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17 September 1996

### "L'AVVOCATO DE' TEMPI CRISTIANI" (*Par.* 10.118-120): AMBROSE OF MILAN RECONSIDERED

The two garlands of representations of wisdom in the Heaven of the Sun (*Par.* 10 and 12) raise many questions concerning Dante's choice and grouping of these persons, but not regarding their historical identity, which in most cases is self-evident or has been firmly established by Dante's commentators. The only exception remains the eighth soul of the first group:

Ne l'altra piccioletta luce ride quello avvocato de' tempi cristiani del cui  
latino Augustin si provide.

Paulus Orosius, adduced first by the *Ottimo commento* (1331/32-1334), is the author today most often accepted to identify this person {P. Toynbee, *Dante Studies and Researches* (London, 1912), 121-136; C. Riessner, "*Paradiso X*, 118-120: 'quello avvocato de' tempi cristiani': Orosius oder Lactantius?", *DDJb* 47 (1972), 58-76; A. Martina, "Orosio," *ED* 4 (1973), 204-208}. With his *Historiae adversus paganos*, Orosius in fact would qualify perfectly as an "avvocato de' tempi cristiani," because it was his objective to defend the "tempora christiana" against the pagan view that Christian religion and the abandonment of pagan idolatry had initiated an era of historical calamities and general decline {*CSEL* 5, 1ss., 563s.}. Dante was well acquainted with this work and had not only used it often as a source for historical materials, but had also cited Orosius along with Livy, Pliny and Frontinus as outstanding Latin authors "qui usi sunt altissimas prosas" {*DVE* 2.6.7}. The prologue and *explicit* of the *Historiae*, where Orosius dedicates his work to Augustine and states that he wrote it "secundum praeceptum tuum," as a sort of supplement to the first ten books of Augustine's still on-going work, *De civitate Dei*, would also account for the verse "del cui latino Augustin si provide," especially since Augustine himself also expressed his esteem for Orosius and accepted his assistance in several other matters {Augustine, *Epist.* 166.1, *CSEL* 44, 547s.; *Epist.* 169.13, *CSEL* 44, 621; *Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas*, *PL* 42, 669-678; Orosius, *Liber apologeticus*, *CSEL* 5, 603-664}. Taken together with the evidence adduced by Riessner from medieval sources {Riessner 1972, 72-74}, where Orosius was said to have written his *Historiae* "petente vel iubente Augustino" (Vincent of Beauvais), "ex precepto beati Augustini" (Salimbene de Adam), everything points to Orosius, unless it can be proven that another candidate would fit Dante's description even better.

Most other figures who have been proposed are clearly less promising, because they lack either an appropriate relation to Augustine (Tertullian, Lactantius) or a fame for being an "avvocato de' tempi cristiani" (Valerius of Hippo, G. M. Victorinus, Paulinus of Nola). But as a case worthy of being reconsidered there remains Ambrose, first proposed by Jacopo della Lana (1324-28) and then adduced or even preferred as an alternative to Orosius by most early commentators. In modern times, this identification was never seriously examined or defended, except by Antonio Cimmino, but his

pleadings may have been too passionate to be convincing {A. Cimmino, *S. Ambrogio e Dante* (Napoli, 1896 [2a ed. 1902]); "Ancora S. Ambrogio e Dante," *GD* 19 (1911), 131-134; "S. Ambrogio celebrato nel *Paradiso* di Dante," *Scuola cattolica*, an. 40, ser. 4a, vol. 24 (1912), 235-241 }.

a) "Ne l'altra piccioletta luce ride:" Modern commentators usually discard Ambrose, because the phrasing "piccioletta luce" seems to point to a minor author and would appear deprecating if applied to one of the greatest fathers of the Church. Against this view Cimmino has argued that the phrasing "l'altra piccioletta luce" indicates 'smallness' of the luminous appearance not as a distinctive feature of this special saint, but as a common feature of all the souls, and that Dante might have stressed it especially in Ambrose to indicate a special degree of humility in this saint. This latter intuition in fact finds a possible confirmation in the *Legenda aurea*, where among other etymologies of the name *Ambrosius* we read: "dicitur ab ambor, quod est pater luminis, et sior, quod est parvulus: quia pater in multorum filiorum spirituali generatione, lumen in sacrae scripturae expositione et parvulus in sua humili conversatione" {ed. Th. Graesse (Regensburg, 1890), 250}. Since Dante in the very same episode, in his eulogies on saint Francis and Dominic, more than once demonstrates explicitly how proper names reveal significant spiritual properties of their bearers {*Par.* 11.52ss.; 12.67ss., 12.79ss.}, it seems not unlikely that in his presentation of Ambrose he could have used "piccioletta luce" as almost an equivalent of the name *Ambrosius* to characterize this saint as "*luminosus* in sacrae scripturae expositione et *parvulus* in sua humili conversatione." The common understanding of the verse remains a possibility, but should no longer be regarded as a conclusive argument against Ambrose.

b) "quello avvocato de' tempi cristiani:" instead of "tempi cristiani," the majority of manuscripts offer the reading "templi cristiani" {G. Petrocchi (ed.), *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, vol. 4 (Milano, 1967), 168}. This reading, if authentic, would settle the question in favour of Ambrose, as an obvious allusion to the conflict with Valentian and his mother, where Ambrose refused the imperial command to give over one of his two Milanese churches to the Arians {*Epist.* 76 [Maur. 20]: *De traditione basilicae*, *CSEL* 82.3, 108-125}. His famous denial, "templum Dei tradi non posse," had found its way into *Decretum Gratiani* and from there into the *Legenda aurea*, according to which Ambrose, giving an outstanding example "intuitione ecclesiae libertatis," explained his refusal with the words: "Si de me aliquid compellaretur aut posceretur, fundus aut domus aut aurum aut argentum, id quod juris mei esset, libenter offerem, *templo Dei* nihil possum decerpere nec detrahare, cum illud custodiendum, non decerpendum acceperim" {ed. Graesse, 256s.; cf. *Epist.* 76, n.2 and n.8, *CSEL* 82.3, 109 and 120}. But without being aware, as it seems, of this intertextual parallel, most modern editors have rejected "templi" as a *lectio facilio*r and presumed a scribal correction of "tempi," because the latter can be understood as a plural either of "tempo" or of "tempio" {cf. *Cv* 4.13.12, ed. F. Brambilla Agno (Firenze, 1995), 346}, and thus might have led early redactors to clarify the form to make it more obviously in agreement with the biography of Ambrose. This seems possible, but it is not supported by the chronology of the early glosses: the first commentator to refer "templi" in explicit form to the 'templa Christianorum' of Milan seems to have been Serravalle (1416/17), if he is not drawing on the unpublished second redaction of Benvenuto da Imola's commentary (1375/76), whereas the manuscripts of the *Commedia* attest the reading "templi" at least since 1335 {MS *Ash.*, cf. Petrocchi, *l.c.*}.

On the other hand, even if the reading "tempi" should be preferred, the possibility of understanding it as a plural of "tempio" would still allow one to interpret it as referring to Ambrose as defender of the churches of Milan. And even if understood as a plural of "tempo," the word would not be without a possible point of reference. In *De doctrina christiana*, a work cited by Dante in *Monarchia* (3.4.8-9), Augustine praises Ambrose as the one who, against claims that Jesus had drawn his doctrine from Platonic sources, had offered historical proof that, on the contrary, all the "vera et bona" in Plato's philosophy had been derived from the Old Testament, when Plato dwelled in Egypt and had a chance to learn these "vera et bona" from Jeremiah {2.28.43, *CCSL* 32, 63; cf. *Epist.* 31.8, *CSEL* 43.2, 7-8}. It is true that this passage presents Ambrose as defending Christian doctrine rather than Christian 'times' against claims of ancient pagan superiority, but the historical and chronological character of his argument might very well have suggested an understanding as expressed in Dante's verse.

c) "del cui latino Augustin si provide," if understood in the sense "whose discourse/writings Augustine used for his own betterment," would match with the decisive role that Ambrose had played, with his preaching and teaching, and also with his hymns, in the history of Augustine's conversion, as acknowledged in the *Confessiones*, where Augustine describes Ambrose as an eloquent preacher and 'adsertor' of true faith, whose preaching had led him from incertitude and Manichean error to acceptance of Catholic truth {*Conf.* 5.13-14; 6.3-5; 9.5-7; cf. Possidius, *Vita Augustini*, *PL* 32, 35}. With regard to Ambrose's eloquence, one could cite in addition a eulogy describing him as "qui scriptorum inter Latinos flos quidam speciosus enituit," quoted by Augustine as words of Pelagius and adduced by the *Legenda aurea* as an Augustinian appraisal of the "elegans venustas" of Ambrose's style {ed. Graesse (1890), 258; cf. *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 1.40, *CSEL* 42, 252}.

The evidence adduced here in favor of Ambrose is not conclusive, but may show that there is no necessary contradiction between Dante's verses and the personality and fame of Ambrose as described by Augustine and in medieval tradition. This is more than may be said about any other candidate except Orosius, and should suffice to establish him as a viable choice right after Orosius, even if it may still be desirable to remain on relatively safer grounds by giving preference to the latter.