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ON THE VIOLENCE OF VOICE: (RE)IMAGINING POETRY READINGS

Poetry developed initially as an oral tradition; this is indisputable. Poets passed on stories, longer narratives, in spoken form—partly as a means of remembering, partly as a means of dispersal, a way to share what, before paper, pen, or computer, was hitherto unmemorable, unsharable. And to this day, what separates poetry from other written forms is its attention to sonic value—the sound of the words in our mouths, the softness or hardness that shapes a syllable, the way the sound of a word parallels, or does not parallel, the meaning it tries to convey.

This is not to say that other forms of writing do not value sound, but, rather, that poetry is often a privileging of sonic value over meaning. But to say that this is the sole difference between the forms is to make poetics reducible to their oral tradition alone, and this is not the case, especially for many 20th and 21st century schools of poetry, including but not limited to the language poets, the objectivists, the black mountain school, even the modernists. Poetry is also different from prose in that it takes a shape on the page that is not overdetermined or prescribed by the page itself: poems have a texturology and textuality other than the arranged form of paragraph, the indentation the page forces on language. Poems are made as much of silence as they are of sound. And sometimes the silence that a white space conjures—in enjambment, in extended stanza break, in indentation and caesura—is not reducible to the silence of a reader’s breath, a pause between words. Sometimes silence can only be rendered in this white space. And sometimes the poem’s shape and texture cannot (or, more truthfully, should not) be rendered orally at all. Think, for instance, of all that is lost in a reading of e. e. cummings. In his poem, “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond,” spacing and punctuation is deconstructed in a way that I find hard to even consider corresponding to orality. How does one—even the most skillful of readers—read (not show) a poem without capitalization? How to adequately render it without marring that smallness, that softness—even that humility and subversion?

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)

nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

Moreover, how to successfully breathe life into the lack of space between the syllables? To show the decreased distance between “nobody” and “the rain?” And is it possible to vocalize a parentheticals? These are questions that should be asked and considered more seriously, lest we commit a violence against the poem itself. While cummings often presents us with technical difficulties when spoken, there are far more difficult options to consider, including but not limited to erasure poems, electronic literature, mixed media poetics, etc. One would most likely avoid reading some of Susan Howe’s transplanted poems, Gary Barwin’s poems comprised of punctuation, or Jen Bervin’s Dickinson Fascicles sewn onto fabric. We would consider how to properly read these poems aloud—if reading them aloud is even possible—and yet we jump so haphazardly into reading poems which, on the surface appear easier to navigate sonically. Are they? Perhaps the answer lies not in refusing to read our poems aloud entirely, but to more responsibly consider how to read our poems. It is largely a question of technique.

This is not to say that public readings of poetry do not have a community value, a social value, even a political value, but
simply that these values often take precedence over what is best for the poem itself. Certain poems (in my opinion, most poems) need their materiality, their corporeality—or, at the very least, to have the physical poem on the page accessible while the speaker reads—otherwise, an entire world is lost in the rendering (and are there not already too many, even infinite, worlds between the reader and the poem?). Perhaps, the only poems that should be read aloud, that do not demand the reader’s relationship to be primarily with the physical poem on the page, but instead with the poem’s spoken life, are 1) poems which use form for simple enjambment alone, for the spaces that breaths and pauses can easily parallel, and 2) poems that are written primarily and specifically to be read aloud, for a speaker to breathe life into them in a way that the page cannot. An example of the former, take this excerpt from Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” for instance:

It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence;
I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is.

[...]

What is it, then, between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

Here, and throughout the entirety of the poem, line breaks correspond to punctuation, to the line’s natural (sonic) ending. The voice would have little trouble mimicking such a structure, and, if done properly, little would be lost—perhaps, even, some would be gained in the pronunciation. The text’s punctuation parallels its oral existence, wherein even the dash signifies the place of an extended breath—the poem’s own silence. So too can this vocal equivalence occur in poems of shorter line-lengths. Consider Joseph Massey’s poem, “Forced Perspective:”

Alley
outlined
in purple
loosestrife.

Bewilderment—

imagine it
possessed
a tint.

Like above, here the reader’s breath can easily mimic the white space on the page. “Alley / outlined.” Each line break becomes a pause. “Loosestrife.” Each period, a slightly longer pause. “Bewilderment—” Each dash, the longest pause. This
suggests that one of the largest struggles in properly turning the tangible poem into something sayable is navigating the poem's natural pauses, its silence.

Unlike Whitman, the reading of Massey's poem would be comprised more of the space between the words than the words themselves. But are poetics of silence more easily read out loud? Or less? The poem lives between the reader and the page, is best realized when read from the page directly through the mouth of the reader (whether that mouth be literal or figurative). But poetry readings—oral readings—can carve that white space out of thin air, if the reader/poet is paying attention and reading with care, and that can be interesting and useful beyond social value. So all of this is not to say that poetry readings have no place or should never be attempted but, more gently, to say that they should be attempted with more care and attention than they are often given; this is also to say that few of us, as poets, have actualized or realized the poem in the same way, orally, as we have textually. We seldom give the spoken poem as much thought as the poem we craft on the page. Best, I think, to conceive of poetry readings—when they are necessary and good—as shared acts of silence.

There is also the question, eschewing authorial intent, of who decides which poems are best suited for vocalization and which should remain purely on the page. Undoubtedly, poets are not the sole readers of poems, be it their own work or the work of others, and even some poems which were never intended to be read aloud inevitably will be read anyway. How best to navigate these hazy spaces? How best to decide which poems are served, even heightened, by their spoken life, and which are wounded? Not to mention that, even when spoken successfully, no performance is repeatable—a reader might fully inhabit a poem's performance on Monday and fail to inhabit the same poem the next day. This suggests that the problematics of poetry readings are more akin to those of theatrics than typical poetics. Yet we seldom discuss these issues, pragmatically or theoretically. Reading a poem out loud is really another form of translation: transferring something tangible unto something intangible. And while we often seriously consider the effects of translating from one language to another, we seldom consider this more common act of translation that occurs when something written is made manifest vocally and what is lost in the translation.

Perhaps we should also note that poetics are primarily a private, introspective act. To read a poem, says Maurice Blanchot, is “to exist in a space of solitude” between the page and you, the reader. Think of Emily Dickinson’s chest—unseen, unspoken—, or take, for instance, the endless list of poetic outsiders and poets of difference. Paul Celan. Friedrich Hölderlin. And the list goes on. Hayden Carruth, for example (despite his capacity for prolificacy) did not read his own work aloud until he was well into his fifties, due partly to agoraphobia, depression, and general social anxiety. The list is endless because the act of creating poetry occupies the most silent of spaces. To bring a poem to life, to vocal life, is always to violate this silence from which it came into being. Sometimes a violation of this silence is justifiable, but, oftentimes, it is not.

We must consider the effects of the ubiquitous poetry reading voice, an over-emphatic, lilting extension of vowels—hard to describe, but you know it when you hear it. If this is the most commonly shared experience of a spoken poetics, how did it come to be? And is this mode of reading really the sonic equivalence the poem demands of us? Or is it a mode of performativity that simplifies, if not commodifies, our experience of the poem or, even more radically, our experience of the poem's emotional center? When Frost spoke of the “sounds of sense,” he meant the “abstract vitality of our speech, pure
sound—pure form.” As poets, we pay close attention to these sounds of sense in the act of writing the poem—the poem we present on the page—but often pay far less attention to its rendering when spoken aloud. Does the spoken poem lose, in itself, the abstract vitality of speech? Are we reading the poem the way it wants, even demands, to be read? Or are we reading the poem the way we come to hear other poems read, in a kind of language that inevitably homogenizes the poem? If we are to responsibly actualize our work in oral form, would this not require of us a sort of sonic training (in the same way that we study the written word), whether that training be in the mode of acting, meditation, or something else that does not yet exist, at the limit of that which is speakable? All of this is not to take a stake on the philosophical or linguistic privileging of speech over written word—or vice versa—but simply to pose that, in reading our poems aloud, we must consider the act as seriously and fervently as the act of writing itself. For each time the poem is read, it is, in some sense, re-written.

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