Performance and Silence
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"Another use for silence: furnishing or aiding speech to attain its maximum integrity or seriousness. Everyone has experienced how, when punctuated by long silences, words weigh more; they become almost palpable. Or how, when one talks less, one begins feeling more fully one’s physical presence in a given space."

—Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”

Silence:
Performance poetry values the performance of a work over its composition, presentation over substance. It’s poetry of the sound bite, photo op, and talking head presidency.

Performance:
Performance poetry is as “composed” as any other literary work, but it’s created as a script for performance rather than an isolated text, its voice muffled in dusty libraries. As for the sound bite, the soul of poetry has always been compression. It’s true that performance poetry has a large audience, the better to distribute pleasure and instruction.

Silence:
In the 1990s America not only produced shoddy products but also came to prefer them. Performance poems represent the institutionalization of inferior products. In this respect, they resemble what Donald Hall calls “McPoems,” tasteless and bland pseudo-poems that mainly communicate their urgency to be poetic.

Performance:
There are good performance poems and bad ones, like any other mode. In fact, poetry slams have a better way of establishing poetry’s value, by means of applause, judges from the audience, and a scoring system.

Silence:
The purpose of performance art was to challenge the preciousness of the art object, to decommodify it. But in the United States, the more an art form opposes commodity, the more likely it is to gain commodity status. This happened with rock and roll, outsider poetry including the Beats, and hip hop and rap music. In its emphasis on what will play with the audience, performance poetry makes an unashamed appeal to poetry’s commodity potential.

Performance:
To communicate a poem isn’t to “commodify” it, your favorite word. Performance poetry simply heightens the vocalism inherent in poetry generally, as seen in traditional lyrics like “Ding dong bell, pussy’s in the well.” Those who attack performance poetry are afraid of confronting the awesome power of words when they are properly communicated.

Silence:
With the dominance of marketing motives over philosophical and moral purpose comes the risk of audience manipulation and even demagoguery. The author of Mein Kampf understood the secret of political speech-making:

“The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.”

Performance:
You’re reading Mein Kampf now?

Silence:
Research only. I hide it in the closet.

Performance:
It’s true that the voice has power and must be used to moral ends. One of the reasons that spoken word poetry is popular with multicultural audiences is that they can see themselves, for once, being heard. Jessica Hagedorn writes that the poetry reading is “detached and academic to me, visions of young women wearing tweed suits and tortoise-shell glasses, clearing their throats and ‘reading’ about their animas rising and libidos pulsating in trembling, Sarah Lawrence-type voices.” In other words, the placid reading is political, too, promoting the values of a culturally dominant class. Only by piercing the veil of decorum with her voice can the marginalized poet be heard.
Performance poetry reflects American culture’s love of instant gratification. It demands total ease of consumption, with little work on the part of the consumer. One hollow moment of entertainment follows another. In this, performance poetry resembles television.

As a mass medium of great power, television lends itself to the spoken word. Why not put it to use? Only in a Puritan country like the United States could a complaint be lodged against gratification. If poetry gratifies, all the better! The pleasure of poetry is not the amount of work required for understanding it, but the directness and immediacy of its report. Performance poetry provides that pleasure by means of the most traditional and beautiful of instruments, the voice.

Performance poetry emphasizes spectacle over other aspects of literature. Aristotle wrote, “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts (of the tragedy), it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry.” When a poet goes onstage as an actor, in personae and using costumes, he or she creates spectacle but not necessarily poetry.

Most performance poetry doesn’t require costumes, light shows, and the other technologies of stagecraft. It is, quite simply, a poet filling space with mind and voice. An auditory spectacle, poetry has always related to the breath of a speaker, and it is only by means of performance that the oracular and musical properties of poetry are revealed. As Charles Olson wrote, “Breath allows all the speech-force of language back in (speech is the ‘solid’ of verse, is the secret of the poem’s energy).” By presenting no verbal spectacle, the poem as text gives poetry its well-earned reputation for dullness.

Like America in general, performance poetry is proudly anti-intellectual. Even the most bohemian poets of the previous generation—for example, Allen Ginsberg—saw themselves as part of an intellectual tradition, albeit against the grain. The current emphasis on performance is far more dismissive of text and satisfied with a low literacy level.

If the nation is sinking into illiteracy, it’s the fault of society as a whole, not performance poetry. Spoken word awakens the senses and cleanses the soul through song. The real problem is the refusal of poetry-as-text to accept its public role.

With its need to be understood in one listening, performance poetry works against complexity, reducing the poem to what can be declaimed. But much excellent poetry, from Marianne Moore to Hart Crane, doesn’t lend itself to oral recitation despite being ingeniously verbal. Why should complexity be valued? Because it is the only means of capturing the contradictions of experience.

Much performance poetry also has complexity—for instance, “the chapped lips of void kissing aureola’s perception” by Edwin Torres. It requires “close listening,” to use Charles Bernstein’s title. But you must first acquire the ears to hear it. Roland Barthes writes on the “granularity” of the spoken word: “It is not the ‘clarity of the messages,’ but the blissful search for ‘pulsional incidents,’ the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning of language.” Torres’ poetry is far from a simple declaratory oral poetics. It is complex and “abstract” in a manner reminiscent of dada sound poetry.

Performance poetry encourages amateurism. Literary expertise, even if innovative, is disdained as elitist. Such a low standard would be laughable in disciplines such as music, mathematics, philosophy, dance, and engineering. Why encourage it in poetry?

Performance poets read poetry all the time, but to a different purpose than poets who write for the page. Their words are seeking an immediate audience reaction, which has its own high standard of professionalism. You imply that the performance audience has limited intelligence. In fact, the audience is savvy about quality and, like fans of Italian opera, quick to disparage a poor performance.
Silence:

Performance poetry is poetically conservative. This is an unexpected criticism, since slam poetry is strongly populated with multicultural figures. Nevertheless, slam poetry represents traditional values such as orality, narrative, clarity, closure, directness, and popular lyric sentiment, as well as the bardic and heroic stance of the poet. Also, much performance poetry is written in the middle or “Iowa School” style but performed in a more insistent and vocal manner.

Performance:

It’s true that some slam poetry has mainstream values aesthetically. It’s easier to communicate with a narrative or dramatic base, using time, place, characters, and incident. But it is also forceful and convincing. At the same time, performance poets like Jackson Mac Low create work that’s innovative both as text and presentation.

Silence:

Performance poetry misunderstands its own poetics. The first generation of postwar poets to emphasize performance—Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, and Jerome Rothenberg, among others—had a political rationale for their works. The difference between the first and second generations of the spoken word is that the latter can’t distinguish the poetics of Robert Creeley from that Maxine Kumin.

Performance:

If the poem is to be served and not the ego of the poet, if we strictly judge a poem on its own merits rather than by the biography and group loyalties of the poet, poems by James Dickey and Maxine Kumin are as good as those by Ginsberg and Baraka. It’s not the kind of poem that matters; it’s how it impacts the wider audience. In this respect, performance poetry is far more democratic than the poem-as-text.

Silence:

It has little impact if it’s lost on the air. The poem-as-text has far wider distribution over the long run.

Performance:

That’s changing. Text is momentary, too, because communicated increasingly through websites and blogs.

Silence:

Performance poetry participates in intellectual “downsizing.” In the 60s, there were numerous new aesthetics to ponder, from the Deep Image and Confessionalism to Surrealism and The New York School. Now there are only two vanguards: performance poetry, which delights in the spoken word, and language poetry, which emphasizes the written and theoretical. Poetry is reduced to its most extreme characteristics, and the radical center is lost.

Performance:

What you call “the radical center” has no program except the lyric poem. Performance poetry and language poetry have simply reacted to poetry as they found it: directionless, boring, and rule-bound. Just listen to yourself—“radical center,” “innovative traditions,” what’s that all about?

Silence:

Created largely for entertainment value, performance poetry often falls on the deeper, metaphysical level of enjoyment. In other words, it’s boring. Film director Andrej Tarkovsky commented that directors can be divided into two categories:

“Those who strive to imitate the world they live in—to recreate the world that surrounds them—and the directors who create their own worlds. Those who create their own worlds are generally the poets. They are Bresson… Bergman… Bunuel…Kurosawa. They have trouble getting their films out because the audience is used to a symbolic nonexistent film world—the result of the audience’s own interests and tastes. The directors I named are opposed to all this—that the taste of the audience should be the deciding factor—not because they want to be obscure, but because they want to listen secretly; to give expression to what is deep inside those we call the audience.”

The best poetry is exciting and challenging. Retaining its freshness on a second reading, it requires this secret listening on the part of the reader. But because of mass media, the culture increasingly lacks the reflection and silence necessary to secret listening.
**Performance:**

The concept of “secret listening” is appealing, but limits itself to readers, and it values only the prayerful hermetic mode, which collaborates with power. Tarkovsky’s films were made by and for an elite, who study them like a text. Some spoken word poetry is difficult to comprehend as text, too, but when it’s performed everything is clarified by the speaker’s voice, which announces intention, timbre, and emotional scale. In other words, voice gives us meaning’s boundaries. This is true even when the performed poem contains what Nick Piombino calls “aural ellipsis” or gaps in meaning.

**Silence:**

Poems have their most important performance at the moment of composition, not in recitation. Even improvisation is a form of writing. The best poetry is voiced as a silence. When the voice is in excess of the poem, when it’s theatrical, disbelief sets in, and the audience feels the hollowness of the communication. Written or performed, poetry takes place on the stage of the mind, where the lighting and stagecraft are unmatched.

**Performance:**

I know you write the histories. But you’ll never have the last word on this. The shamanist / showmanist aspect of language, the spoken word, is being practiced all around you, by cab drivers, stand-up comedians, and waitresses. It comes in living color and demands to be heard. Why do you think Kerouac is still a best-seller, while the mid-list author goes quickly out of print? Because it’s spoken word disguised as a novel!

[long pause]

Are you there?

**Silence:** [silence]

**Performance:** Hey! [hangs phone on table]

**Silence:** [more silence]

**Performance:** Damn it! [hangs up]

**Silence:** [very long silence]

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Photo of a tv screen showing a Busby Berkeley musical, *42nd Street*: a dance-apart portrait of Ruby Keeler