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Pagan and Christian Consolation

I

It is well known that the early Church Fathers usually received a thorough classical education based upon pagan writers before they turned to their own literary production. As a result of their belonging to either Greek or Roman educated elites, they self-consciously adopted various pagan literary models and inherited fully developed pagan genres. At the same time, however, they actively transformed what they inherited by adapting the existing genres to their own goals and using them as vehicles for conveying the Christian message. It gave rise to specific literary hybrids that, on the one hand, clearly showed formal (and not only formal) similarities with their role models, but, on the other, significantly differed from them in content as well as in context. Scrutinizing those intentional similarities and differences can be highly rewarding as it can give us a hint of the literary strategies applied by some of the early Church Fathers in their effort to emulate their models and distance from them at the same time.

The purpose of this text is to closely examine the above-delineated question within the genre of *consolatio* (λόγος παραμυθητικός) which under the influence of Greek and Roman rhetoric and philosophy gradually evolved from one single topos to a genre of its own.¹ Although it could be delivered as a funeral speech, the usual form of consolation was the epistolary. Consoling the bereaved is a natural urge that received its literary formation as early as in the *Iliad*, in a scene of Achilles solacing Priamus.² But more than being merely a sign of compassion, literary consolation provided the author with an opportunity to express and expound his own philosophical attitudes and convictions, and to convey them to the addressee (and thus to the readers). In this way, epistolary consolation often approached the form of philosophical treatise dealing with topics such as death, afterlife, fate, grief, etc.

It was a Platonist Crantor from Soli (IV-III cent. BC) who with his praised treatise *On Grief* (Περὶ πένθους) established consolation as a literary genre. The genre was then transplanted to the Roman soil and further elaborated by Cicero in his equally famous *Consolatio*, written after his daughter's death and dedicated to himself, and in certain passages of his *Tusculanae disputationes*. However, it was fully developed only in Seneca and Plutarch, whose works form the pagan corpus for our examination and will be discussed below. Among the early Christian writers, it was Ambrose, Jerome, and the Cappadocian Fathers who particularly excelled in the genre of consolation taken over

¹ This article is to some extent based on and marks a further development of our work "Plutarh i Seneka: dva pristupa tešenju ožalošćenih" (Plutarch and Seneca: two approaches to consoling the bereaved), *Lucida intervalla. Prilozi Odeljenja za klasične nauke, Filozofski fakultet u Beogradu*, 30 (2/2004), 5-68.

² *Il.* 24. 507-551. Priamus has come to Achilles' tent to request the body of his son Hector; Achilles, moved by the old man's grief, tries to calm him and thus sets a model for all future literary consolations.

from their pagan predecessors. The present examination will address only the writings of Ambrose and Jerome, and compare them with those of Seneca and Plutarch in search of literary and philosophical continuities and discontinuities.

II

The commonest but not necessarily the only reason for writing an epistolary consolation was death, more precisely that kind of death which was perceived as untimely (*mors immatura*, ὁ ἄσπορος θάνατος). In Seneca's opus we find two such extant works: *Consolatio ad Polybium*, addressed to the Emperor Claudius' secretary mourning his brother's death, and *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, addressed to the writer's acquaintance mourning her young son's death. In Plutarch, two consolations of the kind have survived: *Consolatio ad uxorem*, dedicated to the author's wife on the occasion of their own son's decease, and *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, in which the addressee was a friend of Plutarch who also lost his son.³

Among the early Latin Christian authors, the genre of epistolary consolation was taken over vigorously by St. Jerome, in whose correspondence we find several consolations, the most important for our analysis being the one addressed to Jerome's disciple Paula, who lost her daughter Blaesilla (Letter 39). Also considered is his consolation to a certain Theodora, who mourned the death of her husband Lucinius (Letter 75).⁴ On the other hand, none of the consolatory works of St. Ambrose was in epistolary form; they were all funerary speeches, subsequently revised by the author. Ambrose delivered two orations dedicated to the deceased Roman emperors: the *De obitu Valentiniani consolatio* for the Emperor Valentinian, and the *De obitu Theodosii oratio* for Theodosius the Great. However, a degree to which he praised the characters of the two rulers makes these works more panegyrics than consolations. It is not the case with another funerary speech of Ambrose, given on the occasion of the untimely death of his brother Satyrus, bearing the title *De excessu fratris Satyri*. As one of the most elaborate examples of Latin Christian consolation, it fully exhibits the main elements of the genre, the more so as it was intended to relieve the author's own grief.⁵ This work, Jerome's letter *Ad Paulam*, Seneca's *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, and Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Apollonium* form the core of our comparative analysis.

III

It would certainly be an oversimplification to presume any kind of clear-cut and straightforward pagan-Christian opposition in this case study. There are at least as many differences between Plutarch and Seneca as there are between Ambrose and Jerome, both in terms of their literary style and intellectual approach. Seneca's rigid stoicism differs considerably from the mild philanthropy of the Platonist Plutarch. However, they both shared

³ When referring to these works, we stick to the following editions: Seneca, *Moral Essays* II, tr. John W. Basore (Loeb Classical Library: London, 1970); Plutarch, *Moralia* II, tr. Frank Cole Babbitt (Loeb Classical Library: London, 1971).

⁴ Other such instances are Letters 77 (a consolation to Jerome's friend Oceanus over the death of his wife) and 79 (to Salvina, a lady of the imperial court, considering the decease of her husband). The references from Jerome's works are given here according to *Patrologiae Latinae tomus XXII, Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi opera omnia, tomus primus*, ed. J. P. Migne et successores (apud Garnier fratres: Parisiis, 1877).

⁵ There were actually two separate speeches, delivered seven days one after the other and later joined together by the author. Thus, in some manuscripts the second book is titled *De Resurrectione*. We refer to these works of St. Ambrose according to *Patrologiae Latinae tomus XVI, Sancti Ambrosii opera omnia, tomus secundus pars prior*, ed. J. P. Migne et successores (apud Garnier fratres: Parisiis, 1880).

and built upon the same literary-intellectual heritage—the one that started with Homer and received its generic form with Crantor. What they operated with was a standard set of commonplaces and stereotyped arguments within which it is not always easy to discern one philosophical tradition from another. An eclectic mixture of Platonism, stoicism, Epicureanism etc., mostly appealing to the reader's common sense and illustrated with appropriate quotes from poetry and prose, had become a universal basis for composing a consolation. The same goes for St. Ambrose and St. Jerome, who both excelled in their classical education and did not hesitate to engage it in their own writing. All this said, however, it should be noted that, when juxtaposed with their pagan counterparts, the consolatory works of the Christian authors exhibit a radically new and different element of argumentation, as our analysis demonstrates. This one new element – the eschatological perspective of Christianity – drastically changes the context of the consolations and their psychological range.

Every consolation contains a *laudatio* as one of its main elements. The person of the deceased is always praised for his/her virtues and portrayed as exemplary. Hence the advice is given that we should keep our memory of the deceased alive and fresh. Plutarch and Seneca follow this pattern diligently.⁶ What comes subsequently is a remark that to mourn after our beloved ones is natural and justified, but only if it is limited to a “reasonable” extent. Once it exceeds this extent, it becomes “the worst of all passions” (*τὸ χαλεπώτατον πάντων παθῶν*), a vice (*vitium*) and evil (*malum*).⁷

One of the focal points around which both Seneca and Plutarch build their argumentation is the concept of self-deceit or forgetfulness (*opinio*, δόξα). Why are we so distressed when someone dear to us dies? It is due to a false but deeply embedded conviction that our mortal bodies will last perpetually. *Quae deinde ista suae publicaeque condictionis oblivio est?*, Seneca asks Marcia concerning her son. *Mortalis nata es et mortales perperisti. (...) Et quae diligis, veneraris, et quae despicias unus exaequabit cinis.*⁸ Plutarch, too, points to this kind of self-awareness in his address to Apollonius: *Χρηὶ γὰρ εαυτὸν εἰδέναι θνητὸν ὄντα τὴν φύσιν (...) Ἀνθρώπων γὰρ ὄντως θνητὰ μὲν [εἴσιν] καὶ ἐφήμερα τὰ σώματα.*⁹ This leads to a further development of “consolation” based upon anthropological pessimism peculiar to the ancient Greeks: there is nothing we can do about our mortality. *In regnum fortunae et quidem durum atque invictum pervenimus, illius arbitrio digna atque indigna passuri*, concludes Seneca.¹⁰ To confirm this viewpoint, Plutarch invokes Homer and his well-known lines: *Οὐδὲν ἀκιδνότερον γαῖα τρέφει ἀνθρώποιο / (...) τοῖος γὰρ νόος ἐστὶν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων, / οἷον ἐπ’ ἡμῶν ἄγρησι πατήρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε.*¹¹ Man's mortality is something imposed upon him from above for reasons that remain unexplained and unexplainable, something Crantor terms “the *obscure fate*, which follows us from the very beginning and brings no good” (*ἢ τ’ ἄδηλος αὕτη τύχη πόρρωθεν ἡμῖν καὶ ἔτ’ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ἠκολούθηκεν οὐδ’ ἐφ’ ἐνὶ ὑγιεῖ*).¹²

The only remedy, as emphasised by both writers, is to *tolerate* one's conditioned

⁶ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 34-35 et passim; Sen. *Ad Marc.* 12. 3 et passim.

⁷ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 2; Sen. *Ad Marc.* 1.8.

⁸ Sen. *Ad Marc.* 11.3. Cf. also 9.5: *Error decipit hic, effeminat, dum patimur quae numquam pati nos posse providimus*. Note that, according to Seneca, the error, or self-deceit, *effeminates* one's spirit. This sex-based attitude towards grief will later appear in Plutarch (*Ad Apoll.* 22) and in St. Ambrose (*De excessu fratris*, I, 7).

⁹ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 6. Cf. also 21.

¹⁰ Sen. *Ad Marc.* 10, 6.

¹¹ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 6. The quotation is from Hom. *Od.* 18. 130; 136-7.

¹² Quoted by Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 6.?

existence. This kind of quiet, introspected, and resigned self-awareness can only be based upon *reason*. Reason is man's last resort in coping with his mortality and the other calumnities of the earthly existence: *Κράτιστον δὴ πρὸς ἀλυπίαν φάρμακον [ἔστιν] ὁ λόγος καὶ ἡ διὰ τούτου παρασκευὴ πρὸς πάσας τοῦ βίου μεταβολάς.*¹³ Relying on reason leads to a state of *readiness*, which is perceived by both writers as a state of constant feeling of existential uncertainty and almost hopeless awareness of one's mortality.¹⁴ In this regard the motif of borrowing occurs: life is only borrowed to us and we should be prepared to return it to the borrower whenever he requests it. *Nos oportet in promptu habere quae in incertum diem data sunt et appellatos sine quaerella reddere*, says Seneca.¹⁵ As a stoic, he goes one step further than Plutarch and advocates man's right to suicide as a decent way out of this world.¹⁶

There are two crucially important implications of the above-delineated arguments. First, that the world is a place full of evils, making man's earthly existence a kind of unbearable burden, and subsequently, that death is good since it releases one from this burden. The flesh with its passions, fears, and illusions enslaves the soul and drags it down; therefore, death must be something joyful and blissful (*εὐδαιμόν τι καὶ μακάριον*).¹⁷ In this regard, both authors arrive at a pessimistic but significant conclusion, that it would be better if we were never born at all.¹⁸

Finally, no consolation can avoid the question of the *post mortem* destiny of the soul, which implies a shift from the ethical and psychological to the ontological and metaphysical plane of argumentation. While Seneca does not go into detail on this matter, sticking to the vague stoic understanding of the soul as a divine, fiery substance that somehow continues its existence after death, Plutarch elaborates on it basing his approach on Plato's *Apologia Socratis* (40C). There, for the sake of "objectivity", Socrates analyses three possibilities: that the soul ceases to exist together with the body; that it remains existent but in a deeply dormant state; and that it moves to a new abode. Whatever the case, argues Plato's Socrates (and Plutarch after him), death is not an evil as it liberates one from this wicked world. Needless to say, both Plato and Plutarch (and to some extent Seneca, in his stoic manner) strongly believed in the eternal existence of the soul as an entity different from the body. They considered that the soul could obtain the level of pure contemplation of the Truth only after separating from the body and its "insanity" (*τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀφρωσύνης*).¹⁹ Thus both in Plutarch and in Seneca we find a strongly negative attitude towards the body, an attitude upon which they ultimately base their attempts to console the bereaved. However, they seem to be unable to specify what it is that one should expect in the afterlife, once the material body is left behind.

¹³ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 6. In our opinion, the term *λόγος* here should be understood as *reason*.

¹⁴ Sen. *Ad Marc.* 9. 5. *Aufert vim praesentibus malis qui futura prospexit*, concludes the author. Cf. also Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 21.

¹⁵ Sen. *Ad Marc.* 10. 2. Cf. also Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 28. Plutarch compares humans with bankers (*οἱ τραπέζιται*) who should always be ready to return their loan to the creditors.

¹⁶ Sen. *Ad Marc.* 15-16.

¹⁷ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 13. Cf. Sen. *Ad Marc.* 11. 2.

¹⁸ Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 27. Plutarch illustrates this point with the story of the Phrygian king Midas and Silenus. We find the same story in Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* I, 114. Seneca does not mention it but comes to the same conclusion, cf. *Ad Marc.* 22.3: *felicissimum est non nasci*.

¹⁹ Plut. *Cons ad Apoll.* 13. Since pure knowledge cannot be acquired within the body, Plutarch advocates its mortification during one's lifetime (*ἐὰν ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν ὀμιλῶμεν τῷ σώματι*) and purification from it (*ἀλλὰ καθαρεύομεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ*). However, Ambrose expresses a similar thought: *Scimus tamen quod [anima] corpori supervivat, et ea, jam depositis proprii sensus repagulis expedita, libero cernat obtutu, quae ante sita in corpore non videbat* (*De excessu fratris* II 21).

IV

In the consolatory works of St. Ambrose and St. Jerome all the main elements of the genre are evident, revealing their thorough classical education and intentionally emulative approach. Large parts of Jerome's letter to Paula and of Ambrose's funeral speech are standard rhetorical *laudationes*, praises of Paula's daughter Blaesilla and Ambrose's brother Satyrus.²⁰ Both authors admit that sorrow is natural, as long as it does not exceed certain limits. Thus, to illustrate this "natural" range of mourning, Ambrose says: *Bos bovem requirit, seque non totum putat, et frequenti mugitu pium testatur amorem*. The comparison with animals and their grief is clearly reminiscent of Seneca's words about the cows that mourn the lost member of their herd (*vaccarum uno die alterove mugitus auditur*), even though the sense is slightly altered.²¹ Jerome is also considerate to Paula concerning her daughter's death: *Si parentem cogito*, says he, *non reprehendo quod plangis*,²² and elsewhere he admits: *Confiteor affectus meos, totus hic liber fletibus scribitur. Flevit et Jesus Lazarum, quia amabat illum*.²³

It is important to note that in the analysed works, for the reasons discussed below, Ambrose uses classical topoi much more frequently than Jerome. Thus he conforms to Plutarch and Seneca in stating that, in the ultimate perspective, death should not be a reason for grief since it is inevitable and common to all living beings: *mortem non esse lugendam: primum, quia communis est, et cunctis debita*.²⁴ Furthermore, it liberates us from all carnal and wordly calamities and therefore cannot be an evil: *Ergo si mors carnis et saeculi nos absolvit aerumnis, utique malum non est, quae libertatem restituit, excludit dolorem*.²⁵ Subsequently, coming one step closer to his pagan predecessors, Ambrose denotes the body as a "prison-house" (*corporeum ergastulum*) from which the soul is eager to escape: *quanto magis anima nostra corporeum istud evadere gestit ergastulum, quae motu aereo libera, nescimus quo vadat, aut unde veniat*.²⁶ We find a similar expression in Jerome, who speaks of "the burden of the flesh" (*sarcina carnis*) from which Blaesilla's spirit was delivered: *Postquam autem sarcina carnis abjecta, ad suum anima revolavit auctorem*.²⁷

This world is a place of misery, concludes Ambrose, and when death comes, there is no question of loss: *Non enim nobis ereptus es, sed periculis*, he says to his deceased brother. *Non vitam amisisti, sed ingruentium acerbitatum formidine caruisti*.²⁸ For Jerome, too, the world is "darkness" (*tenebrae*): *Faveamus Blaesillae nostrae, quae de tenebris migravit ad lucem*.²⁹ This leads Ambrose to a sombre thought previously

²⁰ Given his lifelong preoccupation – but quite atypically for other consolations – it comes as no surprise that Jerome first praises Blaesilla's knowledge of languages: *Si Graece loquentem audiisses, Latine eam nescire putares: si in Romanum sonum lingua se verterat, nihil omnino peregrini sermo redolebat. Jam vero quod in Origine quoque illo Graecia tota miratur, in paucis non dicam mensibus, sed diebus, Hebraeae linguae vicerat difficultates* (Ep. 39.1).

²¹ Amb. *De excessu fratris*, I 8; Sen. *Ad Marc.* 7. 2.

²² Hier. Ep. 39. 5.

²³ Idem. Ep. 39. 2. The reference is to Jn. 11. 35.

²⁴ Amb. *De excessu fratris*, II 3. Cf. II 4: *Quid enim absurdus, quam ut id quod scias omnibus esse praescriptum, quasi speciale deplores?* Death is for Ambrosius *lex communis* and *naturae consortium*. Plutarch and Seneca abound in such periphrases. Cf. also I 4: [Satyrus] *quod naturae communis fuit reddidit*.

²⁵ Ibid. II 21. Cf. also chapters II 18-20.

²⁶ Ibid. II 20.

²⁷ Hier. Ep. 39. 1.

²⁸ Amb. *De excessu fratris*, I 31.

²⁹ Hier. Ep. 39. 3.

expressed by Seneca and Plutarch – that it would be better if we were not born at all. However, he is careful enough to confirm this topos with the authority of Scripture: *Non nasci igitur longe optimum, secundum sancti Salomonis sententiam. Ipsum enim etiam ii qui sibi visi sunt in philosophia excellere secuti sunt.*³⁰

A number of other instances reveals Ambrose's debt to the pagan consolation writers and their line of thinking. Thus in several places he appeals to reason (*ratio*) and temperance (*modus*): *Cur enim moestitiam tuam non ratio potius quam dies leniat? Or: Sit tamen patiens dolor, sit in tristibus modus, qui exigitur in secundis.*³¹ Jerome, too, emphasizes this to Paula: *Attamen quod tempore mitigandum est, cur ratione non vincitur? And: Detestandae sunt istae lacrymae, plenae sacrilegio, incredulitate plenissimae, quae non habent modum.*³²

The set of traditional arguments can also be recognized in the well-known motif of loan (*faenus*) employed by Ambrose. Life is only borrowed to us by the Lender (*creditor*) and it is a fault if we refuse repayment: *An si pecuniam neges, culpa est: si hostiam neges, pietas est? (...) Naturae auctor, et necessitudinis creditor fraudari non queat. Itaque quanto uberior fenoris summa, tanto gratior sortis usura.*³³

An obvious borrowing from Plutarch (or from another common source such as Crantor) is the idea of excessive mourning as something befitting women, something that softens and effeminates man's spirit: *Denique Lyciorum feruntur esse praecepta, quae viros jubeant mulierum vestem induere, si moerori indulgeant; eo quod mollem et effeminatum judicaverint in viro luctum.*³⁴ Finally, Ambrose approaches Plutarch's and even Seneca's views concerning the cathartic and relieving function of death, but, as we shall see, in a radically different perspective: one should even desire death, he says. Why mourn over other people's death when it is exactly what we should seek for ourselves? (*Deformis est enim ... moerere in alio gravius quod in se ... sit expetendum*).³⁵ However, what Ambrose has in mind is one's readiness to sacrifice oneself for the faith, for religion, for righteous judgement (*pro fide, pro religione, pro aequitate iudicii*), not resignation or suicide. Thus, to draw a strong line of difference, he immediately condemns suicide as cowardice, madness (*amentia*), and the cause of permanent loss of one's ties with the beloved ones: *Mortem non ferentes, et mortem appetentes ... qui quoniam consentaneum naturae suae ferre ac perpeti nequiverunt, contrarium voto incidunt, ut ab his in perpetuum separentur quos sequi desideraverint.*³⁶

V

So far our brief survey has suggested that St. Ambrose and St. Jerome formally and generically based their consolatory writings upon those of their pagan predecessors. We

³⁰ Amb. *De excessu fratris*, II 30. Cf. also II 5: *Fuisse etiam quidam feruntur populi qui ortus hominum lugerent, obitusque celebrarent.*

³¹ Ibid. II 8 and II 11. The term *ratio* here corresponds to Plutarch's λόγος, which should not be understood as what Jerome rendered as *Verbum* in the Vulgate (see footnote 13).

³² Hier. Ep. 39. 5 and 39. 6.

³³ Amb. *De excessu fratris* I 3. Cf. Sen. *Ad Marc.*: *Mutua accepimus. Usus fructusque noster est, cuius tempus ille arbiter muneris sui temperat; (...) Pessimi debitoris est creditori facere convicium.* Cf. also Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 28.2 and see footnote 15.

³⁴ Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 7. Most likely he refers to Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 22: *Τὸν τῶν Λυκίων νομοθέτην φασι προστάξαι τοῖς αὐτοῦ πολίταις, ἐπὶ πένθῳσι, γυναικίαν ἀμφιεσαμένους ἐσθῆτα πενθεῖν, ἐμφαίνειν βουλευθέντα ὅτι γυναικῶδες τὸ πάθος καὶ οὐχ ἀρμόδιον ἀνδράσι.*

³⁵ Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 7.

³⁶ Ibid. II 11. It should be emphasized that Plutarch, unlike Seneca, does not approve of suicide as a solution to the problem of death.

should now pay attention to another aspect of their literary approach and answer our main research question: what is the crucial ingredient of their consolations that makes them wholly different in character from those of Plutarch and Seneca? In other words, what was the way a Christian author established a distance from the pagan role model he emulated, at least in the case of consolatory literature? At which point a discontinuity in the Crantorian tradition appeared?

The answer is evident: for a Christian writer, no proper consolation could even be conceived of without the notion of the Resurrection. It was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that gave death a radically new meaning – or, from the Christian point of view, that gave it *any* meaning at all. Thus we find in Ambrose and Jerome an entirely new layer of argumentation and interpretation, one that is certainly expected to appear but at the same time enters a complex interaction with the traditional pagan arguments used by the Christians. This interaction sometimes approaches the point of contradiction, which can be resolved only if we presume that the authors intentionally employ two separate levels of argumentation: 1) the one inherited through the literary consolatory tradition and appealing to the reader's common sense, and 2) the one based on the authority of *fides Christiana* and appealing to the reader's religious convictions. An underlying tension between these two levels appears occasionally as the authors refute the arguments they themselves have posed at other places.

Ambrose epitomizes the attitude a Christian should have towards grief and consolation in the following way: *Quem dolorem non soletur resurrectionis gratia?*³⁷ What sorrow is not excluded by the belief that nothing perishes in death? *Fleant ergo qui spem resurrectionis habere non possunt*, he concludes.³⁸ No doubt, death is something we all “owe” (*debitum est mortis*), but not to some abstract philosophical principle; we owe it to Adam, in whom we fell, in whom we were cast out of Paradise, in whom we died (*Lapsus sum in Adam, de paradiso ejectus in Adam, mortuus in Adam*).³⁹ And Adam means sin, which passed from one man upon all. However, Ambrose discerns three types of death: 1) natural (*naturalis*), 2) penitentiary (*poenalis*), and 3) spiritual (*spiritualis*).⁴⁰ Natural death is that by which the spirit is liberated from the body (*cum anima nexu corporis liberatur*) and concerning which all the traditional arguments appealing to one's common sense are fully applicable. It has also a prophylactic function, i.e. it prevents one from more sinning: *nam mihi lucrum est mori, ne plura peccem*. Penitentiary death was given to us by the Lord not so much as punishment, but as a remedy (*non enim pro poena Dominus, sed pro remedio dedit mortem*); it implies dying for sin and becoming alive for God (*una est cum morimur peccato, Deo vivimus*). Spiritual death means eternal condemnation due to one's sinful condition and implies not only the death of the flesh, but of the soul as well. It is this type of death that is truly regrettable and beyond consolation. Obviously, only the second level of argumentation can address the problem of the later two types of death.

Jerome also differentiates between spiritual and natural death and argues that only the former is worth grieving: *Lugeatur mortuus; sed ille quem gehenna suscipit, quem tartarus devorat, in cuius poenam aeternus ignis aestuat*.⁴¹ The cause of both natural

³⁷ Ibid. II 3.

³⁸ Ibid. I 70.

³⁹ Ibid. II 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid. II 36-37.

⁴¹ Hier. Ep. 39. 3.

and spiritual death is sin, i.e. Adam's fall: *Nempe illud quod in Moyse, id est, in Lege veteri sub peccati Adam omnes tenebantur elogio [damnatione]; et ad inferos descendentes consequenter lacrymae prosequuntur.*⁴² For Jerome, too, death carries a prophylactic role: it is good for one to die sooner *ne longo vitae itinere [al. longa vita in itinere] devii oberraret anfractibus.*⁴³

The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ have transformed *the very nature of death*. He could have avoided dying, but then death would remain the same as it had been before his coming. Thus his death means life for all those who follow him: *Unius morte mundus redemptus est. Potuit enim Christus non mori, si voluisset; sed neque refugendam mortem quasi ignavam putavit, neque melius nos quam moriendo servasset. Itaque mors ejus vita est omnium.*⁴⁴ In Jerome's wording, *In Jesu vero, id est, in Evangelio, per quem Paradisus est apertus, mortem gaudia prosequuntur.*⁴⁵ As a consequence, to mourn over those who die is a mark of infidelity, it reveals one's disobedience and lack of faith: *Non vereris, ne tibi Salvator dicat: Irasceris, Paula, quia tua filia, mea facta est filia? Indignaris de iudicio meo, et rebellibus lacrymis facis invidiam possidenti?*⁴⁶ Hence Jerome's somewhat harsh reprimand of Paula, which resembles Seneca's reproach of Marcia and her "maternal selfishness": *Si parentem cogito, non reprehendo quod plangis; et Christianam et Monacham, istis nominibus mater excluditur. (...) Detestandae sunt istae lacrymae, plenae sacrilegio, incredulitate plenissimae.*⁴⁷ What comes forth as opposed to the previously mentioned appeal to *ratio* is faith: *Sed ego rationem a Christo non exigo*, says Ambrose. *Si ratione convincor, fidem abnuo.*⁴⁸

It is interesting to note that both writers allude to some kind of self-conscious *post mortem* existence. Thus, in Jerome's letter, the deceased Blaesilla addresses her mother in the following way: *Putas me solam? Habeo pro te Mariam Matrem Domini. Multas hic video quas ante nesciebam. O quanto melior est iste comitatus.*⁴⁹ However, having said a lot about the separation of the soul from the body (note, for example, Jerome's expression *aliquem exire de corpore*, 39. 3), they both feel the need to emphasize the corporal nature of the resurrection on the Day of Judgement. Ambrose clarifies it in the following way: *Necesse est corpus resurgere, cuius actus expenditur. Quomodo enim in iudicium vocabitur anima sine corpore, cum de suo et corporis contubernio ratio praestanda est?*⁵⁰ Jerome does not mention it to Paula, but he does it in his letter to Theodora. In order to avoid any possibility of Origenian misinterpretation, he stresses the remaining ontological difference between the deceased and the angels: *Quando dicit, non nubent, neque nubentur, sed erunt sicut Angeli in coelis, non natura et substantia corporum tollitur, sed gloriae magnitudo monstratur. Neque enim scriptum est, erunt Angeli, sed sicut Angeli; ubi similitudo promittitur, veritas denegatur.*⁵¹

⁴² Ibid. 39. 4.

⁴³ Ibid. 39. 3.

⁴⁴ Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 46. Cf. also II 6: *et sic nobis sicut per unum mors, ita per unum etiam resurrectionis*. The first is Adam, the second is Christ.

⁴⁵ Hier. Ep. 39. 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Cf. also Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 26: *Quis enim tu es, qui de tuo merito ante pronunties? Cur praevenire desideras cognitorem? Cur eripis sententiam iudicaturus?*

⁴⁷ Hier. Ep. 39. 5-6. On the selfishness of the bereaved, but in a non-Christian context, cf. Sen. *Ad Marc.* 12.1 and Plut. *Ad Apoll.* 19.

⁴⁸ Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 89.

⁴⁹ Hier. Ep. 39. 7. Cf. Amb. *De excessu fratris* I 6. On the other side, in his letter to Theodora, Jerome compares death with falling asleep: *Neque enim mors, sed dormitio et somnus appellatur* (Hier. 75. 1).

⁵⁰ Amb. *De excessu fratris* II 65.

⁵¹ Hier. Ep. 75.2. His words are in reference to Matt. 12. 30.

VI

Finally, a question remains why St. Ambrose relies upon the available pagan tradition much more explicitly than St. Jerome. One would expect that the great admirer of Cicero and Demosthenes and the earnest student of Greek and Roman literature would freely reach for that precious heritage.⁵² However, Jerome's letter to Paula hardly contains any references to the pagan consolatory tradition. Its frame of reference is exclusively that of Scripture. There are only a few allusions to the concepts of the Crantorian lineage, most of them mentioned in this article. On the other side, as we have seen, Ambrose allows himself significant excursions into the pagan background, even though he ultimately reaches the point of refuting or minimizing most of the arguments of this origin.

The answer could be inferred from Jerome's position in Rome at the time after Blaesilla's death (385-389 A.D.). Jerome had already been the spiritual adviser of her mother Paula when the death of Blaesilla's husband led to her conversion as well. However, the intensity with which Blaesilla carried her austerities brought her a public accusation of fanaticism, particularly when she fell ill and died less than four months after the conversion. Jerome was blamed for what was perceived as canvassing both the mother and the daughter.⁵³ Paula, a wealthy Roman aristocrat and Jerome's main supporter, came under attack immediately after the funeral as her sincere adherence to Christianity was brought into question. "When you were carried fainting out of the funeral procession", Jerome writes to Paula, "whispers such as these were audible in the crowd: 'Is not this what we have often said? She weeps for her daughter, killed with fasting. How long must we refrain from driving those detestable monks out of Rome? Why do we not stone them or hurl them into the Tiber? They have misled this unhappy lady; that she is not a nun from choice is clear. No heathen mother ever wept for her children as she does for Blaesilla.'"⁵⁴

In other words, Paula's mourning over Blaesilla was publicly perceived as a sign of weakness that could further weaken the position of the Christian community in Rome, most particularly that of Jerome. In this context, the scope of his consolation surpassed the level of personal grief. As they were under attack by the pagan community of Rome, the adviser took care that his disciple regain her spiritual strength. These reasons could have dictated the general tone of the consolation and the apparent absence of the pagan literary elements. If so, this case would illustrate the complexity of the problem concerning the ambiguous attitude of the early Christian writers towards the tradition they emulated. Furthermore, this would lead to the problems of generic analysis, as Frances Young puts it. "Little of the Christian literature of the fourth and fifth centuries escapes influence from the classical traditions of antiquity", says she, "yet little of it can be analysed neatly according to the classical genres. (...) What makes generic analysis difficult is the fact that many different forms are used as vehicles for a single given tradition of Christian argument."⁵⁵ The consolations analysed here fit this conclusion perfectly.

⁵² On Jerome's attitude towards the pagan literary heritage see Nenad Ristović, *Starohrišćanski klasicizam. Pozitivni stavovi starohrišćanskih pisaca prema antičkoj knjizi* (Early Christian classicism. The positive attitudes of the early Christian writers toward the antique literature) (Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2005), 206-214.

⁵³ See Jerome, *Letters and Select Works. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 47-49.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 53. The English translation is by W. H. Fremantle.

⁵⁵ Frances Young, "Classical genres in Christian guise; Christian genres in classical guise" in: *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, Andrew Louth (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).