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Poetry Praising Poetry: An Examination of Alcuin's Better-Known Poems

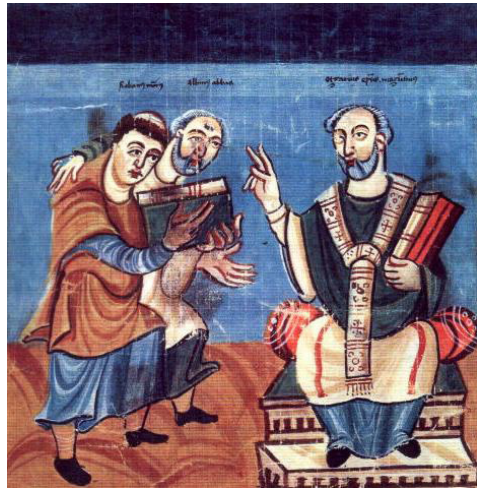
Poetry Praising Poetry: An Examination of Alcuin's Better-Known Poems

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Alcuin, the 8th century monk, scholar, and advisor to Charlemagne, receives most of his renown from his theological and political essays, as well as from his many surviving letters. During his lifetime he also produced many works of poetry, leaving behind a rich and diverse poetic collection. Carmina 32, 59 and 61 are considered the more famous poems in Alcuin's collection as they feature all the themes and poetic devices most prominent throughout the poet's works. While Carmina 32 and 59 address young students of Alcuin and Carmen 61 addresses a nightingale, all three poems are celebrations of poetry as both a written and spoken medium. This exaltation of poetry accompanies features typical of Alcuin's other works: the theme of losing touch with a student, the use of classical – especially Virgilian – reference, and an elevation of his message into the Christian world. Alcuin's ability to employ these poetic devices, which only really exist in the poetic sphere, to make powerful state-



Manuscript drawing of Alcuin, ca. 9th century CE.

ments within all these significant themes establishes poetry as a truly elevated medium.

Alcuin makes clear in *Carmina* 32, 59 and 61 his belief in the power of poetry, in praising poetry as song and focusing on the aural power of words. At the beginning of *Carmen* 32 Alcuin writes, *Te cupiens apel – peregrinis – lare camenis* ("Desiring to strike you – abroad – with songs").¹ Above all things Alcuin's desire for his student is to embrace poetry. He plays on the double meaning of words like *camenis* and *carmina*, which mean both poem and song, to emphasize the sound of poetry. In *Carmen* 32 he writes *tua vox resonat* ("your voice resounds").² This draws attention to the aural side of poetry in bringing up the action of the voice producing sound. The act of sounding repeats in *Carmen* 59 in the line *Nunc cuculus ramis etiam resonat in altis* ("Now the cuckoo still resounds in the high branches").³ Later in this poem Alcuin writes *Qui nunc egregias regalibus insonat artes/ auribus et patrum ducit per prata sequentem* ("Which now sounds the distinguished arts into regal ears and leads the follower through the meadows of the father").⁴ The *egregias artes* are brought to the ears in sound and not to the mind or eyes through reading. The placement of the word *auribus* at the beginning of the line bolsters the importance of the ears and thus of sound. An important poetic device for Alcuin is using the sound of words to emphasize meaning. He does this in the following lines: *Suscitat et vario nostras modulamine mentes/ Indefessa satis, rutilus luscinia ruscis* ("And it stirs up our minds with varying melody/ amply unwearied, the nightingale in the golden-red broom shrubs").⁵ In the first line the string of nasal consonants plays up the melodic aspect of the sentence, while the harsh 's' and 't' sounds of the second line enforce the steadfast nature of the nightingale.

In *Carmen* 59 Alcuin mentions two different birds, *cuculus* ("cuckoo") and *luscinia* ("nightingale"), both of which produce sound. These birds appear only in the beginning

1. Alcuin. *Carmina* 32.3
"Alcuini (Albini) *Carmina*"
in *Poetae Latini aevi Carolini*, Volume 1. Ed. Ernst Dümmler (Oxford: Apud Weidmannos, 188), 160-352.
2. Alcuin *Carmina*. 32.16.
3. Alcuin *Carmina*. 59.1.
4. Alcuin *Carmina*. 59.15.
5. Alcuin *Carmina*. 59.4-5.

of this poem and are a brief introduction to Alcuin's use of birds as paradigms of aurality and song. He expands this idea in Carmen 61, which is entirely addressed to one bird, the nightingale (*luscinia*). The poem praises the nightingale and its song, allowing Alcuin to continue lauding the virtues of sound. Like in Carmen 59 the sounds of the line when read out loud emphasize meaning. In the lines *Dulce melos iterans vario modulamine Musae* ("Repeating the sweet tune with the varying melody of the Muse")⁶ and *Tu mea dulcisonis implesti pectora musis, / Atque animum moestum carmine mellifluo* ("You filled up my breast with the sweet sounding muses and my sorrowful mind with a song dripping with honey"),⁷ soft sounds are put in opposition to the harsher sounds, a way for Alcuin to describe the nightingale not only through words but also through sounds. The play between soft and harsh sounds is a device characterizing the nightingale as a strong figure that has the ability to produce soft melodies. When these two elements are combined they produce a layered character and poem.

6. Alcuin Carmina. 61.9.

7. Alcuin Carmina. 61.3-4.

As a teacher Alcuin often writes poems to his students, mainly the ones who have separated from him in some way. In Carmina 32 and 59 Alcuin laments that he has lost his students to excessive drinking of wine. Lines 1 through 22 of Carmen 32 address the student directly, while line 23 brings an abrupt shift where the poem addresses the student in the third person. This shift begins with the lines *Dormit et ipse meus Corydon, scholasticus olim, / Sopitus Bacho...* ("And my Corydon himself sleeps, once a scholar, drunk with Bacchus").⁸ This loss of direct connection to his student mimics the loss of connection Alcuin has experienced in real life with his pupil. The loss of the student is felt in the lines *Ebrius in tectis Corydon aulensibus errat / Nec memor Albini, nec memor ipse sui* ("Drunk Corydon wanders in covered halls, neither mindful of Albinus, nor he indeed mindful of himself").⁹ The student is drunk (*ebrius*) and as a result does not remember Alcuin, a great source of pain for the teacher.

8. Alcuin Carmina. 32.23-24.

9. Alcuin Carmina. 32.27-28.

10. Alcuin Carmina. 59.22-23.

Throughout his poetic collection Alcuin urges his addressees to remember him. Carmen 59 also concerns a student lost to wine, where Alcuin writes, *Ebrius initiat vobis neu vincula Bacchus,/ Mentibus inscriptas deletat neu noxius artes* ("Drunk Bacchus consecrates not with chains, not harmful erases the inscribed arts from your mind").¹⁰ Again Bacchus hinders the student, leading to a loss of an important skill, in this case the written art, something Alcuin as teacher would have helped this student to develop. This idea adds another layer to the separation between Alcuin and his student, which is silence. In Carmen 32 he writes *Nunc tua lingua tacet: cur tua lingua tacet?* ("now your tongue is silent: why is your tongue silent?").¹¹ When considered in the context of Alcuin's praise of song and sound, this separation is perhaps the most devastating. Looking at Carmina 59 and 61 the main praise of the nightingale (*luscinia*) is that she is indefatigable in her song, implying that she will not be silent.

11. Alcuin Carmina. 32.20.

12. Alcuin Carmina. 59.8.

Distance is another factor that separates Alcuin from his students. This distance is also a pain for Alcuin as distance creates silence. In Carmen 59 he writes *Atque natans ad vos pelagi trans aequora magni/ Albini patris deportat carta salutem* ("And swimming to you across the waters of the great sea/ the letter carries the well-wishes of father Albinus").¹² The great expanse of sea between Alcuin and the student is crossed by the *carta*, which contains this written poem. This heightens the importance and ability of the written word to cross divides and create a connection between two people even when they are separated by great distance. Thus, Alcuin writes many poems to his wayward and distant students in an attempt to reestablish his connection with them in real life.

Alcuin, while he praises sung poetry, also praises written poetry, especially the poetry of Virgil. His use of Virgilian language and direct Virgilian references throughout his poetic corpus brings a new level to the emotion and meaning of his poems. In Carmen 32 the Virgilian reference

comes from Alcuin's use of the name Corydon for his student. This name brings the reader to Virgil's Eclogue 2, in which Corydon is scorned by his lover Alexis.¹³ This name brings up a negative moment that adds to the meaning of the poem. Although in Virgil, Corydon is the one scorned, Alcuin's poem evokes the idea that the student whose name is Corydon is the one scorning Alcuin. At the end of the poem Alcuin directly quotes Virgil in the line *Rusticus est Corydon, dixit hoc forte propheta/Vergilius quondam: 'Rusticus es Corydon'* ("Corydon is rustic, the prophet Virgil said this once by chance once: 'You are rustic Corydon'").¹⁴ What is uncommon for Alcuin is that he follows this line from another poet of Charlemagne's court, Naso, and claims his line *Presbyter est Corydon* ("Corydon is a presbyter")¹⁵ better suits the situation. Using these references he praises the ability of poetic writing to capture a moment and emotion in the perfect words. In Carmen 61 the line *Ut nos instrueres vino somnoque sepultos* ("That you furnish burials with wine and sleep")¹⁶ refers to Virgil's line *Invadunt urbem somno vinoque sepultam* ("They furnish the funerary city with wine and sleep").¹⁷ At this moment in the *Aeneid* there is an attack upon the town while its men are asleep and drunk. This reference heightens the destructive power of wine, to which Alcuin has lost his students in Carmina 32 and 59. In using Virgilian references Alcuin can heighten his own poems with the words of one of the great classical poets. In doing this Alcuin promotes the practice of written poetry and draws on a poetic tradition that allows him to tap into deep emotions and powerful moments.

Alcuin includes many classical references besides Virgil, and these references are both opposed and compounded with Christian themes. Study of Classical works during Alcuin's time was the standard for the education of scholars and monks, so Alcuin's contemporaries would not have wondered so much about their appearance in Alcuin's poetry so much as how he chose to use them in relation to

13. Virgil. Eclogues 2.56 and 2.69. Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916).
14. Alcuin Carmina 32.32.
15. Alcuin Carmina. 32.4.
16. Alcuin Carmina. 61.21.
17. Virgil, Aeneid 2.265.

18. In his book *Growing up in the Middle Ages*, Paul B. Newman comments on the Church's relationship to classical Latin texts and the monastic educational system that existed during Alcuin's time. Newman remarks "Many works, such as those of Ovid and other great classical writers, included pagan themes and imagery of which the Church did not approve. However, rather than destroy these masterpieces, the Church kept them because they were fine examples of Latin composition and grammar which could be used to teach language to future generations of churchmen." See Newman, Paul. *Growing up in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 114.

19. Alcuin *Carmina*. 32.11.

20. Horace alone makes an astounding number of mentions of the drink. Performing a search for the word *Falerna* in the Packard Humanities Institute's database of literary texts (latin.packhum.org/search) returns fifteen separate uses within the Horatian corpus: Hor. Od. 1.20.10, 1.27.10, 2.3.8, 2.6.19, 2.11.19, 3.1.43; Hor. Epod. 4.13; Hor.S. 1.10.24, 2.2.15, 2.3.115, 2.4.19, 2.4.24, 2.4.55, 2.8.16; Hor. Ep. 1.14.34, 1.18.91.

21. Alcuin *Carmina*. 32.10

22. "Hebrews 5:12 (Vulgate)," Latin Vulgate.

23. Alcuin *Carmina* 32.15-16.

24. Alcuin *Carmina*. 59.28-30.

Christian ideas.¹⁸ In *Carmen* 32 there is a clear line drawn between the Christian and classical world. Alcuin writes *Fortia de gaxis veterum et potare Falerna* ("to drink strong and old Falernian from the treasuries").¹⁹ Falerna is a type of wine which classical authors, especially Horace, refer to in their poetry.²⁰ Bacchus, the classical god of wine and drunkenness, appears in this poem as the agent causing his student to sleep and be silent. While drunkenness is attributed to the classical references in this poem, true and good nourishment is attributed to the Christian world. Alcuin writes *Tunc solidos sueras sumere corde cibos* ("Then to receive your solid food with the heart").²¹ This line is a reference to the Biblical line: *facti estis quibus lacte opus sit non solido cibo* ("You are made to be ones for whom there is need for milk not for solid food").²² This scriptural moment brings together the idea that Alcuin is presenting to his student that when the student was young and drinking milk he took in wisdom (*sophia*); however, once the student grew up and ate solid food and wine, he lost sight of this wisdom and as the scripture suggests, the word of God. Alcuin draws the connection between song and spirituality in the line *Ac divina tuis patuit scriptura loquelis, / Aedibus in sacris dum tua vox resonat* ("And divine scripture lies open with your words, and your voice resounds in sacred buildings").²³ In this line the *divina scriptura* is intertwined with *tuis loquelis* stressing the bond between the two. The student, when silenced by the classical Bacchus, is cut off from speech and possibly spiritual connection. The same move is made in *Carmen* 59 when again Bacchus is responsible for hindering the student. At the end of the poem Alcuin writes *Sed praecepta sacrae memores retinete salutis / Dulcisono Christum resonantes semper in ore / Ille cibus, potus, carmen, laus, gloria vobis* ("But retain the mindful precepts of sacred health resounding the sweet sound of Christ always in your mouth, He the food, the drink, the song, the praise, the glory for us").²⁴ The way for the student to bring himself back to Christianity and salvation, after being lost to the Pagan god Bacchus, is to return to Christ, who is tightly bound

to sound. Alcuin repeats the notion that Christ provides the only food and drink one needs, and excess sustenance like wine is unnecessary and even harmful. In his poems Alcuin comments on the sacred nature of song and their ability to fill the heart. This idea is in Carmen 59 in the line *Carminibusque sacris naves implere Fresonum* (“And with holy songs fill up the ships of Frisians”)²⁵ and earlier in Carmen 17 *Atque meum pectus comple caelestibus odis* (“And fills my breast with heavenly odes”).²⁶ These are not simply songs, but *carmina sacrae* and *caelestes odis*. For Alcuin poetry and song offer a type of spiritual fulfillment.

Classical and Christian references do not always act in opposition in Alcuin’s poetry, for he also utilizes references that unite the two realms. Alcuin is also accustomed to consolidating his classical and Christian references. He does this in in Carmen 61 with the *luscinia* as a symbol for this harmony. In describing the song of the *luscinia* Alcuin uses language that references the Muses as in the lines *Tu mea dulcisonis implesti pectora musis* (“You filled my breast with sweet-sounding Muses”)²⁷, *Carmina te mecum plangere Pierio* (“that you strike me with Pierian song”)²⁸, and *Dulce melos iterans vario modulamine Musae* (“Repeating the sweet tune of the Muse with varying melodies”).²⁹ Alcuin writes about the Muses in other poems, especially in the context of poetic inspiration and creation. He opens Carmen 14 with *Pergite, Pierides, musali pollice flores/Carpite* (“Go forth, Muses, to seize the flowers with your muse-like thumb”).³⁰ Later in this same poem Alcuin writes *Ecce tuas aures, iuvenum clarissime, donis/ Versifico volui paucillum tangere plectro* (“Behold your ears, most excellent youth, I wish with gifts, to touch a little with a verse-writing quill”).³¹ This line, from a poem with several references

- 25. Alcuin Carmina. 59.13.
- 26. Alcuin Carmina. 17.2.
- 27. Alcuin Carmina. 61.3.
- 28. Alcuin Carmina. 61.6.
- 29. Alcuin Carmina. 61.9.
- 30. Alcuin Carmina. 14.1-2.



Statue of one of the Muses, Clio, ca. 2nd century CE.

31. Alcuin Carmina. 14.14-15.

to the Muses, brings forth the creation of poetry as a gift worthy of the royal prince. The luscinia is then tied to the Christian world in the lines *Vox veneranda sacris, o decus atque decor/ Quid mirum, cherubim, seraphim, si voce tonantem* (“A voice to be venerated by holy ones, o glory and beauty what a wonder, angel, Seraphim, if thundering with a voice”).³²

32. Alcuin Carmina. 61.12-13.

The bird is placed at the level of the angels. Later in the poem the bird is recognized as a creature of God in the line *Hoc natura dedit, naturae et conditor almus/Quem tu laudasti vocibus assiduis* (“This nature gave, and the nourishing founder of nature whom you praise with unremitting voices”).³³ While the bird’s song may be Muse-like, God was the one who gave

33. Alcuin Carmina. 61.19-20.

the bird the ability to sing and in turn the bird praises God with his gift. While recognizing the inspirational quality of the Muses and the classical world, Alcuin ultimately recognizes the superiority of God in giving these gifts.

Carmina 32, 59 and 61 are perhaps some of the most famous works of Alcuin as they bring together the most important themes and poetic devices scattered across his entire poetic corpus. He focuses on the importance of sound and song while utilizing the aural nature of his poetry to bring forth meaning. An important theme he draws on in Carmina 32 and 59 is the separation between him and a student brought on by both silence and distance. His use of figures from the classical world skillfully plays against and with the Christian world. These themes and poetic devices allow Alcuin to hail the written and aural art he is creating: poetry. His ability to use the same themes and poetic devices to create new and different meanings in each poem speaks volumes to Alcuin’s skill and the power of his poetry.

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