

Antony and Pythagoras: A Reappraisal of the Appropriation of Classical Biography in

Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*

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The question concerning the existence of a genre biography in antiquity as well as the origins, development and characteristics of ancient biographical tradition has generated a vast amount of literature but little consensus.¹ The only agreement seems to be that the attempt by Friedrich Leo, the pioneer of classical biographical study, to systematize biographical writings as "Suetonian" and "Plutarchian" on the basis of structure and purpose, though previously widely accepted, has broken down.² The texts of late antiquity are simply too complex to fit into such neat classification, any borders drawn up are eventually transgressed. The origins of biographical writing are, moreover, as unclear as the relations of biography to panegyrics and historiography. Texts that are defined by some scholars as biographies are regarded by others as panegyrics. A recent study of biography and panegyrics in late antiquity has given up altogether the idea of drawing a sharp line between panegyrics and biography. It claims that we must instead deal with two overlapping sets of texts mainly differing in the presupposed setting, panegyrics being, or claiming to be, speeches, biographies claiming to be texts.³ But since panegyrics were written down and the art developed as a literary genre, they became independent of the oral presentation, and thus the distinction is fairly a theoretical one.

Looking at the situation in late antiquity, Patricia Cox, after a review of the history of research, concludes by stating that it is impossible to define a genre of classical biography, simply because no such genre ever existed. According to her, any attempt to analyse ancient biographies according to their structure ends up with creating a separate genre for each biography.⁴ In contrast to panegyrics, from which biographical writings evolved, there is no discussion on the writing of biographies in ancient handbooks, and there were thus no set of rules to follow. Therefore, each work has to be seen in its own right and on the basis of its specific setting and aim.

¹ See M. van Uffemphe, *Biographie II (spirituelle)*, in: R.A.C. Suppl. 1 (2001), 1088-1364; R.A. Burridge, *Biography*, in: S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C. - 400 A.D.*, Leiden 1997, 371-391.

² F. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form*, Leipzig 1901.

³ T. Hägg / P. Rousseau, *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 2000, 1.

⁴ P. Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity. A Quest for the Holy Man*, Berkeley 1983, 54f.

But even if there is no common rhetorical disposition in classical biography, there is a certain unity in terms of ideals and certain common elements. Classical vitae are characterized by their focus on the ideals and virtues presented by the story, rather than the personae whom are primarily depicted as embodying these ideals. According to Cox, there is thus no attempt to present any development in character or to give an accurate historical presentation. It is the use of anecdotes, maxims and discourses to define and elaborate on the virtues and vices that is important, as well as references to sources that underline credibility. There also seems to be a general tendency in biographical writings to use a kind of bipartite structure where the essential chronological outline is followed by a usually larger section that concentrates on demonstrating the character of the hero. In late antiquity, it is the author's various attempts to prove that the hero is godlike or even divine that, according to Cox, distinguishes it from classical accounts.⁵

As a result of the growing realization during the last century that the search for the classical vita is a rather futile one, earlier attempts to identify the *Vita Antonii*⁶ as belonging to and sharing the characteristics of a genre of biography have neither been favourably received nor continued. In the first attempt at a major comparison between the *Vita Antonii* and classical biographies, Hans Mertel tried on the basis of the work of Leo to prove that the *Vita Antonii* was a classical vita written in a Peripatetic-Plutarchian form.⁷ His analysis was, however, quickly refuted in 1912 by Karl Holl who maintained that the *Vita Antonii* represented the beginning of a new genre, Christian hagiography. But this was to be understood on the basis of previous descriptions of semi-divine holy men and the understanding of the Gnostic represented by, among others, Clement of Alexandria.⁸ Simultaneously, Richard Reitzenstein made the hitherto most thorough attempt at placing the *Vita Antonii* in a classical framework. Through the discovery of a close parallel between the description of Antony in chapter 14 of the *Vita*, and a description of Pythagoras found both in Porphyry and Iamblichus, Reitzenstein concluded that the author had utilized a classical biographical account of Pythagoras for part of his work. However, strongly biased by his favourite ideas concerning aretalogies and "Hellenistische Wundererzählungen", Reitzenstein made little use of his discovery and concluded that the main part of the *Vita* was a composite of independent stories about miracles, heroic deeds and speeches, and that the work was consequently of rather poor literary quality.⁹

⁵ Cox, 1983, 19f.

⁶ *Vita Antonii*, G.M.J. Bartelink (ed.), SC 400, Paris 1994.

⁷ H. Mertel, *Die biographische Form der griechischen Heiligenleben*, München 1909.

⁸ K. Holl, *Die schriftstellerische Form des griechischen Heiligenlebens*, in: NJKA 29 (1912), 406-427.

⁹ R. Reitzenstein, *Des Athanasius Werk über das Leben des Antonius. Ein philologischer Beitrag zur Geschichte des Mönchtums*, Heidelberg 1914.

Although often quoted, Reitzenstein's proof that the author of the *Vita* had used a classical biographical text was thus never really discussed and appropriated. Instead, other scholars, foremost Priessnig, List and Cavallin, continued in the tradition of Mertel and Holl and discussed how the *Vita* as a literary work fit into classical literature, either as a biography of the Plutarchian type, or as a classical panegyric, however, destroyed by insertions.¹⁰ The problem to be solved was mainly a question of which category the *Vita Antonii* was to be put in. It was obvious that Athanasius had used a classical model, but little was done to analyse the specific purpose for his choice or to determine the purpose of his alterations. As a minor attempt in this direction, List suggested that the *Vita Antonii* was written as a reply to Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*. This has not been well received in spite of the additional suggestions by Priessnig.¹¹

A summary and a critical analysis of the numerous studies of the structure and literary character of the *Vita Antonii* against the background of classical models was published in the first part of the last century by Bartelink, first in an article in 1971, and then in his edition of the Greek text of the *Vita Antonii*.¹² Bartelink rejects the analysis of the *Vita* by Mertel, later followed by Priessnig, and based on the classifications of Friedrich Leo. Their critical views on the work are, according to him, due to a strict adherence to the model, which leads to a misinterpretation of the entire text. The detailed analysis of the text by Richard Reitzenstein, which focuses on the diverse elements, finds more favour with Bartelink. He agrees with Reitzenstein that there are numerous examples of ideas and vocabulary in the *Vita* that have a Neopythagorean background. He rejects the idea, however, that the *Vita*, as such, is an uncritical collection of stories that uses the *Life of Pythagoras* as an initial framework. Instead, Bartelink views the use of classical ideas as a conscious attempt by the author to show that Antony was superior to the pagan heroes. Bartelink also rejects List and Cavallin's different approach to the *Vita*, that it should be an example of a classical encomium. According to Bartelink, this is not able to make sense of the structure of the *Vita* and especially the discourses in it.

The only previous scholar who finds favour with Bartelink is Karl Holl, who discussed the *Vita Antonii* in several contributions. On the one hand, Holl sees the *Vita* as modelled upon a tradition represented by the biographies on Pythagoras and the *Life of Apollonius*, but on the other hand, as decisively stamped by a Christian ideal, namely the stepwise ascent to heaven through ascetic struggle. Agreeing with

¹⁰ A. Priessnig, *Die biographische Formen der griechischen Heiligenlegenden in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, München 1924; J. List, *Das Antoniusleben des heiligen Athanasius des Großen. Eine literarhistorische Studie zu den Anfängen der byzantinischen Hagiographie*, Athen 1930; S. Cavallin, *Literarhistorische und textkritische Studien zur Vita S. Caesarii Arelatensis*, Lund 1934.

¹¹ A. Priessnig, *Die biographische Form der Plotinvita des Porphyrios und des Antoniuslebens des Athanasius*, in: ByZ 64 (1971), 1-5.

¹² G.J.M. Bartelink, *Die literarische Gattung der Vita Antonii*, in: VigChr 36 (1982), 36-62.

this, Bartelink goes one step further and regards the *Vita Antonii* as primarily defined by biblical stories and ideas. The overwhelming use of biblical quotations not only christianises the ideas presented, but also, according to him, clearly shows that the inspiration comes mainly from the Bible.

It is striking to see that most of the scholars who have studied the *Vita* against the background of classical literature have been searching in the text for examples of an underlying influence of classical or biblical ideas or models. Focus has been on genre and on parallels with other texts, either in the overall structure, in specific ideas or in specific passages. The amount of parallels found has signalled the extent of classical influence, or, according to Bartelink, the basic biblical orientation of the work because of the sheer amount of biblical quotations. No major attempt has been made at a literary analysis of the *Vita* itself in its own right, and no one seems to have reflected carefully on the author's purpose for utilizing classical or other models in the *Vita Antonii*. Thus the diverse examples of affinities and parallels to the classical tradition lack a context in which they are to be interpreted. It is as though it is taken for granted that the author himself, supposedly Athanasius, had no clear idea for his work, or, as in the case of Reitzenstein, that he was simply unable to produce a coherent literary work. According to my view, any attempt at discussing the *Vita Antonii* as an example of a Christian appropriation of classical biography must start with a clear idea of what the central argument of the text is based on an analysis of its purpose, *ὑπόθεσις*, and aim, *σκοπός*, as it is expressed through the themes and concepts highlighted by the text itself. I will thus begin with a brief attempt at such an analysis and afterwards return to the question concerning the significance of Reitzenstein's discovery of the Pythagorean parallels.

The Life of Antony

The *Vita* begins, in accordance with classical rhetorical rules, with a prologue praising the addressees and referring to their request for his writing, praising its subject, excusing himself for the inadequacy of his text, and giving an account of his sources. In an epilogue, the author returns to the question of addressees and his purpose for writing. The *Vita* itself is traditionally divided into two main parts, the first focusing on Antony's gradual retreat, his ascetic struggle and his ascetic teaching; the second on his relations with the outer world. I will draw the line between the two parts after chapter 44. This differs from the traditional opinion expressed first by Reitzenstein and later by Bartelink in his edition. Both of these scholars regard chapter 48 as the end of the first part and the retreat into the inner desert in chapter 49 as the beginning of the second. However, as will be shown below, there is a strong inner connection between chapters 45-48 and 49-53.

The first part of the *Vita* is divided into two sections and is introduced by a brief description of Antony's childhood, and an account of his ascetic calling and basic

ascetic instruction (chapters 1-4). The first section (chapters 5-15) tells the story about his ascetic struggle in three consecutive scenes or places of retreat, traditionally interpreted as stages in a development: the village house, the tomb and the deserted well. It ends with the famous description of Antony's appearance when leaving the deserted well after twenty years of seclusion and with a short concluding chapter on the establishment of monastic life (chapter 15). The second section (chapters 16-43) consists of Antony's long sermon on ascetic life. The sermon is similarly divided into three sections. The first section (chapters 16-21) describes self-control and virtue as natural and positive and as necessary if one is to stand before God. The second section (chapters 22-38) describes the character of demonic attacks and the methods to defeat them. In the third section (chapters 39-43), Antony retells some of his own experiences. This section also concludes with a short chapter on monastic life. It is described as a pastoral paradise with tents of heavenly choirs – a land of piety and righteousness (chapter 44).

The second part of the *Vita* has two major sections, the first dealing with Antony's victories over the evil powers (chapters 45-66), the second with his victories over his opponents (chapters 67-88). The first section describes Antony's rejection of his own body: his reluctance to eat in company with his disciples, his unsuccessful exposure of his body in Alexandria at the time of persecution, his coarse clothing and his unwillingness to wash himself. This is summed up in a story about how his separateness from the world is a precondition for his ministry to the world, e.g. the sick are healed while sleeping outside his cell while he is undisturbed behind his locked door. It describes how Antony becomes troubled by the presence of so many people that he decides to escape into the inner desert. Here he lives in harmony with nature, even with the beasts. He is not annoyed by anyone, nor is he a burden to anyone else. Securely detached from the world, he is ready to encounter it (chapters 49-53).

We are then presented with three sets of stories about his supernatural gifts, miracles and visions. It is through these that Antony relates to his disciples and to people in need. It is during his time of inner retreat that Antony is first sought by his disciples (chapters 54-56). During their march through the desert, he, like Moses in Exodus, saves the lives of his followers by making water gush forth from the arid ground. His subsequent sermon and a short chapter about his acts both focus on what is hidden inside man, on the importance of self-knowledge and detachment. In a second series of chapters (chapters 57-64), we are then told how Antony heals numerous people. These stories are bound together by the recurrent refrain that it was not Antony who did the miracles, but the Lord. This is made visibly manifest by the fact that Antony always heals from a distance, sending everyone home to be healed there. The third group consists of two visions Antony has in which he witnesses the passing of souls and the demons that try to prevent their flight to

heaven (chapters 65-66). Here again, the author emphasizes the inability of the demons to grasp and pin down the righteous.

The section dealing with his encounter with the world (chapters 67-88) is divided into three sets of stories, each dealing with different groups of opponents. The first are the opponents of the Church, the heretics, (chapters 67-71); the second, the pagan philosophers (chapters 72-80); and the third, the officials of the empire (chapters 81-86). In all these instances, Antony's opponents are described as belonging to the city, to a world characterized as confused and liable to change. In all three stories, Antony's superiority is seen to lie in his simplicity, in the purity of the original and thus divine mind in contrast to the talk of the heretics, the arguments of the philosophers, the greatness of the imperial letters (in contrast to his "pretended" illiteracy), and to the pretentious but shallow show of power by governors and judges. To show the real power behind Antony, each of the three encounters concludes with Antony performing a miracle. At the end of the third set of stories, his service to all is summed up and the secret behind his victories is explained: It lies in his ability to discern the spirits (chapters 87-88). The second part of the *Vita* concludes with the story of Antony's death. This appears almost as an appendix (chapters 89-93).

PROLOG

PART I ANTONY'S DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHING (1-44)

Childhood, calling and ascetic education (1-4)

Ascetic struggle (5-14)

The village house (5-7)

The tomb (8-10)

The deserted well (11-14)

Conclusion (15)

The sermon (16-43)

Preconditions for ascetic life (16-21)

Character of the demons (22-38)

Personal experiences (39-43)

Conclusion (44)

PART II ANTONY AND THE WORLD (45-93)

Transition (45)

Antony's victories over the evil powers

Martyrdom (46-48)

Conquering nature (49-54)

His teaching (55-56)

Healing the afflicted (57-64)

The ascent of the souls (65-66)

Antony's victories over his opponents (67-88)

Description of Antony (67)

The heretics (67-71)

The philosophers (72-80)

The rulers (81-86)

Description of Antony (87-88)

Antony's death (89-92)

Description of Antony (93)

EPILOG (94)

If we compare the disposition of the material in the *Vita* with a number of classical biographical texts, we can detect a similarity to several of them in the fact that there is first a kind of chronological principle leading up to the summit of the career of the hero, in Antony's case, his retreat into the inner desert in chapter 49, followed by a section that is more thematic. But this is a rather superficial relation and perhaps only signals what is almost self-evident, that an ancient biographer had to deal with chronology, but that his focus was primarily on ideals demonstrated in the life of the mature subject of the story. As has been indicated above, it is, moreover, not the division between a chronological and a thematic section that is the most significant aspect of the *Vita Antonii*. In order to see how the *Vita* can be considered as an appropriation of classical biographical tradition, it is, according to my view, essential to go beneath the level of external structure and look at the ideals and arguments that internally govern the text. As mentioned above, classical biography is characterized by a focus on ideals, on the virtues, standards and ideas embodied in the persons depicted. We have to ask ourselves if this is true also for Antony, and if so, which ideals the text transmits, and how they are construed in relation to contemporary pagan constructions.

The Ideals

Antony as unaffected

In the opening lines of the *Vita*, the author signals the natural and inherent holiness of Antony right from the beginning. Antony is unaffected, unformed, ἀνέκτοτος, and without need of formation (chapter 1). This basic ideal and description of Antony reoccurs throughout the *Vita*. Antony is unaffected, he remains the same. But his inaccessibility and exposure to demonic assault is increased. When he emerges from his twenty years of seclusion, he is depicted as the perfect natural human being. His body and soul are described as totally unaffected by his twenty years of solitude,

spiritual combat and ascetic endeavours.¹³ In a commentary on Antony's life in the final passage that follow the description of his death, this same emphasis is placed on his preservation of the natural condition.¹⁴

Antony's long sermon (chapters 16-43), which he preaches after his initiation, also revolves around this theme: Virtue is natural and simple. Everything necessary and beneficial is inherent in man. Everything external is a threat to inner unity, equilibrium and tranquillity. The Greeks travel to obtain wisdom, but the "kingdom of heaven" is within oneself. Asceticism does not add anything to man, its purpose is not growth and development, but protection of stability. Ascetic formation prevents the ascetic from change, from becoming easily moved by the waves of the sea. The fleeting nature of worldly gain, the uncertainty of our lives, the transitory character of pleasure, are contrasted with the preservation of inner peace and calm, and remaining unaffected by external affairs. The multiplicity, fickleness and disorder of the demons are contrasted to their own original goodness and with the tranquillity of the angels. Final authority and judgement lie within man himself, within simplicity and single-mindedness, that which is not disturbed or distracted. The sermon thus ends by pointing to detachment, ἀπαξία, as the sign of perfection (chapter 43).

Even in the description of Antony's debate with the philosophers (chapters 72-80), Antony is able to defeat them precisely because as an ἰδιώτης, a simple-minded, he has a sound, undisturbed mind, and thus does not need any instruction or arguments, which are secondary to the intellect itself anyway. Again, as in the sermon, emphasis is on what is inherent and unaffected. Echoing chapter 1, Antony is shrewd and wise in spite of being unlettered. Echoing chapter 14, he is graceful and civilized in spite of his belonging to the uncultivated wilderness. In his final reply to the pagan philosophers, Antony ridicules their ideas concerning the various transformations of God, the deception and fall of the soul, and the idea of the changeableness of the mind, and contrasts this with the immutability of the Word of God and the stability of the mind. Faith is original and independent, the dialectics of the philosophers, however, is dependent on achieved skill.

Antony's well-balanced and harmonious character is, in addition to the vivid description in connection with his emergence from the deserted well, described in several shorter passages at the conclusion of specific sections of the text. The two most important are found in chapter 56, located after the passage that describes how Antony settles in the inner mountain and before the beginning his healing activity. He is described here not only as compassionate, but also as maintaining equilibrium,

neither boasting when listened to by God, nor murmuring when unheard. In chapter 67, after the account of his miracles and visions, Antony is again described in words echoing chapter 1 and 14. He is said to have been not only patient and humble, but also possessing a strong and unusual radiance coming from the stability of his character and the purity of his mind. Since his soul was free from disturbances, ἀθόρυβος, his outward appearance was calm, ἀταράχως, echoing the last passage of the sermon. Antony was therefore easily recognized, never upset, his soul being calm; never sad, his mind being joyful.

The emphasis on Antony as being untroubled is also manifested in the many references to the disorder and trouble that characterize the world and evil. The demons are unruly, noisy and frightening; they threaten and shake dwelling places, but achieve nothing. Most significant, however, is their fondness for constant change, their transformation into beasts as well as angels, their total lack of order and stability.¹⁵ In the descriptions of the possessed, as well as of heretics and the officials, disorder is, moreover, characteristic. Life in the inner desert is characterized by harmonious relations in contrast to the disturbed world and its unruly nature. Antony even establishes relations with wild and frightening animals (chapters 50-51).

Antony as separated from the world

While the first basic argument of the text has to do with Antony's character, his ἦθος, the second has to do with his place and circumstances, his τόπος. Also here there is a clear connection between the first chapter and the last, Antony's beginning and end. In the first chapter, Antony stays alone at home, detached from ordinary life. After the death of his parents and upon hearing the gospel, he gets rid of his possessions and leaves his only relative. From now on, his contacts are with his teachers and disciples, and later with his followers and opponents. In the last chapters, Antony leaves the outer monastery like "a man who leaves a foreign city and returns to his own". He instructs his two attendants not to tell anyone where he is buried, and dies secluded from the world, hidden on a mountain.

The central idea throughout the *Vita* is Antony's seclusion and detachment from the world. It is stated repeatedly that he has been left alone, that he has isolated himself, and that he persists in secluding himself. He is left alone, μόνος, after the death of his parents. After hearing the gospel, he renounces all his possessions. According to the text, this is not done out of literal obedience to a command but out of the desire that nothing should disturb him, that he should truly be alone.¹⁶ He then retreats further and further away from society. In the second part, it is often stated that he returns to his own place, to solitude. His detachment is, moreover, not

¹³ "He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature" (v. Anton. 14).

¹⁴ "He possessed eyes undimmed and sound, and he saw clearly. He lost none of his teeth – they simply had been worn to the gums because of the old man's great age. He also retained health in his feet and hands, and generally he seemed brighter and of more energetic strength than those who make use of baths and a variety of foods and clothing" (v. Anton. 93).

¹⁵ See especially chapter 9 and the description in chapters 22-30.

¹⁶ v. Anton. 2. Note the expression "so that they would not disturb him".

only from society, but also from the Church. In chapter 1, his church attendance, forcing him to leave his home, is explained by his obedience to his parents and when visiting the church after their death, he leaves immediately when hearing the word. His asceticism has nothing to do with the community. He is later carried unconscious to the village church, but as soon as he wakes up, he leaves secretly. He visits Alexandria twice, but remains untouched by the persecutions there as well as the Arian conflict. He delivers his message and returns happily to his own cell. He acknowledges the honour of the clergy when they visit him, but he never becomes involved with them.

Antony's three places of retreat, the house, the tomb and the well are traditionally interpreted as stages of a progress in Antony's life, the development of ever-increasing seclusion from the world. A closer look at the text does not support this. Except for the geographical location and the specific characterization of Antony's struggle, they are each quite similar. They are three scenes for the same basic idea: the necessity of total renunciation in order to achieve eternal life, of total separation in order to achieve total presence. In the first scene, the emphasis is on the renunciation of material goods and bodily pleasures in order to stand pure before God (chapters 3-7). In the second scene, where Antony hides in a tomb, he is depicted as dying in order to truly be alive. Antony is almost dead. He is revived in the church but is then severely wounded again. Suddenly, a beam of light appears, and Antony not only feels greater physical strength than before, he is also promised that his name will be known everywhere (chapters 8-10). The third scene shows us Antony entering a deserted place, an abandoned fortress, in order to establish a new civilization. He leaves the world behind, symbolized by the silver and gold lying on his way, and descends into the underworld and dwells among reptiles. When he comes forth "as from a shrine", he is filled with the spirit of God. Many people are inspired by his teaching and choose to embrace the solitary life. The desert becomes colonized by his many followers (chapters 11-14). In all three depictions, the author's emphasis is put on Antony's solitude. Each place is described as a kind of hiding-place, and they become increasingly remote and inaccessible. He lives first in *isolation*, in *his own place outside* the village.¹⁷ He then enters a *tomb*, a place outside the world of the living, where he is locked up and *alone* inside.¹⁸ He finally makes his *home* in a fortified well in the wilderness, half-way to Hades, and barricades the entrance. He is *alone, hidden*, as within a *shrine*.¹⁹ In all three places, Antony experiences the onslaught of the demons attempting to force him out of his shrine. All three accounts are summed up with biblical quotations that emphasize the

support given to him by God and conclude with descriptions of Antony and his teaching.²⁰

An important aspect of this focus on isolation and detachment is the paradox that although Antony's entire life and character are marked by detachment and solitude, his ministry reaches all. In the summary of the second part describing his relations with the world (chapters 87-88), Antony is said to have helped everyone, without distinction. No one came to him without his life being changed, and countless people were helped by him. Moreover, Antony had such a gift of discernment that he was able to provide each one who came to him with the appropriate counsel. After the account of his death, the last chapter summarizes the paradoxes of his life, not only that he was healthy and strong in spite of his long ascetic life, but also that he who had hidden in a mountain in the inner desert was known throughout the world. Concealed in a mountain in the desert, he is spoken about in Spain, Gaul, Rome and Africa (chapter 93). Antony serves all and is known to all not by making himself available or by travelling or by disseminating his writings. Even when working miracles, Antony seems detached, even non-present. Healing is given on account of faith. Antony does not serve the people through any acts or involvement with them. It is not his presence that is essential; it is rather the story about him, the story of total detachment. It is detachment, not involvement, which makes it possible for man to transcend the transitory character of time and space. It is not Antony who is attracted to the world, but the world that is attracted to him. As it is stated in the epilogue, it is those who conceal themselves who are made known (chapter 94).

Anthony and Pythagoras

Following this analysis of the structure and ideals of the *Vita*, we will now return to its relation to classical biography. The obvious point of departure is the parallels between chapter 14 of the *Vita* and a lost life of Pythagoras discovered by Reitzenstein and unanimously accepted by subsequent scholarship. But while Bartelink and others argue that Athanasius only borrowed some lines to show that Antony superseded even the heroes of the pagans, a fresh analysis of Reitzenstein's contribution from 1912 actually reveals more far-reaching contact between the *Vita Antonii* and the various Lives of Pythagoras than later research has been willing to admit, or even mention. The reasons behind this lack of reception of Reitzenstein's work are probably twofold. Firstly, the emphasis on a specifically Christian background for the early monastic tradition in general, and for the ideals presented in the *Vita* in particular, has prompted a complete refusal to see the connections between Neopythagorean ideals and the *Vita* proposed by Reitzenstein. Secondly, many scholars have reacted to Reitzenstein's attempts to view aretalogies as the

¹⁷ V. Anton. 3.

¹⁸ V. Anton. 8.

¹⁹ V. Anton. 12.

²⁰ V. Anton. 7, v. Anton. 9-10, v. Anton. 13-14.

general background of hagiography, and this has caused them to question his overall interpretation of early Christian biographical writings.

According to Reitzenstein, the discovery that the description of Antony emerging from his twenty years of seclusion corresponded to a passage from the *Life of Pythagoras* was no evidence that the *Vita* had simply borrowed a rhetorically well structured passage or an impressive image. It was rather a sign of something much more significant. The rather peculiar description of how the people who force Antony out of his retreat to imitate his asceticism are immediately changed into people in need of healing and exorcism, who are then encouraged to become monks, was regarded by Reitzenstein as a sign that the text was actually being composed on the basis of a variety of sources and ideas. In the search for further parallels between the *Vita Antonii* and the Pythagorean tradition, Reitzenstein discovered a number of less evident parallels. These led him to the assumption that the entire first part of the *Vita* is heavily influenced by the *Life of Pythagoras*, and that some of the basic ideals presented in the text have their background in the Greek philosophical tradition.²¹ As for the second part of the *Vita*, Reitzenstein divides it into sections: some that are the complete work of Athanasius himself, and others that are based on collections of stories about his miracles, the so called aretalogies. His analysis of this, however, is not of importance to our present study.

The focus of Reitzenstein's analysis of the relation between the *Vita* and the Pythagorean lives was, quite naturally, upon terminology and direct literary dependence. His conclusion, based on the assumption that Athanasius simply borrowed from the *Life of Pythagoras*, lacks any real substance. The reception of the classical text, i.e. the *Life of Pythagoras*, was, according to Reitzenstein, simply an example of the Christian author's inability to shape his own text. In contrast, I would like to suggest that a comparison between the Pythagorean tradition and the *Vita Antonii* reveals a much more fundamental relation and a more conscious appropriation than suggested by Reitzenstein.

Lets us first have a look at the general outline of the depictions of Antony's and Pythagoras' lives. For Pythagoras, I will be utilizing here the biographical outline in Iamblichus' detailed text in the first part of his work on the Pythagorean life. As Reitzenstein has shown, Iamblichus is dependent in this particular work on an earlier text which was also used by Porphyry in his biographical sketch. In spite of the fact that the literary parallel in chapter 14 of the *Vita* is with Porphyry's text, I will be using Iamblichus' text for the simple reason that Iamblichus provides us with much more information and thus a better opportunity to observe the general similarities between the biographical traditions.²²

According to Iamblichus, Pythagoras was, as a child, given a manifold and rich education. As we know, Athanasius makes the opposite statement in regards to Antony.²³ But except for this significant difference, to which I will return, their stories are strikingly parallel. Although Antony does not study, like Pythagoras he is said to have listened attentively and cared little for food.²⁴ Like Antony, Pythagoras looses his father while still a youth.²⁵ Like Antony, he is revered by the people on account of an almost divine appearance he had by nature.²⁶ Both Antony and Pythagoras struggle through piety, studies and ascetic practise, to achieve stability of soul and bodily restraint, and thus the kind of peace of mind that is neither disturbed by anger, nor laughter, and is characterized by complete tranquillity.²⁷ Because of pressure from admirers, Pythagoras flees at the age of eighteen, the same age that Antony also renounces of all his belongings. Like Antony, Pythagoras searches out all the masters of wisdom, learning from each and combining within himself all knowledge.²⁸ Antony, like Pythagoras, is loved by all.²⁹ As is the case when Antony goes into the desert, Pythagoras goes alone to Egypt. Here he is initiated into the mysteries and comes down from the mountain in a state of complete unaffectedness.³⁰ In spite of ascetic practice, his body is stronger than ever before, the same statement made about Antony after his fight with the demons.³¹ Pythagoras remains 22 years in the Egyptian shrines. Antony is satisfied with 20 years in his desert shrine.³² After his Egyptian education, Pythagoras travels all over the world to gain even more knowledge, whereas Antony stays where he is and ridicules those who travel to gain wisdom.³³ Like Pythagoras, Antony dwells alone in a cave and like Pythagoras, he gathers disciples and teaches them.³⁴ Like Pythagoras, he constantly must flee from his admirers and the tasks they want him to perform.³⁵ Both Pythagoras' and Antony's disciples establish a common life, κοινὸν βίον, and are given regulations for this by their masters.³⁶ As is the case with Antony, we are given

²³ VP. 9, v. Anton. 1.

²⁴ V. Anton. 1.

²⁵ VP. 10, v. Anton. 2.

²⁶ VP. 10, v. Anton. 4.

²⁷ VP. 10, v. Anton. 3.

²⁸ VP. 11, v. Anton. 3-4.

²⁹ VP. 12, v. Anton. 4.

³⁰ VP. 12-18, v. Anton. 11-14.

³¹ VP. 13, 17, v. Anton. 10.

³² VP. 19, v. Anton. 14.

³³ VP. 19, v. Anton. 20.

³⁴ VP. 27, v. Anton. 49f.

³⁵ VP. 28, v. Anton. 49.

³⁶ VP. 28-30, v. Anton. 44.

²¹ Reitzenstein, 1914, 30-36.

²² For Iamblichus see M. Albrect / J. Dillon / M. George / M. Lurje / D.S. du Toit, *Jamblich, De vita Pythagorica. Legende - Lehre - Lebensgestaltung*, Darmstadt 2002.

accounts of miracles performed by Pythagoras, which includes power over wild animals, and we are also provided with his speeches.³⁷

Comparisons between the Life of Antony and the Lives of Pythagoras

<i>De vita Pythagorica</i> (Iamblichus)	<i>Vita Antonii</i>
Rich and manifold education (9)	Refusal to go to school (1)
Pythagoras father dies (10)	Antony's parents die (2)
Pythagoras is revered as "child of God" (10)	Antony is revered as "friend of God" (4)
Pythagoras struggles through piety, studies and asceticism to gain stability of his soul (10)	Antony searches for freedom from care by hard work, prayer and studies (3)
Pythagoras flees from the concerns of the world at the age of 18 (11)	Antony renounces his possessions at the age of 18 (2)
Pythagoras searches out all the great masters and unites their wisdom within himself (11)	Antony searches out the teachers and unites all their skills within himself (3)
Pythagoras is loved by all (12)	Antony is loved by all (4)
Pythagoras leaves his teachers and goes alone to Egypt (12)	Antony leaves his teachers and goes alone into the desert (11)
Pythagoras travels undisturbed and undeterred (15-16)	Antony goes into the desert undisturbed by the demons (11)
Pythagoras is initiated in all the shrines of Egypt (18)	Antony is initiated in his shrine in the desert (14)
Pythagoras stays 22 years in the shrines of Egypt (19)	Antony stays 20 years in his shrine (14)
Pythagoras then travels to all countries (19)	Antony ridicules those who travel to gain wisdom (20)
Pythagoras settles in a cave outside the city (27)	Antony settles in a cave in the desert (15)
Pythagoras is asked for by everyone and has to flee because of his popularity (28)	Antony has to flee his admirers (13)
The people who come to Pythagoras settle down in a communal "monastic" life (<i>koinobion</i>) and built a city governed by his rules (28-30)	The people who come to Antony establishes monasteries in the desert and make the desert into a city governed by his teaching (15)

³⁷ VP. 35-36, 60, v. Anton. 50-54.

This similarity between the characterizations of the lives of holy men thus goes deeper than the question of phrase borrowing. Although it is evident that Athanasius used the specific life of Pythagoras as a basis for some passages, there are good reasons to believe that he, in more general terms, followed an established narrative tradition that emerged in the philosophical schools of the third and fourth centuries AD regarding the lives of holy men, and which is exhibited in Iamblichus' *De Vita Pythagorica*. It is not merely a question of borrowing passages and images, but an entire understanding of what belongs to the development of a holy man. In Iamblichus' text about Pythagoras, we find precisely the same ideals and practises as in the *Vita Antonii*: detachment, an appearance that is pure, undefiled and in accordance with nature, the collection of the wisdom from the experienced, initiation into secret mysteries, the subsequent teaching of disciples and the constituting of communities, and, of course, miracles. Behind this lies neither an embarrassment on the part of the "naked" Christian author, who is forced to accept borrowed clothes, nor the simple fact that in a common culture, expressions tend to be similar. It is rather a far more conscious alignment with what is accepted and thus effective, i.e. the conscious reuse of pagan patterns in order to present a Christian alternative. In a sense, the hero, Pythagoras, is brought down by his own image.

It is therefore not the parallels between the pagan and the Christian text, between the *De Vita Pythagorica* and the *Vita Antonii*, that are primarily significant, it is rather their differences, or even more pointedly, their direct contradictions. It is in Athanasius' alterations, and how he introduces other perspectives, that we get a clue of how to interpret the *Vita Antonii*. It is in the differences and contradictions that we can trace a specific Christian adaptation and appropriation of, or perhaps we should say contribution to, the classical biographical heritage. Perhaps the first striking difference we find when comparing the two texts is the much more radical and antagonistic character of the *Vita Antonii*. Antony's renunciation and his ascetic practice as well as his seclusion are depicted in much stronger terms than Pythagoras'. Antony is at war with heavenly powers while Pythagoras is gathering all knowledge and wisdom and transmitting it to his disciples. This difference is certainly linked to Antony's historical existence as a desert monk. But from what we know of desert monasticism in general, apart from the *Vita*, and of Antony in particular through his letters, the difference between a Neopythagorean philosopher and Antony was probably not that great. The radicalisation of the image and the simplification of the struggle seem rather to be part of a propagandistic strategy to popularise this image and to outdo competing images.³⁸ But it does not really affect the ideals that are presented, the necessity of preserving that which is naturally given, the opposition to change, nor the presentation of a lifestyle characterized by

³⁸ For an excellent interpretation of the demonic imagery of the *Vita* as anti-pagan propaganda see now D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk. Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2006, chapter 2.

detachment from others. We only have to turn to Porphyry's work, *De Abstinencia*, to find a Neopythagorean text which shares some of the more radical views found in the *Vita Antonii*.

A more detailed analysis shows that the central and most striking difference between the description of the early life of Pythagoras and Antony lies in the question of education. This difference is made very clear by the very pointed criticism of classical education given in the *Vita Antonii*, both in Antony's sermon and in his debate with the philosophers. In the first place, Antony ridicules those who travel to gain wisdom, which is exactly what Pythagoras does. If Athanasius knew and used the *Life of Pythagoras* as a model and source for good rhetorical expressions, and it seems evident that he did, he must certainly have had the descriptions of Pythagoras' travels in search of education in mind when introducing Antony's lack of education as well as his criticism of educational travel. An essential part of Pythagoras' development is considered to be of no avail and unnecessary for the Christian. Instead, Antony is portrayed as being taught by God alone.³⁹

This anti-Pythagorean emphasis on Antony's lack of education, an emphasis that has been problematic for several commentators,⁴⁰ corresponds very well with the three debates between Antony and the philosophers. These philosophers are probably intended to represent some form of Neopythagorean philosophy. This is evident not only in the text's statements concerning the importance of a pure mind, and the subsequent critique of dialectics, but also in Antony's attack on ideas about transformation and soul migration.⁴¹

If this interpretation is correct, if the *Vita Antonii* is the presentation of an alternative to Pythagoras, an anti-Pythagoras, it follows that we must look at the purpose and addressees of the *Vita* in a somewhat different light. Traditionally, the *Vita* has been seen as directed towards monks, either in the West or in Egypt, and written as a model for how they should live, a model for emulation. Suggestions have also been made that the *Vita* was written to strengthen the relations between the emerging monastic tradition and the bishop of Alexandria.⁴² But if use of the *Life of Pythagoras* is not due to the author's embarrassing lack of information (Reitzenstein) or some particular literary ambition, we need to look for another purpose and audience. What sense would an attack on the image of Pythagoras and a rereading of the story of the holy man make if the audience was not familiar with the original?

A closer look at Athanasius writings in general and the context in which he wrote the *Vita Antonii* actually makes such a reinterpretation of the text as an apologetic

and even anti-Pythagorean writing plausible. There is no question that Athanasius must have known not only about Porphyry, who died when Athanasius was still a child, but also knew Porphyry's anti-Christian writings, which are discussed both by Eusebius and by Apollinaris, two of Athanasius' Christian contemporaries. Others have suggested that there is a certain affinity between Athanasius' ascetic vocabulary and the Neopythagorean tradition.⁴³ As a literate man educated in Alexandria and responsible for the Christian community, he must have been well acquainted with the Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic schools and their literature, and probably also with Iamblichus' school in Apamea, a school that was actually thriving during the period that Athanasius received his education. The close relation between the *Vita Antonii* and the two apologetic works of Athanasius, the *Contra Gentes* and the *De Incarnatione Verbi*, provide further support for this interpretation.⁴⁴ If we add to this the more recent reinterpretation of Antony and other early Egyptian monks as some kind of philosophical teachers of pure wisdom, it makes sense that Athanasius uses a biography of Antony in order to rewrite the narrative of the ideal philosopher.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The rereading of the *Vita Antonii* against the background of classical biographical tradition makes it evident that it does not make sense to try to relate the *Vita* to a distinct genre of biography. The biographical texts we have are too different to constitute a single point of reference, and all attempts at a universal explanation for the *Vita Antonii* end only with some features being explained while large parts are left untouched or are referred to as exceptions. The search for single passages or even concepts and passages that have a classical, that is to say pagan, parallel, has proven to be more fruitful. However it is not the literary parallels in themselves that are significant, but rather their role in the overall argument of the *Vita*, and the purpose for the use of the classical model or concepts. In the case of the *Vita Antonii*, merely acknowledging that a description of the hero from the *Life of Pythagoras* has been borrowed does not explain why this has occurred. This is evident from the widely different interpretations given by Reitzenstein and Bartelink. It is thus necessary to ask what the purpose was for using the pagan text. But the question of purpose is closely linked to the question of audience. Bartelink's suggestion, that the reuse of a passage from the *De Vita Pythagorica* in the *Vita Antonii* is explained by the author's ambition of proving Antony to be greater than

³⁹ V. Anton. 66. An intriguing question is, however, what role the education of Pythagoras actually plays in his biography. It does not seem to have been essential for obtaining semi-divinity.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, Minneapolis 1995, 35-42, 141-144.

⁴¹ V. Anton. 74.

⁴² See for example D. Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, Baltimore 1995, 201-203, 245-265.

⁴³ Van Uytanghe, 2001, 1337-1338 and A. Festugière, *Pour une nouvelle édition du De Vita Pythagorica de Jamblique*, in: REG 50 (1937), 470-494.

⁴⁴ See J. Roldanus, *Le Christ et l'homme dans la théologie d'Athanase d'Alexandrie*, Leiden 1968.

⁴⁵ See Rubenson, 1995.

Pythagoras, loses its force if the audience is indeed not expected to have any high regard for Pythagoras, or to even know the story of him in the first place.

In this paper, I have suggested that the *Vita Antonii* should be read as an apologetic anti-Pythagorean (or rather anti-Neopythagorean) treatise. In the *Vita*, Athanasius depicts Antony not only as being a more radical and perfect holy man than Pythagoras, but also as outdoing Pythagoras in terms of having a more reliable source of wisdom and power, namely Christ. The conflict between the two, as depicted by Athanasius, is not a matter of their ideals, it is a matter of their sources. Antony, like Pythagoras, had a pure mind and lived in perfect accord with his nature. But Antony does not need to travel, since he is taught by God alone, and he does not need to be physically present for the working of miracles, since it is Christ who is the source of miracles.

As an example of the appropriation of the pagan tradition by the church fathers, the *Vita Antonii* questions the assumption that there is a break with the past, whether this is interpreted as a break in form or in content, in "Kern" or in "Schale". The *Vita* shows that the significant break lies neither in form nor in content but in the question of source. In writing his *Vita Antonii*, Athanasius showed that he shared the ideals, visions and ways of expression of his society and culture, but he claimed another source of power, revealed in the Scriptures and the Christian cult, and claimed that God, not his own God, but the God of all, was actually acting in the life of his hero.

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