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Michael Psellos on Symeon Metaphrastes*

It was more than a quarter of a century ago that a prominent scientific journal published a paper of considerable importance claiming that in his memorial speech on Saint Auxentios the author, Michael Psellos presented the figure of the saint in his own likeness and that the biography of the ascetic Auxentios actually immortalizes Psellos as a saint. As there are several biographies written about Auxentios, one of them by Symeon the Metaphrast (Symeon Metaphrastes), we can compare these biographies with Psellos' speech and put our finger on the details which appear first in Psellos, or although mentioned earlier by others, are only given emphasis by him. With a little adroitness these details can be related to Psellos' rather incomplete biography and to some data from the history of the eleventh century.¹ This idea has always seemed rather far-fetched to me, even though studying another speech written by Psellos, the one on Symeon the Metaphrast, a question that obviously arose in the rhetor is bound to arise in the reader as well: Why could not Psellos himself be a saint or be made a saint?² Hagiographical works were written not only by Symeon the Metaphrast, but by Michael Psellos as well, and what is more, even better ones – or so he thought.

According to Psellos' speech Symeon was born in Constantinople in a rich and prominent family – similarly to Michael Psellos. In his youth Symeon, just like Psellos, became interested in philosophy. Later he held an office, like Psellos, and due to his talent rose to the highest ranks, again just like Psellos. Urged by the emperor Symeon, the emperor's confidant collected the accounts of the martyrs and the biographies of the ascetics known in the tenth century, sifted them through and standardized them. Consequently Symeon the

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¹ KAZHDAN, A. P., An Attempt at Hagio-Autography: the Pseudo-Life of "Saint" Psellus? *Byzantion* 53 (1983) 546–556.

² FISHER, E. A. (ed.), *Michaelis Pselli Orationes Hagiographicae*. (BSGRT) Stuttgart – Leipzig 1994. 267–288.

Metaphrast – the Translator – is regarded as a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church and is remembered in memorial speeches on his feast day, November 9. Psellos' speech was probably written for such an occasion.

On that occasion Psellos the rhetor was in rather an awkward position: he had nothing to speak about. By the end of his speech it turns out that the only miracle in Symeon's life was his death. After his peaceful death his body started to emit a fragrance, and not only for three days (οὐδὲ εἰς τρίτον ἡμᾶρ), but – and this is on the verge of comedy – up till the time when somebody was buried into his grave by mistake, after which the source of the fragrance dried up: ἡ τῆς εὐωδίας ἔσθη πηγὴ (376–383). Besides the fragrance of his body the other reason for his veneration was his literary work. As it is shown by his by-name *the Metaphrast*, Symeon translated – i.e. translated from Greek into Greek – saints' lives. However, his Greek – at least according to the sophisticated literary circles (229–231: τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν τε σοφιστικώτερον τῆ περιβολῆ τῆς γλώττης κεχρημένων) – was hardly readable. It was this literary heritage of dubious merit that eventually provided a firm footing for the rhetor, as in his eulogy he could put forward arguments usually presented in defence statements. But he went a bit too far, and not for the first time, when as the strongest argument saved for the ending he compared the literary heritage of the saint to his own oeuvre (322ff.).

Now let us take a look at the text as a whole, as although Psellos praised Symeon for giving a detailed outline of the subjects to be discussed after a short and varied introduction of the biographies, he himself never used this method, because he probably considered it rather schoolmasterish.

In the introduction, as it was common in Byzantine speeches, the rhetor excuses himself saying that the subject, the praise of Symeon, presents far too great a challenge for his limited talent (1–15). However, at this point he already starts to discuss Symeon's style by comparing it to the flow of the Nile (9: τὸ Νεῖλῶν ῥεῦμα). Then he uses some commonplaces typical of speeches praising cities, and praises Symeon as κάλλιστος πολιούχος (17), the protector of the city, Constantinople, Symeon's birthplace (15–29), followed by lines about him as a child already showing promising talent (30–74). The speech also makes it clear that Symeon was *not* trained to be a rhetor, but αὐτοφυῶς ἐρρητόρευε (43). He did *not* study philosophy either. After receiving a basic education in logic he could only rely on himself and on the talent he was born with. Thus he was saved from drifting along with the extremists of the two careers, who practise their art, philosophy or rhetoric, for art's sake, and

followed the golden mean instead (61: ἐκεῖνος μέσον ἀμφοῖν γεγονώς). This is one of Psellos' favourite subjects: the alloy of philosophy and rhetoric as the noble aim of studies, which is often discussed at length in his works. This discussion, however, is *not* an integral part of the memorial oration, since, as we have seen, Symeon did not study philosophy and rhetoric as Psellos did, and was neither a philosopher nor a rhetor. Let us remember that the authors contrasted with Symeon did not live in tenth-century Constantinople (in Symeon's age) or in eleventh-century Constantinople (in Psellos' age), but somewhere in the ancient Hellas or in the Imperium Romanum at the time of the second sophistic, in the idealised past, where the vessels of Byzantine literature remained anchored – to use Cyrill Mango's well-known metaphor. So Symeon did not go astray but chose the practical career of a civil servant. At this point Psellos is rather obscure, as any Byzantine rhetor would be when talking about contemporary issues, but we are probably right to assume that Symeon was first a councillor and chancellor, and later the one responsible for foreign affairs. (The word *logothetēs* referring to the latter post does not appear in the text.) After these Psellos presents Symeon as the ideal courtier, who is always able to adapt to the circumstances if necessary, keeps to his opinion if it seems to be correct and only changes it to his advantage. After a daring *aposityopsis* and some words of apology he comes to his main subject, Symeon's literary work. The earlier recordings and biographies were not worthy of the words and deeds of the martyrs and ascetics, since they no longer discussed the witty retorts of the martyrs and the struggles and victories of the ascetics, but only mentioned them as incidental circumstances. Due to their language these *bioi* were impossible to appreciate, some even found them downright ridiculous. However, there was no one to translate them till Symeon undertook the task. Symeon was criticised on various grounds, though. They said that Symeon's substandard usage of the language could perhaps be overlooked if the content of the texts was related to the subjects of general knowledge (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy or music). In Psellos' opinion all these can be found in Symeon's biographies, and what is more, they do *not* lack rhetorical devices either, whenever there is an opportunity to use one (246), but not with an end in itself – he returns to his subject as soon as possible.

Psellos' next argument is that for the varied content chosen by Symeon one single style would not have been suitable. A further, very strong argument is that Symeon intended his work not only for the sophisticated minority well versed in rhetoric but also for the less educated majority: *He knew many figures*

of speech and used them in a way which both the connoisseurs and the crowd were pleased to hear and both parties were satisfied with. The rhythm of his text and the beauty of his expression attracted those who were familiar with rhetoric, captivating them in a net of pleasantness, while he won the uninitiated with the refreshing clarity of his voice, and both were fascinated by his conciseness and his reliability (256–265). Had he written his biographies in the standard literary language, his readers would not have understood them (272–275). On the other hand the presence of rhetorical devices ensures that the text meets the expectations of both parties (276–285).

After defending Symeon's language and style and referring to his values, e.g. his volubility, Psellos continues with a short evaluation of his own works, in a few rather equivocal lines. He is trying to sound modest, but fails. He that has ears to hear, let him hear: *I envy this man for this euphony and his pleasantness, likewise for the usefulness of his subject. Although I have also written several things on various subjects, my writings do not inspire others to imitate me. Perhaps they will be appreciated by the connoisseurs, and I might be envied for my eloquence and the variability of the figures of speech, but the crowd will ignore me, because in my works there is not enough meaning and deep thought* (321–329).

Before his description of Symeon's death and his prayer to the saint Psellos emphasizes that Symeon's writings should not be compared with classical literature but with the works of Christian writers: the preachers of the Gospel, the defenders of the faith and the homilists.

In fact, it is only at this point, at the very end of the speech that we realise that Psellos is talking about a saint. If we do not consider the last 24 lines, we can easily read the speech as a literary essay. Psellos had to overcome the difficulty that in literary speeches it was the *form*, i.e. the language, the style, the structure, the rhythm and the metre that served as grounds for judgement, whereas the content was hardly discussed, if at all. What we have to notice is that Psellos looks for rhetorical elements in Symeon's works as well, though earlier he said that Symeon had never studied rhetoric (43: αὐτοφῶς ἐρρητόρευε). Consequently, a text can be rhetorical – in Psellos's words *technikos* (τεχνικός), i.e. a text prepared according to the rules of art – even if it was not written in the standard language (282–283: ἡ δέ γε τοῦ ἥθους μεταβολὴ ποικίλη καί, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, τεχνική). In other words if one intends to find good characterization and description, a balanced and proportional structure or different figures of speech in an ample and varied collection, they are sure to

find rhetorical devices prompted by the *subject*. There is only one thing a text like that cannot offer: periodic sentences. Instead, it flows boundlessly, like a swollen river, like the Nile.

An indispensable element of every literary essay regardless of where and when it was written is comparison (*synkrisis*). Psellos does not compare Symeon with classical Greek authors (in the speech there are strong references to Isocrates, Aelius Aristides, Thucydides and Xenophon, though without mentioning their names), as they are not worthy of the comparison. On the other hand he considers a comparison with Christian authors reasonable, but he only puts it forward as a suggestion. He mentions other works as well (συγγραφαί), ones we cannot attribute with certainty to any author. He writes about an antiquarian type of history of the Greeks (ἀρχαιολογία Ἑλληνική), a geographical description (καταμέτρῃσις τῆς συμπάσης γῆς) and works on history in which we can read about the victories of the Babylonians, the Persians and Alexander the Great. But these cannot be compared to the hagiographical works either, since firstly, these are written for the benefit of the soul, and secondly, they also contain occasional descriptions of the native land of the soldiers of Christ, of rivers and their sources, of cities and their location, air and climate, not to mention the victories of saints over their internal and external enemies (296–300). Last but not least he compares Symeon's achievement with his own oeuvre (322–329).

In this paper I have only presented an overall view of Psellos' speech and not a meticulous analysis, though the text is not in a state of flux, so to say. We have several manuscripts and three editions of the oration. The most recent critical edition was published by the Teubner publishing house in 1994, in *Orationes hagiographicae*, a volume containing the hagiographical speeches of Psellos. The editor made three corrections in the 390 lines; a misprint (75) and a rather questionable grammatical structure (126: τὸν) remained in the text. But, in contrast to the modern corrections and conjectures Elizabeth A. Fisher restored the readings of the manuscripts, which turned out to be a good decision, since although the result is a somewhat dishevelled text, it is more exciting than the well-groomed and textbook-like versions of the earlier editions. The main deficiency of the edition is that it fails to indicate the parallel places, most importantly the identical and similar places in Psellos' works.

According to Psellos human nature has two adornments: νοῦ γέννημα and γλώττης ῥεῦμα, thought and fluent speech. At the beginning of his speech he says the following: Symeon's brain was very well suited for begetting ideas

and his speech was like the flow of the Nile. Psellos' train of thought can be understood like this: the things that can be conceived and verbalised, i.e. the cognizable things are created by the co-ordination of different words according to different rules, and can be recognized by these. The rules that can be used in this process can be logical or rhetorical. But the rules are bounds as well: those who do not know or do not observe the rules can neither think nor speak. One of the bounds of rhetorical speech is the periodic sentence divided into clauses. Thus comparing somebody's speech to the flow of the Nile is ambiguous at the very least. Besides the obvious praise the educated can detect criticism as well, which is understandable if we consider that Psellos had to be very careful not to swing to the other extreme, i.e. he could not possibly set the barely defensible as an example. Saying that Symeon's language flows like a river (57f. – at the third place in the same speech: ἡ γλώττα ποταμηδὸν ἔρρευσεν ἐξ ἐπιχειρημάτων πυκνῶν) is also criticism rather than praise. In the speech Symeon, the untrained rhetor, who is αὐτοφυῶς ἐρρητόρευε, hardly ever receives more than such ambiguous praise from Psellos, who is constantly present in the speech not only in roles usual for rhetors, but with his judgement of dubious value as well. We cannot blame him for that. A writer can only grasp his subject within his own boundaries, and if the subject happens to be another writer (who is also a saint), he is bound to picture himself in him, in our case comparing a trained rhetor with an untrained one.