Kate Cooper

Meaning and Believing in a Narrative
A Coda

Every collection of medieval manuscripts contains at least one mystery – a text, or textual fragment whose secrets have not yet unfurled into understanding – and often those mysteries are legion. A text is anonymous and its authorship or context difficult to situate, even in broad terms, or an exemplar contains copyist's errors which hold indispensable clues to the scriptorium that produced it – if only we know how to read them. In another case, there is something not quite right about the provenance; the manuscript was smuggled, or stolen, or seized by a colonial power, and precious clues to its meaning were erased or simply forgotten. In some cases, such as the dazzling gospel-books preserved at Garima in what is now Ethiopia, an ancient legend turns out, in light of new techniques of analysis, to contain more truth than European scholars had been willing to believe.[1]

In each of these cases, the material object – a book that has been handed down for centuries – offers more questions than answers, inviting the reader to face a profound uncertainty. Do we know enough about this book to be ready for the stories we will find there? Every library is a treasure-house over-flowing with stories launched out onto the waters of time by kindred spirits of another era, messages of uncertain status that nonetheless exert an undeniable hold on our minds.

1 Cf. Judith McKenzie and Francis Watson, The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia, Oxford 2016.

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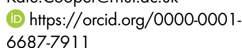
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As Ekaterina Novokhatko and Rutger Kramer remind us, this cautious and yet hopeful feeling was one that medieval readers knew all too well. Already in the tenth century Odo of Cluny was wrestling with the status of the stories he had received, and wanted to tell. In his 'Life' of the warrior-saint Gerald of Aurillac, Odo considers the problem of the conflicting and unreliable narratives in circulation about his hero, and proposes that his own task will be one of bringing order.

> Many doubt whether the things that are said about the blessed Gerald are true, and some think that they are certainly not true but fantastic [...] I too, formerly, hearing the fame of his miracles, was nevertheless in doubt, and for this reason chiefly, that stories get about here and there, through I know not what channels, and are then gradually discredited as empty.[2]

But as Odo well knew, the need to bring order to a welter of stories of uncertain status is one that reaches back even farther, to the beginning of Christian historiography. The preface to the 'Gospel of Luke' contains a similar claim, written at the end of the first century CE, at a time when the women and men who had known Jesus during his lifetime had only recently departed to join him in the afterlife.

> Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. ('Luke' 1:1–4, New International Version)

This "orderly account" was of course the 'Gospel of Luke' and 'Acts of the Apostles', the paired books providing a seamless narrative to carry the story of Jesus and his followers forward to encompass the missionary efforts of the Greek-speaking Rabbi Paul of Tarsus, whose vision of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus led to the re-invention of the Jesus movement into Christianity, a faith aimed at gentiles as well as Jews.

Mateusz Fafinski and Jakob Riemenschneider have invoked Todorov's idea of the "Fear of the Barbarians"[3] as a point of reference to account for the discursive field of Late Antiquity, with "literalisation" its dominant mode of practice. A valuable complement can now be found in the notion of "preposterous poetics" mooted by

2 Vita Geraldi, Prefatio, in: Odo of Cluny, Vita sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis. Édition critique, traduction française, introduction et commentaires, ed. and transl. by A.M. Bultot-Verleysen (Subsidia Hagiographica 89), Bruxelles 2009, pp. 130–132.

3 Mateusz Fafinski and Jakob Riemenschneider, Literarised Spaces. Towards a Narratological Framework for Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in this volume, pp. 7–23.

Simon GOLDHILL in an evocative recent study, 'Preposterous Poetics: The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity'.[4] GOLDHILL's idea of the "preposterous" turns on the central role played by the re-telling and adaptation of inherited stories in Late Antiquity and by extension early Byzantium and the Early Middle Ages. Though the habit itself was not new, it was newly important at a time when the writers of a multicultural empire were re-assessing the value of rival cultural traditions, and giving greater value to the myriad voices of stakeholders who might or might not want to defend the imperial project as Roman control began to unravel. Some of what began as marginal cultural traditions would outlast the empire itself – one need only think of the rabbis, the many Christian churches, or the adherents of Islam. It was the fact of embracing and incorporating these voices from the provinces – with strategies of appropriation and re-purposing playing a critical role – that made Late Antiquity so culturally vibrant.

Central to both the ancient and modern developments were new strategies of reading, which offered a way to appropriate, consolidate, and re-focus the elements of cultural inheritance. A beloved story was a living organism, repeatedly shifting shape and unfolding new meanings to ring true for new hearers. The result was sometimes a collapsing of time and difference. Here we come to the "preposterousness" of GOLDHILL's title – the sense that what is before and what is after have somehow been switched or undone. This dissolving of time held a special resonance, GOLDHILL argues, for Christian and Jewish writers who looked forward to a coming end-time when all things would be reversed.

As Jas ELSNER has brilliantly argued, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarly "discovery" of Late Antiquity owed a great deal to comparable pressures, in particular the Austro-Hungarian Empire's need to understand how a vast multicultural empire could evoke a sense of continuity and shared identity when facing unprecedented political and social change. The art historians of the Vienna School – notably Franz WICKHOFF (1853–1909) and Alois RIEGL (1858–1905) – celebrated the Christian transformation of the Roman Empire as having created a shared community of the imagination even as the multilingual and multicultural Roman state began to splinter.[5]

Augustine of Hippo it was who formulated most famously the idea, in his 'De Doctrina Christiana', of "Spoiling the Egyptians" – the subversive take-over of elements from the dominant culture by scavengers from the minority.[6] The late antique culture of spoliation and bricolage built on traditions that reached back to the Hellenistic and early Roman empires. For the profoundly Hellenised Jewish writers of the high Empire, Philo and Josephus, or the frequently rewritten anonymous romance

4 Simon GOLDHILL, Preposterous Poetics: The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity, Cambridge 2020.

5 Jan ELSNER, The Viennese Invention of Late Antiquity: Between Politics and Religion in the Forms of Late Roman Art, in: J. ELSNER (ed.), Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland, Cambridge 2019, pp. 110–127.

6 Aug., doct. christ. 2.40.60.

'Joseph and Aseneth' at the cosmopolitan end of the spectrum, being Jewish under gentile rulers posed challenges but also spurs to cultural invention. ('Joseph and Aseneth' hits so many inter-cultural notes that modern scholars have been divided over whether its author was Jewish or not.)[7]

These writers showed a new interest in the stories of women, slaves, and children – people who from that point on had been seen as viable protagonists. In some cases, this reflected displacements and reversals of fortune experienced by the writers themselves: Josephus for example was carried away from Jerusalem as a captive and served the future Emperor Vespasian as a slave; when Vespasian's son Titus destroyed the city and with it Herod's Temple in 70 CE, the recently freed Josephus was there as his translator. Also carried away as a slave was the hero of 'Joseph and Aseneth', he of the many-coloured coat, although in his case it was his brothers who had sold him to merchants bound for Egypt. We know from 'Genesis' that Joseph eventually thrived there, and was given as wife the radiant Aseneth, whose father was priest in the Temple of the Sun. Much ink has been spilt on the fact that this mother of Israel was an idol-worshipper, but 'Joseph and Aseneth' puts paid to the problem. Moved by her beloved's incredible beauty, Aseneth threw down her idols and began to worship his God of her own accord.

But the Bible was not the only source for these appropriative re-inventions and re-writings: since the time of Herodotus, Greek writers had wrestled vigorously over what had really happened to Helen of Troy and the men who fought for her. The most troubling attempt to make sense of her story may be that of the Byzantine poet Colluthus, who stopped to wonder how Helen's daughter Hermione reacted to her mother's departure. Left with her grandparents after Helen's disappearance, the girl was terrified by the thought of her mother's fate. Even more distressing, Helen came to her in a dream to describe her despair as she was carried unwilling away from her beloved child.

Penelope too was the subject of alternative traditions, and, as Sabina Tuzzo reminds us, the monks of Bobbio preserved a Latin ekphrastic epigram, 'De Penelope' – possibly an exercise of the rhetorical schools – which weighed on the side of those who believed she was by no means an exemplar of conjugal fidelity.[8] So Hermione's dream and Penelope's longings find their place in the kaleidoscope of stories told from unexpected points of view, many using inventive narrative forms. As Michael Roberts and others have shown, the writers and artists of Late Antiquity were masters of formal invention as well as appropriation. Lines from older texts and fragments of sculpture were re-set into striking new designs, amounting in both art and literature to a new "jewelled style" built around inherited gems re-purposed in new settings.

If Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writers brought something distinctive to the idea of reading, it was a third, complicating element in the relation between the teller

7 For example in Rivkah Nir, Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book, Sheffield 2012.

8 Sabina Tuzzo, The Erotic Dreams of Penelope ('Epigr. Bob.' 36 Sp.), in this volume, pp. 41–55.

of stories and the reader or audience. This element is of course God, who features as creator, as Word, and also as witness to the reader / listener's engagement with the narrative. NOVOKHATKO and KRAMER capture this well: "sanctity helps structure a fictionalised reality, allowing the readers / listeners to become a part of the narrative through a shared immersive experience."[9] At the same time, the community of discourse is an eschatological community, and the wise foolishness of the storyteller allows him or her to pose as an undistorted conductor of the energy that flows through the story, a living conduit between the 'holy men' who trained him or her, and the people reading or listening to these words.[10]

Religious faith is, after all, a kind of falling in love, followed by the sometimes difficult challenge of building a life with the beloved at its centre, and yet it is a love mediated by the example of those who came before. This is where the epic tradition gives way to the lives of the saints and the rabbinic disputations of the Talmud. With its elucidations of the Mishnah, the oral traditions that supplemented the Torah given to Moses, the Talmud was revered as a guide to daily life, captured in a treasury of stories illustrating the disputes and interpretations of the rabbis. Each story offered insight on how large and small acts of attention might re-orient the heart toward the Beloved. Of course, the protagonists are themselves readers – enactors – of the sacred text. The narrative becomes a hall of mirrors, multiplying and magnifying the story around the teller and listener, so each can be located within the infinite reflection from the first word of Creation to the end of time.

Reuven KIPERWASSER and Serge RUZER have called our attention to how both the rabbis and the Christian monks of Late Antiquity brought the sense of textual discovery to that most evocative of narrative motifs touching on the problem of identity, the sea journey.[11] Brilliantly exploring its topoi – whether of dangerous and miraculous creatures, divine intervention to calm the dangerous waters, or the hidden treasure at the bottom of the sea – they show how the sea itself became a book from which to read the story of creation, from God's life-giving Word to his intervention and protection, to the mysterious promise of a time when all will be revealed and made new.

In this way of seeing, the hall of mirrors reveals itself to be an unfolding revelation, making visible the connection between the end and the beginning, between heaven and earth. The book is itself a worm-hole, a portal through which the reader can amble confidently back and forth between the past, present, and future. For such a prize, it was only right, medieval readers knew, to wrestle with uncertainty. We can only be the wiser if we learn to view the problems these narratives contain with the same unflinching sense of expectation.

9 KRAMER and NOVOKHATKO, Dead Authors and Living Saints: Community, Sanctity, and the Reader Experience in Medieval Hagiographical Narratives, in this volume, pp. 205–226.

10 Ibid.

11 Reuven KIPERWASSER and Serge RUZER, Aramaic Stories of Wandering in the High Seas of Late Antiquity, in this volume, pp. 161–177.