

## Gregory Nazianzus' *Poemata Arcana*: A Poetic, Musical Catechism?

FREDERICK W. NORRIS

One of the more unexpected titles and styles employed to state the Christian faith appears in Gregory Nazianzus' *Poemata Arcana*. The title coined by the editor Billius sets apart these eight poems as a unit within the *Poemata Dogmatica*. The Greek term 'aporreta' probably meant to designate the character of these eight poems; it may appear at first glance to be more ambiguous than we might prefer, but for Billius it signifies that the central truths of the Christian faith cannot be captured fully in speech, not even in poetry. In Gregory's words the journey is on a "flimsy raft" or "frail wings." Whenever the truth is framed in human thoughts and words, it suffers constriction and incompleteness.<sup>1</sup> Using the discipline of poetry for discovering words and phrases that might hint at shapes Christian faith can assume is surely a type of enlightenment. Yet even the best poets show that their fullest achievements do not explain the perfect nature of God. It cannot be known on earth at any particular time simply because of any specific persons' lack of ability. The exact center is always "ineffable" to everyone.

For The Theologian, much of theology is apophatic; we only know about God what God chooses to make known. Our minds are too small to take in the fullness of God's nature. We can grasp the love for us and offer some pictures or images of what the Trinity is. But there is no way that any human, or for that matter any group of humans, can encompass God so that every facet of divinity becomes our possession. Thus these poems strike out toward as much knowledge as possible, as rich an understanding of the truth as can be reached. But faith, trust in God, is always required because in some deep ways God is always a mystery.

The contents of these verses have slight similarity to the confessional fragments of the New Testament and the creeds from the two great Councils of 325 and 382. But they appear neither in a short compass nor in the rather straightforward narrative structure of the *Regula Fidei*.<sup>2</sup> Narrative stands in the background of Gregory's efforts, but the chronology in these poems jumps from event to event as he chooses.

The positions taken more closely resemble the content of Origen's *On First Principles* than they do Origen's statement of the *Regula Fidei*, which appears as a dense and musing synopsis within *On First Principles*.<sup>3</sup> Gregory and Basil the Great in 358-59 created an anthology of Origen's works, the *Philocalia*, which includes passages in Greek from Origen's *On First Principles*. I have little doubt that Gregory and Basil had read Origen's piece, perhaps all of it, in now lost Greek manuscript(s). Nazianzen wrote these eight poems over twenty years later than the assembled an-

1 C. Moreschini and D.A. Sykes, *St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Poemata Arcana*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 51.

2 Paul Blowers, "the *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997), 199-228 notices how important narrative is for the *Regula Fidei*.

3 Origen, *On First Principles*, Book I.4-8 is usually seen as the statement of the *Regula Fidei*. Yet I.9-10 also introduce themes as teachings of the Church.

thology, i.e., sometime after 381 and before his death in 390.

Gregory's first poem in the *Poemata Arcana* is entitled "On First Principles." If that is the correct title—some manuscripts name it *On the Father*—it is probably meant to connect at least this poem with Origen's efforts. When one looks at the chapter divisions in Koetschau's edition of *On First Principles*, thus primarily the sections in Rufinus' translation, the similarity of themes is striking. Origen's Book I.1-5 and 7-8 deal with the Father, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Loss or Falling away, Rational Natures, Things Corporeal and Incorporeal, as well as the Angels. These topics have a different order in Gregory's *Poemata Arcana* but they are dealt with in his verses. The major order in Origen's work at I.6, The End or Consummation, are not treated in the poetry, but The World and the Creatures in it, The Beginning of the World and its Causes, That there is one God of the Law and the Prophets, That the God of the Old and New Covenants Is the Same, The Incarnation of the Savior, The Soul, The World and the Movements of Rational Creatures Both Good and Evil and The Causes of these Movements appear within Gregory's poems in some fashion. Yet, in The Theologian's piece no extensive treatment of Resurrection and Punishment appears. Anyone can see rather readily that most of the material in Koetschau's *On First Principles* edition of Rufinus' translation that has been used to put Origen's doctrines into question do not emerge in Gregory's *Poemata Arcana*. Certainly the contents found in Jerome's fragments of *On First Principles* and the charges in Emperor Justinian's letter that raise the most penetrating attacks on Origen have no place in Gregory's eight poems. For example there are no pre-existent souls falling into bodies; neither is there a discussion of whether all souls will be saved in the final consummation, thus some apparent interest in universal salvation.<sup>4</sup>

The organization of themes in Gregory's work cannot serve as proof that such points were never in Origen's Greek piece but only in Rufinus' translation. Nazianzen's efforts are formed by complicated goals that do not allow the poems to be narrowed toward that conclusion. Yet, they at least do not demonstrate that such teachings were significant to Gregory and Basil's anthology of Origen's views. We should trust the newer French and German editions of *On First Principles* that do not follow Koetschau and exclude all the evidence in Jerome and Justinian for Origen's heresy.<sup>5</sup> Also importantly, Gregory's verses are not "soundings," attempts to push Church doctrine farther than it had already gone.<sup>6</sup> Nazianzen at times designates

4 Origen himself rejected the salvation of the Devil; therefore he never supported a full universal salvation. See my "Universal Salvation in Origen and Maximus," *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics*, 1991, ed by Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Book House, 1992), 35-72.

5 Paul Koetschau, ed. *Origenes De Principiis*, GCS (Leipzig: Hinrick'sche Buchhandlung, 1913) The best English translation is still G.W. Butterworth tr., *Origen's On First Principles* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1936, rpr. 1966). The introduction by Henri de Lubac in that edition warns about pressing the accusations of Origen's heretical views too far. Origen was faithful, humble and clearly a man of the church. Any questionable statements should be viewed as parts of early speculative discussions that went beyond accepted dogma. Rufinus and his followers understood that. Jerome and his circle did not.

6 G. W. Butterworth. *Origen: On First Principles* (New York: Harper and Row, Torchbooks, 1966) described Origen's project as "inquiry," questioning without any attempt to insist on their systematic organization.

certain views as those held by many but not by all.<sup>7</sup> The fuller content of these poems, however, seems to be a beautiful catechism that clarifies the faith and in its poetic form attracts hearers or readers. It is not as brilliant a catalogue of accepted faith and further speculations as Origen's work is.

Yet Gregory is not an amateur cribbing from Origen's masterwork in a complete way; he develops significant themes from Origen's theology expressed in these poems. They greatly resemble what we know from the Alexandrian's *On First Principles* even as we find them in the chapter divisions of Rufinus' translation. The following synopsis of Gregory's eight poems shows this closeness, and yet some dissimilarity, to Origen.

The first poem, "On First Principles," uses Origen's title and insists that his eight poems are a unit.<sup>8</sup> Neither Angels nor men can fully know God. Angels cannot completely preach the Godhead, i.e. the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; therefore the human poet can only ask for the Spirit's inspiration while confessing that his works will miss part of the mark.

The second, "On the Son," looks at the relationship between Father and Son, which must be defended. The Father surpasses all, but "the Son is his image and glory, begotten outside time and without division of the Godhead." A Son who is only human cannot save humans. He accepted a body without any loss of divinity. God and man, he bore flesh and "died to raise the dead." The human body is praiseworthy because he accepted it.

The third, "On the Holy Spirit," claims that the Holy Spirit deserves equal praise. The Bible did not speak of the Spirit's divinity because the Son's equality with the Father had not yet been accepted. "Progressive stages" [of revelation] were required. "The Three Persons are undivided in Godhead, though distinguishable." "To say that the Son and the Spirit hold second place to the Father does not imply division." Some earthly analogies do not help. "Monas" and "Trias" present no difficulty. "Trias" does not demand tritheism.

The fourth, "On the Universe," insists that the One God created everything absolutely; no pre-existing matter was involved. The Manichean views are wrong and should be countered. "God precedes darkness and is its master." Man is not composed of darkness and light that entail an as yet undecided war with each other. Darkness begins unlike God; its nature is the "absence of light." Evil is not everlasting. "Before the creation of the world, the Trinity was occupied in self-contemplation and in contemplating the forms for the World." "Past,' present,' and 'future' are eternally present to God: time makes no division." "The Divine Mind" made "two orders of intelligent beings, angels and men." Both exist far from God's glory to keep them from grasping for "equality with God." Man, earth mixed with divinity, is farther removed.

The fifth, "On Providence," says that Mind, not Chance, made and guides the world. The Cosmological Argument is true; astrology is false. "God controls the harmonious order of the universe and it will take many forms not yet revealed." Freedom is given so there can be moral categories.

7 D.A. Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 39.

8 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 77 notes that "the title, if correct, would certainly be influenced by Origen's work."

The sixth, “On Rational Natures,” indicates that angels are closer to the light and thus are given authority “over men and nations.” Yet Lucifer fell and “is responsible for evil in men.” There are three levels: “God is one and unchangeable. Angels suffer change, but only with difficulty. Man is very much subject to change.” Lucifer fell to earth, envied man, and drove the humans from Paradise. Other angels fell with him “and thus a great host of evils entered the world.” The Devil refines men. He may be wounded by the defeat of his hosts and “in his own person.” Still he is not close to “the divine light [which] is the standard of judgment.”

The seventh, “On the Soul,” states that the soul is “God’s breath and immortal” and is not one part of a common soul; neither is it merely the source of life in the body. A transmigration of souls would threaten a final judgment. Man is formed by the Logos from earth and Spirit and is in the image of God. Midway between “heavenly beings and animals,” humanity “loves the earthly state and is yet drawn to the heavenly.” Human bodies reproduce naturally, but how the soul enters the body is mysterious, unless, as many believe, it is transmitted from parent to the child. The soul’s actions may well be related to the “state and quality” of its body. Adam was meant “to progress toward divinity.” Since he was not to eat of the one tree, his freedom was limited. Furthermore, because of the fall, he and Eve were driven out of Paradise and would die. Paradise was closed to all so that later generations would not be in sin eternally. But humanity will come back to Paradise as the home-port.

The eighth, “On the Testaments and the Coming of Christ,” claims that “the Old Covenant for the Jews and the New for the whole world” are not in conflict; “both show God’s care.” Because of Adam’s sin, false worship and idolatry are everywhere, even in Israel. They forsook the prophets and followed kings. All this was led by the Devil. As a result God was angry and brought in the Gentiles “to provoke the Hebrews to jealousy and repentance.” Since “the Hebrews dishonored the Law, the Incarnation was necessary.” Christ understood that “the divine element in man was being destroyed.” He became “completely man that he might completely save man, uniting divine and human natures, one hidden, one visible.” All hailed Christ’s birth; it was “the work of the Word through the Spirit.” Christ gave the Law, a gift whose part was finished. John the Baptist proclaimed Christ’s work. Christ brought a two-fold cleansing through baptism and his blood. Changeable man “needs baptism as a means of grace.” It “corresponds to the ‘seal’ of the exodus.” “Like the natural gifts of creation, baptism is common to all.”<sup>9</sup>

In his commentary Sykes notes specific passages in Nazianzen’s poems that either depend upon Origen’s *On First Principles* or know Origen’s positions and move in another direction. When Nazianzus speaks about matter in 4.7-8 he deals with the practical point that would contradict *creatio ex nihilo*. The clever distinctions that Origen used in 2.1.4 are off point for Nazianzen’s discussion. Origen sees a world as always present for God to rule over, indeed a succession of worlds, in 3.5.3, while Gregory sees real danger in ascribing eternity to the world.<sup>10</sup>

These poems are not what moderns would consider a small systematic theology any more than Gregory’s orations resemble the exposition of a carefully structured

9 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 51-55. I have condensed Sykes’ content outline at some points.

10 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 4, 16-20.

system like that which Gregory of Nyssa constructed in his *Great Catechism*. Here both the scrutiny of some themes and their organization, in Nazianzen's view, have not yet been fully decided by his Church. We may suggest that the *Poemata Arcana* do not fit within the category of the *Regula Fidae* either. If any learn, perhaps even memorize, their words, they will have grasped most of the central issues in Christian faith. Yet the eight poems together do form an odd catechism from which knowledge of the faith can be acquired.

The first poem, "On First Principles," insists on the inability of angels or men to know fully the nature of God. Gregory's other works, particularly those against the Arians, demand this as the starting place. The cosmological argument is important to him when anyone tries to explain creation. Like Origen he rejects the transmigration of souls. I suspect that at his time and in his region, Manichaeans needed attention. Evil is not a second, equal power. The one God created all and sustains all. Lucifer is responsible for evil. The divinity is being severely attacked but it is still victoriously there. A fuller description of man shows that men are dual natured, "freshly made earth" and divinity with limited free will. Humans yearn for paradise. These features reveal his poems of the "ineffable" faith as in close relationship with the genuine questions raised by other earlier and dangerous attacks that he sees as present in his contemporary world.

To understand more fully this small unit of theological poems so expertly expounded by C. Moreschini and D.A. Sykes,<sup>11</sup> we do well to look at John McGuckin's brilliant suggestion that a particular poem outside the *Poemata Arcana*, entitled "On Matters of Measure" or "On Metrical Issues" (the pun the point) is "the prelude, or proem, to his [Gregory's] own first edition of the Collected Poems, the entire group" of possibly 30,000 poems, not merely the *Poemata Arcana*.<sup>12</sup> The smaller collection will be best understood when it is placed within what McGuckin sees as Gregory's own gathering of the poetry. "On Matters of Measure" explains why he composes verses.

For McGuckin, this "proem" was probably written not long after 381 when Nazianzen's public reputation had been under such heavy attack that he had felt it wise to resign as the second president of the 381 Council and as the bishop of Constantinople. The charge brought by Egyptian bishops insisted that against ecclesiastical law he had been translated from one see to another, from Sasima to Constantinople. Gregory rebutted the accusation by noting that, although he was appointed bishop at Sasima by Basil of Caesarea, he never served there. But public damage had been done by raising the charges. Leaving Constantinople and the Council probably was the best thing to do, yet being forced into such decisions made him quite angry. Egyptian leaders had previously sent Maximus the Cynic not to assist him but to replace him. Nazianzen first praised Maximus and enjoyed his help, but when at night Maximus had himself installed as Constantinople's bishop, Gregory turned on Maximus with a vengeance. Did this mean that Nazianzen was a bad judge of character or an older man too trusting of a talented younger man? Probably both. He warned that councils

11 Moreschini and Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*.

12 John McGuckin, "Gregory: The Rhetorician as Poet," Jostein Børtness and Tomas Hägg, eds. *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 193-212.

should never be trusted. They are filled with cawing crows who understand little and falsely feel greatly empowered. This particular bunch of field birds was so dense they did not fully grasp the importance of expanding one section of the 325 Creed to say many more positive things about the Holy Spirit so that teaching about it and the Trinity would be balanced.

How was Nazianzen to rebuild his threatened legacy in his waning years? Few seem to have found his orations in bad taste, although Basil's family was hurt that the encomium dedicated to the Great Caesarian appeared late. Most Christians then and now assess his orations as quite good; indeed one modern expert on ancient rhetoric insists Gregory is the best Greek orator since Demosthenes.<sup>13</sup> A comment in an autobiographical poem by Nazianzen hints that he was offered one of the few public chairs of rhetoric at Athens because of his brilliant rhetorical skills.<sup>14</sup> He even expected ovations when he preached.<sup>15</sup>

Within these orations his knowledge of Scripture is broad, deep, and clearly important. Any Christian hearer or reader will know that he is a committed churchman. Furthermore, he shows his dependence on philosophical rhetoric as well as his understanding of classical philosophies. He probably knew the broad perspectives of philosophy through compendia, but he seems to have read some of Plato's and Aristotle's treatises rather thoroughly. No matter the damage to his reputation because of ecclesiastical juggling, his orations demanded unqualified fame.

Indeed one of Nazianzen's claims in "On Matters of Measure" is that he represents the fullest of his Hellenistic heritage: he is not only a *rhetor* without peer, he is also a major Hellenistic poet. By writing verse he wants to show that he can meld the sharply opposed positions of Plato and Aristotle concerning the utility of poetry for society; no small feat. Indeed as a Christian poet he can present a superior sense of Greek *paideia*, which brings the greatest dreams of Greek culture to fruition.

Part of this was fed by his reaction to Julian. The Emperor had made laws that Christians could not teach the Greek heritage in the schools because they did not believe in the myths that its literature took as truth. Thus there were to be no Christian mentors of the great Hellenistic heritage in public classrooms. All classic and contemporary literature was explained and inculcated only by pagans.

The two Apollinari, father and son, had insisted they would maintain their use of pagan literary forms by reframing the Bible itself in Greek verse. They and their community were Greek as well as Christian; thus the Hellenistic literary gifts also belonged to them. Gregory moved against Julian's law by writing poetry. He fills it with Christian content as well as Greek learning. He views himself as a "songwriter" and will challenge the pagan singular claim on literature by composing verse in their forms.<sup>16</sup>

Of course this is a robust if not an arrogant claim. Against it stands a series of observations from modern scholars most trenchantly expressed by C.A. Trypanis in his thorough study of Greek poetry. In this history he must address the Theolo-

13 George Kennedy, *Greek Rhetoric Under the Christian Emperors*, "A History of Rhetoric, Vol. III" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 237.

14 *Carmen de vita sua* II, 245-64, PG 37, 1046-47.

15 Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 117.

16 Poem 2.1.21, *In diabolium* (PG 37, 1280), translated in Gilbert, *On God and Man*, 152.

gian's poetry because there are still 17-19,000 verses of the 30,000 Jerome and the *Suidae Lexicon* say existed<sup>17</sup> as well as 254 epigrams. His general assessment of the poetry is that "the quality of his verse is at its best second-rate. It is long-winded, and the flat and moralizing didactic tone that prevails tends to become tiresome." Yet for Trypanis, Gregory's epigrams are significant. They brought back the form after nearly two centuries of its absence and provided a fine literary model for many later Byzantine pieces. He also sees talent in Nazianzen's autobiographical poems, which reach a height in autobiography not found elsewhere. There is a "lyric" quality and "an elegiac touch here and there that break through the conventional crust," at least in his best autobiographical poem, "On His Own Life." But if Trypanis is to be consistent in his general attack on the verses, the poem he praises can be no better than the best "second rate" poem Gregory offers. His comments on it, however, threaten his general opinion of the poetry's quality. Liking the epigrams as he does also softens his general analysis. In Trypanis' opinion only Gregory's reputation as "The Theologian" accounts for his verses' strong influence in Byzantine poetry because his verses contain neither "novelty, arresting imagery [n]or lyricism."<sup>18</sup> Indeed the decision of the Byzantine Church itself is straightforward; it did not adopt his poetry for any of its liturgies, even the one given his name. Elegant phrases may well have been adopted from his orations.

The autobiographical verses that demonstrate some merit in Trypanis raise the question of feelings in the poems since they are charged with disappointment, anger, and near disgust that Trypanis dislikes. The Theologian is hurt, indeed incensed. How could his father agree to his ordination and his mother not defend his plans even though she knew his deep desire to be a solitary monk? Why would his friend Basil of Caesarea force him toward taking a new bishopric in the waterless backwater, Sasima, strictly for ecclesiastical political reasons, again supported by his father? And then is friendship so cheap that when Nazianzus refuses, he is cut out of Basil's inner circle for such a decision? Gregory's autobiographical poetry has significant theological points, yet its relatively few verses restrict him from the many insights that Augustine's *Confessions* offer. However, as poetry, they provide an attempt at refinement in Greek that Augustine does not reach in his Latin. They are rich in feeling, one aspect that some view as a mark of quality poetry.

Is there originality in his poetry beyond the feelings expressed in the autobiographies or does he merely copy and thus bring back the stuffy didactic poetic forms of earlier centuries? Sykes shows that Gregory's employment of didactic poetry is not limited to a return after a two-century dismissal of the old form. During his era various Greek poets had renewed didactic poems; thus Gregory was working not stiffly within dead ancient forms but specifically within the didactic poetry tradition that was being developed. Thus for his poetic and educational purposes didactic verse is both traditional and innovative. Gregory is no slave to classical didactic form. His

---

17 Jerome *De viris illustribus* 117 and the *Suidae Lexicon* I.541 Adler ed. say that the full collection originally had 30,000 verses. It is not certain that the loss of so many lines of poetry gives evidence of their poor quality, but it does raise such a question.

18 C.A. Trypanis, *Greek Poetry from Homer to Seferis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 411.

work does not represent “an antiquarian. . . or a purely academic pastime.”<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, one suspects, he simply makes errors, [Ar. 1.5, 5.7.] though there may have been a view that epic convention sanctioned quite arbitrary changes as in Martial, *Epigr.* 9.11.15. In other ways, however, it is clear that Gregory was not arbitrary but following *developing trends*. The hexameter was not a static form. Later writers introduced variations, for example in allowing hiatus, and Gregory’s practice may be paralleled in Quintus and Apollinarius Metraphrastes. [Cf. W. Quandt, *Orphei Hymni* (Berlin, 1955), 412\*] Similarly in caesura and diæresis he follows later practices, as he does in his placing of long monosyllables. However, the most obvious technical change came in later writers in the proportion of dactyls and spondees in a line, and here it may be claimed that Gregory has a recognizable place in a changing tradition. In Homer and Hesiod the proportion is 2½ dactyl to spondee. In Quintus it is 4½:1, in Nonnus 5½. The *Arcana* show the same proportion as Davids discovered in his examination of Gregory [H.L. Davids, *Die Gnomologieën van Sint Gregorius van Nazianze* (Amsterdam, 1940), 143ff.] 5:1, some indication of awareness of literary movement.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at the clauses of his poetry does not determine finally whether he is a good or bad poet. He does, however, “show a full mastery of school models that any contemporary pagan would have envied.”<sup>21</sup> In his hexameters he uses chiasitic, “where two syllables and four are balanced by four syllables and two.” Other placements also appear: *a (c) b b a*, *a b b (c) a* and *a b b b a* as well as a ‘frame pattern,’ *a . . . a*. The most often used structure is *a a (c) b b*. The pattern *a b a b* can be found but Nazianzen seldom uses it, preferring “enjambment where they suit his subject-matter better.”<sup>22</sup> Thus his talent is not limited to the “school models.”

The strongest approach in arguing for his original poetic skill is to peruse the examples of his gift as a wordsmith, something quite clear in the Orations. Sykes offers at least 70 instances within the *Poemata Arcana* in which Gregory’s vocabulary choices are a *hapax legomena*, words rarely evidenced in others’ works. Sometimes words in this group are given a different meaning from their common usage, or known words are shortened in form to fit the meter of the verses.<sup>23</sup>

Trypanis attacks Nazianzen’s originality in two more areas. He carefully points out that modern research has declared to be spurious the works that show the Theologian creating the “paraebetuc alphabet.” It emerged well before his time. Furthermore two poems attributed to Gregory, “Evensong” and “Exhortation to the Virgins,” do employ a “new rhythmic metrical system” but they were not written by him. Furthermore “older examples [of that system] exist.”<sup>24</sup> These points are incontestable.

In a further assessment Trypanis finds that the verses “remained aloof from the people.” Yet because of Gregory’s great reputation and the often “approachable,

19 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 58.

20 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 61-2. *Italics* mine.

21 Trypanis, *Greek Poetry*, 410. This is in some ways intended as a slight to show the stage beyond which Gregory did not progress.

22 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 57-63.

23 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 77-264.

24 Trypanis, *Greek Poetry*, 411.



edifying content,” they affected Byzantine authors.<sup>25</sup> On first look there seems to be a stark contradiction between poetry that “remained aloof” and yet had “approachable, edifying content.” To a degree that the didactic verse involves a newer use of the form, it probably was above the reach of some readers or hearers who had not received Nazianzen’s education. Again, that was a chance he would take because he wanted to ground the claim that Christians could use such higher education as pagans had received. But the “approachable, edifying content” fits The Theologian’s deep interest in pastoral theology and ministry.<sup>26</sup> For him, aspects of Christianity deserve the highest expression in human language: poetry. This poetry must contain “approachable, edifying content” to accomplish its goal. Every expression of the Christian faith must strive to be understandable and finally uplifting.

A further look at the *Poemata Arcana*, however, tends to support the charge that The Theologian’s use of imagery is either lacking or weak, even when he had insisted in the *Theological Orations* that the best theologians were those with the best images, outlines, or whatever they might be called.<sup>27</sup> Yet Gregory says he is “wary of the use of figurative language for Divine realities,”<sup>28</sup> a sense that he exhibits earlier when he rejects the capacity of analogies from outside Scripture to depict the Trinity.<sup>29</sup>

That view may well explain the dearth of images in some of these verses rather than a poetic failure where he writes of God the Father in PA 1 with limited pictures. In *Theological Oratio 3* (*Or.* 31) he gathers many poetic descriptions from Hellenistic and Biblical literature. Perhaps in PA 1, since he wishes to remove “technical jargon,” his distrust of words and analogies to depict divinity fits his plan for these poems. The lack of strong images is intentional and thus may represent a “lean” approach rather than a “flat” one. Yet when, for instance, he wishes to compare the humanity and divinity in Christ, he poetically uses the characteristics and deeds of Jesus as he did in *Or.* 29.<sup>30</sup> Their lyrical power is evident today even in English translation, and their content is strictly limited to Biblical statements that were not always poetically formed.<sup>31</sup> These negative judgments of his poetry, that in some sense might touch parts of his prose orations, are further complicated by the fact that a number of modern interpreters see Gregory as psychologically devastated: a whining man who attacks those who dislike him and is crushed by friends and family who betray him. Being apparently quite fickle, he can praise traits of those who failed him,<sup>32</sup> but in the

25 Trypanis, *Greek Poetry*, 410-11.

26 Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light*, “Oxford Studies in Historical Theology” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 235-70, the chapter on Pastoral Ministry.

27 Gregory, *Or.* 30.17, Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 274.

28 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 2.22, 3:41 and 3:60-70, 100, 126 & 133-7.

29 Gregory, *Or.* 31.31-33.

30 *Or.* 29.19-20.

31 <sup>33</sup>Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 2, 8-10. Professor Rosenkranz, my Syriac teacher at Yale, said that the power of Syriac poetry was often missed by critics who did not notice it was restricted to Biblical phrases or clauses. Gregory gladly uses non-Biblical images when appropriate, but his poetry cannot be understood without close attention to his Biblical pictures.

32 See his praise of Basil in his encomium on the Caesarean’s death, *Or.* 43, that also includes a denunciation of Basil for betraying him. Such attacks within encomia are rare.

process can never fully advance toward psychological health beyond his deep sense of being slighted. For these critics some of his rare insights in the autobiographical poems come from one who is unbalanced and in our age would be hospitalized for mental illness.<sup>33</sup>

McGuckin challenges such views of Gregory's personality; he warns that psycho-historical analyses of ancient figures by modern historians have developed strange arguments not well supported by the texts. In this case specifically when Nazianzen's sense of humor is not detected, these psychological opinions rest on what I would call the judgment of earnest amateurs. There is paranoia neither in knowing that Egyptian bishops really want him dead, or at least removed, nor in recognizing that family and friends cannot always be counted on. It is balanced to view these deeds with deep fear and anger while he sees his own plight as undeserved. To decry such situations need not be senseless whining when his good poetry itself is marked by deep personal feeling.

Sykes, argues that the poetry itself need not be too harshly judged because of its perceived poor quality contested above. Composing the *Poemata Arcana* offered Gregory a discipline to reign in his self-confessed undisciplined soul. There was no established reason that Christian literati could not match pagan authors. The level of the poetry turns on an education that both older upper class pagans and Christians had received.

Theologically, Gregory's *Poemata Arcana* deal with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Trinity and Unity. They look at the Universe, Providence, Spiritual Beings, and the Soul as well as the two covenants and the Coming of Christ. Their length allows Nazianzen to treat points in more detail than the New Testament confessional fragments and the Councils' creeds. They address "ineffable" fundamental issues for which Nazianzen himself employed more extensive approaches specifically in his *Theological Orations*. In the *Poemata Arcana*, however, he does not so much quote himself as construct poetic clauses of his views. As Gilbert says, "If one wanted a clear statement of the main ideas of these orations, shorn of technical jargon, one could hardly do better than these poems."<sup>34</sup> This is a different type of originality, but still one not often reached. In a way the verses return to the concern of the earlier *Regula Fidae*; the form of the *Regula* by its various authors is short and compact without much "jargon." The Theologian raises the content of the *Poemata Arcana* to a different level through poetry. The uncluttered themes will help those in the Church, at least those who had some education but were not fluent in Hellenistic philosophy, rhetoric, or poetry as Nazianzen was, to receive a heightened sense of Christian faith. The poems present Christian claims in Hellenistic verses at the same time that they specifically avoid the elegant buffoonery of classical rhetoric—cute words without content—that Gregory so despised.<sup>35</sup> They provide simple, appealing aspects of Christian confession that meet the needs of common people.<sup>36</sup>

33 McGuckin, "Gregory: The rhetorician as poet," 193-4. He mentions Szymusiak-Affholder, Rapisarda, Cox Miller, Gilbert, and to an extent even himself. I noted Nazianzen's difficulties of temperament. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 6-9.

34 Gilbert, *God and Man*, 7.

35 Or. 27, 1. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 217.

36 Trypanis, *Greek Poetry*, 411.

Some themes that occur regularly in the early *Regula Fidae* and the creeds are not treated, particularly the paragraph on the church. Evidently his poetry gave Gregory the opportunity to emphasize those subjects he found most needful in his church while rejecting others.

The plan to clarify aspects of Christian doctrine with sparse but beautiful language is also evident in his cleaning up some difficulties expressed within his orations. For instance, Mason had insisted that the Theologian's language closely resembles Sabellianism, but PA 3, 58-60 "minimizes any inadvertent suggestion of Sabellianism which might be suspected in the oration."<sup>37</sup>

Sykes notices that in PA 3:75, though Gregory teaches a coinherence in the Trinity, he does not use the technical term *perichoresis*. For Sykes this is evidence that the term had not yet appeared in Nazianzen's works. The word first occurs in Nazianzen's *Ep.* 101, a letter that may have come after Gregory decided to attack Apollinarius forcefully.<sup>38</sup> Its absence, however, might depend on his desire to leave out technical words.

In 4.70 "the language becomes suddenly more personal and biblical, recalling . . . Deut. 33:27." For Gregory sharing in the divine nature is a blessing that is not physical. It occurs "through baptism in a proleptic sense and anticipates heavenly communion." It takes place only "in a world beyond the present" as "assimilation not identification."<sup>39</sup> The charges against astrology are regularly seen in others' writings, specifically Origen's, but the issue is not originality. Here the poem "gives that faith more comprehensive expression." Therefore, rather than seeing these verses as primarily lines with technical terms absent—a claim that is indeed true—they are specifically selected clauses that make the faith clearer. The plan of these poems is both to avoid dense theological arguments and their jargoned vocabulary while at the same time elucidating the faith.

The intent to avoid technical concepts and words in the *Poemata Arcana* may well be tied to the grand observation of Celica Milovanovic-Barham that some of Gregory's verses were composed in order to be sung.<sup>40</sup> In his second reason for writing verse, expressed in "On Matters of Measure," Nazianzus offers poetry for the youth and hints that their songs depend on different melodies from those sung in the Church. For the sake of those youth and their education in the faith, theological poetry should be put to their tunes so that they also may sing the faith with heart and mind. Sykes even finds some of the words that Gregory creates fit the meter well and thus provide poetry that is of more value because of such attention to meter.<sup>41</sup> They

37 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 133.

38 Gregory Nazianzus, *Ep.* 101, PG 37, 181C; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1077 cites this as the first use of the word. The letter is in PG 34: 869A. Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 67 sees Gregory writing lightly against various enemies here.

39 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana*, 4:83 & 95-96, 169 & 171.

40 Celicia Milanovic-Barham, "Gregory of Nazianzus: *Ars Poetica* (*In suos versus Carmen* 2.1.39)" *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5.4 (1997), 497-510.

41 Sykes, *Poemata Arcana* 149 says *asomos*, fits meter; for *perioqe*, 190, metrical considerations are important. He also notes, 9, that *uperschethe* has an extra syllable and thus disrupts the meter. Sykes makes a textual choice, 107, *ho moi theos* on the basis that Nazianzen is not "so metrically inept as to be forced into using a word of dubious theological import merely because he could think of no other way of keeping his hexameter right."

fall directly within Gregory's pastoral concern as a "song writer."<sup>42</sup> Thus these poems can provide intelligible teaching, which when sung, will fix the faith, particularly in the minds of youth.

#### CONCLUSION AND MODERN VIEW

Gregory Nazianzen's poetry certainly has verses that are less than his best and represent literary failings, but on the whole the assessments that they are "at ...best second rate" show themselves to be third-rate judgments.<sup>43</sup> Weaknesses exist. But the negative claims on the whole have been seriously contested. Examples ground a more positive judgment.

Their theological significance rests in their authorship by The Theologian, one who helped the Church grasp its Trinitarian, Christological, and other traditions. First and foremost he was a fourth century contextual theologian. His creation of what I have suggested is a poetic catechism was influenced by Origen's *On First Principles*. That in itself is a remarkable feat. Learn these poems, sing them to tunes you enjoy, and you will emerge as a well-taught Christian influenced by a catechism that flows. Nazianzen was a child of Cappadocia; he loved its Greek heritage more than some—like Basil—and would not concede anything adjudged "good" from that culture as well as Hellenistic culture as the sole property of pagans.<sup>44</sup> The nature of the "good" would finally be determined by God and should be used by all.

Third, Gregory recognized that Church leaders and parents are often anxious about how the Christian faith could be passed to their children. The order and content of the liturgy would teach all of them the Creed and show how worship can be performed. But how much more effective were less-jargoned verses written to fit youthful tunes. Fourth, he wanted the depth of the Gospel to be plain, so he wrote verses particularly for youth that also could be employed by adults. That a wealthy, retired, aging bishop, ever seeking relief in hot baths and worried about his reputation, would be so intent on passing the tradition to the rising generation demonstrates his character, commitment, and mission.

Fifth, his theology was sophisticated but not systematized according to ancient or most twenty-first century logical or philosophical canons. He was a writer and

42 The term "song-writer" seems not to include the composition of music. That he was a lyricist primarily fits well with his interest in the youth's music. The project matched his words with their music. Kenneth Levy, "Byzantine Rite, music of," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stanley Sadie ed. (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1980, rpr. 1987), 554 indicates that there are no manuscripts of musical notations dating to Gregory Nazianzen's era, either from Christian or from pagan composers. If such discoveries are ever made, they would need to be directly connected to the Theologian's poetry. That is highly unlikely.

43 Trypanis, *Greek Poetry*, 411.

44 The best textual evidence for the opening lines of Gregory's *Or. 27*, the first of the *Theological Orations*, notes that he viewed the Arians, old or new, as lacking in *paideia*. Cf. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 86. A remark uttered before his "On Matters of Measure" appeared, Nazianzen made *paideia* a significant discussion with heretical Arians. Thus what in some ways appears to be an arrogant claim that he is a better rhetorician and poet than any pagans is a part of a previous assertion. It is also a continuing observation from others. His poetry, a model for Byzantine verse, is composed to affirm and deny aspects of the differing Platonic and Aristotelian senses of rhetoric and poetry. He defines and employs rhetoric, poetry and a larger sense of *paideia* together through his commitment to culture and Christian faith.

speaker who had a series of goals. He saw no formal or useful distinction between constructive and pastoral theology, something many contemporary modern theologians have not comprehended. “On Matters of Measures” occurs among the other 21 poems that, along with the *Poemata Arcanae*, are included in their collection of *Theological Poetry*.<sup>45</sup> The editors of the Migne collection mangled the deep sense of his theology by including other poems in a category of their creation called “Moral Poetry.” In their view theological poems were not concerned with how to live out the faith, and moral verses neither deepened nor enlivened theology. For The Theologian, if you knew the truth of God available to humans, you would, through the Spirit, strive to live it out in God’s wild world while caring for others. There should never be any disconnect between the best of thought and life.

Obviously Nazianzen provides an excellent model for teaching and inspiring each new generation of Christians, whether lay-folk or theologians. Interweave theological and pastoral demands with the finest and most convincing values from culture, judged by the Gospel, in order that they all strengthen each other. Do not hold your education in disrepute. Know it and use it often. But as a teacher of youth or adults of “popular culture,” who may be viewed by the pagan and Christian elite as utterly vulgar, look carefully at their speech and their music. Struggle to be a contemporary litterateur who can intentionally forgo the incisive technical terms as well as tight logical systems that can constrict God’s truth.<sup>46</sup> Contextualize and simplify always with a view toward making doctrines understandable.

Following these principles produces our best leaders, but each of those leaders must not be jailed within our revered present day theological forms. Often they appear to be shortcuts or brilliant foundations that only make sense to the most highly educated who have enjoyed long Christian education. Regular sermons and classes for adults, youth, and children demand careful attention to simplicity, but never encourage simpletons. It always amazes one how difficult it is to make the Christian faith clear to children and regular folk without calling forth the disdain of academics. Who are the slow ones?

\*\*\*

To present this paper as part of a Festschrift for Father\Professor McGuckin seems entirely correct. He is a master of Greek capable of correcting others’ translations. Unlike many students of Nazianzen, he is also well attuned to The Theologian’s poetry because he himself is a published poet. His own wit can create guffaws or groans, but because of his laughter, he does not miss the subtle humor of Gregory. Recognizing that element helps McGuckin steer away from many Psycho-Historical readings as the imposition of modern concepts on understandable ancient texts. Tone-deaf earnestness makes Nazianzen a much less interesting figure.

Last but not least his skill in playing the guitar allowed him to teach his fellow student Sting to play the instrument in their school days. John happily concedes that the pupil exceeded the teacher. Later both he and his artistic wife Eileen—painter of

<sup>45</sup> McGuckin, “Gregory: The Rhetorician as Poet,” 197-8.

<sup>46</sup> From Gregory’s viewpoint, it would always be odd to attack anything Arian with the narrow syllogistic arguments they so preferred. Too much modern theology has employed Arian methods to denounce Arian positions, a pyrrhic victory.

lovely pictures and creator of icons for the Orthodox—urged Sting to keep his teaching position in which he excelled and leave thoughts of a musical career behind. That one the McGuckins got wrong.