SECTION IV

THE POEM IN PERFORMANCE

This section is discouragingly small, a fact which seems to be a reflection of our current critical notion of the ontological status of "the poem," a reflection therefore of a tilt in our perceptual axes away from the aesthetic experience and toward the aesthetic object. The critical forces which have encouraged such a tilt, in this century, are obvious enough. It is a situation which we may hope will be redressed in the century to come, for the category of performance—what Jakobson calls delivery design and delivery instance—is an essential part of any coherent and complete theory of versification, and a part which has received far too little serious study to date.

11 Ayer, James R. "Dylan Thomas in the Aural Dimension." Computer Studies in the Humanities and Verbal Behavior 1 (1968): 6–9. Ayer suggests that Thomas's style changed significantly after 1938, the year he began his readings over the BBC.


The best performances are based on extensive preparations which examine, in depth, speaker, medium, listener, situation, and subject, all of which are examined here for Shelley. Shelley, by the way, had a voice that Hogg said was "excruciating"; it "excoriated the ears."

Begins on p. 82.

18 Breen, Robert S. "Symbolic Action in the Oral Interpretation of Robinson Jeffers' 'Roan Stallion.'" Diss., Northwestern University, 1951.

Identifies two faults ("sing-song" and "matter-of-fact" voicing) and four necessities (poetry should be read (1) qua poetry, (2) with honesty, (3) with aesthetic distance, and (4) so as to give a unified impression) of performance.

Observations on oral performance based on the scansion-system of O. C. de C. Ellis (E349). Noteworthy sections here on Rhythm, Sprung Rhythm, Use of Pause, and Cadence.

A ranging review of the work of structural and transformational linguists (Trager & Smith, Chomsky, et al.) on poetry with reference to the implications for oral performance. Cannon, disappointed at the impact of the former school on American criticism in general, notes three shortcomings of the Structural treatment of poetry: (1) fragments rather than whole texts are taped and analyzed; (2) intentional ambiguities in the poem-in-print must be resolved in performance; and (3) no one reading of a poem can supersede all the rest as authoritative or perfect. Still, he encourages familiarity with transcription and a linguistic understanding of poetic grammar.

Simple elucidation of the semantics of intonation, followed by a line-by-line commentary on the recording of the poem.

As a companion to his comparative anatomy of metrical styles (E709), Chatman offers here a tentative schematization of the kinds of information conveyed in performance, using Beardsley's categories of General, Emotive, and Cognitive Import, with application to The Waste Land.

Exploring the "diminishing contact" between poet and audience since the advent of the printing press, Church applauds a recent series of recordings of English poetry on phonograph records, and he examines specially the records first released (on the Romantics) and the quality of the performances.
E15 Clinton-Baddeley, V. C. "The Written and the Spoken Word." Essays and Studies n.s. 18 (1965): 73–82. A retrospective on the history of recorded poetry, with special emphasis on the extensive editing and splicing by sound engineers in search of the perfect performance. Sample observation: "All Yeats's poetry demands that the reader should acknowledge the line endings."


E17 Corman, Cid. "The Structure of Poetic Rhythms in relation to an oral poetry." In his W ord for W ord: Essays on the Arts of Language. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977. Vol. 1, pp. 65–76. The entire section of eight essays on "Oral Poetry" is important; Corman discusses the rhythms and meters of oral compositions, taking the "breath-unit" as the crucial element, each breath-unit being composed of various feet. "It is accent that creates the basic rhythm and quantity (timing and sound-values) that creates the melodic line; but both must cohere in a true poem. Accent is the dance; quantity is the song."

E18 Cunningham, Cornelius C. "The Rhythm of Robinson Jeffers' Poetry as Revealed by Oral Reading." Quarterly Journal of Speech 32 (1946): 351-57. On the premise that the rhythm (meter) can only be determined correctly by marking the stresses heard in an oral interpretation, the author collected thirty such transcriptions of three poems, concluding from them (in spite of himself) that Jeffers' metric is not stress verse or free verse but "iambic-anapestic duple meter."


I20 Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Finnegan is the single most valuable source available on the social manifestations of performed poetry. And though the scope of the book--its forte--is immense, providing for the first time a genuinely global perspective on the subject, nevertheless her judgment on each of the various specific problems in the theory is remarkably well-informed. See section 4.2 on "Prosodic Systems," pp. 90–102, for examples of the wide variety of metrical and sonal patterns in the world's poetries. Also section 4.3 on structural repetition, 4.4 on diction, and 4.5 on performance.

I21 Fleischmann, Wolfgang B. "Poetry Reading." Princeton (A18), pp. 967–70. See also s.v. "Oral Poetry."


I23 Forrest, William C. "The Poem as a Summons to Performance." British Journal of Aesthetics 9 (1969): 298–305. Critical of the Ingarden-Wellek "objectivist" view of the poem as linguistic object, as a mere "set of linguistic norms," Forrest counters with a defense of the priority of performance both in poetic composition and in critical interpretation, developing brilliantly a concept of "homorganic alliteration" and also an analogy of fetal development in utero to the poem prior to performance.

An experiment to gauge the comprehension of oral against written modes of poems, with skilled and unskilled oral interpreters. Conclusion: comprehension was greatest when subjects had a written text of the poem before them while it was being read aloud at the same time.

A nostalgic lecture on the virtues of poetry heard in the ear: the many long examples suggest that the speaker was conveying his message performatively rather than discursively.

Seven sonnets are analyzed for oral interpretation, recorded, then transcribed, noting stress, pitch, and juncture via the Trager-Smith system.

It is interesting to contemplate its denigration as a primary category throughout the history of Western aesthetics, particularly since performance entails interpretation in music, poetry, drama, and dance, and perhaps also in painting, sculpture, and film.

Hillyer finds the cardinal rule of verse to be that every line is divided into "two equal time units." His performance-directive scansion marks syllabic length, stresses, and pauses.

An early study of what we would now term "breath-groups." The great rhythmic activities of the body are the breath and the heartbeat, four of the latter for each of the former. Reading octosyllabic verse, one takes about 20 breaths per minute to read about 20 lines per minute, thus making, by equivalence of the breath and line, such verse very easy to read. Iambic pentameter verse goes more slowly, since longer, and is thereby more fatiguing, but caesuras are available as compensations. Ballad meters are hemistichic and easy; the duodecasyllabic line is rarely used because it is too long for one breath but too short for two. Finally, as line corresponds to breath, so accent may correspond to pulse--four pulses to the breath equal four stresses to the octosyllable. Certainly it is true that in the oral delivery of verse one must accommodate the phrasal contours to one's breath; the question is whether such biological rhythms were the primal origins of meter.

Approves of the value of phonetic transcription for clarifying (1) meter, (2) sound patterns, (3) lexical ambiguities, (4) structure, and (5) problems of semantic interpretation. Sample analysis of Levertov's "One A.M."
Actors will keep closer to Shakespeare's intent in his lines the closer they keep to the metrical pattern in their delivery.

Includes a section on "Psychological Metrics" discussing Williams, Ginsberg, Olson, and Pound.

"The poetry . . . in which the sounds--the vowels and consonants, the tone patterns, the currents of rhythm--are the chief carriers of content . . . [is the] poetry which is most inaccessible to readers trained to bring, not the whole of themselves, but their wits, to a reading."

At the outset, Levin cites Seymour Chatman from the 1956 Kenyon Review symposium (E712) as a examplar of the new interest by structural linguists in metrics. These linguists, armed with the Trager-Smith inventory of suprasegmentals, believe that the meter was to be discovered by reading the poem aloud, and Chatman himself insists that ambiguity exists only on paper and is instantly resolved in oral performance. Levin's response is to distinguish lexical ambiguity (which no performance will disambiguate) from syntactic ambiguity (which is resolved in reading). Thereafter, he can only plead that ambiguity is an intentional device of intensification in poetry, and that insofar as oral performance reduces ambiguity, it performs "a real disservice to the poem." Ambiguity is preserved in "visual performance . . . a silent reading."

The latter half of the essay demonstrates syntactic ambiguities in a Dylan Thomas poem. Cf. Loesch (I39).

This rather amorphous summary of the variety of conflicting prosodic opinions about the meter of Old, Middle, and Modern English verse leads to no clear commitments or conclusions about the authority of the text, performance, or expectation for determining scansion save one: the reader must try to identify the prosodic pattern intended by the author, since that is by implication the best one the author could conceive.


Part of a symposium. Acutely aware of the difficult problem of poetic ontology which underlies problems in both prosody and oral interpretation, Loesch charts some eminently tough-minded and pragmatic courses toward a solution. The indispensable core of such a solution is an adequate description of the poem

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both as text and as performance. Such adequacy we do not have at present; hence Loesch sets about to review all the important linguistic work done since Trager and Smith (D32) on phonology and metrics, showing clearly the nature of what has been accomplished, and also what has been ignored or slighted. Her grasp of the larger architecture of the theory is synoptic and firm. Sample phonetic transcription (i.e. a complete text) of "In My Craft or Sullen Art" at the end.

139 -----. "Literary Ambiguity and Oral Performance." Quarterly Journal of Speech 51 (1965): 258-67. A very important counterargument to the structural metrists' claim (see I35) that in the performance of poetry all semantic ambiguities created by alternative intonational patterns for a line must be resolved ("disambiguated") by the performer (since he can only utter the line one way one time). Loesch shows that "it is rarely, if ever, the case that only disambiguating intonations are available. A non-disambiguating intonation is always available as well." This seems plain sense: unless we had heard ambiguous statements uttered, in the past, how would we know they existed?

140 Long, Chester, C. "The Poem's Text as a Technique of Performance in Public Group Readings of Poetry." Journal of Western Speech 31 (1967): 16-29. In the midst of a discussion of group (but non-choral) performances of poems by two to three interpreters appears a discussion, on a much higher level, of the ontological situs of the poem, with Long differentiating text, performance, and form of poetry.


142 Nichols, Wallace B. The Speaking of Poetry. Boston: Expression Co., 1937. 110 pp. A first chapter treats prosody in a surprisingly sure-handed manner; thereafter, eight chapters explore the "speaking" of various genres of poetry. Altogether the book is considerably more intelligently written than one expects, and it altogether avoids the bombast, cant, and vacuity of most works on "oral interpretation." Nichols shows sophistication in the principles of his craft.

143 Orr, Peter. "Poetry and the Human Voice." English 22 (1973): 18-23. The aural manifestation of poetry is more central to its nature than the textual manifestation. The poem is a sounding and therefore must be heard.


145 Pike, Kenneth L. "Implications of the Patterning of an Oral Reading of a Set of Poems." Poetics 1 (1971): 38-45. Exhortation that we learn to read, write (via simple contour markers), and perform poetry with a heightened awareness of voice-quality and intonation.


See also: B167, C277, G129, L800.