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THE HELLENISTIC ORIGINS OF BYZANTINE LITERATURE

ROMILLY J. H. JENKINS

WE can make no attempt to survey Byzantine literature as a whole, not merely because of the sheer magnitude of the task, but also because much of it, and much of the best of it, does not derive from a Hellenistic source. The best poetry of Byzantium, which is found in her rhythmical hymnology, is an instance of this.¹ The great Krumbacher has warned us against the fallacy of regarding Byzantine literature as a mere offshoot of classical antiquity.² It was an independent entity, created out of a fusion of Greek, Roman, oriental and native Byzantine elements, and permeated by an Orthodox Christianity which included not only the areas of dogmatic belief and everyday conduct, but also those of political theory and practice. It is certainly a question whether Lucian would have found himself any more at home in Byzantium of the tenth century A.D. than in Athens of the fifth century B.C. Nevertheless, several of the most important strands in the Byzantine literary fabric were of specifically Hellenistic origin, and remained unaltered until the last days of the Empire. Among these were, scholarly versification, rhetoric, literary encyclopedism, and, most of all, historiography.

It is not possible to consider any literature without also considering the people for whom it was written. The Hellenistic culture, especially after the final establishment of the Roman Empire, included a large body of educated and leisured men, who lived in a multitude of cities and who, if they could not continue, could at least appreciate the literary traditions of the past. It was for such men as these that Plutarch wrote his moral essays, and Lucian his satires. The very fact that such authors could be read simultaneously on the banks of the Thames and the Orontes contributed to the tone of easy urbanity and good breeding in which they wrote. Even up to the sixth century A.D. rhetoricians, theologians, and historians could still count on a widely educated and widely extended audience. After the cataclysms of the seventh and eighth centuries, the curtain rises on a wholly different scene. The most cultivated provinces of the Hellenistic East are under the Saracen heel. The old homeland of the Hellenes, from Chalcidice to Cape Taenarum, is so completely Slavized that it is recognized everywhere as *Sclavinica terra*. Byzantine Italy is under threat from Lombard, Frank, and Saracen. And the lands west of Italy are nearly as remote as the moon. At home the external and internal struggles of the Empire, under the gloomy enthusiasts of the Isaurian dynasty, have left little room for the cultivation of polite letters, and have even destroyed much upon which such cultivation might be based.³ A revival of profane letters did, as we know, come in the ninth century, and thereafter no such

¹ Even these "Hebrew Melodies" can scarcely be called "poetry" in the western sense of the term: they have no trace of lyrical inspiration, and seldom rise above the level of impressive declamation. See N. B. Tomadakis, *Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν βυζαντινὴν λογοτεχνίαν* (Athens, 1952), pp. 122-3, 207-17.

² K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byz. Litteratur*² (Munich, 1897), pp. 21-2; the whole introductory essay, *ibid.*, pp. 1-36, remains of permanent value.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

disastrous setback was again experienced until 1204. But it was a revival with a difference. In and after the ninth century it is nearly true to say that if a secular writer were not read in Constantinople, he was not read anywhere. This is a fact of prime importance for explaining the most characteristic of the literary *genres* practiced at Byzantium. Polite letters assume an esoteric air. No secular literature was written for a wide public, since no such public existed. Instead of the epic or the idyll, the drama or the romantic tale, we find the epigram, the ornate epistle, the ἠθοποιία or the laborious *ecphrasis*,⁴ that is to say, species of composition which could be appreciated only by a small circle of highly instructed scholars. This surely explains the tendency of later Byzantine writers to become ever more affected and euphuistic, in proportion as their audience contracted and demanded ever more elaborate displays of stylistic ingenuity.

Moreover, the whole spirit of literature, as an art liberally and spontaneously practiced, had changed beneath the perennial strain of the fight for bare survival. The climate of culture was austere and puritanical. The union of the pagan and Christian cultures was marked by St. Basil's celebrated Advice to young Christians on what use to make of the classics;⁵ but this tract, while emphasizing the importance of an "undercoat" (as it were) of pagan education, yet added significantly: "Whatever can help us to attain to the other life, that we must love and pursue with all our might; and whatever cannot achieve this purpose, that we must reject." The duty of man was to do God's will and get to heaven. Urbanity and wit, poetry and fancy, could be of no service in these operations. There were witty and amusing men in all ages at Byzantium; but we should never guess it from what they have left us. Only now and again, from some scholion or some account of a foreign observer, does a shaft of gaiety penetrate the gloomy pall of Pharisaism. Satire, indeed, on the Hellenistic model, was to some extent revived in later centuries; but it is satire that has lost all urbanity and charm, and tends to become an instrument of rancorous polemic. Even the Prodromic poems, which satirize, with some humor though certainly not with good-humor, monastic life under the Comneni, do not rise above a tone of servility and monotonous grumbling. It is melancholy to read the record of Michael Psellus⁶ that his mother, to whom he was fondly attached, would never kiss her children except when she thought them asleep, and unable to witness this very human weakness.

It was not to be expected that in such a climate secular poetry could flourish. Many of the best writers and scholars in all ages, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, George of Pisidia, the Deacon Theodosius, Christopher of Mitylene or John Mavropous, have left us reams of iambic verses on theological or historical subjects; but we can scarcely recall a single line of poetry. And, what is surely more remarkable, this truth holds good even of those more popular compositions in which the stressed "political" line has liberated the composer from

⁴ See Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, ed. by Rabe (Teubner, 1926), pp. 36-41.

⁵ *MPG*, XXXI, cols. 564-89.

⁶ Ed. K. N. Sathas, *Μεσοβυζαντινὴ Βιβλιοθήκη*, V (Paris, 1876), p. 17.

the restrictions of classical prosody: I mean, in such works as the lays of Digenes or the *Chronicle of the Morea* or the tedious verse romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁷ The content is often interesting, but interesting to the historian only. We can best illustrate these truths by a glance at one who was, by the united testimony of Byzantine and modern critics, the greatest of Byzantine poets, and who became the model of verse composition to succeeding ages: I refer to George of Pisidia.

George,⁸ who is sometimes, but very erroneously, called the last of the ancient Greek poets, was the contemporary and panegyrist of the Emperor Heraclius. He was a voluminous versifier, but his most celebrated compositions were his accounts of Heraclius' campaigns against the Persians and Avars. These poems took the form of *encomiastic epic*, a kind of composition deriving from, and very popular in, the Hellenistic Age, when the exploits and victories of many Seleucid or Pergamene sovereigns were lauded in this manner. In a later epoch, Claudian and Corippus wrote similar poems in Latin.

George's verses are iambic trimeters, instead of the hexameters traditionally associated with epic. His model was the *rhexis* of Euripides, and he was a good scholar; so good, indeed, that in the eleventh century the question was seriously discussed as to which of the two, Euripides or George, wrote the better verses.⁹ The very fact that the question could have been put at all is striking testimony to the total lack of poetic feeling and appreciation at Byzantium during the most cultured epoch of her renaissance. Still, George was a careful versifier: and if he ignored the law of the final cretic, so did all others in the post-tragic age until the law was reformulated in 1797 by Richard Porson.¹⁰ Moreover, in spite of the rules of encomium, he tried to tell the truth, and was, as is well known, used as a historical source for Heraclius' campaigns by the ninth-century chronicler Theophanes. But nothing can disguise the fact that he was laboring with an essentially artificial language and meter. Nor was this his only problem. His cantos are denominated *akroaseis*: that is to say, they were composed for recitation. And here we encounter one of the fundamental differences between ancient and mediaeval Greek, which made of them virtually separate languages. The ancient principle of prosody, of vowels short and long by nature or position, could no longer appeal to the ear in an age when all vowels were isosyllabic and the stress accent had succeeded to the tonic.¹¹ The Byzantines themselves were probably unaware that what they spoke would have been utterly unintelligible to an ancient Hellene. This vital difference accounts for the disappearance of the hexameter from verses written for recitation: for it is virtually impossible to write a rhythmically stressed hexameter while at the same time preserving the ancient quantities, although

⁷ For these, cf. K. M. Setton, "The Byzantine Background to the Italian Renaissance," *Proc. Am. Philosoph. Soc.*, 100 (1956), pp. 38-40.

⁸ Giorgio di Pisidia, *Poemi*, I. *Panegirici epici*, ed. by A. Pertusi, *Studia Patristica et Byzantina*, 7 (Ettal, 1960).

⁹ See A. Colonna, *Studi bizantini e neoellenici*, 7 (1953), pp. 16-21; cf. A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, I (Madison, 1961), p. 231.

¹⁰ P. Maas, *Greek Metre*, tr. by H. Lloyd-Jones (Oxford, 1962), pp. 34-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

it is said that some effort to do so is discernible in the epic poetry of Nonnus.¹² But the trimeter can, by the exercise of some ingenuity, be made to yield a rhythmic as well as a quantitative scansion, and it is clear that George worked to make it do so. In other words, his poems, and all other later iambs written for recitation, are not single but double compositions: they are meant to be read as classical, and to be recited as mediaeval Greek.¹³ Mr Edmund Wilson tells us of a poet of foreign extraction who wished to rhyme "pure" with "picture": and why not?—both end the same way. At Byzantium, in similar circumstances, the difficulty would scarcely have arisen: picture to the eye, picture to the ear.

Century after century this odd, complicated game continued to be played. But both skill and learning declined. The false quantities multiplied and the stresses became more regular, until, with Manuel Philes in the fourteenth century, the process is complete, and the iambic trimeter is as much a rhythmic line of four beats as the "political" of seven.¹⁴

In our astonishment at the verbal dexterity demanded by this exercise, we must not lose sight of the fact that the one thing which this dexterity could in no circumstances produce was poetry. What it could and did produce was rhetoric: and here, at the outset, we come upon the most powerful and pernicious influence of Hellenism on the mind of Byzantium. To overload the sense with sound, to conceal it in the convolutions of euphuism, to avoid using one line where four would do as well, such were the methods of George and his successors. He might borrow his forms from what he understood of Euripides; but his heart was elsewhere. His second Persian canto begins:¹⁵

Demosthenes, step forth with courage now!

Apollo is dead and Demosthenes Musagetes reigns on Mount Helicon. More and more the great masters of antiquity, both poets and prose-writers, came to be regarded simply as models of rhetorical expression. "Even Euripides and Plato," wrote Anastasius Quaestor to Leo Magister in December 906, "would be embarrassed to find words for your achievements, O most renowned of rhetoricians!" These two authors have been demoted from their poetic and philosophical pedestals, and have become texts from which "good things" were to be extracted by the encomiastic orator.¹⁶ It would of course be untrue to say that no genuine poet is ever rhetorical. Euripides himself is often so, though never in his happiest passages. But the comparison instituted between him and George ignored what is to us a very obvious distinction: Euripides was a poet who sometimes descended to rhetoric; George was a rhetorician who never ascended to poetry.

¹² C. M. Bowra, *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse* (Oxford, 1938), p. xlvi.

¹³ Maas, p. 20.

¹⁴ P. Maas, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 12 (1903), p. 297.

¹⁵ Pertusi ed., 96/1.

¹⁶ G. Koliass, *Léon Choerosphactès* (Athens, 1939), p. 93. Cf. also the distich attributed to Leo VI (A. Vogt, *Revue historique*, 174 [1934], p. 16, note 4):

ἔρρε μοι, ὦ τριτάλαινα Πολύμνια, ἔρρετε Μοῦσαι·
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν ἀπὸ νῦν ῥητορικὴν [sic] ἔραμαι.

The Hellenistic Age was essentially an age of prose. The same is even more true of its successor. Despite the oriental passion of some of its hymnography, the occasional felicity of some epigrams turned solely for the eye, and the even rarer flights of fancy in the verse romances of the post-crusading era, the Byzantine civilization must be characterized, from first to last, as wanting in that great gift which nature reserves for her favorites, poetic feeling and expression.¹⁷

If we now turn to consider Byzantine secular prose-writing in general, we are at once brought up against the striking—one might say, the overwhelming—phenomenon of the survival in all ages of the Hellenistic rhetorical education. This education was the indispensable qualification not only, as in Hellenistic times, for all who wished to pass for educated men, but also for all who wished to earn their living in one or other of the enormous offices of the imperial bureaucracy. The Emperor Basil II was an exception—so far as we recollect, a unique exception—in holding this instruction in contempt. It has to be remembered that a very large part, from age to age, of those who qualified in Greek letters came from families to which Greek was unfamiliar; and whatever we may think of the results of such education, we have to admit that it was both thorough and successful. The earlier rulers of the Macedonian house provide a classic example of this. Basil, the founder of that house, was a peasant, half-Armenian and half-Slav, and wholly illiterate. Yet both his sons, Leo and Alexander, were accomplished scholars, and his grandson Constantine was one of the most learned men and, by Byzantine standards, one of the most elegant writers of his age.

The western parallel, as formulated by Professor Christopher Dawson, is useful if we do not push it too far. He says: "What has perished, strange to say, has not been the literature of the conquered, but of the conquerors . . . the literature of the Dark Age is not, as we might expect it to be, the literature of warlike barbarians: it is a literature of Latin schoolmasters and grammarians, of commentators and homilists. The children of the barbarians put themselves to school with the monks and the Fathers. . . no-one could guess from a study of his works that a man like Bede, for example, was hardly two generations removed from pagan barbarism."¹⁸ In short, Bede did not write in Anglo-Saxon for exactly the same reason that Constantine Porphyrogenitus did not write in Armenian.

In the primary education of a Byzantine four Hellenistic handbooks, the first three dating from the second century and the last from the fourth century A.D., were universally and minutely studied: Apollonius Dyscolus and his son Herodian on syntax and the parts of speech; Hermogenes of Tarsus on the categories of literary style and the principles of literary criticism; and the *Progymnasmata*, or Rhetorical Exercises, of Aphthonius of Antioch. The precepts derived from these writers were illustrated by extracts from the classical poets and orators. The influence of these works was unbounded. It pervad-

¹⁷ Cf. Tomadakis, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ C. Dawson, *Medieval Essays* (Image Books, 1959), p. 149.

ed every branch of Byzantine writing, and the thought of every educated man. One amusing instance may be cited: Constantine Porphyrogenitus, in his *Life of his grandfather*, says that when Basil came to power in 867 he found the treasury empty, and observed, "We must have money: nothing that needs doing can be done without that." You might think this authentic enough; but not at all. These very words are given by Aphthonius as a typical example of γνώμη ἀποφαντική, or "declaratory generalization," and Aphthonius took them from Demosthenes.¹⁹ It is certain that Basil, who could not read, did not use these words, and equally certain that his grandson took them, not out of Demosthenes, but out of his primary schoolbook.

It is interesting to note that the stylistic quarrels which were rife in the age of the Second Sophistic between Atticists and Asianizers were, ostensibly, still being waged in the fourteenth century.²⁰ But they had lost almost all meaning, since neither side understood the terms they were using; and to call a man a "neoterus" in the latter epoch was not so much a criticism of his style as a personal insult to his classical education. In truth, though every scholar had been grounded in the stylistic principles of Hermogenes, among which "clarity" (σαφήνεια) and "purity" (καθαρότης) were not the least important, the artifices of rhetoric had long since won the day. Photius could, it seems, genuinely appreciate the limpidity of Isocrates and Lucian, but it never occurred to him to imitate it in his own compositions, which are as labored and convoluted as any in the Middle Ages, with the single exception of those of Arethas of Caesarea. The Cappadocian Fathers were justly extolled for the purity of their Attic style, and we may perhaps extend their influence into the age of Justinian. But from the seventh century onwards we look in vain for a revival of that simple elegance achieved by Isocrates and Plutarch, St. Basil and St. Gregory. The task of communicating important information, for example in the field of diplomacy, was now relegated to the slovenly and ungrammatical speech of everyday. The rest was "fine" writing, and the finer the better. Such writing has been well characterized by a French scholar²¹ as loaded with "accumulation, pathetic emphasis, apostrophes, subtle argumentation in the style of the rhetors of the Second Sophistic, almost outrageous usage of images and metaphors, quips and puns, abstruse figures of speech, insertion of passages from or allusions to ancient authors," and—we may add—to ancient mythology, as classified in a hundred handbooks after the style of Apollodorus. Photius and Arethas, Psellus and Princess Anna, Metochites and Choumnos, Cydones and Manuel II, all in their several ways men or women of very high natural abilities, are mere examples of an intellectual malaise that was nearly universal. No more remarkable instance of the tenacity

¹⁹ Aphthonius, p. 7; Demosthenes, *Olynthiac* I, 20. It is sometimes hard to decide whether a rhetorical commonplace put into the mouth of a historical character was in fact uttered by him or not. We are told (Theophanes Continuatus, Bonn ed., 208/18) that when Michael III wished to make his new favorite emperor, he said πρῶτον μὲν εἶδος ἄξιον τυραννίδος, which is a line from the *Aeolus* of Euripides, preserved by Stobaeus (ed. by Heuse IV, 481). But Michael would certainly have known the line, and may easily have quoted it.

²⁰ See J. Verpeaux, *Nicéphore Choumnos* (Paris, 1959), pp. 113-5.

²¹ Verpeaux, p. 117.

of these ancient prescriptions can be found than in the pursuits of the Emperor Manuel Palaeologus: already an old man, and a desperately busy one, he yet made time to write a Description of Spring (ἔκφρασις ἔαρος) in the style of Libanius, and an Imaginary Allocution (ἠθοποιία), as prescribed by Aphthonius, on what Tamerlane might have said to the defeated Bajazet. One cannot but recall Macaulay's celebrated characterization of Frederick the Great: "this resolute and sagacious blue-stocking, bearing up against a world in arms with an ounce of poison in one pocket and a quire of bad verses in the other."

It is impossible not to wonder whether the rhetorical training common to churchmen and laity alike may not have had an influence on public morals more damaging than that of mere intellectual obscurantism. Aristophanes²² and Plato,²³ each in his characteristic fashion, had inveighed against the rhetorical training of youth, on the ground that all such training had for its aim, not the discovery of truth, but the speciousness of falsehood. Eight centuries later, Synesius of Cyrene was making exactly the same complaint.²⁴ An integral part of this training, as systematized in the Hellenistic Age, was the so-called *anaskeue* and *kataskene* of the same proposition. The former, says Aphthonius,²⁵ is the refutation of a position, the latter its vindication. What then was likely to be the result of being daily instructed, during several of the most impressionable years of youth, in an art which consisted in defending, with equal readiness and facility, first a proposition and then its precise opposite? The reputation of the Byzantine for trickery and instability was one which he early acquired in the West and never subsequently lost^{25a}: and we can scarcely doubt that for this unenviable estimation the rhetorical training must bear a substantial share of responsibility.

In no department of literature does this rhetorical passion exercise itself more strongly than in the favorite Byzantine pastime of letter-writing.²⁶ Schubart has trenchantly observed that Byzantine letters (of which vast quantities survive from all periods) are deficient in every single thing which, ordinarily speaking, characterizes a letter.²⁷ If we may expand his meaning: to us, a letter is a message accompanied by an expression of personal regard; a Byzantine letter is an impersonal rhetorical flourish, which either contains no message at all, or, if it does, the message is couched in so obscure and allusive a fashion as to be nearly unintelligible. In most cases, the message itself was communicated orally by the bearer, or *komistes*; and the written text was one of a thousand variations on the theme: "You are absent, but no distance can sunder those who are united in spirit."²⁸ Should the correspondent be thought to welcome a rather longer and more ingenious exercise, an *ecphra-*

²² *Nubes*, 1036ff.

²³ *Gorgias*, 463 E ff.; 500 A ff.

²⁴ *MPG*, LXVI, col. 1148 B.

²⁵ Pp. 10-16.

^{25a} Cf. C. Neumann, *Die Weltstellung des byzantinischen Reiches vor den Kreuzzügen* (Leipzig, 1894), pp. 111-13.

²⁶ Tomadakis, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

²⁷ See G. Karlsson, *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine* (Uppsala, 1959), p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-78.

sis could be inserted, that is, a word-picture, of some work of art, or construction, or piece of scenery, which, deriving ultimately from descriptions of the plane tree and the Ilissus of Plato's *Phaedrus*, or from the κισσῦβιον of Theocritus' First Idyll, had been popularized by Lucian and Philostratus. This type of "epistolary conversation" (as Gibbon calls it) was actually preferred by Byzantines to personal intercourse: "For where," asks Psellus, "is the beauty in simple conversation? where is the ordered composition? where the rhythm of melodious harmony?"²⁹ It is only very rarely that a letter-writer, under stress of urgency or exasperation, brushes aside Orpheus and Hesiod, the plane tree and the breathing zephyr, the Homeric tags and the commonplaces of rhetorical exclamation, and shows that he is a man with a message to deliver.

The better scholars and wiser men realized perfectly that in their exercises they could never hope to rival their antique models. But this did not deter them. "For," says the Emperor Manuel II, "if we must legislate that, because of the greater, the lesser must keep silent, I imagine that none of us moderns would dare to open his mouth, owing to the unquestioned superiority of the antique. But this would be appalling (ἀλλὰ τοῦτο κάκιστον)."³⁰

We have been compelled to pass an unfavorable judgement on Byzantine rhetoric, since it colored nearly every department of Byzantine literature and since honesty forbids us to regard its influence as anything but disastrous. We have to remember that those who practiced it at Byzantium after the seventh century were composing in what was virtually a foreign language, a language learned from vocabularies, grammars, and phrase-books, a language which differed radically from the idiom they had heard at their mother's knee, even if that idiom had been a form of Greek:³¹ a language in which "no one ever quarrelled or drove bargains or made love." It was, until recently, the universal practice in the schools of the West to compose verse and prose in classical Latin. The better scholars did this better and the worse worse; but we doubt whether, among the many myriads of such compositions, there was any which could claim higher merit than verbal dexterity. What would be our estimate of French and English literature in the eighteenth century if we possessed of it nothing but the Latin compositions of such scholars as Boileau and Addison?

Luckily for the Byzantines, their claim to a respectable place in the literature of mankind does not rest on rhetorical poems, diatribes, and epistles. The highest kinds of literary creation were beyond their achievement, and even their comprehension. But in two important departments their contribution was firmly based and extremely valuable: those of literary scholarship and historiography.

If we now turn to the Hellenistic origins of the former of these activities, we find the principles of the earlier age carried on, unaltered and uninterrupted, into the later. It is a truism that Hellenistic scholarship, which had inherited

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁰ *Lettres de l'empereur Manuel Paléologue*, ed. by E. Legrand (Paris, 1893), p. 79.

³¹ Cf. F. Dölger, *Paraspora* (Ettal, 1961), pp. 40-1.

the vast but unco-ordinated treasure of classical Greek literature, conceived its duty to be the criticism, co-ordination, and epitome of this heritage. It was the age of the compendium, the handbook, and the encyclopedia. The *Deipnosophists* of Athenaeus and the *Natural History* of Pliny are examples of this tendency. Scarcely any department of human activity escaped codification. There were handbooks of tactics, agriculture, horsebreeding, gems, and so on. There were lists of philosophers, centenarians, and teetotalers. And there was a manual of make-up, ascribed to Cleopatra.³²

In the Byzantine age this tendency was always remarkable: and for good reasons. When, after the troubles of the seventh and eighth centuries, the mediaeval empire began to take stock once more of the classical inheritance, it found that inheritance drastically reduced: and the collection of books, and their codification and abstraction, had to be undertaken as a matter of urgency. When we think of the Byzantine encyclopedists, we think naturally of the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, whose name and age are justly associated with the most fruitful labors in this field. But in fact the tenth-century scholars were merely carrying on the tradition of men like Photius in the ninth century, or Hesychius in the sixth, or John Stobaeus in the fifth.

The *Anthology* of Stobaeus cannot of course be considered as an original literary production, since, apart from the selection and arrangement, there is nothing original in it. Yet it is remarkable for its gigantic scope, for its influence on Byzantine encyclopedists and classicists generally, and as illustrating the characteristic approach of those scholars to their material. It was through such handbooks as these that the educated Byzantine acquired those ready citations which he had at his finger tips, and which were the hallmark of cultivation. They were, moreover, in line with the plan of Christian education which St. Basil, in the treatise referred to above, had advocated. An educated Christian should be grounded in the Greek classics, but not in all of them: for, as the bee flies from flower to flower, lighting on some but avoiding others, so the Christian should search out for his reading such examples of virtue as were to be found in pre-Christian literature, and leave the rest alone. The *Anthology* of Stobaeus is a prime instance of this eclectic method. Much the same attitude is expressed by the encyclopedist Constantine Porphyrogenitus in the middle of the tenth century: "whereas in the passage of so many years an unconscionable mass of historical material has accumulated, and historical writing has expanded to an infinite and intractable volume," he thinks the only way to deal with it is by excerpting, and therefore offers to the public such elements as will, in his opinion, conduce to their advantage.³³

When, in the ninth century, we find this traditional work of encyclopedism recommenced, the most striking document that meets the eye is of course the *Bibliotheca* of Photius. There is much in this extraordinary work which remains unexplained, and is perhaps inexplicable. That it was compiled in the sixth decade of the ninth century is deducible from the Preface; and that it summa-

³² W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (Meridian Books, 1961), pp. 292-3.

³³ *MPG*, CXIII, cols. 633, 636.

rizes, with theological or literary criticism, no fewer than 280 separate codices, many of them very long indeed, dating between the fifth century B.C. and the ninth century A.D., the text will show. But why, where, and in what circumstances it was composed; what considerations dictated the length of each article; whether its compilation was, as the Preface seems to claim, the result of a gigantic *tour de force* of memory, or whether at least the longer articles were dictated after a fresh perusal of the subject matter: all these are questions which the scholarship of centuries has been unable to answer.³⁴ The significance of the *Bibliotheca* for us is that it is one more effort, on the part of a single, capacious intellect, to codify and expound the knowledge of past ages. The tone of exposition is often dictated by theological prejudice, and the stylistic comment, though here and there it betrays shrewdness, is most often a mechanical attribution of literary categories derived from Hermogenes. The chief interest lies in the choice of documents. Substantially more than 50 per cent of them are Christian and theological works, a fact which, when we remember that Photius was at this time still a layman, illustrates the predominance of the religious partner in the marriage of Christian and pagan traditions effected by St. Basil. Of the 43 per cent of pagan authors, the vast majority are historians and rhetoricians. The classical historians, with the significant exception of Ctesias, are barely noticed, whereas much emphasis is laid on Hellenistic historians of the imperial age. Those who search the pages of Photius for mention of classical poetry or drama will search in vain. These were not the serious business of grown men: they were what schoolboys read with grammarians. Professor Dain has reminded us³⁵ how precarious was the survival to our own day of much that we regard as the most precious legacy of ancient Greece. While the *scriptoria* of Bardas and Photius were duplicating the Homilies of Chrysostom, the Lives of the Saints, or Commentaries on the Psalms, Sophocles lay forgotten. It was only at the end of the tenth century that two scribes with nothing better to do set themselves to write the Laurentian prototype from a single uncial manuscript of the fifth century A.D.

Throughout the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries this work of collection and codification went on, with results which it is no exaggeration to describe as splendid. The *Basilika*, the *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, the *Greek Anthology* are some of the brighter gems in this vast treasure house of stored knowledge. Symeon Metaphrast retold the martyrologies, and marred them in the retelling, though he wrote—a rarity even at that time—a good, plain Greek, for which his encomiast Psellus afterwards thought it necessary to apologize.³⁶ But the most prodigious work in the whole encyclopedic range is of course the *Souda*. It may be questioned how far this extraordinary collection can be claimed as literature; but if a test of literature be that a work can be read with pleasure and profit in and for itself, then the *Souda* will properly fall within this category. Combining the essential features of a dictionary and

³⁴ See ed. by R. Henry, I (Paris, 1959), pp. xix-xxv, li-lii.

³⁵ *DOP*, 8 (1954), pp. 45-6.

³⁶ *MPG*, CXIV, cols. 193, 196.

an encyclopedia, it presents us with an infinite number of articles of every kind—philological, historical, biographical, even moral. Here before us is the abstract of mediaeval Byzantine knowledge, of the antique past and of the Christian present. Errors, it must be said, abound. Confusions among homonyms are frequent. Many of the philological articles would not come amiss in Plato's *Cratylus*. None the less, the *Souda* contains an enormous amount of information not found elsewhere, and it is consulted by scholars of the twentieth century as it was by those of the tenth.

In reading the *Souda* we are often struck by the fact that its compiler, like his contemporaries, drew no line between the Hellenic past and the Byzantine present.³⁷ It is well known that Byzantine historians gave to the barbarians around them the names of those who had held their territories in ancient times, so that Bulgarians become Mysians and Russians become Scyths. On the other hand Tzetzes allows Achilles to appear before Troy with a retinue of Bulgarians. The *Souda* thus by no means confines itself to the past, but contributes valuable information on contemporary life and usages. The same is even more true of the last and greatest annotator and expositor whom we shall mention here, the twelfth-century Eustathios, who in later life became archbishop of Salonika. For, in his voluminous commentary on the Homeric poems, he often illustrates his theme by modern phrases and instances, which have been admirably listed by a great Greek scholar recently dead, Professor Koukouless.³⁸

Whatever truth there may be in the dictum that Michael Psellus was the first scholar of the renaissance, it is certain that Eustathios, a century later, must be included in that tradition. In him we see the fine harvest of so much tenth- and eleventh-century cultivation. He could not of course emancipate himself from the prevailing atmosphere of pedantry and rhetoric, and had indeed himself been a *grammatikos*. But his learning, enormous though it is, he handles with a charm and humanity to which the nearest parallel in English Literature is Burton's *Anatomy*. To read his pages is to make us regret even more deeply the hideous crime of 1204. For it is in him, rather than in Psellus, that we seem to discern the first streaks of that bright day which was to dawn over Europe. Commenting—for example—on the parting of Hector and Andromache, Eustathios observes very justly the dramatic interplay of emotions between father, mother, and son, and then proceeds: "note with what fidelity to nature (πιθανῶς) the poet mingles these various emotions in this passage: smiles, tears; terror, laughter. It would require a long essay to do justice to this happy and genuine touch."³⁹ The terms of this critique—πιθανόν, γλυκύ, ἐνδιόθετον—are all from Hermogenes; but the substance of it shows an appreciation of the text which transcends grammar and syntax.

All these scholars, then, from the fifth to the twelfth centuries and beyond, are the representatives of a conservative tradition in Byzantine letters which is directly traceable to the Hellenistic past. We are at first sight tempted to

³⁷ On the mediaeval sense of continuity, see C. H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), pp. 116–7.

³⁸ Ph. I. Koukouless, *Θεσσαλονίκης Εὐσταθίου Τὰ Λαογραφικά*, 2 vols. (Athens, 1950).

³⁹ Eust. Arch. Thess., *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem*, II (Leipzig, 1828), p. 122/36–41.

apply to them Our Lord's denunciation of the servant who had received the single talent, until we remember what the value of its preservation has been to us, and also that it did after all produce a moderate interest. In each of these writings there is something of unique and permanent value which is not mechanical repetition from the classical and Hellenistic epochs. And we need only consider for a moment what our loss would be if Constantine Porphyrogenitus, or the author of the *Souda*, or Archbishop Eustathios had never written a line.

If this is true of the encyclopedists and commentators, it is surely even more true of the majestic line of Byzantine historians. Here we reach the single department of secular writing in which the models of past ages served to inspire rather than to fetter. And the reason is clear. However history may be written, its subject matter is men and events, and these were to be found not so much in the remote as in the recent past, sometimes even in the present. It is remarkable that the greater number, including most of the best, of Byzantine historians, chose recent events for their theme, and were themselves men with practical experience of affairs. Procopius stood to Belisarius as Polybius had stood to Scipio: and indeed, although Procopius ostensibly imitates Thucydides, he is far more akin, both in spirit and matter, to the great Hellenistic historian. Symeon Logothete was, as his title implies, a statesman. The part played by Psellus in the politics of the later eleventh century is notorious. Princess Anna was daughter of the reigning *autokrator*. Nicetas was imperial secretary and later the governor of a province. And George Sphrantzes is merely the last of a long line of diplomatic historians. This practical approach to historiography was of great importance, and was in exact accord with the precept of Polybius himself, whose influence on the whole of Byzantine history-writing, at least until the thirteenth century, was both vast and beneficent. "Things will never go well with history," he observes,⁴⁰ "until either men of action undertake to write it, or else historians come to regard a training in practical affairs as indispensable for their work."

But this was not the only Polybian precept held in honor among Byzantine historians. As is well known, Polybius insists first and foremost on truth and impartiality,⁴¹ without which history must be very much worse than useless. And here his insistence was strongly reinforced by Plutarch and Lucian. A striking feature of Byzantine history-writing in almost all ages is the tradition (rightly stressed by Krumbacher⁴²) of objectivity, a tradition which, when we consider the general state of public morals and the temptation of any statesman-historian to falsify the story of his own time, cannot be too strongly emphasized. Even the chronicler Theophanes knew that God was watching him to see that he wrote truth.⁴³ The Byzantine historian was profoundly conscious of the dignity of his craft: it was τὸ βέλτιστον χρέμα, τὸ κάλλιστον εὔρημα

⁴⁰ XII, 28, 3-5. Cf. Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs*, ed. by G. B. Hill (London, 1900), p. 138.

⁴¹ Tarn, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

⁴³ De Boor ed., p. 413.

τῶν Ἑλλήνων.⁴⁴ Much has been made in recent times of alleged falsification by tenth-century historians in their accounts of the reigns of Amorian emperors. Of *suppressio veri* these historians were undoubtedly guilty; but I doubt if it can be proved that they deliberately set down what they knew to be untrue. Of course there are two sides to every question, and of course historians have their point of view and try to further it by heightening the color here and toning it down there: and this tendency comes out strongly in the Byzantine historians' conception of the "heroic ideal," which itself derives from the Hellenistic and Roman tradition. But to make some prominent personality (ruler or general) the focal point of the narrative is a perfectly legitimate form of historiography, to which Lord Macaulay's treatment of King William III furnishes a close parallel. In the main, it is true to say of Byzantine historiography that all through its course the classical principles of history-writing resisted, with surprising pertinacity, the rival claims of propaganda and dogma. The composition of *plasma*, of the partially fictitious but edifying narrative, was strictly relegated to formal encomium and hagiography, which one could admire without necessarily believing. Indeed, encomium is, in all important respects, secular hagiography.

Characteristic is the approach of the Continuator of Theophanes, who sets out his principles in a passage which echoes Polybius in every line: "The body of History is a dumb, bloodless corpse where it is deprived of the causes of actions. But, where these are obscured by the passage of time, the serious student will certainly forgive us if, in matters so ambiguous, we confine ourselves to true, rather than invent fictitious (πλασματώδεις), accounts. On the other hand, where the causes can be known, we must put them fairly and squarely before the reader, for in this way alone will he derive benefit from our story."⁴⁵

A third Polybian tendency is to allow the author's personality to obtrude itself into his narrative. Many regard this as a blemish, but this may partly be due to the fact that Polybius' own personality was not an attractive one. Be this as it may, his example encouraged the Byzantine historians to illuminate their narratives with their own personal comments, and to avoid the almost totally impersonal style of Thucydides, which might otherwise have been canonized into a principle. Psellus and Anna are of course extreme examples of this tendency; but there are passages in almost all the historians where some personal comment or violent expression throws a light on the author and his epoch which we should be unwilling to lose.⁴⁶

I have elsewhere written⁴⁷ of the influence of Plutarch on some of the best of the Byzantine historians, and cannot repeat it now. But I do not think it an exaggeration to say that what is best and most enduring in Byzantine historiography derives, directly or indirectly, from the principles and practice

⁴⁴ Nicetas, Bonn ed. 768/5-6.

⁴⁵ Theoph. Cont., Bonn ed. 167-8.

⁴⁶ E.g. Nicetas, Bonn ed. 391-2: a personal outburst against the Franks, but one of profound historical significance.

⁴⁷ *DOP*, 8 (1954), pp. 17-18.

of these two great Hellenistic writers. And it is honorable in the Byzantines that they chose these models in preference to the innumerable bad examples of the same epoch, which provided rich material for the jests of Lucian and for the invectives of Polybius himself. By contrast, the direct influence of Herodotus and Thucydides, though avowed in all ages, was superficial. Thucydides was admired for what, to a modern reader, is the least satisfactory of his characteristics, his style. Photius⁴⁸ called him a "canon" of Attic, which suggests either that he had not read Thucydides or, as is more probable, that he could not recognize a good Attic style when he saw one. Similarly, Herodotus was appreciated mainly (and very justly) as an Ionic stylist until the return to pure classical models in the Palaeologan age. But, in our admiration for the classical historians, we must not overlook the sterling worth of the best of the Hellenistic: and it is salutary to recall the immediate inspiration of the author of "Coriolanus" and "Julius Caesar" and "Antony and Cleopatra."

I must end as I began with an apology: for even of the secular department of Byzantine letters I have been able to do no more than take a bird's-eye view. The picture is necessarily an uneven one. I have had to omit altogether one most important aspect of Byzantine prose writing, I mean, hagiography, which does not fall into the secular category, although, at any rate formally, there is a close connection between saints' lives and the Hellenistic biographies of philosophers, between hagiography and aretalogy. Yet I hope to have said enough to demonstrate the profoundly Hellenistic character of the secular department, both in its weaknesses, which were many, and in its achievements, which were fewer but solid. We have noted throughout our period the paralyzing grip of Hellenistic rhetoric, a strait-jacket which held its prisoners in a state of mental retardation. We have seen how it took the place of the poetic faculty, which could in any case not have survived the artificial union of a static form with a shifting medium, even had the poetic genius not long been extinct.

Yet, in the Hellenistic heritage of Byzantine letters there is much for which we remain permanently thankful: for its insistence on preservation, scholarship, and true record. Tradition has always gone for much in those lands, but they have also often been the battleground of conflicting traditions. Let us be grateful that the mediaeval Byzantine adhered with fidelity to at least some of the traditions handed down from a world more liberally minded and more cultivated than his own.

⁴⁸ *Bibliotheca*, cod. 60.