

Gerasim Petrinski, *The Image of the Demon in the Byzantine Hagiography* (VI-X c.) (in Bulgarian), Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2018, 462 pp., ISBN 978-954-07-4599-2

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The figure of the demon is presented to the reader by Gerasim Petrinski as a rhetorical figure through the different phases of its historical and microhistorical development. *The Image of the Demon in Byzantine Hagiography* captures its porosity in the stratification of meanings and playfully displays elements of the genealogy of its meaning from classical literature into motifs of folklore and Byzantine hagiography, bringing to attention unfamiliar sources such as the *Apocalypse of the Theodokos* and the *Apocalypse of St. Anastasia* among many others. Through powerful images and stories of the lives of saints from 565 to 1000, rarely encountered elsewhere, Petrinski makes us aware that in Byzantine hagiography a multifaceted interest in demons and their role is articulated, in both literary constructs and in social and political manifestations. Indeed, this is a book of rare encounters, devilish in its vertiginous proliferation of information, and in its peculiar invitation to inhabit such a vast spectrum of references often associated with feelings of fear and ambiguity. This book can be seen as an academic thriller and it is a pleasurable experience for those interested, even outside of academic circles, in the complexity and genealogy of the representation of evil in its religious and secular contexts.

The incipit is the characterization of the hagiographic genre by typology, the role of Jean Bolland and the formation of the periodical *Analecta Bollandiana* (1882), an important collection that cannot itself be considered a typology because we still have to ask and answer the question “what is hagiography?”: a question that must be answered from the point of view of literary theory. There follows the classical division into basic types of texts of “martyrologies” and “lives of the saints,” known from the work of the German literary critic Karl Krum-

bacher, and a consideration of various subtypes. The latter include reworked pagan myths, rhetorical and vernacular or “folk” biographies, all subdivisions based mainly on an analysis of language and style. Petrinski, while framing the historical development of Byzantine hagiography from 565 to 1000, introduces a methodological turn in which Byzantine hagiography is read as an intermediate genre between rhetoric and literature. He dwells on a series of issues surrounding the definition of the genre, emphasizing that in the case of hagiography we meet texts possessing a complex function and transversality. These texts are meant as *officia oratoris*, *delectare*, *docere e movere* or as oratorical texts, to entertain, or touch emotionally. Even if such stories can today be seen as didactic and something obsolete, in their original context they are pregnant with actuality and urgency. Petrinski brings back that urgency both in the complexity of their composition and in their content. Hagiography becomes a stage on which the question of the demon will be displayed.

Before proceeding with detailed examples of the demonic in Byzantine hagiography, Petrinski introduces us to the meaning of the concept itself and the phases of its development. He unravels several phases, the first of which is the “Homeric” phase in which the demon is the idea of an unknown, indefinite and irrational force that affects human life in critical moments. The second phase is the work of Herodotus (c. 484-c. 425 BC) in which Petrinski shows the presence of a specific “demonology” that will later be used by the Pythagoreans. Demons, according to Herodotus, have a mortal origin and hence follow the ancient Greek literary hierarchy of the supernatural world, proceeding from mortals to blissful mortals and then heroes, demons and gods. In this hierarchy, the demonic manifests a certain ambivalence between the living and the dead; sometimes it is useful but at other times harmful to mortals.

An interesting detail in Petrinski's analysis is that, according to the Pythagoreans, dreams are not imaginary, but a different reality in which mortals visit the “other” world and where they can talk to the souls of the dead and demons. In that sense, the demonic occupies that liminal space associated with dreams. Here, we encounter a visible spatial division related to the demonic, between this world and the “other world,” which will persist in Christianity and will be transformed into various spatial locations: cemeteries, bridges, ladders, and many other spaces that we will meet later in Byzantine hagiography.

After presenting the demonological systems of the Neoplatonists, where we find articulated the ability of the demonic to take different forms, Petriniski shows that from the objectification in the second period we gradually witness a subjectivization of the demon. Our modern understanding is shaped by both this fundamental grammar formed in antiquity and the Christian subjectivization that locates the demon in the dualism of good and evil, turning it into a transcendental evil and identifying it with the Devil. Petriniski proceeds to study the genealogy of the understanding of evil in Christianity, where we see intertwined motifs from the Old and New Testaments, and where we observe the personification of evil in a particular Enemy. Pride will be the main motive in the depiction of the Devil as a fallen angel, and this will remain a key concept in the theological literature in both Basil the Great and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom evil does not exist in nature but arises out of personal choice.

The question of personal choice and the identification of the Devil with the problem of the knowledge of good and evil has affected the sacred history of mankind since the Fall and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Evil will acquire very personal characteristics such as envy, enmity to humanity, lying, deception, manipulativeness, cunning and death. One of the main consequences of the entry of evil into human history is the loss of immortality. A turning point in the Christian understanding of evil is the Resurrection of Christ as a decisive event in the history of the salvation of mankind. This signifies both the victory over death and the defeat of the Devil. According to the Byzantine understanding, the only forces capable of performing miracles and acts of healing are the Divine Powers.

Although demons are often depicted as weak and trembling in the presence of Christ, their delusions allow them to succeed in conquering the world of sin-prone people. The demon and human weakness intertwine and the demonic acquires more and more psychic characteristics: anger, pride, envy, deception, enmity, disbelief. This individualization also begins to acquire more and more the character of physical stereotypes as elements of the demonic begin to be recognized in the specific height, age, or proportions of the body. According to the life of St. Theodore Sikeot, demonic forces can not only deform the body but also be transmitted from one body to another. The demonic takes the form of bodily suffering; it is contagious and can be encountered in various dis-

eases. Just as the demonic affects physical appearance, it is also revealed in language and speech. For example, speaking out loud is one such outward sign and Petrinski observes that demons usually speak the language of their area of origin, and often when they emerge from their host they speak out loud. Another expression of the demonic — alongside blasphemy, pleading and self-pity — is obscene speech. A special place in Petrinski's analysis is occupied by ventriloquism and false prophecies.

The visible manifestations of the demonic then multiply in animal forms, dragons, scorpions, birds, crows, bats, pigs, dogs and wolves, insects and plants — from zoomorphic to spatial and bodily forms like levitation, the habitation of the human soul after death, the sensible world. The book brings to the reader's attention both cultural and anthropological analyses of perceptions of alterity. One example of this can be found in the marginalized other (Ethiopians, women as destroyers or temptresses), which resonates with the contemporary critique of the domination of an implicitly intertwined rhetoric of patriarchal and cultural stereotypes in Byzantine culture, one that currently occupies a marginalized position compared to the Western tradition.

Petrinski observes that in the 1st and 3rd centuries, with the spread of Eastern cults everywhere in the Roman Empire, their processes began to acquire some political characteristics, even in the case of elitist Neoplatonism, which tried to objectify and build a philosophical idea of evil. However, they remained without much political influence. To some extent this gap between spiritual processes and political efficacy is occupied quite successfully by early Christianity, which managed to synthesize the various understandings of evil in a syncretic way. Petrinski emphasizes that while contemporary Christian demonologists, such as Richard Greenfield, use the term “standard Orthodox tradition,” it only has meaning for the period from the 11th to the 14th century. But, when we talk about the period from the 4th to the 9th century, things are much more complex. Here, the continuous struggle to define orthodoxy is in full swing and Orthodox doctrine is far from complete; key theological works of St. John Climacus, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus have yet to become the cornerstones of tradition; there are the heresies of iconoclasm, monothelism and many others. In that sense, the majority of motifs present in the lives of the saints and the meanings hidden behind them cannot be explained by any standard orthodox tradition.

The Image of the Demon in Byzantine Hagiography demarcates for itself an independent field of Byzantine esoteric scholarship and allows us to look at some of the questions of the marginalization of the other. In this book Gerasim Petrinski traces a parallel liturgy fluidly connecting high culture and popular belief, giving us the feeling that religious traditions survived in complex cultural contexts often intimately connected to our lives and emotions. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for transforming hagiography into a stage on which to better display that complexity.

Forms of marginalization extend to knowledge itself and, if in the Western tradition we have a separation of the categories of “knowledge” and “demon” immortalized in the figure of Goethe’s Faust, in the Byzantine tradition knowledge itself is charged with demonic semblances and transmission by the experience of faith. Concrete examples such as the lives of saints become a form of embodiment in which the personal choices of a way of living are emphasized. Petrinski makes us think about the role of storytelling, the stories we decide to hold onto and those we decide to forget. As we read the book, we witness the emergence of forgotten lives: St. Phantine the Younger, St. Paul of Latros, St. Basil the Younger (to mention some of the truly rich and invaluable testimony presented in the volume). We encounter St. Theodora only through the story St. Basil the Younger tells of her, but this is not a surprise. In fact women rarely wrote, their stories being instead narrated by men. In this case, as with St. Basil, we meet her only after her death. Now her soul and we as readers are migrants passing through otherworldly aerial toll houses, each tax collection point named after one of the deadly sins and surrounded by unfortunate “demons” impersonated by Ethiopians. Here, evil lies not only before our eyes but in some cases also in ourselves. Petrinski shows us that the perceptions of fear of the other are mirrored and survive in language and in society and that the hagiographic literature of the period 565-1000 is a cluster of plots we often see reflected around us. In the multitude of voices the *lives of saints* are the custodians of a new understanding of radicality, those stories insisting on questions regarding the demystification of forms of domination — through the fear that we as readers are invited to rethink as we read this book and through the stories and encounters of our own lives.