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THE RHETORIC OF SINCERITY*

Sincerity was (and in many cases still is) a central notion in the evaluation of ancient poetry. The New Criticism described and discredited this kind of approach to literature as the "sincerity fallacy", a misconception that regarded poetry as an expression of the biographical author's psychic experience. The more direct or the more authentic this expression is, the higher the quality of the poetry that is created. It goes without saying that from the viewpoint of such a concept of literature the title of this paper seems an apparent oxymoron, since rhetoric was regarded as a means of mediation that excluded the possibility of a direct or a sincere communication of experience. Ovid's poetry was often undervalued as highly rhetorical and therefore necessarily insincere. But first of all I would like to speak of the rhetoric of classical scholarship and the role the concept of sincerity—sometimes in sophisticated disguise—still tends to play in it.

Sincerity has not been always regarded a value. The notion presupposes the modern individual, and the concern with it came to characterise some European cultures not sooner than at the beginning of modern epoch.[1] Sincerity as a concept of literary theory is the heritage of Romanticism, a movement that wanted poetry to be an unmediated expression of thoroughly penetrating experience, which can be appropriately described by the German term *Erlebnis*. Therefore, Romanticism had no confidence in traditional means of mediation like rhetoric or literary *genres*. We can hardly be surprised by the fact that classical philology, which in its modern form was developed in a cultural milieu basically determined by the achievements of German romantic poetry and literary criticism, has enthusiastically adopted these ideas and will be very reluctant to get rid of them. In the present state of our culture, however, we can scarcely believe in the possibility of a direct approach to even our own experience. The post-modern consciousness happily dismisses the hope of coining an unheard of language to express a unique experience, since that experience (which is not so unique, to start with) has already been mediated by the language to consciousness. In the twentieth century even the concept of a unified personality, which could face a unique experience, was dismissed. On the other hand we have no access to the author's mind, and therefore we can neither verify nor refute any statement about the congruity of experience and expression, and therefore even speaking of such seems nonsense.

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[1] Lionel TRILLING, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1971, 26. For the importance of sincerity in post-modern context cf. Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity 1991, 200–208.

The favourite figure of the New Criticism was irony, which can be regarded as the opposite of sincerity. It was traditionally defined as a case when the literal meaning of a statement is different from or rather the opposite of the intended one. The New Criticism's hero is no longer the sincere poet, who creates a new language to express exactly what he wants, but the ironical one who composes a poem that is able to indirectly hint at a different intended meaning. But we have problems with this *intention,* since it implies the supposition of an intending being, a consciousness behind the utterance that disposes over the various, i.e., ostensible and real meanings. This consciousness, however, we cannot directly reach to make a comparison between its intention and the actual meaning of its utterance. It can be true that "we cannot conceive of speech without speakers—conveyed meaning without a conveyer of meaning",[2] but the bare and probably inevitable presumption of a consciousness behind the utterance is insufficient to recognize its intention as different from the meaning of its utterance. Nevertheless some of us are able to recognize irony. Is it only a matter of our imagination? If I can imagine an opposite intention, or if I cannot imagine a sincere intention, the text becomes ironical. There are some texts that seem ironical to some readers and sincere to others. Lucan's eulogy on Nero at the beginning of the *Pharsalia* can figure as an obvious example.[3] But those who regard a text as ironical must refer to some textual or contextual contradiction that signal irony, or should make the reader cautious about the literal meaning. Some recent definitions of irony, therefore, tend to silently dismiss the intention of the speaker and speak of a contradiction between words and contexts, or of an exploitation of deviations from syntactic or semantic norms.[4]

A problem still remains: every poetic text exploits deviations from syntactic and semantic norms. Actually this is exactly what poetry does. With a pinch of wit and with sufficiently close reading we certainly will find contradictions in every text. Close reading results in irony.

How can the concept of sincerity play any role in literary criticism in such a situation? Of course I will not discuss examples of a naïve biographical approach, which is still very much with us. Some scholars write as if they were living in the nineteenth century; never-

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[2] Paul HERNADI, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification,* Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 1972, 173.

[3] For an ironical reading of the eulogy see Berthe M. MARTI, *The Meaning of the Pharsalia,* AJPh 66 (1945) 352–376; Emanuele GRISET, *Lucanea IV: L' Elogio Neroniano,* Rivista di Studi Classici 3 (1955) 134–138; Otto Steen DUE, *An essay on Lucan,* Classica et Medievalia 23 (1962) 68–132; Otto SCHÖNBERGER, *Untersuchungen zur Wiederholungstechnik Lucans,* München: C.H. Beck 1968. For the other way of reading that will take it a sincere laudation see Pierre GRIMAL, *L'Éloge de Néron au début de la Pharsale,* REL 38 (1960) 296–305; Lynette THOMSON, *Lucan's Apotheosis of Nero,* CPh 19 (1964) 147–153; Wolfgang D. LEBEK, *Lucans Pharsalia: Dichtungsstruktur und Zeitbezug,* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1976, 74–107; Klaus E. BOHNENKAMP, *Zum Nero-Elogium in Lucans Bellum civile,* MH 39 (1977) 235–248; Erich BURCK, Werner RUTZ, *Die ‚Pharsalia' Lucans,* in: E. Burck (ed.), *Das römische Epos,* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1979, 161–62

[4] Roger FOWLER (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms,* 2nd, rev. ed., London, New York: Routledge–Kegan Paul 1987, 128–129. (First ed. 1973.)

theless those ways of thinking are much more interesting that try to take into account the post-modern condition of literary criticism but are unable to break with the strong biographical tradition of classical scholarship. I think we can find the most suitable examples of sincerity criticism in the scholarly literature on Catullus, Horace and Ovid. Catullus was generally accepted as "*Erlebnisdichter katexochen*",[5] and it seems to be difficult to break with this tradition. But not at all impossible. (I refer to the books of William Fitzgerald and David Wray.[6]) The sincerity of Horace's political poetry, on the other hand, has been a fiercely debated topic, which has never been independent from the political attitudes of the debating scholars or their contemporary social environment.[7] As to the sincerity of Horace's love poetry let me exceptionally quote one single sentence from a book on Horace, which was ruled by the naïve biographical attitude, "As to Horace, it may legitimately be doubted whether he was ever more than ankle-deep in love."[8] Ovid's love poetry with its cheerful tone and playful variations of all possible topics of a well-established genre did not entice the fans of sincerity. But the poetry of exile was many times described as an expression of life exceptionally immediate in classic literature, and now we can read a quite interesting set of analyses on the problematic nature of this immediacy. Furthermore, once the idea started circulating that Ovid might never have been exiled,[9] we have had to face the possibility of a completely ironical reading of both exile poetry collections. I am going to analyse briefly two appearances of the sincerity approach to literature from the Catullus scholarship, and then I will touch on the problems of reading Horace today.

Eve Adler[10] usually finds some textual or syntactical contradictions in Catullus' poems. For example, in c. 8 there is a speaking "I" (and she thinks "it is natural" that the speaker is Catullus [8]), an acting "you" called Catullus, and finally an acting "he" also called Catullus. But such contradictions, Adler insists, do not result in irony; on the contrary, they are markers of "direct self-revelation." (6) She thinks the poet's distance from the speaking persona is "part of a person's anguished self-division", (7) and Catullan poems communicate "a lived experience of a person" who includes and is superimposed to the three components: the speaker of the poem, the addressee called "Catullus", and the poet presenting the poem. (11) We have many Catulluses. One is acting in a life situation; another one is reasoning about it; a third one composes a poem to express this reasoning; and there is "the person Catullus", who contains all of them and something more. "The poem is a conquest of the experience it expresses, and the experience is less immediate than the conquest." (11)

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[5] Günther JACHMANN, *Sappho und Catull*, RhM 107 (1964) 20.

[6] William FITZGERALD, *Catullan Provocations: Lyric Drama and the Drama of Position*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1995; David WRAY, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2001.

[7] Ernst DOBLHOFER, *Horaz in der Forschung nach 1957*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1992, 5–6 and 12–13.

[8] Victor G. KIERNAN, *Horace: Poetics and Politics*, London: MacMillan 1999, 122.

[9] A.D. FITTON BROWN, *The Unreality of Ovid's Exile*, Liverpool Classical Monthly 10.2 (Feb. 1985) 18–22.

[10] Eve ADLER, *Catullan Self-Revelation*, New York: Arno Press 1981.

I think Adler misunderstands a concept of modern literary theory when she speaks of a distance of the poet from their persona, since one of the two ends of this supposed distance, namely the poet, cannot be experienced by reading poetry. What actually is useful is a differentiation between poet and persona to make it clear that when we speak of a poem's speaking voice we do not speak of the biographical author. Adler distorts this well-known concept in order to bring back the idea of the author and to speak of the poet's person and personality, notwithstanding everything twentieth-century literary criticism had told us about the sterility and inadequacy of this kind of discourse. But it is only the less skilful of her techniques. She seems to take into consideration the modern insight into the mediated nature of experience, but she applies this insight in an old-fashioned model of literature, the key words of which are experience, expression, poet and personality. She knows that it would not be up to date to insist that the biographical author is identical with the poem's speaker, or that they were immediately expressing the poet's experience; therefore she makes these differences the main topic of Catullus' poetry. There is nothing especially Catullan in the model of the tetrahedron with the triangle of poet–speaker–agent and the superimposed person. A major part of lyric poetry stages an agent and a speaker, and since readers face a composed text they can imagine a composer of it; and then they can imagine the all inclusive personality all the same. But the discourse on the last two factors is an imaginative one, since in poetry we can only experience the poem's speaker and agent. When Adler makes the poem's actual topic the conquest of the experience, i.e., the composer-poet's activity when writing a poem on the experience of the person-poet, she situates her discourse in the sphere of the imagination. She differentiates between poet and poetical voice only to create a theoretical framework in which she can peacefully speak of the biographical author's personality.

Niklas Holzberg investigates much more carefully what he calls "the hidden author".[11] He explicitly, repeatedly and sometimes fiercely refuses the direct biographical reading of Catullan poetry. He thinks the events narrated or referred to in the poems do not communicate information of the poet's life, since they belong to the persona and make up a "Catullus novel" (14). Nevertheless, he wants to formulate statements about the poet. Nothing can be told about his life and personal beliefs, he admits. But something can be told because behind Catullus' speaking persona the author Catullus is hiding. "Dieser ist freilich nicht so versteckt, daß es sich nicht lohnen würde auch nach ihm zu fragen und zu suchen." (14) Derrida's readers will be reluctant to receive this idea that there is something (an author of all things) beyond the text. When he recognizes a Greek poem, which the Catullan one quotes, transforms or parodies, he describes this situation by a topographical metaphor that the Greek poem hides behind the Latin one. "Wieder einmal versteckt sich hinter Catulls Text ein anderer, und hinter den beiden Texten versteckt sich wiederum der Autor, dessen Anwesenheit sich freilich in seinem freien Umgang mit der Vorlage manifestiert." (55) Of course it is a version of intertextual reading, and Holzberg is usually brilliant at analysing texts. But he is not satisfied with speaking of texts interrelated by *his* reading process. He

[11] Niklas HOLZBERG, *Catull: Der Dichter und sein erotisches Werk*, München: C.H. Beck 2002, 11–60.

feels a need to speak of an author, a consciousness we can reach through the text. His Catullus is insincere, and completely ironical, who plays a literary game with us. Instead of an immediate expression of experience the Catullan poetry appears here as a self-referential game of the literary medium. This approach would do without any hint at the author quite alright. But the ghost of the biographically focussed literary criticism haunts us here as a transcendental belief in a creator behind the creation, an author manifested in the poem.

Irony, however, is not the only possible opposite of sincerity. Insincerity or lying can also be discussed in this context. From the viewpoint of irony, sincerity and insincerity do not differ too much; while an ironical text offers some contradictions to create some tensions within the utterance, both sincere and insincere declarations are supposed to be completely congruent. The difference is not situated in the text but in the envisioned uttering personality; an insincere poet does not say what he feels either because he is unable to do so, or because he consciously says something different from his personal beliefs due to his political or financial interests. It goes without saying that we do not have evidence of the authors' personal beliefs in most cases. The decision of accepting a poetical utterance as sincere, therefore usually depends on imagination and is basically influenced by political preferences. Catullus's poems on Lesbia are usually regarded as sincere, those on other women and on Iuvencus are not, and this difference is quite probably caused by an attitude, which sets high value on bilaterally exclusive heterosexual love and rejects both promiscuity and homosexuality. Horace's political poems will be regarded as sincere outbursts if someone has a positive opinion of Augustus' regime or authoritarian political systems in general. Otherwise one will need some effort to argue for Horace's sincerity. Let us see the theoretical methods recent scholarship develops to solve this problem, which it had better not discuss at all.

Randall L.B. McNeill formulates a binary opposition of biographical and rhetorical interpretations of the self-image of Horace's poetry. The first one believes that the poems offer a sincere and accurate record of the poet's life, while the latter treats the texts "as self conscious and artificial literary works, more the products of craft than of earnest self-revelation".[12] Although McNeill realises that recent scholarship tends to deny the need of choice between these possibilities, he thinks it is a risky strategy to leave such questions open, since "questions of what is real and what is invented lie at the very heart of Horace's poetry".[13] I would like to highlight the verb *lie* in this sentence, which I regard as a quite sophisticated identification of the "invented" with a lie. It also seems to reject Fraenkel's postulation that "Horace... never lies".[14] I do not think, however, that the question of the truth of the biographical statements remained open; it turned out to be inadequate. In a fictional medium there is neither truth nor lie, and nowadays readers tend to treat lyric poetry as rather a fictional and auto-referential medium than as one of direct personal declarations.

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[12] Randall L. B. MCNEILL, *Horace: Image, Identity, and Audience*, Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001, 3.

[13] MCNEILL, op. cit. 4.

[14] Eduard FRAENKEL, *Horace*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1957, 260.

McNeill has the impression that different poems of the corpus offer different and in many cases incompatible self-portraits, and it is impossible to elaborate an all-comprehensive image of Horace. Nevertheless he tries to do so by envisioning a poet who always takes into consideration the social context and speaks to different, concentrically growing, audiences at the same time, but "controls and directs the responses of each of his audiences".[15] A poet able to control the responses of all readers would be a unique phenomenon in the history of literature, and this hypothesis is contradicted by the fact that different codices contain variants, which testify to different readings. However, the very demand of a strategy that clarifies the differences of self-images in different poems is the legacy of the biographical approach to literature, since nothing can guarantee the unity of a corpus, i.e., a set of separate pieces of literature written by or attributed to a single author, but the biographical author's supposedly unified personality.

Another interesting attempt of "biographical" reading has been made by Ellen Oliensis, who simply erased the differentiation between author and persona through introducing the notion of *face*.[16] The poem is regarded as an utterance in a life situation; the speaker tries to realize a speech act, and for this he construes a face. The faces that appear in various poems may naturally be different. The face is not a clue to the extrapoetic life, nor is it an immanent feature of the poetic medium. Oliensis is interested "in the life that happens in [Horace's] poetry" (3). This approach is compatible with a modern social theory of personality, and therefore it avoids the shortages of psychologically centred biographical interpretations. Face does not only mean a sort of social behaviour, but also prestige, and in this meaning the poem that constructs or destructs face appears as a game of power, which might open the way towards a post-modern reading of Horace. At the same time, however, the series of poems are interpreted in accordance with the scheme of a carrier story, which brings back biographical plots into the scholarly narrative. This is obvious in sentences such as the following: "The more face Horace accumulates, the less effort he needs to devote to maintaining it" and "As Horace gains authority, moreover, he defers differently—paying more deference to Augustus and less to Maecenas" (5). We can see the plot of a successful life history that offers a frame to the interpretation of poems as manifestations of the struggle for face, i.e., for social rise. Although with the concept of face the problem of sincerity seems to be avoided, since this approach does not differentiate between personal belief and uttered content, the result is rather similar to the image of an insincere Horace who says what is favourable for his carrier.

After these examples of the surviving topic of the author's personal sincerity I would like to turn the table and to approach to the notion of sincerity as a rhetorical achievement of the text. Rhetorical formation we can experience, of course, in every text; rhetoric is not some additional extra to embellish a previously bare linguistic expression. But the moods of these rhetorical formations might be rather different. Some of them might be suitable to being received in a given cultural context as non-rhetorical and unformed outbursts of some

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[15] McNeill, op. cit. 5–8, the quotation is taken from page 142, note 23.

[16] Ellen Oliensis, *Horace and the Rhetoric of Authority,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.

sincere consciousness. The moods that we can accept as sincere probably tend not to display too obtrusively their devices and not apply mediating systems of communication that are not used nowadays, such as mythology. Catullus' Carm. 5, a poem widely accepted as a quite good example of sincerity, does not contain any references to ancient mythology or to particularly Roman social institutes. It operates with images of nature and a general notion of a generation gap instead. (Nevertheless I can imagine that in the phrase *ru*mores *senu*m *seueri*orum we should detect the playfully hidden denomination of the *mores maiorum*.) But we can compare it with Horace's c. 1.8, which displays a very similar topic through a similarly general imagery. We cannot say that Catullus' text tries to hide its rhetorical devices, since the multiple anaphora is rather obvious.[17] But the highly artistic play with word order, characteristic of Horace's melic poetry, is definitely absent here. And we can realize a basic difference. The Catullan poem stages what can be called a life situation in which a direct expression of a consciousness is possible. The speaker of the poem addresses a person directly and wants her to react immediately. Horace's poem, on the other hand, is a calm discussion of possible life strategies the addressee of the speech may follow in other, various situations of the long (but according too the poem's speaker too short) period of youth. Teaching is usually not a life situation that can work without applying traditional systems to communicate previously given knowledge.

I do not think, however, that a text is able to achieve sincerity without the reader's cooperation. Contradiction in the text, or between text and context, can destroy sincerity if readers focus on them. Nobody can see the context in its totality because a perceived context is always partial. Moreover it is always changing in the stream of historicity. A text in order to be sincere needs a reader, who is willing not to recognize contradictions. The "willing suspension of disbelieve"[18] is very much needed when we want to avoid ironical readings. To refer to a telling example I will quote Eve Adler again, who characterizes Catullus' pederastic poetry with words like "indirectness, reserve, convention, artifice" (45). Moreover she describes all the love poems addressed to persons other than Lesbia with the notion of irony (47, 100). Apart from political preferences, it depends on the context, to be sure; if a reader is willing to accept the Lesbia poetry as sincere, and takes those poems as the definitive context of Catullus' pederastic and other miscellaneous love poetry, they will be unwilling to accept the latter group as sincere too.

I am very much convinced that my text is also full of contradictions. I hope that readers who like irony have been enjoying them, and those who prefer sincerity were willing to disregard them.

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[17] Cf. Ernest A. FREDRICKSMEYER, *Observations on Catullus 5*, AJPh 91 (1970) 440.

[18] Samuel Taylor COLERIDGE, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Princeton: Princeton Univerity Press 1983, vol. 2 (vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*), 6.