Disclosing but not Disclosed
Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist

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Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of Holy Scripture as the disclosure in human language of "The Name above every name" leads him beyond allegory as it had traditionally been practiced and towards a theory of reading according to which the Biblical text is the fixed and finite medium of an infinitely variable meaning that can never be exhausted. The Bible is not the revelation of God as God is in his unchangeable nature, but of God as he relates to an ever-changing world and, especially, to the reader as a being caught up in that mobility. The Bible points not behind itself to a metaphysical truth to be discovered and proclaimed, but forward towards a meaning disclosed only in the act of interpretation itself and immediately superceded. The one test of a valid interpretation is that it points to its own inadequacy. For, as Gregory says quoting the apostle, "If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know as he ought"1.

Both in his speculations about the nature of language and in his understanding of Biblical interpretation as an infinite pursuit of what must forever remain absent, Gregory raises issues that have much in common with modern literary theory, especially as practiced by those critics who have come to be labelled as "post-structuralists" and even "deconstructionists"2. Without attempting to remake Gregory in a modern mold, this paper seeks to suggest some points of contact between Gregory and the deconstructionist movement and to explore the implications of some of Gregory's ideas from that point of view.

1. The debate with Eunomius

As is now well recognized, Gregory was forced to focus his attention on the problematic status of language and, especially, theological

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1 Cant 11 (GNO VI 320,20); cf. perf (GNO VIII/1 194,11-14).
2 For a particularly lucid discussion of this movement see Berman.
language, in the context of the debate with Eunomius\(^3\). Eunomius claimed that ungeneracy was uniquely the attribute of the highest God, who alone could be conceived of as without source or origin. Since this ungeneracy distinguishes the supreme being as God the Father not only from ordinary reality, but even from the Son and Holy Spirit, ungeneracy is the very essence of God. Furthermore, God himself, as the author of language, has guaranteed the accuracy of this identity between ungeneracy and the true godhead. For God would not have commanded us to seek after his knowledge if such knowledge had not been given to man. God created the usage and granted to man the knowledge of names suitable to the essences they represent. Names denote essences, and for each distinct essence there can be only one proper name. For his own essence God has granted to man the knowledge of the name "ungeneracy"\(^4\).

Eunomius is an advocate of a representational theory of language\(^5\). Things are perceived as they exist in their essences. God created intelligible concepts that correspond directly to those essences and that can be expressed unambiguously in language. The role of the human mind is passive in the apprehension of the truth; whatever is the product merely of human conception or human naming is no more than a vibration in the air\(^6\). This theory depreciates the human mind, but does so precisely to guarantee that man have direct access to the knowledge of things as they are. Gregory responds to these claims not only by stressing the traditional belief in the inadequacy of human thought and language for the apprehension of the divine nature, but also by emphasizing the role of the human mind in structuring through language the nature of reality as men perceive it.

In answer to Eunomius, Gregory puts forward four claims of his own. He argues, first, that language is a human invention and therefore both arbitrary and fallible, so that the ability of language to express any reality whatsoever in its own essence is questionable. Second, he maintains that language is bound to an order of reality so entirely unlike the divine nature that words cannot even inadequate-

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\(^3\) On the significance of the Eunomian debate for Gregory's theory of language see especially MÜHLENBERG, Unendlichkeit Gottes; CANÉVET, Herméneutique biblique; YOUNG; KOBUSCH.

\(^4\) Eunomius' theory of language was contained in the second book of his Apologia Apologiae, of which Gregory gives extensive excerpts in his second book Against Eunomius (GNO I, esp. 281-347). For discussion see, in addition to MÜHLENBERG, Unendlichkeit Gottes; and CANÉVET, Herméneutique biblique; DANIÉLOU, Eunome; and KOPECEK. The fragments of Eunomius have been collected by VÄGGIONE 1987.

\(^5\) The "representational" or "referential" theory of language is most especially associated with the name of John Locke. See BERMAN 13-17.

\(^6\) CE II 44 (GNO I 238,26-29).