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HUMANISTIC ASPECTS OF CAROLINGIAN COURT POETRY: POETICAL TECHNIQUE AND USE OF SOURCES IN PAUL THE DEACON'S *CARMEN X*

The object of this article is the analysis of a typical specimen of Carolingian court poetry, namely Paul the Deacon's *Carmen X*, which was written at the very beginning of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance in 781. In my opinion, Paul's poem demonstrates once more how, on the one hand, the poetical technique and use of classical sources and, on the other, the crucial influence of the environment of Charlemagne's court not only make Carolingian poetry an extremely innovative literary form, but also strongly connect it with the later phenomenon of Humanism¹.

If during the period of Humanism, the court occupied a central position in the cultural life of Europe, especially through its network of relationships and agenda of social events, which provided frequent occasions for the production of incidental poetry and literature, a very similar situation characterises the Carolingian age, which largely revolved around the Carolingian court.

As Mary Garrison has cleverly underlined, the court assumes a central position in the cultural context of the Carolingian renaissance: „Equally important as a stimulus to poetic activity were the new occasions (mainly provided by the court) where verse was required for communication, celebration, entertainment and display. [...] Of course, writers continued to turn out poems in the standard genres [...], but alongside this predictable trend, important new developments can be traced”². Mary Garrison continues by mentioning the re-discovered genres which characterised Carolingian poetry, namely, secular epic, pastoral poems influenced by Vergil, Calpurnius Siculus and Nemesianus, philosophical poetry in the style of Boethius and, finally, the re-emergence since Classical Antiquity of „an appreciable number of poems evoking biographical circumstances and the inner life”³.

The return to classical literary models and the use of a classical Latin language, which Mary Garrison clearly emphasises, complete the picture of the similarities that strongly connect the Carolingian renaissance with Humanism. As Giles Brown has effectively stated in a recent essay: „The ‘Carolingian Renaissance’ may be defined as the revival of learning

¹ For an analysis of the similarity between the literature of the Carolingian renaissance and that of the Humanistic age, see especially M. Garrison, *The emergence of Carolingian Latin literature and the court of Charlemagne (780-814)*, in: R. Mc Kitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 111-140. (Hereafter, Garrison, *The emergence*)

² M. Garrison, *The emergence*, p. 114.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

in conjunction with a movement to reform (to ‘correct’) both the institutions of the Church and the lives of the Christian peoples living under Carolingian rule⁴.

Now, a „revival of learning”, especially focused on Classical culture and Latin language, and a „movement to reform appear” to be concepts which, when they are taken in their general sense, perfectly apply to the spirit of Humanism and its new models of education and civilisation.

Therefore, Carolingian intellectuals seem to share with humanists a similar cultural tension and the specific need to use new standards and forms of expression, which may concretely create a „revival of learning”. This extensive program of innovation is certainly accomplished in different manners in every aspect of Carolingian culture, but one of its typical expressions is undoubtedly the Latin poetry of the Carolingian court, where language and style constantly search for new expressive modes and openly rely on classical culture and classical Latin (the foundations themselves of any ‘revival of learning’ in Western Culture).

As I mentioned above, I have chosen Paul the Deacon’s *Carmen X* as a typical and extremely representative specimen of the court poetry of the Carolingian age, which was actually written before Paul joined Charlemagne’s court, and eventually prompted his recruitment in the king’s entourage.

In April 781, while Charlemagne was in Italy in order to confer with the Pope and recruit scholars for his court, Paul had a chance to meet him in Rome⁵. After the conquest of Pavia in 774, Paul’s brother had been detained as a prisoner of war in the Frankish kingdom for seven years. Therefore, Paul decided to intercede for him and his family by writing a poem and addressing it to the king⁶.

Paul needed to produce a piece of poetry that would be moving and, in accordance with the king’s program of cultural renaissance, would sound soberly classic and emotionally effective. Since he had to describe a man in exile in a foreign land, Latin classical poetry offered him many possible sources of inspiration: in particular Virgil’s First Eclogue and the Aeneid, which described exiled shepherds and exiled Trojans, and Ovid’s poems from Tomis, which were entirely centred on the poet’s condition as an exile. At the same time, the bible and patristic literature could provide more models and references.

However, even though a general biblical background can be certainly noticed in the texture of the poem, Paul seems to make a very precise choice with regard to his main poetical model: he opts for Ovid’s poems from exile, to which he constantly refers and alludes throughout his *carmen*.

In addition, and on a minor scale, references to the patristic tradition, late antique and early medieval poetry are detectable: Vittorio Capetti, for instance, found in Venantius Fortunatus, Paul’s main medieval model⁷.

⁴ G. Brown, *Introduction: the Carolingian Renaissance*, in: R. Mc Kitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 1.

⁵ See W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon*, Princeton, 1988, p. 341.

⁶ See L. Capo, *Paolo Diacono*, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, t. 81, Roma, 2014, p. 154; F. Brunhölz, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, Erster Band, München, 1975, p. 266-67.

⁷ „At quamvis de servili imitatione cogitare nequas, videtur mihi Fortunati carminibus versandis sedulam operam Paulus dedisse, quae ei non descriptivi tantum generis, sed et aulici et epigraphici exemplaria praebebant, V. Capetti, *De Pauli Diaconi carminibus cum appendice novem eiusdem poetae carminum Italicis versibus redditorum*”, in: *Atti e Memorie del Congresso storico tenuto in Cividale nei giorni 3, 4, 5 Settembre 1899*, Cividale, 1900, p. 80.

In the poem's opening line, „Verba tui famuli, rex summe, adtende serenus”⁸ the influence of biblical Latin emerges in the use of the phrase „famuli tui”⁹ and in the address to the „rex summe”¹⁰.

However, in the second line, „Respice et ad fletum cum pietate meum!”¹¹ the imperative ‘*Respice*’ placed at the beginning of the verse appears to be a parallel to Ovid’s *Epistulae ex Ponto*, 1, 9, 25, „Respice quantum debeat auxilium Maximus esse tibi”, where the Roman poet says to his friend Maximus, through the words of their recently deceased common friend Celsus, how grateful he is for the help that he and his brother had provided in interceding to appease Caesar’s wrath „ne sit ad extremum Caesaris ira tenax” (*Ep. ex Ponto*, 1, 9, 28). So, in the second verse, Paul imitates Ovid’s *Epistula* because the contexts of his and Ovid’s poem are very similar: there is the necessity to intercede with a powerful emperor (Augustus/Charlemagne) in order to end the exile of a beloved person.

In addition, it can be noticed how the identification of Charlemagne with Augustus, which will be systematically developed in the anonymous poem *Karolus et Leo Papa* and the works of Modoin of Autun and Einhard, has one of its first attestations in this subtle literary allusion in Paul’s poem.

The next two lines, „Sum miser, ut mereor, quantum vix ullus in orbe est / Semper inest luctus tristis et hora mihi”¹², find a perfect parallel in Ovid’s *Tristia*, 5, 7, 7-8, „Sum miser; haec brevis est nostrorum summa malorum / quisquis et offenso Caesare vivit, erit”, where the Roman poet describes how his grief is caused by the offended Caesar, who inflicted his punishment on him: Paul, too, suffers because of the punishment that the offended Charlemagne inflicted on his brother.

In the next section of the poem, made of two distiches, „Septimus annus adest, ex quo nova causa dolores / Multiplices generat et mea corda quatit: / Captivus vestris extunc germanus in oris / Est meus afflicto pectore, nudus, egens”¹³, Paul momentarily abandons the Ovidian model and places two new poetical allusions at the end of each distich. The first one, *mea corda quatit*, finds a parallel in Silius Italicus, 2, 254, „quatit hortantum praecordia terror”, later imitated by the fifth century poet Paulinus of Périgueux in his epic on Saint Martin (*Vita Martini*, 5, 765), „Corda quatit, tremulo conuellens viscera motu”. The second allusion, at the end of the second distich, „nudus, egens”, finds a parallel in another late antique poet, Optatianus Porphyrius, who writes in his *Carmen* 29, 1, „Nudus, egens, Veneris naufragus in pelago”.

In the next two distichs, „Illius in patria coniunx miseranda per omnes / Mendicat plateas ore tremente cibos; / Quattuor hac turpi natos sustentat ab arte, / Quos vix pannuciis praevallet illa tegi”¹⁴, Paul describes, through the use of extremely touching images, the misery of his brother’s wife, who is forced to beg for food in all the squares of Pavia, and can barely afford to cover the limbs of her children with torn rags. This moving description of a wife’s despair

⁸ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 1, in E. Duemmler (ed.), *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, Tomi I Pars Prior, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Berlin, 1880, p. 47-48.

⁹ Cf. *Gen* 42:11; 44:31; *Ex* 5:16; *Num* 32:27; 2 *Chr* 6:21.

¹⁰ Cf. *1 Sam* 26:19.

¹¹ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 2.

¹² Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 3-4.

¹³ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 5-8.

¹⁴ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 9-12.

in the hour of her husband's exile finds a perfect parallel in Ovid's *Tristia*, 1, 3, 43-46, „Illa etiam ante lares passis astrata capillis / Contigit exstinctos ore tremente focos, / Multaque in aduersos effudit uerba Penates / Pro deplorato non ualitura uiro”. Paul re-uses the Ovidian expression *ore tremente*, which he places at the centre of his description: his brother's wife begs for food with trembling lips, while Ovid's wife touches the extinguished fires of the sacrifices with trembling lips.

In the next two distichs, „Est mihi, quae primis Christo sacrata sub annis / Excubat, egregia simplicitate soror; / Haec sub sorte pari luctum sine fine retentans / Privata est oculis iam prope flendo suis”¹⁵, Paul develops the motif of the sorrow of his family for the exiled brother by adding the figure of his sister, a nun who has lost the use of her eyes through constant weeping. Now, in this general description of personal grief, many echoes can be found in Classical poetry, and especially in Virgil and Ovid, but Paul seems to allude more openly to Venantius Fortunatus, whom, as we mentioned above,¹⁶ scholars often mention as one of Paul's main models. In his *Carmen*, 9, 2, 56-58, Venantius produces a series of images and terms, „Luctus adest oculis, est neque fructus opis. / Viscera torquentur, lacerantur corda tumultu; / Sunt cari extincti, flendo cadunt oculi”, which crop up in Paul's description.

The Ovidian model returns at verse 18, „Nec est, heu, miseris qui ferat ullus opem”¹⁷, through the expression „opem ferat”, which finds three parallels in *Metamorphoses*, 2, 305; 11, 399 and, especially, *Ex Ponto*, 4, 8, 81; and, again, at verse 22, „Debuimus, fateor, asperiora pati”¹⁸, which finds a parallel in *Ex Ponto*, 4, 10, 36, „Quam miser est, qui fert asperiora fide!”

In the distich 23-24, „Sed miserere, potens rector, miserere, precamur, / Et tandem finem his, pie, pone malis!”¹⁹, Paul addresses the Christian emperor Charlemagne to implore his mercy, and his verses assume certain distinctive characters of Christian Latin: the expression, *potens rector*, is from the Ambrosian hymn, 17, 1-2, „Rector potens, uerax Deus, / Qui temperas rerum uices”; the imperative *miserere*, repeated twice, is typical of any Christian prayer, while the search for assonance, „pie, pone” and rhyme, „his / malis” in the pentameter, seem to be derived from liturgical language.

Distich 25-26, „Captivum patriae redde et civilibus arvis, / Cum modicis rebus culmina redde simul”²⁰, is extremely interesting, as it merges together the influence of pagan epic poetry, which clearly appears in the expression, „Redde arvis”, used in a very similar context by Statius, *Theb.*, 11, 280, „Redde arvis domibusque viros!”, and the Christian epic tones of a poem by Venantius Fortunatus on Gregory of Tours' restoration of the Church of Saint Martin : „Haec danti in terris culmina redde polis” (*Carm.*, X, 6, 78).

In the doxology at the end of the poem, „Mens nostra ut Christo laudes in saecula frequentet, / Reddere qui solus praemia digna potest!”²¹, besides a typical Biblical, liturgical language at verse 27, a final allusion to Ovid's poems from exile appears in the expression, „praemia digna”: ‘Da, precor, ingenio praemia digna meo’ (*Tristia*, 3, 11, 50). It is interesting to notice

¹⁵ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 13-16.

¹⁶ See above, p. 4, n. 9.

¹⁷ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 18.

¹⁸ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 22.

¹⁹ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 23-24.

²⁰ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 25-26.

²¹ Paul. Diac., *Carmen* X, 27-28.

that Ovid employs this expression in a completely different context, that is, in his account of the construction of the bull of Phalaris (*Tristia*, 3, 11, 39-54), while Paul uses it to describe Christ's mercy and generosity.

At this stage, even though it is not possible, from the elements gathered above, to reconstruct in detail the technique that Paul specifically used to compose his poem, still I believe that some aspects of his method of composition can be deduced with a certain approximation.

In the first place, it seems clear to me that there are two kinds of poetical references and allusions in *Carmen X*, which I would define as „unconscious” and „conscious”.

‘Unconscious’ are all those references and allusions which spontaneously crop up in the mind of the poet without a specific intention of using them. They belong to two main classes: Biblical/Patristic and Late Antique/Early Medieval.

The primary cultural background of the poet, that which was at the basis of his formation as a young student in Pavia, appears to be mostly founded on literary texts, especially historical and scientific, from the imperial and Christian age²². The poetical models, which the author absorbed in this period of his literary career, belong largely to the same historical periods, namely, late antiquity and the early middle ages²³. As a consequence, Paul spontaneously returns to his Christian, patristic and late antique, early medieval poetical background, when he writes his poems, as this background represents the basic matter of his poetry.

In *Carmen X*, this clearly appears in a series of poetical references and allusions to the Biblical/Patristic and late antique/early medieval tradition, which runs through the poem from the first to the last lines: as we mentioned above, Biblical/Patristic references are at line 1, 23, 24 and 27; references to late antique and early medieval poetry are at lines 6, 8, 16 and 26. However, these references and allusions appear to be accidental, that is, they are not the result of a conscious search for a poetical model from which the poet might draw materials in the form of quotations, but crop up spontaneously in his mind while composing his poem. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Biblical/Patristic and late antique/medieval references and allusions in *Carmen X* are always found in generic expressions of feelings or addresses to Christ and the emperor, but never in specific depictions of the condition of Paul's brother as an exile. The only exception is the allusion to *Carmen* 29, 1, „Nudus, egens, Veneris naufragus in pelago” by the late antique poet Optatianus Porphyrius, which appears at verse 8: „Captivus vestris extunc germanus in oris / Est meus afflicto pectore, nudus, egens”²⁴. Here the citation from the poem of a late antique author specifically refers to the condition of Paul's brother as an exile, and not to any generic description. However, the fact that Optatianus' poem is actually composed of a single verse made it particularly easy to remember, and may explain why it stayed in the poet's unconscious memory.

On the other hand, the second set of poetical quotations and allusions, which I defined as „conscious”, all refer to a specific poetical model, namely, Ovid's poems from exile. It is clear that, as we mentioned above, when he set out to compose a poem addressed to Charlemagne

²² See L. Capo (ed.), *Paolo Diacono: Storia dei Longobardi*, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano, 1992, p. xix.

²³ See L. Capo (ed.), *Paolo Diacono: Storia dei Longobardi*, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, Milano, 1992, p. xix, n. 4; K. Neff, *Die Gedichte des Paulus Diaconus. Kritische und erklärende Ausgabe*, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters begründet von Ludwig Traube, Dritter Band, Viertes Heft, München, 1908, p. 1-169.

²⁴ Paul. Diac., *Carmen X*, 7-8

on the condition of his exiled brother, Paul made a specific choice and selected Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* as his guide and source of poetical material²⁵.

Initially, he wrote his poem in the same meter of Ovid's poems from exile, namely, elegiac distiches. However, Paul subsequently uses the elegiac meter in many of his poems as, for instance, his *Carmen IV, Versus in Laude Larii Laci*, where the allusions to both Virgil and Ovid are frequent²⁶, but in this specific instance, the elegiac meter appears to be a precise choice to make his poem as close as possible to those of his model. Paul deliberately sets out to produce a poem in the same metric frame of Ovid's poems from exile.

In each section of the poem, in which Paul specifically describes his brother's condition as an exile and the consequences of his condition, namely, lines 2-4, 9-12, 18-22, his constant model are Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, as we have seen above. It can be noticed that Paul drew his references and allusions from poems belonging to Book 1, 3 and 5 of the *Tristia* and Book 1 and 4 of the *Epistulae*. This demonstrates that he had a complete knowledge of Ovid's exile elegies, and that he was able to examine them thoroughly in order to choose the most appropriate references. It is probable that he used two distinct manuscripts, one including the *Tristia* and the other the *Epistulae*, as the textual transmission of these poems on exile was basically independent from the other, both in the early Middle Ages and later²⁷. There is no doubt, however, that Ovid's exile elegies were extremely popular in the period following Charlemagne's death, as Ralph Hexter has amply demonstrated in his articles²⁸, and it is quite probable that Paul's early poem addressed to Charlemagne opened the way to further imitations of the Ovidian model²⁹.

At this stage, I think we can hypothesise that Paul's composition of *Carmen X* happened in two distinct phases. The first one represents the work of a medieval author who, even though he set out to mould his poem on the model of Ovid's exile elegies and consequently chose the elegiac meter, still based his poetical art on the typical style of early medieval poetry, that is, relied on biblical and patristic literature and late antique and early medieval poetical models. Therefore, we can imagine that the first draft of the poem did not include open references and quotations from Ovid's exile elegies.

In the second phase, the *revival of learning*³⁰ which characterises the Carolingian renaissance and strongly connects it with the later phenomenon of Humanism, comes into play and substantially influences the language and style of the poem. Thus, we can imagine that Paul revised his poem against the exile elegies of Ovid by consulting both the complete collections of the *Tristia* and *Epistulae* from two separate manuscripts. Through such revision, he reworked all those sections concerning his brother's exile and the consequences it had

²⁵ In a recent article, a team of American scholars have demonstrated, by analysing Paul's poems through linguistic computing, that for another poem he uses Catullus as his main model: C. Forstall, S. Jacobson, W. Scheirer, 'Evidence of Intertextuality: Investigating Paul the Deacon's *Angustae Vitae*', *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (September 2011): 285-296.

²⁶ See Paul. Diac., *Carmen IV*, and *apparatus* in E. Duemmler (ed.), *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini*, Tomi I Pars Prior, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Berlin, 1880, p. 42-43.

²⁷ See R.J. Hexter, *The Poetry of Ovid's Exile*, in: W.S. Anderson (ed.), *Ovid: The Classical Heritage*, New York, 1995, p. 37-70; Ovid, *Tristia and Ex Ponto*, 2nd edition revised by G.P. Goold, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (Mass.) – London, 1988, p. xl.

²⁸ See Hexter, *The Poetry*, p. 41.

²⁹ See *Ibidem*, p. 41.

³⁰ See p. 1, n.1.

on his family by using images, expressions and specific terms drawn from Ovid. In a sense, Paul updated and recreated the poetry of his time through a deliberate use of a classical model and, specifically, an Ovidian model.

Paul's poetical experiment, which involved the use of an innovative poetical technique in a context in which the poet must produce his poetry according to his current necessity, was definitely crucial for the development of later Carolingian poetry. Paul's early poems were a key influence on the authors who later joined the Carolingian court, as they opened the way to a new poetical experience, where the occasions offered by the court, the traditional elements of early medieval poetry and the innovations inspired by Carolingian renaissance all worked together to produce a new kind of poetry. This new poetical experiment, which characterises most of Carolingian poetry, appears to anticipate largely the technique and cultural approach of the Humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

Humanistic aspects of Carolingian Court Poetry: Poetical Technique and Use of Sources in Paul the Deacon's *Carmen X* **Summary**

The object of this article is the analysis of a typical specimen of Carolingian court poetry, namely Paul the Deacon's *Carmen X*, which was written at the very beginning of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance in 781. In my opinion, Paul's poem demonstrates once more how, on the one hand, the poetical technique and use of classical sources and, on the other hand, the crucial influence of the environment of Charlemagne's court that both makes Carolingian poetry an extremely innovative literary form, and strongly connects it with the later phenomenon of Humanism.

Keywords: Paul the Deacon, Carolingian poetry, sources of Medieval Poetry, Carolingian Court, Ovid's Exile Elegies

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