Toward the Glittering Heaven: Poetry and Asceticism in Gregory of Nazianzus’ Arcane Poems

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The very act of writing can purify. For Gregory of Nazianzus, an early Christian theologian, both the composition and reception of poetry could serve as meaningful components of asceticism, the Christian discipline of holiness. In establishing the ascetic value of poetry, Gregory affirms the place of literature in spirituality: holy creativity has sacred value. In this article, I argue for an ascetic reading of Gregory’s Arcane Poems, a poetic text that rises easily to the upper echelons of early Christian theological poetry, both in breadth and in beauty. I argue that the structure of these poems evokes Mt. Sinai, one of Gregory’s favorite metaphors for purity. Moreover, I contend that a deeper understanding of Gregory’s poetic theories of meter and mimesis yields an ascetic reading of the poems. Our topic thus ranges from the aether heights of theology to the winding climb of asceticism, but throughout it all is poetry, an art form which Gregory cherished—and which, I hope, will be reinterpreted and renewed for the reader.

2. Gregory of Nazianzus, Christian Poet

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-c. 390) was highly regarded for many things—bishop of the imperial city, paladin of the Nicene faith—but we will focus here on another aspect of his life and work: his poetry. Although Gregory's poetry stands within a long tradition of Judaeo-Christian poetical expression, it is nonetheless especially remarkable. Nineteen thousand lines of Gregory’s poetry survive today; he wrote much more. Spanning a multiplicity of topics and genres, his poems range in length from his massive autobiographical...
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poem of almost two thousand lines to short epigrams of only a few lines each. After he retired from Constantinople in 381, Gregory embarked upon a massive project of literary production, polishing orations and letters and authoring vast amounts of poetry. He wanted to publish, McGuckin argues, a mammoth tri-fold anthology, with one volume each for orations, letters, and poems, although this astounding work was never completed. It was in this season of fecundity that Gregory authored his Arcane Poems.

Composed of eight parts, the Arcane Poems—seven hundred thirteen lines of Greek dactylic hexameter verse—form the most comprehensive and profound of Gregory’s theological poetry. The first poem, the shortest, is an introduction, in which Gregory makes clear that his words are intended for the pure, before presenting a kind of Trinitarian creed. The second and third poems advocate for the divinity of the Son and the Spirit and offer them praise. The message of the third poem is particularly poignant, as Gregory had long championed the divinity of the Spirit. Together, the first three poems parallel Gregory’s most acclaimed prose works, the Theological Orations. In the fourth poem, Gregory argues that God spun the cosmos out of nothing; in the fifth, he argues that it is God, and not the stars, that control our lives. The sixth concerns rational natures, the seventh the soul. And the eighth poem narrates the creation and fall of man, the giving of the two covenants, the manifestation of Christ, and the cathartic grace of baptism.

I list below the titles of the eight poems, although it should be noted that the titles were most likely affixed after Gregory had passed.

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All available evidence—including their manuscript history and thematic cohesiveness—indicates that the eight Arcane Poems are meant to be a poetic unit. Both branches of their manuscript tradition transmit the Arcane Poems in the same order, although one includes an

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5 Although Gregory’s practice of writing poetry did not begin after his retirement from Constantinople, most of what we possess today was probably written during that time: Gilbert, On God and Man, 1; and Christopher A. Beeley, Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.
7 Arc. 1.8-10.
8 Gregory’s cause came in the wake of the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.), a document that did little to clarify the issue. For further information on Gregory’s Trinitarian theology, refer to the following sources: Beeley, Trinity and Knowledge of God; John McGuckin, “‘Perceiving Light from Light in Light’ (Oration 31.3) The Trinitarian Theology of St Gregory the Theologian,” The Greek Orthodox Theological Review 39, no. 1 (1994): 7-32.
extra poem. All modern commentators, to my knowledge, accept the coherency of the poems. But how can we interpret the poems as a harmonious whole? Previous scholars—Keydell, McGuckin, Werhan, and Sykes among them—have made attempts at understanding the arrangement of the Arcane Poems, but I find these attempts unsatisfying to greater and lesser degrees. All impose structures that are either too linear or too vague. To my mind, we have not yet analyzed the organizing structure of the Arcane Poems sufficiently. And, because of this, the ascetic dimensions of the Arcane Poems have not yet been appreciated.

3. The Structure of the Arcane Poems

My reading of the Arcane Poems rests on two structural elements: first, a strict division between the content of Arc. 1-3 and that of Arc. 4-8; and, second, an underlying metaphor, the Theophany on Sinai, which provides hermeneutic guidance for the relation of parts. Let me present each element in turn, first considering the textual evidence, then the relevant contextual evidence.

Both Peter Gilbert and Brian Daley have previously recognized the textual seam after the first three poems. The third poem ends with arresting conviction.

So this much radiance the Three’s displayed, for me, for all mankind, from 'neath the cherub wings a-stretched out o’er the ark divine, in which is veiled the royal nature of God. And if my song lacks something more to be explored by choirs of heavenly throngs, then let the Three be those who know what yet remains beyond.

No other poem, save the last, has such a definite conclusion. Many of the other poems, by contrast, move on almost without pause. The subject matter, moreover, is different on both sides of the divide. Only Arc. 1-3 speak of the members of the Godhead in mutual relation, God as Trinity. Conversely, throughout Arc. 4-8, God is invoked as one, and it is always in the context of creation and redemption. With one exception, when the words three (τριὰς) or divinity (θεότης) are mentioned, they refer to God’s single agency. While no explicit explanation for this divide is given

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10 Moreschini, Poemata Arcana, ix; Gilbert, On God and Man, 84; and Carm. 1.1.11, trans. Gilbert. The interpolated poem, “On the Incarnation of Christ,” is only sixteen lines long and does not match the Arcane Poems in style or tone. Caillau broke from this order again in his 1842 edition by the inclusion of a ninth poem between the fifth and sixth. Gilbert, On God and Man, 4, 7.
11 Modern scholars regard this as a mistake: the interpolated poem, Carm. 1.1.6, “On Providence,” is written in a different meter and does not concern the same subject matter. Moreschini, Poemata Arcana, xix-xx; Gilbert, On God and Man, 7; and Sykes, Poemata Arcana, 56.
14 Peter Gilbert compares Arc. 1-3 to the Theological Orations, implying that Arc. 4-8 must go into some other category. Gilbert, On God and Man, 7. Likewise, Brian Daley compares the Arcane Poems to Origen’s On First Principles (Περὶ Ἀρχῶν), in which reflections on the Trinity are treated first. But Gregory must have borrowed such a structure with purpose, and there is still more to be said about what that purpose might have been. Daley, “Systematic Theology in Homeric Dress”; Origen, On First Principles, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London: Peter Smith, 1973).
15 Arc. 3.90-94.
16 Arc. 5.71.
16 Arc. 4.55, 6.12. The exception is found in Arc. 4.65.
within the text of the *Arcane Poems*, the subjects of discourse adhere to an outline elucidated in Gregory’s *Theological Orations*. I will suggest that the first three *Arcane Poems* consist of *divine philosophy* and the last five of *true mythology*.

In the *Theological Orations*, *divine philosophy* is Gregory’s term for theology, strictly defined as discussion on the Divine essence. But this is no casual discussion: the nature of the subject demands a discourse pure in extent, pure in setting, and pure in participants. As Gregory says at the beginning of *Oration 27*:

> Discussion of theology (τὸ περὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν) is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone—it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor, I would add, is it for every occasion, or every audience; neither are all its aspects open to inquiry. It must be reserved for certain occasions, for certain audiences, and certain limits must be observed.¹⁸

Purity, or *catharsis*, is the necessary prerequisite. When the discourse has been refined, the next step, Gregory says, is to refine the philosopher, “to look at ourselves and to smooth the theologian in us, like a statue, into beauty.” Only when we are free from the morass of the material world will our minds be prepared to contemplate the divine.²⁰ Fortunately, the impure are not without recourse to more suitable subjects. At the end of *Oration 27*, Gregory lists them. Various authors within the classical canon suffice. But if these vociferous debaters must confabulate about Christian subjects, Gregory will provide “broad highways” for them, presumably so that they cannot possibly fall off the road. He gives a long list of doctrinal but non-theological topics: the universe, matter, the soul, natures, the resurrection, judgment, reward and punishment, even the sufferings of Christ. These subjects I call *true mythology*, to glean a phrase from Gregory’s repeated use of the word *myth* (μῦθος) in the last five *Arcane Poems*.²² When we apply Gregory’s theory to the *Arcane Poems*, the structure becomes remarkably clarified.

But the second structural element aids our interpretation even more: an underlying, Sinaic metaphor. Gregory invokes this metaphor at the very beginning of *Arc. 1* and again at the end of *Arc. 3*, establishing Sinai as a frame for the entire text and the revelation within the temple as a frame for divine philosophy. Within a stern prologue, Gregory invokes the Theophany on Sinai:

> But all unhallowed who draw near, like beasts on Sinai’s side, when Christ shone down from mountain crown and Law in stone inscribed, may Sinai’s aiguille shake in rage, may jagged apex break and crush their head and strike them dead, as Mount and people quake.²³

Similarly, at the end of *Arc. 3*, Gregory writes that his doctrine has been revealed to him “from ’neath the cherub wings a-

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¹⁹ Orat. 27.10.

²¹ The word “myth” had the original meaning of word or story. H. G. Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889), s. v. “μῦθος”). For some modern readers, it carries connotations of falsehood. To avoid confusion, I have at times supplied the adjective true. Note that this usage is distinct in origin from that of J. R. R. Tolkien.

²² Orat. 1.7-14.
stretched out o’er the ark divine,” envisioning himself as Moses, who, according to the traditional account, walks inside a vision of the temple on the peak of Sinai (See Ex. 19, Deut. 4.9-40, 5.22-23, and 9.8-10.5).24 Here, too, context from Gregory’s corpus proves highly relevant. For, in Gregory’s allegorical use, Sinai is a visual representation of the differing degrees to which purification is realized in the lives of the believing assembly.25

I eagerly ascend the mount—or, to speak truer, ascend in eager hope matched with anxiety for my frailty—that I may enter the cloud and company with God (for such is God’s bidding). Is any an Aaron? He shall come up with me. He shall stand hard by, should he be willing to wait, if need be, outside the cloud. Is any a Nadab, an Abihu, or an elder? He too shall ascend, but stand further off, his place matching his purity. Is any of the crowd, unfit, as they are, for so sublime contemplation? Utterly unhallowed?—let him not come near, it is dangerous. Duly prepared?—let him abide below...Is any an evil, untamed beast, quite impervious to thoughts of contemplation and divinity?... he shall stand still further off.28

In this passage, Gregory develops a robust, taxonomic hierarchy, formed upon the slope of the mountain.27 Thus, purity is put on a spectrum in Sinai, which exemplifies the proper placement of individuals. Gregory has intentionally invoked Sinai as a guiding metaphor for his poetic discourse, taking the peak of Sinai as the apex and arranging his words downward. We begin with a Trinitarian creed, descend into theological discussion and descend still farther into less critical topics. We see this principle reflected too in Gregory’s invitations to his audience. In Arc. 1, Gregory twice expels the unpurified. In Arc. 2 and 3, Gregory invites the congregation to worship (μυθος). But in Arc. 4 and Arc. 8, the invitation is to contend in arguments and inquire in curiosity. The descent is clearly marked. The conical shape of Sinai is even mimicked by the textual shape of the poems. Only three concern divine philosophy; the remaining five cover the many topics of true mythology. When we read the Arcane Poems, then, the topmost part, the first and most laconic poem, represents the apex of Sinai. The bottommost part represents the broad plain surrounding the mountain.

4. Poetry and Asceticism

Together, these two elements establish the structure of the Arcane Poems. Next, we will analyze how this very structure provides a space within which an asceticism can be performed. But it may prove helpful first to understand the connection between poetry and asceticism for Gregory. We begin with theological anthropology, for Gregory’s understanding of the human problem forms the backdrop to his understanding of the ascetic enterprise.31

26 Orat. 28.2, trans. Williams.
28 Arc. 1.8-10, 36-39.
29 Arc. 2.1 and Arc. 3.1.
30 Arc. 4.1-2 and Arc. 8.1.
31 Beeley, Trinity and Knowledge of God, 63-64. Winslow and Ellverson have composed thorough,
For Gregory, the human person is a mixture (κρόωμα) or mingling (μιξίς) of two elements. Originally, Gregory believed, this relationship between dust (χόος) or flesh (σάρξ) and divine breath (πνεῦμα) or soul (ψυχή) served a pedagogical purpose: the heavenly nature served as a buoyancy toward God; the earthly nature served as a counterweight against pride. But the harmonious, mutually pedagogical relationship ended with the premature tasting of the forbidden fruit. Both elements rebelling together, human flesh became “heavy” and the symbiotic relationship dissolved. Human tension, then, derives from this dialectic between disparate and flawed elements. At first, God tried to chastise humankind, but later turned to a more effective solution: Christ. Gregory speaks of the conjoining within Christ as a new mixing by which human dissonance is resolved. Christ embodies a moderation that is even more perfect than the prelapsarian harmony of Adam and Eve; He actually infuses humanity with divinity. The Christian is thence ushered on a journey toward God, a journey metaphorically called becoming God or theosis (Θεωσία).

The term asceticism refers to this journey of growth. The word comes from the Greek word ἀσκησις (ἀσκησις), which means exercise, practice, or training. But it broadens to include the notion of spiritual discipline, anything from the study of scripture to the formalized monastic life. Gregory’s picture of Christian asceticism, then, can be summarized as follows: the human being, by the grace of God and the ministry of Christ, works out the restoration of the original, harmonious relationship between soul and flesh. The endeavor entails at least two important facets for our purposes: the Christian must moderate the self and imitate Christ.

Poetry, for Gregory, was deeply connected to asceticism. Although he provides no formal treatise on poetic theory, Gregory’s perspective can be gleaned from a poem called “On His Own

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33 Ellverson, 50. See Winslow’s discussion of this (Dynamics of Salvation, 51-58). Between these warring factions is another faculty, which Gregory calls the heart (καρδία) or the temper (Θυμός).

34 Arc. 7.114.

35 Gregory maintains a place in his theory for Lucifer, however, who first ensnared the human race. See Arc. 6.84-91, Carm. 2.1.70, and Carm. 2.1.21.


38 Harrison, “Gregory the Theologian’s Soteriology.” 15.


In this poem, a defense of the practice of writing poetry, Gregory reveals that he uses restrictive meter as a check against the excesses of his tongue. To the Greek mind, we should note, the concept of meter can mean more than just poetic meter. The Greek verb to measure (μετρεῖν) can signify to measure, to circumscribe, and to moderate. But the word picks up a moral sense: one can “measure out” or “moderate” the proper proportions of one’s lifestyle. Additionally, the verb to meter can mean to write in verse. Writing in verse, then, is an ascetic solution for the immoderation that Gregory sees around him, both literary and spiritual. My acknowledgement of this ascetic significance is not new, yet it cannot be emphasized strongly enough. As McGuckin observes,

Straining to observe the metre is a difficult task that limits his writing. He implies here a marked contrast to those who wrote 

\[\text{Verses.}\]

43 Lampe, s. v. “μετρεῖον.” See Gregory’s usage of the word in Arc. 4.57. 
44 Moreover, the verb to be moderate (μετρεῖον) was used by Gregory of the orthodox position concerning the Son of God. Lampe, s. v. “μετρεῖον.” The text is as follows: “οἱ περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ μετρεῖοι.” Orat. 31.1. Greek text from Cursus Completus Patrologiae Graecae, ed. J. P. Migne, vols. 35-38, Paris: 1857-1886. Accessed online through http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hus.eresource:patgrae. 

This “toiling with the meter” slows down Gregory’s tongue and moderates his person. The meter of poetry therefore suggests the moderation of asceticism. But the connection runs deeper than similarity. Rather, Gregory conceives of the flux between thought, word, and deed as a stream that can be dammed up. If he can prevent the word, the passion will die— parched, as it were. The purification of speech is a means to holiness. Gregory sees meter as a mechanism for poetic regulation that extends beyond the moderation of words to execute a lasting effect on the poet. 

Along with meter, poetry, for Gregory, is characterized by mimesis (imitation), which refers either to the imitation of reality through words or the assumption of a role. In “Rhetorician as Poet,” McGuckin argues that Gregory joins a perceived dispute between Plato and Aristotle, both of whom see imitation as poetry’s defining characteristic but disagree on its desirability. Plato deplores the imitation of unworthy
exemplars, for in learning to imitate one learns to be. Poets practice a derivative art; they fail to ascend to the real. Conversely, Aristotle sees imitation as a source of poetic value, particularly in tragedy. As the actor participates deeply in the imitation, both actor and audience participate in the emotion. By this process, poetry, for Aristotle, can effect a profound emotional lavation. McGuckin suggests that Gregory considers his verse to be a “golden mean.” Gregory, I would add, connects the imitation of poetry with the Christian goal of imitating Christ. In making Christ the object of his poetic mimesis, Gregory agrees with Plato insofar as he mimics only the highest good, and he agrees with Aristotle insofar as he uses imitation for cleansing. For Gregory, therefore, poetic composition and reception can generate a Christian, ascetic mimesis.

5. Meter and Mimesis on the Holy Mountain

But how can we bring the notions of meter and mimesis to our understanding of the Arcane Poems? Let us begin with the descent down Sinai. Mimetically, Gregory becomes Moses on the slopes of the mountain. His role as Moses is interpretive and didactic: to ascend, hear, and proclaim the divine message. Thus, in Arc. 1, Gregory asks the Spirit to make him a “loud-sounding trumpet of truth.” He also moderates his message according to his audience, taking up the twin roles of mythagogue and mystagogue, leading his people into the true myth (μυθός) and the true mystery (μυστήριον) of the faith.

For its part, the audience takes up the role of the Hebrews. They are invited to self-evaluation at the very start, when Gregory commands the impure to depart. Members of the audience are led to their places and, since purity requires action, Gregory therefore invites the audience to participate in acts of purity beyond the poems. The poems function as a call to both awareness and action. The poetic meter (μέτρον) functions as the standard of distance from God. In Arc. 4, Gregory relates that God cast the created worlds to a distance from the divine throne in order to deter pride. He

55 Ibid., Book X, 595a-602c.
56 Aristotle, On Poetics, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 5.1449a-1449b.
58 “The Rhetorician as Poet,” 198-99. McGuckin notes that this connection with literary criticism probably comes through Origen, who was deeply involved in literary criticism in Alexandria.
63 This kind of differentiation is standard for Gregory, who advocates the principle of pedagogical accommodation, whereby the teacher teaches to the noetic level of the student. Dimitris Alexandrakis, “The Educational Philosophy of Saint Gregory the Theologian,” The Greek Orthodox Theological Review 39, no. 3-4 (1994): 275-298, 289-91.
66 Arc. 4.84-92.
uses the same word for *distance* (τῆλε) as when he commands the sinners to "flee to a distance." So the distance formed around the cone of Sinai is akin to the distance that is formed around the throne of God. As Gregory declares,

> These things the Spirit teaches clear about angelic glow, both last and first. But I've observed a meter here below. The meter's God: as much as toward our Sovereign one draws nigh, so much he's light; and as he's light, so much becomes his pride.

Both distances, cosmic and poetic, allow us to assume the proper stance toward the divine center.

At this point, we have completed a metaphoric descent through the Sinaic metaphor of the Arcane Poems, focusing on their providential taxonomy. But the asceticism of the metaphor has another side to it, an acclivity. In fact, the poems also embody the ascetic ascent toward the Divine. Here, we read and interpret the poems from the end, as if backwards.

At the lowest echelon, Gregory crafts the entirety of the Arcane Poems as an exemplar of moderation, separated by its meter, which regulates the speech such that it is more "pure" than quotidian conversation. The textual landscape of the Arcane Poems stands in opposition to the world outside, a world of verbosity so extreme that it becomes unintelligible. The Arcane Poems, however, being divinely inspired and moderated, are a towering mountain of pellucid text. The poetic meter of the Arcane Poems acts as a moderating force: the text itself is purified and, insofar as it is purified, it is illuminated.

Of course, the world outside the landscape of the poems is not a direct presence within the text. Yet we can infer its existence from the text itself. The final words of the Arcane Poems etch out a perimeter of baptism around Sinai:

> So shared is air, and shared the earth, and shared the astral hall, the orb profound that spins the seasons round, and shared by all is this lavation gift, which is salvation from our fall.

For Gregory, lavation, or baptism, is the inward road for all humanity, the first step of purification. It leads into divine truth, which the Arcane Poems represent. If the impure must flee to a distance, there must therefore be some outer place to which a sinner can flee. Those without baptism are after a fashion expelled from the poem itself.

At the second echelon, the final five Arcane Poems, Gregory invites his audience to participate in moderated debate. In stark contrast to the first three poems, Gregory begins the fourth with refutation, personifying the Manichaean darkness and the Cosmos, so that he can deal with them face-to-face.

Arc 5 is similarly argumentative. Gregory briefly states his own position then briskly moves on to combat atheism and astral determinism. He begins Arc 7 by refuting some half dozen errant views of

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67 Arc. 1.8-10.
68 Arc. 6.97-99.
69 The forwards and backwards motion through such a space is given a different spin by Ps.-Dionysius, in his short but important Mystical Theology. A comparison would be quite interesting.
70 See Arc. 6.97-99.
71 Arc. 8.97-99.
72 See Orat. 14, trans. Browne, in which Gregory exhorts his congregation to be baptized.
73 At the beginning of Arc 4, Gregory exhorts, “Come on, let us celebrate too the creation of the great God, wrangling against lying opinions.” The final poem is equally inviting: “Come and inquire” (Arc. 8.1.)
74 Arc. 4.24 and 4.55. Of course, the personification drips with irony: by calling them into existence, Gregory highlights the fact that they did not coexist with God.
the soul before presenting his own view. Although Arc. 6 and Arc. 8 have a narrative tone, they are properly understood as continuations of Gregory’s presentation of his own views in Arc. 5 and Arc. 7.

Yet Gregory is engaging in a deliberately controlled argument, modeling an ascetic ideal that he espouses in other texts: moderation in debate. For Gregory believes in temperance even in the earthy task of argumentation. He advises, “We should use gentle, not harsh words to answer him [the interlocutor], thereby teaching him good order.”75 He exemplifies this ascetic ideal in the Arcane Poems, moderating and metrifying his debate at the most foundational level of language. Gregory’s audience is meant to participate in a form of discussion that is controlled, moderated, and ultimately pure.

Of course, this injunction for moderation in debate does apply to the first three Arcane Poems. Gregory does of course want to combat false theological views in these poems. However, he adopts a new tone of reverence. At the third echelon, then, the first three Arcane Poems are a blend of argument and worship. So Gregory begins Arc. 2 and Arc. 3 by calling the faithful to sing (ἐοίδω) of the Son and the Spirit. This is in fact a connection to be expected: early Christian poetry—including Gregory’s—was deeply rooted in hymnody.76 The first three Arcane Poems enact not only moderated argument, then, but also moderated and musical praise.

At the fourth echelon, the very beginning of the Arcane Poems, Gregory constructs what I argue functions as a sort of creedal formula, a short, eleven-line summary of Gregory’s Trinitarian doctrine. Gregory invokes the inspiring power of the Holy Spirit and then declares:

There is One God, unmade, uncaused; no origin has He. He’s circumscribed by nothing, naught that was nor comes to be, embracing time from every side, and boundless, Father God of the only one Begotten Son, who’s worthy of our awe; He suffers naught of the flesh He wrought; as Mind, He has no flaw.

Another God there is, yet in Divinity the same:
the Word of God, the living Signet-Ring of Holy Name,
the only Son of the Uncaused One, unique, yet equally,
that while God reigns and Father remains,
the Shepherd He might be
and World-Creator; might and mind of Father God is He.

One Spirit, God from God, there is. Begone now! all of you
whom Spirit has not formed to deem His own Divinity true,
whose tongues are soiled, whose core is spoiled with evil deep below,
but half-enlightened, spiteful, self-assured of what you know,
a hidden well, a covered lamp, whose veiled light won't show.77

But why has the Spirit been lauded with just one line? Gregory expended no small effort fighting for the equal place of the Spirit in the Divine Godhead.78 One would imagine that such a man would insist on equality of language for equality of status. The question becomes particularly troubling when we consider the strikingly

75 Orat. 32.20, trans. Vinson.
77 Arc. 1.25-39.
78 For example, see Orat. 31. See also Arc. 3.42.
parallel format of the Nicene Creed. Actually, Gregory has delayed his praise of the Spirit for Arc. 3. In doing this, he mimics the progressive revelation of God, who did not clarify the divinity of the Spirit until Christ had been made fully known. Thus, in Arc. 3, Gregory presents us with five lines of praise of the Spirit:

Omnipotent, diverse in gifts, the holy choir’s hymn,
He giveth life to all alike, both those in earth and heaven,
and from the Father comes, spontaneous, holding might divine,
though not the Son—there’s only one—and yet He stands inside
the incorporeal Divinity, in glory same, sublime.

I maintain that Gregory intends for this section to substitute the last stanza of Arc. 1, forming the more complete creed. Let us now look more closely. In the Greek, only one indicative verb can be found, the verb to be (εἰστίν).

The lines primarily consist of a chain of epithets strung together in apposition. The construction favors being over action and description over definition. Note, too, that the assertions about the Son and Spirit primarily stress their relationship to the Father. The lines on the Father, though, are predominantly apophatic. God is unoriginate, uncaused, not circumscribed, boundless, suffering no thing of the flesh in the Son. Only God’s relationship to the Son and God’s existence as Mind (νοῦς) are expressed positively. For Gregory, the reality of God is inexpressible; he cannot delineate the borders of God. Although he must proclaim truth, nothing of what he says here arrives; it only approaches.

In fact, Gregory cannot rely upon any individual word to adumbrate God. His most common word for the Divine throughout the Arcane Poems is God (Θεός), but he notes in Arc. 1 that three beings can properly be called God. And all three beings share in the same, one divinity (θεότης), the quality of being divine. So neither God nor divinity alone can fully describe Gregory’s Trinity. The word Three (τριάς), which both Sykes and Gilbert have translated as Trinity, appears most often juxtaposed with the word One (μόνος). To achieve the effect of threeness and oneness, Gregory must employ delicately balanced sentences, as in the line, “So from the One comes Three, and from the Three again comes One.”

Gregory, despite his best efforts, wrestles with the linguistic problem that no word can truly delineate God. But Gregory’s creedal formula goes beyond assertion. By praising each member of the divinity with an equality of lines, Gregory embodies the equality of their divine cachet, representing a truth that he struggles to express with the connotations of words alone. Perhaps, as Azkoul argues, Gregory turns to poetry at least partially because

80 See Arc. 3.10-23.
81 Arc. 3.5-9.
82 Arc. 1.25. At other times I have had to supply the verb to be to facilitate the readability of the English translation.
83 Note that Gregory uses his most katophatic language in his description of the Spirit.
84 In Plato’s logical terminology, an apophatic statement is a negation while a kataphatic statement is an assertion. Liddell and Scott, s. v. “ἀποφασις.”
85 Arc. 1.25-29.
86 McGuckin, “Perceiving Light from Light in Light,” 12. As Frank argues, Gregory believes that it is necessary to say what we can, while admitting that we cannot say much. G. L. C. Frank, “The Incomprehensibility of God in the Theological Orations of Saint Gregory the Theologian and Its Implications for the Contemporary Debate About the Fatherhood of God” The Greek Orthodox Theological Review 39, no. 2 (1994): 98.
87 Arc. 1.29-30.
88 See Arc. 3.60, 3.72-73, 3.87. Gregory uses “Three” by itself in Arc. 3.90 and 3.93.
89 Arc. 3.60.
the medium can ascend to theological truth more easily than prose. But, in the end, poetry, too, is incapable of reaching the ultimate truth of God.

Ultimately, the Arcane Poems lead us beyond the apophaticism of Gregory's creed into the cloud of unknowing at the very peak of Sinai. As Otis says, "The fact is that Gregory knew the limitations of words... He was sure that the best knowledge is inarticulate." So too in the Arcane Poems: at the very peak we are plunged into the darkness of nontext.

I know we set sail on rafts so frail across the broadest sea,
or with our wings, such feeble things, toward the glittering heaven we speed,
when human minds attempt to shine a light upon our God,
Whom angels fail to fully hail, His government or laws.
Yet God is often not as pleased with gifts from the well-to-do
as with the gifts from hands of the loving, little, faithful, few.
So boldly I will start to fly and break into my song...

On the surface, this hesitation is a standard rhetorical trope: aporia. But Gregory expresses sincere hesitation: he knows that God cannot be described by words, yet he must burst into speech, almost childlike in his faith. This passage has two verbs as its bookends: to know (οἶδω) and to break into speech (ρήξω λόγον). As Sykes notes, the verb phrase to break into speech connotes speaking out after a silence, the "silence of hesitation and awe." Moreover, the verb is in the future tense. As such, we can reasonably interpret these lines as preceding Gregory's act of speaking and therefore as being more thought than speech.

To my mind, this moment points to the silence that precedes it. In the Sinaic metaphor, Moses ascends into the cloud on the very peak of the mountain, where he comes to know God in a way that cannot be known. It is, of course, impossible for Gregory to inscribe it, for it is a knowledge that cannot be expressed in words, even apophatic words. In the end, as Gregory knew, God must be followed in silence. As Bailey puts it, "Gregory shows us the beauty of holy hesitation in matters divine." For the theologian himself declares:

You cannot know how great a gift from God is silence and not having to speak on every occasion, thus to have it within ourselves, as keepers over both our speech and our silence, to choose what to say and what to suppress. For all speech is by nature loose and inadequate and, because it is open to challenge, vulnerable, and speech about God all the more so as the subject is more important and the emotion runs higher and the venture is more difficult. What shall we fear? And where then place our trust? Human reason? Speech? The things we hear? We oscillate precariously between three poles: the difficulty of forming a conception of him, the near impossibility of

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92 Arc. 1.1-8.
94 See Arc. 1.6-8.
95 Sykes, “Poemata Arcana,” 80.
96 In Ps.-Dionysius’ Mystical Theology, the author describes the peak of Sinai as enveloped in “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.” Dionysius, Mystical Theology, 137, see n. 9. See also Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses, 80-81.
97 See Orat. 2.92; Orat. 40.5; and Carm. 1.1.29.
expressing it in words, and the still greater task of finding an ear to receive it in purity.\textsuperscript{99}

Sinai, for Gregory, would align these three poles into one, vertical ascent. The higher one ascends up the mountain, the less possible it becomes to form an accurate conception of God. The feeble wings and frail raft of the prologue cannot continue to be the vehicle when a certain point of the journey has been reached. All words and thoughts—all text—must be left behind: “We need,” Gregory writes in his \textit{Theological Orations}, “actually to be still in order to know God.”\textsuperscript{100} This stillness, among other things, means that the pen of Gregory must ultimately cease. For Gregory and his audience, hearing the \textit{Arcane Poems} is not only about what is said within. It is also about what cannot possibly be said within.

\section{6. Concluding Remarks}

In the preceding pages, I have argued for an ascetic interpretation of the production and reception of poetry, through meter and mimesis. I have argued that Gregory constructs the \textit{Arcane Poems} as a textual representation of the landscape of Sinai and that the metrical and mimetic qualities of poetry are enacted upon those slopes. Throughout this study, I have attempted to draw out the ascetic dimensions of the \textit{Arcane Poems}, the ways in which the poems themselves might have drawn Gregory and his readership closer to God. But there is still room for further reflection on the relevance of these themes.

First, the idea of poetry as asceticism connects to important trends in Gregory’s day: early Christians saw many ways of writing as cultivating holiness. For example, as Derek Krueger explains, the act of authoring the biography of a saint could help a Christian imitate that saint.\textsuperscript{101} Or, as Charles Stang suggests, the act of pseudonymous writing, such as that of Pseudo-Dionysius, could enable the author to reach a mystical stance of non-identity from which to know the unknowable God.\textsuperscript{102} Margaret M. Mitchell, Stang notes, demonstrates that John Chrysostom experiences the presence of the apostle Paul through his homilies, using text to bridge time and space.\textsuperscript{103} Claudia Rapp explores how even the copying of scripture was spiritually significant for early Christians.\textsuperscript{104} Further study on the connections between literary forms and early Christian ascetic practice is certainly merited.

Yet this way of understanding a text has broader implications for scholarship. Texts are produced and received within worlds of lived experience. And in these diverse worlds, the production and reception of texts impact both author and audience. So the existence of a text is not only a testament to the ideas expressed within but also a memorial to the very action of hearing and delivering it. As Kreuger says, “So what is authorship? It is not so much a proprietary claim over literary output as a performative act, a bodily practice resulting in the production of text.”\textsuperscript{105} This hermeneutic principle

\textsuperscript{99} Orat. 32.14, trans. Vinson.
\textsuperscript{100} Orat. 27.3. See also Ps. 46:10.
\textsuperscript{101} Krueger, \textit{Writing and Holiness}, 2. See also Charles M. Stang, “Dionysius, Paul, and the Significance of the Pseudonym,” \textit{Modern Theology} 24, no. 4 (2008): 541-555, 550. For two good examples of saint’s lives, see Athanasius’ \textit{Life of Antony} and Gregory of Nyssa’s \textit{Life of Moses}.
\textsuperscript{102} Stang, “Dionysius,” 551-52.
\textsuperscript{105} Writing and Holiness, 8.
may be applied fruitfully to other time periods and other religions; it holds promising heuristic value. While our tendency seems to be to read texts as vessels of information, the study of poetry as asceticism stresses another way of approaching a text, namely, texts as catalysts, acting upon the author and the reader.

But how can Gregory the poet speak to us today? Although he wrote in a distant world, Gregory provides a poetic theory that is still relevant. Like Gregory, American poet and literary critic Yvor Winters strongly defends poetic meter for spiritual reasons. In this passage, Winters elucidates his view of the connection between poetry and asceticism:

The spiritual control in a poem, then, is simply a manifestation of the spiritual control within the poet, and, as I have already indicated, it may have been an important means by which the poet arrived at a realization of spiritual control... The conception which I am trying to define is a conception of poetry as a technique of contemplation, of comprehension, a technique which does not eliminate the need of philosophy or of religion, but which, rather, completes and enriches them.106

Gregory’s ideas are still alive. Using poetry to achieve control and purity in one’s life is still, as Winters shows, a viable regimen. Anyone seeking progress in purity can turn to Gregory to receive a poetic theory that harmonizes the heights of literature and the depths of faith. His ancient lines hold within them the shimmering expectation that, despite the frailty of both poem and poet, God, through Christ, will fill both with divine light. There is still, for Gregory, something beneficial about writing and hearing poetry. There is still promise in the ascetic enterprise. No poem, no life is perfect: the art is in the making.

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1. Selected Orations

**Orat. 2, Apologia for his Flight to Pontus.** Translated by Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 6, First Oration on Peace.** Translated by Vinson.

**Orat. 14, On Love for the Poor.** Translated by Daley and Vinson.

**Orat. 20, On Theology and the Installation of Bishops.** Translated by Daley and Vinson.

**Orat. 21, Panegyric on Athanasios the Bishop of Alexandria.** Translated by Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 27, First Theological Oration: An Initial Refutation of the Eunomians.** Translated by Williams and Wickham, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 28, Second Theological Oration: On Theology.** Translated by Williams and Wickham, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 29, Third Theological Oration: On the Son.** Translated by Williams and Wickham, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 30, Fourth Theological Oration: Second Oration on the Son.** Translated by Williams and Wickham, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 31, Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit.** Translated by Williams and Wickham, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 32, On the Need for Moderation in Debate.** Translated by Vinson.

**Orat. 38, On The Theophany, or the Birthday of the Savior.** Translated by Daley, and Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 40, Oration on Holy Baptism.** Translated by Browne and Swallow.

**Orat. 42, Final Farewell: Delivered in the Presence of the 150 Bishops.** Translated by Daley, and Browne and Swallow.

2. Selected Poems (Carmina)

**Carm. 1.1.1, “On the Father.”** Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.2, “On the Son.”** Translated by Sykes, Gilbert, McGuckin, and Cantarella.
**Carm. 1.1.3**, "On the Holy Spirit." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.4**, "On the Cosmos." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.5**, "On Providence." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.7**, "On Rational Natures." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.8**, "On the Soul." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.9**, "On the Testaments and the Epiphany of Christ." Translated by Sykes and Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.6**, "On Providence." Translated by Gilbert.

**Carm. 1.1.11**, "On the Incarnation of Christ." Translated by Gilbert and McGuckin.

**Carm. 1.1.29**, "Hymn to God." Translated by McGuckin.

**Carm. 2.1.11**, "Concerning His Own Life." Translated by White and Meehan.

**Carm. 2.1.12**, "Concerning Himself and the Bishops." Translated by Meehan.

**Carm. 2.1.21**, "Against a Demon." Translated by Gilbert.

**Carm. 2.1.34**, "On Silence at the Time of Fasting." Translated by White.

**Carm. 2.1.39**, "On His Own Verses." Translated by Daley, Gilbert, and White.

**Carm. 2.1.70**, "The Serpent." Translated by McGuckin.

3. Other Primary and Secondary Sources Used


Evenepoel, W. “The Early Christian Poets Gregory Nazianzus and Prudentius.” In


