HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF MICHAEL PSELLOS’ THEOLOGICA 59.1*

In this article I would like to discuss the following, interconnected issues that together create a literary and theological context for the analysis of some of Michael Psellos’ ideas expressed in Theologica 59:

1. The patristic origins of Psellos’ terminology used by him to describe the Incarnation of the Logos and possible patristic roots of Psellos’ concept that the deification of Christ’s humanity is mediated by nous.

2. The broader reception of Gregory the Theologian’s terminology used by Psellos in the contemporaneous Orthodox tradition, including liturgical texts.

3. Different opinions, which existed in patristic and Byzantine literature concerning the moment of complete and perfect deification of Christ’s humanity. This issue is directly related to Psellos’ ideas about the mediation of nous in the process of deification and is reflected, among other places, in a well-known liturgical text attributed to Symeon Metaphrastes. Symeon lived slightly earlier than Psellos and was considered authoritative by the latter.

4. The way in which the theme of the mediation of the nous was reflected in the works of Nicodemus Hagiorites in the eighteenth century. Nicodemus was not just an expert in patristic theology but also its perceptive interpreter. His remarks regarding the passage from Gregory the Theologian may indicate a particular tradition of Orthodox interpretation of this type of ambivalent statement. The interpretation, I must add, falls within the tradition of Maximus Confessor’s theology, whose authority for Nicodemus was absolute.

In Theol. 59 Michael Psellos observes that the nous “mediates” between the human body and God during the deification of Christ’s humanity:

επειδή ὁ ἴμετερος νοος μέσος ἔστι σώματος καὶ θεοῦ, τοῦ μὲν λεπτότερος, ἐκείνου δὲ πᾶς ἀν παχύτερος εἶποιμι συγκριτικῶς,

(1) * I would like to thank Prof. Alexei Sivertsev of DePaul University for his help in writing this article and translating it into English.
I shall now consider the traditionalism of such an understanding of deification for patristic writings. It is worth pointing out that when patristic and Byzantine authors discuss union between saints and God they often talk about the mediating role of *nous*. One immediately thinks of a well-known passage from St. Gregory Palamas’ letter to Xene:

"Ἄλλ' ὁ κατηξιωμένος τοῦ φωτὸς ἐκείνου νους καὶ πρὸς τὸ συνημμένον σῶμα πολλὰ διαπορθμεύει τοῦ θείου κάλλους τεκμήρια, χάριτι τε θεία καὶ σαρκὸς παχύτητι μεσιτεύον καὶ δύναμιν τῶν ἀδύνατων ἐντιθείς." 3

Here Palamas observes that the *nous*, having received the vision of divine light, passes on the acquired grace to the body connected with the *nous*. In the process the *nous* serves as a mediator between divine grace and the “coarse body.” The same idea can be found in Palamas’ *Triads*. 4

Unlike Palamas Psellos talks about humanity deified by the Incarnate Logos, and yet the vocabulary he uses is almost exactly the same. It seems that in both cases the terminology can be traced back to St. Gregory the Theologian. In *Theol* 59 (p. 232–233) Psellos provides the following interpretation of Gregory the Theologian:

"Διὰ τούτο περιφρονεῖς θεότητα, ὅτι τῆν σήν παχύτητα κατεδέχατο, διὰ μέσου νοὸς ὁμιλήσας σαρκί, καὶ γενόμενος ἀνθρώπος ὁ κάτω θεός, ἐπειδὴ συνενεκράθη θεώ, καὶ γέγονεν εἰς, τοῦ κρείττονος ἐκκιήσαντος, ἕνα γένομαι τοσοῦτον θεός ὅσον ἐκείνος ἀνθρώπος." 5

In his other writings Gregory the Theologian makes the same observation at least two more times:


(3) Γρηγόριοι τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Συγγράμματα, t. 5 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992) 225–226 (= Φιλοκαλία, τ. Δ' (Αθήναι, 1991) 112).
