Augustine’s Three Visions and Three Heavens in Some Early Medieval Florilegia

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When, according to an eighth century pseudoaugustinanian text, Orosius wanted to persuade St. Augustine to elucidate some particularly knotty questions on the scriptures, he explained for his master and for his readers the very essence of the value of florilegia to his society. “It is the case that many very pious men, unlike in style but not unlike in faith, have published innumerable little works, such that it is difficult to read them all; and they which are read are little understood on account of the beauty of their eloquence and very difficult intricacies of the questions.”

This, surely, is a classic statement on the educational exigency which prompted a genre which flourished so robustly in the middle ages. Yet the underlying motivation for the production of florilegial works can only be explained partly in terms of providing a “clarification” of the difficult writings of the ancients. Florilegia were compiled for various reasons which

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are not always obvious. Indeed caution is needed even if, or perhaps especially if, an overtly ingenuous explanation for composition is provided by the author of the text. Many florilegia, and this is the case with the pseudoaugustinian Dialogus quaestionum LXV which was quoted above, comprised a selection of readings which related to circumstances other than those indicated by the work. The Dialogus quaestionum LXV was supposedly a dialogue between Augustine and Orosius that was intended to provide clear answers to difficult questions raised in the writings of the ancients. In fact, the work was fashioned from excerpts primarily from Augustine’s work and the question and response form of the text was rapidly transformed into a biblical commentary. The true purpose of the work, however, was to contribute scriptural and patristic authority to a particular side of a late eighth century Christological dispute.

This particular florilegist showed remarkable skill in fashioning a work which operated on a diversity of levels. His composition is an important indicator that the florilegist’s craft, which is often deemed to be an inferior literary endeavour, is not the artistically or intellectually sterile process of cut and paste that it can often seem. Nor is the finished product necessarily a misshapen monster pieced together from borrowed literary corpses. In the hands of a skilled florilegist, or even the not so skilled, the excerpted texts came to the attention of new audiences who read new meaning into them.

In order to fully appreciate the contribution that this type of literature made to the early medieval understanding of patristic texts, it is necessary to move beyond studies which focus on the “vertical” relationship between the pseudonymous text and the original source text, and strive towards a “horizontal” investigation across a wide spectrum of early medieval florilegia. That is to say, it would be useful to be in a position to trace how these texts related to one another to create a literary culture of their own. It is the kind of study, however, which is not easily accomplished. Many florilegia have not survived (although pseudonymous attributions to Church Fathers must have improved survival rate) and they are often difficult to date with any accuracy. Any study which attempts to survey these little studied texts must begin by investigating the date and origin of the work under review. Even then it may not be possible to recreate accurately the transmission of ideas through surviving texts, or be certain of the contexts in which they were first (or secondly) discussed. Any discussion of the florilegist’s art must be framed by these and many other limitations. Nevertheless, there are cases where groups of such texts survive whose relationship to each other are more securely known.