

EARLY CHRISTIANITY:

ARTS AND SOUL

Both late pagan and early Christian expression may be considered subdivisions of some larger whole—call it the Style of Gnosis. Both are embraced in the earthly gloom and the search beyond gloom for transcendent form. As we look back on the larger motion, it seems inevitable that a faith should have grown from that world hunger. That it would be mystical is also clear. Material Rome was a Lazarus beyond even Christian revival. The faith must be one that could outlive Rome rearing in its fall the divine purpose. It must be a faith beyond this life, since this life grew darker from year to year. It must give man what he searched for, a will and power to suffer and die, to meet loss and martyrdom, not in frenzied struggle, but in peace. It must give order to a new society, incorporating the somber Stoic morality in a group-righteousness of love, attended with all the promises of the immortality cults.

With the Stoics religion had remained questioning, burdened with the weight of doubt and the cloud of reason. So Marcus Aurelius:

If indeed there are no Gods, or if they do not concern themselves with the affairs of men . . . [ii. 11]. If souls outlive their bodies, how does the air contain them from times everlasting? [iv. 21]. Things are . . . so wrapped up in mystery that . . . even the Stoics find them hard to comprehend [v. 10]. And the poor soul

itself is an exhalation from the blood . . . [v. 33]. What bathing is when thou thinkest of it—oil, sweat, filth, greasy water, everything revolting—such is every part of life and every object we meet with [viii. 24].

Most of the oriental mysteries, so far as we may judge of them, were tumors that rose in the flesh of late empire, giving the world-weary a jag of excitement, without requiring devotional transformation of the whole life. No doubt every overripe civilization leans to such pseudo-religious cults, pandering to the lechery of self. Neo-Platonism was rich and beautiful, but for intellectuals only, and, like Stoicism, burdened with the cloud of reason.

All of these shared the quest; it is only that Christianity discovered the profoundest way of realizing it, of filling the accepted dark with mysterious light. It absorbed the whole man, broke down the introspective selfhood—in Augustine's phrase, *abyssus humanae conscientiae* ("the abyss of conscious personality")—which sophisticated culture had fostered. Doubt is swallowed in a surety of disciplined love.

The outward appearance in the pagan world is, of course, abandonment, madness, folly, and crime. The fact is that when forms are exhausted they must be renewed in something larger. The cure must be radical; it amounts to symbolic death and palingenesis. By whatever deeper genius guides the spiritual motion of groups and cultures, shaping the unplanned and unplannable response (for if it were planned it would not be believed; it would not come as an answer to the human need), the Christians hit on the paradoxical truth (classical thought and rationalism having avoided paradox) that he who would find his life must give it, that the road to self-command was self-surrender, and that those who would discover deeper reason must abandon reason altogether, becoming like children and fools. It is this lowliness, surrender, and drunkenness of early Christianity that gives it a strange ambivalence, a hard external shell of bigotry and dogmatic zeal, carrying the vital kernel of wisdom, humanity, Christlike love.

There are few works of art which show this rare complex of shadow and light in Christianity before Constantine. The best that has so far come to light is probably the head of a prophet from a tomb in the Viale Manzoni, Rome (*ca.* A.D. 240)—one of the most somberly beautiful heads in the scope of art. It is interesting to place it beside that bust of the virtuous but ineffectual emperor, Alexander Severus, its near-contemporary. Both move in the same darkness. That is the common heritage of the age

of Gnosis. But where the Alexander, for all its gentle soulfulness, is blindly groping through the stew of personality, searching, as Augustine described his own pre-Christian phase, "with a proud dejectedness and untired weariness" ("superba deiectione et inquieta lassitudine"), the other, in its very shadow, has found. It has the calm of moral ordering. In its somber wisdom the joy of faith is renewed. We seem to hear the anticipation of Augustine's later voice, as he considered tottering Rome: "Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. . . ." The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter-up of mine head." If the earthly kingdom should fail, what then; for the Kingdom of God shall "be eternal, and we shall be assured of its eternity; and thus the peace of this blessedness and the blessedness of this peace shall be the supreme good." And as Augustine's heavenly city gathers up Neo-Platonism and transforms it, so the Viale Marzoni head incorporates the Zeus-type of Greek art in a Christian vision. The earliest Ambrosian and Gregorian chant, which was in process of formation throughout this period, similarly inherits late-classical richness of form with the earthly shadow, which it irradiates with mystical light.

Of course, as we have implied, this Augustinian peace did not come without cost, not only of Stoical darkness, the pessimism of the world, which it accepts and spiritually redeems, but of the harsh shell of intolerance as well, in which the germ of love and humanity rode and which doubtless protected it through a violent time and brought Christianity out triumphant over its competitors. From the very nature of the human paradox this dogmatic stamp of authority springs up with the Christian dedication and the resigned humility it requires. So Paul, who closes the Letter to the Galatians with such phrases as these: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"; "If a man be overtaken in any trespass . . . restore such a one in a spirit of meekness"; "Let us work that which is good toward all men"; "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our lord Jesus-Christ," opens it with a curse on divergence from his gospel: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema."

How much more, then, does this harshness emerge when the early Christians who paid for their unworldliness at a proportionate price are succeeded by wealthy bishops, who fought for the lucrative tax-exempt positions of the church and, installed in them, gave Christian blessing to

everything Christ himself had condemned. We witness just such an organizing reversal as has occurred time and again in the history of revolutions. Tender humility fortifies itself in intolerant pride, and this is in keeping with the whole dilemma by which a religion, supposedly of poverty and self-sacrificing love, found itself, in the first place, in the real world at all, and, second, made mistress of the Roman state, owner of African slaves and land, protectress of empire and scourge of the infidel.

It was doubtless the breakdown of all traditioned sanctities of senate and emperor under the military tyranny (which came in waves each worse than the one before, cresting after the death of Alexander Severus) that enforced the need of some new divinity to hedge the emperor, elevating him above the Praetorian rabble whose puppet he so easily became. The result after the reforms of Diocletian was Constantine's establishment of the Caesar as oriental demigod in Christian guise, the divinely appointed king, chosen vessel of God. This solution expresses the age, its humanistic abandonment, the removal into mystery, out of time. The emperor puts off the human toga of Roman citizen and leader of the senate, in which Augustus had robed despotism, and which other rulers down to Severus had, as Gibbon says, "decently preserved." Faith now becomes the key to power, and history takes the spaceless form of a symbolic encounter between spiritual legions.

The impact of this change is startling, if we recall the histories of the Greeks, or even of the Romans, and then turn to the *Life of Constantine*, written by Eusebius (ca. 263–ca. 339), his at first hostile churchman. Constantine's armies march under the banner of the symbolic cross. Against this sign the demonic forces array themselves, led by the Roman Maxentius, who puts forth all his sorcery: "sometimes for magic purposes ripping up women with child, at other times searching into the bowels of newborn infants. He slew lions also, and practiced certain horrid arts for evoking demons." But it is in vain. The biblical prototypes suggest the issues; as Pharaoh and his chariots went down into the sea, Maxentius and his guards, put to flight, are drowned in a river, and Constantine erects in Rome a triumphal statue of himself bearing a spear in the shape of a cross:

By virtue of this Salutory sign, which is the true test of valor, I have preserved and liberated your city from the yoke of tyranny. I have also set at liberty the Roman senate and people, and restored them to their ancient distinction and splendor.

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The history of the Middle Ages and Renaissance is heralded. A mystical Christianity espouses the antithetical freedom and glory of pagan Rome.

It is thought that Eusebius was a native of Palestine; he was certainly educated there, under a disciple of Origen. The style of thought and narrative betrays its source. This is biblical history—miraculous, careless of cause and effect, time or place. It moves in another realm, which has been conquered by the “Salutary sign.”

Finally, in the third book of Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*, with the account of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) we reach a climax in the sanctification of force. It is what comes to characterize the Eastern Church, where spiritual power is united with temporal. Here humility toward God—“with regard to his mind, it was evident that he was distinguished by piety and godly fear”—parades in an exterior of regal pomp (*ibid.* iii. 10):

And now, all rising at the signal which indicated the emperor’s entrance, at last he himself proceeded through the midst of the assembly, like some heavenly messenger of God, clothed in raiment which glittered as it were with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendor of gold and precious stones.

This is the imperial heaven which glistens two centuries later from the gold mosaics of Ravenna’s walls. But the supreme reversal of Christ’s own values follows in the fifteenth chapter:

Detachments of the bodyguard and other troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of those the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the imperial apartments, in which some were the emperor’s own companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ’s kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality.

Various works of art show this holy hardening and militant canonization. The colossal bronze of Constantine would serve; but more cruelly expressive is that of his heretical son, Constantius II (*ca.* A.D. 360), in the Conservatori in Rome. It may stand as a portal to the sinister aisle of Dark Age religion—the scourge of mortal man’s believing that he comprehends and represents the divine will. And hand in hand with the inner life the outward form has been dogmatized, stylized into symbolic ritual, a surrender to the primitive; in terms of technique the wheel of the classical world has come full circle, back to the geometric and angular with which the sixth century B.C. began, the immersion of personality in transpersonal cult. But the return is also a leap to a new mode on the organizing scale. The

abstract asperity of this face—the eyes rolled upward in a piety stripped of earthly and humanistic shading—is a mirror of the savagery practiced under the curtain of faith; both are symptoms of a declining state, overrun by barbarians from without; within, hardening socially to the feudal frame, mentally to the hierarchy of superrational dogma. Yet under all this, as in the primitive return of Constantius' face, the new personality is smoldering, the visionary self and world, latent in the eyes, cruelly advancing in the hard mask of bronze. Even here the germ of advance, like a crab, retrogresses forward.

It was this Constantius II who made the terror of Christian piety so plain that the forlorn effort of Julian (331–63) to restore the liberal worship of the pagan gods was a natural consequence. But, if this is a testament to Christian intolerance, it is equally so to the blindness of Julian, who thus dreamed that a rational relativism, which even when alive had been unable to maintain itself, could now be resuscitated from death by an act of will.

As we consider the first abuses of official Roman Christianity, it might seem the sincere message of Christ was done for, discredited forever. But these were manifestations only of what zeal had implied from the first, but had compensated for with another life, which was still stirring in the shell. Christianity was as subtly constructed as any evolving vitality. It bore the means of its own regeneration, its successive and purifying reform.

Christian love and humility, as they aim at an ideal limit, manifest themselves in the tension of matter only as coupled with and in the strength of their opposite, arrogance and self-seeking, individually or socially. Thus the medieval ascetic, who approached surprisingly near the aim of self-denial, did so by virtue of existing in the Catholic frame, an organization strenuously devoted to its own welfare. So, in the fourth and fifth centuries, under the now secure protection of a dominant church, the ascetic and mystical spirit in Christianity might retire to meditation or the wilderness, drawing to a specialized core which poured soul into the organism of the whole as the militant and grasping members sustained it. Monasticism, the extreme of this, growing—with the church consolidation—from its beginnings in Anthony of Egypt (250–350) toward its Italian codification under Benedict (450–543), became a burning heart in the antithetical and supporting frame.

But everywhere there were stirrings of apostolic earnestness, tempered by Christian humanity, working through the zealous forms of such an age. The giants of this aspiring were the Latin Fathers: Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory. It is they who direct the rescue of the spirit from

bondage to the militant body, the Constantinian state. The letters of St. Ambrose (*ca.* 339–97) to Valentinian II and Theodosius are the spearhead of the struggle, especially his rebuke to the latter after the punitive massacre in Thessalonica (written *ca.* 390): “I prefer God to my sovereign,” and, “if you purpose being present, I dare not offer the Sacrifice.” The Christian message prevailed; the emperor confessed his guilt and was readmitted to the communion only as a repentant sinner. It would be hard to assess how far Western individuality, as it later developed, was dependent on this opposition and tensile independence of church and state, or to judge how far their monolithic conjunction in the East was correlated with its suppression of individuality. In one sense, therefore, Ambrose’s action (curious he should have been born in the French-German city of Trier) was causal, though in another sense it is only symptomatic of the Western trend, as it was already differentiating itself from that of the East.

Just as one might have thought, the true spirit of Christianity was smothered under the official basilica of Constantine—and would have misjudged—so the bronze statue of Constantius II might lead to the assumption that by 360 the Dark Ages had already fallen, that the rich personality and harmony of the classical world had been thrown down by “A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” (Yeats, “The Second Coming”). But that fear would also have proved premature. For it was just under the Dominate restoration of order, down to the formal extinction of the Western Empire in 476, that the Christian arts enjoyed a last rich harvest. Both faith and style restore themselves in a literature, art, and music of supreme depth and beauty.

If the acceptance of earthly darkness and preoccupation with spiritual light gives the Roman-Christian flowering much in common with the Dark Ages for which it sets the forms, and even with the Western medieval, there is this difference—that where the twelfth-century Romanesque is emerging from the bareness of the primitive and ascetic, irradiated from the future by the first rays of unconscious humanistic morning, the Roman Christian is suffused from the past by the twilight gold of the pagan world.

If primitive art is that in which individuality, with all its elaboration of personal mood, meditation, feeling, heart, does not freely appear—tending rather to hereditary suppression under the communal canons of cult—then classical Gregorian chant, with Augustine and the earliest mosaics of Ravenna, while on the voluntary road to primitive submission, have not

by any means arrived there. This is not merely because they are technically elaborate. The canons of primitive art in themselves may be remarkably complex; but it is by virtue of an impersonal bareness, a stripping-off of the atmospheric modulations of a civilized age, that we call such an art "primitive." The rhythms of African music, Moorish linear design, Celtic illumination, geometric pottery, the Medieval Sequence, have formal aspects in which they are beyond sophistication; yet, when contrasted with productions of ripest individuality—Tel Amarna art, Chinese landscapes, Greco-Roman thought and poetry, the quartets of Beethoven or Goethe's *Faust*—we sense the primitiveness of spirit.

It is just this primitiveness that the classical Christian arts have not yet stripped themselves to, though they steadily approach that condition, as the contrast of Augustine (354–430) with Gregory (540–604) would imply. Indeed, Augustine's own development from the *Confessions* (398) to *The City of God* or his increasing canonization of contemporary miracle (contrast the complaint in the *Confessions* that miracles do not exist in our time with his official promulgation of miracles reported in 428 in connection with the transporting of Stephen's bones) may indicate such a trend. In the supreme works of the age, however—the *Confessions*, the contemporary Ambrosian and Roman chant, the early basilicas of Rome and Ravenna—not only is the form subtle and refined but it retains from its classical home a rounded richness and meditative crepuscularity. This is particularly true of the Augustine, which gathers up the entire Greco-Roman evolution of consciousness and gives it a new introspective depth and self-awareness. Personality as such, it is true, is here merged in the common faith and worship, but there is still the sense of an individual who knowingly surrenders himself and in that act plumbs unexplored mysteries of inner being. By the tenth century this awareness has largely disappeared; the surrender of personality is an automatic condition of the primitive life and creed; consciousness has withdrawn to that latent and ineradicable core—the germ of later advance—the private soul before its God.

The earliest body of music which is generally known and admired today is Gregorian chant, named for the sixth-century pope who gathered it together. It is not alone the still-accepted plainsong of the Catholic church but constitutes one of the great art monuments of all time. It must be observed, however, that we know it only by modern reconstruction. The traditional performances obviously changed throughout the Middle Ages and in the post-Renaissance grew much degraded. It is largely as revived by the theorists and monks of Solesmes Abbey that we hear it

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today. They began their work of purification and recapture in the nineteenth century, and considerable dispute has arisen about interpreting the rhythm. The various theories are reviewed by Gustav Reese.¹ The heart of the disagreement seems to be that the Solesmes school holds all notes of equal value, where the mensuralists assert that in the classical period notes were long and short and that only after the rise of polyphony (eleventh and twelfth centuries) were all notes assimilated to an equal length for ease of polyphonic performance. This would seem to relegate Solesmes Gregorian to the Middle Ages rather than to the Roman Christian period. Where the truth lies cannot at present be resolved; so that all plainsong, as now sung, is subject to the distortions and *Zeitgeist* modifications we note in any half-certain effort at restoration, as in Viollet-le-Duc's Gothic, of the like. Of one thing, though, we may be sure. The Solesmes interpretation, while in the matter of note lengths it *may* conform to a later period, is aesthetically unlike whatever plainsong must have existed in the twelfth century and afterward. It is consciously reconstructed in the Roman-Christian spirit, and, in the absence of any satisfactory, much less beautiful, performances by the mensuralists (who disagree much among themselves), the Solesmes recordings must be taken as the best existing (though necessarily provisional) realization of Classical Christian chant.

As such, it has melodious roundness and subtle flow of rhythm which were the classical heritage; in the long caressing phrases the religious dedication of Hebrew and Eastern ritual mixes with the modulations of Greece and Rome. Though it celebrates a spiritual withdrawal, the duality of earthly decay and faith outside time, it does so in a lingering ripeness of earthly form. This is the condition also of fifth-century mosaics and illuminations (the Orphic Shepherd Christ in Ravenna, or the "illusionistic" Vienna Genesis, probably of the school of Antioch); in fact, it is the very substance of early Christianity, where the new faith builds on the quiet ease of patrician culture. Thus Augustine retires for meditation to the suburban villa of a wealthy friend. The gentle nostalgia of this late classicism (poignantly coupled with mystical faith) is most perfectly represented by that magical passage from the *Confessions* (Book ix, chap. 10), where, shortly before his mother's death, Augustine speaks with her concerning the Kingdom of Heaven:

The day now approaching that she was to depart this life, (which day thou well knewest, though we were not aware of it) it fell out, thyself as I believe, by thine

1. *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1940), pp. 140 ff.

own secret ways so casting it, that she and I should stand alone leaning in a certain window, which looked into the garden within the house where we now lay, at Ostia by Tiber; where being sequestered from company after the wearisomeness of a long journey, we were recruiting ourselves for a sea voyage. There conferred we hand to hand very sweetly and forgetting those things which are behind, we reach forth unto those things which are before.

Here the mild twilight of Greco-Roman personality is evoked by that single impressionistic touch: “that she and I should stand alone leaning in a certain window”—in which also the symbolic application is caught up and carried along. For this becomes the window—and all earthly life is for Augustine such a window—to what immediately follows, perhaps the most glorious meditation in the entire range of mystical literature; yet not altogether mystical either. Mysticism, too, is subdued under the Neo-Platonic shadow; the highest moment is still a “sighing after.” (Typical that this great passage should be derived from Plotinus, from the *Enneads* v. I, 2:)

We said therefore: if to any man the tumults of the flesh be silenced, if fancies of the earth and waters and air be silenced also: if the poles of heaven be silent also: if the very soul be silent to herself, and by not thinking upon self surmount self: if all dreams and imaginary revelations be silenced, every tongue and every sign, if whatsoever is transient be silent to any one—since if any man could hearken unto them, all these say unto him, We created not ourselves, but he that remains to all eternity: if then, having uttered this, they also be then silent (as having raised our ear unto him that made them) and if he speak alone; not by them but by himself, that we may hear his own words; not pronounced by any tongue of flesh, nor by the voice of the angels, nor by the sound of thunder, nor in the dark riddle of a resemblance; but that we may hear him whom we love in these creatures, himself without these (like as we two now strained up ourselves unto it, and in swift thought arrived unto a touch of that eternal wisdom which is over all:—could this exaltation of spirit ever have continued, and all other visions of a far other kind been quite taken away, and this one exaltation should ravish us, and swallow us up, and so wrap up their beholder among these more inward joys, as that his life might be for ever like to this very moment of understanding which we now sighed after: were not this as much as Enter into thy Master’s joy? But when shall that be? Shall it be when we shall all rise again, though all shall not be changed?

Here is a truly Gregorian sentence, and, as the Gregorian phrase has behind it the heritage of Greek and Eastern song (or as the mosaic-filled basilicas are built upon centuries of architectural achievement), so on Platonic philosophy and the sure foundation of Ciceronian eloquence rests

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the vaulting of this verbal dome. Yet it is an illusionistic vault, which opens within to the dimensionless mosaic of mystery. For it is not in technique alone that the similarity to Gregorian lies; what Augustine speaks of here is precisely what Gregorian more than any other music attempts. Where later Western music dilates and diffuses, breaks us up on the "forms of the earth and waters," Gregorian unifies and converges, abandoning all but the inviolable voice of mystical surrender and immaterial reward. Goethe's dictum, "How few are inspirited by that which speaks only to the spirit," here applies; this is the paradox of Gregorian—that the same expression which seems of all others least varied, most limited and plain, once we give ourselves to be drawn through the single point of its melodic line, transcends the limitation of emotional range, becomes of all music the most hypnotically full.

It is hard to parallel this experience today in the Roman basilicas. The transformations of Renaissance and Baroque have filled them with voluptuous riot. The most impressive at a first glance is St. Paul's outside the Walls, but it is almost entirely a reconstruction and without atmosphere. Far richer, and best preserving its Roman-Christian sanctity, is Santa Sabina, of the fifth century. One can actually hear Gregorian there, and to do so is to stand at another Augustinian opening into that last classical age.

The condition of living and speaking in the inner silence imposes on such art all the limitations of the style of Gnosis, of which worldly shadow, subdued emotion, resignation, with the unobtrusive and indefinable pervasion of triumph are elements. Suppose we climb the Aventine in the spring, the morning of Palm Sunday, say, and at sunrise, from the little park over the Tiber, look out on Rome under the pouring song of the nightingales. Then pass into the church of Santa Sabina. Ethereal light filters through alabaster panes down the antiphonal of columns, the undulation of arches, along the shadowy retreat of aisles; it lingers in the frescoed apse (one must look through Zuccaro's paint to the earlier lines) and reflects as from a liquid in the polished marble of the floor. Imagine the procession of the olives and palms in the cloister, the responsive chanting of the monks within, and the group without knocking at the doors of cypress wood (carved with the Crucifixion [422-32] in a style typically restrained), then the opening of the gate, the divinely lingering cadence of the "Libera me," like a green island of eternity.

Out of the crushing of Rome this peace flowed like honey, serene, without the dramatic contrasts of assertive ego of later religious music, of

Gabrielli and Bach. Suppose we hear the “Christus factus est pro nobis” (Solesmes Album, VM87, face 5). The emotional range is as great as Gregorian allows, a veiled modulation, the tragic opening mitigated by the suavities of prayer, the exultant close restrained by the temporal shadow. It begins: “Christ was made obedient for us unto death, even to the death of the cross.” The whole phrase hangs in the silence, the lingering pain which is not pain because it is soothed into acceptance. A pause, and then: “For which God has exalted him and given him a name above all names.” It is the resurrection, the leap from the dark. The simple change of range, the faintest shift of figuration: for the solemn drop on “crucis” the insistent pulse and soar of “exaltavit illum”; it is a contrast as subtly mysterious yet as richly moving as that from page to page of the Vienna Genesis: from the dying Jacob blessing his son, back to the scene of Jacob greeting the sunrise, with the strange rosy light on the mountain stones. And any greater shift would be out of place in the amber suffusion of Santa Sabina, at Augustine’s sequestered window, or anywhere in the Ausonian dusk of that age.

Mention of Ausonius (ca. 310–95), who was writing into leisured old age at his villa in Bordeaux, reminds us how far this late-classical twilight could retain its pagan spirit, its celebration of warm days in the wine of Gaul:

Quis color ille vadis, seras cum propulit umbras
Hesperus et viridi perfudit monte Mosellam:

Thus opens the poem on the river Moselle, which Rolfe Humphries has translated:

What color are the shallows, now that evening
Moves the late shadows forward, and the river
Is dyed with the green mountain? All the ridges
Swim in the ripple of motion, and the vine
Trembles, and is not there, and under water
Its cluster, seen through glass, is magnified.²

And Helen Wadell, whose *Medieval Latin Lyrics*³ contains another version, in her notes on Ausonius and his pupil Paulinus, gives inspired reminiscences (as if she had lived it herself) of that last walled garden in which pagan and Christian love mingle and contend. She writes:

2. *Poems Collected and New* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), p. 233.

3. London: Constable, 1929.

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“The poetical fame of Ausonius,” said Gibbon in an acid footnote, “condemns the taste of his age.” A good deal of it is sad stuff. . . . But . . . the new romantic imagination working on Virgil, himself romantic enough . . . in the fields of Sorrowful Lovers, from a phrase or two in his original . . . has created the twilight world of Western Europe. . . .

The poem, a literary culmination of the illusionistic tendency which had produced the Odysseus landscapes and was flowing into the Christian miniatures, especially from Alexandria, is this:

SILVA MYRTEA

Errantes silva in magna et sub luce maligna
Inter harundineasque comas gravidumque papaver
Et tacitos sine labe lacus, sine murmure rivos,
Quorum per ripas nebuloso lumine marcent
Fleti, olim regum et puerorum nomina, flores.

She translates:

THE FIELDS OF SORROW

They wander in deep woods, in mournful light,
Amid long reeds and drowsy headed poppies,
And lakes where no wave laps, and voiceless streams,
Upon whose banks in the dim light grow old
Flowers that were once bewailed names of kings.

This is the poet of personality and gentle nostalgia, a luke-warm convert to Christianity, whose favorite pupil, Paulinus, was called from that Callic lingering of Greece and earthly affection into spiritual isolation by the siren of Christian eternity:

Not that they beggared be in mind, or brutes,
That they have chosen their dwelling place afar
In lonely places: but their eyes are turned
To the high stars, the very deep of Truth. . . .
And whatsoever wars on the divine,
At Christ's command and for his love, they hate. . . .

So wrote Paulinus, and then, with a last great but impersonal protest of love, “Ego te per omne quod datum mortalibus et destinatum saeculum est” (“I shall hold thee through all chances and fates”), he withdraws into the silence, the service of St. Felix at Nola: “Spring wakens the birds’ voices, but for me My Saint’s day is my spring.” It is the retreat into spacelessness, the current and motion of the time.

In the mosaics of Rome and Ravenna it is brought visibly before our eyes. Strange, to see a representational art with a long tradition in the life of this world even while retaining its realistic surface become possessed by an entirely non-representational and symbolic spirit: the bodies stiffen and remove themselves from the flux of things; the eyes widen and grow unfathomable (they were sublunar orbs before; now they gaze down from the Empyrean); the colors are spectral, gold and blue veils; the symmetry is final, stylized; nothing is valid in its own right but as it speaks of the known but unknowable divine: the monogram, the lamb, the dove, the throne, the living font and well. Not Christ nor any of his disciples continues as a man; they are caught in the timeless aspect of their being, neither acting nor suffering, yet suffering in a victorious and eternal act—"at the still point of the turning world." Yet all the residual frames of representation remain; and it is a sensation which takes us to the heart of that age to see these haunting eyes (*Head of a Prophet* [sixth century, S. Apollinari Nuovo]) longing as the late Romantic, yet dogmatically resolved, indifferent, cold, implacable, a trifle cruel, and yet none of these precisely, since none of these applies at that remoteness of vision—"an image out of Spiritus Mundi" to see these eyes, of which the very soulfulness is vacancy, gazing from the still lush trappings of imperial technique—this is the unforgettable impact of the developing Byzantine.

It is as if we saw the Christian spirit divesting itself of classical consciousness, preparing for the Dark Age agony, the fallen world, and unquestioning faith beyond—the stripped intensity and paradox of blessing. Augustine in the last Roman flowering had heralded it: the dismantling of the pagan temples to rear the narrowing basilicas of God. A hundred years later, with Gregory, we have crossed the divide:

Soon afterwards the wild nation of the Lombards jumped at our throat and mowed down the inhabitants of that country. The cities have been laid waste, the fortresses destroyed, the churches burned, the monasteries torn down; the fields are abandoned by human beings and without cultivation. . . .

. . . Wild animals have taken possession of places where multitudes of men lived before. I do not know what is happening in other parts of the world, but in this country where we live, the world not only foretells its end but manifestly displays it to our eyes. . . .

. . . Since all temporal possessions have fallen away from us, we must strive with greater eagerness for things that are eternal [*Dialogues*, Book viii (trans. Christian Mackauer)].

This is the rock gorge that lies between Christian antiquity and the Christian West.