

**Johannes Alexander Gaertner**  
**Two Twentieth-century Latin Poems**  
**(edited by Demmy Verbeke)**

Johannes Alexander Gaertner was born in 1912, in Berlin-Lichterfelde, Germany, from a Jewish mother and a Christian father. He studied theology and art history at the universities of Berlin and Heidelberg, receiving his doctorate from the latter in 1936 with a dissertation on Johann Gottfried Herder's position on Christian art. Gaertner was eligible for conscription in the German army – despite being half-Jewish – and therefore emigrated to South America immediately after his graduation. He thus became part of the large number of German-born intellectuals who moved to the Americas to flee Nazism. We see, for instance, a parallel with Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905-1999), the famous scholar of Renaissance humanism who was also born in Berlin, fled to the USA in 1939, and became a professor at Columbia University, New York.

Gaertner continued to live in Peru until the end of World War II, working in Lima as a private language tutor and as a bookseller. During the same period, he met and married another German refugee, the fashion designer Gerda Meyer (1916-2004). The couple moved to the USA in 1946, where Gaertner was supported by Walter Muir Whitehill (1905-1978), the director of the Boston Athenaeum, through a mutual interest in Latin. In 1947, he was hired as a Latin teacher at Lafayette College, a prestigious undergraduate college in Easton, Pennsylvania. Soon, he also started teaching art history courses, for which he was particularly known: all obituaries remember him primarily as an inspirational teacher of art history, rather than as a Latinist. Gaertner was promoted to associate professor in 1958 and to professor in 1967, and was furthermore instrumental in the creation of the department of art and

music at Lafayette, of which he became the first head in 1964. He retired in 1977, and stayed in Easton until his death in 1996.

Besides writing a book on American art in Germany (*Prisma der Demokratie: Ausdruck und Selbstkritik in der Malerei Amerikas*, 1961) and a volume of German poetry (*Diapason*, s.a.), Gaertner also published two collections of Latin verse: *Vox Humana* (1954) and *Cantus Firmus* (1966).

In his small oeuvre, Gaertner championed a modern form of Latin poetry, combining rhymed verse (which is typical for medieval Latin poems) with classical standards of grammatical correctness (although he does not shy away from coining new words). He abandons classical meters and insists that all modern verse should be accentual. Gaertner's themes are both classical and contemporary, but both are treated in a highly personal manner, conveying a certain modern nihilism to almost every topic he turns to. These features are illustrated by the following poems, which are taken from Johannes Alexander Gaertner, *Vox Humana* (Lunenburgiae Vermontensium [Lunenburg, Vermont]: Apud prelum typographicum Stinehourianum, 1954), pp. v and xiiii. Gaertner explained his poetical principles himself in 'The Lyrical Possibilities of Post-Classical Latin', *The Classical Weekly* 46-11 (1953), pp. 161-5. The biographical sketch is based on the *Dictionary of Art Historians* (edited by Lee Sorensen at [www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org]); Dirk Sacré, 'In memoriam Johannes Alexander Gaertner (1912-1996), Latijns dichter uit de Verenigde Staten', *Kleio* 26 (1996/97), pp. 37-42; idem, *Musa Superstes. De poesi saeculi xxi latina schediasma* (Romae: Academia Belgica, 2001), pp. 26-28; and Jules David Prown, 'Comments from the symposium dinner, October 20, 1995' in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11-1 (1998), 9-10.

***In congressu scholastico***

Loquitur, loquitur, senex famosus,

garrulus, aridus, vaniverbosus.

Ecce qui temporis impetu

paulos post annos eris et tu.

***At a conference***

He talks, he talks, that famous old man,

babbling, boring, he talks all that he can.

But beware, in a few years,

it will be you who pains people's ears.

**Commentary**

Both poems illustrate well the euphonic quality of Gaertner's oeuvre, his use of rhyme and rhythm, and his creative approach towards Latin. The rhyme scheme of the first poem is aabb. The rhythmic pace is enforced by the sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables.

**Line 1** Note the repetition in the first line: *Loquitur, loquitur*.

**Line 2** *vaniverbosus* is a coinage, a combination of 'vanus' (conceited, vain) and 'verbosus' (verbose).

**Line 4** *paulos post*: note the alliteration.

***Canticulum***

Dormi, mi fili, dormi –  
sunt qui dicunt  
vitam beatam esse:  
dicunt, dicant, nesciunt.

Dormi, mi fili, dormi –  
veniet dies  
quo tibi erit  
larga, largissima quies.

Dormi, mi fili, dormi –  
aderit mox  
mihi, tum tibi  
ultima, optima nox.

***Lullaby***

Sleep, my son, sleep –  
They say  
that life is blissful.  
They say, let them say, they don't know what they say.

Sleep, my son, sleep –  
The day will come  
that you will enjoy

plentiful, most plentiful calm.

Sleep, my son, sleep –  
soon there will be  
the last, kindest night  
for you and for me.

### **Commentary**

The second poem offers the rhyme scheme abcb. As in the first poem, we notice the poetic device of repetition: each stanza opens with the same assonating sentence, a typical feature of the lullaby-genre to which it belongs.

The last line of each stanza similarly contains an element of reiteration: the stylistic figure of *tradio* (i.e. repetition of the same word in a different grammatical form) in stanzas 1 and 2 and the use of two cognate superlatives in the last one.