



“So.”:
The Worlds of Oral Performance

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“So.” So begins Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*. This “So.” evokes a long-ago world of oral performance—a group wrapped in skins, seated around a fire, their attention rapt and eyes riveted on the poet telling the story. This first line “So” sets the colloquial tone of this epic Old English poem. Medievalists may argue about the “looseness” of Heaney’s now famous translation, but, because of its beauty and compelling readability, this is the translation I always use in my survey courses in British literature.

Oral recitation of poetry has a long tradition in the Academy. Reading out loud reminds us of poetry’s corporeal nature, of how poetry is breath and the pressure of tongues against teeth as much as ink on paper. Reading poetry out loud reminds us of the irretrievably social nature of language. When Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States (2001–2003) was coming to read his poetry at Oakland University in 2002, I selected some of Collins’s poems and introduced them in one of my classes. One selection was “On Turning Ten,” a perfect example of Collins’s strategy of starting with a small, amusing perception, and then ending in an unexpected place. The nostalgic child misses his younger selves:

the perfect simplicity of being one
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.

But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

The final seven lines of the poem, as I read them aloud to my students, moved me to an unexpected place:

It is time to say goodbye to my imaginary friends,
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.¹

As I read the poem out loud, I saw my son, just about to turn ten—and the poem—in a new light. I felt an increased tenderness and new awareness of the difficulty of being a child. Reading the poem moved me close to tears, made sharing the poem at once more personal and more social, and surprisingly, forged a kind of solidarity between myself and my students.

A generation or two ago, recitation of literature formed an essential part of a grade school and high school education, but this practice has almost disappeared. Recitation, however, remains part of the rituals of birth, marriage and death. My father's death was preceded by a terrible deterioration in his mind and body. He would sit by the window and ask what the weather was outside. He would have partially chewed food in his mouth and ask if he had eaten. My father had taken over his father's failing fork-lift truck business, but he should have been a professor of French or English literature. In my visits home, I read poetry aloud to him, and when I returned home

¹ "On Turning Ten" can be found in Billy Collins's *Sailing Around the Room* (Random House: New York: 2001) and was one of the poems Collins read aloud on his visit to Oakland University.

for visits, I immediately noticed the calming effects of my reading, and I also learned a lot about memory. My father would frequently correct my reading—either the pronunciation or the wording. He was a stickler for proper pronunciation, insisting on my pronouncing “duty” as “dyooty” and “caramel” as “car-a-mel.” One of his favorite poems was one I loved but never bothered to think much about—Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud”:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in neverending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Only when I recited it (from memory) at his funeral did I understand the “wealth” Wordsworth wrote about. The poem is

less about seeing daffodils than about the memory of seeing them. So, now, when I read this poem out loud to my classes, my “heart with (melancholy) pleasure fills,” responding to the ways orality gives poetry new power through its social qualities.

What is true of poetry is also true of fiction. Heaney’s “So.” is as much a part of narrative fiction as it is of poetry. The world it evokes is the world of story telling. Not only is this world “oral,” “of or relating to communication by speech,” but also “aural,” “of or pertaining to the organ of hearing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). If an oral world focuses on the spoken word, an aural world focuses on the heard word. The aurality of literature, then, emphasizes its social elements. Heaney’s “So.” is so apt a beginning for the poem because it calls attention not just to the spoken nature of the poem, but to its heard nature. The poet’s audience here is crucial.

The power of orality and aurality derive from their social nature and begin early in our lives with parents reading to children, children reading to parents, and stories told on travels (or of travels). I fondly remember listening to radio dramas during family road trips. More recently, at a friend’s house for Thanksgiving dinner, each guest was asked to read a poem if he/she expected to get pie. My myriad experiences of the pleasures of oral performance inform my classroom pedagogy and have led to my introduction of public events celebrating literature at the university, finding expression in the Tax Day Poetry Bash (April) and the fiction Read-In (November).

Each year on Tax Day, colleagues, students and community members gather in the Oakland Center and read poems—their own poems, poems written by famous and celebrated poets, poems by obscure poets, song lyrics, and, even the Michigan tax booklet:

Resident

You are a Michigan resident
if Michigan is your permanent home.
Your permanent home is the place
you intend to return to whenever

you go away. A temporary absence
from Michigan, such as spending the
winter in a southern state, does not
make you a part-year resident.²

Over the twelve years of Poetry Bashes, I have worried about getting the word out, but in the end I realized that all we need is a room, some chairs, and a microphone. Forty to eighty people then appear. The aural nature of poetry fuels the event's success. When someone reads a poem out loud, it is a social act. I select a poem based on several social calculations: I want to impress my colleagues, keep the interest of students in attendance, and the poem needs to be particularly expressive of me. One year, my son's rugby game was scheduled during the Poetry Bash. I made the difficult decision to attend the Bash, but I insisted on reading a poem about rugby—surprisingly, there were many from which to choose. I love this one by Mick Imlah:

London Scottish
(1914)

April, the last full fixture of the spring:
“Feet, Scottish, Feet”—they rucked the fear of God
Into Blackheath. Their club was everything:
And from the four sides raised that afternoon,
The stars, but also those on the back pitches,
All sixty volunteered for the touring squad
And swapped their Richmond turf for Belgian ditches.
October: mad for a fight, they broke too soon
On the Ypres Salient, rushing the ridge between
“Witshit” and Messines. Three-quarters died.
Of that ill-balanced and fatigued fifteen
The ass selectors favoured to survive,
Just one, Brodie the prop, resumed his post.
The others sometimes drank to “The Forty-Five”:
Neither a humorous nor an idle toast.

² My wife read this as a “found poem.”

Once I choose a poem, its oral dimensions rise to the surface. I practice reciting it, finding the appropriate balance between syntax and meter, between sentence and line. Always, I try to imagine those in the audience—and the faces I conjure always belong to my colleagues. It occurs to me it is a little like choosing a gift—I want to choose a gift to please the recipient, but I also want the gift to say something about me—and that something, I admit, I want to be impressive. Even here, however, in the most self-absorbed aspect of poetry, the calculus is undeniably social.

At the Bash, I am most eager to hear what my colleagues will read. Brian Connery, for example, always chooses poems by poets I have never heard of but wish I had. I love sitting in the audience listening to my colleagues read the poems they chose. I also enjoy listening to students read poems—both poems that they have written and those they choose from poems they read in class or from their own, individual reading. Reading a poem out loud offers many choices for a reader. Every word is an intersection. Sometimes the intersections open onto dead ends, but often ways lead into ways, a journey through the twists and turns of language. When we listen to someone reading a poem, we leave our permanent home and follow her through the thicket. When the guide is experienced, we are sure to see a wealth. And when the guides are people we care about, our pleasure is enhanced by witnessing their pleasure.

This shared pleasure led to the 2005 inauguration of the Read-In by me and my colleague Jeff Insko. We scheduled it for the anniversary of Blake's birth (November 28), and chose his long and difficult masterpiece, *Jerusalem*. We estimated the length of time it would take to read the poem at about eight hours (I determined how many lines I could read in ten minutes and then did the math) and set up a schedule of ten-minute segments per reader. People sent emails, called, and signed up in person to read. Two students, Rachel Banner and Lisa Czapski, stayed with us for the entire time. I feared (and

hoped) I would be reading most of the poem myself, but happily, it turned out that I had to elbow my way to the podium.

Since then (always on the Monday before Thanksgiving), we have read Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Woolf's *The Waves*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and, this year, Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Each year, many students decide to spend large portions of time at the reading and a small group of students insist on reading again and again. Participants sense that the event is something special, as they respond to the oral and aural nature of the experience. Having sat and listened together for an extended period of time—unlike watching a film together, or reading alone—participants in the Read-In forge a sense of community. This last year we read aloud *The House of Mirth*, which we started at 8 am and finished around 9 pm. One student, Tara Fugate, was there for the duration. Wharton's keen analysis of the social world and focused but complex question—will Lily Bart be able to negotiate the rigorous demands of her upper-class society to find a man worthy of her?—commanded our interest. I found myself laughing repeatedly, much to the chagrin of some readers who must have thought I was laughing at them.

This anxiety—that one is risking ridicule by reading in public—is quite common, whatever the literary text may be. Stumbling by professors and students alike occurs, despite our hope that we will read flawlessly. This drawback of oral performance can also yield dividends, however, by enhancing our appreciation for the writer's difficult art.

My most memorable stumble in the oral performance arena occurred back in graduate school, when I was one of only two men, and the only straight white man, in a course on feminist theory. The professor asked me to read Sharon Old's "Outside the Operating Room of the Sex Change Doctor":

Outside the Operating Room of the Sex-Change Doctor

Outside the operating room of the sex-change doctor, a tray of penises.

There is no blood. This is not Vietnam, Chile, Buchenwald.

They were surgically removed under anaesthetic. They lie there neatly, each with a small space around it.

The anaesthetic is wearing off now. The chopped-off sexes lie on the silver tray.

One says "I am a weapon thrown down. Let there be no more killing."

Another says "I am a thumb lost in the threshing machine. Bright straw fills the air. I will never have to work again."

The third says "I am a caul removed from his eyes. Now he can see."

The fourth says "I want to be painted by Gericault, a still life with a bust of Apollo, a drape of purple velvet, and a vine of ivy leaves."

The fifth says "I was a dirty little dog, I knew he'd have me put to sleep."

The sixth says "I am safe. Now no one can hurt me."

Only one is unhappy. He lies there weeping in terrible grief, crying out "Father, Father!"

When I read the line beginning "The fifth says," I read: "The fifth says 'I was a dirty little dog, I knew he'd have to put me to sleep'" instead of "have me put to sleep." I did not notice my mangling the placement of "put" and "me." Professor Kathryn Bond Stockton did, and she made quite a big deal out of the difference. Despite my brief humiliation, the difference between my recitation of the line and the line as written provoked a fertile meditation on the meaning of the line. Indeed, that difference between choices (and not just the bad ones) is part of the rewards of listening to others read poetry. The difference between the way we would read a line and the way an actual reader reads the line can provoke discovery and insight.

The challenges and pleasures of oral performance highlight its complex social relations. The late 18th-century English political philosopher and novelist William Godwin argued that it was "absurd and vicious" for "men" to "repeat words" or perform music not "their own" because it would involve a violation of private judgment (760). Godwin is anxious here because he seeks to preserve the integrity of the individual. Perhaps his

fears are grounded, if one values individual integrity as the highest good. Reading literature out loud does involve some risk that boundaries of our selves will be violated. My experience with Billy Collins's "On Turning Ten" (to say nothing of "Outside the Operating Room of the Sex Change Doctor") suggests that reading a poem does involve some degree of putting oneself on the line. Sometimes, that line is the place of someone else—or at least our imagined version of someone else. In the place of that other, we do risk losing something of our individual integrity, but that is part of the pleasure of literature.

Nowhere is that sense of dangerous margins greater than when students recite a poem before classroom peers for a grade. My students must recite at least 14 lines of poetry from memory in front of the class for a grade, and they quickly learn that they must make choices about words, meaning, tone, pacing, and so on. Blake's famous poem "The Tyger" is a case in point:

Tyger, tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Is the "eye" (which was pronounced "ee" in some areas of England in the 18th century) supposed to rhyme with "symmetry," or is there supposed to be a deliberate asymmetry in the couplet? Reading the opening of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" silently, we may not need to choose, or may not recognize that we are choosing, where to place the stress:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness
Pains my sense . . .

But when we read it out loud, we must decide which of the first three words to emphasize. The consequences are not earth shattering, but they are real. Working through those decisions catalyzes the performer's understanding of a poem. Students are encouraged to immerse themselves in the performance. The best recitations, I tell them, are those that make me nervous: like the woman who came dressed as an 18th century man,

or the man who recited Robert Burns's "My Love is like a red, red rose" in a Scottish accent (he later recited it in a spot-on Christopher Walken voice), or the woman who sang one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, or the student who recited all 160 lines of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." By the time they are done with their recitation, they own a poem, and thereafter bring the orally performed poems up in class discussions, in their papers, and on their exams. Finally, in putting themselves on the line, in the place of the other, they may find themselves and find themselves as part of a beautifully entangled web of self and otherness; they may even find themselves wrapped in skins, seated around a fire, just so.

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