



XI. METRES

¶ With regard to the metres of our hymns we must note first that two methods of measuring rhythm exist from the very beginning.³ In classical poetry we are accustomed to scansion by *quantity*. That is not the only possibility. Even before Christianity there were popular Latin songs measured by stress-accent. When Caesar's legions marched, singing :

*Mille occidimus, mille Sarmatas
mille mille Persas quaerimus.*⁴

they had found a rhythm by stress-accent. So there were always these two systems. The "noble" language admitted metre by quantity only ; at the same time vulgar

¹ Tomasi : *Opera omnia* (ed. Vezzosi, Rome, 1748-1761), vol. iv, p. 168.

² Durandus of Mende († 1276) knows all about hymns in the office. He describes their place, at Matins after the Inuitatorium and in the other hours, just as we have them now (*Rationale*, v, c. 2, etc.).

³ "As, among the Romans, the arrangement of words in the verse was not made without regard to their accents, so also did they allow an effect of accent on quantity in prosody."—Gercke and Norden : *Einführung in die Altertumswissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1910), i, p. 249. See many examples of this in the whole chapter, pp. 248-257.

⁴ Cf. A. F. Ozanam : *La Civilization au Ve Siècle*, XVe leçon (*Œuvres complètes*, Paris, 1855, vol. ii, p. 141). The whole chapter is worth reading: "Comment la langue latine devint chrétienne."

Latin had its poems by accent. In this poetry, even when, apparently, the same metres are used as in the noble language, accent takes the place of the long syllable, and hiatus is always allowed. From what is called the “silver age” of the later emperors the sense of quantity in Latin was fading; stress-accent was taking its place. So the Romance languages have but little sense of quantity. In the forms they assume we see the influence of the stress-accent much more than of short and long syllables. The Teutonic people, when they began so speak Latin, helped this development. They had little sense of quantity in Latin, much sense of accent. So, finally, by the middle ages, all natural sense of long and short syllables had gone; there remained, as there remains to most of us when we speak Latin now, only a sense of accent. Exactly the same development was taking place in Greek.

Now in the first Latin hymns, though they were written in a classical metre and were measured by quantity, there is already evidence that accent was beginning to take the place of length. St. Ambrose’s own hymns are correct, from the point of view of classical metre. Such licences as he allows himself are found also in the Augustan poets. The spondee instead of an iambus in the first and third feet is admitted by all. So, when Ambrose writes: *Ostende partum uirginis* (“Intende qui regis,” ii, 2), we find in Horace: *Aptantur enses conditi* (Ep. vii, 2). He puts an anapaest for an iambus in the “odd” feet: *Intende qui regis Israel*; so does Martial: *Cum fama quod satis est habet* (Epigr. i, 50, 42). Ambrose sometimes makes a short final syllable long, in arsis when it has the ictus: *Te diligat castus amor* (“Deus creator,” iv, 3); so does Vergil: *Tityrus hinc aberat. Ipsae te Tityre pinus* (Ecl. i, 39). This is, already, influence of stress-accent. He replaces the long syllable by two short ones, in arsis: *Martyribus inuentis cano* (“Grate tibi Iesu,” i, 4); so also Horace: *Ast ego uicissim risero* (Ep. xv, 24). There is only one and a doubtful example of hiatus in St. Ambrose: *Ne hostis inuidi dolo* (“Deus creator,” vii, 3). But here

the reading: *Nec hostis* is equally authenticated. Soon after St. Ambrose poets begin to use licences that would not be possible in the Augustan age, licences which already show this influence of stress-accent at the cost of length. In the anonymous Ambrosian hymn “*Conditor alme siderum*” we have such lines as *Christe redemptor omnium*. Lines such as *Caelorum pulset intimum*, *Ad laudem nominis tui*, show the weakening of final m, even before a consonant. St. Isidore of Seville († 636), in spite of his affection for strictly classical metre, is obliged to recognize that, in his time, “rhythm is not formed by unchanging rule, but runs in feet ordered reasonably.”¹ St. Bede († 735) knows and describes the two kinds of rhythm accurately. He quotes the hymn, “*Rex sempiternae Domine*,” as an example of rhythm by accent.²

These two influences of popular Latin, stress-accent and hiatus, become more and more powerful, till in the later Middle Ages hymns are written entirely by accent. St. Thomas Aquinas’s hymns, for instance “*Sacris solemnibus*,” have a purely accentuated rhythm. With the growth of accent instead of quantity comes such further popular ornaments as assonance, end-rime, and alliteration.

It is said that St. Ambrose’s iambic dimeters are taken from the Saturnian verse, being its first half, with completion of the last foot.³ It was some time before the Church admitted any other kind of rhythm. Prudentius wrote other metres (“*Corde natus*” is trochaic tetrameter catalectic); but of his hymns only the iambics (“*Ales diei nuntius*,” “*Nox et tenebrae et nubila*”) were used at first. Then other metres gained their place. Paul the Deacon’s hymn, “*Vt queant laxis*,” is the first example of the

¹ *Etymologiae*, i, 39 (M.P.L., lxxxii, 118).

² *De Arte metrica*, 24 (M.P.L., xc, 173).

³ The second part of the Saturnian line would give trochaic three-foot lines (“*Aue maris stella*”) and also (hypercatalectic) the trochaic tetrameter (“*Pange lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis*”). The old Latin Saturnian line consists of an iambic dimeter catalectic, followed by three trochees: $\cup - \cup - \cup - \cup | - \cup - \cup - \cup$.

beautiful Sapphic measure. Trochaic and asclepiad ("Te Ioseph celebrent agmina caelitum") poems were admitted. Hexameter is represented by "Alma Redemptoris mater," elegiac by "Gloria laus et honor."

It is to be noticed that most of the tunes to which we now sing the hymns take no notice of the metre at all. There is not a trace of hexameter rhythm in the tune of "Alma Redemptoris mater," nor of elegiac in that of "Gloria laus et honor."

Our diatonic plainsong hymn tunes are certainly not as old as St. Ambrose. To see the kind of melody to which he taught his people to sing his hymns we must look rather to late classical Greek examples, as far as we can now understand them.¹

XII. THE REFORM OF URBAN VIII

¶ In the seventeenth century came the crushing blow which destroyed the beauty of all Breviary hymns. Pope Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini, 1623-1644) was a Humanist. In a fatal moment he saw that the hymns do not all conform to the rules of classical prosody. Attempts to reform them had been made before, but so far they had been spared. Urban VIII was destined to succeed in destroying them. He appointed four Jesuits to reform the hymns, so that they should no longer offend Renaissance ears. The four Jesuits were Famiano Strada, Tarquinio Galluzzi, Mathias Sarbiewski, Girolamo Petrucci. These four, in that faithful obedience to the Holy See which is the glory of their Society, with a patient care that one cannot help admiring, set to work to destroy every hymn in the office. They had no concept of the fact that many

¹ For example, the tune of the hymn to the Muse Calliope by Dionysios of Halikarnassos (about 29 B.C.), transcribed by J. Westphal: *Elemente des musikalischen Rhythmus* (Jena, 1872), p. xviii. He puts it in triple time, exactly observing the iambic measure (♩ ♪). As Westphal writes it, it would pass for our third mode (mi-do). For St. Ambrose's tunes see G. M. Dreves: *Aurelius Ambrosius* (Maria-Laacher Ergänzungsheft, 58, Freiburg, Herder).

of these hymns were written in metre by accent; their lack of understanding those venerable types of Christian poetry is astounding. They could conceive no ideal but that of a school grammar of Augustan Latin. Wherever a line was not as Horace would have written it, it had to go. The period was hopelessly bad for any poetry; these pious Jesuits were true children of their time. So they embarked on that fatal reform whose effect was the ruin of our hymns. They slashed and tinkered, they re-wrote lines and altered words, they changed the sense and finally produced the poor imitations that we still have, in the place of the hymns our fathers sang for over a thousand years. Indeed their confidence in themselves is amazing. They were not ashamed to lay their hands on Sedulius, on Prudentius, on St. Ambrose himself. Only in one or two cases does some sense of shame seem to have stopped their nefarious work. They left "Aue maris stella," "Iam lucis orto sidere," and St. Thomas Aquinas's hymns alone (they would have made pretty work of "Sacris solemniis"). In 1629 their mangled remnants were published. We still await the day when the Bull of publication will be revoked. But not everyone suffers from this textus emendatus of the hymns. The Benedictines, Carthusians, Dominicans, the Vatican and Lateran Basilicas, still use the old forms. When the new Vatican books were announced, the first thing for which everyone hoped was that we should be allowed again to sing the hymns as they were written by their authors. No one who knows anything about the subject now doubts that that revision of Urban VIII was a ghastly mistake, for which there is not one single word of any kind to be said. Now all the points which shocked him, as not being classical, are known and established as perfectly legitimate examples of recognized laws. It was as foolish a mistake to judge poetry of the fourth and following centuries by the rules of the Augustan age, as it would be to try to tinker prose written in one language, to make it conform with the grammar of another. There are cases where

these seventeenth-century Jesuits did not even know the rules of their own grammar books. In “*Conditor alme siderum*” they changed lines which are perfectly correct by quantity.

The Vatican Gradual cheered our hearts by restoring the authentic form of the hymns therein. But there are very few hymns in the Gradual. We looked forward to the continuation of the same work, where it was so much more needed, in the Vespers, and then in the new Breviary. Alas, the movement, for the present, has stopped. The new Vespers and then the Breviary contain Urban VIII’s versions. So at present we have the odd situation that in the Gradual the old form of the hymns is restored; but when the same hymn (for instance “*Vexilla regis*”) comes again in the Vespers, we must sing the seventeenth-century mangling.

This can only be a temporary state of things. If ever we are to have a final Breviary, as the result of so much change in our time, the very first improvement, more urgent than a restoration of the Vulgate text, is that we have back the authentic hymns.

XIII. OTHER LATIN HYMNS

¶ The hymns of our present Roman Breviary are by no means the only ones we may know and sing. They have, no doubt, a certain precedence; they are naturally the best known, since every priest has to say them constantly. It is true also that among the Breviary hymns are very splendid ones. Even in their present desolate state many of them are still fragrant with the memory of the early Church and Middle Ages. Yet the Breviary hymns are not always the best out of the enormous number that exist. The Solesmes monks have done good service by publishing collections of old proses and hymns under various titles: “*Varii preces*,” “*Varii cantus*,” etc., and by adding a selection at the end of their editions of the *Liber Vsualis*, that they may be sung at Benediction,

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processions, devotions. Some of these hymns ("Adoro te deuote," "Aue uerum," "Inuiolata," "O filii et filiae") have never been forgotten by our people. Some ("Puer natus in Bethlehem," "Laetabundus," "O panis dulcissime") are coming back through the Solesmes editions.

There is room for more. There is room especially for translations of old hymns. In nothing are English Catholics so poor as in vernacular hymns. The real badness of most of our popular hymns, endeared, unfortunately, to the people by association, surpasses anything that could otherwise be imagined. When our people have the courage to break resolutely with a bad tradition, there are unworked mines of religious poetry in the old hymns that we can use in translations. If we do, there will be an end of the present odd anomaly, that, whereas our liturgical hymns are the finest in the world, our popular ones are easily the worst.

When we produce another poet like Prudentius it will be time to think of having new hymns. Till then, why not use the enormous riches we already have? Let us hope that Mr. McDougall's little collection, with his excellent translations, will be a step towards better Catholic hymns in English.

ADRIAN FORTESCUE

LADY DAY, 1916.

*Ein uerbum bonum et suaue
sand dir got, das beisset aue,
zehande wert du gotz conclaue,
muter, magd et filia.*

*Da mitte wurdest salutata,
vom helgen geiste fecundata,
von herr davitz stammen nata,
on dorne sind din lilia.*