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A SHORT SURVEY ON ORAL POETRY AS RITUAL PERFORMANCE. THE SICILIAN *CUNTO* AS CASE STUDY

This paper aims to investigate the performative nature of oral poetry. In particular, we intend to focus on peculiar Sicilian phenomenon called Cunto which throughout a knowing mixing of rhyme and breath provides the storytelling with a tremendous and unique impact.

From the immanence's point of view, orality claims that any statement is unique as any moment is transient, scattering away with the voice that inherits in it¹.

It is understood that oral poetry exhibits its ritual origins. Voice plays with time and space in a process that pertains to the ritual and performance, escaping the illusion of an enduring materialization:

Through the voice, the word becomes something that is exhibited, a gift that is virtually eroticized, and at the same time an act of aggression, a determination to conquer the other person, who submits because of the pleasure he derives from hearing it. In extreme cases, the meaning of the words ceases to matter, and the voice of itself captivates us because of the self-mastery it indicates, as the Ancients taught us through the myth of the Sirens (Zumthor 1985: 7).

When Paul Zumthor wrote these lines, the discovery of mirror neurons was still to come, but inevitably, as Peter Brook later reported, not without some triumphant self-congratulation, the performance devices function within a framework in which, one might be tempted to say, biology forewarns any human dynamic of relationship. What Zumthor could not deny was, in a peremptory way, the tight bond between oral poetry and ritual expression.

¹ «All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word "permanence", by the time I get to the "-pence", the "perma-" is gone, and has to be gone. There is no way to stop sound and have sound. I can stop a moving picture camera and hold one frame fixed on the screen. If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing-only silence, no sound at all», Ong 1982: 32.



In a primary oral culture, in order to effectively solve the problem of keeping in mind or recovering an articulated thought, it is necessary to think in mnemonic forms created especially for a prompt oral recovery. Thought must be born within balanced modules with great rhythmic content, it must be structured in repetitions and antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithets and formulaic expressions:

Orally recorded interviews with the twentieth-century bards supplemented records of their performances. From these interviews, and from direct observation, we know how the bards learn: by listening for months and years to other bards who never sing a narrative the same way twice but who use over and over again the standard formulas in connection with the standard themes. Formulas are of course somewhat variable, as are themes, and a given poet's rhapsodizing or "stitching together" of narratives will differ recognizably from another's [...] essentially, the materials, themes and formulas, and their use belong in a clearly identifiable tradition. Originality consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience (Ong 1982: 58).

The action of Mastery replaces the obsession of authorial claims with the authority of a practice sanctioned over time by a genealogy destined to legitimize its duration:

[...] in the epithet we have an element which is extremely familiar to us, one by which, perhaps more than by any other aspect of style, we judge an author's genius, his originality, the fineness of his thought. Consequently, when we find that the majority of epithets in Homer - in fact, all ornamental epithets - are traditional and are used in so far as they make versification easier for the poet, we are confronted with two alternatives: either we must conclude that the style of Homer does not deserve the honour in which it has been held, or else we must entirely change our conception of an ideal style. We shall adopt the latter point of view (Parry 1971: 23).

In this sense, the problem of *inventio*, which seems to be the question par excellence in the *milieu* of modernity, is replaced by the problem of *intentio* in a traditional practice like the Sicilian *Cunto* (as we will see shortly) in which ritual poetry finds expression.

In this perspective, the art we are talking about looks more like a sort of craftsmanship than an aesthetic experience. By the way, it is quite clear as a distinction between art and craftsmanship occurred in the modern age, creating a contradiction never felt before:



[...] the distinction between arts and crafts, or between “artist” and “artisan,” is also specifically modern, as if it were born of this profane deviation and had no meaning outside of it. For the ancients, the artifex is indifferently a man who practices either an art or a craft; but in truth he is neither artist nor craftsman in the current sense of these words, but something more than either, for, at least originally, his activity is related to principles of a far more profound order (Guénon 1974: 17).

An extended oral thought, though not expressed in verses, tends to be highly rhythmic, since rhythm also helps the memory from a physiological point of view. Marcel Jousse (posthumously edited by Gabrielle Baron: *Le parlant, la parole et le souffle*, Gallimard, Paris 1978) showed the intimate connection between oral rhythmic models, the process of breathing, the gestures and the bilateral symmetry of the human body in the ancient Aramaic and Greek paraphrases of the Old Testament (Tsur 2003). Therefore, an ancient attitude has measured this pivotal element of narrative over time recognizing it in all likelihood a search for pleasure.

That is why, Eric Havelock (1986: 71) has affirmed:

The repetition is linked with a feeling of pleasure, factor of primary importance in understanding the spell of oral poetry [...] In primary orality, the oral specialist, whether bard, priest, prophet, or seer, continually clothes his memorizable instruction in designs that are contrived to please; so that the instruction itself is fastened on the social memory by indirection, as it is translated into active examples. [...] Tradition in short is taught by action, not by idea or principle.

The repetitiveness of the modules and gestures, the rather rigid observance of a formal repertoire even before the contents may lead us to think once again of the way in which *Cunto*, as a result of a fundamentally sacred ritual, responds to the “way”, intended by the Latin etymology (*modus*), of “rhythm” and “rule” in which to pay a faithful intention, rather than as “fashion”, or ephemeral infatuation for a whimsical outcome, destined to leave early the witness to an invention of new coin.

Even if we run the risk of contradicting ourselves, we cannot afford to avoid the question of the origin of *Cunto*.

Where does the *Cunto* come from? The problem of its origin is hard to pin down. Probably the West owes so much the East, as it always happens, when we face cultural and ritual phenomena. In a fifteenth-century Iranian treatise on theatrical ritual, the *Festvat-Name Soltani* of Kashefi, speaking of oral storytellers, says:



If they ask you what is the origin of this art, answer that it is wisdom and that wise man ignores, when the narration begins, where he will lead it. If they ask you how the story ends, you answer: «with the conquest of hearts, if the hearts do not accept it, the narrator will not be able to carry out his purpose» (Mahdjoub 1971:167).

The recursive form of each oral narration, here is enriched by a lyrical musicality marked by the pressing rhythm of the breath that drags the plot, especially in battle scenes, towards what seems, in effect, a phenomenon of trance.

A tangible sign of devotion to an ancestral heritage is the wooden sword that, for instance, Mimmo Cuticchio² received from Peppino Celano, as a symbol of a traditional mastery³. This kind of mastery is certainly connected to a ritual background that Giuseppe Pitrè (1889: 179) identified in an indisputable ritual moment: «*Cunto* begun with the sign of the cross, to which people devotedly tipped their hats, lasts a couple of hours». On the other side of Mediterranean *milieu*, where the art of *Cunto* is called *halqa* (that means circle, pl. *halaq*) something similar has recently been reported: «*Al-halqa* is a term used both for the performance space created when audiences cluster in the form of a circle around a performer(s) (*hlayqi/hlayqia*) and also for the performance created there» (Amine 2012: 28).

Amine is very clear about ritual work of Moroccan storytellers, very often introduced by sacred formulas. This fact was already reported, though in a vague and distorted manner, by western ethnologist: «Varied as the public *halqa* performance was, [...] Their presentations, though private, were as carefully structured and performatively presented as the more public offerings of the *gouwal*». Lacost-Dujardin, in his ethnographic study of the folk tales of the Berber kabyle people of Algeria, suggests that the performance of these stories traditionally has a “sacred” character:

² Mimmo Cuticchio (Gela, 1948), the last living Master of *Cunto*, lives in Palermo where, as heir of great Sicilian puppetry called “Opra dei pupi”, he runs a very important theater in Via Bara all’Olivella (Di Palma 1991; Venturini 2017).

³ The wooden sword is blatantly unsuitable for the duel, which accentuates its symbolic character. The wooden sword goes back, in traditional symbolism, to a very remote past, since in India it is one of the objects that is used in the Vedic sacrifice (see: Coomaraswamy 1938) and by the *khatib* (the Imam who delivers the speech during the muslim community prayer every Friday). It symbolizes, first of all, the power of the word, something that should seem quite evident, especially as it is a meaning generally attributed to the sword, and not even a stranger to the Christian tradition (*Apocalypse* 1: 16; 19: 15); «He made my words like a sharp sword» (*Isaiah* 4:2).



It unquestionably suggests, in many respects, a magic ritual: the recitation can only occur at night [...] It takes place in the vestibule, one of the magic centers of the home. The storyteller is an old woman or a group of old women, very often *settut* (sorceress) or at least familiar with magic practices. The recitation itself is preceded and followed by sacred formulas, truly rituals of entry and departure (Ivi: 19).

Just as sacred are often the contents of what is told:

As a site of a community's subjunctive mood and performative agency, *al-halqa* hovers between high culture and low or mass culture, sacred and profane, literacy and orality. Its varied repertoire combines fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Sirat Bani Hilal*, stories from the holy Qu'ran and the Sunna of the prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) (Ivi: 28)⁴.

Starting from Gabriele Sofia's thesis of a performative dimension of the audience (2013), what we would like to survey is the emotional form of *Cunto* as space of a primal performance destined, in terms of interbody subjectivity, to produce experience because of a deep immersion into the storytelling. The ritual feature of this event is due to the issue that Richard Schechner has already detected referring to the Cognitive turn, which is how our species faces the phylogenetic process by entrusting storytelling a crucial fitness function.

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Brian Boyd (2009) has indicated how narrative could be used as mind's playground and Ellen Dissanayake (2000) cleared how artwork represents a virtual experience of everyday life.

⁴ «In the first centuries of Islam, a form of official storytelling, the *qissa*, was sanctioned by the leaders of the faith to provide religious and moral guidance to the illiterate majority, and these were widely circulated and presented, often to enormous crowds, in streets, markets, and public spaces, the same areas that had already provided a performance space for the public storyteller, and often the sacred and secular performers utilized the same space[...] The fact that the Amazight public storytellers and the Islamic performers of the *qissa* and other narrative genres were creating highly similar performances in the same spaces and doubtless with overlapping audiences means that inevitably the two forms would borrow material and techniques from each other at least during the first two centuries of Islamic domination, the greatest flourishing of the *qissas*, and probably longer» (Amine 2012: 24). The fact that "sacred" and "secular" storytelling used same venue and addressed to the same audience is hardly surprising, since in traditional societies, almost until now, this distinction was only related to a point of view. On sacred oral performance, Amine cites, among his sources, Ibn al-Jawzi: «Ibn Al-Jawzi, at the end of the thirteenth century, himself a famous preacher in Baghdad, divides Islamic oral performers into three categories, the *qass*, who presented the *qassas*, edifying tales and stories of the prophets, the *mudhakkir*, or preacher, and the *waiz*, or admonishing preacher» (Ivi: 24).



Furthermore, Steven Pinker (1997) and Michelle Scalise Sugiyama (2005) conceived storytelling an essential tool for social practices' development.

As Bruce McConachie explained, there is no embodied meaning except to the extent of interacting with the elements, animate or inanimate, in a dynamic environment.

But this social relationship, as Victor Turner had already understood in *Body, brain and culture* (1983, in Turner 1986), exists only in a precise relationship with our neurobiological roots.

The performative dimension, as a simulation space inherent in all human action (but not only), seems to reduce, sometimes, the captious differences between the artistic genres (novels, theater, monologue), by reorienting the caliber of their primary and more authentic need, that is the construction of a meaningful plot which builds a plausible narration:

Considered as an emergent activity of human evolution, performance is an intentional, emotionally expressive, event centered phenomenon involving pattern and attention in social interaction - i.e., a type of play - that entails conceptual integration. As we know, scholars have defined performance in many ways, but none has distinguished it from other modes of play in terms of its evolutionary and cognitive foundations (McConachie 2011: 11).

The original centrality of the play measures, in a constant correspondence, with the rite, its effective function and the necessity of a recourse to the gratuitousness of the simulative expedient. Play has evolved through the advantages of adaptivity. The amount of play in a species seems to affect its degree of adaptability to the action. Behaviors such as escape, pursuit, attack and defense can sometimes make the difference between life and death. Creatures with greater motivation to practice such behaviors in situations of imminent danger have found greater efficacy in the most dangerous situations. Species that play repeatedly and with more exuberance are destined to make their skills more sophisticated and to improve their behavioral prosody.

In this sense, sociality, and eusociality as well, seems to play a fundamental role:

Functional significance of animal play, so far as is known, involves three different aspects of social relationships: (1) Play serves to indicate current wellbeing and future reproductive success; (2) play helps animals [rats] learn when to act in self-defense and when not to; (3) play is important in developing and maintaining close, emotionally positive dyadic social relationships in adulthood and between parents and offspring (Boyd 2009: 40).



Each game weaves a story and each story plays with its multiple levels. As Wolfram Schultz has shown (1997), dopaminergic neurons respond to primary rewards only when they appear without warning; on the contrary, dopaminergic neurons do not come into action in the face of a fully provided gratification.

Here comes deception as mechanism of desire and privileged factor in the construction of performative power of storytelling (Rose 2011). A frustrated expectation keeps intact the relationship between the author and the reader (or between the actor and the audience), and triggers dopaminergic device that regulates curiosity and emphasizes our interest and pleasure.

Each *Cunto's* session, lasting two hours, ends with a ritual formula by which, like in an oral feuilleton, the storyteller dismisses the audience and gives it an appointment at the next day's session.

Beyond this, during the storytelling, he plays with the spectators, as Pitriè demonstrated⁵, probing their passion and competence.

The indirect dialogue, in the *Cunto*, between the storyteller and the audience can then be compared to the co-evolutionary struggle, examined by Robert Trivers (2011), between deceitful and deceived?

Is it possible to consider "play" as the premise of the narrative relationship established between the Storyteller (*Cuntista*) and his audience? In this case, this peculiar art could provide a precious case study for a more comprehensive survey on storytelling and the way it works cognitively and performatively through the forms of oral poetry.

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⁵ «L'uditorio, [...] ha odorato e conosce a bella prima se chi conta sa o non sa, se piglia la storia pel suo verso, se parla bene o male, se prende le giuste e vere pose degli antichi contatori [...]» («The audience has smelled and it is perfectly aware If the storyteller knows or not, If he strikes the right pose of the ancient storyteller»), Pitriè 1889: 178.



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