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Shelley, a reader of the *Dionysiaca*?

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Could Percy Bysshe Shelley have read with critical attention the *Dionysiaca*, the largest Greek epic from Antiquity, written by the enigmatic poet Nonnus of Panopolis (5th century)? It seems that Shelley asked for a copy of this work upon the advise of his friend Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866). And it is our purpose in this working paper to research the possible knowledge of Nonnus' poem in early XIXth century England. Hopefully, this note will allow a thorough discussion on the topic and a future conclusion to be published soon.

Peacock, a novelist and a poet, was fascinated by Nonnus¹ and imitated his bombastic style, full of repetitions and daring metaphors. Not being a mainstream Greek author, we believe that it is necessary to summarize here some points about Nonnus. He was a Greek-Egyptian poet dated, by all accounts, in the middle of the 5th century AD: we do not have any further information about his life. His *Dionysiaca* are a fascinating compilation of myths about the figure of Dionysos, an enormous epic poem that emulates Homer². Besides telling about the god's birth and deeds, his crusade against the Indians and his final apotheosis, the poem also includes descriptions, erotic

¹ See W. CHISLETT, *The classical influence in English Literature in the nineteenth century, and other essays and notes*, Walton Press, Philadelphia 1918, pp. 136-139. Cf. also W.H.D. ROUSE, *Nonnos' Dionysiaca*, Loeb Class. Libr., Harvard-Heinemann, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1940, vol. III, in the preface, without quoting his name

² He tries not only to imitate Homer, but to overcome him: 48 books, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Together.

adventures, epigrams and epitaphs, imitations of idylls, mourning songs and much more. On the other hand, Nonnus also wrote –or at least it is usually attributed to him– a *Paraphrase* to St. John Gospel, both works being written in a very peculiar hexameter. In the latter he tries to ennoble the simple language of the Gospel with metaphors and sometimes daring innovations, such as Dionysiac references and epic vocabulary referring to Christ. And the other way round: there are possible references to Christianity in his pagan work. Both poems and Nonnus' possible intention have puzzled Classical scholarship for a very long time³.

Now, Peacock was so fond of this obscure Greek poet from Egypt that he took some malicious delight using his knowledge of this strange poem –not even a normal topic for Classical scholars– to puzzle Oxford professors⁴. Peacock, in M. Butler's words, "was prodigiously well read in Greek and Latin, French and Italian, as well as in English Literature, and takes a special pleasure in confounding the reader by allusion to an esoteric favourite, such as the *Dionysiaca* of the fifth-century poet Nonnos"⁵. In his extravagance, Peacock considered the *Dionysiaca* "the finest poem in the world after the *Iliad*"⁶.

Peacock alluded in his novels to several passages of the *Dionysiaca*, both in the original Greek and in his own translations. In *The misfortunes of Elphin* and *Crotchet Castle*, for example, Peacock quotes directly in Greek in the middle of a speech: "as

³ Only on the basis of these two works, some claim that Nonnus converted, in some moment of his life, to Christianity, having written first the *Dion.* and then the *Par.*, but this, of course, is a disputed matter. Thus, there are many theories on the real identity of Nonnus: some say he was the bishop of Edessa of the same name, some other that he was a commentator of Gregory of Nazianzus, some even think that he could not have written both works, etc.

⁴ C. VAN DOREN, *The life of Thomas Love Peacock*, New York 1966 (repr. 1991) where quotations from Nonnus are frequent: pp. 18-19, 110, 132, 152, 156.

⁵ M. BUTLER, *Peacock Displayed. A Satirist in his context*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Londres 1979, pp. 19.

⁶ See again C. VAN DOREN, *The life of Thomas Love Peacock...*

Nonnus sweetly sings”⁷. One of the characters of *Crotchet Castle*, reverend Folliot, quotes *Dion. XXV* 280 in chapter II and *Dion. I* 528 in chapter XIV. *The misfortunes of Elphin* contains a kind of summary of books XIV-XV from Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* (chapter III) and chapter VIII begins quoting *Dion. XII* 21-24 in translation, as in chapter X (*Dion. XXXIII* 29-32)⁸. In his poetry, some influence of Nonnus style can be found as well, e.g. in his *Rhododaphne*⁹. Moreover, he had conceived a huge poetic project: a *Nympholepsy*, of which there is a draft in a manuscript from the British Library¹⁰.

Peacock had a very intense correspondence with many men of letters, among whom we find often references to Shelley. It seems that his letters dealt frequently with questions of literary criticism. He wrote an essay about his friendship and contact with Shelley. In an essay entitled *The four Ages of Poetry*¹¹ (to be published afterwards along with his *Memoirs of Shelley*), Peacock classifies the four stages of ancient verse: “The iron age of classical poetry may be called the bardic; the golden, the Homeric; the silver, the Virgilian; and the brass, the Nonnic”, and he praises “the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus, which contains many passages of exceeding beauty in the midst of masses of amplification and repetition”. This article stimulated the debate with Shelley.

Peacock tried to arouse Shelley’s interest for the *Dionysiaca* in other occasions. In a letter of August 19th 1818 addressed to Shelley, Peacock writes: “I read Nonnus occasionally. The twelfth book, which contains the ‘Metamorphoses of Ampelus’, is

⁷ Cf. *The works of Thomas Love Peacock*, vol. IV: *The misfortunes of Elphin and Crotchet Castle*, AMS Press Inc., New York 1967, pp. 24, 70, 83, 191-192.

⁸ Dinas Vaur’s war song in this book has a certain Dionysiac inspiration. It is printed in the preface of Nonnus’ first English edition and translations, W.H.D. ROUSE, *Nonnos’ Dionysiaca...*, vol. III

⁹ Cf. D. BUSH, *Mythology and the Romantic tradition in English poetry*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1937, pp. 184

¹⁰ British Library, Ms. 36815, ff. 120-122. Cf. M. BUTLER, *Peacock Displayed...*, pp. 110-111.

¹¹ Published in 1820, cf. T.L. PEACOCK, *Memoirs of Shelley and other essays and reviews*, edited by H. Mills, Rupert Hart-Davis, London 1970, pp 124.

very beautiful [...]”¹². Both in Van Doren’s study and other sources, such as Peacock’s letters, edited by Joukovski¹³, it is obvious that Peacock wrote in some occasions to his friend Shelley concerning the excellence of Nonnus’ poetry. Apparently it became more than enough encouragement for Shelley, who finally asked for a copy of the book, incited by the insistence of his friend Peacock¹⁴. We know, therefore, that Shelley wrote to his bookseller as early as December 1817 in order to ask for a French translation of Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*, “printed I think at Paris”¹⁵.

R.L. Lind, who has studied Nonnus and his readers across the ages, fails to examine the question in detail. He says: “The edition Shelley ordered according to the letter in Peck II, 49, specifies the edition ‘printed I think at Paris’. The editions printed before 1817 could not have fitted this description, of course, since none was published at Paris until that of the Comte de Marcellus, Didot, 1856.”¹⁶

Lind argues, therefore, that it is not likely that Shelley ever read Nonnus in a French edition, as stated in that letter, since, in his opinion, there was not a French translation printed in Paris until that of Marcellus in 1856¹⁷. But the fact is that there were several French translations and versions of Nonnus’ poem before that date.

Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* enjoyed some success in the 16th and 17th century, both in Italy and France. Poets such as the Italian Giambattista Marino (1569-1625) imitated the Greek author in several works¹⁸. In France, Jean Dorat (1508-1588) knew so well that

¹² C. VAN DOREN, *The life of Thomas Love Peacock...*, pp. 134.

¹³ N.A. JOUKOVSKI, *The letters of Thomas Love Peacock*. Vol. I: 1792-1827, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001.

¹⁴ Cf. N.A. JOUKOVSKI, *The letters of Thomas Love Peacock*. Vol. I..., pp. 134-144, letters 73, 75, 76.

¹⁵ W.E. PECK, *Shelley: His Life and Work*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1927, 2, pp. 48-49.

¹⁶ R.L. LIND, “Nonnos and His Readers”, *Res Publica Litterarum* I, 1978, University of Kansas, pp. 159-170, p. 169-170, n. 23

¹⁷ COMTE DE MARCELLUS, *Les Dionysiaques ou Bacchus*. Poème en XLVIII chants, grec et français, précédé d’une introduction, suivi de notes littéraires, géographiques et mythologiques, d’un tableau raisonné des corrections et de tables et index complets, rétabli, traduit et commenté par le Comte de Marcellus, ancien ministre plénipotentiaire. Paris, Librairie de Firmin-Didot frères, 1856.

¹⁸ See GIOVAN BATTISTA MARINO, *La Sampogna*, V. DE MALDE (ed.), Parma 1993, pp. 137-189, F. TISSONI, *Nonno di Panopoli. I canti di Penteo*. La nuova Italia editrice. Firenze 1999, pp. 56-61, esp. 57-58.

poem¹⁹ that he drew leitmotifs from Nonnus for some frescoes by Niccolo dell'Abate devoted to the celebrations of the *grande entrée* of Queen Elizabeth of Habsburg, wife of Charles IX, in Paris (March 30th, 1571)²⁰. And that was the beginning of the interest for Nonnus' poem in Baroque France.

In 1605, when the Latin translation of Nonnus's *Dionysiaca* is printed in Germany²¹, Claude Garnier publishes *L'Ariadne de Nonnus Panopolitain*, dedicated to the duchess of Longueville (*dédiée en étrennes à Madame la Duchesse de Longueville, en l'an 1605*)²². No place of publication is printed, but arguably it is again Paris.

However, twenty years later, Claude Boitet de Frauville translates the whole poem, 48 books in some 20,000 hexameters in the original Greek²³. This French translation of the whole poem, heavily based in the Latin version, will have an enormous influence upon the arts of this epoch. The painter Nicholas Poussin, for example, read it and used Nonnus as a source for inspiration²⁴ and Michel de Marolles quotes him in his *Tableaux du Temple des Muses* (1655), as a useful source for artists of all times. This accessible French translation contributed greatly to making the *Dionysiaca* popular. Quoting Malcolm Bull, "insofar as Nonnos ever found a wider audience it was through this edition"²⁵.

¹⁹ Cf. R.G. PFEIFFER, *A History of Classical Scholarship from 1300-1850*, Oxford University Press 1976 [Ger.tr. *Die klassische Philologie von Petrarca bis Mommsen*, Verlag C.H. Beck, Munich 1982, pág. 133] y G. DEMERSON, *Dorat et son temps. Culture classique et présence au monde*, Adosa, Clermont-Ferrand 1983, pp. 174, 175, 179.

²⁰ N. MAHE, *Le Mythe de Bacchus dans la poésie lyrique de 1549 à 1600*, P. Lang, Bern-Frankfurt-New York-Paris 1988, pp. 39-40.

²¹ E. LUBINUS, *Nonni Panopolitae Dionysiaca*, nunc denuo in lucem edita et latine reddita per Eilhardum Lubinum, poeseos in Academia Rostochina professorem. Ex Bibliotheca Ioannis Sambuci Pannonii. Cum lectionibus et coniecturis Gerarti Falkenburgii Noviomagi et indice copioso. Hanoviae, typis Wechelianiis apud Claudium Marnium et heredes Iohannis Aubrii, 1605.

²² *L'Ariadne de Nonnus Panopolitain* [...] par Claude Garnier, S. L. 1605.

²³ Entitled *Les Dionysiaques, ou les voyages, les amours et les conquêtes de Bacchus aux Indes*, traduites du grec de Nonnus Panopolitain, R. Fouët, Paris 1625.

²⁴ M. BULL, "Poussin and Nonnos", *Burlington Magazine* 140, 1148 (Nov. 1998), 724-738.

²⁵ M. BULL, "Poussin...", p. 724

But there was one more version of Nonnus' epic in Baroque France: the literary rewriting of the *Dionysiaca* by P. de Marcassus: *Les Dionysiaques, ou, le parfait heros* (1631)²⁶. The book was also printed in Paris.

It seems clear that Shelley could have ordered a copy of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, in French translation and "printed I think at Paris", since, as we can see, there were even three French versions of the poem published in that city. We would suggest that Shelley bought Boitet de Frauville's translation, printed in Paris en 1625, for it was by far more widely read than the other two versions (Marcassus' and Garnier's). Certainly, it was not Marcellus' edition, published centuries later.

Now, there was also an English translation of Nonnus that Shelley could have read. Let us mention, as a coda to these notes, that in October 1822 an anonymous writer praised Nonnus' poetry in some remarkable pages of *The London Magazine*. "On the poetry of Nonnus", mysteriously signed by some unknown *Vida*, is a defence of Nonnus' style²⁷ and includes excerpts of translations from Nonnus' *Paraphrase to Saint John* (IV 25 ff. and XI 40 ff.) and *Dionysiaca* (book I), and a comparison to the opening of Milton's *Paradise Lost*²⁸. It includes a long passage of book X, concerning the love relation between Bacchus and Ampelus, in an elegant English translation, published in the following issue (November 1822, pp. 440-443). We are inclined to think that this anonymous text could be ascribed Peacock

Shelley died in July 8th, 1822, when his boat sank during a stormy voyage to Lerici, so he could not read the anonymous translation of *The London Magazine*, but we

²⁶ P. DE MARCASSUS, *Les Dionysiaques, ou, le parfait heros* [...] A Paris: chez Tovssainct dv Bray..., 1631.

²⁷ "On the poetry of Nonnus", *The London Magazine* (oct. 1822) 336-340 / (nov. 1823) 440-443.

²⁸ Some parallel has been noted between Milton and Nonnus. The *Dion.* I 206-18, II 644-49 speak of the rage of Typhon, and so does Milton, *Paradise Lost* I 199 and II 539-546: *Others, with vast Typhoean rage, more fell / rend up both rocks and hills, and ride the air / in whirlwind*. See G.F. BUTLER, "Nonnos and Milton's 'Vast Typhoean Rage': The *Dionysiaca* and *Paradise Lost*", *Milton Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1999 Oct) 71-76. See also the comparison between *Dion.* XLI 185-203 and *Paradise Lost* IV 340 ss. suggested in W.H.D. ROUSE, *Nonnos' Dionysiaca...*, vol. III, pp. 210-211.

must remark here something that has passed unnoticed until now. Elton published in 1814 a book entitled *Specimens of the Classical Poets ... from Homer to Tryphiodorus translated into English Verse, and illustrated with biographical and critical notices* (Baldwin, London 1814, in three volumes) and it seems that there was a translation of some passages of the *Dionysiaca*. We shall leave the question here *sub iudice* for further research. A visit to the British Library can make clear if this can be considered the first English translation of the poem, in 1814. Charles Abraham Elton (1778-1853), a classical scholar and poet²⁹, used to sign with the pseudonym *Olen* in *The London Magazine*, where he dedicated some verses to Charles Lamb (1775-1834), another poet and friend of Shelley also enamoured of Antiquity³⁰.

Before that date, the *Dionysiaca* were undoubtedly known before to Bentley³¹ and, probably, to Milton; but no translation into English that we know of existed before. More than a hundred years later, in 1939, the modern translator of Nonnus, W.H.D. Rouse, claimed to have written the first English version, in the general introduction to his extraordinary work³²: “This is the first English translation of Nonnos, and there are no others in any language except the Latin and French, and quite lately, one in German hexameters.” Obviously, he was nor aware of what we just saw.

At this point, it becomes necessary to examine Shelley’s poetry and search for possible influences of the *Dionysiaca*. It seems that he followed the advice of his persevering friend Peacock and that he read the poem, either in French or in English.

²⁹ *The Brothers and Other Poems*, 1820

³⁰ Apparently we have a group of poets and scholars very fond of Greek myths, who could have had access to Nonnus’ mythological poem. Some further considerations are required here, but it goes beyond the aim of this paper.

³¹ Bentley’s appreciation of Nonnus was as follows: “He had a great variety of Learning and may pass for an able Grammarian, though a very ordinary poet”, as written in *A Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris. With an answer to the objections of the Honourable Charles Boyle*. London, Henry Mortlock & John Hartley, 1699 [*Dissertations upon the epistles of Phalaris, Themistocles, Socrates, Euripides, and The fables of Aesop*. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by the late Wilhelm Wagner. London, G. Bell & sons, 1883, pág. 90]. However, Bentley shows a good knowledge of Nonnus’ poem, for he quotes by

But, is it possible to find any Nonnian echoes in Shelley? We shall leave this question open, for it goes beyond the aim of this note. Since Shelley was very fond of classical mythology, it would not seem odd to think that he looked up in the *Dionysiaca*, an enormous mythological poem, in search for inspiration. In the light of what we have seen, his verses dealing with Actaeon's myth in *Adonais* (XXXI: [...] he, as I guess, / Had gazed on Nature's naked loveliness, Actaeon-like, and now he fled astray / With feeble steps o'er the world's wilderness, / And his own thoughts, along that rugged way, / Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey) could be compared now to *Dion.* V 287-551, one of the longest and most interesting versions of that myth. In any case, Shelley is not the only English poet who could have read and followed the author of the *Dionysiaca*³³.

The fact is that we know that Peacock advised Shelley to read the story of Bacchus and Ampelus, as written by Nonnus. For Peacock it was an extraordinary work of art ("The twelfth book, which contains the 'Metamorphoses of Ampelus', is very beautiful"). And Shelley himself wrote some notes about one of his early friends, in a passage upon the antique group of Bacchus and Ampelus that he had seen in Florence. "Look, the figures are walking with a sauntering and idle pace, and talking to each other as they walk, as you may have seen a younger and an elder boy at school, walking in some grassy spot of the play-ground with that tender friendship for each other which the age inspires." And he describes the group at the Uffizi in a lovely and similar manner: "Bacchus and Ampelus. Ampelus with a beast-skin over his shoulder, holds a cup in his right hand, and with his left embraces the waist of Bacchus. Just as you may have seen a younger and an elder boy at school, walking in some remote grassy spot of their

heart and very precisely *Dion.* XLVII 29 as a source for the correct spelling of the name "Zagreus". Some of his critics thought he had invented this verse (cf. W.H.D. ROUSE, *Nonnos' Dionysiaca*.... III, p. 374, a).³² W.H.D. ROUSE, *Nonnos' Dionysiaca*...., vol. I, p. viii.

playground with that tender friendship towards each other which has so much of love. The countenance of Bacchus is sublimely sweet and lovely, taking a shade of gentle and playful tenderness from the arch looks of Ampelus, whose cheerful face turned towards him, expressed the suggestions of some droll and merry device.”³⁴ Shelley seems to know the episode of Bacchus and Ampelus as told in the *Dionysiaca*: the myth is quite rare to find in other Ancient sources. Ovid alludes very shortly to the story of Ampelus, in relation to the star Vindemitor (*Fasti* III 409-410: *Ampelon intonsum satyro nymphaque creatum / fertur in Ismariis Bacchus amasse iugis*). The star Vindemitor appears in other sources³⁵, but the myth of Ampelus, as told by Nonnus, cannot be found elsewhere. There must have been a common Hellenistic source for Ovid and Nonnus that would associate this star with the myth of Ampelus and his metamorphose, developed in late Antiquity: but Nonnus’ tale is the only complete reference. Some other sculptures seem to allude to the story: some of them in the British Museum and some other example that have little relevance³⁶. Nonnus tells the story in three long books (X to XII), which start with Bacchus in love with Ampelus, a *puer dilectus superis*. It is told how they play as comrades in a sportive mood –and some *topoi* of homosexual love–, mentioning a grassy playground, a river, etc. Just as Shelley describes the group, as two fellow students playing.

To sum up, Shelley could have read a copy of the *Dionysiaca*, in a French translation, before his death; he could have even had access, in English translation, to rare mythological narrations such as the story of Bacchus enamoured of Ampelus. The

³³ Gamaniel Bradford argues that Keats could have read Nonnus’ poem when he wrote *Endymion*, cf. G. BRADFORD, *Journal*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1933, pp. 264-265.

³⁴ See P. B. SHELLEY, *Poems and Prose*, T. WEBB (Editor), Everymann S., 1995, From [Notes on Sculpture] Bacchus and Ampelus.

³⁵ G. CHRÉTIEN, Nonnos de Panopolis, *Les Dionysiaques*. Tome IV: Chants IX-X, Les belles lettres, Paris 1985, p. 67, quotes some minor references in Euctemon (Geminus III 6) and Aratus *Ph.* 138.

³⁶ A piece at the Pushkin Museum, in Moscow, another at the Pelizaeus-Museum of Hildesheim. Cf. M.A. ZAGDOUN, “Ampelos”, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* I, Zurich-Munich 1994, pp. 691-692. See also G. CHRÉTIEN, Nonnos de Panopolis, *Les Dionysiaques...*, pp. 68-69

English translation of this passage was published in 1822, the year of his death, by an anonymous admirer of Nonnus; but nevertheless Shelley seems to have known well the episode. As a new contribution, we have also brought to light a possible first English translation which had passed unnoticed to Nonnian studies, published in 1814, more than a century earlier than Rouse's one. Undoubtedly this translation could have been accessible to Shelley before his death.

Nonnus' *Nachleben* is still an open question and much work needs to be done. Many years later, in August 16th 1851, a reader (with the pseudonym *Aegrotus*) sent a letter to *Notes and Queries*. In his question –which would never be answered–, this person asked for any English translation of Nonnus' poem: he did not know that the only existing translations were the fragments in Elton's *Specimens* and the mysterious translation of book X, on Bacchus and Ampelus, by some unknown *Vida*, in *The London Magazine*; this anonymous reader never knew that there were one of the greatest poets of the English language could have found inspiration in such obscure epic, the *Dionysiaca*.

We leave the question open for the time being and announce a forthcoming article with some conclusions.