

## 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.