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# Michael Psellos: the *Encomium of His Mother*

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## *Introduction*

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The extraordinary eleventh-century scholar, teacher, rhetor, and courtier Michael Psellos is one of the most important intellectual figures in the 1,000-year history of Byzantium, but he is scarcely known to students and scholars of rhetoric today. The chief reason is that almost none of his many surviving works have been translated into English (or any other modern language). The only important work by Psellos available in English is the *Chronographia* — an acknowledged masterpiece of Byzantine historiography, and in itself a rhetorical and literary masterpiece as well — in which he portrays fourteen Byzantine emperors from Basil II to Michael VII Doukas (976-1078), a series of (after Basil) mostly inept fools who brought the empire to disaster, and most of whom he had personally known or served. In the course of that work he also sketches and implicitly justifies his own intellectual and pedagogical project, which was to reunite rhetoric and philosophy, and to revive the whole spectrum of secular (pagan Greek) learning, as a basis for wise

political deliberation and the better guidance of the state. Famously, he claims to have singlehandedly revived the study of Plato and Aristotle — a statement that, while surely an exaggeration, probably also bears an element of truth.<sup>[1]</sup>

But Psellos' *Encomium of His Mother* is perhaps — at least for students of rhetoric — his most important work. In the first place, it exemplifies what educated Byzantines took to be great rhetoric. The twelfth-century scholar Gregory of Corinth, in a treatise on style composed perhaps a half-century after Psellos' death,<sup>[2]</sup> as he is recommending models for imitation, lists Psellos' *Encomium of His Mother* as one of the four best “speeches” (*rhêtorikous logous*) of all time. (The other three are Demosthenes' *On the Crown*, Aelius Aristides' *Panathenaicus*, and Gregory of Nazianzos' *Encomium of Basil the Great*.)<sup>[3]</sup> Around the same time Anna Comnena, in her brief discussion of Psellos in her history of the reign of her father Alexios I Comnenos, makes clear reference to this speech without naming it, thus showing that she is and expects her audience to be familiar with it.<sup>[4]</sup> Also in the twelfth century, the anonymous satire *Timarion* calls Psellos “the Byzantine Sophist” (*ho Buzantios sophistês*) and portrays him as a philosophically oriented rhetorician taking his proper place among the great worthies of the Second Sophistic (41, 43, 45; Aelius Aristides, Herodes Atticus, and Polemon are named).<sup>[5]</sup> Between Gregory, Anna, and the *Timarion*, we see that in the century after his death Psellos has been canonized as a rhetorical and literary figure who can be placed alongside the great figures of the ancient past, and that his *Encomium of His Mother* has likewise been canonized as one of the greatest of his speeches, indeed as one of the great speeches of all time.

This speech is also important — in the second place — because in it Psellos makes a case for his own life and career as a “Byzantine sophist.” I have argued this point at length elsewhere,<sup>[6]</sup> and will not belabor it here, except to note that a key to understanding this speech is the concept of the “figured problem,” as discussed in “Hermogenes” *On Invention* (4.13), a text with which any well-educated Byzantine would have been familiar, and which Psellos himself summarized in a verse synopsis for the young Michael Doukas.<sup>[7]</sup> The “figured problem,” in essence, is a discourse (or, for “Hermogenes,” a declamation exercise) in which the ostensible subject-matter of the speech serves as a foil for something else, primarily

by way of irony (saying the opposite of what one means), indirection (making arguments that lead to different conclusions than the point supposedly being proved), or allusion (tacitly referring to things that cannot be openly mentioned, or that one lacks the freedom of speech to mention). All these methods of “figured” argument are at work in Psellos’ *Encomium of His Mother*. While praising her character and deeds — her striking personal beauty and her spiritual and intellectual excellence, her supervision of the education that enabled him to rise from obscurity to the imperial circle, and her “saintly” later life and swerve into monasticism — Psellos implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) defends his inability to approve the Christian asceticism that in his view destroyed her, and which he characterizes as “apostasy,” while also defending his unswerving devotion to secular learning (and the secular, civic life it informs) as a staying-true to his mother’s original gift to him, and even as a truer form of devotion to God. Most of the lengthy peroration is a “confession” of this continuing devotion, from which, as he says, “I will never be torn away” (27). As a defense of his life and career, Psellos’ *Encomium of His Mother* can be placed in a series of such defenses — or defenses of rhetoric — beginning at least with Isocrates’ *Antidosis* and continuing through such late-antique discourses as Aelius Aristides’ *Defense of Rhetoric against Plato*.

The speech is valuable in other ways as well. It provides some glimpses into what the experience of the late-classical *paideia* was like, at least for a precocious Byzantine schoolboy like the young Michael Psellos. It also provides some glimpses into Byzantine family life, and, perhaps most importantly, it gives us a rare portrait of the life of a highly intelligent, intellectually ambitious Byzantine woman from outside the imperial family, or for that matter below the upper ranks of the Constantinopolitan aristocracy. As Psellos tells us, his mother — her name was Theodota — came from a respectable but completely undistinguished family (2), while his father’s family “had once been raised to senatorial rank, but had not prospered after that” (4). In a letter Psellos says “I cannot put on airs, and must treat silversmiths as equals.”[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]-->\[8\]<!--\[endif\]-->](#) Apparently the family had fallen from its former patrician rank to the social level of guild craftsmen, or what might be called the Constantinopolitan bourgeoisie. The story of Theodota, then, is at least in part the story of what happens to an intellectually gifted Byzantine woman in such circumstances: she is not permitted to go to school, but she educates herself; and the only kind of learning that a woman in her position may pursue without attracting blame is religious learning. This, abetted by an emotional crisis at the death of her daughter, leads her into an

extreme asceticism — derived, most probably, from Symeon the New Theologian, who had at that time become the object of a cult<sup>[9]</sup> — and that asceticism, eventually, brings her to what looks like death by anorexia. (It is this Symeonesque asceticism in particular that Psellos wishes to portray as an “apostasy.”) Theodota may look to us like a “Shakespeare’s Sister” kind of figure, though she is hardly as passive a victim as that. Notably, Psellos says that she taught him the intellectual equality of women with men (25).

Just when the *Encomium of His Mother* was composed is uncertain, though the text’s Italian editor and translator, Ugo Criscuolo, suggests 1054, the year in which Psellos became a monk and briefly “retired” to the remote monastic community at Bithynian Olympos (Mt. Uludag, in present-day Turkey) in order to escape from the increasingly unstable atmosphere at the court of Constantine IX Monomachos during that emperor’s final years. The arguments for this date rest chiefly on Psellos’ remarks in the final section (31). I am not wholly persuaded, and suspect that the date may be later, though admittedly there is no definitive evidence for such a view.<sup>[10]</sup>

What matters more than the precise date, perhaps, is Psellos’ apparent sense of being under suspicion or attack, and his need to defend himself. He had been appointed “Consul of the Philosophers” in 1045 by Constantine IX — a sort of minister of education, in charge of the so-called “University of Constantinople” (really a collection of imperially subsidized schools and teachers, in a revival of ancient Roman practice). As such he was the leading representative, and the leader, of an increasingly revived culture of humanist secular learning. This revival had been gathering momentum since the early tenth century, but in the eleventh it seems to have reached critical mass: Constantine IX greatly expanded the ranks of the imperial bureaucracy, and this in turn produced what might be called an education boom, since the ancient secular *paideia* was the essential requirement for an imperial post (and, hence, a promotion in social class). After the eleventh century this revival would continue, as what has been called the “Byzantine renaissance,” to the last days of the Byzantine state (and it would cross over into the Italian renaissance as well).

The secular *paideia* inherited from late antiquity, with its pagan roots and (mostly) pagan literary canon, was conventionally referred to in Byzantium as the “external learning” (*ho thurathen logos*, literally “the learning from outside the door”), or the “external wisdom,” which was conventionally placed in opposition to “our doctrine” or “the better philosophy,” meaning Christian doctrine. Since for centuries the secular *paideia* had remained essential to training functionaries for the imperial bureaucracy, it had

survived in a more or less cooperative symbiosis with Christian thought, and this arrangement worked well as long as the “external wisdom” was clearly the subordinate member of the pair (and was indulged in only as much as was necessary, i.e. for useful technical skills). But the secular humanist revival over which Psellos was presiding increased the possibilities for tension. Psellos was compelled repeatedly to defend himself on charges of paganism, or of being more devoted to Plato than to Christ. His successor as “Consul of the Philosophers,” the less circumspect (and less rhetorically skilled) John Italos, would be tried and anathematized by Alexios I for the crime of submitting the Christian mysteries to Aristotelian analysis. This climate of increasing tension, then, is an essential part of the rhetorical situation in which Psellos composes the *Encomium of His Mother*, and defends his way of life and his devotion to philosophy and rhetoric.

Finally, I should emphasize that this text is a “speech” perhaps more metaphorically than actually. While it is possible that it was performed on some occasion — though clearly not at Theodota’s funeral (which is described in the text as a past event; 24) — there are also clear evidences that Psellos understands himself as the “writer” of a text to be read, despite other moments where he figures himself as the “speaker.” Certainly Gregory of Corinth and Anna Comnena knew the *Encomium* as a text, a work of literature. That was probably its primary mode of circulation.

The following translation is based on Criscuolo’s edition of the text.[\[11\]](#) The section-divisions and numberings follow Criscuolo, and, with a few exceptions, so too do the paragraph divisions. (Criscuolo divides each section into four paragraphs labeled a, b, c, d; I have omitted the paragraph labels and have occasionally divided one of his paragraphs into two, or have moved a sentence from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next, where it seemed to improve the clarity of the exposition.) One notably literary feature of this text is its allusiveness: Criscuolo’s edition identifies and cites echoes and quotations of classical and Christian authors in virtually every paragraph. Psellos assumes a well-read reader. I have noted some of these allusions, but for most the reader should consult Criscuolo. Another feature of the text, which I already have suggested, is its studied use of ambiguity, or of statements than can be taken in multiple or opposite senses, which often cannot be rendered in translation. Many of my notes are meant to alert the reader to the possible ranges of meaning in a given expression, or to suggest alternative translations to the rendering I have chosen.

I do not think this or any translation of Psellos' *Encomium of His Mother* can be absolutely definitive, given its complexities and subtleties. I offer mine, then, as one way of reading the text, one that I hope rhetoricians in particular will find useful, while I look forward to the day when there will be additional and better translations — and more translations of the rest of Psellos' substantial *oeuvre* — available. I would like to thank Thomas Conley, who read an early and very rough version of this translation, and pointed out the error of my ways. Likewise, I would like to thank Elizabeth A. Fisher and especially Anthony Kaldellis for their help. When in doubt, I have taken Criscuolo's Italian renderings as my guide. And of course, as one must always say, all the errors here are mine alone.

1.

This encomium is for my mother. But my intention is not to praise her as one would a parent. Rather, I render justice in payment to her nature, and bring forward the proper tribute to her virtue, not singling out either but arguing for both<sup>[12]</sup> by means of a single case.<sup>[13]</sup> If either, separately, should merit praise — the former because it is naturally compelling, the latter because of its inherent worth — should they not be woven together, and each be made more beautiful through the other, and the laudation be given a better form?<sup>[14]</sup> Radiant laudation must go forth from orators of reputation to persons of great merit, and especially so when the speaker relies not on the testimony of strangers, but on house and family. In this respect my situation is auspicious.

It is not right, in fact, that persons unrelated to the family should make praise and boldly furnish their encomia with brightly ornamental themes, but take no heed of members of the household, and deprive the family members of the praises they truly deserve, for fear that outsiders might be skeptical. Then what is alien would defeat the household, and the stranger would be greater than the blood-relation. It is commonly agreed upon by the noble that one should render thanks to fathers and mothers and other members of the house to the degree that one is capable. How, then, can we undo this compact, and sometimes keep and sometimes abandon our promises, and while our parents live shower them with praises, but when they have died ignore the requirements of piety, and refuse the one proper speech still owed to them when they have gone to the next life?

Yet those who compose encomia to their relatives in heaven have this fear: the hearers of the speech are not familiar with the virtues of the person being eulogized, and now for the first time they hear them praised, narrated, and adorned. But I take courage, as I speak, from those who knew my mother, and there are many witnesses of the things I shall attribute to her.<sup>[15]</sup> Moreover, it would be an injustice to my mother were I to omit this tribute, having received my education from her<sup>[16]</sup> (as I will show) and not repaying even a small portion of my debt. I myself, then, am not afraid: no-one would suspect me of making praises that are mostly false. But many might charge my words with being insufficient — with arguing that the natural debt owed my mother must be repaid, but showing insufficient zeal, and giving not

as much as should be given, but only as much as I wished to give or could. And I would have shrunk from the task, did not this failure in itself furnish a reply: my mother's great excellence utterly exceeds my intention and ability.<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]-->

Since, then, I am called to make a faithful and becoming speech for her, I must begin the encomium. Be charitable to me, mother, should I fail to make my praises equal to your virtue. I have not attempted to do that, but, rather, to present an image of your virtue to those who do not know. Those who do know will not fasten upon my words, but will bear witness to the truth. And to those who shall come after me, I say plainly in advance that my speech has cut itself not to the measure of your capacity for good, but to that of my zeal.[18]

## 2.

To my mother, then, came virtue, which she inherited from on high and from her family, and from the union of both parents, as if from two streams that flowed together in one sea. So much do I grant the authors of her nature. They had no thought for an especially distinguished life and a glorious occupation: I mean, that is, what the many call distinguished and glorious, thinking heedlessly and in error. The better sort have learned to interpret these words differently. For them, distinction and glory are not superficial ornaments, and are not acquired by way of external things — rather, the fountainhead[19] of glory springs from deep within themselves — so the language of praise does not derive a single word from those externals, but takes adornment and illumination from their opposites. Now, both of my mother's parents kept their gaze fixed on each other only, and because they took each other as the best examples they harmonized themselves in goodness, mutually forming and being formed. They were models and objects of imitation for each other, and even when receiving the most wondrous gift that could be given, they gave back again what they received.

They lived within the limits of their fatherland, the grandly-named City,[20] but there were no limits to the greatness of their virtues. They matched each other in measuring their lives by the other life that abides and redeems, one life copying the image of the other, the one that is limited by time copying the one that is without limit and without end. Just as they entered this life and grew old together, at nearly the same time,

when their allotted span was coming to a close, one went ahead as if to prepare for the other the well-deserved life above and wait in proper readiness.

From such parents as these did my mother spring, when she first released her mother from her birth-pangs and received the proper blessing from her father. And were I not a philosopher, an admirer and lover of the one concealed beauty, and devoted in no way to that of symmetry and complexion, I would say — as people say — that beauty straightway flowed through all of their daughter's body; for the beauty in her soul remained unseen, until she would reach her prime. Just as some flowers straightway after springing from the earth display the whole coloring of their beauty, and are the first to show it and be seen in bloom, so also — as they say — did beauty suffuse my mother, in symmetry of limbs, in fullness of hair, in radiant complexion. And I would add whatever else I learned from her mother and father that dwelt on their daughter's form.[\[21\]](#)

But since my way of life[\[22\]](#) constrains the tongue, I shall pass over this part and turn to the next topic of my speech. If I seem to have mistreated it, forgive me, whatever I might omit, as I go through the necessary parts of my theme. But if, on the other hand, I have tried to narrate and also praise some things that are beyond my knowledge, that is no surprise. I have heard most of these things from my mother herself, and the rest, concerning her elegance and refinement, I have learned from members of the family.

### 3.

They have said that, as from a great firelight, or a diaphanous and aerial flame, or a pellucid radiant sunrise, certain splendors and translucencies were manifest, and announced the virtue from which they radiated. It was not only that her bodily beauty gave an image of her soul's form; or that her spirited glance signified the boldness of her character; or that her fair complexion portrayed the purity of her thought; or that her firm language echoed the steadiness of her reasoning. Rather, it was that her soul itself lit up its own imprint in a body not yet full grown. Thus most people could not decide whether her youthful bloom preceded the graces of her soul, or her soul's graces sprouted before her bodily grace, or the two ran side-by-side and kept pace with each other and maintained equality of rank. Each illuminated the other, and one attracted to itself the eyes of everyone, while the other stunned their thought.

In the works of the loom and whatever women's hands weave, and whatever clever minds fashion, of which I often was a witness, not one of all women could be her rival, not even she that is praised by Solomon for such things.<sup>[23]</sup> I would even say that the very things that that wise man attributed to that woman have been confirmed in double measure for my mother. On one hand, she made little fuss about the domestic virtues, since almost no-one would neglect them. On the other, since she had not been given a masculine nature and it was not possible for her to go to school,<sup>[24]</sup> she did so cleverly.<sup>[25]</sup> Keeping it secret from her mother as much as possible, she obtained the necessary elements of literacy from the monastery,<sup>[26]</sup> and then she composed syllables and fashioned speeches on her own, with no further need for basic instruction.

And she was dedicated to the holy Church as well. She was not presented for service by her mother, like some inanimate votive offering, but of her own choice and before her mother could promise her, she went forth from the house and served and honored God. Henceforth she paid little attention to her body; but it had no need of attention. Rather it was, like roses, without need of fictitious beauty, and this unconcern with ornament was with her an artless addition and a natural enhancement. When creeping mist overshadows the sun and shrouds its radiance in a cloud, we cannot tell where the lamp of heaven shines; but nothing obscured her beauty, not even her neglect of her youthful grace, so that, like the radiance of a lamp that was everywhere visible, her form<sup>[27]</sup> caused all who saw her to stand thunderstruck, and all who heard her to be astonished. And there were some who thought it good fortune in another sense if they beheld her somewhere. I do not mean lovers only of the beauty set before them, but also those whose understanding is philosophically conveyed from sense-impressions to what is intelligible and invisible.

But how I digress, as necessity pulls and diverts me from consistency! However much I have disvalued beauty in my reasoning,<sup>[28]</sup> now I invoke it as a crowning glory for my mother, although this was not my plan, since it was the cause of her assent to life.<sup>[29]</sup> Her reputation reached everyone, attracted one admirer after another, and stopped people open-mouthed in their tracks, especially the common crowd that rely on what they hear, and those that rely on what they see. Shall I add something here, something that I really ought to say? It was not, as I believe, her visible form that so subdued the many as much as the hidden and unseen form of her soul, so that in consequence, even if it was invisible, those who saw and heard her were astonished because of it. I am making a distinction between those who see externalities,

and those who glimpse the inward soul. And since both existed in her, and both kinds of humanity were about[30] — that is, those who cling to the phenomenon and those who embrace the noumenon — as well as the third and middle kind who both belong to and differ from the other two —her father proposed for the first time that she get married,[31] and started a huge argument.[32] Since she was not to be persuaded, he gave up on persuasion by words and thought he might try compulsion, so he pretended to threaten her. But she forestalled his pretended threats with her assent,[33] for she did not perceive the dissimulation (as she later described the scene). Then many competed for her, and some ran ahead, and the victory went not to the one most favored by fortune, but to the one most endowed with virtue. I mean my father, whose happiness would have been incomplete if he had been deprived of such a woman, just as, in fact, he obtained the fullness of happiness from her.

#### 4.

He was at that time, as the saying goes, a youth with his first beard, and in looks as handsome as a statue. He did not, in truth, resemble her in that respect alone, as there was scarcely any difference in their characters: it was as if convergent souls recognized each other in the flesh, and thus they were joined in perfect concord.

Youthful flowerings are not alike in all respects. While one is not yet done with childhood, another is blooming with life, and another is ready for noble purposes. One is ready for one thing, and another for another; and since life is divided into action and thought, one is more inclined to the active life, and another to contemplation. But for my mother this division did not hold: everything came together all at once,[34] and was already in full bloom. There was both prudence and intelligence, a disposition inclined to reason, a reason inclined to action, and an ability to divide and not divide these opposites and to embrace one while seeming to embrace the other. Thus she never strayed far from God, or from careful housekeeping either. Rather she was approaching God in all she did, or indeed was constantly devoted to Him, and felt no need to be reminded of practical matters, since in them she was not other than with God. Indeed she was both improving herself and augmenting her household, profitably employing what was there, and thoughtfully adding what was not.

In my father's case, his family had once been raised to senatorial<sup>[35]</sup> rank, though their affairs had not prospered after that. But if one were to place him on one side of a scale with my mother, and put the rest of the family on the other side, with my mother he would easily tip the balance, while otherwise being inferior to them. It seems to me that the woman praised so fulsomely by the wise Solomon performed her deeds in a mean and vulgar way, to the extent of handling a spindle and making two cloaks for her husband, as if she did not want to do more, or could not make other things of that sort.<sup>[36]</sup> My mother was much more magnificent, and did not turn the spindle only: she took up any instrument that belonged to the women's quarters. And though she did not make cloaks for her husband — my father was not so poor as that — she wove them for herself, her handmaids, and many women of the family, and otherwise for the majority of the unfortunate; and most of what she made happened to be extraordinarily beautiful.

And then she brought a child into the world. The child was a little daughter like no other, aside from her mother, and this statement is no boast: her beauty was a cause of astonishment to most people, as I will explain. When my mother was visibly pregnant and the first offering of her womb appeared to be acceptable<sup>[37]</sup> to God, from whom she had received it, she pulled herself together and strove earnestly at life. Unlike the majority of women who, when in that condition, prefer to relax and live indolently, she became more vigorous than languid, and with great energy she disciplined both her body and her mind. So nature, as if pleased with herself and amazed at having brought forth such beauty — I mean my mother — and as if reckoning that she might not exhibit such beauty except through her, formed my sister in its image, so that there would be an almost perfect likeness even when the prototype had passed away. This was nature's plan, though God decided otherwise, as I will show at the proper time.<sup>[38]</sup>

A second child was born, and again a female child, and that was not entirely satisfactory, either to the parents or to the rest of the family. Just as childless women yearn to have a child, my mother had fully wished her second child to be male. But the anxieties<sup>[39]</sup> on both sides of the family<sup>[40]</sup> were held in check: nature was making preparations, and needed some time for the wished-for birth. Since it was inevitable that God would listen to her prayers, her womb received the command to bear a child, the time for her labor arrived, and this writer was brought into the world,<sup>[41]</sup> led forward by many prayers and hopes. A great and sacred hymn for the birth was sung, although the child was not quite like its parents.<sup>[42]</sup>

## 5.

Let the part of the story that concerns me now be set aside, and the subject of my mother be taken up. But if I narrate something about myself as well, let no-one blame me. My purpose is not self-celebration, but an account of the source of my mother's virtues, wherever that may lead. I would do an injustice, were I to show her deprived of all her hopes and unfortunate in her prayers. And that is not how it will be, since what she hoped for appears to have come to pass, in some measure, and not entirely displeasingly to her. Whatever the family ascribes to me as an infant, such as not crying, not even for the necessities of nature, or not accepting any breast other than my mother's, or recognizing her as the one who had given birth to me as if from knowledge rather than familiarity, or other things of which I need not speak, I leave to the women's quarters. But whatever I happen to know about myself and my mother after I reached the age of understanding, that I will speak of very clearly, with no hesitation and no concern for jealous tongues.

My mother was led to an embrace of education<sup>[43]</sup> by the very loveliness of learned discourse<sup>[44]</sup> and a desire for practical activity. Moreover, my own nature also encouraged her to this, as she was astonished at the quickness of my understanding, and convinced of my ability to learn. Most people related to the family say that when I was a child, nothing that was said passed through my ears in vain, and that every word was copied in my soul; and because of that my mother was guided to the better things, and at the end of my fifth year she fixed upon a teacher. My lessons were not only easy for me, but also more enjoyable than any other childish pastime. I would be vexed if given no lessons<sup>[45]</sup> for an entire day. Study was play to me, and play was study — not because some things were play and others were study, but because I embraced some things because of their sweetness, and avoided others because of their harshness.<sup>[46]</sup> I say these things not from a wish to praise myself, but to indicate the origins of my love of learning.

After that some time passed, and when my eighth year had arrived my natural inclination was leading me to higher education.<sup>[47]</sup> Many of the family contended that I should not be launched upon that open sea (or, rather, be sent away); instead they would turn me to something easier, and ferry me to some safe harbor to cast my anchor. For me it was difficult even to hear about giving up my studies for something else. My mother very readily took my side, and for a while my preference was an object of dispute among my guardians. She decided the question. Whoever might raise an objection, if she could discover a better

argument against it, my mother stood up for learning, and she very elegantly explained the vision she had had. Actually there were two visions: one that I heard about from her, and one that I learned about later, from the person to whom she had confided it. My mother told me that, once when she was dissolved in sleep, she seemed again to be disputing what my lot should be. Since she often was feeling overwhelmed by the arguments the family made against her, a certain man from among the servants of God, someone familiar to her and resembling the golden-tongued John (and I mean our Antiochene),[\[48\]](#) said to her, “Do not be distressed, O woman, by these considerations,[\[49\]](#) but with a conquering resolve instruct your son in learned matters. I will accompany him as his guide and teacher, and I will fill him with learning.”

I learned of this dream-vision from my mother; but what I am about to tell I learned from one of her sisters, after my mother had passed away, and after I had sworn sacred oaths. She said that my mother had once related to her that, when she was divided within herself by arguments about my future, a dream of the following sort brought her to a decision. She seemed to enter the church of the Apostles,[\[50\]](#) very reverently, while attended by some guardians she did not recognize. Then she approached the bema[\[51\]](#) — she had no fear of the mysteries in the shadows — and saw a woman of indistinct features who came from within to meet her and told her to remain outside as she approached. But she, when she had come out, did not speak to my mother at all, but to those standing near on either side. Turning from side to side she said, “Fill this woman’s child with learning,[\[52\]](#) for you see that she does honor to me.” My mother also related the appearance of those on either side: for both, she said, were a pale grey, but one had a large, rounded head neatly sprouting a growth of white beard, which did not hang down from his nose or fall from his chin at all, while the other had a smaller head and body, but his beard was longer than the other’s by far.[\[53\]](#) From these two visions, then, my mother regained her courage, carried out her decision on my behalf, and brought me to the beginning of my studies.

## 6.

I do not know what has happened to me. How should I manage my argument? It leads me on, bringing in one theme[\[54\]](#) after another, and my intention is not at all to mix up stories about myself with my mother’s virtues, but I cannot otherwise complete my encomium for her, or present the truth about her deeds,[\[55\]](#) without including something that pertains to me. How could I demonstrate that she is the cause

of my reputation for learning,[56] without invoking the beginnings[57] from which I was brought to my success? And, should anyone care, let this much be credited to each of us: to her, knowing and choosing better things for me; and to me, not betraying those things to the end.[58] I appeal to those that are fond of making disparaging remarks and bringing accusations, since no-one who listens without malice would blame me for enjoying the benefit of my mother's virtue even in accounts and narratives about her.

But my argument must return to its proper starting-point, and take up what follows from the theme.[59] Or rather, now that I have reached this point, let those who gave me my first lessons testify that I went through them easily, that I understood more than most, and, to speak briefly, that I learned readily, that I persistently retained what I had learned, that I recited with good expression, and that in one circuit of the sun I learned to write correctly and recited the entire *Iliad* — not learning the epic only, but also figure and trope and diction, and timely metaphor and harmonious composition.[60]

Now, if you will not declare that I am obsessed with dream-interpretation,[61] I will briefly describe one of my visions to you. I was not yet ten years old (or perhaps I had just reached that age), and one night a dream[62] lifted me up, and transported me into the open sky.[63] I do not know whether or not I was hunting, but it seemed to me that I was pursuing two musical birds,[64] one of which resembled a little parrot, and the other a magpie, and they both went in beneath the fold of my robe![65] At this my spirit was lightened and gladdened, and by frequently using my hands I kept up with them and grasped their wings.[66] But the birds said, “Neither rule tyrannically, in the way of men, nor seize power by force: rule, master, according to law! Rather, accomplish this by reason, and stay and converse with us. And should you persuade, then rule over us; but if not, give us back the freedom of our wings.”

It seemed to me that what they said was wise, and as I grasped each one firmly by the wings on either side, I imagined some philosophers exchanging arguments with them, and then and there the veil that birth casts over the soul was lifted from me.[67] At the outset, then, equipoised arguments on both sides were established, and they opposed enthymemes and syllogisms to my antitheses; and when the conversation had played out the argument as far as possible and I was chattering on at length about one of their points, they said, “Stop, since even we have awarded you the victory!” At that time I did not fully understand my dream; rather, I supposed that what I had seen was a representation of the more irrational part of the soul.

But later, once I had attained a grasp of music and the more exacting studies, I connected those apparitions to the verbal arts, since those twittering birds emitted a voice both musical and human.[\[68\]](#)

7.

Here ends the part about myself; my speech may now begin the praises of my mother. I have not yet touched upon what I know directly from observation, but what I have heard from her father and mother — I mean her parents — and from others who knew her well, and also what I myself have remembered and inferred. But what I tell henceforth I have also seen and heard, and have understood from a more philosophical point of view. I would say, to sum it all up in a single point, that no mortal woman could compete with her; I would admit only those that have been called immortal. What woman is there more capable in judgment, more refined in character, more sound in reasoning, or more discerning in talk and action? Who has a more measured tongue, in speech and in silence? What other woman has so adorned herself with modesty? Who, to put it most plainly and precisely, has in equal measure mixed opposites together — timely governance with measured gentleness, sublimity of mind with discipline of thought?

O, her sober eye bent to the ground and perceiving what is beyond! O, hands so gentle by nature and by age, accepting harshness with kneelings and submissions to God! O, all her feeling turned to the love of God, and all her inclination straining toward that alone! O, the cosmetic paintings and pencilings[\[69\]](#) that my mother alone disdained! O, the deceitful bloom and artificial whiteness that she commonly shunned and avoided! O, the wigs and hairpieces that she never wore, and were incomparably beneath her! O, the perception in her eyes, the character in her brow, and the intelligence couched in all her senses! O, she knew no femininity but what belonged to her by nature, and otherwise strengthened her soul and made it firmer and more courageous,[\[70\]](#) and she manifestly was stronger than the rest of the family, both all the women and all the men, by being incomparable to the women and better than the men.

But how could anyone describe your secret life with God, and your conduct, the nightly vigils and early risings, the flights of the soul, the rapture of the mind, the illumination, the ascent?[\[71\]](#) O, how could I leave out any aspect of your virtue?[\[72\]](#) I meant for others to know your virtues,[\[73\]](#) and wished to fashion this encomium so that my praise of you would not be doubted. I have obliged myself to speak before impartial judges and unimpeachable arbitrators,[\[74\]](#) so that nothing I say will be liable to scrutiny.

But now I have erred in two very important respects, and I take responsibility on either count. I have narrated your life sparingly, and have been silent about most of the better things, yet even concerning the lesser things I will be doubted by most people who did not know you.<sup>[75]</sup> And I do not know, as I set forth on the deeps of your virtues, which of these swelling waves I should reject, or equally which I should accept.

So how, as I plunge ahead, shall I hold out against the currents on either side? I do not know which I should prefer, since all your virtues have earned the right of precedence and they surround me, each one pulling me to itself and dragging me along. I wish to marvel at your moderation, and the ascent of your soul to the better life draws me in the opposite direction.<sup>[76]</sup> I am drawn up thither, and then the depth of your humility draws me down again.<sup>[77]</sup> Then your gentleness takes it place, and then another virtue and another again, so that it becomes impossible to give any part of your life its proper praise, while this pointless dance — or, rather, this endless procession — unfolds and substitutes one thing for another, for the boundless throng of your virtues does not permit a return to those that came before.

## 8.

What I have become is much less than what you hoped for, and I will submit to your chastisements, since I have not conducted my public life according to your precepts.<sup>[78]</sup> From the beginning, as governesses<sup>[79]</sup> do with little children, you trained all my perceptions, urged every holy utterance upon me, and did not permit me to be amused with fables from the nursemaid. For I remember, bringing it up as from the deep, that I was crying about something and you wanted me to calm down and go to sleep, and against the myths and bogey-monsters you set now Isaac brought by his father to the sacrifice, wholly obedient to his begetter;<sup>[80]</sup> and now again Jacob contriving to obtain his father's blessing by following his mother's counsels;<sup>[81]</sup> and now another, the most divine one of all, the new Adam, your God and Master, obeying His mother and father.<sup>[82]</sup>

I remember too your words about chastity, and your counsels regarding purity, even if things have turned out differently with me. I have not been forgetful of you, nor of the fire and light with which you illuminated temperance and burned away licentiousness. Neither will I not pass over that deed you wished me not to see, but that I saw. My mother loved me — how should I put it? — with passionate intensity, and

often she wished to put her arms around my neck and embrace me, but she restrained her yearning with higher law and better judgment,[\[83\]](#) lest I become spoiled and be more disobedient in some way to her injunctions. Once I appeared[\[84\]](#) to be deep asleep, as if I had been drugged, but in fact I had only just closed my eyes; and she, being unaware of that, came to me and enfolded me in her arms and kissed my face repeatedly; and with many tears she said, “O dear child, I love you, but I cannot kiss you often!” Thus she watched over my development and closely supervised my education. Her soul was truly of such character. But before I speak of that, I should make some general distinctions.

I recognize more than one kind of soul attuned to virtue. On one hand, there are simple souls that are full of grace and attentive and gentle to their neighbors. On the other hand, there are those that are bitter and melancholy, who regard the greater part of life with gloom, are harsh in character and unapproachable to most, are peevish and disagreeable with whatever they dislike, and are more hateful to vice than devoted to virtue. But my mother’s virtue was a combination of the two: for who had a more cheerful look, or conversed more gracefully, or corrected error with a gentler manner? This was her natural role.[\[85\]](#) But in other cases, with many persons and on many occasions, she exercised stern discipline, and could dissuade them merely by raising an eyebrow. This admonitory face was directed at those of a harsh or awkward character — I mean those that seem unapproachable or difficult to reach — and she sometimes could unnerve them, due to the superior force of her virtue. Of course it was not the crowd only who feared her admonition and restrained themselves. Her parents too, even when they were far advanced in gray-haired old age, bowed to her superior nature[\[86\]](#) and considered her a living law, a paradigm of action and speech and silence, even if they fell far short of the archetype. And if they suddenly encountered her when they were upset about something, she put the unsteadiness of their soul in order; and if they were angry, she dissolved their anger; and whatever they were doing or suffering, she converted their state of mind to the better thing.[\[87\]](#) And if they committed some error[\[88\]](#) that escaped her notice, they took care that she not know about it!

I do not mean that she behaved arrogantly toward her parents.[\[89\]](#) Who among all women has so served and honored her begetters? She supported them when they grew old and comforted them with words and deeds, sat by them when they were ill, sympathized with their pains, and stayed awake through their sleepless nights. She did not, moreover, think herself wiser than her progenitors. They, however, had a

different estimation, not remarking her judiciousness toward them,[\[90\]](#) but being astonished at the excellence of her virtue. She adapted her character perfectly to everyone, and to the differing habits of association and conversation she encountered, and did not lecture to the crowd like a sophist, but discerned what was suitable to each person and managed according to the situation.[\[91\]](#)

## 9.

To my father she was not only a colleague and a helpmate in accordance with the divine command, but also a promoter and a discoverer of the finest things in life. His character was such as I have not yet seen in others, yet many have known the man and, if they wish, will bear witness for me. His character was both straightforward and noble, with nothing effeminate about it, tempered with unaffected gentleness, not easily moved to anger, and unperturbed by anything whatsoever that might happen. I myself never saw him either angry or upset, and he never struck anyone with his hand, nor told anyone else to do that. He was always graceful in spirit, and though he lacked a facile tongue he could speak pleasantly when speech was called for. In the business of life he was exceptionally energetic too, and while he could not write with a rapid hand, nevertheless his writing was more winged than his speech, and relying on no other instrument but itself, it proceeded nimbly, evenly, and without stumbling, like a stream of oil that flows without a sound.[\[92\]](#)

As for his body — but how shall I say this, how produce a digression from the main argument, where the work of praise is very difficult? For when he was young he was like a great cypress, equally growing tall and increasing the spread and bulk of his limbs in proper proportion. And the cheerful glance in his eyes, as one might say, sent forth an aphrodisian charm, not with vaunting pride and boastfulness, but with handsome grace and straightforwardness, signifying good character, so that his expression was, in truth, by its mere appearance an index of his inward soul.[\[93\]](#)

Further, if someone capable of discerning the qualities of souls from the outward appearances of bodies saw my father — before listening to chatterers and before consulting others — he would declare, concerning what has heretofore been concealed, that as my father glowed with the frank simplicity of former times, they had been kept alive; and if I too am somehow tinged with such a quality, it has been transferred from him by example.[\[94\]](#) I have fallen entirely short of my mother's example, since her role in

life was not to be an object of imitation, but of astonishment. In my father's case, however, I fly after him like an eaglet, or rather follow him like a shadow, or even less than that, as I have not entirely conformed myself to him and been transformed.[95]

Since, then, my father was that sort of man, everyone was encouraged by his even temper and no-one was afraid to approach him and converse with him. Only my mother, from the surpassing sublimity of her virtue, kept company and spoke with him not on terms of equality but of inferiority: in this respect alone[96] she maintained an incongruity, and did not converse in a manner corresponding to his,[97] since she was being observant not of his character but of the ancient command.

## 10.

O, but which of my mother's noble qualities could I treat superficially? I wish my speech for her to omit as little as possible, and I put my hand to everything with equal enthusiasm: so it seems to me that, as far as my invention is concerned, I grasp my subject-matter like an artless wrestler who is unequal to his opponent. I, like most, would wish to speak on any point concerning her with utmost elegance, so that my speech cannot address her virtues briefly, either those that are beyond measure or those that impose a lower standard on my words. And yet you trained[98] me, O mother, constantly for this, acting not only as my right-hand counselor, but also joining in with my schooling and conspiring with it, when you asked me upon my return from school what I had learned from the instruction, and what I had contributed to my schoolmates' discussions or picked up from them. Then too you brought me to memorize what had been learned, pretending to listen with pleasure whether I said something about orthography, or something about poetry and from what each poem[99] had been derived and how it had been composed and what were the commonalities and differences among them.

I also know this about you — and I was quite amazed — that you would stay awake with me at any time of night, reclining on your bed as I read, inspiring me with strength and courage more than Athena did Diomedes.[100] I was not unaware of this, when I repeatedly took up the same passage, either to make it steady in my memory or to hunt for something that was hard to catch.[101] When I was grappling with a difficulty,[102] you conjectured from the anadiplosis of a verse,[103] and stood by me just like a comrade

in arms, raising your hands to God and beating your breast with your fist — this was your way in prayers[104] — and calling for the diagnosis of the ambiguity from on high.

All children are indebted to their parents for something, and above all for the fact that they have received their existence from them; but that debt is only a requirement of nature. In my case, I owe my mother a double debt since she both gave me my physical existence and dazzled me with the beauty of words.[105] She did not urge that role upon my preceptors, but assumed it herself and sowed the seeds of knowledge in me. Although that debt is compelling, it cannot in any way be repaid, not because of the debtor's bad intentions, but because he is not in a position to return what the creditor meant to give. Many starting-points for praise encircle my mother's gift, and none that are merely chanced upon: she did not blaze her trail through level plains, and I cannot approach her by smooth roads, but by untrodden ways through mountains above the clouds.

And I know you have no need of words from below, as you possess the silence on high, mystical and ineffable.[106] But it would be terrible if, having acquired the art of speech from you, I should gather nothing from it to contribute to your praise, as if I were shallow, hard-packed earth that gave the farmer nothing in return for the casting of seed. But I am not like that: I have not wasted what was sown, and I have yielded up the grain. The bread, however, is not at all appropriate to you, as you fare on heavenly delights, by which indeed you live as much as, in life, you furnished what was fitting and nourishing to your soul, and vigorously strengthened your desire for perfection.

## 11.

My mother was content to obey the law,[107] and she was bound by flesh and blood. By "law" I mean that which accompanies our exile from the original state of grace. As for the proper dignity of the soul, and what is its freedom from mixture with the body, and what is its admixture and to what it therefore flows or is inclined, and what is the way up and the ascent and from where and how does it fly away, and whither does it proceed and where does it arrive and what is its fate beyond and who are the electors, and what is the judgment and who is the recorder — about these things and others she sought wisdom from the Holy Scriptures, just as the thirstiest deer are drawn irresistibly to the springs of such gushing streams.[108]

She wished to break free of the world and devote herself to God, but there was nothing she could do while her husband was still alive and he considered separation from her an apostasy from God. So she was agitated on that account, and in her reasoning she turned over and over many considerations whether she might find a way of attaining what she desired. She wished, as if facing a fork in the road, to travel both paths alike, and to arrive at the same end. It was her prayer, both daily and nightly (and very much secret and unobserved), to end her days in the monastic life and to share in the life without passion and suffering. For a long time, in fact, she was in love with the ragged hairshirt and the hermit's belt, and that above all things was what she studied and prepared for: to shave the head, roughen the body, pave the knee with calluses, harden the fingers, and live purely in the purity of God.

Hence, while she could not fully possess what she desired, she went to those who had achieved it, men and women alike. She was deferential to the men, but associated and slept with the women, resting her head upon the same animal-skin upon the same stone floor.<sup>[109]</sup> She disliked, in fact, an altogether soft bed and extravagantly luxurious clothes, and she sought to conjure neither a brilliant complexion nor soft robes nor elegant dress nor anything else of that sort; the clothing and pleasure she desired for herself were the ruggedness of a simple cloak, the sacred habit, the cross, the spiritual crown upon the head, and as many other marks as are established for us of what is ineffable and most holy.

Since she could not enjoy these things, but could refrain from luxuries and engage in humble toil, and go begging among those in gold-gleaming, star-studded clothes — and this just once a year, so as not to create a bad impression for her husband — since, then, she could not fully enjoy the practice of poverty, she somehow mingled again with those who had attained the highest eminence,<sup>[110]</sup> as if assisting them in the business of virtue and sharing the profit pureheartedly. Some things she gave, and some she received: from them, the touch of the hands, the earnest prayers, the hopes for the future; from her, the care she provided to the indigent, the sharing of her things, and the service she rendered in humility with her hands, washing their feet and resting them on a bed and caressing their limbs, no matter how battered and covered with sores they were.

But which of her worthy deeds should I not relate with great magnificence? Which of the brilliant images of virtue shining from her should I not dye with speech's colors? She did not feed the indigent as most people do, and abuse them as if they were slaves, and bend down from on high and repeatedly reproach them for their misfortune. Rather, as if she were not giving but taking profit from it, she attended to those that were afflicted for whatever reason.

So she led them up the entry-stairs and gave them her right hand and bowed deeply to them, and then, when she had washed, purified, and rubbed all their limbs with perfumed oils, she did not turn them over to the housekeeper, but herself set them at the table, and then folded her hands upon her breast and meekly rendered service as if to lords. Often the goblet overflowed as she held it glistening with her fingers, and she gave to the poor readily, mixing the wine skillfully so that it would go down well and be lovely for the drinker. This was how she knew to feed the poor, and she tended each of the virtues with the same perfection.

But in other ways she led a retiring life, and had no wish to know something about everything — neither what happened in the marketplace, nor at the palace, nor whether someone had been nominated as grain-buyer or treasurer, nor even if something good or bad had happened to one of the neighbors. She stopped her ears against every extraneous piece of gossip, and did not visit the crowded marketplace, not even if there were a billowing sea of people.[\[111\]](#) Indeed she ignored these things altogether. But if any men or women did something virtuous, she would seek them out and assist them from afar, at any place or time, whether they inhabited valleys and hollows, or stood upon the heights, or had recently been raised up.

Since the Lord of suplicants did not intend to ignore her prayers forever, but meant to grant each request at the proper time, something of that sort occurred. But the argument that stands apart on high must now come into this part of my theme.[\[112\]](#)

### 13.

My mother's first child, her beautiful daughter, about whom I left off speaking earlier,[\[113\]](#) was like a flower blooming from a calyx, unfolding into her season, and she was already near womanhood and ready to be given in marriage. And — to pass over the intermediaries — as much as she matched my mother in point of beauty, in her voice, in her combination of features, and in her discernment and preference for

what is most excellent, and as much as she was led to the spiritual graces from the better aspects of these things, to that extent I would say that we were a pair,[\[114\]](#) conspicuous and clear, if only to our parents and the rest of the family, if not to others. Since she truly was very beautiful (whereas my parents only thought me so), her beauty immediately struck whoever saw her, and through her outward appearance even her hidden, inner excellence was imaged forth. My own was not so apparent, and indeed I was not much to speak about, but my parents were quite unclear about what was not the case, permitting their fondness for me to seduce their judgment.

Our feelings for one another were no different than those that our parents felt for us. Rather, like two shoots sprouting from the same trunk, we were linked to each other, at once separate and inseparable, except that she had sprouted sooner and I was the younger and greener shoot. Time had given her the precedence of birth, though my inferiority in age was offset by the superiority of my gender. But I took after my father artlessly, and she after her mother, as if she had been derived from her two parts, the soul and the body, and she preserved the likeness in both respects. In both respects, then, she was superior to all other women except her mother: for she differed from her mother in no way, so that they triumphed as a team. For if my mother was thought superior, the superiority was my sister's also; and if my sister was seen to be superior to other women, my mother also took the prize for excellence. They were so much alike that the only difference between them was the number of their years. If someone saw just one of them, he would mistakenly think he saw the other; and if he saw both, he would not immediately grasp that they were mother and daughter. Their similarity was altogether uncanny! For my mother had given birth to her when she was young, and was older by a brief span of years, and in point of bloom was indistinguishable from her offspring. Indeed, they differed from each other in no respect at all.

My sister, then, was ahead of me both in age and in the graces of the soul, and inspired considerable respect. Unlike my mother, however, she neither kept back from me her state of mind on account of household business, nor revealed her deepest feelings secretly; rather, she kissed and embraced me often and shared everything with me — her plans, her thoughts, her doings. She was preparing herself for chastity[\[115\]](#) too, and in a spirit of like-mindedness she lectured me on maintaining one's reputation and urged strict self-discipline,[\[116\]](#) just as if giving orders.

But she was at once so sisterly and tender to me that I was completely in her thrall and approached her with modesty, especially whenever she would embrace me. And she was admired not only by our family, but also by the family she married into. A brief episode will show the greatness of her sensibility.

#### 14.

A certain woman in the neighborhood was taking pay from those who desired her youthful bloom, and in that way was living the shabby life of a prostitute,[\[117\]](#) painting herself and enchanting many with her fictitious beauty. And when this careless young woman fell ill, the noble and wellborn bucked up their nerve and began to argue about her. My sister often had censured her, reproached her licentiousness, and criticized her disgracefulness, and finally she commanded her to live somewhere else, far away. At first she was deaf to every accusation and exhortation, and held unswervingly to the life she had begun; but when my sister would not let her go, and assailed and rebuked her, she said, “But if I give up prostitution, how will I get the basic necessities of life?” My sister’s nobly inclined or, rather, philosophical nature blurted out[\[118\]](#) a speech and swore sacred oaths[\[119\]](#) that she would support her not only with necessities, but with luxuries as well. The woman was persuaded by these words, and they were reconciled to each other: she would no longer display herself to the gaze of men, and would refrain entirely from her former habits of association and intercourse, and my sister would share in common with her all that she might need — housing, clothing, food, and even luxuries if she wished. Then she gave thanks that she had rescued from poverty a soul that had become a victim of the beast.

As she had promised, my sister richly[\[120\]](#) took care of the woman, with the result that several women of her family became jealous and blamed “the savioress” for preferring an outsider to members of the household. She, as she knew why she treated that woman as she did, was not much bothered by these reproaches. She laughed gently and softly at whatever points they urged against her, and scattered their words to the winds. For a while, then, the woman kept true to her promises, changed her formerly shabby way of life, and adorned herself with the beauties of chastity. Even to me she seemed sincerely chaste and virtuous:[\[121\]](#) she lowered her eyes and covered her face with a sense of shame, and went to the holy church and kept her head beneath a veil. If she saw someone unexpectedly, she blushed immediately. And

she kept her body unadorned, wearing neither rings on her hands, nor fancy, brightly-colored shoes on her feet. In this way she completely transformed herself, and completely reversed her way of life.

But the change was short-lived: before her new character could settle in, she slipped back into her former life. O how she strayed, and O how complete was her relapse! This escaped my sister's notice — and the woman was guilty of unchastity — and she loved and cared for her as though she had once and for all been converted. But she was about to learn the secret, too; and here for me is the sweetest part of the narrative, as well as saddest, as the tale will show.

My sister was pregnant at that time, and her labor had begun. The delivery was difficult and she suffered greatly. The women watched over her labor-pains and assisted her, stimulating and easing the contractions, and with lubrications preparing the unborn child's escape from the womb. That woman took part in the midwifery, putting on an appearance of chastity, and my sister relied on her more than on the midwives. One of them became jealous at this, and said, "Your trouble is because of *her*! Pregnant women aren't allowed to assist at childbirth! That's the rule of the women's quarters!" Then my sister said, "But which of you is pregnant?" The one who had spoken pointed straight at that woman, and pulled back her frock and exposed her belly. And then, knowing all, my sister sighed; she forgot her labor-pains and was torn in her soul with inexpressible suffering at this speech. But she was not for that reason deprived of the nobler gain. Rather, she ordered that woman<sup>[122]</sup> instantly to flee to the farthest corner of the earth, and immediately she had a beautiful delivery, and the newborn child came forth into the world. Incredibly, nature had brought my sister to bloom with its firstborn beauty,<sup>[123]</sup> and more incredibly still death took her away. It was, I think, impossible that death would let the extraordinary beauty of her form<sup>[124]</sup> pass by, and not carry it off.

## 15.

At that time I happened to be staying in the countryside outside the City,<sup>[125]</sup> having made a brief trip abroad with a noted rhetorician<sup>[126]</sup> who had been appointed as judge<sup>[127]</sup> of no small part of the western region. I had made my first venture out from the City and had seen the surrounding wall, and so to speak the whole open country. I was sixteen years old and large for my age, and having been recently released from the study of poetry, I was gratefully applying myself to the art of rhetoric.<sup>[128]</sup> My sister, as my

parents afterward told me, suffered a terrible illness in her viscera: her liver quickly became infected and swollen, her whole body was wasted with a burning fever, and her nature gave out and yielded to its power<sup>[129]</sup> before the wasting had fully consumed her, so that she died while her flesh was still in bloom. I will show, later, how my parents reacted to this misfortune;<sup>[130]</sup> but now I must keep things in connected sequence.

I had lost my sister prematurely, then, and my parents could not forget their child; but they were equally anxious that I not be stricken by the unexpected news and add to their great suffering another no less painful, as they knew that we were virtually one person, and that if one were destroyed the other would be destroyed as well. They planned to take me in their arms and, by means of circumlocutions, gradually reveal the actual, central fact of the calamity. To this end they sent me a letter, reproaching me for being unsociable for so long and teasing me for being careless with words, and — not to finish where I started — after a quick jump from the gate, breath soon fails to last the race — they added some of the usual news about my sister, by which I had often been snared before. By these devices, then, they sought to turn me homeward. They supposed their trick would go undiscovered; but I was besieged and conquered from a different source, and the truth struck before their beautiful deception. But I shall tell the story as it happened.

I had just come to the wall,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[131]<!--[endif]--></sup> and was near the place where my sister's body had been laid to rest. A week had passed since her burial, and many of the family were there, mourning the one laid in the tomb and consoling my mother. At that place, then, I happened to meet and talk with a relative, a man of straightforward, noble character who neither knew about my parents' ruse nor that I had been taken in by their contrivance. I enquired about my father and others that were related to me, and he, neither embroidering nor shading the truth in any way, said, "Your father is rendering up the funeral lament for his daughter, and your mother is there beside him and is inconsolable, as you know, at this misfortune." When he said these words I hardly knew what had happened to me: just as if burnt by holy fire,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[132]<!--[endif]--></sup> I was stricken and speechless. I slipped down from the saddle on my horse, and the news of my arrival reached my parents' ears.

They started up another lament on my behalf, and the wailing was more vehement than before. When a fire has been lit and a small amount of kindling is added, the flame is roused and its spirit is intensified, and

it leaps up from the pyre with redoubled force. When they understood what had happened, they ran to me as if they had gone mad, and then for the first time my mother publicly displayed her beauty, without regard for the gaze of men. They were brought to where I lay insensible, and, taking hold of me on either side, they called me back to life with their lamentations; then they led me round, half-dead, to where my sister had been entombed. But how shall I hold back the tears, even now, as I describe the scene? How can I bring the story to completion, when a mist has overcome my soul? But I will speak as I can, and fortify myself with higher thoughts.<sup>[133]</sup>

When I opened my eyes, I beheld my sister's tomb, acknowledged what had happened, and gathered my wits. And then I broke down and sobbed and poured streams of tears upon her tomb, like drink-offerings, and said: "O my sweet, my more than a sister, if there is a name for something more than kinship and affection! O beauty impossible, nature incomparable, virtue unrivaled, statue ensouled, spur to faith, reason's rein,<sup>[134]</sup> grace unconquered, O all to me and more than my soul! How could you go away and leave your brother? How could you be cut off from the one who shares your nature? How can you endure so much solitude?<sup>[135]</sup> O, what sort of dwelling has received you, what resting-place is your fate, what meadows, what delights? What paradise enchants you? What is this beauty that you prefer to seeing and conversing with me? What flower attracts you, what roses, what gushing rivulet? What nightingales, what cicadas putting forth lovely sound? As for your body's beauty, does nature watch over and protect what it has received, or has the heaped-up earth destroyed it utterly, and extinguished the light of your eyes, and hidden the bloom upon your lip, and undone your composition and dispersed your compounding, or does your beauty still abide, watched over in the tomb? Surely the spirit that left your flesh has wholly turned to God, and there is for you no word at all nor any recollection of the things of this world, as you enjoy the contemplation and illumination there. I do not blame you for this incommunion.<sup>[136]</sup> I cast no reproach upon the secret, the communion beyond our nature. But if you have assented even briefly to this visible world,<sup>[137]</sup> do not deny me consubstantiality with you!<sup>[138]</sup> Hold onto me and share your destiny with me! And if I should prove inadequate in that place,<sup>[139]</sup> nevertheless the tomb will not separate me from you physically; rather, when our ashes have come to

dissolution, I will be rejoined with you in the sifting-together of our dust,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[140]<!--[endif]--></sup> if only in that lowly condition.”<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[141]<!--[endif]--></sup>

## 16.

I wailed these and other still more agitated things at my sister’s tomb, and my parents wailed aloud and all but wept tears of blood. And the gathering crowd lamented too, and so overwhelming was their sorrow that they virtually were compelled to sink down under the weight of their emotion, and to pass together from lamentation into speechlessness. And as they struggled to drag me from the tomb, my parents said, “Have pity on us, dearest child! Conserve what little breath remains to us, so that you not destroy us utterly, and no-one blame you for our ruin! Yes, for the sake of these gray heads who brought you up, for the sake of our souls, which still are bound to these bodies in order to live for your sake!” Thus they spoke; but for me the lament ended in further lamentation. For when I looked and saw my mother wrapped in a black, threadbare cloak and humbly dressed in ragged clothes, I could not control myself, and was little short of death.

This is what had happened to her. My sister was slipping away and breathing her last, with her head resting on my mother’s breast, neither yielding up her soul, nor being stirred to speech, nor ceasing her breath. And then, naturally and peacefully, she repaid the debt that mortals owe. My mother, having somehow held herself together up to that point, closed her daughter’s eyes and was flooded with abundant tears, or rather burned with a nameless fire, and she sighed her laments<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[142]<!--[endif]--></sup> and wept. When she saw that her husband also was shaken by the force of this misfortune — he was prone to such feelings (and I recognize the imprint of his character in my soul) — when she saw him in this state, she immediately commanded her soul not to be confounded with emotion — O noble and unsinkable mind, unvexed by storms in such a sea! — and she philosophized with an unusually lofty superiority to circumstance, and unfolded for her husband many reasons for changing to the better life.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[143]<!--[endif]--></sup> She spoke with passion and achieved persuasion beyond her hopes. And she did not put off the opportunity:<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[144]<!--[endif]--></sup> immediately she made thank-offerings to the Almighty<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[145]<!--[endif]--></sup> for her transformation, changed her clothing, cut her hair, and put on a threadbare robe, though she was still in the prime of life and not yet past her bloom, still adorned with

leaves<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[146]<!--[endif]--></sup> and not yet having a withered petal, still bringing forth tender shoots, still sprouting late-summer fruit. My father agreed to what she had said, and in that state they carried out to the sepulchre my sister's body, still radiant with beauty, still showing the splendid charm of her face.

They said that when they wearily combed out my sister's undulant hair, they let it fall from the edges of the bier as they arranged her corpse — her hair was golden and abundant — and then she was carried out raised high and visible even to those three stories up. Not a single person looked away, or did not dismount his horse, or did not descend from the third floor. So all the men and women followed along and sang the dirge together. This for my mother was the passage to the better life;<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[147]<!--[endif]--></sup> this for her was the prelude to monastic life. This passion for the life without passion changed her, and this death became for her a call to immortality.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[148]<!--[endif]--></sup>

And what happened after that? Once she had set foot on the path to the better life and entered the sacred racecourse and descended into the stadium of the spirit, she was not troubled in her soul when she saw the theater full of angels and men, which is the experience even of most men. Some turn back from the starting-post, and some wander from the track and go away uncrowned.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[149]<!--[endif]--></sup> But she, when she considered where my sister would be entombed, decided to stay there — it remains, and will remain, a place for philosophic souls to train themselves for virtue<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[150]<!--[endif]--></sup> — and there she cloistered herself, forthwith bidding farewell to both household and life, which is to say flesh and blood, except that she procured such additional necessities as was proper, and with them equipped herself for the life to which she was committed, like someone going off on a journey. Since she was not yet properly<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[151]<!--[endif]--></sup> consecrated to God, and the rites of her initiation had not yet been conducted by a spiritual guide,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[152]<!--[endif]--></sup> she once again made a very wise and intelligent decision: she would first offer my father to God, and once again give him the precedence, even in what concerns the other life. When she had beheld the consecration of his immortal part,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[153]<!--[endif]--></sup> they would render to the Almighty His share of the sacrifice from the funeral pyre,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[154]<!--[endif]--></sup> and the first rite in her return to God would be complete.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[155]<!--[endif]--></sup>

Concerning what happened thereafter, I lack the words with which to praise her.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>>[156]<!--[endif]--></sup> Just as some suitable material that is made into a wheel and then set in motion from a level place shows its capacity to roll well and easily in conformity with its shape, and then reaches sloping or downward ground and is immediately borne along with unchecked speed in a downward plunge, so too my mother, as her soul was well-disposed from the beginning to the better life and easily moved to the good by her natural inclination, was rapidly borne downward with unhindered speed to the goal of her inclination.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[157]<!--[endif]--></sup> She no longer was divided between soul and body, matter and immateriality, profane and holy ground, nor was she split between Caesar<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[158]<!--[endif]--></sup> and God; rather, she brought together and turned to God all her desires and all her appetites, and brought herself to Him with all the power of her soul. She immediately subdued her flesh, purged her pride, and humbled her body, the prison of her soul. She disregarded all the requirements<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[159]<!--[endif]--></sup> of nature, gathered her soul about herself, withdrew from the life of sensation, and brought every desire under her subjection. She enslaved all irrationality, and uprooted strange fantasy, unnatural reasoning, irrational belief, materialistic aestheticism, and loose thinking. She would live by the intellect alone, and with that instrument would embark on the ascent to God.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[160]<!--[endif]--></sup>

You should have been eyewitnesses of her virtues, rather than mere hearers: thus I would have been freed from suspicion, and you would have seen the truth. I cannot now tell the whole story of her virtues, and should I do so even in brief, many will doubt me. Since she felt shame at having descended into a body (which has commonly been said about one of the pagan Greek philosophers)<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[161]<!--[endif]--></sup> she showed only a small part of her face, and a small part of her hands, and no other part of her was exposed. But she made her skin an object of philosophic contemplation, as it was not only intimately related to the body, but also touched from without; and at night she slept upon that alone.<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup><sup>[162]<!--[endif]--></sup>

She wished not to nourish her body at all, but as it were to abrade and weaken the fetters of her soul. But since she was not entirely at war with nature, she made her resistance at suitable times, and in such measure as not to be immoderate in moderation. When she prayed, if she went immediately into rapture I cannot say, but so it seemed in every respect. She neither turned nor moved at all — not her head, not her hands, not her feet, nor any part of her clothing. She was like a shadow painted on a board,<sup><!--[if !supportFootnotes]--></sup>

[!supportFootnotes!->\[163\]<!--\[endif\]->](#) and the only noticeable change was when her expression seemed to show fatigue. One knew she was alive only by her breathing and her posture.

She often philosophized with me concerning the fact that prayer is a sort of encounter with the Almighty,[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]->\[164\]<!--\[endif\]->](#) and must not be a bartering of requests insofar as the one speaking stands aloof: she considered separation[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]->\[165\]<!--\[endif\]->](#) from the Deity[<!--\[if !supportFootnotes\]->\[166\]<!--\[endif\]->](#) unworthy of the soul. “There is no need,” she said, “to say that It is extended or compressed; rather, It is indivisible from Itself, and abides everywhere, as Light, as Air, as something other than what is common and public, as a Trumpet calling. All that have the spiritual eyesight adequate for vision see this, and hear the Call, and to hear it is pleasant for the listener. But, to all that see without seeing or hear without hearing, the spiritual dimension of sight and sound is denied. Amid materiality the mind perceives the immaterial, and when the material and immaterial are somehow kept apart, the mind beholds in a purified way the Vision and hearkens to the Sound; but when the mind is tainted by materiality, its fitness for such perception is destroyed. Thus certain people believe that they hear Voices and Sounds, and they receive inspiration in their soul and are chastely enraptured. In prayer, we must take care to keep the body immobile and unchanging. Since not all of the soul sinks with the bodily ship, and only a part of it is mixed with flesh and has its end in sensation, the other part goes sailing buoyantly above, like a buoy on a fishing-net, nimble as a cork, and is not pulled down by the nets; and from without another angelic mind brings this part to itself and leads it upward to God.” This was her truly spiritual and sacred wisdom, which she was taught from on high, and which she taught us here below.[\[167\]](#)

## 18.

I will say more about my mother later; for now, however, I turn to my father. He had always been handsome in body and soul, but after he was deemed worthy of initiation and of ascending to and glorifying the Almighty,[\[168\]](#) he became still more noble and splendid. He was like a man freed from bondage, indeed exactly like a man winged and free, as if he were a living votive offering set up to God.[\[169\]](#) He went about with his soul full of unmixed delight, and he often said, “If there is a second Kingdom of Heaven set aside for those joined closely to God,[\[170\]](#) God knows all and he who says so tells no lie. But even the life of those who devote themselves to Him seem to me to lack nothing of the first Kingdom. My

soul dances and rejoices, not as in its earlier ‘baptism’ in the flesh,[\[171\]](#) but as if within the boundaries of sacred precincts. Now, moreover, I no longer infer the soul’s immortality by means of reason; I directly behold it! The soul goes forth from the body and persists, and is separate from the physical nature it was born with, not only in its activity, but also in its essential being. But it has not been redeemed from bondage as much as it wishes; so for the time being it turns with pure motives back upon itself, and to the intellect, and through the intellect to God.” Philosophizing in this way, he solved for me many inconclusive syllogisms,[\[172\]](#) and immediately[\[173\]](#) offered his perception, bringing forth a proposition and conclusion simultaneously, without the need for an intermediate discursus.[\[174\]](#) I saw that he had become another person. He was exalted to the highest by his powers of ascent, and he sang the praises of climbing the stairway up from Babylon and returning[\[175\]](#) to Jerusalem.

A little while later I paid him a visit, as I had received a message from him asking me to call. As soon as I entered his cell, he said, “My son, that bright joy has left me; a sort of gathering gloom has crept upon my soul, and I know that it assails me from my lower, physical nature. For it” — and here he added many philosophical reflections, concerning what physicality may do and at what times, how it enters the soul, and other such considerations based on nature and careful observation of experience — “it besieges me and I cannot throw it off, and, just as if enclosed within walls, my soul lies hidden and sunken in the depths.”

That was what he said. And then I, in that moment of need, called upon the power of eloquence[\[176\]](#) and discussed the ways in which our spirits fall low, and how we prevail through conversion to the better life, and I dispelled his anxiety and steadied his soul. “O sweetest child,” he said, “how shall I entertain you in exchange for these marvelous words of yours? What a pleasant thing it is, when a father and son dwell together as philosophers, and share the salt!” And I replied, “Father, you are not hosting an unwilling guest, and there is no way that I would leave, even if you had not invited me to your hospitality.” My father smiled briefly at this speech, and said, “I have learned from those who have made inquiries whether there are some animals that also receive their already-scattered offspring into their natural bosom;[\[177\]](#) as for me, I would gladly tear open my breast and place you inside!”

So on that day, then, after I had dined together with my father, and long after the sun had gone down, I said farewell with many embraces and went out from his cell, and departed and left him beaming with joy. But I was not at ease. So I thought I would visit my mother, and consult with her as a cure for my troubled

soul. She received me with great gladness, just as if I had come from a journey abroad, and persuaded me to stay the night.

**19.**

But sometime before midnight someone made noise at the outer door. The doorkeeper recognized who it was, and went to my mother and me in a state of distress. For her it was, in fact, already time for the morning hymn. She came and beckoned to me and said, “Your father, my dearest boy,[\[178\]](#) suddenly took ill last evening, and is burning with a violent fever.” At that I went immediately to my father, and my mother followed on foot. When we entered his cell, we found him absolutely burnt up with fever, convulsed with rapid, short breaths, and clearly exhibiting an inflammation in his viscera. And once I had felt the pulse in his artery — I had earnestly been studying medicine for some time[\[179\]](#) — I immediately lost hope. His pulse died away at moments, so that it scarcely moved, or rather it stirred so faintly that it felt like the movement of ants. Drained and stricken dumb, I stood up, not knowing whether I should weep for him, or console my mother, or bitterly lament my own situation. He perceived my distress, clasped my right arm, and said, “I, O child, am going away on the appointed journey, which the Word has ordained; but as for you, control yourself, do not cry, and support and console your mother.” He lingered for a little while; then he opened his eyes suddenly and whispered something indistinct; and then he closed his eyes and exhaled his final breath, rendered his soul to God, and left me to my lamentations.

Since none of his fellow monks[\[180\]](#) had yet arrived, I fell upon his breast and tenderly kissed his heart. “O father,” I said, and many times, and then I paused, as I had not yet gathered my breath. And then, when I had pulled myself together, I sighed deeply and cried out again, “O father, where have you gone so suddenly? How could you fly away, leaving behind your son? O unexpected parting, O bitter separation! Still the echo of your words last evening rings in my ear, and still we seem to philosophize and converse about the soul. What was the dart that suddenly wounded your soul? What sent that lance against your bowels? What shot that deathbearing arrow into you? I thought I had removed it! Perhaps I somehow re-opened your wound and spread the infection, while removing the dart. But you are like a changed person,[\[181\]](#) and you render up your soul. O, those parting words to me, the farewell kisses! Indeed, father, you gave me your final, woven words,[\[182\]](#) when you were about to go and prepare for your long

journey.[\[183\]](#) I supposed it was an expression of your natural generosity and affection, such as you customarily made. I do not know where to turn, or how to calm the feeling that swells my soul. Shall I console my mother first, or receive her consolation? You, O father, have departed on the truly blessed journey, or, rather, you have prepared yourself for heaven, launched yourself on high, and ascended to God, toward Whom you have directed all your effort, while I have been left behind in this wandering life, and I do not know where I will end, or what harbor I will come to after crossing the wide sea. But, O father, name sweet to me and beloved![\[184\]](#) If some memory of us here below remains in holy souls, if some recollection has been granted by the Lord, remember your son! You will not disrupt your experience of the illumination, you will not diminish your contemplation of it, for thus we have heard about the angels — that they are furnished with wings for the heavenly life, and at the same time watch over life here below. And you have been raised to the dignity of the angelic state: show me your new dignity, show me your unalterable transformation!”

So I wailed these things aloud, as I closely embraced my father. But when I briefly raised my head, I first of all perceived that my mother was drawing me to her, and pulling me back with her hands. I turned about and looked at her. O, splendid soul! But how could I describe the blending of emotions in her, and how she rose superior to its power? It caused a terrible, sharp pain in her viscera, and her nature was sinking down. It was as if her superior mind had been deeply moved by the natural passions, and she was thrown into confusion. She checked her flowing tears, and stopped the sighs assailing her from below. Her pallid face blushed red with shame at being in such a state, and in her heart there was a mixture and struggle of contradictions. But her philosophical tendency prevailed. Then she looked at me intently, and said, “Has not, my child, your profane learning[\[185\]](#) helped you at all to holy piety, and has your education all been idle, and has your talent for study been spent on idle, common talk? Have you not yet learned the nourishing philosophy of the Gospel realm? We are to work zealously at self-mastery, to break the body’s dominion, free our soul from its mixture with physical nature, and be with God! This is the goal of our many struggles in this world, our calling, which your father has now met successfully. Now for the first time his soul is truly liberated! What you now see is matter given form by nature, composed from elements and decomposed back into them. Indeed this beautiful body once was inhabited by a soul, but the serpent’s poison filled it with gloom and mist. God wishes to make it pure again, and to remove the poison: for this

reason he divided the mixture, separated the component elements, and poured out his skillful drug, in order to reform and rebuild the house anew, and establish the soul in it once more. You will see your father again, if indeed you wish, with the body he was born with, when the trumpet shall sound mightily,[\[186\]](#) as our traditions say, and the Creator shall give form to matter and shape the dust, and remake humanity anew. Be instructed in this teaching, my child, and cleave to the better philosophy. And, if you wish to lament, weep bitterly for yourself, as you are still held fast in bondage, and set to wandering on the sea of life, and have not yet come to port!”

I felt ashamed — what would anyone say? — at these words of my mother’s. I broke off my lament, lay my father down, and turned to her and said, “May you teach me the higher doctrine,[\[187\]](#) and share your wisdom, which you yourself have drawn in abundance from the etherial springs above.”

## 20.

I will return to my mother presently, but another argument[\[188\]](#) pulls me another way, and compels me to fondly linger with my father. Or not an argument, rather, but a nocturnal vision — if such a thing is not in fact an argument, but something innate and sent forth from the soul and endowed with knowledge of reality, or something separate from the soul and more divine, which mystically reveals to the spirit the fundamental truth of things when it is separate from the body. I will permit myself a brief digression.

My reason was struggling impatiently to learn what sort of fate my father had met. One evening I offered many prayers to the Almighty[\[189\]](#) for a vision concerning this — and somewhere my father’s soul was drawn to this as well, as if he were compelled to reveal the place to which he had retired — and then I went to sleep. How long I was asleep that night, I do not know. Suddenly I thought I saw him, or perhaps did not think it, but truly saw. For a time, then, just as if my eyes were open, I saw my father in the clothing in which he had been buried, astonishingly more handsome than before.

He was in a state of artless, simple joy, and his soul was exalted with pure and bounding happiness, and from his eyes there emanated a sort of light, like beacon-fires, and the brightness of his glance was extraordinary. Each of his aspects, the noumenal and the visible, was beyond both my sense-perception and my thought. He approached me in a very human way and did not withdraw, but allowed himself to be embraced. And he embraced me in turn, and addressed me in his familiar voice and said, “Child, beloved

before and now still more beloved, be of good cheer about me. For at the same time that I died I saw God” — thus he described his fate — “and on your behalf I have prayed earnestly and persistently to that ineffable Nature.”[\[190\]](#)

Concerning the other things you told me, father, should I speak or keep silent? I would greatly prefer to speak — for what you said brings honor to me, especially since it was both divine and from God — and I would be ashamed were I to falsify His reply. For God has intended something finer for me, though constantly I act in a manner contrary to His decisions, not because of some misreckoning of the truth in the word of God, but because of my own wickedness. For we are not compelled to the better life, father, just as we are not compelled to the worse, and it is not from foreknowledge that we are driven to this or that life, and foreknowledge does not change one’s character, but preference and the inclination of the will makes the difference in the conduct of our lives.[\[191\]](#) God is in all ways good, or rather, is the fountainhead of goodness,[\[192\]](#) and wishes to make all things good; but my judgment is weak[\[193\]](#) and I voluntarily slip into wickedness.[\[194\]](#) But if you follow the divine voice in being disturbed at my inclination, persist often and anew with the Lord who is zealous on our behalf, and raise me from the world of the senses to that of the mind.

## 21.

Here let the story of my father be completed; the remainder of the debt that I owe to my mother must now be repaid. She always had been in love with the blessed lot of those who have devoted their lives to God, and after my father’s ascent her whole being took wing in that direction. It seemed wrong to her that two persons who had lived inseparably together in the flesh, and who were bound together in spirit in the afterlife, should now be in differing conditions while he lived joined to God and she lived in the world. So she sought anew the more holy union, and often she cursed her corporeal bond — that her soul could be held down by it, the divine affair by low concerns!

So she applied to the dissolution of that bond whatever was customary to accomplish the purpose, and her tears flowed down in floods — for much of her material substance already had been drained away — and she abstained not only from pleasures but also from necessities as well, reducing her flesh,[\[195\]](#) sleeping on the ground, and practicing every other kind of self-discipline.[\[196\]](#) Hence she cast aside all

earthliness, drained away all pliant moistness, dispersed all airiness, and gave dominion to the elemental fire that is within us. And this thing, which is neither to be opposed nor counterbalanced, is more caustic than fire itself. It diverts the power of nature into supernatural change, and then establishes what is left of the body in a new way of life.

Soon her body was parched and consumed, and little by little it wasted away and was no longer in opposition to her soul, but readily was mounted by it and took wing toward God.[\[197\]](#) I do not mean to say that the largeness or smallness of bodies weighs the soul down or makes it rise, with the soul being held down by them or lifting them up. Rather, wherever the project of asceticism[\[198\]](#) is undertaken, emptying the body and depleting its bulk, it lightens the body with the soul that is joined to it, not so that the body may be raised physically by the soul — for the raising is not accomplished by the physical attenuation of one's materiality — but, rather, so that it will not resist the soul's ascent to heaven, and, so to speak, will be transformed together with it. In this way her body became so light as truly to float above the ground.

She then, as if just making a start at temperance, as if for the first time taking up the practice of asceticism,[\[199\]](#) sought one honor after another,[\[200\]](#) and an account of these must be given, even if she kept most of them hidden even from me. In fact she did not want them to be known by anyone, except one handmaid. She shunned everything pertaining to ambition for public honor, although she zealously performed good works in secret; and if someone happened somehow to notice what she was doing, she stopped and concealed it and artfully pretended to be doing something else. But I would be unjust if I kept completely silent about her virtue's artfulness,[\[201\]](#) especially now that she has been transformed,[\[202\]](#) when I (as the speaker of this encomium) am freed from the suspicion of flattery and there is no need for my narrative to conceal in obscurity the departed one's zeal for virtue.

## 22.

Many people of different sorts criticized the inappropriateness[\[203\]](#) of her asceticism, both those who cared for the body and wished to rebuild her strength, and those who philosophized about the measures and definitions of the virtues, and especially when we may properly partake or abstain from food. But above all the father through whom she had been reborn,[\[204\]](#) who had a reputation for both his splendid life and his instructive speech, frequently censured her lack of moderation. He certainly felt respect for the dignity of

her virtue, but nevertheless he contrived by various stratagems to pull her back against her will and to modify her way of living. Once, when she had been shaken to her soul by his threats, she ordered her trusted handmaid to skillfully prepare and bring a large, delicious fish. It was indeed prepared and brought, and she received the fish on a table that for the first time had been set beside her. But when she saw that suddenly, at the end of her life, her philosophic life had been exiled and replaced by an unaccustomed lavishness — a breadbasket, a napkin, and whatever else pertains to the dining-table — streams of tears brimmed up in her eyes, and she heaved a deep sigh, beat her breast with her hands as forcefully as she could, and said, “O, I am to blame! All at once I have thrown away whatever I have laid up for my journey, since these things — table and winejars, fishes and cups — are incompatible with my philosophy, and are extravagant, superfluous intrusions! I do not know what is in front of me, and do not perceive the drama, and do not understand the stage! I have fallen from the life of temperance, thrown away my hopes, and wasted the wealth of virtue!” And she raised her hands to heaven, and said, “I have sinned before my Lord!”

When she had stopped her disconsolate weeping, she advised her handmaid to go outside the monastery and to bring in the first poor person she encountered. So she went out, and after a short time had passed she brought in a woman who had grown old prematurely. And as soon as she had come in my mother stood up and greeted her with strengthened hopes, led her by the hand, and seated her on the bed, calling her “mistress,” “benefactress,” “savior,” and all the most lovely names. And after the old woman had feasted on the fish, she wrapped her own penitent’s cloak around her shoulders and sent her on her way. Thus did she profit from the food that had been given, thus did she enjoy the dinner-table, thus did she forget the life of self-control!

But when her body had entirely collapsed and her hands could not move and her feet could not perform their natural function, did she not then give up singing hymns in a standing position?[\[205\]](#) Far from it! But someone may ask: “How indeed could she be capable of doing what she wished?” When it was time for hymnody, with two of her handmaids leaning against her, or rather each one getting under an elbow and twining her arm around it, then indeed they easily supported her weight and stood her up in the correct position. And in this way, until her final release, she rendered thanks to God.

She had been desiring the sacred habit for a long time, but she had feared the thing as if she were not prepared for it; moreover, she was no less afraid she would fall short of that great and splendid dignity. While she was in doubt about this and divided in her thought, a holy vision gave her good guidance on this matter.<sup>[206]</sup> A female elder who from childhood had grown old in the life of chastity was carried off in her soul while sleeping. She was not lifted up into the air, but transported into something like a theater; and she was not brought down into the stadium, but instead raised high above the place where the Emperor's seat should be. She looked about and saw a single golden throne, indescribably exquisite, for the brilliance of its material was neither possible to look at with the naked eye, nor could it be described in any way. On either side many thrones had been readied, some of them golden also, but most of them ivory; and in the midst of these, on the right, one was set apart from the rest. She could not tell what material it was made from, except that it was dyed with a dark color,<sup>[207]</sup> and yet the coloring gave off a certain brilliance, and was not deprived of any splendor. When the old woman asked about this, the one who had brought her said that the throne was Theodota's — for that was my mother's name — and also said the following, in these words, "The Emperor says this throne is to be prepared for her, as she is ready to come here before long."<sup>[208]</sup> At that, the dreamer<sup>[209]</sup> awoke, went running to my mother, and announced her vision. My mother understood, and — O what sublimity of soul, what transcendent knowledge, what virtue! — she explained the dream another way, and sent the old woman away unworried about her.

### 23.

When she had thus learned that her release was near, so that that she not cross over into the next life uninitiated, she appointed a specific day for the rite to be performed. And when everything was ready — the cross, the girdle, and above all, grace — the fatted calf was sacrificed, the table was set and the lamp was lit, and the daughters of Jerusalem stood ready in line to escort their queen. We supposed she would be carried out on a litter. What else were we to think? But she — how can I describe the wonder? How can I speak persuasively? For if I who saw these things myself can scarcely believe them, then how will others be persuaded by my speech? May God and the angels be my witnesses that I do not narrate falsely.

So then, while we were supposing in that way, she suddenly appeared, as if bringing herself from a royal bedchamber to her King and Bridegroom, blooming with beauty, her face beaming, at the peak of her

power, bringing to the Bridegroom wedding-gifts like no other: unwashed hair, callused knees, dried-up bones, and roughened skin. And still greater things He gave in return: a glittering golden ring upon the hand; sandals upon the feet, to tread on scorpions and snakes; the victory-trophy of the cross; the helmet of salvation; the sharp sword of the spirit. O, what gifts! Even as I speak, my soul is stung with remorse for failing to achieve what I have wished for. And in consummation the Bridegroom sacrificed Himself, and offered the bride the sacred meal of His flesh to eat. When she had partaken of all the wedding-gifts, only the sacrificial offering was left: then she was commanded to go forth with the cherubim, and she followed and flew along with them. And I indeed saw this indescribable spectacle, and immediately I threw myself down, prostrated myself on the pavement, took hold of her feet, and beseeched her then and there to touch me with her speech and prayers. She briefly nodded to me and said, in her gentle voice, “You may have, my child, these blessings,” and so saying she fluttered off on seraphic wing and joined the angelic powers. And when it was necessary that she both see and eat the sacrificial calf, whatever she saw or tasted her soul would know, and as she partook of it she was transformed and her countenance was filled with splendor. No-one who was there did not see, or, having seen, was not amazed. After that she never again went outside the church’s grounds.

I, then — but perhaps it was also the dispensation and decree of the Lord above that I should not see my mother’s passing, as I had not been purified in preparation for that mystery — I then saw that my mother was completely changed, and not at all suspecting that she was immediately going to die, I stayed there no longer.[\[210\]](#) But she, since the time of her death[\[211\]](#) had been ordained and she soon would lay her body to rest, as those who attended her have told me, she sat on a low bench, and then reclined on her left side and gave many thanks to the Word — and suddenly, just as if someone had appeared from the other side, she turned about in utter astonishment.

But how shall I make my laments again, and how, O mother, shall I display to others your disposition towards me? While she was gazing fixedly as if in ecstasy, she came back to herself and said, “Let my beloved son come forward!” O, how holy her voice! O, how unfortunate my life and soul! O, how shall I bear the misfortune, or even speak of it? And again: “But where is he?” At this, one person after another came forward; but my part in the tale can wait.[\[212\]](#) As she repeated her call for me, and no angel sent word winging to me and no spirit brought me thither as with Habbakuk, she saw the vision again, and such

a vision that she greatly wished to be joined with it. She raised herself up from the floor as far as she could go, then folded her hands upon her breast, and sweetly and serenely released her soul to those that were taking her — her measure of life complete, the fetters of nature loosened — and her soul gently departed, as if dispersed into the shining light, and she returned to her kind and removed herself to God.[\[213\]](#)

#### 24.

And so it went with her. When I had heard the message, I came running in frantic haste to see my mother while she was still alive, and to hear her words of farewell, and even to benefit in some way from her transformation. But it was not to happen for me wholly as I wished, as she was already dead when I saw her, and I immediately was filled with more tears than I can tell and was stricken in soul with a piercing grief, as if possessed with a Corybantic frenzy, so to speak, and Bacchic madness. I fell upon that sacred, divine, and truly living body — for he who says so tells no lie — and I lay there dead, knowing nothing of what I had done or suffered, until those who were there began to pity me and take hold of me, and then stood back and sprinkled me with cold water, and finally brushed my nostrils with perfumed fingers; and they restored my mind and recalled my faculties back from the dead.[\[214\]](#)

When I grasped once more the evil that had occurred, I lamented bitterly and wailed aloud, and said, “O mother, this is only natural, but by the dignity of your soul you are my master[\[215\]](#) and benefactor. But, O mother, sweet name — for I am constrained to say this, even if the name is beyond my worthiness — O nature alone among earthly things you are most holy, and especially to me, for you not only bodily bore me in your womb and suffered the pains of birth, but also spiritually brought me forth and arrayed me with learning and adorned me with the ways of piety,[\[216\]](#) and allowed me to be proud of you and to exalt you, and hence to put you on display and to call you greater than others. O living fountain, O light to the mind, gushing forth for me the rivers of your goodness, and dazzling me with the lightning-flashes of your excellence, but now blocking your stream and hiding your light, contrary to my hopes, how has death defeated even you? If this is the law of nature, why did you not command the angels taking you to pause a little while, until you could see your son and give him your last words? But as it is, all at once your eyes that were full of modesty were closed, your godly mouth was shut, and your divine tongue was silenced. But which part of you should I first embrace?[\[217\]](#) I do not even know whether this is your wish, but

yearning seeks desperately for the impossible. Shall I tenderly kiss your heart, the life-pouring fountain of the spirit's revelations? Shall I fold my arms around your breast that was fit to receive and contain the illumination sent down from on high? Shall I embrace your head, the sacred shrine of God? Shall I press my lips to your mouth, if somehow it is possible to draw from there the holy stream? Shall I take my fill of every part of you, if I may thus somehow satisfy my yearning? But where is the part that thought, that spoke to me? Where is your sacred mind, your lucid soul? Which angelic order has you, or what archangelic rank have you assumed? What ethereal portion is now yours, or is it something more sublime and heavenly? Or have you transcended the body entirely, and do you dance in a circle beyond the great circumference of the whole world, amid the incorruptible light and the blessed visions and all that is impalpable and invisible? While you are there with the Lord, will you still watch over me? Or does one yearning reduce the other, your love for God reducing your love for me? When my father departed, he went straightway to God and asked about me and received an answer.[\[218\]](#) Your disposition should be no worse! Ask the same questions, and propitiate God for me as well, and now more than ever care for your son! You have withdrawn from me, without delivering your final words: but now, from the other world, compensate my lack, permit me to see you in my dreams with the signs of your condition. O mother, be sweet to me once more, and often and forever!" And I broke off my utterance. These things and more than these I said in my laments, and afterward I joined the funeral procession, making my farewell speeches, as the occasion now required, and I myself took up that holy and sacred body, and lifted it with my hands and placed it in the chapel.[\[219\]](#)

After that, what happened? A wondrous event indeed. What sort? As the news about her issued, so to speak, from every part of the city, so people came from every part, one after another, and gathered near her; for they already had heard and been struck by her reputation for saintliness. There was no turning away the throng. Rather, they all came out together — men and women alike, elders and youths, differing by family and time of life — and with one desire they touched every part of her. Some placed their hands upon her, and some their face, and others some other part of their body. Finally, they pulled apart the very cloth with which they saw she had been covered, and distributed the shreds among themselves, but not on the basis of equality; rather, everyone sought to lord it over the crowd, and in that way tyranny[\[220\]](#) won distinction.

At this moment her spiritual father came forward and paid the appropriate respects. Then he looked round at everyone and, disregarding the rest, saw that the mother of the deceased was standing there by the bier — for she was still living at that time — and he frankly expressed himself, speaking to be heard: “Woman, know that you have been the mother of a martyr and a saint. I am certain of both, and I will testify for your daughter.” So he said these things, and his speech moved the gathering. Indeed if some people had not stopped the crowd from coming in and laid her body in the earth, the assembled throng would not have dispersed even on the third day.

## 25.

Thus she was incomparable, both in her saintly way of life when living, and in her holy funeral when she had died. Things that were dissimilar co-existed in her, and the contradiction between them was reconciled for her alone, or she saw the contradictories — how shall I put it? — as similar because they shared one nature. She covered the sin<sup>[221]</sup> of even our first mother, not only because she was an advocate for good to her spouse and drove away the serpent’s homilies, but also because she gave herself to immortality in yet another way, not burying the soul together with her body, and not becoming part of nature, but making nature part of herself, and devoting her body to the higher nature alone.

To the next generation of the family, moreover, she made herself an example and an ornament of virtue. She judged the female and the male, not giving one sex the greater and the other the lesser status — for that would suit an irrational judge, and an unexamined judgment — but assigning equality to both. Although the sexes differ in bodily strength, nevertheless their reasoning power is equal and indistinguishable,<sup>[222]</sup> and is not worn out by the inferior parts of the body, while they are nerved by the superior.

Should someone try to sum her up, he would count her among the saints and rank her with the martyrs. For she also struggled against a most frightful and arrogant tyrant, and she was no more frightened than she was frightening, persisting amid terrors and not cowering beneath reprisals.<sup>[223]</sup> And she sanctified the earth with her blood, not from those sources that are natural, but from those that usually produce a stream of tears. Her body was not sacrificed with a sword, but its continuance was undone with intense prostrations, genuflections, and kneelings on the floor. She also passed through fire, burning with the

desires of natural necessity, but not indulging them, and instead refraining even from permitted things. She passed through water likewise, refusing the use of wine and with the ancient draught[224] fulfilling her body's need. In these ways she refreshed her soul.

She carried off the prize for piety from each and every woman,[225] wasting her flesh away through ascetic self-discipline, emptying her body, subjecting the dust to the spirit, enslaving her physical nature, in her practical endeavors nobly cultivating practical virtue, in her contemplative life steadfastly advancing to visionary enlightenment, and in both parts of her life setting an example to each and all, wisely reconciling the material and immaterial, or rather mixing the immaterial with the material, most sublimely and beautifully demonstrating this wisdom in the communion of the Lord.[226]

## 26.

Yet, mother, while I can admire and be astonished at you, I cannot imitate you. Rather, on my own I have deviated from your prayer, and have not advanced according to your hopes. But perhaps your word[227] on this matter has not been in vain, for I have fulfilled some part of your wish as far as my habit is concerned, and have pursued philosophy to the point of wearing the threadbare cloak.[228] And this too was your work, even after your death! A certain dream-vision has encouraged me to say this.

For after you departed from this world, and I had buried the seed of your prayer in the furrows of my soul, one night as I slept I thought I saw some hierophants dressed in white, and they said they had come — as they had been commanded — to take me to the holy fathers.[229] And when they had spoken in such words, I rose up immediately and followed after them, as after superiors.[230] They went before me; and the path, which was wide, narrowed and its sides somehow converged, almost as if it were necessary for us to be crowded together as we departed. Then they said to me, “The narrowing, O child, is considerable, as you see, and for most it is impassable; and on that account we fear for you. But since you may not avoid it, follow bravely.”

As they said these things, both speech and the road came to an end for us. A barrier blocked our way, and it was made of hewn stone, neither exceedingly white nor the opposite color, but a sort of pale yellow,[231] and thin, but not entirely translucent. And at the midmost point, something like a navel had been cut into[232] it, and it was opened not into an exact circle, and not widely: as if sharp points were

suspended all around its circumference, the small orifice<sup>[233]</sup> of the stone contracted itself still further. My guides informed me that I would have to slip through this opening, there being no other way to pass beyond this point, and they suggested that I put my head in first, and then, in that position, slip the rest of my body through. I did as they said, and when I emerged the stone gave way and dissolved as if it were an extremely soft substance.<sup>[234]</sup> And when I was on the other side, I first of all encountered a staircase that descended to a profound depth. I went down boldly, and at the end a chapel<sup>[235]</sup> was open to me: the left-hand side was adorned with an icon of the Mother of God; the other side I could not yet entirely see.

Then I saw my mother standing near the icon, as if she were doing her devotions, and I rushed forward to embrace her. But you enjoined me with your hand to stand and wait a little, and I immediately quailed and stopped in my tracks. And without turning yourself about, as if concealing your conversation with me,<sup>[236]</sup> you said, “Turn your eyes to the right side of the chapel.” I did this, and a monk was visible, not standing, but on his knees, with a writing-tablet in his hands, on which he had fixed his gaze. He looked like someone surpassingly great, with an austere face and a melancholy brow, and consummately redolent of the ascetic life. I asked my mother, “And who is this?” And she, still without turning around, said, “Basil the Great, my child.<sup>[237]</sup> Go to him, and bow down before him.” But when I approached and looked at him, he raised his head,<sup>[238]</sup> suddenly folded shut the writing-tablet, and made a thunderous sound and vanished. I could no longer see my mother, but was somehow in another place, and those who had brought me mysteriously reappeared and seemed to be fitting a stole<sup>[239]</sup> to me and whispering certain words, which I could not recall when I awoke.

## 27.

So I am persuaded, O mother, that even in death you have taken careful thought for your son, and I have grasped this fact by many sure signs. But as for me, since I oppose your way of righteousness and resist its rule, I do not at all practice the philosophy dear to you. Rather, some destiny I do not know has seized me from the beginning and has fastened me to my books, and I will never be torn away from them.

For the art of discourse<sup>[240]</sup> holds me in its spell, and I have been exceedingly in love with its management of cases and its flowering beauty, and like the bees I fly to the meadows of reasoned eloquence: and some of the flowers I cut, and from others I drink the nectar of a phrase, and in my beehive

I make honey. The turning of the globe<sup>[241]</sup> does not permit me to be still, but compels me to inquire what is its motion, whence it originates, what is its nature, what are its cycles, how is it ordered, how is it divided, how large are the segments of its lines, what are their angles, their joint ascensions, equivalencies and obliquities, what are their magnitudes and of what nature, how are their movements produced and how many of them there are, and whether all things are made from fire or have some other nature. I am moved as well by the science of bodies at rest,<sup>[242]</sup> and I cannot fail to reflect upon the extension of magnitude, or to observe the exactness of the proof, how the starting axioms derive directly from the mind but the premises derive directly from the axioms without intermediate terms, how everything is established and how specified, what is the proportional, what is the incommensurate, what is the rational magnitude, what is the disproportional, what is the commensurate, what sorts of lengths and powers there are, and the rotation of the solid. Nor does the first and immaterial domain<sup>[243]</sup> permit me to be idle. I have marveled at its relation to all things, and of all things to it, its finiteness and infinitude, and how from these two all other things derive, and how the idea, the soul, and nature are reducible to numbers, one according to innate conception, one according to what coincides with reason, and one according to what corresponds to the natural order. And whence comes natural reason and what is perfect in it, and what is the symmetrical, the ordered, the beautiful, the self-sufficient, the equal, the identical, the pure, the simple, the paradigm, the origin? What is the generation of living beings, what is the spiritual, what are the natural properties of numbers up to ten, how is a triad produced, what is the procession, and how does it extend through all of the divine becoming?

Music too attracts me with its ineffable charms, and in a certain way I have grown up with it and made it my own. I have no superficial understanding of this art:<sup>[244]</sup> I have studied not only its types of diction, measures, and playing techniques, but I have inquired as well into its values,<sup>[245]</sup> its effects,<sup>[246]</sup> its occasions,<sup>[247]</sup> and the essence of its rhythms, and which of them are correct<sup>[248]</sup> and which are not, and what is the source of their beauty, and which is connate<sup>[249]</sup> with the life of the soul.

I do not only inquire into the various types of knowledge, but ask as well whether some rushing streams may flow from them. And the transcendent wisdom — which governs<sup>[250]</sup> the others, gives their basic principles,<sup>[251]</sup> interprets their axioms, is purely immaterial, and is placed after physics — I do not merely investigate, but also honor and worship with awe, whether one wishes to call this art that oversees

the logical process dialectic, or wisdom simply, since the more recent sages have reassigned the name of dialectic to a branch of logic.[\[252\]](#)

**28.**

I admire syllogistic demonstrations also, not only those that deduce a conclusion from what is inherent in the starting premises, but also those that produce inductive inferences. I study sophisms, just enough not to be taken in by them, and not to draw the conclusion that knowledge and wisdom are the same,[\[253\]](#) or that wise men are knowledgeable by virtue of their knowledge while knowledgeable men are wise by virtue of their wisdom, or that man alone is an animal if man alone laughs and all that laugh are animals.[\[254\]](#) These things attract me, and still more the comprehension of occult matters: what is providence and destiny and whether the hereafter already is extant,[\[255\]](#) what is unmoved, what moves itself, and whether the soul receives into itself anything from its birth,[\[256\]](#) or nothing at all.[\[257\]](#)

I wonder also about the common living being, whether it retains the knowledges of the soul forever, and whether immortality is an essential property of the soul, or comes over it in some other way. Mostly I have philosophized that it is indeed immortal, from its similarity to the Deity, from its non-admission of contraries, from its return, and from its movement and illumination in dreams. And I ask as well whether a bond exists between the soul and the body (which the first has entered as a secondary form of life), what is its mixture with the irrational, what is its ultimate end in the resurrection, what is its judgment, what is its fate, whence does it come to be, what is it, what can it do, how many functions does it perform, what is its mixture with the mind, what is its return, and in sum (lest I enumerate each point about it), I have been entirely preoccupied by these questions.[\[258\]](#)

But I do not limit my curiosity to that either. Rather, when I hear the astrologers speak as if doing violence to some of the stars and all but offering sacrifices to others, I wonder where this difference in treatment has arisen, or how one's birth is governed and determined according to the stars' configuration. I have rejected, then, these ideas as neither evident nor true, and I have profited enough from dabbling in this art to bring a case against it on the basis of my own knowledge. I have denied that anyone's life is molded and remolded by the stars, and I have discredited the character-types and the fixed signs, and the entrances and lodgings of the heavenly bodies.[\[259\]](#) I grant the power of truly predicting the future neither to

constellations nor conjunctions of the stars, nor to the voices of birds, nor to their flights, cries, or movements, nor to meaningless echoes, nor to alien doctrines,[\[260\]](#) nor to anything that Hellenic thought [\[261\]](#) was led astray by. But if I should study the precision of the canons of the astronomical sphere, this rather is the love of beauty and the love of wisdom combined; and if I should inquire about the origins and fountainheads of things, this too is desirable to contemplative souls.

I know the sacred art and what it is, and I have crowned it in wool and sent it away.[\[262\]](#) I have carefully studied the secret powers attributed to stones and herbs, and have utterly rejected their superstitious use. Amulets I detest, both diamond and coral, and I laugh at sacred stone objects dropped from heaven.[\[263\]](#) I consider it monstrous to proclaim an alteration in the order of the universe, of all that has been beautifully arranged by the providence of God. I vehemently denounce propitiations, purifications, mystic symbols, naming-formulas, movements said to be god-inspired, the ethereal maintainer,[\[264\]](#) the empyrean, the leonine fountain,[\[265\]](#) the first father,[\[266\]](#) the second, the iunxes,[\[267\]](#) the guides of the universe,[\[268\]](#) Hecate, the Hecatesians, the undergirding,[\[269\]](#) and things that are ridiculous even to name. But if I would inquire about eternity and time, nature, contemplation, and the One, and perception and memory and the mixing and blending of opposites, and whether the objects of thought[\[270\]](#) are established in the mind or are external to it, it seems to me that I am necessarily engaged in a philosophical activity.

## 29.

I should, then, devote myself to God alone, especially now that I have renounced the world,[\[271\]](#) but my vocation, the soul's uncontrollable love for all knowledge, and the constraint imposed upon me by my students have persuaded me to dwell upon these things as well. And you would know, O mother, just what I wish to say, as you are pure soul. But my speech is addressed to others: I speak not only to men, but also to God and the angels. I am acquainted with all Hellenic books,[\[272\]](#) and (I might add) the barbarian ones as well, all those that Orpheus, Zoroaster, or Ammon the Egyptian wrote, and all that the Parmenideses and Empedocleses composed in verse — for I pass by the Platos and the Aristotles and all their contemporaries and successors who labored at philosophical discourses — and they have written on subjects both effable and ineffable, and I have read all of their theology and their treatises on nature, and have admired the depth

of their thought, and wondered at the exceedingly careful development of their argumentation. But if I have observed anything contrary to our doctrine, even if explained with an exacting demonstration, and even if covered[273] with every wisdom and grace, I have rejected it as utter nonsense and absurdity. I pay no mind to their better doctrines, but my soul's ambition is moved at least to know what their doctrines were.

For there are indeed unfailing treasuries of wisdom with us, depths of doctrine and beauties of thought, should anyone want them, and a spontaneous blossoming of style without excessive artifice. And one might ask, what is divine revelation, and what is intelligible and what is conceivable?[274] What is the stream that flows from the wellspring of the universe, and what is the true substance drawn from the One? What is the name of God and what is signified by it, and what is the whole and what a part, and which should be attributed to God, or neither? What things are intelligible and which are conceivable, and which are theological symbols, and what is each one? What is the wheel, what is electrum, what is pure gold, the vapor, the mounting of the cloud, the throne, the river? What is the flying scythe,[275] the axe, the tree, the stump, the cedar, the oak? What are the angels' names? What are the rituals for us? What is communion, anointment, the lamp, the stairway, the pillars, the uplifting love and essence of the good and beautiful from which all things arise and toward which they ascend? What is the perfumed bride,[276] the door, the net, the heat, the sun, the vineyard, the vigil, and what is apostasy from these things?[277]

And if someone dismisses these things as overly lofty and celestial and goes to our shoemakers or tentmakers, or the weavers of nets, and wishes to take careful note of everything they say, then he will know that other things strike the many like what is projected on the senses by the sun — but with these things the light is dim and obscure, like faint starlight, which only the mind can see and sensation cannot bring near, for each of them brims with mystery and secret initiation.

For not one of them is inaccessible to contemplation, not even the humblest thing, not the upper room furnished for a supper,[278] not the jug of water, not the closing of doors and the apparition of the Word.[279] Even the disciple Didymus[280] is subject to contemplation, as he is doubtful,[281] and so too are the pair that run together, and those that run ahead.[282] Neither is the fish-hook without interpretation, nor the fish drawn up from the sea, nor the gold stater,[283] nor the number of the fish.[284] But neither are the names of the apostles without significance, nor the Forerunner's girdle and garment of camel-hair[285]

— but, to sum it all up in brief, I would say that the whole evangelical discourse has been endowed with esoteric meaning that the many can scarcely perceive. With these things, then, I shall anoint my head and wash my soul, and I shall have no need of Hellenic purifications.

### 30.

**But since** I have been allotted the sort of life that does not suffice for itself alone, but is placed at others' disposal and permits them to draw for themselves from something like a winebowl overflowing with many streams,[286] for that reason I have also taken up secular learning,[287] not only the parts that are theoretical,[288] but also those that descend to history and poetry.[289] And in fact I speak to some of my students about poems, and about Homer and Menander and Archilochus, and Orpheus and Musaeus, and as many female poets as there were, Sibyls and Sappho the songstress, Theano, and the wise Egyptian woman.[290]

Many also press me earnestly about the words in these poets, asking what is *akratisma*,[291] what is *ariston*,[292] what is *hesperisma*,[293] what is *dorpis*[294] and *hê en tois deipnois isaia*,[295] which ones composed in verse and which employed the style of prose, what is dancing according to Homer, and generally what is the heroic life according to that poet? And then again what is *opsophagia*,[296] what is *poluteleia*,[297] what is the use of fruit from the upper branches of fruit-trees, what is the earliest event of the Trojan War, what are nectar, ambrosia, and *propoma*,[298] what is the “underground geranium,”[299] and what is genesis that takes place in the earth? I won't mention how many topics they propose to me — who is Alexis, and Menander, and Krobylos the parasite,[300] and Klesaphos, and whether there is anyone else said to be good at poetry.

Many compel me also to discuss the care of bodies, and they demand that I supply them with a treatment and a diagnosis. On account of these concerns I have given the whole art a philosophical examination, so that I need not approach each case individually. And not only with words but with their hands they bring me back to the Italian wisdom[301] — I do not mean the Pythagorean philosophy, but simply that public-spirited and materialistic ~~one~~heart,[302] that has something to say about **private and public** lawsuits, laborious procedural demonstrations, slavery and freedom, legal and illegal marriages and the gifts and benefits involved, the gradations of family-relations and contracts both military and civil, what a

pledge is, what force a guarantee has in a legal proceeding, when a horse kicks or a cow butts or a dog bites what responsibility the master bears for the harm they have done, what the legally binding rule is, why an alias is invented, the distribution of an inheritance, the ancestor and the descendant, the legitimate child[303] and the illegitimate, what statute applies in each case, what an assault is and how many parts it has, and how much time is set aside for the trying of each action. Then having brought me up against these matters, just as in philosophy, they exact accounts of what has been legislated.[304]

Nor do they omit inquiring about the measurement of the world, how large the uninhabited parts are, and how large the inhabited fifth part is. So I must describe for them the geography of the whole earth, correct or fill in the deficiencies in their geographic table, and discuss whatever Apelles, Bion, and Eratosthenes accurately wrote about these matters in their treatises. I have not stopped interpreting the myths of the Hellenes allegorically for them, and in this way too they pull me about and tear me apart, being in love with my tongue and my soul, as if it possesses a knowledge more uncommonly rich than that of others.

### 31.

O mother, this life of mine has been purified, and the other life waits in store, that life toward which I have long been hastening. Although I am still caught[305] with many hooks, with the emperor holding me tight, contending with my superiors about me, and prevailing through his extraordinary dignity, his splendor, and his preeminence among and above all others,[306] how many both now and earlier have partaken of the same learning, or attained communion with it! For if both the monastic habit and cloak[307] seem incompatible in some way to both the emperor and those around him, this has not been only my innovation, and it seems most sweet somehow not only to those in public life,[308] but also to most of those who live apart from it.[309] And if my ethos has fitted itself to differing occasions,[310] others may philosophize about that; it was spontaneous with me. Be gracious from on high to these wanderings of mine,[311] and moreover divert and restore me to the ascent to God,[312] and grant me a pure delight in the evangelical life, the life concealed in God.[313] And then, when you have permitted me to drink from the stream of virtue as much of that river as is available to me and as much as I can hold, and after I have

been transformed, accept me and fill me,<sup>[314]</sup> with your freedom of speech before God and your prayers, from the first and divine fountain of thought.

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[\[1\]](#) E.R.A. Sewter, tr. *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellus* (New York: Penguin, 1966); see in particular 6.36-43. For a highly perceptive analysis of the whole text, see Anthony Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[\[2\]](#) N.G. Wilson, *Scholars of Byzantium* (London: Duckworth, 1983) 184-85, estimates Gregory's *floruit* at c. 1120-1150. The date of Psellos' death is not known, but he drops out of sight after 1078 (at the age of 60), the year in which the *Chronographia* breaks off.

[\[3\]](#) Only a part of this text has been published: see Anastasio Kominis, ed., *Gregorio Pardos, Metropolita di Corinto e la sua opera* (Rome: Istituto di Studi Bizantini e Neellenici, 1960), 128. Another piece of what appears to have been the same text or a variant of it is published in Chistian Walz, ed., *Rhetores Graeci* (Tübingen, 1832-36) vol. 3, 570-87, though Walz labels the author "Anonymous."

[\[4\]](#) See E.R.A. Sewter, tr., *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 5.8: "Psellus ... had the help of God ... for his mother with passionate supplication kept constant vigil in the sanctuary of the Lord before the sacred image of the Theometor, with hot tears interceding for her son. He attained the perfection of all knowledge." This image clearly derives from the dream-vision scene in section 26 of Psellos' encomium, as well as (secondarily) from other parts of the text.

[\[5\]](#) Roberto Romano, ed. and tr., *Timarione* (Naples: Cattedra de Filologia Byzantina, 1974). For an English translation, see Barry Baldwin, tr., *Timarion* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1984).

[\[6\]](#) Jeffrey Walker, "These Things I Have Not Betrayed: Michael Psellos' Encomium of His Mother as a Defense of Rhetoric," *Rhetorica* 22.1 (2004), 49-101.

[\[7\]](#) See Hugo Rabe, ed., *Hermogenis Opera* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913). There is no published English translation of the Hermogenic *On Invention*, but a French translation is available in Michel Patillon, ed., *Hermogène: L'Art rhétorique* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1997). For Psellos' synopsis of Hermogenean rhetoric, see L.G. Westerink, ed., *Michael Psellus: Poemata* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1992), poem 7.

[\[8\]](#) See Constatine Sathas, ed., *Mesaiônîkê Bibliothêkê V* (Paris, Maisonneuve, 1876), letter 207 (to the Patriarch Michael Keroularios), 510.

[\[9\]](#) I discuss this more fully in my article (see note 6), 81-83 ff.

[\[10\]](#) My argument rests, in essence, on a view that Psellos' descriptions of his activities in the final sections of the speech seem inconsistent with his probable activities at Bithynian Olympos, and may be more consistent with the activities of his later career, when, though still a monk, he lived in Constantinople and continued his secular roles as an educator and imperial advisor; likewise, his reference to "changing my *êthos*" to adapt to different circumstances (31) seems consistent with his many changes of political coloration over his career. All of this, however, is circumstantial and speculative.

[\[11\]](#) Ugo Criscuolo, *Michele Psello: Autobiografia: Encomio per la madre: Testo critico, introduzione, traduzione e commentario* (Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1989).

[\[12\]](#) *To eikos amphoin epimerizomenos*, literally "distributing probability to both."

[\[13\]](#) *Dia mias huptheseôs*, "through one hypothesis." As a rhetorical term, "hypothesis" signifies a particular "case" (involving specific persons, actions, and circumstances) to be argued and judged, as in classical declamation exercises.

[\[14\]](#) *Tous ek tôn logon epainous meta tou kreittonos suneisenenkein schêmatos*, literally "to pay the praises from the speech together with a better figure." *Kreittonos* might be read as "stronger"; *schêmatos* as "form, appearance, gesture," as well as "figure." See "Hermogenes" *On Invention*

(4.13 Rabe; see n. 7) on *eschêmatismena problêmata*, “figured problems,” in which the ostensible subject-matter is a cover for something else.

[\[15\]](#) *Tauta ekeinêi anatitheis*, literally “the things [I am] setting up to her,” i.e., as votive offerings.

[\[16\]](#) *Ex ekeinês men tous logous labôn*, literally “receiving the *logoi* (the learned disciplines, the liberal arts) from her.”

[\[17\]](#) Rhetorical terms here: *hupolêpsis*, “reply,” a topic of introductions (see “Hermogenes” *On Invention* 1.1 Rabe; see n. 7); and *boulesis kai dunamis*, “intention and ability” (or “motive and capacity”), a subtopic of the conjectural stasis (see Hermogenes *On Issues* 20-21 Rabe). Psellos’ overt point, of course, is that nothing he can say will be equal to his mother’s virtues; but the topic of “intention” raises an ambiguity that indicates a central subtext of this speech.

[\[18\]](#) *Prothumias*, “readiness, willingness, eagerness, desire” to act; or “zeal,” suggesting Psellos’ own ambitions and purposes in life, which will emerge as a central subject of the encomium’s final sections.

[\[19\]](#) *Pêgê*, “fountain” or “spring,” a term that Psellos later will apply repeatedly to his mother, and that also has resonance with religious ideas of God as the *pêgê zôês*, “fountain of life.”

[\[20\]](#) Constantinople.

[\[21\]](#) *Eidos (tôi edei)*.

[\[22\]](#) I.e., the monastic life into which Psellos has retreated.

[\[23\]](#) *Proverbs* 31.10-31.

[\[24\]](#) *Mêde exên tautêi deôs logois prosomilein*, literally “it was not possible (or allowed) for her to boldly engage in conversation with the learned.”

[\[25\]](#) *En deinôi epoieto*: “she did it cleverly”; or “it was done with skill.” Cf. also *deinos* as a rhetorical term signifying the supremely skillful style (especially in Hermogenes), and in Byzantine rhetoric often signifying stylistic indirection and subterfuge.

[\[26\]](#) Probably the monastery of Ta Narsou, in the neighborhood where Psellos grew up, and where he later would begin his education.

[\[27\]](#) *Eidos*.

[\[28\]](#) *Ho gar hoson epi tôi logôi kallos êtimaka*, literally “however much upon [=according to the terms of] my *logos* I have disesteemed beauty”; *logos* here may signify Psellos’ speech, argument, or reason, or “doctrine” in the sense either of a philosophical position or the Christian doctrine to which Psellos is now subject as a monk.

[\[29\]](#) *Enteuthen autêi to pros bion neusai prosgegone*, literally “in consequence [of her beauty] the nod of assent to life came to her as a reinforcement,” i.e., she consented to marriage. This “assent to life” contrasts with her later asceticism.

[\[30\]](#) *Parên*, from *para-eimi*, “be near/alongside, be present.”

[\[31\]](#) *Tina koinônias autêi probalomenos*, “he proposed a *koinônia* to her”; *koinônia* can mean either “communion” or “marriage.”

[\[32\]](#) *Logous kinêsas pollous*, literally “set many arguments in motion,” with the additional sense of “stirring up” or inciting trouble.

[\[33\]](#) *Phthanei têtî kataneusi tèn prospoiêsin*, literally “the nod of consent came before the pretense” (the punishment he was pretending to threaten her with).

[\[34\]](#) *En tautôi kairôi*, “in the same *kairos* (moment).”

[\[35\]](#) *Hupatous patrikiou*, literally “highest patrician”; cf. *hupatos*, “Consul.”

[\[36\]](#) *Proverbs* 31.10-29. Psellos does not seem to remember the passage accurately: “A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the

time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.’” (Revised Standard Version)

[\[37\]](#) *Prepousa*, literally “fitting, seemly, proper, appropriate.”

[\[38\]](#) See sections 14-16.

[\[39\]](#) *Ôdines*, literally “labor pains,” more generally “anguish.”

[\[40\]](#) *Ep’ amphoin toin genoïn*, literally “on both families”: Psellos here makes a *recherché* use of the ancient dual case.

[\[41\]](#) *Exerragê tês phuseôs*, literally “broken off from nature,” i.e. in the process or parturition.

[\[42\]](#) *Ei kai mê toioutos ho tokos hoia dê ta aitia tês gennêseôs*, literally “even if such a child was not like the causes of its engendering.”

[\[43\]](#) *Epêgeto pros logou paradoxên*, literally “was brought (or won over) to a reception of *logos*” (here indicating “learning,” i.e. in the liberal arts). The phrase is ambiguous, as it may refer to her own process of self-education or to young Psellos’ education at school.

[\[44\]](#) *Auto to peri tous logous eraston*, literally “the very loveliness pertaining to the *logoi*,” or “discourses,” meaning the learned disciplines of the liberal arts.

[\[45\]](#) *Paidika*, literally “childish things, childhood pursuits,” as well as “elementary education” and, metaphorically, the “favorite pastimes” of adults.

[\[46\]](#) *To trachu*, literally “ruggedness, roughness, harshness,” and also “savagery.” Psellos seems to suggest that he considers some of the usual pastimes of boys crude, brutal, and unpleasant, in comparison with the delights (*to hêdu*) of literary study. There may also be an implied contrast between those delights and what he considers (in his letters) the crude barbarism of monastic life.

[\[47\]](#) *Ta kreittô mathêmata*, “the greater (better, stronger, higher) learning.” Psellos has now attained elementary literacy, and is ready to progress to more advanced grammar (literary study), logic, and rhetoric.

[\[48\]](#) John Chrysostom (“Goldenmouth”), who was from Antioch.

[\[49\]](#) *Enthumêsesin*, “enthymemes,” the basic form of rhetorical argument; or “considerations,” argumentative points taken to heart (the *thumos*).

[\[50\]](#) The great church of the Holy Apostles, which contained the tombs of Constantine the Great and many other Byzantine emperors, was also the site of an important school where the full liberal-arts curriculum was taught. For a panegyric speech (circa 1200) describing the church and its school, see Nikolaos Mesarites, “Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles at Constantinople,” ed. and tr. Glanville Downey, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 47.6 (1957), 857-924.

[\[51\]](#) *Bêma*, the sanctuary of the church, containing the altar; or classically the speaker’s platform.

[\[52\]](#) *Grammatôn*, “letters” or “literature.”

[\[53\]](#) The apostles Peter and Paul, as represented in traditional iconography.

[\[54\]](#) *Hupothesis*, “case.”

[\[55\]](#) *Tên epi tois pepragmenois alêtheian*, more literally “the truth on the things that have been done.”

[\[56\]](#) *Tês emês en tois logois eudokimêseôs*, “of my being esteemed in the *logoi*” (the learned disciplines).

[\[57\]](#) *Tais archais ephieis*, reading *ephiêmi* as a legal term, “refer to, appeal to.”

[\[58\]](#) *Emoi de to mê epexienai toutois eis telos*, literally “and to me not going out against those things to the end” (or, perhaps, “in the end, at last”).

[\[59\]](#) *All’ anakteon authis ton logon epi tèn oikeian archên kai prosekteon têtî hupothesi ta ephexês*, literally “but the discourse must return again to the proper starting-point and must attach to the theme the things [following] in succession.” Psellos seems to be invoking the inventional topic of “from a beginning to its end” (*ap’ archês mechris autou tou telous*), discussed in the “Hermogenean” *On Invention* (3.10 Rabe; see n. 7) amid a discussion of epicheiremes and other forms of proof. The idea is to treat a sequence of events as an entelechial unfolding of causes and effects. In his verse synopsis of the Hermogenean corpus, Psellos says this topic is “more indispensable than the other topics of invention” (*Peri Rhêtorikês* 234, in Westerink, *Poêmata*; see n. 7).

[\[60\]](#) That is, in one year at the age of eight or nine, Psellos completed the traditional course in “grammar,” from basic literacy to the study of Homer and literary composition. This passage is often understood to mean that Psellos memorized and recited the entire *Iliad*; but it is more likely that he simply worked through it — perhaps memorizing/reciting a certain number of lines each day, or simply reading a certain number of lines aloud “with good expression” and explicating (grammatically parsing) them — in a year’s time. Perhaps the more impressive claim is that he learned to “write correctly,” meaning to write properly “Attic” Greek (the classical literary dialect), in just one year.

[\[61\]](#) Or: “but if you would not declare me wholly an expert in dream-interpretation” (*ên de me mê panu phaiête oneirophrona*).

[\[62\]](#) There are two readings in the Greek text here: *nuktos thêra tis*, “a nocturnal hunt,” or *nuktos thea tis*, “a nocturnal spectacle” (or thing seen; a vision). While *thêra* has some consistency with what follows (and is preferred in Criscuolo’s edition of the Greek text), I have chosen *thea* here, as more consistent with the idea that Psellos is relating a dream-vision. Note, however, Psellos’ employment of “hunting” metaphors, in section 10, to describe his efforts to understand difficult passages in the poetry he was studying.

[\[63\]](#) *Eis eleutheron aera*, literally “into the free air.”

[\[64\]](#) *Ornithê duo tôn mousikôn*, “two birds of the musical kind.” *Ornithê* is (another) *recherché* use of the ancient dual case, here glossed with a redundant *duo*, “two.” These two “musical” birds — birds of mimicry and imitation — seem to represent what Psellos has been doing in his grammatical (literary) studies.

[\[65\]](#) *Hupo ton kolpon amphô enededukei*, literally “both entered in beneath my breast.” *Kolpos* can signify “bosom,” or any “gulf” or gap, and the folds of a robe.

[\[66\]](#) *Pollakis tais chersi diômalizon kai prosêrmothton tois pterois*. *Diomalizô* signifies “be consistent”; *prosarmozô* “fit to, adapt to, agree with.” This less-than-clear line seems to mean either that the birds are pulling him through the air while he holds on (compare with images from classical mythology, such as Aphrodite’s chariot drawn by sparrows); or that he is flapping his arms in unison with them (or both?). Criscuolo renders this as “spesso usando le mie mani mi adoperavo a mantenermi al loro livello, ad adeguarmi alle loro ali,” “often using my hands I strove to keep myself at their level, to adapt myself to their wings.” The following paragraph suggests that he is simply holding onto them.

[\[67\]](#) *Ôsper tote prôtôs aphairetheisês moi tês achluos hên hê genesis epitithêtai têi psuchêi*, more literally “so that, at that point, for the first time was lifted from me the veil (or mist) that birth casts upon the soul.”

[\[68\]](#) “To the verbal arts” = *eis tous logous*, more literally “to the *logoi*,” the verbal arts, liberal arts, or learned disciplines, as opposed to the “more irrational” (*alogôteros*) aspect of the soul, which young Psellos had originally taken the birds to represent (in a simple allegory of reason bringing “animal” nature under its rule). Thus birds of mimicry, perhaps representing the attainments of grammatical (literary) study, have brought him in his dream to discovery of the higher arts of rhetoric and philosophy, as embodied in the dialectical exchange, which is set in opposition to tyrannical rulership enforced by violence. See also Nikolaos Mesarites’ description of the school at Holy Apostles (see n. 50), where the voices of children reciting their grammar lessons are compared to the sound of birds echoing through the church.

[\[69\]](#) *Graphai te kai hupographai*, “paintings/pencilings and also paintings beneath the eye” (i.e., mascara); but there is a pun here, as the phrase can also be translated as “writs [of indictment] and proceedings/decisions,” or “writings and admissions of guilt in writing”: the pun suggests that women “write” their self-indictments and confessions by applying makeup to their faces.

[\[70\]](#) *Arrenôtheisa*, literally “becoming manly, doing a man’s duties.”

[\[71\]](#) *Anabasin*, “ascent, going-up.” Cf. *anagôgê*, “ascent, uplift, return (to God),” a term from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s mystical Neoplatonic-Christian theology, which Psellos will later invoke when discussing his parents’ turn to monasticism. For an English translation of Ps.-Dionysius, see Colm Liubheid and Paul Rorem, tr., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987); for the Greek text, see Beate Suchla, Günter Heil and Adolf M. Ritter, ed., *Corpus Dionysiacum (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagitica)* (Berlin, DeGruyter, 1990-91).

[\[72\]](#) *Tôn sôn*, literally “of your things, of the matters pertaining to you.”

[\[73\]](#) *Eidenai ta sa*, “to know the matters pertaining to you.”

[\[74\]](#) *Hupo adekatois ... kritais kai anupoptois diaitêtais*, more literally “beneath [or in subjection to] impartial judges and unimpeachable [or unsuspected] arbitrators.”

[\[75\]](#) There is a double entendre here, as “better things” and “lesser things,” *ta kreittô* and *tôn elattonôn* can refer to sacred and secular matters, and also suggest the old sophistic opposition of *kreitton* and *hêtton*, the “stronger” and “weaker” arguments, and the antilogistic game of “making the weaker argument stronger.”

[\[76\]](#) *Anthelkei me hê pros to kreittô anagôge tês psuchês*, literally “it counter-pulls me, the ascent of your soul to the better things”; note *anagôge*, a term for the soul’s “ascent” drawn from Pseudo-Dionysius’ mystical theology (see n. 71), and *ta kreittô*, “the better (sacred) things,” a common term for “the better life” of monasticism — and the implicit claim that praising this draws Psellos away from praise of his mother’s moderation.

[\[77\]](#) *To bathos tês sês tapeinôseôs*, “the depth of your humility”; but note that *tapeinôsis* can also mean “humiliation, abasement, defeat.”

[\[78\]](#) *Mê kata tas hupothêkas politeusamenos*, “not having conducted [my] life as a citizen according to [your] injunctions.”

[\[79\]](#) *Maiai*, “good mothers, grandmothers,” a term of address often used with old women; later “foster-mother, midwife.” The sense here seems to be a person charged with the instruction of the child. There is a possible resonance here with Socrates’ “art of midwifery” (*maieutikê*) in Plato’s “maieutic” dialogues.

[\[80\]](#) *Genesis 22.*

[\[81\]](#) *Genesis 27.*

[\[82\]](#) Christ as a child; *1. Corinthians 15.45; Luke 2.40-51.*

[\[83\]](#) *Nomôi kreittoni*, i.e., “higher” spiritual law.

[\[84\]](#) *Eôikein*, “I seemed,” or perhaps “pretended.”

[\[85\]](#) *To meros emphutos*; reading *meros* as “the part one takes in something”; or one’s lot in life.

[\[86\]](#) *Prosekunoun*, “they played the dog (i.e., behaved like Cynic philosophers) to [her],” *ôesper tina kreittona phusin*, “as if [to] a superior nature.” The allusion to the Cynics seems to render this remark ambiguous.

[\[87\]](#) *Pros to kreitton.*

[\[88\]](#) *Plêmmelêsantes*, “played a false note [in music], erred, offended, sinned.”

[\[89\]](#) *Ôs ekeinês tês tôn tekontôn katepairomenês psuchês*, literally “that her soul was arrogant toward her parents.”

[\[90\]](#) *Ou pros tèn ekeinês peri ekeinous gnômên horôntes*, literally “not regarding (looking toward) her judgment concerning them.”

[\[91\]](#) *Diatupousa kata kairon*, “conceiving/disposing according to *kairos*.” This distinction between lecturing “like a sophist” and adapting to individual interlocutors (i.e., dialectically) is, of course, the distinction made by Socrates in such Platonic dialogues as *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedrus*.

[\[92\]](#) In other words: Psellos’ father was not a man of fluent speech, but could speak acceptably when the situation called for it; and he was not accustomed to writing and wrote slowly, but could write without help and without making mistakes, well enough for business purposes. The conventional “stream of oil” metaphor (see Plato, *Theaetetus* 144b) may refer either to the smoothness of the written words (the words “flow,” probably in the conventionalized phrases of business-documents), or to the handwriting itself (the script on the page “flows” evenly, without blots etc.).

[\[93\]](#) *Katêgoros tês oikeias psuchês*, “a revealer of his inward (or, possibly, friendly, familiar) soul.” Compare Isocrates, *Antidosis* 255: “To speak as one ought we rightly take as the chief sign of prudent thought, and speech that is true and lawful and just is the image of a soul that is good and worthy of trust.” Here, the “charm” in Psellos’ father’s straightforward glance takes the place of Isocrates’ true-lawful-just *logos*, while the preceding passage has already established that Psellos’ father was able to “speak as one ought” when “speech was called for.”

[\[94\]](#) This passage is more than a little murky, and probably by design. “Concerning the things that have long been hidden” translates *peri tôn teôs kruphiôn*, “concerning things long (or hitherto) occulted” (or concealed; cf. *kruptos*, “hidden, buried”); “glowed” here translates *zôpuron*, “fired into life; blazed with life”; “the frank simplicity of former times” translates *tês archaias haplotêtos*, suggesting the “ancient” simplicity/frankness represented in classical literature; “had been kept alive” translates *tôi biôi perieisin*, “they are retained [kept about] in life”; “tinged” translates *kechrôstai*, “has been painted, colored, tinged, browned” (as by fire or sunburn), or “infected”; and “transferred” translates

*metenênektai*, a perfective form of *metaphereô*, “transfer, carry over, alter, transform” (with further links to the notions of “metaphor” and rhetorical “colors,” etc.). Psellos’ point is that his father embodies an “example” (*paradeigma*) of old-time classical virtue, or “frank simplicity,” from which he has taken on a like coloring or complexion (as if by “sunburn” or “infection”), so that the old, simple, classical virtues seemingly long-buried or “hidden” in Byzantine life (and in Psellos’ adult life) have “somehow” been kept alive in him. At the same time, “before listening to chatterers” suggests that this first impression might be challenged by the stories that some others might tell about Psellos’ unsophisticated father. If this general analysis is correct, Psellos seems to be hinting at the “Hellenic” — or pagan — virtues of ancient times, which would be a dangerous thing to do. It is worth noting that the language of “hidden/buried” ancient virtues resonates with Psellos’ claim, in the *Chronographia*, to have revived the long-buried “streams” of thought issuing from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy (6.365-66 in Constantine Sathas, *Mesaiônikê Bibliothêkê* IV [Paris: Maisonneuve, 1874]; 6.42-43 in Sewter [see n. 1]) — a stance that earned him suspicions (and accusations) of heresy, and that led to the trial and conviction of his student and successor, John Italos, who seems to have been less circumspect than Psellos. On Psellos’ “wicked” if cryptic efforts to revive “Hellenic”/pagan thought, see Kaldellis (see n. 1).

[\[95\]](#) *Mê panta ekeinôi sunarmozomenos kai metastrephomenos*, “not wholly to him being joined in agreement (harmony) and changed.” The locution may suggest either that Psellos has not fully followed his father’s example, or that he has not yet been reunited with him in the next (“transformed”) life.

[\[96\]](#) *Monon entautha: entautha*, “here, in this,” can also mean “in this world” (in contrast to *ekei*, “there, the other world”) — in which case he is suggesting that his mother obeyed the traditional requirement to be deferential to her husband “only in this world.”

[\[97\]](#) *Kai mê katallêlôs sunomilousa*, literally “and not correspondingly did she converse,” i.e., not “talking back” to her husband in like manner.

[\[98\]](#) *Epaidotribeis*, “trained, exercised, educated,” like a *paidotribês*, a gymnastic trainer; note the wrestling metaphor above, and in the following paragraph.

[\[99\]](#) *Pothen hekaston parêktai*, literally “whence each was derived.” *Paragô*, in the passive, as a grammatical term, signifies “be derived”; what may be meant here by *hekaston* is “each word,” or “each poem,” or simply “each thing” (in a poem).

[\[100\]](#) *Iliad* 5.1-3: “And now to Tydeos’ son, Diomedes, Pallas Athena gave strength and courage, so that he would become pre-eminent among all Argives, and win glorious renown.”

[\[101\]](#) *Thêromenos ei ti toutou dusthêraton*, “hunting if something in it [was] hard to catch.” Compare with the “bird-hunt” scenario of Psellos’ dream in section 6.

[\[102\]](#) *Palaisma*, literally a “fall” in a wrestling-match.

[\[103\]](#) *Etekmaïrou têi anadiplosi tou epous: tekmaïromai* signifies to reason or conjecture from signs; *anadiplosis*, “reduplication” or “doubling-up,” is the figure of repeating words in successive phrases.

[\[104\]](#) Compare with Theodota’s later methods of prayer, and her ideas about it, in section 17.

[\[105\]](#) *Me kai ouisôse kai tôi tôn logôn kallei katêstrapsen*, literally “me [she] both invested with existence (*ousia*) and lightning-struck with the beauty of *logoi*”; *logoi* could here signify “words, discourses,” and/or “literature” in the learned disciplines (the liberal arts).

[\[106\]](#) *Tên mustikên kai aporrêton*, echoing Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, *Epistles* 9.1 (PG 3 1105d): *Allôs te kai touto ennoêsai chrê, to dittên einai tên tôn theologôn paradodin, tên men aporrêton kai mustikên, tên de emphanê kai gnôrimôteran*: “But one must understand this also: the theological tradition has a dual aspect, ineffable and mystical on one hand, manifest and intelligible on the other.” My translation here is indebted to Liubheid and Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius* (see n. 71).

[\[107\]](#) *Tôi nomôi*, “the law,” in the sense of communally agreed-upon conventions, or traditional rules of conduct.

[\[108\]](#) *Hôsper hai dipsêtikôtatai tôn elaphôn, akathektôs epi tas tôn toioutôn namatôn pêgas*, echoing, with some modification, Septuagint Psalm 41.2, *hon tropon epipothei hê elaphos epi tas pêgas tôn hudatôn, houtôs epipothei hê psuchê mou pros se, o theos*, “As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God” (Revised Standard version, Ps. 42.1).

[\[109\]](#) That is, she joined the nuns in sleeping on animal skins on a stone floor, as an act of penance.

















