

# ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

**VOL. XXXVIII**

HELSINKI 2004

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**THE REALISTIC AND THE SUPERNATURAL ORDER OF  
THE WORLD PRESENTED IN PRUDENTIUS'  
*PERISTEPHANON***

STANISLAW STABRYLA

The question of realism in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* has not been given much scholarly attention hitherto.<sup>1</sup> But even a superficial reading of this cycle of poetry shows that, alongside the realistic components, the world portrayed in it comprises a series of motifs which could be termed "*miracula*" – supernatural or miraculous. The "*miracula*" in the structure of the cycle's individual parts seem to be a typical element of early Christian hagiography on the one hand, but on the other an expression of the poet's belief that the martyrdom of many of these champions of Christ was attended by extraordinary phenomena.<sup>2</sup> The poetic world of the *Peristephanon* is composed both of realistic constituents corresponding to phenomena in the real world, and of ones which are part of the supernatural order. Let us examine a few examples to reach some general conclusions on the matter.

In *Perist.* I (*Hymnus in honorem sanctorum martyrum Emeteri et Chelidoni*) the death of the two Spanish soldier martyrs is preceded by an extraordinary phenomenon, still memorable despite the lapse of time ("*Illa laus occulta non est nec senescit tempore*", v. 82). Suddenly two gifts (*munera*) belonging to the martyrs, a ring and a scarf, rise up into the sky, pointing the way to heaven (*viam coeli*):

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs. The Liber Peristephanon*, Ann Arbor 1993, makes only a short mention of it on the page 105. A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, *passim*, discusses this problem at some length, cf. below.

<sup>2</sup> The relation of the early Christianity, and particularly of such authors as Tertullianus, St. Hieronymus and St. Augustine to the problem of miracles is treated by Palmer (above n. 1) 32–56 (ch. *Curiositas and Credulity*).

*Illius fidem figurans nube fertur anulus,  
hic sui dat pignus oris ut ferunt orarium,  
quae superno rapta flatu lucis intrant intimum.*

*Per poli liquentis axem fulgor auri absconditur  
ac diu visum sequacem textilis candor fugit.  
subvehuntur usque in astra nec videntur amplius.<sup>3</sup>  
(Perist. I 85–90)*

This miraculous occurrence is witnessed by the assembled crowd (*conventus adstans*)<sup>4</sup> and the torturer, who slays the martyrs, but is so strongly affected by the unusual event that he appears to be possessed.

In the poem's structure the miracle preceding the death of the two martyrs is the only exception to the general scheme for a realistic presentation of the world. The main sequence of cause-and-effect occurrences in the story of these two soldiers from Calagurris in Spain is made up of events belonging to the natural order of human experience, such as the attempt to force the two soldiers to sacrifice to the pagan gods (v.40–50), their categorical refusal (v. 53–69), the tortures (v. 70–72) etc. The description of the possession of the torturer (v. 92–111) is also part of the natural order, although the narrator's commentary suggests that the phenomenon itself, especially its causes, have a supernatural character.

The whole of Poem II, in honour of St. Laurence, (*Passio Laurenti beatissimi martyris*), is presented in the realistic convention. This formulation of the story of the martyrdom and death of St. Laurence seems to have been influenced by the poet's main source, *De officiis ministrorum* by St. Ambrose.<sup>5</sup> According to the narrator St. Laurence's martyrdom and death, here described in the realistic mode only, inspired a profound spiritual transformation in the people of Rome, who abandoned the worship of the pagan gods and embraced Christianity. In the closing apostrophe the poem's narrator beseeches the holy martyr to free him from the enthrallment of the body and the bondage of the world:

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotations according to the edition: *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis Carmina*, ed. M.P. Cuningham, Turnholt 1966 (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina CXXVI).

<sup>4</sup> J. Petruccione, "The Persecutor's Envy and the Rise of the Martyr's Cult, 'Peristephanon' Hymn 1 and 4", *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991) 329 f. asserts that the phrases "*fertur*" and "*ut ferunt*" are an indication that the poet refers to the oral tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *De officiis ministrorum* I 41; II 26; cf. also M. Brozek, *The Introduction*, in *Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, 'Poezje'* (transl.), Warszawa 1987, 30.

*Audi benignus supplicem  
Christi reum Prudentium  
et servientem corpori  
absolve vinculis saeculi!  
(Perist. II 581–584)*

The story of Eulalia in *Peristephanon* III (*Hymnus in honorem passionis Eulaliae beatissimae martyris*)<sup>6</sup> is built up basically of realistic components<sup>7</sup>, such as the future martyr's escape from her country home (v. 25–44), her solitary journey to the town of Augusta Emerita (v. 45–63), her speech to the Roman governor (v. 64–95) and his reply, threatening her with torture and death (v. 96–125), Eulalia's refusal to offer up a sacrifice to the pagan gods and an account of the tortures (v. 126–160). However, the poem's final section brings the description of a miraculous event at the young martyr's death. A white dove flew out of the dying Eulalia's mouth, embodying her soul:

*Emicat inde columba repens  
martyris os nive candidior  
visa relinquere et astra sequi;  
spiritus hic erat Eulaliae  
lacteolus celer innocuus.  
(Perist. III 161–165)*

The narrator's commentary describes the martyr's pure soul flying up to the gates of heaven in the form of a white dove, which even the torturer can see ("templaque celsa petit volucer" *Perist.* III 170).

Another item which seems to belong to the "miracula" category in this story is the snow which covered the martyr's body like a linen shroud. Of course there is nothing unusual about the atmospheric phenomenon of snow as such, which would be absolutely natural if it were not that it appeared at

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<sup>6</sup> The detailed notices on this poem in the paper of D. P. Kubiak, "Epic and Comedy in Prudentius' Hymn to St. Eulalia", *Philologus* 142 (1998) 308–325.

<sup>7</sup> The notion of realism is not equivalent with a historicity of described events. This problem in a relation to *Peristephanon* III is discussed at some length by J. Petruccione, "The Portrait of St. Eulalia of Merida in Prudentius; *Peristephanon* 3", *Analecta Bollandiana* 107, fasc. 1–2 (1989–1990), 824. The problem of historicity and of the relation to legends in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* took up P. P. A. Sabbatini, "Storia e leggende nel 'Peristephanon' di Prudenzio", *Rivista di Studi Classici* (Torino) 29 (1972) 32–52; 87–221; *ibidem*: 31 (1973) 39–77; cf. also M. Lavarenne, *Introduction in: Prudence, Peristephanon liber*, t. IV: *Le livre d e couronne*, Paris 1951, 11.

the very moment of Eulalia's death in outcome of terrible torture, and that its occurrence was ordained by God Himself:

*Ipsa elementa iubente deo  
 exequias tibi, virgo, ferunt.  
 (Perist. III 184–185)*

In *Peristephanon V (Passio sancti Vincenti martyris)* we have a far more concerted instance of "miracula" in the structure of world portrayed than in the previous stories in the cycle. The Spanish priest Vincent, who is tortured and killed on the orders of Datianus, the Emperor Diocletian's governor, for refusing to worship the pagan gods, severely criticises the traditional state religion (v. 35–92). The realistic convention is used to relate the next part of Vincent's dialogue with the governor, interrupted with descriptions of the tortures the persecutor uses against the intransigent priest (v. 95–208), and an account of the rest of his sufferings before he dies (209–268). But the next section of the narrative contains a relation of the miraculous occurrence which takes place while Vincent was in prison, where he is subjected to the most severe torture (v. 269–270). Suddenly an extraordinary light fills the dark dungeon and the fetters on Vincent's legs split open, while his bed of hard shells is suddenly covered with a layer of soft flowers (v. 277–279). Finally a choir of angels appears, the comeliest of whom announces to Vincent that his tribulations will soon come to an end, that he will die a victorious death and be rewarded in heaven, exhorting him to free himself of the shackles of the body and join them in heaven (v. 285–304).

In Prudentius' presentation the miracle which happens in the martyr's cell is not merely a hallucination or a mystical vision, but a real fact, authenticated by the prison-warder's reaction on seeing the extraordinary event:

*Hoc cum stuperet territus  
 obsessor atri liminis  
 quem cura pernox manserat  
 servare feralem domum,*

*psallentis audit insuper  
 praedulce carmen martyris  
 cui vocis instar aemulae  
 conclave reddit concavum,*

.....

*Vernare multis floribus  
stramenta testarum videt  
ipsumque vulsis nexibus  
obambulantem pangere.*  
(*Perist.* V 309–316;321–324)

Datianus, Vincent's persecutor, too, treats this miracle as something that really happened, as something that belongs to the real world, though not at all auspicious for him:

*Inplentur aures turbidi  
praetoris hoc miraculo,  
flet victus et voluit gemens  
iram dolorem dedecus.*  
(*Perist.* V 325–328)

The next "*miraculum*" associated with Vincent is the warder's sudden conversion in outcome of the powerful impression the first miracle makes on him (*Perist.* 345–352). Another unusual phenomenon, counter to the ordinary laws of nature, is the fact that the martyr's body, which the praetor has ordered to be thrown out into the rushes along the riverbank, is not devoured by birds and predator animals. It is guarded by a crow (*corvus*) which flaps its wings to chase away approaching predators (v. 393–420).

The sequence of miracles making up the ancient legend of St. Vincent concludes with the story of the unsuccessful attempt to sink the martyr's body in the sea.<sup>8</sup> To the amazement of the sailors who were convinced that Vincent's body would submerge as soon as it was cast into the water out at sea, it is kept afloat and reaches the shore faster than their boat, where it finds a temporary sanctuary (v. 485–508).

By the incorporation into the story of St. Vincent's martyrdom of a series of episodes clearly transcending the bounds of reality as known to human experience, Prudentius seems to be trying to build up an aura of the miraculous surrounding the events associated with this martyrdom. In outcome we get a decisive predominance of "*miracula*" over "*facta*". The story of St. Vincent marks the maximum as regards presence of the miraculous in the component parts of the *Peristephanon* cycle, while the "*facta*" are merely a framework.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. S. Stabryla, "Death for Christ as Victory in the Light of Prudentius' *Peristephanon*", *Analecta Cracoviensia* 32 (2001) 679.

In the subsequent poems of the cycle supernatural motifs diminish quite visibly in favour of the historical material. This does not mean that the mode of presentation is exclusively realistic. Here are a few examples of further miracles.

The whole of the *Hymnus in honorem beatissimorum martyrum Fructuosi episcopi Augurii et Eulogii* (*Perist.* VI) is in the realistic convention, and neither the story's background nor its historical details, concerning the Spanish martyrs of Tarraco sentenced to death in 259, raise any doubts. Their agreement with the historical facts is confirmed by the *Acta Martyrum*.<sup>9</sup> In the hymn in honour of Fructuosus there are a few episodes which cannot be rated as belonging to the realistic convention.<sup>10</sup> The first (v. 91–99) is the appearance of a spirit from heaven ("*resultat / caelo spiritus*"), who delivers a speech in which he shows that only the souls of the blessed can endure the test of martyrdom, thereby finding their way to God.

*Non est, credite, poena, quam videtis,  
quae puncto tenui citata transit,  
nec vitam rapit illa sed reformat.*

*Felices animae quibus per ignem  
celsa scandere contigit Tonantis  
quas olim fugiet perennis ignis !  
(Perist. VI 94–99)*

The ensuing scene, in which the martyrs are burned at the stake in by their persecutors, might be ascribed to the realistic mode of presentation of an execution scene, if it were not for the description of their souls' miraculous liberation from bondage.

*Nexus denique qui manus retrorsus  
in tergum revocaverant revinctas  
intacta cute decidunt adusti.*

*Non ausa est cohibere palmas  
in morem crucis ad patrem levandas,*

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford 1972, no. XXXII.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Acts of Martyrs* (no. XXXII 5–7, ed. H. Musurillo) there are descriptions of other miracles connected with the martyrdom of St. Fructuosus and his companions. Palmer (above n. 1) 208 analysed them ; a detailed comparison of the miracles in *Acta Martyrum* and in the *Peristephanon* cf. pp. 220–221.



*solvit brachia quae deum precentur.*  
(*Perist.* VI 103–108)

There are more miraculous events following the death of Fructuosus and his companions. The guard in the prefect's palace sees the gates of heaven wide open and the souls of the martyrs flying straight up to heaven.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the prefect, his daughter witnesses the same scene:

*Vidit praesidis ex domo satelles*  
*caelum martyribus patere apertum*  
*insignes viros per astra ferri.*  
.....  
*Haec tunc virginitas palam videre*  
*per sudum meruit parenre caeco,*  
*ut crimen domini domus timeret.*  
(*Perist.* VI 121–123;127–129)

When, after the martyrs' bodies have been burned, the faithful collect up their ashes and bones to take home and keep them as holy relics, three figures in snow-white robes – no doubt angels – appear and instruct them to put all the remains into a marble urn and inter them together ("*mandant restitui cavoque claudi / mixtim marmore...*" v.140 f. ).

In Prudentius' poem the miraculous events accompanying the martyrdom and death of Bishop Fructuosus and his two deacons provide a justification of their later apotheosis, and forecast the special care which the Spanish martyrs will bestow on Tarraco, their earthly home. In the conclusion of this poem the narrator expresses his hope that the martyrs will also extend their protection to him at the Last Judgement, just as they protect Tarraco, and save him from punishment on account of his poetry:

*Fors dignabitur et meis medellam*  
*tormentis dare prosperante Christo*  
*dulces hendecasyllabos revolvens.*  
(*Perist.* VI 160–162)

The next work in the *Peristephanon* cycle, the hymn in honour of Quirinus (*Hymnus in honorem Quirini beatissimi martyris ecclesiae Siscinianaе*, *Perist.* VII), is built up on the account of the miracle which occurred during the martyrdom of St. Quirinus, Bishop of Siscia (Illyria), in 310, during the persecution of the Christians under the Emperor Galerius.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Roberts (above n. 1) 73.

Essentially the relation of the event itself is maintained in the realistic convention, and consists of the following episodes: the Bishop and Martyr is thrown into the river from the bridge, with a millstone round his neck (v. 21–30); crowds of faithful Christians gather on the banks (v.31–35); Quirinus is miraculously kept afloat, despite the millstone, and preaches on the subject of death to his flock (v. 36–45); the continuation of the description of the miracle (v. 46–50); and the Bishop's prayer for death by drowning in the river (v. 51–85).

In Prudentius' presentation, the miracle which precedes Quirinus' death consists in the martyr's keeping afloat despite the millstone round his neck. This event runs counter to the laws of physics, but it is a sign of the power of God, who can suspend the natural laws, as shown later in the example of St. Peter walking on water (*Perist.* VII 61–70).<sup>12</sup> Quirinus' prayer is in praise of God's extraordinary power, which has wrought the miracle:

*Haec miracula sunt tuae  
virtutis, domine, ut modo  
suspendor leve praenatans  
summo gurgite fluminis,  
cum collo scopulum traham.*

*Iam plenus titulus tui est  
et vis prodita nominis  
gentilis habet stupor.  
(Perist. VII 71–78)*

Quirinus' prayer for death is answered: God withdraws the supernatural power which has enabled him to keep up on the water:

*Orantem simul habitus  
et vox deserit et calor  
scandit spiritus ardua  
fit pondus grave saxeam  
corpus suscipiunt aquae.  
(Perist. VII 86–90)*

In the highly dramatic poem in honour of St. Romanus (*Romanus, Perist.* X), the historical facts are integrally combined with the legend of the martyrdom of this deacon from Caesarea, put to death in Antioch during the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mt 14,29 f.

wave of persecution under Galerius (303–311). This martyr was especially venerated in Spain.<sup>13</sup> While he is being tortured Romanus, who has voluntarily submitted himself for martyrdom out of love for Christ and his fellow Christians, experiences a singular instance of the power of God. When he has been put on the stake a huge downpour of rain extinguishes the fire, as if at the martyr's behest:

*Et iam retortis bracchiis furca eminus  
Romanus actus ingerebatur rogo.  
"Scio" – inquit ille – "non futurum ut concremer,  
nec passionis hoc genus datum est mihi,  
et restat ingens, quod fiat miraculum".*

*Haec eius orsa sequitur immensus fragor  
nubis ruentis, nimbus undatim nigro  
praeceps aquarum flumine ignes obruit.  
Alunt olivo semiconbustas faces,  
sed vincit imber iam medentem fomitem.  
(Perist. X 851–860)*

Romanus' premonition does not fail him: he is to die by another kind of death ("*nec passionis / hoc genus datum est mihi*", v.854), and is fully aware that only a great miracle ("*ingens miraculum*") can save him from the stake. And indeed, at that very moment clouds appear and the rain sets his persecutors' plans to naught. But what is a great miracle of God for the Christians and most of all for Romanus himself, confirms his persecutors in the belief that he is a magician ("*magus*") applying Thessalian charms ("*Thessalorum carmine*") to escape punishment.

While the "*miraculum*" described in v.851–860 may be regarded as a fortuitous atmospheric event which frustrates Romanus' execution at the stake, the martyr's ability to continue speaking after the removal of his tongue (v. 891 ff.) is presented by the narrator as an outright miracle.<sup>14</sup> The horrifically maimed Romanus addresses his persecutor Asclepiades, telling him that his ability to speak despite the loss of his tongue is one of the innumerable signs of the power of the Creator, who is capable of suspending or amending the laws of nature which He Himself has established.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Brozek (above n. 5) 31

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Palmer (above n.1) 246.

*Habet usitatum munus hoc divinitas,  
 quae vera nobis colitur in Christo et patre,  
 mutis loquellam, percitum claudis gradum,  
 surdis fruendam reddere audientiam,  
 donare caecis lucis insuetae diem.*

*Haec si quis amens fabulosa existimat,  
 vel ipse tute si parum fidelia  
 reddere pridem, vera cognoscas licet.  
 Habes loquentem cuius amputaveras  
 linguam. Probatus cede iam miraculis.  
 (Perist. X 951–960)*

Standing before the astonished Asclepiades, Romanus accounts for his ability to speak though tongueless as a miraculous proof of God's power, before which his persecutor should humble himself.<sup>15</sup> The testimony of Ariston, the physician who performed the amputation, leaves no doubt that a real miracle is involved:

*Sciat hic quis illi verba sigillet deus.  
 Ego unde mutus sit disertus nescio.  
 (Perist. X 999–1000)*

A patent departure from the realistic convention comes in the eschatological passage in *Passio Agnes* (Perist. XIV 91–123). After the death of the martyr Agnes, her spirit is liberated from the shackles of the body and rises high above the earth. Accompanied by angels, she looks down on a world full of pride, envy, crime, paganism, and all sorts of evil. A special place in this description is accorded a scene where Agnes' spirit vanquishes a devil which has assumed the form of a fiery-plumed dragon. This eschatological section closes with a brief description of God decorating the virgin martyr with two garlands, as a reward for her chastity and for the sacrifice of martyrdom (v. 119–123).

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I shall close this outline of the two orders of the world portrayed in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* with some general remarks. The conclusion

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Kah, "Die Welt der Römer mit der Seele suchend..." *Die Religiosität des Prudentius im Spannungsfeld zwischen 'pietas christiana' und 'pietas Romana'*, Bonn 1990, 246.

which may be drawn is that the poetic world in this cycle is built up of realistic components alongside elements of the "miraculous", whereby the intensity of the latter type varies in the particular poems belonging to the cycle. The composition of the world presented by Prudentius in these poems through an amalgamation of the realistic and the supernatural was undoubtedly the realisation of one of his chief aims – to depict the martyrdom of these champions of Christ as extraordinary events transcending the bounds of ordinary human experience. The martyrs, who gave up their lives for Christ willingly and in full awareness, joyfully suffering terrible tortures, were especially beloved by God. They were his chosen ones, who by their suffering found a way to Him, and therefore deserve not only their ultimate reward, but also the distinction given them by God while they were still on earth. The "*miracula*" attending their suffering and death were signs through which God expressed His approval for their attitude, conduct, words, and death. They were signs in a double sense; on the one hand they confirmed the martyrs in their faith and conviction that they had made the right choice, while on the other hand they offered both the Christians and their persecutors proof of God's power, superior even to the laws of nature. Two orders coexist in the poetic world of the *Peristephanon*: the realistic order which is concordant with the categories of human experience; and the supernatural order beyond the senses, which is a sign of God's omnipotence. In the *Peristephanon* the two orders, the "*facta*" and the "*miracula*", continually overlap and intermingle with one another, giving rise to the idiosyncratic spiritual climate of these poems.

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