SATIRE AS PERFORMANCE: A RE-READING OF ORALITY

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Abstract

Time there was when scholars believed that Homeric formulaic expressions and epithets alone conferred orality on a text. The seminal work by Milman Parry, establishing the orality of Homer, places emphasis on some traditional techniques of composition in the Homeric poems. However, recent criticisms by oralists who are concerned about techniques in oral compositions have cast doubts on what makes a text performative, an action-in-performance. Indeed, the study of 'speech acts' contained in satiric compositions reveals that this genre of poetry can be read as action-in-performance. By investigating the 'speech acts' and other structural elements in selected compositions by Juvenal and Horace, this paper seeks to show that ancient Roman satire exhibits similar grammatical structure and oral features, and can thus be seen as performance, even in its literary form.

I

Introduction

In *A definition of Performance Studies*, Ronald Pelias describes performance as "a process of dialogic engagement with one's own and others' aesthetic communication through the means of performance" (1992:15). In other words, performance is not just communicative but also transactional of events between a speaker and his listeners. In effect, "the participants share in an ongoing, dynamic interrelationship, a communicative process that triggers their sensitivity, not only to what is being said verbally, but to their nonverbal behavior as well." Pelias observes further that

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"performance, like all communication events, is a complex process calling upon participants' interpretative and behavioral skills" (15). Moreover, human communication as performance, according to Pelias, possesses "dramatic features...that compel explanations of all human action and helps in understanding the nature of performance itself". As a corollary to the above, Roman satiric poetry can be described as a 'dialogic engagement' between the satirist's aesthetic communication and that of his audience/interlocutor, since it was declamatory, and was usually recited before an audience which included the poet's patron. Satire however, does not necessarily flow from the performance of a play, but from the performance inherent within the text; hence, the essence of this paper is not the substitution of performance for text, but with satiric performance as represented by the text.

George Test (1991:17) regards satire as being dependent on the interpreter's ability to recognize that the satirist's oblique and surreptitious expression is actually an attack with certain goals in mind. This dialogic relation is further highlighted in Northrop Frye's (2008) reference to satire as 'militant irony,' a riposte which it utilizes to call on interpreters to refigure the meaning of the utterance in view of its new context of use. They expect their readers to make the necessary external connections. The fact is that satirists do not expect their utterances to be taken at face value.

Satire, by its very nature, George Test (1991:32) submits, asks the audience to make a connection between the text and the context in which it finds expression, since, according to him, the satirist demands that its audience engage in a dialogue of a special kind. They are also expected to react to the mixture of aggression, and other emotions expressed in the work.

In their various submissions, these scholars have substantiated the dialogic nature of satire, which establishes the view that, embedded in these compositions are performative utterances, which, according to Austin, would elicit perlocutionary effect on the audience. The satirical nature of the verse emerges in the process of performance and oralization, rather than the written

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rendering of same. Body movement/gestures and the articulation of words communicate the hidden meaning of an otherwise straightforward composition. It is in the performance of satire that its true nature (satirical) emerges. In essence, the written text masks the communicative capacity of satire. The action of satirizing also betrays its dialogic nature. Essentially, therefore, satire becomes performance when its oralization is reinforced through these illocutionary elements of performative acts.

II

Conceptualizing Performativity

Can a text be an action-in–performance[i] by being embedded within performative utterances? The question may be further asked, "Can satire be described as an oral poetic text?" In other words, can one say that a satiric poem, privileges performance by betraying elements that have illocutionary force and by the same token educe a perlocutionary effect on the interlocutor? Or is performance in such contexts, limited to the traditional formulaic techniques of Homeric composition? These questions pre-empt, perhaps, the possibilities of performativity as a function of the pragmatics of language and the pragmatic competence of the interlocutor, since all utterances, both performative and constative, have action embedded in them. The idea here is based on the belief that literal or normative meanings may be overridden by the actions of wilful interpretations. Yet, the fact remains that no one possesses an exclusivity of interpretative strategies; these logically follow from a pre-understanding of the interests and goals that animate the speech/utterance/question of someone operating within a community where everyone is linked by assumptions that have become habitual. Within the framework of contemporary critical debate, therefore, there may be two ways of interpreting this puzzle: either there is a literal meaning of the utterance and we

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should be able to say what it is, or there are as many meanings as there are readers and none is literal (Fish.1979:305-306).

In the last few decades, there has been an undeniable indeterminacy, a certain kind of vagueness, in the meaning of words, utterances etc., even as interpretations are reliant on the "norms and possibilities" embedded in language and the linguistic meanings of words. Moreover, we are forced to abandon our regular fields of experiences in verbal or literary communication, for a world in which "no text can mean anything in particular" and where "we can never say just what anyone means by anything he or she writes." When a speech is made, it is, more or less, like a *performed* act, within a given setting/context, which may include, making a statement, asking a question, issuing a command, presenting a report, sending a greeting or giving a warning. The term is, of course, derived from 'perform' the verb, which, combined with the noun "action", indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action. It is more than the thought of just saying something. Yet a number of performative statements may be contractual (e.g. 'I bet') or declaratory (e.g. 'I declare war') etc. Hence, in the words of J. L. Austin (1962:8), "under appropriate circumstances, to utter a sentence, is not to describe what I am doing, or what I should be said to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: *it is to do it.*" In addition, it would also be "necessary that either the speaker or other persons should also perform certain actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words."

This paper aims at adopting the instrumentality of "Speech Acts" to show that a 'text' can be performative not necessarily by virtue of betraying elements of the age-long formulaic expressions and epithets of orality. In furtherance of Amodio's (2004) contention for a more flexible theory of orality, this study intends to show that Roman satiric poetry can be read as a response to the 'utterance(s)' from individuals in the society. However, there is the inevitability of performative actions in such poetic 'renderings'

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of 'verbal duels' between the poet and the society or individuals within it. Such poetry discusses relevant aspects of the socio-political life of the people.

III

"Performative utterances" as performance in the satires of Juvenal

Understanding 'speech acts' as performative is predicated on a simple thesis that, in understanding 'literary' or 'poetic' discourse, just as in ordinary spoken or written discourse, one normally takes cognisance of what the author or the *persona* is doing in the act of uttering a given piece of discourse. For instance, when a mother says to her daughter, "it's time for you to do your school assignment," she does not necessarily spell out the reasons behind the utterance nor does she say it is mandatory for her daughter to act on it; rather, the force of such a statement is assumed to be self-evident and does not need to be spelt out. The same situation applies to 'literary' or 'poetic' discourse, whether the discourse is fictive or non-fictive (such as the works of Roman satirists, Horace and Juvenal). Some of these might be utterances of the author himself or of a *persona*, as sometimes happens in Roman satirical works. Therefore, to understand or interpret such kinds of literary works, the reader needs to deduce correctly what it is that the author or speaker is doing in uttering the words he speaks or writes.

In the same vein, it is possible to read Roman satire as essentially an "oral text," and therefore performative even though it exists in literary form. Since the over half a century long seminal works of Milman and Adam Parry, and those of subsequent "oralists" concerned with technique in the interpretation of orality,

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there has been a paradigm shift in the recognition of 'oral poetry' and 'formulaic poetry' as not being exchangeable terms, thus making it imperative for the "orality" of our poems to remain an open question (See Parry, A.,1972:1).

As aptly observed by Mueller, (1984:14) "whether audiences read the *Iliad* or listen to it, they must construe and respond to the meaning of the words, and this act of making sense may justly be called 'reading'. And whatever response is elicited from this reading depends, perhaps, on the method adopted." However, it would appear that the issue of interpreting a text, either as 'oral' or otherwise, has for too long been dogged by the rather narrow focus on the definition of 'oral literature' or 'orality.' In addition, Amodio proposes, among other things, the articulation of an oral theory that is more flexible than the oftentimes programmatically presented 'Parry-Lord theory'. This objective is to be achieved by challenging the notion "that orality and literacy are exclusive and contradictory episteme whose contact radically alters the former and inevitably signals its end." Such a proposition can offer modifications to oral formulaic theory as originally formulated by Milman Parry and Albert Lord (2005:1-3).

Conversely, the past few decades, have witnessed a growth in the importance of performance in the study of verbal behaviour by social anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists among others, and this has shown that written communication can also make use of "strategies associated with speaking, in order to create involvement"(Tannen,1982:18). Written texts, while not targeting a specific audience, are nevertheless defined by their readers. In the words of Ong (1986:148) "there are no universal listeners. There are only individual listeners, real or fictional, but all time-bound."

Although the idea of Homeric oral tradition is textually mediated, and can be performed periodically and in more than one locale,"(Bakker,1993) there is a sense in which it can be argued that performance is not only conferred on a 'text' by virtue of its being 'periodically performed', but that 'performance is an

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essentially bundling of hermeneutic features' of a text. The fact that it is a stylized and intensified speech in a spoken language can be brought to bear on the interpretation and classification of the text, even though not in the oral tradition mould.

As a closer reading of the works of Juvenal and Horace would reveal, performance is not an exclusivity of stage productions, since an 'action' can also be accomplished with the use of words or utterances. The presence of 'performatives' in these works would show a 'bundling of hermeneutic features' hitherto masked in uncertainty. When Umbricius in Juvenal's *Satire 3*, utters the following statement:

> res hodie minor est here quam fuit atque eadem cras deteret exiguis aliquid, proponimus illuc ire, fatigatas ubi Daedalus exuit alas, dum nova canities, dum prima et recta senectus, dum superest Lachesi quod torqueat et pedibus me porto meis nullo dextram subeunte bacillo.cedamus patria.(23-28)
>
> [My resources have shrunk since yesterday...so I am going/where Daedalus put off his weary wings
> While yet I am still in vigorous middle age, while active years are left me,
> While my white hairs are still few and I need no stick
> To guide my tottering feet. So farewell Rome.]

Umbricius has already packed his belongings on a waggon heading to Cumae-Roman countryside. In other words, he is carrying out an action, even though the statement serves the purpose of informing the interlocutor or his audience, which is quite another matter. Perhaps the question might be raised with regard to whether the reader *saw* the action being carried out. Yet, the perception of the perlocutionary effect of the performance by the satirist (as represented here by his *persona*) is not necessarily visual, (even

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though it is visual in this particular instance), and as indicated by Austin (1962), such performatives should elicit some action or, if you like, a reaction in the interlocutor. Hence, as witnessed above, the circumstances of Umbricius is tantamount to a perlocutionary effect, capable of eliciting a concrete reaction. Similar circumstances would be played out in the course of this article, in which the reader either merely perceives the effect of the performative utterances or becomes a medium for the perlocutionary effect of the utterance.

Juvenal's conviction was that the Greeks were somewhat to blame for the state of affairs in the city of Rome. However, like other contemporary socio-political problems, the Roman armies had a share in the sorry state of affairs. Hence, what Juvenal was witnessing being played out in his contemporary Rome, was the working of nemesis in respect of Rome's conquest of the world:

> saevior armis
> luxuria incubuit uictumque ulciscitur orbem (6.292-3).
>
> [More devastating than armies,
> Luxury has fallen upon us, avenging the world we conquered.]

The satirist's utterance of dejection is not a mere description of the happenings in the city; rather, he provides a graphic verbal picture of the ongoing situation. The perlocutionary effect of Juvenal's performatives can be seen in the city of Rome. There are indications that, during the period, about the second century AD when Juvenal wrote, the moral tone of Rome and its inhabitants was really low indeed[2]. In *Satire* One (23-50), he says in translation:

> Today we are elbowed aside by men who
> Earn legacies in bed, who rise to the top via that quickest, most popular route...need I tell you how anger burns in my heart when I see bystanders jostled back

by a band of bravos (66 peng.)
Whose master has first debauched his ward,
and later defrauded the boy as well?
The courts condemn him, but the judgment is farce.

Equally serious are the poet's linguistic collocations/utterances concerning the effect of Greek influences on the native Romans. Greek cultural imperialism as manifested in their speech and other mannerism has become like the plague. Juvenal again paints a garish picture of this effect on women:

omnia Graece:
hoc sermon pauent, hoc iram, gaudia, curas,
hoc cuncta effundunt animi secreta. quid ultra?
concumbunt Graece (6.186*ff*).

[Everything's done in Greek.
In this they express their fears, anger, joys, and concerns;
In this they reveal their hearts secrets; what else can I say?
They even co-habit in Greek.]

We also encounter Juvenal in *Satire* 8, in a didactic disposition, where he is making statements urging Ponticus, a governor designate, to match his nobility with dignified conduct (80-104).

So when you at last obtain
Your long-awaited reward, that provincial governorship,
Set some curb on your anger and greed, pity the destitute
Local inhabitants, whose very bones, you'll discover,
Have been sucked dry of marrow.

The above seemingly rhetorical flourishes from Juvenal are actually sober truths; imperatives, which should elicit actions from "other persons," i.e, the addressee. Ponticus is further advised:

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Take care not to victimize
Courageous, desperate men. You may strip them of all
Their gold and silver, they still possess their weapons.

As indicated earlier, the intent of these performatives or utterances, which are indignant tirades from the satirist, is to educe some action from the individual they are directed at. This is typical of the purpose of such tirades, which inveigh against every aspect of Roman life and intended to promote moral reform.

It is the tradition among Roman satirists to intimate the audiences with their intention or, as it were, their programme, in their first *Satire*; and Juvenal does not fail to take full advantage of this tradition. Quite early, in the piece, he indicates his programme of action: a passionate condemnation of the degeneracy of morals consequent on the promotion of prurient poetry by literary dabblers in his contemporary Rome. Juvenal is moved by *saeva indignatio*, a passion which sustains him throughout this satire. Moved by anger, he justifies his lampoons of this vice in the following statement:

difficile est saturam non scribere. nam quis iniquae
tam patiens urbis, tam ferreus, ut teneat se,
causidici noua cum ueniat lectica Mathonis
plena ipso, post hunc magni delator amici
et cito rapturus de nobilitate comesa(30-34)

[It's misplaced kindness, to refrain from writing.
The paper will be wasted.
Why then have I chosen to drive my team down the track
Which great Lucilius blazed? If you have the leisure to listen
Calmly and reasonably, I will enlighten you.]

Fuelled by his anger, the perlocutionary effect of his use of performatives in the statement *difficile satura non scribere*, (it is

difficult not to write satire) is indicated in his performance of an act that would culminate in a response by his audience. In lines 1-10, he is passionately piqued about the inanity of the epic tradition which he describes as of little value, scoffing at its themes, and referring to them pejoratively with dimunitives, as he lashes out:

> Semper ego auditor tantum? numquamne reponam
> uexatus totiens rauci Theseide Cordi?
> inpune ergo mihi recitauerit ille togatas,
> hic elegos? inpune diem consumpserit ingens
> Telephus aut summi plena iam margine libri
> scriptus et in tergo necdum finitus Orestes?
> nota magis nulli domus est sua quam mihi lucus
> Martis et Aeoliis uicinum rupibus antrum
> Vulcani; quid agant uenti, quas torqueat umbras
> Aeacus, unde alius furtiuae deuehat aurum

> Must I always be stuck in the audience at these poetry-readings, never
> Up on the platform myself, taking it out on Cordus
> For the times he's bored me to death with ranting speeches
> From the Thesied of his? Is X to get scot-free
> After inflicting his farces on me, or Y his elegies?
> Is there no recompense for whole days wasted on prolix
> Versions of Telephus? And what about that Orestes –
> Each roll of the crammed solid, top and bottom,
> More on the back, and still it wasn't finished!
> I know all the mythical landscapes like my own back-room:
> The groove of mass, that cave near Aeolu's island
> Belonging to Vulcan. The stale themes are bellowed daily
> In rich patrons' colonnades till their marble pillars,
> Crack with a surfeit of rhetoric. The pane-trees echo
> Every old trope – what the winds are up to, whose ghost

Aeacus has on his hellish rack, from what far country

He refers to a well-known hero with the casual *alius* in (line 10), again the statement, *uexatus totiens rauci Theseide Cordi?* suggests that Juvenal is irritated by the nauseous cacophony from the themes of some of the poetry declamation by some poetasters in his time.

His opening rhetorical utterance in the first few lines rather violently parodies and emphasizes the ornate nature of such compositions encouraged by the rhetorical schools of his day. According to Anderson (1982), Juvenal's stimulus should be interpreted as his puritanical uprightness raging at the general concern with trivial things and the complete obliviousness that Rome is being destroyed by its own immorality.

IV

"Performative utterances" as performance in the satires of Horace

Horatian *Sermons*, like Juvenal's satires, also seek to reform[3] human character or behaviour, and are consequently aimed at amending human follies. Invariably, they are taxonomical, preceded by thought provoking rhetorical questions, and couched in such speech acts or performatives which are suggestive of action-in–performance. Therefore, embedded in his sermons are his perceptions of human incongruities. Little wonder, then, that his satire betrays elements of performativity, indicative of the fact that such irrational behaviour ought to be amenable to reason. The opening statement in *Satire One* of his first Book of satires (*Satire*.1.1) is a soul-searching rhetorical question directed at his patron – Maecenas:

> Qui fit, Maecenas, ut nemo, quam sibi sortem seu ratio dederit seu fors obiecerit, illa contentus vivat, laudet diversa sequentis?
>
> [How is it, Maecenas, that no one is content with his own lot
> Whether he has got it by an act of choice or taken it up
> By chance – but instead envies people in other occupations?]

Horace, here, is of the view or impression that humans make themselves miserable through their insatiable greed and envy for other people's occupation, believing that happiness, which all are seeking, lies in the other man's occupation; so, the frantic pursuit of those ends are a misconception and, therefore, irrational. He may not have set out to influence societal behaviour at large, but obviously would have wanted to stimulate people's moral awareness. Even though the argument may be posited about the intention of his satires – to give pleasure, entertainment, especially with his skilful presentation and amusing anecdotes, etc. – he still goes the extra-mile to suggest what he considers sensible behaviour, such as: obeying parents (1.4.105ff); listening to the advice of candid friends (1.4.132); observing other people's faults (1.4.109ff); introspection (1.4.133ff) and reading the right books, like satires.

Horace's sermons are directed at what *we should not do.* And most often his subjects of ridicule are what he describes as *exampla stultitiae* (short-sightedness and perversity in human nature), and many of them are identified: the miser, spendthrifts, gluttons and debauchees, all ridiculed to the reader's entertainment and pleasure. But, in the same breath, the satirist hopes that, at least occasionally, the reader would, while smiling, pause and listen to an inner voice, which murmurs something like *de te fibula narratur* (you are the subject of the story):

Tantalus a labris sitiens fugientia captat flumina — quid rides? mutato nomine de te fabula narrator (1.1.69-70).

[Tantalus thirstily strains at the waters eluding his lips –
What are you laughing at? Change the name
and you are the subject of the story.]

Horace's preachments against the miser – a particular social type – are further illustrated with the story of a certain Ummidius, who would rather starve and go about tattered than spend his money. He is split down the middle with an axe by a disgruntled freed woman within his household. Then the poet urges his readers in his critical voice:

non ego avarum
cum veto te, fieri vappam iubeo ac nebulonem:
est inter Tanain quiddam socerumque Viselli:
est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines,
quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum. .(1.1.104-8)

[When I urge you not to be a miser,
I'm not saying you should be a rake and a wastrel.
There is a stage between the frigid midget and the massive vassal.
Things have a certain proportion. In short, there are definite limits;
If you step beyond them on this side or that you can't be right.]

The satirist's use of the word *'iubeo'* in the second line of this statement – a verb in the first person indicative, which literally implies 'I order' (you) – is imperative of the intent of the concept of performativity embedded in those lines.

While giving the account of a journey he embarked on with Maecenas, his patron to Brundisi, to a summit conference, he describes the deplorable living conditions and the action he decides upon thus:

> hic ego propter aquam, quod erat deterrima, ventri indico bellum, cenantis haud animo aequo exspectans comites. .(1.5.5-9)
>
> [Here I declared war on my stomach because of the water
> Which was quite appalling, and waited impatiently
> As the other travellers enjoyed their dinner.]

The act of 'declaration of war' on the stomach of all places, smacks of a hunger strike. From all indications, it goes beyond a mere thought. For personal reasons, Horace embarks on a 'hunger strike', refuses to eat with fellow travellers, but rather impatiently watches as they enjoy the very same meal he despises.

Again in *Satire* 1.8, Horace employs Latin collocatives in conferring performativity on a statue of Priapus, turning it into a narrator. He is exploiting a tactic, common to a variety of Greek epigrams, in which statues bearing inscriptions are often represented as speaking in the inscription[5].

> Olim truncus eram ficulnus, inutile lignum, cum faber, incertus scamnum faceretne Priapum, maluit esse deum. deus inde ego, furum aviumque maxima formido; nam fures dextra coercet obscaenoque ruber porrectus ab inguine palus, ast inportunas volucres in vertice harundo terret fixa vetatque novis considere in hortis.
>
> [Once I was the trunk of a fig-tree, a useless lump of wood.
> Then the carpenter, wondering whether to make a bench or a Priapus,

Preferred me to be a god. So a god I am, the terror
Of thieves and birds. Thieves are deterred by the weapon in my hand
And also by the red stake projecting obscenely from my crotch.
The birds are an absolute pest, but the reed stuck in my head
Frightens them off and stops them settling on the renovated gardens.]

The above is a performative utterance or statement which indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performance of an action, and not mere verbal expression. We are saying that actions can be enacted not only by a performative utterance, but also that such circumstances and actions must be appropriate. To reiterate the words of Austin (1962:8), "under appropriate circumstances, to utter a sentence, is not to describe what I am doing, or what I should be said to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it." In other words, the action, of whatever nature, is actually ongoing.

V

Conclusion

The foregoing investigation reveals that orality or performance is not an exclusivity of stage performance or the Parry-Lord formulaic strategy of conferring orality on a text. Rather, as portrayed above, performativity can also be privileged by the presence of 'speech acts' or performative utterances in a text. This is justifiably so because Roman satiric tradition, (as shown in Juvenal's opener in *Satire* One) encouraged public recitation by poets before an audience and their patrons.

There is little doubt that, by its character, the object of satire, even in antiquity, has been the eliciting of some form of action or reform from the audience. Even though some scholars have made attempts in recent times to persuade us that Horace had

no intention of reforming or influencing behaviour, nevertheless, he might have chosen ethical subjects for their variety and interest, although he did not expect to modify our attitudes or make us better any more than he hoped to turn his readers to poets (cf.Rudd 1986.11-12). Such doubts, however, may not be entertained about the intent of Juvenal, the bitter old man from Aquinum, whose savage anger and criticism leaves no one in doubt about his expectations. Hence, besides immortalizing their names, these satirists were possibly bent on leaving the society better off than they met it.

Endnotes

[i] "An oral poem is not composed for but in performance"' (Lord.1960:4).

[2] As described in his opening satire, Juvenal lamented the deplorable conditions in the city of Rome due to corruption and greed of the upper classes; such as fires, collapsing buildings, also the preponderance of muggings, among other vices.

[3] There have been attempts in recent times to persuade us that Horace had no intention of reforming/influencing behaviour; nevertheless he may have chosen ethical subjects for their variety and interest and though he did not expect to modify our attitudes or make us better any more than he hoped to turn his readers' to poets.(cf.Rudd 1986.11-12).

[4] One can't but align with Rudd's interpretation of Horace's intent here, since it, invariably, projects the perfomativity of those lines in *Satire* One.

[5] According to Anderson (1982:76) in *Iamboi* 7and 9, Callimachus represented Herms as speaking, to provide a local aetiology.

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