

Review

Nilsson, I. *Raconter Byzance: la littérature au XIIe siècle*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014. Pp. 258. ISBN 9782251444994. €45,00

This third publication in a series of monographs under the general editorship of Paolo Odorico, commissioned as an exploration of twelfth-century Byzantine literary culture, examines and challenges implications of ‘exceptionality’ implicit in much academic discussion of the Byzantine novel. Motifs and expressive devices recognisable as typical or strongly associated with the twelfth-century novel are frequently to be found also in writings as disparate in style and function as historical narrative and the funeral poem. Ingela Nilsson’s lively and attractively-written study of Byzantine ‘Romanesque’ literary discourse explores such relations between literary form and content and their influence on the character and significance of Byzantine literary production. Five chapters of richly sourced critical discussion explain with precision and illuminating insights how political, cultural and educational practices in the eleventh and twelfth century Byzantium shaped and in turn were mediated by artefacts and processes associated with literary production and its recursive influence on court life and associated literary consumption.

In her opening discussion of Manuel II Palaiologos’ famous description of Spring, ΕΑΡΟΣ ΕΙΚΩΝ, Nilsson illustrates how aspects of the writer’s personal experience are embodied as well as ‘represented’ by the insertion of a text in time and space. Manuel, in this example, responds to the sight of birds portrayed in the tapestry he has seen in the royal collection in Paris, around 1400, by expressing himself in terms that evoke the rich quality of his personal feelings, yet the form and literary mode of his evocation are filtered through a self-conscious dependence upon richly-layered cultural and personal accomplishments, derived from his upbringing in the fourteenth-century imperial court and upon lifelong engagement with and practice in the ancient tradition of ekphrastic writing (*imitatio*). Nilsson’s interpretation of authorship here is framed upon a concept of agency as insertion of a particular text in a literary flow, transacted in time and space, the *contexte culturel*. The author’s ‘self’ is less important than the written text itself. Literary production and ensuing questions of interpretation are, Nilsson argues, best considered not from the creative perspective of the author, but from the circumstances of commission, construction, and

reception of his writings. The referential and cultural significance of a text, its *littérarité*, derive from its purposive origination and intention to engage with a ‘public’.

Orientalism¹ and its ‘colonialist’ implications² are touched upon in the author’s brief treatment of tradition as an enduring component of literary production and ‘transformation’ in the Greek society from late Antiquity down to the present day. Such appropriations from the past and their interdependencies with other cultures and traditions are, quoting Said’s formulation, ‘une norme universelle’. From a narratological viewpoint, genre functions to denote a work’s structural relations with other works, rather than to define a set of features internal to and definitive of a particular work’s meaning and purpose. Narratological questions deal with the role and function of stories as they are told, and Byzantium ‘overflowed’ (*débordait*) with stories whose character and purpose were continually changing and developing. This book shows how narratology provides tools with which we can delineate and classify ways in which such writing is structured and deployed to attain specific transmissive effects.

In Chapter II, *Un Point de Départ Évident: le Roman Comnène*, Nilsson explains how the twelfth-century Byzantine novel must be understood against a background of wide-ranging changes after Manzikert, across social, political and economic fronts. With flair and economy she exposes how twelfth-century Byzantine literature reflects its relation to contemporary events and associated social and economic changes, such as the rise to influence of a lower tier of aristocracy, florescence of the imperial court as a magnet attracting individuals seeking personal advancement and reward, and the increased prominence of ‘provincial’ cities in the metropolitan circuit of literary and political networking. She shows vividly and succinctly how the ways in which the ‘stories’ contained and intricately reworked in the four Komnenian novels, reflect and ‘effect’ what they have to tell us by reference to the authors’ allusive reworking of contemporary events. The four Komnenian novelists are then introduced and their works identified as key sources to illuminate the distinctiveness of twelfth-century novelistic discourse and its potential contribution to our appreciation of the aesthetics of Byzantine literature in general.

In Chapter III, historiography’s chief function of recording and explaining events is examined. It is especially important in a Byzantine context to distinguish the historian’s use of transmissive colouring, inherent in all narrative (story-telling), from what may be termed the ‘essential facts of the case’; to separate *le récit* from *la vérité*: Nilsson quotes Barthes’

¹ E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978), 19.

² A. Cameron, *The Byzantines* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 20.

insight concerning the latent semantic charge inherent in even the bald ‘matter of fact-ness’ of a list of events, where the disarming simplicity of a chronological entry may add a suggestion of self-evident ‘normality’ or ‘naturalness’ to reporting of the ‘event’ itself. But the signifier, or referent, always transmits an additional charge of meaning upon the simplicity and seeming neutrality of the fact or event signified, a supplement which Barthes termed *l’effet de réel*. Form and content may conspire to subvert the simplicity of straightforward ‘transmission’, enabling an author to enjoy a ‘writer’s zone of freedom’ exercised through application to ‘form considered as human intention’.³

In such ways, Nilsson shows the reader how narratological principles can be used to interpret the ancient novel and other Byzantine works, whose literary and social functions may have become obscured over time. This is especially the case in respect of well-known resemblances between Byzantine novels and lives of the saints (hagiography) where ‘surprising’ resemblances occur in accounts of experiences of erotic love, physical desire and its consummation. We should not, the author points out, expect the life of a saint to represent ‘historical fact’ any more than we would be correct, narratologically, to read history as (merely) an inventory of ‘facts’. In the novel, lovers are driven by *eros* or *pothos* to act as they do – as is their fate (Tyche). Similarly, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, stories of the ‘doings’ of early Christians illustrate how ‘Divine Providence’ is driven by *eros*, the Creator’s love for his own creation, fulfilling the ‘will of God for human kind’ and shaping human lives. A constitutive recursiveness thus shapes and animates narration, in which both literary and aesthetic principles infuse accounts of events and so, in both genres, reach out beyond narrative itself to afford meaning and pleasure to an imagined reader/audience in a continuing thread of repetition and variation.

Chapter IV tackles the wide and, in scope, somewhat unmanageable subject of Rhetoric, especially the use of *ekphrasis* in panegyric writing, and shows how the form and content of educational training in childhood shaped the deployment of rhetorical tropes and their literary significance in adult life in the work of twelfth-century imperial courtiers. Early training acquired through the practice of *progymnasmata* during the education of the young had a profound and lasting influence upon a writer’s later works, one that extended beyond the mere acquisition of a body of narrative material, or ‘content’, with which a subsequent composition might be constructed. Rewriting passages based on earlier study of passages from both scripture and classical authors provided aspiring authors with not only ‘raw

³ S. Sontag, introduction to *Writing degree zero*, by R. Barthes and translated by A. Lavers and C. Smith (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1967), xiii-xiv.

material', but a practical training in writing that accorded a central formative role to 'l'imitation et la transformation'. Chapter V focuses more directly on stylistic features and functions of the novel as a literary form in twelfth-century cultural life, in other words, the court. Especially important were some narrative features displayed in the Komnenian novel that enabled form and content to exert a variable interplay between meaning and context, and in this chapter, histories by Eustathios of Thessalonike and Nicetas Choniates, Niketas Eugenianos' novel *Drosilla and Charicles*, and Manasses' *Hodoiporikon* are drawn upon to illustrate the authors' distinctive approach to narrative, and one which manifests itself variously in disparate twelfth-century texts in their deployment of meticulously structured narratives and use of specific motifs and rhetorical features. Chapter Six extends this wider view and concludes that we must not in any context treat twelfth-century writings as 'one-offs' or 'exceptional'. Their literary features, characterised by frequent use of imitation and variation and by deployment of motifs, images, characterisations and dramatic contretemps, are recognisable both from events in contemporary Byzantine high society and in certain guises borrowed for them from the Bible, heroic and Late Antique literature. The author acknowledges that this long and varied list might have included texts and genres ranging from the satirical *Timarion*, to the coarser and more bitter diatribe *Anacharsis*, Theodore Prodromos' parodic *Katomyomachia* and the anonymous (Euripidean) plaintive cento, *Christos Paschon*. A comprehensive study of Byzantine story telling would thus embrace a vast 'mélange' of diverse texts revealing how Byzantium told its story: *raconte Byzance*. But this book provides both students and scholars with a sure guide and stimulating exposition of what made the twelfth-century Byzantine novel sparkle for its courtly readership.

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