CHAPTER 19

Flights of Fancy: Some Imaginary Debates in Late Antiquity

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Since her doctoral work on the ecclesiastical history of Evagrius Scholasticus, subsequently published as her first book, Pauline Allen has been an unflagging and indefatigable elucidator of Greek Christian texts from late antiquity, and especially those from the sixth and seventh centuries. From ecclesiastical history to homiletic and heresiology, she has opened up the possibilities for other scholars with her critical editions, commentaries, and discussions. She has guided younger colleagues and pupils and inspired collective research on a scale one can only describe as impressive. And hers has been and remains a major voice in the field of patristics, not only in Australia but also internationally through the International Association for Patristic Studies and her own regular appearances at the Oxford Patristic Conferences. That Pauline was once my student seems extraordinary today, when we celebrate her own huge and sustained contribution to patristics as a profession and an academic field. She is a scholar who has never been afraid of making others think, or of giving them good questions to think about. I am delighted to offer her these thoughts about a question that has intrigued me for some time and that I hope she will find interesting too.

I have long been interested in the more literary and rhetorical features of Christian writing and in the thought processes and emotion in the minds of those who wrote. It is one of the great shifts in modern approaches to late antique and early Byzantine texts that the role played by these aspects and their importance are now taken for granted, in sharp contrast to the old positivistic attitude that saw genres such as hagiography only in terms of the

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historical information that could be gained from them. Pauline Allen herself has opened up the field of preaching in late antiquity and shown how much this too can benefit from such an approach. Heresiography is another type of writing that was very central in Christian late antiquity, and one that Pauline has addressed in her work on Severus of Antioch and Sophronius. In her work on Maximus Confessor she also dealt with a highly complex, and indeed tangled, body of material connected with the events of the seventh century, the aftermath of the Lateran Synod of 649 and Maximus’ trials, exile, and subsequent death—events which are even now only poorly understood, but which gave rise to a rich variety of writing by contemporaries. We are perhaps only now beginning to realise just how complex and how vast is the amount of written material produced by Christian authors overall, and how much remains to be done in terms of a complete rather than a selective understanding of their multifaceted works. The distribution, reception, and textual history of these works are also important parts of this process, which need to be understood if we are to do justice to the efforts of contemporaries to make their voices and their views heard. Much, indeed most, of this writing was designed to achieve specific goals, and to put messages across. But along with this, and with the promotion of particular viewpoints, went a complementary, not of course contradictory, but equally striking, flowering of the imagination, and this is what I want to address here.

The question of fictionality in Christian writing is one that has recently been raised in relation to the early Christian period,² in the context of a growing but still relatively new interest in the issue of whether Christians (by which I mean writers with a clearly Christian purpose) can be said to have engaged in ‘literature’ at all. Most obviously, the question of fictionality (often linked to narrativity, but not necessarily always associated with it) arises in relation to such works as the apocryphal ‘Acts’ of the late second and third centuries, effectively Christian novels, with a high degree of imaginative and fanciful content, and many of the ingredients of romance and story-telling associated with quite different contexts. Fiction in saints’ lives is also well recognised, at least in the sense that some elements are seen to be much less ‘historical’ or ‘reliable’ than others. Both the apocryphal acta and Christian saints’ lives

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