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PREDICTABILITY AND ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN BÍLOVSKÝ'S HOMILETIC WRITINGS

Petko Ivanov

Kázání má tři hlavních částek, kteréž jsou: I. *Exordium*; II. *Tractatio textus*, v níž se obsahuje: *Propositio*, *Declaratio*, *Demonstratio et amplificatio*; III. *Conclusio*.

Jan Amos Komenský¹

Exordium

The *Sermon for the Second Sunday of the Advent* is penned by one of the most representative ecclesiastical writers of the Czech Counter-Reformation, the Jesuit priest Bohumír Hynek Bílovský. He was born in 1659 in Hlučina (Silesia). Later he joined the Jesuit order and was consecrated as a priest in 1689 (or 1692). In the years that followed he served as both a church administrator and a fryer in Vrahovice and Letovice (1702-1708), and subsequently in Olomouc where he died in 1725. During his lifetime Bílovský was well-recognized for his religious hymns. His celebrated book *Stella Nova* (New Star; 1703) contained 15 odes commemorating in Latin the life and the martyrdom of Jan Sarkander (†1620). The same year 1703 Bílovský published also his Czech collection of spiritual poetry, written in Sapphic verse and entitled *Církevní Cherubín* (Church Cherubim). His major literary venue, however, was homiletics in the field of which he soon gained the reputation of the best preacher in the country. A selection of his homiletic writings was published in 1720 under the title *Cygnea cantatio: Hlas duchovní labutě* (The Voice of the Spiritual Swan) which features the sermon here discussed.²

Bílovský's *Sermon* is one of the best examples of Czech Catholic homiletics written in a native tongue. It exemplifies the tendency of the Czech Counter-Reformation

¹ See Kašpar 1893: 68.

² Bílovský's biography and literary activities are discussed in some length by Vasica 1933: 211-231.

from the 17 c. to preaching in the vernacular in order to facilitate the realization of homiletics' primary rhetorical aim: to make the flock understand the basic meaning of the mass. Preaching in an intelligible language, however, is only one of the conditions that makes this primary goal attainable. The construction of the sermon itself in such a way that it explicates semantically the gist of its immediate liturgical context while being at the same time an intrinsic part of its structure, is the *conditio sine qua non*. It is my basic premise that Bílovský's sermon is so highly acclaimed as an example of the genre because it fulfills this requirement. In accord with this premise the focus of my analysis is the explication of the structural and the topical dependence of the text on its liturgical context, and especially on the selection of the Biblical pericopes. I proceed from a brief outline of the liturgical context of Bílovský's *Sermon* and then analyze the text itself in respect to its particular missions in the mass for the Second Sunday of the Advent.

Tractatio textus

Propositio

The first distinctive feature of Christian homiletics that is crucial for its literary analysis is its liminal status between oracy and literacy. A sermon is above all a verbal presentation within the frame of a Christian mass; it is an oral event which may or may not be recorded writtenly.³ Most of the medieval sermons that are extant in a written form have been preserved by *reportatio*, i. e. they have been noted down by listeners and then written up. Even if they have been put down in writing prior to their presentation (by what we may call today their "author") the text is only a scenario for the verbal performance that allows for (and even requires) improvisations *ad hoc* -- from ad-libbing and the introduction of details pertinent to the immediate audience to substantial truncations and variations in order to accommodate the particular situation of the feast ritual that -- as any performance -- is unique by definition. Especially open to improvisations is the frame of the sermon, which includes the *exordium* (with its mandatory topoi *invocatio Dei* and *captatio benevolentiae*) and the *conclusio* that necessarily features a prayer. In view of their immediate dependence on the

³ About sermons as "oral literature" see D'Avray 1994: 17 ff.; cf. also Regan 1983.

circumstances (the audience, the parish, the temple's patron saint, the historical moment, etc.) these parts are usually not recorded, as it is in the case of Bílovský's *Sermon*.

The other significant characteristic of a homiletic text is its direct connection to the *pericopes* used in the mass. The pericopes are excerpts from the Bible designated for each individual service throughout the year by the Missal as part of the 'Proper' (or the variables inserted into the unchanging order of the mass). Generally every 'Proper' includes three such pericopes: one from the Old Testament, another from the Apostle (mainly the Epistles, and more rarely the Acts and the Revelation), and one from the Gospels. Their selection is determined according to a semantic criterium, i. e. by the general message of the feast. The Missal organizes the pericopes according to two complementary calendars: the *Temporale* that takes account of the Sundays of the Church Year and the big Christ-centered holidays (predominantly but not exclusively movable feasts) associated with the Nativity and the Easter seasons; and the *Sanctorale* that sets out the saint's feasts, always fixed on a particular date. If a homiletic text is based on pericopes assigned for the former calendar, they are called *de tempore*; if they follow the latter, they are called *de sanctore*.⁴

According to the type of structural connection between the homiletic text and the pericopes, homiletics is subdivided into 1) homilies, a form of *explication de texte*, i. e. an exegesis of the Biblical reading, line by line and phrase by phrase; and 2) sermons that constitute variations on a particular quotation from the pericopes for the day.

Bílovský's text, according to its own designation, falls into the category of *sermones de tempore*. It is assigned to the Nativity season, most specifically to the Second Sunday of the Advent. The Advent, with which the Catholic Church Year begins, is the fast period before Christmas and invariably includes four Sundays. The entire spirit of the Advent is that of vigilance, of purifying both body and soul in preparation for the Coming of Christ.⁵ The waiting for Christ is interpreted both retrospectively and perspectively. Within the cyclic liturgical time the Advent's vigilance relates to the expectation of the feast of Christmas that commemorates the First Coming of Christ made visible in the act of the Incarnation. The Advent is thus an expectation of a past

⁴ See details in Spencer 1993: 23-24; cf. Hughes 1995: 6-8, D'Avray 1994: 5, and Bataillon 1980: 20.

event from the sacred history that is symbolically reenacted every year. At the perspective end, the Advent is equally an expectation of a future event -- the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Day of Judgment that will mark the end of the linear time of *die Weltsgeschichte* and will fulfill the soteriological promise open to man by the Incarnation of the Logos.

All the pericopes for the four-week season of the Advent are selected in agreement to these two mutually dependent messages. The particular pericopes for the Second Sunday of the Advent are predominantly oriented to the Second Coming and forefront the eschatological implications of the Christ-story. It should be noted that according to the rites set up by the various Catholic orders the selection may vary. The standard combinations of pericopes used by the Jesuit order to which Bílovský belonged may be represented as follows:⁶

Sunday's topic	The Prophet	The Apostle	The Gospel
Vigilant <i>waiting</i> for the Lord's coming	A just shoot; Jer. 33: 14-16	Day of the Lord's coming; I Thess. 3: 12-4: 2	Watch! Luke 21: 25-28; 34-36

Because of the strict generic rules of the Catholic *sermones de tempore* these pericopes entirely determine the limited semantic framework in which Bílovský's text may unfold. In this respect his choice of an apocalyptic stance, the tone of vigilance, and the particular imagery of the Second Coming are by no means a matter of personal penchant. On the contrary, they are only functions of the canon set out by the requirements of the particular Church's feast and the text of its mass 'Proper.'

⁵ The name *Advent* is derived from the Latin *Adventus*, which literary means 'coming.'

⁶ The other two major orders of the Dominicans and the Franciscans used the same combination not for the Second but for the First Sunday of the season; see Guéranger 1983: 193. The selection of pericopes for the Advent is discussed in details by Nocent 1977: 95-161; cf. also Guéranger 1983: 21 ff.

Declaratio

I discussed so far the principle dependence of a *sermon de tempore* on the semantic framework prescribed by its liturgical context. The particular structural organization of the sermon, however, is equally standardized by strict rules outlined in *Artes praedicandi* and other rhetorical handbooks, and illustrated by the high examples of the Christian rhetorical praxis.⁷ The author (or compiler) of a given sermon thus operates on a limited set of structural options having to comply with an invariable *formulary* for a rhetorical text in which he has to combine an equally limited set of semantic *formulae* from the pericopes and the sacred tradition.

The formulary for a sermon requires a three-partite composition that reprises a theme from the pericopes by means of other Biblical *exempla*, using the strategies of *explicatio* and *amplificatio*. In compliance with the general requirements of the genre and its particular liturgical setting, Bílovský's *Sermon for the Second Sunday of the Advent* is organized as a three-partite reprise of the Gospel pericope for the day (Luke 21: 5-11; 25-27):

Luke 21: 5-11; 25-27

Then, as some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and donations, He [Jesus Christ] said: "These things which you see -- the days will come in which not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down." So they [Christ's disciples] asked Him, saying:

[Thematic Clue:]

"Teacher, but when will these things be? And WHAT SIGN WILL THERE BE when these things are about to take place?"

And He said: "[...] When you hear of *wars and commotions*; but do not be terrified, for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately." Then He said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and *famines and pestilences*; and there will be fearful *sights and great signs* from heaven." [...]

⁷ See Charland 1936 and Jennings 1991; cf. Spencer's (1993: 21 ff.) speculations on the role of "model sermons" in medieval homiletics. Among the Czech handbooks in homiletics the most widely applied is Comenius' *Umění kazatelské*, see the edition by Kašpar 1893.

[Sermon's Theme:]

“And THERE WILL BE SIGNS IN THE SUN, IN THE MOON, AND IN THE STARS; and on the earth distress of nations.”

Then they [the people] will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

Demonstratio et amplificatio

Bílovský's sermon is subdivided into: 1) *introductio* (setting out the central theme of the pericope); 2) *processus* (the reiteration of the theme); and 3) *distributio* (demonstration of the theme by distinctions of its principles).⁸

The first part introduces the basic proposition of the text “Almost never does the Lord punish the world for its sins [without] a sign” (p. 83). This general statement, repeated twice in the first paragraph of the text,⁹ situates the sermon from the very beginning in the particular lexical-semantic field of “divine signs.” The double repetition of the lexeme “sign” is the first thematic clue to the principle text from the Gospel of St. Luke, since the word itself is undoubtedly the lexical leit-motif of the entire Gospel pericope. This subtle reference is further explicated by a paraphrases of the key-statement in the Gospel passage (“whether on the sun or on the moon or in the motions of the planets,” p. 83; cf. Luke 21: 25).

The general proposition of the sermon is illustrated in the introduction by one *exemplum* from Scripture -- the narrative of the Great Deluge. The explicit reference to *The Book of Genesis* is combined with a direct quotation¹⁰ and is further elaborated into a synopsis of Noah's story under the refrain “but not without a sign” (p. 84). The most important message of this Old Testament example is that Noah, who believed in the sign, was saved from God's wrath, while the rest of the people perished in the flood. Thus the

⁸ Cf. Bataillon 1980. In Jan Amos Comenius' terminology, these three part of the text can be defined as *propositio*, *declaratio*, and *demonstratio et amplificatio*. Comenius also differentiates a fourth element of the exposition, called *applicatio* that discusses the benefit from the particular sermon for the audience. This element is present in Bílovský's text as a parallel motif of his *demonstratio et amplificatio*.

⁹ Cf. “almost always these events [of divine punishment] are preceded by a sign,” *ibid*.

¹⁰ “I will destroy man and everything I have created for man's use, I will destroy, ravage and lay waste,” Gen. 6: 7.

introduction does not only lay out the semantic parameters of the sermon by contextualizing it into the Gospel pericope, but also points to the salvational value of its own topic. For the divine signs are given to man “for warning and admonition” (p. 83) and the proper understanding of them opens a way to salvation.

The *processus* opens with a summary of the introduction that is in fact a reiteration of the initial proposition: “So God does not send his general punishment until a sign has preceded it” (p. 84). The statement is illustrated again, this time not by events from *die Heilsgeschichte*, but by contemporary events from *die Weltsgeschichte* familiar to Bílovský’s audience that bring the abstract proposition painfully close to home (the war with the Turks and the plague in Austria). Both historical examples are highlighted by the incantatory repetition of the refrain “but not without a sign” that builds up a rhetorical suspense. The tension culminates in the final reiteration “thus God does not punish without a customary sign,” and in the rhetorical question “But what are the signs which precede the Day of Judgment?” This question introduces for the first time the theme of the Second Coming and the direct quotation of the Gospel pericope that is presented as its answer.

Bílovský chooses to cite only one verse from the pericope (Luke 21: 25), the same one which has only been alluded to in the *introductio* of the sermon. Moreover, he repeats this key-passage twice: once in Latin (“Erunt signa in sole, luna et stellis”), and immediately after that in Czech translation. This persistent repetition (with only slight variations) of a short phrase is perfectly in tune with Bílovský’s general leit-motif technique that creates the impression of an overall stylistic unity and adds to the internal dynamics of his concise and punctuated rhetorical periods.

It is also at this high point of the sermon that Bílovský comments directly on his particular homiletic goals: to expound the signs of the Second Coming for the personal improvement of his listeners and for the eternal salvation of their souls. This self-justification motif of the sermon is later taken up again in a passage that compares the Church to a “mother who admonishes her disobedient and unrepentant children” (p. 85). If the most obvious goal of the admonition is to cultivate fear of the Lord, our Father, the ultimate goals are edification and salvation, reiterates Bílovský. Thus he recapitulates under the double rubric of edification-salvation both the value of every divine sign of

impending punishment and the value of his own explication of these past and future signs for the benefit of his audience.

The *processus* further amplifies the theme by illustrating it with a number of exempla equally drawn from the Bible (Exod. 7-11; Joel 2: 10) and from the sacred tradition (Richard of St. Victor, St. Augustine, St. Dionysius the Areopagite).¹¹ The initial *exemplum* of the Flood is again referred to in relation to the mega-sign of the total solar eclipse that lasted for 40 days and 40 nights. This reiteration of the primary *exemplum* is structurally significant not only because it builds an additional bridge between the *introductio* and the *processus*, but also because it connects all the scattered mentions of solar eclipses in all three parts of the sermon into a dense symbolic network. The number 40 has a stable meaning of “a trial period” in Judeo-Christian numerical symbolism. For 40 days was Jesus tempted by the Devil in the desert, and the soul undergoes a trial for 40 days after death. In this respect the 40 days of the solar eclipse during the Flood signified above all a trial period of mankind, against the background of which every other solar eclipse, every new “sign in the sun and the moon and the stars” should be treated as signifying the forthcoming trial of the souls at the Day of the Final Judgment.

The specific eschatological message of the text, which is directly subordinate to the conceptual premise of the Advent and its orientation toward the Coming of Christ, is unpacked in the third section (the *distributio*) into a chronological catalogue of the omens preceding the Judgment Day. The signs are grouped into 15 days according to the eschatological vision of St. Jerome, the famous translator of the Vulgate, which he drew upon Hebrew sources.

Thus Bílovský’s sermon unfolds, in accord with the canons of the genre, as an elegant variation on the central statement of the Gospel pericope: God always sends signs before he tests mankind. Bílovský proves this thesis on large-scale examples from sacred and political history. Then, by shifting the focus from retrospective recapitulation toward prospective instruction, he raises the most essential question for each and every Christian that is re-actualized with new intensity every year during the Advent season: what are the

¹¹ The passage where Bílovský refers to “the Glossa,” which in [...]’s edition of the sermon is interpreted as a “dark place” (p. 88), is in fact a reference to the collection of explanations of Biblical words drawn from various church authorities (see Jennings 1991: 81).

signs of the Last Judgment? The sermon logically proceeds thereafter into a detailed answer of this question. These are the signs, Bílovský meticulously accounts in the concluding *distributio*, and every one of us should be constantly prepared to recognize them so that we can prove worthy when the End comes, and be saved.

Conclusio

As my analysis demonstrated, both the structural frame and the semantic ingredients of Bílovský's sermon are *á priori* determined and allow little room for "poetic license" in the modern sense of the term. The only venue for demonstrating high artistic merit open to a homiletic writer in such a normative poetics is the masterful selection from the limited set of prefabricated semantic *formulae* and structural "panels," and their combination according to the limited "syntactic" rules of the genre. In other words, the artistry of a medieval preacher is rooted not in the originality that breaks out from the canon, but in his ability to explicate to the maximum the inherent artistic potential of this canon.¹²

In this respect we can claim that Bílovský's *Sermon for the Second Sunday of the Advent*, which so masterfully operates within its generic and contextual limits, is indeed a highly artistic example of a Catholic sermon. His contribution for Czech literature is above all the establishing of native Czech quality examples of the genre, written in the vernacular and comparable in their artistic value with the highest examples in the tradition of Catholic homiletics.

¹² For a sophisticated analysis of the 'literary' qualities of medieval sermons see Wenzel 1984 & 1988.

PERICOPEs FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY (DOMINICANS & FRANCISCANS) OF
ADVENT

[= Nocent 1977: 101]

Sunday's topic	The Prophet	The Apostle	The Gospel
	1 A The nations gather; Is. 2: 1-5	4 A The day is near; Rom. 13: 11-14	7 A Watch!; Matthew 24: 37-44 (Noah & the Flood)
Vigilant <i>waiting</i> for the Lord's coming	2 B May God come down!; Is. 63: 16-64: 8	5 B Day of the Lord; I Cor. 1: 3-9	8 B Watch!; Mark 13: 33-37
	3 C A just shoot; Jer. 33: 14-16	6 C Day of the Lord's coming; I Thess. 3: 12-4: 2	9 C Watch! <u>Luke 21: 25-28; 34-36</u>

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Predictability and Artistic Freedom in Bílovský's Homiletic Writings (Abstract)

The paper offers an analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by Bohumir Hynek Bílovský (1659-1725) in his sermons for the Advent (published in 1720). From the example of this chef d'oeuvre of Czech homiletics, the paper addresses the literary qualities of "applied" liturgical genres in general. The basic premise is that a sermon is part (albeit an autonomous one) of the ecclesiastical ritual for a particular feast. According to this premise, the paper examines Bílovský's texts against the backdrop of the Catholic liturgical scenario for the Sundays of the Advent and, more specifically, in connection with the respective Biblical pericopes. In conclusion, it raises the broader question about the levels of predictability and the degrees of freedom open to a homiletic writer by a normative poetics. The artistry of a Bílovský as a preacher, I claim, is rooted not in his breaking out from the canon, but in his ability to reveal to the maximum the inherent artistic potential of this canon.