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Eric Daryl Meyer

*One who says: I am He who is, who follows you and whom you are (following), who is (following) after you with a view to seducing you and to have it be that, coming after, you become one who follows me. (Derrida 2008, 67)*

Jacques Derrida despairs of finding animals among philosophers. “Thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis” (2008, 7; cf. 40). The poetic imagination, in contrast to the philosopher’s, has from time to time had the courage to stand in the gaze of the animal and to write as one *who is seen*. Guided by Derrida’s intuition about poetic discourse, this essay takes its beginning in an ancient piece of erotic poetry in which animal metaphor features prominently—Solomon’s Song of Songs. This book’s place in the canon was a puzzle and perplexity for many Jewish and Christian thinkers, but rather than label it lewd or unspiritual and ignore it altogether, many early Christian authors employed an elaborate theological exegesis to lay bare a narrative of love between God and God’s creatures hidden in the erotic movements of the Song of Songs. The fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa penned one such engagement with this enigmatic text in the form of fifteen homilies (hereafter *GNO*).<sup>1</sup> The presence of animals all through the Song, and thus all through Gregory’s

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own. I have benefitted from the forthcoming translation (with introduction) by Norris, and also from the older, but currently accessible translation by McCambley (1987). Both translations contain marginal reference to the page numbers in *GNO*, which I employ throughout the essay’s citations.

homiletic commentary, provides an opportunity to examine the conceptual interrelation of divinity, humanity, and animality.

This essay, then, ventures a reading of Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* alongside Derrida's *Animal that Therefore I Am* in an attempt to locate Gregory relative to the trajectory of an "immense disavowal" of animals that Derrida traces from Descartes to Levinas. Derrida names this disavowal as the production of a concept, "the human," by means of a stark contrast with another concept, "the animal"—an enormous, falsely homogenous, bounded set, capturing millions of different species in a single term. Thinking with Derrida, I argue that Gregory's discourse on animality remains irresolvably conflicted. Although he labors toward it, Gregory's theology cannot finally abide a categorical distinction between humanity and animality. The theological anthropology informing Gregory's anagogical exegesis of the Song of Songs "short circuits" so that human animality is necessary to reach the deepest meaning of Scripture and the summits of spiritual ascent, despite Gregory's more explicit claims that spiritual transformation entails the transcendence of humanity beyond animality. Animality remains integral to Gregory's reading of the Song of Songs, not simply because of the pervasive animal metaphors within the text under his consideration, but on account of his understanding of theological exegesis and the role of desire in spiritual progress.

This essay will proceed in three sections: First, I will describe Gregory's unique conception the practice of anagogical exegesis, and the cosmological/anthropological framework which provides the exigency for such an approach to Scripture. Second, to examine Gregory's exegesis in action in relation to the human-animal distinction, I will analyze Gregory's exegetical approach to the complex of nakedness, shame, modesty, and clothing—which traditionally serves as one "cut" dividing humans from other animals, and which also features prominently in

Derrida's text. Third, I will follow the trajectories of animal desire, contemplative knowledge, and spiritual transformation as they intersect in the Song and Gregory's homiletic commentary upon it.

### Anagogical Exegesis

Gregory explains and defends his exegetical method in both the first homily and the preface that precedes it in order to attune his hearers' ears to the deeper meaning of the scriptural text and to counter anticipated antagonism from "certain Church leaders" who strongly disapprove of Gregory's mode of interpretation.<sup>2</sup> All things equal, Gregory would prefer to call his approach to Scripture "anagogical interpretation" (τὴν διὰ τῆς ἀναγωγῆς θεωρίαν) rather than "allegorical" or "typological," but he is clearly more concerned to offer rationale for his exegetical method than to quibble over its title (*GNO* 6:5).<sup>3</sup> Gregory's style of exegesis is by no means *sui generis*, being grounded in a tradition running from Philo through Origen, but he is uniquely interested in the ways in which an ascetically attuned reading of Scripture "leads upward" (ἀνάγειν) drawing the reader toward God. After offering a brief overview of Gregory's anagogical exegesis, this section demonstrates that Gregory conceives of proper biblical interpretation as an upward movement which transcends animality, or excises animal meaning from what is properly a spiritual (read "human") text.

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory's mention of "some clerics" (τισι τῶν ἐκκλησιαστικῶν) is often taken to refer to Diodore of Tarsus and his student Theodore of Mopsuestia, though Gregory does not name anyone specifically (*GNO* 6:4). See Heine 1984, 366-69.

<sup>3</sup> Norris (forthcoming, xliv), agrees that "anagogy" is the best terminological fit for Gregory's understanding of the relation between the text of Scripture and the ascetically attuned reader.

Gregory's relationship to his primary influence on theological interpretation, namely Origen, has been the subject of several excellent studies (see, in particular, Dünzl 1993; Norris 1998; Ludlow 2002). Gregory conceives that each book of Scripture bears its own unique aim (σκοπός)—he uses Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for examples (*GNO* 6:19-23)—and that each book accomplishes that aim through its own unique (and perceptible) logical sequence (ἀκολουθία). Where Origen conceives of the σκοπός of the whole canon as a description of the journey of the soul (Ludlow 2002, 50-51; cf. Torjesen 1986, 71-2), Gregory's piecemeal approach to Scripture expects a differentiated aim within each book which must be ascertained through careful, contemplative reading rather than assumed from the outset. Like Origen, Gregory reads Scripture as a canonical whole, a practice which validates connections between far-flung passages on the basis of a shared word or image.<sup>4</sup> Yet unlike Origen, the meaning of a passage is first governed by the sequential logic in the book where it is found, rather than an overarching canonical theme (Norris 1998, 531-2; Ludlow 2002, 53, 63-4). Nevertheless, understanding the spiritual meaning of a text according to its σκοπός involves what Norris calls "transposing" the historical narrative and material imagery up into a spiritual register (Norris 2002, 520-21). Gregory himself uses the image of "transfiguration"—as the dusty, tired body of Christ was found to be unbearably radiant upon a mountain, so also does the properly

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<sup>4</sup> Dünzl refers to this as the "Stichwort" (keyword) method of exegesis, in which sense is brought to a difficult word through connections made to other instances of the same word in Scripture. For example, Gregory makes sense of the bride's comparison to a dove by reference to the appearance of the Spirit as a dove at Christ's baptism (Dünzl 1993, 54); for contrast with Origen, see Ludlow 2002, 55-56, 58.

attuned reader find a deeper and mysterious light emerging from the plain page of Scripture (*GNO* 6:14).

The particular σκοπός of the Song of Songs, as Gregory conceives it, is to draw the soul into loving union with God (Norris forthcoming, xxxiii; Laird 2007, 40). He writes:

ταῦτα διαμαρτύρομαι μέλλων ἄπτεσθαι τῆς ἐν τῷ Ἄισματι τῶν Ἀισμάτων  
μυστικῆς θεωρίας. διὰ γὰρ τῶν ἐνταῦθα γεγραμμένων νυμφοστολεῖται τρόπον  
τινὰ ἢ ψυχὴ πρὸς τὴν ἀσώματόν τε καὶ πνευματικὴν καὶ ἀμόλυντον τοῦ θεοῦ  
συζυγίαν·

I bear solemn witness to these things because I am about to apprehend the mystical sense in the Song of Songs. For through what has been written there, the soul is led like a bride toward a spiritual, unstained, and bodiless union with God (*GNO* 6:15).

The σκοπός of the text is a function of divine authorial agency and not something thematized by the “Solomon of flesh and blood.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Gregory regards the Song of Songs as a text whose logical sequence (ἀκολουθία) contains both a narrative of the union of a soul with God, and a spiritual “hook” that draws the reader into a similar union. As Norris notes, then, anagogical exegesis is not merely a technical skill practiced upon an inert text (Norris forthcoming, xx).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory suggests that there is another “Son of David” speaking through Solomon, on whose account the text is replete with true Wisdom (*GNO* 6:17; cf. Ludlow 2002, 54).

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Coakley is surely correct in asserting that any division of Gregory’s mystical and exegetical theology in texts like the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, the *Life of Moses*, or the *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, from his constructive and systematic theology (as worked out in the

Rather, it is an approach to a text which is embedded within a particular vision of the world—and specifically of the way that language, text, meaning, understanding, and spiritual progress operate across a boundary between the visible material creation and the invisible intelligible creation. The practice of anagogical exegesis mirrors Gregory’s cosmology, in which a spiritual/intellectual layer of creation is always distinct and superior to, yet nevertheless inseparable from a material layer of creation.<sup>7</sup> The Song of Songs is a bridge: it narrates material acts, but simultaneously and inseparably bears an intelligible meaning which acts spiritually on its ascetically attuned readers so that properly understanding the text is already also progress in an immaterial journey.

Accordingly, the σκοπός of the text, as Gregory understands it, does not lie flat on the page, passively waiting to be grasped and articulated; rather Gregory attributes an agency to the text itself, or finds a divine agency working through it. The meaning of the text works itself out on the reader as much as the reader works out the meaning of the text:

ἐν οἷς τὸ μὲν ὑπογραφόμενον ἐπιθαλάμιός τις ἐστὶ διασκευή, τὸ δὲ νοούμενον τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ψυχῆς ἢ πρὸς τὸ θεῖόν ἐστιν ἀνάκρασις. διὰ τοῦτο νύμφη ὧδε ὁ ἐν ταῖς Παροιμίαις υἱὸς ὀνομάζεται καὶ ἡ σοφία εἰς νυμφίου τάξιν ἀντιμεθίσταται,

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polemical writings against Eunomius and Apollinarius) is surely forced and false. Gregory’s reflections on Scripture, God as Trinity, and human salvation in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* are no less serious and no less carefully crafted than his hardened polemical works (Coakley 2003, 6-8).

<sup>7</sup> Gregory’s unique understanding of the doubleness of creation stands in the tradition of readings of Genesis 1-3 significantly informed by Plato’s *Timaeus*. Prominent predecessors would include Philo (*De opificio mundi*) and Origen (*De principiis*).

ἵνα μνηστευθῆ τῷ θεῷ ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἀγνή παρθένος ἐκ νυμφίου γενόμενος καὶ  
κολληθεὶς τῷ κυρίῳ γένηται πνεῦμα ἐν διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ ἀκήρατόν τε καὶ ἀπαθὲς  
ἀνακράσεως νόημα καθαρὸν ἀντὶ σαρκὸς βαρείας γενόμενος. ἐπειδὴ τοίνυν  
σοφία ἐστὶν ἡ λαλοῦσα, ἀγάπησον ὅσον δύνασαι ἐξ ὅλης καρδίας τε καὶ  
δυνάμεως, ἐπιθύμησον ὅσον χωρεῖς. προστίθημι δὲ θαρρῶν τοῖς ῥήμασι τούτοις  
καὶ τὸ ἐράσθητι· ἀνέγκλητον γὰρ τοῦτο καὶ ἀπαθὲς ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσωμάτων τὸ πάθος,  
καθὼς φησιν ἡ σοφία ἐν ταῖς Παροιμίαις τοῦ θεοῦ κάλλους νομοθετοῦσα τὸν  
ἕρωτα.

By means of the elaboration [of the Song] the things of a wedding are sketched  
out, though what is intuited is the mingling of the human soul with the divine. For  
this reason the ‘son’ of Proverbs is named ‘bride’ here and ‘Wisdom’ passes over  
into ‘Bridegroom’ so that the human being becoming a pure virgin (from a  
‘bridegroom’ [courting Wisdom]) may be betrothed to God and joined to the  
Lord, and may also be one Spirit through mingling with the impassible and  
uncontaminated, becoming pure thought as opposed to weighty flesh. The one  
speaking is Wisdom, so then, *love* as much as you can—with your whole heart  
and strength—and *desire* to your full capacity. I will audaciously add these  
words: May you be smitten-in-love, for this passion for the incorporeal is  
irreproachable and impassible, just as Wisdom speaks in Proverbs ordaining this  
kind of love for divine beauty (*GNO* 6:22-23; cf. 27).

The description of the union between the bride and bridegroom is given pedagogically as a  
ὕπογραφομένον, an outline meant to be filled in by pupils—as a child learns to write her letters



by copying over faint tracings.<sup>8</sup> In this case, the person who truly reads and understands the Song of Songs, traces out or copies over its narrative sequence (ἀκολουθία), not in the bodily sense offered on the page but in the intellectual sense (νοούμενον) discerned within it.<sup>9</sup> Through its descriptions the text itself (or the Spirit working through the text) lures the interpreter into this pedagogical process by engaging the interpreter’s desire and leading her forward in transformation so that she too might be smitten. Within Gregory’s anagogical framework, the text is not interpreted correctly until it is interpreted in a participatory manner.<sup>10</sup> Gregory prefers

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<sup>8</sup> Gregory repeatedly uses ὑπογραφόμενον and ὑπογραφή in clearly pedagogical (or mystagogical) contexts, though he can also use it in the more general sense of a “description” or “outline.” In any case, it always refers to the “lower,” material meaning of a text which is to be transposed into a spiritual register. See particularly *GNO* 6:19, 39, 144-45, 146-47, 180, 188, 190, 384.

<sup>9</sup> So, for another example, “The anagogical interpretation here aligns with the thought already examined, for the discourse [or the *Logos*] accommodates human nature to God by an ordered sequential road (ἡ δὲ κατὰ ἀναγωγὴν θεωρία τῆς προεξητασμένης ἔχεται διανοίας· ὁδῶ γὰρ καὶ ἀκολουθία προσοικειοῖ τῷ θεῷ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν ὁ λόγος).” It is not clear in context whether ὁ λόγος refers to the discourse of the Song of Songs (as McCambley’s translation has it) or to the second person of the Trinity (as Norris’ translation reads). At any rate, there is a transformative divine agency at work upon the reader in and through the sequential development of the text (*GNO* 6:145; cf. 278-79, 294-96). Ludlow claims that for Gregory, “the text is a ladder leading up to God” (2002, 63-64).

<sup>10</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison refers to Gregory’s style of exegesis as “iconic,” in that attention to the surface of the text ultimately involves the reader in the scene described; as with an icon, the text

to call his theological interpretation “anagogical” because he understands the text to lead the reader upward to God.

However, the upward movement in Gregory’s anagogy is not entirely irenic. For Gregory, any reading of the Song which sees nothing more than romantic and sexual interactions is abortive and nonsensical; it halts at the material appearance of the text and fails to comprehend the immeasurably more valuable inner meaning (*GNO* 6:11). Inasmuch as Gregory associates sexual activity and sexual urges with animals, the spiritual meaning which transcends the material content of the Song also corresponds to a transcendence of human spirituality over human animality and a connection to other animals. Given humanity’s precarious position straddling the boundary between the celestial, intelligible creation and the material creation, human animality always threatens to overcome human spirituality, swamping it with animal passions (*De hominis opificio* §18, PG 44; translation available in Schaff and Wace 1954). In point of fact, Gregory is quite explicit that the project of anagogical exegesis is an endeavor to negate and suppress the threats of animality. Immediately preceding Gregory’s statement of the σκοπός of the Song (quoted above) Gregory places a hedge meant to keep animal associations out of any reading of the text:

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looks back at the reader (Harrison 1992, 125); likewise, Martin Laird coins the term “logophasis” to try to capture the sense that the text affects the reader in her relationship to God in ways other than simply communicating content or concepts, “it is not language in search of God (kataphatic), but language that is full of God (logophatic)” (2001, 4; cf. Mosshammer 1990, 99; Ludlow 2002, 62; Dünzl 1993, 335; Norris forthcoming, xx, xli).

μή τις ἐμπαθῆ καὶ σαρκώδη λογισμὸν ἐπαγόμενος καὶ μὴ ἔχων πρέπον τῷ θείῳ  
γάμῳ τὸ τῆς συνειδήσεως ἔνδυμα συνδεθῆ τοῖς ἰδίῳ νοήμασι, τὰς ἀκηράτους  
τοῦ νυμφίου τε καὶ τῆς νύμφης φωνὰς εἰς κτηνώδη καὶ ἄλογα καθέλκων πάθη.  
Whoever introduces a passionate and fleshly line of thought, or lacks the garment  
of conscience fitting for the divine wedding—let them not be bound up by their  
own thoughts, dragging the uncontaminated speeches of the bride and bridegroom  
down into the passions of livestock and animals (*GNO* 6:15).

Here, human animality threatens to intrude and defile the purity of the scriptural text while proper anagogical exegesis would transcend the mire of human animality;<sup>11</sup> but Gregory can also deploy anagogical exegesis along the boundary between humanity and animality as a process which prepares a “raw” text for proper human consumption by refining and cooking rough words fit only to be gobbled up by animals:

δεῖξαι τὸ ἀναγκαῖον τῆς κατὰ διάνοιαν τῶν ῥητῶν θεωρίας, ἧς ἀποβαλλομένης,  
καθὼς ἀρέσκει τισίν, ὅμοιον εἶναι μοι δοκεῖ τὸ γινόμενον, ὡς εἶ τις ἀκατέργαστα  
προθείη πρὸς ἀνθρωπίνην βρῶσιν ἐπὶ τραπέζης τὰ λήϊα, μὴ τρίψας τὴν καλάμην,  
μὴ τῷ λικμητῷ διακρίνας ἐκ τῶν ἀχύρων τὰ σπέρματα, μὴ λεπτύνας τὸν σῖτον εἰς  
ἄλευρον, μηδὲ κατασκευάσας ἄρτον τῷ καθήκοντι τρόπῳ τῆς σιτοποιΐας. ὥσπερ

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<sup>11</sup> Norris (forthcoming, xxiii) rightly characterizes Gregory’s view by suggesting that animality “infects” the spiritual meaning of the text. Derrida finds similar thinking in Descartes, who suggests that animals lack intelligible perception. That is, animals are attentive to appearances but fail to perceive the meanings and essences which are (invisibly) interior to appearances. Authentic humanity moves beyond the aesthetic fixations of animality (Derrida 2008, 73).

οὐκ ἄκατέργαστον γένημα κτηνῶν ἐστὶ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώπων τροφή, οὕτως εἶποι  
τις ἂν ἀλόγων μᾶλλον ἢ λογικῶν εἶναι τροφήν μὴ κατεργασθέντα διὰ τῆς  
λεπτοτέρας θεωρίας τὰ θεόπνευστα ῥήματα οὐ μόνον τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης, ἀλλὰ  
καὶ τὰ πολλὰ τῆς εὐαγγελικῆς διδασκαλίας.

The necessity is evident for an interpretation of [Scripture's] words according to their intent [as opposed to their material sense], even though it pleases some to reject it. It seems to me that to do so is as if someone set out uncooked crops on the table for human consumption without grinding the stalks, without separating the kernels from the husks by winnowing, without refining the wheat into flour, without providing bread in the proper manner of food-preparation. Just as uncooked produce is food for livestock and not humans, someone might say that without being prepared through a refining interpretation, the divinely inspired words [of Scripture]—not only of the Old Testament, but most of the gospel teaching—are food for non-discursive animals more than for discursive creatures [i.e. humans and angels] (*GNO* 6:12).

In this passage, even the inspired language of Scripture is too beastly and rough for proper human nourishment where it describes material realities. Anagogical exegesis, under the direction of the Spirit mills and extracts (not to say “cooks up”) the meaning that is truly human. Anagogical exegesis is thoroughly implicated in the discernment, placement, and reinforcement of the boundary between humanity and animality, and for Gregory, it names a process in which a

properly human meaning is secured against animality.<sup>12</sup> The operation of Gregory's exegesis moves to excise animality—whether in the text or in the reader—as an impurity or excess which would prevent human union with God. The remainder of this essay will explore the ways in which Gregory's sharply cutting exegesis necessarily fails to parse humanity from animality, demonstrating that, in fact, animality remains central and indispensable to Gregory's exegesis in unacknowledged (and even disavowed) ways.

### The Anagogical Garment and the Naked Song

Derrida frames his text with an anecdote. Stepping out of the shower one day he stood naked, face to face with a little black cat. The cat was, of course, also unclothed. The cat's eyes incited shame in Derrida; more particularly, an intense impulse to cover himself. Gregory of Nyssa, too, carries a strong sense of shame. He exhibits his squeamishness by cloaking the erotic passages of the Song which display the bride and bridegroom's bodies with sublimating warnings against a merely carnal understanding of the text. Gregory clothes the text of the Song of Songs in a garment of theological interpretation.

While many have elaborated upon the interaction between Derrida and the particular "*petit chat*" whose gaze confronts him with his nudity, fewer scholars have taken Derrida at his

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory later employs an even more violent image in this regard, referring to the divine command in Exodus 19 to stone animals found upon the base of the mountain where God and Moses were to meet. Gregory takes this image up to suggest that proper scriptural interpretation involves putting to death every irrational and animal thought, and that only in this manner will the interpreter be prepared to hear the voice of God (*GNO* 6:27-9). Gregory of Nazianzus uses the same passage from Exodus in a similar manner in Oration 28.2.

word when he claims that *L'Animal que donc je suis* is at heart a discourse about “*the truth of modesty*.”<sup>13</sup> That is not to say that Derrida is primarily concerned with the complex of shame, nakedness, modesty and clothing—inasmuch as it has been *one* of the many ways in which humanity has set itself apart from animality. Rather, Derrida suggests that the Western philosophical tradition lavishes inordinate attention upon a constellation of attributes (“nonfinite” in quantity) by which humanity may be divided from “the animals” precisely in order to cover over, mask, ornament, or compensate for a felt lack or deficiency—as clothing covers perceived nudity. The attributes “proper” to humanity which purportedly set humanity apart (for example: reason, speech, responsiveness, self-reflection, consciousness, laughter, deception, tools, culture, awareness of death, excess labor) are a supplement for the perception of an original “fault” (Derrida 2008, 20, 45).<sup>14</sup> What sets humanity apart is the *sense* of a fault, or a lack (always discovered in contrast with “the animals”) which expresses itself in the myriad ways that humanity “announces itself to itself” as other-than-animal.<sup>15</sup> The topic of Derrida’s discourse is

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<sup>13</sup> “La vérité de la pudeur sera finalement notre sujet” (Derrida 2006, 70; cf. 2008, 45). Derrida also claims that the essay is about “response” and “limitrophy” though all these themes are arguably bound up together (2008, 8, 29).

<sup>14</sup> For Derrida’s earlier investigation and definition of the notion of “proper”-ness, see 1982, 246-50). In an otherwise excellent book, Leonard Lawlor makes an unjustifiably strong connection between *evil* and the aporia that Derrida refers to as humanity’s “fault” (Lawlor 2007, 29, 40). Derrida’s sense of the fault is more a rhetorical-metaphysical concept than a juridical/ethical category—though the two are not altogether separable.

<sup>15</sup> Though Matthew Calarco largely holds to Derrida, he differs on this point, suggesting that animals have been understood primarily according to a “privative interpretation of animal life” in

the truth of modesty because it is on account of his modesty that “man” must make something of himself and overcome his nakedness, his deficiency, his fault.<sup>16</sup> Within this picture, animality represents a kind of fullness, completion, or immediate self-presence that humanity lacks.<sup>17</sup>

The previous section demonstrated that Gregory’s entire project of anagogical exegesis reinforces a certain conception of the relation of humanity to animality. This section turns to examine the concrete operation of Gregory’s exegesis upon the textual animals of the Song of Songs, particularly in relation to human nakedness. The Song confronts any interpreter with a confusing mix of animals, nudity, and human romance. As such, it would seem like difficult interpretive ground on which to maintain a rigid categorical distinction between humanity as such and “animals.” Given the sheer number of animals standing in for humans in the Song, Gregory might be expected to configure the relationship between humanity and animality as something other than categorical difference. After all, in a text which he considers a celebratory

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which animals (as such) lack something that humans have. The disjunction between Derrida and Calarco on this point is not fundamental, though Derrida would suggest that “privative interpretations” are always already supplements that are meant to cover for some fault or flaw (Calarco 2008, 18).

<sup>16</sup> I deliberately use androcentric language here in order to signal, perhaps too subtly, that the project of setting humanity over against animality is aligned with the project of setting masculinity over against femininity, and other significant cultural-political binaries.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida’s articulation of the constitutive role of “the animal” in Western philosophical thinking about the human and Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the “anthropological machine” are mutually illuminating and deeply consonant (Agamben 2004, 15-16, 21, 29, 37).

mystagogical narrative of divine-human communion, the two main figures are ceaselessly likened to animals. The bride appears as a lion or leopard, a horse, a turtledove, birds, goats, sheep, fawns, a bee, a gazelle, and a deer; the bridegroom appears as a gazelle, a fawn, a raven, a dove; and other characters in the narrative take on animal guises as well. Not only that, but the overwhelming majority of these animal associations are positive ones. That is to say, Gregory takes the animal metaphors as *praise* of the bride or bridegroom rather than censure.<sup>18</sup> Much as Derrida “thinks with” modesty and nakedness *both* as a corporeal uncovering *and* as a relation to a primal fault, Gregory too takes up the theme of modesty and nakedness in relation to a cosmological narrative running from shame to perfect communion. This section will explore the ways in which nudity and animality intersect within Gregory’s anagogical interpretation of the Song, and argue that Gregory’s exegesis paradoxically uses the animal metaphors describing the bride and bridegroom to shore up his categorical distinction between humanity and animality.

Nudity and animality intersect in at least four ways within Gregory’s homilies on the Song:

First, Gregory denigrates a certain kind of shamelessly erotic nakedness as “animal” in such a way as to imply that it is less than human. Debased, carnal sexuality is strategically associated with animality so that authentic humanity “naturally” transcends it. In the passages adduced in the first section, Gregory transfers human sexuality across the human-animal distinction, so that it appears in human life as a “proper” of animals rather than humans—as something to be controlled, tamed, and overcome, rather than as something that belongs to

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<sup>18</sup> The exceptions here are the lion/leopard and the raven, which are taken to symbolize how far the bride (or in the case of the raven, Jesus’ apostles and prophets) has come from a dissolute life of sin (*GNO* 6:250-53, 391-93).



humanity as such. For Gregory, copulative genital intercourse is unnatural and improper to humanity in God's image.<sup>19</sup> The person who sees the nudity of the Song in this manner "is passion-ridden and fleshly, still stinking with the stench of the dead, old man; [such a one] ought not pull the meaning of the divinely-inspired thoughts and words down to a sense fit for non-discursive livestock. (μή τις ἐμπαθῆς καὶ σαρκώδης ἔτι τῆς νεκρᾶς τοῦ παλαιοῦ ἀνθρώπου δυσωδίας ἀπόζων πρὸς τὰς κτηνώδεις ἀλογίας κατασυρέτω τὰς τῶν θεοπνεύστων νοημάτων τε καὶ ῥημάτων ἐμφάσεις.)" (*GNO* 6:25). Thus, nakedness in any highly sexualized sense belongs properly to animals rather than to humans for Gregory (cf. 250-52 where the former association of the bride with lions and leopards is taken as indicative of a shamefully sinful past; cf. 15, 104, 391-93, 423-24).

Second, though rare, there are moments in Gregory's mediation of the Song when the bride or bridegroom is literally naked in her/his own body. This literal nakedness might be recognized as "animal" within the economy of Gregory's theology inasmuch as the physiological functions and physical vulnerability of the bride and bridegroom stand in the foreground while the subjective, conscious, and intellectual aspects of their interaction recede. "My beloved, she says, put his hand through the opening, and my inmost parts cried out for him. (Ἀδελφιδός μου γάρ, φησὶν, ἀπέστειλε τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ διὰ τῆς ὀπῆς, καὶ ἡ κοιλία μου ἐθροήθη ἐπ' αὐτόν.)" (Song 5:4; *GNO* 6:332). While Gregory continually warns against a sexual understanding of such passages from the Song, he must also allow traces and glimpses of this sensuous content to

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<sup>19</sup> For a more explicit picture of Gregory's understanding of the connection between animality and sexuality (as unnatural to humanity as such), see *De hominis opificio*, §14-16. Substantial secondary literature has been written on this passage from *De hominis opificio*. My understanding of the passage aligns closely with Zachhuber (2000, 169-72).

appear (even if only by means of his enthusiastic protests) because they are indispensable to the anagogical project. This literal sensuous content is the material anchor for the theological metaphor of human-divine communion.<sup>20</sup> Without at least some hint of the erotic interaction of the bride and bridegroom, Gregory's discovery of exalted spiritual descriptions of divine-human communion in the Song would be totally untethered. And furthermore it is the base, animal, erotic desire (in sublimated form) that drives the reader toward God; without the connection to the erotic beauty of the corporeal bride and bridegroom, the alluring anagogical attraction of the Song would fall flat.<sup>21</sup> Inasmuch as corporeal procreation is, for Gregory, a vestige of animality

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<sup>20</sup> "Gregor indes sieht einen weiteren Aufstieg der Seele darin, daß nun nicht mehr die Stimme (des Bräutigams) ans Herz, klopft, sondern die göttliche Hand selbst durch die Luke hereinreicht" (Dünzl 1993, 169). Gregory quickly allows κοιλία [inmost parts, bodily cavity, womb, belly] to slip back to the more spiritual and less sexual καρδία/heart (cf. *GNO* 6:333). Nevertheless, the sublimating theological movement still capitalizes on a glimpse of the bride's "inmost parts" crying out at the touch of the bridegroom.

<sup>21</sup> "The discourse now before us also urges the same things [as Proverbs, i.e. 'Be in love with divine beauty']; it does not bring its counsel regarding this matter to you nakedly, but rather philosophizes upon these thoughts through unspeakable things, setting forward an image of the pleasures of this life as a device for its teachings. The marital image is a construction whereby desire for beauty mediates a longing, but not in the usual human pattern where the bridegroom initiates desire. Rather, the virgin anticipates the bridegroom without shame, making her yearning public and praying for when she will enjoy the bridegroom's kiss. (ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ νῦν προκειμένος λόγος τὰ ἴσα διακελεύεται οὐ γυμνήν σοι τὴν περὶ τούτου συμβουλὴν προσάγων, ἀλλὰ δι' ἀπορρήτων φιλοσοφεῖ τοῖς νοήμασιν εἰκόνα τινὰ τῶν κατὰ τὸν βίον ἡδέων εἰς τὴν τῶν

in human life, Gregory must call at least minimal attention to the animal nakedness in the Song in order to ground his theological exegesis.

Third, the bride and bridegroom frequently appear naked under the guise of animal metaphors. The Song uses animal imagery to describe the bodies of bride and bridegroom and Gregory is more than content to take up the animal metaphors of the Song in his anagogical exegesis. In Gregory's homilies, the human nakedness which would appear too sexually charged—and therefore too animal—is tamed and muted precisely by means of the animal images, which partially veil and obscure the human bodies described, or at least distance them from a straightforwardly sexual legibility.<sup>22</sup>

προσεικάσθη μὲν ἐκείνη τῇ ἵππῳ ἢ διὰ τῶν ἀρετῶν κεκαθαρμένη ψυχῇ· ἀλλ'  
οὐπω τοῦ λόγου γέγονεν ὑποχείριος οὐδὲ ἐβάσταξεν ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς τὸν ἐπὶ σωτηρία  
τοῖς τοιούτοις ἐποχούμενον ἵπποις· χρὴ γὰρ πρῶτον διὰ πάντων κατακοσμηθῆναι

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δογμάτων τούτων κατασκευὴν προστησάμενος. ἢ δὲ εἰκὼν γαμικὴ τίς ἐστι διασκευή, ἐν ἣ  
κάλλους ἐπιθυμία μεσιτεύει τῷ πόθῳ, οὐ κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην συνήθειαν τοῦ νυμφίου τῆς  
ἐπιθυμίας κατάρξαντος, ἀλλὰ προλαμβάνει τὸν νυμφίον ἢ παρθένος ἀνεπαισχύντως τὸν πόθον  
δημοσιεύουσα καὶ εὐ|χὴν ποιουμένη τοῦ νυμφικοῦ ποτε κατατρυφῆσαι φιλήματος.)” (*GNO*  
6:23).

<sup>22</sup> Another excellent example of this dynamic is found in Gregory's comments on the extended praise of the Bride's beauty (Song 4:1-5, 6:5-9), in which her hair is compared to a flock of goats, her teeth are likened to twin sheep, her lips to a thread, her cheeks to pomegranates, her neck to a tower, and her breasts to grazing fawns. The passage is repeated twice in the Song and receives extended commentary in Gregory's exegesis (*GNO* 6:218-42 and 450-56; cf. 78, 85, 140, 175, 178-79, 377).

τὸν ἵππον, εἶθ' οὕτω τὸν βασιλέα ἔποχον δέξασθαι. εἶτε δὲ ἄνωθεν ἑαυτῷ  
ἐφάρμοζοι τὸν ἵππον ὁ κατὰ τὸν προφήτην ἐπιβαίνων ἐφ' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἵππους καὶ  
ἐπὶ σωτηρία ἡμῶν ἐφ' ἡμῶν ἵπαζόμενος, εἶτε καὶ ἐν ἡμῖν γένοιτο ὁ ἐνοικῶν τε  
καὶ ἐμπεριπατῶν καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ βάθη τῆς ψυχῆς ἡμῶν διαδύμενος, οὐδὲν διαφέρει  
κατὰ τὴν ἔννοιαν· ὃ γὰρ ἂν τὸ ἐν ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων γένηται, συγκατωρθῶθη καὶ τὸ  
λειπόμενον· ὃ τε γὰρ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ τὸν θεὸν ἔχων καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ πάντως ἔχει καὶ ὁ ἐν  
ἑαυτῷ δεξάμενος ὑπέβη τὸν ἐν αὐτῷ γεγονότα. οὐκοῦν μέλλει ὁ βασιλεὺς τῷ  
ἵππῳ τούτῳ ἐπαναπαύεσθαι.

The soul purified through the virtues was likened [in Song 3:9] to *that* horse, but  
has not yet come under the hand of the Logos nor carried upon herself the one  
who rides such horses unto salvation. For it is first necessary that the horse be  
fully ornamented [i.e. Song 3:11] and then, so dressed, to receive the king to ride.  
It makes no difference to the sense here whether the one who according to the  
prophets mounts upon us horses and rides upon us unto our salvation is fit from  
above or whether he comes to be in us, he who slips through into the deep parts of  
our souls, dwelling and walking about. For to whomever the one happens, the  
other is set straight along with it. The one who has God upon him also has God  
completely within himself, and the one who receives in himself is under the one  
who has come to be in him. Thus the king intends to rest upon this horse (*GNO*  
6:84).

The nonthreatening nudity of animals stands in for human nakedness when Gregory desires to  
make theological points that are thoroughly anchored in sexual metaphor. Because the unclothed  
bodies of animals do not appear immediately sexual, they provide some modest cover for the

sexualized nakedness of the Song's human bodies—though Gregory considers “animals” as a category to be hyper-sexual.

Fourth, the *modality* of the bride and bridegroom's nudity in Gregory's homilies is the same sort of undecidable nudity that we perceive in animals. Animals, so the traditional thinking goes, are clothed within their skin in a manner that our skin always fails to cloth us. The visible surfaces of animal bodies are ambiguous. If animals are naked, they do not reflect upon their nakedness, nor regard it as a problem. Neither is animal nudity ever, *prima facie*, a matter for human reflection or concern. In the same way, the bride's body appears all through the text, yet she never seems to be totally bare. She is naked in the way that animals are naked—unreflectively. The proper shame that attends to human nakedness as its authenticating supplement remains notably absent, leaving the nudity in Gregory's text ambiguously human at most. There is a dark and violent scene in the Song where the bride wanders the streets of the city looking for the bridegroom. In her wanderings she is accosted and beaten by watchmen of the city who strip her of her veil. Gregory allegorically negates the violence and fear in this passage insofar as the bride's clothing has come to symbolize the bride's separation from her beloved and the watchmen have become angels. Where the bride in the Song cries out in fear and shame, in Gregory's text she finds joy in her further unveiling (*GNO* 6:359-61).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, seeing her stripped in this way, the flock of attendants marvel at her beauty and ask where they might also be similarly stripped of their veils (379). The bride does not offer so much as a blush at her exposure before these friends in the Song, and perhaps more remarkably, Gregory hardly blushes at her exposure before his congregation. Under the aegis of this theological

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<sup>23</sup> “Wer aber nach Gregor den Sinn des Gesagten überschaut, für den sind es die Worte einer Frau, die sich des Schönsten rühmt” (Dünzl 1993, 179).

interpretation, human nakedness becomes a garment of glory; the absence of shame that generally signals animal nakedness becomes here a sign of the bride's perfection.<sup>24</sup> Thus, not only does the bride appear under the guise of animal metaphors as she progresses spiritually, but inasmuch as her perfection is demonstrated by a certain shame-free and unreflective nudity, she enters into an "animal" mode of corporeality.

None of these intersections of animality and nudity in the Song represent for Gregory a transgression of the assumed abyssal difference between humanity and animality. Paradoxically, Gregory preserves the humanity of the bride and bridegroom in categorical opposition to animality precisely by means of the text's animal imagery. Gregory doubles the nakedness of the animal so that it appears *both* as hypersexual, shameful, degraded nakedness, which the humanity of the bride naturally transcends, *and* as the perfected, exalted nakedness which knows no reason for shame and no longer suffers from any fault. First, sexual impulses and actions are expropriated from humanity and rendered proper to animality so that they may register as something "other" to be excised, tamed, or slaughtered. Subsequently, however, animals stand in for humans in the text's references to "union" so that the nudity therein can be taken as shame-free, perfected nakedness-without-fault. In both ways Gregory uses the animals of the Song to transpose the bride and bridegroom's interactions from a sexual register to a spiritual register.

Without the animal metaphors to distract, delight, and teach his audience, Gregory would be left

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<sup>24</sup> "She did as she heard, removing that garment of skin which was cast around her with her sin. (ἐποίησε γὰρ ἅπερ ἤκουσεν ἐκδυσάμενη τὸν δερμάτινον ἐκεῖνον χιτῶνα, ὃν μετὰ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν περιεβάλετο.)" (*GNO* 6:327-28). Indeed, Gregory begins the first homily with an invitation to the discerning listener to strip off the garment of sin and enter the intimacy of the bridal chamber in pure, white garments, thus evoking the nudity of baptismal rituals (*GNO* 6:14).

with the shamelessly sexualized “animal” nakedness of the Song; with the cover of the animal metaphors, however, Gregory reads the Song as Solomon’s reflection on the shame-free nakedness of a perfected humanity, for whom nudity represents the absence of guile, impurity, and any barrier to communion with God. The animals of the Song, however, have no spiritual weight of their own; they figure in Gregory’s anagogical exegesis only as metaphorical tools, lending all their energy to the spiritual progress of the bride. While “animality” seems to play an indispensable role in Gregory’s exegetical project here; it does so entirely at the level of metaphor, and in such a way that the categorical difference between humanity and animality as such is reinforced rather than questioned. Gregory’s theology, however, short-circuits in a deeper way, so that spiritual ascent and anagogical interpretation turn out to rely on the persistence of animality within the human.

#### *L’Animal que donc Je suis: Following and Being Transformed*

Throughout *L’Animal que donc je suis*, Derrida plays upon the homonymy of the first-person present-tense forms of the verbs “être” (to be) and “suivre” (to follow) (2008, 54-55). His title, while naturally translated as *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, could equally be rendered *The Animal that Therefore I Follow*. The philosophical point made here is that humanity discovers or constructs its identity only through an encounter with animality or in relation to animals, even if such a relation or encounter is entirely abstract.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Derrida argues that in philosophical

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<sup>25</sup> “As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself” (Derrida 2008, 12). The notion of

discourse the words “animals” and “animality” are abstract rhetorical tools necessary for the formation of a human identity, but which function as a disavowal of real animals, a turning away from the eyes of fellow creatures.<sup>26</sup> So, Derrida recognizes that by way of his formation in a tradition of Western anthropo-logic running from Aristotle through Descartes to Lacan, that he

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“animal pedagogy” in the introduction of Oliver 2009 is an excellent development of Derrida’s theme. She argues that, “Despite the explicit message of these [anti-humanist, philosophical and psychological] texts—that humans are radically distinct from animals—animals function to teach man how to be human. Not surprisingly, then, this animal pedagogy is not acknowledged. To acknowledge the dependence of *man* and *humanity* on *animal* and *animality* is to undermine man’s sense of himself as autonomous and self-sovereign. For if anything, in the history of Western thought, man trains animals and not the other way around” (20-21).

<sup>26</sup> Throughout the text, Derrida labors to dissociate himself from “they” who use the category “animal” naively (for example Derrida 2008, 47-51).



follows “animality” in a certain abstract way,<sup>27</sup> but he also wonders if he might follow an animal, a cat in his case, into a different identity, a mode of being human that sees and is seen by the eyes of other creatures (2008, 5-6, 31-32, 54-60). This notion of following an animal strongly evokes Gregory’s most treasured image for spiritual ascent in the Song. The bridegroom appears repeatedly as a deer bounding across the hilltops luring the bride—and simultaneously, the reader—into a chase.<sup>28</sup> The spiritual transformation of bride and reader take place by following this divine animal; and as it turns out, animality is not superfluous in the process.

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<sup>27</sup> The depth of this formation (and not some crypto-conservative attachment to the human-animal distinction for its own sake) is the reason why Derrida refuses to deny or negate the human-animal distinction altogether. Matthew Calarco upbraids him for this refusal (2008, 137-49), but perhaps underestimates the difficulty of simply setting aside the human-animal distinction for a human subject whose identity is formed by that distinction both at an individual and species level. Calarco rightly recognizes that Derrida makes any attempt to draw a categorical distinction between humanity and animality nonsensical, but this is because his engagement deconstructs such a distinction from within its own assumptions rather than denying it more straightforwardly. See Derrida 2008, 29-31 for the relevant passage.

<sup>28</sup> “She begins to see the one she yearns for appearing before her eyes in another form. He is likened to a deer, compared to a fawn, and he does not stand steady, neither in one appearance nor in the same place where he appeared. Rather, he leaps upon the mountains, springing from the ridges to the prominent hills. (καὶ βλέπειν ἄρχεται τὸν ποθούμενον ἄλλω εἶδει τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἐμφαινόμενον· δορκάδι γὰρ ὁμοιοῦται καὶ νεβρῶ παρεικάζεται, καὶ οὐχ ἔστηκεν οὔτε ἐπὶ τῆς μιᾶς ὄψεως οὔτε ἐπὶ τοῦ τόπου τοῦ αὐτοῦ τὸ φαινόμενον, ἀλλ’ ἐπιπηδᾷ τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἀπὸ

For Gregory, the image of the deer leaping away from hill to hill describes the anagogical function of the *text* of the Song as it incites desire within its readers for God’s beautiful but elusive mystery.<sup>29</sup> The bridegroom’s animal appearance as a deer is taken to signify God’s inscrutability in such a way that the reader is drawn into pursuit.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Song leads the

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τῶν ἀκρωρειῶν ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν βουνῶν ἐξοχὰς μεταλλόμενος.)” (*GNO* 6:178; cf. Song 2:8-9; 2:17; 8:14).

<sup>29</sup> “The things set before us anagogically by the philosophy of the Song of Songs lead to desire for a sense of the higher goods and set anguish in our souls by producing a certain kind of rejection in us through the recognition of incomprehensible matters. . . . She is carried to many [ideas] by her visions, thinking perpetually that she sees something else and never settling in with the same image of what she grasps. So, she says, ‘Behold, he *comes!*’ That is, not *standing*, not *settling in*, so as to be made known to an eager onlooker by holding still. Rather, he steals away out of sight before he is completely known, ‘leaping on the mountains and springing on the hills,’ as she says. (Τὰ νῦν προτεθέντα διὰ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως ἡμῖν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Ἄϊσματος τῶν Ἄϊσμάτων φιλοσοφίας καὶ εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ἄγει τῆς τῶν ὑπερκειμένων ἀγαθῶν θεωρίας καὶ λύπην ἐντίθησιν ἡμῶν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἀπόγνωσιν ἐμποιοῦντα τρόπον τινὰ τῆς τῶν ἀλήπτων κατανοήσεως. [ . . . ] ἐπὶ πολλὰ φέρεσθαι ταῖς ὀπτασίαις ἄλλοτε ἄλλως βλέπειν οἰομένην καὶ οὐ πάντοτε τῷ αὐτῷ παραμένουσαν χαρακτῆρι τοῦ καταληφθέντος · Ἴδου γάρ φησιν οὗτος ἦκει, οὐχ ἔστως οὐδὲ παραμένων, ὡς διὰ τῆς ἐπιμονῆς γνωρισθῆναι τῷ ἀτενίζοντι ἀλλ’ ἀφαρπάζων ἑαυτὸν τῶν ὄψεων, πρὶν εἰς τελείαν γνῶσιν ἐλθεῖν· Πηδῶν γάρ φησιν ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη καὶ τοῖς βουνοῖς ἐφαλλόμενος.)” (*GNO* 6:139; cf. 137-42, 170-71, 178, 356, 378-77).

<sup>30</sup> In conversation with Levinas, Derrida invokes the concept of a *divinanimality* arguing that the “quasi-transcendence” of absolute alterity which Levinas seeks to describe is best encountered in

Christian into a life of desire, the life of a faithful lack, a stretching out (ἐπέκτασις) toward the inscrutable beloved with a gaze which transforms the reader according to a logic which has come to be called the “mirror of the soul” (See Louth 1981, 90-92; Daniélou 1954, 291-307).

κατόπτρῳ γὰρ ἔοικεν ὡς ἀληθῶς τὸ ἀνθρώπινον κατὰ τὰς τῶν προαιρέσεων  
ἐμφάσεις μεταμορφούμενον· εἴ τε γὰρ πρὸς χρυσὸν ἴδοι, χρυσὸς φαίνεται καὶ τὰς  
ταύτης ἀγὰς τῆς ὕλης διὰ τῆς ἐμφάσεως δείκνυσιν, εἴ τέ τι τῶν εἰδεχθῶν  
ἐμφανείη, καὶ τούτου τὸ αἴσχος δι’ ὁμοιώσεως ἀπομάσσεται βάτραχόν τινα ἢ  
φρῦνον ἢ σκολόπενδραν ἢ ἄλλο τι τῶν ἀηδῶν θεαμάτων τῷ οἰκείῳ εἶδει  
ὑποκρινόμενον, ὥπερ ἂν τούτων εὐρεθῆ ἄντιπρόσωπον.

Humanity is transformed in accordance with the appearances it chooses, and so, truly seems like a mirror. For if someone looks upon gold she appears as gold, and by way of its appearance she manifests the shining of that material. And if someone reflects some fetid thing, he imitates its shame by way of a resemblance, acting into its natural appearance—be it a frog, toad, millipede, or some other unpleasant sight, whichever he is found to be facing (*GNO* 6:104).

Gregory argues that whatever object a human soul fixes its gaze upon, the soul begins to assimilate to that object. The Song works, then, by transfixing a person’s gaze upon God’s

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the “face” of an animal (a possibility which Levinas disavows) (Derrida 2008, 132). Though Gregory certainly operates with a hierarchy in which the alterity of animals is far inferior to humanity while the alterity of God is far superior; he nevertheless finds animality a fitting figure to describe God’s utter transcendence of human knowledge. See also Derrida 2009, 13, in which Derrida describes humanity as a vanishing mediator between the alterity of animals and God.

beauty, a gaze which is held firm by the ever-increasing desire fueled by the Song's sensual language, so that the reader is caught up in an infinite process of pursuing God and increasing in conformity to God. Here, at least, animality does not appear "beneath" humanity; in doggedly following the bridegroom as a divine-animal, the bride (and concomitantly the reader) undergoes a becoming-animal, being found in the form of a deer or gazelle, like her beloved (*GNO* 6:377).

However, it is not only at the level of imagery that animality is integral to the process of the Song's spiritual transformation. For Gregory, *desire* (ἐπιθυμία) is a function of the appetites and impulses that humanity shares with other animals. The text of the Song functions analogically not primarily because it teaches a person about the nature of God, or about the path of approach to God, rather, the text functions because it incites desire within the reader by presenting God's beauty; it leads the properly attuned reader up into love (*GNO* 6:27-29, 63). The orientation and increase of the reader's desire is a central concern of Gregory's exegesis; Gregory's fundamental commitment to the incomprehensibility of God means that the soul's gaze is a gaze of loving desire, and not the gaze of knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

οὐδέποτε γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν ἐγνωσμένων ἢ τοῦ ἀνιόντος ἐπιθυμία μένει, ἀλλὰ διὰ  
μείζονος πάλιν ἐτέρας ἐπιθυμίας πρὸς ἐτέραν ὑπερκειμένην κατὰ τὸ ἐφεξῆς ἢ  
ψυχῇ ἀνιούσα πάντοτε διὰ τῶν ἀνωτέρων ὁδεύει πρὸς τὸ ἀόριστον.

The desire of the one ascending never settles on what has been known, but instead, by one desire after another, each greater again than the last, excels on to

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<sup>31</sup> "Die ἐπιθυμία (nicht den ἔρος) zeichnet Gregor in den *CantHom* als die ständig vorwärtstreibende, nie erlahmende Kraft auf dem endlosen Weg zu Gott" (Dünzl 1993, 366-67; cf. Laird 2003, 79; Ludlow 2000, 58-59, 63; Louth 1981, 97).

the next in line. The ascending soul makes its way toward the infinite, always by higher things (*GNO* 6:247; cf. 323-24, 356, 425-26).

Furthermore, within the framework of Gregory's theological anthropology, the priority of love and desire over knowledge entails that human animality takes the lead in spiritual ascent, rather than following after the distinct and exclusive traits of humanity as such.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately for Gregory, God's transformative grace does not utilize the faculties that set humanity apart from other animals (discursiveness, being λόγικος), but draws humanity forward through a faculty that all animals hold in common (ἐπιθυμία).<sup>33</sup> Of course, in the contexts where Gregory indicates the centrality of desire to spiritual transformation, he does not name it as a function of animality—to do so would undermine the anthropological exceptionalism that Gregory has labored to establish—nevertheless, it is clear enough elsewhere that desire is proper to that part of the soul which a human being shares with the animals, and he offers no reason to believe that a desire which is focused upon God derives from a separate faculty than other desires (for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, §14).

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<sup>32</sup> Gregory “identifies love with the appetitive faculties of our irrational nature,” that is, with ἐπιθυμία (Smith 2004, 191).

<sup>33</sup> “Gregory asserts that the text presupposes asceticism and actually teaches it through language that appears to speak of its opposite: [ . . . ] This paradox occurs because the same human drive that impels one toward bodily love can also be directed toward God, and the same human receptacle that can be filled, though ineffectively, with sensual pleasure can also be better filled with divine life” (Harrison 1992, 124).

The centrality of desire within Gregory's depiction of the soul's approach to God is a commonplace within scholarship on Gregory, but most scholars follow Gregory in eliding desire's "animal" provenance when it has a positive spiritual or theological function, rather than naming this dynamic as a short-circuit in Gregory's attempt to categorically distinguish humanity from animality.<sup>34</sup> Seemingly, desire is a function of animality when it dangerously leads to distraction and promiscuity, but not when it is directed toward God—yet Gregory provides no basis for such a distinction.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the anagogical meaning of the Song of Songs relies upon the sexual desire that Gregory associates with the animals to "hook" the reader and lead her forward. But if desire were still named as proper to animality in its positive role in anagogical exegesis and spiritual transformation, then the categorical transcendence of humanity over animality would be called directly into question. As it stands, Gregory's short circuit amounts to an ideological device safeguarding anthropological exceptionalism: the authentic human being transcends impure animal desires because she is discursive and spiritual rather than base and material, yet as she progresses to the highest reaches of spiritual transformation and the most

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<sup>34</sup> One paradigmatic example of this dynamic is Smith 2004. In the first part of the book Smith meticulously traces Gregory's effort to distinguish humanity from other animals along the lines of rationality/discursiveness, sexual procreation, desire, and passion/emotion. Yet, when desire returns to play a positive theological role in human salvation, its essential connection to animality is pervasively effaced (see 37, 69, 77-78, 87, 104-6, 183, 187, 219, 227). The quote above in n. 32 is the closest that Smith comes to naming the significance of human animality for salvation.

<sup>35</sup> Dünzl takes stock of the ambivalence in Gregory's treatment of erotic desire (1993, 357, 364-69).

profound meaning of the Song of Songs, the necessity of (no-longer-named-as-animal) desire returns as the engine of spiritual progress.

Though Gregory did not avail himself of it, an alternate path through the short circuit here would be to acknowledge the continuity of animality and spiritual desire. To recognize spirituality as a function of animality (rather than of humanity-as-such) would be to doubly emphasize the importance of the animal metaphors of the Song as they illustrate the spiritual pursuit of the elusive God. In pursuit of the divine-deer-bridegroom bounding over the hills, the bride might find herself becoming-animal. Through her unbroken gaze, the bride might become a *spiritual-animal* whose desires orient her instincts, impulses, and attentions and drive her on after God's mystery. For Gregory to think in this manner, however, would require a fundamental reconfiguration of the categories "human" and "animal" wherever they are taken to signify an absolute contrast or metaphysical difference.

### Conclusion

The pervasive presence of animals in the text of the Song launches Gregory's theological interpretation. The literal zoological excess makes it difficult to take the text seriously as erotic writing, and even if it *were* straightforwardly erotic, such "base" meaning would be below Gregory's estimation of the dignity of Holy Scripture. Animals force the literal meaning of the Song into the mill of theological interpretation so that it can be refined into something capable of nourishing its readers. In other words, the prominence of animals in the text presents an excess that allows for the erasure of animality; the Song can be sublimated largely because its animals almost demand an allegorical (or anagogical) reading. And yet, for all the rhetorical bluster with which Gregory divides humanity from animality, traits and features associated with animality

turn out to be constitutive of human perfection. Gregory marvels that the Song storms the castle of sensuousness in order to turn its power to good use:

τί γὰρ ἂν γένοιτο τούτου παραδοξότερον ἢ τὸ αὐτὴν ποιῆσαι τὴν φύσιν τῶν ἰδίων παθημάτων καθάρσιον διὰ τῶν νομιζομένων ἔμπαθῶν ῥημάτων τὴν ἀπάθειαν νομοθετοῦσάν τε καὶ παιδεύουσαν; οὐ γὰρ λέγει τὸ δεῖν ἔξω τῶν τῆς σαρκὸς γίνεσθαι κινήματων καὶ νεκροῦν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ καθαρεύειν ἀπὸ τῶν ἔμπαθῶν ῥημάτων τῷ στόματι, ἀλλ' οὕτω διέθηκε τὴν ψυχὴν, ὡς διὰ τῶν ἀπεμφαίνειν δοκούντων πρὸς τὴν καθαρότητα βλέπειν, διὰ τῶν ἔμπαθῶν ῥήσεων τὴν ἀκήρατον ἐρμηγεύων διάνοιαν.

What could possibly be more paradoxical than to make [human] nature purify itself of its own passions by legislating and teaching impassibility in customarily passion-ridden speech? [Solomon] does not say that it is necessary to be beyond the movements of the flesh, and to ‘mortify one’s members upon the earth,’ and to purify the mouth from the speech of passion. Rather, he manages the soul so that it looks toward purity through things that seem incongruous [with purity], translating undefiled thought by passion-ridden speech (*GNO* 6:29).

The power of desire constitutes the hook in the lives of readers for the anagogical function of the text. While Gregory constantly warns about the dangers of allowing desire to slide toward the passions shared with animals, the total eradication of the “animal” aspects of desire would leave a human desiccated and unresponsive to divine allure (*GNO* 6:21). Thus, the obverse side of the “paradox” wherein the Song teaches ἀπάθεια by means of passion-ridden language is that, once purified, human animality must take the lead in the journey of salvation. As Smith notes, Gregory’s narrative of salvation is “in essence a narrative of the transformation of the bestial



passions into holy desires” (Smith 2004, 183). The unspoken entailment, however, is that something of the beast remains in the soul made holy.

Derrida’s text examines the necessary failures and fractures in the anthropological projects of Descartes, Kant, Levinas, Heidegger, and Lacan. Within each of these thinkers’ systems, the human supposed to transcend animality altogether turns out to have done so on false premises, *or* more often, fails to live up to the measure of transcendence upon which the animals are judged deficient.<sup>36</sup> This essay has demonstrated that Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs* contain the same sort of “failure” as the contemporary texts that Derrida examines. While Gregory does in fact labor toward a categorical distinction between human beings and animals in which humanity (as spiritual) altogether transcends animality (as material), his project necessarily fails inasmuch as he can never completely harden the boundary he seeks to draw. Gregory upholds difference in the attributes proper to humanity and animality—the human is still discursive, still the subject of modesty, an animal is still characterized by its passionate desire—yet over the course of the transformations narrated in Gregory’s theological interpretation of the Song, the desires proper to animality become indispensable to human perfection. Within that “short circuit” Gregory inadvertently opens possibilities for thinking

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, with all his attention to multiple differences is careful never to deny any distinction between humans and other creatures lumped together as “animals”; he does, however, deny that the frontier of that distinction is simple, linear, and hermetically exclusive. Derrida multiplies differences between creatures of every shape and habit in order to relativize what has been taken as the master Difference between the vast myriad of creatures and the one creature called the human being. He is concerned to avoid *both* a “biological continuism” that would deny any significant difference *and* any sort of metaphysically absolutized distinction (2008, 30-31).

differently about the relation of humanity and animality in a theological register—possibilities which have yet to be explored in constructive theological projects.<sup>37</sup> The transcendence of the human over the animal, then, turns out to include a return of humanity to its animality—only now in a perfected state. The perfected human-animal has utterly focused desires, and is revealed (exposed, laid bare) to all without the (human) supplement of shame, without the second-guesses and inward turns of self-reflection. In order to continue on the long way to God, pulled along by the anagogical grace of divine beauty, humanity may need to find and follow its own animality, saying, “This animal that therefore I am; by grace I am following unto salvation.”

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<sup>37</sup> Constructive projects are, however, beginning to appear; see, for example Clough.

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