



Bernhard Oestreich

Performance Criticism of the Pauline Letters

Translated by Lindsay Elias and Brent Blum

Biblical Performance Criticism 14

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016. Pp. xx + 345. Paper.
\$42.00. ISBN 9781498298315.

Rafael Rodríguez
Johnson University

Performance Criticism of the Pauline Letters is volume 14 in the Biblical Performance Criticism series and a translation of the author's *Performanzkritik der Paulusbriefe* (translated by Lindsay Elias and Brent Blum), which was originally published in the WUNT series (2012). This edition includes a foreword by Glenn S. Holland (vii–ix) and a brief preface to the English translation (xv), in addition to the translation of the original preface to the German edition (xi–xiii). Throughout, translations of German quotations are marked “my translation,” which suggests the author was involved in the production of the English translation, though this is never made clear. The BPC edition performs a double service: making Oestreich’s work available to readers who cannot access the German original and providing an affordable edition for individual readers as well as libraries.

Oestreich, motivated by his interest in homiletics (xi), turns his attention to the mechanisms by which Paul’s letters were experienced and received by their original audiences and how his letters worked their effect on those audiences. Oestreich leans into one of performance criticism’s most important insights: our written texts are the material remains of *events* in the ancient world. The experience of those events transcended and encompassed the contents of our written texts, so that those contents were affected by extratextual considerations such as gestures, tone, pace, ritual and rhetorical space, and myriad other aspects of their performance before an audience. As event, the performance is not reducible to the written text, but the text is all that remains of the performance. This is both the warrant for and the limitation of performance criticism.

A brief introduction (1–6) emphasizes the oral but nonspontaneous (or nonextemporaneous) nature of Greek and Roman letters. The letter is oral language with materiality (i.e., it can be held in the hands), so it participates in the dynamics of both oral and written language (3–4). The letter, as material speech, was offered by the author to the recipients as a gift. The question driving Oestreich’s analysis, then, is: “How must we imagine what took place when a letter from Paul reached the recipients and its influence came to bear?” (4). In other words, Oestreich focuses on the *reception* of Paul’s letters by an audience or audiences (rather than the letters’ composition or transmission). Performance criticism offers Oestreich a method for imagining and analyzing that reception.

The remainder of the book consists of four lengthy chapters. The first, “Theory of Performance Criticism” (7–97), offers a standard literature review and methodological description. Oestreich locates the study of Paul’s letters within the study of Greco-Roman epistolography (7–16) and rhetoric (16–31), as well as the rise in the twentieth century of orality studies (31–40) and, relatedly, performance criticism (40–50). Oestreich, following Richard Bauman’s *Verbal Art as Performance* (1977), offers an extended definition of *performance* that includes five key elements: (1) materiality and corporeality (52–57) that is (2) framed by social convention (57–59) and involves (3) interaction with and within the audience (59–61), that is (4) both ephemeral and self-influencing (“autopoietic feedback-loop”; 61–63), yet (5) points to “things that already exist” (i.e., a tradition of such performances; 63–67). The remainder of the first chapter lays out Oestreich’s performance-critical method (67–97). He attempts, first, to develop an ideal “*heuristic evaluation model* of the performance of a text” that might approximate “*a possible and probable performance*” (68, emphasis original) of Paul’s letters. He offers a ten-step reconstruction of receiving, reading, and performing an ancient letter (72–79) and maps his definition of performance onto this reconstruction.

In the second chapter, “Influencing Audience Interaction by Use of Letters” (98–151), Oestreich addresses the effect of the letter’s performance on the audience. The first section examines the interaction between the reader and audience when the letter writer addresses a divided audience and/or divides his audience. The performative space itself was hierarchically populated, probably with like-minded individuals sitting together in groups, so that the reader could call out factions and position his body, gaze, and voice to address specific groups directly. The audience not only interacts, then, with the reader; it also interacts with itself, as one group overhears the author-and-reader address another group, only later to find itself addressed in the presence of the first group. The second section uses Georg Simmel’s century-old sociological discussion of “three-group situations” (112–15), which can perform one of three basic functions: a group can mediate between two other groups, benefit from the rivalry between two others groups, or activate schismatic forces between two other groups “to dominate or otherwise win an advantage” over one or both of the groups (112). This section examines nearly a dozen examples by Paul (including Colossians), Clement, Cicero, and Ignatius. Finally, the third section (which focuses exclusively on Paul’s letters) examines references to the author’s (i.e., Paul’s) own body, especially when these disrupt the

performer's embodiment of Paul's *parousia* ("presence") and draw the audience's attention toward the fact that the performer is not the author. Strangely, Oestreich interprets these as authorial control over the audience's interpretation of his letter, as way to bypass potentially negative interpretive strategies from an adversarial or nonenthusiastic reader (136–51 and *passim*).

Chapter 3, "Strategies in Letter Writing to Achieve Reconciliation" (152–227), considers how a letter writer might pursue reconciliation as a particular kind of effect upon an audience. This chapter offers a lengthy exegesis of Rom 14:1–15:13 (152–90), discussion of three other passages from Paul, and brief discussions of one letter each by Plato and Claudius (190–95). In every case, the innovation of Oestreich's discussion is a focus on the interpretive and presentation strategies by the reader in the public performance of the letter before an audience, as well as, in places, the author's manipulation of the reading situation to highlight differences between the reader and the author (see above). In Rom 14–15, Oestreich draws out the performer's address, on Paul's behalf, first to the weak in faith who abstain from eating meat and then to those who eat. "Throughout the whole performance of this passage there is the strategy of alternatingly addressing one group in the presence of the other to encourage them to view the other group positively, which is documented in the linguistic parallelism" (188–89). Though Paul aligns himself with the eaters rather than the abstainers, he elevates the latter and enjoins the former to a particular action in order to honor and be reconciled with the abstainers. This reconciling rhetoric is repeatedly embodied in Oestreich's reconstruction of the reader's performative techniques.

The final chapter, "Strategies in Letter Writing to Achieve Separation" (228–74), considers the opposite function, how a letter writer might pursue separation as a particular kind of effect upon an audience. Oestreich examines Galatians and, more briefly, 1 Clement (228–58 and 259–74, respectively). The analyses in this chapter are consistent with previous chapters. Paul divides his audience into two groups: the majority within the Galatian churches, who have been victimized by "prominent Jewish Christians" or proselytes (236) by the proclamation of "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6), and the agitators who are victimizing the Galatians. Paul only ever speaks *about* the latter, without explicitly identifying them. Oestreich sees here a performative strategy whereby Paul clearly identifies the offending ideology (pressing gentile Christians to observe Jewish law, especially the circumcision of male converts) without calling out specific individuals. Instead, Paul leaves room for those who were attracted or even devoted to the offending ideology to identify with the letter's rhetoric and to include themselves among that part of the church that was victimized but that, after receiving the letter, recommitted themselves to Paul's gospel. Oestreich finds a similar strategy at work in 1 Clement.

The book ends with a brief "Summary and Perspectives" (275–83), a lengthy bibliography, and three indices (author, subject, and ancient document).

Oestreich does Pauline scholarship a helpful service by relentlessly reminding us to consider the actual, embodied social *events* within which Paul's letters were received and had their effect upon their audiences. Rather than mere linguistic artifacts, Paul's letters were the basis of important social and communicative performances. Being persuaded by (or swept up into) the apostle's rhetoric was not just a cerebral process. It involved associating with certain people, disassociating from others, confirming or reevaluating previous beliefs, and so on. This is the major gain to be had by considering a turn to performance criticism, and Oestreich's work is a model of such a turn.

However, there are several areas where Oestreich's discussions are unpersuasive or even unhelpful. For example, although he, like most performance critics, recognizes that performative events affect the presentation and interpretation of a written text's content (i.e., performance is *extratextual*), he repeatedly refers to performance as something "woven into the fabric of the text" (e.g., 80), as if Paul's letters included the directions for their own performance. The effect, then, is that Oestreich's reconstructions of the original performances often lose sight of their tentativeness and provisionality; Oestreich repeatedly speaks of what a reader did or would have done rather than what he—Oestreich's readers are always male (74 n. 308)—might or could have done. Thus we find ourselves in a circle, often a vicious one at that, wherein a particular textual interpretation gives rise to a reconstruction of the performative context, and that reconstruction serves as the basis for the interpretation.

A second critique is a common subspecies of the first: Oestreich argues that Paul's references to himself and his own body disrupt the performative fiction in which the reader embodies the apostle's presence among his audience. When Paul refers to himself "as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Phlm 9), or to "the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17), these references highlight differences between the bodies of the author and of the reader and would subject the reader to the audiences' evaluation of him as a medium, an intermediary, between Paul and the audience. Perhaps, but this is not the only possibility. It is just as likely that the reader lends his body to the re-presentation of the apostle's persona, so that the audience experiences the reader *as if* he were old, imprisoned, or branded, even if the reader were, when not in character, young, free, or unmarked.

A third critique: Oestreich participates in and perpetuates a number of performance criticism's excesses that have mainly served to impede the method's acceptance among other New Testament scholars. Media critics often refer to oral cultures and print cultures, implying that the presentation of communicative content in one is foreign to the other. He cites approvingly, for example, David Rhoads's description of "ancient culture as a culture dominated by oral communication" (42). What does this mean, and how is this different from, say, the "modern, print-media-dominated culture" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (before the development electronic and cyber media)? Were Western cultures of the 1800s and 1900s bereft of "oral communication"? Of course not. One need not pretend that writing (to say nothing of *print*) was the same in Industrial Age

Europe or America as it was in ancient Mediterranean cultures, but neither should we pretend that we are alienated from or unfamiliar with oral communication. Similar comments could be made about the performance critics' fascination with and fetishization of *scriptio continua*, reading aloud before audiences, and other features of ancient reading events. Performance criticism needs to nuance more carefully its description of ancient media cultures without alienating them from their modern counterparts.

I could say more, both to endorse and to critique Oestreich's book, but perhaps that is the point. Bernhard Oestreich has presented a valuable and helpful opportunity for the institution of Pauline scholarship to consider anew the actual social experience and reception of Paul's letters. If *Performance Criticism of the Pauline Letters* is successful in starting or stoking a conversation between performance critics and Pauline scholars, we will all be better off for it.