

Nicole Kröll (ed.): *Myth, Religion, Tradition and Narrative in Late Antique Greek Poetry*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2020 (Wiener Studien. Beiheft 41). 240 p. € 49.50. ISBN: 978-3-7001-8584-0.

The conference proceedings volume is an awkward genre. It represents the effort to collate, organise and streamline diverse papers, often pitched at different levels and based on work at different stages of development, and challenged or changed by the intervening discussion and debate. The most ambitious of such volumes also strive to weave a connecting narrative between the papers – to stress, or reveal, or create a thematic cohesion and ensure that the book is more than a sum of its parts. Depending on the conference, the editor and the papers, the seams of this deceptively simple process can remain on show: reviewer comments about ‘mixed quality’ papers, over or understated premises, and a lack of dialogue between chapters or sections are common. In the burgeoning field of late antique poetry, the conference-driven-publication business is booming.¹ Whilst some such volumes are extremely important contributions to the field,² and almost all contain some brilliant individual chapters, overall these publications can receive a muted reception, and risk being underestimated before they are opened.

The present volume brought such issues to the foreground for me because of the unusual hybridity of its form: it both is and is not a ‘conference proceedings’. The introduction (co-written by Herbert Bannert and the editor, Nicole Kröll) explains that this is a combination of papers from two different conferences; but the book also derives from the discussions and research of the ‘Nonnus group’ (my phrase): “members of [an] international community who in recent years have been in lively exchange with one another” (p. 8). This compound origin story continues in the volume’s structure. It is divided into two parts, one on “Myth and Religion” (pp. 27–89) and the other on “Tradition and Narrative” (pp. 93–229). There are two base-con-

1 The ongoing “Nonnus of Panopolis in Context” series is an illustrative example. See p. 8 note 4 of the current volume under review.

2 K. Carvounis/R. Hunter (eds.): *Signs of Life? Studies in Later Greek Poetry*. Beningdigo 2009 (Ramus 37,1 & 2), which began life as a conference in Cambridge, remains one of the most widely-cited collections.

ferences, two authors of the introduction, and two versions *of* the introduction (one English, one German; pp.7–24).³ The editor has tried to strike a balance between letting the individual papers breathe and creating a loose discursive frame around the whole collection. This frame is not without its problems, but let us first turn to the two parts, and the contents of the chapters within these.

“Part One: Myth and Religion” begins with David Hernández de la Fuente on *metanoia* in Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* (“A Dionysian *μετάνοια*? The ‘Good’ Indians as ‘Secret Converts’ on Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*”, pp. 27–44). He reads several of the Indian characters as secret converts to Dionysius, in opposition to those like Deriades and Morrheus who are *theomachs* and remain obstinate to the Dionysiac world. Hernández de la Fuente analyses these ‘good Indians’ in parallel with Christian conversion stories (in John, via the *Paraphrase*, but to a small extent because, as he notes, the Fourth Gospel does not in fact have as many such stories, and more prominently in the *Acts*). This is a very interesting topic, and a generally well-executed analysis of some challenging passages. It offers a stimulating new perspective on the much-debated issue of how much Christian resonance we can detect in the *Dionysiaca*. I was not convinced by all the steps in the discussion, particularly those concerning the Indians’ darkness. Turning to a shocking scene from Nonn. Dion. 35 where Morrheus tries to wash the blackness from his skin in a bath, Hernández de la Fuente suggests that the episode offers “a clear indication of racial blackness with moral evil” (p. 32). To my reading, the passage in question does not fully support this interpretation: Morrheus is trying to become snow-white to be *derisible* to the Maenad Chalcomede, and in contrast the other testimonies cited, there is no mention of the soul here. There are certainly passages in the *Dionysiaca* which do suggest a connection between colour and evil, but the evil tends to be on a more cosmological rather than ‘moral’ plain.⁴ This is a big issue and an important one, and Hernández de la Fuente is right to raise it: were it to be a paper in its own right (this is of course not the primary focus of this chapter), it would require further scoping and expansion. The chapter would also have benefited from bringing in

3 This unusual double act shows a commitment to the bilingualism of the volume and avoids either language appearing as the core or the periphery.

4 Thanks to Tim Whitmarsh for a helpful discussion on this wider point.

conversion stories from other traditions – e.g. Joseph and Aseneth, or ‘pagan’ philosophical transformation of a metanoic kind,⁵ which could contrast with or impact this Dionysian-Christian worldview.

Delphine Lauritzen offers a nuanced close reading of an important and often still under-appreciated poem by John of Gaza: the *Ekphrasis* or ‘Description’, a rich and heady account of the universe in strongly personified terms (“Two Hymns for One Poem. Beyond ‘Pagan vs Christian’ in John of Gaza’s *Ekphrasis*”, pp. 45–57). The poem contains two hexametric prologues, and appeals to Apollo, the Sirens, the Muses and the Christian God all as sources of inspiration. Focusing first on the long opening section – which demands to be read as the programmatic launchpad of the poem – and then on the verbal dynamics within the two hymns, Lauritzen neatly demarcates what she calls an “aesthetics of transition”, and stresses that the pagan and Christian dimensions of the p(r)oem are not antagonistic, but rather “there is no opposition at religious level [...] but both [hymns] share the same system of references, which could not be any other than Christian” (p. 52). She is surely right that the poem reveals that “the strict ‘Pagan vs Christian’ approach does not lead to correct interpretation” (p. 45), but there are surely very few readers who would still genuinely adopt such an approach – to John of Gaza, Nonnus or any other author in Late Antiquity. I also wonder whether the assimilation of Apollonian, Neoplatonic and other pagan references into a system which “could not be anything other than Christian” (p.52) ought not itself to be conceived as its own form of antagonism, but one of absorption, consumption, or even typological refraction. Nevertheless, the chapter nicely draws out the subtleties of the poem, though some of the words on which Lauritzen did not concentrate sparked my curiosity too: for instance, what of the fact that *Aion* is described as *αὐτόσπορος* (v. 163)? This could be rewardingly read through and against other, earlier late antique poetic personifications of *Aion*, such as those by Nonnus and, more partially, Quintus.

Frederick Lauritzen makes a succinct and strongly argued appeal to take George of Pisidia seriously not just as a turning point in epic metre or a repository for Byzantine history but rather for the purpose of his poetry (“Late Antique Philosophy and the Poetry of George of Pisidia”, pp. 59–

5 See e.g. S. Goldhill: *Preposterous Poetics. The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge 2020 (Greek Culture in the Roman World), pp. 149–193.

68). Lauritzen proclaims this purpose to be, unsurprisingly, philosophy, although as the chapter goes on to show (something which ought to have been signalled from the beginning), this philosophy is also intimately connected to George's theology, and his interventions into contemporary religious politics. Lauritzen ends with the provocative though speculative suggestion that these doctrines and concerns "may be a further explanation for the sudden demise of the Nonnian hexameter verse with which [George] was now associated" (p. 67). Heresy killing the hexameter – that is a very compelling thought.

Domenico Accorinti concludes the first section with a discussion of pagan and Christian astral imagery in a series of (mainly) verse inscriptions ("Pagan and Christian Astral Imagery in Late Antique Poetry", pp. 69–89). Taking as his cue two widows' contrasting funerary dedications to their husbands, Accorinti first offers some helpful opening remarks on the state of beliefs regarding the afterlife across the wide period which we call 'Late Antiquity', and then traces through nine examples how astral imagery could mediate views and positions on the transition from life on Earth to what lies beyond. Whilst the analyses are clear and informative, and Accorinti sprinkles them with a couple of tantalising links to the hexameter poets (e.g. Nonnus' *Paraphrase of St John* and Quintus), overall his tone is more surveyistic than the other chapters in the volume, and he ends rather abruptly after the discussion of the final inscription, with no culminating or overarching remarks.

"Part Two: Tradition and Narrative" starts, somewhat ironically, with one of the most overtly religious authors covered in the volume: Gregory of Nazianzus. Jan R. Stenger ("Beim Häuten der Zwiebel'. Gregory of Nazianzus' *De vita sua* as Autofiction", pp. 93–112) focuses on Gregory's self-centred poetry (which, of course, is properly all of his poetry – as Stenger notes, no other ancient Greek wrote so much about himself – but most explicitly, the *De Vita Sua*), and argues that 'autobiography' is not the right term to characterise this work, since there is no fully fleshed out ancient concept of autobiography as genre. Reading the *De Vita Sua* against models such as Libanius, Jerome and Augustine does not give sufficient space to the poetological ambitions of the *De Vita Sua* (and more bluntly but no less crucially, the fact that it is written in verse) – which is of self-proclaimed central importance to Gregory's project. Stenger proposes Günter Grass' 2006 chronicles (part memoir, part hazy recollection, part distortive fiction)

and the concept of ‘autofiction’ as a more productive frame for reading Gregory’s poem, as the narrator appears as an allusive and unreliable figure, with a problematic and elusive memory. Whilst he is absolutely right to stress the distinctively pronounced importance of poetics and form to Gregory’s agenda (and more could and should have been said about *On his Own Verses* to affirm this point), surely only a reader tone-deaf to irony would take *De Vita Sua* as ‘straight’ autobiography (whatever that would mean):⁶ it is glaringly and self-consciously “a hybrid that appears to blend autobiographical narrative with fictional elements” (p. 95). We do not need a Grass (or a Serge Doubrovsky) to see this, as ancient poetry offers us (and Gregory) ample models already; from the *Odyssey* to Lucretius to Callimachus,⁷ not to mention the critiques of lying poets or the precarious rewards of *kosmesis* by Thucydides, Gorgias, and Lucian ...

Ursula Gärtner takes us backwards in chronological time to the *Posthomeric* of Quintus Smyrnaeus and discusses a wide range of episodes from the poem to argue that a more holistic understanding of *ekphrasis* better unlocks Quintus’ techniques of narration, focalisation and visualisation (“Ekphrastisches Erzählen bei Quintus Smyrnaeus. Zur Bedeutung von Einzelszenen, Visualisierung und Fokalisierung in den *Posthomeric*”, pp. 113–132). Gärtner’s deep knowledge of the *Posthomeric* is on display throughout the chapter, combined with an instructive look at the rhetorical tradition. The findings here would form a fruitful dialogue with the discussions of *ekphrasis* and visuality in other papers in the volume, especially Mary Whitby’s treatment of the animal descriptions in the *Dionysiaca* (on which see below).

Arianna Magnolo gives us the second chapter on Nonnus (“The *Alexandra* in the *Dionysiaca*. Two Examples”, pp. 133–148). Drawing on her 2018 PhD dissertation, she analyses two passages to make the case for Nonnus’ intense engagement with Lycophron’s *Alexandra*: the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Nonn. Dion. 13, and, on a more micro-lexical level, the use of the single word *γαμβροκτόνος* in the funeral games for Staphylus (Nonn. Dion. 19). Lycophron is indeed an invigorating model for getting to grips with Nonnus’

6 Even the title of Carolinne White’s English translation (C. White [ed.]: Gregory of Nazianzus. *Autobiographical Poems*. Cambridge 1996 [Cambridge Medieval Classics 6]) is more of a tag than a comment on genre.

7 See the recent PhD dissertation by M. A. T. Poulos: *Callimachus and Callimacheism in the Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus*. Diss. Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 2019.

poetics. Magnolo persuasively emphasizes how through its darkness, its excess, and its deformation of myth, the *Alexandra* is an always-already Nonnian poem, and she is right to resist making *poikilia* the endpoint answer to why Nonnus draws on it (and any source text) in the ways he does. It would have been interesting to consider how the Lycophronic dimensions of the Iphigeneia scene (especially the stress on her witchlike qualities) contrast with other possible models for the sacrifice; not only Euripidean drama (which Magnolo discusses) but also, potentially, Christian sources, such as martyrological accounts.

Staying with the *Dionysiaca*, the editor's own chapter ("Reshaping *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Cyclopes in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*", pp. 149–164) uses the description of the Cyclopes in the catalogue of Dionysian Troops (Dion. 14 and 28) as a test case for Nonnus' wider strategies of Homeric engagement. Kröll's argument is in itself convincing – she shows how Nonnus inserts the Cyclopes into an un-Odyssean, and in fact distinctly Iliadic epic setting (a catalogue in a war), and carefully avoids summoning Polyphemus, the most infamous Odyssean cyclops with an equally notorious *Nachleben*, as an acting character anywhere in the epic. Whilst this witty allusive ducking and diving is certainly characteristic of Nonnus, the extent to which it can be taken as synecdochic of his entire approach to Homer is questionable: as announced by the opening proem (and the slippery treatment of the Odyssean Menelaus there), a key part of the poet's approach to Homer is that it is pluralistic, ungraspable, polytrophic – one example *cannot* stand for them all. It would therefore also have been productive to set this treatment of Polyphemus and the Cyclopes against some other episodes which directly redraft Homeric scenes. I am thinking particularly of the ἀριστέα of Aeacus in Dion. 22, where Nonnus explicitly prophesies and subverts Achilles' later fight with the Scamander, in almost a direct reversal of the techniques that Kröll outlines here: this is a highly Homeric character who does not ever appear in the *Iliad*, inserted as an acting character into the most proto-Iliadic of scenes. It is also an overstatement to say, as Kröll does at the start of the chapter, that there has been "scarce" (p. 149) scholarship on Nonno-Homeric relations: as her chunky first footnote shows (p. 149) there have been many articles, papers and even book-length studies, which provide much more than just "groundwork" (id). She is right, however, that this relationship remains one-sided: Homeric scholars still need to take much more notice of Nonnus.

In the fourth and final Dionysiac paper, Mary Whitby (“To See or Not to See? Nonnus’ Elephant Deconstructed [*Dionysiaca* 26.295–338]”, pp. 165–186) moves from catalogic monsters to catalogic mammals, and analyses Nonnus’ fascinating and elaborate description of the elephant in book 26. Situating the passage within a pleasing range of contexts sources and models, both the obvious and less obvious (e.g. Herodotus, Nicander, Silius Italicus and Dionysius’ *Bassarica*) Whitby demonstrates how the Nonnian elephant is both highly ekphrastic and not ekphrastic at all, “at once an implausible hybrid and realistic beast” (p. 168). She offers the quietly confident conclusion that unlike Ps.-Oppian, Nonnus had in fact seen an elephant first-hand, adding another important example of the mesmerizing mix of fantasy and autopsy that characterises this epic. Obvious connections to Kröll’s paper on catalogues and beasts are not exploited, and some comment on the Latin question and reception of Roman power would have helped to deepen the discussion of Silius Italicus.

In the only paper from the second conference, and the only chapter on Colluthus, Marcelina Gilka gives a rich account of the figure of Hermione in the *Abduction of Helen* (“Like Mother, Like Daughter? Hermione in Colluthus’ *Abduction of Helen*”, pp. 187–209). Gilka first provides some elegant close readings – especially on the nexus of imagery concerning the throwing of veils, which connects Hermione both to the carefree nymphs at the start of the poem and to the darkly proleptic Cassandra at the end – and then reads Colluthus’ Hermione against the two most extensive surviving portrayals of Hermione as a grown-up: in Euripides’ *Andromache* and Ovid’s *Heroides* 8. I wish that Gilka had taken a firmer line on the positive relationship between Colluthus and Ovid: her reading clearly supports the idea that Colluthus knew and engaged with the *Heroides* in this intimate, inventive depiction of Hermione. The piece is also quiet about cultural history: whilst intertextuality is clearly the main focus, given the uniqueness of Hermione’s characterisation – the fact that she is a young child, her ‘close encounter’ with her mother’s ghost, and her uncomfortable relationship with her father who is left behind – some engagement with the cultural concerns motivating

such choices would have strengthened an otherwise stimulating piece.⁸ Taking that step could have also encouraged some connections with the ‘religious’ first half of the volume.

Finally, Andreas Rhoby analyses a selection of epigrams from the Eastern Mediterranean of contrasting materiality, locality, and function (“Inscriptliche griechische Epigramme in frühbyzantinischer Zeit [4.–6. Jh.]. Eine Fallstudie zur Evidenz auf den Inseln des östlichen Mittelmeers”, pp. 211–229). Focusing on authorship, origin, metre and donors, his readings work together to attest to how, from the fourth century onwards, epigrams in hexameters (and other metres) become popular for navigating the micropolitics of the church, for example to express gratitude towards bishops for charity donations. Alongside Accorinti’s chapter, this piece stands as an important reminder of the variety of *material* forms that late antique poetry takes, and shows that the purpose (and indeed the poetics) of epigraphic, papyrological and other carved verse deserves just as much of our attention as the more ‘bookish’ narrative texts.

The presentation of the volume is generally decent, although there are signs of a relatively light-touch editorial hand. It is not the easiest to navigate: the chapters are not numbered, there is no collated bibliography, no author biographies, and many line numbers are given imprecisely via the elliptical ‘ff’. References on occasion could be fuller, for instance when Hernández de la Fuente discusses earlier references to the myth of Dionysus in India (p. 27), there are no direct references to the primary sources, should one wish to follow up and consult e.g. the fragments of Cleitarchus and Megasthenes. Gilka’s abstract is pasted into the introduction with just a colon after the title (p. 13), rather than integrated into the discussion like the rest of the synopses. Finally, as I have intimated above, there are virtually no cross references between the chapters.

The papers at their best offer new angles on complex and rewarding poems, moving beyond the usual suspects in terms of both theme and text. Collectively, they do indeed reflect the “lively exchange” of this group of scholars, and “illuminate a rich and colourful selection of late antique Greek poetry”

8 Gilka makes no mention of Helen Morales’ important article on the episode (H. Morales: Rape, Violence, Complicity: Colluthus’s *Abduction of Helen*. In: *Arethusa* 49, 2016, pp. 61–92) and refers in a footnote to her own forthcoming work about Hermione’s status as a child but does not give any further details.

(p. 10). More than once, however, I felt that the authors were pushing against walls that have already been broken down, for example on strict pagan versus Christian demarcations, poems' literary qualities versus their philosophical and theological agendas, or ancient literature versus modern generic categories. Many of these divisions are already largely a relic of the scholarly past – but they are subconsciously upheld by the volume's frame. Placing “Myth and Religion” on the one side and “Tradition and Narrative” on the other obscures the multiple and meaningful intersections between all four of these concepts. The chosen structure risks perpetuating traditional and unhelpful divides between theology and poetics, and a more adventurous organising premise could have brought to the surface many of the latent connections between the pieces, concerning space and geography, monstrosity and animalism, scale and form; or more explicitly set Nonnus in and against his predecessors and successors. Seizing the opportunity created by the unusual starting point(s) of the volume, the editor could have been more experimental and ambitious in structure and overarching theme. Such ambition may just turn out to be necessary, to ensure that as conference culture returns to some form of new normality, in the next phase of late antique poetic studies the genre of the proceedings volume becomes a force to be reckoned with, and no longer hides underread and underrated in the margins of academic exchange.

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