

ABSTRACT

Beauty as “Oxymoronic Polarity” in Gregory of Nyssa

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Gregory of Nyssa stands in a dense philosophical tradition that affirms the transcendental value of beauty, but he nowhere defines this term, and it rarely receives a foreground in scholarship. This dissertation presents a holistic account of beauty in Gregory of Nyssa in two parts. The first part constructs a synthetic definition of beauty as “the disclosure of being in the apprehension of love” through analytic examination of lexemes pertaining to beauty, desire, and love in his texts. The second part advances a tripartite schema of Gregorian beauty by targeting three theological *loci* in his thought—infinity, virtue, and ordered unfolding—and articulating in each case a paradox or “oxymoronic polarity”: hiddenness and revelation; sameness and difference; selfhood and otherness. The term “oxymoronic polarity” is chosen to reflect the way that Gregory deploys oxymora as rhetorical and conceptual tools, placing paradoxical concepts into conceptual union that maintains their opposition in a genuine union without treating them as preliminary stages in a higher synthesis. The method is constructive exegesis, maintaining fidelity to Gregory’s thought but venturing to elaborate embedded implications.

The Introduction places Gregory within his historical context and presents the thesis of the dissertation. Chapter 1 establishes a baseline grammar for beauty in Gregory with respect to the state of scholarly literature. Chapter 2 presents a textual analysis of Gregorian beauty, with emphasis on beauty’s initiative. Chapter 3 completes this definition with an examination of the response of the subject to beauty in desire and love. Chapter 4 narrates the development of beauty from a tool of ascent to the disclosure of being’s hidden excess in dialogue with Plotinus and the theology of divine infinity that Gregory developed against Eunomius. Chapter 5 defines beauty’s content as moral virtue by articulating a polarity of sameness and difference within the Trinity, between God and the soul, and within the *plērōma* of humanity. Chapter 6 concludes the study by probing the saturated implications of encounter in the polarity of selfhood and otherness, in which the beholding of beauty in the other is also recursively full of self-presence.