

Agathias on History and Poetry

Anthony Kaldellis

THE STUDY OF BYZANTINE HISTORIOGRAPHY has entered a phase of transformative debate, from which it will inevitably emerge with broadened intellectual horizons and an enriched understanding of its own aims and methods. The exclusive interest of past scholars in factual reliability, closely connected to the search for 'sources', or *Quellenforschung*, is gradually making room for the wider appreciation of Byzantine histories as works of literature and original thought, which possess value independently of the accuracy or veracity of their narratives.¹ This shift of focus represents a partial emancipation from the traditional concerns of political history, and yet has thankfully been spared the inane extremes of postmodernist theory. It is hoped that future works of synthesis will emphasize the unique virtues and vices of each historian in his dual capacity as author and scholar, as well as the more philosophical aspects of his work.² A number of Byzantine historians, including Agathias, are now emerging as subtle and imaginative authors, capable, in a manner almost worthy of Herodotus, of constructing highly nuanced images in the course of their

¹ See in general the debate in J. N. Ljubarskij *et al.*, "Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism: Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings," *SymbOslo* 73 (1998) 5–73.

² In his magisterial survey of Byzantine historiography, Herbert Hunger treats the following aspects of Agathias' work thematically: biography of the author, summary of the *Histories*, accuracy of information and sources, classicizing vocabulary, and religious beliefs: *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (Munich 1978) I 303–309; Apostolos Karpozelos' recent survey is more detailed and gives a better sense of the overall development of early Byzantine historiography, but essentially reproduces the same schema when discussing individual authors: *Βυζαντινοί 'Ιστορικοί και Χρονογράφοι* I (Athens 1997) 432–41, with an appendix discussing Agathias' view of Justinian: 442–48. Warren Treadgold has also proposed to write a general survey of Byzantine historiography: *Why Write a New History of Byzantium?* (Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies: Toronto 1997).

narratives,³ and of cleverly using classical allusions in order to make innovative philosophical arguments.⁴ Their works must be read and analyzed with patient care, for their central messages are almost never stated clearly and unambiguously, as in modern works of scholarship, which, partly for that reason, seldom possess any literary value.

Yet considerable tensions exist between the search for the truth and the desire to tell a good or edifying story, as many ancient and Byzantine historians realized. Each devised a practical solution to this problem, based on the ultimate aims of his decision to compose a record of past or contemporary events.⁵ Here I shall examine one aspect of Agathias' solution, focusing on his view of the relationship between history and poetry. His position on this as on other matters has been seriously misrepresented in modern scholarship.

According to his most influential modern interpreter, Agathias was driven to write his *Histories* through "a strong literary enthusiasm."⁶ Furthermore, "when we find Agathias ... saying that history and poetry are intimately related, so much so indeed that they are divided only by meter, we may be sure that he was expressing his own personal view."⁷ This view is expressed in "a manifesto of his own on the closeness of history and poetry," which he "inserts" into the preface of his *Histories*.⁸ When we turn to the preface itself, however, we discover that Agathias gives a far more nuanced explanation for this decision to write history, and that the views ascribed to him by his modern interpreter are explicitly ascribed to someone

³ For Agathias' subtle, if negative, depiction of Persian culture, see C. Questa, "Il morto e la madre: Romei e Persiani nelle 'Storie' de Agatia," *Lares* 55 (1989) 375-405.

⁴ See A. KALDELLIS, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: A Reinterpretation," *Byzantion* 69 (1999; hereafter "Kaldellis, *Byzantion*") forthcoming), and *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia* (Leiden 1999, forthcoming).

⁵ I cannot do justice to this vast theme here. For some thoughtful studies of individual authors, see W. R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton 1984); G. B. Miles, *Livy. Reconstructing Early Rome* (Ithaca 1995).

⁶ AVERIL CAMERON, *Agathias* (Oxford 1970; hereafter 'Cameron') 11.

⁷ Cameron 58; cf. 31: "we have no reason to disbelieve him when he says that he was persuaded to write history only on the reflection that it was after all very like poetry."

⁸ Cameron 32; cf. 9, 37, 67f; Karpozelos (*supra* n.2) 438. The scarcity of my citations to modern scholars reflects the lack of attention to this aspect of Agathias' thought, which has not yet been recognized as problematic.

else in the text. As it turns out, Agathias was profoundly aware of the divergent natures of history and poetry.

The major reason that Agathias gives for his decision to write history is linked to his views about its ultimate purpose, which also point to some of the differences that he perceived between it and poetry. The main justification for writing history in the preface (1ff) is based on an analysis of human motivation.⁹ Men perform great deeds chiefly in order to be praised and remembered by others. As history can virtually immortalize their memory and transmit the praise of their glorious deeds to future generations, it is capable of inducing men to undertake even more magnificent achievements.¹⁰ Its aim is therefore political in the strictest and highest sense. Yet if historians can incite others to perform great deeds, then they too are "benefactors of society" and should be "accorded the greatest admiration" (*praef.* 6.17f). Agathias says that he came to this conclusion before deciding to write history himself. Nevertheless, now that he has done so he intends to reap his fair share of praise. Accordingly, he tells his readers exactly who he is, at great length (*praef.* 7-15).

Therefore, Agathias' theory of human motivation is capable of explaining his own decision to write history, for the historian is also caught up in the circle of self-interest, benefaction, and praise that propels all great accomplishments. Whereas his aim is to create something "useful" (*praef.* 11.16f), something that will have "a positive value for posterity" (*praef.* 10.12f), his motivation is the love of honor or glory, as Agathias indirectly reveals later when he claims that his friend Eutychanus urged him to write history, "anxious to enhance my reputation and

⁹ I cite the most recent edition, R. Keydell, ed., *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum* (=CFHB 2 [Berlin 1967]), and quote (with occasional modifications) the translation by J. D. Frendo, *Agathias. The Histories* (=CFHB 2A [Berlin 1976]). Citations to Agathias' preface consist of the section number, followed by the line numbers of the relevant page of the Keydell edition. For a fuller analysis of the two views of history in the preface, see Kaldellis, *Byzantion* (section I).

¹⁰ An episode at *Hist.* 1.15.1ff illustrates the psychological basis of the historian's power to influence behavior. After the forces of the Roman (Herul) general Fulkaris had been defeated, "he did not see fit to run away, but chose rather to meet a glorious end than to become an ignoble survivor." Although he could have escaped, he feared "the sting of Narses' tongue" and the "abuse" he would thereby incur. Cf. 2.7.6.

improve my status" (*praef.* 12.22ff).¹¹ A passage near the end of the *Histories* shows that in terms of their motives and effects on society, historians do not differ much from generals. After his last victory on the field of battle, Belisarius was denied praise by those who envied or feared him. By the very act of describing and celebrating his exploits, Agathias granted to Belisarius' memory what the man himself had been denied.¹² For

initiative is blunted and all incentive to action destroyed when noble spirits are deprived of their rightful share of acclaim and in consequence those qualities that have been disparaged, whether they are associated with military success, literary achievement, or with some other matter of vital concern, cease, much to the detriment of society, to be properly cultivated (5.20.5ff).

Therefore, the views expressed in the preface are not mere rhetoric, but are consistent with Agathias' outlook in the main body of the text, *i.e.*, with his practice as a historian.

Agathias' reasons for deciding to write history were entirely his own (*praef.* 10–11). Nevertheless, a number of his friends, of whom only Eutychnianus is named, "encouraged my initial endeavor" (*praef.* 11.17f). In this context, Agathias praises Eutychnianus, who, in order to bolster Agathias' confidence, had claimed that "*in his view* history was not far removed from poetry, and both were kindred and related disciplines differing radically perhaps only in the matter of meter" (*praef.* 12.1ff; my italics). Although Agathias says that "these promptings"¹³ found in me a ready and receptive listener" (*praef.* 13.5f), he never openly endorses this view of the relationship between history and poetry, which he attributes firmly and entirely to Eutychnianus. This hardly constitutes "a manifesto of his own." We may ask, however, to what extent did he agree with it, and, why did he include it in his preface?

Let us compare Agathias' view of history with what he says about poetry in the preface (7–13) and elsewhere. "Poetry is a sacred and divinely-inspired activity. In it souls attain a state of ecstatic inspiration" (*praef.* 9.30f). Yet this ecstasy requires no societal justification. "Seized by the Muse and possessed by this frenzy," the poet is compelled to create works of "surpassing

¹¹ For the glory sought by historians, *cf.* Hdn. 1.1.1; Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.31; Agathias' friend: *PLRE IIIA* (1992) 475 *s.v.* "Eutychnianus 1."

¹² For the problems with Agathias' account of the battle see Cameron 49f.

¹³ The precise antecedent of *τοιαῦτα* is unclear.

loveliness" (9.1f). Agathias says nothing of the poet's need to be praised by others,¹⁴ nor does he mention any benefits that poems confer upon society. In fact, he explicitly declares that, in contrast to history, poetry has no practical value (8.29f; 11.16f). Whereas history is useful, poetry is "delightful," "amorous and enchanting," "amusing and entertaining," "surpassingly lovely," and "pleasant" (7–10). This section of the preface, therefore, directly highlights an essential characteristic of poetry, namely its ability to move the reader, even if only about trivial subjects, through its use of beautiful language.

Agathias then openly usurps for poetry a prime characteristic of Socratic philosophy, following the Delphic commandment to know oneself (10.4f). We may wonder whether he is confusing poetry with philosophy. But had not Aristotle argued that poetry was more philosophical than history? And had not Plato, whom Agathias explicitly cites here, called poetic inspiration a form of heaven-sent madness?¹⁵ History, on the other hand, is chiefly concerned with political events like wars, invasions, and migrations (*praef.* 10.6–10); it is by no means inspired by divine madness; and by the very act of publishing his work—by attempting, that is, to influence the ambitions of future leaders and heroes—the historian himself enters the political arena. The difference between history and poetry thus seems to evoke the classical distinction between the active and the contemplative life. This could well be the perspective of a poet, devoted to the timeless themes of *eros* (*praef.* 7.23f). But poets are notoriously deluded about their Muse, to the same degree, perhaps, that historians overestimate the influence of their works over posterity.

However that may be, it is clear that according to Agathias historians and poets differ widely in their motivations, their proximate and ultimate goals, the subject matter, and the social value of their work. The *Histories* reveal yet another great difference between the two. In the second part of his preface, Agathias argues that history is above all concerned to reveal the truth, "whatever the consequences" (*praef.* 20.12f). This view emerges from a contrast between history and rhetoric, *i.e.*, panegyric, which in its attempt "to flatter and fawn upon" the

¹⁴ ἀξιέπαινον at *praef.* 8.25 refers to activities that are scholarly, not poetic: in addition to composing verses, Agathias made a collection of contemporary epigrams, which he then arranged and classified.

¹⁵ Arist. *Poet.* 1451a38–b11; Pl. *Phdr.* 245 A; cf. Cameron 58 n.9 for parallel citations.

powerful ends up "disregarding the truth" (16.21ff). Yet in Book 4 Agathias also rejects the myth of the flautist Marsyas who was cruelly flayed by Apollo. He denies its historicity, calling it "a wildly improbable fabrication of the poets ... without a shred of truth or likelihood about it," and advises his readers "not to be misled by the tales of the poets" (4.23.4ff; cf. 3.5.4 for "the fabulous and incredible creations of the poetic imagination").¹⁶ Apparently, poetry is not concerned with historical truth either. To this degree it differs from history in the treatment of its subject matter. Its ability to please and entertain its readers derives largely from the inventiveness of the poet's imagination. For these reasons, it is extremely improbable that Agathias accepted the position of Eutychnianus. We may not attribute to the author of the *Histories* the view that history and poetry differ only with respect to meter.

Why then does he mention Eutychnianus' view at all? I believe that he uses it as an extreme corrective to the entrenched notion that history and poetry had to be kept apart, which Agathias wants to revise in order to legitimate his own conversion of history into an instrument of philosophical edification. Let us examine the sequence of the arguments in the preface.

Immediately after the account of history's moral purpose, with which his preface begins (1-3), and before the seemingly irrelevant excursus on poetry (7-13), Agathias inserts a comparison between history and "political philosophy" (4-5). Whereas both seek to "instill virtue into men's hearts" (5.14f), political philosophy is less effective because it is stern and unyielding, while history "makes everything as attractive as possible (τῷ θέλγοντι πλείστῳ χρωμένῃ), rendering her message more palatable" (5.10f). Although it shares the aims of political philosophy, it proceeds in a more pleasing and attractive manner

¹⁶ Elsewhere (*Byzantion* [section V]) I have argued that Agathias was not a Christian. To those arguments can be added his curious discussion of this myth. Agathias dismisses it as a fabrication, not, like the Christians, because he rejects the absurdities of all Greek theology (*sic* S. Costanza, "Orientamenti cristiani della storiografia di Agathia," *Helikon* 2 [1962] 93f), but because he cannot believe that a god would behave in such a manner, in other words, because the story reflects poorly on Apollo! Whereas a Christian apologist would reject Apollo on the basis of the story, Agathias rejects the story for the sake of Apollo. The campaign to rescue the gods from the tales of the poets began early in Greek history (Xenophanes), and became a prominent theme of philosophical theology (cf. Pl. *Euthphr.* 5E-6c; *Resp.* Book 2). Cf. Agathias' peculiar use of a pagan legend as an example of divine Justice (2.1.2f). He does not openly accept the story, but does not 'refute' it either.

(5.15f). At this point Agathias inserts his excursus on poetry, which, as we have seen, stresses its pleasant nature. The purpose of this digression is probably to suggest that history can become more elegant by drawing closer to poetry, which can provide the enchantment that political philosophy lacks. Poetic compositions are by their nature θελκτήρια (8.30), whereas history is essentially useful (10.13: χρήσιμα; 11.17: ἀναγκαῖον). It is only after he has made these distinctions, and hinted at the grounds of a possible alliance, that Agathias mentions the views of Eutychedianus on the closeness of history and poetry (12.1ff).

In the digression at the beginning of Book 3, Agathias reveals that he is contemplating some such alliance between poetry and history. He claims there that his narrative serves the "twin objects of amusement and utility (τὸ θέλγον ξὺν τῷ ὠφελίμῳ)," and, alluding appropriately enough to the poet Euripides (*HF* 673f), announces that his purpose is "to mingle the Graces with the Muses" (3.1.1–4). Although it is not easy to differentiate with precision between their respective contributions, it nevertheless seems reasonably clear that in order to further the philosophical objective of his *Histories*, Agathias intends to exploit the stylistic aspects of poetic composition (excluding meter, of course). Even though he was aware of other essential characteristics of poetry that differentiated it fundamentally from history, he was primarily interested in its ability to imbue narrative with charm, grace, and edification. That is why, as we have seen, his digression on poetry focuses so heavily on its aesthetic qualities.

This combinative enterprise, however, conflicted with the dominant theoretical attitude among the most important ancient historians, who dissociated the serious purpose of history from the delights of poetry. Thucydides excused the ἀτερπέστερον of his work by invoking its ὠφέλιμα, and was followed by Diodorus Siculus, one of Agathias' main sources, who claimed that "poetry pleases (τέρπειν) rather than benefits (ὠφελεῖν)."¹⁷

¹⁷ Thuc. 1.21.1–22.4 (with some negative comments on the historical reliability of poetry); Diod. 1.2.7; cf. Kaldellis, *Byzantium* (section IV) for Agathias' careful use of Diodorus. Polybius drew a strong contrast between history, which aims at the truth, and tragic poetry, whose purpose is to move the audience's emotions (2.56.5–12; cf. 16.17.9ff). Procopius (*Bella* 1.1.4), whom Agathias also knew well, differentiated sharply between the functions of rhetoric, history, and poetry; for similar views of Cicero see P. A. Brunt, "Cicero and Historiography," in his *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (Oxford 1993) 183. See *infra*, however, for some dissenting views.

These were precisely the qualities that Agathias wanted to reunite, albeit in full knowledge of the substantial differences between history and poetry. His decision amounted to no less than a deliberate break from the great tradition of classical historiography that stretched from Thucydides to Procopius.¹⁸

Yet the specific target of Eutychianus' remarks was probably Lucian's treatise on *How History Should Be Written*, which contains severe strictures against the admixture of history and poetry. A century ago Heinrich Lieberich argued that Agathias drew upon this work when composing the preface to his *Histories*.¹⁹ Cameron (58ff), noting the many similarities between the two texts, granted that "it would be tempting to suppose that [Agathias] knew and was opposing Lucian's strong distinction between history and poetry." In the end, however, she did not endorse this thesis because "Agathias' whole approach is so different from that embodied in Lucian's pamphlet" (146). Yet a difference of approach need not preclude or even discourage the hypothesis that Agathias was familiar with Lucian's treatise, which, as it happens, is seriously flawed on the key issue of poetry. Cameron seems to assume that mere exposure to Lucian's thesis entails its automatic acceptance. In fact, Agathias' preface does echo many of Lucian's dicta, but propounds a totally different approach to poetry, which seems specifically aimed against the latter's narrow and insufficient view. A comparison of the two texts should cast some light on the uniqueness of Agathias' position.

Both draw a strong distinction between panegyric and history,²⁰ and argue that the latter should care about nothing but the truth.²¹ Cameron (59) rightly points out that these views were conventional and need not entail Lucian's influence on Agathias. But the auxiliary arguments developed by both authors are strikingly similar. Both claim that those who use excessive praise ultimately do not gain the rewards they seek because the men they praise are repelled by flattery. The sentence structure is parallel in the two texts and there are verbal

¹⁸ Cameron (58) "cannot tell whether in fact he felt himself to be taking sides in the old controversy." But his use of technical terms such as *θέλγον* and *ὑφέλιμον* in programmatic statements about his purpose suggests that he was fully aware of the language and concerns of the ancient debate.

¹⁹ *Studien zu den Proömien in der griechischen und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Munich 1898–1900) II 10ff.

²⁰ Lucian *Hist. conscr.* 7; Agath. *praef.* 16–20.

²¹ Lucian 9, 39–40, 44; Agath. *praef.* 16, 20.

similarities as well.²² Furthermore, both authors specifically allow history to include some praise of noble individuals, so long as it is measured and in accordance with the truth.²³

Lucian's views on poets (8: ἔνθεος γὰρ καὶ κάτοχος ἐκ Μουσῶν) are identical to those of Agathias (*praef.* 9: ἐνθουσιῶσι ... μουσόληπτοι γίνονται). Both agree that poets compose verses in accordance with their own emotions only, and with no regard for social utility or truth. But when it comes to the relationship between history and poetry, Lucian and 'Eutyichianus' are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Agathias' friend reverses not only Lucian's dicta, but also his language and metaphors.

Whereas according to Lucian the admixture of poetry and history leads to "a kind of prose poetry" (8), which he considers self-evidently ridiculous, Eutyichianus claims that history and poetry differ "perhaps only in the matter of meter" (*praef.* 12.3), *i.e.*, that history is a kind of poetry in prose. In a later passage, Lucian allows the historian to make use of poetic expression in order to render a grand theme, but warns that the language should "stand on solid ground ... lest it sink in the frenzy of poetry" (45). Eutyichianus, on the other hand, encouraged his poet-friend to write a history and not "to be dismayed by the novelty of the experience, like a landsman embarking on his first sea voyage" (*praef.* 12.26-1).

Was Agathias, as Cameron claims (146), "so little aware of the questions raised" by Lucian? Or is the opposite the case, namely that he recognized the fatal weakness of the latter's argument for the separation of history and poetry? Anyone who examines carefully the treatment of poetry at *Hist. conscrib.* 8 will notice that the admixture of poetry and history is condemned and ridiculed only to the degree that poetry is panegyric. In other words, Lucian has nothing to say about poetry as such, and treats it only insofar as it is a 'metrical encomium'. The admixture of non-panegyric poetry and history, which would give rise to a kind of prose poetry, *i.e.*, an embellished and entertaining narrative, did not seem so self-evidently ab-

²² Lucian 12; Agath. *praef.* 19. The similarity between these two passages is noted by Lieberich (*supra* n.19) II 11; Cameron 33 n.1.

²³ Lucian 9; Agath. *praef.* 17.

surd to other ancient critics, Quintilian for example.²⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus recognized that the charms of Herodotus' prose rivaled those of the finest poetry, and claimed that in his own view history should have some poetic qualities.²⁵ A few ancient historians declared that they would ornament their narrative with beautiful language in order to please their readers, albeit without sacrificing in the least the chief goal of history, which is the truth.²⁶ And whatever we may think of him as a historian, Theophylactus Simocatta, one of Agathias' successors, also emphasized the kinship between history and poetry.²⁷

Lucian's preoccupation with the dangers of encomium informs his entire argument for the exclusion of poetry, blinding him to other, more essential, features of pleasing or edifying language. At *Hist. conscr.* 9 (cf. 13) he formulates the classic distinction between τὸ τερπνόν and τὸ χρησιμόν. The latter, he claims, is the proper object of history, which derives from its obligation to speak the truth; the former, however, he virtually equates with encomium, even though he paradoxically proceeds to argue that encomiastic language in fact displeases the majority of readers (10–13). In the end, he gives a very insufficient account of τὸ τερπνόν. This crippling limitation of Lucian's argument stems from his narrow and unimaginative view of the ultimate ends of history, about which he has remarkably little to say (in an essay that should be about little else). The ἔργον and τέλος of history is utility (9), but the utility Lucian has in mind is utterly pedestrian: it consists of giving the

²⁴ Approaching the matter from the standpoint of rhetoric, he proclaimed (*Inst.* 10.1.31) "that many of the excellencies of the historian require to be shunned by the orator. For history has a certain affinity to poetry and may be regarded as a kind of prose poem, while it is written for the purpose of narrative, not of proof.... Consequently, to avoid monotony of narrative, it employs unusual words and indulges in a freer use of figures (tr. H. E. Butler, Loeb edition). Strabo (1.2.9) also notes some fundamental similarities between poetry and history; cf. *Demetr. Eloc.* 19.

²⁵ *Thuc.* 23, 31; cf. 15 for Thucydides' moving portrayal of the destruction of cities, which leaves no scope for poetic improvement. Dionysius (2, 8) establishes Truth as the supreme object of history. At *Pomp.* 3 he self-consciously calls the works of both Herodotus and Thucydides "beautiful poems."

²⁶ *Jos. AJ* 14.2f; *Dio Cass.* 1.1.2.

²⁷ Theophyl. Sim. *Hist. praef.* 6–12 (the Homeric poems treated as a kind of protohistory), 3.5.1. According to Menander Protector, Agathias' direct successor, the Emperor Maurice, a lover of history and poetry, encouraged the production of both. Menander's own view of the relationship between the two is unclear: fr. 1 Blockley. An epigram of his survives at *Anth. Pal.* 1.101.

reader valuable practical lessons derived from the errors and successes of the past, which can be applied to similar circumstances in the future (42). We may set aside the justice of his attribution of this view to Thucydides and say only that it reduces the historian to a technocrat of practical advice. Certain passages of his treatise (*e.g.* 37, 49) make us wonder whether he saw any difference between the lessons of accurate historical accounts and those of military manuals. Had he grasped the literary and moral implications of historiography, he would undoubtedly have produced a very different account of τὸ τερπνόν.

Agathias, as we have seen, had a far broader appreciation of the uses and disadvantages of poetry for history, which was closely tied to his philosophical view of the goals of history. His aim is unabashedly patriotic, and his 'prose poetry' is devoted to the service of definite moral values. Important differences between him and Lucian can be traced to these aspects of his work. Whereas Lucian encourages the historian to be as impartial as possible—in effect *apolis* (41)²⁸—Agathias emphasizes his patriotism and praises his own native town (*praef.* 14f); for the moral importance of *patris* see *praef.* 2.9). Modern historians may feel uncomfortable in the presence of this undisguised moral purpose. Nevertheless, the moral candor and contrived poetic charm of Agathias' 'historical philosophy' stand apart from both the sterile advice of Lucian and the anguish of an age reluctant to abandon the comforts of an unaesthetic and amoral objectivity, but firmly convinced of the inherent subjectivity of all writing.

ATHENS

July, 1999

²⁸ An important precondition of Lucianic impartiality at *Hist. conscr.* 5 (ὡ γὰρ πρὸς ἡμᾶς γε τολμήσειεν ἄν τις ...) can be contrasted with Agath. *praef.* 10 for the age of Justinian and his successors.