

THE HISTORICAL POEMS OF THEODORE PRODROMOS, THE EPIC-HOMERIC REVIVAL AND THE CRISIS OF INTELLECTUALS IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY*

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The twelfth century and the Comnenian era were a time of social and political transformation, characterized by relative stability within and outside the empire, as well as by a revived economic situation¹. Changes affected mostly the administrative structure of the empire and the way leading positions were distributed so that many were dispossessed of what would have been otherwise their natural role in society. Modifications occurred also within the cultural world and are mirrored in the increasing number of situations of artistic patronage, and in the decreasing relevance enjoyed by artists and men of letters during that time, despite their larger number. Consequently, it is natural to wonder whether these changes affected the way poets and writers perceived themselves and the way they interacted with the society they lived in. In order to try to answer these questions, in this article I shall focus on possibly the most significant literary character of the time, namely the poet Theodore Prodromos, and I shall consider the way he described and perceived the society he lived in as it emerges from his poems.

Life and Works

Theodore Prodromos is one of the most prolific and well-known writers of the twelfth century; nonetheless, his biography is anything but certain, starting from his birth up to the date of his death. Scholars have dealt at length with the issue of Prodromos' date of birth; the early date set by Papadimitriou² in the 1070s has been discarded on the

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¹ On the Comnenoi and the historical events see F. CHALANDON, *Les Comnène: Études sur l'empire byzantin*, Paris 1926; P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143-1180*, Cambridge 1993; W. TREADGOLD, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997, pp. 613-706.

² S. D. PAPANIMITRIU, *Feodor Prodromos*, Odessa 1905, p. 14 ff; for a detailed discussion of the life of Prodromos see Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, ed. W. HÖRANDNER, Wiener Byzantinistische Studien IX, Vienna 1974, pp. 21-35 and A. KAZHDAN, 'Theodore Prodromos: a reappraisal', in A. KAZHDAN-S. FRANKLIN, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries*, Cambridge-Paris 1984, pp. 87-114.

basis of evidence both internal and external to the poems, and it is now believed that Theodore was born in Constantinople around 1100. The poet does not say much about his family or his childhood; however, it is possible to gather from the poems that his father, who was also named Prodrimos, was relatively learned³, and that Theodore studied grammar, rhetoric and philosophy⁴, although it is not clear where and who were his teachers.

According to the earliest datable poems, a series of compositions written for the wedding of one of the grandsons of Alexius I, Theodore entered the imperial court as a poet at the service of Irene Ducaena around 1118, and after her death he began to write for emperor John II until the latter's death in 1143. Prodrimos' relevance at court seems to have diminished during the reign of Manuel I; indeed, there are no verses dedicated to the new ruler until 1149, when Theodore started celebrating Manuel's military achievements in his verses, as well as writing poems about high court dignitaries for various occasions. In several poems it is possible to detect, beside the official celebratory tone, laments and pleas on behalf of the author with respect to his misfortune and his ill health; because of this, it is believed that Prodrimos retired in a hospice, possibly at the church of the Holy Apostles, where he died as the monk Nicholas in 1158 or in 1170⁵.

Theodore enjoyed substantial fame both during his life and after his death, as the vast quantity of works circulating under his name proves; not all of them are genuine, and scholars have divided these writings into three major groups: a) authentic works, b) works of uncertain attribution, which include also the vernacular "Prodromic poems", and c) the collection of poems contained in the Marciana library manuscript, Marc. XI, 22, generally attributed to an anonymous poet named Manganeios Prodrimos, after the Mangana monastery where he retired towards the end of his life; there are also in addition various historical and theological works.

Let us consider briefly the various *genres* in which Theodore and his imitators wrote, as they are an excellent example of the versatile talent of Prodrimos. The original works comprise poems, mostly dedicated to the imperial family, court dignitaries,

³ Theodoros Prodrimos *Historische Gedichte*, IV, p. 201, v. 1; XXXVIII, vv. 19-21, p. 378.

⁴ Theodoros Prodrimos *Historische Gedichte*, XXXVIII, vv. 50-59, p. 379.

⁵ For the two different dates see Theodoros Prodrimos *Historische Gedichte*, pp. 31-32 and A. KAZHDAN, *Studies*, pp. 92-93.

officials events, as well as some relevant autobiographical compositions, which will be discussed later in this article, discourses, letters, theological, philosophical and grammatical writings, satires, as well as the erotic novel in twelve-syllable verses *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*⁶.

The second group contains a wide spectrum of works on various arguments, which have been tentatively ascribed to Theodore: letters, theological poems, σχέδη, grammatical writings and satirical compositions, such as the dialogue *Timarion*⁷. A few poems written in vernacular Greek are part of this group and they are referred to as *Ptochoprodromica*, as the author constantly laments his poverty and his pitiful situation; the issue of authorship is problematic and opinions still diverge widely. Scholars have often refuted Theodore's paternity of the *Ptochoprodromica* by claiming differences in metrics, and the use of vernacular as unworthy of him; however, metrical variations may well be a result of the adoption of a different language and a different verse. The fact that both poets are clever and satirical, and that in the vernacular poems there are several passages written in high style, led Hörandner to identify Ptochoprodromos with Theodore; however, this attribution has not found universal acceptance, and most scholars seem to agree only on the impossibility of rejecting or accepting beyond any doubt Prodromos' authorship on the basis of metrics, language and of the information available⁸.

Finally, the vast *corpus* of poems found in the Marciana manuscript XI, 22 has long been attributed to Prodromos because of the many similarities with his authentic work. Although aspects of the life of this mysterious author correspond to events that occurred to the real Prodromos – for both were part of the circle of the sebastokratorissa Irene, both were poor and ended their life in a monastery – nevertheless, it seems now certain that the author of these verses was a poet junior to Prodromos, who flourished in

⁶ For a detailed list of Prodromos's writings see Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, pp. 37-56.

⁷ For the *Timarion* see R. ROMANO, *Sulla possibile attribuzione del 'Timarione' pseudo-luciano a Nicola Callicle*, *Giornale italiano di filologia* 4 (1973), 309-315; IDEM, *Pseudo-Luciano, Timarione*, Naples 1974.

⁸ For the discussion of the various opinions on this issue see H. G. BECK, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliterature*, München 1971, p. 104; Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, pp. 65-67; M. J. KYRIAKIS, *Poor poets and starving literati in twelfth century Byzantium*, *Byzantion* XLIV (1974), pp. 290-309 and A. KAZHDAN, *Studies*, pp. 90-91. The poems have been edited by D. C. HESSELING-H. PERNOT, *Poèmes prodromiques en grec vulgaire*, Amsterdam 1910; repr. Wiesbaden 1968, and more recently by H. EIDENEIER, *Ptochoprodromus: Einführung, kritische Ausgabe, deutsche Übersetzung, Glossar*, Köln 1991, that offers an updated discussion of the Ptochoprodromic question.

the 1140s and 1150s and eventually retired to the ἀδελφῶτον of the Mangana cloister; hence, the name of Manganeios Prodromos to distinguish him from the other, or the other two poets⁹.

In this article I shall consider only historical and personal poems that have been undoubtedly attributed to Theodore, as they represent the most valuable tool in understanding how the poet perceived himself and his role in society, and how he related to it. Within the vast *corpus* of the historical poems I shall examine two different occurrences of personal expressions: one is the expression of the self that appears in the poems addressed to the emperor to celebrate his victorious military campaigns, where Theodore depicts the ruler as an epic hero and presents himself in his role of court poet. The other is a deeper and more dramatic utterance of Theodore's personal history and of the ensuing feelings which emerge in the poems focused on him, and which depict him in his wretchedness, his suffering and his – alleged – poverty; for these compositions seem to exemplify best the changes that occurred within twelfth century Byzantine society.

Historical Poems

Let us turn first to the historical poems, many of which are dedicated to John II on occasion of his campaign in Asia Minor, the conquest of Castamon and Gangra, and the campaigns against the Turks. In these compositions Prodromos embodies at his best the role of official court poet devoted to spreading the news of imperial victories among the citizens, and to praising the ruler for his courage, his ability and his endurance. These verses are particularly interesting as they reveal sides of Theodore's personality, which otherwise are absent from his poems on illness and poverty.

In the group of poems for the conquest of Castamon, Prodromos presents himself mainly as the herald of the achievements of the emperor. In one composition he expresses his admiration for John and states that nothing, not even the ruler himself, could drive him away from his intent to learn about the events¹⁰, while in another poem he affirms

⁹ The poems of Manganeios Prodromos are still mostly unpublished; professors E. and M. Jeffreys are currently working at the edition and the translation of Manganeios's compositions. For a list of the poems see E. MIONI, *Bibliothecae Divi Marci Venetiarum codices graeci manuscripti* I-III, Roma 1973, III, pp. 116-125 and, more recently, P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel*, pp. 494-500.

¹⁰ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, III, vv. 46, p. 194:
ἐξερέειν με θέλοντα κατὰ σθένος οὐκ ἀπεώσεις.

that he will engrave the great deeds of John II in books, lest they get lost or forgotten by the generations to come¹¹. This role of imperial herald is very interesting, as Theodore blends in it two independent aspects; on the one hand, he carries out his duty of court poet, whose aim is to praise and flatter the emperor beyond measure, while proclaiming himself unworthy and incapable of such a task at the same time. On the other hand, the poet plays with his name and frequently presents himself as John the Baptist – the Prodomos of the Lord who had been sent to spread the word of God – in this instance, the Prodomos of the emperor, the *vox clamans in deserto* that has to divulge and to preserve the memory of the imperial deeds¹², thus effacing his previous assertions of unworthiness.

It is worthwhile to consider these two elements, as at first they seem rather contrasting. To overcome his incapacity to sing the extraordinary victories of the emperor Theodore admits seeking help from the prophets and from David, the Biblical poet *per antonomasiam*¹³. This statement is remarkable for its ideological content; in fact, while it emphasizes the conventional humbleness of the poet, it simultaneously points to the strict analogy between Christ and the Byzantine emperor, who is the representative of God on earth, and for whom only the words of the Psalmist are worthy. The relation between God and the emperor is re-proposed in the image of Theodore as the Prodomos of the ruler, an image that at the same time subverts the concept of unworthiness voiced by the poet, and that rather seems to claim a relevant function for him in the ‘economy’ of the empire.

Moreover, one ought to notice also that on several occasions Theodore proposes himself as a valid ally to the emperor against his enemies together with Christ and the

¹¹ Theodoros Prodomos *Historische Gedichte*, VIII, vv. 1-4, p. 234:

καὶ τάδε σου μέγιστα μυθήσομαι ἔργα πολίταις
 Ῥώμης κουροτέρης, Κομνηνάδῃ πτολίπορθε,
 εὐχος ἀνακτορίας, καὶ ἐν βιβλίοισι χαράξω,
 ὄφρα καὶ ὀψιγόνοισι μετέσσειται οὐδὲ θανεῖται.

¹² Theodoros Prodomos *Historische Gedichte*, XVI, vv. 167-169, p. 282:

καὶ γίνομαι σοι Πρόδρομος ὁ προφητῶν ἀκρέμων
 καὶ προφητεύων προλαλῶ καὶ προανακηρύττω
 ὡς πᾶσα βάρβαρος ἰσχὺς ὑποταγῆσεται σοι.

¹³ Theodoros Prodomos *Historische Gedichte*, XI, vv. 147-148, p. 257:

ἐκ τοῦ Δαβὶδ δανείζομαι τοῦ μουσικοῦ προφήτου
 τοὺς ἐπαινέτας, βασιλεῦ, τῶν σῶν ἀριστευμάτων.

Theodoros Prodomos *Historische Gedichte*, XVII, vv. 17-20, p. 287:

ἀπ’ ἐμαυτοῦ μὲν οὐ θαρρῶ τὰ τῆς εὐχῆς σοι δοῦναι,
 ἐκ τῶν σοφῶν προφητῶν δανείζομαι καὶ λέγω
 καὶ μάλιστα τῆς τοῦ Δαυὶδ πνευματοκρούστου λύρας
 καὶ τούτοις χρῶμαι συνεργοῖς ἄρτι καὶ συνευχέταις.

Virgin; when confronted by such a statement, it is natural to wonder whether the poet's expressions of humility are sincere, or whether he had a rather high opinion of himself. However, by looking closely at the poems, I would say that neither of the above is true: for the expression of humility is an indispensable part of the genre, as the emperor stands above all human beings, and Prodrornos, for his part, is unaffected by egocentrism. On the contrary, what emerges from the poems and strikes the reader is the profound self-irony of the poet, particularly in the comparisons between himself and the Baptist. Theodore, in fact, describes himself as the Prodrornos who should announce the imperial victories and escort the ruler in his expeditions; at the same time, however, he voices his reluctance to travel through and outside the empire infested by enemies, as well as the weakness that prevents him from accompanying John II; unlike the Baptist, who wandered in the desert and preached fearlessly at the cost of his life, Theodore says that he never set foot outside Constantinople and that he was fearing even shadows before the emperor defeated the Turks¹⁴. Furthermore, while claiming his role as Prodrornos, the poet quite ironically admits his hatred for poverty – the wild honey – and the lack of comforts – the camel-hair robe – that such a mission requires, and beseeches the emperor to rescue and free him from his wretched state, thus fully repudiating the eremitic vocation of the Baptist, and introducing the subject of his poverty in a composition, which was initially dedicated to the ruler in his role of warrior-hero¹⁵.

The poems on military campaigns offer Theodore the opportunity to fulfill his role of court poet, as well as to address several appeals to the emperor so as to obtain help and remuneration; poverty, in fact, is one of the recurring topics in Prodrornos' poetry, and is also one of the showcases to which the reader can turn to look for information on the poet and on the decreasing importance of his role. However, the reader is immediately confronted by the unresolved question of the real or presumed destitution of the author;

¹⁴ Theodoros Prodrornos *Historische Gedichte*, XVIII, vv. 46-48, p. 304:

καὶ Πρόδρομος ὁ τρίδουλος τοῦ σεβαστοῦ τοῦ κράτους
καὶ τρίδειλος ὑπὲρ λαγῶν μηδ' ἔξω Βυζαντίδος
ἄλλην ποτὲ τῶν πόλεων ἢ τῶν χωρῶν γνωρίσας.

¹⁵ Theodoros Prodrornos *Historische Gedichte*, XVI, vv. 218-223, p. 284:

ἔχεις καὶ μὲ τὸν Πρόδρομον θερμότατον οἰκέτην
ἐκ τῆς ἐρήμου τῆς σκληρᾶς, τῆς ἀνχηρᾶς πενίας,
τῆς ἐπαράτου καὶ λυπρᾶς νῦν ἐπανήκοντά σοι,
ἔξ ἧς με ρύσαι, δυσωπῶ, μισῶ γὰρ τὰς ἀκρίδας,
μισῶ τὸ μέλι τὸ πικρὸν, τὴν δερματίνην ζώνην
καὶ τὴν ἀδρᾶν περιβολὴν τὴν ἐκ τριχῶν καμήλου.

for Theodore moans endlessly in poems and letters about his miserable economic state and his poor health, but it is hard to ascertain the level of truthfulness of these complaints, as the figure of the poor starving *litteratus* gained enormous ground in twelfth century literature and became quite popular, as I shall discuss shortly¹⁶.

As mentioned earlier Prodromos' family background is not known, but it seems possible to gather from his excellent education that he came from a family of some means, probably small landowners¹⁷. As poverty has often a preeminent position in his poems, it is worthwhile to investigate the reasons that drove Prodromos to distort reality, and also to what extent one can trust his words on this matter. Petitions for help appear in the historical celebratory poems, as well as in other compositions, which focus entirely upon the issue of poverty and illness; I am going to consider firstly the brief appeals interspersed in the poems on the military campaigns of the emperor, and I shall examine the longer compositions in details later.

The tone and the content of the short appeals present in the historical poems vary, for sometimes they openly concern the issue of poverty, while other times are general pleas to the ruler for salvation; however, it is realistic to think that Theodore adopted the latter to mask his requests for favours and compensation, and to make these less blatant. Two passages in *Hist. Ged.* XV-XVI¹⁸ are very interesting examples of this type of plea and deserve some attention. *Hist. Ged.* XV is a poem dedicated to the tenth campaign of John Komnenos against the Turks; the first part is a long warning to the barbarians to prepare for war and defeat because the emperor is marching against them; then, close to the end, Theodore suddenly breaks the continuity of the poem and introduces a long tirade to the emperor – not to say a reprimand – where he wonders why John lets the poet's only enemy – τὴν μιαρὰν πενίαν – go undefeated within the city, whereas he pities and benefits everyone else in the empire; hence he asks the ruler to annihilate his foe – poverty – and only subsequently to go fight in the East¹⁹.

¹⁶ See M. ALEXIOU, *The poverty of écriture and the craft of writing: towards a reappraisal of the Prodromic poems*, BMGS 10 (1986), pp. 1-40; R. BEATON, *The rhetoric of poverty: the lives and opinions of Theodore Prodromos*, BMGS 11 (1987), pp. 1-28.

¹⁷ A. KAZHDAN, 'A reappraisal', pp. 104-105.

¹⁸ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, pp. 271-285.

¹⁹ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XV, vv. 81-90, p. 274:

τί τοῦτο δρᾶς, ἀήττητε Ῥωμαίων αὐτοκράτορ;
τί τοῦτο δρᾶς, μυρίαθλε μυριονικηφόρε;

The second appeal to consider is at the end of *Hist. Ged.* XVI; in these verses Theodore depicts himself as the Prodromos of the emperor who comes from the harsh desert; nonetheless, he wants to be rescued and set free because the desert is nothing other but the poverty, ἀὐχμηρὰ πενία, that affects the poet and that he loathes deeply²⁰. Finally, at the end of *Hist. Ged.* XVII one finds a further passage in which Theodore displays a high degree of self-irony, but mixes it also with well-concealed satire towards the emperor. In this poem Prodromos declares himself unable to praise the ruler with his own words, so that he will use the words of the prophets to illustrate how the emperor fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Toward the end, Theodore adds his voice to the long list of prophets' prayers, and expresses the wish that the Turks would prove as weak and hungry as he himself is, so that John will easily defeat them²¹; with this scoffing remark, Prodromos again proves his strong sense of self-mockery, and simultaneously finds an indirect way to complain about and to make the emperor aware of his poverty.

Poems on Illness

Alongside the passing remarks on poverty which have been discussed above, one finds also several poems that focus entirely upon the author's illness and his situation; it is essential to consider some of these poems since due to their subject the self-portrait that Theodore offers, as well as the general tone of the compositions, is rather different from the one previously discussed and new aspects of the poet's character come into sight, which appear to be evidence of social changes and of a different attitude toward culture.

στρατεύεις κατὰ τῶν ἐχθρῶν καὶ πάλιν τῶν ἐφῶν,
 θήγεις αὐτὸς τὴν μάχαιραν, ἐξακονᾶς τὸ δόρυ,
 τοῦ δὲ Προδρόμου τὸν ἐχθρὸν, τὴν μιανὰν πενίαν,
 Προδρόμου τοῦ κηρύσσοντος τὰ στρατηγήματά σου,
 ἕως ἀκαταγώνιστον ἔνδον τῆς πολιτείας.
 μὴ τοῦτο δράσης, βασιλεῦ, μὴ πρὸς τῶν τροπαίων
 ἀλλὰ τὸν ἔσω πρότερον ἐχθρὸν ἐξαφανίσας
 οὕτω μοι χάρει πεποιθῶς κατὰ τῶν ἐξωτέρων.

²⁰ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XVI, v. 224, p. 284:
 φωνὴ βοῶντος πέφυκα, τί μοι καὶ ταῖς ἐρήμοις;

²¹ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XVII, vv. 394-395, p. 299:
 ἰσχύσαι τοίνυν, ὕψιστε, τὰ φύλα τῶν βαρβάρων
 καὶ τῆς Περσίδος ὁ λαός, ὅσον αὐτὸς ἰσχύω.

Within this group it is possible to distinguish poems addressed to members of the imperial family, high court-dignitaries or friends of the poet, in which he grieves and seeks aid, and poems in which Prodromos instead addresses his illness directly. I cannot discuss all these poems in detail because it would be too long, but I would like to mention first three short poems dedicated to the monk Ioannikios (LXII) the logothete Stephen Meles (LXVIII) and the anonymous officer τοῦ κανικλείου, one of the emperor's private secretaries and the warden of the imperial inkstand (LXXII) respectively, which seem to be united by the theme of illness and of the subsequent impossibility to visit an acquaintance. And it is indeed the importance bestowed upon the issue of the visit that, in my opinion, represents the innovative aspect of these poems. By reading these verses one gathers the impression that Prodromos composed them as a polite way to apologize and to explain the reasons for missing or delaying a meeting with the addressees, as in the case of the poem to Ioannikios; but in the case of the logothete and of the officer τοῦ κανικλείου, the situation seems to be different, as well as the relationship between the writer and his interlocutor. For Theodore's concern to justify his case seems to point rather to a relation of patronage, in which the poet plays the role of *cliens*, than to a relation of friendship between equals; and this rapport is further emphasized by the gratitude of the poet for the help he had already received from his patrons, and by the subsequent request for more help in a near future. Thus, it appears that although Prodromos gravitated mostly around the court, and was at the service of several members of the imperial family – *in primis* the emperor and the sebastokratorissa Irene – he had also found, or he had sought, protectors who did not belong to the imperial family²².

The existence of a relation of possible clientship between Prodromos and some of his addressees brings back the question of the social status of poets and literati in the twelfth century: was Theodore really in a severe economic situation, which was worsened by recurring illness, or it was just an attitude among men of letters to lament one's own poverty as a means to claim an affluence which was expected, or in the hope to gain always greater compensation? Before considering this important issue, however, I would

²² See, however, Theodore's assertion to have served just few masters in his life, *Historische Gedichte*, LXXI, v. 92, p. 519:

οὐ γὰρ ἐπίσταμαι πολλοὺς δεσπότης ἐν τῷ βίῳ.

like to discuss two poems which are critical for the understanding of this matter and of Theodore's self perception.

Illness is central not only to poems dedicated to friends and patrons as a way to excuse himself and, in all probability, to obtain support, but also becomes the focal point of two deeply personal compositions in which Theodore voices all his discouragement and grief for his state in the form of appeals to the disease to cease oppressing him once for all²³. These two poems have a very similar structure: both begin with an address to the illness, continue with the depiction of the condition of the poet through a series of very vivid similes that describe Theodore's exhaustion by comparing it to everyday manual activities, and conclude with an appeal to Christ for salvation. It is worth spending a few words on these similes as they are revealing of Theodore's perception of himself as intellectual and of his attitude toward daily life activities. It is very interesting to note how in these instances, and especially in *Hist. Ged.* LXXVII, Theodore draws comparisons from humble actions and from the surrounding actuality, thus introducing a wave of realism into the poems, whereas in the compositions considered previously he had favoured Biblical and mythological imagery.

Theodore depicts his sorrows in the three significant similes of *Hist. Ged.* LXXVII, and draws their content from the simple craftsmanship that he could observe in action in the streets of Constantinople, and in each simile he portrays a different side of his reaction to infirmity. In the first simile Theodore voices his frustration through the image of an octopus crushed against the rocks by the fishmonger so as to soften it; in a similar way the illness wears him down with its unbearable pain²⁴. Although at first such a scene could appear humorous, at a closer look one realizes that it is all but funny, and that the choice of the octopus is intentional to describe the poet's condition. Because the octopus is a boneless fish, it perfectly conveys the idea of the exhaustion caused in the poet by disease; moreover, considering the contempt for manual labour that Theodore expressed in various poems, the mention of the *ταριχοπώλης* – a modest dealer in salt

²³ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, LXXVII-LXXVIII, pp. 544-549.

²⁴ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, LXXVII, vv. 27-29, p. 545:

ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἀνὴρ πολὺπονν μετὰ χεῖρεσι ταριχοπώλης
ζῶν ἐλὼν παίησι, μένος δὲ πολὺποδι δάπτει
τύμμασ' ἀεικελίισιν, ἀτὰρ ταρίχευσε δαμάξας.

fish – manages to communicate very well the bleakness of and the discomfort for the situation in which the poet finds himself.

Illness, poverty and humble activities are central also to *Hist. Ged.* XXXVIII, a poem dedicated to the princess historian Anna Comnene²⁵, where Theodore describes at length the kind of education he received, thus disclosing plenty of autobiographical information as well as considerations on the role and the status of men of letters in twelfth-century Byzantine society. The poem begins with an appeal to the princess and to all the forces of nature to listen to the vicissitudes that induced the poet to pursue culture rather than a military or a manual career. Theodore narrates how his father advised him, when he was still a boy, to study with great zeal, as that was the only feasible way to achieve glory and wealth in life, since he was too feeble to become a soldier, and craftsmanship would bring him shame and dishonour instead²⁶. So Prodromos spent his youth bent over books, learning rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, and hoping for things – wealth, fame and recognition – that would never materialize²⁷; whereas – he regrets – had he chosen to become a cobbler or a shepherd, he would lead a comfortable existence and in no financial straits²⁸. Toward the end of the poem, after the long tirade on poverty and on the uselessness of his efforts, Theodore returns to the subject of his distressing disease, which nags him unceasingly, and eventually he ends the poem with a further appeal to Anna to intercede with the Virgin on his behalf.

At a first reading, this poem may seem very similar to others discussed earlier in the course of this chapter, as it deals with Theodore's usual complaints about his poor

²⁵ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XXXVIII, pp. 376-381.

²⁶ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XXXVIII, vv. 39-44, pp. 378-379:

σκυτέα δ' οὐ σ' ἐπέοικε πεφηνέαι οὐδ' ἄρ' ὑφάντην
οὐδέ τε χαλκοτύπον· καὶ γὰρ ἐμὸν ἔσσειαι αἰσχρός.
τέκνον ἐμὸν, βιβλίουσιν ὄλην ἐπίθου μελεδῶνα
καὶ σοφίην ἀγάπαζε καὶ ἀμφὶ λόγοις μέγα μόχθει,
οἷ σε καλὸν τελέσουσι καὶ ὄλβιον ἐν μερόπεσσι
καὶ μέγαν ἐν κτεάνεσσι καὶ οἷς ἐτάροισιν ὄνειαρ.

²⁷ *ibid.*, vv. 45-48, p. 379:

ταῦθ' ὁ πατήρ ἐπέτελλεν· ἐγὼ δὲ κλύων ἐγεγῆθην
ἐλπόμενος κατὰ θυμὸν, ἃ μὴ τελέεσθαι ἐμελλεν·
ἔκτοτε γὰρ πονέεσκον ὅσον σθένος ἦματα πάντα,
ἦματα καὶ νύκτας, περὶ ταῖς βίβλοις δ' ἐθανάτων.

²⁸ *ibid.*, vv. 68-72, p. 379:

ὡς ὄφελον γάρ, ἄνασσα, βαναυσίδος ἔμμεν' ἀγωγῆς,
ὡς κεν ἄλις βιότιοι πορίσματα ἐνθεν ἀγείρω·
ὡς ὄφελον σκυτέεσσιν ἀνά ξυνὰ νάκεα τέμνειν,
ὡς κεν εἴοισι πόδεσσι ὑπ' ἄρβυλα καλὰ τιταίνω·
ὡς ὄφελον ποίμνης μέγα πίνος ἔμμεναι ἄρχων.

health; actually, on a closer examination, it offers several remarkable details on the poet, which are worth some thought – not least, the description of his education and of the reasons for pursuing a literary career. Three main considerations emerge from this text, all of which are relevant to a better understanding of Prodromos and his situation: a profound contempt for manual labour, an intense fascination and reverence for war and warlike ideals, the belief – almost the pretension – that culture ought to provide wealth and honour to those who pursue and master it, and that it has no value *per se*, but represents a means to attain something else. In order to comprehend the origin of Prodromos' mentality, it is necessary to explore briefly the issues listed above.

Theodore's disdain for craftsmanship and for newly acquired wealth, which he expresses through the words of his father and, less explicitly, in the similes previously mentioned, has its roots in the importance that aristocracy and noble lineage assumed in Comnenian times. While earlier in Byzantium emphasis lay upon moral distinction rather than upon nobility of blood, from the eleventh and twelfth century the concept of hereditary aristocracy acquired greater respect and significance, so that to be an aristocrat, preferably related to the ruling family, became the necessary factor for one to take active part in the hierarchical structure of the imperial court²⁹. Although Prodromos was not of noble descent, he partook in the current ideology, and held nobility and military valour in the highest esteem; consequently, he felt and voiced a sense of moral superiority and contempt towards craftsmen and traders³⁰. In a certain way, Theodore claimed for himself a sort of 'nobility of culture and reason', as he unmistakably expressed in the poem to Anna by affirming indignantly that by then manual works had attained precedence over reason³¹.

This last statement is remarkable and revealing of the changes that Byzantine society underwent within a few centuries, as well as of the way of thinking at the time of

²⁹ A. KAZHDAN-A. W. EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1985, pp. 99-119; P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel*, pp. 320-322; IDEM, *Byzantine snobbery*, in *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX-XII century*, ed. M. ANGOLD, Oxford 1984, 58-93; M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, London-NY 1997², pp. 241-269; M. MULLETT-D. SMYTHE eds., *Alexios I Komnenos*, Belfast 1996.

³⁰ Similar feelings are expressed in the Prodromic poem IV; see M. ALEXIOU, *The poverty of écriture*, pp. 28-30.

³¹ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, XXXVIII, vv. 85-86, p. 380:

δέρκεό μοι, βασίλισσα, πόσον παθέεσιν έάλων,
ώστε λόγου προπάροιθε βαναυσικά έργα καθίζειν.

Prodromos; in fact, around two hundred years earlier the poet and general John Geometres had expressed an almost identical thought in one of his poems, but, instead of lamenting the superiority of crafts over reason, he lamented the superiority of warfare and military skills over reason and culture³². It leaps immediately to the eye how profoundly social values have changed from the tenth century, and such a change of perspective is further corroborated by the relevance that military and chivalrous virtues attained during the Comnenian times, as well as by the epic-Homeric revival, and by the appearance of a Byzantine epic poem, the *Digenes Akrites*.

Prodromos' attraction to warlike deeds and military bravery is visible throughout his historical poems, where he sings the praises of the emperor and other members of the Comnenian clan at length, as I discussed at the beginning of this article; Theodore describes John II as a Homeric hero, who defeats the Turks and conquers their cities, and Manuel I as an indefatigable knight, who wears his armour night and day, bearing fatigue, thirst and cold to secure the safety of the empire. The fascination with military ideals, which pervades the *Weltanschauung* of Prodromos, is recognizable also in several other writings of the time, such as the *Υλη ιστορίας* of Nikephoros Bryennios, the *Alexiad* of Anna Comnene, and the chivalric epic of *Digenes Akrites*, all of which reflect the mentality, the values and the ideology of the ruling military aristocracy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. For a full understanding of Prodromos and his work it is important to dwell briefly upon the origin of this phenomenon.

The Epic-Heroic Ideology in Comnenian Society

After Alexius I seized power and became emperor in 1081, he managed to gather together the most prominent aristocratic families with a skillful policy of alliances achieved through close marriage ties: the Comnenoi shared the imperial power with the Doukai, the Palaiologoi and the Melissenoi; however, preeminence was given to the

³² *Anecdota graeca e codd. manuscriptis Bibliothecae Regiae Parisiensis*, ed. J. A. CRAMER, I-IV, Oxford 1841; Hildesheim 1967, IV, vv. 4-5, p. 342:

ἀλλ' οἱ σοφοὶ νῦν, πλὴν ἐγὼ μωροὺς λέγω,
τὴν γνῶσιν εἶπον ἐμποδῶν τῆς ἀνδρίας.

ibid., vv. 23-26, p. 342:

ἢ δ' ἀρετὴ καὶ γνῶσις ἐν ταῖς γωνίαις
στυγναὶ κάθηνται καὶ παρημελημένοι
θρηνοῦσι πικρῶς οὐχ ἑαυτᾶς τῆς τύχης·
φύσει γὰρ αὐταὶ τίμια καὶ τοῖς ξένοις.

closest relatives of the emperor, who were granted distinctive titles and privileges. The support of his relatives and the strong spirit of γένος helped Alexius overcome the hardships he had to face during the early years of his reign, but at the same time induced him to manage the empire as a private possession of his aristocratic clan, rather than for and on behalf of his subjects³³. By means of reforms, Alexius transformed court hierarchy, enhanced the power of nobility in the imperial system, and tied the highest imperial offices to aristocracy, thus degrading and excluding from top power positions the members of civil service and of civil aristocracy. Following the strenuous fights of the military aristocracy for the defense and the reconstruction of the territorial integrity of the empire against internal and external opposition, military prowess, emphasis on strategic and heroic qualities of the warrior-hero, a chivalric sense of war and duel came to occupy a prominent place. The ideal of a warrior-hero, who alone could withstand the enemies and save the empire with his extraordinary capacities, reflects the very essence of the aristocratic mentality of the times, which clearly ignored, or rejected, the universal dimension of the issue of the security of the empire, by considering it just an aristocratic affair; this type of champion is perfectly exemplified in the histories of Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna Comnene³⁴, as well as in the historical poems of Prodromos. The protagonists of these works are described with an intense Homeric flair and behave according to a strict code of honour, which goes back to the Homeric epic: they are noble, of course, but they distinguish themselves also for their beauty and their bravery, for their strength and their intellect; one may say that the ancient Greek ideals of καλοκαγαθία and ἀνδρεία reappeared in all its significance at the Comnenian court³⁵.

Because of the prominence acquired from the eleventh century onwards by a military life-style of this sort, Bryennios, Anna and Prodromos arguably began to perceive the events and the protagonists depicted in the *Iliad* as mirror images of their vicissitudes and their historical condition. As a result, they gave a profound Homeric imprint to their writings, with the consequence that the limit between history and epic

³³ See M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire*, pp. 115-156.

³⁴ For the discussion of the epic-Homeric ideals in the eleventh and twelfth centuries see A. CARILE, *Il «Cesare» Niceforo Briennio*, *Aevum*, 42 (1968), pp. 429-454; IDEM, *La «Υψηλή ιστορία» del Cesare Niceforo Briennio*, *Aevum*, 43 (1969), pp. 56-87 and pp. 235-282; R. KATIČIĆ, *Ἄννη ἢ Κομνηνὴ καὶ ὁ Ὅμηρος*, *Ἐπετηρὶς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν*, XXVII (1957), pp. 213-223.

³⁵ See A. LAIOU, *Mariage, amour et parenté à Byzance aux XI-XIII siècles*, Paris 1992, esp. pp. 26-37.

became blurred, and the historic narration sometime may result into a sort of fabulous epic account³⁶.

Such a deeply rooted aristocratic and martial attitude brought about, side by side with the Homeric revival, the creation of a Byzantine epic, which would result in the poem of *Digenes Akrites*, an epic-aristocratic, Christian and Byzantine hero, whose purpose is to defend the empire and to fight against the infidels. The eponymous hero of the poem, who is of noble descent, valiant in battle and skillful in hunting, is the outcome of the early Comnenian military ideology and, at the same time, has assimilated all the features that prospered and characterized the joyous atmosphere at the court of Manuel I, such as a taste for hunting, feasting and playing the cithara. Digenes, as Paul Magdalino has written, shares the common ground of epic with the Homeric panegyrics of Prodromos and the heroic biographies of Alexius I by Bryennios and Anna³⁷.

After this *excursus* about military ideology in Comnenian times, it is necessary to return to the poem to Anna and to consider Prodromos' attitude toward culture and the value he confers on it, as his position is remarkable and representative of the crisis of the times in which he lived. If one reflects on the attitude of previous Byzantine intellectuals toward culture and its intrinsic worth, the difference between their stance and Theodore's certainly leaps to the eye; suffice it here to compare it with Mauropous' and Psellos' opinion on culture. Mauropous, for instance, entered public life and became part of the *entourage* of Constantine IX only at a later stage in his life, while he had begun his career as a teacher. Although John earned a living from his teaching, it seems clear from his poems that money was not the reason why he immersed himself in literary culture: it was a genuine passion for learning and books that urged him to offer his knowledge to anyone who wanted to partake of it³⁸.

Psellos, a pupil of Mauropous and a teacher in his turn – among his many other activities – expresses his ideas on learning in several passages of his *Chronographia*, of which one seems particularly revealing, and deserves closer attention. At the end of a

³⁶ A. CARILE, *La « Ὑλη ἱστορίας » del Cesare*, pp. 263-264.

³⁷ P. MAGDALINO, *Digenes Akrites and Byzantine literature: the twelfth-century background to the Grottaferrata version*, in *Digenes Akrites: new approaches to Byzantine heroic poetry*, eds. R. BEATON-D. RICKS, Aldershot 1993, pp. 1-14.

³⁸ See for example *Iohannis Euchaitorum metropolitae quae in codice vaticano graeco 676 supersunt*, ed. P. DE LAGARDE-J. BOLLIG, *Abhandl. der history.-philol. Klasse der königl. Gesellschaft der Wiss. zu Göttingen* 28 (1882), epigram 29, 92, 98.

lengthy digression on all the subjects he has rediscovered and made available to those who are interested, Psellos claims not to have sold his culture, τοὺς λόγους, for a salary, rather to have offered it freely³⁹. This aspect of the gratuitousness of culture, which is common to both Mauropous and Psellos, together with the belief that knowledge is intrinsically valuable, seems to have vanished by the times of Theodore. In the poem to Anna Prodromos voices his bitterness and his deepest disappointment at the fact that years of demanding and exhausting studies have failed him, because they have not provided him with the expected wealth⁴⁰; conversely, the poet senses learning as a wearying activity that, together with poverty and bad health, has consumed all his strength⁴¹; Theodore's words lack the enthusiasm for culture that filled Mauropous' verses, or the sense of pride that Psellos derived from his vast and multifaceted knowledge, or, as it happens with Metochites in the fourteenth century, the conviction that culture can soothe sorrows and persists even in the direst circumstances⁴².

On some occasions Theodore seems proud of his poetic talents, as when he recalls his public speeches, or when he presents himself as the official writer of the ruler's exploits⁴³; nevertheless, sometimes he gives the impression that he considers his rhetorical ability and his great culture as a mere commodity and a craft that can be used to make a living, and to attain money and favours when there is a need to do so. This rather materialistic conception of culture as an object to be exchanged for something else appears to be a characteristic feature of writers during the twelfth century and a sign of the crisis that struck intellectuals at that time: Prodromos, Ptochoprodromos⁴⁴ and

³⁹ Michael Psellos, *Imperatori di Bisanzio, Cronografia*, eds. S. IMPELLIZZERI-U. CRISCUOLO-S. RONCHEY, I-II, Milano 1984, I, 29, ll. 17-24:

οὐ μισθοῦ τοὺς λόγους πωλῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ προσεπιδιδούς εἴ τις λαμβάνειν ἐβούλετο.

Also VI, 43, ll. 12-13 where Psellos blames those who forsake culture, as soon as they attain what they want.

⁴⁰ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte* XXXVIII, vv. 63-65, p. 379:

τόσσα μὲν οὖν ἀέθλησα, πατρὸς δὲ τέλεσσα ἐφετμήν,
ἀλλ' οὐπω μοι ἀέθλι' ἀεθλοσύνας ἐπὶ μακραῖς,
οὐ μέγας ἐν κτεάνεσσι καὶ ὄλβιος αὐτὸς ἐτύχθην.

⁴¹ Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, LXXVII, v. 20, p. 545:

σῶμα δ' ἐμὸν προλέλοιπε βίβλους πενίη θ' ὑποδηθέν.

⁴² See *Theodore Metochite's poems to himself*, ed. J. FEATHERSTONE, Vienna 2000, poem 17.

⁴³ See, for example, Theodoros Prodromos *Historische Gedichte*, VI, vv. 100-104, p. 223, and XVI, vv. 183-185, p. 283.

⁴⁴ M. ALEXIOU, *The poverty of écriture*, pp. 6-10.

Tzetzes, to mention just a few, all share this attitude towards knowledge, and voice their dissatisfaction because their expectations have not been met.

The Crisis of the Intellectuals

It is indeed surprising to encounter such low consideration of culture on part of such learned men; it is therefore necessary to reflect on how and why culture came to lose some of its appeal and its value in twelfth century Byzantium. Throughout the centuries education had been the guarantee of a profitable and successful career at court or in the civil administration; in the second half of the eleventh and in the twelfth century, however, the situation began to change for various reasons. On the one hand, the Comnenoi had modified the way of obtaining administrative positions, and tended to distribute them to relatives and members of other aristocratic families; on the other hand, the development of *σχεδογραφία*⁴⁵ and the establishment of several schools, such as the school at the Orphanotropheion, made access to education available to a wider number of students, thus creating a class of well educated people, who found themselves deprived of their natural professional outlets, namely bureaucracy and teaching. The reason why *σχεδογραφία* had been introduced in schools is rather mysterious, nor is it known who introduced it; this was a new teaching method, consisting of short passages, either composed by the teacher or taken from works of literature, which students had to analyse grammatically, stylistically and syntactically. It is likely that such method established itself quickly within the Byzantine educational system because it represented an effective way of teaching large numbers of students, it could provide good literary skills in a rather short time and, in addition to that, it eased the problem of the meager supply of books, parchment and writing instruments at the time⁴⁶.

In spite of the innovations in teaching methods and of the establishment of more schools, it seems, however, that the basis of Byzantine education in the twelfth century remained the private teacher, who would tutor for a fee a small number of pupils in his

⁴⁵ On this topic see G. SCHIRÓ, *La schedografia a Bisanzio nei sec. XI-XII e la scuola dei SS. XL martiri*, Boll.Grott. 3 (1949), pp. 11-29; H. HUNGER, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, I-II, München 1978, II, pp. 25-29; A. GARZYA, *Storia e interpretazione di testi bizantini*, London 1974, pp. 1-14; A. KAZHDAN, *Schedography*, ODB, I-III, Oxford-NY 1991, III, p. 1849.

⁴⁶ P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel*, pp. 329-330; M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire*, pp. 101-102.

home. It is known that Tzetzes worked as a γραμματικός, and one gathers from his writings that in Constantinople there was a large number of private teachers who were quite impoverished because of the stiff competition and the uncertainty of payment and appointments⁴⁷: being a teacher and an intellectual would no longer guarantee wealth and respect, but rather became a profession that was open to the competition of crafts and trade, by then dominating in society, and that envied the affluence, which the latter provided. Since the social situation was such, it appears that the issue of the poor starving schoolteacher and man of letters, which is present in Tzetzes, in the satires of Ptochoprodromos and also in the poems of Theodore, is actually more than a literary *topos*. Certainly Tzetzes and Prodromos might exaggerate the seriousness of their situation to obtain higher recompenses, and perhaps to give an ironic flair to their writings; suffice it to think of the *Ptochoprodromica*; nonetheless, it seems that at the core of their complaints was a genuine social upheaval that altered the structure of Byzantine society, and worsened the condition of those who, like Prodromos and Tzetzes, had to make a living on court appointments and student's fees⁴⁸.

In conjunction with the emergence of the starving poet in literature, and rather unexpectedly, but perhaps as a consequence of these social changes, it is possible to note that throughout the twelfth century authors displayed a stronger sense of the self and of their personal identity, and Prodromos reveals himself as a paradigm of this phenomenon. Since authors tended to portray themselves as destitute and needy, one would expect them to appear in their text only to plead for help and money, but facts are actually quite different. Authors began to gain greater prominence, and to emerge time and again in their texts with the sole purpose of presenting themselves and expressing their views: the voice of the poet, as we have seen, is detectable not only in petitions for money, but also in imperial encomia, where it responds to this novel wish for self-promotion. However, a most striking aspect of the author's presence in the text, as seen in the case of Prodromos, is the way he relates to the ruler: for the poet does not appear just as a humble servant in

⁴⁷ P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel*, pp. 328-329; M. J. KYRIAKIS, *Of professors and disciples in twelfth century Byzantium*, *Byzantion* 43 (1973), pp. 108-119.

⁴⁸ P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire*, pp. 340-342; see also I. Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, ed. P. A. M. LEONE, Leipzig 1972, esp. 75, 80, 82 where he claims to earn his living only by writing and teaching, and to be too poor to maintain two slaves; M. J. JEFFREYS, *The nature and origins of the political verse*, *DOP* 28 (1974), pp. 141-195, especially pp. 154-155.

need; often he seems to place himself on the same level as the emperor, and to address him as an equal by resorting to profound irony, which diminishes significantly the regality of the ruler and affects his Christ-like image.

It is apparent that the way poets related to the ruler and represented themselves has changed during the twelfth century. If one wonders about the reasons for this phenomenon, the most plausible answer is to be sought in the decreasing consideration authors enjoyed at the time; one could say that this longing for self-promotion in authors such as Tzetzes and Theodore is directly proportional to their loss of relevance: venting their opinions, appearing in texts and, even, being ironic toward the emperor seems the only opportunity to claim and to reinforce their fading significance.

Conclusions

It is now time to draw some conclusions. As we have seen in the previous pages, Prodromos voices his thoughts and opinions throughout his poems and modifies them according to the situation and his interlocutors. When Theodore celebrates the emperor, he depicts himself as the imperial messenger and the court poet in charge of announcing the glory of the ruler; possibly because he has to maintain the focus of the poem on the emperor – absolute ruler and hero – he never gives way to excessive despair and complaints, rather he disguises his requests behind a curtain of irony, and mixes them with the praises of the emperor.

A deeper and wider personal imprint appears instead in the poems dedicated to other members of the imperial family, or to several of his patrons; on these occasions, pleas for help and demands for money become more explicit and very frequent, as if the more achievable status of his addressees allowed Prodromos to be bolder and more open about his needs and wishes. When Theodore describes how battered he feels because of his illness, or when he gives voice to his profound disappointment because he has not achieved enough in spite of his efforts, one can perceive the intensity and the truthfulness of the feelings behind the lofty language of his verses, and can also notice the repercussions of the changes that occurred in twelfth century with regard to the status of writers and poets, and that stirred in intellectuals a deeper desire for involvement and recognition in their works.

Therefore we ought to wonder whether the writer's need for a place in the foreground is a consequence of the changes that occurred in the Byzantine social structure: as Prodomos came from a modest background, but lived in a society that had the cult of nobility, that no longer kept the intellectual in the highest consideration, and where connections to the powerful were the most important element to improve one's career, it seems plausible that the literati felt disregarded. Consequently they felt the need to promote themselves and their work, and to claim greater significance within the social order, significance that they felt ought to be attributed to them on the basis of their culture and their value, and not on the basis of nobility of blood.

As a result of the above-mentioned adjustments, it emerges quite clearly that social changes influenced the way men of letters perceived themselves in society and were perceived by it in return, so that they felt it necessary to display their condition, their feelings and their talents in order to claim back their former place within society. Prodomos is not only the herald of the ruler, but he is also his own herald in a world that no longer fully appreciates its intellectuals.