescence as acts of resistance, in so far as they possess the right code and know the way it communicates the hidden transcript of dissent. In the case of tested Christians, the *Testimony of Truth* assumes that Roman rulers have property rights over this corrupted world, including the visible bodies of the believers and their audible signs, such as the verbal confession: “I am Christian!” Theatrical denials of reverence conducive to tortures and death penalties are therefore dismissed as vainly suicidal pretenses of purging the worldly (i.e. demiurgical-archontic) stain from both carnal bodies and spiritually empty words. To prevent this tragic fail, the text insinuates the idea of respectfully returning the coin of the individual’s bodily survival to its legitimate administrators, the earthly rulers. Questioning salvation, that which really matters, is far beyond their means. In the end, just as Jesus is said to have befuddled some proxies of the ruling class by making up a riddle concerning the tribute (Herzog 2004),³⁵ so several Jesus followers might have been able to dupe the archons’ delegates in a similar equivocal manner.³⁶

3.2 Linguistic tricks

A second set of examples concerns *linguistic* disguises, such as two-faced speeches and wits. Once again, Boyarin makes a good point by noticing that, somewhat paradoxically, martyrdom literature teems with ambiguous

³⁵ Note this Scott-driven interpretation of *Mark* 12:13–17: “Trapped into making a statement about the payment of tribute, Jesus uses a coded, ambiguous and elusive form of speech that communicates in the hidden transcript of resistance while appearing to show appropriate deference to Rome and its quislings” (Herzog 2004, 59–60).

³⁶ By gesturing at the infrapolitical space between the toning down of outward deviance and the experience of socio-political conformity, I am not suggesting that any reader of this text used such a pedagogy of trickery as a motivation to act, only that it was possible to do so.

statements that are used to ensure the martyr's fate. Contrary to the pro-life logic of Scott's infrapolitics, pro-martyrdom writers make tricksterism team up with death (Boyarin 1999, 51). Once again, I argue that the extra-textual reality may well have been different, thereby reasonably wedding tricks and survival.

According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*,³⁷ the future saint Polycarp was sitting in a carriage on his way to martyrdom when the police captain and his father asked him: "What harm is to say 'Caesar is lord (*Kurios Kaisar*),' and to sacrifice and so forth, and to be saved?" (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.2; trans. Rebillard 2017, 95). Note that, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott's first "elementary" example of arts of disguise is the slave saying "Yes, Master!" in a "slightly sarcastic" way (Scott 1990, 139). Could not a Christian on trial spit out "Caesar is lord!" in the same passing and deceitful way? Was "Caesar is lord!" a more compromising statement than, for instance, the decision to wear the laurel crown as some Christian soldiers were prepared to do (Tertullian, *The Crown* 1.6)? Lastly, was Jesus himself not the ultimate Trickster, in that he publicly, though cryptically, recognized Caesar's mundane rulership (*Mark* 12.13–17)?

It is worth recalling that, before the edict of Decius (250 CE), the performance of sacrifices in the presence of the jurisdictional authorities was not the ordinary acid test of a standard procedure of interrogation.³⁸ Furthermore, Roman governors and proconsuls were not, as a rule, as zealous as the depictions of insinuating officials in the martyrdom narratives might have it. Insofar as religious deviants were not so high on the list of the local rulers' concerns, the judges were far more lenient (Tertullian, *To Scapula* 4–5; see Moss 2012, 10). Their smooth-talking behavior was not aimed at triggering the martyrs' fervor; in many situations, verbal performances of reverence on the part of the defendant were probably sufficient to secure the dismissal of a case and escape from a more brutal test of sincerity. We can be sure that most officials were not as scrupulous as Pliny, who dictated selected prayers to the gods evidently for the purpose of preventing ambiguities and slippery phrasing (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* X 96.5; see Moss 2013, 142).

With regard to witty verbal performances, Polycarp was later requested to recant by pronouncing the simple formula, "Away with the atheists (*Aire tous*

37 Traditionally dated back to the late 160s, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in its extant form, has recently been assigned a date no earlier than the Decian period. See Moss 2013, 94–104. According to Rebillard (2017, 84), since there is no *terminus ante quem*, "any dating of the composition of the text based on its content remains very tentative".

38 "... prior to 250 there was no legislation in place that required Christians to do anything that might lead them to die. Even the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan provided guidelines only for Pliny, not for the entire empire" (Moss 2013, 145).

atheous)” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.2). What an atheist is, though, depends on the religious preferences of the speaker and, indeed,

with a stern countenance Polycarp observed the whole crowd of lawless pagans that were in the stadium and, gesturing at them with his hand, he groaned and looked up to heaven, and said: ‘Away with the atheists.’

(*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.2; trans. Rebillard 2017, 97)

When one is weaker than one’s interlocutor, language with a double meaning is preferably used to trick and not, as here, to provoke. We should imagine a trial setting in which the exploitation of double meanings to save one’s own skin would be much easier than using them to irritate an already enraged audience. Such a context would roughly correspond to the standard stage of Christian abjurations, since Jesus followers were usually interrogated in less crowded and spectacular courtrooms. When performed in small and separated chambers (*secretaria*) within the governor’s residence (see e.g. *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1; *Acts of Cyprian* 1),³⁹ or even at the bottom of much broader basilica halls, bombastic rhetoric and gesturing could not produce the same theatrical effects they generated in the amphitheater.⁴⁰ Therefore, the kinds of witticisms that are artfully disambiguated by the narrative to ensure the martyr’s fate might have tapped into a “well cooked” pedagogy of trickery for achieving the opposite aim: survival. Just as the legendary exploits of the folk heroes of North American slaves mimicked the survival strategies of real slaves (Scott 1990, 163), I argue that martyrdom plots, too, drew on coded techniques of disguise and concealment that actual believers most likely adopted to sustain life, postpone heavenly rewards, and, perhaps, to gain the approval of fellow-Christians for their agility. In the texts, these artifices are redirected towards a glorious, memorable, and exemplary death. The last example provides further support for this hypothesis.

In the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*,⁴¹ the dialogue between the North African martyr Speratus and the proconsul Saturninus is an artfully crafted

³⁹ Fences and curtains could serve to cordon off the *secretarium*, thereby restricting access and limiting or obstructing the show. See Ebner 2001, 315.

⁴⁰ For the long-lasting theatricality of courtroom dramas and the importance of “largely free-floating, paradigmatic narratives” for the modelling of the judicial scenes, see Grig 2004, 59–68.

⁴¹ The exact location of ancient Scillium within modern Tunisia is unknown. The *Passio* is usually said to represent “the closest of all our extant Acts to the primitive court records” (Musurillo 1972, XXII). Although it is very likely that some Jesus followers from Scillium died as martyrs at the end of the 2nd century CE, the *communis opinio* about the “authenticity” of the text is debatable.

case of mismatch between public and hidden transcripts which rapidly peaks with the open declaration of the latter. For a while, the powerful and the powerless talk past each other (Moss 2012, 128). When the governor refers to the possibility of obtaining the pardon of “our lord the emperor (*domni nostri imperatoris*)”, Speratus answers,

We have never done wrong, we have never given ourselves over to wickedness. Never have we uttered a curse, but when abused, we have given thanks, for we hold our emperor in honor (*propter quod imperatorem nostrum observamus*).

(*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 2; trans. Rebillard 2017, 357)

According to Scott’s taxonomy of “elementary forms of disguise” (Scott 1990, 138), the last sentence is a “euphemism”, that is, a varnished message “expressed in a power-laden situation by an actor who wishes to avoid the sanctions that a direct statement will bring” (Scott 1990, 152). Euphemisms, Scott continues, “continually test the linguistic boundary of what is permissible and . . . often they depend for their intended effect on their being understood by powerholders” (Scott 1990, 153). With respect to this case, however, we might add that the success of euphemisms could be undermined by the speaker’s ultimate determination not to escape the sanction and to be punished instead. The actual identity of Speratus’ *imperator noster* is unveiled less than ten lines later. After a bureaucratic solicitation to repentance, the proconsul utters a clear invitation to sacrifice and gives a peremptory demand for an oath. The “political *cordon sanitaire*” (Scott 1990, 19) immediately breaks:

Speratus said: ‘I do not recognize the imperial authority of this world. Rather, I serve that God whom no man has seen, nor can see, with these eyes.’

(*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 6; trans. Rebillard 2017, 357)

In extra-textual situations, the provocative potential of euphemism might have remained confined to Speratus’ previous oblique reference to God in a non-actionable statement. Then it would have been up to the judge to decide whether to keep this ambiguity alive or not: that is, if the double-entendre is understood, whether to bring pressure to bear on the defendant in order for the veiled intention to be revealed or disavowed, or rather to be content with the innocuous original formula and simply let the suspect go.

4 Poaching

Objects work as *categories of objects* which, in the most tyrannical fashion, define *categories of people* – they police social meaning, and the significations they engender are rigidly controlled. In their proliferation, at once arbitrary and coherent, objects are the best possible vector of a social order that is equally arbitrary and equally coherent, and, under the banner of affluence, they indeed become a most effective material expression of that order.
(Baudrillard 1996 [1968], 191)

Following up on Baudrillard's reflections in *The System of Objects*, one might say that the modern industrialized "consumer society" has optimized, systematized, spectacularized, and – certainly "for the first time in history" – "philosoph[ized]" in terms of "self-fulfilment" (Baudrillard 1996, 184) a cross-temporal impetus: the drive towards, and the pressure on, the hegemonic integration of the population via the standardized semiotics of everyday goods and artifacts. Meanings, past and present, are caught up in objects and people are caught up in both by consumption. Produced in a city workshop, a statue of Caesar contained and conveyed symbolic contents that were automatically absorbed by the buyer; this latter, in turn, was socially *classified* (also) through the integration of the statue into the gamut of objects and goods he/she bought, possessed, and consumed (Baudrillard 1996, 19). Wherever it was staged, in a public square or in a private house, the exchange-value of the statue was a commodified means through which a metaphysically justified socio-political order was disseminated and consumed by a ruled population situated at varying degrees of distance from the state's headquarters. If the statue of the emperor fell down and broke into pieces, as happens in a scene of the *Acts of Peter*, it had to be repaired, since people might otherwise suspect that the power entrusted to the ruling Caesar was questioned and endangered along with the integrity of the item.⁴² As a rule, things-advertising-power are removed, smashed, and taken down when people rise up, or as soon as the hated government is toppled.

Most of Michel de Certeau's work is aimed at countering neo-Marxist and post-Marxist theses on the absolute passivity of consumers, and, more specifically, the idea that practices of consumption *passively* reflect the socio-spatial proximity or distance of specific categories of individuals to or from the location of power – and almost nothing else. De Certeau thus shares with Bhabha

⁴² In *Acts of Peter* 11, we see the apostle Peter exorcising a demon in the house of the wealthy senator Marcellus. As it departs, the demon breaks a statue of the emperor and, instead of marveling at the power of God, Marcellus fears imperial reprisals. A scholar rightly comments: "Once again he [Marcellus] is caught up in social obligations that conflict with loyalty to Christ. Peter reassures him and restores the statue" (Stoops 1986, 98).

and Scott the fundamental assumption that confrontational behaviors and acquiescent attitudes do not tell the whole story about power relations, the location of the agency of change, and the resistant quality of everyday life. In the end, the famous Certeauian notion of the “tactic”⁴³ suggests that critical imagination is neither a privilege of cultural producers nor a prerogative of social rebels. Far from being ineradicably invested in commodities, symbolic values are continuously negotiated through their uses and during their whole life-cycle. If usage is creative and consumption is a tacit production, then semiotics implies a day-to-day “guerrilla warfare” (Eco 2014, 134). However uneven the distribution of signified-weapons, top-down decisions on meaning, functions, and values do not have the last word on the processes of signification.

From the wide array of the “ordinary man’s” tactics displayed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1984 [1980]), I will pick up what de Certeau calls the art of “poaching”. He connects this art paradigmatically with the practice of *reading* (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 165–176), thus taking the latter as the equivalent of consumption in a society’s “scriptural economy” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 131–153). Reading is a most accessible act of hermeneutical and ideological non-commitment, dissent, and creation of unanticipated meanings among literate and semiliterate populations. Now, the level of literacy among early Christians is generally considered to have been as low as that among other non-elite religious associations (Gamble 1995, 10). Yet, however problematic the formula of “textual communities” (Stock 1983, 88–240) may be, the considerable acquaintance of both literate and illiterate Jesus followers with a variable and multifarious set of authoritative scripts provided them with a distinguishing textual stock to poach from. The more the individual was conversant with the scriptural literature, the more his/her poaching could generate new significations from the increasingly patrolled meanings of scriptural writings.

In a recent essay, Harry O. Maier has persuasively interpreted Paul’s imperial imaginary and vocabulary as a way of poaching from a whole “repertoire of political ideas in order to redeploy them for the idiosyncratic aims of his own Christ communities” (Maier 2015, 39). Yet the risk in applying the notion of poaching to

43 “... a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. [...] It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. [...] It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 36–37).

intellectual *writing* is that almost any conceptually relevant line penned by any Christian writer was an act of poaching from the cultural property of an established literary tradition. Inside the “scriptural economy”, poaching could range from the micro-level of terms, concepts, and ideas, through the meso-level of the genre (e.g. Greek novel, epistle, etc.), and up to the macro-level of the cultural technostucture (e.g. philosophy) of a written message. Poaching can, in a word, broadly define the way Christian writers navigated the whole literary process. Outside the scriptural economy, the material-cultural hunting reserve within which one could poach was even wider. Christ-believing individuals poached and counter-poached in any “crack that particular conjunctions open[ed] in the surveillance of the ‘proprietary powers’” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 37), as we can call the social powers who ratified the meaning of any given cultural item: cult images, military emblems, sacrificial meats, etc. Like mimicry and other conceptual tools for illuminating everyday micro-resistances, poaching, too, can be heuristically undermined by its all-embracing descriptive potential.

In consequence, Christian poachers will not correspond here to some talented writers and/or readers “insinuating their inventiveness into the cracks in a cultural orthodoxy” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 172). Nor will they be represented by a limited group of creative exegetes contesting “literal meaning [as] a product of a social elite” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 170). My only example will concern *non-intellectual writers*, that is, ordinary people engaged in everyday businesses that involved writing and led them to use scriptural acts differently from their implicated meanings.

In chapter 23 of *On Idolatry* (Carthage, around 198–206 CE), Tertullian deals with the danger of idolatry as a threat lurking in both “deed and word”, and specifically with the problem of oaths sworn by non-Christians gods. In line with the general strategy of the book, he wants to *create* this problem by challenging other quieter Christians (Rebillard 2012, 9–33). In this sense, the whole tract on idols can be read as an artfully manufactured confrontation between minimalist poachers (the Christians Tertullian dislikes) and maximalist counter-poachers (Christians like Tertullian). The battlefield is the common semiotic territory where Greco-Roman material and literary culture, on the one hand, and Christian authoritative textuality, on the other, meet and sometimes clash. The selected passage reads as follows:

But there is a certain species of that kind (of hidden idolatry) in deed and word, double-edged and threatening on both sides. [...] When they borrow money from the heathens under pledged securities, they give a guarantee under oath, though they deny to be conscious of this; but, of course, this knowledge is required by the time of the legal proceedings, the place of the law-court and the person of the president (... *iurati cavent, etsi*

*negant se scire; volunt scilicet tempus persecutionis et locus tribunalis et persona presidis).*⁴⁴ Now Christ prescribes that swearing is forbidden. ‘I have written,’ one objects, ‘but I have not said anything; it is the tongue, not the letter which kills.’

(Tertullian, *On idolatry* 23.1–2; trans. Waszink and van Winden 1987, 67)

Let us set aside, for the time being, the question concerning the truthfulness/authenticity of the objection in its given form. The direct involvement of an officer as high as the governor (*praeses*) of the province – here the *proconsul Africae* – in a matter such as the drafting and the signing of a private loan contract is “hardly imaginable” (Waszink and van Winden 1987, 286 following Schöllgen 1985, 240). Normally, in the case of simple contracts of lease, sale, etc., there was no need to be granted a hearing before the governor because the contracts were stipulated in the presence of witnesses.⁴⁵ At the same time, the information that written pledges might have contained oaths to non-Christian gods as “supplementary – but not legally binding – guarantees” (Schöllgen 1985, 241) for the recipient is credible. In this case, the borrower was eventually asked to sign scribally-redacted declarations containing descriptions of guarantees sealed by oath formulas.⁴⁶ Even more likely is the possibility that Jesus followers used to receive money on loan, just as did anyone else in financial distress. Tertullian’s hope that, in early 3rd-century Carthage, credits and debts would be conferred only among “brethren” (*On Idolatry* 23.7) is a counterfactual matter of faith (*credo quia absurdum*).

The opponent’s ironical distortion, most certainly manipulated by Tertullian, of the Pauline argument⁴⁷ that “it is the tongue, not the letter which kills” (*Lingua, non littera occidit*) – which is further clarified as “the silent voice of the pen and the mute sound of the letters do not count (*Non valet tacita vox in stilo et mutus in litteris sonus*, *On Idolatry* 23.5)” – is of paramount interest here. In order to procure a loan without betraying the faith, this Christian in need is said to

⁴⁴ Waszink and Van Winden do not follow the alternative reading of the text as emended by Oehler in his 1853–1854 edition: *Pecuniam de ethnicis mutuantes sub pignoribus fiduciati iurati cavent et se negant; se scire volunt scilicet tempus persecutionis et locus tribunali set persona presidis*.

⁴⁵ Yet the editors suggest that: (a) no matter the actual presence of the governor, the document could have been “‘adorned’ with official features in order to give more weight to it”; (b) in the legal-jurisdictional domain, the term *praeses* “seems not to be restricted to the governor of a province” (Waszink and van Winden 1987, 286). The word might then designate inferior jurisdictional figures, such as the “president” of a smaller court assigned to treat minor legal cases.

⁴⁶ Schöllgen (1985, 241) explains that the content of the oath may either be the promise to pay or that the deposit is the debtor’s property – or both.

⁴⁷ 2 *Corinthians* 3:6. A conflation with *James* 3.5–10 (on the evil of tongue) is possible.

poach in the gap between the written and the oral side of a Roman legal institution in a way that de Certeau fails to consider: the resistance of underdogs may lie in writing, and not in reading, a *pre-fabricated* text. Assuming that the “literal meaning” of a legal text is “the index and result of the social power” of “socially authorized professionals” (de Certeau 1984, 171), there is, nevertheless, a basic physical-material layer to this literality that is free from proprietary powers: the letters themselves as culturally established stains on the paper. This case eventually shows that the autonomy of a graphic sign from both its mental⁴⁸ and verbal pronunciation can offer a tactical escape: “I am *just* signing. *I am not saying* what is written, *I am not stating* what is signed.”

Two sensible objections can be raised. First, Tertullian’s opponents are likely to be imaginary antagonists and the whole treatise a “dialogue in disguise” (Waszink and van Winden 1987, 9). In order for Tertullian’s strategy to be successful, the reported protests against his own maximalist agenda must relate in some way to the audience’s ordinary experience. Yet the rhetorically adorned line of arguments in *On Idolatry* 23 is hardly imaginable as a sequence reflecting an actual debate. Second, what these exchanges primarily reveal is that “Christians did not routinely activate their Christian membership” when they had to borrow money. Rather, “it is Tertullian who challenges them to do so” (Rebillard 2012, 30).

Nevertheless, for my purposes, it suffices to consider the following series of arguments: (a) according to a minimalist understanding of a Christian allegiance, giving a guarantee under oath was a sensible behavior; (b) articulated as a rejection of the “legal gods”, Christianness – the quality of being Christian – was a possible motivation to poach across a written legal document; (c) despite its maximalist agenda, Tertullian’s treatise itself contains instructions on how to consume a prefabricated document without fully adhering to the whole gamut of cultural meanings attached to it; (d) by looking at our own daily experience, the practice of technically fulfilling the terms of a document, without subscribing to its worldview,⁴⁹ is quite a common way of performing cultural acts the structures of which are pre-established, uniform, and unchangeable (at least from the perspective of the consumer); (e) like subordinate workers, past and present, who are expected to sign contracts whose words potentially conflict with their own worldview and eventually ratify their social weakness, early Christians were in a position of deliberately poaching in the

⁴⁸ Tertullian cunningly appeals to the workings of human consciousness in order to argue for the impossibility of such an action: “the hand cannot write anything which the soul has not dictated” (*On Idolatry* 23.2).

⁴⁹ In cases of minor importance, even without reading through the text.

gap between graphic signs and their established interpretations. Once again, in doing so they show that the “construction of the social text” by cultural producers does not correspond to its reception by those “who are supposed to be satisfied to reproduce the models elaborated by the manipulators of language” (de Certeau 1984 [1980], 169). Like mimickers and tricksters, poachers, too, make clear that the battle of meaning “is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives” (Eco 2014, 142).

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