
Three Byzantine Literatures: A Layman's Guide*

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THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE lasted for over a thousand years. Its élite was numerically stronger at some periods, few in numbers in others. But throughout the Empire's existence this élite set a high premium on literary culture and production. Being well-versed in a classical poet, and being able to turn out a witty epigram or, better yet, a eulogy to the Emperor, could bring more than material rewards or the applause of the connoisseur—literary or scholarly success could open the road to high dignities in the state bureaucracy or the ecclesiastical hierarchy. A young *littérateur* could fancy he was carrying a high official's insignia in his bag full of notes on a difficult author.

Under these circumstances it is not astonishing that both the cultivated and lowbrow wrote a great deal. Despite the losses inflicted upon the library collections of Constantinople by the Latin conquerors of 1204 and the Turkish conquerors of 1453, the remnants of Byzantine letters, much of them salvaged by the collectors of the Renaissance, are impressive. In bulk, the surviving Byzantine literature by far surpasses the classical Greek.

And yet, Byzantine authors, with the possible exception of Prokopios, the historian of Justinian's time, are almost unknown to modern readers. Why should this be so? Partly, the reasons have to be sought in us; but partly, they are due to the character of the literature itself. Byzantium is only indirectly a part of our Western heritage. Thus we do not know the Byzantine world as well as do the Orthodox Greeks, as well as the Orthodox Slavs, whose mediaeval literature was patterned on Byzantine letters. The Song of Roland is closer to us than its roughly contemporary counterpart, the epic of Digenis Akritas, the Byzantine hero of the frontier struggle with Islam. Since the Renaissance we have

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valued originality in literature; the Byzantines, like Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, valued imitation of ancient models. Form is only one of our concerns in appreciating a literary work; but Byzantine refined intellectuals were preoccupied with form often at the expense of content. If we want to look for concrete information and sincerity of feeling, we have to descend to the level of the less educated writer.

On the whole Byzantium's literature was too much a reflection of the upper layer of its society; with one important exception it did not deal predominantly with timeless subjects of concern to all mankind. This one exception was God and man's relation to Him. But our age is too secular to appreciate this intensity of religious feeling. The beauty of the religious poetry of a Romanos the Melodist (sixth century) or an Andrew of Crete (d. 740) is lost on most of us.

In the light of the preceding sentences, it becomes understandable why Prokopios should be the one Byzantine author known to the general public today: his *History of the Wars* deals with the reign of Justinian whom many people, and a minority of Byzantinists, consider to have been the last Latin Roman emperor; Prokopios's *Secret History* is a vivid, and often salacious, lampoon on Justinian and his wife Theodora. Other Byzantine historians approached the depth and broadness of Prokopios; but they dealt with emperors whose names are not widely known—who has heard of Emperor John Tzimiskes, let alone of one of his historians, Leo the Deacon? Moreover, with occasional exceptions, these historians were prudish. We learn from them that emperors had illegitimate children, but we hear little, if anything, about the circumstances which produced them.

It may be argued that the achievements of Byzantine literature are inferior to those of Western mediaeval literature. Both the West and the East inherited the motif of a mortal's descent to limbo from the apocryphal gospels; in the West, the utilization of the motif led to Dante's *Divine Comedy*; in the East, it produced two relatively short ironical works in the style of Lucian (second century A.D.): the *Timarion* (twelfth century) and the *Mazaris* (fifteenth century). But when we turn to historiography, we obtain a different picture. Where is a western Prokopios? Psellos's historical *Memoirs* covering the period between 976 and 1078 is the best work of its kind in the whole Middle Ages. No western imperial princess undertook a work similar to the *Alexiad* of Anna Komnene. At the age of fifty-five Anna wrote the history of her father Alexios Komnenos's reign (1081-1118), and wasted no opportunity in the course of this work to pour scorn upon the uncultivated Latin crusaders. No Western ruler of the fourteenth century produced a work similar to the *History*, or rather apologetic *Memoirs*, of Emperor John Kantakouzenos (1347-55), written after John's abdication. Otto

of Freising was an outstanding western historian of the twelfth century, but his Byzantine counterpart, Niketas Choniates, was just as good. In the field of historiography, at least, Byzantium's contributions were equal or superior to the best the West had produced.

Byzantine civilization was a composite entity in which Hellenistic and Roman traditions coexisted with Christian ideology and popular culture of various origins. At first glance, its literate society may seem uniform, but we can discern gradations within it. It follows that Byzantine literature, a reflection of the empire's civilization and society, is not monolithic but shows manifold aspects. I therefore propose to discuss not one, but, as it were, three Byzantine literatures: first the learned one; its language is, or attempts to be, classical Greek; its model is the canon of the ancient writers; it centers around the court, the state administrative offices, the literary salon, the bishop's curia, or the study of an impecunious savant. Second, the spiritual one; its language is the *koiné*, based on the Septuagint and the gospels; its models are the Holy Writ and sometimes the church fathers; it centers around the monastery and is read there, in the cell of an anchorite, or in the mansion of a rich and pious layman. Third, the popular one; its language is an elevated form of the spoken Greek of the time seasoned with some notions learned in elementary school; its models are not consciously imitated, but absorbed, and their provenance is varied: the Semitic, later the Islamic East, the feudal West, and the higher forms of Byzantine literature. It centers around the campfire of the Anatolian frontier, or the retainer's room of the feudal castle—but it was transmitted to us predominantly through the monastic milieu. This tripartite division should not be taken too literally—there were princes who wrote in the popularizing language and monks who imitated and edited the classics—but on the whole it holds true.¹

¹When the first draft of the present essay was written—quite a number of years ago—the idea of a tripartite division of Byzantine letters and of correlating genres and levels of style with the social and educational standing of the producers and consumers of literature was a new one. Today, this idea is implied in many modern writings, such as those dealing with levels of style. It was also partly implemented in the standard reference work by Professor H. Hunger (1978, see bibliographical appendix below), where the body of Byzantine literary writings in high and middle styles is discussed by genre. The tripartite division adopted here has at least two advantages: it introduces a simple and practical principle for organizing the material; and it reminds the reader of the social reality in which a product of any literature is embedded. It also has at least one shortcoming—it only incidentally mentions developments in time, either within genres and within groups of producers and consumers of literature, or across Byzantine literature and civilization as a whole. The idea of development in time within the body of Byzantine civilization was especially stressed by scholars of the first half of our century, during their campaign against the distorted image of Byzantium as a petrified, unchanging society. In recent years (especially after 1978) the concept of change across time has been again applied to Byzantine literature as a whole in the numerous writings of Professor A. P. Kazhdan.

When we speak of Byzantine literature, we have in mind works produced between the time of Constantine the Great (or Heraklios, a seventh-century emperor) and the fall of the Empire in 1453. The view that the Byzantines of the High Empire held of their literature was different. To them, that literature also encompassed all that was written in Greek from Homer through the tragic poets of the fifth century B.C., through Plato, Demosthenes, the orators of the imperial time like Aelios Aristides, along with the Holy Writ, the church fathers and the Christian rhetoricians and poets of the early Byzantine times: Saint Basil, Saint John Chrysostom, Synesios, and above all, Saint Gregory the Theologian. This fusion of the pagan and Christian writings into one body of texts to be revered and imitated did not happen without some soul-searching. Some—if by far not all—apologists of the early Christian times, and the lowbrow monks of the Byzantine period rejected pagan wisdom and literature. In the usage of a segment of the Byzantine and Slavic *literati*, “Hellenic” meant “pagan” down to the last centuries of the Empire, and even after its fall. But it was impossible to create Christian Greek literature out of nothing. The church fathers of the fourth century who helped to create such new Christian genres as the saint’s eulogy, asserted that in their writings they would not follow the rules of eulogy elaborated in pagan literature and then calmly proceeded to do just that. They could not have done otherwise, for they themselves had been educated in pagan schools—in Athens or in Antioch for instance—or were formed by the best pagan rhetoricians, such as the late fourth-century writer Libanios. Officially, only a subordinate role was assigned to pagan letters: a selective study of “exterior Wisdom” was only to prepare for the better understanding of the Christian religion, that “Wisdom of ours.” This was the point of view of Saint Basil. In practice, at least in the practice of the highly educated writers, pagan literary devices were predominant. It is only by rare veiled allusions to the Holy Writ, that a sixth-century rhetorician like Chorikios of Gaza betrays his Christianity. That this permissive attitude spread down to the middle echelons of the ecclesiastic milieu may be deduced from the following passage in a short life of Isidore of Pelusion (about the year 400), rewritten in some office of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the mid-eleventh century:

Isidore . . . turned his whole mind toward the gathering of wisdom. He carefully studied the New and the Old Testaments, but he also acquired the whole of the pagan culture (τὴν τῶν Ἑλλήνων παιδείωσιν) to the highest degree. For those who are lovers of the (spiritual) Good (φιλοκάλοις) are in need of it, so that they may be in a position to elucidate and properly expound the workings of Reason. . . . A gifted and reasonable man should not shun all pagan

learning; rather, he should accept it and master it to the highest degree. For a reasonable and God-loving person may profit from it; on the contrary, a frivolous and pusillanimous man derives no profit even from the teachings of the Church, on account of his innate sluggishness and indifference. Thus those who are industrious and love letters (φιλολόγοις) derive profit even from exterior Wisdom.²

Thus, pagan Greek literature provided the Byzantines not only with reading matter, but with most of its genres—the drama being a notable exception—and devices which were to be widely imitated. How successful this imitation was can be seen from the fact that Byzantine authors succeeded at times in fooling modern scholars. Only in the twenties of the nineteenth century did scholars discover that the dialogue *Philopatris* going under the name of Lucian (second century A.D.) was not by Lucian, but was written by a Byzantine; recently, the author of *Philopatris* has been dated to the tenth or even to the eleventh century. Only about forty years ago was it finally established that two discourses going under the name of Aelios Aristides were not antique works, but had been written by a fourteenth-century Byzantine humanist-monk Thomas-Theodoulos Magister. And only in the past thirty years or so research has been able to establish for sure that some readings in Greek tragic poets such as Sophocles—previously taken for genuine—were really felicitous conjectures made by fourteenth-century Byzantine editors.

This classicizing bent of Byzantine literature made it easy for sophisticated readers to discern who were the “best” authors in their midst. They were the authors who had mastered the Attic tongue and were able to use the rare grammatical forms and categories long dead in the spoken language; authors who could appropriately, or not quite appropriately, allude to an antique poet—Homer, a tragedian, Pindar, a less known lyric author, in that order of ascending refinement—to make their point. Authors who could avoid the vulgarity of concrete detail and could gracefully choose an indirect path instead of a straight one, who would say “my genuine consanguinarian” instead of “brother” and “shining spiritual sword” instead of “argument,” and “a wooden chair riding on the back of a horse” instead of “saddle.” Authors who would intersperse their balanced prose with assonances,

²Cf. the Imperial Menologion version of the *Life* of Isidore of Pelusion, in Morton Smith, “An Unpublished Life of St. Isidore of Pelusion,” *Εὐχαριστήριον Τιμητικὸς τόμος ἐπὶ τῇ 45-ετηρίδι τῆς ἐπιστημονικῆς δράσεως καὶ τῇ 35-ετηρίδι τακτικῆς καθηγεσίας Ἀμίλκα Σ. Ἀλιβιζάτου* (Athens, 1958), p. 436. I consider the so-called Imperial Menologion to be the product of the chancery of Patriarch Michael Keroularios. He, rather than Emperor Michael the Paphlagonian, is the Μιχαὴλ Π. (i.e., Πατριάρχης) of the acrostics placed at the end of each *Life* in that Menologion.

rhymes, and puns. Finally, they were the authors who, without saying so directly, could let their well-read audience know that in construing their discourses, they were following the outlines recommended by the best ancient theoreticians of oratory.

The technical excellence of these “best” authors, so defined, like that of Photios, Eustathios of Thessalonike, Niketas Choniates, Maximus Planoudes, or of Theodore Metochites commands our respect, even awe, although their obscurity exasperates us on occasion. It is with the second-best learned authors that we are less patient. We feel that they are insincere, artificial, and fail to live up to their models. Their presumably classical language shows enough hyper-correct forms and lexical and grammatical slips to remind us that the idiom in which these authors were really at ease was the mediaeval, rather than the classical, Greek. Their quotations from classical works impress us little, for we soon discover that they come not from their being immersed in these works themselves, but from thumbing through excerpts or through anthologies of sayings for appropriate occasions. Their elusive style is both tantalizing and frustrating: after disentangling all the intricacies of a phrase, we come out with a banal meaning. Their adherence to ancient textbooks of rhetoric—reused in Byzantine times—deadens our interest for the developments in, say, a speech in honor of an emperor. We know that after the inevitable preamble, stressing that no one could possibly be equal to the task of treating the lofty topic at hand, the author will nevertheless proceed to discuss the emperor’s birthplace, ancestry, youth, education, deeds (classed according to the four cardinal virtues), and so on, in accordance with the arrangements presented for the “Imperial Discourse” by the late antique rhetorician Menander (third century A.D.).

In addition to excessive adherence to models, any Classicism has another weakness: imitation of the wrong models. Byzantine writers did not avoid this pitfall. They imagined themselves writing in the Attic language of Plato, but in fact they followed the precepts of Atticism, itself an archaistic current of the first centuries of our era represented by Philostratos, Lucian, Dio Chrysostom and Aelios Aristides. They wanted to write like Demosthenes in the fourth century B.C. but they followed the precepts of rhetoricians who had lived in the first four centuries after Christ. Both in their aesthetic canons and in practice, these writers were at best Christian continuators of Hellenistic Alexandrine scholarship and such writers of the Second Sophistic as Philostratos, not of the spirit of Plato’s Athens.

Given these characteristics, we will find Byzantine literature most pleasing in the small genres where form is predominant, such as epistolography or especially in early epigrams transmitted by the Palatine Anthology, like a funny one by Palladas. Freely translated, it runs:

There once was a flirtatious creature,
The daughter of a grammar teacher.
She bore, after embraces tender,
A child of masc., fem., neuter gender.³

The same characteristics will be disturbing in genres such as historiography, which we cultivate for the sake of information, but which the ancients, and therefore the Byzantines as well, viewed as a form of rhetoric. Here we expect the author to tell us what happened in his own words rather than in terms borrowed from Thucydides, Herodotos or—and this is least painful—from Xenophon.

Still, the Byzantines wrote not for us but for their equals and, above all, superiors. We should, therefore, stop giving them grades in terms of our own system of values, and close the discussion of the learned literature with an enumeration of genres that were practiced in it

First came rhetoric. In fact, Byzantine society knew what we call vertical mobility to a considerable degree; but according to official ideology, the Empire was a pyramid with the emperor, his family, and the court at its summit. The lofty position of the ruler, the exigencies of imperial policy, and the ambitions of the courtiers, called forth a deluge of imperial panegyrics, which were the official propaganda and the journalism of the Byzantine Middle Ages. The court rhetoricians vied in spreading the message of the Byzantine imperial idea and in showing off their learning. In the *Mirrors of Princes*, emperors could contemplate their god-like nature. But, as the same *Mirrors* pointed out, although god-like, the emperor was mortal. He, or a member of his family, or a dignitary would die: promptly the funerary orations were pronounced or the poetic funerary dirges sung and written down for posterity. An important event in the court or in the life of a dignitary would elicit another speech. On holy days, high prelates would pronounce homilies (some homiletic literature in high style still awaits its editor). On other festive occasions, declamatory speeches or poems called *ekphraseis* would be delivered at the court or in a literary salon: descriptions of buildings, of a city, of a work of art.

A man of letters would leave the capital and his friends there, or would learn about a new talent in a neighboring city: a learned and witty correspondence would be started, not so much to keep in touch or to convey messages (these were passed on by the letter carriers), as to impress each other with literary erudition and elegant style. Each other—and posterity. For from the beginning, these letters were meant for publication.

³*Anthologia Palatina*, 9:489. Palladas is dated to about the year 400.

Next came history. Not world chronicles written by less refined authors (though not necessarily by monks), but histories of a period or of a single emperor, memoirs, or accounts of single events. Saving the imperial past from "depths of oblivion" or from the "all-gnawing tooth of time"—to use Byzantine expressions—was considered an occupation worthy of a princely pen. Emperors and imperial princes tried their hand at antiquarian, historical and memoiristic writing: Constantine Porphyrogennetos (or his ghost writers) in the tenth century, Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna Komnene in the twelfth, John Kantakouzenos in the fourteenth, Manuel II in the fifteenth. Events reported by ancient historians were sometimes used by Byzantines as models for the description of similar events in their own histories—thus Prokopios and Kantakouzenos patterned their descriptions of the plague of the middle of the sixth century (541-42) and of the Black Death (1346-47) respectively on Thucydides' description of the plague in Athens. But usually reality was depicted quite faithfully. However reluctantly, learned historians did resign themselves to use barbaric words to designate notions unknown to the ancients; in short, high style did not necessarily imply linguistic purism. Thus we read the word *λίχιος* (i.e. the liegeman) in the work of the bluestocking Anna Komnene. The antiquarian spirit of Byzantium was so strong that, but for one or two centuries, we have adequate narrative sources for the whole span of the Empire's existence.

Life at court was a very competitive affair. In general, Byzantine courtiers, hemmed in in a social space where candidates for a position were much more numerous than the positions themselves and where so much was at stake, were a quarrelsome lot and took umbrage easily. Two dignitaries, two prelates, or two vain intellectuals would have a falling out: a war of lampoons would be the consequence. The authors would accuse each other of all sorts of vices, among which lack of literary and scientific knowledge would be prominent. In their war, the adversaries would draw from an arsenal of antique invective (including accusations of pederasty), but would occasionally adopt a Christian literary form, if it fitted the enemy: thus in the eleventh century Michael Psellos composed a lampoon against a monk by the name of Jacob in the form of an ecclesiastical hymn; the first letters of its strophes formed the following acrostic: "I sing harmoniously of Jacob the Drunkard."

Among genres imitating antique models, poetry was least successful. True, it was written in meters purporting to continue the classical patterns: hexameter, pentameter, iambic trimeter and anacreontic. But since long and short syllables no longer existed in Byzantine Greek, these meters underwent a change; thus the Middle Byzantine iambic trimeter was, in practice, a verse of twelve syllables with a break in the middle (after the fifth or the seventh syllable) and with an obligatory

stress on the eleventh syllable. Some attempts at imitating the Homeric, or better epic, dialect, such as those by Planoudes (ca. 1300), were fairly successful. Others, whether undertaken by Gregory of Nazianzos in the fourth century, by Empress Eudokia in the fifth, or by Theodore Metochites in the fourteenth, were qualified failures. The most felicitous imitations were *centos*, that is, combinations of lines of antique poets in such a manner that they would result in new contents. Such were, in the fifth century, the stories from the New Testament patched together by Empress Eudokia from Homeric lines and, in the twelfth century, the tragedy "The Suffering Christ," one-third of its two thousand six hundred verses consisting of lines from Euripides and Aischylos.

The long learned poems dealt with subjects which we do not consider proper for poetic treatment, even though French readers thought otherwise as late as the eighteenth century: I am referring to the *Jardins* by Jacques Delille. These learned Byzantine poems had a didactic purpose. The gospel of John, the first eight books of the Bible, the book of a prophet, or the first chapter of Genesis on the creation of the world in six days would be put to verse or embroidered upon. Allegorical poems would describe the struggle of the body with the soul; other authors would sing the praises of such branches of "mathematics" as harmonics and astronomy in hundreds of hexameters; describe a giraffe or elephant; write chronicles; or recount Homeric epics in thousands of hexameters or dodecasyllables.

The best achievements of Byzantine poetry lie in the epigrammatic genre, which I already had an occasion to praise. The famous Greek anthology comprising twenty-two thousand lines is the result of compilations undertaken by Byzantine erudites of the ninth, tenth, and fourteenth centuries. Hundreds of its epigrams belong to Byzantine authors from the fourth to the tenth century (thus, its Book eight consists of epitaphs by Gregory of Nazianzos). Some of these epigrams are a bit pedantic, but some are really witty and a few even risqué. The milieu that produced these trifles is to be sought among the high officials of the administration; even emperors like Leo the Wise (886-912) tried their hand at them.

But these consuls, *referendarii* and lawyers were not the only practitioners of small and middle size poetic forms. Among the Byzantine *literati* of the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries we meet a small but vociferous group of intellectuals who claim to be poor and who never tire of telling their readers about the hardships under which they have to live. Today we know enough of these intellectuals' social standing to realize that they exaggerated their plight; still, for literary purposes at least, they were particularly interested in filling their allegedly empty stomachs. They begged for government grants, better living accommodations, for

a horse and fodder, for a garment. They were conscious of their culture; still, they fawned upon their benefactors, and they hoped to be admitted into the magic circle in which a rich patron dispensed his liberality. The standard literary means for gaining such admission were flattery of the rich, making fun of themselves, and the display of learning. This included writing petitions, or executing small poems on order: an epitaph to be put into a church over a rich man's tomb, or a description of a work of art (an *ekphrasis*, as we already know), a dirge or a wedding song. The Byzantine dodecasyllable was used on most of these occasions.

The classicizing attitude of the Byzantines which we value little in their own literary production, was a blessing in disguise, both for them and for ourselves. A blessing for them, because it kept them familiar with classical antiquity. If you have to dig up Solon and Lykourgos in order to compare them with a wise and just saint, you learn something about these ancient legislators in the process. A blessing for us, because we owe the vast majority of our classical Greek texts to the piety, competence and pedantry of the Byzantine scholars and bibliophiles. One of the two earliest Plato manuscripts that survive (*Clarkianus* 39, once at Patmos, now at Oxford), containing the first twenty-four dialogues, was executed in 895 at the behest of a Byzantine prelate, Arethas, who provided it with scholia in his own hand. Arethas was scandalized by the licentiousness of Lucian but he read and annotated him assiduously. Our indebtedness to Byzantine literary criticism is also great. We owe to it the preservation of fragments and contents of works now lost. I have in mind not only Byzantine philological and lexicographical works, but also, and above all, the *Bibliotheca* by Patriarch Photios, a kind of literary diary which gives us the contents of some 280 works, a number of which have since disappeared. These works were presumably read and discussed in Photios' circle; however it may have been, the *Bibliotheca* reflects the personal experience of the learned patriarch himself, who must have read, or at least leafed through, held in his own hand, or marked for excerpting, the items he lists in his work.

Classicism, however, had other consequences which determined the character of Byzantine letters. Except for historians and philosophers, Byzantine writers were not often influenced by their immediate predecessors; each generation went back to antique sources (and often, as we have seen, misunderstood them), rather than build upon the achievements of the preceding one. Exceptions, such as that offered by Nikephoros Blemmydes (thirteenth century) who drew upon an epitome by John Tzetzes (twelfth century) for classical examples that he put into his *Imperial Statue*, are rare enough to confirm the rule. What we call Byzantine Renaissances—that of the Macedonian dynasty, ninth to the tenth century, that of the Komnenoi—twelfth century—that

of the Palaiologoi—fourteenth century—are just intensifications of contacts with antiquity which have never been lost, rather than rediscoveries of ancient culture. Antique literary culture was endemic in Byzantium. Some think that this is one of the reasons Byzantium did not know a Renaissance similar to that in the West. The Byzantines were too familiar with ancient culture to react to it as violently as did the barbaric West which had been less familiar with it for centuries.

While in a learned literary work numerous allusions to ancient writers would surround an occasional quotation from the gospels, the proportions would be reversed in an average work of spiritual literature. Works of the second variety of Byzantine letters take their inspiration from the language and substance of the Holy Writ and of the works of the church fathers. There, allusions to Homer would be more rare and would be outnumbered by quotations from the psalms. By the prevailing Byzantine standards, this literature was not highbrow, that is, obscure and replete with secular and classicizing elements, and its authors knew it. But they also knew that writing in a highbrow fashion was a goal to be striven for. All this can be seen from the following illustrations: First: about 1210, the highbrow historian Niketas Choniates composed a speech honoring his emperor who had just slaughtered the Turkish sultan. The subtitle of the speech ran: "This speech is full of clarity on account of the limitations of the listeners." In what did this clarity consist? It consisted in using the language of the Bible, in alluding to the Psalter, and in imitating (to the extent to which this refined author was capable of so doing) the style of a simple church sermon. Second: in one saint's *Life* the author thundered against worldly learning but did so in such detail that the invective was at the same time a display of his own worldly wisdom. Third: while ridiculing the pursuits of technical (and presumably pagan) philosophers, a church father would slip in an allusion or two so as to let the initiated reader know that that father too, was familiar with this nonsense. This defensive attitude speaks for itself.

It is a truth only secretly admitted by snobs of all times that the less highbrow a literature is the more entertaining it is. One of the two Byzantine equivalents of the modern novel was created in the ecclesiastical milieu. This equivalent is the biography of a saint. We know several thousands of these stories. The hagiographic genre has some antique as well as early Christian antecedents and was developed both in its less sophisticated and its more refined forms by the church fathers of the fourth century. Later on, in any case starting with the ninth century, a typical *Life* of a saint has its rules and commonplaces and follows a rigid plan. In the preface, the author has to stress his ignorance and to say that he undertook his work upon the instigation of his abbot,

or even the deceased saint himself, or simply because he remembered the parable of the hidden talents. Already the saint's parents were saintly and rich (the latter was often true in real life; in literature, the motif enabled the hero charitably to squander parental possessions in his later life). As a child, the saint does not play with other children, but spends his time meditating on the scriptures which he learns, sometimes by heart, with astonishing facility; if he is a dullard, a miracle improves his intelligence after a night spent under an altar. Soon he retires to the desert, or joins a monastic community under the guidance of a spiritual father who puts him to many unpleasant tasks. When his fame grows, he flees to another place, shunning notoriety; he beats all records for asceticism, but he is no show-off; he refuses ecclesiastical dignities or accepts them only because he has to obey his superiors; he is tempted by the devil who instigates brigands, wild animals and sinful ecclesiastics against him. The saint invariably triumphs, although he may suffer occasional setbacks. In his victories he is assisted by the gift of distinguishing the diabolic visions (φαντασία) from angelic ones (ὄπτασία). He has telepathic gifts. He also predicts his death, sometimes to the minute.

In spite of these commonplaces, and in addition to offerings of genuine spiritual wisdom, a good deal of space is left for adventures, anecdotes, and amusing motifs in this literature. Female saints spend their lives in monasteries in a monk's disguise and their sex is not discovered until after their death; an austere saint treads upon an apple with his foot, for it is through this fruit that Eve had brought about the fall of humanity; over-protective mothers, such as the mother of Saint John Chrysostom, try desperately, but vainly, to prevent their sons from entering a monastery. We are only mildly amused by these stories and too often value the saints' *Lives* merely as a quarry for historical information; but Byzantine monks and pious laymen and lay women must have lapped up these texts, which combined edification with entertainment.

In the tenth century, classicizing trends affected Byzantine hagiography. At that time, the refined public clamored for, and obtained, reeditions of the saints' *Lives*. They were put into a more elegant style, or "metaphrased," by a team working with the emperor's blessing under the direction of a high imperial official Symeon, who was appropriately called "the Metaphrastes"; concrete details and prosaic passages were expurgated from them. A few scholars regret that this so-called metaphrastic revision should have taken place. But cultivated Byzantines liked it that way, and, if we are to believe Psellos, some sophisticates reproached Symeon for not going far enough in his reworkings, and were of the opinion that his style was too low.

The pious hagiographic entertainment was supplemented by edifying, if secular, novels coming from the East, such as the Romance of

Barlaam and Joasaph, a Christian version of the Buddha legend which is also familiar to students of western medieval literature. But the monk's ascetic practices had to take precedence over entertainment, both pious and secular. As guides on his road to perfection, the monk used sayings or short biographies of the anchorites of Egypt and Palestine, the two cradles of Eastern monasticism. He could follow the exploits of these Coptic fathers, bearing bizarre names such as Pambo or Horos, and breaking all records for mortifying themselves, exposing themselves to mosquitoes, fasting interminably, or maintaining absolute silence for years. The main collections of this kind were written between the fifth and the seventh centuries.

The monk also turned to manuals of contemplative life, arranged in groups of one hundred chapters, or in thirty chapters, symbolizing the number of years Christ spent on this earth before he revealed himself to the world. This was the arrangement of the *Ladder of Paradise* by John, Abbot of Sinai (d. after 650), called John of the Ladder because of this work. By following this most famous manual of Oriental asceticism, written (in a relatively complicated style) on the basis of the author's own readings, but also of his personal experience, the monk could hope to ascend to impassivity, first shedding vices on the first twenty-three rungs (or chapters) of the *Ladder*, then acquiring virtues on the last seven. Union with God awaited his soul at the top.

Hagiographic and ascetic literature was much more read than secular highbrow works; we can prove it for the ecclesiastical milieu, but the proposition is plausible as a general statement. A library catalogue of the monastery of the island of Patmos was compiled about the year 1200. It comprises 330 items; only 20 are concerned with profane literature. The others are liturgical, patristic, ascetic. The library held six manuscripts of John of the Ladder alone and only one of Aristotle.

Ascetic literature is the only genre of Byzantine letters which is read today by laymen and monks for inspiration. In the modern world it has performed this function for almost two hundred years. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, an anthology of Byzantine ascetic writings, concerning contemplation and prayer, and ranging from the fourth century to the fifteenth was published in Venice under the title of *Philokalia*, or *Love of the Good*. It was twice translated in Russia, at the end of the eighteenth and in the nineteenth century. It nourished generations of Russian monks and lay mystics. English and French translations, done for practical rather than scholarly purposes, appeared within the last twenty years. Thus the precepts of the desert fathers and of John of the Ladder concerning the meeting of God face to face in true prayer are alive among the faithful to our day.

Literature called popular is the last variety to be discussed in this survey. Its language has certain literary pretensions, but to a considerable extent it reflects the mediaeval Greek vernacular, with occasional reminiscences from the Septuagint and from the classroom. This language is quite unaffected by purism; its charm consists in the fact that it absorbs many barbarisms, such as romance words learned from the Frankish feudal lords and their retinues established in Greece after the conquest of 1204; it also uses a few Arabic and even some Turkish terms which entered the vocabulary of frontier bards during the centuries of the long struggle and contacts with Islam. Unaware of purism in language, this literature is not purist in the choice of its subject matter. The late Byzantine romances of chivalry betray their western inspiration by the very names of their heroes: Rodophilos is Rodolphe, Belthandros is Bertrand, Florios is Flor. Even such romances that are not translations, but original creations, did experience the influence of western, especially French, romances of chivalry and adopt their devices and their conventions. Their universe does contain vestiges of the antique novel (notably the work of Achilles Tatios) and of the "learned" Byzantine novels of the twelfth century; but in the main that universe is that of the Arthurian cycle or of the Oriental fable. It is filled with impregnable castles, guarded by dragons, with imprisoned fair maidens suspended by their hair from ceilings in castle halls, and with witches who can put the hero in suspended animation by means of a magic apple. Most of the popular literature is poetic in form, but its authors do not try to imitate classical meters; they use the fifteen-syllable verse, called "politic" or "popular," and based exclusively on the principle of stress. This meter began to occur with greater frequency in the early tenth century, although it is attested earlier—perhaps as early as the seventh.

Not all of the literature written in the vernacular is an expression of the popular genius. When the vernacular made its first appearance as an artistic device in literary works—this happened in the twelfth century—its idiom was adopted for purposes of satire and parody and practiced for the amusement of the educated by authors who could boast some learning. Such is the case of begging intellectuals who go under the name of Theodore Prodromos; one of them, under the guise of a poor and unpedigreed brother Hilarion, petitioned the emperor for redress from the chicanery to which he was being exposed by two snobbish and avaricious abbots, father and son.

But the best products of Byzantine vernacular literature are popular in their origins, if not always in the form in which they have come down to us. I have in mind the epic poems of the Akritic cycle. About a hundred of these were still recited in the past century, but they are certainly Byzantine, for some of their versions have been recorded in

manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Byzantine writers made references to them from about the year 900 on. The world of these poems is the world of the Akritai (hence the name Akritic). Akritai was the name given to border warriors of the eastern frontier, or even to the chiefs holding sway along the eastern marches of Byzantium, during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries—the period of Byzantium's counteroffensive against Islam, and of intermittent peaceful co-existence with it. The way of life of the Akritai or "borderers" was similar to that of their Muslim counterparts, settled on the Arabic or Turkish side of the frontier. Therefore the theme of these poems is not ideological warfare, but chivalry, tolerance and even some camaraderie of men with a common profession. The people that produced these poems, however—and that heard their original versions—were not eastern counterparts of western knights or courtiers. In my opinion the milieu of the Akritic poems is to be sought lower on the social scale of the frontier society; and the descriptions of upper-class reality that we read in these poems are more flights of fancy and expressions of wishful thinking than depictions of the authors' real world. This may be one of the reasons why everything here is heroic, fantastic, exaggerated.

Here is a paraphrase of one of these Akritic poems, the Song of Armuris:

Armuris's father is a prisoner of the Saracens. The young Armuris, mounted upon a black horse belonging to his father, crosses the wide Euphrates in one jump; he challenges a Saracen army of one hundred thousand warriors, each of whom would not be afraid of a thousand adversaries; he proceeds up the river and mows them down the whole day long; he proceeds down the river and mows them down the whole night long. He arrives at the gates of Syria (the poem takes it for a city) and threatens to fill its narrow streets with heads and its *wadis* with streams of blood. The threat is effective. Armuris Senior is unshackled and given a bath and a sumptuous meal with the Emir of Syria. Thereupon he is released and asked to prevail upon his son to have pity on a Saracen whenever he meets one. The tolerant Emir decides to give his very own daughter in marriage to the young Armuris.

The greatest of the Akritic poems deserves a place among the works of world literature. This is the epic of Digenis Akritas, a work of about four thousand lines. The name Digenis, "man of double origin," comes from the plot: Digenis was the son of an Arab Emir and of the daughter of a Greek general and governor of Cappadocia. The Emir kidnapped

the daughter during one of his raids against the Byzantine territory; he fell in love with her and settled the matter of kidnapping with the maiden's brothers. He embraced Christianity, of course, married the general's daughter, and settled on Byzantine soil. Digenis, the issue of this mixed marriage, is the hero to whose warlike and amorous exploits along the lonely border the epic is devoted.

It interests us little here whether this epic dates from the tenth, the eleventh, or even—this is the latest suggestion—the twelfth century, whether the Digenis of the poem goes back to an historical Greek general or is a synthetic figure, which of the poem's versions is closest to the archetype, or what the original elements of this archetype were. When we read the epic for enjoyment, we are impressed by the hero's precocious youth (as a young boy, he kills two bears and a lion on one hunting expedition); we admire his pride in his meeting with the Byzantine emperor (he is sure of the emperor's good manners, but not of those of his retinue. He therefore asks for a private audience; otherwise one of the emperor's soldiers might make an untoward remark, in which case he would be a dead man); finally, we notice his tact and his exuberance in his duel with the Amazon Maximo. In one version of the poem, the description of the duel runs as follows:

And I forbore, my friend—[Digenis himself is speaking to
a friend]from hurting her—
In men it is blamed not only to kill
But even to join battle at all with woman;
She was of those then famed for bravery,
Wherefore was I to fight nowise ashamed—
On her right hand I struck above the fingers;
The sword that she was holding fell to earth,
And quaking seized her and great fearfulness.
I cried out, "Maximo, be not afraid,
I pity you as a woman and filled with beauty;
But that you know me strictly by my deeds
I will show you forth my strength upon your horse."
Straight a descending sword-cut on the croup
I swung, the horse was severed in the middle,
And half of it fell on one side with her,
The other side the rest was borne to earth.
She started back, grievously terrified,
And in a broken voice, "Mercy," she screamed,
"Have mercy on me, lord, I have sorely erred;
Rather let us make friends, if you disdain not.
I am a virgin still by none seduced.

You alone have conquered, you shall win me all;
And have me helpmate too against your foes."
"You die not, Maximo," I said to her,
"But it cannot be for me to make you wife.
I have a lawful wife noble and fair,
Whose love I will never bear to set aside.
Come let us go under the tree's shadow,
And I will teach you all that me concerns."

What happens under the tree's shadow is set forth in detail in other versions of the poem.

Acquaintance with a few pages of a text brings us nearer to the spirit of the literature than the reading of a long disquisition about it. Therefore, for the reader that should wish to acquaint himself with some representative Byzantine writings available in English translation, I should recommend the following items, chosen to typify the three varieties of literature treated here. First, as representing the learned literature, the *Chronographia* or Memoirs of Michael Psellos, translated by E. R. A. Sewter (1953), the dialogue *Timarion*, translated by B. Baldwin (1984), the *Histories* of John Kinnamos, translated by Ch. M. Brand (1976), and the *History* of Niketas Choniates, translated by H. Magoulias (1983); second, as an example of the spiritual literature, the *Life* of a sixth-century Lycian saint, Nicholas of Sion, translated by Ihor and Nancy Ševčenko (1985) and the seventh-century *Lives* of John the Merciful, patriarch of Alexandria, by Leontios of Neapolis, and of Theodore of Sykeon, both translated in *Three Byzantine Saints* by Norman H. Baynes and Elizabeth Dawes (1948); third, to exemplify the popular epic poem, *Digenes Akrites*, translated (from a version that stems from a learned, or semi-learned hand) by J. Mavrogordato (1956).⁴ For those who would like to go further, I have appended a short bibliography. It lists some basic reference works dealing with Byzantine literature as well as a few recent studies that provide convenient access to modern Byzantine literary scholarship.

The present essay has not touched upon Byzantium's theological literature or hymns and liturgical poetry. Omitting the former can be justified. To be sure, church fathers, especially those of the fourth century, proved to be excellent stylists and rhetoricians not only in their polemical, but also in their doctrinal writings. Still, we do not associate

⁴On other English translations, cf. E. A. Hanawalt, "An Annotated Bibliography of Byzantine Sources in English Translation," *Byzantine Studies/Etudes byzantines*, 9, 1 (1982) 67-87. An expanded version of this bibliography is to appear soon.

theology with belles-lettres. Omitting liturgical poetry is less easy to justify. This poetry did have a literary life of its own; its vast bulk, recited throughout the liturgical year and deposited in special liturgical collections and reference works, was at all times elaborate in form; and its best products, such as the *kontakia* of Romanos the Melodist or the *canons* of Andrew of Crete (d. 740), John of Damascus (d. ca. 750) or Joseph the Hymnographer (ninth century) deserve a literary critic's full respect. As an excuse for the latter omission I shall quote the compiler of a version of the Digenis epos. He closes his fourth book with the following words:

And we will cease our discourse at this point
 Keeping what follows for another book;
 Surfeit of discourse, as my Preacher says,
 Is always enemy of listening.⁵

⁵The two quotations from the Digenis epos have been borrowed from J. Mavrogordato, *Digenes Akrites* (1956) 209-10 and 141 (the Grottaferrata version). The "Preacher" of the second quotation (ὁ ἔμὸς Θεολόγος) may be Saint Gregory of Nazianzos, called "the Theologian."

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The Socratic Revolt and Cavafy*

JOHN CHIOLES

He is a mythologist with an astonishing feeling for history . . . One is never quite sure when one reads him whether a youth who works in a poor blacksmith's shop in contemporary Alexandria will not turn up in the evening at one of the dives where the subjects of Ptolemy Lathyros are holding their revels, or if the favorite of Antiochos Epiphanes has not in mind to discuss with the King the outcome of Rommel's operation on Libya. Surrounded with tombs and epitaphs—it is Cavafy I am speaking of—he lives in a huge cemetery, where with torment, he invokes endlessly the resurrection of a young body; of an Adonis who, as the years pass, seems to change and become vilified by a love . . .

THIS IS THE POET SEFERIS speaking in his "Letter to a Foreign Friend."¹ As maker of myths Cavafy conveys an ethical world which is consistent with the entire sweep of Greek philosophy. Seferis might have also added that "knowledge in memory" develops the feeling for history, turns the poet into mythologist, but is also responsible for the release of the idea in poetic expression. To be sure these are qualities which are attributable to Socrates, that special Socrates of dialectical thinking, of discourse as the life force in existence. Mythmaking, historicizing, the critique of an ethical idea—these are the tools of Cavafy's poetry. And they are also the tools of discourse in Socrates' own brand of philosophizing—particularly in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates struggles to develop his dialectic art through the mystery of Eros as life force. This takes the philosopher in the area of myth and history, and, most importantly, in the area of poetry.

*This is the second part of a longer work on Cavafy. The first part under the title "Eros and Revolution in the Poetry of Cavafy" appeared in the last issue of *JMH*.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the translations are from C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, ed. G. Savidis (Princeton, 1975).

¹George Seferis, *On the Greek Style*, p. 175.