

Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (editors):

Gregory of Nazianzus. Images and Reflections

Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006

349 pages (bibliography; indices)

ISBN: 87-635-0386-7 (hardback)

Price: 395 DKK; \$72; €56; £40

Gregory of Nazianzus, the most 'literary' Greek father of the church, is known in the Byzantine tradition both as 'the Theologian' and as the 'Christian Demosthenes'. For the latter reputation, we may refer to the numerous quotations in Greek medieval rhetorical handbooks and treatises. A man of letters, Gregory was an active exponent of oratory and contemplated at length the art of the rhetor and his place in society, specifically in a religious context – although he had himself received a thorough classical, profane education and went through a (short) epideictic career.

In May 2003, an international conference was held near Bergen, Norway, devoted to "Gregory of Nazianzus: the Theologian, the Hellenist, the Man". The book under review here brings together the revised versions of papers originally presented at this conference, complemented by a few papers delivered at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo (in the context of a research project on "Aesthetics and Cognition in early Byzantine Theology"). The Bergen conference assembled outstanding scholars, some of whom have been publishing widely on Gregory over the last years or even decades, whereas others contributed expertise from several other disciplines and periods. The book reveals a clear bias towards scholars who embrace an Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian research tradition rather than a continental European approach. Representatives of the latter are, in fact, conspicuously absent from the list of contributors to the book and to a certain extent also from the Bibliography, where Italian scholars in particular are underrepresented.

In the following synopsis, special attention will be given to (those aspects of) the contributions that are likely to arouse the greatest interest among students of the history of rhetoric. The book does, however, do justice both to Gregory the theologian and to Gregory the 'Demosthenes'.

In his "Introduction. Prompting for meaning in Gregory's rhetoric" (pp. 9-17) Jostein Børtnes introduces Gregory as a "philosophical rhetorician" (p. 12) and links the recent reevaluation of his "rhetorical theology" (p. 11) to the cognitive turn in rhetorical studies (with ample references to the work of Mark Turner¹). The connection between thought and language is, indeed, a central issue in Gregory's orations. Thus, his readers and interpreters are invited to (re-)construct the meanings prompted by his rhetorical apparatus. In fact, this is what most of the articles that follow do: constructing, reconstructing, and deconstructing meanings expressed, projected, and hidden by Gregory in his enormous and heterogeneous oeuvre.

Frederick W. Norris is undoubtedly the scholar who has written the most penetrating analyses of the intertwining of rhetoric, philosophy, and theology in Gregory's work². His

¹ In particular to *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) and to *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² See especially F. W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

paper, “Gregory contemplating the beautiful: Knowing human misery and divine mystery through and being persuaded by images” (pp. 19-35), mainly falls back on his earlier publications as he emphasizes Gregory’s creative use of Greek literature and rhetoric, specifically in his theological writings. Since he practises a probability discipline, the Theologian expresses his mental images of the inconceivable in Aristotelian *enthymemes* and rhetorical-poetic imagery. In his conclusion, Norris advises contemporary theologians to follow Gregory’s views of aesthetics and cognition and to (re-)embrace poetry and rhetoric in their theological thinking.

Børtnes’s own contribution, “Rhetoric and mental images in Gregory” (pp. 37-57), is closely related to Norris’s approach. Starting from the (remarkably few) passages where Gregory deals with material paintings (*eikones*), Børtnes’s discussion meanders towards the double presence of the idea of ‘image’ crucial to Gregory’s thought, one which is cognitive/epistemological/*mnemonic*, (the ‘verbal eikons’ reflecting the theologian’s mental pictures), and one which is ontological/anthropological/*mimetic*, (man as an *eikon* of God, basis of the notion of *theosis* or deification). In passing, Børtnes touches briefly upon the question of (scriptural) intertextuality. Students of rhetoric might take offence at Børtnes’s sometimes gratuitous use of terms such as “rhetoric of quotation” (p. 47), “rhetoric of cognition” (p. 57), “rhetorical art” (p. 54), where literary skills are meant; even in the title of the contribution, one might replace “rhetoric” by “discourse”.

A very thoughtful but dense text is Stratis Papaioannou’s “Gregory and the constraint of sameness” (pp. 59-81). His philosophical approach to Gregory’s aesthetics of discourse, anthropology, and self-representation draws on modern philosophical vocabulary (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida) and comparison with ancient thought, especially Marcus Aurelius. The ‘sameness’ mentioned in the title refers to the unity that underlies, in pre-modern Greek thought, the categories of being, knowledge, representation, and ethics (pp. 59-62). Gregory is shown sometimes to remain within this constraint of ‘sameness’, and sometimes to transcend it, in what Papaioannou calls his “dynamic ontology” (p. 80). The pages on *enargeia* (pp. 65-70) will be of particular interest to readers of *Rhetorical Review*.

“*Skiagraphia*: Outlining the conception of God in Gregory’s *Theological Orations*” by Edgars Narkevics (pp. 83-112) ties in with the philosophical approach of the preceding papers, but moves towards a more outspokenly theological slant. Narkevics rightly describes the cycle of Gregory’s five theological orations (*Orations* 27-31) as “a polished masterpiece of rhetorical art” (p. 84) and pays attention to the (dialectical) argumentative strategies in the polemical parts of the cycle (directed against the Neo-Arians). His ultimate concern, however, is to explain the fundamentals of Gregory’s “philosophy of God”, that is, his trinitarian conception.

With Samuel Rubenson’s “The Cappadocians on the Areopagus” (pp. 113-132), we switch to another modus. Rubenson’s starting point is the disappointingly little information on contemporary Athens to be found in the works of the three fourth-century Cappadocian fathers, Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, although both the latter and Basil had studied there for a long time. In general, we have only a small amount of inconclusive epigraphical and archaeological evidence about Christians in fourth-century Athens; in literary sources the city remained primarily the emblematic city of classical literature. The same goes for the Cappadocians. Rubenson then turns to the primary text representing the Christian response to the Athenians, namely Paul on the Areopagus (Acts 17), and examines the presence of this text in the works of the three Cappadocians – with equally meagre results.

Tomas Hägg’s contribution, “Playing with expectations: Gregory’s funeral orations on his brother, sister and father” (pp. 133-151), is a convenient opening of a triptych devoted to Gregory as a family man – or rather as a rhetorician portraying his own family (and himself). Hägg gives a general outline of the funeral speeches for Gregory’s brother, Caesarius (or. 7), Gregory’s sister, Gorgonia (or. 8), and their father, Gregory senior (or. 18), with some extensive

quotations from the texts. His analysis focuses on rhetorical structure, narrative technique, and methods of characterization, and pays special attention to Gregory's manipulation of conventions as well as his (inter)play with the listeners' expectations. In this way Hägg demonstrates, both admirably and admiringly, Gregory's masterly rhetorical skills.

Virginia Burrus makes an attempt at further interpretation and contextualization of one of the three familial funeral speeches, in "Life after death: The martyrdom of Gorgonia and the birth of female hagiography" (pp. 153-170), and does so from the double perspective of gender and genre studies, including the corresponding jargon. She first discusses the ambivalent generic position of this innovative and at the same time typical text, a Life "at once distinctly feminine and distinctly Christian – if also queerly classical" (p. 156), and concurs with Susanna Elm, who dubbed it "the earliest hagiographic text in praise of a Christian woman" (p. 155, quoting from Elm's contribution to the volume under review, pp. 174 and 187). Burrus's meticulous reading of the oration reveals Gregory's characterization of his sister as an ascetic wife and a "martyred bride" (p. 160). The final part of the paper argues that Gregory, connecting female hagiography to the concept of martyrdom, transgresses the boundaries of the funeral oration, which Burrus describes as "traditionally a quintessentially masculine genre" (p. 166).

Susanna Elm's "Gregory's women: Creating a philosopher's family" (pp. 171-192) opens with a quotation from Burrus's 2000 book *Begotten, not Made* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), which argues the redefinition of masculinity in the (christianizing) late Roman empire. Elm's paper does indeed fit particularly well after Burrus's, as it deals (again) mainly with Gregory's funeral orations on his brother and sister. Informed by Judith Butler and Maud Gleason, Elm states that "gender is not a fixed category [...], gender was and is performative" (p. 173), and she asks herself how Gregory constructs his own gender identity through these speeches. She argues that Gregory's purpose was to "create a new masculinity and femininity for himself" (p. 174), and that, in order to have his audience accept him "as their father and their mother, he himself needed to demonstrate that he originated from a family that was capable of imbuing him with the powers he now displayed" (p. 173). He is said to conceive of himself as a Christian incarnation of the late antique "true philosopher" (p. 185). The parallel with pagan champions of an ascetic life (illustrated, not surprisingly, by the case of the emperor Julian), is said to contradict the majority of modern scholars (including Burrus) who "posit a new masculinity as a specifically Christian phenomenon" (p. 178).

In his "Gregory: The rhetorician as poet" (pp. 193-212), John McGuckin focuses on another aspect of Gregory's self-construction, suggesting that Gregory issued his enormous verse corpus with the specific intent of establishing his name as the first major Christian poet. In what is, in my view, a rather forced manoeuvre, McGuckin places Gregory's view on the function of poetry both in the Platonic tradition of the poet-priest-philosopher and in the context of Aristotelian insistence on *skopos*, *telos*, and the 'golden mean'.

Neil McLynn's "Among the hellenists: Gregory and the sophists" (pp. 213-238) raises interesting and neglected questions from a socio-historical perspective. The study is mainly based on Gregory's letters and explores his involvement in (profane) education as well as his role in the Cappadocian network of *amicitia*. McLynn's attractive and partly novel main theses, cautiously proposed on the basis of the meagre available evidence, are that Gregory functioned as a teacher of rhetoric (a 'sophist') at Nazianzus until his ordination in 362; that he continued to host traditional symposia, which featured readings of his literary works for his fellow-ascetics; and that he remained active in the local educational system, within which he imagined that his own poetry could play a didactic role.

With Stephanos Efthymiadis's "Two Gregories and three genres: Autobiography, autohagiography and hagiography" (pp. 239-256), the reader's attention is directed towards Gregory's *Nachleben*, specifically to his only fully-fledged Byzantine biography, the eighth-century *Vita* by Gregory the Presbyter. Making extensive use of the excellent 2001 edition by Lequeux,

Efthymiadis convincingly argues that the biographer borrowed freely from the whole *corpus Nazianzenum* and that he was writing for a secular, non-monastic audience.

The paper by Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, “*Theosis* according to Gregory” (pp. 257-270), occupies an odd place in this book: it is placed between two papers on the Byzantine reception of Gregory, and, more importantly, it is a straightforwardly theological contribution, aiming at illustrating the Orthodox doctrine of deification by means of passages taken from “St Gregory the Theologian”. This is, of course, a legitimate purpose, but it does not square with the mainly rhetorical approaches of the other contributions.

That is, except for Andrew Louth’s “The appeal to the Cappadocian Fathers and Dionysios the Areopagite in the iconoclast controversy” (pp. 271-281). Neither Gregory nor rhetoric play any role in this contribution, which moreover unduly neglects the existing studies (some of which are indeed quoted in other contributions and properly listed in the main Bibliography, cf. below) on the use of Gregory’s works as an important source of authoritative quotations in both iconoclast and iconodule literature.

Philip Rousseau’s article, “Retrospect: Images, reflections and the ‘essential’ Gregory” (pp. 283-295), is an intelligent survey of the whole of the present volume, for the most part convincingly regrouping the contributions along thematic lines and establishing links between them. Rousseau’s own interests and sympathies seem to be reflected in the varying degree of attention paid to the various papers and in the paraphrases he gives of them. Rousseau’s conclusion, however, is a fair expression of the main common focus of the volume: we cannot identify an ‘essential’ Gregory, “a personality neither simply contrived by the subject himself nor simply ascribed to him by others” (p. 294). But we can improve our understanding of the pathways between different persons, in this case between Gregory and his original audience, his Byzantine readers and admirers, and ourselves. I would like to add that the volume certainly contributes to a better assessment of the ways in which Gregory presented himself through his literary and rhetorical activity.

The Bibliography of works cited in the volume (pp. 297-322) is very useful and might well serve as a starting point for future research on Gregory. It is state-of-the-art, except for the already mentioned disproportionately small representation of scholarship deriving from non-anglophone research traditions. Particularly regrettable is the absence of several Italian and German editions and commentaries, especially of the *carmina*, in the section “Primary sources” (pp. 298-303).

The Index locorum and General Index are valuable, albeit sometimes too extensive (or mechanical), for example p. 329, where the single poem II.1.39 gets 27 entries, 25 of which refer to a couple of pages in one contribution.

The book is particularly well edited, with numerous cross-references between the various contributions. Typos are unfortunately relatively frequent in non-English quotations (e.g., two times “toute texte” instead of ‘tout texte’, in reference to Julia Kristeva’s definition of intertextuality, p. 46; “rhétorique”, in citation of Laurent Pernot’s *La rhétorique de l’éloge*, p. 186) and non-English names (e.g., “Meier” for Maier, p. 299).

As for the readership, *Gregory of Nazianzus. Images and Reflections* seems generally to be directed at students and scholars already acquainted with Gregory. There is no straightforward introduction to Gregory’s life, works, and thought (the finest introductory monograph on Gregory is written by John McGuckin, one of the contributors to this volume³) – although several contributions do offer basic information. Gregorian scholars will probably find the most

³ John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

stimulating and innovative pages in the papers by Papiroannou, Narkevics, Burrus, Elm, and McLynn. Students of rhetoric might, depending on their interest (philosophical, literary, sociological approaches) turn first to Norris, Hägg, McGuckin, or Efthymiadis. No knowledge of (Gregory's beautiful) Greek is needed: Greek is largely confined to the footnotes; all quotations are translated and most Greek terms in the text are given in transliteration.

Of course, the multiple authorship leaves its marks. There are some reiterations, for example within the otherwise interestingly complementary triptych Hägg-Burrus-Elm, and the authors are, of course, not always in agreement on particular points. Hägg and Burrus (p. 144 and p. 169, respectively), for instance, disagree when it comes to Raymond Van Dam's suggestion that Gregory did not know his sister Gorgonia well – this reviewer tends to follow Hägg who refutes Van Dam.⁴ Likewise, McLynn (p. 234, n. 71) is not convinced by McGuckin's triple suggestion (which is not a new one) that Gregory's poem "On matters of measure" (II,1,39) was designed as a proem to his "Collected Poems" (pp. 195, 205, and 212) – neither am I, by the way, attractive though the hypothesis may seem. With few exceptions, the contributions to the volume generally reflect an approach to Gregory's works that is more interpretative and less positivistic (and sometimes less positive as well) than in most existing scholarly literature on the subject.

All things considered, this polyphonic volume is – in comparison with the average collection of conference papers – a coherent book, and it is an important contribution to Gregorian scholarship.

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⁴ Cf. R. Van Dam, *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 93-96.