

Towards song: re-shaping spoken lyric

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Our interest in this paper is in the performance of lyric poetry, and its possible relation to singing.^{[note]1} Our contribution owes at least as much to the studio as it does to the page, since we both come at the question as practitioners, with practices that approach the sounded word from different perspectives. The main precedent for this enquiry, apart from work undertaken separately by each of us, can be found in those parts of Douglas Oliver's 1989 publication, Poetry and Narrative in Performance, that deal with poetry rather than narrative. Oliver, who was all of journalist, poet and teacher, adopted the word performance to refer to any act of reading, whether aloud or silent, and relied in his research on a category of performance that he called a 'neutral reading', an idea that we shall want to discuss, and on a combination of recordings and graphic representations of read poems. Using more recent technology, we have done the same, with the significant addition that we have also been able to edit aspects of the recordings. These editings take the performances away from a supposed neutrality in the direction of musicality. It was theatricality – or better, dramaticity – rather than musicality that Oliver saw as a threat to neutrality: an important distinction in relation to lyric poetry.

In this paper, we concentrate on particular sounded performances of lyric poems and their proximity to – or distance from – song. As though lyric poetry were not already a troublesome enough category, this process has also made a problem of the term song, or of a difference between a reading that is particularly attentive to the phonic contours of a text and of an underlying pulse, if such there be, and sung performances that give words over to vocal modulations that are likely to accentuate pitch relations and rhythm and may allow for considerable variation in syllable length and intensity, and which can

give the symbolic burden of language over to an affective bodily investment in vocalic behaviour.

Although we do not want to get ensnared in them, it would be as well to acknowledge some of the difficulties for such an enterprise. As literary forms of poetry have become increasingly literate rather than oral and in many contexts also increasingly assumed to be objects for silent study with every component simultaneously available for attention rather than caught up in the time-flow of performance, for some the term performance when attached to poetry is either a mark of an inferior genre or a category error since for them lyric poetry is what is not performed. At worst, 'performance' imports an excess or supplement by way of the presence of the performer and for this reason some contemporary poets are unhappy about having their poems read by actors. It will, in any case, necessarily constrain the range of ambiguities that can remain undecided on the page. Sounded performance has also been associated with a suspicion of the misleading specificities of any given voice, with all its cultural and psychological markers. In the case of poems written for pages – or for screens mimicking the characteristics of pages – it is the written text of a poem that now carries the privilege and that is no way viewed as a second-order construct founded on an oral original. In our terms, an acoustic performance does not restore an original in any sense but rather finds within the written an interpretable score for one possible sounded reading among others.

Music too was subject to a literate turn, where markings originally intended as a mnemonic for performance evolved into the basis of a musical ideology in which musical meaning has tended to reside in what can be communicated by notes rather than in the more complex, messy vicissitudes of sound itself. If music is more commonly assumed to be performed than read from a page, in the Western classical tradition at least, its performance imports the same excess to the authority of the score, which both precedes and outlives any given performed interpretation. Of course, scores have evolved to describe greater degrees of expression and indeed, the nineteenth century cult of orchestration demanded this of them. Nevertheless, the growing fascination

with timbre in contemporary music still largely evades the graphic-representational lattice. It is the voice, of course, that provides timbre in vocalised performances of poetry.



There seem to be two main aspects to contemporary assumptions about what constitutes lyric poetry, only one of which is of interest to us on this occasion:

Of or pertaining to the lyre; adapted to the lyre, meant to be sung; pertaining to or characteristic of song. Now used as the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung), [...] and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments. (OED, entry on lyric, sense 1)

One aspect invokes the lyre, a stringed instrument of considerable antiquity; the other categorises lyric according to its supposed place in a (usually) three-part typology, in which the other categories are epic and dramatic. [note]² In this second aspect the poem's connection with song is less important than its singular first person engagement with 'the poet's own thoughts and sentiments'. We are particularly interested in possible differences between 'meant to be sung' and 'pertaining to or characteristic of song'.

We set up some of the terms for discussion by considering a short poem by Edward Dorn, for which a recording by the poet is available (Dorn 2010). There isn't the space in a short article to present the detail of our consideration but some of the broad issues may be worth indicating. We were attracted to the poem, *Daffodil Song*, by its inclusion of the word song in the title and by its brevity. This last made it simpler for us to compare versions – Dorn's own recording and one by each of us – and their relation to the notation implied by the layout on the page, very much including line breaks, and to a graphic representation of the pitch contours as revealed by the software, Melodyne (see below).

It seems usually to be assumed of the lyric poem in an age of literacy – despite the direct association in its name with music – that the poem itself is a

'text', in a written form that can be reproduced in different formats without significant loss. Of course, 'visual poems' or 'sound poems' can unsettle this assumption. Otherwise, the graphic display will be read first and a performance listened to – or not – subsequently. The poetry reading, as a kind of performance event, is an optional supplement for most readers. Even so, anything written is only actualised through being read, and this implies sounded, even if only for 'mental ears' (Prynne, 2010). Poems in general are forms of language behaviour that accentuate the soundedness of language and the term 'lyric' draws attention to the fact that the so-called lyric poem does so in particular. Any reading whatever, very much including silent reading, and particularly any reading of a poem describable as a lyric, is an act of language, a performance. We are assuming that the qualities and judgments necessary in silent reading can be influenced by attention to recordings of audible readings, going some way towards meeting Oliver's declared motivation for his study:

No satisfactory way has yet been developed of teaching people to hear the music of poetry. No wonder the audience for this Cinderella of the written arts remains so small when in school and university so little attention is paid to how students listen to or perform verse lines. Creating notations for stress patterns is no substitute for training novices to hear the melody within a poem's delicately narrow band of frequencies. Until the melody is heard it cannot be properly suggested how it unites with meaning and emotional significance. (Oliver 1989: vii)



Although we were both engaging with some of these themes in our quite separate practices, we stumbled into a recognition of a shared interest through Prior's project Black Water Brown Water, which featured Hall as a reader (Prior 2007-8). The piece uses a passage from the 'fift song' of Michael Drayton's PolyOlbion, the long topographical poem published in 1612. The excerpt we used included the lines:

Now Sabine, as a Queene, miraculously faire,

Is absolutelie plac't in her emperiall chaire
Of crystall richlie wrought, that gloriously did shine,
Her grace becomming well, a creature so divine: (Drayton 1953: 75;
Soundfile 1))

[Link to soundfile: 01 Hall Prior PolyOlbion unprocessed.mp3](#)

Black Water Brown Water employs various techniques in extracting pitch material from the spoken word recordings that form its substrate. For the most part, however, this process involved tracing formants within the speech and articulating other, non-vocal sounds with them, creating a complex interplay between the speech and the other sounds in the piece. However, the 'musicality' in Hall's reading intrigued Prior and we began exploring what would happen if the sounds were pulled from their original positions into the nearest notes within a tempered scale (Soundfile 2).

[Link to soundfile: 02 Hall Prior PolyOlbion processed.mp3](#)

As can be heard in the recording, this manipulated version only moves some of the pitches to their nearest semitone. Not everything landed where we anticipated, so Prior moved the now pitch quantised 'notes' to the positions he felt were implied in the original reading. The end result sounded to us almost like a song.

This short experiment wasn't actually used in Black Water Brown Water, but since that discovery a few years ago, we awaited a pretext to return to the questions raised for us, one of which could be said to be: when does speech become song? By what transformations does one become the other?

The strong metrical pattern of Drayton's alexandrines can be quickly internalised as expectation, and reinforced through a routine fulfilment of that expectation: the rendition can become not so much song-like as sing-song. We agreed to take strong metrication as one category and to consider two others, very broadly conceived: one, with Annie Finch's The Ghost of Meter in mind, could be called spectral metre, where more or less strong vestiges of metrical regularity can be heard in poetry that has emerged out of what could

loosely be described as a post-metrical tradition (Finch 2000); the other, not in any conventional sense metrical, but in which other prosodic features, such as lineation, provide notational clues for performed sound-shape. In case we needed to change the text in any way, we took examples from Hall's work.

In this paper, we focus on a single quatrain in the second category (carrying strong traces of metrical regularity) that comes from Interscriptions, a visual text sequence made in collaboration with Peter Hughes.

think of script as a great order
spun out from the body of the state
stained and absorbed within the interior
like landfill. tears are always its fate. (Hall and Hughes 2011: 27)

In our enquiry into spoken lyric poetry, it is not only the absence of timbral representation where the musical score fails us, nor the inability to represent the microtonality Oliver alludes to with his description of the 'delicately narrow band of frequencies' in which the melody of poetry resides. To adopt composer Denis Smalley's phrase, it is the spectromorphology of the voice – the complex interaction between its frequency content and its temporal development – that the score fails to capture (Smalley 1997: 107--126). Yet it is in this spectromorphology of the speaking voice that our enquiry is located.

Drawing on our work with the Dorn poem, we adopted a simple heuristic method. First, we make what is intended as a recording of a 'neutral' performance of a few lines and make initial judgments by ear as to whether or not we are satisfied. We keep a copy of that recording and analyse it through the combination of ear and eye that recording and graphic representation allow. The analysis considers the following: segmental durations, including pauses; any accentual regularities; phonemic recurrences of any kind, including rhyme; variations in loudness; transitions and articulations between segments; and switches between voiced and unvoiced passages.

At this point, the recording takes on an alternative authority to the page. Where the page leaves open the opportunity for alternative readings and allows for a disruption in the linearity of the text, the recording is fixed, closed

and resolutely linear. To focus on the oral, however, is to restore the possibility of valuing parameters latent in the text. We should not assume, though, that the recording process returns us to a preliterate mode of reception. Further to Walter Ong's category of secondary orality – an orality predicated on the technologies of writing, recording and broadcast media – the context in which we are now working is inherently digital, an orality predicated on the possibility not only of graphism but of transformation (Ong 1982). For our purposes, though, the plasticity afforded us by the technologies we are using is not deployed to make of the voice a point of departure or an extension of human vocality but rather to become an alternative point of reference, literally a microphone through which to hear a different understanding of what is already there.{{note}}4 As we move from eye to ear in absorbing the poem, the symbolic burden of language inevitably gives way to the phonic, the semantic now being joined by layers of meaning from below (the innate, unavoidable contingencies of vocal utterance) and above (the deliberate interpretation of the text resulting in chosen pitch contours, vowel lengths and the articulation of consonants etc.).{{note}}5 If the page ascribes value to the semantic, the recording reifies the minutiae of all that surrounds it.

After recording, we load our sound file into software called Melodyne,{{note}}6 which can be used to analyse and modify the pitch of pitched sounds: its commercial raison d'être being to manipulate the tuning of musical performances or to build harmonies from monophonic sound sources. Our use of the software begins with analysis, where much can be learnt from its graphical rendering of a recording without recourse to any transformative signal processing. With our own recordings of Interscriptions 12, though, the analysis phase was followed by a period of experimentation where subtle shifts to both the pitch centre of individual phonemes and the pitch modulation within them were explored. Again, we listened to the results and judged. Were they immediately pleasing? Were they telling us something about the 'neutral' performance? Or something about the text or composition? We then experimented with making a modified performance, sometimes even mimicking some of the altered qualities. An extreme version of this is to 'sing' the text: to make of pitch relations a primary principle in performance and to

accept the permissions of many genres of song to extend syllables, perhaps even through introducing supplementary segmentations within them, geared to pitch change.

We would say that Oliver's notion of 'neutrality' assumes a 'neutral' musicality in a poem that is every bit as close to prose rhythms as it is to actual singing. The term can cause trouble, which is why we have wrapped it in quotation marks. A similar problem arises with 'minimal', which one of us has used to refer to the performance mode of readings of page-based lyric poems, where these are not given over to expressions of strong feeling or polemical intent.⁷ Barthes's term, 'zero degree', which we have used above, suggests the need for the same kind of attention to performance as he gave to writing.⁸ If a reading is 'neutral' or 'minimal', what is being held off, what supplements of a more copious performance mode are being eschewed or – Barthes' term – privated? Here is Oliver on neutrality, fully acknowledging the difficulty:

The 'neutral' or 'unmarked' tune is that which the words would assume for an average voice in a given dialect when no special emphasis (for example, dramatic or syntactic) is given to the line, providing there were absolute agreement between different readers about the semantic, emotional and syntactical interpretation. (Oliver 1989: x; author's italics)

'Would assume' and 'providing' indicate the hypothetical nature of the idea that readings can approximate to such neutrality when they attend carefully to the score with its pattern of phonic sound rather than reaching for an implicit psychological motivation for the emotion always present to language. This allows for either a negative interpretation of 'neutrality' as an active eschewal of certain communicative registers otherwise readily available or a positive one that sees reading as being primarily a responsibility to the linguistic material in the text, according to which its signifying substance is inseparable from its significations and is itself imbued with all the other voices that have used it.

Oliver's two examples of 'special emphasis' are 'dramatic' and 'syntactic'. These are very different categories. Drama belongs uncomplicatedly to

domains of performance, variously understood, and is a mixed-mode, in which speech and/or song usually combine at least with actions requiring bodily movement and gesture, if not also costume and scenography. According to Genette, 'drama is shown – imitation of action without narration. (Drama can include song.)' (1992: 28). Given Aristotle's division, which prompts Genette's essay, Oliver could presumably have included as another emphasis, performance inflected with the supplementary demands of story-telling. A 'lyric', given the purpose of either drama or narrative, can take on the appearance of a moment in a plot that provides its context, and fills out what the specific words may be treated as lacking.

Syntax, in contrast, is not a mode of discourse or performance: it belongs to grammar, the system of language, determining the principles for the combination of parts of speech, just as prosody in its broader phonological sense could be said to belong to the system of 'speech', as an unavoidable component of vocalised utterance. As components of systems, they cannot be avoided in performance. Performance can choose to draw attention to them, or treat them as at zero degree, whether that performance is on the page or through audible rendition. You could say that in ordinary (non-poetic) speech, prosodic shaping follows syntactical rhythms in the register that feels appropriate to the occasion of the utterance, with phrases and clauses and sentences usually treated as units, with pauses of different duration between them, rising or falling intonations to mark sentence end. Any poetry that is composed within the principle of lineation sets up the idea of a line – a sounded unit – as at least as important as sentence or clause as a logic for composition and therefore for performance. Lyric poetry is likely to work with a tension between syntactical and prosodic organisation, most evident, often, at line-endings.



As an example of the practical method we adopted for our exploration there follows some close attention to the single quatrain whose text is given in full above. Soundfile 3 and Figure 1 represent a reading of the quatrain without

benefit of Melodyne's sound-manipulation facilities. We have pasted the text over the contours revealed by Melodyne [{{figure1}}

[Link to soundfile: 03_Hall_Prior_Interscriptions12_01_unprocessed.mp3](#)

Before any manipulation, our first reading of Interscriptions 12 already implies tonality. By comparing the recording with (fig 2), we can also perceive formant movement within the voice that is not represented in the Melodyne graphic. An example of this can be heard in the first two words, where it is possible to hear the formants falling while the root note – the perceived 'pitch' of the voice – remains the same.

[{{figure2}}

Our first manipulation of the recording takes the harmony implied in the original reading and attempts to reduce the degree of ambiguity around the syllables that either appear to be unvoiced or fall between divisions of the twelve-tone scale (Soundfile 4).

[Link to soundfile: 04_Hall_Prior_Interscriptions12_01_processed.mp3](#)

Again, the first two notes of the quatrain are a good example of this: the falling formants of the original now become the two distinct notes of E and Eb and likewise the word 'great' is now shifted up to fall clearly on Bb. Rather than reinforcing the implied tonality of the original recording, this process slightly confuses it, as the new Eb on the second word is not part of the implied scale. However, by moving a select few phonemes to quantized note positions, the reading clearly moves in the direction of song.

Two syllable sequences suggested problems to us either with the performance or the text: '[f]rom the body of the' in line 2 and 'within the in' in line 3. The following interconnected factors may have contributed to this: loss of tempo-control in performance (but why?), lack of syllabic articulation in performance and/or text, continuous voicing (all voiced vowels and continuants in these passages), lack of contrast provided by alternations between stopped and continuant consonants. The b and d of body are both

voiced stops but it is easy to pass rapidly from the unaccented schwa of the to the voiced bilabial stop b, through the o, barely treating the d as a stop, and so on. These last are articulatory considerations and we have needed to keep in mind a distinction between articulation and perception. In speaking and listening, though, articulation cannot be wholly separated from perceptual response since the overwhelming majority of those who hear speech also produce it, all the time, and know what the sound-shapes feel like in the mouth.

Two steps were taken to address the perceived problems with the initial performance of this quatrain. The first was deliberately to slow the reading down and to articulate the syllabic transitions more clearly. The risk here is that the poem loses its connection with speech and thought, becoming a solemn or even pompous pronouncement. The other step was to attempt to address voicing and transition patterns in the text. This is not easy with an already published text, where any change made for prosodic reasons is likely to have semantic and discursive effect. Even so, we tried out some changes. First we tried changing line 2 – ‘spun out from the body of the state’ – to ‘spun out from the body of this state’.

Apart from any other effects, this breaks the voiced passage a fraction earlier with yet another unvoiced sibilant, introduces a more emphatic – and therefore more stressed – demonstrative, and encourages a careful articulation of both sibilants, the one that acts as coda for this and the one that provides the onset of state.

We then tried changing line 3 – ‘stained and absorbed within the interior’ – to ‘... throughout the interior’. Again the lexical change is in the direction of increased emphasis: throughout is semantically ‘stronger’ than within; the voiced w of within is replaced by the voiceless th, which is also the initial phoneme of the quatrain (th in Think), and ends with a voiceless stop (t), followed with its aspirated puff, that pushes the vowels back in the mouth and requires an articulatory step rather than a slide between the diphthong in through and the second syllable, out. It also echoes out from the previous line.

We tried these changes out in a number of recordings and found that they did indeed address the problems of tempo and articulation in performance but the switch in signification from ‘the state’ to ‘this state’ left us uncertain. We decided to try reverting to the original but to apply to the unchanged text some qualities of the revised performance. Soundfile 5 is a later recording that draws on that process.

[Link to soundfile: 05_Hall_Prior_Interscriptions12_02_unprocessed.mp3](#)

[[figure3]]

Figure 3 compares line 2 of the earlier reading with the modified one, with the lowest labels referring to the slower, later reading. Figure 4 does the same with line 3.

[[figure4]]

The experimentation had taken us through a provisional change to the text and then back to performance. The return to performance had drawn on each one of the stages.

We undertook one further step with Interscriptions 12. Taking the melodic hints offered by the editing process in Melodyne, Hall re-read the quatrain (Soundfile 6).

[Link to Soundfile: 06_Hall_Prior_Interscriptions12_02_processed.mp3](#)

While this reading borrows some of the pitch contours from the previous Melodyne manipulations, it had never been our thought to turn lyric poems into conventional songs!

In the final iteration of the piece, we used Melodyne again, but this time deliberately allowed significant portions of the text to escape processing altogether and we applied pitch manipulation much more sparingly (Soundfile 7).

[Link to Soundfile: 07_Hall_Prior_Interscriptions12_03_processed.mp3](#)



We are still playing with the possibilities opened up by these experiments and make no pretence at having reached a conclusion or even a vantage point for summary. At the very least, the process has suggested a useful rehearsal method for the live performance of lyric poems and for an analysis of what is there to be heard. It has in addition enabled us to continue to explore relationships between texts and performance on the assumption, as we have argued, that any form of reading is necessarily also a form of performance. We hope too that we have contributed practically to an enquiry into the notion of musicality in relation to lyric poetry.

Notes

1 An early version of this essay was given as a paper at The Shape of Song: A Conference on Lyric Poetry, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, Sat. 7th July 2012.

2 Gerard Genette demonstrates in The Architext: an introduction (1992) that the supposed source for the triadic typology, Aristotle's Poetics, does not, in fact, include the lyric, nor does it refer to the mode in any detail.

3 In music processing, 'quantisation' usually refers to the process of correcting performance discrepancies in the time domain, by moving recorded notes to their nearest bar, beat or fraction of a beat. 'Pitch quantisation' refers to the equivalent process in the spectral domain, where recorded notes are re-tuned, usually to their nearest semitone.

4 For a discussion on the role of recording in the audio-poem, see McCaffery (1997, 149--168).

5 This three-tier description of vocal utterance is explored in detail by Mladen Dolar (2006, 23--32).

6 See <http://www.celemony.com> for information about Celemony's Melodyne software.

7 Hannah Silva raised this question in 'On the "minimal performance": Interview with John Hall' (Silva 2013).

8 'The second problem arising in connection with privative opposition is that of the unmarked term. It is called the zero degree of the opposition. The zero

degree is therefore not a total absence (this is a common mistake), it is a significant absence.' and '...in rhetoric, where, carried on to the connotative plane, the absence of rhetorical signifiers constitutes in its turn a stylistic signifier.' (Barthes 1967, 77--78)

9 Audacity is a free digital audio editor and recording computer software application (<https://sourceforge.net/projects/audacity/>).

Image captions

Figure 1: screenshot of unmanipulated reading of Interscriptions 12 in Melodyne

Figure 2: Screenshot of Interscription 12, heavily processed, in Melodyne with spectrogram from Audacity.{{note}}9

Figure 3. Comparison of original and modified readings of line 2 of Interscriptions 12. Audacity waveform.

Figure 4: Interscriptions 12, comparison of two readings of line 3. Audacity waveform.

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