David Ungvary: Converting Verse. The Poetics of Asceticism in Late Roman Gaul. New York: Oxford University Press 2024 (Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity). XIII, 272 p., 2 maps, 2 tables. £ 78.00/$ 120.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-760074-0.

Late antique Christian authors wrestled with the problem of their pagan literary inheritance. Was it appropriate for monks and theologians to compose classical poetry after the prohibition of pagan worship in 392 by Emperor Theodosius the Great? To what extent were Christian poets allowed to put Latin verse to use in their pursuit of new ascetic ideals, like those fostered at the abbey of Lérins? Did holy subject matter justify the composition of poems redolent with the vocabulary and cadence of Virgil and Horace? David Ungvary's book pursues these questions through an investigation of the literary production of a handful of Christian Latin writers active in fifth-century Gaul. Over the course of six chapters, "Converting Verse" examines the ways in which these Gallo-Roman authors "debated and reconfigured the forms, meanings, and functions of Christian Latin poetry [...], partially as a way to make sense of drastic religious transformations and political crises in their worlds" (p. 12).

Chapter 1 ("Verse and Conversion: Augustine and His Protégés", pp. 14–49) begins the story not in Gaul, but in Italy, more specifically, in a rural villa at Cassiciacum on the outskirts of Milan, where Augustine retired in the summer of 386 for an introspective retreat with friends. Among those in attendance was a young poet named Licentius. He was struggling to write a poem about the pagan lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, whose star-crossed romance was best known from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.55–166. Augustine (ord. 1.8.24) suggested to his friend that he overcome his difficulties by shifting the focus of his composition from the tragic death of the lovers to praise for the "pure and honest love, whereby beautifully virtuous souls gifted with learning are joined to understanding through philosophy, and not only escape true death, but also enjoy the happiest life" (p. 16). In Augustine's view, classical poetry could serve Christianity so long as poets abandoned pagan themes and adopted a moralizing voice, a line of argument that he developed more fully in his treatise *De doctrina Christiana* (composed between 397 and 426). Around the same time, Paulinus of Nola took a similar stance in response to his old teacher Ausonius of Bordeaux. When confronted about his ascetic withdrawal from aristocratic life, Paulinus composed a verse

rebuttal that evoked his new Christian muse (carm. 10.142–143): "I confess that I have a new state of mind, a mind not my own – well, it was not my own in the past, but now it is mine through God its author" (p. 30). His conversion to Christianity and subsequent divestment of material wealth did not require a repudiation of verse composition, despite its close association with pagan culture. Ungvary refers to this as "compromised asceticism" (p. 31). Christian poets in fifth-century Gaul turned to Paulinus as the model of a pious man who had successfully wed traditional literary practice with his commitment to live a rigorous religious life.

Chapter 2 ("Authoring Asceticism in Late Roman Gaul, ca. 400–430", pp. 50–85) surveys the efforts of three Christian authors active in Gaul in the decades around 400 – Sulpicius Severus, John Cassian, and Eucherius of Lyon – to reconcile their writing enterprises with ascetic practice. For Sulpicius, the impresario of the cult of Saint Martin of Tours, conversion and composition went hand in hand. After his fateful encounter with this holy man, Sulpicius wrote an idealized account of his life, the *Life of Saint Martin* (ca. 396), as well as the *Dialogues* (406), which presented a debate about the character of Gallic asceticism in a climate of criticism leveled at Martin by Christian elites. According to Sulpicius, Martin sanctioned differed registers of devotional activity, including the composition of literary works like sacred biography, the sharing and imitation of which established an ascetic textual community. In the early 400s, the development of a new center for monastic activity on the Mediterranean coastal islands of Lérins near Marseilles shifted attention away from Martin's charismatic model of sanctity to the paradigm of a cloistered community where elite converts to Christianity melded aristocratic pastimes and ascetic virtues. Before 430, John Cassian composed the *Conferences* and the *Institutes*, in which he contested the value of traditional literary practice for Christians and championed religious practice based on the cultivation of a disciplined life in emulation of the experienced monks of the Egyptian desert. Eucherius of Lyon offered a riposte in the form of an exhortatory letter known as *On the Contempt of the World*, where he argued for "the compatibility of refined aristocratic literariness and the transformative spirituality of the ascetic" (p. 79). Taken together, the writings of these authors highlight the tensions facing Gallic Christians who composed poetry between 400 and 430.

Chapter 3 ("Verse and Incursion: The *Epigramma Paulini* and a Post-406 Poetics of Reform", pp. 86–128) steps back slightly in time to offer a thematic

survey of literary responses to catastrophe in the first decade of the fifth century. The crossing of the Rhine by barbarians in 406 and the ensuing political turmoil in the Gallic provinces prompted authors to leverage these calamities "to reinforce radical spiritual critiques and moral exhortations of their Gallo-Roman Christian communities" (p. 95). The chapter focuses on the earliest poetic response to these events: the *Epigramma Paulini*, which comprised 110 lines of hexameter composed by an anonymous author before 410. Set in a bucolic landscape evocative of Virgil's *Eclogues*, the poem portrays a dialogue about the relationship between worldly hardships and spiritual care. Comparing the human soul to a villa plundered and left in ruin by sin, the poet exhorts his readers to cultivate virtue and undertake moral reform. He then concludes his composition with a denunciation of contemporary sinners that shifts the poem's register from Virgilian pastoral to Horatian satire, an example of "generic hybridity" (p. 128) first examined by Kurt Smolak in an article published in 1999.[1] Another feature of the *Epigramma* is what Ungvary calls its metapoetical self-consciousness, that is, the ways in which the poem "presses on the boundary between poetic representation and reality" (p. 107). Rather than offering a literary escape to a pastoral setting untouched by contemporary troubles, the poem challenges readers to jettison their concern for their imperiled aristocratic estates and to focus instead on their spiritual reform. Unfortunately, the author of the *Epigramma* does not offer "any assurance of compatibility between the structures of classical Roman literature and the demands of a burgeoning ascetic Christian culture," but rather "generates a sense of ambiguity and ambivalence about that prospect" (p. 106).

The second half of the book features three chapters that offer case studies of Gallo-Christian poets, some of whom experimented with generic hybridity and metapoetic self-consciousness to make sense of the rapidly changing world of fifth-century Gaul. Chapter 4 ("A Double Life: Paulinus of Pella's *Eucharisticos*", pp. 129–159) examines a confessional poem of 616 hexameters composed around 460 by Paulinus of Pella. Known as *Eucharisticos Deo sub ephemeridis meae textu* ("Thanksgiving to God according to the Text of my Diary"), this poem is a paradox. Inspired in equal parts by Virgil, Ausonius, and Augustine, the *Eucharisticos* stands as "the first sustained attempt at Christian confessional self-writing in classical Latin verse" (p. 134). Render-

1 K. Smolak: Zwischen Bukolik und Satire: Das sogenannte *Sancti Paulini Epigramma*. In: IJCT 6, 1999, pp. 3–20.

ing in verse the copious notes about his life that he kept in a diary (*ephemeris*), Paulinus recounted his upbringing, education, and marriage, before lamenting the loss of his property, the death of his wife and sons, and his displacement due to barbarian invasions. Fortunately, an unnamed patron saved him from destitution in his old age, which compelled him to write his thanksgiving to God. The poem presents many puzzles, from the character of the poet's source material to the questionable sincerity of his gratitude to the seeming contradiction between the pretentious form of the *Eucharisticos* and its humiliating content. The poet displays knowledge of his grandfather Ausonius's suite of short poems likewise called *Ephemeris*, which includes an *oratio* to God that may have inspired his own composition. While I was not convinced by Ungvary's suggestion that Paulinus's integration of the terms *eucharisticos* and *ephemeris* in some way "signals his participation [...] in ongoing efforts within Latin poetry to achieve synthesis among Roman aristocratic and Christian ideals of life and literary practice" (p. 147), it is clear that the poet's novel thanksgiving offered his readers a striking alternative to the theories of prayer promulgated by John Cassian. With its unique combination of "Augustinian confession and Ausonian verse," the *Eucharisticos* was "[t]he fittingly amalgamated composition of an in-between Christian" (p. 159).

Chapter 5 ("Announcing Renunciation: Sidonius Apollinaris and Poetic Disavowal", pp. 160–195) focuses on the literary career of Sidonius Apollinaris (ca. 430–479). This aristocrat wrote poetry in the service of his advancement in the imperial administration, including verse panegyrics for the emperors Avitus in 456 and Anthemius in 468. By 470, however, he had abandoned his secular ambitions to become the bishop of Clermont. Sidonius's conversion also entailed his abandonment of verse composition. Shortly before doing so, he experimented with Christian poetry by writing an ode of thanksgiving (carm. 16) addressed to a fellow bishop but then attempted to give it up completely. According to Ungvary, the bishop's "relationship to poetry was at the center of a pervasive anxiety to reorient his literary habits around his religious vocation" (p. 181). But this portrait is complicated by the fact that Sidonius returned to writing poetry in the later 470s, when he composed a handful of poems on Christian ascetic themes couched in the style of Horace at the request of some aristocratic patrons (epist. 9.12–16). It is difficult to explain both Sidonius's choice to return to verse composition and his decision to emulate Horatian lyric, when so many other styles of poetic expression were available to him. Ungvary hedges on the meaning of these par-

adoxical poems, stating that "Sidonius neither fully adopts nor completely rejects Horatian poetics as suitable for Christian composition" (p. 193).

Chapter 6 ("The Poet and the Virgin: Avitus of Vienne's *De consolatoria castitatis laude*", pp. 196–226) concludes the book with a discussion of the poetry of Avitus, the bishop of Vienne (490–518). He was the author of a sprawling five-book Old Testament epic in verse entitled *De spiritalis historiae gestis* as well as a shorter poem composed in 506 on the Christian pursuit of female chastity known as *De consolatoria castitatis laude*.[2] Although he was only a generation older than Sidonius, Avitus lived in a world of radically altered expectations. Gone were the imperial pretensions of Sidonius's early career and the classical vocabulary and allusion that aided and abetted his ambitions. For his part, Avitus was not averse to verse so long as it served as a vehicle for ascetic activity. Ungvary focuses his attention on *De consolatoria castitatis laude*. In order for this composition to operate as a handbook for devout readers, the bishop sanitized it of all references to pagan themes and populated it with exegesis of biblical episodes, holy models of behavior, and moral precepts. In this way, "[p]oetry could serve as a discourse of solidarity among educated Romans [...], but pride in one's Romanness was no longer central to such an enterprise" (p. 226).

An epilogue ("Beyond Gaul – Ennodius of Pavia's *Eucharisticon*", pp. 227–236) briefly considers the legacy of the tension between classical verse and Christian asceticism in the sixth century through a discussion of Ennodius's *Eucharisticon*, a confessional prose work written around 511 in response to the author's escape from a life-threatening sickness. Ungvary implies that this treatise marked a turning point in Ennodius's life, during which he pledged to forsake poetic practice to advertise his candidacy for a vacant bishopric. Indeed, the future bishop of Pavia alluded several times in the *Eucharisticon* to the dangers posed to Christian authors who engaged in verse composition, but like Sidonius before him this did not prevent him from indulging in this practice at least once after he assumed his episcopal rank in 513.

"Converting Verse" tackles a difficult historical question through an analysis of textual evidence that is reluctant to divulge clear answers. The book is at its best when Ungvary applies his skills as a Latinist to the analysis of the

2 On the latter, see most recently M. Roberts: Advice to a Sister: Avitus on Chastity (*De consolatoria castitatis laude*). In: Traditio 78, 2023, pp. 1–16.

fifth-century poems that form the basis of his study. Readers will surely benefit from his close reading of the *Epigramma Paulini* and the poems of Paulinus of Pella, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Avitus of Vienne. Taken as a whole, however, the book does not measure up to the sum of its individual chapters. To be sure, Ungvary's analysis identifies many tensions and paradoxical features in the verses produced by Christian authors in fifth-century Gaul as they navigated and negotiated the boundaries between their classical inheritance and their ascetic vocation, but these observations do not cohere into a broader statement about literary change in the period. Sometimes, the stated conclusion is a predictable generalization, as when the chapter on Sidonius ends with the observation that "conversion was not a straightforward and simple process" (p. 194). More often, however, Ungvary summarizes his analysis by restating the conflicting nature of his source material without explaining why it is so, as with the statement that closes the book: "[w]hen classical poetics met Christian asceticism, paradoxical syntheses resulted [...]" (p. 236).

While the introduction (pp. 1–13) to "Converting Verse" nods to literary and practice theory, attention to recent scholarship on religious identity in Late Antiquity may have shed more light on the conflicting tendencies of these fifth-century poets. Éric Rebillard's incisive book "Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE" argued persuasively that "most Christians practiced a situational selection of identities; that is, they did not give salience to their Christianness at all times."[3] Drawing inspiration from Bernard Lahire's 2001 study "L'homme pluriel," Rebillard proposes that late antique Christians had a fluid and complex understanding of their identities and the competing religious and social allegiances that accompanied them.[4] Viewing the cultural production of fifth-century Christian poets through the lens of identity studies and with particular attention to the expectations of patrons and audiences may help to explain some of the seemingly contradictory impulses of authors who both protested the practice of verse composition and nevertheless embraced it.

3 É. Rebillard: Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE. Ithaca, NY/London 2012, p. 8. See my review in BMCRev 2013.05.28 (https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2013/2013.05.28/).

4 B. Lahire: L'homme pluriel. Les ressorts de l'action. Nouvelle édition. Paris 2001; id.: The Plural Actor. Translated by D. Fernbach. Cambridge/Malden, MA 2011.

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