

Despite the traditional belief, endorsed by T. S. Eliot, that the printed poem should represent merely the equivalent of a musical score for its actualization in oral performance, the creative procedures of writing, performing and interpreting poetry are actually subtly inter-related. The voice, the persona of the poem, is encoded in its printed form; but in its release or realization in oral performance, it begins to resonate both with the intended idiom of its creator and with the conditioned, interpretive expectations of the audience. The poet-performer releases his poetry from the tyranny of the printed page. The author is a performing poet who illustrates his argument with examples from his own writing in which he seeks to recreate the voices of, among others, Paul St. Vincent, a young, black South Londoner; Sally Goodman, the white, English feminist; and Philpot the middle-aged, black cricket fan.

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Which Poem Am I Reading?

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Many years ago, at a poetry reading held at my flat in Shephards Bush, West London, I got an unexpected response to a poem I had just read. It was a short poem, and printed with it on the same sheet of paper was another short poem, very different in shape. Members of the audience had an opportunity to see what was being read but—as this was a “reading,” not a workshop—not to read the poems themselves. The unexpected response referred to was based on the assumption that I had read not the poem whose rhythm, shape and pace I had tried accurately to convey in the reading but the other poem on the page, which seemed very different to me in all these aspects. I was given credit then, after I’d revealed the error—was this to save face?—for working *against* the flow of the poem on the page. (This was the late 60s or early 70s, the tail end of performance, concrete and sound poetry.) I was thought to be subverting the poem on the page, undermining it. Someone used the image of a discredited government running against itself in the hope of reelection. I liked that.

It was tempting, of course, to dismiss this response of the gathering in the room in Ladbroke Grove on the grounds that it was mainly English—there was one American—and that the possibilities people allowed for

in how a poem written by a West Indian might sound, might be limited. It is entirely possible that had I read the poem which people thought they recognized, they would then not have recognized it as such.

Of course, we were determined to break away from the world represented by the pentameter and from what A. Alvarez was then calling “the gentility principle.” And the trick was to achieve this even when you read the right poem. We didn’t wish to give ammunition to the many literary snipers aiming their fire at poetry-in-performance. They talked, often convincingly, of the coarsening effects of the poet playing to an audience; of the tendency to simplify imagery and to become literal, to have an eye to the quick laugh, the telling punch-line; of the temptation to subordinate poem to poet. There was a feeling, too, that the poet-in-performance tended to select or develop a performing voice that she/he was comfortable with and to write to that voice, gradually equating it with the poet’s voice, with the attendant failure further to experiment with other voices (as, say, actors do) which might equally be authentic voices of that particular poet.

I was later to explore this aspect of growth, this area of possibility, by adopting different personae—Paul St. Vincent, the young black South Londoner:

*Chase him down the alley
put him behind bars
in a basement and charge him rent.
Lambchops has potential
for violence. He’s faking
says the Pig in the wig,
make him an example
of our collective self-defence.
Black them here stop them there
before they get too cheeky
too second-generation aware
and ape us overtake us
queueing up for houses
they claim their fathers built.
They’re a problem so he’s a problem
a potential mugger
on a quiet English street,*

*so smash him smash him
or soon he'll flash an education
and leave you crumpled in a heap.*

"A Mugger's Game"

Or, Sally Goodman, the white feminist:

*We're writing a poem about a lily in a pond.
We're clearing away the garbage to get to the pond.
We're entangled and frustrated by the fuckrapemurder to the pond.
We press through the splaat violence violence
and win through to the lily in the pond -
the lily with the broken neck, bleeding.
Our poem shows the witchbitch, the outlaw looking on
from the edge of the pond. Ah Ah, my innocents;
we are sitting here debating the group position,
all trying to break wind secretly, together: a small success.
Now we must prepare for rivals flushed
with a taste of Götterdämmerung
We are writing a poem about a lily in a pond...*

"The Group"

I tried to exploit the rhythmic possibilities released by these other selves.

We're not just talking about contrasting great visual extremes here because that lifts the pressure on the poet to get it right and removes the sense of ambivalence, the possibilities for creative confusion—all of which make the thing interesting. There is no way, for instance, that in looking at Apollinaire's *Il Pleut*, with its five delicate streamers of rain, we're going to communicate this to a listener as rhyming John Betjeman. Nor are we likely to associate the following eight lines with the first part of a traditional sonnet:

*p m r k g n i a o u
p m r k g n i a o
p m r k n i a o
p m r n i a o
p m r i a o
p m i a o
m i a o
m a o*

This being the celebrated “Chinese Cats” of Edwin Morgan.

But as a practitioner, a performer, I have a notion of visible language which transcends interpreting what’s been written on the page. Surely by now we all agree with Charles Olson in his questioning of the “closed form,” the inherited line, stanza, formal pattern, the “verse that print bred,” and we find our own release in more open forms of composition by “field.” But when Olson says “the voice is greater than the eye,” he is still in a sense using the book/line frame of reference. The *line* is meaningless in a non-scribal culture. The line of poetry, in the traditional sense, can be said to work one way for the reader and another for the poet. What does the reader in fact see when she/he opens the book?

A shape which might be sense or nonsense. On reading the first line, the reader is still aware of the shape of the poem, but apart from the line which is being read, the rest of the poem might well be nonsense until, gradually, each line is recovered for sense.¹

This isn’t how the poet necessarily sees it. It’s true that often the verbalization of a smell, a sound, a memory, an idea, a dream accords with what is easy to say with one breath, with what would seem spring-board for development/expansion and at the same time is comfortable to the eye conditioned to conventions of how books are designed, of how their contents are to be negotiated. *A line of poetry*. So far so good. But it’s equally possible that the poet sees more than this, might see, in fact, *poem* rather than *line* and might see it in startlingly clear terms, different, in fact, from the way in which the reader might see all but the line which she/he is actually engaged in reading. In that sense, *poem* and *line* dissolve; they become one: it’s almost like something hierarchical becoming democratic. Your *line*, then—we have to use these confusing terms—becomes as long as the *poem*: if your poem has the dimensions of China, you might see your line as a billion visible characters long instantly apprehended by the reader or audience.

Of course, the question of human scale—which properly dominates disciplines like architecture, but not music or philosophy or thinking or the novel, though very short novels might be given another name—this human scale question might be used to put limitations on the poem, the line, limitations happily coinciding with the aesthetics of book design, with the tyranny of the page. With this in mind, therefore, talking about visible

language in terms of patterns words make on the page, how do we rescue the poem?

There is an interesting point, reputed to have come from Philip Larkin, designed to convey a distrust of poetry reading or poetry-in-performance. I'm not thinking of his throw-away remark that the poet performing is someone pretending to be himself, but of the more telling charge that the poet-in-performance in some way holds the listener up to ransom. The theory being that the poet puts the listener at a disadvantage, for unlike the solitary reader, the listener is unable to go back and check things imperfectly understood or to confirm that a later verbal explosion was triggered from an earlier planted image. Also, the listener is deprived of the ability to pause and reflect *within the poem* and of the security of knowing when the poem will end: the listener is robbed of the total—as opposed to the localized—cultural experience.

Of course, we can quibble about some of these notions. The listener, unlike the solitary reader, might not be able to stop and go back over something imperfectly understood, but at least the listener is often in a position to ask a direct question to the author. There is also, the other point: the length of the poem acting as a sort of tease. Is this how it really works? It's common practice at a poetry reading to announce the unusual. The unusual, in this context, might mean that the performer might sing rather than recite or read a piece, or that a section might be in a foreign language. More usually, it means drawing attention to a poem that might be thought longer than average or, at the other end of the scale, a haiku. The modern poetry audience, in the absence of any introductory comment to the contrary, would assume an experience of listening to a poem equal to, say, the attention span of the reader who might have occasion to turn the page once but not, perhaps, twice. What I'm saying is that the modern poetry audience is as attuned to the poem as the theater audience is to the scene from the play (the play being the complete reading) or the concert hall audience to this or that particular movement or song (the symphony or the concert being again the complete reading).

But what is it that we are performing? No one accepts (other than the sound poets, who are no longer young or, in many cases, alive) that a written poem is just a score waiting to be interpreted. But immense care is taken by the potential performer to hit the right note with the audience and to try and militate against

anything discordant—from a too-cold hall to what might be perceived to be inappropriate dress on the part of the performer.

Everyone agrees that sound is different from sight and that, hence, hearing a poem read or recited is different from reading it silently yourself. There are, of course, ideologies associated with the tyranny of words on the page, linking with all sorts of terrible things in other aspects of the world generally associated with class or—if you are a person of real imagination—with patriarchy. I'm talking about things like the compartmentalization of knowledge; a division of labor of understanding, and the sort of anti-oratory approach to cultural expression (and hence, presumably, to the conception of culture) which either leads to or issues from some form of de-racination. There is the parallel charge of elitism—the under-privileged being the world's millions unable to read—though it probably isn't true anymore that those who can read tend naturally and voluntarily to do so.

What everyone agrees on is that the habit of writing shouldn't make us deaf and dumb, or words would be robbed of, among other things, much of their sensuality and their drama and *all of their noise*. T.S. Eliot, on the sleeve note to *Four Quartets*, puts the minimalist position:

What a recording of a poem by its author can and should preserve, is the way that a poem sounded to the author when he had finished it. The disposition of lines on the page, the punctuation (which includes the *absence* of punctuation marks...) can never give an exact notation of the author's metric. The chief value of the author's record... is a guide to the rhythms.²

Of course, in this, Eliot wants to assist the potential listener, not, in fact, to be influenced by that listener, not to engage with that listener; and he is not in any real sense talking about poetry-in-performance.

One of the more exciting aspects of poetry-in-performance (as with nation language in Caribbean poetry) is the way in which it has brought new life to the traditional made-for-the-page line, even in the most hidden of ways, in forcing old work to take new stresses by the very consciousness of existence of the new.

I fancy that my somewhat nostalgic poem, "Family," which opens

*And we, too, are family.
We have not succumbed to the priests,
the psychiatrists*

though not exactly recollected in tranquility, and suggesting a lower noise level than, say,

*HER RED RIB ELK AND EEL HER WET DIP
THE NEW BIB DAZ AND VIM SHE LET RIP*

which is a clear boast of patriarchy and obviously influenced by performance, is not, in subsequent reading/performing, unaffected by the later poem. This later poem—about patriarchy—is secure partly in the assumption that its audience is likely to be anti-patriarchal in its sentiments, so the poet can safely be the bad guy. There is an unheard but palpable call and response thing happening, the poison is being lanced, the poem is being challenged. So the drill-like, drum-like, insistent, relentless maleness—absent in the “Family” poem—is not a possibility closed to the poet.

Now, finally, let me look again at a bit of a poem and at some of the visual aids which have helped me to communicate it to an audience.

A Last Fling IV and V

(a late meeting with Philpot)

*Yes man,
talkin bout statistics, the boys
gettin better. Now it's First after First
after First—and where it goin end
is nobody's business. Man, we not talkin
bout cricket any more, you know: we moving
into History. Whitewash. Blackwash,
every damn kinda wash. We talking big name,
man. Napoleon and Russia. Ever hear
of that woman, first one, fling sheself
over Niagara in a barrel and come out
dancin? Richards driving through the covers, eh?
That's what we talkin bout! See what I mean?
Sperm count of the hog, man. That's what I mean.
Genghis Khan, world conqueror givin the chineyman
licks. Slapping down old Asia. They say he
warm up Siberia hotter than that girl we used to know
back in Great Portland Street days, eh? And we don'
come to Mongolia yet. We win there too, you know:
runs in the family. Roots? You talkin bout root!
This is the tree, the tree of knowledge.
A good feeling, man, a nice warm feeling.*

Yes,
here in the dark, on the verandah, a little
bit like home again. Nothing furtive, No Sir.
Forget about the old man and young girl stranded
at a holiday resort out of season.
We're over the awkward, scripted phase
making up for impersonating the other to please
bitches in the audience. Just one of those
necessary meetings of old-time pioneers
who took different forks in the road
and turned what was common into difference.
We pay each other the compliment
of having lived on the edge of the team,
which didn't win in those days, a team
of saggar-boys who couldn't cope
with the women and their batting. There he was
young Philpot, yearning
to throw off the taunts of small-island dasheenman,
and come out breaking arms and heads, hotter
than Wes Hall and Griffiths—another bluestreaking
tornado to punish and lash the enemy. Ah well,
the young boys seem to be catching on.

Yes,
Philpot's reminiscences cloud and illuminate
like a day at Headingley toying with the covers.
There, in a patch of sunlight, his hero snicked
a four through the slips. For twenty years
this fan pondered the blemish on a fine innings.
Now, wise in the ways of the world (and of women) he
can see
the value of mishitting towards the victory.
Ah, but those were the days, the days. So when's the next
Test?

v

It is Tomorrow.
It is next year.

First, let's quote the note to this section of the poem. Part of the interest here is the play between the voice and the written idiom. The nation language/creole/dialect of the first section is that of a now familiar sort of poetry-performing act, in which tone and gesture are as important in conveying the experience as are the words on the page; then comes a change of balance, West Indian in its vocabulary and stresses, but less stagy; and finally, a voice still

recognizable from the multiplicity of West Indian voices, distinctive not in its idiom, but in the values (again stresses, pauses, associations...) which it invests in the most innocuous-looking "standard English" phrase. The point is to try to avoid type-casting and stereotyping.

"A late meeting with Philpot" is Part IV of a long poem. The preceding part had the visual tidiness of rhymed couplets, the sense of loss filtered and teased into matching strands, like a card-player playing without a partner. There is a sense of control here, of emotions, of a low-keyed game in accepting one's position with a mild wit and a pretense of humor. The longish lines and rhyming couplets seem to portray this visually.

"A late meeting with Philpot" looks different. There is a chunk, and another, and a third; then it peters out. Indeed, there is a decrease in bulk from chunk to chunk—some draining, perhaps, of his overt West Indianness, through which he might rediscover something not so easily labeled but fitting him. So in this first mode the poem seems to convey the physicality, the bulk of Philpot. He is at a cricket match in England; it is summer so we suspect that it is cold or raining; he's probably in an overcoat, a raincoat. He's middle-aged (a contemporary of Hall and Griffiths, prominent members of West Indian cricket teams of the '60s) so the suggestion of bulk might refer to his physical girth or to the information baggage he brings with him to the match, baggage which starts spilling out in the form of random information when he is excited and finds himself an audience. The word-salad which results suggests someone whose outward bombardment with (perhaps useless) information might be overloading the filtering of his mental processes: hence the feeling that this could not be represented by traditionally tidy shapes like the couplet, the sonnet, quatrain, etc.

121\

As the concerns of the poem change, the sense of bulk awkwardness decreases somewhat, till we get to *Part V*:

It is Tomorrow.

It is next year.

which disengages from Philpot and returns the poem to its opening conceit, that there will be time, tomorrow, next year, to meet, as it were, one's destiny.

I seem to be saying that the listener-reader-performer relationship is more complex and productive than, say, Eliot's musical score model would have us believe and that embracing it need not lead to all of Larkin's complicated fears being realized. Consider what seems to be happening in performance: the poet presents the

poem to a live audience. The poet differs from an actor performing, in at least two important ways: the poet is not backed/protected by the text, by an absent author; and the live audience can challenge the validity of the product in more intimate ways than walking out (which is the usual course of action employed by the disappointed theatergoer). For the poet/performer, the protection of middle-man is removed.

This, perhaps, militates against the poetic mountebank succeeding indefinitely (though the parallel problem of the good poet but bad performer reading her/himself off the circuit remains). The poet-as-performer is coming out this side of not being quite a preacher/teacher/activist/comic/apologist/bore, stripping the sermon/lesson/protest/joke/cause of outside authority, thereby admitting to a degree of vulnerability, thereby working against structures (most of them oppressive) which, in order to deny/conceal that vulnerability, wear the faces of authority. In this spirit, in this environment, performance is a continuous process of *becoming*.

Endnotes

- 1 Olson, Charles. 1950. *Projective Verse*. New York: New Directions.
- 2 Eliot, T.S. (1979: originally published 1939-1942). London: Faber.