Conrad Leyser

Pope Gregory the Great: Ego-trouble or identity politics?

"Some of our people also tell a story related by the Romans of how the soul of the Emperor Trajan was refreshed and even baptized by St Gregory's tears, a story marvellous to tell and marvellous to hear." 'The story' is really a story within a story. "One day", as Gregory was crossing the forum of Trajan, he was stopped in his tracks by what he saw depicted in a stone frieze "a deed so charitable that it seemed more likely to have been the work of a Christian than of a pagan. For it is related that, as he was leading his army in great haste against the enemy, he was moved to pity by the words of a widow, and the emperor of the whole world came to a halt." Trajan grants the widow's suit, and Gregory in turn looks to intercede with God for the soul of Trajan. "He wept floods of tears, as was his custom", until his petition was answered, "seeing that he had never presumed to ask this again for any other pagan."[1] Thus the so-called Whitby Vita Gregorii, composed c. 700 in Northumbria: as its anonymous author observes, the story proved a compelling one. It was told and retold in subsequent biographies of Gregory, and took on a life of its own in the high Middle Ages.[2]

On the face of it, the legend of the Pope and the Emperor would appear to have little to do with a search for the historical Gregory: surely the story exemplifies all that obstructs such a search. What we shall suggest, however, is that our own well-intentioned efforts to arrive at an unvarnished Gregory, stripped of the accretion of tradition, are themselves problematic. The Trajan story carries a message which we would do well to heed. It positions Gregory in a classical tradition as a wise ruler prepared to humble himself to make sure justice is done; furthermore, it imputes to Gregory full consciousness of his place in this tradition. As a guide to Gregory's self-understanding, it is in fact hard to improve upon this section of the Whitby Vita.

That Gregory participated in the Great Tradition of ancient philosophical self-awareness has long been recognized.[3] Indeed, Gregory's familiarity with Seneca, for example, is a phenomenon better observed by literary scholars of an earlier generation: more recent philosophical contributions on the development of notions of the self have tended to pass from Seneca to Augustine, and thence directly to Descartes, Locke, and Kant.[4] The effect of omitting over a millennium in such a canon of European selfhood is not only to perpetuate the myth, challenged by this volume, that there were no 'individuals' after the fall of Rome until the early modern period; it also draws on and lends support to an overly psychologized notion of personal identity, an atomized notion of the self all but meaningless to the ancients.[5] It is too easy for a modern audience to understand the Platonic 'Know yourself' in terms of what we mean by 'self-knowledge'. To avoid anachronism, Plato's dictum must

---

[1] Vita Gregorii 29 (ed. Bertram Colgrave, The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great, Cambridge 1968) 127–129: *Quidam quoque de nostris dicunt narratum a Romanis, sancti Gregorii lacrimis animam Traiani imperatoris refrigeratam vel baptizatam, quod est dictu mirabile et auditu … Nam die quidam transiens per forum Traianum, quod ab eo opere mirifico constructum dicunt, illud considerans repperit opus tam eleminosarium eum fecisse paganum ut Christiani plus quam pagani esse posse videret … [I]ngrediens ad sanctum Petrum solita direxit lacrimarum fluenta usque dum promeruit sibi divinitus revelatum fuisse exauditum, atque ut numquam de altero illud presumpsisset pagano.*

[2] Gordon Whatley, The uses of hagiography. The legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages, in: Viator 15 (1984) 25–63.

[3] For classic histories of the self, see Georg Misch, Geschichte der Autobiografie in der Antike (Berlin 1907); English translation/adaptation with Ernst W. Dickes, The History of Autobiography in Antiquity, 2 vols. (London 1950). Misch then continued his original Geschichte with a further three volumes on Das Mittelalter as follows: Teil 1: Die Frühzeit (Frankfurt 1955), Teil 2: Das Hochmittelalter im Anfang (Frankfurt 1959), and posthumously ed. Leo Delfoss, Teil 3: Das Hochmittelalter in der Vollendung (Frankfurt 1967). See also Pierre Courcelle, Connais-toi même de Socrate à St Bernard, 3 vols. (Paris 1974–1975).

[4] See below on Gregory and Seneca. In modern philosophy of self, a landmark is Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge-Mass. 1989); see now Richard Sorabji, Self. Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death (Oxford 2006).

[5] A point made by Alasdair Macintyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (London 1981); and by Christopher Gill, Peace of mind and being yourself: Panaetius to Plutarch, in: Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt 2, 36, 7 (1994) 4599–4640.

be glossed with Aristotle's no less well-known 'Man is by nature a political animal'. If humans are creatures whose identity is only realized when living in association with other creatures in the *polis*, the city state, then 'Know yourself' is an injunction not to solitary introspection, but to a life lived in groups; it is a 'political' maxim.

To apprehend ancient and medieval 'identity politics', the work of Gregory the Great may serve as a better vantage point than that of Augustine: crudely speaking, Gregory is Aristotle to Augustine's Plato. The Confessions, the highpoint of ancient Christian Platonism, are vulnerable to modern misreading as the solipsistic outpourings of a troubled soul. Augustine's text requires the corrective gloss of Gregory's Pastoral Rule, his classic treatise on what sort of person a ruler should be, and how he should adapt himself to meet the varying personal needs of his subjects. 'The personal is political': this is not how Gregory would have put it, but it is, we shall suggest, the message he sought to convey.

GREGORY'S GREATNESS

Gregory was bishop of Rome at the turn of the seventh century (from 590 to 604). At this juncture, the Roman Empire in the West was definitively at an end. The attempt of the Emperor Justinian to wrest the western provinces from Gothic control had collapsed; and as Gregory reached adulthood, new masters of Italy appeared. In 568, the Lombards moved south and west from the Hungarian plains and occupied much of the peninsula. Although the eastern Empire maintained a capital at Ravenna, it fell to Gregory and his peers to feed and clothe the Romans and to confront the Lombard threat. His response to these challenges never fails to impress. Gregory overhauled the administration of papal estates, initiated the conversion to Catholic Christianity of the Lombards – and, famously, he sent a mission to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons now occupying the former Roman province. In other words, where Justinian's project of imperial reunification had failed, Gregory succeeded in bringing new peoples into the fold of the Church in the Latin West.

For these achievements, Gregory was long to be remembered – a scenario which he himself could not have imagined. Gregory's most certain conviction was that the end of the world was at hand. He styled himself after the Old Testament prophets, but above all, as we shall see, he took as his model the Apostle Paul: as Paul had done, Gregory saw it to be his duty to gather in the faithful in the Last Days.

Gregory's reputation, his perceived 'greatness', poses a problem if it is the historical Gregory whom we seek. He was first called 'magnus' by his late ninth-century Roman biographer, John the Deacon.[6] If the intention was to ensure that Gregory's renown rivalled that of the Frankish Emperor Charles the Great, it largely succeeded. John the Deacon's Vita Gregorii became the definitive account of Gregory's life and work, and the title 'magnus' stuck, sealing Gregory's status as a monumental figure.

Our capacity to understand Gregory in his own context suffers as a result. Every age has been tempted to project onto Gregory its own ideas of 'greatness'. He is the saviour of his city from barbarians, the leader of Christian Europe, the founder of modern pastoral theology. For Erich Caspar, himself one of greatest historians of the papacy, the greatness of Gregory lay in his personality. „Man hat mit Recht nicht Gregor sondern Gelasius I. den größten Papst zwischen Leo d. Gr. und Nicolaus I. genannt. Aber fragt man nach dem größten christlichen Charakter, so gebührt Gregor unter allen Päpsten die Palme."[7] Caspar's well-taken point is that Gregory's contribution to the course of papal history was charismatic rather than institutional – but his assessment comes close to eliding the late sixth-century historical agent with the late ninth-century literary creation 'Gregory the Great'. Any renewed search for Gregory in his immediate context has to find a way behind the canonical image erected well after his death and renewed repeatedly across the medieval centuries.

The Carolingian remaking of Gregory cannot simply be thought away: it has done permanent damage to the historical record. Our best source for Gregory in his context is his letters, some 850 of which have survived. This makes Gregory by far the most richly-documented bishop of Rome, indeed individual *tout court*, in early

[6] John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii IV, 63, PL 75, 213. For discussion, see Paul Lehmann, Mittelalterliche Beinamen und Ehrentitel, in: Historisches Jahrbuch 49 (1929) 215–239, at 220–223.

[7] Erich Caspar, Geschichte des Papsttums von den Anfängen bis zur Höhe der Weltherrschaft, zweiter Band: Das Papsttums unter Byzantinischer Herrschaft (Tübingen 1933) 514, trans. Robert A. Markus, Gregory the Great and his World (Cambridge 1997) 203: "Not Gregory but Gelasius I has rightly been described as the greatest pope between Leo the Great and Nicholas I. But if one were to ask about the greatest Christian personality, then the prize among all popes would have to go to Gregory."

medieval Europe. From Leo I, for example, we have only some 160 letters and decretals.[8] But these riches can flatter to deceive. To begin with, we must distinguish between those form letters generated by the papal administration, and those which Gregory seems to have drafted himself. As Dag Norberg has demonstrated, the rhythmical precision of Gregory's prose makes it possible to do this.[9]

Far less easy to determine is the question of how many letters have been lost. According to John the Deacon, there were fourteen volumes of papyrus letters in the papal archives. How many letters of Gregory it contained we can never know. Based on an assessment of the productivity of the papal *scrinium*, one scholar puts the estimate at 20,000. This is likely to be too high, but an estimate of over 1,300 at least, and maybe 3,000 to 4,000 does not seem implausible.[10] From this original Register, John the Deacon tells us, Pope Hadrian I (d. 799) had made a two-volume selection. This shorter edition, containing some 684 letters and copied onto parchment, was an immediate success. Within a century it had displaced the original, even in Rome. John the Deacon made very heavy use of Gregory's correspondence to compose his Vita Gregorii, but used the Hadrianic Register, even as he challenged sceptical readers to consult the original papyrus volumes.[11] After John, we lose sight of the original Register altogether. We do not know when or whether it was discarded or destroyed. The long term effect of the Carolingian monumentalization of Gregory – Hadrian's Register and John's Vita – was thus to render *de trop* three-quarters of our best evidence for the historical Gregory.

With regard to Gregory's other works, the manuscript evidence is much better, but the problem of discerning Gregory can be no less acute.[12] Our abstracted notion of Gregory and 'the gregorian' can make it impossible for us to assess sixth-century evidence. To take the best-known example: there has survived a late sixth-century Roman manuscript of the Pastoral Rule (Troyes 504).[13] The text, beautifully copied in what Elias A. Lowe called 'new style' uncial, has been corrected with marginal and interlinear glosses in the same script. From Mabillon onwards, scholars have been perhaps unduly mesmerized by the possibility that the manuscript emanates from Gregory's own circle, or even his own hand. The corrections are not only to spelling or biblical citation, but to the wording of the treatise itself. In his Codices Latini Antiquiores, Lowe averred "Written in Italy and probably in Rome as suggested by the paleography of the manuscript and the manner in which the text is manipulated … obviously it bears the mark of a book revised under the author's immediate supervision."[14] More recently, Armando Petrucci has followed suit, hailing the codex as the finest example of Roman uncial, and drawing attention to two Tironian marginal notes deciphered by Fabio Troncarelli as 'Codex meus'; the Troyes manuscript is at one remove from Gregory's autograph is the triumphant conclusion. [15]

Other scholars have sought to sound a note of caution. Rosamond McKitterick suggests that the hand may be Merovingian, and not Roman uncial.[16] Paolo Chiesa, in an exhaustive survey of the corrections, concludes

---

[8] Detlev Jasper/Horst Fuhrmann, Papal Letters in the Early Middle Ages (Washington-D.C. 2001) 41–52 (Leo), and 70–81 (Gregory).

[9] Dag Norberg, Qui a composé les lettres de saint Grégoire le Grand, in: Studi Medievali 3a serie 21 (1980) 1–17; and the same author's Style personnel et style administratif dans le Registrum epistularum de saint Grégoire le Grand, in: Grégoire le Grand, ed. Jacques Fontaine/Robert Gillet/Stan Pellistrandi (Paris 1986) 489–496.

[10] The estimate of 20,000 is given by Ernst Pitz, Papstreskripte in frühen Mittelalter. Diplomatische und rechtsgeschichtliche Studien zum Brief-Corpus Gregors des Großen (Sigmaringen 1990) 251–252; and the note of caution by Markus, Gregory the Great 206.

[11] Lucia Castaldi, Il Registrum Epistularum di Gregorio Magno, in: Filologia Mediolatina 11 (2004) 55–97.

[12] I would signal briefly here the controversy over the authenticity of the Dialogues (attested first in a late seventh-century manuscript). Since the Reformation, it has been an axiom for some that Gregory 'the Great' could not have written a text as trivial as the Dialogues, containing as it does stories of magical wells and monastic lettuces. Conversely, some of the defenders of the text's authenticity appeal no less strongly to the majestic qualities of the text to make their case. Both sides in this discussion have made of 'Gregory' a fixed and ahistorical image. See Francis Clark, The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues, 2 vols. (Studies in the History of Christian Thought, Leiden 1987), and Markus, Gregory the Great 15–16, for further bibliography.

[13] See now Codex Trecensis. La "Regola pastorale" di Gregorio Magno in un codice del VI–VII secolo: Troyes, Médiathèque de l'Agglomération Troyenne, 504, 1: Riproduzione fotografica, ed. Luigi G.G. Ricci, 2: Studi critici, ed. Armando Petrucci (Florence 2005).

[14] Elias A. Lowe, Codices Latini Antiquiores VI, No. 838.

[15] Armando Petrucci/Franca Nardelli, Il codice e le sue scritture, in: Codex Trecensis. La "Regola pastorale" di Gregorio Magno in un codice del VI–VII secolo: Troyes, Médiathèque de l'Agglomération Troyenne, 504, 2: Studi critici, ed. Armando Petrucci (Florence 2005) 14–29, citing a personal communication from Fabio Troncarelli at 24, n. 52.

[16] Personal communication 28.2.08. On Merovingian uncial in general, see Rosamond McKitterick, The scriptoria of Merovingian Gaul: A survey of the evidence, in: Columbanus and Merovingian monasticism, ed. Howard B. Clarke/Mary Brennan (British

equivocally: the effect of the corrector's intervention is one of simplification, betraying an intimate understanding of Gregory's arguments, but taking the text away from Gregory's normal linguistic register.[17] This leaves open both the possibility that the revised edition represents Gregory's second thoughts, and that the corrector is someone else altogether. Further technical inquiry may not, in fact, resolve the matter: instead of pursuing the question which version is more 'gregorian' – the original or the corrected version – we might do better to abandon the unitary notion of 'Gregory' that underpins the whole discussion.

A second problem emerges, ironically, from our efforts to get behind the greatness of Gregory. Crudely speaking, we impute to him an 'inner self' which he is unlikely to have recognized. His writings appeal constantly to the categories of 'inner' and 'outer', and it is not hard to find passages where he seems to reveal intimate truths about his deepest experiences. As argued from the outset, however, this is profoundly to misread the ancient language of political identity. What Norberg calls the 'style personnel' of Gregory's letters is hardly spontaneous outburst: it required more work (and quite possibly more collaborative work) than the form letters issued by his scribes.[18]

These two problems compound each other. We regard Gregory as a monumental figure, but one we are able to 'understand'. Many portraits of Gregory resemble sympathetic journalistic profiles where the reporter looks to create the impression that s/he has managed to penetrate behind the façade of the public man to catch him in moments of vulnerability.[19] What such depictions do not notice is the extent to which this 'glimpse of the inner man' is itself a performance sustained by Gregory in his capacity as a well-educated public speaker and office-holder. In short, the 'man behind the pope' is a public identity Gregory worked carefully to create. To recapitulate it in our accounts of his experience is to mime rather than explain his strategy. Gregory appealed, no doubt to a degree instinctively, to ancient rhetorical codes of self-presentation. Nothing was more conventional to a writer of his day than those apparently telling moments on which we fix as self-revelatory.

NOLO EPISCOPARI

We have very little contemporary external evidence for Gregory.[20] His story, in his own words, is familiar but requires rehearsal here. It is most fully told in the prefatory letter he attached to the Moralia in Iob, the thirty five books of allegorical exegesis sent to Bishop Leander of Seville in 595. Here Gregory recalls his former conversations with Leander about the course of his life:

> "I exposed to your ears everything that I disliked about myself since I had put off the grace of conversion for a long time and even after I was inflamed by a love of Heaven, I thought it better to wear secular clothing … While my mind obliged me to serve this present world in outward action, its cares began to threaten me so that I was in danger of being engulfed in it not only in outward action, but, what is more serious, in my mind."[21]

As we are able to piece together from his correspondence, Gregory was urban Prefect of Rome, the most prestigious office in the city, with primary responsibility for the administration of justice. In 573, however, he laid down his office, and retired to a monastery he had himself founded in a family property on the Caelian Hill. The retirement from public life was not to last.

Archaeological Reports, International Series 113, Oxford 1981) 173–207, reprinted in ead., Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms, 6th–9th Centuries (Aldershot 1994).

[17] Paolo Chiesa, Gregorio al lavoro: Il processo testuale della Regula Pastoralis, in: Codex Trecensis. La "Regola pastorale" di Gregorio Magno in un codice del VI–VII secolo: Troyes, Médiathèque de l'Agglomération Troyenne, 504, 2: Studi critici, ed. Armando Petrucci (Florence 2005) 31–99.

[18] See Norberg, Style personnel.

[19] A problem afflicting even excellent studies such as Claude Dagens, Saint Grégoire le Grand: culture et expérience chrétiennes (Paris 1977).

[20] As observed by Markus, Gregory the Great 1.

[21] Gregory, Registrum epistularum V, 53a (ed. Paul Ewald/Ludo Moritz Hartmann, MGH EE 1, 1 and 2, Berlin 1891) 1, 354: *omne in tuis auribus, quod mihi de me displicebat, exposui, quoniam diu longeque conversionis gratiam distuli et postquam caelesti sum desiderio afflatus, saeculari habitu contegi melius putavi … Cumque adhuc me cogeret animus praesenti mundo crescere, ut in eo iam non specie, sed, quod est gravius, mente retinerer.* Translation adapted from J. Martin, The Letters of Gregory the Great, 3 vols. (Toronto 2004) 1, 379.

> "But finally I fled anxiously from all of this, and looked for the haven of a monastery, leaving behind what belonged to the world, as I then mistakenly thought. From the shipwreck of this life, I came out naked. For as a wave, once a storm has built up, often shakes a carelessly tethered boat even from off a bay on the safest of shores, so I suddenly found myself on an ocean of secular cases, under the pretext of ecclesiastical rank."[22]

In c. 578, Gregory was made a deacon and sent as papal apocrisiarius to Constantinople; it was here that he began the allegorical exposition of the Book of Job that he was later to write up as the thirty-five books of the Moralia in Iob. In 585/6, he was recalled to Rome where he continued to serve in the papal administration. In 590, Pope Pelagius died, and Gregory was chosen to succeed. He was the first monk to be pope.

In a flurry of letters to episcopal colleagues following his election, Gregory represents his assumption of office as a disaster.[23] If anything, the stricken tone increased rather than diminished in volume as his tenure wore on. In the preface to the Dialogues, composed in 593, Gregory deplores his experience in power, and the interruption to the life of contemplation he would rather be leading;[24] again in his Homilies on Ezekiel (begun in 592–593, finally completed by 601) Gregory interrupts the course of his own exegesis to vilify himself under every possible heading – berating not only his loss of contemplative repose but also his failure as a moral guide.[25] The thread of lament continues in his letters through to his death, his spiritual suffering compounded by the physical pain of gout. No wonder that in the dedicatory letter to the Moralia, he compared himself to the afflicted Job.[26]

These passages are the basis for the stubborn view that Gregory became pope "in spite of himself."[27] It is granted, on this account, that reluctance to power was a well-established topos. But the claim is made that Gregory's insistence on this theme goes beyond the "merely rhetorical". As I have argued repeatedly, this is to mistake both the character of the rhetorical tradition in which Gregory operated, and it is to misapprehend his immediate political circumstances.[28] Gregory's vulnerability in power should not be taken as a transparent window onto his heart. In comparing himself to Job, his point was surely to argue that he was everyman.

An ancient audience, Christian or pagan, would have had no difficulty in recognizing Gregory's reluctance to assume power, and his declarations of suffering in power as part of his moral claim to rule. The paradox of reluctance and entitlement had been established by Plato in the Republic. The person who despised power was the one who could best be trusted to exercise it on behalf of the common good. This is what entitled philosophers to be kings. As Pliny the Younger said to none other than the Emperor Trajan: *recusabas enim imperare, recusabas, quod enim imperaturi.*[29]

This Platonic theme was hardwired into Roman political discourse. In 1948, in a little-noticed article, Jean Béranger showed that the seizure of power by Augustus required an asseveration that his position had been thrust upon him, and that he exercised it in deference to the unanimous will of the people. As Béranger very pertinently says, "The sincerity [or otherwise] of these statements has nothing to do with their historicity. What matters is that these statements were made, they have meaning, they allow us to reconstruct a context."[30]

---

[22] Gregory, Registrum epistularum V, 53a, ed. Ewald/Hartmann 354: *Quae tandem cuncta sollicite fugiens portum monasterii petii et relictis quae mundi sunt, ut frustra tunc credidi, ex huius vitae naufragio nudus evasi. Quia enim plerumque navem incaute religatam etiam de sinu tutissimi litoris unda excutit, cum tempestas excrescit, repente me sub praetextu ecclesiastici ordinis in causarum saecularium pelago repperi.*

[23] Gregory, Registrum epistularum I, 5–7, ed. Ewald/Hartmann 5–10.

[24] Gregory, Dialogi prol. 3–6 (ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, SC 251, 260, 265, Paris 1978–1980) 12–14.

[25] Gregory, Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam I, 11, 4–6 (ed. Marc Adriaen, CC SL 142, Turnhout 1971) 170–172.

[26] Gregory, Registrum epistularum V, 53a, ed. Ewald/Hartmann 357.

[27] See e.g. Robert Gillet, Grégoire le Grand, in: Dictionnaire de Spiritualité 6, 875–876; Dagens, Grégoire 84, 140.

[28] Conrad Leyser, 'Let Me Speak, Let Me Speak': Vulnerability and authority in Gregory the Great's Homilies on Ezekiel, in: Gregorio Magno e il suo tempo 2 (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 33, Roma 1991) 169–182; id., Vulnerability and power: The early Christian rhetoric of masculine authority, in: Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 80, 3 (1998) 159–173; id., Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great (Oxford 2000) 142; see also Markus, Gregory the Great 25.

[29] Pliny the Younger, Pan. 5, 5–6. "You refused to rule: you refused, precisely because you were about to rule."

[30] Jean Béranger, Le refus du pouvoir (Recherches sur l'aspect idéologique du principat), in: Museum Helveticum 5 (1948) 178–196: "La sincérité de des sentiments n'a rien à voir avec leur historicité. Ce qui importe, c'est que ces paroles one été prononcées, qu'elles ont un sens, qu'elles contribuent a reconstituer une situation."

In the later Empire, Béranger shows, the demonstration of reluctance was no less a prominent feature of political discourse, as is born out by the panegyrics of Symmachus, the letters of the Emperor Julian, or the Gesta of Ammianus Marcellinus. Christian emperors and now also their bishops instinctively asserted this theme on their assumption of office.[31] The political logic of their situation demanded nothing less: they were at least as vulnerable as the Emperor Augustus to the accusation that they had seized power for their own gain. This was certainly the case with Ambrose of Milan, who in 374 moved from the office of provincial governor in northern Italy to bishop of Milan. In the account of Rufinus of Aquileia, Ambrose's accession was a story of a divided city miraculously uniting around one diffident candidate for office. Ambrose's own writings, his biographer, and again Rufinus of Aquileia went to some lengths to assert his surprise, repeated attempts to escape election and eventual acquiescence to the will of the people. Neil McLynn has shown that these sources can be understood to reflect the precariousness of Ambrose's position, and the need to negotiate carefully to build consensus before risking the claim to command. That he was subsequently remembered in the Latin West as 'the reluctant bishop' *par excellence* is a testament to his political skill and the commitment of his disciples to sustaining this image.[32]

Political weakness, not psychological ambivalence also accounts for the most sustained development of this theme in the later Empire: the Apologia de fuga of Gregory of Nazianzen, composed on the occasion of his accession to the patriarchate of Constantinople. Gregory was an episcopal transferee, having already been chosen for the much less prestigious rural see of Sasima: demonstrating the absence of ambition was essential. The tenuousness of his position can be indexed by his resignation just a few weeks after assuming office.[33]

Gregory admired Ambrose and he cited Gregory of Nazianzen's De fuga: again, political logic dictated no less.[34] His own *situation* (in Béranger's sense) was every bit as precarious as theirs. Taking office at a moment of civic crisis, Gregory insisted on bringing many of his ascetic colleagues with him into the papal administration. To the Roman clergy they displaced, this was little short of a *coup*. An immediate political function of the rhetoric of reluctance was to deflect accusations of ambition from this group. This may help to account for the continuation, or even escalation, of the language of lament beyond 590. Tension between Gregory's circle and his enemies, in so far as we can trace it, increased through the decade, and came out into the open on his death. The next two generations, in fact, saw conflict in Rome with differing candidates for papal office.[35] We need invoke no interior conflict on Gregory's part to account for expressions of vulnerability in power.

Gregory's protestations are thus part of the grammar of ancient politics. His insistence is an index neither of his heartfeltness nor of his hypocrisy, but of the urgency with which he needed to establish his credentials to rule. By the same token, however, it is fair to say that his ambitions as a ruler extended beyond mere political survival. Gregory came to power with a programme in mind. The classical rhetoric of reluctance deflected accusations: it was also the beginning of a 'charm offensive' through which office holders sought to win friends and create disciples. A bishop's *nolo episcopari*, in other words, pointed towards his active exercise of power, and, specifically his authority as a teacher.

ANCIENT CARE OF SELF AND OTHERS

At the start of Book III of the Pastoral Rule, Gregory sets out thirty six different pairs of contrasting temperaments, detailing the contrasting admonitions to be delivered to each.[36] It is at this juncture too that he explicitly cites Gregory of Nazianzen. What he drew from the De fuga was not only tropes of reluctance, but

[31] See in general Yves Congar, Ordinations invitus, coactus de l'Église antique au canon 214, in: Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques 50 (1966) 169–197.

[32] For references and further discussion, see Neil McLynn, Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital (Berkeley-Ca. 1994) 1–52.

[33] Neil McLynn, A self-made holy man: The case of Gregory Nazianzen, in: Journal of Early Christian Studies 6, 3 (1998) 463–483; on episcopal transfer in this period, see Mary Sommar, Pragmatic application of proto-canon law: Episcopal translation, in: Confrontation in Late Antiquity: Imperial Presentation and Regional Adaptation, ed. Linda J. Hall (Cambridge 2003) 89–101.

[34] See Gregory, Regula pastoralis (ed. Bruno Judic, Gregoire le Grand, Règle Pastorale, SC 381, 382, Paris 1992) 26–39, on Gregory's use of Gregory Nazianzen and Ambrose in the Pastoral Rule.

[35] Peter Llewellyn, The Roman church in the seventh century: the legacy of Gregory I, in: Journal of Ecclesiastical History 25 (1974) 363–380.

[36] Gregory, Regula pastoralis III. pref., ed. Judic 258, drawing on Gregory, Moralia XXX, 3, 13.

also tropes of rulership (The term used by Gregory for ruler, *rector*, meaning anyone who held power, not just bishops, most likely came from Gregory of Nazianzen). In other words, the Pastoral Rule follows De fuga in its development from apparently melancholy introspection to robust moral guidance. 'Self-revelation' forms part of a carefully judged strategy aimed at the (re)formation of other selves, both in theory (the Pastoral Rule) and in practice (the Register).

As a practical manual on rulership, however, the Pastoral Rule can bewilder its modern readers. "Nowhere does Gregory provide a context for the extremely individual spiritual direction he advises", observes one commentator.[37] The reason for this, we suggest, is that the 'context' he had in mind was the nebulous but well-trodden space of ancient philosophical dialogue. In the preface to his own Dialogues, Gregory is in fact explicit that he and his interlocutor have retreated to the unspecified *locus amoenus* occupied by all moral teachers since Socrates.[38] Here the teacher could count on the full attention of his disciples as he sought to impart the ways and means of self-knowledge. All were aware that this did not actually happen in a vacuum. The *locus amoenus* was a way, temporarily, to aestheticize the ruthless world of power politics.

Two canonical figures defined Gregory's approach as a moral guide of souls. One is the Apostle Paul – for Gregory the moral teacher past compare, the *egregius praedicator* whose brilliant feats of correction he never tires of recounting, as we shall see below. The other was the Stoic Seneca the Younger (d. 65 CE). Gregory knew and used his Seneca as a matter of course. Nero's court philosopher dealt with topics and questions of obvious relevance and interest, such as the "analysis of the vices and virtues … the relative merits of the contemplative life and the active life, whether withdrawal from public life can be justified."[39] In particular, as many commentators have observed, it is in Seneca's work that we find the sustained use of personal experience as a tool of moral exhortation – the technique so central to Gregory's approach. Seneca to Lucilius:

> "I shall do as you ask and shall happily relate to you in my letters what I am doing. I shall keep watching myself continually and – which is a very useful habit – review each day. For what makes us so bad is this, that none of us looks back on his own life."[40]

In a passage which has become celebrated in modern philosophical writings, Seneca recounts how Sextius used to examine himself at the end of every day. "What faults have you cured today? What vice have you resisted? In what ways are your improved?" These stories of self-examination, and its exemplification, were meant to inspire Seneca's young charge Lucilius to follow suit.

Seneca's appeal to personal experience has captivated many scholars in search of ancient roots for our sense of self; he occupies pride of place in a modern canon that runs from Georg Misch's classic Geschichte der Autobiographie to Michel Foucault's History of Sexuality. Foucault's (in some ways very traditional) claim to see in Seneca the key "technician of the self" after Plato and before Augustine has been variously received by Anglo-American audiences.[41] While this is no place for a full review, a brief rehearsal of the issues can serve to clarify the nature of the contribution essayed here to an understanding of Gregory and pre-modern 'identity politics'. Some sceptics have argued that Foucault's approach is ontologically extravagant in positing the existence of 'a self'.[42] For this minimalist school, it should be explained, the Socratic 'Know thyself' is an injunction to reflexivity: the object of knowledge is the soul. Seneca's project of 'self-examination' was no more than a continuation of ancient therapy of soul, albeit with a marked rhetorical flavour. On the other hand, there are 'maximalists' for whom 'the self' comes into being with Platonic self-knowledge. From this perspective, Foucault's analysis is reductive in its emphasis on discourse over reality,[43] and anarchic in its fascination with discontinuity, when there is in fact continuity.[44]

---

[37] Judith McClure, Gregory the Great. Exegesis and Audience (Oxford D. Phil. thesis 1979) 120.

[38] Ernst Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, Engl. trans. Willard R. Trask (New York 1953).

[39] Marcia Colish, The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages 1 (Leiden 1985) 14.

[40] Seneca, Epistula 83, 2, cited and discussed by, among others, Catharine Edwards, Self-scrutiny and self-transformation in Seneca's letters, in: Greece & Rome 44, 1 (1997) 23–38.

[41] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, tr. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York 1976–1984); see also id., L'Herméneutique du Sujet (Paris 2001); Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault, ed. L. Martin/H. Gutman/P. Hutton (Amherst-Mass. 1988).

[42] Brad Inwood, Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome (Oxford 2005) esp. 322–352.

[43] Taylor, Sources of the Self.

[44] Sorabji, Self 52–53.

Granted that this discussion is a search for the mythical origins of the modern self – much as nineteenth-century historians sought out the origins of the nation-state – one is still struck by its political naïvété. Whatever serene appearances to the contrary Seneca may have sought to maintain, he lived his life at the beck and call of autocrats; when instructed to take poison by Nero, he did so.[45] When he and others discussed control of anger, it was because of the vertiginous political conditions under which they lived: lives were in play as *domini* succeeded or failed to rein in their tempers.[46]

The largely ahistorical and apolitical quality of modern philosophical accounts of the self weakens their capacity to assess the impact of the rise of Christianity. Most philosophically-minded commentators, to a greater or a lesser extent, promote the view that Christianity lent an oppressive element to classical discussion of selfhood. In Richard Sorabji's view, to pass from Seneca to Augustine is to leave the world of Stoic self-control for that of Christian extremism in the fight against temptation. As Peter Brown has observed, to tell this story in terms of a demonization of the morally neutral ancient passions is to miss the point.[47] The earliest Christian communities, those to whom Paul of Tarsus wrote, were not highly placed in the social pyramid. They were tiny sectarian groups: only radical solidarity would preserve them. If they sought to eliminate and not merely control the passions, to make heart speak to heart in the group, this was because it was their only realistic political option, not out of a wilful neurosis.

This is not to say that Christians existed in a social or cultural vacuum. Clarence Glad has shown that Paul's approach as moral guide partook of standard ancient philosophical moral formation (which he names "psychagogy").[48] Paul's "I became all things to all people that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9, 22) drew in part on the same Stoic tradition which formed Seneca; but the best analogy is perhaps to be found in Epicurean communities in southern Italy, as witnessed in the writings of Philodemus of Gadara. The sociology of these communities was similar to that of the early Jesus movement. Moral instruction was needed to foster the strength of the group as a whole, and not only the moral advance of single pupils in a one-to-one master-disciple relationship. Epicurean and early Christian communities thus took tentative steps away from an ancient culture of friendship based on moral equivalence, towards a candid assessment of strength and weakness on the part of those instructed. What both Paul and Philodemus developed was a science of admonition based on adaptability. Different people required different remedies, and there were different remedies to be applied at different times. The key in particular lay in knowing when to strike – when to deliver harsh criticism. Glad has shown that their deliberations on this topic are remarkably similar. The difference lies in their understanding of the stakes: unlike Paul, Philodemus was not of the view that the world was about to end. (This is not to say that his moral fervour was less than that of Paul's.)

How did the Pauline tradition develop past the first century, in a context of diminishing apocalyptic expectations and greatly widening this-worldly possibilities? After Constantine, of course, the temporal and social horizons of Christian psychagogy changed dramatically. This is not the place to explore the booming development of Christian advice literature across the late Roman period – a process obscured by later monastic copyists who had little interest in treatises for the married laity.[49] Suffice it to say here that Christian guides could now play Seneca to their imperial Neros, and they seem to have noticed. In the late fourth century, we find a forged correspondence between Paul and Seneca.[50] These 'letters', known to Jerome when he composed his De viris illustribus, seem to have arisen as a rhetorical school exercise. Just as Augustine learned to take the part of Dido in her lament for the Italy-bound Aeneas, so other pupils may have been charged with imaging the voice of Paul and Seneca.[51] Seneca begins:

---

[45] See Miriam Griffin, Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics (Oxford [2]1991) 367–388.

[46] On this theme in general, see William Harris, Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity (Cambridge-Mass. 2002).

[47] Richard Sorabji, Emotion and Peace of Mind. From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation (Oxford 2000), reviewed by Peter Brown, in: Philosophical Books 43, 3 (2002) 185–208.

[48] Clarence Glad, Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 81, Leiden 1995); see also Friendship, Flattery and Frankness of Speech. Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World, ed. John Fitzgerald (Supplements to the Novum Testamentum 82, Leiden/New York 1996).

[49] See now Kate Cooper, The Fall of the Roman Household (Cambridge 2007).

[50] Epistula Senecae ad Paulum et Pauli ad Senecam 'quae vocantur' (ed. Colin Barlow, Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome 10, Horn 1938).

[51] Augustine, Confessiones I, 13, 21 (ed. Luc Verheijen, CC SL 27, 1, 1, Turnhout 1981) 11f.

> "I believe that you have been informed, Paul, of the discussion which my friend Lucilius and I held yesterday … When we had read one of your treatises, that is to say one of the many letters of wondrous exhortation to an upright life which you have sent to some city or to the capital of a province, we were completely invigorated."[52]

To which Paul replies:

> "I was extremely glad to receive your letter yesterday, and I could have answered it immediately if I had had with me the young man whom I intended to send to you. You know when and by whom and at what time and to whom a thing should be given or entrusted … But I count myself fortunate in the approval of a man who is so great. For you, a critic, a philosopher, the teacher of so great a ruler nay, even of everyone, would not say this, unless you speak sincerely."[53]

The correspondence has thrown modern observers off the scent in all sorts of ways. It was long mistakenly used as evidence that late Roman Christians thought Seneca had converted.[54] But this is not the conversion of Seneca: it is the conversion of Paul from apostle to the gentiles to court philosopher.

The correspondence of Paul and Seneca provides a useful point of comparison with another, better-known rhetorical exercise, which uses the memory of Paul as a moral teacher. In his Confessions, composed 397–401, it is to Paul that Augustine turns at the moment of decision in the garden in Milan.[55] As is now well established, in framing the story of his conversion here, Augustine drew on his rereading of Paul in the early 390s.[56] His encounter during these years with Paul's Letter to the Romans has been monumentalized, in anticipation of the readings of Paul on the grace of salvation by Luther and Calvin. Seen in its late fourth century context, Augustine's purpose was not to create a proto-Protestant interiority, but to establish his own view of Paul in the new dispensation of the Christian Empire. Augustine neither shared Paul's conviction of impending apocalypse, nor was he content to conscript Paul as a court philosopher, celebrating the Christian takeover of imperial cult. He himself had turned aside from a promising career as imperial orator, rejecting the role of triumphalist ideologue at the imperial court in Milan. In returning to the smaller world of north Africa, Augustine resought something of the intimacy of the early Christian universe. The Confessions are a Pauline text in the sense that they chronicle Augustine's search for friendship and community, the transparency of heart to heart. This provincial discussion of the 'relational self' was, among other things, a way to maintain contact with a pre-Constantinian Christianity unused to the giddy access to power.[57]

Paul as Seneca, Paul as Augustine: these were the models bequeathed by the fourth century to those, like Gregory, in search of an 'identity politics' suited to their needs and purposes. While he drew on these models, Gregory took up a third position. Seneca was a courtier, Augustine was an ex-courtier, he, Gregory, was the philosopher-king himself. But the figure around whom Gregory's exquisitely self-conscious reflections on philophical rulership coalesce is still Paul.

GREGORY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

The central fact of Gregory's world, in his view, was that it was about to end. He had in mind not only the political collapse of the western Empire and the failure of Justinian's reconquest. The signs of the impending Second Coming were everywhere to see, they were thickening, the dawn-light of the new age was breaking through the cosmos. The corollary of this perception, after 590 at least, was that it had fallen to him to respond to this situation. No less than Paul, Gregory sought to gather in the faithful in the Last Days. Hence the famous

---

[52] Epistula Senecae ad Paulum et Pauli ad Senecam, ed and trans. Barlow 139–140; Latin text on 123–124: *Credo tibi, Paule, nuntiatum quod heri cum Lucilio nostro de apocrifis et aliis rebus habuerimus … [L]ibello tuo lecti, id est de plurimis aliquas litteras quas ad aliquam civitatem seu caput provinciae direxisti mira exhortatione vitam moralem continentes, usque refecti sumus.*

[53] Epistula Senecae ad Paulum et Pauli ad Senecam, ed. Barlow 140; Latin text on 125: *Litteras tuas hilaris heri accepi, ad quas rescribere statim potui, si praenetiam iuvenis quem ad te eram missurus habuissem. Scis enim quando et per quem et quo tempore et cui dari committique debeat … Sed quod litteris meis vos bene acceptos alicubi scribis, felicem me arbitror tanti viri iudicio. Nec enim hoc diceres, censor sophista magister tanti principis etiam omnium, nisi quia vere dicis.*

[54] Arnaldo Momigliano, Note sulla legenda del cristianesimo di Seneca, in: Rivista Storica Italiana 62 (1950) 325f.

[55] Augustine, Confessiones VIII, 12, 29, ed. Verheijen 131

[56] See Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (London ^{2}2000) 146–157; Robert A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine (Cambridge ^{2}1989) 82–84; Paula Fredriksen, Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self, in: Journal of Theological Studies, n.s. 37 (1986) 3–34.

[57] On the relational self, see Kate Cooper in this volume.

mission to the extreme edge of the Roman world, the former province of Britain abandoned in the fifth century, to convert the *Angli* whom he had heard had settled there.

Gregory's Paul was not the Paul of Augustine. If "For now we see through a glass darkly" had been Augustine's maxim, "But then we shall see face to face, then we shall know even as we are known" was Gregory's. Even as he identified profoundly with Paul's luminous sense of the end times, however, Gregory was aware of that as bishop of Rome, he was no wandering first-century rabbi. His institutional position required him to draw on the fourth-century Paul, the court philosopher who could hold his own in the most elevated, Seneca-reading circles. Gregory's Paul is a hybrid, at once prophet and courtier – but the net result is a teacher to end all teachers, practising the rulership of souls, the skill to end all skills.

To illustrate this, we may return to the Homilies on Ezekiel and the moment when as observed, Gregory interrupts himself to heap shame upon his own head. "Let me speak, let me speak, let the word of God pass through me, even if it condemns me as it does so." As is too infrequently observed, Gregory's lament about his failings is in effect a prologue to a programmatic discussion about how one should preach. By 'preaching', it should be clear, he means teaching by word and example – not, or not only, pulpit oratory.

> "As we have broached the topic of exhortation, we should make a brief set of observations about the order and weight of speaking that should be in the mouth of a pastor. A teacher should weigh what he says, to whom he says it, when to speak, how to speak, and how much to speak. For if one of these is missing, our speech will not be suitable … We should think about what we say, bearing in mind Paul's dictum 'Our speech should always be seasoned with the salt of grace'" (Col 4, 6).[58]

These were standard categories of rhetorical instruction – referred to, indeed, in passing in the correspondence between Paul and Seneca.[59] This is not necessarily to suggest that Gregory knew of the letters – it is enough to observe that the forger and Gregory drew alike on a common pedagogical tradition.

Gregory pursues the theme of Paul's malleability, contrasting his harshness to Titus with his more patient line with Timothy (how to speak) and his very careful 'dripfeeding' of his words of correction in the letter to the Hebrews (when to speak). When it comes to Paul's treatment of the Corinthians Gregory interrupts his exegesis to break out into the vocative. This time, however, it is not to curse himself, but to speak to the Apostle. Paul begins the letter to the Corinthians with fulsome praise of their devotion. To which he adds, "So none of you lack in any grace at all, as you wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ".

> "I ask you, Paul, if none of them lack anything, why do you trouble to write to them? Why do you address them from afar? Let us think, dearest brothers, how much he praises. Look how much reassurance he gives them …"

Paul's tactic, as Gregory reads it, is to calm the Corinthians, and then gently to strike, chiding them for their divisiveness.

> "For the skilful doctor seeing the wound that is to be cut, but seeing also that the patient is afraid, soothes for a long time, and then suddenly strikes. First he lays on a gentle hand, and then he pierces with the knife of correction."

"But surely Paul didn't lie?" asks Gregory. No, of course not. The strong at Corinth were indeed lacking in nothing; it was the weak who were divided, and who required Paul's expert medical attention.[60]

Here we have a key to Gregory's own tactics, should we care to use it. When he condemned himself out of his own mouth, he surely did not lie. Equally, it was a goal of his to reassure the weak as to their own moral standing and capacities. Identification with the weak was the essential prelude to their moral cure, which could be a brutal one, if need be. In Gregory, then, the early Christian psychagogue has ascended to the very height of power. If and when he did pass Trajan's forum, he would have recognized in the Emperor a fellow ruler.

---

[58] Gregory, Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam I, 11, 12, ed. Adriaen 174–175: *Sed quia de exhortatione sermo se intulit, innotescere breviter debemus in ore pastoris quantus esse debeat ordo atque consideratio locutionis. Pensare etenim doctor debet quid loquatur, cui loquatur, quando loquatur, qualiter loquatur, et quantum loquatur. Si unum horum defuerit, locutio apta non erit … Consideremus etenim debemus quid loquamur, ut iuxta Pauli vocem, 'Sermo noster semper in gratia sale sit conditus.*

[59] As above n. 53, Paul to Seneca.

[60] Gregory, Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam I, 11, 18, ed. Adriaen 177: *Peritus enim medicus vulnus secandum videns, sed aegrum timidum esse conspiciens, diu palpavit, et subito percussit … Sed numquid mentitus est Paulus?*

John the Deacon, Gregory's ninth-century biographer, did not approve of the story of Trajan, at least as told by his predecessors.[61] He did not regard it as fitting that Gregory should be seen intervening to save the soul of a pagan, and in his retelling of the story, he sought to drain it of this sensationalist content. In general, John has won much favour with modern scholarly readers for what appears to be a naturalistic, evidence-based approach to the task of biography. The bulk of the text is actually a catena of quotations from the Register, with a narrative frame at the beginning and the end. I have argued elsewhere, however, that for all its empirical solidity, John's composition must be seen at least in part as a polemical tract.[62] It was an attempt to mobilize the memory of Gregory behind Pope John VIII, John's patron, and as a weapon of attack against his enemy, Formosus. At the end of John's account, Gregory appears in a dream and puts to flight an unnamed ghastly apparition, whom contemporaries had no difficulty in identifying as Formosus.[63] John's text in other words partakes of medieval magical realism. Like the story of Trajan, this tale of Gregory seeing off Formosus captures a key medieval element of Gregory's identity.[64] For all his reluctance, humility, and compassion, Gregory was a figure to be feared.

[61] See John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii II, 44, PL 75, 104–106.

[62] See Conrad Leyser, Charisma in the archives: Roman monasteries and the memory of Gregory the Great c. 870–c. 940, in: Le scritture dai monasteri. II Seminario internazionale di studio 'I monasteri nell'alto medioevo', ed. Walter Pohl/Flavia de Rubeis (Roma 2003) 207–224 (with the caveat that this essay accepts a c. 900 date for Pseudo-Paul the Deacon, Vita Gregorii. This text must have been composed before 827: see now Conrad Leyser, The memory of Pope Gregory the Great in the ninth century: A redating of the interpolator's Vita Gregorii (BHL 3640), in: Gregorio magno e le origini dell' Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale, Firenze, 13–17 maggio 2006 (Firenze, forthcoming).

[63] John the Deacon, Vita Gregorii IV, 100, PL 75, 241.

[64] Cf. 'Whitby' Vita Gregorii 28 (immediately preceding the story of Trajan), the story of Gregory's lethal assault on his successor Sabinian.