THE ART OF PERSUASION IN 17th AND 18th CENTURY ROMANIAN ORATORICAL TEXTS

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Abstract: *Relying on the accomplishments of classical ancient oratory, ars praedicandi treatises captured more and more of the attention of medieval rhetoricians, yet this type of rhetoric (unexpectedly) became obsolete during the Renaissance, only to be rediscovered and revived by the baroque rhetoricians, obviously under the influence of the Counter-Reformation. A man of his time, Anthim the Iberian will correlate theological and scientific knowledge (an enterprise characteristic of the Renaissance), as well as make use of stylistic abundance (metaphors, antitheses, interrogations, repetitions) and of the power of spectacular imagery when writing his speeches (a technique which belongs to the baroque style).*

Keywords*: rhetorical topos, ars praedicandi, sensitivity*

If Romanian literature was off to a slow start when it comes to the lyric genre or the novel (nevertheless, with exceptional results), the oratorical genre appears to have been more within the reach of Romanian scholars. With its long-standing, glorious tradition, the art of oratory is considered by Dan Horia Mazilu to be one of the most productive and substantial arts in our medieval literature. Romanian oratory followed two directions, one in accordance with Christian eloquence – of Byzantine constitution, naturally – and the other with lay eloquence, pertaining to an increasingly diverse set of ceremonials.

Relying on the accomplishments of classical ancient oratory, *ars praedicandi* treatises captured more and more of the attention of medieval rhetoricians, yet this type of rhetoric (unexpectedly) became obsolete during the Renaissance, only to be rediscovered and revived by the baroque rhetoricians, obviously under the influence of the Counter-Reformation. In the vein of this style so fond of sumptuous settings, baroque preachers will be particularly concerned with the form and expressive performance of a speech. Their texts are fraught with metaphors, antitheses, interrogative series, surprising similes, all used to outline the narrative episodes with great impact on the audience, 'guided by other options and literary *tastes* and wielding *grids* visibly modified with respect to the components of *sensitivity* (Mazilu,1987:148). The religious side of speeches had become unsatisfactory and audiences preferred to have them laicized.

This tendency is underscored in Eastern Europe by Haleatovskyj's treatise, the title whereof translates as "Cheia înțelesului"("The Key of Meaning") which enumerates the areas that preachers may look to in order to revive the themes of their speeches: "One must read the Bible, the lives of saints, one must also go through the writings of the mentors of the Church, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Athanasius, Theodorit, John of Damascus, Ephrem the Syrian and other teachers of the Church who unravel the sacred texts of the Bible; read the histories and chronicles of different kingdoms

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and countries, what occurred and is occurring in those places; one must go through the books about animals, birds, reptiles, trees, plants, rocks and the manifold waters to be found in rivers, wells and other places; one must observe their nature, their properties... Moreover, read the various homilies of the preachers of our time and follow their example..." (Mazilu, 1987:150)

Thus, the authority continues to lie with canonical sources, but the stress is now placed on educating the listeners and cultivating virtues (be they Christian, generically human or patriotic). Sermons are turned into instruments of moral redress and culturalization.

The new status acquired by the sermon (on Romanian soil) is mostly due to the oratorical talents of Anthim the Iberian and to the assimilation of the theories and works of European baroque preachers. Undoubtedly honed in the Byzantine school (John Chrysostom is the master of Eastern-European orators), Anthim's rhetoric must also be regarded from the cultural, social and political perspective of his time. Anthim succeeds in "nationalizing" sermons (the remark belongs to Dan Horia Mazilu), in other words, lending them a characteristically Romanian identity, liberated from the constraints of canons. While the writings of Coresi and Varlaam are aimed at all ages and societies, Anthim's sermons (*didahii* in Romanian) are addressed to 18th century Romanians, with the purpose of correcting the "crooked" ways. The metropolitan scrutinizes the realities of the time and the behaviour of his faithful with a careful eye and establishes social and moral diagnoses. Like a veritable censor of his era, he condemns loose language (which had become the mark of his flock) and uses his words as a lash against those who robbed the country from the outside (Turks) and from the inside (boyars). By means of shocking images grouped according to the accumulation technique, in his homily on the *Sunday of the Publican***,** Anthim thunders against cursing: " [....] for what other people is there that curses as we do, profaning the faith, the cross, Communion, the dead, alms, candles, the soul, graves, koliva, prosphora, confession, baptism, matrimony and all the sacraments of the Holy Church, scorning and mocking our own faith.[..] we dishonour our elders[...,] besmirch our priests[...] disregard feast days and holy days as if they were nothing, but even do our worst on such days, rejoicing the devil with our buying and selling." (Ivireanul,1972:96)

It is the boyars that made the object of most of the metropolitan's verbal "fusillades": "We fail to say that him whom we see rob and pilfer and afflict the poor we praise and call wise, as one with an understanding mind, worthy and just in his deeds…" or "I am ashamed to speak of the gloom of the gluttonous, how they wail on fast days: they yawn often, go to bed only to rise again shortly; they force themselves to sleep and crawl forth, waiting for the days to pass, not understanding anything of them… they call fast days longer than the others; they pretend to suffer from sick stomachs and dizzy spells and troubled usages, which are not the signs of fasting, but of indulgence…" (*ibidem*:102)

In a remarkable homily titled *Sermon on Palm Sunday (1),* Anthim puts together an indictment against the boyars who showed an immoral and inhuman behaviour: "And what do we do in that false confession?... We fail to tell the iniquities we commit all the time, the slandering, the favours, the double-dealing, the betrayals and denunciations we commit against each other to bereave others of their good name; we say that, caught in the waves of

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the world, we seek into our souls, but leave a sarindari [1] at church every now and then, our offering to God taken from robbed money and dishonest fortunes. We fail to say that him whom we see rob and pilfer and afflict the poor we praise..." (*ibidem*:95) Good deeds and fair behaviour are constantly pursued, which is a position that reveals an interest in the relationships between the members of the same community. When it comes to weighing the relationship between man and Divinity against the one between man and man, Anthim appears to tilt the balance toward the latter (nevertheless, lay information is filtered and given a theological interpretation every time).

Anthim's sermons stand out through more than just the admirable spiritual ideas they contain; the shape the ideas are clothed in inscribes them among the remarkable productions of the baroque style. The abundant stylistic adornments and surprising images earn the sermons the status of "... honourable figure of baroque literature. From a rhetorical perspective, their structure, which comprises <figurae verborum> and < figurae sententiarum>, places them among the most elaborate sermons in European oratory." (Mazilu, 1998:388). Closely acquainted with Greek and Christian rhetoric, Anthim will resort to the well known *topos* of modesty (an instance in which the speaker declares his so-called impotence with respect to the importance of the chosen theme). The purpose of this *excusatio propter infirmitatem* is to capture the attention of the audience and introduce them into an atmosphere suitable for the topic of the speech: "[…] but, my mind being clouded by ignorance and further darkened by the count of her divine and most enlightened gifts, I chide and deplore the unworthiness and nescience of my learning" or "[…]which I pray you all to hear with love, disregarding the impotence and nescience of my teachings." E.R. Curtius used to say that humility is a pre-Christian topos, but Christian writers added to its force. "Thus, I know not what I shall do today to fulfil the duty of praising their celebration. Shall I speak? But what suitable words will my dumb mind and ignorant learning manage to coin to give due praise to their great dignity? Shall I then be silent? I fear damnation, as one who ungratefully conceals the great benefactions which they have bestowed [...]" Anthim laments in an excellent rhetorical exercise.

Although, as I mentioned, it is the theologian who speaks, Anthim demonstrates thorough knowledge of the writings of historians and includes the theory regarding the creation of the Universe and of man by combining the four primordial elements in his *Sermon at the Epiphany*: "Thus, the first and most useful of the elements is the wind, for without breath man live for even one hour. The second and most exalted is fire, not only that which we see with our eyes and put to our own use, but also the fire in the heavens. The third element is water and the fourth is earth. Thus, man is made of these four elements [...]"(*ibidem*:68)

A man of his time, Anthim the Iberian will correlate theological and scientific knowledge (an enterprise characteristic of the Renaissance), as well as make use of stylistic abundance (metaphors, antitheses, interrogations, repetitions) and of the power of spectacular imagery when writing his speeches (a technique which belongs to the baroque style). He will focus on human relations, social justice and moral righteousness (an ideology prefiguring the Enlightenment). Those sermons which resulted from the study of the society

[1] A list comprising the names of the deceased, to be read by the priest at 40 memorial services.

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of the time constitute “the richest, most varied and most colourful fresco of the era, similar to the opus which John Chrysostom had bestowed upon the 4th century Byzantine Empire” (Ivașcu,1969:114).

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