

Claiming the Wilderness: Asceticism and Politics in Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*.

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Abstract:

This critical paper, although not presented at the conference, complements *Wilderness* by examining the eremitic life through the filters of Christian hagiography and the religious tensions within and without the Church in the fourth century CE.

“To our age and culture,” writes Robert C. Gregg in his introduction to his 1980 translation of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* (c.356 CE), “the figure of Anthony is thoroughly startling – even offensive” (Greg 1980: pg 2). Indeed, in this time of aggressive sensuality, of obsessive consumerism, the austere self-abnegation personified by men like Anthony (c.251-356 CE) is so antithetical to our way of living as to arouse at best bemusement and at worst contempt. The idea of voluntarily leaving home and going to live a punishing life in the desert, renouncing not only material possessions but also sexual and social relationships in the pursuit of the Divine, undermines the foundations of contemporary Western society so acutely as to make it extremely unsympathetic. The eremitic lifestyle of Athanasius' Anthony transcends present-day notions of ‘dropping out’. He cannot be understood in relation to modern socio-political discontent, just as he cannot be reconciled with current trends in Christian thought. Anthony does not value family, nor does his understanding of being a Christian conform to a conventional participation in the life of the Church. Likewise, Athanasius does not portray Anthony's renunciation of the world as personally antagonistic. He is not abandoning his society as an act of judgement or protest, but rather, as Athanasius puts it, in obedience to “God's design” (Gregg 1980: pg 31). Thus when he leaves his old life behind him, his wealth and his family, he is investing in a vision that it is difficult for us to comprehend, let alone share. Yet for Athanasius' readers in the fourth century the figure of Anthony did not so much repel as inspire – the rigorous simplicity of his faith a shining testament to the truth of the

Gospels. However, Athanasius' depiction of Anthony is in fact far from simple, for the *Vita Antonii* is not merely the biography of a saint, but rather an intensely political work; at once a polemical attack on Greco-Roman paganism *and* a passionate endorsement of post-Nicene orthodoxy. This paper will explore how Athanasius, amid the spiritual and social upheavals of the fourth century, uses the Christ-like figure of Anthony to add divine credence to his theological prejudices and concerns.

The *Vita Antonii* is not so much a biography as a hagiography and as such makes for painful reading. Its protagonist, with his eyes forever fixed on Heaven, seems hardly mortal, and it is with an unbelievable fortitude that he endures, not only the extreme physical deprivations of the ascetic life, but also the near perpetual onslaught of demons. Indeed, so resolute is Anthony in the Faith of Christ that the pagan gods of classical mythology, with all their frailties and contradictions, seem ironically the more human. For Athanasius, Anthony is not merely flesh and blood but a movement of the Spirit: the perfect exemplar of the Christian life. Thus even as a child the future eremite is portrayed as a moral paradigm. "He was not frivolous," we are informed, "nor as a youth did he grow contemptuous; rather, he was obedient to his mother and father, and paying attention to the readings, he carefully took to heart what was profitable in them" (Gregg 1980: Pgs 30-31). Indeed, Anthony's youthful enthusiasm for all things righteous even went so far as to influence his diet. Despite living in an affluent home "he did not pester his parents for food of various and luxurious kinds" (Gregg 1980: pg 31), but was rather content with simple fare. Athanasius even goes so far as to stress that Anthony took no pleasure in food; he ate to live, nothing more (Gregg 1980: 31). Thus the *Vita's* picture of the young Anthony is frighteningly severe. A boy without humour and a teenager without rebellion, Anthony's childhood and adolescence appear as dry as the desert he would later come to inhabit.

Nevertheless, for Athanasius such a dry moral temper is viewed as being entirely commendable, and in hagiographic terms both of these examples serve to illustrate Anthony's closeness to perfection, with his outer and inner purity born from a direct communion with the Word of God. Thus

even before Anthony is led into the wilderness, Athanasius has taken pains to show his readers a young man possessed of a simple and receptive faith; a young man whose natural predisposition towards frugality, humility and obedience make him not only an ideal receptacle for the message of the Gospels but also its ideal proponent. Like the seed planted in good soil (Matthew 13:8), Anthony is shown first to absorb the teachings of the Lord and then to grow into their likeness. Thus when he hears his priest recite the passage “Do not be anxious about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34/ Gregg 1980: pg 31) he cannot fail to take action, giving everything he owns to the poor and trusting in God to provide for his needs. As laudable as this may have sounded to Athanasius’ audience in the fourth century, to modern readers the uncomfortable extremity of Anthony’s piety is compounded by its familial repercussions, for at the time of this life-changing event he had only recently lost his parents and become the sole guardian of his younger sister (Gregg 1980: 31). Thus when he decides to dispose of *his* property he is, by extension, disposing of *her* property as well. Indeed, not only her *property*, for Athanasius informs us that Anthony decided to place “his sister in the charge of respected and trusted virgins” (Gregg 1980: pg 32). Whether his sister wanted to leave her home and become a nun we are not told; to be sure, Athanasius does not even bother to record her name. Her role within the narrative is simply to be an object of renunciation, and thus a further example of Anthony’s commitment to the Word of God (Matthew 12:46-50).

With such devout credentials, the young man who seeks to devote himself to ascetic “discipline rather than the household” (Gregg 1980: pg 32) is already a saint in embryo, and it is a remarkable feature of Athanasius’ *Vita* that its protagonist should be shown to ‘struggle’ in so effortless a manner. He leaves home because it is God’s Will; it is as simple as that. Athanasius does not portray his hero racked by an agony of indecision and doubt – far from it. Anthony is not only sure of what God wants him to do, but he also has the inner resolve to put this into practise. Anthony is driven, and the strength of his determination is impressive. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to discern the humanity beneath Anthony’s superhuman want of effort. Thus as he begins to live the ascetic life, first in a hut not far from his native village, and

then ever further away until he reaches his legendary Inner Mountain, the possibility of failure is never a serious threat. No matter how many times the Devil taunts him; no matter how many demons physically assault him; no matter how hard the ground on which he sleeps, or how little he has to eat or drink; Anthony remains implacable (Gregg 1980: 33-37, 65,68). Unlike Job, whose torments eventually drove him to despair (job 19:1-29), Anthony's faith in his God is supreme. Thus when faced with any adversity all he need do is make the sign of the Cross and call on God's name for the strife to be overcome (Gregg 1980: 41). For these are not 'challenges' in the mundane sense of the term, but rather instances of Divine power. They exist to promote the supremacy of the Christian God, and their political significance cannot be overlooked.

Indeed, the *Vita Antonii* is an intensely political work, and embodies many of Athanasius' prejudices and concerns. Most notable are Anthony's frequent tirades against both Greco-Roman paganism and the heretical teachings of Arius (c.250-c.336 CE). Whether either of these was Anthony's particular obsession is uncertain, and although Athanasius claims a slight acquaintance with the historical Anthony (Gregg 1980: 29-30,98-99), the Anthony of the *Vita* comes uncomfortably close to being Athanasius' parrot. Thus we find him aggressively dismissing the pagan gods as "demons" (Gregg 1980: pg 47) and abusing the Arians by saying that "theirs was the last heresy and the forerunner of the Antichrist" (Gregg 1980: pg 82). Indeed, the polemic against the Arians becomes so extreme that Athanasius even has Anthony receive an ecstatic vision in which the hermit beholds the table of the Lord being savagely attacked by wild (Arian) mules (Gregg 1980: 91). Clearly Athanasius, who was instrumental in opposing Arianism throughout his career, wanted to take this opportunity to claim Anthony for post-Nicene orthodoxy, and whatever the historical Anthony's actual creed, the Anthony of the *Vita* is an articulate proponent of Athanasian Christology (Gregg 1980: 81). Indeed, it is important to remember that the Church in the fourth century, despite having gained social legitimacy during the reign of Constantine (306-337 CE), had yet to defeat the forces of paganism or satisfactorily reconcile its own internal factions. The Church's supremacy was far from assured, and Athanasius' violent polemic testifies to its insecurity.

Unlike the innumerable pagan cults that flourished interchangeably throughout the Empire, Christianity demanded the exclusive devotion of its followers, and it was this unremitting exclusivity, coupled with a vociferous self-policing, that engendered both external and internal persecution. Thus, in such a competitive climate, men like Anthony were prizes to be claimed, on the one hand standing as challenges to pagan holy men such as Pythagoras of Samos (c.580-c.500 BCE) and Apollonius of Tyana (*fl.*1st century CE), and on the other acting as the embodiment of a particular Christian persuasion. It is worth noting that Athanasius has Anthony explicitly refute any affiliation with the Arians who had apparently “falsely claimed that he held the same view as they” (Gregg 1980: pg 82), and it is tempting to speculate whether other *Vita Antonii* may have been written around this time in which Anthony either propounds Arian Christology or sides with the Meletian schismatics. Certainly, the Anthony that is transmitted to us by Athanasius is, to all intents and purposes, an Athanasian, and the *Vita* systematically sets out to illustrate how this ‘orthodoxy’ is in perfect accordance with scripture. Anthony is portrayed as a simple man who “could not bear to learn letters” (Gregg 1980: pg 30) and yet moved by the Word of God becomes endowed with supernatural wisdom. On two occasions he is shown to defeat pagan philosophers in debate (Gregg 1980: 83-87), and he frequently preaches with the authority of a priest (Gregg 1980: 64-66,85-86). In short, the *Vita* creates Anthony as a paradigm of post-Nicene orthodoxy, for through his God-inspired actions and words, Anthony bears witness to the ‘simple truth’ of the Nicene Creed.

To be sure, this process of orthodox identification extends to what is clearly an imitation of Christ. The *Vita* is saturated with incidents that can be seen to bear a direct relation to the Gospels, all the while reinforcing the spiritual authority of the emergent orthodoxy. Like Christ, Anthony is shown to be a peripatetic miracle worker, healing the sick and casting out demons (Gregg 1980: 42,74,78,83); like Christ, Anthony enters a tomb and undergoes a form of ‘resurrection’ (Gregg 1980: 37); like Christ, Anthony attracts numerous disciples (Gregg 1980: 42); and like Christ, he often feels the need to withdraw from his disciples into solitude (Gregg 1980: 67). Yet for all this,

the most significant element of identification is to be found in the desert itself, for the spiritual significance of this geography is deeply embedded in both the Old and New Testaments. The Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt (Deut 2:7); the prophet Elijah (*fl.* 9th century BCE), retrospectively a proto-John the Baptist/Christ, brooded in the desert fed by ravens (1 Kings 17:1-5); and, most significantly of all, after his baptism Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil (Matthew 4:1-11). In each instance the desert acts as a chrysalis, as a process of metamorphosis, in which the subject of change is brought ever closer to God. Indeed, the longer Anthony spends in the wilderness, the harder the Devil has to try to tempt him away from the ascetic life. With each assault it is possible to discern an increase in Anthony's spiritual powers, and by the end of the *Vita* the virtuous young man who first entered the desert has become the reflection of his Lord. Thus it is significant that Anthony, when he visits Alexandria during the persecutions of Maximinus (306-308 CE), should be depicted as praying for martyrdom, something that was held in sacred regard by the early Christians for being analogous to the Crucifixion (Pagels 1990: 89-114). "You must take up the cross and bear it after your Master," writes Tertullian (c.160-240 CE) in his treatise *De Anima* (c.212 CE), before adding pointedly: "The sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood" (Holmes 1980: pg 231). For Tertullian, as for so many Christians during the early centuries of our era¹, martyrdom was seen as the ideal testimony of faith, a chance to truly empathise with the Passion of the Lord, and thus it is natural that Athanasius should seek to place the Christ-like Anthony firmly within the martyr's fold. However, by the fourth century martyrdom was becoming far less common, and Maximinus' bloody persecution of the Christians was to be the last². By the time Athanasius came to write the *Vita Antonii* the era of violent

1

Such as Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-c.107 CE). Polycarp of Smyrna (c.69-c.155 CE) and Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130-c.200 CE).

2

The persecution briefly enacted during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363 CE) was not physically violent. Rather it took the form of legislative measures designed to exclude Christians from political life.

persecution was well and truly over, and those who would have once sought paradise through martyrdom were compelled to seek it by other means. Indeed, the eremitic life was, in many ways, born out of martyrdom's decline, and later even gained the appellation 'white' or 'bloodless martyrdom' (Gregg 1980: 16). Thus by having Anthony actively expressing a desire to be martyred, whilst simultaneously engaging in the next best thing, Athanasius succinctly equates these two paths of self-denial. Consequently, it is possible to read Anthony's life in the desert as an emulation, not only of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, but also of his Passion. Anthony is prepared to forsake everything so that, by his example, others might also believe and be saved. Indeed, on a subsequent visit to Alexandria, Anthony's presence caused such a stir that apparently "as many became Christians in those few days as one would have seen in a year" (Gregg 1980: pg 83). We are also informed that as a direct result of Anthony's example "the desert was made a city by monks" (Gregg 1980: pg 43). Thus by depicting Anthony as the Christ of asceticism, by mapping his life and words so closely to the Lord, Athanasius seeks to endow his orthodox theology with the ultimate divine credence.

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Biographical Statement

Tom Masters is a research student at the University of Winchester and is currently writing an epic poem about the nature of the universe.