

Thelonious Monk and the Performance of Poetry

What is the status of performance
in poetry? This statically
worded question will not likely lead me
to a discussion of Thelonious Monk.
But you start where you can,
where mood flings you, like an old dish
towel drying in the rain.

Of course, there are still those who don't read
their poems, insisting that the page is sufficient,
the rest gets in the way. I used to feel more
that way myself, that is I thought my work existed
in some primary way as words
on a page & that in doing
a reading I was *adding* a performance
element, suggesting one way that a work might be
read. Reading
poems required a number of performance decisions
not obvious from the texts &
a reader might well make
other decisions in reading to her-
or himself than I had
done. My insistence on the primacy
of the
poem as written was partly a reaction against
the popular notion of poems as merely
scores to be performed, something deficient
without infusion of theatrical or
musical overlays, as if
poems were like lyrics on the back of a record album.
A page, a book,
seemed to me – still does – an unexcellable site
for poetic activity.

Nonetheless, I've come to feel
that the idea of the written
document as primary makes for an unwarranted
or anyway unwanted
hierarchy; hearing
work performed is in no way inferior to
reading it to yourself. Rather, these are two competing
realizations of the work, each

with its own set of advantages &
limitations. Moreover
all reading is performative
& a reader has in some ways to supply the performative
element when reading –
not silently before a page but out
loud & with a beat.

(One advantage of hearing
work performed
is that it does
not allow opportunities to
reread or rehear; at least in my
work, it pretty much forces listeners
to get lost, to give up
any notion of following in detail, fore-
grounding tempo & sound,
association & texture
[making the experience
more like hearing music or watching
a movie]. Of course, the ability to read in
detail
is just what gives the written
its primacy – much of what
is happening pros-
odically, thematically, & structurally can't
really be grasped in performance.)

Paul Schmidt, lamenting
performance styles at many poetry
readings, has recently advocated
that poets memorize their work,
suggesting that a declamatory
style of reading would bring life
to an otherwise often deadly practice.
Strong medicine
& met more with a denial of disease
than a discussion of alternative
therapies. *Why spend time preparing
for a performance when that
time could better be used
writing?* – For many poets will make much
of the authenticity or naturalness of their reading
style – mumbling, stumb-
ling over words, fumbling through papers, virtual

inaudibility, sitting in a chair bent over page, no discernible shape or rhythm in the projected sound of the work.

Yet this is just as much a performance style as the most declamatory reading: all readings are performative, whether they appear to deny the performative or flaunt it.

My experience is that if I really care about a poet's work, then I am interested in hearing them read regardless of their attitude to performance, & that a good deal about the rhythm & acoustic dimension of the work is made more explicit (is exhibited). Indeed, there are some poets who "overperform" their work to the detriment of being able to hear it – kind of like doing an electric guitar version, in triple time, of "Misterioso"; or revving your car engine while the gear is set to neutral. Loud is not always better which is one reason Monk seems to suggest so much for poetry performance. & for certain works, the dreaded monotone style is not only appropriate but powerful & evocative; but then there is a difference in holding to a single tone over a period of time & just droning on aimlessly.

To perform a poem is to make it a physically present acoustic event, to give bodily dimension – beat – to what is otherwise spatial & visual. Poems, no matter how short, necessarily involve duration, & writing as much as performing is an act of shaping this durational passage. In performance, it becomes possible to lay down a rhythmic beat, a pulse, that is otherwise more speculative or tenuous in the scoring of words on a page. For me, this pulse is constructed around "nodal" points of pauses or silences or breaks – a *point* I want to put as technically as I can to distinguish this from notions of breath or speech rhythms or other notions of an unconstructed or unimposed reading style.

While I am skeptical
about the value of appropriating
musical terms to discuss
performance prosody, I am still tempted
to suggest that breaks or
silences can be a most active
musical device in poetry performance
in that they create musical phrases
that are then syncopated by the rhythmic pace
that precedes & follows them. In my
performances, I'm interested in employing
several different, shifting, tempos
& several different intonations (voices)
that pivot
& spin around these nodal
shifting
points. These blank spaces –
silences or
intervals – serve as ful-
crums for making audible
the rhythmic pulse & phrasing
being
played out, at the same
time scissoring
the syntax of the language (that is, cutting
against expected breaks of the
grammatical phrase or unit of
breath). Given these interests, the sound I am
laying down is
not simply that of a
person reading words
in any "straightforward" way
but playing
each
word
as if a
note or
chord on
the
piano, with slight
pauses creating unexpected
spaces between words, allowing phrases
to veer off into
unexpected sequences of wobbling

sound. I
no more take for
granted how to do this than I assume
the syntax
or prosody of a
poem I am
writing; it is a highly constructed, albeit
improvised, process, based on choosing
from a variety of different tonal,
rhythmic, & phrasal possibilities.



A number of years ago, I was asked to read in the International Sound Poetry Festival in New York, despite the fact that my work & style of reading would not normally be considered sound poetry or performance poetry. I prefaced my reading by saying that I thought there were only two types of poetry: sound poetry & unsound poetry. But now I would change that to *sounded* poetry & *unsounded* poetry.

It is perhaps a remnant of Romantic ideology that still haunts that performance styles of poetry readings are so often self-represented in terms of an authentic voicing of "the" emotions or "the" unconscious, where effacement of the performative is equated with genuineness of the work, where the acting style is to pretend that there is no acting, where the performance style is to feign that no performing is going on. This of course is the story of our everyday life – where troubling social acts are performed as if without premeditation or self-conscious intent; it's the sort of acting that resembles puppetry. The best symbol of this phenomenon is a presidential actor widely praised for his relaxed, natural – I hear this as untheatrical & nonrhetorical – style.

Every reading (whether one's own reading of a book or a poet's reading to an audience) is an enactment, a sounding, an embodiment, which is to say a reading that takes or makes time, that enters into

the social, material, & historical space of
our lives. To deny the performative
aspect of poetry is to repress
its most literally political dimension, which is to
say, how it
enters into the world. To deny the rhetoricity
(rhetoricallness?)
& theatricality of a poem is to idealize a
literary space outside of ideology & history, a zone
timeless
& blank in which evasion substitutes for the friction
of interaction. Yet this
friction is the music of our lives. The
acknowledgment of the performative dimension
of poems is a
recognition of their political bearing
in the world, fully as
much as recognition of the theatricality of each
of our
social performances is a necessary prerequisite
for us to find
out how these ingrained
habits might be changed or reshaped. For
to sound is to give a hearing –
speeches not speech –
& without such forums
we are doomed to endless repetition of sounds
we have not ourselves
participated
in
making. The performative dimension
of poetry can
be understood
in Louis Zukofsky's sense
as its upper limit –
music. This would make
an attempt to understand the relation of
the work of Thelonious Monk to
contemporary poetry
an essentially political gesture.