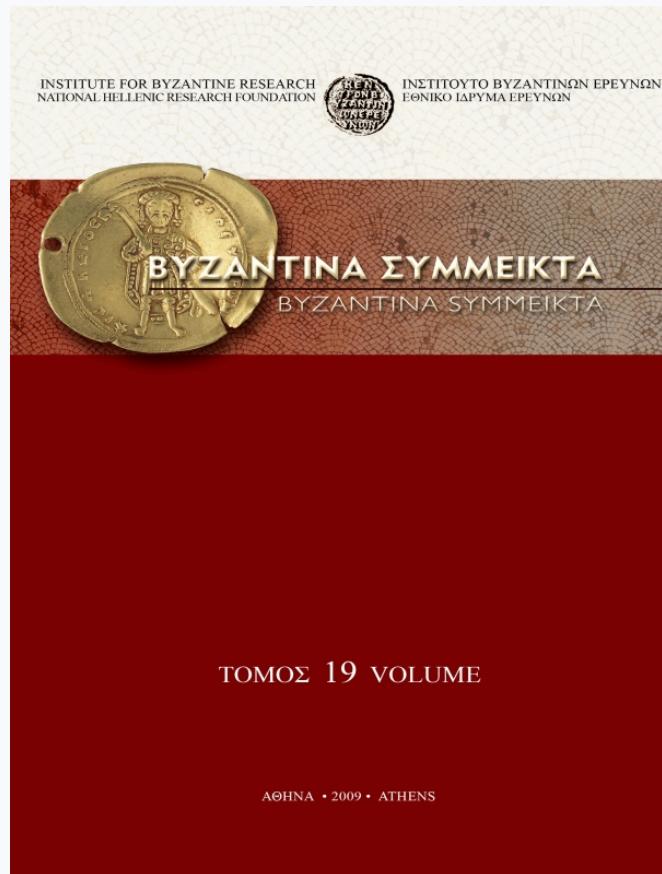


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 19 (2009)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 19



**Βιβλιοκρισία του: Α. ΜΑΡΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (επιμ.),
Τέσσερα κείμενα για την ποίηση του Συμεών του
Νέου Θεολόγου**

Marc D. LAUXTERMANN

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.955](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.955)

Copyright © 2014, Marc D. LAUXTERMANN



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

LAUXTERMANN, M. D. (2009). Βιβλιοκρισία του: Α. ΜΑΡΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (επιμ.), Τέσσερα κείμενα για την ποίηση του Συμεών του Νέου Θεολόγου. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 19, 291–297. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.955>

Α. ΜΑΡΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (επιμ.), *Τέσσερα κείμενα για την ποίηση του Συμεών του Νέου Θεολόγου*, εκδόσεις Κανάκη, Αθήνα 2008, τε΄ + 159 σσ. (ISBN 978-960-6736-05-6).

This volume contains four papers by three Byzantinists and a philosopher, which were originally presented at a postgraduate seminar on the poetry of Symeon the New Theologian held at the University of Athens in 2007. As I do not share the axiomatic certitudes of Stelios Ramfos (the philosopher) and sadly lack the hermeneutic skills necessary to understand what he is trying to convey in the strenuous and opaque prose of his contribution aptly entitled *Αίσθησις οξύμωδος*, it is with equally oxymoronic sentiments that I will restrict the following discussion to the other three papers, on which I am at least in a position to form an educated opinion. These papers are excellent and should be regarded as essential reading for anyone interested in the poetry of this great mystic, Symeon the New Theologian (henceforth Symeon NTh).

The first paper is by Johannes Koder, the editor of the poems of Symeon NTh in the *Sources Chrétiennes* series (it is nothing short of a miracle that the marvellous poetry of Symeon has been edited not once, but twice in recent years – and in both instances, by scholars as accomplished and scrupulous as Koder and Kambylis). Koder's essay is basically an introduction into the still unexplored domain of Symeon's poetics and poetry, and as I am not aware of any such introduction (what we have are either the minutiae of philologists or the generalities of theologians), it definitely fills a lacuna in the existing literature. Koder sketches the life of Symeon NTh and rightly stresses the fact that most of what we know (or think we know) is based on the *Life of St Symeon the New Theologian* written by Niketas Stethatos, his trusted disciple, but perhaps not so trustworthy biographer, who clearly attempted

to portray the saint as another Theodore of Stoudios. The same Niketas Stethatos also played a crucial role in the preservation of Symeon's poetry, which he copied for personal use when the saint was still alive, and then edited when the saint was dead. Although we will never know what Niketas brought to the text, it is safe to assume that it was more than just adding titles, marginal commentaries, and stichometry or correcting the saint's erratic spelling, grammatical lapses and other solecisms, but rather involved a thorough and systematic revision of the saint's mystical and sometimes blatantly unorthodox utterances. And the most impressive evidence for this, of course, is the infamous poem no. 21, a poetic epistle addressed to Stephen of Nikomedeia and the Synod, in which Symeon NTh defended himself against accusations of heresy. This poem has come down to us in two different versions, Vat. gr. 504 and the rest of the manuscript tradition – and it stands to reason that the manuscript tradition follows Niketas Stethatos, whereas the isolated Vatican manuscript represents an independent branch of the text tradition, unaltered by the editorial interventions of Niketas. In other words, both the biography and the poems themselves have been tampered with by Niketas Stethatos to an unfathomable extent, and this means that we are reading Symeon NTh through the prism of a highly influential eleventh-century theologian with an agenda of his own.

In his essay Koder also addresses the important question of Symeon NTh's motives in writing down his various mystical experiences (including the sanctification of his penis in poem 15): why did Symeon write? what urged him on? Koder rightly warns against the intentional fallacy, the traps of seeing a relation between the details of the saint's biography (as construed by Niketas Stethatos) and the text of the poems (as edited by the same Niketas Stethatos). Koder sees Symeon as a genuine mystic, of the same breed as Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross: a tool of the Holy Ghost, unable not to convey the wisdom imparted upon him, almost forced against his will to celebrate the wondrous presence of Christ within him, a vessel overflowing with divine love (for which, see the brilliant title attached to the collection of Symeon NTh's poems (devised by Niketas Stethatos – by whom else?): *τῶν θείων ὑμνῶν οἱ ἔρωτες*, 'The Loves of Divine Hymns'). And Koder is right, of course. Symeon NTh is a medieval mystic, who describes his visions of God's omnipresence in a language that is truly moving. However, in order to understand this language, we will have to go one step

further and ask ourselves what the dominant function in Symeon's poetry is. For instance, if one compares Symeon's poems to those of Hadewijch (an early thirteenth-century nun in Flanders), one sees similarities, but also differences: her poetry is much more sensual and physical, it is a poetry of longing when the divine bridegroom is away, and rapturous encounters with Christ when he presents himself to her in the flesh – is this simply a question of gender or, as I am inclined to think, a fundamental difference between Flemish and Byzantine cultural codes? So I would say that in order to understand Symeon NTh's mystical poetry, we have to situate it within the cultural and social contexts of late tenth and early eleventh-century Byzantium.

Koder points out that most of Symeon's poems appear to have been written after his heresy trial in 1003 and subsequent exile in 1009, and he rightly emphasizes that when Symeon ceased to be the abbot of the flourishing monastic establishment of St Mamas, he had to address a different audience: a religious community of like-minded spirits, which included not only monks and priests, but also laics. Koder also refers to an interesting passage in the *Life of St Symeon the New Theologian*, in which Stephen of Nikomedea challenges the saint to write a defence of his religious views, which he does, first in prose and then in verse. The passage is rather unusual in that it describes a creative process that one nowadays does not associate with the kind of lyrical effusions Symeon puts to paper: at first he conceives a general idea, then he writes a first draft in prose, and subsequently he reworks this draft into verse form. This poetic procedure is hardly what Wordsworth would recognize as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', his famous definition of the essence of lyrical poetry. But then again, Symeon NTh is not a romantic, and attempts to read him with contemporary eyes are doomed to failure – what we understand as lyricism, may well be a rhetorical strategem and what we see as an emotional outpouring of religious experiences, may well be a calculated and well-thought lesson in ascetics.

In his discussion of Symeon's metres, and especially the political verse, Koder shows a sovereign command of the subject and an expertise in metrics that has become a rare commodity in our days. His study of the various genres and moods that make up the literary universe of Symeon NTh's poems: homiletics, didacticism, katanyxis, autobiographical tendencies and

lyrical explorations, is excellent as well. His essay ends with an analysis of two beautiful short poems, nos. 57 and 10. Although I have read and reread poem no. 10 on numerous occasions, its precise meaning still eludes me, but I do understand the verdict of the great Paul Maas: “Die Schlusszeilen sind unter den fast 150000 byzantinischen Versen, die ich gelesen habe, für mein Gefühl die schönsten”. These are the sublime verses that inspired this verdict: *νὺξ μ' ἔχώρισεν ἀδελφοῦ γλυκυτάτου τὸ ἄτμητον φῶς τῆς ἀγάπης τεμοῦσα*. Hiatus is among the more annoying features of Symeon NTh’s poetry, but here it is used in a superb way: *τὸ / ἄτμητον κτλ. τεμοῦσα*, ‘separating the ... inseparable light of love’.

The second paper is by Alexandros Alexakis, who analyzes the ‘Mystical Prayer’, the hymn that opens the collection of ‘The Loves of Divine Hymns’. Incidentally, the ‘Mystical Prayer’ is the only text in this collection that deserves to be called a ‘hymn’ – despite the misleading title attached to the collection, none of the other texts exhibit the formal features of hymns. Alexakis is particularly interested in the tripartite structure of the ‘Mystical Prayer’ which, he says, fits well into the theoretical model developed by J.-M. Bremer, according to whom pagan hymns are divided into three parts: invocation of the deity, eulogy of the deity celebrating his/her past accomplishments and feats, and concluding request. Alexakis proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the ‘Mystical Prayer’ is structured in a similar way. However, whether he is right in claiming that this tripartite structure is typical of Greek hymnography only, is debatable; I recognize the pattern in many Psalms. But Alexakis is certainly right in seeing a connection with the poetry of Gregory of Nazianzos (the ‘Theologian’, from whom Symeon got his sobriquet); Koder, too, points to the same church father as one of Symeon NTh’s major influences. Gregory of Nazianzos is the first in a long series of Byzantine poets trying to integrate the tenets of Christianity into an educational and cultural system dominated by the demands of the classical tradition. Another of these poets trying to come to grips with the problem of christianizing Hellenism or hellenizing Christianity is John Geometres, a contemporary of Symeon. The absence of his name in the whole volume is rather surprising and, I am afraid, indicative of the only serious shortcoming of this collective enterprise: the obvious reluctance to situate Symeon NTh within the context of his time and within the framework of literary, cultural

and intellectual traditions. Symeon NTh is quite unusual in many respects, but the only way to understand how unusual he can be, is to compare him with contemporaries and predecessors. Nothing is gained by seeing him as an isolated figure, a white raven in an aviary of multi-coloured birds.

The third paper is by Athanasios Markopoulos, who provides an astute and thorough analysis of poem no. 13. In the first few pages, Markopoulos seems to be aware of the pressing need to situate Symeon NTh within the cultural parameters of his time. He rightly stresses that Symeon is not a *poeta doctus* and has little in common with other poets, since he implicitly rejects the conventions of the literary tradition. As far as one can speak of mimesis in the case of Symeon's poems, his literary models are the Old and the New Testament, other early Christian texts, ascetical and mystical treatises, the church fathers, and hymnography. This is all very true, and no one will argue with Markopoulos, but I noticed a parallel between poem 13, v. 4: *καὶ τέρπομαι καὶ χαίρομαι* (ὅταν κατανοήσω), and Aristophanes, Plut. 288, ως ἥδομαι καὶ τέρπομαι (καὶ βούλομαι χορεῦσαι), a verse often quoted by Byzantine metricians when they wish to prove that the political verse derives from the iambic catalectic tetrameter. So it would seem after all that Symeon did pick up at least some trivial bits of knowledge when he was in school. Symeon NTh may not have written the usual run-of-the mill poetry and been innovative in many respects, but as Markopoulos stresses, his poetry fits well into the general patterns of development in the late tenth and eleventh centuries: the widening use of the political verse around the year 1000, the exploration of new linguistic and stylistic levels, and the more personal and sometimes almost egotistical character of the poems produced in this period.

This is how Markopoulos summarizes the poetry of Symeon NTh: 'Στο ποιητικό σύστημα του Συμεών ο λόγος του μεσολαβεί ανάμεσα στην απτή καθημερινότητα και τη θεία υπερβατικότητα, με κεντρικό άξονα την αναίρεση του θανάτου'. Is there such a thing as 'the reversal of death', and is this the central theme of Symeon's poetry? I am not so certain that it is, but it would make a fine counterbalance to the equally important concept of love in his poetry. Symeon NTh was certainly not the first (nor the last) to explore the ambiguity of Thanatos and Eros, but he used the two terms in a rather different manner. For him, death is the condition of people who,

physically speaking, may be very alive, but who are very dead in a spiritual sense, and love is not a feeling of sexual titillation from without, but rather the experience of the fullness of God within oneself.

In his study of poem no. 13, Markopoulos rightly emphasizes how important the concepts of contrition and divine grace are in the literary output of Symeon NTh, for whom it is clear that God reveals Himself to those who have prepared themselves for His coming. If I understand Markopoulos correctly, he divides the poem into five parts: (vv. 1-21) introduction centred around the concepts of remorse and grace, (vv. 22-36) doctrinal exposition of the bodily and spiritual faculties of will, (vv. 37-53) eulogy of God's incarnation, (vv. 54-86) lyrical evocation of how God loves Symeon and Symeon loves God, and (vv. 87-98) thanksgiving to God for all His blessings. Throughout his paper, Markopoulos stresses the importance of 'theosis', deification, and what it meant to Symeon NTh.

There is hardly anything I disagree with in this paper, but I am not so sure whether Markopoulos is right when, towards the end of his paper, he portrays Symeon NTh as a traditional thinker, who, living on the cusp of a new age –one characterized by secularization–, rather obstinately clings to the teachings of the church fathers and monastic and ascetic authorities of the past. I do not know whether this assessment is entirely fair to Symeon NTh. A Psellos he certainly was not, nor even a Mauropus for that matter. That much is true, but how many Pselloi and Mauropodes were there in the eleventh century? How representative are a handful of court intellectuals? If the cultural history of eleventh-century Byzantium had been figure-headed by the likes of Niketas Stethatos, Leo of Bulgaria, Michael Keroularios, Niketas of Herakleia and John Oxeites, our understanding of the period would be fundamentally different. The later eleventh century saw an upsurge of religious sentiments, reflected in the much more emotional style of icon and wall painting, the popularity of the moralistic poetry of Philip Monotropos, and the highly personal comments one finds in Psalters for private devotional use, such as Bodl. Clarke 15 and Athous Dion. 65 – and one might argue that there is a connection here with the mysticism of Symeon NTh. One always reads that it was the hesychasts who rediscovered Symeon NTh. But did they? Or was there a surreptitious mystical tradition in Byzantium that surfaced only occasionally and, therefore, left hardly any traces in our written sources? What we desperately need is a history

of Byzantine religiosity through the ages. And my guess is that in such a history Symeon NTh would not be a loner, an isolated voice in the desert, reverberating the words of early monasticism and echoing in the ears of the hesychasts, but would hold a central position.

MARC D. LAUXTERMANN,
Oxford University

