2

The Contest

In *On Perfection* Gregory laments the fact that his life does not match his words. He continues to pray that he may attain the ideal he expounds, but says that he does not yet see himself as "such a person as could present his life instead of a word" (*Perf.* 173). Does this imply that *On Perfection* is an early work and that later Gregory did attain the perfection he describes as far as that is possible in this life?[1] Perhaps. But in the prologue to his *Life of Moses*, generally agreed to be a late work, he says much the same thing. He begins by appealing to the analogy of a horse race. As a spectator he is merely urging "the charioteers to keener effort." As an old man and the "father of many souls," whether as a bishop or as a spiritual director, he has the obligation "to accept a commission from youth." He has been requested to give an outline of the perfect life so that the grace of his words may inform the lives of those who hear him. But he says: "It is beyond my power to encompass perfection in my treatise or to show in my life the insights of the treatise." This should come as no surprise, since many "who excel in virtue will admit that for them such an accomplishment as this is unattainable."[2] Even though Christ's grace and promise will always help those who strive to keep their promise in baptism, it is not easy to put the ideal they have embraced into practice.[3] The attempt to do so involves what will probably be a lifelong contest.

1. See, e.g., May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens," 56: "*De perfectione* dürfte ebenfalls in einer verhältnismässig frühen Lebensperiode Gregors entstanden sein." He appeals to the passage here cited and says, "So spricht man nicht als alter Mann!"

2. See the translation by Malherbe and Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, Prologue 1–3, 29–30 (*GNO* 7.1:1–3).

3. See Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 154: "Yet he [Nyssen] never suggests that the

The Christian life, then, is a continuous struggle designed to actualize what is meant by the profession of Christ in baptism. My argument in the first essay was that the themes associated with baptism encompass the whole of the Christian life and find their location in Christ. Imitating him by dying and rising with him becomes an honoring of the baptismal promises in the ongoing interaction of the Christian's free efforts and the continuing assistance of divine grace. The challenge of the contest demands that Christians should become in fact what they already are by promise. It is not clear to me that Gregory appeals to himself or to anyone else as an example of total victory in this contest.[4] To be sure, Moses seems to be such an example, but it is not so much Moses as the allegorical meaning of his story that supplies the model. It would be possible to argue that victory in the contest belongs primarily to the martyrs. With this in mind I want to begin with Gregory's account of the first martyr, Stephen, to show how he thinks the promises of baptism are fulfilled in a life. Then I wish to turn to ways in which he understands the contest for ordinary followers of Christ, as well as those like Paul, the other apostles, and the martyrs who have successfully walked in Christ's footsteps.

STEPHEN: VIRTUE THE GATEWAY TO VISION

At the beginning of his first homily *In Praise of Stephen* Gregory comes close to asking his hearers to imagine that they are present to witness Stephen's contest.[5] They are to think of "the great athlete stripped for action in the arena of his confession" and competing "with the evil rival of human life." The contest is a life-and-death one with the devil himself. The arena is also a theater, and the spectators are not only humans but also the angels (*St. 1* 96; cf. 1 Cor 4:9). Gregory employs the same metaphor in one of his encomiums of the Forty Martyrs, adding the demons to the crowd of spectators. The

soul must be totally purified before there is illumination." I am indebted to Smith because he has persuaded me of the importance Gregory attaches to the age to come as the locus for true perfection. In what follows I may well be exaggerating his point, but much of what I shall say has been learned from him.

4. I am reminded of John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection. He distinguishes perfection in this life from that in the life to come, and he appears to conclude that we should expect perfection in this life without claiming it. Only once that I can find does he refer to anyone in this life as perfect, and in that case it was to a woman on her deathbed. For the development of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 179–90. For further comparison of Gregory and Wesley, see Plant and Plested, "Macarius, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and the Wesleys," 22–30.

5. See Leemans, "Reading Acts 6–7," 9–19; Bovon, "Dossier on Stephen," 279–315; Trudinger, "Stephen and the Life of the Primitive Church," 18–22.

angels were watching for the time when they could convey the martyrs "to their allotted place"; humans waited for the end, wondering whether they would be strong enough to follow the martyrs' example; demons looked on, hoping for the defeat of the contestants (*FM. 2* 163). We can suppose that Gregory has a similar idea in his homilies on Stephen. In them he is, of course, obliged to rely on the account given in Acts 6–7, and he places the story of Stephen in the context of all the opening chapters of Acts, obviously treating them as evidence for the golden age of the earliest church, an ideal to which Christians should aspire to return. The homilies describe Stephen's virtues as well as the vision he has immediately before his death, and it seems reasonable to suppose that it is his virtues that prepare the way for his vision.

Even before his victory in the contest Stephen, whose name in Greek means "crown," wore a crown "truly put together out of many and various virtues." He was entrusted with the care of widows, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and "great wonders of divine working also coincided with his teachings" (cf. Acts 6:5–8). Both his work in distributing food to the widows and his preaching "guided souls, feeding some with bread, teaching others with the word, and setting a bodily table for some, while holding a spiritual feast for others." As well, "by the boldness of speech and by the power of the Spirit he stopped the mouths of truth's enemies" (*St. 2* 97–98). As a deacon he by no means "fell short of apostolic worth." In fact his diaconate followed Paul's, since Paul called himself "a deacon of Christ's mysteries" (cf. 1 Cor 4:1); and still more Christ himself, "the Lord of the universe, who through his flesh dispensed human salvation . . . was not ashamed to be called a deacon, since he said that he was in the midst as one who is a deacon" (Luke 22:27). Stephen's virtues, then, were acquired by his imitation of Paul, who himself imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1; *St. 1* 78–79).

In the events leading up to his martyrdom Stephen "resisted anger with forbearance, threats with disdain, the fear of death with the contempt of life, enmity with beneficence, slander with disclosure of the truth." He prevailed in no single way, but "by resolving himself into various kinds of virtue against every form of evil worked by the Jews at that time, he both combined them all and prevailed over everything" (*St. 1* 85). At length Stephen is surrounded in a circle by those stoning him to death; and in this way "he accepted what was happening like a crown of victory woven by the hands of his opponents." Stephen's virtues prepare the way for his vision, yet in one respect the vision leads to a new expression of virtue. Looking to Christ, "he saw the lawgiver of forbearance [and] remembered the laws commanding us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who fight against us" (Matt 5:44; *St. 1* 88). Finally, Stephen's

last words imitated Christ's, who said from the cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). So Stephen, "reaching up to the Master, said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'" (Acts 7:59). The angels then took away "their own devoted follower" (*St. 2* 100).

On the whole Stephen's virtues lead to and culminate in his vision: "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). But the preceding verse describes the vision somewhat differently; here Stephen sees "the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). While it is not entirely clear, Gregory appears to identify "glory of God" with "the reflection of God's glory" in Heb 1:3, understanding as the glory itself the God at whose right hand "the Son of Man" or "Jesus" is standing. Conflating the two verses he finds the Father, who is the glory, the Son, who is the reflection of his glory, and the man of Christ now glorified in heaven. What Gregory actually says is that Stephen, "having left his nature and before leaving his body, looked with pure eyes at the heavenly gates opened to him (verse 56) and at what appeared within the inner sanctuary, the divine glory itself ('God' in verses 55–56) and the reflection of God's glory ('glory of God' in verse 55). No one can describe in words the exact imprint (Heb 1:3) of the Father's glory, but its reflection in the form that appeared to humans (Jesus and Son of Man) was clearly seen by the athlete, since it appeared so as to be grasped by human nature" (*St. 1* 87).[6]

The vision is not a direct one either of the Father or of "the reflection of his glory." Moreover, it is given to Stephen when he had "come to be outside human nature and had been transformed to angelic grace" (cf. Acts 6:15). It came only as he entered the borderland between this life and the next. As well, the vision may not be an end in itself. As noted, it is what enables Stephen by seeing "the lawgiver of forbearance" to forgive his enemies. More broadly, Stephen's martyrdom has two lasting effects. Just as athletes who "have retired from contests train the young by athletic exercises . . . I think we also must be trained by great Stephen." This includes opposing those who "fight against the Spirit" (*St. 1* 89).[7] Gregory returns to this theme

6. Cf. *In cant.* 13 (*GNO* 6:381). Distinguishing between Christ as uncreated and as created, Gregory identifies the "manifested glory" of Christ with "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14). "We have seen his glory—even though what appeared was a man. But what was made known through him, he says, was 'the glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.'" See also a little later (*GNO* 6:387): "Your understanding will not first be drawn up to what is incomprehensible and invisible before it grasps by faith what is seen."

7. For the polemical context of Gregory's discussion of the Spirit and the vision of glory, see Maspero, "Fire, the Kingdom, and the Glory," 226–76; Cassin, "*De deitate filii et spiritus sancto et In Abraham*," 277–311; Radde-Gallwitz, "*Ad Eustathium de sancta*

at the end of the homily. Next, Stephen was not only "the first to make a path as an entrance for the chorus of martyrs" (*St. 1* 76), it was also from the persecution following his defeat of the devil "that the course raced by the apostles into the whole world took place." Gregory follows the text of Acts (8:4—9:15) and ends by speaking of Paul's conversion and mission that "brought nations everywhere to faith" (*St. 1* 81).

Toward the end of the first homily Gregory addresses two problematic interpretations of Stephen's vision. Those who deny the divinity of the Holy Spirit point out that Stephen sees the Father and the Son, but not the Spirit, while those who think the Son to be inferior to the Father draw their conclusion from the fact that the Son stands and is, therefore, "subject to the Father's authority." Gregory disposes of the second difficulty by a careful examination of scriptural texts, concluding that "standing" and "sitting" are no more than bodily terms applied metaphorically to God in order to show that "the divine has walked without moving, while being seated immutably in the good" (*St. 1* 93). The first of the rejected interpretations is the one that has to do with the apparent absence of the Holy Spirit. Gregory points out that it is only when Stephen was "filled with the Holy Spirit" that he "saw the glory of God and the Only Begotten Son of God" (*St. 1* 90; cf. Acts 7:5). It was "when Stephen was first illuminated by the glory of the Spirit that he apprehended[8] the glory of the Father and the Son" (*St. 1* 90). Thus, the focus of Stephen's vision is the risen and glorified Lord, and yet there are at least glimmers of a vision of the Trinity.

VISION AND VIRTUE

Gregory is almost certainly aware of Origen's explanation of the soul's three stages of ascent found in his prologue to the *Commentary on Song of Songs*.[9] These three stages correspond to the three books of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs), as well as to the division of Greek philosophy into ethics, physics, and "enoptics," and Origen treats them as "moral, natural, and contemplative" stages. Proverbs supplies moral instruction for the life of virtue in its narrower sense; Ecclesiastes surveys the visible world, pronouncing it "vanity" and encouraging the reader to renounce what is "transitory and weak" in this corporeal realm. This becomes guidance to "fellowship with God by the paths of loving affection and of love" repre-

trinitate," 89–109; Radde-Gallwitz, "Gregory of Nyssa's Pneumatology in Context," 259–85.

8. ἐν περινοίᾳ . . . ἐγένετο.

9. See my translation of the Prologue in *Origen* (CWS) 217–44, especially 231–34.

sented by Song of Songs. Gregory alludes to the pattern Origen establishes in the first chapter of his treatise *On the Titles of the Psalms*. The first psalm provides "some understanding of what lies ahead" in the psalter as a whole, and each of the five divisions of the book "by some suitable correspondence bears witness to what is blessed," since "blessed" is the first word of Ps 1. The psalter, then, "divides virtue into three parts." Here virtue takes us beyond the moral life to the entire Christian path. The first of the three blessings is "alienation from evil," which is presumably the movement from vice to moral virtue and is "the beginning of an inclination to the better." Next there is a blessing upon "meditation on what is lofty and more divine." Here the stage represented by Ecclesiastes has a more positive definition. The emphasis is not upon the vanity of the phenomenal world, but upon how that realization presses the Christian beyond this world. Gregory can elsewhere treat this "stage" as one in which we discern God's presence in the world by noting how it is contingent upon his power and providence. Finally, the psalter "blesses likeness to the divine, achieved by these stages and because of which the preceding blessings are pronounced."[10] The treatise itself respects the five divisions of the psalter found both in the Septuagint and in the Masoretic text, and presumably we are supposed to find the threefold pattern within each of the five sections. This is not in fact easily done.

Despite the fact that it is possible to discern in Gregory's writings Origen's threefold pattern, there are at least two complications. First, Gregory allows the scriptural text he is following to eclipse the bare bones of the pattern.[11] Next, and more important, is the fact already noted that he insists that the stages are not really successive for Christians in this life, but are intertwined aspects of the path they must take. To be sure, looking at the pattern in terms of its eschatological aim tends to construe it in a linear fashion. But in this life the aspects are reciprocal, and it even seems often the case that we should speak of two rather than three aspects. Moral virtue is from one perspective the prerequisite for vision, but it is equally true that vision is what enables moral progress.[12] Toward the end of *Homily 13 on Song of Songs* Gregory is speaking of the church as the body of Christ

10. *In inscr. ps.* (*GNO* 5:26).

11. Cf. Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life,* 107: "First, there is no basis in the treatise for the three clear-cut stages of the ascent of the soul which Daniélou proposes. . . . The stages Gregory sets forth are based on the chronology of Moses' life, and what he discusses in each stage is controlled by what the imagery of the Biblical text suggests." I should agree, though with some qualification.

12. In *De hom. op.* 5.1–2 (PG 44:13a–c), Gregory compares the image of God to a portrait God makes of himself. The colors of the painting are the moral virtues, but the portrait includes "mind and word" and, finally, "love." There seems to be an allusion to the three aspects of the Christian life, which are built into human nature.

and is interpreting Song 5:2, the bridegroom's "eyes are like doves at the abundance of waters, washed in milk, seated at the abundance of waters." What this means defies comprehension, but Gregory tentatively offers his interpretation. Citing 1 Cor 12:21 ("the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you"), he argues that the church needs both eyes and hands. He concludes by saying, "It is proper for the church to flourish when discernment of truth is united with what is active, since neither does contemplation by itself perfect the soul apart from the presence of works rightly directing the moral life, nor does an active way of life furnish sufficient help unless true religion presides over what takes place."[13] Here Gregory thinks of the "eyes of the church" as those entrusted with guiding the whole body, and so the bride's perfection remains incomplete apart from her guidance of the daughters of Jerusalem.[14]

A similar pattern informs the *Life of Moses*. It is certainly possible to discern Origen's outline of what will come to be called the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways, and it is probably easier to find aspects of the moral dimension when Gregory turns attention to the children of Israel.[15] Crossing the Red Sea stands not only for baptism but also for leaving behind the pleasures of evil. The initial bitterness of renunciation finds sweetening in the cross just as the wood sweetened the bitter waters of Marah (Exod 15:25). "The campsites, where the person following the pillar of cloud is refreshed as he presses on, would be the virtues."[16] It is also possible to discern what Origen defines as the stage represented by Ecclesiastes. The theophany of the burning bush teaches Moses that nothing "apprehended by sense perception and contemplated by the understanding really subsists"; only "the transcendent essence and cause of the universe" truly subsists.[17] Later Gregory gives another but complementary account of illumination. The trumpets sounding from Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16–19) refer to "the wonderful harmony of the heavens [which] proclaims the wisdom which shines forth in the creation and sets forth the great glory of God through the things which are seen."[18] To learn that creation is vanity is also to recognize that it is contingent upon God; and this enables one to discern the divine presence in what God has made and directs by his providence.

13. *In cant.* 13 (*GNO* 6:393–94). Laird, *Grasp of Faith*, does not appeal to this passage, but it certainly coheres with his fine discussion of *logophasis*, especially in ch. 6, 154–73.

14. Cf. *In cant.* 13 (*GNO* 6:377–80).

15. See O'Connell, "Double Journey," 301–24.

16. *Vit. Mos.* 2.135 (CWS 86–87; *GNO* 7.1:76). See the whole of 2.132–36.

17. *Vit. Mos.* 2.24 (CWS 60; *GNO* 7.1:40).

18. *Vit. Mos.* 2.168 (CWS 96; *GNO* 7.1:88–89).

The transition to what Origen regards as the final stage is one that Gregory treats as indicated by the contrast between the illumination of the burning bush and the darkness of Mount Sinai.[19] But this highest level of Moses' progress has multiple and confusing meanings and includes the description of the heavenly tabernacle which he sees (Exod 26:30) and enters, as well as the vision of God's back while standing on the rock (Exod 33:18–23). What Moses sees upon climbing the mountain of divine knowledge and entering the dark cloud is paradoxically "a seeing that consists in not seeing" and a knowledge that is ignorance. Yet somehow it is an "access to the invisible and incomprehensible," and Gregory describes it as slipping "into the inner sanctuary of divine knowledge."[20] But Moses continues to advance and "passes on to the tabernacle not made with hands" (cf. Heb 9:11). This is Christ himself with the "veil of his flesh" (Heb 10:20) hiding in the Holy of Holies the Only Begotten Son of God. Here Gregory observes that whoever "loves Christ" should not be disturbed by supposing that naming God a tabernacle in any way "diminishes the magnificence of the nature of God."[21] It is tempting to conclude that the highest knowledge of God is the love of Christ. Should we then suppose that all of this—and more—represents Moses' perfection?[22] Not at all. Let me call attention to Warren Smith's fine examination of Moses' progress in terms of "cycles of purgation and illumination."[23] To put his argument in a slightly different way, Gregory tends to collapse Origen's three stages into two reciprocal aspects of the Christian life—vision and virtue interacting with one another.

In what looks like a side observation in his discussion of the dark cloud Gregory states that "religious virtue is divided into two parts, into that which pertains to the Divine and that which pertains to right conduct."[24] The order in which the two parts are mentioned implies that vision empowers virtue and not that virtue qualifies someone for vision. Moreover, in this same place Gregory goes on to say that Moses first learns "the things

19. *Vit. Mos.* 2.162 (CWS 94–95; *GNO* 7.1:86). One complication derives from the scriptural texts. Immediately after God speaks the Decalogue, Moses "entered the thick darkness" (Exod 20:21; γνόφον). Then he goes up again to receive the tablets of stone, and "entered into the midst of the cloud" (Exod 24:18; νεφέλη). Gregory appears to conflate the two passages, identifying the cloud with the thick darkness, perhaps because Exod 19:16 speaks of "the dark cloud" (νεφέλη γνοφώδης).

20. *Vit. Mos.* 2.163 (CWS 95; *GNO* 7.1:87).

21. *Vit. Mos.* 2.176 (CWS 99; *GNO* 7.1:92).

22. Nor is it necessary to suppose Gregory always uses the metaphor of darkness for the highest contemplation. See Laird, *Grasp of Faith*, ch.7, 174–204, where he argues persuasively that Gregory can also use the metaphor of light for the same purpose.

23. Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, ch. 6, 148–82.

24. *Vit. Mos.* 2.166 (CWS 96; *GNO* 7.1:88).

which must be known about God," namely that "none of the things known by human comprehension is to be ascribed to him." Only then does he learn "the other side of virtue," that is, learning by what pursuits the virtuous life is perfected." This corresponds to what he says in Book One about the consequence of Moses' experience of the burning bush. "After he was empowered by the theophany which he had seen, he was commanded to release his countrymen from Egyptian bondage."[25] Similarly, in Book Two he argues that what Moses saw in the light from the bush was "the Radiance which shines upon us through the thorny flesh and what is (as the Gospel says) the true light and the truth itself" (John 1:9; 14:6). Such a person "becomes able to help others to salvation."[26] In what follows there are repeated references to how Moses gives this help to the children of Israel. The *Life of Moses* is as much an account of their journey as of his. After attaining the height of contemplation Moses returns from the mountain to lead the people toward the promised land. Gregory ends by saying that Moses became perfect by being the servant of God, and even though he makes no mention there of Moses' role in guiding the people, it seems unnecessary to omit this aspect of his journey.[27]

Does this mean that Moses' contemplation is imperfect? The answer must be a qualified yes, if for no other reason than that it must be completed by his role as guide and leader of the people. There may be, however, another reason for the imperfection of present contemplation. In *Homily 4 on Song of Songs* Gregory tries to interpret Song 2:7, "I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and strengths of the field, not to rouse or awaken my love until he wills." The "field" is the world (cf. Matt 13:38), and the "powers and strengths" are the angels (cf. Ps 102:21 LXX). The bride's oath requires the daughters to look beyond this world to the angels. Thus, this life is a preparation for the next, so that those who live in the flesh and in the "field" of this world may not live according to the flesh or be conformed to this world (cf. Rom 8:12; 12:2). Instead, they should "meditate beforehand on the life for which they hope throughout their time of life in this world."[28] My suggestion is that contemplations given Christians in this world are imaginative "glimmers" of what can be supposed the characteristics of the

25. *Vit. Mos.* 1.21 (CWS 35; *GNO* 7.1:10).

26. *Vit. Mos.* 2.26 (CWS 60–61; *GNO* 7.1:41).

27. Cf. *In inscr. ps.* 1.7 (*GNO* 5:45). The title of Ps 89 is "A Prayer to Moses, the Man of God." Gregory tells the story of Moses and says that he offers prayers to God for others and carries God's mercies to them. He introduces the fourth ascent and "raises up with himself" those who have accomplished the first three ascents.

28. *In cant.* 4 (*GNO* 6:134). Cortesi, *Omelie*, 56, notes this passage, but employs it to speak of the angelic life of the resurrection.

age to come. Perhaps as well they are largely the product of meditation upon scripture. My suggestion may go too far, but it is clear enough that such meditation is a following of Christ that represents perpetual progress in the good, a progress that will continue in the age to come without the interruptions visionary leaders experience because of their followers. Even if there are some more perfect who may somehow already participate in the future beyond all futures, by the very fact that they still live in this world they still must anticipate it.

Indeed, it is not even clear whether there are very many Christians who have attained a sufficient purity of heart to qualify them for the incomplete perfection possible in this life. As I have noted Gregory makes no such claim for himself. I think we can assume he believes that for most if not all Christians the interaction of vision and virtue is dynamic and ongoing. What explains this, I think, is that the contest for virtue in its narrower sense never ceases and continues to involve the struggle to eradicate vice. Therefore, I want to turn attention to Gregory's homily *On the Dead*, even though it certainly appears to be an early work and includes ideas that Gregory elsewhere treats in different ways. Nevertheless, the homily does supply an understanding of the Christian contest with the devil and the passions that is fairly coherent throughout his writings.

THE CONTEST

In *On the Dead* Gregory's aim is to persuade his hearers not to mourn excessively for the departed. He makes no attempt to forbid grief altogether, but at the end of the homily cites 1 Thessalonians 4:13, "that you may not grieve, as others do who have no hope."[29] It is, however, the faithless who "confine the hopes of living to the present life." This is why "they make death the equivalent of a disaster" (*Mort.* 68). His argument begins with a definition of the good as what is good "both of itself according to its own nature, and likewise for everyone and at all times" (*Mort.* 30). Since the present life does not fit this definition, "removal from such a life is separation from nothing good" (*Mort.* 34). The reason for this assessment of the present life has to do with the contest that Gregory calls in *On Perfection* "the civil strife between virtue and vice" (*Perf.* 180). Only after death will the mind cease "being vexed and troubled"; it is only "when this war within us is destroyed by death that the mind maintains peace, having left the disputed frontier of the

29. See discussions of Gregory's treatment of grief in *Life of Macrina* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited," 227–46; Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses," 37–60; Smith, "Just and Reasonable Grief," 57–84.

battle." Here Gregory supposes that the contest is never totally won this side of the grave (*Mort.* 43–44).

This statement, of course, contrasts with other passages in Gregory's writings that appear to leave open the possibility of purity of heart and the triumph of moral virtue over vice. While he nowhere that I can find reconciles the apparent contradiction, it does seem possible that he does understand that the realities of this life almost always compromise the ideal and that even when victory seems assured the conflict remains hidden and apt to break open again. Perhaps the small victories along the way afforded the Christian in this life are all one should expect before the final victory over sin and death. Still more problematic is that Gregory in the passage just cited identifies "the disputed frontier" with "the body, and coming to be outside the battle lines drawn up by the elements against one another." By "elements" he apparently means the the body and the passions (cf. *Mort.* 34). Throughout the homily he disparages the body in a way that at first seems without qualification. At the same time he does speak of the purified body of the resurrection that "must be loved" (*Mort.* 62).

THE BODY, THE PASSIONS, AND THE SENSES

The problem of Gregory's assessment of the body is by no means confined to *On the Dead.* Throughout his writings there is an obvious tension between his account of the soul's ascent and his conviction that the body will be raised from the dead.[30] There may well be various ways of explaining this fundamental fault line in Gregory's thought. To some degree his possible philosophical sources help explain the problem, and one could speak of a Platonizing account of God's creation of humanity in his image and a Stoicizing account of the leavening process that leads to the resurrection. Perhaps more important, Gregory appears convinced both by aspects of Origen's contemplative notion of human (and angelic) destiny and of Irenaeus' anti-gnostic insistence upon the physical character of redemption. Moreover, the context in which he employs these two theological traditions can be considered his polemic against Eunomius and Apollinaris.[31] As will be obvious, my own approach involves shifting attention to how Gregory

30. See, e.g., Bouteneff, "Essential or Existential," 409–19. A solution depends upon seeing the body as "image by association" and by distinguishing this "coarse material body" from the "resurrection body," 417.

31. See Hübner, *Die Einheit*. Without altogether excluding the influences of Platonists and Stoics, he places the problem in the fourth-century controversies and gives importance to the influence of Marcellus of Ancyra together with Origenist themes.

uses these philosophical and theological themes and by damning a good many torpedoes to conclude that even though Gregory's themes cannot be systematized, there are ways of trying to see them as aspects of a coherent view.

To return to *On the Dead*, if the body is somehow at the root of the human predicament and helps explain the continuous contest experienced in this life, it is necessary to ask why this is so. The first part of Gregory's answer in *On the Dead* revolves around the fall of humanity. His discussion of this occurs in the context of his argument that "not even the nature of the body is useless with respect to the hope of good things we await." I shall return to this aspect of the matter later in my argument. For the moment, Gregory says that if humanity had not fallen, "we would certainly not have needed the coat of skin (Gen 3:21), since likeness to the divine would be shining upon us." But the devil's deceit resulted in "an inclination to what is bestial and irrational." That this could happen depended upon the fact that God created humanity "with free autonomy" (*Mort.* 53–54), and, as Milton's God says (*Paradise Lost*, 3.98–99), "I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall." What we notice first is not the coat of skin's positive use.

The coat of skin correlates with humanity's inclination to the bestial and irrational, and it "means becoming material." Gregory does not say so, but it is also the divine punishment that fits the crime. In this way "properties of the irrational nature belonging to animals were mingled with humanity," and these properties include or at least lead to the passions, "pleasure, anger, gluttony, greediness, and the like" (*Mort.* 55). The problem, then, is not merely the body but the bestial irrationalities associated with it. Later Gregory will identify the coat or coats of skin with mortality.[32] Here, however, he seems surprisingly close to Origen's account of the fall of the rational beings who take on "heavier" bodies and are divided into angels, humans, and demons. But Gregory does not explain here from what condition humanity fell; yet whether the body is the transformation of an originally pure one or there is a completely new one it is the consequence of the fall.

Gregory's homiletical purpose includes showing that the present phenomenal world is by no means a true good, and that death involves leaving it behind and being born to a new life that is truly good. Even the elements of this world are not good always and for all. Water nourishes, but it also produces floods; air is good for humans but lethal for fish. Fire, "though useful to us in some respects, is ruinous in many ways" (*Mort.* 30). Another point is that death delivers a person from "the inclement aspects of

32. See, e.g., *Or. cat.* 8 (LCC 3:283; *GNO* 3.4:130).

the atmosphere," from "all constraining evils" such as farming, seafaring, commerce, and the various arts. The dead need not fear war in any form, and the soul has no place "for slavery and lordship, poverty and wealth, noble and ignoble birth, private lowliness and dignified ruling power" and other things like them that constitute the divisions now found in human life (*Mort.* 35). The list continues and includes freedom from earthquakes, ship wrecks, captivities, the assaults of wild beasts and of the stings and bites of creeping and poisonous things, taxes, orphanhood and widowhood, and diseases (*Mort.* 35–37).

Part of these lists of evils has to do with a world plagued with vices or passions of one kind or another. The life to come will be one "in which no one is either heaped up with luxury or trampled down in humiliation, where no one is either made savage by rashness or frightened by cowardice; no one either swells in anger . . . or is driven to confusion by fear" (*Mort.* 36). Opposite vices, characteristic of earthly life, appear to leave little room for any golden mean. The problem, though, is not merely the emotions or passions associated with the body, but also the world perceived by the senses. Even when the soul is infantile "the operation of the senses is born immediately perfect together with the body." As a result, "reasoning in judging of the good is prejudiced by sense perception," that is, "the soul accepts what has been prejudged by custom without testing it." Thus, we fail to realize that what is accounted good by the senses and custom is not really good at all (*Mort.* 48). Fallen human beings, then, are tied not merely to the body as such, but to the irrational emotions attached to it. And these emotions when provoked and activated by the senses, by the devil, or by the circumstances of life become the passions as the vices and diseases of the soul. This is because the passions, whether quiescent as emotions or active as vices, are the product of our present embodiment. It is unclear where Gregory locates the passions, but perhaps he thinks of them in the borderland between soul and body.[33]

In *On the Dead* Gregory speaks of the passions in several different ways, but all of them depend upon "some falsified illusion of the good." Early in the homily, without speaking of the passions, he specifies as false goods "externals such as strength and beauty, distinguished birth, property and ruling offices, distinctions," and the like. These are not truly good since "beauty and power are short lived . . . ruling offices are easily overthrown . . . reputation has no substance . . . passionate attachment to property . . . is vain" (*Mort.* 31). As Gregory says in the *Catechetical Oration*, seeking

33. Gregory suggests the idea that the passions exist on the "borderland" (*en methoriō*) between soul and body in *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46:57b–c).

such false goods is like Aesop's story of the dog that dropped the real bone in his mouth in an attempt to grasp its reflection in water.[34] A second way of thinking of the passions is to note that "the life of our body is actualized in two ways, both by filling and emptying" (*Mort.* 32–34). The examples Gregory gives include eating and drinking, breathing, sleeping and waking. Neither filling nor emptying accords with Gregory's definition of the good. Filling is good sometimes, but "surfeit" makes filling destructive, while emptying can be not only of what is harmful but also of what is beneficial. The implication may be that "filling" in this life never satisfies, while emptying may be an emptying of the good. The idea resembles Gregory's interpretation of making bricks in Egypt in his *Life of Moses*.[35] The brick molds are constantly filled and emptied again. This means that "those who yearn after the pleasures of clay and keep on filling themselves with them never keep the space which receives them full; for though it is always being filled, it becomes empty again before the next pouring." Anyone can understand what this means "by looking at the appetitive part of the soul." In *On the Dead* Gregory says that this pattern never ceases "until after this life there is no longer "acquisition and deprivation," but a condition in which the soul "is always filled and never limits its fullness by satiety" (*Mort*. 36).

One further way in which Gregory describes how the passions are provoked has to do with the bodily needs of humans, including procreation, food and drink, clothing and shelter. "Appetite [ὄρεξις] is moved" for these needs, and its impulses are necessary in our present condition. Nevertheless, "whoever is the servant of pleasures has made necessary needs paths for the passions." The appetite for food can lead beyond what is sufficient to "sumptuous fare"; clothing can be sought not merely for covering the body but for "ornamentation"; procreation, designed for bearing children, can lead to "lawless and forbidden pleasures." In short, "greed with great gates has burst in upon human life, and effeminacy, luxury, frivolity, various kinds of profligacy, and such things like some withered offshoots of necessary needs have sprouted up because appetite has gone beyond the limits of need." Gregory's conclusion is that these vices are not the fault of the body, but "free choice produces them by turning aside the aim of need to the desire for wicked things" (*Mort.* 58–59).[36]

34. *Or. cat.* 21 (LCC 3:298; *GNO* 3.4:56).

35. *Vit. Mos.* 2.60–61 (CWS 68; *GNO* 7.1:50).

36. See Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 89–94, where he discusses "Nyssen and Classical Views of the Passions." The whole of chapter 3 should be consulted, especially because it provides an excellent account of how the passions are treated in *On the Soul and Resurrection*.