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MIMETIC PERFECTION

St Gregory of Nyssa's Poetry of the Self

Timm Heinbokel

ABSTRACT

“Christianity is a μίμησις of the divine nature.” This definition of what it means to be a Christian, given by St Gregory of Nyssa in his letter *De professione Christiana*, employs a term commonly translated as “imitation” or “representation.” Even a brief study of some of the seminal sources of classical Greek thought, however, will show that the concept of mimesis surpasses any of these translations and effortlessly crosses the boundaries of the sphere of aesthetics, towards the fundamental questions of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, and ethics. An analysis of Gregory’s letter, together with the related treatise *De perfectione*, will then show his nuanced familiarity with the subtleties of mimesis, which he consciously employs to arrive at his definition of Christianity. With this in hand, I will argue that even some of Gregory’s most perplexing scriptural exegesis in his homilies on the Song of Songs grows out of his coherent concept of mimesis, which ultimately is of fundamental importance to Gregory’s anthropology, cosmology, and Christology.

KEYWORDS: St Gregory of Nyssa, mimesis, scriptural exegesis, theological anthropology, aesthetics

Introduction

In a brief letter addressed to a certain Harmonius, edited in Werner Jaeger’s *Gregorii Nysseni Opera ascetica* as *De professione Christiana*, Gregory sets himself a concise task: “Let us ask as in a logical problem: What is meant by the term ‘Christian’?”¹ After briefly reprimanding those

¹Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia W. Callahan, Fathers of the Church 58 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 82. For *De professione Christiana* and *De perfectione*, quotations in English will be based on this translation,

who “through pretense and imitation play the role of the Christian” (οἱ διὰ μιμήσεως ἐσχηματισμένης τὸν χριστιανισμόν ὑποκρίνονται), Gregory first systematically discusses the meanings of the word “Christ.”² He summarizes his findings densely by stating that “if we, who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with that incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements which follow along with it.”³ A little later, he distills this to a quite dramatic high-point of his letter: “If one can give a definition of Christianity, we shall define it as follows: Christianity is an imitation [μίμησις] of the divine nature.”⁴

Gregory realizes the boldness of his claim, and immediately goes on to substantiate it by referring to his reading of Genesis 1.27: “The first man was constituted as an imitation [μίμησιν] of the likeness of God.”⁵ Christianity, therefore, does nothing more than bring man “back to his original good fortune.”⁶ In this, there seems to be yet more implied for Gregory: because we are asked “to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect,” we can see that the firmament of heaven is not “some remote habitation of God.”⁷ Also, when we separate ourselves from the earthly passions to imitate our Father, this separation “does not come about through a change of place, but is achieved only through choice.”⁸ As Gregory argues, the Gospel clearly suggests that “it is possible for us without exertion to be present through thought wherever we wish to be, so that a heavenly sojourn is easy for anyone who wants it even on earth,”⁹ and the Psalmist teaches that “not being separated by choice from God is the same as living in heaven.”¹⁰

although frequently modified. Greek citations will be taken from *Opera ascetica*, ed. Werner Jaeger, John Cavarnos, Virginia Woods Callahan, Gregorii Nysseni Opera 8.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1963), with page and line numbers given after those of the translation by Callahan where both sources are used.

²Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione Christiana* (FOTC 58:84; GNO 8.1:133, 12–13).

³Ibid. (FOTC 58:84).

⁴Ibid. (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:136, 7–8).

⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:136, 14–15).

⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:85).

⁷Ibid. (FOTC 58:87).

⁸Ibid. (FOTC 58:88).

⁹Ibid. Cf. Mt 6.19.

¹⁰*De professione* (FOTC 58:87. Cf. Ps 138.8–11).

In this short epistolary meditation, most likely written in the last years of his life,¹¹ Gregory develops with startling vehemence a powerful concept around that “μίμησις” that he uses to define Christianity. Mimesis can either make us “hypocrites” or lead us to becoming “what is contemplated in connection with that incorruptible nature.” It can bring man “back to his original good fortune” and lead him to “a heavenly sojourn . . . even on earth.” What is this mimesis that brings man back to the likeness of God? That brings heaven down to earth, and earth back to heaven? What we encounter today in the feeble translation as *imitation* must have had for Gregory more complex resonances than the mere copying of words or actions.

In trying to answer these questions, we will, as Andrew Louth once put it, approach an understanding of theology “where there is no real separation between the object of knowledge and the process of knowing, where to come to know God is to be assimilated to God in some way.”¹² One only needs to point to a writer such as Pseudo-Dionysius, who in his *Mystical Theology* describes the earthly hierarchy as a triad of sacraments, ministers, and those ministered to, with each triad again opening into a triad that reflects the threefold movement of purification, illumination, and finally union, to find an illustration for this understanding of theology.¹³ Maximus the Confessor, to cite another well-known example, in *Ambiguum* 41, describes the overcoming of the five divisions of being (with the one between uncreated nature and created nature as the last to be overcome) almost entirely in the vocabulary of “perceiving,” “seeing,” and “contemplating.”¹⁴

A good portion of the secondary literature on Gregory has been dedicated to the conundrums of Gregory’s writings about a knowledge that “in some way” implies participation, that goes beyond a mere gathering of cognitive information. Thus, beginning with Jean Daniélou, much thought

¹¹Jean Daniélou, “La chronologie des oeuvres de Grégoire de Nysse,” *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966): 159–69, at 168.

¹²Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present Day* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 3.

¹³Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers, Brian Davies, ed. (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 40–42, 53–54.

¹⁴Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 41; Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, vol. 2, trans. Maximos Constas, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 29 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 102–21.

has gone into Gregory's use of the term *epektasis* and his particular concepts of divine infinity and divine simplicity.¹⁵ More recently, this aspect of Gregory's thought has received renewed attention in connection with his argumentation about language especially in *Contra Eunomium*, and more far-reaching associations have been made with "post-modern" thinkers and the problem of the legitimization of knowledge.¹⁶ In addition, Martin Laird's work on "the exalted epistemological status" which Gregory accords to *faith* could fruitfully be read as an approach to the kind of knowledge that Gregory wrestles with in his writings.¹⁷ As I am going to argue, through his nuanced use of the concept of mimesis Gregory indeed gives quite a specific answer to the "in some way" Andrew Louth has so aptly put his finger on, and an answer that does not shy away from using perplexingly *technical* (in the sense of τέχνη) and *physical* (in the sense of φύσις) language to explain his "definition of Christianity."

Gregory, however, is of course not the first Christian thinker writing in Greek to employ the language of mimesis: already the letters of Ignatius of Antioch abound with hortatory expressions urging his addressees to be "imitators of God."¹⁸ It is then Origen who in his *De principiis* produces the first comprehensive reflection on mimesis in a Christian context. When he writes that "Christ is put forward as an example to all believers," so that

¹⁵Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée: essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1942); Hubert Merki, *Homoiōsis Theōi: Von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottähnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa* (Fribourg: Paulusverlag, 1952); Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa; Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966); Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁶Alden A Mosshammer, "Disclosing but not disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist," in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der christlichen Spätantike*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Christoph Klock, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 99–123; Scot Douglass, *Theology of the Gap: Cappadocian Language Theory and the Trinitarian Controversy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁷Martin S. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

¹⁸Ignatius, *Ephesians* 1.1; *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 219.

according to his example and guidance, “we may, by the imitation of him, be made partakers of divine nature,” we can, although the original Greek text is lost, assume that he is using *mimesis* vocabulary.¹⁹

It will thus be the first aim of this essay to gain a broader understanding of the vocabulary and concepts surrounding mimesis, using the classical sources in conjunction with more recent scholarship and interpretation. After coming back to Gregory’s letter and closely related writings of his in light of this background information, we will then, with these insights at hand, attempt to illuminate some of Gregory’s most startling images in his homilies on the Song of Songs.

Classical Background

PLATO

Plato is the first Greek thinker to explore mimesis extensively in a variety of contexts, mostly as the backdrop for a philosophy of art. A careful reading of his key texts in this regard quickly reveals that, contrary to how these writings may commonly be presented, Plato does not have a unitary conception of mimesis. Instead, mimesis receives multiple and fluctuating treatments in his dialogues. Plato reflects on art and poetry without mentioning mimesis in several of his earlier dialogues, notably *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Ion*. While mimesis has a brief but rich appearance in *Cratylus*, he raises issues of more immediate concern for the present investigation for the first time in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*. Here Plato already presupposes a usage of mimesis terminology in the categories of visual resemblance, emulation of behavior, dramatic enactment, vocal and musical expression (including dance), and metaphysical conformity.²⁰

The overarching concern of this first discussion beginning in Book 2 is the contribution of stories (μῦθοι), that is, above all poetry, to the education of the young guardians of the ideal city. In 376c, the examination begins on the grounds that μῦθοι are a subclass of λόγοι concerned with “fiction” or “falsehood” (an ambiguity of ψεῦδος/ψεύδης) that nevertheless must be held

¹⁹Origen, *On First Principles* 4.4.3; Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. and trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 289.

²⁰Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 15.

accountable to the ethical and religious standards of (normative) truth.²¹ It thus follows an interplay between notions of truth(fulness), goodness, and benefit in the discussion, evolving into Socrates' speaking of the need to censor unworthy role models in poetic scenes, due to poetry's strong ability to induce and shape beliefs (377e–78a). This notion then introduces the treatment of mimesis proper in 392c, when the discussion moves from the *what* of poetry to the *how* of poetry. After distinguishing between pure narrative in third-person form and narrative through mimesis (here limited to dramatic enactment in direct speech), Socrates quickly decides that although young guardians should themselves not engage in mimesis, because of the principle of social specialization, they may be exposed to mimetic poetry for the presentation of virtuous characters. All other poets will be denied admission into the city (398a). Because mimetic poetry entails assimilation to the figures of poetry (396a–b, 396d), and because of the malleability of the young souls, the cultural and psychological formation in these heightened states of mind—self-likening, absorption, identification—calls for strict regulation.

In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato's second critique of mimesis treats mimesis as a wide concept: "What is the nature of mimesis as a whole?" (595c), Glaucon, Socrates' interlocutor asks. The starting point is a metaphysical argument applying the concept of "form" (εἶδος, ἰδέα) to classes of objects such as couches or tables, without, however, making direct references to the metaphysics of the middle books, such as the allegory of the cave. The discussion begins with Socrates' describing the use of a mirror as "the quickest way of all" to "make everything"—and therefore inviting Glaucon to carry a mirror with him to do precisely this "quickly and in lots of places" (596c–e). This, however, Glaucon promptly replies, does not make "the things themselves as they truly are," just as the painter painting a bed makes a bed only in a certain way. This leads Socrates to deduce "three kinds of beds" (597b). The first "is in nature a bed, and I suppose we'd say that a god makes it. . . . The second is the work of a carpenter. . . . And the third is the one the painter makes" (ibid.). In fact, further probing

²¹Ibid., 49. The English translation of the dialogues used in this study is Plato, *Collected Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998). Greek citations are taken from Plato, *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

by Socrates reveals to Glaucon that the painter is in fact not a craftsman and maker, but only a μιμητής, who is, like the tragedian, third from the king and the truth, “as are all other μιμηταί” (597e). Having no knowledge of the truth of what he represents, he produces a mere μίμησις of appearances (φανόμενα) and not of the truth (598b). Not knowing “the good or bad qualities of anything,” whatever the μιμητής will go on mimeticizing “is what appears fine or beautiful to the majority of people who know nothing” (602a). Plato’s rhetorically provocative, even satirical, composition of the dialogue could very well be interpreted as an attempt to foreground the important thought that a convincing artistic semblance of reality is neither valuable in itself nor an indication of knowledge of reality on the part of the artist.²²

A convincing concept of mimesis, as Plato invites us to see, requires more than an appeal to simple verisimilitude. Ironically, it is precisely these ideas that have often been considered definitive for the mimeticist tradition in aesthetics.²³ Yet Plato repeatedly presents the ethical dangers for the city resulting from a reductionist and unquestioned understanding of the mimetic arts as connected to ideas of realism, and illusionism. The most extensive of Plato’s later reflections on mimesis, found in Book 2 of the *Laws*, therefore, has the Athenian expound the rudiments of what could be called an ethical aesthetics, i.e., a set of standards for the evaluation of mimetic art (here: poetry, music, dance, visual art) that focuses on the benefit or harm done to the character (ἔθος) of those performing or experiencing such art.²⁴ Plato makes the Athenian wrestle with “correctness” (ὀρθότης), “benefit” (ὠφέλεια), and “pleasure” (ἡδονή) as criteria of quality (667–71). The uneasy relationship between technical and ethical criteria is finally resolved—as we would have by now predicted—by the clear subordination of representational technique and correctness to ethical considerations.²⁵

Our brief review shows us to what degree Plato had a prolonged, complex, and profoundly ambivalent relationship with mimesis. His answers seem to fluctuate between a negative stance, concluding that reality cannot

²²Halliwell, *Mimesis*, 58.

²³Ibid., 143.

²⁴Ibid., 65.

²⁵Ibid., 69.

be adequately spoken of in some unmediated manner, and a positive stance, for which mimesis is all that we are capable of in our attempt to speak about reality. In *Critias*, one of his late works, he even allows the idea that “everything we say must surely be mimesis and image-making.”²⁶ This perspective is expanded in the *Timaeus*, in which the cosmos itself is the mimetic work of the δημιουργός, who takes an unchanging and eternal model as his prototype.²⁷

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle considers the mimetic arts as belonging to the class of τέχνη, forming a particular subdivision of ποιησις.²⁸ With all τέχναι, poetry, visual arts, music, and dance fall under the principle that holds that human craft, in its imposition of form on matter and its ordered pursuit of ends, “follows the pattern of nature” (μιμείται τὴν φύσιν).²⁹ However, there is a specifically mimetic character to the arts as classified in the first two chapters of the *Poetics*. Thus, a poem is mimetic because it is the bearer of an identifiable representational content, which is not true of a builder making a house. The demarcation might be expressed as the ability of the mimetic arts to render and communicate a “possible world,” as Aristotle remarks when comparing poetry and history in *Poetics* 9, where he states that poetry, in contrast to history, is concerned with “things which *could* be the case and which are possible in terms of probability or necessity.”³⁰ Therefore, mimetic art is inherently related to a (supposed) state of reality in the world, but the actual relation to this reality is in every case contingently determined.³¹ This lets Aristotle accommodate a flexible set of artistic options for the

²⁶Ibid., 70. (Referring to 107b in *Critias*.)

²⁷Ibid., 71. For a recent and thorough investigation see also Christoph Poetsch, *Platons Philosophie des Bildes: Systematische Untersuchungen zur platonischen Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2019).

²⁸Halliwell, *Mimesis*, 153.

²⁹Ibid. (Referring to *Physics* 2.2, 194a 21–22.)

³⁰Ibid., 154. (Referring to *Poetics*, 1451a 37–38.) The English translation of the *Poetics* used for this study is Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Citations from the Greek are taken from R. Kassel, ed., *Aristotle's Ars Poetica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

³¹Halliwell, *Mimesis*, 155.

configuration of believable human experience, a “possible world,” as opposed to Plato’s religiously and ethically prescriptive views.³²

Aristotle uses the terminology of *ὁμοίωμα*—as expressing similar attributes or qualities—to describe artistic likeness beyond the visual media of painting and sculpture. However, not all likenesses are mimetic: intentionality is fundamental to mimetic likeness. Aristotle rejects as “empty talk and poetic metaphor” metaphysical forms as paradigms in which sensible particulars participate.³³ Material things do not resemble metaphysical forms and anything can be like anything else without being intentionally rendered “in its image” (*εἰκαζόμενον*) and thus qualifying as mimesis. In line with this notion of intentionality, his discussion in *Poetics* 4 of both the natural propensity to mimetic activity (using the example of playing children) and the natural pleasure that is taken in mimetic objects demonstrates that mimetic activity is both rooted in nature and, at the same time, requires a process of understanding and recognition. His discussion of musical mimesis in *Politics* 8, as able to present and convey aspects of character (*ἔθος*), underlines the ability of mimetic arts to convey emotional and ethical feelings: “our souls are changed” (1340a 22–23). When he then remarks in the *Poetics* that the effect of pity and fear to be worked on the audience should be “embodied” into the dramatic construction itself, these emotions in the spectator represent the emotional upshot of the understanding and recognition of the pitiful and fearful, thus leading to their *κάθαρσις*.³⁴

The art to which Aristotle ascribes the richest and most culturally important mimetic capacities is clearly poetry. As may be inferred from our remarks on the “possible worlds” of Aristotle’s mimetic arts, poetry for Aristotle does not involve propositions with a determinable truth value—hence his demarcation of poetry from history. While we have noted the ambiguous use of *ψεῦδος*/*ψεύδης* by Plato, it is noteworthy that Aristotle avoids the use of these words and their cognates when he talks about poetic mimesis.³⁵ Not at all preoccupied with questions of counterfeiting, deception, or verisimilitude, Aristotle instead dedicates most of his *Poetics* to the

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 157. (Referring to *Metaphysics* 1.9, 991a 23–26.)

³⁴Ibid., 161. (Referring to *Poetics*, 14.1453b 10–14.)

³⁵Ibid., 167.

question of how to construct—both in terms of the *what* and the *how*—and deliver a powerfully immediate and cognitively rich plot as “imagined human action and life” (6.1450a 16–17). Impossibilities explicitly do not represent an obstacle on the way to sufficient emotional impact: “events which are impossible but plausible should be preferred over those possible but implausible” (24.1461b 10).

Thus, one of the most striking consequences of the Aristotelian perspective on mimesis is how far it distances itself from the element of “transparency” with which Plato at times burdens his concept of mimesis.³⁶ Because mimesis, for Plato, always shows to a varying extent how reality *is*, great ethical constraints need to be put in place. Whether or not in response to Plato, any conception of mimesis as mirroring dissatisfies Aristotle, and he is comfortable with acknowledging mimesis as creating an artistic artifact that signifies or enacts patterns of (supposed) realities. Nevertheless, this does not happen in a realm of pure artistic self-sufficiency.³⁷ Aristotle, for example, stipulates clear canons for plot-construction in *Poetics* 13 (“Good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to affliction”) and similarly in chapter 15 he declares goodness as one of the essential aims of characterization. In addition, the fourth chapter, with its historical excursus on the development of poetry, shows how for Aristotle the ethical has been incorporated into the art of poetry as a set of cultural practices and institutions that naturally evolved.³⁸

MODERN INTERPRETATION

Aristotle’s approach thus acknowledges two complementary aspects of mimesis. As artistic artifact, the work of art in its “internal” aspect, is structured mimetically in that it is the product of an artistic shaping of artistic materials. As an outward-facing representation and signification, the work of art mimetically enacts and signifies a (supposed) reality.³⁹

In his study *Time and Narrative*, published from 1983 to 1985, Paul Ricoeur, an influential modern interpreter of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, has elaborated on these aspects of mimesis to develop his notion of “threefold

³⁶Ibid., 171.

³⁷Ibid., 172.

³⁸Ibid., 175.

³⁹Ibid., 172.

mimesis” in the construction of narrative (μῦθος).⁴⁰ For Ricœur, Aristotle’s concept of mimesis requires the preexisting intelligibility of action and life in the world. While mimetic art extends and reshapes understanding, it starts from already given possibilities of meaning. Describing what he designates as mimesis₁, he writes: “To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality.”⁴¹ Following this preunderstanding of what is prefigured in the lived world of human acting, there follows the process of emplotment, or “mimesis₂,” which configures the world of the text. He likens this configurational act itself to a “grasping together” of actions and incidents, and he stresses the kinship of this grasping with the operation of judgement in Kant: the placing of an intuitive manifold under the rule of a concept.⁴² When considering temporality, in mediating between discordance and concordance, between event and story, the act of configuration is able to “extract a figure from a succession.”⁴³ Mimesis₃ then marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader.⁴⁴ It is likened by Ricœur to what H.-G. Gadamer would call the “application” or “fusion of horizons.”⁴⁵ Mimesis₃, however, does not stop at a merely intellectual process of understanding and recognition, but leads to a refiguration of the “world of the reader,” completing the narrative and thus restoring it to “the time of action and of suffering.”⁴⁶

The Imitation of the Divine Nature

Even by way of a brief study of some of the key sources of classical thought we have seen that the concept of mimesis receives multiple complex interpretations that go well beyond anything that could be subsumed under the headings of *imitation* or *representation*. The thoughts of Plato and Aristotle on mimesis could not even be confined to the sphere of aesthetics,

⁴⁰Paul Ricœur, “Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis,” in *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1983–1985), 3:52–87.

⁴¹Ibid., 64.

⁴²Ibid., 66.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 71.

⁴⁵Ibid., 70.

⁴⁶Ibid.

but effortlessly cross any boundaries towards the fundamental questions of epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, and ethics. For Paul Ricœur, finally, mimesis becomes a powerful theory to explore the impact of fiction on reality. Our initial interest in broadening our understanding of mimesis, however, stemmed from Gregory's postulation that Christianity is the mimesis of the divine nature. To try to answer the question of whether Gregory had a similarly complex and broad concept of mimesis as the one we just discovered, we should first return to his letter to Harmonius (*De professione Christiana*).

In an attempt to pay back his debt of not having written for a long time, Gregory begins his letter by announcing that he will extend it to such a length that it will rather count as many letters.⁴⁷ He reminisces on the countless conversations he and his addressee used to have, and takes this as an invitation “to imitate in my epistolary style the conversations we used to have when we were face to face” (διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολιμαίου ταύτης φωνῆς τὴν κατὰ πρόσωπον ἡμῶν συνουσίαν μιμήσασθαι).⁴⁸ If the two friends were able to meet in person “our old lyre would reawaken under the plectrum of your intelligence” (ἐκ τοῦ παρὰ τῆς σῆς φρονήσεως πλήκτρον δίκην τὴν γηραιὴν ἡμῶν ἀνακινεῖσθαι κιθάραν),⁴⁹ but since that is impossible, Gregory continues, he will simply have to “assume your role also” (ἀναγκαῖον ἂν εἶη καὶ τὸ σὸν πρόσωπον ὑποδύεσθαι).⁵⁰ What seems to be nothing more than a flowery and elegant beginning of a letter to a learned friend turns on closer examination out to be a sophisticated rhetorical move in the delivery of Gregory's argument. Setting the stage for his argument that Christianity is τῆς θείας φύσεως μιμησις, he does nothing less than set the stage for the mimetic performance of a dialogue between the two friends. Assuming both his own and his friend's actor's mask (πρόσωπον), Gregory is going to *mimeticize* the conversation, just as if he were a lyre (κιθάρα)—one of the main instruments of the mimetic art of μουσική—played by the plectrum of his friend's intelligence.

Such a play evidently needs “a hypothesis profitable to the soul for the scope of our letter,” and this turns out to be the question “What is meant

⁴⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:81).

⁴⁸*De professione* (FOTC 58:81; GNO 8.1:129, 13–14).

⁴⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:81; GNO 8.1:130, 10–11).

⁵⁰Ibid. (FOTC 58:81; GNO 8.1:130, 13–14).

by the term ‘Christian?’⁵¹ Gregory in fact asks “Τὶ τοῦ Χριστιανοῦ τὸ ἐπάγγελμα;”⁵² which, according to the literal sense of ἐπάγγελμα, makes him inquire what the *profession* of a Christian is. As in the case of a doctor, an orator, or a geometrician, Gregory elaborates, the Christian should wish “to be addressed in accordance with truth,” the use of his title in this way depending “on the practice itself” (αὐτῷ τῷ ἐπιτηδεύματι τὴν προσηγορίαν πιστώσεται).⁵³ Therefore, as in the case of the doctor, the orator, or the geometrician, whoever would seek the true scope of the profession of a Christian (τὸν ἀληθῆ σκοπὸν τοῦ Χριστιανοῦ ἐπαγγέλματος)⁵⁴ will find a specialized knowledge and skill—an art (in the sense of τέχνη)—rather than an empty title.

Above all, in order to be worthily called a Christian, we should not act like the main protagonist in the story Gregory then tells about a certain showman in the city of Alexandria. This showman trained a monkey to dance “with some grace, and having dressed him in a dancer’s mask and a costume suitable for the occasion, and having surrounded him with a chorus, gained fame by the monkey’s twisting himself in time with the music, concealing his nature in every way.”⁵⁵ One day, however, one of the spectators threw almonds on the stage, leading the monkey to immediately lunge at the treat, forgetting the dancing and his costume, finally “emerging ugly and ridiculous from the shreds of the mask” (προσωπείου).⁵⁶ Gregory immediately makes explicit the moral of the story: “[T]hose individuals not truly shaping their own natures by faith [οἱ μὴ ἀληθῶς αὐτὴν τὴν φύσιν ἑαυτῶν τῇ πίστει μορφώσαντες] will easily be disclosed in the toils of the devil as being something other than what they are called.” Ultimately, they are led to “remove the mask [προσωπείον] of moderation or meekness or some other virtue in a moment of personal crisis.”⁵⁷ For in fact “those ape-like souls” have been doing nothing more than “through pretense and imitation playing the role of the Christian” (οἱ διὰ μιμήσεως ἐσχηματισμένης

⁵¹Ibid. (FOTC 58:81; GNO 8.1:130, 15–17).

⁵²Ibid. (GNO 8.1:130, 20); the Greek title is Περὶ τοῦ τί τοῦ Χριστιανοῦ ἐπάγγελμα.

⁵³Ibid. (FOTC 58:82; GNO 8.1:131, 6–7).

⁵⁴Ibid. (GNO 8.1:131, 8–9).

⁵⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:82; GNO 8.1:132, 1). As Halliwell has pointed out, the “ape metaphor” represents a *topos* in the discussion of mimesis. See Halliwell, *Mimesis*, 357, n28.

⁵⁶Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:83; GNO 8.1:133, 1).

⁵⁷Ibid. (FOTC 58:83; GNO 8.1:133, 4–14).

τὸν χριστιανισμόν ὑποκρίνονται).⁵⁸ It is necessary to understand the correct meaning of the Christian profession precisely to avoid being like the monkey, who, by “concealing his nature” (ἐπικρυπτομένῳ τὴν φύσιν),⁵⁹ merely showed forth an “assumed form” (τὸ σεσοφισμένον σχῆμα).⁶⁰ This will allow the Christian to become *true*—to really be what he also appears to be.⁶¹

The particular wording of Gregory’s admonition to those playing the role of the Christian through mimesis is clearly explained by his story of the monkey engaging in what we have earlier seen classified as the mimetic arts: dance, music, rhythm, tragedy/comedy (including masks and a chorus). Like Plato with his mirror simile, Gregory first seems to call out those with a simplified and unquestioned concept of mimesis before employing the exact same term in his definition of what it means to be a Christian. What is more, he even uses an example of false mimesis within the profitable epistolary mimesis he performs with his very letter. He thus seems to be cognizant of previous philosophical inquiries into the status and value of mimesis in the arts and Plato’s anxieties over the non-virtuous use of mimesis, and yet comfortable with the ambiguities and complexities of the concept. He does not shy away from using it as the very vehicle of his argumentation and the basis of his definition of the nature of Christianity.

The bad example of the “incident of the almonds”⁶² thus gives him sufficient reason to begin the inquiry into the meaning of Christianity that will arrive at said definition. In line with his demand that the title should correspond to actual practice, he proposes to first study the title itself. Here, he succinctly states that “Christ” simply means “the king” if expressed with “a clearer and more familiar word.”⁶³ This is how Scripture indicates royal dignity, Gregory continues, but since Scripture also states that the divine is inexpressible and incomprehensible, both the prophets and the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have contributed “with many words and ideas to our understanding of Christ’s incorruptible nature.”⁶⁴ These brief

⁵⁸Ibid. (FOTC 58:83; GNO 8.1:133, 12–13).

⁵⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:82; GNO 8.1:132, 7–8).

⁶⁰Ibid. (FOTC 58:83; GNO 8.1:133, 2).

⁶¹Ibid. (FOTC 58:83).

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid. (FOTC 58:84).

⁶⁴Ibid. (FOTC 58:84; GNO 8.1:134, 9–11).

observations are sufficient for Gregory to already draw out momentous conclusions for those bearing the name “Christian.” He writes:

If we, who are united to Him by faith in Him, are synonymous with Him whose incorruptible nature is beyond verbal interpretation, it is entirely necessary for us to become what is contemplated in connection with the name of that incorruptible nature and to achieve an identity with the secondary elements which follow along with it. (εἰ γὰρ τῷ ὑπερέχοντι τῶν τῆς ἀφθάρτου φύσεως ἐρμηνευτικῶν ὀνομάτων συνονομαζόμεθα οἱ διὰ τῆς εἰς αὐτὸν πίστεως πρὸς αὐτὸν συναπτόμενοι, ἀνάγκη πᾶσα ἐστί, καὶ ὅσα μετὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος τούτου περὶ τὴν ἀφθαρτον ἐκείνην θεωρεῖται φύσιν νοήματα, καὶ πρὸς ἐκεῖνα ἡμῖν τὴν ὁμωνυμίαν κατὰ τὸ ἀκόλουθον γίνεσθαι.)⁶⁵

Because the incorruptible divine nature of Christ remains inexpressible and incomprehensible, what remains is the absolute requirement to wholly become whatever we are able to discern in relation to the name. With this, he implies, we might not be able to give a *verbal* interpretation of the divine nature, but possibly a *non-verbal* one. We do indeed “by participation in Christ receive the title ‘Christian’” (ὡς γὰρ τῇ μετοχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ τὴν τοῦ Χριστιανοῦ προσηγορίαν ἐσχήκαμεν),⁶⁶ yet we are also with this drawn into a share in the words that interpret his ineffable nature and are first and foremost to strive to share these qualities.⁶⁷

It follows that whoever “puts on the name of Christ” (τὸ μὲν ὄνομα τις τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑποδύοιτο) but does not exhibit in his life these qualities, does nothing more than put on “a lifeless mask” (προσωπεῖον ἄψυχον).⁶⁸ This lets Gregory state the main thesis of his letter: “If one can give a definition of Christianity, we shall define it as follows: Christianity is a mimesis of the divine nature” (ὅτι χριστιανισμός ἐστί τῆς θείας φύσεως μίμησις).⁶⁹ Foreseeing an objection by his friend, Gregory goes on to show that this definition is in no way immoderate, for “the first condition of man” (τὴν πρώτην κατάστασιν) as found in Scripture clearly shows that it does not exceed the

⁶⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:84; GNO 8.1:135, 6–12; English translation adapted.)

⁶⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:84; GNO 8.1:135, 12–13).

⁶⁷Ibid. (FOTC 58:85).

⁶⁸Ibid. (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:135, 22–25).

⁶⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:136, 7–8).

limits of human nature: “The first man was constituted as an imitation of the likeness of God” (ἡ τε γὰρ πρώτη τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κατασκευὴ κατὰ μίμησιν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁμοιότητος ἦν).⁷⁰ Christianity therefore is rightly said to be nothing more than the bringing of man back to his first constitution, to how he initially was “constructed.”

Having postulated the main claim of his letter, Gregory again enjoins an illustration of how the “promise of this title”⁷¹ fulfilled in mimesis can be wrongly understood and lead to great danger. Completing his use of the mimetic arts for his argumentation, he now employs the example of a painter who is asked to paint a picture of a king. If that painter were to paint “a disfigured shape” (δύσμορφον εἶδος)⁷² and call it an image of the king, the authorities would be rightly upset with him, for people will think that the ἀρχέτυπον in actuality looks like whatever that painter found himself able to paint. This is precisely the danger with those who call themselves Christians but instead conform themselves to many forms of animals in their lives driven by passions. For if it is clear to all “that the promise of the name proclaims a mimesis of God,” then they will make the divine an object of blame among unbelievers.⁷⁴ On the other hand, even a person that has never received “an explanation of this mystery” (ὁ μήπω δεξάμενος τοῦ μυστηρίου τὸν λόγον), that Christianity is the mimesis of God, will believe that the divine revered by Christians is good if he *sees* life among Christians as “models of complete goodness.”⁷⁵ This is precisely why, Gregory can now continue, Christ calls us “to be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (γίνεσθε τέλειοι, ὡς καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τέλειός ἐστιν) (Mt

⁷⁰Ibid. (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:136, 11–15). In one of the few dedicated treatments of *De professione Christiana*, Mary Emily Keenan at this point observes with reference to W. Jaeger’s *Paideia* that “Gregory uses it [μίμησις] in the Platonic sense of a copy or reproduction.” Mary Emily Keenan, “De Professione Christiana and De Perfectione: A Study of the Ascetical Doctrine of Saint Gregory of Nyssa,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 5 (1950): 167–207, at 179. As we have seen above, it would be difficult to find an English equivalent to how Plato uses the term, and his repeated investigations into the concept should be studied trying to avoid the preconceived notion of Plato’s alleged condemnation of μίμησις. Without the latter step, Gregory’s nuanced and varying uses of concepts associated with μίμησις are easily missed.

⁷¹Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:85).

⁷²Ibid. (FOTC 58:86; GNO 8.1:137, 6; English translation adapted).

⁷³Ibid. (GNO 8.1:137, 9).

⁷⁴Gregory of Nyssa, (FOTC 58:86).

⁷⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:86; GNO 8.1:137, 13).

5.48)—or, rendered etymologically, we are called to become “finished,” that is, the completed and fulfilled result of our original *κατασκευή*, achieved in the mimesis of the divine nature as the interpretation of the proclamation of the prophets and apostles.⁷⁶

Precisely because “the divine pervades all creation” and “the divine nature touches each element of being with equal honor,” Scripture is able to call us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, making plain that the firmament of heaven is not “some remote habitation of God” but the very creation that surrounds us and within which we are placed.⁷⁷ Put the other way around, it follows that choosing not to be separated from God “is the same as living in heaven.”⁷⁸ When Christ calls us to imitate our Father, he orders us to separate from earthly passions, and in this, simply through an “impetus of thought” (*ἐν μόνῃ τῇ τῆς διανοίας ὀρμῇ*),⁷⁹ a “heavenly sojourn is easy for anyone who wants it even on earth,” not through a change of place but simply through choice.⁸⁰

The Interpretation of Christ

While Gregory confines this investigation of the term “Christian” as derived from the word “Christ” in *De professione Christiana* to just one paragraph, the same exercise is repeated more thoroughly in another epistolary treatise, *De perfectione*. Already the alternative title “On what it is necessary for a Christian to be”⁸¹ illustrates the close connection between

⁷⁶How “salvation through imitation of Christ” is connected to the soteriology of other Greek Christian writers is succinctly summarized in Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 190–204. What the author calls “the ‘humanistic’ solution” is however commonly presented in the framework of ethics, whereas I would argue that Gregory’s thinking needs to be put in the framework of *aesthetics*—understood here not in the sense of the philosophical tradition beginning with Baumgarten and epitomized by Kant. We could also by way of Hans-Georg Gadamer point out that a separation between “good” and “beautiful” would be quite unthinkable for the writers forming Gregory’s philosophical (let alone theological) background: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 37.

⁷⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:87).

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:88; GNO 8.1:140, 6).

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione* (FOTC 58:93).

the two letters, and, as we are about to see, the main building blocks of the argument in both letters are similar. Gregory in fact begins his treatise by referring to the request that prompted his investigation: “Your zeal to know how anyone may become perfect through a life of virtue [τοῦ κατ’ ἀρετὴν βίου τελειωθείη] so that you may achieve a blamelessness in all things is in keeping with your purpose in life.”⁸² We are reminded of his words concerning Matthew 5.48 in *De professione Christiana*, and what may sound here like the beginning of an arid moralizing philosophical discourse now already gives us a good idea of where Gregory is going to take his argument. He then announces that his response to the request of the addressee will follow the ὑπόθεσις that he will strive “to set before you an accurate description of the life towards which one must tend.” He begins this task by stating that Christ “bestowed on us communion in his revered name [χαρισαμένου τὴν κοινωνίαν ἡμῖν τοῦ προσκυνουμένου ὀνόματος], so that we get our name from no other person connected with us.”⁸³ With this, we are called to understand and give thanks for the greatness of this gift, to then “show through our life that we ourselves are what the power of this great name requires us to be.”⁸⁴ For these two undertakings—understanding “what we believe He is when He is called upon by His name” and applying the subsequent knowledge of “what sort of persons we should be shown to be”—we find our surest guide in Paul. For he, more than anyone else, knew “what Christ is,” and clearly indicated by what he did the kind of person named after Christ.⁸⁵ Indeed, he was “mimeticizing him so brilliantly that he revealed his own Master in himself, his own soul being transformed through his accurate imitation of his prototype” (οὕτως ἐναργῶς αὐτὸν μιμησάμενος, ὡς ἐν ἑαυτῷ δεῖξαι τὸν ἑαυτοῦ δεσπότην μεμορφωμένον, διὰ τῆς ἀκριβεστάτης μιμήσεως μεταβληθέντος τοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ εἶδους πρὸς τὸ πρωτότυπον).⁸⁶ Gregory thus puts forth Paul as the prime example of what he argued for in his letter to Harmonius: Paul achieved a complete change (μεταβληθέντος) according to the prototype, so perfectly mimeticizing what is given by the great name by what he did

⁸²*De perfectione* (FOTC 58:95; GNO 8.1:173, 2).

⁸³Ibid. (FOTC 58:95; GNO 8.1:174, 1; English translation adapted).

⁸⁴Ibid. (FOTC 58:95).

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:96; GNO 8.1:175, 5–8).

that the prototype itself would be revealed and no longer Paul but “Christ seemed [δοκεῖν] to be living in him.”⁸⁷

This proves for Gregory that Paul indeed knew the significance of the name of Christ, which he recorded in the many titles he used for him. Beginning with “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1.24), Gregory then enumerates some thirty quotations from Paul’s epistles, all of which he will discuss further in that specific order in the lengthiest section of his treatise. First, however, he goes on to elaborate on the difference between these phrases and the name of Christ: They are all indications of the “unspeakable greatness of the gift for us,” that is, being a person named after Christ, each of them making its own contribution to revealing what is signified by the bearing of that name.⁸⁸ All the force of the other titles depends on that of royalty, however, as is also indicated in the “historical books” (ἐν ταῖς ἱστορίαις), where the anointing of kingship comes first.⁸⁹ Similar to his distinction in *De professione Christiana*, he writes: “But it is the kingship itself which declares what the title of Christ means.”⁹⁰

Since we are called “Christians” and are thus bearers of “the first of names,” it is necessary that “there be seen in us also all of the interpretations of this name” (πάντα τὰ ἐρμηνευτικὰ τῆς τοιαύτης φωνῆς), so that our life “be a testimony of it” (ἐκ τοῦ βίου τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἔχειν).⁹¹ Only if we are able to manifest all the *interpretations* of the divine name can we be deemed a worthy bearer of that name, giving a proper *martyria*. Notably, this dynamic does not work the other way around: “Being something does not result from being called something.”⁹² What Gregory had laboriously refuted in Eunomian thought—the strict correspondence of “words” and “realities”—he also negates in the case of those bearing the name of Christ. For anything to be named validly, it is the nature first that “completely reveals the form of address as a true one.”⁹³ Christians therefore need to “become what the name means, to then in this way adapt themselves to the

⁸⁷Ibid. (FOTC 58:96; GNO 8.1:175, 8).

⁸⁸Ibid. (FOTC 58:97).

⁸⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:97; GNO 8.1:177, 2).

⁹⁰Ibid. (FOTC 58:98).

⁹¹Ibid. (FOTC 58:98; GNO 8.1:177, 11–14; English translation adapted).

⁹²Ibid. (FOTC 58:98).

⁹³Ibid.

calling” (γενέσθαι χρῆ ὅπερ τὸ ὄνομα βούλεται, εἴθ’ οὕτως ἑαυτοῖς ἐφαρμόσαι τὴν κλήσιν).⁹⁴ This point is driven home by an example from the mimetic arts: Just as we need to distinguish a man from a piece of wood that has taken on the form of the man “through mimesis,” so we need to distinguish the true Christian from the one who merely seems to be a Christian through individual elements of his character.⁹⁵

This leads up to the statement of the main claim of the treatise, picking up on the “perfection” that the addressee asked Gregory to elaborate on: it is not some individual elements that make up the true Christian, but “the marks of the true Christian are *all* those we know in connection with Christ.”⁹⁶ Indeed, all the interpretative terms signifying Christ (πάντα τὰ ἐρμηνευτικά τῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ σημασίας ὀνόματα)⁹⁷ need to be illustrated by the life of the Christian if “the man of God is to be perfect” (2 Tim 3,17). In this, Gregory now introduces an important distinction: for “those that we have room for we imitate, and those which our nature does not approximate by imitation, we reverence and worship” (ὧν ὅσα μὲν χωροῦμεν, μιμούμεθα ὅσα δὲ οὐ χωρεῖ ἢ φύσις πρὸς μίμησιν, σεβόμεθά τε καὶ προσκυνοῦμεν).⁹⁸ What is implied by the distinction between the name and the interpretative terms (and also by the kind of Christology Gregory is going to engage in), is made explicit in that there is precisely no “compounding” of natures (which he also ruled out in his letter to Harmonius), and that there are attributes of the divine nature that can only be worshiped instead of imitated.

Gregory is now ready to begin the largest section of his treatise, the systematic discussion of the interpretative terms of the name of Christ as found in the writings of Paul, in order that they may become “the safest guide for a life of virtue” through μίμησις and προσκύνησις.⁹⁹ The manner and sequence of his discussion betrays clear traits of a very conscious and highly sophisticated composition, and has rightly been called “St Gregory’s Christology.”¹⁰⁰ A detailed analysis lies beyond the scope of the present

⁹⁴Ibid. (FOTC 58:98; GNO 8.1:178, 3–4; English translation adapted).

⁹⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:98).

⁹⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:99).

⁹⁷Ibid. (GNO 8.1:178, 15–16).

⁹⁸Ibid. (FOTC 58:99; GNO 8.1:178, 13–14).

⁹⁹Ibid. (FOTC 58:101).

¹⁰⁰Cf. for example Callahan’s introduction to *De perfectione* (p. 94). I would argue against Keenan, who does not see a significance in the order of the titles, that the hierarchy of the

study, and we will have to limit ourselves to highlighting those aspects that are most pertinent to his overall exposition. In general, for every term or group of terms Gregory strictly forces himself not only to bring out the meaning of the term, but also to spell out how this understanding may be applied by the Christian engaging in his proper practice. What Gregory brings out with this repeated move in many cases seems to expand on the main points he made in his letter to Harmonius. Thus, the meaning of the first term he discusses, “the power of God and the wisdom of God,” (1 Cor 1.24) is that through beholding the “greatness of the composition of being,” we may recognize Christ’s power through what we comprehend, and then *worship* the incomprehensible wisdom “of the one who thought of these things.”¹⁰¹ With this, we become powerful and wise as well, and thus perfect. Just as in *De professione Christiana*, Gregory therefore highlights the importance of creation for the mimesis of Christ, for “all creation . . . came into being through him and is united with him.”¹⁰²

Importantly, the divine nature to be mimeticized in all of this is for Gregory the one that is revealed in and through Christ. The fact that Gregory briefly discusses the titles of Christ in *De professione Christiana* prior to arriving at his definition of Christianity based on mimesis, and the fact that he likewise engages in the same investigation, yet more extensively, after postulating said maxim at the beginning of *De perfectione*, should clearly demonstrate that τῆς θείας φύσεως μίμησις cannot be taken as referring to any metaphysical conception of “divinity” as debated in the classical writings that nevertheless form Gregory’s intellectual background. Thus, in *De perfectione*, Gregory also sees baptism as the beginning of this process when he later on writes that “through His making us ‘children of the day and children of the light,’ born of ‘water and the Spirit,’ . . . He Himself acts as our guide in this birth in the water of the Jordan.”¹⁰³ This is continued

titles is of great theological weight for Gregory (Mary Emily Keenan, “De Professione Christiana and De Perfectione,” 187). Cf. also how Origen at the beginning of his *Commentary on John* goes to great lengths to establish a hierarchy among the titles applied to Christ.

¹⁰¹Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione* (FOTC 58:101).

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid. (FOTC 58:114). Cf. also his use of mimesis when he speaks about baptism in his catechetical oration. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse* 35; Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse: A Handbook for Catechists*, trans. Ignatius Green, Popular Patristics Series 60 (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2019), 139–44. Although he does not

in the Eucharist, for “the Logos who becomes food and drink is received and assimilated without distinction by those seeking him,”¹⁰⁴ and finally completed in the Father: “we also . . . will cleave to the Father of incorruptibility by imitating, as far as we can, the innocence and stability of the Mediator.”¹⁰⁵

* * *

After a detailed analysis of the letter to Harmonius that sparked our whole investigation, in conjunction with the closely related, systematically expanded discussion of the same notions in *De perfectione*, we are now in the position to conclude that Gregory is not only familiar with the investigations into mimesis that we discovered in our review of some of the most pertinent texts by Plato and Aristotle (something that might not necessarily come as a surprise), but, more importantly, he seems aware of the nuances and complexities of those investigations. Gregory transposes the technique of mimesis out of his intellectual background, steeped in classical rhetorical training, into a wholly different, yet related, context. Overall, if we were to situate Gregory in relation to Plato and Aristotle, we would have to conclude that he, together with both classical authors, takes for granted the classification of the visual arts, poetry, music, and dance as mimetic arts. He likewise recognizes the great emotional and ethical impact these practices can exert, expanding it even to the physical and bodily. His story of the “incident of the almonds”¹⁰⁶ shows that he is familiar with critical inquiries into the value of mimesis, which, however, do not keep him from inscribing mimesis into the very heart of his anthropology and ultimate account of “Christianity.” On the contrary, either by refuting reductionist understandings of mimesis through the monkey *topos* in *De professione Christiana*, or by recourse to the Great Apostle (who himself employs the language of

specifically study the works considered here, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz argues that Gregory’s soteriology is “integrally connected with his theology of baptismal imitation of Christ,” in this way showing how mimesis, as the lens through which Gregory interprets baptism, seems to be pivotal for Gregory’s thought also when studied from a completely different angle. See Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Doctrinal Works: A Literary Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 28 and 191–219.

¹⁰⁴Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:108).

¹⁰⁵Ibid. (FOTC 58:117; GNO 8.1:206, 12–13).

¹⁰⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:83).

mimesis) in *De perfectione*, Gregory frees mimesis from any simplifications or suspicions. Indeed, it may be said that since both the *what* and the *how* of his mimesis are unquestionably aimed towards the highest standards of virtue, he can forgo Plato's ethical anxieties in favor of a less ambiguously positive evaluation. He remains uninterested in any kind of metaphysical system of forms and correspondences, truths and appearances, besides the mimesis of the one divine nature that is revealed in and through Christ, to the effect of the mimetic and worshipful ascent, encompassing both soul and body, of the Christian. This may position him closer to Aristotle, whose natural development of mimetic practice through history and whose absence of a metaphysical system of "forms" made him less preoccupied with ethical regulations. Yet at the same time Gregory's understanding of mimesis goes well beyond that of a τέχνη aimed at projecting a contingently related "possible world" to the effect of ethical instruction and emotional καθαρισμός.

Does Gregory then simply unconsciously synthesize and extrapolate his concept of mimesis against the classical backdrop, to arrive at a particularly poetic manner of expressing what it means to be worthily called a Christian? Or is there more to his use of mimesis, a conscious and intentional elaboration that allows him to answer the questions most fundamental to him? To continue our inquiry, we will have to try to make sense of some of Gregory's most perplexing and original statements in a work that Werner Jaeger, together with the two letters discussed so far, quite curiously lists as one of the *Gregorii Nysseni opera ascetica*, his homilies on the Song of Songs.

The Mirror and the Archer

Already in his second homily, after having given an *apologia* for his exegesis in the prologue and having positioned the Song of Songs as the "Holy of Holies"¹⁰⁷ of Scripture, entered into as the crowning instruction in wisdom given by Solomon after his Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Gregory employs the language of mimesis in a peculiar context. With regard to the verse "If you

¹⁰⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 1 (GNO 6:26); Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 29

do not know yourself, O beautiful among women, go forth in the footsteps of the flocks, and tend the kids by the shepherds' tents" (I.8), Gregory comments:

Know how much you have been honored by the Maker above the rest of the creation. . . . Only you came into existence as a copy of the Nature that transcends every intellect . . . a model of that true Light in the contemplation of which you become what it is, imitating that which shines within you by the reflecting ray that shines forth from your purity. (γνώθι πόσον ὑπὲρ τὴν λοιπὴν κτίσιν παρὰ τοῦ πεποιηκότος τετιμησαιο.... μόνη σὺ γέγονας τῆς ὑπερεχούσης πάντα νοῦν φύσεως ἀπεικόνισμα... τοῦ ἀληθινῆς φωτὸς ἐκμαγεῖον, πρὸς ὃ βλέπουσα ἐκεῖνο γίνῃ, ὅπερ ἐκεῖνος ἐστὶ, μιμουμένη τὸν ἐν σοὶ λάμποντα διὰ τῆς ἀντιλαμπύσης αὐγῆς ἐκ τῆς σῆς καθαρότητος.)¹⁰⁸

First, we see that leading up to his use of μιμουμένη, Gregory refers to man as being made as an ἀπεικόνισμα of the divine nature. We are reminded here of his paraphrase of Genesis 1.27 in *De professione Christiana*, where he feels compelled to substantiate his claim that Christianity is τῆς θείας φύσεως μίμησις: "The first man was constituted as an imitation of the likeness of God" (ἢ τε γὰρ πρώτη τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κατασκευὴ κατὰ μίμησιν τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁμοιότητος ἦν).¹⁰⁹ With the making of man as "the mimesis of the likeness of God," we see how for Gregory the concept of mimesis is inscribed into the very center of creation, into the very heart of what it is to be a human being. More strikingly, this allows him to say that the ray that may shine forth from man by his purity is actually the result of the mimesis of "that which shines within you." The mimesis of God in the creation of man (in the subjective and objective sense of the genitive) thus becomes the foundation for the mimesis of that very gift inscribed in the being of man. When we read that man is "a model of that true Light in the contemplation of which you become what it is," we could go so far as to say that man is called to mimeticize himself, in this way becoming that which he already is.¹¹⁰ This idea seems to be in keeping with how Gregory, in *De professione*

¹⁰⁸Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 2 (GNO 6:68; Norris, p. 75; English translation adapted).

¹⁰⁹Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:85; GNO 8.1:136, 14–15).

¹¹⁰For an overview of the critique of the "Werde, der du bist" injunction especially by

Christiana, described how “the promise of this title” is bestowed on those who “by participation in Christ receive the title ‘Christian,’” with the fulfillment of the promise being man’s return “to his original good fortune.”¹¹¹ Likewise, we are reminded of Gregory’s words in *De perfectione* that Christ “bestowed on us communion in his revered name” and how with this we are called to understand and give thanks for the greatness of this gift, to then “show through our life that we ourselves are what the power of this great name requires us to be.”¹¹²

Having seen how Gregory understands man as both the object and subject of mimesis, we are able to appreciate Gregory’s predilection for the mirror simile. He frequently employs this famous simile to illustrate the importance of having the mind, as the governing principle of man, oriented towards the divine. This contemplation engenders a forming of the mind in the likeness of the divine beauty, in turn impressing the same form on the material body. For instance, we read in chapter 12 of his *De opificio hominis*:

And as we said that the mind was adorned by the likeness of the archetypal beauty, being formed as though it were a mirror to receive the figure of that which it expresses, we consider that the nature which governed by it is attached to the mind in the same relation, and that it too is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror, and that by it is swayed and sustained the material element of that existence in which the nature is contemplated.¹¹³

Gregory does not associate the mirror with the kind of deception and illusionism with which Plato associates it in his writings. Instead, being a mirror entails being formed (*μορφούμενον*) to receive a figure, and this process even governs the relationship between the mind and the body, between

Nietzsche in the context of René Girards work on mimesis, see Johannes Zachhuber, “Die patristische Ethik der ΟΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΩΙ und die Mimesislehre René Girards: Perspektiven der Aneignung einer theologisch-philosophischen Tradition,” 2007, <http://users.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/safeperl/trin1631/main.cgi?5>.

¹¹¹Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:84–85).

¹¹²Ibid. *De perfectione* (FOTC 58:95).

¹¹³Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis* 12.9; *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994 [repr.]), 399.

the intelligible and the “material element.” Contemplation of the divine beauty thus forms both the mind and the body into the likeness of divine beauty, and this process is likened to the reflection of a figure in a mirror. To suggest an awareness on Gregory’s part of the famous mirror simile in Book 10 of the *Republic* almost seems unavoidable. In any case, Gregory continues his use of classical *topoi* to illustrate the extraordinary power he lends to mimesis, and shows himself comfortable to accord to a mimetic process as mechanical as the reflection of a figure in a mirror the power to form the mind and the body.¹¹⁴

The mirror simile can equally be found throughout his homilies on the Song of Songs. Thus, in the third homily, commenting on “*My spikenard gives off his scent.*” (Song 1.11), he says:

The rays of that true and divine Virtue shine upon the purified life through the inward impassibility that flows from them, and they make the Invisible visible for us and the Incomprehensible comprehensible, because they portray the Sun in the mirror that we are. (αἱ γὰρ τῆς ἀληθινῆς ἐκείνης καὶ θείας ἀρετῆς ἀκτίνες τῷ κεκαθαρμένῳ βίῳ διὰ τῆς ἀπορρεούσης αὐτῶν ἀπαθείας ἐλλάμπουσαι ὄρατὸν ποιοῦσιν ἡμῖν τὸ ἀόρατον καὶ ληπτὸν τὸ ἀπρόσιτον τῷ ἡμετέρῳ κατόπτρῳ ἐνζῶγραφοῦσαι τὸν ἥλιον.)¹¹⁵

Here, it is not the mind that is the mirror, and not the body that is the mirror of the mirror. Rather, we learn that man comes to reflect God in himself insofar as (and because) he already has the reflection of God inscribed in his very being—explaining why Gregory is comfortable with the rather mechanical simile of the mirror. This is the foundation of the artful crafting of the self in the mimesis of the self, man’s becoming what he is, encompassing and superseding any division between mind and body, the intelligible and the material—making visible the invisible and comprehensible the incomprehensible in coming to know himself.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴On Gregory’s use of the mirror figure, see David Bentley Hart, “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the Vestigia Trinitatis,” in *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 111–31.

¹¹⁵Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 3 (GNO 6:90; Norris, p. 101; English translation adapted).

¹¹⁶Cf. *Ibid.*, 77. Franz Dünzl has rightly pointed out that Gregory’s dynamic concept of

Within the tension of *becoming* and *being*, Gregory is unmistakably clear that this process for man is unending. Reviewing the bride's progress in the first five homilies, he states that "in the ascents previously accomplished, the soul was always being changed for the better by comparison with each current stage of growth, and so never stopping at the good she had already grasped."¹¹⁷ Since that which is mirrored is infinite, the bride's ascent equally becomes infinite. That this process is eternal is made clear by Gregory in his eighth homily: "what is ever and again discovered of that blessed Nature that is the Good is something great, but that what lies beyond what is grasped at any particular point is infinitely greater; during the entire eternity of the ages this becomes the case for the person who participates in the Good."¹¹⁸ In his sixth homily, Gregory even goes so far as to talk of a continuous creation of at least the mind: "It is also, in a certain fashion, always being created, as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness."¹¹⁹

One of Gregory's most vertiginous passages ties together many of the comments we have studied so far. Elaborating in his fourth homily on the verse "I have been wounded by love [*ἀγάπη*]. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me" (Song 2.5), he develops a reading of the text in which the Father is an archer discharging his own chosen arrow (i.e., the Son) in order to introduce the archer together with the arrow in his target—for "God is love" (1 Jn 4.8, 16) and "I and my Father will come and make our dwelling with him" (Jn 14.23). The soul, "who a little before was the arrow's target, now sees herself, in the arrow's place, in the hands of the archer," showing that "one and the same is both our Bridegroom and our Archer, who handles the purified soul both as bride and as arrow."¹²⁰ The wounded one becomes herself an arrow, perfected for "the journey on high. And thither I am being dispatched, not separated from the archer, so as at once to be borne by the flight and to be at rest in the hands

creation is the foundation for his dynamic concept of salvation: "Die ontologischen Kategorien Gregors erweisen sich damit als Bedingung der Möglichkeit für die heilsgeschichtliche Dynamik." Franz Dünzl, *Braut und Bräutigam: die Auslegung des Canticum durch Gregor von Nyssa* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1993), 255.

¹¹⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 6 (GNO 6:175; Norris, p. 187).

¹¹⁸Ibid., Homily 8 (GNO 6:245–46; Norris, p. 259).

¹¹⁹Ibid., Homily 6 (GNO 6:174; Norris, p. 187).

¹²⁰Ibid., Homily 4 (GNO 6:128, 129; Norris, p. 141).

of the archer.”¹²¹ At least implicitly, this arrow in its journey also comes to wound others. For commenting on the subsequent verse (“I have charged you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and virtues of the field, do not rouse or wake love [ἀγάπην], until he please”) Gregory sees the bride teaching “the way of perfection to the souls that are her disciples,” directing them “to keep their loving [ἀγάπην] sleepless and wakeful until the time when God’s will achieves its end, that is, until ‘all have been saved and have come to the knowledge of the truth.’”¹²²

In his thirteenth homily, Gregory sees himself commenting on the same words again, found in Song of Songs 5.8: “If you should find my kinsman, say to him that I am wounded by love.” Replying to the subsequent question in 5.9, “What is your kinsman more than another, O fair among woman?” he employs Ephesians 4.15–16 and says:

Anyone, therefore, who focuses attention on the church is in fact looking at Christ—Christ building himself up and augmenting himself by the addition of people who are being saved. She, then, who has put the veil off from her eyes sees the unspeakable beauty of the Bridegroom with a pure eye and in this way is wounded by the incorporeal and fiery arrow of love [ἔρωτος], for ἀγάπη when intensified is called ἔρωσ. (οὐκοῦν ὁ πρὸς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν βλέπων πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀντικρυς βλέπει τὸν ἑαυτὸν διὰ τῆς προσθήκης τῶν σωζομένων οἰκοδομοῦντα καὶ μεγαλύνοντα. ἢ τοίνυν ἀποθεμένη τῶν ὀμμάτων τὸ θέριστρον καθαρῶ τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ τὸ ἄφραστον ὄρα τῷ νυμφίῳ κάλλος καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τρωθεῖσα τῷ ἀσωμάτῳ καὶ διαπύρῳ βέλει τοῦ ἔρωτος.)¹²³

Gregory thus describes the bride’s ascent as a dynamic circularity of wounding and unveiling that constitutes an infinite ascent, made possible and driven ahead by the process of mimesis created into the bride’s very existence.¹²⁴ In this formation of the totality of human nature, initiated through the wound of the Father’s arrow of love and our looking at Christ

¹²¹Ibid., Homily 4 (GNO 6:129; Norris, p. 143).

¹²²Ibid., Homily 4 (GNO 6:131; Norris, p. 143).

¹²³Ibid., Homily 13 (GNO 6:383; Norris, p. 403).

¹²⁴For a reading of *In Canticum canticorum* as building an ontology of desire, see J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2004), 183–227.

with unveiled eyes, it follows the growing into the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4.15–16).

Conclusions

Having studied the complex backdrop against which Gregory employs the language of mimesis in his attempt to define the essence of what it means to be a Christian, we see how he is well versed in the artistic and metaphysical value of mimesis. He appeals to the entire spectrum of the mimetic arts in his application of mimesis, as well as, by way of his paraphrasis of Genesis 1.27, questions of metaphysical correspondence. He even employs mimesis for the very delivery of his argument, employing bad examples of mimesis to illustrate his own application of it, and frequently utilizing mimesis as an exegetical device. While he liberally appeals to all concepts and techniques associated with mimesis in his writings, he transposes them onto a wholly different τέλος. When he introduces divine mimesis as created into human existence in both *De professione Christiana* and *In Canticum canticorum*, he is able to deduce the infinite ascent of the bride and her “ongoing creation,” to use one of his most daring expressions, as the τέλος of the fundamental scriptural accounts about God and man. In this way he makes τελειότης the τέλος of Scripture. His mirror anthropology, as taught by the Great Apostle, posits the essence of man as “that mirror which we are” as the very prerequisite for the mimesis of that divine nature that is revealed in and through Christ.

Gregory’s use of mimesis even in his most original passages can be further enlightened by going back to Ricœur’s account of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. We recall that Ricœur delineated a threefold aspect of mimesis in the prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration of narrative. What is pre-understood in the “lived world” is grasped together in the “triumph of coherence” of narrative, to find itself in turn fulfilled in the refiguration of the “world of the reader.”¹²⁵ We must now add: The one who finds himself exposed to

¹²⁵This step might be similar to what Martin Laird has described as “logophasis”: “Having abandoned all language that searched for God, the figures of the bride and Paul assumed language that was full of God, and their words had the same effect upon others that the attractive power of the Word exerted upon them. Because the Word indwells them, the Word now speaks through them.” Laird, *Grasp of Faith*, 211.

the configured mimesis in the last step of his own refiguration is then led to see other and different narratives prefigured in the “lived world.” We are brought, in the words of Ricœur, to “the circle of mimesis,” which in a spiraling movement continues to intertwine the “possible world” and the “lived world,” the “world of the text” and the “world of the reader.” With this in mind—and if we take seriously Gregory’s repeated calls to complete an uncompromised mimesis of the prototype as well as his assertion that the body is the “mirror of the mirror”—we can easily see how the unending process of mimesis in his thought cannot be confined to ideas of intellectual catharsis or ethical virtue, but must be understood as ποιησις in the two-fold sense of the word, an interpretative crafting of the entire human nature in accordance with the divine, to become ὁμοφυής and ὁμοούσιος.¹²⁶

Indeed, if we were to retrace the threefold aspect of mimesis in the works we have studied by Gregory, we would find that mimesis₁ or “prefiguration” in the θεωρία of creation and Scripture is exemplified in his exegesis of the Song of Songs. For “in our earnest search for what is profitable in the inspired Scripture, there is nothing to be found that is unsuitable,”¹²⁷ and the soul “stretches herself out from things below toward the knowledge of things on high, once she has grasped the marvels produced by God’s working.”¹²⁸ This seeing and contemplating of what is prefigured in creation and revelation with mimesis₂ engenders the “configuration” of the self in the ascetic and liturgical life of the μιμησις and προσκύνησις of divine nature, for whatever “our nature does not approximate by mimesis, we reverence and worship” (σεβόμεθά τε καὶ προσκυνούμεν). Being among “those who are truly shaping their own natures by faith” (οἱ ἀληθῶς αὐτὴν τὴν φύσιν ἑαυτῶν τῇ πίστει μορφώσαντες),¹²⁹ man becomes an arrow “in the hands of

¹²⁶Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works*, 111–12; 197, 20–21. How startling this claim may be for us as modern readers might in part be explained by what Michel Foucault observed regarding the practices of self-examination and confession in Hellenistic philosophy: “You see that the task is not to put in the light what would be the most obscure part of our selves. The self has, on the contrary, not to be discovered but to be constituted, to be constituted through the force of truth.” Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 37.

¹²⁷Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily Preface (GNO 6:4; Norris, p. 3).

¹²⁸Ibid., Homily 11 (GNO 6:334; Norris, p. 353).

¹²⁹Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (58:83; GNO 8.1:133, 4–14).

the archer,” sent on a journey “on high” and wounding those around him. Having first been wounded by love and having received the archer and the arrow into himself through that wound, man in turn becomes the arrow “not separated from the archer, so as at once to be borne by the flight and to be at rest in the hands of the archer.”¹³⁰ This configuration leading into refiguration and ongoing creation then forms the foundation for the continuous unveiling of Scripture and creation, the alteration of the vision of mimetic preunderstanding that continually re-initiates the circle of mimesis, first entered into through the arrow of divine ἔρωσ.

In this way we can begin to estimate the ontological impact of Gregory’s mimetic circle of what it means to be a Christian, a mimetic and hermeneutic circle intertwining making and understanding, being and becoming, ontology and epistemology. Man made as a mimesis of God, in the subjective and objective sense of the genitive, is able to take the great gift of his calling as the object of the very mimesis he is going to engage in. In the ἐρμηνεία of the great calling that is bearing the name of Christ, man becomes *true*: seeing the archetype, he is able to become what he *really is*. Using the full breadth of what we have encountered as mimesis, we can say it is for Gregory the poetic crafting of the self to the likeness of God, or θεοποίησις, to become σύμμορφος θεοῦ.¹³¹

This “fashioning of the nature by faith” certainly has consequences that are in keeping with the ascetical endeavor: “The person who intends to dedicate himself to the worship [θεραπεία] of God will not be frankincense burned for God unless he has first become myrrh—that is, unless he mortifies [νεκρώσει] his earthly members, having been buried together with the one who submitted to death on our behalf.”¹³² Just as our mimesis begins with our birth through “water and the Spirit,” so it is in mortification and death that the completion of man’s mimesis begins. Yet death is neither an episodic beginning nor an episodic end, for our mimesis finds completion

¹³⁰Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 4 (GNO 6:129; Norris, p. 143).

¹³¹While the *Problematik* of grace and freedom sometimes read into Gregory has been treated extensively elsewhere—e.g., Verna E. F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1992)—and cannot be discussed adequately here, we might point out together with Martin Laird that for Gregory it is, expressed in very general terms, a posture of complete receptivity towards Scripture that forms the foundation of this θεοποίησις (Laird, *Grasp of Faith*, 206).

¹³²Gregory of Nyssa, *Song of Songs*, Homily 6 (GNO 6:189; Norris, p. 201, 203).

when we “will cleave to the Father of incorruptibility by imitating, as far as we can, the innocence and stability of the Mediator.”¹³³ What we see Gregory doing here, it could be argued, goes beyond a mere reversal of death and birth, beyond the proclamation of death as the true birth of the Christian. As Ricœur points out, Aristotle makes no mention of time in his *Poetics*. Instead, “the configurational arrangement transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole,” presenting temporal features that are “directly opposed to those of the episodic dimension.”¹³⁴ Just as τῆς θείας φύσεως μίμησις has as its object that which is beyond time, just as our μίμησις requires the continued μνήμη of the eternal archetype, so our entrance into the unending process of mimesis has as one of its consequences the entrance into something that lies beyond our common conception of time. Likewise, when Gregory writes that “it is possible for us without exertion to be present through thought wherever we wish to be, so that a heavenly sojourn is easy for anyone who wants it even on earth,”¹³⁵ and that “not being separated by choice from God is the same as living in heaven,”¹³⁶ we then equally craft whatever we conceive of as space from earthly into heavenly—from “world” into “tabernacle.”

¹³³Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione* (FOTC 57:117; GNO 8.1:206, 12–13).

¹³⁴Ricœur, “Threefold Mimesis,” 67.

¹³⁵Gregory of Nyssa, *De professione* (FOTC 58:88).

¹³⁶Ibid. (FOTC 58:87).