

Holy Prosody and Profane

J. M. LALLEY

ST. PAUL IN HIS MESSAGE to the Christians of Ephesus exhorted them to speak "in psalms, in hymns and in spiritual odes."¹ Precisely what the Apostle and his followers understood by these terms, and how, if at all, they differentiated them, are questions for which neither the exegetes nor the musicologists have certain answers; but it will be noted that all three terms are Greek by etymology. To the Greeks *psalmos*² meant merely a poem that was sung to the accompaniment of a lyre, a cithera or some other stringed instrument; but *Psalmoi* was also the word with which the translators of the Septuagint Bible had chosen to render the Hebrew *Tehillim*. Thus, since St. Paul was a Hellenized Jew, as were also, no doubt, many of his converts, it is fairly safe to suppose that the word had for him and them the same special and scriptural meaning it holds for most of us today.

To the pagan Greeks *hymnos* meant a lyric of praise and glory, sung in honor of some god or hero; but to Christians of the Apostolic age it may well have designated one of the scriptural canticles such as the *Megalynei*, or *Magnificat*. Perhaps, then, it was the *odai pneumatikai* that came nearest to our own conception of a hymn, though Dr. Egon Wellesz of Oxford, a formidable scholar in these

matters, believes that the canticles were counted as psalms and that the spiritual odes signified those jubilatory chants, such as the *alleluia*, that were borrowed by the Christians from the Jewish liturgy and afterwards elaborated into tropes and sequences.³ At all events, owing to the labors of Wellesz and others, it is now generally agreed that the musical setting as well as the poetical forms of early Christian worship were derived from Semitic and not from classical sources as was once supposed.

Hebrew psalmody and plainchant are said to have been introduced by Esdras (Ezra) in the epoch of the Second Temple, which followed the return of the exiles from Babylon (c. 536 B.C.). The Psalms themselves, though attributed to David, are now adjudged on internal evidence to be mainly of post-exilic composition and even to have been influenced by Babylonish forms.⁴ The passages were sung alternatively by the Levitical choir and by the congregation. Antiphonal singing, after the Temple practice, seems also to have been in use from the earliest times in the Christian churches of Palestine and Syria where the liturgical language was Aramaic. Elsewhere, however, the responsive practice of the synagogues appears to have been followed, with the leading

passages sung in solo by a cantor or precentor and the refrain in chorus by the congregation.⁵

The Psalms, metrical in the original, become dithyrambic in Greek and proximate to prose in Latin. This no doubt required some modification of the Semitic chants; for though poetical and musical rhythm are not, as Sidney Lanier persuaded himself, identical,⁶ they are nevertheless related and in some degree interdependent.⁷ Thus, whatever its origin, the "free rhythm" characteristic of Greek and Latin psalmody seems to have been necessitated by the verbal structures. Metrical verse, after Hellenistic models, and mainly sapphic or anapestic, is said to have been introduced into Greek hymnody about the end of the second century under the influence of the Christian Platonists of Alexandria, though there is no evidence that such hymns were used liturgically. Antiphonal hymnody, after the Syrian usage, apparently became general among the Greeks during the bitter fourth century conflict of Arians and Orthodox. The Arians were reproached for having taken many of their melodies from the degenerate Greek theatre of the time, and possibly defended themselves with the retort made famous 1600 years afterwards by Rowland Hill.⁸ At any rate, both sides seem to have used the antiphons as vehicles of doctrinal iteration and propaganda; and, according to tradition and the testimony of St. Augustine, it was the great Gaulish adversary of the Arians, Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who introduced metrical hymns and antiphonal singing into the Western Church.⁹

All this is of great literary interest because of the influence of subsequent Latin hymn writers in shaping the characteristics of modern vernacular verse. English poetry in particular owes to them its release from the constrictive old alliterative forms into simpler and more flexible rhythms, especially the accented iambic, that made possible

its wonderful development in the hands of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and Keats. This influence was, of course, mostly inadvertent and owing in some degree to the extent to which the meters and mannerisms of the hymnists were parodied in student songs, such, for example, as *Gaudeamus igitur*. The purpose of sacred and secular verse are not the same, and religious fervor and poetical genius are but infrequently united in a single author. Considered purely as poetry, perhaps less than twenty of the mediaeval Latin hymns are of very great merit¹⁰; in some cases indeed they have been vastly improved by translation, as, for example, in *Jerusalem the Golden* by John Mason Neale from the *Urbs Sion aurea* of St. Bernard of Cluny.

Of the many hymns attributed to St. Ambrose of Milan only four, all in iambic, are uncontested as to authorship, but these served as metrical and poetical models for other writers. The incorporation (c. 529) of the *Ambrosiani* into the monastic office of St. Benedict of Nursia presently sufficed to make them universally familiar to the profane poets of Western Europe. The trochaic meter was similarly popularized through the *Vexilla regis*, the *Pange, lingua* and other works of the gifted sixth century hymnist, Venantius Fortunatus. It was not, however, until the thirteenth century that metrical hymns were admitted into the Roman Breviary, and, curiously enough, the objection to them was exactly the same that was made 400 years afterwards by the more stiff-necked Scotch and English Puritans¹¹.

St. Ambrose and his poetical successors, down to Fortunatus and even later, wrote in the unrhymed quantitative measure of the classical Latin poets; that is to say the long syllables of the iambic or trochaic dipodes were formed not by stress as in modern English poetry but by the recurrence of long vowels. The source of the accentual meters and rhymed stanzas that later became the most remarkable charac-

teristics of Latin hymnody has been a matter of much inconclusive dispute. Some scholars have sought to trace them to the pre-classical, or "Saturnian," verse forms found in ancient mortuary inscriptions and said to have survived in the *lingua rustica*, or backcountry dialect; some give the credit to Brythonic and some to Afro-Roman influences, and still others to the Irish ollahms, famous in their day for rhyming rats to death¹². Certainly by the end of the Carolingian period accentuation and rhyme had become the general practice of the Latin hymnists.

Five hundred years later these barbarisms, as they were deemed, became an occasion of great scandal to the priggish humanists of the Renaissance. Thus in the great reform of the Roman Breviary, instigated by Pope Leo X, completed under Urban VIII, and approved by the Council of Trent, all but a few of the famous mediaeval hymns were revised or rewritten in conformity with the prosody of Horace and Vergil¹³. At about the same time a similar emasculation of English verse forms was attempted by Gabriel Harvey and some other pedants, but it was notably and most happily a failure¹⁴.

With the humanist reaction, alas, Latin hymnody fell into the long decay from which it is unlikely ever to recover. Since the sixteenth century virtually all great hymn-making has been vernacular and mainly Protestant, though one remarkable exception is the extra-liturgical but universally loved Christmas anthem, *Adeste fideles*, written—ironically enough in accental rhythm—about the year 1750, probably by a priest of the English college at Douay. The well-known Latin hymns written in quantative meters for the new Gallican Breviary by Jean de Santeuil in the reign of Louis XIV are more remarkable for classical elegance than religious ardor. One of the more recent additions to the Roman Breviary does, however, combine urbane humanism and Christian tenderness. This is the hymn written in

well-polished sapphics by Pope Leo XIII for the feast of the Holy Family. One stanza refines into prayer a familiar Vergilian sentiment¹⁵.

*O neque expertes operae et laboris
Nec mali ignari, miseros iuvate,
Quos reluctantes per acuta rerum
Urget egestas.*¹⁶

Never elsewhere, I dare say, has the cause of the lowly and oppressed been pleaded in such cultivated and fastidious diction.

1. Eph. V; xix
2. From ΨΑΛΛΙΕΝ; to pluck softly.
3. *Eastern Elements in Western Chant* (Oxford, 1947) p. 176 ff.; *History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography* (Oxford, 1949) p. 33.
4. Cf. Curt Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World* (New York, 1943); Paul Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York, 1941) Cap. II.
5. Wellesz (*opero cit.*) believes that antiphons were also employed in the services of the synagogues and in the primitive Greek churches. The only evidence of this, however, seems to be in the statements of Philo of Alexandria, quoted by Eusebius of Caesaria, concerning the musical practices of the Therapeutai; Eusebius, apparently, confused the Therapeutai with the Graeco-Coptic Christians; but it is now clear that the Therapeutai were a branch of the Jewish sect of Essenes.
6. *The Science of English Verse* (1880).
7. Cf. Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature* (Athens, Ga., 1948); also T. S. Omond, *A Study of Metre* (London, 1920).
8. "He (Rowland Hill) did not see any reason why the devil should have all the good tunes." — E. W. Broome, *Biography*.
9. Another Gaulish enemy of the Arians, St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers, is said to have been the first to write metrical hymns in Latin, but these seem to have been composed for private worship, and there is no evidence that they were ever sung in the churches. The authenticity of various extant hymns attributed to St. Hilary cannot be established.
10. The twenty would include, no doubt, the *Veni, redemptor* of St. Ambrose; all the surviving hymns of Fortunatus; the morning hymn of Prudentius, *Lux, ecce, surgit aurea*; the two sapphic sunrise hymns attributed to St. Gregory the Great, *Ecce, iam noctis* and *Nocte surgentes*; the *Jesu, dulcis memoria* of St. Bernard of Clairvaux; the leonine *Hora novissima* from *De contemptu mundi* of St. Bernard of Cluny; the *Vana salus hominis* of Adam of St. Victor; the *O quanta qualia*, written for the office of

- Héloïse and her nuns by Peter Abelard; the Eucharistic *Pange, lingua* of St. Thomas Aquinas; the *Dies irae* of Thomas of Celano, and the *Stabat mater* of Jacopone da Todi.
11. *Viz.*, that nothing but scripture should be sung in the churches. All hymnody in the Puritan view was a Popish innovation. Yet the Puritan antagonism to popery extended also to plainchant, and thus it was necessary to rearrange the psalter in metrical form to adapt it to various Scotch and English traditional airs; e. g., Psalm XXIII, as sung to the tune of *To Celia*:
 The Lord's my shepard; I'll not want.
 He maketh me down to lie.
 In pastures green He leadeth me
 The quiet waters by . . .
 But of all the metrical versions of the Psalms only one, *Old Hundred* ("All people that on earth do dwell"), has survived in modern Protestant hymnals.
 12. Cf. *As You Like It*, III, iii, 166-7.
 13. The older accentual versions are retained, in the breviaries of the Benedictines, Carthusians, Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans and some other religious orders. Those who are interested in comparisons might consult Britt, *The Hymns of the [Roman] Breviary and Missal* (New York, 1922); and Byrnes, *Hymns of the Dominican Missal and Breviary* (St. Louis, 1943).
 14. Harvey's disciples included Sir Philip Sidney and for a time Edmund Spenser; but Spenser's reversion to accentual iambic pentameter in *The Faerie Queene* provoked a bitter attack from his former master.
 15. *Non ignari mali miseris succurrere disco.* (Aeneid, Book I, 1.630)
 16. O ye who were never strangers to toil and hardship
 Nor unacquainted with sorrow, help in pity
 Them who, beset by dire want, struggle
 beneath
 Burdens most cruel.

The Legend of King Psapho

"Psapho is God," the birds were taught
 to say
 Led by a boy disguised in parrot-green,
 And, propaganda dropped by popinjay,
 The race would marvel and the monarch
 preen.

Psapho seems vain, but (blasphemy aside)
 Was little less ingenious than we,
 And shone the tawdriness of common pride
 Till virtue winked from virtuosity.

Our humbler Psaphos know a wiser game:
 The method varies and the birds now fly
 To prove that we and Psapho are the same:
 "Psapho is you and you," the parrots cry.

This doubtful compliment, though dropped
 by kings,
 ("Psapho is ordinary—so are you")
 Implies we soar the best by sharing
 wings —
 A thought, which beautiful, is scarcely
 true.

Psapho's are clipped and we have lost our
 own,
 And thence the irony in which our age
 Locks Psapho fast, who thinks he sees a
 throne,
 Unconscious that he perches in a cage.

CHARLES TOMLINSON