

Adoring Hypatia. Platonic Love, or the Conflicting Emotions a Byzantine Teacher May Arouse

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Intervento presso il convegno “Emotions in Byzantium” dedicato alla memoria di Jakov Nikolaevic^ Ljubarskij, che si è svolto all'Università di Pietroburgo alla fine del maggio scorso, organizzato da Fatima Eloeva e Sergej Ivanov.

“There used to be a woman in Alexandria, by name of Hypatia. She was the daughter of Theon, a philosopher in Alexandria, and had reached such heights of wisdom that she had by far surpassed all the philosophers of her circle. She inherited from her father the teaching *diadoché* of the Platonic school deriving from Plotin, and exposed all the philosophical doctrines in her addresses to a free public (...) From everywhere people would come to her to philosophise.” So narrates in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* Socrates, a contemporary and lawyer at the Court of Constantinople,

A) Love

In *Hypatia, or the Partisan Spirit of the Alexandrians*, a long article from Suidas, a Byzantine lexicon from the tenth century, we read that Hypatia

“had become such an experienced teacher, was so just and wise, but also so beautiful and attractive”,

that her students would fall in love with her. Suidas's' information stems from two by now lost accounts from the time of Justinian: the first, whether true or fake, is by Esychius of Milet, and the second, of which only a few fragments have survived, is the *Vita Isidori*, the last priest of the temple of Serapis, written by the Neoplatonic Damascius, the last scholar of the Academy of Athens. Presumably it is the first that states that Hypatia,

"being more naturally gifted than her father, did not limit herself to the technical-mathematical teachings of her father, but dedicated herself to real and true philosophy, to great result. Although a woman, she would wear the *tribon* [i.e. the cape of cynic philosophers], and would go about the city publicly, explaining to whomever felt like listening, Plato, Aristotle or any other philosopher".

The scion of an ancient family of land-owners of Cyrenaica, Platonic, polygraph, politician and eventually a Christian bishop, Synesius represents to the full the vitality, the tolerance, and at the same time the transformism proper of the educated aristocracy in late antiquity. Trained at Hypatia's school, differently from his teacher, he left a long literary trail to posterity. On his way back to Costantinople, after meeting Hypatia, Synesius wrote, to a scholar friend who had remained in Alexandria the following words:

"What a marvellous subject for a poem, our journey together. It has given us the opportunity to witness what fame by itself could not prove: we have seen, we have heard the woman who is the real initiator to the mysteries and the orgies of philosophy".

In his very many letters, almost an autobiography, connecting him to his milieu, both pagan and Christian, Synesius is the key witness of our brief inquiry on the emotions that a Byzantine teacher and free intellectual might arouse. First as an intimate friend but second as a midway point between the protagonists of the conflict of which Hypatia remained victim. Pagan by birth, like his contemporary Augustine, converted to Christianity through the good offices of the patriarch Theophilus, the destroyer of the Serapeum, Synesius married a Christian and became a novice in that religion. As he himself said, he wanted to be initiated "to all mysteries", and Christianity was one of them. His election as bishop of Cyrene can be considered by his own admission as something of an incident, since the second canon of the Nicean Council prohibited the appointment of novices as bishops. But history later celebrated with its verdict this election, which he owed in origin to his political activism in the Pentapolis.

Synesius anyway journeyed to Egypt much earlier than these events, probably in 393 A.D., one year after Theodosius' edict and the destruction of the Serapeum. Paganism was prosecuted and Platonism was not only looked down by the Christians, but was also subdivided into factions, *sectae*, in competition with one another.

"To-day it is Egypt that keeps the seeds of wisdom alive, which it receives from Hypatia. Conversely, once the seat of wise men, Athens is now honoured only by beekeepers: it is not by chance that the couple of sophists, Plutarch's students, who have remained there, draw the young to their school not with fame, not with eloquence but with jars of Hymettos honey",

as writes Synesius in a letter.

Hypatia is the

"most venerated philosopher, cherished by God".

The other pupils of the Alexandria school are

"a blessed group listening to the admirable voice"

of the woman who will remain for ever

"adored teacher", "benefactress" "mother, sister, teacher, patroness", "supreme judge", "blessed lady" with a "most celestial soul".

Years later, in his eighty-first letter, Synesius wrote to her:

"Believe me, you are the only treasure that together with virtue, cannot be taken away from me".

Teacher and pupil are of the same age, and they were only twenty-three at the time of their first encounter. Strangely coupled in their destiny, they shall die in different places but almost at the same time. Synesius will not know about her death but shortly before it, paraphrasing the Homeric *Nostoi*, he sent her a dystich which has the power of an epitaph:

"If the dead in Hades are doomed to forgetfulness
Even down there I will remember my adored Hypatia".

Adoration: that is, almost a sacred tie; entwined to the emotional bond proper of Platonic love, in its proper Platonic sense. These are the emotions aroused by Hypatia in her disciples, and particularly in her most brilliant and cherished one. In his last letter, prostrate after the death of his young children ("Synesius should have lived only before knowing the evil of life"), he wrote these words to her:

"If you do care at all about my affairs, well enough; otherwise, I do not care either".

II. Phthonos

It is renowned that complex relationship tied the Roman governor to the local élites of the provincial territories in the IV and V centuries of the Roman Empire. Among the various centuries-old features inherited by birth, there was the special "Hellenic" education, which was officially minoritarian in the christianized empire, and had therefore a political connotation. Influent among the *intelligencija*, the heiress of the intellectual dynasty which referred to the School of the Mouseion, Hypatia was mainly the teacher of the Hellenic life-style (*helleniké diagogé*), which inspired the unchristianized aristocracy. Suidas, still probably with Esichius's words, confirms this: she was

"fluent and dialectical (*dialektiké*) in her speech, cautious and shrewd (*politiké*) in her action, so that the whole city revered her and paid homage to her".

As Socrates Scholastichus informs us,

"from the Hellenic culture (*paidèia*) she had derived a self control and a directness in her speech (*parrhesia*)"

which helped her to

"directly confront the powerful and to attend men's meetings without fear. All of them held a deferential attitude for her extraordinary wisdom and looked up to her, if anything, with reverential awe".

Again, and literally, Hypatia was *adored*. But, in political terms, she was the spokeswoman of the city *intelligencija*, to the representative of the central Roman government and namely with Orestes, prefect of Egypt.

"The political leaders administrating the city",

Suidas tells us,

"were the first to go and listen to her, as still happened in Athens. If paganism was finished, there, anyway, the name of philosophy maintained its stature and appeared worthy of consideration to those holding the most important city offices".

For strange it may seem nowadays, philosophy strongly and directly influenced the internal policy of her city. In a letter of introduction, Synesius, a pupil of hers, wrote to her:

"You have always had power, may you hold it for long and may you make good use of it".

It is from this very power, however, local and based on a system of patrons, that the development of the new ruling classes in the young Byzantine empire took its very first steps, after having started in the provincial capitals by the political legitimisation of the Church. The *polis* of the late antiquity witnesses from now on the bishop, and not the philosopher, become the consultant and the "civic defender" of the imperial representative. "The Christian bishop had to have the monopoly of *parrhesia*!", wrote Peter Brown proposing a historical, perhaps too direct syllogism on the very case of Hypatia: if during the transition from paganism to Christianity the roles of the philosopher and the bishop developed to such an extent that they coincided, what was the bishop to do if not eliminate the philosopher?

“A personified *phthònos* raised arms against her”

accuses Socrates. The *phthònos* of the Christians against the followers of another religion, according to all sources, and a common opinion in ancient literature, was the cause of the violent end not only of Hypatia but together with her of the old life-style of the *polis*, the same one outlined in the nuanced reference to Athens on the part of Suidas.

Writes Socrates:

“Because of the frequent meetings between Hypatia and Orestes, there arose among the people that it was Hypatia’s fault if Orestes did not reconcile himself with their bishop”.

In fact this idea is reaffirmed two centuries later in a fourth and no less important source of our study. The *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu, probably written in Coptic a few years short of the Arabic conquest of Egypt, and often neglected by scholars, as it only survived in a late Ethiopic version. In the allegiance between the prefect and the philosopher, the Coptic bishop read, in all probability rightly, “the pagan will of reaction against the outrageous Christianity of Cyril”, as stated by Rougé)

At this precise moment the monks make their appearance in Hypatia's story. The monks, or the “zealots”, and with them another dangerous emotion, a different nuance of *phthònos*. *Zelòs* — that is “fervour” or “emulous desire” causing “rivalry”, in on word, and etimologically, “jealousy” — comes on stage.

Again Socrates:

“Beings with incandescent and fiery spirit, these monks, often illiterate, hired by Cyril, are bands of hoodlums wandering from town to town inflamed by social hatred of the pagans, the civilised world in general and city dwellers.”

In the fifth century, as Evelyn Platagean has written, monasticism has pushed “ascetic imperturbability over the brink of subversion. All in all, the whole monastic world is animated by the claim of their supremacy [...] and all monks have, at that time, free access to the cities”.

"Some monks from the mountains of Nitria, whose spirit was seething since the time of Theophilus, who had maliciously armed them (...), and had consequently become Zealots, in their fanaticism decided to fight in Cyril's name",

Socrates reports. These over-conscientious agents of the new power were stuffed with ideology and conformism. They would not accept neither religious difference nor the old-fashioned, calm, tolerant turn of mind belonging to the Hellenic *intelligencija*. The new patriarch, who had long dwelled among them in the desert before his appointment, absorbs them in the body of the *parabalani*, "nurses-stretcher bearers", in fact clerics, who constitute his private militia in Alexandria. Suidas defines them

"abominable beings, true beasts".

Already Aristotle's *On Politics* said that

"the renunciation of the life in the polis can only make men Gods or beasts".

It is at this very moment that Suidas's sources refer *phthònos* as the triggering element of the drama, to Cyril and not in general to the Christians. *Phthònos*, then, no longer as "evil will", but with the more specific and personal meaning of "envy": the bishop's rivalry against the philosopher, combined with the natural jealousy of the cleric for a woman of the world.

C) Will of Annihilation

Suidas wrote:

"One day the bishop of the opposing sect, Cyril, was passing by the house of Hypatia and noticed a number of people crowding in front of her door,

men and horses gathering together,

some coming, other going other waiting outside (...). After inquiring what they were all doing and the reason of such hustle and bustle, he was informed that it was Hypatia's day for receiving and hers was that house. Having learnt that, Cyril felt his soul bitterly bitten and for that reason he soon organised her murder, the most impious of all assassinations".

This takes place

"in the fourth year of Cyril's episcopate, the tenth of Honorius' consulate, the sixth of Theodosius the Second, in the month of March".

Socrates writes that at the time of the aggression the monk's rage is made worse, ironically enough, "by the period of fasting". Monks and *parabalani* gathered together under Peter the Lector, also a cleric as his name tells us, and contrived "a secret plan". Both Suidas and Damascius state that a

"multitude of bloodthirsty men fell upon Hypatia while she was, as usual, returning home".

Theon's daughter was pulled out of her litter and dragged "to the church named after Caesar emperor", that is, in the courtyard of the Cesaraeum, recently built by Theodosius. Damascius writes that here,

"heedless of

the revenge of gods or of humans,

these truly wicked massacred the philosopher", "and while she was still scantily breathing they gouged out her eyes".

Socrates writes that

"they stripped her clothes, slaughtered her cutting her body with sharp potsherds, carried those remains to the so called Cinaron and set them on fire". "The pieces of her brutalised body were scattered all over the city, and all that she suffered because of the hostility

(*phthònos*) against her outstanding wisdom", according to this pagan source, which also defined her lynching as "appalling crime and an immense shame to the city".

The *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Philostratus, now lost, was written a few years after these events and has been handed down in the summary given by Photius. In Philostratus, openly an Arian and therefore hostile to the bishop of Alexandria, one reads:

"The woman was slaughtered by the hand of those who profess the consubstantiality".

But also for Socrates of Constantinople

"what Cyril and the Church of Alexandria committed was no small act of infamy. For murders and wars and the like are something totally alien to the spirit of Christianity".

John of Nikiu, who in a very clear, almost provocative way took Cyril's side, gives us an almost unrecognizable version of the story. The Coptic narration considers Hypatia's lynching almost as a legitimate execution, something to be proud of for "the flock of believers" who committed it. Petrus is not only a lector, but also a magistrate and a perfect servant of Christ. The encounter between the executioner and the predestined victim, guilty of hypnotising her students with her magic" and of exercising the "satanic" science of the stars, was neither casual or contrived in the secrecy of an ambush, as it happened in the very place where Hypatia taught: it is emblematic that in this version she was dragged away *from her teacher's cathedra* and not from her carriage.

The opposition between Hypatia and Cyril has been traditionally understood as a conflict between religious and between contrasting "philosophies" or world views, as a confessional and ideological drama where the protagonist pays with her life that freedom of speech, *parrhesia*, proper of the Hellenic philosophy. But the history of philosophy has pointed out the artificiality of the opposition between pagan and Christian Platonism: "What estranged the old aristocratic literati or at least kept them away from Christianity for a certain time was not paganism in itself as much as the religion of culture, the classical

ideal of *paidéia*, the *helleniké diagogé* or Greek way of living presented in Synesius's *Dion* as the most fecund and mainly effective method for cultivating one's mind", as stated by Marrou. The opportunity to integrate Greek *paideia* and Christian culture had already been felt and requested.

Was Cyril guilty of Hypatia's death? This question, posed by many historians, ancient and mediaeval beside the modern ones, has developed more pregnant meaning: could a pervasive ideology — such as Christianity, but not only — help being involved in the hardest methods of politics, in contagious violence, in fanaticism? We put off this question, far too ambitious to be answered to here and now. But I'd like to point out, as a partial and temporary conclusion, that a true teacher, a real, independent intellectual, especially if of a different faith, is very often the favourite victim of such kind of ideological power and of its methods of politics. And this because of the very emotions he or she arouses: too much love on one side — platonic, immaterial and even "sacred" love of his or her free intellect and wisdom; and too much *phthònos* on the other side, too much envy and *zelos* and will of annihilation of his or her career, if not life: will of "dragging the teacher", in John's or Nikiou's words, "away from the teacher chair". Thank you.