

Emotional Preaching: *Ekphrasis* in the *Kontakia* of Romanos

Romanos the Melodist was a sixth century hymn-writer and a deacon in the church of the Theotokos in the Kyros district of Constantinople. Very little is known about his life with any certainty, but he was probably of Syriac origin and born in Emesa (modern Hims, in Western Syria). It is likely that he was trained in Greek rhetoric in Berytus (modern Beirut), before moving to Constantinople some time in the reign of Anastasius.¹ During his time in the capital he wrote long hymns, of which fifty-nine genuine ones remain,² and which were later called *kontakia*.³ They were sung in place of a spoken prose sermon, although their liturgical setting is still a matter for debate.⁴ The hymns are far from classical in form. Romanos does not, for example, imitate classical models and write in Atticising Greek as some of his contemporaries did. Nor does he employ classical poetic metres. The *kontakia* consist of strophes of equal length, and each strophe ends with a refrain probably sung by the congregation. The first letters of all the strophes make up an acrostic. Usually it is something like THE HYMN OF THE HUMBLE ROMANOS (ΤΟΥ ΤΑΤΕΙΝΟΥ ΡΩΜΑΝΟΥ Ο ΥΜΝΟΣ).⁵ For these, among other reasons, many scholars have posited a Semitic origin for the *kontakion*, and it certainly seems plausible that Syriac poetry of the fourth and fifth centuries had an influence on Romanos' compositions.⁶ Yet the *kontakia* also show evidence of Romanos' Greek rhetorical education, as well as hints of fourth- and fifth-century Greek homiletics.

Although Romanos wrote poetry rather than prose sermons, and wrote no formal theological tract, he should be read as a theologian. I do not claim that he was a Gregory of Nyssa or a John Chrysostom, but I argue that he was nevertheless concerned to teach what he considered to be orthodox theology to his flock. For Romanos there is no split between poetry and theology. His rhetoric is not mere ornament. Rather, Romanos constructed his poetic *kontakia* so as to articulate to the congregation his theological convictions, and his poetry embodies his theology. One

¹ See the Synaxarium of Sirmond in Grosdidier de Matons (1977), 162.

² According to the Oxford editors: Romanos (1963).

³ Rosenqvist (2007), 24-25.

⁴ On the liturgical setting of the *kontakion*, see Frank (2006), 59-78, Grosdidier de Matons (1980-1981), Krueger (2005), 298, Lingas (1995).

⁵ All translations from Romanos are mine.

⁶ There is a fair amount of literature on this debate. The best of it suggests that Romanos participated in both cultures, drawing influence from Syriac as well as Greek poetry and homiletics. See, for example, Brock (1994), Brock (1985), Cameron (1991), de Halleux (1978).

of these theological concepts, the idea of a new creation, will be particularly important for this paper, and so a short explanation of what it means might be helpful.

Romanos' *kontakia* tell a traditional narrative of Christian history. As a result of the Fall, sin and death were brought upon humanity. God had compassion upon his creation and became human in order to redeem humans. God becoming human was a world-changing event. Nothing like it had ever happened before and it is beyond human capacity truly to understand or explain. At the point of the incarnation, Romanos believed that a new creation was instituted. This new creation meant many things. It meant a change in the nature of time: Christ summed up all previous events and time in himself. Time was no longer conceptualised as linear. One way in which Romanos expresses this new conception of time is by constructing dialogues between characters who could never have met chronologically.⁷ This new creation is not quite paradise; after all, humans still sin and die. But it is a changed reality, and Romanos believed that Christians were called to participate in it. Baptism was of course part of this participation, and participation in Christ through the Eucharist was another central way that Christians took part in the new reality through the liturgy. Romanos also uses the refrain of his hymns to make the audience part of the Gospel stories, drawing together the ideas of the conflation of time and participation in the earthly life of Christ. You can see from this short explanation that dialogue, for example, is a device Romanos uses to communicate certain ideas about new creation, and in fact to make the congregation participate in the new creation. Dialogue is not the only device Romanos uses to encourage participation. The device I wish to focus on in this paper is *ekphrasis*.

Rhetorical handbooks from the first to the fourth centuries (and still in use in the sixth century) described *ekphrasis* thus: "Ἐκφρασίς ἐστι λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς τὸ δηλούμενον. ('*Ekphrasis* is a descriptive speech which brings visibly before the eyes the thing described').⁸ Although we often think of *ekphrasis* as describing artworks, ancient rhetorical theorists had in mind a much more expansive range of subjects: people, places, events, seasons, animals and plants, paintings and

⁷ In *On the Nativity II*, for example, Romanos includes a dialogue between Mary and Adam and Eve.

⁸ Aphthonios *Progymnasmata* p.36 lines 22-23: Rabe (1926). See also James and Webb (1991), 4, Zanker (1981), 297.

statues were all potential subjects for *ekphrasis*.⁹ Artworks are by no means the most important of these subjects.¹⁰ In his chapter on *ekphrasis* in his *Progymnasmata* Nicolaus the Sophist says,

ἐκφράζομεν δὲ τόπους, χρόνους, πρόσωπα, πανηγύρεις, πράγματα. τόπους μὲν, οἷον λειμῶνας, λιμένας, λίμνας καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα· χρόνους δέ, οἷον ἔαρ, θέρος· πρόσωπα δέ, οἷον ἱερέας, Θερσίτας καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα· πανηγύρεις δέ, ὡς Παναθηναία, Διονύσια καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς δρώμενα· καὶ ὅλως πρὸς πολλὰ τῶ προγυμνάσματι τούτῳ χρησόμεθα. διαφέρει δὲ καὶ κατ' ἐκεῖνο τῆς διηγήσεως, ὅτι ἢ μὲν τὰ καθόλου, ἢ δὲ τὰ κατὰ μέρος ἐξετάζει· οἷον διηγήσεως μὲν ἐστὶ τὸ εἰπεῖν· ἐπολέμησαν Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ Πελοποννήσιοι· ἐκφράσεως δέ, ὅτι τοιαῦδε καὶ τοιαῦδε ἑκάτεροι παρασκευῆ ἐχρήσαντο καὶ τῶδε τῶ τρόπῳ τῆς ὀπλίσεως.

We compose *ekphraseis* of places, times, persons, festivals, things done: of places, for example, meadows, harbours, pools, and such like; of times, for example, spring, summer; of persons, for example, priests, Thersites, and people like that; of festivals, like the Panathenaia, the Dionysia, and things done at them; and, all in all, we use this progymnasma for many things. It differs from narration in that the latter examines things as a whole, the former in part; for example, it belongs to a narration to say “The Athenians and the Peloponnesians fought a war,” and to *ekphrasis* to say that each side made this and that preparation and used this manner of arms.¹¹

Only at this point do artworks come into the mix:

Δεῖ δέ, ἡνίκα ἂν ἐκφράζωμεν καὶ μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχὸν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἴ τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, πειρᾶσθαι λογισμοὺς προστιθέναι τοῦ τοιοῦδε ἢ τοιοῦδε παρὰ τοῦ γραφέως ἢ πλάστου σχήματος

⁹ Webb has a table of the different categories given by the four main progymnasmata texts: Webb (2009), 56.

¹⁰ It is interesting that the Shield of Achilles, which is held up as the great example of an *ekphrasis* of a work of art, is not considered as such by Theon (*Progymnasmata* 7). He places it in the category of objects, which focuses on how the objects were made. See Ibid.70.

¹¹ *Progymnasmata* 11. Translation adapted from Kennedy (2003), 166-167.

Whenever we compose *ekphraseis*, and especially descriptions of statues or pictures or anything of that sort, we should try to add an account of this or that impression made by the painter or by the moulded form.¹²

A very wide range of *ekphraseis* have survived from the ancient world and late antiquity. Short lines describing people (e.g. *Iliad* 2.2.17-8) in Homer are *ekphraseis*. The fifth-century (BC) orator Demosthenes uses *ekphrasis* to create a picture of a land devastated by war in *On the False Embassy* (19.65). Thucydides' description of the night battle (7.43-4) is defined as a mixed *ekphrasis*, since it combines an *ekphrasis* of time (night) with an *ekphrasis* of action (battle).¹³ Theon takes examples from Herodotus for his students, pointing to his *ekphraseis* of various animals in book 2 of his *Histories*.¹⁴ Achilles Tatius' description of Alexandria, which describes not only parts of the city but also his own reaction to the sights, is a fine example of a city *ekphrasis*.¹⁵

The quality which sets *ekphrasis* apart from other narrative descriptions is *enargeia*, or 'vividness'. An ekphrastic description must be vivid. It must be so vivid that the audience is able to 'see' the thing described in their mind's eye.¹⁶ In short, as Nicolaus argues, *ekphrasis* should attempt to turn listeners into spectators.¹⁷

One of the reasons for this focus on vividness and sight is that in late antiquity vision was considered to be the most important and the most truthful sense.¹⁸ An active concept of vision dominated late-antique thought, following certain classical conceptions: one in which optical rays come out from the eyes, touch the object being looked at, and take back the essence of the object to the eyes.¹⁹ This idea, called extramission, was the belief of the Pythagoreans and Euclid,²⁰ among many others, and became important for Christians, as we will see shortly. Even when extramission is not the theory of choice, sight is still conceptualised as a type of touch. Lucretius

¹² Adapted from Kennedy's translation: Ibid.167.

¹³ Webb (2009), 62.

¹⁴ Theon *Progymnasmata* 7. See Kennedy (2003), 45.

¹⁵ 5.1.1-5, quoted in: Haas (1997), 30.

¹⁶ Webb (1999), 12.

¹⁷ Nicolaus *Progymnasmata*, in Kennedy (2003), 166. See also Macrides and Magdalino (1988), 49. Nicolaus was not the only person to see *ekphrasis* in this way. Plutarch had a similar theory (*Moralia*, 346F-347A). Compare Dionysius of Halicarnassus *De Lysia* 7 and Aphthonius *Progymnasmata* p.36 line 22. See also Webb (2007), 16.

¹⁸ James (2003), 228.

¹⁹ Nelson (2000), 152. See also James (2004), 528.

²⁰ Bartsch (2006), 62.

argued that sight and touch were connected because an object handled in the dark will be recognised as the same object when seen in the light (*DRN*. 4.230).²¹ This idea continues to be important in Christian late antiquity. Georgia Frank quotes a suppliant to the monk Paphnutius as saying: “[May] the man who is setting out to your piety be found worthy to embrace [Paphnutius] also with [his] very eyes.”²² Unlike hearing or smell, sight was able to translate the object of sight directly to the person seeing, without interference or contamination of some sort.²³ It was the only *pure* sense. For Christians, sight was a link to God. Pilgrims flocked to see ascetic monks, in the hope that by seeing the holy man, who had a special connection to God, they would see God.²⁴ Likewise, by seeing the place of Christ’s crucifixion or burial, the pilgrim believed he participated in the event, that he truly witnessed Christ’s death. *Ekphrasis* achieves the same thing, without the need for the pilgrimage. For Christian writers, this device became a way to enable their listeners to ‘see’ God, to witness certain biblical events, and to participate, through sight, in the life of Christ.

It is this ability of *ekphrasis* to make listeners see which connects it to the emotions. *Ekphrasis* creates images in the minds of listeners, and images can be used to work on emotions. Longinus, in his treatise *On the Sublime*, argues that poets and orators both use images to elicit certain emotional responses from their audiences, although they differ in their reasons for doing so.²⁵ Procopius, roughly contemporary with Romanos, in his *ekphrasis* on Hagia Sophia, stirs up wonder and amazement in his audience as he creates an image of the church as heaven. Another contemporary *ekphrasis* on Hagia Sophia, that of Paul the Silentary, draws on memory to create emotion.²⁶ He takes his readers on a walk through the church, describing what one sees at different points. His readers are encouraged to remember the sights in the great church, and what they felt when they first saw them. Both creation of new images and plays on remembered images are used in *ekphrasis* to call forth different emotions.

So, how does all this work in Romanos’ hymns? In the *kontakion* entitled *On the Massacre of the Innocents*, Romanos uses *ekphrasis* to describe Herod’s slaughter of

²¹ Lucretius did not believe in extramission. See *Ibid.* 59-60. Plato’s concept of vision is more complex, but involves light flowing from the eyes to the object, as well as light in the object and in the surrounding air. The eyes still have an active role to play. See *Timaeus* 45ff. See also Betz (1979), 53.

²² Quoted in Frank (2000), 14.

²³ Nelson (2000), 154.

²⁴ Frank (2000), 86.

²⁵ *On the Sublime* XV. See also Webb (1997), 117-118.

²⁶ James (2003), 61-62.

the children in graphic detail.²⁷ The *ekphrasis* lasts for several strophes, so I will only quote a few sections:

Νεφέλης φωτεινῆς ἑφαπλωμένης
κατὰ τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ σκιαζούσης,
γνόφον σκοτεινότατον ὁ Ἡρώδης εἰσήνεγκε
καὶ ἐσκότισεν ἅπαντας·
τὴν ἰλαρὰν γὰρ φύσιν τῶν παίδων καὶ γελῶσαν
δεικνύει παραχρῆμα κλαίουσαν πικρῶς·
τὴν πρὸ μικροῦ (ἔτι) εὐφραινομένην τῷ τόκῳ
τῆς παναχράντου ἀγνῆς Μαρίας
καὶ ἄρτι μᾶλλον ὀδυρομένην·
ὡς ἄνθος γὰρ αὐθήμερον ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν κατέπιπτε,
καὶ πᾶς ὁρῶν ὠδύρετο καὶ τῇ Ῥαχὴλ ἐμήνυε·
«Δεῦρο κλαῦσον, Ῥαχὴλ, καὶ συνθρήνησον ἡμῖν
μέλος ὀδυνηρόν·
(3. θ'. 1-11)²⁸

With a shining cloud spreading over
the Jews and overshadowing them,
Herod brought in the darkest gloom and made all humanity dark.
For the cheerful and laughing nature of children
straightaway he rendered bitter weeping.
Those which shortly before had rejoiced in the child
of the all-undefiled, holy Mary
now are altogether lamenting.
For as a flower which on the same day [it opens] falls down to the earth,
and everyone who sees it laments, [everyone] cries to Rachel,
“Come, weep, Rachel, and mourn together with us [in] a lamenting
song...”

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of this *ekphrasis* see Barkhuizen (2007), 36ff. On torture as an oft-used topic for *ekphrasis* see Maguire (1981), 99.

²⁸ All quotes from Romanos are taken from the Oxford edition: Romanos (1963). They are also formatted as in this edition.

And then later:

Μαχαίραις ἀνηλεῶς ἀποκτανθέντα,
 ὡς ἐν σχήματι φόνου, ἄμεμπτα βρέφη
 τὰ μὲν ἐκεντήθησαν ἀπρεπῶς καὶ ἀπέψυξαν,
 τὰ δὲ διεμερίσθησαν·
 ἄλλα κάρως ἐτμήθη τοὺς μασθοὺς τῶν μητέρων
 καθέλκοντα καὶ γάλα ποτιζόμενα,
 ὡς ἐκ τούτου λοιπὸν ἐν τοῖς μασθοῖς κρεμασθῆναι
 τὰ τῶν νηπίων σεπτὰ κρανία,
 καὶ τὰς θηλὰς δὲ κατασχεθῆναι
 ἔνδον αὐτῶν τοῦ στόματος τοῖς ὀδοῦσι τοῖς τρυφεροῖς. (3. ιδ'. 1-9)

Those who were killed mercilessly with daggers,
 as in the way of murder, were blameless children.
 Some were stabbed indecently and died, and others were cut up.
 Others had their heads cut off at the breasts of their mothers
 as [the infants] were tugging on them and drinking milk.
 As a result the revered skulls of the infants
 hung on their breasts,
 and their teats were held back
 within the mouths of the infants, in their delicate teeth.

There is a lot that could be said about this *ekphrasis*. It conflates time, with the Old Testament figure of Rachel watching these horrific events along with Romanos' contemporary audience. It thus joins the Old Testament world to post-incarnational reality. It makes the congregation participate in the event: they join Rachel in mourning for the children. It also marks the boundaries of the new creation by emphasising the perfidy of the Jews (elsewhere in this *ekphrasis* the Jews are labelled with all sorts of horrible names) and simultaneously seeks to construct boundaries in Romanos' contemporary polity.²⁹ The Jews are not part of the new creation as Romanos conceptualises it.

But what I want to focus on here is the sheer emotional intensity which Romanos achieves through the use of *ekphrasis* and which demands that his congregation

²⁹ See Barkhuizen (2007), 47.

participate in his narrative. The vividness with which Romanos describes this event enables him to bring the slaughter before the eyes of his congregation. (One scholar has even labelled it bad taste).³⁰ He makes them feel pity for the children and hatred of Herod and the Jewish soldiers. This example of *ekphrasis* shows the vividness Romanos can create and the sorts of emotions he can call forth from his audience.

Elsewhere, Romanos uses *ekphrasis* to draw attention to human sinfulness. In *On the Healing of the Leper*, Romanos vividly describes the leprosy to his listeners (8. ε'. 3 - 10):

τῶν παθῶν ἔστι τῶν ἄλλων δυσειδестέρα ἐν ἀνθρώποις,
 ὡς ἐπὶ χόρτου βοσκομένης τῆς σαρκὸς ὑπ' αὐτῆς·
 ἐπιτίθεται αὕτη τοῖς μέλεσι πᾶσιν,
 ὡσπερ ἐπιθυμοῦσα παραδειξαὶ ὅλον
 ὄνειδος τὸν ἀνθρώπον·
 τῆς λώβης γὰρ ὑπάρχει συγγενῆς ἢ ἀκάθαρος νόσος,
 ἥν τέχνη ἰατρείας ὄλως οὐ θεραπεύει,
 Χριστὸς δὲ ἐκδιώκει
 ὁ φιλόανθρωπος.
 [This disease] is uglier than the other diseases among humans,
 since it feeds on flesh as though it were fodder.
 It attacks all the limbs
 as if desiring to show the human as a total disgrace,
 for the unclean, congenital disease generates its lesion
 which medical skill utterly fails,
 but Christ banished it,
 the lover of humanity.

The desperate state of the leper is emphasized by the exclusion from society that comes with ugliness and deformity and the lack of any potential cure. Leprosy dehumanises in a horrific way. Thus vivid description makes the congregation pity, and identify with, the leper. Romanos encourages them to see leprosy as symbolic of general human destruction, of human sin and brokenness. This state can only be

³⁰ Grosdidier de Matons thinks the description was written « avec plus réalisme que de bon goût » : Romanos (1965), 200.

brought to an end by Christ. No human doctors can heal it. Christ brings human sin to an end by his death and resurrection, just as he does the leprosy in the Gospel story. By creating a sense of pity and even fear at the state of this leper, Romanos uses emotion to teach the congregation about their need for Christ's redemption.

Human need is again the subject of an *ekphrasis* in *On the Passion of Christ*, in which Romanos plays on memory as well as new imagery. He describes human thirst and Christ's quenching of it (20. η'. 1-7):

ᾠλετο δίψη ὁ γηγενής, καύσωνι κατεφλέχθη
 ἐν ἐρήμῳ πλανηθεῖς, ἐν ἀνύδρῳ,
 καὶ ἰάσασθαι τὴν δίψαν οὐχ εὔρεν ὁ δύστηνος·
 διὸ ὁ σωτήρ μου, ἡ πηγὴ τῶν ἀγαθῶν, ζωῆς νάματα ἔβλυσε
 βοῶν· «Διὰ τῆς σῆς πλευρᾶς ἐδίψησας,
 πίε τῆς ἐμῆς πλευρᾶς καὶ οὐ μὴ διψήσεις εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα·
 διπλοῦν ταύτης τὸ ρεῖθρον· λούει καὶ ποτίζει
 τοὺς ῥυπωθέντας...

The earthly race was destroyed by thirst, consumed by burning heat
 as they wandered in the desert, in waterless [land],
 and the wretched [race] has not found a cure for its thirst.
 For this reason my Saviour, the fount of good things, gushed forth
 [a stream of life,
 saying, "You were thirsty because of your side."³¹
 Drink from my side and do not ever thirst.
 This is a twofold stream. It washes those who are dirty
 [and quenches thirst..."]

As we have seen, *ekphrasis* is a way in which Romanos makes his congregation participate in the story. It is closely connected with *enargeia* and *phantasia*, which are designed to make the listener visualize the situation and react in a particular way.³² By employing these devices Romanos changes the congregation from passive listeners into active participants in the events he vividly describes. They are no longer simply

³¹ Adam is thirsty because of Eve, who came from his side (Genesis 2:21-23). See further below.

³² Webb (1997), 112 and passim.

listening to him tell them about the thirsting Israelites, but they see the Israelites before them and experience their thirst.

This thirst is emphasized in this passage by repetition of the word thirst (δίψα) and words related to water (πηγή, νόματα), and by the (somewhat pleonastic) juxtaposition of ἐν ἐρήμῳ and ἐν ἀνύδρῳ. By conjuring up this image Romanos makes his congregation feel the thirst of the Israelites in the desert. At the very least he brings them to feel pity.

This passage follows a reference to the Eucharist and human redemption through the Eucharist (ιζ'. 7): ἡμεῖς δὲ τοῦ σωτῆρος τὸ αἷμα λαβόντες εὕρομεν λύτρον ('But we, receiving the blood of our Saviour, have found redemption'). This and the references to Christ's side in this passage (which redeems Eve, taken from Adam's side) immediately connect the quenching of thirst described in this *ekphrasis* with receiving the Eucharist. Romanos creates a picture of a spiritually and physically thirsty humanity, which is redeemed and whose thirst is quenched by Christ's crucifixion. References to thirsting in the desert also call to mind the water which burst from a rock to quench the thirst of the Israelites in their journey through the desert (Exodus 17:1-6). Yet this water did not quench human thirst forever, nor did it restore humanity to everlasting life. It is in the Eucharist, which is both a symbol of and a participation in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, that human thirst is quenched.

This reference to the Eucharist, which links Romanos' preaching with other rites of the Church or parts of the liturgy, reminds the congregation of the most obvious way in which they participate in the life of Christ: through receiving the sacrament of his body and blood. This reminder is central to Romanos' endeavour to make his congregation participate in the new creation which he believes is present after the Incarnation. Participation does not only take place in the Eucharist, but these references may keep the idea of participation in the minds of listeners. They are also appeals to the senses, encouraging the congregation to remember the taste of the bread and wine.³³ In this *ekphrasis* the appeal is specifically to the feeling of thirst, both physical and spiritual. The congregation is made to picture the Israelites in the desert and not only to imagine but also to identify with, even feel, their thirst. Romanos uses

³³ On the senses, see Frank (2005), 163-179, Harvey (2006).

the *ekphrasis* to prepare his congregation to receive the sacraments, making them thirst for the 'stream of life'.

Ekphrasis is a useful tool in the mouth of a skillful preacher like Romanos. Its links to image-creation and the sense of sight give it a strong connection to the emotions. By creating certain images in the minds of listeners, by making them witness particular events, Romanos is able to call forth emotions from them and to use these emotions to guide and to teach. Human sinfulness and need of God's redemption are emphasised through emotional *ekphraseis*. Emotional involvement in the images Romanos creates makes the congregation participate in Gospel stories and recall their participation in the Eucharist. By these means Romanos makes his congregation part of the new creation which Christ inaugurated at the incarnation.

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