

Gregory of Nyssa, Witness of Macrina's Life and Death

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(A preliminary version)

In contrast to Augustine or his namesake Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa did not feel any need to write an account of his own life, or the great deeds which the power of God performed through him.¹ On the other hand, he regarded it as his task to record for “the times to come” the story of someone else’s life, namely his sister Macrina (*Vita sanctae Macrinae*). Unlike in the case of the life of Moses, who – as a model of virtue – also became a subject of Gregory’s account later on,² or in case of Gregory the Wonderworker’s life, taken down because of his family’s reverence for this outstanding man,³ Gregory can bear personal testimony when speaking about Macrina:

We did not have to rely on hearsay since experience was our teacher, and the details of our story did not depend on the testimony of others.⁴

As Gregory himself put it in the dedication of his treatise, the idea of writing such an account was suggested to him by his correspondent (presumably Olympius⁵), to whom he had narrated the story of Macrina’s life:

At that time, you suggested that a history of her good deeds ought to be written because you thought such a life should not be lost sight of in time and, that having raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy, she should not be passed over in silence and her life rendered ineffective. Accordingly, I thought it right to obey you and to write her life story as briefly as I could in an artless and simple narrative.⁶

¹ See Gregory of Nazianzus, *De vita sua* (ed. Ch. Jungck, Heidelberg 1974)!!; Augustinus Aurelius, *Confessiones* (ed. L. Verheijen, CCL 27, Turnhout 1981).

² See *De vita Moysis* (ed. H. Musurillo, GNO VII/1, Leiden 1964), a work in which Gregory addresses the issue of the perfection of life: *τίς ὁ τέλειός ἐστι βίος* (*Vita Moysis I*, GNO VII/1, 2,20f.)

³ See *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi* (ed. G. Heil, GNO X/1, Leiden 1990).

⁴ *Τὸ δὲ διήγημα ἡμῖν οὐκ ἐξ ἀκοῆς ἐτέρων διηγημάτων τὸ πιστὸν εἶχεν, ἀλλ' ὧν ἡ πείρα διδάσκαλος ἦν, ταῦτα δι' ἀκριβείας ἐπεξήγει ὁ λόγος, εἰς οὐδὲν ἀκοὴν ἀλλοτρίαν ἐπιμαρτυρούμενος* (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, ed. V. Woods Callahan, Leiden 1952, p. 371). English translation by V. Woods Callahan (*Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works*, Washington, D.C. 1967), p. 163.

⁵ As for the name of the addressee of Gregory’s work, the manuscript tradition alternates between the following names: Olympius (an ascetic), Hierius, and Euprepius (a bishop); see GNO VIII/1, 370 *ad titulum*.

⁶ Ἐπεὶ οὖν ἐδοκίμασας φέρειν τι κέρδος τὴν τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἱστορίαν, ὡς ἂν μὴ λάθοι τὸν μετὰ ταῦτα χρόνον ὁ τοιοῦτος βίος μηδὲ ἀνωφελῆς παραδράμοι διὰ σιωπῆς συγκαλυφθεῖσα ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἀκρότατον τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ἀρετῆς ὄρον ἐαυτὴν διὰ φιλοσοφίας ἐπάρασα, καλῶς ἔχειν ὠνήθην σοὶ τε πεισθῆναι καὶ δι' ὀλίγων, ὡς ἂν οἶός τε

For the sake of future generations, Gregory's narrative thus aims to save from oblivion and "ineffectiveness" (ἀνωφελής) the life of a woman who "raised herself to the highest peak of human virtue through philosophy" (ἡ πρὸς τὸν ἀκρότατον τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ἀρετῆς ὄρον ἑαυτὴν διὰ φιλοσοφίας ἐπάρασα).⁷ I would like to focus on three motifs which are included in this statement and around which Gregory's account of Macrina is built: (1) it is a life of a woman (2) who through philosophy (3) reached the very peak of human virtue.

Before I return to them, let me point out that there is yet another testimony about his sister which Gregory left to us and on which I will also draw, namely the dialogue "On the Soul and Resurrection". Gregory and Macrina were engaged in this dialogue, sometimes called the "Christian *Phaedo*", shortly before Macrina's death; it does not give an account of Macrina's life and death in the way *Vita* does, but of her wisdom in the matters of Christian teachings.⁸

(1) Life of a Woman

Gregory's *Life of St Macrina* is the earliest surviving biography of a Christian woman.⁹ Gregory does not hide his admiration of the fact that the subject matter of the conversation with his correspondent, and later on, a written record, is a woman's life. However, he goes on to say that it is in fact not appropriate to call her a woman:

[A]s often happens, the flow of our conversation turned to the life of an esteemed person. We spoke of a woman, if one may refer to her as that, for I

ὦ, τὰ κατ' αὐτὴν ἰστορεῖσθαι ἐν ἀκατασκέυφ τε καὶ ἀπλῶ διηγήματι (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 371). English translation by V. Woods Callahan, p. 163f.

⁷ In doing so, Gregory manages his sister's memory, cf. D. Krueger, *Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 8, 2000, pp. 483-510.

⁸ Concerning this dialogue, see Ch. Apostolopoulos, *Phaedo Christianus. Studien zur Verbindung und Abwägung des Verhältnisses zwischen dem platonischen Phaidon und dem Dialog Gregors von Nyssa Über die Seele und Auferstehung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986; H. M. Meissner, *Rhetorik und Theologie. Der Dialog Gregors von Nyssa De anima et resurrectione*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991.

⁹ See D. Krueger, *Writing and the Liturgy*, p. 486. Concerning this work, cf. P. Maraval, *Introduction*, in: SC 178, Paris 1971, pp. 19-132; its literary form is also analyzed by M. B. Pranger, *Narrative Dimensions in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina*, in: *StPatr* 32, 1997, pp. 201-207; G. Frank, *Macrina's Scar. Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 8, 2000, pp. 511-530; F. Cardman, *Whose Life Is It? The Vita Macrinae of Gregory of Nyssa*, in: *StPatr* 37, 2001, pp. 33-50.

do not know if it is right to use that designation of nature for one who went beyond the nature.¹⁰

Here Macrina is presented as a woman who “went beyond the nature” (τὴν ἄνω γενομένην τῆς φύσεως). What Gregory means is probably not only the fact that his sister overcame the weakness of her sex and became equal to men (although he also uses the expression *γυναικεῖον*, “womanish”, in order to describe an undignified lament governed by passion),¹¹ but that she overcame human nature as such. The fact that she “transcended her nature” (ὑψηλοτέρα γενομένη τῆς φύσεως)¹² is manifested in the fortitude with which Macrina succeeded in “setting reason against passion” (τῷ πάθει τὸν λογισμὸν ἀντιστήσασα)¹³ in order to comfort her mother after Macrina’s beloved brother Naucratus died prematurely. But it was mainly when facing her own death that Macrina showed great courage which “transcended the common nature” (ἐκβεβηκέναι τὴν κοινὴν φύσιν);¹⁴ this she also tried to encourage in Gregory, who, during their last conversation, became desperate over her approaching death and the death of their much admired brother Basil, who had died not a long time before that.¹⁵ Macrina’s wisdom and courage thus stand in opposition not only to her mother’s despair or the lament of the women from her convent mourning her death, whom Gregory can hardly pacify, but also to Gregory’s own weakness.¹⁶ In the dialogue “On the Soul and Resurrection”, it is Gregory who represents *πάθος*, fear of death and grief, while Macrina rejects them as unreasonable, contrasting them (similarly to Socrates in the *Phaedo*) with rational argumentation (*λόγος*).¹⁷

In this dialogue, Gregory calls his older sister his teacher (*διδάσκαλος*);¹⁸ her task is to refute all philosophical teachings on the soul incompatible with the notion of immortality, and to expose those lines in Scripture which relate to the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body. Macrina’s role seems to resemble that of Diotima in the *Symposium* (whom, however, Plato lets expose the

¹⁰ ... οἷα δὴ φιλεῖ πολλάκις ἐν τούτοις γίνεσθαι, εἰς μνήμην βίου τινὸς εὐδοκίμου προῆλθε ῥέων ὁ λόγος. Γυνὴ δὲ ἦν ἢ τοῦ διηγρήματος ἀφορμὴ, εἶπερ γυνή· οὐκ οἶδα γὰρ εἰ πρότερον ἐστὶν ἐκ τῆς φύσεως αὐτὴν ὀνομάζειν τὴν ἄνω γενομένην τῆς φύσεως (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 371). English translation after V. Woods Callahan, p. 163.

¹¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 380.

¹² *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381. For Macrina’s “transcending nature” and her psychagogical role, see J. Warren Smith, *A Just and Reasonable Grief. The Death and Function of a Holy Woman in Gregory of Nyssa’s Life of Macrina*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12, 2004, pp. 57-84, here p. 75.

¹³ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 380,18. For the whole passage, see 380,17–381,14. Concerning Macrina’s and Gregory’s brothers and sisters, see J. E. Pfister, *A Biographical Note. The Brothers and Sisters of Gregory of Nyssa*, in: *VigChr* 18, 1964, pp. 108-113; P. Maraval, *Encore les frères et sœurs de Grégoire de Nysse*, in: *RHPhR* 60, 1980, pp. 161-166.

¹⁴ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 395,21.

¹⁵ ... ὥστε μοι τὴν ψυχὴν ἔξω μικροῦ δεῖν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως εἶναι δοκεῖν συνεπαρθεῖσαν τοῖς λεγομένοις καὶ ἐντὸς τῶν οὐρανίων ἀδύτων τῇ χειραγωγίᾳ τοῦ λόγου καθισταμένην (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 390,6–9).

¹⁶ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 399–401.

¹⁷ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 12a. 16a.

¹⁸ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 12a *et passim*.

nature of love, not face an approaching death by means of arguments), while the role of the only female character in the *Phaedo*, Socrates' wife Xantippe, is quite the opposite: she is the embodiment of natural bonds and affections which obstruct philosophical discourse.

For Gregory, Macrina as a female character is not just a worthy successor to her grandmother, whose name his sister carried and whom she resembled in her willingness to endure physical hardship for Christ¹⁹ (Macrina the Elder was a disciple of Gregory the Wondermaker,²⁰ and she showed great courage during the persecution of the Christians²¹). Nor is she just a worthy holder of the secret name Thecla, revealed to her mother as an augury of Macrina's monastic pursuits²² (together with her mother, Macrina established a community of women who dedicated themselves to God,²³ which was later joined by a monastery led by the youngest brother, Peter²⁴). By the same token, she is not just a bride of "the unseen Bridegroom",²⁵ to whom she has "dedicated her body and her soul from her infancy up to now"²⁶ and towards whom her approaching death is directing her. For Gregory, Macrina also and perhaps above all embodies the ideal of Christian wisdom, or rather, love of wisdom, i.e. "philosophy".²⁷

(2) Love of Wisdom

The expression "love of wisdom" (*φιλοσοφία* and derived forms) appears in the *Life of St Macrina* sixteen times. What Gregory means by it, however, is not classical

¹⁹ In the prayer before her death, Macrina speaks about being "crucified with" Christ (like the criminal in Lk 23:42!!), with whom she "nailed her flesh": *καὶ γὰρ σοὶ συνεσταυρώσθην, καθηλώσασα ἐκ τοῦ φόβου σου τὰς σάρκας μου* (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 398).

²⁰ See Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 204,6 (ed. Y. Courtonne, Basile, *Lettres*, II, Paris 1961, 178,3ff.).

²¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 371f.

²² *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 372. Concerning Macrina's place in women monasticism of her time, see R. Albrecht, *Das Leben der heiligen Makrina auf dem Hintergrund der Thekla-Traditionen. Studien zu den Ursprüngen des weiblichen Mönchtums im 4. Jahrhundert in Kleinasien*, Göttingen 1986, pp. 27-238.

²³ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381f.

²⁴ Peter, the youngest brother (who went on to become Bishop of Sebaste), was raised by Macrina from his early childhood as a monk (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 383f.); he and Macrina were dedicated to God by their mother in her last blessing (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 384f.), and he was consecrated as a priest by his brother Basil (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 385). He was not present at the death of Macrina because he had left to await Gregory's arrival, whom he nevertheless missed. Gregory was then welcomed by the monks from Peter's community (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 387f.).

²⁵ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 396.

²⁶ ... ᾧ ἀνέδθηκα καὶ τὴν σάρκα καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ νεότητός μου καὶ μέχρι τοῦ νῦν (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 398).

²⁷ Concerning Macrina's "philosophical ascesis", compared with the ascetical ideas of Gregory's time, see S. Leuenberger-Wenger, *Ethik und christliche Identität bei Gregor von Nyssa*, Tübingen 2008, pp. 344-351.

education, i.e. instruction “in the secular curriculum” (τὴν ἕξωθεν ταύτην καὶ ἐγκύκλιον παιδείου), which draws on poetry to a large extent. This was not given to Macrina because her pious mother did not consider it right to instruct her daughter by means of such stories of women which are narrated in the passions of tragedies (τὰ τραγικὰ πάθη), wickedness of comedies (τὰς κωμικὰς ἀσχημοσύνας) and crimes of the *Iliad* (τῶν κατὰ τὸ Ἴλιον κακῶν τὰς αἰτίας). Instead, she let her read the Scriptures, especially the book of Wisdom and the Psalter.²⁸

When her younger brother Basil returned home from school where he studied rhetoric, proud of his skills, Macrina convinced him to give up this vocation and study “philosophy” (τὸν τῆς φιλοσοφίας σκοπὸν), so he “withdrew from the worldly show” and chose a life of manual labour, poverty and “a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue”.²⁹ Her beloved brother Naucratus “dedicated himself to philosophy” (τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον φιλοσοφῶν) by “regulating his own life through moderation” (κατεκόσμηκε διὰ σωφροσύνης τὴν οἰκείαν ζωὴν): he left for a forest where he took care of poor and helpless old men and hunted in order to provide food for them.³⁰ The youngest brother, Peter, was brought up by Macrina from his early childhood so that he could be raised to “the high goal of philosophy” (πρὸς τὸν ὑψηλὸν τῆς φιλοσοφίας σκοπὸν) when he was still a boy.³¹

Macrina even became a guide for her own mother (who had been so concerned with Macrina’s pious upbringing) towards “philosophy”, i.e. towards the “immaterial and simpler” (πρὸς τὴν ἄυλόν τε καὶ λιτοτέραν ζωὴν) or a “humble” life (i.e. in the poverty of a convent).³² In this way, Macrina and her mother achieved the “peak of philosophy” (τὸ ὕψος τῆς φιλοσοφίας),³³ and their life in the community of virgins without social differences was “divorced from all mortal vanity”. Their souls, “just as by death”, were freed from the body and all concerns related to it, and

²⁸ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 373. Concerning the spirituality of Macrina’s family according to Gregory’s writing, see E. Giannarelli, *Macrina e sua Madre: Santità e Paradosso*, in: *StPatr* 20, 1989, pp. 224-230; S. Elm, *Virgins of God. The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1994, p. 39-47 and 78-105; R. Van Dam, *Families and Friends in Late Roman Cappadocia*, Philadelphia 2003, pp. 99-113; N. D. Howard, *Familial Askēsis in the Vita Macrinae*, in: *StPatr* 47, 2010, pp. 33-38.

²⁹ ... κακέϊνον πρὸς τὸν τῆς φιλοσοφίας σκοπὸν ἐπεσπάσατο, ὥστε ἀποστάντα τῆς κοσμικῆς περιφανείας καὶ ὑπεριδόντα τοῦ διὰ τῶν λόγων θαυμάζεσθαι πρὸς τὸν ἐργατικὸν τοῦτον καὶ αὐτόχειρα βίον αὐτομολῆσαι, διὰ τῆς τελείας ἀκτημοσύνης ἀνεμπόδιστον ἑαυτῷ τὸν εἰς ἀρετὴν βίον παρασκευάζοντα (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 377).

³⁰ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 379.

³¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 383f.

³² *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 377; *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381: ... πρὸς τὴν ἐμφιλόσοφον ταύτην καὶ ἄυλον τοῦ βίου διαγωγὴν ... πρὸς τὸ ἴδιον τῆς ταπεινοφροσύνης μέτρον κατήγαγεν.

³³ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381.

became similar to angels.³⁴ Their “philosophy” thus “grew continuously with all goods they received to still a greater purity”.³⁵

The motif of continuous growth and transcendence of what has been achieved, so typical of Gregory’s spirituality (“epektasis”), also characterises the philosophical life both Macrina and Peter led after their mother died:

These two, having fulfilled her command, attained to a higher level of philosophy (ὕψηλότερον τῆς φιλοσοφίας), always struggling in their individual lives and eclipsing their early successes by their later ones.³⁶

Their “philosophical life” was then sanctified by Peter’s consecration as a priest.³⁷

In all these passages, “philosophy” is synonymous to a monastic or quasi-monastic life dedicated to labour and poverty. The members of Peter’s and Macrina’s communities are called “those who philosophise in this place” (οἱ ἐν τόπῳ φιλοσοφοῦντες).³⁸ “To share a philosopher’s table” (μετασχεῖν τῆς φιλοσόφου τραπέζης) means to be a guest at the monastery and share their meal,³⁹ but at the same time, it also probably refers to the conversation there. Macrina not only gave her guests a meal, but she offered them the “wealth of philosophy” as well.⁴⁰

“A higher level of philosophy” (τῆς ὑψηλοτέρας φιλοσοφίας) is also what Gregory calls the dialogue in which he and Macrina were engaged when Macrina was on her deathbed and in which Macrina tried to ease his grief at Basil’s death.⁴¹ Gregory says in the *Life of St Macrina* that Macrina provided “arguments, explaining the human situation and disclosing the divine plan hidden in misfortune, and she spoke of the future life as if she was inspired by the Holy Spirit”;⁴² these arguments were undoubtedly captured in the dialogue “On the Soul and Resurrection”, which

³⁴ Καθάπερ γὰρ αἱ διὰ θανάτου τῶν σωμάτων ἐκλυθεῖσαι ψυχαὶ καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον τοῦτον μεριμνῶν συνεκλύονται, οὕτως κεχώριστο αὐτῶν ἡ ζωὴ καὶ ἀπόκτιστο πάσης βιωτικῆς ματαιότητος καὶ πρὸς μίμησιν τῆς τῶν ἀγγέλων διαγωγῆς ἐρρυθμίζετο (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 382).

³⁵ ... ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸ καθαρότερον ταῖς τῶν ἐφευρισκομένων ἀγαθῶν προσθήκαις τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἐπιτιδοῦσης (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 383).

³⁶ Οἱ δὲ πληρώσαντες τὸ διατεταγμένον ὑψηλότερον εἶχοντο τῆς φιλοσοφίας, ἀεὶ πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον διαμιλλώμενοι βίον καὶ τὰ φθάσαντα τῶν κατορθωμάτων τοῖς ἐφεξῆς ἀποκρύπτοντες (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 385). English translation by VWC 173.

³⁷ Καὶ ἐν τούτῳ πάλιν αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ τὸ σεμνότερόν τε καὶ ἀγιώτερον προήει ὁ βίος τῆ ἱερωσύνης τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἐπαυξηθείσης (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 385).

³⁸ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 411.

³⁹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 411.

⁴⁰ τραπέζαν αὐτοῖς παραστήσασθαι, καὶ τῷ τῆς φιλοσοφίας δεξιώσασθαι πλούτῳ (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 411).

⁴¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 390.

⁴² ... τοιοῦτους διεξῆλθε λόγους φυσιολογοῦσά τε τὸ ἀνθρώπινον καὶ τὴν θείαν οἰκονομίαν τὴν διὰ τῶν σκυθρωπῶν κεκρυμμένην τῷ λόγῳ διακαλύπτουσα τὰ τε περὶ τῆς μελλούσης ζωῆς καθάπερ θεοφορουμένη τῷ ἀγίῳ πνεύματι διεξιούσα (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 390). English translation after V. Woods Callahan, p. 175.

has already been mentioned. What we learn here about this dialogue is “how Macrina was lifted up by her philosophical discourse on the soul; how she explained the reason for life in the flesh, why man exists; how he is mortal, whence death comes; and what release there is from death back again into life”.⁴³ Macrina, “philosophising up to her last breath” (μέχρι τῆς ἐσχάτης ἐμφιλοσοφεῖν ἀναπνοῆς), not showing any signs of fear of the approaching death, resembles a being more angelic than human in Gregory’s eyes,, or at least completely detached from the flesh.⁴⁴

The dialogue “On the Soul and Resurrection” mentions those “of no small reputation in philosophy (ἐπὶ φιλοσοφία) amongst the Greeks”.⁴⁵ Although Macrina rejects their views of the soul as “pagan nonsense” (τοὺς ἕξωθεν λήρους),⁴⁶ later in the dialogue she tries to refute them in great detail, paying special attention to Stoicism and Epicureanism, with which the Apostle Paul struggled as well (Acts 17:18).⁴⁷ In Macrina’s opinion, “Gentile philosophy” (ἡ ἕξω φιλοσοφία) can provide convenient tools for argumentation,⁴⁸ but the truth must be sought in Scripture. As for Plato, Macrina says he “philosophises about the soul in a riddle” (περὶ ψυχῆς φιλοσοφεῖ δι’ αἰνίγματος), referring to Plato’s allegory of the chariot and the pair of horses.⁴⁹ Aristotle is not mentioned by name, but he is characterised as “the philosopher who succeeded him and who studied phenomena in a methodical way and diligently investigated our present life, declaring that the soul was mortal”.⁵⁰ No names are assigned to other authors, either, “all before and since their time, whether they philosophized in prose or in verse”.⁵¹

In the dialogue, not only Greek (pagan) thinking,⁵² but also Christian teaching is called “philosophy” (ἡ καθ’ ἡμᾶς φιλοσοφία).⁵³ “Our philosophy” only adopts from the “Gentile philosophy” (ἡ ἕξω φιλοσοφία) what is in concord with Scripture (for example, it does not accept the teaching on metempsychosis as a whole, but only

⁴³ ... ὅπως ἐπήρθη τῷ λόγῳ περὶ τε τῆς ψυχῆς ἡμῖν φιλοσοφοῦσα καὶ τῆς διὰ σαρκὸς ζωῆς τὴν αἰτίαν διεξιούσα, καὶ ὅτου χάριν ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὅπως θνητὸς καὶ ὄθεν ὁ θάνατος καὶ τίς ἢ ἀπὸ τούτου πρὸς τὴν ζωὴν πάλιν ἀνάλυσις (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 390). English translation after V. Woods Callahan, p. 176.

⁴⁴ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 395f.

⁴⁵ Καὶ εἰσὶ γέ τινες παρὰ τοῖς Ἑλλησιν οὐ μικρὰν ἔχοντες ἐπὶ φιλοσοφία τὴν δόξαν ... (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 17,23!!).

⁴⁶ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 17,26!!.

⁴⁷ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 21,13ff!!.

⁴⁸ Ἡμῖν δὲ εἰ μὲν ἰκανὴ πρὸς ἀπόδειξιν ἀληθῶς ἦν ἡ ἕξω φιλοσοφία, ἡ τεχνικῶς περὶ τούτων διαλαβοῦσα, περιττὸν ἂν ἦν ἴσως τὸν περὶ ψυχῆς λόγον προτιθέναι τῷ σκέμματι (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 49,36!!).

⁴⁹ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 49d-52a!!.

⁵⁰ ὅσα θ’ ὁ μετ’ ἐκεῖνον φιλόσοφος ὁ τεχνικῶς τοῖς φαινομένοις ἀκολουθῶν, καὶ τὰ νῦν ἡμῖν προκείμενα δι’ ἐπιμελείας κατεξετάζων, θνητὴν εἶναι διὰ τούτων τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπεφήνατο (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 52a!!).

⁵¹ πάντας τοὺς τε πρὸ τούτων, καὶ τοὺς ἐφεξῆς, τοὺς τε καταλογάδην καὶ τοὺς ἐν ῥυθμῷ τινα καὶ μέτρῳ φιλοσοφήσαντας (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 52ab!!).

⁵² See also *De an. res.*, PG 46, 124,3!!.

⁵³ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 108,21!!.

employs the immortality of the soul, which is complemented by the teaching on resurrection).⁵⁴

As we can see, the expression “philosophy” is used throughout the dialogue to refer to teachings, especially of the ancient thinkers, but it sometimes refers to their Christian applications as well. Macrina also reveals her familiarity with individual philosophical schools and their methods of argumentation: for example, she recapitulates Epicurus’ teaching,⁵⁵ Stoic theory of elements,⁵⁶ the doctrine of man as a microcosm,⁵⁷ a single spiritual force which makes sense perception possible,⁵⁸ the Platonic notion of passions (*θυμός τε καὶ ἐπιθυμία*) as the moving forces of the soul,⁵⁹ and various forms of the conception of reincarnation.⁶⁰ Presumably it was Gregory who put these words into Macrina’s mouth, but thanks to the dialogue, the image of “philosophy” which brought Macrina “to the highest peak of human virtue” gains a more speculative character. It was probably not just a matter of monastic asceticism, but also spiritual meditation, “love of wisdom” in its full Greek meaning of moral and intellectual exercise.

(3) Human Virtue

This brings us to the last topic, namely virtue as the goal of philosophy. The expression *ἀρετή* appears twelve times in the *Life of St Macrina*. It has been said already that Basil chose “philosophy”, or a life which would “lead to virtue” (*τὸν εἰς ἀρετὴν βίον*), i.e. he gave up the fame of a rhetorician and accepted voluntary poverty and labour.⁶¹ Eventually, his life and deeds won him so much renown that he surpassed all “those conspicuous in virtue” (*τοὺς ἐν ἀρετῇ διαλάμπαντας*).⁶²

Macrina’s mother is also described as a virtuous woman (*κατ’ ἀρετήν*) who was “following the will of God in all things and embracing an exceptionally pure and spotless way of life, so that she had chosen not to marry”.⁶³ Even as a married

⁵⁴ Οὐκοῦν τὸ μὲν μὴ ἔξω τοῦ εἰκότος εἶναι τὸ πάλιν τὴν ψυχὴν ἐν σώματι γενέσθαι, παρὰ τῆς ἔξω φιλοσοφίας μεμαρτυρησῶν δόγματι (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 109,11!!). Ἡμεῖς δὲ καλῶς ἔχειν φαμέν, ἐκ τῶν ἐκκλησιαστικῶν δογματικῶν ὁρμώμενοι, ποσοῦτον παραδέξασθαι μόνον τῶν τοιαῦτα πεφιλοσοφηκότων, ὅσον συμφωνοῦντας αὐτοὺς τρόπον τινὰ δεῖξαι τῷ τῆς ἀναστάσεως δόγματι (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 108,38!!).

⁵⁵ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 21,15ff.!!

⁵⁶ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 21,33ff.!!

⁵⁷ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 28,23ff.!!

⁵⁸ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 31a ff.!! Here Macrina regards this force (*τις δύναμις νοητή*) as *ἐννοία*, *διανοία*, *νοῦς*.

⁵⁹ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 49d–52a!!; 52d–53a!!

⁶⁰ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 108,20!!

⁶¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 377. See above, note ??.

⁶² *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 377.

⁶³ Ἦν γὰρ δὴ τοιαύτη κατ’ ἀρετὴν καὶ ἡ μήτηρ ὡς πανταχοῦ τῷ θείῳ βουλήματι χειραγωγεῖσθαι, διαφερόντως δὲ τὴν καθαρὰν τε καὶ ἀκηλίδωτον τοῦ βίου διαγωγὴν ἀσπασαμένη, ὡς μηδὲ τὸν γάμον ἐκουσίως ἐλέσθαι (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 372). (VWC 164).

woman, she was “perfectly schooled in virtue (τελεία τοῖς κατ’ ἀρετὴν ἅπασιν)”, but “nature (φύσις) won out even over her” when she learnt of Naucratius’ death. “Reason giving way to passion”, she was hit by the terrible news “like a noble athlete felled by an unforeseen blow”.⁶⁴ It was in this situation that “the great Macrina’s virtue” (τῆς μεγάλης Μακρίνης ἡ ἀρετὴ) became evident. Unlike her mother, she managed to remain calm by “setting reason against passion” (τῷ πάθει τὸν λογισμὸν ἀντιστήσασα), as we have heard. “She kept herself in hand”, and, “by her own firmness” (τῷ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν στερεῶ τε καὶ ἀνενδότῳ), she became a “bulwark” (ἔρεισμα) for her mother’s weakness.⁶⁵ In this passage, virtue seems to be identical with the victory of reason over passion; it is presented as firmness and even transcending of one’s nature (ὑψηλοτέρα γενομένη τῆς φύσεως).⁶⁶

However, human nature can also be a good teacher, as Gregory shows, using his youngest brother Peter as an example. Without any Gentile education (τῆς περὶ τοὺς ἕξωθεν τῶν λόγων ἀσχολίας ὑπεριδῶν), Peter attained the same virtue as the great Basil. His “sufficient teacher in all good things was nature” (ικανὴν δὲ διδάσκαλον παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μαθήματος τὴν φύσιν ἔχων), with Macrina as an example he was able to watch and follow constantly.⁶⁷ What Gregory means by nature as a teacher is probably not observation of nature, but a natural ability of his brother; this, at least, seems to be suggested in his previous remark that Peter was of a “lucky nature” (φύσεως εὐκληρία), which made it possible for him to acquire all kinds of manual skills without any help.⁶⁸

It was probably Macrina who was Peter’s main teacher of virtue, as her life “always exalted in virtue” (ἀεὶ δι’ ἀρετῆς ὑψούμενος).⁶⁹ Macrina also became the “guardian and director” (φύλακά τε καὶ παιδαγωγόν) of Vestiana, a widowed noble lady, who learned “the life of virtue” (τὸν πρὸς ἀρετὴν βίον παρ’ αὐτῶν ἐκδιδασκομένη) in her community.⁷⁰ The place where Macrina dwelt, i.e. her convent, is even described

⁶⁴ Ἡ δὲ τελεία μὲν τοῖς κατ’ ἀρετὴν ἅπασιν ἦν, πλὴν ἐκράτει κάκεινης κατὰ τὸ ἴσον ἡ φύσις· ὀκλάσασα γὰρ τὴν ψυχὴν ἅπνουσ τε καὶ ἄφθογγος παραχρῆμα ἐγένετο, τοῦ λογισμοῦ τῷ πάθει παραχωρήσαντος, καὶ ἔκειτο ὁμοῦ τῇ προσβολῇ τῆς πονηρᾶς ἀκοῆς καθάπερ τις ἀθλητῆς γενναῖος ἀπροδοκῆτω κατασεισθεῖσα πληγῇ (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 380).

⁶⁵ Ἐν τούτῳ διεφάνη τῆς μεγάλης Μακρίνης ἡ ἀρετὴ, ὅπως τῷ πάθει τὸν λογισμὸν ἀντιστήσασα ἑαυτὴν τε ἄπτωτον διεφύλαξε καὶ τῆς μητρικῆς ἀσθενείας ἔρεισμα γενομένη πάλιν ἐκ τοῦ βυδοῦ τῆς λύπης αὐτὴν ἀνιμήσατο, τῷ καθ’ ἑαυτὴν στερεῶ τε καὶ ἀνενδότῳ καὶ τὴν τῆς μητρὸς ψυχὴν πρὸς ἀνδρείαν παιδοτριβήσασα (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 380).

⁶⁶ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381.

⁶⁷ Οὗτος τοίνυν τῆς περὶ τοὺς ἕξωθεν τῶν λόγων ἀσχολίας ὑπεριδῶν, ἱκανὴν δὲ διδάσκαλον παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ μαθήματος τὴν φύσιν ἔχων ἀεὶ τε πρὸς τὴν ἀδελφὴν βλέπων καὶ σκοπὸν ἀγαθοῦ παντὸς ἐκείνην ποιούμενος εἰς τοσοῦτον ἐπέδωκεν ἀρετῆς, ὡς μηδὲν ἔλαττον τοῦ μεγάλου Βασιλείου δοκεῖν ἔχειν ἐν τοῖς κατ’ ἀρετὴν προτερήμασιν (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 384).

⁶⁸ ... τινι φύσεως εὐκληρία πρὸς πᾶσαν τέχνης ἰδέαν τὴν διὰ χειρὸς ἐνεργουμένην ἐπιτηδείως ἔχειν, ὡς μηδενὸς καθηγουμένου διὰ πάσης ἀκριβείας ἐκάστου τὴν ἐπιστήμην κατωρθωκέναι (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 384). Gregory also assigns a “lucky nature” (φύσεως εὐκληρία) to his brother Naucratius (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 378).

⁶⁹ Ἄλλως δὲ καὶ ὁ βίος αὐτῆς ἀεὶ δι’ ἀρετῆς ὑψούμενος ... (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 381).

⁷⁰ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 402.

as a “school of virtue” (τὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς φροντιστήριον) by a military man who came there with his family.⁷¹

As we can see, there is a close connection between virtue and “philosophy”, i.e. life devoted to God. Interestingly, the relationship between virtue and nature is not quite clear: on one hand, virtue means transcending one’s nature so that passion can be controlled by reason; on the other, nature can help attain virtue. In yet another passage, Gregory speaks about “the nature freed from human cares/passions/experiences (παθημάτων)” which is “more than human”, i.e. resembles incorporeal angels.⁷² The transcending of one’s nature, which Gregory attributes to his sister, has already been mentioned. So what it actually is that Gregory means by “nature”? Is it the passionate side of men which can be conquered by reason?

Because the answer to this question cannot be found in the account of Macrina’s life, let us seek it in the dialogue “On the Soul and Resurrection”. Here it is said that desire and anger (the “horses” in Plato’s charriot) are not an intrinsic part of the nature of the soul, because Moses (who represented a model of perfection for Philo as well⁷³) was able to overcome them (κρείττων ἦν θυμοῦ τε καὶ ἐπιθυμίας).⁷⁴ As it is not possible to give up what is included in the definition of any being (εἰς τὸν λόγον τῆς οὐσίας), anger and desire are not part of human nature (ἄλλο τι ἄρα παρὰ τὴν φύσιν ἐστὶ ταῦτα, καὶ οὐχὶ φύσις).⁷⁵ These passions are external to the nature, not in its essence.⁷⁶ The soul is an image of divine beauty, and as such, its nature can only consist in the reasoning faculty.⁷⁷ Passions, which also pertain to animals, become part of it when the soul joins the body.⁷⁸

At the same time, however, Macrina explains, drawing on the biblical parable of the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24!!), that bad impulses of the soul cannot be uprooted

⁷¹ *Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 410. The expression φροντιστήριον refers to a place of contemplation or meditation, or a monastery. Aristophanes employs it to ridicule Socrates’ school (*Nubes* 94!!: “thinking-shop”). VWC 188 translates the phrase τὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς φροντιστήριον as “the monastery of virtue”; E. Stolz (Gregor von Nyssa, *Schriften*, BKV 56, München 1927, p. 366) as “Schule der Tugend”.
⁷² Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἐλευθερωθῆναι τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων παθημάτων τὴν φύσιν κρείττων ἢ κατὰ ἀνθρώπον ἦν (*Vita Macr.*, GNO VIII/1, 382).

⁷³ In many respects, Philo’s *On the Life of Moses* was an inspiration for Gregory’s treatise of the same name.!!

⁷⁴ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 53,34 ff.!!. The argument that Moses overcame both anger and desire is based on the biblical account, according to which he was “meek beyond all men” (πραῦος ἦν παρὰ πάντας ἀνθρώπους)!! and that he did not desire what most people desire (οὐκ ἐπεθύμησε τούτων τινός, περὶ ἃ ὀρώμεν ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς τὸ ἐπιθυμητικὸν ἐνεργούμενον)!!.

⁷⁵ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 53,44f.!!.

⁷⁶ Δῆλον οὖν ὅτι τῶν ἕξωθεν ἐπιθεωρουμένων ἐστὶ ταῦτα τὰ πάθη τῆς φύσεως ὄντα καὶ οὐκ οὐσία (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 53,50f.!!).

⁷⁷ Φαμὲν γὰρ τῆς ψυχῆς τὴν μὲν θεωρητικὴν τε καὶ διακριτικὴν καὶ τῶν ὄντων ἐποπτικὴν δύναμιν οἰκείαν εἶναι καὶ κατὰ φύσιν αὐτῆν, καὶ διὰ τῆς θεοειδοῦς χάριτος, διὰ τοῦτο σώζειν ἐν αὐτῇ τὴν εἰκόνα (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 57,23ff.!!).

⁷⁸ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 46,61f.!!.

because along with these, the soul could lose the good impulses leading to virtue.⁷⁹ According to the biblical account, man was created to have dominion over the animals; in Macrina's interpretation this means that reason is to have dominion over passions and use them to a good end, i.e. to attain virtue.⁸⁰ If men were absolutely free from passions, they would feel no desire to raise themselves to divine things.⁸¹

The contradiction in these two positions, which resemble the Stoic *apatheia* and *metriopatheia*, may perhaps be accounted for by different degrees of perfection: while passions can be used to a good end, the highest perfection (here attributed to Moses only) consists in overcoming them completely. This, however, does not remove the contradiction between a nature which does not include passions (as in the case of Moses) and a nature which is to be overcome by subjecting passions to reason (as in the story of Macrina's life). Perhaps Gregory used the expression "nature" less precisely in the story of his sister's life than Macrina herself in their last dialogue as Gregory captured it. In any case, Gregory's Macrina, "transcending her nature" in the sense of subjecting passions to reason and similar to angels in the degree of her separation from the body, seems to resemble Moses, who was free from passions. Despite the contradictory formulation, "transcending of the nature" achieved by Macrina may mean the same thing as freeing one's nature from passions as it is attributed to Moses.

Gregory's sister is thus presented as a female counterpart to Moses – a model of virtue, which is understood here as a way of overcoming of passions by reason through the "love of wisdom", i.e. a life in solitude dedicated to poverty, labour and philosophical discourse. His narrative is not only a remembrance of the beloved sister and celebration of his family, but also a personal testimony about the power of "philosophy" as a way to attain virtue and about the victory of the "love of wisdom" over fear of death.

⁷⁹ Τὰς γὰρ τοιαύτας τῆς ψυχῆς ὀρμὰς διὰ τῶν καλῶν σπερμάτων οἴομεθα τὸν λόγον ἐνδείκνυσθαι, ὡν ἕκαστον, εἰ μόνον πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἐγεωργεῖτο, τὸν τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐν ἡμῖν καρπὸν πάντως ἐβλάστησεν (*De an. res.*, PG 46, 64,35ff.!!).

⁸⁰ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 61,21f.!!.

⁸¹ *De an. res.*, PG 46, 65,11f.!!.