**Gregory of Nazianzus’ Apologetic for Poetry: “On My Own Verses”**

“The two of you [Gregory of Nyssa and his brother, Basil of Caesarea] have been for all the rest a model of philosophy, and a kind of spiritual measuring-stick for ordered behavior in prosperity and for patient endurance in adversity, since philosophy knows how to do both: to take prosperity moderately, and to take adversity gracefully.”—Letter 76 to Gregory of Nyssa

“Is speaking Greek yours alone? Do you own Attic style? Whose are the draught-board and numbers and the art of calculation, measures and weights, tactics and art of war? . . . Do you own poetry? . . . Let anyone who loves literature and who devotes himself to this occupation—which I will not deny I do myself—join me in my anger! For I leave everything else for those who wish to pursue them: wealth, noble birth, a good reputation, power, all of which belongs to the illusory world joys of this lower world; I cling to the things of the mind alone, and I do not grumble at the labors on land and sea which won these things for me.”—Oration against Julian (364 AD)

Gregory of Nazianzus’ commitment to poetry placed him as part of the “Theodosian Revival,” the move among Christian educators, writers, and intellectuals to develop an authentic and classically sensitive alternative curriculum for Christian students. Julian the Apostate’s brief reign from 361-363 AD posed a threat to Christian education since he refused in an edict of 362 to let them teach in the traditional academies or to employ traditional pagan texts. Thought Julian died in battle shortly after making these moves, they were something of a wake-up call for educated Christians. They committed themselves to expanding Greek and Latin texts along Christian themes, as well as showing their facility with classical allusions and style.

Written in the last few years of his life after his official retirement, “On My Own Verses” was one of the poems that Gregory wrote to defend his legacy as a Christian intellectual, both as a rhetorician and as a bishop. Throughout the poem, he assumes the ideal of the Christian philosopher, one who gives himself to study and contemplation with the goal of the wise life, that is a controlled life which is calm and ordered and focused upon the higher truths of God and the transcendentals of the true, good, and beautiful. His defense of poetry is also a defense of a certain kind of ideal intellectual life.

Overview

Stanza 1 (ll. 1-15): Gregory begins by distinguishing the unmetrical words and undisciplined life of his critics from a poetic and ethic based upon Scripture and its sound words (in wisdom and in beauty).

Stanza 2 (ll.16-32): Amidst a divisive world of diverse schools (again, of both theology and poetry), Gregory defends his own motives, which are not for personal fame.

Stanza 3 (ll.33-44): He begins to set out more clearly his guidelines for writing: 1) a measured life and measured words go together; 2) it should serve as an example for the young, as well as offer pleasant material that helps draw them to truth and beauty;

Stanza 4 (ll.45-57): 3) In all honesty, he doesn’t want the pagans to write better poetry than Christians; 4) his poetry can be a kind of siren song that consoles him in his old age;

Stanza 5 (ll.58-68): 5) The reason found in words outweighs (or perhaps is enshrined in) their beauty. (Gregory takes a more self-effacing tone here.) He desires his poetics to offer a number of possibilities in wise formation.

Stanza 6 (ll.69-81): An invective against the badly talented and corrupt writers.

Stanza 7 (ll.82-89): A defense of the poetic examples in the Old Testament and an example of this: David’s playing and its effect on Saul’s madness.

Stanza 8 (ll.90-103): The conclusion argues that beautiful verse has value in helping others receive wisdom. The last two lines are a poetic allusion, as well as a last jab at his critics.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Gregory bring together moral discipline with poetic discipline in the poem?
2. How does Gregory defend his own motives for writing beautiful verse?
3. Likewise, how does Gregory defend the writing and study of poetry for Christians?
4. Does Gregory’s use of insults fit the overall poem? Why does he include them?
5. What kind of wise formation does Gregory hope to impart to young readers?

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Another to Christ

The dragon came back.

I beg you, David, approach

and come strum the kennor:

Drive away! Drive away the evil one

who chokes the spirit.

(PG 1406)

Still Another to Christ

New? Can it be new, Logos of God?

Can it be made new? My heart’s center

Is bare of claims or mental games, so

That wicked spirit, shirking it, has fled.

So swept, my place is filled with the better.

Fill me with you, not again with Ill-Will.

Now on, I’ll make him a lousy workshop.

(PG 1407-08)

Another to Christ

The dragon came again, so I stretch up to you.

Surround, oh surround me! Do not desert your image,

Or hateful he will snatch me, a bird from its poor place.

Ah! I dread your ruling, yet hunger for release.

I’m run ragged here; I’ve no fixed point for living.

You call from above; I’ve no nerve to draw near.

Even so I am yours, Christ, to save as you see fit.

(PG 1418)