

Latin Christian Poetry

By A. Sara Tirone

It is difficult to know definitively when the 'Ancient World' in the West came to an end.

Although there were plenty of death knells which rung the changes along the way: the mass conversion to Christianity, the sackings of Rome by the Visigoths, Vandals and Ostrogoths, the division of the Empire into east and west, the ascension of King Odoacer – but the end of Rome and the beginning of the Dark Ages was far more a transition than any single event.

Even if we're on flimsy ground regarding the moment of metamorphosis, we can certainly say that the soundtrack to the transition was provided by one of the most neglected groups of ancient artists: Latin Christian poets.

Though revered in the middle-ages, since then the Christian poets who wrote from 4th - 6th centuries have been much maligned as shallow imitations of their pagan predecessors, concerned more with proselytism than prosody.

And perhaps there is an undeniable truth in this statement. Latin, Christian poetry is passionate, often bordering on the fanatical, but there are, as Carolinne White states in her wonderfully approachable work on the topic, *Early Christian Latin Poets*, "further delights and complexities of this unjustly neglected corpus".

However, before we sup the flesh and blood of the works of the holy scribblers, one glaring and vital question must be asked: 'What about the Latin, Christian poetry before the 4th century'?

Quite simply, there are no extant Latin, Christian poems from the first three centuries.

The knee-jerk reasoning for this is to cite the Roman persecutions of the Christians, but this doesn't quite cut it. The severity of persecution oscillated enough to allow some work to blossom, and the holy texts themselves obviously pre-dated the poetry inspired by them.

So has this work been lost? Well... possibly, but the crux of the issue (an unintended pun for the etymologists amongst you) lies in the fact that the early church was more influenced by Greek and Hebrew; and most early hymns were composed in either Greek or Syriac (a western dialect of Aramaic).

The early Christians considered Latin too pagan or, if you prefer, not Christian enough – a delicious irony as some hard-liners consider the dropping of the Latin mass to be the zenith of impiety.

So the dearth of early, Christian Latin poetry is no mystery.

The 4th-6th centuries was a time of biblical re-education. Many religious texts were translated into Latin and biblical and apostolic study became as much a part of the assumed curriculum for literate men as Virgil or Homer had been for their forefathers.

Paradoxically, detractors have accused the early Christian poets of being both too similar to, and not distinct enough from, their pagan forebears.

Here it appears we have some muddled thinking as, whilst nobody could make a convincing argument that the style and meter of the Christians were not either heavily influenced by, or directly copied from the likes of Ovid, Horace, Virgil and Propertius, what makes them distinct is the tone and content of their work:

"The abundance of sins tends to throw Christians into confusion. As a result of this our Lord wanted to give us a warning, comparing the kingdom of heaven to a net cast into the sea which catches up many fishes of every kind from different places. When they have been pulled to the shore, the fishermen separate them, placing the good ones in barrels, the bad they put back in the sea". - Augustine

This is even more true for non-Latinists as poetical rhythm is often, inevitably, lost in translation.

So we are left with content — and in this respect there was a tectonic, or perhaps divine, shift from the time of the pagan writers.

Overnight, poetry became more serious, cerebral and spiritual. What was once a distracting folly for the educated elite became an exercise of the utmost reverence and piety.

Although Christian poetry was a form of worship, that's not to say it was without its pleasure. However, this was a merry bi-product, the spoon of sugar to help the medicine go down:

"With voice at least may my sinning soul honour God, even if with good deeds it cannot" – Prudentius

Despite the truth of this, Christian Latin poetry was far from one-dimensional.

"It is a poetry that covers a wide variety of subjects and forms — theological points and doctrinal issues, anti-pagan and anti-heretical polemic, moral advice, saints' lives and miracles, hymns, biblical epic based on both the Old Testament and the New, and pastoral, as well as more personal lyric, epigrams, consolation in bereavement and autobiographical poetry" (Caroline White).

Though despite these lofty intentions, the actual language used is often derived from Vulgar Latin — the language of the gutter, the downtrodden and the oppressed.

A possible explanation for this is the vulgarity of the original scriptures themselves which, if Paulinus of Nola is to be believed, could not be further from the rarefied eloquence of the King James' Bible:

"Let not the simplicity of scripture nor the poverty of its vocabulary offend you, for these are due either to the faults of translators or else to a deliberate purpose, for in its way it is better fitted for the instruction of the unlettered congregation as the educated person can take one meaning and the uneducated another from one and the same sentence"

Though whatever the lexical shortcomings, this was made up for in spades by the fervent belief that these were not pagan word-games, but Christian truths:

"Why should we prefer barren land covered in weeds to a lovely green landscape" - Sedulius

Though the problem with writing about the truth was that there was often some meddlesome schismatic throwing spanners into the works.

Thus, a good deal of the time and energy spent by the early Christian poets went not into proselytising, exalting, or composing perfect verse, but into denouncing other heretical sects.

This seemed especially true of Augustine in his determination to ensure a singularity of exegesis in a time when there were many dogmatic pretenders jostling for supremacy.

Several poets made pains to condemn the apostate tendencies of the Pelagians, Arians, Donatists, Priscillians and Manichees who between them believed wild and dangerous things such as we don't inherit sin from Adam and Eve, God is superior to Jesus, Jesus is not eternal (though was created before time began) and other such insidious heresy.

This gives us another clear and unambiguous way in which the Christian and pagan poets differed; the polytheists were far more laissez-faire and ad hoc when it came to the malleable details of their gods' lives, attributes and even morality.

So it is not just because the subject matter is more familiar to us that the words of the Christian poets resonate with such vigour. It seems the pride and passion they put into their work was done so without affect:

"From the wound of Christ flowed the sacraments of the Church"
- Augustine

The fire and brimstone were as burning and acrid on the page as off it. And so, even if one can make a solid case to state that the likes of Ovid and Horace were finer practitioners of their art,

whatever Christian poetry lacked in style or objective beauty, it more than made up for in pride, passion, piety and, of course being Christian, a heavy dose of pathos:

"The holy one went out after• being handed over for punishment... his magnificent head was encircled with a crown woven of thorns, because in his mercy he took upon himself all the thorns of our misfortunes... he was hung high on the spreading cross, transforming the anger of the crisis by means of loving devotion... suddenly a horrendous darkness fell, taking possession of the whole sky, covering the shadowy daylight with gloomy mourning; the sun buried...just as for three hours the darkened stars hid...so for three days the Lord endured imprisonment in the cave that was his tomb" – Sedulius

Early Christian Latin Poets is available in Assumption University library.

Bio-data:

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