CHAPTER XLIII

A Desire (not) to Die For.
Narrating Emotions in Pseudo-Nilus' *Narrations*

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This chapter explores a short, sophisticated, and narratologically labyrinthine Greek text to which scholars commonly refer as the *Narrationes* or *Narrations*.[1] The earliest manuscripts that preserve it (from the tenth and eleventh centuries), attribute it to a certain 'Nilus the monk' or 'Nilus the eremite monk',[2] who as early as the eleventh century was identified with Nilus of Ancyra (also known as Nilus the Ascetic),[3] the late fourth- and early fifth-century author of a corpus of letters, commentaries, and treatises on the monastic life. The text has been transmitted alongside other works attributed to him and was printed as part of his corpus in the *Patrologia graeca*, vol. 79;[4] however, today most scholars no longer accept that traditional identification (hence 'Pseudo-Nilus', which I also adopt).[5] They rather see it as an assumption built on thematic similarities between the *Narrations* and some of the other

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[1] Ever since her classic *Narrators and Focalizers* (1987) was one of the first books on my reading list as a young graduate student in the early 2000s, Irene de Jong has been for me an admired and inspirational scholar, a dedicated and supportive reader, and a generous colleague. This chapter, dedicated to her with warmth and gratitude, illustrates, I hope, how narratology can 'sharpen and enrich our interpretation of texts' (De Jong 2014: v). I thank the editors of this volume, Evelien Bracke, John Morgan, and audiences in Cologne, Paris, and St Andrews for valuable comments on earlier versions of this chapter. It was written with the support of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (*FP7/2007–2013*; European Research Council Starting Grant 337344: *Novel Saints*) and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (European Research Council Consolidator Grant 819459: *Novel Echoes*).

[2] See Conca 1983a: 1 for these and other variations across manuscripts.

[3] The identification with Nilus of Ancyra is first found in the eleventh-century Codex Marcianus graecus (Conca 1983a: xi, 1).

[4] See Migne 1865.

[5] The traditional identification has been questioned since Heussi 1916, 1917. It is accepted by e.g. Degenhart 1915 and Ringshausen 1967: 9–31.

writings attributed to Nilus, such as his *Letter to Heliodorus Silentiarius*.[6] The place of composition is equally uncertain, with Elusa (in Palestine), where part of the story is set, perhaps being the best educated guess so far.[7] The dating of the text too is debated; common opinion has converged on the (possibly early) fifth century CE.[8]

The text was divided into seven parts by its seventeenth-century editor Pierre Poussines[9] – a division followed in the editions of Conca (1983a) and Link (2005), and in Caner's (2010) English translation.[10] But, as the following summary aims to demonstrate, these units cut across the story's complex narrative structure. At the beginning of the story, an anonymous primary narrator reports to an unidentified primary narratee his arrival in the city of Pharan after an attack by barbarians (τῶν βαρβάρων, 1.1). He recounts that he overheard some locals praising the life of desert solitude (τὸν ἐρημικὸν ... ἐπῄνουν βίον, 1.1) and reports the ensuing conversation that he had with them on that topic (1.1–11). He then cites a long story that he told them about his earlier adventures (2.1–6; 2.15–4.14): how he had left his wife and departed for Sinai with his son Theodulus to live a life of desert solitude amongst a community of monks there (2.1–6); how barbarians had attacked and had killed a number of monks and abducted others, including Theodulus (4.1–6); how both he and other survivors had reacted to those events at the time (4.7–10); and, finally, how he had reached Pharan (4.11–14). At this point, the narrator recounts, the conversation between him and the Pharanites was interrupted by the arrival of a slave who had escaped from the barbarian camp (5.1) and who reported how the barbarians had been plotting to sacrifice both him and Theodulus, and how he had escaped while Theodulus had stayed (5.2–20). After citing the slave's account, the primary narrator describes how he learned that Theodulus was alive, had been sold to the bishop of Elusa, and was being prepared to be ordained priest (6.11–20). He relates that upon his arrival in Elusa (6.22), he was reunited with Theodulus (6.23), who filled him in about his whereabouts (7.1–16). In the final paragraphs (7.17–19), he recounts how the

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[6] See Caner 2010: 73–75 and Link 2005: 4–8 on the different voices in this debate and their most important arguments.

[7] As suggested by Caner 2004: 137–138.

[8] Klein 2018: 1077, Morgan 2015: 168, and Caner 2010: 76. Its *terminus ante quem* is a Syriac translation of an excerpt found in a manuscript dated to 886 (Caner 2010: 75).

[9] Poussines 1639, reprinted as Migne 1865: 589A–649B.

[10] In this chapter, I cite the Greek from Link's edition (2005) and the English translation from Caner 2010.

bishop insisted that he too enter priesthood. Theodulus and he accepted and prepared to return home (7.18).[11]

As is the case for so much early Christian narrative, research into the *Narrations* has long focused on questions of authorship, authenticity, and historical enquiry.[12] At the same time, this text has also been recognized for its rich intertextual design. It is sprinkled with quotations from the Old Testament and scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to motifs it has in common with Greek love novels.[13] It is easy enough to read it as a so-called 'family romance', with a father and his son first being separated and then happily reunited.[14] One novel that has been a particularly important source of inspiration for Ps.-Nilus is Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*: not only does Ps.-Nilus clearly draw for his treatment of sacrificial rites of the barbarians (3.2–3) on Tatius' description of how Egyptian bandits (also called 'barbarians') prepare to sacrifice the heroine Leucippe (3.12.1, 3.15.2; 3.16.3),[15] but the entire narrative procedure is also strikingly similar.[16]

This chapter takes issue with one claim that often surfaces in scholarship on the *Narrations*: that it is a straightforward glorification of eremitic monasticism as a way of life.[17]

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[11] For more extensive summaries, see Solzbacher 1989: 202–208 and Morgan 2015: 171–175.

[12] See e.g. Henninger 1955, Ringshausen 1967, Christides 1973, Mayerson 1975. Tsames and Katsanes 2003: 340–342 take stock of the most important strands.

[13] Heussi 1916: 112–115, 1917: 138–144, Conca 1983b, Devreesse 1940: 220, Henninger 1955: 95–97, Tsames and Katsanes 2003: 335–336, and Bossina 2008. Degenhart 1918: 19–26 has reservations about the significance of a number of similarities.

[14] See also Messis 2014: 324. Robins 2000 discusses other such family romances dating to roughly the same era (Jerome's *Liber Tobiae*, the *Recognitiones*, and the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*). Flusin 2011: 212 more generally reads the *Narrations* as 'a novel' and 'novelistic fiction'.

[15] Henrichs 1972: 53–56, Link 2005: 8–11.

[16] Conca 1983b: 352 (in passing) and Morgan 2015: 184–185 (in more detail).

[17] See e.g. Heussi 1917: 156 (on the depiction of the monks' life in the *Narrations* as 'unverkennbar als Idealbild des asketischen Lebens gemeint'), Solzbacher 1989: 236 (on the depiction of the monks' way of life as idealizing), Binggeli 2007: 164 (on both the *Narrations* and other Sinai narratives as 'une importante production littéraire à la gloire du monachisme sinaïtique'), and Detoraki 2014: 79 (on the monks' massacre as a sign of sainthood crowning

Such a reading is facilitated by the fact that the eremitic monks are clearly depicted as heroes because of the fortitude and perseverance that they display in the face of death. They are associated, for example, with a number of Old Testament paradigms and sharply contrasted with the cruel, murderous barbarians.[18] In addition, the text presents itself as an example of martyr literature. It explicitly refers to the monks as 'holy' (τῶν ἁγιῶν, 4.14), uses tropes commonly associated with martyrdom to describe both their extraordinary courage in facing death willingly and actual deaths,[19] and mentions the celebration of their commemoration in the liturgical calendar (on the 14th of January; 4.14).[20] Indeed, it can reasonably be assumed that, together with other stories such as Ammonius' *Report*, the *Narrations* echoes a local martyr tradition that goes back to bedouin raids in the fourth century.[21] Later writings, which straightforwardly rehearse the information provided by Ps.-Nilus, testify to the veneration of the murdered monks as martyrs in Constantinople, where their relics were said to have been brought during the reign of emperor Justin II (565–578).[22] Both the self-presentation of the *Narrations* as martyr literature and the role it subsequently played as source material

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their monastic career). To the best of my knowledge, only Morgan 2015 offers a deviant interpretation (to which I return in my conclusion).

[18] See e.g. Link 2005: 114, 136 on the negative characterization of the barbarians and positive depiction of the monks, and Ward 2015: 34–38, 105 on the uncivilized barbarians enhancing the spiritual power of the monks, and the 'creation of two diametrically opposed groups, the heroic Christians and the villainous nomads'. On the paradigms, see Caner 2010: 79–81.

[19] For example, the monks' deaths are presented as 'prizes' or 'trophies' (τοὺς ἀθλούς, 4.12, 6.4), and the monks themselves as 'athletes' (τοῖς ἀθλοῦσιν, 4.12; τῆς ἀθλήσεως, 6.4; ἀγωνιστήν, 6.6) who receive victory wreaths (τοῖς στεφάνοις, 4.12; στεφάνους, 6.4) for their contests (τοὺς ἀγῶνας, 4.12; ἠγώνισαι, 6.4). On this rhetoric, see Ward 2015: 105–108.

[20] In the manuscript tradition, accordingly, the *Narrations* are read as a martyrium from the earliest manuscripts onwards (Heussi 1917: 139).

[21] Mayerson 1976, Solzbacher 1989: 240–242, Caner 2004: 142, Ward 2015: 97–102.

[22] The *Menologium Basilianum* (*Patrologia graeca* 117, ed. Migne 1894, col. 256, under 14 January), for example, characterizes them as 'holy fathers' and repeats the sharp contrast between their asceticism and their uncultivated assailers already present in Ps.-Nilus. The *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (ed. Delehaye 1902, *AASS* vol. 62, 389–391) again adopts the common metaphor of martyrdom as *athlēsis* to denote the death of the monks.

documenting the monks' cult arguably explain to some extent why modern readers too have readily continued to interpret it as a straightforward glorification not only of the fortitude and perseverance of the monks in the face of death specifically, but also of their life of eremitic monasticism more generally. But is it? I argue that a reading of the story that takes into account its narratological configuration does not support that view. I will show that in Ps.-Nilus' story the concept of eremitic monasticism is inextricably bound up with that of emotion, and that an analysis of how emotions are narratologically constructed can shed a different light on the appreciation of the concept of eremitic monasticism.

Emotions and their Narratological Configuration

To the best of my knowledge, emotions in the *Narrations* have never been examined in any detail. Yet, they are very prominent for different reasons. For one, they are instrumental in broadly contrasting the two groups around which the story revolves and therefore crucial in shaping its moral message. Whereas the monks are positively depicted as rejecting passions (e.g. 3.12–13; 5.14), the barbarians are characterized negatively precisely by their wild and uncontrolled impulses (e.g. 4.2).[23] Moreover, emotions set the plot in motion at crucial junctures. Immediately in the first lines, the narrator is explicit that, when he arrived in Pharan, he was in great dismay (σφόδρα συγκεχυμένος) after the attack of the barbarians, his face 'still bore a visible account of the calamity' (φανερὰν ἐπὶ τοῦ προσώπου φέρων) and the Pharanites decided to speak to him because they were struck by his 'tear-soaked eyes and most grievous lamentations' (δεδακρυμένοις τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ... καὶ λίαν ὀδυνηρὸν προσοιμώξαντος, 1.1).[24] The *fabula* too (i.e. the events in their reconstructed, chronological order) is set in motion by an emotion – and one which is connected directly to the topic of the eremitic life: in the first episode of the narrated time the former self of the primary narrator experienced a vehement desire (πόθῳ, 1.3; σφόδρα ... τεθαύμακα, 1.3; ἐπιθυμία πολλή, 2.2) for desert solitude, which made him leave home and depart for Sinai. In other words, both the

[23] On this contrast, and more generally, the theme of rejecting vehement passions, see Caner 2010: 79, 85 n. 43.

[24] On the narrator's tears as reminiscent of those of Odysseus preceding his own long and analeptic account to the Phaeacians (Hom. *Od.* 8.521–531), see Link 2005: 112–113.

fabula and the way in which it is told in the narrative are presented as determined by the force of emotional disposition.

Just like other aspects of the story, Ps.-Nilus' construction of emotions is strongly reminiscent of Achilles Tatius' but more complex, because the narratological configuration is more complex too. Whereas in Tatius' novel the story is recounted almost entirely by one internal, secondary narrator (Clitophon), the *Narrations* accommodates three such narrators (the anonymous narrator in Pharan, the runaway slave, and Theodulus) who in subsequent, more or less extensive analepses cover different episodes of the story. Moreover, the portion of the story recounted by the primary narrator is not limited to the introductory frame (1.1) as in Achilles Tatius (1.1.1–2.3), but is resumed briefly over halfway of the narrative (5.1) and covers (in chronological order) the events following the narrator's encounter with the Pharanites from the opening scene (5.1; 6.1–3; 6.8–24; 7.17–19). This configuration turns the story into a heuristic puzzle reminiscent of, for example, Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, where different narrators similarly present pieces of information about different episodes of the story.[25] But unlike Achilles Tatius or Heliodorus, Ps.-Nilus builds on this narratological configuration to break down his anonymous protagonist in three different 'selves' (i.e. the same character at different moments in time). By definition, each of these 'selves' focalizes the events in a way that is determined by an unequal degree of cognitive access to the story as we read it: the primary narrator, first, has *ex eventu* knowledge about the entire story as he recounts it (to us), including its happy ending; secondly, the secondary narrator (who addresses the Pharanites) is the former self of the primary narrator (and a character in the story narrated by him) and has such knowledge only of events preceding and including his arrival in Pharan; and thirdly, the narrator's former self in the more distant past is the character in his own story as he tells it (as a secondary narrator) to the Pharanites; he has, of course, no *ex eventu* knowledge at all.

Emotional and Spiritual Growth

As I will argue, the depiction of emotions is both determined by and capitalizes on the protocols operative in this narratological configuration. Part of this depiction clearly echoes

[25] On Ps.-Nilus and Heliodorus, see also Conca 1983b: 353–354 (on narrative structure), 356–357 (on style) and Morgan 2015: 185–186 (on narrative structure).

Achilles Tatius' narrating methods. In both stories, for example, the narrator offers, for explanatory purposes, introspection into the emotions of his earlier self.[26] And in both stories such introspection often takes the form of maxims. By means of these, the two narrators either rationalize their earlier emotional responses (by presenting them as instantiations of commonly-accepted human behavioural patterns)[27] or explain the emotions of others.[28] But in other respects, Ps.-Nilus' construction of emotions is more complex than Achilles Tatius'. A good example is the narrator's account of how he heard the mother of one of the murdered monks address a prayer to God, not to lament but to glorify the death of her son (6.3–7).[29] She was explicit that she had forced herself to master her pain and that she had repressed with reason feelings that had arisen from her suffering. The narrator recounts that, after hearing the woman's courageous reaction, he felt ashamed (ᾐδούμην, 6.8) at his own earlier reaction to his son's imprisonment and the death of the monks. This is a reference to a prayer that he himself had addressed to God after witnessing both the abduction of his son and the slaughter of the monks by the barbarians, and that he had cited in his narration to the Pharanites. In that prayer, he had questioned the point of eremitic life in the face of their slaughter:

> 'Where now are your [i.e. the monks'] toils of abstinence? Where your feats of fortitude? Is this the victory you received for your great struggle? Are these the prizes for your blessed contest? Did you run the race for righteousness in vain? Is there no point in labouring for virtue? For divine Providence left you helpless just as you were about to be slaughtered. Justice did not oppose your killers. ... Why did it [i.e. the power of God] let these righteous ones be attacked on every side, left alone and utterly helpless, letting them be thought unworthy of concern?'
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> (Ps.-Nilus *Narr.* 4.7–9)

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[26] Concerning the detailed digressions on emotions in both Ps.-Nilus and Achilles Tatius, see also Caner 2010: 78.

[27] e.g. 1.7, 2.1, 2.3, and 6.19. On the psychological content of many of Ps.-Nilus' gnomic clusters, see Theodorou 1993.

[28] e.g. 6.16. On the same procedure also characterizing Clitophon's narration in Achilles Tatius, see De Temmerman 2014: 176–187.

[29] On the anonymous mother of the Maccabean youths in 4 Macc. 14:11–17:1 as a possible model, see Caner 2010: 79–80.

When the narrator now contrasts his own prayer with that of the woman, he is explicit that 'I had thought that the charges I had made against God for the things I suffered had been justified, but I knew I had erred (τότε ἔγνων ἁμαρτών) when, by the woman's example (τῷ παραδείγματι τῆς γυναικός), I learned (ἔμαθον) that every onslaught can be borne, however dire. ... the sobriety of someone who has suffered much the same, whose calm control of suffering teaches (διδαχθείς) one not to give in so easily to one's own' (6.8). The narrator, in other words, clearly presents his encounter with the dead monk's mother as a profound moment of insight for his previous self, taught by example about proper emotional behaviour in the face of suffering: such behaviour, he then realized, should be driven not by emotion but by self-control and by reason. He thus presents his capacity to recognize and critically reflect upon his previous emotional disposition as the product of increased personal maturity.[30]

This too is a procedure familiar enough from Achilles Tatius' Clitophon and other internal narrators in ancient fiction: the collocation of one's previous and later selves as to present the latter as having been psychologically enriched by experience.[31] But in the case of Ps.-Nilus, the narratological configuration adds another layer of complexity. The primary narrator is not alone in commenting on the prayer of his former self: after citing it to the Pharanites as a secondary narrator, he had already commented on his own words of grief (ὀδυρόμενος, 4.7). He had been explicit that the prayer contained such harsh criticism of God because it 'was spoken in grief and rage' (ἀθυμία ... καὶ λύπη, 4.9). He had, in other words, already distanced himself from his earlier, critical attitude towards the eremitic life by presenting it as the result of an ephemeral and emotional disposition rather than a genuine conviction. He had again drawn on gnomic wisdom as to explain (and justify) this psychological dynamic: he had reasoned that grief and rage 'can drive even those who strive for self-control to utter blasphemies in the face of misfortunes' and that in such cases one can be forgiven (συγγνώμην, 4.9) because of the strength of the emotion (τὸ πάθος ... τυραννοῦν). The secondary narrator, in short, had been critical of his former blasphemous self, and had rationalized the emotions of that self in order to distance himself from them in his narration to the Pharanites. The primary narrator now goes one step further: after his encounter with the dead monk's mother (which occurs at a point in time following his meeting with the

[30] Both his (initial) penchant for reacting emotionally and the contrast with a female character align the protagonist with Greek novelistic heroes. See Konstan 1994: 15–26 on the contrast between resourceful novel heroines and their emotional male counterparts.

[31] On a similar procedure in Jerome's *Life of Malchus*, see Gray 2020: 242–243.

Pharanites) and setting up her behaviour as an example for himself, he can now also identify the correct way to behave in the face of misfortune.

This progression of insight into his own emotional housekeeping in the face of personal loss chimes with a similar progression on the spiritual front – the narrator's appreciation of the virtues of the eremitic life. On this topic too there is an interplay of voices of the narrator's different selves, which assess both the eremitic life and his own attitude towards it differently at various stages of the story. As we have seen, the secondary narrator takes care to reject the criticism of the eremitic life as advanced by his previous self (in the prayer), thereby reaffirming the validity of his initial desire for that type of life. But in another instance he *is*, in fact, critical of that desire: when he recounts to the Pharanites that he used to desire desert solitude so vehemently (σφόδρα ... τεθαύμακα, 1.3; ἐπιθυμία πολλή, 2.2) that he left his home and family for it, he confirms that that desire allowed him to live happily and enjoy great serenity for a considerable time (2.6), until the attack of the barbarians (1.3). Ever since that terrible event, he explains, his emotions of suffering no longer allow him to praise desert solitude, although he does share the Pharanites' sympathy for it in principle and recognize that during his stay at Sinai he has known its benefits.

Just as when he rejects the blasphemous comment in his own prayer as emotionally inspired, he is, here too, explicit that his reservations about the solitary life result from his current emotional disposition. Since, he explains, 'a cloud of despair prevents me from seeing the truth clearly' (τοῦ τῆς ἀθυμίας νέφος ἰδεῖν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς τὴν κρίσιν καλῶς οὐκ ἐπιτρέποντος, 1.3), he now looks back on this initial desire for desert solitude in negative terms: he refers to 'a great desire for the places in which I have now been ruined' (νῦν πεπόρθημαι, 2.2) and repeatedly characterizes it as a tyrannical passion (τὴν τυραννίδα τοῦ πάθους, 1.3; τυραννικῶς, 2.4) that has destroyed what was dearest to him (μοι τὸν πάντων φίλτατον ἀπολώλεκεν, 1.3) and has left him alone (μόνον), deserted (ἔρημον), and without consolation (παραμυθίας πάσης καταλέλοιπεν).[32] Just as in his comment on his prayer, then, the secondary narrator presents to the Pharanites his doubts about the validity of his earlier desire for the eremitic life as an ephemeral disposition driven by the emotion of despair.

But in this case, his self-presentation is inconsistent with the fact that the same criticism of the eremitic life also surfaces in primary narrator text. When the primary narrator recounts the reunion with his son, he mentions how he then unambiguously identified his

[32] See Caner 2010: 85 n. 43 on human passions as negatively connoted forces that tyrannize a person in Stoic and Christian doctrine.

earlier choice to pursue an eremitic life as the source of their misery and explicitly embraces that criticism as legitimate:

> I tried to apologize and persuade him that I was to blame for all of the evils that he had experienced. I was the one who took him from his homeland and made him dwell in a land that was constantly being ravaged: for truly it was as I've stated (ἦν ὡς ἔλεγον ἀληθῶς).
>
> (Ps.-Nilus *Narr.* 6.24)

The final words explicitly align the view of the primary narrator with that of his previous self at the time of the reunion with his son. In other words, his initial desire for the solitary life is criticized once again, this time not by the secondary narrator at a time of despair, but both by his later self when the reason of that despair has been lifted (he has recovered his son), and by the primary narrator, who in retrospect confirms, despite the story's happy ending, that his initial desire for desert solitude was profoundly misguided. His critical attitude towards the eremitic life, then, has nothing ephemeral, as he first claimed as a secondary narrator; rather, it is consolidated as a part of the moral message of the story.

The fact that the solitary life is criticized not only by the previous selves of the primary narrator but also by the primary narrator himself is further emphasized by metaliterary ramifications.[33] The secondary narrator's claim that a 'cloud of despair' (τοῦ τῆς ἀθυμίας νέφος, 1.3) prevents him from praising the solitary life is picked up (and verbally echoed) by the Pharanites when they encourage him to tell his story:

> 'What more worthy way to pass the time', they said, 'than to nurse (θεραπεῦσαι) a broken heart and relieve an unhappy soul of its grief? A cloud (νέφος) loses its gloom by discharging drops of rain; the darkness clears, little by little, by releasing its tinge of water. So too a saddened soul can be unburdened (κουφίζεται) by recounting its tragic reversals (τραγῳδοῦσα συμφοράς), and have its despair dispersed by describing its grievances. But if stifled by silence, a passion may very well swell up like moisture in a festering wound that constantly throbs and cannot be drained of pus.'
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> (Ps.-Nilus *Narr.* 1.11)

[33] For a fuller account of the *Narrations'* reflections on narrative as a concept (both its effect on its audience and its benefits for the narrator), see Morgan 2015: 176–181.

With these words, the Pharanites evoke the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis* through the allusion to tragedy and suggest that sharing the story may work therapeutically for the narrator: it may mitigate his despair. This possibility is confirmed a little later by the secondary narrator, who echoes this scenario and announces that he will (continue to) tell his story, 'hoping that I might feel better (ἐπικουφισθείς) if I unload some of my unbearable pain' (2.15). The fact that storytelling can have therapeutic effects is a time-honoured motif both in classical literature and elsewhere, but my point is that it is introduced here with language echoing the narrator's initial claim about his despair being the reason for his inability to join them in praising the solitary life. These echoes underline the logical possibility that, if his storytelling would indeed work therapeutically, he would afterwards be able to join the Pharanites in praising the solitary life. And since the story to which both the Pharanites and the secondary narrator refer is, of course, part of the overall story as we read it, the possibility is raised simultaneously that the primary narrator too could be affected by this therapeutic development. The possibility is raised, in other words, that at the end of the day and because of its power as narrative, this story will be, precisely, a praise of the solitary life – which is how some scholars have read it, as we have seen.

But significantly, that possibility, flagged up so emphatically by the Pharanites' comment, never materializes: in actual fact, the narrator never joins them in praising the solitary life, neither at the time of his narration in Pharan, nor when he tells the story *post factum* as a primary narrator. On the contrary, when reunited with his son, as we have seen, he emphasizes the problems to which his initial desire for it has led, and as a primary narrator he unambiguously upholds that appreciation. This observation is made even more salient by the fact that the primary narrator elsewhere explicitly connects the therapeutic effect of storytelling with an awareness of the story's happy ending: when he asks his son to tell his story, he assumes that the therapeutic effect of storytelling will be all the more likely since for his son the storytelling would happen *post factum*:

> His trials were over and no longer would be painful to recount. For as health after illness or healing after trauma brings cheer instead of despair, so too is it pleasant to describe sad affairs once they are over; their narration may even bring us as much pleasure as the original experience brought pain.
>
> (Ps.-Nilus *Narr.* 6.24)

This happiness *post factum* is exactly the position in which the primary narrator too (unlike his former selves) finds himself. But, strikingly, in his case that fact does not change his stance on the eremitic life, as the Pharanites implied it might. His story, the *Narrations*, is no straightforward praise of the solitary life; it rather raises important and critical questions about it that, through the narrative configuration of the story, ultimately become the core of the moral message of the story.

The final plot development of the story underscores this reading. When the primary narrator recounts how he eventually recovered his son, he mentions that at that occasion he told him about a promise that he had made to God to assume 'the harsh servitude of abstinence and other austerities' if he would ever recover him (7.13). This promise chimes with the secondary narrator's earlier claim that his rejection of the eremitic life was ephemeral and emotionally driven by despair (1.3; 2.2). But in actual fact, the narrator does not live up to this promise: the story rather ends with his and Theodulus' ordination as priests, which implies, as he takes care to underline, heavy duties of ministry (τὸ βάρος ... τῆς λειτουργίας, 7.18) and is therefore clearly set apart from the isolated life of eremitic monasticism.[34] After all, their ordination is followed not by their return to Sinai but by their return home (οἴκαδε, 7.18), which provides a sense of closure reminiscent of that in the Greek novel and thus casts this final plot development as the story's happy ending. This is made explicit by the narrator, who characterizes it as the beginning of a brighter life (τῆς φαιδροτέρας ζωῆς, 7.19) after so much adversity (μετὰ πολλὴν ταλαιπωρίαν).[35]

Finally, the idea of civic ministry may tie in with the one passage in the story where the primary narrator explicitly addresses the primary narratees: he recounts that soon after he himself had been taken captive by the barbarians, they were thrown into confusion by the sudden arrival of armed forces whom he enigmatically calls 'the warriors of your forces' (τῆς ὑμετέρας δυνάμεως μάχιμοι, 6.16). Caner speculates that 'your' refers either to an otherwise unmentioned escort from Pharan or to Roman forces posted in the Negev desert,[36] but would

[34] On the ordination as the 'happy end' to the story, see also Link 2005: 154. Messis 2014: 324, on the other hand, reads the end of the story as a 'refusal to re-enter social life and a new socialisation in the framework of a monastic community instead of a reaffirmation of the norms of urban culture'.

[35] On these final words and their possible allusion to the end of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (and its Platonic reminiscences), see Morgan 2015: 190–191.

[36] See Caner 2010: 123 n. 183.

it not be more logical to see in it a reference to the civic community whom the protagonist at the end of the story decides to join and serve as a priest? Should we imagine, in other words, the entire *Narrations* as being told by a priest to his flock?

Conclusion

I have argued that a reading of the *Narrations* sensitive to its narratological construction of emotions does not support the common view that the story is a straightforward glorification of eremitic monasticism. I am not the first to challenge this orthodoxy. Following a different route, Morgan reaches a similar conclusion: he identifies a number of structural similarities between Ps.-Nilus' *Narrations* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and interprets them as conveying the message that the *Narrations*, just like the *Metamorphoses*, is a 'conversion-narrative, from a deviant to a correct religious position' and that '[i]n Apuleian terms, eremitic asceticism equates to asinine servitude'.[37] I would add that this conversion implies an emotional and spiritual evolution of the protagonist that Ps.-Nilus depicts much more subtly and accurately than scholars have realized so far. This evolution is presented as part of a broader pattern of psychological maturation. The narrator, in addition to his progression of insight on the spiritual front, also acquires a sense of being personally enriched in his ability to manage and control his emotions. On both fronts, maturation comes about through personal experience and suffering. Just as the narrator learns throughout the story how to behave in the face of despair and grief, he also learns what kind of life (not) to desire.

Finally, my reading of this emotional and spiritual progress suggests that the *Narrations*, rather than being a straightforward glorification of eremitic monasticism, offers a polyphonic assessment of it that invites us to reflect critically upon it. At best, eremitic monasticism is an arduous road, potentially virtuous in itself but paved with danger, grief, and disaster, and ultimately abandoned altogether for the pursuit of an alternative, civically oriented model for living a truly religious life. This ultimate pull towards society, away from the desert, inscribes the *Narrations* in a broader hagiographical tradition that values civic-based engagement over isolation. In Leontius of Neapolis' *Life of Symeon the Holy Fool* (7th century), for example, the protagonist eventually leaves the desert for the city in order to

[37] Morgan 2015: 188–190.

teach righteousness.[38] This tradition can be traced back at least to Eusebius of Caesarea (3rd–4th centuries), who in his depictions of Pamphilus, Origen, and others upholds a model of sanctity based not on ascetic isolation, as promoted by Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, but on communality, as has recently been shown by James Corke-Webster (2020). He finds that the two different approaches of Athanasius and Eusebius 'reveal a debate over the nature of sanctity from the earliest days, played out in a literary arena' (11). I submit that it is time to recognize Pseudo-Nilus as a voice in this debate – one that ultimately is more Eusebian than Athanasian.

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[38] See Johnson 2013: 263–264 on Symeon challenging the concept of ascetic renunciation away from society.

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