

Lived Religion

Conceptual, Empirical and
Practical-Theological Approaches
Essays in Honor of Hans-Günter Heimbrock

Edited By

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THE ACT OF LOOKING IS THE ACT OF CREATING: PHENOMENOLOGY OF HOMILY

Michael Thiele

Said Jesus: "See what is in your sight, and that which is hidden to you shall be disclosed. There is nothing hidden which shall not be revealed." (GThom 5)

The Art of Formation

Profane and religious speech crave "form-ation"—in play, in aesthetic performance, and body-mind presence (Heimbrock 2001, 235). Aesthetic learning is thus the process of "perception and practice of adequate forms" to celebrate our life and lament its chasms (Kriegstein 2001, 202). What would we be, what would our speech be without this *aisthesis* and *mimesis* "that wrestles the form from the formless?" (Heckmann 1987, 39).

To perceive the formless, to entice it into form and bring it into speech has always been the business of rhetoric and homiletics. Its job is to find 'the form of doctrine' (τύπον διδασκῆς) in its right configuration, according to Paul's Letter to the Romans (Rom 6:17). The artist Fiona Tan puts it like this: "The act of looking is the act of creating" (Spindler 2005, 233). And the artist Richard Serra: "Seeing is believing" (1997, 39; cf. Heimbrock 2003a).

In the last century, E. Lerle introduced the concept of gestalt, or form, as part of his empirical theology for preaching in 1963. With the exception of Meyer zu Utrup's scant and weak *Gestalthomiletik* (1986) he did not, however, find an extensive echo. This century, H.-G. Heimbrock has put the topos in the public eye. He achieved this in the framework of a life concept that emphasizes the fragmentariness of our existence—existence understood as an incomplete form that longs for redeemed completion (2001, 220–221). The fragmentation of our life and "the fragmentation of the personality" (Perls 1972, 10) strive for wholeness. This corresponds, in art history terms, with the method of *fragmentation*, which no longer represents the whole, opting instead for parts and seeking to ensure that the whole does *not* appear (Pfeiffer 2004,

158–159). Physiologically, this approach corresponds, in turn, with the fragmentation of our perception: the various perceptive modes do not form a holistic system but are divided into subsystems. For the *aisthesis* of the eyes, for example, that means that color, shape and plasticity are, for the most part, processed separately and then gradually reassembled into a complete picture (Pakesch 2003, 19). Perception is signified on the one hand by the experience of fragmentation and, on the other hand, through its drive to cancel this fragmentation again as part of a synthesis (Crary 2002, 13, 132). Perception both fragments and defragments. When applied to the homily, this means that its form—comprising the entities of the verbal, the paraverbal and the nonverbal—are only synthesized into a complete corpus in the course of the processing of these elements by the recipients, although this corpus is again only temporary, since everything is temporary to the end of time.

To this extent, participation in the divine, that which appreciates “the limits of its own form”, accepts its own limitations (Cornelius-Bundschuh 2001, 320). For: “Anything that has no limits, has no form at all” (Vinci 2003, 53). The kenotic body of Christ correlates with all this, his *deformatas*, his formlessness, that eventually ends in the “negation of form [...] in the crucifixion” (Heimbrock 1998, 179). However, the paradox is that precisely the imperfect seeks to be presented in a perfect way (*parfaitement*), in a flawless form (*d’uni forme qui ne fust pas défectueuse*), as the engraver J. Callot showed in favoring the formless (the ‘*ungestalt*’) in his work (Fraenger 1992, 72). So deformity seeks concise embodiment. The gestalt laws work according to the *principle of prägnanz*; according to this principle, our brain structures the sensations we experience to produce the simplest pattern possible (Göpferich 1998, 56). This principle should guide us when we preach; it also complies with the simplicity and the accessibility of the Gospel.

What then gives the sermon a concise form? Worth mentioning in terms of its organization is a good arrangement and in terms of the language its pictorialness and, moreover, concepts and thoughts that express the primary emotion of the sermon. Such qualities of form enable the creation of a long-lasting centering point. That is because concise forms are extremely attractive. They attract the eyes, ears, all the senses, the consciousness and the subconscious—and hold their attention. They have thus a strong updating dynamic. This includes the intrinsic force of the contents of the address, which can be still remembered and accessed by the listener after a long time. On the listener’s side too there are factors that promote the updating dynamic, such as

personal relevance (what is personally important to me, the listener?), strong motivational engagement (what motivates me?) or emotional stimulations (what captures my feelings, my heart?) (Lerle 1965, 157).

What is required is a concise form or, to put it another way, a precise inexactness (!). In such subtle cases as the speech and homily there is also a certain vagueness, a 'relation of blurredness' (Rosenthal 2004, 119), since it is not possible to agree upon a concept for that which is, since this would determine its being too prescriptively (Moxter 2001, 92). Alongside all *claritas* and *luciditas* there is also a good measure of *obscuritas* in rhetoric and homiletics, which is linked with its pictorial and metaphoric speech.

"It's for us to decide what to make of these pictures" (Sontag 1999, 36). The preacher's sermon is not complete—it only attains its complete form in the listener. According to the law of closure, it is the listener who completes the sermon. "It's a closure—completion of a gestalt" (Perls 1972, 71). The writer P. Roth describes how that can happen in the third part of his Christ trilogy, the novel "Corpus Christi" (2000, 84):

S'il se présentait à toi, tu ne le verrais pas. Mais qu'un étranger qui te tournait le dos se retourne, lentement, te donne en se tournant la possibilité de le voir en cet instant où il te montre presque son visage—car se tourner, c'est donner la possibilité de voir—, tu comprendrais de quoi il est question, même sans que vos regards se soient rencontrés. Bien mieux, tu serais compris dans ce mouvement de son visage. Car maintenant, tu peux compléter ce que tu n'as pas vu. Tu complètes le "presque", et tu en fais une totalité. Tu reconnais l'étranger, pleinement et totalement.

Comment puis-je compléter ma vision ?

Par ce que tu portes en toi. Qu'as-tu d'autre à ta disposition ?

Roth outlines the *law of closure* in striking and poetic terms. He explains how an equally concise yet incomplete and not yet closed form is perfected: *totalité!* In addition, he reflects important facts within the genetic framework of rhetoric—the text exists in the listener's reception—that is drawing the creation out of our own consciousness: we are only able to recognize what is already in some way in us. We can only achieve closure within this recognition framework.

In this sense, concise forms are particularly important from a linguistic point of view: "The first law of the sermon is to apply gestalt to the linguistic expression, to the unity of content and form, not to their separation." (Nicol 2002, 26) Rhetoric meets this requirement with

its gestalten and its figures. Rhetoric is a beautiful woman but also a warlike one (Augustine even appointed rhetoric in the war against the lies of the pagans):

A plaid that she placed on the shoulders according to Roman fashion covers the robe under the weapons. It is embroidered with all the phrases which give speech brilliance; this is the model for all rhetorical figures. [subarmalis autem uestis illi peplo quodam circa humeros inuoluto Latiariter tegebatur, quod omnium figurarum lumine uariatum cunctorum schemata praeferebat] (Mart. Cap. 5, 426).

Let's look more closely at the rhetorical figures. The term *figura* crops up first in Terence (ca. 185–159) in Eun. 317: Nova figura oris, the quite different form of the face—so dreams the lover of the countenance of the one he worships—speaking of a beautiful, round face. When we discover something round, when we recognize a face, then the “general form” appears: “This universality is admitted into our experience like figures in an inlay work” (Waldenfels 2001, 69). “We work with the whole figure” (Hirsch-Hüffell 2005, 17).

The lexeme ‘figura’ originally means ‘three-dimensional structure, form’. It is linked with *ingere*: ‘to work with matter, to create from clay or wax’, which in turn has a similar meaning to *formare* ‘to create, form a material’ (materiam formare). The word *figura* is apparently a synonym of *forma*. It is connected with *figulus* ‘the worker with clay, potter’; *factor* ‘sculptor’; *effigies* ‘three-dimensional artwork, picture’.

As a concept in rhetoric theory, *figure* comes up relatively late in Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* in 94 A.D. He uses the expression *figura* in the linguistic sense for every way “in which a thought is formed, just like the body, which can take many different forms, but always is in some sort of position” (Quintilian 1972–75, IX, 1, 10). “FIGURE POSITION STRUCTURE” (Penck 1979, 11) or “Figures: Thrust, Stance, Gesture, and Expression” (Rathgeber 2007, 210)—these are the coordinates in which the form moves. Only when we take a stance towards our sermon and speech subject, only when we take up a position with regard to it—in the physical and figurative sense—will we be able to represent the universality of the form. Only then will our speech or homily give expression to the universal. Only then will it signify the essence, the subject matter of the “first phenomenology of expressions” (Penck 2007, 43).

The Art of Reproduction—Against Mood—for Shape (Penck 2007, 9)

The listener is challenged to defragment and reconstruct the sermon. It is only in the reproduction that the fragmentary sermon becomes a whole in the sense of Gestalt theory. We are programmed for wholeness: the incomplete form, the unsettled situation, the unfinished sermon cries out for balance and reconciliation (Erbacher 1980, 157). The gestalt laws are fundamentally involved in the impact of the homily; gestalt is essentially a “form of feeling” and the form of the sermon specifically dependent on the prevailing emotionally-driven sensory perception of the person listening to the sermon (Schneider-Quindeau 2001, 151). A sermon from everyday life will, in the sense of the Gospel, put the focus on those things that are marginal; the preacher wants to commend their manifestations to the hearts of the listeners:

If one is looking for common features, we would speak about the joy of the minute—in fragments, reductions, models—and also about reckoning with the understanding of the observer, who combines individual particles to complete an insight or form (Metken 1996, 14).

The phenomena—and precisely the ‘minutiae’—merit our undivided attention, “attentiveness as a Christian virtue” (Hilger 1998, 143). Their perception, their exact perception is based “on the awareness principle, on phenomenology” (Perls 1972, 16). And behind that is the idea of “making people able to see again through phenomenology” (Blumenberg 1981, 30). The phenomenon of phenomenology is always something that is given—on the condition that it can also be different; in this respect, looking is also about the presence of that which cannot be seen (Moxter 2001, 93).

Phenomenology distinguishes itself through a particular stance towards people and things, beginning with what the particular individual encounters at a physical and sensory level on Sunday morning in the church service and through the week in their everyday life; it takes the perception of form in a normal environment and in the lifeworld as its starting point. People do not understand the things that surround them there as fragments; they build them into a meaningful whole, i.e. into a form.

In exactly the same way, the person who hears a sermon orders what he hears into a totality that makes sense to him. The language form of the sermon, propounded from the physical form of the homilist, is completed in the perspective of the listener into the whole form of an

experience, into “coherence as an equilibrated, meaningful ‘gestalt’” (Weidacher 2004, 49). This whole form is, in turn, an incomplete form, because all forms in our life are only ever temporary (Heimbrock 2003b, 181–182, 193, 197, 214–218):

Genuine art, on this view, addresses the imagination like the figures of Gestalt psychology, prompting the viewer to fill the artwork in such a way that we apprehend it as an organized configuration of lines, colors, shapes, spaces, vectors, and so on.

The form absorbs us.

Its Gestalt properties compel our attention and encourage us to dwell on and contemplate the ways in which the composition interacts with our perceptual capacities, thereby serving as pretext for us to explore our sensibility—to take note, for example, of how a particular diagonal line draws our attention to the foreground (Carroll 2006, 109).

In the best cases, the reconstruction becomes development of belief. That is not possible without gestalt. Without this development of form belief does not grow in us. How does ‘revelation’ occur? Revelation is the state that emerges from an ‘unlocking’, from a situation of ‘disclosure’ (Seip 2000, 283). Sometimes revelation comes, this boundary experience; sometimes, to put it trivially, the penny drops. I. T. Ramsey makes this clear with the analogy of the polygon and the circle. Regular polygons, the square and the circle are extremely concise units; they are simple and clear, and therefore have a high conciseness and transparency, fully in line with the rhetoric ideas of *luciditas* and *claritas*. Such concise shapes are, in terms of reception theory, much more quickly understood and are stored much longer in the long-term memory than units of less conciseness, like a bad right angle of 93 degrees or an irregular shape that is only similar to a circle (Lerle 1965, 132–133).

Let’s imagine a series of regular polygons, triangle, quadrilateral, pentagon, hexagon, heptagon, octagon... polygons with three, four, five, six, seven, eight... right to a never-ending number of sides. What does this show us? If we keep the area of the polygon roughly constant and visualize the geometric process, it seems that after a certain number of polygons the outline of a circle suddenly appears. The polygon cannot, however, ultimately become a circle, since the last polygon must have an infinite number of angles; infinite, however, is not a number. The sides of the last polygon must have the length 0, and then they would no longer be sides. You can, however, get as close as you can to the circle with polygons and call it the boundary figure of the polygon.

At the moment in which we recognize the outline of the circle generated by polygons, there is what one could call a 'mathematical insight'. This is related to the previously discussed Gestalt law of closure, in which we are compelled by gestalt closure to complete parts of a figure: in a form that has not yet been closed into a circle we close up the gaps and look at a complete circle. Or when the length of the sides of a regular triangle tends toward zero, we make out the form of a circle. This addition or completion can be seen as analogous to extrapolation in a faith-related situation. Since the many polygons will never achieve the circle form, but can only approximate it, it becomes clear that the circle displays another quality and another logical consistency in relation to the infinite polygons. That is how it is with God. God is beyond reach, unprovable, but deducible—or better still: God reveals himself. If we are fortunate. The circumstances from which he reveals himself are 'evocative' (Ramsey 1983, 153–154).

From clear, concise units, from a clear, concise arrangement, the sermon also reveals itself to the listeners. It can also lead to disclosure experience, in which the listener fully completes the sermon. Disclosure arises then from closure: "It was something that was closed but it was also something to enter into another world" (Farrow 1996, 21). The form completes itself. Revelation occurs.

As is often the case in divine things, the form in all of this is certainly part of an all-determining paradox: It is not ultimately possible to explain that which it seeks to represent in terms of speech and sermon at all. For God is non-pictorial, without form. At the same time, that which is without form is also the formative one: "yes, when he [scilicet man] wants to give you form he has erred and has to err: for you are without form, although you are the first single source of all form" (Herder 1998, 52).

But we cannot do anything else, other than to try again and again. This continual urge to provide form is unique to humans. We have to. It is a compulsion; a gestalt compulsion. And this compulsion gives us pleasure.

Conclusion

Speech, earthly or divine, comes to life in formation. According to Rom 6:17, doctrine requires form. The desire of the sermon is to perceive the shapeless, the kenotic Christ, and give him form in the

homily—concise and ordered form. It looks at the marginal; for the inconspicuous phenomena deserve our undivided attention—attention as a Christian *virtus*. The ‘figural’ (= formative) rhetoric, the spoken rhetoric with its figures, can support the provision of form. It may be able to create a centering point and with this a strong updating dynamic, i.e. the energy to be remembered and updated again by the listener. The congregation reconstructs the sermon, forms it again. And perhaps the closure of the sermon also brings disclosure.

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