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Author, Audience, Text and Saint: Two Modes of Early Byzantine Hagiography

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University of Vienna

Lennart Rydén Memorial Lecture, Uppsala, 24 October 2014

Saints were omnipresent in Byzantium: they could be seen and encountered everywhere. But their presence also had a transcendent aspect to it: since they had gone to Heaven straight after their death, as a reward for their virtuous life, they continued to live in an eternal presence with God, and were thus always accessible to the prayers of you and me, as much as to the emperor, or the woman and child next door. No wonder, then, that stories of the saints inspired the Byzantine imagination, in images and in words. The modern Greek word for icon painter is ‘hagiographos.’ The term ‘hagiography’ as referring to written texts about saints, usually implying a full-length biography, is a 19th century scholarly invention.

Hagiography has since the 1960s been mined as a source for social history, as these texts tend to be full of colorful details that allow scholars to gain glimpses of everyday life. It has also been examined from the viewpoint of *histoire de mentalité*, as offering access to the mindset of the common woman, man and child, away from the elites and the court on which Byzantine authors, who themselves hail from this background, usually focus. Hagiography is all that, but it can be much more: a way to understand the literary practices of authors and the literary tastes of their audiences.

Professor Rydén was a master practitioner of this craft and method.

He was in the vanguard of scholars of his generation who recognized the potential of hagiography to offer a deeper understanding of Byzantine language and literature and its place within the continuum from antiquity to the modern period. The following ruminations on literary forms of classical antiquity and their application in Christian hagiography are offered, with gratitude and appreciation, in his memory.¹

My questions this evening will involve juggling multiple components: not just author, audience and text, but also the saint himself. Not the saint as a dead person who lived a long time ago, but the saint who is very much alive in Heaven, in a different—eternal—layer of time that co-exists with the time in which we live, the saint who is accessible in his icon in a corner of the private home, the saint whose relics grandmother may be wearing around her neck and after whom the oldest child is named, the saint whose tomb the local bishop is taking such great care to keep beautiful. How is the saint made present in hagiographical writing? And what role do audience, author and text play in this process? Underlying this line of inquiry is the big issue of literary history: to what degree do textual strategies in a Christian context, in this instance: hagiographical texts, represent literary novelties compared to their predecessors in pagan antiquity? I will confine myself to the formative period of late antiquity (or, if you like, early Byzantium), when holy men and saints began to populate a multi-religious landscape that was increasingly Christianized, and I will largely concentrate on examples from the Greek East, where the phenomenon of asceticism led to the formation of monasticism in Egypt, Palestine and Syria.

Before we can set out on this investigation, it is necessary to clarify what exactly we mean by ‘cult of saints’ and ‘the genre of hagiography.’ In 1923, Hippolyte Delehaye defined hagiography as “writings inspired by religious devotion to the saints and intended to in-

¹ I am grateful to Professor Ingela Nilsson and her colleagues at Uppsala University, especially Hendrik Mäkeler and Ragnar Hedlund, for their generous hospitality on the occasion of my visit.

crease that devotion.”² This definition may apply to later periods, when the cult of saints at their burial sites was well established, bringing pilgrims and commerce and contributing to the power of bishops who acted as patrons of new buildings or commissioned new hagiographical texts to promote a local cult. But a definition of early Byzantine hagiography, from the 4th to the 7th century, that focuses specifically on the cult of dead saints misses the mark. For the earliest hagiographical texts in Greek and Latin, Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Anthony* and Jerome’s *Life of Paul the Hermit*, were not written to promote a saint’s cult at the location of his shrine, but about hermits and spiritual teachers whose place of burial was not even known to their biographers. The emphasis on dead saints and their cult is anachronistic, shaped by our myopic view of the Catholic Middle Ages. What mattered in fact, at least in our foundational period, was the living holy man in interaction with others.³

Hagiography has its origin in the context of the early ascetic movement, and for this reason is best described with the vague term ‘monastic literature.’ Defining hagiography as a ‘genre’ that consists exclusively of full-length biographical accounts is too restrictive.⁴ Monastic literature, by contrast, takes a wide variety of literary forms: biographies that follow a holy person’s life from birth to death (e.g. the *Life of Anthony*), collections of posthumous miracle stories (e.g. the *Miracles of Cosmas and Damian*),⁵ travelogues that highlight selected

² H. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints (Les legendes hagiographiques*, first published Brussels 1905), transl. D. Atwater (Dublin, 1988), p. 2.

³ For much of the following, see C. Rapp, “‘For next to God, You are My Salvation’: Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. J. Howard-Johnston, P. A. Hayward (Oxford, 1999), 63-81.

⁴ M. van Uytfanghe, “L’hagiographie: un ‘genre’ chrétien ou antique tardif?” *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993), 135-88.

⁵ H. Delehaye, “Les recueils antiques des miracles des saints,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 43 (1925), 5-85.

aspects of several holy peoples' life compiled in a larger work (e.g. the *History of the Monks in Egypt*), as well as sermons and funerary orations in praise of a holy person. The Apophthegmata (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*) belong in this context, too. They convey the teachings of the Egyptian ascetics or desert fathers which they dispensed, one by one, to their visitors. Many of these monastics were held in high esteem as holy men during their lifetime and venerated as saints after their death, once they had proved their ability to work miracles.

The concrete context of social interaction between a holy man and his disciples or visitors within the monastic enterprise is essential to understanding the literature that it eventually generated. The audience for such encounters could be pious laypeople in search of spiritual guidance or in need of intercessory prayer, or pilgrims who wished to spend a few days, months or even years in the presence of the master ascetic in order to learn from him. Spiritual guidance consists in the personal connection between a "father (*abba*)" and the person who asks for advice: "Father, give me a word!" As an experienced ascetic, the *abba* is in possession of the divine gifts of foreknowledge, discernment and forbearance, and thus his response offers exactly what the disciple or visitor needs to hear in order to advance on his own spiritual journey.⁶ The words that were generated in these one-to-one encounters became treasured possessions, and soon were shared with others and passed on to subsequent generations. Over time, the result was a more general applicability of the original, oral interaction between a Father and one specific disciple to multiple and indeterminate recipients through its eventual fixation in writing. In this manner, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* became popular reading material already among monks in early 6th century Palestine (although it is unclear whether in the Alphabetical Collection, the Systematic Col-

⁶ On the expectations of both spiritual fathers and their spiritual sons, see now the insightful treatment by A. D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers. Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Milton Keynes and Waynesboro, GA, 2007), esp. p. 123-229.

lection, or a combination of both)—now studied at Lund University under the direction of Professor Samuel Rubenson. As a cumulative text, they report the wisdom dispensed by monastics who lived long before that, from ca. 330 to ca. 460.⁷ Once written down, these words of wisdom were accessible to a larger reading public, even outside of monastic circles.

It cannot be emphasized enough that this interaction of the living holy man with his admirers, followers and disciples is the primary mode of communication which provides the precedent and model for all later interactions between a dead saint and his clientele of miracle-seekers, or between a hagiographical text and its audience. The first and foremost aim of all hagiographical writing is to render the saint present for the benefit of the audience, whether readers or listeners, every time that the text is performed. For our investigation, we have to take into account several elements: the text itself in its rhetorical form, the saint who is the subject matter of the text, and of course the author and the audience.

⁷ However, the sayings of individual Fathers must have been known in oral form much earlier. See L. Regnault, “Les Apophthegmes des Pères en Palestine aux Ve-Ve siècles,” *Irénikon* 54/3 (1981), 320-30, p. 323. A fair proportion of the oral material got lost in the transmission process, as a comparison of the Greek *Apophthegmata* with the Ethiopic tradition shows: J. M. Sauget, “Une nouvelle collection éthiopienne d’Apophthegmata Patrum,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 31 (1965), 177-82; L. Regnault, “Aux origines des collections des Apophthegmes,” *Studia Patristica* 18, pt. 2 (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1989), 61-74. For a good and recent introduction to the *status quaestionis* about the transmission of the *Apophthegmata*, see E. Giannarelli, “Gli ‘Apophthegmata Patrum et Matrum’ fra sentenziosità, esegesi, e ‘humour’ apparente,” *Aspetti di letteratura gnomica nel mondo antico*, vol. 2, ed. M. S. Funghi (Florence, 2004), and W. Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford, 2004), p. 165-273. It has recently been argued that the Systematic Collection is at least as early as, if not earlier than, the Alphabetic Collection of the *Apophthegmata*: R. Bagnall, N. Gonis, “An Early Fragment of the Greek *Apophthegmata Patrum*,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 5/1 (2003), 260-73.

I would like to suggest that there are two co-existing modes of making the saint present: one aims at eliminating the need for words and text altogether; the other depends on the author's presentation of the text in a specific literary form. In the former, the text aims to make itself invisible, in the latter, the text carries a message beyond the content it conveys, through its specific stylistic features. Interestingly, both modes have deep roots in the literary tradition of classical antiquity.

1. The Vanishing Text

The message conveyed by a holy man was his teaching, communicated in words, but even more so enacted in his daily conduct.⁸ Teaching by example, through the congruity of word and deed in the process of character formation has a long tradition in ancient education. In late antiquity, it was highlighted by Hyperechius, whose maxims of advice to monks probably date from the late fourth or early fifth century: "Truly wise is the man who does not teach with his words, but instructs through his deeds."⁹

This echoes a saying by the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus which Pseudo-Plutarch quotes in his *The Education of Children*: "A word is a deed's shadow."¹⁰ Plutarch further emphasized the need for

⁸ F. von Lilienfeld, "Die christliche Unterweisung der Apophthegmata Patrum", *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 20 (1970), 85-110. Her remarks, p. 86-95, on the instructive value of the sayings of the Fathers in close conjunction with their personal conduct can be applied to other kinds of monastic literature as well. For much of the following, see C. Rapp, "The Literature of Early Monasticism: Purpose and Genre between Tradition and Innovation," *Unclassical Traditions. Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. R. Flower, C. Kelly, M. Williams, Cambridge Classical Journal, Supplement (Cambridge, 2010), 119-30.

⁹ Hyperechius, *Adhortatio* 122, PG 79, col. 1485A: Σοφὸς γὰρ ἀληθῶς ἐστίν, οὐχ ὁ τῷ λόγῳ διδάσκων, ἀλλ' ὁ τῷ ἔργῳ παιδεύων; cf. *Apophthegmata, Systematic Collection* X 109, ed. Guy, vol. 2, p. 86.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 9, trans. F. Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia I*, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1927), p. 46.

fathers to provide a suitable example for their children through their own conduct, although he was concerned with the avoidance of undesirable behaviors rather than with setting up models of virtue: “Fathers ought above all, by not misbehaving and by doing as they ought to do, to make themselves a manifest example to their children, so that the latter, by looking at their fathers’ lives as at a mirror, may be deterred from disgraceful deeds and words.”¹¹ This notion of teaching by example is pervasive in the *Apophthegmata*. Thus Abba Sisoës once refused to give a word of instruction to a disciple, explaining: “Why do you make me speak without need? Whatever you see, do that.”¹²

Just as teaching must be done through both word and deed, learning too must include an element of action. There was a common consensus that the word alone, even the word of Scripture, is worthless if it is not put into practice. A typical piece of advice by Desert Fathers includes all these components: Scripture, the instruction by spiritual guides, and personal action: “This is what God asks of Christians: that one subjects oneself to the divine scriptures, and that what is read is being practiced (*kai ta lektea praktea*), and to have obedience to the *hegoumenoi* and the spiritual fathers.”¹³ The advice of an *abba* to a visitor often does not consist in a word of wisdom or Scriptural interpretation, but rather in an exhortation to adopt a particular ascetic practice. In one famous instance, when a young monk asked an *abba* for a *rhema*, an instructive word of wisdom for reflection, he was instead given concrete guidance for action and advised to remove his desire for competitiveness.¹⁴

¹¹ Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 20, trans. F. Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia I*, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1927), p. 67.

¹² *Apophthegmata*, Alphabetical Collection, Sisoës 45, trans. B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo and Oxford, 1975, rev. ed., Kalamazoo, 1984), p. 220.

¹³ F. Nau, “Histoires des solitaires égyptiens”, *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 18 (1913), 137-46, nr. 388, p. 143.

¹⁴ *Apophthegmata*, Systematic Collection, X 179, ed. Guy, SCh 474, p. 130. The same advice is also given in the *Apophthegmata*, Alphabetical Collection, Matoes 12, PG 65, col. 293B.

In ancient biographical and historical writing, words and deeds had the narrative function of revealing character.¹⁵ Aristotle explained in his *Rhetoric* that “actions are signs of character.”¹⁶ They also had an intrinsic pedagogical value. Ancient authors generally agreed that a typical saying or anecdote has the ability to depict a person’s character better than an exhaustive list of deeds. Plutarch observed this in the process of his composition of the *Parallel Lives*:

...a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.¹⁷

The importance of words and deeds is emphasized in the *progymnasmata*, rhetorical exercises that were taught to advanced students in the schoolrooms of antiquity and beyond.¹⁸ Among the different kinds of exposition, these instructional handbooks all include the *chreia*. Aphthonius, a student of Libanius in Antioch in the second half of the

¹⁵ R. A. Burrige, “Biography,” *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period (330 B.C.–A.D. 400)*, ed. S. E. Porter (Boston and Leiden, 2001), 371-91.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Ars rhetorica* 1.9.33 [1367b], ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford, 1959), p. 41.

¹⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander I*, trans. B. Perrin, *Plutarch’s Lives*, vol. VII, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1919), p. 225.

¹⁸ They were still widely used in the 9th century and in the 13th century, Nikephoros Blemmydes notes in his autobiography that he first read Homer and other poetic works, and then the *Progymnasmata* of Aphthonius and the rhetoric of Hermogenes. J. Irigion, “Survie et renouveau de la littérature antique à Constantinople (IXe siècle),” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 5 (1962), 287-302, repr. in *Griechische Kodikologie und Textüberlieferung*, ed. D. Harlfinger (Darmstadt, 1980), p. 178; Nikephoros Blemmydes, *Curriculum Vitae* 1. 4. 2, ed. J. A. Munitiz, *Nicephori Blemmydae Autobiographia sive Curriculum Vitae* (Turnhout, 1984).

4th century CE, whose *Progymnasmata* enjoyed great popularity in Byzantium, defines it thus:

Chreia is a brief recollection, referring to some person in a pointed way. It is called *chreia* because it is useful. Some *chreias* [sic] are verbal, some active, some mixed. One that makes the utility clear by what is said is verbal; for example, Plato said the twigs of virtue grow by sweat and toil. An active *chreia* is one signifying something done; for example, when Pythagoras was asked how long is the life of men, he hid himself after appearing briefly, making his appearance a measure of life. A mixed *chreia* consists of both a saying and an action; for example, when Diogenes saw an undisciplined youth he struck his pedagogue, saying, ‘Why do you teach him such things?’¹⁹

A *chreia* can thus consist of a pithy remark, or of a short narration of a significant action, or of a combination of both. Its purpose is always utilitarian, its intention to provide some kind of instruction for the audience. And, in Aphthonius’ definition, it reveals something significant about the speaker or actor who is always a specific person with a name. The *chreia* came to popularity in the Hellenistic period of the 4th century BCE, as a way to encapsulate witty, clever or wise remarks by philosophers and other prominent people, including Alexander the Great.²⁰ Later collections of *chreiai* are attributed to philosophers of the Cynic, Stoic, Epicurean and Peripatetic schools.²¹ They enjoyed

¹⁹ Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata* 3, ed. H. Rabe, *Rhetores graeci*, vol. 10 (Leipzig, 1926), p. 3, l. 21-p. 4, l. 11, trans. G. A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Leiden and Boston, 2003), p. 97.

²⁰ R. F. Hock, “The *Chreia* in Primary and Secondary Education,” *Alexander’s Revenge. Hellenistic Culture through the Centuries*, ed. J. M. Asgeirsson, N. van Deusen (Reykjavik, 2002), 11-35, p.12.

²¹ H.-R. Hollerbach, *Zur Bedeutung des Wortes chreia*, Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität zu Köln (Cologne, 1964), p. 80. For a comprehensive list of *gnomologia* and *chreia*-collections in antiquity and Byzantium, see J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 337-41.

continued popularity in Byzantium well into the middle and late periods.²²

In Late Antiquity, *chreiai* were used widely, both in primary and in secondary education, first to teach pupils how to write (not the Psalms!), and later also in grammatical exercises, as the Egyptian papyri of the second to fourth century CE attest.²³ Unlike proverbs (*gnomai*) that are generalized statements and often anonymous, the *chreiai* are always personal and thus are easily integrated into larger narratives, especially those of a biographical nature. Thus Menander Rhetor comments on Plutarch's *Lives*: "They are full of stories, apophthegms, proverbs and *chreiai*."²⁴ Recent research has shown that the

²²To give a few examples: A collection of 81 straightforward and unembellished sayings of Epicurus is preserved in a 14th century manuscript: Cod. Vat. gr. 1950, f. 401v-404. See H. Usener, K. Wotke, "Epikurische Spruchsammlung," *Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für classische Philologie* 10 (1888), 175-201; H. Gomperz, "Zur epikurischen Spruchsammlung," *Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für classische Philologie* 10 (1888), 202-10. Another manuscript of the 14th century contains a collection of 577 sayings of philosophers, poets, rhetors, and rulers, with a final section of sayings attributed to women. The structure of this collection resembles that of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, in that the sayings are arranged in alphabetical order of the speakers, and are often given a specific setting ("When Anacreon was given a talent of gold by the tyrant Polycrates, he returned it to him, saying: 'I detest a gift which forces me to lose sleep'.") Cod. Vat. gr. 743, f. 6r-47v. See L. Sternbach, "De Gnomologio Vaticano inedito," *Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für classische Philologie* 9 (1887), 175-206; *op. cit.*, 10 (1888), 1-49 and 211-60; *op. cit.*, 11 (1889), 43-64 and 192-242. Quotation at *Wiener Studien* 10 (1888), p. 10. For references to other such collections, see L. Sternbach, "De Gnomologio Vaticano inedito," *Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für classische Philologie* 9 (1887), p. 176-78.

²³R. F. Hock, "The *Chreia* in Primary and Secondary Education," *Alexander's Revenge. Hellenistic Culture through the Centuries*, ed. J. M. Asgeirsson, N. van Deusen (Reykjavik, 2002), 11-35. For a different view on their place in the curriculum, see M. T. Luzzatto, "L'impiego della 'chreia' filosofica nell'educazione antica," *Aspetti di letteratura gnomica nel mondo antico*, vol. 2, ed. M. S. Funghi (Florence, 2004), 157-87.

²⁴Menander Rhetor, ed. and trans. D. A. Russell, N. G. Wilson (Oxford, 1981, repr. 2004), p. 392, l. 30-1.

sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are indebted to this rhetorical form.²⁵ It is also employed in rabbinic literature, where Caroline Heszer has shown that it served “as a reminiscence of the holy man himself as well as a means to propagate his lifestyle.”²⁶

Given the popularity and wide dissemination of the *chreia*, any monk with even the most basic writing skills is thus likely to have been exposed to the format of the *chreia* as the essential way to convey the character of a person as a lesson and example for others. The *Apophthegmata* should therefore be seen as a Christian manifestation of the *chreia* in all its three forms, verbal, active and mixed.²⁷ Lillian Larsen has made a convincing case that the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* not only follow the *chreia* format, but that, like the *chreiai*,

²⁵ R. C. Tannehill, “Types and Functions of Apophthegms in the Synoptic Gospels,” *ANRW* II 25/2 (Berlin and New York, 1984), 1792-1829; B. L. Mack, *Anecdotes and Arguments: The chreia in Antiquity and Early Christianity*, The Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA, Occasional Papers 10 (1987); J. S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 263-328, esp. p. 306-16; V. K. Robbins, “The Chreia,” *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*, ed. D. E. Aune (Atlanta, 1988), 1-23. See also R. Hock, “Chreia,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York, 1992), p. 912-14; and J. M. Asgeirsson, “The Chreia as Principle and Source for Literary Composition,” *Alexander’s Revenge. Hellenistic Culture through the Centuries*, ed. J. M. Asgeirsson, N. van Deusen (Reykjavik, 2002), 37-57. For an example of the application of this method see *Kingdom and Children*, ed. D. Patte, special issue of *Semeia* 29 (1983).

²⁶ C. Heszer, “Apophthegmata Patrum and Apophthegmata of the Rabbis,” *La narrativa cristiana antica: Codici narrativi, strutture formali, schemi retorici*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 50 (Rome, 1995), 453-64, p. 465.

²⁷ This is implicitly suggested, but not developed, by J.-C. Guy in the preface to his edition of the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata*. In a little-known article, the case was first made in print by K. McVey, “The Chreia in the Desert: Rhetoric and Bible in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,” *The Early Church in its Context. Essays in Honor of Everett Ferguson*, ed. A. J. Malherbe, F. W. Norris, J. W. Thompson (Leiden etc., 1998), 245-55. See also V. K. Robbins, “Apophthegm,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New York, 1992), p. 307-9.

they were also used by more advanced students for exercises for the conjugation of verbs.²⁸ Recognizing the *chreia* as the basic underlying structure of the *Apophthegmata* form emphasizes their purpose as teaching tools while at the same time acknowledging that their written form evolved from classical models of instructional literature. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* were the basic background music that provided the tune, rhythm and direction to guide the footsteps of subsequent generations of monks. But this teaching requires active participation by the audience.

This also applies to full-length biographies of holy men that usually circulated under the title *Life and Conduct* (*bios kai politeia*). These can equally be regarded as a sequence of *chreiai* embedded in a continuous narrative that serves a didactic purpose. Athanasius of Alexandria exhorts his audience to imitation in his preface to the *Life of Anthony*: “For I know that, hearing about Anthony, you will first marvel at the man, and then you will wish to strive to imitate his purpose. For the life of Anthony is sufficient for monks as a pattern of asceticism.”²⁹ This criterion of mimetic success could override historical accuracy in the perception of the importance of certain holy men. Jerome notes this at the beginning of his *Life of Paul of Thebes*, who chose to live as a hermit long before Anthony: “Others, whose opinion is commonly accepted, claim that Anthony was the first to undertake this way of life, which is partly true, for it is not so much that he came before all the others, but rather that he inspired everyone with a commitment to this way of life.”³⁰

Once it is accepted that deeds speak more than words, the holy man’s teachings are inscribed by *imitatio* in his disciples and the saint

²⁸ L. L. Larsen, *Pedagogical Parallels: Re-Reading the Apophthegmata Patrum*, Ph.D. Diss. Columbia, 2006, esp. p. 74-115.

²⁹ *Life of Anthony*, Pr. 3, ed. Bartelink, p. 126, l. 15-18. Translation mine.

³⁰ Jerome, *Vita Pauli*, Prologue 1, trans. C. White, *Early Christian Lives* (London, 1998), p. 75; ed. R. Degòrski, *Edizione critica della “Vita sancti Pauli primi eremitaie” di Girolamo* (Rome, 1987), p. 68-9. There are two Greek translations of this text. The first one may well have been produced by

is performed, as it were, by his audience. The audience thus assumes the role of a substitute text as a medium for the transmission of the teaching of the holy men. In other words, it is not the author's primary aim to make a saint by celebrating the subject of his narrative, but rather to make saints out of those who encounter his work. In this manner, the holy man himself and definitely the literary efforts of the hagiographer become, ultimately, redundant. The text dissolves in the teaching that is enacted by the disciples. What remains is the eternal existence of the saint as he is rendered present in the life of his followers.

The Text as Message

In the second mode, by contrast, the hagiographical text draws attention to its specific literary form. It, too, aims to render the saint present, but it does so through the mediation of the author.

Saints' lives often begin and usually end with the invocation of the saint's assistance and prayers on behalf of the author and audience. This is, of course, reminiscent of the invocation of the Muse at the beginning of the *Odyssey* and many other such works. The author asks the saint for his intervention in the creation of his text, so that the text becomes an instantiation of its protagonist saint's supernatural powers, its very existence the result of a miracle for which the author is the conduit. To participate in the recital or reading of a hagiographical text thus is tantamount to the witnessing of a miracle. For the saint is actually present at the recital of his *Vita*, as Els Rose has demonstrated

Sophronius, Jerome's friend and trusted translator of other texts, including the *Vita of Hilarion*. It certainly pre-dates the end of the 6th century, and survives in nine manuscripts. See J. Bidez, *Deux versions grecques inédites de la vie de Paul de Thèbes* (Ghent and Brussels, 1900).

with regard to the *Life of Martin of Tours*.³¹ There are other instances in which the hagiographical text has the same value as a relic, a tangible piece of the saint's presence in the here and now.³² The author thus assumes a quasi-liturgical role, an aspect emphasized by Derek Krueger:³³ analogous to the priest at the consecration of the Eucharist, the hagiographer's invocation of the saint brings him to life, as it were, in the narration of his *Vita*. And this is repeated every time someone reads or listens to the text.

The author is not only the conduit of the miracle of the text, he is also directly affected by his own composition. Already in classical antiquity, narrating the life of exemplary people could have a transforming effect on the author, who thus positions himself as a model for his audience. Plutarch commented on the effect that the composition of his *Parallel Lives* had on himself:

I began the writing of my 'Lives' for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavouring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues herein depicted. For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together...³⁴

This leads me to a further point: authors of early monastic texts sometimes attempt to compensate for their lack of opportunity to have been disciples of their holy protagonists by declaring their literary activity

³¹ E. Rose, "Celebrating Saint Martin in Early Medieval Gaul," *Christian Feast and Festival: The Dynamics of Western Liturgy and Culture*, ed. P. Post et al. (Leuven, 2001), 267-86.

³² For much of the following, see C. Rapp, "Holy Texts, Holy Books, Holy Scribes: Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity," in *The Early Christian Book*, ed. W. Klingshirn, L. Safran (Washington, D.C., 2006), 194-222.

³³ D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: the Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia, 2004).

³⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Aemilius Paulus* I 1, trans. B. Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. VI, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1943), p. 261.

to be an act of substitute discipleship. They claim to engage in vicarious *imitatio* of the saint, not through their own life, but through the composition of a *Vita*. A good example is the *History of the Monks in Egypt*, the first Christian collection of biographies of holy men and women. The author, who spent time with the monks during an extended visit to Egypt, perhaps in 394/5, was writing down his experiences at the request of a monastic community on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem:

I have therefore trusted in their prayers and presumed to apply myself to the composition of this narrative (*diêgesin*) so that I too should derive some profit from the edifying lives of these monks through the imitation of their way of life, their complete withdrawal from the world, and their stillness, which they achieve through the patient practice of virtue and retain to the end of their lives.³⁵

The act of composing a hagiographical text thus not only constituted *imitatio* through authorship, but also fulfilled the obligation to provide an example of conduct to others. If this could not be achieved through one's own life, then at least through one's pen. Sulpicius of Severus, whose *Vita of Saint Martin* was composed in 397 partially with a view to presenting Martin as Gaul's answer to Egypt's Anthony, thus explains his intention: "For even if we ourselves had not lived in such a way as to be an example to others, we have at least made an effort to prevent a man who deserves to be imitated from remaining unknown."³⁶

The idea of vicarious discipleship not through living a holy life, but through the composition of a hagiographical text continued to be

³⁵ *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, ed. A.-J. Festugière, *Subsidia hagiographica*, 34 (Brussels, 1961), Prologue 2, p. 6. Trans. N. Russell, intr. B. Ward, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (London and Oxford, 1981), Prologue 3, p. 49.

³⁶ Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin of Tours* I 6, ed. J. Fontaine, Sulpice Sévère, *Vie de Saint Martin*, vol. 1, SCh 133 (Paris, 1967), p. 252; transl. C. White, *Early Christian Lives* (London, 1998), p. 136.

expressed in Greek hagiographical writing in later centuries.³⁷ In the mid-seventh century, Leontius of Neapolis begins his *Life of Symeon the Fool*, one of the three *Vitae* edited by Professor Rydén:

Since therefore I am unable to present instruction and the image and model (*eikona kai typon*) of virtuous deeds from my own life, carrying with myself everywhere the mark of sin, come, and from the work of others and their sweaty toils, I shall today unveil for you a nourishment which does not perish but which leads our souls to life everlasting [cf. Jn 6: 27]....For the zealous, those whose intention is directed toward God, it is sufficient for their conscience to set them in the presence of instruction, recommending all good things and dissuading them from evil. Those more humble than these need to have the commandment of the written law set before them. But if someone escapes both from the first and from the second type of path which leads to virtue, it is necessary that from the zeal and concern of others, which he sees before his eyes, through his hearing, and through the stories (*diégeseōs*) which are told to him, a divine yearning be aroused in him to shake his soul from its sleep, that he may travel through the straight and narrow path and begin eternal life now.³⁸

Leontius employs the technical term for narration, *diegesis*—a concept to which I shall return—and explains that it reaches its audience through the sense of hearing, which is somewhat inferior to seeing with one's own eyes, as an original disciple would have done. He also establishes three tiers of spiritual perfection and their corresponding need for particular kinds of guidance and instruction. The most

³⁷ See also C. Rapp, "Byzantine Hagiographers as Antiquarians, 7th to 10th century," *Bosphorus*, ed. C. Rapp, S. Efthymiadis, D. Tsougarakis (Amsterdam, 1995 = *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 21), 31-44.

³⁸ Leontius of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, ed. L. Rydén, trans. and annot. A. J. Festugière (Paris, 1974), p. 55, l. 18-p. 56, l. 12; trans. D. Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius' Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley etc., 1996), p. 132.

efficient way to inspire spiritual weaklings to a God-pleasing life is the story of the virtuous conduct of another person. Those who have greater spiritual strength are able to observe written instructions. But only those with particular dedication are capable of following just their conscience in their knowledge of good and bad. The deeds of a saintly person thus have the same instructional value as disembodied teaching. They can be more effective in reaching a wider audience, especially—we are meant to understand—if they are made available by an accomplished author such as Leontios himself.

The notion that the hagiographical text renders the saint present is also reinforced by the use of certain stylistic features that hagiography has borrowed from classical rhetoric: the narrative form of *diegesis* (*narratio*).³⁹ Many authors of early Greek hagiographies insist that they are composing not a *bios* (which would require exaggerations and bending the truth), but a *diegesis* or *narratio*. This is a term derived from ancient epideictic rhetoric, where it carries a very precise definition. In courtroom speeches in ancient Athens, the *diegesis* was the narration of the criminal deed by an eyewitness. If no eyewitness was available, the claimant presented the perpetration as if he had been an eyewitness. In order to be effective, *diegesis* has to display the three basic characteristics postulated first by Isocrates in the 4th century BC: clarity (*saphêneia*), brevity (*syntomia*) and probability (*pithanotês*).

These rules, which are also described in detail by Quintilian in the first century AD,⁴⁰ among others, were still taught in the institutions of higher learning in Late Antiquity. They were included in the handbooks of rhetoric composed in the 2nd century by Hermogenes⁴¹ and in

³⁹ Much of the following is based on C. Rapp, “Storytelling as Spiritual Communication in Early Greek Hagiography: The Use of *Diegesis*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6/3 (1998), 431-48.

⁴⁰ Quintilian, *Inst.* IV 2. 31-132 (M. Fabi Quintiliani, *Institutionis oratoriae libri duodecim*, ed. M. Winterbottom, vol.I, Oxford, 1970).

⁴¹ Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata*, ed. H. Rabe (*Hermogenis Opera*, Stuttgart, 1969 =reprint of the 1913 edition *Rhetores Graeci*, vol. VI), p. 4-6.

the 4th century by Aphthonios.⁴² Both these authors continued to enjoy popularity in the educational process in later centuries. According to Lemerle, they “seem to have remained the masters of Byzantine rhetoric”⁴³ and their handbooks were the foundation of all rhetorical instruction in the Byzantine Empire.⁴⁴ It is reasonable, then, to assume that even those men who had but the most superficial encounter with higher education, including late antique hagiographers, would have had a certain familiarity with the concept of *diegesis* and its schoolbook definition. Many Greek hagiographers describe their work in the same way, as a *diegesis* or as sharing the characteristics of brevity, clarity and truthfulness. In doing so, they claim not only implicit truthfulness and trustworthiness for their account, but also assume for themselves the stance of eyewitness or prototypical disciple simply by adopting this particular narrative style.

In this mode of the text as message, we have the saint performing his sanctity eternally and in biblical time. The hagiographer assumes the role of both spectator and eyewitness, especially if he presents the text in the form of a *diegesis*. The text itself is the miraculous result of prayers to the saint in which the author invites his audience to join every time the text is performed through recital, reading and listening. There is a chain of performative spectatorship that works through the medium of the text, by its very existence and through the type of narrative it offers.

It is time to conclude. Both modes, the text that aims to make itself redundant and the text that makes itself known, have as their aim the replication and perpetuation of the saint as an embodiment of

⁴² Aphthonios, *Progymnasmata*, ed. H. Rabe (*Rhetores Graeci*, vol. X, Leipzig, 1926, p. 2-3 = ed. L. Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci*, vol. II, Leipzig, 1854, p. 22).

⁴³ P. Lemerle, *Byzantine Humanism* (Canberra, 1986, updated from the original French edition, Paris 1971), p. 295.

⁴⁴ G. L. Kustas, *Studies in Byzantine Rhetoric*, *Analekta Blatadon*, 17 (Thessalonike 1973), p. 5 and p. 20 sqq.

virtue that invites imitation, by author and audience. What distinguishes them is the role of the text and of the author. In the first mode, the text is dispensable, because the writing parchment or canvas for the holy man is his disciple who follows his example through *imitatio* in every way—and by extension this includes anyone who encounters the hagiographical text, whether as a reader or as a listener. In the second mode, the text is essential as embodiment and conveyor of the message that the saint continues to exist and exert his powers, in biblical or typological time. The hagiographer plays a crucial role as mediator of sanctity and facilitator of its enactment. It is no coincidence that this second mode of the Text as Message follows the first mode of the Vanishing Text at some chronological distance—although it is impossible to pin this down with greater accuracy. As monasticism became entrenched in early Byzantine society, ascetic ideals were no longer all-pervasive, but confined to those who chose to pursue this lifestyle under controlled circumstances and in confined spaces. This became the context for the actual imitation of a holy man’s teaching by his disciples or subsequent generations. Hagiographical writing, by contrast, now in the biographical form, became the *locus* for vicarious imitation by author or audience, through the production or the consumption of the text itself. Yet for all their differences, both hagiographical modes owed their articulation to the shared heritage of ancient rhetoric that remained the bedrock of Byzantine literature.

