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For the love of literature: a Byzantine perspective

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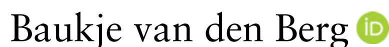
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> To safeguard against technocracies and against bureaucracies what is truly human in humankind – to deliver the world to us in its human dimension, that is to say, as it is revealed to individuals who are at the same time interrelated and separate – this, I believe, is the task of literature, and what makes it irreplaceable.
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, 'What can literature do?'[1]

One evening in 1326, Manuel Gabalas (later, Matthew, Metropolitan of Ephesos), was overcome by the desire to read – no text in particular, simply the first book he found.[2] The book he randomly selected from his shelves turned out to be Homer's *Iliad*. Upon reading, he found himself immersed in the narrative, despite its ostensible lack of moral edification.[3] The Sirens of Homeric poetry called to him: at once willingly and unwillingly, Gabalas continued reading, appreciative of the poet's clever narrative arrangement and the characters' lifelike portrayal, particularly how subtly their outer appearance reflected their inner traits. After reading selected passages, Gabalas reflected on the poem's overall meaning, struck by its revelations about human life. The Greeks, he realized, had started a war over just one woman to ensure that nobody would ever slight them again. He lamented contemporary humankind's condition: while the ancient Greeks were stirred on account of a mere mortal woman, her beauty perishable, the people of his day had no such experience when their soul, its beauty eternal, was violated or captured by demons. Over a matter as important as their

1 Tr. C. Fleming, *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1.1 (2020) 17–27 (27).

2 The account is based on *Letter* 20 ed. D.R. Reinsch, *Die Briefe von Matthaios von Ephesos im Codex Vindobonensis Theol. Gr. 174* (Berlin 1974); see also L. Silvano, 'Perché leggere Omero: il prologo all'Odissea di Manuele Gabala nelle due redazioni autografe', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 67 (2017) 217–37 (218). On Gabalas, see *PLP* 3309.

3 Gabalas, *Letter* 20.11–14.

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souls' very integrity, Gabalas observed, they hesitated to seek justice, although the prospective battle would not even require bloodshed.[4]

Gabalas reports his reflections on the *Iliad* in a letter to his erudite friend Michael Gabras.[5] He shares his experience, he explains, to demonstrate that a lover of philosophy may derive moral benefit even from worthless things. Of course, Gabalas' moral musings stand in a long tradition of ethical exegesis of Homeric poetry, almost as old as the written versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves. Regardless, what Gabalas describes is a personal reaction to the *Iliad* as literature, as verbal art appreciable for both its literary aesthetics and its bearing on lived experience. Whether the episode reflects reality, or whether Homer even intended the *Iliad* to be read this way, are moot points: Gabalas' reading stems from his own historical and cultural positionality, prompted by a text whose values continue to be redefined today.

Lovers of *logoi*

It is well known that the Byzantines lacked a term precisely capturing our notion of 'literature'. Indeed, 'applying the modern idea of literature to earlier times carries with it a certain amount of anachronism.'[6] The term most closely resembling 'literature', *logoi*, encompasses many texts denied 'literariness' today.[7] Byzantine readers described aesthetic literary experiences in reaction to a broad variety of texts: the patriarch Photios, for instance, comments on stylistic features of Galen's treatise *On Medical Schools*, Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Commentary on Genesis*, and Cyril of Alexandria's polemical *Against Nestorius*;[8] Michael Psellos is transported by the stylistic beauty of the opening of the Gospel of John and analyses the aesthetic qualities of the works of the fourth-century Church Fathers;[9] Theodore Prodromos and Eustathios of Thessalonike examine selected hymns of John of Damascus and Kosmas the Melodist from religious and literary perspectives;[10] and Theodore Metochites critically reflects on the literary style of Aristotle's philosophical works.[11]

4 Gabalas, *Letter* 20.31–54.

5 Gabras: *PLP* 3372.

6 A. Pettersson and D. Damrosch, with the collective of editors, 'General introduction: literature, history, world', in A. Pettersson (ed.), *Literature: a world history*, vol. 1: *Before 200 CE* (Hoboken 2022) lxiii–lxxx (lxiv).

7 On the term *logoi*, see, e.g., F. Bernard, *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry, 1025–1081* (Oxford 2014) 38–43; S. Papaioannou, 'What is Byzantine literature? An introduction', in idem (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature* (Oxford 2021) 1–17 (10).

8 Photios, *Bibliotheca* cod. 164, 38, 49.

9 On the Gospel of John, see S. Papaioannou, 'Readers and their pleasures', in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, 525–56 (537–8); on the Church Fathers, see the relevant essays in C. Barber and S. Papaioannou (eds), *Michael Psellos on Literature and Art: a Byzantine perspective on aesthetics* (Notre Dame IN 2017).

10 See B. van den Berg, 'Hymnography as literature in the commentaries by Gregory of Corinth, Theodore Prodromos, and Eustathios of Thessalonike', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 117.3 (2024) 877–900.

11 Metochites (*PLP* 17982), *Sententious Remarks* 3 ed. K. Hult, *Theodore Metochites on Ancient Authors and Philosophy: Semeioseis Gnomikai 1–26 & 71* (Gothenburg 2002).

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Contemporary readers may recognize literary or rhetorical qualities in these works; however, we do not typically study patristic writings, scriptural or liturgical texts, and philosophical treatises as literature. Conversely, for Byzantine readers, these texts clearly engendered literary experiences on account of their verbal art. Thus, should we wish to understand Byzantine literary culture on its own terms, we must cast a wide net by doing away with anachronistic divisions between secular and religious or technical/didactic and literary texts.[12]

To do so, we must begin with a deeper examination of Byzantine literary thought. Crucially, various Byzantine literati emphasize the close relationship between a work's form and its content or function; a text's success in achieving its religious, didactic, or moral purposes depends directly on its verbal artfulness. This idea underlies Psellos' well-known insistence on the combination of philosophy and rhetoric: to communicate his wisdom effectively, the erudite man needs not only compelling ideas but also eloquence.[13] In the twelfth century, Christopher Zonaras expresses a similar idea in an exhortatory treatise to his son Demetrios on the value of education: to produce intelligent ideas and express them cogently, one must study grammar and rhetoric and engage with ancient model texts. Failing to do so renders one a hidden treasure.[14] Similarly, Metochites urges Nikephoros Gregoras to cultivate his rhetorical sophistication alongside his philosophical and astronomical studies, to best share his scholarship.[15] Thus, these Byzantine writers deemed rhetorical or literary virtuosity essential for compellingly articulating one's ideas.

If literary form enables texts to fulfil their functions in moral edification, religious devotion, or political communication, clearly much was at stake surrounding *logoi* and the education facilitating it. That the field of *logoi* encompasses nothing less than civilization itself is expressed poignantly in an oration by Manuel Holobolos in honour of Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. In Holobolos' view, the emperor, a 'lover of *logoi* and a friend of intellectuals' (φιλολόγε καὶ φιλολόγιε βασιλεῦ), fights not only barbarian foes but also barbarous rusticity (βαρβαρώδους ἀγροικίας) and beast-like irrationality (κτηνώδους ἀλογίας) by restoring education in the imperial capital after the Latins had plunged the city into intellectual and moral darkness. Now

12 On such anachronistic binaries, see Papaioannou, 'What is Byzantine literature?', 10; P.A. Agapitos, 'Greek', in M. Chinca and C. Young (eds), *Literary Beginnings in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2022) 255–75 (258).

13 See e.g. S. Papaioannou, 'Rhetoric and the philosopher in Byzantium', in B. Bydén and K. Ierodiakonou (eds), *The Many Faces of Byzantine Philosophy* (Bergen 2012) 171–97; see also E. Amato and I. Ramelli, 'Filosofia *rhetoricans* in Niceforo Cumno: l'inedito trattato *Sui corpi primi e semplici*', *Medioevo greco* 6 (2006) 1–40.

14 See esp. lines 4–6 and 217–26 ed. E.T. Tsolakis, 'Χριστοφόρου Ζωναρᾶ, 1. Λόγος παραινετικὸς εἰς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ Δημήτριον, 2. Ἐπιστολές', *Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα της Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής του Αριστοτελείου Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης* 21 (1981) 387–407.

15 Metochites, *Poem* 4.24–82 ed. J. Featherstone and I. Ševčenko, 'Two poems by Theodore Metochites', *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26 (1981) 14–44. Gregoras: *PLP* 4443.

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that grammatical, rhetorical, and philosophical education have been re-established, *logos* and virtue thrive once again.[16]

Holobolos thus presents Michael's love for *logoi* as covering a wide range of learning and as having strong moral implications. Other Byzantine literati, too, praise their aristocratic or imperial patrons as *philologos*: John Tzetzes, for instance, dedicates his *Theogony* to the *sebastokratorissa* Irene, 'the greatest lover of *logoi*' (φιλολογωτάτη).[17] Constantine Manasses, in his funeral oration for Nikephoros Komnenos, celebrates his learned patron's 'desire for *logos*, his passion for books, his study of philosophy, his fondness of learning and the arts'; although Nikephoros led a military life, the fire of *philologia* and enthusiasm for rhetorical elegance always burned within him.[18] Similarly, Eustratios of Nicaea dedicates his commentary on Book 6 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to Anna Komnene, 'a pious princess, a princess who loves *logoi*, a princess who loves the good and the beautiful'; she values her soul over her body and adorns it with the good arts of *logoi*, sciences, and virtues.[19] Demetrios Kydones' joy at Helena Kantakouzene's penchant for *logoi* likewise displays a moral dimension: he hopes that she will become a shining example for others, restoring *logoi* to their rightfully prominent place given their inherent goodness. Seeking to stimulate her literary endeavours (and her piety), he sends her his translations of St Augustine's work.[20] For Byzantines, then, the compound *philologos*, by contrast with today's 'philologist',[21] preserved the affective aspect of its first part alongside the broad scope of its second: a philologist was anyone who invested and was invested – with intellectual and/or material resources – in *logoi*, whose cultivation crucially affected the moral well-being of both state and soul.

16 Holobolos (*PLP* 20147), *Oration* 3, esp. 95.8–97.7; quotations from 95.34–5, 95.10 ed. M. Treu, *Manuelis Holoboli orationes* (Potsdam 1907). On this oration's date and context, see R. Macrides, 'The New Constantine and the New Constantinople – 1261?', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 6.1 (1980) 30–41.

17 Tzetzes, *Theogony* 2 ed. P.L.M. Leone, *Ioannis Tzetzae Theogonia* (Lecce 2019). Manasses does the same in *Synopsis Chronike* 3 ed. O. Lampsides, *Constantini Manassis Breviarium Chronicum* (Athens 1996), as does Prodromos in his grammatical treatise for Irene: see N. Zagklas, 'A Byzantine grammar treatise attributed to Theodore Prodromos', *Graeco-Latina Brunensia* 16 (2011) 77–86 (84).

18 Lines 181–5 ed. E. Kurtz, 'Εὐσταθίου Θεσσαλονίκης καὶ Κωνσταντίνου Μανασσῆ μονῳδίαι περὶ τοῦ θανάτου Νικηφόρου Κομνηνοῦ', *Vizantiiskii Vremennik* 17 (1910) 302–22; quotation ll. 181–2: λόγου μὲν πόθος καὶ βίβλων ἔρως καὶ περὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν σπουδὴ καὶ τὸ φιλομαθὲς καὶ φιλόμουσον. On *philologos* and related terms in antiquity, see G. Nuchelmans, *Studien über philologos, philologia und philologein* (Zwolle 1950).

19 Eustratios, *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics* 6, 256.3–8 ed. G. Heylbut, *Eustratii et Michaelis et anonyma in ethica Nicomachea commentaria* (Berlin 1892); quotation from 3–4: βασιλὶς θεοσεβής, βασιλὶς φιλολόγε, βασιλὶς φιλάγαθε καὶ φιλόκαλε.

20 Kydones (*PLP* 13876), *Letter* 25.4–14 ed. R.-J. Loenertz, *Démétrius Cydonès, Correspondance* (Vatican City 1956); for a translation and discussion of this letter, see F. Kianka, 'The letters of Demetrios Kydones to Empress Helena Kantakouzene Palaiologina', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 64. *Homo Byzantinus: papers in honor of Alexander Kazhdan* (1992) 155–64 (157–9). Helena: *PLP* 21365.

21 See also Nietzsche's critique of the German philology of his era, as expressed most elaborately in 'We Philologists' (tr. W. Arrowsmith, *Arion* 1.2 (1973/4) 279–380).

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Literature and the human experience

In their general introduction to the four-volume *Literature: A World History* (2022), Anders Pettersson and David Damrosch place verbal artistry and transferability at the core of literature, defining transferability as 'the intended capacity of the ostensible content [sc. of a literary work] to be transferred to other circumstances in real life'. A literary work invites readers 'to think and feel about aspects of the human condition'; the outcome of that response, namely the literary experience, is thus situated in the reader and not in the text itself.[22] Across time and place, this quality of transferability has manifested itself differently. Therefore, to understand how literature was experienced in Byzantium, we must explore how readers and writers of this era engaged with different kinds of literary works. Although a comprehensive survey of Byzantine literary thought lies beyond this essay's scope, I outline two notions that are central to Byzantine reflections on transferability as a core quality of literature: 'usefulness' (ὠφέλεια) and allegory.

The idea that literature should be useful appears in relation to many different texts, from the poetry of the pagan past to hagiography, historiography, and romance. These frequent reflections on the benefits of literature 'make it clear that reading mattered primarily because of the effect that it had on the human *ethos* and *psyche*'.[23] Simultaneously, however, one may interpret such assertions of a work's usefulness as articulating Pettersson and Damrosch's 'transferability': a work is useful if readers can relate it to their own lived experience and employ it for further reflections on human life. For instance, Eustathios of Thessalonike and John Tzetzes notably define Homeric poetry as 'useful for life' (βιωφελής) because it teaches many moral lessons, lessons redefined by centuries of readers in terms meaningful to their specific historical and cultural circumstances.[24] Such claims can be dismissed as attempts to justify the authoritative role of a pagan poet in the Christian school curriculum or simply to lend weight to those scholars' ambitious commentary projects. Alternatively, they can be regarded as representing Byzantine experiences of reading Homeric poetry, similar to that of Gabalas at the opening of this essay.

Both pagan and sacred poetry produced such literary experiences. For instance, in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Euthymios Zigabenos delineates the transferability of David's sacred song by stressing its universal application:

22 Pettersson and Damrosch, 'General Introduction', lxiv–lxvi; quotations from lxv.

23 I. Toth, 'Modern encounters with Byzantine texts and their reading publics', in T. Shawcross and I. Toth (eds), *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond* (Cambridge 2018) 37–50 (42–3).

24 For the moral reading of ancient poetry in the twelfth century, see B. van den Berg, 'Twelfth-century scholars on the moral exemplarity of ancient poetry', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 63 (2023) 103–29, with further references. The usefulness of ancient literature is satirized in Theodore Prodromos' *Sale of Political and Poetical Lives*: see P. Marciniak, 'Theodore Prodromos' *Bion Prasis*: a reappraisal', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 219–39, esp. 225–7; E. Cullhed, '"The Blind Bard and I": Homeric biography and authorial personas in the twelfth century', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 38.1 (2014) 49–67 (52–3); I. Nilsson, 'Poets and teachers in the Underworld: from the Lucianic katabasis to the *Timarion*', *Symbolae Osloenses* 90.1 (2016) 180–204 (192–3).

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Καὶ ὅλως κοινόν ἐστι πᾶσιν ἰατρεῖον παντὸς πάθους, κεκτημένον φάρμακον, καὶ πάντες οἱ λόγοι πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ἁρμόζουσιν ὃ καὶ θαυμασιώτατον, καὶ τῆς βίβλου ταύτης ἰδιαίτατον. Οὐκ ἔστιν οὖν ἐν ἀνθρώποις, οὐ πρᾶξις, οὐ λόγος, οὐ πάθος, οὐ διανόημα, οὗ μὴ τὴν ἰατρείαν εὕροι τις ἐνταῦθα· συμφόρημα γάρ ἐστι πάσης ἔμπλεον θεωρίας καὶ πολιτείας, δημόσιον ταμεῖον διδασκαλίας παρεχόμενον ἐνταῦθα τὸ πρόσφορον· (Euthymios Zigabenos, *Commentary on the Psalms* PG 128, 51.56–52.8)

And in general, for everyone, it is a universal remedy for every suffering, as it possesses a medicine, and all words apply to all people, which is the most admirable and most characteristic feature of this book. There is thus no action, word, suffering, thought among people for which one would not find the remedy here, since it is a collection full of every view and way of life, a public treasury offering what is fitting to the circumstances.

A literary work fulfils this moral function only if we apply it to our own lives. Later in the preface, Zigabenos therefore outlines how readers can relate the Psalms to themselves: we can understand Christ's enemies as demons assailing Christians; Saul, Absalom, and other tyrants as the devil; David, 'both anointed and king, as each of us. Just as he was anointed with the oil of rule to kingship, so were we anointed with the oil of baptism to kingship in heaven.'[25] The parallels between Zigabenos' reflections on the Psalms and ideas on the moral exemplarity of pagan poetry in the scholarship of the same era highlight the centrality of transferability to the Byzantine reading experience.

Byzantine writers frequently anticipate such a readerly attitude by stressing their works' usefulness in the preface. Niketas Choniates, for example, opens his *History* by claiming that 'historical narratives have been invented for the common benefit of life' (αἱ ἱστορίαι … κοινωφελές τι χρῆμα τῷ βίῳ ἐφεύρηνται).[26] By recording the events of the past, Choniates continues, historical narratives elucidate human nature and expose readers to vast-ranging experiences from which they can glean moral lessons applicable to themselves.[27] By situating his work in a long historiographical tradition, Choniates undoubtedly held similar ambitions. Hagiographers, too, repeatedly emphasize the usefulness of their accounts: the *Life of Pelagia of Antioch* (*BHG* 1479) in Symeon Metaphrastes' *Menologion*, for instance, begins by stressing the benefits of narrating a tale about a virtuous woman, given its capability of inciting imitation in women as well as in men; Gregory the Cellarer opens his *Life of Saint Lazaros of*

25 Zigabenos, *Commentary on the Psalms* PG 128, 72.49–73.9: καὶ χριστὸν καὶ βασιλέα, τὸν καθ' ἕκαστον ἡμῶν· ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος ἐχρίσθη τῷ ἐλαίῳ τῆς ἀρχῆς εἰς βασιλείαν, οὕτω καὶ ἡμεῖς τῷ ἐλαίῳ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς βασιλείαν τῶν ἐν οὐρανοῖς.

26 Choniates, *History* 1.5 ed. J. van Dieten, *Nicetae Choniatae historia* (Berlin 1975). For Byzantine ideas on the moral value of history, see L. Neville, 'Why did the Byzantines write history?', in *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Belgrade 2016) 265–76, esp. 268–9.

27 Choniates, *History* 1.5–2.18.

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Mount Galesion (*BHG* 979) by recalling the moral advantages of reading about saints; and Theodora Raoulaina records the lives of the Graptoi brothers to prompt her readers to virtue.[28] Whether the story in question is fact or fiction is largely irrelevant: various Palaiologan romances, too, emphasize their potential lessons about human experience. *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*, for example, presents itself as a tale educating readers on the bitter-sweetness of love.[29] We should read such claims not as simply articulating literature's pervasive didactic thrust in Byzantium – particularly because modern literary sensibilities typically oppose didacticism to literariness – but as simultaneously representing the Byzantine literary experience and expressing literature's transferability.

Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe is a particularly interesting example, as this romance is often connected with a poem by Manuel Philes. After summarizing the romance's plot (which does not entirely match that of *Kallimachos*), Philes offers a moral-allegorical interpretation encouraging readers to 'look at the deeper meaning of the work and recognize yourself from the things that are told', thus explicitly inviting them to relate the tale to their own experiences.[30] Similarly, Philagathos of Cerami's allegorical interpretation of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* demonstrates how this novel, when read correctly, becomes 'educational and teaches ethical philosophy' (παιδαγωγικὴ καὶ ἠθικῆς φιλοσοφίας διδάσκαλος).[31] Rather than viewing such statements as representing discomfort with fictional or erotic tales, I suggest that we interpret them as explicit reflections on literature's transferability, as responses to the invitation of literary works 'to think and feel about aspects of the human condition'.

28 *Life of Pelagia* 1 ed. S. Papaioannou, *Christian Novels from the Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes* (Cambridge MA 2017); Gregory the Cellarer, *Life of Lazaros of Mount Galesion* 1 ed. *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* 3 (Brussels 1910); Theodora Raoulaina (*PLP* 10943), *Life of the Graptoi Brothers* 185.1–14 ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Ἀνάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς σταχυολογίας*, vol. 4 (St Petersburg 1897).

29 *K&C* 20–2 ed. M. Pichard, *Le Roman de Callimaque et de Chrysorrhoé* (Paris 1956). On the romances' didactic stance, see e.g. P.A. Agapitos, *Narrative Structure in the Byzantine Vernacular Romances: a textual and literary study of Kallimachos, Belthandros and Libistros* (Munich 1991) 54–64 and 'SO Debate: genre, structure and poetics in the Byzantine vernacular romances of love', *Symbolae Osloenses* 79 (2004) 7–101 (46–50); E. Lampaki, 'Narrative as instruction and the role of the narrator in *Kallimachos and Chryssorroi*', in E. Camatsos, T.A. Kaplanis, J. Pye (eds), *'His Words Were Nourishment and His Counsel Food': A Festschrift for David W. Holton* (Newcastle 2014) 47–63. For an alternative reading, see C. Cupane, 'Δεῦτε, προσκαρτερήσατε μικρόν, ὦ νέοι πάντες: Note sulla ricezione primaria e sul pubblico della letteratura greca medievale', *Diptycha* 6 (1994/5) 147–68.

30 Lines 84–5 ed. B. Knös, 'Qui est l'auteur du roman de Callimaque et de Chrysorrhoé?', *Ελληνικά* 17 (1962) 274–95: πλὴν ἀλλά τὸν νοῦν μυστικώτερον σκόπει, καὶ γνῶθι σαυτὸν ἀπὸ τῶν εἰρημένων. Philes: *PLP* 29817.

31 Philagathos, *Allegorical Interpretation of Heliodorus* 50–2 ed. N. Bianchi, *Il codice del romanzo: tradizione manoscritta e ricezione dei romanzi greci* (Bari 2006) 48–57. See M.G. Duluș, 'Philip-Philagathos' allegorical interpretation of Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*: Eros, mimesis and scriptural anagogical exegesis', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 114.3 (2021) 1037–1078. On allegorical reading of the ancient novels, see also I. Nilsson and N. Zagklas, '"Hurry up, reap every flower of the *logoi*!": the use of Greek novels in Byzantium', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017) 1120–48, esp. 1123–4, 1127–8.

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While Philagathos reserves a text's 'correct' interpretation for expert philosophers like himself, Philes' invitation may suggest that different readers attribute diverse meanings to a literary work depending on the circumstances of their own lives. Gabalas expresses a similar outlook regarding the *Odyssey*'s transferability in the preface to his moral reading of the poem. Odysseus' tale – he argues, in terms strikingly resembling those of Zigabenos cited earlier – is 'a truly universal lesson' (κοινὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς παιδευτήριον), 'a universal remedy to cure all those who suffer terrible things' (κοινόν τι φάρμακον θεραπείας πᾶσι τοῖς τὰ δεινὰ πάσχουσι). In Gabalas' reading, Homer intended his poem to be read as a story about human life, and as offering wide-ranging instruction in the vicissitudes of human existence; how exactly this operates, however, depends on readers' prior familiarity with suffering. Individual readers must actively relate the poem to their own lives; Gabalas' moral allegorical reading of the poem assists them in doing so.[32]

* * *

'Literature is the record we have of the conversation between those of us now alive on earth and everyone who's come before and will come after, the cumulative repository of humanity's knowledge, wonder, curiosity, passion, rage, grief and delight.'[33] Byzantine *logoi* belong to this world of literature, as they reflect Byzantine attempts to understand and communicate the human experience. Byzantine literary thought demonstrates that the era's readers approached literature with similar expectations concerning its relation to their own lives, often expressing this transferability in terms of morality and didacticism. That is to say, moral attitudes towards literature are central to Byzantine notions of literariness, not opposed to them. Literary aesthetics were valued as buttressing the import of *logoi*; thus, ethics and aesthetics were mutually enhancing qualities for a literary work. Being a 'philologist' had ethical implications that made literary activities – across the broad field of *logoi* – central to the moral wellbeing of state and individual. Of course, we can dismiss such ideas as the self-serving rhetoric of Byzantine literati or as empty *topoi* devoid of meaning. Alternatively, we can take them seriously and engage in a cross-temporal and cross-cultural conversation on the human experience and the love of *logoi*.

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32 Gabalas, *Prologue* 29–31 ed. Silvano, 'Perché leggere Omero'. On Gabalas' Homeric project and moral interpretation of the *Odyssey*, see J.B. Juan López, 'Manuel Gabalas: biography, intellectual network, works and thought', PhD diss., Central European University, 2024.

33 A. Kirsch and D. Stevens, 'Should literature be considered useful?', *New York Times* 7 September 2014, *Sunday Book Review* p. 31.

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