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Holy Aemulatio: Vita Hilarionis and Jerome's Efforts to Outdo the *Life of Antony*

Sveto posnemanje: Vita Hilarionis in Hieronimovi napori pri preseganju Antonovega življenjepisa

Abstract: The three lives of saints penned by Jerome, *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi*, and *Vita Hilarionis*, were frequently described in the past by one or another variant of Edward Gibbon's acerbic verdict – that their only defect is »the want of truth and common sense.« Twentieth-century scholarship, less sweeping and perhaps more discerning, pointed out significant differences between the texts. While the *Life of Malchus* is not even biography and while the subject of *Life of Paul* seems to have been a figment of Jerome's imagination, the *Life of Hilarion* is anchored in reality, to the extent that traces of its protagonist can still be found in independent secondary sources such as Sozomenus. However, while its historicity poses intriguing questions of its own, recent decades have become particularly interested in its narrative strategies. Susan Weingarten convincingly showed how Jerome used and subverted a masterpiece of profane literature, namely, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. What inspired such a daring tactic? The approach was partly motivated by the text Jerome was emulating, namely, the *Life of Antony* itself.

Keywords: Jerome, Hagiography, *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi*, *Vita Hilarionis*

Povzetek: Trije Hieronimovi svetniški življenjepisi, *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi* in *Vita Hilarionis*, so bili v preteklosti pogosto deležni te ali one različice jedke sodbe iz ust Edwarda Gibbona, ki je mimogrede navrgel, da je njihova edina napaka »pomanjkanje resnice in zdrave pameti«. Raziskovalci 20. stoletja so z manj posploševanja in morda z več razločevanja poudarili, da obstajajo med temi tremi besedili tudi velike razlike. Medtem ko *Malhovo življenje* sploh ni biografija in se zdi, da je bil protagonist *Pavlovega življenja* plod Hieronimove domišljije, je Hilarionov življenjepis zasidran v stvarnosti: sledi njegovega protagonista je moč najti v neodvisnih sekundarnih virih, kakršen je Sozomen. Zgodovinskost besedila zastavlja vrsto svojih lastnih vprašanj, zadnja desetletja pa se posebej zanimajo za v njem nakazane narativne strategije. Susan Weingarten je prepričljivo pokazala, kako je Hieronim uporabil in subvertiral mojstrovino profane literature, Apulejevega *Zlatega osla*. Kaj bi lahko navdihnili tako drzno taktiko? Zdi se, da je bil pristop deloma motiviran prav z besedilom, ki ga je Hieronim posnemal, z Antonovim življenjepisom.

Ključne besede: Hieronim, hagiografija, *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi*, *Vita Hilarionis*

1. Introduction

The three lives of saints penned by Jerome of Stridon, *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi*, and *Vita Hilarionis*, were frequently described in the past by one or another variant of Edward Gibbon's acerbic verdict that »the only defect of these pleasing compositions is the want of truth¹ and common sense« (Gibbon 1931, 5, n. 17). Twentieth-century scholarship, less sweeping and perhaps more discerning, pointed out significant differences between the texts and that it hardly makes any sense to lump them together. Timothy Barnes, in his *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, warned that »it becomes a serious bar to understanding when all three are treated as if they formed three parts of a trilogy, or when they are put on the same level of historicity«; this can happen when all three are assumed to be truthful, or all three are characterized as 'romances of monastic life' (Barnes 2016, 171). Interestingly enough, this fact was consistently recognized by the manuscript tradition, where the texts tended to be transmitted separately; of many manuscripts that contain *Vita Pauli*, *Vita Malchi*, or *Vita Hilarionis*, only a minute segment contains all three.²

While one could argue that the *Life of Malchus* is not even biography³ and while the subject of the *Life of Paul* seems to have been a figment of Jerome's imagination, the *Life of Hilarion* is an entirely different matter. Following criticism from contemporaries who were not always ready to provide the *carte blanche* from Mark 9:23, *Vita Pauli* 6.2 demanded the faithful – »haec incredibilia videbuntur eis, qui non crediderint omnia possibilis esse credentibus« – Jerome's subsequent attempt was anchored in reality. The onslaught of his colleagues is evident from the very beginning of the text, where Jerome complains about their scepticism:⁴

»Maledicorum voces contemnimus, qui olim detrahentes Paulo meo nunc forsitan detrahent et Hilarioni, illum solitudinis calumniati, huic obicientes frequentiam, ut qui semper latuit, non fuisse, qui a multis visus est, vilis extimetur.« (*Vita Hilarionis* 1.6)

¹ It seems that Gibbon was not yet ready for the more nuanced understanding of Christian biography, open to the fact that in these texts, »truth claims were made quite apart from the stories themselves and, indeed, were often incidental to the narrative being told«; these claims could be focused on »the order of world powers and the constructedness of social or family relations« (Johnson 2020, 81).

² The landmark work by W.A. Oldfather's team (McNeil B.V.M. 1943) was supplemented by *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana Manuscripta* (Lambert 1969) and more recently by the work of Edgardo Morales (Leclerc, Morales, and Vogüé 2007, 112 ff.).

³ For the discussion of the literary form, see the edition and commentary published by Oxford University Press (Gray 2015, 14). It should be noted that a shift is currently taking place in the very definition of biography as the life story of a historical, rather than a fictional individual, which used to be the norm (von der Nahmer 1994, 57 ff.); recent scholarship proposes a revision, as it is »arguably a remnant of our modern characterization of biography as a provider of historical truth« (De Temmerman 2020).

⁴ The text is from the critical edition published by Sources Chrétiennes (Leclerc, Morales, and Vogüé 2007).

»I disregard what the critics say of it, for those who earlier found fault with my life of Paul will now perhaps also find fault with my life of Hilarion. If they criticize Paul for his solitude, they will criticize Hilarion for his sociability, believing that because Paul always remained out of sight, he did not exist and because Hilarion was seen by many, he should be regarded as of no importance.«⁵

Vita Pauli was among the earliest literary achievements of Jerome; it probably appeared before 381. Despite the slanderers' claims, it was of significant literary quality and came to have enormous influence in the West. Only later (but probably still before 392) followed the lives of Malchus and Hilarion. Stephan Rebenich, who pointed out the fine literary form of *Vita Pauli* (Rebenich 2013, 18), was not the first one to do so; Richard Reitzenstein, in *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen*, speaks of a 'gem of narrative literature' (Reitzenstein 1906, 68), and indeed several scholars analyzed the motives and elements which Jerome borrowed from Greek and Latin literature of both pagan and Christian provenance when composing his *vitae*.⁶ When working with earlier forms, Jerome was flexible.

»Collections of examples and apophthegms, as well as miraculous stories, served him as a framework for individual episodes; the predominant literary structures are modelled on the archetype of the classic novel and the classical biography. Terms such as 'romance of monastic life', 'Enkomion', 'travel-aretaology', 'saint's Life' or 'Mönchsbiographie', therefore describe only one particular aspect of this work.«

Rebenich further noticed how Jerome mastered classical literary practice and integrated stylistic devices and narrative structures of pagan origin into his writings. His mixed reception of classic examples guaranteed his contemporaries an entertaining reading experience (Rebenich 2013, 18).

2. Modelling and Rivalry

Despite all this eclecticism, one text was on Jerome's mind more than the others when he embarked on his hagiographic projects. *Life of Antony* by Athanasius⁷ was translated from Greek to Latin by Jerome's friend and patron, Evagrius of Antioch. Antony's story was an ancient bestseller, highly influential; in a famous passage in his *Confessions*, Augustine mentions its role in his conversion.⁸ For Jerome, Evagrius produced a golden standard. He quotes his very words in one of his seminal polemical letters, *Ep. 57*, known as *De optimo genere interpretandi*:⁹

⁵ Wherever possible, translations are taken from the Penguin anthology of *Early Christian Lives* (White 1998).

⁶ For *Vita Hilarionis*, see in particular the study by Paul Winter (Winter 1904).

⁷ There was considerable controversy regarding the authorship of the text; however, as one overview of the problems involved concludes, the various theses »have not convinced many« (Harmless 2004, 111–113).

⁸ The significance of this mention is perhaps heightened by the fact that the references to Antony are otherwise hard to find in Augustine's work (Kamimura 2014, 42).

⁹ The text is taken from the critical edition published by Mnemosyne (Bartelink 1980).

»Verum ne meorum parva sit auctoritas quamquam hoc tantum probare voluerim, me semper ab adulescentia non verba, sed sententias transtulisse, qualis super hoc genere praefatiuncula sit, in libro, quo beati Antonii Vita describitur, ipsius lectione cognosce. »Ex alia in aliam linguam ad verbum expressa translatio sensus operit et veluti laeto gramine sata strangulat. Dum enim casibus et figuris servit oratio, quod brevi poterat indicare sermone, longo ambitu circumacta vix explicat.« Hoc igitur ego vitans ita beatum Antonium te petente transposui, ut nihil desit ex sensu, cum aliquid desit ex verbis. Alii syllabas aucupentur et litteras, tu quaere sententias.« (6.1–2)

»In quoting my own writings, my only object has been to prove that from my youth up, I at least have always aimed at rendering sense, not words, but if such authority as they supply is deemed insufficient, read and consider the short preface dealing with this matter which occurs in a book narrating the life of the blessed Antony. A literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense; the exuberance of the growth lessens the yield. For a while, one's diction is enslaved to cases and metaphors, and it has to explain by tedious circumlocutions what a few words would otherwise have sufficed to make plain. I have tried to avoid this error in the translation, which at your request, I have made of the story of the blessed Antony. My version always preserves the sense, although it does not invariably keep the words of the original. Leave others to catch at syllables and letters, you for your part, look for the meaning.«¹⁰

Evagrius followed this approach in his translation; this meant adding and occasionally improving. Compared to the previous Latin version, which was close to the original and stylistically less than impressive, Evagrius produced a rhetorical breeze of fresh air, showing an audience for Lives on a high literary level. Indeed, it is not surprising that numerous borrowings from Evagrius' translation could be detected in Jerome's text since he »entered into competition with Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* and its Latin translations« (Rebenich 2013, 22). Indeed, this rivalry seems to be the scholarly consensus (Rousseau 2010, 133). As for the stylistic swagger, Hagendahl, for instance, called Jerome's style »rather exuberant«, stressing that it is not devoid of classical ornaments, such as »Virgilian lines« (Hagendahl 1958, 105).¹¹ More recent studies go into detail, analyzing particular parallels between the texts, for instance, the concept of the desert (Šubrt 2007), solitude (Konig 2020), or supplication (Gray 2020b). Alan J. Ross has shown how Jerome's writing relies on »allusive engagement with the only other monastic hagiography likely than in existence, Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*,« and how well-marked intertext it represented. Jerome mentioned both Greek and Latin accounts; there seems to be a consensus among scholars that Jerome presents Paul as »not just the earlier but also the superior monk« and a »truer example of asceticism« (Ross 2020, 124–127).

¹⁰ Translated by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley.

¹¹ His work gave new impetus to the scholarly research of these texts; in the years that followed, even their Latin world order was meticulously analysed (Heimann 1966).

3. *Aemulatio*

The present paper proposes to take the observation a step further and use this concept of competition, *aemulatio*, a key concept when one tries to analyze Roman translation (McElduff 2013), for Jerome's *Life of Hilarion*, the longest of his three *vitae*, which for some reason remained sorely underrepresented in Hagendahl's brilliant and magisterial analysis. *Life of Hilarion* was a new attempt to outdo the *Life of Antony*. This time, it was based on a personality with significantly stronger historical credibility, to the extent that traces of its protagonist can be found in independent secondary sources such as Sozomenus.

Philip Rousseau eloquently describes how Jerome's Hilarion, in his career, mirrored the path of his teacher, Antony;¹² first by keeping him company and trying to understand his way of life, later by deciding to mirror the same pattern, *ordo*, of his life, selling everything and going to the desert. Hilarion's staying there was again akin to Antony's; it took 22 years before people started visiting – but once they did, »they flocked to him«. ¹³ The next step, the miracles, will be again oddly familiar to the readers of *Vita Antonii*. Antony healed a young girl from a distance (*Vita Antonii* 58), as well as a man, possessed while on a boat (63) – and so did Hilarion (*Vita Hilarionis* 25); like Antony (*Vita Antonii* 89), Hilarion kept visiting the monks living nearby (*Vita Hilarionis* 17); and while Antony made a spring appear in the desert (*Vita Antonii* 54), Hilarion made the rain (*Vita Hilarionis* 22) fall on the crops (Leclerc, Morales, and De Vogüé 2007, 51).

However, the exciting part comes afterwards, with Hilarion showing his taste for one-upmanship. While Antony avoided crowds by withdrawing to the desert, Hilarion opted for »a prolonged pilgrimage, a lifetime of escape from reputation, and from the danger of becoming rooted in one place« (Rousseau 2010, 138). This meant moving first to the site where »Antony himself used to sing, pray, work, and rest when weary« (*Vita Hilarionis* 21.4) and later, to the oasis of Aphroditon. There, he realized an island might be a better choice, so he sailed to Sicily; and when that was not enough, he decided to go to »barbarous races where his name and fame were unknown« (28.1), which meant Epidaurus in Dalmatia, and eventually Cyprus, where he died, »semper de fuga cogitans« (31ff.).¹⁴

While the historicity of these events poses fascinating questions of its own,¹⁵ recent decades became particularly interested in the implied narrative strategies; as Christa Gray points out, the fact that its protagonist is a historical character

¹² See the fourth chapter in his *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church* (Rousseau 2010, 137 ff.).

¹³ »Certatim ad eum de Syria et Aegypto populi confluebant.« (*Vita Hilarionis* 8.9); cf. *Vita Antonii* 14.2, »Πολλῶν ποθούντων καὶ θελώντων αὐτοῦ τὴν ἄσκησιν ζηλώσαι.« Greek text of *Vita Antonii* is quoted after the SC edition (Bartelink 2004).

¹⁴ Rousseau perceptively pointed out how Hilarion's deliberate dedication to a life of pilgrimage can be understood as »a vivid comment on Jerome's own enforced situation, following his expulsion from Rome« (2010, 138).

¹⁵ Recent scholarship of the genre warns that even »when the biographee is a historical person, stylization can be so strong that we cannot trust the biography to give us any reliable information about the reality behind him« (Praet 2020).

should not preclude the understanding of the text as a Christian literary biography (Gray 2020a, 88).¹⁶ This tradition forms part of its background, even though the author mostly avoids explicit referencing or even direct quotations from earlier texts, as do others in this genre (Müller 2020, 80). To begin with, *Vita Hilarionis* is rhetorically structured in a way that mirrors *Vita Antonii* (Nehring 2003, 434). Its preface has a passage that sounds very much like a passage from *Vita Probi* in *Historia Augusta* (Adkin 1997); it is not entirely clear who copied whom, but what matters is that Jerome is echoing the Sallustian *Bellum Catilinae*, as well as Cicero's *Pro Archia*. When describing the carnal desires of a young monk, he uses Virgil (Pataki 2001). In *Vita Hilarionis* 3.7, editors of the critical edition have noticed parallels with Vergil, Livy, and Tacitus in one particularly dense sentence. However, this was only a beginning; and one can imagine Jerome as a late-antique Al Pacino in the *Scent of a Woman*, thundering: »I am just getting warmed up!« Susan Weingarten, in her study on *The Saint's Saints: Hagiography and Geography in Jerome*, has shown how Jerome used, and subverted, a masterpiece of profane literature, namely Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. Weingarten analyzed a series of verbal and visual parallels and discovered a shared joke and examples of shared vocabulary, as well as a series of shared images and functional parallels. It seems that the bawdy and indecent *Golden Ass* was used as a fundamental antithesis for the ascetic monk – as a »pagan captive which has been shorn and converted to Jerome's ascetic Christianity« (Weingarten 2005, 104).¹⁷

Why all these parallels, and why are they not explicit? Jerome's ambivalence with classical authors is well known. Weingarten points out his letter 22 to Eustochium about being a Ciceronian, not a Christian. As he wrote in that letter: »Quid facit cum psalterio Horatius? Cum evangelii Maro? Cum apostolo Cicero?« (*Ep.* 22.29) Decades later, he developed this motif further: »Quid Aristoteli et Paulo? Quid Platoni et Petro?« (*Adv. Pelag.* 1.14) Could this be the reason for his concealment – which nonetheless failed to conquer his rivalry? Just as Hilarion in his Christianity surpasses his pagan rivals, the many literary allusions appear to have been used by Jerome to show how compared to the *Vita Antonii*; his literary masterpiece can go one better. Nevertheless, what in Athanasius' text inspired such a daring tactic?

4. *Life of Antony and Its Literary Context*

To attempt an answer to this question borders on rushing in where angels fear to tread. Scholarship has long ago realized that Jerome's relationship with the cultural legacy of the ancients could not be defined in an unequivocal formula. »It is inconsequent, inconsistent, reflecting opposite tendencies, fluctuating like

¹⁶ For the reciprocal influence, see the intriguing concept of 'Bio-Historiographie' (Führer 2020).

¹⁷ It should be noted that the case of Apuleius remains *sub iudice* and that Neil Adkin disagreed with Weingarten in 2011, arguing that her parallels are too general to prove direct dependency (Adkin 2011); in two earlier papers, he had already written about the »dangers of over-zealous identification of classical reminiscences in this work« (Adkin 2000, 2010).

the currents of the tide.« (Hagendahl 1958, 309) Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder whether Jerome's approach was not at least partly motivated by the way other texts were alluded to in the *Life of Antony* itself. Richard Reitzenstein famously showed how Athanasius employed the lives of pagan philosophers,¹⁸ specifically the *Life of Pythagoras* by Porphyry (Reitzenstein 1914); other scholars, such as Johann List, discussed parallels between *Life of Antony* and *Life of Plotinus* by Porphyry (List 1930); and Ludwig Bieler, in his *Theios aner: Das Bild des „göttlichen Menschen“ in Spätantike und Frühchristentum*, created a whole network of parallels between the holy men of antiquity, using texts such as Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and *The Lives of Sophists*; the *Pythagorean Life* by Iamblichus; the already mentioned *Life of Pythagoras* and *Life of Plotinus* by Porphyry; and the *Lives of Philosophers* by Eunapius (Bieler 1935).

Indeed, one can go through *Life of Antony* using this type of framework, and the analysis produces a series of parallels with the classical literature. Like the pagan holy men, Antony was marked by early maturity, and as a child, he wished to »stand apart from the normal activities of children« (*Vita Antonii* 1.2). The same could be said of the young Apollonios of Tyana, also able to rise above his companions like a young eagle (*Vita Apollonii* 1.7); and about the young Porphyry, developing so fast, according to Eunapius, that he soon became an ornament to his teacher (*Vitae sophistarum* 4.1). Similarly, the young Proclus did not yield to peer pressure (*Vita Procli* 11). Their archetype, of course, was the young Pythagoras (*De vita Pythagorica* 10). Antony was also marked by special knowledge, such as the knowledge of approaching death; he ordered the monks to wrap his body, prepare it for burial, and hide it under the earth, so that »to this day no one knows where it is hidden« (*Vita Antonii* 91–92). A similar shroud of secrecy covered the deaths of Apollonios (*Vita Apollonii* 8.29 ff) and Plotinus, who was reluctant to mention even the details of his birth (*Vita Plotini* 2). Of course, Antony's life was marked by the ubiquitous asceticism, linked by Reitzenstein, via direct quotation, to the *Life of Pythagoras*. His biographer stresses that it is »superfluous even to speak about meat and wine, for nothing of this sort could be found among those who are zealous« (*Vita Antonii* 7.7) – and there were parallels for this in the conduct of Pythagoras (*De vita Pythagorica* 187 ff.), Apollonios (*Vita Apollonii* 1.8), and others. The unique capabilities, marked by Antony's exceptional knowledge,¹⁹ can also be traced across the lives of Pythagoras (*De vita Pythagorica* 66; *Vita Pythagorae* 28) Iamblichus (*Vitae sophistarum* 459), and Apollonios (*Vita Apollonii* 8.26). Antony's benevolently traditional approach to nature sometimes gives the impression of a proto-Francis of Assisi (*Vita Antonii* 50); this can also be observed with Pythagoras (*De vita Pythagorica* 60) and others. Although Antony avoids his followers, they come in droves, eventually making the desert a city (*Vita Antonii* 14.7; 44). Pythagoras likewise attracted many followers, who created their community (*Vita Pythagorae* 20), and entire cities sought Apollonios of Tyana

¹⁸ This took place in the broader context of the relationship between asceticism and ancient philosophy (Bobovnik and Derhard 2020).

¹⁹ For instance in *Vita Antonii* 19.4–5, where the monk saves two visiting companions, somehow knowing they need help and sending them water to the desert.

(*Vita Apollonii* 4.1). Many more of these *loci in libris* could be adduced here (Movrin 2011, 324–340). Direct quotations cannot pinpoint these parallels. However, their sheer number testifies to the close relationship between the texts; in this context, Patricia Cox perceptively wrote about ‚mirroring‘ (Cox 1983, 146).

5. Conclusion

In the opening of one of his *Lives*, Jerome mentioned that he had been silent for a while. His little exercise, so he stated, helped him overcome his writer’s block; he desired »to practice on a minor work and to rub away, so to speak, any rust from [his] tongue«²⁰ – which probably explains his search for inspiration in the texts of older masters. While there are no explicit references to using secular authors in such practice, scholars have certainly understood this remark in the context of what seems to be ‚unequivocal traces‘ of several classical passages – even though Jerome’s paraphrase technique meant that, in his writings, »hardly a word is left unchanged in the passage imitated« (Hagendahl 1958, 117–118). Admittedly, this makes the analysis somewhat tricky.

With all this in mind, what can be inferred from the fact that Athanasius played upon classical allusions and that Jerome upped the ante by using ancient biography and several other genres, from Cicero to Apuleius? It would seem that Jerome’s *aemulatio* went much further from mere content and style; it also included narrative strategies, using pagan texts as models, following the example of the Israelites in the Exodus, despoiling the Egyptians of their gold and silver. There is, of course, a caveat, memorably expressed by Bartelink. It is challenging to know which of these lives were known to Athanasius when he was writing the *Life of Antony*, and the same could be said about Jerome (Bartelink 1982, 146–147). One can almost sense a similar realization from Susan Weingarten when she speaks about Jerome using Apuleius »consciously or unconsciously« (Weingarten 2005, 104).

Indeed, Jerome’s efforts to outdo the *Life of Antony* pose several challenging questions. While his strategy of using pagan sources mirrored the one in the *Life of Antony*, it is hard to say how much of this was calculated and how much was intuitive. Furthermore, there is the thorny issue of how the audience perceived Jerome’s efforts.²¹ Questions like these will be challenging to answer, but this difficulty should not preclude them from being stated. It is easy to feel gaslighted by the constant oscillating of Stridonian’s position and the many contradictions between his proclamations and stylistic usage. The above paragraphs, however, testify to the fact that this complexity is far from coincidental:

»In his case, matters lie deeper. His inconsistency reflects the inner conflict of his soul. He was a Christian ascetic and felt the incompatibility of this ide-

²⁰ *Vita Malchi* 1.2: »Prius exerceri cupio in parvo opere, et veluti quamdam rubiginem linguae abstergere.«

²¹ As the time was passing, the perception of this layer all but disappeared; this can be seen from Jerome’s reception in euchological texts (Aracki Rosenfeld 2020).

al and the humanism of pagan antiquity strongly. But he was also a rhetor brought up in the atmosphere of the old cultural legacy. He felt attracted and repelled – at the same time. For a time, the one feeling prevailed over the other, but he never reached a stable equilibrium. As a Christian, he felt bound to reject pagan literature. But he did not cease admiring it and reading it – apart from a short interruption caused by the dream. To this reading, he owes more than his incomparable style. If any Latin Father can be called a humanist, it is certainly Jerome.« (Hagedahl 1958, 328)

Abbreviations

Ep. – *Epistulae.*

Adv. Pelag. – *Adversus Pelagianos.*

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