

Divine Intoxication? Jesuit Georgic Poetry on Exotic Beverages

Dr Yasmin Haskell held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship between 1999 and 2002. She won a publishing contract with the British Academy through the PDF Monograph competition, and her book on Jesuit Latin didactic poetry is published in summer 2003. In the early modern period, the subjects of poems in the didactic genre were as multifarious as they were topical, including meteorology and magnetism, raising chickens and children, writing and conversation. Below, Dr Haskell considers poems on the social and medicinal benefits of coffee and chocolate illustrating the particular perspective of Jesuit ideology.

Before Romanticism, one of the most enduring and successful genres of classical poetry was the didactic: poetry of (usually secular) instruction, in moral and natural philosophy, agriculture, technology, and the arts. And perhaps the single most influential ancient didactic poem, inspiring countless imitations through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and early modern period, was Virgil's *Georgics*. Virgil's poem 'about' farming was simultaneously, of course, a sophisticated literary monument to Roman cultural identity and imperial ideology. The Italian poets who imitated it in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were, at best, skilful gem-cutters, whose bijoux reproductions – usually one or two books to Virgil's four – treated such pretty topics as citrus fruits, silk, and saffron. Their poems were embellished with Ovidian-style myths, designed more often to delight than to instruct.

Things began to get a little more serious again in the seventeenth century, when a Parisian Jesuit, René Rapin, published four stately books on French formal gardening: *Horti* (Paris, 1665). Though influenced by the Renaissance Italians, and a master of decorative metamorphosis himself, Rapin aspired to something of the grandeur of the Roman Virgil. The princely gardens of the title are conceived not so much as private playgrounds than as public theatres for demonstrating Gallic political and cultural supremacy, and the structure and style of the poem, as announced in the preface, are religiously calibrated to a Virgilian standard. Rapin's neoclassical georgic found many contemporary admirers, notably in England. Ironically enough, however, it was the poem's ornate baroque underbelly that caught the eye of Jesuit readers and emulators. A more austere poetic successor, Jacques Vanière, SJ (author of *Praedium rusticum*, in sixteen books, on the management of a modern country estate), records his gradual disenchantment with frivolous mythological digressions à la Rapin. But Vanière was not typical in his disapproval, and most Jesuit continuators of

the Latin georgic tradition appreciated the value of narrative relief to keep the reader reading – not to mention the lure of the exotic, even the erotic ...

Father François Oudin's eighteenth-century anthology of (mainly Jesuit) *Poemata didascalica* contains three poems consecrated to the modish modern beverages of tea and coffee: Pierre Petit's 'Chinese Tea' (*Thia Sinensis*; Paris, 1685), Thomas Fellon's 'Arabian Bean' (*Faba Arabica*; Lyon, 1696), and Guillaume Massieu's 'Coffee' (*Caffaeum*; Paris, 1738). Fellon was a Jesuit, Massieu an ex-Jesuit, and while Petit was not, and never had been, a member of the Society of Jesus, his 'Tea' was evidently written to titillate a Jesuit palate. (It was dedicated to the Jesuit-educated and -loving Pierre Daniel Huet. Moreover, in his finale, the poet seems to applaud the missionary activity of Jesuits in the East.) The beverage poems in Oudin hark back, in some respects, to the Italian Renaissance georgic tradition: not only are they about consumption, but they are offered, quite self-consciously, as objects of literary consumption. The didactic-poetic instruction is in self- and social gratification, and there is a playful ironizing of the Virgilian georgic form and Roman work ethic.

Such 'labour' as these poems prescribe is generally of a more genteel variety than that enjoined on Virgil's peasant farmer. Having sketched the features of the coffee mill – such technical *ephrases* were de rigueur in early modern didactic – Fellon bids us 'not to scruple to turn the handle by hand; what did Bacchus not do in order to drink wine?' (*Nec te pudeat manibus versare molile: / vinum biberet, quid non faciebat Iacchus*, my emphasis). Virgil, of course, had used a similar phrase of spreading dung on parched soil in *Georgics* 1. 80! The time for relaxation will come, but our Jesuit reminds us that 'there are many things hurriedly to be got together which the use of the drink requires directly: pots, cups, and also heaps of coal' (*tibi plurima dantur / Maturanda, quibus succi mox indiget usus, / Vasaque, crateresque, simul carbonis acervi*). We thus make provision for 'less favourable times' (*iniquis*

temporibus) and ensure that we will always have ‘little feasts’ (*parva ... convivia*) to offer our friends when they visit – a gentle parody, in short, of Virgil’s georgic discourse. And while Fellon celebrates coffee’s power to help us work through the night, and also its medicinal properties, it is the *social* benefits of the drink that are given prominence at the climax of his poem.

For his part, Massieu, poet of *Caffaeum*, imitates Virgil – no surprise there – but one suspects that he is also *emulating* his Jesuit precursor. As in Fellon’s poem, the agricultural work of coffee cultivation is glossed over, and the focus is on the token work of procuring the beans and coffee-making apparatus. Here Massieu generates an elaborate georgic simile:

Ergo, quod satis esse tuos cognoris in usus,
Tu longe ante para; largam sit cura quotannis
Collegisse penum, et parva horrea providus imple:
Ut quondam, multo ante memor prudensque futuri,

Yasmin Haskell’s book, *Loyola’s Bees: Ideology and Industry in Jesuit Latin Didactic Poetry*, is published in the Academy’s series of Postdoctoral Fellowship Monographs.

Loyola’s Bees

Ideology and Industry in Jesuit Latin Didactic Poetry



YASMIN ANNABEL HASKELL

Colligit e campis segetes, tectisque reponit
Agricola, et curas venientem extendit in annum.
Nec minus interea reliqua est curanda supellex:
Vascula sorbendo non desint apta liquori,
Ollaque, cui collum angustum, sub tegmine parvo,
Cui sensim oblongum venter turgescat in orbem.

[‘Therefore, that which you know is sufficient for your purposes prepare well in advance. Make it your concern to collect a large store every year, and providently fill your little barns—just as once the farmer, mindful long before time, and having thought for the future, harvests the crops from the fields and stores them under cover, and prolongs his cares into the coming year. Nor should less care, meanwhile, be expended on the remaining accoutrements. Let not little cups be absent, fit for sipping the liquid, and clay vessels, with a narrow neck, under a little cap, and with a belly gradually swelling into a distended sphere.’]

Like Fellon, Massieu does not pass up the opportunity of describing the coffee mill, even if the prosaic tasks of toasting and grinding the beans are passed over briskly as ‘lighter matters’ (*leviora*). The ‘greater matters’ that now ‘summon us’ (*Nos majora vocant*) are the preparation of our morning cup of coffee and the art of drinking it! With an Ovidian wink he declares that ‘the smooth liquid must be cooked with art, with art it must be drunk’ (*Arte coqui debet blandus liquor, arte bibendus*).

Massieu knew from personal experience the spiritual and moral premium which the Jesuits placed on hard work. (He left the Society because of pressure from his superiors to abandon the Muses and dedicate himself to theology.) As Virgil had declared the peasant husbandmen ‘blessed, if only they knew their own advantages’, Massieu declares the drinkers of coffee ‘blessed’ (*o fortunati*) because they are *industrious*: ‘no sluggish torpor afflicts their breasts’ (*Haud illorum pectora segnis / Torpor affectat*). Indeed, they positively *enjoy* getting up before dawn to go to their allotted chores! Perhaps with a nod to his former confrères, Massieu commends the invigorating beverage to those whose ‘task it is to feed minds with divine speech, and terrify the souls of sinners with their words’ (*queis cura est divino pascere mentes / Eloquio, dictisque animos terrere nocentum*). Where Fellon had Apollo invent coffee and throw a party to win his followers back from Bacchus, god of wine, Massieu claims that Apollo invented the drink to cure the growing *laziness* of poets, who have taken to pleading imaginary illness to avoid work. Even so, in Massieu’s poem, as in Fellon’s, the moral duty of

altruistic work is nicely balanced by more private values – the cultivation of one’s personal physical and psychological well-being.

These frothy little French poems are outdone in length, virtuosity, and curiosity, by a contemporary Neapolitan concoction, the *De mentis potu, sive De cocolatis opificio* (‘On the Mind’s Beverage, or, Manufacture of Chocolate’; Naples, 1689), in three books, by Tommaso Strozzi, a celebrated Jesuit preacher. (The Jesuits, of course, were notorious chocoholics, and were actively involved in the New World cacao industry.) Strozzi was doubtless as familiar as his French confrères with Rapin’s ‘Gardens’, but the ‘Mind’s Beverage’ seems to owe more to a sixteenth-century didactic poem, Fracastoro’s *Syphilis*, on the epidemiology and treatment of the ‘French’ disease. Strozzi’s poem is largely set in a mythicized New World, as was the third book of Fracastoro’s. In the Jesuit poem, Apollo and the Muses migrate to America because Greece has been overrun by Turks. In the first book, Apollo creates chocolate as a source of inspiration for poets; in the third, he is invoked as god of healing and we learn about chocolate’s medicinal uses (the marvellous cacao tree parallels Fracastoro’s guaiacum, which had been touted as a miracle cure for syphilitics).

Strozzi’s poem is unsettling for modern readers in its frank discussion of digestion, defecation, and mental illness, its cheerful acceptance of African slavery, its celebration, in almost sexual terms, of the pleasures of drinking chocolate. In the third book, the poet brings pagan and Christian, pathological and mystical, into a somewhat unholy communion in his retelling of an episode from the life of St Rose of Lima. Languishing from a fever, Rose is restored to health and experiences ecstasy upon drinking chocolate delivered by an angel. She ‘hungrily immerses her mouth and whole soul in the wounds of her crucified betrothed, and drawing deep, sucks in the delights and vital spirit from the Divinity’ (*suffixi in vulnera sponsi / Os animumque omnem vivax demergit; & alto / Delicias haustu, vitamque e Numine sugit*). This sort of fusion of the physical and psycho-spiritual is usually associated with the Jesuits’ emblem books and devotional poetry. Generally speaking, their *didactic* poetry is more sober. What unites all the poems

discussed in this article, however – whether predominantly serious or playful, neoclassical or baroque – is a shared Jesuit faith in the goodness of the natural world, its providential usefulness, and indeed an assumption that God expects us to exploit Nature for His greater glory.

If ‘drugs’ can help us to preach and teach better, to function *in the world*, they are a good. Hence, I think, the frequent juxtaposition in these poems of the stimulating effects of, e.g., coffee, and the enervating effects of wine. In the Jesuit scheme of things sociability is also desirable, and tea, coffee, chocolate – and in other poems, tobacco and snuff – are commended as excellent social lubricants. As regards Jesuit attitudes to ‘altered states of consciousness’, though, here we enter a more hazy area. It is well known that St Ignatius turned his back on the austere ascetic practices of his youth and the mystical experiences that accompanied them. A healthy suspicion must be entertained in the face of all spontaneous apparitions and revelations, which might, after all, turn out to be Satanic deceptions. Ignatius believed that a labour-loving God would not wish to hinder his followers’ apostolic work with inconvenient interruptions. On the other hand, he was not averse to manipulating the feelings and fantasy, achieved a remarkable mastery over his own emotions, and is supposed to have induced inspirational visions at will. To us, the trivial technology of the cane-press, chocolate mill, or coffee grinder might seem a world away from that of the *Spiritual Exercises*, a text which aims to whip up the exercitant’s psyche into a ferment of remorse by means of a very different kind of ‘creative visualization’. And yet, the Jesuit didactic poet who compared the gastronomic titillation of a cup of hot chocolate with the spiritual elevation of a Peruvian saint should not, perhaps, be condemned out of hand as a degenerate epicure. He was, I suggest, a true believer, like Ignatius, in the artful exploitation of nature and sensation to bring about moral and spiritual *metanoia*.

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