

“Blasts of Language”: Changes in Oral Poetics in Britain since 1965

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In 1943 George Orwell described the situation of poetry in terms almost unimaginable 60 years later: “many people who write verse have never even considered the idea of reading it aloud” (1994:240). He knew what he was talking about because he was trying to persuade poets to contribute to a wartime broadcasting experiment that aimed to win the minds of intellectuals in India by making a poetry magazine available on the radio. He also felt that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) had done little in this area in Britain. Although the BBC would go on to make poetry broadcasting a significant but small part of its programming, their initiative would remain of limited importance to poets, as would the production of LP and later tape and CD recordings. What did change was the growth of live performance by poets who would willingly read aloud; over the next few decades speaking poetry aloud would become central to most poets’ reputation and reception.

Today all but a very few dissenters read their work aloud, some are more performers than writers, and for many poets performance is an integral part of their writing career—compositionally, socially, and not least financially. One arts organizer goes so far as to say that “more poets read more often than at any time since the troubadours” (Robinson 2002:7). The situation has reached the point where the refusal to read aloud can become as distinctive as the elective anonymity of a novelist like Thomas Pynchon. Oral performance is for many poets the primary activity: they were first excited by live performance, they have learned to compose for performance, and their readership has been shaped by performance. What Andy Croft says about Middlesbrough—“almost all the most distinguished poets of our time have read in Middlesbrough during the last fifteen years” (quoted in *ibid.*:43)—could be said about many cities and towns. The poet Basil Bunting, whose career as a poet stalled during the 1950s after an early success in the ’30s, was a beneficiary of the development of the new

performance culture, as a bibliography of his performances illustrates.¹ Nor was it for lack of broadcasting—he did have two BBC readings in 1954 and 1957. The complete absence of live public readings was the problem. Only after he began to read at the Morden Tower series in Newcastle curated by Tom Pickard was his reputation re-established. Live public readings were essential to the building and maintenance of this reputation.

In a prior sketch of the history of this transformation of the reception of poetry, we have suggested that the contemporary poetry reading emerged from the demise of private reading circles and the use of poetry as a primary text for elocutionary training (Middleton 2005). Most readers of poetry in the nineteenth century would have heard poems read aloud by friends and family, and by the author only if they had a personal friendship. Many such readers, if they came from middle and upper-class backgrounds, would also have learned to speak poetry aloud as one of the various regimes of elocution that were supposed to be an asset to social and public life, as well as to clarity of thought and its expression.

The formation of poetry choirs by John Masefield, Elsie Fogarty, and others in the 1920s and early 1930s was arguably a decadent extravagance at a moment when the social structures that had made possible this wide circulation of the aural values of poetry were no longer viable. Changes in leisure brought about by the mobility of the car and the new entertainment technologies had put an end to the reading circles and the interest in elocution. Masefield tacitly admitted as much when he told the Scottish Association for the Speaking of Verse that he experienced the same emotion felt by the farmer who “looks on a patent corn-drill-and-sower, a machine, odd to look at and incomprehensible to many, but whose end is to make the valleys so thick with corn that they seem to sing” (1924:30). Verse speaking in the old mode had indeed become “incomprehensible to many.” He believed that verse when spoken aloud is so moving as to be “irresistible,” but associations for poetry performance proved not to be irresistible at all and effectively disappeared during the Second World War. It was the new form of public reading by the poem’s own author, under quite specific conditions, that would transform the landscape once audiences already sensitized by jazz and rock music could be attracted to the performance of powerful social and political passions in unaccompanied lyrics.

¹ A bibliography of Basil Bunting compiled by Roger Guedalla (1978) lists “principal readings and lectures,” and this account suggests that until the poet was able to read his work regularly he could not hope for an audience. Once offered frequent opportunities to read, he could promote his major poem *Briggflatts* in both the United Kingdom and the United States (84).

Despite the avowed importance of performance for contemporary poets, relatively little is known about this history. How is it that poetry readings have come to be an essential part of the writing and distribution of poetry over the past 40 years? The interrelation of campus readings, avant-garde performances, poetry slams, ethnic performance, religious arts, and the heritage poetics of minority languages has not yet been researched, and we know almost nothing about how specific poems, poets, and types of poetry have been shaped by expectations of performance. Is it true, for instance, that, as many poets allege, the standard format of the poetry reading—“a 45- to 60-minute reading where brief poems are the going thing, with explanations of personal references, some literary references, some circumstances of composition and/or intention”—has led to what Hank Lazer calls “a narrow conception of poetic accomplishment” (1996:52)? Poets themselves have rarely reflected upon its importance to them, and no tradition of critical reviewing, nor any systematic recording, has encouraged the growth of critical self-awareness. Since the proliferation of readings and other more performative, theatrical, and musical forms of poetry events has not attracted historians, much of this work is already lost—neither recorded nor reviewed, despite its evident importance for poetry, for both poets and audiences. This inattention is itself an integral part of the phenomenon. In our view, histories of English-language poetry of the past 60 years are so much based on the study of printed texts that they miss one of the most important forces at work in the shaping of poetry at all levels of its form, meaning, and genre.²

To describe the phenomenon in this fashion, however, is to elide the many difficulties in the way of researching it. Literature, indeed most contemporary cultural practices of textuality, attract intensive academic interest, to the point where writers of literary fiction and poetry are able to incorporate advanced hermeneutic methodologies into their work. The emphasis in literary theory—whether poststructuralism, historicism, or cultural studies—on print culture has mostly assumed the oral performance of poetry to be no more than a vehicle for textual distribution,³ a negotiation with the complex politics of identity, and not internal to the semantics of the text itself. Theoretical readings of textuality and orality have often relied on models of either opposition or progression, and this methodology has

² Middleton 2004 is an attempt to sketch what a different history might look like for the United Kingdom.

³ Most critics would agree with Christopher Beach that poetry performance has been beneficial as a means to ensure a “continued public for poetry” (1999:124), but would not go further.

hindered attempts to produce more nuanced analyses of the relationship between the printed and the performed text. At the same time, the all-embracing concept of performativity (made to account for gender, expertise, and agency) undermines attempts to discern methodologies for the study of the material specificity of sites of poetry performance. The work of historians of orality, ethnographers of performance, and linguists, which might have been a stimulus to research, has so far had little impact on the dominant modes of interpretative criticism of poetry. We also lack conceptual models for the distributed social engagement that occurs when a text is performed and therefore becomes the shared property of a social network whose interactions may take many forms, ranging from close community to divergence and non-communication.

Any attempt to further our understanding of the relationship between poetry and performance is immediately met with two particular problems. First, a great deal more historical research is needed before we can be confident that our speculations about this history are correct. We need the scattered collections of recorded material to be archived and analyzed so that we can trace changes in the presentation of voice, the paratexts and “circumpoetics” of introductions and commentary, the degree to which a few dominant styles have emerged, the variations of emotional expressiveness, and the use of sharp- or soft-edged articulation. Then we need information on who read where and when, on the place of readings in many different individual careers, and the place of funding organizations and entrepreneurs. To what extent are we perhaps looking at several partially independent, partially overlapping histories when we consider the many different communities, ranging as they do from those clustered around academic verse to the celebrity cultures of some performance poetry? Second, we need to develop new conceptual tools for reading the several dimensions of a poem—its visual, semantic, oral, and mechanical form (as printed text in a magazine or book, screen image, or even in a few cases a CD)—as different facets of the same linguistic unit of meaning. This radical expansion of the poem’s signifying fields needs to be understood as proffering a challenge to many of the received assumptions about contemporary poetry. Not only does contemporary poetics require new, shared narratives for poets who are rarely read in relation to each other, but its emphasis on what Garrett Stewart has described as the “displacement” between “a merely evoked aural and an oral vocalizing” (1990:5) questions the assumed centrality of the silent reading itself.

During the past year, funded by a small grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) in the United Kingdom, we have been

carrying out the preliminary research necessary to meet the first of these two challenges. This has involved interviewing a range of British poets about their interest and experience of poetry performance in order to gain a fuller picture of the past 40 years, the period in which the explosion of poetry readings has taken place.⁴ Earlier research suggests that despite some differences between the poetry cultures of the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries, the similarities resulting from shared literary markets, communication technologies, and cultural practices are far more prominent. For this reason we decided to begin by focusing on accessible local practice through interviews with poets and organizers of reading series. There are good reasons for starting with interviews. The self-understanding of protagonists in the *habitus* of poetry performance is crucial to making the right sense of all the other data.

Interviews enable the researcher to test hypotheses by asking questions that appear to lead to the core of the phenomenon and by listening to the poets measure the accuracy of these directed investigations. Interviews act as a sampling device, catching diverse information that can be taken at this stage to represent larger bodies of data yet to be found, and they give the poets an opportunity to begin to put on record their own tentative articulations of this history. Interviews also provide oral nuance that can be analyzed fruitfully if the exact contours of idiomatic expression are carefully respected in transcription. Written accounts necessarily accommodate themselves to existing discursive genres, and, in the absence of any discursive forum for reflecting on the aesthetics and cultural work of poetry performance, much of the writing that has been done on this theme tends to gloss over some of the determining features of current performance practice, as well as its internal tensions and uncertainties. Most of the poets we interviewed have never publicly reflected on these issues despite their importance in everyday praxis; giving them space to articulate provisional thoughts yielded significant correctives to the received wisdom about the poetry reading.

We began with two different constituencies: poets who have been active in an underfunded, often neglected avant-garde that has always valued performance even when publication remains their defining arena; and a highly successful network of younger poets, often associated with an Afro-Caribbean community, for whom stage performance is an explicit goal. This division is broadly apparent in the critical apparatus for contemporary British poetry that has made much of the allegedly persistent demarcations between the political, aesthetic, and social ambitions of these two groups of

⁴ All interviews were taped between 2002-03.

poets. As we encouraged these poets to reflect on the principles at work in their practice and that of others they had observed, the character of such divisions between communities began to seem more complex as a set of more commonly shared assumptions about the role of performance in poetry began to emerge.

Chief among these beliefs was the conviction that poetry remains an oral art. Publication of texts for individual, silent reading is important for all the poets we interviewed, but readers valued silent reading usually only when they were also familiar with the live performances and the intensity of exchange they make current in their poetry communities. All of those interviewed were confident that they knew how to identify a good performer, and much of the work of their careers had been dedicated, in different ways, to fostering performance, both that of others and their own. What also clearly emerged from these discussions was the sense that the performed poem produces its own kinds of reading practices and its own kinds of cultural and social contexts. There was a persistent mistrust of existing institutions—universities, arts funding organizations, arts centers, and so forth—which, it was feared, would interfere with these practices without understanding their parameters.

The discussion that follows is a prolegomenon to future historiography of poetry performance in English-speaking cultures of universal literacy, highly developed leisure cultures dependent on advanced communications technology (in contrast to cultures where orality remains a tangible link to earlier pre-industrial times). Our research points to some major lines of development in recent decades, suggests further areas for investigation, and should help confirm the centrality of oral performance for a wide range of poets. In the context of the study of oral literature, it may bear repeating that this poetry is rarely if ever studied with the assumption that its orality is integral to its achievement. Our paper sets out how this emerging history challenges the received assumptions about the development of contemporary poetry and points toward the need for an expanded theoretical vocabulary for understanding this phenomenon.

Learning to Perform

How do poets learn to perform? The usual unexamined assumption has been that poets write first and then gradually learn how to read their creations aloud afterwards through the trial and error of actual

performances.⁵ Our research suggests that imitation, not always based on live performance, also plays a crucial role. Several poets told us that they were influenced by the Beat writers a decade or more after their currency in the United States.⁶ Peter Finch⁷ explained that his own practice changed during the late 1960s as a result of listening to recordings of American poets reading to jazz that would have been recorded up to a decade earlier. He looked around for United Kingdom parallels to the work of the Beats, Jack Kerouac, or Kenneth Rexroth and found nothing, except perhaps the work of Jeremy Robson, and also read with great interest the accounts of poetry readings in the novels of Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes. Fired by these new images of poetry performance, he “formed a thing called Second Aeon Travelling Circus,” a guitar band who sometimes read poems and worked in a folk/rock context. Then he saw Adrian Henri’s Liverpool Scene perform: “He was engaging in a theatrical way with the audience” and this style of “entertainment” in a poetry reading was “a move away from the more academic approach.”

Allen Fisher⁸ also remembers the impact of the Beat poets:

I suppose I was a teenager, I can’t really remember the dates, but there was something called jazz and poetry. And people who were not that much older than me like Mike Horovitz, were very young then but he was sort of the young hippy on the block doing stuff with jazz groups . . . and Spike Milligan and Adrian Mitchell and people like that, other names I’ve now forgotten. And they did things with poetry and jazz. I was already a jazz fan. I was a blues fan and I went to folk concerts and things like that but I didn’t really go to poetry readings and I came in by that route. But

⁵ The poet Robert Duncan, in a 1958 letter to Denise Levertov, mentions the improvement in the reading practice of Robert Creeley in terms that imply such a learning process (Bertholf and Gelpi 2004:109): “Last night at Joe Dunn’s Bob gave a reading that now stands with Charles’s and yours to make a triumpherate [sic] of the beauty the discrete voice can give to the poem—I had feared he would mumble or obscure the voice of the poem (for all reports of his last reading here had been that it was poor indeed).”

⁶ The Beat writers, among whom Robert Creeley is sometimes included, were most active in the United States between about 1955 and 1965.

⁷ See Caddel and Quartermain 1999, and the British Electronic Poetry Centre website (www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc), for poems by and further information on Peter Finch.

⁸ See Rothenberg and Joris 1998, Caddel and Quartermain 1999, Tuma 2001, and the British Electronic Poetry Centre website (www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc), for poems by and further information on Allen Fisher.

one of the reasons I came in by that route was that I had been reading Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and all sorts of other people. And I did know about readings. I did know that it was something they did and never heard them. There was a lag really in the history—I'd heard everything after they'd gone so to speak. So I'd got Kerouac's recordings but not when he was alive and so on.

Fisher underlined the point by adding that in some cases live performance was not helpful: "Ginsberg I did hear, but I didn't hear him at his best I don't think, or nothing like his best."

The poets also told stories of more direct contact with older contemporaries as well as the Americans. Maggie O'Sullivan⁹ told us that her first experience of attending a reading was one by the Liverpool performance poet, Adrian Henri:

He was the first living poet that I'd ever encountered. I thought it was tremendously exciting, his delivery and the energy of his work. And soon after that I started going to the Poetry Society. . . . It was Bob [Cobbing]'s workshops really that were the main kind of excitement for me there, because the poetry society also held other readings of [e]very kind of standardized poets. . . . I would have been nineteen, twenty, and thinking this is so dull. I decided this wasn't for me, the boring kind of confessional mode. And I was so excited and intoxicated by what Bob was doing. . . . He was running his workshop and so he performed during the workshop session. I knew immediately that this is the work that I wanted to be involved in and that interested me. And also I remember at that time there was a reading with Robert Duncan and Fielding Dawson and I was so inspired by Robert Duncan's work and his reading. I was so enamoured of the American poets at that time. I went into it very deeply.

For many of the poets we interviewed, performance styles were the result of the influence not only of a few charismatic individuals, like the Beat poets and their immediate successors and imitators, but also practitioners trained in a wider range of art forms. Bob Cobbing's workshop was significant not only for Maggie O'Sullivan in this respect. Peter Finch told us that after his early ventures, he went on to work with visual material and music and toured with Bob Cobbing, with whom he did a lot of work in the 1970s, making "free form poetry readings." From Cobbing he learned to record his own voice on a tape recorder, then slow it down and imitate the result with his voice until he did not need the recorder. Allen Fisher's early

⁹ See Rothenberg and Joris 1998, Caddel and Quartermain 1999, Tuma 2001, and the British Electronic Poetry Centre website (www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc), for poems by and further information on Maggie O'Sullivan.

connections to the Fluxus group of performance artists left him with an enduring interest in bringing elements of performance art, such as props, special gestures, or special reading styles, into his readings: “I’ve been a performance artist as well and done some performance work and sometimes I’ll have that with a reading as well. And so that has an interactive aspect because it’s using objects or furniture or space. The last one I gave here used easels, rope, charcoal, recordings, a whole series of things as well, and that was quite deliberately set up.”

Our younger poets were sometimes directly influenced by a later generation of political poets. As well as citing the influence of Beat poets such as Ginsberg and Dub poets such as Linton Kweisi Johnson, Patience Agbabi¹⁰ remembers being deeply impressed by the radical poet Adrian Mitchell, who developed a powerful polemical performance style. Joelle Taylor,¹¹ also influenced by Mitchell, names Joolz, John Cooper Clarke, and Attila the Stockbroker as early models for her writing. These younger poets were also more influenced by the currents of popular music and theater than by innovative developments in the visual or performing arts. Joelle Taylor’s career began with a pop band who “ran out of music,” and she was touring with the Pogues by the time she was 16 as a way of warming up the audience even before the warm-up band. By the late 1980s she was working an established network that included speaking to the anti-war demonstrators at Greenham Common and on the university circuit. Expectations of performance poets, a growing number at that time, were explicitly political. Patience Agbabi’s career began as a performer at poetry venues such as Apples and Snakes, Hard Edge Club, and Night Writers, where performance had to be lively, accessible, entertaining, and above all topical. The example and support of other Afro-Caribbean poets was also very important to her, and one writer in particular, the American poet Kwame Dawes, made a deep impression through a program held by the Afro-Star School. Dawes insisted that poetry should work both on the page and on stage, and he read and critiqued *Transformatrix*, her first published collection. Both Agbabi and Taylor were part of the performance group Atomic Lip, which flourished in a poetry scene that included a range of performance poets: jazz poets, sound poets, and dub poets.

¹⁰ See Sissay 1998, Hoyles and Hoyles 1999, McCarthy 1998, and Newland and Sesay 2000 for poems and further information on Patience Agbabi.

¹¹ See <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/education/slamtm03.htm> for further information on Joelle Taylor.

One reason the older poets looked abroad and to recordings was that the models of poetry performance they witnessed were often uninspiring. Cris Cheek¹² recalls his first poetry reading in similar terms as a pairing of opposites, John Betjeman (then poet laureate) and Ted Hughes, at his school:

I remember that the school set up both Betjeman and Hughes at a podium, and that they both stood behind the lectern (Betjeman in a black suit and black tie and some brogues, and Hughes in a leather jacket, much racier and rock and roll). Betjeman read from *Summoned by Bells*, which is fairly whimsical and anecdotal and colloquial . . . and he was very affable in his delivery. Hughes was sterner, obviously the shift was from a southern, middle-class, very media-friendly voice of Betjeman to something that I needed to tune into a little bit more because of the dialect. And Hughes was reading poems like “The Thought Fox” and some of *Crow*, and his language was obviously much more muscular, much more jammed together.

Peter Finch recalls attending his first readings around 1965-66, when he was newly interested in poetry and often baffled by what he heard: “I was bored stiff . . . it took me many years to really begin to find how you could get something out of a reading.” They were “dry formal affairs,” the poets were often poets with roots in the 1940s, and they read an “introverted verse.” Poets might ask for questions after their readings—which marked them off from other forms of performance: “after an entertainment you don’t ask for questions.” There were few young people attending. Even though there have been great changes since then, some of the old practices persist, he adds, saying that even today “the old style of reading continues” on occasion. Perhaps it was this early experience of fascinated puzzlement at poetry readings, as well as his later career as performer and arts organizer that has led him to reflect extensively on what happens during a text-based reading. It is not just the poet as performer who has to learn; listeners also have to acquire reception skills too.

When Finch looks back at those early poetry readings, he recalls that “the first problem was just understanding what they were on about.” He expresses it strongly: in a “traditional” reading you have “concentrated language blasted at you.” These blasts of language led him to reflect on the internal contradictions of the listener’s experience:

What you do in listening to poetry is you don’t listen to everything, some of it you take in and you use traditional comprehension of it; otherwise

¹² See Tuma 2001 and Caddel and Quartermain 1999 for further information on Cris Cheek.

you just listen to the sound the words make. Sometimes it's the sound, sometimes you grab a bit of the meaning, and as those two processes, which both come from the ear, mix together, you get different things out of a poem. I didn't realize that; I thought what you had to do, was understand every simple thing. And I sat there, listened to the poem, and thought, I don't understand anything. Couple that with the concentration problem. If you're not accustomed to sitting for several hours listening to somebody talk to you in that way, your mind is going to drift. And poetry readings tend to go on"

The paratext helps too: "It's very interesting if the poet says a few things about how this particular poem came into being or puts it in a context you might have missed."

The significance of the struggle for comprehension is something that Allen Fisher also considers very important. One of the most powerful readings Fisher can recall was given by the American poet, Charles Olson, visiting London in 1967:

There are many people around us now, most of the people around us now, who haven't heard Charles Olson, never will. But they could have heard recordings, and I would still recommend that they do hear those. But having said that, having seen him read live, I've never actually got over it, absolutely astonished how good it was and I never understood a blinking word he was talking about at the reading. I thought what is this *about*? So isn't that interesting? Now I could tell you what it's about.

Fisher too does not believe that the audience has to understand every word they hear: "there is another understanding possible, which is to do with what it feels like, what speed it's at." This extra-semantic dimension is not simply unrelated to the production of meaning, even if it may function more like augmentation by another performance medium rather than as added emphasis. Research has little to say about just what is happening to enable an audience to have a specific sense of "what it feels like" to hear a particular poet perform. This is something that matters to O'Sullivan very much:

I suppose it's quite an old-fashioned thing to say, but it's like the source, I want to be near the source. There is something about hearing a poet read their work that you could never replicate, this astonishing kind of bodying forth of the sounds, the language. It's bodying forth, it's the body, for me, to experience that presence, that physicality, that whole being. That language, bringer of language to experience them in the flesh.

She also talks about “this ability to totally inhabit language, so that the body is in the language” that differentiates a more engaging poetry reading from “those awful dull readings at the Poetry Society” where “it was like there was a detachment between the reader and the work, that they weren’t entering it at the vocal or psychic or physical level, it was just reading stuff.” Although this quality may in part be generated from somatic or environmental factors beyond control, O’Sullivan believes that the poet can give the members of the audience occasion for “choosing between different types of attention, different involvement, where to focus their attention.”

Allen Fisher illustrates what he means by this quality of performance by recalling a reading by a contemporary of his whom he had not heard before:

I’d read the books and liked them and I’d come to the reading along with everybody else and he opened his mouth and I couldn’t believe it, I just thought my god I can’t believe how good this is, and I was almost in tears by the end of the reading—it was fantastic . . . because it was eloquent, and eloquent means that not only was it able to say the words that were written down, that you could read, but it was able to make them clearer than you could have anticipated. Now that’s a bit odd really, because that means what would happen to someone who would never ever get this chance?

Fisher’s speculation points to one reason why poetry readings are now so pervasive—reading the poetry in a book almost requires prior experience of the poet’s oral style. This belief guides his own practice as a performer. The choice of poetry will depend to some extent on what sort of audience he is performing for, especially whether they are likely to be familiar with his work or not. Fisher states, “I suppose there are things I know will work better with an unfamiliar audience because they have worked before.” But sometimes he might want some degree of alienation because this unfamiliarity can work as a “necessary difficulty . . . so that it makes sure that people are alert to what’s going on.”

The Poet as Career Performer

All the poets we interviewed spoke passionately about the satisfactions of performance and its overall importance for their work.

Gilbert Adair,¹³ in a written interview, speaks of his first reading as a determining moment for him:

In 1979 I was living in Crouch End & aware that poetry readings were being put on in a local café on Finsbury Rise, *The Rainbow*. It wasn't a series, more occasional. I managed to get a reading there, my first. I thought of it as a collage poem—a huge sheet with varying-sized typewritten bits of paper glued all over it. It's long since disappeared. I stood with this thing occupying most of the table in front of me, overflowing fore, aft, and to the sides, and started reading. I'd taken lessons from a neighboring amateur singer on voice projection, I was following these breath-rules, but I didn't dare look up or I'd lose my place in this vast expanse of close-set typeset words. So I hadn't a clue as to how the small audience, none of whom I knew except, a little, the organizer, a poet called John Gibbens—they were all sitting in the compacted spaces around the café's close-packed tables—were reacting. The work itself took its main inspirations from [William] Burroughs and also, I guess, a kind of B.S. Johnson urge to *unpack* things. I seemed to be the only one making a noise in the place. . . . I paused appreciably for breath and heard a male voice say something like, "I think we should stop this for a while & discuss what we're hearing." And then voices I remember as mostly female, "No no we're enjoying this, let him keep going." So I did, and presently it was over. It was wonderful. I decided then and there: I must find ways to make this happen again. . . . I suppose there was a certain reassurance that even with a non-specialist audience . . . a reading didn't have to be immediately, discursively "understandable" to be enjoyed—at least by some. The piece hadn't been written to be read aloud in the first place. If it distinctly hadn't worked that way, however, would I have changed the way I was writing? I don't think so, but it never came to that.

The skills of performance require practice and planning, even if it is important to give the impression of spontaneity. Finch believes that poets have on the whole become more skilled at performance, even if this has been a slow process. He says ruefully, "poets have been massively undisciplined" in their work with audiences. Like most of the poets, he believes that "the nature of the poetry reading has changed. . . . Today people who don't read poetry books don't mind going to a poetry reading," and they treat it as a leisure activity, "a bit of fun," perhaps even "an intellectual injection . . . we've got writers who can provide that now." Performance is not appropriate for every poem he writes, however, and he is conscious that his poems themselves can demand quite different kinds of presentation. Some

¹³ See Clarke and Sheppard 1991 for further information on Gilbert Adair. An interview with Adair is available in issue one of *PORES: An Avant-Gardist Journal of Poetics Research*, online at www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1.

poetry is written for an attentive audience to listen to quietly, whereas some is written in what he calls his “declamatory” style, with which he has built his reputation.

This sharp awareness that the poet’s texts may sometimes fall on either one side or the other of a divide between orality and silent reading is perhaps unusual, but other poets certainly do think of performance as more than a simple sonic transcription of a written text. O’Sullivan recalls that the poets she met at workshops when she was starting out “were only concerned with what was on the paper, and it was embedded in critical analysis, and there was no kind of interest in how you sounded this out, how you might use the space; it was English Lit. at its absolute worst.” One sign of a growing awareness of the vocal entailments of the written text is a shared sense that poetry readings have improved. Like Finch, Fisher believes that poetry readings have evolved over the past 30 years “from a series of habits that started in America in the ’60s and in Britain in the ’70s, of regular poetry readings and so on. . . . People have got better at it or thought more about it. I hope that’s true, I think it is. I still know some poets I read who are terrible readers.” Fisher plans his own performances carefully: “By planning, what I mean is I have a list of what I’m going to read at a reading, a little book, so if I’ve read at a place before I look at the previous list to make sure I’m not doing it again, or the same again, or if I wanted to do the same again, I’m doing it for a particular reason, in other words, it’s not some accident that it’s repeated.” He times the delivery of the work, and builds in flexibility in case the reading starts late. Poetry performance has, he feels, completely altered the landscape of poetry: “I also think that the poetry reading complex, the fact that there has been poetry readings and they continue has changed the way poetry’s now written and provided. It’s changed what it looks like on the page, it’s changed what is on the page, it’s changed what’s permissible, it’s changed the potential for the tones really, and the potential for non-words almost.”

Cris Cheek concurs with these assessments and also adds an aside that hints at one of the most important and least discussed aspects of this growth:

Poetry reading (or vast swathes of poetry readings) has got its act together in terms of a public presentation, it’s not so introverted, it has taken on some ideas more broadly shared with other performing arts. Some of that might tend towards the theatrical, some of it might tend towards the other side of performing arts, performance art, live art, those kinds of histories of performance. Broadly speaking the vast majority of poets who are operating in any kind of reading conference, coherent series presentation circuits, are much better at their delivery, they don’t tend to sit, they’re not so muffled, they’re more confident, they’re more assertive vocally,

they've learnt more about how to project their voices. And there have been moves made by many poets in many spheres of poetry to aid that projection. Some of which could be over-characterized as standing up rather than sitting down, although I think you can still do a perfectly good job sitting down, but I think standing up brought a little bit more rock and roll to poetry than sat-at-the table mode.

This allusion to rock music as a measure of the intensity of audience experience is a useful reminder of the cultural context in which poets have to perform.

The importance of foregrounding these changes in performance values in such explicitly pedagogical settings was agreed upon by Agbabi and Taylor, who have both taught extensively in schools and, in the case of Agbabi, in higher education. Taylor has integrated performance poetry into the curricula of many London schools as a way of intertwining developing literacies and writing. She suggests that slam poetry, for example, is "poetry for people who don't like poetry" and debunks the "myth of the poetry reading" by demonstrating it to be something not "silent and static" but "alive, organic, and interactive." Her negative comments on the more conventional poetry reading echo Finch's description of the continuation of the older style of poetry reading. Agbabi similarly considers the performed poem a vital way of making the reading of poetry more accessible and can even train audiences who lack skills needed to read poetry on the page by helping make prosody tangible to them in the auditory enactment of lineation and scansion.

Although Agbabi resists the "page-stage" division (this was the subject of her master's thesis at the University of Sussex), she believes that a good reading should come from the body of the reader. In her teaching, for example, she encourages students to memorize poems in order to allow them to be spoken from the body rather than read as a script. This does not mean that she prepares each detail of the anticipated performance: the poem is not rehearsed, she insists, just learned. Echoing Peter Finch's longer perspective, she too believes that stagecraft has become increasingly important to a wide range of poets. Although he expresses it with less emphasis than Agbabi, Fisher also thinks that the poet's body plays a key part in the performance: "I've learned that the energy from a reading is better for the kind of work that I make if I'm standing up. Because some of the nervous energy comes through the feet or rather comes back out of the body into the ground, so it works in a positive way usually." Planning provides a framework rather than a set agenda for every word and action. Improvisation can be an important element of some readings. Fisher explains, "If I improvised it wouldn't be necessarily always as radical as changing the words. It would sometimes be

the speed and lack of speed, or it would be intonations. But sometimes what I do is pick pieces that are difficult, and it sounds perverse when I say it, but they trip me up, I trip myself up in trying to read them. And out of the mistakes that occur from the trip-up I improvise. Rather than correct the trip-up I expand upon it, and develop it into ‘what does that now mean?’” Such extemporizing usually only lasts for a line or two at most. It is closely linked to a poetic method of rewriting earlier texts according to various constructivist strategies, and thereby creating new poems; occasionally he actually performs such a construction process live.

A career as a performer carries with it potential risks incurred by the relatively transient practices of performances in a culture where documentation is so highly valued, and techniques for recording poetry performance remain undeveloped. Despite her evident success as a performance poet, Patience Agbabi was explicitly wary of the consequences of not taking publication seriously, and believes that the longevity of a poet’s career depends on publishing books. The older poets we interviewed recalled the emergence of entertainment as a legitimate aspect of the poetry performance as something of a liberation from earlier modes of high seriousness. Two decades later, in the 1990s, entertainment has come to dominate events as far as many poets and organizers were concerned, and so it becomes necessary to stress other aspects of poetry performance. As Agbabi says, the very designation “performance poet” has become a problem for some writers who feel it to be a denigrating term used by the Establishment, a code for working class or ethnic poetry that does not need to be taken seriously. Although she has taken the performance of poetry to a much further degree of professionalization than most poets, Agbabi retains a strong loyalty to writing and to certain traditional forms of the poem. Her interview reveals that the poetry scene still makes strong distinctions between spontaneity and rehearsed actions when categorizing poetry performances, and that these judgments can screen cultural divisions. However good the performer, if he or she is not also a poet publishing written texts in readily available book form, then his or her status as a poet is uncertain. She resists, however, the idea that poetry is a purely verbal or cognitive art, saying repeatedly that poetry is a bodily art, and requires performance. This belief, and the conviction that performance is also important as an informal pedagogy for potential readers of poetry who lack the specialist training needed to read a poem, suggests that she conceives of a written text as a reliable score for performance, and that this performativity is implicit in the written text.

Allen Fisher is a poet with a very different aesthetic, and yet he too emphasizes the interdependence of writing and performance: “My poems are never complete until I’ve read them to somebody. If there’s any rewriting it takes place after the first reading. . . . Public might only be two people, but it would need to be public. Because it’s that business of the other person hearing and their response that you somehow understand, that you then make a decision about.” Taylor, who organizes London’s Respect Festival Poetry Slams, considers this poetry to be written “on air” and not appropriate for translation onto paper. Her attempt to anthologize the poems by finalists from a previous year’s Respect Slam failed, and this shortfall led her to decide to record the finalists from 2003 onto a CD at the Exchange studio in Camden. The experience of Johnson and Taylor in organizing large poetry events was not unique among the poets we interviewed. Finch has developed his position as the Director of the Welsh literary arts council, Academi Gymreig in Cardiff, so that he can directly fund many poetry reading series, and he regards this activity as an important task for his organization. Nevertheless, most poets are unlikely to be in a situation where they can either organize or fund readings, and thus have to rely on the extensive formal and informal networks of people who make poetry performances possible. How do these organizers of poetry reading series shape this history of poetry performance? How do they understand their own role and what do they value in the poets they invite? We asked poets who have had many years’ experience in organizing such events to give us as full an account as they could of the issues that they encountered.

Poetry Reading Series

Just as a publisher will create a poetry list, so too do organizations. These range from institutions that treat British poets as representatives of British culture as the British Council does, by sponsoring events around the world at which about 20 or more British poets will perform, to those that present poets in reading series that meet on a regular basis (typically on the same day every few weeks) and nurture a stable core audience over time. The history of one important avant-garde reading series will give some idea of what is involved.

The long-running series, Sub-Voicive Poetry (SVP), was founded by Gilbert Adair in 1979. Adair describes the first couple of years of the series as a “community service” model that “included floor readings at the end” and allowed for public discussion. There were lots of local readers, and the events were generally held in the upstairs rooms of central London pubs.

The atmosphere was typically informal—most of the audience (largely consisting of other poets, small press publishers, and their friends) would have a drink and there would be a continual external noise from the street and from the traffic to the bar downstairs. Adair describes “a kind of educative thrust, trying to bring people in contact who weren’t familiar with each other’s work,” and he highlights a gradual movement in the readings from the “community service phase” towards a more performer-centered event. In terms of delivery, poets learned not to offer much in the way of introductions—this was not to be a confessional mode of performance. Poets were tacitly discouraged from giving their readings emotionally expressive coloring and from using the pieties of cadence widely used by readers of the autobiographical personal lyric; a percussive delivery was commonly favored. Readings might, however, be performative, and some poets would at times go beyond semantically coded sounds altogether in pursuit of voiced non-phonemic sounds. Critical judgment and criticism were assumed to take place informally behind the scenes. Audiences were relatively stable for extended periods of time, and largely consisted of other poets, small press publishers, and their friends. The picture that emerges is of a reading series that itself has to learn how to perform, and in doing so moves away from what Adair calls the “community service” model that can include public discussion to a more performer-centered event.

In the early 1990s, when Adair left England for a job in Singapore, Lawrence Upton¹⁴ took over the running of the series. Both organizers were asked about the selection of poets. Were there specific criteria of some kind: performance skills, relevant interests, shared poetics? Adair’s criteria were based on the requirement that

either I or someone I trusted thought this was a serious poet with something to say to people familiar with, at least, twentieth-century avant-garde traditions, or open to responding to someone who was coming out of these. “Linguistically innovative” as I coined somewhere in the late eighties, and have recurrently been tempted to think through. But it being a social thing, there were in practice other criteria too—mainly, that any member of Bob’s [Bob Cobbing’s] workshop who wanted could get a reading at Sub-Voicive.

What emerges in this interview typifies the responses we received from others. These criteria are in practice largely tacit ones, and probably have more to do with performance abilities than the organizers are necessarily willing to admit.

¹⁴ See www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc for further information on Lawrence Upton.

Upton's discussion of his selection pointed to his desire to invite poets who have not been heard for a while, though he also has a small number that he is willing to invite at least once every season. He places a high value on the quality of the vocal reading itself, the projection of the voice, and the ability to engage the audience, and he encourages where appropriate improvisation and intermedia. Failure is a risk he says he is willing to run, and he is eager to try out poets he has not heard before. Although he remains keen to do so, there have clearly been underlying principles of exclusion and inclusion, as a look at the records of the reading series during his term as organizer makes plain. In practice there is considerable discussion in advance with friends and regular attenders, and a series of suggestions emerge. Why not invite leading mainstream poets whose work may be of interest to the audience? Upton feels that such poets could easily find reading venues in London and elsewhere. SVP should, he feels, concentrate its commitment on poets whose work he and the core audience admire and who are not likely to have many opportunities to perform elsewhere.

We gained a strong impression that the reading series has been an important site of exchange for poets, publishers, and readers. Here one could do business around poetry, a business conducted among poets and otherwise disembedded from its urban location. Nicholas Johnson's¹⁵ experience of organizing a reading series and then a series of poetry festivals outside the metropolitan nexus was somewhat different. He feels that the location of the Six Towns festival in the Potteries region¹⁶ is important for breaking with the strong metropolitan influence on contemporary poetry. For him it was necessary to draw into the enterprise as much of the local community active in supporting the arts as possible. Seed funding was provided by the Arts Council, but local newspapers and radio stations provided additional financial support. Services were provided free by some local businesses, and local people provided accommodation for some of the dozen or so poets.

Unlike SVP, which could largely draw on existing London audiences, Johnson had to create an audience in this area. He was particularly interested in attracting an audience under thirty who had little experience of an oral tradition of poetics, and in bringing in those with connections to an oral traditions that had been marginalized ("folksy" or Celtic); he was also interested in paying attention to voicing, to dialect, to accent, to regional

¹⁵ See Johnson 2000 for further information on Nicholas Johnson. He is the publisher of Etruscan Books.

¹⁶ So-called after the six towns, including Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme that comprise the Potteries, the industrial area where china and pottery manufacturers congregated for several hundred years.

identities, and to an expanding notion of Britishness. Each year a surprisingly high proportion of the poets were Scottish poets, for example. The aim was to offer a texture of voices and a range of contrasting performances. Poets were selected above all on the basis of their likely skills in performance. The festival quickly created a core of performers who regularly returned each year. Small pamphlets of work, produced cheaply each year to go with the festival, led to the emergence of a small press, Etruscan Books, that eventually issued a series of three-poet anthologies, and then a major anthology, *Foil*, of younger contemporary poets.

Our third example of a poetry series is another metropolitan one, but a world away from the intellectuals of SVP. London's Respect Slam, organized by Joelle Taylor, attempts as Johnson did to use the performance of poetry to create a new body of poetry readers and listeners. The Slam's constituency is drawn from the whole of the London area, from young people between the ages of 12 and 18, and groups are brought along from local schools, youth groups, and young offenders' institutions. The 2003 event was dedicated to the memory of Stephen Lawrence, whose mother, Doreen Lawrence, was a patron. Respect themes focus on anti-racism but also include respect in schools, bullying, and child abuse. Taylor explains that one of the key elements is the training of participants, making highly visible what we have seen as an element of the other reading series that was important yet not foregrounded. Taylor, working with the Poetry Society, employs contemporary performance poets as poetry consultants to show contestants how to "work a slam audience." The judges of Slam competitions are chosen randomly through a lottery (although the Respect Slam also includes a chosen panel of well-known poets), and generally this dynamic means that the competition cannot be a "fair" assessment of the quality of the writing, but instead is dependent on the dynamic between poets and their audience and judges. This arrangement renders the slam deeply interactive: poets can improve their marks through explicit interaction with audience by the use of jokes, dancing, even pleading. Each performer has just three minutes, and the result is that it is the performance, rather than the quality of the writing, that is the key to success. This success can mean a lot in terms of access to the media. Anthony Anaxagorou, a winner from poetry slam 2002, now presents Youth Nation, a twelve-part series for the BBC.

Conclusion

There remain many uncertainties about this situation. What are the key determinants of the rise of performance and what are simply contingencies that help give it a particular cast? Is the hegemony of performance the result of the transformation of leisure by the new communications technologies or perhaps the result of a growing appetite for the arts to work in more than one medium at a time? Are we seeing the making of a new or renewed oral tradition with the staying power of earlier traditions, or is this more of a transient fashion in poetry that will ebb away and be replaced by non-oral practices? Unlikely as that latter prospect seems, there is little in the current state of our knowledge of this relatively new phenomenon to assure us that performance is going to continue to be integral to the circulation of poetry. Innovations in the distribution of music as compressed and easily downloaded digital files for portable players may have a marked impact on the provision of recorded poetry if some current ventures to create web archives of MP3 poetry recordings are successful. Would that diminish the emotional and intellectual investments in poetry performance? Perhaps the interactivity of the slam is a pointer to the future. Speculating about the future is a reminder that our current knowledge of the ethnography of poetry performance is still underdeveloped and limits our understanding of the ways in which poetic meaning is projected through the synergy of orality and writing.

One overriding conclusion arises from our work: the conditions of contemporary life preclude the creation of a supportive audience for poetry solely on the basis of silent reading. Keen readers of poetry find themselves wanting to hear the poem's sound articulated by its author, and the media and recording industries have not hitherto been able to satisfy this need. Live performance by the author is all that will suffice. And then a feedback process occurs. As listeners try to sort out the "blasts of language," the complex and possibly unsayable word-strings that comprise much of the poetry written directly for the page, they find themselves becoming cognitively active in new ways. This is not ordinary linguistic communication. Models of communication, whether communication is considered as the decoding of a message or as the amplification of inferential cues (as in Relevance Theory), do not adequately describe what we might call the "oralization" of a text. Poetic writing does not usually originate as the transcription of a real (or imagined) statement; poetic writing is a verbal pattern in a two-dimensional space that depends on the back-and-forth scanning of visual recognition that then elicits an extended hermeneutic activity.

Off the page and carried by a voice that does not allow such intensive cognitive attention to meaning, the performed poem impacts listeners differently. They begin to notice sound patterns, tempo, the grain of the voice, its embodiment, its acoustic properties, as well as the complex iconicity of poetic language. Over time this prompts poets deliberately to incorporate such features more and more into texts for performance. Meanwhile, audience skills begin to sharpen and change as people participate in a well-focused public reading experience over time. Performance does not replace publication; instead it becomes a complement to publication, and the two modalities generate an interdependence that reaches a new level of integration, so that the result is more than the sum of its parts. Even when poets use easily understood language, perhaps by imitating the idioms of an informal or confessional address to the audience, the cognitive and perceptual excess over and beyond semantic interpretation becomes more and more pronounced. Poets do of course sometimes work with language that can be read aloud as if it were a form of natural speech, but what we observed in our interviews was a widespread recognition that the performed poem was usually something else, especially in its entirety. Speech might be part of its repertoire, but the overall effect was more akin to a group of musicians who might employ a singer. These poems employed a range of effects, with varying degrees of success, that would include speech-based elements.

Performance has increasingly become a condition within which poets have to operate when even the largest organizations, such as the British Council, have come to treat it as a norm. Our research suggests that it would be a mistake to treat this orality as simply a continuance of long-established traditions. What we are witnessing in this history of recent poetry performance are sometimes radical innovations, innovations for which there is either no precedent or, in cases where there may be some few precursors, little shared consciousness of this history and almost no critical history. We also see that this is a phenomenon with no single cause. Many factors—economic, technological, social, aesthetic, and cultural—all contributed to its emergence and changing features. Our poet interviewees experienced these developments as happening beyond their direct control. None of them feel they have invented an oral poetics themselves, and yet they also see it as capable of some redirection, depending on their relation to the cultural institutions. Dissonances as well as equivalences that occur in the poetry's cultural work of marking transitions between speech and writing are everywhere evident. These performative blasts of language can be described as blasts because they tend to resist assimilation as solely communicative

meaning because of the storms, explosions, excessive noise, and other discomfoting effects that are intrinsic to their success. Research into this history is sure to develop and will carry with it a burden: its narratives will become part of the poetics that informs future practice. Further studies will therefore need to find ways of acknowledging the blast without either ignoring its resistance to assimilation or merely domesticating it. Listening to as many as possible of those who have helped make this history will be a good start.¹⁷

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