Challenging the Heretic: The Preface of Gregory of Nyssa’s Contra Eunomium III

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In the letter to his brother Peter, written between the summer of 380 and the first months of 381, as it is well-known, Gregory supplies some information regarding the writing of the Contra Eunomium (hereinafter CE): the short time he disposed of Eunomius’ text only allowed him to answer the first book and the insults against Basil moved him at times to reply. Nevertheless, there is another point on which Gregory dwells and which is interesting for the present enquiry: If the first part of the discourse (τὰ πρῶτα τοῦ λόγου) seems somewhat outside the controversy (ἐξαγώνια), such an arrangement of the discourse will, I think, be approved by one who judges carefully . . . Besides, if anyone reasons about it accurately, the pages are also part of the controversy (ταῦτα μέρη τῶν ἐγγύων ἔστιν). Without tackling the question whether Gregory refers only to the first or also to the second book of CE, it is interesting to point out that he defines his work as a contest, according to a terminology that, as it will be seen, is not at all alien to him. In fact, in Epistle 15, again about CE, he writes to John and Maximian: But if any part of the treatise appears worthy of the ear of the sophist, choose certain passages, especially those before the debates (τὰ πρὸ τῶν ἐγγύων μάλιστα), and take to him specimens of choice style (ὅσα τῆς λεκτικῆς ἰδέας).  

1 On the dating of the Epistle 29 see G. Pasquali, Gregorii Nysseni Epistulae, GNO VIII/2, Leiden 1959, 87.
3 Ep. 15,4. Pasquali (“Le lettere di Gregorio di Nissa”, SIFC 3 (1923) 75–136, here 111) conjectured ἐπιλεκτικῆς for ἐπιλεκτῆς of the ms. Maraval (Grégoire de Nyssse: Lettres, SC 363, Paris 1990, 210), on whose text the translation of A. Silvas is based, accepts instead the conjecture of Müller (λεκτικῆς), which now seems preferable, considering the historical background. The dating of the Epist. 15 is not sure; nevertheless the remarks of R. Criscuolo seem solid (Gregorio di Nissa. Lettere, Quaderni di Κοινωνία 6, Napoli 1981, 39). Unlike Pasquali, he considers it most probable that Gregory refers to the first two books of CE and his proposal is to date the letter to the end of 381. According to A. Silvas (Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters, SVigChr 83, Leiden-Boston 2007, 158) the letter can be dated to 382 or to the spring of 383. Here it is not possible to tackle the problem of the dating of the letter and so we restrict ourselves only to the following remarks: 1) Gregory refers to the parts which precede the theological debate; if we do not understand the expression as having a general meaning, it could be correct to think of
The starting point for the present enquiry is the definition of \textit{CE} as debate and contest with an enemy (ἀγών), as proposed by the Nyssen. Such terminology is also confirmed in every way by the examination of the preface of the second (but not of the first!) \footnote{The preface of \textit{CE} I is structured mainly on the image of the heresy as illness: cf. ex. gr. \textit{CE} I 1, Οὐδὲ τὸ τοῖς ἀνίατα νοσοῦσι τὴν τῶν πολλῶν φαρμάκων προσαπολλοῦν παρασκευὴν ἐπὶ τῷ τῆς ὑφελείας σκοπῷ φέρει τῇ τῆς σπουδῆς ἄξιον; \textit{CE} I 2, Οἱ τε γὰρ νοσώδεις καὶ ἤδη πρὸς θάνατον ἔτιμου τοῖς δραστικωτέροις τῶν φαρμάκων εὐκόλως προσδιαφθείρονται; \textit{CE} I 4, Ὅθεν γὰρ τῷ ὑπερβάλλοντι τῆς κατὰ ψυχὴν ἀρρωστίας . . . ἐκεῖνος δὲ μόνον πρὸς τὴν ἐγχείρησιν τῆς θεραπείας ἐκίνησε τὸν μόνον ἐν τῷ περιττεύοντι τῆς φιλανθρωπίας καὶ τοῖς ἀμηχάνοις ἐπιτολμῶντα πρὸς ἱασιν. Only afterwards, as it will be seen (\textit{CE} I 111ss), Gregory will turn to the metaphor of wrestling.} and of the third book of \textit{CE}, that is of the sections which precede the theological debate, but which, to use the words of Gregory, have to be considered integral parts of the work. Given this shiny awareness by Gregory, one needs to examine the preface of \textit{CE} III with the aim of shedding light on the characteristics of the fight carried out by the Nyssen, the movements of defence and attack, and finally those points considered by the opponents to be either strong or weak. A comparison of this passage with the rest of the author’s production and an analysis of some important sources helps to bring to light a stratified and articulated substratum, in which context it will be possible to place and better understand the preface of \textit{CE} III.

\section{The Rules of the Fight}

The exordium of \textit{CE} III introduces the atmosphere of the fight (ἐν τοῖς ἀγώσι) between Gregory and Eunomius in an exemplary way:

Εἰ τῷ νομίμως ἀθλοῦντι τῶν ἐν τοῖς ἀγῶσι πόνων ὅρος ἐστὶν ἢ τὸ παντελῶς ἀπειπόντα πρὸς τοὺς πόνους τὸν ἀνταγωνιστήν ἐκστῇν τῷ κεκρατηκότι τῆς νίκης ἢ τρισὶ πτώμασι κατὰ τὸν ἀθλητικὸν καταβληθῆναι νόμον, δι’ ὧν γίνεται τῷ νεκρικότι τῇ κρίσει τῶν βραβευόντων ἢ ἐπὶ τῷ στεφάνῳ δόξα διὰ λαμπροῦ τοῦ κηρύγματος . . .

For the athlete who competes in the regular way at the games, it is the rule that either the opponent refuses altogether to go on and voluntarily

\footnote{The prefaces of the 1st, of the 2nd and maybe even of the 3rd book of \textit{CE} 2) Pasquali referred Gregory’s words only to the 1st book of \textit{CE}, in which introduction there is an invective against the heretic, on the basis of his conjecture (ἐπιλέγειν τινί = obstrectare alicui), which is disputed, as it has been seen. Therefore the text of the passage should be examined more accurately and, in the light of lexical remarks exposed in this study (\textit{CE} is defined as a debate), such an analysis should be able to give useful elements to clarify the dating of the letter itself.}