POEMS AS ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS: THE HAIKU POEMS BY MIRELA BRĂILEAN IN TELLING MY DESIRE IN ONE BREATH

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the haiku poems poem by Mirela Brăilean in her most recently published volume (2022), Telling My Desire in One Breath/ Spunându-mi dorința dintr-o suflare from the point of view of speech acts. The analysis will start from Philip Pullman's quotation from an interview taken with him by the New Yorker (Schwartz 2019): "Poetry is not a fancy way of giving you information; it's an incantation. It is actually a magic spell. It changes things; it changes you." Poetry could thus be regarded as an illocutionary act. The illocution refers to what was done, according to Austin (1975). The quotation also expresses exactly the role of the haiku poem and of the haiku poet, which is that of expressing a new perspective over something.

Keywords: haijin, moments of revelation, fresh perspective, pragmatics, speech acts.

The present paper aims to apply the Pragmatics theory of speech acts to haiku poems, in order to show that Philip Pullman's statement "Poetry is not a fancy way of giving you information; it's an incantation. It is actually a magic spell. It changes things; it changes you." (Schwartz 2019) applies very well to the purpose of haiku poems, which has to do with presenting the reader with a new vision on life, with fresh perspectives on various details and phenomena.

Research regarding whether or not poetry can be a speech act has already been done. On the one hand, there is research claiming that poetry cannot be a speech act since it is not "serious" and since it is not performative:

> Geoffrey Hill (2008) and Christopher Ricks (1996) strenuously reject what we may call *Austin's Claim*: that utterance of a sentence in poetry could not be 'serious' (Austin 1962: 9–10, 21–22, 92, 104). But they accept the conclusion that Austin, with others (e.g. Strawson 1964; Searle 1969), draw from this claim: that the utterance of a sentence in poetry could not be a performative utterance. (De Gaynesford 2010: 644)

Other researchers, such as De Gaynesford (2010: 644) believe that poetry could be understood as speech acts, e.g. some poems could be commissives, and their message could be "I promise". The type of speech acts could be related to the type of poems that we have in view. Western poetry could be understood as commissives, meaning "I promise", in the case of love poems addressed by the poetic persona to their love interest. Poetry as performative utterances can be supported since we find in poems examples from "the classes of 'verdictives' (e.g. 'I value'), of exercitives ('I plead'; 'I dedicate') and of 'behabitives' ('I thank'; 'I welcome'; 'I bid farewell')" (De Gaynesford 2010: 644). However, with haiku poems, the situation is different.

While Austin believed that "a fanciful use of language, like poetry, does not carry illocutionary acts", Garcia (2008) claims that this is not true. The theory of speech acts refers to "a point of intersection of a theory of language and a theory of action" (Searle 1977: 17). Haiku poems, eventually, suggest, although indirectly, for readers to take an action, meaning to look at things from a different perspective they usually use. Haiku poems make readers

aware of aspects they had ignored until then in their everyday life experiences, yet with which they can resonate very well. From this point of view, haiku poems can be regarded as illocutionary acts. Haiku poems can be defined as having fixed form; however, nowadays, modern haijin (or those poets practicing haiku poems) no longer obey a fixed syllable pattern, especially when it comes to haijin from Western cultures: "Haiku is one of the most important forms of traditional Japanese poetry. Haiku is, today, a 17-syliable verse form consisting of three metrical units of 5, 7, and 5 syllables." (Kozlovska 2012: 45). Regarding haiku poet Mirela Brăilean, she "proves maximum responsiveness to everything that surrounds her", as mentioned in the preface to her book written by Valentin Nicoliţov, the President of the Romanian Haiku Society (in Brăilean 2022: 13). Nicoliţov goes on showing how Mirela Brăilean offers readers her own perspective in relation to life in her poems, prompting them to get a fresh perspective by reading her haiku poems: "Reading these poems makes one feel seized by a sense of simplicity and clarity. This is due to the *karumi* aesthetic category, to the naturalness and ease with which the author writes her poems. From this point of view, the book may be a way to express the poet's feelings in her relationship with life and involvement with the environment she lives in" (in Brăilean 2022: 14). The perspective offered by the haiku poet in this case is clear, and a means to make the reader see various details and life events from a different angle. From this point of view, the haiku poem, in Mirela Brăilean's volume, could be regarded as an illocutionary act, together with a means of establishing a dialogue between poet and reader. Her poems ask precisely for a response from the reader, from empathy with various experiences, as well as with being surprised by being urged to look at life experiences from a fresh, unexpected perspective. Thus, "one can see the art of haiku poetry not as the art of making up fancy and impressive relations in a poem, but as the art of seeing the relations that already exist around us, and the art of making other people see them, too." (Kozlovska 2012: 54). The fresh perspective on experience was also a principle held on to by Shklovsky, with his concept of defamiliarization: "Shklovsky was reluctant to indulge in art's conventionality and he continuously argued that defamiliarization is necessary so that humans consistently view literature from fresh perspectives." (Salwi 2021)

Thus, one of the main features of haiku poems is to urge readers to see things from a fresh perspective, which is, after all, one of the universal purposes of all art. This urge could be understood as being achieved by the poet through illocutionary act.

Illocution, according to Austin (1975), refers to what was done. Illocutionary acts can be of different types, which will be analysed with respect to haiku poems in order to see where haiku poems fit from the point of view of offering a new vision on the world, just like Philip Pullman claimed that poetry should:

> illocutionary acts are summarized in Hollis (1983) according to the taxonomy proposed by Searle (1979) in *Expression and meaning*:
>
> Assertives. The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition.
>
> Directives. The illocutionary point of these consists in the fact that they are attempts...by the speaker to get the hearer to do something.
>
> Commissives. ...Those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action.
>
> Expressives. The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content...

> Declaratives. It is the defining characteristic of this class that the successful performance of one of its members brings about the correspondence between propositional content and reality. (Garcia 2008: 196)

We could understand haiku poems as working through various suggestions and allusions. Thus, even if they urge readers to see things differently and explore various everyday life experiences differently, or even just make them aware of things they may have noticed, this is done in a suggested way or in a way asking for empathy. A haiku poem is not a directive in a literal, specific way, as it only suggests a certain course of action for the reader. It is not a request, a command, or even a piece of advice explicitly. A haiku poem clearly is not a declarative, since declaratives refer, for instance, to pronouncing someone guilty in a court, or pronouncing someone husband and wife. Haiku poems cannot be considered expressives, since the author does not directly mention his/ her feelings, but lets them be understood by the readers. Haiku poems cannot be compared to assertives either, since assertives should sound like "I disagree", "I agree", "I understand what you are saying but I disagree", etc. We cannot call haiku poems commissives either, since the poems do not express any speech act at the level of literal, word for word meaning. Commissives refer to speech acts including promising, threatening, offering, refusing, etc. If someone says "I'll be back," this is a commissive, implying a promise. Thus, haiku poems could only be regarded as, in certain cases, expressing such illocutionary acts in an indirect, suggested, or alluded to manner.

In order to better understand the situation of haiku poems, the present paper will focus on the haiku poems in Mirela Brăilean's recently published haiku poetry volume (2022), *Telling My Desire in One Breath/ Spunându-mi dorința dintr-o suflare*.

Haiku poems in this volume show the creation of a different perspective on various life experiences from the part of the author, and asking, indirectly, through suggestion, for the reader to explore these possibilities.

In what follows, the present paper will aim at finding types of poems in conveying fresh perspectives over life experiences.

The author resorts to comparisons between aspects in nature and aspects related to human life, e.g.:

> winter wasteland –
> the old maid gently powders
> her withered face (Brăilean 2022: 25)

In this poem, the author tries to suggest to her readers that the "winter wasteland" could be associated with the image in the second part of the poem, following the dash, or kireji. In this way, a different perspective on the "winter wasteland" is formed for readers, since the image in the second part feels so powerful. The perspective on reality changes, once the image in the second part functions like a personification for the "winter wasteland" in the first part.

Another example of this same type of haiku poem, making associations between human life and nature elements, is the following:

> plums in bloom –
> grandma doesn't hide anymore
> hair under scarf (Brăilean 2022: 31)

The plums in bloom could be seen as a comparison between grandma's white hair and the delicacy of the flowers of spring. At the same time, we notice a contrast, since spring is a

sign of the beginning, of youth, and the grandmother is advanced in her old age. However, the comparison could serve as a means to show how the poet or the poetic persona cares for her grandmother.

In another poem of this type, the main character is the poetic persona's mother:

autumn days –
as if more fragile
mom's shadow (Brăilean 2022: 50)

Mother's shadow shows mother becoming more vulnerable and fragile herself. Autumn is related to a season of passage, towards winter, the latter being associated with humans' old age. The suggestion of this poem is to draw attention to the sadness of seeing a parent becoming more fragile with older age. Everyone can notice how their parents become more fragile with old age, yet this poem draws attention to the comparison with "autumn days" for the older years of life. Autumn days can be regarded as kind, since the sun no longer has as much power as during the hot summer. The air is cooler, and the sun can shine but not as strongly during some hours of the day, when they remind for a bit of cooler summer days. At the age suggested, parents can be regarded with nostalgia, since they may no longer seem like the powerful, authoritative figures of childhood, although they still receive respect.

In the haiku poem below, we notice a suggested passage from real, everyday life, to fantasy:

dew on the grass –
a ladybug climbs up
to the sun (Brăilean 2022: 25)

The passage from everyday life reality, present in the dew, and the ladybug climbing towards the sun, in the second part, is very delicately suggested. This is most likely an optical illusion, since the sun's rays are reflected in the dew drop, and the climbing towards the sun is not literal but imaginary. The borders between reality and fantasy are, thus, questioned and blurred. The poet tries to make readers see the fantasy aspects that can happen in real life, with a bit of imagination or of noticing optical illusions. Reality can be a pathway towards something unexpected, as in the case illustrated by the poem above.

A clear example of optical illusion, which leads to the blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy, occurs in the poem below:

summer river –
a paper boat jumping
over the clouds (Brăilean 2022: 41)

The reflection in the water shows the paper boat floating on the clouds, since the sky is reflected in the water. This is not a product of the imagination of the poetic persona observing the scene, but a blurring of boundaries between sky and earth which is created by nature itself. This poem urges readers to look for such moments which can be, apparently real, and created by nature as if to tempt the readers' and poets' imaginations.

Another mixture of reality and fantasy occurs in the haiku poem below:

on father's shoulders
braving the dragon –

steam engine (Brăilean 2022: 26)

All the fantasy aspect takes place in the mind of the child suggested in this poem. In his/ her imagination, the child is fighting a dragon, while staying safely on his/ her "father's shoulders". The "steam engine" is the everyday life real object that prompts such imagination, and such make-believe games. The readers' perspectives on the "steam engine" are changed, from a usual everyday life object: this engine becomes, through allusions, the dragon that the child confronts with the help of his/ her father. Through this haiku poem, readers are suggested to go back to the age of childhood, when they would make various associations blurring the boundaries between everyday life and fantasy.

The haiku poem below shows another mixture of reality and fantasy, this time as a way to show that, even though the horizon line seems to unite sky and earth, these boundaries, when blurred, are just a means of presenting a fantasy world that is the result of optical illusions:

mount blizzard –
buried under the snowdrifts
the Milky Way (Brăilean 2022: 28)

A fabulous world is suggested in the poem below, reminding of fairy-tales:

night fishing –
a fish swallows both the bait
and the moon (Brăilean 2022: 53)

The fabulous scene is a mixture of fantasy and reality. The reflection in the lake shows the exact scene of the fish swallowing the moon, which is in fact only the mirrored image of the moon, not the real one. In the lake, fabulous actions are suggested, together with the victory in fishing. This poem also belongs to the optical illusion type of haiku poems. While haiku poems are considered to observe real-life details, these poems where the borders between reality and imagination are blurred seem to disobey the rules. However, we could argue that the apparently fantastic element is just an optical illusion offered by nature in real-life. There are moments where earth and sky elements are, apparently, so close to each other, even if, realistically and scientifically speaking, they are not.

Other poems suggest a message created through deciphering the allusions appearing from the combinations of the two parts, such as the poem below:

summer love –
the remains of a kite
taken by the wave (Brăilean 2022: 32)

The poem above suggests that "summer love" is something impermanent, and easily lost. The memory of the experience is suggested by the "remains of a kite" which end up by being "taken by the wave", thus also eventually lost, and forgotten.

Other types of poems show a means of illusion for the poetic persona to control nature, or, in this case, the weather, as they wish to, such as the haiku poem below:

frosty days –
a finger restores the sun
on the window (Brăilean 2022: 39)

In this poem, the haiku poet shows how drawing the sun on the window during "frosty days" can show the wish for having warmer weather. At the same time, it shows the mood of the poetic persona, which is warm, and, most likely, very optimistic. The sun that is drawn on the window suggests a compensation for the cold outside.

Other types of haiku poems include those where there is empathy between humans and elements in nature. In the case below, the nature elements try to offer consolation to the burnt victims, while at the same time showing how fragile and transient health and human lives can be:

shading the window
a branch of birch –
the burnt ward (Brăilean 2022: 51)

The birch branch seems to sympathize with the feelings of the burnt victims, trying to protect them from the sun. This poem urges the reader to notice compassionate elements in nature, which may in fact be the projection of those that look at certain scenes, like this one.

Project various emotions that are specific to human beings on elements in nature can also be seen in the haiku poem below:

autumn mountain –
as if in a hurry the shadow
of the peak (Brăilean 2022: 54)

The arrival of the autumn in the mountains could be associated with various reasons for humans to hurry up: to go into a warm house, since it is cold outside, to prepare for the arrival of winter, to look out for specific dangers associated with this time of year, such as heavy rains and landslides. The mountain is seen as sympathizing with humans' emotions at this time of year, its shadow also looking as if it were in a hurry.

In the haiku poem below, nature elements seem to provide comfort and support, or at least they do so since humans project this role on them:

abandoned village –
just the moon turns on the lights
at the windows (Brăilean 2022: 62)

Here, we could think of abandoned villages in the Romanian rural areas. Someone may return and feel the nostalgia of the times when, for instance, grandparents still lived there. They project the role of the protection and comfort offered by their presence in childhood to the moon, turning on the lights. Fear of the dark is a well-known and common fear for young children, which was probably comforted by grandparents or parents switching on the lights. The darkness surrounding the village offers now a feeling of emptiness for the visitor, and the moon tries to give him/ her comfort.

The haiku poem below substitutes weeds for human audience:

no vacancy –
summer theatre overgrown
with weeds (Brăilean 2022: 64)

The same feeling of nostalgia as in the example of the abandoned village shows up in this haiku poem. As a compensation for the lack of use for the summer theatre, the weeds function as a substitute for the audience formed, once upon a time, of humans. The poetic persona missed the time when there was, indeed, no vacancy, since all seats were taken and all tickets were sold for humans. Nowadays, the emptiness is filled, in a compensatory manner, half-seriously, half-literally, with weeds.

Fear related to having someone in an ATI room, which was common during the COVID-19 crisis, is expressed through the image of the fly that has drowned in a tea cup:

a drowned fly
in a cup of tea –
ATI room (Brăilean 2022: 55)

The image of the fly drowned in the tea cup is an expression of anxiety regarding the future of the person in the ATI room. It is a means of expressing fear just like in dreamwork in psychoanalysis. It could also be regarded as an image used for free associations, and as a means of expressing worrying over the health of the loved person sent to ATI.

A collaboration between human activities and seasonal habits is suggested in the haiku poem below:

carpet in work –
rearranging the leaves
the autumn wind (Brăilean 2022: 56)

Here, the wind in autumn seems to suggest gathering fallen leaves and creating a carpet pattern. We often hear, at least in the Romanian language, the phrase "carpet of autumn leaves", as they fall and cover the ground and alleys. Nature can be a help and also a source of inspiration for the person working on the carpet.

Correspondences between humans' states of mind and weather are suggested in the poem below:

foggy days –
retreated into depths
memories (Brăilean 2022: 58)

The fog is associated with loss and difficulty invisibility. The memories can be hard to remember, and probably many details have been lost.

The haiku poem that inspired the title of this volume functions as an association between blowing dandelion fluff and making a wish:

dandelion fluff –
saying my desire
in one breath (Brăilean 2022: 69)

There is one more suggestion offered by this association, however. The author suggests that haiku poems function as a means for her to express herself. The short haiku poem form can be compared to dandelion fluff, in the sense that reading such poems only lasts for a short while.

Sometimes, human feel like protecting elements in nature:

first frost –
over the chrysanthemums
mom's shawl (Brăilean 2022: 71)

Since outside is so cold, the mother of the poetic persona attempts to protect the flowers from cold with her shawl, in a protective and affectionate gesture.

Judging from the examples of haiku poems above, there is always an indirect, suggested illocutionary act, warning or raising the awareness of the readers on details that should be noticed regarding humans' relationship with nature, as well as with their surroundings generally speaking. Reality contains surprising details which can help, through observation, create the feeling of a magical, fantasy world, one which is familiar to readers from fairy-tales or fantasy stories.

While we cannot mention a specific class of illocutionary acts that could be applies to haiku poems, their message indicates a disguised illocutionary act, deciphered by the reader from the putting together of the two parts of the haiku poems. The mission of the haijin, or of the haiku poet, is to present reality anew, from a fresh perspective, and to present readers with moments of revelation.

Therefore, it depends on the type of poems whether or not, or how illocutionary acts can be applied. In Western types of poems, illocutionary acts could be directly recognized, once the poet expresses them directly to the readers.

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