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THEORY
AUGUSTINE AND POETIC EXEGESIS

H.J. Westra

When one thinks of Augustine in connection with poetry and literary aesthetics, certain topics immediately come to mind, such as his attitudes towards classical literature and rhetoric, as well as their implications for Christian teaching, especially in the De doctrina christiana. In fact, these well-known topics have become commonplaces of Augustinian scholarship.¹

The situation is entirely different for a relatively little explored and problematic subject, namely Augustine’s attitude towards the Christian poetry of his own times as practiced by authors such as Paulinus of Nola and Prudentius. Augustine does seem impressed by the liturgical poetry of Ambrose, in particular his evening hymn Deus creator omnium to which he refers several times in the Confessions (e.g. 9.12.32; 10.35.52; 11.27.35). Non-liturgical poetry fares very differently. Prudentius’ hymns are unlikely to have been intended for the liturgy. Instead, the Cathemerinon probably represents the birth of Christian lyric poetry as a literary genre, intended to be read rather than performed. Even the more Ambrosian first and second hymns of the Cathemerinon were too long and complex for inclusion in the liturgy in toto. Yet Prudentius’ innovation passed without comment. As things stand now, there is, to my knowledge, no substantive comment on non-liturgical poetry as practiced by his contemporaries in Augustine’s writings. Could this possibly be due to the accident of transmission? Augustine was in contact with

¹ This is a revised version of an article by the same title in Hugo Meynell (ed), Grace, Politics and Desire: Essays on Augustine, Calgary 1990, 87–102, noted in the review by P. Horban in Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review 33 (1994) 544–549. The argument about Augustine and Christian poetry remains the same.