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creative work seven is still a figure of this world, while eight is beyond this world, marking the day of the Resurrection and the beginning of the Kingdom<sup>44</sup>.

The creation of man belongs to the sixth day, because it reflects as a microcosm the perfection of the macrocosm. Origen is also aware of Philo's interpretation of man as male and female, 2 being the female number and 3 the male one<sup>45</sup>. Thus the sixth day represents the perfect unity of the male and female numbers, of the noetic and the psychic elements<sup>46</sup>.

The numerological correlations of the creation events can be represented schematically as follows:

<i>arête</i>	Making	One (absolute)	Trans-noetic, trans-psycho-somatic cycle
Day one	Ordering Separation	One (first)	N O
Second day	Naming Ordering		E T
Third day	Separation Naming Ordering Separation Naming vegetal fertility	Three	I C C Y C L E
Fourth day Fifth day	Making Ordering (animal fertility of the waters)	Four	
Sixth day	Ordering (animal fertility of the earth) Making (man <i>Gn</i> 1, 27)	Six	PSYCHO-SOMATIC CYCLE
Seventh day	Rest	Seven	

44. *ComJn* 13,59,18 [GCS 4.290]; *SeIPs* 118,64 [PG 12.1624 BC]; *ComJn* 2,33,27 [GCS 4.91].

45. *DeOpif.* 13, *Leg.* 1,3.

46. See in the next chapter ("The Mystagogic Significance of the Creation of the Universe and of Man") the section on the creation of the microcosm.

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## PROTOLOGY AND LANGUAGE IN ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA'S THEOLOGY

Mihail Neamțu

St Gregory of Nyssa (†396) developed his theory of language in the context of his theological disputation with Eunomius of Cyzicus (†395), the leader of the radical Arian movement in the second half of the fourth century. This paper is an attempt to compare Eunomius' epistemological tenets with Gregory's more fluid statements about what man can hope in terms of theological knowledge. I try to show how their understanding of language depends very much on how they read *The Book of Genesis*, and especially the narrative of Adam's creation and his endowment with the power of naming. In comparison with the Alexandrian tradition (Philo and Origen), Gregory is surprisingly radical, claiming that language is a human invention. On the contrary, Eunomius defends the opposite idea, considering the scriptural and non-scriptural "names" as literally "inspired" and "divine". I give heed to St Gregory's most interesting insights from *De hominis opificio*, where he speaks about the correlation between homo faber and homo sapiens. Having free hands, man is able to think and to articulate meaningful sounds, which make him a social being. I suggest the possibility of drawing some consistent parallels between St Gregory of Nyssa and St Augustine of Hippo, starting with their dialogical interpretation of language. Yet, at least for Gregory, language is closely related to Adam's fall. Language and sexuality are realities of the post-lapsarian world, which made human mind opaque and the exercise of interpretation indispensable. Gregory included also Babel in the genealogy of our linguistic finitude. Babel was temporarily restored at Jerusalem, on the day of the Pentecost. St Gregory interprets this "great feast of languages" (Shakespeare) as another compelling proof for his eschatological vision, which presents the human beings, like the angels, sharing love and joy without any need for semiotics. This teleological orientation of Gregory's thought explains, at least part-

ly, his basic epistemological pessimism. Gregory emphasises over and over again that human mind cannot know the ultimate structure of reality, and even less its Creator. Both in theology and epistemology, St Gregory leaves open the possibility to progress, although the relationship between these two realms of knowledge is rather asymmetrical. The progressive knowledge of God – which first requires purity of heart – enfeebles gradually the intellectual commitment to positive knowledge. While contemplating God, one takes distance from reality and perceives nature as an epiphany. This very doxological attitude makes human being similar to the angels, who incessantly adore God in wonder and praise.

### The Ministry of Hands

Gregory's anthropological considerations are determinative for what nowadays one might call a "theological theory of language". Obviously, man's power of reasoning governs his linguistic performance. Nothing speaks so clearly about this human vocation (to think, to speak, and to write) than the physical attributes of man, which make him *not* a "microcosmos" (an appellation against which Gregory protests explicitly), but a sure candidate for divinisation. The bodily constitution of man has two distinctive traits, which even the most developed animals cannot share: standing vertically and having free hands. The eighth chapter of his famous treatise *On the Making of Man* (written, like his *Contra Eunomium*, in Basil's memory) bears witness to Gregory's outstanding insight. To begin with, Gregory plays down a false etymology, assuming that *anthropos* is a composite noun, merging the preposition *ana-* ("upward") with the verb *tropéin* ("to orient, to direct"). Then, he stresses the connection between the vertical physical constitution (which already speaks of man's creation "in the image and the likeness of God") and our intellectual abilities, namely the capacity to think, to speak, and to write.

*Especially do these ministering hand adapt themselves to the requirements of the reason: indeed, if one were to say that the ministration of hands is a special property of the rational nature, he would not be entirely wrong; and that not only because his thought turns to the common and obvious fact that we signify our reasoning by means of natural employment of our hands in written characters. It is true that this fact, that we speak by writing, and, in a certain way, converse by the aid of our hands, preserving sounds by the forms of the alphabet, is not unconnected with the endowment of reason; but I am referring to something else when I say that the hand co-operate with the bidding of reason.<sup>1</sup>*

1. *On the Making of Man* (VIII. 2), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) V, 393a (PG 44, cols. 144 B12-C9).

One cannot miss the allusion made by Gregory to the ministry of priesthood in which hands and mind go and work together. Man is called to be not only minister at the altar of God, but also priest and deacon of all creation. But Gregory also points the importance of the order in creation, which somehow is repeated in human own constitution. Stars are created first, as protectors of life on the earth; grassland comes after, as *Heimat* for the wild beasts; eventually, man is made out of earth (which inherits the mineral, the vegetal and the animal life) and spirit, poured in the sleeping body of Adam. If man is expected to reign over the creatures (tamed only by the human reason), it is because spirit should rule man's senses. There is a certain progress and teleology in God's creation, and as in Aristotle's cosmology, *causa efficiens* determines *causa finalis*. One could even speak about a doctrine of continual creation, since Gregory explicitly declares that "no single thing existing, whether an object of sense or of thought, is formed spontaneously or fortuitously, but that everything discoverable in the world is linked to the Being Who transcends all existences (*tēs pantōn tōn ontōn hyperkeimenēs phusēs*), and possesses there the source of its continuance (*tēn aitian tēs hyperexōs echei*)"<sup>2</sup>. The progress is given from above and affects the material structure of the universe, as it happened in the first days of the creation. "We may suppose that nature makes an ascent as it were by steps (*per gradum*) – I mean the various properties of life – from the lower to the perfect form"<sup>3</sup>. This order is respected at all the levels of creation, and echoed also in the Scriptures, which have their narrative bodies (the historical one being the "garment of skin") and yet, just a single spiritual *skopos*<sup>4</sup>. This sequential order reflected in God's creation, and above all in man's dual constitution, has a musical beauty<sup>5</sup>. The balance between intellectual properties and physical aptitudes is shown at best in man's capacity of correlating his mind's decisional acts with the extraordinary mobility of his hands. The instruments used by musicians are designed not only for the sounds that man likes hearing, but, says Gregory, they befit first our manual intelligence. Gregory of Nyssa is aware that musical instruments – like the technological products<sup>6</sup> – are only the projection (by prolongation) of our organs. Not before noting

2. NPNF V, 309a (Gregorii Nysseni Opera (Leiden, Brill) - GNO I. 396. 19-20).

3. *On the Making of Man* (VIII. 7), NPNF V, 394b (PG 44, cols. 148 B10-C1).

4. J. Daniélou, "Akolouthia" chez Grégoire de Nyssa", in *Vigilie Chrétiennes* (V.C.) 7 (1953), pp. 154-170 (reprinted in a modified version in *Temps et être chez Grégoire de Nyssa*, in J. Fontaine &

5. H. I. Marrou, "Une théologie de la musique chez Grégoire de Nyssa", in J. Fontaine & Ch. Kannengieser, *Épiktasis. Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal J. Daniélou*, Paris, 1972, 500-509; Marrou's references are restricted mainly to St Gregory's commentaries *In Ps.*

6. *On the Making of Man* (VIII. 8), NPNF V, 394b (PG 44, cols. 148 C-D): "As you may see musicians producing their music according to the form of their instruments, and not piping with harps nor harping upon flutes, so it must needs be that the organisation of these instruments of ours should be adapted for reason, that when struck by vocal instruments it might be able to sound properly for the use of words".

en passant that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this case was made convincingly by the prominent Russian theologian Pavel Florensky<sup>7</sup>, let us read again Gregory's extensive description, in the most vivid images, of man's gifts:

*For this reason the hands were attached to the body: for though we can count up very many uses in daily life for which these skilfully contrived and helpful instruments, our hands, that easily follow every art and every operation, alike in war and peace, are serviceable, yet nature added them to our reason body pre-eminently for the sake of reason. For if man were destitute of hands, the various parts of his face would certainly have been arranged like those of the quadrupeds, to suit the purpose of his feeding: so that its form would have been lengthened out and pointed towards the nostrils, and his lips would have projected from his mouth, lumpy, and stiff, and thick, fitted for taking up the grass, and his tongue would either have lain between his teeth, of a kind to match his lips, fleshy, and hard, and rough, assisting his teeth to deal with what came under his grinder, or it would have been moist and hanging out at the side like that of dogs and other carnivorous beasts, projecting through the gaps in his jagged row of teeth. If, then, our body had no hand, how could articulate sound have been implanted in it, seeing that the form of the parts of the mouth would not have had the configuration proper for the use of speech, so that man must of necessity have either bleated, or "baaed", or barked, or neighed, or bellowed like oxen, or asses, or uttered some bestial sounds (ē thērōidē mukēthmon aphienai)?<sup>8</sup>*

In other words, *homo faber* is the proof for *homo sapiens*, and some contemporary evolutionist thinkers did not miss Gregory's contribution to the history of scientific ideas<sup>9</sup>. Gregory's perceptive description of the complemen-

7. I was able to read Florensky's essay only in Romanian translation, cf. P. Florensky, *Perpectiva invernă și alte scrieri*, trad. Tatiana Nicolescu, Alexandra Nicolescu și Ana Maria Brezuleanu, București, Humanitas, 1997, 140 et sq.

8. *De hom. opif.* VIII (PG 44, cols. 148 D3-149A9).

9. Gregory of Nyssa was not only once integrated into an evolutionary anthropology; E. C. Messenger, *Evolution and Theology. The problem of Man's Origin*, London, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1931; E. C. Messenger (ed.), *Theology and Evolution by various writers*, London, Sands & Co., 1950. The above fragment from *De hominis opificio* is included as motto of the famous book of the French ethnologist A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la parole*, vol. I & II, Paris, Albin Michel, 1964-1965; in the orthodox area, see Alexander Kalomiros, "God's Breath in Ape's Body", in *Epiphany* 10 (Fall 1989-Wint 1990), pp. 10-23; "The Eternal Will: Some Thoughts Concerning the Scriptural and Patristic Understanding of the Creation of Man and the World", in *Christian Activist* 11 (1997). Dr. Kalomiros defended the theory of evolution with reference to Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, but he was harshly refuted by Hieromonk Seraphim Rose and Damascene Christensen, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man*, Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000, pp. 514-515, 522-527, 540-544; Indications *against* an evolutionist interpretation of Gregory are given in NPNF V, 305b (GNO I. 387. 13-16): "our humanity is preserved continually, from first to last, within the same circle of qualities, losing none which it had at the beginning, any more than it acquires any which it had not then". In any circumstance, the reader should be aware that Gregory would have never joint the nihilist presuppositions of the evolutionist anthropological theory, as it is understood nowadays. For this implications, see P. Koslowski, "The Theory of Evolution as Sociobiology and Bioeconomics. A Critique to Its Claim to Totality", in P. Koslowski (ed.), *Sociobiology and Bioeconomics. The Theory of Evolution in Biological and Economic Theory*, Berlin, Heidelberg & co., Springer, 1998, pp. 301-328.

tary role played by hands in their dialogue with the mind must have been entirely novel to his contemporaries<sup>10</sup>. However, it is very important to understand that Gregory's praise of man is not justified only by the latter's intellectual capacity. *It is not the size of the brain that makes man superior to other creatures, but his linguistic capacities, and the ionic structure of his being*. The linguistic abilities were, strictly, inconceivable in the absence of some exceptional physiological aptitudes. Verticality gives man not only a deeper horizon and more profound visual perception, but also manual freedom and the capacity of articulating a very complex bodily and vocal language. Gregory is aware that hands are not only for writing, but can articulate a bodily language, to which he clearly alludes when saying: "we speak by writing, and, in a certain way, converse by the aid of our hands"<sup>11</sup>. There is a mutual correlation between the intellectual capacity of the human brain and the manual skills, and yet, Gregory avoids a materialist account of man's creation. What makes man remarkable is his capacity to illustrate all the gifts of the wild nature, imitating and surpassing them. Man is the crown of God's creation not only because he performs unrivalled intellectual exercises (in mathematics or other theoretical arts), but also due to his capacity to shape forms of beauty<sup>12</sup>. The human mind is for Gregory "a skilled musician (*hāper tis mousikēs empeiros on*)"<sup>13</sup> able to conduct the "animated instruments" of his body. Human language does not signify a brute state of affairs, in the way that animals react by various screams while they sense fear, hunger or sexual desire. Man contemplates perfection, since God "did not give, but imparted him (*ouk edōkenm akk'oti metedōken*)"<sup>14</sup> mind and reason. Since tonality, syntax and harmony are crucial in the performance of human language, Gregory carries out his musical metaphor in imagining the human body as the scene of an invisible concert performed by innumerable organs. He compares "breath" with a "flute" and the "mouth" with a "lyre", which strings are invisibly played and attuned at the request of the mind.

Being given in the Garden of Eden, the gift of language is expected to perform a musical symphony. Yet, because the biblical idea of paradise does not cover only the rustic Eden, and is paralleled also by the heavenly Jerusalem, Gregory compares the map of our mind with the complexity of a polis, in which

10. F. M. Young, "Adam and anthropos: a Study of the Interaction of Science and the Bible in two Anthropological Treatises of the 4<sup>th</sup> century", in *V/C* 37, 2 (1983), pp. 110-140 (F. M. Young dwells here on the parallels between Nemesius and Gregory); R. D. Young, "Gregory of Nyssa's Use of Theology and Science in Constructing Theological Anthropology", in *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (Summer) 1993, pp. 345-363.

11. *De hom. opif.* VIII. 2 (PG 44, 144B12-C9).

12. A. Meredith, "The good and the beautiful in Gregory of Nyssa", in *ERMENEUMATA*, T.4, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990, pp. 133-145.

13. *On the Making of Man* (IX. 2), NPNF V, 395a (PG 44, col. 149 C1-2).

14. *On the Making of Man* (IX. 1), NPNF V, 395a (PG 44, col. 149 B4-5).

different buildings and avenues satisfy the need for beauty and diversity<sup>15</sup>. On “the spacious territory of our mind”, knowledge gathers impressions coming through various sensible canals, and yet, what makes a unity of this diversity, is beyond the bodily senses. There is no physiological organ – not even the brain – which in Gregory’s anthropology could not be identified with the residence of human thought, which is linguistically determined. The miracle of thought is not more arresting than the miracle of musical performance, since at stake, in both cases, is the power of unifying the multiplicity and the ability of discerning one *telos* (and, therefore, the *akolouthia*) amidst the profligate diversity of sensation or emotions. Both thought and musical performances resemble the mystery of God’s simplicity, which does not exclude difference. Our triune God cannot be grasped in the logic of binary propositions, but only through the submission to darkness of all the senses. To express the ultimate mystery of the triune God requires a *sacrificium intellectus*, since it integrates multiplicity into unity<sup>16</sup>. Stressing the parallel existing between God and man made in the divine image, Gregory celebrates incomprehensibility as the reverse of our call for the infinite resemblance to God<sup>17</sup>.

For Gregory of Nyssa, symphony is not only the archetype of scriptural hermeneutics, but also that of the linguistic performances. This is not only because language, like music, is learned and practised as a skill. There is not only a structural connivance, but also a shared finality in musical and linguistic performances. Thinking, speaking or writing should convey harmony and beauty, if they are to be regarded as revelation of one truth. Contemplating truth means for Gregory to grasp the beauty of the creation (*Wz* 13, 5), which is better expressed by the non-verbal art of music. Grasping the truth is not a matter of objective validation of one statement against one fact, but the poetic intuition of the dynamic process of the self-disclosure of truth. Knowing truly the truth implies rigour and charity, which ultimately needs ascetic struggle with the chaotic forces dwelling in our body, mind and imagination. “Tuning” the wild passions of the body is not a goal *per se*, and is meant to open the

15. *On the Making of Man* (X. 4), NPNF V, 396a (PG 44, cols. 152 C12-D6). For an excellent research in Gregory of Nyssa’s psychology, see M. R. Barnes, “The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa’s Psychology”, in *Journal of Medieval Theology and Philosophy* 4 (1994), pp. 1-24; M. R. Barnes, “Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology in Its Psychological Context”, in *Modern Theology* (MT) 18, 4 (2002), pp. 476-496.

16. *On the Making of Man* (XI. 2): “How is there diversity in unity? How is unity maintained in diversity (*pōs en poiētia ton en*)?” (NPNF V, 396b, PG 44, col. 156 A9-10). In the whole passage, Gregory clearly alludes to the orthodox doctrine of God as the confirmation of the human, but not less wonderful “miracle of thought”.

17. Among many modern orthodox theologians who have drawn on this point, one should mention V. Lossky, “In the Image and Likeness”, in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London, James Clarke, 1957, pp. 114-134.

horizons of limpid, unified, all-inclusive perceptions. It is no surprise that Gregory can hold a strong admiration, simultaneously, for mathematics and for the musical arts<sup>18</sup>, both related to what he calls “*epinoi*” (imaginative faculty). And it so happens that both arts imply a process of abstraction or, in other words, the taming of our arbitrary imagination. Symphony means diversity, but requires rules of constituting the unity, the meaning, and everything beyond (“the sublime”).

Ultimately, language’s eminent pattern is that of a melody, to which the beauty of all parts of the body and faculties of the mind must contribute. This explains why prayerful doxology best befits the vocation of the human mind. We are at our best when we sing, suggests Gregory, and it becomes apparent why the *Old Testament* calls its mystical book *par excellence* “the Song of Songs”. But the song is not of an ordinary kind, comforting the sensual desires of the broken heart, “for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked”<sup>19</sup>. It is the nuptial song of the purified heart, which longs for God’s secret beauty and his infinite love.

### Conversion and Conversation

In the light of the scriptural account of creation, Gregory is ready to accept that Adam has been given the right to call the creatures “upon their names” after the fulfilment of all of God’s demiurgic acts. If man was made the crown of the whole creation, then the gift of language can be regarded as the last of Adam’s endowments (which pre-existed Eve’s conception). Without being put in relationship with the living world (and, afterwards, in close relation to his wife), Adam would not have needed language<sup>20</sup>, not even to address God<sup>21</sup>. Presumably, Adam was addressing God in thoughts that needed no vocal utterance whatsoever. Since Gregory considers the sexual determination of the

18. M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958, p. 193: “like mathematics, music articulates a vast range of rational relationships for the mere pleasure of understanding them”; M. Henry, *Voir l’invisible*, Paris, Bourin-Julliard, 1988, p. 202: “La capacité d’exprimer immédiatement la vie se trouve dans la musique sa manifestation bouversante et constituée sans doute l’essence de l’art”.

19. T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’, V”, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London, Faber & Faber, 1963, p. 173.

20. NPNF V, 266b (GNO I. 273. 5-8).

21. Though not explicitly expressed by Gregory of Nyssa, the idea occurs in John Chrysostomos, *Homilies to Matthew* (prologue), NPNF X. 1, 1a (PG 67, col. 13A 1-8): “It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course”.



human being (in contrast with the immaterial reproduction of the angels) as a post-lapsarian reality, one can imagine that Adam had access to a passive knowledge of God, which did not need any discursive articulation.

Confirmation is given in *The Book of Genesis*, which presents language as a thoroughly human instrument. Language seems to fulfil the vital need for interaction and dialogue<sup>22</sup> that characterised human beings *ab initio*. If God called upon Adam, then Adam had to speak to the creatures. Giving names to the beasts, Adam made the first step to tame them. Yet, the goal of this act does not reside, apparently, in the utilitarian plan of domesticating the animals. Read metaphorically, the biblical scene shows Adam consecrating, almost in an Eucharistic way, the gifts given to him by God. One cannot forget that some of the animals were, later on, components of the sacrifices requested by God (and which, above all, was to test man's gratefulness). Linguistic performance appears to be from the beginning an act of improvisation, and therefore, of improving somehow what has been already given. Usage of words reveals not only authority, but also opens an intermediary territory, where the subtle art of dialogue can be played in sounds and silence (the latter being, again, indispensable in musical performance<sup>23</sup>). To carry on Gregory's thoughts, one could say that language is ambivalent and manifests not only the potential of domination, but also the virtue of recognition, valuing silence as the privileged space of hospitality. To call upon somebody requires already the preparation for attentive silence. Any responsible speech promises a time of listening, which again means hope, faith, and love. Adam received the gift of language in order to

22. I follow here the interpretation of Augustin, *De Gen. Ad litt.* IX, v. 9 (PL 34, col. 396): "*Quanto enim congruentius ad convivendum et colloquendum duo amici pariter quam vir et mulier habitarent?*" Language socialises, opens new worlds, and becomes a measure of the human generativity. On this, many modern thinkers, both Jewish and Christians, point in their commentaries that Adam's gift of language encapsulate the premises of a dialogical philosophy. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, edited by Garrett Barden and John Cumming, New York, Seabury Press, 1975; E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, Paris, 1963; J. Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, Paris, Calman Lévy, 1997; J.-L. Chrétien, *L'arabe de la parole*, Paris, PUF, 1999, and also Rubem Alves, *The Warrior, the Prophet and the Poet*, London, SCM Press, 2002.

23. The adoption of an impoverished style in painting (Malevich, Rothko), sculpture (Giacometti, Brâncuși) and music (the minimalists), during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century, is very telling. In music, this kenotic usage of silence is most striking in Arvo Pärt's work. Cf. Paul Hilliard, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 1: "All music emerges from silence, to which sooner or later it must return. At its simplest we may conceive of music as the relationship between sounds and the silence that surrounds them. Yet silence is an imaginary state in which all sounds are absent, akin perhaps to the infinity of time and space that surrounds us. We cannot ever hear utter silence, nor can we fully imagine such concepts infinity and eternity. When we create music, we express life. But the source of music is silence, which is the ground of our musical being, the fundamental note of our life. How we live depends on our relationship with death; how we make music depends on our relationship with silence".

apprehend better the wonders of God's creation, and yet, was still unable to perceive their essence. This structural incomprehensibility of creation, emphasized on many occasions by Gregory, outlines the need for conversation, and for conversion. Called to dialogue, Adam could grow in his innocent sense of wonder and praise<sup>24</sup>, learning new things and still not being guilty of curiosity. While talking to Adam, Eve could have explored the inexhaustibility of a person made in the "image of God". It is the image of God that makes human being a mystery, and, in the modern sense of the word, a person. Hosted before anything else by the language<sup>25</sup>, which emulated the Edenic gardens, Adam and Eve's conversations must have been unparalleled, and they remain so. The words of their language conveyed their thoughts in transparency, and only freedom of choice shifted their minds from the marvellous experience of incomprehensibility (which was poetic, resembling God) to the dramatic, pitiable and corrupted experience of misunderstanding<sup>26</sup>. Ambiguity became real only when Adam's freedom chose autonomy (which is, actually, self-love and lack of faith)<sup>27</sup>. Then, the darkening of thought collapsed the previous luminosity of human language, and hermeneutics was instituted as, at least, an "art of divination"<sup>28</sup>. Since Adam's fall, life itself became a foreign language to be endlessly learnt. If before his alienation from Eden, Adam enjoyed the spiritual

24. An author very close to the Cappadocian Fathers' theology, Evagrius of Pontus, defines the natural contemplation as "the wonder united with praise" (*In Pr* 118, 171). Recently, Kallistos Ware shed new light on the theological significance of wonder, in *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Press, 2000, pp. 69-74.

25. Stressing the original character of language (*die Sprache*), which pertains to man's essence Martin Heidegger called it the "house of being" (*das Haus des Seins*) first in 1947 (*Brief über den Humanismus*), and then in *Der Weg zur Sprache* (1959), where he gives further qualifications: "Sie [die Sprache] ist die Hut des Anwesens, insofern dessen Scheinen dem ereignenden Zeigen der Sage anvertraut bleibt. Haus des Seins ist die Sprache, weil sie als die Sage die Weise des Ereignisses ist", in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12, Frankfurt-am-Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1985, p. 255, edited by P. D. Hertz, *On the Way to Language*, New York, Harper and Row, 1971; for language as "hostel" of being, see also J.-L. Chrétien: "en parlant pour la première fois, l'homme n'entre pas dans la parole: il faut qu'il l'habite déjà" (*L'arabe de la parole*, p. 2).

26. To my knowledge, W. Dilthey was the first author to make clear the difference between lack of understanding (*Unverständnis*) and mis-understanding (*Misverständnis*). Dilthey thought that lack of understanding is treated by hermeneutics (developing the art of comprehension), while any kind of misunderstanding can be solved by natural sciences (through positive explanations).

27. Th. Kobusch: "Die Lehre [Gregors] von der Sprache ist in einer Philosophie der Freiheit begründet, nach der Gott den Menschen als freies Wesen, mithin auch den freien Gebrauch der Vernunft und der Sprache will", in "Name un Sein. Zu den sprachphilosophischen Grundlagen in der Schrift *Contra Eunomium* des Gregor von Nyssa", in L. F. Matco-Secco & J. L. Bastero (eds.), *El "Contra Eunomium I" en la producción literaria de Gregorio de Nisa*, Pamplona, 1988, pp. 247-267, here p. 256.

28. The expression belongs to Fr. Schleiermacher and does not do full justice either to hermeneutics, or to divination.

pleasure of peaceful conversation, afterwards he had to undergo conversion. Mind lost its limpidity and words need to be restored to their former iconic purports. In the post-lapsarian condition of humankind, uttering word runs always a risk, that of openness and generosity, which can succumb to garrulity. Too easily and too often words become like "waterless clouds, carried along by winds, and fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted" (*Judg* 1, 13). This uprooted character of words Martin Heidegger alludes to, in his famous critique of daily gossip (*das Gerede*)<sup>29</sup>, by which one talks about everything and nothing, falsely pledging our needs to live in the present, and to have everything at hand. Talking, "we are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea"<sup>30</sup>. Words are exposed to misapprehension because our language is ambiguous and our identity unstable. With the same tongue, "we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (*Jm* 3, 9-10). When the heart lacks love, the word can become like a sword, and language the most powerful tool for destructive purposes. Confronted with this double-sided constitution of our speech<sup>31</sup>, those who look for perfection decide that silence is very often the best solution. Since Jesus himself, facing Pontius Pilate, remained quiet (*Matth* 27, 14; *Jm* 19, 9), silence was regarded very often the golden virtue of Christian monasticism<sup>32</sup>, though its valuation can be traced back to the age of the early Greek thinkers<sup>33</sup>.

29. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2, Frankfurt-am-Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1977, §35, p. 244: "Das Gerede ist die Möglichkeit, alles zu verstehen ohne vorgängige Zueignung der Sache. Das Gerede behütet schon vor der Gefahr, bei einer solchen Zueignung zu scheitern. Das Gerede, das jeder auftraffen kann, entbindet nicht nur von der Aufgabe echten Verstehens, sondern bildet eine indifferente Verständlichkeit aus, der nicht mehr verschlossen ist". Further on, Heidegger makes also the connection between gossip and curiosity: "Das Gerede regiert auch die Wege der Neugier, es sagt, was man gelesen und gesehen haben muss. Das Überall-und-nirgends-sein der Neugier ist dem Gerede überantwortet. Diese beide alltägliche Seinsmodi der Rede und der Sicht sind in ihrer Entwurzelungstendenz nicht lediglich nebeneinander vorhanden, sondern eine Weise zu sein reisst die andere mit sich" (*ibidem*, p. 229).

30. Otto Neurath, "Protocol Sentences", in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism*, London, 1959, p. 201.

31. M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 232: "[Die Zweideutigkeit] spielt die Neugier immer das zu, was sie sucht, und gibt dem Gerede den Schein, als würde in ihm alles entschieden".

32. Valuable references are to be found in P. Miquel, "Silence", in *DS* t. XIV, Paris, Beauchesne, 1990, pp. 830-842; Ignatius of Antioch, *Magn.* 8, 2, SC 10bis, Paris, Cerf, 1969<sup>4</sup>, p. 86; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Exil.* VII (SC 416, pp. 375-387; GNO V. 410-416); Denys the Areopagite, *Theologia mystica* 1 speaks of "silence initiatory into the mysteries" (PG 3, col. 997A-B); John Climacos, *The Ladder* XI; Isaac the Syrian (*De perfectione* 66) calls silence "the mystery of the age to come". For Ephrem the Syrian, see Paul S. Russell, "Ephraem the Syrian on the Utility of Language and the Place of Silence", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (JECS) 8, 1 (2000), pp. 21-37.

33. Cf. M. Dupuy, "Silence", in *DS* t. XIV, Paris, Beauchesne, 1990, pp. 843-859. References are given for Plato, *Parm.* 142a; Plotinus, *Enn.* V, 8, 5; III, 8, 9; Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* IV, 9.

As we have already seen, Gregory of Nyssa<sup>34</sup> is not at all foreign to this apophatic tradition, which still does not regard language as pure negativity. As the light spot on a prism displays beauty in colours, silence makes possible the articulation of language. In Gregory we see at best how ordinary language is, in fact "fossil poetry" (R. W. Emerson), since the most ordinary words can be the sparkle of the most meaningful images in the laudatory performance, which again, cannot avoid silent awe in God's presence. "Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him" (*Ps* 37, 7), says David, while the Prophet Isaiah is told: "Listen to me in silence" (*Is* 41, 1). Being "the contemplation of the invisible things", prayer is the greatest virtue<sup>35</sup> that outlines the "margins of silence" (Vl. Lossky)<sup>36</sup> which speak of God more distinctly than "thousands words in a tongue" (*I Cor* 14, 18).

### Angelic Silence and Human Speech

Unlike Augustine<sup>37</sup> (and even less than any of the Jewish medieval Kabbalists), Gregory does not like speculating on the possible nature of the Adamic language<sup>38</sup>. Yet, he allusively refers to the immediate character of the angelic speech:

*For, in case of immaterial intellectual nature (noeras physcōs), the mental energy is speech (he kata ton noun energia logos estin), which has no need of material instruments of communication (hypērcēsia)*<sup>39</sup>.

34. NPNF V, 260a (GNO I. 254, 27).

35. *De or. dom.* I. 1 (PG, col. 1124C): "mēden tēs proseuchēs einai tōn kata tēn zōēn timiōn anōteron".

36. V. Lossky, *In the Image and the Likeness of God*, London, 1975, p. 151. An inspiring application of Lossky's expression is to be found in A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery. Essay on the Nature of Theology*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1999, pp. 91-95. The Fathers' references to the silence of God and in front of God – *coram Deo* – should not be confused with the agnostic silence of the philosophers towards Being (invoked by Wittgenstein, in the last sentence of his *Tractatus*, or Heidegger in various places from *Beiträge zur Philosophie zur Philosophie und Identität und Differenz*). See the splendid commentary of J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*, Chicago, 1991, pp. 53 sq.

37. On this, J. K. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2000. Smith draws heavily on Augustine's theory of language in his research on the paradisiacal language.

38. Theo Kobusch goes so far to put Gregory face to face with the work of Richard Simon (1638-1712), since the latter, "in seinem 1678 erschienen und sofort unterdrückten Werk 'Histoire critique du Vieux Testament' kritisierte er die bisher üblichen Vorstellungen von der Entstehung der Sprache. Mit breiter Berufung auf Gregor von Nyssa legt er dar, dass Gott weder als Urheber der Sprache, noch als Verursacher der Verschiedenheit der Sprachen gedacht werden kann. Vielmehr wollte Gott – so R. Simon und Gregor von Nyssa – dass die menschliche Natur sich auf je ihre Weise auch sprachlich entfalte" (*art. cit.*, p. 248).

39. NPNF V, 289b (GNO I. 340, 19-21).

If the concept of speech is still appropriate for defining the communication among the angels, in respect to God such description is obviously absurd, since “the True Life is an actuality actuating itself (*energeia tis estin he ontōs zōē eautēn energousa*)”<sup>40</sup>. In Thomas Aquinas’ terminology, God is *actus purus* and, therefore, he does not need to make himself known. Like sexuality, divisive language appears to be the consequence of Adam’s fall. Gregory is confident that “we should have no need of using words and names if we could otherwise inform each other of our pure mental feelings (*gymna [...] ta tēs dianoias kinēmata*)”<sup>41</sup>. Purity of mind<sup>42</sup>, therefore, diminishes proportionally the use of verbose communication, and those who become similar to the angels (or, in human words, to children), can understand better the mystery of silence (*inifans*). For immediate communication, which is realisable without words between minds of the same, one needs only purity of thoughts. When this level is achieved, either through words, or in silence, human mind can make a miraculous connection with the realm of the invisible. This explains how words invested with personal energy in which dwells the Holy Spirit can perform miracles, as one finds in the narratives of the Gospels<sup>43</sup>. It is very telling, from this viewpoint, that the biblical Greek language uses the word “*semeia*” for “miracle”.

To reach the status of a holy receptacle, language – like body and sexuality – needs language needs discipline. Gregory of Nyssa is fully aware that we are only in the possession of a broken instrument, which constantly needs correction, like our thoughts. He does not have the naivety of some of those theologians and humanists who believed that the roots of the primordial language are somehow traceable. Gregory thought that, apart from Adam’s fall, another event marked the condition of human language: the Babelian confusion of tongues, which, in the variant of the biblical myth, tore apart also the ethnic unity of humankind<sup>44</sup>. Gregory makes clear that language is necessary

40. NPNF V, 287a (GNO I, 333, 26-27).

41. NPNF V, 289b (GNO I, 340, 21-24).

42. The concept of pure mind occurs also in Eunomius’ *First Apology* (4 I, 20, 3-4), but has a merely philosophical sense: it is required by the examination of the nature of the universe.

43. D. Maguerat, “Magie, guérison et parole dans *Les Actes des Apôtres*”, in *Études théologiques et religieuses* 72, 2 (1997), pp. 197-208.

44. NPNF V, 275b-276a (GNO I, 300-301.7) In the history of the biblical exegesis, Gregory’s interpretation of the Babel episode was positively received first by Richard Simon, Augustin Calmet and E. Morin, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (cf. T. Kobusch, *art. cit.*, pp. 248-249). In England, W. Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Dissert*, 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, London, 1741, shows interest in Gregory’s writing; apart from Kobusch’s historical account, J. Milbank noticed this parallel in *Word Made Strange*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 59. Interestingly enough, in Germany, J. C. Herder regards Gregory “als einen Vorkämpfer der aufklärerischen Position Bezug” (Kobusch, *loc. cit.*, p. 250).

and performed only in a disrupted world, characterised by *diastasis*<sup>45</sup>. Since we are made *ex nihilo*, our knowledge is never substantial<sup>46</sup>, and, therefore, human language remains imperfect. Gregory does not seem to hope that a “return to the things themselves” (Husserl’s dictum: “*Zurück zu den Sachen selbst!*”) could be, in any sense, possible. “Things in themselves” are to be known only by God, while man can only grasp their contextual meaning. Man can acquire incomplete knowledge only since his very nature is ambivalent (spiritual and material). Aristotle has clearly established that one knowing subject and one known object cannot come together if their characters do not possess homogeneity<sup>47</sup> (in hermeneutics, this sentence can be translated as such: every disagreement includes an agreement). Gregory leaves substantial knowledge to God, who is the infinite Creator of all things. But to man was allowed a deflected knowledge of the finite creatures (with whom we share materiality), and “an affective knowledge”<sup>48</sup> of God, in whose image man has been made. On both sides (horizontal and vertical), our thought and knowledge encounters limitations, and together with that, a call for infinite surpassing (*epēktaisis*). All “divine names” derive from “human names”, and express tangentially God’s immanence in the economy of creation<sup>49</sup>.

## From Babel to Pentecost

If one does not know the structure of Adam’s idiom before the fall, it is even more senseless to attribute to God a language of designation, as Eunomius

45. T. Paul Verghese, “*Diastema* and *Diastasis* in Gregory of Nyssa. Introduction to a Concept and the Posing of a Problem”, in H. Doerrie, M. Altenburger & U. Schramm (ed.), *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie. Zweites Internationales Kolloquium über Gregor von Nyssa (Minister 18-23 September 1972)*, Leiden, Brill, 1976, pp. 243-259.

46. More on this point, see the remarkable monograph of Alcuin A. Weiswurm, *The Nature of Human Knowledge According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Washington DC, The Catholic University of America, 1952, pp. 119-146; apart from his accuracy, Weiswurm is especially good in drawing comparisons between Gregory’s and Aristotle’s epistemology (read through the lens of Thomas Aquinas).

47. Aristotle, *De anima* (I, 2), 204b8; Aristotle follows the famous principle of the ancient Greek philosophers, which defined knowledge as a homeopathic process (*tois homoiōis ta homoiōta gignosketai*).

48. A. A. Weiswurm, *The Nature of Human Knowledge according to St Gregory of Nyssa*, Washington, 1952, p. 194.

49. A word should be said about the divine creation, which in Gregory’s eyes, is not “out of necessity, but in the superabundance of love (*ouk anankē tini pros tēn tou anthrōpinēs physeōs, all’ agapēs periochia*)” (*Or. Cat. V, NPNF V, 478b*; ed. R. Winling, SC 453, 162, 32-33; ed. Mühlenberg, GNO III, 4, 17, 3-4).



did<sup>50</sup>. One cannot imagine in God a linguistic performance, “who is at once (*all’ holon di’ bolos*) sight, and hearing, and knowledge”<sup>51</sup>. One can speak, of course, about the Word of God (*logos tou theou*), but this tackles already the central problem of the Trinitarian theology, debated at length in CE I and CE II. With reference to the mystery of the Trinity, the divine and hypostatic Logos can be called also “Son”, “Icon”, or “Wisdom and Power” of God (1 Cor 1, 24)<sup>52</sup>. The creative Word of God by whom “the heavens were established” (Pr 33, 4) is the One announced in the Prologue of St John and incarnated as Jesus Christ. He is the only “language” of God that one could ever imagine, and the only ones who speak this language are the saints. There is, of course, a helpful analogy in the scriptural description of the Son as Word of God, which allows Gregory to pinpoint their indestructible unity. “The Father of the Word needs to be thought of with the Word, for it would not be word were it not a word of some one”<sup>53</sup>. Language and thought are intimately connected as the Father (compared with the human mind) with the Son (called the Word). Words are intrinsically relational, and so are the divine Persons of the Trinity, says Gregory, without developing this analogy into an imagery that could be misleading or idolatrous.

Stressing the natural connection between the vocal utterance of the words and the act of breathing, which are both invisible, Gregory suggests in an analogy of Stoic origin how the Holy Spirit is contiguous to the Word of the Father. The unity of Godhead is always expressed in the Scriptures, though the subject of theophany is not always explicit. Any scriptural reference to articulate speech by God has to be taken metaphorically, and yet, with the appropriate respect due to its inspired character. The Scriptures are part of the divine economy, but they do not express exhaustively the works of God in creation. The Gospels themselves do not record “many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21, 25). Obviously, Gregory does not deny the possibility of divine inspiration, but he stresses that the destination and the modality of expressing is “proportional (*tō metrō tēs physisēs ton logon êmin*) to the capacity of our nature, so that we might be able thereby to signify the thoughts of our minds”<sup>54</sup>. For Gregory, the Scriptures are the testimony of the divine phi-

50. An introduction in Eunomius’ theology is provided by R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; for his writings, the reader should consult Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, text and translation by Richard Paul Vaggione, Oxford, Clarendon University Press, 1987.

51. NPNF V, 271b (GNO I. 287. 3-4).

52. M. Harl, “A propos d’un passage du *Contre Eunome* de Grégoire de Nysse: *aporroia* et les titres du Christ en théologie trinitaire”, in RJR 55 (1967), pp. 217-226.

53. *Or. Cat. I. 2* (NPNF V, 476b; ed. R. Winling, SC 453, p. 151; GNO III, 11).

54. NPNF V, 274a (GNO I. 294. 22-23).

lanthropy<sup>55</sup> and, therefore, they should be understood as a kenotic manifestation of God. Although he does say *expressis verbis* that Scriptures are the first incarnation of God, one finds in Gregory’s biblical theology some similarities to Origen’s views. Our perception is gross, needing a steady point of reference, and continual pilgrimage in the land of “divine letters”, since one can easily represent the Scriptures as an epistolary. Gregory puts it eloquently: “in as much as human nature is in a sense (*tropon tima*) deaf and insensible to higher truths, we maintain that the grace of God at ‘sundry times’ and in divers manners (*polymerôs kai polytropôs*) spoke by the Prophets”<sup>56</sup>. Though deaf, when inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophets and the apostle of God can look like “drunkards”. Gregory compares the process of inspiration of the Scriptures with the miracle happened in the day of Pentecost, this “great feast of languages”<sup>57</sup>. Then, at Jerusalem, “each man received the teaching of the disciplines in his own language (*en tē idia dialektō*) wherein he was born, understanding the meaning of the words by the language they knew (*dia tōn gnōrimōn autō brēmationōn*)”<sup>58</sup>.

Since the plurality of dialects is preserved in the reception of the divine teaching (the process of understanding being shaped by the idiomatic profile of each one), Pentecost – the feast that harvests the catholic meaning of the Church – does not contradict, but fulfils Babel. Languages are landmarks on the fissiparous body of humankind, divided into cultures, habits, ethnic groups etc. Of all these, Gregory of Nyssa seems entirely conscious, reading the myth of Babel as a description of a historical event<sup>59</sup>. Stretched between the hypothesis (1) “language of human origin”, and the hypothesis (2) “language of divine origin”, the narrative of Babel could be interpreted either way. While Philo the Jew<sup>60</sup> chose the second option, Gregory chose for the first one. Breaking the idiomatic unity of humankind was, certainly, God’s will to punish the pride

55. NPNF V, 290a (GNO I. 341. 14-21); NPNF V, 292a/b (GNO I. 348. 27): “*aita touto en tais poiiklais pros tous anthrōpous theophaneias kai kata anthrōpon sēmaitizetai kai anthropikês phthugge kai kai orgên kai eleon kai ta toutanta hypoductai pathê*”.

56. NPNF V, 275a (GNO I. 297. 6-9).

57. W. Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1595) act 5, sc. 1. 1.

58. NPNF V, 274b (GNO I. 296. 6-8).

59. For relatively modest theological remarks, see J. Daniélou, “La division des langues”, in *Essai sur le mystère de l’histoire*, Paris, Cerf, 1982, pp. 49-60. For other cultural readings of this axial myth, see U. Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, edited by James Fentress, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995; P. Zumthor, *Babel, ou, L’inachèvement*, Paris, Seuil, 1997; and also the informative article of E. Ciurtin, “À la lisière réverbérée de la Tour Babel. Notes de lecture – Paul Zumthor, *Babel ou l’inachèvement*, Seuil, 1997, édition roumaine, Iași, Polirom, 1998”, in *Archives* 2, 1 (1998), pp. 211-241 (en roumain, avec un résumé en français).

60. Philo, *Leg. All. II*. 14-15. And the commentary of J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists 80B.C. to A.D. 200*, London, Duckworth, 1996<sup>2</sup>, p. 181, “There is thus a consensus among Platonists, Stoics, and Pythagoreans by Philo’s time that words are attached to things by nature, not by convention”.

of the people. But he just gave an impetus to an innate possibility of human language, that of being divided and reproduced: "God, willing that men should speak different languages (*allais glossais*), gave human nature full liberty to formulate arbitrary sounds, so as to render their meaning more intelligible"<sup>61</sup>. Even the Hebrew language, in which the author of *The Book of Genesis* writes (for Gregory, he is unmistakably Moses), is posterior to this event, though the historical circumstances in which it emerged as the idiom of the "elected people", remain veiled in secrecy. Assuming that the birth of a nation coincides with the birth of its idiom, Gregory searched for an answer to the Jewish dilemma: how the people led by Moses from Egypt to Canaan could acquire Hebrew language in such a short time? To respond, Gregory takes refuge in the concept of miraculous intervention, which sounds more plausible and humanly speaking is much more acceptable than the imaginary thesis held by Joseph Flavius or even Origen, about the antiquity of the Jewish language<sup>62</sup>. "To suppose that God used the Hebrew tongue, when there was no one to hear and understand such language, methinks no reasonable being will consent"<sup>63</sup>.

The implications of this theological position are strong; there is no sacred language as such. The process of translation is not criminal since it follows the pattern of understanding by the human mind of divine commandments. At a closer glance, the Scriptures themselves – at least those used by the Christian Church – are a corpus of texts translated into an idiom almost foreign to the language of their subjects and, in part, of their authors. Yet, the Scriptures were sacred and enjoyed a broad veneration among Christians. Gregory's viewpoint, therefore, confirms the early Church's understanding of the importance and the necessity of translating the Scriptures into the idioms spoken by the gentiles.

### Acknowledging Cultural Diversity

Going deeper into the substance of his argument, Gregory parries the blows of his adversary by referring to the evidence of cultural and linguistic diversity<sup>64</sup>. To claim that just *one* concept expresses the essence of God would lead to the conclusion that, since it supports no comparison, any attempt to translate it is doomed to failure. I think that the point made by Gregory is particularly strong. If *agennetos* indeed captures God's essence, then the necessary conclusion is that *agennetos* can be regarded in itself as a separated ("idiomatic")

61. NPNF V, 276a (GNO I. 300. 23-26).

62. Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI. 3.

63. NPNF V, 276b (GNO I. 301. 24-26).

64. G. Bardy, *La question des langues dans l'Église ancienne*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1948.

essence, which accepts no synonym. The conclusion is peremptorily absurd and chauvinistic: only people speaking Greek would be able, in Eunomius' view, to know God's essence.

Since Gregory did not allow Hebrew to represent God's thoughts, he had all the more reason to refuse Greek language any sacred authority over the other "barbarian" idioms. "Things are named by the indication of the voice (*dia tinos sēmantikēs phōnes*) in conformity with the nature and the qualities (*kata tēn engeimēnēn hekastō physin kai dynamin*) inherent in each, the names being adapted to the things according to the vernacular language of each several race (*en hekastō tō ethnēi*)"<sup>65</sup>. As Samuel Johnson one thousand years later, Gregory regarded languages to be "the pedigree of nations", which cannot and do not need to be dissolved. What makes languages and ethnic origin irrelevant is only a life dwelling in the Spirit. As St Paul put it, "there is neither Jew, nor Greek, there is neither slave, nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Ga* 3, 28).

For Gregory, the "divine names" complement one another like the words of a dictionary, but no one expresses the "essence" of God. Gregory's vision about knowledge is close to the phenomenological hermeneutics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which describes any process of understanding as an act of translation, which, therefore, is perfectly perfectible<sup>66</sup>. "Since the nature of most things that are seen in creation is not simple", words are necessarily multiple, and cover only patches of meaning, which themselves endlessly change. What words express are the qualities or, in other terminology, the energies of the objects described. An increase in qualities of an object determines the growth in quantity of appellations, which precision is proportional to their narrowness. Even if the defined objects are not composite, like God who is simple by essence, the two-fold character of human knowledge (rooted in the senses and processed by immaterial intelligence) makes inevitable the lapse into semantic multiplicity. Words can point out the meanings of the objects, but their functionality never describes their "inner" rationality.

In this respect, the most eloquent example is that of the Scriptures, which were written by different authors, and express in a variety of authorial styles the revelation of one God. Despite God's simplicity, the Scriptures are intrinsically multifarious, and this fact receives from Gregory an interesting explanation. Referring to the *Psalms*, Gregory imagines their author (i.e.: David) being in the Spirit (*en pneumatō*) and interpreting "by voice and word (*dia phōnon kai brēmation*) his own knowledge of the mysteries given him by God"<sup>67</sup>. Therefore,

65. NPNF V, 278a (GNO I. 305. 23-26).

66. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1960, edited by G. Barden and J. Cumming, New York, The Seabury Press, 1975, pp. 345-449.

67. NPNF V, 290a (GNO I. 340. 19-21).

if the writing of the Scriptures can be imaged as a process of translation, following divine inspiration, one should admit the presence of a significant human contribution to the "fabrication" of the material corpus of the Bible.

It is also significant that not even the divine Scriptures escaped the process of idiomatic translation (the *Septuagint*, if not also some of the Gospels, like Matthew's, probably). The multiplicity of ethnic idioms reflects, on a larger scale, the organic plurality of appellations for a single object within a living language. If no particular language is "better" than another, there is no right to say that a word is more privileged to utter meanings than another. Words, like languages, are not better, just different. "The Hebrew calls Heaven by one name, the Canaanite by another one, but both of them understand it alike (*noei de hōsantōs hekateros*), being in no way led into error by the difference of the sounds that convey the idea (*tēn katanoēsēin*) of the object"<sup>68</sup>. The motives of this diverted state of affairs are obscure, and, apparently at least, there is no more logic in somebody's endowment with a language than in the arbitrary usage (*kata to aretikon*) of a word<sup>69</sup>. It is true that Gregory emphasizes the human decision in giving words by calling the circumstances in which Moses ("from the water", in the language of the Egyptian) and Jacob ("the supplanter") received their name, which etymology provide "the memorial of the occurrence". But not all words follow this pattern, and even when onomatopoeic words are translated into other language, their original meaning becomes obscure (like from Egyptian to Hebrew, or from Hebrew to Jewish). Onomatopoeia is an exceptional phenomenon, and usually designates interjections in the vocative case. It might well be the case that Hebrew words tend to "photograph" the realities they express (and the perfect example is *dabar*, which means both "word" and "thing"). Biased by this occasional behaviour of the Hebrew language (exploited in full by the later Kabbalist<sup>70</sup>), Gregory is tempted to play down, sometimes, specious etymologies, just for the sake of spiritual interpretation (e.g. *theos* derived from *theaomai*, "to see")<sup>71</sup>. Yet, in

68. NPNF V, 279a (GNO I. 310. 2-5).

69. NPNF V, 279a (GNO I. 309. 29).

70. E. Levinas, "Le nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques", in E. Castelli (ed.), *Débats sur le langage théologique*, Paris-Rome, 1969, pp. 57-60; A. Scrima, "Le Nom-Lieu de Dieu", in E. Castelli (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 213-220; G. Scholem, *Le nom et les symboles de Dieu dans la mystique juive*, Paris, Cerf, 1983; M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1990; F. Böhl, "Die etymologische Namensdeutung in der rabbinischer Literatur", in J.-P. Chambot & G. Lüdi, *Discours étymologique*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1991, pp. 161-172. For possible connections between Jewish Kabbalah and Christian Hesychasm, see A. Louth, "Knowing the Unknowable: Hesychasm and the Kabbalah", in *Sobornost* 16, 2 (1994), pp. 9-23.

71. In *Ad Abl.* (GNO III. 1. 44. 7-45.5), Gregory of Nyssa provides also an alternative etymology, relating *theos* to *theater* ("holder"). There were also other false etymologies played

Gregory's writings, this is *not* the rule, but the exception. It is very significant that the etymologies played down by Gregory expose attributes revealed by God in his economy. The relative mobility of the etymologies given to a single word like *theos* shows that Gregory's interest was not philological, and that even the name of God remained relative<sup>72</sup>. Certainly, like Hermogenes in *Cratylus*<sup>73</sup>, Gregory does not accept etymological investigations as an appropriate tool to understand the meaning of words. One passing note betrays Gregory's distrust of the pictorial language of the Egyptians, namely hieroglyphs. In John Milbank's words, "what Gregory identifies as the 'daemonic' in the hieroglyphic enigmas is their mixture of the half-human and the half-animal: this, he suggests, is effectively how Eunomius conceives of the divine logos — as an 'intermediate' being who is constantly being 'dragged down into a condition subject to passion'"<sup>74</sup>.

### The Virtues of the Intellectual Pessimism

Having clarified a philosophical point, Gregory recalls the purpose of his writings, which is to refute a bad understanding of the Christian religion (*exegetia*). Suspending for a while his analytic response to Eunomius' ideas, Gregory reminds his reader that his points are not just mapping an intellectual controversy over some tedious questions, like the nature of language and the limits of human knowledge. There is much more, Gregory goes on, and it is all about salvation<sup>75</sup>. A subordinationist version of Trinitarian theology has not only problematic consequences from the cosmological viewpoint (placing the Son at the top of the angelic hierarchy), but also very grave soteriological consequences,

down by the Church Fathers, indicating as possible sources the verbs *thein* (to run) and *aithein* (to burn). See Gregory Nazianzus, *Or.* 30. 18 (SC 250, pp. 262-264).

72. Gregory of Nazianzus explicitly refers to "God" as "a relative name" (*ibidem*).

73. The bibliography of this topic is, unsurprisingly, huge. Among the most comprehensive treatments, see K. Gaiser, *Name und Sache in Platons "Cratylus"*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1974; for the background of Plato's discussion, see M. Kraus, *Name und Sache: Ein Problem im frühgriechischen Denken*, Amsterdam, B. R. Grüner, 1987; for a comparative approach, see J. Bronkhorst, "Etymology and Magic: Yaska's *Nirukta*, Plato's *Cratylus*, and the Riddle of Semantic Etymologies", in *Numen* 48 (2001), pp. 147-203.

74. J. Milbank, "The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn", in *Word Made Strange*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, p. 88.

75. NPNF V, 255a (GNO I. 240. 16-19): "The tenet (*dōgma*) which has been held in common by all who have received the word of our religion (*ton logon tes eusebeias*) is, that all hope of salvation should be placed in Christ, it being impossible for any to be found among the righteous, unless faith in Christ supply what is desired".

by lessening Christ's power to save humankind<sup>76</sup>. Though not strongly visible, there was a hidden connection, at least for Basil and Gregory, between their defence of the *epinoia* argument about language, and the redemptive task of defending Christ's majesty. Having behind them the heresy of Sabellianism and facing ahead a new variant of Trinitarian subordinationism, the Cappadocian theologians had to make sure that Holy Trinity is not notional, but real. In this respect, they pursued a critical interpretation of the limits and the tasks of theological language.

Gregory's theoretical framework is remarkably consistent at all its levels of discourse, and one could say that ontology and cosmology are justly echoed in his theological anthropology. There are different realms of existence, situated somewhere in between the earthly *topos* of human beings and the God of heaven, called here by Gregory "the majestic existing One" (*to megalaton tou ontosontos*). One cannot achieve a proper understanding of God since there is a "wide and insurmountable" gap between the uncreated nature (*hē akitistos physis*), and the created world. "There is no faculty in human nature adequate to the full comprehension of the divine essence (*ouk estin en anthrōpinē physis dynamis eis akribē katanōsin oustias theou*)"<sup>77</sup>. Cosmological settings, also, reveal Gregory's rationales for epistemological prudence. Gregory returns to his dearest doctrine of God, whose measure is only the infinite (*tēs de metron ē apertia estin*). Conversely, God's creation is "limited by time and space" (*chronō kai topō perieigomenē*)<sup>78</sup>, or in J. Daniélou's words, "un passage du non-être à l'être"<sup>79</sup>. Our empirical knowledge is necessarily confined within these boundaries. Gregory even concedes that "in this life we can apprehend (*epinoōscai*) the beginning and the end of all things that exist, but the beatitude (*hē makariotēs*) that is above the creature admits neither end, nor beginning (*oute arribēn, oute telos*)"<sup>80</sup>. This passage needs a correction, given in Gregory's commentary on *The Book of the Ecclesiastes*, where he openly professes his pessimistic ideas about the competence of human knowledge:

*To my mind, the creation does not know itself yet and it has not understood what is the essence of the soul, what is the nature of the bodies, the origin of the beings (ta onta), how they are generated one from another, how what is not receives substance, how what exists is dissolved in non-existence (to on eis to me on), and what is the harmony among the contraries in this world. Thus, if creation does not know itself, how may it declare about what is above itself?*<sup>81</sup>

76. M. F. Wiles' defence of an Eunomius' soteriology is not very convincing, cf. "Eunomius: hair-splitting dialectician or defender of the accessibility of salvation?", in R. Williams (ed.), *The Making of Oribodius: Essay in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 157-172.

77. NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 245. 19-21).

78. NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 246. 18; 20).

79. J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, Leiden, Brill, 1972, p. 99.

80. NPNF V, 257a (GNO I. 246. 24).

81. *In Exa.* VII. 8 (SC 416, p. 386, GNO V, 415. 17-23).

It is noteworthy that, following the Alexandrine exegetical tradition<sup>82</sup>, Gregory was very keen to give a commentary on *The Book of Ecclesiastes*<sup>83</sup>. Though not completed, Gregory's exegesis was very effective in shaping his mind about what Christian philosophy means.

There are serious reasons to think that Gregory's attraction for this *Book of the Ecclesiastes* is grounded in his biography. As somebody who was for a long time married, a successful advocate in Nyssa who, in his youth, refused to join Basil's passion for ascetic life, Gregory of Nyssa knew quite well what vainglory and worldly gratification could mean. The understanding of the book that reveals "the vanity of the vanities" is best prepared by reading of *Proverbs*. The letter configures the moral understanding of the divine commandments, which being insufficient needs a spiritual complement. Grounded in the natural contemplation, the mind finds the world abundant in lessons about death, shame and futility. This worldly spectacle is inspiring painted by a divine book, which in the Greek language bears the name of the Church (*ekklesia*). Gregory does not hesitate to see the divine inspiration of *Ecclesiastes* sealed by the authority of Christ, who like *Ecclesiastes* (1, 1), was called "the Son of David" (*Matth* 1, 7).

82. Didymos der Blinde, *Kommentar zum Ecclesiastes* (Tura-Papyrus), Teil 1, 1-2, 14 (in cooperation with the Egyptian Museum from Cairo, edited and translated by Gerhard Binder and L. Liesenborghs), Bonn, 1979. Before Gregory of Nyssa, one can trace also some indications in Gregory of Thaumaturgus' writings, cf. K. W. Noakes, "Metaphrase on Ecclesiastes of Gregory Thaumaturgus", in *SP* 15 (1984), pp. 196-199. Following Gregory of Nyssa, the next author who interpreted *The Book of the Ecclesiastes* was, not surprisingly, Evagrius Ponticus. See P. Géhin, "Un nouvel inédit d'Evagre le Pontique. Son commentaire de l'Ecclesiaste", in *Byzantion* 49 (1979), pp. 188-198. In the Latin-speaking world, one has Hieronymus, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastem* (CCL 72), Brepols, Turnhout, 1959, pp. 257-361. In the Syrian literature, one has Theodor of Mopsuestia, *Das syrische Fragment des Ecclesiastes-Kommentars*, Syrian text with complete Index edited by W. Strothmann, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1988). More on this, see in Klaus Deppe (ed.), *Kohélet in der syrischen Dichtung. Drei Gedichte über das Kohélet-Buch von Afrem, Jacob von Sarug und Johannes von Mosulim*, translation and full index by Klaus Deppe, Wiesbaden, 1975. Mention should be made also of Procopius Gazaenus, *Proopii Garzei Catena in Ecclesiasten necnon Pseuchrysostomi Commentarius in eundem Ecclesiasten* (CChrSG4), edited by Sandro Leanza, Leuven, Turnhout, 1978. General information can be found in S. Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of *Qoboleth* in Early Christianity", in *VT* 24 (1974), pp. 168-177; S. Leanzo, "I condizionamenti dell'esegesi patristica. Un caso problematico: l'interpretazione di Qohelet", in *RSB* 2 (1991), pp. 25-49; A. Quacquarelli, "La lettura patristica di Qoélet", in *VetChr* 29 (1992), pp. 5-17; S. Streza, *Storia dell'esegesi del libro dell'Ecclesiaste nei Padri (fino a Origine)*, Doctoral dissertation, Roma, Università Gregoriana, 1992.

83. More on this, see S. G. Hall (ed.), *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: an English Version with supporting studies: proceedings of the Seventh International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa*, St. Andrews, 5-10 September 1990, Berlin, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993; E. Ferguson, "Some Aspects of Gregory of Nyssa's Interpretation of Scripture Exemplified in his 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes'", *SP* 27 (1993), pp. 29-41; and the introduction of F. Vinel at the French translation of Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélies sur l'Ecclesiaste*, edited and translated by F. Vinel, Paris, Cerf, SC 416, 1996, pp. 7-97.



In doing so, Gregory opens the doors of the *Old Testament* with the key of the *New Testament*, which seems to be the only suitable way of understanding the Law. He carries out a very close reading, line by line, of the first three chapters of *The Book of the Preacher (Qoboleth)*, which consists in a beautiful meditation upon the transient destiny of the man and of the cosmos. Our becoming is paralleled to the play of children who build castles out of sand<sup>84</sup>. Nurtured by conceit, the appeal for vainglory of every human being brings forth, eventually, only the bitter taste of deceit. Neither physical beauty, nor worldly fame can make us truly happy, since mortality and oblivion rule over all human bodies. Over the vain glorification in the eyes of the world (*Eph* 2, 10), the Apostle chose eternal glorification "in Christ" (*Rom* 15, 17; *I Cor* 1, 31; 15, 31).

What is significant for Gregory's teaching is not just that he, predictably, spurns materialistic pleasures (tackling harshly the voyeuristic culture of his age, which, like ours, is ruled by *concupiscentia oculorum*), but that he finds no real consolation in mere intellectual activity. To know only in part man, history or cosmos hardly comforts anybody's heart. Discursive knowledge can be helpful, of course, mainly for two reasons. One is positive, when knowledge is directed to assist by technical products people's basic needs. It can engender charity and self-forgetfulness in working for others. The second reason is negative and not practical, but metaphysical. Since we do not know anything by essence, discursive knowledge can provide clues about another way of understanding reality. If knowledge has no limits, vanity also is boundless. One knows that "of making many books there is no end" (*Eccl* 12, 1), and this can only increase knowledge and sorrow (1, 18). Since it comes out of curiosity, knowledge decays very often in the experience of boredom<sup>85</sup>, which is another mark of our mortality. Since Adam's fall, *knowledge* and *life* are divided, and this very often makes us captives to sorrowfulness. Knowledge is a wound, which only love can heal. One needs to despair of everything he knows about creatures in order to start searching for the Creator, not by imaginative analogies, but through the uniting force of prayer. Dimmed knowledge about things brings no substantial remedy for death, but still it can teach us through its vanities.

84. The image is perennial and can be traced back in Homer (*The Iliad* XV, 363).

85. The phenomenology of boredom was first systematically researched by M. Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit*, GA 19/30, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1983, pp. 117-198, edited by W. McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 78-169; partially inspired by Christian spiritual writings (from Evagrius to Blaise Pascal), the research was carried out by J.-L. Marion, "L'angoisse et l'ennui. Pour interpréter Heidegger 'Was ist Metaphysik?'" in *Archives de Philosophie*, Paris, 43, 1 (1980), pp. 121-146; *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, Paris, PUF, 1989, ed. by Thomas A. Carlson, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1998, the last chapter, for a strict theological interpretation, see Id. *God Without Being. Hors-Texte*, ed. by Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 115-138.

As T. S. Eliot put it: "after such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now, history has many cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, guides us by vanities"<sup>86</sup>.

For a solid mind, the uprising of boredom out of knowledge destroys intellectual certitude as an earthquake wipes out a city. Intellectual boredom begs fundamental questions and, although aroused by a particular experience of deceit, it can interrogate a totality of meanings. But the fundamental affection of boredom, perceived by moderns as *Weltschmerz*, reveals the idolatrous potential of knowledge within a life married to death. To feel bored and sick of everything is the first symptom – compared by St Gregory with the desert of Sinai – of soul's abandonment of the realm of the idols. Unhappiness is the beginning of exile. The easy satisfaction with regional and temporary certitudes is upset by the thirst to communicate with the One above ages. After all, the human being is driven by the innate desire to love and to be loved. The contemplation of being for its own sake, says Gregory, makes nobody happy "without change". Only the Lord Jesus taught us the divine beatitudes in the key of the paradoxes<sup>87</sup>, an exegesis of which Gregory made in *Orationes de beatitudinibus*. Any sorrowfulness or distress experienced in the naked perception of the world indicates the separation of man from God, who alone is infinitely good. Nonetheless, one does not suffer distress and anxiety without being discreetly witnessed by the cloud of the Holy Spirit<sup>88</sup>, which through shadows guides the pilgrim towards the promised realm of happiness. Tasting the vanities of the world, the soul feels, obliquely, that only the divine goodness could quench her thirst for love, communion, and meaningful knowledge. For Gregory, the true philosophy should mean, at last, to grow in love for Christ, who alone is "the wisdom and the power of God" (*I Cor* 1, 24). In a way, says Gregory, "everything apart from God does not exist (*pan de to exo autou theoroumenon anuparxia esti*)"<sup>89</sup>. Only God is adequate in "calling the non-beings as beings (*kaloúntos ta mē onta hōs onta*)" (*Rom* 4, 17). This is not a surprise if one considers the difference between beings and not-beings only as an *ontic* difference, distinct from the *ontological* difference between the Creator and the creature. As with almost all early Christian authors, for St Gregory of Nyssa, *to be or not to be* is hardly an important question. Only love makes sense

86. T. S. Eliot, "Gerontion (1920)", in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1969, p. 38.

87. This paradoxical contraction of the Christian beatitudes in the experience of suffering was eloquently penned by Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes suivies de Nouveaux Paradoxes*, Paris, Seuil, 1952, p. 136: "Tant vaut la douleur, et tant vaut la joie. La douleur est l'envers de cette unique étoffe dont l'endroit est – ou sera – la joie".

88. *Vit. Moys.* II. 121 (PG 45, col. 361 B8-12; ed. J. Daniélou, SC 1bis, 66).

89. *In. Eccl.* VII. 7 (SC 416, pp. 370-371; GNO V, 406. 27-28).



of being either alive or dead, but effectively sheltered by God<sup>90</sup>. “Love is the anathesis of evil”, which itself “must be not conceived as something existent, but rather as the absence of good”<sup>91</sup>.

### Scientific Disillusionment and Spiritual Progress

It is one thing to apprehend the formal limits of the world – more precisely, to grasp its finitude – and something different to understand the essence of the creature, which possibility Gregory specifically denies in all of his works. In *CE III*, a few lines below his glosses on the ontological difference between the Creator and the creature, Gregory presents the science of astronomy, objects of which, unlike Aristotle, he regards as dynamic. Because of their never-ending motion, the objects of natural sciences provide no condition for a compact and definitive knowledge. Even less, Gregory concludes, can we know about the Creator of the world: “we know that He exists (*oti mēn estin oidamen*), but of His essential nature we cannot deny that we are ignorant (*ton de tēs ousias logon agnoein ouk arnoumetha*)”<sup>92</sup>. Though probably would disappoint Stephen Hawking’s dream of catching God’s ultimate idea about the universe<sup>93</sup>, Gregory’s epistemological position is of a modesty which, in our times, Sir Karl Popper would have probably been happy to applaud<sup>94</sup>. He defends the fundamental idea of falsification in the positive sciences, even leaving room for scepticism towards ill-tempered attempts of unification in physical theory. “What is there to unite things so contrary by nature? And how can the harmony of the universe consist of elements so incongruous (*dia tōn heterophōnōn*)?”<sup>95</sup>. Still Gregory responds: “If any one should interrogate us on these and such-like points, will

90. H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, edited by J. Fessio and J. Ricles, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1991, *epilogue*; also H. U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone: the Way of Revelation*, edited by Alexander Dru, London, Sheed and Ward, 1977. A more straightforward approach was undertaken by J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*, especially pp. 83-107; J.-L. Marion, “Philosophie chrétienne et herméneutique de la charité”, in *Communio* 17, 2 (1993), pp. 93-95.

91. *In Ecl.* VII. 7 (SC 416. 371, GNO V. 407. 1-10).

92. NPNF V, 257b (GNO I. 248. 2-3).

93. S. Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, London *et alii*, Bantam Press, 2001, p. 160: “There may be an ultimate theory that we will discover in the not-too-distant future”. The last chapter of this breath-taking book outlines Hawking’s premises for “the Theory of Everything”, which, he hopes, might be able to describe God’s ultimate idea about the universe. For a narrative account *ad contrarium*, see John D. Barrow, *Impossibility. The Limits of Science and the Science of Limits*, London, Vintage-Random House, 1999.

94. K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London, Hutchinson, 1959.

95. NPNF V, 258a (GNO I. 249. 11-14).

any of us be found so presumptuous to promise an explanation of them? No! The only reply that can be given by men of sense is this: – that He Who made all things in wisdom does alone know the reason/meaning of His creation (*monos oide ton logon tēs ktiseōs*)”<sup>96</sup>.

Gregory does not only base his case on cosmological references. Anthropology too<sup>97</sup> – with its thorny questions about the union between soul and body – serves Gregory’s conviction that “whosoever searches through the whole divine revelation (*dia touto pasan tis theopneuston phōnen*), will find therein no doctrine of the divine nature (*tēs theias physisēs tēn didaskalian*), nor indeed anything else that has a substantial existence (*tōn kat’ousian hyphestēkotōn*)”. The conclusion drawn almost emulates the philosophical scepticism<sup>98</sup> of late Antiquity: “we pass our lives in ignorance (*en agnoia*) of much, being ignorant first of all of ourselves, as human beings (*hoi anthropoi*), and then of all things besides (*epēi ta de kai ta alla panta*)”<sup>99</sup>. If Scripture is silent in respect of what the faculties of the soul are, or the way body and soul are one, this means that such enquiries – which are obligatory in a philosopher’s repertoire – are legitimate and acceptable, if made under title of hypothesis and with methodological caution. If the realm of the visible puts problems for comprehension, Gregory warns his challenger that the invisible is much less accessible to any human mind, limited in time and space:

*All that comes within our comprehension (hypo katalepsin hēmeteran) is such that it must be of one of these four kinds: either contemplated as existing in an extension of distance (en diastēmatikē tini paratasei theōresisthai ta onta), or suggesting the idea of a capacity in space within which its details are detected (topikou chorēmatos parēchein tēn ennoian), or it comes within our field of vision by being circumscribed by a beginning or an end (kata tēn archēn kai to telos perigraphē entos) where the non-existent bounds it in each direction (for everything that has a beginning and an end of its existence, begins from the non-existent), or, lastly, we grasp the phenomenon by means of association of qualities (dia tēs sōmatikēs tōn poioteōn sunthēkēs katalambanomen to phainomenon) wherein dying, and suffering, and change, and alteration, and such-like are combined*<sup>100</sup>.

96. NPNF V, 258a/b (GNO I. 249. 26-30-250. 1).

97. G. B. Ladner, “The Philosophical Anthropology of St Gregory of Nyssa”, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958), pp. 59-94; S. de Boer, *De anthropologie van Gregorius van Nyssa*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1968; J. Behr, “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis epifacio*”, in *JECV* 17, 2 (1999), pp. 219-247.

98. Yet, Gregory’s scepticism is not radical, like that defended by Pyrrho or Timon. Among the Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria exploited the argument of the sceptics to enforce an epistemological fideism. Claiming that no knowledge is given without a set of indemonstrable presuppositions, the sceptic philosophers admitted the validity of the recourse to faith. See E. Osborn, “Arguments for Faith in Clement of Alexandria”, in *V/C* 48 (1994), pp. 1-24.

99. NPNF V, 261a (GNO I. 257. 26-258. 1).

100. NPNF V, 308a/308b (GNO I. 395. 3-14).

Gregory's division is not very systematic: the first two kinds of hension are related to the category of space, the third to the category of time, while the last one implies both of them. Interestingly enough, Gregory does not directly connect our limits of knowledge to our bodily constitution, but to our condition of created beings.

In *CE I*, Gregory unleashed his most inclement attack on Eunomius' philosophical eclecticism<sup>101</sup>. Without calling himself a philosopher, Gregory recognises in the argument of Eunomius the main source of confusion. "Acting like those who get their bread by begging"<sup>102</sup>, says Gregory, the bishop of Cyzicus provides a completely indiscriminate way of dealing with the ideas of the Greek philosophers. First, he implies that Eunomius has read uncritically Plato's *Cratylus*, on the meaning of names. "Being struck by the beauty of the Platonic style (*τῆ καλλιπῆσῃ τῆς Πλατωνικῆς λέξεως*), he thinks not unseemly to make Plato's theory a doctrine of the Church (*δογμα τῆς ἐκκλησίας*)"<sup>103</sup>. Gregory criticises Eunomius more than Plato. Gregory is aware that a theory of language which claims that names mirror existing objects in reality, backs up etymological procedures as methods to unfold the original meaning. Gregory reasoned very simply: if there is one signified thing, while the signifiers are many, it would be illusory to think that etymology can explain the genesis of language. There are here two at least two problems: first, the genesis of the individual practice of language, in which multiplicity dwells unrestricted. Secondly, there is the problem of genesis of the national idioms, which although they contain one another, are never entirely translatable. Gregory suggests that to imagine that language is reducible to a nomenclature of objective names would be very naive. Different actions cannot be expressed in static enunciation: language is not only about facts, but also about intentions, or values, or invisible passions. Obviously, the latter set does not consist in simple objects, and the way they are expressed is always linked not only to vocal articulation, but first, to bodily language (of which Gregory is very much aware). There are experiences irreducible to sharp linguistic qualifications, such as taste or smell (which are invoked heavily by St Gregory in his homilies on the *Song of the Songs*). A perfume can never be adequately described. To say that language mirrors reality is inconsistent, if reality includes the realm of the invisible. In order to express the ineffable, language makes use of metaphors, as the Scriptures bear testimony. Gregory's epistemological ambitions remain modest, since he does not say *how* man has acquired, individually and collectively,

101. Gregory goes so far that considers Eunomius' writing to be "unphilosophical" (GNO I. 81. 16-18).

102. NPNF V, 291a (GNO I. 344. 17): "ὁμοίον τι ποῖον τοῖς ἰὲν τροφῆν ἐκ προσαιτῆσθαι εἰσῆσαι συναγαροῦσιν".

103. NPNF V, 291a (GNO I. 344. 23-24).

the languages in which one can express his discursive intelligence. Gregory seems to reason that the positive sciences should be characterised by openness towards every novelty brought in time by further research, and that any dogmatism in this field would mean just contempt for human intelligence.

Compared to Gregory's common sense, Eunomius' epistemology is at least bizarre, and completely unacceptable from the contemporary standards, though J. Daniélou called his linguistic theory a theological "innéisme"<sup>104</sup>. First, Eunomius tackled the realm of divinity with tools appropriate only to natural contemplation (or, in other words, positive sciences). Because of this inadequate method, he is drawn to refute the idea of progress in both fields of knowledge (divine and human). Eunomius' pretended understanding of the divine is frozen in the possession of a single word, and consequently, reduced to an empty meaning. Stuck in his obsessive reference to the concept of *agnōmētos*, Eunomius could stand up for the structuralist slogan, which accomplishes the reduction of life to narrative knowledge, and the diminution of understanding to mere possession of meanings<sup>105</sup>. In short, stagnation is what characterises Eunomius' epistemology in both territories of knowledge, vertical (theological) and horizontal (pragmatic). While claiming that human language, closely related to the process of thinking, has been revealed by God and does not suffer change in time, Eunomius blocks the way for any dynamic approach towards reality, which requires adaptability and the invalidation of previous schemes of understanding (in Popper's words: falsification). Therefore, he is

104. J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, Leiden, Brill, 1972, p. 5.

105. Yet, since it is made of joys and sufferings, life remains beyond text, while narrative knowledge does not exhaust the possibilities of paradoxical understanding. A phenomenological analysis of the essence of the coincident affections like "joy" and "suffering", unveils the roots of life as situated at a non-intentional level, where the law of correlation between formal intention (or the act of signifying) and empirical intuition (or saturation) collapses, revealing the pure donation of life, beyond any mental representation or axiological judgment. Edmund Husserl (*Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, Huss. X, Nijhoff, 1966; *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten 1918-1926*, Huss. XI, Nijhoff, 1966; *Ergänzungsband zu Analysen zur Passiven Synthesis*, in Huss. XXXI, Dodrecht; Kluwer, 2000) made first steps in speaking of primary impressions (*Ur-impression*), which escape the consciousness' flux of temporalisation; Michel Henry undertook the task of deepening these phenomenological analysis, reaching extraordinary results (from the viewpoint of the Christian theologian, at least). See especially his last volume (*Incarnation. Pour une philosophie de la chair*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, principally §11-§13) that I reviewed in *Sobornost* 24 (2002), p. 2 and *Studia Phaenomenologica* 1, 3-4 (2001), pp. 391-418 (in Romanian). Rolf Kühn has carried out Henry's insights in several books, among which the most significant are: *Studien zum Lebens- und Phänomenbegriff*, Cuxhaven, Jung Hans-Verlag, 1994; *Husserls Begriff der Passivität. Zur Kritik der passiven Synthesis in der Genetischen Phänomenologie*, Munich, Karl Alber Verlag, 1998; the rehabilitation in phenomenology of paradoxical knowledge belongs to J.-L. Marion, *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris, PUF, 1998<sup>2</sup>; and *De surcroît*, Paris, PUF, 2001. For details, see my lengthy reviews of both books in *Studia Phaenomenologica*, Bucharest, 1, 1-2 (2001), pp. 80-388; 1, 3-4 (2001), pp. 419-427.

completely unable to admit any possible "logic of discovery", and even less a pragmatic of knowledge. Theologically, Eunomius' theory is bankrupt as soon as it reaches the idea of "ungeneracy", which leaves little room for the knowledge by prayer and, therefore, can hardly justify the need of worship<sup>106</sup>. Where inquiry is needed, Eunomius glibly pretends that everything is obvious; where discreet silence is needed, the heresiarch conjures reason to speak. Almost everything in Eunomius' theology went against Gregory's understanding of reality, which was secured by his doctrine of divine infinity; the latter fosters the mystical theology (*mystikē theōria*), in which an endless number of "divine names" absorb the unfathomable mystery of God.

## BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE DESERT: THEODOSIAN LEGISLATION AND THE PLACE OF THE MONKS IN LATER ROMAN SOCIETY\*

*Cristian Gafar*

The anonymous writer to whom we owe the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, written around the close of the fourth century, has left us powerful descriptions of the wonders of faith he saw during his peregrinations through the land of Egypt. One of these concerns the city of Oxyrhynchus, upon which the anonymous monk generously bestowed his compliments. Thus, he told his readers that

*the city is so full of monasteries that the very walls resound with the voices of monks. Other monasteries encircle it outside, so that the outer city forms another town alongside the inner. The temples and capitols of the city were bursting with monks; every quarter was inhabited by them. Indeed, since the city is large, it has twelve churches where the people assemble. As for the monks, they have their own oratories in each monastery. The monks were almost in a majority over the secular inhabitants, since they reside everywhere right up to the entrances, even in the gate towers<sup>1</sup>.*

For our enthusiastic author, the urban setting of Oxyrhynchus was a perfect environment for monastic life, especially since the monks seemed to have cohabited peacefully with the inhabitants of the city and with its authorities. However, his description is probably a constructed utopian image of the perfect Christian *politeia*<sup>2</sup>, rather than an accurate description of fourth-century

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1. *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (henceforth *HMA*) 5. 1-3. The translation is taken from *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, transl. by Norman Russell, introduction by Benedicta Ward, London and Oxford, Mowbray, 1980, p. 67.

2. Thus, we are told that "not one of the city's inhabitants is a heretic or a pagan. On the contrary, all the citizens as a body are believers and catechumens, so that the bishop is able to bless the people publicly in the street" (*ibid.*, 5. 4) and that the chief officials and the magis-

106. "And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying" – T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", in *Collected Poems (1909-1962)*, London, Faber & Faber, 1963, p. 215.