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Animated Pulpits: On Performative Preaching in Seventeenth-Century Naples

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Abstract

The article foregrounds a number of cases of performative preaching in Naples under Spanish rule with particular attention to the specific form of competition between preachers and professional actors. In the churches and streets of the city, preaching was ever present, nourished by a mix of theatre and sacred oratory, a near realisation of the concept of *théâtre sur le théâtre*. Examples of this phenomenon are to be found in the cultural transformation of certain actors and impresarios into hypocritical, bigoted preachers and the dazzling voice of Giacomo Lubrano, the Jesuit poet, who created the rhetorical machinery of Neapolitan-style preaching.

Keywords: Acting, Actor-Preacher Competition, Naples under Spanish Rule, Preaching, Voice

The voice was a call for life, but, above all, for attention in the maze of streets in seventeenth-century Naples. The voice laid claim to the space of attention and that of emotion in a city resounding with words in different languages, ranging from the Neapolitan dialect of the indigenous populace, to the Spanish of the rulers, the Tuscan variety of Italian in the speech of the wealthier classes and the Latin of the Catholic Church, as well as the languages spoken by so-called ‘foreigners’. Thus the city, second only to Paris for the number of inhabitants and arguably first for that of different ethnic groups, was thronged with preachers in both streets and pulpits.¹

For religious orators the distinction between open air and closed-in spaces meant two levels of prestige, the former preparatory for the latter, as well as two different performative modes. Only after the experience of the streets and passing the relevant tests (beginning with human and meteorological unpredictability) could they aspire to the pulpits in the protective semi-

¹ On Naples’ cultural environment see Megale 2017; on performances from pulpits, see, in particular, 306-311. Megale’s essay has been translated from Italian by John Denton.



darkness of churches, no longer subject to any kind of risk. Whether in town or church, the preacher fashioned words in his mouth, shaping them, trying them out, intoning them, so as to overcome any interference from onlookers: the din of chattering voices, shouting and prattling, aware, in the words of St Paul, no one is *oudèn áphonon* ('no language'), that is, 'without one's own voice' (1 Corinthians 14:10). Just as in the case of an actor's monologue, the main aim of the words proclaimed from the heights of the marble church pulpits or the specially erected structures in strategic positions in the city, frequented by all sorts of people, was to captivate, or rather mesmerise the listeners, issuing dire warnings to those over whom they held sway.

We have no documented evidence of the types of voice involved. We should think of them as thundering, high, well-pitched rather than soft or shrill, able to command respect, since, on each occasion, the preacher had to face the serious problem of audibility, which was obviously easier to solve in apses and naves built with acoustics in mind, rather than in the squares or broad spaces of the cramped Neapolitan cityscape, architecturally prone to the dispersion of sound.

However, among the varied seventeenth-century evidence concerning the voice, one example emerges capable of illustrating this complex phenomenon, which was so crucial for the success of the preacher's words. In the last year of the seventeenth century, Andrea Perrucci, originally from Palermo, but educated in Naples, a poet at the Theatre of San Bartolomeo and author of religious works (in the form of both tragedies and oratorios), in his 1699 treatise entitled *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata, ed all'improvviso* (*A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation*) devoted a chapter to this decisive subject, stating, among other things:

Esce la voce dalle fauci per la ripercussione dell'aria, e se queste saranno tumide la strangolano, se ottuse la oscurano, se rare l'esperano, e se sono sconvolte la rendono uguale al suono di organi rotti. Si distingue la voce per quantità e qualità, per quantità è grande o piccola; per qualità è chiara, fosca, piena, sottile, leggera, aspra, rotta, sciolta, dura, flessibile, candida, ottusa, acuta, grave e fluvida. La buona voce è quella, ch'è dolce, libera e sonora, uguale al tintinnio dell'argento e dell'acciaio, ma che non faccia un istrepitoso suono. (1961, 116; Part I, Rule 10)²

² 'The voice emerges from the throat because of the reverberation of the air. If the throat is swollen, it strangles the voice; if thick, it dims it; if thin, it irritates it, and if upset, it makes it sound like broken instruments. The voice can be characterised by quantity and quality. With regard to quantity, it can be loud or soft; as for quality, it can be clear, dark, full, subtle, light, rough, broken, relaxed, hard, flexible, pure, dull, high, low or fluent. A good voice is one that is sweet, free, and resonant, like the tinkling of silver or steel; it does not make a roaring noise, and is not brittle, like broken, untuned bells, which can in no way adapt to the ear, but will offend it instead ...' (Engl. trans. 2007, 52-53).

In his thorough treatment of the subject, Perrucci, whose legal background accustomed him to attracting his listeners' attention by means of words, effectively defined the voice as 'l'interpretazione della mente' (1961, 116) ('the interpreter of the mind'; Engl. trans. 2007, 54). Previously, Carlo Borromeo, who overcame his stutter to become an excellent preacher, had been well aware of this, though, perfectly coherent with his attack on the theatre, he had chosen to preach from the altar rather than the pulpit. The reason was that he did not want his body to be in any way contaminated by a place reminiscent of the actors' theatricality he detested.

Thus, the seventeenth-century preacher mixed the most daring rhetorical procedures with performative practices, measuring them out and shaping them, so as to *delectare et docere* holy writ in the wake of the Counter-Reformation, turning to the practice that, for centuries, had indoctrinated the illiterate masses by means of the spoken and repeated word. The appeal of the problematic mastery of orality could be recorded by transcription, which was usually immediate: while the preacher pronounced his words resounding with Catholic teaching, a scribe, often squatting on the pulpit steps, half-hidden from the throng of the faithful, wrote them down, amid the flickering of candles and clouds of incense.

In the 1630s, in the streets and alleyways of Naples, mingling with the professionals and imposters, there will have been a group of preachers with a recent background as impresarios and actors. Before becoming lay brethren attached to the order of Piarist fathers who preached to the populace in the Duchesca district, Andrea della Valle, Francesco Longavilla, and Orazio Graziullo were, respectively, the impresario and actors at the 'Stanza della Duchesca' venue, opened in 1613 in the district of the same name, and in operation successfully up to 1626. It was the arrival in Naples of Giuseppe Calasanzio (founder of the above-mentioned religious order) that determined the closure of the theatrical venue and its associated recreational activities; and that, thanks to support from the Spanish viceroy and powerful urban authorities, allowed the opening of the first state school for poor children in the kingdom, to replace the theatre and rooms used for playing ball games.

Andrea della Valle, Calasanzio's first adversary, did not give in when confronted by the authority of the future saint from Spain and his successful educational model, which had already been tested in Rome, but took over its mode of operation. After selling him the theatre, which soon adjoined the first church of the Piarist order in the Kingdom of Naples built next to the school, at a high price, he successfully put his theatre impresario expertise at the service of the spread of the Catholic faith. His example was followed by the above-mentioned actors who, after removing their theatrical gear, turned to the task of winning over souls for God. Their art was transformed and miraculously cancelled the contrast (i.e. Theatre *vs.* Heaven) on which the ecclesiastical condemnation of the stage and its actors had been based in the modern age: an exceptional example of switching allegiance and, at the

same time, cultural resilience, grounded in the shift of the meaning of the verbal art and its performance.³

If in this historical context actor-preacher competition had become less intense and settled down on the performance level, nevertheless, more than once the preachers clashed with the actors in the streets: the evangelical word *vs.* the theatrical one, an individual performance *vs.* a group one, the pulpit *vs.* the stage. A symbolic anecdote, reported by Benedetto Croce, even referred to Pulcinella as a rival of the crucifix. The former allegedly attracted crowds with his irresistible gags, laughter overpowering catechism to the extent of making the preacher, who was so outclassed and humiliated, unsuccessfully try to dissuade the onlookers, by shouting: 'Over here – this is the real Pulcinella!' (1992, 125). The scene of a preacher outclassed by an actor, which probably never took place, is symptomatic of performative psychotechniques widely employed to attract (and maintain) the hearers' attention. Although it cannot be attributed to a precise temporal context, the episode clarifies assimilation between two systems of 'entertainment', each with different aims but similar methods, oral communication making the attraction of opposites possible, actual practice demolishing the thought barriers erected by theology to separate the two worlds. It is not difficult to come to the conclusion that the repeated attacks by the Church on the world of theatrical make-believe – in Naples as well as elsewhere – at the time of the Counter-Reformation could be, in its extreme forms, the very substance of the clash between preachers and actors, or hide glaring traces of a communication conflict, with no holds barred, between the two sides of active intellectuals.

As in a system of correspondences, the rule of reciprocity controlled the world of both actors and preachers, and they were well aware of this fact. 'I gesuiti sono i comici della Germania' (Burattelli, Landolfi and Zinanni 1993, I, 142; 'The Jesuits are the actors of Germany') was the baffled comment of Giovan Battista Andreini, one of the seventeenth century's leading actors, playwrights and theatre company leaders, writing from Prague to Ercole Marliani on 4th December 1627, thus revealing the relentless, widespread competition from the clergy. Further support for this view was to come, more than a century later, from the Rev. Laurence Sterne in Paris, when, in the leading theatres, he heard the faded, weak voices of the actors, while those of the preachers in Catholic churches were worthy of the best theatrical professionals (Frasca 2015, 323). This competition could even turn into reciprocal imitation, spurred on by the Catholic clergy, whose aim was the spread of the instructions of the Council of Trent to combat the unsettling consequences of the Lutheran Reformation; and by actors, who needed to expand their audiences and steer well clear of the fear of boredom, that was always lying in wait in the theatrical world, and could strike a mortal

³ For the history of the theatre and its actors see Megale 2017, 199-220.

blow. The extent to which the entrenchment of sacred theatre depended on sacred eloquence is an illuminating reflection of this cultural process, in the century that made of the prose of preaching ‘l’espressione più genuina e più violenta del ... concettismo’ (Pozzi 1954, 13).⁴ Thus, the title of the above-mentioned treatise by Andrea Perrucci is not at all surprising. In the last year of the seventeenth century, when eloquence from the pulpit had penetrated and enriched all the means of communication from literature to the theatre, the Neapolitan printer Michele Luigi Muzio published the work with a title significantly divided into two parts: *Dell’arte rappresentativa, premeditata ed all’improvviso parti due. Giovevole non solo a chi si diletta di rappresentare; ma a’ predicatori, oratori, accademici, e curiosi* (‘A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation in Two Parts. Helpful not only to those who enjoy acting, but also to preachers, orators, academics and the curious’). The subtitle indicates the target readership presumably as widespread as the use of prescriptive acting and performative rules indispensable for those capable of weaving words and voicing them: professionals and amateurs in the theatre, preachers, orators, academics and ‘the curious’, i.e. the whole world of oral communication.

In modern times, beyond theological differences, shepherds of souls have always had to face applause seekers: they competed for audiences and stole techniques from each other. The permeability inherent in performative acts from the pulpit in relation to the theatre centred on the use of the performative word, measured out in pauses and accumulations, accompanied by amplified gestures, enlivened by improvised phonetic variations, enriched by the artificiality of baroque *concettismo*, rhetorical devices stimulated by the implicit challenge of theatrical symbolism like ‘tante coorti di vocaboli’ (‘the unending cohorts of words’), metaphorically comparable, according to Giovanni Pozzi, to a ‘procession’ (Pozzi, in Marino 1960, 46, 48). In Naples, the Franciscan friar Francesco Panigarola was well aware of this. He was well known for his ‘rutilanti prediche’ (‘fiery sermons’), maintaining that ‘il christiano dicatore sempre dice cose grandi’ (‘the Christian speaker always speaks great things’), in line with the principle of ‘mediocrità artificiosa’ (‘affected mediocrity’; Giunta 2012, 110).

Preachers, like actors and those who were able to speak in public, could have their own fans, and had to travel as a consequence of their reputation. It was by no accident that Giovanni Azzolini, the Neapolitan Theatine father, originally from the Salento region in southern Apulia, complained about this to his readers, forced – like many others – ‘col piè sù la staffa’ (‘keeping his feet in the stirrups’), ‘con animo sfacendato et agiato sui libri’ (Azzolini 1647, ‘A chi legge’ [To the Reader]; ‘unable to devote his time to books in peace and quiet’). The regret expressed by this great preacher, whose language was strongly influenced by Marinism (the ornate style of Giovan Battista Marino),

⁴ ‘the most genuine and forceful expression of ... *concettismo*’.

in an attempt to justify the small scale of his published work, is very close to the stereotyped complaints of the *Commedia dell'Arte* actors concerning the hardships of travel. Competed for like stars, as had previously been the case with the early generations of professional actors, the best preachers were hired in advance by the churches of major cities for the most important dates in the liturgical calendar. The church of the Annunciation in Naples, for example, welcomed the Venetian preacher Serafino Collini, specially called in from Mantua owing to his extraordinary public speaking skills. He was so popular with the Neapolitan congregation that his funeral homilies from his time in Mantua were hastily printed, under the title *La regia tomba* ('The Regal Tomb'), by Lazzaro Scorriglio in 1615, with enough examples of the words 'da lui composte, e recitate' ('composed and proclaimed by him'; Collini 1615, title-page) for specific preaching performances able to satisfy the better educated citizens of Naples. A kind of 'instant book' publishing industry sprang up in connection with eloquent sermons, almost as if they were commercial products nourishing the fashion for panegyrics.

The sermons preached by the most incisive orators teamed with images from the performing arts, both owing to the festive atmosphere in which preaching was required by the liturgy, and to the informal use of lexical items often borrowed from the despised world of the theatre. A rich catalogue of these performances could be put together. It is enough to mention *I divini spettacoli nella notte di Natale* ('The Divine Performances on Christmas Eve'), and *Il Mostro scatenato per le Quarant'ore del carnevale* ('The Monster Let Loose for the 40 Hours of Carnival') in the *Orationi sacre* by Azzolini (1633) to understand, beginning with the titles, the close link of the sacred with the profane, pulpit with stage. This was clearly visible in the continual crossover between the two phenomena: methods and techniques were taken from the theatre, but with selective eyes and ears. Even Louis de Cressolles, when, in his *Vacationes autumnales* (1620), he recorded the preacher's repertoire of gestures, prescribed that the latter should avoid certain examples of the actor's body language: the head not moving up and down, for example, a typical stance of the comic Zannis in the *Commedia dell'Arte* (Fumaroli 1990, 268). So, at the technical level, the orator's eloquent body, the direct incarnation of the *Logos*, following the unbeatable interpretation of Marc Fumaroli, is moulded in a mirror relationship with the actor's body, opposites irresistibly attracting one another, both sharing the same public, communicative media.

From simple raised platforms or pulpits, surrounded by the *chiaroscuro* effects of large paintings, amid clouds of incense, in the dimness interrupted by shafts of light and the flickering flames of candles, surrounded by the varied colours of hangings, the preachers became closer and closer to entertainers, and ended up by being themselves an active part of the spectacle offered by baroque churches, certain sources of astonishment and 'maraviglia' ('wonder'). And so great was the performative impact of the preachers, whatever religious

order they belonged to, that they attracted, as is well known, a long series of attacks, to the extent of inducing Pope Innocent XI Odelscalchi to publish, in 1680, an *Admonitio ad verbi Dei concionatores* to condemn the plague ('pestis') of the histrionic word ('tamquam histriones'), versifying ('conversi ad fabulas uti poëtae'), empty and ornamental ('inanis facundiae lenocinio'), bizarre and ineffective ('per quaestiones curiosas ac paradoxa vana'; Forni 2011, 29).

But, despite the official directives of the Roman Catholic Church, towards the end of the century, Spanish-ruled Naples, experiencing the widespread phenomenon of preaching, was the scene of a near manifestation of the concept of *théâtre sur le théâtre*. The dazzling voice of Giacomo Lubrano, the Jesuit poet, was mainly responsible for this invention. He created the 'Neapolitan style of preaching', rhetorical machinery comparable in precision and complexity with the stage machinery of the time. Both sacred and profane, it was an expression of the extreme baroque style,⁵ a synthesis of the theatre and sacred oratory. Lubrano was so well known that his sermons were preached from pulpits in Venice, as well as Rome, Naples, Sicily and the rest of the kingdom, and his Lenten compositions were published posthumously in 1703. 'Molte prediche furono fatte dall'Autore nell'immaturo dell'età giovanile, molte nell'improvviso o delle congiunture, o del tempo, altre per aderire al genio vario degli Uditori, altre per ubbidire a' comandi espressi de' padroni e degli amici' (Lubrano 1703, 2).⁶ These words appear in the address to the *Lettor cortese* (Gentle Reader), appropriately presenting a summary of the ground covered by his preaching. This Neapolitan Jesuit was an illusionist of the word, by means of which he enthralled his hearers, changing their moods and directing their feelings. He did not fail to distance himself, with perfect Counter-Reformation rigour, from ephemeral festive decorations in churches, warning, following St Ambrose, that 'Ecclesia non theatrale negotium est'; see – on this subject – his sermon warning against the use of rich decorations customarily hung in Naples on the occasion of the great feast of Corpus Christi and the authoritative sources he referred to:

Non cascano gli occhi a chi ha Fede nel vedere nell'Ottava di solennità così santa esposte nella pubblica piazza pitture favoleggiate dall'arte con disegni d'impudicizia, non vi volendo più a sensuali per prenderne copia, che un guardo. Tutta la pompa svanisce in merenduoie di sbevazzamenti nelle finestre in immodestie curiose: che apparati idolatri di libidine o intessute negli arazzi, o colorite ne' quadri! Questa è Fede di Crocifisso, che nell'adorarlo l'offende? Questa è Fede argumentum non apparentium, piena di vagheggiamenti, di cianciumi. Intendiamola con Ambrogio:

⁵ For clarification of this point see Frasca 2002.

⁶ 'Many sermons were preached by the Author, in the immaturity of youth, many improvised owing to circumstances or time, others to suit the hearers' sensibility, others to obey the requests of employers and friends'.

Ecclesia non teatrale negotium est. Omnis gloria eius ab intus. Intendiamola con Agostino che non tutti i concorsi alla feste del Sacramento appartengono alla misericordia di Cristo, anzi lo provocano a gastighi mentre lo strapazzano con finta di applausi. Non omnes qui portant Sacramenta Christi, spectant ad misericordiam Christi. Intendiamolo dal vescovo Scipione che è una contradizione sacrilega pregiarsi del titolo de' Christiani e caricar Cristo d'ingiurie. Hæc est difficillima improbitas, nomine Christiani appellari, et Christum impugnare. Non facciam che di noi si averri: Filii autem Regni ejicientur in tenebras exteriores. (Lubrano 1703, 27)⁷

The rivalry between the world of preachers and that of actors, the latter having chosen as their patron the Roman actor St. Genesius, who, while making fun of baptism by miming it, had been converted to Christianity and subsequently suffered martyrdom, also included street entertainers. They were feared enemies in some urban environments, to the extent that Lubrano himself, at one point in one of his Lenten sermons, when complaining about the absence of the whole of Naples from churches, included the 'vagabondi', who 'Senton le prediche continove dalle gesticolazioni mimiche di un saltimbanco, dalle cantilene di squaltrinacce [*sic*], senza tedio, senza stanchezza ritti in piè fino al tramontare del sole, allo scoperto dell'aria infreddata' (23).⁸ This antagonism lasted well into the eighteenth century, and was challenged, on occasion, by effects lifted directly from theatrical practice. A good example of this is the sermon on death, during which the Redemptorist Father Ludovico Altorelli, recalling similar previous performances, prescribed that the preacher – a kind of new Hamlet – should conduct a dialogue with a skull, not without sufficient stage lighting and vocalism as in the theatre:

Voglio far venire un altro predicatore su questo pulpito, vostro paesano, ma venuto dall'altro mondo e voglio farvi fare da esso la predica della morte ... e in ciò dire

⁷ 'Do not the faithful lower their gaze, when seeing, during the Octave of such a holy feast, fanciful paintings with immodest figures, so that only a glance is enough to those who are inclined to sensuality to perceive a great amount of such images. Ceremonial is reduced to drinking bouts at the windows with curious immodest acts: what idolatrous decorations full of lust woven into tapestries or coloured in pictures! Is this faith in the Crucified Christ, which in worshipping Him offends Him? This is faith *argumentum non apparentium* full of vanities. Let us follow Ambrose: *Ecclesia non teatrale negotium est. Omnis gloria eius ab intus*. Let us follow Augustine when he says that all the throngs at the feasts of the Blessed Sacrament belong to the mercy of Christ. On the contrary, they provoke Him to punishment while they overwhelm Him with feigned acclamations. *Non omnes qui portant Sacramenta Christi, spectant ad misericordiam Christi*. Let us follow Bishop Scipio in saying that it is a sacrilegious contradiction to call oneself a Christian and hurl insults at Christ. *Hæc est difficillima improbitas, nomine Christiani appellari, et Christum impugnare*. May it not be true for us *Filii autem Regni ejicientur in tenebras exterioris*'.

⁸ 'Listen to the continuous preachings with the mimicking gesticulations of an acrobat, the crooning of whores without losing interest, without growing tired, on their feet till sunset, out in the cold'.

prenderà le torce accese e dirà al popolo via! Prima che venghi quell'altro predicatore cercate perdono a Gesù Cristo, sì, correte a Maria Santissima, e intanto subito prenderà il teschio di morte e lo girerà con le torce accese avanti, e dopo farà un dialogo di domande fra lui e il teschio, avvertendo però che quando parla al teschio si volterà al medesimo e quando poi farà rispondere il teschio, si volterà al popolo. Si avverte pure che la risposta che lui stesso darà da parte del teschio, la darà sempre a terzo tono di perorazione. (De Rosa 1983, 215)⁹

The staging of the *facies hypocratica*, with a voice coming from the afterlife, was intended to terrorise, encourage to avoid sin and educate: the faithful, petrified by this vision and chilled by what they heard was thus ready for any kind of penance. For Deleuze, 'the essence of the Baroque entails neither falling into nor emerging from illusion but rather *realizing* something in illusion itself, or of tying it to a spiritual *presence* that endows its spaces and fragments with a collective unity' (2006, 143).

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⁹ 'I want to invite another preacher to this pulpit, a fellow countryman of yours, though he comes from the world of the dead and I want him to deliver the sermon on death ... and when saying this he will take the burning torches and will tell the people Go! Before the other preacher arrives seek pardon from Jesus Christ, yes, run to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and he will then take the dead man's skull and will turn it with the burning torches in front of it, and will conduct a dialogue between him and the skull, warning that when he speaks to the skull he will turn towards it and when he gets the skull to answer he will turn to the people. The answer that he will give from the skull will be delivered in the third pleading tone'.

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