ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIAN POETRY OF LATIN LATE ANTIQUITY

ABSTRACT: Ancient Poetry in general makes the claim of divine inspiration, thus deriving authority from a supernatural source. Accordingly, it bases the validity of its message on a foundation beyond argument, which has consequences both for the relationship between poets and their poems, as well as between poems and their readers. In Christian Late Antiquity the divine foundation of poetry had to be renegotiated, and as a consequence authorities and arguments had to be given a new role in the Christian poetic discourse. This paper will analyse the various possibilities and their consequences, also looking at the issue in terms of how far pagan poetry already foreshadowed such a development. The poets taken into consideration include Commodianus, Prudentius, the Carmen adversus Marcionitas, Prosper of Aquitaine, and Venantius Fortunatus.

In his essay Vom Ursprung der Poesie Friedrich Nietzsche explains that poetry has the power to turn a human being almost into a god, and that even the wisest person occasionally becomes the buffoonish victim of poetic rhythm, if only in that one feels a thought to be more truthful if it has a metrical form. According to Nietzsche, therefore also philosophers conjure up verse aphorisms taken from poets in order to lend strength and dignity to their own philosophical thought. In other words, Nietzsche claims here – even if perhaps with a twinkle in his eye – that poetry

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented in Oxford in summer 2012 at a colloquium on late antique poetics. I am very grateful for the constructive criticism I received from the participants in the ensuing discussion.

2 My translation of Friedrich Nietzsche, Vom Ursprung der Poesie (Fröhliche Wissenschaft, 1886, Buch 2,84), 48 f.: “… by means of verse a person became almost a God. Such a fundamental feeling does not allow itself anymore to be fully eradicated, — and up until this day (…) even the wisest of us occasionally becomes the fool of rhythm, be it only in that one perceives a thought to be more truthful when it has a metrical form and approaches with a divine hopping. Is it not a very funny thing that the most serious philosophers, however anxious they are in other respects for strict certainty, still appeal to poetical sayings in order to give their thoughts force and credibility?”. I am grateful for this reference to my colleague Dr Sabine Lichtenstein (University of Amsterdam).
can add to arguments authority in the sense of “augmentation, enhancement” (as also illustrated by the etymology of auctoritas from augere). In the following we will investigate how far this is also true of Early Christian poetry, where we will concentrate on the Latin tradition. By way of theoretical background we will rely on the still very useful distinction made by Max Weber in his three legitimate types of ‘rulership’ (Herrschaft) or of, as commonly translated into English, ‘authority’, that is, charismatic, traditional, and legal. Most importantly, put in this framework of investigation and using the analytical paradigm of authority, I hope to arrive at a more differentiated profile of what certain poetic techniques can or are supposed to achieve and why they are employed in the first place. My hypothesis is that Christian poetics is much concerned with enhancing the authority of its literary outputs, which in turn functions to enhance the cultural authority of the Christian message.

I Sources of Poetic Inspiration and Authorization before Christianity

From Homer as the first (extant) poet in European history onwards, poets have often claimed the source of their poetic inspiration to be divine. Particularly popular candidates as agents of inspiration were the Muses, occasionally named as individuals, like Clio or Calliope (Empedocles B 131.3 D–K; Lucretius 6.92–5), the god Apollo, a philosophical deity (in Parmenides), Cupid (Ovid, “Amores” 1.1.3 et passim), or Venus (Ovid, “Ars” 1.30, who in “Ars” 1.25–8 expressly skips more conventional deities of poetic inspiration, like Apollo and the Muses). Less frequently and later, the role of inspiration could be attributed to humans, like a lover (Cynthia in Propertius 2.1), imperial patrons (Statius, “Silvae” 5.1.1–97) or the princeps himself (e.g. Manilius 1.7–10 hunc mihi tu, Caesar, patriae princeps-

3 S. Weber 1968 [1922].
4 It goes beyond the scope of this paper to deal with modes and instantiations of creating authority in prose texts, where e.g. the dedication of a work to a patron, a son, etc. is of significance.
6 For the political as well as the poetic ramifications of Ovid’s rejection of Apollo in his “Ars” and his “Remedia” in order to assert his own poetic greatness, see Armstrong 2004, and for a similarly complex exploration of the scope and boundaries of divine authorization in Ovid’s “Fasti” 5, see Boyd 2000, especially 63, 92–95. Potscher 2002 rightly emphasizes that despite his irreverence towards myths and their stories about the gods it would be oversimplified to characterize Ovid as irreligious. Moreover, in “Ars” 2.493–510 and 3.347–8 the Muses reappear, see Albrecht 1996, vol. 1, 808. For Lucretius as a special case mentioning Venus see below 311.
7 Rosati 2002, 229–237, 251 explains that Statius nevertheless uses the Muses as figures of authority when he wants to negotiate real political pressures. The latter can be done more safely with the Muses rather than with the imperial family as direct addressees.
These ‘supernatural’ sources of inspiration, which can include humans as inspiring agents, were invoked to endorse the truth, importance and impact of the poetic content as well as highlight the superior poetic ability of the poet. They could have manifold functions for the ensuing piece of literature, relating to its 1) author, 2) content, and/or 3) audience or readers: regarding 1), the function of supporting the truth claim in a ‘totalitarian’ way that refutes questioning the poet’s superior access to knowledge and truth, regarding 2), the function of highlighting the universal validity and truthfulness of the poem’s statements as far as its content is concerned, and regarding 3), the function of suggesting the immediate relevance of the poem’s content to the readership.

This overarching supernatural authentication of a poem could be enhanced by additional or achieved by entirely different means, the latter often as a conscious move to alter the perspective, function and message of a poem.

1) Concerning the poet, his or her role could be amplified by stylizing him or her as κῆρυξ or προφήτης, in Latin as vates. Here the character could oscillate between divinely inspired vates (e.g. Ovid, “Ars” 3.549; “Fasti” 6.5; “Pont.” 3.4.93f.) and poet endowed with his own ingenium (Propertius 3.2.25f.; Ovid, “Tristia” 3.7 passim). Lucretius in the prologue to his “De rerum natura” claims Venus to be the starting point of his poetry, but in 1.921–950 explicitly refuses divine inspiration, and instead provocatively emphasizes his own mens vigens (1.925 instinctus mente vigenti) and laudis spes magna (1.923) as his poetic driving forces. Thereby he arrogates his autonomy and independence from divine support, which is of course entirely in line with his philosophy at large. In terms of Max Weber’s three types of authority (see above), all these instances would be equivalent to a pronouncement of the personal charismatic quality of the poet.

2) Regarding content, also various possibilities do occur to amplify its intended impact. Especially an elegiac poet (e.g. Tibullus 2.4.15), but also a didactic poet (e.g. Vergil, “Georgics” 1.176; humorously Ovid, “Ars” 1.1f. and “Remedia” 16) could emphasize the usefulness of the praecepta conveyed. Horace in his “Ars poetica” talks surprisingly little about inspiration, and rather emphasizes hard
work, art and talent (372–411)\textsuperscript{14}. The content gains added emphasis and pedagogical effectiveness through the poetic form; the latter is seen as an artistic challenge which directly correlates to the difficulty of the subject matter. The novelty of the subject matter could even pose a challenge to the language of Latin per se, which first had to be moulded to be suitable for the new content (Lucretius 1.136–139)\textsuperscript{15}. On the other hand, facts, reality, or arguments could also play an important role in enhancing the authority of the poetic statements, as being superior to mere fiction: e.g. the poet of the “Aetna” emphasizes the self-evident persuasiveness of reality itself which can be perceived by the senses: 191 f. res oculique docent; res ipsae credere cogunt. / quin etiam tactus moneat (“the facts and the eyes teach; the facts themselves force to believe. / Indeed, even touch would instruct”)\textsuperscript{16}. Arguments or facts could either be characterized as emanating from an extra-subjective, divine source of inspiration, as already mentioned above, or could be claimed as its irreconcilable opposite, like in the satirists Persius and Juvenal and in didactic poems\textsuperscript{17}. For instance, Juvenal in his satire 4.34–36 says, provocatively modifying the epic invocation of the Muses: incipe, Calliope. licet et considere, non est / cantandum, res vera agitur. narrate, puellae / Pierae; prosit mihi vos dixisse puellas (“Begin, Calliope. It is even allowed [to you] to sit down, one does not have to offer a poetic singing-recital, the topic is a true event. Do tell the story, young women from Pieria; may it profit me to have called you young women”, i.e. rather than Goddesses)\textsuperscript{18}. In satire and in some other genres fiction or poetic fantasy are often seen as lacking trustworthiness and therefore as having little authority. This recalls the famous lines in Hesiod’s “Theogony” 21 f., where the Muses pronounce that they can tell many lies that are similar to true things, but can also, if they wish, convey truth unconcealed\textsuperscript{19}. One could speak here of the playing-off of a charismatic against a legal or ‘factual-scientific’ authority. But Aristotle, in his “Poetics” chapter 9, 1451a36–1451b31, rehabilitated poetic fiction as having the power of telling general truths, whereas for instance historiography would ‘only’ tell particular factual instances of truth. This was also taken up in poetry in order

\textsuperscript{14} Olejnis 1998, 206–223. This is equivalent to the rhetorical triad ars, usus and ingenium.

\textsuperscript{15} A claim that analogously, for philosophical prose, had been made by Cicero, see Glucker 2012.

\textsuperscript{16} Albrecht 1996, vol. 1, 279f. claims that the poet is “inspired by reality”, but the point seems rather that he urges the readers to take direct conviction from the facts they can perceive with their own senses.

\textsuperscript{17} Albrecht 1996, vol. 1, 280.

\textsuperscript{18} Pollmann 1996, 481f. The Pierides were the daughters of Mnemosyne and Jupiter, or alternatively of king Piers of Macedonia. Their most ancient seat of worship was Pieria, hence the Muses are called Pierides. By calling them puellae, Juvenal, in an almost Euhemeristic turn, takes away the divine quality from the Muses and turns them into ordinary mortals. But he expresses his hope that this will enhance the authenticity and truth of what they are going to tell.

\textsuperscript{19} The topos of the potential fictitiousness and deceitfulness of poetry could be used throughout the Middles Ages and the Renaissance as well; for an instance in Maffeo Vegio see Schmitz 2012, 131–133.
to promote one of poetry’s particular qualities: by venturing into the realm of poetic imagination or fiction, poetry has the power to tell deeper and more universal truths, which have a stronger impact on the reader and wider applicability. Typical poetic techniques instantiating this could be narrative devices like metaphor and allegory, or fable and comparison. It is this area where Christian poetry proved to be most fertile and powerful in its ambition to achieve ‘spiritual impact’.

3) A further means to enhance poetic authority is the indirect appeal to the intellectual background of the audience or readership through the use of literary allusion or rhetorical intertextuality. One could categorize this technique under traditional authority, i.e. authority constructed by recourse to already well-known and accepted customs, roles, or, as in our case, canonical authors20. Here of course much depends on whether the readers are able to decode this semantic densification of the hypertext by means of an implicit hypo-text which is thereby reinterpreted. In this way, by taking Hellenistic critical Homeric scholarship into account, in his “Aeneid” Vergil rewrites essential scenes from both the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey”, with the ambition to match Homer’s achievement with an analogous Latin epic. Another immediate involvement of the readership is intended in passages where either the readers are directly apostrophized or where the poets talk in their authorial voices explicitly about their poetry, themselves and/or their purposes, and the role expected of their readers. Propertius, for instance, saw himself as the Roman heir to Callimachus21. A particularly striking instance of intertextuality is the cento, originating presumably in Hellenistic times, where the ‘voice’ of the poet is nearly exclusively perceivable through his or her arrangement of verse fragments taken from a (normally canonical and thus well-known and authoritative) hypo-text, especially Homer or Vergil.

II Possibilities of Authorization in Christian Poetry

When the Christian poet Proba in the preface to her “Cento” emphasizes that “she shall tell that already Vergil sang of Christ’s pious deeds” (23 Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi), she makes it perfectly clear that she does not aim at plagiarism or forgery, but gives a self-confident and self-conscious instruction to the reader to understand the aim of her poem as de-coding a message hidden in Vergil which she has the authority to proclaim. Unsurprisingly, she can call herself therefore vates in line 12 of the preface: arcana ut possim vatis Proba cuncta referre22. And of course she is particularly proud that she can almost exclusively

20 Cf. Bažil 2009, 52–56 on the gradual transition from partial to complete intertextuality (in the cento), and the implicit normative classicism that generates (‘traditional’) authority.
21 Cf. e.g. Propertius 3.1.1 f.
22 Pollmann 2004, 87 f. Dykes 2011, 33 is only partly helpful and lacks deeper understanding when he emphasizes that the cento makes also “sense without the original”. Bažil 2009, 109–197
use Vergil’s own verses to convey this message. Thus, Proba invites the reader to apply intertextuality in order to explore deeper levels of significance in her cento. This interpretive key opens up potentially unlimited and thus uncontrollable possibilities of creating meaning, depending on the industriousness, knowledge and imagination of the multiple readerships. But in verse 18 f., Proba makes it also clear that she is not interested in earthly fame. On the contrary, she sees writing her Christian cento as an act of penitence for her former pagan and thus mistaken poetic activities, and as a documentation of her conversion to proclaiming truth as a Christian vates. With this, we have finally arrived in early Christian poetry, on whose Latin side the remainder of this paper shall focus.

As Marc Mastrangelo has rightly reminded us again recently, Christian poetry is facing a double challenge to justify its very existence: it is hemmed in between the already pagan stock accusation of poetry in general as telling lies, which goes back to Hesiod (see above) and Solon (frg. 29 West), on the one hand, and on the other the restraints of competing Christian liturgical forms and regulations. Thus, the investigation of how Christian poetry established its authority becomes especially pressing as Christian poetry was disadvantaged from the start, first because poetry was so strongly associated with pagan learning and culture, which were criticized by some Christians as being deceitful and damaging, and second, because Christian liturgy and devotion had a very narrowly defined and clearly circumscribed use of some forms of poetry which potentially allowed for little creativity on the poet’s side. It is the hypothesis of this essay that the two-pronged cultural pressure on Christian poetic activity forced Christian poets to focus in a particularly sophisticated and innovative way on modes of authorizing their work, that is, “to bring the whole world of poetry into Christianity”.

If one surveys the development of Christian poetry in the early centuries, it is striking how rarely non-classical forms are used as an experimental alternative to create a specifically Christian form of poetry that consciously breaks with the august pagan past. Such forms, for instance, are represented by the poems of Commodianus, Damasus, and Luxorius. Predominantly, Christian poetry followed mutatis mutandis.

offers a detailed analysis of the cento, and 119 n. 17 discusses vatis, which is rare for a nominative, as a genitive dependent on arcana cuncta, i.e. “all the secrets of the vatis Vergil”. At 132 n. 50 he translates: “Et fais de moi, Proba, l’inspiré chanteur qui dévoile tous Tes mystères”.

23 See also Gärtner 2004, 426 f.
24 See Jakobi 2005, especially 77–86.
25 Mastrangelo 2009, 311–313.
26 Very strongly emphasized by Mastrangelo 2009, 327 (“subsidiary roles and function of poetry within the church-dominated society”), whereas Roberts 2007 focuses more on the “prestige” (142) of writing poetry and “the rediscovery of a public voice for poetry” (162). At any rate, it is striking that the practice of high-quality Christian poetry in the fourth and fifth centuries is so at odds with the rather critical attitudes of figures like Jerome and Augustine; see also the contributions by Vessey and Westra in Otten/Pollmann 2007.
27 Klassen 2011, 29.
mutandis the classical form, albeit adding innovations in content and poetic style. This type of Christian poetry thus found itself in an intricate position between an established form it could not embrace without problems and justification on the one hand, and on the other the obligation to legitimize its novel message. Therefore it seems reasonable to expect that Christian poetry in particular developed a rich variety of ways in which to authorize this new enterprise.

Partly, Christianity could and was prepared to follow established poetic forms of authorization. Indeed, from its very beginnings, the Christian tradition was also familiar with divine intervention. A particularly striking instance is Paul’s call to Christianity, where especially Gal 1:15–16 (“But when it pleased God who […] called me by his grace, 16 to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen […]”) emphasizes the power of the Christian God to change the identity of an individual38. Another important Christian notion is the claim that Holy Scripture is divinely inspired, viz. at 2 Tim 3:16 “All Scripture is God-breathed (θεοπνευστός) and is useful for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”, a notion that can also be found in the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria29. It is therefore obvious to expect Christian poetry to draw on this biblically as well as classically sanctioned source of divine inspiration. As far as we know, the first instances of Christian poetry beyond rudimentary samples in the New Testament and in liturgical forms occur only in the second half of the third century AD. Predominantly, Christian poetry followed the classical tradition by way of imitation and emulation, while also adding specifically Christian, ‘new’ modes of poetic form and expression. Christian poetry can be seen both as being an integral part of the general literary landscape of Late Antiquity, thus sharing specific characteristics with its ‘pagan’ contemporaries, as well as being a cultural force that produced innovative culture in its own right30. By also taking into account the criteria developed in the previous section I will outline in the following some Christian techniques of asserting poetic authority31.

Commodianus is the earliest extant Christian poet, if we accept as a date for his life and works the second half of the third century32. In his “Carmen apologeticum” the poet presents himself in a self-confident manner: he himself has seen the truth, which lies in the Christian faith, and for the grasping of which the poet owes God thanks of such magnitude that it surpasses his ability to express it.

28 BRANDT 2010, focussing in particular on Gal 1:16. I am not sure whether I agree with his contention that by emphasizing divine intervention Antiquity underplays the element of human creativity in the process of individual change.
29 WHITLOCK 2002, especially 96–121 (on Philo) and 411–414 (on 2 Tim 3:16), and (better) HERZER 2004.
30 See for an excellent overview DÖPP 1988, and POLLMANN 2012 from the perspective of the transformation of literary genres.
31 THRAEDE 1998, 331 explicitly states that he does not deal in his entry with the issue of ‘inspiration’ in connection with Christian poetry.
32 See HECK 1997, 629f.
Moreover, thanks to his conversion experience, he feels now able to urge others with this poem to recognize the true God (“apol.” 9–14). His poem culminates in an eschatological outlook where those who relinquish their errors will be saved in the end (1057–9). This is an innovative, characteristically Christian and biblically based mode of ascertaining authority for one’s plea by referring to the overall perspective of salvation history. We will encounter this feature in Christian poetry elsewhere as well33.

In his other poem, the “Instructiones”, in the praefatio to book I, Commodianus argues in a way that is very similar to the “Carmen apologeticum”: the poet, being the offspring of pagan parents, had himself been submerged erroneously in the heathen cult. Now, that he has recognized the true God, he intends to testify him and instruct others to do the same (“Instr.” 1.1 praef. 7–9 testifico Dominum: ... ignaros instruo verum). Again at the end of book I his argument’s authority is invigorated by an outlook to the day of final judgement. At the end of book 2, the poet includes a sphragis, now in order to expound his own authority: in “Instr.” 2.35 the beginnings of each of the 26 lines form an acrostic, read backwards from line 26 to line 1: Commodianus mendicus Christi. This forms a provocative appeal to his social anti-authority which implicitly contrasts with his personal charismatic authority that is meant to bring into sharper profile the seriousness, sincerity and importance of his argument, which he perceives as being anti-establishment. This reminds of a figure of thought particularly well-known in connection with satire, namely the idea of the world turned upside down34. But Commodianus can also rely on an underlying motif taken from tradition: being a ‘beggar of Christ’ innovatively adds biblical authority as sanctioned by John 9:1–7 where Jesus Christ heals a blind beggar. In the ensuing tradition, Christ was always regarded as a friend of beggars and occasionally as a beggar himself, possibly echoing Philippians 2:7 where Christ becomes a δοῦλος/servus. For Augustine, being a Catholic Christian meant to be a mendicant, as for instance in his sermons 56.6.9; 61.7.8; 106.4. We can conclude that Commodianus focuses on Christian motifs as sources of authority, and consciously forgoes the possibility of grounding his poetic authority in following established classical metre and style. As already mentioned, his anti-classical experiment was not followed by many in Late Antiquity.

The poem “Laudes Domini”, a hymn to Christ in 148 hexameters written by an anonymous author, is the earliest securely datable Christian poem. As it refers to the final victory of the emperor Constantine, its date of writing can be located between 317 and 323 AD35. The metre follows one traditional form of praise poem, as it had been established by the Homeric hymns. It is the first ambitious ‘classical’ poem that aims at adopting panegyric discourse with the aim of praising Christ and the emperor. Already pagan predecessors had employed the panegyric

33 For further instances see below 323 f. and 326.
34 On this figure of thought, brilliantly theorized by MICHAEL BAKHTIN, see DÖPP 1993.
topos of comparing an emperor to a deity; however, from a Christian perspective this had to be done with more diligence, due to theological restraints. As the “Laudes Domini” is a pre-Nicaean text, the distinction between the nature of the emperor and the nature of the incarnate Christ was not yet a doctrinally settled issue. Therefore the poet can draw parallels between Constantine and Christ: they both are rulers characterized by parental love towards their subjects and both have the role of a teacher. Constantine is predestined by Christ to be ruler, which entails the sacralization of secular power. On the other hand, Constantine is not conceded any supernatural powers or divine authority by the poet. In contrast, it is merit that afforded Constantine his rulership, and his legislature has to follow divine law. Thus, the poem exerts ‘exhortative’ authority over the emperor through praise. This is a technique familiar already from pagan panegyric, but here it is given a Christian twist.

Juvencus is the first poet to have written a so-called biblical epic in four books, more precisely a hexametrical harmony of the Gospels (“Evangeliorum libri”), under Constantine, probably in 329/330. Juvencus’s Christianization of the epic genre also led to a creative transformation of the function of the poet and his/her poetry. In his proem he denies Rome’s everlastingness (1 f. immortale nihil mundi compage tenetur, / … non aurea Roma). This is provocative enough. But it implies more. First, in the pagan tradition it was one of the markers of poetry’s power and prerogative to make people and their deeds immortal. By denying Rome’s immortality the poet simultaneously signals implicitly that he as a Christian poet is not able to make earthly people and their deeds immortal either. Second, in this pagan tradition poetry and thereby the poet himself both were immortal, which in Roman poetry was frequently combined with the longevity of the Roman Empire. Thus, he denies immortality to pagan poets and their works.

However, Juvencus still integrates himself into the succession of Homer and Vergil (9 f. hos celsi cantus, Smyrnae de fonte fluentes, / illos Miniciadae celebrat dulcedo Maronis), appealing to their traditional function as vates (11 gloria vatum). Although in the following he relativizes the charismatic authority of his pagan poetic predecessors, he does not create an abrupt discontinuity with the poetic tradition, but builds on it by way of emulation and ameliorization. Implicitly this prepares Juvencus’ claim of being a superior poet by being a Christian writer with a special mission. Consequently, regarding content he states a sharp and uncom-
promising contrast between the lies told in pagan poetry (16 mendacia) and the truth and glory of the true God proclaimed in his work (20 falsi sine crimine). In an emulating comparison a minore ad fortiorem Juvenecus proclaims that if already lies bestowed such long-lasting fame to his pagan predecessors (15 tam longam … famam), surely his much nobler deed will afford him immortal praise (17 f. nobis certa fides aeternae in saecula laudis / immortale decus tribuet meritumque rependet)42. This inverses the pagan literary thinking mode, where it is the poet that makes the theme glorious, and not the other way round as here in Juvenecus, where the superior quality of the story he will tell will afford him fame.

But Juvenecus moves this even a step further. In the following lines he extends the pagan idea of immortal literary fame to a genuinely Christian, “non-aesthetic and otherworldly”43 idea of personal immortality through salvation and links his poetry to the day of final judgement: he surmises first and proudly that he expects his poem to survive the final combustion of the world, a clear hyperbolic surpassing of any pagan expectation of literary permanence, and second, he expresses the hope that perhaps this poem will even rescue him from the flames of eternal condemnation (21 f. nec metus, ut mundi rapiant incendia secum / hoc opus; hoc etenim fors an me subtrahet igni). In this way, the poem’s soteriological function transcends equivalent pagan attempts at making poetry to have beneficial effects on their readers, like for instance the power of healing the wounded soul of a disappointed lover, etc. It is therefore not surprising that Juvenecus can of course not employ the pagan Muses as sources of inspiration for his new Christian poetry44. Instead, the proem culminates in an invocation of the Holy Spirit as the inspiration of this poem: ergo age sanctificus adsit mihi carminis auctor / spiritus (…), ut Christo digna loquamur (25–27). The latter is an intertextual ‘correction’ of the hypotext in Vergil, “Aeneid” 6.662 Phoebo digna locuti, thereby revealing Juvenecus’s new Christian poetics: Christ replaces Apollo as the god of prophecy, of music and of healing. This again conflates the literary and the theological, building on a famous Vergilian hypotext in a Christianized way. Juvenecus also alludes to the water of the Jordan as a source of inspiration (26 f. et puro mentem riget amne canentis / dulcis Iordanis). By way of emulation, this combines the Christian theological notion of baptism with the classical-traditional literary notion of a river as a metaphor for poetic inspiration or poetic principles. Callimachus preferred the small pure fountain, but Horace transformed this in “Ep.” 2.2.120 f. vemens et liquidus puroque similimus amn i / fundet opes Latiumque beabit divite lingu a, whose phrase is echoed in Juvenecus. However, it is not the lips that

42 On the constitution of authority through aemulatio, especially of Latin against Greek authors, see the overview by DÖPP 2001.
43 GREEN 2006, 18.
44 SCHMITZ 2012, 125 f. rightly emphasizes that it is the personal aspect of the Muses that was not compatible with the new Christian poetics, but that occasionally the Muse(s) could be employed metonymically to denote poetry.
are touched by the liquid, as in Propertius 3.3.51 f. and Ovid, “Amores” 3.9.25 f., but it is the mind that is irrigated\textsuperscript{45}. Thus, instead of having an emphasis on poetic language or form (symbolized by the lips), the emphasis lies on the poet’s mental integrity and inspiration. His authority is based on the latter rather than the former. This receives further theological underpinning at the very end of the epic, where in 4.803 and 806 Christ’s \textit{gratia} and \textit{pax} respectively are named as the indispensable preconditions for this work. The notion of \textit{pax} echoes for instance Lucretius 1.29–43, Vergil’s “Eclogue” 1, and also Propertius 3.3, where the Pax Augusta is eulogized as the necessary pre-condition for successful poetic production.

Prudentius, arguably the greatest late antique Christian poet, is a rich source for various methods of enhancing his statements. This contribution does not afford the scope adequately to reflect the rich poetic craftsmanship of Prudentius, whose oeuvre employs almost all the techniques discussed in this paper. A few observations offered in the following shall suffice. For instance, in his “Psychomachia” 1–11, Prudentius names Christ as the source of his inspiration for the following poem; Christ replaces the Muses and Apollo in this function\textsuperscript{46}, as he did in Juvencus (see above). In his “Peristephanon” 10, this role is performed by the martyr Romanus who at the same time forms the theme of this hymn (1–15). But again the poet is ultimately authorized by Christ himself, who will speak through him (16–25, especially 18–20 Christ speaking to the disciples: \textit{nolite verba, cum sacramentum meum / erit canendum, providenter quaerere; / ego inparatis quae loquantur suggeram})\textsuperscript{47}. Similarly, in hagiographic epic the versified saint can be the inspirational source and the theme of the poem, as for instance Martin of Tours in Paulinus of Périgueux, “Vita Sancti Martini” 1.305 f.\textsuperscript{48}.

A striking instance of creating poetic authority can be found in the preface to the second book of Prudentius, “Contra Symmachum”. Here Prudentius ostensibly praises Symmachus’ powerful rhetorical prowess that surpasses his own and compares it to a storm into which he will set out with his boat. I quote “C. Symm.” 2 praef. 51–66\textsuperscript{49}:

\begin{verbatim}
sum plane temerarius, qui noctis mihi conscius quam vitae in tenebris ago, puppem credere fluctibus tanti non timeam viri, quo nunc nemo disertior exultat, fremit, intonat, ventisque eloquii tumet: 55
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{45} These remarks follow GREEN 2006, 22 f.
\textsuperscript{46} For more details see POLLMANN 2001, 107, 111 f.
\textsuperscript{47} ALBRECHT 1996, vol. 2, 1361–1363 is too superficial.
\textsuperscript{48} See POLLMANN 2002, 614 f., 625, and SCHMITZ 2012, 128 f.
\textsuperscript{49} The following is inspired by a seminar on Prudentius held by SIEGMAR DÖPP in Munich in the Sommersemester 1986.
Precipitous indeed am I, since though well aware of the night which I am passing in the darkness of my life, I do not fear to entrust my bark to the waves of so great a man, whom none in our time surpasses in power of speech to leap and roar and thunder and swell in storms of eloquence. Most easy it is for him to sink me, since I have no skill in handling my boat, unless you, O mighty Christ, should stretch out your hand in your benevolent divine power, so that the rush of his eloquent speech shall not drown me with its waves, but that walking step by step I may stand firm on the rolling waters.

The symbolism of ‘poetic waters’ is familiar from classical poetry since Callimachus, “Hymn” 2.105–113, and re-appears as the metapoetic image of a sea voyage for embarking on a critical literary endeavour in Latin, not in Lucretius, but for instance in Vergil, “Georgics” 1.40–42, 4.147–148, Propertius 3.3.22–24, 3.9.3, Horace, “Odes” 1.3.1–20 and 4.15.1–451. Neither Tränkle nor other commentators before him have so far, however, remarked on the intricate playing off of different authorities in this passage. When Prudentius highlights here his lack of rhetorical skills, this should not be understood as the poet’s potentially dishonest, self-effacing modesty. The passage rather repeats motifs which had already framed book 1 of “Contra Symmachum”, in “C. Symm.” 1 praef. 45–63, where Wisdom’s barque fights against the storms of this world, and “C. Symm.” 1.643–655, where Prudentius emphasizes that while he in his unskilled way does not intend to attack his rhetorically powerful opponent Symmachus, he is still keen to defend the Christian faith. One may also think of Ambrose, “ep.” 18.2 where he calls Symmachus eloquent (verborum elegantia). But regarding our passage in “C. Symm.” 2, we can in addition identify a parallel figure of thought in Catullus. As it is not certain whether Catullus was familiar to Prudentius 52, I will not make a claim of direct dependency, but for interpretative purposes such a comparison is still illuminating. In Catullus’ poem 49 he addresses the great orator Marcus Tullius Cicero:

50 I modify Thomson’s Loeb translation here. Tränkle 2008, 163 could have been even clearer in his German translation, and I suggest as a modified version: “Für ihn wäre es sehr leicht, einen, der sein Schiff nicht zu lenken versteht, versinken zu lassen, wenn nicht Du, machtvolle Christus, mit gewogener göttlicher Macht Deine Hand ausstrecktest, damit der Schwall des beredten Mondes mich nicht in seinen Fluten untergehen läßt, sondern ich vielmehr, Schritt für Schritt voranschreitend, fest auf der schwankenden Wasserfläche stehe.”


52 Catullus was known to Prudentius’ near-contemporary Ausonius, see Albrecht 1996, vol. 1, 353.
Disertissime Romuli nepotum, 
quod sunt quodque fuere, Marce Tulli, 
quodque post alius erunt in annis, 
gratias tibi maximas Catullus 
agit pessimus omnium poeta, 
tanto pessimus omnium poeta, 
quanto tu optimus omnium patronus.

O most eloquent of Romulus’ descendants, of all that are and have been, o Marcus Tullius, and of all that shall be later in other ages, – Catullus bestows greatest thanks upon you, he, who is the worst poet of all, in so far the worst poet of all as you are the best advocate of all.

Cicero, unmatched in his rhetorical skills, is the foil against which Symmachus is praised in Prudentius. Like Prudentius, Catullus claims that his own skills form no match in comparison with those of his opponent. But then Catullus shifts the category of comparison, by turning the focus away from Cicero’s unrivalled rhetorical talents to his quality as advocate which for Catullus leaves much to desire. The poet expresses this by turning the comparison on its head: Catullus is to that degree the worst of poets to which Cicero is the best of advocates. If Cicero is a bad advocate, Catullus cannot be such a bad poet after all. Following the logic through to the beginning of this little poem, this also means that Cicero’s rhetorical talents are not as wonderful as one might think at first glance, if they are not borne out by adequate behaviour and application in “real life” as advocate. Catullus plays off rhetorical skill against (professional) ethical behaviour, implicitly claiming that rhetoric without ethics is not worth anything. A similar logic is employed in Prudentius, but here it is not the poet himself that is played off against the opponent, as in Catullus, but instead biblical authority comes in. The assurance that Prudentius will not be swallowed up by the floods of Symmachus’ eloquence reminds us of course of Matthew 14:22–33, where Jesus walks on the water and saves Peter when Peter doubts that he can do likewise. Crucial are verses 14:30–31, where Peter perceives the strong wind (ventum validum) and begins to sink (coepisset mergi), whereupon Jesus stretches out his hand and saves him (extendens manum apprehendit eum). By way of contrast, Hilary of Poitiers in his commentary on Matthew ad loc. from the middle of the fourth century, in fact the first commentary on Matthew in the Latin West, interprets this scene by focussing on Peter’s strong will to follow Christ which is thwarted by his ensuing fear of death; then Peter’s weakness is resolved by his repentance and return to Christ. Jerome in his commentary on Matthew ad loc., written 398, focuses on the anti-docetic aspect, i.e.

53 Fordyce 1960, 213–215 emphasizes that the specific historical event Catullus may be alluding to in this poem is difficult to specify, and pleads for a reading of the poem “at face value, as a genuine expression of admiration and gratitude” (214), but concedes the possibility of irony, which is the line I follow. As already pointed out above, I do not necessarily expect a direct connection between Catullus 49 and the passage by Prudentius dealt with above.

54 Mk 6:45–52 and John 6:15–21 do not have Peter attempting the same!
even if people tried to explain Jesus’s ability to walk on water with his superhuman body, this could surely not be applied as an explanation to Peter who was clearly human. Second, Jerome focuses on Peter’s faith which was normally strong but fails here. The following will illustrate how independently Prudentius operates in his poetic adaptation of this biblical scene.

Prudentius complicates the storm scene, as he implicitly admits that most likely he will be thrown overboard. In this he differs from Peter who left the boat voluntarily and precipitously in his ambition to emulate Jesus, and who fails due to his lack of faith. But the poet Prudentius himself seems to be able immediately – step by step – to walk on the water. This is owed to the fact that, unlike Peter, he never doubts Jesus’ solidarity, indeed has trust in it from the beginning of this endeavour. Thus, Prudentius’ seeming weakness in rhetorical skill is compensated for by the strength of his faith, which in this instance even surpasses that of Peter. This in turn means that with divine support Prudentius will be able to withstand Symmachus’ rhetorical prowess. As in Catullus, this implicitly undermines this rhetorical prowess by playing Christian faith off against it: rhetoric without faith is nothing, whereas strong faith can act as successful rhetoric. The focus of truly persuasive, authentic authority shifts from external social status-performance to internal or personal conviction, a Nietzschean “Umwertung eines Wertes” avant la lettre.

Of course, one will expect arguments to play an important role in the intricate genre of didactic poetry, in which Christianity was particularly fertile. Arguments intend to appeal to reason, and are particularly available to experts. We can subsume this mode of authority under Max Weber’s third category of “legal authority”, which derives from but is not necessarily bound by tradition. Moreover, the group of experts potentially able to own and exercise such authority is more open, as it is not necessarily guaranteed by, for instance, birth or wealth, but can ideally be joined by everyone who can prove to have the necessary skills, knowledge and/or qualifications. A relatively little known poem, the anonymous “Carmen adversus Marcionitas” (written presumably not before the second quarter of the fifth century55), is a didactic poem in which the poet uses partly unusual techniques to enhance the argument. One of the most striking features is an ‘internal proem’ (Binnenproömium) that explicitly demarcates the structure of the five books of the entire poem: 5.1–18 recapitulates in a kind of hexametric summary the arguments of the preceding books 1 to 4 and anticipates the argument of the ensuing and final book 5. Strikingly, the poet does not speak of himself in the first person, but makes each of the poem’s books the subject and thus agent: 1 primus (sc. liber) erat referens, 5 inde sequens (sc. liber) … docet, 7 tertius (without verb!), 13 quartus

55 Pollmann 1991, 28–33, unsuccessfully refuted by Moll 2010, 21–23, who partly misrepresents her arguments and does not seem to comprehend the issues that would make the early, 3rd century dating he reintroduces highly problematic. Gualandi 1997, 162 suggests the possibility of an even later date for the poem (at least 6th century), based on metrical and linguistic criteria, which is a much more tempting avenue to pursue further.
(sc. liber) et ipse refert …, and finally 16 hic quintus … resolvit. This reminds surprisingly little of Lucretius, the arch-didactic poet of the Latin language, who presents elaborate introductions to each of his six books and also speaks of himself in the first person (e.g. 1.265 docui; 1.830 scrutemur). He also frequently turns to the addressee of his poem, Memmius, in the second person, thus enhancing the pedagogical connection between teacher and pupil. Nor are we reminded of hexametrical argumenta, like, for instance, those of Statius’ “Thebaid” (written in the 90s AD) which go immediately into the paraphrase of the content without mentioning the book number of the poem. The aim in the “Carmen adversus Marcionitas” is obviously to give the argumentation as such a lot of weight and to suggest the poem’s purely rational authority.

The poet of the “Carmen adversus Marcionitas” speaks relatively rarely of himself, and if at all, then never in the first person singular, but always in the first person plural. Thus, it is often not entirely transparent whether he refers simply to the Christian orthodox community at large. The only clear self-references seem to be the framing statements of book 4: first, at the beginning 1–15 the poet sees himself as someone who enlightens inexperienced Christians and especially new-comers (catechumens). He describes himself not as a learned and instructing person (a role that only befits Christ: 3 solus docet omnia Christus)\(^{56}\), but as Christ’s servant (4 famulos, reminding faintly of Commodianus’ mendicus, see above). He is filled with ardent zeal and God’s inviolata potestas commands him to fight with arguments against the vain voices of his heretical enemies (9 vacuas voces dissolvere vento). The poet sees his activities as merited (10 merito), as he works hard to distil the signs of salvation, generously bestowed by God’s grace, even from Marcion’s own teaching (11 f. ipsius ex verbis etiam monumenta salutis / nitimur exprimere, quae gratia larga profudit) – again highlighting the argumentative superiority of the orthodox cause. At its end, the fourth book concludes that the poem’s heretical opponents can be refuted with confidence with the authority of the Bible, whose statements are distorted by the heretics (218–223). Then, abandoning the mode of argumentation as authorizing technique, the poet emphasizes the moral consequence that such heretics have to be avoided and ignored at all costs (4.118 f.), and concludes, by creating a protreptic community between him and his (as he hopes) persuaded readers, that he has been able with the help of divine ‘decency’ (honestas) to enhance God’s word, to praise God perpetually and to hope optimistically for eternal life (230–236)\(^{57}\). Here the poet embeds his authority in a confident eschatological framework of salvation which is more or less guaranteed by his poem. In this assuredness he goes beyond Juvencus and is closer to Commodianus (see above). In 5.19–30 the poet of the “Carmen adversus Marcionitas” emphasizes that, despite this success in principle, historical vicissitudes and the

\(^{56}\) As, for instance in “Laudes Domini” 91 Christ as magister vitae, and in Lactantius, “inst.” 4.10.1 etc.; cf. Schierl 2009, 135 with n. 25.

\(^{57}\) Especially 4.234 certaque salute reminds of Juvencus, proem 17 certa fides, see above 318.
fluidity of language make his task potentially an endless one: in this life truth and heretical belief are inseparably intermingled, and the risk of ambivalent speech is unavoidable even for an orthodox believer. That this situation will only end with the day of final judgement is made implicitly clear in the final lines of the poem (5.252f.) where Christ’s second coming is announced, but without a date or time-span. Thus, the poem culminates in a relatively low-key, not explicitly threatening eschatological authority.

Prosper of Aquitaine’s “Carmen de ingratis”, another didactic poem that was probably written around the time of Augustine’s death58, contains an interesting double introduction which first turns to the reader and then invokes the inspirational source. In a præfatio written in elegiac couplets, Prosper urges his readers to “arrive at a reasonable and calm understanding” (præef. v: quos [sc. versus] si tranquilla studeas cognoscere cura; transl. HUEGELMEYER 43) of his verse arguments against the enemies of divine grace. This will enable his readers to recognize God’s grace operating in them not because of their merit but in order to produce merit (præef. x non … ex merito … sed ad meritum). In the ensuing Introductio this theological position, which the poet intends to prove in the following poem, is immediately put into poetic practice, as the poet himself also needs this operating grace from God Father in order to fulfil this task (Introdc. x: da fari, Pater omnipotens). God is his true source of inspiration, which, however, takes the specific shape of a pure love of all his fellow human beings, which is again a gift of Christ (Introdc. i–ii congenitae in Christo gentis mihi castus ab alto / insinuatus amor). In a powerful ending (“carm.ingrat.” 982–1002) God’s grace is again invoked as the indispensable source for all good works which of course includes the poet’s work, although this is not explicitly mentioned. The poem concludes with an eschatological prayer for final salvation. In this prayer we can note that the theological concept of grace makes the poet, by necessity, less confident than, for instance, Commodianus (see above).

As our last ‘test-case’, it may be appropriate to have a brief look at Venantius Fortunatus (ca. 540 to after 600), who is often called the last ancient and the first medieval poet. His appeals to authority are characterized by a seemingly equal reference to pagan and Christian sources as authorities. But, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, this has to be judged with more discrimination: Fortunatus refers to pagan sources only as authoritative models as regards “matters of style or form and rarer (…) social status”, whereas regarding the subjects of doctrinal faith and moral lifestyle only Christian sources are seen as normative59. Most importantly, in Venantius Fortunatus we have the first Christian poet who develops an exclusively Christian canon of poets before him: in his “Vita Martini” 1.14–25 he refers to Juvenecus (as the first), then Sedulius, Orientius, Prudentius, Paulinus of Périgueux, Arator, and finally Alcimus Avitus, with himself in a modesty topos as their unworthy successor (1.26 ast ego sensus inops). Fortunatus consciously ignores the

58 HUEGELMEYER 1962, 12.
59 POLLMANN 2005, 311.
de facto continuity of the pagan tradition in Christian poetry. Thus, “Christianity is not given any pagan foundation, but is seen as a tradition in its own right and with a self-sufficient past”\textsuperscript{60}. At last, Latin Christian poetry has got its own traditional authority, by being able to refer to an established canon of exclusively Christian Latin poets.

III Conclusions

By way of summary, the following intends to profile some of the most important aspects of how Christian poetry generated its own novel authority which was all the more necessary in a cultural climate that was relatively hostile towards this freshly rising cultural force. Again all three criteria, already mentioned above, of author, content and audience/readership of poetry have to be considered. First, characteristic of early Christian poetry is the poet’s re-working of an authoritative source. Underlying is the respect for the past, while at the same time emphasizing novelty. The truth can be established from a written authority, and the harmonization of authorities can serve as a cultural stimulus, while at the same time it leads to the partial rejection of the old pagan belief. All the same, poetry insists on its own aesthetics and power to tell the truth in its own way. This is achieved, among other things, by an emphasis of the poet on his or her own integrity and existential involvement in the poetic subject matter. The authorial involvement of a Christian poet qualitatively surpasses that of pagan predecessors. Thus, second, on the one hand we find in early Christian poetry the serious commitment to the ‘best’ substance, that is, the ‘traditional’ authority of the Bible, and of the Christian God, in particular Jesus Christ. But third, on the other hand, we detect here also poetic freedom in presenting this substance and in the explanation of its meaning or significance, which could entail the correction of errors, the transformation of the tale and embellishments of speeches, characterization etc. in order to enhance credibility\textsuperscript{61}. Acceptance of the Bible as the source authority did not prevent the inclusion of reason and argument, style and meter, autopsy and experience, which accentuates the multi-dimensional authority of the poet. Finally, poetry as a pointer towards moral truth could rival prose as an authority in its own right. Here one of the most ambitious experiments would be Prudentius’s innovative allegorical epic, the “Psychomachia”, which enjoyed a powerful reception history in the Middle Ages.

\textsuperscript{60} Pollmann 2005, 312; see also 313 f. Hernández Lobato 2012, chapter 7, concludes that eventually late antique Christian poetry managed to turn its pagan predecessors into a quarry of infinite possibilities for intertextual allusions.

\textsuperscript{61} Carl Lofmark analysed in his London dissertation from 1981 the role of source authority in Middle High German narrative poetry, and came to comparable conclusions.
and beyond. A lot depended on where a Christian poet situated him- or herself on the sliding scale of eschatological fulfilment, either taking a position that was closer to an already nearly perfect state, or consigning him- or herself to the ‘not yet’ that emphasized the distance from such perfection. If opting for the former state, the ultimate criterion of truth and authority could be achieved already in this life, thus authority asserts itself. If opting for the latter, such authority had to be hoped for in the life to come. This had the necessary consequence that authority had to configure itself within a framework beyond space and time. This latter technique uses eschatological suspense as a means to avoid immediate conflict, as the ultimate judgement is postponed for an uncertain period of time, but the consequence is also a much more lasting source for this type of ‘charismatic’ authority.

All in all, the various forms of authority discussed above should not be regarded as mutually exclusive opposites. It is rather the case that, for instance, arguments can serve as one authoritative means to make the source authority, namely the Bible, and by extension thus the Christian faith, more plausible, convincing and trustworthy. Anti-heretical arguments have the function of bringing order and hence control into a chaotic and spiritually pluralistic world, and thereby making Christian sense of it. The expert or ‘legal’ authority of the Christian poet as inspired prophet is apparently not at odds with the divine inspiration of the Biblical source authority – on the contrary, the latter enhances the former. As regards the reader, Christian poetry established itself as a new authoritative and argumentative basis for enhancing the appeal of the relatively recently established Christian identity and self-awareness. It exploited traditional pagan poetic authority and combined it with biblically based spirituality, thereby opening up for Christian readers an edifying focus and dimension of their existence that went beyond the criteria and boundaries of this world, in particular their immediate cultural environment. Although there is no abrupt discontinuity with the pagan cultural past which serves as an inculturating ‘spring-board’ for Christian poetry’s establishment, in the extreme case this could lead to the programmatic eclipse of pagan poetry as an authoritative means, as we for instance observe in Venantius Fortunatus.

Finally, to return briefly to Nietzsche’s quote from the beginning of this essay: Christian poetry did not primarily aim at making its subject matter more truthful in an intellectual sense, but was directed towards authoritatively augmenting the appeal, impact and transforming power of its message.

---

62 This highly original poem is still in need of a close literary critical examination and could not be done justice within the context of this contribution. For a few brief remarks see Pollmann 2001, 106–113.

63 Something similar is claimed for the pagan poet Claudian by Guipponi-Gineste 2009.

64 As shown by Mastrangelo 2008 for Prudentius.


Jacqueline Assael, Pour une poétique de l’inspiration, d’Homère à Euripide, Namur 2006.


JESÚS HERNÁNDEZ LOBATO, Vel Apolline muto: estética y poética de la Antigüedad tardía, Bern 2012.


CARL LOFMARK, The Authority of the Source in Middle High German Narrative Poetry, London 1981.


KARLA POLLMANN, Kontiguität und Eklipse: Zwei Auffassungen von Heiligkeit im hagiographischen Epos der lateinischen Spätantike, in: Metaphysik und
Establishing Authority in Christian Poetry of Latin Late Antiquity


Graham Wheeler, Sing, muse …: the introit from Homer to Apollonius, in: Classical Quarterly n.s. 52, 2002, 33–49.

St Andrews/Canterbury  

© Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart