

WRITTEN WORDS. VITA CYRILLI III: 17*

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*“Schreiben ist ein Mißbrauch der Sprache,
stille für sich lesen ein trauriges Surrogat der Rede.”*

J. W. Goethe

1. FROM THE LIPS OF GREGORY

The Vita of S. Constantinus-Cyrrillus (= VC) tells the story, that young Constantin, after having been seriously disappointed by the vagaries of life, decided to spend his days by studying the immutable wisdom. He sat down “in his house” and learned “by heart the books of Gregory of Nazianzus” – as most if not all translations¹ declare. The relevant part of the sentence (VC III: 17) according to the South Slavonic redaction of the text runs like this:

(1) и поучае се симъ, съдѣваше въ домоу своѣмъ, оуче се изъ оустъ книгами светаго Григоріа Богослова (Grivec, Tomšič 1960: 97)²

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¹ I have been unable to find a translation preserving – as I propose here – the original reading. The numerous translations (Киселков 1923: 7: „изучаваше наизуст книгите на Григория Богослов“; Dvorník 1933: 351: „S'étant voué à l'étude, il restait dans sa maison, apprenant par cœur les livres de Saint Grégoire le Théologien“; Schütz 1985: 27: „lernte die Bücher ... auswendig“; Florja 2000: 48: „И взял за учение, сядя в доме своем, уча на память книги святого Григория Богослова“; Тахиаос 2005: 262 [repeating the older translation from Lavrov]: „И он оставался дома, изучая наизустъ творения Григория Богослова“) may all follow an edition which already has changed the original Inst Pl „книгами“ to Dat Pl „книгам“ resp. repeat Lavrov's edition (Лавров 1930: 3): „уча^ла книгамъ изъустъ“.

² „Et ad litterarum studium se conferens, sedebat in domo sua, memoriae mandans libros sancti Gregorii theologi“ (Grivec, Tomšič 1960: 172).

ММФН (1967: 64)³ and Angelov, Kodov (Ангелов, Кодов 1973: 121)⁴ present the same passage according to the East Slavonic redaction of VC, which differs from the reading of (1) in displaying a Dative Plural *книгамъ* instead of an Instrumental Plural *книгами* and additionally leaving out the gemination *-ъ* with the noun *оусть(ь)*. At first, the reading of the Russian redaction of VC seems quite satisfying because we expect the reflexive verb „*учити сѧ*“ to prototypically⁵ govern a Dative object (like in VC III, 23: „*научи ме хоще дождьствоу граматичьскомоу*“), and the change from Instrumental „*книгами*“ to Dative „*книгамъ*“ is clearly in favour of a smooth connection with the verb „*учити сѧ*“. But the change from Instrumental to Dative is only a try towards a good wording, because „*изъ оусть(ь)*“, whatever case „*книга*“ will be, does hardly have the adverbial meaning „by heart“.⁶

The expression „*изъ оусть*“ is not an adverb „*наизуст/ nazpaměť*“ resp. an adverbial phrase „*на память*“, but a prepositional phrase. The preposition „*изъ*“ governs a genitive and the noun „*оусть*“ is genitive plural. The writing “double jer” (*-ь*) should be read as an orthographic Serbism, because in Serbian manuscripts starting with the 14th c. the regular writing of the genitive plural „*-a*“ was replaced by writing „*два ъ*“ (Daničić 1981: 70). Accordingly, the writing „*оусть*“ represents the genitive plural “(from the) lips”.

There is additional evidence from the context of the whole anecdote that makes clear that young Constantine never had learned “by heart” the works of Gregory of Nazianzus. Because if he had, why then does he become in need of a teacher of grammar who would help him to get deeper into the meaning of Gregory’s writings (VC III: 21)? It is, to say the least, rather a musical idea that Constantine would have learned texts “by heart” without being able to understand them, be it out of theological or, as VC states, out of grammatical reasons. How can you possibly learn something by heart without being able to reproduce its meaning? Already the fact, that Constantin sought grammatical help in understanding the writings of Gregory seems argument enough to state that he could not have tried to learn Gregory’s writings by heart. Not only because of morphological reasons, but also for the sake of avoiding unnecessary extraordinary meaning the phrase „*изъ оусть*“ does not mean “by heart” but “from the lips”.

³ „*A zabrav se do učení, sedával ve svém domě a učil se nazpaměť knihám [учасл книгамъ изъоусть] svatého Řehoře Bohoslovce.*“

⁴ „*И отдавайки се на наука, той си седеше вкъщи и учеше наизуст писанията [уче се изъоусть книгамъ] на свети Григорий Богослов.*“

⁵ Rare occurrences show „*učiti se*“ to govern an Accusative (*хотѣахъ что от него оучити сѧ*; Supr [Цейтлин, Вечерка, Блахова 1994: 756] = “they wanted something [Acc] to learn from him”), but these are *ad hoc* constructions.

⁶ Danti (1981: 46) in a close reading of section III of VC thinks that Constantin “*impara a memoria le poesie di Gregorio*”, assuming that Constantine memorized not the prose, but the verses of Gregory, which is somewhat more probable, but firstly still follows the ungrammatical reading of VC III: 17 (“by heart”) and, secondly stands against VC III: 21 (*бесъды*), which states that Constantine read Gregory’s homilies.

2. VOICE AND WORD

“Constantin learned from the lips of Gregory with the help of books.” VC III: 17 neither is another example for Constantin’s intellectual abilities⁷, nor is the proposed translation “from the lips” a poetic formulation. The factual meaning of the sentence is clear: Constantin read or even studied Gregory’s books. The act of reading is expressed in the phrase “to learn from lips with the help of books”, which poses the question of this paper: Under which cultural circumstances can such formulation be expected? There are several possibilities which do not exclude each other. Sentence (1) is ...

- ... the culturally adequate use of written language in Antiquity and Middle Ages (2.1)
- ... a formulation related to the semantics of written language (2.2)
- ... a Christian pattern (2.3)

2.1 READING ALOUD

In the eyes of a present-day reader the formulation “from the lips of Gregory with the help of books” is a confusion of oral and written language. But in antiquity the common practice of reading exactly consists of this medial mixing: to read mens to reproduce written language as oral performance. The practice to read aloud was a strong cultural behaviour, even if no potential hearer was present at the time of reading or, on the contrary, if people present at the time of reading did not qualify as potential hearers, because the content of the written text was not meant to come to their audience. In every case, fully ignorant to possible witnesses the recipient of a written text normally read it aloud.

In his seminal study Balogh (1927) has given many, sometimes very irritating to modern understanding examples for the custom to read aloud, and Neumer (2003) added more reflections about the phenomenon of reading aloud, which can also be seen by studying the phrasal structure of antique texts⁸. As an example from Church Slavonic literature, slightly more special, we add an episode from the Vita of Bishop Porphyry of Gaza (*dies natalis* February 26; retold in Ростовский 1993). After the baptism of empress Aelia Eudoxia’s boy child Theodosius, who eventually became emperor Theodosius II. (401–450), an official of the empress carried the new-born baby at the time, when all left the church after the end of the ceremony. At the

⁷ MMFH 1967: 64 (footnote) mentions, that according to Anasthasius the Librarian Constantin knew also the works of Dionysios Areopagita by heart. Hardly this is any argument in support of „изъ оустъ“ = “by heart”. If hyperbolically it is said about a scholar, that he knows “his Shakespeare by heart”, then nobody would expect, that the proposition, for sure uttered with all sincere feeling, could be proven in this way, that the scholar could reproduce word by word all the Shakespearean dramas from first to last. But, on the contrary, the proposition implies the expectation, that someone, who knows “his Shakespeare by heart”, will not need any grammatical support to understand Shakespeare’s texts at all.

⁸ “Wenn Römer und die Bewohner des lateinischen Herrschaftsgebietes lateinische Texte lasen, taten sie das anders als wir. Sie sprachen nämlich beim Lesen halblaut mit, was sie lasen. Das bewirkte eine Verringerung der Lesegeschwindigkeit” (Glücklich 2007: 6).

church entrance bishop Porphyry laid down a sheet of paper (свитка) on the boy and the servant took it up and read it aloud, putting his hand under the boy's head and presenting him to the audience, as if the boy himself would speak (как бы для выражения соизволения) in authority as *porphyrogenetos*. The audience accepted the message with acclamations as the first decree of the new-born emperor⁹.

On the one hand, the example is different from usual examples for the custom of reading aloud. It is clear that a decree has to be read aloud in order to be proclaimed to the audience which gathered around the church entrance. Reading aloud in this situation is not different from what we would expect to happen. But on the other hand the episode is a good example for the status of written and spoken words in antiquity. No one in the audience was not well aware of the fact, that a baby, even if born as emperor, cannot speak and therefore cannot deliver decrees. The absolute and by any assumptions unbridgeable difference between the speaker (the servant) and the assumed author of the text (the bishop) on the one hand and the pretended origin of the words (the baby) did not hinder the acceptance of the words "as if" they would come directly from the lips of the new-born emperor. The story is not in the first line about reading aloud, but about the effect, that something read aloud is going to be accepted „as if“ actually someone else is speaking.

Speaking about the custom to read aloud is speaking about the conception of written language which is – even in the extreme example from the *Vita Porphyrii* – always the conception "as if another would speak". Svenbro (2002) mentions, that Greek had about 50 words used at different times to designate the act of reading, which shows that the new cultural technique "writing and reading" needed some time to arrive at a common accepted concept with a common accepted term for it. Interestingly, Svenbro points to the gr. verbs "legein, ana-legein, ana-legesthai, epi-legesthai" = "to say, speak, read" which show by their morphology (ana-, epi-), that the reader completes a text in adding his own voice to it¹⁰. In pronouncing mute letters the reader reproduces them as if they really would form an acoustic sound chain (Svenbro 2002: 62), and thus Svenbro comes to a definition of reading (Svenbro 2002: 63, italics i.o.), which especially holds true for Antiquity and Middle Ages:

Lesen heißt somit, seine eigene Stimme dem geschriebenen Wort (letztlich dem Schreiber) zur Verfügung zu stellen. (...) Seine [the reader's] Stimme unterwirft sich dem geschriebenen Wort, sie vereinigt sich mit ihm. *Gelesen werden* heißt infolgedessen, über den Körper des Lesers Macht ausüben, sogar aus großem räumlichen und zeitlichen Abstand heraus.

Reading means, to place the own voice at the disposal of the written text and *to be read* means, to command the body of the reader throughout spatial or temporal distance. [paraphrase Th.D.]

⁹ „Все видевшие и слышавшие это удивились, благословляя новорожденного царя и многолетствуя ему, начинающему свое царствование делом милоседия...“ (Ростовский 1933: 471).

¹⁰ „Der Leser fügt dem geschriebenen Wort seine Stimme hinzu, welches für sich unvollständig ist. (...) So wird das Lesen ein „epi-log“ für das geschriebene Wort, dem eine eigene Stimme fehlt und das mithin auf den Leser angewiesen ist.“ (Svenbro 2002: 61).

It is this concept of reading, which lies beneath the custom of reading aloud, “as if” the author of the text would speak by himself. It may well be that at early stages in introducing the new medium “written language” into society the same illusionary effects took place as we see today in the use of our new media. “Written language” was the fascinating new medium which became really “hot” – in McLuhan’s (1992) terms – if it was read aloud “as if” the author himself would speak.

2.2 TRANSCENDENT STRUCTURE

Obviously, people were able to read silently also in Antiquity or the middle Byzantine times of Constantin. Of course, there has been neither physical inability, nor intellectual delusion or moral obligation to read silently resp. not silently. But the concept, that written language is a medium which demands the reader to let his own voice be ruled by the voice of an original speaker had been solidified and became the leading perception of the medium, both, when using it (reading aloud) and when speaking about it (to read = to hear the voice of another). After all, Derrida’s “Of Grammatology” (1983) polemicalises with an asserted “theological” comprehension in the relation between speaking and writing throughout the Western (Christian) culture. Derrida, although failing in realistic historical explanations, has a bunch of examples we will not repeat here, but instead quote another episode from Church Slavonic literature.

The “Dialogues” of Gregory the Great (Gregorius 1849 = Patrologia Latina 76: coll. 293; cf. VMČ 1997: 319 = fol. 159d42–27) in book 3, chapter 32 contain the story about bishops from Africa whose tongues had been cut off by Vandals, partisans of Arianism, in order that the bishops could not confess any more the authentic Trinitarian belief¹¹:

Nam cum [Vandalorum rex] eis in ipsa defensione veritatis silentium indicaret, nec tamen ipsi contra perfidiam tacerent, ne tacendo forsitan consensisse viderentur, raptus in furorem, eorum linguas abscondi radicitus fecit. Res mira et multis nota senioribus, quia ita post defensione veritatis etiam sine lingua loquebantur, sicut prius loqui per linguam consueverant.

The martyrdom of the African bishops is like a metaphor for the theological implications of the concept of reading “as if” someone else would speak. In Antiquity, reading means, to lend his own voice to the command of a first speaker and the voice from the first speaker – the author – makes itself heard by using the reader’s body. The Almighty author, who wants His voice to be heard, is not limited to bodily

¹¹ In the German translation (Gregorius 1933: 166): “Als unter Kaiser Justinian die Vandalen in Afrika eine wütende arianische Verfolgung gegen den katholischen Glauben unternahmen, wurden einige Bischöfe, weil sie fest auf der Verteidigung der Wahrheit bestanden, öffentlich vor das Gericht gestellt. (...) Da er ihnen bei der Verteidigung zu schweigen gebot, sie aber der Irrlehre gegenüber nicht schweigen wollten, um nicht etwa durch das Stillschweigen den Schein der Zustimmung zu erwecken, geriet er in Wut und ließ ihnen die Zunge an der Wurzel ausschneiden. (...) ... er habe noch gesehen, wie ihr Mund ohne Zunge sprach, ja sie hätten den Mund geöffnet und gerufen: 'Schauet her, wir haben keine Zunge und wir reden doch!'”

abilities. He can make stones live and cry (Habakuk 2:11, Lk 3:8) and make Himself heard by any bodily phenomenon. The bodily phenomenon is needed only to meet the necessities of hearers, whose perception is bound to bodily experience. But the voice itself is transcendent to the body which only transports and utters it. This is the experience of the African fathers – they are testifying (μάρτυς = martyr) as bodies that there is a truth to be heard with a defined origin, but the voice springing from this origin is transcendent to their bodies. The bodies of the martyrs and the voice which is speaking through them stand in the same relation like the sign and the meaning, but taking sign as both oral and written lingual element and meaning as origin of speech. Oral or written language is the bodily appearance of a personal origin or, in more linguistic terms, written or oral speech is the appearance of a personal intention. If we understand the concept of language, which is expressed by antique terms, in a more pragmatical way, much like Speech Act Theory, than the behaviour of reading aloud is more understandable: writing is conceptualized as speech duplicated in another medium, which lacks audibility. Audibility is the sign for the presence of the speaker. To make the written, this is the duplicated speech as far as possible similar to real speech, audibility as sign of presence has to be added again with the help of the reader's lips. Audibility of speech does not add to the intellectual content of the speech, but to its performance as presence of a speaker. The theological implications of reading aloud are at the same time the fundament on which the custom of reading aloud can emerge: If sign is not designating a concept, but the intention of a speaker, than it is inevitably that a sign needs its audible realisation.

2.3 DEAD LETTERS

I am aware that the arguments in 2.1 and 2.2 somehow diverge from usual considerations, because most authors (including Derrida) who speak about the concept of language in Antiquity take it as a given fact that also Antiquity would have made a difference between sign and concept (in Saussure's terms: signifier and signified). They overlook the fact, that Saussure's difference already is insensitive to the medial difference between oral and written signs: for Saussure, each sign, be it oral or written, is a signifier designating a signified. But speaking about Antiquity we are dealing with an understanding of language, which is sensitive to medial differences: An oral sign is a signifier designating a person with intentions to speak; a written sign is only designating an oral sign, but otherwise mute and dead. Note the fear of the African bishops (2.2) that their silence could be misunderstood as mute acceptance of heresy: speaking or not speaking in a given situation is always subject to interpretation about the intentions of present persons who choose to speak or not to speak. In Antiquity the conception of language does not remove language from the speaker. Antique language thinking is not insensitive to medial change, but on the contrary: lingual signs in written media lack the most prominent characteristics for language – the oral sign als sign of a speaker. And this is why the speaker had to be added in reading aloud.

From this point of view the Biblical metaphors of “dead” signs get a culturally adequate meaning. Often quoted is 2 Corinthians 3:7–8 (KJV):

But if the ministration of death, written *and* engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which *glory* was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?

The “ministration of death” is related to the statement, that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (v. 6) because the written sign always lacks the audible presence of a speaker. While the written sign may come in contrast to reality (the „law“), only the intention of a speaker, how the written sign should be applied to reality („the spirit“), performs the full meaning of a lingual sign. It is therefore, that Christian thinking always relates on the duplicity to accept the Old Testament on the one hand and on the other hand to insist on the right to apply it situationally guided by „the spirit“.

I will not deepen the Christian metaphor of „dead“ letters which for their full meaning need the presence of a speaker who utters them intentionally. It would be unfair in a short paper to contrast the Christian metaphor of “dead” letters with Jewish thinking, a contrast, that was not intended by the first Christian writers themselves like Paul. To analyse culturally accumulated stereotypes of the contradiction between (Christian) “spirit” and (Jewish) “law” is just beyond the scope of an article and also beyond my competence. It is only to mention, that the metaphor of “dead” letters originates on the fundament of a language thinking, which is sensitive (against the prejudgment) to medial change: the language thinking of Antiquity cannot be understood without the crucial connection between oral signs and their origin in a speaker and written language lacks the speaker’s audible presence which means it lacks the phenomenality of language itself.

Just to give another example it can be pointed to a common misunderstanding about Christian “meditation” in the Middle Ages. It has been shown, that meditation did not consist in silent contemplation or the like. On the contrary, the Greek verb *μελετᾶν* was synonymous with „to recite by heart/ from memory“ (Wortley 2006: 318):

other than in exceptional circumstances, *meletê* was no silent matter among the early monks, far from it! It was in fact the vocal and continuous enunciation of the Word of God, the bold proclamation by the anchorite of sacred texts he had committed to memory (Wortley 2006: 317).

No problem, to go from here to the Hesychast Jesus Prayer but it should be enough for the purpose of this paper to see, that not only reading the Scriptures, but also contemplating and memorizing them was an audible act, giving the “dead” letter back its voice, or more adequately in a monastic context, offering one’s voice as an instrument for the words of another.

3. CONCLUSIONS

After having pointed to the real – as I think – meaning of VC III: 17, that Constantin “learned from the lips of Gregory with the help of books” we tried to show

that this meaning of the sentence is fully in accordance with the behavioural custom in Antiquity to read aloud (2.1). Thus, reading is an act which includes a bodily sign (written letter) and a transcendent speaker (author) and therefore is a perfect model for theological reasoning about bodies which let through them the voice of God. I doubt, that the theological implications of the structure are the reason for it to emerge, but rather on the contrary, the transcendental structure of written words and an absent author gave way to theological metaphors (2.2). The most prominent metaphor of written language in Christian context is the “dead letter”, a metaphor, which can be understood to emerge in a culture, which conceptualizes reading as “giving voice to letters” (2.3). Thus, the formulation of VC III: 17 is fully acceptable in both Antique and Christian context, and we would have to go far back to Platon’s Phaidros about the unacceptability of written language at all to construe a pagan vs. Christian contrast, which otherwise hardly can be seen. VC II: 17 is the reflection of a Christian pattern, which, as so often is seen, emerged in a culture, whose learning is deeply intertwined with pre-christian ideas.

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(Summary)