

“TO SAY GREAT THINGS GREATLY”.

THOMAS THORILD ON RHETORIC AND ELOQUENCE

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In the history of Swedish literature the poet, philosopher, and publicist Thomas Thorild (1759-1808) is generally considered a central figure in the movement against classicism. Thorild was a pioneer of the pre-Romantic aesthetics of expression that paved the way for the High Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. Modern scholarship has devoted much attention to Thorild's claim that an original writer must reject the formal demands of classical doctrine and forge his own path.¹ Considerable attention has also been given to the innovative character of Thorild's own literary writings. However, Thorild's break with classical doctrine not only involved his diverging from

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¹ For the most thorough discussion to date of Thorild's aesthetic ideas, see Arvidson 1931, pp. 295-343.

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existing literary patterns or norms;² in essence, Thorild discarded rhetoric as a theoretical foundation for literary communication. What I would describe as Thorild's 'radicalism', then, lies not so much in the innovative stylistic devices that are found in his work – for example, the characteristic asyndetic and elliptic constructions – as in his understanding of what writing and reading poetry really means. For Thorild, the main objective of literary communication was to establish a direct emotional contact between the author and his readers.³ In this endeavor he largely abandoned neoclassical literary theory, with its strong connection to the rhetorical model of communication.

But if Thorild can be seen as a precursor of a different and a-rhetorical mode of communication, what of his own views on rhetoric and eloquence? Does his work include any statements on the issue of communication that can be read as a theoretical foundation for an a-rhetorical – or even anti-rhetorical – literary practice?⁴

As is very often the case when Thorild addresses theoretical issues, the answers to these questions are complex. When dealing with Thorild's views on philosophy, politics, and aesthetics one soon notices that he often applies his concepts in a confusing and contradictory way; his position changes constantly and his mode of expression is often elliptical. The Swedish literary scholar Horace Engdahl encapsulates this difficulty when writing that Thorild 'does not give his argumentation the technically elaborated form demanded

² See my discussion of Thorild's poem *Passionerna* ('The Passions', published 1785), in Fischer 2002.

³ On the notion of literary communication in the late eighteenth century, see Fischer 2004 and 2005.

⁴ There are no comprehensive studies of Thorild's view on classical rhetoric; however, Fridholm 1940, pp. 68-77, discusses Thorild's work in relation to Longinus. Thorild's relation to Cicero and Quintilian is commented upon by Arvidson in his edition of

by science or philosophy taken more strictly. Thorild exhorts, exemplifies, and affirms. He stretches the language to the breaking point and delightedly raises his voice, as if his meaning was obvious'.⁵ Something similar might be said about Thorild's attitude towards classical rhetorical theory. In his work we find programmatic rejections of the doctrine of classical rhetoric alongside expressions of more or less unreserved adherence to its basic assumptions. This ambiguity cannot be satisfactorily accounted for simply by referring to Thorild's notorious conceptual inconsistency; it also needs to be seen in a historical perspective. For in many respects, Thorild's stance represents the general late eighteenth-century view of the status of rhetorical doctrine.

In fact, it has become something of a commonplace to talk about the 'demise' of rhetoric in late eighteenth-century European culture. It is no doubt true that the traditionally strong position of classical rhetoric in the educational system was questioned and that rhetoric's position as the dominant literary theory was challenged by new ideas on literary communication. Rhetoric was dismissed as an art of dissimulation and conceit, and was contrasted to ways of expression that were considered spontaneous, sincere, and truly original.⁶ At the same time, rhetorical theory itself had gone through a transformation, as exemplified by the tendency, from the sixteenth century

Thorild's collected works; see Thorild 1982, pp.148-149; and Thorild 1990, pp. 19-20.

⁵ "inte ger sin argumentation den tekniskt utarbetade form som vetenskap eller filosofi i strängare mening förutsätter. Thorild besvärjer, exemplifierar och slår fast. Han belastar språket till bristningsgränsen och stegrar förtjust rösten, som om meningen vore uppenbar"; Thorild 2000, p. viii. All translations from Swedish are mine, unless otherwise indicated. I would like to thank Russell L. Friedman and Pernille Harsting for helping me with the English translation of Thorild's complex Swedish texts.

⁶ See the discussions in Cahn 1986; Bender & Wellbery 1990; Campe 1990; and Fafner 2003.

onwards, to emphasize the issue of style at the expense of argumentation.⁷ In Sweden, this is reflected in the fact that, from 1667 onwards, *elocutio* became increasingly important, as *inventio* became increasingly marginalized in successive editions of the German polymath Gerhardus Johannes Vossius's *Elementa rhetorica*, the most commonly used rhetorical primer in the Swedish grammar schools.⁸ Furthermore, as a speech by the eighteenth-century Swedish scholar (and later bishop) Olof Celsius shows, in the 1760s the term 'rhetoric' could be used more or less synonymously with 'style' (*elocutio*).⁹

The particular events leading to this 'demise' and the details of the debate concerning the status of rhetoric in late eighteenth-century Sweden have yet to be explored.¹⁰ However, it is clear that in this debate rhetoric was considered neither as a coherent set of oratorical and pedagogical practices, nor as a set of theoretical concepts regarding these practices. Accordingly, attacks on the efficiency of traditional rhetorical pedagogy are found side by side with appraisals of the great importance of eloquence for public life.¹¹ In the same vein, accusations against professional rhetoric of being nothing more than an immoral art of conceit and dissimulation are juxtaposed with de-

⁷ Cf. also Genette 1972, esp. pp. 22-25.

⁸ On the Swedish editions of Vossius's *Elementa rhetorica*, which was originally published in Leiden in 1626, see Stina Hansson's "Efterskrift" ('Postscript') in Vossius 1990, pp. 38-46. On the change of focus from *inventio* to *elocutio*, see op.cit., pp. 43-44.

⁹ '[Orators and poets] are not satisfied until they have crammed the complete art of rhetoric, with all its tropes and schemes, into every single line they write' ("gifva sig icke tillfreds, förän de tvingat hela Rhetorican med alla dess troper och schemata inom hvarje stroph af det de skrifva"); Celsius 1768, p. 33.

¹⁰ Öhrberg 2001, pp. 24-25, lists the recent studies on rhetorical practice in eighteenth-century Sweden.

¹¹ Skuncke 1993, pp. 15-16, comments on the difficulty of determining the status of rhetoric in eighteenth-century Sweden.

mands that the classical models be meticulously studied and imitated. ‘Artful’ eloquence was dismissed as cold and sterile, and at the same time the ability to give apt expression to one’s innermost emotions was put forth as an ideal by such an influential thinker as, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Moreover, criticism of rhetoric was often combined with criticism of the widespread teaching of Latin – which was dismissed as time-consuming and largely unprofitable – and it is not always possible to make out whether the target of the criticism is Latin or rhetoric, or both.¹² Clearly, the classical rhetorical tradition, in which theory was integrated with elocutionary and pedagogical practice, had become increasingly ‘fragmented’ during the eighteenth century. For this reason, the Swedish debate seldom touched upon rhetoric as a unified field but instead focused on various aspects of rhetoric’s theory and practice.¹³

In his recent book on *Transformationen der Rhetorik*, Dietmar Till has drawn attention to the fact that we cannot point to a sudden rupture in the development of rhetorical doctrine in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but rather to an asymmetrical erosion of the traditional elements of rhetoric.¹⁴ Indeed, as Brian Vickers has famously argued, the history of rhetoric may best be described as a series of ‘fragmentations’ (in the medieval period and in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries) and ‘reintegrations’ (in the Renaissance and, perhaps, in our own age) of the classical view of rhetoric as a unified system of thought, language, communication, and pedagogical

¹² On the status of Latin in the higher education of eighteenth-century Sweden, see Tengström 1973, pp. 73-79; and Lindberg 1984.

¹³ To this extent the Swedish debate was part of the general European debate on the issue, on which see Cahn 1986, p. 150.

¹⁴ See Till 2004, p. 105.

method.¹⁵ The examples given above of the discussions of rhetorical topics in eighteenth-century Sweden indicate that here we have yet another instance of ‘rhetorical fragmentation’.

In this paper I focus on the theoretical discussions of rhetoric in the work of Thomas Thorild. I hope to show that, in these discussions, Thorild often took his point of departure in the conceptual framework of classical rhetoric, but clearly distanced himself from the understanding of rhetoric as a theory of persuasive communication.

Thorild on Style

In his earliest surviving prose piece, an oration given at the Gothenburg student club in the Swedish university town of Lund in the spring of 1778, Thorild, in a thoroughly conventional and apparently unreserved manner, opens his speech by adopting the rhetorical idea of the inseparable union between wisdom and eloquence:

The ability to express one’s thoughts in an orderly and clear fashion has always been held in high esteem. Among the Greeks and the Romans, the wisest were always the most eloquent. [...] Today everything should be gracious and beautiful. The greatest geniuses have introduced this custom and common acclaim has affirmed it.¹⁶

Such unreserved praise of eloquence stands isolated in Thorild’s work, where classical rhetoric as such is nowhere discussed at length. Nevertheless Thorild addresses the issue of rhetoric – or rather issues that may be seen as rhetorical – in various contexts, first and foremost in connection with his first

¹⁵ See Vickers 1988, pp. 214-215.

¹⁶ “Den egenskapen at uttrycka sina Tankar med ordning och ljus har i alla Tider varit högt aktad. Hos Grekerne och Romarne voro de visaste altid de vältaligaste. [...] Alt

appearance on the Swedish cultural scene, in 1784, as the author of the poem “Passionerna” (‘The Passions’) and as the editor of the short-lived journal *Den nye granskaren* (‘The New Observer’).¹⁷ Having to comment upon and even defend his unorthodox style of writing, Thorild formulated what might be called his own theory of communication. Furthermore, in 1789, in the pamphlet *The Sermon of Sermons. On the Impiety of Priests and the Fall of Religion*, written during a prolonged stay in England, Thorild criticized the bad oratorical habits of the clergy and contrasted these with his own view of ‘true eloquence’.

Thorild’s thoughts on rhetoric are mainly concerned with style (*elocutio*) and declamation. Style is, in fact, a recurrent theme in Thorild’s works: it is central to his poetics and may be seen as a key concept in his views on language, communication, and literature. The topic of declamation holds a central position in Thorild’s thought on rhetorical issues and is dealt with in the context of his discussions of delivery (*actio*) and oratorical practice in general.

The question of style is a main issue in Thorild’s quarrels with the Swedish poets, literary critics, and advocates of the classical style, Johan Henric Kellgren (1751-1795) and Carl Gustaf Leopold (1756-1829). Likewise, it was his ideas of style that lead Thorild to dismiss as superficial such poetical conventions as rhyme and meter. However, it is not entirely clear what precisely ‘style’ meant to Thorild. At times his understanding of the term appears to owe a great deal to classical rhetorical theory, where stylistic considerations serve the pragmatic goal of persuading the audience. Thus, in

bör i våra dagar vara leende och Skönt. De största Snillen hafva infört denne seden; och et allmänt bifall har stadgat den”; Thorild 1932, p. 298.

¹⁷ The journal was published for a five-month period only.

the manuscript text “Filosofiska betraktelser” (‘Philosophical Meditations’), written between 1781 and 1782, Thorild wrote:

When I use so many hard words such as ‘fool’, ‘crazy’, and so on, this is not part of my philosophy; it is in order to be comprehensible and powerful in the language used in this country. In the same way I remember that in my early youth I used to curse in order to be eloquent (for already then I loved all that was strong and energetic). In order to dominate the imagination, imagination must gain all of its fire and all of its weapons by way of greater force: the expression of the beautiful and the ugly, of the serene and the despicable, are natural to the senses: it is these one must attack, the sense with the weapons of the sense. Dressing the truth in sensual beauty and the lie in sensual ugliness, that’s what nature does. It does not speak, it is – and it carries you away.¹⁸

The quotation contains, in Thorild’s rather succinct formulations, little more than a fairly conventional rhetorical consideration of the issue of *decorum*. Thus, also according to Thorild, when choosing the right expression a speaker or a writer must consider what is proper in relation both to the subject matter and to the effect he wishes to have upon a particular audience. It is interesting to see that Thorild further elaborates on this idea by referring to nature and its *modus operandi* as a basic model. The term ‘nature’ is used frequently in Thorild’s writings, and this has led modern scholars to regard him as a deterministic materialist and even a pantheist.¹⁹ However, on account of his unsystematic use of terminology, it is not easy to determine the

¹⁸ “När jag nyttjar så många hårda namn af dåre, af vansinnig etc. så är det ej min filosofi: det är för at i Landets Språk vara begripelig och kraftig. Så som jag mins at jag en tid i min första ungdom svor af våltalighet (ty jag älskade redan då det energiska och starka). Inbillningen för at herrska öfver inbillningen, måste hafva all dess eld, alla dess vapen, i mera styrka: uttrycken af skönt och styggeligt, af högt och förakteligt, äro Sinnenas naturliga: dem måste man bestorma, Sinnet med Sinnets vapen: kläda Sanningen i sinlig skönhet, och Löggen i sinlig styggelse: Så gör Naturen – Säjer ej: det är: utan bortförer”; Thorild 1932, pp. 441-442.

¹⁹ See e.g. Arvidson 1931, pp. 39-160.

precise character of Thorild's 'naturalism'.²⁰ What is clear is that, in the passage above, Thorild transforms a line of argumentation, which at the outset concerned style, into a deterministic *credo*.²¹ By referring to the authority of nature Thorild legitimizes his own use of a powerful, hyper-persuasive language.

Yet, this idea of style and linguistic expression implies a contradiction: on the one hand, Thorild sees style as a forceful means of persuading the audience; on the other hand, he requires that style be a 'natural' and necessary expression of the content itself. In many of his texts Thorild clearly felt compelled to respond to allegations of incomprehensibility, and from a rhetorical-pragmatic perspective incomprehensibility must be regarded as a failure. But it is precisely in this context that Thorild displayed how far he actually was from having a rhetorical view of linguistic communication.

In an article that appeared in his 1784 journal *Den nye granskaren*, Thorild defended his choice of a complex style that went far beyond the expectations and intellectual capacity of his audience:

People are apparently bewildered (I have already heard so much of this!) at *this unusual* tone. But to *me* it is natural. And I believe it shall be so for all those who are better informed about the powers of the soul. In *my* understanding, the dignity and calling of an author is also something infinitely more elevated. He is a priest of the holy truth of nature. Should he not then be allowed to freely deliver himself to the whole force of his soul and feeling? Would anyone – for there are individuals who are deceived by their own aloofness and pettiness – would anyone hear his cries of truth and felicity, without being moved in the slightest?

"*Incomprehensibility*"? How long can one comfort oneself with this self-denigrating word? The ignorant, petty, hasty, and powerless minds looked for strength in their own shamelessness and despair; and they found this. Wretched prank! Good for a couple of days. But this word is unworthy of a *people!*

²⁰ Cf. Bredsdorff 2003, pp. 280-281.

²¹ On the naturalistic and deterministic foundations of Thorild's philosophy, see also Thorild 1932, pp. 443-444.

Should I be somewhat hard to *understand*, so be it, for *understanding* is not something you breathe in with the air! I see no reason to consider it as something natural in itself! And what is more: is not the audience that I am looking for, the noblest in the country? It is with them that feeling and greater understanding should commence. We have enough authors who do not trouble the soul: petty, buffoons, despicable. But every author should by nature be *above* his readers. What is there then to say? Let us not desecrate and demean nature and genius by such base utterances. Is it not a pure, sweet, and elevated bliss to *rise* in light and feeling? *Lightness* is no *elevated* taste. [...] It is the bread and butter of the soul.²²

Here Thorild sees style as primarily an intuitive consequence of the author's feeling, to the benefit of which every pragmatic consideration must be cast aside. Instead of adjusting to the stylistic norms and expectations of the audience, the author should lift their minds to his own level.²³ In order to dissolve the contradictory definitions of style being, on the one hand, the 'natural' and necessary expression of an author's feeling, and, on the other, a pragmatic vehicle for communication, Thorild here employs the theoretical notion of an elite audience ('the noblest in the country'). This made it pos-

²² "Man skall förundra sig (jag har redan hört så mycket sådant!) öfver *denna Ovanliga* tonen. Men för *mig* är den Naturlig. Och jag tror at den skall vara det för alla dem, som känna något mera af Själens Krafter. I *mit* begrep är en Authors Världighet och Kallelse också något oändeligen högre. Han är en Präst i Naturens heliga Sanning. Skulle han då ej fritt få lämna sig åt hela sin Själs och Känslas styrka? Skulle någon – därföre at här gifvas väsender, inbiliska af sjelfva sin köld och litenhet – Skulle någon aldeles utan en rörelse höra hans rop til Sanning och Lyksalighet?!/ 'Obegriplighet?' Huru länge skall man trösta sig med detta sjelf-förnedrande Ordet? De okunniga, små, qvicka och magtlösa hufvuden, sökte i sin skamlöhet eller förtviflan en styrka; och funno denna. Eländiga uptåg! godt för några dagar. Men et *Folk* anstår ej detta ordet! Om jag ock skulle vara något svår at *förstå*; så är ju detta *förstå*, ej en egenskap som man andas in med luften! Jag ser ej något skäl at anse den för så naturlig för sig! Och annars: är ej det Publicum jag söker, det Ädlaste i Landet? Där skall känsla och högre förstånd börja. Man har nog Authorer som göra Själén ingen möda: små, gycklare, föraktliga. Men hvar Author bör naturligen vara *öfver* sina Läsare. Hvad har man då at säga? – Låt om Oss ej Ohelga och förnedra Naturen och Snillet med så låga inkast! Är det ej en ren, ljuf och hög sällhet at *stiga* i ljus och känsla? *Lättheten* är ingen *Hög Smak*. [...] Det är Själens alldags föda"; Thorild 1934, pp. 17-18.

sible for him to defend what were in his day considered to be major deviations from the audience's stylistic norms and values.

At the same time it is clear that, on several occasions, Thorild and his audience, or at least his critics, failed to understand each other as regards the issue of style. In the brief article "Inkast" ('Opinion'), which was also published in *Den nye granskaren* in 1784, Thorild rejected the accusation that he was 'declaiming too much'.²⁴ In his view, this accusation merely reflected the audience's inability to recognize the strong emotions that dictated his expression at the moment of writing:

Do they even know what it means to declaim? When the weak soul cannot *feel*, it wonders why others shout "*oh!*". God in Heaven cannot prevent the weak soul from finding incomprehensibility in the *elevated*, and declamation in the *strong emotion!* *To declaim* is, in fact, to deliver strong words rather than noble nature, and big sounds rather than elevated emotion. Judge me *accordingly!* Above everything I hate lies. But where does the spiritless and cold man see anything but *body*? Is not the world merely mechanical and dead to him? Are all immortal songs no more than sounds? – Read the world's supreme examples of genius, works in which feeling and the tone of the soul are at their highest. Understand them. And then be attentive to that upon which you pass judgment.²⁵

Here again it is obvious that, to Thorild, style cannot be defined pragmatically and that traditional rhetorical considerations must be rejected in favor

²³ I have dealt with this in greater detail in Fischer 2002, p. 79.

²⁴ "*Declamerar för mycket*"; Thorild 1934, p. 35.

²⁵ "Vet man hvad *Declamera* är? När den svaga Själens ej kan *känna*, så Undrar hon hvarföre den andra ropar *ach!* Gud i Himmelen kan ej hindra Svagheten at finna i det *Höga* obegriplighet, och i den *starka Känslan* declamation! Det är *Declamera*, at gifva mera starka ord än ädelt väsende, mera stora ljud än hög känsla. Döme man mig *därefter!* Jag hatar Lögn öfver alt. Men hvar ser den själ-toma och kalla människan annat än *Kropp*? Verlden för hånne är ju mekanisk och död? Hela odödliga Sångere ej annat än ljud? – Läs Verldens yppersta Prof af Snille, Arbeten där Själens ton och Känslan äro högst. Förstå dem. Världigas sedan gifva akt på det ni dömer"; Thorild 1934, p. 35.

of ‘authentic expression’. Thus, Thorild’s position is far removed from the theory of style of classical rhetoric, as becomes even more apparent in another statement from the same text: ‘*Big words* do not make up a sublime style; rather feeling, elevation, and power do.’²⁶ If this is the nature of the sublime style, it is difficult to grasp what Thorild wanted the term ‘style’ to refer to. The classical rhetorical theory of style comprises both the choice of the right wording in accordance with ‘good usage’, clarity, and linguistic elaboration (*latinitas, claritas, ornatus*), and a consideration of the appropriateness of the wording in a specific literary and social context (*decorum*). However, to Thorild the particular choice of wording was clearly irrelevant. Whatever words such as ‘feeling’, ‘elevation’, and ‘power’ might mean in the context of Thorild’s text, it is obvious, from a rhetorical point of view, that they can only be discussed in terms of wording and formulation, and this is a discussion that Thorild seems eager to avoid.

This somewhat paradoxical view on the issue of style is also found in the 1784 essay “Skrifsätt” (‘Way of Writing’). Here Thorild emphatically claims that an author’s ‘way of writing’ should always be a reflection of the thoughts he wishes to express. According to Thorild, then, readers tend to perceive as clear and comprehensible the kind of language that merely conveys ordinary and trivial thoughts, whereas those same readers react negatively to an author such as himself. However, he adds, the opposition to his way of writing is based on a misunderstanding: the audience’s difficulty with his work has nothing to do with his way of expression but rather with the very thoughts that he expresses:

²⁶ “*Stora Ord* gör ingen sublim Stil, utan Känslan, Högheten, Kraften”; Thorild 1934, p. 36.

He who thinks *in an ordinary manner* is prone to write *in a transparent manner*. But higher ideas often involve the difficulty that although you understand the language very well, you do not grasp the meaning all that easily. One is not used to thinking in such an elevated manner. But the effort is uplifting.²⁷

To Thorild, there cannot be such a thing as an inadequate style, as long as the style employed in a given text is a ‘natural’ expression of its contents:

*From the person who writes customs declarations to the person who writes oracular works of wisdom and genius, all levels are too high, or too low, or natural, according to different minds. The petty is natural, the mediocre is natural, and the exceptional is as well.*²⁸

What matters is whether style and contents – or in other words: thoughts – actually fit together:

But behold the impertinence of the small minds! It is *affected!*, they shout. For the affected and the grand have this in common that they both appear to be a *lot*. But is it big and *empty*, or big and *strong*? – *that* is what should be examined.²⁹

Here Thorild labors with two distinct criteria of stylistic adequacy. On the one hand, expression should follow ‘naturally’ from the content, since elevated and unusual contents calls for an elevated and unusual means of

²⁷ “Den som tänker *ordinärt*, skrifver gärna *tydligt*. Men högre ideer hafva ofta den svårigheten, at fastän man aldeles väl förstår språket, fattar man dock ej så lätt meningen. Man är ej van at tänka så högt up. Men bemödandet uplyfter”; Thorild 1934, p. 73.

²⁸ “*Från* den som skrifver tull-sedlar, *til* den som skrifver Orakler af Vishet och Genie, äro alla grader för höga, eller för låga, eller *naturliga*, för olika hufvuden. Det lilla är *naturligt*, det medelmåttiga är *naturligt*, det förträffeliga likaså”; Thorild 1934, p. 74.

²⁹ “Men betrakta impertinencen hos de små! Det är *affectedadt*, ropa de. [T]y det *Affecterade* och *Stora* hafva det gemensamt at de bägge synas *Mycket*. Men är det

expression. But on the other hand, the understanding of what is ‘natural’ varies to a large extent according to the specific capacity and expectations of the audience. Both these criteria are found in the rhetorical theory of style and are contained in the elocutional virtue of *decorum*. But whereas the classical theory underlines that both criteria should always be considered when discussing stylistic adequacy, Thorild opposes them to each other. This entangles him in a theoretically rather troublesome position. For how is it possible, all pragmatic considerations set aside, to determine what is ‘big and empty’, as opposed to what is ‘big and strong’? Tested rhetorical wisdom would claim that the decision lies with the audience, but Thorild appears to regard the audience’s view as irrelevant and instead insists on an intrinsic connection between content and expression. Accordingly he discards the question of comprehensibility as a stylistic or even linguistic matter: ‘It is not the *style*, Sir, that is difficult, but the *ideas*, the concepts!’³⁰

Thorild refuses to submit to stylistic conventions, and in a polemical article in the last issue of *Den nye granskaren* (1784) he maintains: ‘My way of writing is as natural to me as my own soul. Whoever does not understand me should just read something more transparent.’³¹ In this way Thorild can discount all criticism: in fact he only writes for a chosen audience that is able and inclined to understand him. The question of the aptness of the verbal expression is therefore perfectly irrelevant: either the reader belongs to the

Stort och *tomt*, eller Stort och *starkt* – *det* är hvad som bör undersökas”; Thorild 1934, p. 74.

³⁰ “Det är ej *Stilen*, Min Herre, som är det svåra; utan *Ideerna*, Begreppen!”; Thorild 1934, p. 73.

³¹ “Mit Skriftsätt är mig så naturligt som min själ. Den som ej förstår mig, kan läsa något Tydeligare”; Thorild 1934, p. 120.

chosen audience, or he does not. This position is in many ways typical of Thorild's idea of the function of (what he terms) an 'author'.³²

Thorild develops this in the article "Uplysningen" ('The Enlightenment') from 1784:

When did I say that I write for the *general public*? I am proud and humble. I demand nothing more than the modest number of better readers: the purer and stronger souls, whose enlightenment exceeds the small portion of Swedish wits and who have a part of the world's wits.

But let us be friends, gentlemen! Everything is fitting in its *proper* place. A sun in a hut is not as *becoming* as the small *candle*. Let everyone read what *he* understands; a page in *Tacitus*, an oration by *Cicero*, a novel by *Voltaire*, or a thought by *Montesquieu*. In this way there is peace and light throughout the world.³³

But even with the reservation that he does not write for each and everyone, Thorild still has not neutralized the problem of linguistic expression altogether. His definition of the task of the 'author' or genius was to a large extent based upon traditional rhetorical ideas, as he clearly states in what follows immediately after the passage quoted above. Here Thorild once again calls upon pragmatic considerations: 'But he nonetheless is the best writer

³² The fact that Thorild prefers the English word 'author' to the Swedish 'författare' may be a way for him to indicate that he is about to launch a new definition of authorship. It was not least thanks to his strong orientation towards British culture that Thorild stood out from the French-dominated contemporary Swedish culture. Arvidson 1989, p. 209, suggests that this might partly be explained by the fact that Thorild grew up in Gothenburg, Sweden's largest port, connected to Britain via the North Sea.

³³ "När sade jag at jag skrifver för den stora *Allmänheten*? Jag är Högmödig och Ödmjuk. Jag begär endast det måttliga antalet af Bättre Läsare: de mera rena och starke Själar, som uplyste öfver den lilla portionen af Svenskt vett, ock hafva en del af Verldens.// Men låtom Oss vara Vänner, Mine Herrar! Alt är godt på *sit* ställe. Solen i kojan, är ej så *väl*, som det lilla *ljuset*. Hvar och en läser det *Han* föstår: en *Tacitii* sida eller en *Ciceros* oration, en *Voltaires* roman eller en *Montesquious* [*sic*] tanke. På detta sättet är Frid och Ljus i hela verlden"; Thorild 1934, p. 81.

who obtains the greatest effects; who moves and awakens the principal powers of humanity; who elevates the noblest and greatest matters.’³⁴

Thorild’s notion of style is, of course, not completely original. It has some very obvious affinities with ideas found in the eighteenth-century British and continental debates that challenged the classical rhetorical theory of stylistic adequacy, traditionally codified in the three *genera dicendi*.³⁵ Authors such as Hugh Blair in England and Bernard Lamy, Du Marsais, and d’Alembert in France saw style as a reflection of the unique emotions of the individual writer or orator, rather than as a pragmatically determined means of persuasion.³⁶ But Thorild took quite an extreme position, even in the context of the contemporary debate, by radically refusing to discuss style in terms of words and figures.

Thorild on Delivery

One of the most ardent rhetorical debates in late eighteenth-century Sweden dealt with homiletics and religious rhetoric in a broader sense. The discussion attracted the attention of poets such as Kellgren and Leopold, and it was of great importance to Thorild as well, not least since it touched upon the issue of declamation.³⁷ This appears from an essay, published in 1784 in *Den nye granskaren* and entitled “Höra Prästerne under allmänna granskningen?” (‘Should the clergy be subject to public scrutiny?’). Here Thorild strongly criticized the oratorical practice of Swedish clergymen:

³⁴ “Men den skrifver dock bäst som gör de största Verkningar; som rörer och upväcker Mänsklighetens Första krafter; som uplyfter de mest Ädla och Stora föremål”; Thorild 1934, p. 81.

³⁵ On the three *genera dicendi*, often termed *genus subtile*, *medium*, and *grande*, see e.g. Cicero, *Orator* 5.20-22; and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 12.10.58-62.

³⁶ For Blair’s view on style, see Müller 1981, pp. 88-90. For Lamy, Du Marsais, and d’Alembert, see Till 2004, pp. 334-340.

But *this* makes me wonder. In the songs of the poets I hear a beauty that captivates me; the voice of sensuality penetrates from the charming sceneries of the theater. – But in the books of the theologians... Dare I say it? *There*, on each page I find poor taste and ignorance; and in the temples are heard the miserable *cries* of the repulsive, presented to me as the voice of the God of sweetness and delight.

I profess, artlessly, that of all things that have displeased me in this society, I have found nothing more *amazingly foolish* than this way of *declaiming* religion! To cry out, with ferocity, screams, discordance, and often with the garishness and gesture of the furies, something one professes to be *truth*, *peace*, and *divinely moving*! – My God! How did anyone come up with this? If this is supposed to be the voice of Heaven and wisdom, then I would be really interested in hearing just once how madness speaks!³⁸

Although Thorild addresses various aspects of the period's homiletic practice in this essay, his predominant concern is the delivery (*actio*) of the preachers. Thorild takes his point of departure in a traditional rhetorical argument: the preachers ignore the principle of *decorum*, in so far as they are not concerned with the agreement between content, expression, and delivery. For once, Thorild's criticism is concrete and particular, and he presents several examples of what he regards as the preachers' unsatisfactory delivery:

It is obviously the preachers' lack of feeling, moving truth, grace, and strength that makes their *audience* small and lukewarm. The human soul is constantly drawn to the place where truth and bliss talk.

³⁷ See Möller 2003, pp. 129-131, for a survey of the debate.

³⁸ "Men *detta* är min förundran. I Skaldernas Sånger hör jag en Skönhet som bortför mig; från Theaterns tjugusende scener genomtränger Sinlighetens röst – Men i Himmlärlärarnes böcker. . . Skall jag säga det? *där* möter mig på hvart blad den låga smaken, och okunnigheten; och i Templen där ljuda Misshaglighetens olyckliga *skrån*, som man likväl säger mig skall vara rösten af behaglighetens och ljufhetens Gud!// Jag betygar, utan konst, at af alt hvad som stött mig i detta Samhället, har jag funnit ingen ting mera *förunderligen dåraktigt*, än detta sättet at *Declamera* religionen! at med vildhet, skri, miss-ton, ofta furiernas färg och åtbörder, utropa något, som man säger skall vara *Sanning*, *Frid*, och *Gudomligt rörande*! – Gud! Huru har man fallit på något sådant? Om detta skall vara Himmelens och Vishetens röst: så hade jag väl lust at en gång huru vansinnigheten talar!"; Thorild 1934, p. 67.

Why not raise oneself up to the *feeling* and the *expression* that are worthy of the *divine*? Why not adopt the *voice* and the *gesture* that befit the magnificence of its preacher? Everything public should necessarily have an air of nobility and dignity. – But I have as yet scarcely heard anyone *delivering* a sermon even with discrimination, not to mention with real *truth*, grace, and force. There is no wretchedness and baseness of thought and expression, nothing objectionable in the tone and comportment that these orators do not exemplify. *Some* of them move their bodies, heads, and arms like bad actors and half-frenzied revelers. *Others* keep to a distasteful, stiff, and immobile posture. An “*and*” or a “*to*” is shouted out with frightening violence, whereas the most noble and important part of the sentence is lost in a mumble. They affect a tearful tone. They affect a gentle smile. I know a certain, tender, sensitive, and enlightened man who – having seen a preacher inflate his face with savage colors, throw himself back in a frenzy, and with *mob-like crudity* shout out the sweet and redeeming names – after a few minutes had to walk away with a convulsion of disgust. The temple and the souls are filled with savage noise and sound, and if it is endured at all, then it is due to *faithful*, good, and sweet barbarism; and if anyone is edified, then it is through his own excellent soul’s elevation. – Preachers! Preachers! Is *this* how you present divinity teaching truth and sweetness to mankind? Is *this* how you give the soul the peaceful and holy feelings that are to accompany the soul in its solitude and lead it to bless the Gospel and yourselves?

It is incomprehensible to me that people do not consult a mirror or a friend, or set aside a moment in which to practice; that people do not establish societies for *declamation*. But it is even more incomprehensible that, *lacking all of this*, anyone dares expose to the public all the unpleasantness of his soul!³⁹

³⁹ “Det är tydeligen brist på egen Känsla, rörande Sanning, behaglighet och styrka, hos Prästerna, som gör *Åhörarna* få och ljuma. Mänskliga Själén söker outhörligen dit där Sanningen och Sällheten tala.// Hvarföre uplyfter man sig då ej til den *känsla* och det *uttryck* som äro värdige det *Gudomeliga*? Hvarföre lärer man sig ej den *röst* och den *åtbörd* som passa med Högheten at vara des förkunnare? Alt Offentligt bör nödvändigt hafva en air af ädelt och Värdigt. – Men jag har ännu knapt hört någon som *framtalat* sin predikan, ens med urskillning; än mindre med verkelig *sanning*, behag och styrka. Där är ingen eländighet och låghet i tankar och uttryck, ingen tonenes och beteendets misshaglighet, som ej desse Talare gifva exempel af. *En del* hafva sin kropp, hufvud och armar, som verkelige histrioner och half-rusige Bacchanter. *Andre* förbehålla sig en osmaklig, upstäld och orörlig Skepnad. Man skriker til et *Och*, ett *At*, med den grufligaste häftighet, och förlorar i et mummel det ädlaste och vigtigaste af meningen. Man affecterar en gråt-ton. Man affecterar et smekande löje. Jag känner en viss öm, känslöfull och uplyst människa, som sedan han sett en Präst upblåsa sit ansigte med vildhetens färgor, kasta sig dåraktigt bakut och ropa med *Pöbelns råhet* de ljufva och frälsande Namnen, måste med en liten convulsion af

Thorild's analysis is, in fact, in perfect accord with the period's homiletic theory.⁴⁰ Further on in the same essay, however, it becomes apparent that his criticism goes beyond traditional rhetorical concerns, and that his – to a modern mind – sound recommendations as regards rhetorical practice and self-knowledge are only of secondary importance as far as the issue of *actio* is concerned:

The art of delivery is nothing other than the art of *understanding* and *feeling*. This proves how *many* preachers are but noisemakers, with no feeling and knowledge of the soul! *Punishing* words should be pronounced with severity, emphasis, and dignity; *tender and persuasive* words with openness, sweetness, and an unaffected tone; *teaching* words with evenness; one *puts little stress* on the light words; one *emphasizes* the strong ones. Once again: all of this is nothing but the art of *understanding*. *Beauty* is not asked for, only discrimination.⁴¹

afsky efter några minuter gå bort. Man upfyller Templet och Själarna med et vildt Larm och ljud; och om det så *väl* tåles, så är det af det *trogna*, goda och ljuva Barbariet; och om någon upbygges, så är det genom hans egen förträffeliga Själs uplyftning. – Präster! Präster! Är det *så* man föreställer Gudomligheten talande Sanning och Ljufhet til Människor? Är det *så* man ingifver Själens de fridsamma och heliga rörelser som skola följa henne i ensligheten och komma henne at Välsigna Läran och Er?// Det är mig obegripeligt, at man ej har en Spegel at rådfråga, en Vän, en ledig stund til Öfning; at man ej inrättar Sällskaper för *Declamationen*: Men ännu mer at man, *utan alt detta*, vågar upställa sig för det Allmänna i hela sin Själs Obehaglighet!"; Thorild 1934, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Benzelius 1771, pp. 31-34. First published in 1694 and reprinted in 1747 and in 1771, this remained the standard treatise on homiletics in Sweden until the publication, in 1779, of Johan Möller's *Afhandling om et rätt prediko-sätt*.

⁴¹ "Konsten at *Uttala* rätt, är endast Konsten at *Begripa* och *Känna*. Detta bevisar huru *många* Präster som äro blott Larmare, utan Själens vetande och känsla! Man säger det *Straffande* med alfvar, eftertryck och värdighet; det *Öma* och *öfvertalande*, med openhet, ljuf och okonstlad ton; det *Lärande* med jämnhet; man *öfverfar* de lätta orden; man ger de starkare *vigt*. Ännu en gång: alt detta är ej annat än Konsten at *Förstå*. Man begär ingen *Skönhet*, utan blott Urskillning"; Thorild 1934, p. 69. On the concept of 'understanding' in Thorild, and on its intellectual and emotional implications, see Karitz 1913, pp. 4-5; Cassirer 1941, pp. 100-108; and Fischer 2002, pp. 78-79.

To Thorild the appropriate delivery is the result of the orator's thorough intellectual and emotional understanding of the content of his own message:

There is *one* thing, however, that has not yet been considered, and that to *my* mind is always *wanting*. People look for genius, taste, and decency. But I have as yet not heard the voice of the *soul!* The *one moving* and strong voice that tells me that the preacher has himself felt the bliss and the delights he preaches!⁴²

At first glance Thorild's demand for agreement between the message and the emotional state of the speaker appears to accord with the rhetorical-poetical topos that received its classical wording in Horace's *dictum*: "si vis me flere, dolendum est/ primum ipsi tibi" ("If you would have me weep, you must first feel grief yourself").⁴³ Similar statements are found in Cicero and, especially, in Quintilian, and are frequently repeated in eighteenth-century Swedish homiletic theory.⁴⁴ Within the framework of the classical rhetorical tradition, then, the question of emotional authenticity of expression remained a technical concern, belonging to the realm of *decorum*.

Thorild, however, pushed this even further. To him, the right delivery of a speech depended on sincerity, defined as the speaker's heartfelt and genuine conviction of the truth of his message. In fact, Thorild's view on delivery closely resembles that of Johan Möller (1738-1805), who, in his homiletic

⁴² "Men man har ännu ej tänkt på *et*; som *jag* alltid *saknar*. Man söker Snille, smak och det Städade. Men ännu har jag ej hört *Själens* röst! den *enda rörande* och starka rösten som säger mig at man sjelf känt den Lycksalighet och de Ljufheter man Predikar!"; Thorild 1934, p. 70.

⁴³ *Ars poetica*, vv.102-103. I quote the English translation by Rushton Fairclough from Horace 1991, p. 459.

⁴⁴ See Cicero, *De oratore* 2.189-190; and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 6.2.26; as well as Benzelius 1771, pp. 32-33; and Möller 1779, pp. 133-137.

work, claimed that classical rhetoric's preoccupation with the impression the orator makes on the audience, is not sufficient, at least as far as religious rhetoric is concerned. Instead Möller maintained that, in order to be truly persuasive, the preacher himself has to be genuinely convinced. Affectation will always reveal itself, no matter how skilful the preacher's attempt to conceal it.⁴⁵ These ideas clearly reflect Quintilian's vision of the ethically defined 'ideal orator', most notably presented in *Institutio oratoria* 12.1.29-31. However, Thorild's views should also be seen in light of the larger contemporary discussion: as Michael Cahn has shown, it was commonplace in eighteenth-century British rhetorical theory to state that the efficiency of a speech depends on the orator's own belief in his message.⁴⁶

Thorild on 'the Stile of Truth'

The issues of style and delivery are brought together in Thorild's main discussion of rhetoric and eloquence in the English-language pamphlet *The Sermon of Sermons. On the Impiety of Priests and the Fall of Religion*, published in London in 1789.⁴⁷ Here again religious rhetoric is Thorild's main target, and here the reader finds what may be characterized as an explicit anti-rhetorical attitude. In fact, Thorild devotes the greater part of his preface in *The Sermon of Sermons* to a discussion of rhetoric:

⁴⁵ Cf. Möller 1779, pp. 137-138. On Möller's work, see also Brillioth 1945, pp. 216-218.

⁴⁶ See Cahn 1986, p. 158.

⁴⁷ In 1788, in the hope of finding a more receptive audience for his writings, Thorild moved to England – which he considered the most enlightened and modern of the European nations. In 1789 and 1790 he published a number of English-language texts on various political, philosophical, and theological issues, sometimes using the pseudonym "A Philosopher of the North". However, Thorild's English work was largely ignored, and in 1790 he returned, disappointed, to Sweden. The most thorough account of his stay in England is found in Arvidson 1993, pp. 403-471.

It may easily be observed that most Writers are grave, or elegant, triflers: busy eternally in forming and transforming, finely or pompously, in this more florid or that more lofty manner, petty and trivial things.

Stile and Eloquence are become the grand art of Words, of pretty punctilios, of high fancies, of loose and strange ornaments: and that is to say, the grand art of Vanity in Writing. [...]

The grave authors, grave mostly without energy, have given an olympic display of their skill and eminent sagacity; the more learned, of their vast riches: all have looked upon Truth, sublime and dear for ever to man, as the grand object of their Vanity; few or none simply as the warm and high interest of their Heart.

Hence the surprising effect that there is an *art* of moving the heart, an *art* of reasoning, that is, an art of playing with the human mind, of playing ostentatiously with Truth, in order to raise admiration: exactly as in the operas and tragedies of the Theatre, where all that is divine in heaven and grand upon earth is made the marvellous, vainly affecting and transient object of a spectacle.

So the serene or terrible, always irresistible Majesty of Truth, transformed in all these petty ornaments and weakened into this vain sweetness, has at last no force but this playing one – *to move and please*.

That majesty, which should strike and vanquish the human mind!

Vast as his fancy is the Vanity of man. A vanity, however, that indeed could not rise higher, than to force down the Truth of heaven only to give majestic airs to a structure of vain eloquence; than to rob the divine feelings of the heart and the celestial florid forms of genius, only to animate and embellish this structure.⁴⁸

From this description of the degeneration of religious eloquence into a mere “art of words” in which the tasks of moving and pleasing are allowed to dominate at the expense of teaching the truth, Thorild turns towards the theme of “vain pomp”, a recurrent topic in eighteenth-century criticism of rhetoric:

The *true reason* of this grand show, this proud and magnificent abuse of all that is divine and most sacred, is – that weak and worthless men, through the dark succession of lie and injustice, in the profaned name of God, having imperceptibly filled all high places of Church and State, Priests of this set, void of every sense of a great mind, have been unable to feel the heroic flame

⁴⁸ Thorild 1934, pp. 319-320.

or to conceive the majestic stile of Truth, and such kings and grandees too false and wicked to bear it. All men, then, imitating, both in unworthiness and pride, these kings, priests, and grandees – the civil truth has been transformed into an elegant lie, called Politeness; the religious truth into a mere august show; and all that is most serious and sacred, finally, into the vain pomp of heathens.⁴⁹

Thorild's assault on religious eloquence in *The Sermon of Sermons* clearly differs from the treatment of this issue in his earlier texts. Whereas, in the earlier texts, the priests were criticized for neglecting basic rhetorical rules, the accusation here is rather that they focus too much on the issue of eloquence.⁵⁰ The two points of view are, of course, potentially reconcilable, but Thorild's change of focus deserves to be pointed out. It should also be noted how Thorild generalizes his criticism: a similar deterioration was to be found in public, political life where "civil truth" had degenerated into "an elegant lie, called Politeness".⁵¹

Yet, Thorild does not direct his assault towards eloquence or persuasion as such. Indeed, he insists: "True and natural Eloquence, that is, Persuasion, is but the force of a great mind *expressed*, even if it should be in a single word, in a simple look or motion. *Pectus est quod disertos facit*: it is the heart that makes eloquent."⁵²

This may appear to be traditional rhetorical wisdom; indeed, the Latin phrase that Thorild quotes is taken from Quintilian and figured often in eighteenth-century discussions of whether eloquence depends on art or on

⁴⁹ Thorild 1934, p. 320.

⁵⁰ Similar criticism is found in Möller 1779, pp. 138-140 and 176-215.

⁵¹ Starting with Rousseau, the theme of dissimulation had become a commonplace in eighteenth-century critique of the social life of the upper classes; cf. also Geitner 1992. For Rousseau's views, see Starobinski 1971.

⁵² Thorild 1934, pp. 320-321.

nature.⁵³ However, in the original context, that is, *Institutio oratoria* 10.7.15, the phrase, “pectus est quod disertos facit”, expresses Quintilian’s idea that, in order for the speaker to be persuasive, he must himself first experience and then display the emotions he wishes to stir up in the audience. If this is not possible, Quintilian says, the speaker must develop a technique of ‘self-suggestion’ in order to put himself in the emotional state that is required for the particular rhetorical task.⁵⁴

Thorild’s use of the quotation, however, appears to reflect the period’s general understanding of Quintilian’s phrase: what was a pragmatic concern in Quintilian’s first-century treatise, was reinterpreted in the eighteenth century as a demand for emotional authenticity.⁵⁵ Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Thorild only quotes part of the sentence that reads as follows in Quintilian: “pectus est enim quod disertos facit et vis mentis” (“[i]t is the heart and the power of the mind that make us eloquent”).⁵⁶

In accordance with his focus on the heart (rather than the mind) of the orator, Thorild goes on to claim that only those who lack true inspiration need to resort to conceit and rhetorical ornament:

How then must these low and lukewarm souls do? they must need waste ornaments, assume a grandeur, act feelings, play heroes; they must violate all the beauties of genius to serve their pride. The world then applauds the sublime actor, the *moving and pleasant* show [...].⁵⁷

⁵³ The phrase was often used as an argument in support of natural affective rhetoric as opposed to doctrinal rhetoric in the pedagogical tradition; see Till 2004, pp. 384-385.

⁵⁴ Quintilian explains the technique of self-suggestion in greater detail in *Institutio oratoria* 6.2.26-36.

⁵⁵ Cf. Till 2004, pp. 384-385.

⁵⁶ I quote the English translation by Donald A. Russell in Quintilian 2001, vol. 4, p. 381.

⁵⁷ Thorild 1934, p. 321.

True eloquence is, according to Thorild, always ‘natural’, spontaneous, and without art; it follows naturally from a strong urge to express oneself. It is therefore not surprising that Thorild condemns all oratorical affectation:

Such is the eloquence of *Art!* a mere blaze of vanity, even as empty as pompous: and hence all the finest morals, hymns, sermons without number, devotions, magnificent services on one side; and all abandoned levity of heathens on the other – flourish together.⁵⁸

Nor is it surprising that Thorild’s discussion of eloquence in the preface to *The Sermon of Sermons* closes with a reflection on style, the topic most frequently addressed in Thorild’s various discussions of rhetorical issues. Here, however, Thorild appears to subscribe to the classical theory of style as presented in the works of Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian:⁵⁹

In the vast variety of STILES, there is none, which is not natural in its place, and unnatural out of it. Yet, among these three degrees, the easy, the grave, the sublime – they have decided the first to be, eminently, the *natural*. Yes, for little and lukewarm minds, or for petty playing matters: generally for all that is not susceptible of energy, flame, and grand beauty. But nothing is more *unnatural* than to treat grave and high subjects in an easy manner, in a florid, mild, graceful stile. It is as unnatural as little sporting melodies in grave and sacred Music. The serene or terrible majesty of Truth disdains these fine arts: disdains the mimic sweetness that makes her power languid, familiar[, and] *easily* contemned; disdains the vanity that colors her light and spoils its splendor; disdains the petty fretful mind that tempers her fire into a pleasant tepidity.⁶⁰

When style was discussed in the context of eighteenth-century Swedish homiletics, it was usually considered from a pragmatic and pedagogical point of view. According to the homiletic treatises by Benzelius and Möller, some

⁵⁸ Thorild 1934, p. 321.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Cicero, *Orator* 5.20-22 and 23.75-28.99; Horace, *Ars poetica* vv. 86-92; and Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 12.10.58-62.

situations might indeed call for oratorical elegance and stylistic gravity, but the preacher was always to adjust his manner of expression to the linguistic and intellectual capacity of the audience.⁶¹ Focusing on the task of instructing (*docere*), the preacher should be concerned about the accessibility of his text and therefore focus on the classical elocutional virtue of *claritas*.⁶²

Thorild is in complete accord with the period's homiletic theory when approaching with suspicion the orator's duty to please (*delectare*).⁶³ According to Thorild, to please is to flatter; and when reduced to mere flattery, the truth to be communicated is reduced to a 'harlot':

If this Truth now must move sweetly and *please* – is it not clear that the queen of heaven is become a harlot? For to *please* is it not, in every age, gently to glance over, to sooth, to flatter the vices of the age? O, it is. Hence you will never see the true *human spirit*, that is, the divine spirit of what is just and great, sinking in a people, but that it instantly will be a rule as of manners so of Oratory to sink together – in order to be polite and elegant, that is, to be bastardly sweet, dastardly gentle, all easy and tepid. And thus, to prove how sentiment and eloquence sink unitedly, as to sentiment there are no more among us any high duties in life; great things are not more serious and arduous; the pettiest and dullest king, the most false and wicked minister, every naughty trifler of a great place, may be praised and adored – and as to eloquence, they have established formally a taste, of *this day*, of *their fancy*, a Correctness through which a good word is not more that which is mighty to express truly, but that which is most *polite*; they have established the *Law of elegant triviality*.

And so there is at last – neither a voice for Truth, nor a field for genius, nor any worthy space allowed to human majesty.⁶⁴

As soon as flattery gains a footing in society, eloquence declines along with manners. As an antidote Thorild in the same text formulates this basic

⁶⁰ Thorild 1934, p. 321. See also note 35 above.

⁶¹ See Benzelius 1771, p. 15; and Möller 1779, pp. 105-109.

⁶² See Möller 1779, pp. 105-109.

⁶³ See Möller 1779, pp. 191-197.

⁶⁴ Thorild 1934, pp. 322-323.

rule: “Let us freely decide then, that in nature there is no other Eloquence, it may be to move or instruct, than – to say *great things greatly*.”⁶⁵ Once again Thorild’s reflections on style and rhetoric end in his insistence on agreement between matter and expression, and a consequence of this is that ‘natural’ eloquence must deal with “great things” exclusively. As always, Thorild casts aside all pragmatic considerations.

It is not easy for the reader to determine with precision what it might mean “to say great things greatly”, and Thorild is, as ever, reluctant to treat the question of style as a question of (the choice of) words. In the context of *The Sermon of Sermons*, however, it appears that, to Thorild, a ‘great’ style is akin to what in classical rhetorical terminology is usually called the ‘sublime’ or ‘grand’ style:

And, from the same principle of Nature, that there is no other stile, than the *stile of Truth*: which is sweet, easy, grand, terrible – that is, all in a just moment.

But now, if it be considered, that – *natural* is, not what is *easy*, but what is *true*, for the roarings of the sea and thunder of heaven are indeed natural; and *correct*, not what is *polite*, but what is *just*; and *eloquent*, that is, persuasive and moving, not what has a shining *elegance* of ornament, but what is really *great* – you have found this new and strange truth, that an author may write *truly, justly, greatly*, and not be easy, polite and elegant.⁶⁶

This passage is difficult to interpret. First, Thorild appears to adopt the notion of *decorum* as the chief principle of writing, but immediately thereafter he challenges this very principle. Whereas Cicero defines eloquence as the ability to excel in all of the three stylistic modes, by employing each of them in its proper place,⁶⁷ Thorild, in keeping with his general idea of the

⁶⁵ Thorild 1934, p. 323.

⁶⁶ Thorild 1934, p. 323.

⁶⁷ See *Orator*, 21.69-72 and 36.123.

‘natural’ agreement between expression and content, insists that true eloquence is to be found only in the act of speaking about “great things”.

In the immediate continuation of the text, Thorild for once furnishes the reader with a concrete example of ‘true eloquence’ based on stylistic excellence, namely the prophesies of Isaiah, which, according to Thorild, display “a *prophetical horror of stile*”, by way of which the “words not merely express” but also “brighten” and “inflame the sense”.⁶⁸ In Isaiah’s eloquence Thorild finds truly sublime qualities: “For it is evident – that Sublimity is but to see what is *truly grand* or *dreadful* in any subject, and to express it with even that dreadfulness or grandeur.”⁶⁹

* * *

In his reflections on the nature of language and rhetoric, Thorild often took his point of departure in selected issues from classical rhetorical theory, but he modified these in accordance with his own views on communication. Thus, at first glance many of the questions he dealt with appear to be located within the conceptual framework of rhetoric. However, in so far as rhetoric is understood as the theory of persuasive communication, Thorild’s writings suggest a transformation of the very foundation of rhetoric.

Thorild’s idea of verbal – poetic as well as rhetorical – communication was not based on the pragmatic concern of persuasion but on the idea of a

⁶⁸ “There is a *prophetical horror of stile*. As in ISAIAH. It gives a just awe to certain subjects. In that stile the plain and true idea is heightened by the glowing majesty of Fancy. The words not merely express, they brighten, they inflame the sense. A reader must then see the character of what he reads; must distinguish force, grandeur, pathos; and not sillily cry woe! at every lightning of poetry”; Thorild 1934, p. 324.

‘natural’ and necessary expression that reveals the true meaning to the right audience of the words communicated by the author or orator. In order for this communication to succeed, the author or orator must be guided by ‘nature’ and emotion. This in turn means that the linguistic form is not a relevant matter of discussion in Thorild’s work; the wording is no more than a necessary and natural consequence of the thought. Thorild therefore had little need for a genuine theory of rhetoric; as long as the author or orator is guided by his innate sensibility, wording and delivery will follow by themselves.

Frequently arguing from a rhetorical point of view while at the same time dismissing the theoretical foundation of rhetoric, Thorild’s stance was clearly ambiguous and in many respects characteristic of the theoretical discussion of rhetoric in late eighteenth-century Sweden.

⁶⁹ Thorild 1934, p. 324.

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