

Paul in Gregory's in Canticum (P.-M. Boutin)

“The *Song* read through the prism of Paul’s teaching”¹ announces a paragraph from the introduction to the news translation of *Cant* published in March at *Sources Chrétiennes*. Paul is thus presented by the authors as “an interpretation key”, but also as “a character whom Gregory assimilates to the Bride”, in such a way that “the *Song*’s interpretation contains almost explicitly Paul’s experience and his proclamation of faith”. It appears obvious if we analyze the twelve occurrences of 2 Co 2:15-16² spread through the *Cant* : “For we are a good odour of the Anointed unto God, in them that are being saved, and in them that are perishing; to the one an odor from death unto death; to the other an odour from life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?”³ After this scan, we will see how it shows that Gregory feels the Anointed’s presence in the very text of the *Song*.

In the first homily, the smell of the Spouse’s perfumes, superior to all the perfumes (cf. Sg 1:3), is not smelled by the physical nostrils, “but pertains to a certain intelligible and immaterial faculty that inhales the good odour of the Anointed by sucking in the Spirit”⁴. Gregory establishes thus the essential elements of the symbolism: when one speaks of perfume, it has to be understood according to the spiritual sensation⁵, ie of the good odour of the Anointed (according to 2 Co 2:15). It is important to do so to avoid a carnal interpretation of the *Song*. Therefore, “there is in us a dual activity of sensation, the one bodily, the other more divine—just as the Word says somewhere in Proverbs, “You will find a divine sensation.” (Pr 2:5). In fact, a certain analogy between the operations of the soul and the sense organs of the body is to be found”⁶.

If we consider that the perfumes are the virtues⁷, then the text teaches us that the divine Virtue who covered the Heaven (Ha 3:3) can’t be compared to the virtues we

¹ M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Grégoire de Nysse. Homélie sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, Introduction, p.44-45.

² The text most cited by Gregory in the *In Cant*.

³ ὅτι Χριστοῦ εὐωδία ἐσμὲν τῷ θεῷ ἐν τοῖς σωζομένοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις, οἷς μὲν ὁσμὴ ἐκ θανάτου εἰς θάνατον, οἷς δὲ ὁσμὴ ἐκ ζωῆς εἰς ζωὴν

⁴ Modifiée. *Cant* I GNO VI 34,15-18. Est-ce à mettre en lien avec la « sensation raisonnable (λογικωτέρα) » dont parle Clément d’Alexandrie ? Cf. C. MONDESERT, H.-I. MARROU, *Clément d’Alexandrie. Le pédagogue. Livre II*, p.131. Clément affirmait plus haut : « Et lui-même, le Sauveur, quand il lavait les pieds de ses disciples pour les envoyer à une grande destinée, voulait signifier les voyages qu’ils auraient à faire pour le bien des peuples, et qui seraient auréolés d’une gloire sans tache, grâce à tout ce qui avait été préparé par sa propre puissance. C’est pour eux que s’exhalait le parfum et partout on connaît maintenant ce qu’ils ont fait pour répandre cette bonne odeur sur tous les hommes (cf. Ct 1:3) ; car la Passion du Seigneur a été une source abondante pour nous de bonne odeur, mais pour les Hébreux de péché ». Suit la citation de 2 Co 2:14-16. Ainsi le rapprochement entre ces deux textes remonte au moins à Clément.

⁵ Sensation (feeling).

⁶ Modifiée. *Cant* I GNO VI 34,2-6. Voir M. CANEVET, « Sens spirituels », *Dsp* 14, 1990, col. 598-617.

⁷ *Cant* I GNO VI 35,16. Clément approuve ceux qui éprouvent une aversion envers les hommes qui se parfument et appelle à ce que « chez nous, les hommes exhalent non pas l’odeur des parfums mais celle des vertus, et que la femme répande la bonne odeur du Christ... qu’elle se délecte de ce parfum saint qu’est l’Esprit. C’est celui que le Christ prépare aux hommes qui sont ses disciples : un onguent de bonne odeur, qu’il a composé avec les aromates célestes ». C. Mondésert, H.-I. Marrou, *Clément d’Alexandrie. Le pédagogue. Livre II*, p.133.

know⁸. For this reason, our words cannot express the nature of the Being itself, but his Name is “a perfumed ointment emptied out” (Sg 1:3)⁹. The marvels we contemplate in the world give us the names by which we designate the divine Virtue (Wise, Just...). However, these words, received by the creation after the manner of a vessel for unguents, only show a small quality of the good odour of God, received by the creation after the manner of a vessel for unguents¹⁰ : the image of the perfume pictures well this elusive, unknowable nature, of God¹¹. Thanks to their love, the souls, represented by the maidens (Sg 1:3-4), attract the Spouse, but even this love comes from the good odour of the perfume which they long for¹². From the first Homily, 2 Co 2:15 is presented as a key for the exegesis of Sg 1:3-4 : even if the text of the *Song* never has εὐωδία, Gregory sees a connection with 2 Co 2 thanks to verse 14 : « But thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us in triumph in the Anointed, and maketh manifest through us the odour of his knowledge in every place.»¹³ This Pauline exegesis of the *Song* will allow him to see the Anointed in the symbols related to the perfume¹⁴.

Gregory pursues the theme of the good odour of the Anointed commenting Sg 1:12 in the third homily. For him, the text teaches us that “what is, according to its essence, which transcends the entire structure and order of Being, is unapproachable, impalpable, and incomprehensible”¹⁵. However, all the virtues that we possess, imitations of the True Virtue, form a unique perfume which the purified sensation (αἴσθησις) of the soul perceives as the good odour of the Spouse¹⁶. To correctly understand Gregory’s assertion, we need to make a step back and consider the exegesis he offered in the second homily. According to him, what was said served to purify the souls and to cleanse the meaning contained in the text from all taint of the flesh. The directing part of the soul¹⁷, or the sensation, will then be sufficiently purified¹⁸ to receive the manifestation of the Word who made himself delightful and accessible to adapt himself to the joy of the Bride¹⁹. Furthermore, Gregory concluded commenting Sg 1:11 that the soul became, by faith, the throne and the dwelling of the One who rests in her because he lives in her²⁰. Paul, once he became a vessel of election (cf. Act 9:15), is

⁸ Cf. *Cant* I GNO VI 35,14-36,11.

⁹ Au sujet de l’interprétation de Sg 1:3 dans la période patristique, on peut lire P. Meloni, *Il profumo dell’immortalità. L’interpretazione patristica di Cantico 1,3*, Roma, 1975.

¹⁰ Cf. *Cant* I GNO VI 36,12-38,2.

¹¹ Cf. *Eun* II 101-105 GNO I 56-58 (Cortesi 174-5).

¹² *Cant* I GNO VI 39,9-14.

¹³ « Τῷ δὲ θεῷ χάρις τῷ πάντοτε θριαμβεῦντι ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ καὶ τὴν ὄσμην τῆς γνώσεως αὐτοῦ φανεροῦντι δι’ ἡμῶν ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ ». Soullignons, en passant, le caractère étonnant de l’expression « manifester le parfum ».

¹⁴ Est-ce Grégoire qui établit ce lien ou est-il présent dans 2 Co 2,14-17 ? À ce propos, voir P. Meloni, *op. cit.*, p.41-42. C’est une Gezerah shavah (ou hekkesh), la deuxième règle des sept règles d’interprétation données par Hillel : par analogie entre deux termes ou deux faits, l’ensemble des idées contenues un passage (ici celui de 2 Co 2,14-15) permet d’expliquer le sens du mot dans un autre (le *Cantique des Cantiques*). C’est donc aussi une binyan ab mi-katuv echad, la troisième règle : le sens d’un passage sert à l’interprétation de beaucoup d’autres. Cependant, Grégoire ne part pas de l’Écriture, mais de la lumière du Christ et, dans son argumentation, le Nouveau Testament a force d’argument d’autorité.

¹⁵ *Cant* III GNO VI 89,16-18.

¹⁶ *Idem* 89,6-15.

¹⁷ « Toutes ces paroles antérieures ont pouvoir de purification et de lustration par quoi les âmes rendues saintes sont préparées à recevoir les bien divins... et l’explication du début du *Cantique des cantiques* donnée dans les homélies antérieures, au cours des deux jours précédents, nous a servi à laver et à débarrasser de la souillure de la chair le sens contenu dans les choses dites ». *Idem* 71,3-5.14-18.

¹⁸ *Idem* 72,13-14.

¹⁹ *Idem* 72,3-5.

²⁰ *Idem* 87,15-16

an example of such a soul as he became a dwelling containing the Nature which nothing can contain²¹. It's then that the soul "touches (ἐφάπτεται) the one she seeks through her sensation (αἰσθήσεως) of smell, as if by her power of smell she recognized the distinctive quality of some flesh (χρωτὸς), and she says that she recognizes his fragrance by means of the good odour of a perfume".²² Gregory describes here the reality of the Incarnation which approaches the soul, makes itself accessible to the spiritual sensation and educates it, making it more perfect.

This inaccessible and transcendent grace present in Paul gave itself to him so that he may respire it, thanks to the fruits of the Spirit. Thus he was able to imitate the Spouse by his virtues drawing in himself by his life (βίου²³) the inaccessible Beauty. He becomes then himself the good odour of the Anointed and we can apply to him what is said of the Bride : "My spikenard gave off his odour" (Sg 1:12). He then offered himself to the others so that they might perceive the One who approached him : it is the Spouse who gives to the Bride her perfume. Gregory continues commenting the rest of 2 Co 2:15. Paul was a good odour for those who are saved as Titus, Silvanus or Timothy, but not for Démas and others²⁴: this odour is offered to the freedom²⁵. Gregory thinks that we can also see a connection with the anointment of the Gospel when a woman comes to anoint the head of the Lord with spikenard²⁶: through this reference, he can precise that the perfume signifies the mystery of the death²⁷ and that the good odour becomes an anointment for the body of the Church on the whole earth and in all the world²⁸.

Explaining the following verse ("My beloved is unto me as a bundle of myrrh, that lieth betwixt my breasts"), Gregory makes his thought more explicit. In fact, relying on his cosmetic and medical knowledge, he comments how "the Bride receives in her directing faculty²⁹ the good odour of the Lord ; she makes of her heart a bundle for this incense and accustoms, one by one, all the activities of her life, as many members of a body, to simmer by the Spirit that spreads in her heart".³⁰ It is the Lord Himself who rests in the heart of the Spouse who marked the body with the good odour of which it is shrouded³¹. Gregory will record in the following homily that it's truly the good odour of the Anointed, of which the cypress is a symbol, which allows to build an honourable life (βίου)³². In the fifth homily, the Bride, seeing the flowers on earth at the end of the winter (cf. Sg 2:11-12), will be invited by the Word to see the virtues, among

²¹ *Idem* 87,17-88,6.

²² *Idem* 88,13-16.

²³ A. Rousseau d'une part (A. ROUSSEAU, *Homélie*, p.91, n.21) et M. Canévet et F. Vinel d'autre part (M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Homélie*, p.256, n.1) pensent qu'il faut lire ici βίου avec la majorité des manuscrits et non pas εὐώδους, conjecture de Langerbeck (GNO VI 91,5).

²⁴ *Idem* 91,4-92,7.

²⁵ Cf. M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Homélie*, p.71.

²⁶ Grégoire fait ici référence à une scène racontée en Mt 26,6-13 (//Mc 14,3-9) en l'interprétant en lien avec Jn 12,1-7.

²⁷ *Idem* 92,17-18.

²⁸ *Idem* 93,6-7. Est-ce que Grégoire ne pense pas ici à « en tout lieu » (2 Co 2,14) ?

²⁹ Ou dans sa conscience (συνειδήσεως). *Idem* 94,11.

³⁰ *Idem* 94,19-95,1.

³¹ Cf. *Idem* 94,4-12. « L'intérieur de l'âme, le cœur, lieu de l'inhabitation divine, s'élargit, rayonne ou s'exhale jusqu'à traverser les franges les plus éloignées de la vie humaine, comme le Christ, à partir de ce cœur de l'humanité qu'est l'Incarnation, transfigure progressivement l'humanité tout entière dont le lien ultime est précisément le rayonnement de la gloire de Dieu ». M. CANEVET, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique. Étude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu*, p.330.

³² *Cant IV* GNO VI 112,16-18.

which the violet which is the good odour of the Anointed³³. Where does this flower, which is also found in the vine and which exhales its perfume, come from? From the Spirit who produces, in those who are saved, this good odour³⁴.

In the first cycle of homilies, we have just seen that 2 Cor 2:15-16 plays a central role in the interpretation of the Canticle: moral, apophatism, transformative action of the Incarnation, spiritual sense, interiority and exteriority. Let's see if we can confirm that later.

In the second cycle of homilies (VI-XV)³⁵, Gregory comments that a member of the Church such as Paul (who is compared to the breasts of the bride who grazes among the lilies (cf. Sg 4:5-6)) is valuable. In fact, he goes to the pastures of the pure lilies, thus allowing its smell to be filled with the good odour of the Anointed. Then he nourishes the Church with what he is filled with: the Logos³⁶. Indeed, Gregory had first asserted that Paul, after having rectified his life, had become a vessel of election for his Master (cf. Acts 9:15), no longer speaking from himself, for it was the Anointed who spoke in him (cf. 2 Cor 13:3)³⁷. Paul is truly the good odour of the Anointed, Gregory insists in the ninth homily, whom the soul is called to imitate in order to reveal only the good odour of the mystery of truth, accomplished in it by the Gospel's teaching. Thus the odour of his perfumes, the manifestation of the truth, will be superior to all the spices of the sacrifices of the Law (cf. Sg 4:10). We see that the compliment first addressed to the Spouse by the Bride (cf. Sg 1:3) is now formulated by the Spouse praising the Bride (Sg 4:10), as we had already contemplated in Paul in *Cant* III. It is because the soul has been transformed by virtue and by the sacrifice of passions according to the Gospel's teaching. In turn it becomes a good, pure, immaterial odour exhaled by the virtues³⁸ thanks to the Spirit; his life (βίος)³⁹ then appears to the Spouse's sense of smell as a perfume of good odour³⁹. In fact, the New Covenant changes the waters of the Old Covenant into rivers of spices that spread the good smell of the doctrines by the Spirit, like "the great Paul, whose current was the good odour of the Anointed"⁴⁰. What was that aroma he exhaled? "A life (βίον) pure and odoriferous that is a mixture of the various and diverse aromas of virtue"⁴¹, "an aroma of purity and impassibility becoming an odour of life (ζωή) for those who were saved"⁴². Finally, in the fourteenth homily, Gregory clearly shows that, like the jaws of the bride compared to the cups of spices by the Spouse (Sg 5:13), Paul's nature is made "of this prestigious flavour which, at the beginning of the Song, the bride declares to surpass all aromas (cf.

³³ *Cant* V GNO VI 153,14-154,3.

³⁴ *Idem* GNO VI 156,20-157,4.

³⁵ M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Homélies*, Introduction, p.29.

³⁶ *Cant* VII GNO VI 240,18-242,13.

³⁷ Cf. *Idem* 235,14-20. On retrouve la même série de citation qu'en *Cant* III.

³⁸ *Cant* IX GNO VI 268,13 à mettre en parallèle avec « la puissance intelligible et immatérielle qui attire la bonne odeur du Christ » de la première homélie. *Cant* I GNO VI 34,15-18.

³⁹ *Cant* IX GNO VI 266,4-268,15. On voit là le thème de la réciprocité, fréquent dans *In Cant*. Cf. M. CANEVET, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique. Étude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu*, p.342-347. C'est d'abord le Christ puis toute personne qui vit de la charité qui peut offrir ce sacrifice. Cette idée est présente chez Clément d'Alexandrie. Cf. C. MONDESERT, H.-I. MARROU, *Clément d'Alexandrie. Le pédagogue. Livre II*, p.135 : « Si on dit de la fumée odorante de l'encens que c'est le Grand Prêtre – le Seigneur – qui l'offre à Dieu, il ne faut pas y voir une offrande et une bonne odeur d'encens, mais il faut comprendre que c'est le don agréable de la charité – la bonne odeur spirituelle – qui est offert par le Seigneur sur l'autel ».

⁴⁰ *Cant* X GNO VI 301,6-302,15.

⁴¹ *Idem* 306,13-15.

⁴² *Idem* 307,11-13

Sg 1:3)⁴³. Replenished as a vessel (cf. Acts 9:15) by the good odour aroma as a child of the Holy Spirit⁴⁴, he produced in himself and brought forth the divine drink by composing for his hearers, thanks to the good odour of the Anointed, the fragrance of the various flowers of the virtues⁴⁵.

Thus, what was said in the first homily prepared the explanation offered in the third homily and is extended in the second cycle of homilies: like a vessel, Paul was renewed by the Spirit, and Gregory insists on his action. Thanks to the purified sensation of his soul, he was able to collect, through the Spirit, in his heart⁴⁶, the trace of the good odour left by the ineffable presence of the divine Virtue of the One who made Himself accessible to him. This poetic image expresses what Gregory describes elsewhere as the sensation of presence (αἴσθησις (...) τῆ ψυχῆ τῆς παρουσίας)⁴⁷; thus his whole life (his body) and his words were impregnated with it like a vessel is marked by the rest of the good odour of a perfume⁴⁸. What was then invisible and inaccessible becomes mysteriously visible and grasped⁴⁹ through and in the life and words of Paul, for the Logos, this aroma superior to all perfumes, fills him: the nature of the cups, of which Paul is an example, is of this aroma, that is of the nature that nothing contains⁵⁰. Paul is the example of humanity transformed by the Incarnation: for Gregory, his transfigured life is the trace in him of the mystery of the Incarnation which produces the transformation into something more divine⁵¹. His virtuous life, a reflection of the heavenly Virtue, and his Gospel's teaching spread the good odour of the Anointed, through the Spirit⁵². The wonder that the Logos realized in Paul can thus manifest in his virtuous life as well as in his words this presence of the Anointed in him: "the

⁴³ *Cant XIV GNO VI 402,20-23.*

⁴⁴ *Idem 403,3-5.*

⁴⁵ *Idem 403,9-11.* On retrouve ici en écho le résumé du parcours de l'épouse présenté par Grégoire au début de la sixième homélie : « dans son propre nard, elle reconnaît la bonne odeur divine (cf. Ct 1,12). Et elle ne s'arrête même pas là : par une nouvelle démarche, Celui-là même qu'elle désire, tel un aromate exhalant une odeur agréable, elle le suspend entre ses seins spirituels d'où jaillissent les enseignements divins et elle le tient en fermée dans l'espace de son cœur (cf. Ct 1,13). Après cela, elle produit comme son propre fruit le vigneron, qu'elle appelle une "grappe" exhalant par sa fleur une odeur agréable et douce (cf. Ct 1,14) ».

⁴⁶ Que Grégoire appelle aussi sa conscience ou la faculté maîtresse ou cette certaine puissance intelligible et immatérielle.

⁴⁷ *Cant XI GNO VI 324,10-11.* « L'odorat est privilégié par Grégoire, parce que ce sens permet à la fois de saisir une présence (parfum, odeur, effluve, etc. : les termes sont abondants), mais une présence diffuse et indicible, sans avoir la clarté inaccessible de la vue ». M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Homélies*, Introduction, p.71.

Voir Daniélou, Canévet, Laird, Brugarolas.

⁴⁸ Comme le dit Cortesi : « Tout en maintenant l'infinie distance entre Dieu et l'humanité, Grégoire, en cohérence avec le principe interprétatif de toute la vie chrétienne – qu'il saisit dans l'Incarnation du Verbe – décrivant la vie selon la vertu, considère premièrement l'unité de vie et d'amour rendue possible par l'Incarnation : en ce sens alors, les vertus humaines sont réellement des comportements humains, mais vivifiés dans la chaleur de l'Esprit et ils jaillissent dans l'amour d'un cœur transformé par la présence du Logos Lui-même ». A. CORTESI, *Le Omelie sur Cantico dei cantici di Gregorio di Nissa*, p.191.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Cant III GNO VI 90,14-15.*

⁵⁰ *Cant XIV GNO VI 402,20-23.*

⁵¹ Ce qui intéresse chez Paul c'est l'œuvre du Christ en lui, cette présence du Christ en lui qui le transforme totalement sans pour autant le faire disparaître. Tout l'homme a été transformé par ce parfum, par le divin. Ainsi son humanité devient le lieu de la manifestation de la vérité. La clé exégétique paulinienne dépend littéralement de cela.

⁵² « En respirant le parfum divin, Paul est transformé par l'union d'inhabitation en un vecteur du Verbe lui-même ; ses faits et actions deviennent vecteur de la présence divine », M. LAIRD, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p.157.

knowledge of the Good that transcends all intelligence comes to us through the virtues in the same way we can, by analogy, deduce from an image (εἰκόνας) the beauty of the archetype”.⁵³

On the other hand, the names that describe Paul’s virtues or the concepts he employs “show only a minute quality of the divine perfume”⁵⁴ from which “our reason conjectures the invisible, appearing, through a certain analogy, through what is understood, the incomprehensible”⁵⁵. Paul’s teachings⁵⁶ are like a body filled with the Anointed, thus showing that it is the Anointed who spoke in him, as he himself says (2 Cor 13:3), a body that exhales the good odour of Christ. In this way, he becomes knowable, according to the logic of 2 Cor 2:14: we see how faithful Gregory is to Paul’s thought. It is through him, in so far as he participates in the triumph of the Anointed, that the fragrance of the knowledge of God is poured out, which gives him to make “accessible the inaccessible”⁵⁷. This arouses in the maidens the desire of the One who dwells in him, impelling them to run, attracted by this good odour of the Anointed. For in the good odour of the Bride, of whom Paul is an example, they feel the transforming presence of the Anointed. Therefore they feel that his words are but a trace of the One who is ineffable, of the One who wanted to attract the soul by lowering himself to his spiritual senses. Breathing this good odour of life, the soul then lives the same mystery that was realized in Paul, according to the movement of the Homilies.

The sensation of the soul, purified by the sacrifice of passions and virtuous life, can then exceed what was figurative in the Law; she is enabled to feel, thanks to the Spirit, the good odour of the manifestation of the truth⁵⁸ behind the figure and shadow of the *Song*. Like Paul, attracted by the beauty of his life, she passes to an immaterial and spiritual interpretation of the Law. Transformed by the mystery of truth – the Incarnation, leaving behind in Baptism its earthly origin with the flesh, she also leaves the material and fleshly meaning and transforms the bodily aroma into something adapted to the mind and the intelligence for the virtue. The more the soul exhales the good odour of the Anointed, the more it feels this presence in itself and in the text without ever grasping it. It feels its good odour, that He comes to meet it, but can only feel it. She feels in the body of the text the good odour of the Anointed and therefore wishes to follow the words to contemplate the One she seeks. And the more she exhales the good odour of the Anointed, transformed by this presence that comes into her without her knowing how and yet it is there that she grasps him. Exegesis is Christological (anointological) from beginning to end: it starts from the Incarnation, from the experience of the Anointed, makes seek the Anointed, gives to meet Him in order to be ever more united to Him and to manifest Him to others as the mystery of salvation. The good odour of the Anointed allows Gregory to express his Christological (anointological) conception of language: the words cannot express what God is because he is ineffable and yet they contain traces of his presence which thus draws us to him in an unceasing contemplation of his coming through the Scriptures.

⁵³ *Idem* 91,1-4. Développer à partir de Brill et articles de Giulio et don Paco.

⁵⁴ *Cant* I GNO VI 37,18-38,1.

⁵⁵ *Idem* 37,1-3.

⁵⁶ *Cant* X GNO VI 301,15

⁵⁷ *Cant* III 90,15 : « la présence mystérieuse, indicible, et pourtant saisissable du Dieu transcendant ». M. CANEVET, F. VINEL, *Homélies*, Introduction, p.71.

⁵⁸ Encore une fois, c’est une gezerah shavah : Grégoire applique à tout l’Ancien Testament ce que Paul dit de la Loi.