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Giselle de Nie, *Word, Image and Experience. Dynamics of Miracle and Self-Perception in Sixth-Century Gaul*. Variorum Collected Studies Series, 771. Ashgate: Aldershot, U.K., and Burlington, VT, 2003). xiv + 374 pp. Index. \$119.00 U.S./£62.50 U.K. (hb). ISBN 0-86078-933-0.

Review by Bailey K. Young, Eastern Illinois University.

Giselle de Nie is known particularly for *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours*.^[1] Historians who are not specialized in the early Middle Ages may have heard of Gregory as our single most important narrative historian for Merovingian Gaul, whose work, misleadingly titled *The History of the Franks* in Lewis Thorpe's 1974 Penguin Classics translation into English, is often loosely compared to the Venerable Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, which tells the story of Anglo-Saxon England at roughly the same time. They may even recall that he is known for credulity—miracles are frequently happening—and for a rather crude, debased Latin style—a notion for which he is himself partly to blame, as the lines in his preface where he laments the decline of letters in his day and deprecates his own style as not very polished are often quoted. But Walter Goffart's 1988 study, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, showed that the conception of Gregory as a rather simple, straightforward, naïve storyteller is in itself romantically naïve, and partly the result of Gregory's own conscious artistry.^[2] Since then Martin Heinzelmann's *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* has definitely established the sophistication and complexity of this author's historical writing, and notably established that its true title should be *Ten Books of History*.^[3]

Indeed, over the past twenty years there has been a wonderful *renovatio* of studies regarding Gregory, his works, and his world, to some extent inspired by the (presumed) 1400th anniversary of his death celebrated in 1994 with symposia at international medieval conferences at Kalamazoo, Michigan, Leeds, England, and Tours itself. Giselle de Nie has been an important contributor to this re-appraisal. In his review of Gregory scholarship up to 1992, Heinzelmann praises her "recognition of the significance for Gregory of 'typological' or 'figurative' thinking as absolutely correct and quite thought-provoking."^[4] It is less the historian who interests de Nie, however, than the writer and his world-view. As Raymond Van Dam points out, she "assumes the existence of an underlying pattern or logic in Gregory's writings and finds that coherence precisely in Gregory's apparent ramblings and unexpected allusions."^[5] Although Van Dam expresses some reservations when de Nie's use of comparative material from such domains as psychology threatens the "moorings" of her study in the sixth century, he cites approvingly her extensive use of Gregory's hagiographical writings, which up to that time had been much neglected by historians.

The volume under review updates her intellectual project. It is a collection of seventeen articles written between 1989 and 2002 and presented in the usual Variorum format, which means that the original pagination and even typeface of each separate piece has been retained and there is no overall bibliography at the end, although there is an index. Since Gregory remains the principal writer considered (every article is wholly or partly devoted to him), a short introduction for the general reader is in order. Born perhaps in A.D. 539 in what is now Clermont-Ferrand, then a city in the mountains of central France, Gregorius Florentius belonged to a distinguished late Roman lineage proud of its Christian roots: one of the first Christian martyrs in Gaul, Vettius Epagatus, killed in Lyons in 177, is claimed as an ancestor. His mother, Armentaria, counted two sainted bishops of Langres (in eastern Gaul) among her direct ancestors; an uncle, Nicetius, was bishop of Lyons. When Gregory turned eight he was sent to the household of his uncle, Bishop Gallus of Clermont, to be raised, so it seems no

surprise that he was ordained a deacon as a young man and in 573 succeeded Eufronius (a first cousin once removed) as nineteenth bishop of Tours. This city on the Loire river, long a frontier for competing polities in post-Roman Gaul, was most noted as the resting place of its Bishop Martin (died in 397), whose cult Gregory vigorously promoted through building (restoring and enhancing the funerary basilica raised by his predecessor Perpetuus), politics (invoking the saint's posthumous power to prevent taxes!), and his voluminous literary output.

The ten books of histories began as a providentialist summary of universal history in the tradition of Orosius, from the creation of the world; but from the end of Book II, where the story of Clovis, his conquests, and his conversion to the Catholic faith is told, the narrative focuses on Gaul. The last five books cover events during Gregory's own lifetime (the latest entry is in 591); in a number of them he was an actor himself, as an influential bishop well known in the courts of the various Merovingian rulers whose conflicts and acts of treachery he famously laments. Gregory knew most of the members of the lay and clerical elites of his day personally, among them Venantius Fortunatus (540-ca. 604), an Italian man of letters who came to Gaul seeking a cure at the shrine of Saint Martin and pursued there a very successful career first as a court poet and finally as a fellow bishop in neighboring Poitiers.

Besides his poetry, preserved in some six volumes, Fortunatus wrote at the behest of his friend Gregory a *Life of Saint Martin* and other hagiographical works, most famously the life of a Merovingian queen turned nun in what later became his own diocese of Poitiers, Radegonde. Gregory, too, was known in his own day primarily as a hagiographer, and a considerable number of these works survive, though only recently have they been getting the scholarly attention they deserve with Giselle de Nie among the first scholars to take these "non-historical" writings seriously. Altogether, Gregory's and Fortunatus's writings offer in her words a "substantial corpus" of work reflecting sixth-century Gaul, much of it hagiographical and much of this centered on miracles, which she chooses to regard as key to a "seemingly impenetrable thought world and mind-set" (introduction, pp. x-xii). The acts of church councils and the sermons of sixth-century figures such as Bishop Caesarius of Arles provide a complementary body of contemporary source material.

According to their author, "the essays collected here attempt to approach an understanding of the sixth-century experience of miracles by examining the latter's imagistic contours and dynamics as these are mentioned, or hinted at, in the sources. Because each was designed to present its theoretical argument independently, the reader will find that there is a certain unavoidable overlap between them in this respect" (introduction, pp. ix-x). Although her sources focus on sixth-century Gaul, Giselle de Nie is really an historian of the phenomenon of consciousness and how its refraction through the literary materials preserved from this time ought to be understood. She turns for help in this task to an impressive variety of scholars in such fields as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. She presents a passage in which Gregory of Tours discovers that a lamp that he had at first glance taken to be leaking oil is *in reality* (my emphasis) miraculously overflowing in the light of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz "has called a 'leap' or 'slip' from common-sense reality into belief-reality" (see essay six, pp. 269-70). Her point is that the bishop of Tours, whose first reaction in this episode shows him not prone to credulity, is disposed to recognize and accept such signs of (for him) a *higher reality* (again, my emphasis). Though this predisposition is at odds with the scientific-materialist view of the world, de Nie and Geertz would argue that we have much to gain by seeking to take it on its own terms, with respect, as a point of entry into a form of consciousness with its own coherence. Gregory might well invent—in order to express his own views—speeches put into the mouths of characters like Queen Fredegund or Emperor Tiberius as a device "to induce in his readers the recreation of the dynamic form of the transcendental reality he portrays in action," a strategy that can be better understood with reference to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's comments on reception theory (essay eight, p. 78). A passage from Fortunatus describing how a nun afflicted with dropsy was cured after the performance of symbolic healing rituals in a dream is discussed in the light of the research of a Belgian anthropologist of ritual

curing processes among the Yaka in Africa, the memoir of a twentieth-century American spiritual healer, and a study by an “apparently agnostic American surgeon at Yale, Bernie Siegel, [who] found that meditative, affective visualizations of dynamic, health-inducing imagery helped bring about improvement or even cures of cancer patients” (essay fourteen, pp. 12-14).

These essays, then, should interest two rather different kinds of readers: those who are trying to understand the thought-world of late Antiquity—more specifically its western half; and those drawn to post-modern approaches to psychology, society, and culture. Giselle de Nie wants to persuade us that Gregory of Tours and Fortunatus would not be out of place in their company; indeed, like Paul Ricoeur, they accept “as one of the uses of the imagination the envisioning of another possible reality to contrast with the existing one in order to evaluate and work on it” (essay seven, p. 67). I am quoting here from the opening of “Seeing and Believing in the Early Middle Ages: a Preliminary Investigation,” a quite clear and concise essay that I would recommend as an introduction to Giselle de Nie’s general approach. It belongs to the section entitled “Iconic Alchemy,” a signature concept of the author’s. This term highlights the title for essay eleven, also particularly recommended. Here she draws attention to a “fact” noted by Plato and later Augustine “which modern psychology has now experimentally confirmed: that we perceive (i.e. interpret) our surroundings through an interplay between sensory data on the one hand, and stored mental images and propositions on the other” (essay eleven, p. 158). Gregory and Fortunatus are taken to be masters of an art that uses the visualization of symbols in writing (or their enactment in ritual performances) to render dynamic in the reader/performer/believer the processes that might lead to healing the body but, more importantly, transforming the heart and opening the inner eye to the perception of spiritual truth. Here is how she puts it in her introduction: “Although Gregory never mentions Augustine, the reason he gives for writing about the miracles which he saw or which came to his attention shows how relatively close he is to the Church Father, and how far from us. Essentially, it is this: speaking and writing about holy subjects is becoming part of God’s speaking to mankind through Christ, the divine Word, who is actively present in such human words. Carried by them into what may be arid, barren human hearts, he there continues his Creation: causing a faith to sprout that transforms and heals” (introduction, p. xiii).

As Raymond Van Dam remarked in the *Speculum* review cited above, “de Nie’s reflective and discursive presentation is often her own worst enemy.” These articles are demanding, not for bedtime reading. Those who read history chiefly to get at the “facts” of what happened and why in a past era are not advised to pick up this volume. But no serious student of the thought-world of late Antiquity or of the history of spirituality ought to neglect the paths that Giselle de Nie has opened up; others, interested in anthropology, depth psychology, the use of symbols in literature, or the interplay between written and oral culture, will find much to reflect upon in her work. A helpful feature is the index of Subjects, Persons, and **Authors** (the latter bolded, as here); since the bibliographical references are otherwise embedded in the original publication format (generally in footnotes) this is a handy tool indeed.

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- “Text, Symbol and ‘Oral Culture’ in the Sixth-Century Church: The Miracle Story” (1997)
- “The Language in Miracle--the Miracle in Language: Words and the Word according to Gregory of Tours” (1995)

NOTES

[1] Giselle de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 1987).

[2] Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 114-16 (for example).

[3] Martin Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The original German edition was published in 1994.

[4] Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours*, p. 5, n. 18.

[5] Review in *Speculum* 65.2 (1990): 392-94.

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