Introduction

He, that increased the beauties of the Church with his teaching,
and heaped praise on the High, Who does not lack in praise;
He that was a second spring in our land,
and in his flower-like poems blossomed our churches.
—Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on Saint Ephrem*, 149–150

Here strums the God-stricken lyre
Christ's Orpheus: away all ye beasts!
Let Christ's every sheep hear the din.
—John Geometres, *Epigram on the Book of* [Gregory] *the Theologian*, 124

The greatest poet of the patristic age . . . perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.
—Murray 1967, 222

The three quotations above, one originally in Syriac, one in Greek, and one in English, were written, respectively, during late antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the twentieth century, but they share a similar tone of praise for two poets, Gregory of Nazianzus and Ephrem the Syrian. They attest to the success enjoyed by these poets, and they sound an invitation to read them. In doing so, they prompt the unaided reader to ask wherein lies the poetic excellence praised by readers in the past: when confronted with texts written in a distant time and in dead languages, one often finds it easy to oversee the artistry and refinement that were obvious for the original audience of such texts. So it is with the poems of Gregory and Ephrem: even when they can be easily translated, these poems are often difficult to understand, to the point of being enigmatic. The reader is left asking, "What's the point?" This is the question I meant to answer in the present work: What is the point of these texts? Or, put otherwise, what do they express precisely, and how do they do it? Wherein lies the artistry of this kind of poetry?

This approach, emphasising literary value and rhetorical phenomena, is natural enough in the field of classics, where texts enjoy a much more common and established appreciation as works of art. It is much less common, though not completely unheard of, when applied to late antique poetry, in Greek or in Syriac, since these authors and their texts have been studied under different assumptions, mainly by theologians or historians. Therefore, the novelty of my approach can be appreciated against the background of previous scholarship on the two authors.

Gregory of Nazianzus and Ephrem the Syrian in scholarship

Gregory of Nazianzus, born to rich Christian parents in Cappadocia, was educated in the foremost cities of Christian and classical learning of his time: Palestinian Caesarea,

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111553788-001

Alexandria, and Athens[1]. During his stay in Athens he befriended the fellow countryman Basil of Caesarea, an acquaintance that would prove crucial for Gregory's career. In the first years after his return from Athens, Gregory worked with his father, Gregory the Elder, bishop of his hometown Nazianzus, while keeping in contact with Basil. The younger Gregory was indeed part of the loose group of notable churchmen and prelates from Asia, whose leading figure was Basil and which more or less accepted Basil's interpretation of the Nicene Creed. But our Gregory was also the highly educated son of a wealthy landowner and thereby part of a network of friendship and family ties connecting the notables of his Roman province and of the eastern part of the empire[2]. As an educated Christian landowner, Gregory of Nazianzus opposed Emperor Julian's efforts towards paganism and against Christian teachers, notably through his two speeches against the emperor (*or.* 4 and 5). Later, as a Nicene prelate and Basil's friend, he likely opposed Valens's religious policy, too. Moreover, he was also an enthusiastic sponsor of Christian asceticism, as demonstrated by Gautier[3]. In practice, Gregory probably alternated periods of ecclesiastical, public activity and periods of ascetic retreat. During one of these retreats, around the year 379, he was invited to preach in Constantinople, the imperial capital. It was the acme of his career: there he declaimed the theological speeches (*or*. 27–31) that acquired him the moniker "the Theologian" (ὁ Θεόλογος) par excellence among the Byzantines; there he chaired the ecumenical council in 381. However, this was also his last moment in the spotlight, for his managing of the council was a failure, and he was forced (or chose) to retire once again as an ascetic. In this way he spent the last years of his life, still a prominent voice in the church but without an official appointment; he administered the diocese in Nazianzus, and most importantly he wrote poems and edited his previous works. He died probably in 390.

Scholarship on Gregory, and in general on the Cappadocian Fathers, is generally well developed. Apart from biographies and studies on late antique Cappadocia[4], there are also global evaluations of his thought and his works: a good sample of the variety of questions elicited by Gregory can be glimpsed in two collective volumes, Børtnes/Hägg 2006 and Beeley 2012. A fundamental milestone of Gregory scholarship and an

1 Gregory famously wrote much about himself and his life, notably in the poem numbered II, 1, 11 in the Patrologia Graeca edition of the poems, and in the *or.* 43, the panegyric for the anniversary of Basil the Great's death. The most recent scholarly biographies on him are McGuckin 2001a and Bernardi 1995. Strictly speaking not a biography, but rich in biographical elements, especially for the first part of Gregory's career: Elm 2012. A critical assessment of Gregory's autobiographical writing is given by Storin 2019, McLynn 1998, McGuckin 2001b and Elm 2015, whereas Storin 2017 reviews critically Gregory's biographies.

2 These ecclesiastic and civic networks in Cappadocia have been studied by Van Dam (see Van Dam 2002; Van Dam 2003a; Van Dam 2003b).

3 Gautier 2002; see also: Sterk 2004, 119–140; Storin 2011; McLynn 2012a; *passim* in Elm 2012.

4 See nn. 1–2.

inspiration for the present work is Elm 2012[5], which, through an account of Gregory's confrontation with Emperor Julian, delineates the pragmatic significance and the political stance of many of Gregory's works in the Christian communities of the time. Looking at Gregory's works specifically, one can understand why his speeches or homilies (*or.*) have drawn the most attention. Theologians and church historians have tended towards *or.* 2, *On Priesthood*, and on the dossier of the theological speeches (*or.* 27–31), whereas historians and biographers have found the two speeches against Julian (*or.* 4–5) and the panegyric for Basil (*or.* 43) particularly interesting[6]. Recently, Storin has thoroughly studied Gregory's letter collection (*ep.*)[7].

The poems (*carm.*) remain the least studied part of Gregory's oeuvre. It is a broad corpus, mainly in hexameters, elegiacs, or iambics, and with different themes. The constitution of the text is itself problematic: editions of single poems or of cycles of poems are available[8], but we still rely for many texts on the Maurine edition in Migne's Patrologia Graeca 37–38, dated 1842. The texts are transmitted by a wealth of manuscripts, and given the size of the corpus and its composite nature, almost every text has its own tradition; however, Werhahn divided the poems into twenty groups (*Gedichtgruppen*) on the basis of the most common groupings in the manuscripts, thus giving a good starting point for the *recensio* of the texts[9]. This was later undertaken by Höllger for *Gedichtgruppen* XX and XI and by Gertz for *Gedichtgruppe* I with supervision by Sicherl, who produced also the *recensio* for *Gedichtgruppen* II, III, V, VII, VIII, and XVIII[10]. Independently from these, Palla 1990 provided a *recensio* for *Gedichtgruppen* III and IV.

Among the poems treated in the present work, *To Himself and on the Bishops* (II, 1, 12) has enjoyed more philological attention than the others. Since it is included in *Gedichtgruppen* XI and XX (a Renaissance anthology), there is Höllger's recension, together with Meier's edition, complete with German translation, introduction and commentary (Meier 1989). For the other poems examined in this book, belonging to *Gedichtgruppe* I (II, 1, 10; II, 1, 13; II, 1, 17), Gertz 1986 can be supplemented by Palla 1990, which, though concerned with *Gedichtgruppen* III and IV, covers many manuscripts of *Gedichtgruppe* I. Moreover, an edition with introduction and commentary (Simelidis 2009) of II, 1, 10 is

5 Her other works on Gregory are also noteworthy, and nearer to the object of my research: Elm 1999; Elm 2000b; Elm 2015a; Elm 2015b.

6 On *or.* 2 see, for example, Lochbrunner 1993, 39–66; Louth 1997; Rapp 2005, 41–44; Elm 2012, 247–268; for the *or.* 27–31 see Norris 1991; for *or.* 4–5, Kurmann 1988; Elm 2012, 336–478; Niccolai 2023, 214–219, 276–279.

7 Storin 2017a; Storin 2017b; Storin 2019a. These studies culminate in his translation of the full *corpus*: Storin 2019b.

8 Werhahn 1953 (I, 2, 8); Jungck 1974 (II, 1, 11); Meier 1989 (II, 1, 12); Crimi/Kertsch/Guirau 1995 (I, 2, 10); Bacci 1996 (II, 2, 6); Moreschini/Sykes 1997 (I, 1, 1–5; 7–9); Tuilier/Bady/Bernardi 2004 (II, 1, 1–11); Moroni 2006 (II, 2, 4–5); Simelidis 2009 (I, 2, 17; II, 1, 10; 19; 32); Kuhn 2014 (II, 1, 34A/B); Conte/Fiori 2019 (II, 1, 30; 68).

9 Höllger/Sicherl/Werhahn 1985, 17–34.

10 Höllger/Sicherl/Werhahn 1985; Gertz 1986; Sicherl 2011.

available, and another edition with French translation and notes is comprised in Tuillier-Bady-Bernardi 2004. Bibliography for poems II, 1, 13 and 17 is rather scantier, though an Italian translation of these poems exists[11].

As regards exegesis, the study of Gregory's poems has considerably progressed in the last thirty years. Two main trends can be highlighted: a more theologically and philosophically oriented one and one concerned with literary values and intertextuality. Examples of the first trend are the commentaries of Sykes and Schwab on theological poems[12]: both of them take into account literary issues too, but their main concern is with Gregory's argumentation against heretical and pagan doctrines, his use of classical sources to this effect, and his theological stance as expressed through poetry. To the literary trend of study belong the editions of Simelidis and Kuhn, both of which include commentary[13]; the first is important in showing Gregory's treatment of sundry literary sources and his rhetorical expertise, while the second analyses Gregory's poetic imagery and links it with his sources. Sources, indeed, have been the main focus of literary research on Gregory's poems: because Gregory is among the last classicising poets of antiquity, scholars have often assumed that his poetry can be explained by the reuse, combination, and citation of earlier poets. Although this approach can be too reductive, it has produced some useful studies on Gregory's poetry[14], among which Prudhomme's monograph distinguishes itself by exceeding the *Quellenforschung* and offering a broader, literary interpretation of the poems[15]. What is still lacking in the scholarship on Gregory's poems is an exegesis that considers the pragmatic value of these works, their being communicative acts, and therefore the different contexts and debates for which they were intended; this has been masterfully done by Elm 2012 for some texts in *or.* but is yet to be done with the poems.

Sources on Ephrem's life are much scantier than those on Gregory's[16]. Ephrem was likely born at the beginning of the fourth century in Nisibis, today Nusaybin, in southeastern Turkey. The town was an important trade and military centre at the border between the Roman and Sassanid Empires. For this reason, it was besieged three times by the Persians between 337 and 359; the sieges are recorded also in some poems by

11 Crimi/Costa 1999, including also II, 1, 10 and 12.

12 Moreschini/Sykes 1997; Schwab 2009.

13 Simelidis 2009; Kuhn 2014. A similar approach has been taken by Meier 1989 and, with much more emphasis on the *Quellenforschung*, by the Pisan commented editions (Crimi/Kertsch/Guirau 1995; Bacci 1996; Moroni 2006; Conte/Fiori 2019).

14 E.g.: Lefherz 1958; Kertsch 1978; Frangeskou 1985; Demoen 1996.

15 Prudhomme 2006. Useful articles in this direction: McGuckin 2006, Storin 2011, McGuckin 2012, McLynn 2012a; Elm 2015b.

16 The hagiographical tradition is not reliable (see Amar 2011; Kavvadas 2018) and Ephrem's works offer but isolated clues on his person. Scholars have to rely on these clues and a few early testimonies, such as that of Jerome or Jacob of Serugh (see §1.2.1). I based my biographical sketch mainly from the general introduction on Ephrem in Brock 1992 and Wickes 2015a, 6–14. Also useful: Outtier 1973; Palmer 1998; Russell 2005.

Ephrem, who was likely present. In his Nisibene years, Ephrem served in the local Christian community, probably as a deacon and with some sort of teaching position. Maybe he was engaged in a local form of asceticism, one not yet influenced by Egyptian models. The most important date in his life was 363, when he witnessed Emperor Julian's failed expedition against Persia, the monarch's corpse returned in Roman territory, and the Romans' handover of Ephrem's city, Nisibis, to the Persians. In response to these events, Ephrem left Nisibis, and after a brief sojourn in nearby Amida (today Diyarbakır), he spent his last ten years in Edessa (today Urfa), dying probably in 373.

He wrote prose works—both exegetical commentaries and theological treaties—and poems. Among his poems, the *madrāšē* (singular *madrāšā*), stanzaic poems, are considered his speciality, whereas his *mēmrē* (singular *mēmrā*), stichic poems, are somewhat less famous. The two terms have been variously translated in modern languages. *Mēmrā* is less problematic, because the word itself has the very ordinary meaning of "discourse", "speech". Given its metric (a succession of lines with the same number of syllables and without rhyme), the genre is nearer to prose than the *madrāšā.* Furthermore, it tends to be spoken by the poet in his own voice and to focus on the interpretation of Bible passages. For all these reasons, to translate *mēmrā* as "homily" or "metrical homily" is not wrong. The case of *madrāšā* is much more complicated. The root of the word has something to do with "teaching", coming from an original meaning "to tread" and formed by way of metaphor. The underlying connotation seems to be that of a repetitive effort resulting in a deepening of the matter at hand, an intensive approach to things[17]. The origin and import of the name have been extensively discussed in scholarship, with various results[18]: for example, Beck's editions oscillate between *hymni* ("hymns") and *carmina* ("poems"), whereas Den Biesen, followed by Palmer, stresses the pedagogical and musical nature of the texts with his translation "Teaching-Songs". I have chosen in the following pages to take a neutral position on the question and have translated *madrāšā* with "poem", reflecting its basic meaning as a kind of speech observing metrical rules[19].

Ephrem's poems are extant in complete form only in a group of fifth-to-sixth-century manuscripts from the Scetian Monastery of the Syrians. Excluding these manuscripts, stanzas are preserved, single or in groups, in liturgical manuscripts; however, the readings, groupings, order, and attributions of these stanzas from liturgical sources are very unreliable—not to mention that the material is far scarcer than the complete poems, to the point that without the Egyptian manuscripts we would not even be able

17 Payne Smith 1879–1901, 954, 956–957, *s.vv.* ܬܪܝܒ. ܡܕܪܫ. Compare also the Greek root of τρίβω, "to tread" "to thresh", giving rise to διατριβή, "study", "brief lecture", "discourse".

18 Beck 1983, 352–353; Lattke 1989; McVey 1999; Wickes 2015a, 13n57.

19 Wickes 2018, xiii rejects the term since it could mislead us into reading the texts under our aesthetic assumptions and not on their own terms. The point of my work is precisely to read the texts on their own terms; therefore, I do not think that the term "poems" will be misunderstood.

to recognise the poems and the cycles in which they are organised[20]. On the basis of the manuscripts and with moderate use of liturgical witnesses, Dom E. Beck produced a reliable critical edition of all of Ephrem's stanzaic and stichic poetry and a complete translation of these texts with short notes. The selection of poems discussed in the present work (*CN* 13–21) has its main witness in the sixth-century manuscript Brit. M. add. 14572 (Beck's R), containing the whole cycle of *CN*. It represents the basis of Beck's edition, which is here employed[21]. However, not only has the manuscript has lost some pages, but it is also likely to represent an abbreviated text. Some of the lacunae can be filled with the help of Brit. M. add. 17141 (Beck's E), an eighth-to-ninth-century liturgical codex, which contains consistent excerpts from *CN* 15–21 and 34 and smaller portions of other texts. Beck's critical edition can be relied upon, but occasional philological reflections will be needed, especially since some texts contain considerable lacunae. Valuable instruments in interpreting and translating the texts are the translations by Beck himself, the older ones in Latin by Bickell and in English by Stopford, and the latest in French by Fhégali/Navarre[22].

Studies on Ephrem's *madrāšē* have been overwhelmingly concerned with his peculiar theology, resulting in important syntheses[23]. In this line of studies, Ephrem's rich symbolic language has been considered only in its theological import, far less in its rhetorical, poetic, and pragmatic effectiveness. This means that, for example, theologians have tended to collect single stanzas or passages taken from different poems in order to stress a point of content rather than considering single poems or cycles in their inner structure and argumentation.

Because Ephrem's Syriac could not boast the long and preserved literary tradition in which Gregory's Greek poetry was inserted, almost no *Quellenforschung* has been developed for his poems, and scholars, apart from theologians, have only begun to appreciate these texts' literary art. Besides some older contributions[24], some recent works, in analysing thematically linked cycles of poems, have employed a very fruitful blend of literary or rhetorical analysis and reconstruction of the context of performance and the intended audience. Among these, the works by Shepardson on anti-Jewish language, by Wickes on the Bible in the *Poems on Faith* (*hymn. fid.*), and by Hartung on the treatment of Jesus' passion, must be mentioned as successful examples of this new scholarship on

20 Brock 1997; Outtier 1975–1976.

21 Beck 1961a (critical edition); Beck 1961b (German translation).

22 Bickell 1866; Stopford 1898; Fhégali/Navarre 1989.

23 E.g.: Murray 1975–1976; Martikainen 1981; Bou Mansour 1987; Brock 1992; Shemunkasho 2002; Murray 2004; Den Biesen 2006. Wickes 2015a and 2015b, though still mainly theological in focus, display a deep understanding for the literary and argumentative structure of the single pieces.

24 E.g.: Martikainen 1974; Palmer 1995. See also Rouwhorst 1989 for its successful contextualisation of Ephrem's paschal cycles of poems.

Ephrem[25]. I find their approach very convincing, and, at least in part, this work attempts to extend it to another cycle of poems, namely the poems on the Nisibene bishops.

Bishops

Fundamental to my approach to these texts are two assumptions, or two concepts, that I deem necessary for appreciating the texts when one scrutinises them as literature: first, that late antique poetry is public literature, a real-world act of communication; second, that the subject matter of poetry influences its form; that is to say, in order to grasp what a certain rhetorical form *means* or *does*, we have to understand how it interacts with the literal meaning and the things in the world it wants to describe or prescribe.

The first assumption is a relatively new acquisition for classicists treating late antique texts, who have long seen this poetry as a mere continuation (sometimes even as a degeneration) of Hellenistic literature: bookish texts without a real audience, stale experiments in combining and desecrating the genres of classical literature[26]. On the contrary, a more promising approach to these texts concentrates on their pragmatic value, their influence on late antique society and the political struggles they underlined and accompanied. Among many, I mention only the first study in this direction, Alan Cameron's "Wandering Poets"[27]. Over the years, the quantity and quality of contributions analysing these aspects of late antique literature has amply demonstrated the importance of poetry—among and sometimes above other genres—as a force shaping public discourse and legitimising authority and as the language of the elites in the empire[28].

Given this assumption, it was only natural to look for texts whose theme could be easily linked to societal and political struggles, even to concrete episodes of such struggles. This enables a safer application of the assumption because the texts are more

25 Shepardson 2008; Wickes 2018; Hartung 2023.

26 See, for example, the harsh judgement of Ludwich in the foreword to his edition of Eudocia and Proclus (Ludwich 1897, V-VI); Keydell 1953 on Gregory; still Roques 2007 on Synesius and Hose 2004 and Hose 2006 with stress on the negative influence of school exercises; the first paragraph of Agosti 2001a describes this situation. Significantly, the overall picture of literary studies on late antiquity given by Dorival 1994 barely mentions poetry.

27 Cameron 1965.

28 In general, Garzya 1984; from the same Cameron, his book on Claudian (Cameron 1970); for Nonnus, the introductions to the Italian edition with translation offer this kind of contextualisation for the *Dionysiaca*, together with abundant bibliography in the same vein (Gigli Piccardi 2003; Gonnelli 2003; Agosti 2004; Accorinti 2004; see also Agosti 2006 and, on stone epigrams, Agosti 2010); for Ambrose's *Hymns*, Dunkle 2016; although it is on a prose author (Jerome); see also Hale Williams 2006. Although not so much concentrated on the pragmatics of these texts, as with their aesthetics, Roberts 1989 must be signalled for his effort to take late antique poetry in earnest and on its own terms, rather than discarding it for *a priori* reasons of taste.

easily dated and connected with a specific audience. Therefore, I chose to concentrate on Gregory's and Ephrem's poems on the bishops. This choice has the additional advantage of focusing the study on an unusual theme for poetry: since the very premise of the poems challenges our understanding of what belongs to the genre, the analysis of a given poem's treatment of its subject may prove exemplary of the art peculiar to Gregory and Ephrem, in accordance with my second assumption, that the literary form is really understood only in relation to the content.

Bishops are a very interesting theme on two other accounts. First, they are interesting in view of their rising importance in the late antique world and the likely necessity of defining and defending them before civic and religious communities on one side and the imperial power on the other. This applies in particular to texts written in the fourth century, because after Constantine the bishops, already important actors since at least the time of Aurelian, saw a massive increase in their relationships with secular powers, in their connections with elite society, in their ability to influence civic life through buildings, charity, preaching, or written texts, and, consequently, in the overall attention that contemporaries dedicated to them. Second, bishops are of interest because they have already been thoroughly studied by historians: this provides my work with a solid historical background against which to evaluate the strategies employed by the poets. Fundamental in this respect is Rapp's monograph on late antique bishops, as well as Sterk's book on their relationship with asceticism[29]. To round out their approach, I have also used two collective volumes on various themes surrounding bishops[30]. Apart from concrete questions, it was critical for my approach to the poems that I consider also the more general problem of episcopal authority and legitimation—that is, the question: With what rhetorical devices is the authority of the bishop imposed, and why is it formed? On this question I could count on much good scholarship, among which Peter Brown's must be mentioned for its influence[31].

Here I must clarify what is the position of the present work in relation to this kind of historical scholarship. The aim of this work is not to solve concrete questions on fourth-century bishops, such as their typical activities, the functions they had in real-life communities, or their actual relations with other powers. For one thing, the data here examined are not nearly enough to form a historical judgment on these questions. Even if they could contribute discrete pieces of information, this was not my approach or my aim in dealing with the texts: I have not treated these poems as "sources" but as

29 Rapp 2005; Sterk 2004.

30 Rebillard E., Sotinel C., *L'évêque dans la cité du IVe au Ve siècle: image et autorité: actes de la table ronde organisée par l'Istituto Patristico Augustinianum et l'École française de Rome (Rome, 1er et 2 décembre 1995)*, Rome 1998; *Vescovi e pastori in Epoca Teodosiana, XXV Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma 8–11 Maggio 1996*, Rome 1997.

31 Brown 1992. On bishops: Lizzi Testa 1987; Lizzi 1998; Cracco Ruggini 1998; Lepelley 1998; Elm 2000a; Leppin 2016; Leppin 2017. On ascetics: Brown 1971; Clark 1985.

"texts"[32]. This means that the argumentative direction has mostly gone *from* the historiographical syntheses *to* the literary analysis, *from* the general *to* the particular and not vice versa: I have used historiography to understand the texts, not the texts as sources to make historiography. The only partial exception is the question of authority: here a more focalised approach, concentrating only on a few texts and trying to trace broad historical developments in the concrete cases, can be useful, too, in order to verify and possibly correct the great syntheses.

Reasons for a comparison

A further advantage of the theme of bishops is that both Gregory and Ephrem have written poems on it. I think this coincidence in theme justifies a comparison: Gregory and Ephrem are the first Christian poets of substance in their respective tradition (Greek and Syriac), they are both regarded as initiators of Christian literature in those traditions, they wrote in the same century, and, among contemporary treatments of the hot topic "bishops", theirs stand out as being the only ones in poetic form. As I will demonstrate, they also had similar opinions on many debated topics of the time, especially in regard to asceticism. Perhaps even more interesting than the similarities are the differences: Gregory wrote in a long and imposing tradition of poetry that went back to Homer and that, at least since Callimachus, was characterised by a pervasive and structural recourse to intertextuality, whereas Ephrem, though participating in Greek culture, had a much less substantial corpus of literature in his own language drawn on. Gregory wrote about Constantinople and probably *for* Constantinople, the very centre of the empire, whereas Ephrem wrote in Nisibis, about Nisibis and primarily for Nisibis, a city at the border of the empire. Gregory was a bishop himself and treated the bishops as peers; Ephrem remained a deacon throughout his life and experienced the bishops foremost as superiors in his community.

This highly significant constellation of similarities and differences has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. This may be due to the difficulties of acquainting oneself both with the intricate tradition of Greek poetry and with the Syriac language, to the neglect surrounding Gregory's poetry, or to the prevalent theological interest in these authors. Even the best monographs on Gregory, like Elm 2012, or the most advanced studies on Ephrem's poetry, like Hartung 2023, lack a sustained comparison of the two *as poets*. For there have already been attempts to compare Gregory (and the Cappadocians more generally) with Ephrem, but none of them is both wide enough in scope and focused on poetry.

32 I take this distinction from Hartung 2023, 6 (who in turn is quoting Averil Cameron). In the whole introduction (pp. 1–29), he positions his work in respect to theology similarly to how I position mine in respect to history.

Comparisons have been attempted mainly in three directions: Trinitarian theology, stance towards Emperor Julian, and Ephrem's *Vita* tradition. The hagiographical tradition on Ephrem testifies to precocious attempts to connect the Syriac doctor with the Cappadocians, especially with Basil. The most important studies on the *Vita* deny the historicity of the encounter between Basil and Ephrem, though they confirm significant contacts between Cappadocia and Mesopotamia at least for the fifth century[33]. As will be seen, Ephrem's and Gregory's similar representations of asceticism hint to a similar Anatolian *koiné* for the fourth century. The other two dossiers enabling a comparison of Ephrem and Gregory stem from the fact that the two had common enemies: Eunomius and Julian. In the first case, the reference texts would be Gregory's *or.* 27–31 and Ephrem's *hymn. fid.*. The comparison has been made by Russell, but his focus is mainly theological, and the difference in genre between the corpora (prose and poetry) makes a literary comparison less significant[34]. As regards Julian, the go-to texts would be Gregory's *or.* 4–5 and Ephrem's *Poems against Julian* (*hymn. c. Iulian.*), and once again one would compare prose with poetry. One of the most recent and perceptive monographs on Julian, Niccolai 2023, treats Gregory but never mentions Ephrem, although the author knows Syriac. An attempt at comparison on this account can be found in an article by Papoutsakis, where the author begins with a discussion of Gregory and then focusses mainly on Ephrem[35]. Regrettably, the comparison is not carried out further, so that one cannot speak even in this case of a sustained comparative study of the two authors.

Given the current status of scholarship on these authors, I am confident that the present work, through its comparison of Gregory and Ephrem, may add something new to our knowledge and appreciation of both. Furthermore, in accordance with my second assumption, that a correct evaluation of literary form must take into account its relationship with the content, a comparative method seems advisable, enabling us to evaluate how two different authors deal with the same theme under similar constraints (metre in this case).

Form, scope, and structure

As regards the form of the present work, it is true that a running commentary, especially if accompanied by general introductions, can best serve the understanding and appreciation of a piece of ancient literature. However, such an approach also comes with strings attached: the effort and time required by a well-made commentary prevent

33 Amar 2011; Kavvadas 2018.

34 Russell 1994. The preface (pp. 1–5) is particularly interesting because of the author's arguments for the significance of his comparison. Some of them apply also to the present work.

35 Papoutsakis 2018. The author goes so far as to postulate a direct knowledge of Gregory's orations on the part of Ephrem. I find his argument unconvincing, and I discussed it at §1.1.2.

one from considering more than a single longer text or a few shorter texts. The experiences of previous commentators of Gregory are instructive from this point of view, since they, albeit very useful for the scholar, share the same weaknesses[36]. First, they are isolated, and by this I mean that they, taking into consideration a single poem without a broader analytical project, fail to contextualise the poem in the literary work of the author, and thus are led to only a partial appreciation of the poem's aesthetic qualities. Isolation is a much more significant problem when we are dealing with a poet such as Gregory, who often rewrites passages and ideas in different forms. Here, we can notice the second weakness of such comments, the use of parallels. Since Gregory rewrites the same things with variations, the commentator is tempted to pile up parallels for every single expression. Add to this that Gregory comes after a long tradition of poetry, so that precedents for practically every single utterance can be found in earlier authors, and the typical commentary note will look like a series of numbers, which the reader will scarcely be able to manage. Thus, a commentary on a single poem by Gregory always risks turning into a maze of parallels, obscuring instead of clarifying the content and art of the poems. Ephrem does not present the commentator with these problems; however, a line-by-line commentary is still to be attempted, to my knowledge[37].

To avoid the possible pitfalls of a commentary, I have chosen a more argumentative format, analysing groups of poems instead of single pieces, through a group of thematic kernels. A choice of groups of poems determined by a common theme (bishops) has one key advantage: it avoids the isolation that affected previous commentaries on Gregory, because it allows the interpreter to consider everything the poet wrote on the chosen theme, and it lends meaning to textual parallels. Now these can be examined in their variations as well as in their similarities, and since we are considering the context of every single occurrence, we can examine the process of rewriting more thoroughly. Considering entire cycles of poems, the researcher can trace recurring literary choices as well as structural elements of the single poems that in the analytic format of the commentary would remain unnoticed. Add to these the possibility of sustained comparison of two poets—which is impossible in the form of a commentary—and the contributions that historical studies make to a study of the common theme of bishops, and this work should be able to provide a guide to these poems—not necessarily exhausting every minor detail (as a commentary would do), but providing an introduction to an informed reading.

The major objection against this format is its fundamentally ambiguous nature. On one side, the aim is understanding and analysing texts, which, by virtue of their consistency and structure, impose their own rhythm on the interpreter. On the other,

36 This is true above all of Meier 1989 and of the Pisan commentaries, much less so of Moreschini/Sykes 1997 and Schwab 2009.

37 Scott 2020, an unpublished but online available dissertation, comments a cycle of verse homilies by Ephrem. However, it is not a line-by-line commentary. Incidentally, the present work answers many questions raised in Scott's dissertation.

comparing two authors writing in two different languages requires a stronger focus on the common theme (bishops) and the common historical context, so that the work risks considering only the content of the poems and not their literary form, treating them as "sources" and not as "texts". To this objection I hope my work will provide a fitting response: the choice of themes, under which I have analysed passages of the poems, has been determined by a combination of history and literature, meaning that I have chosen themes that not only figure prominently in the poems but also are formally determining for the poets and that we know from historical research were debated at that time. The closer my analysis adheres to the inner rhythms of the text, the surer will be the confirmation that these texts give on what we know on bishops. Moreover, the different responsiveness of Ephrem's and Gregory's texts to different thematic kernels should also give interesting information on their different concerns. However, I cannot deny a measure of whim in the choice of themes and in the analytic approach. In order to balance this arbitrariness, I have let the texts speak as much as possible whenever I quoted them in full. This means that the argument of the section may sometimes emerge after a longer analysis of the texts. For this reason, introductions and conclusions are appended to longer chapters, so that the reader may grasp the argument in its broad outline. To enable readers to employ the work as a commentary, I have appended an index of the text passages. To the main body of the work, I have attached an appendix with my English translation of the texts, which may serve as a reference to the reader who wants to locate in their context the passages analysed. Moreover, some of these texts have never been translated into English, or they have been translated in the nineteenth century, and therefore it is not unreasonable to make a new translation[38]. As regards the criteria of my translation, I have preferred to introduce a certain amount of interpretation instead of being slavishly literal, especially as regards Ephrem's often elliptical texts; I have also avoided the proliferation of parentheses often found in translations from Syriac. For I believe that the main task of a translator is his choice among the many possibilities and that the choice must be resolute in order to offer a readable text. I think the analysis will persuade the reader also of the motivations behind my translation choices.

Among Gregory's texts, I have selected only four poems, although many more could have been added. Indeed, Gregory's experience in Constantinople is the starting point of his autobiographical poetry, and almost any poem could have offered interesting cues on his relationship with the bishops. However, in the majority of these, the theme is touched upon only in respect to other concerns; by contrast, the four texts I have

38 Ephrem's *CN* have been translated: in Latin (Bickell 1866), in English (Stopford 1898), in German (Beck 1961b); in French (Feghali-Navarre 1989). Apart from the Latin translations in the Patrologia Graeca, for Gregory's autobiographical poems there is a comprehensive Italian translation (Crimi/Costa 1999). II, 1, 12 has been translated by Meehan 1987 (English) and Meier 1989 (German); II, 1, 10 by Simelidis 2009 (English) and Tuilier/Bady/Bernardi 2004 (French). II, 1, 13 and II, 1, 17 have not yet been translated in a modern language, as far as I know.

chosen address the theme of bishops directly. They are marked as II, 1, 10; II, 1, 12; II, 1, 13, and II, 1, 17 in the Patrologia Graeca and, though all in different metres (except the two shorter poems numbered II, 1, 10 and II, 1, 17, both in elegiacs), have been provided by tradition with similar titles, reflecting a similarity of content. In the case of Ephrem, the choice fell on *CN* 13–21. This corresponds to the complete dossier of poems on the bishops of Nisibis, part of the broader collection of poems on the city (*CN* 1–21) and itself divided into two cycles (poems for Valgash, *CN* 13–16; poems for Abraham, *CN* 17–21). Other poems in the same collection of the *CN* as well as in other collections address in full or in part the theme of bishops, but these two cycles are the longest cohesive texts upon it, with the added bonus of being concerned always with the same community of Nisibis.

As for the thematic structure of the book, after a first chapter aimed at presenting the texts (§1), two chapters cover common questions in the Syriac and Greek poems, concerning language (§2) and content (§3). Finally, each poet gets his own chapter, one for Ephrem's peculiar themes and features (§4), one for Gregory's (§5). The first chapter (§1) is divided into three parts, one giving a generic outline of each poem (§1.1), another proving my assumption that these poems should be read as political acts addressed to a community (§1.2), and a final section clarifying the peculiarities of and reasons for the poetic form (§1.3). In the second chapter (§2), I will examine the texts in light of a much-debated question in the history of early Christianity: When and how and how much did the notion of "bishop," as opposed to "priest," develop? This means that I will describe the language our poets employ to describe the bishop and possibly to distinguish his office from other offices. The chapter is divided into two parts, one examining direct titles or nouns (§2.1), the other metaphors and imagery (§2.2). The third and longest chapter (§3) treats three themes fundamental for the history of the episcopate: first, the functions of the bishop in relation to his community (§3.1); second, his relationship with the rising ascetic movement (§3.2); third, the methods of selection as a way to gauge his claim on authority and legitimacy (§3.3). The most important theme peculiar to Ephrem is the uninterrupted succession of bishops through the history of the community, what he calls *yubbālā*: this occupies the first part of the fourth chapter (§4.1). Then I will explain for the first time some obscure passages of *CN* 13–16, alluding to a crisis in the community of Nisibis (§4.2) and to a hitherto unknown early veneration of saint Jacob of Nisibis (§4.3). In the fifth chapter, on Gregory (§5), I will address two fundamental directions of his poetry that are almost absent from Ephrem's, namely autobiography (§5.1) and invective (§5.2). A conclusion will collect all the results of my inquiry in a broader outline.