CONTEXTS OF PRUDENTIUS' POEMS

MAURICE P. CUNNINGHAM

PROFESSOR Fontaine[1] has suggested recently that definition of the human context of the poems of Prudentius is a major desideratum. Characteristically, he has at the same time also made significant contributions to the task itself. Perhaps the most important one is that he has quietly abandoned as outdated and disproved the notion, which derives in part from Puech and Boissier,[2] that the poems of Prudentius had no real human context. In this paper[3] I hope to carry further this inquiry, examining the evidence for various aspects of the social, literary, and intellectual contexts of the poems.

But first one should say a word about the poet's own social context. Successive generations of scholars[4] have tried to extract personal information from the two program poems, *Praefatio* and *Epilogus*, the latter being entitled enticingly *De opusculis suis Prudentius*. One suspects that sometimes more information has been extracted than the poet gives. About all it amounts to is: (1) the poet has had a successful career as a civil servant; (2) he is of senatorial rank; and (3) he has retired honorably from the service. We can also justly infer (4) that he is a Christian layman.

Additional information in *Peristephanon* 9 has not been fully exploited. The poem is intensely personal in tone. From it we learn that the poet had had an experience at Imola, while on his way to Rome. He was troubled by something he called "my wounds" (*Perist.* 9. 7 *mea uulnera*), and the matter involved his professional career (7 *omnes uitae labores*). As a result of that experience, he had immediate hope that Christ would favor him, namely, that he would be successful in the matter which he was going to Rome to take care of. At the urging of the sacristan of the *memoria* of the martyr Cassianus at Imola, he prayed for success, making a full review of the whole business, what he wanted to get, what to avoid. He also tells us that he had left affairs behind him at home (103 *domi*) in great uncertainty, and that his expectations for the future were involved. This last item is definitely material rather than theological or eschatological.

1. J. Fontaine, "Société et culture chrétiennes sur l'aire circumpyrénéenne au siècle de Théodose," *BLE* 75 (1974): 241–82, esp. 255–61 and n. 34.
2. A. Puech, *Prudence: Etude sur la poésie latine chrétienne au IVᵉ siècle* (Paris, 1888); and G. Boissier, "Le poète Prudence," *Revue des deux mondes* 91 (1889): 357–90, reprinted in *La fin du paganisme*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1907), 2: 105–51.
3. Prudentius is cited from M. P. Cunningham, ed., *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina* (Turnhout, 1966) = *Corpus Christianorum*, series Latina, 126. Two items which are forthcoming should be mentioned: "Forty Years of Prudentian Studies, 1932–1971" is scheduled for publication in H. Temporini, ed., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, volume 3; much explanatory material has been provided for an edition of Prudentius in the series "Escritors Llatins" (in Catalan).
4. The best recent treatment is that of I. Lana, *Due capitoli prudenziani* (Rome, 1962). The best and most careful discussion of the evidence I know is H. Middeldorpf, "De Prudentio et theologia prudentiana," *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie* 2.2 (1832): 127–90.

The modern reader, alert to any mention of the poet's personal affairs, immediately wonders what Prudentius' problem was. It would be easy to say that we do not know, but that is not quite accurate. We do know something about it. It was a problem which could be solved in Rome, and probably only in Rome. That is why he is going to Rome. And it was solved in Rome; the poet says that it was.

A number of hypotheses will fit these facts. Puech thought that Prudentius went to Rome to see the emperor, and spends some effort in conjecturing possible chronologies. This suggestion seems very unlikely. One more naturally expects that the problem had to do, in one way or another, with such ordinary matters as money, property, or status, and that it involved consulting records filed in Rome. Someone in an office somewhere says that money or property charged to Prudentius has not been properly accounted for. Prudentius knows that it has been, but must go to Rome to locate and produce the proper record. A second possibility is that he must assert and establish his freedom from certain taxes or other obligations; otherwise his livelihood will be lost. Or he must attend a meeting of the senate or perform some other ceremonial act to establish status. The list could be long; but it is not endless. I favor some variation which connects the problem with the continual harassment of Christian senators by their pagan colleagues. After all, to them, official pro- or anti-Christian policies were part of the political process, as the reign of Julian had demonstrated.

Prudentius was successful. His success, however, may not have been quite so easy or prompt as his summary narrative of it might suggest. In the classical tradition generally, the ease of execution is usually in inverse proportion to the form of statement. The easier the statement, the harder the accomplishment.

The overall picture I see of Prudentius in Rome is one of a seasoned and knowledgeable official, who knows how things get done. He does not attack his problem directly, because oftener than not the ostensible problem is not the real problem. Instead, he pays his respects to all of the great and powerful to whom he has access. If there is some service he can perform for someone else, he does it. It is in this context that I see some of Prudentius' other works. For example, the *Contra Symmachum* is not a bit of shadow boxing off in a corner. It was probably encouraged, if not commissioned, by prominent Christian senators in Rome, when they learned that Prudentius was a poet. It is very hard for us to realize the power and importance of literary compositions in the politics and policy of the official Roman world of this period.

In respect to the subject matter of the *Contra Symmachum*,[5] one observes that, by the time Prudentius' poem was published in about 402, the situation had changed drastically from what it had been in 384, when the original affair began. At that time the Christian senators of Rome had called on Pope Damasus to have some reply made to Symmachus' original petition

5. The relevant information is conveniently accessible in M. Lavarenne, ed., *Prudence*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1948), pp. 85–106.

(*Relatio* 3). He in turn called on Ambrose to make one. Ambrose's two letters (*Epist.* 17 and 18) constitute the response. But in the meantime there had come the fairly comprehensive legislative program of Theodosius. To Prudentius, Theodosius is the perfect prince; the poet becomes the spokesman for Theodosius, against whose wisdom the rhetoric of Symmachus is powerless. Finally, instead of being a clerical spokesman for an institutional church, Prudentius is a senator replying to another senator in defense of established imperial policy. In addition, one of the main effects of the *Contra Symmachum* is to disprove the implicit thesis of the pagan party that only the ignorant, uneducated, and those in general who lack status accept and favor the Christian position.

Prudentius may well have spent a couple of years in Rome after his experience with the martyr Cassianus, before he achieved success in the specific endeavors which brought him to Rome in the first place.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF THE POEMS

The suggestion just made about the *Contra Symmachum*, that it was welcome to and encouraged by the Christian senators in Rome, is not subject to specific verification. But it is hard to doubt.

We can be quite firm about the social context of *Peristephanon* 8. The *inscriptio* reads: "De loco in quo martyres passi sunt nunc baptisterium est Calagorra." The poem is clearly designed to be exhibited on the wall of the baptistry at Calahorra. This is its social context.

According to their *inscriptiones*, the other poems in the *Peristephanon* (naturally excluding *Romanus* = *Perist.* 10) had an identifiable social function. Five of them bear the label *hymnus* (*Perist.* 1, 3, 4, 6, and 7). The rest have the label *passio* (*Perist.* 2, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14). Clearly all of these poems bear a relation to the celebration of the annual feasts of martyrs. *Passiones* played a regular part in the public celebration of martyr cults; without going into details, we can assume that Prudentius' poems called *passiones* played a similar part.

In regard to *hymni*, Augustine (*sermo* 13 Denis = *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, p. 58) mentions hymns as part of the celebration of martyr cults when they are perfomed in the way he approves of. His words are: *hymnos dicunt*. Prudentius also, in describing the celebration of the feast of SS. Peter and Paul in Rome when he was there, includes hymns as an important element in the cult (*Perist.* 12. 60 "et his et illis perfruamur hymnis").

No chronology of the poems of Prudentius should ignore this line. It suggests that Prudentius became aware of the possibility of using hymns in martyr cult while he was in Rome, and that all of his hymns on martyrs are in imitation or emulation of the Roman practice. I make the suggestion with diffidence.

The poems of the *Cathemerinon* are also called *hymni* in the *inscriptiones*. The plain implication is that they were intended for use in the poet's own household. Christian household cult is not widely attested. Why should it be, when most of our authors are clergymen? But in one place Augustine does mention the use of hymns in the home (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 49.23 =

CCL, 38: 593). Someone says: "Surgam quotidie, pergam ad ecclesiam, dicam unum hymnum matutinum, alium uespertinum, tertium aut quartum in domo mea."

We have identified a social context for the twelve poems of the *Cathemerinon* and for the thirteen in the *Peristephanon*. We have conjectured a reasonable situation for the *Contra Symmachum* also. We may reasonably assume that the other poems are addressed to real audiences too. I do not enlarge on these matters now, since my purpose here is to sketch the main outlines rather than to fill in details. I think the following thesis is probable: The poems of Prudentius are, for the most part, related to events, situations, and conditions in the immediate world around him. The next task will be to examine in more detail the mutual relation of contexts and poems, in order to gain a better insight into what the poet has accomplished.

<div align="center">LITERARY CONTEXTS</div>

My second thesis is that, with respect to poetic type or genre (in any of the numerous senses of the word), almost none of the poems of Prudentius has a direct formal antecedent in the classical Latin corpus. Proof requires nothing more than simple observation.

Each *liber* of the long poems in hexameters contains an introductory section in a non-dactylic meter. Some of the poems of Claudian (in hexameters) have *praefationes* in elegiacs; hence one infers that Prudentius is adapting a device taken from more recent tradition. No hexameter poem in the classical Latin tradition has anything of the sort. The way in which the *praefatio* is related to the rest of the *liber* in Prudentius is apparently quite novel. Each of the *praefationes* is devoted to the telling of some biblical narrative, which is then stated to have a relation to the subject matter of the hexameters.

The *Contra Symmachum* demonstrates other similarly obvious departures from classical norms. Books 1 and 2 are clearly parts of a single composition in two books; the parallelism between the two *praefationes* confirms the fact. But the second book is no mere continuation of the first. Book 1 contains a formal presentation of the policy of Theodosius on religion combined with a regular *contra gentes*. Book 2 is truly a reply to Symmachus' *Relatio* point by point, whether one accepts the quotations from the text of Symmachus or not. Surely the classical tradition offers no parallel for a composition of this form.

The *Peristephanon* is a collection which includes poems of three distinct types: *hymni, passiones*, and one *inscriptio* or epigram.

The three books, *Apotheosis, Hamartigenia*, and *Psychomachia*, are an even more striking departure from any classical standard. They are regularly labeled *liber I, liber II*, and *liber III* respectively in the manuscript tradition; thus presumably they are parts of a single composition. Current tradition applies the term "epic" to them in various ways. Although this term is often so carelessly used that it has ceased to be practically useful, I would point out that the *Psychomachia* has *arma*, but no *uirumque*. I do not discuss *Tituli historiarum*, which is also in hexameters.

The remaining poems invite attention to their metrical form. Some are

monostichic, some in couplets, some in strophes, and a great many in stanzas of three, four, and five lines.

The poems in elegiacs (*Perist.* 8 an inscription, and *Perist.* 11 a communication) both lie well within the classical limits set for the meter. The monostichic poems (*Perist.* 13 and 14) and the others in couplets (*Perist.* 9, 12, and *Epilogus*) are all more or less developments of, rather than departures from, the classical tradition. This is probably true also of the poems in sapphics (*Cath.* 8 and *Perist.* 4) and of *Praefatio*, which is in three-line strophes.

But the stanza is something else again. I distinguish between strophe and stanza as follows: A strophe is a unit larger than a couplet, consisting of lines in more than one meter. It may, but need not, be end-stopped. In a stanza the lines are all in the same meter. In Prudentius stanzas consist of sets of three, four, or five lines. They are end-stopped in the sense that the stanza becomes an integral unit of composition and structure.

The only precedents I know of in the Latin poetic tradition are one or two of the hymns of Hilary and the stanzas in the hymns of Ambrose.[6] In Hilary the stanza seems to represent, at least in part, an attempt by Hilary to use a poetic form familiar and acceptable to the people for whom he wrote his hymns. This seems especially true of the third Arezzo hymn, which is in trochaic tetrameters catalectic in three-line stanzas. The new element here is not the metrical line, which has a long history of usage as a popular meter. The same meter is also used in the *Peruigilium Veneris*, which follows the older Latin tradition in being broken up into units of varying length by a refrain. The new element is the stanza. The Ambrosian stanza is also regularly said to be a popular verse form. The obvious conclusion is that the stanza is an element borrowed or adapted from popular song. It was chosen by Hilary, Ambrose, and Prudentius in turn when they sought forms of verbal and musical expression which would be appropriate for and acceptable to ordinary people, the people for whom they were composing.

Prudentius himself, in *Cathemerinon* 3, seems to assert that the stanza is one distinctive mark of a new kind of lyric poetry which he thinks is more suitable to the Christian themes he is expressing (*Cath.* 3. 26–30). Later in the same poem (81–85) he appears to say that neither heroic (*ueterum tuba*) nor lyric poetry of the classical Latin tradition is adequate to the sort of Christian purposes he is writing for.

Let us look at the passages in more detail (*Cath.* 3. 26–30):

> Sperne, camena, leues hederas,
> cingere tempora quis solita es,
> sertaque mystica dactylico
> texere docta liga strophio
> laude dei redimita comas.

6. See M. P. Cunningham, "The Place of the Hymns of St. Ambrose in the Latin Poetic Tradition," *SPh* 52 (1955): 509–14.

Camena (26) may be loosely interpreted as "the spirit of the Latin poetic tradition." As that spirit or *camena* acts with the poet to produce his poems, the poet addresses her (as poets are accustomed to do). He tells her to do something, which turns out to be what he is in fact doing himself. Here he tells his *camena* to reject ivy (*hederas*), which he calls *leues*, light, not serious enough. This is the stuff with which she had previously been accustomed to wreathe her temples. Instead, his *camena* is to learn to put around her temples (*docta liga*) a mystic garland woven of dactylic stanzas. Since the words *dactylico . . . strophio* obviously refer to the metrical form of the poem itself, "dactylic stanzas" seems an appropriate paraphrase, and adequate for our present need. The term *serta mystica*, the mystic garland which is woven out of the dactylic stanzas, refers to the religious subject and purpose. Just what is included in the term *leues hederas* we can learn from a passage further on in the poem (81–85):

> Quae ueterum tuba quaeue lyra
> flatibus inclyta uel fidibus
> diuitis omnipotentis opus
> quaeque fruenda patent homini
> laudibus aequiperare queat?

The poet has just elaborated on the abounding work of God and his natural gifts to men. Then in an exclamatory question, he says: "What trumpet of the ancients or what lyre by their music could fitly praise God's work and what lies open to man's enjoyment!" I interpret this to be a statement that heroic and lyric forms of verse as they exist in the classical Latin tradition (*ueterum*) are inadequate to the task of the Christian poet, or at least to the task of Prudentius at the moment.

In the literature on Prudentius one often encounters the formula "Christian subject matter, pagan form." It never was much more than a formula; but, even on that level, it is interesting to see that Prudentius himself has rejected it specifically and unequivocally.

If I read him correctly, Prudentius here in this poem rejects classical forms and genres; he does not reject the diction, techniques, or poetic principles of the classical phase of that tradition, although he obviously accepts or introduces modifications in all three of these areas. Why Prudentius made these judgments we do not know. But we do know that at this time a good deal of metrical experimentation was going on and had been for some time. At one end of the scale we have poems of the learned in more than one meter, ones which actually change meter part way through, such as some produced by Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola. At the other end, we have the stanza, which, as I said before, appears to have a basis in folk music and popular song.

My conclusion, then, is this: Not only do the poems of Prudentius, for the most part, lack direct filiation in the classical Latin tradition; a good many of them in fact represent striking innovations even in terms of contemporary practice so far as we know it.

INTELLECTUAL CONTEXTS

My third thesis is that, in terms of his characteristic modes of thought and expression, Prudentius represents quite a new departure in the Latin poetic tradition—that is to say, it is new with respect to the classical tradition; naturally he is much closer to movements of his own time, although even in comparison with other poets of the period who are now extant, Prudentius' work displays considerable innovation.

I shall treat only two topics under this heading: (1) imagery and (2) presentation of scenes involving pain or suffering.

Imagery. The fact that Prudentius is governed by norms and procedures of style which differ decisively from those of the classical phase of the Latin tradition appears nowhere more clearly than it does in the form of his imagery and the use he makes of it.

Striking metaphors are very rare; perhaps the best known is the expression *flores martyrum* in *Cathemerinon* 12. 125.

Similes are quite common, although Prudentius' use of them is distinctive. The *Psychomachia* has one simile. When the Virtues have apparently routed the Vices, they lead their troops back to camp in two columns, one of infantry, one of cavalry, singing antiphonally (*Psych.* 650–64):

> Not otherwise sang victorious Israel, as they kept glancing back at the wild menace of the sea behind them, while they marched on to the further shore dry-shod. The height of the hanging water broke and hissed at their heels; the undertow caught the black Nile-people at the sea bottom. The sea bed filled again with water for fish to swim in, which buried the bare sand. Beating booming drums with drumstick in marching time, God's people sang the Almighty's wonderful work, to be recalled in later ages, that banks of water rose amidst the sea, as waves stood like cliffs and the wind fell, and could hold masses of water suspended. Even so, when the tribe of Vices had been routed, the mystic song of the Virtues resounded in sweet psalmody.

One would hardly expect to find a simile like this in any poet who belongs strictly to the classical tradition. Prudentius' contemporary, Claudian, has a number of ordinary epic similes in the poem on the rape of Proserpina: lions, bees, Amazons, and so on.

In the classical tradition, imagery tends to refer to and to draw upon typical situations: some activity is like bees doing what bees do, like a wolf at the sheepfold, like a lion, and so on. Or someone is like Diana, or Apollo, or Ariadne in a typical posture or situation. Or, more generally, "and from her eyes fell tears as water falls from snow" (Ov. *Am.* 1. 7. 57–58).

The most characteristic imagery in Prudentius, however, involves an event of the sort technically known in Biblical studies as a "type" (*tupos*). Mostly these events or types come from Scripture: for example, the crossing of the Red Sea, or the feeding of Daniel in the lions' den. Or there is a scriptural allusion. Or, at the least, the image is organized with the same technique as is used for scriptural references.

One might cite from the *Romanus* a simile in which the devil's last fling at persecution is compared to a snake (*Perist.* 10. 26–30): "Thus a snake

wounded by spear point bites back at the iron and driven by pain grips the imbedded point in his teeth and shakes it; but it has gone too deep and ignores the risk of his bites."

This passage has affinities with the traditional type of epic simile. The wounded snake occurs in *Aeneid* 5. 273 ff. The wounded animal biting the weapon is used of Turnus at the opening of *Aeneid* 12 (4 ff.), where a wounded lion bites and breaks the *fixum latronis telum*. In Vergil's context, the symbolic potentialities of the elements in the simile are determined and controlled by (1) the literary tradition, (2) the context in the poem, and (3) in part and at times by something obvious in contemporary social conditions and institutions. In terms of (1) the tradition, snakes, lions, and so on belong in similes and similes of this sort belong in certain types of poem. In terms of (2) the *Aeneid*, the mortally wounded lion foreshadows Turnus' defeat and death. In terms of (3) the social institutions shared by Vergil and his audience, Aeneas represents Rome's destiny, Turnus and the dying lion are obstacles to that destiny. This is all in the *Aeneid*. It represents the field of operation and relevance for imagery and symbolism that is possible and appropriate for poetry in the classical tradition. But the *anguis* in Prudentius is not just "a snake"; it is "the snake," "the serpent" of Genesis. The *latro* of Vergil's *latronis telum* is merely the hunter, regarded as poacher from the lion's point of view, or as Aeneas from Turnus' point of view.

The form of thought and expression involved in Prudentius' *imago* of the wounded snake may be called typology, because the same data and conditions apply to it as apply to what is known as Biblical typology. Thus the serpent of Genesis is a figure of the devil, who is also the prime mover of persecution of Christians. Typology in this sense is perfectly ordinary and traditional in orthodox Latin Christianity long before the year 400. It provides the greatest single category of poetic imagery in Prudentius. Thus Abraham and Loth in their actions in the *praefatio* of the *Psychomachia* are types for the soul and body respectively. Judith (*Psych.* 67) with Holofernes is a type of Pudicitia (*dum tempora nostra figurat*). The commonest terms for "type" in Prudentius are *forma*, *figura*, *imago*, and *exemplum*. One should note that it is not the persons who are the types; it is the event in which the persons participate which is the "type."

I do not adopt here any of the more intellectual and theological definitions of type and typology, such as one finds in the Biblical commentaries of Origen or Jerome. The mode of thought and expression involved is present and active in Christianity from the very earliest Jewish-Christian period. The Lamb of God is an obvious example. Confining ourselves to the Latin West, we may say that it develops powerfully in the liturgy, including sermons, and in the visual arts. Ancient Christian sarcophagi are full of examples. The Easter Proclamation (*Praeconium Paschale* or *Exultet*) provides excellent insight into the modes of thought involved. "This is the night on which Israel escaped from Egypt; this is the night on which they celebrated the Passover; this is the night in which Christ rose from the dead; this is the night in which year after year Christians celebrate the Easter Vigil." And they are all the same night: this night.

As I have said, the *praefatio* of the *Psychomachia* is built upon events in the life of Abraham presented as figures or types. But the Virtues and Vices in the body of the poem are something else entirely. They do not "stand for" something else; they are merely vivid realizations of themselves and of their own characters. One might call them personifications.

A comparable distinction is found in the conventions of ancient art. In non-Christian art one distinguishes (1) the historical event, e.g., the miracle of the rain on the column of Marcus Aurelius, from (2) the typical situation. Diana riding on a stag is simply Diana in a typical and characteristic situation. The same is true of Venus doing her hair or of a statue of a man representing his status. In Christian art the technique of the historical event is applied to the typical event: crossing the Red Sea, Jonah going into the sea monster, and so on. As examples of the typical situation one might cite the figures of the Church of the Circumcision and the Church of the Gentiles on the mosaic in the apse of Santa Pudenziana in Rome, and probably the whole mosaic.[7]

The Virtues and Vices of the *Psychomachia* belong to the artistic tradition of the typical situation. Their activity constitutes no real event, because they merely express or act out their own characters. Lavarenne among others complains that the Virtues do not treat the Vices in a "Christian" manner. Their manner would be un-Christian if it were shown to persons; it is pre-eminently Christian as shown to Vices.

The figures in the *Psychomachia* are frequently called "allegorical" (Faith, Humility, Patience on one side; Idolatry, Pride, and Wrath on the other). The term is also often used for Biblical types. This is simply an instance of one word being used in two quite different senses (see Aug. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 103 *serm.* 1. 13 = *CCL*, 40: 1485–86).

But both forms of expression pose problems for us, because both involve imagery (*imagines*), and the traditional rhetorical distinction between literal and figurative meanings in language is inadequate as a basis for interpretation of such texts as these. Augustine long ago noted that all language is symbolic, since it operates through *signa*. But the traditions of classical rhetoric still tend to dominate our approach to linguistic texts. The weakness of that system is not so great in dealing with the figurative, but it does not at all deal adequately with the literal. Most of the items we have been discussing—metaphors, similes, types, examples, and so on—are in one very real sense literally meant. But to avoid arguing about mere names I have treated them all in terms of the word imagery, by which I mean about what is meant by the Latin *imago* and *imagines*.

Prudentius is full of *imagines*, and a great many of them present vigorous and lively action. Jacob, the bold wrestler (*Cath.* 2. 73–76 *luctator audax*), sweats (*sudauit*). The lions in the lions' den lick Daniel (*Cath.* 4. 47 *lambunt*

7. Easily accessible reproductions are found in J. Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pl. 18; and in A. Grabar, *Martyrium: Recherches sur le culte des reliques et de l'art chrétien antique*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1946; repr. London, 1972), pl. xxxix (see also pp. 202–3). In F. van der Meer and C. Mohrmann, *Atlas of the Early Christian World* (London, 1958), pl. 452, p. 139, reproduces the head of the "Church of the Gentiles" from this mosaic. On the same page, pls. 451*a* and 451*b* reproduce figures from a mosaic in S. Sabina (Rome) which are labeled respectively as "Eclesia ex circumcisione" and "Eclesia ex gentibus."

indomiti uirum leones) and act like kittens. A similar fondness for action is common in the representation of type events in contemporary Christian art, though techniques vary.

A fine example to illustrate Prudentius' use of *imagines* is in his Hymn for Cockcrow (*Cath.* 1). In the first stanza, the cock and Christ are virtually identified (1–4). In the next line, "Away," he cries, "with beds" (*auferte clamat lectulos*). The verb *clamat* has for subject both *ales* and *Christus*. Later, the crowing of the cock (*uox ista*) is called a figure of Christ (*nostri figura est iudicis*). Then the *uox* is simply that of Christ, and as such it is a signal (*signum*) for wandering spirits to retire. The terms "literal" and "figurative" will not do justice to this kind of complexity. And yet these forms of conceptualization are normal in Latin Christianity long before the time of Prudentius and long after.

Presentation of scenes involving pain and suffering. Critics almost invariably comment upon our poet's tendency to present scenes involving pain and suffering in such a way that the reader is made vividly aware of the suffering and of the attempt to cause pain. The critics in general disapprove of this feature of the poet's style; but, before we discuss their reasons, we should examine the fundamental characteristics of this stylistic feature.

What does the poet accomplish by this means? I see four separate aspects or functions of this device. First, in one sense we are simply speaking of a single aspect of the poet's great gift: vivid and earthy realizations of the actual and particular in the scenes he describes. His Hymn for Epiphany (*Cath.* 12) is an excellent example. The poem develops the story of the Holy Innocents. Herod is presented as just the kind of man who, as king, would order the death of all male infants for dynastic reasons or simply to protect himself from a possible danger. By implication, Herod's soldiers too are presented as just the sort of lumpish, unfeeling men who would follow such orders. Then we see the Holy Innocents themselves, clustered before God's altar and playing with the symbols of their martyrdom, the palms and crowns.

Second, this same principle of selective realism applies to the poet's presentation of the sufferings of martyrs in the *Peristephanon*. It is possible to present stories of martyrs without stressing their sufferings. But, from all that we can learn of the subject in the period in which Prudentius is writing, it is clear that the people who honored their martyrs would have felt cheated, if an account of the sufferings were omitted. In fact, they did feel cheated, when no documents were available. Prudentius says so (*Perist.* 1. 72–78). In these poems, the poet's purpose is to honor and foster the cult of the martyrs whom he celebrates. To do so it is necessary to present their sufferings with a certain degree of vivid realism. In terms of the audience and the occasion for which he is writing, the poet must be counted successful.

Third, the matter of the sufferings has another dimension as well, although it is one which is quite hard for us to estimate. At the time of Prudentius, it seems clear that the passion of Christ was not given elaborate or detailed treatment. Its reality is accepted but not stressed. On the other hand, the martyrs were said to participate in Christ's passion, and to a limited extent to suffer as Christ suffered. Consequently, when Prudentius emphasizes and

elaborates upon the sufferings of a martyr, he is also treating of Christ's passion in a vicarious way. He says as much himself (*Perist.* 5. 299–300; see also Aug. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 40. 1 = *CCL*, 38: 448).

Fourth, one other use which the poet makes of the unpleasant or ugly calls for comment. He presents the conflict between Constantine and Maxentius in 312 in terms of Rome and her noblest citizens being rescued from slavery and mistreatment. This is standard rhetorical procedure. The political leader or party that loses is regularly depicted as guilty of outrageous behavior, especially against the more respectable portions of society. This particular situation is similarly presented by Lactantius (*De mortibus persecutorum*). Cicero does as much for Catiline. But Prudentius extends this pattern of thought to new dimensions. He operates with a model or conception of reality which equates pagan, bad, ugly, and barbarous or uncivilized. These terms are contrasted with their opposites: Christian, good, beautiful, and Roman or civilized. This pattern of thought is not a mere rhetorical ploy; it represents one of the poet's most firmly held convictions (see *C. Symm.* 2. 816–19).

We may conclude then that the vivid presentation and realization of scenes involving pain and suffering is an element in the style of Prudentius which is structurally essential to his basic meaning and message.

But that is not all that needs to be said on the matter. There is a striking parallel between some of the things we have been noticing here in Prudentius and certain new elements which appear in monuments of the visual arts in the late Roman period. These latter are studied by Professor Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli,[8] who notes that one of the earliest marks of the new style in late Roman art is a new way of representing persons suffering pain or distress. He calls the new elements "plebeian" or "popular" in contrast to the older style, which he calls "official." The artist has new statements to make and he is making them to a new audience.

Prudentius too has new statements to make and the audience to which he addresses them is primarily the same plebeian and popular audience to which the new artistic styles are addressed.

As we noted above, critics generally tend to find fault with Prudentius for the vivid ways in which he presents scenes of pain and suffering. In much the same way they also find fault with him for excessive fullness of expression and other matters of a similar sort. In all of these respects we are dealing basically with disappointed expectations. The critics think that they already know the literary and artistic traditions within which the poet is, or ought to be, operating; and they judge him by those canons. When he fails to meet their expectations, they list these failures as "faults." One begins to suspect that some of the common lists of Prudentius' alleged faults might serve instead as a list of normal features of the newer and more popular art of the period.

Lawrence University

8. R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome: The Late Empire, Roman Art A.D.* 200–400, trans. Peter Green (New York, 1971).