

MEANINGS OF THE TERM *EROS* AT SAINT SIMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to highlight the meanings of the Greek term eros (“love passion”, in ancient Greek, usually opposite to agape, “Christian love”) in Saint Symeon the New Theologian’s main writing, Τῶν θεῶν ὕμνων οἱ ἔρωτες. It is well known that, in Antiquity, there was a very clear distinction between the terms that expressed love: eros, philia and agape and that, in Christianity, the term agape specializes, expressing Christian love, in opposition to eros, used for expressing sensual, bodily, inferior love. Nevertheless, in Saint Symeon the New Theologian’s writings, this stereotypic dissociation is not respected at all, both terms coexisting and referring to approximately the same realities.*

Keywords: *eros, Christianity, Neoplatonism, Song of Songs, monk, Byzantium.*

1. Introduction

Our study aims to achieve, based on a philological analysis of several fragments from the main work of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Byzantine mystic monk from 10th century (949-1022), Τῶν θεῶν ὕμνων οἱ ἔρωτες, the signification of the Greek term *eros*.

It is well known that, in Antiquity, there was a very clear distinction between the terms that expressed love: *eros*, *philia* and *agape* and that, in Christianity, the term *agape* specializes, expressing Christian love, in opposition to *eros*, used for expressing sensual, bodily, inferior love. Nevertheless, in Saint Symeon the New Theologian’s writings, this stereotypic dissociation is not respected at all, both terms coexisting and referring to approximately the same realities, situation which incited us to search the reservoir of ideas which stood at the basis of this almost aparent joining of terms and significations. Simultaneously, we start from the fundamental premise that he is, despite his originality, tributary to the past patristic tradition, seen as a synthesis of Ancient Greek philosophy, elements from Gospels and of Neoplatonician elements, which he had known very well, due

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¹ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Hymnes*, introduction, texte critique et notes par J. Koder et traduction par J. Paramelle et L. Neyrand, *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris, les Editions de Cerf, 1969-1973; Rom. trans. „Imnele iubirii dumnezeiești” (“Hymns of Divine Love”), trans. D. Stăniloae, in *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă (Studies of Dogmatic Orthodox Theology)*, Craiova, 1991; Simeon Noul Teolog (Simeon the New Theologian), *Imne, epistole și capitole. Scrieri III (Hymns, Epistles and Chapters. Writings III)*, trans. I. Ică jr., Sibiu, Deisis, 2001.

to the fact that he lived for a period at the Studion monastery, the largest cultural center of those times, but also at Saint Mamas Monastery, where he organized the library².

2. The primary meaning and ancient theorizations of Greek notions which designate love – *eros*, *philia*, *agape*

Although the etymology of the word *eros* is unknown³, its first sense, as it appears in Homeric epopees (*Od.* XXI, 289, XXIII, 214), is desire, relish, yet broadly (appetite, wish for battle), thus without implying the idea of love or sensuality, as well as *agape* is not exclusively a Christian creation, but it is found, indeed, extremely rare, also in Homeric epopees, as derived from the verb *agapein* – at the origin, to receive with affection, especially guests, close in meaning from *philein*, but more expressive⁴.

Thus, there can be distinguished three ancient different significations of *eros*:

a) *eros* designates a primary abstract universal force which explains the union of natural elements, for giving birth to other principles (the first philosophical cosmogonies and Hesiod's *Theogony*);

b) in platonician theory from *The Banquet*, the *eros*, in its four stages from Socrate's discourse – bodily *eros*, spiritual *eros*, *eros* preoccupied of beautiful things and divine *eros*, reaching to contemplate the essences⁵ – expresses the idea of an interior absence, leading, finally, to the communication with the world of Ideas, through which the man is permanently aspiring.

c) the prevailing idea of the *eros* denuded of philosophical meanings, expressing a harmful passion or even the simple carnal desire and increasingly personified, until it becomes a concrete deity, whose defining elements sinthetise the whole literary tradition of the 6th -3rd centuries a. Chr. (love poetry, represented by Alceu, Sappho, Anacreon and, two centuries after them, Apollonios of Rhodos).

The notion of *philia* does not present problems, because its meanings have remained, in time, relatively unchanged – the sentiment of affection in family (husband-wife, parents-children, relatives, friends), as they were theorized by Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*⁶.

² Nicéas Stéthatos, *Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949-1022)*, texte grec inédit publié avec introduction et notes critiques par Irénée Hausher et traduction française en collaboration avec Gabriel Horn, *OC* 45, vol. XII, Roma, 1928, chap. 19-20.

³ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris, Klincksieck, 1999, s. v. *Eros*. A popular etymology is offered by Platon, in *Cratylus*: "ἔρωσ" δέ, ὅτι <ἔσρεῖ ἐξῶθεν> καὶ οὐκ οἰκεία ἐστὶν ἡ ῥοὴ αὐτῆ τῶ ἔχοντι ἀλλ' ἐπίσακτος διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων, διὰ ταῦτα ἀπὸ τοῦ <ἔσρεῖν> "ἔσρος" τό γε παλαιὸν ἐκαλεῖτο. (Platon, *Cratylus*, 420 b). Trans. P. Creția: "Eros [is called in this way] because it flows from outside inside, and this current is not proper to the one who holds it, but it enters in him through eyes; for this cause, in ancient times, it was named *esros*, from the inside flowing (*esrein*)."

⁴ *Ibidem*, s. v. *Agapao*.

⁵ *Platonis Opera*, ed. J. Burnet, vol. 1-2, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.

⁶ Aristotelis *Ethica Nicomachea*, cap. VIII, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1894.

3. First Christian centuries theorizations of terms *agape* and *eros*

It is known that dogmatic theorizations from the first centuries set the Christianity as the religion of love and impose a specific terminology, mostly tributary to the Ancient one. The distinction is very clear only at first sight: the term *agape* is used almost 200 times in Gospels, in contexts which express the so-called “Christian love” – theorized by Saint Apostle Paul in *Corinthians*, thus, without any carnal implication – or God’s love for humans, human’s love for God and human’s love for his fellows, as they are theorized by Saint Apostle John “the commandments of the new law”⁷. The word *eros* is used in Scriptures extremely rare, with positive connotation (for example, in *Proverbs*, 4, 6-8, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 8, 2 – both of them referring to wisdom).and it has a clear pejorative meaning in the New Testament, of passionate, inferior love, which implies sin, while *philia* remains in the spectrum of family and friendship relationships.

However, the notions, at least as they appear expressed in the *Song of Songs*, suggests a complementarity, sometimes even until confusion – it is difficult to say where *eros* ends and where *agape* starts. Thus, in Lampe’s patristic dictionary, at *eros* voice⁸, we find that its first sense is synonym for *agape*, a passage from Origen’s commentary to the *Song of Songs*⁹ being offered as a prime example.

In his work we find a socio-cultural explanation for the predominance of the restricted use of the term *eros* (*amor*, *cupido*, with its Latin equivalents) in the favor of *agape* (*caritas*, *dilectio*): the tendency of common people to think in stereotypes, to associate to the first vocable a negative sense, because of its frequent uses in profane literature, and to replace it with a term denuded of other previous meanings¹⁰.

It is, after all, a linguistic problem: it also relies on the polysemy of the term *eros*, which may have both positive and negative connotations, depending on context, while *agape* is specialized in a single sense (love for God, seen as the supreme virtue, which extends to love for fellows).

Passing these cultural and linguistic obstacles, in the holy writings, it will achieve the perfect synonymy of meanings between the two terms:

*Nihil ergo interest in scripturis divinis utrum amor dicatur an caritas an dilectio*¹¹.

⁷ “God is love– *agape* – and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” – John, I, 4, 16; “Herein is love, [...] but that he loved us, and sent his Son [to be] the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved (*agapein*) us, we ought also to love one another.” – *John*, I, 4, 9-10. *King James Bible*, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>.

⁸ Lampe, G.W.H. (Ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2000, s. v. *Eros*, p. 550.

⁹ *Quaecumque de caritate scripta sunt, quasi de amore dicta suscipe, nihil de nominibus curans, eadem namque in utroque virtus ostenditur*. Origenès, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques, texte de la version latine de Rufin, introduction, traduction et notes par Luc Brésard et Henri Crouzel avec la collaboration de Marcel Borret*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991, *Proem.*, 2, 23. It has to be mentioned that in Latin also, there exists the same distinction between terms *caritas* (after *agape*) or *dilectio* and *amor* (equivalent of *eros*).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 2, 20.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 2,25.

Following him, in the comments to the same work, Gregory of Nyssa places the sign of equality between the two notions, even giving to *eros* a stronger nuance, through the strengthening of the term *agape* with a qualitative adjective: Γὰρ ἐπιτεταμένη ἀγάπη ἔρωσ λέγεται.¹²

However, at an electronic research, the term *eros* (with its derivatives) has only thirteen occurrences, while *agape* is mentioned one hundred thirty-three times, in the same homily. Most occurrences of the term *eros* refer to the love between the bride and the groom and only two of them to the so-called θεῖος ἔρωσ¹³. However, it should be noted that, in the logic of the text, the references in which the term seems to be perfectly justified, from the perspective of the profane literature, for the love between two characters, fold on the divine *eros*, through the process of allegory: thus, behind the two lovers, the groom Christ and the bride Church are hiding, and the relationship between them can only be described through words and symbols of profane erotic field, which acquires a much higher signification¹⁴.

In fact, Gregory of Nyssa problematize the theory of divine names – θεῖα ὀνόματα – referring to *agape* and *eros* long before Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. We believe that these ideas inspired our author – rather than those of Origen, who was forbidden in those times –, especially because both belong to the same area. In addition, researchers have identified some clear remnants of the cappadocians parents' theology, Saint Gregory of Nyssa being part of them, although their names are not clearly mentioned throughout his work.

4. Neoplatonician and mystic theorizations of terms *agape* and *eros* (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor)

Starting from Plotin, the founder of Neoplatonism, who suggests introspection as a method to achieve *eros*, with the aim of mystical union¹⁵, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite will affirm, like Origen, not only that the

¹² Our trans.: “Because *eros* means burning love (*agape*)”. Gregory of Nyssa, *Opera*, vol. VI, Leiden, Brill, 1960, *Homily 13*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 6, 191-193.

¹⁴ The problem of the erotic language's allegory is resolved in the same way by all commentators of *The Song of Songs*, starting with Origen, which realizes the movement of the plans interior – exterior, human – divine (*Secundum exteriorem hominem, iste agitur cupidine et amore terreno... secundum interiorem hominem, agitur cupidine et amore caelesti*. Our trans.: “Concerning the exterior man, he acts according to the earthly desire and love ... concerning the interior man, he acts according to the heavenly desire and love”. Origenès, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques, texte de la version latine de Rufin, introduction, traduction et notes par Luc Brésard et Henri Crouzel avec la collaboration de Marcel Borret*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991, chap. 11) and to Gregory the Great, who sees in the language of profane *eros* a didactic mean of transgression to the divine one and to *apatheia*: *Quia ex sermonibus huius amoris discimus qua virtute in divinitatis amore ferreamus... debemus per haec verba passionis transire ad virtutem impassibilitatis*. Our trans.: “Because from the words of this kind of love, we learn how to boil of love directed towards divinity ... we must pass, through these words of passion, to the virtue of unsuffering.” Grégoire le Grand, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, introd., notes et index par Rodrigue Bélanger, Paris, Cerf, 1984, III, 14-15.

¹⁵ Plotin, *Enneade*, I, 6, in Plotini *Opera*, Leiden, Brill, 1951-1973, from *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

semantic demarcation between *eros* and *agape* had to be used only for not confusing readers unable to notice nuances, but he will also give priority to the concept of *eros*, against to the so-used *agape*: Ἐδοξέ τισι τῶν καθ' ἡμας ἱερολόγων καὶ θειώτερον εἶναι τὸ τοῦ ἔρωτος ὄνομα τοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης... ἔμοι γὰρ δοκοῦσιν οἱ θεολόγοι κοινὸν μὲν ἠγείσθαι τὸ τῆς ἀγάπης, καὶ τὸ τοῦ ἔρωτος ὄνομα¹⁶.

He will also make the real transformation of the Greek notion *eros*, as it was understood by Plato - a desire that arises from a lack - into a “willing love, an outpouring of the divine goodness”¹⁷, having the property of explaining divine bliss, directed towards all creatures, all creatures needing it¹⁸. Overall, it also grants blissful nuances to the term *eros*, in addition to the Neoplatonic meanings (ἐκστατικὸς ὁ θεῖος ἔρωσις¹⁹), while *agape* is used for naming God’s person.

Maximus the Confessor, marked by the whole ancient and Neoplatonic tradition, shares with Saint Symeon both the quality of being Byzantine monk and mystic, and the main preoccupation for consecrating to the concept of love - sometimes called *agape*, as it appears in the title of his writing, sometimes *eros* - a whole work, Περὶ ἀγάπης. There have also remained from him some scholies to the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, in which he contradicts the superiority of term *eros*, next to the passage quoted above, claiming, twice in the same chapter, that *agape* is a nobler name, which contains the second one:

“But the love (*agape*) also indicates the *eros* and it is a more divine name than the *eros*”²⁰.

At least at a first reading, it could be claimed that *agape* is defined as a mood or as a virtue, which is, ultimately, reached through unsuffering – *apatheia*²¹ (chap. 1), being directed on God, but also on humans, while *eros*, less occurrent (at a research in *TLG*, 6 apparition, to 231 for *agape* and its derivatives) is used, in three fragments, with its pair of synonyms - just like Saint Symeon the New Theologian - in the context of blissful estate: Ὅταν τῷ ἔρωτι τῆς ἀγάπης πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν ὁ νοῦς ἐκδημῇ...²² or ... ἡ ἐπιθυμία εἰς τὸν θεῖον ὑπερηύξησεν ἔρωτα καὶ ὁ θυμὸς ὀλοστός εἰς τὴν θεῖαν μετετρέπη ἀγάπην... εἰς ἔρωτα θεῖον, ὡς εἴρηται, ἀκατάλεκτον καὶ ἀγάπην

¹⁶ *Ibidem*. Our trans.: “Some of us find that the name *eros* is a holy word, even more divine than *agape*. For it seems to me that theologians consider the names *eros* and *agape* to be the common”.

¹⁷ Andrew Louth, *Dionysie Areopagite – o introducecere (Dionysius the Areopagite – An Introduction)*, trans. Sebastian Moldovan, introd. Ioan I. Ică jr., Sibiu, Deisis, 1997, p. 136.

¹⁸ *Corpus Dionysiacum* I: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus*, IV, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *The Scholies* of Saint Maximus the Confessor at *Divine Names*, in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Opere complete (Complete Work)*, trans. D. Stăniloae. București, Paideia, 1996, p.194.

²¹ Ἀγάπην μὲν τίκτει ἀπάθεια. Our trans.: “Because unsuffering gives birth to love (*agape*)”. Massimo Confessore. *Capitoli sulla carita*, Roma, Editrice Studium, 1963, in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, chap. 1, 2.

²² Our trans.: “When the mind goes to God with the desire (*eros*) of love ...” *Ibidem*, 1, 19.

ἀκατάπαυστον ἔστρεψεν.²³

We observe that, if in the first fragment, there is a relation of determination *eros* – *agape* (the second term being attributed to the first one), in the following examples, between them it is established a coordination relation, and that in all three examples, *eros* is placed in initial position, and its presence can be understood on the (neo)Platonic path, through the ascension motive, of the aspiration to the heights, while *agape* seems to be an endpoint of this ascension inspired by *eros*.

5. Philological issue

It is known that the work of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, including *Hymns*, written in exile, have circulated in Constantinople since his lifetime, but his followers have taken, over years, the transcription and the publication of new improved editions. Nicetas Stethatos, the disciple who published the *Hymns*, relates, in Saint's biography, this operation of metagra/fein: he got all the manuscripts held by privates, he compared them with the remaining drafts from his master and he conscientiously copied their content, intervening only to correct the small ambiguities and to order the passages²⁴. However, manuscript tradition revealed that Nicetas's edition, from 1035, is different from the first editions, the modern editor of the *Hymns*, L. Neyrand, affirming that the disciple did not just give a title to the publication, order the passages, retouch metric imperfections, write a preface, an introduction to each hymn and scholy, but he also made some “minor changes” in the text, without distorting the general meaning²⁵. It is also noted that certain titles are not appropriate to the content²⁶.

These philological remarks are very important for our study because, concerning τῶν θεῶν ὕμνων οἱ ἔρωτες²⁷, from the twenty-five occurrences of the term *eros* counted, almost half of them, twelve, are found in the title, in the preface and in the introductions of several hymns, the so-called “table of contents” – πίνακας – so in elements that clearly belong to Nicetas Stethatos and that could not belong to the author. Practically, only thirteen occurrences belong to Symeon the New Theologian, and three of them are negatively connoted. The preface is full of Neoplatonic elements inserted in the Christian discourse, starting from soteriological values of philosophy and from metaphorical image of

²³ Our trans.: “The appetite for divine *eros* has increased and the whole desire has moved to the divine love ... as I said, to the divine *eros* and to the immeasurable and constant love”. *Ibidem*, 2, 48.

²⁴ Nicetas Stéthatos, *Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949-1022)*, chap. 140-150.

²⁵ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *Hymnes*, introduction, texte critique et notes par J. Koder et traduction par J. Paramelle et L. Neyrand, Sources Chrétiennes, les Editions de Cerf, 1969-1973, vol. II, p. 49.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁷ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *op. cit.*, Rom. trans. „Imnele iubirii dumnezeiești” (“The Hymns of Divine Love”), trans. by D. Stăniloae, in *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă (Studies of Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, Craiova, 1991; Simeon Noul Teolog (Symeon the New Theologian), *Imne, epistole și capitole. Scrieri III (Hymns, Epistles and Chapters. Writings III)*, trans. by I. Ică jr., Sibiu, Deisis, 2001.

intellect's winging, in order to accede the wisdom in heaven²⁸ until the idea that certain words, and, thus, the realities behind them are accessible only to the initiated²⁹. Even though the title given by the disciple, Τῶν θεῶν ὕμνων οἱ ἔρωτες, has its origin in *De divinis nominibus*, where there are made ample references, imbued with Neoplatonism, to a work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's master, Hierotheus, intitled Ἐρωτικοὶ ὕμνοι, considered a supreme authority³⁰. The modern editor of *Hymns* draws our attention that the syntagm θεῖος ἔρωτες, cited in this writing, is also found in the *Life of Timothy*, of Symeon the Metaphrast³¹, but we have already shown in the third chapter, that the origin should be sought at Origen and, most likely, at Saint Gregory of Nyssa, in his commentary at the *Song of Songs*.

This premise of the influence that the *Song of Songs* has, as a source, for the preface, has been reinforced for us by one of the few contexts from the insertions of Nicetas, in which, contrary to the habit, we have an occurrence of the term *agape*, situated in a comparison introduced by conjunction ὡς: | ἔρωτι κάτοχος ὢν τοῦ Θεοῦ ὡς τετρώμενος ὑπὸ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ...³²

The comparison may have its origin in a passage from the Saint's *Hymn 16*: Κατὰ τοῦτο τιτρώσκομαι τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἐκείνου...³³ or in the following one, from *Hymn 24*: τῇ ἀγάπῃ | ἔτρωσας...³⁴.

However, in fact, this verse represents a resumption of a passage from the *Song of Songs*, and Nicetas's assumption *tale quale* of the verbal mode and of the regime for the noun used (in genitive) entitles us to believe that this was the first source of inspiration, and not the actual text of the Saint, using each time a different grammatical form of the verb and being always accompanied by dative. Here is the biblical quotation from the *Song of Songs*, to which, certainly, both of them had access: ὅτι τετρωμένη ἀγάπης ἐγώ³⁵.

However, it should be noted that researchers have identified, in Saint's writings, similarities with the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, only certain formal similarities of words and stylistic constructions and they have even advanced the hypothesis that the author, most likely, had not had direct access to these writings, as his disciples³⁶.

However, we do not consider that the clumsy attempt of Nicetas was not totally unsubstantiated, because, undoubtedly there exists a problematization of divine names, a certain arrangement of the various terms that he also predicts, but we believe it should be searched further, in terms of symbolistic of terms and images from the *Sog of Songs*.

²⁸ Nicéas Stéthatos, *Préface à Hymnes*, *op. cit.*, 9-10.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 192-195.

³⁰ *Corpus Dionysiacum* I: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, IV, 14-15.

³¹ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 64.

³² Our trans.: "Contained by eros towards God, as he had been wounded by his love...". Nicéas Stéthatos, *Préface à Hymnes*, 65-66.

³³ Our trans.: "Therefore, I am wounded by his love". Simeon Noul Teolog, *Imnul 16*, v. 9.

³⁴ Idem, *Hymn 24*, l. 246-247.

³⁵ Our trans.: "For I am sick of love." *Song of Songs*, II, 5.

³⁶ Syméon le Nouveau Théologien, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 50-51.

6. Contextualizations and meanings of the term *eros*. *Eros* with negative sense vs. *eros* with positive sense

We have already noted that the term *eros* appears in the corpus of Symeon's *Hymns* thirteen times, three of which being used with negative stereotypical meaning, but without carnal connotation. In this chapter we intend to analyze the contextualizations and the significances of these occurrences.

Thus, in *Hymn* 39, we find, at an interval of only four lines, the same word *eros* connoted both with positive and with negative value, which proves that, for the author, the concept *per se* does not have a default nuance. Moreover, the remark is made, at philosophical level, by Plato in the *Symposium*, when he states that *eros* is not love in itself, but love for something³⁷.

Consequently, its meaning is defined within a context, given its determinative. Thus, “the lust for the bodily ones” (ἔρωτας τῶν σαρκικῶν³⁸) opposes to “the lust and the love for God” (ὁ ἔρωσ ὁ πρὸς σε καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη³⁹), phrase in which the term is highlighted both by the person over which it reflects its action, but especially by the coordination with its synonymical counterpart, more strongly marked.

Surprisingly, we found in the same hymn, a mirror example, of positive connotation opposed to a negative connotation, even for the couple *agape*: thus, φυσικὴ ἀγάπη, “natural love” (v. 98), love for humans (v. 108) oppose a construction with clearly pejorative sense, almost oxymoron through its structure: ἡγάπων γάρ... δόξαν καὶ πλοῦτον “for I loved ... glory and wealth” (v. 120). This lexical joining, in fact, unusual, does not address the changing of the proper meaning for the analyzed term, but it has effects in the stylistic plan, being a sign of irony to the reversal of the consecrated values: the love, the greatest Christian virtue, is associated with the material elements that cause the greatest vices.

Since the meaning of the term *agape* is very rooted, we cannot question an additional semantic mark attesting its positive value, and the attempt of deviating from it is used only in stylistic purposes. Not the same statement could be made about *eros* and about several words from its semantic field, as πόθος – “yearning”, ἐπιθυμία – “desire”, πάθος – “passion”, positively or negatively connoted, depending on the term near which it is found: φιλοδοξίας ἔρωσ | ἢ ἄλλη τις ἐπιθυμία⁴⁰ or ἔρωσ δόξης⁴¹.

We consider that, in these three contexts, the original meaning of the word, lust, desire, in general, as we translated it, reveals best, without reference to carnality; it does not constitute a vice in itself, as we will see in the following lines that there it cannot constitute a virtue, but it may involve one or another.

The spectrum of positively connoted occurrences is uniquely linked to the

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 201 c.

³⁸ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymn* 39, l. 10

³⁹ *Ibidem*, l. 14.

⁴⁰ Our trans: “the lust for glory / or for other passion”. *Idem*, *Hymn* 30, 90.

⁴¹ Our trans: “the lust for glory”.

erotic area, in its common meaning, and it makes clearer or more subtle allusions to the imagistic or even to lexical representation from the *Song of Songs*.

Thus, the lines Περιπατῶ καὶ καίομαι ζητῶν ὧδε κἀκεῖσε | καὶ οὐδαμοῦ τὸν ἔραστην εὐρίσκω τῆς ψυχῆς μου⁴² have a lear correspondent in ζήτησα ὃν ἠγάπησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἐζήτησα αὐτὸν καὶ οὐχ εὗρον αὐτόν⁴³, but the main difference between the passages is given by the different use of the loved one's name, in Symeon's text, with a derived noun from ἔρωσ, while in the *Song of Songs*, with the verb ἀγαπάω. Precisely the replacement of this word seems to be deliberate, especially because of its median placing, in the center of the verse, and we believe it cannot be explained only by prosody or by musicality (the alliteration given by the group of sounds e-r-s). On the other hand, it would be useless to seek in this epoch and in this environment profane lyrical reminiscences, only indirectly detectable, as they influenced the text of the *Song of Songs*⁴⁴, although, analyzing the situation in synchrony, they would have indicated the term as more accurate, in a scenario between two lovers, especially considering that all commentators of this biblical writing support the idea of the allegory of eros, designated as the strongest passion that moves the soul, and also as the most suitable for expressing spiritual realities.

We believe the explanation may be also stylistical: the desire for leaving the regular patterns, for enriching the meaning of the biblical quote, which might become a cliché, exactly through his authority, replacing a consecrate word with an unusual one, which draws attention, being more expressive exactly for the rarity of its use.

The terminology of construction from the *Hymn 20*, καὶ πόθου θείου ἔρωτα οἷα πῦρ μοι ἐμβάλλεις⁴⁵, seems tributary to the one in the commentary of Gregory of Nyssa, where the association θεῖος ἔρωσ - πόθος appears near the image of arrow that inspires love. Thus, the verb ἐμβάλλειν illustrates the idea of the insinuation of *eros* - through the prefix ἐμ-, suggesting intrusion, as it appears in *Iliad* and in *Homeric Hymns*⁴⁶. In accordance with *Ethymologicum Magnum*, the word arrow, βέλος, comes from the verb βάλλω: <Βέλος> Παρὰ τὸ βάλλω⁴⁷, so we can think at the arrows of Eros from Greek antiquity, representation which has a Christian correspondent in the commentary of Gregory of Nyssa, in the person of God - the Father, the archer who breathes divine love θεῖος ἔρωσ, using His Son as an arrow:

⁴² Trans. I. Ică jr.: “nowhere do I find the one that my soul loves.” Idem, *Hymn 16*, l. 12-13.

⁴³ Our trans.: “I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not”. *Song of Songs*, 3, 1.

⁴⁴ About the literary sources that influenced the *Song of Songs*, vide C. Bădiliță (coord.), *Septuaginta*, vol. IV /4, Iași, Polirom, 2006, pp. 579 sqq.

⁴⁵ Trans. I. Ică: “And you throw in me like a fire the love of divine longing”. *Hymn 20*, l. 239.

⁴⁶ Ὡς εἰποῦσα θεὰ γλυκὺν ἕμερον ἔμβαλε θυμῷ. (II, III, 139). Trans. G. Murnu: “With the word has the goddess planted the sweet desire in chest.” or Τῇ δὲ καὶ αὐτῇ Ζεὺς γλυκὺν ἕμερον ἔμβαλε θυμῷ. (*Ad Venerem*, 45). Trans. G. Acsan: “And in her chest has Zeus planted the sweet desire...”.

⁴⁷ *Ethymologicum Magnum*, s. v. βέλος.

“With the arrow, show the word that planted in my heart. And the archer that sent the arrow is love, and we have learned from Scripture that love is God, Who sends His chosen arrow, His only-begotten Son, to those who redeem”⁴⁸.

The very musical and almost ludic repetitions of the word *eros*, from *Hymn 29*, placed in different positions of the line and at different cases and verbal tenses, in *polyptoton* and in *figura etymologica*, are also part of the same category:

ἔρωτος τὸ ὑπερβάλλον | σβέννυσι τὸν ἔρωτα μου. | οὐκ ἔρῳ γὰρ,
ὅσον θέλω, | καὶ λογίζομαι μηδ’ ὄλως | ἔρωτα Θεοῦ κεκτήσθαι. |
Ἐκζητῶν δὲ ἀκορέστως | τοῦ ἐρᾶν με, ὅσον θέλω, | προσαπόλλω καὶ
ὄν εἶχον | ἔρωτα Θεοῦ, ᾧ θαῦμα;⁴⁹

The fragment refers to a specific Platonic paradox, as it is understood in the story of Poros (Resource) and Penia (Poverty): the eros translates an inner lack, which becomes a continual aspiration to beauty and heavenly⁵⁰. It is not desired *per se*, but it is a way of rising to an endpoint, a perpetual search (ἐκζητεῖν) which offers oscillating and contradictory moods – emphasized here by the symmetry of the almost antinomian pair ὑπερβάλλον | σβέννυσι, blooming, dying and rising on the same day (*Hymn 29*, 340⁵¹). We note that the eros appears to be kept far from the organs of the intellect, from knowledge and from will, without attacking the νοῦς or βουλή, but suppressing any faculty of understanding and decision⁵². The conclusion of the ineffable blissful state, which actually the whole hymn takes into account, could lead us again to the allegory of ardent eros from the profane Greek poetry, which the quote strikingly resembles, for the expression of several spiritual and mystical realities, with terms consecrated to erotic passion, from the semantic field of fire (φλέγω, καίομαι), of seeing (ὁράω, βλέπω), of searching (ζητέω, οὐχ εὕρισκω), which could have been inspired to the Saint, especially in the *Song of Songs*, but also by the works of Gregory of Nyssa, who valorise the whole ancient tradition.

⁴⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Tâlcuire amănunțită la Cântarea Cântărilor (Detailed Interpretation to the Song of Songs)*, in *Scrieri I (Writings I)*, PSB 29, trans. D. Stăniloae et alii, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1982, p. 169.

⁴⁹ Trans. I. Ică: “The overwhelming of love extinguishes my love. For I do not love as I want and I think I have not gotten the love of God, but as I was looking unsaturated to love as I want, I make to perish even the love of God that I had, oh, miracle!” *Hymn 29*, l. 320-328.

⁵⁰ Τὴν τῆς μητρὸς φύσιν ἔχων, αἰεὶ ἐνδεία σύννοικος. κατὰ δὲ αὐτὸν τὸν πατέρα ἐπίβουλος ἐστὶ τοῖς καλοῖς καὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, ἀνδρείος ὢν καὶ ἴτης καὶ σύντονος, θηρευτὴς δεινός, αἰεὶ τινας πλέκων μηχανάς, καὶ φρονήσεως ἐπιθυμητῆς καὶ πόριμος, φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου, δεινός γόης καὶ φαρμακεὺς καὶ σοφιστὴς... (Plato, *Symposium*, 203 d). Trans. P. Cretia: “Inheriting her mother, he is always missing something. Instead, from his father it comes that he strives in every way to acquire beautiful and prizing things, that is fierce, reach, full of enthusiasm, a very skilled hunter, always inventing something to achieve his goal, thirsty of knowledge and knowing how to acquire it, always philosophizing...”.

⁵¹ Trans. I. Ică: “Avidly seeking to love (*eran*), [...] wishing how I want is a desire that exceeds the desire and I violence my nature to love beyond its nature [...] and, incomprehensibly, this love dies when it lives more, although it lives and blooms in me.”

⁵² Claude Calame, *Eros în Grecia antică (Eros in Ancient Greece)*, trans. by Margareta Sfirsi-Lăudat. București, Editura Symposium, 2004, p. 28.

It is also visible the involvement of physiological symptoms, prior to the process of falling in love, affecting organs which, for the ancient, were seats of feelings – the heart (καρδία), the diaphragm (φρένες) – or even to the intellect (νοῦς), as they appear, for example, in the following fragment: Καθ' ὅσον δ' οὐχ ὀράται μοι, ἐκτηκομαι τὰς φρένας, | τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὴν καρδίαν μου φλεγόμενος καὶ στένων⁵³.

These nuances, in fact perfectly painted in the lyrical love of 7th – 6th centuries a. Chr. and then repeated in the Alexandrian age, get a strong echo in the work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, from which we provide a representative example, in which the same two elements from the semantic field of fire, related to physiology, also occurring at Saint Symeon the New Theologian, φλέγω and ἐκκαίομαι:

Φλέγεται πρὸς τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἀγάπην καὶ ζέει τῷ πόθῳ κόρον τῆς εὐχῆς οὐχ εὐρίσκων, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ πρὸς τὸν ἔρωτα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἐκκαίόμενος...⁵⁴

These two terms symmetrically fit three pairs of binoms consisting of fundamental concepts of antiquity, valued in Christian note, and others typical to Christianity itself: from the first category, the notion that designates the love towards God, understood as the highest virtue, and the divinity itself: πρὸς τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἀγάπην, then a second one, consisting of a profane element, valued in Christian note through the presence of prayer as a defining activity of contemplation and as a condition of communion with God – τῷ πόθῳ τῆς εὐχῆς and a third one, specific Platonician: τὸν ἔρωτα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.

It should be noted that in all instances with positive value, the eros is directed only to God, as the object of contemplation, never to people⁵⁵, as it happens with the concept *agape*. Here the following statement is necessary: both the Platonician eros and the one analyzed, θειὸς ἔρωτος, aim high, in a perpetual searching, which involves several steps: for Plato, as we mentioned in a previous chapter, the transition from the carnal to the spiritual eros, then, through the eros concerned with beautiful things, to the divine eros, while for Saint Symeon, for achieving to see God, in fact achieving to the mystical experience in which eros is a *sine qua non* element, there is a scale, based on the virtues that appear in the *Beatitudes*, from humility to *apatheia* (especially, *Hymns* 4, 33, *Et.* 11, *Cat.* 1). However, for the mystical eros, the ultimate goal is not the abstract contemplation, but merging with God, as a mystical union, after an interior consumption of all resources. The mystic is the one in love (ἐράστης)

⁵³ Trans. I. Ică: “And since it is not shown to me, my mind is melting, my mind and my heart burn in flames and I sigh.” *Hymn* 16, 9-11.

⁵⁴ Our translation: “He burns after God's love and he scratches him with long, not finding the saturation of prayer, but he is always consumed by love for beauty.” Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *De instituto Christiano*, VIII, 1, 78.

⁵⁵ V. Krivošein, *În lumina lui Hristos, Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog, viața, spiritualitatea, învățătura (In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Life, Spirituality and Teaching)* trad. Vasile Leb și Gheorghe Iordan, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al BOR, 1997, p. 406.

with God, Who is not only ἐρόμενος (the person loved, the object of love), according to Plato's scheme, but Agape (the love itself). Therefore there is a reciprocity of love between the lover and the beloved, reciprocity which is not discussed at Plato and which does not condition, in any case, the eros.

7. Conclusion

The whole theorization of the concepts *eros* and *agape* at Saint Symeon the New Theologian can be analyzed only by taking into account the role of these terms in the previous tradition, itself a synthesis of ancient Greek philosophy, of elements from Gospels and of Neoplatonic elements. Thus, it could be stated that it remains faithful to this line, bringing as innovative elements a very fine and daring expression of love for God in terms of physical love and a certain vision that emphasizes the importance of the body in the mystical union, which proves that his work does not only transmit the idea of a cold contemplation, but the one of a lived experience.

The meaning of the term *eros* is defined within a context, given by its determinative, as opposed to *agape*, which is always positive and which has always an absolute value, no needing to report to something. Thus, “the lust for the bodily ones” (ἐρώτας τῶν σαρκικῶν⁵⁶) opposes to “the lust and love for God” – without determinat (ὁ ἔρωσ ὁ πρὸς σε καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη⁵⁷). The spectrum of positively connoted occurrences of *eros* – straighten only to God, as a unique object of contemplation, never to people⁵⁸, as it happens with the concept *agape* – links exclusively to the erotic area, in its common meaning, and it makes clearer or more subtle allusions to the imagistic or even to lexical representation from the *Song of Songs*.

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⁵⁶ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymn* 39, l. 10

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, v. 14.

⁵⁸ V. Krivošein, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

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