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Classical Style as Achievement of the Living Philosophy

(Constantin-Ionuț Mihai *Retică și convertire în filosofia antică. Un studiu asupra literaturii protreptice*, Iași: Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași, 2018, 310 p.)

Among the books published by “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Press in 2018, Constantin-Ionuț Mihai’s *Rhetoric and Conversion in Ancient Philosophy* cannot go unnoticed. The study is basically an in-depth analysis of the concept of “protreptic” (προτροπικός), which has been sparsely explored in the field until now. Conceived initially as a PhD thesis, the research is now highly regarded among the volumes whose purpose is to lay emphasis on the particularities of ancient philosophy. The author is hardly a novice when it comes to tackling this subject: it represents the core element of his philosophical approach in his numerous articles and presentations for various scientific events.

What strikes you first is his simple, concise, incisive style which maintains its undiluted consistency throughout the whole work. The text is not stylistically heavy and the narrative is fluid – qualities of a classical style rarely encountered in our authors’ repertoires nowadays. The footnotes emerge at the right moment and straighten out any dilemma the reader may be confronted with, offering an instrumentation which is not too tiresome, abundant or intrusive. The author’s understanding of classical philology is also relevant, without which a scientific text of such a broad reach would be impossible to elaborate.

Regarding the target audience of this kind of text, we can identify, *grasso modo*, at least two categories of readers: the neophytes in the matter of Ancient classical philosophy and the connoisseurs of it. For the former, the book offers valuable information about Ancient culture and its protagonists through an accessible and digestible content. For the latter though, the present study fits into that category of mandatory works for anyone interested in the field. The subtle and complex perspective on what philosophy meant in the Ancient times, sustained by quotes and excerpts from the classics’ works, can offer the expert in the matter a more-than-welcomed support for the identification of the authorial intention and the argumentation’s framework.

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The book is made up of five carefully elaborated chapters, structured as an algorithm of analysis. The intentions of the research, clearly specified in the introduction, are painstakingly followed throughout the study, which shows the author's respect for the reader. But what are these intentions? First of all, the work's purpose matches the author's desire to offer those interested in the subject a journey into the history and signification of exhortative philosophical discourse. Other intentions add up to this one, such as: defining the literary species which boosts the interest in philosophy, interpreting texts of the authors who were preoccupied with these kinds of enterprises and from whom these types of texts were preserved and, last but not least, outlining the "protreptic" as a cultural phenomenon in Greek and Latin antiquity. Obviously, the whole process of theorizing about these issues takes into account the historical and cultural context.

Leafing through: the first chapter (19-76) offers a bird's eye view of this literary species; the second one (77-116) aims to present the particularities of Plato's protreptic (the dialogues *Euthydemos*, *Gorgias*, *Phaidon*); the third one (117-174) analyzes Aristotle's *Protrepticus*; the fourth one (175-240) takes into consideration Marcus Tullius Cicero's dialogue *Hortensius*, and the last one (241-280) highlights the major importance of the study of philosophy for Ancient personalities as reflected in the protreptic works in which the acquisition of virtue was always at stake.

About the book, in greater detail. The introduction and the first chapter of the book theorize about different aspects related to the meanings and the history of Ancient rhetorical and philosophical traditions. These fragments contain highly relevant issues such as elements related to the genesis of this type of literary species, more precisely the warfare context in which it was born (most probably caused by the feuds between rhetoric, sophistic, philosophy and medicine schools who were in search of disciples). Then the focus is on the characteristics and particularities of this kind of discourse, and on referencing the authors who embraced it. The rant between researchers about the special status of literary species ascribed to the protreptic is discussed in the first chapter too. It is not neglected the utilitarian character of the protreptic discourse which is permanently regarded as a matter of ideological dispute between doctrines, and implicitly schools of philosophy. This chapter also provides an analysis of terms specific to the exhortative discourse (προτροπή, συμβουλή, παράκλησις, παραινέσις), focusing mostly on the context in which they are employed in relation to the core concept of the study.

The second chapter mostly concentrates on the analysis of Plato's discourse which is tributary to the exhortative style. It is also discussed the most important feature of the protreptic's bipartite structure: *disproof* (ἔλεγχος), which consists of criticizing the ideology embraced by the actor or rival

school's doctrine, and *demonstration* (ἔνδειξις), which illustrates the role of supporting the ideas promoted by the emitter of a protreptic discourse. The author's analysis reflects his in-depth knowledge of both Plato's texts and their recurrent motifs (body-spirit relation, the myth, the true knowledge) and of the contextual particularities of the concept of "protreptic". The most seductive moral can be this: the ordinary man's life is opposed to the philosopher's, considering that philosophy is the necessary condition of acquiring happiness.

As I previously mentioned, the third chapter showcases the Stagirite's *Protrepticus*, and it is rather unfortunate that only a few fragments of it have been preserved. Here we find out that various researchers really strove to remain as faithful to that kind of exoteric discourse and as objective as they could in their attempt to restore it, considering that, as in the case of other similar Aristotelian works, they only had bits and pieces to work with. The objectivity can be noticed in the author's interpretation too, especially when he presents the polemics between exegetes regarding the restoration of *Protrepticus*. As he consistently does throughout the entire study, Constantin Ionuț Mihai never seeks to take sides when it comes to the ideas involved in the disputes. The conclusions are formed only after a subtle pondering and analysis of the arguments, thus conferring an honest and logical justification on the general ideas of the text. Following this path, the text will offer important information not only about the Stagirite's body of work, but also about his life, personality, and his intentions in different situations.

The fourth chapter, which is the last one focused on "the author and his work", deals with Marcus Tullius Cicero's dialogue *Hortensius*. Most probably written in a period when the thinker from Arpinum, retired from political life of Rome, needed philosophy more than ever (it's about 46-45 B.C. when Cesar was in his prime), the dialogue has been preserved only partially. It was a "tribute" from Cicero to his own rival rhetorician Hortensius, a celebrated personality of Roman political life who was the supporter of the futility of philosophy. The remained fragments put at our disposal faithfully evoke the tendencies of the exhortative discourse. The author of the study also mentions the essential versions which offer those who are interested salient data about the Ciceronian work's structure and content. It is also analyzed the quality of *medicina animi* attributed to philosophy by Cicero. We cannot neglect the stylistic and literary value of *Hortensius*, considering that it had a huge influence on classics' literature such as Virgil, Seneca, or Quintilian. Still, as a general idea of the exegesis we can identify the fact that the dialogue *Hortensius* contains strong references to works of Plato, Aristotle or Posidonius. It appears that this is rather a conservatory take on the protreptic discourse, grateful and tributary to its inspirational sources.

Finally, I have to lay emphasis on the importance of the last chapter: not only does it represent a well-executed synthesis of information from the previous chapters, but it also explains to the reader what philosophy stood for *in concreto* in Antiquity. He talks about that complex phenomenon defined as *way of life*. Unlike the approaches of contemporary philosophy, it is good to remember that, at least in ancient times, philosophy had also to be lived, not only read or elaborated and preserved in treatises and compendiums. So, back in the day, the attachment to a doctrine meant in the first place that you should turn it into a *modus vivendi*, while presenting it as a theory and a set of ideas was rather a subsidiary objective. The book also deserves the credit for explaining this huge issue the contemporary exegesis has been confronting with for a long time: the split between the philosopher's life and the doctrine according to which he was raised and educated. Thus, philosophical models shouldn't only be sought in the thinker's theses, but also equally in his deeds.

I can definitely state that *Rhetoric and Conversion in Ancient Philosophy* is a remarkable guide for those who want to form a coherent and articulate opinion on the world, philosophy, and classical culture. But the readers can easily be compelled to regard this book as something we may rightfully call a "metadiscourse": it starts by providing a stimulus for studying philosophy, but it also ends up being a call for meditation on the urge of living philosophy.