THE 'WHOLE HUMANITY': GREGORY OF NYSSA'S CRITIQUE OF SLAVERY IN LIGHT OF HIS ESCHATOLOGY

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I

NOWHERE in the literary remains of antiquity is there another document quite comparable to Gregory of Nyssa's fourth homily on the book of Ecclesiastes:[1] certainly no other ancient text still known to us—Christian, Jewish, or Pagan—contains so fierce, unequivocal, and indignant a condemnation of the institution of slavery.[2] Not that it constitutes a particularly lengthy treatise: it is only a part of the sermon itself, a brief exegetical excursus on Ecclesiastes 2:7 ('I got me male and female slaves, and had my home-born slaves as well'), but it is a passage of remarkable rhetorical intensity. In it Gregory treats slavery not as a luxury that should be indulged in only temperately (as might an Epicurean), nor as a necessary domestic economy too often abused by arrogant or brutal slave-owners (as might a Stoic like Seneca or a Christian like John Chrysostom), but as intrinsically sinful, opposed to God's actions in creation, salvation, and the church, and essentially incompatible with the Gospel. Of course, in an age when an economy sustained otherwise than by chattel slavery was all but unimaginable, the question of abolition was simply never raised, and so the apparent uniqueness of Gregory's sermon is, in one

[1] Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten homiliae* (hereinafter IEH), in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (hereinafter GNO), eds Werner Jaeger *et al.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958–), vol. V: 334–52.

[2] Unless one includes in this consideration other texts by Gregory himself, where remarks regarding slavery (of a more diffuse and occasional nature) are also found. See especially *Contra Eunomium* (hereinafter CE) I, GNO I: 178; *De oratione dominica* (hereinafter DOD) V, GNO VII. ii: 70–1; and *De beatitudinis* (hereinafter DB) III, GNO VII. ii: 105–6, 126–7. For a fuller treatment of the broader scope of Gregory's remarks on slavery and freedom, see Daniel F. Stramara Jr, 'Gregory of Nyssa: an Ardent Abolitionist?', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 41, 1 (1997), 37–60.

sense, entirely unsurprising. Gregory lived at a time, after all, when the response of Christian theologians to slavery ranged from—at best—resigned acceptance to—at worst—vigorous advocacy.[3] But, then, this makes all the more perplexing the question of how one is to account for Gregory's eccentricity. Various influences on his thinking could of course be cited—most notably, perhaps, that of his revered teacher and sister Macrina, who had prevailed upon Gregory's mother to live a common life with her servants—but this could at best help to explain only Gregory's general distaste for the institution; it would still not account for the sheer uncompromising vehemence of his denunciations.

Of course, the Ecclesiastes homilies were preached during the Great Lent of 379, when Gregory's moral authority had no doubt been considerably fortified by his recent triumphant return to Nyssa from two years of banishment under the Arian emperor Valens; it is appropriate that they should sternly admonish, reprove, and summon to repentance, in order to prepare his congregation for Easter, and explicable that they should be marked by a certain confidence of tone. Moreover, ever since Constantine had granted churches the power of *manumissio in ecclesia* in 321, propertied Christians had often made Easter an occasion for emancipating slaves, and Gregory was obviously encouraging his parishioners to adopt an established custom.[4] Even so, he could, in all likelihood, have quite effectively recommended manumission—simply as a salutary spiritual hygiene, or as a gesture of benevolence—in terms calculated better to persuade than to offend. But Gregory's sermon goes well beyond any mere exhortation to the exercise of charity; he leaves no quarter for pious slave-owners to console themselves that they, at any rate, are merciful masters, not tyrants, but stewards of souls, generous enough to liberate the occasional worthy servant, but responsible enough to govern others justly. Gregory's language is neither mild nor politic: for anyone to presume mastery over another, he says, is the grossest arrogance, a challenge to and robbery of God, to whom alone

[3] Examples of the latter can be found in the work of Theodoret (*De providentia divina* VII) or in that of Gregory's elder brother Basil (*De Spiritu Sancto* XX).

[4] See *In sanctam ecclesiam* (hereinafter ISE), GNO IX: 250–1.

we all belong;[5] to deprive a person of the freedom granted all of us by God is to overturn divine law, which gives us no prerogatives one over another;[6] at what price, asks Gregory, can one purchase the image of God—God alone possesses the resources, but as divine gifts are irrevocable, and God's greatest gift to us is the liberty restored to us in salvation, it lies *not even in God's power* to enslave humanity;[7] when a slave is bought, so are his or her possessions, but each person is set up by God as governor of the entire world, and no sum can purchase so vast an estate;[8] the exchange of coin and receipt of deed may deceive you that you possess some superiority over another, but all are equal, prey to the same frailties, capable of the same joys, beneficiaries of the same salvation, and subject to the same judgment;[9] we are equal in every respect,[10] but—as Gregory phrases it—'You have divided human nature (*tēn physin*) between slavery and mastery and have made it at once slave to itself and master over itself.'[11]

Gregory's rhetoric, in short, presses well beyond the issue of mere manumission and adumbrates that of abolition; the logic seems as irresistible as it does anachronistic—and therein lies its mystery. If any part of Gregory's sermon perhaps provides a clue to the deeper currents of his thought, and to the stridency with which he expresses himself, it is this last phrase: 'You have divided human nature. . . .' Perhaps it is only a rhetorical flourish, but it is an odd phrase in itself (in what sense, precisely, is a 'nature' divisible?), and if one reads it according to the theological grammar established by Gregory's eschatology (particularly as developed in two treatises of 380, *On the Soul and Resurrection* and *On the Making of Humanity*), it takes on a meaning at once unexpectedly literal and daringly speculative. This, at least, is my argument: the unique ferocity of Gregory's critique of slavery is understandable only in light of his eschatology; or, otherwise stated, Gregory's enmity towards the

[5] IEH 334.
[6] IEH 335.
[7] IEH 336.
[8] IEH 336.
[9] IEH 337.
[10] IEH 338.
[11] IEH 335.

institution was the result of his habit of viewing all things (and especially human 'nature') in an eschatological light.

II

Before proceeding, though, I should state an axiom that will govern the argument to follow: Christian eschatology, properly understood, is not only different from, but inimical to, every worldly teleology. The eschatological concerns not the fulfillment of the immanent designs of 'nature', history, consciousness, or destiny, but concerns rather a judgment that falls across all of these from beyond the totality—the cosmos—they describe, and that rescues creation from everything within them that obeys the logic of violence and death.

When, for instance, Aristotle distinguishes between those who are free by nature and 'natural slaves', he does so teleologically, according to a science of the human essence and the end towards which it properly tends, and to a clear notion of what constitutes a degenerate or aberrant expression of the common nature.[12] Knowing the ends of humanity, he knows as well who is capable of them and who, deficient in nature, must serve as 'a living tool'.[13] The Aristotelian world is, to resort to a fashionable phrase, a hierarchy erected within totality, a closed order of immanence, within which every distinction is a difference in rank and natural prerogative: in such a world, nothing could be more obvious than the superiority of city over nature, reason over appetite, Greek over barbarian, man over woman, master over slave. The 'violence of metaphysics' (another fashionable phrase)[14] always functions thus: the securing of first principles or foundations by which one may discern the essences of things, recognize the order of noble and base or

[12] See the *Politics* 1254a–b, 1260a, 1280a.

[13] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1160b; *Eudemian Ethics* 1241b.

[14] Consider, for example, the words of Gianni Vattimo: 'When Nietzsche speaks of metaphysics as an attempt to master the real by force, he does not describe a marginal characteristic of metaphysics but indicates its essence as it is delineated right from the first pages of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where knowledge is defined in relation to the possession of first principles.' ('Towards an Ontology of Decline', in *Recoding Metaphysics: the New Italian Philosophy*, ed. Giovanni Borradori, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988, 64).

good and bad, construct taxonomies, determine the difference between the ideal and its distorted reflection, know what ends are right and what measures expedient, decide how to govern and whom to rule, and understand the shape of destiny. This is perhaps no more true of Aristotle's discourse concerning nature than of Hegel's concerning history: and within either, instructively enough, slavery plays some necessary part, as belonging either to the just deployment of persons of varying capacity (in one case) or to the probationary maieutic of the master-slave dialectic (in the other). To describe the hierarchy of substances or the grand narrative of history is usually to justify one or another regime, or at least to describe its 'necessity'.

But eschatology, for Christian thought, concerns neither 'nature' nor history (in this sense) but the Kingdom of God, which is, as the gospels assert, adventitious to both: it comes suddenly, like a thief in the night, and so fulfills no immanent process, consummates none of our grand projects, reaps no harvest from history's 'dialectic'. Only thus will it complete all things. At the same time, the Kingdom has already, at Easter, been made visible within history and now impends upon each moment, a word of judgment falling across all our immanent truths of power, privilege, or destiny. None of the founding gestures of a metaphysics suffice to secure reflection against this disruption. In the Paschal light of the Kingdom, the household, the city, the entire epic of civilization and culture are all denuded of the glamor of 'necessity'; thought is deprived equally of the Platonic myth of *anamnesis*, the recollection of immutable truths by eternal selves, and of the Hegelian myth of *Geist*, the totalization of history that abandons transient selves to a 'spiritual' logic; and 'human nature' is expelled from the stable regime of the Aristotelian *polis*. From the securer vantage of a fixed metaphysics, the eschatological must seem at best an insane act of speculative expenditure, one that casts aside all the hard-won profits of history's turmoils and tragedies at the prompting of an impossible hope; but eschatology opens the future as a horizon of hope only in taking leave of every idealism, indeed of every attempt to disclose a continuity between the stories humanity tells of its metaphysical pedigrees and the ultimate order of things, so as to resituate humanity in a narrative that

places both origins and ends in the hands of the transcendent God. As a discourse entirely of the divine future, it reaffirms the sheer gratuity of creation, over against myths that would root the world in a divine or cosmic past, a theogony or primordial struggle, and so interrupts every self-aggrandizing saga of origins, of autochthony, and every taxonomy that sets persons in their proper places. Phrased simply, Christian eschatology, correctly grasped, should always constitute a provocation of the powers that prevail within, or the institutions that compose, a social world. The light of this absolute futurity should unsettle every present.

But, even if all of this is axiomatic, at least for the argument at hand, what sense does it make of Gregory's complaint against the slaveholder, 'You have divided human nature'? Talk of 'nature' scarcely seems to venture beyond the limits of a metaphysically determined world, with its immanent essentialisms. But this phrase may actually mark a profound inversion of categories: 'human nature', understood as a worldly *telos*, however imagined, can at most confirm the orders and prudential necessities of a world; lifted up, however, into the eschatological consummation of creation that opens in Christ, as it is for Gregory, it can perhaps expose those orders and necessities as mere sinful conventions—but only if it is indeed so lifted up, rendered eschatological without reserve. This requires an altogether radical act of reconceptualization, and this is what Gregory's treatises from the year following the Ecclesiastes homilies provide.

III

On the face of it, however, Gregory's eschatology might well seem indistinguishable from one or another species of metaphysical closure, an idealist recuperation of history's vagaries into rational meaning, at once a barely regenerate Platonism and a foreshadowing of German idealism. One could view Gregory as the first metaphysician of history, the first to allow the Greek *logos* to be shaken by the historicality of scripture, even a brilliant precursor of Hegel, but an idealist for all that. For him, the making and redemption of the world belong to a single great 'process', by which is brought to pass a perfect

creation, conceived and willed by God before the ages and residing eternally in his will; the entirety of time is an *akolouthia*, a gradual unfolding of God's eternal design, in time and by way of change. Creation is twofold, so to speak; or, in a sense, there are two creations, a prior (or eternal) creation that abides in God, as the end towards which all things are directed, for the sake of which all things are brought about; and a posterior creation, the temporal and cosmic exposition of this divine model, which from the creature's vantage precedes the ideal, but which is in fact guided by it. The idealist cast of such a scheme is scarcely difficult to see; and it is made especially obvious by Gregory's description of the fashioning of humanity in the divine will: from eternity, he says, God has conceived of humanity under the form of the ideal Person (*Anthropos*), the archetype and perfection of the human, a creature shaped entirely after the divine likeness, neither male nor female, possessed of divine virtues, deathless and entirely beautiful.[15] By all appearances, this is mere Christianized Platonism. And yet this apparent idealization of humanity becomes at once unstable, and begins to divest itself of its ideality, where Gregory goes on to describe the first Person as comprising (as indeed being) the entire plenitude—*pleroma*—of all human beings, throughout all the ages, from first to last. In his reading of Genesis 1:26–27, Gregory takes the creation of humanity according to the divine image to refer not principally to Adam, but to this fullness of humankind, comprehended by God's 'foresight' as 'in a single body'.[16] Adam and Eve, however superlatively endowed with the gifts of grace at their origin, constitute in Gregory's eyes only the first increments (so to speak) of that concrete community that, as a whole, reflects the beauty of its creator and that, in the fullness of its beauty, will come into being only at the end of its temporal *akolouthia*, when it will be recapitulated in Christ. The entirety of 'the human' exists, until then, only in the purity of the divine wisdom, where it is comprehended 'altogether' (*athroōs*) in its own fullness,[17] and here alone—in

[15] See C. N. Tsirpanlis, 'The Concept of Universal Salvation in Saint Gregory of Nyssa', *Studia Patristica* XVII, vol. 3, 1132.

[16] *De Hominis Opificio* (hereinafter DHO) XVI: PG44: 185C.

[17] DHO XVII: 189C.

the coinherence of the 'whole humanity'—has God fashioned a creature in the divine likeness: 'Thus the "Person according to the image" came into being, *the whole nature*, the God-like thing. And what thus came into being was, through omnipotent wisdom, not part of the whole, but *the entire plenitude of the nature* altogether.'[18] It is this entirely novel coincidence in Gregory's thought of the idea of *physis* with that of *plērōma* that marks an irreversible break from Platonism and that (more relevant to the matter at hand) makes somewhat unexpected sense of the use to which the word '*physis*' is put in the fourth sermon on Ecclesiastes.

Of course, whatever its novelty, Gregory's account of creation still seems to bear the semblance of an idealist metaphysics of some kind, a hellenizing (or even proto-Hegelian) 'rescue' of the doctrine of creation from its ungovernable arbitrariness by way of an ultimate ideality. Gregory's exegesis of Genesis bears more than a passing resemblance to Philo of Alexandria's, which also distinguishes the first account of humanity's creation from the second: the former, Philo (like Gregory) claims, concerns an ideal, divine Person, shaped in God's eternal counsels before the beginning of the world, while the latter concerns the actual race of finite men and women who live and die in time.[19] But, for Philo, this primordial *Anthropos* is still a Platonic form: an interval remains between the two creations, a *chorismos* between eternity and history, idea and image. In Gregory's account, however, the primal Person is neither in any real sense pre-existent, nor finally transcendent, of the plenitude of persons who come into being throughout time; persons are neither shadows of, nor separated participants in, human 'nature', but are in fact its very substance.[20] Gregory's reading certainly resembles Philo's, but finally differs from it radically: Gregory submerges the ideal in the historical (rather than the reverse), while still allowing the 'ideal' (which now should really be read as the 'eschatological') to prevent the historical from assuming

[18] DHO XXII: 204D.

[19] See Philo of Alexandria, *De Mundi Opificio*, in *Opera Quae Supersunt*, eds Leopoldus Cohn and Paulus Wendland, 7 vols (Berrlini: Reimeri, 1896–1930) [Reprint in 8 facs., Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1962–4] I: 38.

[20] See G. B. Ladner, 'The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958) 82.

the aspect of an enclosed order oriented towards an immanent end. The first creation stands over against—in judgment—any attempt to wrest a meaning, natural privilege, or 'destiny' from the prudent arrangements and sinful ambitions of history by sacrificing the good of particular persons, because it is precisely the full community of persons throughout time that God elects as the divine image, truth, and glory. At the same time, the very openness of history, thus liberated from its worldly end, also stands over against any ideality that might serve to reduce this perfect and primordial creation to an abstraction. If the ideal and the actual constitute not two realities, but only two sides of what ultimately stands as a single reality, a kind of reciprocal critique must pass continually between them, such that neither ever suffices to explain or 'found' itself.

Which is to say, perhaps, that 'the eschatological' names that species of thought in which history's truth and the truth of history's disruption uniquely coincide. Still, within this very indistinction of ideal from actual, inasmuch as the reconciliation of its terms occurs under the form of an *akolouthia*, a certain division remains, between the innocence of time and the violence of history, between the good creation God wills and the destructive fictions of a fallen world. This is the ironic power of the eschatological, which makes every moment within time one of discrimination, a *critical* moment. Gregory's sense of this division is probably most vividly expressed in the form of a speculative mythology he devises concerning what might have been had we not fallen: but for sin, he opines, humanity would have propagated itself in a more angelic fashion; only God's foresight separated the race into distinct sexes, so that even when deprived of the properties necessary for celestial procreation (whatever those might be) humanity could bring the race to its fore-ordained plenitude.[21] Gregory's Platonizing prudery aside, the important idea here is that God brings the good creation he wills to pass in spite of sin, both in and against human history, and never ceases to tell the story he intends for creation, despite our apostasy from that story. But for sin, says Gregory, God's design would have still *unfolded*, but peacefully, continuously,

[21] DHO XVII: 189D.

from potentialities established in creation at the beginning, according to an innate dynamism,[22] and everything would have come without obstruction to partake of divine glory.[23] Sin, though, inaugurates its own sequence, an *akolouthia* of privation and violence, spreading throughout time from its own principles;[24] and so God's gracious purpose appears in time always now as a counter-history, the story of the church enmeshed in stories of power.[25] Humanity, as the *pleroma* of God's election, still possesses that deathless beauty that humanity, as an historical being, has lost; and God, seeing that beauty, draws all things on towards the glory originally intended for them,[26] by drawing persons into the body of Christ. In the incarnation, Christ enters into this human plenitude, into the midst of its temporal *akolouthia*, and orients it again towards its transcendent end. And because it is a living unity, the incarnation of the Logos must be of effect for the whole: Christ has, one might say, assumed the *pleroma*, in its history of fallenness, to restore to it the unity of his body—to which all persons properly always already belong[27]—and so his glory enters into all that is human.[28]

This is, of course, one of the points at which Gregory's theology opens out onto his notorious universalism: in the incarnation, Christ implicates the entire human plenitude in the pattern he establishes; such, says Gregory, is the indivisible solidarity of humanity that the *entire* body must ultimately be in unity with its head, either the first or the last Adam.[29] This is the meaning Gregory finds in John 20:17: when Christ goes to his God and Father, to the God and Father of his disciples, he presents all of humanity to God in himself;[30] and so Christ's

[22] *De Mortuis* (hereinafter DM) PG 46: 517D.

[23] *De Anima et Resurrectione* (hereinafter DAR) PG46: 105A.

[24] *De Virginitate* (hereinafter DAR) GNO VIII. I: 299.

[25] See A. J. Philippou, 'The Doctrine of Evil in St. Gregory of Nyssa', *Studia Patristica* IX (1966) 252.

[26] See CE III, II, GNO II: 74; *De Infantibus Qui Praemature Abripiuntur* (hereinafter abbreviated as DIQPA) PG 46: 177D–180D.

[27] J. Laplace, 'Introduction', in Gregory of Nyssa, *La Création de L'homme*, Sources Chretiennes 6 (Paris, 1943) 28.

[28] *In Illud Tunc Ipse Filius* (hereinafter IITIF), PG44: 1313B.

[29] See Jean Daniélou, 'L'apocatastase chez Saint Grégoire de Nysse', *RSP* 30 (1940) 345.

[30] *Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii* (hereinafter RCE) GNO II: 346–7.

obedience to the Father even unto death will be made complete only eschatologically, when humanity, gathered together in him, will be yielded up as one body to the Father in the Son's act of obedience, and God will be all in all.[31] Until then, the resurrection of Christ has already inaugurated an *akolouthia* of resurrection, so to speak, in humanity's one body:[32] an unfolding that cannot now cease (given the solidarity of human nature) until the last residue of sin—the last shadow of death—has vanished.[33] But Easter will be complete only in the raising up of the whole humanity, in the final restoration of creation.

For now, in the between times, the mystical body of Christ, the church, is the only visible form of that redeemed nature; but the visible manifests the as yet invisible. As Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, 'the theological unity of the Mystical Body of Christ is entirely based on this philosophical unity. The total Christ is none other than total humanity'.[34] And, ultimately, there can be no true human unity, nor even any real unity between God and humanity, except in terms of the concrete solidarity of all persons in that complete community that is, alone, God's true image. Obviously, Gregory's thought must admit of a certain tension here, between free historical contingency and God's eternal will. Humanity is one, as God first fashioned and eternally wills it, and cannot finally be divided; nor can any soul be redeemed outside of this human *pleroma*. But while each person is 'objectively' implicated in the salvation Christ has wrought in human nature before any 'subjective' appropriation of it,[35] it is in each person, as he or she takes on the lineaments of Christ's form, that the likeness of God also dwells in its fullness and is expressed.[36] Gregory's eschatological subversion of Platonic categories would otherwise be unintelligible. God will be all in all, according to Gregory, not

[31] IITIF 1316A–B.

[32] RCE 387.

[33] IITIF 1313D–1316A.

[34] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995); see also A. H. Armstrong, 'Platonic Elements in St Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Man', *Dominican Studies* I (1948) 115.

[35] *Oratio catechetica* (hereinafter OC) XXXII, ed. James Herbert Srawley, Cambridge: CUP, 1956, 114–22.

[36] CE I: 78–9.

by comprising humanity within himself according to a metaphysical premise that comprehends the 'idea' of the human, but by way of each particular person, in each unique inflection of the *pleroma*'s beauty;[37] and yet this assumption of the human unfolds only within human freedom, within our capacity to venture away. Of course, for Gregory, sin is always only accidental to human nature, a privation, a disease that corrupts the will, the opposite of real human freedom, ultimately to be purged from human nature, even if needs be by hell (which is, according to Gregory—as is most clearly stated in *De anima et resurrectione*—a period of purgation, not an eternal perdition).[38] The power of evil is inherently finite and must, sooner or later, exhaust itself, and relinquish its grip upon every soul, as each is drawn into the infinity of God's splendor and peace.[39] Evil, after all, builds only towards an end; it is a history with an immanent *telos*: in the light, however, of the God who gives himself as an infinite future, from beyond all immanent ends, evil's 'end' (its 'consummation') proves to be nothing but its own disappearance.[40]

[37] DIQPA 181B.

[38] It is only to the less clever that the fire of hell is presented as a terrible punishment; to the wise, it is recognizable as a saving therapy (OC VII: 46–9). Which is not to say that, for either class of souls, the chastisements of that fire will not exceed everything one can imagine (OC XV: 163–4). The logic of hell is explained at greatest length in DAR: 97B–105A, by Makrina, on her death-bed, to Gregory. At 101B–4A, incidentally, Gregory provides—implicitly—his interpretation of the '*kolasin aiōnion*' of Matt. 25:46: apparently it means a punishment so terrible that it persists for 'an entire age'.

[39] DHO XXI, 201B–4A.

[40] See Jean Daniélou, 'Comble du mal et eschatologie chez Grégoire de Nysse', Festgabe Joseph Lortz II (Baden-Baden, 1958) and M. Canévet, 'Nature du mal et économie du salut chez Grégoire de Nysse', *RSR* 56 (1968). Gregory even suggests that the Logos awaited a day when every manifestation of evil (which, apparently, is capable of only a finite number of forms) had made its appearance upon the earth before entering into human history, so that the divine cure might touch every extremity of our illness (OC XXIX: 107–9). And Makrina, in DAR (104A–5A), explains to Gregory that when evil is finally abolished, by being purged from every individual will, then every soul, having regained its proper freedom, will turn freely to God and be joined to him, the fountainhead of all virtue, and God will be 'all in all' both in the sense of 'instead of all' (God becoming the sole 'element' in which our life will subsist) and 'in all' (God entering into each of us and so abolishing evil in the depths of our nature). See IITIF 1313A–6A, *In Christi resurrectionem* PG 46: 661C–D, and *In Canticum Canticorum* (hereinafter ICC) VIII, GNO VI: 247–9; XI: 335–6; XIV: 421. The image that most perfectly expresses Gregory's sense of the intrinsic nothingness of evil's 'consummation', and its necessary limitation, is found in DHO XXI (201B–4A), where Gregory likens evil to night, which (according to

By framing his account of the birth of humanity 'according to the image' in terms of a temporal unfolding, which makes the 'ideal' and the actual each the 'cause' of the other, Gregory distinguishes himself as one of a very few theologians capable of viewing worldly time in the light of salvation without resorting to some notion of sacral history set like an island in a sea of otherwise meaningless temporality (much as he does not think in terms of a particular saved humanity extracted from the mass of the reprobate): the story of Christ is also quite literally the story of all time, the story of the lordship of the Logos over the body of humanity.[41] Seen from the perspective of the Kingdom, time is redeemed from our sinful histories, the story that every secular dispensation fails to tell is told at last, and the distinction between the ideal Person and the multiplicity of contingent persons throughout time disappears upon the horizon of God's good creation. The inevitability of Gregory's universalism is obvious here: each person, as God elects him or her from eternity,[42] is indispensable, because the humanity God eternally wills could never come to fruition in the absence of any member of that body, any inflection of that beauty. Apart from the one who is lost, humanity as God wills it could never be entire, nor even exist as the creature fashioned after the divine image; the loss of even this one would leave the body of the Logos incomplete and God's purpose in creation unrealized. Gregory's anthropology sometimes seems like the Philonian, caught in the same penumbral interval between idealism and the biblical story, but it is this eschatological collapse of the distinction of

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the geocentric cosmology of late antiquity) is nothing but a cone of shadow cast weakly by the earth, out into a universe of light. This is another reason, incidentally, for Gregory's denial of hell's eternity: there can be no endless godlessness posed over against the endlessness of God; he is the sole infinite, and the infinitely good (see *In inscriptiones Psalmorum* II, GNO V: 100–1).

[41] One might note here that Gregory in a sense offers a Christian answer to Hegel's understanding of universal history different from a more 'Barthian' approach: he allows all history its place as the theatre of God's ordination neither by making the violence of history a necessary negative probation nor by subordinating the merely particular to the synthetic; and he clearly marks the difference of God's true story from the stories of sinful humanity without making it seem as if the true story told in Christ is simply an intrusion upon worldly time, a radical rupture.

[42] DHO XXII: 207C–8B.

ideal from actual that sets his formulation apart. The Kingdom, as he imagines it, will be achieved only in the harmonious play of all created differences when creation achieves 'the redeemed oneness of everyone united one with another through their convergence upon the One Good'.[43] The old idealism dissolves in the narrative of creation, and in the light of this eschatology. At the same time, another idealism is resisted in advance, that of the dialectical recuperation that rescues (or sublates) spiritual truth from the provisionality of *mere* historical particularity. Platonic beauty suffers defatigation in its transposition from the ideal to the phenomenal realm, Hegelian truth emerges from and rises above the interminable, tragic welter of the particular; but for Gregory, the only site of the beautiful or the true is in the entirety of creation's living body. Human history is embraced from beyond itself, receives its only true meaning from an end transcendent of it, and so is justified not through any sacrificial rationality or prudential logic of its own, but by grace.

And if the 'essence' of the human is none other than the plenitude of all men and women, every essentialism is rendered empty: all persons express and unfold the human not as shadows of an undifferentiated idea, but in their concrete multiplicity and hence in all the intervals and transitions belonging to their differentiation; and so human 'essence' can be only an 'effect' of the whole. Every unlikeness, in the harmonious unity of the body of the Logos, expresses in an unrepeatable way the beauty of God's likeness. The human 'original', no longer a paradigm, is the gift and fruit of every peaceful difference and divergence; and only as this differentiating dynamism is the unity of the human 'essence' imaginable at all, as the peaceful unity of all persons in the Spirit, who is bringing creation to pass and ushering in the Kingdom. And even in the Kingdom, that essence will not be available to us as a fixed *proprium*. According to Gregory, the final state of the saved will be one of endless motion forward, continuous growth into God's eternity, *epektasis*; salvation will not be an achieved repose, but an endless pilgrimage into God's infinity, a perpetual 'stretching-out' into an identity always infinitely exceeding what has already been

[43] ICC XV: 466.

achieved;[44] there will always be the eschatological within the eschaton, a continuous liberation of the creature, subsuming all that has gone before into an ever greater fullness of God's presence to the soul, so that the creature will simply be freed of all memory, all recollection,[45] and so all anamnetic grounding in the absolute. The eschaton, thus conceived, brings nothing to a halt, returns nothing to its pure or innocent origin; it repeats the gracious liberation of difference that creation always is, endlessly, but it never secures beings within being, or fixes them in their proper places, or discriminates the noble from the base; it is, rather, a perpetual venturing away from our world, our totality.

And, most importantly, it has appeared already, in our midst, at Easter; the verdict of the resurrection now breaks upon every instant, disrupts every representable essence, every serene proportion. All our discourses of power and privilege belong to the language of death, which has already been conquered in our one shared, indivisible nature. Even the finality of death has now been deprived of its authority, its power of consummative completeness, and so now no refuge is left for our 'essence': except there, in God, where we dwell 'altogether'.

IV

The first conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that, whatever metaphysical grammar it may borrow, Christian eschatology must inevitably subvert the discourses by which (in every age) we rationalize creaturely differences in hierarchies

[44] The doctrine of perpetual progress, of the soul's *epektasis* into God, so thoroughly pervades Gregory's developed thought that there is little purpose in citing particular passages from his work; the theme is, however, developed most fully (and most beautifully) in the two great 'spiritual' treatises *De vita Moysis* and *In Canticum Canticorum*.

[45] ICC VI, 174. This abandonment of *anamnesis*, in favor of a pure 'towardness', rapt up into an infinite divine future, marks one of Gregory's most striking departures from the atmosphere of Platonism. Worldly memory's tragic anxiety and philosophical recollection's otherworldly pretensions alike are displaced by the force of his eschatological vision. One might also recall Gregory's reproaches of Arians and Pneumatomachoi for thinking of God only as the unshaken origin, the absolute and beginningless past, and not as the endless future—for thinking, i.e. in terms of memory rather than of hope (CE I: 666–72).

of high and low, noble and base, great and nameless. The verdict of God is on the side of the particular person, and so neither justice nor truth can ever stand against the other who confronts us as the stranger, the enemy, or the 'slave'. Ultimately, for Christian thought, the eschatological light that breaks upon reflection not merely as a promise, but as the Paschal event that constitutes all Christian memory, exposes the falsehood of our worldly teleologies: for there is no good end immanent to a nature we each privately possess, to which some may attain and of which others fall short. Our only just and permissible end is given us all, as one, from beyond the world we fabricate to accommodate our violences. We own neither essence nor prerogative, but belong to Christ; this is a freedom exceeding any power we exert over one another, because it is freedom from death. But it is also one we have rejected so long as we continue to 'divide human nature between slavery and mastery'.

The precise meaning and peculiar power of this phrase becomes clear at last: for Gregory, no accusation could be more terrible, nor any more precise. Every violence or coercion that divides us quite literally divides the one body—the only true identity—that we can ever possess. Moreover, as even this 'whole humanity' belongs not to us, but to Christ, as his body, all divisions between free and slave, privilege and poverty, eminence and abasement are wounds that we, in our arrogance and faithlessness, inflict upon him. Writes Gregory, in his fifth homily on the Lord's Prayer, nature never so divided us —only power has done so—nor did God ever ordain slavery, not even on account of sin.[46] Which brings me to my final observations.

First, given the extreme concreteness and essential sociality of Gregory's language concerning human nature, it would have been impossible for him to draw any specious distinction between slavery to sin and death and slavery to political or social power; if God acts to liberate us from the one, God condemns and overthrows the other. As Gregory says, all freedom is essentially one and the same thing: it is to be without master.[47]

[46] DOD V, GNO VII. ii: 70.

[47] And so virtue is the highest and most invincible freedom. DAR 101D.

So long, then, as human power continues to exercise mastery, violence, or coercion over souls and bodies, God's saving purpose is resisted. And there is inevitably a social provocation in Gregory's eschatology; if Christ has assumed to himself the human *pleroma*, the eschatological fulfillment of our shared nature has entered our history, and left us no time any longer for the provisional employment of unjust but 'necessary' arrangements of political or social order. We are already condemned and raised up together, in him in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, free nor slave, man nor woman;[48] and so our nature's redemption is neither an abstraction nor even only a promise, but is even now a practice, a church, a newness of life in which we participate only insofar as we really enact a redeemed society. If, says Gregory, Christians indeed practised the mercy Christ commands of them in the beatitudes, humanity would no longer admit of division within itself between slavery and mastery, poverty and wealth, shame and honor, infirmity and strength; all things would be held in common, and all would be equal one with another.[49] Gregory's Easter vigil sermon of 379 (*On the Holy Pascha*), which would have followed upon the Ecclesiastes homilies, celebrates every form of emancipation, seamlessly joining the theme of liberation from death to that of the manumission of slaves, while again urging the latter.[50]

And my last observation is this: if this eschatological light indeed deprives us of every essentialism and pierces the canopy of being where we shelter ourselves and construct hierarchies within totality to legitimate our prejudices, ambitions, and violences, and promises us no homeland but Christ, then in a sense the slave is the one always nearest God, and always most human: for the slave truly owns no essence, no *ousia* (which is, in Greek, also to say 'wealth'), has no clan or homeland, can boast neither autochthony nor *telos*, has no grasp of first principles. Amid the divisions—the slaveries—we are always forging—political, social, economic—the one who is dispossessed, homeless, nameless, with neither power nor privilege

[48] See Dumitru Staniloae, 'L'image de dieu et al déification de l'homme', *CV* 19 (1976) 109–19.

[49] DB V, GNO VII. ii: 126–7.

[50] *In sanctum Pascha*, GNO IX: 248–50.

to call upon, is the one whose humanity has been verified for us in the body of the slave who was raised from the dead. All myths of eminence and power are overturned at Easter. And no theologian has ever evinced a profounder sense of this than Gregory. Late in the course of his *Contra Eunomium* of 382, he addresses Eunomius's argument that Christ could not really be God because Paul describes him as bearing the form of a slave, and no one could be both slave and Lord of all things; Gregory's answer is as various as it is indignant, but one point he makes with special force is that God assumes the slavery in which we all languish precisely in order to purge slavery—along with every other ill—from our shared nature: 'And as', writes Gregory, 'in the life we hope for, there shall be neither sickness nor curse nor sin nor death, so also slavery will vanish along with these things. And to the truth of what I say, I summon the Truth himself as witness, who tells his disciples, 'I call you no longer slaves, but friends'.[51] For Gregory, clearly, this truth has reoriented all our 'truths'; this verdict has fallen upon all our romances of power, irrevocably. Often it is as if, in Gregory's thought, one is confronted by the tableau, from the Fourth Gospel, of Christ standing before Pilate, scourged and mocked, while Pilate demands of him that he produce his pedigrees—'Whence art thou?'—and then pronounces the only truth that he himself knows—'I have power to crucify thee'. By every worldly wisdom, Christ—beaten, derided, crowned with thorns—is an absurd figure, madly prating of an otherworldly kingdom, oblivious to the powers into whose hands he has been delivered; but Easter reverses the ordering of this scene, vindicates Christ over against the power that crucifies, locates truth there where he stands, in the place of the victim and the captive. And if this judgment has already come upon us, and liberated us from death, we can do no other now than desire and advance the release of all who lie in bondage. This cannot be gainsaid. And Gregory seems often to have seen with a clarity rare not only for his time, but perhaps for every age of the church, the magnitude of this truth: we can never again deceive ourselves that we can call justly upon any power but that which sets others free if, in the resurrection of Christ—much to our

[51] CE III, viii, GNO II: 259.

consternation and embarrassment, no doubt, even to our condemnation, but ultimately for our redemption—the form of God and the form of humanity have both been given to us, completely, now and henceforth always, in the form of a slave.

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