

Aglæ Pizzone

From Recollection to Innovation: Notions of Progress in 12th-century Byzantium

### 1. “New”, a problem?

“They were familiar with the supposition or subterfuge that the new might in fact be ‘nothing new’. Assimilating novelty to tradition, and viewing innovation as no more than renovation, can often operate as conscious or unconscious mechanisms for allowing individuals and collectives to come to terms with novelty: such strategies do not reduce innovativeness, but can reframe it in a way that may be felt to make it more acceptable” (A. D’Angour, *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 223).

### 2. The future is in the past: Ecclesiastes I 9-10

τί τὸ γεγονός, αὐτὸ τὸ γενησόμενον·  
καὶ τί τὸ πεποιημένον, αὐτὸ τὸ ποιηθησόμενον·  
καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν πᾶν πρόσφατον ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον.  
ὃς λαλήσει καὶ ἐρεῖ Ἴδὲ τοῦτο καινόν ἐστιν,  
ἤδη γέγονεν ἐν τοῖς αἰῶσιν  
τοῖς γενομένοις ἀπὸ ἔμπροσθεν ἡμῶν.

What is that which has been?

The very thing which shall be:

and what is that which has been done? The very thing which shall be done:

and there is no new thing under the sun.

[Who is he] that shall speak and say, Behold, this is new?

It has already been in the ages that have passed before us.

### 3. The “recollection” model

3.a Theodore Prodromos, *Speech for the Patriarch John Agapetos*, pp. 237, 257-238, 270

Τίνα ταῦτα; τὸ τὰς μαθήσεις ἀναγκαίας ὅτι μάλιστα εἶναι τῷ εἶ ζήσονται, τὸ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσιν ὅπη ποτὲ τὸ νοοῦν χειραγωγεῖσθαι πρὸς νόησιν, τὸ τὰς ἀναμνήσεις μὴ τῶν οὐ χρειωδῶν εἶναι, ἐν οἷς ἂν αἱ μνήμαι διακόπτανται τῇ μεσιτεῖα τῆς λήθης· τὸ γὰρ καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις αὐτὰς ἀναμνήσεις εἶναι φάναι μηδ’ εἰς ἀνάμνησιν ἡμῶν ἐρχέσθω, τῇ δὲ τῶν ψυχῶν προϋπάρξει συνεξοιχέσθω ὡς ἐκείνης ἐξημμένον καὶ ἡρτημένον, εἴ τι τοῦ ἐν Φαίδωνι Πλάτωνος ἀναμνησκοίμην. ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν μὲν ἀνάμνησιν μάθησιν τίνα εἶναι θείμην ἂν καὶ οὐκ ἀρνησαίμην, ὡς οἶον ἀπὸ δευτέρας ἀμαθίας τῆς λήθης ἐγγινομένης, ἕως ἂν μὴ τὰς ψυχὰς προϋπάρχειν παρὰ τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς φιλοσόφων μυσταγωγοῦμαι. τούτων οὕτω προϋποτεθέντων ἡμῶν, οὐδ’ ἐκεῖνο παρετέον ἂν εἶη, ὡς τῶν τῷ βίῳ χρειωδεστάτων ὅτι μάλιστα τὰ βιβλία εἰς τε τὴν πρώτην μάθησιν μέγα μέρος ἦ καὶ τὸ ὅλον λυσιτελοῦντα καὶ εἰς τὴν δευτέραν ἀνάμνησιν καὶ τῷ τὰ φανένθ’ ἀλίσκοντι χρόνῳ παντάπασιν ἀντιστράτηγα.

And what are these? The fact that learning is most necessary for a good life, the fact that the mind is somehow led to intellection through the senses, the fact that recollections are not useless, those, I mean, in which memories have been impaired by oblivion; for to affirm that learning itself is recollection should not lead us straight to recollection proper, on the contrary let’s bid it farewell together with the pre-existence of the souls, which is consequentially linked to it, if I ever wanted to recall a bit of Plato’ *Phaedo* here. I, on the contrary, would posit and would not deny that recollection is one sort of learning, as is the case when oblivion ensues from a subsequent ignorance, as long as I do not have myself led astray by the philosophers of our times into believing that the souls pre-existed. Given these premises, we shall not overlook that, among the most useful things in life, books help a great deal or else they do all the job as regards the first learning and also as regards the second recollection and they are a barrier against the time that seizes the visible world (transl. A. Pizzone).

### 3.b Theodore Prodromos, *Speech for the Patriarch John Agapetos*, p. 240, 302-308

πόθεν γὰρ οἱ ἐν αὐτῇ σοφίζονται ἄνδρες οἳ τε ἰθαγενεῖς καὶ ἐπήλυδες, ὅσοι τε τὸ μέγα βῆμα καὶ ὁπόσοι τὴν σύγκλητον ἀποπληροῦσι βουλὴν, οἷς καὶ Ἀριστοτέλεις ὅλους καὶ Πλάτωνας, εἰ περιῆσαν ἔτι τῷ βίῳ, τοῦ περὶ λόγους πρωτείου παραχωρήσειν εὖ μάλα δισχυρισαίμην ἄν; Πόθεν δὲ ἡ νῦν τῶν μαθημάτων ἀκμὴ καὶ τὸ αὐχμημα τῆς φιλοσοφίας, εἰ παντάπασιν ἡμᾶς ἐπέλιπε τὰ βιβλία, εἰ μὴ σπαρτούς τις καὶ τοὺς νῦν φιλοσόφους κατὰ τὸν τῶν γιγάντων ἀναπλάττειν ἐθέλοι μῦθον;

And where do all these men philosophizing in the city, both indigenous and strangers, come from? Those who climb the tribune and attend the senatorial meetings, to whom I would maintain that all the Aristotles and the Platos, if still alive, would give the first prize? Where would this zenith of knowledge and this boast of philosophy come from, if books had left us altogether, unless we are willing to buy the story of earthborn philosophers, along the lines of the giants' myth (transl. A. Pizzone).

### 4. The “innovation” model

Eustathios of Thessalonike, *Oration for Michael of Anchialos*, 7, pp. 113, 60–114, 93 Wirth

οὐ γὰρ δῆπου δοτέον ἐν τοῖς ἄρτι χρόνοις πέρατι τὸ καλόν, ὡς μὴ ἂν ἐξεῖναι ταῖς ψυχαῖς καινὴν τινα τέμνειν ὁδὸν βίου σπουδαίου, ἀλλ' ἀνάγκη εἶναι παραμένειν τοῖς πάλαι καὶ πρὸ ἡμῶν καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἐγκαθῆσθαι καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν ἐλίττειν αἰεὶ κύκλον τριβομένους περὶ τὰ φθάσαντα, οὐδὲ γηράσαι νομιστέον τὸν χρόνον οὐδὲ τὴν φύσιν ἀποκαμεῖν, ὃ δὴ τινες οὐκ οἴμαι πάνυ σπουδάζοντες, ἀλλὰ θέσεώς τινος προῖστασθαι θέλοντες οἴονται, ὡς μὴ ἂν μήτε λόγου καινοῦ τινος προβολέας εἶναι τοὺς τοῦ καθ' ἡμᾶς γένους μήτε πράξεως ἑτεροίας παρὰ τὰ ἐν παλαιοῖς ἀγαθὰ.

For in the present times we should not assign a limit to beauty, on the assumption that our souls are not in a position to break new ground in a distinguished life and that by contrast we must stick to the ancients who have preceded us and must follow in their footsteps and walk endlessly in circle, busy with the same old practices. Nor shall we think that time grows old or that nature grows tired: this is the opinion put forth by some people who in my view do not believe it in earnest but say that to champion a certain thesis, on the assumption that our contemporaries are not able to advance some original *logos* or to accomplish a peculiar action that goes beyond the good deeds of old times (transl. A. Pizzone).

οὐ γὰρ στενοχωρήσω τὸ τοῦ λόγου ποικίλον ἐγκατακλείσας εἰς οὕτω μονοειδὲς οὐδ' οὕτω καταψηφισαίμην ἂν πενίαν τοῦ πλούτου τῆς ἀνθρωπείας φύσεως, ὡς μὴ ἂν πλέον μηδὲν τῶν ἀνέκαθεν εἰς αὐτὴν καθηκόντων καλῶν ἔχειν προσκτήσασθαι τι κατὰ λόγον καινότερας εὐρέσεως· οὐκ οὐκ τὰ τοιαῦτα δοξαστέον, ἀλλ' ἔστι πάντως καὶ τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ θεόδοτον ἀγαθόν, εἰ καὶ μὴ οὐχ' ὅπως σπάνιον· καὶ δέδοται θεόθεν καὶ αὐτῇ προσεξευρίσκειν τεχνασμάτων δεινότητος καὶ λόγων ἐγχειρεῖν καινότησιν ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἔργων ὁμοίων ἐπινοίας, ἃ μὴ πρὸς ἀρχαία ῥᾶον ἐξεικονίζειν ἔχει τις, ἀλλ' αὐτὰ πρὸς ἀρχέτυπον καλοῦ προῖστᾶν τοῖς εἰσέπειτα· καὶ γέγονε τοῖς πάλαι χρόνοις ἔργα καὶ πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα, ὅσα ἐκμετρεῖν οὐκ ἂν ἔχη τις· ἐξηνέχθησαν βουλαὶ καὶ σοφισμάτων ἐπινοίαι, ὅσα οὐδὲ μακρὰ τις καμῶν διὰ βίου περιελεύσεται, ἀλλ' οὐ δῆπου τὰ τῆς εὐρέσεως πεπεράτωνται, ὡς μηκέτ' ἔχειν ἔργον καταπραχθῆναι καλὸν ἐκ καινῆς ἢ βουλὴν προβεβλησθαι διεκπεφευγῖαν τὸ αὐχμηρὸν ἢ νόημα εὐγενές, οὗ εὐκλεές τὸ νεώτατον, ἀλλὰ καθάπερ ἡ μὲν τῶν ἐν λόγῳ στοιχείων ἀρχὴ ὄριστα καὶ ὅσα εἰς τὴν τούτων σύλληψιν καὶ τὰ ἐκ τούτων ὡς ἐν ἀδροτέροις μέρεσι λεκτά (οἳ δ' ἐξ αὐτῶν λόγοι οὐκ ἂν δι' αἰῶνος ἐπιλείψωσι καινὰ καινοῖς ἐπισυνείροντες τὰ νοούμενα), οὕτω καὶ τοῖς κατ' ἄνθρωπον ὁ μὲν ὀρθὸς λόγος μεμέτρηται κανόνισιν οὐ διανενημένους εἰς ἄπειρον, τὰ δ' ἐξ αὐτῶν μετρεῖσθαι οὐκ οἶδασιν.

For I shall not put a constraint on the variegated nature of *logos* by straight-jacketing it into plain uniformity nor would I condemn to poverty the richness of human nature, on the assumption that she can acquire nothing in the way of original discoveries besides the noble properties that belong to her since the dawn of time. We should not endorse such opinions, for our generation too possesses in the highest degree god-given good, even though it is necessarily rare; and this generation too has received from God the ability of finding out further skillful devices and try their hand at a number of innovations pertaining to good *logoi* as well as at the design of corresponding actions. Looking back to ancient deeds makes it no easier to envisage these qualities, but they stand by themselves, setting an example of nobility for the generations to come. Clever devices were conceived of and designed, as many as one will not be able to embrace, not even in an entire, long life, and yet invention has not reached its limits, so that a fine deed could not be achieved anew anymore or a superb plan conceived or else a noble idea, whose magnificence lies in being most novel; on the contrary, just as the basic letters forming the *logos*

have been defined and so has their composition and the more articulated sayables arising from them, whereas the *logoi* that are built upon them would never forever cease to add new thoughts to new thoughts, so too in human actions, right *logos* is limited by rules that have not been infinitely divided, whereas the actions that arise from [these rules] cannot be limited (transl. A. Pizzone).

##### 5. No Byzantine discourses on originality?

“In what sense can we say that a society which did not share our sense of originality acted originally? I ask this not because of the illusory danger that we shall confuse our perceptions with theirs [...] but because not one of the contributors has been able to point to the existence of the notion of originality in Byzantium” (A. Cutler, ‘Originality as a cultural phenomenon’, in A.R. Littlewood [ed.], *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*, Oxbow, 1995, p. 203).

##### 6. A mixed model

###### 6.a Theodore Metochites, *Semeioseis I* 6-9, pp. 22-24 Hulst

Καὶ οὐδὲν ὃ τι σχεδὸν λέλειπται γε ἡμῖν, οὐδὲ χώρα τις ὅλως εἰς κοινωφελῆ τινα φορὰν ἴσως ὅστις ἂν οἴος τ’ εἶη, οὔτε καιρὸς εἰς ἀνεμέσητον ὁμῶς ἐπίδειξιν τινα καὶ προκοπῆς ἐντεῦθεν ἄμιλλαν, ἀλλ’ ἢ μόνον, πᾶσα ἀνάγκη, γλώττης ἀπραξία καὶ κάθειρξις διὰ πάντων. Ὅπου γὰρ ἂν τις καὶ κινήσαι τὸν νοῦν, νέον οὐκ ἂν ἐρεῖν ἔχοι, ἀλλ’ ὁ πρότερον ἤδη φθάσαν ἦνυσται τι, καὶ τοῖς ἀκροωμένοις προειληπται· καὶ λοιπὸν ἀηδία ταῦτά φέρειν, ἢ πρὸς φιλοτιμίαν ἴσως, ἢ πρὸς γέ τι χρησίμων, ὡς γε δόξειεν ἂν, καὶ περὶ ὧν ἄλλοι πρότερον ἤδη καὶ ἴσως γε καὶ κομιδῆ βέλτιον, σπουδάζειν αὐτὸν τινα νῦν γε εἶναι καὶ κατεπείγεσθαι, οἷς οὐ καθάπαξ ἄρα μὴ δεῖ γέλωτ’ ὄφλοντα, οὐδ’ ἔστιν ἠτισοῦν χρεῖα.

There is hardly anything left for us, no room at all for any contribution of general usefulness for that person [among us] who is perchance able [to make such a contribution], and no opportunity for an at least legitimate display [of wisdom] and accompanying striving for improvement. There is only the enforced inactivity and confinement of the tongue at all times. For wherever someone might move his mind he cannot say anything new, but only something which has already been achieved by someone else, and already received by the listeners. The only thing left to do is to reluctantly present the same results, either, perhaps, to gain glory, or for some supposedly useful purpose, and now oneself study things that others have studied before, and perhaps much better, and incur ridicule by exerting oneself on subjects where absolutely no exertion is required, or of any use whatsoever (transl. Karin Hulst).

###### 6.b Nikephoros Gregoras, *Letter 23*, 43-59 Leone, to Theodore Metochites

Ἐνταυθοῖ δὲ τοῦ λόγου γενόμενος, τοῦ σοφοῦ Σολομῶντος εἰπόντος ἐμνήσθη· ‘πρόσφατον ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον’ εἶναι μηδέν, ‘ὃ λαλήσει καὶ ἐρεῖ· ἴδε τοῦτο καινὸν ἐστίν’· ἤδη γὰρ ἐν τοῖς αἰῶσι φάναι γεγονέναι· ἀλλ’ ἰδοὺ τὰ παρόντα καινὰ καὶ οἷα μηδὲν μηδαμῆ πω γέγονεν ἐν τοῖς αἰῶσιν. ὥσπερ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδένα τῶν ἐξ αἰῶνος χρηστῶν βασιλέων εὐρεῖν τῆ τοῦ ἡμετέρου βασιλέως ἀμιλλώμενον φρονήσει πάνυ τοι ῥᾶστα διοικεῖν ἐχούση καὶ ἐξομαλίζειν κυκεῶνας μεγάλους πραγμάτων, οὕτως οὐδὲ τῶν ἐξ αἰῶνος οὐδένα σοφῶν τῆ σῆ σοφία ἀμιλλώμενον. πάντας γὰρ ἐκείνους τοὺς σοφοὺς ὡς ἔοικεν ὄρους καὶ προτάσεις γέ τινας, ὡς ἂν τις εἴποι, ὁ πᾶς ὑπεδείκνυ χρόνος καὶ οἷον εἰπεῖν ἐπαγωγικά τινα κόμματα πρὸς ἓν τι συλλογισμοῦ συμπέρασμα κράτιστόν σε, ὡς ἐντεῦθεν γίνεσθαι λήθην μὲν ἤδη τῶν προτέρων ἐκείνων σοφῶν, τῶν δ’ ἐξῆς μηκέτ’ εἶναι χρεῖαν ἄρα μηδεμίαν· μηδὲ γὰρ εἶναι σοφίας εἶδος σοί γε παρειμένον μηδέν, ὃ τοὺς τε γενομένους διέδρα καὶ ὃ τοῖς ἔσομένοις ἴσως ἔσται καινὸν εὔρημα καὶ ‘πρόσφατον ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον, ὃ λαλήσει καὶ ἐρεῖ· ἴδε τοῦτο καινὸν ἐστίν’.

After reaching this point in my discourse, I was reminded of the wise Solomon, who said: “There is nothing new under the sun, whereof a man shall speak and say ‘Look this is new’; and he says that it has already been in the ages before us: but there, the present is new and such as it never was anywhere in the ages before us”. As it is impossible to find any of the valiant kings of the past matching the mind of our emperor, which can easily rule and smooth away big troubles, likewise it is impossible to find any of the wise men of the past matching your wisdom. And it looks as if the time in its entirety had designated all those wise men, as it seems, as premise and preparation and so to say as inductive elements leading to one conclusion of the syllogism, the best, you, so that those wise men from the past will fall into oblivion, while those to come will not have any usefulness, in that you do not neglect any form of wisdom, that has escaped the men of the past or that will perhaps be a new invention for those of the future and ‘something new under the sun’, whereof a man shall speak and say ‘look this is new’ (transl. A. Pizzone).