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Nigel G. Wilson, *From Byzantium to Italy. Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 2nd edn (London, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 231 pp., ISBN PB: 978-1-4742-5047-4.

Twenty-five years after the first edition, this precious and acclaimed book on Greek in the Italian Quattrocento by the renowned Oxford scholar, Nigel Wilson, has been re-issued. In his original one-page preface, reprinted here, Wilson modestly defines his work as a preliminary sketch of the period. Five lines added at the end clarify that this second edition contains only minor adjustments and a fuller, if still highly selective, bibliography. These refinements demonstrate not only that the author has kept abreast of the vast scholarship in the field, but also that his contribution to the period still stands unchallenged.

Although I have not been able to compare the two editions side by side, the basic structure of the work appears unaltered. The book consists of fourteen pithy chapters roughly divided into two parts around the middle of the fifteenth century, although this evident chronological break is not signaled explicitly. Chapters 1-9 cover the first half of the fifteenth century, and are mostly devoted to single figures of early humanists such as Chrysoloras, Bruni, Vittorino da Feltre, Guarino and Filelfo; the chapter on 'Greek Prelates' deals with Plethon and Bessarion, the latter under the sub-section 'the Greek cardinal' (8.ii). Chapters 10-14 move on to the second half of the century articulated this time in geographical terms, from 'Rome under Nicholas V and his successors' moving up the peninsula to Florence, Padua, Bologna, Ferrara and Venice (with the exception of a 'downward' moment all the way to Messina). Within these cities, that mirror the locations of the early humanists in the first half of the century, with the notable exception of Mantua, and with the occasional mention of Milan, the figures singled out for mention are Argyropoulos, Ficino, Chalcondyles, Janus Lascaris, Politian, Aldus Manutius and Marcus Musurus. Besides these, a large number of minor figures make their appearance, if often little more than by name. Chapter 15 is not merely a summarizing conclusion, but pushes the enquiry further into the sixteenth century with new information.

The particular expertise of the author as textual editor and paleographer is evident in the angle chosen for the presentation of the material. When declaring that ‘the capacity to correct texts with success [is] a rare gift’ (p. 174), we read not only a judgment about past scholars, but a statement from experience. In taking on the duty to ‘mention the deficiencies of even the most gifted men’, as in the case of Theodore Gaza (p. 91), Wilson speaks as if from an ideal *panoptikon* where the standards for quality are beyond appeal. To give just a few examples, Filelfo ‘cannot be ranked with the greatest figures of the ‘400’ (p. 57), Bessarion’s notes on the *De caelo* by Simplicius ‘prove that he misunderstood Latin’ (p. 72), Andronicus Callistus, though perhaps in need of further study, shows for the time being ‘no proof of exceptional talent’ (p. 133). Yet one senses the author’s excitement as the quality of scholarship devoted to Greek texts and their edition steadily improves, towering in the achievement of Musurus, who earns the palm as ‘the ablest textual scholar that Greece has ever produced’ and is rewarded with rare appreciative adjectives such as ‘intelligent’ and ‘excellent’ (p. 172). To use an unfashionable word in the English-speaking world, but one with much currency still in Sweden, this is a world of (all-male) philologists, where searching, reading, transmitting, and, by the advent of the printing press, divulging an informed and erudite love for Classical texts constitutes the very fibre and stuff of life. Philological success is the measure of the man, the name of the game. All these activities go on in the mind of these scholars, who are presented as if disembodied and geared towards one single aim: the preservation of the Greek heritage beyond the decline and fall of Constantinople (an event, that of 1453, only twice mentioned in the book).

This intellectual world acquires a lived dimension on a couple of occasions. One is the recalling of a Platonic-style symposium by Ficino, where the persons named as guests, including himself, become real human beings after their being assigned reading parts: ‘A division of this kind was approved by all. But the bishop [Antonio Agli of Fiesole, who was assigned Pausanias’ speech] and the doctor [the other Ficino, who was assigned the speech by Eryximachus the doctor] being forced to leave, one for the cure of souls, the other for that of patients, handed over their parts in the discussion to Giovanni Cavalcanti. The others

turned towards him and sat ready to listen in silence'. (p. 107) Thus the staging of the *Symposium* for the feast of the circle of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1468 was disrupted by the real tasks of its members. Another instance where the real life of an emigré breaks in is when we descend to Sicily to meet Constantine Lascaris, described as 'one of the least fortunate refugees from Byzantium'. Wilson spends some words to consider his predicament through a letter denouncing poverty and neglect, matters that he reckons can be accounted as sufficiently real, rather than attributed to a sporadic fit of depression (p. 137). When during this letter Lascaris contemplates alternatives to Messina, he concludes that Britain cannot be envisaged as a possible solution, since 'Andronicus Callistus had died there friendless'. The bitter isolation and uncertain positions of these emigrés only transpires from these references. Financial considerations creep into the path of Aldus' career also, though on the whole lack of detailed information appears not to allow pursuit of this kind of evidence for researching these personalities more in the round.

Wilson's specific concern is to highlight the establishment and as far as possible the functioning of educational institutions by looking at the curriculum chosen and the teaching methods employed. Reference to specific manuscripts aids the task of mapping out such activities. Professorships in Greek at major Italian towns enabled a certain continuity of study and thus a growth in the knowledge of the language and of Classical literature by the end of the '400. After all, the production of Aldus's press must have had a relatively large market of buyers, however fleeting and unpredictable their status may have been. Wilson sees these developments as markedly and characteristically Renaissance as opposed to medieval. These historical periods are treated in the book as neatly separate, as signaled by the opening statement, 'In Western Europe in the Middle Ages Greek was not generally known' (p. 1). The very poor quality of translations from Greek up to the 1300 is taken as a sign of the meaningfulness of such a break; and an ascending curve is traced in this respect culminating in the time (if not exactly corresponding to the work) of Aldus. Although Wilson occasionally acknowledges some precursors to the philological methods developed by the humanists, as in the work of the twelfth-century biblical scholar Maniacutia, he is con-

tent to keep them defined as ‘medieval’ without problematizing such definitions. Although such convenient divisions are enshrined in historical and literary handbooks, Wilson’s blanket endorsement demonstrates a certain disregard, if not disdain, of recent scholarly attempts at questioning chronological boundaries in order to remove them. At any rate, this is not the kind of discussion to be found in this book.

Wilson’s point of view, apparently amply justified by his evidence, is strictly focused on the Classics, as opposed to Christian writings in Greek. The predominance of Classical literature in the education of a Christian society, and the neglect of the vast resources of Patristic writings, is a surprising, if apparently endemic, situation over which Wilson ponders. Emblematic is his remark about the manuscript of the *Homocentones* that the Camaldolese monk Pietro Candido presented to his abbot: ‘It is difficult to see what spiritual enlightenment could have been obtained by reading stories from the New Testament told in hexameters, each verse of which was constructed from parts of two or three lines of Homer’ (p. 161). Literary refinement and the fascination with the clash and merging of ancient and Christian cultures were, however, at the very heart of the papal and ecclesiastical sponsorship of Greek scholarship, of which Camaldoli appears to have been a major centre. Wilson’s idiosyncratic treatment of the Council of Florence (1439) is telling in this respect. He compares this assembly, tongue-in-cheek, to a modern academic conference where what is happening on the fringes is more important than the official proceedings. He judges its outcome ‘a specious union’ and goes on to deal with matters of geography instead: the introduction by Plethon of a text by Strabo may lie behind the project of discovery of the Americas soon after to be undertaken by Columbus. In this vein, the role of the Latin Church in the sponsorship and preservation of Greek humanist culture is considered with a degree of puzzling reticence and dealt with only when unavoidable, as in the case of ecclesiastical figures such as Ambrogio Traversari and Marsilio Ficino. Bruni’s Latin version of St Basil, *Discourse to the Young* (pp. 16-18) provides another opportunity for discussing relative pedagogies.

Despite or perhaps because of the richness of the information provided, one concern can be raised about the audience for such a book.

This distillation of knowledge is packed with names and titles of works well beyond what current-day Classical Languages students can hope to master, or even be superficially acquainted with. One is therefore inclined to compare this book to one mentioned in it, the *Thesaurus cornucopiae et horti Adonidis*, a compilation of learning aids, which Aldus printed in 1496. Wilson describes it as a pedagogical effort that did not quite achieve its aim: ‘one needs to be quite a good scholar already in order to derive any benefit from it’ (p. 155). Similarly, for all its *akribia*, this small book on the Renaissance is hardly written with a pedagogical bent, at least by modern standards. Many authors and works are mentioned without further context or explanation; the notes are laconic in the extreme; in them, articles are cited without titles, and there is no final bibliography to supply such essential information and act as an easy point of reference. A high level of previous knowledge is expected to follow topics that are discussed from already given premises. For example, in none of the references to the ‘Pandects’, a collection of Laws from the Greek *Digest* preserved in a single manuscript in Florence, are their contents, importance or features of this manuscript explained. Rather, their mystique as a precious ‘talisman’ and the consequent jealous preservation of the manuscript in question is described with that knowledge taken for granted. One needs to know, moreover, how to look this item up in the index: the Pandects in fact appear as the first entry in the list of manuscripts for the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, as an unnumbered codex (index iii), with slightly different references from the entry under *Digest* in the list of ancient authors (index i). These choices prove the point that a considerable amount of previous knowledge is presupposed by the book.

Yet even for an advanced researcher the task is not an easy one. The tantalizing mention of rare works, for example, *Pinax* by Cebes (p. 170), cannot easily be followed up without scouting for references outside the book, since no footnote is provided. Moreover, mention of Aldine editions is often made without giving the exact title of the book, but only a list of contents. It may be obvious for Renaissance experts how one can retrieve these copies, in what libraries to find them, and with what reference material, but none of this information is provided here.

In other words, any further research one might like to undertake from the many enticing leads provided by Wilson cannot be started without considerable effort. Finally, as a reader, one often finds oneself placed outside the possibility of judging for oneself about the subject. While Wilson has done great service to scholarship in reading and digesting an impressive number of prefaces to Renaissance editions, the wider context of these not-easily reachable works is often elusive: his confident sifting and selective presentation of the evidence does not enable one to form one's own opinion. This condition is not easily accepted, even in the case of boundless trust for one's guide (a Virgil for a Dante). Reading these pages can therefore result in over-exposure to a dense mass of information difficult to keep abreast of.

Among the bibliographical additions, one may remark for this Scandinavian journal a reference to the 2014 edition of Eusthatus of Thessalonica by Eric Cullhed in the context of the discussion of Besarion's ownership of his autograph manuscript (the reference is found at ch. 8, p. 74 n. 25 and the pages where Cullhed discusses the issue are 37*-39*). In this as in other cases, however, the main text has not been substantially altered. Other additions include recent monographs on individual authors and a few editions, mainly by Italian scholars. The adjustments in the text reveal the merging of two redactions, so that 'recent discoveries' can refer to literature from 1969 (as at p. 42 n. 18) or to a 2014 publication (as at p. 81 n. 11), which can cause bafflement.

To return briefly to the indexes. These are divided into four groups: Ancient authors, medieval persons (and authors), manuscripts, and general. Although they are relatively short (11 pages), one wonders whether such division is helpful. The indexes omit all titles. These could have served as useful subdivisions for longer entries, such as 'Aristotle', and guided the reader to recurring discussions, such as that about his *Poetics*. Moreover, titles of unattributed works such as the *New Testament* (in italics) and Psalter (not in italics) are oddly found in the index of ancient names, whereas others, such as *Stephanites and Ichnelates*, or indeed the *Thesaurus cornucopiae*, are entirely omitted. In the manuscript index, I would have preferred to find citations for codices in the Laurenziana prefixed by 'Plut.', the correct shelfmark necessary to search for

them in (among other things) the online catalogue. The first entry, 25 sin. 9 is also odd, as the ‘sin.’ is in theory applicable to all the following signatures, but not found there. Finally, the two El Escorial manuscript shelfmarks should match each other by following the same conventions (usually, with a capital Greek letter and full stops).

These small points of precision do not detract from Wilson’s admirable and admired contribution to scholarship. One should not of course stop at such cavils. Wilson’s understanding of the place of Greek scholarship in the Renaissance, his careful delineation of the relative importance of Aristotle and Plato in this panorama of learning, his attention to cultural manifestations, including painting, botany and medicine, are all riches to be drawn from this slender book. Its agility is deceptive, though, in so far as absorbing it will take much more than the time it takes to read.

[List of misprints:

- p. 33: *pracsertim* should read *praesertim*
- p. 42: *Muntua* should read *Mantua*
- p. 91, par. 2: insert full stop after ‘Vittorino’s school’.
- p. 121, par. 2: insert comma after ‘Roman empire’.
- p. 145 : *Codro*’ – add *s* (twice).
- p. 150: the quotation in Latin is not translated.
- p. 172 and 215 n. 25: *Organon* italics.
- p. 186 n. 3; *Urh. gr.* should be *Urb. gr.*
- p. 201 n. 19: *Fubini* is not at n. 2 as indicated, but at n. 3.
- p. 203 n. 17: *Unterauchungen* should be *Untersuchungen*.
- p. 217 n. 44: *duo* should be *due*.
- p. 228 *Modens* should be *Modena*.]

Index i, s.v. Favorinus: the ancient author at p. 149 is not the same as the character at p. 154 (see index ii, *Camers*, Favorinus), so that the reference to the latter page should be removed here.

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