

**Anna Maria LASEK, *Nonnos' Spiel mit den Gattungen in den "Dionysiaka"***, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2009, 163 pp., ISBN 978-83-7654-025-2.

Steadily gaining momentum in the twentieth century, Nonnian studies seem to have blossomed with the beginning of twenty-first: serial conferences, volumes of commentaries and studies – it seems that never before has the academic world had so much appreciation and interest in the late imperial poet. Polish works on his *Dionysiaka*, despite the contribution of Henryk Wójtowicz, remain rare, which adds to the importance of the present volume (additionally, it was published in German, thus rendering it potentially influential beyond the Polish-speaking milieu). The study, based on carefully selected passages of the poem, falls into three sections, devoted respectively to hymnic, epigrammatic and bucolic passages. The author pays detailed attention to the verses in question, considering their ‘generic purity’ (i.e. the conformity to the convention), immanent poetics, language, style, and discussing their context (this is particularly important when considering passages which are not what they might seem to be). The longest section is devoted to ‘hymnic’ passages, from prayer-hymns (Athene, Herakles Astrochiton, Selene), through imprecations (Zeus to Cadmus, imprecation to Eros), and concluding with *Lobgesänge* directed at Tyros and Beroe. All these are considered in light of their autonomy, language and presence of generic constants, and then classified as either ‘hymns’, or ‘hymnic passages’, the categorization ultimately dependent on the context. With the epigrams, there is a further complication: after all, these have to be categorized in accordance with the widely known generic divisions into the *epitymbia*, *erotika*, *epideiktika* and then, hardly surprisingly, we are left with the *incerta*, the epigrams that do not fall into any of the known subcategory. The third genre to be considered is the bucolic – in Book I, aiming to deceive Typho, Cadmus creates a false pastoral scene the description of which discernibly relies on the earlier literary tradition, while Book XV includes the story of Hymnos’ love for the huntress Nikaia (discussed on pp. 118–130), with the haunting image of the impotence of the bucolic song and the laments over the death of the young shepherd (it seems however striking that the analysis of the relevant passage makes almost no reference to the well-established tradition of bucolic lament), the story offering particularly interesting interpretation possibilities, duly sketched by the scholar: her argument for the intended literary polemic, built upon the respective theses of GONELLI and HARRIES, is interesting and deserves closer attention (it would, however, benefit from certain elaboration). This having been said, it must be noted that the analyses have somewhat chaotic appearance, and sometimes the reader is left to wonder what exactly forms the subject of inquiry in a given chapter: for example, the discussion of the actual meaning of the adjective *nekyssoos* (p. 41) seems better suited to appear in the footnotes than in the main text of the study, devoted as this latter is to the generic or compositional issues.

Yet, the book disappoints. Most of this disappointment is due to methodological mistakes made right at the beginning, when the principles of research are defined. This makes it a reviewer’s nightmare: regardless of possible appreciation of care and diligence employed, of the understanding of the ambitions of the project, regardless of the possible detailedness and sensitivity of analyses, one is left with a sad duty of saying: this is not right. Once the wrong choice of crucial premises has been made, it compromises the work. Nothing can save it. Some pages, some observations may be treasured and praised, subchapters may be rescued, but not the whole. It simply falls apart.

Should we consider its title, the monograph, developed from A.M. LASEK’s (hereafter L.) doctoral dissertation, purports to analyze the play of literary genres in Nonnos’ immense poem: expectation not unreasonable in the light of the fact that the *Spiel mit den Gattungen* is a phrase well known to the students of *Literaturwissenschaften* (it is hard not to think of it other than within the framework of literary theory). Now, such a project would be ambitious, even if unrealistic (from the genealogical point of view, the *Dionysiaka* are and remain an epic, the genre being notorious

for its noncompetitiveness<sup>1</sup>), demanding expertise in at least two areas of study: that of ancient literature and that of modern theory of literature. Yet, the introductory chapter serves to steer one right: the work is an inquiry into composition, the *Spiel mit den Gattungen* phrase being thus used *kata metaphoran* (which, as a matter of fact, remains a predominant tendency in the Classical scholarship<sup>2</sup>): it aims at studying (elements of) other genres as they appear in the poem (this does not prevent occasional forays into the area of genology pure and simple, witness discussion of genres' elasticity, p. 10). It is at this point that the reader realizes that the difference between change of genre and widely understood intertextuality has escaped the author. This is not a minor detail: this is a difference between saying that genre of the work is affected if within an epic poem a character addresses formal prayer/formal hymn to the gods and saying that pattern of prayer in the epic poem conforms to the traditional and looks back to that attested e.g. in Homer. To complicate matters even further, L. seems unable to differentiate between the various phases (and levels) of literary composition: it is not invocation (compositional element working at the stylistic level) that displays affinity with hymnic genre, but hymnic genre that makes a prominent use of invocations (to confuse the two is paramount to confusing – in terms of rhetorical theory – the *inventio* and the *elocutio*, i.e. to confuse the use of *locus* with particular instance of its actualization)<sup>3</sup>. Hence, what L. classifies as 'hymnenartige Götteranrufung' is in fact an invocation to Athene; and yes, it displays very distinct stylistic and linguistic similarities to the surviving hymns to Athene – still, these similarities are simple result of hymns' tendency to employ the device known as *invocatio*, a direct, often kletic, address to the god. This, in fact, is why SIMON employs quotation marks when describing the 'hymnic' character of the address to Selene, a circumstance noted but never appreciated in the present work<sup>4</sup>: though frequently described as a hymn on basis of its dimensions and similarity to later Homeric and Orphic hymns, this long passage remains – from the formal point of view – an invocation.

Finally, there remains the issue of definition. Namely, the definition of *Spiel* which L. imports from HUIZINGA's masterwork. Let me be clear: I venerate HUIZINGA. But he was not writing of composition of actual, existing literary work. He was writing of an act of composition and (re) creation, of the exploration of possible, yet different, sets of (game-) rules. He was not thinking of learned poetry, of the enjoyment derived from an ability to recognize crypto-quotations, uncovering falsified or misused generic characteristics etc. He was operating on the far more subtle and general level<sup>5</sup>. Invoking a strongly philosophical definition when discussing technicalities necessarily results in confusion: hardly surprisingly, the reader never gets to know how this Huizingan

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<sup>1</sup> This characteristic falsifies L.'s observation that the tag *epos* is insufficient in the case of *Dionysiaka*, as they contain elements of other genres (pp. 10 f.).

<sup>2</sup> It seems however significant that M.A. HARDER chooses to put the term in quotation marks in the title of her influential article '*Generic Games*' in *Callimachus Aetia* (in: M.A. HARDER, R.F. REGTUIT, G.C. WAKKER (eds.), *Genre in Hellenistic Poetry*, Groningen 1998, pp. 95–113; hence: HARDER 1998). Additionally, her article demonstrates particular sensitivity to narrative patterns in the analyzed poem, a feature sadly missing from L.'s work.

<sup>3</sup> The misunderstanding affects major part of the book, though I employed the example of 'hymn to Athene' for which see pp. 19–23.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 43. Additionally, one may note that the discussion of this particular address would have benefited from consulting Prudence JONES' article '*Aspects*' of *Deity*, in: N. CAMPION, M. YORK (eds.), *Astrology and Academy*, Bristol 2004, pp. 25–48, while any discussion of Hekate's persona seems incomplete without a reference to S.I. JOHNSTON masterly work (*Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldaean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta 1990).

<sup>5</sup> The basis invoked is HUIZINGA's classification of *Poesis* as *Spielfunktion* – one however wonders whether L. appreciates the difference of functional levels existing between Huizingan definition and the level of her own inquiries. One suspects definitions in terms of HAMBURGER, HIRSCH JR., not

definition of play translates onto the phrase play of generic conventions. Even more surprisingly, the focus on the enjoyment derived by the reader seems forgotten by the first chapter of the work.

Once one accepted the metaphoric use of *Spiel mit den Gattungen* and disregarded the Huizingan problem, another one appears: what precisely is the ‘play of genres’ in this particular study? The classification formulated in the concluding part of the work (in itself taken from HARDER and transplanted onto the Nonnian poem<sup>6</sup>) draws a division between passages that may be defined as examples of one genre appearing within the context of another genre pure and simple, the passages displaying formal characteristics of some genre appearing within different generic context and having their content affected by this ‘external’ conditions, and, finally, passages displaying some affinity with genres other than epic (these are not discussed in the work, and hence are summarily dismissed in the closing discussion). Now, my problem, as matter of fact, is that in the *Dionysiaka* only the two latter qualify as a (*sensu lato*) ‘play of genres’ (or, rather, ‘play of conventions’) under the terms of modern literary theory – and one is absent from the study. As for the first group, the notion of *Spiel* is complicated by the peculiarities of epic genre itself – as I have already mentioned, we expect elements of prayer, hymnic composition or, for that matter, rhetorical structures in an epic poem. In a way, these are indispensable in its composition and have immediate relationship to the actual development of the plot – thus, we may easily regard them as woven into the very nature of epic poem as such. Certainly, they attest to the poet’s way of thinking, or to his intellectual formation (witness the prominence of rhetorical elements in Statius’ *Thebaid*) but they do not classify as *sensu lato* ‘play of genres’ unless it can be proven that they were intended to (this can be achieved through self-referential remarks, authorial/narrator’s comments etc.): this is why the category of ‘play’ figures so prominently in HARDER’s analysis of Callimachean *Aetia* (additionally, it may be mentioned that HARDER’s examples strain against the generic boundaries, which is hardly the case with L.’s first group). Yet, the hymn to Astrochiton, separated from the narrative by introductory formula and displaying in-depth knowledge of the hymnic literature, constitutes a hymnic element within epic context, but one wonders whether it qualifies as *Spiel* – after all, it fulfills the role associated with a hymnic prayer in a manner befitting a hymn, and being endowed with a structure typical of a hymn – and it fulfills this expectations without affecting overall epic character of the work.

At the other end of the story, there is the issue of generic classification of the *Dionysiaka* themselves: and again, from the point of view of modern genology, the nominal classification of the *Dionysiaka* as an epic poem describing deeds of Dionysus or as a hymnic poem to Dionysus’ glory (in the tradition of Homeric hymns) is of no real importance, given that the two share generic constants (the only possible difference being dimension). It is symptomatic that *Gerusalemme liberata* would also be known (at least in Polish history of literature) as *Gofred*, or that we have a very epic genre named *chanson de geste*. What is, however, of possible importance is the ideological dimension: if Nonnus chooses to portray his work as a *hymnos*, this choice is of paramount importance in the hermeneutic and exegetical work (particularly if we consider the Hymnos-story of book XV). In this context, it seems somewhat disappointing to find the question discussed only briefly, with major part of the debate concentrated in the closing remarks (pp. 135–143).

To summarize: the work may have been worth reading due to its careful and occasionally sensitive analyses of the relevant passages, to its detailedness and the insight into Nonnus’ compositional technique that it provides. As it stands, it may be of some use to those studying Nonnian poetics, epic composition, or endeavouring an inquiry into the poet’s intellectual formation. Sadly,

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to mention GUILLÉN would be of considerably more use in the present context – at least from the methodological point of view.

<sup>6</sup> HARDER, *o.c.* (n. 2). The transplantation itself is a dangerous move: endowed with no fabular continuity, the *Aetia* are a poem unique in its characteristics and the narrative devices employed: Nonnus’ poem, by contrast, has an underlying plot and comparatively simplified narrative pattern.

and it brings me no pleasure to write this, it is weighted down by terminological indifference, insensitivity to the levels of critical discourse, and – as mentioned above – by methodological mistakes committed right in the opening phase of research.

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